Lights and Shadows

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Lights AND Shadows 2012
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*Lights & Shadows*
Nucky #10
Best of Show

Jordan Weisenauer

Lights & Shadows
A Wanderlust’s Guide to the Galaxy
Claire Stewart

For every one of you that yearns to be somewhere else and chooses to sit right in your seat because of the ‘inconvenience’. For the dreamers, the dancers, the hikers, and the lovers—you will be stuck in your box till you build yourself a door. The tiny scratches on windows from children itching to go play, turn into the hours spent looking at the screensaver shot from that trip you never took. Mark Twain, Henry Miller, Robert Frost, and Emerson too; they knew the life-giving juices that seep into your psyche as soon as your feet hit foreign soil. It’s uncomfortable, its graceless, but it is as pristine as the flowery words falling off the tongues of your new cohorts. Go ahead and travel with your millions but you will never get the genuine reward. In the purest sense of anonymity, you will own nothing. The sky, the earth, and your own breath will be your only true possessions.

It’s the wind that goes through your hair that also goes through the hair of a young girl in India that stares out on the Bay of Bengal wondering when her ship will come to take her to her real life. How many authors and poets tell you to enjoy, day after day, the exciting new events in your own backyard? I wish we could release the fear of the unknown out of our perception. I wish we could look at each and every person the same way we would look into a mirror—with appreciation of the vitality we are so lucky to be bestowed with; no creed, nationality, nor race standing in our way. But, those are the precise obstructions that creep away when you are on your way out of your tiny little bubble. Every soul is a lesson to be learned. Every encounter is a chance to change the future. For the days when it smells exactly like the morning fog at Machu Picchu, or the nights when your glass of red never measures up to the vineyards tastings in Bordeaux, or when you see a wink from a stranger that takes your back to a café table sharing antipasti with a new charming Italian man. To every lost heart, staring at the same dingy photo from that ‘trip of a lifetime’, aching to be back in the arms of another homeland—don’t let it be your last. Lifetimes are shorter than you know in a huge, unexplored galaxy like ours.
Eight Million Stories
Andy Thigpen

Man,
It must be easy to be Yourself
in a city with so many
Selves.
You can count your beats
out loud
cause your beats blend in with
the sound
of 8 million other feet
Stompin their beats
out Loud

And man, it must be easy to be your
own
in a city where you’re never
alone
where everyone has a home
even if it is the street
feeling all the vibrations from eight million
beats.

Man, you can even dance if you want to.

It sure must be easy to be in tune
with so many people swaying
to their own croon.
Everyone moving to their own

jazz n’ hip hop n’ rock n’ roll
subway brakes screaming altissimo
shuckin along
shakin up tempo
causin a crescendo of
all the other voices in the orchestra.

It sure must be easy to be you
in a place where God isn’t
always watching
the Conductor
not performing
His vision obscured by steel skyscraper guitars
and harmonicas blown
from sunlight reflected glass windows
and taxi cabs
thumping exhaust double bass to the beat

Down here
in the exhaust
you’re the Conductor.
The Maestro won’t cast his eyes
or ears
on your sinful sounds.

And your beats are yours to pound.

Man, just dance if you want to.
The year was 1994 and I was a young boy from just outside Indianapolis. I was learning the rigors of farm life in the Deep South, a much different environment than the corn fields many of my school friends occupied. I was up, as awake as a nine year old could be, at 5 a.m. in the middle of summer. Not that enjoyable, but this educated me on just how much I loved my sleep. This resting period I was always too anxious to enjoy was now a welcomed end to a hell hot day. There was something about the dirt that intrigued me. How different it was at various locations around the farm. There was a certain feel to the dirt depending on where one decided to dig a whole or a trench. Some dirt is just easily sifted through a hand, while other dirt sticks and clumps with a muddy residue left behind. There was red dirt and dark brown, depending on the various mineral levels.

Light cool dirt was always how the garden stayed, an inviting soil. It often made a pillow for my buzzed head while my dog, ole’ Whitey, named for his color and the most famous movie dog of my childhood, would lay with his slobbering head resting on my stomach. I’m not sure what dogs think, or if they do think past the instinctual, but I always thought that farm was the only place I would ever want to be. It was most certainly the case at that point in time.

Our land was divided into various uses. Some areas were used for cotton, others for fescue grass which would later become the hay that made my back sore and my wallet heavier than it ever had been. Five dollars an hour seemed like a whole hell of a lot before I had any knowledge of minimum wage. More importantly than the pay was the satisfaction that came with learning a new craft and executing that craft or skill to perfection, whether it is building a fence or medically assisting an animal.

Not a lot of occupations contribute to the society we inhabit like the agricultural industry. The areas of life farmer’s seep into are overwhelming. From what is outside of you to what is inside, farming makes possible. I wasn’t able to understand many of the lessons I was learning at the time, that is what reflection is for. We aren’t really sure what we learn when we do so I suppose, but at the moment it happens, we seem to hit the record on our mental DVR and come back to it later for understanding, for meaning.

A young group of piglets had started growing their eye teeth, and without them being cut out, tusks could grow, endangering the pig itself and the others around it. Cutting the eye teeth of a small piglet seems like an easy enough task when it is explained. However, is all together different.
in practice. It usually takes one person to hold the pigs, Grandma, and one person to cut the teeth, Grandpa. My job was easy but important. I sprayed the iodine on the pig after cutting its teeth and tagging the ears to make sure infection didn’t set in. There was a particularly vivid day when there were only two of us. Grandpa and I had to do it all.

To try to get it done faster, and teach me a bit of hard work, we split the group into two, I took one and him the other and we began to cut the teeth on our own with each piglet. This was a job Grandpa had done many times alone, I watched him curiously each time to imitate his actions, to make damn sure I did the same, careful not to injure, precise and clean. Despite all effort of carefulness, there was still a great deal of bloodshed when trying to cut the teeth of a wiggling swine. Out of the twenty or so we divided out, I possibly completed the job on five. Despite my feelings of inadequacy, Grandpa informed me that I had done a superb job for a first timer and nobody he knew that was near my own age had done such a thing.

When we finished a job such as this, one that required some effort and strain, we usually found a job with some leisure next. Walking the fence line was an important task that needed to be done on a large section every two days or at least once a week. When five hundred head of cattle are at stake, there has to be a great deal of attention to the fences holding them in. Loose cattle usually meant stolen cattle if they wandered onto a nearby field before they were branded. Ear tags were quick and usually on every head, but they were easy to remove if someone put the effort in.

Rarely this happened and more often than not someone called to inform us that some cattle had slipped through the cracks. Walking the fences encapsulated me within a limbo of the natural world and that controlled by man, unless this was natural too and I had and still have confusion of the two.

These walks often revealed snippets of family history that were only told in moments like these, small inescapable moments, set up like those corny movies but without the gooiness and mushiness they pretend families to be. I was told stories of my great grandfather’s cooking, his prize coon hounds and the way he would often drink too much and do something that probably wasn’t the smartest, but more often than not provided a humorous retelling on occasion.

Every now and then a cow would succumb to an illness and we would find its carcass, sometimes freshly dead and sometimes it was a half eaten mess left strewn about by coyotes who were scared off before finishing the job. Whatever the case, the result was the same, load it up in the bucket of the Bobcat and put it on a pile with whatever brush needed to be burned. We sent the cattle off to some sort of Valhalla I used to think, when the fury of the flames put off a dangerous heat and the fire and the humidity created a comfortable sweat all over my head.

It was on the farm that I gained of sense of what a curse word was to be used for. Not just an obscenity being shouted but an emotion being cast out for all the world.
around to soak in. I learned from my grandfather, the versatile nature of the set of words, Son of a bitch. When sounded out in long decipherable form, there was usually a bit of drama associated. A slow output reflected this. There was also the quick and muffled, “Sunavabitch”, that usually followed when a hammer landed on a thumb. Grandma wasn’t innocent from using her share of curse words. Hers always slipped out in an easily ignored fashion, a long shhh... when dropping a grocery bag. She never completely finished the word but we caught the just of it and would always point it out to be quickly cut off by her defense. If she got really angry a damn might have slipped out, but this only usually happened when referring to one of her four children. They were the ones that gave all the secrets away. Everything I could ever do was already prepared for. My grandparents realized that parenting wasn’t about getting it wrong or right, but rather it was about setting your children and grandchildren up to where they could make decisions that reflected good character and a good common sense.

Coming together and growing life is what the farm was about. The farm was most definitely about more than merely food. The farm was about family, and learning generations of lessons handed down in the only manner a McCormack knows: stern and loving.
Death, Hold My Hand Please

Matthew Gibson

Is it time for me to go right now? But I’ve still got things to do. There’s a place downtown me and my wife have been talking about eating at for some time now. I’ve got reservations this Wednesday for our anniversary. Jesus. I can’t leave like this. Not now. Not yet. Just a couple of more days.

And the blood that moved to the beat of my heart is about to move no more.

I remember being a kid, you know. Death was a thing we talked about at church. It never happened to me. Or my family. Or my friends. Then someone got killed, and Death got real. Slowly, one at a time, people started to live, and people started to die. A guy from school...I’ve known him since I was five...he dies. Then she dies. I played basketball with her. Death is real now. I believe in you, Death. I believe in you. You ain’t gotta take me to make me believe. But you are, aren’t you? The God I’ve prayed to for protection, the God which gave me the strength to carry on after she left, the God which gave me the ability to breathe when I thought I was suffocating in the dark. That God has sent you. And I don’t even see a damned tunnel of light. What a letdown.

