We have found meaning in the man-made things that define our environment – the ice that floats in our filtered water, the machines that signify our daily lives, the remnants of an industrial revolution in the background.

Late at night we sharpen photos, blurring the lines between genres. Behind the verb tense changes and comma placements, hidden in the dirt we play in, we see a message hidden, ready to be exposed.

Laura Jackson
April 2007
poetry

3 a mile from damascus
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She found dark smudges of dirt on his face that afternoon.
Mama could always find the dirt like a preacher’s eyes can always see those who are drifting off on the back pews.

“How do you always find the mud?” But he said it seemed like the mud always found him while he stomped on unsuspecting ants, and when he sank down in the sludge to rip off the crêpe paper wings of Monarch butterflies.

“You wouldn’t want me to just leave it there, now would you?” She wiped his contorting cheeks with a hot rag, and he bit his tongue to keep in a yes.
the devil jonah, a death at sea
debra howell | graphic design | 6” x 4.5”
We have traded the stars, in Birmingham, for white fluorescent tubing and the smolder of streetlamps. We have encased them in iron and steel.

Sometimes in the thick heat of the summers, Mary and I stand on a vine-eaten brick wall etched against the eastern bank of Red Mountain. From the heights, the city lies like a black tarp, wet and flecked with light, and the metallic sounds of industry echo upward through the fog.

“If you squint at them, they flicker,” Mary says.

“I know,” I tell her.

To the south, the smokestacks are firing, gray spires writhing toward the low-hanging stratus clouds. It is late, and another shift will come soon to restoke the flames, replenish the raw material. Sometimes I try to see them—the dirt-crusted boots of the factory workers, the businessmen in skyscrapers of glass, the women who sleep under newspaper along the railroaded veins of the city. I wonder if they have ever seen their city as I see it, swallowed it whole and tasted their part. I want to tell them something.

Last summer, we walked along the steel spines of railroad track, balancing above the white-pitched stones. The railroad is Birmingham’s river, and we raised our arms against the humid gusts. I watched the glass-walled skyscrapers glint above the squat earthen-colored rooftops, the redbrick frames long coated with dirt and soot.

“Listen,” Mary said.

And I listened. The electric buzz of power lines, the low moan of freight trains and the grating hiss of their departure, a trill of birds, a distant siren—I had missed them before. The sounds were not singular, not isolated; they were the sounds of the city, my city.

A man in a paint-tattered navy smock stepped out from under an overpass and said, “In the good and precious name of Jesus, if I can just get me enough for a sandwich.” His fingers looked like burnt sticks.

“This is all I have,” I said, and I emptied the change from my pockets.

“Bless you, son. Bless you,” he said. He smiled with a single tooth and hurried from beneath the overpass, his dark hands wreathing his eyes from the sun.

“He’s going to buy booze with it,” Mary said.

“Probably,” I said. “Still a beggar though.”

We walked until dusk within the rails, pacing our steps to the knotted wooden planks, the whipped air growing cool at our backs.

In the western outskirts of the city, we might have been alone. Houses rose in cinders, stabbing blackly towards the skyline. Speargrass clotted in the cracks of sidewalk plots and trembled in the churning winds, the backlit building-tops
orange and idling in sunset. We left the tracks.

On Elder Street, a house had collapsed within itself. Its roofing sat upon the wood-paneled porch, the brickwork flaring out like the petals of a crushed iris.

“It’s kind of pretty,” I said, and my hands shuddered. I lowered my voice. “But not for them.”

In the last pale traces of day, Mary shattered a window with a rock. The shards echoed like chimes inside the hollow body of the airplane hangar. We crawled inside, falling with our backs to the chilled cement. We stood brushing dust from our legs and staring.

The ceiling and upper walls were green-tinted plateglass, the metal ribs arching like a zeppelin toward the darkening sky. Every pane was chipped or splintered, and the yellow half-light poured through in tangled shoots. We screamed *HELLO*, our ricocheted voices inside wholly abandoned space, resounding against the metal framework and returning to us larger, stretched. “I can’t believe they would just leave it,” Mary said.

