

# The Lighter

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Volume 61  
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Article 1

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May 2016

## The Lighter Spring 2016

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# THE LIGHTER

SPRING 2016



ISSUE 61

VOLUME 2

## EDITOR'S NOTE

While each semester brings new and exciting things to the Lighter submission pool, I've found that on average, the Spring semester is always especially full. For some reason either the steady wind-down of the semester, the creeping warmth of Spring, or some intoxicating combination of the two inspires our students to a heightened level of creativity. We see a greater diversity of art mediums in the spring; a higher variation in poetic style; a larger disparity between the longest and shortest of our prose pieces. At the end of an academic year, artists of both the visual and the literary variety are excited to show off their newly honed skills— and the Lighter is the unabashed beneficiary of their talent. This semester was no exception. A wealth of material made its way to the Lighter submission pool this Spring, and it was with genuine joy that I got to watch our selection committees cultivate this semester's journal from such dynamic sources. For the last three years, my experience on the staff of the Lighter has been a positive force in my life, and a sunny spotlight on the memory of my time at Valpo. But the incredible material we're privileged to publish in this issue has been a special highlight. I hope our readers are able to share in the same joy I've experienced as a part of this incredible artistic project.

The Lighter would like to thank Allison Schuette for her patience and support as the faculty advisor to the Lighter, to Kate Braun and Michele Strachota for their boundless energy and enthusiastic commitment as assistant editors, and to Matt Gryzduk for his creative genius as designer. To the students who served on selection committees; you are wise, thoughtful, and attentive, and your work has shaped a phenomenal issue. To the students who submitted their work; you are creative, talented, and brave, and we are so lucky to have been a step in your creative journey.



All submissions remain anonymous throughout the selection process. The Lighter is an award-winning university journal that welcomes submissions from all students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation. The editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this publication. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.

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# CONTENTS

Are you There, god?	Gabriela Pecenka	8
Cold Fall Climber	Heather Mende	9
Glossophobia	Aislynn Wallace	10
I am not on fire	Caprice Balleweg	11
Strip Down to Nothing to Think About	Victoria Bruick	14
Tammy McIntosh	River Wilding	15
Why I Don't Work for Myself	Victoria Bruick	16
history	Caitlin Alario	17
City Sanctuary in Ruins	Alexa Schatz	18
Hallways of City United Methodist Church	Alexa Schatz	19
Chimpanzee	Sarah Zakowski	20
Ice	David Purvis-Fenker	21
Dad's Garage	Monika Knight	22
Determination or Defeat?	Marissa Rinas	23
Dirty Laundry	Jon Rensberger	24
I do	Sophia Pizzi	25
Immersed	Monika Knight	26
Look Up	Ian Olive	27
Little Bear	Kaitlyn Bohling	28
Prairie Field	Kaitlyn Bohling	29
Frost	Sophie Stauffer	30
Leaf in Water	Laura Whitman	31
Take a deep breath and let it flow through you	Ian Olive	32
The Pain Never Ends	Ian Olive	33
Wiiiiide	Ian Olive	34
Authors	Cora Veltman	35
Follow	Laura Whitman	36
Fly With Me	Laura Whitman	37
Red Tide	Jalisa Williams	38
January 4, 2016	Kaitlyn Bohling	39
Spinner	Cora Veltman	40
Winded Instruments	Sarah Zakowski	41
Vintage Patti	Sarah Zakowski	42

Zentangled Hawk	Sarah Zakowski	43
Agent Orange	Cora Veltman	44
Through the Eyes of a Child	Kaitlyn Bohling	45
Bloom	Sophia Pizzi	46
Hey	Stacy McKeigue	47
Absolute Zero	Stacy McKeigue	50
Telling Secrets	Bethany Wiersma	53
Contributor's Notes		66



# ARE YOU THERE, GOD?

## Gabriela Pecenka

Dear god, dig deeper  
can't feel your breath as you speak  
the light, so vacant  
drowning in your cataclysmic eyes, so bleak

Dear god, where are you  
no words that could intrigue your presence  
too torn, disjointed  
only Chronos could help fight against it

Dear god, a vixen  
don't stray your hands and soul away  
not I, so different  
believe you want, though to me you have  
much still to say

Dear god, please save this  
these heavy strokes make us quite weary  
this life, though daunting  
you know be aimless without you near me

# COLD FALL CLIMBER

## Heather Mende

Standing at the second peak of iced  
stone reaching the sky  
staring at me on the ground.

Spiked feet cling to cliff  
like dirt in soles, shoes so smooth  
I would slip. You climb the side

motioning me to follow  
Your face a speck of white  
Split in half.

What lies behind  
monolith stone pillar so strong  
kept you with me away from the ledge

A forgotten harness with no sling  
and a dull ice axe believing it could work

-- here you are. A back up  
on my stage now grabbing my waist with  
cold hands.

# GLOSSOPHOBIA

## Aislynn Wallace

*n. The fear of public speaking.*

Silence drips from fingertips  
coating my throat  
giving me the urge,  
the push,  
the rush  
to jump  
off the ledge  
into the abyss  
with only my nails to grip  
my skin  
left without  
air to choke back  
truths that snap  
within the cage  
around my heart

# I AM NOT ON FIRE

## Caprice Balleweg

I want you to be proud of me  
You don't have to think so hard  
    Just drink  
        Blink  
            And swallow  
Tell them that your lover is like water  
    I go down smooth  
        I soothe  
            and wound  
                I can be the shape  
Of whatever contains me  
    Short and square  
        Tall and trim  
            Or endless  
                I can be anything  
Except my own shape  
    Shapeless  
        Is a shape too  
            I can fill out  
                And be loose  
                    Running  
                        And rapid  
                            Falling drives me  
                                Over the edge  
Of cliffs and hangs me out to dry  
I'm green and every shade of blue and white  
    Relentless  
        Endless  
Over the top and under your feet  
    Slipping through your fingers  
        Sprinkling on your cheeks  
            Everything

# IF I WERE RUST RED HILLS

## River Wilding

Pilgrims of craft would burrow  
Deeply into my tanned crests and mesas,  
Undaunted by my flatness.

Their eyes stretching over arid  
Distances, my folds and crevices  
Yawning ochre, peach, and teal.

Their humanness somehow paling  
Compared to being the revered paint  
Layered by O'Keeffe.

# OFF-WHITE

## Caprice Balleweg

I am aching  
Raw  
A hard catch of breath  
And I'm scratching the back  
Of my neck  
Tugging on my eyelashes  
Chewing on my cheeks  
Clenching and unclenching  
My teeth  
Watching as the skinny hands reach  
Four  
The afternoon yellow  
Like smokers' teeth  
Stretches out around me  
It's busy  
Four is a crowd  
And I feel crowded up  
Cracked like bones you didn't know you had  
My skin is sore  
And sorry that I've chosen  
To be around people  
Who bump my arms and hips  
On accident  
And never notice  
When I wince  
I pick at my lips  
Until the raw red strips  
Feel that twinge  
Of self-inflicted discomfort  
Every time I find them  
With the sharpness of my teeth  
I bite down  
Hard  
I am aching  
This isn't what they say it is  
It's personless amorphous torment  
And the afternoon smells  
Like cigarettes and stale water  
I'm stuck in standing water  
Wading my way out  
Into the thinning crowd

# STRIP DOWN TO NOTHING TO THINK ABOUT

## Victoria Bruick

Speak about a girl, June or Daisy,  
whichever you prefer. Charming,

by all appearances, chambray eyes,  
bleach blonde hair, constantly trimming

pruning, plucking, only washing her-  
self with like colors to avoid

exposure. Note, remove self promptly  
when confronted with extreme heat.

She graciously supplies used sportswear.  
Care on reverse of pretenses.

Only keep speeches of fever, flames,  
sparks, bright burning sky turning red,

quiet. Her drycleanable fabrics  
will not be fire resistant.

# TAMMY MCINTOSH

## River Wilding

Leave the skin, take the seeds;  
Each according to his needs,  
They say. Farewell to  
Bright, clean bites of flesh.  
All pulp at rest,  
Tucked into stomachs'  
Sleepy acid oceans.

Enamel piercing apple is a  
Strange kind of dismantling,  
Snapping, crunching--  
The sound of humanity  
Shrieking, We are alive,  
More alive than you are.  
You are only remnants.



