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AshBelt: Volume Five

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ASHBELT

THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON
UNDERGRADUATE LITERARY JOURNAL

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2018

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the fifth volume of AshBelt, the undergraduate student literary journal at the University of Akron. Make yourself at home! Here, you'll find misbehaving children, gas station encounters, lunch for one, Isaac Newton, and dark chocolate melting on cement.

Before we start, let me express some gratitude. First, for Professor Eric Wasserman, without whom AshBelt would not exist. Thank you for the guidance, confidence, and advice. We couldn't do it without you. Amy Freels and Jon Miller, your help is invaluable. Thank you for steering us through the maze of book-printing nuance.

Lucien, thank you for capturing the spirit of AshBelt and giving our contributors' words a beautiful home. To the professors who advertised AshBelt in class all year: thank you for the support, and for sending your wonderful students our way. I'm also like to thank Dr. Julie Drew, who gave us a brilliant interview. Thank you for your time and your wisdom.

What can I say about our staff? Casey, Zoe, Julie, Cris, Natalie, Danny, and Ben—thank you for your commitment to our journal. Every ounce of your consideration is multiplied throughout the pages of this book. I couldn't have hoped for a better crew for snacking and discussing the brilliant work of our peers. Also, thanks for putting up with my shoddy seating arrangements.

Okay, folks. Let's get this started. Find a comfy chair, grab your softest blanket, brew a hot beverage. I hope you enjoy your stay!

Sincerely,
Erin Siegfert
Editor-in- Chief

DOROTTYA FENYVESI

Funky Business

“Hey, you want to give me a title?” I ask as I look up from my computer screen.

“For What?”

“Just give me a title.”

“I’m going to need more than that to give you a title...”

“It’s fine, just give me a title.”

“Funky Business.” I type it as soon as he says it, laughing. “Hang on! You just made me title something you wrote about me, didn’t you? And I gave you a title that does not reflect my personality at all!”

I met him at a bar last April. We made eye contact long enough for me to note the exact shade of blue his eyes were, and I knew I had him the second his eyes lowered to my cleavage and didn’t lift back up for a moment. I wore a revealing shirt on purpose; I was having a miserable time and reached for the only solution I could think of at the time, which was getting drunk and getting positive male attention. It was out of character for me, but I argued that it couldn’t get any worse, so I might as well begin to self-destruct. I knew he was an engineer, I had seen him around, and he was hanging with guys I knew were friends with the girl I used to live with. He seemed safe enough, and my friend apparently thought so too, because she left me alone with him for most of the night.

We went to my apartment after the bar that night; a small party had cumulated in my kitchen. As beer pong and flip cup were winding down, he asked me to flex my arm for a Snapchat – to demonstrate my strength and power he claimed. I did it with a laugh, and minutes later we were out in the hallway, competing. He was tall and muscular, I had felt his arm clearly earlier in the bar, and his abs were outlined through the thin material of his shirt.

I knew I only had a chance to beat him in a strength element that required more than just endurance, and he was too committed to back down no matter what I said, so I went with my favorite; holding a handstand.

“Wait you mean against the wall right?” he asked, and I knew I had won before we even started.

“Sure, if that makes it better for you.” I answered with a smile. As if I could hold a free handstand for long. I tucked my shirt into my shorts and kicked up, smiling when he attempted a moment later. His shirt slid up his chest and onto his face and neck even before his boots hit the drywall with a loud thump, and he wobbled for a little, his legs bending oddly before falling away from the wall with another hard landing. I kicked off the wall gracefully, landing my socked feet on the floor without a sound.

“You’re wearing socks. My boots are too heavy.”

“Don’t be a loser. I won, so congratulate me. Besides, I could’ve done that in those boots.”

“There is no way.”

“I could do them in yours even though they’re twice the size of my feet. Hand them over!” He shrugged and bent down to unlace the boots. Heavy, thick leather and sole, a combined weight of fifteen pounds easily. But, I’ve already declared I could do it, so it was going to happen. Not wanting to land too hard on the wall and shatter the illusion of my abilities, I opted for a free handstand, the boots shifting and almost falling off my feet as I kicked up. I flexed my feet to make it harder for them to slip off, but it threw me off balance, so I took a few steps on my hands.

“Shit. I’m impressed.” He said, and I laughed. I landed gracefully back on my feet and slipped the boots off, sliding them in his direction with a smile.

As April turned to May and June, campus became oddly empty. I often wondered if we would still be talking if I had met him any other time – the answer is a very probable no. As he got busy and more enthusiastic about his summer coop, I got less and less excited about mine. I slept too much, ate out too much and

stopped pretending I was okay. We weren't friends, not yet anyway, and we weren't anything more than friends, but for some reason, he kept inviting me over. He was a sort of odd outlier, in that neither of us wanted anything but, we still ate together, mostly in silence, because it was better than not having anyone at all. Every time I thought we were getting closer, he would say or do something so out of my comfort zone, it immediately reminded me of how different we really were. He joked about spicy sausages burning twice, told me vulgar stories of construction workers he overheard at work, and didn't always bother to shower or put a shirt on just because I was coming by. His relaxed attitude about everything was shocking and fascinating to me all at once. I threw fireworks out his window despite my best judgement once, because I wanted to be nonchalant like he was. It made me feel more guilty than cool, especially when his neighbors cursed at us for scaring them with all the noise. It wasn't until a night late in June, that I needed a friend and realized I literally had none of them that I resigned myself to reaching out to him. It was different this time; we didn't have fun activities or alcohol to hide behind.

"My bedtime is eleven. I can't be tired for work."

"Can I just come over for a little bit?"

"Fine." His response made me uncomfortable at the time, but by now I know he means it as a joke.

He was already on his porch when I got to his house, his feet propped up on the table, his shorts sliding up his thigh. He didn't have a shirt on, but it was hot, and he rarely wore one when he was at his house anyway, so I didn't question it.

"What's on your chest?" I asked as a greeting and he rubbed his stomach absent mindedly before he looked at his fingers and wiped the black specks on his shorts.

"Oh, I was grilling." It was awkward at first, the conversation too new and strange for the both of us to really say anything important. I shifted back and forwards in the chair, unable to get comfortable. It rolled if I shifted too suddenly, but he never questioned what I was doing. I listened mostly, not wanting to talk

ridiculous day I had, and he told me about a girl from high school.

"Even mama didn't like her. And mama likes everyone." The Justin Bieber song that popped into my head made me smile, so I asked him about his mom, and to my surprise, he shared. We stayed up well past eleven that night, as he talked about how his mom worked at a gas station but still made sure him and his brother had everything they needed growing up. He told me about a fight he had with his dad the weekend before, and I asked if they were maybe just too similar.

"My dad and I? Oh no, he's my stepdad."

"Oh. But you call him your dad?"

"Yeah. He's been around since I was two. He's my dad."

"What about your biological dad? Aren't you curious?"

"Nah. Don't know, don't care." He went on about football, and dating advice his dad gave him, and I thought about my own family while I listened. My parents, whose first question about any new friend I made was what their parents worked, claiming it said a lot about someone's upbringing. I learned more about him, and in a backwards way myself, that night than I had over the course of the previous two months, and I started to see him as more than just someone better than no one. I use his childhood stories as welcome distractions for the next few days. After that, on afternoons and weekends, I found myself on his porch, people watching, grilling and talking.

As the weather turns cold, our meetings migrate from his porch and backyard to his kitchen and his room. He's binge watching Game of Thrones, and I sit on his couch doing my homework. His roommates have grown used to seeing me in their living room, and there is a place for my shoes by the door. Sure, I could re-watch the show for the third time through, but his reactions and comments intrigue me far more. I find myself writing about him more; nothing is easier than having a live subject sitting right in front of you. A piece I write for my fiction class is a particularly inappropriate conversation of ours – a theory on his

part about back massages always leading to sex – and when we go out that weekend we run into a girl from my class. Between tipsy giggles, I reveal to her that he is the character from a story she’s read, and I watch her eyes widen slightly before she launches into analyzing his character and our relationship: “I definitely thought those two characters in your story were in a long-term relationship. They were just so comfortable.”

“So, you write about me?” He asks the next time I’m over at his place.

“Yup.”

“If I don’t get royalties’ for that shit...” I laugh, as he disappears in the kitchen to check on his lasagna. “The shit you say would make a really good book.”

“Drunk or sober?”

“Both.”

“I truly believe I was born in the wrong era. If I didn’t have to text...” He sticks his head out of the kitchen and throws me his phone. Putting in his code, I look at his most recent texts; his rec crush. Scrolling through their conversation, I tell him to send her a picture of the lasagna he’s making, and invite her over.

“And what if she says yes? Are you going to leave?”

“Oh no. I’m having some of that lasagna. I’ll pretend I’m your roommate’s friend.” He nods, and goes about finding the perfect angle to snapchat the food. She replies with strategically revealing selfies, with words of encouragement across each of them, complimenting his cooking, even though she’s never tried it. Yet, she avoids the invite tactfully, never declining, but when it’s time for the lasagna to come out of the oven, it is just the two of us. He spends most of the meal telling me how much easier it is to talk to girls in person, and I nod my head in agreement between bites of amazing food. Before I leave, he asks if I want to help him decorate for Christmas; “I was going to ask my rec crush, but it doesn’t look like she’ll say yes.”

On a warmer weekend, he’s at home with his family and I have no plans, so I drive two hours to his house on a whim. His

warning of a smoke filled ‘no big deal’ home is sharp in my mind when I walk inside his house. There is a room off of the living room, filled with forgotten Knick-knacks and a desktop that is colder than the rest of the house. His mom straightens and looks up for a moment from playing cards on the computer to greet me, a cigarette hanging from her mouth, a pile of ashes and stumps in an ashtray next to her. Her dirty blonde hair is held back by a colored ponytail, her leg in a cast sticking out to the side, her toes peeking out. He shows me the rest of the house, the neighbors visible through most of the windows. The basement is a graveyard of forgotten hobbies, most of which his father was into at some point. Kayaks, cans of paint and grease, fishing rods, a chemical hood hastily installed above a workbench, all covered in dust and spiderwebs.

“He never sells anything. He wants to get back into all of it at some point I guess.”

I meet his dad when he gets home from work, and we take a twenty-minute trip to go to their property instead of sticking around his house. It’s an empty field surrounded by trees, little hills and paths cut all around. We ride dirt bikes and shoot guns all afternoon. It’s my first time doing both of those things, and I am uncomfortably out of my element. His dad laughs like a proud Santa and claps me on the shoulder when I hit the cap of the Gatorade bottle, his mom offers to write up my horoscope, and by the time his nephew drags me into the woods for paw paws it doesn’t feel strange at all.

A few weeks later, I sit on his bed, and he sits at his desk; it’s how we’ve been doing work lately. The stereo is on in the background, it’s metal according to him, not classic rock like people claim. It makes no difference to me, I focus on my work and tune out the music. His feet are on the mattress, the athletic shorts sliding up his thigh slightly. The toes of his right foot wrap around the big toe of the other foot, and it almost feels like he’s showing off how long his toes are. He took his contacts out already, so he wears his glasses, something he insists he rarely does but keeps doing

whenever I come around. He's engrossed in a phone game instead of actual homework – Game of Thrones – and he doesn't notice me staring at him intently as I describe him. He scratches his chest and chin occasionally, then looks and points at me suddenly when a new song comes on; "Here is the part I know."

"Here come the dancers, one by one." He mouths, his arms circling above his head then wrapping back around his body. "You think I could be a model?"

"You mean Runway or photo?"

"Photo! I'm not gay. You have to be gay for Runway."

"No you wouldn't. Stop with the stereotypes. My friend says straight guys have a fragile male ego. I'm starting to believe it. Like you are extra eager to prove you're straight."

"I do not have a fragile ego. I know I'm straight. Girls just suck."

"What do you even want?"

"I'm ready to settle down... With the right girl. It's just that the right girl doesn't exist. So, until she comes around, I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm just looking for relations of a certain kind." I shake my head with a laugh and lay back on the bed. Sounds simple enough.

"So what about your rec crush? Is she not good enough to settle down with?"

"She has a nice ass. It piqued my interest."

"Let me break it to you... there is more to people than butts."

"She was hitting me up. Like that night with the lasagna. Tell me you'd do that to someone you weren't interested in!"