Tell me there’s something beyond, though. Tell me that there is something up there. Shoot me through the stars. Set me afire inside the cobweb arms of some nebula. But don’t let me stay down here. Don’t let me die with my body. Pull me up, Death. I’d pray to the God I worship, but I think you speak for Him.

I’m looking over, taken so suddenly. And God, it’s dark. And Death, you’re dark. Why does blood taste like steel?

My heart is starving. I want more life. I want more time. I want more breaths.

I was a boy, racing barefoot along a creek bank, with a fishing pole in my hand. Death was so far away. Not even the fish I caught could die. I just bid them farewell, tossed them back, and knew I’d see them again sometime. But Death lurks even in the depths of the creek. Fish do die.

I was a boy, playing a video game. How new! How exciting! I died a thousand times over and a thousand times again on the tiny television screen set up in my bedroom. But Death could not touch me then. Dying meant losing a level. Not losing a life.

Then I felt Death all around me for a time. Only it was really Death’s shadow. I felt like I was going crazy. The world seemed cold and dark and I could not bring myself to
step outside my house. I was a prisoner of fear. But I would
defy Death’s shadow and walk out. Walk out I did. The
bastard never saw it coming. And so there I was, walking the
world anew, afraid of no place, of no fear.

But before the fear, I remember shooting a BB gun
at Styrofoam cups and empty soda cans. They were soldiers
marching in a line. They were harbingers of destruction and
I was the sole man in charge of protecting the world. The
cans died. And the cups died. But I could not die. They did
don’t shoot back.

Let me see. Where am I now? Still a boy, I guess. It’s
not the experiences I had as a boy, but of merely being a
boy.

So go on, take me death. Take me now and let me
live forever in paradise. Damn you for being so quick. But
damn me for being so slow. Damn me for taking my sweet
precious time when I should’ve been savoring the hours, the
days the minutes, and the microseconds. Now I’m about to
embark on a great journey. Death. Hold my hand, please.

What a king I could become if I could control
This stifling need. This buzz and hum and purr
Clutching my concentration, my intellect.
I must succumb to it for slumber.

Not talking, just stuttering out;
Captivity: contained,
In a contracted, collective confinement.

I can’t discredit the predicament;
It tempts my temper in its retraction.
A conscious combat can control my cravings.

I recommend a counter-act;
Not a cloister, just not the scuttering of Times Square.
Back in check, collecting thoughts
In total serenity.

What a monarch indeed,
With a fortress intact and sound.
Galvanized
David Gunnels

I love the way it contains
My spirit and keeps it chained
Before it has a chance
To sprout wings and fly. I love
The bulk and curves that
Anchor me to reality.
I love my gnawed nails
Decimated by the trials
Of the socially awkward
To help maintain composure
Of stronger men. I love the eyes
Of deep, glimmering pools between pine lashes,
The timeless brow transcending
Imagination, the decadent,
Marshmallow palms of white collar hands. I love
The supernatural chi
Composing life with each breath
Like midichlorians dancing
Inside, guiding fates and
Telling hidden secrets.
I love this frame
Designed to take a blow
That could shatter mountains

And stumble headstrong demons
Controlling armies of hatred
And doubt. I love my slew feet.
I love it all, a symphony of breath,
Beats, movement, and thoughts leading
To the sweetest tooth
And the stomach filled with chalk.
All forces contained together
As cogs in a machine
Powered by crushed plants and animal fats
Driving engines toward unknown goals.
I love the birthmark
Carved into the United Kingdom
As it keeps my elbow company.
I love this machine
Chugging along only so
I can do what I do best.

Lights & Shadows
Every morning it peeks through
the linen dress shirts and polyester pant suits.

It gazes longingly at her
begging, pleading, and persuading

for just one more chance. She shuts the mirrored
door holding while another humdrum getup,

for another dull week. Monday meetings, rainy afternoons
on the subway, and eating take out alone in her sweats.

Years before, the dress would be lying on the bed
at four thirty Friday afternoon. She took it out

for martinis with the girls, dancing at local clubs, bachelorette
parties downtown. And date nights that went late into the

night

She remembers, along with every one of her friends,
how she could make the perfect movements

strides, and flirtatious advances in that dress to
woo whoever she had her eye on.
They were spontaneous and carefree together,
free like all the drinks she received.

After three margaritas and a rough night with an unnamed suitor, she thought the dress had lost its magic.

She washed it, removing the smell of cigarettes and bad decisions, and it went back in the closet for good.

Some lonely weekend nights, she pulls it out to pull at the shiny, stretchy fabric—an rayon blended memory. She stares at it with knowing eyes, hold it up in front of the mirror before slamming it back on the rack.

Another night in her bathrobe, another night alone. Black dress— keep hope, all she needs is time.

Freshman Treasurer of Anxiety
David Gunnels

I've always been the kind of person to sit down at the far booth in restaurants. The ones where the back of the seat touches the wall. If I can, I like to slide in as far as possible too. I put forth so much effort just to get as far away from the crowd as I can. This doesn't happen just at restaurants. No matter where I go, I try to slink away to an undiscovered corner to fade away. Hell, it takes me over an hour to work up the nerve to pick up the phone to call someone. Even when I do, I always pretend I'm wearing a mask. This was something I never really thought about or tried to figure out. In fact, this was something that I tried to avoid concentrating on all together. So, it all ended up coming back at me when I decided to run as freshman class Treasurer in high school, as a joke. And by the time I saw it coming, I had no choice but to force my way through.

I remember walking into the school office with a friend of mine who wanted to run for office for real. He never had an attitude that said, "school is serious business," but I always thought he liked the attention of being in clubs and playing sports. In short, he was the kind of friend I lost immediately after graduation. While he signed up to run, I took a glance at who all was gunning for a position. A predictable lineup for president and vice president,
the ones who saw themselves as "special snowflakes." I gathered that the ones running for secretary were those who felt they stood no chance at being top dog. They were the ones who wished they were special but weren't kidding themselves. Then, the Treasurer position caught my eye. While this position had by far the most number of candidates, it also had the most variance. I remember seeing two athletes (one a straightedge member of Peers for Life), two scholars from the top ten of our class, and one quiet girl who no one quite remembers.

"And me," I said, scribbling my name below the last entry. I figured I could have plenty of fun with this. I never planned on taking it seriously, so losing didn't faze me at all. The only thing I really knew about campaigning was that the school was supposed to let us all put up a poster or two to help get votes. Walking out of the office, all I could think about was this great opportunity. I was going to make a poster and everyone was going to have to see it for like two whole weeks.

Now, I don't like to give myself compliments, but at that time, I found myself to be damn funny. While everyone else went out of their way to make their parents buy bags of candy to hand out and stickers for campaign buttons, I planned my poster out during classes. I knew this was my first big chance to display my genius without physically being there to deliver it, so I knew it had to be good. It would be a masterpiece with its punch line lingering in the hall ways for all to witness while I basked in the glory form a safe distance. After three days of planning and failed drafts, I had the best idea. The best. This being 2003 and me idolizing old SNL actors at the time, I designed my poster after the Austin Powers movies.
There was once a time in which you were not a unit, existing apart from a whole—untouched, uncut, free of pink plastic flamingos and me, the man who buries poison in your pores. You were immeasurable before the day I came and decided you’re better suited separated from yourself and spotted by heavy structures composed of more pieces of you mixed with pieces of me.

I claimed ownership of you in the same manner that a rabbit tosses a leash around a bear’s neck and tucks daffodils behind his ears and feeds him berries and herbs, but wishes he’d just do it on his own. But the bear always growls and his stomach grumbles, and you turn brown, or grow too tall, or accumulate plastics and papers that I did not thoughtfully place in your kindly apportioned sections that indicate that you do not belong to you.

When I kick my ambition and your leash to our curb, they will come tromping through your chest-high crab grass, crying over your rebelliousness and my faultiness, and they will beg for the green paper that lets me call you mine. You are not good enough for them. You are too much and never enough for me, but you are too quiet to be on your own in the manner in which you began. At the end of the day, I join you outside and attempt to reconcile with all that is inevitable, when I look up at the sky and curse your coordinates for not letting me see the stars for what they are. I have trimmed you and I have fed you. I have dressed you in pretty little lights and concrete figures and I have shelled out all that my earthly life is worth to call you mine, to not be poor, to lie in your arms.

After the sun sets, after I have ensured your beauty, all I want is to sit on my bench, smoke a cigar and look at the stars in the place where my comfort and yields place me not far from a composite board and polyester box lined with metal brains and plastic bodies and all the responsibilities of a man who has his own piece of earth, and
where the stars are easily confused with dust
catching flickers of light and multitudes of steel
albatrosses blinking, blinking to tell us they're alright.

I sit here, stogy threatening to burn callused knuckles,
cradled in your bosom from my heals to my double
crown and I wonder with all the strength it takes to
stab a pink plastic flamingo into your stubborn flesh,
if it is possible to toss a leash around the stars and
have a yard of them that is my own.

Peace is crowded streets
with no one to meet
just nameless faces walkin by
taxi honkin
people yellin
stompin out beats
(going to meet
faces they're prepared to meet in
suits with tennis shoes without
ever asking always wonderin
why

Peace, for me
isn't quiet.

Peace is metal chimes
slow on the wind
blowin in the wind
stories told by my grandfather
rocking on metal chairs
defaf in the wind
leaves in the west wind
windin through tomato vines
and six-shooter squash
yellow as the screamin
sunrise

Peace, for me
isn't still.

Peace is syncopated
unadulterated rhythm
poundin a funk
that's smelt and felt
two thousand years away
straight out the Milky Way
moving fast and furious like
hips and lips to

bassbeats and drumlicks
ever poundin always pleasin
never droppin never stoppin
to apologize
or wonder
why

Peace, for me
isn't alone.

