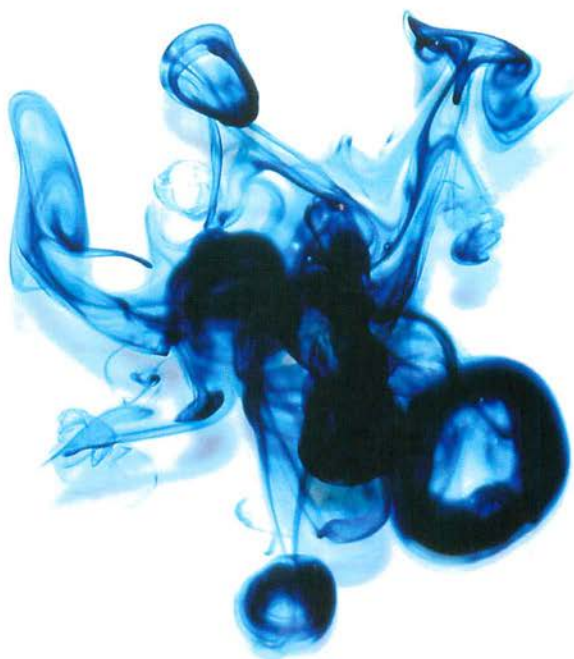


# WATERSHED

A LITERARY MAGAZINE



# WATERSHED

Volume 34

## **WATERSHED**

Volume 34

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## Writing, Spinning, Waiting

*"Sob, heavy world Sob as you spin, Mantled in mist Remote from the happy."*

—W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*

I've just begun an early-morning draft  
when a neighbor's lawn mower  
roars to life, belching oily fumes  
through my bedroom window.  
Its blades spin like furious scythes,  
devouring the summer-scorched grass.

Mid-afternoon I'm revising a different piece altogether  
when I hear the rotors of an LAPD helicopter overhead—  
not the gentle *whup-whup-whup*  
of television sound effects,  
but a real-life, angry buzzing against the ceiling-sky,  
its pilot searching for criminals  
on these palm tree-lined, iron-gated streets.

After dark I hear my ceiling fan  
whirring quietly, slicing through the California heat  
and sending tufts of smooth, delicious air  
toward my upturned cheek.

With the ghosts of today's writing  
swirling around my brain,  
I turn over and burrow my now cool cheek  
into a warm, sweaty pillow,  
patiently waiting for the world to stop spinning.

## My Wooden Skiff

*...and for your boatman, choose old John of Dreams*

Gordon Bok, Bill Caddick

My wooden skiff lies sunburned in the lake,  
her curving stem tied to the mooring chain.  
I dream of boats and water, then I wake.

*Dude, I'm done with 9 to 5; we've got to fake  
the flu tomorrow, offload stress and strain.*  
Her lap-strake hull lies weathered in the lake.

*Tethered to the time, God knows we need a break  
from office mayhem, ink and coffee stains.*  
I dream of gentle swells until I wake.

*Let's cast off sweaty bosses on the take!  
Bass await our bait and fishing brains.*  
Her leathered oars will pull us 'cross the lake.

*Launch at dawn, you bring the beer, we'll forsake  
these bone-dry cubicles for watery terrain.*  
I'm more water-man in dreams than when awake.

I hear salty tunes of song-brimmed boatmen naked  
to the wind; their voices measure, treasure loss and gain.  
My wooden skiff lies sunburned in the lake;  
I'll sing of boats and water when I wake.

*Bob Garner*

---

## Wainright





## Possession

I wander through my parents' house  
cataloging items in my head  
thinking, *This is mine. This is mine, too.*  
saying, "Mom, you really  
should get someone in here to help you clean."

My mother won't let a stranger  
touch her things, she says, all the things  
my father bought her before he passed. My mother  
doesn't need any help  
from me, she says. Everything is fine.

My sister calls me late at night  
wonders how our mother's doing, wants  
to talk about assisted living, a nursing home  
clearing out the house. She wants  
the zebra lamps, she says, she wants  
the enameled plates from Siam.

I tell her  
they're already gone.

## **Altar for the Window Washer with crumpled bills, statues, broken glass and squeegee**

Snow angels with broken wings  
beat against dream windows.  
St. Francis sleeps beside  
Right Guard and Lysol,  
one eye open as the wind  
strums soft blue  
eggs nested in barb wire.

Now only my arms sleep  
gathering beams of lost light  
and spider webs  
for strength—the rest of me  
alert  
and ready to climb the oily  
scaffold  
to sweep the night's mine  
field

to turn the other unstitched  
cheek  
when they come in the night  
with broken  
bottles and baseball bats  
to steal my teeth and open  
veins for a mere eight bucks  
leaving the smell of trampled  
blood behind.

Sometimes at night holes in  
the canvas make Missouri  
stars where I sit on the  
bench until the ninth—

if I could only close my eyes,  
the crack  
of that bat might echo again  
over the bleachers  
into the pillow where I left  
my baby teeth

hoping for a dime—my arms  
flap now against  
the spattered moths and cold  
glass—the strip  
of a windshield's promise—for  
every ten,  
pity pays off, with coins and  
a few fuck-yous  
thrown in...my broken statues  
might forgive

them for opening the gaps  
between my smile  
but not for stealing the soft  
quiet place  
where memories nested milky  
sweet—  
the candled eggs, the bay  
window  
we washed together that  
spring morning in May.

## And the Sailor Home from the Sea

Just above the high tide line,  
wet kelp shimmers and seagulls glide  
above some thing they've never seen,  
wrapped in spindrift and seaweed.

It's the body of a drowned man,  
with bulging eyes and swollen hands,  
released now from the waves of dawn  
to rest on the beach beneath the sun.

Salt crystals glitter in the tangled hair,  
and sharp-beaked terns swoop out of the air  
to strut and peck at the taut blue skin,  
as the sun climbs high and the fog grows thin.

Gulls by day and crabs by night  
strip down the flesh to skeleton white,  
till all that's left is a gleaming skull—  
salt crystals wink in a dark eye-hole.

*Brittaney D. Browne*

---

# Untitled



## **Of Tricycles and Bicycles**

Next to her a tricycle sits,  
too small for her long legs  
now stretching to touch the ground.  
She, unsure of my firm grasp  
upon her seat, grips the handlebars,  
white-knuckled, as I promise to hold  
tight and tell her to pedal just as she  
once did on her trike.

Now it is I who sit upon the seat,  
unsure, unknowing, that he has bent  
the training wheels just enough  
so that I am riding without them.  
His hands let go despite my insecurities,  
his voice near me, assuring that I will not  
fall, and that it does not hurt if I do.

His father too must have played  
these little tricks to make him brave.  
Teasing and laughing so he will not cry,  
so he will get up and try again, and again.  
Holding his seat tightly at first,  
then forgetting to tell him that he has let go.  
Each letting go across the generations.

## Heaven on Earth

Ladies in hats and men in suits flooded the lawn. Church had just adjourned, and the sky was unusually gray for mid-September. When everyone else was still praising the lord and eating baked beans, I went to visit my grandpa, who says the lord didn't help him anymore than the white folks did in Mississippi. Every day he'd wake up at dawn and hobble around his five-acre ranch house, 'cause there was always "water to be cut off, logs to be split, or peaches to be picked." His house was one of the smallest I've ever seen, surrounded by blackberry bushes and poplar trees. It was bordered by green, rolling hills except for the north end of the property. The house though, was proud.

I came running past him at full speed with scraped elbows and knees. I turned around and asked, "You need help with that there choppin' wood, Grandpa?" He set the ax down and rested both his hands on top, "Don't no eight-year-old have any business with an ax." I shrugged my shoulders, moved towards him, and sat on the biggest stump I could find. The edge of the stump was scratching my legs, and the moss was tickling my calves, so I sat like the Indians used to with my legs folded on top of each other. "No, no, ya can't sit there, I'm workin' here, and it's too dangerous for a child your age. What if I was to bust open this here log, and it come up and hit you in the eye?" I laughed inside. I was always at risk of getting "bit by a rattlesnake... breakin' my neck...or getting picked up by some stranger." He'd always say, "I didn't have nobody to tell me what is right and wrong, and I wish I did."

