

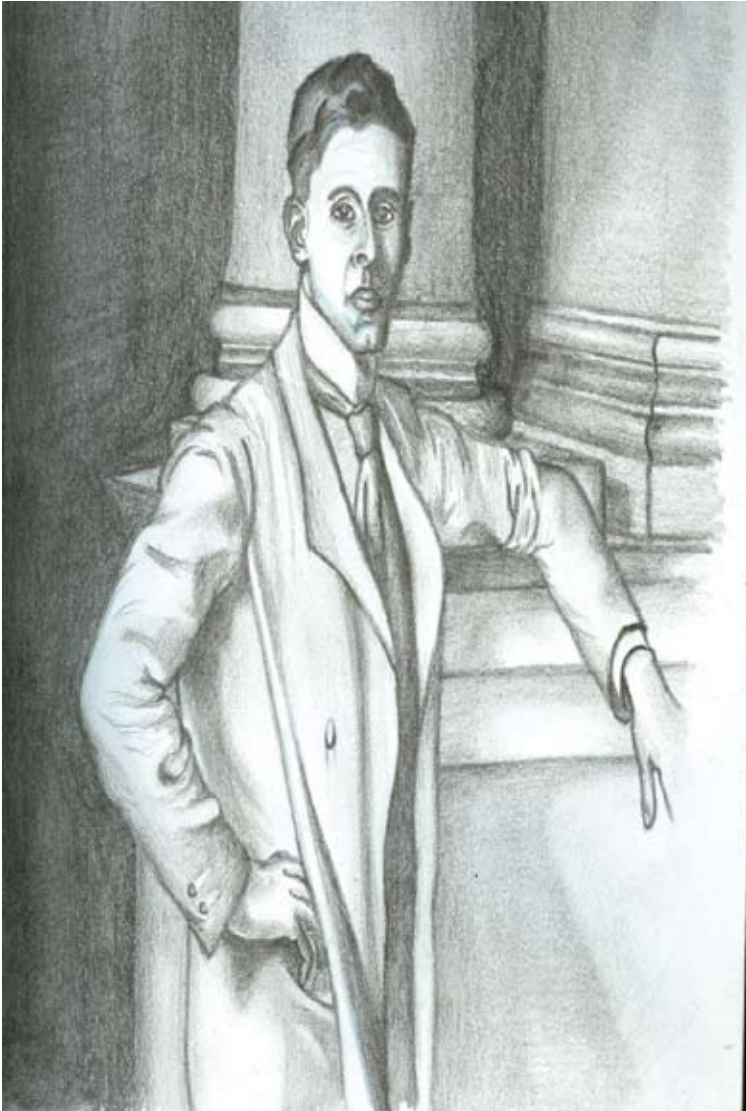
Folio

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of

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for John Hoyer Updike
1932-2009

*then you're out, not
forgotten at first, just out*

Jules Bakes

Revelations 13:14

Yeah, hi.

Well, it's me.

Yeah, I hear you.

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah, well, did you think it would be that easy to pick up with me again? Did you want to have a friendly conversation? Humor me. Listen. I know you're still pissed off at me. I can figure that out and I really don't care. I mean like I guess people might think you had a point, on paper, me ignoring you this long, it must have been, oh, rude as hell, it's not like I was subtle about it. It's not like I can avoid you, exactly. It's not like you're not in my face at every inane family get-together, served to me in great big sloppy spoonfuls with the potato salad, it's not like I don't have to look you right in the damn eye at church, it's not like, it's – No. There's no getting away from you around here. None. I mean, I can make little walky motions in some direction or another or whatever, right, but in the end it's pretty irrelevant, yeah? You're here, and I'm here, and you know and I know and we know we'll never be friends.

You hear me okay? Let me clear my throat. Listen. If you want to know the truth – not that you don't, right, not that you ever didn't – the real beginning of the end between us, you and me, was Osceola. On my birthday. You remember? Oh yeah you do. You always pretended like you weren't there and Mona told me you weren't there but I know you were, I know you know I know, and what I also know is that you did nothing. That's when I started to get it, see, I started to understand what all this, you, was-were about. You did nothing. You didn't care.

That was back in the year when the big one hit the east coast – they're all the big one when they hit you, aren't they? – and caved in half of Grandma's house, like threw a damn golf cart through her kitchen window, like back when the whole neighborhood was blue tarps and mosquito water

for so long that it got the endless horizonless slog-through despairingness of some third world camp full of cracked up refugees, when the local boys of a certain age all went coyote-eyed and roamed the scattered asphalt with baseball bats, shirtless, carrying Coke bottles by their necks, and you told Grandma to send me out. Like it was better that way. That whole mess was your fault to begin with, yeah, but you told Grandma to send me to go live with Farrah. Not to Jacksonville to be with Grandma Sue, with her golf lawn like suede and her champagne sedan, not to Tampa with my cousin Michaela, seventeen and long-of-nail and foul-of-mouth and expert in all kinds of breathtakingly criminal shit, but to Osceola, you told Grandma to send me to Osceola, to stay with Farrah. Farrah, with the wigs. Wig Farrah. You did that. Let me just say thanks right here. Thanks for that.

Grandma listened to you, of course, against all protest, against all violent throes of thrashy post-tween hysterics and the most convincing suicide threats I could pull out on such short notice from behind a half a yard of Bubble Tape. Suddenly at thirteen I was in an Orlando taxicab for the first time, the real shit, you know, gratifying. Red velour interior, the little hospital smelling plastic crown glued to the dash, silently intense mood-disordered driver glowering at the road with one very long brow, gospel on the radio, the whole fucking shebang, but me, I couldn't hear more than the little jing-jangle of tambourine out there somewhere in the scented ether. While me and Ismail the driver sailed down the curbless pale flat straight freeways, thirty, forty miles without an exit through pine-scrub-pine monotony, I sat knees-up between the two David Bowies bawling tin can bright in each ear about gruesomely sexy lonely space death, I heard a rumor from Ground Control, oh no, don't say it's true. I didn't know yet that all my hard-won extra batteries were still sitting in a Winn-Dixie bag on the counter in Grandma's damp kitchen, that those three hours were an extravagant luscious waste. I would have conserved, but I didn't know, and as the air got thick and the trees got dark the volume went up, and up, and up, never done good things, never done bad things, never did

anything out of the blue. I'm happy, hope you're happy too.

Ismail carried my bags to the step with a wide limp and he and his unfathomable eyebrow left me standing there on poured cement with the cicadas and the moss. Behind her screen door Wig Farrah offered me a sandwich before she would even let me in, all spooked and amorphous in her black Star-Trek villain bob. I said no thanks, my backpack in my hands, my legs all cramps. Something like relief puddled in her face. I hadn't seen her since I was seven and she didn't seem to register a difference; her vague pale eyes hovered sort of where my face might have been five years back, and I crossed my arms. She retreated into the dark with the lumbering bewilderment of a middle-aged lady who isn't really sure if she's still watching a reality program or not, gratefully replacing herself in the old dent of an armchair. She shifted, readjusted, settled in like a hermit crab with its shell back on.

I set up the couch on the back porch for you, she said. There's Diet Pepsi in the fridge. Did we talk any more after that? It's hard to remember. She popped open a pistachio and thumb-forefingered it into her mouth like a communion wafer, pinky floating delicate.

That was Wig Farrah, Uncle Drew's ex-wife number two, a floral-printed woman in a black-streaked wood paneled house deep in moss, grown over, smelling like old forgotten rainboots, where everything light had gone dark and everything dark had faded until all things had amiably become more or less uniform in color. The place mildewed, you got the idea, no matter what anyone did with anything, and true to her nature Wig Farrah had relievedly given up on everything. Every surface in the house looked circular, all the corners blackish around the quick round swipes she took with a Brawny sheet when things got too slick and she got ambitious. Everything a hole.

She took me on like a cow takes on an egret, evidently finding it a constant source of joy to discover, time and again, that she didn't care that much. Even her hair had given up, forced as it had been, back in the day, into an endless bootcamp regime of bleachings, blackenings, straighten-

ings, curlenings, so discouraged in the end with its inability to please that it went AWOL, retreating into her spotty scalp like one of those My Little Ponies. Farrah just shaved the rest of it off, like to hell with it, and invested in this warehouse of wigs that gradually filled up any long, flat surface in her bedroom – no mirrors, no perfume bottles, no makeup, lamps, magazines, alarm clocks, crosswords, mints, pills, condoms, paperback romances, none, nothing but a sea of fake hair. All of it sleek and flawless, waved, bobbed, brushed back side to side, each perched virgin on shapely foam heads all swan necks and smooth jawlines that in no way resembled the real thing the wigs would sit on. Walking into Wig Farrah's bedroom was like busting in on a kindergarten classroom, unexpectedly, all those blank little heads, all that sudden guilty silence. No, I lied; there was something else in there, she owned one other object of personal significance and it was a big, grody, gaudy novelty Bible, tasseled like a stripper and falling to bits at the binding. I'm thinking now. Was there something else? Did she own anything else? Did it matter?

What did you have to do with someone like Farrah? She was obsessed with you. I didn't get it. All she ever wanted to talk to me about, when she talked to me, was you, had I talked to you lately, had you talked to me, the things you'd told her, did I understand that, did I. There was even a big freaking portrait of you on the wall. Hanging there. No joke. It'd been there forever, so long that the wallpaper below it was still a kind of pale eggshell, baby-colored, where everything else had gone a sick amber, and it left a pale ghost of you there later, when I took it – you - down. I mean at that point, there in the beginning, I had no argument with you, not really. Good memories, even, kind images, especially about the times around your birthday, all the parties. But even then I couldn't stand Wig Farrah drooling all over you for too long, or the hot basement smell of her living room. I spent most of my time outside, right in the spongy middle of the sick hot inland-summer afternoons, waiting for the rain to hurl me back in.

