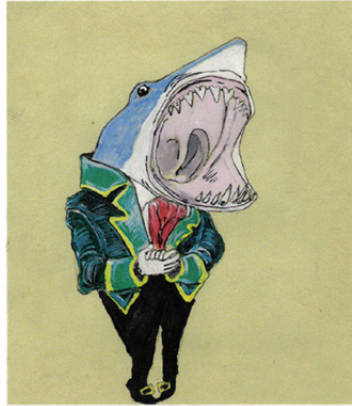


S P I R E S

intercollegiate arts & literary magazine

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T W O T H O U S A N D F I V E
S P R I N G



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Front Cover by Sarah Howle, Washington University
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*Christopher Hudgens
Brown University*

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Readers,

You may have seen us selling you ice cream. Or maybe we accosted you at the activity fair, bribing you with candy or pizza to come to a meeting. You may have seen our flyers in your classes or on the walls of your dorms. What you hold is the culmination of our annoyance, not to mention the hard work of some very talented writers. That's all I have to say to you, the reader. You can go flip through the magazine now.

The rest of this is to the freshman Spires members who helped save the magazine, and who have left me confident that Spires is in good hands for at least the next three years. Going into this year, Spires had 6 members. Three were seniors, three were juniors. Second semester, the three juniors were going abroad. You can see the problem emerging here.

You came to the first meeting and expressed interest, which earned you pizza (or, as I recall, the right to stare at it, because almost no one ate any of it). You came to the next meeting, and the one after, and enjoyed the pleasure of reading student poetry and fiction. Then you became regulars, and I was grateful for your participation.

I threw a party out of that gratitude. We played hungry hippo and twister. It rocked. You stole my blow-up doll and rubber ducky. At the next meeting, you returned the blow-up doll, but forgot the rubber ducky. My adoration of all of you began then and has silently been growing since. As with all the most enjoyable student groups, Spires is primarily a vehicle. It's the car we sit in so we have an excuse to hang out.

We put a lot of work into the vehicle, though, and what has resulted this semester is the best issue I think we have ever put out. Speaking of history, this issue would not be complete without a salute to Peter Jones, Super Senior and longtime Spires member, who is the only member with any ties to the founders of the group, ten years ago. His knowledge on robots and the history of Spires has been indispensable. But even if he does graduate this semester, I'm certain he will continue to find a way to be part of the magazine, even if he does so by living out of the Spires office.

Thanks again to all you new members for your hard work and making my last semester my best. But don't think that cuts you any slack: if the magazine ever comes out late again, I promise to fly back here and raise hell.

Thrive,

Eric Wolff

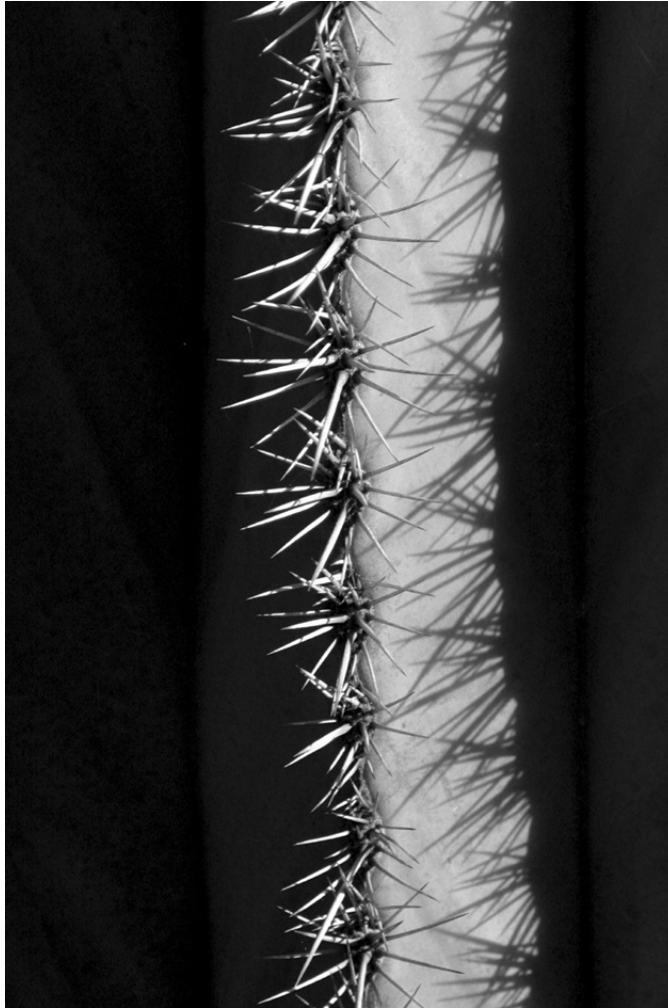
2005 SPIRES POETRY PRIZE WINNER

MUSEUM OF MISSING CHILDREN

This house breathes with every creak
of our consciences.
Trembles with our footsteps
that have become alien, altered.
We are visitors with clean hands, or-
fighting every papery wall with the broken knuckles of a prisoner.
And either way, our shoes can't feel the carpet,
and the chairs don't become our clothes anymore.

And there are my parents. Moth-eaten and hanging in folds of wool,
quietly collecting dust in one corner of the house,
watching over the museum of missing children.
The gone voices still stir the dust and the cobwebs upstairs,
but the only sound, in this house, is an echo.

Brendan Flaberty
Washington University



Oliver Hullard
Washington University

2005 SPIRES FICTION PRIZE WINNER

THE LIGHT BULB BABIES

"The dead, the gentle dead -- who knows? --
In tungsten filaments abide,
And on my bedside table glows
Another man's departed bride."

-- Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

The hunchbacked little boy biked down the street under a sharp scythe of moon, an upside-down goldfish bowl on his head. It bounced and bumped against his nose as he wobbled across the asphalt, but he barely noticed. He was a stoic spaceman, exploring new worlds, and, for spacemen, the helmet was a weightless necessity, a second skin. In his mouth, he held one end of a bright green garden hose, for oxygen, while his pudgy legs pedaled furiously.

The sky brightened above the hunchbacked boy, but he paid no attention. Sunrises and sunsets were among the celestial pyrotechnics ignored by his comic book hero, Space Ace Grin McCCase, who looked on, arms akimbo, as moons collided and planets do-se-doeed. If an enemy star imploded, McCCase might declare, "Don't mess with America, fiends!" but that was about as contemplative as he ever got. McCCase would never cry if he looked too late in the direction of a falling star, or if the new moon left his room a bottomless pitch-black pit. The hunchbacked boy admired that.

The boy rode on past new houses with windows empty as skull sockets, then turned left out of his subdivision. Here, on real roads, he had to be particularly careful not to cause an accident. In his early childhood, accidents had been forgivable and forgettable by nature. One

of his earliest memories was of his mother taking a shattered snow globe out of his hands with just that soothing word, accident. Time had been soft then, as if it could be re-molded into a dozen different shapes. But now he knew it was as hard and inflexible as the metal brace that stretched up his back. He had learned it wasn't enough just to look both ways.

Dinging the bell on his bike basket, holding his goldfish bowl helmet on with one hand, and wailing like a siren, he swerved out onto the road.

"Watch out!" he screamed. "Low-flying spacecraft!"

The end of the garden hose fell from his open mouth. It whipped and snapped against the concrete as he flew into traffic. Studebakers, Fords, and Buicks flashed by, their round headlights like the surprised glowing eyes of robots. The hunchbacked boy had not always biked to school, and he was still getting used to it.

He attended a soot-stained brick block that looked like a factory. Jungle gyms and monkey bars cast prison door shadows in its yard, and before class in the mornings, classmates idled there like inmates, occasionally bursting into brief, violent games. The garbage dump sat next door, so vultures circled above. With their bald, naked heads, they resembled old men dressed in bird suits, and, during recess, the hunchbacked boy had often seen them swoop dangerously low, their talons reaching out like old hands. He watched them now, as he turned onto the playground with its chalky ghosts of four-square and hopscotch. Languidly, as if doing him a great favor, four or five left their perch atop the swing set and slowly

glided toward him. Their shriveled, shrunken heads wrinkled intelligently as they flapped. Starting up at their outstretched wings, the hunchbacked boy suddenly felt afraid to get off of his bicycle. He wheeled around and ran smack into the tetherball post.

"Bernie needs a gurney! Bernie needs a gurney!"

The hunchbacked boy was named Webern, not Bernie, but the chanting girls were right about the gurney. For a long moment, flat on his back, he thought he would not be able to rise again, that his skull lay in pieces around him. Then, gingerly touching his forehead, he realized that his goldfish bowl helmet had shattered, but that he was still, mercilessly, living.

