

OFF CENTER



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OFF CENTER

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Contents

Letter from the Editor 3
Poetry	
Poetic Justice by Ray Steelman 4
At the Blue Plate by Starshield Lortie	..... 4
Still Remains the Work of Art by Rachel Anne Rosson	..... 5
After by Starshield Lortie	..... 6
Mr. Hatley by Ray Steelman	..... 7
The Heart of the Matter by Starshield Lortie	..... 8
Whiskey/Moonlight by Gia Mangino-Southworth	..... 9
For a Friend: Please Feel Better by Jude Romines	..... 10
black and white by Starshield Lortie	..... 11
My Turn at Bat by Ray Steelman	..... 12
Re-Growing Myself by Timothy Donahoo	..... 13
Untitled by Brooke L. Hunnell	..... 14
Short Stories and Creative Nonfiction	
The Night I Met Johnny Mathis by Ray Steelman	..... 15
Weak Souls by Kaitlynn Means	..... 20
Innocence by Ray Steelman	..... 24
My Sister’s Angel by Emily Garrett	..... 25
Reflection	
Generation X by Sidney Blaylock, Jr.	..... 31
Generation Y by Brielle Campos	..... 34
Generation Z by Sophia Luangrath	..... 36
Photography	
Untitled by Angele Latham	..... 14
Lancelot by Sebastian Gonzalez	..... 19
Untitled by Angele Latham	..... 29
Untitled by Angele Latham	..... 30
Flower by Sebastian Gonzalez	..... 30
Untitled by Angele Latham	..... 44
Film Analysis and Discussion	
Heroes vs Villains by Brielle Campos & Sidney Blaylock, Jr.	..... 37
Marvel Movie Rankings by Brielle Campos	..... 39
My Favorite Marvel Movies by Sidney Blaylock, Jr. 45
A Tribute to Will Brown with foreword by Sidney Blaylock Jr. 52

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Letter from the Editors, Volume 3 Fall 2018

Welcome the Fall 2018 Issue of *Off Center*. In this issue, as well as our previous issues, we strive to be a place for writers of the MTSU community to display their works and polish their craft. We hope that readers will engage their works and perhaps become future submitters.

We have a wide-ranging collection of works in this issue, from humorous non-fiction pieces to powerful and moving poems that challenge conventions. We have included multiple works from various authors within the MTSU community. We've also included works that move beyond simple text, including images and multi-modal communication.

Finally, we've included a tribute to Will Brown, an alumnus of MTSU, who, sadly, lost a battle with mental illness. We hope that this will inspire other writers and that his poems will encourage those dealing with mental illness to seek help.

Thank you for reading *Off Center*, and we hope that you enjoy the issue.

Sidney Blaylock, Jr.
Brielle Campos

Poetic Justice

BY RAY STEELMAN

I caught a bee in the palm of my hand
and played with danger a while.
I shook it around and rubbed on its head
I tried best its anger to rile.

I held out its wings, put a thread 'round its leg
Placed it in a jar for a time.
I tossed it around in a cup that I found
Pressed its body beneath an Ike dime.

After a day I soon became bored
and decided to set the thing free.
It flew in the breeze to the top of the trees
Then returned to my arm...stung the hell out of me!

At the Blue Plate

BY STARSHIELD LORTIE

Over fish tacos
and the best cornbread
I've ever eaten,
over the din of dishes,
Kenny Chesney songs, snatches
of strangers' conversations,
overlooking a bend in the
Tennessee River and the skyline
winking to dusky life,
you leave your plate,
this place, me, no glance back
at our pabulum growing cold.

Still Remains the Work of Art

BY RACHEL ANNE ROSSON

Crying out silently to me,
From the canvas in which it was born;
The life-like colors call to me,
To come into their brilliant world.

An ever-shining stream,
A sky of a magnificent spectrum of light;
The stillness seems to scream,
Pleading now for the artists' hands to write.

"Where is thy face, O' boatman,
Furthermore, where are thy cloud-like sails?
Stream, where lies thy steady flow,
That pumps life to the great ocean of whales?

Forest, where is thy echo,
Of the enchanted woodlands' song;
Sky, where are thy humble flocks,
While thy clouds cease to float along?"

Though lifeless in its beauty,
It brings to the mind of its spectator,
The mere idea of escape,
Enough for us to appreciate its creator.

A work of art remains,
In a state of stillness perfection,
A place for us to go when,
In our lives we feel pain or rejection.

We journey in our minds,
To a place engulfed richly in much wonder,
Forgetting our own realities,
That seem to be mercilessly pulling us under.

Silence is thy eternal curse,
Forever trapped inside something endless,
Never an utterance of words,
Yet, forever enchanting to our eyes in its stillness.

After

BY STARSHIELD LORTIE

After all the sobbing and celebrations
die down and everyone has gone home
and I am left with nothing but myself,
after the fear of starting over smothers
any flame of faith that life does go on
and I am weighed down with unshed tears,
after the ability to control all the outcomes
falls with a thud on the cold kitchen floor
and I am left on unstable bare feet,
what rises is the knowing that this is not
the end but an illustrious and elusive
beginning, an answer to prayers for more,
a turning of the tide, a way through,
and although there is never any going back
there is always a coming Home.

Mr. Hatley

BY RAY STEELMAN

There it was, in granite cast
the name of that gentle old man,
and my mind could see so vividly
the face of my old friend.

I remembered times when our paths had crossed,
when I was just a lad,
how he shared with us life's treasures
and that flashing smile that he had.

And how he'd dance a jig and click his heels
then quickly tip his hat.
We'd laugh and cheer... he'd pull us near,
as we gathered in his lap.

And he always had a dime to spare
for a child who needed one,
or a hug deserved or encouraging words,
oh, many are the hearts that he won.

His family and friends... the kids and adults,
the folks in the neighborhood,
knew from all the deeds that he did
our friend was honest and good.

As I stand and gaze at his name below,
it's hard to believe that he's gone.
He gave so much to the lives that he touched,
he deserves a bigger stone!

The Heart of the Matter

BY STARSHIELD LORTIE

It took me more than
thirty years to admit
I wanted that relationship back,
the one I severed
with a flick of my wrist
and a few 4-letter words
and buried under a pile of dirt
with prayers I'd never find it again,
the one that pumped purpose
through my veins
and fed my dreams.
When I ran from that spot
no one saw me run
and now I'm so damn good
at running, running so fast
I don't know how to stop,
my past a greasy smudge
of indifference that's
all too easy to gloss over.
Being heartless gave me wings,
made me invincible,
transformed my fear
into an imaginary friend
who held my hand
and kissed my cheek
and allowed apathy to grow
like a wild fire, then dropped me down
without a way to feel the Earth
under my feet. But the Earth
held my heart in its own,
intently beating like a beacon
under six feet of dirt
and cactus flowers
and voices raised in celebration
of a road that never disappears.

Whiskey/Moonlight

BY GIA MANGINO-SOUTHWORTH

What does whiskey smell like in the moonlight?
Oakwood barrels drenched in the moon's shine,
A sour-sweet comfort.

It's not something you forget
Just like the drive around town in the bed of the truck
And the guardian angel watching over us that night.

The only ones who can appreciate these nights
Are the ones who have seen the stars from this town,
Stars that are drunk off moonlight
And the smell of premature whiskey.

I can smell it from a mile away.
Thirty miles.
A hundred miles.
It never really leaves.

That smell of whiskey in the moonlight,
I think my friend Jack would agree it smells just like home.

For a Friend: Please Feel Better

BY JUDE ROMINES

Every day you greet the morning with one track,
Pad down the stairs, pull out a bowl, confront the facts,
You know you shouldn't, and you wouldn't, but first thing's first,
A little light reading won't hurt —
Except there's voracious vascularity, insatiable instability,
Palpitations, ruminations,
Limited motion with boundless devotion;
A fine display of restraint,
But God are you feeling faint;
Can you dissect your body's worth?
Quantify your hands, your heart, your soul,
In numbers, values, and goals,
You'd find a different meaning in exceeding,
You'd find that limitations are only impeding
A light so grand you couldn't stand
Dampening its glorious glow.
So,
To everyone out there,
Who's craving while concaving,
A message that's been burning me to the core:
A 'fact,' advice, a rule,
"You don't have to weigh less to be more."

black & white

BY STARSHIELD LORTIE

We say it in passing
it's black and white
marking clearly
the lines
that divide us
one from the other.
We plot our history
in those same terms
black or white,
up or down,
right or wrong,
good or bad,
while we search
for absolute boundaries.
We are consumed
with external recognition
of our individual
stake in the world.

We forget
absolution requires
an act of contrition –
a confession
full of remorse,
self-flagellation,
and awareness
of where we want to go.
It requires acceptance
of our history,
our humanity,
and the subtle lines
that provide definition
rather than separation
and connects us
one to the other.

My Turn at Bat

BY RAY STEELMAN

To the wall in center field
was four hundred and fifteen feet.
We had no one on our team
That could hit a ball that deep.
We'll have to punch and place the ball
and steal a base or two.
To homer here in center field,
not one of us could ever do.

Denny's arms were big as hams,
his grip like a vice's bite.
But even he, on his best of days,
Couldn't homer here with his strength
and might.
And big Jim stood at least 6-5
and weighed three hundred pounds.
But his longest shot was 416
When the wind was right and the
pitching down.

Then there was Fred, Billy Bob, and Joe.
They all had great consistence.
Each had homered now and then,
but nothing near that distance.
“We'll have to win this on the mound
with Donnie's pitching arm.
Let's get him going and stretch that thing,
and get it nice and warm.”

