

# story week reader 2009

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The Story Week Reader is published by the Fiction Writing Department at Columbia College Chicago. Printed by Columbia College Xerox Center. Cover design, photography, and layout design by Ann Prazer; layout by Daniel Prazer. Fiction, creative nonfiction, stories in graphic form, and one-act play manuscripts of 750 words or fewer were submitted by students for consideration. The Publishing Lab, a student-run resource library, publishes this annual journal of student writing in conjunction with Story Week. Visit the Lab online at <http://colum.edu/publishinglab> for past issues, market research, and events.

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## **Editor's Note:**

During a recent visit to campus, Dinty W. Moore, the editor of the creative nonfiction journal *Brevity*, compared short short stories to flash paper. There are many good metaphors describing the form, but this one stuck. When the editors of this year's *Reader* met in mid-January to review the sixty-three submissions, we were looking for stories that ignited quickly, and left behind images that resonated long after we set them down. In the subsequent weeks, each editor took on a handful of this year's writers and worked closely on revising the stories to make them more flammable. We admire the writers' dedication to this pursuit, and we hope their efforts resonate with you. Writing is for the reader. We're curious to hear what you discover. Be careful, though, these stories burn quick and hot.

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## petty theft | Melanie Datz

Drunk, we stumbled out of George's Tap and along the dark stretch of Linn Street. Pat and I leaned into each other; it was a humid summer night, and my head spun with beer and lust. Halfway to Pat's, he stopped before a narrow frame house with a forest of flowers in front. "Damn." He reached into his pocket.

"Help me."

"What?"

"The poppies." In the narrow strip between the sidewalk and a row of parked cars were hundreds of poppies, with their petals dropped away to reveal tight drum-shaped seed heads. Pat's Swiss Army knife flashed through the spiny stems. "Hold out your arms."

"It's stealing."

"They're flowers. They'll grow back."

I held out my arms. "What if someone sees?"

"Who's going to see?" There were no lights in the houses; most of the porch lights were off, too. He piled my arms full of poppies and left nothing but silver, serrated leaves.

The poppies scratched my skin. "What are you going to do with them?"

Pat pocketed his knife. "Have a tea party."

In the hot white light of his kitchen, Pat hunched over the poppies spread across the counter.

"Come on—leave those. Let's go to bed." I stripped to my pink and black bra.

"Not now. I can't believe my luck." He yanked a dog-eared *Harpers* from the trash can. The label was addressed to his next-door neighbor. He flipped the slick pages and held it out. "Look, an article on making opium tea. In *Harpers*. Can you believe it?"

I shrugged.

Pat rigged a line from a cabinet handle to the kitchen window. Using first clothespins, then binder clips, then safety pins, and finally string, he hung the poppies, seed heads down. He whistled while he worked.

I took off my jeans. "Come on, baby—you know what beer does to me."

"Later. I need to do this right."

I went to bed alone.

...

from home, he ran off. I combed silent streets for him, calling his name into the valleys of Pittsburgh until a snowstorm hastened dusk. I didn't expect to find him; I just needed to know I had tried as hard as I could. I dreaded returning to my father's empty house. But the phone rang; Jasper was waiting at the police station. I brushed my eyes and informed him, "You are a rascally rabbit."

...

We frequently don't make it down the back stairs before the warmth seeping through my shirt tells me he is letting go of his bladder. When he squirms, I know it's his bowels too. I change my soiled clothes while I wait to carry him back inside. I put my mouth on the top of his warm head, which is now the most reliably clean part of his body, and murmur into his fur, "You are a silly, silly puppy." He flicks his tongue on my chin. He accepts a sponge bath and the rub of a clean towel. I put another load into the washing machine.

One bleary night in November, I fall back to sleep on the couch forgetting that he is still outside stumbling around the yard. When the dawn wakes me, I see that Jasper is not on the folded blanket. I throw the door open to find him standing with stiff front paws propped on the bottom step, waiting. When I scoop him up, instead of complaining, he buries his head in my neck. I clasp him until his ears feel warm again. I realize I'm not going to get a sign.

I call the animal hospital to tell them we're on our way, so other people won't have to watch us wait when we get there. For Jasper, it makes no difference. He knows all there is to know about my tears.

The doctor closes the door behind us.

She pulls her stethoscope from her ears, nods to me, and leaves. I coil Jasper's collar and put it in my pocket. I pass through the waiting room, this time with empty hands.

# waiting room | Karen Zemanick

Now that I wear these glasses, I see new details of each gray whisker springing from Jasper's snout. I advise him that his breath still stinks like fish, then set him on his feet. I remind him for the three-thousandth time, "You are not a lap dog." I guess we're both getting old now.

He wanders the room until he's stuck between a plant stand and the corner, confused now in the house he's known for fourteen years. I reach down to guide him into reverse, and he rubs his cataract-clouded eyes into my legs. "You're a silly puppy," I say.

Each rib and vertebra protrudes beneath his black coat. Friends see how frail he is and shake their heads, thinking I'm dragging things out. He paces in circles until I hoist up his arthritic hips and lay him on a folded blanket. I watch for Jasper to give me a sign that he's ready to rest for good, but he doesn't.

Each night, we sleep in spurts until he makes a low cry every hour or two to ask me to carry him outside. I sigh and throw off my covers.

I groan as I squat to slide my arms under him. Each time I lift him, he buries his head in my neck, and I hold him for a moment. I tell him, "You're funny looking, indeed." I open the back door and get my balance before we descend the stairs.

...

He was six months old, waiting in a dripping wet crate at the Chicago city pound. A filthy, scrawny pup, not barking like all the others—just sitting, with eyes wide and fixed on me, splashing the floor with his tail and shifting his weight from one front paw to the other. I gave him a ride that day, a collar, and a name.

One morning that next summer, as I opened the door wearing my job-interview suit, he squirted past. He made me chase him in the rain, then leave him, muddy and rank, on the basement floor until evening. When I returned, he forgave me for leaving, no differently from any other day, with his two-ears-down greeting and the dance of joy (a certain side-to-side step of the hind legs). I told him I was sorry for being angry, but that I had gotten the job. I added, "Don't pretend I don't know you just slept all day."

Five years later, at Thanksgiving, five hundred miles away

Hung over, I stumbled down Linn Street to work. We'd dropped a few poppies, and I kicked them. A woman in a fuzzy robe, her gray hair in pink curlers, stood on the sidewalk in front of the flower-filled yard. She pointed a cane at the silvery leaves and the ragged stalks. "Who would do such a thing? They won't grow back next year." She wiped her pale blue eyes. "Damn dopeheads. No respect for others' hard work."

My head throbbed. I shrugged and kept walking, though my stomach churned with guilt.

"Just wait." Her face was pink and wrinkled. "You won't always be young."

At work, I slumped in my chair and wondered why I was dating a guy who'd rather mess with poppies than me. The old lady in her curlers resembled my Grandma. When I was in high school, Grandma paid me to pass trays at her Tupperware parties, where dressed-up old ladies drank a lot of Scotch, ignored the sales pitch, and let me sneak drinks. They gave me advice, too. "Keep your hair long," said Grandma's friend Helen, who had flat gray curls across her forehead. "Men like long hair."

"Ladies, if I can have your attention." The Tupperware lady waved a lid.

"She needs to show off her assets," Grandma said and pushed out her chest. "She inherited my bust, and Lord knows, I put it to good use." The old ladies cackled.

Grandma was dead, and I missed her with a physical jolt.

I laid my head on a stack of files and wondered where the old lady's grandkids were. If I apologized, would she adopt me?

...

