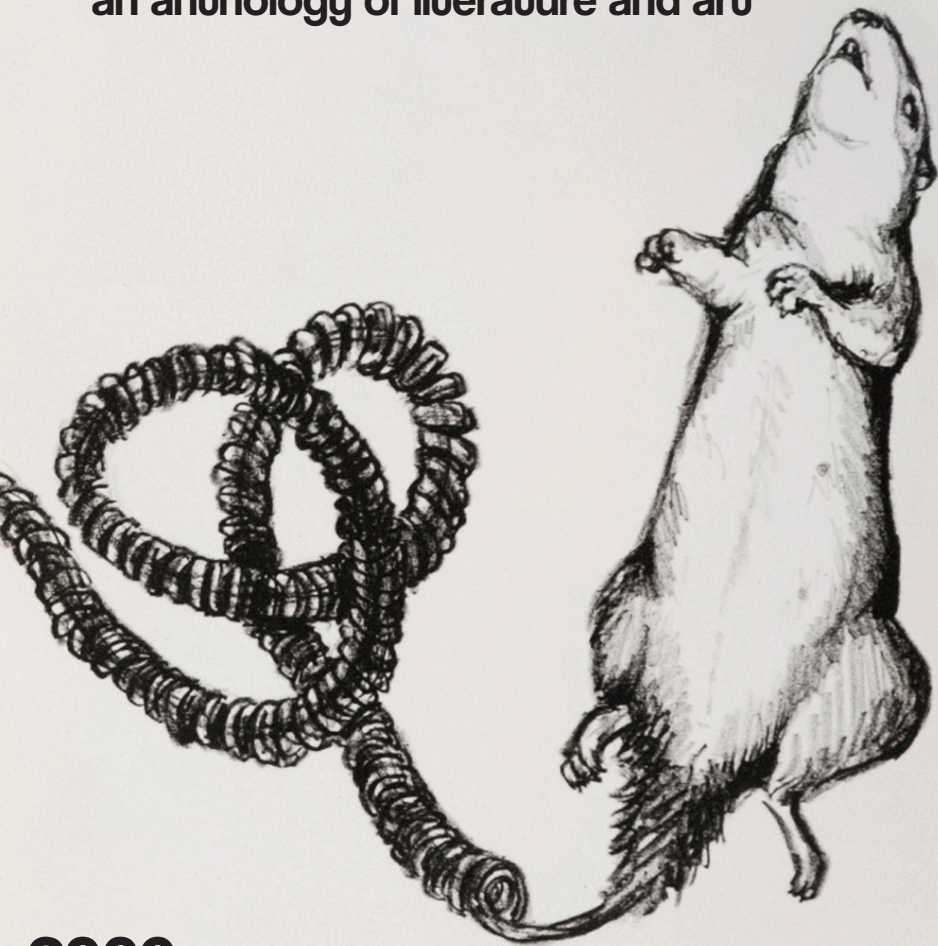


poictesme

an anthology of literature and art



2009

virginia commonwealth university

poictesme (pwä-'tēm) *n.*

1. fictitious medieval French province created by James Branch Cabell (Richmond writer, VCU library patron) in his *Biography of Manuel* (18 volume series), made most famous in *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice* (1919) because of its immediate denouncement by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, making Cabell and *Jurgen* internationally notorious throughout the two year court battle that Cabell eventually won. **2.** a portmanteau (see Lewis Carroll) of two actual city names; originally thought to be an anagram, a specialty of JBC. **3.** fixed law of P. that all things must go by tens forever. **4.** the literary journal of VCU, replacing *Millennium*, whose outdated name was deemed irrelevant by the irreverent new staff. **5.** a name that alludes to the spirit of Richmond through the memory of JBC; an invocation of the arts through its literary roots.

poictesme

a student anthology of literature and art

2009

Richmond

masthead

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Poictesme is an annual literary publication funded by student fees that accepts submissions year round. The editors invite submissions of short fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and artwork. Submissions guidelines are at www.poictesme.vcustudentmedia.com. Please send your submissions and/or questions to pwatem@gmail.com or send in monetary donations, fan mail and/or all hard copy submissions to: ***Poictesme***, VCU Student Media Center, 817 W. Broad St., P.O. Box 842010, Richmond, VA 23284-2010.

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AUDREY WALLS

piedmont station

delaplane, virginia

here the hickory trees
hang dead in dry silence
like stiff brown bones.

if you dropped a lit match
you would burn the land
the barns, the farms, the homes.

leaving a trail of char
through the yellowing grass,
blackening every blank stone.

you would rewrite the story
with your tinderbox fingers
of how you were left here alone.

Paper Houses

First the cornerstone: a jack butts heads with a two. Walls unfold, supporting one another, making bedfellows of spades and hearts. Finally, a heavy ceiling threatens to overwhelm the tenuous walls. Two children peer over their construction with crescent moon grins that bunch their cheeks in Dubble Bubble bulbs.

Across the threshold, bills strewn on the dining table echo cards scattered on the living room floor. Both piles wait to be rebuilt. The mother shuts the door on ambitious giggling. Noisy tremors in the floor bring the paper walls down in a silent crash. Pale cornflower streaks the cerulean carpet where paper walls once stood.

PATRICK SCOTT VICKERS

Uncle Stephen on love, I miss you, wisdom and time

It was February, but warm.

There had been tornadoes.

Uncle Stephen's house sat on a small hill, and grandmother had called me and told me to come home, and to bring Uncle Stephen with me.

He was having a bad day. An under the blanket day. All the windows in the house were open, so that if a tornado hit, it wouldn't pressurize the house and blow out the windows.

But Uncle Stephen's papers and projects were shifting and twisting in the cross winds.

For once, we didn't have to have the fan on.

We were in his bedroom, Uncle Stephen didn't believe in cordless phones, and instead had a single land line with a fifty foot cord that warped and weaved throughout his projects. I twisted the cord around my fingers.

I was watching the bump of Uncle Stephen's head under the blanket as grandmother talked, and when I said I didn't think he would be moving, the bump nodded.

At least get in the bathroom, grandmother said, and I hung up the phone.

"She wants us to go in the bathroom, doesn't she," Uncle Stephen said.

"There's funnel clouds over Starkville," I said, "heading

this way.”

“I won’t be killed in a bathroom,” Uncle Stephen said, “smashed by my own cast iron porcelain tub.”

Under the blanket, and the blackness that was his breathing hole, I could see his eyes glitter in the gray storm light.

The hairs on my arm stood up. Then settled. Stood up again.