I went inside and opened up a cold can of Coca-Cola and sat on the deck. The bubbles in the coke were so concentrated that my eyes began to water. The breeze picked up and the sky began to groan again. I curled up in my grandpa's favorite chair. It became his one day when he was driving home from work. He spotted it on the side of the highway turned over in some blackberry bushes. It was stained from the blackberries and had thorns embedded into the fabric, but he brought it home anyways and said, "This is a fine chair, it's a shame to the person who lost it." Now, it is torn near the shoulder and it squeaks when you rock back and forth. But I didn't care. I sat there

in the breeze with a squeaky, stained chair and watery eyes, waiting for my grandpa. I could hear him coming up the steps. I knew it was him because it would take my grandpa twenty-six steps to get to the top instead of thirteen because he didn't run up them one-by-one like me, but instead he placed both feet on the step before tackling the next one. I heard him open the door and let out small sighs of relief once he got into the house. He opened the icebox and cracked open a coke, turned the corner and spotted me sitting in his chair. He kept walking my way and knew his chair would be empty by the time he got to it. I sat on the clean, hard wooden box next to the barbecue. He sat down in the chair faster the closer he got toward the seat and let out one final sigh as if the job was done. He took the first sip of his coke. I saw his eyes water. He pursed his lips and said,

"What are you doin' with shorts on, child, the rain is coming."

"I like to feel the breeze."

"How'd you get them scars there on your legs?"

"Runnin'."

"See that's your problem, you're always runnin' everywhere. Seems like you're nervous, never can stop movin'." He looked down at my legs that were hanging from the big wooden box and swinging back and forth as though I was still running down the green hill to his house. I quieted my legs and took another sip of coke. It started to rain.

Inside, Grandpa was reading the newspaper and I was lining up chess pieces from my favorite to least when Mama called. The horse was always my favorite. My grandpa used to have a horse back before I could remember. I wished he'd got another and would always ask him why he didn't. He just said it "was one more thing in life that'll break your heart." Now I sat at his moccasined feet that pushed against the floor again and again, to rock the big blue chair my grandma used to knit in. He got off the phone and looked down at me. I smiled and waited for him to give me a report of what the phone call was about. Instead he just said, "If you're not gonna play the game right, don't play at all." I pushed aside all the chess pieces and folded up the checkered board. "Your mama says you gotta get home because you



have school in the mornin' and somethin' about a clarinet." I sighed, wishing that I didn't have to go back to Mama who was always telling me to "Cross your legs your in a dress, child!" and "Smile, but don't be too friendly to strangers!" I gathered my shoes from behind the kitchen door, thinking how much I hated the clarinet, and put them on. Grandpa was watching me as I fumbled with the laces. "C'mon get your coat." He grabbed his keys.

"You're gonna drive me home, Grandpa?"

"Naw, child, I just like to stand in the door with my keys." I laughed and skipped out the door.

Instead of racing down the steps and jumping once I got to the bottom three, I held my grandpa's hand and took all twenty-six steps. His old truck was an '83 Ford and smelled like dust and alfalfa hay. I thought about how my mama always said it takes longer to drive than to run across the hill because of the way the crow flies or somethin'. When we got to my house, I started to swing the door open to run across the lawn, but my grandpa said, "Hold on there now, stop runnin'." I waited for him to get out of the truck. As we walked around the untrimmed lawn, my grandpa mentioned that our rain gauge was full and that it should have been emptied before today.

"What good is a rain gauge when you're lettin' all the rain run out?"

I didn't really know what a rain gauge was good for in the first place, so I stayed quiet. When we got to the front door he handed me a peppermint candy, put his hand on my shoulder, and started walking back down the driveway. Before I got inside I sat on the step on the porch, popped the red-and-white striped candy in my mouth, and watched my grandpa make his way to his truck and drive away. The peppermint and cool air made my nose burn, but I liked it.

Inside Mama had a phone trapped between her shoulder and ear and was opening a box of instant macaroni and cheese. She quickly abandoned the phone when she saw me. "That was your music instructor. He says you are not ready for tomorrow and have been uncooperative during lessons."

"I'd cooperate if I didn't have to play the clarinet."

“That’s not cooperation, that’s getting your way.”

“Why can’t I have my way?”

Mama slopped a big mess of cheesy noodles in front of me. It looked dead. I moved the peppermint around and took a big breath to feel its cold sweetness. Mama looked at me and said, “Go ahead and eat, you have to get an hour of practice in before bed....What’s in your mouth?...Your grandfather gave it to you?...He drove you home?” Mama rushed to the door and looked out in the rain as if she didn’t hear me say that he’d already left. I came up and stood next to her. She sighed and said, “That old man is always runnin’.” The peppermint finally collapsed in my mouth as I said, “I don’t think so, Mama.”

## **Wonderment**



## **Assorted Moravian Scientists, 1865**

The audience includes a red-haired pea with a blond moustache,  
a round pea with a narrow jaw and large ears,  
a wrinkled one with mood swings,  
a near-sighted green pea with a high-pitched voice,  
a yellow pea with white flowers and a temper,  
an inflated pod with a dimple,  
a constricted pod with bushy eyebrows,  
green and yellow pods with bald spots  
and long-fingered flowers at the tops of their stems,  
stubby-fingered peas with purple flowers along the sides,  
tall brown-eyed and dwarf blue-eyed plants,  
some of which will develop rheumatism.

They listen to a friar with a high forehead  
who has counted and counted and counted.  
They applaud politely, then take their genes home.

## **Rain in Mogadishu**

I see children kicking soccer balls  
Made from melted plastic bags.  
The hole in the wall their goal,  
And live mortars add to the defense  
Of the game. I see raining  
Concrete dust coat their covered heads,  
And explosions in the distance turn  
Concrete buildings to further rubble.  
Decimated limbs lay in the dusty streets,  
Not even the dogs venture  
Out in the open to feed on them.  
Rusted out trucks carry weapons mounted  
And guerrilla warfare in the anarchy state  
Has spanned an entire generation.  
Soccer children playing with a watchful eye  
Duck behind concrete walls  
Peering through bullet holes  
Like a screen door, to know when all  
Is clear. The sky is gray, from concrete  
Dust, ash, or clouds, nobody knows.  
This generation has known no peace,  
No difference in the color of the sky.

## **Bath with Stars**

This spoiled country of ours—silly things  
to make a buck, the unusual gift  
of bath salts studded with grain-sized surprises.  
I tossed a handful into the gushing tub  
and wondered at the black, gold, and silver specks  
sinking in fragrant water.

It was only when I pulled the plug  
that the detritus revealed itself  
sparkling in a halo around the drain.  
Perhaps one was stuck on my back  
unbeknownst. It took three tries  
to get the soggy constellation to disappear,  
now night, now scenting the dark sewers  
of America's underground.

## Quiet, Together

I walked pavement with my golden Eddy through the woodland park;  
he pranced at children passing, greeted new dogs with wild cavort;  
I played gracious owner, pleased to sport this puppy power on my leash.

Now with Eddy senior, I tread dirt paths by the creek; he swims pools  
and pads the soothing mud, finds spots to pee agreeable;  
together we are quiet, and my company is good enough for him.

We watch rippling water wash roots of sycamores bending cross  
the stream, branches heavy with rain of yesterday; sunlit now, I see  
them white like birches in new snow. For a moment I believe this  
brook burbles with my heartbeat.

But my dog would have his kibble and his terrycloth at home, so I turn;  
there on a wooden bench rests a solitary man; he caresses  
on his knees a rumpled hat and gazes at his shadow in the trees.

## **Enemy Lines**

I entered enemy territory without a weapon, my hands sweating on the handlebar of the shopping cart that I maneuvered into the shortest line at the check-out counters. My only battle strategy was to put my four-year-old into the front of the cart. Then he could not scurry like a raccoon to forage in the cookie and chip aisles.

Ian sat still in the basket and rocked his head back and forth in time to his humming. We rolled toward the head of the line by the candy stands, and his arm stretched to snatch a candy bar. I grabbed his hand, pried the chocolate out of his fist and tossed it on the counter just out of his reach. His face opened into a pit where a trapped animal howled.

Ian's shrieks hurried the cashier, who rang up the groceries including the candy and yelled, "That'll be \$15.45 altogether."

My hands shook so much that I could hardly open my wallet, and I noticed my fingers were covered with chocolate from our skirmish. I shouted, "Please throw the candy away; don't want him to have sugar. Makes him even worse." Then I shoved across the dollars covered with chocolate prints.

"Here, you paid for this, hon. Might as well let the baby have it." She handed the glob back to Ian, either because she could not hear me over the howls or she just wanted it to stop. The people in line just wanted the screaming to stop too and muttered, "Look at that spoiled brat."

I preferred spoiled brat to autistic. At least brat was in the range of normal. I steadied myself on the handlebar. My face was numb and my tongue was thick like after a Novocain shot. I heard a groan, not from Ian, but from me. My lips clamped together to push the sound back inside.