As the sky spilled slowly black, we laid on the cool floor gazing upward at the lights of lifting planes, flaring away from Birmingham. We had walked across our steel city and found a place within it. The lower walls, swallowed with ivy, wafted in warm and curling drafts. We whispered.

“Think if this place were new,” I said.

“It wouldn’t be ours if it were new.”

“No,” I paused. “It wouldn’t be ours.”

Staring out over the city, Mary squints her eyes again. “At night it’s all just flashes,” she says. “You can’t tell what’s underneath.” She flicks the browned end of a cigarette, sending a hazy arch into the underlying foliage. The slow-sloping ridges of the mountain are coated in oaks, and the lights of the city flash erratically between their dark pursed branches. A quiet descent into the valley—I think of them again.

I think of the day we walked for miles to lie in a place that no one else wanted, balancing the rails between beauty and abandonment. We found something that day, but I have no words for it. Something that could only be whispered in ivy, something that cannot be kept. *I want to tell them something.* I want to tell them: We are all beggars.

Mary eases the clutch, and the soft fastening of second gear hums like the city itself. We are back in the valley, the fog-siphoned lights pouring through windows.
untitled 2 (blue & red)
ruthann pike | oil on cavas, paper towel, lace & string | 24” x 36”
My brother and I had been staring at her for ten minutes before she noticed us. Beneath the huge fan, in the heat of the summer, she was so intent in her motions. Her whole body moving back and forth, from the movement of her feet to her broad shoulders, all propelling the palms of her brown hands into the masa dough. The air smelled white and clean just where we stood—the starch of the tortillas, the same smell that overcame my neighborhood each evening at dinnertime. I loved that smell more than any of my mother’s flowery perfumes; it sank inside of me, cleansed me all over.

Putting her dough under a wet towel to rest, the old woman looked up from her tortilla making at us—two gringo kids with unkempt hair and dirty t-shirts, fascinated. Sweat still glistening on her leathery forehead, she grabbed a ball of dough for each of us from the other side of the counter and, wordlessly, handed them to us. My brother promptly ate his and went to look at the piñatas, but I stayed, playing with that ball of dough and gazing at the tortilladora.

Above her hung a sign, Maíz Es La Sangre De México, stretching out above the Mexican flag and the picture of the Virgen. Maíz flowed through her veins, became the tortillas she stamped out each day. Each day that we went to García’s, she was there making them—usually the tortillas de maíz, but whenever she made them from flour, she would give us dough balls to play with. My mother would spend an eternity buying groceries, comparing salsa jars that all looked the same. But I watched the tortilla maker until my mother called me to the front of the store to help her check out.

“Mommy,” I whined, turning my nose up at the packaged tortillas she had picked out. “Can’t we buy the ones hecho de
“Mano?” I begged, pointing back towards the woman making them. Rolling her eyes, she nodded. She never understood my fascination with the tortilla maker—my mother was a blonde-haired, green-eyed gringa who had never seen tortillas before she moved to San Antonio from Michigan. To her, they were all the same. But not to me. I ran back, smiling. “Una docena, por favor,” I said. Nodding, the tortilla maker called back to her daughter, “Leticia, ¡traigame una docena de maíz!” and out came Leticia with the perfect braids and pink barrettes that matched the flowers on her button-up shirt, bringing me a dozen hot tortillas wrapped in white paper. She smiled as she handed them to me, allowing herself to stare at my white skin momentarily before running back behind the counter with her mother.

To me, making tortillas was almost an act of God. Swaying back and forth to the Tejano music played on the radio—that annoying kind with the accordions that sounds so much like polka and is always found on AM stations—she possessed an unfathomable power. I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wanted to be here each day: Garcías, Tienda y Tortillería, sandwiched between a pawnshop and a dollar store, plastered with signs advertising MoneyGram and international phone cards. Kneading the dough, pressing out tortillas, I could cook them just like she did. I wanted to grow my hair into a long braid like hers: black, with specks of gray, hair so long it must have touched the floor when it was not neatly braided and wrapped up into a bun to keep it out of her way. I wanted to wear that same white apron, to be seen from the street, other people’s children looking in at me through a window. If they came inside, I would hand them a piece of my own masa dough for them to play with.