It wasn't like I didn't try, you know, like, on my own, at first. But the neighborhood was filled mainly with surly

unresponsive boys and elderly sand-flea women who ventured outdoors twice a day to scurry to their mailboxes and disappeared again without a trace. Four houses down there was the playskool-infested yard of Opal, Coral, and Pearl Henley, the triplets who'd been a real town sensation maybe six years ago but were now just an accumulation of little girls. Wig Farrah, watching the Home Shopping Network in her pajamas with her mouth open like it was Silence of the fucking Lambs, ripped her attention from the chamois set on screen to tell me that Mrs. Henley had asked if I'd come around to say hello. Later that afternoon I picked my way across the lawn and came in for a congenial cup of apple juice, avoiding piles of deconstructed board-games and sitting on my stool while the triplets lobbed sauce at one another and screamed for their mother at intervals. But then Mrs. Henley, a harried woman with a nice face but body shaped kind of like a yo-yo, starting making noises that sounded suspiciously like "baby-sit" with a terrible, hopeful gleam in her eye and I knew immediately that I needed to vacate the premises on pain of torture. From then on I was confined to solitary on the slimy wicker in Farrah's yard, and I accepted my due like a war veteran because I knew now there was so much worse.

There were only two real features to Wig Farrah's yard, backdropped against all the black rotten wood, the muddy green-slicked water, the thick grey masses of moss. There had been a set of once-white wicker lawn furniture, which the years had reduced to one slimy armchair and a little low table, both furry brown with needles, both passable in a way when I dragged out the Osceola News Gazette and covered everything my butt would touch in three layers of newsprint. It was here I ate my daily bologna sandwich in the slow shower of needles and read and reread one of the two crushed up Animorphs books that'd survived the trip to some extent. I could recite pages of them for you now. Number twelve, the one where she's allergic to the crocodiles, or number four, where they all have psychic dreams or whatever and meet the lost alien in his underwater thingy. Riveting shit.

The other was her goats.

Her goats, in the sense that way the hell back in the day Uncle Drew had bought two on some kind of dewy-eyed agricultural whim, and the two had become some kind of inbred semi-retarded militant goat phalanx of eleven who served no allegiance to any yard and were fed by no man. Whatever energy came to me in the withering thick of the afternoon was spent kicking the things away from my sandwich, or, as their standards lowered, from my book. They were nothing I couldn't handle except for this one total bastard, my carpine arch enemy, this billy Farrah called Uly. Uly, a horrible, cobbled, knobby creature with terrible slotted pupils and long awful teeth as yellow as his eyes. Uly took no interest in my sandwich or my reading material or anything else on my person that might be delicious, just my knees. The backs. He made it his particular goaty life mission to slam them with his flat hairy head at every opportunity and watch me commune with the mud. That little shit. When Uly ambled into the yard I learned that if I wanted to stay standing I had to do it on the table, and to wave a crack-crackly newspaper and holder blue, and most of the time he'd stand stock still for a few moments, huffing like Farrah after three stairs, and then take his ominous leave. I wasn't always so lucky – the table strategy was a gamble, see, because it usually worked, but when it didn't there was a lot more traveling time before I met up with ground. If the neighborhood hyenas hadn't started skulking around in half-unfriendly fascination to eventually collect me there might have been a real showdown between me and Uly, up close and personal-like. As it was you know how things went down, and for once it wasn't me.

But so there is a code, right, this trick to breaking into the pack hierarchy of a bunch of kids from a small neighborhood, and it's totally simple, and it's pretty much impossible – don't be anything at all. If you're shy, get over it. If you're loud, clam the hell up. If god-forbid you like to build model ships in bottles in your basement or embroider or go antiquing with your grandma or some shit, it stays with you to the grave, or at least until everyone's used to you and ready to wade into your personal sea of crazy. The key is absolute total

fucking blankness, and then suddenly you're whatever they want, their missing element, and you're in. Sometimes you're shit out of luck in this, no matter how empty the visible spectrum of your slate. Sometimes you're the zitty one or the tall one or the girl one and you can't unbecome it and it's too bad for you. But while I sat perched on the wickerware, all print-stains on my hands and thighs, and watched pairs and triples of filthy sneakers pass on the road, dribbling kickballs, dragging ropes, kicking a chunk of curb, I discovered really by accident that, under the laws of Osceola adolescence, the correct response to random and impersonal insults shouted across the lawn ("nice sandwich, fatty", in particular, I was maybe like, what, ninety pounds, soaking wet) is wild braying laughter. I'd broken law number one in multiple compound fractures, but, since I was evidently the batshit insane girl coming out of Wig Farrah's joint, and so pretty much as expected, I was a solid and I was initiated.

There were five or six or seven, depending on who was mad at who and who'd gotten grounded and who'd gotten shipped to Indiana for the week to visit their dad, and they were terrible kids in the way boys are that aren't rich enough and aren't poor enough and don't have nearly enough to do. When it became clear that my once-alluring mental condition was disappointingly normal I was sure ran the risk of being dropped, but it turned out I had an exotic east-coast accent and I was also outgrowing my training bra and of course I was indispensable. I got certain immunities and applauses like a guest star on a sitcom, my laugh track always running full force at its two-drink studio minimum, and if I'd been the kind of kid who was into thinking I would have wondered about it. I didn't.

It was a long Indian summer in Osceola County, and I had their lives like it'd never been anything different. We lay in hot driveways and smoked catnip and assured one another in California voices that we were totally stoned, we laboriously dug lightbulbs out of the dumpsters to smash, we went on loud, angry, very structured missions to systematically destroy large sections of woods behind Farrah's house for reasons that

were totally crucial at the time. We drank sodas and shook them up and belted them into the ground as hard as we could so that they rolled away forlornly, spraying like firecrackers. We hid in garages from the sudden pelting thunderstorms in the afternoons and afterward hoarded errant frogs in buckets. And we went to the 7-Eleven to see if Mona was on break. Always this. We went running through the neighborhoods like dogs go, sniffing chasing half-aware, all of us together in snarling harmony, and every one of us, every one, was totally in love with Mona.

Mona worked the counter in the afternoons, sometimes late night, sometimes so early it was just the other end of late, but somehow she was always on break, sitting on the curb in her stringy gym shorts. Mona was from the long end of a long dirt driveway all hung over with Spanish moss, lined with car parts and rust puddles. She was one of those girls that dropped high school like an old scab who knew how long ago and worked the pumps ever since like it was some kind of freedom, and legend said that once in a while she would sell us cigarettes. I don't think I'll ever really, really know what made Mona what she was – you might now that I think about it – but you can bet she hated our asses. All of us. Not with the wide pleased aloofness of most big kids, you know, but all tiny, mean, vicious, concentrated into a white-hot pinpoint of it. Everything that passed through Mona was magnified. She was the lens, we were the ants, stunned, stung, awed even as we crackled, and we couldn't get enough of it. We would always find her, a belligerent curbside bitch, smoking Camels with skinny stained fingers, wearing a 32C – I saw the tag, twice, through her tanktop. And she hated us, and we were all of us, all, in love with Mona. They had discovered her before I had, long before, but I inherited their adoration like a blood disease.

And here's how it went. Listen. It's important. Joey or Dare would pipe up, softly, at first, very softly, Mona, hey Mona, Mona, and she would drag on her cigarette, exhale in soft chalk white through her chapped lips, ignoring him, ignoring him, until she ground the butt into the curb with her thin

thin fingertips, and her black-caked eyes would slide our way, and we would wiggle into her gaze like dogs expecting to be fed.

Mona, someone would say, Mona, you working today?

For some reason it was wicked, this, it was a weird dangerous infatuation, like we were taking sticks to a slobbery muscular dog on a little frayed bit of a lead. She was just a skinny kid, filthy ankles, stringy black hair that was rooted in mouse-brown down to her ears, and at least three of us outweighed her. She wouldn't bite, really, she wouldn't go for any throat, but we were all of us mesmerized by the sharpness of the feeling that she could. She could. You know she could. She was an older, dangerous thing, and we all needed to know that she saw us, knew us.

Mona, one of the boys would say. So Mona. You a witch?

Yes, she'd say through her teeth, lighting her next. Fuck off. She had a voice like someone's half awake alcoholic dad. She'd inhale, exhale writhing white dragons through her nose. And we would be completely delighted. And someone would go for it. Press hard.

Mona, show us your tits, one of them would say, and we would all tense immediately, laughing shrill, because at the next second she would make a little lunging motion, like she was about to get up and get us. She never did, but we scattered out like crows, shrieking, anyway, because we won. We loved her. We combed the world for her when she occurred to us and our minds licked after her like sad cobwebs in the windtunnel wake of her passing and if that's not love I don't know what is.

--

At home, where home was, Wig Farrah made me call Grandma once a week. She would leave me a plate of store bought gingersnaps as some kind of incentive, and eating them by the telephone I felt like I was picking at birdseed from under a box balanced on a stick, and I waited for the twine to snap tight. I tried to keep my face as far away from the receiver as possible, dialing the rotary with my pinky, but

so many of the lines were down around back home, still, that getting through was a crapshoot. Later on I would just hang up the thing whether it was ringing or not, complaining loudly about service, jam a handful of cookies into my pocket, and go outside, pelting down the street before Wig Farrah could ask any questions. I hadn't really forgiven Grandma yet. Not you either. But I was getting there. I was. At the time.