# WHY I DON'T WORK FOR MYSELF

## Victoria Bruick

I'm calling in sick today because my shoes are tied together. Because no one rang the doorbell last night. I opened it to check. And our planet is spinning and pining and no body cares. They just like that it's not flat anymore because now they know we can't fall off. Spheres

are said to be more complete. I'm calling in sick today because I saw my reflection and I'm not who (I thought) I was. So I had to sit in the foyer and try to remember my face and by then I was hungry again for oatmeal. I can't go to work because sometime

between stanza 1 and stanza 2 a lie seeped under the door and he settled in the front room. He made me feel sick, but I offered him coffee and the lie with that stupid monocle on his face refused twice before I wedged a cup in his hands. I need to take

a sick day because I left my childhood somewhere between the back door and the fence surrounding this piece of land staked as my own. And it makes me itch to think of the wild world creeping through the fences with scratchy reaching peeping-Tom weeds. No one invited them

and now the coffee is (c)old.

# HISTORY

**Caitlin Alario**

we like to pretend we've always been here;  
like the only thing that's changed is  
how smart we are, how much more we know.  
like we've learned something. like we  
don't make these mistakes anymore.

we like to pretend that what we've lost  
we lost by choice, like those before us were simultaneously  
exactly and nothing like us,  
like the only thing we share is history.  
like history is everything and hardly anything at all.

we like to pretend that we are infinitely linear and finite.  
like we'll be ok if we keep moving only forward:  
even in the wrong way, at least it's forward  
thinking and time always keeps moving forward.  
like the marks we make make an incorrigible difference.

we like to pretend we are always and never alone.  
like we are special and the same, like we can hope  
to understand exactly what kind of beast we are  
and what kind of god has made us; dropped us; left us; held us.  
like everything is all right so long as we smile.

we like to pretend that we know all of this;  
like a veil of self-awareness is apology enough.  
we like to pretend we are different; like that matters,  
like that's good. we like to pretend that  
our pretenses are all we have.



## CITY SANCTUARY IN RUINS

**Alexa Schatz**

Digital Photograph



# HALLWAYS OF CITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

**Alexa Schatz**

Digital Photograph



## CHIMPANZEE

**Sarah Zakowski**

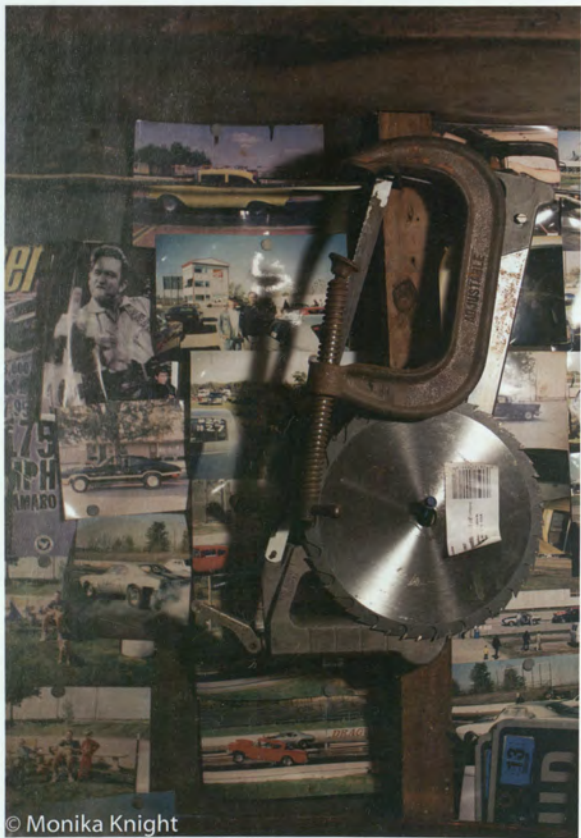
Acrylic paint on black paper



ICE

**David Purvis-Fenker**

Digital Photograph



© Monika Knight

## DAD'S GARAGE

**Monika Knight**

Digital Photograph



## DETERMINATION OR DEFEAT?

**Marissa Rinas**

Digital Photograph





## DIRTY LAUNDRY

**Jon Rensberger**

Digital Photograph



I DO

**Sophia Pizzi**

Digital Photograph

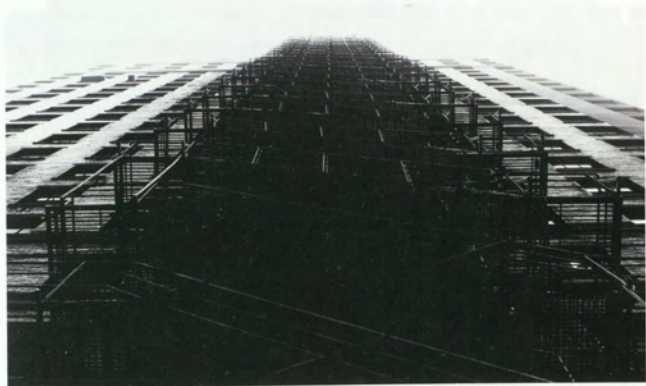


© Monika Knight

## IMMERSED

**Monika Knight**

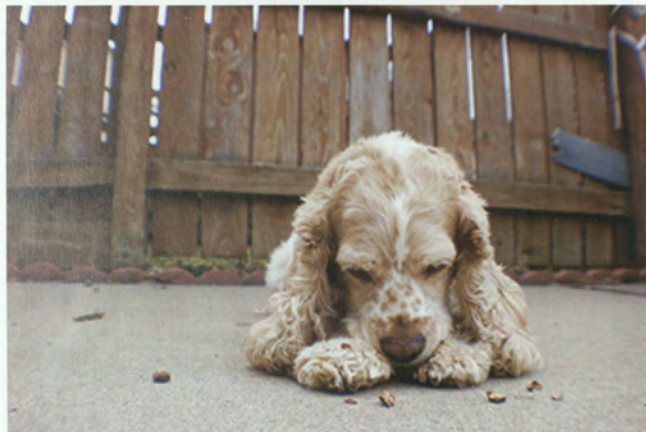
Digital Photograph



LOOK UP

**Ian Olive**

Digital Photograph



## LITTLE BEAR

**Kaitlyn Bohling**

Digital Photograph



## PRAIRIE FIELD

**Kaitlyn Bohling**

Digital Photograph



# FROST

**Sophie Stauffer**

Digital Photograph



## LEAF IN WATER

**Laura Whitman**

Watercolor





TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND LET IT FLOW THROUGH YOU

**Ian Olive**

Digital Photograph



## THE PAIN NEVER ENDS

**Ian Olive**

Digital Photograph



WIIIIIDE

**Ian Olive**

Digital Photograph



## AUTHORS

**Cora Veltman**

Digital Photograph



# FOLLOW

**Laura Whitman**

Watercolor



FLY WITH ME

**Laura Whitman**

Watercolor



## RED TIDE

**Jalisa Williams**

Pastel on Paper



JANUARY 4, 2016

**Kaitlyn Bohling**

Digital Photograph





## SPINNER

**Cora Veltman**

Digital Photograph



## VINTAGE PATTI

**Sarah Zakowski**

Sepia Ink on Paper



## ZENTANGLED HAWK

**Sarah Zakowski**

Sepia Ink on Paper

# AGENT ORANGE



ENERGY DRINK  
NET 8 FL. OZ. (237 ml.)

Contains 100% Juice

## Nutrition Facts:

Amount Per Serving  
Serving Size 1 Can (8oz)  
Servings Per Container 1

% Daily Value\*

Total Juice 100%

Total Sugar 100%

Total Fat 100%

Total Protein 100%

Total Fiber 100%

Total Carbohydrate 100%

Total Fat 100%

Total Protein 100%

Total Fiber 100%

Total Carbohydrate 100%

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Total Protein 100%

Total Fiber 100%

Total Carbohydrate 100%

Total Fat 100%

Total Protein 100%



WITH THE GUILT OF FRUIT  
PURE FRUIT JUICE

Contains 100% Juice

## Nutrition Facts:

Amount Per Serving  
Serving Size 1 Can (8oz)  
Servings Per Container 1

% Daily Value\*

Total Juice 100%

Total Sugar 100%

Total Fat 100%

Total Protein 100%

Total Fiber 100%

Total Carbohydrate 100%

Total Fat 100%

Total Protein 100%

Total Fiber 100%

Total Carbohydrate 100%

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Total Carbohydrate 100%

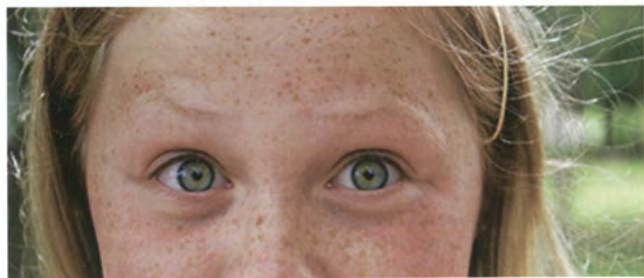
Total Fat 100%

Total Protein 100%

AGENT ORANGE

Cora Veltman

Graphic Design



## THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

**Kaitlyn Bohling**

Digital Photograph

# BLOOM

## Sophia Pizzi

When I was fifteen I kissed a girl who had plants growing out of her pores. Snapdragons and tuberose led my mouth through a valley of milky skin beneath her sternum and into the dip of her neck, where I attempted to lay my own garden. I did my best to plant lilacs, orchids, daisies, but my attempts were lackluster; it was always the wrong season, and the ground was never fertile enough, and my attention span tapered out once the day was over. Regardless of my idyllic disposition, her own flowers' vines eventually grew unruly to the point where they would wrap themselves around my ankles and entrap me within their home. My own garden blossomed in this time and we became neighbors, and I, too, learned to survive on hefty doses of chlorophyll and water and sunlight.