After work I found Pat bare-chested and sweating in his kitchen. His belly was bread-dough white. He aimed a hair dryer at the poppies and drank from a mug smuggled out of the Hamburg Inn. Pat never left a bar or diner without pocketing something. "I thought I'd help them along. Cut down the drying time." He had the oven on, too, with the door open. His dark hair was streaked with sweat.

It was my hair dryer. He'd taken it from my apartment. I yanked the plug from the socket and the dryer's high shriek ceased.

Pat turned. "I'm just borrowing it."

I said, "I'm breaking up with you."

"What? Why?" His mouth hung slack, his brown eyes went damp.

"Because you're a thief." I coiled the cord around the dryer. "Because my Grandma wouldn't approve."

## carrot's choice | Brandi Kleinert Larsen

“For Chrissakes, Carrot, are you going to deal or sit there with your finger shoved up your yoo-hoo all day?”

Carrot's spine shot straight up, and he wheezed like an asthmatic. Rick saw this and smiled, trying to make peace of the situation, but his smacking gums only tripped Carrot up even further. Eisenhower tapped the table gently with his index finger, and Carrot closed his eyes and counted to ten.

Even though Carrot hosted poker, Rick got a severe sense of glee busting the poor guy's chops. The guys thought Carrot looked like the orange root because of his hair, but who looks like a vegetable? His hatred of the nickname was the exact reason Rick used it—even taught it to Carrot's parrot, that cheating bastard of a bird who beat them every week. Truth is, it had been so long that Rick couldn't even remember his host's real name. Let alone how he became the Carrotmeister.

Rick smacked his gums again. Carrot saw the shadow cast inside of Rick's open mouth. It matched the red embroidered “Rick” on his work shirt and Carrot remembered how much his wife Helene, buried four years, 228 days, and, glancing at his wristwatch, 6 hours give-or-take, had wanted him to wear a shirt that said “Saul” instead of the anonymous tie that came with his job in the mailroom.

“Okay, down and dirty for the final round. Quit daydreaming and deal the cards already, Carrot.”

Carrot snapped to attention and decided—no, knew that this would be the last hand he would deal to these sugar lumps. Maybe even one of them would take Irving, Helene's ridiculous macaw, who was only one hand away from winning his freedom. Maybe he should sell the bird to one of those goofy late-night talk shows and use the proceeds to buy a hammock in the Florida Keys. No. Then who would put flowers on Helene's grave? He'd just have to start playing better than his birdbrained friends.

“Eh, he's thinking of Helene, rest her soul,” said Eisenhower. “You deal when you're good and ready, Carrot.”

Eisenhower hardly ever spoke four words strung together, but when he did, dang it, it was something special. Carrot shuffled the cards, enjoying the smooth edges of his favorite deck; he laid its box out special even though the guys wouldn't

double over his California denim. To see him gasp and wail and bleed into the acid-washed fibers, into his unabashed departure from Midwest sensibility. I want to tell him one last time to stop eating my fucking cornflakes.

He looks up at me, a stream of milk forging a trail through deliberate chin stubble. “Hey.”

I bite my lip. “Um, hey.”

Here, hunched over a child's plastic bowl, sits the man that shoved his fist into the nose of a guy who felt me up at a Radiohead concert—left him screaming into his own hands, with tiny bits of bone and blood congealing in a kind of rocky soup.

I drop my purse where I stand and move into the kitchen. His olive eyes burrow into my neck.

Inhales.

Looks away.

I notice his ankles wrapping in and out of the chair legs in a nervous fidget. I suggest we smoke a cigarette. I turn. He rises behind me.

On the back porch, we watch the sun fall over Belmont Avenue. The sky is heavy, erupting in violent magentas, airy pinks, and blood orange. Gabe stares at me. He draws long from his Parliament and traces a line down my clavicle with his index finger where the light has spliced me into equal halves. I watch the trailing digit. It triggers the mind, the survivalist, and I remember any given night: wide-eyed at 3 a.m., hand curled over a can of Mace.

He puts his hands on my shoulders, then lets them fall and settle in the groove of my waist. I push my arms up under his shirt, moving them over his new, lean, California-Sunset Boulevard-early-Jim Morrison shape, and bury my face in his sternum.

Maybe it is the idea of Jim Morrison that keeps me from protesting when he lifts me by my thighs, shoves me up on the balcony railing, tears my skirt. Maybe I just want to fuck.

We spend the next thirty-six hours in a tangled mess of limbs and sheets. Once we pause to eat leftover takeout. Pad Thai, orange chicken, soggy spring rolls. It occurs to me, on the morning he is scheduled to leave, that I have not said more than a handful of sentences to him.

He buries a hand in the flesh of my stomach. “I love you. What now?”

I stare past him. Strands of sun pierce the floor-length mirror and reflect in a blur.

## equal halves | Carly P.

“I don’t know if I can handle you here for a weekend,” I say. My recovering-alcoholic, Newport Beach ex-boyfriend Gabe is on the other end of the phone. His rehab facility—a kind of Four Seasons without the top-shelf mini-bar—has granted him a weekend pass to visit his dying stepfather in Syracuse. Severe weather on the East Coast has prevented him from doing so, and he’s stranded in the Phoenix airport. “If I don’t come, I’ll have to go right back to Orange County. A five hundred dollar ticket wasted.”

“OK.” I said.

“OK, what?”

“OK, come. There’s a spare key under the ashtray on the back porch.”

During my nine-hour workday, I replay the details of our last month together. There is the musty smell of androgynous women—their American Apparel bras left behind our dresser—and whiskey bottles piled to forever near his side of the bed.

On the train home, I envision him lunging from behind my front door, stabbing at my face and chest. My mind, ever the survivalist, has learned.

I exit the train at Belmont. There are Latina girls on the platform eating burritos. Gabe and I used to eat a lot of burritos. I drag my feet. Slow, rough strides.

It is not raining, but everything looks blurry. The window display in a bookstore is merging into a Mediterranean restaurant sign, so that the covers of Danielle Steel melt into heaping plates of baba ghanoush.

I approach my building and see my neighbor walking her Rottweiler.

She is saying hello to me, raising her hand in a familiar gesture, and drawing her lips in smile.

I am saying hello back.

I am walking to my door and fussing with my hair.

I am pausing in the hall before my apartment.

I am remembering what it is like to feel asphyxiated standing next to a person.

I walk in and see him sitting languidly in my breakfast nook, spooning himself bites of soppy cornflakes. I glance at a vase on the foyer table. I want to throw something at him, to see him

care how much time he put into making everything perfect. He slid the top card—face down, of course—to Eisenhower on his right, sitting so close that he could smell his peppermints. He knew that he was supposed to deal to the left, but old habits die hard, and it had been years since the guys called him on it. He returned to the deck and drew the next card for Rick across the table. Across the table wasn’t very far, he only had to extend his elbow to sock him in the nose. Carrot told himself he didn’t want Rick’s blood everywhere and looked down at the deck, the cards taking the majority of space in his kid-sized hands.

Rick set down his Miller Lite, and the force shook the folding table. It annoyed Carrot. He should’ve kept the pink Formica dining set but couldn’t bear to look at it after Helene passed. Like the bird, the table was really hers.

He couldn’t think of her now. Instead, he focused on the pattern on the cards. It was different than the standard Bicycle deck, a pleasing pastel print like sunlight coming through the glass blocks of this room. He was happy he replaced the picture window with the squares so Helene didn’t have to look at the ratty chain link fence of the white-trash couple next door. Carrot slid the next card to Irving and carefully clipped it to the bars of his cage so only the bird could see his final card.

“Aces, Carrot! Aces!” Irving cawed as Carrot dealt himself another lousy deuce from the top of the deck. Eisenhower sniggered, Rick grinned with another gum smack. Carrot realized he really should have folded.

“Irving won again,” Rick said.