When the string caught tight and the box came down and Wig Farrah could corner me it would be you all over again, though, YouFest 1996, all the same shit, blur hur dur, what did I think, what did you say, relentless, droning, never asked me if I gave a shit, probably knew the answer. She would work herself up into an uncomfortable fat-lady froth, get totally out of hand, tug on the ends of today's Aniston layers, pull her scalp all out of whack. Eventually I would stop replying, shrug my headphones over my ears, pointedly turn the volume dial on the Walkman, press my head against the wall, get on my most obnoxious British nasal bawl, Can ya hear me, Major Tom? Can ya hear me, Major Tom?

And of course I could hear Farrah outside my ear-phones, all miffed, saying, Tibet can hear you, Tammy, but she didn't know that.

--

At the 7-11 we bought a giant box of Slim Jims with all the money we had and when we walked out to the curb Kyle offered one to Mona, who was blowing her smoke down the avenue, her temple on the heel of her hand. When she ignored him his waving of it in her direction took on a different tone, and migrated to a different bodily region. You hungry?

Nah, she doesn't look hungry, Dare said, and this was cruelty, you know, Mona so sallow-thin, all bone jut and jaundice. You hungry, Mona? She didn't look up, didn't give a shit. Dare lost interest and so did Joey and then the rest, it was over for it, the afternoon air had gotten thick and still and the sunlight had gone grey and hazy and would disappear into a thunderhead before evening, but I stayed behind when they wandered off down the empty road. I stayed. I wiggled my fannypack around to the front and unzipped it to pry out the

breakfast banana I hid there so the boys wouldn't make me eat it, you know, say all that stupid boy shit until we all got uncomfortable. I held it out, said Here, I don't want this. Are you hungry? Here, I said, and when she didn't move, not to look or scratch or bite, I ducked to put it on the curb, curved yellow like a coffee smile, and I tripped after the boys. I only turned once just to see, just to look, a pillar of something or another already, and I saw Mona, standing on the curb in her cheap pink sandals, peeling the thing back, breaking off bits between her long, thin fingers, and dropping them, pensively, in the dirt.

--

We holed up for the storm in Pete Rickert's garage with the door pulled up. We had three illicit Budweisers to split between the six of us while the sky poured down and we counted seconds from lightning. One of the walls had been badly repaired, and I had to move every so often as the water crept close. I said, Why do you guys call Mona a witch? What's that about?

She's a fucking witch, Joey explained.

Oh, I said. What do you mean witch?

She does weird shit.

Weird shit like what?

Like. You know. Weird. She's weird. She got too many teeth. And her spit isn't white. Keith Baird saw her spit. And it was black. Joey took a big manly-ass swig of his beer and tried not to turn down the corners of his mouth as he swallowed. Like, birds won't land on the street when she's out. For real, seriously. They won't! Watch next time. And like. Listen. You piss her off too much and she stares at you, like just stares –

Hexes you, Pete supplied.

Hexes you, said Joey. Hexes your ass.

So like, you guys haven't pissed her off enough? I said. How are we not hexed yet?

No, we totally are, said Dare. We're hexed like crazy.

No we're not, Kyle said.

We're not, Joey said. Then who would go visit her at

work?

Nobody, said Kyle.

Nobody at all, said Joey. She never.

I drained the rest of my beer, crunched up the can between my palms. Pete did the same, only he got punched, because there were only three beers, for fuck's sake.

--

At the time it didn't bother me that no one seemed to notice when I stayed behind, an electric bell twanging out each exit. I stayed by the counter and I didn't care whether the rest of them lived or died because Mona was looking at me, me, and she had given me the stay-put gesture, an eyebrow pinch and a chin jut together. She was ringing out scratch-off after scratch-off for the other register, where a doughy white woman stood in listless beige stockings turning the pages of *Us Weekly*.

Mona said to me, You're staying with Farrah Novak, yeah? You're Farrah's new girl.

I said, I'm not Farrah's girl. I watched Mona slide each ticket through a red honeycomb of light, the tiny electronic bleat. When Mona spoke I could see her terrible teeth compacted into her small jaw, going into rows like a sharks'.

You might as well be, Mona said. Face like that.

We aren't related, I said, insulted and thrilled both. I don't look anything like her.

Not your face, Mona said, your face. You do the same faces, you and Mrs. Novak.

We do not, I said.

Okay, sure, you don't then. What are you doing hanging around town with those little shits? Don't they give you trouble?

Nobody around here gives me any trouble except Uly, I said.

Uly.

Nevermind, I said. No, I said, and I was suddenly very shy. They don't give me trouble.

What're they, scared of you? Mona said, and she did something like a smile. Her skin was very pale, and there was

no hair on her arms. She said, Scared of you. Girls are scary shit.

Maybe, I said. Yeah. Maybe.

Mona rang up the last of the tickets and I watched her punch in totals with her long, long fingers, the knuckles, the bitten off nails. She held out a hand in silence for the woman's credit card, ran it, handed it back.

To me, she said Why are you always with them? You're better than that. I can tell. You're not like those kids.

I was silent. I couldn't answer for a few moments. I told her, I'm Tammy, and she scanned the next ticket and she was all like, I know.

This was how the boys lost their guest star. I was a filthy kid and I was as much of a little shit as any of the others and it was me Mona tolerated. I was better. It was written. I no longer made appearances, I had my own spinoff now, I had been signed.

I waited nights for Mona to clock out, and she padded down the dark road beside me, smoking, always, like oxygen gave her hives. I was breathless, helium-high, my arm flanking hers tingling red-hot. At first I never knew what to say. On Farrah's porch she introduced me to a bowl, all blown-glass marble-beautiful, showed me how she sipped smoke out of the end, held the hole on the side with the pad of her thumb till the right time, and suddenly talking was easy, and Mona was mine. Not Joey's, not Dare's, not Pete's. We breathed and breathed and Mona said What do you feel?

In the daylight Farrah caught on. She would fret, hilariously, I don't want you talking to that girl, she's a Bad Influence, you're an Impressionable Child. Wig Farrah might have been under the impression that her own gradual molding into recliner-shape between the twin miracles of diet and absolute inactivity was the Right Influence and at any rate I wouldn't have listened to her if she'd told me I needed to spend time with Mona three times daily.

In the nights after she closed the store and as she sat on my porch she was heartbreakingly ugly and she was oh beautiful Mona-all-mine. She held the lighter to my face, her

hand cupped just so, her thin bird bones dark smudged down her red ember fingers, and I wondered how I could ever have been such a kid, sitting in some mom's shitty garage with pubeless juveniles drinking Bud Lite, how I could have failed to realize how much better I was, how I would probably be a C-cup someday too. It was all so clear. Everything so clear.

I learned things. Mona's awe-inspiringly terrible legal name, Harmonica, dropped by a foster mom in an act of kindness that belied her use of the checks the state sent her. Mona's mother, nineteen when Mona saw her last, hopping into the back of a station wagon with a dude called Angel and three greyhounds and a big striped blanket. Mona's father, ambitious but what Mona called dumb as shit, advertising himself as referral-only before he even had a business, a part-time security guard half-drowned in debt eventually blowing himself up in his trailer cooking his first batch of meth. Storytime was the only time she ever made any indication that she'd come from anywhere, from anything. From her mouth it sounded hypothetical, some Indian creation story, all metaphor. As far as I was concerned Mona didn't have parents, she was never born, she never teethed or lost baby teeth or grew wisdom teeth, she was always just as she was, she had always been there, and it couldn't have been otherwise. I didn't know anything and I wanted to know everything. I wanted to open my mouth and consume her and digest her. I wanted to inhale her.

Then who do you live with? I said, hanging upside-down off the couch.

Who do I live with, she said, and laughed, and didn't answer my question at all.

--

Wig Farrah wasn't the only one; the boys were stung and someone hucked a brick through the screen of my porch, which seemed laughably ineffective until the mosquitoes showed up.

Little shits, Mona said while she pulled the screen back across with a tack and her thumb. She talked vicious, spat, with her old, cold, hot-hollow hate, and I sat back.

I know, I said.

Need to be rounded up and gassed like cats, she said, securing the tack in place. Fucking hate them. Fucking hate them.

I know, I said, and my talk was loose and easy because we'd been smoking and I felt nice. But you liked me, right? Because I gave you a banana, right? That's why. And you didn't even eat it, I said. You wasted my banana. You owe me a banana.

Whatever, your goddamn banana, she said. I just like you better, she said. You're a different thing.

First my fingers, then my arms, then in a line straight down my middle I had gone all warm; there is nothing a thirteen year old could ever hear more in stereo and velvet. I was a different thing. I said, I am?

You are. You don't even know it. Mona was rummaging in her pocket for her Camels. Her voice had gone confidential, as though she were letting me in on something. She said again, You're a different thing. You're not under the same jurisdictions as those cockroaches. You don't have the same boss. You're above all that stuff. You don't even know it yet.

Jurisdictions, I echoed, because of how many syllables.

She turned the pack over, tapped out a butt. She said, You make me think of how I used to be.

How's that?

