

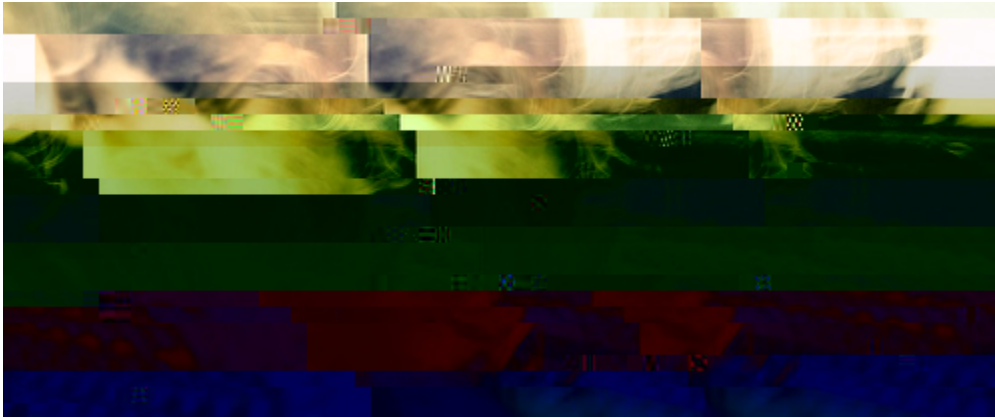


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Runner-up  
2011 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

Triptych  
Callie Milburn



This poem is thrice  
told. It exhales  
a story of ghosts,  
her countenance and  
keys. These are framed,  
threefold. As we  
watch, this poem  
makes us prey.  
It impregnates our peripheral  
sight. To see her  
entirely we must  
look at the picture  
as one. A lady  
splintered, our primary  
focus. Thrice the eye,  
twice removed. Thrice  
her knee-jerk hair. Thrice  
the concentric Underwood  
circles. Each division,  
a longitude rubbing her  
cotton underbelly blur  
on cold-rolled steel,  
whiplash prances slightly  
on some triptych turquoise.

The first breath  
is the cat's cradle,

swathed in her  
butterfly effect. The rippling  
pawprint is proof  
that she carries over  
to the second  
and third frames and  
so on and  
so forth. Now look.  
She has moved  
us into the second breath, just like that.  
We crane to see her seafoam iris.  
There might swim mermaids  
in that jade.  
We will never see  
that half again.  
The margin has left  
us this singular  
storm, this cyclopic green.  
We should note  
her hair is still  
split-end cursive, wringing her powdered neck.  
This is important.  
Note the solar flare,  
the fine-spun

copper coiling. These are  
extensions of her  
lashes. The same faerie  
rings. The same  
pale moons set  
the frame's right hand.  
She looks just  
like before, except this  
time, she loses  
certain symmetries. And so  
she moves out  
of sight and mind.  
This is her  
final breath and frame.  
We watch keys  
dancing in her place.

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Department of English and

## A Frog Crossing the Interstate

Rachel Charbonet-Baker

Jumping the corner, while cars rush by, through  
smoke, puddles, and leaves down to neon  
yellow painted edge of steep rise,  
to maze-loud Interstate with leaps and  
hops, back and forth; drivers can't see  
my beady eyes wide or slimy green  
spots on along crossing to greenery on  
the other side. And trees wait  
with sky overcast, so I make my way  
to return from honking horns  
amidst splashing water from tires to dry tree-  
roof of many beetles, slugs, and birds.  
Once there, I bounce through sticky grass,  
mud, and roots to where many  
yellow, orange, and olive-colored frogs live.  
A pond of blue-black shallowness holds  
tadpoles, moths, and mosquitoes tapping  
its surface between blades of grassy  
shore to keep me in a rocky fortress  
as night falls through branches  
and earth turns colder, silent, with locusts  
singing a star-song on trunks.  
I peer for moonlight, nestled with other  
forest creatures to sleep since zooming  
across such a traffic-full highway.

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## The Swan of Tuonela

Bruce Majors

*Tuonela, land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river with black waters on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing. Lemminkainen, a trickster god, is the hero of the Finnish epic*

Her song now almost speechless,  
motionless,  
                    breathless,  
                            dying metaphors.  
Stones collide in a vast darkness somewhere  
only slightly.

After the music we moved our separate ways  
both toward our own darkness.

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Runner-up  
2011 Clara Cox Epperson Prose Contest

## Old Enough but Not So Old Zach Ludwig

I am not “young.” Maybe for a successful writer I would be considered young. But that’s an image that is fleeting with every passing year. Age is a relative concept and its merit in a situation should always be somewhat subjective. If someone asked me how old I was, I would always reply “old enough.” That left everything open for possibility. Did I tell you I’m writing a novel? It will be a sweeping success and for someone as young as me to be published will be an achievement in itself. It sure will make everyone who underestimated me envious. At least that’s the plan.

I always have a plan. And if that doesn’t work, I seem to always have a back-up plan or two. Some call it OCD or over-bearing and controlling, but that’s fine with me. However, I’m discovering to my dismay that I don’t have a good back-up if my life gets fucked up. I can’t see myself happy being anything but what I always wanted to be – an acclaimed author. I am a student by occupation, in high school. I grew up in a small, southern town you’ve never heard of. And I don’t want to share its name, anyway. That covers most of what you need to know about me.

I haven’t written a lot – mainly poems, a few short stories, a beginning to my great American novel, and thousands of ideas – but some of them are repeats of what I saw on television last week or what I see at the movies. I like the movies. I wonder if writers ever see a movie, then get into trouble when all the pages they write end up with similar ideas and conversations between their characters. Back to my American novel – I think it should be written in a Kerouac or Hemingway type of way. I, too, yearn for a long road trip to discover America.

I bet that would take me west. I have always wanted to see the west. It’s a place to lose your mind, money, and time. But a territory that returns a stronger sense of personal identity when you’re through. I want to get lost in the west. That sounds kind of

Enough tripping. After all I'm still in high school. I figure once my transformation is complete, in a few years, when I really know who I am, I will have time for all that other stuff. Lost anywhere would be an improvement from the day-to-day mandatory mediocrity of my life up to this point. I wonder if I could take a van and live in it for a year or so. Chalk it all up to crazy adolescent exploration or that adjustment period around college age.