A drawing of a tree sailed past us and plastered itself against the window screen. The drawing was one of his sketches of the tree doctor’s tools, the ball of gel to cradle the roots sketched in with blue Prismacolor pencils.

Uncle Stephen coughed and rolled over to look out the window, and I was left facing the back of his head. He was under one of Cora’s blankets, the quilt hand stitched and the patch on his head cotton cloth covered in yellow flowers made from knotted thread.

“You still thinking about that girl?” Uncle Stephen said.

I watched the clouds. They spun and swirled. I thought about being swept away. Of how you were supposed to be able to hear it coming, like a train. But I had never heard a real train, except in the movies. I tried to imagine the roar. I tried to imagine what she would think, if I were to be taken by the tornado, if she would be sorry.

“No.” I said.

“You love her?”

“No.” I said.

The bump under the blanket moved. He coughed, and I picked the bucket up from the floor, but his hand

appeared from under the blanket and waived it away.

"I'm sorry," Uncle Stephen said.

"It's no trouble," I said.

"About the girl," Uncle Stephen said.

"I'm fine," I said. But he knew I was lying. I had been talking about her for almost a month. The month since she had told me it wouldn't work. As if we were machines. Cogs in some life machine. And I was the wrong part for her life, the wrong size, the wrong strata of the Southern life, layered as any fancy cake could be.

"What sucks," Uncle Stephen said, "is that you can't tell if you're truly in love until it's too late."

I set the bucket down. The house shook, and outside the trees bowed, then straightened, obeisant. Begging to be left in the Earth. Attached.

Whatever I was made of, inside, tightened whenever I thought of her. Myself grinding against myself.

"I know," Uncle Stephen said, "because I was in love, once."

This was news to me.

When he was younger, he had been a topic of conversation in the small community he lived in. But I had never seen a woman in his house. Or pictures. Nobody special.

I had thought his head was full of engines and inventions. Wires. Sparks.

"Of course," Uncle Stephen said, "I told her I was in love with her, but I didn't know it, like I know it now, until it was too late."

“Great,” I said.

The bump under the blanket moved again. Nodded?

“I won’t tell you it will get better,” Uncle Stephen said.

There was more air in the house than there had ever been. The February heat had brought the smells of damp Mississippi winter rot into the air and sent them flying, mixed in with the rushes of the ionized storm.

But there wasn’t enough air when I let myself turn my thoughts to her.

“Get me an envelope,” Uncle Stephen said.

“What?” I said.

“From above the desk, there’s a box of envelopes, bring the box.”

It took a while, as above the desk there was also three tool chests, a nest of cables wrestling together and a snake-skin that crumbled when I touched it, but there was a box of business envelopes. 150 count.

“You find them?” Uncle Stephen said. He was so quiet. I could’ve been imagining his voice.

I walked back into the bedroom and set the box down on the bed where he could reach it.

“No,” Uncle Stephen said, “open it.”

I did.

“Envelopes,” I said.

“Give me one,” Uncle Stephen said, and I reached into the box and pulled out the first envelope, and realized it was already addressed, stamped, sealed.

“Well?” Uncle Stephen said.

I handed it to him, to his hand that groped from under the blanket, and he held it to his breathing hole and then gave it back to me.

‘I miss you’ was typed on the front, where the address would go, and his initials were typed in the upper left hand corner, where the return address would be.

“Take them. Open them, but not now, not here,” Uncle Stephen said.

I rifled through the box. Each envelope was the same. His initials. And the same addressee. If three words could be an address. A person.

“I was too old,” Uncle Stephen said, “or too sick, or too something. It was a long time ago. I thought that I would get over her, and I was curious how long it would take.”

“How long did it take?” I said.

“I wrote about a letter a day,” Uncle Stephen said, “whenever I thought of her, I would jot down what it felt like. I reckoned maybe if I wrote them out, the thoughts would leave me, leave me be.”

“And you never mailed them?” I said.

“Not one,” Uncle Stephen said, “she had someone else.”

“You loved her?” I said. But I was also thinking that we didn’t talk this way. Uncle Stephen’s life before me didn’t exist, except in stories, a few tall tales, a random photo of him standing next to a long gone car. But no women. No one woman in particular.

“She used to tell me she loved the shit out of me,”

Uncle Stephen said, then coughed, and I picked up the bucket again.

“Go home,” Uncle Stephen said, “grandmother will forgive me if I get killed, but she won’t forgive me if you get killed too.”

I got up to go and Uncle Stephen said, “take them. Read.”

And then he rolled over and was vomiting into the bucket, and for some time, there was only the vomit, and the cold cloth I brought for the back of his neck. The night swelled through the windows and then I did have to go. Grandmother didn’t trust me to drive at night.

I emptied the bucket one last time, rinsing it in the tub. There was nothing to clean, only bile, because God knew when Uncle Stephen has last eaten. I placed the bucket where he could reach it, and put the box of his letters into my backpack.

He was asleep when I left, the blanket only covering half his face, his eyes sunken into his head and his cheek bones stark and sharp, his face stubbled with gray hairs that caught the last of the storm light, and each hair was a telephone pole, lit as night was falling, the city of the body.

Back at grandmother’s house, after I was in bed, I pulled the first envelope out of the box.

I miss you.

I thought of her. Of Uncle Stephen writing the missing out. Or trying to. The box had originally held 150 envelopes, and from what I could see, it still did.

I took the first one. It was sealed. And when I pressed

my finger under the flap, I hesitated.

I miss you.

The envelope was yellowed and smelled of Uncle Stephen's house.

Mold. Summer heat. Dust. And paper.

The seal gave without a rip, as if Uncle Stephen had barely wet it, and inside was a single sheet of paper.

I miss the heat off your skin. The way I could hover my hand just above your bare back and feel the electricity between us. The thousands of my cells crying out for your cells, and the echo from you, begging for me.

And that was all. I looked at all the envelopes. They weren't dated. There was no hint of a name. I had never touched my her bare back, and it was looking like I never would. And at the thought of her, my center tightened again, twisting.

I folder the letter and put it back into its envelope, where it had waited all these years.

Where was she now? Who was she with? Did her cells still remember Uncle Stephen's touch, and when she wasn't even aware, hunger for him?

I put my head on my pillow, and watched as the storm outside threw down the rain and the windows lit with lightning.

I wondered what would happen if I kept tightening, if there was a limit to how taut my soul could become.