But as I grew older, she noticed me less and less. I was a common sight, standing on the yellowed linoleum floor in front of the jarritos shelf, watching, captivated. My brother lost interest in coming to the store; it was something left to us girls. Suddenly the old tortilla maker was no longer there, her daughter Leticia no longer available to play with me when she felt brave enough to come out from behind the counter. Instead on long afternoons in the store, I was alone. Now there were different girls making tortillas – younger ones. One even had a tattoo. I learned to stop staring.

Mostly.

Only when I am passing by a new tortillería, or when I see them being made in restaurants, do I stop to stare at the yellow maíz tortillas with their small dark spots, or the flour ones with their big brown air-bubble patches. Sometimes they are made with a big machine that does almost everything, sometimes with simpler ones. I stare only until I am noticed, then move on. When I am grocery shopping, though, or waiting for food at Jalisco’s, I make my son go watch the tortilladora. He hates it, he says, but he always eats the dough he gets.

I make my own now that I am too old to watch the process so intently. I bought a comal, a cheap imitation of the old cast-iron styles. I did not grow up to be a tortilla maker, but I still cook them early in the morning, filling my kitchen with that clean smell. Making tortillas is a part of me.
Everyone thinks I am crazy for it. Shocked that a white woman would spend so much time making such a simple food, my friends insist that making our own tortillas is no longer necessary. We have been liberated, they say. My husband even tried to talk me out of it. He never understood why I awoke so early on Saturday mornings to roll out those little balls of dough into flat circles, disturbing him from his only chance to sleep late. I was stubborn. He knew his protests were pointless. Finally he came to accept it; he even bought me a tortilla press.

Each week I make them, so hot they practically melt. I make the flour ones instead of the maíz because I am a pura gringa, and the maíz does not flow through my veins.

I make the recipe I know by heart. Cut the fat into the flour and baking powder mix until it feels like sand. Add hot water. Knead it until you are a part of it, there on that floured surface. Let it rest—always rest. The maíz is not my heritage, but it surrounds me, is everywhere around me, and inside me. It is in my words, my thoughts, my life. That clean smell again, filling the air—it is dinnertime, it tells me, floating in through my nostrils, accompanied by the Tejano music I still hate but cannot stop listening to.

I divide the dough into balls. Una docena, huddled under a wet blanket, waiting to be pressed, to be dropped onto a hot comal. They pop up with the heat. This is not my blood. I grab the tortillas with my fingers and drop them onto a plate. This is something I know, and that is why I must do it.
We had to hold hands to pray once. That was a long time ago—I was starting to forget you. But today I saw a picture of you in your glasses and sweater-jacket, and I remembered how it felt to hold your hand: rough from farm work, motionless. I remember that time we got into an argument over love. You said it was a choice—you were right.

Things are different now. I cross my legs and wear high heels. You can grow a beard and drink alcohol legally, and you probably do both when it suits you. I used to play in your backyard and try to make myself look like a woman for you. You tried to make yourself look like a man, too—but not for me.

You’re still an artist, I see; I saw your sketches. I can imagine you, slouching over a desk with your stubby charcoal pencils, stopping to fasten the top buttons on your old gray sweater because it’s so cold in our little house. And I’d lie, stomach on the carpet, with black coffee and a laptop. You’d walk barefoot over to our tiny stove to stir the tomato soup, thick and red. And I’d look up because you moved, then go back to the novel I was writing.

