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Dialogue

Staff and writers of Dialogue

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Contributors

Kara Breems wishes those mice would just be quiet and let her sleep.

In addition to playing catch with his children, Dale Brown teaches American literature and hangs out (with great hope) at a racquetball court. He is old enough to know better.

Sarah Byker smells bad sometimes.

Jeff Casemier is going to lock himself in the darkroom with a coyote for five days.

Jon Den Hartigh says, “I disapprove of logic like Holly.”

Elizabeth Duffield likes dead flowers and Tuesday nights at Billy’s.

If you’re interesting, gorgeous, and intelligent, please call Matt Faraci at 957-7079.

Michael Heerema lost at checkers to the Monkey.

Mark Johnson’s theory is that Skinner likes dogfood.

When Sherry Koll Levy retires she hopes to become Emily Dickinson.

Nora Lagerway says, “...in fact, I realized that’s what bumpers are for...meow.”

Luke Pals thinks tolerance and intolerance are good friends, and big meanies.

Carin Palsrok says there’s nothing quite like a tall glass of apple juice.

Greg Scholtens seeks drop dead gorgeous SDCRCF who likes walks in the parks, 80’s music, fine wine, and kids in general.

Todd Slager is made up of: water, carbon, sugar, caffeine, and yellow #5.

Matt Smith invites you to write him at msmith23 if you like or hate his “stuff.”

Steve Smith makes his own crack.

Jacoba Sytsma digs tall Canadian men in gator boots.

Peter Szto teaches social work and loves documentary photography.

Lambert J. Van Poolsen loves Kay, popcorn, Monday Night Football, and words one at a time.

Michael VanderBrug quotes Daniel Lanois, from the album For the Beauty of Wynona: “I’m still learning to crawl.”

The Calvin College Dialogue

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Timothy J. Veltman can’t understand why more people don’t like their fish raw.
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In the fall when the leaves are down, I know a girl who talks about pasting them back in the trees, and my grown-up neighbors rake their lawn across the street. Other leaves get wet in the ditches and slowly dissolve in dim puddles, like Cornflakes left in a bowl of milk. And this is beautiful too. In the fall, I do not know what to do.

Of course it is difficult to say exactly what Robert Frost meant by the phrase “What to make of a diminished thing.” But I think he meant to say that it was fall, and furthermore, that there is some decrescendo to our lives that drowns out everything else. Even little kids know what twilight is. There is no one for whom time is not slipping by. So I watch the figures moving through the dying light to see what they make of a diminished thing, and in them I have found two kinds of inertia, the inertias of movement and of stillness.

The inertia of movement is like pasting red leaves back in the trees, or like raking a lawn even while more leaves are still falling. It is like the thing we have always been taught to do in seminars—making the world a better place. But at the same time as we make our minuscule difference, we feel slightly always the futility of the thing we do: if the leaves are hung back in the maples or stowed in neat heaps now, then it will be windy tonight and we’ll wade through them again in the morning; if we spend an evening in a soup kitchen, then it’s only a few hours of hunger we’ve warded off on the way; in spite of all our efforts, trees fall silently enough in protected forests, and the adults we’ve taught to spell say they have nothing to write down.

Then there is the other kind of inertia. Stillness is like knowing that in everything there is a glowing: that all decay is somehow radioactive and phosphorescent, that light is shed everywhere, even in the brown meal of wet leaves in the gutter and their raspiness on the sidewalk before it begins to rain. Such inertia is the feeling that the clouds are cut out against the sky—you can see things that clearly—and deep inside you picture others’ heartbeats as the sudden movement of a scarlet bird. But
again there comes back and remains that same feeling of uselessness. It is as though, just because you’re holding so still thinking, it begins to seem like everyone else is moving with special purpose, instead of being rendered immobile, like you, by the beauty of the world.

And in this world, where the days keep growing shorter, I used to believe that there must be a greater nobility to one or the other inertia. But I think we’re all too old to quite believe in that now. We know that we try to sustain ourselves alternately by an endless series of helpful gestures or by the poise to remain motionless. But either way we try to survive, it is inevitable that certain things will fall apart like autumn does and that’s the thing our lives seem a little hopeless for knowing.

But actually if you were to ask me what to make of a diminished thing, I would say if anything’s more beautiful than hope I don’t know what it is, even in a dissipating world. Of course real life is not about keeping the ground from being littered with autumn. It is not even about one or the other inertia—those are just the states of mind that come and go, whether we reach in or away.

Rather, being human is about lasting in the dusk. And reality is that optimistic patience that keeps us from falling apart beyond repair.