She tucked it between her middle and ring finger, introduced it to her mouth, lit it, inhaled, paused. The way she studied me over her cigarette, between her thin fingers, her knuckles resting just at the corner of her mouth, I thought she would say so very young, or idealist, or think-you-can-do-good-in-this-world, all John Wayne brittle and jaded, but out of her smoke-circled mouth all she said was

Blonde.

--

Later Farrah found a stem on the porch while she was looking for the remains of her newspaper, and she can't have been nearly as pious as she always made out because she knew

what it was right away. When I walked through the living room she said something from the corner, a lot of somethings. She rose from her chair and her voice rose with her and both of them trailed along after me, that-girl-that-girl-that-girl, what was I thinking was I looking for trouble, did I want to end up, what did I, how could.

But I knew my defenses by then, I had my headphones on, you see, and couldn't possibly hear her, and I sang real loud, it could have been me, oh yeah it could have been me, why didn't I say, why didn't I say, and when the door shut behind me Farrah lingered large and furious for a moment by the screen before she walked over to you, the flat canvas you hanging solitary on the wall, and started to talk, low, fast.

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She's definitely going to tell my grandma, I said.

Probably, Mona said, supremely unconcerned.

Which is why I can't go home ever, now.

No, you can't, Mona agreed.

We had sought momentary refuge sitting on the wall next to the Dumpster behind 7-Eleven. It was a very temporary solution for a very temporary problem. It smelled, but by this time tomorrow Farrah would have burned right through her full stores of wrath and wouldn't have the energy anyway to keep checking the porch. I said, generously, Farrah's a nice lady at heart, I mean, she tries, she cares.

She's nothing but a zealot, Mona said.

It wasn't a response I expected. Hesitantly I said, I mean, I guess so. I guess she is. But she means well.

Meaning well doesn't mean shit, Mona said calmly. People like Farrah are dangerous. They always have been.

She's not a bad person.

Maybe, but she is disgusting, Mona said. Mona, unwashed, chainsmoking, yellow in so many places, black under the nails, said this.

Why, I said, because she's fat?

Yes. Because she's fat. Because I know how much she eats. Where do you think she gets her food from? Who do you think rings her out?

Look at you. You smoke all the goddamn time, I said.
Yeah, well. It helps, she said, without vitriol.

She didn't say what she meant but I got it, that it kept her from feeling hungry all the time, because Mona didn't have a lot of money, and what she did have lately went to the weed she'd been sharing with me. I was shamed into silence. It was the only time she ever even mentioned it, acknowledged it, and all she said, around her cigarette, was You know, it's like the addict always gets more sympathy than the fat guy, anyway.

I said, Yeah, because that's totally what you're after, and she said

Maybe sympathy isn't the word.

--

The week passed and Farrah had gone taciturn and I'd been living with her for almost a month. Almost a month, which meant it was almost August, which meant, which could mean – I counted the days in my head, tried to remember if it was Wednesday or Thursday.

Oh, I said. Huh. Tomorrow's my birthday.

Mona barked a little laugh, like I made a joke. No, she said.

No, it really is. For real.

What do you want?

For my birthday?

Yeah. For your birthday.

I don't want anything. I said. I don't want. I want to not go home.

Alright, Mona said. Who do I have to kill?

Kill Uly, I said, and giggled crazy. If you're gonna kill someone kill him, for Chrissake. I hate that goat.

Uly, the goat?

Uly the goddamn goat.

The one hat gives you trouble?

Yeah dude, the one that's trying to kill me. He's trying to kill me, I said. Please kill the son of a bitch before he kills me.

That's not very nice, Mona said. I didn't know if she was talking about me killing Uly or Uly killing me but either

way she was smiling.

I stubbed my cigarette out in the grass. That's all I want for my birthday, I drawled. I want my knees to heal. I wanna be able to sit outside and eat my damn sandwich. For real. Fuck that goat.

--

Farrah was putting her foot down about Mona, as best she knew how. Walking by, I tried my best routine – didn't know what time it was, the lights were LOW-OH-OH – but No, said Wig Farrah, unplugging my headphones. There'll be no more of that, she said.

As punishment she made me hand over my Walkman. I did. I took off my headphones, wound the cord neatly, handed it all to her with some reluctance, though not for the reason she thought. She turned it over in her hand, peered at it, fumbled with the battery case. When she clicked it open and found the compartment completely empty, she stared for a moment or two, clicked the lid back in place, and put the whole set in her side-table drawer without looking at me. We didn't really speak for the rest of the day.

Later that night, when I fell asleep, in the distance there were sirens and sirens and sirens, wailing up and down, curling into one another like smoke.

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Mona woke me up in the middle of the night. I think she was drunk. I don't really know. She was stumbling around in the pitch black backyard, I couldn't see any bit of her, but I heard everything.

Hey Tammy hey Tammy hey, she sang, somewhere out in the dark. I heard the crackling of leaves, sticks snapping. I heard something glass fall with a clatter. Happy birthday little Tammy. Little Tammy. Get out here. Come out come out wherever you – ow, shit. Tammy. TAMMY. Tammy.

What, I said.

Get out here.

For a moment I didn't say anything.

Don't you want your present? Don't you want your birthday present? Come on.

My present? I said.

Your present, she said. Your birthday present. Your big goddamn festive surprise. Come out here. Get out here.

So I did. Mona was not herself, bright eyed, stumbling, in an arm flinging mood, everything needed a grand gesture. She said, We're going to the hardware store. Come on. You're ready for this. You're ready for this. I'm gonna drop the big one on you.

Are you drunk? I said.

Am I drunk. Whatever, idiot. Come on, we're going to the 7-Eleven.

It's closed, I said.

Nothing is closed for you, baby babe, Mona said, and tripped. Babe in the woods. Not on your goddamn birthday. Today you. You. The world owes you one. A big fat one. You're ready for it. You wanna see what you can do today? Birthday girl? Come on, pick it up, move your feet.

Are you taking me to some vacant lot to kill me? I said, and she spat laughter and told me I was a fucking idiot, would she be so obvious about it if that's what she wanted?

Outside the store she tried to make me close my eyes and I said no. She said Don't be a jackass, birthday-girl, so I held my hand over my eyes but my fingers were loose and I could see through the cracks and I think she knew it because she didn't try too hard to lead me around the corner.

Behind the store it smelled like dumpster, as it always did, the remains of old lightbulbs crackling under my sneakers, but there was a strange, bright undertone in the air, something like new pennies, and all at once I felt incredibly light-headed.

I said, Mona.

Don't open your eyes, she said.

I could hear something in the distance like machinery, like someone's big industrial air conditioner, only the place wasn't air-conditioned after close and it took me a moment to understand what I was hearing, and I said Why are there so many –

The new penny smell got stronger and harder and suddenly it didn't smell like anything new at all. I dropped my hand, and I swiped at the flies. The air was dark with them, clouded up, the noise was something horrible. I bit my scream in half, it came out like a yowl, a sad little cat-in-a-bath noise.

There you go, Mona said, with satisfaction.

We were side by side in the alley. Mona was very calm. There was a large puddle of something stagnant in front of us, the surface of it gummed up and wrinkled at the edges where my sneaker had grazed it. There was a kind of pile in the middle. I blinked, my eyes were watering. I blinked again.

It was Uly. Uly, surrounded by more Uly. Twisted like a tube of toothpaste, scattered so I couldn't see what was missing.

Mona, I said. Mona. Oh Mona, no.

Behind me, Mona sang the opening bars of the birthday song. She repeated the first line too many times, trailed off. I wrapped my arms around my middle. I leaned forward, and I swallowed, kept swallowing, but there was nothing to swallow.

You're welcome, Mona said.

Oh my God, I said. Oh God, oh God.

No, Mona said, jubilantly. Not right now, actually. Watch, now you'll see. She held out her moonwhite palm to me, though the flies, in the dark. Here, she commanded. Spit.

And I wanted to tell her that I couldn't, I couldn't spit because my mouth was burlap and dust and full of powdered glass, I would never spit again, but then a tiny lick of wind came by, hissed the leaves, rattled the grass, brushed what was left of Uly and along past my nose and my mouth and suddenly there was too much spit, so much spit, more than I could keep in, and helplessly, helplessly, I deposited a mouthful in Mona's hand, trying desperately not to give her dinner, too.

She jiggled it appraisingly in her palm like eggwhite, leaned her head back, and tipped the whole mess of it into her mouth, and I said Oh, oh God, Mona stop, Mona, please.

Just watch, she said. Keep watching. Don't you stop watching. I'm going to show you. You watch. You want to

know the truth, don't you?

I didn't. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know anything. I wanted to never know anything ever again. But for Mona, silence was assent.

Ignoring the flies, ignoring my noises, she seized Uly by the horns, lifting him up and out of the mess of himself, the flaps of his throat swinging heavy, empty. She pried an eyelid open with her thumb and forefinger. Uly's eyes were like dead jellyfish in their sockets, foggy, gummed, the slotted pupil fixed and vacant. Calmly, Mona swallowed once, then opened her mouth, and across the surface of Uly's dead iris she gave one long, careful scrape of her tongue.

I had thrown up before she did the other one, right into my hand, right across my shoes, and when she finished she dropped Uly, hard, into the puddle of him. She straightened, turned to face me.

She said something to me, but I didn't hear her, because I was staring at the dead goat, his dead saliva-coated eyes, his dead blue tongue. And then, like a pattering few early raindrops before the downpour, the blinking began, The goat blinked – first one eye, then the other, then both.

