

MOTHERS



Broad!

Summer 2014

{ *TABLE OF*

POETRY

<i>"New Orleans August 1949," Naima Woods.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>"Scent of Brown Sugar and Fig," Sandra Fees.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>"Gestation," Laura Jent.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>"House of Brown Wicker," Kristen Rouisse.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>"Penelope and Telemachus, 2012," Amy Neill Bebergal.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>"My Therapist Asks About My Mother and I Cannot Answer," Lori Zimmermann.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>"Mothering My Son's Dead Brother," Chanel Brenner.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>"Dying Young," Alexis Rhone Fancher.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>"Ripening," Megan Mealor.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>"Another Round, Please," Julie Howd.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>"Picking Mulberries," Laura Sweeney.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>"To My Son, Day of the Dead," Emily Jaeger.....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>"watching a film at ithaca college," Sophia E. Terazawa.....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>"Driving in the Dark," Joanna Cattonar.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>"Death Warrant," Alexis Rhone Fancher.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>"The Place Where No Words Live," Noorulain Noor.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>"Choices," Chanel Brenner.....</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>"Balloon Bouquet at Library Square," Susan Martell Huebner.....</i>	<i>57</i>
<i>"Mantis," Elizabeth Savage.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>"At the Pool," Amy Neill Bebergal.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>"The Natural Disaster," Laura Jent.....</i>	<i>67</i>

CONTENTS }

- "Assisted/Living," Joanna Cattonar..... 60*
- "One Sock, Never Two," Sandra Fees..... 68*
- "Mercenary," Emily Jaeger..... 70*
- "For the Poet's Daughter," Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné..... 77*

FICTION

- "An Earnest Proposal," Kirstin Ruth Bratt..... 32*
- "Sunburn," Katie DePasquale..... 62*

NONFICTION

- "Fat Pants," Cate Blum..... 8*
- "Sparring with Infertility," Kim Heikkila..... 14*
- "The Bitter Surrogate," Tracy Foy..... 46*
- "Too Much of Ourselves," Kaylen Mallard..... 71*

ART

- "Some Troubles are Pleasant," Monica Wright..... cover*
- "Mother of the Hummingbirds," Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné..... 13*
- "instructions," Kathy Rudin..... 38*
- "Oleander," Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné..... 56*
- "figure flaws," Kathy Rudin..... 66*
- "Untitled," Athina Pappa..... 78*
- "Ponytail," Monica Wright..... back cover*

NEW ORLEANS AUGUST 1949
Naima Woods

There was a white wall.
My grandmother didn't lean against it,
just stood tall in pants:
a woman erected in fleece,
beaming faintly.

She had a fat baby, naked
sitting on a hobby horse in the front yard.
He boasted a fine-looking moon face,
his two horrible teeth
dropping shadows onto his tongue,
silver like the rest of him.

She was large, seeming to be
almost two stories tall
and in photographs like this,
her skin shone milky, constellated
beauty marks standing up
against her neckline.

She must have changed dirty
nappies a thousand times,
but here her palms
were turned up as if to say
I was not born of this.

The baby grew fatter, sitting there.
His shoe was cast in bronze, an effigy
to his miniature ends. As a mother she wasn't
sentimental, but this, she thought, was
fitting. The shoe
is not the story

SCENT OF BROWN SUGAR AND FIG
Sandra Fees

You draw yourself close.
Yes, a moth.

So close you can feel heat
still rising from the chest,

like a flame faltering
in its final moments.

If you come still closer
there's a scent of food—

brown sugar
and fig.

But it's only Mother's lotion,
the body's last preparation,

its last longing for human hands
that will linger on the skin.

Shadows crowd
the light in the window.

Sandra Fees is a poet and an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, serving a congregation in Reading, PA. She holds a Master's of Arts Degree in literature/creative writing and a Master of Divinity Degree. Her poetry has been published in Wilderness House Literary Review, The Harrisburg Review and Wilda Morris' Poetry Challenge.

GESTATION
Laura Jent

This
was
ideally
begun as
two faint lines
drawn by science
and pink, as promised.
Your father! He rolled over
and went lovingly back to sleep.
I began the long haul of keeping
my eyes open, dreaming that way.
Soon, I was sick, begging for strange
things. Mangoes, a tribute to your grand-
mother, nothing else to explain it. She loved
them and she'll never hold you, so we watched
as I grew, with an eye for her approval. We found
that your heart beating was like music piped in from
galaxies far off, and perfectly arranged. Once, we were
worried and in the hospital, they found you at last on their
miracle of green screens, and you clapped. You amazed us
into laughter. And later, love had me lying in bed, afraid
to move, but you knew—when the monitors were the
talking cord between us, and the staff worried over
me as I faded in and out of your near-life, you
stayed strong and steady like a star. I clung
to the shorelines of wakefulness, like a
small clam in the surf, and you were
the sailor's light, full of the yellow
promise of sunshine, guiding
me home, for love and for
mangoes, for anything
more than the dying.
You kept me here.
And then you
were crying,
Penelope,
alive.

Laura Jent, 36, lives and loves in Durham, NC. She writes poetry and has been published online at sites such as lodestarquarterly.com and millerspondpoetry.com, as well as in print in The Independent Weekly, and ISM Magazine. She also works with individuals who have autism and believes fiercely in building a diverse world through our words and work.

HOUSE OF BROWN WICKER

Kristen Rouisse

I heed the purr of a vacuum
—dewy calves atop sun-
bleached couch, fibers of jasper
jungles, swarms of titian palms.
Whitecaps surge the open window,
depositing starfish bouquets, saffron
pillows of sponge. Barefoot and trailed
by a ghost of hair, my mother hums
Que Sera, Sera—
propels the machine over seas of shag-
carpeting. Doddering motor exhales into
the already humid living room.

Kristen Rouisse is a MFA candidate in poetry at the University of South Florida, where she teaches composition and creative writing. In 2011 she married the coolest dude she knows in Key West, in Ernest Hemingway's front yard, in the pouring rain. Kristen's a self-proclaimed theme park junkie, horror enthusiast, and beer snob who currently lives in Safety Harbor, FL. She's been previously published in *The Release Magazine*.

The year I turned twelve, my mother nicknamed me Fat Pants. I was four feet and three quarter inches tall, and one hundred and two pounds. I wore a bob, shaved in steps up the back and a Vivian Lang sweep of hair that fell over one eye, prompting my grandmother to constantly ask how I could see like that. I wore a full set of gunmetal braces and a face full of acne. When I ran my fingers over my skin, I could not go half an inch before finding another pimple. I did not feel pretty at twelve, even before my name was Fat Pants.

My mother used the nickname affectionately, but I was scared of my mom and I didn't want a term of endearment. I wanted to fly below my mother's radar—to stop making messes, losing my way, misplacing my belongings—and I knew that these habits were somehow part of me, that there was no way to try harder or learn better. My mother's anger was linked to the fact that I was there; and so I strove to disappear. But while I was twelve, I stayed Fat Pants.

In September, with the start of the school year, my mother put me on my first diet. I had five Wheat Thins with peanut butter each morning for breakfast, no more chips or sweets with lunch, no snacks, and no dessert. This change was particularly hard because of all the junk food we kept in the yellow cabinet. The yellow cabinet was long and thin, reaching from the floor to the ceiling of our canary kitchen. There are children I am certain only befriended me to gain access. It was stocked from top to bottom with the kind of crap most kids only longed for: Ruffles potato chips, Hostess Ding Dongs, Nestle Quik, Twinkies, Oreos, club crackers that came with orange cheese and a plastic red stick, Funions, Fritos, chocolate Snowballs coated in hot pink coconut with a creamy surprise in the center.

Despite my new nickname and my new diet, the yellow cabinet remained fully stocked. There was still my sister to feed, after all. I remember coming home from school and watching my mother sit at the kitchen table in a lacy bra and unzipped shorts, flipping through the newspaper while consuming a King Sized Hershey's bar with Almonds. She ate it with her mouth open and I could hear the almonds crunching in her teeth while I stood transfixed, saliva pooling in my bottom lip until my mother pushed back from the table and slid the door closed. "Mommy needs some space," she'd say.

My father and my sister didn't like hearing me called Fat Pants. "Oh my God!" my mom would shout, rolling her eyes, "You are all so sensitive! Where did you learn to be so god damned sensitive?" My

mother had little tolerance for delicate constitutions. Her children would not complain, they would not need special consideration; they would eat everything on their plates. I remember a short phase when I liked using a teaspoon at dinner. "Oh, what's wrong," she'd croon, "is your mouth too teeny weeny to eat with a soup spoon like the rest of us? Catie's got such a delicate mouth. Catie's too delicate for normal silverware."

I was delicate. I skulked around like a stray cat, defensive and always searching for signs of kindness. Each day, I'd unfold my napkin at lunch and look for her ballpoint note scrawled across it. *I love you* and a doodled flower. And even though I had asked her to write these out of envy for the other kids who got them, I still felt hopeful when they appeared in my brown paper sack. And maybe it was this hope for some kind of sitcom family with kids that make mistakes and parents that love them anyway which fueled my decision to steal the Doritos. Whatever the reason, I took them.

Just before my carpool driver pulled into the driveway at 6:20, I reached into that yellow cabinet lying to myself as I did it, pretending I just wanted some Planters peanuts, turning my head from my groping hand, whispering "Damn it" as I landed on the chips, feigning disappointment that I had somehow mistaken a bag of chips for a tube of peanuts, glancing at my watch and mumbling *I'm gonna be late*, then shoving them into my backpack.

I could not bring myself to eat them in my lunch circle, to flagrantly disobey my mother and shove a big fat Dorito in my big fat face. But I could not throw them out either. I was in English class when I found my hand fishing in my backpack, seemingly of its own accord. I snuck out the contraband, and while the teacher was talking, ripped it open. After that, I eased into my subversive act, taking only the tiniest bites, mushing the chips against my tongue to keep myself from crunching. I kept thinking of the time I peed my pants in the first grade when the teacher never saw my raised hand, of how silly I'd been to think that if I let out just a little bit at a time, it wouldn't make a puddle.

And then I choked. A Dorito the size of a guitar pick lodged in my throat and wouldn't give way. I stifled a cough, which seemed to aggravate the chip further and suddenly I was wheezing, and hacking, and flapping my hands. The teacher looked up from her desk, her forehead bunching between the eyes.

"Catie Blum, are you choking?" she asked, her tone accusatory in its concern. Catie, were you eating in class," she demanded. "Were you eating in class?"

My back ached as I pressed myself into my plastic orange chair in

an attempt to somehow merge with it and vanish, but she was coming at me, this choking, crying, hyper-visible scene I had become. *Were you eating in class.* And I had to nod yes, had to admit guilt, because I really could not breathe.

When I got home, now Fat Pants who choked while horking a Dorito, I thought about how to tell my family before they heard from someone else. I went for funny. No one else would call me an idiot if I did it first. I imitated myself nibbling in secrecy, my angry looming teacher, the nurse.

And my mom said, “You know, Cate, the older you get, the more I like you.”

I went to my room and indulged in my recurring fantasy where I wake up, forty years old and black, my family standing around my bed like the one in Wizard of Oz.

“Oh look!” they’d say, “She’s awake! Honey, you’ve been sleeping for the longest time.” I tell my imaginary family my Dorito story and they laugh and laugh, just like my real family had only moments ago. But this feels different. And I know someday it will stay that way: me just the same with the world feeling different.

Cate Blum lives in the mountains where she teaches writing, trail runs, and gardens when she gets the chance. She loves spending time with her family and is the proud new owner of a less-than-obedient puppy.

PENELOPE AND TELEMACHUS, 2012
Amy Neill Bebergal

She watched love make a trident and shield
out of scrap wood in the garage. She snapped
the seal and peeled back the foil as she watched
from the kitchen window.

Unmoored hearts make for the open sea.
Fine—go on your fucking odyssey.
Love in need of love tends anew the siren's
elusive tune. Sure and towards that sound he'll keens
as she makes her morning brew, as she blithely tips
the gold mesh cup of ground and scalded beans, a used
mud now shown the drain with a sprayer hose

when he receives the clarion call of Harry-next-door,
armed and ready for the gambol. "Hold on,"
she says, "I'll let him know." So love also
waits, and meanwhile exalts, as her preparation of an
anointed distillation restarts the maternal heart.

Amy Neill Bebergal's poems can be found in Ghost Town, RiverLit, Killing the Buddha, Blast Furnace, The Boston Poetry Magazine, Riverbabble, The Centrifugal Eye, Moon Magazine, Bohemia, among others. She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Born in Nashville, she now resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband and son.

***MY THERAPIST ASKS ABOUT MY MOTHER
AND I CANNOT ANSWER
Lori Zimmermann***

She dug the ruts in the dirt road I must drive,
past the rusted sign nailed to a post
that's read KEEP OUT for generations.
The road peters out into a pasture
rickracked with Queen Anne's lace,
ragweed, poison oak, barbed wire
and dandelions in full yellow flower.
I go ahead on foot. I pick the best bouquet
I can. I pick my way across the field.
I spot her standing by a sugar maple.
She waves at me. She's brought a blanket.

Lori Zimmermann moonlights as a graduate student in Creative Writing at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She daylights as the Tumblr Conductor for Broadsided Press (broadsidedpress.tumblr.com) and as a library assistant. Her work has been published in the Write on the DOT Vol. III Journal and in Writers Tribe Review's Alienation issue. She is currently working on a series of poems about a kinder, gentler apocalypse. You can email her at lorizimmermann@gmail.com.



a world beyond the reach. it reminds me of a space

too near, too de

but the rain

deep feelings

with life

reason made it

for me to call

come

is a way

carried quite distant

Doni '13

all you need
is love

SPARRING WITH INFERTILITY
Kim Heikkila

January 2014

She hits me and I feel the lower lid of my right eye slide down my cheek, if only for an instant. I shake it off, slip to the right twice to avoid her relentless left hand. I aim for her face with my jab, once, twice, but don't connect. I wait for her to come at me again, parry her glove away when she does, then squeeze my fist through to her nose. She recovers quickly, though, and delivers a flurry of punches. I duck and sink a low jab into her gut and a rear hook into her side, but she catches my left ear with a stinging overhand right. I'm getting more body shots on her than she is on me, but she is in control on top. I can't find her face, and I'm getting mad and a bit shaken. I stand up and counter with an uppercut to her jaw, taking fleeting pleasure in the backwards snap of her head. I double up my left hand with a jab and a hook to her right ear, then try to get out of the way and reset my feet. She is unfazed and her next blow connects dead-on with my mouth; I can feel my mouthguard slide against my teeth in a way it shouldn't. I find myself marveling at the sensation, surprised at the sharp, stinging pain in my top gums. The momentary lapse costs me as she lands a solid right cross that sends my chin up and over my right shoulder with a crack. I step back, take a couple of seconds to rearrange the marbles that have loosened in my head, then step back in to go at her again.

After the bell rings, signaling the end of the round, we stand in the ring chatting—about the holidays, about work, about her two-year-old son who has accompanied her to the gym this morning and is watching from the side of the ring. Sixty seconds later, the bell rings again. We touch gloves and look each other in the eye, the only time during the round that this intimate contact will happen. From that point on, it's back to business.

By the end of our five-round sparring session, I am spent. My nose is a little bloody, my jaw is sore, and I know my ribs will ache in the morning. My friend Larina has gotten the better of me in the ring today, but I am not scared off by it. Frustrated, yes, but not deterred. I tell her good-naturedly that it feels as if she has rearranged my face. Before she leaves the gym, we make plans to spar again. I wave good-bye to her son as they trudge out into the cold winter air.