Peace is a crowded bar
with your favorite people

favorite songs playin
and groovin along, eyes closed
body movin soul
feelin all

whiskey and wine laughin
glancin from one pretty
face to another

Peace, for me
isn't happy.

Peace is the blues
kickin in E or A
about womens and moneys

When you're thinking evil
you're thinkin bout the blues

the Wolf once growled
before the coal train howled
off with him to the moon

My Peace thinks about
guitars of blind men
singin delta soul and
Singin River moans and Chicago
emptiness because peace occurs when I can't be satisfied with no backdoor woman and can only find comfort in myself and the Devil at the bottom of the bottle

Peace is my choice I never can choose but accept as what it is

What I know is

loud as howlin in the night as feet poundin beats on city streets lookin up for freedom

lonely as the blues and chimes

ringin cold in warm wind waitin for a storm as blind as delta guitars and

Peace, for me is a woman who will open my eyes, give me sight hold me tight and whisper through with voice dripping blue

Peace is only found in you.
Until we were six, we were just alike. Same age. Same parents. Same sandy blonde hair. Our eyes were even the same hazel-green, reflecting both the blue sky and green trees as we explored the woods behind our house. She was a little more adventurous than I was, but I was always willing to follow.

When we were nine, my eyes were less green and more blue. Both of us wore glasses, but she didn’t let it faze her. They made her stand out in a crowd. I was just happy to be able to see the board in school.

When we were eleven, we took up different hobbies. Her eyes sparkled like the glitter that came from her majorette leotard. Mine squinted in concentration as I watched my fingers maneuver the keys. When we were fifteen, I played three instruments in the school band, eyes sweeping across the sheet music. Hers glazed over as she zoned out in the back of the band room, bored after marching season was over.

When we were seventeen, she got bright green contacts that made her boyfriend go crazy. They glowed in anger when she kicked me out of the car. I didn’t think the fight was that bad. I struggled to adjust to the pitch dark street where she left me.

When we were nineteen, her wedding left me teary-eyed. Her eyes were stoic and dry.
My fingers grew numb holding the ring. Perched between my thumb and index finger, it became my lens to the world. While my father explained that he had recovered it from the gravel driveway, I framed the world within a circle.

I remembered very well how my parents looked in their wedding photos and how the ring glistened in simplicity. And I could remember my mother glaring at my father with her hand hanging next to her thin hips—her ring finger curved inward while her thumb and pinky worked together to spin the ring around.

As I sit now imitating my mother
I remember hearing the soft clink
of fourteen karats hitting rocks as my father stood tall and proud while my mother walked away. I slip the ring over my knuckle and hear it hit the hardwood. It’s not quite as dramatic.

I pick it up and return to my twelve-year-old ways. It rests perfectly between my fingers as I hold it to my eye and look around the room, reducing everything to a minimum. It stops over him, and I glare at the back of his head through the frame. I don’t marvel at the beauty of seeing something separated from the world around it. I don’t care to switch from the tiny frame to the real world and back again. I simply keep the ring in front of my eye and search its edges for scratches and signs of aging. I catch a glimpse of the reflection of my eye and I decide that he is not The One and I call my father to tell him my decision as I slip the ring back over my knuckle and my thumb and pinky work together to turn it around and around.
Any Color But Yellow

Alex Lindley

I like to watch the great metal hands lifting dirt with a certain triumph. With great yellow arms they give me some sense of progress.

I like their roars when they eviscerate the earth—lions of metal and tar—disemboweling the soft underbelly of unsuspecting prey, choking, coughing up smoke—the digestion of future skyscrapers.

I like their tiny operators. The fruits of their labor rise up in front of them but it’s best to see them at noon when they sit in the shade, their sweat-speckled eyebrows beneath yellow hats.

I like when they back up.
Beep beep beep, they scream and make anyone with a hat any color but yellow jump.

I like them at night just after the dust has settled, when their metal hides are veiled by sand and sweat and graffiti, when their steel bones creak with the fatigue of inertia in the still dark.
When did I stop being an artist?  
Trading my pencils for a book.  
What has changed within me?  
I have ignored myself.

Trading my pencils for a book.  
When did I grow up?  
I have ignored myself.  
Pushing my art aside.

When did I grow up?  
The pencil is too much work.  
Pushing my art aside,  
I relax with Tolkien now.

The pencil is too much work.  
Music used to fill the house.  
I relax with Tolkien now,  
Puffing on my churchwarden.  
Music used to fill the house,  
I keep things quiet now.  
Puffing on my churchwarden,  
What has changed within me?
During break we were allowed to go outside, but only to the playground so that our first grade teachers could keep watchful eyes on us. Everything was in place—structured, ordered. There were no loose pieces during break. None, that is, except for the brick that we had managed to chisel loose from the wall in the side of the school—the side farthest away from the playground and completely hidden from our teachers’ views.

A hidden hole meant hidden treasures.

Kyle dropped a plastic train whistle, a prize he had won at the arcade after getting more tickets than his older brother, into the hole. His eyes closed as he listened to it bounce off the insides of the wall. He slipped in a Seven Mary Three cassette that his father bought him against his mother’s wishes. And finally, he held up his favorite grandmother’s watch—stolen from his mother’s jewelry box. The diamonds glistened as he kissed it goodbye.

Misty held up a note from Josh, the school reject, which simply said, “I love you.” She had to bury any evidence that she ever accepted him. Her Lisa Frank address book, no longer needed because she had memorized everyone’s phone number, landed with a dull thud. We weren’t allowed to see the last object and turned our backs because she wanted to be rid of it before anyone else saw.

I snuck a peak just before it fell in. It was a picture of her dead brother.

The bracelet that Kyle had given me the year before was my first object. I left it in its bubble case that it was in when he slipped it into my hand while we stood in the tunnel. My favorite hair bow was next—the one my aunt had made for me to wear on my first day of school. In a desperate effort to save my father from himself, I slid his bottle opener into the hole.

Once it was all done, we replaced the brick and stared at it for a long time. We knew that we would never get our treasures back, but we didn’t need them. No one did.
My Best Friend the Mutant
Leif Heltand

Caleb is twenty three, white, and looks like a crazy homeless guy. He has very long dreads he has been growing for years but is not a stoner, and is actually rather conservative in his lifestyle. He is tall and lanky, his baby cousins refer to him as Jack Sparrow and it is not hard to see why. He has a goofy laugh, loves life, and is all around a cool guy. About eight years ago I was fortunate enough to get into a conversation with this guy about my comic book collection which lead to us quizzing each other to see who the ultimate Spiderman fan was. I had a rare issue of Peter Parker and Mary Jane’s wedding, but he had sketch pads filled with awesome battles that he had rendered of Spiderman fighting his nemesis and sometimes friend Venom. I decided instead of competing with this guy that he would make a powerful ally. We bonded over our love of nerd culture and also our attempt to branch out in the music we listened to as a form of self-expression. One day we were out in the woods I was Venom and he was Spiderman and I cannot for the life of me remember what the hell our mission was, but I ended up double crossing him, as Venom so often did, and we got into a pretty epic battle at least for some teens with sticks. He cut the battle short and I thought it was odd to hear Spiderman say, “Woah, take it easy man I have Hemophilia type A.”

So here was I wondering why he was telling me that he was a blood lover. I was wondering if he maybe meant like a vampire or something, but apparently I had it all wrong. He explained that it was a genetic disorder that made it hard for the body to control the coagulating and clotting of blood in the body. Hemophiliacs are constantly dealing with joint swellings and minor internal bleeds which make daily living inconvenient. Because of his family’s genetics his hemophilia was a rare mutation, and me not knowing how bad it can be was kind of jealous for a minute that he got to be a mutant. For example, we might have minor blood vessels popping all the time without it so much as phasing us, but this could lead to pretty severe internal bleeding for a hemophiliac. Later that day when we made it back to his place I got to watch him “shoot up” his medication which is a supplement of Factor VIII, a blood clotting factor in our bodies. It was interesting to witness because he has a portacath, a sub dermal catheter, on his chest near his heart and would have to break the skin daily to dose himself.

On Sunday afternoons I would go out into the heart of Green Hill to Caleb’s weekly large family gatherings. Upon one of these visits the aunts, uncles, and grandparents started talking about how pitiful Caleb was as a baby and
after listening for a while I was shown family photos as evidence. There was one picture where Caleb was about three where he had hurt his leg. Almost all the blood in his body had moved down to the leg so he was pale as a ghost with a huge purple leg. Another photo was shown and I thought he may have been dressed up as a pirate, but a ball to the eye that just might have caused a minor black eye on anyone else had caused his eye to completely blackout, I'm still not convinced he wasn't just wearing an eye patch. It took me quite a while to realize how serious the condition really was as far as hindering daily activities. We would go to a park and be walking around and a few minutes later would have to turn back because he hadn't had his medication in a while and the joints in his legs were starting to swell. I didn't mind this too much though because when he was incapacitated that meant we had more time for gaming and his parents would never complain about us wasting a beautiful day inside if he wasn't feeling well.

