

The Blue Route

Issue #4: May 2010

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I am

By: Staci Eckenroth

I am
the petunias
outlined in purple like the velvet
you dressed me in, fenced into
the garden by dandelions and
chicken wire.
And I die with the smear of sunsets, where
after a while everything fades.
You left me reaching my fingers
towards something solid, but I can't
keep rooted to you.

And I am
the little girl in a Cinderella
dress you made,
drained of apologies for broken things,
and tears in fabric,
searching for daylight
and cloudless mornings
when punished with darkness.

And I have worn too much makeup,
then not enough,
worn my hair right, then wrong.
Your definition of perfection
is my face in the center of the page,
a slanted signature at the bottom of a degree,
but you don't know about my name
carved into the pills I take,
or the cigarettes I smoke.
My face smiling out from the page
disintegrates into separate pixels
that add up to nothing at all.

And I have never seen the meaning
in the moonlight and stars;
my feet don't dig deep enough.

It's Only Weird if We Kiss

By: Jamie Hennick

He's the first boy who she had ever allowed to pull her shirt up. The only boy, actually. They were five. Sam doesn't really remember the exact moment, but there's a picture in one of the photo albums that her mother pulls out every time their families get together for dinner. She had done the same tonight, the familiar charade.

"Here's the picture of Sam and Ben!" she screams, while all the adults laugh, "I guess Ben always wanted to be a doctor!" In the picture, Sam is smiling. Ben holds up her shirt as he checks her heartbeat somewhere near her bellybutton with a plastic stethoscope. Then Ben's mom chirps in,

"Good thing he learned his anatomy!" The parents laugh while Ben and Sam roll their eyes. Sam's mom always tells her that she's such good friends with Ben because they both share the same disdain for their goofy parents. Yeah, Sam always thinks, we do.

It's winter break during Ben and Sam's sophomore year at college- the first reunion since parting ways that summer from their sleepy Massachusetts town. They had both decided to go to schools on the west coast, far away from home and also from each other. They have been neighbors, friends, since preschool. Sam can tell that he's changed and thinks that maybe she hasn't changed enough. Sam likes being home, she likes hanging out with Ben. She doesn't like that they only see each other during winter and summer breaks, it's not enough for them to be friends again. The distance had reduced their relationship to rushed emails and infrequent phone calls. Neither returns for Thanksgiving, since the trip requires an expensive plane ticket that their parents can never afford to pay. Sam had gone home with her roommate for the holiday, to her house an hour away. Ben had stayed at school. He told Sam that he just partied with the international students and it had been "pretty chill."

Sam hadn't really noticed how much she misses Ben until they reunite. Until they were back in the same state, same town, at the same dinner table, and now sitting on the same familiar couch in her basement watching reruns of *Saturday Night Live*. Sam likes being back where things are familiar, where she knows that there's nothing wrong with her lifestyle. She likes the comforts of home, free of the anxiety she feels when she pours over her textbooks on a Saturday night. She knows she's not missing out on anything when she's at home.

In the soft glow of the television, they talk in a broken conversation, interrupted by the laugh track from the TV. Ben says he's taking classes to finish the core requirements and says he skips them a lot because he's hung over. He still takes piano. That's great, Sam says, she's proud that he's holding onto his commitment to the piano. He tells her she sounds like his mother, so she stops talking. He tells her about some of

his crazy escapades, peeing on the president's lawn, waking up in someone else's bathtub with dinosaurs drawn all over his arms... Sam can see a mischievous light up in his eyes, getting some sort of thrill out of boasting his stories. He's so *college*, Sam thinks. She's jealous that he's so happy at school. She's not. Sam tells Ben that she likes school enough, but secretly, she hates being at an all girls' school, she feels like she's drowning in estrogen. All they ever talk about is men and boobs, flip-flop tans and homework. She misses playing video games with Ben and making jokes about poop without someone throwing a hissy fit. Ben laughs, but then feels bad. He suggests that she look into transferring, which exasperates Sam. After waiting so long to *go* to college, there's no way she's reapplying to transfer. She's getting the best education she could ask for. Her professors are awesome, the major is just what she wants, Food, Nutrition, and Wellness Studies, and at what other school could she get trained to scuba dive as part of her lifeguard certification? Ok, he says, that's cool. Sam knows she'll make it work. She knows she can. She tells him that she loves the friends she's made. That she wouldn't trade them for the world. She misses him, she says repeatedly. He misses her too. But he doesn't look her in the eye when he says this; instead, he remains glued to the television. Her mom had pointed out in whispered observation that he's developed a beer gut. She tries not to look down at his stomach.

Sam shifts to sit on her hands. They're clammy. So are her feet. She gets up and retrieves an afghan from the pile on the adjacent recliner and sits back down, tucking her limbs under the thickly woven yarn. It's cold outside, but cozy in the basement which is well-equipped with an assortment of space heaters. They whirl in the background and light the darkness with their little orange power buttons. Ben takes out his phone and opens it. Then he closes it and replaces it in his pocket.