No one heard me—not the cashier or the people grumbling in line. Neither did Ian, who was choking on his candy wrapper. I hunched over the cart and retreated through the automatic doors that hissed and shut us out. The battle was lost for that day, but we continued to stand in lines over the years.



My son turned eighteen and towered over me in line. He had learned to stand beside me and no longer grabbed candy like he did back in his shopping-cart days. I learned to avoid stares but still stood guard, a sentry on alert. Often Ian darted around the counters, loped through the pastures of the mega store, and startled customers.

"Where did he go now?" It was easier to track him down now because he was tall and stood out in the crowded store. I found him looking at a watch with lights and dials. He bent down to stare, poke, and then tap, tap, tap its bright face. The watch, however, was attached to the wrist of a customer who leaped back from his attacker.

"Sorry. He just likes cool watches."

"Yeah, okay I guess," and then rolled up his sleeve so Ian could get a better look. I guided my son—a tugboat towing a steamer—back to the line that was now even longer.

"Now that Ian is eighteen," his teacher said at his school birthday party, "he needs an identity card. It's simple, just go with Ian to the California Department of Motor Vehicles and apply for one." Ian and the DMV—her words faded as the anxiety of yet another crowd and another line came to me.

I took Ian's hand so I wouldn't lose him in the clog of people at the entrance of the DMV. Inside, we followed the line that coiled back and forth like a side-winder. "Look," I said, pointing to the large overhead screen blinking numerals, but Ian kept swaying and twisting his hands.

I kept my eyes on the screen and waited for our number just like in our local deli. I wished this was a fast food line. Then Ian would be calm and wait his turn, and I could order two bagels with a large pickle. Instead, he arched his back, swaying back and forth, not sure of what would come next.

I surveyed the row of agents behind the counter and wondered who we would get. The agents all seemed to mumble directions, repeat them louder as if talking to the hard of hearing and then pile up more forms.

"Next," the agent at the end of the counter called. Ian skipped toward her and spun in a backward pirouette with a snap of his fingers. I leaned over to grab a pencil and Ian started to gallop

around the crowded DMV room checking out people's watches. She lowered her voice, "Come around the corner. It's out of the way of the crowd. I know they don't like noise or new places."

How did she know? Did her friend or someone in her family have a child with autism? Did she see a character in a movie or on TV? Outside my small tight space were friends I did not know. Inside an enclosed cubicle, Ian and the DMV lady smiled at each other, shook hands, and then he tap-tap-tapped her watch.

*Lindsey Skinner*

## Meow in My Kitchen



## The Thread

*"An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break."*

—ancient Chinese proverb

Hands clutched  
Carefully hinged  
Limbs laced  
Artfully entwined  
Eyes locked  
Testing temptation  
We begin  
A dance of desire divine  
I unfurl, with a twirl,  
Only to be reeled in again.

The Red Thread of Fate  
Our bodies bound in the web woven about us  
Tethered together, time tests  
Frayed ends, but  
Never severs.  
With twine between us, my hair in your fingers  
We linger  
The chord quivers  
Only to capture me once more.

## “A Man Walks Into a Speakeasy...”

...doesn't work as the opening of a joke;  
it lacks the proper rhythm.  
Too many syllables in the last word,  
its comic effect dying on the speaker's tongue.

And the mode of entry  
is too casual, too ordinary—  
one *walks into* a bar.  
But as for a speakeasy,

one creeps down the steps  
of a back alley in Cicero, Illinois,  
raps his knuckles on the door,  
secret knock-style, and  
mutters a phrase like,  
“Bartolomei's Bakery builds bread,”  
into an eye-level, rectangular slit.

And what about the things  
a man brings with him  
when he walks into a bar?

A talking pig? The Pope? A 12-inch pianist?

Any one of these items would get the man  
tossed out of a speakeasy,  
flat on his back in the alley,  
a cold, persistent drizzle falling on his face.

For all the reasons Prohibition was repealed,  
the one nobody ever talks about  
is the way it screwed up so many good jokes.

## The Orchard

As we walk, mud-caked and sour,  
through the narrow rows of upturned  
crows feet and clover,  
you speak to me with a farmer's tongue  
that has licked clean the wintered bones  
of head-high trees and higher  
telling me, your child,  
these are your smiling children,  
and as you let out a puffed laugh  
I know you mean *captives*;  
as if you were some heavy guard  
grown god-like, spitting life into clay  
and stirring it with your thumb, signing:  
grow and grow and money and die.

## **The Girl in the Locket**

In your acid eyes she's a brass ring, triumphantly  
captured on a carnival carousel;  
she eats your offers eagerly and dissolves  
into blood much too thick,  
bottoming out in an old bunk bed  
clutching distantly to her glass horses,  
eyes gleaming as you serrate and fold yourself  
into her pomegranate vision, pressing whiskey whispers  
along her spine like a cancer until her struggles fall soft  
and your mouth lines with hungry copper.

## **Sympathetic Centerfold**

Pleasantly I pulverized my brain.  
Taking aim at my subconscious directly,  
I inadvertently drove my dreams into overdrive.  
Now my fantasies come alive with the slightest provocation,  
or perhaps it's just the sensation of summertime.  
Tick-tocking rhymes against my irregular rhythm.  
I'm pleasure driven these days,  
f-ed up in so many ways,  
but to my dismay the feeling of being dazed and confused  
ends too soon.  
And I'm left sleepless in this cell,

—I mean room.—

I'm out of tune again.  
Take me to the music.  
I just need someone to make me swoon again.  
Give me a bass drop to unlock my sensual side  
and a treble line to get me in trouble.  
I need a dubstep wobble or unlawful vocal track  
so I can't keep track of my tactfulness at being sinless.

—See, I want to be sinful again.—

A sympathetic centerfold.  
I'll do what I'm told unless rebellion is beneficial to our rhyme  
scheme.  
Still my night scenes have been playing like an online movie  
that hasn't qui-qui-quite loaded.  
I'm left waiting for the progress bar to progress past tomorrow.  
But I'm on borrowed time as the end of high school line is looming.  
I gotta get my childhood booming.  
"Boom boom boom. Gotta get that boom boom boom."



But too soon I'm losing sight of my ability to reason,  
and keep my actions reasonably sane.  
I'm playing a dangerous game with my sensuality,  
possibly fatally scraping it too close to the flames of desire.  
And though I see the warning signs I just keep building myself  
higher and higher,  
till I'm fighting those same clouds and contrails that once set me free.  
My reservations keep failing me.

—Maybe I'm getting a little too free.—

Though I'm still not entirely sure there is such a thing.  
But I'm learning the beauty in destruction,  
constructing night scenes that would mortify Marilyn Manson.  
I'm just dancing through desire,  
because I never seem to tire of temptation.

The following statement is not a confession;  
I do not seek your forgiveness.  
I just feel you should know the definition of an ugly truth;  
it is this.  
Sometimes I judge myself,  
based on how many people currently want to fuck me.

—And I know this is unhealthy.—

I just can't help but sometimes see friendship  
as a restraint compatibility test that I  
usually fail.

See I fall in love  
one hundred and twenty times a minute.  
My life goes by in cut time,  
and I'd be lying if I said I didn't sometimes  
wish for a ritardando.  
For everything just to slow, down.  
Or stop...

But I'm too used to the fast track past life's bullshit to quit speeding now.  
Instead I'm belatedly begging for bliss.  
I just need a violent kiss or romantic fist  
to keep me hooked on this, dynamic tension.

But

I won't mention my madness to anyone but close friends.  
See, I won't be strip-mined for sanity.  
I'll just wait for the counter clarity in what the next day may bring.  
Because after all, tomorrow  
Is still loading.

*Jaclyn Correa*

## **Bee and Sunflower**



## **A Thief of Small Things**

Sometimes we see a thing  
and think it's neat, and  
next thing we know it's  
in our home and growing  
like the oak tree that has

rooted and sprouted next  
to an aloe in a small pot.  
It wasn't expected—  
I put the acorn in  
the pot next to a rock,

and the rock is still there,  
eager for nothing and  
worrying no one with its living.  
It makes the oak look  
anxious; I am, too;

here I am,  
a thief of small things,  
this one from the forest floor  
growing on a table by my window  
in a pot that's too small.

I wish I could play God  
and let it live its short course  
in that small pot.  
But the man in me  
moved it once  
and wants to move it again  
to where it has room to grow.

## **The Machinist**

Firelight frenzy dances along our horizon  
as cigarette smoke looms over us,  
giving your face a friendly pallor  
against the crooked smile I've painted on you.