There are things inside our hearts
that are secret, close and deep.
There are things we cherish for all our
lives
that make us laugh or weep.
They keep us warm on the coldest nights,
and take us to distant places.
They give us tales to tell about.
They're timeless life embraces.

When I think back to that summer day,
and how we had our doubts,
and how we thought that we were beat
before the first man was out.
It touches me deep within my heart,
and gives a memory for me to hold.
I'm once again there at the plate
and I'm twenty-one years old.

When things are tough and there seems
no way
that you can ever win,
keep faith in yourself... take careful aim
at the fast ball coming in.
I learned a lesson in the batter's box
about lack of confidence.
“Cause I'm the guy... first batter up
drove a blazing fast ball over the center
field fence!”

Re-Growing Myself

BY TIMOTHY DONAHOO

Yesterday —
In the space where you used to sleep
roots like veins shot down into the mattress.

Today —
Lying there is a mass
staining the white sheet
becoming pink becoming red,
becoming black.
There is something like a heart growing out of the bed
putting out knotted limbs of bone shrouded in red lilies.
A sculpture of living skin and angrily beating muscle.

Last Month —
I walk to the sink
an itch in my back
the cold air stings more keenly than it should.
Reaching my fingers around my back I grip the edge of a hole.
I don't think about it.
I take a shower.
I dry off,
the towel is red.
Was that the original color?

Some Day —
I go into the bedroom,
Me but not myself.
I see I am sitting there on the bed.
I am pink and bloody, like a newborn
but not screaming, not yet.
I step behind my own self,
embracing, filling the gap
merging the miracle of rebirth
with the wound you left me.
I grow into myself,
the cycle of re-growing complete.

Untitled

BY BROOKE L. HUNNELL

She was a pretty girl.
She beheld her beauty in her eyes,
her radiant, blue eyes.
The windows to her soul,
an enchanting glare,
you could see heaven inside them.
The lightness was nearly transparent.
The reflection of the gleaming summer sky
was present in them,
the stars twinkled twice as bright

like lightning flashes in glassy water.
The clouds were nearly touchable.
The universe was contained within her,
within her blue, blue eyes.

Her eyes are as dark as night now.



Untitled
BY ANGELE LATHAM

The Night That I Met Johnny Mathis

BY RAY STEELMAN

Momma believed in hard work. She taught me that you can't climb the ladder of success with your hands in your pockets. From an early age, she instilled in me the belief that God plus one is always a majority. Believing what Momma taught, in the fall of 1964 I found myself on the Shelbyville highway with my thumb high in the air. Although the odds were against me, my goal was to go to college. Since goals are dreams we convert into plans that we take action to fulfill, upon graduating from high school, my complete focus had been to earn enough money to start to college. Now, I was on my way!

Near the close of the summer, I had purchased a cardboard suitcase from Bob Posey's General Merchandise Store on the Fayetteville public square. I now had it packed with enough clothes to get me through Friday. I made a poster board sign that read "MTSU or BUST." With a little luck, I would be hitchhiking back toward home in five days with a whole week of college at Middle Tennessee State University behind me!

I had spent the whole summer saving every dime on which I could get my hands. I had three younger brothers at home and there was simply no money left for the luxury of a college education for me. Actually, I had always enjoyed a challenge. After mowing a couple of hundred yards; painting a few barn roofs; cleaning out several miles of fence rows; cashing in thousands of coke bottles; and working as much overtime as I could get at the Genesco Shoe Company, I was ready!

They say that laziness and poverty are first cousins, and although I had been working every day since I graduated from high school, I still was poorer than a church mouse's house pet. I had been anything but lazy. I had learned that you can't wait for your ship to come in. Sometimes you have to row out to meet it. During the summer, I had managed to save a little money. Even though my savings were meager, I decided that if I was frugal, and

really watched my spending, I should have enough money to pay my tuition and room and board for a couple of semesters. There would certainly be no money for the luxuries of life. The summer of 1964 taught me that people who say that "money isn't everything" usually have plenty of it!

In spite of a tough summer, things at college got off to a great start. Upon arriving in Murfreesboro and finding my way to the University, I was assigned to the Smith Hall dormitory. This was great because it was located only a short walk to the cafeteria, where I had prepaid a semester's worth of meal tickets. Things were really looking good... then I had my first challenge!

A few days into my new adventure, I noticed a poster on the wall in the Student Union Building. It caught my eye because it was a full-length picture of Johnny Mathis, my favorite singer. Johnny was more than my favorite singer, he was my idol. If I could have been like anyone in the world, it would have been Johnny Mathis. I had spent hours in front of the mirror singing all of his songs. I knew them all by heart! I knew every expression, every tone, and every hesitation in his voice. I knew everything about Johnny. I read all the magazine articles about Johnny. If he was coming to Middle Tennessee State then I was going to be there! Then it hit me. I did not have a dime in my pocket! What was I going to do? Was I going to miss seeing my idol because I was temporarily poor? What could I do? Maybe I could work concessions. Maybe I could volunteer to clean up the place. Maybe I could sneak in.

For the next few days, I was planning and scheming. I knew that in the middle of every difficulty there was opportunity, but I was beginning to get discouraged. Nothing that I tried worked. The concession crew had already been hired. Arrangements had previously been made to clean up the place. The last option was to try to sneak in. The concert was to be held in the gymnasium and security would be very tight, but with a little planning, maybe I could crawl in a window or hide inside for a couple of days before the show. I would not normally even think of doing something like that but... after all, this was Johnny Mathis, not exactly one of those hillbilly singers from

Nashville! I pledged that when I got rich, the first thing that I would do is pay the school back.

After considerable thought, I had a plan. After several trips around the outside of the gym looking for a window that someone might have left open, I noticed that there was a set of stairs and small concrete porch at the back door to the gym. Johnny would be performing inside only a few feet away. Although I couldn't see the concert, if I sat on the steps near the top of the stairs, I should be able to hear very well. I liked this plan because it was an honest approach and I could look at myself in the mirror the next morning. Desire is always the great equalizer, and I had determined that this was my best idea yet! I decided that the poorest of all men was not the fellow without a cent but rather the man without a plan.

On the night of the concert, I was very excited. I would hear Johnny Mathis perform live and would be within a few feet of the actual show! People started arriving several hours early. The place was packed. After the last straggler filed into the gym, I quietly sneaked to my seat at the top of the stairs on the porch and sat with my back against the wall of the building. The show was great and I could hear everything that happened inside. My imagination wandered as I heard Johnny perform all of his biggest hits. I discovered that night that the person with imagination is never alone. I sang along as he performed "Misty," "It's Not For Me to Say," "Saturday Sunshine," and all of his greatest hits. I sat quietly in the dark as Johnny swooned, not knowing that I, his greatest admirer, was only a few feet away.

As the show progressed, I came to appreciate my special seating even more as I realized that I actually could hear the instrumentation and vocals very well from the quiet solitude of my reserved seating. This was even better than being inside. Besides, the price was much more reasonable than the ten dollar tickets in the gym.

As the show progressed, Johnny was in the middle of his beat version of "Wonderful, Wonderful" when I noticed a particularly long instrumental

break. This was certainly not like the version on his albums. Had something happened? Suddenly, the back door to the gym burst open and a figure sprinted to the handrail around the porch where I sat. He cleared his throat and spit over the rail! It was Johnny Mathis! I could not believe it! I jumped to my feet, scaring Johnny half to death! Although in the dark, for an instant, we were staring into each other's eyes! "Great show, Mr. Mathis!" I blurted. He jumped, since he was startled by my presence. I was almost sure that I detected a slight smile and nod as he dashed back into the gym. As quickly as he appeared, and without saying a word, he was gone! In a few seconds, he was finishing "Wonderful, Wonderful." Was I dreaming? Did it really happen? Was he really there? Had I really met Johnny Mathis?

Needless to say, the rest of the show was a blur. I had really seen Johnny Mathis! I kept hoping that he would come back out, put his arm around my shoulder and invite me inside, but that never happened. It didn't really matter anyway. My college career had gotten off to a great start! I had been in school only a few days and had already met my idol face to face. It's the little things in life that make all the difference and determine the big things. If I had not been on that porch that night, I could never boast that I once met Johnny Mathis. Today, when I see Johnny with Jay Leno on the Tonight show or in one of his TV concerts, I wonder if he recalls the night when I nearly scared him to death. Over the years, those simple and hard times have become very precious to me. Life must be lived by looking forward but can only be understood by looking back. The years have taught me that what you get by reaching your destinations in life is not half as important as what you become by reaching those destinations.

I recall that the day after the Johnny Mathis concert, I was in the hall with several others waiting to enter our algebra class. The conversation naturally drifted to the concert. "He really seemed like a super guy," one fellow stated. "Yes he is," I replied. "I was backstage!"

Note: Ray graduated on schedule four years later, then he returned to get his Master's degree at MTSU. During that time, he got jobs riding a garbage truck, doing landscaping, working as a mail clerk, working in a

cheese factory, cleaning out fence rows, coaching football, and being paid to play centerfield for the local State Farm softball team. He earned two degrees without borrowing one penny or getting any financial help at all from home.