"Eww! He's bleeding!" shrieked the loudest chanting girl, a fish-faced wonder named Betsy Smothers. "Look everybody! Gurney Bernie's bleeding! I'm telling!"

"Does Bernie Wernie need a nursie worsey?" gurgled Debbie Bludgeon.

Webern sat up. A drop of crimson fell onto his yellow shorts. He imagined that, in zero gravity, the girls' skirts would flip up over their faces, suffocating them. "I'm OK," he mumbled, picking shards off his red and yellow striped shirt, buying time. There was a limit to how long they could torture him.

Sure enough, the bell rang, and children began pouring, grudgingly but with impressive speed, into the glass-and-metal double doors of the school. Betsy and Debbie dissolved into the flood without another word. Webern wheeled his bicycle over to the metal rack. Next to the other boys', it looked like a shy little girl. Streamers dangled from its handlebars like shiny pigtails. Webern patted its white wicker basket affectionately, then looked around quickly to make sure that no one had seen him. Just as he suspected,

though, he was the last one left outside the building.

Webern had not always been a hunchback. Once, he'd moved invisibly among the other children, one of many crowding and jostling as effortlessly as balloons on a clown's arm. But then, two years ago, a fall from a treehouse had broken him in half lengthwise, and the doctors, for all their whirring machines and tilting funhouse beds, had stuck him back together woefully misaligned. Now his right shoulder rose higher than his left, in a perpetual shrug, and his right foot fell short of the floor.

Gravity is my enemy, Webern thought as he dragged himself through the double doors and up the endless stairs. Gravity and vultures and little, little girls. Just then, above his head, the bell jangled a second time. Great. He was officially late to class. He slumped against the banister, staring up accusingly, but the ding-a-ling, a brass circle mounted high on the wall, looked back as dead dumb as a doorknob. As Webern tried to imagine what mechanism inside could create such a jarring sound, Wags climbed out of the bell, holding a large metal hammer.

"Sorry about that, chum. Just doing my job," the little guy said, affably shifting the hammer from hand to hand.

"No, no, I understand." Webern smiled wanly. Wags was a little boy in lederhosen that no one else could see, and, next to Space Ace Grin McCase, he was Webern's favorite person. But today Webern just wasn't in the mood for camaraderie. "Can't talk now. I'm on a crater reconnaissance mission."

Wags saluted him and hopped back inside the bell. Webern continued up the stairs. He smelled paste and chalk dust and pencil shavings and something else, something metallic and unpleasant that he couldn't put his finger on. It took

him a long moment before he realized it was his own blood, still dripping freely down his cheek. When Webern got to the top of the stairs, he started down the hall toward his classroom, then reconsidered and headed for the boy's bathroom instead.

The bathroom didn't have a door, just a twisty entrance that reminded him of a maze. Inside, milky white light poured through the frosted windows. Webern usually hid out here a couple of times each day. Sometimes, the incessant plunk of water drops and the bucket gray stalls made him feel like he'd fallen down a well, but he tried not to think about it this morning. His face hurt too much.

The mirror hung too high up on the wall for Webern to look into, which usually suited him fine; reflections made him think of evil duplicate Martian spies. But today he needed to see. He flipped a trash can upside down and scooted it noisily across the floor, then stepped on top of it. A shallow scrape stretched down his cheek, bleeding. Webern touched it gingerly, then hopped back down. He tore off a long strip of toilet paper and pressed it against the gash, the way he'd seen his father do after a bloody shave. Then he sat down on the upside-down trash can and set his backpack on his knees.

First he took out his lunchbox. Emblazoned with the radiant image of Space Ace Grin McCase brandishing a ray gun, the tin box declared, "Invaders, Go Home!" Webern unlatched the metal closure and flipped open the top. His sandwich, black with mold, had been prepared with horse-radish and, from the looks of it, chewing tobacco, but at least today nothing was squirming inside. Webern got up, opened the frosted glass window a few inches, then shoved the sandwich out. The vultures attacked before it even hit the ground.

Webern's mother used to pack him sand-

wiches with homemade jelly and white bread so soft it stuck to his teeth. She'd sent hunks of cake with icing thick as toothpaste. But now the job of meal preparation had fallen to his sisters. Willow and Billow were twins and matched their names: Willow was thin as twigs with eyes wet green as dewdrops on leaves, and Billow was a puffed-out clothesline sheet. But inside, the girls were the same. They were witches, Webern knew, and he saw them always with thick black outlines, like villains cut from a picture book and clumsily pasted into his world. This was not the first time they'd sabotaged his lunch.

Webern sat back down on the trash can. He set aside the lunchbox and pulled out his book instead; its cover featured a perfect rocket in flight. The white cone of the spacecraft, as smooth as a crayon's tip, was marred only by a single bubble, a clear glass dome through which smiling spacemen peered. On the book's pages, similar fellows manned the controls, or chased floating sandwiches that hovered, tantalizingly, just out of their reach. Webern eagerly turned past these pictures to the dog-eared page where he'd left off. Next to the text stood a bulbous space suit, multicolored and empty, just waiting for a wearer.

"Candidates for space travel must be young - not more than eighteen when applying for training - and cannot be too tall or overweight. The spaceman must be willing to make great sacrifice," Webern read. "He will be in a world by himself, with his air in a tank on his back, and clumsy claws to use as hands and feet. He will have nothing around him to give him a feeling of security. He can't fall, but any fear of height will make him feel he's falling, and such panic could be very dangerous to him - and to others. Tests will weed out those who cannot tolerate flight into outer space."

Webern sucked his thumb thoughtfully.

Gravity was his enemy, sure; it bent him, stooped him, made him scuffle. But this idea of a test made him nervous. He wondered if the spacemen in training had a chance to prepare, or if something just happened out of the blue. What would it be like if some unexplained force lifted him, helpless and swimming, out of his gray white well?

“Hey there, Sonny.”

The book leapt off Webern’s knees, and he tipped over backwards. Mr. Hull, who looked like an old bird in a man suit, towered in the doorway. He taught the sixth grade, and Webern was only in third. Webern had never seen a grown-up in the boy’s bathroom before; next to Mr. Hull, the sinks looked like something from a dollhouse.

“Shouldn’t you be gettin’ along to class now?” the old man drawled. “Lost your way?”

“Yessir.” Webern crawled around on all fours, jamming book and lunchbox into his bag. The capsized trash can rolled on its side.

“Shouldn’t you be making it chop-chop?”

“Yessir.”

“All right then.”

With a jerk of his head, Mr. Hull marched out of the bathroom. Webern scuttled close behind, clutching his backpack to his chest. Mr. Hull walked briskly, with his arms swinging and his beak high in the air; the bulletin boards rustled as he passed. He stopped at Webern’s classroom and, when the hunchbacked boy caught up, he swung open the frosted glass door.

“Found him dawdling in the potty.” The words rolled off Mr. Hull’s tongue, as if nothing could be more predictable. He gave Webern a little push, and the boy stumbled into the room as the class erupted in laughter.

“Well, then,” said Mrs. Welninski as Webern found his seat. “I guess that finishes off the attendance. Debbie, will you take this to the principal?”

Debbie Bludgeon hopped up and obediently retrieved the attendance sheet as Mrs. Welninski rose from her desk. Mrs. Welninski was a large mannish woman with short curled hair and a nose like an edible root. Her square shoulders reminded Webern of the playing cards from Alice in Wonderland, but he didn’t make jokes or call her names, as some of the children did, because Mrs. Welninski was one adult he did not hate. Around the time his sandwiches changed from jelly to mudpie-and-salamander, other adults had looked at him earnestly and said things about Jesus and the angels and how he had to be extra brave. Mrs. Welninski was the only one who looked right at him and admitted she didn’t know what to say. Webern replied that he didn’t know what to say either, and since then, they’d gotten along just fine.

At the front of the classroom, Mrs. Welninski blew her potato-shaped nose on a yellow hanky.

“Guess I’m Mrs. Ill-ninski today,” she said. She strode across the room to the closet and returned to her desk with a cardboard box. “Gather round, everybody.”

Webern perked up at this. It was usually a good sign when she told them to get up from their seats, though not as good as when she told them to get their coats. By the time he hobbled over, a forest of shoulders had sprung up around Mrs. W’s desk, but he sidled in to get a look.

As she opened the cardboard box, Mrs. Welninski gave a little speech, probably memorized and obviously untrue. She said that a friend of hers had asked her to baby-sit, but although the little ones were quiet and well-behaved individually, there were altogether too many for her to keep an eye on. So would the class help her out? Even those who still believed in Santa were doubtless skeptical that a grown woman would

tote twenty-odd infants to school in a cardboard box, then farm them out to third-graders, but they were willing to play along. Mrs. Welninski gently placed wee ones, bundled in tissue, into the cupped hands of each student. Some of the girls even cooed and cuddled them.