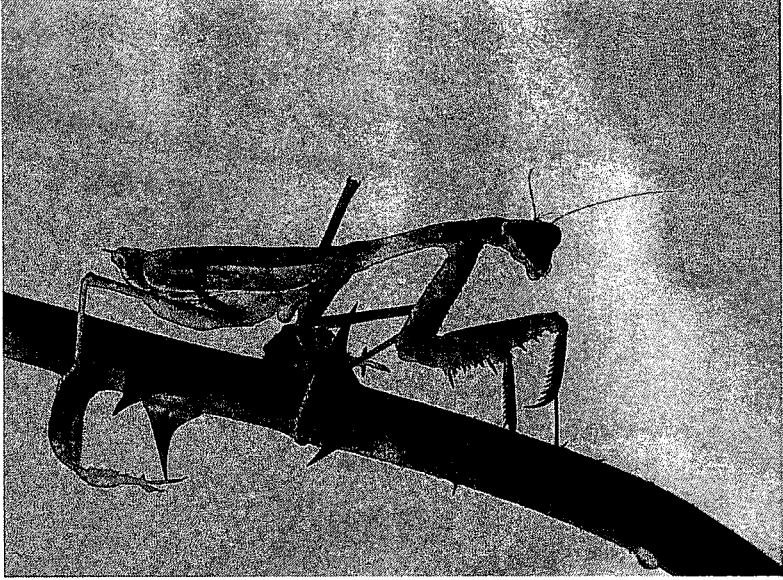
We lace fingers, but  
your prints feel like jagged quills  
that serrate my hands as you pull me closer  
like I'm the world you have to hurt.

You whisper in my ear sounding copper  
as you grind your words like metal shavings  
and press your face to mine,  
watering my eyes with the smell of oil;  
chilling my blood with the touch of your cheek.

*Sanford Dorbin*

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## Reets



## **The Geese Were All Dead**

When we returned home from vacation, their pen was littered with red-black blood-crusts chunks of white fluff and flesh, stench rising over wet ground. Bits of wing floated in puddles of mud. The dogs—wild with fear of the thunder like gunshots, unable to escape the noise and the frantic howling wind—could only silence the geese.

## Wishes

I was early.

Constant.

Sitting shiftless, waiting for the last class to empty,

Gawking at the clouds, the vacuity they provided.

The seat to my left filled with a wet cough.

A tiny voice wheezed through a deep pull of nicotine.

*I'm dying.*

There was no tone of philosophy,

No whimsy, no jest, just finality.

Mute eyes sang compassion to the woman,

The instructor whom I had always listened to

Without interruption just like I was always taught.

*I'm not ready.*

My head bobbed with slow, practiced motion.

*What they say is true,*

*You know.*

*All that is left of me*

*Is the pain*

*And the waiting.*

*I hate the waiting.*

Sometimes there is truth in cliché, I think to myself.

*When I am gone,*

*They will dedicate some thing to my memory*

*But after ten years,*

*It will become just another name on the wall.*

*Who will remember me after I'm gone?*



Meek as I dare—I will.

*Who will remember me after you are gone?*

Responses die in my throat.

*Come.*

*It is time for class.*

She taps my shoulder

And puts out the cigarette.

*Brittaney D. Browne*

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## Untitled



## **Just Married**

Cans rattle, broke,  
Scraping up what they need  
From the road, as we  
Dive, headfirst, into this June squall,  
Highbeams probing a split second into  
The distance.

It's hard to tell who's driving:  
I feel myself pumping the air brakes,  
Hard, for what seems like an eternity  
Before you tap the disc ones,  
And my fingers curl, knuckle white,  
Around my seat.  
But I do not,  
Under any circumstances,  
Make any suggestions,  
Because  
I don't really "want to drive,"  
I want to watch you.

The wind tears at your hair hypnotically,  
Spinning it into  
A spiky, unspoilt caramel tornado,  
Sucking me in,  
Framing the only face that stands out,  
Imperfect and fixed,  
From the ever-shifting road.

We navigate this clunker by greasy stars  
Spattered over the windshield by  
Long hours on the road, and  
The projected universe  
Painted crudely over the dash  
Manages somehow to expand  
With every mile.

I reach over and nestle my pepsi  
In MY cupholder.  
Never, by god, in your cupholder, lest  
You turn to me and we  
Have a straight-faced  
Chat about our boundaries.

Over the rush of the wind,  
I hear Billy moaning and Ramoning  
From the dented speakers, singing about his  
Old, 90s love.

We've heard this song approximately  
A trillion times, but  
It still hasn't gotten old.  
Just comfortable.

We sing along—  
My quavering tenor and your  
Shy contralto,  
Making beautiful, hesitant music  
That tries itself  
Against the wind, against the radio.

## **Kite Flying...**

I lift one finger to catch the drift  
of my thought on the wind  
and then unreel the string of words  
into the ever-changing current.

A dip here, a tug there  
never sure of the breeze  
the spool of my thoughts  
turning turning in my mind.

I like to think I have control  
but the poem flies  
of its own accord  
keeping its own rhythm.

I hold the unimportant end  
foolishly believing I'm in charge  
while the poem twists, turns,  
swings and dips to catch the light.

## **Black Dress Shoes**

My father's black dress shoes:

Marine Corps spit-shined, firmly holding their form  
like a body sculpted by thousands of push-ups;  
perfect for resting on the plush carpeting of a corner office,  
or clacking against the smooth marble floors of the executive  
washroom.

My black dress shoes:

creased, tired, well-worn,  
salt-stained from snowy December playground duty,  
bottomed with a mushy, anonymous substance from the cafeteria floor,  
laces frayed to their breaking point  
by too many papers to grade,  
by too small of a paycheck,  
by my job as a mediator of adolescent angst—

a job I would never trade  
for my father's approval,  
or his six-figure salary,  
or a key to the executive washroom.

*Brittaney D. Browne*

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## Untitled



## Condolences

I cannot, for my soul, alleviate the image of that grotesque sight. It slides just beneath a chilling wind at dusk, deliberately so that I might breathe the scent before it floats toward the hills and dissipates toward sundown, preserving itself for its next visit. It scatters and illuminates itself along the reflective surface of the house pond such that it appears to me even in the decrepit silence of absolute night. I can hear it rattle against the window during rainstorms, screeching like dry tires on asphalt before a collision. It's in between my ears right now. If I were to tell the truth, I would say that I'm uncertain if it has ever left...

We lived in a small rural town somewhere in Utah. Mailboxes and birdhouses were one and the same; roads were narrow and neighbors were distant. My father had known no other area in all his years. He worked at the county sheriff's office and once was involved in the investigation of a big silver chest whose alleged contents were the dreams of a beautiful teenage girl. A band of neurotic males later drowned her in the town well for having radically liberal dreams about free will and authority.

The pond in our front yard was the biggest body of water for hundreds of miles in any direction, and for over three hundred days each year was a frozen gray. Gravel and snow coagulated each morning to leave a thick slush of earth over the streets. None of us younger than the age of thirty-one had an opinion of it because we had never witnessed anything different. Children were to be confined until the age of thirty-one; no explanation was necessary. It was as if the invisible boundaries of the region were somehow rigged with shockwave technology, waiting to send stinging pulses up our spines at the thought of adventure. Of course, because of that etched image, invisible electric fences were not required for me to feel this sensation. I felt it when I inhaled. I feel it when I inhale. To erase the picture would be to stop breathing; I've spent many nights deliberating which would be worse.

"Where are you going?" I asked my mother one morning as she



caked on mascara and blush in a corner of the kitchen.

“Great-grandfather Felix died two evenings ago. I’m going to Coxville for the weekend to attend the funeral and comfort the family.”

She tossed purple grapes into her mouth now, even though she didn’t care much for them. The truth was that she was forty years old, had burned seven cigarettes each day for exactly twenty-five years to the day, and now that she had quit, she was always itching to put things in her mouth. Grapes were affordable, and because of their low volume, the repetitive nature of eating them produced greater therapeutic results.

“Why didn’t you tell us? Why can’t we go with you?”

“You’ve got at least twenty-two years left here, sweetie, you know the rules. Your father is staying behind to catch up on some work in the office. I’ll be back by noon on Sunday.”

It wasn’t irregular that my mother would leave for the weekend. Or that a family member would die without our being notified for days or weeks later. Or that my father, chief of police, would be consumed by work at the station. In fact, irregularities were quite foreign to this town. Mundane might be the word for it. Hauntingly ordinary might be the phrase for it.