The leaves look like dehydrated butterflies in the wind, like something being saved for later. So I watch figures moving through the dying light, making the most of a diminished thing. --jane c. knol
21 lines on water

the warming silence comes slowly
to me as my ears become
numb to the insistent clapping of
the waves outside
my chamber’s walls.
i see shapes that rest in my
eyes as this boat, this ship,
breaks the skin of the ocean
that is not here
to smile upon me.
have i been brought here to die?
i would not care about
you or any of this if it was
not for your very
reason for being.
you cradle me and numb me, but
how many wonders have you
seen? with my vessel and soul
i sail you without mind,
but you would be here without me.
you would be here without me.

--Todd Slager
Nighthawk was an ugly bird. His face was covered with chicken soup-y spots, and his flat beak opened all the way to his ears. And his legs were so weak he couldn't even walk a yard. Merely looking at him disgusted the other birds. Skylark, for example, was hardly himself a beautiful bird, yet he thought so highly of himself that every time he met Nighthawk, he petulantly closed his eyes and turned his head the other way. Even the littler birds bad-mouthed Nighthawk.

“Hey ... there he is again. Look at him, he really gives a bad name to bird-kind.”

“Yeah. Look at that mouth ... looks like he ought to belong to the frog family or something, doesn’t he?”

That’s the way it went. If only he were a hawk and not a nighthawk. These superficial little birds would tremble merely at the sound of his name and cowering, hide themselves in the trees.

But Nighthawk was neither one of Hawk’s siblings, nor even a relative. Instead, he was only the elder brother of the beautiful Kingfisher and — the jewel of all birds — Hummingbird. Kingfisher ate his fish and Hummingbird drank his nectar, and Nighthawk ... Nighthawk ate his insects. And since neither his claws nor his beak were very sharp at all, Nighthawk struck no fear whatsoever into the weaker birds.

It was nice to have Hawk’s name as part of his. It meant that Nighthawk’s wings were incredibly strong, and as he soared, slicing through the air, he looked just like Hawk, and his piercing cry was, in some respects, quite similar to Hawk’s. Of course, Hawk was terribly bothered and quite a bit disgusted by all this. Merely looking at Nighthawk’s face made Hawk angry. Nighthawk has got to change his name, he said to himself.

One evening, Hawk finally went and visited Nighthawk.

“Hey! You home? What’s with this name of yours? You have no shame, do you? You and I, we are utterly different. I, for example, can fly anywhere I please. But you, you can only go out at night. Or only if it’s cloudy. Or dark. And look at this beak, these claws of mine. Compare them to yours ...”

“Hawk! This is absurd. It’s not as if
I selfishly chose my name. God gave it to me."

"Hah! It’s fine for you to say you got it from God. But really, it might as well be from me: it’s just my name with ‘night’ tacked on. Well, I’ll be going now."

"Hawk! This is absurd."

"Whatever. I’ll give you a good name. ‘Ichizou.’ Yeah, Ichizou. That’s a good name, don’t you think? Now you’ve got to announce your new name. Alright? Okay, get a board, write ‘Ichizou’ on it, hang it around your neck and go around to everyone’s places and announce: ‘From now on, I am Ichizou.’"

"I can’t visit everyone!"

"Sure you can. You will. If you haven’t by the day after tomorrow, I’ll strangle you. Think about it: I’ll strangle you. I’ll be up early the day after tomorrow, house by house visiting all the birds, to see whether or not you’ve been by. If there’s even one house you haven’t been to ... that’s the end of you."

"But that’s impossible! If you’re going to make it that hard, you may as well kill me right now."

"Nah ... I’ll worry about that later. Ichizou isn’t that bad a name.” Spreading his huge wings, Hawk flew back to his nest.

Nighthawk silently closed his eyes and thought. Why on earth does everyone hate me so? It’s my face — covered with chicken soup-y spots — and this gash of a mouth. But for that, I haven’t done anything wrong. Once, one of White-eye’s chicks fell from the nest, and I brought it safely back. And White-eye jerked her chick from me, as if I were some thief returning stolen goods. And she laughed at me. And now, I have to hang a placard around my neck, and call myself ‘Ichizou.’ Such a bitter pill ...

Darkness had fallen around Nighthawk and he flew from his nest. The clouds hung low, glowing angrily. Nighthawk flew around the soundless sky, skimming the edge of the clouds. Then, opening his mouth wide, he suddenly folded his wings back and fell from the sky like an arrow, filling his mouth with insects. As he was about to hit the earth, Nighthawk opened his wings again and quickly soared back up into the sky.

The clouds had darkened to a mouse-gray, and on a far-off mountain, a brush fire burned deep red. And as Nighthawk despondently flew through the air, it seemed that the world had been divided in two. Then Nighthawk caught a single beetle, a single writhing beetle that he immediately swallowed. But as he did, he felt a shiver run down through his belly.