The babies, limbless, pear-shaped, and gleaming, were light bulbs with painted faces near their spiraling metal hats. They lolled drunkenly from side to side if placed on their convex bottoms, and had a tendency to roll when placed on their backs. Mrs. Welninski explained that each student would be responsible for keeping his light bulb baby healthy and clean.

"But what if something happens on accident?" asked Gap McLewan, who had already shoved his foster child into the mucky catacombs of his untidy desk.

Mrs. Welninski replied, as she so often did, by writing a fifty-cent word on the blackboard.

"Anyone know what this means?" she asked. I-R-R-E-V-O-C-A-B-L-E. Gap slammed his desk shut, and from somewhere inside came a glassy crunch. "It means the damage can't be undone. No accidents, kids."

For the rest of the morning, Webern held the light bulb baby with both hands. He decided to name her Sunshine. Her painted face was small and bright with star-shaped yellow eyes and a pink heart for a mouth. At first, he hugged her between his palms, but when noon rolled around, he limped out of the classroom as quickly as care and his misshapen body would allow. He needed to make more permanent arrangements.

During recess, some of the other boys put the light bulb babies in their back pockets. But when Rusty Gillette sat down to play Duck Duck Goose, he had to go to the nurse's office to get the glass and tungsten removed. After that, the boys rolled their babies into the short sleeves of their

T-shirts like packs of cigarettes. The girls were only a little more nurturing with their glow worms. They dug a playpen in the sandbox and left their babies snug in the yellow grit, with only their metal hats showing.

"Planting bulbs." Mrs. Welninski snorted. "That's one way to make 'em grow."

Webern glared as the girls dangled from the monkey bars, socializing, resembling nothing so much as a tribe of hooting baboons. His light bulb baby was swaddled in toilet paper, snug in the tin lunch box he'd strapped to his chest with his belt. He wanted to run over and pull the girls' hair, but then his pants would fall down.

"Shouldn't you be eating?" Mrs. Welninski asked, looking suspiciously at his lunch pail papoose. "I didn't see you in the cafeteria."

"I'll do it later." Of course, he had already fed his sandwich to the vultures.

That afternoon, Webern biked home carefully with the lunchbox cradle snug in the basket between his handlebars. He pedaled up the driveway and left his bike in the garage. Since the car accident, it had gaped open as empty as a dragon mouth, and he didn't like to spend much time in there. He let himself into the house and found his father in the living room, honk-wheeze snoring on the couch.

"Hi, Dad."

Webern's father snorted awake. "Goddamn, son. You startled me." He hefted himself to his feet, reaching for his crutches. Webern's father had survived the second world war without a scratch, but ever since the Studebaker smashed, he'd walked with crutches. Even after the cast came off, he would need a padded shoe. Sometimes Webern wondered if people would notice them hobbling together and think it was a family resemblance, when in fact it was only bad luck, separate, undeserved, and excruciating. "I've got

to get to work.”

“No, you took the day off, remember?”

Webern’s father ran a hand across his overgrown crew cut.

“Well. You always did have the memory to beat all. Your mother used to say –” He trailed off, glancing around the living room as though her words might be lying somewhere among the empty teevee dinners and discarded tissues. Webern sucked in his breath. Whenever his mother was mentioned, he had the strange sensation that he was flying very quickly through space, with no possibility of return.

“What did she say?” he asked. His father half-sighed, half-laughed.

“Well, like I said, you’re the one with the memory.”

Webern nodded. “I’m gonna go do my homework.”

“Better lock the door!” his father called after him. “Your sisters’ll be home soon!”

Webern’s bedroom was upstairs, between sharply slanted rafters. Instead of a banister, metal bars like drawer handles stuck out of the walls on either side of the stairs. He often imagined clutching those wall handles as the rocket ships on his wallpaper catapulted him into weightless outer space. But today he had no time for pretending. He was on another mission.

Webern sat down on his bed and placed his lunchbox on his knees. Grin McCase smiled up at him boldly as he flipped open the lid. Webern reached into the wadded toilet paper packing and, gently as he could, removed Sunshine from her cradle. He held her in his hands.

“This is where you’re going to live now,” he whispered. “I’m going to keep you safe.”

She smiled at him with her pink heart-lips. Webern gently nestled her back inside, then shut the lid. He scooted the lunchbox under his bed,

then stretched out on his mattress. One hand slid beneath his pillow and returned, seemingly of its own accord, with a bent Polaroid photograph. Webern rolled over on his back and looked at the picture. In it, a slender, handsome girl sat on the steps of a flooded basement. A desk floated by her bare, dripping feet, but she didn’t seem to mind: her eyes squeezed shut and smiling as a kitten’s. When the picture was taken, Webern was not born yet, and sometimes he wondered if he could say this mermaid was his mother. She seemed more like the dream image of a face he used to know.

* * *

The previous winter, Billow, the fat twin, had taken a shop class at her high school. Inspired by the complex, mimeographed diagrams in her textbook and the glinting, sharp-edged tools in her school bag, she’d come home in the afternoons to perform cruel surgeries on the Studebaker’s mysterious intestines. At dinnertimes, when she’d folded her hands for grace, Webern had watched the dark grease that stained the creases in her palms and knuckles, the undersides of her fingernails. He also watched the secret smiles she shared with her sister. He suspected that something was not right, and as he ate his meatloaf, his stomach felt like a roly poly curling in.

The night of the accident, Webern stayed home with the twins while his parents went out to play bridge. As soon as the car backed out of the garage, he padded dutifully toward the linen closet, where the girls usually made him sit for at least an hour while they made spooky noises and smashed his toys. But on this particular evening, the girls stopped him before he could go into that starchy darkness. They directed him instead to the sofa in front of the black-’n-white teevee, where they brought him hot chocolate and cookies while he watched cartoons. As he slurped cocoa through

a peppermint straw, he felt uncomfortably like Hansel, trapped in the witch's house. The twins stood behind the couch, holding hands, breathing down his neck. They wore black aprons, and their thick black outlines left smudges on everything they touched.

"Eat it all - all that you can." Willow poked him with a candy cane.

"Here, have another ginger man." Billow nudged him with the tray.

"Thanks," mumbled Webern, wondering why they were acting so nice. On the teevee, a cat in a convertible crashed into a barn, leaving a car-shaped hole.

After an hour or two, Webern, sticky and swollen with sugar, dozed off with his cheek pressed to a couch cushion. He dimly heard the storm door slam when the girls slipped out for their usual late-night walk. But he jumped up, wide awake, when he heard the collision outside.

He ran to the window and threw back the curtain, and, for a minute, he thought everything was all right. His father still sat in the driver's seat, struggling with the car door, and he could see his mother outside, lying facedown on the concrete with her purse beside her. She looked like she might just get up, dust herself off, and walk up to the front door. She wore her green silk dress, and the full skirt lay on the asphalt like a fancy Japanese fan up for display on someone's wall, with all the little pleats spread out smooth. There was no blood, only yards and yards of grass-green silk.

Then Webern had seen the broken glass, sparkling like diamonds in the road, and his knees had started to shake.

* * *

By Friday, Webern was the only one in class whose light bulb baby hadn't shattered. To celebrate, he built a mobile out of a wire coat

hanger and some ping pong balls. He stuck it to the side of his white wicker bike basket and, on Sunday afternoon, rode slowly around the neighborhood with Sunshine snug in her new pram. The white spheres swung and spun like planets.

"That's a house. That's a tree. That's a cloud," Webern said, pointing. Sunshine's upturned face mutely reflected the cotton candy sky.

That night, sitting on the kitchen floor, he sponge-bathed Sunshine with some glass cleaner he found under the sink. His father snorted and drooled, facedown on the dinette set table. Webern dried Sunshine with an oven mitt and exchanged the wadded toilet paper in her lunchbox for some green plastic Easter grass he'd saved since last spring. His sisters had been gone for days now. He wondered where they were, and when they'd come back. Before he tucked himself in that night, he locked his door.

Early Monday morning, about a half hour before school, he hurried into the classroom. With much ceremony, he opened the lunch box and presented his newly polished babe to Mrs. Welninski, who sat at her desk, grading papers. She lowered her librarian's half glasses and peered first at the bulb, then at the hunchbacked boy who stood there, hands behind his back, grinning and waiting for her approval.

"Well, Webern," she replied, kindly if ambiguously, "that's really something."

Webern nodded eagerly. "I was thinking about making her a dress out of a lampshade, but then she might not fit in the box. When it's winter, though, I'm definitely gonna make her a sweater out of one of my mittens. I just need some yarn. And needles."

"Webern, I - I think it's wonderful you're still so enthused about this project."