Sam feels naïve, inadequate, sitting next to her oldest friend. She thinks about everything that he's experienced and seen at college and thinks that if they had met at school, they probably wouldn't be friends. She thinks about the nights she's spent listening to the noises of muffled parties that go on long after she turns off the lights. She thinks of what she might be missing, what she should be a part of. She wants to know what it would feel like to be included in rambunctious giggles about last night's escapades, or what it would feel like to not have to ask a million questions of clarification. You did what? With who? She wishes she thought their stories were genuinely funny. She tells herself that it doesn't bother her that much, to feel like she was annoying everyone she talks to. Everyone's another trashy drunk girl, something that she never wants to be. She feels that they disapprove of her studious ways, censor their conversation because they think she's judgmental. They ask her why she never goes out, why she always stays in on the weekends. She says she goes out. To lectures, free movies on campus, sometimes out to dinner. When they raise their eyebrows at this, she tells them she has a scholarship, and they respect that. That she wants to get a good internship in the summer. That her parents will get mad if she doesn't make Dean's List. She has to get good grades. Sam has learned that obedience and consistency will get her where she wants to go and tries not to think twice about what the others say or do.

Ben used to like to study on weekends, watch movies. Sam knows his interests are elsewhere now. In girls and keg parties. She wonders if he even wants to be here tonight, or if his parents made him come. She discards the afghan to the side of the couch and stretches out her feet, her toes. Her mom would yell at her later for not wearing socks, it's the middle of winter, you know. She goes and retrieves some from the dryer.

“So, any girls I should know about?” Sam asks, deeming it a worthy subject for her unfamiliar friend. She wants to know everything about him, like she used to.

He smirks and doesn't respond.

“*What?* I'm just *wondering*. Last I knew you were still talking to Pissy Chrissy...”

“What? Christine? She ended that months ago. Remember? You knew that...” He hates it when she calls her Pissy Chrissy.

“She dumped you?”

“Yes.”

“Geez. What an idiot. What's her deal? And you didn't tell me about this, FYI.”

“It was the distance thing or something. I don't know.” Sam feels good. The conversation is going well. Usually people don't come to her for relationship advice, or any advice. They come to her for homework help. Sam knows they think it's weird when she gets excited to help them. But she likes the attention. People don't know that she listens to them all the time. That she *could* help them with their other problems. She wishes they could hear her now. They'd realize that these words she's saying to Ben are *their* words, that she understands without experience. She's a good learner.

“Whatever. She's an idiot. And I *told* you that was going nowhere fast. Remember? I told you that you should dump her over the summer,” she says as she points her chin upwards matter-of-factly, “Hate to say I told you so!” But she immediately sees Ben's disappointment and smothers her smugness. She never liked Christine, but Ben really did. She probably broke up with him over text message or something like that. Poor Ben.

“Well I have no regrets. College is treatin' me fine in the romance department anyways, if you know what I'm sayin',” he winks at Sam. She waits a moment before asking,

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. *Oh* yeah.” Silence covers the room again with the same itchy discomfort as the afghan thrown across Sam's lap. They don't usually talk about these things. Not

since middle school when they decided it was weird to talk about the people they had crushes on. Sam wonders... has Ben slept with these girls? Do people *have sex* that freely with so many people? She thinks they do, but she doesn't know for sure. She thinks Ben has, anyways, and she can tell he's not lying. When he lies, he bites his bottom lip. So, maybe he's turned into a womanizer? Sam doesn't want to believe the stereotypes that go along with a beer gut. She doesn't want to believe what her mother assumes. That he's a womanizer, a drunk. Spoiled. Into drugs? Sam knows Ben's still a good kid. He still collects action figures. His mom still makes his bed. How corrupt can he be? Has he turned into one of the guys her roommate complains about all the time? In one of her tirades about how dumb men are, after another weekend hookup that leads to nothing?

She doesn't judge him though. She finds his freedom to be enticing. She's actually *jealous* of his freedom. She wants to have the same freedom. She imagines him relaxing, doing all his work, but making sure he has time to relax. She imagines him going to parties and having fun, teaching girls how to play beer pong. She imagines him *surrounded* by beautiful, intelligent girls. She imagines them all throwing themselves at Ben. He's an attractive boy, a nice boy, a charming boy. She's jealous of the new faces he has to touch, the lips he has to kiss, the new bodies he has to hold. Secretly she wants it to be her own. She tries to put herself in his world, but she knows she's not there. She imagines that she is in the dorm room next to his, trying to study. Focusing only on papers and tests and the next mock trial. She socializes with his friends only by accident. At the gym, the cafeteria, the library. She knows this is what she is. Invisible, insignificant, stuck in the grids of the charts in her biology books. Why can't she escape? Why can't *she* be wild and fun?