You might pour a bowl of soup and head off to the bedroom: “You comin’ to bed?” I’d nod, “In a little while.” You’d yawn and scratch your stomach. “Goodnight, then.” Quiet, I’d type a bunch of characters on the keyboard, and you’d think I was too engrossed in my work to say goodnight.
The diner was a fluorescent sanctuary crafted in the likeness of popular Americana—quaint, tin-like, waiting for the troops to come home from Germany. The place was nothing much, but it contained a pleasant plainness similar to that straight-haired, sweet girl that all the guys secretly liked in high school. If this place were a woman, she would be easy to talk to, and would have a smooth, comforting laugh better than jazz. Her lights had a voice, and it beckoned me to come and sit with her for a while.

I wrapped my tired fingers around the cold, bronze handle and flung open the glass door, sliding into the corridor as the glass closed slowly behind me. Now greeting me was a wall of poignantly odors—a mix of coffee, cigarette smoke, and an array of flavored syrups. I felt on my shoulders the smoke and coffee fumes, weighed down by the burdens and thoughts of their users.

I was standing in the front corridor, high walls on either side, functioning as a tunnel leading the wayward, hungry soul to the fluorescent, humming glow of the bakery case. Within it were heavenly treats: pies, muffins, and cakes all seasonally proper, surrounded by the décor of Hobby Lobby Fall cutouts that were a few Thanksgivings past their prime. The employees let their minds wander as they leaned heavily on the great case of treats. One was in Paris, one was in grad school, and one was happy enough just to imagine herself home watching television. Their eyes all gave me a quick, strong shot of disdain because my slumped, backpacked presence meant they actually had to work. One of the ladies put on a face, departed from the team of dreamers, and greeted me at the hostess stand—it stood like a pulpit in the middle of the corridor. The other workers returned to the land of their own daydreams, elbows resting on the bakery case and hands plastered to their faces.

My hostess guided me through the labyrinth of tables while I struggled to keep up, trying not to slam people in the face with my backpack. She made it to the table, a booth set against a wall mainly composed of a large window, and extended her right arm, inviting me to come and sit. I slid into my booth as the hostess placed the menu gently on my table like an artifact. My sliding and shifting made the table move, knocking over a saltshaker which was mostly empty, a few grains of rice left over. This noise let everyone inside know I was there, though not a head turned. I had come to join their world for the night, and they didn’t care.

My waitress had a mean elegance about her. Not much to look at, but she pulled off her homeliness with style through her caked make-up that was two shades darker than her skin tone. She called me “hon” and seemed to sing her deep, raspy words like a chain-smoking lounge singer. She poured my introductory cup of coffee with her whole body while intensely staring down the moving stream of black liquid. Gracefully pulling
up the pot of coffee while straightening her back, she asked for my order. She looked me straight in the eyes. I stated my order quietly—an omelet dish simply named “Number Two.” She responded with a nod and a quick “a’right” and then sauntered off swaying to the tune of the chiming change in her pouch. I swear she was also humming.

I took in the atmosphere while sipping my coffee, lifting up my ceramic cup with two fingers as if the cup itself were weightless. Each booth and table was a separate universe. The lone attendees chewed on their thoughts and washed them down with bitter coffee. The old couples gnawed on their bacon and stared at each other. They did not need words anymore; words are overrated. Young lovers chattered in cherry-cheeked vernacular about all that was fashionable and equally trivial—their clothes, their food, their technology. They wanted to be honest, but that too is overrated.

My table was sticky. Years of customers spilling syrup and employees cutting corners were surely the culprits. The various sauces and dry seasonings were clumped against the wall next to the metal napkin holder. They formed a culinary rainbow of different hot sauces and off-brand ketchups, granting me the power to completely change the taste of my omelet if I so wished. I played with them a while trying not to show I was fantasizing about them being rocket ships.

I could see myself in the window to my right—more than I could see the parking lot outside. Seeing the action of the diner through the reflection, the picture was no different from before. The loners, old couples, and young lovers went on with seemingly rehearsed actions like extras on a movie set. Everything was the same, but strangely intriguing. I heard the old couple say “I love you” to each other, knowing I would never hear another word uttered by them. The young lovers began to talk about religion, wishing they were better than they really were. The loners—they were just there. I believe that was all they wanted to be at the moment.

