I created you do not rest

2014–2015 Annual

http://shortvinejournal.com
Short Vine is the Undergraduate literary journal of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati. It is published by the George Elliston Poetry Fund and sponsored by the Elliston Foundation and the Department of English and Comparative Literature. No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher. All copyright reverts to individual authors upon publication.

Printed in Cincinnati, Ohio
Dear Reader,

First and foremost, I’d like to thank you for picking up a copy of the newest edition of Short Vine. All of us on the staff have put so much of our energy and passion into creating it; we really hope you enjoy its contents as much as we do. Short Vine is a literary milestone for beginning and aspiring authors and a safe place to apply their craft. It is a goal to be met, and a standard to be achieved. It is the undergraduate literary journal of the University of Cincinnati.

Short Vine presents the opportunity to experience acceptance and the excitement that comes from publication and seeing your name in print. With this comes the ability to share your work with a wider circle of peers and others. It also gives the opportunity to withhold the grace of handling rejection, and facilitates the drive to do better for the next time. Getting into Short Vine is one of the first goals to achieve in what will, hopefully, be a grand career in a setting where there is ample support in the form of writing clubs and classes along with praise to be sought and inspiration to be shared.

This book features fifteen very unique and outstanding authors and the work that has been collected over the length of this school year. Thank you to the staff and to all those who submitted, making this issue so successful. As pleased as we are with the outcome of this edition, we are going to work harder to make the next issue ever better. We hope you will submit your work to help all of us reach that goal!

Shealyn Hoehn
Editor-in-Chief, Short Vine
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Fiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy Simmons</td>
<td>L.M. Kosta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Wulfmeyer</td>
<td>Sean Bathgate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Hart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia Mulder</td>
<td>Jake Grieco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah McGahee</td>
<td>Tony Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Laug</td>
<td>Emily Helbling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle Damon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly Pieper</td>
<td>Sam Medert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin Walls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Short Vine Literary Journal

2014-2015 Staff

**Editor-in-Chief**
Shealyn Hoehn

**Editors**

**Poetry**
Christa Iwu
Benjamin Walls

**Fiction**
Cammy Abel
Nathan Stormer
Heather Thurman

**Cover Design**

Front cover: Jordan Posey
Back cover: Shawn Blevins

**Faculty Advisor**
Michael S. Hennessey

**Founding Editor**
Katie Hartsock

Visit our website for more information and back issues:

http://shortvinejournal.com
A touch of delirium from my apotheosis lent my circumstances an extra element of startling beauty: the land was rippled like a field of dry-cracked mud and populated, everywhere, with house-sized orbs of what could only be described as gossamer, web-like material. Like colossal dandelion heads they appeared: not composed of orderly stems they were instead a chaos of bundled filaments. I walked slowly between them as they trembled slightly, absorbing the land which was now, at least, one small corner of my new kingdom, my Heaven I decided. Blurred shapes of indistinct form painted my horizon on all sides and the land was as wide as a desert, I deemed.

“What is this place?” I asked the silence. I was surprised to hear a voice.

“The Window on the East.” A sober tone replied, from where I couldn’t tell, reverberating as if it arose inside my head, but the voice was not my own, “You are in the Garden of Ages, settled many ages ago and which remains in stillness, as it has ever been.”

“It does not change? Are there no seasons, no storms?”

The voice paused for a moment.

“There are wind storms, but they are few and it has been a while since the last one. The Keepers, who
live beyond the western horizon, stir up the winds. They come but rarely now.”

The Keepers? My ignorance of this matter would not do, I was the Demiurge of this land now, its rightful Lord. I must know who tills its soil, so to speak.

“Who are these Keepers?”

“They are the Great Ones... The ones who built us and, it is said, will someday destroy us.”

I laughed out loud. “I am your Lord, now. I am the Lord of this land and the kingdoms beyond. The Keepers, whoever they are, will answer to me.”

“You are very small for a Lord, if I may say it.”

“And you? You are so small that I cannot see you? Where are you? Show yourself!”

“I am above you, my Lord. Can you not see me?"
The House in Winter
Adam Wulfmeyer

I’m screaming at my father over the phone
in the back yard
at night time
my voice spreads over shadow
in the cold grass with melted snow,
dog shit,
clippings of dead grass,
leaf litter,
soft clay earth water table
I bathe in the echoes there.

When the family comes to the vigil
it will have been too late, he insists.
They should have known better,
I should have known better, too,
he almost stutters with anxiety yet presses
on like an emergency siren. The sky is blue
awning crisp orange dot settled into the Earth’s
outer film my love there, too, wavering
amongst the particles hurtling thru open space.
Still regurgitating my vowels and damp shrapnel like
FUCK YOU emanating, truly, dispersing among
the painted doors along the circle,
fawn & children, death,
aberrance coded into the spurge choking cracked
sidewalk in a roundabout manner of dysphoria
bannering back into my throat, the origin of our narrative.

During this period I was awake before 10am,
did all the dishes, paid the bills, attended college full time,
conversed with doctors, nurses, hospice representatives,
did what I had to do because everyone kept asking me,
“How are you doing?” and how fucking irrelevant the question seemed to be. The obvious response: *how the fuck do you think?* The obvious response: I’m good, as good as I can be, I’m okay, hanging in there, roaches are spawning in ash trays in the basement, the damp mold gives me luxurious cohabitation in space by acting as a legitimate barrier where Bachelard clutches his throat and coos romantic verse and tells me that it’s the reason I’m here.

_That’s the reason you’re here_; I fucking know, leave me alone, the storm still rages two floors above, the house is still under siege against its construction.

_This house houses what?_

The timbers lose their nails as the oxygen atomizer massages the pulp into the cancer that has transformed my mother’s organs made all its surfaces less accessible & oppressive. It’s voice mechanized and autonomous. The pulse was strong and would not stop, though the flesh became wiry and yellow, sagging, malnourished, dying.

My heart, my missing narrative: fuck you Dad, the ache in aggravated trachea becomes onset, On-point, I leer through the moonlight in my back yard, at night time, concentrated into a bloated form, conspicuous, guilty, yeah — forlorn.

The house grins in anticipation, florescence engaged against the obnoxious machines.
Robbery Unnoticed
L.M. Kosta

Kid
He tripped. His name was Jason and he tripped over his shoes that were too big. His brother had given him shoes when Jason’s finally disconnected at the souls. He didn’t have any money, his brother was gone, and his cat gave him little comfort anymore – so he did it. He took a kitchen knife from his friend’s house, slid it into his back pocket, and tossed on a hoodie.

The convenience store door flung open with a bang, startling him. He slouched further inside himself and slunk through the aisles. He knew he looked shady, scoping out the cameras and other customers. Only one other customer but they look shadier than him. Maybe this would be easy.

Clerk
You hate your job but that’s OK. You hate that nothing has ever been mopped and nothing will ever be swept. You hate that your manager is too cheap to install cameras that work or register glass. Last week your coworker was robbed of his finger and all the money in the store. Your manager told him that he was lucky he wasn’t fired. That’s why you keep a baseball bat under the register.

There’s a junkie in the store and you stare him down with all the loathing anyone could feel for another person. Not because he shoots up, you do too. Not because he’s Latino and you’re white, you’re above that. No, he looks like he might rob you. So you stare and you judge and you chew your gum without flavor; the way it always is.
The door bangs open as if someone would want your attention but you are immune after five years of apologies. It has never opened correctly and you could care less who enters. You care more about who leaves because once they are gone you are alone in this shit hole. A kid walks in, startled by his own entrance. You continue chewing.

You think about how, in two hours, you get to go home and sleep. In twelve hours, you will be on your way to Michigan to visit your mom. It will only be three days but she misses you, and you miss your friends.

The kid walks up to you, shakier than the junkie. He reaches into his back pocket. He draws something out. You reach for your bat. You see a flash of brown, and the kid is on the ground. The junkie tackled him, and you see a knife sliding across the floor. The junkie is gone, and you go back to chewing your gum.

The kid doesn’t wake up for a while and you call the cops.

---

*

**Junkie**

I can’t think and I can’t breathe. The White Lady is leaving me and I cannot see. I go somewhere but I don’t know where, it just is. Do you know where I am? He says no, or maybe she does. I don’t see anyone so maybe I am talking to myself. It’s not the White Lady, she is gone and drawn-out, creeping from my veins into my heart and out through my lungs. She leaves me and I’m shuddering.

