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Callie Compton

On Treasure Hunting

Mine are only spoken words
not meant without dim meanings known
for eighteen youthful years can’t understand.

Under stagnant water I
am free, a barely bottled fish
with precious scales inside a tiny tub.

Damp and new (but thrown out soon)
is this fair female flesh that with
a child has only burdened, never born.

See me stretched supine, aglow,
and fresh to bathe in age’s wear
as heartbeats pulse faint heat from creasing skin.

But that undefeated pump,
a beating vessel, merely sails
in shallow harbors, still, an anchor missed.

And it wants from looming banks
a greater glimpse of future shores;
for others, then, I’ll drown my rarest gold.

Thus I hear that human youth
soon buries prime allotted time
to die with worthless maps
but wondrous dimes.
It occurred to me that plants look a lot like sea coral. And so I imagined that they are, only they exist in a much thinner kind of water, and this thin water is called air. They look terrible and amazing, crooked skeletal hands when their name is “coral” instead of tree. Look.

I was at Centennial Park in central Nashville, Tennessee. There is a replica of the Grecian Parthenon in the middle of this park. Our attempt to—what?—import grandeur? What will aliens or archaeologists think when they dig up a replica of the Parthenon removed some yadda yadda miles around the globe? Did the Nashvillian people worship the Grecian deities? No, they just made country music. And watched birds bless the Parthenon. So I walked past the Parthenon and stopped by a tree.

Picture this: five square feet. A grass square, a circle of bare dirt in the center, and a gross tree blob growing up out of the middle. You can also see a little rock in this picture. And you can see your foot, in an artificial package made of leather, string and plastic that covers feet that our kind call “sneakers.” This picture is your view of all life on earth.

Are you seeing this coral growing in the air-water? It is alien. It is snake-like. It looks like a tumor. Or like brain nerves, maybe blood veins of God. What kind of life grows in such globby, skeletal ways? It is reaching up towards the sun.

About the sun, this burning thing. It’s just a thing, burning. And it exists “up,” what we’ve named “the sky” or “the heavens.” Good heavens is right. You cannot look at the Burning Thing because it is so bright it will burn your eyes’ retinas to shriveling ruined black bits inside your skull. It is only because of this burning Burner that the tree-coral reaches, that you can see anything at all, that the chunk of matter you’re standing on (we called it “earth”) has Life things growing on it, feeding off each other. It is a willing foundation to microbacteria, platypi, my dog Yona, your college roommate. Hitler. Barney. Such life is supported by the Burning.

Let’s talk about dirt. What is there? Mostly it’s just earth-rock-matter ground up really finely. Why is the earth made of tons of little fragments? Things like tree-coral can live in the dirt bits. This dirt is like some creatures’ water, or air, and it is their closed habitat, like their entire universe. These creatures are relatively very small, and they are building relatively very small dirt civilizations that we will never encounter.
Other creatures like tree-coral collect sustenance from the dirt habitat and then sprout up into the air-water habitat. And I think that just like tree-coral starts in one habitat and punctures the ground, up into another, that humans begin as a seed in the world and grow up into another dimension called enlightenment, towards a different Burning thing.

It’s possible to just scoop up handfuls of the top fragmented part of our earth, but it gets harder and denser towards its middle, like human ghosts. They are fuzzy around the outside and easy to scoop up small parts of with “how are you?” but deeper down—like “who are you?”—a self is much more densely packed, and undiscovered and has ruins of ancient civilizations and bones of dinosaurs and really profitable oil in it. More about dinosaurs later.

So we name these things living in dirt Microbes and they are proof that small things live. And they live in dirt. They might be conscious, they might be downright angsty and praying and making art at a microbial level or in another dimension, but we don’t see it because who knows why? Because our eyes are accustomed to seeing what we expect to see, and we don’t expect to see smaller life forms’ art in the air(water) nor in the dirt.

Let’s talk about rocks. Rocks are hard, and they are minerals? So we call them. Animals eat minerals—Wheaties have iron in them. Rocks are not smart as far as we know and so are less interesting than smart things, although we gave three names to them: Metamorphic. Sedimentary. Igneous. These names mean: dirt made, air-water made, fire made. Rocks are probably smarter than us, and we don’t know it yet.

Then there’s your foot in the corner. It is not “aware” but you are, and you are aware that that foot is you. It is packaged with a symbol on it that is named after a Grecian god. This closed pair of arcs has been named a “swoosh” and “Nike,” and humans tell each other it is worth very much work and money to be allowed to wear items that have swooshes on them. Imported Grecian gods make a lot of money in America. North America.

Imagine that the air is a thin kind of water for tree coral to live in. There are waves in water-water, and they are called “wind” in air-water. Let’s call outer space the heavens, human land middle-earth, and water the depths. Ancient Jewish humans thought that demons came from Hell down in the depths of water. But as we’ll discover, they were wrong. Heaven is down.

What would it be like if life in the water Heavens evolved as it has on land in middle-earth? Right now we’ve tested dolphins’ smarts by human standards. What if in yadda yadda centuries creatures with even more consciousness have evolved from dolphins and they float around dinner tables at water-land holidays and argue about their origins and uncle so-and-so says, “You mean to say my great-great-great-grandfather was a DOLPHIN? A flubbery finned fishable? I don’t think so.” But he’d be wrong. Uncles.

And whales that we see in our human (R.I.P.) age will be like dinosaurs of the future. Giant squids will be their pterodactyls and the great white whale is T-Rex and the hammerhead is a stegosaurus or maybe triceratops. And if they discover and translate humanoid (R.I.P.) texts, then I hope they find Moby
Dick and laugh and love it and worship T-Rexes and name their children Queequeg. They know not Judas, but Ahab.

These creatures wouldn’t dream of flying, like humans (R.I.P.). Instead they yearn to feel the gravity of things, to be grounded and walk the depths. Or maybe they would be permanently floating where water and air meet—so air would be their version of ground—and the darkest deep with those light-bulb fish would be like their outer space, and the light-bulb fish the stars. (So, if fish come up from water to inhale air, and air is their version of ground—what if creatures that flew up in the air had to “come down for dirt” and would land and inhale big piles of it? And both have falling dreams.) And since water carries sound in its heft water-ites would speak, probably telepathically.

Telepathic dolphin offspring dream down, not up, and our future is into the depths, not into the infinite abyss of space, toward Mother Ocean, into the volcanic melting heart of things, rather than the crystalline sea of the heavens and the many loony rocks of the universe’s infinite silence. The nature of the world is to diminish, and of the heavens, to expand. Instead of being super revealed out of the world, consciousness is rooting itself inward, swallowed by the dark maw. Lady Entropy spiraling the tower dressed in a flood.

Now we teach the Atlantis myth to our children and their children for we are flooded and downward and in. We are drowned, subsumed and forgotten. Plato wrote it. NASA is a refrain into the absurd and dolphins are psychic and Life has form in middle earth where trees look more like us than we ourselves.
Nina Adel

Girl

While trailing without intention down the residential street, whose corner foursquare was his home, Christopher passed his classmate Anna’s house, in front of which was a startlingly quiet ambulance. Her father and two of the sisters stood stricken on the porch, resembling black, naked, gnarled winter trees above two uniformed men carrying a metal stretcher down the stairs. Anna was there, too, off to one side, fluid, suspended in mid-air, flinching at the sight of him—of Christopher—passing while gaping unconsciously. But she took it for sneering.

For nearly fifteen years, his sleep was disturbed more than sporadically by the recollection of the father, the sisters, of Anna, just before her mother’s sudden death came real to her that day on the porch; of Anna in the dirt in the schoolyard hours before, with Christopher’s own spit in her hair, her knees and face ground into the dust, his taunting words in her ear. In his dreams, he tried to say he wouldn’t have done it if he’d known what was in store. He would’ve left her alone. But they were the kind of frustration dreams in which the words are bubbling at the base of the tongue, not quite choking you, on the verge of escape, but unable to make the final ascent and be spoken. The dreams kept coming back, the words never rising, never reaching the bereft, transparent Anna.

“Chris,” his wife began one day, breaking through his glassy-eyed atmosphere—for he was a man now, with a well-furnished apartment and a baby soon to be born. “Couldn’t we think of a few more names? We’ve only got six weeks, and all we’ve got are these boys’ names. What if it’s a girl? We should just find out already…” but Christopher put up his hand sharply, stopping her mid-sentence, panicked inside, though she was unaware of this. The names on the list were only boys’ names, for Christopher did not want a daughter, did not want a reminder of that man and his house of girls, of the one he’d shoved in the dust and taunted. Yet his wife did not know this, had never been let in on that history, so she thought it was a silly superstition or some such thing that kept him from expanding the list of baby names. He found he couldn’t speak of it at all and groped pallidly for a different topic.

When the baby was born a few weeks later, slightly premature but otherwise healthy, it was a boy, and Christopher opened himself to the release he’d thought this fact would finally bring. They named him Paul, a name chosen by Christopher for its brevity and the sense of strength a mere four letters would convey; for its quickly-spoken syllable and inescapable final L, for the
trap it set for the tongue. Paul. There would only be Paul. He did not yet know how he would convince his wife, who was resting now, elated, but Christopher was certain he would never again take up the list of names, never risk facing the wet, startled eyes of a young girl—a daughter.
A Good Fire

It was a crisp cold Saturday afternoon as I drove down River Road, going to the house where my father lived near Ashland City. I had to keep a sharp eye out so I wouldn’t miss the turn onto the rutted gravel driveway.

I pulled up to the front of the house and was met at the door by May, my dad’s second wife. As she led me through the living room I noticed my dad’s portable oxygen bottle standing next to the recliner where he slept at night. I asked May about it.

“Ed wanted to sit by the fire in the den and he can’t have the bottle around open flame. You know how he likes a good fire. Keep an eye on him and let me know if his breathing gets worse.”

I stepped down into the den. Dad was sitting in a recliner, tilted back about forty-five degrees. He would get so much fluid in his lungs that he had to sit at that angle for comfort; he could no longer lay flat on his back, either, so he had to sleep at that angle, too. He was bundled up in his favorite red plaid flannel robe and had a quilt draped across his legs.

“Hey, Old Man, how’re you doing?”

“Well, Old Son, I’m doing about as well as can be expected. May’s girls and her grandkids were here for Thanksgiving and it took me all day yesterday to recuperate. How was your Thanksgiving?”

“It was o.k. You know how I am about Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, I remember all the times I had to drive all over creation looking for you because you would slip out between turkey and dessert!”

“Yeah, well, it’s over for another year. Now I just have to survive the Christmas rush at the bookstore. At least getting ready for finals helps keep my mind off of work.”

While we were talking I had been giving Dad a good looking over. Since he was too frail now to come into Nashville, I saw him only once a month if I was lucky. He did not look good. The cardiopulmonary problems that had plagued him the past fifteen years were wearing him out. His medications had taken away any sense of taste or appetite, so he had stopped eating and had lost a lot of weight. He was always a slender man, so he could ill afford the loss and was looking rather wizened. The fluid buildup in his lungs kept him from getting enough oxygen and his complexion was an ashy gray. Having a macabre sense of humor, he would joke about looking pretty good for an eighty-year-old man; the only problem was he was sixty-three. Too many years of stress, a two pack a day habit and working around the furnaces at the Ford Glass Plant had taken their toll.
His face lit up when I mentioned school. “I’m really glad you decided to go back to school and finish that degree. I always felt it was partly my fault that you didn’t go back to Hawai’i to finish.” “No, Dad, none of that was your fault. I had some issues about my life in Hilo that kept me from returning.” “Well, if you say so. Say, put one of those logs on the fire; it’s dying down and I’m feeling the cold. You know how I love a good fire. Now, then, tell me about your classes.” “You’d probably like the one I’m taking about Southern literature. We’ve read Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter and Walker Percy. There are two books I’ll loan you when I finish exams. One is *The Optimist’s Daughter* by Eudora Welty and the other is *Wise Blood* by Flannery O’Connor. I like them both for very different reasons. I’ve read a lot of their short stories, too.” “What are they like?” “Well, the best way to describe them is that Welty writes about Mom’s family and O’Connor writes about your family.” He laughed for a moment, and then he started coughing. Once he got his breath back, he said, “Well, I always said some of my family was like a Tennessee Williams play; I guess this O’Connor person is just as strange!” “Yeah, you could say that.” We spent the rest of the afternoon talking about this and that. Music was the one area where we had the most common ground. When I was a kid Dad introduced me to jazz (both hot and cool), the blues, swing, and big band. He would let me chose the radio station in the car whenever we went somewhere; he would listen to the rock music and start telling me what the influences were on it; he also taught me to pick out different people playing and listen to their style, so I could later identify them on other records. Every so often, in the course of the afternoon, he would have me throw more wood on the fire. Finally, I could tell by the way May had started hovering in the doorway that I should take off and let him get some rest. I leaned over his chair to shake hands, placing my left hand on his shoulder; as we shook hands, I gave his shoulder a little squeeze. We looked into each other’s eyes. For the merest second, for a real Augenblick, fear, and maybe sorrow, flashed in his eyes. “See you soon, Old Man,” I lied. “Yeah, see you soon,” he lied back. As May walked me through the living room toward the front door, I noticed a sign hanging on the back of the recliner. It was a “No Resuscitation” order. I looked at May. She said, “It’s what he wants.” Outside, I stood by my car for several minutes. Looking up into the cold night sky, the stars were so bright it hurt to look at them; at least I think that’s why my eyes were watering. I looked back toward the house, at the column of smoke rising from the chimney. He liked a good fire.
Codlata

Who needs the world? The sleeper does. 
Where he is the night is long and lean. 
Where he is the trees tilt with ease. 
His brother dreams between two blades of grass, 
green as china berry tea. The things that sing, 
sing truth into his heart, and rise like a prayer 
or a wave that won’t expire, tides of cornflower blue 
like a query of heaven. 
Why do you look back? 
Why do you resist when to be born is to be chosen? 
He finds a desire of certain lights to be retreating, 
like the desire of silence to be consuming, 
his desire to be found was fathered by a desire 
to be missing. And his mother’s face is a face 
like the moon, and shines with calamity and light. 
So goes the world, where night 
is exiled to the pages of books. 
What could he do but fall north again, 
if falling north is ascension, a vertical mile, 
a quick blue flare, who brought this tide 
like a veil of wonder to his eyes?
Anseio

I want to walk with you on the red chili clay, and stand beside you straight as a Spanish Dagger. Where I am now they call it an Arkansas Toothpick. Down the emerald green road, a Kentucky Neck Blister. I want to pick a bone bouquet and offer a warm white pelvis to the relentless Sonoran sun. The sour heat—a gift of summer. Maybe they are the stars that did wrong, maybe no stars, but there is a world that sleeps inside your hand, when you touch the canvas you touch my eyes, and we slip into the other world, and it receives us like the ocotillo blooms.
Idrial

The wave from any shore
is one part things that grow broken.

The part I can’t see is where the water bends,
things that rise again.

The other part is the silence I waste,
the silence I can’t find.

But which is the Orca
hunted for the ink and the marble inside him,

And which is the statue or the inscription
lost like a voice in the wind?

And don’t forget the servitude of the tides.
Don’t forget the moon’s luminous submission,
or the things that bind us and how they shine.

Let the stars anchor themselves to a hundred
locked doors.
Let the sea remain a home that bears no real
address.

When the dark calls out who am I?
I answer not my child and wait up all night.
Ben Richardson

Walk the Land

It was Thanksgiving morning, and I was still asleep in the coarse motel bed sheets when I heard my grandmother stirring at the foot of the cot. She was quietly pulling out the honey buns, powdered doughnut holes, coffee creamer, and other breakfast staples, gently setting them on the cheap Formica table she had vigorously disinfected the night before. There was a gray light pressing at the periphery of the heavy curtains and beneath the drapes the dust-clogged heater continued to gargle and sputter out the thick, hot air that leaves a throat dry and scratchy. Peering through the slits of my sleep-closed eyes, I waited until her back was turned before sitting up in bed. The clock read 6:15; she must have lain awake for nearly an hour before rising. She turned around and spied me. “Well, good mahnin’,” she said softly and with a smile, as if to not wake the others, but within the minute my two younger brothers and grandfather were clambering out of bed as well.

