

2007

et cetera

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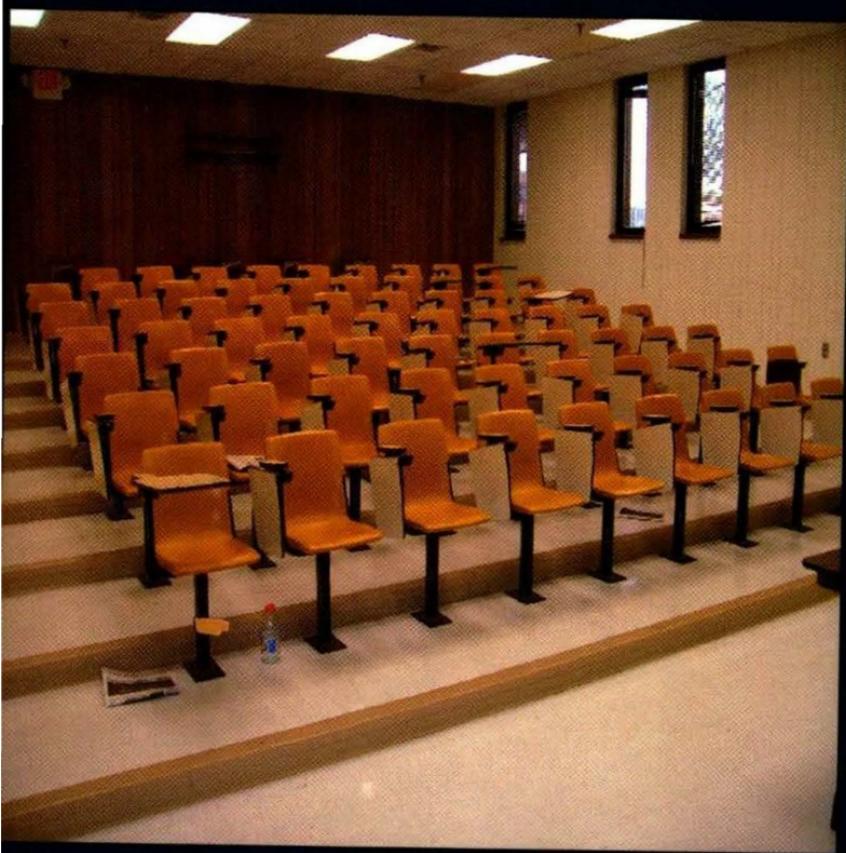
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Et Cetera



Et Cetera

*Marshall University
Literary Magazine*

2007

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Et Cetera is an annual literary magazine that publishes the work of current Marshall University students. We are based out of Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Et Cetera is free to University students and faculty members. Direct queries to:

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Editor's Note

It's hard to write an editor's note. Here's what I've gone through, so far: I compose something, then delete it because it's too personal, too 'me'-centric, and then I compose something else, and then I delete that, too, because it's too generic, and not 'me'-centric enough, and then I back up again, put the computer away, and go do something else for a while to take my mind off the whole thing.

I have put this off, for as long as I possibly can.

So I'll say this, then: through unimaginable, unforeseeable obstacles-internal strife, external meddling, budget freezing, budget shortfalls, deadlines that creep and crawl for so long before finally leaping upon you with reckless abandon, the not-too-pleasant and very frequent realizations of Oh, reah, I have a paper due tomorrow-we have somehow ended up making a magazine. And a pretty darn good one, too, I'd like to think.

And let me also say this: I'm not supposed to be doing this-making a magazine, I mean. One year ago, my friend, neighbor, colleague and landlord Kris Clifford knocked on my door and said, "Hey, I want to put Et Cetera back into print." And I said, "Good for you." And he said, "I need your help." And I said, "Okay." See, because of many of my own above-Listed obstacles, the magazine as a whole had ceased to be a print publication, existing for several years only in the dubious realm of cyberspace; Kris, though, had a dream of fixing that, and, as he said, he needed my help.

He didn't tell me-though, in all fairness to him, the implication was clear enough that I should have guessed-that after his own one-year run with the magazine, he would need someone to take over the reigns for at least the following year. And so, at a time when my own personal life decisions were along the lines of deciding between applying immediately to an Mf-A program, or waiting a year to continue my education, I had already, in a way, made the choice: I would stay in Huntington and make a magazine. But they don't just let anyone produce a Marshall University publication-heck, they barely let students do it-so I had to apply to Graduate School, and agree to spend the next two years of my life composing rhetoric, speaking rhetorically about composition,

learning more about Psychoanalytic Theory than I really cared to learn (did you know that blindness is symbolic of castration?), and decide upon a Comprehensive Exam Plan of Study...all in the name of producing a single issue of this magazine.

But here's the point: my story of reluctant circumstances is not unique. It's just that they call me Editor in Chief, which means I get to write this note which you all will (or will not) read. I could have told you of a certain member of the Marshall Community, who sacrificed more time and expended more effort than he / she was expected to, just because he / she cared about the magazine. I could tell you of another Marshall Community member who risked severing professional bonds that weren't even really cemented yet, just to help us along. I could tell you of the undergraduate staff member who did more work than any of the others (myself humbly included), even while surrounded by graduate students who should have been handling the load.

Why did we all do this? Why did we give so much of ourselves to this publication? And why will next year's staff most likely do the same? Partly, it's because we're crazy. Also, though, Et Cetera is more than a literary magazine. It's a symbol for what's most important, yet all-too-often forgotten, in the university system: the students, and their efforts, their passions, their drive to better themselves, intellectually and otherwise.

Yeah, we're still rough around the edges, in some places. The newly-instituted policy of not accepting submissions from staff members has led to some bumps in the overall submission process - the deadline was extended more times than (insert your own witty joke here). The removal of the Visual Art section was a regrettable, though necessary, step in the production process. And we're not much closer to our goal of increasing circulation of the magazine beyond the confines of the campus than we were a year ago. But what's important - what is wholly important - is that, as students ourselves, and just like the students which we represent in the pages of this magazine, we are continually growing, we are continually learning. We are continually bettering ourselves.

A year ago, Kris wrote in his own note that sometimes we all just want to scream for someone to look at us. Now that we have your attention, the job is to keep you from looking away.

Contents

Short Fiction

1st Place	"It Makes you Hate them" Sarah Jenkins	10
2nd Place	"Step Eight: Migration of the Mejilan" Ryan Faulkner	17
3rd Place	"The Hole" Beth Sergent	24
	"I have Loved the Stars" Erin Felton	35
	"Weightless" Sara Blevins	50

f/Joelty

1st Place	"Big Girl now" Lena Tudor	67
2nd Place	"Dandelions" Travis L. Michael	69
3rd Place	"Jen or Angelina" Christina Belcher	71

"Jacobed"	72
Zachary Ferrel	
"Back to Bas(alt)ics"	73
Lena Tudor	
"Theory of a Legend"	74
Rebecca Smith	
"Laundromatses"	76
Anthony Barath	
"Gum"	78
Anthony Barath	
"Prelude"	79
Zachary Ferrel	
"Sringer Haiku" & "Hong Haiku 2"	82
Brian Lemley	



"Getting back in the Saddle"	84
Angela Hunt	
"Huncington by Night"	96
Chase Henderson	

Short Fiction



Short Fiction

It Makes You Hate Them

It Makes You Hate Them

Sarah Jenkins

First Place

"Do you know why we're here today, Jane?" asked Dr. Boylan, perched on her brown leather chair.

"Yes," replied Janie, making eye contact.

"Why?" asked the doctor.

"Because I need to learn how to control my emotions," answered Janie, slowly, as she looked around the artificially cozy room. For some reason, she was thirsty.

"And why do we need to learn how to control our emotions?"

"Because if we don't control our emotions, then we bottle them up inside, and then we end up hurting ourselves," Janie said, with robot-like repetition of the dialogue from the previous session.

"And who else can we hurt if we bottle up our emotions?" asked Dr. Boylan.

"Everyone," Janie said, thoughtfully, with her head cocked, and her eyes on the ceiling.

"Right. Good. That's very good. Now, today, we are going to talk about what makes us mad, okay? First, just off the top of your head, what is it that makes you mad?" asked the doctor, her eyebrows arched.

"I don't know. Why are these walls so ugly?" Such ugly walls. Taupe, but like a vomity-taupe.

"Forget the walls, please. Come on, Jane, everybody gets mad. Here, I'll go first. Umm. Oh - I know. I get mad when my husband doesn't change the toilet paper when the roll runs out,

Short Fiction

Sarah Jenkins

even though I always remind him to do it. Okay, now, it's your turn."

Silence.

"Jane, you need to do this. Think about it. The last time you got mad, people got hurt. So we need to figure out all the things that make you upset. That way, the next time you get really angry about something, you will know how to control your emotions. So, what makes you mad?"

"I don't like it when people say things about me that aren't true," Janie said, disdainfully.

"Okay. Good. Now we're getting somewhere. So, when people say things about you that aren't true, it makes you look at them in a different way, doesn't it? It might make you disrespect them a little," said Dr. Boylan.

"It makes you hate them," said Janie in a steady voice.

"Now, Jane, we talked about this. It is not healthy to hate anyone." Dr. Boylan paused. "Do you remember why it's not healthy to hate people?"

"Because you always end up hating yourself, or doing something that you might regret," said robot-Janie.

"Right. Now, what else makes you angry?"

"I don't like it when people patronize me."

"Okay. And who does that?" asked the doctor, cocking her head.

"Everyone."

"Everyone makes you feel inferior?"

"Yes," said Janie, matter-of-factly.

"And why do you think that is?"

"I think it's because people look at me, and they think they see a girl who maybe doesn't look all that smart, so they automati-

Short Fiction

It Makes You Hate Them

cally treat me like I don't know," said Janie.

"Like you don't know what, Jane?"

"Anything," said Janie, simply, as she scratched a circle around her palm.

"Well, I think that you are very smart, Jane," said Dr. Boylan.

"You don't count."

"Why not?"

"Because you have to say things like that."

"I have to say things that are true, Jane."

"You also have to keep me from getting mad. Isn't that what we're doing here?"

"Well, yes, but I don't think that means I'm going to lie to you, Jane. I'm telling you the truth. I think that you are a very smart girl, and I'm here to help you learn that you can't let other people make you think that you are not smart."

She really hated it when people called her Jane. Come to think of it, she really hated Dr. Boylan.

"Jane, do you think that most people really know who you are, on the inside?"

"Some people do."

"Like who?"

"Like my mom. And my grammaw. And Aaron."

"Who's Aaron?" asked the doctor, as she bent to write on her notepad.

"My friend," said Janie, with a nonchalant shrug, as she glanced out the window. The last time Janie was here, they gave her a glass of water.

"So those people you just named, do they ever make you mad?" asked Or. Boylan.

"Sometimes."

Short Fiction

Sarah Jenkins

"What do they do to make you mad?"

"Stuff," replied Janie.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Look, just sruff, alright?"

"Okay. Tell you what, if you can just name one more thing someone does to make you mad, then we can talk about how to control yourself the next time it happens," said Dr. Boylan.

Janie looked down at her hands. Short fingernails, rough around the knuckles. One, three...four freckles. She looked up at Dr. Boylan. Janie knew what made her mad. She didn't like being here, and she didn't like the doctor. She didn't like how the room made the sunlight seem like it had a bad smell. She didn't like how Mike from work used to always look at her like he was just waiting until she was by herself in a dark alley. She didn't like how Candice, the girl from clown the street, always seemed so happy, and she didn't like it when Candice smiled at her. Why was Candice so happy?

Janie sat as still as possible because maybe if she did not move, then the doctor wouldn't bother her.

"Jane? Are you thinking?"

"Dr. Boylan, what do you say to your husband when he forgets to change the toilet-paper roll?"

"Well, I gently remind him that it needs done, and then I ask him if it would be too much trouble for him to change it."

"What if he still doesn't change it?"

"Well, he has always changed it in the past after I remind him, Jane."

"But what if you went home today, and it needed done, and you knew for a fact that while you were here, with me, your husband was at home, not changing the roll on purpose. What then?"

Short Fiction

It Means You'll Hate Them

"Jane, I don't see how this is relevant. We're talking about you now. What makes you mad?"

"You would feel like you needed to teach him a lesson, wouldn't you? That's what we do with kids, isn't it? They don't do the right thing, maybe on purpose, maybe by accident, but either way, it's our job to teach them how. Right?"

"Look, Jane -"

"You would go home, and see that he was a lazy bum, and you would know that the only reason he doesn't do it is because you are his wife, and it's your job. After all, 'You probably used most of the toilet paper anyway,' he'd say. 'I work hard all day, while you sit in a nice, cushy chair, so why hassle me over something so trivial?' he'd ask. So, you would go home, and you would know that you need to teach him a lesson, because he made you mad, and it was all on purpose, but without a true purpose."

"Okay. Jane, I think that you -"

"Would you keep your emotions in, Dr. Boylan? Or would you make him see it your way? What if, just as you got him to sit down, and see your point of view-which, of course, is the right one-he would still find a way to make you feel stupid? Now, Dr. Boylan, I don't think that you are stupid, but what if he thinks you are? What if he said some things to you that you knew weren't true? What if he said that you -"

"Jane, you have made your point. Now, it's your turn," said the doctor, firmly.

Janie heard a phone ring on the other side of the door. She moved her hands to her side, and moved her focus to the brass doorknob. She could hear a voice out in the hall. The perky girl at the desk who had told her to "Go right in," and then neglected to give her a glass of water. Janie wished she could just leave. Leave

Short Fiction

Sarah Jenkins

with Aaron. What was he doing right now, outside, as he waited in the car for her? Probably listening to Metallica. Or, wait, was he even still out there? What if he had left? What if Candice, that happy girl from down the street, had come by and smiled at him? Wait, how did Candice get across town? That slut, she must be following Aaron. She wouldn't get him. Aaron was hers, he was Janie's - nobody else's.

"Oka) Jane, just one more thing that makes you mad."

Stupid Dr. Boylan, with her little brown high heels, and her incompetent husband.

"I get mad when people steal from me," said Janie, suddenly.

"Steal from you? Like what?"

"Anything. My stuff. My ideas. My food. My freedom."

"And who steals these things from you?"

"Sometimes, people I don't even know, or sometimes, people down the street from my house. The girl down the street from my house."

"What did the girl steal, Jane?"

"She stole Aaron."

"She stole your friend, Aaron?"

"Yes."

"When did she steal Aaron?"

"Just now. Outside."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know."

"Jane, when was the last time you saw Aaron?"

"Today, before I came here."

