I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices. I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices.

reluctant tears, like raindrops balancing on the petals of morning glory.

I couldn't help but wonder if I had just written a beautiful poem.

He saw the rejection. Sweet, but sinister. A concrete blow.

And you were never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach. I could pull back my desire, but it was never within reach.

The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams.

Providing a creative venue for student expression, our house was visited each evening in a cloud of diesel smoke. Our house was visited each evening in a cloud of diesel smoke. Our house was visited each evening in a cloud of diesel smoke. Our house was visited each evening in a cloud of diesel smoke.

A pillar of fire on the top of the hill. The Peel. The silence of a turned away.

The defile in her lips. The Peel. The silence of a turned away.

The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams. The same should apply for dreams.

The PEEL is a student run literary arts magazine, which aims to provide Appalachian State University with a creative venue for student expression. Submissions are reviewed anonymously by the respective committees - art, graphic design, fiction, non-fiction and poetry - each of which plays an integral role in the magazine's production. Each piece published herein reflects the view of its author or artist only. Funding for The PEEL is provided by Student Development, Academic Affairs and the Student Activity Fee. The magazine is available to students and faculty free of cost. Printing services were provided by Sterling Source, Inc. at a rate of $4.33 per book.

For more information, e-mail thepeel@appstate.edu or visit thepeel.appstate.edu

Cover Art:
Graphic Design
Justin Allen, Sarah Mosseller and Torey Heinz
A Note from the Editor . . .

Someone once referred to this project as my baby, a growing beautiful creation now in its terrible twos. Admittedly yes, like a toddler, this magazine has faced countless problems in its second year, but I am proud to say that due to a dedicated editorial board, diligent staff and talented group of faculty advisors, The PEEL has fought through those growing pains and ultimately prospered. It is my hope that the students and faculty of this university will adopt this project wholeheartedly and allow it to further develop, mature, flourish.

Appalachian houses an immense body of talent that should not, cannot go unnoticed. In reading and viewing this magazine, please recognize that each piece is the creation of an undergraduate student, a person striving to release, to inspire, to indulge in his or her impactful talent. This publication aims to serve both the artist and the audience.

On a more personal but certainly no less emotional note, I want to thank all those involved, those who came to the first, second and third meetings and who still remain on staff, those who learned to operate software programs in only hours, who papered the campus in the rain, who took on additional responsibilities without complaint. To those who supported, remained positive and whose efforts made this production possible, I am in debt to each and all of you, the core to this otherwise empty shell.

Appalachian, The PEEL is in your hands.

From an overly attached editor,

Amy Saltmarsh

Amy Saltmarsh
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Dogwood
Mandy Simmons

petals of flowers
softly drift from the tree
blush pink teardrops
flutter down
like snow
a million dying dreams
change shades in the grass
frozen dew,
the wave of quiet hands
soon soft pink petals
become golden crisp brown
and blow away

I reach out
to grasp
the remains
Finding Kerouac
Hallie Cardé

I.
When we first met he was a woman
on one Greyhound
with twenty-four stops.
Somewhere amid bus token travel
I learned that ears are ugly things
and eating the crust
makes hair grow curly.
She had just enough youth in her eyes,
didn’t see the No Vacancy illuminated
in my aisle seat.

II.
The second time,
Leaves were catching in the wipers,
it reminded him of being fulfilled
by finger-paint strokes.
But that was years earlier;
he was not yet addicted to being halfway there.
Under the shield of the stadium glare,
white light hiding
What ran out of ink on the inside,
our exterior flaws
had already been set to paper.
He lied and said he quit
because tomorrow was just pocket change.

III.
The last time,
we were leaving Lowell, Massachusetts
awaiting a submarine to anywhere
but old and familiar.
We discussed leaving
Middle America to drown in self-discovery.
He couldn’t stay drifting,
looked bad in seersucker,
and hated Ginsberg at first.
When his hat tipped
he was proud his first name rhymed with his last,
promising I hadn’t seen anything yet.

Throw together some well-timed inspiration, the advice
of a mentor who lives a life of poetry, and many nights
spent reading On the Road by Jack Kerouac and this
poem is the result. It’s both a journey and a promise,
while filling all the small spaces in between.
There is so much silence. Who knew that silence could be so loud? It consumes everything; every corner, every shadow, every small blade of grass, even the air I breathe. I can't remember all the days that led up to now. I'm not even sure they matter. All the days before this moment pale in comparison and slip away into a consciousness that I cannot reach. I don't want to reach, for fear I'll fall.

So here I stand in black-heeled shoes that feel too small from standing so long, feet sweaty and dirty from the upturned earth. I have been standing so long that my feet have been forced forward by gravity, mutilating my toes against the point of my shoe. I wiggle to ease my cramped toes but they have long since fallen asleep. My arches are under so much pressure from the height of my heels that I can feel my bones separate. They slide in the acute sweat gathering against my soles. I rock to get comfortable, but it only severely knocks the bones together. The pain is harsh and quick, and leaves a dull throb to follow. I don't dare move again.

The August sun brings no real light, only a blinding and beating haze that settles over my eyes and burns my dark brown hair. The midday sun contorts the bloody clay to a dry rusty dust. It forces itself into me with every unsteady breath I take. It clouts in my veins and clings to the roof of my mouth. The huge mound of dirt at my feet crumbles, falling apart... my life erasing in the heat of the day.

I stare at the minister as he continues to drone on and on,
a plastered frown and practiced sympathy creases his brow and pours from his mouth. It's like sludge, a gross imitation of mud. I see it drip out from his thin chapped lips, down his chin, onto his pristine white shirt; a stain growing above the ivory of his heart.

The sun continues to beat down, relentless, with no breeze for relief. The air is too dry for tears. If I could even form one, I'm sure it would just lift away from my face, like the sand on top of a dune. I see it drift off my cheek as it swirls down, like the inside of an hourglass, it spills into the square pit in the hard ground.

I just want to get out of these shoes. I don't want to be here anymore. I might vomit, I should have eaten something. That nasty, sympathetic tone makes my heart lurch, my spirit twist, and I bleed through the ears. The words the minister lectures mean nothing to me. And nothing to these people that are uncomfortable, daydreaming and shifting.

I look around and all I see is a blur of flesh colored circles and cubes of black. It looks like a five year old finger painting, clumped and smeared. They're all wearing black shoes, black dresses... holding black purses, black headed car keys. They shift, uncomfortable; the only moisture in the cemetery pours from their foreheads, along their necks, marches down their spines, and in-between their legs, finally gathering in their shoes. So they shift.

Shut up! His name is Ethan! He was my life, everything I dreamed of, everything I counted on... gone. What do you do when it's gone, everything you've planned for? What do you do after you've spent your whole life planning for a future that no longer exists... that was ripped away from you by chance?

Go away. Just go away. Disappear, be gone! I'll count to three, when I open my eyes, I'll still be in bed and you will all be gone.

One.
Two.
Three.

Light stings my eyes and blinds me, but I can still see the black. Like a forever spot that tarnishes my eyes and leaves its mark, a black baptism. I feel the dampness gather in my eyes and it strangles me. I tilt my head, avoiding the fall as long as possible. But by tipping back, the emotional mucus that had plugged up my nose pours down my throat, I cough. I choke, people stare at me. Stay strong. My heart stutters in my chest. My knees buckle, and I embrace the blackness that swallows me up.

"... Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we return to the Lord. Find it in your heart to forgive Ethan Sanders, oh God, as we await the day we will see him again at your table, Lord. Thy mercy is great. In your name we pray, Amen."

"Amen," the crowd regurgitates.