My grandmother, a thin woman with short grayish hair, looked as fresh and bright in the first few minutes of her day as she ever did—a morning person if I knew one. As we crowded around the little table, she uncovered all the breakfast options, removing lids from Tupperware containers and old Christmas tins, our eyes already feasting. “Well, who wants what?” she asked, always sure to cut portions on the bigger side. I took a honey bun, two little greasy muffins, and a bowl of Raisin Bran with thick banana slices on top.

“Now, Ben,” my grandmother called to my grandfather, “why don’tcha put on some ca’toons for the boys? These boys don’t wanna be seein’ the mahnin news.” She turned to us and made a funny face that pulled the corners of her mouth down into a mocking grimace. We abandoned our breakfast on the table and the three of us leapt up onto the double beds to watch Elmer Fudd and Bugs Bunny engage in their perpetual hunt.

I finished the last bite of my blueberry muffin, went to my suitcase, and began gathering up every article of camouflage clothing I owned. My brothers did the same, eager to get outside: ball caps, jackets, long-sleeve shirts, cargo pants. We picked up our pump-action B.B. guns, loaded our pockets with little corks for ammunition, and prepared to Walk the Land. Walking the Land is a serious tradition in the Richardson family. When one Walks the Land, he does not embark on a stroll through the woods, nor does he seek rejuvenation in the solitude of wilderness. The Walk is a struggle and the Land is a cursed and gnarled stretch of timberland. There is little natural beauty left to the Land after more than a half century of sufferings: clearing,
burning, replanting, and pine bark beetles. Regardless, it endures, and it must be Walked.

“You boys be careful now; I don’t want t’ hafta splain t’ your motha if anything happens.” She spoke with the Land wrapped around her tongue.

“We will!” we promised. The three of us piled into the backseat of the Yukon and my father took the wheel with his father next to him. It was a man’s endeavor that we took upon ourselves. The leather seat, even through my long underwear and thick camo pants, was cold and stiff from waiting outside the motel all night. Silently, we coasted down the two-lane highway into the early bright, past the sporadically scattered restaurants and half-deserted shopping centers, into the vast stretches of young wood. As we passed, the trees crowded away from the roadside, their naked trunks and limbs huddled together in thick gray bundles, safe from the violent blurs across blacktop.

My grandfather broke the silence.

“Now d’ you boys understand why we Walk the Land?”

“Because we have to see how things are!” my youngest brother, Brice, offered.

My grandfather continued on. “Because this prope’ty was your gran’motha’s fatha’s prope’ty, an’ he gave the north side o’ the highway to Tyson and the south side o’ the highway to your motha.” He called our grandmother our mother, but we knew what he meant. “An’ we need to be faithful stewa’ds and check on the prope’ty t’ make sure there ain’t tennybody cuttin’ down ou’ trees without ou’ pe’mission.”

“Can I shoot the 4-10?” I asked.

“I wanna shoot the 4-10, too!” shouted Brice.

“We’ll shoot some guns after we Walk the Land,” my father answered.

Speeding down Highway 69 South, the Alabama state sign for “Myrtlewood right” suddenly appeared. As warm as I was in the Yukon, I couldn’t wait to jump out into the bitter cold of the woods. My father turned right onto 114 West towards Myrtlewood, and my grandfather began estimating property lines. In the backseat, we strained our eyes like sentinels, alert and ready for the dirt road that entered the Land. “There it is!” my brother Schuyler suddenly shouted. We peeled off the two-lane highway and felt the Yukon in its slow, gravelly rumble over the uneven red clay. My father parked the car in front of the entrance, took the keys from his father, and walked up to the chained gate. I could feel the chill of the Land rush in through the open driver’s door, pulsing with the needling alarm that sang out from the dashboard. It wrapped around my legs and climbed over my knee-high rubber boots, seeping all the way down to my toes, penetrating my wool socks. He swung the gate out so that the long aluminum arm was parallel with the road, the chain links dangling and rattling at the end. We ventured into the Land.

Even with the four-wheel drive we had to move slowly, my father wrestling the steering wheel to keep on the high parts of the dirt road. In the eyes of the vultures soaring high above, the road must have looked like a dried out floodplain, sinuous twists and sudden switchbacks in the water-curved ruts.
that tunneled across one another. Portions of the road were washed out, and still pits of mud and pine needles, a thick, pasty loam, embanked the edges.

“Up yonda’s where the wash women use’ t’ live,” my grandfather told us. The Yukon crawled up to the fork in the road before the washwomen’s house, and we all spilled out of the backseat.

In our entrance, the tires had peeled the skin right off the Land, mixing the rich smell of earth with the gray cold to emit a pungent scent. A hundred yards up the road lay the wasteland. When God cursed the Land on account of Adam’s sin, His arm certainly reached our plot. But perhaps it’s not a direct curse on the Land itself as much as it is a curse on man and his psyche, a warping of what ought to be his natural desire to thrive, to live freely; perhaps the curse polarized man from God in creating false notions of control and ownership and domestication. Perhaps the curse blinded man from seeing nature as the artistry of the Creator, a physical manifestation of the Divine; perhaps the curse has rendered man’s vision warped in such a way that nature is to be feared, because, to him, it exudes qualities of a wrathful, Edwardian God and can only be accepted under the most stringent means of regulation and domestication. Perhaps God didn’t curse the Land after all; perhaps man, in his confusion and constant attempts at improving the quality of his life, cursed the Land himself. Perhaps God, in his omniscience, didn’t have to curse the Land, but allowed man to bring about his own ruin as just punishment against Adam and all his descendants.

If this is the curse both man and the Land have fallen under, I still remained young and naïve. When I looked across the scarred scrubland that swooped down to young pine timberland, I couldn’t see the curse or understand how fear had driven man to make futile attempts at domestication. When I looked at the Land, the hellish unhealed scar, I still saw beauty. I wouldn’t have known to call it beauty then, but I could see the wild animal tracks pressed deep in mud, the steep rise and fall of the earth to sky, and the crowded thickets and acres of towering, thin longleaf pines that rocketed out of the Land. When I looked upon them I felt alive. I was enraptured by the idea that there were still isolated corners of the earth with ample room for a free existence. I didn’t know about the curse.

My grandfather was eager to Walk the Land: “Well, David,” he spoke, drawing my father’s name out into the air like a ribbon, “I’ll s’pose we start headin’ up t’ wards the ridge and faller these tracks right here, y’ imagine?”

We began the climb through the brambles and briars, picking the burrs off our camouflage pants along the way. With every ascending step I sucked the Land into my lungs and watched its frigid smoke pour out of my mouth.

“Look at me, I’m smoking!” I grabbed Schuyler’s arm and blew a breath of the Land through pursed lips.

“I can do more, watch!” he said as he threw back his head and let out a long, mushroom cloud into the air.

“Now ya boys need to he’ p me look out fo’ the prope’ ty lines, ya heah?” my grandfather called up to us. I couldn’t see the purpose of searching for
property lines when they had always been there and would always remain, but it was a part of the Walk and it was mandated by the Land, mandated by man. When we came to the top of the ridge, I looked down upon the primitive roads blazed across the bush by log trucks and machinery; I saw the jagged and frayed tree trunks that accented the Land: malignant tumors deemed worthy of only the crudest amputation; the Land was sufficiently cursed.

My grandfather caught up with us and surveyed the Land for himself. What did he see in that stretch of country? Was it the Land that he saw at all? Or were the pines merely stark, numerical figures and the barren spread of undergrowth a representation of potential, the opportunity for wealth? And if it was wealth that he saw, it was not his own wealth, for the trees would not mature in his lifetime. Maybe he saw the subjugation of the Land as the deliverance of his posterity, deliverance from a fear of the Land.

“Well, whadda ya say, guy?” he asked me with a chuckle. He was on top of the ridge and there was pride in the climb, reflected in his voice, slow, short of breath. His question hung in the air as if to say, “We have toiled in the earth, grappled with the curse, and one day you will have the Land and you will lead the Walk.” I didn’t know what to say. I looked at Brice, turning over a rock with the toe of his boot, and Schuyler, scoping a squirrel or maybe nothing at all with his B.B. gun. I wasn’t sure they had anything to say either.

“Are we getting close to the property line?” I asked.

“I reckon i’s right down on the otha’ side o’ this ridge we been climbin’,” he answered, looking in the direction of forest still to be traversed. “Well, we ought t’ keep goin’. Ya motha’s fixin’ that turkey gravy an’ green bean cass’role. Hoooo, boy!” he chuckled again.

We set off down the other side of the ridge to continue our perpetual hunt. Blisters were beginning to wear on my heels as the awkward rubber boots clattered around my feet. They were a size too big, but I was told I would grow into them. Besides, this was the Walk. You don’t complain on the Walk. I turned around to see my father pulling along Brice, who was only seven. Next to me my grandfather had stopped to reacquaint himself with the compass and photocopied map. A surveyor had sketched the map for my grandfather years ago, and it served as the lone guide next to memory. Glancing from the map, to the compass, up into the timberland before him, my grandfather shifted his stance a few degrees to the right and then back to the left as he aligned his body with the compass needle. Brice and my father caught up with us.

“Well, David,” my grandfather began, “I reckon the borde’ oughta run right about ‘long here, don’tcha reckon? As best I rememb’ there was some o’ange tape on a stake in the ground…. I do believe I got ou’ co-ordinates correc’ly.” His puzzled face wore a grimace behind the large spectacles, his mouth slightly open as his forefinger repeated our tracings along the map. In broad daylight the periphery of the Land eluded him. Maybe the Land didn’t know about the Walk. As we stood there quietly, lying in wait like
anxious predators, the stillness of the earth eerily crept about us. Our roles were reversed without consent, smoked out of our own den, the hunters becoming the hunted.

“Dad, why don’t we try and find the train tracks instead?” my father suggested. Reluctantly, my grandfather lowered the map in his hands and turned at a right angle to begin a new hunt for the rails that marked another main border. He and my father took the lead. After several hundred yards, lagging behind with my brothers, my nose was stiffly frozen and my feet were chilled numb; the Land was pushing us away.

“I’m tired,” Brice whined. “I want to go to Myrtlewood and ride the four-wheelers.” He was too young to understand the solemnity of the Walk, the unspoken rule against complaining. I looked at Schuyler, who was ten and beginning to understand. As I watched him shuffle through the leaves with his eyes to the ground, it was evident he was tiring as well. I held my silence, but my feet longed for rest.

“Dad!” I called ahead, “Dad! Are the tracks out there? Can you see ‘em? Have we found ‘em yet?” My father turned around to face me.

“Yeah, we’re pretty sure they’re just out there,” he called back at us. He looked ahead, desperate to catch a gleam of the gunmetal gray rails. He turned back around. “We can’t see ’em, but we’re pretty sure. It makes sense on the map.”

When my brothers and I caught up with them, none of us could see the railroad tracks. Beneath the pine-cast penumbra, the thickest brush of the Land crawled before us. It twisted out of the earth, pulling shrubs, vines, and dense pockets of softwoods down into its foreboding web. It writhed and crawled with thorns, vehemently concealing whatever rails might snake in the far-off thickets.

Surely, the Land would choke us slowly.

“Well, this is good,” my grandfather said, his eyes downcast, his words addressing no one. The four of us lingered behind him in the ashen air, pluming smoky wisps of breath like tired war-steeds in the blood dusk. “I reckon this is right good.”
CASSANDRA LEETE

darkning

can we please avoid all talk of love
my heart is only a muscle and it’s rather sick of
carrying on conversations which continuously exclude
those who do not participate in late night rendezvous

let us converse about common things
things in which we can all take part
everybody breathes, everybody sleeps
except the insomniacs who stay awake for weeks
everybody blinks, let’s talk about that
short intervals of darkness, of black
a reprieve from whatever picture life temporarily paints

lightning shines light unto what is unseen
while blinking removes us from the days’ current scene
be not be afraid of what you might miss
enjoy the temporary second of bliss
16 times a minute, 16 seconds without sight
blink on my friends, darkness is not reserved for the night.
From space, the Place seemed peaceful and serene. The emerald fields of sugar cane leaves swayed carelessly in the last of the night air. The mosquitoes hummed their vampire song. The crude brown shacks slept and the white mansion snored. From up here, the scene appeared serene, peaceful. But the Sun knew better, so it peaked over the horizon before it showed its entire face reluctant to begin another day of pain. There was no real rest here because there was no peace for the soul or mind. The sleep was artificial like the smiles We plastered on Our faces to live. Everyone would devour this “rest” like greedy pigs although We all knew it would not be enough. The heat rays snuck into the cracks of a shack like coolness thieves. A single ray of light hit a fragment of a strategically placed mirror and that light beamed right into the Woman’s face.

Her eyes opened. She turned from the beam and looked at her Man. She touched his newest gash. It was an accident. She cut him deeply with her machete while working in the cane fields yesterday. She winced at the image of the abysmal laceration and crimson blood running from his arm. She had fussed over it all night, but it was already scabbed over. She was both relieved and grieved. He healed too quickly from the severest of injuries. Once, while in the old country, he tried to explain to her why. He told her how he had lived in Rome, Spain, and Egypt. How he came to West Africa to find a quiet, peaceful existence. He found his peace in her. Nothing good can stay. Presently, she looked around the Shack. Everything was brown and earthen. The wooden walls and roof, dirt floors, even their folded work clothes were dingy and beige. The only glimpse of bright was the bunch of bananas in the corner. She looked over at large dark heap that was her Man.

His health allowed them to survive the nightmarish middle passage into this hell. So many people died on those vessels and many dying here. Sometimes she wished they had not. She feared they would be here for their whole lives and that was tragic. The other sad thought, if they were here, who was looking over things in the village she wondered. She had heard that much of her village was scattered about in this new land. That thought killed her insides every time and she became infuriated before the Sun was over the horizon. If our generation is lost in this hell, who will teach the next? They will be lost because we have been stolen. A hot tear ran down her sable cheek and her full lips trembled with rage.
He kissed the cheek. Her full, dark lips revealed spacey, white teeth. Without him, she would have been killed moons ago. Her anger blurs her sense sometimes. She buried her head into his neck and breathed in his heat. It revived her spirit. His hand wandered between her legs and she giggled. There is no time for love now, she told him in the old language. There is only time for work she said as she rose. Her glorious dark body was already beaded with sweat that ran a crooked path down her back along deep gashes from the whips. Souvenirs for not working hard enough. Fast enough. Long enough. She slipped on a work dress and began wrapping her long kinky braids in cloth. He stood. His own body was flawless as if he’d never endured a lash or gash. His body told a lie that only his soul could relay truthfully. He dressed in rough trousers and a torn shirt. As he secured his pants, kissed her neck, and held her in his black, muscled arms. His round, boyish eyes looked deep into her slanted, piercing ones. Dong! Dong! Dong! No time for love.

They worked together in the fields. She chopped swiftly and he gathered what she chopped. He also chopped down the stalks she missed in her haste. He was watching the back of her dress dance and missed the stalks he swung for. Shhwick! She turned just in time to see the whip lick his back and blood run from His shirt. The white man screamed something in his tongue while shaking the whip at her Man. Unaffected, he chopped the stalks and gathered the rest. She was still staring at the white man and the other slaves moved past. Her fury returned. The white man screamed at Her and walked toward Her with his whip in hand. Her Man grabbed her machete. The white man stopped when he did that. Welding both machetes, He chopped down four stalks in one violent stroke and told her, in the old language: Gather. She obeyed and They advanced. The white overseer returned to his post.

The Field was bathed in heat by now. The Sun rained down heat. The soil exhaled heat. The bodies absorbed heat and heat bounced from body to body. All bodies in your rows before the Sun can make a shadow. The cane rose from the ground trying to touch the sky. We chopped it down. The leaves sometimes sliced Our skin and sweat seeped in to sting. Emerald sugar stalks stretched up from thick roots that hid biting insects and crafty reptiles each biting uniquely, but pain was pain. Then, the songs began. Old songs that reminded Us of Home. So many tribes, but We learned each others’ songs. The stolen of her tribe were all dead now. She and her Man were the last. The white overseer wanted to stop the songs, but he was too impotent. Usually, his tribesmen tortured those who disobeyed. They were a monstrous tribe. Always screaming, yelling, fighting, violently. The white men whipped, and beat, and raped, and impaled and burned, and disfigured. But We were yet defiant. No one had been punished for songs, so the songs went on and so did the Day until there was Day no more.