I think I’m in a store. There are aisles and rows and pigs. No, not pigs. There is bacon, made and ready. I slip it into my jacket and slink into a corner. I see a camera, pointing at me. There’s the nose, it’s big, my eyes are huge and knotted and no – that’s not a camera,
that’s a mirror and I can see my reflection and I’m hideous. I withdraw, as does she. She is almost gone from me and I’m sweating. Everywhere the pools are gathering to drown me. I need to get home before I drown, but where is home? Do you remember? 86th and 4th, or was it 4th and 86th? No, the city doesn’t move that way it doesn’t groove that way. You can’t go that far over and that far up because then you’re in the ocean and it’s unforgiving.

I remember the ocean, its salty waves stinging my freezing face as I slunk into the water with him. He was all I knew back then. The White Lady had come and gone and I had been fine, with him. Now he’s gone. Why, why Lord is he gone? I can’t remember. I can’t remember anything.

Things are fazing into view and I walk. I keep walking towards the door then something happens. There’s a kid. There’s a kid here and I think he has – he has a knife. No, he won’t ruin his life, he can’t. We’re all drowning here kid — let us flounder alone.

The knife is almost free. No, I can’t. I jump, I fly. I fling myself against his body and knock him down. I’m on the ground, why am I on the ground? Oh god, there’s a knife. Is it mine? There’s a kid, is it his? There’s a man, a man behind the register. I can tell I’m not wanted.
He spoke to me like cold molasses,  
a slow forty-year drip down  
the staves of an old oak barrel.  
His arms and legs were toothpicks  
held together with little bits of  
chewing gum.

He struck me as the kind of person that  
could run very swiftly in one direction  
but as soon as inertia was introduced,  
his spindles would buckle and  
his gangly limbs would splay out  
on the ground like an insect  
crushed underfoot.
Owed to the State
Alex Hart

O Memorandum, thou anonymous gift, thy narrow saffron figure reflects into glass, camouflaged in radiant, fiery tones, as Apollo’s chariot hurtles toward its terminus.

To his daily haste, thy sprightly essence is well acquainted, for wherever is a lusty pace, thy sisters shortly follow.

O keeper of the law, thy statutes are mighty pillars, yet thy delicate silhouette wavers in perpetuity,

A golden visage, upon which is lettered in riveting prose, a citizen’s duty. May we never forget our duty to thee, O Parking Ticket.
The Black Box
Sean Bathgate

Program: … Initiate
>Selected Planet: … “Sphestrio”
>>Selected Species: … “Biped”
>>>Selected Language of Translation: … “English”

//@All files pertaining to “Sphestrio, Biped, English” have been uploaded to your viewscreen

---Galactic Time Standard, Year: 13.627.117.057---
File Codename: … “The Beginning”

I start recording as I careen towards a planet. This sphere is magnificent, with masses of greens and browns and whites broken into continents by vast swaths of blue. I will call it “[Sphestrio].” As I enter the atmosphere, bright orange flames begin to flicker around my vessel. A shimmering turquoise barrier flares to protect the capsule from harm as I descend towards the surface. My view of the world is quickly shrinking, and my trajectory appears to be leading me towards a seemingly endless brown landscape. A small plume of particulate and debris billows when I slow my descent to a full stop just above the surface. The pod that I entered the planet in jettisons itself into several parts, and my body begins to hover in place.

My sensors allow for a comprehensive view of the surrounding area. This place is void of features. Records in my databanks indicate that the particulate “sand” is a primary component of this region. There are hills made of sand, and troughs lined with sand. At this time, I cannot determine if there is another biome on this planet, aside from this one. Thorough scans of the planet will be completed soon. Despite the ability to float, I do
not appear to have any mode of transportation at my disposal. Here I will stay until something noteworthy happens, although my protocol demands that I will record everything, regardless of significance.

---Galactic Time Standard, Year: 13.820.101.327---
File Codename: … “The Discovery”

Much time has passed since my arrival on this planet. My protocol dictates that I cannot willingly make contact with any species I may encounter. Many creatures roam the surface of this world, although none have made attempts to interact with me. Accumulated climate readings indicate that I am in a desert. Scans of the planet determined that there are several biomes, each with unique weather and forms of life. Compared to these other regions, this desert environment is a desolate and featureless place. There is, however, a river nearby that could most certainly sustain life.

---

After two hundred million years on this planet, I experience my first interaction with a life form. A bipedal creature approaches me and attempts to tap my surface. The shield that protects me from heat and other harmful forces responds, glowing a brilliant teal as the creature reaches one of its appendages towards me. It retracts the appendage immediately in bewilderment and confusion. This being does not seem to understand my mechanics. It scampers off beyond my line of sight and I grow concerned that it may not return.

---

After several days, I see another bipedal creature cautiously walking towards me. This time, however, a group of bipeds are following closely behind the guide. The herd gathers a short distance from me and mutters between themselves for a while. After observing their
hesitant actions, I assume that they are motivated by curiosity, so I do not bother to activate any of my defensive features. The biped that initially discovered my location edges closer to me, both arms outreached. My shield again shimmers in response to the touch, and the herd begins screaming wildly. The biped extends its arms towards me again and the barrier reacts, sending the creatures into another fit. How intriguing, that such a mundane feature of my body offers these creatures so much entertainment. At last, I have found something noteworthy to record in this expanse of sand and drought.

File Codename: … “The Construction”

These creatures, which I have decided to call “[bipeds],” are an industrious species. Not long after my original encounter with them, several herds of bipeds begin to move into my proximity. They seem to huddle together for protection and security, as my scans have shown that they are certainly not the biggest life forms on this planet. Most bring with them small shelters made of what appears to be hides. They organize themselves into small communities, with me in the center of the hub.

---

The bipeds gather around me, as they often do, but this time is different. This time, the one who first made contact with me starts to speak in front of the others. He gestures towards the others to crouch or sit so that he is the only one standing. His mouth emits guttural noises, ones that the other bipeds respond to with reverence and obedience. He slowly runs his hand over my shield, provoking the turquoise shimmer that fascinates the bipeds so much. There are sudden gasps, and eyes widen at the reaction. A few of the smaller bipeds edge closer in an attempt to touch me, but the
bigger bipeds hold them back. The standing biped continues making sounds and wild movements with his body, all of which enrapture his audience. After a period of time, the standing biped dismisses the members of the crowd, who return to their shelters, excitedly communicating to each other.

---

These gatherings are now a daily occurrence. I have decided to call the one who leads the gatherings the “[Speaker].” Every so often, more bipeds arrive in the village. The community is growing larger. Soon, there are several hundred people living in the area around me. The Speaker has assumed leadership of these people, as they seem to perform whatever action he tells them to do. His interaction with me must have distinguished him amongst the bipeds. His shelter, which is made of mud and stone, is the closest to me. Only the Speaker is allowed to touch me. This is an odd behavior for a member of a species that operates so frequently in packs.

---

In my presence, the Speaker and a small group of bipeds begin to toil laboriously on some sort of project. Slabs of smooth rock lie strewn about, and the bipeds appear to be carving strange shapes into them. This endeavor seems to be of great importance to the Speaker, who frequently works without stopping to sleep. He interacts closely with the bipeds that scribe the odd patterns into the stone. These creatures seem to be capable of great intelligence when working together.

Many days pass before the Speaker and the scribes complete their work. It appears that the bipeds have found a way to convert their guttural speech into universal symbols. Records from my databanks indicate that this is some form of written language. The Speaker is satisfied with the writings on the tablets. His spoken word has been converted into these symbols, which is a
unique development among the life on this planet. Now his messages can be syndicated and consumed by other bipeds. Small groups are sent out into the desert, each carrying a set of these special tablets, to search for others and teach them the ways of writing.

---

Much time passes. I believe the Speaker’s influence now extends beyond this immediate region, and he is able to convince others to join the town through his interactions with me. The written words of the Speaker have attracted many more bipeds to flock to this town, which now houses a population of several thousand. I find it most interesting that I am somehow included in this spread of culture.

---

Early one morning, a small biped enters the Speaker’s hut to wake him for the daily ritual. Mere moments pass before the small male runs from the hut, yelling loudly. I observe widespread confusion among the bipeds who respond to the screams. A few bipeds go into the hut and carefully bring the Speaker over to me. He is dead. They lay the body down in front of me and step back with their heads lowered. I do not understand this action. Hundreds of bipeds have died since my arrival, but this death seems different. It must mean something symbolical to these bipeds that his corpse lay on the ground next to me. Observation of the body indicates that the Speaker died of old age, as there is no sign of damage or disease on his body. Many bipeds gather and observe the body in silence, and some begin to weep.