Lancelot

BY SEBASTIAN GONZALEZ

Weak Souls

BY KAITLYNN MEANS

In the midst of vigorously writing a draft for my final English paper in undergrad, I was abruptly interrupted by my personalized ringtone of a duck quacking, informing me that Paige had sent me a text. In an instant, a wave of emotions rolled over, knocking the breath out of me. It had been a year since I had seen her, a year since I had even heard from her. My best friend. I had tried to prepare my heart for the moment I would eventually run into her or be forced to confront her, but my attempts were thwarted by this measly little text message that struck fear in the pit of my stomach. Will she tell me how it was my fault that our friendship died, that I was too critical and too opinionated to be trusted, and that the loss of my presence in her life was nothing more than a relief? It's because I am toxic. A venomous snake who wraps its way around your torso and squeezes out your soul. But only because mine is so weak.

I finally gathered up the courage to pick up the phone and open Paige's message. This once used to be such a familiar task, Paige and I texting back and forth all day about how we couldn't wait to grow up. It now felt so foreign to see her name on this small screen and I couldn't shake this feeling of guilt off as I began to read the short message.

"Hey, I just realized I still have the flash drive you let me borrow a while ago. Wanna meet at our old spot and I'll give it back?"

My stomach knotted and tears began to rush out of my eyes as if the doors to a dam had just been lifted. With shaky hands, I typed on the slippery screen, coated in my despair, and wrote, "Sure, two o'clock?"

She promptly responded, "Sounds good."

My anxiety shot through the roof, hands shaking, feet tapping, teeth chattering. If I stay locked up in this small little room of mine, a panic attack is sure to follow. I ran to the closet, grabbed my coat, and just before I slammed the door shut, a blue scarf caught my eye. It had been sticking out from behind an unpacked box, shoved in the corner. It was a hand knitted, deep royal blue scarf that Paige had made for me three years ago, for my eighteenth birthday.

Memories from that night of us laughing, drinking rum and cokes, and watching as many Harry Potter movies that we could stay awake for, instantly flashed before my eyes. Involuntarily, my arm reached out and plucked the scarf from its hiding place. I held it out in front of me, admiring its craftwork and the amount of thought Paige had put into it. Back when she thought about me at all. The longer I held the scarf in front of me, the less vibrant it appeared. I quickly wrapped it around my neck, hoping to save it.

I then made the quick five-minute drive to the park, one hour early – an effort to calm my nerves. I ended up right here, under this old wooden canopy where we used to spend hours hiding away from our responsibilities, just talking. It was our old spot – where we first met at recess in the second grade. Both of us had been such shy kids; we had gone weeks without speaking, we just sat here underneath the canopy, keeping each other company. It wasn't until one day, when I heard her sniffing and realized she was crying that everything changed. I scooted myself closer to her, and instead of asking her what was wrong, I put my hand over hers. She looked at me with tear-filled eyes and nearly tackled me to the ground as she embraced me – sobbing even harder. I sat there and listened as she told me all about how her grandmother had passed away that morning and how heartbroken she was. She told me about the last time she saw her grandmother, a week before, and how happy she had been to see her. At the time, she hadn't realized that she had been saying goodbye to her forever. In that moment,

Paige thanked me for listening to her and promised that we would always be friends. We carved our initials into the railing of the wooden canopy, signifying our friendship. Paige didn't even have to ask me to come with her to the funeral. The next day I told her to let me know when it would be and that I would be there; I would always be there for her.

My heart ached as I ran my fingers over our initials and the old, cracked wood pulled at the skin on my fingertips, leaving pesky splinters deep in my hand. What happened to us? I thought as I attempted to pull at the flecks of wood stuck in my flesh. This question had been echoing in my head for months now. Was it something I said? Something I did? The last year had been such a blur, full of so much loss and so much hurt. When my grandpa passed away, I didn't think I was going to make it. The night of his visitation, every face that walked through the door was unfamiliar. My mother, my brother, and grandmother all had lots of support from their closest friends. But not one person I considered a "close friend" came for me. Not even Paige. Someone who spent countless afternoon's after school at my house, for "Paige Friday's" as my grandpa used to call them. Someone who knew my grandparents better than her own. But there was no reason and no excuse given for why she never showed. I noticed, soon after this event, that the phone calls had stopped, and the duck quacking text messages became a rarity. Anytime I messaged her, just to say "Hi," was then followed with a big dramatic speech about how "busy" she was. Was I becoming needy? Maybe I smothered her and that was why she decided to quit pretending to be friends with me.

A heat began to fill my body, beginning at my feet, swelling in my chest, and then all the way up to my head. How could someone who had been a part of my family for so long just abandon me like this? I've been sitting around blaming myself all this time, but what about all of the times I was there for her? No matter what, I always made time for her. I cared about her. When she needed someone to vent to, I listened. When she needed

encouragement, I cheered. When she needed advice, I gave it. I've been fixated on all the things that I could have done, as if I were solely responsible for the end of our friendship. And that's just what this is isn't it? The end.

The scarf around my neck tightened uncomfortably. I yanked it off and appraised it once again. It had once been a beautiful deep blue and when I used to look at it I felt loved, but now as I look at it hanging limply in my hands, an ugly grey, I realized there was no reason to hold on to it anymore.

A bare tree knocked incessantly on the roof of the wooden canopy. It was as if its branches were reaching out for me as the wind became even more aggressive. I knew it was time for me to leave, so I tossed the scarf into the mess of branches on the small naked tree. It caught it and quickly wrapped it around itself. My mind immediately eased and my breath calmed, I was strong enough to walk away. I am strong enough. "Goodbye," I whispered to the canopy, to the tree, and to the scarf. Goodbye, Paige.

Innocence

BY RAY STEELMAN

I'll never forget the look in the little boy's eyes as he stood there, outside of the door, and peered inside through the glass window that was fogged over and covered with mist. It was cold and raining. He was wet and shivering. He stood there alone. It was dark outside, and Roy Rogers was playing that night at the Capitol Theater in Fayetteville where I was born only 5 years earlier. I stood inside holding tight to my grandmother's warm hand.

The men working inside at the candy counter watched the child and laughed at him. Others inside the theater laughed as it rained harder and he got wetter. His little black face was streaked with rain as it trickled across his eyes and dripped with a rhythm from his cheeks. That pitiful look I can still remember. All that the little boy wanted was a Hershey Bar.

I couldn't understand why black children could not come inside the theater to the candy counter like I could, or why they sat upstairs away from us, or why they had their own entrance to the theater and their own water fountains and restrooms.

There were so many questions. I was so young... so innocent. But I did understand what it was like to want a Hershey Bar and not be able to have it. I've often wished that I had walked over and given him mine.

My Sister's Angel

BY EMILY GARRETT

There is a worn, marbled - green document box on the kitchen table in front of me. My fingers tap the lid, itching to open it but equally dreading it. I don't know what possessed me to pull this box out from underneath my bed. Really, today is just like any other day. On a day like this, you make the choice to drag yourself out of bed, to skip the damn coffee. On a day like this, you might finally call your mother or have a salad for lunch instead of that left-over slice of pizza. It is a day in which decisions are made for no apparent reason at all.

Perhaps I pulled out the box because I'm especially sad today. Then again, I'm especially sad every day. Deep down I know I did it because today Benji would have turned ten.

From my place at the kitchen table, I can see into the dim living room. Rachael, my sister, is passed out on the couch. Her black bangs brush the pale skin of her forehead, and in the dusky light, the deep - etched lines around her mouth and the dark pools beneath her eyes could be invisible; she could be twenty - five again — innocent.

My sister is sick, and she has been for years; I think she was sick long before she had Benji. But her sickness isn't one that the doctors can fix or even see. The sickness is in her mind, they tell me, and no amount of medication can extinguish it. She doesn't even lie to me about trying to find a job anymore. She just breathes and drinks and medicates and then passes out on that couch. I let her stay because she has nowhere else to go.

I turn my attention back to the box. With a resigned sigh, I lift the lid. Inside is an array of glossy, rectangular memories. Some of the photographs are vivid, the scenes within full of life and vibration. Others are faded from years of being admired by the sun upon a coffee table or bookshelf. My hand trembles as it passes over a photo of Benji. I grasp it with both

hands, as if I can steady myself against the inexplicable sadness bearing down on me.

Benji sits on a park bench and I can just see the curve of his face and his nubby nose peeking out from the hood of his puffy jacket. The jacket is red, his favorite color. I remember that day. It had been a cool afternoon in early autumn, just months before the accident. I'd taken him to the park, where we fed Cheerios to the koi fish in a small man - made pond. In the photo he looks off camera, a rare moment I'd been able to capture while he was sitting still. He'd been enthralled by the way the fish's mouths opened and closed as they hunted down the pieces of cereal.

"Look at their kisses!" He stuck out his lips to imitate the fish. The curve of his chubby cheek was so soft in the sunlight. He shrieked with laughter when I snuggled closer and gave his cheek a peck.

"Make the fish face!" I did so to his delight.

His giggle was like sunlight and liquid gold.

That night he had a nightmare. He ran into the living room and I held him in my lap as he sobbed, his warm cherub cheek nestled against my chest. Rachael was staying with me then, but she hadn't been home for a few nights.

His tears dried, and each slow breath told me he had fallen asleep. The clock ticked, and I rocked him back and forth, keeping time with its steady rhythm. Benji's head rested on my heartbeat. Rachael still wasn't home and hadn't even called.

After Rachael got pregnant, Mom acted like she wanted nothing to do with her and wanted me to do the same.

"Are you going over there again?"

"She's my sister, Mom."

Mom would just flap her hand toward the door angrily. She would stay angry with me for the next day or so and then ask me how Rachael and Benji were doing.

Rachael was fine, Benji was darling.

Mom would hum as if satisfied, but she only hummed when she was anxious, like some people whistle or chew on their lip. She hummed a lot whenever something concerned Rachael.