My uncle lived in a van once in college. But he did that to save the money he would have spent on rent. I never want to have to pay rent. When I go to NYU, I hope I get a full scholarship, so that I don't have to pay anything. Katy Shoopman, a friend of my sister, who graduated two years ago, was top of her class and had a 1600 SAT – she's getting paid to attend some college somewhere. I'm not sure where because we weren't exactly close. And don't bother asking my sister. She and Katy had a bit of a "falling out" right before Katy went off to school. Something involving my sister and a lot of rumor-mongering at our high school. In such a small town, rumors don't take too awful long to get spread around, by the way.

My sister, Bethany, got pregnant in the middle of her senior year. By the time prom rolled around in May, she was already starting to show. They had to go down to Colsteen's Dress Shop at the corner of Spring and Seventh to have the dress let out as

real tall machine. You had to jump out of it to dismount. When he used to start it in the parking lot after school, it sounded like a dragon dueling with the passing-by marching band. When the lines of chubby nerds banged their percussion and tooted their horns louder to compensate for the roaring onslaught of the OX's dual tailpipes, Jason using only his big toe, would engage the throttle and the thunder claps of the exhaust sounded like a firing range. And the band forfeited and marched on past.

By the time that summer ended – and I was glad it did because I could flee to school to escape the incessant shrieking of my newborn niece, Kendall – I was ready to begin my junior year. Junior year was the most difficult one I had experienced to that point because I found the presence of the fe



She was still only in her underwear and began fumbling around the dark cranberry-colored interior for her lost clothing. I turned the ignition key the remainder of the way to engage the engine and not just the battery. The sound was soft, but still penetrating the silence of the increasingly cold October evening. As she put her clothes back on, I noticed she was shaking. It could have been from the cold or because she was holding back an even-greater torrent of tears.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath as I put the car into drive.

My relationship with Cary Wellington was destined to be repeats of that evening. We would see each other and we would neck, but we never had sex. I don’t know whether saying no to sex once is like telling the girl it’s off forever and you have to give a presidential address to retract the statement, but I do know that nothing really happened with Cary to make me think any differently. Within days, I had purchased a whole box of condoms and was raring to go, but my fantasies never materialized. She seemed more disconnected after that night, like I had done something to personally offend her, though I felt like I hadn’t done anything.

I had the strange feeling that everyone she knew was told about our night by the lake. I don’t know if this was all real or if my own sexual frustration and postponed, pent-up ejaculation were causing any head trauma, but it definitely felt stranger to sit in school after that. I know she told all of her girlfriends and, of course, they told their boyfriends. The problem was that a lot of those guys were preps or jocks, or a combination of both. And those types of people always have someone they can tell about another person’s embarrassment.

One day I was in the restroom during class, it must have been second period, when William Davis came in. He never tolerated it if you called him Will or Bill. It was always William, and he was very adamant about that point. I always had to challenge that because I found it funny.

“Hey, Will, how you doin’?” We had been through this little dance before and he was not amused this time, nor was he ever amused by my wit. He just gave me a kind of a look because he knew that I knew what he preferred to be called. I was heading to wash my hands and he was unzipping his pants to take a leak at the urinal to my right side.

I turned on the faucet, lathered my hands, and began to rinse. In mid-urination, Will began speaking to me, which I found to be a rather profane exercise in bathroom etiquette. Nevertheless, I wasn’t the one peeing so I felt less uncomfortable than I would have if our places were swapped. He asked me how Cary was. It was well known that were an “item,” in whatever the high school standards of that were at the time. She was fine, despite our falling out, I supposed.

And I told him so.

He got right to the point. “So I heard you didn’t fuck her.” My insides jumped and my penis shriveled a bit. Not only did it scare the hell out of me that this was fodder for the public forum, but it involved my reputation and that of my genitalia. And he does not appreciate slander.

“Not exactly,” I said.

He zipped up his jeans and started walking towards the bank of sinks without flushing the urinal, though it looked like he had no intention of washing his hands. “What does ‘not exactly’ mean? You either do it or you don’t.”

I flicked my hands into the sink to avoid dripping them all over the floor and I reached for the paper towel dispenser so I could dry my hands and get out of there. As I

I regained the ability to stand a few minutes later. I was really no worse for wear, except that I couldn't figure out what the fuck had just happened. The rest of the school body responded about the same as Will had – sorry, William. But William was the only one to express his emotion physically. From everyone else in school, I received the cold shoulder, strange looks, or just that odd, out-of-body experience you have when you walk into a room and realize that everyone was just talking about you. And you are not sure why – well, you know why – but you don't know what they said exactly and that's what drives you crazy.

So by the end of junior year I was, if you asked any of my classmates, a closet fag who wouldn't have sex with a good-looking girl, even if she was laid out for the taking. I was still no lover, I had missed that opportunity. I was now a fighter, even though I possessed the dreaded glass jaw. I wish the former had been the case, so I could have avoided my face-plant into ceramic tile. But that's what really happened. Great way to start out senior year!

He hit her. Fucking sonofabitch. He hit her. And hit is a colloquialism. We use that word in any case of domestic abuse – he almost killed her. My sister, with a child at home and baby powder smell on her hands. She had just folded tiny, freshly-cleaned pajamas and placed them on the end of the bed. He beat the mother of his child and she never saw it coming. I didn't visit her when she was in the hospital, but I hear she didn't look good. When she came home, it was no longer a home.

Her bedroom, for her, took on a sanctuary feel – a place of solitude and meditation to escape, if only for a short time, the hell that had become what was outside: real life. The dining room and kitchen became a forum where we all tried to sift through and sort out pseudo-reality and whatever was on our minds – usually having to do with Bethany or the baby. But usually, the family just ate in silence or avoided each other and ate at separate times. The bathroom was the backstage of a Broadway production where we all put on our makeup to cover up the scars of our recent rumbles, to seem more normal. But most were internal sores – except Bethany's – so there wasn't a lot of difference to see. And the garage was the way out. You start the car and remain in place until the air seems so thick it's like you're swimming through the air, just like in Peter Pan. "Second star to the right and straight on 'til morning," they said. I wonder if Bethany remembered that story.

I didn't talk to her enough that last year – my senior year. But I feel that if I had, I might have been able to stop all of this. I know why she did it. Others from the outside couldn't believe it and didn't understand why she would, but I knew why. She had entered a reality that she would never have accepted as her fate. For each one of us, that will be an unfortunate sign of aging – when you look up and realize that life is not what you planned. For most of us, however, it will be "I hadn't planned on three kids instead of two", "I hadn't planned on that second mortgage", "I hadn't planned on the career I'm stuck in now." For her, it was that she hadn't planned on fucking up her life. She had plans. But you know what they say about the "best laid plans of mice and men." – I actually forgot, but I think it's apt.