"Did you see him in your room?"

"No, I saw him outside, by his truck. He drives a blue truck, and he said he would wait for me."

Short Fiction

// Makes You Hate The!!!

"Jane, did Aaron say anything else to you?"

"He just said he would wait for me. And then he said that I wouldn't get a glass of water today."

"I know he knew that?" asked the doctor.

"Because the last time they gave me a glass of water, I broke it," said Janie, looking down.

"That's right. And do you remember why you broke it, Jane?"

"Because it didn't have any ice."

"That's right. You got mad because there wasn't any ice. And did you hurt anybody?"

"Yes."

"Who did you hurt, Jane?"

"I cut my hand on the glass," said Janie, picking at the band-aids on her palm.

"Who else did you hurt?"

"I hit you with the big broken piece."

"And why did you do that, Jane?" asked Dr. Boylan, rubbing her temple where the 9 stitches were.

"Because I was not controlling my emotions."

"So, Jane, what do you think we should try to do in the future when we get mad?" asked Dr. Boylan.

"We should try to carry a gun," said Janie. "That way, we won't cut ourselves."

Short Fiction

Step Eight

Step Eight: Migration of the Mejian

Ryan Faulkner

Second Place

Let me give you words.

We can talk about chicken noodle soup, and the way the pepper collects at the bottom of the bowl.

We can talk about how different people look when they sleep, their muscles slackened to comfort.

Or we can talk about a car that pulls to the left and rattles when you drive it over sixty.

Or we can talk about the rock and the feather, and why one falls and one floats. And of when the feather said, "I can't be a feather anymore," and fell in swinging, windy whips to the earth.

But perhaps I should tell you of the Mejian. It's a bird that seems like any other: it eats the seeds and berries that are available, and has a penchant for warm weather and an indifference to people. And when it feels the first winter chill, it flies to somewhere else.

All these words, words and things.

Words of no sense that make so much sense.

When we reached the corner where our favorite Chinese restaurant sat, her clothes were already tossed across the back seat, and she sat with her hands folded in her lap with an innocence that betrayed her sexiness. She smirked a lot when she was uncomfortable, as she did when I looked at her and smiled myself. These moves are predictable; these moves are planned in advance.

Another approaching car had a headlight out, my hand tagged the ceiling, and her bra joined the rest of the scattered garments behind us.

"You're really bad at this," I said, chuckling.

Short Fiction

Ryan Faulkner

"I know," she said. She didn't chuckle with me. Her hands cupped her chest uncomfortably, and she tipped her head forward so her hair fell down to drape her body. It was a recurring theme: "Do you think they're too small? Tell me the truth. I want to know the truth. You wouldn't tell me if you did." These things in rapid succession, often just as she lifted her shirt over her head to come to bed with me. I wanted in that car to tell her that I loved them, even if they were small-I wanted to tell her how lovely she was when I saw her against someone else.

I wanted to say these things then, to fix her heart that I'm sure was broken. Because there was a catch.

There was the someone else.

"I don't want to be just the other girl to you," she said, leaning back into me as I hugged her waist on her bed.

"You're naive," I said, and kissed her cheek. I could smell cigarettes that were two brushings old, partially masked with spearmint. I hated that smell. But what they don't tell you about the other girl is that even the things you hate are suddenly tantalizing, as if taking out any chance of caring about someone also removes the requirement that you approve of their hygiene, much less like them at all. Sex is not domestic, even if it is habitual.

This was in the waning times of someone else, when I knew our stint was coming to a close. I'd stop calling in a week. She'd be puzzled, since in the beginning it seemed conversations could go on forever without a quiet moment. I thought this way, too, once, until I realized that I only talked, and she only listened.

She accepted my affection with gentle good humor, and asked for very little.

And so when she asked me to kiss her, I did. When she

Short Fiction

Step Eight

asked me to pull her shirt over her brown hair and touch her in ways that J'd never touched anyone but the blonde who was not just the other girl, I did. And when she saw me smiling and asked me why, I said it was because I loved her.

I didn't want her to know that my smiles were always for her. They were never for the other girl.

So we drove. My decision was made, and I'd chosen her. Shore trips stretch into eternity when you're both naked. These moves were planned in advance: she would call after she'd heard I stopped, and that I missed her. She'd wear the lingerie I bought her for her birthday, and I would let where we'd been pave the way for where we were going. I'd left once to find myself. This is what you do when you don't like what you find.

We'd discovered this place one evening by accident after I made her spend an hour browsing the aisles of a video store for horror movies. "Take me and show me something interesting," she'd said.

"I hear this movie we got has a hobo getting his face cut off," I said. "That's prett^y interesting."

Up to the top, a dirty plateau once lush and green with growth, left at night for teenagers to ride ATVs and have their first lay, in the back seat of a car or overlooking the miles of strip-mines that surrounded them. "It's kind of creepy," she'd said then. "Look at that big hole! Jesus!" She pointed across the plateau where a great monolithic bulldozer sat next to a ravine it had surely dug, its scoop left raised to the skies in a pose of victorr, She had turned around and looked at me. "Mr. Bancroft told us that when you dig a hole, even if you put the dirt back, it's never ever the very same again." Her eyes had widened and she was smiling; she had

Short Fiction

Ryan Faulkner

pushed the blonde curls of her hair behind her ears so I could see that excitement better.

We turned off the lights and made out that night. Between kisses I had whispered to her. "Man, this place is creepy... I'll bet if we waited a while we'd see a hobo lose his face for real."

And she'd smiled, groaned, and tried to playfully push me away.

That was then.

I stopped my car on the side of one of the many winding dirt paths that barely passed as roads, and like clockwork, I turned out the headlights. She was cast in the green glow of the dash's lights, her blonde hair-still long and luscious to her belly then, before she'd cut it so short she could barely grasp it in her hands-shined like neon.

All planned in advance. She'd call. We'd drive here and she'd take her clothes off for me. Then it would happen, and we would be fixed.

"Did you touch her?" she asked, breaking the silence. I looked at her. My heart beat faster to match her sentiment, and I could feel love bursting forth from my chest and projecting in a stream across the console, from me to her.

"No."

This was a lie.

"Do you swear to me?" she said, finally glancing up at me from the corner of her eyes, strands of her hair covering her face like a funeral veil. I could see the start of tears that were not welcome welling. She didn't want them. Neither did I.

"Yes," I said, then, "if I touched her, may I be struck down now."

We were both quiet. I noted that the line between struggling to believe and waiting for thunder is tenuous.

Short Fiction

Step Eight

"Come here," I said, and reached over to touch her tan, bare leg. She smacked me away and held her chest tighter.

"I can't, I can't," she said, and all the unwelcome rears suddenly burst out at once. "I'm just, I can't, I'm sorry, I can't," she sobbed, and rocked back and forth.

I sighed--disappointed--and pulled her face to my chest. She didn't resist; she clawed at my back and buried herself in me, clinging like I was a ledge.

I wanted someone else then. I wanted her cigarette stained breath and her dirty room where we'd lay while someone I loved sat three miles away, wondering where I was and what she should get me for Christmas. I wanted someone else's bigger chest--not because it was nicer, but because it was always available. I wanted these things; my biology demanded it. My head agreed.

But there was no having someone else then. She rocked against me and cried, and told me how much she loved me. Her toes were clenched, her feet pulled up into the seat. She was beautiful, and I still wanted her. I hoped it would pass--ten minutes of crying, tops, I told myself. Then she'll be burred on the roll, up in your lap with her back bumping the steering wheel, the tear tracks still visible on her cheeks. I saw a bird beating a path across the sky in my periphery, and I thought it must be nice to know you're going home. I didn't know it then, but I know it now: I was a vampire. I absorbed her.

I still can't look in a mirror and see myself. A lot of people will tell you that you can't blame yourself for relationships that go down the tubes, but in this case, I don't buy it. She was eighteen--the drinking and smoking and bad grades and emotional disconnect from everything that followed that night aren't really so unusual for a kid.

But I know better.

Short Fiction

Ryan Faulkner

Some choices in life change everything, and this was one: this was the path we walked. The other led to cooking Sunday breakfast together, taking our kids to Disney World, and playing Othello on Christmas Eve under tree light while Jimmy Stewart said "Merry Christmas" to a *movie* house in the periphery. We had a garden, and a tendency to let the garden go unattended and die early in the season. But it's funny in that life - we laugh about it. It's our shit garden, you know?

How could I have known? How could I have known what I sacrificed by looking for myself, when what I found was so ugly? I made her see that in me, too. How could I know that there is so little love in the world for us, and that it doesn't come back when you cast it away?

I couldn't. I couldn't.

I'm so sorry.

I would bleed to change it, but real blood isn't like poetic blood. It doesn't fix - it just stains.

I was a vampire. I absorbed her.

How do you forget the way a person looks when they sleep?

I can't eat the last bites of my chicken noodle soup. I know the peppery last bite goes somewhere, but where that is never comes to me.

Did you know that when you wreck a car, no matter how talented the mechanic, the car is never quite the same again? It may zap spark plugs like crazy, or maybe the wheel will just rattle. Whatever it is, the car will never drive the same as when you first drove it.

And I think Bancroft was right - when you dig a hole, regardless of how carefully you put back the dirt, that spot will never

Short Fiction

Step Eight

be the same. You may not be able to see it with your eyes, but cap it with your foot and I promise: you can feel it in your sole.

When it all gees to be coo much, I can still talk about the rock and the feather, and the way the feather decided it couldn't be a feather anymore. Its trip down was marked with quick, jerky swoops, bits of its tuft caught on the nearby branches. But what of the day it decided it wanted to be a feather again?

What happened when it found that it couldn't go back?

All these words. Words of no sense making so much sense.

Mose of all, I think of the Mejilan.

It's like any bird: it builds a nest and feeds on the local seeds and berries. It cultivates a Life. And when a winter chill sets in, it takes flight and goes away for months, leaving its nest to wait for its return.

But it's unique: it's a bird that longs for home, and always comes back to its nest. A nest can't survive winter untended, however—often it's ripped to pieces and left strewn on the ground, hidden beneath broken fall leaves or layers of erosion.

The fejilan is an amazing bird, though. Its sense of smell is uncanny, and it seeks out its nest and unearths it, slowly and painfully. It is predictable; these moves are planned in advance.

And it stands over the broken nest, and scares at it, shuffling its feet and smelling it in disbelief, to be sure that it really is the nest, now unrecognizable. Nature is cruel in that way: I imagine the Mejilan almost hopes it's the nest of another bird, and that this is all some sore of awful mistake. It never takes long for it to be sure, though—its high-pitched chirp, long and steady, is a signal of its realization unlike anything you'll ever hear. It stands at its nest, forever changed.

If you listened hard, you'd swear it wept.

Short Fiction

Beth Sergent

The Hole
Beth Sergent
Third Place

Kimberly hated the walk of shame that existed from the front door of her townhouse to the Smoke Shack convenient store resting on a hill overlooking the public housing addition where she lived.

The addition was officially called "Shawnee Estates", after the WoodJand Indians who originally settled in the area hundreds of years ago. Unofficially, the addition was called "Whore Hollow" because that's how some simply chose to define and degrade this new, unwanted settlement. The townhouses sat in a hollow apart from other houses in the small West Virginia town as if quarantine. Inhabitants were a majority of unwed mothers with their "bastard" babies, welfare checks and Earned Income Tax Credits they could claim on their taxes each year.

Each year Kimberly used her tax credit to buy some new electronic gadget she could otherwise not afford, like a Aat screen television. Of course, she would use \$200 of that tax credit to get the cable turned back on for herself, her two children and boyfriend Todd.

As Kimberly left her front yard and began the steep climb uphill towards the Smoke Shack, she was not ashamed of living in "Whore Hollow". She was ashamed of the bruises on her face left by Todd. She pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and walked with her arms tight against her chest, her head down, and her stride that of an old woman instead of the twenty-four year old she had wasted into.

The March wind threw Kimberly's thin frame off-balance a few times, or maybe this was symptomatic of the blows to the head she'd taken the night before, when Todd had crushed her son's Ridlin tablets and snorted them to get high. Luckily, the case of

Short Fiction

The Hole

beer he drank afterward seemed to level his adrenalin out, allowing Kimberly to escape with only bruises as opposed to open wounds.

She was usually unsure of what she did to enrage him, although last night she assumed it had something to do with the cable being shut off again. The fight began with Todd throwing the remote against her head. She didn't even feel it, mostly because she expected it and realized she was starting to forget when to run-which frightened her even more. It was like her *Life* had become some self-fulfilling prophecy of violence, shame and a television antenna that would only pick up NBC. She missed cable. She missed getting lost in movies on Lifetime Television for Women.

People wondered why she stayed with Todd. He was not the father of her children and his two skills were hanging drywall when he felt *Like* it and being kind when it became a necessity. He knew that if he didn't show occasional kindness that they would both go crazy and lose all hope in "Whore Hollow." To Kimberly, Todd did not feel like hope, but company. Hope to Kimberly was receiving her income tax return and a brief glimpse of what it felt *Like* to have all her bills paid for one whole month and at the same time.

The back of her legs began to stretch and burn as she made it to the top of the hill. The Smoke Shack scooped directly in front of her in a triangular block building made to accommodate a narrow street corner and a drive-thru lane from the nearby highway. Kimberly began digging in her pockets for five dollars in change that would buy a pack of cigarettes for her and a two-liter of Mountain Dew for the kids.

When she entered the Smoke Shack the sound of an electronic bell went off, reminding her of stepping off a descending elevator. No one was in the store, not even the clerk, though Kimberly had spotted Shane's car parked out back. Shane was the

Short Fiction

Beth Sergent

manager and had been there for five years, rearranging beer coolers and cigarette cases with a fluid ease. When she moved at work it resembled a sort of dance or sleep-walking. At any rate, there was an unconscious quality to the way Shane could make change at the register while carrying on a telephone conversations.

Kimberly emptied her pockets on the counter, hearing Shane emerge from the backroom. Shane was almost thirty years old, still teased her hair into a Bon Jovi 1980's aqua-net explosion and smoked like a fiend. Given a man's name, she also fought like one, namely to win. Shane and Kimberly used to go out to bars, before Todd. Kimberly had once witnessed Shane slam a mouthy girl to the ground and hold her there with the heel of her boot pressed against the girl's ear in a parking lot constructed from gravel and cigarette butts.

"Hey you," Shane said while lugging a case of beer to the cooler near the drive-thru window. "What are you doing out so early?"

"Had to get out," Kimberly answered, turning her face away from Shane, who sighed in disgust.