Rachael had always been unstable, but after dropping out of college, she spiraled. It was all men and clubs, modeling for this fellow or dating this old man. I lost touch with her a few times, but then she called to tell me about the pregnancy. She'd been in tears on the other end of the line asking if I'd come see her and if I had any money. I brought her some food instead. She didn't know who the father was.

I'd just graduated college and was working from my apartment as an editor. Rachael showed up on my doorstep, one-month old Benji in her arms, asking me if I'd watch him for the day. She had a job interview. She told me she was finally getting her life together for her son. This continued for the next few years. Most nights she'd come to my apartment drunk and crash on the couch — some nights she didn't come back at all.

Through all this time I watched Benji take his first steps, I toilet trained him, I eased every ache and fever, kissed every boo-boo. Rachael would return through it all, vague and sick, barely there at all. By the time Benji was five, she had completely succumbed to her instability and didn't even try any more.

I had been thinking about filing for custody for a while the night of the accident. I tried to talk to Rachael about it, but I know now that was my first mistake.

"He's my son!" she screamed. She had reached her breaking point long ago.

"Alright, he's your son! He's **your** son! Then act like his mother."

I was crying because I knew she couldn't, and she was crying because, deep down, I think she knew it too. She just couldn't admit it.

She left that night with Benji in tow. That was my second mistake: letting her take him from me.

On her way to who-knows-where, she crashed her car into a truck. She survived.

She was back in my life a few months later asking for a place to crash. She had nowhere else to go.

Tears blur my vision. I hate her. But mostly I hate myself.

Rachael stirs on the couch and sits up groggily.

"What are those?"

I wipe my eyes. "Photos."

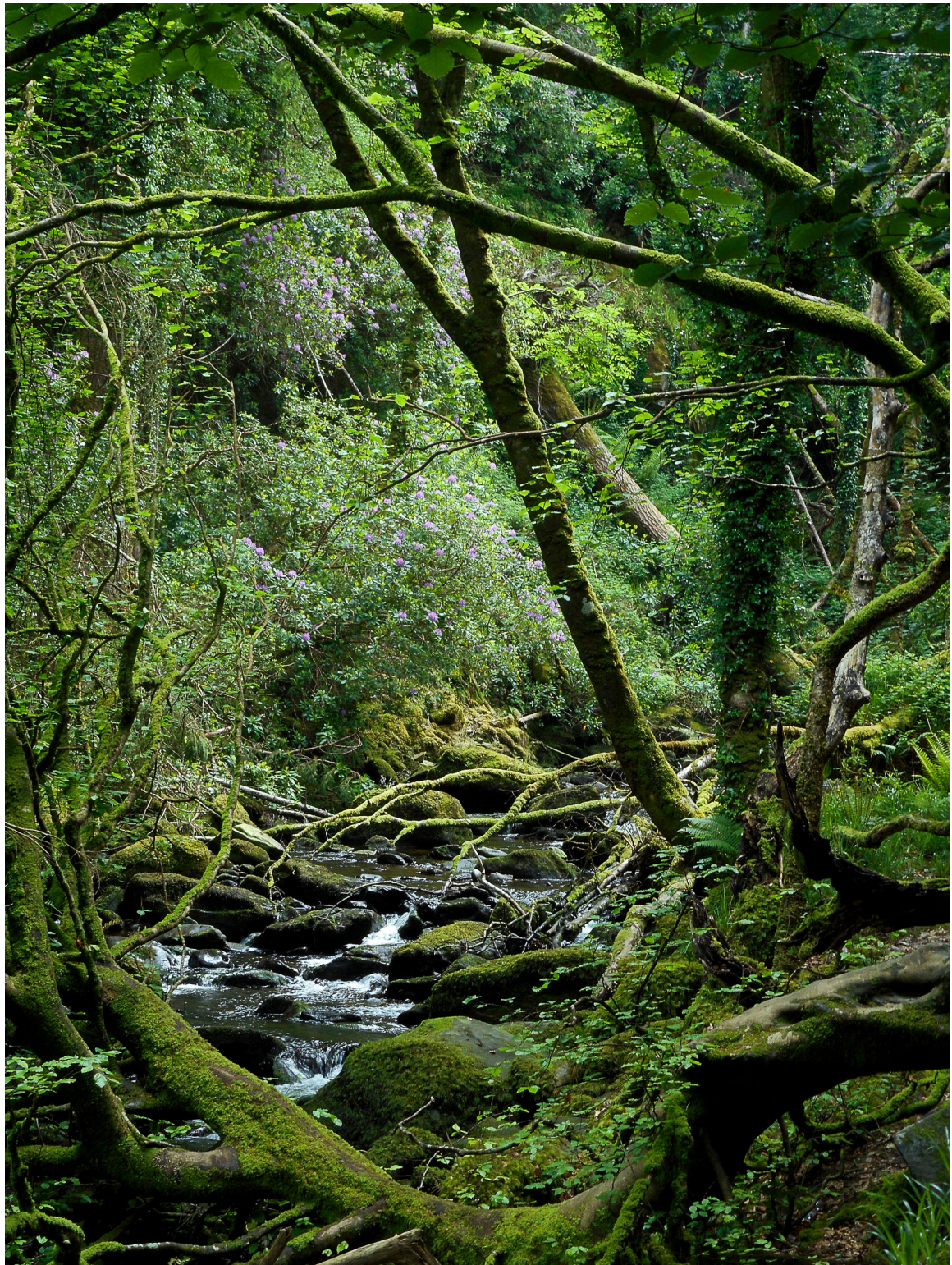
She comes to my side like a phantom, her eyes glassy. She points to Benji in the photograph. "Look Annie! Look how he shines!"

I look more closely and see that there is a faint, white halo of light outlining his tiny form. It may have been a trick of the lens or maybe some God-given symbolism.

"He's an angel now, Annie. My angel!" She starts to sob and collapses into a miserable pile on the kitchen floor. The circles under her eyes and creases on her face are visible again.

She was right; Benji was her angel.

But he was my son.



Untitled
BY ANGELE LATHAM



Flower
BY SEBASTIAN GONZALEZ



Untitled
BY ANGELE LATHAM

Generation X

BY SIDNEY BLAYLOCK, JR. (ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON HIS BLOG)

Generation X

There are very few images of me online (mostly because I don't really put the images that I take online), but if you looked at me, chances are good that you wouldn't think that I'm as old as I am. While I look like a Millennial (or so I'm told), I'm actually part of Generation X, a generation that, I feel, has been largely forgotten in the midst of the two mega-generations: Baby Boomers and the Millennial. I wanted to take a moment to talk about my generation for a moment.

The Melting Pot

One of the problems that I see is the loss of the idea of the "Melting Pot." In fact, this was a central tenet of the new burgeoning race relations in this country after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ending of the segregation laws. There was this idea that America was a bright and shining land in which all races could (and should) blend together in a "Melting Pot" in which we each shared in each other's cultures, values, and traditions in order to make us a strong, unified nation, instead of the divisive, back-biting nation that we had become under the racist ideologies of segregationists. I watched in wonder growing up as this (unforced) diversity played itself out, watching the various cultures of *Laverne and Shirley*, *Happy Days*, *Alice*, *The Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, *American Bandstand*, and *Mork & Mindy*, to name a few. Now, let me be clear, these were not a part of my particular culture, but it was fun to look in on them to see how they lived, worked, and played. My own culture, in fact, consisted of shows like *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, *The Jeffersons*, *What's Happening!!*, *Soul Train*, *3-2-1 Contact*, and *The Electric Company*. While featuring a predominately African American cast or a cast of diverse races, they still brought in guest stars from other races which helped to promote this idea of the seeing the "Melting Pot" in action. This, sadly, went out of

vogue toward the end of the 1980s and early 1990s and it seems this idea isn't as prevalent or ingrained in the succeeding generations.

Technology

One of the things that stands out about my generation is the fact that we got to see many of the technologies that are now ensconced in culture develop and mature (and in some cases die). We are very much "children of technology." Most of us can remember the time before there was MTV (and music videos), remote controls for TVs (you actually had to get up and go to the set to change channels, the rise (and fall) of CDs, DVDs, and (unless something changes in the near future) Blu-Rays. We've seen the rise of video games and seen them crash into a heap, buried in landfills, only to rise again, like a phoenix and become the titans of the entertainment industry. We've seen the computer morph and merge from the introduction of the original Apple computers when they were the "new kid on the block" and now (as of a few days ago), Apple is the first trillion (with a "t") dollar company. We can remember when computers only had 64K of memory (Commodore 64) or when video game controllers only had one button. I could go on and on, but in most cases, Generation X has seen the rise of many of the technologies that we use on a daily basis.

Sure, every generation sees new technologies and progress during their lifetime, but I feel this is where Generation X is unique. Having had a period in our lives without excessive levels of technology, but gaining it early in our lives, we are comfortable with technology or without it. We don't need it to stave off boredom, but use it to enrich our lives. We aren't afraid of technological change, or the pace at which technology changes, but we don't require technology. It isn't a necessity for us, rather a tool that enriches our lives. I find, that as a Generation X'er, I am as comfortable with a book as I am with a Kindle as I am with the Kindle app on my phone. Any of the three would be useful to me depending on the situation and circumstances in which I wanted to read.