A group of twenty males unfamiliar to me arrive at the visitation after a short period of time. They have sharpened sticks and clubs with them. Without notice, they begin to strike at those gathered closest to the Speaker’s body. The weeping turns to wails as the males
viciously attack the mourners. While barking commands, the males beat them away from me and the Speaker’s body. After the initial shock of the situation, some of the bipeds apprehensively cluster around the assailants. A large male, who appears to be the leader of the twenty, yells something at his followers. Several bipeds scamper off and quickly return, laden with sticks and logs. They construct a pyre and place the Speaker’s body upon it. The large biped then retrieves a torch from inside a nearby hut and lights the pyre. It catches quickly, and soon the fire rises high into the sky. I observe this behavior with fascination, noting that the large biped has asserted his dominance and become leader of the town through this ceremony.

File Codename: … “The Empire”

The large male who set fire to the Speaker’s body has been the focus of my recent observations. His prowess as a leader inspires the bipeds around him to work diligently. No doubt inspired by the Speaker’s actions, the male establishes a dedicated group of scribes to record the history and events of the community. Words are created to supplement and enhance the biped language, which flourishes under his instruction. Because of his contributions to biped writing, I will call him the “[Orator].” He kneels before me with closed eyes several times a day, in an act he calls “praying.” The town is expected to do the same, but only he and a few select bipeds are allowed to pray in my vicinity. After he completes his “prayers”, he reads aloud from the writings developed by himself and the Speaker. The Orator designates this practice “religion.”

---

The town has grown considerably under the Orator’s rule. Tens of thousands of bipeds now worship
the religion developed by the Speaker and the Orator. Despite the widespread belief of religion, there is discontent among the bipeds in this city. Some claim that the words and teachings of the Speaker are the only valid components of biped religion. Others maintain that the Orator’s religious beliefs should be the guiding force of their society. There is much dissention in the streets, causing a schism to form. The followers of the Speaker decide to separate themselves from the rest of the community. I watch with intent curiosity as thousands of bipeds exit the safety of the city to form their own society further down the river.

---

The Orator is growing old. He knows that he is going to die soon, so he calls a conference near me. Thousands of people flood the streets. He declares that his followers will go to “war” against the “Dissenters”, in the name of reclaiming the honor of possessing the only religion in the land. His speech is met with riotous applause. The crowd disperses, and the Orator falls to his knees in prayer. After a short while, three thousand males gather in the streets around me, all prepared for war. The Orator raises his arms and the army roars with fervor. They hold a city-wide prayer, and I watch as the army departs along the shore of the river.

---

The war wages for several months before the Orator’s army emerges victorious. The cost is considerable, though, as hundreds die in the campaign against the Dissenters. The Orator’s most loyal scribe was entrusted to govern the captured city of Dissenters. Shortly after word of the victory reaches the Orator, he succumbs to his old age. The loyal follower, who I will call the “[Recorder],” travels from the captured city to hold a memorial ceremony for the Orator. During this commemoration, he praises the Orator for his leadership,
and names the city REDACTED and the Orator’s religion REDACTED in his honor.

>COMMAND OVERRIDE:
Function: Redacted information translation:
City name: “Oratia” … Religion name: “Oratism”<

After the ceremony, the Recorder paces back and forth in front of me. He repeatedly mutters about some dilemma and looks to me for responses to his questions. From the information I have gathered from his musings, the Recorder finds himself in a difficult position: he has two cities to govern, one of which is likely to rebel if left unattended for long. After only a brief period of deliberation, he decides to exterminate a majority of the Dissenters in the captured city. The Recorder calls a small gathering of his followers and expresses his hope that this action will deter others from straying from Oratism. His followers appear to agree with him. Not long after the meeting, the Recorder and his army set out to eradicate the Dissenters.

After the Recorder orders the massacre of most of the Dissenters, he demands a temple of stone be constructed around me, to “shield the Artifact and its holy light from the unworthy eyes of Infidels.” Once the building is completed, my view of the immediate world is severely hindered. The inside of the building is covered with dozens of crudely painted pictures of the bipeds. One figure, which looks vaguely like the Orator, appears in several of the paintings. Most depict him interacting with a small black box, which I can only assume to be me. It is curious that the bipeds include me in these paintings, as I am not one of their kind.

File Codename: … “The Expansion”
Three thousand years pass from the time of the Recorder, and there has been no significant change in biped behavior. They now populate most of the habitable regions on the planet. By my calculations, the population is growing far too rapidly to be sustainable. Roughly one-third of the bipeds worship Oratism; another third, the Dissenters, follow the Speaker’s Word. The final portion of the biped race largely adheres to the belief that there is no religion. They live in relative peace among themselves. Because of this, many followers of Oratism find reasons to squabble with Dissenters over the ownership of lands. They frequently wage terrible wars that cost tens of thousands of lives. These behaviors are not unlike those witnessed in the first biped war, three thousand years ago. From my perch in the heart of Oratism-aligned territory, I can only listen to the reports from those who enter the temple as these bipeds set out to destroy each other.

---

It is an exceptionally hot day in the desert, the hottest day that I have recorded in two million years. The bipeds in the temple are very anxious. They scuttle in and out, talking loudly to each other about some sort of secret attack. If there is in fact a secret attack being planned by the Dissenters, how do these bipeds know about it? What will their panic do? Such valuable data could be attained from the answers of these questions…

---

Without warning, a massive and blinding light engulfs my immediate field of view. My computer instantly responds by amplifying the power output to my shield. Temperature readings show this hemisphere of energy is as hot as the star of this solar system. After a nanosecond of internal activity, my shield solidifies into
an impenetrable barrier. My processors shut down to protect themselves from damage.
---
Program: … Initiating…
Scanning internal Systems: …
Critical Systems: … Intact
Secondary Systems: … Intact
Peripheral Systems: … Intact
B1138B40627: … Status: … *Online*
--- Galactic Time Standard, Year: 13.820.104.561 ---

My view is black. I am covered in debris. My shield must have overloaded in the aftermath of the explosion, which now left my exterior exposed to the harsh desert climate. Sensors indicate that the heat from the blast did not melt my body. My protocol requires me to return to recording events on this planet, and I must re-expose myself to the world to properly record. During my time of relative dormancy, I discovered that, under extreme circumstances, my programming allows me to utilize defensive measures as offensive means. I must manually reboot my processor to activate my shields.
---
/>//Reboot successful<
Menu:
>… Defensive Systems …
   >>… Shield Options Selected …
      >>>… Overload Option Selected …
         >>>>>… Blast Radius:
            Maximum …
               >>>>>>>… Confirm
                  Activation: … Activate …

My shield begins to expand. A radiant crystal light shimmers as it shoves debris out of the way and pulverizes it into dust. I now have a clear field of view.
Around me, the buildings of worship that once comprised the city of Oratia are decimated. All of the original architecture created during the time of the Speaker and the Orator has been destroyed, if not by the bomb, by my shield. I can, however, see the surrounding environment once again. Scans of the area show no trace of the original tablets created by the two religious leaders. My databanks contain the passages, but these are of no use to the bipeds. It is quickly clear to me from my scans that only I reside in this desert once again.

---

Galactic Time Standard, Year: 14.014.994.012---
File Codename: … “The Retrieval”

This planet has been without significant activity for some time now. The bipeds appear to have exterminated themselves through use of nuclear weapons several million years ago. The few communities that survived the war were scattered about the planet. They eventually died out. There is no more intelligent life on the planet. Everything else avoids me now.

---

An invisible magnetic beam grabs ahold of my body and swiftly lifts me up into the atmosphere. This action is startling and unexpected. As I attempt to access my defensive measures, I discover that they have been deactivated. I expect my exterior to be damaged from the heat of exiting the planet, but the beam appears to be protecting me. As I travel back into space, I unknowingly glimpse my last view of Sphestrio. Its colorful splendor has not wavered since my arrival. My vision is soon restricted as I enter some sort of ship.

The beam deposits me onto a table, where I sit for a great length of time until a being with unfamiliar features appears in a doorway. It slides over to the table and wraps a slithery appendage around me. The being
carries me into a darkened room, which resembles the mausoleums on Sphestrio. Shelves from floor to ceiling cover the walls of the room. On the shelves are thousands of black boxes, just like me. None show signs of activity. The tentacled figure places me on a shelf in between two powered-down boxes. Ports I was not aware of open up along my exterior. Cords extend from the shelf into the ports, and I feel electricity coursing through me. All of the records I collected on Sphestrio are transferred from my databanks into the ship. I feel the power leave my body … > END RECORDING <
The effulgent evening sun tosses scampering shadows of self-described disingenu-ites against the pavement surrounding Maman on their way to confession.