Webern nodded. He waited for her to say something else, but she just looked at him, her potato nose tilted earnestly. Webern felt a little disappointed, though he didn't know exactly what more he'd expected. Mrs. Welninski watched as he shut the lunchbox and, pressing it to his chest with one hand, pulled the belt into place with the other. He struggled for a moment, grimacing, then looked back at her.

"Can you buckle me up?" he asked. She did.

With the capsule snug against his chest, Webern walked over to his desk, sat down, and rested his head on folded arms. He gazed up at the alphabet cards above the chalkboard. A was for Angel; she hovered in the pinkish mists of a heavenly sky, strumming a harp. Webern let his eyes half-shut. Mrs. Welninski went back to grading papers. When the school day started, she congratulated him in front of the class.

"You've been an outstanding caregiver," she told him, raising her voice above his classmates' giggles. "We've all got a lot to learn from you." She unpeeled a sticky gold star from a sheet of wax paper and, holding it by one pointed ray, handed it to him.

As his classmates tittered and threw spitballs, Webern stared at the sticker on his finger. Was this really what she thought he wanted? What did a light bulb baby have to do with stars or grades or good examples? He loved Sunshine. He stuck the star onto his lunch box, and it became a supernova in the sky behind McCase.

"Thanks," he said. Across the room, Rusty Gillette blew a raspberry, and, as more giggles erupted, Mrs. Welninski whirled around.

"This behavior is unacceptable," she snapped. "You kids need to learn the value of responsibility. Every light bulb baby deserves a father like Webern."

The rest of the class hardly reacted to her

words, but Webern sat bolt upright, as though he'd just been struck by lightning. For the rest of the day, he could hardly stay in his chair. Of course he'd been a heartless fool to think only of Sunshine when so many others needed his help - if only that square-jawed ace of hearts had spoken sooner! But maybe he could redeem himself; but maybe it was too late. On the clock face, Wags, weak and weary, hefted the minute hand on stooped shoulders.

When the bell finally rang at three o'clock, Webern sprung from his seat with the sudden energy of a jack-in-the-box. He elbowed and shouldered and kned his way through the halls, but he was elbowed and shouldered and kned back. And when he finally got outside, puffing and bruised, his bike had disappeared from the rack.

Webern stared in disbelief at the empty slots between the metal bars; he touched the air where his bike should be. He thought of the time McCase's cargo rocket had vanished into a black hole. Then he looked slowly around the playground. The jungle gym, monkey bars, and swing sets stood naked and innocent. But, at the far end of the school yard, high in the branches of the playground's one tree, something glinted. Webern limped toward the imposing trunk and squinted up into the leaves. There it was: the streamers dangled down between forked branches. Vultures perched all around.

Webern abandoned the bike and hobbled home as fast as he could. For short bursts, he sprinted with a kind of asymmetrical grace, but most of the time, he lurched and panted. When he finally opened the door, he allowed himself a sigh of relief -- his sisters still weren't home -- but he Didn't bother to wake his dad, sprawled on the living room rug. Webern had business to attend to. He creaked straight upstairs to his rocket ship

room.

His mother never would have tolerated it: the bed sheets were tangled ropes, and discarded dirty clothes covered half his toys like scattered shrouds. Webern picked through the mess to one forgotten corner. Much to his relief, the basket he'd slept in as a newborn was still there, half-hidden under a Bugs Bunny sleeping bag. He dragged it into the middle of the room and lined it with a fuzzy blanket from his bed.

When he was younger, Webern had begged his mother to wrap him in a towel and tuck him in the wicker bassinet "like a tiny baby." Now, he suddenly wondered if there had ever been a time before he'd started longing for the past. Again, he remembered the snow globe he'd broken so long ago, and the soothing way his mother had taken the shards from his bleeding hands. How could something so beautiful turn to knives? But he pushed the thought out of his head. He couldn't let himself get sad. He had too much to do.

Webern carefully unbuckled the belt that held the lunchbox to his chest. He unlatched the top and gently placed Sunshine in the baby basket. She leaned against one wicker wall, smiling up at him.

"Be right back," he whispered, kissing her metal hat.

Webern went downstairs and through the door into the attached garage. He pulled the old wooden ladder out from under his father's tool bench and grabbed a screwdriver from a peg on the wall. Then he let himself back in the house, dragging the ladder behind him.

The first light bulb babies he rescued hung from the chandelier in the dining room. Webern didn't even need the ladder to reach these; he just stood on the table. Once he'd unscrewed all eight of the little orphans, he went upstairs and tucked them in the basket with Sunshine. Next, Webern

leaned the ladder against the wall of the living room. He had to be particularly quiet in there, since his father was still asleep on the floor. Holding his breath, Webern leaned backwards off the ladder, reaching up into the ceiling's crater where a solitary light bulb slept, brave and lonely as a spaceman.

To reach the light bulb babies on the kitchen ceiling, Webern had to stack dinette chairs on top of each other, since there was no wall near enough to lean the ladder against. Then he had to use the screwdriver to remove a frosted plastic dome that came loose all at once, almost making him lose his balance. After all that, the refrigerator proved something of a relief; he just reached inside and plucked the little Eskimo out. Lamps were easy too; under the tent-like shades, light bulb babies camped unhappily, waiting for a search party to come their way.

When Webern finished with the main rooms of the house, he tiptoed into his parents' bedroom, as if afraid of waking something that slept there. A dozen light bulb babies napped in a half-circle around his mother's vanity mirror, their plump little butts high in the air. These babies looked different than the ones in the rest of the house; they were rounder, chubbier, with shorter necks. Maybe they were newborns. Webern handled them with particular care; he only brought two up the stairs at a time, and he bundled them up in sock sleeping bags before snuggling them into the basket bed with their brothers.

Altogether, Webern rescued forty-three light bulb babies. Gathered together, they filled his bassinet quite snugly, and he was so relieved to have saved them all that tears came to his eyes, and kept coming with surprising force.

Sniffing, Webern went downstairs to the bathroom. He returned with a box of tissues. But, instead of blowing his nose, he stuffed the

narrow gaps remaining between the glassy bodies with wadded-up, unused Kleenex.

When he was finally satisfied with his handiwork, he wiped his eyes on his sleeve and brushed his hands together. Then he slid the basket beneath his bed and crawled under after it. Dust bunnies clung to his arms. He sneezed, then poked his head back out under the dangling bedspread. Now he lay eye level with his scattered and forgotten playthings: matchbox cars, animals, blocks, robots, jigsaw puzzles. He rested his cheek against the carpet. Webern felt like a wound-down wind-up toy. On the floor across the room, Wags stuck his head out of the pouch of a dusty stuffed kangaroo.

“Nice work, captain,” Wags said. He saluted. “You’ve got moxie.”

“A spaceman never panics on a mission,” Webern told him bravely. “I knew they were counting on me.”

“Well, keep up the good work. I better be hoppin’ along.” Wags snapped the straps of his lederhosen and ducked back down into the kangaroo pouch.

As the sun went down, the house turned brilliant colors: first pink, then orange, and then a rich bloody red. Webern sat for awhile with his glass nursery, keeping company, but as the darkness deepened, the cold pale bodies, motionless in the basket, began to remind him of some unpleasant, half-remembered dream. He crawled back out into the room before the memory could fully hit him.

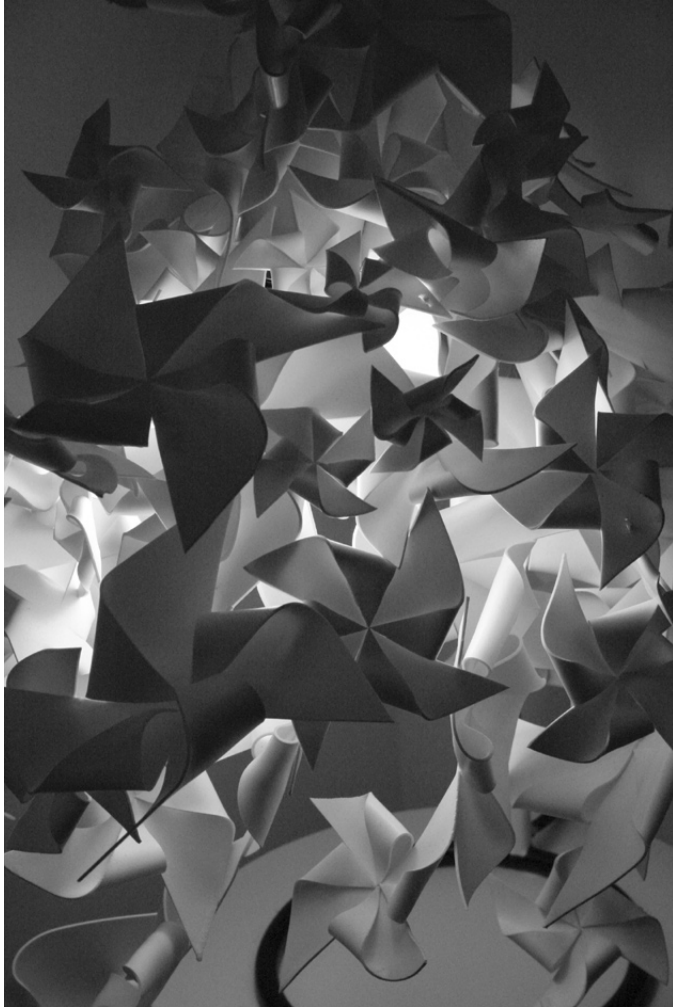
He went to his window and opened it wide. In the moonlight stretched his dark and empty

street. But in the distance, he could just see Willow and Billow coming up the sidewalk. Tonight, the girls were dressed as bed sheet ghosts, sheathed from head to toe; only their crude black outlines gave the disguise away. Webern stared as they drifted toward the house. His hands squeezed the windowsill. Thank God he’d saved the babies while he still could. His sisters would hoot and screech through all the rooms; their sheets would flap and snap like gunshots. They would knock over lamps. Webern knew he would stiffen with fear; he would be helpless and trembling, especially in the darkness. But at least the light bulb babies would be safe; there would never be another accident.