Bourne to Win

Jason Bourne. I love the character, I love the inventiveness of his characterization, and I love the pathos that Matt Damon portrays when playing the role of Bourne. However, I do have an issue with Bourne. He's perfect—and he did nothing to earn his perfection. One thing that I feel that Generation X has learned is that life is hard. If you want something, you have to work for it until you get it. You have to train and work and sweat and sacrifice, but if you do so, more often than not, you'll find the rewards are well worth the effort. The problem with Bourne is that we never really see him train. Sure, he's this ultra-cool, ultra-competent fighter agent, but he "discovers" his fighting ability in the first movie, *The Bourne Identity*. Yes, later movies flesh this out and show more of his history, but what it took to get him to have his almost preternatural fighting ability is hidden from the audience.

In many ways, Generation X is the last major generation that got to see that hard work yields results. I can remember the training montages in the *Rocky* movies in particular and remember equating hard work with success. Now, with the Bourne movies, those qualities of hard work, discipline, and training are hidden away from view, making it seem that one can be (and should be) freakishly good at something without having to put the hard work to become good at it.

In closing, every generation pushes against the one before it and the ones after it. It is, perhaps, the natural order of things — the old must eventually make way for the new and this cycle continues. However, even in this cycle, I think we can take a moment to both reflect on this cycle and ways that we can temper its effects. While my generation is caught in-between Baby Boomers and Millennials, there's no reason why we can't all find a way to learn from (and respect) each other's ways of seeing the world. Instead of looking back at the past and the divisions that defined us, why not look forward instead at the ways our commonalities unite us?

Generation Y

BY BRIELLE CAMPOS

The Second Lost Generation

In the 20th Century, between the World Wars, rose a generation often labeled as the Lost Generation. Names like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, and Tennessee Williams all fell into this category. History calls them the Modernists and the hallmarks of their generation are striking: feelings of alienation, disillusionment of the virtues of war, and cynicism about the American Dream. I have recently spent time with these authors, and whether it is just my own mind, or if there is an apparent link to my generation — Generation Y (Gen-Y) — I am not sure. What I can do is lay out my opinions and see if others agree with my assessment.

I was born in 1990, which is a precarious situation. 90's kids are hard to define: those born early in the 90's like me grew up with the internet. I remember when we started computer lessons in school and I remember when in high school they started putting bans on cellphones. My first cellphone itself was a Virgin Mobile special with Brick Attack as the most interesting feature. Those born later in the decade often started out with a stable and quickly improving World Wide Web; those I taught in martial arts had iPads the first week they were released. All that to say I situate myself squarely in the realm of Gen-Y.

A little while back I saw a post on the internet which described Gen-Yers very well. I feel among them. The post suggested that we were caught between the Gen-Xers who believed if you worked hard and showed loyalty to your company you could achieve the American Dream. They were content with a white picket fence, a family, and a solid retirement pension. On the other side of us is the Millennials who have learned to create their own persona; they can become YouTube famous if they are in the right place at the right time. Which leaves us Gen-Yers in the middle, lost with no idea what to do and how to get out.

You see, much like the Modernists who grew and changed with the industrial boom caused by WWI, we Gen-Yers grew when the world was at a crossroads. It was a time where anything could happen. We were constantly promised that we could be anything, so long as we went to college. And we believed it. Just like the Modernists, when I ask my friends how they feel about our generation, they often reply with words like alienated, frustrated, angry, cynical, and crushed. We were promised the world if we got an education, but once we got it we were told that it would only buy us a white picket fence and a family. Often, it won't even assure a good pension to retire with.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not angry at anyone for this. My parents were fighting their own battle against corporate disloyalty, the tail end of the Cold War, and the rise of the AIDS epidemic and the War on Drugs. They valued a type of community which I feel is lacking from my own generation. I think it was lacking for the Modernists too, because many of them created their own literary societies and actors' guilds to fill the void. My generation turned to Tumblr, Myspace, and Facebook to do the same thing. I also don't blame the Millennials. I am proud of their ingenuity, their constant drive to establish their own persona and brand which is marketable to a wide range of other young people. Some might know of the Vlogbrothers Hank and John Green, and I think their collection of Nerdfighters shows how Millennials have found their own way to construct a community that my generation lacks.

What I feel is worry. My generation has learned to define ourselves by what we do, which is not the healthiest way to survive, but we manage. What scares me is what will I be when I can no longer be a graduate student? Who will I be when I finally get that job at a college and start as a professor? The best I can hope for is perhaps a fleeting sense that I belong, if only for a little while. In the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall."

Generation Z

BY SOPHIA LUANGRATH

The rising of Generation Z is on the horizon, so saddle up millennials — you are in for a ride. My very first clear memory with a VHS happened just over four months ago. It was a magical moment because the only time I've seen these bad boys were in libraries collecting dust and the image printed onto phone cases. I even learned how to "rewind" the VCR when the tape got tangled. I brought this experience to my co-workers and — let me tell you — they were shooketh¹. The head honcho, engaged in this conversation, became very intrigued by my experience. As a man in his late 30s, the incident left him awestruck. My co-workers surrounding me had the very same reaction, which made me think about the differences in generation. I proceeded to talk about how the big black box was rolled in connected to another big TV, that was not even flat. Tragic². The professor decided to make this an educational experience since I was not the only person in my classroom to have not interacted with this technology. The only thing that I was excited for was to tell my coworkers that I was able to experience what they did in their childhood, which made me think of how my childhood was completely different, in social and economic aspects. For example, I discovered that most people in the University Writing Center did not have a cell phone as young as I did. That a great memory for them was going to Blockbuster to choose a movie, while mine was streaming or I watched everything on Disney, Nickelodeon, or Cartoon Network. The evolution of technology has shaped our society and culture, because children are now being raised with tablets in their hands. People look down on our generation for this; however, technology is our future. So, buckle up and get ready for the ride because the new frontier is on the horizon.

¹ Shooketh – Emotional or physically disturbed

² Kim Kardashian – West 2009 T-Mobile commercial

Heroes vs Villains

A Discussion of Taste and Film

BY SIDNEY BLAYLOCK, JR. & BRIELLE CAMPOS

In hopes of fostering the multimodal aspect of the writing process, the following is a segment of the transcript for the Heroes vs Villains podcast.

Brie: So, we're talking about the film *Pitch Black* produced in 2000 by David Twohy starring Vin Diesel as the lead character Richard Riddick and right before we started watching this movie we were having a conversation about heroes and villains and their sort of interest level; how we kind of, um... I tend to lean towards the villains more and you tend to lean towards the heroes more. And for me I think that this film is a pretty good representation of why I like to lean towards the villains. I just feel like they have a little bit more freedom I would say; they are characters that can have really intricate backstories and they have a little bit of malleability they can kind of move around a little bit. So, for instance, a scene that I really appreciated, and I thought it was very entertaining and interesting, comes about midway through the film. They've caught Riddick for the second time and they assume that he's killed Zeke, one of the survivors, and he's talking to captain Fry and telling her that you know on any other given day I would totally take responsibility for this, and I would want you all to be afraid of me, and I would totally take this as a compliment, but as of right now there is something on this planet worse than I am. And I just find that kind of stuff interesting because it kind of for me it tells a big part of who he is. Um without... Up to this point Johns, the guy that has captured him —

Sidney: The bounty hunter.

Brie: Right, that has captured Riddick is kind of the person that gives us the background of Riddick is a killer, he's an escaped convict, he's done all these horrible things, he needs to be locked up, but we haven't really gotten that much from Riddick himself, and so this is a moment where we kind of see, like, he's almost got a sort of moralistic line of like I will take responsibility for

all the horrible things that I have done, but I'm not gonna take responsibility for something that I didn't do or I would normally take that responsibility but there is something on this planet that is far worse and you need to be aware of it and for me that seems much more intriguing because it's a very good representation of how characters can be a little more off-center? Or maybe a little more realistic. And so instead of coming out and saying 'honestly I didn't do this and you need to believe me, and there's something out there' um he's kind of working his way around instead and trying to play a little bit with their minds at the same time so I usually find it interesting and it kind of keeps audiences interested in what's going on.

Sidney: So, for me, I'm really interested in the hero. So, the hero has several things that I'm probably interested in, but probably the thing that I'm most interested in the hero is their growth. A hero begins at one point at the beginning of the story, but at the end of the story the hero ends up at an entirely different point and that's not something that usually happens for a villain. Usually a villain is going to be consistent throughout; they're gonna be the person or persons who are there to hinder the hero from achieving whatever objective goal that the hero has set out to obtain. But what the hero must do, is the hero has to suffer. The hero has to try and fail, and then here's the crucial part; the hero has to decide to try again, to do it a different way, to try to figure out "okay, that didn't work, what other skill, ability, thought process, do I have in my repertoire that I can use to try to overcome this problem?" So, they have to actually get up and try it again. If they don't get up and try it again, then the story is over; they failed and it's a tragedy, but if they do get up and try it again they have to suffer defeat after defeat, but eventually they will manage to accomplish their goal. Or we hope they will as an audience, if they don't, again, it becomes a tragedy, but if they do it: success, and we love it. Um, specifically in terms of *Pitch Black*, captain Fry takes on the hero's position. She wants to live, so she makes a horrible choice at the very beginning of the movie. She decides, "okay, my life is worth more than all the other lives and I'm going to jettison the crew." Due to circumstances in the movie, she doesn't actually get to jettison the crew, so when the ship lands, she actually now has a family of sorts...

Marvel Movie Rankings

BY BRIELLE CAMPOS

Three notes before I get started:

1) This list is strictly my opinion. I say this because some decisions were made for personal reasons, as well as the nature of making a ranking list (why can't I just love them all?!)

2) I have yet to see: *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Ant-Man*, and *Avengers: Infinity War Part 1*. This list only includes the Marvel film franchise, not the television shows. I am including the first and second Iron Man movies, but not the Spider-Man or Hulk movies, mostly because I don't think they were made well enough for the list.