I kissed the same girl years later and her mouth tasted like chewed-up aspirin and warm Gatorade.

Her hair had grown out over the years and now flowed freely past her throat and splayed out across her collarbones. A mid-day breeze blew against us and I saw that her skin was as barren as an apocalyptic wasteland. She told me that I took my garden with me when I left and the peaceful harmony I developed in her flowerbed withered away and left her feeling like apple orchards in January and ice-skating rinks in July. She told me that her emptiness was my fault and I should have stayed to finish what I started. I agreed, but I couldn't focus on anything save for the incessant, lingering fragrance of cold earth and musk emanated by decaying tuberose, blatantly camouflaged by fruity perfume mixed with dainty body glitter.

When I arrived home that day I noticed the orchids in my front lawn had finally started to bloom again. I let my fingers scroll through the contacts in my phone until I found her name and pressed "call," but after the initial ring I was redirected to her voicemail. I started to explain how I had bought bulbs from a middle-schooler last fall and planted them during the first week of April, but we received too much rain and I was afraid they'd get drowned out. I said that I wasn't expecting them to stay alive. I said that I made sure to come home every day during my lunch break, even when it was ninety degrees outside and enormously uncomfortable, so I could feel the softness of their petals and watch as their swirls of fuchsia morphed into pale pink and eventually rose gold. I stopped talking halfway through a sentence about a DIY Miracle-Gro cocktail and said, "Sorry, I think I might have dialed the wrong number by mistake. Sorry to bother you. Have a nice day," and went inside.

**Stacy McKeigue**

*Friday, December 4, 2015*

*5:42 a.m.*

Somewhere on Halstead, cars croon by on the street  
below swollen serendibite sky, fatigued with the weight  
of a new day.

Slivers of staling moonlight and melted stars cling  
to your blinds, left over from the evening before.

The room glows a watery blue, projected on walls  
from the soft face of a digital clock.

Three minutes from now, the alarm will pull  
you from your womb of dreams, birthing you  
into a city far greater than the one you left behind.

In the little town whose borders were never big enough  
to contain you, my shadow glides across dark lawns  
not yet seasoned with snow. The moon looms  
above, bleeding silver ink into surrounding darkness,  
guiding my way home.

In three minutes, I will be curled beneath the bedspread,  
legs wrapped around the body pillow you named after yourself,  
trying to forget.

Trying not to wonder if you've forgotten  
the blue fingertips, dark-washed by the sweat of first-date palms  
and new jeans melting in August sunlight.  
How they curled like shrinking Smurfs when you reached for my hand.  
I think I said "nice" at least twelve times that day  
because it was. Nice. To meet you. To hear your voice,  
joining you in a chorus of Homeward Bound,  
two centenarians disguised as twenty-somethings  
disguised as the best possible versions of ourselves.

Our first kiss was an adventure and...wet. I never told you  
how bad it was, your tongue slippery and too much,  
but I still smiled on the walk home, memorizing  
the music of that moment:  
the look; the tilt; the impact, when I stopped wondering  
if you would taste like the double scoop mint chip from earlier.  
You did.

Did you know my friends still call you Four Hours Guy?

Credits finished, screen black, but I was focused  
on your fingers wrapping my hair into ringlets,  
every kiss tasting of sin and wonder.

We paused to giggle at nothing, brown eyes burrowing  
into mine. You stared at me like you couldn't believe I was  
real, pressed your palms a bit tighter against my hips  
to keep me suspended in that frame. Your favorite scene.

I still see the developing Polaroid night when we thought  
it would end, emerging through the white doorway to find  
your silhouette splashed on the wall, gripping the handle, a black hole  
swallowing all our tomorrows. The bed's gravity pulled  
us back into each other's arms, Denial's whisper on our lips.

I could taste the words on your tongue.

White, white skirt on the floor near your pristine shirt,  
a Simon and Garfunkel record spinning in the background.  
My mouth shivered against your shoulder as I showed  
my hand first, unprepared when you said it back.

We knew our milk carton romance had a "best by" date,  
but even now, I see the apertures of your eyes closing  
around the dry-throated, "It's over."

You'd signed a lease on an apartment in a city not  
spacious enough for two.

You said you no longer loved me after having just said  
you loved me.

You told me guys worked like switches,  
and you were off.

The clouds above my window have rinsed from ebony to steel.  
Your car crosses the Indiana border, shrinking  
the map between us. I want to reach out and grab  
my phone, send a text with all the words I think you need to hear:

You need to know how many hours I've spent  
on the bathroom tile, too weak from tears to lift the toothbrush,  
how I rearranged the furniture so the room we shared  
is not the same room I sleep in now.

Would you care to know how many notebook margins  
have been soiled with your name, or the number of drunken  
friends and new lovers I have used to fill the space  
between my sheets?

I want to ask if your keys dangle from the little blue  
French horn I hoped would ensure your return.  
Did you ever read the sonnet I wrote you,



or is it buried in a landfill with all my shitty  
first drafts?

Do you remember the forehead kisses,  
telling me, "I'm kissing your beautiful mind?"  
and all the times I listened to your rants about  
Excel spreadsheets?

Is living in Chicago everything you thought it would be?  
And for the love of God, did that first night not  
tear you apart the way it did me?

If I knew you would answer, I tell myself  
I would unleash the furies of Hell, calling fire  
and ruin from the sky until you understand  
the damage your stubbornness caused.  
But we both know I'm lying.

If I knew you would answer, I would admit  
to missing you, ask if you're truly better off playing  
the field like a U.S. Cellular shortstop.  
I need to know a tiny part of you knows  
breaking up was a mistake.  
I want the promise of friendship not to be empty.  
So if I pick up my phone right now,  
break the silence we have kept for a month,  
all I really want to say is,  
"Hey."

# ABSOLUTE ZERO

## Stacy McKeigue

Scientists theorize that at absolute zero, even subatomic particles won't have enough energy to move. That all matter in time and space will just...stop.

Our first date was kind of like that.

I got there ten minutes early and hid behind a wall, *hyperventilating*. The air was growing misty and white in front of my eyes. My spine was vibrating so hard, I thought my vertebrae would shiver out of my body and skitter to the floor like a spilled bag of M&Ms.

I was telling myself

*I can't do this*

*I can't do this*

*I can't do this*

*I can't do this.*

And when I heard your voice, everything just stopped.

People around us turned into mannequins, frozen in approximations of daily life. The wind outside quit bothering the leaves, and cars parked mid-turn. My heart, perpetually murmuring to itself loudly and off-beat, went quiet.

When we got to dinner, I realized I had forgotten how to breathe *and* eat at the same time so, I picked pock marks into my pizza crust and listened to the wind in your throat when you inhaled. I curled into the silence between each gasp and the beginning of the next sentence. I could have lived in the cavern of your rib cage, dancing with the echo of your vocal cords forever.

Every day after felt like the end of the world...but in a good way. Time and space unravelled like an undergrad's physics homework gone wrong. Days began at the first text message and ended well after midnight. Food tasted like flying and walking felt like swimming through strawberry yogurt. The first time you held my hand, gravity gave up. I was tethered to the earth only by your fingers, and I was sure that if you let go, I'd drift into space like a suicidal astronaut.

My freshman year of college, I learned how to spot Jupiter in the night sky and my astronomy professor taught us we are all just collections of galactic dust. When things got bad, I'd spend evenings sitting in trees and imagining myself dissipating like a meteor burning off layers as it enters the atmosphere.