I twisted around, banked like a plane, slipped in my puke, and I ran hard.

I ran all the way home, through yards, slipping in mud and stumbling into the porch, smelling like vomit, soaked in sweat, my mouth was open and making some kind of noise. I crushed myself into the seams of the couch till morning but I didn't sleep, you know I didn't sleep, for the first time in years I spent all night babbling away to you but you had no response for me. You had no recourse for me. Didn't you believe me? Do you still not believe me? What, you too?

I lay alone by the wrecked screen all shredded limp in the breeze and my little brain in my little head made desperate stabs at performing all the conversions and maths that would keep me oiled and functioning after some things had melted but nothing came to a sum I recognized, just jabbered in tongue twisters: I must not have seen the things I had seen because that would be crazy, and then I would be crazy.

I wasn't crazy. I wasn't crazy. I must not know the things I knew because then I would be crazy. I must not doubt that I knew what I knew, because then I would be crazy. I must not know.

At some point after morning I must have slept. I woke under the impression I'd been throwing up, but it wasn't vomit, just words, my one line in my mouth, my recurring line, my trawling line, my endless Mona-Mona stop, Mona, Mona-Mona please. I noticed it was light outside and I was walking through the livingroom and the floorboards squeaked under my feet and Farrah said Good lord Tammy, you look like you've seen a ghost.

But I hadn't yet. I didn't see him until I went back into the porch with a glass mason jar of orange juice, only half full, all I could keep from spilling. I put the jar down, I looked at the yard, and I breathed and I leaned backward and backward and back.

There, standing in middle of the yard, motionless, head down, docile, whole, was Uly.

I stood very still. Then I sat down, or I might have fallen. I looked at him for some time. Uly didn't move.

Go, I said.

He didn't twitch a muscle, not even a shiver of his coat to dislodge the flies.

Get out of here. Go. Go, I said. I was whispering hoarse. I cleared my throat, raised my voice. Go.

He stared blankly in front of himself with his yellow slotted eyes. One eye was drifting, slowly, slowly, in the opposite direction.

I reached down for the newspaper, grabbed it by the middle, crunched it up, waved it at him, crushed it into the screen. Go, I said. Go. Go. Go. Go away. Go away.

He wasn't ten feet away from me. He wasn't looking at me, made no indication that he heard me, but with one cloven hoof he took a single step forward.

I seized the mason jar and I heaved. It flew heavy through the screen, juice and all, leaving an orange comet trail behind it. It hit him in the face with an audible Thuck, and

bounced harmlessly away into the grass.

Go away, I said again, except now I was screaming. I heard Farrah call to me from somewhere inside the house. Uly took another step.

That's when I ran inside for you. That's when I still thought you had some say in my life, or some concern, or something. That's when I thought I could be saved. I ran inside, skidding in my socks, and I took you in my hands, took you off the wall, shook your frame to dislodge you from that eggshell ghost left behind. I heard some kind of faint slow squawking, like distance Canada geese, from Farrah's chair. I didn't care. I took you down and I brought you outside and ran down the porch stairs and I brandished you like a fucking flaming sword, like justice. I held out your picture like you burned.

I said something stupid, like Begone, or Thou Shalt Something, I don't even remember, but dead Uly wasn't impressed, he didn't even flinch.

He took another step.

So I hit him. With you. The wide, flat canvas you in your heavy wooden frame. With all my strength I lifted you over my head and I brought you down into his flat, dead face. Then again, then again, and I didn't know how loudly I was screaming till I heard the faint voice of Farrah on the porch, shrieking into her cordless phone, Please! Please! She's possessed, the Devil's got her, the Devil's got her, she's defiling an image of Our Lord Christ -

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That afternoon, before Farrah got the police to come looking for me, I fell in with the boys on their migration path, and they gave me a wide berth, asked me no questions, there was something terrible in my eyes, and there were stains on my dress.

We found her sitting on the curb in her stringy shorts.

Mona, Dare said easily. Old hat, like. Mona, he said, Aren't you working today?

Her black-caked eyes flickered up to me, she watched me from below low lids. She blew out smoke. She said nothing.

She waited.

Mona, I said. It wasn't my place, wasn't my line, and everyone swung to me. I was far back behind my eyes. I said, Mona, are you a witch?

She laughed immediately but her smile was long and slow, her teeth almost white in the shade, in the flicker, the tip of her cigarette was an ice-pick stab in the world.

Are you a witch? I said.

Kind of like Genghis Khan was a politician, she said.

The boys were a silent, huddling mass. My fists were tight, and I was stinging down in the soft parts of my throat where I breathed.

I want to know what you did to Uly, I said shrilly.

Why, does it scare you? Are you scared of it? It won't do anything to you, Tammy, she said, taking a sulky drag. That's kind of the whole fucking point.

What did you do to him? I said. What did you do? What did you do?

It wasn't me.

What? What?

It wasn't me. It wasn't me. Do you get it yet, birthday girl? I was just helping, Mona said. There's no need to shoot the messenger over this.

I was was having trouble breathing. I said, Call it off.

I can't.

Call it off.

I can't. I can't. How could I? It's not mine.

I don't know what you're talking about, I said, and I was starting to scream again. I don't know why you can't say what you mean.

I mean it wasn't me, Mona said, and stubbed out her cigarette.

(And is she right? Will you ever tell me? If it wasn't her, if it wasn't her, who was it? Who was it? Who was it?)

She said, I told you, Tammy, you're a different thing. I always told you. Don't act like I didn't. You're on my team. You always were. I picked you.

I said, I'm not a different thing. I'm not.

Okay, sure, you're not then, she said, and after a long silence she added, viciously, to no one in particular, Aren't you gonna ask me to show you my tits? I got 'em right here.

The boys were dead silent, saucer-eyed. My fingernails were carving little white halfmoons in my palms. I turned and walked away from her, left her there on the curb, indifferent, unwashed, calmly exhaling white.

That evening, without an ounce of fanfare or my Walkman or even a proper goodbye, Farrah shipped me home. In the doorway, she was bare-headed, weeping, her hair a white cottony wisp on her scalp.

So you know why we can't talk. You know why I blame you for what happened. I forgave Farrah, I forgave Grandma, I might even forgive Mona, because in the end she could never help what she is. She can't. She has always been there, and it could never have been otherwise. But I won't forgive you. I can't forgive you.

Because you know what my defense was that day? My defense against a true abomination, a thing that should never walk the earth, a thing that goes against ever rule you ever wrote or noted or dictated? It was a picture frame. A heavy oak frame, with nothing in it. And even that, what did that do? Uly, whatever he was, took three hits from the corner of it and something in his face popped, but he didn't budge. He didn't leave. Even when the frame snapped and your picture ripped and I threw it aside and ran, when I looked behind - I still would look behind - he was calmly ambling after me, his face lopsided, skinned, bloodless. I was faster than he was and even more once I got in the cab that night and headed east, he could never have reached me, but before we stopped talking, you and me, I asked you, I kept asking, what happens when he catches up? What happens?

You never answered. You left me alone. All I can do is wait. And I'm afraid.

If you're listening, if you're ever listening, if you're even there anymore, amen.

Rayon Dwain Lennon

Croon

I was twelve and wanted a son, and so it made sense for me to be walking Tanisha to the bus stop afterwards. Even if I sensed that she wanted to be alone. (The road to my boarding house branched off from in the square, so I comforted myself with the knowledge that we both knew that I had to walk this way.) We had just had sex against the trunk of a big tree in the dark woods around the tennis court. We hadn't talked since (to be sure, we hadn't talked during it either), because every time I opened my mouth to say, "Are you okay?" or, "Did you want to?", my life-long stammer kicked in and the words just wouldn't come. I tried to sneak a glance at her as we made our way through the school gate, past the black bust of the Reverend Lester Davy, the now dead founder of the high school, but settled instead for the familiar click of her high heels (which she never usually wore) against the lamp-lit road.

As we advanced on, I put my hands into my shirt pocket to rub my mother's married rings—the ones she'd given me before she left for Canada. It was one ring really but two rings that formed a heart. My plan was to find an appropriate moment to propose to Tanisha, so that we would become engaged before I left the island to go live with my father in America.

The heavy Jamaican flag fluttered on its silver pole behind the moonlit wire fences in front of the school's defunct single boarding houses. No one was around. Not even the vendors along the roots of the shade trees. Usually the area would be covered in school girls like Tanisha in rich sea-blue uniforms and boys like me in desertcolored khaki uniforms and blue and yellow-striped ties, and for that reason probably Tanisha would have been embarrassed to walk with me. In theory she could have waited in front of the school for a bus but at night it was much safer to wait in town, where the lights were brighter and one or two shops opened, as opposed

to the streetlights in front of the edge-of-town school, which flickered on and off. None of this was said, of course, but understood. As we were walking by the barn-like building of the shoe repair shop, I finally just turned my head and looked at her. She had her arms folded across her chest as if to ward off my stare (we had done it fully clothed, her long nunlike uniform hiked up, so I hadn't even seen her breast parts.) Blue and white and yellow hair ribbons flagged about her face and head. Tanisha wasn't a very beautiful girl by all standards. She had smooth fisted cheek bones that sloped down to a too tight mouth that sometimes gave her an unfairly severe expression when she was not smiling and her strong bony frame gave her this eternal sense about her, like she was made of steel--and better yet because she wouldn't break down like my mother.