As time passed I began to understand the disorder more and was even allowed to help mix the formula and inject it. One of my favorite stories he told me was when he had to go to the doctor to get his portacath readjusted. He complained of chest pains after the realignment and had to return. They did some x rays and the results turned up something frightening. “Well sir it seems the tube of the catheter has gotten lodged in your heart and we will have to go in and remove it immediately.” When the doctor said this Caleb’s family went silent, mouths gaping open, but Caleb, loving the cynical absurdities of life, could not stop laughing at how funny he found the entire scenario. I always admired him for that, being able to find humor in a potentially fatal situation. We were really bored one day and thought why not do some random research on hemophilia. He was curious to see how they synthesized the Factor VIII that he was living off of. So we came across this term of genetically engineered CHO’s. Upon further research we discovered CHO stood for Chinese Hamster Ovaries. Who would have thought that I have Chinese hamsters to thank for the good health of my dear friend?

Something that I haven’t ever really talked to him about specifically is the life expectancy for hemophiliacs. I found out that back in the day hemophiliacs were lucky to live past eleven, but thanks to modern day tech (and the hamsters) they have about the same expectancy as most people. Men lose with this disorder because it is a disorder that attacks us for not having two X chromosomes; it is possible for women to get it but it is really rare. I think he said something about men with hemophilia having ten years less of life on average, and he seems happy with those stats, but they kind of eat away at me. If he and I live similar lifestyles (mine definitely more reckless than his), I could still outlive him by ten years. That is very disturbing to me. I really don’t think that is fair, but he is grateful for all the time he gets. At twenty three Caleb might have had two serious relationships so far in his life. If I had a condition like that I would think I would be absolutely girl crazy and
feel like there is a timer counting down above my head. And it makes me so mad 'cause those two girls were bitches. Something about him being such a nice guy just causes the worst girls to swarm on him. He deserves way better than that and is willing to hold out for the right girl, which is incredible to me.

It has been really cool to see how Caleb deals with his disorder. Instead of it imprisoning him he has sidestepped most things we worry about and gone right for his dreams. Most of us get so caught up in the luxury of daily living that we never get to figure out what we really want to do, let alone actually do those things. Not only has he overcome his situation, but he is also doing what we all wish we could do; whatever our hearts are telling us to. Caleb was in college at UNA for a while and realized it wasn't for him so he dropped out. Even when he was there though we always made fun of him for how much he smiled. You can't be in college and smile as much as this guy did. He realized Florence was too small for him so he moved to Kansas City, Missouri. He now lives with a bunch of other guys in a house that is more like a commune than a home. Caleb is working night shifts for an organization where he is a film director for the company's online web feed. He is a really awesome guy and you would never guess that he had hemophilia unless he forgot to take his meds and you caught him limping a bit.
Something
Caitlin Scully

Is what I thought when I first met him;
He has something hanging above his shoulder, dark,
dreary,
Perhaps Edgar Allen Poe’s ghost.
Tormented or something.
He took a drag of his cigarette and blew the thick cloud of
smoke
Into the school’s fire alarm. Taking my hand he rushed me
down the hall and
I felt a surge of something electric.
We walked or I drove everywhere because he didn’t have a
car or a license-
Something like that. But he did have a guitar
And a voice from the gods,
Something I found attractive and my friends found
dangerous.
At seventeen my life was looking like an extended version
of The Breakfast Club
Something my teachers warned me about, “You’re
supposed to be a role model”- Or something similar.
At night Boston was our playground, a candy store of neon
street lights, public gardens, traffic and pedestrians all
participating in something similar to us.

On the T inbound he would pass me something rolled and laced
With something else and by the time we got to
The Paradise Rock Club or Avalon or Middle East or House of Blues
Wherever his band was paying that night I was hearing my
hair frizz and
Dreaming of the Caterpillar from Alice in Wonderland
Slur “Who are you?” or something phrased like that.
We walked the beach when I felt restless or trapped or
something
And he’d talk about his mother getting electroshock
therapy
And I’d look out onto the horizon of the ocean and long
for the waves
To take me under or something to feel alive
Or anew, I don’t exactly know.
And when I was two weeks away from attending Southern New Hampshire University he called me an elitist and my
mother a bitch
Because she believed in higher education
And I think that is the moment I realized he would never
change,
His something would always be the same.
The Charms of Inner Dialogue

Caleb Darnell

Everyone falls prey
to self loathing
from time to time.
Mired down
So deeply
In that swamp
called self,
you lose sight
of your light
in the jesting miasma.
Directionless, hopeless,
you trudge along,
nothing left to do
but sink
downward.

Everyone has been there.
You can tell by the
Tracks in the mud.

There is a way out
of this nasty
preoccupation.

The solution is simple; change the voice
(or voices)
of your inner dialogue.
Make it innocuous
and goofy.
It may sound foolish,
or downright insane,
but hazard a try.
It's preferable to
the masochistic logistics
of punishing oneself
mercilessly.

The next time your head
tells you: “You'll never amount
to shit, you goddamned loser!” you can
effectively shrug it off
as it was uttered with
a neutered, cartoonish squeal.
The sillier the voice, the better. Curly Howard encourages you to slit your wrists. A high-strung puppet shrilly questions your sexual prowess. Sad clowns chastise you for bungling that job interview, and Ross Perot swears feverishly that your parents never loved you.

Thus the blow is softened, Negativity is deftly diffused and the day gets a little lighter.
To My Lonesome Phonograph

Dylan Schrader

The needle drops in the midst of a 12 pack night—
Hank Williams plays and I sing along.
The hisses and pops drag me away from this time and
Away from my recent memories of you.

Your long black hair waved in the wind.
The moonlight shone through the trees
And we danced as “Harvest Moon” played
Through the speakers of my car.

Hank sounds too blue to fly tonight,
And I’m too buzzed to care. I swap
The records and put on Bob Dylan.
Once again the needle drops...

Hiss, pop, and “Tangled up in Blue.”
One more night drinking
To forget the sound of your voice,
Or the sultry nights of June.

I held you close in the backseat
Of my car—your tan, shapely body
Pressed against mine while

The crickets played harmonies in the woods.
I tilt back another Pabst and laugh as
I fall out of my chair.
The record stops and once again—
I feel as empty as the bottles scattered on my desk.
Lost in a fallen world,
fled from flock and purpose,
In self-defense I
turn to a treasured
pastime of mine:
the “appreciation” of
religious pamphlets.

The sillier, the better,
I always say.
My favorite ones
are made for kids.
Great flourishes of color
with bold Jack Chick
word bubbles
studded with iron-clad
scripture.
Through the spectrum
of cartoon palette,
God folk
whimsically convey
a message
perfected through
centuries of persecution;
you’re going to hell, sinner.

Kids never seemed
more innocent, more pink.
Hell never seemed
more foreboding, more red.
And when the devil
corrupted that boy
with cola and Tolkien books,
my sinner’s heart leaped with glee!

I am in your debt, O
Cartoon Christ!
Even a heathen
such as I is
not beyond the scope
of your pulpy salvation!
You touch me with
your words, your panels,
heal me with
your paint, your ink.
You help me cackle
the woeful present away
whilst hovering in limbo, anxiously awaiting your return: which will be next week, when the truck delivers new copies.

It is the South that made me. With its sweltering summers when I would sit in the house and longingly gaze out into the yards of other kids until I finally learned how to sneak out. If it wasn’t for that Southern heat and hospitality, I would have never wandered onto those screened in porches and asked for a playmate. It was also the cold winters that never made it to any extreme temperature but always kept women in their fashionable boots and furs. 60 degrees in January wasn’t as strange as the enormous overcoat I sweat in all winter because my mother thought it was ‘too cute’. It made me appreciate tiny dirty snowmen that took every inch of snow from the front yard. The South taught me to wear dresses and heels to football games, shorts in December, high hair and thick makeup even when you have a simple t-shirt on—because God forbid anyone from church see me looking too rough. No matter how ridiculous you look, as long as everyone else looks the same way, you are acceptable.

It is the South that made me. My aunts that would swat my hand down when I pointed at people and told me to save my comments until the car. It taught me the courtesy to never say any opinions to someone’s face because that would cause far too many honest feelings to come to fruition. Those things were only to be told in whispers in church pews, over morning
coffee, or late night bitch sessions. It taught me the social
cues that would start the perfect gossip session. It taught me
to look for baby bumps, running mascara, and large (and not
so large) left hand rings. It taught me to distinguish between
the phone calls of sympathy and the phone calls of curiosity. It
taught me that real Southern ladies get drunk behind closed
doors and stare down their noses at those that do otherwise.
It taught me to open a door for everyone, even if they are the
wife-beating, philandering, embezzling asshole down the street
that everyone knows about. If nothing else, the South taught
me courtesy.

It is the South that made me. It taught me about my
politics and beliefs—better yet, politic and belief. Because
there is only one way of thinking here and nothing else makes
sense. It taught me the gun-toting, God-fearing, Confederate-
loving people are the only good people—the salt of the Earth.
It taught me to believe what my parents believe, because that
is the only way to respect them. It taught me to fall in the peer
pressure in my 4th grade mock election. It taught me to keep
my mouth shut when speaking out against the norm. It taught
me to close my eyes, nod my head, and raise my hands in
the air in the church, because otherwise I wasn’t a Christian.
I learned my beliefs should not be my own, but instead the
culmination of everyone around me.

It is the South that made me—and taught me about
everyone else. And by that I mean the Yankees—people from
California, Canada, Mexico, Europe, and the Middle East. That
was everyone else. I learned how awful and rude these people
would be until the day I decided to trek out into the world and
make my own decisions about them. Though ‘those people’
didn’t seem that much different than Southerners, I know that
it just wasn’t the same. The South taught me (by example)
the definition of xenophobia. It taught me the In and the Out
crowds and how easily it is to differentiate the two. It taught me
the history of these two parties and how the South has reacted
to them over time. It taught me to identify another Southerner
even if you are off the coast of South America. It taught me to
stare, gossip, and judge. It taught me to learn what was right
and that questioning those beliefs is just insulting to yourself
and everyone in your life.

