

2010



poictesme

A Student Anthology
of Literature and Art

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 **4.** the literary journal of VCU, replacing *Millennium*, whose outdated name was deemed irrelevant by the irreverent new staff.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.

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A Student Anthology
of Literature and Art

2010

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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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Cover photo: Lauren Rice, **Girl With Book**

5" x 7" medium format photography

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SARAH BRUCE

Marrow

Your river-worn ankles bind me
beneath a sand-dipped ceiling
of shadows, knotted by sailors.
As if it were written on my chest,
your name spills out, dripping
from my toes, left to dry in the sun.
New skin cracks over knuckle joints
as your naked fingers stumble home,
and reams of paper fill my head –
our sweet rocks and brittle wood,
our string and breadcrumbs,
swallows in the night.

The Lion at the Gate

My brother and I played at invalids- sparred each surgery with a stitch or broken bone, kept each cast and eye patch for conversation. Our toybox quickly filled. My mother told me, years later, the neighbors were appalled. I remember Mabel, who died in a nursing home at age ninety-nine, stalked the motion of our Radio Flyer wagon with arthritic eyes and licked her teeth, plaqued in tobacco I mistook for Werther's caramel. I wondered if she wore underwear beneath her cotton dress, as it looked as pellucid as the gowns from the hospital that I had to wear without underwear, and the air condition touched me in ways I had been warned against. I doubt she ever joked with surgeons, sloshed in anesthesia, as the operating table seemed to revolve around the edge of a regulation bed pan, its pee-slicked tin. Her fingers spread over her rocker's armrests, pawing them, like the lion statuettes who sit before the courthouse. Founded to the porch the past fifty years. Married at nineteen and widowed at twenty-three. They say some scars never heal, but I know hers folded neatly into wrinkles. Smoothed to stone. When I explained that it took a week for my tongue to weld itself back after I bit through it in the play zone of Chuck'E'Cheese, she said I should be more careful, because the tongue is the fastest muscle to heal.

The Tracks at Bloomberg

The tracks at the Bloomberg County Train Station stretch the length of a football field. Rows upon rows of copper railway, leading some to loved ones, and some away. Above the ticket counter, a large marble clock face sits. Informing the people of the days to come and the times to let pass. With all the commotion, it is easy to miss these subtle realizations. The blonde at the bar slips a ring off her finger and into her handbag. Nobody notices the old man in line, coughing blood into his palm. Even in all this noise, the baby crying, the high heels clapping the stone walkway, nothing escapes that clock face.

“So where shall we go? We have the entire world at our fingertips.” She says, flipping through the endless list of departures and arrivals. She taps her heels on the tile floor beneath the bench.

“Somewhere warm this time, I’m tired of these frigid, lifeless planets you think so fondly of.” He says half-heartedly, observing the train station as his counterpart gives him an awful expression.

“Well Germantown is full of history, we could see the Ashland Memorial in...”

“Who wants history? Another page in another brochure can tell you all about those dead bastards.”

“That is a little arrogant Charles.”

“Its not arrogant, it’s the truth. You need to move past things. Ever since we left home you’ve been all about...”

“Would you please just stop.”

“No, you need to hear this, what happened back home, it was a disaster waiting to happen. There was nothing you or I could do to stop it. Stop hurting yourself.”

“I need to use the restroom.” She says softly, rising up, she walks off.

Seconds pass, years between rapid footsteps. The old man from the line is gone, he had boarded his train days ago. The blonde is still at the bar, smiling this time and joined by a gentleman in Bermuda shorts. He mutters something and she laughs simultaneously. The bartender keeps serving the rounds, but he saves a shot for himself each time they order another. The clock face disagrees , but the universe is never the wiser.

“Mind if I take a seat?” Asks a man with a leather brief case and newspaper. He sits on the bench uninvited, and the air around the two men grows quiet.

“I’m with somebody actually, she only left for the moment.”

“You’re always with somebody aren’t you Charles?” Said the older man with his ancient briefcase and paper.

“I suppose.”