The clouds had now become completely black, but in the east, they reflected the deep red of the brush fire. It was terrible, Nighthawk thought, flying back up into the sky. Nighthawk caught another beetle. And then he felt a violent scratching in his throat. Impossibly, Nighthawk swallowed it. Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through Nighthawk’s breast, and in a loud voice, he let out a cry. Nighthawk flew round and round and round the sky, crying as he did.

Ah ... Every night I kill a hundred, a thousand bugs and beetles. And now Hawk is going to kill me. Such a bitter pill. Ah, so bitter ... so bitter. I should just stop eating and die of starvation. No, Hawk would strangle me long before that. But even before that, I’d flee to a place far, far away.

The brush fire had gradually spread out like flowing water, and the clouds too, seemed to be burning. Nighthawk flew straight to the place of his younger brother, beautiful Kingfisher. The beautiful King-
fisher had already woken and seen the fire in the distance. And then, Nighthawk flew up to him.

"Good evening elder brother. Why such a hurry?"

"I am leaving for the far country soon, so I came because I wanted to talk to you."

"Elder Brother! You can't go. Hummingbird lives so far away. You'd leave me here all alone."

"Yeah ... but it can't be helped. Say no more. And when you've got to eat don't play with the fish. Just eat them. Well ... goodbye."

"Elder brother! What's wrong? Wait a little!"

"No. It'll be the same no matter what. Say "hi" to Hummingbird for me, ok? I'm not going to see you again, you know ... goodbye." Crying, Nighthawk flew back home.

The short summer night had already begun to brighten. Breathing in the morning mist, the ferns, green and cool, trembled.

Nighthawk let out a high, keening cry. *Keesh, keesh, keesh.* And then, he immaculately cleaned his nest, and straightening out his wings and feathers, he left the nest.

The fog had lifted, and the sun appeared in the east. Bearing the dizzying pain, Nighthawk flew like an arrow at the sun.

"Lord Sun. Lord Sun! Please take me to your home. I don't care if I burn and die in your fires. Such an ugly body as this might still bring some light. Please take me with you."

He flew and flew, but Lord Sun became no closer. Lord Sun, instead of growing gradually smaller and farther away, spoke:

"You are Nighthawk, are you not? I see. Yours must be a very bitter pill. Tonight, go to the Stars and ask of them. Are you not a bird of the night?"

Then, as Nighthawk was about to bow to Lord Sun, the dizziness overwhelmed him and he dropped down to the grass of an open field. And then he dreamt.

Suddenly, something cool fell on his face, and Nighthawk woke. A drop of dew had fallen from one of the young fronds of pampas grass.

Soon it would be night: the sky was a deep blue and the first stars had begun to wink. Nighthawk flew up into the sky. Tonight, too, the brushfire burned a deep red. Nighthawk circled once between the dim light of the fire's burning, and the cool light of the stars. Once more, he circled. Then he resolutely flew toward the Western sky--toward the beautiful Lord Orion. And as he flew, he cried out:

"Lord Orion! Lord of the Pale Stars of the West! Please, take me to your home. I don't care if your fires burn me to death ..."

But Lord Orion had no time for the likes of Nighthawk, and continued singing his noble song, ignoring the bird. Crestfallen, Nighthawk dropped from the sky and began to circle again. And then, he flew toward the south: to Great Dog.

"Great Dog! Guardian of the Blue Star of the South. Won't you please take me to your home? I don't care if you burn me in your fires." Great Dog, his stars winking beautiful blues, purples and yellows, turned to Nighthawk and spoke:

"The words of a fool! What on earth are you saying! Even if those wings of yours could bring you here, it would take you a
thousand — no, ten thousands of thousands of years.” And then he turned away.

Disappointed, Nighthawk again unsteadily turned away — and once more, he made his rounds of the sky, circling twice. And then, determinedly, he flew to the North — to Lord Bear — and called out to him:

“Lord of the Blue Stars of the North! Please, take me to your home.” Lord Bear looked down at Nighthawk and quietly spoke to him:

“This is not a light thing you speak of. Calm down a little. To bring you here would be like a dive into a sea of icebergs for you. Or if not that, it would bring you so near the sea that it would be like diving into a cup full of ice. You would be worse off than you are now.”

Again, Nighthawk unsteadily and disappointedly turned away. Four times he circled. Then once more, he called out: to Eagle, Lord of the Shores of the River of Heaven, who was now rising in the east.

“Lord of the White Stars of the East! Please, take me to your home. I don’t care if your fires completely burn me up.”