Webern looked away from his sisters and up into the sky. He perched on the windowsill. Tonight was so starry that, staring straight up, he almost felt like he could fly. Webern held tight to the window frame, then, for one precarious instant, released it. He felt himself teeter, flapped his arms, then grabbed hold again. Just kidding. No cause for alarm; no need for panic.

Webern thought again about that test for spacemen-in-training, the test to see if they could bear floating in outer space. He thought of his snow globe’s splattering, glittery crash, of his own plummet from the tree house, of his mother’s outline in chalk on the hard and bloody street. He imagined his light bulb babies spilling to the ground and shattering. Maybe the trick to passing the spaceman test was just remembering that falling wasn’t so bad; it was coming back down to earth that hurt.

Chandler Klang Smith
Bennington College



Kimia Ferdowsi
Washington University

DAYS OF RAIN

The day of rain, the earthworm thinks,
is just for him, the world becoming
wet through because he was drying
in his hole in the soil.

The earthworm expands and contracts
in a mysterious worm shuffle,
to the parking lots, puddles,
speed bumps, sidewalks.
The worm body becomes translucent,
newly cleansed, worm blood pumping
push-and-pull to the puddles, the cracks
between bricks, low spots, until the rain
stops.

The day after rain, the earthworm
finds himself littering the sidewalks
among his brethren, all dry curls of worm,
crunchy between bricks,
in the low spots of the parking lot.
They escaped toward the promise of life
outside the garden.

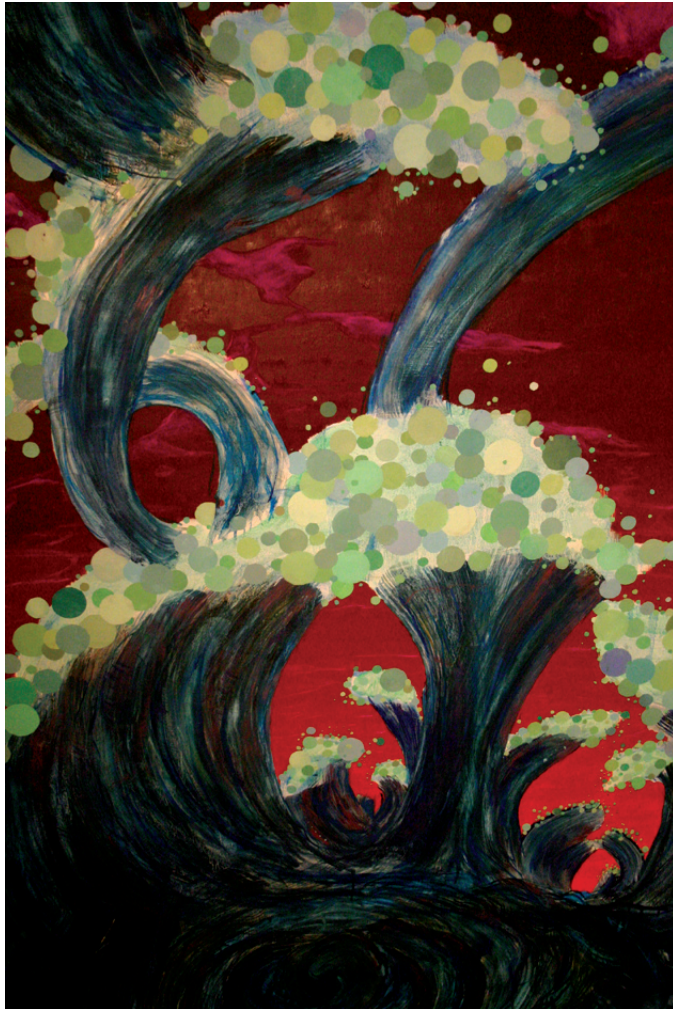
Arrie Brown
Georgia College and State University

Newton Did Not Listen Carefully

I am a particle embarnacled by time,
My shell wears thin in love or ruin, or both.
When the soft cellos shift pitches to richest sounds,
There are no other particles around to cling to.
I am an atom in the eve, and my garden is a volcano.
When it erupts the cellos crescendo and my knees become violins.
 Highly, and out of key, they shriek and clatter.
 And then I am matter destroyed.



Anonymous
Washington University



Jeff Stewart
Washington University

HEARTH: TWELVE FIGURES

1.

Sleeping over, I saw shadows move.
Grandma called them figments.
The figments lived all over.

2.

Cracks on the ceiling
made a woman's face.
The wallpaper looked like lions.

3.

In the closet,
a doll big as a girl slept in a box.
Sometimes I put on the doll's clothes.

4.

The old crib,
painted metal,
looked like a cage on stilts.

5.

I dug in her yard.
I found tin soldiers buried.
And arrowheads.

6.

A blackened tree,
lightning struck,
raised its arms to the sky.

7.
Heavy glass
rippled
the world outside.

8.
Tea pooled
thin and red
in bone china cups.

9.
The claw foot tub waddled
through my dreams
a porcelain hippopotamus.

10.
I wasn't supposed to open
the closet with the mirrored door.
I never did.

11.
In a locket,
I found a curl
of white hair.

12.
The house rattled
with traffic and trains.
Light made ghosts of the curtains.

Chandler Klang Smith
Bennington College



*Emiliano Huet-Vaughn
Washington University*

THE HOUR OF THE PEARL

monday predawn feels less like bleary habit and more like
sunday night's rich stew
a leaf-whirling of baseball

predawn postulates
wrapped in proofs of
careful and brooding and flowery

today's epiphany might be color
that the history of the world
will still be recorded in hues and tones

streetlights blink out
less and less like closing books
the night brightens

subtract for adding
the dark scuttles and color steps off
as lights leave and sun paces

John Kleinschmidt
Washington University

IN A LETTER

This place is a wasteland.
Train tickets are expensive,
flashy clothes are cheap.

Darkly painted people disappear
into converted churches to dance
and sweat. I can see from my window
a shifting constellation of glowing cigarettes.

By day, I see the markets, looking like nails—
strawberries and peppers splayed for tourists,
too precious for everyone else.

Meals, I've found, come in cardboard
packages from the mini-mart,
ingredients in English.

A city has no memory, it seems.

The harbor square doesn't remember
you, mother. The refinished buildings
deny being muscled aside by tanks
I've seen in photographs.

There isn't any indication in the cobblestones,
storefronts or traffic lights
(clicking green, yellow, red, yellow, green)
that any one person has lived here before.

I tried carving your name on a park bench
by writing it there over and over—
it read like a private joke.

But, because no one likes to be forgotten
(especially now that you're between passports)
I won't tell you any of this.

I won't scrawl that I haven't slept in weeks
for imagining the stomp of music from the street
is the sound of shells bursting,
that this is what you heard—
only to find the road swept blank by morning.

Instead, the pen writes, "the weather is cold,
like you told me it would be."
That much is still true.

Paula Brady
Yale University



Turner Williams
Washington University

FERAL

I was born in my mother's mouth
crude and wet, sticking to the wind
and know only one thing – dried leaves and dirt,
the holy sounds of wolves, pine needles –
by which I mean, hunger.
Sister, we never stop shivering or eating.
We huddle in the stiff fur of the dead.
Because I can, I keep my body to the ground
and will open it for no wild thing.
You want to know what the hunters know
and will go out to meet them with flowered
mud in your hair. I keep my nose against the soil.
I will not be a child who comes from
darkness on all fours, howling.