“Double or nothing?” Eisenhower asked.

“No,” Carrot said. “The bird is free now.”

“He’s a bird. He don’t know the difference,” Rick said.

“Won it fair and square.” Carrot opened Irving’s cage, but the parrot did not move. “Come on, you miserable bird, go.”

Irving didn’t budge.

“Aces, Carrot! Aces!”

“Looks like the bird made his choice,” Eisenhower said.

“Guess so,” said Rick, smacking his gums.

“I hate you all,” Carrot said. The parrot and the guys just laughed. Carrot meant it. But it already didn’t matter. Rick picked up the deck and began shuffling for the next hand.

# advice for non-teens about to get into trouble dealing with troubled teens | Casey J. Bye

Here's some advice: don't give your phone number to fifteen-year-old girls. Just don't. I mean, unless you're a fifteen-year-old boy, then by all means. But if, during a particularly sad point in your life after college while you're working at a teen center part-time in your old neighborhood and some girl tells you that her older brother is George (that kid you used to be pretty good friends with in high school) and you should give her your number so he can call you? Yeah, don't fall for that.

All of a sudden it's midnight on a Tuesday, and you're getting calls from not only George's sister, but George's sister's friends, who you've also met briefly at the teen center. Sometimes they call in groups, and you can't make out what's being said between all the giggling and whispering debate over what they should ask you until you finally tell them just how annoying speakerphone is. They take you off speakerphone. And they get all quiet. Because you called them annoying, and you've hurt their feelings.

They're probably all huddled up on one of their beds, shoulder to shoulder, every one of them trying to snag some ear space on the phone receiver. Maybe they made some prank calls before getting around to dialing you. Maybe ate a gallon of ice-cream. Because that's what you assume fifteen-year-old girls do: have sleepovers with loads of ice cream and prank calls. You don't know any better.

You really have nothing better to do, so you try to make them comfortable again. You make some reference to *Napoleon Dynamite*. It's a massive success. And it's not long before the "Well-if-you-were-our-age-would-you-be-interested-in-girls-like-us?" questions start pouring out. And how are you gonna deal with that? I mean, this is George's sister and her friends—they're how you two were in high school. They're not the popular crowd. They're anxious and neurotic outsiders with nervous smoking habits and eight dollar haircuts.

You can't say, "No, girls like you are unattractive and not

made me feel like shit, but I knew one thing: I was putting the thermostat up to 72 when I got home. It was fuckin' cold out.

A few weeks ago, I got on the Red Line again, and the smell of piss and Starbucks hit my nostrils. Scraps of discarded paper rested below my feet, and an empty coffee cup rolled around, the dregs sinking into the grooves of the floor. I sat down, and there she was, almost a year after our first meeting, to my left, in a seat perpendicular to mine. Her back was against the cold, metal train glass with her face buried between her knees, her feet resting on the seat next to her. I could still see the white, flaky skin on her shins. I closed my eyes in an attempt to forget about her damn legs, but my mind refused to let go of the image. Then I realized this was how things would always be. She was on the train last year, and she'd be on it next year, too, and the year after that, and so on until her death. That last bit made me a bit happy until the realization that I was happy only because I saw her death as a good thing. My stomach tightened and released quickly, as if I was about to vomit. We think about wanting people dead all the time (terrorists, douche bags, Ronald McDonald), but never out of pity—that's different. So, naturally, I sat there pitying *myself* for having to go through the agony of feeling empathetic for someone who has to go through the agony of being homeless. This didn't last long, though, because something shook me out of my absolutely horrid reverie. A voice. A declaration!

"You look like that actor!"

I smiled, opened my eyes and asked, "What actor?" Because, I mean, what the hell else was I gonna do?

# the homeless | Mason Johnson

A year ago, just as the snow was overtaking the city, I got on the train, and there she was, sitting across from me next to a gigantic homeless man asleep against the partition. She was also homeless, a black woman who was so short her legs looked like they were half the length they should have been. Despite this, her pants weren't long enough, and you could see the white, flaky skin on her shins. In comparison, her face was about as dark as a face could get. She just sat there staring at me with this huge smile, and for a homeless person, she had nice teeth. Big, straight, and white.

She yelled something, but the train was making that screeching sound it makes, so I didn't hear a damn thing.

"What?" I asked.

"You look like that actor," she screamed.

"What actor?"

"*That* actor," she said, as if her vague answer would make me realize *Oh yeah, I do look like Kevin Bacon!* Which is totally true, by the way.

I repeated, "What actor?"

With a finger in the air she said, "Batman!"

"Batman," I stated, "is *not* an actor—"

She interrupted, "Do you have a camera phone?"

Against better suburban-kid-judgment, I took my phone out and held it up for her to see.

"Take a picture of me!" She yelled, raising two fingers into a peace sign.

After taking the picture she yelled, "Let's see that shit!" Then stood up and leaned towards me, giving me a good whiff of her stench—oranges, sweat, and onions.

I held the phone out to her, and she gazed at it and nodded.

"Nice," she said, and then sat back, leaned on the big man, and fell asleep. As I watched them, I thought about how it was cold and snowing, and how food and clothes are expensive, and that the train was probably the only place they could get a few hours of warmth. So here I was, going home to worry about putting the thermostat above 68 degrees, afraid the heating bill might be too expensive, and I wouldn't be able to afford the next *McSweeney's* or issue of *Y the Last Man*. These thoughts

worthy of my time." Nope. Now you're trapped. You have to say something like "Well, you girls aren't my age, so I can't really even fathom how to answer that question, because it's simply not in my capabilities to think of you in that way." Yeah, they know that's bullshit. They're insecure, not stupid. Actually, as you should know from experience, the insecure ones are usually the brainy ones with the good grades—that's why people don't like them, hence the insecurity.

And you can't just hang up, because, again, they're rejected. And you're just making them more and more insecure. And that's just plain cruel. So you say something like, "Well if I really had to, was forced to consider you girls in that way, I guess I could picture me at fifteen thinking that you would be fun people to hang out with." You didn't even say "I would be attracted to you," or "Interested in dating you." But it doesn't matter. Because that's what they hear.

And from there on out, every night you work at the teen center, they're coming in, hanging all over you, going wherever you're going, bringing you a can of Mr. Pibb whenever they come back from the concession stand, making you mix tapes with titles like "What the Inside of My Heart Sounds Like" on a weekly basis, and going on eBay to buy you expensive, wall-sized art prints of Woody Allen's giant face for Christmas because you once mentioned that you thought *Bananas* was pretty funny.

And the other teen center workers, mostly women in their fifties—teachers, bored mothers whose kids have flown the coop, and the one grizzled ex-cop who'd make you nervous even if you didn't have an underage girl entourage—they're not idiots either. They catch on. I mean, they don't know that the girls have your number and are calling you several times a week, but Christ, if they ever found out . . . Either way, they start teasing you when you're locking up the center, asking how "your girlfriends" were that night. And they're kidding. But they're kidding to make sure you get the point. And you're not making matters any better trying to hide that giant rolled up Woody Allen poster behind your back.