I felt that people were taking my hand. They were hugging me, these oppressive figures in black. Their tears rubbed and adhered to my cheeks, made my dress sticky. Every hug piled on sympathy, until it was a wool blanket that pressed me into the ground and submersed me in the unforgiving August. They suffocated me with kindness, 'I'm sorry', and 'Call us'. I just want to get out of these shoes...
Then they were gone and I was alone, standing in front of Ethan's casket. In front of the open earth that would eat him up. The dirt that would hide him from me and never let him go. The tears came then and I did nothing to stop them. I fell to my knees; the fall crushing the rigidness in my bones and ripping my pantyhose. I fell so far down in that moment, in that dirt, that I was sure I would never surface again. My love was gone. He was drenched in the red dirt that coated my mouth. In the mud that it made against my cheeks. In the bronze it made my wedding band. The dirt piled against my chest like mounds of rocks that would soon pile against his casket.

I found my voice for the first time in hours, needing to speak even though there would be no reply. "What will I do without you? I cannot live through this. You promised me you'd come back to me. How ironic you did, in a flag covered box. You swore to me. No heroics. You promised--me--you... would be back. Not like this. I can't keep wishing every day that this is just some dream that I'm going to wake up from. Ethan... baby... why? Oh God, why? I waited... I waited--for you, I waited a year... and it only took a second to lose you. Oh baby, it hurts. I'm burying my heart with you today. I can't live with it, beating with my love for you in my chest. And oh it beats, like some wild thing. Like the machine that gunned you down."

I yelled and bitched at the hole in the ground. I screamed in fury and anguish, my despair echoing in the empty churchyard to smack me back in the face. I beat myself blue with echoes. "Amelia? Come on sweetheart, there's no need to yell."

I can't stop, the sounds tear from me. Uncontrollable, distorted, bleak sounds convulse out of my sallow body. "Amelia... sweetheart..." Arms enfold me, bare arms in a white t-shirt. Skin so soft and cool it was like hugging the grass under an old shady tree.

"Daddy?"

"Hey Millie." I sagged, finally.

"Oh Daddy... I'm going to die."

"Hush now." I felt his hand against my back, brushing off the blanket of red dirt and grass. The dirt that had crushed me into the ground and rolled in my stomach, making me gag. It lifted so easy under his hand, and clung so easy to mine. But no matter how many strokes of his gentle calloused palms, the dirt had seeped into my pours, becoming black-headed sores that oozed. I was consumed by my self-inflicted disease--this love.

"Ethan's gone." I heard my voice, weak and strained from my crying, so different from my laugh. How did this happen?

"I know baby, deep breaths. We'll get through this. Just you wait and see."

"I love him so much."

"He always knew that baby. He was a smart boy, your Ethan."

I laughed, brittle and broken. "Smart is what got him killed."

"No, smart got him you. Some brain-washed fool got him killed."

I buried my face hard in his neck, rubbing off mud and mascara. I shook all over; nothing I tried could get my body to stop. I just shook and cried, and shook... and cried some more. I cried until my arms were empty, bone-dry as the August air.

I finally took off my shoes. My feet were the same red against white as the strips on our nation's flag, the bruises just as blue. But there was a small relief in my shed tears and freed feet. I could almost feel Ethan's hands on my feet, as he rubbed the hours of standing out of them. I could feel his beautiful, sun-kissed hair against my cheek. I could
feel the touch of his lips in my hair. I could see myself wrapped tightly in his arms. He never let me go. But he asked me to let go of him. I don't think I can, for anything.

When I opened my eyes, I realized I was face-first in red clay and that the churchyard was indeed empty, of everyone. I did not know how long it has been, or how long I grieved on the ground. Ethan's casket was buried...

I wonder what the man who buried him thought of his wife, sobbing on the ground, refusing to leave. I decided I didn't care. I sat up on my knees. My eyes were caked open with the soup of my tears, my throat raw with it. I had felt my father here holding me close, but I know now that he has gone from me. The yard, if you ignore the graves, brings a sense of peace in the dwindling light. The light glows against the vases of flowers and lays flush against the manicured grass. With the lack of sun comes the much-blessed cool. I feel the air shift around me, lifting the plastered ends of my hair. I do not see my shoe. I don't really care: I curl my toes into the chilly grass, letting my head fall back. I ignore the impending urge to look forward, allowing myself just a tiny bit of relief.

But in the end I straighten my head and push my gaze forward to the bleakness I wish I could avoid forever. The cold, unforgiving reality of pewter grey stone sat before me.

Ethan Allen Sanders  
Born December 12, 1985, died July 22, 2006  
Beloved Husband, heroic soldier.  
Psalm 62:5-7

I say the words of the verses in my head, trying to find the peace I should in the promise of the words. "For God alone, my soul waits in silence, He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall not be shaken."

God... I am shaken. I am broken, I am bleeding, I am hurt, I am alone, I am weak, I am sick, I am hot, my soul is cold... I am so many things, all of which say, "I am shaken."

Where do I go? I breathe, but my life has ended here today. I stand on numb feet and sore ankles. I see Lt. Lukers, standing in the parking lot by his old Ford truck, waiting to take me back to my home on the base. A home I'm forced by military protocol to vacate in a matter of two weeks. No time to grieve. My mother is in Iowa but I do not like her. My father is dead. Ethan is dead.

I can't do this; I wish I could convince myself that I'll make it through. But I'll just have to wait and see. I know that I will never love like I loved Ethan. It will take a lifetime to forgive my country for this ridiculous war that stole him from me. Now I'll never know how it would be to share my life with him. I only got the end of his, and he a small piece of mine...

I suppose Iowa will have to do.
Groggy
it's white outside the sky fell down clouds
ran out of fuel and plummeted like peaches off my tree
it wasn't mine it was my neighbors but i watched it close
everyday it was mine outside the peaches fell
down why is it white the clouds are
hanging in the mine my neighbors plummeted outside in the sky
I watched my tree run out of fuel it's white
Like peaches everyday my neighbor fell down in the mine

I watch clouds hanging in the sky
digital photography

THE RESTLESS
SLEEPER ALPHABET

Ren Toner
She showed up on my doorstep, late one Thursday night. It'd been months since I'd seen her last and I was finally getting to the point where I didn't think about her every day. I guess she knew that on some level, and that's what brought her to my front porch that chilly October night. She stood in the doorway and I watched her blue eyes fill with reluctant tears, like raindrops balancing on the petals of morning glories. The streetlight across the parking lot was directly behind her, and the backlit effect made her golden curls look like a halo. Even the demons of Hell were once angels, I thought. I hesitated for a moment. Deep down I knew that inviting her in was a bad idea and that nothing good could come of it. I knew I should have turned her out on the street. I knew I should have shut the door in her face and shut her out of my life forever. I knew I was going to invite her in.

The first time I met her, I never imagined that I'd wind up spending the next two years wondering whether or not we were still dating. I was surprised that she'd even spoken to me, acknowledged my existence. It's not that I can't get girls. I've been told that I'm cute, in a boyish way, and that counts for something. But I've never been the guy who gets those girls, the ones who can walk into a room and be sure that every eye in the place is on them.
Everything about her completely entranced me; her obscenely blue eyes hooked me. Her blonde curls reeled me in and her detached boredom with everything in this world had me willing to drag myself through the bowels of Hell to see her smile just once. When I found myself in her arms that first night, I wondered if maybe I’d accidently sold my soul to the devil.

Gin, clove cigarettes and jasmine. It’s a singularly unique smell, sweet, but a little bit acrid, alluring, but a little bit dangerous. It’s what she always smelled like. She followed me into the kitchen and slumped into one of the chairs at my chipped and stained table. I mixed a gin and tonic for her and started to grab a beer from my wheezing old fridge, but decided that whiskey on the rocks would do a better job of ... whatever. We spent a while catching up, talking about this movie or that, mutual friends, the weather; we made the idle small talk of two people who aren’t yet drunk enough to be anything but polite. I watched her talking, barely listening to what she was actually saying, just watching her lips as they formed her words. It was too easy to believe any lie off of those lips. Even when she smiled, she still seemed pouty, and when she was really pissed her lips drew up into a pucker that begged to be kissed.