"No you're right... I wouldn't. Girls do suck."

Spinning in his chair, he reaches to grab his guitar off the wall. It is what he does when he gets uncomfortable or wants to change the subject. He shakes his left hand out before grabbing a pick – he hurt it a few months back and claims it hasn't been the same since. I roll my eyes every time he complains – I know nothing about playing instruments, but he sounds pretty legit if you

ask me. Sticking the pick between his lips, he turns the knobs to tune the guitar and flips the switch to his amplifier. The speakers switch over to his instrument, and he begins strumming with precision, sighing and tsk-ing himself at any notes he thinks he misses. The beginning chords of Tesla's love song fill the room, and his roommate whistles from the hallway in mock encouragement. We both laugh.

"I will say, if you ever want to seduce anyone, that would be the song to use." He grins, his teeth showing intentionally as he exaggerates the gesture.

My friendship with him is arguably the strangest yet somehow most honest relationship I have. Somehow, he became exactly what I needed without meaning to. I text him 'be there in 5' if I want to come over without feeling bad, or he simply says, 'Door is open' as an indication that he wants to have me over. He listens as I tell him about myself, and I find myself sharing important bits. He asks me to help him buy new shoes – apparently, he likes my European style. We put up Christmas decorations, he insists on lifting me straight up to secure the lights – a chair would be too bulky. He drives me to and from practice one day I don't have my car, and I find out the name of the bartender he's been flirting with for years. He crashes at my house one night after drinking and tells me he's worried about losing me.

KATE TASSEFF

Party of One

For all of my salad days, the table was perennially set for ten.

Mom never made recipes in the default serving size, but doubled, sometimes tripled them: a vat of spaghetti sauce, two baking sheets of french fries, twenty to thirty hard and soft taco shells, depending on how hungry we were. And these meals were never quiet affairs. We all talked over each other, telling Dad about our day, asking Mom to pour a little more gravy, listening to another of Grandpa's yarns of yore. Someone, without fail, would spill their drink.

We didn't eat out often, but when we did, to quote the poets of *Thin Lizzy*, "Man, we just fell about the place." The hosts were often forced to either shove a couple tables together or separate us into booths, and we may have been responsible for a number of carpal tunnel cases in the wrists of Olive Garden cheese graters.

More recently, ever since our late teens, my best friend Katie and I have kept a tradition of trying a new restaurant whenever our small budgets will allow. We'll munch our pad Thai or gourmet pancakes and tell ourselves the same tall tale we've been telling for years, that one day we'll be doing this in Paris.

But these days, my family's schedule is full of soccer games and dance lessons and weekend shifts, and Katie's jobs and my schoolwork often leave her busy when I'm free and vice versa, so having someone to dine out with at the drop of a hat isn't guaranteed.

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And thus I find myself sheepishly googling "best places to eat alone in Cleveland" on a sunny late Saturday afternoon.

On the strength of a few recommendations, I head up to Tommy's Restaurant in Cleveland Heights. It's one of the oldest

eateries in the area, and was health-conscious before it was cool. Word has it that even though it's usually densely populated with families, it has a homey atmosphere that will welcome lonely hearts, too. That's the detail I'm looking for.

Walking down a gentrified stretch of Coventry Road, I almost miss the Tommy's entrance, but then I see a wide window painted with anthropomorphic vegetables: a jolly purple eggplant, a bucktoothed carrot, a yellow onion holding a baseball bat. That last one particularly strikes me. I don't see onions as being either athletic or murderous, so this accessory seems a poor choice. Perhaps he could be skipping rope or playing a harmonica instead; you know, something more benign.

I about-face and slip through the door. The foyer is narrow, made narrower by a two-deep layer of people, some sitting, some standing. Are they waiting for take-out or something? Then I see a notice printed high up on a pillar: "Please sign in and wait to be seated." Oh, no. Is this a sit-down restaurant? I thought it was a counter-service, grab-a-barstool type of deal; guess I didn't read the reviews that closely.

I weave my way to the counter, where a clipboard sits. It instructs me to write my first name and the number in my party. On the list I see plenty of "Greg (2)" and "Madison (4)", but as far as I can tell no "Bertha (1)". Guess I'm their first solo diner today. Gosh, that means they're going to call my name and party number out loud, and I'll have to make a walk of shame past all these couples and quartets to claim my seat. Much chagrined, I sit down on a lobby bench and pull out my phone, trying not to look as self-conscious as I suddenly feel.

Five minutes later, as I'm attempting to block out the teenage couple cozied up on a steamer trunk six inches from me, I hear someone call my name, but no number follows it, unlike it had for other parties. I look up: it's one of the hosts, a youngish man, with curly hair pulled into a bun and a soul patch so insubstantial that a slight puff of wind might send it floating off his chin. He's saying my name very, very softly, despite the cacophony of kitchen

action and customer chatter. I don't know how I feel about this: is he trying not to announce my aloneness to the general public, or is he just being a nice guy? At any rate, I get up and follow him.

We walk past the crowded front section and an aisle of bright wooden booths tucked deeply into the wall, like cubbies that enclose their diners on three sides. I hope he'll seat me here, but we keep going to the very back of the place, where there are mostly long or square tables, except for two small ones with two chairs apiece. One of these is occupied by two women with beautifully tanned skin and a baby in a sling wrap: they look like sisters. The other one is up against a side wall all by itself, and it's almost completely hidden from the rest of the room by a massive white column; this is where my host sets down my menu. Ah, I see how it is: they tuck the single pringles behind this pillar to shield them from all accidental looks of pity. Gracias.

I take a seat and duck behind my menu, which looks as if it's been printed en masse using a word processor from the last millennium; Tommy's mascot, that happy yellow onion (minus the bat this time), sits atop each page. Since I'd heard that Tommy's caters to healthy-eating crowds, I was expecting all nutrition-rich, organic options, but there's everything in this eight-page menu but the kitchen sink: burgers, baba ghanouj, corned beef, pizza, tofu dogs, grilled cheese, escarole pies, french onion soup, phosphates, shawarma, all spelled out in Trebuchet 12. Every conceivable food craving in the Northern Hemisphere could be met here.

The waitress strolls up. She's fairly tall, late-twenties, with chestnut hair thrown into a lopsided updo. Her needle-thin eyebrows rise kindly on her face as she places a squat glass of water in front of me. I order the Power Smoothie, which claims to have bee pollen and spirulina in it as well as a lemon-wedge garnish; I'm a smoothie fanatic, so I'm excited to try this. Then I ask for a turkey burger, hold the cheese.

"Will that be all?" she checks, cocking her head like some girls do when offering pity.

"Why do you ask?" I want to blurt out. "I'm not waiting for

anyone else. Is that a problem?"

But I just say, "Yes, that's it, thanks."

As she walks away, I blush, ashamed of myself. I can't put my finger on why I'm feeling so defensive. I know it's not completely unorthodox for a person to eat out alone, but I sense this stigma clinging to my shoulders anyway. A person can go solo to a coffee shop, a bar, even some fast food joints and raise no flags, but at a sit-down, group-centric restaurant, where everyone else is communing over a big meal, the loner behind the pillar can only be concealed so much. I feel even more dismayed after I watch a skinny, balding old man wearing a t-shirt with "69" emblazoned on the back follow a young waitress all the way to the kitchen door.

"I left a big tip, honey, I left a big tip on your table," he says in a high, too-eager voice. "You really did a fantastic job, such a sweetheart, what a face, eh? Thank you, honey."

In other words, exactly the sort of fellow you'd expect to see wearing a shirt that says "69," and, consequently, exactly the sort of fellow you'd expect to see eating alone. I don't want to be lumped in with this guy.

In an effort to distract myself, I study my surroundings. To be frank, Tommy's doesn't seem sure what it wants to be. The architecture is fairly contemporary, with high ceilings, bright white walls, honey-colored wooden backsplashes, and those unique cubby booths. There are oversized plants in charmingly mismatched pots lining a wall-length shelf, with nature photos taken by local artists hanging below them: geese in flight, ducks swimming, canyons at dusk. These elements give it an airy, hip aesthetic that on its face would attract my peers.

But there are those cartoony veggies again, this time as larger-than-life cutouts interspersed among the potted plants, looming and grinning over the customers. There's a huge homemade quilt displayed on the wall next to my head, which upon first glance seems like your average grandmother's patchwork job, but a closer look shows that every patch says "Tommy's" on it in a different color and design. On each table, tucked between the

napkin dispenser and a drippy bottle of Trappey's Red Devil Sauce, are uncomfortably tacky postcard ads for "FlowerClown.com," upon which a clown in hobo makeup is absolutely drowning in balloon animals: pandas, pigs, a cornucopia. He has a regular gig here, evidently.

This mashup of the vogue and the hokey couldn't possibly work on paper; throw in the War and Peace-sized menu and it sounds like a place that might have tripped over its own quixotic shoelaces long ago. But with that fat, jolly onion as its spokesman for over 45 years, I'm guessing Tommy's doesn't give a darn what anyone thinks of it; it seems perfectly comfortable in its own many-layered skin. And, like any confident being, it gladly embraces any and all kinds of people, including my neurotic solo self. So I let out my breath a little and unclench my shoulders. The unaccompanied diner police aren't going to come arrest me; I can relax.

As I nibble at my lunch, I glance around at my fellow diners. The occupants of the table behind my pillar are a young woman and two 11-12-year-old boys; they've been sharing a pitcher (yes, pitcher) of mint chocolate milkshake. With their knobby knees and squeaky-edged braggadocio, the boys put me in mind of my two younger brothers, and I tune in and out of their shenanigans.

At the square table just beyond them sits a quartet of septuagenarians, chatting with great gentility, their forks moving at a snail's pace. One of the ladies has both legs encased in long braces; she has a soft white bob cut and a serene smile, which she offers to me, unprompted. I smile back. Were I a braver soul, I'd meander over to their table and ask if I could pull up a chair; I'm sure their stories would be almost as good as Grandpa's.

I watch as the two possible sisters at the other tiny table in front of me nudge their dessert plates at each other: "Try mine." "No, you try mine." Looking down at my watery smoothie and wan burger, I wish my friend Katie were here to do the same with me. She'd push her plate toward me out of pity and insist that I share her meal, but I've got to take my own lumps for now. Oh, well. At least the Kosher pickle is good.

At last I finish my meal and leave a generous tip for the only person I've been able to speak with since I've been here, and nod goodbye to the onion on my way out. Will I try Tommy's again sometime? I might; if two of the menu items didn't satisfy me, there are always forty thousand others to choose from. But I don't think I'd do it alone.

And now, it's back to my hometown for my youngest brother's birthday party tonight. My mom's making one of her best recipes: beef tips and noodles (two, maybe three bags full). I heard both pairs of grandparents are coming; we'll have to set out plates for twelve.

ALEX ARCHINAL

A cure to

Frozen bristles of
 A frozen fanatic's
 Anti-fascist facial hair
 Stand proud and
 Erect, pointing to

Smashed words slope
 Down to the ground
 As the supine forms
 Sip gently on hangover relief tea
 Running from

Knotted nooses
 Nailed to the ceiling
 With nobodies hanging
 Nearly silent wind chimes
 Dancing to the nearby beat of

Monstrous portions
 Of mead and meat
 For the master's feast
 Stuffed gullets
 From a monster's hunt
 gorging to run
 away from

Sipping on your coffee
 Silently shaking hands
 Subtly dance around the bottle
 Silently hoping
 That this is it

Seeking a cure
 For

Nothing worth
 Wanting
 Comes without effort
 The answer
 Isn't a bang
 A ballistic missile crashing
 Into your cradled cranium
 It's a dim neon sign
 Hanging in a dark room
 That cuts through the smoke
 Showing you one word
 The answer.

Exhaustion

ASHLEY BANKS
Conditions of Being

“I said to the sun, ‘Tell me about the big bang.’ The sun said, ‘it hurts to become.’”

-Andrea Gibson

Most nights

I wish that I could fall asleep.

My eyes begging--against

the weight of my thoughts for rest,

my mind knowing it is better if they stay busy.

Besides, it's too loud.

Not that anyone is around,

but we all know that the Moon

is a projection of the Sun and

if you listen closely you can hear

people starting their day Mumbai.