When we're together, we are a star in the making. Our combined gravity draws in all the light and matter around us as we rotate, a white-hot core rapidly gaining speed

and volume. We are greater than the sum of the classes and group projects that brought us together, nights spent in the moon-wash glow of computer screens and darkened windows. I can't tell you our velocity because it seems we're standing still while the universe hurdles past us...

But now, you're telling me we're moving too fast. Your eyes are writing a sentence I don't want to read.

People say that just before you die, your life flashes in front of your eyes, but having been close enough to kiss death on several occasions, I can assure you that's not true. You think of the future: what you wanted your life to be. What you think, now, it can never be. The husband. The career. The kids.

The moment before he leaves you is the moment you look back.

At the stuffed bear from Wisconsin, still without a name, perched on the shelf above his

desk. The one you pulled the tag off that read: Someone who loves you, because not yet.

The chocolates from that first date. The ones you didn't eat. The ones you will never eat,

because now everything tastes like bananas, and bananas remind you of him.

The drying scabs on the backs of your ankles from the pair of flats you bought so you could

hide the fact that you're taller.

The poem in your top drawer, the one he wrote about you, the one you read when the world

makes no sense.

The half-planned surprise picnic, ingredients in a box beneath the bed where you two are

currently sitting, never to be enjoyed.

The afternoon you told him we hold the universe in our bodies, and if you shake us, you can

watch the planets spin.

At 373.15 K, the tears I'm trying to hide boil into vapor, evaporating before they even touch my cheeks. The room expands like a balloon, pulling us father apart. My skin is on fire, flames licking the bedspread, trying to crawl towards you. My heart is screaming, "I love you!" My brain is shouting, "Not yet!" and reality cries, "What does it matter now?" Melted moonbeams ooze across the floor, and I agree that we need to slow down.

330 K. The walls begin shrinking inward like in every cliché action movie. Your hand, inches from mine, is still too hot to touch, but we're cooling down. The air is dry and still, and once again I'm having trouble breathing. I try to scratch at the base of my throat, convinced that if I peel away skin and bone, I will find the breath clinging to my lungs.

Our star is collapsing, becoming too cold to sustain us. Soon, it will be a desolate white dwarf, barren, and uninhabitable.

273.15 K. Ice crackles in the bottle on my desk. When you say you just want to be friends, the words slip from your tongue in a cloud of condensation and the droplets shatter on the tile floor. We are sitting in a room made of glass, an exhibit at a museum of good intentions and bad timing. The sign next to the window reads: Extinct.

100 K. The moon shivers. We have stopped shivering because our nerve endings have lost all feeling. Blood vessels shrivel, turn blue, and die. Our eyes lock onto each other, blinking impossible. Lungs burst from the inward pressure. Hearts leak, crumple, then fall into stomach cavities.

0 K. Names do not exist. What we once called the universe is now a supercooled expanse of frozen memories and gases. Seconds are equal to millenniums. Souls are paralyzed. Atoms try to creep into connection, but there's not enough energy to move. Everything has stopped.

And you are here, in my room, on my bed. We will spend eternity facing one another, hanging on the edge of a relationship that is moving too slow to...

# TELLING SECRETS

**Bethany Wiersma**

*"My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours."*

*-Frederick Buechner*

## **Fifth Grade**

While others go home and watch "Arthur," I spend hours poring over my spelling test list of words even though I know them before getting the list, losing sleep over "rhythm." I dance around the kitchen and eat the ends of the French bread that Dad is slicing. I write silly notes to my friends that seem oh-so-serious at the time, full of stick-figure illustrations of the boy I like holding my hand with a code name (of course) in case of detection. I write in cursive, and adore the crispness of a sheet of paper with every-other line filled, my name in the corner, the circled, red grade and smiley face on the top. My Friday nights are spent wedged between mom and dad on the couch with Disney movies and two whole slices of cheese pizza. I'm miffed when my older sister, Anna, begins attending only about every other due to seemingly foreign middle school events like football games and dances. I fall asleep to a prayer sung by Mom, and I wake up early on Sunday mornings for cartoons and cinnamon rolls left on the counter by Dad on his way to prepare for church.

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It was a humid Sunday in May, the kind where summer's knocking on the door. Dad swung open the movie theatre door for us, then marched past to the ticket counter, his long legs completing one stride for every three of mine. He had looked better: his hair was graying, and the creases on his forehead and bags under his eyes were strikingly prominent. The shock of the air conditioning made the hair on my arms stand up. As Dad purchased the tickets, I stuck to my mom's side like there was static between us, hair whisked back in a ponytail, blinking eyes trying to keep up, my skin so light the redness came through like the siren on an ambulance.

The artificiality of the cool, clean building with its lit-up posters and combo deals was like a stomachache after eating too much sugar. The rest is a haze: a huge bucket of popcorn (usually we just get the bags to be cheaper—today my parents are really pulling out the big guns) and a drink so large it feels like my fingers can barely reach around it. I cling to the taste of the words "yes" and "no" on my lips—savoring these concrete, simple answers—extra butter, yes, of *that* I am sure, Pepsi, yes, actually cherry Pepsi if you have that please. Next I stare blankly at the massive screen. It's as if I'm hearing and seeing underwater, but apparently the characters are saying something funny because people are laughing around me. All I can do is eat kernel by kernel and drink sip by sip, surrounded by a mom, a dad, and a sister, not a family.

And that was just it. The g-word: it resonated through my head as the actors and actresses laughed and cried and kissed—*men* and *women* kissing—oblivious to my new reality. Somewhere along the way I got tired of reaching in and out of the bag of salt and butter, and mom slid her hand over mine.

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Earlier that day was the family meeting. I roll my eyes with Anna when the announcement is made over our typical Sunday lunch of lemon chicken from the crockpot, Oma's specialty. What would it be this time? From now on we'll get charged a nickel when we forget to replace the empty toilet paper? A new schedule for drying dishes? Or maybe, Dad got a bonus from performing all of the funerals there had been lately (the odd life of a pastor's kid) and we're saving up for spring break in Disney World? We can dream.

Mom sits in the comfy chair, a box of Kleenex by her side. She opens her mouth and within seconds my visions of roller coasters and pictures with Mickey and Minnie fade out of view—no, are drop-kicked out of the house—and I'm left *wishing* for allowance taken away and chore upon chore.

Mom is gay. She is in love with a woman.

Dad is sitting on the steps behind her—he's already rehearsed his role. He does a lot of nodding and clasping his hands and sometimes he chirps out a "we love you very much" to us in his I'm-emotional-but-collected Dad voice, but by the "very" he's usually choked up, right on the verge of tears, and I'm lost, seeing him cry.

Mom clings to a ball of Kleenexes, her voice shaky the whole way through. She tells us it's not something she can change. But she keeps apologizing to us, again and again, she's so sorry, so sorry, and I'm lost, seeing her fall apart.

They keep hugging me, hugging us, but their arms can't scoop us out of this. I want to both push away from them and get so close it feels like we're one.

Change and I do not get along. Well, I think out loud, they can keep living together. It doesn't matter. I stare at my gay mother and tell her to promise me she won't get a divorce.

She looks at me, pleading silently, helplessly. She cannot promise that.

I trudge up the stairs and into the bathroom, stare at my feet sinking one at a time into the carpet, lean into the rhythm, the constancy, of my steps. I turn the light switch slowly, guiding it upward and holding on for a few seconds before turning to face the girl with puffy eyes and blotchy cheeks in the mirror. I *stare*, mercilessly watch my face crumple until my eyes are blurry with tears. Anna joins me, my anchor, and we're a bundle of hugging and sniffing and Kleenexes.

My mind suddenly jumps to second grade, when I wanted to break my arm because I so deeply craved the attention of a cast: I would walk around the playground with my friends, carefully contemplating the pain and gain of falling from the monkey bars, the swings—of course I never followed through. I just wanted that little medical quirk to brag of, some sympathy and an extra dose of attention...but *this* is not what I was picturing.

The worst is my mother's tears, her helpless misery echoing in my mind.

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## Stranger

Soon after, Mom starts bringing books home. This was a hallmark of our household: education in place of ignorance. Don't ignore the feelings; identify them. Typical social worker. The stack of books sits on the living room table with encouraging titles galore, featuring the journeys and triumphs of families with members of the LGBT community. I snuggle up next to my mom and open one that looks simple—mostly pictures. A couple pages in, a family with two dads, a son, a daughter, and a dog, smile in their backyard with color-coordinated outfits. It's not too bad,

but I stare for a few seconds too long. I flip through a few more pictures similar to this, and then suddenly—there are two women kissing. On the lips! Two women! My eyebrows furrow, nose crinkles, lips purse. I want to look away but my eyes are glued to the page.