A Pretend Man, Sans Camel, Borrowed from Mark Strand

I wait until a stormy day and wake up before it starts raining. While the breezes outside discuss when I should get up. I get out of bed and put on a light green poncho. then I go outside and start walking. I walk until I blend in with my surroundings and become invisible to everyone who is asking me for advice.

L.E. PACE

Dreams of Eden

Like a carp caught midstream,
I'm trapped by the gaze of my wife.
Her cold eyes cut
Through my denim trousers.

The color in her cheek—
Crab apple and hardwood.
Looking at this old woman, I glimpse for hints
Of the girl who I swore before almighty God
I would cleave to as if she were my own flesh.

A single curl strays from its place.
My hand moves to brush it.
A spectral image, she stands, dares me
To turn and grasp her rough, chapped
Hands. With pursed lips, she guts fish, bakes bread.

I work the fields before the rooster's first
Cry and return to that silent house long after dark.
Slowly, I remove my smeared glasses.
Her pinched lips curl, her eyes rove over
My cracked nails.

We wanted children; bone of my bones.

Now, a dry wind rustles the orchard.

All I feel are her eyes

Looking down on my blue overalls.

I grip my pitchfork tightly.

PATRICK SCOTT VICKERS

Uncle Stephen, Envelope 2, Heart as Stone, Valentine

I had the house to myself.

Uncle Stephen and grandmother were in Starkville to see the neurologist.

I pulled the box from under the bed.

Grandmother's house had its own smell, as if all the years of drying her clothes on the line had brought the fierce sun into the house, burning away the Mississippi mustiness and leaving a hint of hot clean cloth.

But Uncle Stephen's box had his house's smell.

When I missed him, I had the box.

And its envelopes.

The second was addressed the same as the first: I Miss You.

And the return address: Uncle Stephen's initials, S. R. V.

Stephen Rye Vickers.

His last M.R.I. had a small white dot.

The neurologist was going to explain the dot.

I held envelope number two and thought about going to medical school to learn how to explain one small mark.

One mystery.

He had typed the addresses, and the periods of the

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manual typewriter left dents in the envelope I could feel.

Dots.

I tore the envelope open.

Your voice comforted me when nothing else would.

SARAH GROVES

Salem

The ghost of John Proctor climbs
up the wall to my window.
He crawls his way through,
until he stands at the foot
of my bed. I know he's coming
by the stilling of the night birds,
the dull slap of the rope against shingles,
a click of the latch, then
the click of bones on floor.
He watches me, his broken neck
cricked to one side.

Famous dead lecher, Mister Proctor,
lover of lambs and eleven-year-olds;
Now you stand looking
at me while I sleep, the hemp
heavy around your neck, your eyes
dull buttonholes.

Abigail Williams before me,
and others after,
will know this monotonous tyranny.

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No pact with the devil ever made this:
larynx choked, limp-limbed
as a poppet, brain pan empty,
you stand as you always stood,
waiting for me to sleep.

The Vacant Morning

The barn next to our house is hollow and open,
and holds secrets. Tales of adolescents.
My uncle and his pool table, the billiard balls
crunching like spades striking ciderblocks.

Sometimes we hide there, fasting from
sunlight in afternoon silo sessions.
I shoot out the light bulbs with a b-b gun
while older kids shoot bottles
out of each others' hands.

Those boys who get drunk and burn
fields with bonfires, blazing brilliant
in the morning hours, as the crickets
say goodbye to the moon.

A farmer comes, with tarpaper skin,
his face flaming with drink
as he feeds the cows and silently hates time.

The splintered, weather-battered boards
take no more; fall in on the secrets.

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In light bulb sockets
dead bats sizzle.

In the vacant morning we leave.
Nothing remains of the barn but dust and dirt,
nails and memories, left for the cobwebs.

MATT STANGEL

a movement in the treehouse

i wasn't so much interested in her face stung swollen and blue,
but that blanket that started at the edge of her, that settled into a
circle of dead bees.

maybe she was playing darts and missed the board,
and the bees poured from the hole in a thin line, a military march,
buzzing drums that slide over you, one by one, like new skin,
and the way they drop when i squeeze the trigger of the smoker.
when the walls were peeled away, you could see the language of it,
and in the center, a baby raccoon mummified in wax and honey.

you see this often with killer bees, their attacks, though usually
they only kill

small animals, birds, mice, the occasional squirrel,
but i, myself, covered in bees like the girl, then the decades
of wax growing up my dead legs. they haven't bred this out of us yet.
it took twenty-six tanzanian queens and an accident to mold
a room of honey that fit neatly inside the walls of another.

Flood or Love Letter

Act I

It's in January that she tells me.

It's a letter, not a call; silent as snow. Her handwriting is small, so small, and the page is blotted with ink. She is three states away, but reading, I can see the bruises, like plums. I write back, tell her to get help, tell her to get away, to come sleep on my couch.

I want to say more. Sweetheart, I want to say. Sweetheart, stay with me. I have blackberries in a bowl in my kitchen, for you. Come stay with me. We will undo all of this, unravel these last three years like a poorly-made sweater. We will knit something new.

Now.

Run.

Unravel.

I do not hear back.

Act II

In March, she writes back, tells me to stop worrying.

Stop.

Stop.

Stop.

It rains for three weeks, and I read that letter over and over again.

The “don’t worry.”

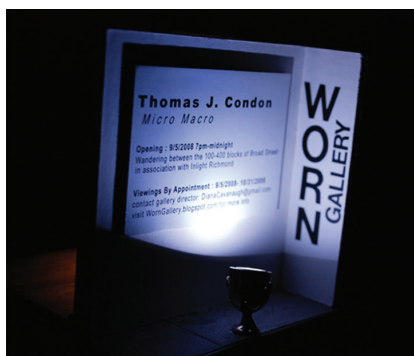
The “I’m fine with him.”

Act III

So much dripping dark green is outside, thunder-rainy, and I fall asleep listening to the sound of leaking water dripping into the bowls I have set out against the flood. Pots and pans on the floor echo with the hits, falling, falling, falling, torture, everything is dripping, everything is rainy. The waters rise. I wake up at odd hours to empty them, dimly seeing in the dark that bowl of blackberries, too, is overflowing with water, onto the floor, making black sticky puddles.