Mark was dreaming. He was dreaming in his trailer that sat in the valley below the entrance of Greenhead Farm. Mark felt the bed move and opened his eyes to Tracy standing over him with her leg cocked up and her black three-inch heel sparkling. She stomped him, stomped Mark right in the gut with her heel. Blood shot up from the hole in his stomach like a hot, steaming geyser. The blood shot so hard that it tore off Tracy's gray sweatshirt, the one with the iron-on Donald Duck across the front and Garfield written up the left sleeve, the one she stole from her mom's boyfriend, John Daniel Rogers. The blood shot up and covered Mark's collection of die-cast John Deere tractors, then shot out the door of his room, turned the corner and shot down the hall to the refrigerator where it opened the door and shot into the pitcher of orange juice and continued to shoot into the orange juice until it ran over frothy and pink. The blood then shot out the window and hit Mark's favorite cow, Toasty Toes, in the eye, making her turn around so that the blood splattered her ass and tail, then it turned the corner of the house, shot across the front yard and blasted a young tow-headed boy who was walking home to eat his mom's crispy fried chicken with green beans covered in hot sauce and drink tropical punch Kool-Aid. The blood then shot up and flew through a swarm of gnats, soaking their bodies and wings, leaving them too heavy to fly so that they fell to the ground, then turned and splashed down in a puddle drowning the half-dead gnats.

Mark's dog, a brown Doberman without his ears pruned so that they hung floppy and cute, trotted over and licked at the puddle and didn't care if there were drowned gnats floating in it.

After washing her heel in the sink and stealing a camouflage t-shirt with the words "Tom Pig's Restaurant" written on the front in hunter orange, Tracy left in a car, probably a gray Toyota.

told the buyer of a full-color poster inside. There wasn't a full-color poster inside anymore. The actual record was cracked in places, but I knew it was still playable. The back of the sleeve was black and white. It felt better to look at than the neon green of the front.

"I can't even look at your dad," said Jeff, lifting himself from the couch and walking over to the coffeemaker on the small table by the window. He pulled a white Styrofoam cup from the stack and poured himself some coffee.

"You can't?" I asked. "I never thought *you* would be afraid of a dead body."

"It's not that I'm afraid of dead bodies. I'm just afraid of your *dad's* dead body."

I thought of my mom downstairs, standing by the open casket.

"I don't like how it smells when I get closer to him," I said. "And dealing with all these people. Did you see Josh, Megan, and Katie downstairs? They're dressed like it's a golf tournament. They didn't come say sorry or anything."

"So I take it your dad was the only normal one on his side of the family?"

"Yep. That's how it always was. And now that he's dead, things are going to get even more annoying with them."

"I'm sorry," said Jeff. "I know it's not much, but I hope that Mister Rogers makes up for them."

"I'm sure he will," I said. I began to look at the song titles on the back of the record. As I was skimming the lyrics, I noticed a song called "Parents Were Little Once Too." I read the last two verses:

*My Daddy seems so big right now  
He must have grown a lot  
Imagine how he felt one day  
When he was just a tot.*

*It's great for me to remember  
As I put away my toys,  
That Mothers were all little girls one time  
And Fathers were all little boys.*

The line about toys made me think of my dad as a child, playing with toys. I thought of my parents as kids. I wondered how my dad would have reacted if his dad, my grandpa, passed away when he was my age. It was strange to me. My dad was downstairs dead. I set the record on my lap and cried for the first time in three days.

# let's be together today | Matthew Novak

My cousin Jeff and I were sitting on a couch at opposite ends in Schroeder-Lauer Funeral Home. He had an old maroon cardigan on that was too small for him. His black, thick-rimmed glasses were inching down his nose, and I could see him looking around the room with curious eyes. People had been coming in and out all afternoon to grab a coffee or chomp a bagel that had been sitting out since morning. I kept looking past them, randomly recognizing faces and smelling old ladies' perfume. But I always gave a half-assed smile whenever one of them smiled at me. I was wearing the same clothes I wore to my eighth-grade confirmation back when I was fourteen: a long-sleeve almond shirt tucked into forest green dress pants with Payless dress shoes. Some of my relatives remembered the outfit and would stop in front of me on their way out, offering their sympathy before bringing up the clothes' two-year-old past.

No one had come in for about five minutes or so—a good thing, considering how small the room was—when I heard the crinkling of paper. I looked over at Jeff as he lifted a square, brown paper bag from the side of the couch and handed it to me. He was still looking forward, his face sad and simple, his black beard and whiskers snaking through his cheeks.

Running my palms along the side of it, I could tell it was a record, but I wanted to play dumb. “What’s this?” I asked him.

“It’s Mister Rogers’ second album. He got really introspective on this one,” he said as I slid the record out of the bag. I threw the balled-up brown paper on the carpet and stared at the record sleeve. It was Mister Rogers, all right; his young, makeup-caked face smiling within a circle surrounded by yellow silhouettes of children holding hands. Around them, it said *Let’s Be Together Today*.

“I got it at Goodwill,” said Jeff. “I know how much you used to like watching him, even if this record cover is kind of creepy.”

And it *was* creepy. Below Mister Rogers’ smiling head on the front, it said in bold type: SONGS AND THOUGHTS ON GROWING FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES. There was a circular yellow sticker in the top right-hand corner that

# el milagro | Sara Vallejo

The scorching summer found Ana at her grandmother’s farm, tucked high on the Texan meseta, only miles from where the Rio Grande winds its way across the country. She was just a tiny thing then, not even six years old, and her grandmother wouldn’t live past Christmas. Wrapped in her gauzy shawls to keep the cold from her arthritic joints, death would steal her from the meseta, under a mottled blue-black sky, pricked with a thousand stars. But it was summer then, and her grandmother was singing, pressing masa tortillas in her stiff hands and stirring horchata laced with vanilla and cinnamon. Ana’s mother was pregnant again, her belly blooming forth with child, and she drank milky, sweet horchata every day so that the babe growing in her womb would be born with the sweetest disposition.

“¡Reúna los pollos!” her mother demanded, pushing her from the kitchen where her grandmother was singing, and out into the fading afternoon on the meseta. Ana stomped across the dusty dirt of the meseta in her bare feet, a sullen frown set across her face, scowling at how peevisish her mother had been the whole day. The girl grabbed for a red hen that squawked and clawed and struggled in her arms. She sang to it, the very same song her mother used to sing to her when she was small and squawking and struggling. The hen quieted, trembling against her breast like a heartbeat, its warm feathers tickling her neck.

In the distance, dusk was creeping over the meseta, painting the sun-baked sand an inky purple. A cool breeze kicked up across the wide plateau and she shivered. Her grandmother called to her in her warm, honey voice, and Ana carefully put the trembling hen into its roost before loping back toward the house. She leapt up the creaking steps and into the warm and embracing womb of her grandmother’s kitchen. Her mother’s temper had sweetened, and she held out a glass of horchata to Ana and called her “mija” instead of “Ana Luisa,” so the girl ventured into the kitchen and sat at her mother’s side.

“El bebé está pateando,” her mother cooed, taking one of Ana’s hands and setting it on her belly. And the little miraculous creature did kick, just a flutter, like a kiss pressed to her palm.

Her grandmother set her gnarled hands on top of Ana’s, smudging the backs of her dark fingers with golden, ground masa. “Es un milagro, Ana. Este bebé es un milagro.”

## sally's diner—dusk | Sara Vallejo

They're whipping down the highway, a streak of blue against the black asphalt and the undulating sea of golden prairie, when the sky rips open. Rain slicks across the windshield, and even with the window wipers screeching and thumping back and forth as fast as their tiny motors will allow, neither of them can see more than ten feet in front of the hood of the pickup. It's Lucy, the girl with ginger hair and too many freckles, who spies the flickering neon lights of the diner. Roland, who mustn't be more than twenty, makes for it as carefully as he can, leaning over the steering wheel so his nose is nearly pressed to the windshield to see through the fury. No one is quite sure how long this particular smudge of prairie has been home to this junction, home to Sally's Diner—open twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, boasting both the best Belgian waffles and Salisbury steaks this side of the Atlantic.

Rain crashes down around them and thunder growls, and they can't seem to reach the diner soon enough. But, suddenly they're tearing across the gravel lot, their jackets pulled up over their heads as umbrellas, panting and laughing as they're bombarded by the warm summer storm.