With a voice like a great wind, Eagle spoke:

“Hah! Such talk will do you no good. Even if you became one of us, you’d be a classless nobody. You’d still need a fortune to make it up here.” With that, Nighthawk lost his strength, and closing his wings, fell to the earth. His weak legs had barely taken him a foot, when suddenly, Nighthawk shot into the sky like a rocket. He rose toward the center of the sky, and his body shook violently and trembling, his feathers stood on end. Then, in a high, high voice, he called out: keesh, keesh, keesh, keeshheee. It was the voice of a true hawk. It was a voice that woke the birds of both field and forest. Trembling, they suspiciously looked up into the starry sky.

Nighthawk flew higher and higher. The brush fire dimmed, and now looked like a mere cigarette butt. Still, Nighthawk flew ever higher. In the coldness, his breath froze whitely on his breast, and as the air became thinner and thinner, he was forced to beat his wings ever more furiously. Still, the stars had grown no larger. Nighthawk was now breathing like a bellows. The cold and the fog cut into him like a knife. His wings became numb. Once more, Nighthawk opened his tearing eyes and looked around the sky.

This was it. It was the end for Nighthawk. He didn’t know whether or not he was falling back to earth, or rising up into the sky, whether he was upside down or right side up, but he felt at peace. His large, bloodstained beak was flattened and bent to the side, though still, a smile could be seen.

And then, after a long time, Nighthawk opened his now cleared eyes. He saw that his body was quietly burning with a beautiful phosphorescence. To his side was Cassiopeia. And behind him, the blue-white River of Heaven.

Nighthawk’s stars continued to burn. They burnt on, and on and on ... and even today, they burn. □
Starry Nights

Pinpricks in the floor of heaven,
patiently blinking through skeptical
gazes, revealing heaven’s porous foundation;
light still leaking out, in some spots
dimly: we have grown fond of having
things obscure. We burn enough ground light
to make the night obtuse,
but not enough to master it.
Heaven blinks at us all the while,
hinting, perhaps; dropping clues:
numerous, distant, oddly symmetrical;
tiny, twinkling, but nothing if not mammoth.

--Tim Thompson

It’s three am, I’m still awake

It’s three am, I’m still awake

Beseeching, bent up
in the hallowing stillness
of my halogen-lit bedroom
(The weight of your wisdom chokes)
I shiver at the comfort
of this naming in the darkness

--Kara Breems
50’s

‘bama
baker
baron
redlined
bus
back
off-limits
but
dad
sat
where
there
was
room.

Dad served
bakeries in the south
as a consulting
engineer and
one day
his
Montgomery client
saw him
exit
the
back
of the
bus
and suggested
that
seating
inappropriate
...
Dad told him
“where I sit is
my own business.”

--Lambert
John
Van
Poolen
Fires blazed all around the veranda, held down by their torches, and my fish-and-chips arrived cold. I asked the waitress why, and she explained, “Like the other waitress neglected your platter because her boyfriend went by in his dinghy,”--she breathed--“Waved all crazy to her you know and flipped--you heard the splash--and she went down to see to him. I’m real sorry.”

I had that kind of inkling but I wanted to speak to her anyway. Then I waited awhile and looked at her. She offered to heat it up again, “But the Japanese eat it raw,” she answered herself. I smiled and said no-thanks. I had to be somewhere soon.

Across the round, immense, old blue rug that spread from the entrance to the kitchen and underneath all the tables, sat an exhausted old man, disheveled in his brown raincoat. He tinkered with his silverware and food which he had barely begun. His hands were big and worn, like his face, like a dock-worker’s. He acted as if he wasn’t alone, which drew some stares from the other guests. Neither the bar nor the waitresses drew him out of his conversation.

Soon a young man with everything going for him sat down across from the old man like a pet, but with some insolence, like a pet.

I paid little attention after that until I overheard them arguing stiffly, just under the restaurant din. The old man was the earnest one, and the young man sat back stubbornly, preferring to look elsewhere, to wave in a waitress and order something. And I soon saw the torches in the eyes of the old man; he was staring right at me. The younger hastily whispered something and the old man turned his head away from me. I don’t remember if I avoided his gaze, I just recall looking in the opposite direction for a long time afterwards, at the dark mountain-regions behind the countless orange and brown-tiled roofs through the torches that guarded the open veranda.

I heard the argument continue over the sounds of the canals below. It grew colder. I turned away from the expanse and back into the small community of guests. The torches only persuaded us to stay with their semblance of warmth, and by a sort of instinct we remained, and kept our dignity in numbers, for anyone could tell you it was much too cold.
The argument escalated; the younger man grew extremely uneasy while the older man waved his hands in the air, pounded the table, and contorted his face in bitterness. And soon the manager appeared from behind his waitresses to view the scene. The old man still whispered as loudly as possible, which made the whole situation rather comical; a few guests and the manager chuckled together, nervously. But the waitresses were not so amused, for one had to serve the younger man, who still sat back in his chair trying to retain some pride. The youngest of the waitresses, who took the order, gave no response to her fellow waitresses' fearful, sympathetic glances as she resolutely walked to the table and interrupted the dramatic ranting of the old dirty man.