Some people say you can miss

so much in the blink of an eye

and i've never been good at math

but we blink 1200 times in an hour

so you can imagine how many

moments I might miss

if I close my eyes.

If I were Andrea I would

ask the Sun if it ever

resents the responsibility

of caring for so many lives—

The way I never wanted

to tell my secrets to the Moon.

There are some things
that are better left unsaid
but it's 3am and too late to start holding
back now. The sun may know that
it hurts to become but I know
all too well that sometimes it hurts
to keep being.

Time Traveling Queers

We were in our own Lavender Scare. You told me that your favorite color was purple so I changed my name to Violet. I wasn't good at lying but for that week I pretended you were a polygraph and I'd do anything to pass. The local motel was the closest thing we could ever have to home. The walls unwrapping themselves like a gift. Each layer revealing a scarlet secret that needed kept— knowing it was easier than covering the cracks. We were floating in our own space like queer constellations nobody looked up to. A week had come and gone and so were you. We had known The Price of Salt and I was the only one left to pay it.

Wrongfully Discovered

When Isaac Newton fell victim to the apple
did he notice its color? Did he bite it?

Gravity had always existed— it just needed a name.
Today I call her Grief.

Too often weight of my difference
deflates what is left of my ability

to tell who I am and who you want me to be—
and there is no one to keep me from

guessing. If I asked, do you think she
would be able to lighten up? Just a little.

I would sit under 1000 apple trees for her
to lighten her load— I never wanted

to hold the weight of the world either.
On the days that I forget who I am I will

lend her my head so I can make my own
discovery. That day— I will call her Wonder.

ALIZABETH CARMELLA

In the Process of

unkempt hands,
 half eaten fingers writing,
 illegible like summer's dead leaves left lying on the porch of your
 front yard,
 cheap Pakistani cigarettes,
 cheap Pakistani tongues
 hissing at pale skin and bruising the sounds that unblinking eyes
 make in the dark of your room,
 fear of your white buffalo and the sarcasm blurred by convenience,
 in between days of rain, the brink of extinction threatens to get the
 hell out,
 the art of repetition exposing itself as the size of my palms,
 soft to the touch, grinding teeth show me a map of the world,
 a map of your adolescence,
 embroidered by ashen voices, wool spanning the length of your
 body,
 wishing I was holding onto the polyester fabric of your jacket
 until I couldn't—
 you haven't learned to swim
 in angular thoughts and erased rituals of nightly masturbation,
 and I know you're thinking of Belgium and convulsing brunettes,
 silicon strapped to skin for affect--
 I'm in the process of removing my cuticles with teeth because I'm
 impatient,
 because I'll never see you as an atom of New York again.

Portrait of the Girl with Head Lice

I know the taste of peppermint gum on Sunday mornings,
 my legs as a cradle of sticky and waiting hands, the singing of re-
 deemer a breath above my head.

I later remember falling into water, wanting nothing more than to
 be a pumiced body ready to float, the fingers of my mother comb-
 ing through my hair before I could breathe without the help of
 eating stones with salt so that I may lose my scent.

You used to say that it weighed heavy on your heart, but I've never
 known for the heavy to speak to me personally. I always thought it
 would soon say "enough," and excuse itself as something soon to be
 expired.

You carried me across the familiarity of voices hung above front
 doors and the stories of places where snow falls in summer, places
 where the dead curl up by your bed and whisper the truth about
 what color really looks like.

When I realized that even the mountains weren't perfect, the burs
 already settled in my skin and I found difficulty in connecting it
 all.

Like DNA and virginity, like your hands cupping my face with god's
 fingers, we knew none of it.

Redeemer now ar rahman ar raheem, I tried to relive the smell of
 sage in my clothes, the moment when I denied that the westward
 interstate existed.

This isn't what was envisioned, the gnats against the skin have
 thickened in summer and you have shaped my mouth into a dull
 spearhead.

White Plains

in between peels
of an orange,
accidentally watching you change from wet clothes through the front
window,
my calloused feet perched like semi-sweet pushes
of a nose against talus cheeks,
I remember you shaking your head, fidgeting grass outside of hospi-
tals where foreign tobacco and God scolded me.
You said that you liked
that I liked watching
in between peels
of an orange,
my embrace of the breeze that interrupted you
and licked your hair, your face now a veil.
My want of leave of foot trafficked side streets, lamp light the color
of lavender.
I remember the smell of sweat as something welcoming,
and your Phasto on a Sunday,
someone's last words being,
I never thought apples were all that romantic.
Once a stiff girl mouthed
you are my Cuyahoga,
because crooked bones are a river
polluted in the torso
that she grasps.

Angelica Corrado almost drowning

i sit cross legged in the shower staring
back at the black and white tiles that collect
condensation around me. that silver
spicket spouting a steady stream that plasters
follicles to my skull, enshrining my ears until all i hear
is the pounding of water. the tub collects
what rolls off my skin, creating a pool that reaches
my shins. climbing
up my thighs to my stomach but never
quite enough to fill my open mouth. as i lean
back into the stream i can still breathe,
but far from easily. with each breath i choke
a bit more as water replaces
the oxygen in my lungs but never
enough to drown.

Cactus Killer

Your needle-like spines have dulled,
 those once piercing protective pins now naked
 eyelashes. Root-rot insides are reduced
 to moldy oatmeal. You used to stand
 firm and proud like an oak but now you lean
 like a pencil pine after a storm, jagged
 where you once were smooth. Mahogany crept
 up your sides and dyed
 your once juniper flesh.

I am the unwanted
 rainstorm running
 my fingers through spines
 and soil. I keep you
 from the daylight you crave and shower
 you each night. I feed
 the fungus inside you. If only I had stopped
 watering you like a willow, you could have bloomed
 like the saguaro you were meant to be.

The Right Shade

I wish I had drowned myself
 in a pool of pink paint. Inhaled
 that pigmented sludge until
 even my kidneys were
 the right shade
 of femininity: faint
 fuschia fitting for young
 girls, matching the soft tulle
 of a ballerina's tutu or the jewel
 in a princess's tiara.

Even if I had gotten that wish,
 the paint would have cracked
 and peeled back
 like an old scab revealing
 my dulled purple flesh.

I need to learn to love the lavender
 and strip the false
 varnish from my insides. To purge
 the ideology that painted
 my mind pink and smothered
 all my lilac.

Kate Harden

Holiday Hatts and Striped Shirts: An Origin Story

“Our love’s a protective poison
But you are your mother’s child”
- Conor Oberst

The bright purple birthday hat my mother is wearing in the only picture I have of her and the other contributor to my existence reeks of Cosmopolitans, bowling alley pizza, and dull love. That old, crinkled picture has that hat’s smells seeping from it the way any light-hearted

romance that serves you for a little while, but never quite works out, does. The beige and blue button down that reveals the white t-shirt on which she must have left more than just her sanity is a hidden rose in the thick foliage I get scratches from climbing towards in my mind. One plus

two equals three lines on his shirt of an on the front porch, barbecue-smoked butterscotch August Sunday afternoon. Three plus four equals seven lines on that same shirt of an ‘80s faded, crying in the bathtub to Sam Cooke blues on an April-showers Tuesday morning. The Doylestown,

Ohio apartment wasn’t picturesque. His wasn’t either, more like a spooky October Thursday latenight, when Jurassic Park reruns scared me, but then, it was never really about me, was it? When the vast woodland that is where I keep my memories was barely a couple of Douglas firs and

Poison ivy, I resisted everything. The sunshine, the chirping birds, the Bambis and Thumpers coming out to play; I invited frost every

time I saw him. My father couldn’t warm my frozenhands, the way Juliette Ferrars’ father couldn’t warm hers. He couldn’t slow the decay that began

to envelope the part of my forest he was supposed to be watering with requited love, but justwouldn’t. Right down to the dollars offered from every adult biologically programmed to love me for any scrap of my affection, stubbornness is only adorable when it doesn’t end with spilled

milk and changed last names. It’s funny about my mother. I wonder why, or if, she doesn’t wish she was still wearing that vibrant hat every time she sees her own almond eyes, but the upturn of the corners of his mouth when we have coffee on a peaceful June Saturday just before noon.

Jesse Harper

Backwards

To the river, the ghost
delivers his sermon, Christian America.

*John baptized one of three;
three fifths must die for the one.*

The phantom's words crawl
like bugs from pit

into the ears of the ghosts,
whispering truth from the blood drop cross.

The black koi, tattered
scales, is bathed in God's tears,

held under. Large bubbles carrying passages,
speaking verse, preaching father's love

tree trunks twisting, outstretched dead arms,
orange leaves preach perversion.

Ghosts revels in their haunt, taking
pride in peeling scales, gritting teeth.

In every crossed T and dotted I,
they braid rope, knots

Ghosts rally in koi ponds, rhetoric.
And we shall cleanse, and make pure.

The river hears the ghost's sermon.
The river runs backwards.

Corpses are caught on driftwood,
careful words waterlogged,

the water drags itself across the river bed
with every stroke of the pen.

Lily Hunger Stiletto

5 inches higher
and I'm up
on a whole new level.
You can hear me
coming a mile away
with the click click
of my heels against
the linoleum. I am the
height of a man now,
you don't have to
lower your eyes to gaze
into mine anymore, so
does this mean
you'll stop giving me
lower pay too?
These shoes are a weapon
I'll just put my foot down
on that glass ceiling
and watch it shatter.
Dance across the shards
Become a ballerina,
pirouette, arabesque,
just without the grace.
I walk on air
supported by a heel
thinner than you think
my waist should be.
In these I feel and look
what I already was:
stronger. And now
you know it too.

Call me something
other than weak.

Jordan Miles
Questions for Georgia

January 29th came easy
all by itself,
no matter the damage
it would do.

you were 18, frozen
from your paper thin bones
to the inside of your soul,
stained a shade of white
like baby powder.
Nothing covered you
except the hospital gown, but

warmth spread like
forgiving, slowing,
fentanyl, and your spine laid tough
against the plastic spring mattress.
With a push, I'd be in your uncertain arms.

A cry for help echoed you.

I wonder how many times
dad winked at you
before I became fingers and toes,
and, did you dream of me?

all the January's after
never came easy
did they?

Mary Ozbolt
Self-portrait in Hoxeyville, Michigan

When death concussed your neck like the deer you fed your family,
I fell in love with my sweet independence like
raspberry ale and merlot on breezy nights glossed with moonbeams.

Jewels in fish tanks can't replace you as much as she tries
to ward off loneliness with polar bears the size of the Bermuda triangle
where you went two backwards pumpkin moons ago.

She surrounds her limited eternity with air conditioning and a new porch
but can't seem to crawl out of your chicken coop filled with quicksand
which falls from quiet mountains of grains of sand and obese dreamers.

Flashy rings and Urban Decay splatter your tongue
while quiet and cool, fresh air, rejects the humid turmoil
of the planet I come from

while the leader of our clan inside this snow globe
of dog hair and crab dip is your true love and
makes me my own kind of beautiful
without destroying the glass
and letting out
all the
Freshwateroxygen.

R. Roberts

BALLOONS ARE SHAPED LIKE UPSIDE DOWN TEARS and other vignettes

I. My cat Seymour died today.

I never really had a cat,
but if I had,
his name would have been Harold
and he wouldn't have keeled today.

II. Clever manslaughter

of the candle.
I thought it was the fire
that did the deed,
but it was the wick
that made him sick
and *snuffed*.

III. Balloons are shaped

Like upside down tears.
Stand on your head
whenever you cry
and let the crystal floaters
fly.

IIII. You are not a psychoanalyst,

a botanist, or a socialist.
You are the anesthesiologist
who put me in a coma, now I'm dreaming
elevator music tingling down my spine.

V. Why does it end bittersweet

with dark chocolate melting on cement,
a heavenly aroma arousing nasal passages
to the thought of disappointment
at the waste of a tasty piece of candy?

Elementary Examinations

Banged the theory in me.

Drew planets on construction paper, a galaxy of colored wax in my drawer. Glitter shadow

on lids and lashes curl my eyes. Here you'd trip to fall head-over-heels,

notions of where to hide, or to pretend these hands and fingers bend words back.

Your world was the shade of blond coward, nervous laugh chilled with steam, jittery.

You poked your nose and music poured out my business in blue gin flows.

Like we were so young we jumped the rope fence bridge for this. Or pizza day

in the cafeteria. I deserved to be half outcast, because it made sense, ahead and behind the class.