He holds the door open for her, and they stumble into the diner. "Roland, it's perfect," she murmurs, and he takes her hand and points out a booth. "There?" he asks her. She smiles. "Yes, there." They drip all over the floor of the diner and hunch together sheepishly as they slink toward the booth, tripping over their sodden sneakers. Their waitress, a short woman named Carla with a crown of tight gray curls, is unduly nice to the two rascallions that have just tracked puddles across the yellowed linoleum, even more so when their sincere apologies stretch shy smiles across their faces. When she serves them generous slices of blueberry pie and steaming coffee, she smiles at them like she smiles at her own grandchildren.

They are deliciously happy with their pie and with Sally's Diner, with each other, and with the web of state and national highways that zips two halves of the nation together. They're running away—no, not away but rather, toward. Running toward something grand, their feet slapping the hard earth with each bound and stride. Even Sally's Diner, a single spark of light

As we were seated, there was a steady stream of old people, like cattle coming and going from the dining room. They had gray, white, and purple hair; some had hair dyed to brown or black. Some were dressed elegantly, others in jeans, some with walkers, wheelchairs, or canes. Most of them nodded or smiled, with a few commenting on the dinner, the day or their health; an air of despondency hung about them.

"So, what are you going to have, Dad?"

Peering through dirty glasses, he scrunched his nose into wrinkles; his mouth pooched out like a fish, as he moved his head closer to the menu. The haggard old duck craned his neck as his head bobbed up and down. He carefully searched both sides of the small menu. "Stuffed pork chops. Had 'em last time, they were kind of dry, but I don't want the fish, had it for lunch."

We knew his days were numbered, though I did not know he would be gone the next night. As usual, I had expectations. Over the years I had waited in vain for him to call me his "princess," or give me some words of wisdom I could hang onto when he was gone, something that would erase the ugly past, but none came. We sat in silence as we did most of the time, ate slowly and talked little.

He ate more of the ice cream than he did his dinner, and then he sat there for a while, his eyes searching the room as if he was looking for something, though he said nothing.

I took sips of my water until it was down to the ice, then sucked on an ice cube, quietly crunching it with my teeth. He folded his pink napkin over and over, wiping the edges with each turn of the cloth until it was back in a neat rectangle next to his empty ice cream dish.

Finally, he said, "I guess we can go."

## the last meal | Robyn Eastman

The thump from his oxygen tank was the only sound I heard that Sunday morning when I came in the door of Dad's senior living apartment. It was my turn to sit with Dad for the day. It took him a while to open the door, and when he did, his gruff voice boomed at me, "Seems like every time I sit down in the bathroom, I get interrupted!"

Still in his robe, he shuffled to the chair by the window. His thinning white-gray hair was sticking up in three directions. He looked withered, so far from the athletic jock who was a champion on the first Michigan State NCAA track team, or the man who traveled all over northern Africa during World War II.

It was an uneventful day. I did my homework; my son and his wife came to visit, then I helped Dad to the bedroom, and tucked him in for his afternoon nap. When he woke up, he sat on the edge of the bed, struggling with his sock putter-onner. His hands were so stiff, he couldn't get his fingers to maneuver it.

"You want to go to the dining room for dinner, Dad?"

"Yeah, I thought that might be OK."

I brought his pants from the back of the chair and knelt down so that his feet went in each leg. He stood up so I could pull them to his waist.

He had been wearing diapers since he had his kidney out. When I pulled the pants up, they sagged all around the diaper, so all I could do was grab both sides of the waistband and count, "one-two-three," and tug them up, as he imperceptibly stood a little straighter. Though his fingers shook and were bulky with knots of arthritis, I walked away to let him zip his pants and fasten his belt buckle himself. The sound of the zipper and the clang of the belt brought back terrifying memories I would never forget.

Since he was on oxygen all the time, I switched him from the machine in his room to the large, portable tank that clanked as it rolled with us down the stretch of red, carpeted hall to the dining room.

The dining room was long and wide with a low ceiling. Gold brocade material cascaded around the windows, and gaudy chandeliers hanging at intervals above the white linen covered tables; it looked like an old hotel. The sign by the front desk read "Room Capacity: 300."

against the muddy earth of Midwestern prairie, an oasis, is more extravagant than the dreams they'd had before they'd set off.

Roland presents her with their tattered map, and she takes the precious article from him with eager and trembling hands and spreads it out on the Formica table. She traces the tip of her finger down the curving red line of the highway and finally marks their stop with a red dot. She notes *Sally's Diner—dusk. Blueberry pie* in careful script across the intersection of an estimated latitude and longitude. He smooths the folds from the map, and they both look, awestruck, at the miles and miles before them. They hide in the diner, the rain lashing against the windows, lightning lighting the sky like the flash of a million cameras. They drink their coffee and eat their blueberry pie, share smiles and laughter, brush fingertips and marvel at each other and the sheer wonder of Sally's Diner at dusk: the sky, the acres of prairie, the summer storm, the freckles across the bridge of her nose, the curl of his hair.

# burning bush | Sheree Greer

The thing wasn't that she couldn't look away. It was that she didn't want to.

Naomi stood leaning against a tall kapok tree, the yellow blossoms closed in the daylight. The tree wasn't very wide, but neither was she. She pressed her budding breasts against the bark of the tree, careful not to shuffle too loudly in the bed of palm bushes around her. She hid amongst their wide, shiny green fronds.

A breeze blew through Naomi's thin cotton tank top as she slid her right hand into the pocket of her cut-off denim shorts. The summer wind carried the smell of fresh fish and ripening breadfruit from Naomi to her cousin, Rachel, who was stark naked, dipping a toe into the stream.

Rachel was tall, a small paunch just below her navel, arms and legs slender from childhood races where she beat all the boys except Isaac. The loss marked her retirement from racing and the beginning of a new Rachel. Naomi watched her finger-comb the small bush of matted hair between her legs and imagined her thinking of Isaac or daydreaming about leaving Cove de Morant—a small town that clung to the edge of their West Indian island for dear life—where everyone grew the same fruit and recycled ancient stories.

Rachel stepped into the stream. A quick shiver shook her breasts, and she steeled herself, walking towards the water that poured from the rocky cliff overhead.

Naomi swallowed, her tongue thick and fuzzy in her mouth like a caterpillar. She remembered when Rachel used to take her to this part of the river. Rachel had taught Naomi how to bless fallen candy, how to take it to your lips and kiss it with your eyes closed, then hold it up to the sky for God to kiss it. *God made dirt and dirt don't hurt, but if I should die before I wake, I pray for God my soul to take.*

But things were different now. There was no blessing away those three years between them. They had shown themselves more substantial than dust on a piece of tamarind candy dropped to the ground and picked up again. Rachel was different in ways Naomi didn't always understand. Rachel didn't want to talk dreams with her anymore. She didn't want to go swimming, or chase one another. She wanted to bathe in their secret stream

either. Can you imagine how traumatic an experience that might be for me? Well, forget it.

Silence emanated from the other end of the phone, an unhappy kind of silence, so I offered to dive down and visit her at least once. But that was it. She was really pushing it, after all. Not even my sister would offer to risk her life swimming next to things like sea urchins and jelly fish and sharks. My mother should really be more concerned for my safety and well-being.

Still, after everything I explained I would do for her, my mother didn't thank me for going that extra mile, or commend me for my tremendous vision and overall commitment to the project. She didn't say a word. So I asked her, with genuine enthusiasm in my voice, "Now, how does *that* sound to you?"

She cleared her throat and said, real matter-of-fact, "My dear, precious child, you have got to be out of your mind. Being turned into a reef ball is quite possibly the worst thing that could ever happen to me, short of being dead, which I would have to be in order for any of these 'nice' things you would do for me to happen. So, no, thank you. I do not wish to become a reef ball. Not now, not ever. Thank you, no."