And then the waitress urgently said "Sir!" I looked, and saw the old man squeeze his eyeballs out of his head, one falling in his plate with a "tink" and the other he tried to catch with his hand, but it caromed away onto the blue rug. The girl screamed and fainted, dropping the steaming soup on the younger man's lap, whose painful yowl soon changed tone to frustration. A circle of waitresses now stood around the table, gasping and admonishing the old man for being so crude as to pop his eyes out to scare an innocent waitress. The old man muttered some things, pointing to his "son" and his son just held his head on the table in disgrace. So I left her with a large estimate on the table because I didn't want to waste any more time there. In the concrete stairwell that turned around the outside corner of the restaurant I stepped on a rat and made it squeal. Before I knew it I had smashed its skull in on the second stomp. The crunchy sound echoed in my head for days. □
I'm Guy Vansmily... and I'm here to welcome you this week's addition of 'Totally Depraved,' the official game show of Calvin College!

"Our contestants this week are...

Bob Vanboringma from Grand Rapids!

"And our next contestant?"

"Cuban Guerilla leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara back from the dead!"

The first question is for Che...

"Cuba, are you from Flint or Pontiac? And what high school did you go to?"

Well, actually I'm from Argentina. Most people in the world think that I've been dead for decades but actually I've been in hiding and thought that I'd reveal myself to the world today.

Really? Do you know Coach "Tall" VanRurasma? How about my cousin Tim? Did you go to Christian High or Calvin Christian? Wow, this is sooooo exciting... I don't know where to begin! Um, ah, well... how about...

Yes! Cool! Go on!

That's all for this week! Hope you had a culturally enriched experience here on 'Totally Depraved'
two poems in the shape between thoughts

“passion/plea”

We can be
if God doesn’t mind
I don’t
Ask, ask not what
an Angel on Fire
Told me to tell you
if God doesn’t mind
We can be
on Fire.

less than before Chicago

Give me respite
from the nearly cripples
crawling in my ears
when it’s too loud to know
breaking on my faith
old bones scented with perfume

just go

I can’t see you anymore
Fade in, Fade out, Forgotten
& I need a drink of
distilled forgotten nights
to warm, fill me
when the wailing comes
prematurely with much Force

just go

But don’t tell them
I was here

--Michael Heerema
Victoria Harbor, Hong Kong

Peter Szto

color print


artists

the people across the street don't think about
these things, or so you say. they don't
read classic American novels and you
and I wonder how they can live so, unfed. we smirk
at the people who go through life unconscious. their kids are playing
and laughing, running in crazy loops while you and I discuss
the incessance of our ideas, our impractical nihilism, and
exactly how expensive organic produce can be.

we talk about big ideas because the small real ones wake us. And
could this be our undoing because
honestly, we make each other half-dead.
I prefer being with strangers, on the bus,
than with you. thinking how they still believe in small talk and
they probably don't worry about the powder in macaroni
and cheese being "fake."

is any of this practical? well, no,

those kids grew up fast but they're also
flying by on wheels that aren't practical--and they are
independent but they still look back at each other like I remember
doing at the roller rink. you'd pass a friend and call their
name and keep on
circling. Again, again, and I watch their ideas fly
while mine stagnate
into the cracks of the cement stairs,
into your bored eyes,
into the wonderful grey.

--Sarah Byker
The Harvester  Jacoba Sytsma  charcoal
Playtime in a Vase
Elizabeth Duffield
oil on masonite board
Emily

Every morning
Emily and I exchange glances
her face, hanging on the office wall,
perpetually young

She had the good sense not to smile
or probably it was the fashion

Only one portrait for posterity
who knew it would
hang in academic halls?

The face reveals little
the lines of poetry tell all
of the mind, the life lived so long ago

We think of her
on beautiful spring days
when the bee is about his industry
and the robin hops down the garden path
when death comes riding by

Her eyes speak intently to me
judging a life spent at a desk
indoors for months

My only prairie
a book of poetry

--Sherry Koll Levy
"In my trunk I packed asparagus."

"In my trunk I packed asparagus and a... a blimp."

"In my trunk I packed asparagus and a blimp and a cherub."

"A cherub? What on earth's that? You have to pick stuff we all know."

"Okay, fine. Caramel corn."