The only perennially respected figure in town was the postman. He had never made a mistake in his twenty plus years at the job, and established an unusually light-hearted rapport with literally every resident in our town. His name was Rick. A dark brown mustache perched above his upper lip and connected thinly to a nest-like beard, which in the last two years had sprouted small, symmetrical gray clouds near his chin. He lived in a small shed-like place on the back of our property. My father was more proud to be associated with Rick than with the rest of his family. The degradation wasn’t the fact, it was the display.

Whenever my mother left, my father’s aggression escalated. It stubbornly occupied the void that once was the illusion of composure. I always thought and always think that it wouldn’t have materialized if I didn’t trudge home each day from school dangling a limp arm, struggling with a swollen eye and catching fresh, sweet blood dripping from a white nose to a white shirt. As a result of this, for three consecutive years until his death, my father would begin each dinner with an oration involving “mankind’s obligation to stand proud” and to “never invite another to spend pity on yourself. If I were to ever

cast pity on my own self I would kill myself on the spot!” Rattling the phlegm from his tough throat, he would continue. “To seek sympathy is to engage in a wasteful exercise of self-degradation; live for what is real—honor is real.” Of course these were the doctrines he would use to justify the graceless clobbers, which somehow seemed both sporadic and regular. These parts my brother and I had memorized. More existed in the body of the sermon, explaining a specific cahoots the devil was in with such ideas as homosexuality, dancing, magic, prostitution, lying, and California. But what bothered my father more than watching his beaten son fall through the door was the possibility that it might be the result of one of the six mentioned places of the Devil.

He would have used more time to punish me for my shortcomings with confidence, but usually felt that extra hours spent to solve a case were always superior hours to those spent rehabilitating an inadequate son. What he really believed was that his pre-supper speeches were of such convincing caliber that they alone would take responsibility for fathering us. It was the day after my mother left for the weekend that my brother Treb and I knew they didn’t.

## II

It was a Saturday evening, but it didn’t matter. It looked like yesterday, which also resembled tomorrow. It was that fuzzy time of evening when the falling sun allowed one’s vision to be blurred but not blind. My father perused documents on a dim front porch by candlelight. I was nearby, chopping an entire pine tree’s worth of firewood, when the telephone leaped into jubilation. I barely flinched; my father eased off his chair and followed the resonation, annoyed that anyone had the gall to disturb him on his day off. He answered and I could hear a silence sit in the air, lethargically waiting for motivation to leave. It finally did when his voice rose into the caller’s receiver ordering, “I want that strumpet dead, and that piece of shit brought to me.” The caller said something more, and got the response, “I don’t care; burn her, use the cabin, call Dr. Figgsit, do a frame.”

When my father burst through the screen door, back on to the porch, I was resuming my chopping exactly as he had left me. I clutched an ignorance about what I had overheard. “Who called?” I asked without lifting my head.

“Mind your own business.”

Several seconds walked by. “I hope you’re not using your brother as any sort of example. He’s as disappointing as you are, I hope you know that.”

I did know that, but it didn’t make me feel any less or more appreciated.

Through a short series of overheard phone calls throughout the night, I gathered that a new officer on the force had spotted Treb with a well-known prostitute in a neighboring county called White Isle, forty miles south of where we lived. He recognized Treb because he had met him in passing on his first day at the station—and outside the house he had seen a car with our county’s registration markings.

Not only was Treb outside the boundaries thirteen years before his time but he was gallivanting with a whore to boot. My father reserved a special detestation for prostitutes as it was, but when he heard that one of them had used their conniving tricks to reel in his oldest son, his skin tore open with a quiet, jet black rage. He stood motionless on the edge of the porch, dripping with frustration, sorting through possible punishments for Treb once the officer dropped him off.

### III

Punctuality was and still is today considered one of the superior virtues of our town and of the remainder of our family. As untimely as anything could have been, the telephone yelled again, and my father answered with an undisguised irritation. I could hear this exchange as clear as I’d heard the last.

“This is Ernie.”

-

“Hi, how was the funeral?”

It was my mother.

“An open casket is routine these days. Don’t think anything of it.”

-

“One of uhm’s choppin’ firewood near the pond and, well, that other one’s gonna get a lickin’ when he gets home.”

-

“Well he told me he was goin’ to Ms. Rittle’s to finish that painting project he’s been workin’ on in her kitchen, but it turns out

he decided to skip town and fuck a smelly, piggish Devil-whore.”

-

“That man I hired last week said he’d seen him when he was drivin’ through White Isle on his way back from his folk’s place. That kid’s gonna get the stove. Do you hear me? The stove!”

-

“I am calm!”

-

“Mary? ..... Hello? Damn this wretched weather. First the radios, now the phone.”

I strained to keep awake for when Treb returned, but it didn’t take long for fatigue to conquer anticipation. Hours later I woke shortly before the familiar sound of a coiled fist on flesh. But something was different. Never, in my father’s history of violence, had he been satisfied with one blow. One always led to two, and two often led to twelve. The sharp sound of the punch and the deep moaning response from the receiver startled me from my bed and I started to inch toward the window to investigate. There were two figures, half-silhouettes, just beyond our front porch toward the pond. One was clearly the man my father had punched for he was uncomfortably crouched as he staggered to his police car, holding one hand pressed to his left eye. This was evidently the officer that had made the report to my father earlier in the evening. The other, gangly and uncoordinated, cast a gaze of bewilderment toward our front door then turned and ran off the property as if his life depended on the haste. As he reached the point just out of my eyesight there was a small collision. The abrupt sound of surprise was followed by the tinny sound of tumbling aluminum. Seconds later another figure materialized from the edge of the foggy road. At first I couldn’t recognize the figure at all, but as it continued forward I knew it was Treb, freshly doused with off-white paint.

I’m sure he would have been welcomed by an unmatched flogging anyway—for even an isolated party in a misunderstanding is often taken for a culprit—but thankfully the flogger’s frustrations with the evening, coupled with a tall glass of spiced rum, had worn him down and put him to sleep.

#### IV

Sunday morning arrived more quickly than it ever had before. An unusual warm rain was crashing onto our property when I rose from my bed. Out in the sitting room I could hear my father reading something that was unquestionably serious. This is how it went:

"To the bereaved, on behalf of myself, I am deeply sorry for your loss. My sympathies are with you while you cope with the events of last night. Sincerely, Ernie Margin."

Immediately after he finished, Rick walked through the back door to get his usual morning coffee: lots of cream, lots of sugar.

"Rick," my father called from where he was still sitting. "I want you to have this letter, my condolences, delivered to the widower of the whore that was found dead in White Isle last night. See to it that your boys have it there by 10 a.m."

Rick entered, sipping his coffee with both hands.

"Is there an investigation? Do you know what happened?"

"They say a truck went out of control, took out a bus stop, a phone booth, and a big mailbox. And of course a whore. They found her among the remnants. White Isle PD questioned some townsmen and figured they knew who she was. Turns out she's got a husband, maybe kids."

"Not a mailbox!"

"Better life than a whore, I agree."

"Wonder which one's had more stuff inside."

"Well, one's more open to strangers."

"Why, may I ask, do you suddenly feel compelled to write this man? I know this is not standard procedure for you. I, if anyone, would know that."

"The circumstances are quite unique with this one, Rick. I just feel bad for that family; I couldn't care less about the wife. Her husband probably worked his ass off and genuinely loved that deceitful slut. Now he's got to try to explain this to sons and daughters?"

"Say no more. I'll be going. Goodbye, Sir."

"Thank you, Rick."

"Oh," said Rick glancing out the window, "looks like the Missus has returned."

When the woman approached the front porch the two of them could see that it was not my mother. She wasn't due for another few hours anyway. It was actually Ms. Rittle.

“Hi there fellas,” she said cheerfully. “I’s just dropping by to leave some money for yer boy, Treb. He did a fine job last night, but ol’ foolish me forgot to pay him. And as humble as he is, you know he wouldn’t ask for it. Anyhow, I’ll just leave it right here for him. You fellas have a wonderful day now. Buh-bye!”

Rick followed her out in the rain and went off to the post office to make the necessary arrangements as I dressed myself for chores and my father sat down with a book about Theodore Roosevelt. Treb was already dressed and doing laundry on the back patio. He still hadn’t spoke with my father since he left the night before. As a point of fact, he was still oblivious to the chaos of events that had somehow cornered him, then disappeared within hours.

## V

Noon was approaching, which meant that my mother should be arriving any minute. Despite that, my father sent me out to the barn to chop more firewood. He and I both knew that I had chopped a month’s worth just last night. I stayed in the barn for several hours, chopping log after solid log. I deliberately chopped enough for six months so that my father would not find reason to send me again.