“You, with the brunette, passing through the turnstiles, almost half your age is she? And last night in the hospital with that sickly old man. Was that your father I wonder? Or holding the children up so they could see out the window of the head car. Yes, you’re always with somebody, always a stones throw away when you’re needed.”

“I have people who need me.”

“You need to slow down Charles.”

“Everyone needs a doctor.”

“But you are not a doctor, you are just a man. Why do you keep putting this weight on yourself?”

"She needs me. She is only a child, I have to help her with what she's going through."

"Don't pretend you care! You justify everything you do with ridiculous pretensions. Every/one of these lives would have continued fine without you."

"That's not true."

"Who's to say what is true anymore Charles, you've already twisted truth as far as you could take it." The man stood up, gathered his briefcase and paper, and left.

Leaving Charles was the greatest thing that man had ever done, it is a shame others could not follow suit.

"All better?" Charles asks his counterpart upon her return.

"Yes thank you. I'm sorry for the way I've been acting. I really do appreciate everything you've done for me. My mother would approve..." She smiles at him and blushes a bit.

"That really is grand, but..."

"I think you should choose our next destination. Somewhere warm. The Peanut Farms out in New Maryland are very nice in the spring. We could spend some time camping out there. Under the starlight, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"It does sound exquisite. What was it called again New, New..."

"New Maryland, yes! Yes, I will purchase the tickets, there is a departure in ten minutes! I'll be right back." She leaps up and runs off for the ticket counter.

The clock face has watched all of this, of course. The happiness in the young girl's heart does not go unrecognized. Two little girls play chase along the railway, until their mother scoops them up and scolds them for getting their church clothes filthy. The blonde has left the

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bar. So has the man in the Bermuda shorts. The bartender has pulled up a chair and rests his head in front of empty barstools. All of his patrons have left him. For once, the sun, the moon and the universe agree, all is well in the Bloomberg County Train Station.

"I've got the tickets, train leaves in two minutes, we should get in line now." She says coming back. Her happiness is blinding.

They collect their bags and trail through the station's walkways. Every step is an eon apart. Lives shatter as they walk toward the locomotive.

"Here it is, 10:15 to New Maryland. Are you ready?" The girl asks. She asks as though her entire heart is resting on this balance beam of a question.

"I...I've forgotten something. It will only be one second. Take a seat and I promise I'll be back."

"Alright, but please don't be long. The train leaves soon."

"I know, I love you."

"I love you too."

Charles sprints down the railway. Past the bar and it's sleeping proprietor. Past the ticket counter and the great marble clock face above it. He stops and hears the sound of a steam whistle blowing in the past. With a deep breath, he steps onto the train. Another whistle blows and the tracks shake. So many tracks, so many people. Some are lead to love ones, far away in distant places. Some are lead away.

SARAH RIDDICK

Dirty Shadows

Now that it's over, I'm going back
to Tim's one more time
to take that shovel
from his nice neighbor who laughed
when Tim drove the tank a foot
into the rain soaked ground
and I'm gonna dig
my feet out of the muddy hole
in his yard, out of his reach
so that when he asks me
again, because he will,
c'mon, jump, just for me,
I will jump, just not towards him,
and, when I'm gone,
when I'm really out of there, I'm gonna fly
through the foggy summer heat,
past the filmy gazes
of a few construction workers
and some suits
until it's the end
of the road and I'm standing on a cliff
down by the river,

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the one I found on my morning run
 last Spring, and there, I'm pressing
my belly against its cool, metal railing,
 thinking of how fence posts feel
like the shovel in my hands, smooth
 and cylindrical, and I'm imagining
how it would feel to raise the shovel,
 a burning pitchfork,
to send it crashing down,
 the metal ringing
as the shovel splits the post, pushes through
 it, like my brother's grand slam
the one he'll have someday,
 and I'll be there for once,
between my mother and father,
 Do you see that? our mouths
open in proud O's
 as we watch the ball sail
across the lot,
 unrolling, unraveling,
there goes my mother's
 cream colored scarf
and then another and,
 wait, they're all ivory--
but here comes my father
 with his tools and his nail gun,

pinning it all together again,
every loop of white yarn wrapped
around his nail gun needle.