I still occasionally think about the not unpleasant pain of those kisses, the way her labret always managed to cut my lip, the taste of blood and gin and clove smoke. By the third or fourth drink, the conversation had shifted. No, I wasn’t seeing anyone. Yes, I’d gone on a few dates with Kyra, that “skinny little whore” from work. No, that one hadn’t worked out. Yes, I had the apartment to myself while Sara did her internship up in New York. No, Sara and I weren’t sleeping together; don’t be absurd. I didn’t bother to ask her the same questions. I was doing a decent enough job of acting like I didn’t care anymore, and I didn’t want to give away my bluff. Plus I knew she could either lie or tell the truth, and I couldn’t decide which one would bother me more. A year or so before, when things had been better between us, I was always grateful that she at least took the trouble to lie to me, but that night I wasn’t in the mood for it.

Our glasses were both getting close to empty, and watching her was starting to get the better of me so I got up and started mixing another round of drinks. When I turned around she was out of her chair, walking towards me. No, walking wasn’t quite the right word. What she did was more of a slinking glide, her stride timed perfectly to accentuate every curve. Her gait was fluid, feline, like a tigress stalking her prey. She’d caught me off guard and for a moment I stood transfixed, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to react, unable to even form a complete coherent thought. She leaned in close, and for a moment I let myself savor her unique gin and clove smoke and jasmine perfume.

I knew I was getting back into trouble. I knew that I didn’t care.
Thank You for Calling
Renée V. Eble

I'm afraid of the prerecorded voices
of those fake women operators.
Their voices telephonically humanized,
but with no mind behind.

They read on monotonously
while your voice is of no interruption.
The only way of communicating is through the loud,
hurried, pound of numbered answers
taking you through a maze of listed options.

I'm afraid of those prerecorded voices
when they hang up on me.
As if for the first time they have come alive
and made a choice.
Wailing Wall
Jacob Daniels

graphite
Dans mon esprit enfantin,
Vous étiez dans une tente dorée,
Avec un chameau, à côté du buisson-ardent.
Vous étiez immobile, calme, silencieux, et
encerclé par les bédouins,
qui dansent -
Et dansent et bougent.

Un pilier de feu sur l'horizon.
Et vous n'étiez jamais dans le noir.

La réalité est toujours différente.

Le vent du désert sur les dunes
De sable touchait la courbe de votre tête,
Gris avec sagesse ou, peut-être,
La tension des bombes
leurs piliers de feu
les balles,
Les sons de mort,
Votre grande tristesse,
L'obscurité tombait encore et encore sur
l'odeur de mort
Et
La distance entre vous

Et nous.
Project E: Dad in war
(I buried the yellow ribbon, not you)
Amanda Musick-Bradshaw

In my child-like mind,
You were in a golden tent,
With a camel, beside the burning bush.
You were still, calm, silent, and
Surrounded by Bedouins,
That dance
And dance and move.

A pillar of fire on the horizon.
And you were never in the dark.

Reality is always different.

The wind of the desert on the dunes
Of sand touched the curve of your head,
Grey with wisdom or, maybe,
The stress of the bombs
Their pillars of fire

The bullets,
The sound of death,
Your grand sadness,
Darkness fell again and again on
The smell of death
And
The distance between you

And us.

This poem is about my dad. He left for Desert Storm, in the Persian Gulf, when I was nine. It was an indescribably hard time, especially for my mother. My 6 sisters and I would gather around the television and watch the news. The scud missiles would fly over the green sky of Kuwait, through night vision cameras...
I escaped into a world of pretend and romanticized his situation. We didn't have to bury my dad. He came home a year later. I took the yellow ribbon down from the Mimosa tree in the yard and buried it in the lower garden. I was only ten years old but I knew exactly what it meant, what it could have meant, to me.
It was hot and the thin linen sheets stuck to the curve of Brent’s ass. The ceiling fan weakly stirred the air. Any faster, and it would wobble and creak with every turn. That wouldn’t let Brent sleep, so he turned it low, low as it could go. Laura asked him to turn it on full blast. He told her to listen to all that squeaking. She rolled on to her side away from him. Brent didn’t feel like trying to say anything. To what end? He got what he wanted. But he felt she was hiding something from him. It was quiet, so he listened to the calming rustle of the palm leaves outside in the moonlight. The hotel room window was thrown open. He listened for a while. He turned onto his back and let the breeze brush the sweat off his chest. He didn’t want anything to bother him. This was Bacalar. A vacation from the vacation. A small town just a few kilometers inland from Cancún. A town with dusty streets. A town with the lingering smell of perpetually cooking fish and wet sand.

After a while, his mind slowly came back to her. Brent didn’t know if she was asleep or icing him out. He thought that she was simply insecure about getting into bed with him; most girls were, but she knew what she was doing. She was conscious of what her beauty caused. The half-assed attempts from guys in cargo shorts. The free drinks. Tired lines. She knew them all. But Brent knew she was accustomed to that. He knew he was beyond that. Brent smiled when he thought of it. He imagined young men, in the bars down near Playa del Carmen and up near hotspots like Cancún, with their hands in their pockets walk up to her. He pictured her at the bar. By herself. He saw the rejection. Sweet,
but sinister. A concrete blow in her glance. The defiance in her lips. The silence of a turned shoulder. The same shoulder that now turned so coldly away from him.

He remembered the night he met Laura, not even a week ago. He left his room at the Hotel Laguna Bacalar and crossed the cobblestone street to have dinner at a place he had known for years. It was a simple place. Folding Coca-Cola tables, plastic chairs, thatched roof, concrete floor and a solid mahogany bar. That's why Brent liked it. No one knew about it. It was far enough removed from the fast-paced nightlife of the coast that tourists rarely ventured to it. There were no night clubs in Bacalar. No hotel chains. No real paved roads. None of the distractions. But as Brent walked up to the restaurant he saw a girl sitting off to the side looking out over the lagoon. Her legs were crossed and she was sitting back with a beer hanging from her fingers. He noticed the dress she was wearing first. Light, white linen. The neck of the dress dipped low on her chest, dotted with stitched flowers. Traditional Mexican decorations. Brent found it odd that she looked in her face, in her cheekbones, irrevocably American. He walked up to her.

"It's even prettier at night, don't you think?" he said.

She turned to him quickly, but didn't say anything for moment which made him feel odd standing there.

"What is?"

"Well, the lagoon. All the lights from docks dotting the edge, don't you think?"

"Beautiful. It's why I keep coming back."

"Same here. I've been coming back here for years. It's quiet. Secretive. No one really knows it's out here."

"Where are you from? If you don't mind me asking."

"From? That's a loaded question. I'm from a lot of places. You mean where was I born, where is it I call home, my hometown? Because each of those is different."

She paused for a moment and looked into Brent's eyes. She took a sip of beer, uncrossed her legs and leaned on to the table.

"Why don't you sit?"

Brent sat. He watched her take a few more sips of beer and liked that her hair was down despite the heat of the night.

"But you first," she said. "You don't seem like the kind of guy to be here alone in such an out of the way place."

Brent laughed. "That's just it, though. Who the hell is going to bother me out here? Not the drunk kids up in Cancun, not lost tourists."

"Ah, you're like me then."

"But you look like the kind of girl that would get along in a place like that."

"I do. Too much, actually. That's where I work. In Cancun. You see, I'm a concierge at the Four Seasons up there. So I get all the pale tourists asking the same questions, going the same places. Tulum, Chichen Itzá, Cozumel. It gets old too, with all the rich kids coming down on daddy's money," she seemed to trail off. As if listing her frustrations was going to offend Brent. But he enjoyed it.

"Been doing that a long time, then?"