In the shack, She fussed over another new cut across His back with water and cleansers and ointment. He let her. Then, he wrapped his heavy arms around her small waist and kissed Her deeply. She held his chiseled face in her delicate hands that were rough on the inside. In one motion, it seemed he had
removed her dress and his own clothing. He removed the cloth from her head and unbraided her hair. He buried His head into Her hair and breathed in her essence. It revived His spirit. The darkness would conceal their affection from the evil of this place. Now they could love. But they had made provisions. They would bear no children here. Never.

We all want to believe. Need to believe that love can conquer all and endure all. However, the hardest thing to know is that is not always true. In some times and places, love is undesirable. It can make you weak, vulnerable. It can kill you.

The next morning, the Man and Woman dressed in their customary fashion. They were oblivious to the events that would change their very existence in a matter of hours. Before they were in the field long enough to sing, the Master summoned the Woman to his house. While she was grateful for the respite from the labor, the trek from the field to the mansion was laborious as well. She hiked over the hills of tall grass, along the beach, and finally, up the steps and around to the path that lead to the rear door. By now the dirt and sweat bound her once long loose plaits to her scalp under her head wrap.

She entered the rear door to find one of her tribeswomen in tears. The woman’s scarred, caramel face showed tear trails that reflected too much pain. She tried to embrace her but the woman only spoke words close to her ear. “If you fight, he’ll make it worse for you here.” When she backed away from the woman, she noticed fresh crimson growing on her dress. She shook her head in disbelief. “But she’s just given birth,” she thought in horror.

“MARIE-EE,” the master sang out. That’s the name the Woman was given, but she never answered to it. This place was not her home. She was frozen in place. He called again. She could hear his boot steps but they were not enough to thaw her from her place. Her arms were still outstretched from the embrace she’d given her bloodied tribeswoman. He was up on her now, he was breathing on her, but she still hadn’t blinked. She saw his hand as it struck her face. She blinked finally. Unthawed, but still very, very cold.

He screamed and gestured wildly, but his words were still foreign to her. However, she had been a woman her whole life and she knew how to read the intentions of men. He, like the other whites on the Place, were wondering why she and her Man had not made children. The Blacks knew why. It was obvious to us. Now, he was making a crude comment about her husband’s sexual abilities. He grabbed her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. She’d never looked at her master up close. His skin was dewy from sweat. His blue eyes looked genuine in contrast to his dark brown hair. No facial hair. He was young, handsome and terrible.

“Don’t you see Marie. You can live in safety. All you have to do is what you already do. I’ve seen you with the Negro. I can offer you more.” He paused for impact. Nothing.

“He can’t even protect you,” he whispered.

Now, he was behind her and inhaled her scent. She turned to flee, but he caught her arm. Her tribeswoman’s words played in her ears. He grabbed her
around the waist and threw her to the ground. She scrambled up and lunged for the door again only to meet his arm around her waist again. This time he climbed on top of her. She scratched at his face and managed to kick him. She fought the woman’s words away as she fought with her master. He landed an intricate punch.

“I didn’t want to have to do this,” she heard him say as her eyes rolled and her eyelids surrendered.

She awoke to the night. Her naked body felt the soft linens. Her eyes beheld fine furniture and soft candlelight. She saw her field clothes cleaned and neatly folded on a chair. They looked as if they had been washed. Something was crawling around her shoulders. She jumped, then realized it was her own hair unbraided and in its full length and glory. She sat up in the bed and faced herself in a mirror, but she did not know herself. Her mind finally put all of the images from before the blackout with the images she was seeing now. Now her mind was racing and her body was dressing itself, then was running full speed towards her Shack.

She found her Man lying on his stomach there, bloody. He had been fatally beaten, whipped, and there were holes in his body. He was supposed to die. He looked as if he were only sleeping. She began gathering materials to clean and wrap his wounds. She could barely hold any of the cleansers. Her dark, thin hands were shaking and boiling hot tears ran heat all over her face. The wounds were already cleaned. He let out a heavy sigh and the wounds began scabbing before her eyes.

He was dreaming. He saw them together in their old village. She was pregnant and he was walking with a little boy with her eyes. He was telling them stories of his travels in other times. Then, he saw himself running to the mansion. He saw the four white men sitting on the porch descend the steps. He clenched her machete and waited for them to approach. He heard the gunshot and felt the pain in his neck. He charged towards them only to be met with more gunshots. He kept charging and felt the whips on his back. He cut the whips and a few of the white men with his machete. He felt the bullet enter his skull. Then, he saw the elder standing over him in his Shack with a bloody bullet in his hand. Then, he saw darkness.

She raced from the Shack, back around the fields she ran. The wind was whipping through her dress and her hair. Her loneliness began to creep around her and slowed her run. She began sobbing as she walked toward the beach. She felt the cool water caress her toes and she walked toward the current. She was the last of the tribe in this hell and she was no longer pure. The tips of her hair kissed the salty water. Her Man had been tortured to the point of death. She had nothing else to offer anyone. Not herself or her Man. She was standing under the water. He would have a better life without her. She knew she would love him again in another time and place. She inhaled deeply and gave up the ghost.
Men fight every fifty years or so if not sooner.
And when they fight they fight for years, if not longer.
And while they fight, other men fight over whether or not
that fighting’s right.
Whether in the wrong or in the right they stand up and get
so red in the head
that it makes the crowds cheer
and the women say the “f” word.
Before a fight the truth always falls ill, bedridden.
The guileless keep vigil at the door and the windows.
And when the fighting ends the men come back
to find their rooms swept out and their chores done,
scores of silence and sunlight.
The living and the dead get flowers two days a year.
The other days are a currency men keep for themselves.
Before they can get rich, truth is collapsing backward into a
bookcase somewhere,
and even the faithful have to hide the knives
and go in two at a time when fluffing truth’s pillows.

Men fight every fifty years or so and when they do,
saliva forms at the corner of everyone’s mouths when they
talk.
They gather around people they hardly know and look twice
at the poor.
Not a moment passes in life where man doesn’t want to
hang his head,
bury his grenades, forget his name and defend no one.
Not a moment comes along where a man isn’t looking for
something worth fighting for.

When a person’s body burns and burns
without the aid of an external source
they call that spontaneous human combustion.
No one knows why that happens either.
She Let Go of God

She let go of God in a panic.
Rubber birds barreling toward her in a frenzy
The men in white cone hats called dibs on her
    house and impaled her with a cross —
There was a victim on it, with a face contorted by
    messengerial nightmare

And she let go of God.

Then the doctor came and told her that she was
    making love to murder while she slept
and together they dined on the fetuses
And that north was really west
The wild animals defecated metallic pyramids and
    bled to death by nightfall
The stench made her scream until she was
    exhausted yet hallucinatory,
since she was terrified of the dreams that night
    brought

And she let go of God.

Two men tied her to a pew one Sunday
They made her watch as they tore each other limb
    from limb
She pretended they were laughing, a staged waltz
    of generous love
She pretended they were the only men on Earth

And she let go of God.

She let go of God so that the sky could be the only
    gospel
expansive, visible, a mystery in which the birds
    could perch
She let go of God because she could no longer recall His heartbeat (though it was her own) and she was dead in almost any way. She let go of God, ignorant of the weight of her Being. She unlearned her freedom and her world became absolute. Now she keeps her gold coins and loses her mind. She swallows them; they sleep at the depths of her commode. Gleaming. Cold.

Somewhere far a woman under greater duress gives birth to bees. And dedicates final breaths to prayer on her behalf.
GROWTH / KATIE BOATMAN / OIL ON CANVAS
As new light climbs a mountainous eastern skyline, yet another November Sunday is born into the quiet hum of street traffic and falling leaves. A few late cars roll into the grayed parking lot of a small Baptist church, revealing families grouped in threes and fours, fully clad in long dark dresses, starched shirts, and penny loafers. Within heavy wooden double doors, a congregation sits in attendance among lines of cushioned pews, bibles, and pamphlets. A few mothers quietly wrestle anxious children, and several backs straighten to gain a better view of a sacred and symbolic ritual.

The soft-faced pastor hovers at the front of the congregation gently perspiring under his vestments as he carefully dunks a young, blond head into the clear baptismal tank. Water quickly courses down the boy’s scrunched face as he is raised and blessed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. His eyes squint open only to catch the shifting, marbled colors of stained glass sunlight as the congregation welcomes one more reborn soul into its flock. As the boy is escorted back to his eager parents, he joins in a multitude of similar baptisms and rebirths this very November morning. There are still other eternal forces at work, unseen and often ignored. Just outside the painted windows of the church, trees heave softly in a passing breeze, as leaves quietly fall to patches of grass, soil, and root. At this very second, lifeless leaves fallen weeks ago are unnoticeably returning from whence they came into the moist recesses of topsoil and humus. One phase of an ornate cycle is complete. Elsewhere, life begins and ends again. Animals large and small fall to never stand again, becoming food or carrion, becoming fuel again for an eternal engine. A grandfather passes softly in his sleep. A newborn sees with eyes for the first time.

Even the smallest of molecules take part in the ritual dance. Water is drawn up from thick roots deep in the ground to slowly make its way against gravity to the tips of branches. It is here that this water will once again undergo evaporation, floating invisibly into the churning vastness of the atmosphere. Fundamental compounds of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorous continually cycle, utilizing plants, animals, bacteria, and the earth itself to flow between soil, sea, and air. Time zones away the sun is setting after a long, uneventful day, urging many to prepare for the first day of a new week. Only a few raise their eyes to pay homage to the presence of twinkling specks of distant stars alongside ancient and mysterious planets. The faithful moon silently
takes its place as it completes its circuit, pulling tides and changing phases. Faraway and unnamed stars dissipate to be replaced as new ones take shape. Eternally, the universe expands in its entropy while its motor continues silent, methodic, and intentional.

Rarely do we take heed of these, the most intricate and all-encompassing forces, brought together by a single shape: the circle. Throughout nature and within ourselves, we see it over and over again. The world and the universe itself work on its principals and its philosophy, for how else could it exist? A circle or cycle by its very nature has no beginning, and, therefore, no end. It is through orbits and seasons, processes and reverse processes that the universe works its invisible magic. Life itself, the natural world’s greatest triumph, bases its very existence on the same principal. While generations rise, reproduce, and pass away, there will always be birth and death; however, it is through the two’s culmination that life continues, precious yet enduring.

The evidence of this great universal secret can be found in the smallest building blocks of the physical world. The atom, comprising everything we know, is equally subject to the cyclical nature of the universe. An atom is made up of a dense nucleus composed of tightly packed protons and neutrons that is encircled by varying orbits of electrons. Furthermore, the name of a specific element is only reached by determining the number of protons within the nucleus of that atom. These orbiting electrons are constantly trying to achieve the lowest energy level possible by taking, giving, or sharing other electrons from other elements. Recombinant nuances can be found even deeper into the architecture of the atom. Protons and neutrons can actually be broken down into even smaller particles known as quarks, which are equally subject to forces of gravitation and electromagnetism. Truly, everything on earth is subject to the constant cycling and shifting of these ever smaller and smaller particles. How appropriate, then, is it that the foundation of existence is based upon this single template? As equally governed by orbits as the largest giants of the solar system, atoms are as much a testament to the concept of the eternal circle as the falling leaves of autumn followed by the sprite green buds of spring.

While these laws govern the smallest components of our natural world, we must also take note of some of the larger, more encompassing forces. These can be found relatively easily. For instance, the water cycle is a fundamental part of every ecosystem on the planet. Driven by the sun, water is evaporated and taken into the sky from oceans, lakes, streams, and creeks. On account of its specific weight and elemental nature, it later condenses as tiny droplets into the delicate form of a cloud where it is carried by torrents of wind. It is only when these clouds meet cool air over land that precipitation is triggered and water is returned to its initial state. It is through this unstoppable and continuous process that life is allotted its vigor and the seasons are moderated in their temperature, giving the earth a healthy balance. Another essential building block for life everywhere, carbon, follows a similar pattern. Existing in the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide, it is eventually absorbed
into the biosphere through plant photosynthesis, which breaks apart carbon dioxide, or it is soaked into bodies of water. It is only here that animals may take advantage of this solidified sunshine and carbon by consuming it from plant producers. Traveling yet again, carbon may be rereleased through plant or animal respiration, decay, or combustion in many forms. As a built-in check, the ocean may also release its absorbed carbon as it is dissolved from heating by the sun. Even carbon is always on the move, shifting between atmosphere, biosphere, land, and ocean. Both the water cycle and carbon cycle take their place as guardians over the world we live in, constantly ensuring relative balance through their vast and complex circles.

The story of life is equally affected by cycles in its own way. After all, as a product of the planet, there is very little chance that life could exist in ignorance of the preexisting rules or themes of creation. The most blatant example would be the practice of seasonal moderation by plants and animals alike. Fall, for example, is so named for the actions of a great majority of temperate trees, which, in adaptation to the orbit of the earth around the sun, shed their leaves to conserve water and energy for the dark months to come. In fact, much of life follows the seasons, slowing down as the days shorten on one hemisphere, and speeding up as light returns to the other. It is only natural for the living to act in accordance to the greater phases of the life-sustaining earth, moon, and sun.

Equally, life works in cycles within itself, creating the marvel of animation out of the despair of death. As an often-cited example, jack pines actually flourish after a normally traumatic forest fire on account of an extremely clever strategy. Jack pine seeds depend on the presence of high heat in order to germinate, giving them an advantage over other competing pines in forests that are frequently ravaged by fire. It is only through the annihilating power of fire that jack pines flaunt their vitality, providing an equal and opposite response to a tragedy of grand proportions. On a more widespread scale, the animal and plant kingdoms complement and thrive off one another through constant circular interaction. While the consumers of the animal kingdom utilize the photosynthesizing power of the plant kingdom, they do not only take from these producers. The waste of all consumers ultimately returns to restore the nutrients within the soil, reinstating the plant kingdom and reinsuring stability and balance. Fruit-bearing producers, however, take even further advantage of the nature of grazing animals. Offering beneficial nutrients, these barterers of the plant kingdom make a tradeoff to employ the mobility and waste benefits of animals. Once through the digestive system, the fruit seed is provided with nutrients all around in the form of excrement, making life out of something otherwise useless and all the while, sustaining animal life.

Decay also plays a vastly important role of this cycle of life. Taking form most commonly as bacteria or fungi, decomposers perform an essential and beautiful task by breaking down the composition and nutrients of dead plant or animal matter, freeing it up to be reused again and again. It is only through
this process that life may continue in its cycle, ceaseless and uninterrupted. Finally the essence of life is once again given back to the soil, ready to supply the means for creation.

This comprehensive involvement of countless cycles within the natural world has had a drastic impact on the human psyche as well, incorporating itself fully throughout the history of religious and philosophical development. As man has come into higher and higher reaches of intellect, the philosophy of the circle has left its mark. What is now thought of as the soul has been around in some form or another since the very dawn of mankind. Ancient Greek intellectuals such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato each believed in the concept of an eternal system in which the soul would come to reincarnate itself as another living entity or pass into another realm. Today, Native American and Inuit spiritual beliefs as well as Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism incorporate reincarnation in some form or another. An idea of the soul as a being of constant reincarnation only makes sense in a world in which all other things are governed by a similar principle. If man’s weather fronts, tides, seasons, stars, and bodies are all subject to continuous and predictable rotation, then why not his soul?

Time and space could possibly be just as cyclical as the rest of the universe. Taking a philosophical stance, Nietzsche propounded a concept known as the “Eternal Return.” Rather than thinking of time as a linear progression, this concept describes time as a circle in which the universe is composed of a limited amount of matter but an infinite amount of time. Eventually, all events will occur over and over again in an infinite circular progression. This concept could be closer to the truth than it seems. A scientific theory known as the Big Bounce postulates that the Big Bang was actually the result of a previous universe’s collapse. As the universe expands, it is likely that density and gravitational force could cause it to actually begin shrinking again, returning everything back to the point of origin and consequently causing a new Big Bang. This would actually support Nietzsche’s theory if the Big Bang occurred in exactly the same way every single time it happened, causing a truly circular universe, eternally expanding and contracting. The very standards and constants by which we measure the world around us could easily belong to the ever-growing number of things circular.