My mom found her. After she brought in the groceries through the front door, she had began packing away baby formula and jumbo packs of diapers in the kitchen

cabinets and hallway closet. Kendall was crying in her crib in Bethany's room. My mom ignored her for a moment while she went to put the extra sodas and beers in the auxiliary refrigerator in the garage where her baby had dozed off for the final time while her grandchild's discomfort was vocalized in the backdrop.

Everything after that was a bit blurry. Bethany killed herself in March, so there weren't many months of school left at that point. For any senior, those final months are a formality, anyway. For me, they were especially hazy. The next step seemed less important in the greater scheme. I tried imagining what Bethany would have said if she had been in my shoes in her senior year. She was already very pregnant by then. Her athletic outfits and blue jeans didn't fit anymore and she was already adjusting to her new life.

Senior year for most people is a time of joy. A bittersweet time. Your last homecoming, the real prom – not that junior prom bullshit they seem to be implementing nowadays – when partying is the prerogative and curfews are a suggestion, and it's the last time you will see many of those people. So many things are coming to an end. Never again will school be so forgiving – they supposedly don't hold your hand in college. Relationships are ending for many couples and some are just being realized but sadly, time is cut short for those would-be Romeos and Juliets. Never again will so many novices at love be stuck in a room together – unless you are one of those church camp people. For many, it's a time of completion because they know where they're going and they think they know who they are.

My final semester in school was a troubling time because too much was happening. So much was crammed in for it to really only be a few months. Kendall was becoming more of a nuisance. Tensions mounted between my parents as they mourned, yet tried to move on. I was encouraged to move on by so many. Leaving home is harder for the people who actually have to leave. Those who get to stay behind have the easy part. I'm not saying I didn't want to go – I did. I was ready to go. I knew a piece of me would always stay behind in the small town where I was born. I applied to a few schools – NYU included, of course.

I felt sorry for my fellow classmates. Many of them were so focused. The smart, driven students knew where the next destination would be and the stupid kids knew that high school would be over and that seemed to be something of an accomplishment to them. And then there was Bethany. She had had the drive and the potential, but was limited by her circumstances. What would she have done if Kendall hadn't been born? What kind of person would she have become? Where would she be now? All of these questions could be turned around and asked about me. I didn't have the answers and perhaps Bethany never had any idea either.

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I was adjusting to my new life, too. But mine came with less baggage. Knowing I had very little to carry with me – realistically or philosophically – made everything easier, I think. I didn't own anything, I hadn't worked for anything, there was very little that I had taken part in so there was not much to carry with me. Mentally, I was a blank slate. I didn't have any real ideals, I wasn't religious, and I didn't have a destiny – at least, not one that I could foresee. I had less to stabilize myself and therefore, I could be a bit more accepting of the fluid feeling that life was taking on.

I knew I couldn't follow the regular patterns. I couldn't follow the rituals others were going through. So I didn't. I became even more consumed in my own fantasies. The only thing I could consider was a next step that wouldn't end with me back at home again. So it was that I discovered the flatlands west of Memphis.

A great writer, that is to say, a great story always delivers what the audience wants at the end, in some way or another. It may not be exactly what people thought they wanted but it just seems to fit, if you think about it. Rhett Butler has to walk out that door, E.T. can't stay with Elliot, and Darth Vader has to die. Sure, we all fantasize about the way things could have gone, but it just wouldn't be what was supposed to happen.

I guess that's where I was. Struggling because I knew I had to deliver what others expected from me. My difficulty was I didn't know what I wanted yet. I didn't know what was supposed to happen for me, but I felt I would take a cue from some of the movies I liked. I decided to take a leave of absence.

I didn't know what the west would hold – or if it held anything for me at all. I took my sister's Honda. It hadn't been driven since she used it to kill herself. The coroner did a good job removing all traces of her. Someone even cleaned out the cigarette butts from the ashtray – the car was cleaner than it had been since we had bought it. It still kind of smelled like burnt-out cigarettes though, and that will always remind me of Cary. My dad had moved it out onto the driveway and put a blue plastic tarp over it.

So I heard that roads on I-40 beyond Memphis become desolate, leaving behind the mountainous terrain of Appalachia and the greenery of the plateau. Beyond Memphis lies a flat wasteland of dry cotton fields, and that feel pervades into the plains. It isn't until you get beyond that and the desert, when you get to the Rockies, that your perspective changes – your attitude changes.

It took a change of attitude for me to see once and for all. Nothing like a trip (in whatever way you like to take it) to make you reminisce and fully experience your own regrets. Luckily, the young have time for regrets. It isn't until you get past the cotton fields of Memphis that you are able to see what went wrong before. So many things, I feel bad about. And I have had a short life, comparatively. What will I feel regret about ten or twenty years from now? Probably most of the same stuff. But hopefully, I'll be more adjusted to it all by then.

I thought a lot about Cary right before I left home. I was still confused about our falling out. After considering her behavior on our one infamous night, I realized that Cary was one of those people who always gets what she wants. She wanted sex – it might not have even mattered with whom – and she was side-struck when I denied her. Sex, in high school, is a tradable commodity in war-time: you stock up when you can, because



# Easter

Anna Gilbert

It was the Easter before the storm. The eggs, found.  
The ham, eaten. The dinner, done. The 6 a.m. joy  
of the bunny, the grass, the treasures buried, the  
budding yard of connected trees, the glorious  
giddy of the laughing kids, the raucousness of  
teenaged tournaments and searching races,  
the flinging “hi” of sneaky sons and Boggle  
played beneath the sun. The sister with  
roses at her belly and the mom with afternoon  
already upon her brow. The candy of youth,  
the weather of warm looking.

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Joel 2:12  
Katie Reasonover

There in the moonlight  
looking down at a bridge  
I saw there below it  
my heart,  
who had been lying on the ground,  
gently rose,  
left my body, turned to the world,  
and there they made conversation.

“Were there rings on your fingers?”  
“No, only under my eyes,” my heart’s reply.

“Did you love this religion?”  
“Sure. Look what it has caused me.”

“But the sun has always risen, has it not?”  
“You of all should know, it is the world that turns.”

The two continued  
and as I rose higher,  
to the left I saw  
the angels, the devils,  
shooting dice for my soul.

To the right  
there were onlookers  
softly rocking my body.  
With this movement  
my heart felt compelled  
to return to its cage.