As I take my place behind the front desk so I can prepare the boxing class I will teach at noon, I see that the holiday cards my son made for the gym's owner, Lisa, still hang on the bulletin board. "To the boss," one says. "Merry Christmas to you!" Tu is a regular at the gym; though he is not interested in boxing, he often comes with me while I teach or work out. Lisa is kind to Tu, allowing him to watch *Spongebob Squarepants* on the TV in her office while I am on the floor, supplying him with Gatorade and potato chips. The other trainers and many gym members know Tu by name. Though he is

small for an eight-year-old and not inclined toward traditional “boy sports,” Tu could boast that a whole platoon of boxers, from professional to casual, are in his corner should trouble arise. He is part of the Uppercut family.

Though I now take these dynamics for granted, I could not have predicted them when I first joined Uppercut in the early summer of 2005. Earlier that year, I’d begun boxing at the YWCA of St. Paul, where I’d taken two seven-week classes taught by a former Golden Gloves champion. My husband and I had also been undergoing a series of infertility treatments at the time. They were costly and invasive and physically and emotionally taxing. It was one of the most difficult periods of my life and I felt myself slipping away in the process. And though I practiced yoga and meditated and took spinning classes and consulted acupuncturists and therapists and nutritionists to help deal with the stress, it was boxing that saved me.

January-April 2005

I first heard about Uppercut in the summer of 2004, from a trainer at the Y. Sandi had been teaching cardio boxing classes, but found them a bit frivolous because they were set to the beat of the music. That’s what members want, the administration had told her. Make it fun. So we’d jump and jab and cross in perfect rhythm with whatever soundtrack was playing. If I wanted a serious boxing workout, Sandi told me, I should go to Uppercut. They offered classes for fitness, but also trained amateur and professional boxers. Plus, the gym was owned and operated by a woman.

I was intrigued. I liked the idea of trying something beyond the typical treadmill-and-aerobics offerings, of learning an actual sport with strategy and skill. The novelty factor drew me in as well; I was surrounded by friends and family members who ran and biked and swam, but no one I knew boxed. Still, I decided not to pursue it because I was consumed by our family planning efforts. By fall of 2004, I was 36 and Steve was 47. I had had one major surgery for serious endometriosis, gotten pregnant naturally only to miscarry several weeks later, and had two additional minor surgeries to deal with the endo. As a result, I was left with only one ovary and fallopian tube, multiple adhesions, seriously compromised fertility, and a ticking clock. That fall, we embarked on two rounds of fertility drugs. Neither worked, and after both rounds my abdominal area felt tight and constricted, as if all my organs were glued together. My doctor concluded that another laparoscopic surgery was in order, not only to deal with the pain, but also to assess whether or not I was a candidate for in-vitro fertilization (IVF). We scheduled surgery for February.

The 2004 holiday season had been brutal. Finally I had to admit that we were facing full-blown infertility. I had resisted the label until then; I believed we simply had pregnancy “challenges.” When the second round of drugs failed just before Thanksgiving, however, euphemism gave way to reality: we were infertile. Or, really, it was me who was, whose body couldn’t

perform the most universal and timeless of human functions. I descended into a period of mourning and self-pity and bitterness, going to bed at night not caring if I woke up the next morning. I cried almost daily... and I am not, by nature, given to crying. I couldn't extend myself to my friends; instead, I was uncharacteristically negative and unstable, hopeful and upbeat one minute, depressed and cynical the next. During the low moments, I felt cursed, as if I were being punished for having so long resisted the idea of children. On brighter days, I tried to reassure myself that everything would be fine, that there was some reason we were struggling so hard with what seemed to come so easily for others.

It was in this dark period that I saw the ad for a new boxing class at the Y. It would be taught by a competitive amateur boxer. This was a boxing class, not a kickboxing or cardio-boxing or aerobics-with-boxing class. This was the boxing of Muhammad Ali and Joe Louis and George Foreman, of Raging Bull and Rocky. I liked the idea that I could partake—in however insignificant a way—of a sport with such legends, such history, such... brutality. The class was scheduled to begin in January. I signed up right away.

I felt nervous but excited when I arrived at the Y for the first class. I joined three other students awaiting the arrival of our instructor: a teenaged boy with dark hair and swagger; a slight middle-aged man with glasses; and an East African woman in her mid-twenties. We glanced at each other in silence, then the boy started shadowboxing in front of the mirror. The rest of us stood and waited.

I would not have taken Mark Connor for a boxer had I met him on the street. He stood just a few inches taller than me with a head of curly brown hair, small eyes, and a sharp nose. When he stripped off his winter coat and boots and put down the bag of gear he was carrying, he probably weighed about as much as I did. He wore long, baggy shorts with a T-shirt neatly tucked into the waistband and boxing shoes that laced up past his ankles. He introduced himself, told us a bit about his boxing career, helped us wrap our hands, and then gave us his first instruction.

“Never...” he said, looking at us with serious intent.

“Ever...” He held up a pair of lace-up red leather gloves.

“Let these gloves touch the floor. Take them out of the gear bag, put them on your hands, hit the bag, then put them back in the gear bag. They do not touch the floor.”

He cracked half a smile, suggesting this was more personal peccadillo than formal rule, but we all nodded along in earnest agreement anyway.

“Okay, let's warm up,” he said. “Grab a rope and start jumping.”

That was our first hurdle. Except for the teenaged boy, none of us was an experienced rope handler. The kid grabbed a jump rope and started skipping along the hardwood floors in front of the mirror. I did a few halting two-foot jumps over my rope until I lost the rhythm and stepped on it. I repeated this exercise until I could skip the rope twenty or thirty times in a row. The other

woman had found a steady half-beat pace, turning the rope slowly and adding an extra jump as it rose above her head. The most challenged among us was the man with the glasses. He muscled his rope around himself with great effort, jumping over it with bent knees and a twelve-inch clearance. He chuckled and muttered and gasped as he struggled.

Mark had been busy setting up the rest of the room—hanging a heavy bag, plugging in a timer—as we jumped. When finally he turned his attention back to us, he was taken aback by the spectacle. He opened his mouth as if to offer guidance, then changed his mind.

“Uh, okay. Put the ropes away.”

We all happily released our ropes, then followed Mark’s example as he led us through some old-school calisthenics—jumping jacks, toe touches, forward and backward bends, pushups. He looked like a skinny Jack LaLanne in handwraps. When he deemed us sufficiently warmed, he gathered us around for his first boxing lesson.

“The first thing you need to know about boxing is this: balance plus speed equals power. I’ll say it again: balance plus speed equals power. So tonight we’re going to work on your balance, your footwork.”

And so we did. In fact, we spent most of the rest of the 90-minute class slowly walking-shuffling back and forth in front of the studio mirror. We positioned ourselves just so, our left feet in front of and slightly to the left of our right (we all were right-handers), knees slightly bent, hips and shoulders at a rough forty-five degree angle to the mirror, left shoulder leading the way. We stepped forward with the left foot, then slid the right forward. Step-slide, step-slide, step-slide until we were face-to-face with the mirror. Then we did it in reverse: step back with the right, slide the left, until we were at the opposite end of the room. Off to a good start, I thought. I felt ready to add a jab, maybe even a cross. Instead, we kept on shuffling up and back. Step-slide up, step-slide back, repeat. Repeat. Repeat. I don’t think we threw a single punch in that first class. Mark explained that we had to learn how to move with balance before we learned how to hit. While I didn’t doubt him, I had just spent ninety minutes at the gym without breaking a sweat. So much for beating the anger out of myself. Still, I decided to give Mark the benefit of the doubt and come back for week two.

I’m glad I did. Over the next several weeks, we learned the basics of boxing. We always started class with the step-slide exercise, but we added punches to it. Step-jab-slide, step-jab-slide. Step-jab-cross-slide, step-jab-cross-slide. It was a big day when we added the hook, the tight across-your-chin punch that derives its power from a quick turn of the hips and shoulders. Step-jab-cross-hook-slide. We added sideways movement, we shadowboxed, we hit the heavy bag. The best part, though, was hitting the pads Mark held. We laced on the bright red gloves and he strapped on thick black hand pads with a white-dot target in the middle of them. Mark would call the punch sequences and we would throw them at the white dot. “1 [jab]. 1. 1-2 [jab-cross].

1-2-3 [jab-cross-hook]. 1-2-3-2!" Sometimes my hits would barely skim the surface of the pad; other times they would connect with a satisfying *thump!* "Relax!" Mark would command all of us. "Relax! Don't tense up your arms. Remember, balance plus speed equals power." I loved it, even if I wasn't particularly relaxed.

I also loved the class because it made me laugh. This is not to say that I found boxing per se, or Mark, or the other students, funny in a derisive kind of way. It was funny in the way it's funny to try something so new and unfamiliar—and scary—and be so bad at it but doing it anyway because it's fun and challenging and everyone else is in the same boat with you. That kind of funny. My partners in this experiment made it all the more enjoyable. Josh was fifteen years old, acted in his high school theater program, and constantly defied Mark's cautious instruction by, instead of step-jab-sliding, step-jabjab-cross-hook-upperupper-cross-sliding. Selam, an unflappable, self-possessed twenty-six-year-old woman, had immigrated from eastern Africa a decade earlier. Forty-six-year-old Dan had a wife and three kids and a serious rope-jumping deficit. I'm not sure what brought the rest of them to boxing, whether they were struggling with demons of their own or simply looking for a new way to exercise. And really, it didn't matter. We all got along famously, and soon I looked forward to the class as much for the socializing as for the exercise. We were the Bad News Bears of boxing, but Mark persevered with (mostly) good humor.

My boxing class thus provided benefits both physical and emotional, no small thing for someone dealing with infertility. In February, in the middle of the first seven-week session of the boxing class, I had my fourth endo-related surgery. The adhesions had worsened significantly enough that the surgeon had to remove my remaining fallopian tube. Whatever dim hopes we'd retained of getting pregnant the old-fashioned way disappeared.

"But, we can try IVF," Dr. Mjanger told me during my post-op appointment. "In fact, we should do that as soon as possible. Then, once you have your baby, we'll just take everything out. Do a total hysterectomy, get rid of that other ovary. You won't need it anymore."

"Okay," I said, noting his assured optimism—once you have your baby—but tripping on the rest of it. "But won't that mean I'm in menopause? What would be the effects of that?"

He was standing at the door by this time, his hand on the knob.

"Yes, yes. But that's the only way to take care of the endometriosis once and for all," he said. "Then we'll just put you on a little hormone pill and you'll feel much better." He opened the door and started down the hallway, his last words echoing back to me in the exam room. "So stop by the desk on your way out and they'll give you information about an IVF clinic."

I sat in the chair for a minute, trying to absorb the fact that my doctor had just suggested I induce menopause before I was even forty years old. I slowly rose and walked down the hall, past the bulletin board adorned with

photographs of patients' babies, into the reception area filled with pregnant women and squalling infants. Seeing these fecund women didn't make me sad; it made me angry. It wasn't personal. I didn't begrudge any of them, individually, their pregnancies. But why not me, too? Why couldn't I join their club? What had they done to earn their happiness? More importantly, what had I done to be denied it? Head down, I hurried past the desk without getting the number for the clinic.

In the aftermath of this visit to the doctor, I could feel myself slipping back into a state of despair. I had a chronic disease and my future seemed to be entirely out of my control: no matter how fit I was, no matter how healthily I ate, no matter how many means of securing emotional well-being I sought, I could not fully control what was happening to me. I felt helpless. But then I realized that just because Dr. Mjanger recommended a hysterectomy and a "little hormone pill" didn't mean I actually had to have a hysterectomy or take a little hormone pill. That was just his recommendation. This was my life, my body, my decision. My life was not sufficiently inhibited from the endo to make menopause a viable option. I would tell my doctor that, or seek another opinion, or both. I did have options. And, although the endo meant I had to care for myself in ways that demanded more attention than I'd have liked, I was not a diseased person. I had a full life: a strong marriage, a rewarding job, good friends. And, I had boxing.

I missed the boxing class that was held the Monday after my surgery so had to do some quick catching up the following week. We spent the last three weeks of the class practicing the punches in our arsenal. Mark was calling increasingly challenging combinations on the pads, moving us around an imaginary ring. After the first session ended, Dan, Selam and I signed up for another seven weeks (Josh had been cast as Kenickie in his school's production of *Grease* and rehearsals conflicted with the boxing class). Two new students joined us for the second session, bringing our total to five. By this time, Dan, Selam and I were the seasoned veterans. Mark would leave us to shadowbox on our own while he introduced the others to the step-slide routine, then bring us all together to work on the bag or specific techniques.

Though Mark insisted on the value of shadowboxing as a training method, most of us longed to get on the pads with him. That was the satisfying part of class, the part where we could feel the impact of our punches, imagine them connecting with an opponent's jaw or ribs. Yet, as Mark started adding some strategy to the sessions with me, Selam, and Dan, it became clear that we were all more comfortable imagining this connection than actually doing it. Mark explained why throwing a certain shot at a certain time was a good, or bad, idea, how it would open our imaginary opponent up for the next punch, or vice versa. He introduced the slip and the bob-and-weave, moves designed to evade incoming gloves. He mimed the combinations an opponent might throw, hoping that we would figure out the next move. When we didn't, he would explain it to us, sometimes having to physically assist us in

moving the way he wanted. “Hit me in the chin,” he told me once. I extended my arm so that my fist was just an inch or so from his chin. “No. Hit me in the chin.” I did it again. “No. Here.” He put my fist on his chin, and continued on with the sequence.

Most often, this is the way it went, Mark urging, cajoling, begging us to throw punches against him that included actual contact. It was a rare occasion that one of us would actually throw one of those fake punches at Mark when he didn’t anticipate it. (Dan did it once, a short uppercut to Mark’s stomach. Though Mark admonished Dan for the blow, the rest of us gave up a cheer.) Instead, to drive home a point about chin position or dropped hands or body angle, Mark occasionally took a swipe at us with his padded hands. I found this quite unnerving and decidedly un-conducive to the goal of relaxing. Still, I loved it. All sports require psychological and physical mastery, but boxing pits one person’s skill directly, literally fist-to-face, against another’s. It is scary and brutally honest in its intimate contest between two people. And in linking so directly the command of physical power to the control of emotions in this contest, it is empowering. It is also dangerous.

By the time we had gotten to the midway point of the second session in March 2005, I had begun to engage with the sport of boxing outside of class. The “sweet science,” it seemed, was everywhere. In the early months of 2005, NBC aired *The Contender*, a reality show about boxing hosted by Sugar Ray Leonard and Sylvester Stallone; the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival featured a documentary about boxer Emile Griffith called *Ring of Fire*; and Hilary Swank won an Oscar for her portrayal of a down-on-her luck waitress who finds success in the ring in *Million Dollar Baby*. But I wanted more than the Hollywood hype and reality TV melodramatics, so I embarked on some extracurricular research. I read about the stars of boxing history, champions whose success stories were laced with pain: Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali, whose 1960 Olympic gold medal was not currency enough to allow him to eat alongside white patrons in a restaurant in his hometown of Louisville, whose career stalled at its height as a result of his stand against the Vietnam War; Floyd Patterson, who had been so shy as a young boy that he would while away the hours hiding in the dark recesses of a subway station in New York City and who, as a boxer, would don a disguise after a defeat so that he could slink out of the arena unnoticed; Sonny Liston, who, having won the heavyweight title from Patterson in 1962, vowed to mend his troubling ways so that he could serve as a role model for disadvantaged kids but, upon his return to his hometown of Philadelphia, found not the typical hero’s welcome for a newly-crowned champion but the deafening silence of an indifferent and unforgiving city; and Emile Griffith, the hat designer-turned-boxer who delivered a tragically fatal blow to his opponent in 1962 and, years later, was unable to defend himself against a savage attack by a gang of thugs after leaving a gay bar one night in New York.