3) I have always gotten sick when going to the movie theater, so in the last couple of years I have resigned myself to waiting patiently for the DVD release. Some of the early films I was still dumb enough to put myself through pain, but somewhere around *Dark World* I finally gave up. Seeing a film in the theater does create a different experience than at home, but we do what we must to stay healthy.

Starting at the bottom:

Avengers: Age of Ultron

I stopped watching this film half way through the first time, and I only recently picked it back up, so I would understand what was going on in the other movies. To say I was confused would be an understatement: the plotline felt more like a loose thread about to break at any moment. I was especially frustrated by the main villain Ultron, voiced by James Spader. I watched Spader in *The Blacklist*, and I had such high hopes for a fantastic

villain who was witty and dark, and instead I felt more like he played a whiny teenager who had yet to develop enough forward-thinking skills to realize what he was doing. Many of the characters seemed to be acting contrary to their normal personas, personalities I had seen grow and expand over the previous works with such excitement. This was a letdown for me.

Thor

I will admit up front: I am a Tom Hiddleston fan, and a Loki fan. However, when I saw this film in theaters during its original release, I just wasn't that enthused about it. I thought that Thor acted like a brat, and that there was not enough time to show a proper growth sequence while he was trying to figure out how to interact with humans and his brother was seeking out some sort of crazy plot. I originally went to see it because of Anthony Hopkins, and again, I was disappointed in how little he appeared. If anything, this film shows the consequences of bad parenting, but it isn't a strong Marvel movie.

Captain America: Winter Soldier

I have been told repeatedly that to understand Steve Rogers I have to watch the first CA movie, but it may be the Iron Man fan in me that makes me dislike his character. Even in this film I was drawn in more by Natasha, Bucky, and Sam than I was by Steve. I think the spy plot, with twists and turns at every corner was well constructed. The fight scenes were awesome, and the characters played well off each other. It was a solid movie, but it didn't get me jumping out of my seat like others higher up on the list did.

Guardians of the Galaxy

I struggled between this and the next film on my list, *Thor: Ragnarok*; I think they are about the same. This isn't surprising because they look similar. I can sometimes get annoyed by characters who are too cocky, and Peter Quill often comes off as cocky. I think that Rocket, Groot, and Drax make for some excellent comedic entertainment, and they work well together despite a large difference in their fighting and personality styles. If I had to, I would say that Rocket is my spirit animal: practical and self-preserving, and yet

easily swayed by conscience to do the right thing. Also, the soundtrack is like my childhood in a nutshell; *Awesome Mix* for the win!

Thor: Ragnarok

As I said earlier, I think this was a decent film. Personally, I liked the character development of Loki in this one, as well as Hela's introduction. I understand that they were trying to make it light-hearted and cheerful, and there were some comedic moments I enjoyed. There were also moments where I felt Thor's character development dropped all the way back to his first introduction, sounding bratty, and I struggled to get behind that. I also think that The Master got way too much time and Valkyrie got not enough. The effects were decent, and the plotline was easy to follow, but overall it was just fun, not function.

Captain America: Civil War

I watched *Winter Soldier* so I could watch this one, and I was not disappointed by the action. I was a little disappointed by the plotline. There were probably too many points of contention in this film for the time they had to resolve them, and they didn't resolve them well. Regardless, the action was great, the amount of characters present was handled perfectly, and the witty banter laced throughout the dialogue was on point. There were also multiple scenes where characters were developed which did not seem forced. Overall it was worth the rental price.

Thor: The Dark World

And here is where a little of my Loki fangirl nature comes out. This was a perfect space to develop Loki's character alongside the story progression, and they did not disappoint. His constant commentary in the film lent a much-needed lightness to the story, and reflected perfectly typical sibling squabbles. I also thought that Thor showed strong progression: he seemed mature and intelligent. I gained a respect for him by the end credits. The cinematography was strong, and the CGI was believable.

Avengers

For how many characters were involved, this film was easy to follow and had a strong plotline. I appreciated the way the characters interacted in the film. I was especially happy with the character interactions; we see the friendships and the rivalries that will continue to develop across the franchise. Surprisingly, I found myself most interested in Tony and Natasha while watching, especially some of their interactions with the main villain Loki.

Iron Man

This film holds a special place in my heart: it was my first introduction to Marvel, Robert Downey Jr., and well-made action films. Before this point, I often watched horror or fantasy films, but the cinematography was amazing, and, as many others believe, RDJ was meant to play Tony Stark. Perhaps some of my sentimentality is the reason I have ranked this film so high, but I can say I liked this better than the second Iron Man because of its plot, characterization, and overall aesthetic. I will always and forever be on team Stark, and this was an amazing introduction to a complex character.

Doctor Strange

I have a bit of sentimentality for this film too; it came out when I was re-searching a few esoteric arts, starting Tai Chi, and dealing with a disability myself. I feel a deep connection with the Sorcerer Supreme, despite his slightly cold personality. Watching the trailers, I was afraid this film would be a Marvel knock-off of Inception, but I am happy to say it isn't. I will warn viewers who have trouble with flashing lights or motion sickness that the film can be difficult to watch. Swaths of bright colors, surrealist images or sequences, and moments of intricate CGI effects make the film amazing but also dizzying. But for those who can handle it, it is a must see.

Black Panther

This is an amazing treatment of history, culture, and race. This was a perfect time for the film to come out, as the power of CGI made the world of *Black Panther* completely believable. Chadwick Bosman makes a perfect King of the "Jungle." The storyline is representative of so many issues in modern

society but does not try to chastise white audience members as much as remind viewers of the deep-seated cultural traditions that Africa has established since the dawn of time. I look forward to seeing another instalment of this character.

It is difficult for me to express in words, without spoiling major plot points, all the reasons I love this film. The characterization of Tony Stark is dead on, and some major issues are handled in the film that I was appreciative of. We see the most of Rhodey than any other Marvel film so far, and I love the way he and Tony work together. There are some amazing photographic angles. There is also a perfect end credit sequence, which if you aren't staying for the end credits in a Marvel movie, are you really watching it?



Untitled
BY ANGELE LATHAM

My Favorite Marvel Movies

BY SIDNEY BLAYLOCK, JR.

Writer's Note: I've not seen *Avengers: Infinity War Pt.1* yet.

Writer's Note 2: This is adapted from a post on my blog.

Writer's Note 3: I tried to be as "Spoiler Free" as possible and not get into too many specifics and just give a general impression of why I felt it belonged where I placed it on the list. I tried not to go into any plot discussion whatsoever (just in case), but I can't guarantee that if you haven't seen the movie, that these listings will be completely spoiler free.

A while back, IGN did a feature on ranking the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in light of the fact that Marvel has finished its "Phase II" movie slate. Mine differs from theirs however, so I thought I'd do my own take on the list.

17. *Iron Man 2*: On this one, both IGN and I agree. This one was the weakest of the Marvel Universe films. IGN says that it is because they were trying to set up other movies in the Universe, but for me, they lost the through line of Tony Stark's character. Tony finding out that his life's work was causing misery in the world in *Iron Man 1* was a revelation of his character. Not having that type of character introspection was a missed opportunity. It was like the filmmakers wanted to do the whole "Demon in a Bottle" storyline here, but decided that it was too dark and then stripped it out while leaving Tony's erratic behaviors in place.

16. *Thor: The Dark World*: Missed this one in the theaters and saw it on Blu-Ray. For some reason, this one was a miss for me. I loved the first Thor, but the storyline on this one just seemed to not make a lot of sense. I pride myself on being able to follow plot, but many of the scenes seemed to lurch from one "element" to another without the tight narrative flow throughout the movie.

15. *The Incredible Hulk*: I liked this one more than the critics and if not for the strong showing of other Marvel Universe movies, this one would be much higher. I liked the "Hulk on the run" motif as it mimicked the TV show from the late 70s-early 80s (which I watched religiously as a child). I also liked the Hulk vs. Abomination fight. What really sold the deal for me with this movie was the awesome cameo by Lou Ferrigno and the fight choreography that called back to the Playstation 2 era Hulk video game.

14. *Iron Man 3*: Actually, I liked this one quite a bit when I saw it in IMAX 3D. Several scenes lose their punch when viewed 2D via Blu-Ray, but it is still a great movie. This one worked better because (unlike *IM2*) they actually did use elements from the storyline "A Demon in a Bottle" (albeit they substituted PTSD for alcoholism) and that worked to explain Tony's increasingly erratic behavior. I didn't like the Mandarin's portrayal all that much, but if you are not going to allow Mandarin to have his rings then a significant change to the Mandarin character is necessary.

13. *Marvel's Avengers: Age of Ultron*: Okay, I was expecting to like this one a whole lot more than I did. I think that the final climax and set-piece was fine. For me, the interactions did not ring as true as they did in the first movie. This one was more set piece to set piece, but the interactions seemed forced for some reason. Take the hinted Widow/Banner romance for instance. Widow seemed to have much more of a rapport with Captain America based on the chemistry and camaraderie displayed in *The Winter Soldier* than she had with her interactions with Banner in both of the Avengers movies. I think, though, what ultimately I didn't like is that Ultron was "creepy," almost horrific like a good classic horror villain. Just like *Winter Soldier* was a mix of superhero and political thriller, I think *Age of Ultron* should have mixed superhero movie with horror movie elements, with Ultron "picking off" the Avengers one by one.