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## The Guardian and the Shade

Steven Stratz

Through the rain I saw you  
Gently kneeling in the mud.  
In your eyes flashed the wicked grin  
Of a demon lathed in blood.

In its fist was an ashen blade  
Of lucrid hammered lead,  
A weapon of great deadly force  
was crashing toward your stead.

Through the rain I saw it,  
Bound to strike the fatal blow.  
You seemed so beaten, terrified,  
Yet hatred did not show.

But as the blade was tearing down,  
A glorious light appeared,  
A figure bathed in shining love  
Emerged in high revere.

Through the rain I saw him  
Softly walking to your side;  
An armored chain-mail suit of gold  
Surrounded swords of pride.

The demon shrieked a deadly hiss  
As the angel drew his blade.  
What ensued was the perilous fight  
Of the Guardian and the Shade.

The clash of good and evil  
Could be heard in all the land;  
The angel shone with mercy,  
While the demon took command.

The monster swiftly threw a blow  
to the angel's armored chest.  
Sparks of mercy, love, and sin  
Blew toward the settling west.



# Faith Is

Richard Cooper

Faith is more than a building of stones and the veneration of old dead bones.  
Faith is beyond the human even with the utmost acumen.  
Faith is the words that GOD spoke to impart what to hold in the depths of the heart.  
Faith is the knowledge of what is right, more than knowing, a second sight.  
Faith is the faith of a child, knowing GOD'S love and being beguiled.

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## At a Halfway House

Bruce Majors

Sign says *Salvation Army*  
could be alley of the lost  
smoke-gray faces stare from every darkness

Homeless sit ragged possessions  
in every doorway or alcove  
suspicious eyes watch  
    for signs of weakness

I get tough yelling out questions  
Is this the place? Who do we see to get in?  
I got family here!

Lock the car  
bravado impresses no one  
they've seen this more than once

Make my way through a crowd  
gathered around the door  
to a wire cage with a desk  
ask if I might see my son  
tough guy façade completely gone  
nothing more than a gentle dog  
    tangled up in wolves

Inside the iron door  
hard faces with hard eyes  
a dark hallway  
I could be stabbed  
no one smiles

A thin shadow emerges from gray walls  
...cries...embraces –  
eager wet eyes not hardened  
    not yet

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TTU

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Department of English and Communications  
TTU





caused my bloodshed. It had been Cody's initial experience inside a wrestling ring and I was teaching him how to fall (also known as *bump* in wrestling patois) for a maneuver in which I stood behind him, clutching both his wrists, and simply pulled him backward, appearing as though the back of his head was being driven into the mat. As I fell to a sitting position and Cody crashed downward in unison, his wrist broke free of my grip and, because of his wedding band, his flailing hand glanced across my face, slicing open my right eyelid. Stitches probably wouldn't have been a bad idea. But I never got them.

\*\*\*

Most people are under the impression that anytime they spot blood on a wrestler's face, it's "gimmick" blood, created by blood capsules or some red gunk in a squeezable container. It's not. Nearly all the blood one can see while watching any given wrestling program is authentic. The only rare exceptions created with blood capsules occur when wrestlers begin spitting up blood, which announcers will then certainly exclaim is a direct result of some "internal injury."

Blood has been a servant of professional wrestling for as long as it has existed, although it's utilized much less than it used to be, due in large part to the outspread of HIV. Typically, a wrestler bleeding, also referred to as *getting color* or *juicing*, is done as a way to elevate the intensity and realism of a match so as to maximize the excitement of the crowd. Before the modern method of bloodletting in the squared circle came about, wrestlers of yesteryear would simply strike one another in the face, usually the nose or the fleshy area along the eyebrow, hard enough until the red stuff gushed out for the audience's amazement. The blood resulting from this intentionally harsh method is often referred to as *hard way juice*, hence the recipient bleeding from being punched, elbowed, or, in my case, rammed into a ringpost – hard.

Nowadays, heads of wrestlers are normally split open by way of self-mutilation. The performers make themselves bleed with the use of, in most cases, a razorblade. Such an act is known in the wrestling business as *blading* or executing a *blade job*. An up close example can be found in one of the opening scenes from the critically acclaimed film *The Wrestler*. The camera pans in on Mickey Rourke – who depicts a broken down, washed up casualty of the wrestling business leftover from the 1980s, yet still performing on a much smaller scale in the independent circuit – as he deliberately creates a gash across his forehead during a match without the use of special effects.

Ahead of time, wrestlers intent on bleeding will cut a razorblade in half, tape up all but one corner, and conceal it on their person somehow, normally by taping it to their wrist with the rest of the athletic tape they have applied to themselves. When the time is right, wrestlers, commonly lying face down, peel away the tape to retrieve the razor, also called a *gig*, and then cut themselves, usually across the forehead. Another area of the body where some wrestlers hide a blade is unthinkable; it is either taped to the tongue or to the roof of the mouth and then coughed up when it's time to be used. Personally, I can never fathom attempting this under any circumstances, because the risks of swallowing the razor or having it lacerate the inside of the mouth are too great.

Regardless of where the razor is hidden, the most challenging part of the entire blading process is pulling it off without the crowd, particularly in seats closest to ringside, becoming aware of what's happening, which is why wrestlers with longer hair

have an advantage; they can cover their hands and face with their hair so that the viewers are unable to see them swiping at their forehead with the blade. Then, ever so subtly, the referee will move in and collect it from either the wrestler's hand or off the

“If you ever do it,” The Regulator added, turning his attention back toward me, “take the gig and cut close to the hairline, so if it scars, it’ll be less noticeable. And don’t cut too deep. But I don’t think you should ever do it.”

I was relieved. I had obviously misinterpreted his intentions. This was merely friendly and professional counsel from someone who had been wrestling almost longer than I had been alive, not an unwanted flirtation. It was a sign of respect and an act of kindness toward me for this veteran to go out of his way to pass along his knowledge, no matter how bizarre that knowledge was. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I assured him.

Perhaps when I got the idea to willingly bleed for my match in December of 2008 I wasn’t listening to The Regulator’s discouragement of blade jobs, but I was definitely going to heed his advice about how and where to cut. Scars weren’t appealing to me, and I intended to make only a small incision to preserve my appearance. In order to get blood flow, a gash from coast to coast across the forehead isn’t necessary, since the mixture of blood and sweat makes it appear as though there is much more coming from the slit than there truly is. I didn’t (and still don’t) want to end up looking like some of the most notable bleeders in wrestling history, with hideous slash marks across their foreheads to show for a life of sacrifice within the business. One wrestler in particular who comes to mind is Abdullah the Butcher. It’s said that the scars on his forehead are so deep that he’s able to place gambling coins in them.