"So... am I supposed to ask if there are any guys?" Ben asks. Sam's face gets red. Of course there's no one. There's never anyone. She knows what he's thinking. That she's never had a real boyfriend and still doesn't. That in high school she was too focused on dissections and derivatives and her GPA and getting *into* college that now she has no history, no experience, no idea what to do in that department... that now she goes to a prestigious college, but it's all girls and her biggest fear is becoming a LUG, lesbian-until-graduation. He doesn't know that her mom asks her constantly *why* no boyfriends, where are the boyfriends? That Sam stumbles to explain that it's not that easy at an all-girls' school. That it's not like buying a new pair of shoes... that her diploma is worth it, but the social dynamics are weird. That she can't get a 4.0 *and* have time for a serious relationship. She doesn't tell her mom that her campus is crawling with horny girls that find it easier to hook up with each other than to find a man. That she doesn't care to hear about her mother's exes, Alan, the tuba player, who's now a doctor. Her mom thinks that she's great friends with the girls in her hall. Best friends. Sam tells her mom that she wouldn't trade them for the world. Her mom doesn't know that she gets uncomfortable when they talk about guys, about sex, about last night's mistakes. She has nothing to contribute. She doesn't want to be labeled as a virgin. She doesn't want to be excluded from their conversations. She wants to know. So she tells them she's had boyfriends before and shows them pictures of herself with her boy cousins as proof. She tells them the break-ups were messy. She's able to contribute to the conversation in that way, in a ya-ya sisterhood men-hating kind of way.

“Well, there’s this guy who works at the café in the library,” Sam says after a while. There’s absolutely nothing going on with them, but it’s still a true statement. There *is* a guy who works at the café in the library. The lie burns like rubbing alcohol as it rolls off her tongue. It makes her insides feel like she’s just vomited. She’s never *really* lied to Ben before.

“Oh yeah? You two have a thing?” Sam looks at Ben, wondering if he’s just playing along. But he seems serious.

“Yeah. We sneak away to the study lounges during his breaks to bang. They’re sound proof.” She knows that he’ll call her out on it, of course she’s still a virgin, but Ben accepts her word as gospel, not questioning any of the fictitious elements. Sam feels dangerous.

“Whoa! When did you start using the word ‘bang’? You don’t ‘make love’ anymore?” Sam punches him in the arm, a move she thinks is appropriate to defend her fabricated love affair.

“Shut up.”

“So what’s his name?”

“Craig,” she lies. Ben’s satisfied with this and continues to watch the TV. She feels a little bad for lying to Ben, but she wants him to think that she’s promiscuous and crazy. Once at a party freshman year, Sam kissed a girl, Caity, on the dance floor. It was an accident. It was the only time Sam had been drunk. It was her first kiss. The whole thing mortifies her. A girl. There had even been guys at this party, and she kissed a girl. She still can’t believe that after waiting all these years for her first kiss, she wasted the moment of a sloppy lip lock with a *girl*. Drunkenly. She knows that Ben would like this story, tell her that it’s hot, that she’s awesome, he might think she’s cooler. She considers telling him. But doesn’t. She knows she won’t.

Ben says he’s got stories, if they’re telling stories. He tells her about this one girl he hooked up with in the library, and again in another academic building, room 213B. He tells her about going up the mountain in his Jeep and that cars are way too small for that, if you know what he means. She finds this fascinating, that her friend, who started from the same town as she did has turned into something she can only dream about becoming. She thinks about her schedule, when she would logically fit in such unpredictable meetings. She can’t. She won’t.

Sam wonders if there really is something wrong with her. *Is* she a lesbian? She doesn’t think she can be a lesbian because she’s never been with a man. So she wouldn’t know. She despises men for not chasing her around the way they chase other girls. Why is she so undesirable? She tries to think of logical reasons why she would be unappealing to men. She finds flaws in her personality. She doesn’t laugh enough, doesn’t giggle, doesn’t straighten her hair, or wear shiny lip gloss. She doesn’t care about getting wasted on weekends, and she doesn’t wear skanky outfits. She often stops in front of bathroom

mirrors to life up her shirt, to check to see if any fat has grown. She's always relieved that it hasn't, but disappointed that there's still no reason to explain why she repels men. Her hall mates used to tell her that she will be their project, that they're going to find her someone. They take her to places but Sam only stays for a few seconds, skeptical that strangers will only talk to her to try to get into her pants. She doesn't want to be anyone's charity. She tells herself it's not all about sex, or love. That there's more to life than that, so she should stop worrying. But she sees the companionship her parents treasure, she sees that they're best friends, and she thinks that life is pretty worthless without *that*. She wants that. To be in love. But these thoughts blend furiously together and she never shares them with any of the girls during late night conversations sitting cross-legged in the dorm hallways. She keeps it to herself. She knows she can figure it out on her own.

