The Red Wheelbarrow
Editors:
Jori Frakie
A.M. Mulzer
Lisa Noonan
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Cover Art:
Amy Armstrong

October, 1996
Alas, to live the life of a poet, to have every nuance analyzed by everyone during your life and for years after you’re dead. To be criticized by people who don’t even know you because they feel it’s their right. To feel responsible for those who’ve misinterpreted and hurt others in a way you never imagined. To have others love you and say things you can’t consult with. To be the one who comforts others who can’t or aren’t comforting themselves. To be the magic catcher who brings new meaning to words like squirrel. We are prisms reflecting rainbows to peoples’ minds. This is the responsibility, calling, and life of a poet.
Letters to Casegemas
Joy Corcoran

I.
Dinner: a strange place to die.

The bullet missed Germaine. Second shot, your skull. Her life was insignificant, her punishment. You knew she'd hear your brains hit the table if she lived. See your blood on the silverware. How cruel to Pablo to leave him out, or was Barcelona too far to travel? I suspect you knew you'd never forgive them. How could you when you loved them? Pablo had her, and you knew how he was, syphilitic monkey, caricature of himself. I know you through him, and I suppose you hate me too, I remember you, and what else here is yours? A painting of your head beside vaginal flame? A place in Joie de Vivre? Even these are Pablo's. This tale means nothing to you, these words you've heard before. Be patient, I will not lie. At night I dream I am a stalk of corn beneath the Iowan sky. I'd take your place, roaming the green horizon, if I knew how. Listen to the sounds of the midwest sky, leave your white-washed walls for an hour and hear them. Tornado sirens like a thousand tenors in wordless harmony. What is Germaine after that? I've seen visions of dragons emerging from cartoon clouds. Have these things crossed your paths?

The Poet's Profession
Sara Mankins

Ah, to live the life of a poet, to be the one who has lips from which words fall, to be the one who stands on the stage and whispers sweet nothings to all those who will listen. To be the one who gets all the attention at art openings and other cultural events. To be the one you always read and watched and dreamed about being. To be the one who signs books for the young as well as the old. To be told that you said something which reminded them of something they had forgotten. To be the reminder of dreams past. To live the life of a poet.

Oh, to live the life of a poet, to be eternally burdened by words and language, to sit in a darkened room surrounded by walls of books. A thesaurus in your lap, for those words you know but simply cannot think of. The Oxford English Dictionary (yes, all 14 volumes) as you sip day old coffee. The countless hours and years you will spend trying to fail better, as it will never be good enough. The nights that you will be awakened with the verse that you have been dreaming of. To stay up as though you didn't know you were supposed to sleep, searching for the words that truly articulate what you are trying to say. To look as though you haven't had anything but vodka and ramen noodles for decades even though you're only 25. To have fries and beer hurled at you by the drunk in the coffeehouse that said he's tired of people and something else you couldn't understand. Oh, to live the life of a poet.
They all laugh.

The older kids are talking strange words that I’ve heard Dad use late at night when Mom yells at him without raising her voice. I leave the garage and walk down Thurman Street going nowhere to think of things I don’t know, hitting a stick on the cement.

Got lost in Tennessee once, or nearly. I was fighting my mother on the side of a highway I can’t remember. Maybe I’ll call AAA tomorrow; maps are free. I’ve been trying to forget love, you understand. I’m pretending it’s easy, and “Iowa’s not so far away.” Distance doesn’t matter when you’re not wanted. Across the table or the continent the word "no" sounds the same; a resonating cesspool only bullets can free you from. Pistols aren’t sentimental. I suppose I could say I wanted to see the Iowa moon, that it’s different, but I told you I wouldn’t lie. The moon tonight is dying in a field of pinkish-gray sky. You know that color from your dinner parties. Cadaverous. The moon only dies when we let it. Bobby’s perched on the fourth star from the moon. Don’t ask which direction. Germaine is up there too. Do you see her? She’s not the same, is she? I hope when I pass through Iowa again, I’ll be closer to him. You and I both know the end of that story, though. My life has become like a reel of a movie I’ll never see, from a script I read somewhere. I’m wandering it like a cornfield, so vast I can only see its colors.
Swimming
Jill Warsett

While I helped Uncle Rick unload the beach chairs, cooler, sand toys, and bottles of lotion from the back of the station wagon, Shelly sat under a palm tree reading "The Taming of the Shrew" and sipping soda. When all the equipment was set up, she grabbed the chair I had just unfolded for myself.