Why can't I remember seeing my father
this way, a surgeon
with steady hands, doing all he can
to save these scarves
that I've imagined? He never was
that determined, not even
when he built the pool so that
in the mornings she could swim
her laps at home, and maybe then
she could be the one
to put the barrettes in my hair
because his fingers were
always too big,
always fumbling,
and I wonder what moments
he would have found
for himself if she had ever said thank you
the real way, ever really swam,
because she didn't, because I stopped
wearing barrettes, stopped feeling
all twenty fingers,

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and now I'm digging
through my mother's lap pool
and my father's Christmas hardware,
the two living rooms, two kitchens,
two master bedrooms,
until I'm back
in my mother's messy, ivy-strewn yard,
carving paper doll outlines
with the tip of a shovel,
three of them, hand in hand,
because I want to lay down
and I don't want to talk about it;
just to see it again,
the shared legs and noses,
three dirty shadows.

RUTH BAUMANN

A Father's Picture of a Daughter

Firstly I notice the hands
are too small for the head.
Little elf-fingers reaching up
to cradle a skull. Not a head but
a skull. It is too lumpy, too
rolled up with itself to be
a head. Like knots in bark,
wood-holes. I expect a sparrow
or a squirrel
to poke out of the skull.

Is it bark or flesh that
weaves itself harshly along
totem pole of spine?
Body stands like the
Washington Monument,
not a pencil but
a pen, ink-less,
poking in the eye of god.

I am confused where earth ends
and animal begins. For

it does not fit right,
the skin upon bones upon
spirit. The hands
are too small for the head
but perhaps it is just as always,
the head is too large
for the body.

Somewhere a coyote moans and
I think I notice a limb or two
rustle in understanding.

JESSICA BURTON

A beast with Pan's horns will lust after a female beast

Do you hear the well's dripping
echo? Do you remember
when you touched the edge
of the elk antler and learned about desire?

You touched me
after that day by the lake
when, testing with our fingers
the water's edge, an elk
approached and drank, dripping
water back into water,
pressing expanding circles
into the surface.

You told me the felt of antlers
was softer than—
And I lied to myself: you called it
my holy place.

A well is holy,
though it rots in the shadow

of the underground
like roots of lavender ladies
fed too much water—
their redemption their death.

I sank into the lake
a year after you wrapped yourself
in Pan's sheepskin.
We paddled the canoe to the center.
You rose and left the ground
to test the mercy of the lake.
The boat had tilted;
the edge dipped into the water,
drinking glossed ground.
You jumped, and I echoed
a fall.

My Father, January 1969

They lived seven months on the isthmus
before he could understand the weather,
a hot humid sweating sky that always
looked full of rain. He rides his red
bicycle flaked with rust around the rims,
pedals pumping circling Fort Clayton
in search of anyone his age, or
anyone with a name or face like his,
the son of a sergeant, a Ben or John.

Even then his face contained the origins
of what would be my own: his thick eyebrows,
my high cheekbones, our pointed defiant chin.
His eyes, however, will never match mine:
cadet blue, smaller and sunken down
into his sockets. He scans the tropic
skyline and brings his bike inside the barracks.

You know, his mother said once, looking out
their screened-in window, balancing his baby
sister on one hip, banana trees grow
only one bunch a season. Just one. That's it.
The banana tree in their yard is empty.
A ragged stub of stalk where someone
had stolen the fruit from the garden
is all they left behind. The family
stops at sunset to salute a falling flag.

Larkspur in the Attic

Here in the attic room the larvae sleep
their ever quiet egg-sleep, hanging from
the walls and ceiling, purple. As Mother
and I raise brooms against the sea unborn

we paint it all with violet dust, some sort
of purple pollen seeming to glimmer
most awfully, here, in window light, in warm
and dusty attic light. The dreaming eggs

do mock the look of larkspur, vast sire of
the Teton canyons, buds I could not bring
myself to pluck. Their violet was a hue
of this world, sacred for its being real.