What was beautiful about Tanisha though was her tan lower lip, which I'd long dreamed of kissing, but which I didn't even get to peck on earlier on. Her velvety black skin. Her super natural, ribbon hair. Tanisha also had a beautiful attitude. And by that I mean that she carried herself like she was beautiful, superior to boys like me, who smelled and stammered. And in fact once when I came to lit class late, she had placed her schoolbag on the picnic-like, two-person, wooden bench to ward me off, as if to suggest that her beloved school bag and the contents of it were worth more than me. I remember standing there and waiting for her to pick it up or at least tell me to move on. She didn't even bother to look up at me. (It was off to the side so the other students weren't paying attention). And then hearing her asks, with her attention still on the board, "You don't mean to sit here, do you?" As though it should never have even entered my mind. "No," I said, blown away to a seat without a seat in back.

That had changed with the letter, with the postcard (for her birthday) I had given her the day before, inviting her to the cricket match—in which I was the star bowler—after school that day. The truth was, walking side by side with her, I didn't even remember what I'd written in the postcard and letter. Everything had simply poured out of me. Tanisha was

a pastor's daughter, much like a girl named Tameka White, who I'd met at a church convention in my former hometown of Trout Hall when I was eight. That relationship had ended when the convention was over and Tameka went back home to the other end of the island. Because of my stammer, I hadn't said much to her over the course of the convention while she stayed at our house. So afterwards I'd written her a purple-prose love letter too passionate for a pastor's daughter and so hadn't been surprised by the "we're over" reply (she hadn't even bothered to write that famous letter to me but to my sister, who told me.)

The results had been different with the Tanisha. And in fact I had sensed that the only reason why she didn't object when I took her hand and led her into the woodland around the tennis court after the cricket match (which we lost) was that my words had moved her so. Even though she was two years older than I, I understood that her acid manner was something she'd constructed to compensate for the fact that boys didn't pursue her. Probably I'd been the first boy to call her beautiful, in that letter--which I was sure she'd read and reread, more than the scriptures probably.

As we drew closer to the square past the many empty street shops showing coverage of Princess Di's death on suspended TVs, past the yellow court house with the thrashing palm trees, I wondered if I hadn't raped her. And if so, if she wasn't leading me to the police station beyond the park's cream clock tower. She hadn't struggled or said no, but I had to admit that even if she had said no, I wouldn't have heard her, so lost was I in the gift of the moment. We hadn't used protection so even as I was entering and leaving her I was certain that she would get pregnant and because she was a pastor's daughter she wouldn't abort it. That's another reason I liked her. Then I would raise a better son than my mother and father (and my older sister who was pregnant and who I hated more than the devil, for sure).

When I was five my father left to pick apple in America on farm-work and did not return. My mother, after waiting without options for years, suddenly packed up and left for Canada

one day after discovering her own father, who had gone to Canada on farm-work himself. I wasn't always certain that she wouldn't return. (Before she left she'd stuck me in a religious boarding school here in Chapelton and my sister in Kingston with our grandmother, my mother's mother.) Then mother had written to say that she would not be coming back home, but that my father would come for me to go live with him in America. I had often overheard the rumor in my neighborhood that my father wasn't my father (I certainly looked nothing like him) and this I sensed was what really dissolved their marriage and left my mother with no option but to leave me, the very embodiment of her indiscretion. (My father was a good enough man that even though he must have felt like he wasn't my father, he still looked after me, realizing that my mother had been lonely when he remarried in America to qualify for his green card.)

We could hear the perennially gushing standpipe, which during noon breaks the primary school students ran to, to cool their frying feet, the muffled choir in the grave-gripped cathedral, two or three foulmouthed primary school boys playing cricket late into the night in the lot outside the walls of the cathedral. We moved past the closed restaurant in which the lady of the boarding house—where I lived—worked (the iron-clad, rainbow-colored shop was barred shut, thank goodness. This woman had a way of acting like the devil's version of my mother); past a series of connected brick shops, some open, some closed. Every now and again our elbows touched like two charged wires and my heart jumped. We were walking closer now since there were so many homeless men in between the shops, begging money and generally leering at her. I was taller than most of the homeless men in rags with flies bumbling around them, so I gathered I could protect her, if only that I looked like the sort to protect his woman to be.

As we began climbing the hill through the white-walled park, which would take us right down past the police station, to the bus stop in front of the unpainted building of the market, Tanisha suddenly said, "I heard you changed your name to Croon?" I kept my head straight ahead as though we had

been talking all along. “Where-where’d you hear that?” I asked. “My friend Trista knows David’s girlfriend, who said that you told her so,” she said. David was one of my room-mates, an older boy. Croon was what I had planned to name my son, so he would know how to overcome his stammer, if he had one. That is, he would croon. I had given David’s girl that name because she’d asked me my name and I couldn’t get my real name out. “Yeah,” I said. “You-you can call me Croon.” “Okay, Croon,” she said either to be funny or hear herself say it.

The two-story building of the police station loomed white behind the lifeless clock tower as we neared the top of the hill. “What, what, what, what did we do in lit class today?” I asked to keep us going. She unfolded her arms from her chest. “We discussed the Maroons,” she said as we came to the top of the hill. “Oh,” I said. Clearly I needed to say it and say it now. “Was that your first time?” I asked and she nearly stopped but kept walking, looking up at me. “No,” she said, looking down at her feet. I felt relieved. It made sense. She was older. A pastor’s daughter but rebellious. I waited for her to ask me that same question as we walked down towards the bus stop, but she didn’t. She probably knew from experience that it was my first time. “You wanted to, right?” I asked as we past the police station, whitened by the moon. She did not stop walking this time, but smiled a little. It occurred to me that the question was a little embarrassing, for her and for me. It showed my insecurity. And my immaturity. But I had to ask. Nothing this good had ever happened to me and to want something this bad and get it was new to me. She was silent for a while as we drifted down in front of the wall of the market, until she said, almost as an afterthought, “Of course I wanted to, Croon.”

Chapelton can be a real ghost town at night. Nobody around except the shop owners closing up shop. I was suddenly aware, as we past the plump bust of Cudjoe of the Maroons, that she smelled just good. Like women in pageants. We got to the bus stop in front of the market, which was like a house with its crumbling front wall facing the streets,

inside quiet now on a Thursday night. To the right of us was a jewelry shop, its doors and windows sealed with curly bars of iron. Across from us stood the bank and shops and the new Chinese-owned supermarket. It was late and so I knew that most buses wouldn't be going to May Pen, mostly they would be returning from there to go to Frankfield past Trout Hall--where my family used to live--to the garage of the man who owned most of the buses, Mr. Worthe, who a few boys from the school, for some reason, mistook for my father. "You-you have enough for taxi?" I asked and immediately regretted it. "Yes," she said leaning up against the railing in front of the closed jewelry shop. I kicked at stones with the worn sketchers that Dad'd send for me. There was a risk in taking taxis at night, I knew. So many people had been driven away robbed and killed on the island. I read it everyday in *The Gleaner*, watched it on the news. "You want me to come with you?" I asked. "To make sure you get home safe." She opened her mouth but didn't speak for a second. "You would do that?" She finally said. I nodded. She said, "Do you even know where I live? All the way in Old Harbour." She paused. "Plus my father would crucify me if he heard I came home this late with any boy." "Wouldn't he go to hell for that?" I sort of joked, but regretted it when she made a serious face. "Sorry," I said. "It's okay," she said. A taxi, one of those white Import Cars that looked like a hearse, came up over the hill past the clock tower and I was about to flag it down when she held my hand. "Let it go," she said, straightening up. "There'll be more."

She didn't let go of my hand for a while and we kept saying nothing and I was too afraid to look into her eyes so I looked across the street at the glassy, white bank, at the shedding heavenly pines in front of the cathedral, at the overflowing metal garbage bin that earlier in the week two shirtless men had fought over the job of emptying, at the newspaper shop in front of which on weekdays an old bald blind man played his flute and read his brail bible as people picked up and dropped coins into his money can. "So," she said, leaning up against the bars of the jewel store again. "When did you start loving me exactly?" "I don't know," I said. "I can't ex-

plain it.” That elicited a smile. “I mean,” she began, kneading my fingers. “I remember always being so mean to you.” “I saw through that,” I said. “Really,” she said. “Yeah,” I said.

A huge truck zoomed by.

We looked into each other’s eyes until the roar of the truck died down the hill. It struck me then just how beautiful my life could be from here on out. Tanisha looked the way at fifteen that she would probably look at fifty, sixty even. And our kids.... “Listen,” I began. “Aren’t-aren’t-aren’t you afraid that you’ll get-get-get pregnant?” She considered this for a while, looking down the hill between the dark shops and white-washed walls of the park to see if any buses were coming. “My grandmother has me on the pill,” she said, dropping my hand. I didn’t know, but hated her grandmother. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not worried,” I said. A bus was coming. I did not believe her, did not want to believe that she was on the pill, but she could have been. I had no way of proving otherwise. I took out the ring as the bus pulled up. “Give me your hand,” I said and she put out her hand to me. I put the ring on her ring finger. “Why?” she asked. “I might be leaving any day,” I said. “I thought I-I-I put that in the letter,” I said. “Oh, you did,” she said and let the bus pass. Another one was coming though, we could hear it down near the school.