"About six years. Came down after graduating at Miami. I have a degree in Tourism and Management. I had to do something with it. I didn't think I could make it past the first couple of years, away from home and all, then I heard from some of the cleaning guys at the hotel that Bacalar was off the map, so I drove out here one weekend to see it."

21
"By yourself?"

"No boyfriend or fiancé, if that’s what you mean. I’m not the real adventurous type, but damn, after those first years, I needed some place to go. How about you, mister?"

"It’s not that interesting, really."

"Oh, come on. You’re in Bacalar. How the hell did you end up here?"

"Well then, if you must know, I grew up near Cancún. My parents had a little bed and breakfast near Playa del Carmen."

"But you’re American, right?"

"Oh sure, just that we came down here when I was young. Went back for college. Came back here after working four years in a cubicle. Been working in Chetumal for the last two, working with real estate developers. Golf courses, resorts, hotels," he paused. "You must be a strong woman to come down here by yourself."

She smiled and nodded, then hung her head slightly as if to take the compliment to heart.

"What do you say we have something to eat?"

"Please, Laura," she said as she held out her hand. Brent shook it and introduced himself. Brent ordered grilled huachinango with squeezed lime, rice, beans and a tequila. Laura asked him what was good and he suggested the ceviche. They ate dinner well into the hot night. Brent ordered more tequila and Laura ordered beers. They made small talk the whole night, never venturing into any conversation too formal. After talking and laughing, Brent suggested they walk over to the central plaza for the carnival. It was, after all, a Sunday night. He insisted. He offered to take her to get some flan and dance with the locals while the marimba band played. Brent was excited to go, but Laura rejected the offer. She told him she loved to dance, but not with so few people and certainly not to marimbas. Instead, he offered to walk her back to her room at the hotel. Talking, they meandered along the dusty cobblestone street, but only enough to keep the silence at bay. He tried to keep things light, funny, keep her smiling. When they reached her room, he bade her good night, but stood there for a moment, waiting. Laura caught him and laughed.

"Oh no, mister, I don’t think so. I don’t even know you. I’m not that kind of girl."

"I didn’t say a damn thing."

It was formulaic for Brent. He leaned in to kiss her and saw her resist for a moment, but she relented and kissed him. She drew back slowly after kissing him.

"That’s it," she said firmly. Brent knew it too. He told her good night and walked back down the stairs to his room. Before he went in, he sat on the railing looking out over the lagoon. He breathed in heavily and smelled the brackish air. Then, a few doors down, he saw a young lady trying to wrestle her bags into her room. Brent knew it too. He told her good night and walked back down the stairs to his room. Before he went in, he sat on the railing looking out over the lagoon. He breathed in heavily and smelled the brackish air. Then, a few doors down, he saw a young lady trying to wrestle her bags into her room. Odd time to check in, he thought. She looked his way as if to say ‘sorry for the noise.’ She waved apologetically and he waved back. He turned into his room and shut the door.

Brent woke up the next morning around ten. Early for a Mexican breakfast. He went down to the hotel restaurant, which was more like a collection of tables on a wide concrete veranda that looked over the lagoon like every other place in the hotel. The breeze was strong and made it pleasant to sit outside. An old waiter walked up to him and asked what he’d like.

"Buenos días, señor, le puedo ofrecer algo para desayunar?" he said.
"Un orden de chilaquiles de pollo con huevos revueltos, si es posible, y un vaso de jugo de naranja, por favor."
"Por supuesto, Y tortillas?"
"Tortillas de maiz, gracias."
"Para servir, señor," he said, shuffling off to the kitchen. He was waiter and cook.
"Breakfast of champions," came a voice from behind him.
Brent turned and saw Laura in a white bikini and ankle-length white skirt. Her skin shone dark brown in the sunlight. Her top may have been a size too small or she liked to show off her cleavage, like last night.
"I hope you’re hungry. I don’t know if I can finish it all," Brent said.
"Already ate. I’m headed to the cabanas down the street to lay out in the grass. They have a dock that’s covered at the end. It’s got a hammock."
"Is that an invitation?"
"Maybe, but you’ve got your breakfast to eat. You’re too late."
"How about we go snorkeling later, down at the south end, if you’re up to it?"
"Maybe. Deep water scares me and some of the fish in there are huge. I can just meet you for dinner at El Recife. You know it?"
"Of course I know it."
Laura gave him a smirk of satisfaction. She put on her sunglasses and walked past him to the stairs that led out to the cabanas. The old man came out from the kitchen and put the steaming plate on the table. Brent thanked him and turned to eat his breakfast. He took a big bite of the fresh eggs mixed with green salsa.
Brent spent the rest of the day around town. He popped into the cantina for a tequila and a beer when it was too hot to keep walking. He talked to the man behind the bar for a while. The man had owned the place for twenty years, he told Brent. He was there before the hotel, before there were the docks. Most of the people that had been there at the time were simple fishermen. The town had changed too much for him. But the tourists brought in more money. He had a wife who was down the street with other wives weaving dresses. Brent asked about the tourists. Brent never saw many gringos, if any. Not all tourists are gringos, the bartender reminded him.
To Brent, Bacalar still had that small town feel, but to the bartender, it had already been lost. He thanked the bartender for the drinks and walked down to the market. He bought a few hand-stitched shirts, a churro, a Coca-Cola in a glass bottle and a bag full of limes to take back to the hotel for the tequila.
Back at the hotel Brent decided to take a quick swim. The sun was melting the sky with burning hues and it was still hotter than hell out. The lagoon was cool, refreshing. It stung like the ocean, but cooled like a lake. Over the years Brent could not get over the way the lagoon made him feel: Not in a cooling, physical sense, but a fluid state of mind where he forgot about everything. One of those nostalgic, distant, far-off feelings. He loved the blue hue of the lagoon. The lagoon of seven colors, the locals called it. Impossible to describe to those who hadn’t seen it, he liked to think. But the sun finally set and Brent went to change for dinner.
El Recife was a pretty upscale restaurant for Bacalar. Tablecloths, candles, real silverware, waiters who didn’t cook. A real fancy place. The restaurant sat on a limestone bluff over the lagoon. The place was dimly lit. The candles on the tables flickered over their faces. Their table was against a varnished bamboo railing that looked out over the dark lagoon. Brent wore a guayabera he bought on a trip to La Habana. His linen pants waved softly in the breeze that came over the balcony. Laura wore a simple red cotton dress. The neck almost plunged to her
tavel. They ordered conch fritter appetizers. Had smoked marlin for dinner. Drank white wine. Brent recounted in detail his excursion through the city. What he bought. Described how no one else could possibly have the same hand-stitched shirts he bought and were therefore a symbol of his knowledge of travel. He explained to her what the bartender told him and how he never thought of tourists other than gringos. It fascinated him. Laura quietly nodded as he spoke. She ate small portions from her plate, trying to make it last all dinner. She sipped slowly from her wine. She interjected a small, “oh,” or “that’s interesting,” when it was due. When Brent finished, Laura talked about her challenging day trying to stay in the sun as the palm trees created shade over her as the sun moved. Not long after she started talking Brent suggested they walk back to the hotel and watch the moon over the lagoon.

They sat quietly on the wide veranda in front of her room. There was a long wicker seat that faced the lagoon and they sat side by side. Brent casually draped his arm over her shoulders. They were warm. Laura occasionally noted a passing fruit bat or fishing boat. Then, almost without thinking, with a subtle twist of his arm, he leaned her face toward him and kissed her. She didn’t expect it but immediately pulled his head toward her. They kissed for a few minutes. Then Brent stood up and pulled her up by her shoulders. Laura pushed him toward the wall just outside her room and Brent playfully let her. She pushed him hard. She opened the door to her room and pulled him in by the arm.