My thoughts are dyed the color of those nights.
Deep evergreen on meadow's edge, low blues
of peak and sky, all shadows in the gloam,
all purple. Edges of the woods would sigh

to urge me back to their darkening pines;
They promised friendship, love that could not know
me. Now, the violet dust, it will not rest.
It only floats, here in this sultry room,
merely sparks in the sun and will not rest.

ISABELLE M. TAYLOR

For K.B

branches, ink strokes that sketch
themselves across the blue and
 gray sky.
clouds, fan brushed, smeared
flakes of snow spark on the sill
as the candle flame splits
 in half, and half again.
red brick, breaks and cracks, heaving
under the weight of the sky
a dust has settled in.

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plate 1. Kate Fowler, **Patience is Progress**
medium format photography



plate 2. Eleanor Doughty, **Where's The Cat**
linocut print on tissue paper, 12" x 6"





plate 3; Roberto Celis, **Distance Attracted**
found wood stump, 56 x 24 x 14.5"



plate 4; Roberto Celis, **Sacrifice**
walnut top, found wood scraps, 46" x 20 x 14.5"

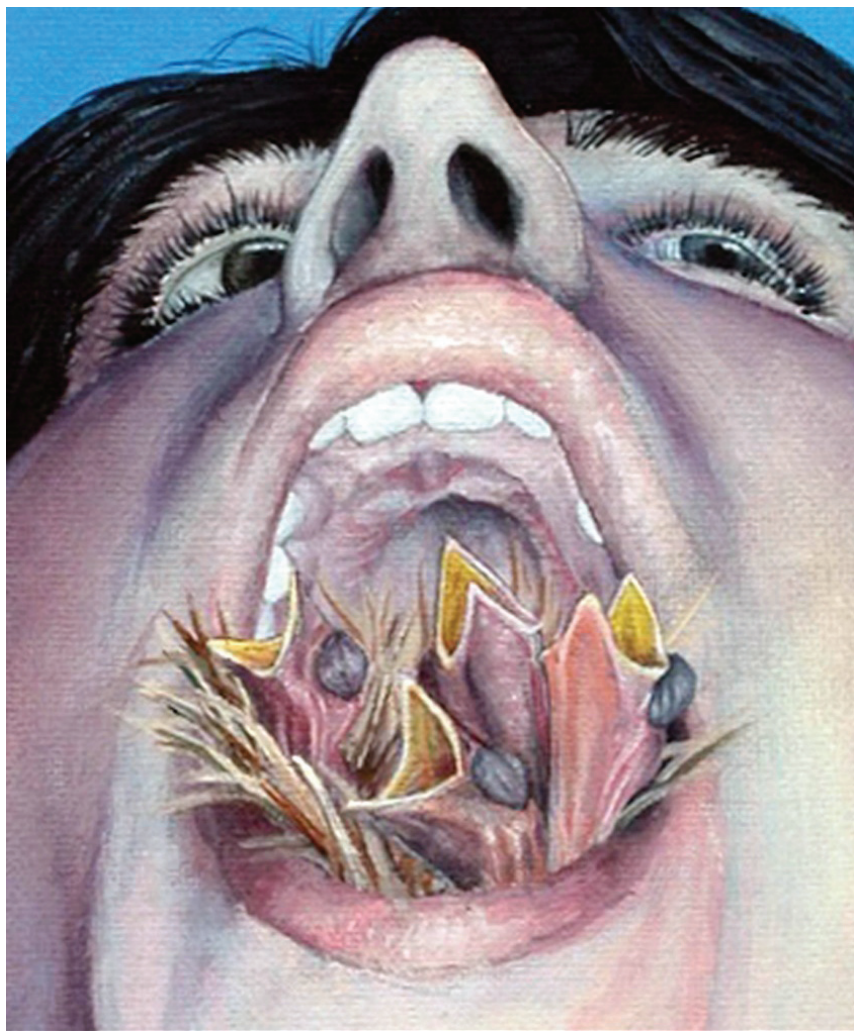


plate 5. Emily Herr, **Patience**
acrylic, 12" x 16"