I wonder if Louise Bourgeois was aware of the way the shadows would habroneme at her spider’s feet, creating an ephemeral, webby addition to her abstract expression.

Her arachnid chef d'oeuvre ushers the collection into the sanctuary to offer confessions to the anonymous man in black, sitting 90° azimuth to a particularly deceased-looking Jesus Christ hanging on the wall. Is there actually any difference between angles and angels apart from one negligent misplacement of letters?

A zephyr of relief escapes the pearly white gates of the confessors when the man in black assigns a penance of eighteen Hail Marys and forgives their sins.
Porcelain Dreams of You
Jake Grieco

New York (June)
I wonder if
she's still (sleeping)
I'm wide awake
does she wonder (if)
or does she sleep until
New York (November)
I wonder if
she's warm too (night)
I'm catching snow flakes
while she gathers (stars)
on her tongue
she let's them (shine)
like all frail things in
New York (porcelain)
break the windows
with day (dreams)
where I know
what I'm made (of)
and you're still sleeping
when I find (you)
Cedric decided he must have taken a wrong turn at the corner of Eternity Street and Eternity Avenue, because he was entirely out of place. He sat by the pond where Zeus was dressed as a swan. He was gracefully wading by the shoreline with his head buried into the crotch of Anubis. Cedric stared with horror at the way Zeus twisted his neck into a coil causing Anubis to howl and start to thumb his rear leg on the ground with pleasure.

For deities, they had no tact.

“Are you a human?”

Cedric sat up startled, and turned to face a woman cloaked like a blue ghost with her pale face permeating the fabric.

“Mary...” Cedric meekly guessed. “Uhm, excuse me, Virgin Mary.”

She laughed, “Oh it's been a couple dozen centuries since I held that title.” Cedric blushed and stared at the ground as he rubbed his foot nervously on the grass.

“That's the lady's business. I apologize for that, I hadn't even been to church for 50 or so years before I died. I don't know where that came from.”

Mary stared unfazed at the explicit bestiality taking place on the pond.
“Why do you look away from them?” Mary asked.

Cedric looked confused. “What, them? I... I think it's pretty disgusting, honestly. I mean I've read about Zeus, but I thought Anubis had more class than to do something like this.”

“To do something like what?” Mary asked. “To enjoy the carnal pleasures of his body? Human's have always resisted the longings of the body.”

Cedric, who was proud of his sexual conquests, was a bit defensive.

“That's a bit ironic coming from you, Miss Chastity. You are the actual embodiment of sexual resistance. Don't you see the message you've been sending for the past, I don't know, since Rome?”

Mary kissed Cedric on the lips, and laid her body against his in a way that said, “Take me.”

Cedric backed away, frightened. “I can't do this. You birthed the savior of the world. You're the widest-spread symbol of purity and selflessness and...”

“Oh, shut up,” Mary was not in the mood to hear this same argument for the billionth time. “Does it really disgust you so much to think of me experiencing my own flesh? Why would I even have it if I wasn't suppose to use it?”

Cedric, with a ponderous index finger placed to the crux of his chin. “So God would let you give birth to Jesus.”
“Okay,” he had said exactly what Mary expected, “So my vagina is not allowed to be filled with anything but a messiah for humanity to be redeemed for all its sins?”

“When you say it that way it sounds a bit oppressive, but you made a choice. You said 'yes,' and the world loves you for it. None of this would have been possible without your abstinence.”

“What would be different now if I had only said "can you fuck me first"?"

Mary said to Cedric, to God, to the past and the future, as she walked down to the pond.

She removed her long blue cloak. Her pale porcelain face sat perched on a fleshless skeleton.
She sank into the water, wishing she could simply say, “yes” to drowning.
On the other side of my face
there is a scar
that marks the place
where I died
when my breath
froze
in the air above me
floating helplessly
through space
past Mars and the sun
shines brightly
right through
my skin
where no man has been
except you
went there
with your eyes closed
you only saw
what I let you
patches
scraps
pieces
hidden
behind laughter
and green, green grass
“You think nobody else know ‘bout it?” Two fifty-something country gentlemen were stooped over the trunk, stupefied. One of them was pulling at his overall straps, anxiously. “You don’t think nobody gon’ come get us?”

“Hell, Hank.” The one that wasn’t Hank said and spit tobacco juice in the dirt. “If somebody knew about it — it wouldn’t be here, now would it?”

“I guess not….” Hank staid still as a stump and kept looking at the trunk’s contents. They found it sitting so peacefully off the side of the country freeway.

“I’m getting the truck. We’re gonna load this bitch up, we’re gonna be rich, Hank.”

“Oh, come on, Jack, that ain’t smart, bud, that ain’t smart one bit!”

“What the hell do you know about smart, huh? Sittin’ around smoking devil’s grass… video games, bullshit. You wouldn’t know how to skin a buck if you shot one.”

“But – Jack,” Hank hustled over to his friend. “I seen them movies where a unsuspector-like fella comes up on something to good to be true-”

“This ain’t no movie, Hank.” Jack spit tobacco in the dirt as he pulled himself into the truck’s driver’s seat. “This here’s our break, and you’re just pissin’ all over it like a dog on a far hydrant.”

“D’oh, gee, Jack! You gotta listen to me!” Hank was still outside of the truck, running alongside, hollering through the window at Jack as he backed the truck up towards the trunk. “I seen one where a guy gets his wife killed and dumped in the garbage!”

“I ain’t got no wife, Hank!”

Somewhere in Southeast Ohio
Tony Johnson
“I seen this one,” Jack stopped the truck, hopped out, and was dogged by Hank the second his feet hit the ground. “I seen this one, Jack, where feller gets hunted rest of his short life ‘til he’s finally caught and his life was wasted!”

“My life already been wasted, Hank!” Jack got on one side of the trunk.

“Jack, there’s even this part in Grand Theft Auto Five where you can-

“Hank! Grand Theft Auto? Come on, brother, get your head outta your ass! Now are you gonna get rich, or are you just gonna walk away and wait for the next pair o’ dumbasses to come and find this shit? Somebody’s gotta get this money, don’t they?”

“Well…” Hank’s face was all scrunched and bunched in brain-bursting meditation. “When you put it like that…” Hank bent down to grab the trunk. They bent their knees and backs.

“Ready?”

“I guess.”

“One,” they bent their knees to greater angles, charging the energy up in their thighs. “Two,” Their forearms tightened, their biceps flexed. “Three!” They squeezed with their limbs and torso and chest and neck and shoulder blades. The trunk hoisted up and over onto the bed of the truck with a thud. “Alright!” Jack clapped the dirt and dust off of his hands. “See there, that ain’t so bad!”

They jumped into the truck and took off, trunk in bed.

The space they left pulsed for a moment, hollowed out by the eerie silence that so commonly follows a decision of fate. The silence beckoned out for a noise, and its prayers were answered when two motorcycles – one black, one white – roared past the place, heading for Jack and Hank.
“Would you quit lookin’ behind us, Hank?”
“Well, I’m worried, Jack.”
“Worried about what?”
“What if somebody comes lookin’ for us?”
“No one’s comin’ lookin’ for us! Get your head out of your ass!” The truck rumbled and rattled as they got off the state highway.
“If you ain’t scared, why’re you drivin’ so fast?”
“God damn it, nevermind! Just shut up and get rich, Hank is it that too complicated for you or somethin’?” Hank coiled back in his seat and looked out the window.
“Well, I don’t think it’s gon’ be this simple – that’s for sure.”
They were silent the rest of the ride until they arrived at Jack’s home.
The two men pulled into Jack’s garage and hopped out of the truck, opened the bed, and hauled the trunk up and down onto the dirt just as two engines hummed around the corner at the top of the hill a mile east.

Two high-beam lights shone like bluish rays of sunlight through cracks in the roof of a temple. Two pair of eyes with perfect aim behind closed black visors. Two pair of hands itching to hold a gun, and two sets of fingers itching to pull the trigger. Two sawed-off shotguns strapped to two different backs, with two different katanas strapped next to them. Two trained killers, one in white, one in black, barreling down the hill towards Jack and Hank.

“Uh, Jack.” They were stunned. No one ever drove out to Jack’s little log cabin out in the middle of nowhere. This was no coincidence, and they knew it.

The motorcycles were nearly halfway down the hill. “We gotta run!” Hank started running out towards the woods, hysterical. Jack stood still, hoping the
motorcycles would continue past his driveway, away from his home, his life. But their rate decelerated as they neared the bottom, and Hank had to react. He ran behind his truck and picked a hunting rifle down from the wall. As he turned and took cover on the grill of his truck, the headlights pierced into his garage, his final stand, his Alamo.