When I arrived at the venue a few hours before bell time, I immediately sought out John, my opponent who would be wrestling under the disguise of a mask that night, to go over the specifics of our match. John and I were the same height, but he had a fifty pound advantage. Despite this, John and I always put on spectacular matches, and he was one of my favorites to lock up with. As usual, I found him sitting with an assortment of bottles around his chair where he sat; several with water in them, one with Gatorade, and another he spat chunks of tobacco into. When I mentioned that I’d be bleeding for the match, he looked at me hesitantly. “I don’t think you should,” he said.

“I won’t cut too deep – just enough to get some color and that’ll be it. It’ll be fine,” I told him.

John let out a long sigh. “Ah, I don’t think you ought to,” he responded. John’s main concern was upsetting the people in charge of the building, which I sympathized with, seeing as though I’d once felt the same reluctance toward bleeding. It took a few minutes before he ever came around.

I’m usually quite talkative in the dressing room before matches, but I was totally focused that night, multitasking by lacing up my boots and explaining to John in detail what we’d be doing at the same time. I delicately handled the razorblade I’d brought along as I wrapped it in tape, lightly pressing down on its tip to feel its sharpness. When a few other wrestlers saw what I was doing, they were all surprised, asking for me to spoil what would take place in the main event. “You’ll just have to watch and find out,” I told them. “Just know this – I’ll be wearing the crimson mask.”

After I finished preparing the blade, I pulled the referee aside and explained what was going to happen and what role he’d play to ensure everything went according to plan. I produced the blade and watched him blink nervously. For an act that would subject no one but myself to physical pain, everyone was sure uptight about it, I thought.

“Just put it in your back pocket. When John tosses me into the wall near the exit sign, run over and act like you’re checking on me. But have it ready,” I stressed to him. “When we go outside the ring past all the fans, you need to have it ready to slip to me when I’m down. Don’t let anyone see you, though. And when I’m done with it, I’ll leave it on the floor. Pick it up and put it back in your pocket. Don’t worry – it’ll be simple.” With that, the referee nodded and stuck the object in his back pocket. “And don’t lose it,” I joked as he walked away.

Just before I made my entrance to the ring, I did my routine stretches and thought I was too much at ease with the notion of harming myself than I should have been. My only butterflies were due to the actual work John and I would have to do inside the ring, because, despite all the attention toward readying the blade, this was still supposed to be a wrestling match. Knowing full well what direction this contest was headed in, over the loudspeakers I heard the promotion’s ring announcer state before the bell sounded: “Folks, this thing could get ugly quick.”

Three minutes into the match, John had a reverse chinlock on me. Apparently, John overheard a fan heckling him and he panted in my ear, “You hear that son of a bitch? I’ll kill ‘im.”

“Ignore it. Just ignore it. Let’s keep going,” I whispered. I fought my way to a standing position and warned John of the next maneuver I was going to pull off. “Jawbreaker,” I said in a low voice, using his arm to shield the fans from seeing me speak. With John standing behind me, gripping me around the neck, I reached up with both hands and pulled John’s chin to the back of my skull, abruptly falling down to the seat of my pants to simulate his jaw crashing into my head.

We kept working hard, even though the temperature was stifling by that point. I mentally prepared myself to have all the air escape my lungs as John hoisted me above his head for a gorilla press slam. After a pin attempt by John and my subsequent kick-out, I gasped, “It’s time. Throw me outside.” My body thumped the concrete floor before I even had a chance to catch my breath. John slowly made his way out to the floor, as if he were stalking his prey. I felt his hand tighten on the back of my neck as he directed me past the fans and toward the brick wall. Just as he launched me toward it, I leapt slightly, for added effect. I heard the people’s disapproval for the beating I was taking as my body again made a sickening thud upon impact, and I slid down the wall to the floor, where I lay in a maimed heap. When I opened my eyes, the referee was crouching over me, handing off the blade. Quickly, I raked it across my forehead, the referee groaning as he looked on. I knew he didn’t want to watch, but somehow he couldn’t bring himself to look away, either.

Blood spurted from my forehead as John and I made our way back to the ring. I winced and kept wiping the blood away, a trick I hoped would escalate the blood loss. For good measure, John pretended to gouge the wound on my head, his skill as a great worker apparent at that moment in particular, because I never felt a thing, though I grimaced and writhed in agony as if he had nearly killed me. As John and I fought back and forth, the crowd seemed stunned and fairly surprised at what they were witnessing; they didn’t want to believe evil was prevailing over good. The loudest reaction of the night from the fans came when I fought back just enough after taking an immense





Runner-Up  
2011 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

When in Rome...  
Caroline Sapp

do as the  
Romans do? do  
indeed, invest the time in  
debauchery! decadence shall  
reign with overflowing  
excess, indeed –

incoherence? Yes! Yes  
please! indeed! with  
glittergold nipples on  
top spraying seeds of  
grape through the  
gold god stuck in –

limbo. between good and  
better! eat the  
meat! tear into  
the hare! suck  
the duck down to  
its last –

fuck the  
girl, the  
boy! Or both! Or  
twice! Or the  
man with the slithering  
tongue with scratches down –

the slender curve, sliding into  
the worship room, worship the  
party thrower, gayest gal, the  
beatific bombshell, the  
frisky frolicsome Ram of  
Rome –

Surely, this makes one



last drop until  
you – yes you – do as the Romans do!

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Department of English and Communications  
TTU

Light  
Jerrel Sanders

Laughter is the dawn  
That dries the floods of yesterday's sorrows  
And beckons the seed of spirit.



The figures of  
Our perception of old trees.  
Our need for recitation  
Recycling words.