The tragedy in boxing history is profound. And while tragedy is not, of

course, the complete story of boxing, it struck a chord with me. I seemed to be attuned to the pain of life as I was facing my own brand of hardship in our struggles to conceive. Near the end of March, we began the IVF process. In-vitro fertilization is a scientific simulation of the most ancient and universal human activity, a translation of intimate passion into clinical detachment, of whispered endearments into antiseptic jargon. When I was ten years old, in 1978, Louise Brown had made headlines as the first “test tube baby.” I remembered hearing the phrase at the time and imagining a baby growing inside a glass vial, its face and hands pressing against its confinement until it burst free. More than twenty-five years later, our hopes for a baby arrived on our doorstep courtesy of Federal Express, which delivered the medication I needed to calm, then stimulate, my sole ovary to release as many good, strong eggs as possible. For someone who had always looked away during the simplest of finger pricks, I became surprisingly adept at injecting drugs into my own belly twice a day. After several days of this, I had to go into the clinic for an ultrasound to determine whether I was ready for the injection that would release those eggs so that the doctor could retrieve them for fertilization in a petri dish, then transfer them back to me in hopes that at least one would take root and become a baby. Though he had no direct role in this stage of the process, Steve accompanied me to the ultrasound appointment.

We cracked jokes as we waited in the reception area of the clinic, its tall windows overlooking the Minnesota River below. Cherry wood paneling, table lamps, and the smell of new carpet reminded us that we weren't at the regular doctor's office. Unlike the waiting room at the ob/gyn clinic, there were no swollen bellies to remind us of our failings, no parenting magazines in the reading rack. Staff spoke in hushed tones so as not to overwhelm the quiet atmosphere. Everything seemed geared toward soothing reassurance. We are the experts. We are here to help you achieve your dreams. Put your trust (and cash) in us and we will give you a baby. Both relieved and discomfited by the staid, tony environment, Steve and I resorted to small talk and sarcastic banter to ward off more serious discussion of what lay ahead.

Finally, they called us into the exam room, tastefully decorated in mauves and taupes. Dim lights and soft music made it feel more like a spa treatment room than a doctor's office. Steve took a seat in a comfortable chair while I changed my clothes.

“Clearly our money has been put to good purpose,” I said. “This cloth gown is way more comfortable than those paper gowns at Dr. Mjanger's office.”

“You'd think they could afford to turn up the heat, though,” he replied.

Any illusion that we had come for pampering shattered when the lab tech came in to draw some blood, followed by the nurse with the ultrasound machine. I reclined on the table. The nurse made small talk as she tried to get a view of my stimulated eggs. We chatted about the weather, the news, the Muzak. As the conversation dragged on, it became clear she was having trouble finding any eggs at all. We kept chatting, avoiding the unease of silence.

“There they are!” she said finally, a note of relief in her voice. “I see three, maybe four decent follicles.” She called Dr. Malo in to confirm her findings and issue instructions.

“Well, there aren’t as many as we’d like, but I think this is as good as we’ll get,” he said. “We’re ready to go. Go ahead and give yourself the next shot tomorrow.”

Although the doctor had said that I could engage in normal activity up until this point, I had to curtail my activities considerably after I gave myself the shot to induce ovulation. So it was that I sat out our last boxing class of the second session. Our class met on Monday night, and I was scheduled for retrieval on Tuesday morning. I didn’t want to miss the class, so I went and sat on the sidelines.

Mark asked why I wasn’t jumping rope with the others.

“Well,” I said. “I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow and I’m supposed to avoid strenuous activity.”

“Is everything okay?” Mark asked.

Up to this point, I had not mentioned any of my personal goings-on to anyone in class. Boxing was my sanctuary, the one place I could go where my fertility status was irrelevant and where I felt strong and capable. I decided to tell Mark, however, because I wanted to stop holding it so close. Though I hated admitting such vulnerability, I also felt burdened by the secrecy of it all, as if it were something to be ashamed of. I wanted to practice talking about it openly and honestly.

“Yeah. We’re just doing some fertility stuff. Trying to get pregnant. Tomorrow.” That was as much detail as I could muster.

“Oh, okay,” Mark said. “I really hope that works out for you. I’m glad you came tonight.” He paused as if he wanted to say something else, then turned to the others. “Okay, guys, grab some gloves.”

I spent the rest of the evening watching my compatriots execute punch combinations on the pads with Mark. Thus ended my fourteen weeks of “Introduction to Boxing.”

I had gone into the whole IVF process fairly certain that it would not work and under the condition that we would try it only once. We could have bought into the money-back-guarantee package at the clinic. We’d have had to pay in advance for three full cycles but would get a portion of our money back if they all failed. So we’d ultimately come home with either a baby or some money left in the bank. Besides the fact that this option required a significant cash outlay—costs our insurance did not cover—I could not stomach the thought of putting myself through the treatment three times. It wasn’t the physical effects that bothered me; it was the prospect of trying and failing over and over again. I couldn’t do it. So I agreed to try it once and put on an armor of skepticism to protect myself. This skepticism began to give way to a growing confidence in medical wisdom and technical proficiency, however.

Steve and I both became slightly more hopeful that the end result would be positive. By that Tuesday morning when we went in for retrieval, we had become guardedly optimistic. Our relatively high yield—six eggs—was better than we'd expected. Now we had to wait for the eggs to fertilize and prepare my body to be as welcoming a host as possible for the resulting embryos. This involved the last series of injections—ten days of progesterone shots.

The belly shots had been subcutaneous injections, easily delivered with a quick jab from a pre-filled pen. The progesterone was an intramuscular injection, though. The needle was huge and thick—it fell closer to the knitting-needle end of the spectrum than it did the acupuncture-needle end—and the fluid it contained was a thick, viscous gold. *Today, we'll be serving your progesterone in a rosemary-scented olive oil, delivered straight to your gluteal muscle via a one and one-half inch, 22-gauge needle. Bon appetit!*

Though I had administered all the abdominal shots myself, I couldn't do this one alone. Steve had to do it for—to—me. I lay on my stomach on the couch, holding an ice pack on my upper right haunch.

"I am so sick of this," I complained. "So sick of being poked and prodded and... prone. Ugh."

"Let's just get this done, Kim," Steve replied. "Come on, you can do it. You're a boxer."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, I'm ready," I finally told him, removing the ice pack to reveal the frozen tundra of my rear end. He knelt on the floor beside the couch and leaned in.

"No, wait. Not quite yet." I balked.

"Come on, Kim. Let's just do this. Get it over with." He mustered his own courage as he brandished the weapon.

"Okay, okay. Go."

He stuck it in and depressed the plunger. It took forever to force the concoction into my muscle, now mercifully numb.

"Okay, done," Steve reported. He looked spent, his face a mix of resolve and relief.

Ten times we repeated this scenario, then returned to the clinic for the final step in the IVF process: the transfer of the two surviving embryos back into my body. We'd been hoping for more than two, but told ourselves this was better; we wouldn't have to deal with the moral ambiguities of what to do with "leftover" embryos. Two it was. Two chances for pregnancy.

May 2005

The IVF didn't work. We got the results on April 19, two weeks and a day after my final boxing class. The news was hard to take: disappointing first, as the reality of this particular failed cycle set in, then devastating, as the finality of the situation descended. We would never have our own, biological children. I would never be pregnant. We would never have the chance to see

ourselves in miniature. I would never be able to assume the culturally vaunted position of expectant mother. We would never experience the nervous excitement of rushing to the hospital as labor began. At times, the *nevers* seemed endless and oppressive. I went to sleep and woke up with *never* on my mind, stretching out into the horizon as far as I could see. Make no mistake—grief borne of loss has a palpable weight. The weight of never settled in slow and deep, sometimes pushing everything else from view, other times just rearranging things. Sometimes that heaviness made it hard to breathe; other times, it made it easier to breathe again, to imagine a life without the hassles of doctors and drugs. I wanted to believe that the agonizing *never* of the present would turn into a joyous never of the future: “We never imagined we could be this happy again,” or “If we’d had biological children, we never would have had the chance to know and love these children.”

I wasn’t boxing when we received the disappointing news. The Y had decided not to offer any further classes. This only added to my frustration. More than ever, I needed a physical outlet for my frustration. The soothing, meditative benefits of yoga simply did not cut it for me. I didn’t want to cultivate the yogic wisdom of acceptance; I wanted to beat the frustration out of myself. I didn’t want to hear about the significance of our fertility “journey,” as if the destination didn’t matter at all; I wanted to be able to live in the dark ugliness of failure and disappointment. Not permanently, not to the point of self-destruction, but until it felt right to move on. And although all forms of exercise provide useful mental health benefits, boxing seemed particularly suited to the expression of pain and anger—not least because it offers a temporary, sanctioned, infliction of pain (real or illusory), a sense that I need not be only a victim of pain, but also an agent of pain. In that dark month of May, I had visceral visions of breaking glass: fantasies of hurling a ten-pound dumbbell at the mirrored walls in the Y studio, watching, listening, feeling with pleasure as the glass, and my image in it, splintered into a million broken shards; dreams of a solid, well-placed punch to my lower abdomen that would break into dust as fine as shattered bone china the scar tissue and adhesions that were binding my organs to themselves. I couldn’t do these things, of course. But I could box. I could give my pain a chance to breathe, to wear itself out until it evaporated like a mist.

January 2014

“Watch your left hand, Kim,” Heidi tells me. “You’re dropping it. That’s why she kept tagging you.” She aims a right hook at my left ear, but I block it with my left glove.

I’m back at the gym a few days after my sparring session with Larina, working with my trainer. I told her about my frustrating rounds and we’re trying to figure out what happened.

“Move your feet. Step toward and past her with your right foot, so she can’t find you. Make her look stupid.” We laugh, understanding that the advice

is strategic, not personal. All three of us are friends. But right now, Heidi is my trainer, in my corner.

“I want you to throw a jab-cross, then step at me with your right foot, get past my jab, then come in with a cross to the head.” She holds the pads for me so I can practice this combination. I land a solid left and right, then glide past Heidi’s left hand and whale her pad with a strong cross. The pop echoes in the gym.

“Yeah! Like that!” she yells. “You’ve gotta make her move. She’s strong, but you’re fast. Use that to your advantage.”

“Okay,” I pant. “Let’s do it again.”

It’s been almost nine years since the “Introduction to Boxing” classes ended and our in-vitro fertilization failed. I am in a much happier, much better place now. Five months after our final visit to the IVF clinic, we began adoption proceedings and in December 2006 welcomed Kai Tu Lanh Heikkila into our lives. He is a happy, healthy, sociable kid. For the most part, today’s *nevers* are indeed joyful: we may never have a quiet house again, but we will forever be a family. I also have a new doctor. I never returned to Dr. Mjanger after he so carelessly suggested menopause as the solution to my ills. Instead, Dr. Amy Kelly now guides me through the minefield of endometriosis; I haven’t undergone surgery since 2005. I knew she was the right doctor for me when her reaction to Dr. Mjanger’s “hysterectomy and hormones” plan was an emphatic “Hell, no!” I’m still functioning on my own hormones all these years later.

Boxing is a constant in my life now, too. In June 2005, I finally made my way across town to Uppercut. It has all the bells and whistles that any boxing gym does—two rings, rows of heavy bags and speed bags and double-ended bags, a complete roster of trainers and fighters—all the amenities competitive boxers require. Both professional and amateur boxers train at Uppercut, but the gym also welcomes those who simply want a good workout. The most unique thing about Uppercut, however, is that it gives equal space to women in a sport that has been so thoroughly male-dominated and male-defined. Its owner is a woman, half of its trainers are women, and it features a team of women fighters. I find this particularly appealing, especially after having been guided through the alienating reproductive treatment process by a series of male doctors. Where once men shepherded me through what is supposed to be a woman’s most “natural” experience, women now guide me through the typically male world of controlled violence. I never experienced infertility as a failure of my womanhood, though I know many women do. But I did find it especially empowering, as a woman, to learn how to express and control the anger and inclination toward aggression, even violence, that we may all occasionally feel but are so often denied. Boxing allowed my anger to exist as it channeled it outward. It didn’t encourage me to calmly accept my misfortune as my fate; it recognized the pain for what it was and gave me a chance to air it. “This stinks! (1-2!)” the sport of boxing seemed to be saying. “You got a raw deal (1-2-1-2!),

and it's not fair (1-2-3!), and you don't deserve it (1-2-3-2!)."

As much as I tried to resist the consuming beast that was our struggle to conceive, to not let myself be defined by it, it changed who I was. At first, all I could feel was erosion. But as much as infertility wears away our selves, it also leads to a new understanding of how we find worth in ourselves and our lives. I don't know what it's like to lose a boxing match, but I do know what it's like to lose a dream, and to have that loss feel like a gaping wound that everyone can see. Sometimes, like Floyd Patterson, I wanted to put on a false nose and mustache to hide my pain from those around me and creep away until I could figure out what I was going to replace my lost self with. Other times I wanted to wallow in that wound, to share it (even inflict it, in the darkest of moments) with others. I wanted to fall into the collective embrace of those who cared about me, let their love and concern bear the weight for me for a while. The losses associated with involuntary childlessness can feel complete and consuming, like being knocked out in the ring: you don't just lose, you lose it all. Still, loss forces us to separate our selves from the things that happen to us. It requires us to make decisions about who we want to be and what kind of fight we want to wage, and to decide whether our goal is to win or to learn if we can't do both.

Boxing has taken on a life of its own for me, separated from the emotional wounds that first led me to—or at least coincided with my arrival in—the ring. Still, as new struggles have arisen—the long and equally difficult adoption process, the discovery and management of another chronic illness, the loss of my mother to pancreatic cancer—boxing has provided a welcome relief. But I no longer box only to release pent-up frustration; I box because I love the sport. I am now a registered amateur boxer and volunteer USA Boxing coach. Though I haven't had a sanctioned fight, I would consider it if the opportunity arose. Boxing is terrifying and exhilarating all at once. And I have learned, at least at this level, that taking a hit isn't as bad as it sounds and if you do get hurt, it's temporary. There always will be another day in the ring.

"Nice work, Kim," Heidi says as she puts down the mitts and grabs her head gear. "Gear up and let's do a few rounds."

Heidi is fifteen years younger and forty pounds heavier than I am, has ten fights and an amateur title belt to her name, and is heading to the national tournament in a matter of days. But now, she's here to work with me, to make me a better fighter.

I lace up my blue boxing shoes, put in my mouthguard, and step into the ring.

Kim Heikkila is a teacher, writer, mother, and boxer from the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. She holds a Ph.D. in American Studies, with a minor in Feminist Studies, from the University of Minnesota. She teaches boxing at Uppercut Gym and U.S. women's history at St. Catherine University. Her first book, Sisterhood of War, focused on nurses from Minnesota who served in the Vietnam War. She is now working on a more personal project about mothering and being mothered through the losses and gains of adoption. Being a mother is the most humbling experience she has ever had.

MOTHERING MY SON'S DEAD BROTHER
Chanel Brenner

While strapping Desmond
into his car seat he asks,
Mommy, where did you go?

What do you mean?, I deny.

I forgot to strap Riley
into his car seat once
and drove five blocks—

till he yelled,
You forgot to strap me in!

I want Desmond to play outside
like his brother did,
but he doesn't want to.

I don't like to get dirty,
he reminds me.

Desmond gets a rash
when I get lost writing
and forget to hydrate
his sensitive skin.