While I stared into the world contained within the glass, my waitress set my late-night dish down. “Well, you enjoy now, hon,” she said before swaying off yet again. My platter now before me, I waved my hands softly, bringing to my nose the scent of the fresh grease and sautéed onions rising from my country omelet. Letting the steaming dish cool down, I looked again at the moving world to my right reflecting off the glass. I looked at myself this time—one of the loners sitting in his thoughts, a subtle addition to the all-too-familiar atmosphere which is forever reproduced. The same old couples who say nothing, only different faces. The same coffee stains on the carpet, the same out-of-date décor under the same moon, forever a silent witness to the beautiful monotony which is this diner. I grinned awkwardly at myself, not caring if anyone saw, and plunged my fork into the omelet.
in need of healing
heather couch
Beneath the moss-backed trestles, the wooden balustrades damped with rot, you walk a quarter-mile with your eyes to the burdened soil. The gondola cars idling the overhead rails once teemed with unloading, reloading; now emptied again and vacant of even your thoughts. You bow as they seep rainfall. Then brisk steps over cobblestone, where brambles of copper tubing sidle the brickwork and yellowed scrims of ivy flit the heavy air. From here, the smokestacks; soot-charred and rising from the squat tin-roof of the blower house, vast and hollow cylinders of granite where fires are not stoked, kindling not lit. Now you are close to what you came for: the rust-scalded slope of the furnace, the ladder-ribbed tower you climb each day to feel artful, to resuscitate with words what weeds have buried. But Aster is taking his lunch.

The coolness below the blasting chamber, grid-mouthed bulbs dangling from iron rafters, he sits gnawing turkey-on-wheat from a pocked lunch pail and gaping a gray-eyed line in your direction. Best stay off the equipment, he says. I knew meaner men than you, fell right off the stove-heights. Rungs came off in their hands.

Before the closing, you’d never see them again. Myrick Hayes got melted. Bones and all. Built into an airplane or a signpost or a water faucet. Put that in your notebook, he tells you. He tears the dried bread with his fingers,
smiles at you. From the starched breast pocket of his uniform, he lifts a cigarette furrowed with heat, a quick-strike
hissing the hem of his boot sole; the furnace’s last ember. He smokes in silent deft passes from hand to mouth
like a machinist at post, a stove-tender. He offers one and you take it. I ain’t scared of ghosts though, he says.

Jimmy Jones one time, big black fella, they dug his body from under six feet of slag. Been gone a month. Wife thought
he ran out on her, and all along been dead. Fell asleep and never woke up. But no sir, I ain’t scared. Guess
I got more to begrudge than most of them. You wouldn’t know, Aster says. He coughs, cranes his knees to stand
and pitches the spent butt of his cigarette to the high snarled grasses. You forget to not believe him. Among
the steam-ducts, paint flaking off in petals, iron rivets jabbing your thighs, you scrawl black lashes across
manufactured paper; like him, making fossils from fossils; and with each stroke, the bitterness of finding yourself
a man and not a faucet. Aster leaves you beneath the vaulted stove and you stare across the yawning pits
of brushwood where white silos, moored with pipe, waver blankly in humidity. Built, too, for keeping what is dead.
rising
bradley carter | watercolor | 22” x 30”
I never did fall asleep. My mother would come in when the room was dark and I had been lying still for some time. She tiptoed across the old wooden floor, stood next to my bed, and whispered in my ear every night since I can remember. Most of the time she whispered, *I love you*, but other times she would recite a line or two from her favorite poems. Those were my favorite nights. *And we shall be fit fellows for a life, and who remain shall flower as they love, praise to our faring hearts*, and then she whispered, *Dylan Thomas is a genius*.

Sometimes she leaned so far in that I could feel her lips brush against my cheek. The pure sound of her soft voice stilled my nightly thoughts and dropped me off at the edge of reality and dreams. I remember this one night, the night before my mother’s birthday, she came into my room and started to cry. I almost opened my eyes, but then she knelt so close that I felt some of her tears fall from her cheek to mine. She whispered, *You are my sympathy – my better self – my good angel – I am bound to you with a strong attachment*.