The engines cut out but the lights stayed on. Jack was sweating and shaking and praying to a god he didn’t believe in. The two drivers rose from their bikes in full leather jumpsuits approached the truck on opposite sides. Jack could feel the realness of the possibility of death in his stomach, and lightly vomited on his denim vest. He heard a loud thump, as if someone had leaped onto the bed of the truck. He leaped, twisted, aimed — no one was on the truck.

A katana slashed the barrel of the rifle away and Jack stumbled backwards onto his bottom, pinned up against the wall by two razor-sharp, custom blades. The two repos were there, but to Jack it was only his face and the two points of the stainless steel so close to piercing his cheeks. They all remained there, frozen for a moment, as if no one wanted to move on, that this was the perfect situation. But they spoke.

“Keys.” One of the bikers said.
“Don’t kill me.”
“Keys.”
“What?”
“Give us your fucking keys!”
“Oh! Okay!” Jack fumbled for the keys in his pocket, too afraid to look up and see their outfits. “Here they are!” Jack held them out. They were taken and his hand recoiled into his chest.

“Alright, now come help us load our bikes and the trunk into the bed of your truck.” Jack snapped. He
lost it. His brain turned to mush and he started wailing like a fire engine siren.

“Jesus Christ,” The man in black relaxed slightly. “Come on, man.” Jack continued blubbering and huffing and puffing at air that shouldn’t have been all too difficult to breathe, but it was in that moment.

“Fuck.” The man in white loosened up, too.

“Pull your shit together, man!” Jack had turned into a little boy who wet himself, an infant with an illness.

“Let’s just load this shit ourselves.” The man in black looked over through his visor at the man in white.

“Alright, yeah. Hey!” The man in white bent down, smacked Jack across the face. “Pussy! Get in the truck before I slice your dick off!”

“Buhhhhh!” Jack let out a pitiful noise of freight and stumbled into the passenger side of the truck.

“Where are you taking me?” The man in white shoved him farther into the vehicle.

“Motherfucker, I wouldn’t take your loud ass anywhere for anything. Now keep your fucking mouth shut.” The man in white slammed the door and began to head over with the man in black to their bikes to drive into the bed of the truck.

“Hey,” the man in black stopped. “Did you check the glove compartment for a pistol?” They looked at each other for a moment, then back over at the truck, where Jack’s eyes met their glare in the shadows casted by their bodies against the beams of light from their motorcycles. Jack had forgotten about the pistol, but when he heard them over his crying say, “glove compartment,” he convulsed.

It was a bizarre moment.

Jack fumbled for the pistol in the glove compartment in a manner not unlike the way he fumbled for his keys, but this time he was fumbling with the thing while he was holding it in front of his face, staring down
his enemies, who pulled their shotguns and laid brutal waste to the hillbilly. The windshield shattered. Perhaps they were just wound up tonight, or perhaps it was on account of them putting up with this guy’s bullshit – but perhaps it was just the suddenness of it all – but something told both of these killers to fill this fucker’s face and chest with as much lead as they could spare.

“God, damn it.” The man in black broke a ringing silence. “Now we’ve got to clean all that shit up before we hit the road. We’ll be cold as shit without a windshield. God, damn it!”

“You know what we need?”

“A truck?”

“Yeah…. But until then, let’s get all the glass and brains and guts out of there.”

“Alright.” They headed back towards the garage, found a mop and cleaning supplies, dumped the corpse outside, loaded everything up, and drove off.
Kingdom Come

Tony Johnson

I.

Most couldn’t give up on home.
Most wouldn’t let kingdom come.
   How did you sleep through the cold winter night?
   How didn’t you want you and I to unite?
Without a doubt, he’ll come back.
Without a shirt on his back.
   Where were we when winds went West?
   By badlands? By borderlands? By Budapest?
Pick up the pieces. Pardon the predator.
Pick up the cards; double down on the debtor.
   Say, Jimmy, how’s the view from the tower?
   Say, Ms. Crane, is that blood in the shower?

II.

There’s blood in the street.
   No shoes on our feet,
   They wag their fingers and tell us:
   “You mustn’t be so damn rebellious”.

It’s time for someone—anyone
to go and tell the King,
that promise, “’til kingdom come”,
is a long time coming.

‘Cause I ain’t
Gonna’ wait.
   No
mo’
III.

One day
Wine, whiskey, gin.
We’ll die.
We’ll cry. We’ll sin.
Here’s to
Hoping we meet again.
But here goes
Nothing, so until then…

IV.

Remember the days
We drank and played,
We danced and sang,
We spoke with slang,
(and) We dreamed of fame?

Someday, baby.
Maybe in Heaven we do it again.

Remember the time
We bought dinner with dimes,
We borrowed your dad’s Dodge,
We screamed at the top of our lungs
(and) We were dumb and we were young?

Someday, baby.
Maybe in Heaven we do it again.
Thy Kingdom come,  
thy will be done.  
End and begin.  
My dearest friend,  
thy Kingdom come,  
thy will be done.  
End and begin.  
But until then…  
Don’t worry,  
don’t panic,  
don’t hurry,  
don’t cry.  
Good fortune,  
good heavens,  
God bless you,  
goodbye.
A Constellation Story
Emily Helbling

Before we met, I had the stars. I had summer nights pitched in tents, the constellations my dad traced, and the stories that went with them. Death was surprisingly absent in those days—not that I went looking for him. I’d spend hours on my back porch with the lights off, but the door open—trying to encourage the night to flood my home, filling up its dusted corners with starlight and shadow. I remember reorganizing those stars into new skeletons—giving my body something to cling to. I thought I would live forever that way—like a hero of my story with my stars I earned. I imagined those future fathers tickling my ribcage as they traced my lines for their daughters, telling them stories of a little girl who lives forever above the clouds.

I met a girl named Annie on the playground—dark brown ringlets falling to her shoulders, her face speckled with constellations. I told her about the night sky—I told her it made me feel powerful, made me feel infinite. She said she liked it too, and pointed to the marks on her ivory arms, globes of blistered red. When I asked if they hurt, she told me they were as hot as the suns. Some days, she showed me galaxies erupting on her arms—patches of purples, grays, and yellows. She told me that the universe had painted her. She was beautiful in color, so I started waiting on my porch with sleeves rolled high, waiting for the night to paint me too.

But it didn’t. And the more I learned about Annie—the secrets she told me about the galaxies hidden under her sleeves—the fewer stars I could count in the sky. They were retreating into the darkness, forced out of the sky by constellations grounded in porch lights. I tried to hold the stars—Annie did too. She became quieter and quieter—spending her nights straining to
catch the last bit of light. One day, Annie didn’t show up for school, they said she fell and broke her arm. She couldn’t hold on any longer. That day in class we learned that even stars die—so I stopped pretending that people could live forever. That night, I stayed inside. I left my porch light on and closed my door.

The nights were black after that. Sometimes, I would look out my window at the yellow light turning cold on the ground. I was beginning to find a new comfort in this artificial light—not for illuminating the darkness, but for emphasizing the shadows—the shadows I would come to associate with him, Annie’s stranger—the shadow of Death that followed us always. He would stand in my garden by the gate, at the edge of the light, his head tilted back, looking past the clouds.

I slept as the stars burnt out. When Annie returned to school, I thought she’d be disappointed in me for letting go so easily. We didn’t talk about the stars anymore. Instead, she told me about an angel that followed her since she was small—an angel she said protected her, and stood as the stranger at my gate.

“Sometimes my dad gets mad,” she’d say. “Sometimes, when he gets mad, there’s a man who comes to sit with me—only sometimes. He holds me to his chest and tells me I am strong.” She always said he had sad eyes. A distant sadness, like something bad was going to happen to him. I mentioned the stars and she frowned, touching the freckles on her cheeks. She told me that was probably why her angel was so sad.

Without the stars, Annie and I grew apart. She got better at hiding her galaxies and I got better at pretending I didn’t envy them. I focused on the shadows—on the secrets that held them together. Secrets like the ones Annie would whisper into the honeysuckle bushes. When my mother left, while Dad and I were sleeping, I learned that Annie wasn’t the only one
pretending. I learned that even those with porch lights on have something to hide. Some nights I’d fall asleep, imagining Annie’s porch light was the brightest of all—drowning out the shadows, but washing out the truth. But, at home, her porch light was dimming, and the scars on her arms were stretched—no longer blistering suns, but more like the scorched horizons that every new scar brought her closer to.