At first, my mother's reaction caught me a little off guard. But then it got me to wondering what other burial offers she must've been given behind my back. My sister probably got to her before I did, proposing something real predictable, like a shaded gravesite with a view of the park and one of those oversized marble tombstones engraved with the words: Loving Mother. Maybe she even made the promise of flowers and a few tears. How unoriginal. My mother probably loved it though, went absolutely crazy over the idea of it, declaring her, yet again, the good daughter. I never stood a chance.

# the good daughter | Noelle Aleksandra Hufnagel

After discovering that a person's cremated remains could be turned into a reef ball and dropped to the bottom of the ocean, I called my mother. This was the kind of opportunity that, if executed properly, would allow me to finally surpass my perfect sister as the good daughter, thereby erasing a lifetime of parental disappointment and regret. This was my time to shine. Promoting aquatic life would just be an added bonus. So I took a deep breath and explained to my mother that although the process would be quite extensive, requiring most, if not all, of my artistic ability, I would craft her into a reef ball when she died. I loved her that much.

First, I would sprinkle her ashes into wet concrete as it's poured into a fiberglass mold. Before the mixture cures, usually about a month, I would be allowed to imprint special messages or drawings, all of which would be done with real class and consideration. I wouldn't just start hot glue-gunning any old thing to her reef ball, transforming it into some kind of gaudy parade float full of feathers and sequins and papier-mâché. Her reef ball would maintain a certain amount of dignity and elegance, resembling something straight out of *Martha Stewart Living* or a Macy's window display.

Afterwards, I would travel on a fishing boat alongside her reef ball, taking her out to a real nice-looking part of the ocean, one with little to no seaweed or garbage. My sister would probably get seasick and have to stay below deck, but I would take care of everything. I would even volunteer to be the one to slide my mother's reef ball teeter-totter style into the water, trying my hardest, like some kind of Olympic gold-medal diver, to get the least amount of splash as possible.

At least once a year, I would visit her out at sea. My sister would probably be too busy to come, but I would make an entire weekend out of it. I would rent a jet ski and drive in circles around her GPS coordinates. I would not, however, go so far as to dive down to see her. I would have to draw the line there. I've always been afraid of being underwater, and I don't much relish the idea of being side-by-side with random creatures of the sea,

without her, at what used to be their secret time—the time when the sun was directly overhead, beaming down with a quiet heat everyone else hid from. Rachel wanted secrets of her own, secrets she didn't have to explain to Naomi. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to be with that stupid boy.

Naomi clenched her jaw, remembering when she saw Isaac, a knotty-headed, ashy-elbowed fool, holding hands with Rachel on the porch swing at Big Mama's house.

"She let you win!" Naomi had yelled from her hiding place beside the porch. Rachel jumped up from the swing and chased her around the house. It was almost like old times until Rachel tackled her and pinched her underarms.

Naomi sank down into the bush. Cracking palm fronds snapped her out of her memory. She knelt forward and pressed her body against the base of the tree, remembering and craving the weight of Rachel on top of her, tickling, giggling, and pinching. She watched her cousin spin around under the small waterfall.

Naomi pushed her hand deeper into the corner of her pocket, touching her thigh through the lining. Her face, usually the color of shea butter, was now plum red with heat. She pressed her middle finger into the corner of the pocket and moved her hand into the space between her thighs. Her finger sought to quench the fire. It rested on the secret place between the fleshy folds that were still smooth and hairless, even in this, Naomi's thirteenth year.

# mother at the polling station

| Kurt Kennedy

“How are the kids, Carol?” Mike asked, slouched in his green folding chair across the long, plastic table inside the Village Clubhouse. He wore a plaid shirt, glasses hanging from the collar, and a gray sleeveless sweater. His salt-and-pepper hair, which usually hugged the sides of his otherwise-bald head, was disheveled. He’d been running his hands through it, either in exhaustion from the slew of “I Voted” stickers he’d handed out or relief that his day of worthy service was almost over. I figured the latter, because he sat with one leg crossed, butt on the edge of the seat, and shoulders on the backrest, which had to be horrible for his back.

“They’re good,” I answered. “Lauren and her husband live in Deerfield now. Oh, I’ve got to show you a picture of little Kaylee.” My arms jiggled a little as I got in my purse and found my wallet. I became so worried about Mike noticing that I forgot I was looking for a photo of my granddaughter.

“Aw, she’s cute—getting big.”

“That’s my little doll-baby,” I said and put the wallet away.

“Do you talk to Derek much?”

“He e-mails every week. He always asks me to ship him different books.” I looked both ways to see who might be listening in the sparsely populated room and leaned closer. “I guess that Iraq is really a dump. Derek’s always mentioning how disgusting it is.”

“Really? Mmm, mmm.” Mike shook his head. “Well, let me get your ballot.” He popped upright, spun the binder in front of him to face me, showed me where to sign, then handed me the ballot and a marker. “Just complete the arrow—foolproof.”

I walked to a booth on the north side of the room, the room where we had Derek’s going-away party. I uncapped the marker, but paused and looked up and out the big windows in front of me. I saw the hillside amphitheatre where Dan and I watched Oedipus the previous summer. I thought of the Greeks, which made me think “war.” Then I remembered when Derek told me he’d enlisted. I had an impulse to say, “God’s will be done,” like Henry Fleming’s mother had said before her son went off to seek

The heat waves coming off the side of the building now made me dizzy. The faces that saw and did nothing seemed to sneer in my memory. The fruit began to give off a decaying stench. Taking his worn, brown shoe, the man stepped down on one of the loose peaches. As he did this he said, “That’s just the way it is, kid,” in a quiet voice that sounded like my own. He walked away leaving a pulpy peach that revealed not an emerald, but a rotting brown pit.

I grew up in a world too beautiful for my own good. It was a world full of Hindu mythology and Catholic saint stories; a world full of princesses with gold nose rings and prophets in Technicolor coats. The brown, worn shoes in front of me reminded me of adventure, not danger. The large feet captivated me, and I did not look up.

The shoes nudged my tiny legs that sat pretzel-style on the sidewalk in front of the store. After a moment of staring and no movement, they kicked my shins with more force. As I was dragged against the building, I watched the heat work itself off the baking brick. It hypnotized me and made me feel unnaturally light. I did not resist; I did not run.

Behind the man in the worn, brown shoes were cartons upon cartons of fruit. Apples shone in the sun, and I imagined that their juice must taste sweet and warm. Bananas sat perfectly balanced, their scent hovering over the whole alley. A few peaches had tumbled out of their wooden basket and looked so beautiful that I thought emeralds must be hidden in the center of them. Pushed behind the building, my favorite beaded shirt was stretched out by tugging. My blue jean shorts were pulled down swiftly. His glimmering crucifix swung side to side, just above my eyes. All too pretty and distracting—I never looked at his face.

A silver watch dug into my right hip. For a moment, I could feel the tiny second hand beating against my skin. With each thrust, I bit my lip harder, and slick blood dripped off my mouth and down my chin. The four faces that passed by, behind the man on top of the little girl, barely eight years old, were the most gorgeous people she had ever seen. Their hair blew in the hot wind, and they had eyes like gems in a cold stream, gleaming and hard. It was beauty she couldn't touch, and she never reached out for them.

As the man finished, the apples winked at me, swearing me to secrecy, and the sun got hotter, washing him off me with a shower of sweat. As he stood, my small trembling hands pulled up my blue petaled underwear, which stung me, settling in between my legs. My brick-rubbed arms pulled up my jean shorts, which felt stiff and unforgiving against the bruise that spread across my hip. He strolled over to the fruit. I could not cry.

his red badge. Instead I said, "I hope you get shot—it'll serve you right, doing this to me."