When I made my way back across the property I could see tendrillous smoke creep out the kitchen windows. It emitted the most repulsive, gut-churning aroma that I, and probably this town, had ever experienced. Some of the animals started to vomit and I couldn’t resist joining them. I noticed that Treb’s paint supplies were missing and guessed that he must have gone off to do another project. At that moment I began running toward the house and up the steps of our porch, thinking my father had fallen asleep while cooking something in the oven. The smell had already given me a pricking headache and I couldn’t fathom what repugnant meat he would be cooking. I grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall in the front room, started toward the kitchen and began spraying wildly in the direction of the stove. I managed to reach over and turn it off as the smoke began to settle. I rubbed the fog from my eyes and stared.

In hindsight I should say I saw him, but at that very moment I only saw *it*. The grotesque sight. There, crammed into the space of our large oven, lay my naked father. His entire backside was charcoaled black, skin dripped and hung from various places like

suspended candle wax. I dragged him onto the linoleum floor and threw up again in the sink. Only then did I notice I was standing in fresh blood. I turned and noticed my father had cut a careful outline around his manhood, leaving only a hole out of which it seemed gallons of blood had poured—his pale stomach already looking malnourished from the void.

I had always known my father to be under the pressures of stress, but I could not imagine why something this extreme had resulted. Before I gave it any diligent thought I noticed something interesting, refreshing. I was not crying. Not a single tear had materialized. The image simply froze my conscience. As I was thinking about this fact, I saw on the kitchen table a letter using my father's unmistakable stationery and a torn envelope beside it. "A suicide note," I thought to myself. But when I looked closer I began to weep like I never knew I could, because I knew that Rick and his men were flawless with their job. As I picked it up and read the contents, an avalanche packed hard and icy with realization, grief, and disorientation tackled me in place. The familiar words read like this:

"To the bereaved,

On behalf of myself, I am deeply sorry for your loss.  
My sympathies are with you while you cope with the events  
of last night.

Sincerely,  
Ernie Margin."

## The Post-Mortem

I know it's sick,  
but I love the diseased look  
of spackled bruising on my skin. The  
other guys are just as sick as me, flaunting  
the grotesque and shrugging off  
the dangerous. It's our homespun blend  
of insanity. The spray of red  
like some infected rash, the smudged shadows  
swollen to an iridescent sheen. Blushing  
patches warm to touch, small isolated fevers  
on every other joint. I want to  
show these uglies off, share the giddy  
gruesome details with someone just as  
twisted and battered as me, someone  
who simply taped a fractured foot,  
or patched a fountain bleeder with a dab  
of Vaseline. Someone who's still at practice  
and not waiting for a foregone diagnosis  
we all know will be ignored. I want to  
tell them how the heating pad  
blister-burned my knotted calf, how my arm  
slipped right out of the socket  
and crunched back in. I want them  
to laugh with me, to hurt with me, to smirk  
at our slightly broken bodies.



## Looking for the Good Life

1

I flee the city in my '63 VW.  
Good-bye to the blurry sun, chemical-tasting tap water,  
my life each day punched in a card, shut in a drawer.  
No more living paycheck to payment due,  
my coin purse flat.  
I leave behind all the cars and buses and noise  
and signs and people on the sidewalks  
and crossing the streets.  
I pass rows of stucco homes  
and big box stores and lots packed with SUVs.  
Good-bye to commuters curled in exhaustion,  
their fists beating helplessly against the safety glass.

2

I stop for the red leaf rushing the asphalt  
and swerve off the expressway,  
tires grinding to a halt near a dusty road.  
A sudden sunset and my squinty eyes  
seek a new horizon of wind over quiet hills.  
I scan the landscape for the house  
that sits and stares as fields grow wild.  
I pray songs in the ground  
will sprout young trees with dew on them,  
and when the rains fall,  
thousands of dead petals will open  
into white flowers.

## How I Came into Being

As the coffin lowers into the earth,  
my parents couple beneath oak leaves rustling in the breeze:  
That's how I came into being.  
From death comes the singing of grief and adoration,  
desires to shed their mourning leading to pleasure in the shadows.

Birds congregate in droves,  
darkening a corner of the forest with the batting of black wings,  
the raucous gathering of iridescent starlings  
like a storm of soaring witches,  
their ecstasies outgrowing heavy cloaks of flapping death.

In dense woods, she tosses off her clothes,  
whispering unintelligible things  
as my father reaches his trembling arms around the small of her back,  
her brown skin yielding to his press.

He smiles,  
envisioning each morbid insinuation on that carpet of tresses:  
Snails slipping around their arms and legs,  
butterflies colorfully covering their clothes in an impermanent  
painting.

Nine months later, I am born,  
yet for months my mother thought:  
*This is the end of everything I know.*  
Each moment she has is surrendered, each thought modified,

and when she enters into sleep, she dreams of me,  
of a coffin slipping into darkness,  
carrying its seeds of strange creation  
feeding the coming life within its hollow of inhumed desire.

*Brittaney D. Browne*

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## Untitled



## **The Dangling Conversation**

The cat stretched out against the man, its simple face a rictus of contented pleasure. The man forced his face into a pained smile and reached down to stroke it. He hated cats. He found them repugnant—everything from their furry, spittle-coated jowls to their infernal tendency to tenderize the laps of their poor, unwitting victims.

What the man was still unsure of, however, was the stunning, candlelit creature in front of him, delicately spooling spaghetti she'd cooked to a perfect *al dente* around her fork. This was date number three, the big one, at her house, and both the man and the woman felt as if they almost had the measure of one another, now.

They played a grand game of conversational chess, each probing the other with witticisms, secondhand political concerns, and carefully constructed grievances. It was a stalemate. The man, resolutely forcing himself not to imagine his opponent sans Dior, remarked on the wonderful shape and texture and consistency and taste of whatever it was they were eating. And the woman, determined not to picture her adversary sans Armani, arranged her face into a gracious smile and managed to chew her meatball in a highly sophisticated manner.

The cat purred away in the man's lap like a steam engine, oblivious.

It really might be a deal breaker, the man thought, eying the cat like a favorite nephew. What if she invites me to move in, and this ugly thing makes a habit of liking me?

They continued like that, each making artful little additions to the tapestry of polite conversation that dangled between them, each flashing the other million-watt smiles, each laughing rich, mellow laughs that rang out every bit as sensual as the food they dissected with surgical precision. Every carefully chosen word and choreographed gesture campaigned aggressively for the other's attention, admiration, acceptance.

The woman remarked how adorable it was that the cat had taken to him so quickly, but privately wondered what she'd do if the man became attached to the stray cat that had once been her roommate's. She hated the cat, but could see no way to tell the man so, not when he so clearly loved the animal. So she smiled, and refined the mask of the kind, compassionate individual that she'd worked so hard to construct.

And so the man, who felt he had successfully portrayed the type of man he assumed the woman would like, and the woman, who was entirely unsure of whether or not the man liked her, forgot to determine whether or not they enjoyed each other's company.

They both eyed the cat with worshipful ardor as it slipped, unthinking, into a deep sleep.

## La Luna

I envy your ivory flesh  
Your voluptuous curves  
Your luminescent cloak  
I witness the way the sky watches you  
The way he guards you with a million stars  
I envy you  
I envy the fortress that surrounds you  
The gentle atmosphere that embraces you  
I envy your eternal beauty  
The way you dance around the earth  
Setting yourself in her gravitational pull  
I envy the courting of daylight and dusk  
And the birth of the moon  
You are clever to use such a force  
I envy the stories written about you  
The poets who sit under the light of your reflective exterior  
And spend hours flattering you  
I envy all that you steal from the sun  
The light you claim your own  
The night you give yourself so willingly to  
I envy your waning  
Your death and your reincarnation in the skies  
I envy your femininity  
The luxurious shadow that clings to your pale skin  
Your soft, black lingerie  
I envy you  
I ask you  
I beg you  
Lend me your mystery  
Let me experience the contrast of luminosity in a dark room  
Let me be the beholder of intuition  
Let me deny the commencement of the new day  
Let me transform the tides of the ocean  
Let me be sovereign of the night  
La Luna,  
I envy you.

## Untitled



## **Insect Corpses**

There were insect corpses on the windowsill.  
Dust had settled on their crisp, twisted antennae,  
and their tin-blind eyes.  
They must have hurled their resilient bodies  
against the glass a thousand times  
before they landed on the white grooves of the sill,  
consigning their tiny corpses  
to this dejected mass tomb,  
exhaustion overcoming them  
as the sunlight streamed through the glass  
reflecting rainbows in each of their thousands of eyes.