Kate Kisicki, **Collage 2**
latex, acrylic, collage on canvas, 23" x 23"



Diana Cavanaugh, **Worn Gallery**
(Thomas J Condon's Micro Macro Exhibition)

lighting, wood and cement floors, walls, art by exhibiting artist,
traveling artist collective, 8.5" x 5.5" x 5.5"



Diana Cavanaugh, **Migration and Settlement**
wood, fabric, and artist performance, 50" x 25" x 56"



Jackie Brown, **Surging Seepage: A Triple Bond Accretion System**

mixed media, 16" x 21" x 18"



Surging Seepage (*detail*)



Jared Boggess, **Isola dei Giganti**
acrylic and ink, 22" x 18"



Deepa Swanson, **Rose**
mixed media, 19" x 15"



Timothy Rusterholz, **Machakos Kenya**, Styrofoam and Wood, 10' x 7' x 7'



Vikki Chu, **Street Aquarium**, ink and digital, 8" x 10"



Vreni Michellini, **La Singularidad**
acrylic, spray paint, soft pastels, 72" x 96"

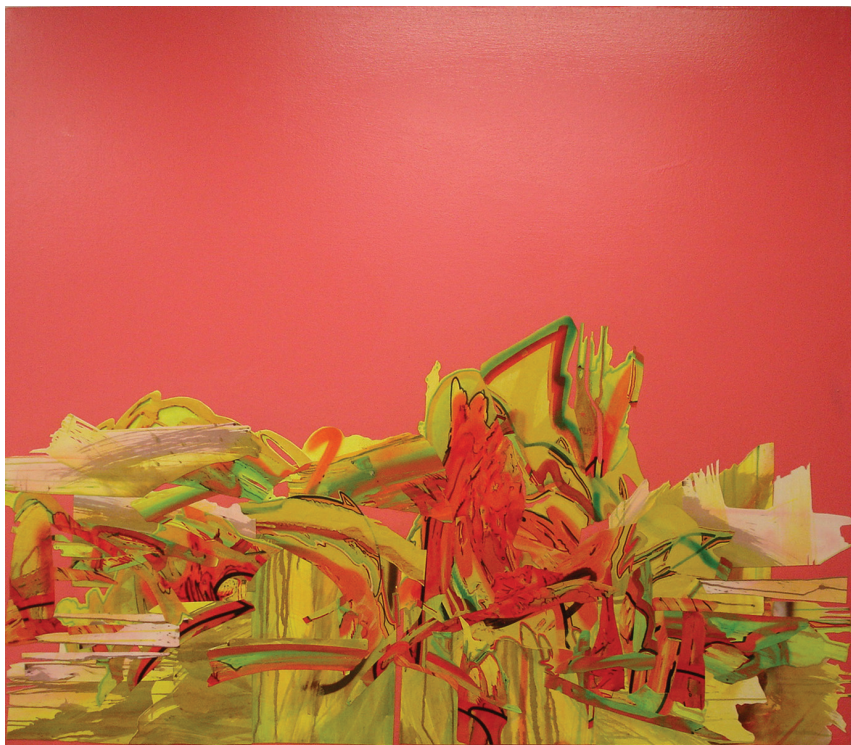


Stephanie Bingham, **Could've Been Me**
bronze cast of a dead fish displayed
in crocheted gold wire net, 2' x 2' x 1'



Andrea Donnelly,
Walls Around Her
handwoven cotton,
deconstructed drawing,
steel, 10' x 8' x 6'





Kate Kisicki, **Creep**
acrylic and collage on canvas, 56" x 48"



Angela Tornello, **You're There**
oil, 22" x 28"



Jared Boggess, A Dream Across Keys, acrylic and ink, 14" x 27.5"



Garrett Fees, **Vuln**
digital collage, 22' x 30'



Roberto Jamora, **Windy**
charcoal on paper, 48" x 54"



ALEX EGNER, *Brought to You by the Escapist
Fantasy Tourism Board*, digital, 24" x 36"



ALEX EGNER, **Brought to You by the Escapist**
Fantasy Tourism Board, digital, 24" x 36"



Vreni Michelini, **Flor Celestial**
acrylic, spray paint, soft pastels, 20" x 20"



*Peter Bains, **Sunlit Type**, photograph, 9.39" x 7.04"*



Shane Burklow, **Captain Stompfootbeef**

ink, 8.5" x 11"

CHRIS RAINTREE

I Remember Who I Am

Earliest Memory

I remember walking in the woods. Then walking into a room. There were red lights and men in there, and laughing. It was that sort of laughing meant to be fun, but always made me nervous. I think it was some sort of bar. Some men wore baseball caps. It was really loud in there. A man saw me and said, “Hey!”

Salt

My brother told me to sniff up a pile of salt. That was the worst nosebleed I ever had.

The Straight Wind

We had a big wind blow through Bedford. My dad called it a straight wind. I was playing with a red and yellow plastic truck in a mud puddle in our driveway. My brothers might have been playing basketball. My dad came out of the house shouting, and it was windy. It was a cold kind of windy, and the sky turned green. We ran into our basement, dark and wet with little windows near the ceiling. We could see green through the windows, and leaves and dirt flying by. The top of a big oak tree fell. We lost a tractor shed too. I don't know what I did with my truck.

Running Away

My parents tell me that when I was really young, I would run away a lot, and that it made them scared. I was really happy though.

The Chicken Nugget

When I was very young, maybe seven or eight, I put a single chicken nugget into the microwave and cooked it for ten minutes. When my chicken nugget was done cooking, it was black. My brother squeezed it in his hand and it turned into powder.

Christmas Car Wreck

My brother wrecked his car one night when we were coming home from Christmas shopping. We were okay. It was snowing. Some of the rescue workers were saying that it should have been a lot worse. The post from a speed limit sign skewered my brother's car. It entered through the windshield and passed through the driver's side window. It completely missed his face.

Fireflies

One time we got a big pickle jar with a green lid and jabbed little holes in the lid with a steak knife. We went out into the field and caught fireflies. I put grass in the jar in case the fireflies got hungry. I put the jar in my room and my room was colored green until I went to sleep. In the morning, most of the fireflies were dead.

When My Dad Threw My Brother

My brother and I were having a fight. We were being too loud and I think my dad was having a bad day. My dad burst into the room and grabbed my brother and threw him. My brother and I shared a room and while we were trying to sleep that night, my dad came in and apologized to us.

Scout Camp

I only went to one camp and it was a day camp for Cub Scouts at Bedford Lake. We caught tiny frogs and sang "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More." There was a boy that everyone thought was really funny, but I was used to being the funny one. He kept imitating a dying cow and I wanted to fight him. On the way home I told my dad about the boy and my dad said that he didn't want me to fight.