My mother was a hippie. Her name was Jane Eyre Mason, named after my grandmother’s favorite novel. My mother loved color, and she used to wear as many colors of the rainbow as she could at one time. She also loved to make jewelry out of buttons. And when it rained, my mother would become so disgusted with the paleness of the sky that she would run outside and start dancing. No matter how hard the rain was coming down, my mother would dance. I stayed inside though, and hid behind the curtains, just watching in embarrassment. But she always explained, “If there is a dance for rain to start, there must be a dance for rain to stop.” She convinced herself of this truth.

She got pregnant with me when she slept with “the most colorful fish in all the sea.” Those were her words for handsome.
She met this fish backstage at a 1968 Bob Dylan concert in Pittsburgh. He was a part of Dylan’s stage crew, and his name was Elliot. That is all I know. The reason I know his name is because she named me after him: Tulip-Kate Juniper Elliot Mason. If boys ever found out what my real name was, I would not hear the end of jokes like, “When are you going to blossom, Tulip?” My name would later be shortened to Tiki—not much better, but it got me through the hard days.

The night my mother cried, I became overwhelmed with curiosity. She never cried. She was the happiest woman I had ever met. She never raised her voice, even when I hated her for rain-dancing or using my full name in front of all my friends just because she wanted me to turn around as I walked the steps into school. She never got mad, not once. But this particular night, she sat on the edge of my bed for a while, just quietly weeping. She cried until her nose had stopped running and her tears had dried up. Then she kissed me on the head and slipped out of my room.

I found an envelope addressed to “Miss Janie My Love” the next morning. It was hidden between our two coffee table books: T.S Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* and Emily Brönte’s *Wuthering Heights*. Inside the envelope was a card, and on the front was a picture of a field of yellow tulips, her favorite flowers. I opened with hesitation and read the words, “I miss you…Love, Elliot.” I remember feeling like someone had punched me in the stomach, and I was momentarily unable to breathe. This was my father, Elliot. I analyzed his handwriting. I felt every square inch of that card, knowing that my own father had once touched it. I stared at the words on the inside until they had all blurred together. It made me feel special, like he was actually writing to me.

Then a strange feeling crept its way from the tips of my toes up to the insides of my pupils. I was angry. Why had he not just *come* to declare his love for my mother? Did he not want to see her? Did he not want to see me? I closed my eyes and imagined him running up the steps to our front porch, sweaty from a long day of hitchhiking across the country, carrying a new toy in his hand to give me, with a cheek-to-cheek smile on his face—his arms wide open for me and my mother. But that was just my imagination. I was bitter because my own father was just a figure of my imagination. He was not real.
That day I found the letter. I also found myself coming home from school to an empty house and an empty closet. My house was colorless; she had taken all her colorful skirts and blouses and scarves, and she ran away with them. My immediate reaction was to cry, but I became so weak in the knees that I fell to the olive-green linoleum floor of our kitchen. I sat there until an hour or so had passed, until I was strong enough to open the freezer door, pull out a half-gallon container of strawberry ice cream, and eat it. With another hour gone, my grandmother came to bring me to her house. My mother once told me that strawberry ice cream cured every hurt and satisfied every need. I was nine years old.

I found out they were living together on the coast of Kauai. He was selling his paintings of the local landscape, and she was a successful jewelry maker, very well-known across the island. These days, I am full of wonders. I wonder if she still uses buttons, if she still hates rain, if she still dances. I consider if she has forgotten her home, if she has forgotten me.

For my mother, rain-dancing was about exposing the colors behind the gray sky and acting silly, spinning until her skirt stuck to her legs and the movement was forced to cease. I do not agree. I am not my mother.