From its chemistry, biology, physics, and metaphysics, the universe in which we live is a universe founded on the concept of the circle. The world around us, in its cycles of ebb and flow, as well as our most sacred beliefs are shaped by this, the most all-encompassing theme of creation. Even if not in a particular spiritual doctrine, every religious or philosophical subscriber is always subject to alternating phases of faith and doubt. Man can either find lament or consolation in these cycles. Some find despair in the perceived inability to escape such a universe. To be bound to a continuous set of circumstances or a set pattern of behavior is rarely a pleasant experience. Still others find solace in this very fact, as comfort is often found in things eternal. Many see beauty in the falling leaves of autumn or even hold their breath at
the arrival of a newborn, immersing themselves in the beauty of the world around them.

On this November morning, thousands will renew themselves, some for the first time and some for the last. The youngest among us will arrive in startling amazement, taking in all that the world has to offer in the first few seconds of life. Thousands will cleanse their souls in sacred and holy waters, spirits soaring. Thousands still will return their bones to the world that created them, released in the fires of cremation or in the silent workings of the underground. Those around us follow similar paths, and this is what binds us. The trees, the lichen, and the animals large and small are all one. They share the same beginnings as they will surely share the same end. There are many ways to baptize oneself in renewal, but what is essential is the decision to do it and to take part in the constant rebirth of the universe. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.
Life / Katie Boatman / Acrylic on Canvas
Shellie Richards
Pass the Abuse

Granddaddy’s Generation-
First the knife
Then the fork
Then the spoon
On the left side of the plate when he was done
With Thanksgiving dinner at the boarding school

Mama’s Generation-
First her dignity
Then her pride
Then the electricity
When the money is tight and the books are not balanced
And lima beans again for dinner

My Generation-
First my shirt
Then my pants
Then my panties
Before the whipping in the bathroom
Because I stood too close to the Christmas tree
She watched her mother spy the little yellow tags on the cans of peas, her small, ashen hand rotating the tin cans as if she could see the ripe quality of each tiny green ball. She had been staring at the cans for more than a while, which caused Paris to become antsy as she shifted her small weight off of her left leg onto her right. From her vantage point, she could not see the small print on the little yellow price tags that rotated in her direction by the shift of her mother’s hand.

Gazing upwards, she felt as if she was surrounded. The long and tall rows of peas seemed to touch the ceiling causing the ugly square market lights to bounce off the aluminum tops of the cans and make her small brown eyes squint with the wiggle of her nose. Green was all she could see from above and below, and after a long while, she began to see the word “green” rather than the actual color. She hazily watched as the “g” and the “r” peeped out between two cans near her mother’s hand and quietly chuckled as the two “e’s” smiled back at her with their opened mouths. She did not care about the “n”. She was too busy staring at the smiling “e’s”.

“56. 56. 56.”

She heard her mother’s harsh whisper above her, consistently rotating the green cans in her hand as if she was scolding it - or wishing that it was something else. A can of corn, maybe? They were just down the aisle if her mother would simply put down the can of peas. Paris suddenly remembered that she did like corn – the little yellow things that, if you squinted hard enough, resembled the shape of horseshoes or Uncle Charlie’s teeth at the dinner table on Sunday afternoons. Yes, she liked corn. Corn was bright and happy. Corn was yellow like the sun. Corn was better than cucumbers and carrots. And corn was much better than green mushy peas that had absolutely no taste to them at all. Paris decided that she would much rather have corn and as she lifted up her brow and opened her mouth in order to alert her mother to this new fact of life, her mother’s eyes suddenly shifted away from the ever-rotating can of peas and met her eager brown eyes.

“Stop shifting from side to side. Do you have to pee? I told you before we left to use the potty.”

Paris looked back down and willed her tiny legs from shifting side to side. She did not have to use the potty. She simply wanted to move down the aisle. She simply wanted corn instead of peas.

“Peas. Peas. Pee,” she murmured silently, frowning to herself. And at that moment she decided that peas tasted like pee. She had never tasted pee, but
it might as well taste like it — because they sounded just alike which meant they rhymed.

Leaving through the big glass doors of the grocery store and feeling the wind strike her face, Paris sighed with happiness. After the long while of scanning peas — and more words from her mother about how the potty at home was much better than the potty at the store and how she should’ve used the restroom there instead of here — Paris delighted in the fact that they would soon be going home. Home was where Noah was and she could not wait until she could feel Noah’s beautiful tail wag against her little cheeks and hands. She wanted so much just to feel his white and brown colored fur in her hands, and see the little drool from his cute little overbite.

“You must be sure to be responsible for yourself, Paris. It is important. It is important to have responsibility. Do you know that word, child? Do you know what responsibility means? You know? Re-spon-si-bil-ity?”

Her mother continued shoveling the many bags into the trunk of the car and looked keenly at Paris as if further emphasizing her point with her dark eyes. She figured the word was something very simple since her mother now spoke the mysterious word with a much lighter and airy tone; the tone was much more pleasant than it had been earlier in the store before the peas and the story about Mr. Germ and the Public Potty. In any regard, Paris lifted her eyes and nodded her head up and down, eager to show her mother that she understood, even though it was merely the pleasant tenor of her mother’s tone she agreed with.

“Good. Good, good,” her mother replied, closing the open trunk door with a loud thump and briskly walking to the open car doors. Paris swiftly tugged at her seat belt once settled within the backseat of the car and watched her mother apply more lipstick to her lips in the square car mirror above her head. Red and resembling the lipstick that Paris had seen many women wear in her neighborhood, it made her mother’s lips stand out among her pale skin. It was red, but purple too, Paris decided. Like a raisin. Or an old apple.

Smacking her lips, she grinned at Paris in the back seat through the mirror, “Pretty, isn’t it?”

With that, she turned on the car and started to pull away from the grocery store parking lot. But before the car moved away from parking aisle seven, a man suddenly stood by its right side. Paris found this odd, as she was seated in the back seat of the car on the right and she was sure that, merely a second ago, no one was there. It was like magic, the man appearing right there out of thin air and it reminded her of Uncle Charlie’s smile; that yellow smile that seemed to appear from absolutely nowhere whenever Paris happened to catch his big eyes at the dinner table on Sundays. Except this man wasn’t Uncle Charlie. He did not look or dress like Uncle Charlie. He, instead, looked a lot more like Noah. He looked just like the puppy that would trot slowly into the house when Paris would forget to open the back door to let him back in after making sure he went to potty near the big oak tree. Noah would be covered in
all soil and leaves from sniffing around her mother's garden and rolling in the
dirt near the elephant ears and red geraniums. Someone must have forgotten
to open the back door for the man, Paris figured.

“Go away. Go away,” she heard her mother chant under her breath.

And Paris kind of wished he would go away too, for he was now walking in
front of her mother's car and stopping her from getting home to feel Noah's
little paws and asking him how his day had been without her. She figured
the old and dirty man had to speak with her mother as he got closer to her
window. As if her mother could read the old man's mind — and Paris knew
this was possible because her mother would often tell her that she could read
minds and that if Paris was to be a bad child, she would simply read her mind
and know it because she was an adult and adults knew children's minds — her
mother hastily picked up her purse and dug through it wildly. Paris could
hear the little rumblings of change before her mother found the silver and
brown coins and dropped it into the hands of the man with the dirty face. She
dropped them before the man could speak a word. She dropped them like
when they went to the park and fed the white ducks in the pond.

The man with the dirty face wrapped his big hands around the coins and
nodded his head up and down slowly. Paris watched as he put the money into
his jacket pocket and licked at his brown lips. He didn't walk away from the
car and she watched as her mother kept her hands on the wheel and kept her
head towards the front of the car, as if something had suddenly caught her
attention. Paris arched her head to see if she could see what she was gazing
at, but could only see a small, red bird picking at a french-fry from an old
McDonald's wrapper. When her mother did not turn her head back to the
man with the dirty face, he slowly took a step back, but not before tilting
his head to look at Paris seated in the rear of the car. All of a sudden a smile
appeared on his scratchy face and Paris noticed his big brown eyes light up
like Christmas tree lights. His smile was big and his teeth were not yellow
like Uncle Charlie's. With a short wave and a wink of his eye, he walked
around the back of the car and disappeared to where her eyes couldn't follow
anymore. She stopped craning her turned neck when she felt the car pull
forward.

“Responsibility,” her mother murmured from behind the wheel.
“Responsibility.”

In the kitchen was a window. The window was not like a regular window,
square and with long draping curtains. The window in the kitchen was big
and it looked like a circle. And within the circle was another circle. And
within that circle was another circle. So there were three circles with shining
glass in between each one. Paris' mother made sure that the circular window
stayed clean, washing the window twice a day. The window was nice and big
and allowed Paris to look out directly into the front yard. Sometimes she
would watch Noah as he mulled around the brown grass, looking for dirt to
roll in or something to play with. Sometimes she would look out that window
and see the different people walk up and down the quiet street of Pewter Court. She would watch as the mailman fed her mailbox pieces of paper or keep an eye on the orange sun, tucking itself into its white covers and turning on the street lamps so that it would not be afraid of the dark.

Sometimes she would just stand there and look at everything and nothing at the same time.

This is what Paris did as they now sat at the dinner table that inhabited the tiny space before the big circular window. In front of her was a plate of peas. Across from her was her mother.

“You must eat those peas, child. They are good for you.”

She could hear her mother’s words, but kept her eyes facing the window with the three round circles. Paris was angry. She knew she was angry because her tiny hands were balled up underneath the table and because her lips were pressing tightly into one another. She knew she was angry because her eyes were squinting towards the window and because her brain kept telling her not to look across the table. Then she became angrier because the window was round and made of circles. Just like the round peas that rolled around on her almost empty plate.

When they had arrived home and opened the front door of their small blue house, Paris had felt an immediate brush of fur against her tiny legs. She had let go of the plastic bag in her hand and immediately tugged at Noah’s pretty white and brown colored fur. The puppy hopped up and down in one place, causing Paris to clap her hands and smile. She had stilled her hands enough to wrap her arms around the little beast and welcome his happy dance with a single sigh.

“How are you, my Noah?” she had asked the love of her life.

“Fine,” he replied and turned to wag his long tail near her happy hands.

“I missed you, my Noah,” she had told him with a serious look in her brown eyes.

“I missed you more,” he replied with a touch of his small paw.

And she was glad that Noah had missed her because she had truly missed him. And she was glad that he was happy because she was sad that he had to stay in the house by himself all day. She had wanted to take him with her and her mother, but her mother had told her that animals were not allowed in grocery stores.

“Animals have their place and we have ours. Make sure you know your place, child. Make sure you know your place.”

Paris did not know about places and animals and grocery store rules and the like. All she knew was that she didn’t want to leave Noah alone. He needed someone to play with and someone to talk to. Just like her. And she wondered if there was a place for her and Noah; a place where they could be together and not worry about the little yellow tags on cans of peas and that “r” word that her mother had talked about.

After playing with Noah and making sure that his collar was not too tight around his little neck, her mother had called her into the kitchen to eat
dinner. And that was where she sat now. Angry and frowning out the window – avoiding the peas.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother put her spoon to the side of her plate and gaze at her turned cheek.

“No what’s the matter with you, dear? Why are you not eating?”

Paris did not answer, just shifted her eyes away from the big circle window and moved her peas around with her spoon.

“Momma, where’s heaven?”

The question – this simple question that Paris wanted a simple answer to – was the question that she had thought about ever since they had left for the grocery store. It was the question that she had thought about when they had parked in aisle seven and made their way towards the big glass doors of the grocery store. It was the question that she wondered about when they walked swiftly toward the aisle of peas and cans of corn. It was the question that her mother, who had now turned away from her daughter’s brown eyes and seemed to stare at everything and nothing through the big circle window, had not answered quickly like she normally would whenever she had a question.

“Is it a place, momma? Is it a place that we can go?” Paris asked her mother, hoping to lead her to some type of answer that she had maybe forgot at the moment and couldn’t remember.

Her mother brought her eyes back towards her plate and, so quietly that Paris had to lift her head and strain her ears, whispered, “Heaven is far away. Heaven is not a place we can go, child.”

“Why not? Why can’t we go, momma? Is it far away like California? Like where Daddy lives?”

She wasn’t sure at first what had happened, but she was sure that that noise – that long, drawn out, growling noise – did not come from the woman across from her. She was sure that that noise, which sounded like a dog whimpering, like when Noah cried from being out in the backyard too long, did not arise out of her mother’s throat. Paris had never heard a sound like that come from her mother. She had never heard a sound like that come from any person she knew.

But as she looked up at her mother and noticed her dark eyes seeming to shine from across the table, seeing her pale face seem to grow a darker shade and her red raisin lips press against one another, Paris knew that her mother had indeed made that awful sound. She knew that she had caused her mother to have watery eyes. She knew she had made her mother sound like a whimpering dog.

And Paris was confused. Was it because she asked about heaven? Was her mother mad because she wanted to know where this secret place was? Was she mad because she knew heaven was far away like California and that their car could never make it there before the sun got out of bed the next morning? Was it because heaven was for animals and that she didn’t “know her place”? Was it because she had not eaten her peas?
Almost as an afterthought, Paris suddenly took her spoon and scooped a heap full of peas into her mouth. She took her spoon and dug into the mountain of peas, filling her mouth with the mushy green orbs that were supposed to taste like pee, but really didn’t. She lifted the peas to her mouth so fast, that she had to chew with her mouth open, causing some of the green things to pop out of her mouth and land right back on her plate like Noah often did with his doggy food.

And all of a sudden, she heard a high pitched laugh. It was a short and sweet laugh, like when Uncle Charlie poked her tummy and made a loud popping sound with his mouth after dinner. It was a laugh that Paris made when her mother was washing the big circle window and had splashed a little bit of water on her shirt, causing her mother to shiver like a wet puppy. It was a laugh that rang through her ears one morning when Noah, all of a sudden, gave her mother his paw after she fed him a doggy treat. It was a nice laugh. And it was pleasant laugh. One she had not heard in a long time.

And the laugh continued. It continued to race through her tiny ears as her mouth chewed on the mountain of peas. She looked up to see her mother, bent slightly over in her chair, laughing hysterically as she watched her daughter crush at the green peas, her little cheeks blowing up like balloons filling with air on either side. Paris could not help but try to keep her mouth closed and smile. Her mother smiled brightly at her and all of a sudden, she couldn’t help but notice how her white teeth and huge smile looked exactly like the smile of the man with the dirty face at parking aisle seven at the grocery store.

Late that night, as Noah cuddled up next to Paris in her bed, and as her mother pulled the covers over her tiny body and kissed her with her natural pink lips, she heard her mother chuckle and wish her goodnight. And right before she left the room and closed the door, she heard a whisper in the dark.

“Heaven isn’t far away. Heaven is right here. Heaven is in a can of peas.”
And Indeed There Will Be Time

He wants to tell her that he loves her.
He wants to push his fingers through her blonde hair
where streaks of moonlight creak through
like the hard oak floor of her foyer.

He wants to cull a loose strand,
his fingers a comb,
and watch it spiral in the solemn breeze
until it rests in the cushion of the creek
and begins the long vermicular journey
to the Chattahoochee River,
west out of Georgia,
south through Alabama,
into the Gulf Coast.

He wants to tell her that his car is not a mile away,
through trails of trillium and sweetgum,
and while he has a full tank of gas
he can drive through the night
behind the engine’s soft hum.

She wouldn’t know any of this,
his language verbose,
his approach remiss,
and besides,
the stars are blooming.

So he sits,
his arms holding tight his legs,
his frame hunched forward,
his chin in his knee,
and his cheek pressed towards his nose,
watching,
through one squinted eye
and one open one,
her,
sleeping.

He wants to whisper words to her,
but he watches her breathing
and how she rests her head
on her elbow
and her elbow
on the boulder
and how the lichen-speckled
boulder
anchors the world
in the chute of the creek.