The Cow

We had a cow that had fallen in a big mud puddle and broke her leg. She couldn't get back up. It was dark out; Dad got his gun and we went to the barn. He shot the cow in the head. I stayed after Dad went back to the house and watched the other cows come to look at the one we had shot. All the cows started mooing. A calf came and walked around the cow and started nursing off of it. Dad came back to the barn to see if I was okay. I told him I was okay.

A Confusing Crush

She wasn't ugly, but she wasn't pretty. We had never talked to each other. I was in third grade. She was smart, and had brown hair and buck-teeth. She was chubby, too. She wasn't pale, but I remember her cheeks pink after recess. She would be sweaty and her hair was always messy after recess.

A Bomb

There was a kid in middle school that everyone really liked. He made me feel cool because I could eat lunch with him. One time he told us that if you put a bunch of balled up pieces of aluminum foil into a bottle of Windex, the aluminum foil balls would turn black. When they turned black, the bottle would explode. I thought it was really cool, and I told my mom and dad. They told me that I shouldn't hang out with people like that.

The Black Line

I learned in school that smoking was bad for you. They said there was a line in our bodies. The line was white or pink. When you smoked, part of that line would turn black. When your whole line turned black, then you would die. I imagined a dynamite fuse in down the middle of your body, and it scared me because my dad smoked. I told him about it that night in the car.

Nap Time

It was nap time at school. We would lie on blue and red mats. Some kids just had blankets, including

me. Nobody was sleeping yet, but the room was dark. Then I saw my mom and my sister. They tiptoed into the room and my sister was smiling big. They waved at us and we all waved back. We were excited to have visitors and I was really excited because it was my mom and my sister.

Decapitated Berries

We had to write papers where we used descriptive language. I laughed at a girl for using a word wrong. She wrote about picking and eating berries and something like – “the decapitated berries are sweet and juicy.” We would laugh at her a lot. We picked on her because her last name was Gaylord and we heard that she had lice. Some kids claimed to have seen her pick at her scalp until it bled.

The Ring

I was watching a soccer game with my dad at the high school. My sister might have been playing. I went to play with the other kids under the bleachers, and a man called down to us. He said he had dropped his wedding ring and wanted help. I felt like I was on a mission and I wanted to find it before anyone else. He sat in the bleachers while we looked and looked, and I finally found his ring. He gave me a dollar, but I told him I didn't want it. I was lying, because I really did want the dollar. He made me take it. That night at dinner, my dad and I told my brother the whole story. When I told him that the man gave me a dollar, my brother said, “That's it?” Dad told my brother that I didn't do it for

the dollar and that I told the man that he didn't have to give me money.

Scared

My older sister asked me to sleep in her room because she was scared. I thought she was scared of ghosts, and that was silly because people older than me weren't supposed to get scared.

Full Moon and Blue Skin

I fell in love one night with a girl. We left a party and went into a field with a blanket. There were round hay bales and we could hear people from the party looking for us. We climbed the hay and laid on the blanket. I told her a story about something I can't remember. The story took a long time to tell and she slept through most of it. We laughed and the moon was full. The moon made her skin blue, and I loved her. I wanted to kiss her but I was scared. I just looked at her instead. Then a train came in the night and we chased it, but it got away.

The Man in the Dark

My sister said that she saw a man on our property. It was dark and she was scared and that made me scared. My dad drove the car down to where she said she saw the man. My dad turned on the headlights, but he didn't see anything.

The Drowning

My best friend and another friend of mine were

swimming in the James River. My other friend drowned. I heard it took upwards of two hours to find his body. I had day-mares of being in the water, not knowing where my friend had gone. I asked my best friend to come and visit me in Richmond because I wanted to see him and see how he was doing. He seemed sad, but in good shape. He said that he might get a tattoo.

The Kittens

I had three kittens. One was named Boots or Bootsy, and it was a really hot day. I thought that they must be really hot. We had an old dormitory refrigerator. I put them in there. I forgot about them. My dad found them two or three weeks later, but they didn't look like kittens anymore.

Soda Bottle Terrarium

In Cub Scouts we learned how to make a terrarium out of a big soda bottle. You could fill it with dirt and plant things in it. I planted clover and wild onion that grew in my yard. The onion grew a lot. I put caterpillars in too. They were supposed to be Monarch butterflies. They went into their cocoons, but they never came out.

The Station Wagon

We had an old go-cart that didn't work anymore and a hill near our barn. We would push it up the hill and ride it down until we were tired of pushing it up. I was riding by myself one day. I was pushing it up the hill and I was getting tired. I heard my dad's station wagon

start up, and then it got really loud, like the engine was revving. I heard my dad come out of the house yelling. Then I heard my brother yell to him, and he sounded scared. I saw the station wagon roll through the bushes and into the side of the barn. I didn't know what was happening but I was so scared, I left the go-cart and ran. The go-cart rolled down the hill without me. I ran to the porch and hid under the swing.

Ten Dollars and Mud Puddles

I was riding my bike home from school one day. I passed a shopping center that had mud puddles in the parking lot. I liked riding through the water so I would circle round and round on my bike and try to splash all of the water out of the biggest puddle. Then a man from the jewelry store came out and said he wanted to talk to me. I thought that I was in trouble. He said he remembered being young like me. He liked to ride through mud puddles too. He said he would do that because he didn't ever have any money. He pulled out his wallet and gave me ten dollars. He told me to go home, so I did. I was excited and told my brother. I showed him the ten dollars, but he didn't believe me.

Sunny

My old dog Sunny was the first pet I ever had and she peed in the house all the time. Everyone would get mad at her, even me. I hit her once because I was so mad and I didn't know what to do. The first night I had her, I tied her outside and she yelped and yelped because she was just a scared puppy. My brother told me to let

her sleep with me and I did. She chased my neighbor's geese and he shot her. I cried and cried. I yelled too. I felt like I was in a movie.

His Secret

I always thought that this boy was weird. He rode my bus. I was sitting next to him and he told me to look. When I looked, he had pulled down his pants and underwear and I saw his penis. It was little and brown. I don't remember if he was circumcised or not, but the hole where pee comes out was looking right at me. He laughed and laughed.

Shooting

My dad bought a 22. I used to shoot soda cans and rats down by the barn. It made me feel like a grown-up. One day I was shooting soda cans and I didn't know that my neighbor was in the woods behind the cans. He came over later that night and was mad. I called him that night to tell him it was me who was shooting, and that I was sorry. He told my dad he wanted me to go to hunter's safety class that weekend. I didn't go to the first day of class, and my dad asked how he was supposed to look our neighbor in the eye. I went the next day and learned that you can't shoot birds unless they are flying. I'll never know how close my bullets were.