## **Giving Birth to Bombs**

I inherited the need to declare war  
On every boundary ever placed around me.

See, I was raised with a ghost town mentality.  
I made an enemy out of the mirror.  
I traded my allies for blank pages,  
But there's never been enough ink in this world  
To save me from the way I see myself.

Then I see you out there on the front lines,  
Dancing like it's the eve of the apocalypse.  
Your shotgun grin collides with my insides,  
And I can't hide from the crosshairs  
Bearing down on the lies in my confidence.

I'm holstered by the missile crisis of your eyes.  
I've been locked in your gaze for what passes for days.  
Bunker busters couldn't break my concentration.

Ancient civilizations crumble more easily than this.  
So I lifted what's left of Rome onto my back  
And watched the shivers climb  
Up my spinal column,  
Like Time,  
Like the whip's crack,  
Like grenade pins in a haystack packed tightly  
Enough to hide the Hiroshima in my carelessness.  
I wear explosions on my sleeve.  
There's never been enough shelter in my dreams  
To save me from the fallout.

My words give birth to bombs.  
My doubts give way to easy targets.  
I swallowed all of Atlantis  
So I could chase it with depth charges,

Marchin' ten-thousand leagues under my breath,  
Where you'll find me,  
Searching for what it means to come up for air.

I swear,  
I was there on the day the dogs were cut loose.  
I've shoved dynamite sticks into my ribcage,  
Just to see who would light the fuse.

I've been forced to watch my own dams burst.  
I've been first in line for the reckoning.  
I've finished last in races towards your heart.  
I've pried my knuckles apart like rivalries.

There's nothing more violent than a memory.  
There's nothing more patient than a chambered round.

I found you lying next to me,  
Alive in a pile of bullseyes.  
Why are there silencers fitted onto my screams?  
Why are there landmines scattered inside of your smile?  
I guess we never learned how to pass lightly over the soft spots.

Meet me at the knots in my stomach,  
Like it's high noon,  
And we're two gunslingers  
Who refuse to draw against each other.

Our standoff might last through the night,  
But I'll fight off the lynch mob in pursuit  
Of that place where we can retrace our steps  
And erase the chalk outlines that separate us,  
Like trust is the blanket we clutch  
To quiet the shaking.

It's panic that's kept me  
Backpedaling  
In the direction of my fists.

I wish I was the only one.

I've witnessed an artist crawl out of a slit wrist.  
She said, "This...is war."  
I've listened to a coffee shop prophet  
Hung with his own microphone cord.  
I've heard of entire gospel choirs crucified by silence,  
Treble clefs hammered into their hands and feet,  
Lyric sheets pinned to their backs like makeshift angel wings.

And these are not demons in my head.  
They're just the lonely reflections of people I've met,  
Vigilantes in a shanty town with fingers pointed at the mirror,  
Like, "You talkin' to me yet?"

I'd never place a bet on the wrong jockey,  
Big shock, seein' me comin' up quickly in the rearview,  
Like all the king's men in suits don't even know who to root for.

They can lead this hoarse voice to water,  
But they can't make me drink from the well  
They pretended to bless while trying to pry  
A confession from the fear in me.

Don't trust the appearance of "me."  
I am not a bomb to diffuse.  
I am not an excuse to run.  
I am not the smoking gun.

I am a butterfly knife  
You can treat like a balance beam.

Step towards me,  
If you don't mind the shaking.  
Put your arms around me,  
If you can embrace my jagged boundaries.  
Kiss me,  
If your lips need more  
Than broken seams to weave together tightly,  
Like I might be even more than what you're looking for.

This...is not a war.  
It's just a dance floor littered with tripwires.  
We can work our way to higher ground.

If you meet me on the roof tonight,  
Under the moonlight we might discover  
That your heart is fully armored,  
And my smile is bulletproof.

## **Minor Figure**

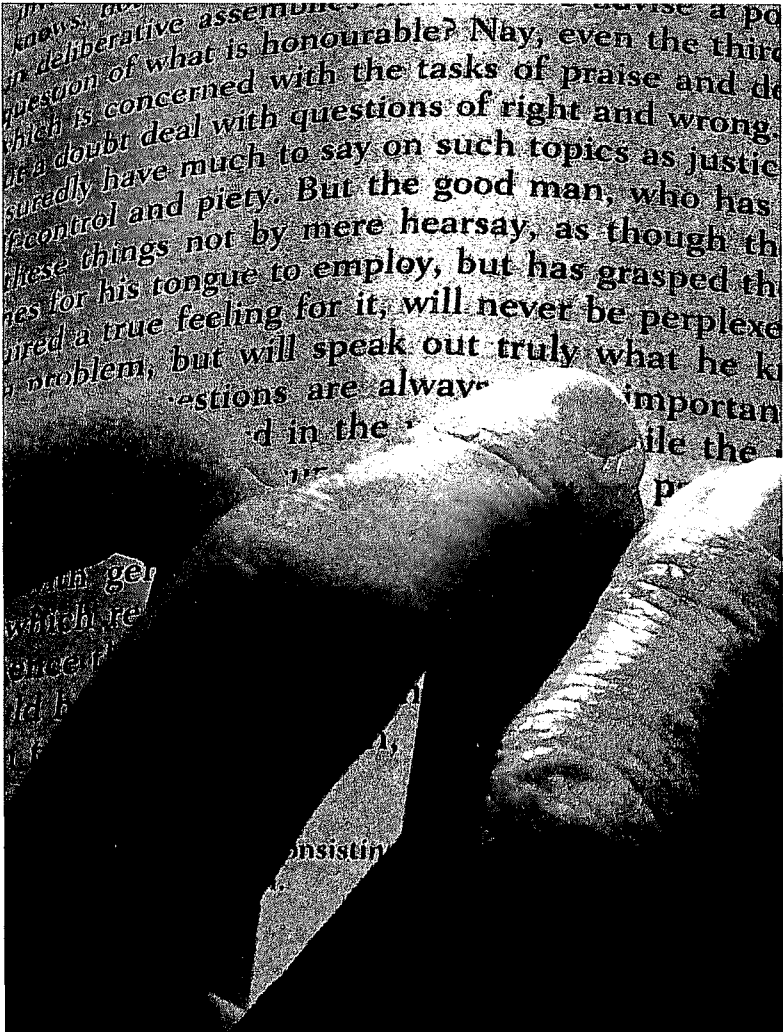
I dug under the floorboards around my bed in search of old love letters. All that I found were bits and scraps, only enough to cobble together a kidnapper's ransom note.

There is little to eat in the fridge and less to drink in the liquor cabinet. The silverware isn't silver and the plates are chipped. A stray cat has taken up residence, unwelcome, and worms squirm in the edges of your picture frames, hogging the limelight. They are eating the silver oxide from the photos and excreting it in trails leading outside, where they will mate in the sun and cool in the sprinklers. They've eaten me out of the picture but left you smiling and intact, and are shitting me out as we don't speak.

You are living somewhere, but I don't know where. Perhaps someday I will be worthy enough for a re-introduction. By this time you will be married with grown children and plenty of your own photographs.

When I find you, I will feel like I've accomplished something. You will be freshly scrubbed, well-rested, and will have an unhurried moment for me. You will introduce me to your husband, who looks pleasant in an oversized wool sweater and pleated khaki pants. Instead of meeting me with hostility, he will be jovial, embrace me as a minor figure from your past and invite me in for a good laugh.

## Quintillian



## **Clueless**

The editor says he wants  
distinct images so I am  
sending him photographs.  
He says he hates cute  
bunny poems so I'm striking  
the B-word from my list.  
He doesn't want trite rhymes  
like love and above. Cowboy  
verse is worse than twangy  
cowboy songs. To print the  
inane would be insane. Please  
no blood and guts. The editor  
wants fresh language so  
I'm spraying this poem  
with Febreze.

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## Watershed Contributors' Notes

### *Nicole Antonio*

Nicole Antonio is the product of dual homes in California and Hawaii. She gets her Catholic guilt and workaholic instincts from her dad, her twisted sense of humor from her mom. Her weeks consist of writing, cruising LA's food scene, and working a day job at the University of Southern California.

### *Cliff Benjamin*

Cliff Benjamin has called Chico home for the majority of his life, feeling a special bond with the wonky town. Now in his late 30s and floating through a second tour of college, he is attempting to cure his folly of youth known as the wrong undergraduate degree.