"I will never understand why you stay with that mother fucker," Shane shook her head from side to side. "I gotta good mind to go down there and beat his ass."

Just then the drive-through bell rang. This ring did not sound like the chime of an elevator, but the brass bell of a boxing ring. Although Shane stuck her head out the window to get the order she still kept talking to Kimberly, as if the customer were merely an inconvenience.

"Go to the police, get a restraining order, kick him out!" Shane insisted, all the while ringing up two cases of Buel Light long necks and a pack of Camels without missing a beat.

"The police won't do anything but give me paperwork to

Short Fiction

The Hole

fill out," Kimberly said. "I can't take that chance. It could get a lot worse."

"Of course it can get worse, it can always get worse, thank you, have a nice day," Shane's advice ran directly into completing the sale with the customer who pulled away. "But, it should get worse for Todd, not you. You guys aren't some tragic Siamese twins joined by the same face and shit."

The bell on the door, the one that sounded like the elevator, chimed twice as Carol and Renee entered the store. Both were friends of Shane and Kimberly, and both lived in "Whore Hollow" with their children.

"What the hell happened to you?" Renee asked, though she knew the answer.

"For Christ's sake take that hood off!" Shane demanded, pulling the hood down from Kimberly's head out of frustration and some unconscious need to control her.

The women stared at Kimberly's left eye, swollen shut with its unique blend of purples and yellows spreading to other regions of her face like the dye case in a psychedelic poster from the 1960's.

"I know why you want him to stay but I don't know why you put up with that," Carol said, cracking a piece of gum.

"That is the biggest bunch of horseshit I've ever heard," Shane barked.

"Well, she's lonely and I understand that," Carol defended her position, "some people just aren't good at being alone."

"How would she know," Shane said, pointing at Kimberly, "she's never been alone in her whole life. She went from her parent's house to her townhouse to down in 'The Hole.'"

"The Hole" was another name for "Shawnee Estates" because most people never got out; and they were never encouraged to, either, with their monthly checks covering living expenses and

Short Fiction

Beth Sargent

existence.

"I hate being alone," Carol said, adjusting her eight shirt to cover her bulging stomach. "I hate people always thinking I'm pregnant when I'm just fat. Maybe if I weren't fat I wouldn't be alone."

Carol and Renee looked like before and after photos of Ephedra abusers when they stood side-by-side, their appearances deceiving the similarities of their lives. Both were the same age as Kimberly, had the same number of kids (two), received the same amount on their S.S.I. checks, had one digit of difference between one another's pin number for their food stamp cards, both were on Zoloft for depression and both walked together each day to the Smoke Shack to buy the same candy and two-Liter of Mountain Dew.

"My grandmother, may she rest in peace, has given me an idea about how to deal with Todd," Shane said as if the idea would solve her own problems, as well. "My grandmother was Italian. She and my grandfather came to West Virginia back in 1912, seeded down south in the coal fields.

"Women didn't have no rights then but they took care of their own, just like we're going to take care of you." Shane pointed again to Kimberly before lighting up a cigarette and blowing a quick burst of smoke out of the side of her mouth.

"How?" Kimberly asked, as a streak of sincere hope appeared between her bruises.

"My grandmother told me this magic trick she brought over from Italy to cure a husband who beat on *his* wife ... or at least the trick slowed *him* clown," Shane said.

"Magic trick," Renee said, and laughed until it turned into a cough from her smoking. "Damn Carol, throw your Zoloft away, all we've needed was magic."

Short Fiction

The Holt

"Meet me at Kim's house at midnight," Shane responded cryptically, the drive-through service bell ringing.

At midnight the four women stood in Kimberly's kitchen, watching Shane pry the lid off of a wooden crate that she'd rested upon the breakfast nook.

"Is that the magic?" Kimberly asked, peering over Shane's shoulders.

"Smells like oranges," Carol said, munching on some potato chips. She suddenly decided to disregard the bag. "I don't even know why I'm eating these. I don't even want them."

"Here," Shane announced, pulling oranges out of the crate and passing them around to the women.

"This is the magic?" Renee's skepticism appeared again, as did her smoker's hack.

"This is no bruises," Shane answered, passing around pillow cases to the threesome. "Fill these up with oranges. Remember, no hitting around the head."

"Are you sure?" Kimberly asked. "I don't know if he's passed out yet."

"Did you crush up the Xanax Carol gave you and put it in his beer?" Shane asked, her tone reassuring to Kimberly, who nodded.

"Xanax is like those potato chips," Carol said, sticking her face into her pillowcase, now filled with oranges, to be overwhelmed by the citrus aroma. "I don't know why I take them like the prescription says because it says too much. Three times a day is too much."

"Too much of a good thing, is a good thing," Renee sang the verse to Alan Jackson's song, causing a chuckle amongst the group to relieve a bit of the tension.

Short Fiction

Beth Sergent

The foursome then walked up the stairs with Shane leading the way. Shane did not seep lightly the way the other three did. She was not afraid. She knew Kimberly's kids were staying with their grandparents. 1-Jds would not understand Todd receiving a beating-they only underscodd him giving chem.

Kimberly and Todd's bedroom was at the cop of the stairs, school pictures of Kimberly's kids lined the wall, as did an expensive Budweiser mirror of Todd's with Clydesdale horses in the center.

Shane was first to enter the darkened room. She could sense Todd, her eyes picking up an inanimate lump on the bed, even though there was not enough light to allow for picking out physical details. Carol stepped on the back of Renee's shoe causing them both to trip and feel Shane's chagrin through the darkness like a three-dimensional nightlight.

1-Jmberly was the last to enter her own bedroom, smelling Todd's scene of Old Spice deodorant and alcohol. She thought about the last time they had sex and how she liked it. Still, she took her place beside Carol on the left side of the bed while Shane and Renee stood on the right, all of them hovering above the dark lump that was a passed-out Todd.

Shane nodded to the other three women who put ski masks over their faces. Carol's had the image of Sponge Bob. It belonged to her youngest son.

Once their faces were covered the four worked together to gently tuck and roll Todd tight into the bed sheet he was resting upon, like folding silverware into a napkin in a fancy restaurant. He barely moaned at the gentle tussle. After they were finished, he looked like a newborn, unable to untangle his arms to scratch his face, his face also wrapped and covered in the sheet to blind him.

Shane administered the first blow and like nervous sol-

Short Fiction

The Ho/

diers hearing the first shot, the others abruptly followed suit. Like the boardwalk game "Clobber the Mole", the women pounded on Todd's mummified body that began to groan. The room reverberated with a sound reminiscent of wet bags of cement dropped onto soft earth.

Todd attempted to rock sideways as if the medication, confusion and panic were colliding in his brain, resulting in what appeared, in the dark at least, to be a furious worm caught on a hook, unable to break free from his fate. Once the beating commenced, the women found it hard to stop, their apprehension turning to fervor at releasing their frustrations.

Kimberly slung the pillowcase so hard behind her back that she fell down from the force of her anger. She quickly recovered and threw the pillowcase into Todd's torso, like a wrestler lunging upon their opponent from high atop the ring.

As if spurred on by the blinking lights and ringing bells of the boardwalk game, the beating continued until Shane threw up her hands, like a conductor ending the symphony. All that could be heard in the room were heavy, bruted breaths from the women high on adrenalin. Their attention turned to the worm, the mummy, to Todd who stopped moving and stopped moaning.

"Shh," Carol whispered, "we killed him!"

"Shh!" Shane shushed all three women, reaching down to the bed sheet where she believed Todd's nose to be beneath. She squeezed the nostrils shut and heard a coughing noise from inside the sheet as relief swept through the vigilantes.

Shane then motioned towards the door and the women exited the room, running down the stairs like children running from fear of getting caught.

Once in the kitchen everyone quickly threw their masks,

Short Fiction

Beth Sergent

pillowcases and oranges back in the crate.

"Hell yeah!" Shane pounded her lists on the kitchen counter like an exited drummer. "We should do this to Marilyn Brady down the street that beats her kids. We could rid the world of evil, or at least the evil in 'The Hole Hollow."

"Let's just get out of here," Carol said, nervously pacing.

"I think I should stay," Kimberly said.

"He can't be here when he wakes up, especially you,"

Shane insisted. "My grandmother said you never let them see you and you never tell. You won't tell, right Kim?"

"No."

"Good, and you're not staying, either. Give him a few days to be hurt and alone and if he does think you did it, he'll have to know you didn't do it alone," Shane said, passing the crate to Carol and Renee, who were headed out the back door. "Anyway, after all those Xanax and beer chasers he'll wake up in the morning and not know what happened, not really know who did it. It will scare him at best, only make him sore at worst... at least, that's how my grandmother said it used to work in the coal fields. No bruises and no trail, but if it happened enough it made the men know they were being watched and someone knew when they went to sleep."

"Like Freddy Kruger," Carol said.

"This ain't no coal field," Renee disagreed, holding open the back door with her foot, waiting on Shane.

"It might as well be," Shane answered. "You're all stuck down in 'The Hole' with no way out, living off the company store and their welfare checks... and I'm stuck too, selling beer and cigarettes to all of you. Hell, with all the Zolof and alcohol this might as well be an Indian reservation minus the Indians!"

"Shane, let's go!" Carol pleaded, balancing the other end of the crate.

Short Fiction

The Hole

"Come with us," Shane said, pulling on Kimberly's hand.

"No, I'm staying," Kimberly resolutely stated. "You said it would scare him. I want to see him scared."

"Kimberly, you shouldn't be here when he wakes up," Renee declared.

"Hit me, Shane," Kimberly insisted. "If you hit me, too, when he wakes up he'll think we got into it again like always only he'll realize he lost it this time. Maybe he'll think twice about next time. This will change him, I know it."

"It was supposed to change you," Shane answered, infuriated at receiving a confused expression from Kimberly.

"Do it Shane...."

Shane abruptly shut the sound from Kimberly's mouth with a swing of her open hand. A slight trickle of blood near the center of Kimberly's bottom lip had begun to pool. Shane exited the back door with Carol, Renee, the oranges and the deed.

The next day Shane, Carol and Renee stood outside Kimberly's townhouse, watching as a lifeless body was taken away in an ambulance that ran its lights but not its sirens. Kimberly was taken out afterwards, hands cuffed but not behind her back, as if the police did not consider her a threat, even though she was now a killer. As she passed her friends she briefly clasped her hands into a praying position, pressing her fingers against her lips as if to tell them "not to tell."

After Kimberly had been placed in the back of the police cruiser her friends overheard the officer say Todd, who had no bruises, had been stabbed and that it must've been self-defense judging from the day old facial bruises and the fresh wound to Kimberly's mouth.

Renee gathered Carol and Shane into a huddle and began

Short Fiction

Beth Sergent

whispering: "Do you think we helped her kill him?"

"Maybe he got up after we left and went into a rage," Carol suggested.

"No, he was so out of it he would still be in bed by now," Shane answered.

"What are we going to do?" Carol asked. "What if she tells about the oranges and us? They'll totally believe her, too; they believe her now. She looks so innocent."

Shane felt sick, breaking away from the powwow and heading towards the sidewalk that would lead uphill to the Smoke Shack.

She thought about what went wrong with her grandmother's story. She tried to rationalize that Todd's death had been caused by his kindness being too temporary. She began to run up the hill, wanting out of "The Hole," wondering what it was like living in her grandmother's world where there were no "Whore Hollows" and drive-thru windows passing out beer, cigarettes and long-shot lottery tickets.

A siren from behind startled Shane, causing her to stop running and watch as Kimberly was taken away. Shane felt momentarily jealous of Kimberly beating her out of "The Hole" until she realized maybe the girl had only moved sideways to a place where justice never gets you out, it only digs the hole deeper.

Short Fiction

Erin Felton

I have Loved the Stars

Erin Felton

I am only twenty-three weeks pregnant, tired, alone, and in examination room 308 in St. Philomena's Woman's Hospital. I am preparing for a caesarian section. The pregnancy was accidental, but not altogether unwelcome. *I'm* stationary, I'm established, and after almost 40 years of different crises, I have finally reached a place in my life of emotional stability. The only inconvenience in my whole situation is a rapidly advancing cancerous tumor that has lodged itself several millimeters into my cervix.

I had just bought a new house in Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania, and had recently settled into a new job at AT&T when stomach cramps sent me to the ER. At the time I just thought it was gas, but of course then I didn't even know I was pregnant.

"Ms. Landers?" the doctor said as he peaked through the door. His name was Dr. Pete, and he was young, much younger than I was, and good looking. He had perfectly wavy hair that looked like it belonged in a shampoo ad. He reminded me of a doctor on a soap opera, all clean-cut and very serious. He took a seat near me and lowered his clipboard.

"Ms. Landers," he said very calmly, "you have invasive cervical cancer."

"Invasive?" I asked.

"Stage 1B. This means that it has already advanced as deep as seven millimeters."

"Seven millimeters? Is that much?"

"For a rumor, yes, that's much," he said. He spoke quickly, or maybe I was thinking in slow motion. I was having trouble understanding the basic relationship advancing invasive cervical cancer could have with me. I heard cancer, and thought brochures,

Short Fiction

I Have Loved the Stars

balding children, eighty-nine year-old chain smokers. I didn't see how I related to any of these images. The doctor was still talking with strings of big medical terms I didn't quite understand. I forced myself to be alert.

"I would like to do a loop electrosurgical excision procedure as soon as possible," he was saying, "to see how invasive the cancer really is."

Loop electrosurgical excision? I thought, Sounds like an experiment aliens would perform on you.

"A colposcope examination," he continued, "could be a safer replacement, though not as accurate."

Colposcope. Sounds like kaleidoscope, but I have a feeling it's going to be a lot less colorful. Pay attention!

"The ultimate decision is yours, naturally."

"Naturally."

"We'll need to do a blood test on your liver," he said.

My liver?

"And chest X-rays for you lungs."

My lungs? What do my lungs have to do with this?

"I will also do extensive vagina and rectum examinations.

I will schedule those first."

I thought it was my ultimate decision.

"The prognosis is a bit difficult since you are pregnant."

"I'm pregnant?"

"About two months," he said, not skipping a beat.

Two months, I thought. I should have caught that. I was no stranger to surprise pregnancy, but I usually caught it within the first weeks.

"I think we can fight it," the doctor was saying, "if we act quickly."

He picked up his clipboard and was reading from some

Short Fiction

Erin relton

list he had made. But, as he spoke, it seemed it was already memorized.

"Some depends on the results of the rest of the tests, but I would like to do an immediate hysterectomy."

Hy-ster-ec-tomy, I sounded out in my head. Sounds like hysteria-to-me. Hysteria; at least that sounds familiar.