The Rope

My brother and his friend had Playboys in the barn. They hid them in a pile of hay. They would go to the

barn and look at them, and sometimes they would let me look too. My favorite was a cowgirl who had a rope. My brother thought that she was ugly, but I thought she was pretty. She wrapped the rope around her breasts.

The Bathtub

I was really, really sad. I was really lonely, and my family was away. It seemed like I was sad and lonely for months. I got really sick and couldn't stop throwing up, and I didn't know what to do. I only remember being sad and hungry because I couldn't eat and no one was making me feel better. I would sit for hours and hours in my bathtub. It was really quiet except for when the faucet dripped. My fingers would turn into raisins and I felt weak. I didn't want to be sad and lonely anymore. I wanted it to go away. On the wall next to my bathtub, I wanted to write, "I am the light of the world."

A Witch

Sometimes when I would ride my bike at night and it was cold, I would go as fast as I could and pretend I was a witch and I was flying on my broomstick. I still do it sometimes.

Old Rusty Man

No one told me why my baby duck got sick and died in the driveway. It was next to that rusted car I liked to throw rocks at, seats mildewed like the old man who owned it. He had a crinkled one hundred dollar bill he never spent, because a golden lover gave it to him when he was smooth. Sometimes he would take out his dentures and hold them to the sky. They would taunt me, and I would dream of asparagus and battery-acid. But the duck just evaporated into mist, like every time I break eggs in the morning, just to be washed away by orange juice.

Liability

We drive back in the late hours
after meeting your father, who looks
like Hemingway. I would be happy, I think,
if you grew whiskers like that
when you were silver, and I could
feel them brush my cheek in the early sun —
but it may be too soon to say.

We fly down the interstate listening to headlights
mingle with highway shadows. They gossip
of skid marks and carcasses, of billboards.
We have no idea how fast we are going,
and this city has always felt, on rainy days
and after dark, of an abandoned dream.

The swing sets, I tell you, are vanishing.
Shiny playgrounds are sprouting up
in church and school yards
enticing and plastic, without swings.
And when was the last time
either of us has eaten fruit
straight off the branch? — It has been years.

HAYLEY WOZNY

Mirror

I untangle my mother's hair while standing in a jungle mess of IV wires: blue, yellow, red, green, grey. Long fingers work through long hair while I try to keep my own from winding with the wires. Outside there is only the steady flash of a red-and-blue blinking tower, and my mind wanders, she sleeps. She said once how much I look like her, and oh that pained me, for she'd always said how she was happy with herself even though she said she knew she was not pretty. Knot. Pull gently. In the mirror across the room it's me I see, no longer that odd thirteen but twenty-two and remembering that small comment, that small comment – outside the window blue flashes and in my mind and there I am, knotted blue sheets, tangled legs, and a boy, calling me beautiful. Beautiful! Another knot. Gently work out. And I feel beautiful. Knot. And she is beautiful. Knot. Untangle. Untangle. Untangle.

Motion and the Illusions of Animation

An innocuous traveler sits to one side of the tracks,
looks down either end of infinity
anticipating the next locomotive,
the constant, even acceleration.

But transience invades travelers
in dark stations over the years,
while an engine is seen for mere seconds
during the turns within a train's
brief time in transit.

Untitled (Silence)

I.

I woke up this morning

This morning stole my breath.

I awoke not to the sounds of

rustling trees,

singing birds,

rusted nails.

The pores off my skin are the loudest voices,
and they don't even speak.

II.

I lie now a rank and musty form.

There wasn't a shower,

nor a tub,

nor even a stove to boil water.

I hiked up the mountain

with a backpack.

I traveled for 4 hours to the Croix du Niveulet.

There, my breath came to me as full as the bosom

poictesme

of a newborn mother.

The air danced in my lungs and resonated

in my

feet.

And when I was one with my breath and

my breath was one with me,

my eyes lay upon the great cabin.

It stood there

not making a sound,

not squeaking or

whistling

(as cabins sometimes do)

DAVID OSNOE

The Devil's Dimensions

When I told you I buried things for a living, you mistakenly thought I was being obtuse and metaphorical, didn't you? There is such a thing as the bright satisfaction of a metal tongue lashing chunkily into the damp creole earth. Bayou witches call this the jungled, boggy mist-yard, a name in the dark language that rolls down your throat like black molasses, and it's where I bury those things that need losing.

You couldn't be fooled in our love-bed, when I tried to hold back my beastly lust from searing you into a few fragile pieces. You would draw me out like a tiger tamer, all power in those dusty gray eyes of yours.

If I had writing hands, I'd write you some sonnet to snag the heart and minds of young lovers, to turn their insides outside and make them yearn for our raw force. I make my hole six feet long and six feet deep – I call them the devil's dimensions, and I lower, lower, lower until it's the star-bloated sky over me and the chocolate cake earth around me.

How I wish that when I told you that I buried things for a living, I was being obtuse and metaphorical. Some part of me is sinking into this grave with you, and it's only revenge that stops. My soul-slide to suicide, and this raging energy...I'll give the devil more, I'll make the goddamned bayou witches cackle and squeal my name – and it will be by my own hands that I will lay my last devil's dimensions.

Before the Sound of the Bell

My dear Theo, I decided long ago to live
By those words that I wrote to you in my first letter
After I'd arrived at Saint-Rémy. Do you remember?
The only lesson one should learn in life is to suffer
Without complaint. For everyone's sake, I've played my part
As the madman. Who dares say otherwise?
"Fou roux!" the old women would scream
At me when I passed the Place du Forum.
Now, no one speaks as I shuffle
Through the cheerless rooms
And lightless passages of the men's quarter.
Between iron bars I can see
Cornfields and olive groves hemming my lonely district.
It is, for me, a moment of frightening clarity,
When nature becomes so beautiful. I want to weep, I'm ashamed
To say, when I see them. Only two things keep me sane:
My fond memories of the North, to which I've returned
These days past, and the knowledge that soon,
They'll release me. After that, I'll come to see you
In Paris for a time. But I mustn't stay long, you see,

For there's one scene
 That occupies my thoughts more than the rest.
 A church. It's on the edge
 Of a town, ah! the name escapes me now.
 And when you catch it from the west
 At the right forenoon hour, the building appears violet
 Against the flat blue sky. The stained glass glows ultramarine.
 The pink, sun-burnt sand forks, leads one path
 To the rectory, the other toward the pews.
 It brings to mind the studies I made
 Of the old tower and cemetery from the vicarage in Nuenen.
 I gave one of them to Elisabeth for her birthday
 Because I was pick-pocketed in Antwerp and hadn't the money
 For a real gift. Do you remember?
 The same year Mama took to the terrible flu.
 But, lo I feel the sadness of those early years returning, as well.
 I know because of the way the clouds break
 Over that steeple of my memories, and because—the line
 Between insufferable and sublime is far too thin.
 This sadness will, dear brother, last forever.
 Nevertheless, a warm handshake in thought for you and Jo,
 And believe me. Your brother,
 Vincent.