Sam's mom yells down to announce that Ben's parents are leaving but Ben can stay as long as he wants. Sam's parents are going to bed, so goodnight Sam!, she yells. It was good to see you, Ben. See you soon. She says she'll see Sam in the morning.

A movie comes on TV, one they've both seen several times before. Through the opening credits, Sam listens to her mom as she shuffles around the kitchen. Sam can see from memory the routine- preparing the coffee maker, putting away the placemats, pushing in the chairs, starting the dishwasher and turning off the lights. She'll leave on the bathroom light so Sam can find her way to bed.

"Want to play a game?" Sam asks. Sure, Ben says, how about Candy Land? Like the good ole' days? Sam thinks his choice is some sort of reflection of his opinion of her, childish, immature, predictable.

"How about strip Candy Land?" Sam's suggestion flies out of her mouth like an unexpected hiccup. She thinks about retracting the offer, but instead leaves it on the table. She wants some stories of her own. She doesn't want to be boring anymore. She doesn't want everyone to think she's boring. Ben can help her. She waits nervously for a response.

"Whoa girl. Wild child!...I guess I'm down...Frank and Tina have any booze lying around?" Sam looks around the basement, locates bottles of wine on a nearby pantry shelf and tells him that they'll notice if they're missing. One step at a time. Ok, he says. No worries.

The game begins slowly. Sam doesn't know why she suggested this. She's glad it's winter. She's glad she put socks on. Two layers. Ben has no shame. In no time, he whips through the Candy Cane Forest and takes off his shirt. They strip every time they land on a landmark, or get their favorite color. Ben's is green, Sam's, yellow. Soon enough he's down to his boxers. Sam's layers and good luck allow her to remain in her jeans and t-shirt. She fidgets, bites her finger nails, plays with her hair, anything to divert her attention from Ben's body, a sight she's conditioned to seeing from summers spent lounging by her pool, but never in the flickering lights of the TV. In the winter. On her couch. She lands on Gloppy the Molasses Monster. Ben looks up at her, waiting for her

to choose which item to remove. Pants or shirt. Sam sits there, mad at herself for suggesting such a game, considers refusing to play, but decides she must. She crosses her arms and reaches for opposite sides of her waist. She pretends she's Pissy Chrissy and pulls her shirt up slowly, allowing it to mask her face for as long as possible. But then it's off, and Sam's aware that she's naked, no, almost naked. She wonders if she's wearing the wrong kind of bra for a boy to see. A boy named Ben that she's known since she was two. A boy whose face she could barely see anymore in the darkness of her basement.

"Ok, this is weird." She finally says. She knows she sounds like a prude.

"Nah. No it's not...it'd only be weird if we kissed."

She looks up, squinting her eyes to detect a smirk in his face. There's no smirk. Is he teasing her? Is this flirting? When did they start flirting with each other? Did it really only take her taking off her shirt? In her basement? Over a game of Candy Land? Is Ben really that much of a boy?

Of course he is. Sam thinks. She lets her knee touch his for a millisecond. An electric charge courses through her denim. Sam feels the energy race up her inner thigh. She wonders if he can feel it too. She thinks about her mother's comments, *It's time for boyfriends, Sam. Where are the boyfriends, Sam? This house is ready for boyfriends...*

She leans in, balancing her head on her palm. She watches Ben as he picks a card. She knows she's very close to falling out of her bra. She looks down. She has cleavage.

Ben leans back from the coffee table where he was taking her turn. Hey, oh hey, he says, that smirk sweeping across his face. She thinks about what he's thinking, she knows what should happen next. She knows he's kidding, but an unfamiliar compulsion envelopes Sam and leads her lips to his, locking them together. The first moment passes, the moment where he could have pushed her away in shock, repulsion. Sam closes her eyes. She thinks that's what she's supposed to do. Ben reciprocates. He starts moving his head, his lips, in fleshy activity that tastes like the apple pie they had for dessert. It's easier than she'd imagined, but Sam still wonders if he can tell she's never done this before. Soberly. Or with a boy. She thinks she likes it, but isn't sure. He separates their faces a few millimeters, leaving Sam's lips tingling. She purses them together to capture the sensation.

"Now, *this* is weird," he says, smirking again. He grabs her by the naked waist and she remembers her lack of shirt. But she's supposed to be almost naked, right? They collapse sideways onto the couch in a bizarre, uncomfortable embrace. She runs her fingers through his hair, stopping when her hand reaches the nape of his neck. She strategizes. How can she move into a more comfortable position? Is this right? Is she good at this?

She feels his fingers fumbling with the fastening of her bra. She pulls away. Panics. Not yet, she whispers in a tone she's never heard. He laughs and their lips fuse together once again.