It is the South that made me. With its old customs and
expectations of what a Southern belle should be—just the term
sounds like a stale cracker. A belle should keep her mouth shut,
stand in line, learn to cook, and speak when spoken to. They are the
ones that plan out their marriage in high school. They are the
ones that bring their husbands a beer on the couch. They are
the ones with low expectations, high hair, and middle of the
road standards—a Stepford wife with a twang. And they are
everywhere. Thank goodness the South taught me how to act
on a date so I can, hopefully, one day, be married, living in the
exact same town, with the exact same people, and having the
exact same dreams I had before I ‘settled down’.

It is the South that made me. It made the feeling of
freshly pulled cotton, the sound of a mandolin, and the taste of
bacon fat part of my being. It made every memory I have thus
far. It gave me my voice and my words. It gave me a change of
perspective as well as an old way of thinking. It taught me to argue with those that see a different side than I do, and the day came when that was everyone around me. It taught me that the people who are most talked about have the most interesting stories. It taught me that looking the same as everyone is expected but gives you no value. It taught me how to deal with a broken heart when I may have stepped out of my place as a woman—and I am better for it. It may be a twisted, strange place that no one understands except its own inhabitants. It may be ridiculed, exaggerated, and detested. It is everything I know and love and everything I learned to hate. If nothing else, the South taught me to have gumption. If that is the only thing I have taken from it, I think I turned out pretty damn well.

I wonder
Do we need Christ for Christmas?
Can't we just have a holy-day holiday?
Why do we need a virgin birth
by starlight star bright
on a silent pagan night
to be the reason for our season?

Do we need Christ for Christmas?
I wonder if pure, white Christ
would be standing in line in front of florescent temples at black midnight
stocking up on TVs, iPods, couches, and refrigerators
standing in the frigid air or

warming his feet by hobo fire
with fingerless gloves
sharing his love to the heavenly homeless host.

I wonder if Christ wasn’t in Christmas
Would it still smell like oranges and cloves?
Would the poor still need winter clothes?
Would the fir trees turn brown and die?
Would parents still, to their children, lie
about the Scandinavian elf that breaks into
your house at night
steals your damn cookies
and leaves you everything that Christ couldn’t
quite afford
this year—with a blood red bow on top.

I wonder does Christmas need Christ?
would fir trees stand dying forlorn in living rooms
wondering what incandescent star lights their
crowns
and what wandering folded angels are tucked in
their boughs?
Could it be possible to understand
strings of Christ-lights tactically strung between
tinsel stuffed branches
reflected in glass balls
that send warm colored light dancing with the
ember’s shadow
like sugarplum dreams
silhouetted on the floor.
Would Christ know how to decorate his tree?
And I wonder if Christ, in his swaddled splendor could see
snowy carolers on doorsteps, shiny wrapping paper,
policeman’s tazers
miles of multicolored light, tears shed over
checkbooks at night,
honey-baked ham, mac n’ cheese, collard greens,
cold pork and beans
soggy feet, snow-covered streets, glitter traces,
smiling faces,
and I wonder just what he would say
and I wonder just what he would do
captured under the mistletoe
after too much egg nog.
Frat Blues

You’ve learned the Greek alphabet, but still have yet
To read the lessons taught by Socrates
Wanting to be a component
These are not friends, not in a real sense.
Don’t pay your dues, see how quickly they jump
Not to help you
When you hear Plato you think of clay.
Weak understanding of Reason, Euthyphro in character
Representing of the Greek in classless fashion
The purchase of Brotherhood, what a bastardization
Of true fellowship, a weak understanding of togetherness

Blown

Sweat dripped from the bill of my cap like a melting icicle, slowly but consistently. The taste of dirt in my lip along with Skoal. Crouching to attack the next ball, I prepared myself for action. Three runners at second, three at first, and an L Screen on the field. Creeping forward like a child who didn’t want to get caught by his parents, I came to a position of readiness.

One clang of the bat, one ball in the lights, and a simulated play. Spinning like an ice dancer, I turned, head up, to catch the ball soaring over my head. The sound of my breath, the feel of the grass on my cleats, and the silence of the play. Running after the ball like a dog, Ihung my tongue and sprinted into position.

One muscular right fielder, one small second baseman, and one bang. Cutting at the last moment, I heard the silence break with the sound of a shotgun. Hit the grass, grab my knee, and roll in agony. Yelling from the depths of my stomach, I laid down on my back and breathed to the beat of my pulsing knee.
My first memory of Aunt Francesca took place in a crowded shopping mall when I was only six years old. I was hardly old enough to understand grit then, but I knew that day that Aunt Francesca had it ... in spades. Her gaunt face played ironically off of her hulking shoulders as she threateningly thrust her half pointer finger in the face of a terrified Bath and Body Works cashier. She had lost the point of her pointer finger years before my birth while eviscerating a particularly stubborn cabbage. Her people were snake-handling people, and snake-handling people didn’t let fancy doctors sew severed fingertips back on.

The cashier trembled under Francesca’s heavy stare and the relentless gaze of her finger nub. Every tiny hair on her thin upper lip quivered with seething rage. Her skin was darker than most women in their 60s, indicative of years of picking cotton for clothing she would never wear. All five feet and 100 pounds of her had been set off—which was no difficult task—by a misleading coupon. Francesca never was a woman who read the fine print, or much print at all for that matter. But she pulsed with passion for every emotion that entered her, which was why she got mall security called on her and her six-year-old grandnephew that sweltering day in Mississippi.

Francesca had raised my father, and she saw it her duty to raise me, too. She had always been tough—she once beat my father with a hot frying pan for cussing in the kitchen—but I remember feeling her paper-skin hands holding me and realizing that her iron exterior was only a thin veil over her femininity. She’d been married three times, but she never subscribed to a bridal magazine and only once wore a dress to her father’s funeral, where, as far as anyone in the family knew, she cried for the first and only time in her life. Where even the toughest strongman would blubber and wail, Aunt Francesca would lash out with physical violence, oftentimes creatively utilizing household objects as makeshift weaponry. For my great aunt, an umbrella was a spear, a lamp was a club, and, on at least one occasion, a banjo was a baseball bat.

She was often violent, but she raised not only her four children, but her absent brother’s five children as well. All my aunts and uncles who grew up under the threat of her legendary whippings said they always felt loved in spite of them. Her love carried over to me; though she struck at others like a venomous snake, I received nothing but tenderness and a piercing, loving gaze from her in my early childhood. Francesca was not the picture of
femininity, but her peach scent permeated my nose and memory when she hugged and kissed me, and suggested a gentle womanhood wasted on hard times. I never knew her scent was cheap perfume until a gathering at her house after her funeral, when I overheard some of my uncles joking about how she bought it from a corner convenience store. I always assumed she smelled like peaches because they were her favorite food.

Those who knew her closely knew she had her tender side, but to others Francesca was as rough as the skin of her worn, leathered palms. She slept with a loaded shotgun under her Spartan mattress every night of her adult life—and used it twice. Once to put a slug in the shoulder of her schizophrenic neighbor siphoning gas from her 1981 F-150, and once to ward off her belligerently drunk ex-husband, Frank. She blasted five times through the front door Frank was banging on—once for every time he threatened to break it down. The recoil covered her wispy arms and shoulders with purple and jade bruises that matched her electric green eyes. Following a trail of blood two miles down her country road, she called an ambulance for Frank, and the police for herself.

For Francesca, everything she’d been through up to the moment she saw the security guards scampering towards her culminated in an adrenaline rush that, never failing, turned her blood to fire. Her pointed shoulder jabbed into my ribcage as she raced through the food court with me in hand. I held her squirrel-brown wig to her head as if it were a treasured toy. In rollercoaster ecstasy, I watched the brightly colored shop fronts blur like trees along a highway. The air around me was infused with rapid cigarette and peach breaths, and the bloated mall security guards became winded and faded into the crowds. I knew then what grit was. Francesca sucked grit through her teeth like cigarette smoke, and let it permeate her soul.
Roommates

David Gunnels

Their passions merge at the
  Moans and sizzles
  Of hot oil, steam, and cream.
  A tease of garlic and
  Juicy fruits complement
  glazed beef.
They craft their meal gingerly
  With generous portions for each,
  Yet they both really ache for
  What neither can ever achieve.
  A touch for the taboo,
  A forbidden hunger for more than just food.
Tensions mount
  As the meal is taken,
  Sauces tasted,
  They converse about their day.
The sweet scents while tasting wine,
  Shopping for soft bed sheets,
  They know their days are the same.
  They always have each other,
  Just not the way they need.

Fear

1st Place 2D

Lizzie Baxter
I love this enduring skin that holds my soul together.
The slight but strong bones and body
that may resemble a twelve year old boy,
but can still exude my femininity.
I love thigh muscles from years of volleyball past
still holding on strong to the hope of
a good rally soon.
I love my big forehead from which I
received taunts and jabs for years.
But now, says my father, holds more brains than
any bullies ever will.
I love those unpierced, unmarred
ears that I refused to touch
out of stubbornness and an
urge to be different in my preteen years.
I love my fake red hair for its passion
and fire. The only thing I will
ever allow to be unnatural—
my one conventional peculiarity.
I love these eyes
with their strange oversensitivity
and nearsightedness—only stronger by the day.
I love that tiny hidden tattoo

from a young lapse in judgment
which reminds
me how far I have come.
I love every one of my 56 moles—
dark stars in a pale sky.
I love that burn on my left hand—
one of my falls from grace.
I love this crimson blood.
From my beginnings that will never cease.
The One
Eric Maldonado

She alights upon my conscience
as a butterfly doth a lily,
with lightness and Grace and sense.