Lisa Hollenbach
Washington University



Alison Harrington
Washington University

WHAT SEX IS

The first night of what Pops called sex happened in the bathroom. You were home that night, awake late doing the dishes, even though they were already clean. When you came to say goodnight, you didn't say it, decided not to see what was happening behind my bathroom door. I didn't see anything either. The whole time, I kept my eyes closed.

Pops was my best friend. I say he was, because he was before he wasn't. You asked me once, when I was lying with you in bed, late at night, why someone gave a kid such a name. Do you remember the answer? His parents named him Pops because he's always been three years closer to puberty than anyone else his age, even from birth: he left his mother's womb with a more hair than normal and the beginning of two front teeth already poking through his gums. Pops, now twelve (not fifteen, but he likes it when you make that mistake) possesses the body and mind of a late stage teenager; he has tiny nicks on his face from a razor and a few small hairs on his chin that he calls a goatee. You think his hyper-development has something to do with the name his parents gave him. When I first told you about Pops, you said "See, that's why I didn't name you Killer."

And so you decided to name me Seymour, which isn't much better, especially in the fifth grade. I tell the other kids to call me C, but with a name like Seymour how can they resist? They break my name in half and pronounce it in two.

Hey C-More is how they say it.

They say my name friendly because they have to. My relationship with Pops saved me from falling off that social cliff. Pops can protect people just by his presence, whether he is there or not. When Pops stopped our friendship, the protection

went with it.

This is one of the things I think about, the nights I cannot sleep, the nights I spend walking on the ceiling. It's like being on the floor, but on the ceiling; instead of dirty laundry and furniture, I avoid light fixtures and ceiling fans. The doors are problems, too—the knob is too high to reach when not standing on the floor. That's why, when you tuck me into bed at night, I ask you to leave my door open as you turn off my light. (Don't worry, Mom. My feet stay on the ground while I pretend I am on the ceiling).

I played this game mostly during the days it took the roofer to come to patch up the hole in my ceiling. The hole went clean through the roof; at night you could see the stars from my bed. When you asked how I made the hole in the roof, I said "I dunno, an animal must've done it."

"What kind of animal?" you asked.

"A big one," I said, which we agreed, in the silence of our nodding heads, was a good enough lie for the both of us.

I'd never told anyone until now about how I walked on the ceiling. I didn't even tell Pops. You're the first.

* * *

Pops said lots of things to me that I didn't understand. But because Pops was doing the talking, I listened and pretended to know. It's not the words he said that made me listen, but the way spoke them. Whatever he told me felt like a secret, and was one.

"Barbie doesn't have a clitoris," Pops said, standing atop the toilet seat with the fluffy blue cover, in the bathroom you remodeled for me, because "Big boys take showers, not bubble baths." Pops likes to steal Barbies from girls in our class. With the two fingers that weren't needed to

hold her in one hand, Pops traced circles around the lumps on Barbie's chest. These lumps, Pops explained, were Barbie's rack.

"Really," I said, trying to swallow my yawn as though it were a handful of marshmallows. I was sitting propped above the tile by a shoebox stuffed with basketball cards instead of shoes, elbow on my knee, an open palm cupping my chin. Had I leaned any further forward, I would have fallen off the shoebox. It was the time of night when TV stations show either infomercials or static and, against my will, I was nearly asleep. With anyone other than Pops, I'd have been sleeping for several hours by then. Pops threw Barbie into the corner of the room, next to the crumpled shirt that, two minutes prior, covered his chest. Small sprouts of black hair sprung from Pops' armpits when he moved. Pops is the oldest kid in the fifth grade, and the only one with hair under his arms. In Pops' fashion, he did a karate-style spin kick off the toilet, onto the floor, so gracefully that it looked like he was doing ballet rather than showing off. Pops could do that, mean two different things at the same time.

"You heard of the species of fly that can French kiss?" Pops said, half buzzing, still shirtless.

"Can they do karate, too?" I asked. Pops put his hands on my shoulders. He was standing in the blind spot behind my head.

"The Ser-rom-yia fem-or-ata," he said with great difficulty. "They have sex and French kiss, and afterwards the female sucks the guts out of the male through the mouth." He recited this last part in the same tone he uses for multiplication tables. Then Pops told me about the Junior High girl.

"We French kissed under the bleachers, right before we did it," he said.

"Did what?"

"You know—fucked. Sex."

But I didn't know. Pops asked me if I'd ever had sex. Of course, I said. When he asked with whom, I told him it was a girl from sleep-away camp last summer.

I actually did hold hands with that girl at summer camp. We did it hiding in the bushes. She stared at the reflection of her face in my eyes. I love you, she said. On the ground behind her, I watched platoons of ants carry crumbs on their backs. The girl and I never talked about sex. From watching PG-13 movies, I thought sex had something to do with men wanting to make babies without actually making them.

"How big is your prick?" Pops asked.

"How big is yours?"

He thrust his waist outward, like a seventh grade girl compensating for her lack of chest by arching her back, and put his hand far in front of his waist to show me exactly how big it was. "Eleven and a half inches" he said.

"Me too."

"Prove it," he said.

"You prove it."

He leaned down, without any particular sense of urgency, like he was going to tie his shoelaces, and tried to undo the button of my pants. In avoiding, I fell off the shoebox and onto the floor.

"Fine, then take off your shirt," he said.

"One or the other or, if neither, both."

On pool day at school, I am the only kid who wears a shirt that doesn't have a real excuse. My stomach is not composed of flabby folds. I do not have sensitive skin, even though that's what the note I forge says. When it comes time to go in the pool, I jump in with my shirt on and, afterwards, change in the bathroom stall at the back of the locker room. But this wasn't school. This was Pops, so I took off my shirt and pants. I was still wearing the boxers you'd given me at Christmas,

the blue ones with the basketball players on it.

Pops picked up my shoebox and placed it in front of the full body mirror. When Pops flexed his muscles, I stepped up onto the card-filled shoebox and did the same. Looking in the mirror, I could see that, even with the shoebox, Pops was a about a basketball taller than I was. His wrists were the size of my biceps.

“See, I’m stronger than you,” he said. That means I have a bigger prick.”

“What do muscles have to do with it?”

When I said this, Pops pulled down his pants, showing me his prick. It was the size of a Cheetoh.

“It’s not hard yet,” Pops said, anticipating my question. “It gets big when it gets hard.”

When I asked Pops how to make it hard, he told me to put my mouth on it. I told him I’d much rather believe him than touch his prick, let alone put my mouth on it. “What else makes it hard?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Only mouths. The mouth is like the secret password of the prick.” A little while later, we heard you come into my bedroom to check if we were sleeping. The bedroom was empty. We were around the corner, behind the bathroom door, in the middle of doing what Pops called sex. You didn’t say goodnight, but when we returned to my room the bed was turned down, neatly and with love.

What Pops called sex happened several times actually, mostly the week after Pops’ brother was home from college. Whenever we’d do it I’d close my eyes, walk out my room upside down, wander the house while walking on the ceiling. Sometimes late at night, while you were sleeping, I’d quietly visit you.

* * *

Pop’s vocabulary expanded with each of his brother’s visits. After this most recent visit, Pops

started using new words that I’d never heard: orgasm, clitoris, and cognitive psychology.

Pops calls his brother Webster, not Jack, his brother’s real name, because Webster is Jack’s middle name and being called Webster turns Jack a funny shade of red. Pops plays every sport Webster played when he was his age. Until recently, I’d only seen Pops cry twice—once was when he accidentally shot his dog. The other was when his brother left for college.

I never told you about the dog and the handgun. Pops’ father didn’t want me to tell you about it. He didn’t make me promise, though.

It was the summer you first started covering my eyes whenever couples kissed; I was seven, Pops was nine, and we were already best friends, but new ones. I don’t remember how Pops and I got that way, became so close. You said it happened when he found out I had lots of basketball cards. I collected the cards of players with funny names, players like Anthony Bonner and Sarunus Marcuilionis. Pops called these players underrated. “No one knows how good they’re going to be,” he said. “People with names like these are destined for greatness.” Pops traded guys with funny names to me for players that were on all-star teams, or one day would be. I became friends with Pops because he had funny name and wanted to be friends with me.

Now, about the dog and the handgun:

We were learning about subtraction. Pops demonstrated the idea nicely when he subtracted one of the handguns from the metal trunk in his father’s closet. His father was lifting weights in the basement, listening to music from a CD player strapped to his hip. He wore the kind of headphones that look like a pair of hearing aids and capable of blasting music so loud that it can drown out gunshots.

Pops took me into the backyard and showed

me how he could subtract a couple bullets into the sky. Tied to a tree was Pops' twenty pound named Pizza, hopelessly trying to swallow a tennis ball.