You were gone a really long time,
he says, and his knowing
brings me home.

Chanel Brenner's collection of poems, Vanilla Milk, will be released by Silver Birch Press in October 2014. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in Poet Lore, Rattle, Cultural Weekly, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Glassworks, and elsewhere. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and six-year-old son.

DYING YOUNG
Alexis Rhone Fancher

Midnight, and again I'm chasing
sleep: its fresh-linen smell and
deep sinking, but when I close my eyes I see
my son, closing his eyes. I'm afraid of that dream,
the tape looped demise as cancer claims him.

My artist friend cancels her L.A. trip. Unplugs the
internet. Reverts to source. If cancer
will not let go its grip then she will
return its embrace. Squeeze the life out of
her life. Ride it for all it's worth.

By the time his friends arrive at the cabin
my son is exhausted, stays behind while
the others set out on a hike. He picks up the phone.
"Mom, it's so quiet here. The air has never
been breathed before. It's snowing."

I put on Mozart. A warm robe. Make a pot
of camomile tea. The view from my 8th floor
window, spectacular, the sliver moon, the stark,
neon-smearred buildings, their windows dark.
Sometimes I think I am the only one not sleeping.

My artist friend wants to draw the rain. She
wants to paint her memories, wrap the canvas
around her like a burial shroud.

Tonight, a girl in a yellow dress stands below
my window, top lit by a street lamp, her long shadow
spilling into the street. She's waiting for someone.

I want to tell my friend I'll miss her.
I want to tell my son I understand.
I want to tell the girl he won't be coming.
That it's nothing personal. He died young.

Alexis Rhone Fancher is an L.A. based poet/photographer whose work can or soon will be found in Rattle, Fjords Review, The MacGuffin, Deep Water Literary Journal, BoySlut, Carnival Lit Magazine, Luciferous, HighCoupe, Gutter Eloquence, the Good Men Project, Bare Hands, Poetry Super Highway, The Juice Bar, Poeticdiversity, Little Raven, Bukowski On Wry, numerous anthologies, and elsewhere. Her photographs, published world-wide, include a spread in HEArt Online, and the covers of Witness and The Mas Tequila Review. A member of Jack Grapes' L.A.Poets and Writers Collective, Alexis was nominated for two Pushcart Prizes in 2013. She is poetry editor of Cultural Weekly. Find her at www.lapoetrix.com.

RIPENING
Megan Mealor

mother was our madness
and our curves even her silhouettes
were silver
mother could grow marigolds
in november she was our snake charmer

our static cling

Megan Mealor is 29 years old, and has been writing poems and stories since she was four years old. Her past and upcoming publications include *elan*, *Digital Americana*, 4 and 20, *Belle Reve*, *Midnight Circus*, *Obsessed With Pipework*, *The Rathalla Review*, *Hello Horror*, *Deep South Magazine*, and *Black Heart Magazine*. Megan lives in Jacksonville, Florida with her husband, son, and two cats. She is currently working on her first chapbook, a book of Japanese-style poetry, and several children's books.

ANOTHER ROUND, PLEASE
Julie Howd

Sometimes I want to turn on all the lights
in my apartment, then leave. Wear a navy
blue shawl, black dress and, better still, brown
crocs. I've reached the age of snail
appreciation. I can't lick a popsicle
without feeling obscene. My mother
is even bigger, her head grown large
as the Louvre, her ears grown
practiced in forgetting. My practice
is in not looking past what's right
in front of me, the spider web
glistening its skillful galaxy,
the dried up tendril of a bluebill
still curling as if to grasp
at one last life.

Julie Howd is a writer from Massachusetts who, like the birds, flies south for the winter. She was just recently a fellow at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute and will be completing her MFA this year at the University of Texas in Austin.

PICKING MULBERRIES

Laura Sweeney

Behind our carport,
along the brick wall of
the neighbor's garage,
I'd squeeze and shimmy
around to my other neighbor's fence.
Not sure which half was theirs,
but thinking they were raspberries,
my mother's favorite,
I'd cull a handful of mulberries,
like the petunias I stole
around the block when I was five
then tossed in my red wagon.
Under interrogation I wailed
"But they were for you!"
before she made me apologize.

Now, chopping rhubarb on the porch,
our next fight about to brew,
I wonder, does she understand
why I don't like raspberries?

Laura Sweeney co-facilitates *Writers for Life*, which offers grant-funded creative writing workshops throughout central Iowa. She represented the Iowa Arts Council at the First International Teaching Artist's Conference in Oslo, Norway. Her recent and forthcoming publications include poems in *The Daily Palette*, *Pilgrimage*, *Poetica*, *Appalachia*, and *the Journal of Poetry Therapy*, and essays in *The Good Men Project* and in the anthology *Farmscape: The changing rural environment*.

AN EARNEST PROPOSAL

Kirstin Ruth Bratt

At the party, Julie smiles and behaves according to expectation, as if she is overjoyed to be attending a party. And she is. She has traveled long and far with Bashir to attend. But there is always the Julie who longs for a small cave, who prefers to be alone with a chosen few rather than exposed on an open plain, surrounded by the unknown wilds and dangers of social convention.

Although he sits across with the men, and though they are separated by a low wall and its seating, still she can sense Bashir watching her, not as a hunter watches his prey but as a well-fed and proud lion, leader of a fierce and fearsome pride, might watch his chosen one, waiting to enjoy her presence, to be alone with her again. He is trying to feel her feelings with her, as he always does. And as always, she keeps her head down, eyes low. Let Bashir watch her without glancing indiscreetly toward the men. Stay close to Rukia. Bring honor to the family. Use her few words to greet and thank and enquire after the well-being of others. She knows enough words to do this. And Rukia, in her gracious way, introduces Julie as her daughter, talking to Julie with patience, as if Julie can understand every word. And Julie, as always, waits and hopes for the day that it all makes sense to her, when she and Rukia will talk in a normal way with one another, as if they had always known the same language.

Julie and Rukia move among crowds of thick flowing jellabas, of silver trays covered by silver domes, and Julie remembers how she had loved Rukia from the beginning, how she had been grateful for the woman's kindness and warmth, how Rukia had taken Julie as a daughter from the first moment. But in spite of this, there are times when Julie feels anxious; there are times that, without warning, Julie feels an impulse to run away, into the desert night, leaving her shoes lined up with the others along the entry wall and run off in her bare feet, seek a quiet space where she can put her back up against a wall for a full view of the swirling world around her, as it circles and spins. At these moments she finds her way to a washroom, washes her face and hands, lingers alone for a moment in the only place she won't be pursued and interrupted. She looks in the mirror and coaches herself. Wait, she tells herself, just wait. Someday you will be at home here, and you will say what you want to say. You will be understood.

When she walks out of the washroom, Bashir is there. He has come so that a look could pass between them. He asks if she is enjoying the party, but she knows what he is asking. She doesn't know how to say both yes and no at once, so she just pulls her face back in a tight grin, eyes wide and nostrils flared. He laughs, and she knows it is enough for him.

And Julie goes back to Rukia's side, not far from Bashir's gaze. She

knows to raise her hands for washing, to accept things as they are offered to her—the soap, the water, the towel. She eats the lamb, chews without wincing. She eats the chicken also, easily, and the pastries, reaching forward to eat from the common plate, taking bread and drinks as they are offered. She behaves as if at peace, smiling freely to the new mother, whose baby is the reason for the gathering, holding the new child in her turn.

Bashir knows every movement of her face, and he reads each flicker to precision. Because he can do this, he can also make his own face implacable. She is not deterred, however: she has learned to read his shoulders and neck if his face is incomprehensible. In this way they carry on an invisible conversation, an intimacy that people notice without understanding. Since the day he declared his love to her, he began to tell her everything: from the smallest detail to the largest. Even now, they narrate their life together as a continual whisper in the ear: Did you see that? What does it mean? That reminds me of something and Remember when?

He tells her everything because he knows how it all interests her. This is something that is true for them that remains unknown to others. Thus have many been surprised to learn that everything they say about Julie, no matter the language, is known to her. Some people learn this fact through a series of embarrassing episodes. He translates even their unkind words directly, without nuance, without assuaging. Bashir wants her to know exactly what people say so that she is aware of everything happening around her. And she is keenly aware, often to the point of sorrow.

And now, the morning after the party, Julie sits across the room from Bashir and his mother. She realizes they are talking about her. This isn't one of those paranoid moments that language outsiders feel. It is real. They are talking quietly, and this is rare. They steal glances at her. Also rare. Bashir never does this. He speaks always in large and glowing tones, always in terms she will understand. Julie doesn't ask, not even with her eyes. And then, abruptly, he leaves. He walks away from his mother, leaving her in the middle of a sentence.

He has warned Julie of this day, and now Julie can tell it has come. Rukia has introduced the idea to Bashir—another wife, one to care for him as Julie can't, one to bear the children Julie doesn't want. The words, the idea, the plan is open now, unfolding. Rukia has been working this over in her mind since Bashir first suspected it, and she has introduced it in full, with a particular woman in mind, knowing a half-fleshed idea would never see light. And instead of laugh outright or firmly interrupt his mother, Bashir has walked away—unable to look Julie in the eye, wink, or smile a comfort to her.

Sometimes Julie thinks about the disappointments her friends

detail to her: their husbands, small infidelities, the exclusion they feel from the inner lives of their men. They envy Julie her closeness to Bashir, their passion for one another. Now she envies them their certainty.

He has made himself part of her daily breathing, and now she has learned something new about her husband. He cannot say no to his mother, not even for Julie. She will file this new information about her husband in a locking cabinet of her brain so that it will never find its way to the open pathways leading to her heart. He cannot say no to his mother. And Julie's brain must now hold what her heart cannot. Her brain will be a fortress for the poison. She will slowly corrode, so slowly that she can still die an ordinary death, not like the sudden failure her heart would suffer if she allowed the poison to reach it.

Indeed she feels the poison leaking into her, and she knows it can never work its way out again. Corrosive poison. She begins to feel how it rubs against the sides of her arteries, scraping away her insides. She imagines it grey, turning her veins and arteries the same cold grey. She can see how it tinges her skin, and it frightens her.

She sees Bashir in collusion with his mother, and she can't believe it is Bashir: mild, sweet Bashir, whom she had come to love by his soft voice, and later by his velvet skin. She knows Bashir as well as she ever thought she could—the way he bites his lip when parallel parking or whistles to himself when he thinks she isn't listening—the way he refuses to whistle when he knows she is there, and why? She often wonders. Why does he say yes to one request but not this other one? Now she looks upon him as a stranger: a man she has never known and would certainly refuse to know had she been privy to this knowledge about him.

She remembers furniture shopping in Agadir with Bashir, laughing at the polygamous families who came to the store, wondering how they would choose the color of the sofa. It was a joke they shared between them, back in those times when they laughed together. Those times that still existed this morning when they woke embracing, those times that are ending now.

Is it her yearning for small, dark caves? Is that why Julie finds herself in this threesome? Her friendships have always been this way—always two friends, as if she is never quite enough, never a full companion. Don't they know how she yearns for someone patient enough to be hers—someone to love her without conditions, someone who won't turn away to another?

Marriage had seemed the ideal to Julie—to have a best friend in her husband—someone to love her best and never turn away. Now she sees that she will always be on the outside of a threesome, alone on the outside, other pairs always taking from her, excluding her, and love a hard

line between. A threesome is a narrow bridge, not a circle to enclose and warm her.

And now he is gone, and Julie alone. And at this moment, Julie feels a shift inside of her—a growling, roaring loneliness. She imagines herself a wolf, tired of bowing and licking the paws of its leader, striking off alone in the woods to kill. She will join a pack of female wolves—all silver and gray—a savage pack of hunters who will care for her as they care for their own. She will tear into the flesh of her victims without thought for morality and ethics.

Since their marriage, Julie has come to realize the full import of Bashir—the grand expectations his people hold for him, how they bow low and defer to his words. She has become part of a large family, whose mysteries constantly elude her. Julie has discovered the difficulty of being the wife of Bashir, and she is glad they live far away, abroad and apart. Yet Julie always feels the reach of them; their long arms and shrill voices reach across the sea, calling for Bashir, pulling him ever nearer. And now she will turn from them, from all of his people, a pack that has betrayed her.

Now Bashir walks alone to the parlor—a quiet place usually, a retreat. And now he finds Alma here, waiting for him, and now he faces her in the cool dimness—his childhood friend, the girl he has always known. In fact, there was a time he thought he would marry her, before he became enamored with other places, before he left his childhood behind him.

There with her facing him, it becomes a real thing: his mother's suggestion, Julie's paralysis. A new way to live in the world, the way his mother sees best.

There's a picture of them playing together; Rukia had brought it out a few weeks ago, and now he understands why. All this meant as a subtle persuasion, meant to convince him of his mother's perspective on the matter. Here she is, his friend and playmate, the one who best understands him.

Alma has loved Julie too. She has been a sister to her, helping her adjust to the large, tiled house, its many rooms and spaces, the various neighbors and relatives always coming and going, trying her few English words. Why would this be so hard? Alma is smart and tough, adaptable. Rukia is right: Julie needs help at home, and she doesn't want to produce a child. Bashir could eat foods from home again. He could feel more comfortable in a foreign land. He and Julie could be just as happy as always, maybe more than ever.

The only requirement is that he treat them equitably, as equals. Julie would need to understand that Alma is not simply a servant, no

longer just a friend to them. How they live is their choice. The consummation is required, but so what? Julie can be there with them. They can do whatever they want, and it can be fun for them, another adventure to share.

Now Alma is here, a temptation before him. Bashir feels flushed and anxious. Alma is wearing make-up. Unusual. He notes it. Flashes of red fabric peek through the spaces of her jellaba, as if casually. Her scarf is a brilliant red silk. What does she want of him? Why is she here? Why are they suddenly alone in this cavernous parlor? He orders her away, using a commanding tone that works easily with all women, except Julie.

He will simply choose and make everything work his way, as he always does. Bashir doesn't usually entertain ethical dilemmas: what he wants is simply what is, and no one usually disagrees. But Julie? Could she? Will she? He hasn't the confidence he usually does to say that Julie will love him enough, but then why? And then who cares?

He has made certain promises to Julie in past times, and this idea of his mother's, the complicity of his friend, all this is beyond Julie's capacity to understand. But Julie has never failed him, never failed to accept and love him. He knows she won't. Julie won't. It can't happen without Julie's agreement, and she won't. He can ask Julie, let her think it over. She loves him. He will never love Alma any more than he has always loved her. Julie will always be his first, his public wife—no one needs to know what happens in the privacy of their home.

Isn't he, Bashir, worthy of concern? He misses home—his language, his food, his rights and wrongs. What Rukia says is true. He needs more from life than books and lectures. He needs a family, a home full of children. Just he and Julie? It's fine for now, but as they get older they will need more. Who will provide children for his old age? Who will succeed him? Any child that comes to them will be Julie's child, too.

He smells the soup, his favorite, and he knows he soon must face them all again—Rukia, Julie, Alma, his brothers, a crowd of neighbors. They are all there in a room of tension and discomfort, and he is the eye of the storm. He hopes to be wide and expansive—enough to stop the tempest from wrecking the house—enough to hold the winds at bay.

He hears them below, milling around and asking polite questions, asking of Bashir. Where is he? Who will call for him? He realizes that his life will be filled with these little negotiations now—Who will call for Bashir?—Who will call him to the table? He wants it to be Julie. He wants her to come, take his hand, lead him to the table, but she doesn't.

Julie isn't eager to find him, and this is the first time he has never known her disinterest. He wants her to be eager for him, but she has never been one to compete with others.