"No way. You have to start over from 'A'."

Crammed between bulging duffels and greasy pillows and buried under coloring books, construction paper, markers, flip-flops, Walkmans, tapes, and magnetic checkers, my three younger brothers and I endure the stretch of road linking New England and the northern Midwest by playing the "trunk game." Our imaginations offer the possibility of an ordered travel experience—no loose ends, no items unaccounted for, everything somehow a perfect fit. Though we fear it, at least we know the rule of the game: if you can't remember the contents of the trunk in alphabetical order, you lose. Simple, straight-forward, neat.

But not so simple or straight-forward or neat because now this "trunk game" has me musing about journeys and packing bags—a territory dangerously ripe with confounding metaphors. Perhaps I should invite you to pack your bags and come along for the ride, or maybe I should entice you by promising that this essay reveals the solution to all that emotional baggage you lug around, or maybe I'm feasting on rotten fruit, and I should just bag the whole thing. But the cat has been scratching to get out...

When the time comes to pack for her trip, the Scrupulous Packer first makes a detailed list and then hauls out the plastic: plastic cosmetic pouches, plastic shaving cases, plastic pill bottles, plastic soap boxes, plastic toothbrush holders, plastic ziplock bags in which to seal the items wrapped in plastic sandwich baggies, even an empty plastic garbage bag for dirty clothes. Everything has a place in the suitcase, and everything is safely contained.
Once she finishes packing, the Scrupulous Packer drives to the airport, checks her baggage in, and boards the plane. While sipping a glass of Diet Coke with lime she stretches her lips into a contented smile around the short white straw, closes her eyes, leans her head back, and thinks organized thoughts about her organized suitcase. But, during the flight, the lock on a pit bull's cage in the baggage room somehow snaps. Frightened, the dog scrambles out, sees across the room an enormous pile of luggage, runs over, and begins chewing through it. He smells his owner somewhere in there. He gnaws at the Scrupulous Packer's suitcase and thrashes it around because it is the one on top. Pieces of clothing forced out of their folded state burst through the new holes in the suitcase. Shampoo and conditioner bottles wiggle free from the confines of three sandwich baggies held in place by a rubber band and happily spurt their contents out of an unlocked ziplock. Soon the dog rips open other luggage nearby, and the mess of one suitcase becomes the mess of them all. Torn clothes, drenched in lotion and aftershave, slide between books and shoes and jewelry. And everywhere, shredded bits of plastic and cracked plastic containers. Before the passengers exit the plane, the captain announces that there has been a slight problem in the baggage room and that a few pieces of luggage have been damaged. Alarmed at first, the Scrupulous Packer quickly reminds herself of the invincibility of plastic--she had never thought of the possibility of an animal getting loose in the baggage room. She heads directly to the baggage claim area and recognizes her suitcase on the conveyor belt. A sweater that isn't hers sticks out of the top, the side of it glistens with some sort of green translucent gel, and there are several jagged tears. The Scrupulous Packer shrieks and grabs the cumbersome load. A man carrying a similar-looking load runs up to her and growls, "Hey! That's my sweater there. Give it to me!" But she is in a panic and screams at him to get away from her stuff. With the ardor of a bag lady protecting seemingly worthless possessions, the Scrupulous Packer presses this precious burden against her chest as she stumbles away from the baggage claim area.

"So...you ready?" I ask. "Are you?" She stares down. "I asked you first." "Fine. I guess I'm ready, I think. I mean, sure there's stuff I'm kinda nervous about, but...how about you?"

We sit outside on the lawn one evening at the end of the summer and discuss the impending journey. The grass pricks my legs as I casually tear handfulls from the earth. I lean back, crumpling thick green patches with elbow and forearm, and my chest heaves a contented sigh. "Oh, I feel completely prepared. I don't know why everyone makes such a fuss over it. Everything's mostly packed. I can't wait to go."

Graduation luggage lays open-
Bodyscape #117
Steve Smith
charcoal
mouthed on the floor of my room, feeding on piles of folded T-shirts, jeans, and sweaters, stacks of books, and dozens of shoes. Plastic containers separate toothpaste from soap from shampoo from laundry detergent. Months of scrupulous planning, months of making lists, months of roaming up and down drugstore aisles: I am ready to leave for college.

I am ready for the best time of my life, the perfect chance to start over. After all, veterans tell me that is what the college experience is about. I envision clearly the destination of my journey: life-long friendships, 4.0s (I secretly hope I am a budding intellectual prodigy), roles in every play, a prime seat in the orchestra, and through it all painless, intimate knowledge of self. What an organized package—everything simple, straight-forward, neat.