I considered voting Democrat. I figured I better move to another booth to make a more level-headed decision.

The old wood creaked under my feet as I walked to the south side of the room. Mike looked at me suspiciously. I smiled and kept walking to a booth. I stood and looked out those windows for a minute. I spotted a man, woman, and girl on the playground. This reminded me of Lauren's call last week—she was crying and said Jeff cheated on her. I said: "I told you he'd do something like this. Now you're stuck because you've got a child. I told you to listen to me."

I thought about family values and swayed back Republican. My marker was a centimeter away from the paper when I decided to move again.

I walked to the east side. Mike furrowed his brow.

"Sorry," I said, shrugging my shoulders, ducking my head, and curling into myself.

I saw Lake Michigan through the windows. The calming effect of the water helped me focus. I'd go Democrat, it was settled. Then my husband Dan's voice popped into my head: "Democrat! What the hell? Our son's military." I couldn't remember the rest of this argument, but remembered it ending by me telling him if it weren't for having to take him to chemo, I'd have time to think these things through. I completed the arrow pointing to the Democrat.

I walked to the ballot machine, and it sucked mine up like a vacuum. I walked back to Mike. He smiled and handed me my sticker.

"Say 'hi' to Dan. And, if you would, say a prayer for Maggie this Sunday. She got laid off last week—a year from retirement."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Hon, tell her if there's anything I can do, just call." I raised my hand to cover my suddenly queasy stomach. I wanted to rip open the ballot box and change my vote.

Mike smiled and nodded.

I walked out.

## growth spurt | Candace Monique Robertson

Eleven-year-old Hannah was experiencing a growth spurt—bones stretched to knobs of knees and elbows—making every feature on her face appear oversized. She blamed her mother, Beatrice, obviously. In order to fill things in, the little girl loved to sneak into the refrigerator after her parents were fast asleep to devour finger scoops of mashed potatoes, icing, and pudding.

But one night, the square kitchen suddenly came aglow when a 180-pound version of Hannah blocked the exit, her fists perched on flannel hips. “You keep eating like that, and it’ll give you nightmares.”

“You never give me enough at dinner.”

“Everybody’s got to eat, not just us growing girls.” She patted her belly button before sliding the bowl from Hannah’s grip. “So suck the flavor from your fingertips until morning, because it’s time to go to bed.”

“You’re so mean.”

“You keep saying that, and it might come true.”

As Hannah adjusted her head atop her Barbie pillowcase, she flicked her thumb as her mother passed in the hallway, then slipped into the most vivid dream.

• • •

In the kitchen, Hannah’s nervous tremble set her knife a-clatter inside of a nearly empty jelly jar. She heard her mother’s throaty sigh coming from the front door. Spreading her sandwich with a little jelly at a time, she pinned her gaze upon the bread as her mother allowed a chuckle to splash across her plump glossed mouth. Beatrice sauntered around the table, in the center of the room, letting her three-inch heels drag and click.

There were still warm pots and pans spread out all over the robin’s egg-colored tablecloth, all filled with food Hannah had prepared. Beatrice sucked her teeth, peeked into a dish of roasted ham, then peas, and slammed the lids shut. Hannah shuddered. The aromas from the dishes began to mingle in the air with the freshly-mopped floor and Hannah’s apple jelly sandwich.

Dusk fell outside the window above the sink, splotching the kitchen with cruel blue-gray light. Hannah began to fold away from her mother’s shadow.

“Huh,” Beatrice loudly cleared her throat and moved to the

Drop out! What will his parents say? Does he even *have* parents?

“I don’t buy into the hierarchical fascism of high school. Teachers telling you what to read, how to dress, what to believe. Let me ask you something: what’s two plus two?”

I hesitate. “Four?”

Jax exhales in exasperation, so that the escaping air blows his hair straight out from his forehead.

“Maybe. But maybe not. Everything we’ve ever learned is just something a teacher told us. How do we know they’re right?”

“Well—I don’t know. I mean, some things are just true. Like math stuff, and science. Facts.”

Jax shrugs. “I don’t believe in facts,” he says, his eyes obscured by that curtain of hair.

“What are you going to do when you drop out?” I ask.

“Who knows? Follow a band. Move to Norway. Do you know it’s one of the most prosperous countries in the world? Norwegians use the Scandinavian Welfare Model, and everyone has health care. They also have one of the most environmentally aware societies in the world.”

“And fjords.”

He looks at me, thunderstruck.

“Yes,” he says slowly. “And fjords.”

He touches my cheek and moves in, slowly. I don’t know what other first kisses are like, but I think mine, with this boy who is so wise and soft-lipped, rates high.

Soon, his urgent fingers creep under the bottom of my shirt. Why do I think of my parents? “Come on,” he hisses, his breath hot. But how do I tell him I’m not ready without sounding like some hopeless rube? Downstairs, Katie, with her clothes from Lincoln Park boutiques, with her eyeliner and her Louis Vuitton handbags, is probably shirtless, and T.J. is unhooking her lacy Victoria’s Secret bra—the type of undergarment that my mother would never even *consider* letting me wear—while I’m here trying to wrestle the bottom of my shirt away from Jax’s grasping hands and goddammit, I’m not ready.

A fjord is a long, narrow inlet carved out of a mountain by a glacier. The glacier makes its cuts by pressing and pressing, keeping that pressure on until even the mountain gives, and ancient stones that seem impervious get worn to nothing.

But I’m only fourteen, and fjords are as old as the world. They’ve given into the push, but I don’t have to.

So I push him off me and leave the room.

# on fjords and fourteen-year-olds | Jessie Morrison

Jax and I are sitting on the carpeted floor of Katie's bedroom, leaning against the side of her bed. Katie's mom is at work, and we have to be out of the house by five. Jax has a little mole on his neck and shiny hair that hangs over his eyebrows in lanky curtains.

"Hey," he says, unfolding his legs and standing up. "I've got a song you've got to hear."

He walks over to Katie's CD tower and trails a finger down the titles.

"You heard of the Allman Brothers?"

I hadn't.

"Oh yeah," I say, too quickly. "I love them."

"Yeah," he says. "I'm really into classic rock."

I smile up at him, wide-eyed and available, as instructed by *YM* magazine.

Katie is downstairs with Jax's friend T.J. She was thinking about letting him go to third, and I'm wondering if he is unbuttoning her pants right now. Up here on the second floor, Jax has opened the window and lit some incense. We've had a bunch of wine coolers, and he has pot in a tiny Ziplock baggie, like a sandwich bag for one of my old Barbies.

"You smoke?" he asks.

I'm the same age as he is, fourteen, so why do I feel so naïve? For just a moment, I wish I was still in eighth grade. I'm scared, and I think about my parents.

"Sure," I finally say.

I watch him roll the pot into a thin paper joint. He lights one end and passes it to me.

Our eyes are closed, and our shoulders are touching.

"Listen to that slide guitar," says Jax. "This is so much better than that conformist commercialist Top 40 crap."

I wonder, where did all this knowledge come from?

"Do you like school?" He asks.

Actually, I do. I get good grades and I'm in the honors track.

"Eh, it's okay." General ennui: usually a failsafe response.

"I can't wait until I'm sixteen so I can drop out."

sink behind her daughter. Clicking her manicured nails along the metal edge, she tilted her head back as she peered down the bridge of her nose. "You're getting too big for your britches, little girl."

"Ma'am?"

"You heard what the hell I said." Her lips curled into her coffee stained teeth.