They get into a rhythm. Sam likes the rhythm. The infomercials distract her a little bit, but she is refocused by his wandering hands that set each area they touch on a fire that courses through her entire body. Up her spinal cord, where it settles in her core for a moment's time before shooting down to her toes. It's quick, it's coursing. She knows this is weird, that she will probably regret it, but it feels good so she doesn't stop. She wonders if this makes her a slut. She thinks about how funny kissing sounds. She wonders what to do with her tongue. She follows his lead. She's making out with Ben... *Ben*, Ben. But she keeps going... she's satisfied.

When he reaches down to her pants to unbutton them, Sam puts a hand in front of his face. Now what? He asks. She doesn't answer. He apologizes. We don't have to do this, he says. Sam grabs her shirt and tells him maybe he should go home. Please, she says. He sits there for a second, but then he does. He puts on his clothes, silently, except for the clinking of his belt buckle. And then he leaves.

Sam is left alone in the dusty light of late-night sitcoms. She wonders what's wrong with her. This is proof. That there must be *something* wrong with her. She replays each touch, each move, each kiss, over and over. It was bliss. So why did she send him away? Will he call her tomorrow? Will they do this again? Will things be weird? Did he imagine she was someone else?

She throws her shirt on the ground instead of putting it back on. Different parts of her body take turns getting heated from the oscillating space heaters. Sam only feels like screaming, but she knows her parents are sleeping. She takes off her pants, regretting the whole time that she hadn't let Ben. Then her bra. Last, her underwear. She crawls under the coffee table where she and Ben used to make forts. She looks up at the letters scribbled in magic marker that barely resemble their names.

Her body tenses, encased in a cold, prickly glove that prods at every sensitive area on her body. The rug roughly exfoliates what was moments ago cradled in Ben's arms.

A few minutes pass. She starts feeling dirty. She wishes she had stolen some wine. Then maybe she wouldn't remember this whole thing. Ben is probably home, talking to some girl on his computer already. She doesn't know why she did that, suggest to play that game. She doesn't know why she threw herself at Ben. Why she *thought* she could do that. She hopes that miraculously he'll forget the whole thing. Won't tell anyone, won't make fun of her for not knowing what to do, for not letting him take her pants off... Sam thinks about how meaningless it all is. She's just one more girl in his book. There are more important things for her to worry about. She *has* friends, she tells herself. It's not like she's alone. She's mad that she gave Ben the satisfaction. He's just another one of those boys.

Secretly, she wishes he will come back and find her like this. Naked, on the floor. Secretly, she wishes that they'll have sex together and get it over with. That she won't be a virgin anymore, won't be so out of the loop. That everything will start to make sense. That she won't worry so much about everything. That she won't care if everything doesn't make sense. Tears build behind her eyes, but they do not fall. The pressure sinks like a deflated balloon and stays wedged solidly, immovably between her lungs and heart.

Sam falls asleep under the coffee table and wakes up the next morning with the afghan covering her naked body. Bleak winter sunlight strains through cold snow clouds. She looks upward to the couch and sees Ben passed out face down. Sam panics and hopes her mom hasn't come downstairs to do laundry. She's still naked. She wriggles across the floor, bundled in the afghan like a cocoon. She dresses herself under the afghan. Why is he still here? What is he thinking? Did he come back expecting more? She stands there, contemplating how to exile him from her house. Finally, she just kicks him.

"What the..."

"Yeah, what the hell. What are you doing here?"

"I came to check on you, you seemed freaked out. I started walking home but came back because you seemed freaked out. It was late so I just crashed here."

"You need to leave."

"Whoa, Sam, what's your problem?"

"You need to leave," she repeats forcefully.

"Chill out. Do you need to go to our fort? Looks like you were pretty cozy there... Will that calm you down?"

"Shut up! And if you tell anyone about this, I'm... I'll... I'm going to..."

"Whoa. Chill out..." He stretches and says through a gaping yawn, "I just woke up..." Sam stands with folded arms, glaring disapprovingly, "Ok, ok, I'll go, I'll go... want to do something later? My parents are driving me nuts."

Sam knows she should be elated. He's acting normal. He wants to hang out. They're still friends, even if she's a freak. She *is* a freak, she thinks. She should say yes.

But she can't help but imagine what Ben sees when he looks at her. A body to be undressed, to be conquered. She assumes he only wants to hang out to get in her pants. Kissing changes everything. He's going to use her. Do you want to? He asks again. No, she doesn't. Get out, she says. He's too slow. She picks up a glass of water from the coffee table and pours it on his head. She's shaking. What the hell was that for? He shouts as water soaks into his shoulders. She's not sure. She starts crying, sobbing.

Paralyzed by insecurities. She collapses onto the sofa. She can't believe that she wished this mess upon herself. She's mad at herself for not being able to contain her instincts, for not being able to control herself. She decides that she's going to give all her childhood board games to charity.