Her subtle flutter makes me silly.

The First Time
Ashley Gonzales

Not until you're married or you'll go straight to hell was all
she ever remembered hearing. The kids at school laughed
and made crude jokes about things she only pretended
to understand. Her mom had given her a book one time,
one of those Time Life informational books on the male
and female reproductive systems and how the act of sexual
intercourse happened. A bright blue book with glossy cover
and smooth pages, sometimes she would sneak into the
living room to re-read the book, hoping to find the answers
to all those burning questions. Not wanting to seem uncool
she laughed at the jokes the kids told and even repeated
some that seemed the most humorous, all while wishing
that she knew at least half of what she was saying. If only
she had someone to talk to, someone who would answer
her questions without mocking or condemning her to hell.

Then she met him and instinct seemed to guide
her to what she wanted to know. On fire with desire and
without knowledge to protect her she lost it all one stupid
November night. Afterwards she could not recall a single
moment that was beautiful or pleasurable, only memories
of fumbling hands and incessant pleas punctuated by the
sharp pain and overwhelming realization and horror at
what she had just done, than the flooding shame.
When he had finished he threw her the clothes that he had pulled from her body and told her to *Hurry, before my parents come upstairs* then he stepped into the bathroom to wash the blood from his body.

Is this it she wondered. Now somehow broken in a way she did not yet understand and damned to hell she pulled on the clothes and fled from his house before he could see the tears that were starting to spill. If only she had someone to talk to.

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I wonder if we fuck –

a mindless

whirling sweating

drunk grunt and sigh –

will your orange skin

rub off on mine?

What if I can’t wash it off?

What would happen if you, orange girl,

stayed with me

for more than a few whiskey drinks

and awkward twisting hours?

What if I could never wash you away?

Could this be love:

A smear of carrot-colored sex across my bare chest

A fitted sheet ajar, sweaty and crumpled in the corner

A slow ceiling fan sliding shadows on the walls

drying our skin

A few spineless condoms sick – drowned in latex and

our mixed drink:

*Lights & Shadows*
it was the best cocktail in town that night.

Could this be love?
   batting eyes button downs
   ruffled blouses and jammed zippers
   red lipstick on red wine glasses
   immemorial memories without a rhyme like your skin.
Two Days with Eli
Melissa Walker

There is a photograph in my bathroom cabinet. I have no idea why it is there or why I have never thought to move it. My two-year-old reminds me constantly of its existence as he bounces off of the potty and swings the cabinet door open to greet his namesake. "Hi Ewi...Momma, dats Ewi!" He tells me, so proud that he recognizes the little boy in the picture. A timid smile reaches my lips as I catch a glimpse of the bright-eyed boy grinning at me from the picture in my bathroom cabinet. "Yes, that's Eli," I tell my son, thankful that he recognizes the uncle he has never met, thankful that the strawberry blond smiling at him between the stack of washcloths and the rolls of toilet tissue will be the only image he knows of my baby brother. Thankful that, if I try really hard, I can see that little boy too, and sometimes—before the more disturbing images creep in—I can even remember what that silky red hair felt like. I can feel my fingers slipping through it over and over again trying my best to get him to drift off to sleep on the pillow next to mine.

Before my younger brother was conceived, my world consisted of receiving orders from my older brother and being bossed around by nearly everyone older than me (which was pretty much everyone). My older brother felt as if five years made him superior in both intellect and brute strength. He towered over me and expected my life's purpose to include serving him, but finally, the day I had been anxiously awaiting had arrived. My baby brother had entered the world, and I would tower over him with all of the authority my nine years would allow. As I sat in the waiting room, my mind raced with excitement, my hands and feet surged with nervous energy; and while consumed with my anticipation, I failed to notice the sullen faces filling the room around me. I couldn't stop smiling even when my dad ushered my brother and me into another room. It was only then, when I glanced up and into the eyes of my father, that I glimpsed the tear hanging just inside the bottom rim of his eyelid. It just sat there waiting for its opportunity to roll down his cheek and enter the world. My smile faded as he grasped for the words that seemed to elude him. My father slowly began to speak in a low, almost inaudible voice, as if he was leaking a secret that wasn't his to tell. I didn't understand most of what he said. So, I began a sort of internal conversation trying to force my young mind into comprehending information that was far beyond its grasp. My thoughts began to race: "Cystic Fibrosis? What is that—like Asthma maybe? That's
not so bad; I have a friend with Asthma, and she has a sister who bosses her around nearly everyday while they stand in line waiting for the bus.” Soon though, I realized Cystic Fibrosis wasn’t like asthma at all. This was wrong. I was supposed to be asserting my authority. I was supposed to be holding him in my arms, telling him how it was going to be in my house. Two days? He might not live two days! This wasn’t right at all.

But he did live two days. He lived so much more. This scrawny little infant, with an I.V. protruding from the top of his head, beat the odds over and over again. Every time some solemn specialist in a lab coat related the latest life expectancy for my little brother, Eli surpassed it and left them scratching their heads. He grew into an active boy with light brown eyes that sparkled when he laughed. A strawberry blond who tanned beautifully in the summer, he ran around the various campsites we visited with his shirt off showing anyone who cared to see the “zipper” that crossed his belly. This prominent scar was evidence that this laughing, running, marshmallow-roasting little man had endured a lot in his short life. Surgeries, doctor visits, the barrage of daily medications—these were all in stark contrast to his outgoing nature which infected those around him with an appreciation for life.

Eli continued to go grow, and in a short time, I found myself waiting in the driveway as the yellow school bus approached to deliver him from his first day of kindergarten. We met in the middle of the driveway, he rolled his eyes up toward me, and with a sigh asked, “Can I quit now, or do I gotta wait till I’m seventeen?” School was not always a walk in the park for Eli. He was different. In elementary school, a minor flaw will fling a child into a small group of misfits; a major abnormality or a series of imperfections and that child is an alien on a foreign planet. Eli was small for his age; he was absent a lot; he ate too much; he took more pills after one meal than most people take in a year. These imperfections required him to endure snickers and pointing, name-calling and bullying, teasing and isolation. He scraped the food off of his lunch tray into the garbage instead of asking for the extra helpings his body needed. He skipped doses of medication in an effort to fit in with his classmates. Meanwhile, he continued to blow by the time limits placed on his life and grew into a long lanky teenager who no longer found the need to conform.

He discovered a group of people who accepted him because he was different. Black became the bulk of his wardrobe’s color palate. He hung metal chains around his neck and dangled them from the belt loops on his oversized pants. He painted his finger nails, pierced his ears (at least his ears were all that I knew about), and found a home in a clique of outsiders. He tucked sketch books under his arm and drawing pencils behind his ear. I had the privilege to peek into his world through these drawings. He was an artist. I encouraged him to educate himself and enter the field of graphic design—but Eli
missed a lot of school. He knew his time here was limited, and the finish line was rapidly approaching. Occasionally, I would forget, but I would soon be reminded when one of his sketches was interrupted by a coughing spell that left him gasping for breath and sent visible shock waves through his frail body. His two days had come and gone.

When my little brother turned twenty, I rode with my aunt and uncle to visit him in the ICU in Memphis. My uncle went for coffee; my aunt waited in the hall; I entered the small sterile room that my brother was currently calling home. I couldn’t find the strawberry blond who used to lie beside me fighting sleep with every ounce of energy his little body could muster. I searched unsuccessfully for the defiant kindergartner who struggled to find his niche in this world. I didn’t see the dark artist who met me in the hallway at my church to bring me a framed bible verse for my birthday. Instead, I discovered a frail, tired, wisp of a man who didn’t weigh enough to make a dent in the mattress. He had tubes running from every corner of the hospital blanket that covered him. He had a respirator taped to his mouth. His hair was no longer the beautiful bright strawberry color it had once been, but had darkened into a dull, matted, coarse jungle that stuck up all over his head. His light brown eyes found mine, and I saw the pain and fear that had replaced the love for life that they had once possessed. I remember little about that visit except for telling him that I loved him and watching a tear slowly roll down his cheek as he nodded his head in affirmation.

I prayed with him, asking God for mercy and for His will to be done in Eli’s life. I kissed him on the forehead; I left the small room; I collapsed in the arms of my aunt waiting in the hall.

I would visit him one more time, and he would gesture for me to remove the respirator that kept him alive. That was beyond the scope of my family’s capability. He knew we loved him too much, and apparently, God knew it as well. He took Eli home soon after that visit. My husband sang a beautiful rendition of When I Get Where I’m Going at his funeral, and his family and friends celebrated a life that could have ended in two days. I am thankful to have had my baby brother in my life. I asserted my authority, I taught him, I learned from him, but mostly—I loved him.

I have many pictures of him around my house, but the one in my bathroom cabinet—I think it will stay right where it is. I have a little boy who shares his uncle’s name, and that photograph is his little secret. He loves to pop open that cabinet and greet his namesake like they have this special hidden relationship that takes place between the washcloths and the toilet tissue. I love that.

The lab coats only gave him two days, but Eli—he gave us twenty-one years. In that time, he showed me the meaning of courage, the value of stubbornness, and the definition of love. I will always attempt to remember my brother as that marshmallow-roasting toddler, as that defiant kindergartner, as that dark artist, but occasionally, the image creeps in of that suffering wisp of a man begging
to go home. When that happens, I just stop and thank God that Eli is no longer suffering; because I know, that when I see him again, his hair will be a bright strawberry blond, and my fingers will feel its silky texture as I look into his light brown eyes—that will sparkle when he laughs.