“Where did you get this from?” She said, rubbing the ring on her finger. “My mother’s,” I said, nervously kicking up more gravel. “She gave it to me before she left,” I added. “Oh,” she said. “Listen,”—looking but not looking at me--”um, I think--well, we’re too young. You’re too young. I know what happened but we should slow down.” I didn’t know what to say. It sounded a lot like I was being rejected. “What are you saying?” I asked. “That-that we should date, you know,” she said, looking past me to the bus at the bottom of the hill. “Okay,” I said, accepting back the ring. She said, “You can come to my father’s church. You know the blue-roof church on Old Harbour Road right?” “Pass it all the time on my way to Seaview Gardens,” I said. “Good,” she said as the bus pulled up and she boarded in no time. “Bye Croon,” she said, looking back down from a window

as the bus pulled off. “Yeah,” I said. Croon, I was my son.



Rayon Dwain Lennon

The Exile Goes Home to Trout Hall, Jamaica

First Place; Folio Poetry Contest

I hop off a top-heavy country
bus and stand on this bridge, under
which I was baptized at nine, trying
to interpret the sunny language of the river
of voices in the air above the
water-hugged rocks and heat-ripened
breasts of godly girls who look up, hurling
stony insults my way. So I cross,
follow a yellow butterfly into the sunny heart
of town, where the colorful
wooden shop fronts are littered with the idle voices
of half-naked men leering at school girls in baby
blue uniforms, while their wives labor in the surrounding
ugly fields of Mr. Sharpe, the good Englishman,
who built and named this town of no trouts, Trout Hall,
who once a year deploys his planes
to spray his neighbors and green alligator-
skinned uglies, hybrid child of the orange, grapefruit
and tangerine. Everybody knows his slogan: "The Affliction
is only skin deep, so the beauty is in the eating." Over
the cardboard church even the pigeons sound gospel
and I am moved by brooks as brooding
as the bible; traffic flows the wrong way
and one of my American dollars is worth
more than twice my age. The driver of the white Import
Car lets me out across from the coffee
field where most of the trees have been
cut down to make room for weed-covered graves,
and the English missionaries' sun-blocking peach
Baptist church is still empty, except for the cows
chewing mouthfuls of shadowy poisoned grass and the cricket-

ers

crying, “Out,” as wheezing, rustcolored cars line up to cross the pocked face of the palm-sheltered bridge; the concrete-tilted house I used to live in has grown from a box into a mansion and the stonewall is still too low to imprison the gully when it rains. The nearest police station in Frankfield is still thirty miles away with one running car. Under a wind-sheared sky, the air smells inhumanly of burnt flesh, and nobody knows

the berries over the graves are sweetest. I slip into a clouded bar and down Red Stripes until I forget my place. Outside red palms are sweeping up the last of day’s light. A Jehovah’s Witness in a black suit hands me blue leaflets but I remind him that we created God, that if nothing else heaven is a place like Cuba, where everyone but God is a slave, that I am trying to write a fiction greater than God, a poetry to define our world. He laughs and I only feel lost. The street lights won’t come on. A divine wind blows out the sun. He pats his pockets and asks me for a light.

Rayon Dwain Lennon

Ferry Street

The cathedral is a huge relief, heaven
planted in cold hell, all red-brown bricks,
emanating Sahara warmth, a bell like
a mother's voice, the mazy figure of a Queen's
crown, little iron-looking
wooden doors and no fence. Across
the street in front of a white corner
shop candles and teddy
bears mark the murder of a boy around
a rain-darkened light pole. Alive
little boys pull down a tire-based
basketball hoop to dunk an airless
basketball. It must be twenty
degrees out but a prostitute in nothing
but a tight white silk dress confuses
traffic. You can smell the Atlantic
or the salty drains stuffed with crack
the police can't find. A drug-headed
girl dances when she walks. I look back
up at the rusty spire disappearing
in the sunny clouds. Candles burn
in every window of the rectory
and every business advertises in half
Spanish. Bullet-riddled pines shade
a lot. The three-story houses are falling
down but standing up. There are no
Obama signs and I am forced to beg
God for the indoor calm of the cathedral
as an old black woman waves
to me from a baby stroller.

Stephen Paul Johnson

Illusions of Grandeur

I pissed on an anthill today.
Overall, I found it to be very rewarding.

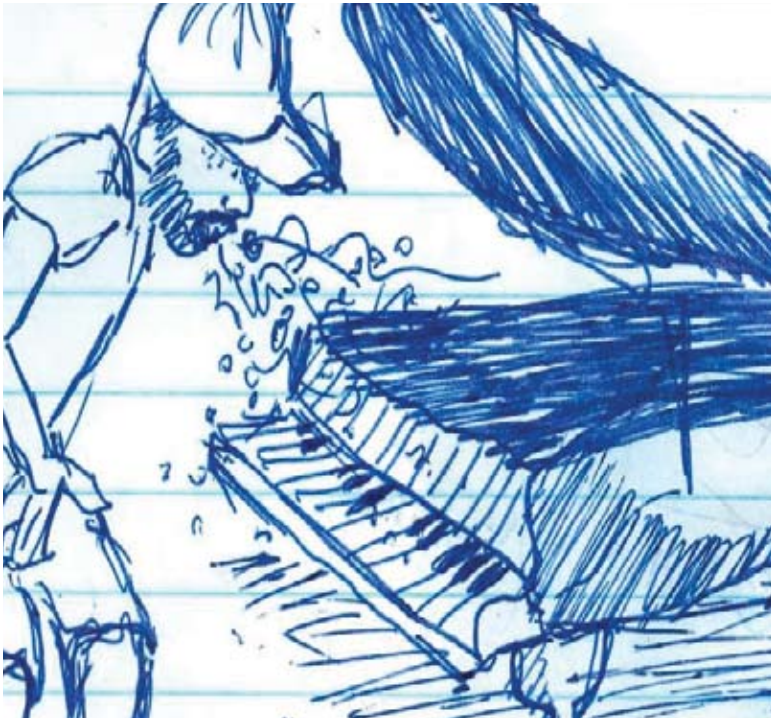
I imagined their terror, the little ants;
Getting flushed away
In a sweeping river, boulders of dirt
Knocking them sideways.
Losing their loved ones, yelling:
“Save the Queen!”...
There is only one known
Species of ant who can swim.
This is not them, I thought.

I recalled my Nigerian Professor
Saying, “You Americans are so
Uncouth. Snacking! All of the time!
And never washing your hands,”
And I realized
That he was absolutely right.

Most recently,
On my way through the woods,
I pissed innocently on the side
Of the trail.
From beneath the leaves
On the forest floor,
A swarm of perturbed ants fled
The monsoon. I could sense the anarchy,
Almost as if I was one of them.
I wondered briefly, if there would ever be
A place for me to pee
Where such devastation would not be wrought.

I've spent very little of my day so far

Thinking about the ants,
But I have found myself growing increasingly thirsty.



Peter Cunningham

Five to Seven Minutes on High

When Max and I found out that the freezer had broken we'd just gotten back from spending all of our money on TV dinners. We had found the massive appliance only a few months beforehand, sifting through the guts of a burned-down Arby's. It took four men to lift, and barely fit into the back of Ricky's van. The weight of it pushed the tires to their limits. Max said he was surprised it even lasted as long as it did. Still, the timing couldn't have been worse. We'd bought enough dinners to fill the damned thing.

Lacking both Styrofoam coolers and the means to obtain ice we resigned ourselves to eating as many of them as we could before they thawed. In our minds it was the only logical thing to do.

We sat like chess masters on either side of the table, communicating through icy glances our mutual respect for the task at hand. Neither of us knew how long they would take to thaw, or how long they'd keep once they had. Ideally we'd be done quickly enough that we'd never find out. I put the first round in the microwave and hit the button.

"You know if we do this right," Max said, "we probably won't even need to eat for a while. We can live on stored body fat, like a camel or a bear or something."

"If we do this right," I said, "it'll be a while before either of us even wants to eat."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." His gaze fell and his eyes grew dull.

The timer on the microwave dwindled, and like a starter pistol it finally beeped.

"Let's do this."

We started with the fried chicken. It felt like rubber fried in lard, and tasted like the same but with a dash of snuff. The corn was corn only insofar as it was small and yellow. The potatoes were chalky at best. The brownie tasted like chicken. We ate slowly, pacing ourselves despite the urge to take it all

down like medicine. We ate dinner after dinner in this way. Salisbury steaks with gravy like tobacco water, chicken nuggets unencumbered by the weight of moisture, peas like little green bunny turds and stuffing in which I could swear I saw Chinese bylines. There were meatloaves.

After we'd each eaten eight we hobbled out to the stoop for a cigarette break, bloated and delirious. After a couple of minutes Ricky walked by.

"Hey guys," he said.

"Hey, Ricky."

"Christ, you guys look like shit. Did you get more of that scotch with the rocking chair on the label?"

"No," Max said, "we spent all our money on TV dinners and when we got back the freezer was broken."

"The big one?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Wait," Ricky stepped back and held up a single open palm. "You guys aren't trying to –"

"Yeah," I said.

"Shit!" He said.

"Yeah," Max said.

"Do you two want some help?"

Max and I looked at each other and shrugged.

"Yeah."

So we let him in, and he ate with us. More dinners, more ham with the texture of gym mats, more chopped sirloin and lima beans which left the same dull tang on either side of the tongue, more fish fillet that tasted the way a widow feels and more pork with neither chops nor loins. It wasn't long before Ricky's cheeks puffed out with a restrained belch and he pushed his tray forward.

"Guys," he said, "we're gonna need some help."