Once I shot your bird and you plain cried in the light, high school kids smoking

by the tires, your knees buckling from the joke I pulled on you. Swings magically press skies

and highs until we rolled up our own grass. Before the anxious doubts of a child

your feet dirtied in clovers. A past life, on a different Earth, long ago. The swings flew away

and away to the melody and the wind pushed me. Like several whispers singing out of tune. You were in

my zone. Together our bodies burned to the ground. Leaves shimmied under the sun

like a popped dandelion head on the heels of curtain call. Slipping into silence, then crashing

our existence from it. You knew every trick in my book and how to let me win.

Jennifer Stein

Widow

Treason
 is what sullen widows do
 when trimming the gardenias,
 thoughts adrift
 All Nebulous, swollen, swimming
 Slow circles around the shells of the skull
 And snipping with vicious precision, the
 jaws of the blades chomp at stems
 and also at
 the looping string of words from the men
 she has met and conquered.
 What wondering begins
 In the stunted hearts of lost, unloved women!
 Among the bumbling bees dipped in pollen
 The widow wipes her brow and clip
 The thorns of her life away, so
 Absentmindedly,
 yet with so much of
 A sergeant's
 authority.

Zac Taylor

let me hear the church bells ring

thistles and thorns wrap around shins. the sunday
 sun sizzles. waves of heat ripple from the weeds,
 shortening breathe with pollen and shimmering
 spider webs and ruffling lush. sweat always drips
 from my nose first. the brown silo is packed in
 spruce and oak. rusty railing skims palm, tinting
 orange. each step up, ringing. like the church bells
 i love to hear——but neglected for today. cirrus
 clouds wisp the blue while the back of my body is
 chilled with the intense heat of the top. wind stilled
 sweat drops, ice on skin, preached a
 cliché “it’s calm before storms” sun-
 less cold nails foreign to me, attached to someone
 close to me. hormones and rampant impulse pinned
 skin to carpet. a carpet shared with plastic soldiers
 and littered with porn that beat me bleeding till’ i
 pretended. branding purity with sleepless nights,
 with episodes, with marijuana, with repression, with
 traumatic disorder, ... i should’ve heard the
 church bells ring.

ode to El Roi

i left fingerprints on your mirror crown. i wanted to
hold it. and feel what it felt like to feel on the
right side. Sampson strong--- until he

let his hair cut. when the flavor of honey is the taste
of concrete before it solidifies. the joy of the Lord
is my strength--- but i let my hair get

cut and sink faster than my might to let it man-bun
for more than six months. the joy of the Lord
bubbled out of my nose heckled eyes

sucking in water instead. the hair clogged my drain
and now my hash smells like molded spinach. they
told you that too. tied to legality--- even

though it was dirt ash rocks thorns twigs--- you
had your hair cut. but grew it back to take me to
your beach flour sand. Corona and lime. rose

cheeks. sunshine palm trees birds singing freedom.
surfing over clear conscious swells. sunsets with
each leg relaxed in cool orange horizons---

when the moon sways my board to wave breaks.
when the fingerprints i left on your mirror crown
turn to jewels.

not worrying if sharks will bite through dark ocean.

Subsequent New

20th century alcoholics lickin' *Demi*
Tasse's to stories fantasy realism
dichotomy of imagination and
_____.

it hits you most when your stomachs
not full so fill it 80 proof pizza
cookies peanut -butter smothered in
_____.

i can only write short stories poems
letters essays do it all again for
the purpose of feeling
_____.

no one showed me how to wallow
outside of distressful drowning in
altered cognitive places better than
_____.

indulge in every lustful Oreo cream
pie high but don't forget to workout
whenever you get done
_____.

Alex Archinal

Blurred Identity

The creaking wooden floor caused Ruby to wince as her bare feet, despite her best efforts, seemed to find every creaky spot that the house seemed to be getting more of every year. She pulled open the small ladder that led into the attic, and carefully began to climb with one of her hands, keeping her cup of tea balanced in the other. After several hours of rolling around in bed, she had decided to try and do something she did back in high school—go up into the attic and let her mind wander.

Her bare legs felt cool as she threw them over the edge of the bed, her rough sheets, the way she liked them, pulling at her form, begging her to stay, but Ruby never could listen to the soft culling of sleep. Quiet footsteps echoed into the kitchen, a plaid robe wrapped loosely around her frame, the well-conditioned night air sending small shivers up her spine. She procured a small white mug from the drying rack, the same white mug Ruby used earlier that evening, and silently made herself a cup of tea. It tasted bitter, and she let the scalding liquid play over her tongue before letting it slide down her throat. With a scalded mouth, she silently left the kitchen and made her way towards the attic.

A loose trail of steam followed the robed girl, slowly dissipating in the gently moving nighttime air. She passed her parents' bedroom, slowing down. Ruby frowned and continued walking, with a more confident stride onto what she remembered to be more stable pieces of floor, and fumbled in the darkness for the pull string. Grasping it and pulling softly, the well-oiled ladder sprung free from the ceiling, and extended down onto the ground. With her mug held aloft with one hand, she began to ascend the slanted ladder, wincing at every little creak that emanated out into the turgid silence of the house. She knew from past experiences that silence was key in this situation, and that if someone in the house woke up, that could cause a lot of problems for her. Once, when she

was a freshman, her mother had passed her in the hallway, and neither of them had spoken a word. Her mother was a long-time alcoholic, and was stumbling down the hallway from the bedroom she shared with Ruby's father. Ruby didn't mention the fact that she was crying and shaking, and her mother didn't mention the fact that Ruby reeked of marijuana smoke. They never spoke of the passing. She didn't want a repeat of that encounter, especially considering she knew her mother hadn't bought alcohol within the last week, while Ruby was just as high now as she was then.

The pitch-black attic slowly enveloped as she ascended through the opening, the stagnant air sending a tension-filled chill up her spine. Once inside the attic, she used her free hand to grab a flashlight from her robe pocket. The dull yellow light was swallowed instantly by the dark, barely illuminating a few feet in front of her. She walked further into the attic after pulling up the ladder. Feeling her way in the still, nearly palpable darkness, she found a large dresser resting against the far wall of the room. Ruby set her still steaming cup down and opened up the top right drawer. Inside were several large candles, all in different, mild scents. A quick check of her robe pockets found her lighter, and soon she was carrying lit candles throughout the attic, setting them down wherever a flat surface could afford the space. Several candles were placed on the dresser, right up against the mirror. She walked away from the dresser, and sat down on one of the boxes of family photos that littered the now dimly lit room, facing the large mirror atop the dresser.

Ruby unfocused her eyes as she watched the steam curl above the thick ceramic mug in the hazy darkness. She wrapped her hands around it, the heat just enough to hold without burning.

"I'm surprised. With the chamomile and the weed, I'd thought you'd be knocked out by now. Although chamomile is more psychosomatic than anything, isn't it?" It called out.

She didn't reply for a while, taking a small sip in the bloated silence. "Sleep never did come easy to me, even if I am medicated up." The wind pounded against the lone window, the rattle breaking the flow of the conversation before it really had the chance to start.

She set the mug down in front of her, the warmth seeping into her bare feet, causing her to unclench her toes slightly.

“It’s hard to stay away when you’ve been running on fumes for what, a year and a half now? Ever since you left?” Ruby shrugged, looking down at the rough wooden floor as her feet played along the surface.

“It’s been longer than that since I felt okay,” She looked up towards the ceiling of the attic, watching as the light shone on the twitching spider webs.

It chuckled. “Is that why you came crawling back here? To try and feel better? That was a bad move if I’ve ever known one. Look at me when I talk to you.” Ruby let the silence draw on. “Why are you unhappy?”

Ruby took another sip of her tea, and waited several moments to answer. “Remember when I was younger? And Sam and I went down to the creek? Back when we lived in Chardon?”

“Of course, I remember. Sam was the first girl that we,”

A scowl found its way onto Ruby’s face as she interrupted her nighttime companion. “That’s not relevant! That’s just the last time I felt, I don’t know...like me.”

She responded in a quiet voice. “You think you felt like yourself at some point, that’s a shocker. You usually only ever come up here to convince yourself that you always feel like yourself.”

“Sam was the first person who ever looked past who I tried to be and got to know what was deeper down. She was the first person to ever get high with me and watch the night sky fly by,” Ruby said.

“So, what? You miss your little plaything? Or perhaps the easy drugs? Or the fact that she was the only person who you thought didn’t use you?” She asked, her tone accusatory.

Ruby slowly shook her head. “I don’t...I don’t know what I’m so worked up about. It’s just like, everything is so disjointed right now. I feel like a frayed wire. I can’t focus on anything, it all just seems...hazy.” She set the mug back down, and held her head in her hands, rubbing her eyes. “I just want things to go back to

being simple again.”

The voice spoke with clear disdain dripping in it. “You need to stop wishing for the past to come back. You stupid girl, things were just as bad back then.”

She was quiet for a few moments, letting the silence ring out into the attic. “I just want to know why I don’t feel good. Why I can’t describe how I’ve been feeling.” She sighed and leaned back, splaying her arms out behind her, gently wiping them across the rough wood, feeling the dirt play across her skin’s ridges. “It just feels like...like that I haven’t said anything original in a while.” The voice moved in the dark, her plaid robe illuminated in the dust filled air, and her voice filled the attic, bouncing around and staying in the exposed beams. “You always think you aren’t being original.” Ruby didn’t respond. The voice sighed. “You know what your problem is?”

Ruby looked up, into the mirror. “What?”

The voice took on a sharp edge, and Ruby could tell the voice was smiling. “You just don’t want to hear someone call you out on your bullshit. You think what, no one else has identity issues? That a lot of people could say what they looked like? You just want to be special.” The voice’s red hair was held up by a thin black headband, with several strands jutting out from over the edge, covering her eyes.

Ruby looked away, the hot flash of shame rising in her cheeks.

“You know I’m right. You spew all this bullshit about yourself, about how you want to find yourself and blah blah blah. You know what your real problem is? You don’t like who you are inside. You hate yourself because you are a boring person. You aren’t special. So you’ve spent years crafting this entire world of fake problems, so that you can just keep on running away.”

The steam, a trickle of what it was, rose in front of Ruby’s face as she took a deep breath. “I just feel so sick all the time. And not some stupid ‘uh I feel so sad or bad’ or some other shit. I feel physically sick all the time. I feel like at any moment I might die.

And I am so, so afraid that I will start crying in public, you know? I just want to be able go through one day and say ‘hey, I feel like the same person I was when I woke up today’ Do you know how horrible of a feeling that is? That every time you see something that has any sort of meaning other than what’s in front of ya,ya,ya, you have to seclude yourself immediately afterward because you feel like your whole god damn world view ch,ch,changed and it just makes you f,feel so shallow and empty because if you’d seen it sooner, then maybe...maybe this time would be the time you can hold onto something. And you keep on thinking it’s just because you are tired. That if you could just get a good nights s,s,sleep...no, a f,f,few good night’s sleep, you’d be able to say who you are. B,b,but I, I just can’t get any more sleep and like...what if I never can say wh,who I am?” Ruby’s voice had begun to quiver near the zenith of his speech. She slowly leaned forward throughout, leaning forward on the boxes until her face was in her hands. The sound of a quiet weeping filled the small attic.

“I’m too old for this shit. Who am I? I...I need to go smoke.” The attic was filled with the soft rolling of a ceramic mug as Ruby abruptly stood up, knocking over her mug, still gently sobbing.

“Did you come here to justify smoking another blunt? Or to tell yourself that it’s okay to go down the path of self-destruction as long as it’s not ‘boring?’” She said flatly. Her flannel robe swung open in the cool attic as goosebumps traveled up her frame.

“I don’t need this okay? I didn’t come here to be belittled like this!” Ruby looked at her coldly, her red rimmed eyes not obscuring her vision. She glared for a few more seconds, until her face slowly lost its edge and her jaw relaxed, protruding forward slightly. Her face became lax, and her eyes slowly began to glaze over.

“You’ll be back. You always will.”