Ben sits there and stares and then starts to talk. He tells her this is hard to say, but that he needs to say it... that he's liked her for a long time. Since the summer between 9th and 10th grades, when they went to Lake Champlain with their parents... the summer they spent learning to water ski. Sam doesn't respond. She punches him in the arm. Shut up she says. He continues, tells her he's serious. He's not kidding. He tells her that he likes her because he already loves her, that he's sorry if that's coming on too strong. Please don't be freaked out. He says he thought she'd think it was weird, that they'd stop being friends, if he ever said anything, so he didn't. But he's wanted to tell her for a long time. That those other girls are *dumb bitches*, that he's always wanted it to be her. He makes excuses, says that the distance makes it easier to forget, to pretend... Sam doesn't answer. Is this for real? She questions every word that flows with such unadulterated conviction, like something out of a movie. It seems real. But it can't be real, she tells herself. It's not. No one ever thinks these things about Sam. Ben says they can work something out, that they *should* work something out...if she wants. Doesn't she think so? Maybe? That they should try *something*. It makes sense, doesn't it? He asks her to stop crying. *Please*, stop crying.

Sam feels his hand on her back, timidly comforting her. She doesn't flinch, like she usually would. They hear Sam's parents' footsteps shuffling around upstairs. Silence ticks with the clock for what seems like an eternity. They are frozen. Then, Ben asks in a hushed tone what she thinks. She can tell he's nervous. He wants to know what she thinks, but she doesn't know how to say it. She doesn't trust herself to say it. So she just says she doesn't know, that she just doesn't know. She knows that things could be great. She says she needs time. She's skeptical because things are never great. He's not messing around with her. She knows he's not lying. She *knows* he's not making this up. But she asks him to leave. He doesn't protest. He gets up and looks down at her. She doesn't look up, but keeps her head cradled in her hands. So he goes without saying another word.

The Block

By: Rory Meagher

The block we lived on didn't have any trees. Across the street there was the cemetery, where my mom took me to pray when I was bad. She said it gave me perspective. I didn't have any brothers or sisters. My dad left before I was born. My mom was my best friend, and when she was gone I was alone in the house.

My neighbor George used to scour the cemetery just for something interesting. I don't think he ever found anything cool in there. One time I saw him leaving it in the morning, his shoulders hung low, and his face wore exhaustion. I been in there all night and now I know, he said. All the names in there are all the names on the block. Harris, Jones, Sanders, Smith, Cole, Johnson. People here don't go anywhere, just across the street. Seeing George like that took something out of me.

At age thirteen, George was the big kid on the block, and when he walked by with that step full of swagger, everyone looked at him in awe. Go get George, everyone would always tell me. I think he liked me best, and that's why they told me to get him. Donnie, you get George! He's your fucking neighbor! I was also the second oldest at eleven.

We played football in the bank parking lot down the street to the left. There were always a few cars and, of course, the big dumpster, but it was still a football field to us. We weren't supposed to play there, but the next closest parking lot was all the way down at the grocery store on Howard.

After George scored a touchdown, the manager came out of the bank carrying an expression that scared me. He was a big, bald man, and the old bastard showed his yellow teeth like Timmy's dog does before it barks. He clutched at the knot of his orange tie, as he began screaming with such vigor that his words were landing on us, weighing down on us.

Like usual, I looked to George to see what to do. With the other boys leaving, the manager turned back to his fort. George flashed him a grin that said fuck you and he reached real far back with the football. Then, he snapped like a catapult. His whole arm swung over his body, bringing his weight forward onto his front leg. The ball spiraled directly at the bank manager making his way up the short steps to the door. I wanted to get the attention of the other boys who were walking away, but I couldn't take my eyes off that ball, that beautiful ball. If I spoke, it might ruin it – the ball might disappear. Only George and I saw the ball hit the man in the back of the head, slamming the front of his head forward into the bank door. He toppled backwards down the steps. George high-fived me, and we trotted back to our block, not laughing but smiling like we were stoned on something.

I can't describe the block well. It all looks the same to me: the dirty sidewalks, the scattered trash, the rusted gutters, the baby crying from 13, the sleeping guy on the porch of 11, the big, white van in front of 15. Nothing ever changes. But after the football game, something did. My mom went to the grocery store like usual, but she never came back.

I walked over to George's porch, and my stomach burned. It had gotten dark. He was slouched on the red and white lawn chair, tapping his feet to the music that no one heard. I sat down on the rocking chair and told him that my mom didn't come back. He sat straight up.

How long has she been gone, he asked. It was hard to see his face. Sitting opposite him in the dark, it reminded me of a confessional.

She left two hours ago, I said.

Let's go fucking check it out. He stood up.

Alright, but do you have any food?

Uh, let me check, wait here. He jumped through his open doorway, and ran through his house. I could hear the cupboards banging, and my stomach growled at the sound. He came back out with a half-used roll of crackers. This is all I got, he said.

I thanked him, and we began our journey. We walked side by side in the center of the street. I removed one cracker at a time from the cylinder-shaped bag, took it to my mouth, and demolished it. I did this like breathing.