This afternoon it rained. When it started to drizzle, I went outside like she used to. I stood in the middle of my backyard garden, lined with yellow daises and bright green ivy, and rested there until my hair was soaked and my feet were muddied from the fresh-falling droplets. Then I began to move. I danced, spun, and lifted my hands to the sky to stir up the clouds. If the rain slowed, I moved faster. And only when it poured did I finally rest. I met the deafening shower with a still spirit and found my innocence washed away with the pouring rain.
conversation in rain
brynn w. miller | oil on canvas | 20” x 24”
I. Cremations

He sifts through the ashes after each burning. The charred bone that does not burn to ash must be ground, and Peter sifts searching through with gloved hands and a magnet for tooth fillings and the joint-pins that could destroy the grinding machine.

The air is thick with humidity, steaming his glasses and filming over his skin—the sweat does not evaporate; it soaks into the suit his parents bought him for the summer at the funeral home, working for his grandfather. Peter does the cremations himself. “It’s hard to tell one from the next,” he tells me over the phone in the bland cool of air conditioning. “When you’re dressing bodies, every body is different. But when you do cremations, everyone is the same.”

I sit in my bedroom listening to his voice travel the wires over kudzu-covered Mississippi forest and farmland to my house in the outskirts of Memphis, and he murmurs, “It’s so hot that they burst into flames. It looks like I’m throwing the bodies into a furnace, like logs.”

II. Sunless

I work in an office all day on the eighth floor of a city building, windows mirroring the sky and grid work of streets, taxicabs, police, and the homeless on the corners. I bring sweaters to work and enter numbers into my outdated computer, a hand-me-down from past interns. My cubicle, an intern’s cubicle, has no windows, and I feel cold, sunless. “What does a dead body look like?” I ask him, rubbing my cheekbones in the mirror. “Dead,” he tells me.

III. Mr. Klavelle

Saturday, Mr. Klavelle was weed eating in his fenced backyard. The weed eater short-circuited and electrocuted him, and his youngest daughter found him lying there, dead in the half-tended lawn, crushing the dandelions and crabgrass. She touched his face, and the electricity still in him coursed into her; she screamed. I went to his wake to bring flowers, a bundle of lilies and white roses, to his oldest daughter who was a schoolmate of mine.
“Today I saw my first dead body.”
“We played hide-and-seek in the funeral home, when I was little. That’s when I saw my first dead body,” Peter tells me on the phone.

I file papers on lunch break, taking sips of tomato soup from a foam cup during the conversation lulls. “It was like he was sleeping, but he wasn’t sleeping,” I say, shuffling papers, searching for M – Marketing. “I kept expecting him to move, watching for him to move, while we all walked around his body chatting and hugging. But he didn’t move.”

“They aren’t supposed to,” Peter says, and I decide that I do not want a wake.

IV. Photo Album

His grandfather, Jack Coleman, teaches him the business. Jack founded Coleman Funeral Home, met his wife there and raised his family in the A-frame house behind it. On a summer visit from Memphis, he takes me out to Wendy’s for a coke.

“I want you to know the family you’re marrying into,” he says, opening a photo album cluttered with loose photographs, ticket stubs, and other odds and ends that mean something to someone.

“I went to prom with her.” He taps his finger on the black and white photograph of a group of kids, my age, smiling around a dinner table. “And he was my best friend. They both died within a year of each other, not too long ago. We did her funeral, but he was Catholic, so another funeral home did his. Carl, on the right, he isn’t dead yet, but he already talked to us about doing his service.” I nod and look at Carl, grinning up from over his plate of chicken, twenty-years-old, like me.

V. The Hallway

A man in his late forties committed suicide in his mother’s house. The house was small, overtaken by tall grass and rusting junk in the front yard—tricycles, a stove, pieces of cars. A mangy yellow dog growled from beneath the porch, protecting two underfed pups. Peter and the coroner were the last to arrive.

The hallway leading to the far bedroom was narrow and full of officials squeezing past one another, their backs
rubbing along the rose-patterned wallpaper, yellowed from cigarette smoke and age. The smell of blood hung heavy in the air, and the EMTs knew he was dead from the blood pooled on the floor. He had shot himself from the bottom of his jaw with a shotgun full of buckshot. The mother couldn’t understand. “What’s going on? I need to see him. I need to see him, one last time.” She shook the paramedics.