Besides, this isn't a place to be angry, to express anger, to feel it. This isn't a place to have deep conflicts and resentments. Not here in this house, not in this village, where every feeling is felt by the crowd. Small arguments and conflicts, sure, the kind that can be resolved in an afternoon. Bashir is always arguing with someone about small things. But fundamental differences, touching the core of hospitality? Somehow she must win this battle without fighting.

The afternoon comes with a sharp edge. She can't stop thinking of Rukia as a monster. A giant lizard, whose tongue might reach out to poke her, grab her, feed her to a hungry companion. Or a giant fly who would land in the sticky way of giant flies, who would carry her off to a distant place from whence Julie could never return, take her apart in pieces, starting with the limbs and working slowly toward her vital organs.

Julie remains downstairs, dreaming these horrifying deaths. She wonders how she might disappear, quickly, with the least hassle and embarrassment, how she could make it seem an accident. It would be easier at home than here, surrounded by his family, and suddenly she is anxious to have it all concluded—the other wedding, a return to home, where she can drink enough poison to die.

She wonders what they will do without her. How they will mourn and regret her death. For her, it will be a relief to escape them. For them, it will be a sentimental thing, missing her, reminding themselves of her, talking over their losses, the shame. It would tire her, their sentimentality, and she is glad to think of missing it. She will allow Rukia to win, and then she will die in the most punishing way.

Oh, but no, even as she thinks of it, she knows she will do as he wishes—as she always has. He wins every battle, even as he loses the war. But Julie won't tell him the tallies and results. She will let him win as she dies of her wounds. He will capture and hold her, keep her warm and beating against his chest, stop her from fluttering away. He will lose without ever knowing when, without knowing how slowly she falls dying in his arms.

Kirstin Ruth Bratt is the author of These Temples Are Not in Ruins (Redbird Chapbooks, 2014) and Moroccan Tales of Love and Disaster (Dahlia Press, 2015). Her short story collection, Proposals, includes the winner of the 2013 Brainerd Writers Alliance fiction contest, and her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Kirstin's fiction, poetry, and non-fiction have been published in Barrelhouse Magazine, Turn up the Volume: Poets for First Amendment in Wisconsin, Talking Stick, Lake Region Review, Penumbra, Prairie Wolf Anthology, Tribe, Cold Noon, The Muse, Pomona Valley Review, Five Poetry Journal, Radius, Kite, Marco Polo, Kudzu Review, Montreal Review, and other journals. Currently, Kirstin teaches at Saint Cloud State University.



EVEN AFTER-
ER 2 KIDS,
MOTHER ST-
ILL NEEDED
INSTRUC
TIONS.

- DP
- Bat
- Soft
- Mild white soap
- pins
- Cotton balls, cotton bag for waste
- Baby lotion or powder
- Clean diaper, shirt, other clothing

out the same time each day, midway
room is warm and free of drafts.
urely and never leave him alone on
toct usually recommend an oil or



TO MY SON, DAY OF THE DEAD
Emily Jaeger

I killed you
with the milk
from my breast, infected.

So I built you a blue house
placed your wrapped and empty
body inside.

I light a candle in the window
toy trucks are out front
for when you visit
in the night.

I made you a sister
she stays above the earth
and we call her little sun.

On all saints day
I knead a hundred pastries for you
salt between my knuckles.

Your grandmother,
aunts, and uncles
walk the red dust roads
to eat for you
the rings, crescents, and birds
of dough,
sit on the chairs
blue from the left over paint.
We pass your sister from arm
to arm
and watch as her face reddens
angry, alive.

Emily Jaeger is a returned Peace Corps volunteer and backyard organic farmer who dreams in four languages. Currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at UMASS Boston, Emily is co-founder and co-editor of Window Cat Press (<http://windowcatpress.weebly.com>), a zine and tumblr for young, emerging writers.

WATCHING A FILM AT ITHACA COLLEGE
Sophia E. Terazawa

Do you remember that time
the white film professor
pointed me out?

"Is that Vietnamese on your shirt?"

Yes.

"Are you Vietnamese?"

My mother is....

"Great! Then you're going to love
the film I'm about to show."

Do you remember that time
the white tenured film professor at Ithaca College
pointed me out?

"Now let's imagine that we
are in the jungles of Vietnam
during the Vietnam War."

What...

"This is a powerful propaganda film
that really helped to expose the horrible
things that happened in Vietnam during the Vietnam War."

Someone turned, "Oh my god,
you should leave." But the body was trapped
inside a shirt, lights out.

Act One:
A silent film
[black and white]

Napalm.

The braided wind in
propellers

A ditch.

(continued)

A wooden rod skewered into
the exposed vagina of a panting woman.

Legs and arms.

The white boy with rope
choking the neck of an old man.

Stage Left:
My hands shook in the dark
upon a rice field.

Monk in flames.

Her dark breasts exposed. Her mouth cut open by the butt of
a glass bottle. She screams watching what the men do, the men do
the baby with bullets for eyes.

My mother. My mother. my
mother my mothermy mother mymothermymother mymother.

Upstage:
The white girl behind me proclaimed
loudly over and over. "Oh my God. Oh my God. OH...
my... God."

***Sophia E. Terazawa** is a poet and performer. Her writing has recently appeared in Kalyani Magazine and The Journal for Creativity in Mental Health. Please visit her artist page at <http://www.sophiaterazawa.com/>.*

DRIVING IN THE DARK
Joanna Cattonar

driving in the dark in the rain
you tell me I was a hard birth

as the tires sizzle beneath us
you explain *il dottore* away

yes, how old he was
yes, he didn't use drugs

but didn't he cry out
in your screams

Dio! aiud' questa donna!

so how could you complain?
what could you say?

say anything, Ma,
tell me you love me again

as we drive in the clatter
of this endless rain

tell me I am not the problem, Ma
tell me the darkness is

Joanna Cattonar's poems have appeared widely in diverse journals, most recently in The Spoon River Poetry Review, 200newmexicopoems.wordpress.com, Mezzo Cammin, Malpaís Review, Gertrude, Sinister Wisdom, and So to Speak.

DEATH WARRANT
Alexis Rhone Fancher

When my son's ticket was about
to go to warrant, I went to the
courthouse and explained to the judge
that he was in the hospital, dying.
Someone gasped.
Someone grabbed my hand.

Josh lusted over a muscle car, a
Dodge Charger with a Hemi-powered,
5.7L V8 under the hood.
He wanted me to buy it. I wanted to
lease it. He said that meant I
knew he was going to die.

The judge looked over the warrant.
"He's in the hospital, you say?"
"Yes, your honor. Terminal cancer."
"Good," she said. She handed the
paperwork back to the bailiff.
"Then he won't be driving
without a license,
out there endangering others."

Alexis Rhone Fancher is an L.A. based poet/photographer whose work can or soon will be found in Rattle, Fjords Review, The MacGuffin, Deep Water Literary Journal, BoySlut, Carnival Lit Magazine, Luciferous, HighCoupe, Gutter Eloquence, the Good Men Project, Bare Hands, Poetry Super Highway, The Juice Bar, Poeticdiversity, Little Raven, Bukowski On Wry, numerous anthologies, and elsewhere. Her photographs, published world-wide, include a spread in HEArt Online, and the covers of Witness and The Mas Tequila Review. A member of Jack Grapes' L.A. Poets and Writers Collective, Alexis was nominated for two Pushcart Prizes in 2013. She is poetry editor of Cultural Weekly. Find her at www.lapoetrix.com.

THE PLACE WHERE NO WORDS LIVE
Noorulain Noor

For Jahanara (in sickness)

I always knew you would live up to your name
my baby, Jahanara,
who makes the world more beautiful,
sometimes in instants as tiny as a raindrop,
sometimes in those as big as a leap of faith

there is no distance between the rhythmic
lub-dub of my heart
and the cyclic beep of yours
that I hear on hospital monitors

I
feel you kicking inside my belly
on lonely afternoons;
see that wrinkle between your eyes,
your mouth wide open,
taking your first gulp of air;
hold you in my arms and whisper in your ear
shhhhh...shhhhh...shhhhh, quiet now, darling, mama's here;
live the months I have known you—
first when you were growing in me
and now in this world—
all in one infinite moment

you are with me in a place
where no words live;
we see each other
and feel the weight of a thousand years—
for you and me,
this world is neither our beginning
nor our end

Noorulain Noor is a clinical researcher at Stanford University and the Associate Editor of Papercuts. Papercuts is a publication of Desi Writers' Lounge, an online writing community for emerging South Asian writers, run entirely on a voluntary basis. Her work has appeared in ARDOR, The Bangalore Review, Apeiron Review, Clapboard House, and other journals. Raised in Lahore, Pakistan, Noorulain now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she leads poetry workshops, blogs, and writes on the broad themes of identity, multiculturalism, and the immigrant experience.

CHOICES
Chanel Brenner

The nurse places two boxes of tissue, a cheery pink water pitcher, saltines, and an apple juice container resembling a child's oversized juice box on the long table. She peers beyond us in the coffin-shaped room designated for PICU visitors. Laughter expels from me like lava. This is how they handle parents of a dying child, where they hide the grief.

My laugh surprises a chuckle from the nurse that sticks in the wrong pipe. She covers her mouth at the sound, exiting as if she'd disturbed a memorial service.

I memorize items as if studying for a final exam. Tissue box, six inches from the ten-inch-high juice box, three inches from the sweating water pitcher, and the pregnant puddle around its base. I nibble a cracker that clumps like ash on my tongue.

The doctors file in like pallbearers, heads bent, eyes averted, sitting at the table's end, like a fading crescent moon. All but one stare at their clipboards and paper, while their leader speaks, words dropped like stones on tile floor, "If he was eighty, we'd let nature take its course, but because he's a child, we're offering you choices:

One: We do nothing and your child dies.

Two: We cut a hole in his skull to drain the blood and relieve the pressure, but he'll likely still die.

Three: We remove the clot, but he'll probably die on the operating table or shortly after. If he survives he'll most likely never talk, understand or walk, breathe or eat, and we still can't remove the AVM.

Four: We do an angiogram and gather more information about the extent of the damage, and then make a decision. We'll still put the tube in, drain the blood if possible, then perform one, two, or three, depending."

The fluorescent lights flicker insistently as we ask the doctor to repeat the choices. His words hang in the air like volcanic smoke and ash, as I remember my mother's advice just days ago about an insignificant decision, "Do whatever you want. That's the great thing about life, we have choices." My head cranes up to meet the flickering, the room quiet except for a baby's wailing, muffled by the layers of drywall, wood, and insulation dividing us; I think of our son's body down the hall, beyond successive layers of God knows what.

Chanel Brenner's collection of poems, Vanilla Milk, will be released by Silver Birch Press in October 2014. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in Poet Lore, Rattle, Cultural Weekly, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Glassworks, and elsewhere. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and six-year-old son.

THE BITTER SURROGATE
Tracy Foy

Shame and secrets turned me into a tangle of blood and bone and skin. So, I try to tell the truth even when it's fucked up. I've been pregnant five times by four different men; three resulted in births, and two were terminated. In retrospect, I do not know what it says about me. I'm not sure if I'll ever understand the *whys* in my life, but I am very certain of the *hows*. I do know how pregnancy made me feel. I wanted to die. I thought I would die every time.

“You have to tell her,” my boyfriend of two years said to me.

“She's gonna kill me,” I tried to explain. I knew what my mother was capable of.

“She's not gonna kill you. She was young once; she'll understand.”

“She's gonna kill me,” I repeated.

As a teenager, I didn't have the privacy or portability of a cell phone like kids do today. When my boyfriend even hinted at a discussion about our “secret,” I'd hang up for fear my mother might be lurking on the other end of the line and overhear something. If he dared to bring it up in my home, I'd shush him with narrowed eyes and flared nostrils, then usher him out the front door and into his mother's car. It was only after the car started up and the radio was on that we could talk.

In 1986, I thought I was the first sixteen-year-old girl to ever get pregnant. And I really believed my mother would kill me. Not in an I-am-so-disappointed-in-you-I-could-die kind of way, but a grab-a-butcher-knife-out-the-kitchen-drawer-and-cut-the-baby-from-your-womb way. If dirty dishes led to hours of screaming, what kind of rage would my teenage pregnancy ignite?

I understand now that my skewed view of her wasn't fully justified. After all, my mother had not been diagnosed yet. My mother—a short woman with a petite frame, eyes the color of Jack Daniels and a temperament to match. A line from an Audre Lorde poem always comes to mind when I think of Mother—“A beautiful woman with ugly ways.”

I remember the burning on the back of my thighs after my mother slapped me with my brother's plastic race track. The welts appeared instantly, in a fat crisscross pattern. In elementary school, I spent a lot of days with my butt on the edge of my chair to avoid pressing the raised skin underneath my pants (the baggiest I could find) against the hard edges of the seat. I can see myself at eight seated between my mother's legs on the bathroom floor, she on the closed lid of the toilet. She broke

the heavy wooden brush she held across the top of my head. I jerked forward.

“I told you to stop moving when I’m trying to do your hair.” She pulled a handful of my hair so that I was looking straight up at her. “Look what you made me do. This was a good brush.” My mother showed me the two pieces of wood and bristle. I dropped my new Hardy Boys paperback on the bathroom floor and bit down on my lip to keep from crying.

“And you better not cry or I’ll give your black ass something to cry about,” she said. My mother’s national anthem.

I must have heard that line a hundred times after we left my father and the comfort of our three bedroom ranch home in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a brief stay at a Salvation Army in Chicago. I missed my yellow canopied bed, sunny room and father, so I cried a lot during that stay in the shelter. The threats and an occasional follow through with a few strikes across my ass from her leather belt were a small deterrent.

Of course, there were lots of happy moments too; my mother has dozens of photo albums to prove it. Christmas and birthdays were always over the top in our home; our entire living room would be littered in presents. I was a Blue Bird, a Brownie, and then Girl Scout. I had sleepovers and my mother baked cookies for school events. There was baton twirling, gymnastics, cheerleading—even a boxer named Cookie, whom my dad had stolen for us.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with some women. You make sure your kids have, even if you go without,” my mother used to say whenever she saw a child in hand-me-down clothes. She made certain we always had the nicest clothes and the latest toys.

My boyfriend was still trying to reason with me as we hid again in the front seat of his mother’s Buick. “You can’t go to camp. Your morning sickness is too bad.”

“I’m going.” I didn’t feel like explaining to him that I was exhausted from morning sickness and dread. On the occasion that my mother was not at one of her two jobs or with her boyfriend, I would bolt into the bathroom and turn on the faucets in the sink and tub to hide the sound of my vomiting.

I had stopped hanging out with my girlfriends. Although I wasn’t showing yet, I was afraid they would notice my condition somehow. My friends confided in their mothers. I knew that they would not be able to keep my secret. I spent a lot of time alone, daydreaming of ways to end the pregnancy. My favorite plan was throwing myself down the staircase of our two-story townhome but I didn’t think the architecture would allow

for the job to be done right. The stairs had a small landing halfway down that would probably break the fall, leaving me a bit banged up but still pregnant.

“You have to tell your mom before you go,” my boyfriend said.

“I am not telling her.”

“Well, then what are we gonna do?”

“Nothing.”

“What? We have to do something. You’re pregnant.” My boyfriend looked at me like I was crazy. He threw his arms up in frustration.

“Shut up. This is all your fault anyway. I never even wanted to do it. You wanted to do it. Not me,” I said. I got out the car and slammed the door.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he climbed out of the driver’s seat.

I looked at him, the fucking genius who’d sworn nobody got pregnant the first time they did it. I knew better.