[Falling]
The building zooms by at speeds Faster than birds pass on the way down.
I remember a set of pale blue eyes And ivory hands pushing me as the ground and I collide—I awake.

[Sweating Bullets]
I've been waking this way at 3 am every morning Since the accident. My girlfriend is leering at me With a look between worry and contempt As I wipe the sweat from my forehead.

[Drive]
On the ride to work every morning I pass the site of the accident I can still see her pale blue eyes stare Into mine as I held her little white hand And her soul left her body.

[Work]
The computer stares back at me as I think of How she used to sit and work on her manuscript.
I used to love the way her mouth moved gently
As she edited.

[Diner]
After work my girlfriend meets me at our favorite diner.
I order steak and eggs and she orders a salad.
She starts talking about work and I fail to
listen. Her green eyes don’t have the same enthusiasm
as Josephine’s blue eyes did.

[Dreaming]
She is sitting in the café where she always wrote.
She’s reading Faulkner—As I Lay
Dying. The sun shines brilliantly on the passing cars, even
the one
That will kill her.

[Another Dream]
I dream she is next to me, the scent of lilacs and
Chamomile permeate the air, and she kisses me
Once, Twice, Three times.
Then fades away, into nothing.

[Waking]
Her fading memory wakes me again.
Three A.M. My girlfriend is asleep this time.
It’s been three years and twenty-seven days.
Purgatory lasts a while.

[Pawn Shop]
I walk in to the dusty old pawn shop.
Browsed around and bought a real beauty.
.357 magnum. Jet black. Quick trigger.
I pull it back, imagine my ending.

[Calling in]
I call in to work today. I tell them I have a cold.
I lock the door, pull back the hammer,
And realize I am too much of a coward.
“I’ll see you again one day, honey,” I tell myself.
To Whom It May Concern

Brandon Thigpen

You may not have known him, but my granddad was a great man. He was a strong and handsome, with skin browned from the relentless sting of the high noon sun, lean from the harsh work that comes from roadside construction, hair always parted and perfect, with a strong love for his God and family. A meticulous thinker he was, who would always think ahead, planning for the worst but always hoping for the best. While he could be serious when it came to work and business, he always had a lighthearted demeanor and knew how to enjoy life. I remember those days long ago when he would carry me fishing at the pond on his property. The hum of the dragonflies buzzing about and the sound of a catfish breaching the surface are as audible today as they were those many years ago. The blood that coated our hands when he showed me how to scale and prepare fish, the taste of our hard earned dinner, all still resonate with fervor in my brain.

However, he enjoyed his cigars. So much in fact that he would cut them into four pieces so they would last longer. He did not drink or engage in any other vices, but he did love his smokes. He stopped smoking well before I was born, though I still remember him indulging in chewing tobacco on those days I would spent at his house. The damage from years upon years of smoking, however, had been done. As I grew older and stronger, my granddad grew thinner and weaker. A phlegmy, painful cough haunted every waking moment as his condition became more severe. A stroke one night signaled that the end was nigh. A once strong, mobile man was reduced to a shell of his former glory. His tan skin became deathly gray and pale. A walker became mandatory for his mobility—that is, if he had the breath to walk. His speech became slurred and nearly inaudible, and the doctors now discovered that he had developed esophageal cancer from his years of cigar smoking.

And slowly, my grandfather wilted in his Palliative Care room at ECM. Those last visits hold the deepest pain for me. At the funeral, I was happy that he had been released from a body that had turned its back on him. But as I sat there by his side—a smile hiding my tormented mind—I knew that the strong man I knew for so long would soon be no more. The man that had taught me to fish, had helped my family though hard times, and loved me more than his own self, would be eroded away by the winds of time. His once perfect hair was a frizzy, oily mess. Food no longer tasted good to him, so he stopped eating. His skin was so tightly pulled against his bones that he looked like cadaverous skeleton. He did not have the breath to move, so a catheter was inserted to help with waste removal. And the most haunting sound was his raspy, pained breaths that sounded like a shovel scraping over a tombstone.
Invasion Installation

Art Faculty Award & 1st Place
Digital Media

Jennifer Prybyla

Lights & Shadows
Back Door Man

Amber Huett

He carries the mailbag everywhere he goes.
He carries the mailbag everywhere he goes.
Shouldn’t come in the house, but every day he does.

The other houses have boxes at the front.
All the other houses have mailboxes at the front.
He comes in our back door, then I hear the grunts.

My Mama lets him in when Daddy says goodbye.
Mama lets him into the house when Daddy says goodbye.
He smiles and winks at me with my same brown eyes.

Mama says she loves him because they have fun.
Yeah, Mama loves him because he’s so much fun.
When Daddy finds out, he’s gonna get his gun.

Puppet Master

Tajha Lewis

You loved me, but I only played
you, something I could play with,
where and there, when I felt like it.

The time I laid eyes on you, different,
like the gods themselves made you.
A radiant smile, just a glance mesmerizes,
Muscles a penny could bounce off.

After saving, praying, and hopefully wishing I finally got you.
Not allowing anyone to come near for in fear of losing and
even damaging you,
I just couldn’t get enough of this rare treat.

I had you on strings, entertaining me was your
Job, and you did it without ceasing because....

You would tell yourself
“Today has to be the day.”

Such a fool, I was playing. Like every puppet
master must learn, the strings will break,
the paint will fade.
We’ve been speaking...but see speaking isn’t enough for love. Love contains so many things exposed, and trying to hold it in could denature it all.

We’ve been talking...but that’s too much for careless people. Open heart talking leaves this distant relationship in dismay. I’m still learning the ropes of how you function.

We’ve been conversing...talking a little deeper than the average. Being honest about what’s happening at heart and in the eye. Love’s cries, intention of emotion, the “hidden” meaning of an act. Sanity is intact.

We’ve been relating.... Does the story repeat with a different pair of teeth? Do we chatter until we’re done playing achy break-y on repeat? Or should we live as if today matters and tomorrow could never come?

Love comes when not in pursuit, if you’re not listening for the flute.
You said I love you into a pillow so it would muffle up your voice; because, although the words were true, you couldn’t bear to make that choice.

I couldn’t hear what you were saying, but I knew what you had said. The sound still dancing on my eardrums and resonating in my head.

There were two paths that lay ahead. One was paved and one was gravel. And despite the things I said, you chose the easy road to travel.

You said that this might happen and I said I didn’t care. I thought, *maybe things will work out* after everything we shared.

You’re beautiful and virtuous and everything between. I believed in a dream of “us,” the same one you too had seen.

I want you to be happy and I want you to be free. And I wish it meant, instead of him, that you would be with me.

I know that you have wanted this since before we ever met. And that the paths ahead were opposite, a hippy and a vet.

Well listen to me closely and lend to me your ear. If I could and had the power, I would wipe away your fear.

I know you from the outside in, which is more than I can say for him.

To me you shine bright as the sun. To him, his view of you is dim.

I accept you for your flaw and folly, but do you think he’d do the same? I respect the choice you had to volley, but your final spike lost me the game.

Champions are made of sticks and stones. I even knew this from the start.

I would have rather had you break my bones, but instead you broke my heart.

The pieces of me, scattered around, wait for you to put them back together.

So take from your finger, that string of yours and wrap around my heart, your teather.
Some people believe that the only true abuse is physical – that if there are no signs of bodily pain or suffering, then a child or spouse or lover is fine and healthy. I knew this as a child, remembered in perfect detail the vague disinterest of the nuns only half-listening to my story, or the priest who informed me that little girls who lie must cleanse her sins in the confessional. I remember watching the pretty red candles at the foot of the Virgin Mother burn as he scolded me, how the light threw itself upwards and played across her faded, painted features as she stared down with an expression once-beatific but now simply tired. I was selfish, he said. There was always food on my table, always clothing on my back, warmth when the air was cold and cool when the air was humid. There were many children who ate scraps out of garbage cans to survive, not to mention those poor starving people in Botsuana. How self-centered was I, he asked me, when I complained of abuse from a man who moved the world to keep me in school?

My father was just about canonized for sainthood by the rest of the church. He was a good man, they said, a real salt-of-the earth kind of fellow. Truly generous. He would gift those church members down on their luck with clothing and toys for their children; on those same days, I'd notice
my bare dresser drawers. I couldn’t begrudge them their gifts of course – they truly did need those things, times were hard for them – but that blocks-long walk to school in the snow would have been much more comfortable with a coat of some sort. There must have been a reason he did that, people would say as I stood shivering in the hallway, my wool socks and shined shoes soaked to the point of being placed on the chipped-paint radiator nearby. My father was a good man. I must have done something wrong for him to discipline me so.

At home, I was deemed incapable of performing the meanest of tasks. Brooms were taken out of my hands, dishes out of my fingers, W index and washcloths away from the sills. Sometimes I’d even be dressed – can’t risk me wearing something backwards after all, or looking silly. When I ate he would lean forward across the old, rickety white table with his napkin and wipe off my face since I couldn’t be trusted to do it myself, humiliating me regardless of the company present. Other folks began to think I was just a very slow child, a burden on my poor father; after all, he was a kind man. I must have done something to earn that. Such things can be easily internalized, and for some time the slow child sat there in her learned helplessness as tasks were completed all around her, tasks she had learned to feel she was simply too inept to accomplish herself. Teachers at school began to wonder at my listlessness, my lethargy, the way I stared at the walls. Oh what a burden my poor father carried.