We turned left to cut across the bank parking lot. The one light post threw a dim orange over the vacant lot, occupied only by the green dumpster in the back left corner. We walked diagonally through it, as I munched my last cracker. I dropped the empty cracker bag and listened to it whimper. I could hear something else too. It was feet hitting the asphalt behind us, and then thwaps hitting more rapidly. I turned back and saw the manager running after us. He must've been hiding behind the dumpster. George looked too, and when he saw it, he slapped my back. Run, he said. Then, he shouted it. Run! He kept his hand on my back, pushing me ahead of him. I could feel him making me faster.

The man was screaming at us. His footsteps were louder, closer. Then, George stopped pushing me. The man had tackled him. I slowed down and looked back. Just fucking go, he shouted from the scuffle. The man tried to wrestle George into submission, but George kept throwing punches. Get outta here, he said again. And, I took off. Partly because I was scared, partly because I wanted to listen to him, wanted to believe that he'd be fine, but mostly because, more than anything, I wanted to find my mom.

I turned left down the alley behind the bank. I sprinted to the end of it. Fuck, I thought, why did I leave George? I stopped before the intersection, as a car was coming down the road perpendicular to mine. I could still go back to George. The car swerved from side to side, then veered violently off the road. It went onto the sidewalk and through a street sign. It smashed into the building on the corner across from me, breaking brick. I ran over to the car, whose door opened and spilled out a middle-aged man. He tumbled gracelessly onto his back and stared at me, as blood swam from his forehead over his face. I could smell the alcohol.

Are you okay, I asked. He moaned something. I looked around. There was no one, nothing but a dark street. I looked back at the man. He was transfixed on something in the distance. A peacefulness swept over him. He stopped panting, and calmly closed his eyes.

I remembered George. I never should have left him. I could go back and get him, and he would know what to do. I ran. I thought about how guilty I looked running away from a dead man, and I ran faster. I sprinted down the alley and whizzed around the corner into the bank parking lot. I stopped. The parking lot was empty. I put my hands on my knees and caught my breath. This was not good at all. I walked around the lot looking for something, anything. I stopped in the center.

There was nothing to do but head back. Maybe George and my mom would be waiting for me at home. I would walk back and they'd be sitting on the porch laughing, playing cards by the candlelight. My mom loved to do that with me. We'd play 'go fish' till midnight sometimes. She would try to teach me gin or rummy, but I never liked those. 'Go fish' was too simple for her, but I loved it for that. And I loved her for playing it anyway.

I was back at the block, and I gave it a quick survey before going the rest of the way. Darkness covered the row houses. There were no lights on anywhere. I walked faster to get through the shadows and back home. I didn't stop at George's house because I hoped he'd be on my porch with my mom. But, I could feel the darkness of his house as I passed it. I could feel the emptiness, and I tried to ignore it. A few paces more, and I was in front of my house. It didn't make sense. It looked the same as George's house. Maybe they were playing a trick on me, but something crept into my mind. I heard a car pull up behind me. I turned around. There were two cops getting out of their cruiser, and they had bad news. This was the day something changed. But I could see these men believed that nothing had changed.

Seismology

By: Meredith Noseworthy

You are good at things with sugar and things,
he says to me when I've baked this many
of them, left them to cool, balanced plates
on every unbalanceable surface. Before, when

we walked to the burnt-away house,
we didn't speak. The trouble's

always in the measuring out—portions spilt
on the table, with one shorter leg. Always

in trying to be precise: a hand will slip

and when things fall they can't
be undone. He draws in the flour.
In that dark, he tells me earthquakes

are like buttons popping off, that the trouble is in
the tension of our surfaces. Blackened, thumb-sized

the shingle I took from that day of staring
at what wasn't ours, will keep.
I collect evidence, write lists. I only know

to fix these little hurts: attend to tension—
the most you can do—to not spill out the water.

Smoke

By: Alicia Pietrzak

It spills off the end
of my cigarette as it did
off hers, except now
I always stain my filters
with lipstick.

But there was once a time we couldn't
distinguish between the two resting
in an ashtray, as the slivers
of grey ghosts trickled
through the room, blending
into one cloud. Rising above
the thick din of gravity that kept
us cross-legged on the floor, dwelling on
what was to come that next day.

And she would pick
hers up between
her calloused fingers,
on hands that were always
rougher, stronger than mine.
Hands that rolled
the stories of our
illicit youth, and brought
a heathen smoke to our saintly
mouths, that would turn
upward, grinning
as the high set in. With memories that were

curtailed by reality, we packed
her up to ship
her out to guns and camouflage,
away from the security
of Newton St. and the yellow
walls of her bedroom
that were coated
with a narrative about
best friends and their vices.

And as we pulled
the tapestries and posters down
into boxes. I was surprised
to see stark white
rectangles beneath
in their absence.