"Possibly in conjunction with intensive radiation therapy," he said.

Radiation- isn't that deadly? Pay attention!

"The ultimate decision is yours, naturally".

"Naturally," I repeated.

I still wasn't able to make any of these new words relate back to me. I decided to consider it objectively, like the doctor-at least for now.

"What will the treatment do to the baby?" I asked.

"This will terminate the pregnancy."

The word terminate. Why did he need to say terminate?

I decided at that moment that I was going to keep this baby at all costs. Somehow, I was going to give this baby life. I didn't know why I was set on going through with it. It wasn't as if I was in contact with the father, and I was older, too, nearly forty, hardly a time to scare a family. But something inside me was screaming with hope for this last chance at a child, and nothing I could do could silence it.

"What if I decided to keep the baby?" I asked. "Would the baby get the cancer?"

"Leaving the cancer untreated for the seven months that it would take for the baby to develop is extremely risky," he said. "In that time the cancer could spread to the point of being untreatable. However, the baby would not be directly affected by the cancer, and we could perform a caesarian as long as it has enough time to

Short Fiction

I Have Loved the Stars

develop."

Enough time?

"You would then be intensely treated."

Enough time?

It was then that the whole concept of enough time hit me. The view of life on a timer hit me, and it hit me hard.

"You ready for your pre-op assessment?" a plump curly-haired nurse asks, interrupting my thoughts. She is humming something from the radio and cheerfully grabs the thermometer off the wall. I am so extremely sick of routine examinations by this point. After about a million check-ups in the past months, I've got the procedure memorized. Temperature: 3 seconds. Click, wait, beep- good! Blood pressure: pump, pump, pump, release, count 1, 2, 3, 4- not good, but not dead. Pulse: find the vein; look at your watch: 5, 6, 7, 8- yup still there! Excellent! She finishes my vitals- all the same as yesterday. She reviews my medical history- nothing has changed since the weekend.

"Alright hon," she says, "you look good for surgery. I'll roll a chair in here. Then, we'll go up to your operation room." She shuts the door and leaves me to my thoughts again. I've had a lot of time for thinking recently; waiting around in quiet medical rooms all day gives you no escape from your thoughts. I try to tap my feet to release some of my nervous energy, but after a few minutes my feet get too tired and I have to stop.

Today will be one of only two pregnancies I've seen all the way through, assuming everything goes well. My first one was when I was much younger, nearly twenty years younger. I had painful stomach cramps then, too, only they had been Labor pains. I don't remember the actual labor very much past the intense pain. Mostly, I just remember the time right after the delivery.

Short Fiction

Erin felcon

My husband Art was there, of course. I had woken up to him leaning over me, gently stroking my face. It was a very comforting thing to wake up to. That was the great thing about Art: he was always able to soothe me. The labor had been long and hard, and without anesthesia I had passed our from rhe pain. Arr had come in to see me before he headed back home. He needed to sleep and then fetch my mother-in-law to see rhe baby. "June is beautiful," Art said reassuringly. "She's just perfect." He was leaning down on the bed so his face was level with mine.

I felt rhat I knew his face more than anyone on earth had. That when I looked I saw things no one else ever noticed in him. His almond-shaped eyes were sharp emerald green and looked like an Arabian princess awkwardly placed on a man's face. His nose filled out more to rhe sides when you looked up close, but was angular and pointed from far away. His ears were largely disproportionate; ir was his most striking feature. When other people looked they were only big, bur when ! looked they were aboriginal and crudely sincere. It was perhaps my favorite fearure of his. How could a man, humbled by his ears, be anything bur earnest? And he was earnest, everything he did was earnest. I learned his features early on in our relationship, long before I loved him. I learned the face and the ears and the skinny little arms that ended in dainty hands. Evenrually, I only remembered how he was when / looked ar him; his image has become so common to my eyes that I was unable to notice much anymore.

Art and I were good friends long before we dated, and naively in love before we got pregnant. We both came from pretty rotten families: his father was a classic case of alcoholism and wife beating, and my single mother spent as much time in the insane house as she did in ours. When his family moved next door to

Short Fiction

I Hnve Loved the Stars

my uncle, with whom I stayed when my mom was away, we would sneak out of our houses at night, and meet in a cornfield that was about half a mile up the road. We would lie down under the stars and tell each other secrets, and do the amazing things we were going to do when we finally escaped West Virginia. Anything seemed insignificant under the stars; they made our world seem so small we could manage it. It was our sanctuary all through grade school and clear on to high school. We'd sneak exciting bags of marijuana in our pockets and smoke as if we had invented it. It was there we drank our first whiskey, there that we first kissed and there that we first went all the way. And it was there, too, that I told him I was pregnant. We quickly married, barely out of high school, and were thrown headfirst, kicking and screaming into adulthood. And just like that, our days in the cornfield were over. Never since have stars brought me any comfort.

The midwives came in to bring me baby June and then everyone left me to nurse. I stared down at the tiny wad of blanket and wrinkled pink flesh for the first time. Its features were miniature and so spongy compared to the world around it, like a tiny play-dough person. Its eyes were a sharp green, like Art's. Its lips were pursed together and sucked at the air. Its little coos were soft and hungry. They say a mother's bond with her child is created in the first nursing. But as I stared down at this new creature, expecting, demanding my milk, I felt sick. I didn't offer my breast, like they had showed us to do in my La Leche League classes. Instead, I pushed her away, and left her in a pile in my lap. I was horrified by my own repulsion. What sort of mother refuses her child? What woman finds her baby ugly, and demanding, fresh out of the womb? Maybe things would have been different if I had forced myself to nurse her. Maybe then I would have stayed. Maybe then, I would have noticed some sort of beauty, understood some sense

Short Fiction

Erin Felton

of worth in this baby. Maybe then, I couldn't have run away. But I didn't see her nurse, and one day later I dressed in my street clothes and left the baby in the care of the nurses-for good.

The door opens and I snap out of my thoughts. A bleached blonde nurse enters pushing a minimalist wheelchair toward me as if it is my throne. Her name is Holli Ann and she is my least favorite nurse in the hospital, and possibly my least favorite person on earth. She always wears these ridiculous dangle earrings that brush against her neck, and this hideous pink eye shadow that makes her eyelids look like fresh salmon. She appears to be about half my age, but insists on patronizing me every chance she gets. She's one of those super-Christian girls whose morals are only secure if everyone else's are lost. I first met her when Dr. Pete instructed her to get my medical history. I had pointed out to him that several other nurses had already taken my medical history and she could just confer with them, but he insisted.

We were in the same examination room. It was cold, and I was very tired. I was a few months pregnant by this point and had refused all treatment that could put the baby at risk, much to the dismay of everyone who examined me. She introduced herself and asked me to sit on the examination table, even though we were only answering questions. They started off simple enough.

"Do you smoke?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you use oral contraceptives?"

"No."

"Do you have multiple sexual partners?"

"Only when I'm lucky."

She raised her eyebrow disapprovingly.

Short Fiction

I Have Loved the Stars

"No," I corrected.

"What is your number of previous pregnancies?" she continued.

"Completed?"

"At all."

I thought for a moment. "Five."

"Your method of birth control?" she asked.

"Obviously nothing good." I laughed, but she didn't.

"Condoms, I guess," I said. "When I think of it."

"Are your parents living?" she asked.

"No."

"How did they die?"

"My father, I don't know. I never knew him. My mother, of an accidental overdose. She was schizophrenic."

"Do you have any living relatives?"

"No."

"Are you married?" she asked in a tone of disapproval, glancing down at my rummy.

"No," I answered shortly.

She nodded her head smugly. She already knew I wasn't married.

"Is there a father?" she asked.

"Is this on the form?"

"What exactly do you have planned for the child if you don't make it?" she continued.

"Send her to Mexico," I said dryly. "I have friends there."

I got up angrily and left without filling out the "personal habits" and "past medications" sections. It was the last time anyone asked me about that.

Nurse Holli Ann and I reach the operation room. I

Short Fiction

Erin Felton

thought I knew every corner of this hospital, but this room is new to me. It's much larger than my other rooms, and colder, too. It smells like mint cough syrup, which makes me a little sick. It's empty for the most part, except a metal medical bed, which I assume is intended for me. The walls are white like the rest of the hospital, and mostly bare except for a small window by my bed. White walls always make me anxious. I prefer distractions in my life, and white walls provide none.

Nurse Holli Ann is moving around the room putting various instruments on the counter. Most of them look heavy, like they belong at a construction site rather than an operation room. They are bulky and reckless and only magnify my anxiety. My C-section had been initially scheduled for a month later, when we would be sure that the baby's lungs had fully developed. However, early last week Dr. Pete discovered cancer cells on the lower third of my vagina and by Wednesday it had made it to my pelvic wall. Now, quickly approaching the fourth and final stage of my cervical cancer, the doctor has ordered an emergency C-section and "God's good graces." I know now for sure that I am dying, because the doctor has stopped talking to me about treatment and instead discusses movies and the weather.

I look out the window to see if I could see the sky, but all I could see was a bunch of office windows. The intermittent pattern of window lights only faintly resembles stars. Instead, to pass the time, I look off to one of the empty walls and try to picture the most amazing sky I'd ever seen.

It was at the edge of a big corn field somewhere in Oklahoma. My old pickup had run out of gas about 10 miles past the nearest town, so I pulled off the road and decided to camp out there for the night. I had been driving aimlessly for a few days, stay-

Short Fiction

I Have Loved the Stars

ing in cheap hotels when I could find them, and driving through the night when I couldn't. I was more tired than I had ever been in my life and seemed to be slipping in and out of consciousness as I drove. I ached badly where the baby had torn through and I had an incurable headache.

I laid my coat out on the bed of the truck and looked up at the sky. The land was so flat here that the sky wrapped all around you. It was a giant dome, unlike in West Virginia where the sky just fills in where the mountains leave off. The sky was so clear too; there wasn't a light other than the stars for miles and miles. It looked like there was a stripe of cloud reaching around the dome. It was hazy and more silver than a normal cloud, and seemed much further away. The Milky Way.

Suddenly, as J gazed at the stars in their unbridled enormity, I felt a surge of fear overcome me. It felt like I was melting down into the truck's metal and my heart was preparing to liquefy. I knew then that I had to preserve myself. I had been wondering since the hospital why I had left. It wasn't something that I had planned. I just did it. Now I knew. It was because I needed to preserve myself. I had to escape before it sucked away my life. I had seen my mother sucked dry by her children. It wasn't our fault, I know; we were only babies. But, the effect was the same. I couldn't afford to give anything. I was so small already, under the stars, I couldn't imagine becoming any smaller.

Nurse Holli Ann touches my arm and I am back in the operation room. She helps me out of the wheelchair and onto a medical table. The crisp paper sheet crunches under my rear. She tells me to lie back, and rolls up the bottom half of my robe. Then she turns to the counter where she has laid out her supplies. The air moves slightly, even in this super sterile room, and it feels cold

Short Fiction

Erin Felton

against me. The nurse returns with a razor and begins to shave between my legs, where the final incision will fall. It is utterly humiliating to let this bleached blonde child shave me. When you get sick they tell you all about numbers, percentages, procedures, even pain. But no one can prepare you for the humiliation. No one even tries. I close my eyes and try to find some comforting image to focus on. I pull deep into my past, searching for a calming scene. Instead, I remember my mother.

I was young, very young, maybe three or four. I was lying on my belly with my face pressed against the crack between the bathroom door and the carpet. I was crying, and had been for a long time. My face was burning and my head was filled with pressure. I was screaming for my mother. She was on the other side of the door but wouldn't answer me. I don't remember why I needed her, maybe I was hungry, or maybe I had seen the cigarette smoke that seeped through the door's cracks and thought my mother had caught fire. I stayed there for hours making whimpers muffled in the carpet that only distantly suggested the plea "mother".

I woke up the next morning with the carpet imprinted on my cheek and found Uncle Leroy in the living room. Mother was gone. He told me she was on vacation. I didn't see her again for a very long time.

"Are you ready to get this going?"

I open my eyes. Nurse Holli Ann is gone, and instead Dr. Pete is standing over me.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I say with a weak smile. He takes a towel and wipes a clear antiseptic over my tummy. His touch is much gentler now than it has been in my examinations, but focused, like he is preparing for battle.

Short Fiction

I Have Loved the Stars

I imagine the baby and the cancer as warring nations, or the ancient battle of angels and demons waging somewhere between my cervix and upper uterus. Dr. Pete is the god with white latex gloves preparing for my apocalypse. Gently, precisely, he snatches out the good through my belly. Then he raises it up as the victor and leaves the crumbling world to its fiery demise. The last image scares me and I try to snap out of my fantasy and focus on Dr. Pete's movements.

He is drawing careful blue lines on my belly like a blueprint. It tickles, but I am careful not to move. Then he attaches little metal sensors unto my chest and also my fingertips. I'm not sure what these are for, but they look like little computer chips. A group of nurses come in and build a green tent around my stomach. No one is talking, not even to give instruction.

Dr. Pete returns wearing a baby blue hair cover and a matching surgical mask. I can only see his eyes and don't like it. I don't recognize him easily. His expression is harsh and focused. He straps a plastic mask connected to a long tube over my nose and my mouth. I breathe in deeply. My thoughts start to fog, and my daydream memories become lucid and blend themselves with reality.

I was only scarcely conscious. There were voices around me. They were deep and sounded angry, but I couldn't understand them. I tried to open my eyes, but all I could see was fog, a heavy bluish fog. The voices got louder and I was pulled up harshly. Then I was floating. The voices were low now, but close. They sounded like they were in my ears, like a ringing. Suddenly, I dropped; not far but fast. My head throbbed and the voices stopped.

I opened my eyes. I was 1) fog face down in the mire by the

Short Fiction

Erin felton

side of a road. Nothing around me had any familiarity. It looked like it was late afternoon, and I was in a pretty poor neighborhood by the looks of it. The houses sagged and drooped. They looked lazy and leaned against one another for support. A rusty guard-rail started a few feet from my head and was badly twisted from a wreck. Behind it was a pitiful looking payphone with the cover of a phone book hanging by a chain, but without any pages. Across the street there was a dirty three door garage with a brightly painted sign that said "Pedro's Auto shop. Lost Good Job in New Mexico."

My senses started to come back along with a pounding headache. I had left my boyfriend in California and traveled all night on a random bus. It scopped at a filler station and I got out to take a hit, but I remember my bag was gone. I was pretty strung out already. I was on a week long high but quickly falling.