“I’ll pull out,” he had whispered as I wiggled under him. It was prom night and after the dance we had returned to his house.

“I don’t want to do it yet. But soon, I promise,” I lied.

“You always promise then change your mind. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t want to, that’s all.”

“You know you’re not normal. Why are you scared? It’s okay,” he said, ripping my panties as he struggled to pull them down. We were on his living room floor. His entire family was asleep upstairs, and I watched the top of the staircase for movement.

“I’m not scared,” I said. I knew sex was overrated and I had decided at ten years old that I didn’t want to do it again.

“Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you.” He tried to kiss me but I turned my head. His fingers worked frantically inside of me, then his thing. I kept my eyes on the staircase as he whispered “I love you.” He had me pinned down, so I relaxed.

It was painless and quick. He got up to get me a washcloth, his black suit pants balled up in his hands to hide his privates. I got on all fours and reached around in the dimness from the streetlight through the window. I found the pink purse that matched my lacy pink prom dress and tucked my torn panties away.

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

I wiped between my legs with the lukewarm washcloth. I held the dress up enough to clean myself but not enough for him to see anything. “Yes,” I answered truthfully. He was my first love, in a manner of speaking, my first real boyfriend. At sixteen, I had sense enough to know that what we were experiencing was not the same as the love I read about in my stacks of books; I never felt like I would die if I didn’t see his face

soon, my heart didn't race, and there were no tiny fireworks shooting across my body. But he was always there, a constant. I knew that if I disappeared from the face of the earth, someone would miss me.

After arriving home in the morning, I cut my panties into tiny pieces, wrapped them in notebook paper, and placed them in a drawer to wait until I could walk them to the dumpster of our apartment complex. My mother had a habit of going through our trash and discovering things that were thrown away for a reason. She wouldn't find those panties.

Over the three weeks of camp, my lack of enthusiasm for hiking, running, swimming, and sleeping in the great outdoors transformed into an absolute fervor. I woke up every morning at six to do stretches like a maniac. We would run two miles after yoga and I was in the front of the pack by the end of the first week. In the group activities designed to bring the counselors together through trust exercises, I was the first volunteer to climb up the rope ladder and fall backwards into a group of unfamiliar arms.

I couldn't admit to myself that I was working out in hopes that the baby would die or, at the very least, I might drop dead in the blistering early morning heat.

We were each assigned a cabin with four to six girls or boys. I talked to my girls about the importance of doing well in school and working hard. Most of them already liked boys. "Make sure you focus on school," I said. There would be plenty of time for that once they were older.

When I wasn't with my girls, I chatted away with the other counselors about what college I wanted to go to and how excited I was about my upcoming senior year. I buried the truth until we climbed off the big yellow bus near home and I saw my boyfriend leaning up against his mother's car, right on time to pick me up.

A couple of weeks later, he delivered an ultimatum.

"If you don't tell her, I will," he said.

I didn't say anything for a moment. I was sick of him and exhausted because all my running and hiking in camp didn't change a thing. I was still pregnant.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Are you crazy? You're over three months pregnant. You won't let me tell my mother, you won't talk to yours."

"I don't want to talk about it." We walked to my front door.

"Too damn bad. You tell her tonight or I am telling her tomorrow. Your mother is not that bad. You've never been in trouble before, you'll see. It'll be okay."

"No, it won't," I whispered. I went into the apartment and waited

for the next day to arrive because there was still no way in hell I was going to tell my mother. But I knew my boyfriend meant business this time.

In my dreams that night, I was one of those girls on television who wrapped their newborns in blankets only to tuck them in the bottom of their closets. After their babies died, they tiptoed out the back door and placed their nameless shame in the bottom of garbage cans before their parents even noticed.

The next day, I found myself sitting in our sunken living room next to my boyfriend. My mother was pleasant, speaking in the high-pitched voice she used for company. His mother and my mother talked about the best options for my boyfriend and me. Nobody asked me what I wanted to do with my baby or my body. As the conversation continued, my mother became more animated and upset. I concentrated on not crying; my mother would notice if I cried.

“Listen, this will all work out. My oldest daughter got pregnant at sixteen too. We took care of it,” his mother consoled.

My mother shook her head and twisted her eyebrows.

“And guess what?” His mother put her hand on my mother’s leg and leaned in.

“What,” my mother squeaked.

“They both went to college and ended up getting married four years ago. They got good jobs and are doing just fine. They just bought a big house out East.” She clapped her hands together like she was in a Baptist church. She was at least fifteen years older than my mother and she reminded me of my grandmother, sincere and trustworthy.

“Umph, that is so good,” my mother said.

“Of course, we’ll help pay for it, and I know my son will want to be there.”

“Of course.”

My boyfriend’s mother stood up, then my mother walked her to the front door. My boyfriend and I followed behind them in silence.

“She’s such a lovely girl. Don’t be too hard on her. Kids mess up but we have to love them through it,” said his mother. She hugged my mom, then kissed me on the cheek. She gave me a strong look—*it’ll be okay*—before turning away.

“Thank you. I agree she is.” My mother looked me in the eyes for the first time since they had arrived. I turned my eyes to the floor.

My boyfriend and I stood at the bottom of the stairs holding hands as the ladies climbed the four steps to the door.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

“No.” I wiped my eyes before my mother might notice. For the first time, I saw fear in his face; he gave my hand a squeeze before letting go.

“I’ll come back after I take Momma home,” he said.

My mother stood at the door, smiling and waving, until they were out of sight. She turned to me, teeth clenched. “How could you do this to me?”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, refusing to make eye contact.

“You are killing me. I don’t have money for a fuckin’ abortion. I have to call my sisters. Everybody is gonna be talking about me. Laughing at you. How could you do this to me?”

“He said he would help.”

“He said he would help,” she mimicked. “You believe that nigga? And I know his po’ ass momma is probably just talkin’.”

I had believed him and I felt confused. At times, my mother had liked my boyfriend more than me; often, she got on the phone when we were talking and invited him over. If I wasn’t home when he called, she always told him where I was, and even gave out the phone numbers of my friends so he could call me wherever I was. She wanted me to invite him to every holiday function. And suddenly, I couldn’t trust him.

She fell to the couch like one of her soap stars and sobbed loudly, face down against the cushions.

“How could you be so damn stupid? Haven’t you ever heard of birth control? If you wanted to act like a little ho, you could have used protection. And why would you tell his mother before me? I looked like a fool. She must think I’m a nut for not knowing you were pregnant.”

There it was.

My mother believed in utter and complete allegiance to the family. No matter what happened, you put on a brave face when you were in public. Getting pregnant was one thing, but running to outsiders about it was the ultimate betrayal. I tried to tell her that my boyfriend had confided in his mother, but she wasn’t hearing it. I had done the unforgivable.

“It was just once,” I said again, later that evening. I didn’t dare tell her that I hadn’t felt I could come to her earlier. Secrets were not safe with my mother. Secrets were weapons she could and would use against you in a fit of anger.

“I bet it was just once,” my mother said.

“It was.”

“I can’t believe the shit you say, get the hell out of my face.” She turned her back to me.

I went back to my room and waited. I could hear her moaning and cursing most of the night.

“My sisters are loaning me the money for an abortion,” she told me the next morning. She had come in to wake me up. “They called you a tramp and said I should let your stupid ass have the baby. Teach you a lesson about acting like a little slut.”

A week later my mother informed me that the appointment was made. Since I was already past the first trimester, I couldn't have the procedure done in Indiana and we had to drive out of state. That meant more money, my mother said.

My boyfriend met us at our apartment. As we walked outside, my mother announced that she was too upset to drive, so her boyfriend would be driving us to the appointment—apparently, telling him had added to her shame and embarrassment. I put my head down to avoid her boyfriend's eyes as he jumped out to open the door for me, then her. Both my boyfriend and I were licensed drivers. Why did she have to involve another person?

"I tried to be a good mother," she whimpered, over and over, as we headed through Indiana toward the clinic in Kentucky. Her head moved right and left across the headrest. The rest of us were silent.

I kept the fear of what the abortion would feel like to myself. Whatever the pain, I thought, I had earned it.

The building was a large unmarked dark red brick dwelling in the middle of downtown Louisville. You walked up a flight of steps upon entering, then were buzzed in through heavy glass doors. Inside the huge waiting area were several couches full of women. Some younger than me; some seemingly older than my own mother. The women were of every race and nationality. Some laughed and talked, some cried, and others looked completely lost. All I could do was shake.

Where were all the men?

It felt like an assembly line. First, a consultation to see if you understood what you were doing and that there were alternative options. They asked me to confirm that I was not being coerced. I knew to say yes, the abortion was what I wanted. In reality I was so confused, it was impossible for me to make a decision of that enormity. I wanted a moment to think, but that was impossible.

Back to the lobby to wait for the ultrasound to see how far along I really was. Then back to the lobby again.

My mother told me she was going to leave, that the men were waiting downstairs in the car for her. This was the long part, waiting for the doctor's examination and the procedure, and my mother didn't think they—even my boyfriend—needed to sit there since they couldn't do anything. I would be out of it. I didn't dare beg her to stay.

She was still punishing me. It was just her way, so I nodded in agreement. What else could I do? I felt my body shaking uncontrollably. She took my jacket and purse—there was nowhere safe to leave my things alone in the clinic—and left. I wanted to run after her but I knew what she would say. *This is your fault, don't cry now.*

* * *

“Are you alone?” the nurse asked as she escorted me to the room where my procedure would take place. I didn’t answer. She shook her head in pity.

Moments later I was on a table with my wobbly legs in stirrups and a strange man standing between them. He stuck a couple of fingers inside of me and I flinched, kicking a tray near my feet.

“Try to stay still,” the doctor said. “I am sure you’ve had much bigger than this inside of you.”

I bit my lip to keep from crying again and one of the nurses came closer to hold my hand. “You’ll be fine,” she whispered. Somehow I doubted that. She patted my arm.

When they gave me the anesthesia, they told me to count backwards from one hundred. “100, 99, 98, 97...”

Images. Memories. The first week of middle school for me. My mother in our downstairs laundry room, sorting dirty clothes. “Tracy, come here,” she yelled.

I turned off WTLC, the local R&B station, and headed to the first floor of our townhouse. As I walked into the laundry room, she had a pair of my panties and my tapered white Chic jeans in her hands. Her face had twisted in disgust. I could feel my body start to quiver from anxiety. What did I do now? Dealing with my mother’s instability drained me. Anything could set her off.

“Look at this,” she said, flinging a pair of my dirty panties into my face. Her hand sat on her hip, her lips pursed.

“What?” I watched as my panties fell to the cheap green and white linoleum.

“Look! Can’t you see those brown spots? You started your period, fool. You don’t have cramps?”

“No.” I picked my underwear up off the floor and balled them into my fist. I was embarrassed that the most important moment of my adolescence may have happened without me even knowing. Another reason for my mother to ridicule me, to think I was stupid.

“Go upstairs and get a pad from under my sink and put it on,” she said and turned back to the laundry.

I did as I was told, then pulled out all of my dirty clothes from the hamper to check them. I found tiny brown dried spots in my underwear and felt justified in missing the signs—they were barely there. But I still felt foolish.

The phone rang. By the time I picked it up, my mother was telling one of her boyfriends that I’d started my cycle and didn’t even know it. I put the receiver down and ran back downstairs.

She saw me storming towards her in the kitchen and turned her back to me, still talking. I walked around and stood in front of her. She kept on talking.

“Mommy!” I said, trying to control my anger. My mother rolled her eyes and shooed me away with one hand. “Mommy, why would you tell him my personal business?”

She pressed the receiver against her breast. *Now* she wanted to be discreet.

“Look, don’t be mad at me because your silly ass didn’t know you started your period,” she laughed, waving me off again. Everyone who called our home that day heard the story. I hated her.

“Honey, wake up,” a nurse said as she shook me gently. “It’s time to move you to recovery.”

“My mother?” I asked, still very drowsy.

“We checked the waiting room. She’s not back yet.”

I felt groggy. Lost. I wanted my mother. I was fitted with a maxipad, given some pain medication and moved to a room with several recliners. I climbed into one and went to sleep.

“Wake up.” A different nurse woke me now. “You have been in here for a couple of hours and we need this chair. You’ll have to sit in the waiting area. Your mother isn’t back yet.” I was still wobbly; she was patient as she helped me up.

There were no clocks in the waiting area, no windows. I was the only one left when a woman came out and said the clinic was closing. Was there someone I could call? I told her that there was no one. I lived in another state and I didn’t have a jacket or my purse. She apologized, but I would still have to leave. I went out through the glass doors and down the stairwell to the street.

People hurried by. There were no signs but I felt sure they could tell what I had done. I leaned against the building and shoved my hands into my pockets. I had no money, and no one to call. I was bleeding and cramping, and the sun had begun to set, the air growing cold. My mother had deserted me, I was sure. But how could my boyfriend (or her boyfriend, for that matter) just go along with it?

The tears had stopped by the time they pulled up. Her boyfriend jumped out of the car and helped me in, his eyes apologetic. Everyone was quiet.

“Where did y’all go?” I finally asked.

“We went to a movie,” my boyfriend said. His eyes were wet. I didn’t care about that.

“It was longer than we thought it would be,” my mother said. *So what we went to the movies*, her tone said. *You got knocked up*. My boyfriend reached over to take my hand. I pulled away, cut my eyes at him, and shifted my body towards the window. The approaching fall landscape whizzed by in green and orange as I pressed the side of my face against the chilly glass. My unborn child was not the only thing that died

inside me that day.

My mother nursed me for a couple of days, then I returned to my senior year of high school. She never mentioned it again. For a woman controlled by emotion, that had to be difficult.

Years later, I would look at my swollen belly in the bathroom mirror and feel ashamed. I was married, the mother of two, and pregnant with my third child. We took good care of the kids and they were well-adjusted and loved. But still I felt no glow, no giddiness, just this abnormal feeling of disgrace when people looked at me or asked about my pregnancy. I did what I could to conceal my depression by smiling and allowing people to touch my belly, but I hated it. Being pregnant still felt like a dirty little secret, and I knew that was crazy at my age, which made it worse.

I tell myself it's the termination of the first pregnancy that left this scarring across my life, not the girl abandoned on the sidewalk with that bloody brick between her legs. Whatever it is (vulnerability, shame, abandonment or fear) that troubles my relationships, it is always here—lingering, diminishing every “I love you,” every hug, every kiss; the bitter surrogate for all the things I lost on that trip.

Tracy Foy is a high school teacher and writer who resides in Central Florida. She has a BA in English from the University of Central Florida and earned a MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. She is currently working on her first memoir titled Me. Love. Crazy.

BALLOON BOUQUET AT LIBRARY SQUARE
Susan Martell Huebner

I.

At the senior living facility where my mother now lives
in the entrance lobby, wide as a ballroom and quiet as a church
3 balloons strain against their weighted ribbons.
Each is a shiny silver number: 1 0 0 .
Someone has hit the century mark.

The doors woosh open and close with comings and goings.
Every soft swoosh sends the puffed-proud mylar puppets dancing,
floating in the weak winter sun streaming through the windows.

II.

These days my mother floats, too,
riding the wind horse of memory.
Sometimes she controls the reins,
cherishes her good fortune.
Those are worry-free days.
But sometimes the destinations that call
are not of her choosing.
Those days are blue blankets
she pulls up to her chin.

III.