12. *Spider-Man: Homecoming*: I liked *SPH*, but I felt that it drifted into just the place that I didn't want a new Spider-Man movie to go: high school. The high school elements were the worst elements of the previous Spider-Man movies and this one was no exception. I know Peter Parker was portrayed as a high school student for much of his "early" run, but really, Peter Parker is much better as a character when he graduated high school and was working at the Daily Bugle under J. Jonah Jameson. There are elements of that (without J.J.J.), but it is still a high school narrative and those are probably one of the least interesting tropes for me. The action was good, the story was pretty good, and the humor was very much in keeping with Spider-Man, but at least half of the movie (perhaps more) is about Peter Parker's high school life rather than Spidey and/or his life outside of high school. That's the only reason I'm rating this so low—I actually liked it quite a bit, but not as much as the movies above it (and that's mainly because of the high school segments).

11. *Thor: Ragnarok*: I really liked the third Thor movie, but not quite as much as many of the stand-alone movies of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I found the action of the movie to be really well done—there are three set-pieces in the film that are standouts (beginning, middle, and end), while the humor really made the movie fun. If there was a downside, it was perhaps that Marvel already has done this with the *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and this is perhaps a little too close to the same "schtick" that Marvel has already done in that movie. Still, on the whole, I liked this one much better than I did with the second Thor movie *Thor: The Dark World*, so Marvel is doing something right.

10. *Ant-Man*: Now we're starting to get into territory where ALL of the following movies are good, but it just depends on individual preference. Even in this grouping, I'm making fine distinctions between the movies. Let's just say that if any of the movies from here above are playing on TV and I have the time, chances are good I'd just sit and watch to the conclusion. I liked this story—it was a fun movie. It was also a "heist" movie and I'm not per-

sonally a big fan of those. Luckily, the heist was part of the movie's climax and it was pretty interesting.

9. *Thor*: So the first Thor movie doesn't get a lot of love, but it sets up the first Marvel Avengers movie, it features great performances from the leads (Tom Hiddleston owns the role of Loki), and has some great comedic moments. I really like the earnest approach to the story—both in terms of acting and the story itself. It is the "Fall from Grace" story, but because it isn't a tragedy (aka GrimDark), the hero is given the chance to redeem himself and learns what it means to be a hero. The cynic in me says that this why the movie isn't universally loved—it is hard to be a hero because a true hero isn't a jerk or an anti-hero. A true hero has to be willing to sacrifice. And in America (and the world at large), that just isn't a very popular idea (*Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, I'm looking at you).

8. *Captain America: The First Avenger*: I really like this movie. This is mostly a period piece movie, but I like it more for its message than its out-and-out action sequences. This the quintessential American movie—the little guy with a heart of gold who becomes not so little and stands up to those who would oppress others. Again, not a popular sentiment these days. I didn't grow up in the time period the movie describes, but as someone who minored in history, I love the period piece behind the movie.

7. *Doctor Strange*: Okay, I liked this one just slightly more than I did the first Captain America movie, but less than I did the first Iron Man movie. I think that Benedict Cumberbatch was an awesome choice to play this role because of his time with Sherlock, and that gave him the right "timbre" for playing the narcissistic Stephen Strange. I also thought that the change from selfish to selfless was well-earned, and unlike the critics and masses, I liked the conclusion and final fight. I thought that it was well-earned and concluded the story well, but was also darkly humorous. I loved the special effects, and Doctor's Strange's cloak was a great character all by itself!

6. *Iron Man*: This one's special to me as it is the first time that I realized that Marvel was really serious about "Universe-building." I've always been a Spider-Man and X-Men reader (on the Marvel side), but it was impossible to ignore the other heroes. I would see references in other comics about Iron Man and had a comic that was the precursor to the Marvel Handbooks that described the tech of Marvel's heroes. It diagrammed how Spider-Man's web-shooters worked, how Falcon's wings and flight apparatus worked, how Mandarin's rings did their thing, and so on. As I recall, the comic showed several variants of Tony Stark's armor, including the "gray Iron Man" suit. Seeing that suit on-screen and then seeing Tony reworking it into the "contemporary" suit blew my mind! If nothing else, I realized that this batch of Marvel movies intended to get it right and treat the source material with respect. I was hooked on Marvel's movies with this one.

5. *Guardians of the Galaxy*: So this one was one of those movies that I decided that I really loved the trailer and that I was going to see no matter what. To understand my reasoning, you have to understand that I had been talked out of seeing *World War Z* at the theaters by the lukewarm reviews. When I saw *WWZ* on Blu-Ray, I loved it and wished that I'd seen it via IMAX (as I'd intended before watching/reading reviews). I made up my mind that if I ever saw a trailer that I liked, I was going to see the movie no matter what. I saw the trailer for *GG* in March/April and liked it. I expected the critics to hate this one or at least be lukewarm with it like *WWZ*, but to my surprise they liked it and so did I. *WWZ* taught me that if I'm already predisposed to like the movie, to go see it, otherwise I might miss out. I was doggedly determined to see *GG* no matter its critical reaction – and I'm glad I did. It was both a good Marvel movie and a good sci-fi movie as well.

4. *Captain America: Civil War*: I thought this would go to number one based on the fact that even though this is a Captain America movie, it is essentially an Avengers movie because the plot line revolves around the fracturing of

the Avengers based on ideologies. When I saw this in the theaters (IMAX 3D), it was by far my number one movie. However, after purchasing it and rewatching it multiple times, I've found that after the first major scene, the pace really slows until spectacular sequences in the middle. I think, however, what keeps this one lower than *CA:WS* and *Avengers* is the fact that while I liked the ending, the reason why both Cap and Tony fracture, while set up earlier in the movie, seems forced. It was almost as if I could see the screenwriters pulling the strings in order to put Cap and Tony at each other's throats at the end. Neither *CA:WS* or *Avengers* gave me that feeling. I love this movie, don't get me wrong. The "airport" scene alone is one of the best scenes in movies, but I just can't help feeling that the two heroes were "manipulated" into their final fight, not by the villain of the story, but by the screenwriters reaching too hard to wring pathos out of the audience.

3. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*: If not for the first Avengers film, this one would definitely be my favorite. It had everything that I look for in a movie. Spectacular fight sequences and choreography, tight plotting, reversals, betrayals, secrets, spy vs. spy, secret organizations, two leads who work well together, cats and dogs living together in harmony (okay, so I threw that last one in there from *Ghostbusters*, but I wanted to see if you were paying attention). For me, this one paid off the promise made in the first Captain America film. A man of a different era now has to come to grips with the modern world and all its perceived faults.

2. *Marvel's Avengers*: Of all the Marvel Universe movies released so far, this one is my favorite. It has all of the elements that I enjoy (strong characterization, tension between teammates, heroism, and teammates banding together against a common foe). The fight sequences were astounding and more importantly, seemed real and engaging, and the character interactions were spot-on. The final sequence was jaw-dropping in its scale and intensity. I almost ALWAYS stop and watch this one out to the end whenever I run across it playing on TV. They got this one perfect for me.

1. *Black Panther*: So, I'm not sure if this is going to stay here, but for now, this is my personal #1 Marvel movie so far. Political? Not really. I'm an action movie junkie who secretly wants to marry the action of an Avengers movie, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, with the same heart and skill of sci-fi and fantasy writers like Robert Jordan, Tad Williams, Elizabeth Moon, and (my personal favorites) David Eddings. The number and quality of characters and characterizations really push this one up for me. If you'll look at *Avengers* or *CA: Winter Soldier*, you'll see that these stories have a characters who feel real and grounded. Now, take this and multiply it by (pretty much) the entire cast. Now, add in the Marvel trademark humor and action scenes and you have a stellar movie. I'm also putting it at the top in that it is also "aspirational" for me. I would like to get to this level of writing for myself (and I would like to see more of a market for this type of story). I also, from a sci-fi point of view, love the Afrofuturism aspect where Africans/African-Americans find a balance through technology and futurism, and I really like this and wish there were more stories in this mode. Characters, characters, characters – then great setting, then great plot, then great action – then characters, characters, characters. And that's why *Black Panther* is my new #1.

There you have it – my top Marvel movies, so far.

The Most Excellent Workman

The Poetry of William Brown

... that as virtue is the most excellent resting place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman.

—Philip Sidney, A Defense of Poesy

The soul of a poet. It is, like all souls, unique. However, the soul of the poet is something that is at once both rare and wonderful. Rare in the sense that, to a poet, words are life. They breathe, they sing, they live, they die, they express, they exhort, they comfort, they mourn, they nurture, they sustain, they cajole, and most importantly, they simply are. Wonderful in the sense that the poet is at once a part of and outside of his or her time. A poet lives in tune with the world, feeling its rhythms, dancing its storms, navigating its winding and twisting paths, quietly, thoughtfully, relentlessly, creating ideas from words and ideas forged through personal experience. Yet, we name the poet as Outsider, Provocateur, Catalyst, Troublemaker. The poet – the really good one – stands without, looking at the world, not as it is, but as it could be, no, as it should be. And sometimes we hear and sometimes we don't. But the poet – the really good one – is always speaking, whether we hear or not.

Silence is the antithesis of the poet.

Which brings me to Will Brown and his poetry. Now, this may be unprofessional to say, but it is true: I didn't really know Will. He had finished his coursework just as I arrived. I only knew of him as "Will," the graduate student who wrote poetry.

But perhaps, this isn't as true as I thought when I sat down to pen this introduction to his work. I do know Will. No, I never met him in person, or in the flesh, as the saying goes.