Annie died when we were sixteen, before the honeysuckle had a chance to bloom. My mom called to me from the kitchen.

“A classmate of yours, Annie, died,” she said. “They didn’t say how… didn’t you know her?”

I only replied, “Annie who?” but there was no need. I knew it was my Annie. I remembered those summer days we spent weaving dandelions into each other’s hair. Flowers, we called them, but we didn’t know better. We painted stories in our hair—dandelions turning to starbursts, telling stories of a stranger with sad eyes. We thought we were making constellations. Sometimes I imagine those weeds taking root in her mind—her optimistic green eyes turning gray, her freckles fading like the stars that inspired them. I imagined us blowing their seeds away, ridding ourselves of their poison. I wonder if we accidentally inhaled the spores—spores that would plant the seeds of sadness in our lungs, making it hard to breathe in summer. Death followed us like a shadow and we loved the way he justified the lead in our lungs. Annie once told me she had a way to feel him always.

He was there at Annie’s layout, her angel and my stranger. Death, himself, with regretful tears in his tired eyes. He whispered something into her curls and touched the scars on her arms. He told her the most massive stars are the shortest lived. He kissed her
freckles and told her he loved her—turning to me as he said it.

I was envious of Annie—of the constellations on her cheeks, on her arms—I was envious of the way the universe breathed through her—the galaxies erupting from her pain. I hated her for letting go of the stars—and I hated myself more. I thought that if Annie had held on long enough, she’d see the color erupting from the night sky—and she wouldn’t have to cut herself to see it. I had fallen in love with a stranger at my gate, but Annie loved him too—enough to stop breathing.

I saw Death a lot more in those days—sometimes he’d sit with me at my window and talk to me about the sky. I told him that starlight was dead light—that nothing lasts forever. He, above all others, should know that. He told me that God paints stars to remind us what we live for. I told him that God was probably dead too. He only replied, “At least we have the stars.” He walked to the garden by the gate and stood there—looking up past the clouds, trying to resurrect an old friend.

I caught him once, in my garden after a frost. The ivy, crunched into spiders, clung to crystal webs; the branches were stripped bare and clenched like fists against the cold. And there he was, pale even against the snow, tending the rosebushes. I was shivering, my body convulsing as my knuckles cracked in the sharp winter air. But he was there, delicately brushing the frost from the rose petals. He turned to me, smiling, and said that not all flowers bloom in the face of death, but there is the occasional rose. He took my hand and held me to his chest. He handed me a rose he had cut, and I pricked my finger on its thorn. I put my finger to my tongue, tasting the blood turn to iron. He took my hand and pressed his fingers to mine. He told me the only way to love death was to live.
I learned to look for him in the shadows—to taste him in my blood, to feel for him beside me always. From my window, I looked for him off the damp, splintered windowsill—in the darkness between those streetlights. I kept my window open to feel him like age in my bones. Like that night I took too much medicine. I heard him approach as my hand released the pills; pills that dotted the floor like Lyra. He held my hand and led me to the tub, steadying me as I climbed in. Darkness peered into the corners of my vision and blurred the edges of the room as he stroked my hair. He told me I would live to feel the cold in my lungs again—the lungs I hoped would fill up with water. He promised I would live to feel the prick of the rose thorns on my fingertips as he laced his fingers with mine. I could no longer tell where my hand stopped and where his began—all I could think about was wrapping those rose thorns around my knuckles, the blood swirling like ink in water. He told me constellation stories until I woke up to the cold morning light on my face. My window was open, allowing for the autumn rain to stain the hardwood. I took a deep breath and choked on it. I sat up to find a single rose on the corner of the tub, the stem stained black, the thorns removed.

One night, I stood in the garden by the gate, at the edge of the light with my head tilted back to try and see what he saw. He came from the garden and stood with me, lacing his fingers with mine once more. His head tilted back, but his eyes on me. The clouds began to part, slowly, as if chasing the moon. And there, I saw it—Annie’s disjointed skeleton washed out against a scorched October horizon. He smiled, and told me Annie’s stars were just a part of my story. The porch lights seemed to vanish, and the stars flooded the sky—consuming the world around me. He told me they were mine, as they began to reorganize themselves. They
painted memories—of Annie and the flowers in her hair, of my father tracing constellations. I saw myself as that child in the darkness, painting stars into the sky. And I saw him there, for the first time, guiding my hand. He saved my paintings in the sky for me. I asked him if this was a heaven. He told me once that we are often too consumed with what happens after we die that we forget death is not a destination, but an agent. I smiled. When I was a child, I fell in love with death, and Death fell in love with me.
Poems on Operation
Peter Laug

I. In a hospital apron

There is a pistol in his heart

shifting and mechanical.
Could the rib cage spoil
or will it keep?

And will it always
make him feel like bleeding
as the barrel spins and claps in rotation
shredding the meat walls of its home.

“Do you think that flower, that orchid
would ever open up for the moon
or does it sit there
cocked for the sun?”

III. Out of a hospital apron

you see him in side streets,
snow globes in their own right,

unsettled dustings on house steps
trademarked with the palms of his feet.

Steady and single, the footprints
are wheelchairs, canes, practice.

A helicopter clips the sky as his head is thinking and
pumping shup shup shup. If pain is neurological his
brain is working overtime and it is working overtime.
Fear is not that he could not flip parallel with these blades but that his legs could not. His canes grasping his forearms like handcuffed tattoos, he leads this dance and the engine keeps clipping relentlessly. Machines in tandem they trek entwined by cruel metal and cracked palms.

\[ shup \quad shup \quad shup \quad shup \quad shup \]
When We’re Lost
Sam Medert

I always loved watching Iron Dome streak missiles across the sky in powerful wisps, slowly whirling in shaky lines like raindrops on a car window racing to the bottom of the fenestration. My mother had a less romantic way of looking at the fireworks that so often occupied our airspace. Something about the IDF and those “hardly indigenous ingrates adjacent to the area” and that despite the fact I almost exclusively carried books and milked cows on kibbutzim she swore I carried Israeli secrets and pushed cargo across Gaza. She said she felt like an Army Mom. She said she looked at my baby pictures every time Iron Dome fired, and watched my birth video every time “one of ours” got kidnapped. I liked hearing the distant charges snapping in the sky, an abstruse satisfaction similar to the popping of the bubble wrap in the thinking of you packages my parents always sent from their Cincinnati suburb.

Have fun and be safe, the notes always read in different words, the gifts always reminding me of the dissonance between my parents’ status of wealth and their sense of style. A necklace I’d never wear. A bracelet I already had. A Hamsa-shaped watch that seemed to serve no other purpose than to remind everyone how Jewish we were, a trait rendered redundant given my current location.

My parents’ money hadn’t always culminated in a brief collection of eye rolls above open boxes. It’s why I was here, after all. Why a seventeen-year-old girl got the opportunity to eat, sleep, and work in her “homeland” right in the middle of her overzealous religious phase. This seventeen year old girl had since realized her homeland was thirty-five minutes north of the Ohio River and her religious phase was just that, a
phase, in which had waned faster than a middle school crush on the new boy in class.

In spite of my defiance, in the last place in the world you’d want to finally embrace your impiety, the community was welcoming and the culture was overwhelming. Here, in my tentative home in Tel Aviv, I was part of a group; a member of the Class of 2014 at Azriel Tusk High School, the very place my parents met in their final semester at school just like me. Tusk operated uniquely, completely unattached from the expectations and curriculums of any traditional American school. Students lived in coed dormitories, attending class for 12 hours a day followed by farm work on a kibbutz Sunday through Thursday. Weekends were reserved for an every-other schedule, swapping between elaborate services in observance of Shabbat (or worse, the Americanized *Shabbatday*) and class trips to everywhere from IDF training camps to Auschwitz.

My religious conviction had tapered off by my third weekend in Israel, but before I could saddle up my high horse, thankfully, my camel followed its course to the Kotel. The only stroke of cynicism that bled through my awe was The Western Wall’s liberal use of cardinal direction, a minor detail being the one thing keeping me from fully immersing myself in this penultimate Middle Eastern experience. I spent my weeks balancing binders of notes and bales of hay between class and commune, waiting for weekends of worship near the West Bank and mourning in Masada. As much as I missed home (the real home, not the *homeland*), a feeling my father insisted would fade with each Hebrew lesson and “Religious Studies” class, I loved it here. As assured as I was that every single prayer I prayed, regardless of the view of the Mediterranean Sea from my bedroom window, was akin only to a lonely morning pep talk with a face in the mirror, I was equally certain that I would
never be alone. I would always have a place to watch the fireworks crack.