He wonders how
her boyfriend’s
ironic orthopedic shoes
would squeak,
sleek creek rocks,
in the wetness and
how the Velcro straps would
crunch and sour
the crisp spring night air and
how it is a good thing indeed
that he is not here.

He casts far downstream
his thoughts about sneakers and
thinks about himself,
about time, their
impending
separation,
the veiled future.

He thinks about the first time
he saw her and
the first time
she broke his heart.

And when the last remaining
embers of his thoughts,
sashaying luminaries,
extinguish, overwrought,
there is nothing left for him
but to shut his long gaze
on the moonlit sky
and dream
that one day
he will tell her that he loves her.
Gram’s house had all these crazy new, old things. A basement with a pool table, wild strawberries in the middle of the back lawn, chocolates hidden in the buffet, a sideways bathtub, and this one closet.

Who knows why it was there, this long, extended cavern of a tunnel off of, out of, the old hardwood floor at a slight angle from the closet of my mom’s childhood room. Jim and I used to try to run up the angled floor, this funny slant for no obvious reason, until we found the low-ceilinged, unfinished room—narrow like a walk-in closet but much longer and squatter. Who knows? Mom’s wedding dress was supposedly up there somewhere. There were random boxes in between the rafter-floor, hanging them and us directly above the dining room—sound floating upward through the thin wood—probably not a good place for an eight-year-old and her little brother.

Gram was always the better grandmother, which is probably why even Dad didn’t encourage us to stay with his family. But it was Thanksgiving, so everyone was invited. Nana yells. Dru drinks. Something was said—God knows what. But Mom’s yelling? Nana’s yelling—again. And Jim and I are invisible above: silent, young, innocent. Innocent. We aren’t supposed to know. They said something about Jim again. Jim looks at me in the dark middle ground, neither here nor not here, pleading. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me. No, it wasn’t. It’s them, but we can hear it. They didn’t know. We can hear it.
To the romantic traveler, I would advise curbing any form of a special occasion while in Haiti. This includes wedding proposals, religious sermons, and declarations of candidacies. For all of these will indubitably and soundly be interrupted by a dog. A Haitian dog has a quota of barks to fulfill throughout the hour — and it will do so on the order of every five minutes, it seems. And never alone. No, of course not. Like the Haitian people, the dogs embrace the old world sense of community — if one barks, they all bark. I remember distinctly one evening, as I was unwinding after a long day’s work, I heard a dog crying a way off in the distance — I figured a man must have stepped on its toe in the dark. Well, that crying inspired a dog a few paces off to join in, and then another dog a furlong distanced to do the same, so on and so forth, until the crying reached the front porch. This happened several times throughout the course of the night, waking me up each time. It was tiring, to say the least. And so it was that I lay in bed at 4:25 in the morning not tossing or turning or covering my ears, but trying to decide whether I should shoot the dogs or the buffoon who stepped on the toe. I am no philosopher; I am a member of the NRA. Thus, “decide” is probably too strong a word.

Tale

Several months ago, on the recommendation of a friend, I took a week off from my practice in Tennessee to perform some missionary dental work in Haiti. It was a delightful trip. It was an enlightening trip. It was a lovely trip. I ended up with forty mosquito bites. I ended up with three wooden carvings of Jesus washing feet. And a case of what I believe was amoebic dysentery.

But the trip also provided me with one of the most intriguing tales I have ever heard of pertaining to a U.S. politician. It entailed a wonderful bit of governmental folly — an ever-favorite topic of mine, as it is the tendency of man to grace diplomats with the distinction of being other than human. Like gods, of the people, by the people, and for the people. Thank God for Humility.

At about 11 AM on the third day of the trip, after extracting three wisdom teeth in a row — a rather ambitious undertaking in ninety-five degree heat — I decided to rest for a few minutes. I took a seat next to our translator...
(Haitians speak a Creole French), a man by the name of Pastor Martinique. Pastor was not his first name, of course, but his vocation. I never learned his first name—or last, if by chance Martinique was his given name—because he was always just Pastor to me.

Pastor Martinique was of middling height and build and bore a close resemblance to Bill Cosby. He wore frameless glasses and carried a look of the deepest contemplation on his face at all times. Whether he was pondering God or lunch, I never knew because Pastor was always full of surprises.

Perhaps the most endearing quality about him was his innocent sense of humor. He liked a good joke, especially about the Catholics, and he would tell them all day, first in English, and then in Creole, so that the patient could get a laugh, too (unless he was a known Catholic; then Pastor would tell a blonde joke). This turned out to be a rather effective way of pulling teeth. He’d tell a joke, causing the patient to laugh and open his mouth, and I would swoop in with my forceps at just the right moment, and yank the sucker(s) out. We made a great team.

As I sat there next to him I let out a long sigh. “Pastor, I’m exhausted. Haiti is wearing on me.”

“It is?” he said. “Well, I’m sorry. It is probably the heat. Americans don’t usually handle the heat well.”

He knew full well about Americans because he was one. In fact, he had a house in Florida that he frequented often. Somewhere in Naples, I think. But he and Madame spent most of their time in Haiti housing missionary groups.

“No, it isn’t the heat. I’m from Tennessee. This is nothing. It’s those dogs—they bark incessantly. I’m surprised a man ever gets sleep on this island.”

“We stick grass in our ears,” he said. “An old Haitian trick.”

I tried this later, rolling some grass into a ball and sticking it in my ear. I felt only slightly ridiculous. So, in order to alleviate my discomfort, I told the other members of our group about the noise-dampening effects of grass, and they followed suit. I was a hero for nineteen minutes until Madame Louise saw our experiment, grew a bit red, and cried, “That Pastor!” She explained that this was a favorite joke of his, and he had told the same thing to some British missionaries a few months prior. Several of them developed ear infections as a result.

“Well, I think the next time I come, I am just going to bring my shotgun,” I responded.

“And shoot my pets?!”

“Yes, my pets! I once told a group of Canadian missionaries—they are very gullible, you know—that the spiders on the island were my pets, and not to kill any of them. All week they screamed and yelled and cowered, but did not injure a single one. It was not until my wife grew so weary of their crying, that she took an old newspaper to every spider in the house. The missionaries
tried to stop her, of course, believing that the spiders were my pets, and that I would be very sad if any of them died. Well, as you can imagine, I was comfortably reading in my parlor when I heard, ‘THAT PASTOR!’ and decided to go for a walk.”

“So the dogs aren’t your pets?”

“No, they are.”

I was confused. He elaborated.

“You see, dogs are revered in Haiti, much the same way cats were revered in ancient Egypt. Especially the strays; we Haitians love our strays.”

“Is that because dogs have some special voodoo power?”

Voodoo is largely practiced in Haiti, but most only on chickens.

“Nooo,” he answered with a scowl, “no, no, no. Dogs will have nothing to do with that superstition. They are too pious. No, the reason we love our dogs follows a tale that will take much longer than a short break to tell.”

I told the nurse to give me another twenty minutes. I was very tired.

“Go ahead, Pastor,” I said. “I am eager to hear.”

“Well,” he shifted in his seat to a more comfortable position. “OK.”

“About fifteen years ago, in the summer of 1994, Haiti was under great political turmoil. So much so that the U.S. military was threatening to invade the island. Out of supreme desperation, our General Cedras called upon your President Jimmy Carter to keep the U.S. from doing this—to lead talks with our leaders and resolve the problems. President Carter relayed this cry to your, then, President Clinton, who was busy, I suppose, with his female White House aides and asked President Carter to administer aid to Haiti himself. So, he assembled a diplomatic team consisting of Senator Sam Nunn, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell, and Senator Strom Thurmond. Senator Thurmond was a late addition and is still, to this day, a complete mystery because he was so old. I remember seeing him for the first time and thinking he was going to die any minute. But, well, he didn’t.

“Anyway, only a few days after Senator Thurmond joined the other delegates, Senator Nunn backed out, claiming he had private issues that needed to be taken care of. Chairman Powell followed suit a few days later, claiming health reasons instead. This left President Carter with only Senator Thurmond as a companion on the mission—as all other members of the U.S. government provided legitimate excuses for their inability to join the two men in Haiti. Then, a week before they were scheduled to leave, President Carter backed out, saying that his interests had become conflicted by a chance at economic gain. He said that General Cedras had offered him a monetary reward if the U.S. was successful in negotiating a non-militaristic invasion. With the welfare of the Haitian people at stake, President Carter said, he had to remove himself from the mission.

“At this point, I knew something was strange because this made no sense to me. What politician would not accept money? And what politician would think the Haitian government has money? The Haitian government has no money! How could we offer a reward? We would probably ask a reward from
the U.S. for a peaceful negotiation. Of course, I couldn’t do anything with a strange feeling so I prayed and waited to see the real reason, if there was one, as to why Senator Thurmond was making the trip by himself.

“He arrived in early August with an aide, a personal chef, and a two Secret Service agents. Our two reporters on the island were there as he walked off the plane, and anxiously prodded him with questions. But all he did was just wave his hands at them and tell them he was too tired for the press. The Secret Service quickly pushed them back, and he walked quietly into the terminal.

“Of course, we were eager to hear from Senator Thurmond, as our fate rested solely in his hands, but for two days all he did was sleep. We knew this because most of the employees in the embassy were Haitian, and, as you may have already figured out, Doctor, we Haitians are like a great family. One person tells another, and another tells another, and so on. Pretty soon the whole island knows what happened. It keeps a man honest, Doctor. You want to kiss a woman other than your wife? Ha! Good luck. Good, good luck.

“I should also add, before I go further, that I had a particularly good vantage point during this whole escapade, as my congregation was right down the street from the U.S. Embassy. In fact, people came by my office every day to talk to me about Senator Thurmond. Did I think he was going to get the job done? When did I think it would be over? Why was he sleeping so long? All of these questions, and no answers. It was rather bothersome, actually, but it kept me invested in what was happening the entire time.”

Pastor became distracted by some boys making noise in the yard. He leaned out the window and yelled at them in Creole. They ran off screaming something over and over again, and the dogs started to bark. This brought him back to the story.

“Well, on the third day, he finally rose. On a Sunday, nonetheless! Service that morning was very energetic—I could barely keep my congregation in their seats. His rising on the third day was a sign, people said. A sign that we would all be saved. Haitians are very superstitious, Doctor, very, very superstitious. And we love signs! I was flooded with questions after service — Did I think this man was Jesus? Did I think he could save us? I was not sure how to respond; I was not sure because I knew he was just an old man who needed rest. Hope was such a rare thing in those times, though, that I was afraid to speak against it.

“That afternoon, Senator Thurmond held a press conference, and talked for five hours. He mentioned the political affairs of Haiti only once in that amount of time, then spoke of the heat, the humidity in Georgia, the shading effects of pine trees, the way a person can tell the difference between a red and white pine—something about counting the needles—his grandmother’s insistence upon pine tea for an upset stomach, and how he didn’t generally care for the taste of pine tea—he’d rather have a Coke. A reporter asked him one question, which Senator Thurmond answered for nearly two hours. And
when he started discussing his mother’s biscuit recipe, the reporter stood up and left.

“The Haitian people didn’t really know how to take that first day. There was still a sense of optimism in the air, but there was also uncertainty. The Senator could certainly talk—yes, yes, he could. And this was endearing to Haitians, because, well, we can talk, too. But our fate was in this man’s hands and he was talking about biscuits and pine trees. It was nerve-wracking to say the least.

“It didn’t get any better, either. The Senator spent most of his time in the embassy walking around and talking to the staff. It didn’t matter if they spoke English or not—as this was one way Haitian workers tried to avoid his stories—he would just call in his translator—who grew frustrated as well, always having not only to listen, but speak for him, too. His maid staff tried over and over again to tell the Senator that they could not speak English, but he called the translator every time. As they made his bed, he would check the tag on the sheets, commenting on the quality of the cotton. As they brought him towels, he would look at the tag and comment on the quality of the cotton. He said they were Egyptian cotton—soft, but inferior to South Carolinian cotton. He told them how Haiti needed to import American-made products and not Egyptian or Chinese. South Carolinian products, in particular. They were the best.

“After about a week of this, every one in Port-au-Prince was trying to figure out ways to avoid conversation with this man. Pretending not to be able to speak English had not worked. A few even tried pretending to be deaf, but this only invoked Senator Thurmond to yell and mouth every word he was saying, keep a constant gaze with the listener, follow them everywhere, wave his hands in the air, and cause quite a scene. Nobody knew what to do. We were more desperate than when General Cedras originally begged for aid from President Carter. Senator Thurmond could not be stopped! Our own leaders cancelled meetings with him. It was then that we realized there was only one thing to do: Avoid Senator Thurmond at all costs. We were on the lookout wherever we went—as it was the tendency of the Senator to go on daily walks through the city—and if we saw him in the distance—if we were lucky—then we quickly turned down an alley or ran in the other direction. This worked rather well for most of the population. But Port-au-Prince is a big city with a lot of people, Doctor, and Senator Thurmond usually ran into someone.

“We had just about given up when God finally answered our prayers. One day at noon, Senator Thurmond went for a walk down to the fill-up station with two security guards and his translator to get a Coke—it was a Friday. We in the area had grown quite used to this routine, and were well aware to stay off the street at this time. In fact, the street was basically empty that day, except for a blind man and his dog—a stray that he used as protection against thieves—who were sharing an ice cream bar. The Senator saw him and was intrigued by his sharing ice cream with a dog. He went over to the
man, and asked him if he did not see what he was doing. The man said that he could not see because he was blind. With this, Senator Thurmond began telling the story about his uncle who had lost his eye at the battle of San Juan Hill when Theodore Roosevelt’s horse kicked him in the face. But before he could get further than that, the dog started barking. No one knows why it did—whether or not it was spooked because Senator Thurmond was the first white man that dog had ever seen, or because there was something about his voice that drove the dog crazy—but that dog barked and barked. Senator Thurmond was flustered by the barking and unable to return to his train of thought. Discouraged, he walked away from the blind man, bought his Coke, and headed back to the embassy.

“The translator, who at this point was desperate for a way to quiet the Senator, saw what had happened and was pleasantly surprised. That night after work, he caught a stray dog and put it on a leash. The next morning, he showed up to work with the dog, claiming he had been blinded the night before by a large sneeze, and he needed the dog for protection. The Senator said he had never heard of anyone becoming blind from a sneeze before, but he had had a sister-in-law who went deaf from an ear infection. Before he could get any further, though, the stray began to bark. And it barked every time Senator Thurmond attempted to speak. Well, he couldn’t have this problem with a translator so he fired him—much to the translator’s delight.

“Within a few hours, everyone in Port-au-Prince had heard about what happened and rejoiced—we had been given our answer! People were hoarding dogs and selling them on the street. For the first time in the history of Haiti, there was not a single stray dog in the city. Each one had a home! The entire embassy staff had become blind and required dogs. Even our president—who often was asked to have diplomatic conferences with the Senator—had a terrible accident on his motorbike that left him blind. Senator Thurmond was thwarted on every occasion for conversation. He became so discouraged that he resigned his post, and headed back to the U.S.

“On his last day on the island he held a press conference to say farewell to Haiti. He was met by an audience of ten people, and twenty dogs. Before he could even finish saying, ‘Good day to my friends of Haiti,’ the dogs started barking. The senator grew red in the face, slammed his fists on the pedestal, and spread his arms out, shouting, ‘E-NOUGH already, d—n it!’ Then he walked off stage and was never seen in Haiti again.”

“So, did he have anything to do with the eventual peaceful invasion of Haiti?” I asked.

“Oh no, no. President Clinton arranged something after Senator Thurmond left. It was really no big deal,” responded Pastor.

“Oh,” I said. I wasn’t sure whether or not he was joking about it being easy, but I also didn’t have the energy to argue. It was too hot. And the dogs had started barking. So, instead I said, “Hey, Pastor, you hear the one about the nun who wanted to become a prostitute?”

“A what?”
“A prostitute.”
“Oh, prostitute! I thought you said Protestant. Now, that would have been a good one!”
Sarah Shepherd

Only a Streetlight Can See What I See

It happened again, 
the moment that pauses 
between the wind and the sun, 
between the shade and the 
melting pavement chocolate, 
between the breeze and the 
puddle, 
that moment when I can see 
what no one else saw. The leaves, 
they fell to the ground.