Then we'll sober  
And wallow  
Back into the house

And we'll wake  
With only ourselves to blame.  
Pretend we're fine  
Promises in lines  
Practically consoling

Each other for  
Nothing. Is this reality  
What we want?  
Wishing and wasting

Everything for  
The sake of comfort.  
Nothing

For neither of us  
To be had,

Until we wake,

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First Place  
2010 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

Ash  
Callie Milburn

Quicksand remedies suffocate twist-tie solutions  
that dissolve resolve and build you up to compost shred  
Taste the perspiration of debris aspirations  
that clutter to-do lists you always manage to leave undone  
Gulp the sweat of your brow that feeds your fragile ego  
until you crashandburn and choke on ash  
that composes your decomposed pisspoor excuse for composure  
Postulate miniscule steps to nowhere that pave  
the gutters of your unbeautiful mind  
And don't mind the obvious obscenities that you fail  
to observe because those babyblues are sewed shut  
with concrete thread that knots the know-it-all  
you have become And still you know nothing  
nothing and no one exists to convince you otherwise  
And wisdom itself underestimates you because sagacity  
alludes you and subdues your overdue rerun of wakesleepwalk  
And you walk under magnified shadows while  
pools of turpentine thin the rush of thriving to  
dripdrop pitiful while all vitality and thirst trickle away  
Dehydrated you cannot whistle for parched the blank pages  
of your song won't hold a candle to the books you've burned,  
the ash you are

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First Place  
2010 Clara Cox Epperson Prose Contest

## This Road Not Yellow Joshua D. Martin

I blame Judy Garland for the first cliché that I ever learned. In the film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, the character Dorothy wants nothing more than a prompt return to Kansas. “There’s no place like home; there’s no place like home,” she recites, hoping that repeating a universal truth could magic her out of Oz and into the colorless reality of her simple Kansas farm. Dorothy is an object of much contrast, establishing a pretty skewed relationship toward both her family and her native state. Her attitude toward home changes eventually, with Oz as the catalyst for her about-face. The film ends happily, and Dorothy wraps herself in the comfort of her family. The tornado that opened the film had long vanished into the sky, the Wicked Witch of Oz was really just a fictitious evil, and the Kansas cows moo themselves back into normalcy. Dorothy resumes the life she had momentarily left through a dream. There’s no place like home.

But Judy Garland died of a drug overdose, and Dorothy never needed a heart transplant.

When I was six, I decided that Dorothy was probably too optimistic in the end to know what she was talking about and that the sudden upheaval into a fictional fantasy land would make anyone want to return to a life devoid of green Wicked Witches and flying monkeys. I decided that “There’s no place like home” was a simple line and nothing more. Its factuality was irrelevant to the overall hunky-dory effect of the film. I think I grew way too pessimistic because my own concept of home became blurred and confused. Because when I think of home, I think of a person.

My grandfather has lived in the same small town his entire life. It is a community populated by more cows, I think, than people. Tractors outnumber cars. Churches line the sides of the road. Old barns act as sacred, untouched monuments to people from years past – daunting and disfigured ghosts – and the people who currently live here know each other like they know the land out of which they raise their food. But the town’s possibilities are as minimal as its beauty and simplicity are abundant.

The only way to enter is by following a curvy, snake-like road. If you survive its seemingly unending twists and turns and its rollercoaster-like ups and downs, your reward is entrance into the community. My grandfather grew up here. Besides various jobs, and occasional travel demanded by those jobs, he hardly ever left the area. This is what he knew. This is where he stayed.

Abraham Carter grew up living and loving a life that I only came to know through fading photographs. The setting looks strange and primal. Gardens explode with vegetation and slanted, unstable barns tower above the people who rely on them as much as do the animals which occasionally lie and rest and sleep inside. The people imprinted on the plastic live without smiles, or at least hide their happiness well. The pathetic road



idea, so I was more than reluctant to let “the stub” get near me – the midget digit of the scary grandpa. When my mom and dad married, right before the family group picture was taken, my grandfather raised his hand and waved his miniature finger, smiling and creating a laughter that filled the simple country church hidden in the enclaves of that all-too untamed nature. It’s one of my favorite pictures that I have of my family – my grandpa, dressed in an uncomfortable, decorous tuxedo, and his decapitated digit, held high like an Olympic torch. Yes, he was godlike. Zeus.

\*\*\*

My own family started its story in the same community, but when I was one, we moved away. Not far – just enough to ensure that neither of us fell into the trap of the community’s simplicity and comfort. For my mom, I think, it was a way to branch out. For my dad, it was simply the next step. I was one, so I neither understood nor cared.

My mom and I kept driving back through the road to visit my grandparents, both of whom were divorced and consequently single. My grandmother, who at having become a grandmother only increased in her altruism, was always an easy person to approach. She was rarely strict, and like most grandmothers I know, she let optimism rule her judgment. Without my grandfather, her house lacked a brisk, harsh, authoritative voice. So when we visited my grandfather, I did my best to be as stiff and as mute as possible. He was the first person, I think, of whom I was genuinely afraid. He was strict, unwavering in his judgment, and loud. Maybe that’s why I also liked him as much as I feared him. So when I was on his good side, and I usually was because I tried my hardest to not screw up, we were often inseparable.

So home, the idea, remained just as divided between my own community and that of my grandfather. I liked it, though I didn’t understand why my grandparents were divorced and living in separate houses. It was just an accepted, unquestioned truth – something undisguised and ignored, pushed behind the white picket fences of the family we had created, staring blankly back, mute.

And then the trips through Seven Knobs stopped. Suddenly, like a heart attack.

\*\*\*

My mother’s family has always suffered from a genetic line of heart trouble – irregular heart beats, clogged arteries, heart disease, heart attacks. Medical terminology bred itself into our vocabulary much like old recipes handed down from one generation to another. My grandfather and his brothers have had at least one heart attack, some have had more than one; last year, my great-uncle died, unexpectedly, of a massive heart attack. My mother suffers from an irregular heart beat, as do I – kind of like an internal reminder that I have genetic bad luck, that things are never definite.

When I was six, shortly after I cast Dorothy off as a delusional fool, my grandfather moved out of his house and into St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. Only temporarily, I was told, would he stay there. I don’t really remember a lot of specific scenes, just a collage of images and brief memories blurred within a murky fragment of time. I remember IV’s jutting from his arms, and I remember waiting for hours in a big maroon waiting room with my cousins. We played with dinosaur toys and colored entire coloring books, filling the pages with a vibrancy the hospital seemed to lack. I remember my family going into a Catholic church at the hospital to pray, even



Such was the first encounter with his second wife.

\*\*\*

The marriage didn't last long, so I don't remember much. I do remember that she smoked, and that even though my family and I had hung small signs outside my grandpa's home reading, "NO SMOKING ALLOWED; TRANSPLANT RECIPIENT," she continued smoking anyway, creating a hazy, chaotic environment whenever my family and I visited. They eventually divorced. I'm not sure why.