But here is where the pit bull unexpectedly ravages the suitcase. Before classes start, the theatre company rejects me. My first blue-book mid-term wears a glowing, red C+. Over the phone I hear talk of the new space at home for piles of wrinkled clothes, ironing boards, sewing supplies, and little brothers—my room transformed. The corner of a green-flowered suitcase surfaces from the depths of dorm-room clutter. So I suppose this is my home now—whatever I can squeeze into that damn luggage and carry around with me. I wander from world to world, estranged from all of them, yet belonging intimately to each. Every day my tightly-knit self unravels a little more, until I am only a knotted ball of yarn. I plead for purpose somewhere in this tangle. In imperceptible stages I begin to understand that these experiences which tear me apart make me whole. I awaken to my bag lady self.

“How do you like college?”

“On the whole it’s been pretty good. I’ve lear...”

“That’s wonderful. What’s your major?”

“Oh, I’m not sure yet...but I’ve learned a lot in the past two years about my bag lady self.”

The high school parent with whom I’m conversing nods politely and makes a mental note not to let her daughter apply to the college I attend.

Why a bag lady? Why a stereotype which carries with it such negative connotations?

A bag lady journeys to an unknown destination, toting her threadbare canvas bag spilling over with soggy newspaper, shards of an old wine bottle, a couple cans of beets, a tattered quilt, and a thousand other things most people throw away. No job, no home, no money—only a random assortment of vehemently guarded junk.

Although the strap grooves her shoulder, the irregular bulges of the bag leave hideous bruises on her hips, and her fingers bear the scars of handling broken glass, she treasures her possessions. Perhaps I should not have used the word “junk” earlier: yesterday the newspaper shielded her quilt from the afternoon rainstorm, and a shard of glass opened her can of beets for dinner.

A bag lady does not stop by the side
of the road one afternoon to empty her bag, shake out the dust, discard unnecessary items, take inventory, and organize the contents. She has been collecting possessions for twenty years, and such a task of detangling, I suspect, would occupy the rest of her days. A bag lady does not leave her bag by the side of the road one morning because she tires of lugging it around. She survives by the bag. If she separates herself from it she sacrifices part of her identity.

But I am more than a detached observer of the bag lady. You see, I have been journeying unawares with bag ladies my whole life. I recognize their lopsided gaits, the weight-bearing side of the body determinedly heaving itself forward. Like Jane Kenyon, I hear "how like the sound of laughing [their] weeping is." Though my experiences seem as disjointed as laughing and weeping, I travel the stretches of road which bring them together. In weathered face and written word I read the bag ladies' stories, and each day I understand their language more fully. Faces and words move beyond simply a compilation of isolated characters into a language of tangled wholeness, a wholeness that encompasses both sorrow and joy.

These things happen...the soul's bliss and suffering are bound together like the grasses... (113)

--Jane Kenyon, from *Twilight: After Haying*

My suffering and bliss are inextricable, just as the grasses bound in a bale during the haying season. And I find freedom in being bound, freedom born of an acceptance that the bag which burdens me is also the bag out of which I live. □
Nuclear Arms  
Christina Bratt  
charcoal
unseen

I am nurtured and cared for by ghosts.
I don’t exactly mean ghosts.
I know they have bodies,
I have touched them.
Which is more than I can say for God,
Yet I know he cares for me,
Though, I can’t reach him on the phone.

These ghosts, they are on the phone.
I reach them, and they reach me,
Through a desperate piece of plastic.

I hear their voices.
Their voices teach and guide me.
When I listen,
I can imagine them around
My smoky dining room table,
With my dog laying on her side,
Content to do nothing.
Sometimes I see myself.
With them,
Sitting in some imaginary,
Soft living room.

I can’t imagine God anywhere.
I have no idea where I would
Actually see Him.
Only evidence.
[like candlelight and warm spring breezes]

These ghosts, they fly in,
And out,
Like a pocket of warmth in a brisk autumn breeze.
When I hear them they are real,
And True.
When I hang up,
They are ghosts,
[And sometimes I cry.]

—Michael J. VanderBrug
The worst I’ve been
I don’t understand
like even simple things such as
perfect grilled cheese, the formation
of an onion, turning on a box full of
images, moving pictures. I don’t know
what it is to feel like
only a survivor except that
it might be empty like now.
The world would be grey and
you wouldn’t think that no one
understands you’d just think
I don’t know
the worst yet. And you’d know
you could always be lonelier,
happier, stupider, and that’s
your comfort. But there’s
hardly a darkest shade of grey.

It’s the inbetween, it’s static,
it’s flat. Like you and I and the
fall colored leaves and surviving
until winter when you can be
lost and everyone will lose
you and no one will say

That’s the worst he’s been.
Because it’s only winter.
It’s only grey.