Nothing stood out to him. Nothing that he hadn’t experienced before. But maybe it was the wine at dinner. At the same time it wasn’t. Somehow, he kept coming back to it. She knew what she was doing. She was great at it. Really great at it. It was sensual and slow. Something set her off when he mentioned the squeaking fan, though. Maybe his voice brought her back to reality. Back to the hot room. Back to what they had just done. Brent lay there. Afraid to say anything. He got what he wanted. So he got out of bed naked, pulled on his pants, walked over to Laura’s side, kissed her and wished her good night. Laura never moved a muscle. He walked out the door and up the stairs to his room.

The girl with the bags from the night before was out on the veranda. She wore a tight, short dress that showed off her curves. Brent felt embarrassed with the pile of clothes in his hands.

“Long night out,” he tried to explain.

“Looks like it. Didn’t know there were any clubs around here,” she joked.

Brent put on his shirt. He saw the young lady turn away from him to give him his privacy. He pulled out his key, unlocked his door and walked in. He didn’t turn on any lights. A light breeze was coming in through his window so he lay down on his bed. He rested there for a while staring out the window. He could hear the young lady humming softly outside. Brent listened for another few moments. “Why not?” he asked himself. He got out of bed and walked on to the balcony.

“This might sound strange, but would you like to have a glass of wine or something? I don’t mean to impose on your evening or anything,” he said to the girl.

“It’s no imposition. I’ve got a bottle of Concha y Toro here and it’s still an early night,” Brent was surprised. He made his invitation on impulse. Out of courtesy. He never expected her to accept. Much less to offer a bottle of her own wine. “Good choice. I’ll be right out. I have a bottle of Casillero del Diablo.”

He went into his room, changed his pants, changed his shirt and grabbed the bottle of wine and a bottle opener. When he went back out, the young lady was sitting in an old equipal sofa on the wide terrace, which overlooked a few
palms and the silent lagoon. There were no other chairs so he sat down on the far side of the sofa and placed his bottle of wine on the matching table.

“Hope you like this wine,” Brent said. “It’s from a special cellar in their vineyard. That’s about all I know.”

“That is the name, you know? Casillero del Diablo. The Devil’s cellar.” She laughed.

“I was trying to sound intelligent. Damn, you got me. I’m Brent.”

“Daniela,” she said. Her accent came out when she said her name.

“Oh, brasileira. You’re Brazilian.”

“You can tell?”

“Of course. It’s almost like an Italian accent, but smoother, prettier and faster.”

Brent poured her a glass of wine. She thanked him, held up the glass and took a sip. Then another longer one.

“I thought I lost my accent. I guess after so many years it slips away. Except when I drink. It comes out.”

“Drink a little more then. It’s a beautiful accent. One of the prettiest, I think.”

“That’s what my fiancé always says.”

Brent coughed. “Fiancé? I haven’t seen him. I thought it was just you that checked in.”

“Well, he’s off doing his thing. We flew in to Cancún from Miami for a week for a vacation we planned months ago. Months ago. The day after we landed he told me he wanted to take a three day deep sea fishing trip. He left yesterday morning. I don’t know why I let him. I guess I thought that letting him go would show him how he was just leaving me there.”

Brent poured her another glass of wine. He filled it this time.

“That’s just ridiculous.”

“Isn’t it? I couldn’t believe it. So, I thought I would take a trip of my own. I asked around our hotel for a good place to visit, a place that was quiet, and they all said to visit Bacalar.”

“I didn’t know that many people knew about it.”

“Most don’t. But it seems like the word is leaking out.”

She took a long sip of her wine and twirled the glass by the stem. Brent picked up the bottle to offer a refill, but she waved him off.

“It’s getting late. I should get to bed. But if you have no plans for tomorrow, I was thinking of swimming in the Cenote Azul. Want to come?”

“Never been before.”

“Neither have I. It’ll be fun. It’ll be an adventure.”

Daniela stood up and brushed out her dress with her hands. Brent stood up after her. He wished her goodnight and said he would meet her around noon. They exchanged kisses on each other’s cheeks.

The next day Brent went down for breakfast a little past noon. Daniela was not there yet. He ordered only eggs with salsa and a glass of fresh orange juice. He ate slowly. Drank the juice in small sips. Daniela was still not down from her room. Brent went down to the dock of the hotel to wait. At a quarter to two, Daniela came down to the dock. She carried a towel in one arm and a bag over her other shoulder. She wore a thin, almost sheer sarong tied around her neck and she let down her dark hair. They traded kisses. Brent asked her why she was late and she said she was always late, every day of her life.
They walked south through town. There were no sidewalks so they walked in the streets. Fruit vendors passed them, bells clanging, offering oranges, limes, bananas. The local kids pressed them to buy gum. A few old men in weathered chairs in front of a rose-colored house watched them pass then muttered among themselves. Daniela and Brent talked about travel, life, food. She told him how she made her own flan. Her fiancé didn’t like it much. So she only made enough for herself on weekends. They talked quickly and often interrupted each other to get in a better story.

After what seemed like a long time to Brent, they reached the cenote. It was a deep, forbidding blue, surrounded on all sides by thick mangroves. Herons speckled the trees on the far bank. Someone, maybe a local, had made a makeshift dock over the mangroves. Daniela untied her sarong and let it fall to her feet. Her green bikini was two sizes too small.

"You've been here for a little more than a week and you haven't met anybody?" she said.
"Oh no. I have. I met a nice couple from Monterey—"
"That's not what I meant. I saw you leave for dinner with that girl from the hotel."
"Her? She was here by herself. I just thought I'd show her around town. Just to be nice, you know? Nothing more than friends."
"I'm not judging. You two just looked very peaceful together."
"I think you mean quiet."
"You don't like her?"
"It's not that I don't like her. Just quiet is all, she's quiet. What about you? Have you softened up on your fiancé?"
"No. Why should I? He left me to go play with fish. Let him play with his stupid fish."
"I don't see how he could leave such a beautiful girl."

Daniela smiled at him. She suggested they head back to the hotel since the sun was going down. She wrapped the sarong around her waist and they walked back. The streets were quiet. A few stray dogs lay against the wall of the hardware store. It wasn't quite dark yet but a lone street light flickered on and was immediately swarmed by eager mosquitoes. A taco vendor was out on the street a little earlier than usual for dinner, so Brent offered Daniela some. He ordered four tacos and two Cokes. It was still hot out and the streets smelled like standing water and salt. They sat on the dusty curb and kept talking and laughing. Brent wished they could sit there all night and tell stories. He liked the way she laughed. He liked that she wasn’t afraid to walk around town in a bikini top. When they were done, they finally headed back to the hotel, but Daniela stopped short of the entrance.

"I have an idea," she said. "Let's take one of those old, dugout canoes onto the lagoon. It's almost dark. It'll be fun. Our own little adventure."

Brent agreed. They walked around the hotel and down to the grassy shore of the lagoon. He found a large, heavy canoe tied up to a dock. He helped her in and he rowed it out into the middle of the lagoon. The sky was a dark blue and he only saw the blackened outline of Daniela's face against it. Brent lay on his back in the bow of the canoe. His
arms draped over the side. Daniela was at the stern. He felt she was looking at him. Daniela then moved slowly toward him. She rubbed his shoulders, lay down on top of him and kissed him. Brent kissed her back. He kissed the side of her neck. Then her ear. She drew back and lifted off her top. She went in and kissed him again. Brent opened his eyes in the early darkness for a moment and thought he saw her smile when their lips met. The sky went dark and the canoe drifted into the night.

Brent woke up the next morning in Daniela’s bed. Only the sheets covered them. Daniela’s back was to him so he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled. He looked at his watch. It was half past noon. He told her he was going to grab them some breakfast from downstairs. He pulled on his swim trunks and got up to leave, but Daniela called after him.