Finally I turn the book towards my mom. "Would you do this?" I ask, every syllable seeping with repulsion. My mom's face is tired. She stares at me and sees disgust looking back. "Yes," she says, matter-of-factly. I look away and flip on. From then on I strategically grip two or three pages instead of one so that I can flip through without the image of those kisses.

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## Phoenix

It's Saturday morning in our kitchen. The sun was shining, one of those October mornings where everything is living, breathing fall. We were in a strange limbo between the announcement of separation and actually carrying it out—on that morning Dad was out seeing a potential condo to call home for the time being. Anna and I sat at the plain kitchen table—this was before our new marble counter came in, before all the new came pouring in—eating pancakes and veggie sausage with eyes half-closed. Uncle Sherm, my dad's brother with Down's Syndrome, was over for the weekend, a visit that had been scheduled long beforehand that my mom saw no reason to change. Sherm was still Sherm. The leaves, visible through the window directly next to the table, covered the ground in shades of orange and brown and everything in between. One vividly red single rose sat on the table in a vase, a "congratulations" to Anna after her performance in the school musical. Anna and I ate in sleepy silence, Sherm's chewing overpowering the James Taylor CD, which we tuned out due to the unprecedented amount of times it had been played. Mom sang along as usual, flipping over pancake after pancake even though Anna and I were already stuffed.

She moseyed over, spatula stacked three-high with those fluffy discs of white flour, all sweetness and warmth. She flipped them onto the serving plate with a flourish, complete with a jazz square to Taylor's next song. My pancake featured a chocolate-chip smiley face; Anna's had a more random smattering of the chocolate pieces (too cool for the shape but not the sweets). As Mom turned back to the stove, still singing, she looked at us, wheels spinning, a glow in her eyes I had not seen for a long time. "Sherm!" she called. He turned around from his seat at the kitchen table, mid-chew, syrup around his upper lip. "Yes?" he spat out in typical, abrupt Sherm fashion. "Dance with me!" she cried. "Whup?" he giggled. Suddenly mom was at the table, grabbing Sherm's hand in one of hers and the rose in her other. She stuck the rose between her teeth and flung Sherm into a waltz.

Flying around the kitchen, she was invincible. Her joy was simple and true and existed nowhere before or beyond this moment, just now, in the scent of butter-milk and maple syrup, the trees outside one big blur of burgundy, and the music filling up her lungs. She wanted her pancake girls to get up and gallop around like they used to, sliding across the linoleum floor in socks with pink polka dots. Or at the very least, to wipe off that deer-in-the-headlights expression they'd been modeling for weeks now and *laugh*. Her apron was coming untied and her hands had pancake mix on them so that when she clapped them against Sherm's it was a snowfall of flour, and she whooped and pranced and dipped Sherm and brought him back up again as he laughed out "Diane! Diane!" She bit down on the rose and it tasted of

old water and greenness, stale life. Her head swarmed with the familiar words of the song, and her kitchen was warm and her fleece pajama pants hugged her legs just right. She knew just where her pots and pans were, and just when she would flip the next batch of pancakes, and just what James Taylor was about to say next.

She twirled Sherm around and took the rose out of her mouth to present to him, and he plopped back in his chair, a thirty-year-old ball of giggles. I stared at my mom in awestruck silence as she went right back to the stove.

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### **Oblivious**

Dad just looks tired.

I remember the Saturdays when I would wake up early and crawl into the half-empty bed next to Mom, asking "where's Dad?" The excuses were endless: last night he was having back problems and needed the special chair downstairs, last week he had a little cold and the snoring was keeping her up so he moved to the couch, and the week before he just couldn't sleep. I always assumed this was true. "Maybe he should see a doctor," I would recommend to my mother condescendingly, amazed they hadn't thought of that yet, as I scooted in closer to her.

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### **Move-In**

I had gone over to Sally's house quite often—before. I loved the magic of "the comfy chair," huge and pale yellow with a light blue floral pattern, complete with an ottoman and the perfect level of softness. It felt like sitting in someone's lap, right at home. It was big enough for two if they were willing to get cozy—and we had squeezed three in there plenty of times. Just for us, she kept Capri Suns and Jones Sodas in the fridge, and stocked half of the frozen food aisle in her freezer. We gasped at smoothie mix and pizza rolls and mozzarella sticks: a junk food delight. It was always a special treat to walk to Sally's.

But now, as Dad traded dresser for dresser and hauled out table for chair, this was much different from chips and cheese with Disney Channel. This did not feel anything like the nights of crafts on Sally's living room floor. We had met her, known her, learned to love her, prior to her becoming this. And what was she now? I cried as the loveseat in our living room (headed for Dad's house) was moved out for Sally's yellow chair, in shock that a furniture set-up different from the one that had been there as long as I could remember was even possible.

I hated the new, I hated the change, Sally's soft hands on the lawnmower rather than my dad's huge, firm fingers.

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### **Announcement**

Anna and I make mac and cheese all by ourselves—convinced that spiral noodles taste better than straight—and sit at the kitchen table eating the whole box scoop by scoop. We hear the garage open and Mom and Dad walk in, talking in somber undertones. Dad comes over to us and strokes my hair. He tells us that they've just met with the board at church and announced the separation, and a letter will be going out soon to every member of the congregation. Anna and I shrug. "Okay." I don't really get why it's any of their business.

At church the next week, there are lots of looks and hugs and people rubbing our backs with glossy eyes. I just smile, but *my* eyes aren't there. Dad reads the liturgy from the pulpit as usual. The Scripture is the same, the liturgy the same, the



hymnal, the pews.

But Mom cries every time we sing.

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Slips of paper are passed around at lunch, carefully typed out in Marker Felt font with a smiley face at the end for good measure. Each contains a simple sentence: "please meet me after school on the hill!" There's one for each friend in my close inner circle. The final bell rings and our math teacher prays to close the day as always. Half the class has one eye peeking open, feet tapping and minds moved on to bigger and better things like convincing mom to pick up a Speedway slurpie on the way home or the possibility of getting out of soccer practice early. With an "Amen," we are released.

My friends have been pestering me all day, curious to the meaning behind these mysterious notes. I repeat my mantra—"I just have something to tell you"—through teeth stuck together in a smile like superglue. Heart pounding, I walk outside briskly. I want to be the first one there, to have maximum control over the situation. Long-forgotten words on the elementary school playground suddenly echo through my head, hanging upside down with legs over the top of the monkey bars. Someone mentions a classmate's parents who are separating, and my friend Emily proclaims boldly that her parents would "*never, ever* get a divorce." I swing my legs and sway my hair and "mmhmm" along with the rest of my friends, adding a soft murmur of "can't imagine."

"Hey!" Emily herself skips on over, plopping her butt in the grass and dropping her backpack to the side, immediately slipping into her sixth-grade chirp: "I have to go in like five minutes because my mom has to get my brother too after this. And it's my sister's birthday so we kind of have to hurry because we're going out for dinner. But then my brother has soccer practice so yeah. But it should be fine. Oh my goodness wasn't math so boring today? And Mr. Schipper made that joke and no one laughed and it was sooooo awkward."

I superglue-giggle and nod, my stomach churning as my six other friends make their way up the hill. I cut off their hyper afterschool remarks, call the group to order, and launch into a brief, extremely censored synopsis: my mom and dad love each other very much but have come to realize that they are not the right people for each other and that it just isn't going to work. It just isn't going to work. So they are going to get divorced. And I need you to keep this private, just for a little while. And if you have any more questions you can ask me. *And also my mom is gay, and there is a woman moving into our house, but none of you can know that because your parents teach you a God who would tell you not to love us if you knew that. But it makes no sense—because she is my mom! This is who she is! And I love you all but how can I really, because you do not know me, you do not know this. Because your biggest worry is who you will couples skate with at the roller skating party. Yes I love you but this is beyond you, and I am sobbing and you rub my back but you do not know, and you cannot know.* Because I attend a school with a prayer bell at the end of the day, and I live in a town famous for a church on every corner.

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## Rebellion

Sally's packing our lunches for school the next day, bagging up Ruffles potato chips. "Anna, could you unload the dishwasher?" she asks.

"No."

I glance up from my Magic Treehouse chapter book in awe of this blatant refusal. In the Wiersma household, we listen to instructions. We do what we're told. We're not aware there's another option. Apparently, there is.

"Anna, I need you to unload the dishwasher, please. That's your job today." "You can do it," spits back Anna without missing a beat. She doesn't even look up from her Spanish homework.

Sally raises her eyebrows and Mom, overhearing, walks in.