I give my mother a set of towels, bright flowers embroidered on soft
Egyptian cotton.
She treasures these, keeps them folded in tissue paper in her closet.
They're too special, she says, to be used for everyday.
In her bathroom hang threadbare towels I remember from my
childhood.
On her bed, a white plastic basket filled with fresh laundry waiting
to be placed in lilac-sachet drawers.
Worn gossamer-thin, a pair of flannel pajamas sits atop a nightgown,
one my father loved, lacy trim at the hem now attached by safety pins.
No, she says, she doesn't really need new pajamas. She has plenty.

IV.

I am not always prepared
to enter the fragile shrine of her last home.

(continued)

Sometimes when I leave her
I sit in the parking lot and weep.
I think about the balloons,
the great three-digit miracle
that someone, not my mother, celebrates.
I try to believe that today
is celebration enough.

***Susan Martell Huebner** lives and writes in Mukwonago, Wisconsin. She is a member of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, Wisconsin Writers Association, and the Southeast Wisconsin Master Gardeners. She is a participant at AllWriters' Workplace and Workshop and believes collaboration and community keep the arts alive. She is published in many places, most recently in Tic Toc, an anthology by Kind of a Hurricane Press, and she is currently working on a second novel while her first is out in the world diligently seeking a publisher.*

MANTIS
Elizabeth Savage

Good servant
gone servile

anger softly heels
a sister self
to shadow
self harmless

as a luxury
lies sleepily
leaf-

fully those green
hands
lighting
at her mouth

Elizabeth Savage mothers like a mother in Fairmont, West Virginia, where she has written *Jane & Paige* or *Sister Goose* and *Grammar*, both from *Furniture Press Books*. *Idylliad*, of which "Mantis" is a part, will be published by FPB in 2015. Her recent essays and reviews appear in *Jacket 2*, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, and *the Journal of Modern Literature*. Since 2008, she has served as poetry editor for *Kestrel: A Journal of Literature & Art*.

ASSISTED/LIVING
Joanna Cattonar

like
a handmaiden
with no regrets

for
the long walk
in from the country,

she
bears her beauty
tenderly

with
such mortal
care,

while
we attend
more gingerly

than
she, as if
what would we

do
if suddenly
the years

cracked,
spilled, ran
at our feet?

Joanna Cattonar's poems have appeared widely in diverse journals, most recently in The Spoon River Poetry Review, 200newmexicopoems.wordpress.com, Mezzo Cammin, Malpaís Review, Gertrude, Sinister Wisdom, and So to Speak.

AT THE POOL
Amy Neill Bebergal

He wore goggles, unaccustomed to the feel of water
in his eyes. He turned somersaults below the surface
to show me his mastering of the gravityless, while I sat on the side,
ankles in. Here at the pool the boys strut skill, while girls

cluster in observable interiority. He goes under, twists, pushes out
against the wall towards her, a girl refracted at the blue line
where she's immersed, where from underneath she must appear
a wavering blur over pillared legs, white like porcelain.

Both newly teens, I'm aware he might be a thing, for she too
has been following his movement below the bodied surface.
She catches me watching them—his stealthy approach, then away
with a flash like a fish before arriving—unhooked, hazy intentions
a dream unawakened—and appearing instead beside me.

I meet her eyes across the surface and we smile reflexively wide
at each other, and I remember—I'm the mother—both of us sides
he'll swim towards or away from. All day, rough concrete has been
gathering the heat of high summer, warm beneath the thinning
towels we're dripping into, his bleach-stiffened hair drying in spikes.

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Amy Neill Bebergal's poems can be found in Ghost Town, RiverLit, Killing the Buddha, Blast Furnace, The Boston Poetry Magazine, Riverbabble, The Centrifugal Eye, MOON Magazine, Bohemia, among others. She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Born in Nashville, she now resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband and son.

SUNBURN
Katie DePasquale

The first thing you do when you get to the beach is beg and beg until Jenna's parents say okay, you can go explore the boardwalk as long as you're back in an hour. So you walk as fast as you can, away from the pink stucco hotel and its musty interior into night air that smells salty and sharp. You are on the boardwalk in no time, your sandals scuffing along the boards and Jenna's flip-flops slapping against them. You pick your way through crowds of people, knowing that all the lights and noises and smells revolve around you. The beach, open and dark to the left of you, with the ocean's pitch-black water stretching out to nothingness, is there for you too, should you choose to use it. You and Jenna look at each other at the same time and start giggling. You found each other in the nervous, directionless haze of freshman year at a school where you knew no one, and now everyone recognizes you as a pair. They even used to confuse you sometimes since you're both tall and thin with dark hair, until last month when Jenna chopped and bleached hers, separating you once again. Your mother is torn about Jenna, speaking out against her heavy eye make-up and multiple ear piercings, but she always ends those conversations with a sigh, saying "I just want you to be happy." That's why you're even on this trip with Jenna's family; your mother is concerned about your happiness.

You float in and out of stores that reek of sunscreen and cheap cloth, playing with the bead and hemp jewelry, trying on sunglasses and shell necklaces and posing in front of the tiny mirrors that sit on the high countertops until the owners frown at you and you leave. You laugh at the tee shirts with a woman's muscular, string-bikini-clad body painted on the front, and even more at the tacky shirts that say "Ocean City" in puffy, curvy script with waves and dolphins bursting from the words. The cutest boys, the ones with floppy hair and long shorts who have stopped skateboarding to lean against the walls between stores looking cool, they get a smile. But you don't stop to talk to them. Instead you and Jenna buy yourself fake rose tattoos. The man in the store offers to apply them for you, his yellow teeth rabbit-like in an unpleasant grin as he leans on the counter and eyes the skin over your tank tops. "Ha, you wish," Jenna responds, grabbing your arm, and the two of you run, giggling at your brilliant exit, all the way back to the hotel, where you apply the tattoos in the fluorescent-lit bathroom. You fall asleep admiring the final placement of your thorny rose on your ankle and thinking of the best ways to display it to the world, wishing there was a universe where your mother would allow you to get a real one.

Early the next morning, Jenna's family makes both of you go to the beach with them even though she moans and whines and tries to talk them

into letting you out of it. Her mother's face purses up and she says, "This is a family vacation, Jenna Marie, you are going to have to spend some time with us, so just accept it." Her mother has one of those flowered, skirted swimsuits to cover up a pear-shaped lower half, and a tense, closed look to her. Her father is a big man whose face reminds you of a mole stuffed animal you used to have, with tiny features all squashed in the front of a large head. He calls Jenna "little girl" all the time and looks at her like he's afraid she might not like him anymore. Jenna's brother George is even more sullen than Jenna because the friend he invited couldn't come at the last minute. He refuses to sit under the beach umbrella or use sunscreen because he wants to get a tan on his skinny chest, as if it will help. He's red before the end of the day, and when Jenna bumps him as you're all packing up that evening, he yelps. Touching him leaves shiny white marks on his flesh. You fold your towel around your waist like a skirt, glad that you tan naturally. Your skin is an even bronze. You feel tall and lovely and flat, like a girl in a magazine.

There are two men in the hotel pool when you get back, older men with their wives or girlfriends, you aren't sure which, and little children shrieking and splashing and hanging off of them. You watch them as you pass by, noticing their height and the width of their shoulders, the way they are generically handsome as if they stepped out of a soap opera (your mother watches "The Bold and the Beautiful"), and you feel them watching you back. Their gaze feels inquisitive, appreciative. You wonder if they'll be there tomorrow as you go up the concrete steps, catching the toe of your sandal on the top one. Maybe you'll see them again.

As you get ready for the beach the next morning, Jenna's mother watches from beneath her oversized glasses with eyes that are always in sharp focus. Her mouth wrinkles up as she watches you applying sunscreen, swooping it up and down the arms, legs, stomach that are already smooth and gold, remembering your promise to your mother to apply and reapply. Her face stays turned toward you as you pull your hair into a ponytail and roll on lip gloss that smells like watermelon. She adjusts the top of her own swimsuit and slides on her flip flops as Jenna is explaining that you're going to wait for the rest of the family by the pool. Her mother stays seated in front of the mirror above the desk, smoothing down her own frizzy hair, and lets you leave the room without saying a word.

You and Jenna stretch out on lounge chairs so that your stomachs are concave in the space between your exposed ribs and your bikini bottoms. The men come out after you've been sunning yourselves like lizards for about a half hour. Neither of you moves, but you hear the splash as one of them dives into the chemically enhanced blue of the water. They are alone

this morning, and their laughter rises over the water toward you like a mist. No one else is at the pool yet.

Eventually you sit up slightly, resting on your elbows, to stare at them from behind the safety of your sunglasses. They are both very tan and lightly muscular, and you aren't quite close enough to make out their features. Jenna fluffs up her hair and asks after a minute if you feel like swimming. The men are getting out of the pool, water drops standing out on their hair and skin and running down their chests and legs, as you and Jenna are sliding into it. One of them half-turns back, and they don't leave, but sit on chairs a few feet away, legs wide and elbows on knees, eyelids drooping under the heat and against the water still dripping down their faces.

Jenna's mother appears suddenly at the gate, and tells you both to get out of the pool and come to the beach, the rest of the family's ready now. You see her peering over the top of her sunglasses at the men while she's talking to you. Jenna hops out of the water instantly, irritated and willing to show it, but you rise more slowly, adjusting your bikini bottom, trying to project your aloofness and maturity. "Hurry up, girls, we don't want to keep everyone waiting," Jenna's mother says as she turns and walks away. Dutifully, you trail behind her. You notice the spider veins that spread through her thighs while you're walking, and don't look back because you don't have to.

At the beach, you and Jenna put down your towels a few feet away from her parents' umbrella and chairs. Her mother pulls out a little white beach hat and Jenna rolls her eyes at you. "Sorry my mom's being such a pain," she says, and you shrug. Your own mother spends plenty of time advising you on what to do and where to go; it isn't unusual behavior really. George goes swimming and stays out in the waves for most of the afternoon, wearing a tee shirt to protect his peeling back. You and Jenna stay on your towels, sunbathing and making fun of the people strutting by in swimsuits too small or tight for them. You notice the cute boys again but don't dare to go over to them, even the ones whose towels are close by, who keep glancing in your direction, because Jenna's parents are *right there*. Later in the day, you ask if you can go to the boardwalk for fries and drinks, and Jenna's mother says, "My God, your arteries are going to be clogged shut by the time you're twenty," as she hands over ten dollars for your snack. Jenna thanks her and she goes back to her romance novel, her eyes hidden beneath her dark glasses again, her pale legs bright in the sun. You and Jenna drag yourselves through the sand, so hot it stings your feet as it sifts into your sandals. You buy your fries and some lemonade and eat at one of the little benches slightly shaded from the sun by an overhanging store awning. You try to remember to hold your stomach in and sit up straight while you're eating. You can hear your mother's voice telling you not to slouch, to be proud of your height.

When you decide to go to the pool again that night, Jenna's mother

raises her eyebrows. She follows you out, claiming to be interested in gauging the temperature, but you see her look over the balcony and know she is checking for the men. They aren't there. "Have fun," she tells you. "We'll be right up here, if you need us." She watches you walk down.

You haven't been in the water fifteen minutes before the men come out. You hear their voices as they're walking toward the pool, and a woman calling something at them from a room a few floors up. You and Jenna glance at each other in the dim light coming from the inside of the pool and the rooms around it whose curtains are open. You both keep swimming, treading water and continuing your conversation about school and who will maybe be in your homeroom next year. The men stop talking as they enter the pool gate. They stretch out in lounge chairs, and you hear the squeaking sound that plastic makes against flesh as they're settling in. One of them says, "Beautiful night, isn't it," and the other responds, "Mmmm, hmmm," in a way that makes you and Jenna pause and look at each other as if you can confirm what the men are really talking about. You wonder what to do now, because the situation feels different at night. You start to swim laps, going to the end of the pool where they're sitting and then back, into and out of your spot as observer and observed. Jenna floats on her back, eyes closed, eyeliner bleeding a little, letting the water move her. The men don't say anything more, but you hear a shout from a woman calling down to them, "Hey, there, *boys*, don't forget the beer!" There is laughter in her voice. And soon after that call, you hear sandals on the steps, on the pavement, coming in the gate to the pool, and you stop swimming, looking up, wondering if one of them has come down to reclaim the men. But it is Jenna's mother who walks into the light in her bathing suit and a flowy navy cover-up, arms crossed over her chest like she's holding herself together, who says tightly, "Get out now, we're going for ice cream." Jenna looks from you to her mother, confused, and gets out of the pool, saying, "I didn't know we were going out."

Her mother grabs your towels and throws one over Jenna, holding the other under her flabby upper arm, against her body. As you start to come up the ladder, the side of your top catches on the last step, but you don't notice until it's too late and you are exposed. Your arms cross over your breasts instinctively as you stand by the ladder, dripping, head still high, waiting for Jenna's mother to pass you your towel. She holds on to it as she leans toward you and says, "There's no need to be so modest all of a sudden. You don't have much to cover up anyway." Her voice carries across the water, and you can tell that she is looking past you at the men, her eyes glittering in the weak light thrown up from the depths of the pool. Biting the inside of your cheek, you have to reach for your towel.

Katie DePasquale is a writer and editor in the Boston area. She has a Master's in Writing and Publishing from Emerson College. Her work has recently appeared in Wilderness House Literary Review.

THE NATURAL DISASTER

Laura Jent

She came reluctantly to us. Then she was
the cloud that settled in. She brought
a trunk full of tears, and I opened it up,
as lovingly as anyone can cause a flood.
Months later, even after she'd gone on
to drown other mothers and land-lovers,
we shifted through the alluvium, and found
we had no more bones to stand with.
No more shells for shelter.
She had cleaned us out.
Empty banks, barren bed, the river
found comfort in summer storms,
from which we harvested fresh water,
faces toward the sky.
Seasons have passed, and quickly.
Our own helixes have spun up into a child,
half a decade old. A twisted vine, she climbs.
Focused on her cling, we aim to forget the days
when we had no soil, no sunlight, and worse:
constant, rancid-tasting rain.

Laura Jent, 36, lives and loves in Durham, NC. She writes poetry and has been published online at sites such as *lodestarquarterly.com* and *millerspondpoetry.com*, as well as in print in *The Independent Weekly*, and *ISM Magazine*. She also works with individuals who have autism and believes fiercely in building a diverse world through our words and work.

ONE SOCK, NEVER TWO
Sandra Fees

Separating from the only skin
I'll ever grow inside
besides my own: *Mother*

I learned to leave things behind,
parts of myself,
other people,

sometimes without wanting to
but not always.

This is how it feels
to back out of a familiar driveway
one last time.
You think you are ready
until you sneak that final glance.

It's like singing amazing grace
by my dying mother's bedside
but feeling no mercy,

slipping for a second time from her body
only this time she is the one scrunched like a newborn.

All our lives we are losing things this way
and by degrees—

zest, fingernails, mooring,
the gods, a set of keys, a way of life,
a time zone, one sock, never two.

We lose ourselves and each other
at least once, sometimes twice,
maybe a hundred times before it's done,

(continued)

and in between,
we forget our way,
if we ever knew it.

Someone tells me we're better off
without these attachments,
even as the call for bodily reunion
brews deep in the earth of me.

***Sandra Fees** is a poet and an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, serving a congregation in Reading, PA. She holds a Master's of Arts Degree in literature/creative writing and a Master of Divinity Degree. Her poetry has been published in Wilderness House Literary Review, The Harrisburg Review and Wilda Morris' Poetry Challenge.*

MERCENARY
Emily Jaeger

it was the last thing left so I sold it
as you counted the blue veins
embroidered thick across my thighs.

First went the field left behind
when he left us for her.

Brothers learned times for sowing
to taste coming frost on the wind.
Mother taught me to straddle
papaya saplings in the garden
whisper *be female, bear fruit*.
They bore me only sticky male shoots.