“Don’t worry about it.”
“It’s just breakfast. My treat.”
“No, I mean, really. I need to head back today.”
“Back?”
“My fiancé comes back from his trip today and I need to pick him up at the docks in Playa del Carmen. So don’t worry about it.”
“Oh. Sure.”
Daniela said nothing but sat up in bed looking at Brent, the sheets dropped down to her hips.
“So I probably won’t see you around here again?” he said.
Daniela smiled. “No.”
Brent nodded. Daniela got out of bed and held up the sheet over her chest. She walked to Brent and looked into his eyes. She dropped the sheet and kissed him. Then she pulled back.
“I need to get dressed,” she said.
“I know.”
Brent turned and walked out the door. The sun was coming over the lagoon and was warming the red tiles on the balcony. Still wearing his swim trunks, he walked down to the restaurant for some breakfast. He sat down at a large limestone table out on the wide veranda. It wasn’t hot yet and the morning breeze was beginning to blow. The old waiter came out and took his order. He started with a large glass of grapefruit juice. He thought about Daniela. The girl was leaving. Brent thought he was making an impression on her. Maybe she’d really stay. Leave that guy standing at the docks. But he knew she wouldn’t. He let the sun warm up the tops of his shoulders. He sat there for a while watching the sun rise over the lagoon. A few times the old waiter came out and sat with him to watch the lagoon. Then he left Brent to finish his breakfast.
“You just disappeared,” came a voice from behind him.
Brent turned around quickly and saw Laura standing there. Her eyes were swollen and red.
“Where have you been?”
“You just disappeared,” she said again. “You just left.”
“I thought you were sleeping—”
“You don’t just leave a girl alone afterwards. I thought a man of your character would know that.”
Brent shifted in his seat. “Sorry.”
"Don't lie. You don't care. Not one bit. And I couldn't see past the bullshit until you left." She paused for a moment. "God, and I was so scared. It sounds so stupid..."

"Scared? Of what?"

Laura held her breath. "Scared that I might actually like you. That I might have some sort of feeling for you. I don't even know you. I've known you for a week. It sounds so stupid of me to even say anything to you now."

"If you thought you liked me so much why were you so quiet at dinner?"

"What do two strangers talk about?"

Brent opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"God, Brent. Don't you feel anything?"

Brent said nothing. He sat back in his chair with his hands in his lap. He didn't look up. Laura walked around to the other side of the table and sat down.

"You play that other girl like you did me?"

Brent looked up at Laura.

"It's all right," she said. "I don't know why I got my hopes up. You seemed so genuine." Laura laughed. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you."

"I don't know what you were thinking, Laura. We're both out here, on vacation, alone. I mean, what did you expect?"

"Then just come out and say it, damn it! Say you don't care. Say you just wanted to sleep with me."

"You said you weren't that kind of girl."

"Are you really that thick, Brent? Think you've the only one that can charm someone into bed?"

"That doesn't make sense."

"It does. You just played your part well. You were convincing." She took a breath. "But I just had this gut feeling about you."

Brent looked away.

"Then I saw you with her and it made sense."

"Then why are you here? You could be miles away right now. From all this. But you're here, talking to me."

"Still don't get it, do you?"

"Guess not."

Laura looked hurt. She started to get up.

"Tell me," he said. He tried to reach her hand.

She took a deep breath and looked out over the lagoon. "That maybe, just maybe, you did want something more."

She turned to look at Brent. Her lips were pursed.

Brent looked down at his lap and didn't say anything. He looked up at Laura and saw her searching his eyes. Looking for a sign, a giveaway hint of feeling, but found nothing. She turned to walk toward the hotel and paused for a moment, waiting for Brent to say something. He tried to think of something to say. Something comforting. But he couldn't and he watched Laura walk away. He watched the way her dress blew in the salty wind. Brent turned to his breakfast but didn't find it appetizing. He sat back in his chair and saw a fisherman standing in a canoe with a net on the lagoon. The water looked cool. It looked inviting. Maybe later he'd go for a swim. The lagoon beckoned.
View from the Top: Mt. Baldy

R. Martin Stamat

photography
artist's statement: Coffee, spray paint and fabric pattern paper served as an inspiration for representing easily recognizable symbols such as numbers in a new, not so recognizable way.
Life
Jacob Daniels

acrylic
Joe Underwater
Samantha Floyd
Untitled
Colby Rabon
Escape from the Nightmare
Rachel Haycraft
artist's statement:

These selections from the series, “Bones of the Earth,” focus on the elation of traveling over the earth by foot. The series targets those who take a moment to study the nature of the ground beneath them. The ancient rocks, like true bones, shape and sculpt what is around us and dictate who we have become as a global biosphere.
I am interested in exploring and sharing all of our world’s surfaces and this series stands to show the scale, ancient age, and diversity that rests quietly beneath our feet. I used a Canon Digital Rebel XT with the 18-55mm and 55-200mm lenses. I used no filters or editing in this series as I wished to portray the images as I saw them in my global rovings.
Brotherly Love
Jacob Daniels

artist's statement:
As an aspiring artist I believe that my position is and should be a humble one. I am simply a channel, expressing and creating Life. But for whom am I a channel? I am a channel for the Creator of Life, the ever existing, never changing eternal force for whom and through whom everything exists. I think everyone is a creator and my goal is to try and open peoples eyes to that which lies inside of them; the love and extravagance that lies behind the veil of seemingly ordinary life.
Watch out, Toto
Jennifer Miller
Night Walk
Nicholas Jewett

acrylic on board
portrait three
Justina E. Brinkley

artist's statement:
I painted this as a portrait of one of my good friends. Every line, every color is a direct reflection of what he was for me during a rough time in my life.
Choking on Interrogatives
Jim Cleary
Rooftop #1
Colby Rabon

scan from 35 mm negative
Being widowed with seven children meant that my mother had to make tough, hard, and even heartbreaking decisions to keep us all safely together in our home. Our neighborhood was filled with families whose children had new bikes, brand-name clothes, and two parents who took them to the dentist twice a year for checkups. My brothers and sisters and I had bikes that were handed down and repainted, clothes from Dollar General, and Mama took us to the dentist when we were in pain. We all knew a love and devotion from our mother that would never waver. We never missed a meal and never knew thirst, but there would always be things that we simply could not afford. But although our mother did not have the money for many things, she always found money for a Christmas tree.

The day after Thanksgiving was the absolute latest my siblings and I could wait for a Christmas tree. Our house was three blocks from the bus stop where our mother left each morning and arrived each evening in a cloud of diesel smoke from her city chariot. This particular year I was eight and my brother Jimmy was four. We had walked the three blocks to meet our mother that evening and, to our surprise, we saw some workmen putting together a Christmas tree lot in the corner of our local grocery
store. I am not sure whose smile was the widest, but my brother and I both heard the starting pistol in our head that made us jump around with excitement. It was officially the Christmas season. Christmas trees were going on sale!

Jimmy and I could hardly stand as we watched the workmen and waited for our mother. The bus stop that my mother used was on a major four-lane that my mother had called "the highway" and we were never to put a step on it. Running alongside of "the highway" was a service road that everyone used for walking and riding bikes. There was just a patch of grass that separated the two. Jimmy and I had just about worn a path walking back and forth from the sidewalk to the edge of the highway. We would lean as far over as we dared, trying to see the first glimpse of the bus. It seemed like forever before that diesel chariot finally released our mother from its doors. Our mother could not understand a word as Jimmy and I excitedly spoke at the same time and pointed to the Christmas tree lot. She looked in the direction of our pointing and could only sigh and say, "It can't be Christmas already!"

Our yearly event of getting a Christmas tree took a lot of teamwork. Each of us had a job to do in getting this year's tree in our living room upright and decorated. Mama stopped the tradition of us all going together and picking out a tree because by the time all eight of us left the lot the salesman was ready to quit, and when we got home Mama had a cigarette burning in four different rooms. The new family tradition was altered to our oldest two brothers David and Daniel going to get a tree while Mama turned on Walter Cronkite and acted as the traffic light while we all came from different directions with our decorations. We would all gather our school-made ornaments, store-bought bulbs, lights, and tinsel. Jimmy and I would stand on chairs we had dragged from the dining room into the living room and placed under the window. We stayed out of the way of the older kids, who had to detangle string after string of lights, by frosting up the cold windowpanes and playing tic-tac-toe. It seemed like hours to Jimmy and me, but in no time David and Daniel would turn the corner of our street and their arrival was formally announced to the entire house by our shrieks of joy.