One 
by one 
they fell 
like hesitant 
children.

The sky, it was blue, 
and the air soft, 
and the light, oh bright it was!

Only a streetlight can see what 
I can see. 
Returning from toil, my heels 
clacked a cracked sidewalk. 
To my left and right, 
leaves. 
They have not moved, only for 
the wind a little. 
I saw them fall. 
I saw them fall. 
I saw them fall hours ago.
Bombshell

“They’ve bought themselves a grand new house.
It’s built on stilts!”

But I loved their old home. There were sweet grapefruits and a canal for swimming.

We’d climb that tree and wash our splinters in the sea.

“Oh, the grapefruit tree.
It died years ago.”

The grapefruit tree died years ago.
Shelly Reed

The Harvest Hike

Stabbing pains shoot through my left calf. I crumple to the dirt path and inspect my leg, half-expecting to find a porcupine embedded into the side of it. My head is swimming. My vision is blurring. What the hell is going on? I’m worried. I’m worried because this isn’t the first time something like this has happened.

A month ago I was sitting on my green, checkered chair, strumming my guitar. I think I was writing Rachel a love song, enjoying the sweet acoustic notes. I specifically remember taking a pause to gnaw on the nails of my left hand. If they are past a certain length, it drives me crazy. Some things are not meant to be, like long scraggly rattails, and the nails on my left hand. They must die! But not the nails on my right, of course; they must live in order to pluck the guitar strings effectively.

So there I was, chewing on my fingers, when all of a sudden my left arm fell under attack. Piercing needles jabbed at my elbow. It felt like being mobbed by an angry quilting society.

There was another incident, about four months ago, before the wedding. I was playing Frisbee with my buddy Kyle. Suddenly, dizziness filled my head, and the one disc flying toward me multiplied into two. Seeing double isn’t optimal for Frisbee, so I laid down on the grass and watched the clouds blur into oblivion. The dizziness eventually passed and I continued, forgetting all about the incident.

Now, I begin to concentrate on my hiking shoes. They slowly come into focus. Thankfully, the searing pain has subsided. Massaging my leg, I decide that I should probably go visit the doctor instead of finishing the hike. I reluctantly leave the maple trees of Grand Woodlands Park behind me, glowing fiercely with the colors of harvest.

I decide not to tell Rachel about my doctor’s appointment. There is no need to worry her if it turns out to be nothing, especially since she’s been stressed out with school. The waiting room smells like sterile death and I shiver as I pick up a Men’s Health magazine.

I can’t help being distracted by the other patients. There is a child who blows into a Kleenex every five minutes and keeps announcing, “Look, Mommy, my boogers are green!” There is a pregnant woman, an elderly man with translucent skin, and a guy who looks like he swallowed the state of Texas.

“Clark? Clark Landers?”
I flash a forced smile at the scowling nurse.
“This way,” she grunts.
I follow her down a long corridor and into a tiny room. There, the nurse takes my blood pressure, asks a few routine questions, and tells me the doctor will be in shortly. I try to listen, but her scowl screams, “I hate you!” and I am counting the seconds until she leaves. She must have had a long day. After fifteen minutes, a round, wobbly fellow peeps his head through the door.
“Hiya, sport. I’m Dr. Madison. What seems to be the problem?”
“Hey, Doc. I’ve been having sharp pains in my arm and leg.”
“What kind of pain?”
“It feels like stabbing needles.”
“Is the pain concentrated in one area of the body?”
“Yeah, the left side. I also get dizzy, and my vision blurs. But it doesn’t happen all that often. Maybe once a month, if even that.”
The appointment takes longer than I expect and encompasses various coordination exercises, blood work, and a trip to the hospital for an MRI. Dr. Madison says it will be a few days before the results come back, and that he will reach me on my cell.

I sniff the iced tall, nonfat, vanilla latte. It’s the way I check to guarantee a drink’s deliciousness. Everyone knows that a coffee that smells good, tastes good. Of course, I make the sniff very discreet because I’ll admit, it’s a little strange that I feel compelled to smell other people’s drinks. But it’s this attention to detail that made me a Starbucks employee of the month. My father wouldn’t be very proud of how my international business degree is being put to use. Good thing he’s not around.

As I hand the vanilla latte to a dimple-cheeked teenager, I feel the buzz of my phone in my pocket. It’s Dr. Madison.
I take my ten outside and call him back. His words fill my limbs with lead. The diagnosis is a cheese grater that scrapes my body, shreds my heart, shaves my brain and scatters the strips everywhere. I am no longer whole. After forever has passed I struggle to move forward in any direction. I just need to move; I need to feel alive. My legs feel as if they are wriggling through a pool of molasses. My brain hollers simple commands: “Go. Step. Inch forward. Pick up foot. Place it here.”

Where am I? Turning around, I see the green awning with white block letters. I can’t go back to work, not now. I need to find Rachel.

Standing outside our townhouse, I peer in at Rachel. I see her spoon cookie dough onto a tray. Hurriedly, she separates it, distracted by the noise from the TV in the room next door. With cookie dough in hand, Rachel slides into the other room.
“No, you’re such a freakin’ idiot!” she screams.
She slaps her hand to her head in disbelief and realizes she’s pasted a greasy blob to her forehead. She must be watching the Steelers game. I don't want to go in, she looks so happy gliding between the worlds of Betty Crocker and John Madden.

Finally, after ten minutes, I decide she needs to know. I twist the doorknob and step inside. As I walk in, I smell melting chocolate chips and hear the soft drip of the leaky faucet filling a saucepan in the sink. I sit on one of the hardback wooden chairs, now wishing we had asked for pillow cushions in our wedding registry. With closed eyes, I try to piece together what I'm going to tell her.

As I sit there, an abrupt taste of blackness fills my mouth; the cookies are burning. Rachel dashes into the kitchen, opens the oven door, and mutters “frick” under her breath.

“Oh!” she yelps. “I didn’t hear you come in.”
I strain a partial smile.

“What’s wrong? You look awful.”
I feel awful.

“Rachel, I don’t know how to tell you this… Remember the time I told you I had a weird, sharp sensation in my arm?”
She nods, slowly.

“Well, weird stuff like that has happened three times now, so I went to the doctor. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry. Please don’t be mad.”
“I’m not mad. W-What did the doctor say?” she says fidgeting with a stray wisp of hair that has escaped from her ponytail.

“He ran a bunch of tests and called me today to tell me the results.” I pause, taking a big deep breath.

“And?”
“I have multiple sclerosis.”
“What? What does that mean?”
“My own body attacks my central nervous system.”
“Oh my God.” Rachel’s features cloud over. A heavy rainstorm builds in her eyes. “How did you get it? Can it be cured?”

“The doctors don’t really know that much. They don’t know how you get it, and, as of now, there is no cure.”

“What can we do then? What’s going to happen to you?”
“I’m only in the very first stage now. There’s medicine to slow the progression; it’s the closest thing they have for a cure.”

“Will you still be able to live a normal life?”
“I don’t know. It depends on how fast it progresses.”

There is an uncomfortable silence in which I witness Rachel struggling to control her emotion.

“I hate this!” she screams, clutching her head with her hands. “All I want to do is take this away. Clark, I feel so helpless.”

“So do I.”
Rachel pauses in deep thought.
“We can fight this. If you take your medicine and follow everything the
doctor says, you should be okay, right?”
“It’s not that easy. My medicine, Copaxone, costs a little over two thousand
dollars a month.”
I look at Rachel, hoping she has some magical answer to the problem I
present, but she is silent. I hate this thieving disease that waltzed in and stole
my freedom, my happiness, and my life in a matter of minutes. And the
pathetic part is I can’t even afford to fight this intruder. I am sinking, sinking
in a pile of quicksand. Hurry up already. Swallow me whole.
“Clark, I can drop out of school. That will save us thousands of dollars.
And then I can teach piano lessons out of our house. I don’t need a degree to
do that.”
“W-What? No, you only have seven months left till graduation…I won’t
let you give up your dreams.”
“I said I would love you in sickness and in health, and I meant it. I’m going
to do everything I can to help you get through this.”
That’s it. The dam breaks, and a river of tears flood my cheeks. I can’t
believe she is willing to do this for me. Searching my heart, I wonder if
I would do the same if the roles were reversed. So this is what marriage
is about: self-sacrifice, unconditional love. How could I have entered into
marriage without knowing this?
“Rachel, I love you, more than anything.”
“I know. I love you, too.” She grabs my hand and turns her gaze upwards.
“God, if you’re there, please heal Clark. He’s so young and full of life. Please
take this away.”
In my head I pray: Why, God? What did I do to deserve this? Why this
disease of all things? It isn’t fair to Rachel. God, please be real. I can’t handle
this on my own.

Sitting side by side, Rachel and I clasp hands in silent meditation for a long
time, hoping for a miracle.

Rachel is at school, probably breaking the news to her professors and friends.
The bed feels empty without her. My body, a tightly-curled cinnamon bun,
sticks to the sheets. I make no effort to get up. The hope I felt from last
night’s prayer has evaporated and is replaced by a series of frantic questions I
will ask my doctor this afternoon. How fast does MS progress? Is it genetic?
Can I even have children? Rachel really wants to be a mother. I kind of want
to be a father.

My father, he should know about this. Maybe he’ll know what to do. If
anything, he can afford to help me pay for the medicine.

I reach for the phone, but I don’t know his number by heart. I scroll
through my list of contacts twice. It’s not there. In the kitchen, I spy Rachel’s
phonebook. There it is, William Landers. How she managed to get his
number is beyond me. Hastily, I dial the number. It feels strange. I haven’t talked to him in months, not since...

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

Silence follows.

“Look I know it’s been a while…”

“I’ll say… How’s your mother?”

“Mom’s good. She got promoted about a month ago. Ryan’s good, too. He’s captain of the lacrosse team this year.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it. What about you, are you still working at Starbucks?”

“Yeah, I was named employee of the month.”

“Clark, you know that’s not something to be…”

“What about you? Are you still with what’s her name?”

“Her name is Pamela. And she’s great. Her sons Joey and David just started soccer last week. You never played soccer.”

“Nope, never.”

There is another awkward pause.

“So, how’s Rachel?”

“She’s good.”

“I still think you’re too young to be married.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you mentioned that the last time we talked.”

More silence.

“Why did you call? Is something wrong?”

“Well…yes. Something is wrong,” I pause, grasping the reality of my words. “Dad, I have MS.”

He emits a slight gasp.

“What? Really?”

“Yeah, I just found out yesterday.”

“Son, I’m really sorry,” he says. His tone has changed.

“I don’t know what to do. And the medicine is really expensive. I can’t afford it. I should be worrying about my body, but all I can think about is the money.”

“Clark, I…I wish I knew what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I guess I thought…well, never mind. I don’t know what I thought. Nothing makes sense anymore. I should go.”

“Thanks for calling…I’m sorry.”

“Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

My head nods slowly forward, hitting the keyboard. I yank my body upright and struggle to pry my eyes open. The Google job search has been unsuccessful. I told Rachel that she should keep going to class, that I was going to find a higher-paying job or at least one with really good health insurance. But, apparently, no one is hiring.
I wonder what would happen if I didn’t take the medicine right away. So far, the attacks haven’t been too frequent. Maybe it won’t progress much in the next couple months. Or perhaps there is some sort of MS fund I can apply for. I just wish I had money or knew someone else with money besides my dad. I guess Rachel can always go back to school once we’ve saved up a little money. It’s just not ideal. Then again, nothing about this situation is.

Maybe my dad was right; I am too young to be married. I should have saved up some money first. Now I’m dragging Rachel into my problem. I wonder how long it takes God to answer prayers. It’s been two weeks since I was diagnosed. I’m still waiting for a miracle.

I swivel my chair away from the computer screen and gaze out the window. The mail truck has just pulled away, giving me an excuse to take a break from looking for jobs. Inside the mailbox is one lonely letter; I pinch it between my thumb and forefinger. Scanning the surface, I realize that there’s no return address. I slip my finger into the corner and carve along the v-shaped flap. I carefully unfold the contents of the envelope.

Clark,

I know it must have been extremely difficult for you to call me, especially after everything I said the last time we talked. What you do with your life is your own business. This is hard for me to admit, but I know I was never there for you kids while you were growing up. I don’t know much, but I do know that a father is supposed to take care of his own children. Here’s a little something. I hope it helps. Thanks for the call, and for trusting me with your troubles. God knows I don’t deserve your trust.

–William

In the envelope is a check for six thousand dollars. I can’t believe it. He hasn’t done anything nice for me since my eleventh birthday when he bought me a Superman bike and matching Superman water bottle. I don’t know what to think. He hasn’t been there for me, Mom, or Ryan for the past eight years. He didn’t even come to my wedding. But now, when I really need him, he shows up.

Slowly, my shock and confusion melt like a piece of chocolate in my hand. I’m left with a warm, sweet, gooey feeling.

When Rachel walks through the door, my excitement bursts like a shaken soda can.

“I called my Dad.”

Her eyebrows rise.

“I want to do whatever I can to keep you in school. So I called him about two weeks ago. I wanted to ask him for money, but I couldn’t. He said he was sorry, and I thought that was the end of it.” I seize the check from the countertop and dangle it in front of her face. “But look, he sent a check for
six thousand dollars. Isn’t it great? You’re going to graduate, and I’m going to have medicine!”

“Clark, that’s wonderful, really wonderful,” she says, surprise written in her wide brown eyes. “But sweetie, six thousand dollars only covers three months’ worth of medicine. What are we going to do after that?”

“We’ll make it work. I’ll find a higher paying job by then, I promise.”

“How?”

“I’ll keep asking around.”

“Will you even be well enough to work?”

“I have MS; I’m not dying. Besides, my name’s Clark. I’m Superman!”

Rachel smiles. “We’ll have to cut back on expenses. Hopefully, you’ll find a job. I know I can babysit for the Robinsons on the weekends. We just have to make it work until I graduate. I never thought I would say this, but thank God for your Dad.” Her steady eyes full of indescribable faith shift toward me. “We can do this,” she whispers.

“We can and will!” I snatch her hand and tango her down the hall. I twirl her into a back dip and hold her there; my face hovers over her face.

“It’s good to see you smiling again.”

“No,” I groan. Losing control, I let go of Rachel. My nerves are weaving a cocoon of pain around my left arm. My head is reeling. Rachel reaches out her hand, and I interlace my right fingers with hers. I catch the look in Rachel’s eyes before my vision fizzes over.

“Yeah,” I say, “We can do this.”
Skin on skin
Bone on bone
A house without a heart
Is not a home
A woven hat as a roof
A foundation of broken shoes
A heart as a hearth that’s forever warm
Sit here when you’re cold
Refuge from the storm.

Never have the walls pulsed like this before
A living breathing house for a home
A light that never goes off
It keeps growing and growing
But never grows old.

So in the darkness of this basement
Of this glowing house
We lie half naked
Whisper beating on your ear drum
Jokes and secrets and fragments of fun
Never thought I could smile
With my heart moving in a minute, a mile.

Haven’t felt uncomfortable yet
Using that word in every sense
A two-way street has never been so lit
As the end of the one
Where this house sits.

Where comfortable silence
And blaring noise can co-exist
You hear the world as one static
Picking up the layers of life as music
I hope this melody just adds to it
My mind types life as letters on a page
And drenched in ink
Sits your name.

Skin on skin
Bone on bone
This has a heart
Call this home.
My parents set out to ruin my life in the most direct manner possible. They brought me into the world after a rather fortunate accident. My mother found out she was pregnant with me while living in Maine. She and my father were contemplating divorce and not for the first time. Perhaps I should blame the hyper-emotional state surrounding my birth—why else would they mar my stunning potential with what could possibly be the tackiest pairing of names in the whole of human history? With two words — “Shawn Tina” — they set me on the path to become someone’s occupational therapist, who on the side does the makeup of pimply teenagers going to their first proms just to make ends meet. I mean, did they want a second-rate country singer with loose morals and a bad perm as a daughter? They must have.

Separately, the name Shawn is not so troublesome. There is strength about it, perhaps owing to its Irish roots. The name itself means “God is gracious,” but just as he giveth, he taketh away also. The name is stripped of its weight and possible dignity by the utter silliness that follows.