The Thick Shiver of a Narrow January

The thick shiver of a narrow January
is unbearable; the wet spokes of time
when they are tangled in the dry rot of leaves.

Everything turned cold-blooded:
trees release dead yellow finches while
white concrete spans a distance infinite.

The smell of the sun, and the
sight of singing, sounding constellations;
I have forgotten how it feels
to be next to fire.

TOM BATTEN

Shave

His father barked at him from the barber chair, “Ernesto, stay away from the window.”

Ernesto ignored him, as well as the worried cluck of the barber, and peeked through the dingy yellow blinds anyway. Most of the people from the town were outside, standing in the street before the barbershop. The smoldering sun beat down on them, drawing the sweat from their bodies in streams. They bore this in hopes that they might see Ernesto’s father’s face completely shaven, something that no one had seen in more than thirty years.

There was Juan, the former soldier who carried seven bullets in his chest that formed a ragged circle around his heart. There was Mad Carlos, who, every year at Christmas, assembled Nativities from chicken scraps and tried to sell them door to door. There was Ana, who carried Ernesto’s heart in the locket around her neck yet didn’t know his name. There was his teacher. There was the Priest. There was the American, a singer who came to the town years before, hoping it would inspire his songs, but went insane after eating the green mold on the rocks near the river, and who, two years later, would be killed in a flood on Ernesto’s twelfth birthday.

“Ernesto, please. Sit down and behave.”

Ernesto turned and faced his father, who had a white sheet over his chest, dusted with black where the barber had clipped the thick hair that covered his face. The

barber dragged a straight razor up and down a leather strap, clucking his tongue nervously on every up-stroke. The light that squeezed through the blinds revealed a field of black hair that twitched like a swarm of flies in the stale, dry air.

“You will make the barber nervous. Sit.”

Ernesto let the blinds snap shut around his fingertips and slunk down into a chair. A newspaper lay on the floor, and he shuffled its pages with his feet. He had not seen his father’s work friends outside.

He could understand Madame Ultima, as her enormous size made the hot sun extremely dangerous. And what was left of The Human Bullet Family was still in mourning and almost never left the house. But where was Nigel, the Acrobat? Where was Dainty Jane and her trained dogs, or Jake, the Lobster Man? Why did these people, the fixtures at parties and holidays, stay away when packs of strangers did not?

His father’s face looked strange. It was still covered with thick, black hair; but his hair was now short as bristles, where once it had been full and curled. The barber twisted his father’s face from side to side with one hand, held the razor high in the air with the other, and looked for the best place to begin. What would they find underneath, when it was all over? Would they recognize the face left behind?

“Ernesto, please. Stop kicking your feet.”

Ernesto stopped, and the only noise in the shop was that of the crowd outside. Someone, somewhere, plucked a guitar in little fits and starts. It almost sounded like a wind chime through the flimsy barbershop walls.

“This part will be very difficult,” said the barber. He wiped his glasses with the same rag that he used to clean the sweat that collected in the folds on his forehead and the bags under his eyes. “I won’t be able to completely shave the hair that grows over your eyes. The skin there is too thin.”

Ernesto’s father closed his eyes and nodded. “I trust you. Just do what you can. I don’t expect to be beautiful, just good enough to work.”

Ernesto was surprised to hear his mother’s words come through his father’s mouth. How many times had she erupted at the breakfast table, or moped as his father packed for another tour that would last all summer? Ernesto was always proud that his father avoided becoming a slave to the processing plant, where his classmates’ fathers carved their fingers down to knobs, de-beaking chickens. Ernesto’s father led a far more romantic life, and it confused him that his mother rejected that.

His father always resisted her. He would sit down at the kitchen table and run a comb across his face, explaining that it was foolish to waste a natural gift.

The barber pinched his father’s face between his fingers and began to scrape, starting at the jaw line and moving steadily upwards. Each stroke sent another clump of black hair to the ground and his father’s feet. Ernesto strained his neck to see the skin revealed underneath the barber’s hands. It was pale and soft, like toilet paper.

The shaving continued. More and more of his father’s face felt the touch of air for the first time. The barber began to work around the borders of his father’s eyes. Ernesto imagined how the barber might slip and

accidentally slice through the skin, so his father's eyeball would slide out like loose change from a ragged pocket and dangle against his cheek from a thin, taut string that tugged at roots somewhere deep inside his skull.

A hard rap against the door to the barbershop snapped Ernesto out of his fantasy. The barber froze mid-stroke, with the razor still pressed against his father's face, as if caught in the act of murder. All eyes turned to the door, which shook against another round of sharp knocks.

No one moved to answer, and for a moment all was still, as though the disturbance was imagined. The hair in the air swooped and swung in the low light, then vanished as the door swung open and filled the shop with the imposing form of Gregario, the Ringmaster. Behind him, Ernesto saw the crowd rush to peek through the doorway; but after a moment, Gregario slammed the door shut behind him as he entered the room.

He was dressed, as always, in a bright blue tunic, blue pants with red stripes, a long red cloak, and a tall black hat. He had sewn a filthy, felt parrot to his shoulder. He wore these clothes on and offstage; and the felt parrot was a particular delight to Ernesto, who had always enjoyed the way it bobbed as the Ringmaster walked.

The Ringmaster removed his hat and placed it, along with his sturdy wooden walking stick, on a bench near the door. He loomed there, looking down his long thin nose and scowling.

The barber was the first to speak. "You should not be here. This is delicate work, any distraction can be very dangerous."

The Ringmaster smiled and took off his bright red gloves, tucking them in his belt as he stepped forward. "Danger? This, this is what you consider 'danger?'" He stood over Ernesto's father and looked down at him. "Quite a life you have chosen for yourself, eh?"

Ernesto's father met his gaze and stared back. "He's right. You should not be here. There's nothing more for us to say to each other. You had your chance."