Ruby stood up, and grabbed her cup. She walked around the attic, extinguishing the candles. She grabbed the flashlight and walked back towards the pull-down ladder and turned around to see her companion one last time, as the also got ready to descend

the stairs, looking over her shoulder. She scowled and descended the stairs, bathing the attic in darkness. She walked silently through the house, and set the empty mug in the kitchen sink. A small scowl found its way onto her face as she looked in the window, and could see her dark blue eyes contrast with her flannel robe. She took her headband out and grabbed the loose hairs, putting them back into place.

Amanda E. Piekarz

On That Pier

The first time I met Max was in Wendy's, on my first day. She was in the midst of a screaming match with another manager named Marc. After it was over, she called me into the office to introduce herself. I wasn't sure I wanted to know either of them after witnessing that fight.

"Eileen?" Max said. She paused for a moment. "That's an 80-year-old cat lady name."

"Sorry?" I didn't know what to say to refute her claim.

"How about Lena?" Max asked.

"Lena?" I said. Max leaned back, looking pleased with herself.

"Yeah." Max said, nodding her head. "Lena."

"I guess Lena is okay?" I said, and Max smiled. Maybe I did want to know her.

After that day, we became close friends. Every second spent with Max was an adventure. Nothing was off limits. Max had this undeniable love of life that was contagious. You couldn't be sad around her, it seemed impossible.

It was about a year after meeting Max that Blaine came into our lives. He never talked at first. I didn't know how to approach him, or what to say. Max got him to open up. She always knew how to connect with people.

Blaine and I didn't become friends over night like Max and he had, but I do remember the first moment I thought of him as my friend. I have a hobby of collecting rare coins, and currency. Someone paid for their food with a two-dollar bill, but it wasn't a normal two-dollar bill. This was a 1976 bicentennial series two-dollar bill. You hardly ever see those in circulation.

Blaine gave me two dollars to put in the Wendy's safe, so I could take the two-dollar bill I wanted so much. Blaine barely knew me and didn't realize how important this two-dollar bill was to me.

He just gave me two dollars, no questions asked. I knew, in that moment, we would be friends.

You never wake up knowing what days you're going to remember. There are days that don't seem important until they are. Mine was a Saturday, and I was at Max's apartment. Blaine was supposed to come, but he wasn't feeling well.

It was uncomfortable just to exist that day, with our clothes sticking to our bodies, and the humidity making the air hard to breathe. I wanted to go outside. It was one of those summer days where the heat was almost too much, but you could tell that night was going to have a nice chill.

"Let's go somewhere," I said. "I want to find somewhere to put my rock."

Where we lived, people would paint rocks and put hashtags on the back of them. I found my rock outside of Wendy's. We went out for a smoke break when something caught my eye. I picked it up. The rock was light blue, with a yellow sun in the corner, roughly the size of a milk cap. On the back, the hashtag read #NorthEastOhioROCKS.

"And where do you suggest we go?" She asked. She sounded annoyed, but I knew it was the heat working its magic. "We live in the middle of nowhere."

"We could go to the lake." I said. She settled back into her arm chair and didn't say anything. We lived about two and half hours away from Lake Erie.

"I guess we could do that." She said. Max got up and disappeared into her room. She came out with her shoes on, sporting a hoodie in one hand. "We going or not?"

I sat up on the couch and pulled on my shoes. I grabbed my hoodie, and Max grabbed her keys out of the ash tray. I followed her out the door.

Max had a red Ford Escape. This car was ancient, it was stick shift, and it was almost old enough for historic plates. The muffler wasn't great, so the car had a deep rumble to it the entire time it was running. You could often hear her car coming before

you saw it. The only new thing about the car was the Bluetooth radio which Max installed herself.

She walked around the car and unlocked it. I pulled open the creaking door, sat, and got buckled. Every time Max sits down in a car, she does this thing where she scrunches her face up and emits a loud, high pitch scream into her hands.

“You good?” I would ask.

“Just pent up energy,” Max would say.

Max lit a cigarette, shifted into gear. We pulled out of the parking lot and were on our way.

Getting on the highway when you know you have a long way to go gives off an irrational form of excitement. We didn’t have an exact destination in mind. We had clear skies, a full tank of gas and miles of open road ahead of us.

About an hour into this trip, we began seeing signs for Erie, Pennsylvania. We both knew we wanted to go to the lake, but the idea of crossing state lines to do it sparked interest.

“We could go to Pennsylvania.” I told her, pointing at one of the signs. Max glanced at the sign as we passed it. The exit we would need to take was coming up.

“I don’t know how to get there,” Max said. Max refused to ever use a GPS. It was unusual, but she always knew where she was, and where she was going. I admired her for that.

“Then we follow the signs,” I said, “We figure it out. You’ve always gotten us home before.” I wanted her to say yes. I wanted a story I could tell one day. I wanted to make a memory.

Max didn’t have long to think before she was pulling in the right lane to take I-80 towards Pennsylvania. I grinned. Max was never one to deny a challenge. Navigating home from Pennsylvania would prove to be just that.

I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out the rock that initially gave me the idea to go somewhere. I don’t know why leaving this rock somewhere interesting was important, but it was the only thing on my mind. I was admiring the rock when Max interrupted my thoughts.

“Should I date Blaine?” She asked. The question wasn’t entirely out of the blue. I could tell she wanted to say something for the last couple of exits.

“Yes.” I answered. I ran my thumb over the rock. Max stared out the windshield. It started to rain a few miles back.

“But what about...” Max began, lighting another cigarette.

“Nope. Blaine.” I told her.

“It’s just...” She tried, but I cut her off.

“Marc isn’t good for you. He’s got a girlfriend. You two are too similar. Blaine is... loyal. He’s good.” I said, looking out my window. The rain was coming down harder now.

“Yeah, I know.” She said.

“Blaine wouldn’t hurt you.” I began, “He would go to the ends of the Earth if you asked him to. I don’t know if it’ll work out long term, but you guys complement each other. I can see it.”

“Wouldn’t it be weird though?” She asked, flicking the lit end of her cigarette out the window. She closed her window most of the way. I kept mine open, I liked the rain.

“I guess, a little. For me.” I said, looking toward her for the first time since the conversation started. For a moment, I was glad Blaine couldn’t make it that day. Don’t get me wrong, I love Blaine. I just got the feeling it would be the last time Max and I would hang out before the group dynamic changed forever. Blaine would come on another trip, on another day. This felt different. “I’ll figure it out. You guys belong together.”

Max was quiet and put on some music. I kept the rock in one hand, and my other hand out the window. I closed my eyes and tried to feel each individual rain drop. The steady pattern it formed on my skin was calming, and I wished I could capture that feeling forever.

“I want to, you know.” Max said. She turned the music down. She didn’t have to say what she wanted, because I already knew. Max had a rough dating history. I knew how hard it would be for her to start dating again, especially if she dated someone who cared for her. Someone who treated her right. I knew there would

an adjustment period where she'd freak out. It would pass, though. I was sure of it.

"I know you do." I told her. We didn't speak of it again on that trip, but by the end of the month Max and Blaine were dating. I saw it coming, but I was still sad when things changed. Everything felt strange, and different. I knew I pushed them together. I knew I said I'd be okay, but I avoided going to her apartment. I couldn't shake the feeling I was being left behind. I felt like a stranger in a place I once considered home, so I stopped showing up for a while. Change is never fun for the ones being left in its wake, but you adapt, and you move on. But that's a story for another day.

We made it to Erie, Pennsylvania after a four-hour drive. The first thing we did was stop for food. We found an Arby's and decided it was better than nothing.

Darkness was falling rapidly, and we still had a long drive back. On the ride there, I looked up a few things to do in Erie. I found the Erie Land Lighthouse, and we decided to go there and try to get to the top. If no one was there to let us up, then we would just walk the shoreline. Lighthouse, or not, we still crossed state lines to see Lake Erie.

The Erie Land Lighthouse was black and white striped. There was a black guard rail on top surrounding the enormous bulb. When you stand this close to a lighthouse, you realize the color of the light is a brilliant blue. The light cast out on Lake Erie for miles, illuminating the fog that rose steadily off the water in white wisps.

The lighthouse was closed, but it was an amazing sight to take in. Here was something so mundane, but it seemed larger than life. Max and I walked down the shoreline, listening to the water splashing against the side of the pier. Lake Erie was a murky black color, with a greenish tint to it. The water off the pier could be five feet, or five hundred. It was too dark to tell.

I reached in my pocket and grabbed my rock. We found a bench facing Lake Erie, right on the edge of the pier. This would be where I left it. Leaving this was one way to let people know we were

here, to solidify the impromptu trip we took. It wasn't something huge, or meaningful, it was just a rock. It was a small piece of home, found in the garden at Wendy's. The same Wendy's that brought us all together.

Someone would walk by, and maybe wonder why I left a rock on a bench overlooking Lake Erie. They wouldn't know what this trip meant to me, or why I felt like my world was crashing around me. Not even I knew that. They wouldn't know this day, and this trip, would be the happiest day I would have for a long time. They wouldn't know I would do anything just to have another day like this. They wouldn't know I wished time would stand still, on that pier, one hundred and thirty-seven miles from home.

They wouldn't know. They would just see a rock.

Daniel Rickard

30,000 Feet in the Air

I was thinking of Anthony as I drove down the desolate country road. My thoughts kept turning to his voice, his eyes, the way he used to run his warm hands through my hair, more gently than I had ever thought possible. But these days those thoughts always dissolved into the sound of the door slamming behind him that night, so harsh and final that nothing before that house-shaking crash seemed more tangible than a dream. *“I can’t do it anymore, Jess. I don’t know where you’ve gone, but I haven’t been able to touch you for years. Not really. It’s no way to live. I’m sorry. . .” Slam.* The sound still echoed in my mind through a haze of fatigue, and half-remembered lecture notes. God, I was tired. How much farther could this road go? I glanced down and realized that my gas light had come on. Dimly, I wondered how long I’d been driving on empty.

Luckily, it wasn’t long before a scrapheap of an old gas station appeared like a mirage on the side of the road. I pulled in, stopped at a pump, and stretched my creaking joints as I got out of the car. I was too young to feel this old. I was entering my pin number on the pump’s ancient keypad when a sudden voice nearly made me jump out of my skin. In hindsight, I guess I don’t know why I’d been so convinced I was alone.

“Golly, Miss,” the man said, strolling toward me through the rusty pumps. “You sure do look nice. I don’t see that much ‘round here. I think the last time I caught sight of anyone dressed that nice at one of my pumps must’ve been about three years ago. And they was on their way to a funeral.” His brow furrowed. “Say, *you’re* not on your way to a funeral, are you? I’m awful sorry if you are. Sometimes I just start talking, and any sort of sensitivity I might have goes right out the window.” He shot a quick look at my station wagon, as if checking to see whether I had a casket stashed in the back seat.

I clenched my teeth to stifle a sigh. After six hours on the road, this strange old man’s voice was like sandpaper on an exposed nerve. I was not in the mood to chat with any banjo-twanging locals. But, as usual, when I opened my mouth, cold courtesy won out by a nose. “No, I’m not on my way to a funeral.” Then, feeling I owed more, “I’m heading home from a conference. I was one of the speakers, this weekend.”

“Wow, good for you, Miss.” He said. “I can’t imagine talking in front of any kinda crowd without making a darn fool of myself. Once I tried to do this reading at church, and got my words bungled. Ended up talking about the Shepherd and his lamp, heh. I can read alright, but my tongue stops cooperating when I get nervous.” He shrugged. “I was always impressed by folks who don’t get flustered by that stuff.”

He sounded genuine, kind. A year or two ago that might have made me feel something. Now, I could almost hear Anthony’s voice, saying *“here comes the Ice Queen . . .”* “Well, don’t be too impressed,” I replied. “My presentation didn’t go over particularly well.”

“Aw, that’s a shame,” he sighed. “Way it goes, sometimes. Oh, hey, let me get that for you. I don’t want you to stain your nice clothes. These pumps are all covered in rust. Can’t imagine who let ‘em get that way.” He flashed me a warm smile as he fit the nozzle into my tank.

“Thank you,” I said, grateful, thinking of tetanus. A memory bloomed in my mind, of Anthony pumping gas into our car while takeout steamed fragrantly in my lap, threatening to grow cold before we made it home. I shook my head. *I’m just hungry*, I thought, drowning that memory out. I’d driven straight through lunch.

“So, what brings you here?” There was something amiable about the old man that I might have found charming, if he hadn’t been grating on my nerves.