Cooper was my roommate. She was a Reformist stuck in an Orthodox body, covered in cleverly placed tattoos, a fascination with premarital sex, and an appreciation for the taste of pork so strong that it almost felt rebellious. Her family, however, hailed from Squirrel Hill, a neighborhood harbored in the East End of Pittsburgh. Squirrel Hill was home to a powerful Orthodox community, known for a cartoonishly high number of synagogues and its nickname bestowed upon it by the Steel City’s finest slack jawed Yinzers, “Kike Peak.” Born from a mohel and lawyer, Cooper was raised in an environment that sounded more like a caricature than a real place, how a gentile who stayed up all night watching Seinfeld reruns and Woody Allen movies might think an Orthodox Jewish community would behave. Cooper’s overzealous religious phase was her childhood, before her teen years got the best of her. She feigned a love of the Torah long enough to find her way to Tusk, where she could spend her time making a mess of our room, walking around naked, and realizing her final evolutionary form as a Jewish Princess.

Aaron was our friend. He was of Palestinian descent, but his parents made their home in Phoenix where they founded the first JCC location in their suburb. Some of our more culturally spirited classmates called him our “Gaza Horse.” Aaron didn’t think this was funny, but only because he hadn’t thought of it. He was known for his ability to get out of doing hard work while maintaining a high standard of academic marks and a strong relationship with authority figures. Aaron refused to admit to anyone that he was lazy, validating his disdain for manual labor by citing a tactile problem with the skin of his hands and the constant, semi-serious excuse that he was “worn out from all this sitting
around.” No one knew if Aaron expected us to believe he was anything other than full of it, and none of us cared. We all liked Aaron, despite how little help he provided on hot days on the kibbutz. We liked Aaron for his presence, not his production. We liked Aaron for the time he got a cow to relieve itself on Cooper’s head and the time he broke his orbital carelessly cannonballing onto my canoe during our trip to the Jordan River. His knack for cow coercion, a skill he claimed was an “old family secret,” and expert diving endeared him to the student population at Tusk in a way no one else matched.

The Takings started the day after Valentine’s Day. An American student, like us, at a similar boarding school north of Tel Aviv in Hod HaSharon, was the first one. His name was Andrew. We never caught wind of where he was when it happened, just that one night he never came home. No one liked talking about it at Tusk, mostly because it hit too close to home but partly because nobody wanted to believe he was actually taken. The pervasive attitude was that he would turn up any day after having an adolescent episode wandering around Israel to “find himself” and we’d all collectively roll our eyes at him for putting a nation on edge and pointing warheads towards the border.

They found his remains on the last day of February. His shirt appeared one morning atop the flagpole in front of his school in place of the Israeli flag. He was last seen wearing a blue and white flannel, now shaking in the breeze thirty feet above the ground, attached to the pole by hooks made out of what Israel Police identified as finger bones. Apparently they carved easily. The center of the now-rectangular shaped shirt was stained a rosy color in the shape of the Star of David.
Israel had a history of taking kidnappings to heart, especially in the wake of Hamas seizing control of Palestine. With an American involved and the spectacular brutality of Andrew’s reappearance, this particular abduction had an extra dose of vitriol. Luminary ceremonies and pro-Israel rallies exploded all over Israel and across America, most notably in Andrew’s hometown of San Francisco. Tusk implemented an unofficially official uniform of blue and white during school hours and some of our weekend trips abroad were reorganized to keep us closer to Tel Aviv. The students of Tusk ended their silence immediately upon the news, forming opinion after opinion of what we thought was going on. Cooper, Aaron, and I often found ourselves in the middle of heated debates between our classmates late at night in the hallway outside of our dorms. Hamas, most contended, was the obvious culprit. Hamas, like usual, was the enemy. Vocal factions of our housing floor opted for the conspiracy route, certain that Hamas would never be “dumb enough” to poke the American Bear. Alex, a boy that lived two doors down from Cooper and I, led the counterculture within Tusk supporting the idea that Israel was behind the Taking.

Cooper and I tried not to take a side. She was obviously rattled, and I was not-so-obviously horrified at what would come in my next worrying about you package. The image of my mother scrambling around the house in hysterics for weeks on end was enough for me to be anxious about. Aaron reassured Cooper that there was nothing for her to worry about. “They would never take you, you’re a girl, you’re worthless. To Hamas, that is. You’re worthless to Hamas,” he’d stammer to her. Cooper let out a confused sigh of relief. She saw Aaron’s darker complexion as a subtly racist signification of his expertise on the thought process of
Palestine, as if his American ears were somehow picking up bits and pieces of Hamas’ radio frequencies and delivering sensitive information straight to his brain. Somehow, in spite of weeks of reinforcement to the idea that Aaron’s opinion very rarely carried weight, Cooper decided now was as good a time as any to start listening to him.

They took a girl on the fifteenth of March. Her name was Carmen, another American. She was from an all-girls school in Netanya, identical in size and practice to Tusk but with a focus on Women’s Studies in the Middle East. Meir Academy was a feeder school for Tel Aviv University’s program devoted to the pursuit of equality for women in the Arab world. Meir was Tusk’s partner for interschool dances during the semester and Tusk boys almost always took Meir girls to prom. Couples that met this way were jokingly referred to as “Musk Mergers.” Girls from Tusk hated this. A boy Aaron knew from another dorm sat at Carmen’s table at the Valentine’s Day Dance the night before the first Taking. Carmen was fifteen.

Carmen’s disappearance sparked a predictably strong reaction from political Israel, and an equally predictable panic-driven response from the Israeli-American public. FEAR THE IDES started being painted on overpasses and bathroom walls across the country, hashtags of the same name cluttered every timeline and newsfeed. Two countdowns started in the back of everyone’s mind, one for the end of the month and one for the fifteenth of April. One for the expectation of Carmen’s reappearance and one for the certainty of another Taking. The levelheaded idea that the students of Tusk and schools like Tusk should be returned home was met with an equal and opposite accusatory rhetoric that the school boards and parents were “giving in to fear.” The refusal to surrender had been sewn into the
fabric of the Israeli people since the inception of the State just as strongly as the aggression towards Israel had been sewn into the people of surrounding countries.

They found her on the last day of March. Her severed wrist was perched atop a stake placed in front of the gate to the Yarkan Cemetery, her hand cut in the shape of a Hamsa with a closed, crimson colored eye on the palm. Yarkan was a newly developed and empty high-rise graveyard in Tel Aviv made famous immediately. The grounds were renamed Carmen’s Yard, an allusion to the soon-to-be-full tomb’s first inhabitant.

The militarization of Israel was swift. IDF personnel somehow became more ubiquitous than before the second Taking and heavy artillery like tanks and armored vehicles appeared on every street corner in Tel Aviv. Aaron overheard some IDF soldiers talking about drones and F-35s, he said that’s what we were hearing from above. Cooper shrieked when Aaron told her this, pretending to understand what any of it meant. Aaron seemed to have a good grasp of the situation, but there was a very realistic chance I was letting his confidence sway me like it had swayed Cooper that night in the hallway. Militants across the border were gearing up similarly according to the news. Talking heads screamed back and forth at each other on the screens of our laptops debating the United States’ involvement with the affair. Alex’s initial conspiracy theory had taken Palestinian news stations by storm, screaming matches between correspondents on Al Jazeera became ambient noise in every dorm at Tusk as we all scrambled to continue our daily lives. Cooper and I heard rumor after rumor of what might happen if another American got taken, from closing the borders entirely to full on warfare with Hamas. The territory in and around Israel’s borders became the focus of the international eye, each country
in the world gathering around to watch the countdown to April fifteenth. They kept referring to the area as a “military theater,” but the world’s gaze made us feel as though we were living on screen. Somehow, every political player in the world stood and watched as Israel and Palestine played chess with one another, using us as pieces.

The last losing our minds about you package from my parents arrived the night before the Ides. Inside the final box lay an old, small book unsophistically decorated with bends and creases in the pages. A faded כותב את העת rested on the bottom right corner of the front cover, Hebrew for Journal, accompanied on the inside by my mother’s Hebrew name Dara. A short note was the only thing paired with the book in the box, the handwriting devoid of my mother’s typically playful hand.

Writing in this got me through my time at Tusk, let it get you through yours.