"Anna."

Anna scoffs at her. "Are you kidding me?!"

Mom motions for her to come into the living room. She looks at me pointedly. I get the cue and hustle up to my bedroom, opening a *Harry Potter*, the first book I can grab off the shelf. I read the same sentence four times, "*Expelliarmus!*" echoing in my head.

Half an hour later I've finished the next chapter and I get up to see what's cooking for dinner. On my way downstairs, I'm stopped in my tracks by the sight of Anna in Mom's arms, silent tears streaming down her face. Now it's my turn to give Mom the pointed look. "What?" I whisper what I think is discretely, making shrugging motions and pointing at Anna. Mom glares at me—I get the cue again and walk into the kitchen to see if I can snag an appetizer.

It's not the last we see of sobbing Anna. Thirteen and outspoken as ever, she made her feelings towards Mom and Sally explicitly known through slammed doors and lots of time at friends' houses. Often I played along, following Anna's lead. Anna was the lead in the eighth grade play, she went to football games on Friday nights, she got straight A's and had kissed a boy: as my model in every other area of life, I assumed she had to be right about this, too.

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It is a strange thing to feel like you need to take care of your dad. To be a parent. It is strange to feel like maybe you should not go to that sleepover because you could have a movie night with Dad, not because he makes you feel guilty but because you don't want him to be lonely. It is strange to have two houses, but not quite two homes, because at Dad's your bed is different and you hear his TV from his bedroom at night, and it's a little dustier, and you don't remember where the dishes go. It is strange to share a room with Anna, and to argue when she wakes me up coming in late after finishing homework. It is strange to have a new cuisine, the staples of Dad's: chicken patties, spaghetti with Texas Toast, milk with a 50/50 chance of being expired, a stock of potato chips and Fritos and Doritos and any other –ito in the top cupboard without fail.

The cat hates it, too. She is too old for all this change, her opinion broadcasted through hairballs and poop and indignant meows left all around the house. Eventually we have to put her down: another ending.

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### **Chicago Trip**

We're at the Brookfield Zoo, the new four of us: me, Anna, Mom, Sally. We've spent ample time on the monkeys and penguins, and opted to skip the snakes. The weather is perfect, 70 and sunny, and Sally even stops in the souvenir shop to buy me a ridiculously overpriced, floppy white bucket hat with the zoo logo on it that she saw me eyeing. We're now relaxing on a bench and enjoying some Dippin' Dots

as we decide if there's anything else we need to see before we head out. My cookies and cream melt in my mouth, sweet and refreshing.

But I can't pretend. I still haven't caught up. All I can think about is last time we were here, when Dad made it his mission to master every animal sound (even the ones without a sound, just because it made me laugh so hard my stomach hurt). And yet I'm scooped in close to Sally and the way she says, "What's up, buttercup?" makes me want to scooch in even more. I think about how last time my therapist told me to draw, and how sometimes it helps to make hot chocolate and write stories, but mostly how I just usually feel like crying. Here, in the middle of the Brookfield Zoo, the shock spills over as tears melting my beads of ice cream. Mom starts rubbing my back. That makes me feel worse. The only thing worse than being sad is Mom being sad because I'm sad. "What's goin' on, peach?" she asks. My head repeats: *I miss Dad. I love Sally.* "I'm okay. I'm okay." I tell her.

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Holidays are strange, too: for a while, we still invite Dad, Anna and I assuming he will be there. He sings O Holy Night in his red and green shirt-tie combo, hitting the highest note in a screaming falsetto. Mom throws popcorn at him and we all join in, the dog going crazy. We laugh until our stomachs hurt. Even amidst the slaughter of salt, he doesn't miss a beat.

But at the end of the night, try as we may, we can't avoid the unavoidable. We have to say goodbye. It's Christmas Eve and I watch out the window as Dad tromps through the snow. His engine whirs, car lights go on, and he's gone.

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Sally takes the mug of hot water out of the beeping microwave and stirs in the packet of hot chocolate. I sit slumped over, head resting on my wrist, and hold the mug firmly in my other hand when she slides it across the counter to me. She walks around the counter to me before returning to her PhD work. Her hands are soft and smell of vanilla and honey. She gives me a kiss on the forehead, her glasses and shoulder-length brown-gray hair brushing against my cheek.

Sally drives me to school and we harmonize to the Jonas Brothers, "Burnin' Up" ending with me doubled over in fits of giggles. She begins a Saturday afternoon Starbucks delivery ritual, and occasionally Anna chooses to ride along. One night, discussing upcoming events over our enchiladas, Anna sighs when she learns that Sally is *not* planning on going to her choir concert (it's on a weekday, so the attendance would be too conspicuous at our small school). Slowly, we shift.

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On the 4th of July, Dad comes over with his new girlfriend to roast hot dogs. I prance around the yard with my burning sparklers as the night comes, making the most dramatic leaps, spins, and flailing motions in order to get a laugh out of Dad. Anne, his girlfriend, behaves perfectly, practically tiptoeing into the backyard she's trying so hard to not step on anyone's toes. She asks if there's any way she can help and helps with the water pitcher. I sit on the armrest of Mom's porch chair, laughing shyly and trying to one-up Anna's contributions to the conversation. After dinner, Anna and I go to bounce on the trampoline while the adults talk some more. We hear glimpses of work, relatives, weather.

Anna finds our volleyball and begins setting up a Wiersma sister original Olympic trampoline extravaganza. She calls Zimbabwe immediately but this time I'm successful in one-upping her (Djibouti!). I bounce on the stretchy black surface

again and again and again, my hair flying up and around me. Down, up. Down, up. The small talk, dripping with forced etiquette, the newness—*more* newness—slices through the air as I bounce. The conversation turns to Anne's two young children, details of these new characters punctuated by the springs of the trampoline and my heavy breathing. Finally I land flat on my back and stay there, staring down the sky, pleading for some shade. But the clouds are on their best behavior today, too, politely moving on to give the sun a turn.

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Gradually, I began to enjoy Sally's magic touch with chai lattes, her new title as "LQ" (the laundry queen—no stain too gruesome for her to get out), her willingness to wake up early to pack our lunches just because she wanted to, immediately catching on to Anna's PB&J with crunchy peanut butter and mine with creamy. She buys spontaneous popcorn at Target and cheers for us to give mini-performances on piano and clarinet when we practice in the living room.

Our Mother's Day gifts transform from nonexistent to flowers included. Our birthday card messages follow her trajectory from imposter to blessing.

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It's 1 a.m., and here we are, eight fourteen-year-old bundles of feistiness after a ding-dong-ditching mission accomplished. We have finished off the cupcakes and ice cream, two bags of chips, and a case of Mountain Dew. We sit in a circle of agitated sleepiness, cheeks red and eyes bright.

Truth or dare rolls around, and as usual, it starts out with the silly questions, the demands to run around the house five times mooing like a cow (*so* crazy, we think), and the typical naming of crushes and dream-kisses. Gradually, the questions deepen as we discuss insecurities and fears and high school heartbreak. Then it's my turn. My friend eyes me with restless intensity. "What," she asks, "is your deepest, darkest secret?"

A giggle is stifled and all girls turn to me, the suspense like breath freezing on a window. My mind flashes "Mom! Mom! Mom! Mom!" against the black canvas of my brain like an emergency exit sign, yet within seconds I have done the typical pause, bite lip, sigh, eyes roll up like I'm thinking, thinking, searching, anndnd...wait one more second... "I seriously can't think of anything!" I mask in teenage despair. "Umm...I could tell you an embarrassing moment but seriously I don't really think I have anything beyond that." They all sigh but nod along—they, too, would have been unable to deliver if this had been their draw.

The loneliness eats at me like a hawk picking at roadkill—taking his time, beak pointed and sharp.

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## Angst

This is high school: I start to write. I'm convinced I will become a cat lady, so I write to pass the time until it's socially acceptable for me to live in a little apartment with dentures and at least five cats so that people can come visit me and pretend they are enjoying themselves. I am seventeen years old and have never been kissed, so life is deeply, darkly, and utterly unfair. I'm standing there, mopping the floor at work. I've got two large towels, one underneath each of my feet, my hair piled in a messy bun on the top of my head, pink cheeks, wishing this f-ing ice cream shop floor wasn't quite so spacious, and thinking I'm really something special, really darn rebellious, for saying "f-ing" in my head. Just like that, too: my mind literally

pronounces it “effing.” And the radio is playing, as always—there’s this odd mix in that shop of something playing that’s either some cheesy station that makes you want to puke it’s so self-righteous or some techno dance-beat with lyrics that are *not* appropriate for eating a Tommy Turtle Sundae to. And I’m pissed at my manager, because I’ve been working there longer than she has, and yet she’s in charge of me because she’s older. (AND she has a boyfriend, which is automatically synonymous with “horrible human being” in my jealous eyes.) On this particular night he’s there, actually. The shop is closed, hence me scrubbing the floor, but my manager has all the time in the world as she says good-bye to this guy while I’m grunting away at a spot of raspberry Flavorburst.