For The Girls By The Drained Pool

By: Ryan Rader

“As for measure and other technical apparatus, that’s just common sense: if you’re going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will go to bed with you” -Frank O’Hara

I wore those pants in the snow,
My treaded boots displacing powder

like dust in the expanding universe,
Ankles kept safe in white socks,

the weather speaking in waves.
I remember six distinct summers

of you, the wild dancers,
Punk-hipster art-fag fashion-

-istas, mosh-pit, kickflipping
crowd-surfing social butterflies.

We may swap peeks from laces up
to a cuffed leg and nod politely

in certain social situations, bus
stations, venues, dives, but I am

a fraud, an observer in your clothing,
Know me as the inventor of nothing,

willingly assimilated by my subjects,
and in my mind a skateboarder pauses

in the air and I envy the fearless,
with molecules so slow they stop

time. Tight denim and duct-taped shoes
hovering over waxed rotating splinters,

wheels buzzing the mouths of
the girls on the lip of the pool,

their legs dangling into echoes,
flipping their hair in a chorus.

Moderation

By: Ryan Rader

Six-hundred pounds and eleven feet between them,
the couple holds plastic sacks from the grocer downtown.
I've been pounding the sidewalk, moving fast, trying
to kill time. They appear, bouncing from right foot
to left, shifting the mass of their hips-- those spare tires--
made only for a semi-truck on a long, long road,

the plastic strips in lieu of handles digging
into the dense fingers of the husband while
the wife carries only two, both on her right hand.
It continues for blocks, the struggle, protrusions
a foot from their bellies, those bellies!
I look down to my feet and jump a dying puddle

while the wife's trapeze act shadows her husband.
We are directly across from each other, a sign
that says NO PARKING just behind her.
They pause at the curb. Water splashes
upward towards the sidewalk. He steps,
into the refuse, dampening his sweatpants

and reaches a heavy hand, motioning her across.
She steps far enough, just a small splash
with the heel of her flip-flop. She made it.
Down the street, their bodies wave goodbye.
I walk a straight line to Savages, counting
the calories I spent watching them dance.

Disengage

By: Kaitlyn Wall

The house empties. It becomes
a cardboard box, the walls flimsy
in the wind. All day, you are running
to lean your weight against them. The whir
of tires on the street outside is
absent. You know even in the burning
sunlight that your life has hollowed out,
like a pumpkin scraped of its fat seeds. One
night, you walk outside and stand
on the sidewalk, your arms spread,
searching for the moon hanging on its string
like a hard, pearlescent memory. It is gone,
and when you wander back inside
and the door slams behind you, the plaster
around the edges begins to crack. You under-
stand then, that you cannot continue
to hold on. The pieces you are clutching
in your fist are the shards of a windowpane;
they are slicing your palms. You begin to unravel.
By the time they find you, you are nothing
but a pile of loosened yarn on the hardwood
floor. They tie tight knots along your length,
carry you out into the night, and toss
you like a lasso around the moon.

Contributors

Staci Eckenroth is a junior Creative Writing major at Susquehanna University from South Amboy, New Jersey. She likes black-and-white photography, long necklaces, and the color yellow. Staci also has a tendency to buy too many books that she fears she won't have time to read.

Jamie C. Hennick is a senior English major at Dickinson College, planning do something with her life that does not involve a dress code or a cubicle. She plans to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing once she is out of debt from the cost of her undergraduate degree.

Rory Meagher is a sophomore at Susquehanna University. He is a Creative Writing major, and a member of FUSE (Forum for Undergraduate Student Editors) and the men's lacrosse team. He is from Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he attended Allentown Central Catholic High School (class of '08). He is the youngest of six, raised by Fran and Molly Meagher.

Meredith Noseworthy is a senior double-majoring in Creative Writing and Theatre at Knox College in Galesburg, IL. Currently, she works as a technical artist in Knox's costume shop, a writing tutor in Knox's Center for Teaching and Learning, and a poetry editor for the campus' literary magazine, *Catch*. Originally from a one-stop-sign town in Vermont, Noseworthy plans to move to Chicago after her graduation.

Alicia Pietrzak is a sociology major and creative writing minor at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY. She plans to graduate in the Spring of 2011 after six tumultuous years and pursue an MFA in creative writing. She is currently writing a memoir that she hopes to finish by 2015, and always has some poems going. Aside from writing she enjoys talk radio, her cat, the Buffalo Sabres, environmental awareness, music festivals, and the bar.

Ryan J. Rader, at age eight, told a group of fellow children that Santa Claus was not real, and was subsequently grounded by his parents. He has been unable to tell the truth ever since.

Kaitlyn Wall is a senior at Susquehanna University, and is currently serving as a genre editor for *RiverCraft Magazine*. Next year, she hopes to attend an MFA program for poetry, and believes strongly in the following: tattooing, evolution, and equality.