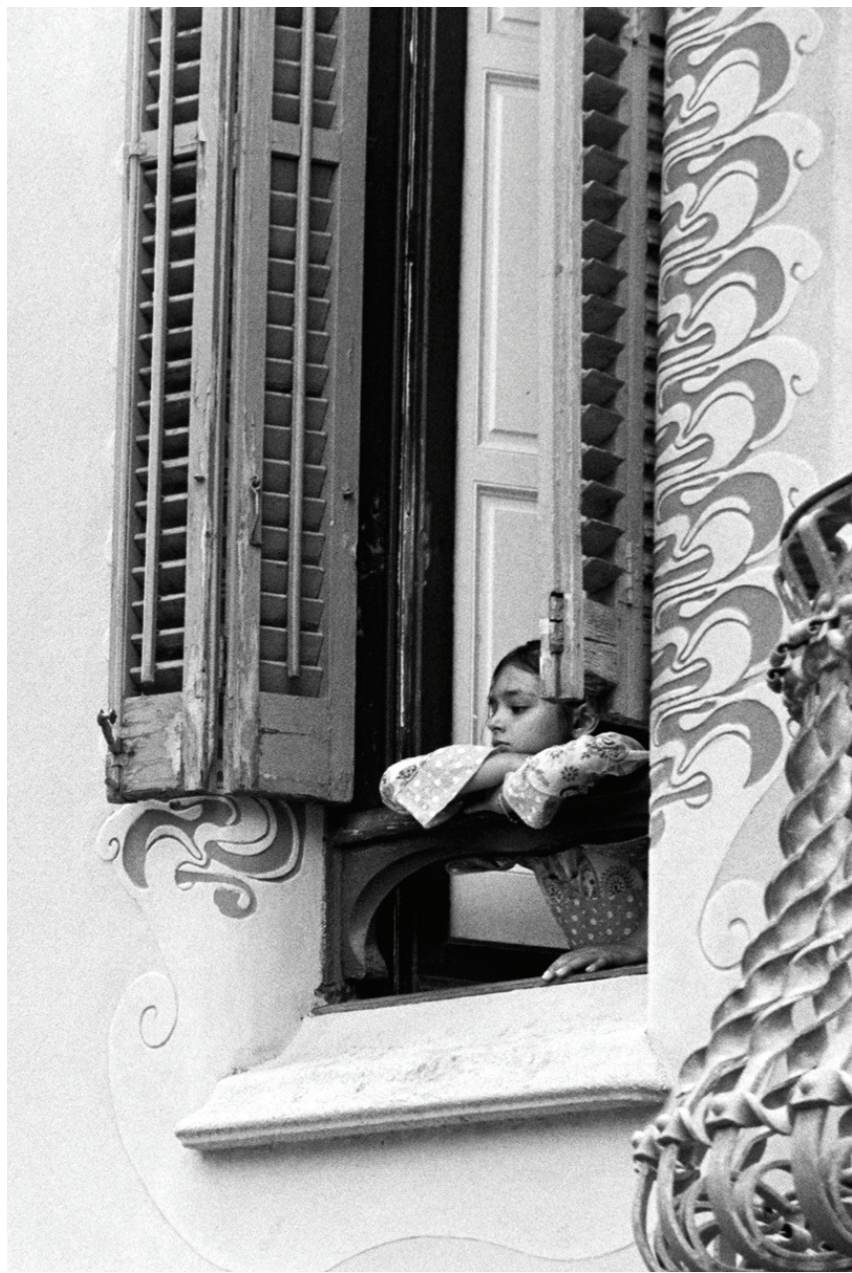


plate 6. Kasia Clarke, **Crumble: Lay Me Down Near the Water**
35mm photography



*plate 7. Vreni Michelini, **Emergence***
terra cotta, 17 x 19 x 7



plate 8. Kelsey McNeil, **Rust**
35mm photography



*plate 9. Waimin Khuu, **Landscape***
oil pastel



Lawlor

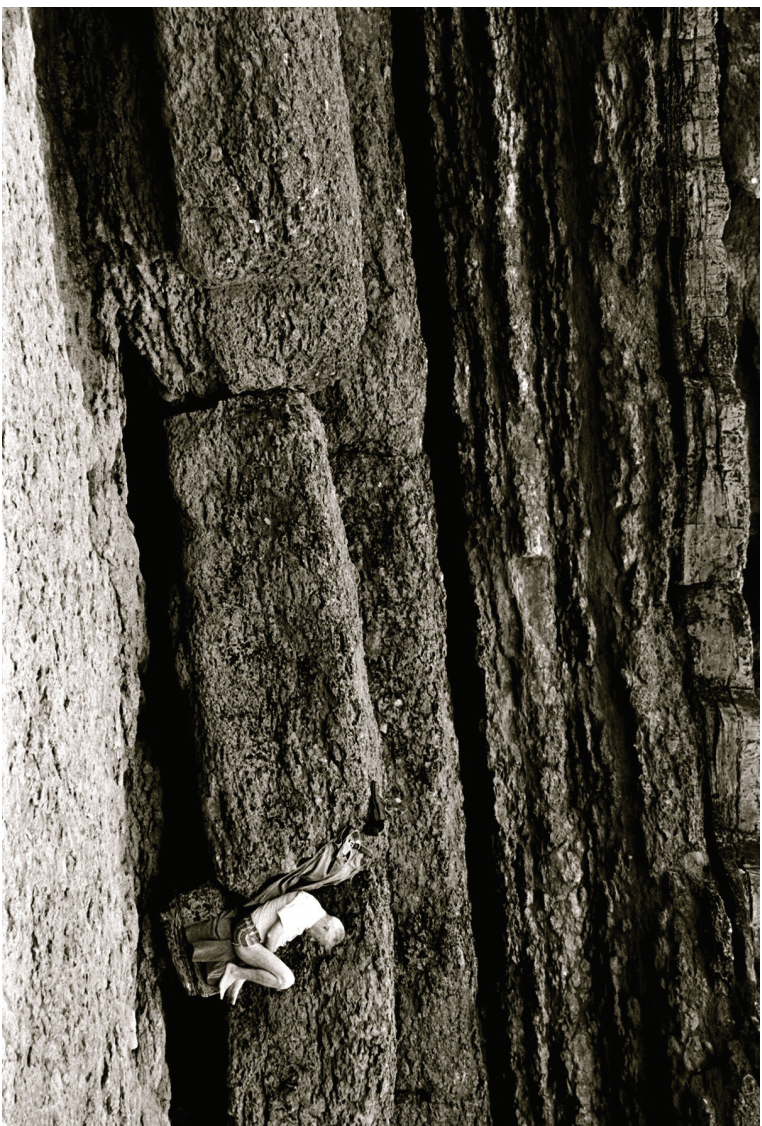
plate 10. Douglas Park Lawlor, **The Sky Opened (Music is Universal)**
pen and ink on paper, 32" x 20"



plate 11. Emily Herr, **Winter Meadow**
acrylic paint, 14" x 27"



plate 12. Kasia Clarke, **Salt Fields**
35 mm photography, sepia print



*plate 13. Kasia Clarke, **Swallow***
35mm photography

Death of a Jewish Mother

Let the crows scare swift from the echoing squeal
And let not Christoph's virgin hand tremble from the feel
Of the warm blood capsizing as he slits the back
Of the swine that will fry and be torn by the jaws
Of the Inspector, who will pat dry his lips and strike his black boots

On floorboard that can't conceal the sneeze
Of the mother
Whose shot veins
Stain her son's
Trembling teeth.

MARTHA STEGER

Re-enactment

Traipsing through the Civil War's Yellow Tavern battlefield
With German journalists searching for German re-enactors,
I see smoke all around — Federal smoke, Confederate smoke,
Some of it from Germans posing as their immigrant forefathers
Who'd come to farm what's now the "breadbasket of the Confederacy"
And been caught up in this merciless war between the states.