Maybe it was the effects of her smoking or maybe even the lonely, blunt reality of another failed marriage that made my grandpa worse, but it's common for transplant recipients to be sensitive to anything – the sun, the wind, maybe even their emotions.

The whole thing was sort of a like a coarse and gradual goodbye. My grandfather had always appeared stern, callused by a thankless childhood of farm work and unrelenting labor in adulthood. But this? It was probably the most difficult job he ever had – vindicating the ungreen witch.

Despite my attempts to sound level-headed, I couldn't say anything because my word bank tends to run dry when conflict wraps itself up in my family. I guess I just wanted the ideal. My mom never answered my pleas for reconciliation. She stared out the window with an adult logic that couldn't mend, a mentality I didn't possess.

Months later, while camping with Dorothy, my grandfather mysteriously fell down a cliff, breaking his arm and his collar bone. The fall affected him worse than it would have a normal person. His immune system had grown weak over the years – heart attack after heart attack, marriage after marriage. We abandoned our ill feelings and drove to the hospital, breaking speed limits and accepting Dorothy for what she was. Nothing more.

We asked the typical question. "Did you slip?"

"I don't know."

a lot of memories, most of which are probably irrelevant to you, the reader. What matters is that I have them and that I made them. But of equal importance is the fact that I have memories that stretch through a curvy road to a community and to a people who still accept me despite my long absences – something I didn't expect. I've answered a lot of questions which needed answers. But not why I keep going back to my grandfather's town. There's really not a lot there, except old people and older houses. Fields, now empty. Gardens, now dead.

My grandfather is one of those people. The last time I visited him was brief. I was thankful that I didn't have to stay as long as I did because I wanted to run away from the weak, nearly bed-ridden man who had taken the place of my loud and dogmatic grandfather. But I stayed, setting the plate of food I had brought him down on his dinner table and engaging in conversations about college, the future, and family – big ideas dissected by small people. I saw the list of his medication hanging on his refrigerator door, the names of all twenty pills written neatly in the sweeping cursive of my mother and her sisters. Under the morning section were fifteen names, none of which I could pronounce. Some had what I'm guessing were nine, ten syllables. Others were short, with few vowels. The remaining few were to be taken at night, their names equally confusing and just as unpronounceable. The breaks in our conversations were heavy. We didn't talk about the extreme unlikelihood that he would ever leave his house anytime other than an

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empty optimism. When people hear his name, they assume either that he is dying or is already dead. My family and I wait in a Nashville hospital, thirteen years after that lackadaisical, maroon introduction. We sit locked away from a city bursting with life and rapidity. I notice how different people look when I'm walking on the streets: the businessmen and the urban hippies, the doctors and the college students. And then everything, everyone, blurs together when the elevator doors open to the waiting room layered in cheap, floral wallpaper. We read the same magazines, watch the same television, walk up and down the aisles, wring our hands, fall asleep, fall awake. Fall apart. It's really just the same story. He said he wanted to go home, before slipping soundlessly out of coherency, large, grey buildings blocking out the sky barely visible from his small and mundane window. We wait.

\*\*\*

Initially, I grew to believe that my grandfather would cheat death again, like the other fifty or so times which now exist only as noble attempts of a man too in love with life. I grew to think that the essay you now hold would exclude what you expected from page one – his death. Walt Whitman once called it a “sweet, delicious” word. But I think he forgot to mention that it also has a bitter foretaste. The sweet part, I think, lies at the center, like a strange candy, layered away until a person cracks open the hard outer shell and swallows the rigid, soured reality. It's never easy to swallow.

My grandfather passed away on the thirteen year anniversary of his heart transplant. We opened the curtains and welcomed a sun which bathed his body and ours in a warmth that both the cheap coffee and the stale, grey room had failed to offer. His monitor displayed its flat line, as if it were some sort of ostentatious cyber-badge. A digital question mark neighbored his linear, lifeless lifeline. I guess the digital world doesn't accept death sweetly and deliciously, as we do. The computers and the monitors, faithful neighbors for many nights during many years, stopped their beeping and whining. They left death alone, ascribing to its abstractness an innocent and confused symbol. Later, we walked out of the room, and I left the curtains open. I give you the sugar-coated description. I've already swallowed the sour part.

I stayed with my grandmother that night, and I drove through Seven Knobs Road with the windows up, music blaring. *She looks so much older now*, I thought as she welcomed me into her house. *When did this happen?* Everything seemed too shaped and bent for his passing. I stopped reading the book I brought with me and turned over on the couch, trying my best to sleep. I got up for a glass of water and noticed the frail flowers sitting fragily and lifelessly in a glass vase.

\*\*\*

So when I think about my grandfather's fall and his house, his marriages and his transplant, of horses and Western shirts and of June 24, I think of it all as a real myth, or something like it – too complex and unbelievable to be anything else.

For a long time he sat in his weathered and withering blue chair, watching Western reruns and deliberately avoiding the

edifice of loneliness and anecdotal refuse, my grandfather withdrew into himself, like a forgotten hermit, becoming ghost-like in a grave and indeterminable silence. His left arm acted as if it were a bastardized limb of symbolic betrayal; a long, vertical scar hid the imbedded machinery that made big and swollen the hard and darkened skin made brittle by the accumulation of years, the sad and unfortunate creation which is time. His chest shrank, making the scar of his surgery bright and big and unnatural. And the silent decay of his own life fed upon his mind like a parasite savoring its own created infection.

Had he the energy to do so, I imagine he would have raised his hands in a feeble plea to his newly discovered God, asking for a magical pill to diminish the loneliness of a foreign heart. Instead, he was left with the low, humming rhythm of an oxygen machine and a dinner table littered with bottles of prescription pills. And so, when I think of home, I think of many things – interstates and IV's, hospitals and houses. I keep my memories of my childhood, and of my grandfather, stashed away in crinkled, fading photographs, or locked away in my feeble prose. My grandfather kept his hidden and tucked away, or perhaps twisted underneath the caps of prescription bottles. He took his twenty daily pills, some the size of small erasers and others resembling large rocks, simply out of regularity. And much like my grandfather's relationship to his pills, I cling to my memories, to the idea that is home, because they keep me going, giving continuity to a life which offers few promises. And as much and as hard as I try to fight that savage cliché, I feel as if I'm drawn to it, not because it's true or because it holds any value, but because I wrestle, or did struggle, within myself to find clarity with the concept of home. There's no place like home. I try to fill the hole it leaves with specificity, and with meaning.