"Watch what I taught him," Pops said, pointing with the gun. He took the tennis ball from his dog's mouth and threw it in the bushes. Pops had taught Pizza how to beg every time he said Pepperoni. At least that's what he told me. When he tried to get the dog to do the trick, Pizza barked. I'd never seen anything disobey Pops, least of all a dog as tall as his ankles. Pizza was spinning in circles now, howling at the sky. Pops pointed the gun at Pizza, shouting Pepperoni, Pepperoni. He told the dog to shut up or else. The dog kept barking, Pops got a little too excited, and accidentally subtracted a dog from his family. I looked at Pops and he looked back. There wasn't much to say. The dog was alive and then it wasn't.

Pops wrote the cover-up, to be given to his father. Pops became so excited about covering up the mistake that he didn't realize he'd actually made one. We went into the bathroom to practice our we-don't-know-where-the-dog-is expressions, to practice the lines Pop's had written.

"I need you to say something about the weather. Like how the sky is pretty today or something to throw him off, so this doesn't look planned. And when he asks us where Pizza is, we pretend like we don't know where to look, and when my Dad finds him, we play it like a shock and ask him what happened."

The plan might have actually worked had we not left the handgun on the kitchen counter. Pops maintained his innocence till the end. He wouldn't even admit the dog was dead.

"If he's not dead, what is he?" asked Pops' father.

Pops got the container of liver treats from the

cupboard. He took a couple out and kneeled in front of Pizza.

"Mmmmmmm" he hummed, holding the liver treats in his hand, under the dog's mouth. He gently dropped a treat onto Pizza's nose. Pizza didn't move, didn't even flinch. The treat bounced off the dog's nose, into blood beside it.

Pops' father grabbed Pop's wrist and lifted him off the ground. He made us hose down the dog and ordered Pops to carry it to the dumpster. It was as though he were disciplining Pops for being the neglectful owner of a goldfish, and the punishment was to flush the fish down the toilet. We transported the dog via a pedal operated BMW mini-car. Pops drove; Pizza lay across a towel in the passenger seat. I followed on foot, but took over driving the homemade hearse when Pops, momentarily realizing his dog would not wake up, moved his hands from the wheel to his face, where I couldn't see him cry.

When we got to the dumpster, Pops couldn't lift the dog out of the BMW by himself. He had a good grip on the head and waist, but Pizza's back paws slumped on the cement. I picked up the other half. Pops eyes were red, but he'd stopped crying. Pops made bad situations better by pretending they weren't actually happening.

"This is like burying a dead body, a mafia man," Pops said, struggling to look over his shoulders to make sure no rival Mafioso were watching.

We heaved the dog into the dumpster. "They'll make us made men for this one," he continued. "We'll be part of the family. No more fighting for respect, no more looking behind our backs."

When you picked me up later, Pops had forgotten about the mafia hitman scenario. He was lying in the backyard, piling up tissues in a trashcan. The second time Pops cried was comparatively simple. Webster drove away in his

car and Pops locked himself in the closet. I saw him sniffing a few hours later, when he finally came out.

The weekends Webster spent at home, he drove a red convertible and hung his arm—what was left of it—out the window. A couple years before, Webster had that same arm out the window when he flipped a different red convertible into a ditch. The part of his arm that stayed attached to his body looked like a car wreck. Despite the injury, Webster still insisted on driving at least twice above the speed limit, because “Real men do double what they’re supposed to.”

Webster liked to take Pops out with him on the Fridays he was home. They parked outside the local high school, sipping sodas and scoping out the girls. Pops said high school girls only wore clothes because there was a taboo against going to school naked. Later, at night, Webster took Pops to parties where, as Pops put it, “We try to get those girls to take their clothes off.” Pops invited me to do this with him once. All the crazy people in the world come out after ten o’clock and I don’t want you out with them was what you said when I asked if I could go.

Pops found other ways to involve me with his brother: “The Experiments” Pops called them. We did The Experiments because Pops didn’t believe everything his brother told him. We had to test them to be sure. Once, after telling Pops the story of the Ser-rom-yia fem-or-ata fly, Webster told Pops another fact about flies.

“You know how to kill those little buzzers? A glass of soapy water and a ceiling. You trap the fly between the two and, after a few seconds, it falls dead into the glass.”

Pops and I tried this one. We couldn’t reach the ceiling, so we smeared some poop on the underside of Pops’ dining room table, which

we would then use like a ceiling to trap the flies. Minutes later, we confirmed that Pops’ brother was right—the flies fell dead into the salty water, but after minutes instead of seconds. As with all our experiments, we always found something was a little off.

The hole in my ceiling that kept me from sleeping resulted from one of our experiments. An animal didn’t do it. Pops and I made the hole the same day we stole acid from the science lab at the junior high down the street. You told me it was wrong to steal but, technically, I didn’t do the stealing—I watched Pops do it.

Pops liked to think of the theft as a military operation in hostile territory. He wore camouflage army gear and a black headband. In his pockets were two walkie-talkies and a pair of pocketknives in case, as Pops put it, “anyone got in our way.” Both pocketknives were for Pops. He brought a butter knife for me.

We didn’t have to use our knives. Someone left the front door of the school unlocked. The acid was behind a glass door with a skeleton on it.

“Webster brought some of this home when he was in high school,” Pops said. “We experimented on it with a squirrel. The acid ate straight through its skull and part way into the metal dumpster the squirrel was on top of.”

“That’s terrible,” I said.

“No,” he said. “The squirrel was already dead.”

When we stole the acid this time, Pops knew exactly what to do with it.

“I’ll bet you five bucks that it’ll eat through your roof,” he said.

Five minutes later and Pops was on top of the paint-chipped roofing above my room, pouring a test-tube’s worth of acid onto the wooden panels. In the end no money exchanged hands, because the acid did more than eat clean through the roof—it

bit through the bedding and ran out of strength halfway into my mattress. I moved my pillow down a couple inches to cover up the damage to the bed. After Pops left, I returned the empty test-tube to the junior high, even though that was only half of what we stole. I couldn't return the acid because it was gone, all used up. You told me once it's never too late to do the right thing, but what can you do when it is?

* * *

"Maybe it's the spit, not the mouth," I said, when Pops told me that the mouth was the secret password of the prick. I took a cup from my bathroom counter, spit in it several times, and filled the rest up with tap water.

"What are you doing?" Pops asked. He was lying on the floor, curled up in a ball, leaning his head forward in an effort to try and put his prick in his own mouth.

I handed Pops the cup. "Try that," I said. Pops stood up and eagerly thrust his prick into the water. It didn't get hard; it just got wet.

"I told you," Pops said. "Only the mouth does it. Try it. You'll see,"

"How do I do it?"

"Do it like a goldfish," Pops said, sitting on the ledge of my bathroom counter. He puffed his cheeks outward, then pulled them inward. "Like that," he said, "but faster."

I closed my eyes and tried. Pops screamed. "Not like a shark!" Pops said, pushing my face away.

"Goldfish have small mouths," I said. "If I did it like a goldfish I'd have to not do it at all." Even though I did it wrong, I could tell Pops was right. His Cheetoh now looked bigger, more the size of a miniature pickle.

"So do it like a big fish with a big mouth that lost all its teeth."

I tried what Pops said. He seemed pleased. "How do you like eleven and a half inches," he whispered.

When I became tired, I coughed his Cheetoh out of my mouth.

"You can't stop," Pops said, looking down at me. I continued coughing, even exaggerated the effect as an excuse to stop. Pops got off the counter, filled up a cup of water.

"It wasn't that good, anyway," Pops said, kneeling by my side, handing me the water.

"What'd I do wrong?" I asked.

I drank the water, gulped it down. Pops didn't answer my question with words. He'd do that a lot—answer with the actions words tried to mean but never could. He drew pictures of elephants on my back with his finger and whispered sorry in my ear. He helped me up, took off my boxers, and showed me the proper way to do what he'd wanted.

* * *

On the weekends, Pops and I played sports next to the junior high, at the local park. I never told you this because it was one of our secrets. I don't believe in secrets anymore.

Pops and I registered at the park down by ourselves. Just us two, Pops and I. On Saturday mornings, while you thought I was at Pops' house, Pops and I played roller hockey on a court meant for basketball. Pops scored the most goals on the team, despite playing defense. When he didn't score, the other team stole the puck and charged towards me, past a defense turned offense, leaving me to fend off the oncoming force by myself. He did similar things in other sports, too. Pops liked to wrestle on my racecar bed, in our underwear. It was fully clothed before it was in our underwear, but Pops didn't want me to rip his shirt, or we'd get so sweaty that we'd have to strip. In the summers, when the sun scorched my room, we wore

less than underwear.

You walked in on us once, wrestling in the summer. Do you remember? We were battling each other to see how quickly Pops could put me in a headlock, and how long it'd take me to get out of it. As a counter-offensive, I pulled hard on Pop's prick. We stopped and held our positions like ice sculptures when we saw you in the doorway, staring at us. But you left as quickly as you'd appeared, closing the door and retreating back through the hall as if you were the one who had done something.