VI. Rubber Bands

“Yesterday I saw a dead woman bleeding from her empty eye sockets. The blood ran down her face and neck and onto the embalming table, all the way down the table.” Peter’s black-frame glasses slip on his face, and his tawny hair that hung in his eyes last fall is short, clean-cut, and approved by his grandfather. It’s the middle of the summer, and we’re walking down Hillshire Road, swinging hands, while my shirt sticks to my back, and I feel the thick air filling the hollows of my lungs. He says, “The room smelled like copper and the veins in the body—they asked me to touch the veins in the body—they felt like rubber bands.”

VII. The Ash

“I hate the death-calls,” Peter says, swinging halfheartedly on the chain and plastic of the playset swing behind the Colemans’ house. He twists in his swing, crossing the rusted chains. He looks over at me. “I go on them with my uncle, the coroner. Suicides are bad, especially the messy ones. But the worst is picking up the stillborn babies. We take them out in paper sacks, like grocery sacks. They’re blue and small—they don’t look real.”

I squint my eyes to look out over their backyard, an empty field with dragonflies hovering in the heat. At my summer job—my résumé builder—I type, copy, and redistribute papers. I don’t touch anything that is real. I drag my bare feet in the grass and dig my toes into the dirt, the soot, the ash.
When you were a notion, hushed and silent with promise, an infant veiled quiet in pregnant frame, a divine touch stirred, hastened, a sudden rousing spark awakened you inside and ignited your being. A pulsing heart replaced nut and bone, earth and water mixed to meet, and you were living.

No longer sleeping, you began to take root, grow, push, and sprout, swelling with each green breath, breaking the solid earth above. A leafy shoot springing, emerging, nut to bud you were born—yawning and opening outstretched arms to the sun, soaking in the promise, when you became new.

The years hastened forward, fledgling to sapling and then virgin tree, trembling, you quivered with the winds of slow change and smoothly unfolded, limbs spread out like fingertips reaching out in one perfect waving sweep. Brilliant and silver-tongued, blossoming, you thrived.

More ancient than any one man, silvered maple turned whitened ash above the timberline and below the bloodline, your gnarled body grasped at veined leaves, deep roots surviving cracked and collapsed beneath a weathered frame. Bare as bone on bone and fossilized you slept, while we watched you fade to dust and bronze dirt, sighing.
depression & hope
josh wilkerson | photograph | 5” x 7”
Bios

Benjamin Bailey is a junior Digital Media Studies major. Senior Will Calvert doesn’t cater to senior citizens when it comes to font size. Bradley Carter is a sophomore Drawing/Painting major. Kellyn Clay is a freshman PR/Advertising major. Heather Couch is a senior Education major. Hudsonville, Michigan native Sally Goulooze is a junior majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language. Freshman Michael Grubb is “good” at “dancing.” Andrew Gray wishes poetry was more like chocolate chip pancakes. Aaron Hardin is the epitome of high tech, low class. Emily Hurst is a senior Education major who foods her salt. Debra Howell thinks she should consider a career as a mobster after graduation. Junior Laura Jackson really did grow up speaking Spanglish. Heather Kapavik is a junior English major. Cody King studies philosophy in the library. That Brynn Miller, she’s so chartreuse right now. English major Sarah Nadaskay grows trees in buckets in her room. Senior Ellen Alexandria Ordóñez constantly talks about the dangers of processed, hormone-filled, partially hydrogenated, high fructose foods. Junior Painting major Ruthann Pike plans on painting until she loses her eyesight. Then she plans to die. Renee Roberson is an English major from Memphis, Tennessee, who likes cake. Cake. Cake. Cake. Mmm. Lauren Smothers hasn’t lived long, but she did live in London. Senior Art major Josh Wilkerson likes to listen to hip-hop and country at the same time.

union students may send submissions for the torch to:

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