“Gas,” I said, my stomach growling audibly. “Your signs suggested you had some.”

“Well, they weren’t lying. But what I mean is, what brings you to this stretch of road? The nearest conference center’s got to be hours away.”

“It is.” I glanced up at the thick, gray clouds drifting like a ceiling over the cracked asphalt of the parking lot. “Honestly, it would have been much more efficient to fly. But I can’t stand airplanes. I haven’t been on one since I was a kid.” I graced the man with the ghost of a smile. “Appreciate the irony. A renowned psychologist with a crippling phobia. How droll, right?”

“Really?” He looked up into my face for a moment. I nearly looked away, but stopped myself. His eyes were very bright, once I took the time to meet them. “Got me a few of those phobias myself. Not airplanes, though. I love flying. I got to ride in an airplane once when I was just a sprout. Spent the whole night up in the air, surrounded by these murky kinda clouds, just buried in this . . . what’s the word?”

Morass. I don’t know where the thought came from, but those syllables hung heavier in my mind than they had any right to. “Well, anyway,” he went on, looking down at the pump. “The whole night goes by, darker’n hell, dark as you can possibly imagine. Little kid that I was at the time, I didn’t know any better, and I get to thinking, you know—that’s it. That we’d reached the end of the world, and we was never going to see the light again.”

In my mind, Anthony was yelling the way he would toward the end, his beautiful voice going hoarse. “*No. Don’t you shrink me, damn it! Stop pretending this is about anything but you! You loving that job more than me. You being too afraid to let anyone in—to just be a person . . .*” My chest was tight, like I was just seven years old again, and there was 30,000 feet of nothing under me to break my fall.

Then the man looked back up at me, with his bright eyes shining.

“And then the most amazing thing happened. Along came the sun. And suddenly all these clouds, these shadows all around, they all got turned to gold, and everything you was thinking wasn’t

much to look at just becomes this *sight*. A sight you wouldn’t trade for the world. That plane ride sure stuck with me.” A small, faint smile played at his lips as he pulled the nozzle out of my car and replaced it on the pump. “Course, I don’t get too many opportunities to fly, these days. Must be decades since we had our last Gas Station Attendants’ Convention.” He chuckled. Without meaning to, I chuckled with him, and wiped my eyes when he wasn’t looking.

“How much do I owe you?” I asked.

“Twelve fifty.” He’d filled my tank. I didn’t even have to do the math to know he was undercharging me, but something in his smile gave me the impression it wasn’t an accident.

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve been very kind.” And I meant it, too.

“It’s been my pleasure, Miss. I don’t get too many opportunities to shoot the breeze out here. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Actually, yes. Do you happen to know if there are any good restaurants around?” I had suddenly realized I hadn’t really felt full in months.

“Sorry, Miss. I suppose you saw there ain’t much around here. This here road’ll lead you to city lights, if you follow it. But I’m afraid they’re quite a ways off, still.”

I sighed, stomach growling. “That’s unfortunate. I . . . I’m famished, actually.”

The man’s eyes lit up. “Well you know,” he said, slowly. “It might be there’s no restaurants ‘round here . . . but I’ve got a roast that’s been cooking up in the crockpot all day, plus some brussels sprouts, a little sweet corn . . . I’d have you, if you were wantin’ to come over?”

“Oh no, I really couldn’t,” I said, looking this strange man over again. Impulsively, I wondered what the emergency response time was in this backwater. Then I felt guilty for even letting the thought cross my mind.

“Well, of course I won’t force the mater,” he said. “But the

fact is, the wife taught me a little something about cooking, before she . . . passed last year. And I don't get too much company out for supper these days."

I sucked in my breath for a moment. My stomach fluttered, like I was standing on a plane in flight, about to step off. I could almost hear Anthony's voice in my mind. *"Are you really doing this? You didn't when you really needed to, when I really needed you too. Why change now, when it's already too late? You know it's not safe. You know you're opening yourself up to a—"*

"No. No, I'm sorry. Thank you, but I can't. I really must be going." There was a twinge in my chest, a regret too quiet and quick to truly feel.

The man's eyes crinkled at the corners as he flashed a smile that hardly wavered at all. "Well, can't say I blame you, Miss. Can't say I do. Well, you get on home safe now, you hear? And I appreciate you taking the time to talk to an old man like me."

"Thank you again. For everything," I said, feeling an odd twist in my stomach. I was more than hungry. "Goodbye," I said. The man nodded at me, and smiled.

I got in the station wagon, pulled up to the edge of the of the parking lot, and paused. I glanced in the rearview mirror, and caught the man looking back over his shoulder. Our eyes met. "You never change," said Anthony's voice. But that wasn't quite true, because on impulse, I was cranking the window down, leaning out.

"Hey," I called. "I never got your name."

The man turned, and called back, "It's Alvin!"

I felt my cheeks grow warm as I smiled for him. "I'm Jessica. It was a pleasure meeting you, Alvin!"

"It was very nice meeting you too, Jessica."

Alvin threw me a little wave as I pulled into the road and drove away. And somehow, the miles went easier now than they did before. I drove through the night, and when morning came I watched the sunrise break through the clouds and imagined, just for a second, that I was 30,000 feet in the air.

Paige Bittle Mud Pies

It was early, the sun had just made its way past the horizon line, illuminating the fat dew drops on the lawn. Franny sat on an old beat up lawn chair near the back of their small house, one socked foot resting lightly on the wet grass as she put on her shoes. Franny and her brother Jason had just been kicked out of their house for the day, since their stepdad had just got home from the night shift and needed to sleep. Their stepdad worked most nights, so they were used to finding activities to entertain themselves outdoors. Their house sat at the edge of an acre of green grass, with a dense patch of brush at its edge, which led on to a dirty winding creek.

Franny was seven, with long skinny legs pocked with bruises, the result of a recent growth spurt and lifelong clumsiness. Her hair was short and dark, like her brother's. In fact, she looked so much like her older brother Jason, that strangers often remarked how much the two young boys looked alike. Their mother was quick to remedy this mistake, but secretly, Franny took this as a compliment. Jason was nine, with the same stick-like legs but a wider frame, part puppy fat and part muscle. His face looked perpetually dirty, but this was more a result of being in the sun a lot than from a lack of bathing.

As Franny pulled the last loop of her shoelace tight, she stood and began walking toward the swing set near the brush line, intending to spend the morning making mud pies, but Jason stopped her.

"Let's go to the fort." He said, pulling her arm. Franny shrugged and followed saying, "All right, but after the fort we are doing what I want to do."

Nodding once, Jason turned and started toward the clearing they had made in the brush. Grabbing a long stick at the edge of the path, Jason forged on ahead, hitting the long grass at the path's

edges as he walked. Franny trailed behind, arms outstretched, slowly pulling heads off the long white Queen Anne's Lace as she passed. Every few feet, she threw them in the air in front of her, letting them softly fall and hit her face and arms.

"Come on Franny," Jason said, glancing back. "You're taking forever."

"What's the hurry anyway?" said Franny.

Jason smiled, a crooked mischievous thing, that usually meant he had plans to get them both in trouble. "I have a surprise at the fort." He said.

"What kind of surprise?" said Franny, stopping to put her hands on her hips.

Jason sighed. "Will you just come on and I will show you."

Their fort was nature made, a hollow cavern created by a twisting of vines and branches. While the fort was covered, it was not waterproof, so they kept it mostly empty, save for a shoebox in the corner with their Power Ranger toys, and a Louisville Slugger. It was humble but perfect, with space for both of them to sit and plan their next adventures. Jason beat Franny to the fort, as always, and climbed in the little entrance. Just as Franny ducked to climb in herself, he popped back out again, dragging a large round container filled with shiny cans.

"What is that?" Franny asked, ducking her head closer to the purple tub.

"It's beer." Jason said. "I found it on the Cranstons' lawn."

The Cranstons were their next-door neighbors, a young couple whom their stepdad called white trash, with a habit of collecting junk cars and leaving them in their front yard. They were a wild bunch, prone to having their biker friends over at all hours, drinking and laughing and passing out on the lawn. Franny liked them a lot.

"What do you want to do with it?" Franny asked.

Jason picked up a can, studying the label. "I dunno. I figured we could store it maybe? It would be nice to have something to drink

on hot days, save us from walking all the way back to drink from the hose."

"Do you even know what it tastes like?" Franny asked, picking up a can herself.

"No." Jason said. "Maybe we should try it."

He popped the tab, taking a large gulp. His face contorted as he closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Opening his eyes, he smiled and said, "It's great, try it."

Franny placed the can she held back into the container and took Jason's. Gripping the can with both hands, she held it up to her eye, stopping to look at the contents through the hole in the top. "Are you sure? It sorta looks like pee."

"It's great." Jason said, grinning. "Just try it. It's really great."

Franny took a sip. The beer tasted warm and metallic, like old pennies. "Ugh! It's rotten!" she said, spitting it into the dirt.

Jason's face cracked as he darted around Franny laughing. Franny threw the open can at him, but he dodged it easily. The beer hit a tree trunk and liquid shot everywhere, splashing onto Franny's face and body.

"Yuck!" she said, wiping her face with her t-shirt, "We can't store this stuff. Maybe we should just give it back. It's still early, maybe the Cranstons haven't noticed it's missing yet."

"Easy for you to say, you weren't the one who had to take 'em." Jason said, pacing back and forth. "I had to sneak up on Mr. Cranston to steal these, he was snoring right by them on their porch." Jason paused to kick the now empty beer can at the tree. "I'm not taking 'em back. We'll just have to find something else to do with them." He stopped, giving Franny another crooked smile. "I have an idea."

He ducked inside the fort, grabbing the old Louisville Slugger. "Let's hit 'em all at the trees, make a game of it." He said, swinging the bat. "Whoever can hit the most into the trees wins. I'll go first."

He grabbed a can from the container, threw it in the air and

swung. The bat smacked the can, spraying beer all over their clothes as it smashed into a nearby tree. Jason hit four more this way, then handed the bat to Franny.

Franny hesitated, staring at the dripping wet bat. "All right." She sighed.

Gripping the handle with one hand, Franny tried to throw the can then swing, but she couldn't get her second hand on the bat fast enough to hit it. It fell on the ground with a thud, spraying more beer on her already soaking shoes. She tried again and was met with the same result.

"Hold on." Jason said, grabbing a can from the container. "I will throw it up, and you hit it."

This method worked much better, and after a few tries Franny finally hit one against an old oak tree that sat on the left of their fort. They went on like this for a while, taking turns hitting the cans until the brush around their fort was littered with them, and the container was empty. Jason won the game easily.

"We should pick these up," said Franny, grabbing a can. After all, it was important to keep a fort clean and tidy. They piled them back into the original container, smashing and crushing the cans as they went.

"What should be do with these?" Jason said. "We can't take these back, and we can't throw them away. They will have to stay out here until we can figure out where to put them."

"They stink." Franny said. "Let's hide them near the creek so we don't have to smell them in our fort."

They dragged the container to the creek, heaving it into the brush near the water's edge.

"We should rinse off in the creek," Jason said. "Just to get the smell of beer off our clothes. I don't want mom to suspect that we took those cans."

"Mom said we shouldn't play in the creek," Franny said. "because of the seaweed."

"Sewage, not seaweed." Jason said. "Look if we just rinse off

a little, just splash a little water on our clothes, we will be able to dry before mom gets home."

Jason crouched near the bank and began splashing himself with water from the stream. Franny crouched beside him and did the same, splashing herself and Jason in the process.

"Dang it Franny. You're gonna soak us both. Just cup the water in your hands instead ok? I'm going to find another spot to rinse off." He stood up, walked a few steps from the bank and leapt to the other side.

"No fair," Franny said. "I'm coming to that side too." Mirroring Jason, she took a running jump and fell right into the creek.

"Dang it Franny!" Jason shouted. "Why'd you do that for? You're never going to dry in time and now you're going to get in trouble."

Franny looked down at water flowing over her legs and began to cry.

"Come on Franny don't cry." Jason said, crouching near the edge of the bank. "Come on, just take my hand."

Franny looked up, but made no move to grab his hand. Fat tears ran down her cheeks. She whispered, "I didn't mean to fall in."

Jason sighed and walked into the creek, sitting down in the stream right beside her. "Don't cry ok? Now we're both wet, and mom will be mad at us both. It's all going to be ok."