The hours it took trying to get that thing to stand upright always became comical to our mother. It did not take a dead, defenseless tree long to bring my brothers to fits of anger. Jimmy and I were given the job of being the tree holders. We may have been only eight and four, but we stood strong and proudly held our own against the eye-poking, scratching limbs. After many, many adjustments (and a few tears), the four of us ended up covered with pine resin, but we overcame and the tree was standing in the small metal green and red Christmas tree stand. Mama looked at the trail of pine needles that ran from the back door to the front door and said, "That poor tree looks scared to death."

There stood our bare Christmas tree with all of us lined up in front of it armed with boxes of bulbs and piles of still tangled lights, ready for battle. The time had finally come. We were going to finally decorate our Christmas tree. Our poor sister Janet had the hardest job. She had the job of keeping all the rest of us from stepping on lights and dropping bulbs and, with the extra eyes in the back of her head, she had to keep Jimmy from putting tinsel in his mouth. But, most of all, she was to somehow keep that tree upright and off of its side. Mama would start off the festivities by asking someone to pick a Christmas song to sing. We did not have a Christmas record to play, but Mama said she did not need one because she had the best orchestra of her own, so we would break out in "Jingle Bells" or "Frosty the Snowman" so Jimmy could sing too. Mama hummed along
from the den as she filled every bowl we owned with popcorn and threaded seven needles. Clinking lights and glass ornaments held together as seven pairs of hands desperately vied for the perfect bulb and tinsel placement, while the matching seven pairs of feet tried not to step on the bulbs and tinsel that fell from the tree. It took a good couple of hours of fighting over who put on the most green bulbs, accidentally stepping on toes, searching for decorations that we made in school, and frantically calling for another extension cord, but each and every year we got the job done.

By the time we had finished decorating the tree, the angel on top was hanging on for dear life; the lights were still tangled and all over the place, too many red bulbs hung in the same spot, and the popcorn string had a huge gap of missing popcorn. At dead center, toward the bottom was about a pound of tinsel in a big clump, where Jimmy insisted it should be, and the entire tree leaned a few degrees to the left. With one last glance from each of us around the room and double checking to make sure our crayon masterpiece made it on the tree, we made sure that we had every bulb and string of tinsel on the tree. Finally, the time had come for us all to scatter through the house and turn off the lights. Each of us darted for a light switch that was in the on position, while Jimmy darted straight for Mama's arms with the oncoming darkness. After a few of us banged into each other in the darkness trying to get back to the living room, Pat, standing guard at the plug, would ask, "Ready?" and we would all excitedly reply in unison, "Ready!"

The incredible burst of color with our sounds of joy and amazement instantly lifted off the thick blanket of darkness. Our tree was now full of life, color, and strength as its limbs and needles proudly held out for all to see our store-bought bulbs, lights and tinsel together with our homemade angels, stars, and popcorn. All eight of us would stand in that moment of joy and then my six brothers and sisters and I would look up toward our mother as she gave her yearly blessing, "This is the most beautiful tree in the world."
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Bloodlines
Mary K. Carter

Between Bronte and Sandberg
a steer skull collects dust.
Yellowed sockets stare backward through time,
empty as the concentration camps
Mother's grandparents evaded,
or the Texas home Father left
to meet her, to find himself
as me, seething in her womb.

I've heard it rains ash in both places.
From the soft grey smudges
between your fingertips
I'd imagine there exists enough
hissing in the air to conjure
the hollow smell of greed, sweat,
and blood from oil
refineries and genocide.

I've never been to those wastelands.
I've only seen calm, breathing bovine
and fires that burn to warm our clean hands.
Yet in this peace the air grows stagnant
and I hear the hissing ash in my dreams.

Leaving is the only way
we exist. I exist
by this restlessness
smoldering in my blood.
Someday when I am
placid yellow sockets
beside the steer
my descendants will wonder
where my feet had taken me
to keep my hands clean.

"Bloodlines" is a piece that grew out of my fascination with my personal ancestry, as well as how modern
philosophy would tell us such fascination no longer has any importance in comparison to that of generations
before us. The poem also serves as a metaphysical commentary on the confines of the present.
Banana Pudding
Sarah Humphries

Family reunions revolve around your scoops and spoons and surreptitious recipes.

Grandmother was the oldest of twelve pudding eaters, a proud waif of a woman.

You are the color of Aunt Nell's favorite polysynthetic suit from the Sears and Roebuck catalog.

You quell the conversations Uncle Jeb has while his dentures float in a nearby cup.

You rest, perfectly, between the pecan pie and string beans.

Optimism in the Kitchen
Nick Weaver

I spilt coffee on this morning. The droplets and large looked suspiciously and I couldn't help just written a beau slow in C-minor the a romantic perspective of soiled dishes in
I spilt coffee on the kitchen floor this morning. The mess of tiny droplets and larger puddles looked suspiciously like sheet music, and I couldn't help but wonder if I had just written a beautiful song, something slow in C-minor that would give a romantic perspective to the pile of soiled dishes in the sink.
Golden Rays of warm light filter through my sheer brown curtains, illuminating dust particles. They dance like fairies in the breeze, lightly billowing through the curtains. A strand of my bronze hair catches in the stream and flutters before my closed eyes, obscuring the dazzling light show behind my lids enough to wake me.

As I gain consciousness, for a moment I am a queen waking in her castle, surrounded by all she wants and needs in life. The soft comforter is silk to my skin and the warmth of the sheets, heated by sun, wraps me in a cocoon so comfortable I doubt I am actually awake.

Slowly, I stretch out of my nightly fetal position, allowing Life to crawl back through my veins, to the tips of my toes and fingers. I watch those dust fairies dance, and through them remember the mystical nature of my being.

For further proof of this link between magic and reality, I pull back my chocolate curtains and peek through the blinds, hoping for a trace of glitter in the trees.

Instead I see the Appalcart stop and remember my fate. It is a Tuesday morning. I am no queen and class starts in fifteen minutes.
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Night

A solid brick chimney sits among broiled wreckage. The structural frames of the house are charred and weak. Coal black remains gather warmth slowly. Twisted pipes and melted wires begin to heat up. The floorboards and the remains of a kitchen table and high backed chairs smolder, first black coals, then embers. Embers glow intensely red, marbled with orange until the small flames come.

Tame at first, the flames crouch low over destroyed wood and carpet. They gain confidence, licking higher into the air to test their strength. The flames grow larger, now white hot where they touch wood and plaster. As they move, they piece together ruined boards, orange flames painting the wood grain stronger. Bred by the strength of fire, empty walls fill in between support beams.

The flames are strong now, rushing with intention to rebuild. They come together, not just at the perimeter of walls but pulsing everywhere. A strong gust of flame and hot air pushes the ceiling up from the ground where it had rested. Under cover of smoky rooms, flames push melted rubber into place, building the security of oaked floors and reknitting the fabric of bed sheets and curtains. Clouds of smoke mask the work of the fire, as a magician guards the secrets of his magic.

The flames reach their highest peak, yellow fire licking a forked tongue at the night sky. Here, the fire forms its most precious creation, a tiny bedroom, walls painted delicate pink by flames. It builds a white-framed bed from blackened wood. Thick, gasping smoke produces curly haired dolls and tiny dresses perfect for a little girl, much like the one who lies motionless on the floor. The flames curl through the room up towards the roof, cuddling the small child in a loving embrace.