But immigration itself had been a war between the states
Of mind, to pull one back or push one forward to life's battlefield
With unknowns and newness shaped by a confederacy
Of forces, where players often grope like re-enactors
And in times of desperation scream out for their forefathers
Who have vanished in overwhelming clouds of forgotten smoke.

The French student shadowing me asks a re-enactor for a smoke,
As the furrows between his brows show his mind's puzzled states
About the motives of descendants who would imitate forefathers
On this sweltering day crawling through a weedy, seedy battlefield
As authentic, wool-clad re-enactors
Willing to die for the Confederacy.

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“Weren’t Indian tribes here first in their own confederacy?”
He asks, mimicking Indian pipes as he blows circles of smoke.
“Aren’t all of you ‘Americans’ simply re-enactors
Reinventing your lives forever in many different states
On an ever-changing, over-charging battlefield
To pay some debt as yet uncharged by your forefathers?”

Ah, the credit to mete out upon our forefathers
Who traveled from one to another confederacy
From the battlegrounds of Europe to a new battlefield
Where winning was sometimes a matter of mirrors and smoke
And altered personalities and overworked states
Of mind that made them hesitate like re-enactors.

Someday there will be the immigrant re-enactors
On yet another planet as forefathers
Are remembered in previous states
Of being, in a faraway galaxy, confederacy,
Where all that lived had gone up in the smoke
Of more than one mushroom-shaped battlefield.

Are we on the cross-filled battlefield as confused re-enactors,
Searching through the smoke of foremothers and forefathers
For the perfect confederacy – before it’s too late, the best of all states?

ISABELLE M. TAYLOR

“Purpose”

Warmth. Breath after breath fills silence.
A tea kettle grumbles, like an old man on a bus
waiting for his stop.
A radiator clicks and hisses its sweet song,
melting ice,
in cold, cold places.
Tissue-like smoke curls around invisible
fingers of sunlight.
Anger continues, all the while adumbrating fear.
Nostrils seethe as they burn with each inhalation.
An interlude from thought.
Muscles tense as they hold on to imaginary objects.
The mind keeps shaking the bars of its invisible cage.
Telescoping through a lifetime, as it tries to escape
by ruminating on pain and creating self.

the job site

He takes me to visit.
He is proud of the shelves.
I notice everything
except the shelves.

I try to focus:
The shelves are new and crisp
and reach out with arms of fresh pine scent
to either embrace in welcome
to shove aside the trash. Or both.

But the rest:
this giant dirt-brown splinter
fracturing up from the ground,
something of a cradle
burrowing under the skin.
This is where someone lives,
or tries to. I feel shivers like beetle legs
crawling the length of my life.
It is like a bad sort of naked.

The house, as distressed
as a barrel with an axe in its chest.
Everything suffocates in cages of brown, brown
boxes and brown bags and thick brown
constellations of dust.
Roof beams protrude like
rib stripes ripping through flimsy flesh.
I am unsure if it feels like the belly
or the skull
but something has swallowed us,
and exploded.
I wonder if it breathes, or hurts.
Or wants to hurt.

We step outside and I notice
the sky is unpackaged.
I notice first the lack of brown
before I remember blue
as something separate.
And then it is blinding,
and we do not go back inside.

I tell him the shelves were wonderful.

BABYLON

We walk our dogs in the crumbling remains
Of the Capital under the warmest of skies. Goose shit
Covers the lakeshore, the flagstone banks where princes
Used to spread their striped beach towels
Are sprouting grass; the chains they used
To pull themselves out of the water are fused with rust.
This is a quiet place, with only the distant oceanic roar
Of the highway, the lapping of the water, the lazy wind.
The houses that border the lake are smooth white
Marble. Now people string laundry
From the balconies, make cold cut sandwiches
Behind the plantation shutters in their disjointed apartments
Cut from palaces; fans stir the leaves of plastic plants. Men
With beer bellies sit on stoops, swatting flies
With damp newspapers. We have come to terms
With our decay, with the peeling
Paint, the Astroturf, the algae spreading over the pond,
And by extension with the collapse of the factory towers,
The sloughing of empire, the crumbling of the land
Into the sea. We are content to drink from brown bottles
On the steps of the King's summer palace. Nothing fazes us;
The radio reports from the border, the layoffs, the days

Where we get no phone reception—
We read, or play checkers,
Or fall asleep on our porches overlooking the dead lake.
When destruction comes, we will be waiting here,
Not because we do not love life,
But because we are as part of this place
As the cracked flagstones, and anyway, to be honest,
We don't have another place to go.

