

Afters
by Natalie McNabb

After the trees appear more alive more reaching new places ahead
road beneath seattle behind i drive remembering the chains one
old, one new rob, an old chain josh, a new one shouldn't have married
either one i know now After grand-mama's borrowed courage pushes my
tennis shoe into the gas pedal pushes me into a new After ahead
connecticut approaches welcomes me with sunshine and blue above i am eleven
again grand-mama dreams in whispers of the great artist-colony-in-the-sky as i lie on her
bed nights she leaves for that place one night they take her body from me and i cry
they burn her they throw her cooled ashes at beach waves i wonder how she'll find
the other artists in the sky if she is just washing back up on the beach at my feet i hope she
found them lacking something warm to call my own without her, i return to my parents
too busy to deal with a kid couldn't care less about a teenager mother drives off to
get new tires put on a semi rests sideways on her bmw in the pictures father sees
crushing her they put her in the ground dirt's all around her i can't care
later that night i eat a twinkie watch i love lucy reruns father doesn't see
any more Afters for himself he raises vodka tonics to mother above puts them to
his lips swallows them down one after another until he is crushed by something
bigger than himself something that buries him too tangled huckleberries slip by
a stone fence

25 m/p/h i slow pass a white library with black shutters gold leaf
letters proclaim the benefactor or maybe the town there are two words i
really can't read them a playground a child in a navy-piped sailor dress and white
sweater pushes another in a floppy straw hat on a green swing a boy pushes his friend
down a bumpy slide his friend lands in a pile of wood chips too hard god's wasted
too much on me pregnant so rob leaves it amazes and doesn't amaze me
he marries quickly wins custody of our baby girl no job and not settling anywhere
for more than a week doesn't help me the drugs don't help much either still josh
feeds them to me i eat them up like candy am i wicked?
abandoning my baby for josh for his drugs selfish maybe not wicked
regret After angela, my angel too late what does the world offer you at the wise
age of fourteen? 45 m/p/h past passes from me with the library and playground
in my rearview mirror

the leaves are more vibrant than anything i've ever seen carrotty orange, bing
cherry, speckled ginger-yellow as far as i look the meandering black road leads me away
from the old the arrest my cell shadowy concrete everywhere
they haul preacher-lady to the pink room they take away her bible every one of us
will receive our reward in hell she screams hits of acid are found somewhere between
genesis and exodus she makes something shift into place inside me softly
it helps me run from the drugs the little powder piles chop, chop, chop
smoothed into slick white strips sucked up my nose licked off a dirty mirror
jammed into an arm, a leg, anything available and not visible deliverance doesn't come
from words of those who've been through it too not from those who analyze my mind and
muddle it more liberation comes with a shifting with something so soft in

place inside me at last i tuck the drug away someplace not between genesis or
exodus, but someplace between angela and grand-mama choking feelings come now
i roll down my window air chills my face i smell connecticut's first fallen leaves
already mulching protecting tender roots before snows come they'll turn back to
dirt After i remove the keys from the ignition and my new key from the ashtray its
white paper tag reads #217 i climb wooded stairs, find my new door, let myself in
try to find my best After yet

~ *Fish International Short Story Competition 2006/2007 Runner Up / Top 25*

~ *Bricolage Literary and Arts Journal, The University of Washington, Issue 24*