--Sarah Byker
solitude  Greg Scholtens  gelatin silver print
Aunt Kate died last week. She was almost ninety. It was not unexpected. The clan gathered in, eight of the nine surviving siblings from the original thirteen. Aunt Eavey was too ill to make the drive from Mill Creek in Tennessee all the way to Louisville. But the others drove in from Tennessee, Indiana, and Kentucky. Opal, Ona, Wilburn, Houston Ditmore, Emma, Willard, Verdia, and Parker. None of them ever got that far from home.

At the funeral, the preacher spoke of Kate’s hospitality. I remembered the strawberries and ice cream she always had for me whenever we stopped by her place in Louisville on our journeys between the Tennessee homeplace and dad’s factory job in Indiana. Kate was almost 20 years older than my father, and she was one of the first to escape the dust of rural Celina, Tennessee. North was opportunity. My dad joined her there in the early forties to work first on the L & N Railroad and later at Seagram’s Whiskey Distillery. They lived on Chestnut Street, 511, right downtown. Dad’s mother, my grandma, had died around then. He was 16 when he showed up at Kate’s apartment. He called her “Little Sister,” but she was really more of a mother, I guess.

Kate’s house represented something like an underground railroad stop on the highway from poor white poverty to the midwestern middle class. Almost all of the brothers and sisters stayed in Louisville with her at one time or another. And the cousins talked about it at the funeral. They remembered the food, the welcome mat, the open door. It all sounded a bit like what you’re supposed to say at funerals, but it wasn’t. We’ve got TV’s now; cliches are hard to get around.

We had all buzzed at Turkey Town last year about Kate and her shoes. Turkey
Town is a graveyard on a Tennessee hillside where the family meets every July to have church, decorate graves, and eat. In her nearly nine decades, Kate missed only once. She was there last July and talking of the bargain shoes she’d found in Livingston. She bought five pairs. Five. She had some walking left to do. She knew the stuff about the shoes was funny. I think she bought them for the joke. She had that kind of humor about her. She would have loved it had she known the funeral home guys locked the keys in the hearse at the graveyard. Nobody in there to open the door but Aunt Kate. And she wasn’t quite up to it.

Turkey Town wasn’t quite the same this year without Kate. The feast of barbecued chicken and the rest was sumptuous, as usual. But we knew Kate was very sick up there in Louisville. She died just a few hours after the midnight of Turkey Town day. Someone said she made it past decoration day on purpose. I don’t know; maybe the timing was coincidental.

Louisville will not be the same now. Nobody there knows my name and how much I’ve grown. We’ll still drive through on the way home. My little boy likes strawberries and ice cream, too, but we’ll probably stop at Shoney’s where the strawberries aren’t so good. ♡
fame

see the wall and climb it
see child we all need dreams
we go inside
and wish we were english
we fight and we yell and we wail
our hands are what hold us
our face on the back
feet in the water
ideas page by with fleeting endowment
and give us names as if they are gods
and everything we scratch for
and everything that's not nailed down
we cry for
with the shallow hope that
someone will see us

--Todd Slager

Skyscraper and paved
earth: a city of man.

If one man can die, all may fallow.

Sandburg's grass doesn't
stop at the battlefield:

it will seed itself in cracks,

until all iron and oil
returns to the earth.

--Matt Smith
Willie

Jeff Casemier

gelatin silver print
A Silly Story for Axl

Chorus: The sovereignty of God is an interesting concept. Ask any clergy member. But what they don’t tell you is that it doesn’t apply between the months of May and September.

We played in the sand and ran through the surf. I tried to sing “The Freshman” For what it was worth. She laughed. She thinks I’m a total idiot. That is what I love about her.

We “got back to nature,” And swam in the lake. [Talk about shrinkage, for Heaven’s sake.] Her eyes sooo brown; I began to drown. [it’s easy to do, you know. Just stop thinking.]

Dancing in the rain, [She was really never vain] She kissed me on the 23rd, For thirty pieces of silver And a bottle of Boone’s Farm.

Gettiup.
The Sun disappeared and so did she;
Back to school,
Back to her books,
And all those teachers’ dirty looks;
[And what an autumn chill]
Back to her boyfriend, Bill.

Chorus:
Brutal Brutus.
Jelly Judas.
All freezing in Dante’s furnace.

So drink your drink,
and smoke your Camel.
Spare me all the psychological ramble.
(I watch General Hospital everyday,
and Ricki Lake on Tuesday--Jackass.)
So shut your pie-hole, Polli.
Stop pissing on my pity party.

Bartender!
One more for Ireland!

Goodbye, Honey-Bunny.
Maybe next time,
But not in the summer time.

--Jesse Buck