I missed the bus out, but managed to break into a garage, Pedro's garage. I found the box where they keep all the keys for all the cars they are working on. It was padlocked, but I smashed it on the ground until the walls gave and five keys clinked onto the floor. I picked them up and started all five cars. The room filled up with exhaust quickly and I lay down on the cement to sleep. The owner must have found me, and dragged me as far as the roadside.

I stayed lying by the road for a long time after that. My head pounded like jackhammers were trying to break into my temples, and my heart beat fast and non-rhythmically. I pushed my face against the dirt and tried to die. Finally, I gave up. In spite of myself I was going to live. I pulled myself up and stumbled over to the pay phone. It was pretty dark by now, only a little pink cloud echoed the sunset. I searched my pocket for change, and then dialed Art and my old number collect. It was the first time I had tried to contact him since I left.

Short Fiction

I Have Loved the Stars

"Hello?" a young feminine voice answered.

"Hi," I paused. "I'm, um looking for Arc Banchosi."

"He's at work, want me I take your message?" she said in that trained telephone voice children of good parents do.

"Are you his daughter?" I asked. My chest was pounding. Why had I called? I hadn't thought this through.

"Yeah."

My head began to spin and I leaned against the phone booth for support. What sore of luck had kept Art at our old house, at our same number? And what karma had made it be that it was June to answer the phone? I tried to picture what she may look like. Her voice sounded little. Of course she was little; Art and I both had tiny frames. She sounded pleasant too, and healthy. I tried to picture a small version of myself with Art's green eyes and big ears. Then it occurred to me, what if I wasn't talking to my daughter? It was perfectly logical that Art would remarry, and by now he could very easily have other children old enough to be talking on the phone.

"How old are you?" I asked suddenly.

"Daddy says I shouldn't talk to people I don't know."

Of course he did.

"Listen," I said in as calm of voice as I could create. "I am not a stranger. I am a good friend of your daddy's. So you can tell me how old you are?" I started counting on my fingers. It was 1986 when I left, it's 1993 now... 93 minus 86... carry the one...

"Seven! Are you seven?" I asked.

"June? Junebug?" a woman asked in the background.

"Who are you talking to?"

Junebug?

'I don't know, Mommy."

Mommy?

Short Fiction

Erin Felton

The woman picked up the phone. "Who is this?" she demanded.

I was quiet.

"Don't you ever call here again. You hear me? Never!"

The line went dead. It was the last time I tried to make contact with June.

I open my eyes. The operation room is dark and there are no more nurses or doctors around. The green cent is gone. I try to sit up, but I can't seem to get my brain to connect with any of my muscles. I try to yell, but my voice box seems frozen and far away from me. I don't panic; instead, I feel peaceful. For the first time in months, I can't feel any pain. My mind seems far away from the rest of my body and I meditate on how good it feels to be disconnected. I close my eyes and see the sky that night I slept in the cornfield. The clearest pinpricks of light stretch around me on all sides. They even seem to stretch underneath the truck. I look to my side and see Art beside me. He leans forward to stroke my cheek. He hasn't aged a bit. I look at myself. I am young too. He nods his head to the space between us. I look down to see a wiggling baby girl with pink play dough skin and sharp green eyes. The three of us watch the stars revolve around us. We are three very small galaxies gently spinning together in the bed of my old pickup. I fall back asleep.

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

Weightless
Sara Blevins

"Life begins with lists.
That's how we box it in-tell ourselves it's okay.
We can denounce it only if it can be listed.
We can crust it only if it can be enlisted.
We make it safe to ignore only when we blacklist it.
We make a list to save ourselves the trouble. We make lists just to
make do.
To do's, to be's, to cake's and who to do's.
This girl down the street keeps a diary that she thinks is a secret,
But, it's just a list.
Conquests, half-smiles that drip
With lipstick....
Every mascara-ed eyelash on which
She'd wished...
Shit, that girl's got a sickness.
She makes a list of everything she eats.
Then she turns around and makes a list of it all comin' out.
Every day she thinks this... this is birth.
In reverse.
She keeps a list of all the days she's met
and her parents just try to keep
a list of the weeks
She's got left."

My lips brushed the microphone. Applause was a palpable
thing, an alive thing that you could wrap your mind around or
something that breathed like a pet curled at your feet. I wanted to
spread my hands wide and say hello. Applause was a form of love,
especially to poets. Especially to me. If I could just stop Laugh-
SO

Short Fiction

Weightless

ing...I might have been able to say something important.

The microphone was hot. It wanted to kiss my lips. I wanted to kiss it back, but I was drunk, drunk, drunk. I stumbled forward to press my lips against the cold metal. I had something to say, first. Don't take me away. Don't touch me! Not yet. I've got something to say. I said---don't touch me.

The lights swirled like a kaleidoscope and I tried to cling to the microphone stand. It was treacherous. I was falling. I couldn't see anything because everything was spinning. Spinning so fast I couldn't hear a word Gavin was saying. Don't let me fall. His hands were always at my elbow. Don't let me fall, I said. But we were laughing. Laughing like nothing outside of laughter existed. And it was so kind. And it was so good.

Later, he pushed me into the street and it flowed like a river. A river named 16th Street. Cars went by like fish. I wanted to reach out and touch them. I wanted to jump in and ride on a dolphin. Dolphins are the only animals that have sex for fun. Or maybe that's just something I had read.

"Go home. Ashley, Go Home," he said, with a little shove on my shoulder.

He was crazy. I guess he saw that thought on my face. Everything was always written on my face. Right down to my identity. Fat girls knew how to hide too, though. I could hide, hide, hide. Make myself so small, you might not even have known me.

"You going to make it on your own?" he said with a frown.

His eyes were hazy in the light. He wasn't alone. I thought I recognized her but it didn't really matter. They all giggled the same way. I looked at her. Well all ten of her. Gavin wasn't laughing anymore. Nothing he hated more than to lose a night with a girl. I should have said something. And should have soon. Or I'd lose him.

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

"You walking?" he repeated.

I slanted my eyes and his oh-so-beautiful face blurred. She was perfect. Thin. Just like him. But, oh in the water that was glistening cobblestones like pebbles in the bottom, a person could be weightless. I took one hesitant seep into the street and then took a good long look around.

I yelled across the yellow-broken line fences, "No, I think I'm swimming."

Don't ask me to tell you when I changed. I don't know. And by, "I don't know," I mean there are no measurements for the time or the day or the hour that I turned into someone I never knew. You know, as a matter of fact, don't ask me anything. Just shut up....and listen.

The surgery was the easy part, you know. It was the following that changes a person. I know that at first it was the slow trudging from consciousness to wakefulness and that a fire burned inside me like alcohol-raw and alive. It was odd that nothing had changed. I knew nothing had changed before I opened my eyes. I know that when they focused, I crawled to the mirror in my pseudo-hospital room and searched my body with a fierceness I didn't know existed inside of me.

That day I saw my body as a quilt. I examined every patch of patterned skin. Nothing was new, except a square across my abdomen. Scars artfully blended with the surgery that had taken my appendix years earlier. They had promised five discrete scars to treat "morbid obesity". And here it was as promised, a bud of puckered skin. Who knew a cure could be so touchable? Puckered skin like a symbol, or maybe just a memory. A new patch for my new quilt.

Short Fiction

lightness

A nurse came in and raised an eyebrow. She wore white like it was a surrender. I wanted to be nasty to her. I wanted to give her a piece of my mind. But I gave her a piece of my body instead. Don't touch me. She did anyway, and I submitted to the needle. Then I was falling (please, don't let me fall) into the pillow. They didn't cell me. I swear, they didn't cell me that falling was like floating.

Somewhere over my head she said, "Did you think, lovey, it was going to look different right away?"

Life begins with lists. The first list I can remember making was this one:

- Fat girls are either too loud or too quiet.
- Fat girls are lazy.
- Fat girls have no feelings or have too many feelings.
- Fat girls are messy.

The second list I remember making is this one:

- Fat girls are not pretty, no matter how oceanic, emerald, or chocolate their eyes are.
- Fat girls are not allowed to evoke any sentiment other than "nice". After all, that's all they got going for them.
- Fat girls are not to be heard.

I first started doing spoken word at coffee shops and night clubs in my hometown. The idea of writing poetry that sticks on your tongue thick as musical notes was a lucrative one. If fat girls were allowed to feel something only too much, then I loved spoken-word poetry too much.

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

It wasn't just spoken-word poetry that I loved too much. The coffee shop was the first place I met Gavin. Gavin was a pretty boy; and by pretty boy, I mean a gorgeous, American, golden-haired, blue-eyed, bee-boppin pretty boy.

He had a lazy eye. That's very important. His lazy eye was the only thing that kept him from being physically perfect. And by perfect, I mean he was a lady-killing, sex-addicted, downright good lay. But because I was a fat girl, I was in no danger of being lady-killed, a victim of his sex addiction or a good lay, and thus we formed a strange relationship. He told me everything. I suppose that I was the first person that stayed longer than a night in his life. But one of the things that he told me was that he was a damn good bass player. And he was. He told me about two months after I'd been performing on my own that he wanted to play behind my voice. The music was the missing ingredient. I had always felt that connection, but nothing, absolutely nothing like this. I suppose it was all the sex or the years of bass-playing that gave him the edge, but the man knew how to create atmosphere. He knew how to keep me spinning. He knew how to play all the strings in a bass, in a woman, in a crowd.

And if fat girls had been allowed to fall in love - I might have loved him.

The hardest part of recovery is that you don't know what your body will accept. My body is being held hostage. I have returned to myself - returned to my most basic. I huddle smaller and smaller in corners of beds I don't recognize. I have nightmares that I have lost so much weight that I am nothing but a fetus, curled in a dark, endless womb. I take up as little space as possible.

Short Fiction

lf/eightless

I pass Like a specter from bedroom to bathroom. I throw up six rimes a day. My face is a clock's. Tell the time on it. But god, don't touch me. Please, don't touch me.

I hold my head over the toilet and open my mouth as if I am going to speak, but there is nothing to say. There is no one to listen.

"God, I dated that girl over there," Gavin said, pointing his index finger in a vague direction over my shoulder.

I was sipping coffee with him in a coffee house somewhere in Chicago. Gavin was making it big. So was I. Bue I was chinking hard about caking a "health" hiatus. That's what Gavin called it every rime I mentioned the surgery. Surgery was an unpleasant, unpretty word. I don't think he could stand to hear it coming out of his own mouth.

He was scaring at me in my scarves and bracelets. Staring and whipping up the froth in his coffee with his middle finger. His fingers were thick and glistened with perfectly rounded fingernails. How do you play bass with those kind of fingers?

"Hell, you muse think you are some kind of gypsy," he laughed.

I looked toward the direction he had pointed and waited for my eyes to right themselves. The girl was pretty. Bur she was a big girl.

"Did you dace that girl or sleep with her? Normal people distinguish a difference," I said.

He was scill stirring the damn coffee with his finger and stroking the top of his bass with his other hand. Absently. He was always absent. Looking over the top of my head at the girl.

"What did you just say?" he asked, his gaze coming around to my face.

Short Fiction

Sara I3levins

"Nothing."

"She looks so different. She used to be like a ten, man. A real ten. I mean stacked like a cake. Something must have changed her. I never got her, though. Not like I get you."

"You don't 'get' me," I said.

"Sure, I do." He grinned, and (stoptalkingpleasestoptalking) there's just no stopping him. "But Stacy, she's really let herself go."

I swivel in the seat and stare. I want to drink her all in as if she is on display. As if at the end of the day, someone is going to hold up a sign and pronounce her a perfect ten. Her hair is course and long and held up by a giant headband. Her hair is full of bounce and I imagine that it is a piccure of her personality. She is laughing out loud now. Big and loud and alive. I felt something sick in my stomach crawling like a worm. Oh, how I hated her. I didn't want to defend her. I wanted to submit to the hatred. I didn't want to say it... I didn't want to. But I did.

"Yeah, maybe. Maybe she just closed her eyes and let... herself..go."

I was standing in the lunch line when the sickness came again. I was half of myself at this point. And a fourth of my identity. I had turned into a mathematician. I could count calories. I could count pounds. I could come up with an equation for the cultural distinction between a size 20 and a size 8. I knew instinctively that to tell someone your weight was far easier than to tell someone your size. Size is a private affair of tangled jean legs and brassy waist buttons. It is not an event designed for reproduction.

Short Fiction

Weightless

Gavin's voice came to me from far away. I wasn't listening to him, I couldn't help it. I had stopped listening so that I could hear my body speaking.

"Hey. Hey, Ashley. Listen to me. You look sick," he said. I kept looking into his face, not hearing a word. All I could see was his sky blue eyes dulled by judgment. He was looking at me and seeing a completely different woman. He saw only my size. I don't want him to touch me. Sizing me up. That's what it has come down to all along. But no one wants to size you up - they want to size you down. I am a weight to him. An entire person condensed into the measure of size. And in his beautiful, still face all I saw was that desire for me to be what he wanted me to be.

I'm angry. So angry. I have to get away. To get away before it happens. Don't touch me, just don't touch me. [said it over and over again. I shoved at him, pushed him out of the way. I stumbled down the hallway. His hands were there. The rough, calloused pads of his fingers rested on my elbow. I said, DON'T TOUCH ME.

"How does a woman bear those calloused fingers on her body?" I asked.

He absorbed the words as though they were radiation emanating from my body. The hurt plays like a bass across his arched brows and careless lips. I was pulling all the strings, after all.

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

His hands fell away and I rumbled into the wall. I clutched all my body together as if I could keep all the particles of my flesh from exploding into the air. As if the coiled springs of my abdomen would force my quaking stomach into stillness. touch me. don't let me fall. It hurts. Oh God. It hurts.

"What's wrong with you, Ash? What the hell is wrong with you," he backed away from me as if I might burn him.

His voice was deceptively soft. So soft it sounded like a loving endearment, so soft I almost couldn't hear him. don't ask me to explain. Leave me alone. Don't touch me. don't leave me.

"What do you think is wrong with me?" I choked.

I wanted to choke him. I wanted to hurt him. Hurt him just like he hurt me. Instead he looked at me, his eyes level and clear. His lazy eye didn't even twitch.

"You want a list?"

I stopped doing spoken word at 160 lbs.

My mother once told me to be wary of mirrors and cameras. Both will steal a piece of your soul, she said. It doesn't surprise me, really. Because I search mirrors for hours these days; I am trying to find something new. Something stares back at me, and it's not like I've lost anything. This mirror-searching is just a morning ritual. Every woman steps through a mirror into the world. It's

Short Fiction

lf/eight/m

a door. It's a rite we teach each other, culturally. I give it aU one final glance.