### *Mike Berger*

Mike Berger holds a PhD in psychology. He is now retired and has been writing poetry full time for the past year. He has found much success in his writing career, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *AIM*, *Still Crazy*, *First Edition*, *Stray Branch*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Evergreen*, and *Krax*. His chapbook, *Raw*, was published by CC&D Press.

### *Kevin Book-Satterlee*

Kevin Book-Satterlee has been published previously in *Englewood Review of Books* and *Perceptions*. He draws inspiration from spirituality, those who have no voice, and the contrast of having lived in the city and on the farm.

### *Brittaney D. Browne*

Brittaney Browne, a Chico local, is pursuing her BA in anthropology. She enjoys investing efforts in keeping the art of film photography alive, as well as venturing through Bidwell Park on her loyal bicycle. She hopes one day to be able to travel by sea, lead a simple life, and view the extraordinary through her lens's eye.



### *Cody Caudill*

Cody Caudill graduated from CSU, Chico in spring 2010 with a BA in English and is currently pursuing a PhD in writing studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He was born and raised in Northern California and, although he has recently relocated to the Midwest, will always feel rooted in that part of the country. Cody has been a poet for six years now and is a previous contributor to *Watershed*.

### *Bob Cengr*

Bob Cengr is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Southern California.

### *Melissa Cheatham*

Melissa Cheatham is a senior at CSU, Chico studying English education and completing her certificate in literary editing and publishing, and she will soon begin the credential program. She enjoys editing, reading, writing, and tutoring students in writing. She also loves playing with her pugs Gilly and Pugly, backpacking the world with her husband, Dustin, and she is obsessed with taking photographs of flowers. Melissa also dreams of writing and illustrating children's books one day. Melissa's photo, "Wonderment," is dedicated to Mandy, a sister, friend, and the mother of beautiful niece Jade, whom the photo captures.

### *Jaclyn Correa*

Having transferred from a community college in a small Northern California city, this is Jaclyn Correa's first semester at CSU, Chico. She is pursuing a degree in English studies. Jaclyn loves writing, photography, singing, camping and hiking, cooking, her boyfriend, and her beautiful cat, El Jefe.

### *Holly Day*

Holly Day is a journalism instructor living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband and two children. Her most recent nonfiction books are *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, and *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*. Her poetry and fiction have most recently appeared in *Willow Review*, *The Blotter*, and *Pinyon*.

### *Sharon DeMeyer*

Sharon DeMeyer graduated from CSU, Chico with a BA in English in 1996. She is currently pursuing a graduate degree in English with a focus in creative writing.

### *Sanford Dorbin*

Sanford Dorbin lives in Chico. He has had work in earlier issues of the magazine.

### *Brianne Epley*

Brianne Epley is currently enrolled in the graduate program at CSU, Chico, where her focus is nineteenth-century British literature and feminist poetry. She was born and raised in Northern California and has been writing poetry since she could hold a pen.

### *Kenneth Fries*

Kenneth Fries has been living in Chico with his wife, Janet, for the past six years since retiring as a federal attorney with the US Agency for International Development in Washington, DC. He still does some consulting work on development projects in Africa for the International Law Institute in Washington. He has been writing poetry for the last fifteen years, inspired by travel, time for reflection, and the encouragement of other writers here in Chico.

### *Bob Garner*

Bob Garner is a poet, painter, and songwriter living in Chico. His work has appeared in numerous issues of *Watershed* over the years.

### *Jeremy Gerrard*

Jeremy Gerrard will be defending his master's thesis in American literature in December 2010. He plans to leave for a PhD program next fall, though he will always feel a warm connection with the city of Chico. He enjoys, and encourages, the rejection of idleness, and he believes that laughter is the water that helps our pills go down.

### *Julian Gobert*

Julian Gobert is a filmmaker, composer, and writer living in Toronto, Canada. He received an MFA in electronic music and recording media from Mills College in Oakland, California. His poetry has previously appeared in *Prism International*, *CV2*, *dANdelion*, *Prairie Fire*,

*The Nashwaak Review*, and *Watershed* 32.1. His poetry chapbook *Points of Departure* is forthcoming from Vallum.

### **Joan Goodreau**

Joan Goodreau, a special education teacher and program specialist, lives in Chico and is writing a memoir about raising her son, who has Autism Syndrome Disorder. Her short stories, articles, and poems have appeared in such periodicals as *The Dalhousie Review*, *Ottawa Poetry Journal*, and *Flashquake Magazine*.

### **Meghan Gottowski**

Meghan Gottowski, or M. Irene, is currently a junior at CSU, Chico, majoring in communication studies with a minor in creative writing. She is complexly simple, hopefully romantic, and boldly inquisitive. She believes good writing makes even the most irrational ideas seem plausible. She is a fan of peace and knowledge, equality, unconditional love, and freethinking.

### **Jonathan Greenhouse**

Jonathan Greenhouse's poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared or is forthcoming in more than a hundred literary reviews around the world, including *Borderlands*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Polluto*, *Soundings Review*, and *US 1 Worksheets*. He makes his living as a Spanish interpreter and periodically leaves his professional cocoon to explore the world around him with his hilarious wife.

### **Lara Gularte**

Lara Gularte was nominated by Bitter Oleander Press to *Best New Poets 2010*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as *Bitter Oleander*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Eclipse*, *The Evansville Review*, *The Fourth River*, *The Hiram Poetry Review*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Permafrost*, *The Santa Clara Review*, and *Water~Stone Review*. She is an assistant poetry editor at *Narrative Magazine*.

### **Alexandra Hager**

Alexandra Hager is a poet living in Seattle, Washington.

### *Brianna E. Johnson*

When Brianna Johnson is not working or going to school, she enjoys spending time with her family, writing, reading, and traveling.

### *Joanne Lowery*

Joanne Lowery's poems have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Eclipse*, *roger*, and *Poetry East*. Her most recent collection is the chapbook *Scything* published by FutureCycle Press. She lives in Michigan.

### *Tara Malcom*

Tara Malcom was born in San Diego, where she learned all about the finer things in life. Promptly escaping to Chico, she learned all about the things that make life fine. She currently resides there, and will for innumerable years, as an English education major (even though she will never be a teacher).

### *Katya Manges*

Katya Briann Manges is editor-in-chief of the *Seven-Eighths Under Water* literary magazine, an award-winning performance poet, and an intern at *The Synthesis Magazine*. She looks to earn degrees in publication and creative writing, with a focus in journalism and poetry.

### *Adam Montgomery*

Adam Montgomery is a husband and father. He is finishing a BA in English with a minor in creative writing at CSU, Chico.

### *Heather Morse*

Heather Morse is a senior at CSU, Chico and plans on beginning the credential program and graduate school in spring 2011. She attempts to be a writer, aspires to be a teacher, and fancies herself a novice chef. Shockingly, she would rather be found at home devouring an engaging book than in any bar Chico has to offer.

### *Ben Mullin*

Ben Mullin is a burgeoning writer with a passion for wordplay and reading who is a weekly contributor to *The Orion*. His hobbies include running, playing video games, and wasting inordinate

amounts of time on Facebook. He finds it odd to refer to himself in the third person.

### *Dixie Salazar*

Dixie Salazar has published three books of poetry: *Hotel Fresno* (Blue Moon Press), *Reincarnation of the Commonplace* (Salmon Run Press), and *Blood Mysteries* (University of Arizona Press). *Limbo*, her novel, was published by White Pine Press in 1995. She has also published numerous poems and some short stories in close to sixty different literary journals, including *The Missouri Review*, *The Red Brick Review*, *Poetry International*, and *Ploughshares*, as well as quite a few anthologies. *Flamenco Hips and Red Mud Feet* is her newest book (University of Arizona Press, 2009). Currently she shows oil paintings and collage work at the Silva/Salazar studios in Fresno, California. She has also taught extensively in the California prisons and the Fresno County jail. Salazar teaches English at CSU, Fresno.

### *Lindsey Skinner*

Lindsey Skinner is an English education major at CSU, Chico. She enjoys dinosaurs, zombie movies, and spending time outdoors.

### *Nancy Talley*

Nancy Talley is a poet, crone, grandmother, and crabby old woman.

### *Carey Wilson*

Carey Wilson is a graduate student in English at CSU, Chico. Previously, he worked as a book designer and editor for travel handbook publisher Moon Publications and as production designer and art critic for the *Chico News & Review*. For several years he wrote the column "Culture Vulture" in the *CN&R* under his nom de plume, C. Owsley Rain.

### *Matthew Zellmer*

Matthew Zellmer is a CSU, Chico graduate student mastering in English. He writes and performs spoken-word poetry. He likes to play the drums. He also likes bubbles. And swing sets...