The fights between my mother and father were always out in the open, with the violence seen but the resolution never displayed – as if soft words and tender feelings weren’t worthy of the same publicity as angry rhetoric. Or perhaps there were never any makeups at all; the fighting was a near-constant thing. He’d punish her by withholding love, behaving coldly to her, refusing to touch her or speak in her presence save when absolutely necessary. He hid in another apartment of the complex, one used for storage and filled to the brim with pots and pans and other necessities taken out once a year for holidays. He punished me by withholding himself. When I displeased him, I didn’t exist. His eyes went through me, his ears couldn’t pick up my raspy voice. His body stayed limp when I hugged him, as though he weren’t there either – though I could always smell his Old Spice cologne, feel the warmth of his chest and the smooth stitching of the sleeves on the arms that I wanted so badly to hug me.

There was never enough that I could do. When I brought home A’s, he wanted to know why they weren’t A+. When he said I wasn’t active, I joined the swim team – only to be resented for the responsibility that driving me to and fro would place on him. When I’d ask to play he was always far too busy, though my younger sister never had to beg. All she had to do was reach out her pudgy little arms for him, or grasp at the corners of the old brown recliner, and he’d scoop her up into his arms with a look of true delight on his normally stern features. I recall wishing often that I was her,
then feeling selfish. I had a mother who adored me and
showered me with love, with attention, with encouragement.
Why did I always focus on this man, this stranger in my
house? That was often brought up to me as well. So you
have one parent you’re not happy with – big deal. At least
you have ONE who cares. Be grateful. Show some joy for
what you have.

Time has aged him like a sour wine, though it has
aged me well. Every act in his house now is one of defiance
– when I sweep the floor, when I wash the dishes, when
I scrub the windows or feed the cats. To speak of him in
anything less than glowing terms is a bald lie, and how could
I do that to the man who’s work once supported me? I often
find myself wondering if he’s right, if the years of coldness,
of being berated and made to feel small, were a tiny price
in comparison to the home his hard work provided for me.
Am I selfish? Am I entitled, even spoiled?

When that happens, when he rants, when he yells in
his fury or throws coffee cups, he doesn’t exist. My eyes go
through him, my ears can’t pick up his raspy voice. I use all
the tactics he taught me so well against him, and I cope. I
rise above him by becoming him.

And some tiny voice in the back of my head, some
little cold hands squeezing knots into my stomach, ask me if,
perhaps, I might one day be canonized for sainthood as well.
The sun poured into my eyes for the first time in weeks. The snow had finally stopped and it was time to travel a little farther from a shelter. No one outside of this country knew what was going on over here. If they did know I am not sure they would care. Not after the way we marched onto every province we could and made them do what we wanted. Not after everything we have done in the name of Democracy and Freedom, as if these two things existed flawlessly and without regret. Pure bliss for the military men and pure hell for the men that still had some shred of humanity and compassion. I was somewhere in middle of the two. Some sort of moral purgatory has plagued my soul and mind. I wasn’t sure how I would react to the simplest situations anymore. The world had changed and so we had to change with it. I walked through the thick bed of snow that covered everything in sight. Flow far was I going to go? I wish I knew the answer to that. There was no life about except the birds that flew overhead and because the snow killed all the food it wouldn’t be long for them. What was I to do now? What happened here?

I thought I knew. Maybe that was just what I was suppose to know. Maybe it isn’t even truth. How do I even know for sure this is happening? I unholstered the pistol on my hip and pulled the trigger. The crack in the silence was enough to let me know it was real... enough. I would trek on until I at least found an area with something sturdy enough to build a shelter.

Suddenly large boulders of flame descended from the sky and pounded and gnarled the soil around me as I dashed and dove out of death’s grasp. Where was this coming from? I pondered as I quickly gazed up in between quick dashes. There seemed to be an aerial assault overhead almost too high to hear any noise from at all, and from here it just sounds like a hard wind. Without a steady gaze upward, which seems quite unreasonable, unless of course if large pieces of flaming shrapnel are slicing into the earth upon which you walk, then there would be no way of seeing this battle of supremacy. Problem was, I didn’t know what side to pretend to belong to.

All that came to mind that seemed reasonable was running like hell and hoping. Hoping I made it to wherever the hell I happened to be going. I’m not sure what the feeling was I drew from looking up at the massive battle of flying leviathans. It was a strange brew of relief that I wasn’t all that was left and a fear of death in a most brutal fashion. There was also a dash of humor. I’m not sure what brought that comedic feeling on. Maybe it was knowing that no matter what happened to me it was all going to be in vain.

I was lying to myself. I had some image in my head
that this world could go back to what it was. I knew that would never happen. I'm not sure if I even wanted it to. Was a world full of death and hate and greed a world that should exist? Was I in position to make that call? As I watched the ships above weave and whirl around in battle I realized that the world I knew, the world that was mine, would never be again. This new world would takeover and whatever side won would rule only for a little while until the opposite faction gained control and this see-saw would continue until each side started to split and then there would be many factions that made alliances with each other and there would be some sort of balance, at least a few decades of peace before war took over the hearts and minds of men again. Slowly it would turn into something similar but also very different of its previous existence.

I had seemingly maneuvered myself away from the area that the wind was carrying the debris that was steadily falling from the sky. I finally reached the edge of the smoke and dust that hampered my orientation and saw a clearing. “Where to now?”, I muttered out loud to myself and the empty world around me. Nothing was anywhere. Just gnarled and damaged land that had been here for millennia and would continue to be here until complete destruction.

I have watched the sun rise twice since I witnessed the aerial assault. I never found out which side was victorious. Not sure it would matter. I still have found no person nor inanimate object that can help me make heads from tails of the severity of the situation I was in. I have tried to remember what happened before I woke up in the last shack I left. 76 was etched into the side of the lean-to. I’m not sure what it meant or means but all I remember is 76. Everything else before that is just a white flash. I can see movement within the flash but nothing of substance, nothing that defines anything. I was in that shack so long I don’t really remember anything before I emerged into the world on this current journey. There were no birds in the sky now. Odd as it seems, I haven’t found any bird corpses. They must just be magically vanishing, that is a better explanation than the present one.

Somewhere out there has to be living. Somewhere there has to be children laughing, running with puppies that are too clumsy for their legs, and sharing an ice cream cone with their fuzzy friend. If that isn’t out there, if peace isn’t out there, then whatever is out there isn’t what I need or what the world needs. How long do I search for it? Do I starve to death or do I use a bullet to end my journey? They say that starving isn’t painful after the first week and I’m likely to die in my sleep. The bullet is much more of a drama, a dark spray of blood and brain across the ground I am forced to trek. The bullet takes courage, it is sudden and it is irreversible. Starving seems to be much more of a commitment. Is this where I am, where I am going? Mulling over how to best kill myself doesn’t seem to be the best thought exercise. I have heard nothing, seen nothing, smelled nothing but thick air full or nothing. Suddenly it got dark. A storm, something real. This was nature boasting its power. Problem was, there was no one around to witness this monstrosity of frustration from the mother that bore us.
Renewal in the Midwest
Alex Lindley

You are a lean-to
church in the Dust Bowl
drowning out the sounds
of gritty gusts with gospel
music. I can see you there--

You are the elderly lady
in the white hat, tarnished
by the dust in the air,
your house, your ears.

You are the deacon
who noticed the church grounds
are surrounded by a ring
of dead, but barely green,
grass and included it in
your sermon.

You are the congregation--
the haggard poetesses who
said the words of the sermon
pooled in their minds like a cup
of cool water spilled on
cracked, baked earth.

You are the saloon-style doors
blown open by the gale, and

you are the spittle from the mouths
that cried out when
the dust hit their eyes.
The sidewalks and trash forming loud mountains of smell bring back a time when the city lived and was more than ethereal imaginings of the golden apple. Before black hole yuppies muscled the family business from the gentle Sicilians. Before the lemon arches replaced the monobrow of some old Greek mother warmed with the logos of her dusty dead ancestors and the coffee that revives the city’s vampires for another night of fucking and drugs and drinking and dreaming and even living beneath the spotlights that shine on all the steel babes ever shaking empty the tall glass of time. Man ha tt an, draw me out into your distraught ghettos and family plots and tattoo shops and funeral parlors where the famous and rich and poor and academics and poets and junkies are merely the dead. Manhattan, you are astonishing, like an honest man of magic birthing cathedrals and record stores.
and dive bars and
whores and brown
drivers for yellow
cars and race wars
that parade before
my face from deep
within the walls of
modernity’s womb.

In the hole by the
river I sit and wait,
in this space where
once glimmered
mighty trees of
national pride of
power of dignity,
for a winged deity
to sweep me up in
its arms and ferry
me to that far shore
where the dreams of
peace of redemption
await await I await

and I wake to find
only spirits perpetually
crashing down aflame
and afraid. Awaiting
arms that are amputated
by the passage of time.
A New Orleans Side Street at Dawn
Alex Lindley

I am the son of the invincible mother
And the father who is beautifully flawed;
Of a simple time viciously clawed
Changing violently into another.

I tell you that I have seen it in my time,
The lamplight that trickles from an aged crack
In the wall behind the café, and runs down your back—
A slug with a trail of neon sign slime.

You say that I've romanticized those days,
And a moralist wouldn't let such memories simmer
Like gumbo or jambalaya, until the truth is dimmer
Than the dusk, but the jazz was nice, and the plays.

I am the son of the invincible mother
And the father who is beautifully flawed;
Of a simple time viciously clawed
Changing violently into another.

And my parents' voices wash over me like when the levee broke,
When the stoop stood two twains deep.
The contrast between then and now, wake and sleep,
Is the vibrant life of which they spoke.