Uncle Rick recognized my frustration and tried to get Shelly to move, but Aunt Kim had just returned from putting on her bathing suit and told Shelly to stay put.

"Colleen can sit in that chair." She pointed to the empty brown chair that had been patched-up to cover the holes where people had worn through the cloth. I sat down and my legs began to itch from the coarse material.

Uncle Rick had settled on a beach towel with a can of beer and the newspaper. I decided to join him with a can of soda and a magazine. He smiled at me and I watched his bare, pregnant-like stomach move up and down with the beat of the waves crashing down on the shore.

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"Wouldn't that be neat?" She was off in her own world now, picturing the whole thing right before her eyes. "I've talked to Shelly about it and she's very eager to apply. She's so mature, she'd fit right in! You two

Poem of Not Knowing
Stacy Tiderington

I bet your sister is still a virgin,
Tyler Staples says to me.
I think
Brie is like Mary
mother of Jesus.
I do the dance of childhood
my small figure framed in the garage door
through which I see bare trees.
The garage is old and peeling,
smells of wet cigars.
They laugh at my dance,
Big eighth graders,
me only in third.

I say
I guess Brie is.
He grins and says in a sing song way
She's still a virgin, she's still a virgin
So then I think maybe it's bad
to be like Mary
heavy with child.

I say
I guess Brie isn't.
"Hello, is Anita there?" Jake asked.
"No," the man said as he hung up the phone.

Jake imagined his mother setting the dinner table for two, using the best of her fine China. The ones that used to sit in the glass cupboard at his house, the ones he was never allowed to use. Looks always seemed to matter. Jake turned away, his pants torn from climbing the sycamore out front, snagging them on the neighbor's pointy metal fence, from being a boy, being a "man.

I couldn't be roommates. Wouldn't you just love that? On the weekends you could double-date. Shelly has been seeing too much of that boy, Freddie. She needs a good intellectual environment where she can meet people more like her." I almost choked on my soda. I had met Freddie two weeks earlier at Shelly's house. He and I immediately hit it off. We talked about fishing and he told me he would like to come with me sometime. Before Shelly came back from the kitchen with drinks, he kissed me on the lips.

When Aunt Kim finally stopped talking, it was completely silent except for the wind and the water rushing close to our feet. Suddenly Shelly snapped her book shut and got up. Pulling off her shirt, I could hardly keep from noticing how developed Shelly had become under her blue bikini. Catching me looking, she laughed and said, "Don't worry, Colleen. They'll come in no time." I blushed and began studying an article in my magazine intently.

She knelt down beside me, giving me no other choice than to look straight at her breasts. "Come on," she said. "Let's swim." I got up under the watchful eye of Aunt Kim and pulled off my shorts. I left my T-shirt on and ran down to the water, swimming as fast as I could below the waves until I had to come up for air. Shelly had tears in her eyes and was swimming around me in panic. I sank down again, this time much deeper so she couldn't see me at all. I kept swimming until I needed to breathe, and when I came up, Shelly was far away. She saw me and swam over as fast as she could as if to save me from something.
"Colleen, I thought you had drowned!" she squealed. "God, don't scare me like that."

I didn't say anything, I just laughed at her and started swimming as fast as I could. She tried desperately to keep up, but the weight of her breasts must have slowed her down.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" she asked when we were in talking distance. I looked back toward the shore, and though we were far away, I could see the titterment in Uncle Rick's face. He was never very bright, but he had a lot to put up with and I pitied him. Back in the water, Colleen was still talking. "It's because of what my mom said, isn't it? You really could go to college with me if you just tried. Don't you want to get out of this shit hole and see the real world, Colleen? We would have so much fun together!" I began to laugh uncontrollably now. I tried desperately to catch my breath.