* * *

The night I learned that Pops didn't want to be friends anymore was the night you drove me to the hospital, to have the gash on my forearm sewn up. It was also the day Webster left to go back to school, so he could "get back to sexing the nice piece of ass in the next-door dorm."

"When you lay a girl," Webster said, instructing Pops "never give her pause. Act confident. Unflinching. What are you now—fourteen? Fifteen? Well overdue, whatever you are. Sex can always be yours if you've got the balls to take it."

Beaming with pride, Pops mentioned our sex. A sound came from Webster's nose. His mouth didn't open long enough to say anything. The two brothers, entirely different looks on their faces, turned to me for confirmation. Smiling and silent, I nodded my head.

Webster took Pops out of the room. I lost them there.

* * *

Later, back at home, Pops and I traded basketball cards; I was trying to negotiate a deal for Zydrunas Ilgauskas. Pops wanted the card of a player named Peter Stevens, who was apparently a front runner for basketball's rookie of the year.

"Zydrunas is underrated" Pops said. "In a

couple years, he'll be playing aside Stevens in the all-star game." Zydrunas was the coolest name I'd ever encountered in my extensive basketball-card-trading history, so we made the deal.

Pops had brought over a Beckett, that magazine that says how much the cards are worth. You'd bought me one once and vowed to never again when you found it in my New York Knicks trashcan a day later. But because this Beckett was Pops', I was curious, so I opened it up to look up the cards we'd traded. Pops was sitting on the edge of my racecar bed, flipping the channels on the TV, squinting in between the static, trying to see the racks of real girls that looked like Barbie.

The value of the Peter Stevens card I traded to Pops wasn't hard to find. It was number three on the top ten hot cards list, \$17 and going up. Peter Steven's wasn't the only player I recognized on the list. I noticed four other cards on the top ten list that I'd traded to Pops. I looked up Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Anthony Bonner, Sarunus Marciulionis, and all the other funny names Pops had traded me. They weren't anywhere in the book. They were commons, each worth about three cents. They were not underrated, because no one even bothers to rate them. And they certainly never play on all star teams. Commons rarely ever play. I looked at Pops, sitting on my bed, squinting at my television set.

"I think I see a woman," Pops said, leaning closer to the television set. "Or maybe a tree."

Before I knew what I was doing, I ran at him like a baseball player rounding third, heading not for home plate, but for the catcher. I flung my body at him; together, we tumbled onto to floor. Pops was still holding Peter Stevens in his hand. That hand was shaking.

"You bent the corner." Pops said, examining the card.

"I want it back."

“No trade backs.”

“I’m not asking for a trade back,” I said. “I want the card.”

Pops threw the card behind him, into the wall.

“I’m going to pee,” he said. He walked around me, stepped onto my racecar and down again, on his way to the bathroom. He must have been in the bathroom for almost an hour, until my anger was overpowered by another, weaker emotion.

“Wanna do a swordfight?” I suggested, through the wall. He’d locked the door.

“Shut up—faggut.” Pops said, struggling with the last word, as if saying it for the first time.

“What’s the password?” I asked.

“There isn’t one.”

“You can have the card back—the Peter Stevens. I really don’t care that much.”

“The corner is bent,” he said. “It’s worthless now.”

“Maybe we could fix it, bend the corner the other way.”

“There’s still a crease in the cardboard,” he said. Pops said the next part like the overly-preentious card collecting snob that he wasn’t. “I only collect cards in mint condition.”

I didn’t know what to do, so I asked Pops.

When Pops didn’t answer, I asked him about sex—if he wanted it.

Pops opened the bathroom door. His eyebrows were raised high, his forehead wrinkled. Pops looked serious. Pops was never serious.

“No,” he said. “I only suck clit.”

This had already been written, they’d planned it out. His plan went as smoothly as the one with his dog. This time, Pops didn’t write the words himself, but he probably practiced them in the bathroom. He took the words from a movie, one starring mad scientists and secret agents. Pops was

the secret agent.

“Remember all the time we’ve spent together, all the things we’ve done?”

I nodded.

“Well, forget them. They’re ended,” he said, his voice wavering between a boy’s and man’s, as if he was going through puberty all over again.

“And, if you say anything, I’ll end you.”

I almost laughed. Almost, because before I could Pops pulled out his pocketknife and sliced open my forearm. In the movie, this is where I scream, but I didn’t. This was real. The cut didn’t hurt, but the blood stained the carpet. Pops took hold of the bottom of my shirt and used it to wipe the red off his pocketknife, stuffed it back into his pocket. When it became clear that the blood wouldn’t stop, that the real blood that needed concealing was the blood coming out my arm, Pops’ composure, or lack of it, was equally real.

“Stop bleeding,” he said, “or I’ll cut you again.”

I didn’t know how to stop bleeding, but I tried to anyway. I tried, in the sense that I closed my eyes and walked on the ceiling.

“Stop bleeding,” Pops said, louder this time. “Use your hand.”

Outside, I heard specks of snow knocking quietly against my bedroom window. I tried to let them in, but I couldn’t reach standing on the ceiling, or from where I really was, frozen to the floor in front of Pops.

I didn’t cry, not during the whole mess (later that night, the doctors explained away the delayed pain as due to “shock”). Pops was the one that did it. He cried like he did for Pizza. There were tears and sniffles, snot hanging from his rim of his nose like melting icicles clinging to the bottom of an overpass. I didn’t know what to do, so I did what you would do when I am crying. I found the tissue box, gave the whole thing to Pops. He

went through half the box, throwing tissues on the carpet to keep the blood from staining. Pops didn't leave the tissues on the floor. When he was done crying, he picked them up, tossed them in the trashcan. I thought you'd appreciate that—his manners—but when you came in you didn't seem to notice. You hurried me into the car as I passed out and, when I awoke later, told me that Pops had left my life for good.

"It's no reason to get upset," you said. "They'll clean up the wound. We probably won't even be able to see the scar, in time."

* * *

You're sitting with me on the edge of my racecar bed now, reading the animal book. This is the same book you read to me when I was four, and you read it now knowing I'm far too old for it. You say you think the animal book is funny because there's more about insects in the animal book than there is about animals.

The stitches in my arm itch. I scratch them. You take my scratching hand and place it in yours. "If it bothers you," you say, "then don't think

about it."

When your attention is back to the book, I rub the arm with stitches against my bed.

We're on the page that has pictures and facts relating to flies when I remember Pops and the story about the Ser-rom-yia fem-or-ata, which I tell to you despite knowing I shouldn't, like the time in kindergarten that I said "Shit" when the teacher asked for words beginning with a "Shhh" sound.

And before you can express your surprise, I ask: "Can people do this too? When people French kiss and have sex, can the mate suck the life out of the male through the mouth?" I close the animal book and place it on my pillow, below the hole in the ceiling that keeps me from sleeping, above the depression in my bed that shouldn't be there.

You don't even know what sex is, you say, picking back up the book, turning your eyes downward.

Yes, I say. I know what sex is.

Sex is when your friend doesn't want to be friends with you anymore.

Eric Wolff
Washington University

RESIDUE

Wet paint.

On the fingers of a child
who cannot read
the sign.

That starlight is older than our Universe,
he says.
She rests her head atop the faint
traces on his shoulder.

The house was built of exactly
one thousand bricks.
He used four logs in his fireplace.
And two matches.
Any more would have been
too many.

She exits.

they are holding
signs of what had been
inside her.
Screaming.

Please change the
channel before it
pollutes
this room.

The guests are coming.
The cleaning will not be
finished.
The doorknob closing behind them
is laden with fingerprints.

Across your hand isn't as
far
as it looks.
Perhaps we can build a bridge
between our
incandescent failures.

New flowers.
The earth is stiff and cold.

She cries.

I saw the hand
(albeit too late)
and felt the sting
only a mirror could
verify.

I fell down the stairs.

Again.

She said to finish
because somewhere
children were starving.

Mud clinging to their shorts
might have given them away.

The trees were privy to their secret.

What if the face
pressed to the glass
watching you drive away
were your own?

Would you tell him the
airplane game is over?

Liz Neukirch
Washington University



*Amy Sapan
Washington University*

FINGERSPELLING

Firsthand absorption.
A body bending into letters
And back, speaking, the only sound
Is the rearranged wind

Bending around the fingers.
A mouth without words
A mind silent unto itself, speaking,
The only sound left is the breathing

In and out, a rhythm of the body,
Music without sound.
Deafclap
Hands shaking towards the stage.

Feel the coldbursts of gathered noise
Echoing in your throat
Would this be what it is to speak
Without knowing what words mean?

James McAnally
Washington University

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