Next I sold the cow
fed the children powdered milk
the clink of tin spoon against pitcher
marking each day until I stirred water.

Now I am merchant of the midday fuck
after your work in the fields and before lunch
my sheets left red grit stained.
I barter my own salt
let you taste with outstretched
tongues, even as I bleed
ripe papaya's wet seed.

Your wives pass my front gate with cheeks turned.
I sing my wares: he returns
to you in the evening to lie
shoulder to shoulder in your crooked bed
he will return to you and you will forgive him
like the corn you replant each year
like the southern wind that comes
after rain to dry red earth to stone.

Emily Jaeger is a returned Peace Corps volunteer and backyard organic farmer who dreams in four languages. Currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at UMASS Boston, Emily is co-founder and co-editor of Window Cat Press (<http://windowcatpress.weebly.com>), a zine and tumblr for young, emerging writers.

TOO MUCH OF OURSELVES

Kaylen Mallard

The 1952 Cellucotton puberty pamphlet, *You're a Young Lady Now*, opens with a pigtailed girl in rolled jeans removing a blindfold from one eye. Her face looks pleasantly surprised, as though a dozen of her neighborhood chums stand before her in cone hats offering a sheet cake. But her stance, body full front, legs apart and braced, one arm raised with palm open, suggests pure terror. "It's time to open both eyes," the first page warns, "and get even better acquainted with yourself."

"You're just gonna get a thrill out of this," my grandmother said when she gave me *You're a Young Lady Now*. "This is what I learned as a girl." We read it together, even though I was twenty-two and well past puberty, sitting on her 1970s floral sofa beside a nineteenth century flintlock gun. When we finished, she took me to her basement to drudge up other artifacts of womanhood. She spent five minutes explaining how a sanitary belt worked only to discover the white strip of fabric she held was a jock strap. I left the basement disappointed.

I've since acquired several other female puberty guides. I can't pinpoint why, but there's something about having these booklets, with their pastel covers and photographs of teenagers in taffeta dresses, that enthralls me. I'm simultaneously repulsed by and jealous of the women powdering their noses (literally), and I wonder if there's something to mine in the pamphlets' pages. I'm looking for the what is and the what should be and all the blurring in between.

The summer before my "one special day" of noticing "a stain on your pajamas or your panties,"¹ I watched Kerri Strug stick the vault. I wanted to cry just as she had in Bela Karolyi's arms. I wanted to be the hero of my own Olympic gymnastics team. That night, I went to bed dreaming of my own vault triumph: the bulge of my calf muscles on the sprint, the glitter eye shadow, the red, white, and blue hair ribbon.

Rachel came to us that same summer, an orphan of sorts. Temporarily homeless, she moved in. Oversized university sweatshirts appeared in our bureau and blonde hairs (blonde!) covered our bathroom sink. My family had recently adopted a wild grey cat, I had adjusted to my little sister decapitating my Midge dolls, and we'd initiated family game night. I did not need a big sister.

Then Rachel talked to me—a ten-year-old—like an equal. She had picture-book blue eyes and a coed bounce. "Kaylen," she said, "I am just so glad to be here with ya'll." We talked about Jesus, boys, the digestive system, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. I fell hard. Stunned by this girl, this woman, I

¹ *You're a Young Lady Now*, a 1952 publication of the Cellucotton Products Co, producers of Kotex.

let Rachel settle into my life. She ate Cheerios for dinner and introduced me to butter and sugar sandwiches. In a true act of sisterhood, Rachel explained to my parents that *Saved by the Bell* was not evil, allowing Zack Morris to enter my world at a time when I started “to notice boys, and, what’s better, they begin to notice you!”²

Actually, I’d noticed my first boy the year before. Alex Calkins won the Andrew Jackson Elementary School student council presidential election, and I tried to partner with him on as many Tennessee history projects as possible. We colored a mean flag. But he was Mormon, and we were Baptist, and this tortured me.

When I was eight, I drew a portrait of Love on Hampton Inn stationary. “Love,” I wrote above the hotel logo, “by Kaylen Mallard.” Cupid, his hair one limp ink mark, his face obscured by either a beard or cat whiskers, holds a speculum-like bow beside an arrow-pierced heart. Below him, a tiny, frowning man stands a discreet distance from a woman who is leaning against something resembling a racecar, covered wagon, or headless pony. She seems ready to go. Whether or not he’s coming along is unclear.

Once, we thought menstrual blood held seductive powers. “...if the girl who was anxious for a young man’s love could place a drop in his cup of liquor she would be sure to win his affections.”³ Put your heart in it, girls. Get what you want.

That summer, the summer of quasi-girlhood, I wanted to jump on the headless pony. Though I didn’t have my menstrual blood yet, I sensed its potential powers. What I had instead were my own brazen models of femininity: Rachel and Kerri. Kerri and Rachel. Brave Kerri. Pretty Rachel. Smart Rachel. Resilient Kerri. I took my Alex-laden heart to Rachel, who listened during the Olympic commercials. She reassured me that my Mormon-boy crush did not condemn me to hell. This freed me to bask in my last summer of being uninhibited, girlish. Rachel invited me to help her choreograph a cheerleading routine to “C’Mon N’ Ride It (The Train).” I, the bookish girl with braces, clapped my hands at my center and shuffled my feet back and forth, then dipped down, arm pulling the train whistle on *I think I can, I think I can*.

I got my period. Alex Calkins moved. Rachel left our guest bedroom for the dorms, but stayed in my life as a blonde beacon of Woman-Be-All-That-You-Can-Be. She would go on to succeed in medical school, marry a radiologist, and have three blue-eyed children who could pose without flinching for family photographs. In short, she continued to be perfect.

² *Growing Up and Liking It*, 1968, Personal Products Company. The inside cover reads, “...the fun is just beginning!”

³ *The Adolescent Girl: A Book for Parents and Teachers* by Winifred Richmond, Ph.D., psychologist, Government Hospital for the Insane, The Macmillan Company, 1925. In addition to recounting previous beliefs about menstruation, Richmond explains the characteristics of the Abnormal Girl, the Delinquent Girl, and the Normal Girl.

* * *

In 1997, long hair cut in layers became popular. I wanted that cut. Layered hair was big girl hair. And big girl hair was a big deal in the fifth grade. My parents acquiesced. I entered the mythical world of Southern hair salon and sat in a green-leather chair, a black smock covering my body.

The Southern hair salon is a place nearing holy ground. It's where Southern girls go to get fixed. "Work a miracle," we demand on entrance. "We gotta look good!"

"Girl, you are just gonna love this cut. I'm tellin' ya," said the hair goddess wielding the shears. "You are just gonna look so pretty, you won't even be able to stand it."

Pretty is important. No, pretty is imperative. I started wearing makeup at twelve and eyeliner at fourteen. My mother instituted a house rule: toenails must be painted. "You might as well walk out of the house topless as walk out without your toenails painted," she said. During my years of young ladyhood, Momma spent thousands of dollars on hair removal and figure-flattering clothes. Just after I left home, stiletto boots and cashmere sweaters would appear at my doorstep, tags on. "Keeping dainty and well groomed can always help you feel attractive...confident."⁴ Generations of Mallard women believed it. Even the United States Women's Gymnastics Team seemed to believe it.

In that swivel chair, I sensed my own baptism into the world of pretty. Head back, hair wet, I allowed the wise beautician to fashion my brown hair into something adult. Out came the blow dryer. Out came the round brush. When a cut emerged, I gripped the chair handles. Disaster.

My bangs stood several inches above my forehead, feathered in a store-brand Farrah Fawcett way. My hair, fence-straight since birth, had decided to wind and wander: curls. When I returned to school, my peers called me Martha Washington. The big girl hair experiment had failed.

Fourteen years and eleven months later, I sat in Rachel's living room. Rachel had matching caramel-colored leather furniture, granite countertops, and heated toilet seats. She looked pristine in khakis and a grey T-shirt, and she looked young and vibrant even though she sat crying.

"They were great at the hospital," she said. "We knew she wasn't doing very well, so we went in just for a quick ultrasound. That's when they couldn't find a heartbeat. They had to induce labor then. But they had little outfits for us to put her in, and they let me and Chris hold her for a while."

Four months before she lost her baby, Rachel and I had dinner. "Pray for me, Kaylen," she said, "I don't know. It's the weirdest thing, but I want a fourth. I really feel that God is putting this desire in my heart for a reason. I

⁴ This advice continues with encouraging the menstruating girl to monitor her shower temperature, ensuring the water is not *too hot* or *too cold*. *Very Personally Yours*, 1961, Kimberly-Clark Corporation.

know I'm thirty-four, but I want another baby." She slipped me a going-away card. On the inside two of her children had written their names in oversized, shaky script, "Julia Mommy," covered a quarter of the front page. "I love you. I'll miss you, Love, Jackson."

The menstruation Q & A books published by the makers of Kotex and Modess in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s that I own do not mention sex or reproduction. The only hint of an answer to the question where do babies come from appears opposite a blue and black ink illustration of the ovulation process. "If the egg becomes fertilized while passing through the tube (as it must be, to start to become a baby)..."⁵ The booklets avoid certain terminology. "To nourish the baby as it develops, your body builds a spongy lining of blood and watery fluids inside the uterus. When the fluids are not needed they flow away through an opening in the lower front part of your body."⁶

I worked to promote female reproductive health for nine years. As a volunteer, and later staff member, of the March of Dimes, I educated fourteen- to twenty-three-year-olds about healthy reproductive choices. "Not thinking about a baby yet?" I'd tell young women and men. "But maybe one day? Eat right! Exercise! Don't smoke!" I had schooled myself in the wonders of my own belly. I knew third-hand cigarette smoke, smoke stuck in clothes and upholstery, could affect the fetus. I knew premature black females fight the hardest to survive while WWB's (wimpy white boys) have the highest mortality rate. I knew Rachel's fourth child had developed the beginnings of baby teeth and could swallow.

In July of 2008, I led a national volunteerism conference for high school and college students which featured Kerri Strug as its keynote speaker. "Will you stay with Kerri today?" a conference staff person asked me. "Just make sure her questions are answered and help her with logistics."

I prepared Kerri for her speech, lunched with her, and accompanied her on a tour of a neonatal intensive care unit. I found myself beside Kerri for most of the day, peering into the same incubators and making small talk with the nurses in the hospital's hallways. Kerri was kind and easygoing. Good at talking to the parents of babies in crisis. Good at encouraging young volunteers and posing for photographs. We talked about her life in Washington D.C. and its dismal dating scene. About her upcoming trip to Beijing for the Olympics. About her gold medal, which she kept at her parents' home. "My niece wants to try gymnastics," I remember Kerri saying as we left the hospital, "I told her parents, don't let her. Encourage her to do something else. Play the violin or something."

⁵ *Very Personally Yours*, 1961. This pamphlet opens with an advertisement, "If you haven't seen the movie by Walt Disney Productions, 'The Story of Menstruation,' prints are available free..."

⁶ *You're a Young Lady Now*. The aforementioned pamphlet with the freaked-out blindfolded girl.

Kerri's comment didn't surprise me. Earlier that day, in her speech about determination and teamwork, I'd listened to her talk about her long years of training, the weeks away from her family. Still, something stung. I felt compelled to turn away from her, pretending to get lost in Atlanta's buildings outside the window.

My friend Khaty and I walked with a baby between us. The August Montana day broiled us and we looked to the mountains willing a cooling wind. None came. Theo, the baby strapped to Khaty's chest flailing his legs out and into my side, grinned all the same. He didn't belong to either of us, but if you got past Khaty's Hmong skin and my dark eyes, then the way we cupped our hands around his blonde head could fool anyone.

It had been almost five years since I'd heard Kerri's speech and two years since Rachel confided in wanting a fourth. Khaty, a poet, had agreed to take over a nannying gig for me. I would have to move to the midwest soon, and I took in the Montana landscape and our conversation with a desperateness that startled me. I wanted all her wisdom, all her stories, in that half-hour walk. Khaty told me about cooking for her family of sixteen and taking care of dozens of nieces and nephews. She prepared dinner for her parents when they returned home from farm work, late. She tucked little ones in and tidied up. She wrote about her Hmongness and her English-speaking self. I asked her questions. "It must have been hard growing up with different cultural ideas of femininity," I said.

She paused for a moment, her hand on Theo's back. "I think," she said, "I think it's just hard to be a woman."

I was the first of my girlfriends to get her period. "Can I take a bath?" they asked me. "How bad does it hurt?" "When my mother drinks orange juice, hers stops. Does that happen to you?" I gloried in my status as adolescent know-it-all. I exaggerated, embellished, milked the menses for all their worth.

"Most girls go right along as if 'those days' were just like any others... Some feel blue, upset, and cross. They cry easily, lose their tempers over nothing, and use menstruation as an excuse for being rude and mean. They're pretty hard to live with. You see, many girls imagine they feel worse than they actually do. They get in a dither just by thinking too much about themselves."⁷

Like many girls, I do not remember a conscious concept of feminine forming. And I wasn't given a thin pamphlet on the workings of my body to guide me through puberty. But my early impressions of Rachel and Kerri, pretty and appropriate, womanly and not womanly, felt as complex and confused as the blindfolded girl welcoming 1950s youth into the world of ladyhood. This is no 'those days' issue, this thing called womanhood. I

⁷ *You're a Young Lady Now.*

have years behind me of dithers and of thinking too much about myself. When I feel bluesy, upset, or cross, it's no product of my imagination.

In my room, at the bottom of a floral hatbox under a pair of abandoned opera glasses, rests an autographed photo of Kerri Strug. I know the image is being ruined, the photo creasing and the corners tearing, but I let it sit. Fade. When I move next, as is my yearly habit, I will consider throwing it out. I won't, though. Instead, I will keep it in the box. Pinned and wilting, but still with me nonetheless.

Kaylen Mallard is originally from Tennessee, and has a MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Montana. Currently, she works for a nonprofit in Indianapolis, Indiana.

FOR THE POET'S DAUGHTER
Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné

Marry a man who understands
your love of passionfruit
and fear of waves.

At least he will love you carefully,
not drink you when he's thirsty.

Most are already frightened by
your seer's eyes, by all the lives in there
you weren't supposed to remember.

You come from a long line of women
with heron's hearts and good lungs.
There is no running from yourself,
not with all these poems trapped
between your teeth.

Be gentle with yourself
when the days find you alone and burning.

Say the thing you must,
when no one wants to hear it

Say it
even when
your throat is too heavy
for sound.

Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné is a poet and artist from Trinidad & Tobago. Her writing and art have appeared in several local and international journals. Danielle's first solo art exhibition, "Criatura," was held at the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago in June 2013. In 2013 her art was also featured at the exhibition Music is the Soul in Toronto, as well as The Femail Project in Birmingham, UK. She was one of the artists selected for the Museum of Latin American Art's 2014 Woman's Day Display in honour of Frida Kahlo.

ARTISTS IN THIS ISSUE

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Athina Pappa was born in 1986 in Thessaloniki, Greece. She graduated from Democritus University of Thrace in 2010 with a Master's in Architectural Engineering. She worked for a year as a textile designer producing patterns for British high street brands and in 2013, she graduated from Birmingham City University with a Master's in Visual Communication, specializing in illustration. She currently lives and works in Thessaloniki, accepting illustration commissions and exhibiting. You can see more of her work at <https://www.behance.net/athinapappa> and <https://www.facebook.com/AthinaPappa.FelixFelis>. Contact her at athens.pappa@gmail.com.

Kathy Rudin is an artist from New York City who, clearly, still has mother issues.

Monica Wright is an artist and illustrator from Fort Worth, TX.