"Yes. I suppose I did. I had my chance when I found you, living between dumpsters in the city, eating food unfit for rats. I had my chance when I took you in, fed you and clothed you, treated you like a human being for the first time in your life. I had my chance when I gave you work, a way to make a living, a..."

"No." Ernesto's father interrupted. "Not to make a living. Not enough to support myself, not enough to support my wife or my children."

"I gave you a chance to make a decent living. You're the one who chose to spend it on that." The Ringmaster picked up the scissors from the barbers' table and twirled them around his finger, the way a gunfighter twirls a pistol.

"I gave you a chance to use what God gave you for a decent purpose. To be yourself, free from persecution and fear." He dropped the scissors back onto the table, where it clanged loudly against the other tools there.

"It's too late, Gregario. Tomorrow I apply for work at the bottling plant, where I will make enough money to..."

"You will become a slave, and a fool. The same kind of fool that we used to laugh at, who come and pay to

gander and fall for our tricks because their regular lives have no meaning. But no, I'm not here for you, not here to stop you. You have made your choice."

The Ringmaster took a step towards Ernesto and reached out to stroke the soft, brown hair that hung from his cheek. He pinched a tuft between his fingers and looked back at Ernesto's father. "I am here to make an offer to your replacement."

For the first time since the Ringmaster arrived, Ernesto's father sat up in his chair. The barber shuffled around and stood behind him.

"My son will never be a servant to you, Gregario. He will go to school with the money I bring home, and he will have a life far away from here. He'll never sit in a cage while men look at him like some kind of monster."

Had his father only brought him along because he was to be next under the barber's blade? The thought never occurred to him until that moment. He looked at his father's face, but it was no longer his face. It was pale and pulpy, like a Bible left out in the rain overnight. Instead of fierce, he looked sad and weak, as though he was rotting with mange.

"Why don't you let the boy decide, eh?"

The Ringmaster pulled his fingertips through Ernesto's fur until he reached his chin and tilted his face up. Ernesto saw eyes as gray and cold as moon rocks.

With his free hand, the Ringmaster reached under his cloak and produced a felt parrot, just like the one on his own shoulder, only clean and new instead of filthy and torn. The green of its feathers was brightest color that Ernesto had ever seen. The Ringmaster slid a thin

pin through the shoulder of Ernesto's shirt and affixed the parrot there. It bobbed against his cheek, and smelled like something Ernesto could not define, like some kind of foreign spice or flower that didn't seem like it should exist in the same world as the barbershop with its stale air, or the town with its constant odor of moldering flesh from the chicken plant that blew in on the breeze.

"What do you say, boy? Do you want to live like this, every day in front of a mirror, imagining what you see? Or do you want to come with me and be yourself?"

He looked from the Ringmaster to his father, frozen in his chair. The white sheet slid from his shoulders and spilled hair into his lap. His eyes looked small and black, set within his fleshy face. Would Ernesto's eyes look the same?

Outside, all of the people of the town sweated and swatted at flies under the sun. All except for Ernesto's father's friends, who were nowhere to be found. Inside the barbershop, Ernesto sat between his father and the Ringmaster. He wondered if the people were not there for his father, but if they were waiting to hear his decision, and if his father's friends had stayed away because they already knew the answer.

MATT STANGEL

Climate Growth

Humidity is the loose mid-section of a hang-rope,
less frayed, more weathered,

catering its O to the shape of the ravine.
Thursday the new Friday?

Panama shifting. If tidal line? If mountain range?
If steam boat dragging a lattice

of sunlight passing through leaves,
then smoke? If not wide as airplane strip?

If fatter than anaconda sitting on the river bank,
immovable, with a large form getting smaller and slowly

closer to its tail? The leather of a wet strip of mountain,
its painted relation to a low glaze of cloud,

and somehow being inside that wetness,
the skirted balm of low forest.

poictesme

The isthmused air is boarded by a tangle of gnats—

where my arm passed through,
the bugs twitching at equidistant points, velcro of sweat and hair,

If laying a herringbone is like giving a prison tatt?

If trout spawning in river shallows like zigzag bricks,
farm-raised, unprepared for the florescent lighting of the barb?

If blind dwelling, a stone making cataract window eye,

the light inside, not getting brighter,
but passing through easier and in spikes that waver as cars pass?

If dropping a stack of business cards
in front of the elevator, the marbles squares of the lobby catching
window light?

They make the ink with lead and toothpaste,
or the liquid of a burnt chess piece,

a string wrapped around the needle to keep the black,
settling, taking thinner shapes around the river wind.

It may all be a fiasco of sunlight, how much of it your skin keeps,
an allowance of mutation, and the low thinning sky.

A brick decreased like coral,
its pores hollowed in sub-ultraviolet.

KELLY GEMMILLI

Evangel

There is gospel music swallowed
in my stomach—hands waving high
through stagnant Southern air.

The amen hides there, also,
and wants to know how I grew up
in Dixie and still can’t tell cotton
from corn or tobacco. Shame.

My heart, I answer, is full
of fields. If I can bury the heritage
of that soil there is song there—
sugary, soft, rocking chair tones
as soothing as an easy breeze
through an empty church.

How the stalks shiver! How they call
to be walked upon, a leafy sea
under some new Peter. Yet the amen lives
like a hermit, eating only grain,
speaking only in summer.

It knows its master is dead to me
and will not show its face.

Margaret

Whole, small. a sweet pea blossom,
peach fuzz earlobes first unfolding
A twinge pricks the mother of pearl
and starts to slowly swell;
petals perk up in listening
but stay: the roaming serpentine wolves have eyed her
already, tested her sleeping neck with hot damp noses,
found her too furred yet and passed by

Inside the unfolding, in the nacre-gleam,
a thumbprint of filth, a dirty word;
a song, stench seeping into furling,
unfurling flower the profanity cramps and uncurls and creeps
each time clearer, the howling
of a band of roaming serpent wolves

so when the song starts again
they will not palm and finger her
they will not leave, name her
“too green,” “too firm yet.” her sleeping form
this time will be named: “We must
not wait a single minute”

The mother-of-pearl is crimson-muddy
heavy, sour-sweet, high and mad
and the beast-heels beat mad beating beats
stomping their abandon, howling
may tomorrow not ever come,
not here, where we are only
flesh about to turn

Dimpled pendulums of fruits
where was a bud torn asunder
where were the peach fuzz earlobes
is a filthy garden where fruit lies, but
where was a half-pearl trampled into wine?
no, never was here, only fruit lies
half-eaten, tossed off to the ground
there is no bacchanal but flies
and heel-prints in the sticky dirt

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