Franny sniffed and wiped her snotty nose on her arm. "Ok." She said, standing. "Can we make mud pies now?"

Jason stood and walked to the shore. Pulling Franny with him he said "We might as well. We're already dirty."

They walked back towards the yard, water sloshing in their shoes, to make mud pies.

An Interview with Dr. Julie Drew

Conducted by Daniel Paparella who sat opposite Dr. Drew on an eighties looking swivel chair in her calming blue office. To her right was a computer with a pink bellied fish atop it and a whiteboard on which was scrawled, “To do: All the things.”

Dr. Julie Drew is a Professor of English at The University of Akron and a published author of “The Tesla Effect,” a YA fiction series as well as “Daughter of Providence,” a novel, and “Soundbite Saboteurs: Public Discourse, Education, and the State of Democratic Deliberation,” as well as many academic papers.

Cuts have been made to responses for economy of space and to enhance the conciseness.

As I understand it, you began your career with academic writing, but have found your home with writing original fiction, from your adult novel *Daughter of Providence*, to your young adult series *The Tesla Effect*. What drew you to fiction writing?

The short answer is fiction reading, and in fact my first love was writing. I wrote long before I went to college and when I did go to college I knew that I'd major in English but my thought was to do something that might give me a better shot at a job. I assumed that even if I was lucky enough to ever publish something, something being a novel, that I would need a day job. Of course, I wound up loving academics so I surprised myself by going all the way through a doctoral program and you know, going into academics, and love that, and of course academic writing is required to advance through the ranks and I certainly enjoyed that part of it, but once I was promoted to full professor I was able to turn some of my attention to fiction writing.

You teach the course *Writing Young Adult Fiction and UA*. What are some of the major lessons you try to instill in your students in that

course?

It has more to do with genre fiction writing than YA (Young Adult) in particular. Everyone who wants to write and is attempting to write is, of course, somewhat concerned with originality, wanting to come up with a concept, a story line, setting, characters, whatever, that's new and interesting for readers, right? naturally. Genre writing is an interesting, sort of a large category wherein readers go back again and again to favorite genres in part because they know the structure and they know what to expect. If you're a big romance reader, or if you like space exploration/Sci-fi, there are certain conventions and plot points and structures that you expect and want because it's genre fiction and that's where you've gone. That is one aspect of the question that writers have: “how can I be original?” In genre fiction writing there are certain things you want to do to satisfy reader's expectations. The other side of that coin is that if you do too much of that then you are derivative and there's nothing surprising. You want to both satisfy some expectations while at the same time breaking them, defying them, and surprising the reader with some new aspect of the genre. It's a mixed bag, which can be difficult, that's one of the things we spend some significant time thinking about and talking about and practicing and responding to in workshops.

How do you feel about the self-publishing world?

I don't know that I have a particular feeling about it. It's an avenue to get one's work read. Some people have been quite successful at it in monetary terms and have wound up getting agents for representation and bigger publishing houses interested in their work. In fact, fan fiction online has had some results like that—that's a very small percentage of course. My feeling is, and this is what I tell students in my Young Adult Fiction Writing class, is that we can look at the data and the experiences that some writers have had as individuals with the various publishing models that are

available to us, but I don't necessarily think one is better than the other until we put an actual writer in the mix because what I would say is "What do you want to have happen with your work? What is your hope, what is your dream? Are you being realistic about your odds in the various choices that you have, how much of a chance are you willing to take, how much time are you willing to wait before something might happen?" There are lots of different issues associated with the different avenues and it's really an individual choice based on all of that.

What are some of your favorite YA fiction writers and novels, and have you been influenced by them?

I deeply admire the writerly abilities of Julianna Baggott. She is actually a poet, which would explain one of the things that I love about her fiction writing. She is just a master at the perfect word, the phrase, that evokes emotion and depth of detail in the most efficient way possible, and I feel like that's the mark of a poet. Every word does an enormous amount of work for her. Her fiction writing is incredibly imaginative. Her series, *Pure*, is a post-apocalyptic, young female protagonist story. . . I would like to say that I'm influenced by her in terms of that word level work that I was talking about. I certainly strive for that. I wouldn't pretend to even come close to what she's able to accomplish, but, you know, it's good to have goals.

I also very much admire the *Raven Boys Series*, which is Maggie Stiefvater. She does a really good job of introducing magic into a series that is also at the same time not magic. It's really hard to pinpoint what I mean by that, but it's almost like thinking about how *Star Wars* did the force. . . It's magical, but in a way that feels quite realistic.

I'd like to say that I am influenced by everything that I read including nonfiction and the newspaper and everything else. I just

think that narrative is everywhere and we absorb it in our daily lives. I've been reading and writing my entire life and went to college for ten years to gain some expertise in reading and writing and how language works and how putting it on the paper in certain ways can have certain effects. I think I'm so steeped in that that I'm hyper aware of the narratives that we are absorbing all the time, and I note how they're working.

Why do you think some people dismiss YA literature or consider it less relevant or profound than adult fiction?

I believe that it is tied to two things in particular. One is that particularly those who are engaged in literature in some way, either as a personal love or as some way a profession, those people are, and I include myself in that because I fall into that category, we are invested in the importance of literature and that especially means that literature that has been recognized and withstood the test of time. The canon. Literary fiction, which is lauded in a particular way as high culture, right? We are also invested as language gate keepers, that's what we do in the classroom when we help students to learn how to become better writers in terms of structure and organization and thinking and logic, rhetorical strategies, all of that, it is a part of moving students into the form of the English language that carries the most cultural capital. We move them away from forms and uses that have less cultural capital. That's all part of helping students to succeed.

When you say cultural capital, explain that a little bit.

Meaning that if you are heading into post-graduation, into a professional interview where you have first submitted a letter of application and a resume, and have passed that first hurdle, I would venture to say that if you passed that first hurdle you have put together a letter and a resume that is polished, that has no typos, that has no grammatical or other usage errors. . . You then get

an interview and if you're able to present yourself linguistically, verbally, in a similar way, that's cultural capital. If, however, you have sent in a resume and a cover letter that has errors, that uses syntax, that is not acceptable in standard edited English, statistically you are far less likely to get an interview. Cultural capital means that you have something of value.

When talking about YA fiction, if someone gets something published I assume it will be properly edited.

How often do you hear criticisms that young people today can't write? All the time, right? How often do you hear criticisms that young people today in conversation (pause) "like, I was going to the store, and like, my friend was like, oh my god. And I thought WTH?" So criticisms of language use that is associated with young people, abound. If you are writing fiction for young people its at least possible, if not likely, that at least some of your dialogue will, maybe not be that vapid, will include some realistic ways in which young people might talk to each other. So there's that aspect of the dismissal of it. And it's just about language.

Another aspect of the dismissal of it is again tied to young people themselves. Criticisms of YA literature often take the form of: everything is histrionic, everything is overblown, overwrought. The first crush, that sort of thing. I think that's also part of it. It's tied to people who are invested in literature with a capitol L because they have a stake in that in some way. Literature that's worth reading should be high minded and YA fiction is assumed to not be high minded and to not be of a quality in terms of its literariness that they want or expect.

YA Fiction is now more popular than it's ever been and has a crossover adult readership. Why do you think this trend is happening?

I think that there are probably a lot of different reasons, but one that I think is certainly a part of it is that there's actually just some really good storytelling in the Young Adult category. And keep in mind YA is not a genre, all the genres are included in YA fiction. You can find Sci-fi/fantasy, you can find romance, you can find action adventure, you can find spy, you can find paranormal, anything. You can find disability fiction, anything you can think of. There is some really good storytelling out there. As people discover that, they go reading and they look for more, which everybody does it. That's how we all move from book to book.

I would say that another thing is that the other side of the coin of that criticism that I mentioned that perhaps too much YA fiction is histrionic and about firsts, as if it's the be all end all, and I would argue that there's a reason why, that as human beings, we remember our whole lives long: our first love and our first loss and the first time we really understood that our parents are human beings and thus flawed. Those are all firsts, there's a reason why, because they are crucially important, they are formative, they impact us in some way our entire lives. Consequently I would argue they are very, very important. That makes sense to me as subject matter to write about. I think that people are drawn to those things because of course we have those human experiences that are in a broad way common to us all: love and loss and learning to see yourself as a part of something larger, to sort of move out of that egocentric childhood to adulthood. And frankly, in the literary world, we call the coming of age story, which is a cornerstone of the literary cannon, the bildungsroman, I mean this is nothing new. We're just talking about it in mass market, mainstream, paperback fiction. And let's face it, there's a lot of crap out there too. I would never argue that all YA fiction is great any more than I would argue that all adult fiction is great. Some are obviously better than others. But there are some amazing writers working in this area.

You have written a trilogy, *The Tesla Effect*, the first book being *Glimpse*. When writing the main character, Tesla, were any of her experiences drawn from your own life experiences, and how do you see real life experience factoring into fiction?

Well, the fact that we both time travelled. I'm kidding.

(Collective laughter)

I would say that I drew on my experience in the most general way as a teenager, and I'm sure it's not unique in any way, of just being really pissed off for like three years for no apparent reason. Just really, really angry. She's angry. I felt like I could write that, that's a part of her personality. I did ground it in something specific in terms of her anger, but that felt easy for me to write. Other than that, a resistance to any suggestion that anyone is the boss of her. I maybe drew from that as well. The second it gets suggested I'm doing the opposite of what you just told me I need to be doing.

Awesome.

Yeah. Other than that, no. I mean, I have experience of heart wrenching, life changing personal loss of someone in my family, but it wasn't my mother and it wasn't a parental thing. But I think experience with grief in a general way, like a really intense grief can help you write grief. Most, I guess, is not about actual specific things that happened to me that I then had happen to my character, but rather an emotional pool of experience that you draw from to help write certain aspects of the character. I did the same thing in *Daughter of Providence* (Dr. Drew's adult novel).

So the experiences and emotional truth that you put into *The Tesla Effect* series, do you think those were specifically important to a young adult readership and did you have the intention of not only creating a world that seemed natural, but also saying, "hey, young

adults, you will go through this, here is the experience?"

I think so. I thought of the trilogy as one story and that was how I originally laid it out and knew I would divide it into three books. Once I started thinking about it and really plotting it and thinking about my protagonist I knew that there were a couple of essential growing up and maturing questions that I believe we all face in our lives. And maybe not just once, this could just be the learning curve of being a human being, you maybe have to repeat these lessons or whatever. But I knew that I wanted them to be the central driving force or themes of the story and it's sort of like: how do you know when to accept things and when to work to either change it or fight against it? That's really tough. We live in a culture where we see fighting against something that you perceive to be wrong, or not giving up, that's bravery, that's courage, that's a good thing sort of by definition. Then there's the question of: is acceptance giving up? So, that's one driving question. I made it much less of an abstraction and more of an on the ground with a clock ticking question.

Literally.

Yeah, because she had the opportunity to go back and change the thing. She had to face that "Do I just accept the fact that my mother is dead even though I can do something about it? What would that mean," right? Also, "what do we owe ourselves and what do we owe other people?" That's a huge question, not just for us as individuals, but as a community, as a society, you know, what do we owe ourselves and what do we owe each other? The idea that teenagers don't ask those questions and aren't forced to think about those questions is of course false.

Do you feel like you've found any answers to those questions in your life? Or is this still, as everyone is, just floating in the void asking these questions all the time?

Yeah, I think what I, and this is probably me just getting older too, but also grappling with those questions as a person and grappling with those questions in my creative work as well, watching how there are different outcomes when characters make different choices regarding those kinds of questions. The only thing that I've really come to is—and not that it's easy—is that first of all you never, ever get to a final answer, ever. There is no right answer because a right answer would suggest that you've transcended the context, and you can't. An answer can only be better or worse than another answer in a given moment with all of the particulars of that context. And who you are as an individual, who the other players are in whatever situation you're talking about. All we can do is our best to make a good choice and be open to the possibility of making a different choice if it turns out that another one seems better down the road, do our best to try not to find it more important that we be right, and never admit that maybe we made a mistake and should think about going another way. To learn how to live with the uncertainty of that without being a crazy, anxious person who like, has to take Xanax to deal with the uncertainty.