Now Shelly began to cry. "Sometimes, Colleen, you just plain scare me. Why are you always laughing? You think I'm stupid, don't you?" I shrugged, but didn't say anything. I saw Aunt Kim wading into the water. Shelly would grow up and look just like her mother. Her hair was dark and her waist was tiny. Aunt Kim's angel-like skin glowed in her black suit. Shelly saw me watching her and sighed.

"I wish I were as beautiful as my mom," she said. I turned to Shelly and splashed her as hard as I could, making her choke and spit. She started sobbing. I could see where her tears would get her. She'd never stop crying, it was her weapon. I looked at her and laughed, then I swam underwater all the way back to shore, leaving her treading water in the middle of the ocean.

Only Forty Minutes Away
Josh Rathkamp

Jake grabbed the torn eel skin wallet from his back pocket. He shuffled through his girlfriend's senior pictures, a library card, and his old school i.d. He pulled out his mother's green Hudson's card and threw his wallet on the desk. A preferred customers card, he thought as he looked down at his pants that were faded pink after his father had washed them with his red Marlboro sweatshirt.

His father opened the door and launched his laundry on to the wad:bed.

"I'm sorry about your clothes," his father said with a chuckle.
"I'm sure," Jake replied.
"Why don't you call your mom, ask her to buy you new pants? She ain't done shit lately."

Jake heard his father's boots thunder back down the hall, down the steps, finally touching the kitchen floor. He jumped up and shut his door. He started to think of last Christmas, how the tree was lit up with ten different strands of bulbs, every bulb chasing another around the tree; remembering stockings that hung off the mantle as he ripped up newspaper and loaded it into the fire. Jake saw the giant presents in the corner of the family room (too big to put underneath a tree), watched as his brother ripped open his present and pulled out a Sony 5-disc C.D. player. He remembered opening his, a gray desk chair that started wobbling two months later.

Jake reached back inside of his wallet and grabbed a crumpled piece of paper that read Anita, not mom, in bold letters across the top. Jake grabbed the phone, putting the butt of it to his mouth. Looking at the numbers folded into each other, he started to dial.
Heel to Toe
Jerra Tauber

Where the sun streaks the lake with light,
point your face in this direction until you have to squint.
You have never seen such a thing before in your life.
In ten minutes
you will never see something like this again.

The waves of a lake never get to go anywhere,
ever climb up and down the shore like the tide of an ocean.
The wind pushes up against me and I lean on it.
Changes.
I fall over, my head attached to my neck.

In fall two girls play in the sand, digging holes with their feet.
They fall in.
Come Springtime, they will be gathered into a bouquet.
Watch them compete for water.
Hear them suck on the bottom of the glass
until there is nothing left but petals.
When I didn't know any better,  
I picked short flowers out of neighbors' yards,  
handled them to my mother and got sent to my room.  
See the beauty in weeds, survival of the fruitful,  
watch a fly grow tired from banging its head against the windows  
over and over again.  
Wonder how we can show sympathy for the underdog, sometimes.

Change is constant.  
Don't get caught trying to move  
heel to toe, heel to toe, heel to toe.

Uncle Sammy  
Rana Al-Saadi

There are coffee stains  
the size of tear drops  
raining from the eyes  
of Uncle Sammy's picture,  
so in my wallet  
Uncle Sammy always cries.

They said he was a genius,  
a saint so beautiful  
the women wept  
at his chocolate hair, his chin,  
the eyes of milky green.  
He stirred the streets  
with murmurs of foolish girls.  
His words hung heavy in the air,  
soaked with wisdom,  
sadness in their syllables.

Uncle Sammy  
fl ew into an ocean  
blue as the sky above.  
A last glimpse of sky,  
a breath before death.  
Your memory touched all but me  
dying before I was conceived.  
Though no one ever saw you cry,  
you weep  
in my wallet  
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"Voila pour toi! Et voila pour moi!"

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