I hear him ask her if she’s still planning on their date on Friday. She exclaims “YES!” (in caps), and they giggle gaily and say “see ya babe” or something nauseating like that and he’s on his way. And I want to cry. Some song comes on the radio with lyrics about being *so* in love, you know, and I just know at that instant this is meant to be a scene in the movie. Girl hanging on to mop for dear life because she’s got nothing else to hold on to. Or something. Song lyrics pounding into girl’s head as she pathetically reaches down to pick up a used napkin on the floor. Ten feet away, manager flutters around with fresh love on her mind.

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I hate going through the house looking for frames that need to be hidden before friends come over. I hate the anxiety of leaving my room during a sleepover, grabbing a drink of water as I visualize my journal on the top of my bookshelf...*what if my friends read it?* They would know all. Would they leave? Would they cry? Would they preach? What does “friend” even encompass?

I hate government class, loathe it actually, because the musical football player who everyone wants to date starts talking about “homosexuals” as if they aren’t even humans, as if they have absolutely no control over their apparently raging sex drives, as if they made the *choice* to be persecuted, disowned. I hate that he uses the Bible, that he uses a book of love to spew hate. I think I might hate *him*, but I know deep down I really don’t, I really can’t, and perhaps this is why I book it to the bathroom after class, my stride brisk and matter-of-fact, craving the safe-haven of the rows of toilets and sounds of sinks and paper towels. I lean into the stall wall and shake and sob, silently. His words echo through my head as my classmates’ lazy nods replay again and again. They are talking about *my mom*, my mom. I am one straight from the scene; the monster of two people who love each other and have the same genitals is drinking decaf in my living room. She is not “a homosexual.” She is not one of “*those people*.” She is beautiful and wise and silly and full of infinitely more love than their miniscule bubble would ever allow their hearts to open up to.

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## Summer Romance

He and Anna sit in the D&W parking lot, halfway between her hometown and his. The August air at sunset is the perfect bridge: in-between the blazing sun and the starlit sky, in-between the oppressive humidity and the undertones of fall, in-between a summer as camp counselors and year two of college. They laugh about camper talent show acts gone wrong and the time he tackled her into the lake and the prank her cabin pulled on his week two, her earliest flirtation. She wore a bikini to the beach earlier, a lot more for his eyes to feast on than the one-pieces required of counselors all summer. His car stereo plays country, which makes her roll her eyes

but secretly she likes that about him, how he won't listen to her joking demands to switch the station. He's not intimidated by her fire.

Two months later, they're making long-distance work. He drives three hours to visit her. She's decided on *today*. They sit on the futon in her dorm room. She looks him square in the eyes and tells him everything.

He says it's a sin. But he believes he can "love the sinner" while condemning her "lifestyle." Anna flares: she sobs, big and ugly, her face an angry red and her eyes becoming slits and the new mascara she bought for the visit mixing into her skin.

She tells him it won't work. She ends it. He leaves.

Her room is quiet. She grabs a mug, fills it with water, sticks it in the microwave. She stirs in a packet instant chai. From Sally.

She hates how much she *loves* her—she hates that it's not her fault.

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It's a week before Valentine's day, my junior year of high school, and I'm zoning out at my A.P. Statistics homework, thinking about the big *if*. Oh, the places we could go for the perfect date. Oh, what a perfect gift he would get me. (*If* I had a boyfriend.) *Aye aye aye*, I think, *where have all the good men gone*. My dad's girlfriend has just left after a dinner of salmon and pesto (by now Dad has upped his game). He's rinsing the last plate when he says "Hey, Bethie?" I snap out of my Zac-Efron-presenting-roses-on-one-knee reverie.

"Yeah?" I look up. He's sporting his best goofy Dad-smile—something's up.

"I wanna show you something." Dad ducks into his bedroom next to the kitchen and returns with a box.

"Dad..."

"Come look."

He opens the box and a beautiful diamond ring perches on the velvet.

"Dad!!!"

"What do you think?!"

"When are you--?"

"Next week. Val—"

"*Valentine's Day!!! Dad that's the most romantic thing ever!!!*"

I squeal and try it on and immediately call Anna on speakerphone. We make Dad walk through exactly how he is going to do it. He asks if getting down on one knee is necessary or too cheesy and we gasp in horror ("DAD!! THAT'S NOT EVEN A QUESTION!!"). I roll my eyes with Anna over the phone, joking about our exasperation that our Dad has a more exciting love life than both of us combined. He beams in his cheesy Dad way, joyfully verklempt.

She says yes.

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## Childless

I look at her, my Sally, and I see the shadow of a deep desire, of a dream left unfulfilled, long gone. It is a never—it is impossible. Unlike Sarah and Abraham, we've got a God who isn't whispering promises into our ears, two women, and no Hagar. I snuggle up and she pats my cheek and kisses my head, and I wish I could be more for her: I wish I could be her flesh and blood. The dog lying lazily on the top of the couch in the sun is just a dog. The girl taking a break from her homework to cuddle is just a girl. We are no more *her* than the spaghetti she cooked for dinner.

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## The Good Ones

I'm 10 minutes early rather than my usual 5 minutes late, I've scoped out the perfect booth, and I'm pretending to text while I wait for two of my best friends to show up. Our final performance of "Flowers for Algernon" was last weekend, complete with a cast party until 3 a.m. at Steak and Shake. Everything is winding down for the year, with final concerts and awards and deadlines rapidly approaching. We have no motivation for the AP tests—college choices and scholarships are already secured. It's 80 degrees out and it doesn't feel fair to be in school because my brain is spinning with slow-dances at prom and good poems in English class and spontaneous slurpries with friends at the gas station.

So I might as well go for it now. I will tell them. Never mind the fact that it's only two, that I need to swear them to secrecy, that it took me almost eight years to work up to this. What matters is that I'm in my booth at Baja Grill, and soon my friends will walk in the door. And then it will be done.

Elle and Carmen carpool from choir. They walk in laughing and plop their backpacks under the table. I'm over-smiley and my palms are sweaty and my answers to their questions are a second too late every time, my mind elsewhere, but I successfully order my spicy chicken tacos and we sit down to eat. Every time there's a pause I want to steer the conversation towards the goal, but I hesitate a second too long.

*Finally*, the words are there. I press my fingernails into my Styrofoam cup of cherry Pepsi, avoiding eye contact. I've rehearsed this in my head all day long, sitting in AP Stats chanting "there's something I need to talk to you about..." over and over, but still I'm already crying by the second sentence. They both reach for my hand. I snot and sniffle and sigh and laugh through the whole ordeal, and they nod and sigh and "wow" and laugh, too. The first question they ask me after the monologue is "when can we meet Sally?!" and that makes me snot and sniffle and laugh a whole lot more. Our three hands are locked in and through and on each other's, soft and firm and intertwined. Grounded.

Yet this is the lightest I've ever felt: the relief explodes like feathers in a pillow fight.

So let's not forget them, the episodes of "tell" that are natural as breathing. Remember the teachers whose sharp tongues slice through the air in reproach of a classmate to clarify that gay is not, in fact, a derogatory term. Give thanks for the slightly tipsy friend who so articulately declares it "cool." Celebrate the roommate who shrugs and hugs and goes to class. Treasure the friend crying across from me, *with me*, at Panera. To *know* and *be with* is to love.

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My dad is a sap.

He sends texts that drive me crazy, full of emoticons and abbreviated lingo and ending in "xoxoxo." He leaves longwinded voicemails that always end in "I love you." He writes poetry. He takes our high school youth group on service trips to Brooklyn, to a church where a lesbian couple leads worship. He writes about it. He reads us a poem as a prayer before dinner. He writes a poem for birthdays, graduations, baptisms. He wants to learn Spanish. And he writes more poems.

On the night of Anna's college graduation, Dad and I drive the two-hour trek home together. I am mellowed out by the whirlwind of the day, sentimental and reflective. I pull up Mumford & Sons on my iPod and run it through his car speakers, leaning

my passenger seat back as far as it can go, staring at the moon and grabbing Dad's hand on the gear stick.