Hannah turned briefly to see her mother's lowered chin massaging her chest. She knew that thoughts of punishment circled in her mother's falling beehive. As she turned away, her mother absentmindedly circled scuffs onto the clean terracotta squares. Beatrice threw her head back to enjoy a good old country gut buster. And then, stealing another glance at Hannah, she gently tugged the curtains one inch from closed.

"Didn't I cook before I left?"

"That was lunch, mama. I got hungry again."

Beatrice aligned her stare with the shadowy mouth of the sink, adjusted her too-tight skirt suit, and whipped around to her daughter. She dug her thick nails into the girl's wrist with one hand while stretching for the garbage disposal switch with the other. Her heels shuffled, clopped and mocked a haunting jig.

"Mama, please stop!" Hannah leaned against the pull of her mother's tightening grip. Her holey socks could not keep up.

"Give me those fingers!"

When Beatrice's long digits finally tickled the switch, she grinned at the ragged gurgle and grind of the metal teeth. She gave Hannah one final jerk, and watched her fly to her side.

"You'll never touch my food again without permission."

Beatrice pushed the girl's fingers towards the spinning blades. Drrr.

"Mama!"

Hannah collapsed, consumed with pain. The fire in her fingertips surged up her left arm, to her chest, to gradually flood her head with every jolt of her young heartbeat. Spurts and specks of crimson were flung all about the kitchen's fading evening light.

...

"Mmaaaa!!" Hannah sprang out of bed and ran to lock her bedroom door before sliding her potato-scooping fingers into her mouth to check if they were still there.

# the tree in the bathroom | Karen Pilson

Around the age of ten, I became obsessed with the idea of having green eyes. In books on my shelves were stories upon stories of women with dark hair and eyes as bright as spring grass. I wanted that look to be my own; I wanted to be mysterious and flirty. One Sunday morning, I resolved to do something about it.

I pulled out my box of art supplies and began the search. I tossed aside scraps of paper, glue bottles, glitter, paint, pipe cleaners, and stickers until I saw what I was looking for—the green, thick tipped marker. A warm feeling grew inside my belly as I held it close to my chest, guarding it with my fist.

I crept into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. I lifted a leg up on the toilet, steadied my free hand on the sink and pulled myself toward the medicine cabinet. I planted my feet atop the lid, positioning myself directly in front of the mirror. I leaned in until I was head on with my own face, my bangs brushing my reflection. I opened my eyes as wide as they could go. Centimeter by centimeter, I brought the tip of the marker closer and closer to my dark iris. On the first try, I flinched and drew back, twisting my feet slightly, almost slipping off the edge. I repositioned myself, this time concentrating on the goal: my beautiful green eyes.

When the tip was nearly to my right eye, a fist pounded on the door. I jumped back and crashed to the floor, my arm falling behind me, dragging the marker down the wall. Hot pain singed my shoulders, and tears filled my eyes. I blinked, and a few fell. I looked up to see a long green blade sprouting from the middle of the cream paint, right below the beige hand towel.

“What are you doing, young lady? I heard a crash!”

“N-n-n-nothing,” I stammered.

I sat up, my back against the wall. I stretched up my arm, snagging the hand towel, rubbing it along the green streak on the way down. Instead of the ink coming off, it only spread, growing from a tiny line to giant bubbles like oversized leaves; if I had a brown marker, I could’ve easily drawn a trunk.

My heart raced when the doorknob turned and my mother’s

and darted his eyes around as if he were thinking very hard. And then, a look of pain came over his face.

He pulled his arm out of the water along with the biggest catfish I’d ever seen (not that I’d seen many catfish before then). The fish clung to his cantaloupe-sized fist and flailed around on his knuckles, stinging him unmercifully. Even for Bruiser, the catfish was a worthy opponent; the sheer mass of the struggling thing on his arm was enough to make him lose his balance. He focused his attention on remaining upright while the fish tried desperately to release itself, but Bruiser was no amateur at catfisting. He held on to the fish’s bony lips from the inside so it couldn’t squirm away.

“Oh my God!” I hollered at the sight of blood running down the length of his forearm and dripping like a leaky faucet off his elbow.

But Bruiser, he remained unaffected. He looked at me, and then back at the fish struggling for life on the end of his arm. “Psh, he’ll run out of air soon!”

He walked the entire trip back to the house with the dead catfish in one hand and the empty paint bucket in the other. Once there, my aunt Loraine yanked it off and began scaling it for dinner.

## catfisting | Rich Martens

I was twelve when I met my cousin Bruiser for the first and only time. Bruiser wasn't his real name, of course, but it suited him better than any birth name. He was two years older than me, a freshman in high school. Put us side-by-side, and you would never guess we were related.

He was six-and-a-half feet tall. He walked with a heaving swagger, his enormous, eczema-studded arms rigidly held at his sides. When we went to McDonald's, he ate an entire twenty-piece Chicken McNugget meal with a supersized fry and Coke and still had room for two apple pies.

I've always been a city boy, so when Bruiser asked me if I wanted to catch some fish for dinner, I was already hesitant.

"It's important," my mother said, "that you see where our family came from." If this is what my life would be if grandma had stayed in southern Missouri, then she's wiser than I give her credit for.

Bruiser and I walked out of his parent's bungalow towards a small pond a quarter mile down the dusty, unpaved road.

"Hey," I said, tilting my head back towards the house, "shouldn't we grab some fishing poles?"

"Naw," he said and held up the paint bucket full of slop dangling in his right hand. "We got aaall we need right here." It was my great-grandpa's infamous catfish bait, a recipe guaranteed to drive catfish in from the deepest, backwater swamps of Louisiana. Being family, Bruiser shared the recipe with me, but even I'm not careless enough to break my oath of silence, suffice it to say chicken livers, dog food, garlic cloves, and pig intestines are high on the list of ingredients.

When we arrived at the lake, Bruiser got down on one knee into a patch of dried-up crabgrass next to the mossiest inlet he could find. He stuck his chapped hand into the paint bucket and swirled his arm around in the bucket as best he could. Little chunks of raw chicken livers and unbroken garlic cloves stuck to the coarse, blonde hairs of his arm. When he was satisfied, he chucked what remained in the bucket into the pond. The bait was thick and pale and floated along with the algae on the surface of the lake. I covered my nose with my shirt as he plunged his arm into the water.

For a moment, everything was silent. Bruiser bit his tongue

head burst into the bathroom. Her mouth gaped like an open bear trap; I could see her crowns *and* fillings. Then her lips, almost magnetically, snapped shut and pursed. Her face flushed scarlet, and her every wrinkle *wrinkled* before my eyes. She drew in a deep breath through her nose and narrowed her eyes.

"What did you do? *My wall! This was just painted! What in God's name were you thinking?!*"

I crouched, scooted back a few inches and put my back against the tub. I brought my knees to my chest and my forehead to my knees. I remained immobile; it was possible that if I didn't move, she wouldn't see me.

She pushed the door completely open, hitting the wall with a smack. I peeked through the slits of my fingers to see the doorknob had left a mark. Her nostrils drew in again. A cool silence drifted over the bathroom; we were in the eye of the storm. My breath was hot on my legs, but the back of my neck prickled with goosebumps.

"I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but this is unacceptable! Wait until your father gets home! It'll be the belt! This was just painted! We're not made of money! You can't go ruining everything! Don't just sit there! Explain yourself!"

I said nothing.

"*Answer me!*"

I rose slowly, not quite sure what to do next. Then my face lemonned and body tightened.

"You don't understand anything!" I spat, throwing the towel at her chest.

I stomped past my mother back into my room. I slammed the door and sat in the middle of the floor, marker clutched in my fist, heart pumping. I could hear her muttering from the bathroom. I opened my hand and saw green vines growing over my sweaty palm.

She really didn't understand. Her eyes were blue.