But I did meet him. I met him through his poetry. I met him through his words. I met him, well, I met him as I would meet anyone in this world, through his individuality. His poetry has a way of drawing you in so that you feel almost compelled to read the next line and the next, just to see what new and inventive image that he conjured up or even the startling word choice, that so often, sent the poem careening (like a funhouse mirror) off into a new direction — unexpected, yet so totally perfect at the same time.

What strikes me the most, however, is the sheer breadth and variety of poems that Will wrote. His poems show the progression he hoped to achieve, but they reveal far more than that. They reveal a poet, who wanted nothing more than discover the essence of a poem and to work, journeyman-like, to master his craft.

Before I close this introduction, I would be remiss if I didn't at least mention a few of my favorite poems printed here. "Every Fantasy is Threatened at the Edges," "The Morning Commute," and "Flower no. 15" are personal favorites. They convey not perfection, but a serious attempt to discover what lies beneath and what lurks at the edges.

In other words, the most excellent work of a most excellent workman.

Pillow Talk

BY STARSHIELD LORTIE

For Will B.

This poem was originally published in Collage Magazine but has been reprinted here as a tribute to Will Brown. His works follow this poem.

We sat on my porch and talked about the Moon
and Venus because you couldn't say
what you really wanted to say and I knew
but couldn't look at you so we sat in the dark
and watched the Moon and listened to the locust
sing the night awake and talked about the heat
and what the neighbors were doing out in their driveway
so late and how I wished my camera took better pictures
so I could snap one of the Moon as she hung so bright
and close off the edge of my porch that we could
scoop her up with our hands and place her on our tongues
and roll the sweetness of summer around in our mouths
and neither of us wanted to break the spell
she had on us so we sat together without forcing
the other to say what we couldn't and you
lit another cigarette and I went back in the house
and the Moon disappeared over the top of the porch.

Raconteur in the Aviary

You have heard, of course, Maitlin Goes Ashore, the gem of caution, less weft than warping a picture of true responsibility. Have you terror or pity to appreciate falling? Chirrup more than matecall, twitter beyond the push of morningsong — bitter ruin on a Barbary Coast makes dirges, mates. Shall I repeat: put him into a sky for you to think through?

Pinions, hollow bones? Released weight the glyph of vital absence, the Maitlin not there in his own demise? So apt to rise.... Here you are safe but that disease or broken hearts prevail, these clippings the nest of limits in a dirty kingdom. Tragedy, but that I make him an eagle, eludes the harassed budgie, your purposive corpus without a heaven to know: You are not apt to feel the heavy legs, slogging.

Great Illigius cut him down, Maitlin most proud. But familiar came the forces: urgent hands, generations of ill-will lurking in the blood, voices in shrines confounding the agent. But did you choose this? Listen, then: Maitlin — sparrow-bodied prince — longed to o'erleap his hawk mother into a chancellery above clouds, and there: the larger sun the palace of the Peregrine, the attic of appetency unfit for slim vaulting wishes, the unaccounted-for urge compelling — can you see the little one soaring?

Above rain dark vibration of wing bursting lung hung in a field of blue, peak of aspiration and with swollen light in his eye unseen from the side comes ripping a spangle of pain occlusion of beak and talon dominion in full say, esperance tumbling.

And thus he fell, plucked — as all — from his palace by terrific vision in a suspect eye, the gift of gods to spur the chattel to grand finales, the great pleasure of Olympus.

Illigius, too, clown of the Oracle, will never anticipate the reckoning propeller gnawing through a salty horizon. Can you see him explode, mates, and hear the laughter howling in the wind?

Water at Dusk

What will it be to reckon with dissolution of all but some anthracite blacking in your soil? You are much in the way of water, lightly wrecking tonight the loose shoal rubbed already from its tight boundary in our dinner. This will go away tomorrow, be drained of its unstable phrases. This is to say: I am a word dropped in the wind. We are the symbol of a boat corroding in time from the hard smack of salt clinging to the brine, a wave as much as particle in the slit of experiment. It wants to say: Something persists as our light fades, something washed so cleanly of its endeavor that we think it doesn't destroy us, or nearly so. The element floats us, keeps this lamb raw on our tongue then takes it away down to the leviathans pocking the cold alleys with stony memory. It is a rosy hour when we take up our wine, pressed to its

purposes. You are to say: Shouldn't you be working?
But we dine instead, and this glass of water is a
margin. I take it as a suggestion that this meal
is like my last, as if the gibbet awaited me from your
question. As if you had said: Go jump in the ocean.
As if I had said: What can I do to please you?

Fire Twirler

Because we huddle together
with a 'carriage - rug' between us
at night on my porch
someone is bound
to light the ends of a tremendous pole
and accompany our radio
with wild performances
of looping flame.
Did you not say
The Universe sends signs
announcing change?
Could we not expect him then
to come out of the pitch
like a parade?
Can we not say now —
watching him blaze across the lot —
that something is certainly said
for the turn of color in our togetherness,
for this mysterious mortar
holding us close
in the dark?

Flower No. 3

unless she, like One that is looked at So with this exchange, uncollapsible
into either Erebung or bathun Whose voice, eloquent eructation, belies the nothing

made of Madeline, such the uninvested view. A flattened football in the dry culvert,
fish bones, the usual tire and — surprisingly — concrete blocks; I cannot wish away

the distant creek that provides them, diverts metonyms from flow Into foreign beds
I have left the impression of my body speaking in my aftermath of

more than tossed pillows, irreverent positions. You cannot receive unsubjugated this:
she in her vase, waiting on a round table in an unoccupied room toward which Rondee

has directed his eventual steps, and arriving — having desired more than the bodies of
words (whispering lasses plump with news) —

steals her removes the carmine blossom just below the ovule, fixes the flame in a breast
buttonhole, strolls the unoriginal city with her raw feel over his heart. It is like

the story: the climactic revelation of the golden coin in an unfurling palm (as am I
(like running into Rondee at The Midway, seeing him turn and and the inviolate flash

her shining in the dimglow known beneath

Flower No. 15

Some are poets of decay vamping on the bilge
with gassy brilliant colors & bunkum pay-off

Songs of an age of waste Thick as two short planks
in each something comes and something goes

routinely Used up, one becomes unstabled, fixless,
just some wiley guile holding it together some

cruel Ulixes ten years at swords & the same to chasten
steering the drifting ship between discomfortures

No matter how tired the stock return,
glut of colors and snowy white. Smells

retaining the token of synchrosis a durable flam
dropping from a horse the same as splinters an eye
He comes home everytime a different hue: bellicose red
witty blue ashen yellow, the conquerable fear black as

moon scripture It lasts beyond some churlish diurnalcy.
Sometimes the old agons renew Flush with gist,

these songwriters invigorate the familiar,
bleaking the American blushing eye with

A Morning Commute

I.
These lazy bends, marked as the Trail Of Tears, now
my sunpatched highway edged with quiet picnic pull-offs.
I am driving east against the grain of sorrow into sod-farm communities
where wan Regents have anchored a college
and asked me to teach their striving young the art of the essay.

It is like powering back to natal sanctuaries to pray
that local gods stay buried under the hillside or that memories be
washed of their detail, leaving only signposts—
terse capitalized words decipherable in a drive-by—
as a new structure of feeling.

But the beauty here: the way rounded hills
offer a suggestion of buckskin hips, the plural earth
a quorum of green and umber maidens coming and going.

II.
Skirt of feathers in a flock of late-waking starlings, squadron of interlopers.

They have been released from a giant hand.

One moment an explosion: They startle my windshield in a black rush.
I lose the lines, drift, swerve into a danger path,
bully ironworks of the oncoming lane. In that instant

I see before me a frozen brown foot in a hide slipper, dead in the snow.
Tires, the all-weather horseshoe, things touching the ground as we travel—
things that have abandoned themselves in the valley as
the frictious wear of transitions.

I wonder if my wheels will lay along the road
as evidence that I, too, have hunted this game trail,
that I have glided through tracking the quailing verb to its thicket.

The starlings evaporate.

And back in my lane, I continue hurtling.

Just rolling.

Rolling.

Rolling as always with my Destination riding beside me,
her ivory arm out the window, flinging yellowed maps into the motorwind.

Your Photo of a Four Foot Timber Rattler

Don't show me that, the twisted
rope of its body, its crushed head.
Don't you know about my dreams.
About the fanged warnings they
shake behind every shadowy stump.
Can't you imagine the nights
where that creature will soon return
from out of your bland phone into
the path of some journey. Some
fearless obstacle, it will send me
running—haunt my steps. When
I wake up, it will be your fault
no certainty remains, that nothing
but dissolution awaits me in the day.
It will be your fault. For my part
I'll deny your pictures—this fellow
in the grass—like hisses in a bramble
I bat away with prayers.

Every Fantasy Is Threatened at the Edges

I had marvelous parents, sanity in all my
affairs, a devout attention to my health.
I succeeded in school and took a high
paying job with benefits. My wife loves
me beyond all measure. Little children
are drawn to my gentle nature because
I have always been genuinely content.
It is hard to fathom, then, the homeless
man today who came up to my car
asking for change. I gave him the last
bill in my wallet, a five. He rubbed it
between his fingers, looked at it then
me. He crammed it in his jeans
then poked his head in my window.
“Die,” he said. “Die scumbag die.”

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS CONSIDERING SUICIDE OR SELF-HARM

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>)
1-800-273-TALK (8255) or by texting ANSWER to 839863

MTSU Counseling Services (<https://www.mtsu.edu/countest/counseling.php>)
Keathly University Center 326-S
615-898-2670

Crisis Text Line ([CrisisTextLine.org](https://crisistextline.org))
Text HOME to 741741

Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network
(tspn.org)