

Taylor University

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Making Literature Conference

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### Poems and Short Prose

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## **Memorial for My Friend's Sister, His Mother's Daughter**

Does God have a pit  
in his stomach  
like a rotting peach?  
Like I do when

my friend loses  
his sister to syringes.  
Like I do when the mother  
comforts her daughter's  
friends, brings the formula  
to her grandson's lips.

My friend asks if she's  
going to Heaven. I say that God  
knows our pain and knows hers well.

The fog on their cheeks drip  
like anointing oil. God's  
presence polishes the pennies  
scattered around their house,  
face up. I sink in the

hardwood floor of the Eagles Lodge.  
we sit and eat, hug and  
promise to visit when we have  
nowhere else to go. We walk

by albums holding

her smile. I eat cold

noodles and stay until they carry her pictures to the car.

## On my Father's Aging

I visited home over break—you said,  
*I'm getting older. I am*  
*downsizing the garage, taking*  
*it to the flea market to sell. What*  
*doesn't will go in the trash*

I fear my phone will ring and Mom  
will say you fell asleep, your heart  
quit replacing the arm of a loveseat.

*Son, make a pile to keep. The books*  
*are yours to read*  
*or sell for a case of beer.*

When you can't fix the house  
holes will form in the roof  
water will seep into  
the garage, soaking  
antique stories yet to see  
bugs dig caves in the skin  
of their cardboard homes.

Cherry Coke fizzes at your side.  
My hero who couldn't quit  
Pop, the wrinkles on your face  
no longer hold their collagen.

A bouncer without his breath  
lying flat next to a La-Z-Boy chair.

## Shag Carpets and Park Benches

I do my best to hide  
from the locusts in the wind,  
crystallized, falling from charcoal grey  
overcast, living in chemical-encrusted salts.  
Eating the panels of sedans, metamorphosing  
them into cages of rust. Appetized by wheel wells  
and skeletons of rattling railroad tracks.  
Abandoned smokestacks that burned from their gut  
are left to a withering, coarse corroding bronze.

Plug-in fireplaces and North Face are the rich kids' armor.  
If your gas bill goes toward overdue school fees and cigarettes,  
you are left to hug sleeping bags and shag carpeting,  
watching their creeping wings, chilling insect legs  
scratch from underneath the door, outdated windows,  
the keyhole of every room. There they clench the sinew  
in my knees and tap crescent wrenches on my femurs.  
Teeth chatters fight lungs from harboring fluid, blood  
from freezing in veins. I had a shag carpet to nest  
in, blankets to cocoon myself from withering. Not the  
Drifter downtown, sleeping on a park bench, dusted  
in crystals. His funeral home the potholed streets.  
His eyelids collect flakes and the locusts' wings.

## **Orthopedics with God**

The hip is the sturdiest  
joint in the body until  
it thins, rips, spills out its fluid  
under semesters of shoulder pads

switched for crutches.

Sandwiched between Father,  
Son, Holy spirit, sutures  
screaming as they speak  
to shaved bone.

Lord, send me bread  
from Heaven, fill my  
ice machine and cool  
where they stitched  
through my thigh.

If my body is a temple  
strengthen my waist  
where the cartilage split

slap clay and smooth  
out an image of yourself.

Sit me in the sun on the steps  
of my porch so I can smell

the grass outside my window

tell me, like the lame man,  
to pick up my mat and walk.



## **Pacman at the Arcade Casino**

The gamblin' Granny  
next to me pulls  
levers lets the  
wheels roll, smack  
BAR BAR BAR  
or the cherries  
she prays for.

My cherries are  
in the maze. Let  
me strain my hands  
and run from ghosts  
lock my knees while  
she sinks in her seat.

The slot's spin pulls  
her pupils in, its waterfalls  
pour from blocks spilling  
coins in her lap leaving  
bruises on her thighs.

Her change equals chance.  
My quarters equal points,  
my name in pixels.  
The bank account folds

Pacman melts into the ghost  
turns inside out and whispers  
Game Over behind the screen  
begs for credits  
for more lives.

Grandma begs for coins  
for one more spin for  
gas money to pay for the ride home.

## Red Dirt and the Rust Belt

I had a vision of a picture I thought was trapped under junk mail in a moving box three duplexes ago: its edges fading, a permanent smirk in the form of a crease, unable to be pressed away. I found it above my head, hung like a crucifix on the wall with three frames beneath it at my nephew's birthday party. Framed. Protected. Immortalized. Nearly touching the ceiling. One of the few photos of my oldest brother, my sister, and me, before we had any ideas for our next tattoos.

We are on a weathered swing in my grandfather's backyard. My brothers smile still hiding his teeth. He's kept that smile from his baby pictures to ones where he held a bottle of malt liquor in one hand—a middle finger in the other. My sister's mouth wide open by the pain in her sides. When she laughs she tears wallpaper down and settles into the carpet until her abs let her breathe again. We are slightly off center, both of their arms around my pudgy, potato build. My hair was the lightest it has ever been, and it is curly. I'm blanketed between them. My Michelin man legs are kicked out toward the photographer and my fingers are up to my eyes—trying to make sense of the wrinkling of my face as I flash all five of my baby teeth.

You cannot see my eyes, but you can hear our smiles. Innocent. Unchanged. The blanket of pine needles carpets the backyard. The warmth of the Georgia dirt under Papa's garden lay behind us like God laid us against a tapestry for this one photo. The grass was up to my knees and the backyard was large enough to hold eternity. The garden is raised, a frame filled with dirt soft enough to warm your toes under a peach tree never withers.

I usually retreat into some sort of reflection on how our lives were much messier after this, that the next photo we had together was after one gets pregnant at 17. One watches his daughter's mother die next to him, our yet-to-be born baby sister grows up to hate our mom, the absence of my mother's first-born living somewhere with another set of people.

If you put me in the middle, my brother on my left, my older sister on the right, you'd feel my sister's guttural laugh, her hyperventilation. You'd watch the air slowly escape my brothers lips when he locks his smirk into place. You'd hear me cackle, watch my eyes disappear and my hands come up to my face—you would think nothing has broken us. You'd see God replace the red clay of Georgia with the grey grasslands of the rust belt. You'd see the details of our smiles woven in us before any photographer could told us to say cheese.

In this photo and at my nephew's birthday where I tower my sister, look my brother in the eye, one thing would stand: no event can alter a birth smile. And if we are lucky, the wrinkles will stay when our smiles are toothless, like mine in Marietta, Georgia caught on the porch swing together, unmoved by the passing of time, the dangers of moving states and growing up.

Joy doesn't take shape in frequency but in the acute wrinkles of the face.