"Smile pretty and watch your back," J sang to the woman in the mirror. It was an old song, one of my favorites. I closed my eyes and tried to stretch my memory like a rubber band. Pu it taut across the months. What was her name...what was her name. Ani. Ani something. Ani Difranco. There, / had it. She had once been my hero.

My own voice was startling. I wondered idly if / could get a surgery for my voice so that it would match my body.

I was walking down the street observing all of the people. Checking to make sure they were looking at me. I was walking and making lists. Short skirts, check. Perfect hair, check. Heels that hurt but that doesn't matter because they push your chest out and make every one stare. Check.

When I first started doing researching about the surgery, I talked to a stripper who had had it done. She told me that people treat you differently after you lose all your weight. After you are no longer a threat.

She said, "Nobody cares about what your personalit^y looks like because they can't sleep with a personalit^y. What they care about is what your body looks like. A body is real. A body you can touch. A personalit^y is just a metaphor."

She was right. Of course, I had always thought char it

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

would be men who treated you the most differently. I was wrong. When I was fat, I was not unaware of physical repugnance. Nor was I unaware that many use that repugnance to make jokes to their buddies. But I had always put the blame on men. Women, in fact, were far worse. They came at you with secret smiles unveiled for you alone; they invite you to groups. They take you dancing with chem. Women I knew in high school want to be friends again. They look at a tiny body and call it healed. They introduce you to the gym. Show you how to get what you want. But then they want secrets in return—secrets, diet pills, or tips, or occasionally the name of my doctor.

Darkness was coming down like a hood. I was taking a shortcut through an alley when I noticed a man standing near the end. I kept walking with my head down. I was counting the pieces of glass lined on the ground and making lists. I had never been afraid of getting raped. It just wasn't something that I thought about. It was like a universal truth: fat girls don't get raped. It is just logical that it is harder to keep someone larger down.

His shadow kept getting closer and when it stretched long across the alley and I saw that it covered my entire body, a strange shiver of apprehension curled in my stomach. Idiot. Who goes walking towards someone they think is going to rape them? I ran. I turned around and ran and I could hear his laughter half-choke and half-cough behind me. Terror seized in my throat and I contemplated screaming. I say contemplated because my mind had ceased to function in rapid fires, but instead seemed to be slow and syrupy.

Short Fiction

IPightlm

His strange coughing laughter followed me all the way back to 16th Street.

You don't know what your body will reject after the surgery. You eat something that before would be fine, but now your body is forever in control. It decides that the food is a foreign object and must be expelled. By force and with no thought as to where it will go. Then sometimes, it will accept something completely unexpected. It's a game of trial and error.

I spent a lot of time in the bathroom. At the gym, I was expelling everything in my stomach into the miler for the third time that day. I was so used to this place, this same cracking green tile, the green cardboard walls and the bottom of the porcelain toilet. Someday I'm going to have a sculpture of a toilet in my home. I'm going to call it fine art. And then I was crying. I braced my hands on the floor and held myself up, and my head hit against the side of the wall. The door creaked open and I moaned. I tried to hold my breath. As if squeezing all the breath down inside of me into the smallest part of me would force it into silence. I cried again when I thought they had gone. Cried and cried. But, I don't know why.

A hand brushed mine underneath the space between the bathroom stalls. Bony, long-tapered fingers closed over the cradle of my palm. I jerked it away and swiped with my still too-big paws at my eyes.

"Don't cry," the girl said.

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

"I'm not."
"I hear you in here, everyday. We go at the same time, you know."
"...go at the same time?"
"You know... to purge," she whispers.

I rocked my knees together and threw my head back, striking it against the wall. The sound was like cannon fire in the stillness. I looked at the ceiling and then closed my eyes. I looked everywhere but at that stili, small hand. And then I stared at it. I noticed its boniness and its slenderness. I looked at how the skin puckered around the knuckles like a poorly fitted coat. I inspected the swirling lines of her hands, the lines that some say harbors our identities. They were like a child's hands, and I thought they were beautiful. So fucking beautiful. I looked up at the ceiling again, tried ta see through the water-stained tile and the steel beams and tried to imagine the sky. I thought it must be raining.

Then I looked at her hand again, quiet and persistent. And I took it in my own. Our hands came together like a mountain over a valiey o r - a small earthquake.

When I was a size 4, I went to see Gavin play bass. The months had not changed him. His hair still fell in exactly the same shaggy Layers it used too. I stood against the back of the coffee house, cold in my new short skirt. I wore a hat and I knew with certainty he had not seen my newly chopped hair. I was certain that no one would know me now.

Short Fiction

Weightless

His music used to move me. His music used to stir up my insides and fill me with a strange sense of triumph. He was triumphant in his victory tonight. He was lost in the music. He was swimming in it. I wanted to go to him. He looked sick. Broken. The music was screaming at me. It was so angry with me. I knew then what betrayal really was.

I couldn't breathe. I was drowning in the notes. I stayed until the set was done. I stayed up until the moment when he sat the guitar down and stepped out into the cold wind. I was walking out the back door when his voice, dry as wine, stopped me.

"You just going to leave? Without saying a word?"

I felt as raw as a cut. I turned to look at him and my breath filled the sail of my throat. I thought it would push me away from him. My inability, my inadequacy with words would stop him from following me. He was smoking a cigarette. He was leaning up against the back door as if he had been waiting for me the whole time.

"I rudn't think..."

"No, you didn't, Ash. But go ahead, you didn't think what? That I would recognize you?"

I ran my tongue across my lower lip.

"How did you?" I whispered.

He flicked his ashes into the air and bit his lower lip. One hand was tucked securely in the flap of his jacket, that one arm slung across his chest like a shield. He looked at me hard for a minute and then sighed.

"There's only one woman in the world who responds like

Short Fiction

Sara Blevins

that to my music."

I scared hard at the cement, imagining what it would be like to be that cigarette in his mouth. I was ashamed of myself and tried hard not to look at him.

"So this is it, huh? This is what you've become. Too small to look me in the face," he said, disgusted.

no. no. no. that's not it at all.

"Yeah, I guess," I said.

There was an awkward pause between us. We stared at each other, I trying to drink in every detail and he trying to drink in all that had changed. I had been wrong. Things only looked unchanged at a distance. But here, with his face so close, I could see every stress line, and every crack in his lips.

"And her parents....they keep a list of the weeks....she's got left," he said.

I blinked and he was gone. He flipped the cigarette into the parking lot and stepped back inside of the coffee house. He was gone before I could say anything. Before I could beg. I stayed in that spot for a long time. I watched his cigarette smoldering on the ground until there was nothing left but the filter.

Size 2 came like winter. Like a Christmas present all wrapped in skin.

I wrapped up in warm clothes to go outside, always freezing. This never-ending battle of cold, hot, cold, sometimes-just cold. I stood on 16th Street and watched the cars swimming by in their own world, in their own biosphere. I was not part of their species. I was not like them. I was not a strong swimmer-anymore. Blinking, hollow-eyed and gaping like a fish, I watched the

Short Fiction

Weightless

traffic. I watched that endless breath of snow, each individual drop on my eyelashes or my shoes. I watched the world go by.

I went with the Aow along the river of 16th Street and into the darkness. I had conversations with snowflakes on an individual basis as they flung themselves with reckless abandon from the sky. I watched as each crystal of water spiraled to the heated earth, one part ice and one part water. Watched, as it was driven by the wind-watched, as it floated, aimless . . . and weightless.

Poetry



Poetry

Big Girl now
Lena Tudor
First Pia

Sunspring days mellowing in the glade.
The glaze of junesweet perspiration dripdropping from lips
Stained rainbow hues of popsicle delights
Solar gaze haze around my eyes.
Moondripped dewdrops reflect flashlight spotlight
Backyard joys and the blood of family strong in our veins,
The beamlight cuts the night and it bleeds starlight with our laughter
And they may find me, and they may not
I have always been good at hiding
Schoolyard playground practice for the real world years in acceleration
Even though we did not realize it.
Go go Pink Ranger because Tommy is not nearly as cute as Kimberly
And when they hug it is not his arms I see strength in
Green-tinted morning light stained by curtains on Saturday morning amphitheatre
Cartoons were worth getting up early for.
Grandma knew the right words, touches, sacrifices to see me through
That childhood age hazed sun moon star in my mind now because celestial bodies
And memories have a lot in common
As distant as the light-years are long.
And I am a big girl now, she does not always know the
Instinctual way to the healing path
We are on even turf - the black plague of time passing gets to us both

Poetry

big girl 11011

We try to hold memories in our hands, so much stardust
The constellations Aood their riverbanks with the memories,
A lireAy's (Juttering win!rs glowing green
Make a wish and let it Ay away, let it go
Lightning bug-quick, starspeed fast, timebeat slow like toothloss mouthache
Because you just can't go back.

Poetry

Dandelions

Travis L. Michael

Second Place

On a low terrace in 1991, air-sealed from parr^y conversation, he whisded
ash from an upheld cigarette, a gesture so reminiscent of blowing
sparks from the crystal ball of a dead dandelion in that single,
infinitesimally endless July of his early childhood that his
throat winced with lovesick nostalgia. In the ear of his ear,
bad poets whispered their abstract nonsense:

'Childhood wishes leave nubs, adult ones embers.'

Desire had narrowed its swirl on the steps, where two girls sat
babysitting botdes; no music, only empty joy, spinning.
'As for the birds, who's to say whether they sing or scream.'
The girls inside would always dance, as if compelled by a child's
tug in the bloodstream. 'Well, anyone could dream of them.'

The two spoke so intently, leaning in like secret twins,

Wearing looks choked by fire no one else had seen. *He* stood memorizing.
& where would dley travel in words? He hadn't asked.
Maybe to a previous year, to smoke outside a high school prom,
the weepy poetic one complaining how the st.lrs stung
like little mornings, striking a match-a little dress of Aames, a Aare
of intense, private env^y against the sound of dresses.

Poetry

& the other, maybe a Virginia Woolf adorist, he envisioned that from the wan stare & small, expressive hands. She could be an Emily; & yes, it is very late, & yes, longing, in its most devastating sense, can no longer be outnumbered by distractions. But isn't it always more romantic to evade interaction for imaginary details? Besides, that night, he couldn't find a comfortable pose to speak. Instead,

Years later, in a college auditorium, following a visiting lecturer on Jungian theory, he recognized them exiting the front row and chalk it up to mere déjà vu, and even later, in the tilt of a violent fever, he will dream of them braiding tall shafts of grass in a field of dandelions-- their faces, like watercolors, never quite coming into focus; & yet, he will miss them--with that inimitable grace for, visrei.

Poetry

Jen or Angelina
Christina Belcher
Third Place

Filing through a waiti_ng room Cosmo,
And I'm finaUy starting to feel alive.
Ironic as it is, at the same time, my father's mother, who isn't far from
Death, names alive as \What she lacks.
Page 7: Are you Jen or Angelina?
Page 29: 7 ways to make him ache for you.
Filing through a waiting room Cosmo,
Anticipating her false-toothed smile, brilliant on her birthday,
A celebration of so many years to find what we all thought would be the
Grand finale being Celebrated in an off-white hospital room, with off-
White hospital sheets, and off-white collar Workers stabbing at her veins.
Speaking of injections:
Page 60: How to finaUy find your G-Spot.
Filing through a waiting room Cosmo,
Glassy eyes open and my father's mother reads the headlines written on
my smirk and relates:
Page 64: Boone County, Coal Company, Prenner Holler, 1947.
The PoUack boy with red lips she was not permitted to touch.
She reads you in my distracted grin.
Page 72: My heart has migrated into my throat and as soon as I see you it
wIU probably jump out Into your impatient, waiting hands.
If you would, throw it back.
I'U be waiting with an open mouth.

Poetry

Jacobed
Zachary Ferrell

The word flower penned upon petal
In ink upon the skin of the thing.
Can name be nearer nature? Or, can
Name nature with pen & letter?
Selfsame mouth which tastes the apple
Forms the essence with tongue & vowel,
& couples consonant to consummate
The word. But words do not germinate
As apples do. - First fruit; then fall
Of fruit on the ground; then sound; then call
Each thing to name by lip & tongue;
Then fall of man; then concupiscence
& shown seeds in half-rot apples, & new
Science from human love: we accrue
Not one flesh nor shame flushed
Faces, but endure such deliberate
& such necessary graces-Word's work on nature,
By Seven for five senses & five wounded places,
That palm & foot & side let blood -
That God might speak, & we be Jacob.

Poetry

Back to Bas(alr)ics

Lena Tudor

It's elementary, my dear, it's geophysical-
Sex and geology, the lay of the land / the land of the laid

She touches me, she has the alchemic touch
Like base metal given glitter, I love
Fingertips of lightning glowing
Fusion-hot forked tongues
Split my sky, my legs, I'll admit
My liquidus, my partial melt
After centuries of rifting I flow
She and I come together.
Neither of us have faces, they've been burnt off
The bed, always my subduction zone
I go under, I go down
Once more I am assimilated
And I give her, I feed her
I eat her till there's nothing left
And she's just like me
So hot we could combust
There's no soft here
Nothing has the color blue
Sex and temperature, pressure and death.
The thrill's not in the safety
After all, she's not you.

Poetry

Theory of a Legend

Rebecca Smith

Shackled down to mere mortal-they're closing off the exit portal.
I muse watch, yet I can barely endure,
Bue there is beauty in my breaking-my mistakes were worth making.

Don't tempt me with your lure,

Black skies that breed storms and tangled roots that stem thorns:
All part of God's creation.

Through the darkness appear golden sheens, and from down under
raise devilish fiends.

Premature cheers of Jubilation,

Chains of sinful thought keep dragging-their eerie rattles are
boasting and bragging,

For they are defeating the only known Lord.

Lines of death keep fuming brightly-take a breath and hold it
tightly.

Do you trust yourself to swing a mighty

Sword? Ashes to ashes and dust to dust, your shiny metal has
turned to rust.

You have become weak and full of rage.

Tears of sorrow stream elusively. A battle has begun.

Unleash that beast that has been caged.

The sound of a trumpet, sharp and loud, descends to earth from
parted clouds.

Is this what they call Armageddon?

A war so covered with blood-the world engulfed in a fiery flood.

Poetry

One should never underestimate a holy legend.

Close your eyes my darling lover; repeat your prayer and this will soon be over.

Try not to focus on your pain.

Sleep peacefully here in my arms, safe from harm.

I promise, we have not died in vain.

