

## *Pulsing*

There's an old woman who every Thursday morning sits and waits. There's a toddler who every Thursday morning sits and waits. The old woman in the grocery store waits just inside the door near the pharmacy counter. The toddler sits by the door waiting for his mother to gather her purse and keys. The old woman in the grocery store places her left hand and arm through an opening. The toddler places his left hand in his mother's and walks out the door of their house. The old woman takes two coins from her right pocket and inserts them into the slot. The toddler keeps his eyes on the tall shadow that swivels on the sidewalk as he turns the corner. The old woman puts a finger on the red button and waits. The toddler waves his hand in front of the door that opens itself. The old woman feels a rush of air from outside. The toddler is almost carried through the doorway by the wind. The old woman pushes the button and looks up. The toddler looks up. The old woman feels from without and within a tightening. The toddler looks into the eyes of an old woman sitting. The old woman is caught as she is caught weekly by the squeeze around her left arm. The toddler is caught as he is caught weekly by her gentle gaze. The old woman feels from within and without this pulsing, this quickening of her beating heart. The toddler feels his mother's momentum pulling onward and away. The old woman hears a beep and feels the pressure around her arm and her heart go slack. The toddler pulls his eyes at last away from hers. The old woman pulls her eyes away and her arm out of the machine. The toddler disappears around the wall of the produce aisle. The old woman disappears back into herself, pulls the printed report from the machine, and carries it home again as a weekly offering to the church of herself to say yes, the heart is still there and persuadable.

## *Ring Nebula, First Entry*

We christened the ship and launched off, headed for the Ring Nebula with thousands of empty tanks in the cargo bay. We traveled light to the celestial band, I with only my notebook in hand, the first page scrawled with a sentence about the nebula that had been uttered by one of the scientists years before we left: "Its classic appearance is understood to be due to our own perspective." The ring's center is helium, which is the official object of our mission: retrieval of an element that has been exhausted over a half-century of our celebrating. But I signed up as expedition scribe so I could put some better language around the scientist's horrid sentence, to say what I see, and to see if I could get a better perspective. So here I am, first day afloat around the nebula, watching a star going through a prolonged death, deflating slowly outward into a universe where everything seems so open, and the nebula's pin prick of light at the center once held the inflated ball of a sun, and as I write this, I wonder if lack of gravity gives my words less weight, because all I can think to write now is *Classic. Classic. Classic.*

Andrew Johnson lives in Kansas City, MO. His work has appeared in *Sonora Review*, *New Letters*, *MAKE*, and *The Pinch*, and is forthcoming in *Saint Katherine Review*, *Confrontation*, and *Passages North*. He is currently working on a collection of micro-essays.