My disdain for my name should be traced to the motley crew of my fathers’ relatives. Comprising of an inclusive clan of eleven, they are a strange, southern folk who would consistently distort my name. They posture themselves as “Black-ish Rednecks”—light on the Black, heavy on the “-ish.” From my grandmother’s screened porch, the teasing would begin: “Comere Chawwn Teener,” or “Lookit little Chawwn Teener chase dem chickens,” or “Why won’t Chawwn Teener eat her biskutsngravy?” As the oldest male, my father was the assumed patriarch of this clan, and I was the youngest daughter. He would sit among his brothers and sisters smirking while they hooted and hollered after me. His smirk and throaty chuckles made him complicit. The traitor. In muddled backwoods accents they spewed out taunts just as they spit out wads of chewin’ tabbacky. I had no idea who “Chawwn Teener” was, nor did I particularly want to know her.

On the long car rides back to civilization—back to the safety of the suburbs and silent neighbors, none of whom knew my name—I tried to maintain silent indignation. After a particularly haunting hemmin’ and hawin’ session I could not stifle my outrage any longer: “Why in the world did y’all name me Shawn Tina?” I begged of them with all the preadolescent ire I could invoke. After those trips to the country the course of conversation usually took this route and this time, my mother replied something to the effect of: “Well, your sister was already Shannon Teresa, and I am Sandra Talley, so we

SHAWN WILLIS

Shawn.Tina
wanted all the girls to have the same initials. It just makes monogramming
towels so much easier.” The fate of my name and the determination of my
very existence were based upon the ordering of some silly towels? I did not
follow the parental logic that so often trips children up. Looking at me in
the rearview mirror, my father interjected with a previously undisclosed,
life-altering tidbit: “I wanted to name you Schyler Talley, but your mother
thought the name was weird.”

My mother is a force to be reckoned with—she is small, spunky, and
usually bedazzled in some type of “bling.” The 80s was her decade. I have
seen the evidence. She was completely inoculated by the cult of the 80s.
She loved the sparkle, the oversized shoulder pads and slouchy boots—all of
which, to her sheer delight, have made a comeback with the 2000s. She loved
the Lisa Frank colored eye shadows with feathered, come-hither-eyebrows.
And she loved Tina Turner. I suppose in giving me the chance to share a
namesake with such an idol fabulosity and fierceness, my mother was hoping
that perhaps I would grow into my namesake—that perhaps I would become
an idol of fabulosity in my own right.

The usual masculine associations of the name never fazed me; however, I
was agitated by the arbitrary modifiers people attached to my name, like the
prefixes “La” or “Da” and the suffixes like “Na” or “Nesa” or “Nequa.” This
type of molestation of my name bothered me the most. I constantly had to
inform camp counselors or curious strangers that no, my name was simply
Shawn. The End.

Beginning the journey of middle school, I was the chosen victim of the
eighth-grade boys. My status as a lowly fifth-grader was compounded by
being one of the only brown faces in a sea of southern-peach-tinged vanilla.
For the most part, I was comfortable in this world. On a day-to-day basis,
any other way of living or interacting was wholly immaterial, especially with
people whose faces looked more like mine.

For better or for worse, I am now aware of the particular privilege that
so often persists in small southern towns. Attending birthday parties or
carpooling after school, there was always a Mimi or a Lulu. Lily-white, Lily
Pulitzer–clad mothers would exclaim, “Oh why Shawn so-and-so’s been with us
so long, she’s practically family!” Such infantilized names for those stoic black
women who stabilized untidy domestic spheres, keeping houses and children
tidy. These women knew me as the Drs. Willis’ daughter.

In the middle school hallways, my older brother could not help me. He was
also cursed, except with a wholly oppressive, completely daunting namesake:
Howard Clarence Willis, Jr. Again, what were my parents thinking? There is
not a four-year-old or fourteen-year-old on this good earth who should ever
have to answer to the name Howard. I thought answering to the backwoods
clan on the occasional Sunday afternoon was bad; answering to the boys at
Brookstone School on a daily basis was much worse.

My middle school angst was probably a rather typical experience. I was
prone to bouts of daydreaming and doodling in class, writing the name
Schyler Talley in my ridiculous bubble-letter script while abstracting “what-ifs” about the girl she would have been. Schyler Talley surely would have been the coolest, the most aloof pre-teen. Schyler Talley would have been fearless. She would have glided down those hallways with a confidence I am still trying to locate. Instead I was only Shawn—middle name Tina—stuck in middle school hell and filled with all the rage one can reasonably muster at pimply boys with skunky highlights and trendy Skechers.

But on one particular day, I made my name, “Shawn” (and just Shawn), known to the entire middle school. Anderson Phillips and his henchmen had the worst highlights and the trendiest Skechers. Naturally they ruled the school. They usually lurked behind me and my friends making sure to only step on the back of my shoes, spewing their own vicious taunts my way. This crew also made a target of my admittedly nerdy brother (but what could he really do with a name like Howard Clarence?). J.P., as we called him at home, would race down the hallways in high-water jeans tucked into tube socks while balancing schoolbooks on his head. My brother is the ultimate pacifist, and I was quick to defend him and his tube socks by any means necessary. I had reached my limit after an insufferable gym class. I resolved the endless teasing in a way my mother has since given her bedazzled stamp of approval, and all it took was one stinging slap. For the rest of the afternoon Anderson Phillips, the king of the red-faced boys, slunk around trying to hide the splayed white handprint. That was entirely Shawn Tina’s doing, and like my mother she is a force to be reckoned with.

In high school I began to accept the silly, spunky quality of my name as my friends dubbed me Shawn Tuna. Now I have no qualms answering to Shawn, Shawntina, Shawn Tuna, and yes, even “Chawwn Teener” by choice relatives. Trying out and changing up different variations of the same name allow me the flexibility to decide who I want to be and when I want to be “her.” So if I show up bedazzled, spunky, and slightly tacky—please forgive me. It’s all Shawntina’s fault.
Wake with Me, Vienna / Sarah Shepherd / Photography
Often we find ourselves asked who we are, and in a rush to communicate the most apropos of answers, we inevitably dramatize our own lives. Every word is immediately made concrete. Every opinion or belief is painted on our forehead, immovable, immutable. If accuracy is the goal, does it really matter what we say? or how we say it? To some degree, yes. But considering how impossible a task it is to describe to others, much less to yourself, exactly who you are, I say it matters little what you say, and a great deal more how you say it. Don’t we find our personality in between our words, in and between our breaths, our gesticulations, our mannerisms and our tics, in every in-between? This is an old idea, but it has freshness still. In fact, the way things are going, it seems this old idea is only ripening, fattening up and plumping in bulk and pulp, making droop whatever branch on which it has grown for millennia. I believe what you’ll find in fiercely honest responses is a stark comparison between you the listener, and him the responder.

One only has to possess the patience to listen, and a healthy curiosity towards other people’s stories.

So, I’ll ask myself on your behalf: who am I?

Put it this way: I love cats, for example. I will try to like any cat I see. Even the bitch cats. The ones who hiss and give that guttural groan
because they hate you.
The bloody, beat-up ones in the alley with scabs and scrappy diseases.
The skittish ones with spiking hair and a good sense to run away, but an ignorance to know what from.
The ones who will meet you in the hot brush of the jungle and paralyze you with their beaming yellow eyes, then swiftly gulp down your head and grin.
I will try to like them because I am a lover of cats.

I am a lover of humans all the more.
I will try to like you, too — man or woman, young or old, however you come.
I will try, and I will sometimes fail.
Somewhere, though, in the flux of my emotions and my reasoning, in the place that weighs information against information and makes a calculated or miscalculated decision, there harbors at least the chance that I will like you.
(Most of the time, though, chance will be a last resort. Most of the time you’ll be able to rely on your merit, your integrity, your courteousness and your generosity. Chance will be buried under the positive qualities and good looks you possess; your ear for music and taste for food; your consistent loyalty and tolerant demeanor. Most of the time, chance will have never a need).
From that point we will be connected.
We will have gripped space and time and made a knot of the two, strangling the moment, seizing our lives.
And while we coexist, however we coexist, our alliance will be borne of this intercourse, and you will know how I feel about you, and likewise I will know your thoughts of me.
Then, after having learned enough about each other to teach it, we will begin to communicate as animals: wordless and physical, straightforward and efficient, immediate and stable, supportive and fun.
Respect itself will marvel between us, but we will hardly notice its gawking,
Instead, our black holes will direct themselves
forward, two pairs pulling at parallel futures.

Even when out of earshot, out of sight and out of mind, we will have a sense of knowing, of connaissance, for another person that will blow away the perennial fog of loneliness, when and if it’s felt.

Upon our (hopefully) countless reunions will resume the language of old friends: enormous details, mutually relevant anecdotes, splitting laughter — and joy.

And before we’re even conscious of it, the combined force of our black holes will pull apart from the center any sense of awkwardness, of fear or insecurity, of strangeness that may have built upon our absences from one another.

We will both cry the same tear, for the same purpose.

And then it will happen: one of us and then the other will away.

Our pure black eyes will stall, blurred by sadness, and rest woefully on frozen skin.

And in our mourning, mine or yours, with one hand at our mouth and the other on the coffin, our lips will draw a wide smile that at its corner will collect a single tear, because we knew we meant the best, and made the most.

It’s nice to meet you.
SHANNON TITUS

I Remember

Ten. The space between/ the bullets in our firefight/ is where I’ll be hiding, waiting for you. I sang along as my car stereo blared my favorite Dave Matthews song.*

Nine. There seems to be no end to the amount of rain the sky can pour down. I take a deep breath and rest my head on the seat rest. My shoulders ache. I straighten my arms and push them forward on the steering wheel in attempt to stretch them. It’s been a long trip. I try to focus on the music and forget about the depressing, stone-cold grey sky that has been my only scenery for the past three hours. I will be home soon.

Eight. I look in my rearview mirror to see a car tailing me. It’s a black pickup truck and it must be just inches from my Toyota Camry. What an idiot, I think. It’s pouring down rain and he wants me to go faster than 60 on this one-lane highway. I want to get home, too. I want to see my family. I want to see Alicia. I want him to get off my tail so I can get there alive.

Seven. Alicia. I can picture her response when I surprise her, and I can’t help but smile. I see myself slowly opening the door to her room, and there she is, lying on her bed reading. I see her on her back, head propped up with two pillows, her legs bent up, so engrossed in her book that she never even looks up when I enter. I imagine she’s probably reading The Time Traveler’s Wife, the last book I remember her telling me about. I see her dark brown hair falling around her head and the lamplight illuminating the freckles around her nose. Then she looks up and sees me. In her mind she’ll freak out, I tell myself. But I know she’ll act like she saw me yesterday. She’s not the freak-out type.

Six. On second thought, she’s probably finished The Time Traveler’s Wife already. She reads faster than anybody I know.

Five. My phone rings and I look over to see that it’s my mom calling. She’s probably wondering why I’m not home by now. Stupid rain. Stupid jerk on my tail. I don’t answer, though; she hates it when I pick up while I’m driving. When she calls me and she knows I’m on the road, it’s like a test. I’ve failed so many times that now I know. I let it ring.

Four. I push down on the gas pedal as I come upon an overpass. Wait, what is that thing lying in the middle of the road? I squint, trying to see through the pouring rain. It looks like a big metal rod. I panic as my car soars towards

it. I swerve to go around it, but swerve back when I realize I can’t see what’s coming on the other side of the ramp. I can’t make out exactly what it is, but I know I’m going to hit it. I feel my heart rate accelerate from its normal 60 beats-per-minute to what feels like heart attack range. I slam on my brakes.

Three. The image of the black pickup truck enters my mind as I feel it strike me from behind with a powerful jolt. There is a sharp pain that shoots through the back of my neck as my head slams forward. I hear the tires of my car screeching against the wet asphalt, and I’m not aware of which direction my car is going. I feel dizzy. I snap my head up to find my car is currently horizontal across both lanes of traffic and still moving.

Two. I feel a bright light hitting the side of my face from the right. I look over to see two headlights appearing from behind the overpass. I yank on the steering wheel by reaction, trying to clear my car from its path. My car doesn’t move. I’m going to be hit. I see Alicia’s face. I see her lying on her bed reading, this time with me never entering. I see her surprised face, this time with a different kind of surprise. I feel a pain in my chest. I see my mother, lying on the couch of our family room waiting for me to come home. I see my father, trying to console her. I see my sister. I see my brother. I promised him a game of one-on-one basketball. I see my future. I see no future. I see my sins. I see my God. I see the light. It’s moving towards me.

One. The lights are so bright they blind me. They are level with my face; they are coming to consume me. I hear a screeching of brakes. I hear the clashing of metal. I hear the breaking of glass. I hear nothing.


“Chris, I think he just opened his eyes,” I hear an astonished voice whisper. It’s my mom’s voice—I’m sure. Why is my mom in heaven? I open my mouth to respond, but don’t hear any sound come out. I feel a warm hand touching my own hand, touching my arm, touching my forehead. “Blake!” she fiercely whispers. She keeps repeating my name. I want to respond. I try to force my eyes open again. Freakin’ lights. I squeeze them shut again. “Blake, do you hear me? Blake, are you here? It’s Mom, Blake. It’s Mom. I’m right here.” I squeeze her hand; it’s all I can find the strength to do. I hear sniffling. I feel a drop of moisture hit my arm. I feel tired. The blackness is drawing me in. I can’t fight it. I feel nothing.

“All his vital signs are fine,” I hear a male voice say. “He’s living completely on his own now with no help from machines. We just need for him to become conscious. We’ll just have to wait it out. Until that happens, we have no way of knowing what his brain activity looks like.” I’m annoyed. I’m here
you moron!, I want to say. I can hear you. Wait, where am I? I open my eyes. Jeez, those lights are bright. Am I alive? I see the back of a tall, skinny man with dark hair standing next to my bed. He's wearing a long white lab coat. He's a doctor. So I am alive. He keeps talking to...I don't know. I don't see anybody else. He's saying a bunch of medical terms. He talks like he's reciting a medical speech. No emotion. He's talking about me, I assume. I don't like him. I'm more than just a bunch of medical terms; I'm a freaking human being. I turn my head to get a better look at him. “Praise the Lord!” I hear my mom say as she nearly knocks the man over trying to get to reach my bed. “Blake. Blake, are you here?”

“Mom,” I say softly. I notice a gap between my mind and body. My mind can speak clearly, but my mouth is having trouble getting the words out. There seems to be a lack of communication between the two. The doctor comes and stands on the other side of my bed.

“Blake?” His face is long and narrow. Clean-shaven. He has an unusually pointy chin. His eyes protrude from their sockets pretty far out, enough that I notice at first glance. Maybe it's because of his small, circular glasses that highlight them.

“Yes,” I answer.

“How are you feeling, son?”

“Distant.”

He nods his head. “Do you know what happened to you? Do you know why you're here?” I try to think, and I develop an instant headache. I see bright lights coming at me. Oh, no, the car. I got hit by that car.

“It’s a good sign he remembers that,” the doctor says looking back to my parents. “I'm just glad he woke up. Of course we're going to have to run extensive tests...” He keeps talking, but I don't hear the rest. The physical pain of my body has hit me like a baseball colliding with Sammy Sosa's corked bat. I feel the initial shock, and then see no end to how long it will go on as I wait for what feels like minute after minute with no relief. I look down at my body, trying to find the source of the pain. I find plenty of them, the first one being my neck as I try to fight its brace in my attempt to see. That would be the problem; it looks as if my whole body is broken.

Everything is in a cast, it seems. Both my legs are, for sure. My right one is propped up by a sling that hangs down from the ceiling. It feels like it runs from my upper thigh, although I can’t see for sure, all the way over my foot. The same is true for my left leg, although it remains on the bed and the cast cuts off before it reaches my foot. My right arm and shoulder are in a full cast, but on my left the cast spares my forearm and wrist. My whole torso seems to be wrapped in bandages. Either that, or else I feel like I’m being compressed by a corset for no reason. I really hope I’m not going insane. A nurse comes in and puts a new bag of clear fluid in the IV holder. I close my eyes, trying to block out the pain.
I feel someone shaking me by the shoulder. “Blake.” It’s my father’s voice. I open my eyes. “There is someone here you’re going to want to see,” he says. I look around me.