Poetry

Laundromatses
Anthony Barath

I should have worn gloves coming here,
But it's just another thing to forget.
This morning is insane in its chill,
And I wish to God the laundry was open.
For now I'll just write this poem,
And listen to foreign metal.

Car interior's plastic, none of it's made of metal.
Hearer picks up and I feel okay here.
The lyrics to this song would make a short poem
But the melody's something I'll never forget.
Eight o'clock, place's closed, runty minutes I'll do my laundry,
But I'm dreading the walk in and its thirty-second chill.

Last night I didn't expect such a chill,
The gas heater kept me warm, lively square of metal.
Couldn't sleep, least of my worries was laundry.
First was if I'm gonna make it out of this town.
Half my work I put off, half I forget.
For example-Monday morning, writing.

The sun's risen,
Maybe later it'll burn away this chill.
But the winter's not gonna let us forget.
He's daring us to lick the poles of metal.

Poetry

It's like the first circle of hell out here,
And all I'm wanting is to do some laundry.

Well, it's nine-thirty and the laundry
Is closed to me. I'm in no mood now for writing.
It's getting a little too hot in here;
I want to brave thirty seconds-chill
To hear the clang of machines-spinning metal.
This is a day I want to forget.

It's finally open and I realize I did forget
To keep my detergent out of my trunk. Can't wash my laundry
When my soap liquid's about as liquid as metal,
But I can put the last couches on that damned poem
While the owner runs hot water and melts away that chill
And I remember why I like it so much here.

Poetry

Gum

Anthony Barath

Starts in a tree
And it starts in a cane
And the two become one
In a shroud of cellophane.

It's traded for a coin
And it goes in your mouth
The professor can sense
And he wants it spit out.

The bin's so far away
You're at an impasse
Then you think to leave it
With the seat that holds your ass.

Someone will feel it later
Recoil and go, evAv
You can take pride in knowing
That the reason was you.

Poetry

Prelude

Zachary Ferrell

Who speaks here, now, always?
Sudden in a shaft of
Seedlight sprouts the essence:
Flow'r speaks Aow'r, curls the green
Nautilus of coiled &
Quickened stem. The form is
Spidered of its substance
As Christ's own speaking
By Father's provenance.
Though nature's numbers tell
Of gyring stem, such shape
Obsessed Yeats' verse, as well.
In nature's spells the
Life of single flower;
In Yeats', the full history
& nightmare of power.
Against the misery
Of the whole of time, the
Stem's subtle alchemy
Of soul by matter mimed
Proves mute, or less profound,
Mere vegetal effect,
Wanting the power of
Creative intellect.
Flower speaks of cyclic

Poetry

Beauty, through spring & fall,
Winter, summer - not that
Darkness drops again, but
Silent root & stem may
Blossom still, & floral
Crown prove all else desert
Beyond the petaled fan.
Yet in beauty's desert
One observes this witness.
Through sand his slow thighs move;
His blank gaze, pitiless
As the Sun, will pry the bloom,
Unpent each petal to
Pierce poetically
Until sight becomes a
Dwelling in the thing. This
Presence swells the throat of
Stem & holds the blossom's
Tongue that Sphinx might make its
Riddle of the flower's
Vital sum. Thus a rose
Becomes red rose, proud rose,
Sad rose of all my days!
Come near me while I sing
Of ancient ways. The seem
Is made a stultus for
Mimetic blossoming,
As in place of rose there
Flourishes a violet
Violence. The poet
Spies each bloom-begotten
Desert; he, as though an
Iris, dilates until
There persists no nature
Nor space for rose-breath to
Fill. It is not, who speaks?,
But who speaks more loudly
Still; whose blossom pries far
Deeper toward the quiet

Poetry

Heart of fallen man. He
Knows that leaves and trees
Live; he has read Yeats
& dreamt of publishing.
Yet when the branch stretches
He, too, makes this statement.

Poetry

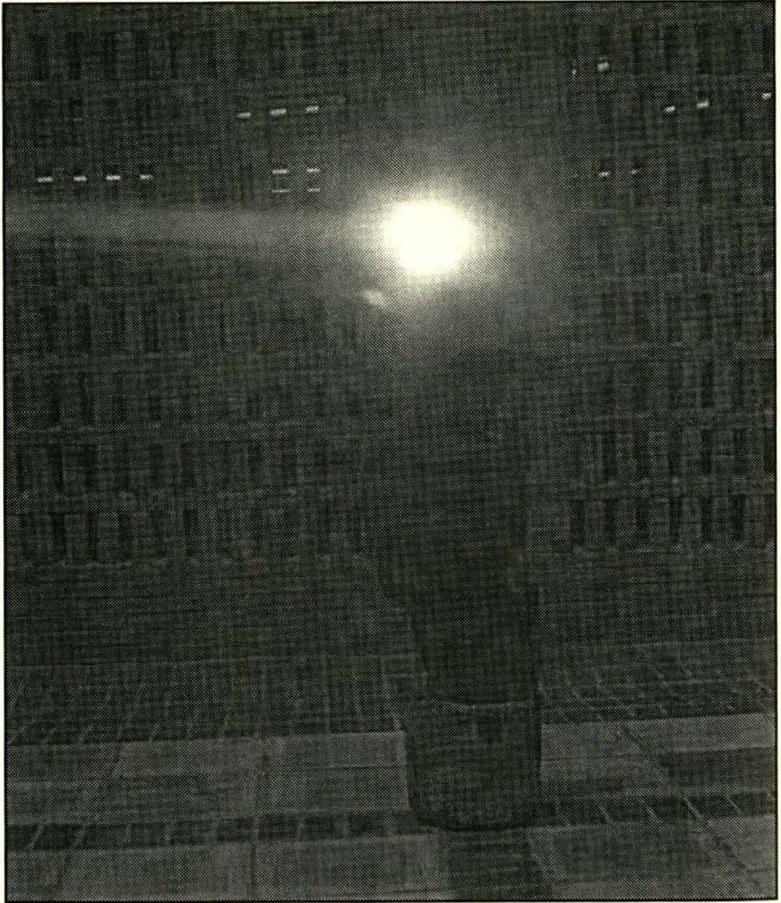
Stringer Haiku
Brian Lemley

Paperclip your tie.
Your flip-out clock screams Please Wash.
Your coffee-stained mug.

Hong Haiku # 2
Brian Lemley

Discourse Linguistics,
Phoneme Syntax Analyst.
Fuck it, smoke A cig.

ETC...



Etc...

Angela Hunt

Getting Back in the Saddle

Angela Hunt

You never know what's going to happen in life. Sure, you might have some good ideas, and you might be going down that road you've always planned, but then life decides to hit you with a truck. For me, this truck is a Ford Ranger and there is no warning. There is just a thud, and then black.

When I was three, Daddy had a big, brown horse named King. Daddy would lift me onto King's back, like I was as light as a feather. King's back was so wide that sometimes I felt like my legs might split apart, but he was warm and fuzzy and gentle, and I felt like a princess, so high above the world, high above my big brothers, that I would cry and cry when Daddy lifted me off of King's back. I wanted to stay on King forever, to bury my head in his scratchy brown mane, to feel the sun beat down on my back. One day, when I was lying down on King's neck, my eyes closed, and my arms flopped down by my side, I breathed in King's wonderful scent, opened my eyes and looked at my dad. I told him that I loved horses and he told me that they loved me too.

Screaming, cold, and darkness surround me. I realize my eyes are closed and when I open them, I see the grey sky above. I don't know where I am. I think I'm on wet blacktop. I can't feel anything but the cold. I feel like I'm in a paralysis dream and decide that must be what's going on. My mind floats in the midst of the frozen landscape and I decide to make myself wake up.

When I was eight, I started taking English riding lessons from Daddy's friend Pam, who, because she was the best riding coach in the region, had a few conditions for her students: they had to be committed riders, crying wasn't allowed, and they always had

Etc...

Getting Back in the Saddle

to get back in the saddle. I agreed, of course.

The lessons went well. I rode an old Appaloosa mare named Fancy, whose black spots were scarring to fade into her white coat from age. I used to love trying to find and count these spots. One day, an evil horse Ay made Fancy buck and side step, swish her tail violently, take off at full speed across the ring and land me directly on the top of my head before I knew what happened to me. I felt like my brain was in a blender, and all previous promises dissolved into a massive headache.

As Pam tried to corner Fane₂ on the other side of the arena, Daddy came and kneeled down beside me. I was trying to be brave, I was trying to make h_{jm} proud of me, but the tears just kept welljng up. I couldn't hold them back any longer. I asked him if we could go home. He patted me on the head, told me that I was going to be okay, but that I had to ride Fancy again. I did not want to do thjs. He thought I would hurt Fancy's feelings if I refused to ride her, but as I watched Fancy galloping around the ring, bucking every so often, I decided that I did not care at aJ how Fancy felt. Fancy was insane.

"You have to get back in the saddle. Otherwise you might be coo scared later on," Daddy explained, wiping my tears away with rus hands. "Just do something for me. Whenever you feel scared like trus, just count to ten, and let it all out. Okay?"

Pam finally grabbed Fancy and scarred to lead her back to us. She took one look at me, and with a hand placed on her hip, asked if I had been crying. I looked at my dad, and then shook my head. She told me that was good, because my form was awful, my weight wasn't in my heels, and she was cired of temng me to keep my heels down. Her work was cut out for her.

Dad offered a cupped hand, I put my left boot into it, and he hoisted me back into the saddle. He looked at me and we counted quietly together, "One, two, three, four. ..."

Etc...

Angela Hunt

A girl kneels beside me. She repeats over and over again, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so, sorry, honey." As she leans over me, some of her tears hit my face. From somewhere in the near distance I hear a frantic voice ask if anyone's called 911. Another voice says that the girl is crazy, or drunk, or both. Strangers surround me, peering down on me like I'm some spectacle.

I look into the sky again, and this time, I notice a big rig to the left of me is caking up half of the view. The driver is smoking a cigarette. He is the only one who doesn't see me. He tosses the cigarette out the window and it flies through the air and disappears out of sight.

A phone rings and I recognize this ring. "Please, my phone. Answer my phone," I tell the girl. She frantically looks across the blacktop, trying to find it. Someone in the crowd hands her the phone. She says hello, explains that I can't come to the phone right now, and tells the caller that I'm okay, that I'm conscious and talking some. There is a pause. I can hear my mother's voice coming through the receiver. It is high and frantic. The girl tells her that she accidentally hit me with her truck, and that I just appeared out of nowhere in the crosswalk.

The reality of this incident sinks in. Perhaps I am not dreaming. Perhaps I really am lying in the middle of this street with a stranger's rears threatening to drown me; that I can't feel my toes, my fingers. I close my eyes, wanting so scay calm, needing to scay calm. I scare ro count. One, two, three, four, five...

When I was eleven, Mr. Chips came into our lives. He was a little Morgan horse, but he looked very much like a mule. It was love at first sight for both me and my dad, and we knew he was the one. With Chip, I began my journey down the road of equestrian stardom that my dad and I had always dreamed of. Chip and I were going to kick butt in the world combined training. We just knew it.

Etc...

Getting Back ill the Saddle

At our first horse show, Chip and I kicked dirt in the faces of all the pure-blooded, giant thoroughbreds that were prancing around. I could tell all the rich girls were sticking their noses up at my Goodwill suit jacket, my rubber riding boots, my short, furry mule pony, but it didn't matter. Chip and I swept all the prizes and it rudn't matter that most of the horses could practically step over the jumps, and that Chip had to harness all of his energy to lift his stocky legs up high and proud over them, because we did it, and we did it better than our competition. I knew Daddy was proud of me; that he was proud of us.

Sirens are blaring and conversations are muddled all around me. I am frozen, helpless, a bug on the sidewalk. J tell them that I'm okay, chat I don't have any money to pay them but no one listens. They ask me what day it is, what time it is, who the president is. My chest suddenly tightens and I remember that I have to go to the bookstore. Today is the lase day for textbook refunds and if I don't go ∞ the bookstore I'll have \$350 in useless textbooks forever. This comment is ignored except for a small laugh from one of the paramedics. A neck brace is placed on me and they roll me onto my side. From chis new view, for a split second, I see a man wearing a Huntington Police Department running suit. I ask to talk to him. I tell him I'm Sheriff Wolfe's daughter, and that I need my dad.

When J was thirteen, my best non-equine friend Beth brought New Boyfriend with her, during one of her rare visits to the barn. Bech always referred to him with such phrases ljke "Me and New Boyfriend are going ∞ the movies, so J can't hang out," or "Me and New Boyfriend are going to make out in the woods, so I can't spend the night." She always srud I couldn't understand. She srud I wasn't mature enough like her.

On this day, Beth walked over to where my dad and I

Etc...

Angela Hunt

were cleaning our stalls and said that Chip still looked like a horse. Her boyfriend called her stupid and said that's because Chip was a horse. He spic into Chip's stall, barely missing my boor.

"Duh, I know that," Beth said, tossing her brown hair ar him. She cold me that she couldn't come spend the night at my house tonight because she had to watch a basketball game with New Boyfriend. She knew I hated char kind of thing.

I hated rhe way Beth talked to me, and I despised rhe fact that she was always embarrassed by my funny boots, my tight breeches and the horse smell that never seemed to leave me. I once cold her I wanted to make that smell into a perfume. She responded that boys would never like me.

After they left, my dad put the pitchfork to the side and looked at me seriously. He asked me if I liked boys. I cold him of course not, char boys are stupid and char I would never like boys. But the problem was that part of me was afraid that maybe I hated chem so much because deep down I knew I wasn't cool, because they called me "hooter-less" and Beth "hoorers." And because they would never like me.

"I hope you never like boys," Dad cold me.

"Dad, I already cold you. Boys are stupid, okay? Geeze."

As the paramedics work on me, getting me ready for transport, the man in the HPD running suit comes over to me. He asks me what daughter I am. I don't understand. He says that the Sheriff told him that all of his daughters are either in school or out of state. He says that none of his daughters should be downtown right now.

I realize that he's forgotten that I've been a graduate student at Marshall University for three years now, and that I moved back home to West Virginia four years ago. Because I don't have a mane and tale, I'm just too hard to keep track of.

I don't tell any of this to the man in the running suit. In-

Etc...

Getting Back ill the Saddle

stead J say, "Angela. My name is Angela. I'm his oldest daughter." I feel my eyes close and my chest clench.