His wallet is open to a small copy of a picture from the wedding. Anna and I are all made-up in our strapless burgundy dresses, complete with hair curled and swirled into updos. Stella, our new step-sister, 5, perches on my hip in her white flower girl dress and sparkly sandals, while Liam, our new step-brother, 7, stands up straight and tall next to Anna in a smile that shows all his teeth. Dad and Anne, our new step-mom, hold hands in the middle of us, and Dad's smile is his purest, gooniest, loveliest form of himself.

Dad lifts my hand up, squeezes it, and gives it a kiss. My eyes are glossy as I turn my head towards him. I squeeze back, hard.

I think back to middle school, those new days in that new house. In the winter, ten minutes before we left for school, Dad would leave us to our scrambled eggs with toast and go out to Anna's car to start it for her, his strong arms wiping off the snow.

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### **A Saturday Afternoon in College**

I lie in my bed, staring at the polyester ceiling, the sound of my fan keeping me company. The curtains are closed but the wall is dappled with sunlight. I need to do my dishes. I'm supposed to be writing an essay, but I've just gotten off the phone with Mom. A quick question about tuition payments turned into forty-five minutes spent catching up.

She is the one I go to: fifth grade, with butterflies in my stomach after the skating party and my first time holding hands, seventh grade, the injustice of being 12 and *still* not having found the love of my life, eighth grade, the thrill of the first slow dance, ninth grade, the crush on the junior who doesn't know my name, sophomore year, the torture of being friend zoned, junior year, the bliss of being asked to prom, freshman year of college, the phone call practically dancing on my way to English because of this boy, and months later crying because I can't believe the pain of ending it. Today I spout out "I'll just become a nun!" and she laughs and laughs and laughs.

"I just want you to be happy. All the time. Kind of neurotically. Happy." Her words replay in my head. Going to college has made me realize that I love my mother more fiercely and need her more infinitely than I ever imagined. In the quiet hours of my life, when the quiet is not so much a comfort but more a reminder of being alone, of a silence that makes bubbles in my stomach, I need to remember to tell myself what my mama would tell me. She would tell me that I'm doing so good. She would be gentle, and remind me how hard I am on myself. She would tell me that I really am wise, and that she's so proud of me. She would tell me maybe this all happened just as it needed to. She would tell me to think less and experience more. She would tell me she just wants me to be happy and to let myself be. She would tell me that my heart is a good one, and that I'm her girl. She would hear my voice catch and do her little click and say "honeyyyyy," and I would leeeean and streeetch and *melt* into the love in her voice.

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### **Wedding**

We're in the foreign land of Iowa. Only four of their siblings are here, out of nine. It's raining, sort of. More like drizzling, or icing, or a mix between the two.



Whatever it is, it's unpleasant. But they have cardigans, and umbrellas, and we wait by the car until it is time. A small group of people who love us—all of us—sit on benches in the rain, waiting to be witnesses to something beautiful.

I sit and watch my mother marry the love of her life, and it's kind of a miracle, how two people look at each other like that. Despite all the broken, there is much more love.

I always cry at weddings.

\*\*\*

### **Now**

I want to share with this boy who is crazy about me, this boy who scares the hell out of me the way he looks at me, his eyes thirsty, somehow, for my same-as-always straight hair and the simple stud earrings I wear every day and the purple bags of tired under my eyes. It makes my stomach hurt, the way he presses his forehead to mine and only wants mine, only wants me. I want to tell but I don't want to have to tell at all.

Maybe, sometime, someday, there could be a someone, a someone who sees me and knows me, not the girl with the gay mom who is going to hell but just *me*, the girl with a mom and a Sally and a big smile and bad posture who plays in orchestra and loves words and would live off the chips and queso from the cafeteria if she could. Maybe someday someone could just know, all these things, and reach for my hand anyways—could take it all as one.

# CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

**Aislynn Wallace**— Aislynn Wallace is a senior Creative Writing major with hopes to find her niche amongst the novelists and screenwriters of the world. Previously published in *The Lighter* for prose and photography, this is Aislynn's first time as a poet. She has always admitted to not understanding poetry, but this time "Glossophobia" understood her.

**Caitlyn Alario**— Caitlyn Alario is a writer simultaneously trying to take herself more seriously and learning to marvel at her own ridiculousness. She hopes to find a way to continue grappling with poetry after she graduates.

**Kaitlyn Bohling**— I hardly consider myself an artist, just someone who enjoys finding beauty in the world. I use photography as an outlet to help myself unwind from the pressures of everyday life!

**Victoria Bruick**— Thank you for picking up this little book and reading our words. The fact you did so proves that poetry matters. Artistry matters. Biggest of thank yous to Caron Freeborn for giving me space to learn, tools to write, and confidence to speak. Best, Victoria.

**Stacy McKeigue**— Stacy McKeigue is a senior digital media major with a creative writing minor. Her interests include spending time outside, having wonderfully strange, deep conversations with close friends late at night, and eating non-breakfast food for breakfast. As a senior, this will be Stacy's last submission to *The Lighter*. Thank you to all my fellow writers and artists who fill the pages of this book, to all the people who help put it together, and to all of its readers. It has been one hell of a journey.

**Gabriela Pecenka**— Writing has always been something I've done for myself. The action of putting the thoughts and emotions in my head down on paper, was therapeutic and calming. It gave me a chance to sort out, and think about my feelings. It wasn't until I started sharing some of things I wrote with my close friends, that I realized I could make others feel what I was feeling too. All I hope to achieve is to evoke emotion through my words, and have people be able to relate to the stories I am telling.

**Jon Rensberger**— My name is Jon Rensberger. I like to revisit places from my past and the back alleys of towns I used to live in. They usually coincide. I enjoy showing the sides of buildings and various scenes that are usually avoided or not normally seen, though my photography. This photo was taken in Porter, Indiana. The viewer is looking into the window of a Laundromat that I used to clean when I was younger.

**Marissa Rinas**— I am a Junior Digital Media Art major. I enjoy venturing out to photograph the hidden beauty in our everyday world.

**Alexa Schatz**— My intention embraces not only the historical and photographic cataloging of abandoned sites, but also a eulogy for the lost ways of life they represent, a statement of their emotional, spiritual, and symbolic significance to our everyday lives, and a sense of the instinctual experience of entering a corresponding universe of silence, rust, brokenness and peeling paint. I want my viewers to see and feel things they can't in the ordinary world.

**Sophie Stauffer**— My medium for this piece, my first published photograph, was a cracked Samsung Galaxy S4. This piece was taken in Scheele Hall, on a frigid winter morning that I would've much rather have slept through. However, using the strength of human spirit, I persevered, and my perseverance was rewarded with this photograph. I thought that this was the first step towards the rest of my life, but alas, nothing gold can stay, as my phone has since ceased to live, and consequently so has my art

**Cora Veltman**— As an artist I believe that it is our responsibility to create work that not just captures obvious beauty, but the intricacies and details around us that we miss every day. Not all art has to be a statement, but must instead come from someone that truly understands how to capture something special.

**Bethany Wiersma**— Bethany Wiersma played "library check-out" from an early age, which consisted solely of her taking books off the shelf one by one while making a beeping noise, and her first answer to the infamous "what do you want to be when you grow up" question was "an editor." She fully acknowledges that neither of those things are normal. While she now plans to be a teacher, she still dreams of being published someday. She would like to thank Professor Clark for helping her find her voice through this piece, and The Lighter staff and selection committees for providing a safe platform to share it. If you have questions or just want to chat about her story, please don't hesitate to email her at [bethany.wiersma@valpo.edu](mailto:bethany.wiersma@valpo.edu).

**Jalisa Williams**— The primary influences on my work have always been fantasy, sci-fi, and other fantastic genres. In my eyes, being an artist means shaping reality into anything I want it to be, and that is something I aspire to take advantage of. As someone who prefers a more realistic style, there is a conflict that comes with the mixing of reality and imagination that I seek to resolve.

**Sarah Zakowski**— I am a Music Education major with a minor in Studio Art. When my artwork is viewed and absorbed, I hope you will react to the various pieces with enthusiasm and emotions of happiness, smiles, and joy. A unique feature to my drawings is that the fine detail I have used to create each piece appears visually different from close up angles compared to viewing my artwork from further away positions. In close up ranges, art lovers are able to view the intricate designs, dots and strokes that I have meticulously placed in each creation. From a distance, art connoisseurs are able to see clear images of my intended subjects. I have drawn pieces consisting of universal themes—music, animals, and family—that people can relate to. I hope when you view my favorite things in these drawings that they will inspire you to consider your passions and interests as well!