So I think that's why I keep driving through Seven Knobs Road. Few trees have fallen, few houses been built, and the community still echoes the simplicity that I have come to know and crave and love. My grandfather's house remains as beautiful and as well-kept as the day we finished building it – a gross contrast to the feeble occupant who was once inside. He often talked about the past as if it were a treasured heirloom – a touchable, tangible abstract. And I listened, too, knowing I could never rewind into that strange and otherworldly past, no matter how much I wanted. We were bound by stories. That's really the whole of Seven Knobs: stories and people. And when I think of both, I keep my grandfather and his story as my own little cliché – a response of which only I am fully conscious. I hold it, strongly, and I keep struggling with images and the past and my words. My grandfather struggled, too; he worked the past like a puzzle, picking up his memories and fitting them into a bigger picture, hidden away and cloaked in secret, beautiful anecdotes. And, whether my optimism be a product of my naiveté or of a strong intuition, I like to think, that he smiled as well, when nobody was looking, so as to avoid unnecessary explanations of a hidden joy. I like to think that he finished the puzzle.

Time is still a little too cruel to the community. Self-built houses betray their owners and rust and grow weak with old age and exposure as rapidly as do their owners. Animals are bought, raised, and sometimes wander into the recesses of the nature which stands like a silent and half-defeated embodiment of what used to be, way back before people created the road that twists and turns and doesn't make travel any easier than the family histories which complicate. And even when some die, the community adopts

that sorrow as its own and very quickly tucks it away because convenience and reality wrestle together in constant and infinite conflict. That's the way of things. The people pick up the pieces, and then they make something with what they have left. They, like my grandfather, my grandmother, whoever is even left, walk with feet caked with a gilded and tainted web of beauty and misfortunes. That's what's left: stories. Everything else is dying, slowly, and in the process, other people, if they're lucky, get glimpses and rare views of something – a town, a story, a person – which is iridescent only there. Because the outside world forgets to slow down, to uncomplicated, to remember. And even if the community does die, only after its human constituents acquiesce to the meticulous ticking of time's clock, the fight was good. I remember it.

I keep driving through the road so that I won't forget.

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# Curiosity Killed the Cat

Callie Milburn

Was it playing when  
curiosity killed the cat?  
I must know. How  
and why? Was it,  
    perhaps, the cat was  
    black, bad luck? Licking  
    old age? Was it  
    preying? Dying to know  
where cat ghosts go  
once they die life  
number nine? Ate seven  
mice and paid? Dearly  
    beloved we are gathered  
    here today to remember  
    the cat. Was it  
    crossing the road to  
get to the other  
side? Did it cross  
a chicken on its  
way out? Inside? Down  
    under? Where was it  
    when curiosity killed it?  
    I wonder sometimes. And  
    I get caught up  
in the wrapping and  
forget about the present.  
I wonder. Was it  
out of its mind?  
    In good company? Maybe  
    over the hill? Beyond  
    the mountain seeing what  
    it could see? But  
all that it could  
see was the other  
side of the... what?  
What did it see?  
    A seashell? A  
    sea shore? Did it  
    drown at sea? Swallow  
    its pride? For whom?

Did it give a  
damn? Did it give  
two? Have a heart  
attack when curiosity struck?  
Did it finish its  
supper, the last meal?  
Was it dead meat?  
Did it regret being  
at the wrong place  
at the wrong time?  
Or was it right?  
Was time like it  
is now? Was it  
alone? Starving for attention?  
Or did it love  
the spotlight? Was it  
ruthless, maybe a glutton  
for punishment? Was it  
a pet? With a name?  
Like mine? Was it  
already one foot in  
the grave? Was it  
arching its back? Breaking  
dawn with yellow eyes?

I wonder, was it  
the cat who wondered,  
in so much wondering,  
was it worth it?

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## Helpless

Jerry Nash

You tried to explain the silence  
During my darkest days  
No calls, no letters  
You said you felt helpless  
Didn't know what to say  
I understand helpless  
We are well acquainted

Helpless is...  
Watching your wife sleep, unable to get up  
Missing the best years of the children  
Watching her  
    Struggle to move  
    Struggle to think  
    Struggle to remember  
Watching her year after year after year  
Until you can't even remember when

Helpless is...  
Sitting alone at the hospital  
While they run useless tests  
Brain scans and spinal taps  
Tests you can't afford  
Using a credit card for the first time to buy groceries  
Eating Lipton soup alone in the room  
As she lies flat on her back  
Not realizing that this is only the beginning

Helpless is...  
Staring into the face of your child  
Nine years old and screaming in pain and fear  
Screaming in spite of the morphine  
Screaming through doctors' worried whispers  
Pain the legacy of a botched surgery  
Gripping her hands as she screams:  
"Make them stop, Daddy!"  
Staring in her eyes  
Searching for words to calm the fear  
Ease our pain

Helpless is...

Sitting in rehab while she learns to walk again  
While she learns to use a foot she'll never feel  
Watching a wound heal day by day  
Knowing that wounds leave scars

Helpless is...  
Listening to her stories  
Of teachers fussing  
As she falls asleep in her wheelchair  
As she fights the drugs that keep the pain manageable  
As she struggles to be the best in her class  
Of classmates taunting  
It can't be that bad  
Stop faking to get attention  
Of friends who soon quit calling  
Uncomfortable with real pain

Helpless is...  
Holding your seven year old  
Hand on her chest  
Feeling her heart racing, throbbing  
Rubbing her back to ease the pain  
Watching her wake exhausted day after day  
Strapping on the heart monitors  
More hospitals, more tests, no more answers  
Hearing "Rub my back, Daddy" night after night

Helpless is...  
Each night room to room  
Holding a wife, daughters, one by one  
As they cry themselves to sleep  
Rubbing a back, a foot, a neck  
Pain that won't ease  
Tears that won't cease  
Night after night  
Days, weeks, months, surgeries, viruses, years

Helpless as they cry  
Helpless as they hurt  
Helpless as she loses her job  
Helpless as you're told to find a cure  
Helpless as you lose your house  
Helpless as you lose everything but each other  
Helpless to stop the voices

That rage, accuse, condemn  
God have mercy, Lord have mercy...  
Helpless in the silence  
Helpless in the silence

Yes, I understand helpless  
We are well acquainted

Tablej Cî <à 0



anatomy  
Callie Milburn

if rain had bones  
i'd imagine them  
pretty pearl splinters

burrowing into slick  
membranal nooks,  
baby fences in sog.

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