The paramedics inform me that they are going to move me now. They lift the stretcher up and roll me backwards. I am restrained, and it is almost impossible to look anywhere except up. I can't stop shivering and J can't understand why I'm the only one shaking. As the doors open behind me, I hear my mother's voice. I strain to see where it is coming from. As I am rolled back into the ambulance I catch a quick glimpse of her back. The girl who hit me with her truck is hugging my mom, burying her face in my mother's hair. I wonder how my Mother got here so fast, and why my father isn't here yet. The doors slam shut and my mother disappears.

When I was fourteen, I competed in the United States Pony Club National Championships. Once again, Chip and I were an odd sight among so many expensive horses and daughters, but we were used to it by now. We had qualified to compete in dressage, where horse and rider must work together in perfect harmony to complete different formations at various gaits in the dressage arena. Even though that was our least favorite event, of the three stages of combined training, Chip and J were determined to make the most of it. Although we tried our best, it wasn't enough. We placed tenth. We were losers and I was a sore loser. When I started to cry, Dad told me it was okay, but I yelled at him, "Just let me cry. Winners can't cry, but I'm not a winner, okay?"

I was angry, and I took it out on him, blaming my loss on the fact that every other rider had a dressage saddle, and I competed in my jumping saddle, because my parents were too poor to buy me two saddles. Dad sighed and promised me that one day, I, too would have a dressage saddle. We loaded Chip into the horse trailer in the rain, and made our way back to West Virginia in silence. During the drive, I wondered if all of this really mattered

Etc...

Angela Hunt

as much as we always thought it djd.

The paramedic who is riding with me in the ambulance is named Darrell. He makes small talk, trying to keep my mind off of the fact that he is cutting my jacket off to make room for needles. He starts to insert a large needle and tells me that I can scream, I'm just not allowed to bite. I tell him that I've fallen off a lac of horses, and not to worry; I can take the pain. At least I hope I can take the pain.

"You ride horses, huh?" he asks, taping something to my arm.

"Noc as much as I used to. I don't really have time anymore. My dad, he still rides some, though. He's like the last Sheriff who still rides a horse."

He asks if my dad is the one who ran for U.S. Congress, who had the horse on his campaign posters.

"Yeah, that's my dad, all right," I answer, crying to smile at Darrell, the pain sinking in. I start to trunk chat falling off horses might be a lot better than getting hit by a truck.

When I was fifteen, Chip and I competed in a Team Challenge at the Kentucky Horse Park, and at thls competition, we moved up a level in difficulty. The jumps seemed as big as Chip, but we made it over the twenty six cross country obstacles, and every stadium jump, racking up a lot of penalties in the process. Even so, I was pretty pleased with my little mule pony, and hoped I wasn't such a sore loser anymore.

However, my coach, Pam, looked like she was having a brain hemorrhage when she found ouc. I was told that I was nor a committed rider, and that I had ruined the team's chances and char was that. I was done. Looking back, I thjnk it would be safe to say that Pam could probably win an award for being the sorest loser.

It was during thjs year that I broke the promise I had made

Etc ...

Gelling Back in the Saddle

to my dad. I started to like boys. My new boyfriend Aaron had come with us to the competition, much to my father's dismay, and Aaron watched while I jumped up and down and then threw my sixth place team ribbon in the trash. I hated losing.

Aaron told me that none of this really mattered, that most people didn't even know what this sport was. I had never thought of it in that way, but he was right. Most of what people knew about the sport came from the Christopher Reeves incident. He was a committed rider and look where that got him.

My dad reminded me that there was always next year; that training in Pam's indoor arena over the winter would be good for both of us. Still angry and upset with the whole ordeal, I told him that maybe I had more important things to do now and that I would never be good enough, and that he was just going to have to deal with it.

The ambulance doors open and I see my mom, frazzled and with red, poofy eyes. She smiles and tells me she's so glad I'm alive. The paramedics push me into the hospital, and I ask if dad is coming, but before she can respond they rush me into the trauma room. Bright lights blind me and my shivering is intensified by the fact that my clothes are being cut and stripped from my body. I try to calm myself, to make myself focus on counting, but I can't stop shaking. I can't control my body. My fingers, my toes, my whole body tingles, like I fell asleep in a locked deep freezer.

When I was sixteen, I inherited my Aunt Jody's blue 1978 Monte Carlo, got my first kiss, and the dressage saddle, which Dad was so excited about. I told him that I didn't compete anymore and I wouldn't really be using it. Dad had kept his promise and I think I broke his heart when I told him that. Soon, my mother had to become the mouthpiece for my father. I would receive messages like: "Your father doesn't want boys in your room," or "Your

Etc...

Angela Hunt

father wants you to change the oil in your car," or perhaps the most frequent statement: "Your father wants you to know that Mr. Chips misses you."

They push me into a new room, and I feel confused, like my brain is jumbled, just like the time I fell off of Fancy. I don't know what they are doing, but I try to make myself trust them. I am rolled onto the CT scanner, shaking violently throughout the move. They tell me that I need to be completely still. This makes me cry. I look up at the Rower border and try to count the Rowers, but as the machine moves me back, I lose sight of them. I try to remind myself that I've been trained to get back into the saddle, that I can handle this.

At seventeen I moved away from home to study theatre. Although I had been performing in community theatre productions with my mother and siblings my entire life, and had gotten more involved in theatre after I stopped horseback riding, it was hard for my dad to understand. My mom continued her job of being the spokesperson for my dad, except now it was over the phone. Every day she would tell me that Dad wanted me to know that Mr. Chips missed me. This was the only way my dad communicated with me.

"Tell Dad I miss Mr. Chips, too," I would respond.

A few years later, when my boyfriend Adam and I decided we were going to get married, we flew to West Virginia so he could ask dad for my hand in marriage. Adam thought that was a little old fashioned, but I told him that my Dad was a little old fashioned, and a little odd, and if I ever wanted to have a relationship with my dad again, he had to do this. I think Adam was terrified. He would remind me that my dad was a sheriff, and a sheriff with guns. I told him that Dad never said much, so he didn't need to worry.

Etc...

Gelling Back in the Saddle

In the end, Dad simply wanted to know how Adam was going to support me, he informed Adam that I was a very head-strong girl, and asked Adam if he Liked horses.

"Sure. Doesn't everyone Like horses?" Adam asked.

"Angela loves horses. And she loves Mr. Chips. Remember that," Dad said.

Mom continued her job as a mouthpiece for live years. She would always end each conversation with: "Dad wants you to know that Mr. Chips misses you."

When I became pregnant with my first son, my husband and I decided to move back to West Virginia, so that I could have the same midwife that helped my parents when I was born. My son William was born in my parents' bedroom, the same room where I had come into the world. It was almost as if everything was the same as it had been on my birth day, except that Dad wasn't there. For some, this wouldn't be very odd. Most men don't want to be around births. But my dad had delivered all of us at home, had helped a wide assortment of animals be born, and even delivered the youngest son of Helen Freeman, Huntington Outdoor Theatre's director. (This was a freak occurrence.) Mom told me that Dad was just too scared to be in the house when this all happened. I didn't know if I believed her.

I did know that I felt Like I had lost my father. I felt Like any connection we once held had been stomped out by me, along with that sixth place team ribbon. I knew that I had let him down, that I had destroyed all of the dreams that he had had for me. But I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if there was anything I could do. The only language my dad and I had ever known with one another was horse language, and I wasn't very fluent anymore.

A nurse rolls me back into the trauma room, where my husband Adam, my mother, and my brother John are waiting.

Etc...

Angela Hunt

They stand by my bed and Adam holds my hand while John takes pictures for his Myspace site. He tells me that I am his friends' new hero, that they've never known anyone who got hit by a truck. He thinks it's awesome. This makes my mom cry. I ask her where Dad is. I don't see him anywhere. She tells me that he's sitting over in the corner of the room, but I still can't see him. I cry out for him.

"Daddy," I say, reaching out for him, tears escaping from my eyes. "Daddy."

He comes over to my side. He takes my hand and wipes away my tears. He tells me that for a minute they thought I was gone. I feel like I lost him a long time ago, but I don't tell him that. Instead I tell him how I tried to be brave, how I was scared, but I made myself count, just like he taught me. He pats me on my head like I'm eight again, and tells me I'm going to be okay.

When I am released from the hospital, my dad pushes me down the hall of St. Mary's Hospital in a wheelchair, and I catch a glimpse of what it could've been like for me: blood pouring out, bones jutting out of the skin, death just around the corner. I guess you never can tell what's going to happen. Dad pushes me toward the exit and the doors open up before us.

The first thing I do when I get home is hobble over to my bedroom closet. Within this closet is a cardboard box filled with horse show ribbons, programs from musicals and ballet recitals, and an assortment of costumes and pictures. At the bottom of this box is a 4x6 picture, taken by a horse show photographer back in 1996. In the picture, Dad is leading Chip by the reins, and I am holding my riding helmet and the video camera my dad used to take to all of my competitions. We are both looking at Mr. Chips, sweaty and lathered from the cross-country jumping run. Our heads are at the exact same angle, with the same expression on our faces. We knew we had won. I take this picture, place it in a frame,

Etc...

Getting Back in the Saddle

and put it on my bedroom dresser.

A few days later I read the police report. Included is a drawing done in pen and almost to scale, by the policewoman who was on the scene. Hal Greer and 5th Avenue are drawn in with small dash marks, and there is a little black truck across the crosswalk. Lying in front of this very tiny truck is an even tinier stick person, arms and legs outstretched at somewhat awkward angles. Looking at this picture, I realize that it took life hitting me with a truck to make me pay attention, to make me push the pride away, count to ten, and breathe. I cut this picture out and put in a frame. I take it over to my dresser and put it beside the picture of my dad, Mr. Chips and me. Every morning when I wake up I see these pictures. They remind me of what I could have lost, and what could have been.

My dad still talks about changing the oil in the car, and about how Mr. Chips misses me and loves me, but now he tells me himself, instead of my mother, and I'm finally okay with that. It's just the way my dad communicates with me. My dad isn't normal, but my dad is one of the last squeaky clean sheriffs in our country, and probably the last who still rides around on a horse. Someday, once the snow melts and my bruises fade, I know my dad and I will ride off into the sunset together, because now I remember how to get back in the saddle.

Etc...

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Huntington by Night

Dr. Rev. Chase Henderson, MD, DD

How To Gee chat Swimsuit Bod by Summer.

(As whispered to me on the darkest of nights by the maddening voices from beyond the spheres.)

Thank you for joining me once again. I am here in my study sipping absinthe and tenderly watching a font of hellish power as it pours through my fireplace. I grin, overlooking the city from my zeppelin-vantage point. It is here that I retire to write or pursue my studies most arcane in between shifts of shagging interns at Arkham Asylum. Audible sigh, a doctor's work is never done.

Now it has been some time since the New Year, and I'm sure you started walking everyday. Maybe lifting weights? Perhaps dipped into bulimia? And I am almost certain that you are not satisfied with the results. The reasons are two-fold. The first being that you are a slave to your ego and will never truly be happy. The second and foremost reason is that being overweight is not a direct result of poor eating and health habits. It's not your fault.

Let me explain. While our basic needs appear to be oxygen, food, and drink, that is in fact far from the truth. Or at least far from the whole story. You see, we survive on various elements unseen that reside in our bodies long after we have passed away. This is the reason behind the tradition of 'witch funneling' by various occult groups in the region. These funnels are placed in the graveyards to collect these elements as they are exhaled from the dead.

But I've gone off crack. Our air is polluted, yes, but not entirely in the way that you think. Invisible to us are the demons, Gods, Pixies, and other unsoundly spirits from the depths of the Earth that feed on these exhalations. They feed on it and their

Etc. ..

Chase Henderson

waste refreshes our spiritual atmosphere again in such a way that resembles trees recycling oxygen. Now, this is usually a beneficial symbiotic relationship. However, certain individual's auras are a delicacy. You see, you are not obese as much as you are bloated with demons.

Now, the cure is exercise. Western medicine has gotten the name right, but not the correct definition. It's not exercise as in working out, but exercise as in the medieval rites to drive out the demons. Fasting, intense prayer, self-Aogging, and cleansing rituals are all well and good, but this is America in the Low. Which also happens to be when problems are solved in America. Now.

With good old American know-how and ignoring all future consequences I've distilled these medieval concepts and rituals into fine liquors. Potent liquors that will quickly get you krunk with knowledge and power, but you have to drink them by the shot. Or you'll die. Of knowledge poisoning and brain failure, because that's just how potent my informative brews are!

Now here are some fine tips for getting fit by this summer.

- Scop sleeping - These demons enter your body in your sleep, so logically if you are not asleep they can't creep into your dreams and gestate. When you finally do go to sleep you'll be too tired to dream. Careful, though: more than five days without sleep causes permanent mental damage, which is like candy to demons.

- Spin three times before entering any building- Spinning confuses demons, because it reminds them of cops, which we all know Our Lord used to distract the Fallen Angels. By the time they got back to Heaven, he had already changed the locks. Their buzz was so harshed that they were transformed into the invisible, screaming horrors that hate all life.

- High sodium diet - Sea salt cleanses areas of tainted elements. So a diet of only sea salt will purge all demonic infestations and prevent new ones. Drinking eight glasses of water a day allows the body to purge these demons faster. For larger demon concen-

Etc...

Hillingoll W Night

trations, double this dose. To save even more time drink sixteen glasses of sea water a day.

•Seconds at communion - If you're Catholic always be sure to get seconds at communion. The body and the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is a wonderful source of protein and demon killing salts. If you're not Catholic just go to the nearest Catholic Church, and then treat the communion as a buffet. There is nothing they love more. You'll need all those Christ-nutrients once you've been assigned as a concubine to a Goetic King once you're burning in hell.

•If you're plagued by the special insulin stealing sprites known as diabeecus - then you need to purchase a copy of The Maker's Diet, but reading it or following it is not required. Simply plaster the copy into your wall like I'm sure you're already doing with a copy of the Holy Bible and a bottle of Jack Daniels. The diabeerus will be compelled to read it and follow the diet, only to repeat the cycle over and over again each time it falls off the fat wagon. However, it will never plague you again. Follow these tips and soon you'll be fit enough to bugger horses like Daniel Radcakes in the upcoming adaptation of Equus.

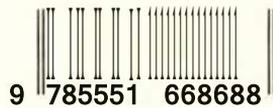
Dr. Chase Henderson currently works as the Chief of Medicine at Arkham Asylum, the position once held by his mentor Dr. Hubert West. There *his* responsibilities include playing God, reanimating the dead, and boinking interns as per his Hippocratic Oath. He was recently upgraded to a Super Scientologist after his Operating Thecan level broke the one million mark. He was hailed as a hero for finally brining Xenu to justice with his cane-sword and pathological lying.

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