Chestnut Blight

The two American Chestnut trees were planted in the sideyard of our grandparents' house long before my brother and I were born. They flourished and spread, letting their soft catkins pollinate, dropping thick, spiked burrs every fall. We climbed in the trees, shaking the leaves from their limbs, stomping on the husks that fell to the ground, until they cracked and showed their soft brown fur lining and two paired chestnuts inside.

I picked up a fresh burr, bright green and tight holding it carefully by its stem and yelled Think fast! to my brother while throwing it. He caught it, unknowingly, in the perfect cup of his outstretched hand. The spines dug into his palm and fingers, until he reacted and cried out in pain. He cradled his small hand underneath his arm, shaking and stomping his feet.

Once inside the house, I watched as our grandmother submerged his pink hand in hot water and hydrogen peroxide, his nose glistening with clear snot, his face red from tears. Slowly, she pulled out each spine with tweezers, her hands thin and precise. With each quick yank my brother whimpered and flinched. She shushed him, the shhh shhh sound thin through her clenched teeth.

I watched the scene through a crack in the doorway, wanting to catch a glimpse of his face. He cried out again, wildly, when he saw me and pointed. My grandmother closed the door firmly, saying Haven't you caused enough trouble today? Then I crumpled down to the floor outside of the doorway, pressing my face against the corner of the cool, closed wood. I ached to hear my brother sobbing. I held my breath and stifled back shuddered cries, not knowing why I hurt so much, too.

SARAH BRUCE

Swaddling

I

My suit jacket
is smothered in the dust
of communion wafers as I
nestle under this pew. I need
to be small and safe,
a sanctuary within a sanctuary,
in a womb of my own.

II

A bed once cradeled me, soft
like a nascent fire's
first breath. I lay
for hours and hours
in something like slumber,
my forearms draped
over ribcage and hips

III

Three decades ago,
before sundown in the summer,
I would catch fireflies
in my jar. Mother told me
to release them peacefully,
but I envied the peace
that they already had.

The Electric Factory

Color gel rosette, spotlight halo
of static spit and hair. His fingers hold tight
to the mic so electric current skips along
sweat-streams-

where do you intend to go tonite?

i heard that you missed your connecting flight

Voice creamy as eggnog: thick, cool, refrigerated;
the o's siphon from his thatch grass beard, his mouth
a font of bluegrass folk. It flows
through elbows knocking butts treading feet;
a faint whiff of pot within the sweat-stench.

to the blue ridge mountains, over near Tennessee

When someone finally opens a door
and the witching hour washes my skin, I am all clammy armpit;
but before the lights turn on
to plaid flannel, gentrified warehouse, Philadelphia Turnpike,
we are tenebroso shoulders,
and he is our hirsute St. Jerome in this Baroque light.

RUTH BAUMANN

diagnosis

In the after
(and it is always the after for
naming it as after is only the beginning of
always)
there is sometimes the urge to scream
it.

Days like clocks
tick.
As do I.
Quietly.

Nobody knows.
Or, most nobody knows.

I want them to know my after,
that there was a before and that
somewhere in-between days opening like hands and closing like fists
I have drawn a line.
Not that they cannot cross it but
I cannot cross back and this
makes me not
like them.
It does not make me
but it makes me not
like them.

The Student Media Center, part of the Student Affairs and Enrollment Services division at Virginia Commonwealth University, is a resource center for recognized independent student media at VCU. Current recognized student media include Poictesme; Amendment, another literary journal; The Commonwealth Times newspaper; Ink, a quarterly magazine; and WVCW radio.

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