I think it's part of the post-modern condition, is learning to live with uncertainty. And to be able to hold simultaneously in your mind: this might be right, this might be right, this other thing that I haven't even thought of yet might be right, and there's no way for me to know for sure, and yet I have to make a decision.

Would you say it's the acceptance of uncertainty that you have to come to?

Yes. The acceptance of uncertainty, doing the best you can with what you have, trying not to let the uncertainty paralyze you, and being forgiving of yourself and other people.

In what conditions do you find it easiest to write? Under deadline, out to lunch, taped to the ceiling, in a bouncy castle, for example?

(Laughter)

In absolute silence. No music, nothing. At home. I find it very difficult to read fiction when I'm writing fiction. I don't write all day and then jump into a novel that I'm in the middle of. The fiction I'm writing is the fiction I'm reading, always. That isn't really something I thought about but I realized it after I wrote my first book. For the first time in my life while I was writing that book, for six months I didn't read a book. But I was reading my own book continuously. Deadlines are useful. I tend to be pretty disciplined and I make my own deadlines for word counts. I've found that I don't do a daily one because then I have no wiggle room, but I do a weekly one. So if on Wednesday the sun is shining and it's been raining for two weeks because, Akron, and I want to just go outside and whatever, go to Sand Run and walk my dog.

What's your dog's name?

Boomer. *(Sorry for the interruption; dogs are cool. She continues her point.)*

I can do that [not write on Wednesday] because I'll make up the words on the last three days of the week. Deadlines are important but making sure you don't set yourself up to fail by being too strict and too unrealistic about what you can produce in a given period of time, because we all have other demands on our time. Bouncy castle, nope. I do write in my head and think about characters. I write backstory, I think about scenes and often times rush home when I'm on a dog walk, and often times come home and have to, you know, get right to the keyboard and jot it down before I forget it. But that's usually when I'm further along in a book and the characters are very real to me so they're kind of in the back of my mind, and sometimes doing stuff.

In Glimpse, there are moments of violence and even expletives are

used. When writing violence and other seemingly adult themes in YA fiction, something marketed for a young adult, what is there to consider, did you think about this?

. . . I would say that the sex and the violence in the book, first of all, there's deep caring between the two people who have a sexual relationship, it has grown over time, and there's every indication that it will continue. There is certainly equal participation and, in fact, the female is the person who instigates the sexual encounter, which was important to me. The violence is in every way depicted as horrific and unacceptable and damaging psychologically and that anyone who would either order it or be the one to actually torture someone is a monster. There are moral, for me, evaluations attached to the sex and the violence that is depicted in the story that I am satisfied with.

As we are nearing the end, are you working on anything new?

I am but I've moved in a slightly different direction. I have partnered up with two former Masters students here. We have formed a production company. We are writing and producing original fiction for kids in a podcast format. We have a mystery series for middle grade students, the first season is out, it's called The Akron Adventures, and we're really happy with that. It's starting to get some good press. It's a ton of fun. We are deep into the writing of season two. We are going to launch, probably in the Fall, a new series from, it's called Snow Day Productions, that's our production company, aimed at early readers, six to nine or ten maybe. Our hope is that at some point we will be publishing YA fiction as well both in paperback and audiobook format. Writing podcasts is a blast, we're really enjoying that. It's different and I'm learning how to write differently than I would if it were on the page. Someday down the road, if the business is still alive and we are doing what we are hoping to do we'll be taking submissions, we'll have an editorial board and people who are writing YA fiction can

submit their stuff to us as a press.

What's your favorite kind of soup?

Oh, I love soup. I like really hearty stew kinds of soups, like winter time soups. Tortellini with spicy Italian sausage and a really meaty broth. Grate some cheese over the top of that and I'm a happy camper.

What is your favorite type of tree and have you climbed one?

A banyan tree. They grow in the tropics. They were all over in my childhood and I have climbed them. They are amazing, they're Ents, they're so cool. They're huge. They grow out and then they grow down. They move across the ground and then they sprout up another trunk and they're these huge structures and you can move from one tree to the other.

You can find The Akron Adventures podcast on SoundCloud, iTunes, and Stitcher.

You can find more information about Snow Day Productions, their podcasts, and place in the community here:
<https://www.snowdayproductions.com>

Alex Archinal is currently a Junior in the B.S./M.D. program. Upon graduation this year with a natural science degree, he is planning to continue his education at NEOMED, a small medical school in Rootstown, Ohio. Once there, he hopes to pursue psychiatry. In addition to writing, he enjoys photography and videography. He has not been published before.

Ashley Banks is currently majoring in AYA: Language Arts education and English. She loves writing poetry and often explores themes involving the LGBTQ+ community and her experiences within it. In addition to writing Banks enjoys the four distinct seasons of Ohio and looking at the Moon.

Alizabeth Carmella, an undergraduate student at the University of Akron, currently lives in Akron, Ohio. Alizabeth will be graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English in May of 2018. She was accepted in the University of Akron NEOMFA program with a focus on poetry writing for the fall 2018 semester.

Angelica Corrado is a senior Psychology student at the University of Akron. She is an advocate for mental health awareness and feminism, topics influencing her poetry. Her work has previously appeared in Atlas and Alice and The Ashbelt. Corrado is the Vice President and Co-Founder UA's Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

Dorottya Fenyvesi is a senior, majoring in Biomedical Engineering and minoring in Creative Writing. She was born in Budapest, Hungary, and came to Ohio at age fourteen. The magical weather patterns of Akron fascinate Dóri so much, she hasn't been able to leave ever since.

Kate Hardin is an undergraduate English major in her final

semester at the University of Akron. She enjoys singing to birds, or to her cat on days he's willing to listen, and being the friend that always has a Tide To Go pen in her purse. She is often mistaken for a local librarian.

Jesse Harper is a senior at The University of Akron, majoring in public relations and minoring in creative writing. He has contributed op-ed pieces to the school's on-campus newspaper, The Buchtelite, covering topics concerning political correctness to the efficiency of the school's Starbucks. What he enjoys most are words and language, and how those words can become a catalyst for change. Within his chosen field, he has studied the topics of persuasion, rhetoric and linguistics, and how to effectively implement them. For him, writing is another means of putting oneself or their perceptions into the rhetorical ring, to spark change and ignite conversation.

Lily Hunger is a junior at the University of Akron pursuing degrees in Spanish and English with undecided career goals. She loves reading all sorts of novels and doing some creative writing whenever she is not drowning in large piles of homework or procrastinating said homework via mildly impressive, but probably unhealthy binges of various sci-fi and superhero shows on Netflix. When not attempting to properly articulate her thoughts and emotions through writing, her main form of communication is that of puns, memes, and frequent rants about fictional universes. This is her first publication, and hopefully not her last.

Jordan Miles is a senior, majoring in communication and minoring in creative writing. She is a member of Delta Gamma sorority and Rho Lambda honor society. Jordan grew up in the small town of Little Hocking, Ohio with her grandparents, mother, and two siblings. She enjoys writing poetry and reflecting on

the short, yet beautiful, life she's lived thus far.

Mary Ozbolt is an undergraduate at the University of Akron and is pursuing an education degree specializing in Adolescent Young Adult Integrated Language Arts with a second major in English. She plans to graduate in May, 2018. Follow Mary on Instagram @vanilla_pages to read about her book, coffee, and cat obsession.

Amanda E. Piekarz was born in Passaic New Jersey, but grew up in North East Ohio. She is a sophomore at the University of Akron majoring in psychology and minoring in Creative Writing. Amanda enjoys reading, and writing. Her two favorite authors, J.K. Rowling and Stephen King, have significant influence on her and inspired her to write. She participated on a "Power of the Pen" team during middle school and high school and was named one of the top thirty student authors in the state of Ohio. Amanda loves road trips with friends, and spontaneous decisions that lead to wonderful memories. Most of her time is spent doing homework, spending time with family, working at Sheetz and writing as much as possible.

Daniel Rickard is a fifth-year English major at the University of Akron with a keen interest in literary criticism and a passion for fiction. Daniel is a lover of music, a singer, and a lyricist, in addition to being an author of short stories and an aspiring screenwriter. He looks forward to spending more time on his writing after graduation. "30,000 Feet in the Air" is his first published work.

R. Roberts is a senior at the University of Akron. During an 8 year hiatus from academia, Roberts recorded and released 5 albums of original music, including Ripe n' Juicy and Lightning Loves the Kite, performed across the country, and

lived in Los Angeles. Roberts returned to hometown Akron to create and collaborate with friends and family. Roberts writes off beat poetry that falls into a surreal, playful niche. Though never published before, "BALLOONS ARE SHAPED LIKE UPSIDE DOWN TEARS and other vignettes" won the Sam Ella Dukes Memorial Poetry Prize in 2008. Roberts plans to write a play this year with the intent to write a musical. Roberts will release another album with rock band "The Queen Cobra," autumn 2018 and hopes to attend graduate school in 2019.

Paige Smith is a senior at The University of Akron, studying English. She doesn't know where her liberal arts degree will take her, but is looking forward to finally graduating. She lives in Highland Square with her husband Ede, and their dog Luna Lovegood. When she isn't reading, making bookish candles, or people watching on her porch, she enjoys playing board games and watching Bob's Burgers over and over again.

Jennifer Stein I'm pursuing an undergraduate degree in English and when I survive that I plan to go on to graduate school. I'm a non-traditional student and reformed luddite, so college has been a continuous learning curve for me. When not studying or working I try to squeeze in as much travel and live music as my schedule and budget allows. The most interesting thing about me is I am a twin and my younger brothers are twins, and our little Stein Family Quartet accounts for most of the joy in my life.

Kate Tasseff is a senior English major with a minor in French. She is a homeschool graduate (valedictorian, class of 2010, thanks for asking) and she hopes you'll hold that against her. She is only two degrees removed from Kevin Bacon, having played "Background Extra #2930" in Captain America: The Winter Soldier, but despite this prestige, she stays humble. Among

her favorite things in life are chips and salsa, gin and tonic, and Lennon and McCartney. When under great stress, she tends to start baking, which usually works out very pleasantly for those around her. In her (rare!!) spare time, you can find her laughing over a Charles Dickens novel or binge-watching Cheers. She hopes one day to become Nora Ephron.

Zac Taylor I have tattoos and eat too many chips. I love my lady, and my mini Aussie. It feels good to smile with people.

Casey Amato is a junior at the University of Akron. She is an Early Childhood Education/Intervention Specialist dual major and spends the majority of her time with six-year-olds. When she isn't creating lesson plans, you can find her reading in coffee shops, blogging about clean eating, and exploring health food stores. She feels most alive when she is surrounded by plants, doing yoga, and drinking almond butter smoothies.

Benjamin Holda is a fifth year senior graduating with an English and Philosophy dual major, and is joining the Peace Corps for a two-year stint.

Natalie Mitchell is a student at the University of Akron studying history. She will soon be starting her senior year of undergraduate work and her first year of master's work simultaneously, so we'll see how that goes. When she's not overworking herself she can be found knitting, donating her juicy O+ blood, or reading graphic novels.

Julie Mullet is a junior pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Supply Chain and Operations Management. In addition to her love for poetry, Julie also enjoys music, spending time in nature, and traveling.

Zoe Orcutt is a junior pursuing a B.A. in English with a minor in History. She enjoys spending her time in gardens most sincere.

Daniel Paparella is the Fiction Editor at AshBelt and will be graduating this Summer with a BA in English and minors in Popular Literature and Film, and Theatre. Daniel plays drums in two punk rock bands: Bobby Bubonic and the Plague, and The Southside Choir Boys. You can find him in trees consorting with squirrels and in dive bars face down in his drum set. Daniel will continue his studies in the NEOMFA for

fiction writing.

Cris Shell is a Junior at the University of Akron. He is currently pressuring a degree in English and multiple ELL related certificates. When he is not reading, writing, or doing homework in the library, he is usually spending time with his cute little cat Peach.

Erin Siegfert is a junior at the University of Akron, pursuing a degree in English with minors in Creative Writing and Consumer Marketing. If she's not studying or rereading her favorite poems, you might find her baking biscotti, practicing yoga, or crushing it at pub trivia night with her parents. She rode her first upside-down roller coaster when she was eighteen. She can tap dance for hours, but don't ask her to stay upright on ice skates or a bicycle. Someday, she'll own a waffle iron. Someday, she'll publish a book.