The fire, done with its awesome task, retreats, revealing sturdy walls. The unbearable heat in the house dissipates as the smoke thins. The little girl stirs and begins coughing violently. Orange fire retreats down carpeted stairs, building a wooden handrail as it goes.

The flames are weak from exhaustion. Almost gone from this place, the fire pauses for a moment to observe its work. Perched in glowing glory among the pine boughs, its flames grow smaller and colder. The fire makes its final retreat on to the wick of a candle which lies tipped against the Christmas tree. The candle rights itself, while the little girl dreams. Her mother kisses her forehead, and wipes a strand of hair from her pale face. She backs out of the room and down the stairs. She walks to the candle on the mantle and with a match, takes the flame from the wick. She strikes it against the matchbox. Pulling the match towards her, she quells the flame. The mother returns the match to the box, tucking it safely away into a drawer. She thinks of her daughter with love and smiles.
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continuity.
uniformity.
consistency
speaks in the
rhythm of my
French knife—
metal flush
against the
fingers of my
left hand. the
curved blade
rocks forward,
then back,
across the flesh
of peppers,
tomatoes,
chives.
segmenting—
squaring—the
imperfect circle
of nature into
lines my human
mind can
understand.
Untitled
Brittany Edsall
There once was an organ grinder who lived a very decent life performing on the streets for the coins that feed him and kept a roof over his head. He was satisfied living day to day off the contributions of others, because he had never needed more than they had to offer. Music was more than what he did, it was his life, and he was always content to play.

One day when he was out on the street corner, playing to his heart's content, a little monkey appeared and stopped to listen. On this day, although the streets were crowded, the organ grinder had not received much of an audience. So when confronted with the monkey he became happy, because now he had someone to play for. With this new happiness he began to play a song that was upbeat and full of swing. When the monkey heard this song he began to dance.

Now a little monkey dancing on the street is a sight to behold for many, and it quickly drew a crowd. The organ grinder was so very happy because he enjoyed watching the monkey dance, he enjoyed being able to play for a crowd, and he enjoyed how generous everyone was with their money. All afternoon the organ grinder played and the monkey danced.

When it became dark and the crowds were dispersing the organ grinder turned to the monkey and said, "Where did you come from, little monkey? Did you escape from the zoo?"

The monkey, who had stopped dancing when the music stopped, slumped down in the street and yawned. "Oh, you must be a tired little monkey? Come, I shall take you home."

The organ grinder picked up the monkey and his bag of money. In the other hand he picked up his organ. Then he walked home.

After that day, the monkey and the organ grinder made fast friends. From then on, the monkey would accompany the organ grinder as he performed on the streets. Everyone loved to watch the monkey dance, and the monkey loved to dance, and the organ grinder loved to play as the monkey danced. With all the money the organ grinder made he was able to feed himself and the monkey with ease. Soon, the organ grinder was able to afford a better home, one that would be warmer and cozier in the winter. He was also able to buy a small bed for the monkey to sleep in. Things had never been better for the organ grinder. He had never been happier because now he had a friend.

About a year later, as the organ grinder and the monkey did their gig on the street, the organ grinder looked up from his music and realized that there was no audience. He was playing his music and the monkey was dancing, but the crowd was just passing them by. Come to think of it, his pockets had become lighter over the months, but why? They used to be a hit, what had happened? As he pondered this, a mother stopped in the street with her little girl and pointed at the monkey.

"Look, look, there is a little monkey," the woman said. "See him dance?"

The little girl's face lit up when she saw the monkey dancing, and clapped for him. Seeing her excitement, the organ grinder began to play louder. As he played, the little girl wrinkled her nose and covered her ears.

"Mommy, why is he making that awful sound?"

The organ grinder faltered. Awful? He listened, inspecting each note closely. Awful? It was not awful. It was music, just as he had always played.

The mother, embarrassed by her daughter's inquiry, quickly hustled her away. The organ grinder was left with the stinging truth. His music was outdated. Dejected, he began packing up his things.

The monkey however, continued dancing. As he danced, a crowd drew near. When the organ grinder saw what was happening, he took out his organ and resumed his playing, happier than ever. To his horror, the crowd drifted apart again. They had come to watch the monkey, not him.

After the crowd left, he plopped down on the floor. He was heartbroken. "They do not like my music," he said soberly. "An organ grinder, don't you little monkey up at him. "I am only holding your audience, little monkey. I am keeping you alive."

The organ grinder sat back and thought about the root of his despair. He had lost everyone's money, go hungry and die because now he had a friend. Back at his house, the organ grinder packed his things away. The monkey took his advice alone and soon he had a crowd forming around him. As he looked back at his old organ, he knew of one thing to do and it was the same thing he had done to his organ... He despaired of it.

"This is all your fault," he said to the monkey. "You are only holding me back. People will come to see you, not me because you are so cute and cuddly."

In his despair, he shoved the organ into the street and said, "Mommy, money, go hungry and die because of you."

The organ grinder picked up the monkey and his bag of money. In the other hand he picked up his organ. Then he walked home.

After that day, the monkey and the organ grinder made fast friends. From then on, the monkey would accompany the organ grinder as he performed on the streets. Everyone loved to watch the monkey dance, and the monkey loved to dance, and the organ grinder loved to play as the monkey danced. With all the money the organ grinder made he was able to feed himself and the monkey with ease. Soon, the organ grinder was able to afford a better home, one that would be warmer and cozier in the winter. He was also able to buy a small bed for the monkey to sleep in. Things had never been better for the organ grinder. He had never been happier because now he had a friend.

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"This is all your fault," he said. "Soon I will run out of money, go hungry and die because you are outdated and awful."

In his despair, he shoved the organ off the table. He did not hate his music; he loved it. He thought about the root of his despair, and as he thought, he began to pack up his things.

"This is your fault," he said. "Soon I will run out of money, go hungry and die because you are outdated and awful."

In his despair, he shoved the organ off the table. It hit the floor and let out a soft note, a note that might sound awful to modern ears, but a note that sounded beautiful to the monkey.

"Oh, you must be a tired little monkey? Come, I shall take you home." The organ grinder picked up the monkey and his bag of money. In the other hand he picked up his organ. Then he walked home.

After that day, the monkey and the organ grinder made fast friends. From then on, the monkey would accompany the organ grinder as he performed on the streets. Everyone loved to watch the monkey dance, and
Love Like Neruda
Sarah Humphries

Quiero amar como Neruda.
Two bodies fused together
in a single burst of honey
cools my gringa skin.

Two bodies fused together
amidst a sultry Chilean whirlwind
cools my gringa skin
with its jasmine breeze.

Amidst a sultry Chilean whirlwind
I find my carnal apple woman
with my jasmine breeze,
with my jazz infused hips.

I find my carnal apple woman
as foreign tongues sound in sync
with my jazz infused hips
and form a fast-fast-slow rhythm.

Foreign tongues sound in sync
with the howl of the trumpeter
and form a fast-fast-slow rhythm
upon the dance floor.

The howl of the trumpeter
and a single burst of honey
upon the dance floor.
I want to love like Neruda.

This poem was inspired by Pablo Neruda's (1904-1973) Soneto XII in his collection, Cien Sonetos de Amor. Select words are taken directly from the work.
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"All the world's a stage, all the men and women merely players."
- William Shakespeare

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."
- Oscar Wilde

"Choose your corner, pick away at it carefully, intensely and to the best of your ability and that way you might change the world."
- Charles Eames

"This mean and unrefined ore mine Will make your glist'ring gold but more to shine."
- Anne Bradstreet "The Prologue"

"Everything happens for a reason."
- Anonymous

"A forest bird never wants a cage."
- Henrik Ibsen

"There's no crying in baseball!"
- Jimmy Dugan

"The Omsk gave me an offer for even more cash money than here. But like I said, I wanted to play in the NHL."
- Anton Babchuk

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reflections ...

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I watched her blue eyes fill with the days before the Peel.

her city chariot

Yellowed