“Where am I?” I ask, squinting. Then I see her. It’s Alicia. She walks to the side of my bed and puts her hand on mine without saying a word. She has built-up tears in her eyes that are refusing to fall. She smiles at me, showing both of her dimples, but no teeth. She’s never been good at covering up true emotion, and I wonder just how bad I look.

Unable to move my neck, I glance down at my body, moving only my eyes. I see white bandages everywhere. I don’t feel like doing further investigation, and look up. That black truck, that car—they really did a number on me. I look back to Alicia.

“I’m so glad you look the same,” I say. “Makes me think nothing’s changed. Like I never left.” I’m suddenly aware of the nurse’s eyes on us. Dad has left the room.

“God, I’m glad to see you.” She smiles big and genuine this time, the smile I remember seeing every day for ten years of my life. Her face and body have changed, but that smile has always been the same. “I’ve been so worried, just so scared.” She runs her fingers through her shoulder-length, thick, dark brown hair. “I’ve missed you.”

“I was going to surprise you by coming home.”

“You did.” She gives me another half smile.

“Not the way I wanted to.” She drops her gaze to the bed as the nurse finishes checking my monitors and leaves the room.

“How are you feeling?” Until she asks, I had forgotten about the aching pain of my body. Like a memory, it comes back to me in a flash, and I find it hard to breathe again.

“Feeling like a just got pummeled by a car,” I joke. I am in too much pain to muster a laugh.

“So, normal then,” she smiles.

“Hey, have you seen my mom?” I ask as it occurs to me that I haven’t seen her yet.

“Yeah, why?”

“Oh, I just haven’t seen her yet. Is she here?”

“Are you sure? She said you talked to her yesterday. You’ve seen her. She’s been here for the past twenty days.”

“Twenty days?”

“You know you’ve been in here for almost three weeks, right? You just came to yesterday.” I could feel my eyes get big.

“No way,” I say, but I see on her face she’s serious. “Twenty days. That’s a long time.”

“Yeah.”

“And my mom’s been here the whole time?”

“Hasn’t left. Can’t get her to.”
“How is she?”
“How hanging in there. Been better ever since you woke up and talked to her the other day.” There is a knock at the door and a tall, lanky man wearing an oversized, long, white lab coat walks in.
“Hello, Blake. How you feeling today?” His glasses are round. They make him look like an idiot.
“Oh I’m alright,” I say. I have never seen this man before, but he seems to know me. “Are you my doctor?”
“Yes, sorry. I’m Dr. McGregor,” he says, extending his hand. “We met yesterday, although informally.” I shake his hand and wrack my brain for any previous image of him. Nothing comes to me.
“We’re going to run some tests here in about an hour. They’re all various types of brain scans, just to make sure everything is OK.” From there he continues into a lengthy discussion of each scan, what it will tell us, and what the procedures are for it. I feel like I’m listening to a recording and zone out for most of it. Periodically I look back at Alicia, who keeps her eyes on the doctor. Alicia follows him out of the room, saying she will be right back with my mom.

I wake to my mom sitting in a chair beside my bed. She is reading the Bible. I smile. Mom is always reading her Bible. Wait, what the heck? I look around, finding myself in a hospital. I look down at my body. I am covered from head to toe in bandages and casts. I’m a wreck. It all comes back to me in a sequence of images, flashing through my brain like a slideshow. Rain. Black truck. Spinning car. Lights coming at me. Brighter lights. Darkness.
“What’s God saying today?” I ask my mom. She looks up, putting the book down on the table and coming to stand beside me.
“Saying you’re d—n lucky you got a praying mother,” she smiles. “I’m so glad you’re awake again.” She looks so incredibly tired. “Alicia said you didn’t remember seeing me yesterday.”
“Alicia?”
“She said you told her that.”
“I saw her? I can’t wait to see her.”
“You just saw her,” Mom laughs. “She’ll be back in a bit, I’m sure.”
“I haven’t seen her.” Mom’s smile fades.
“She was in here fifteen minutes ago. She said you were awake, and she talked to you.”
“No.” I thought as hard as I could. I hadn’t seen anybody but Mom. “Just have her come, OK?”
“OK, honey.” We said nothing for a few minutes, as she stared off towards the window.
A nurse came in a few minutes later. “Ok, Blake, ready for those tests?” she says cheerfully.
“What tests?”
“The ones Dr. McGregor talked to you about. Brain scans.”
“Who is Dr. McGregor?” I am getting sick of people assuming I know things I don’t. It is like they are all talking behind my back, assuming I hear their conversations.

“You know, your doctor,” she says.

“Yeah. OK, sure.” I don’t have the energy to argue. I look to my mom for support, but she is staring at the nurse with a furrowed brow. The nurse wheels me out of the room on my bed.

A man walks into my room while keeping his eyes on the several sheets of paper he is carrying in his hands. He is about average height, with a mixture of thick grey and white hair, and a full beard.

“Hello Blake. Dr. Hurtz, nice to meet you.” I shake his hand.

“Could you explain what’s going on? I know I got hit by a car, but that’s it.”

“You’re lucky to be alive, that’s for sure.”

“Have my parents been contacted yet?”

“Yes, I believe they have.”

“Are they coming?”

“Listen, Blake. I’m here to discuss the results of your brain scans that you got earlier today.” He looks down at his papers again and then back at me. “Do you remember getting some tests done?”

“I didn’t have any tests. I just got here. You’re the first person who I’ve seen.” He takes a deep breath.

“I know you’re confused right now, and I’ll explain everything as best I can in a little bit. But first I just need you to answer these questions the best you can, based on what you know and remember. OK?”

“Yeah.”

“What is the last thing you remember; the most current memory you have before today?”

“I remember right before I got hit. I remember the last ten seconds.”
I run on the treadmill so I can pour myself into the tiny bribe frocks from my mother. They are usually more than likely fashioned from some sort of synthetic, metallic, non-breathable nothing of a dress. Each time she presents me with one, she is usually so hopeful, so proud of her find that I tell myself, “This time, you won’t return it.” Even, well...especially with the lack of fabric, they certainly make a statement. I like to wonder what types of things she thinks I will be doing in these dresses. And where? Where does one wear a gold, sleeveless mock-turtleneck dress with a teardrop-shaped keyhole that exposes regions where the sun don’t shine? I am not personally familiar with these places, though I have an idea of them. What my mother and I imagine is probably not too dissimilar—thumping music, dancing bodies, and intermittent epilepsy-inducing mood lighting. She hopes these dresses will help me ‘socialize’—you know, “have more fun,” as she says. But I can hardly live up to her ideal vision of an extrovert: one of those “It” girls in some terrible lycra/polyester/spandex blend. One can scarcely breathe in these fabrics. I have found that breathing is very important.

I always return her dresses. I return them in exchange for something more aligned with my personal sense of propriety and decency: possibly ruffled, certainly in a neutral color palette, and most definitely open-weaved, breathable, natural fabrics. I love the ease and simplicity of cotton, though my absolute favorite is linen. I will take it crisp and pleated, but more practically I will be a wrinkled mess.

I have found there are certain situations in nature where having the right gear might just save your life. Scarcely any attention is paid to the overall aesthetic impact of an outfit as there are far more important things to consider. I carry this philosophy with me in mostly all of my out-of-doors endeavors—Do my shoes have enough traction? Will my fleece keep me warm in the event night comes on too quickly, and I am still in the forest? Can I stash supplies away in my pockets? My mother, my best friend Gabrielle, and Gabby’s mother are continuously confounded by my practical “nature-girl gear.” Needless to say, I am the odd-ball-out on mother-daughter shopping trips to Atlanta. Aside from being habitually stylish, Gabby is also habitually conjuring up a new scheme for the two of us. Usually I have to grin and bear them while wearing one of my mother’s “bribe frocks.” Last year, I was quite surprised to hear that her newest scheme involved a four-day stint outside in the peak of summer. When I heard her utter the words “Shawn, you’ll love Bonnaroo! It’s going
to be four days of music on a 700-acre farm,” my mind scanned through all
the gear that I had accumulated through the years. We made the lists and
prioritized the supplies. Out of the group we were going with, it seemed like I
was the only one who was concerned about making sure we had the essentials.
This was certainly owing to a small detail — I was the only one who had ever
slept on anything other than goose down and Egyptian cotton.

Gabby brought Logan, our metro-sexual male frienemy, and Logan
brought his most stylist female friend, a fashion merchandising major named
Dusty who was raised on a horse farm in Kentucky. This piece of information
gave me hope, but as it turned out Logan, Dusty, and Gabby were all more
concerned with coordinating their outfits to the genre of music that they
wanted to see. With this, they planned outfits like “Boho-Chic” to go along
with the folksy musical stylings of Bon Iver and “Manic-Indie-Pixie-Queen”
to match the experimental sounds of Animal Collective. I watched them at
first with my typical detached amusement, but the whole ordeal was getting
out of hand. Instead of packing and stocking up on food supplies, Gabby
decided at 8:30 pm, the night before we were supposed to leave she just had
to have a patterned silk jumpsuit from Anthropologie. Her argument was
that jumpsuits were THE MUST HAVE item of summer, and it would be
perfection to wear during one of the daytime shows. Never mind my points
about the impracticality of a full-length jumpsuit itself, but a silk one! In the
heat of summer!

My detached amusement dissipated, and healthy feelings of outrage
emerged as every morning at the festival, we had to wait for Dusty to glue
on her individual false eyelashes and apply a full face of make-up. I do not
think that any of us were fully prepared for the strangeness that unfolded at
Bonnaroo 2009, and I still contend that make-up and silk jumpsuits were
complete non-essentials. People were in their most natural and unnatural
states. They would walk across the stretch of land naked and proud while
in a terrific THC-induced haze. I should have felt at home at Bonnaroo,
but everywhere I turned there was something new confounding my senses.
There were naked, painted babies, flower children, and ultra-goths gathered

Perhaps if I had gone along with the program, I could have fully appreciated
the overall experience. Maybe if I had worn the feather headband with shiny
spandex tights and sequined wedges that are more appropriate for trolling the unsavory bits of Amsterdam, then I would have had "more fun."

I find solace in nature, because it is my way of leaving all of the materiality of the world behind. I have no worries about "bribe frocks." I have no worries about conforming to what my friends wanted me to be at Bonnaroo. I do not need $58 and neon-green bike shorts to simply sit outside. I found solace at Bonnaroo by forging out alone, listening to the music in my simple cottons and basic neutral linens.
More babies are coming every year.
It’s getting sweeter!
Radioactive ooze is seeping up
through the drain covers in our streets.
It’s getting sweeter!
Dogs are beginning to all look the same.
It’s getting sweeter!
All the women grow all the more beautiful all the time.
It’s getting sweeter!
Our notions are restless.
It’s getting sweeter!
Birth control has finally ascended.
It’s getting sweeter!
The perfumes from all the vile department stores
have ripened in the emptying mall parking lots
at the end of the business day.
It’s getting sweeter!
And our father’s guts have poured out of the overly taught jeans
with their belts at the ends of their slack.
It’s getting sweeter!
Our musicians’ guitars have cracked and splintered.
It’s getting sweeter!
Nuns and priests have begun holding hands.
It’s getting sweeter!
Lovers can’t quite seem to keep each other in mind.
It’s getting sweeter!
Science has cleaved the space fabric
so as to allow their infinite theories to fit into the infinite universe.
It’s getting sweeter!
Disease is taking all new, never before conceived and exciting forms.
It’s getting sweeter!
The peaches are slightly more sour this season,
and yet somehow…
it’s getting sweeter!
Nina Adel is a singer-songwriter, writer, curriculum designer and teaching artist originally from Milwaukee, WI. She lives in Nashville, TN, with her husband, Danny, and two children, Kira and Jory. Currently a graduate student at Belmont University in English, Nina writes music, short fiction and creative nonfiction that often reflect her interest in identity, learning differences, environmental issues and the natural world.

Frances Anderson is a senior Design Communications major with an emphasis in Studio Art. She is from Nashville, TN and her works, “virginia woolf” and “gwili andre” address feelings of hopelessness and despondency, and the fragility of the body and spirit by illustrating the final choice to induce death.

Katie Boatman, from Carthage, TN, is a senior studying studio art with an emphasis in painting.

Callie Compton is a freshman English major from Fayetteville, TN. She enjoys activities generally considered “right-brained.”

Emmie “Battle” Futrell does not claim Mississippi as her home, though that is where she was unveiled and born. She enjoys writing and photographing things heretofore unveiled. As an avid Aquarius, she enjoys unveiling the mysteries of the world. Her motto is “Ask not what your country can unveil for you, but what you can unveil for your country.”

Erin Glass is a senior from Phoenix, AZ. She majors in Liberal Studies and enjoys painting.

Michael Huff is a senior English major. He was born in the year of the Dragon. Michael also writes music, and his hero is Indiana Jones.

Michael E. Jackson is a Nashville native currently in the literature track of Belmont’s MA program. He received his BA in English from Belmont College in 1987, completing work started in Hawaii in the mid-1970s. “A Good Fire” is part of a longer work-in-progress and is very loosely based on his last conversation with his father.

Cassandra Leete is a freshman songwriting major. Her hobbies include reading, writing, spoken word, yoga, and dance.
Christine Northern is a graduate student who was an English major as an undergraduate. She was previously published in the 2003, 2004, and 2005 editions of the Belmont Literary Journal.

Erica Payne is a native of Memphis, TN. She is a graduate of Middle Tennessee State University and presently teaches English at Pearl-Cohn High School while earning her Master’s of Arts from Belmont. Erica describes her writing as sensual and eclectic.

Dana Perry is a senior English major with an emphasis in writing. She also minors in the English emphasis in literature.

Christopher Pilny is a senior English major with an emphasis in literature. He is from Hope Valley, RI, and his nickname is “Chainsaw.”

Shelly Reed is an English literature major/writing minor from Louisville, CO. She enjoys roses, scones, mountains and England.

Shellie Richards is enrolled in the English graduate program at Belmont University. She has worked at Vanderbilt University for 15 years and currently edits scientific papers for publication. She lives in Nashville, TN with her husband and their three children.

Ben Richardson is a student of philosophy with a certain love for books and travel.

Erica Scoggins is a junior double majoring in English (emphasis in writing) and Studio Art. She is from Cleveland, TN, and she plans to go to graduate school for film, where she will hopefully be able to use her writing and visual art in the same medium.

Aaron Searcy is an 18-year-old freshman with an undecided major from Dandridge, TN. His interests include history, literature, science, and music.

Sarah Shepherd calls home the mountains and rivers of East Tennessee. When she discovered that dolphin training was not a viable career, she resolved to pursue a degree in English, now a junior. She enjoys bicycles, popsicles, and Europe.

Laura Sherman is a graduate student in her second semester. She is majoring in English with an emphasis in writing, and her hometown is Collierville, TN. She has been previously published in Lambuth University’s Coffeehouse Papers, and she currently writes for Examiner.com about Nashville culture.
Shannon Titus is a sophomore double majoring in English and Social Entrepreneurship. She is from Bowling Green, OH.

Gia Vangieri is a typical Belmont junior from Clearwater, FL.

Fletcher Watson is a senior BU student studying English/Writing with a minor in French. He was born and raised in Nashville, TN, and has lived there his whole life, barring one fun-filled and unproductive year at UT Knoxville from 2003-4. Besides writing poetry and short fiction, he is passionate about having friends, making music, eating food, and, most recently, world travel (preferably some combination thereof). Though he is madly in love with Nashville, he plans on moving within a year after graduation — August ‘10 — if only for a change of scenery and a fresher start, to one of the myriad coastal cities in the USA, most likely Baltimore, MD or Portland, OR. Currently he is the co-editor for local blog-zine The Deli Magazine.


Shawn T. Willis hails from a small Georgia town on the Chattahoochee River. She enjoys long walks in big cities. All too often, she finds herself wearing a frilly apron while cooking — with Nina Simone or Ray LaMontagne playing in the background. She is currently an English Literature major, minoring in Creative Writing. While she is not quite sure what she wants to do with either, she is feeling pretty good about the possibilities.
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