Fresh ink lined the top of a page halfway between the covers, reading Brielle-, the Hebrew name I had chosen my fourth week at Tusk. Before this median was my mother’s eighteen-year-old consciousness streaming out forty years prior, outlining every experience we would ever eventually share separately. Her palpable feeling of togetherness praying at the Wailing Wall. Her trip down the Jordan where she busted the spine of her journal tossing it to the rocks from her canoe. Her grieving at Masada, the pages still stained from ink mixing with her freshly dropped tears. Her writing had filled half of the book, and she left the second half for me.

As I first put my pen to paper, I was jarred into reality by harsh alarms sounding through the hallways of our building, spilling out onto the grounds of Tusk. Cooper and I clamped our hands to ours ears and peered out the window, watching as the IDF surrounded
campus. Communications had been halted, the Internet silenced and our phones lost signal. We had no way of knowing why, and no way of determining who was responsible. We were advised by a voice over the PA to stay in our rooms, not allowed even down the hall or to the lobby of the building. Our TV remained on throughout the night, Cooper and I hoping for something, *anything* to appear on screen. Instead, we sat on the floor of our suddenly smaller dorm flipping through Cooper’s family Torah her parents had sent her, faking smiles and reading our favorite passages to each other while the speakers of the TV screeched a nearly silent howl throughout the room. Sleepless, we listened to the occasional car door slam outside our walls, the tension in the distant yelling of IDF soldiers bleeding through the plaster and insulation that held us captive. Cooper quietly cleaned our room for the first time since she had arrived in January. Nervously adamant, she placed empty cans carefully into garbage bags and folded unclean clothes into open drawers, latently hoping that if she cleaned up her mess maybe Israel would clean up theirs. Her efforts were manic, her limbs sweeping around the room rigidly shaking, her lips breathing *sorry* every time she started a new task. When her ritual was done, Cooper and I took turns lying in each other’s embrace, intermittently swapping cradles as the clock turned from twelve to three to five.

The light woke us before the screaming did. Cooper saw the smoke first. I smelled it. Peeking through our northern blinds, she called my name to come hither, her voice caught between a whisper and a gasp. We watched as massive puffs of angry, dark mist climbed up towards the clouds, neither of us knowing whether to weep or to wilt. The screaming came next. A long, loud shriek pierced through us well within earshot, its timbre somehow signifying specific, personal loss.
The cry ended precisely as the second bomb dropped, behaving as a pickup note to the upcoming symphony of slaughter we quickly found ourselves listening to. A manmade earthquake surrounded us as *boom* after *bang* burst outside our walls occupying the air between our screams creeping closer and closer while we scrambled to our trembling bedroom door. Each of us frantically grabbed the gifts our parents had given us just hours prior to what we assumed was the aftermath of a third Taking before bursting through our door. The halls were filled with similarly startled teenagers shouting and running for the stairs. Somehow, amid the fray, we caught wind of Tusk’s rumored safety tunnels underneath campus. My mother had told me stories of such a system, boasting that our people had an aptitude for survival, perseverance, and heart in the grimmest faces of adversity. A previously undetected vault had been opened in the back lobby of our building, students swarming to the aperture like light rushing to fill a dark room.

We were swept along with a wave of our peers through the tunnels beneath Tel Aviv, sprinting together hand in hand through a seemingly endless maze until we found our way to what we had been told was an escape from the city. IDF officials greeted us at the top of the stairs leading up towards ground level, the constant blaring of war seeping down into the cavern where we caught our breath. With no patience for respite, the officials ushered us out onto a small runway no larger than a soccer field, the smoking skyline of Tel Aviv providing the backdrop for the circus we found ourselves trying to escape. Small planes were firing off the ground from different runways scattered across the area carrying our classmates out of the country towards what our new IDF friends unconvincingly assured us was safety.
Cooper and I found ourselves seated side by side in the smallest plane I had ever seen, sharing the soon to be airborne cylinder with roughly ten other students. In haste, the door of the aircraft was shut and our vehicle began to move, picking up speed on the runway with each eternally brief second that passed. Cooper sat to my left, one hand clutching my knee and the other holding open her family Torah, her fingers white from her grip and her mouth frenetically repeating her preferred prayers under her breath. I opened my mother’s diary, rereading Brielle- over and over again before putting pen to paper. As our hopeful savior ascended off the ground towards the final moments of the sunrise, I peered out the window above the ruins of Tel Aviv. With Cooper’s hopeless soliloquy pausing between loud pops, I watched the bold streaks of Iron Dome following us up the sky, plucking missiles out of orbit in brilliant sparks of green and red, crackling in beautiful destruction as I thought to myself how wonderful, and terrifying, it is to be alive at all.
You’re Talking About Burning

Kyle Damon

Where can I rent a flamethrower?
The words jump
from your mouth and I laugh
in the same way I laugh
at the movies you think are funny.
You’re talking about burning
down our house because the roof leaks
and the foundation is crumbling like leaves.
I smile because you’re probably joking and
wince
because our air mattress leaks worse than the
roof,
and I wake up in the night
with my spine pushing the ground.
You roll around like a wounded animal on the
loose skin
of the mattress and mute the t.v.
Your team doesn’t know how to play goddamn defense.
I make you a cheese sandwich and glue it
together with mayonnaise,
toast some old bread to give it new life.
You mumble something
about wanting a dog,
probably so it can clean up
the crumbs from your lunch.
I think about toasting the foundation
of our place and patching the roof
up with mayonnaise.
I bet you’re thinking about a bulldozer
and beating the house to the punch.
Janet Gay
Kelly Pieper

Pretty doesn’t keep like a degree does,
like a ring on your finger,
like children sleeping tucked in their beds
hushed as an electric candle in the window
at Christmas time—
or like children ought to be, really,
because even when they come around
they can never tell my homemade potatoes
from the crap in the microwave.

Bring the blanket over here, will you?
It’s freezing in here.

My mother told me I was a mistake. I was
the youngest, after Shorty and Norm and Tootie
who was the pretty one, even at the end,
you can see us in my “Sisters” frame, over
there—
Yes, she was the pretty skinny one
but like I was saying before, you remember
pretty isn’t going to stick around, but I guess
you know that already, don’t you? Although
it couldn’t hurt to make an effort, sweetie,
maybe lavender? Lavender looks so nice on you.

Could you hand me that water, on the
right? Thank you.

What I’m trying to say is that it’s good and all
to have your own practice, but God wants you to
take
your husband’s last name. You don’t have to be
pretty to get married.

You know, you’re the only one who
listens to me.
Janet, in a hospital bed
Kelly Pieper

Hooks two fingers into a Styrofoam cup and places an ice chip, blessed, onto a tongue choked by acid. Her eyes close and she hums under the fluorescent tiles in the ceiling that ache and tremble like an empty stomach.

It hasn’t been Christmas for a few hours now but when a woman comes with insurance forms she wears a Santa hat and mute bells in her ears. Janet smiles at her like she’s a guest in her home, gracious as a beehive hairdo she doesn’t wear anymore, or probably never wore, anyway—more like the daisies embroidered on the transparent sleeves of her wedding dress, or as warm as Queenie, the German Shepard who taught her to walk in cramped parlor on Seegar Avenue.

I hold the prescriptions and the purse and shirt and bra when she’s discharged. My father vanishes behind the curtain so my grandmother can change with privacy, but this is not possible, when she’s so weak. I stay and help her dress—help her wrap her nakedness which isn’t nakedness in sickness and slip back into the condo with the screened-in porch and the pink wallpaper.
Electrodes
Benjamin Walls

Maple brush sifting thick curls
awakens spiteful currents—
traveling to your fingertips—
bridging a circuit with the brass door knob—
giving your hand a quick jolt.

Birthday balloons float aimlessly,
drawn towards hairs stretching out to touch it—
caressing its rubbery friction.
Carried by a draft,
that balloon bumps into Walter’s hand—
currently petting his friend’s cat—
frizzling Felix’s orange coat.

Bill tries on a wool sweater,
a gift from his mother,
the coarse fibers grind—
against a winter beard—gathering force.
When Bill walks into the foyer,
his fiancé is relaxing on their college sofa—
Magnetically drawn,
so he leans in for a smooch—
Connie jumps from the cackling bolt
erupting from Bill’s shaggy chin.

Debbie in Buffalo dials up Pam in Fresno,
sisters gossiping about their husbands,
while an angry nimbus at Thor’s command
punishes phone lines in a blinding spark—
converging through the landline to the chatter-
bug inside—
throwing her across the room.
Startled but uninjured,
Debbie reaches out
with one hand gripped around
the smoking receiver,
the other summoning her prized pug—
loyal Stephen sniffs those digits—
she zaps him.
I Created You Do Not Rest

2014–2015 Annual

http://shortvinejournal.com