We called everyone we knew. Given the scope and urgency of our request it wasn't difficult to solicit help. Friends, acquaintances, and strangers all filed into our apartment in a near endless procession. It became an event of sorts, a party with a purpose. Max and Ricky and I assumed the role of overseers, handling meal requests and busing the trays back

and forth. The noises in the place were a gentle cacophony; the dull thuds of fork against plastic sounded like a field of muted crickets, the sound of chewing was like a million boxers pounding a colossal wet sponge. A reporter from a local paper arrived, eager to latch onto a story about the rallying together of young people. The pile of uneaten dinners slowly dwindled until finally there were none. Empty plastic trays lined the floor like fliers after a political rally. After saying its goodbyes the crowd poured itself out the front door, a collective mass of stomach cramps and regret, and left us with the mess. Max and I agreed it best just to forget it till morning and go to bed. Before leaving the kitchen I went over to the freezer and kicked it, stupid thing. Something inside of it sputtered, and the quiet whirl of its motor resumed.

Adam Feller

Text Question Mark Sure Period

He asks about the text and I answer “sure.” “Text? Sure. Let me feel the text, sure.” He doesn’t get it. “The text, man, the text!” I harass him with teeth, all my teeth. “Why smile?” he asks, “Your teeth can’t help the text.” Now I don’t get it.

But we’re on the same page now. We can lock eyes and delve deep.

He asks again, “Can you feel the text?” “The text? Sure. I’m trying to touch the text, sure.” He smacks my face. “I didn’t say touch I said feel.” I smack his face. “But when I touch I feel.” “Then how do we productively touch a text?”

It’s impossible. So I eat the text. It’s the only way to feel the text for sure.

Adam Feller

How I Knew Jesus

First Place; Folio Fiction Contest

Mrs. Bonnadina's third grade class at Clancy Idol Elementary in Lusk, Texas, housed a miracle worker. I was nine when I met Joseph Geesis in 1969. The story in class was that his father had changed their last name. He was dedicated to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Some said his father was dumb and some thought he spelled 'Geesis' like he did on purpose, but no one could say why. Joseph wouldn't say why either. He never said much of anything. Occasionally, Mrs. Bonnadina would ask him a question about the day's work but he never answered right, we all knew he was dumb just like his dad must've been. After she told him he had answered wrong he would spout some nonsense about how Jesus didn't care whether he answered right or not as long as he had faith. We all laughed. I think I even saw Mrs. Bonnadina laugh once, that's why I liked her. And we gave him a hard time whenever possible. Some drew multiple crucifixes on his things. Some went as far as to use newly learned curse words to curse Jesus in front of him. And some, like me and Tommy, pushed him around physically. He never reacted. But once, he got the courage to threaten us: he said he would use his miracle powers to hurt us. We laughed and pushed him down again. Yup, Joseph Geesis said he could work miracles.

The Geesis's lived in a trailer down the street from Tommy Hathaway's trailer. I was good friends with Tommy so I made it a point to walk home with him at least a couple days out of the week. His mother always had chocolate brownies and lemonade so it was worth it. My mother would always put on her angry face with squinted eyes, scrunched nose, and tight lips when I came home late, but I wanted to see a miracle. And I didn't know what to look for in terms of miracles, I just wanted to see one, whether it was done against me or not. My mother and father took me to church a couple times but I didn't pay attention. It was stupid. But

this- this was real and happening directly to me. It was bad enough that I couldn't be around every day. What if I missed it and only Tommy got to see? Or what if he screwed up and I didn't get to see? It just made me want to tease him more either way. I would push him to it if I needed to. And what was so special about him anyway? I bet I could work miracles if I wanted to. I'd have to see one first of course. I told my mother I had important business to take care of but she didn't care. She didn't understand. I couldn't tell her about the miracles after all. And I got hit every now and then but it wasn't so bad.

We used to follow Joseph home. One day, Tommy wanted to throw rocks at him. So did I. As he walked lazily we gathered our stones in our pockets and got a little closer so we could hit him good. I threw and missed and Tommy aimed careful but missed. I threw two at once and that got Joseph's attention. He turned around to look but made no move to run. He didn't even change his facial expression. All he did was to put his hands on his head like he was trying to concentrate. "Are we gonna get miracled?" I asked Tommy.

"Sure are," he answered, "Let's keep throwing."

I threw and continually missed. Tommy got closer than I did. But I assumed the wind worked against us. I could throw a baseball harder than anyone I knew after all. "Do you think he's using the wind to miracle against us?" I asked Tommy.

"I bet he is. But we're getting closer," he answered. Then his supposed miracle worked against him. I hit him in the leg and Tommy hit him in the back within seconds of each other. We high fived and raced to Tommy's. We passed Joseph lying on the ground with his arms spread out and eyes closed but we didn't care to do more than laugh as we kicked the dirt at him. He mumbled something but we left it with him unheard.

Tommy's mother saw us running and demanded to know what trouble we had gotten into. "Just racing, ma'am," Tommy answered. She didn't believe him and only gave us lemonade that day.

The next day at school, Joseph stayed silent like nothing had happened. The rest of us snickered all day long as we told everyone what we had done. We were gods that day. Wendy Dunn asked me to be her boyfriend and Colin Slater gave me his pudding at lunch. Tommy finally got Olivia Berry to be his girlfriend and Lester Steinman did Tommy's homework that night. We tried to keep it from Mrs. Bonnadina but she found out eventually. Tammy Waylan told on us. She wanted to be Tommy's girlfriend. Tommy and I had to write apologies to Joseph after school in our finest print. I had to rewrite Dear Joseph, I'm sorry I hit you with rocks...eleven times. She knew Joseph said he could work miracles and I would have bet all my money she wanted to see one too. But she didn't understand us. She told us that she was going to have a talk with Mr. Geesis about how we had been treating Joseph and show him the apologies. I liked Mrs. Bonnadina but hated her for this. And then she wrote letters to our mothers and demanded we give it to them ourselves. I got beat again. It was worth it though.

After Mrs. Bonnadina talked with Mr. Geesis and after Tommy's mother and my mother got their letters, we were forced to have a talk with Mr. Geesis ourselves. It was his first request. We had to walk home with Joseph after school, another of Mr. Geesis's designs. Tommy scowled the whole way as I asked my questions to Joseph.

"So you can do miracles, huh?" I asked. Joseph just turned his head but kept silent. "So you can do miracles, huh?" I asked again.

"I can," he said in a confident whisper.

"What do you mean miracles?" He just looked at me again. "Do I really hafta ask again? Just talk or I'll hit you."

"Yea, just answer him stupid," Tommy added.

Joseph started to meander around. I thought he was going to walk in circles around us. "I can float, um, I can control things, um, I can, I can heal...see I don't even have bruises on my leg," Joseph lifted his pant leg. The pale leg had no bruise.

“Control things? And how do we know you never had a bruise right off?” I asked skeptically. I didn’t believe that any rock that I threw would leave the victim without a mark. And why wouldn’t he have controlled the rocks?

“What about your back?” Tommy exclaimed, “I hit your back!”

I nodded in agreement but Joseph didn’t play along. “No you didn’t,” he stated.

“Sure did, let me see your back,” Tommy said and tried to rip Joseph’s shirt up. But I had never seen Joseph move like he did right there. He darted out of reach and ran up the road a little. “I don’t believe you, stupid,” Tommy yelled after him. We let him be but kept him within vision and continued to follow him home.

“Hey Tommy,” I asked when the Geesis trailer came into view, “Do you think Joseph’s dad does miracles too?”

“I bet he does. He’s probably gonna use them to trap us in there. Punish us I bet,” Tommy answered.

“My ma already beat me, didn’t yours?” I asked.

“Sure did. But I hear Mr. Geesis ain’t got sympathy for folk like us,” Tommy said indicating his mother as the source.

“You think it’s true his dad would kill for Jesus?” I had heard this from Monica White but she got it from someone else in class. Everybody knew unique facts about the Geesis family.

“I’ll bet he would,” Tommy replied confidently, “But I’m not worried. Are you?”

“No way! But let’s keep a few rocks with us just in case.” We nodded at each other and headed towards the door. We thought Joseph was probably already inside working up a miracle to use on us.

Before we could get to the door, a man stomped out. Here he was, Mr. Geesis. “You boys don’t think I been watching you come down the road taking your sweet time like I had all night? Put those rocks back where they came from,” Mr. Geesis demanded.

We stalled not knowing how to react. “Now,” he

yelled, "Don't make me put them back for you."

We started to empty our pockets but he stopped us. He wanted them back in the road. I led the way and our stones eventually rested in the road again. "Should we run?" I asked Tommy quietly.

"I don't think I can," he answered. So we walked back and into the trailer.

The Geesis's trailer was just like Tommy's: kitchen, sitting room, bedroom, and bathroom. Joseph must've slept on the couch just like Tommy and neither had a television. Tommy's mother always had on the radio and decorated with bright colors. Their trailer always smelled like baking brownies. Mr. Geesis's trailer had no smell whatsoever aside from a slight scent of body odor near the bedroom. His only decorations were a crucifix and a Bible. I wondered whether he could actually read the Bible. And I wondered whether he could read the apologies we wrote to his son. I bet Mrs. Bonnadina had to read them to him.

When he sat us down on the floor facing the couch where he and his son sat, he said nothing. I wondered whether he and his son said absolutely nothing to each other, or if they restricted conversation specifically to the Bible. But Mr. Geesis didn't look like the fool we all made him out to be. He was shaven and dressed in a black suit. Every time we saw him after this day he was in that same suit.

"Now I'm gonna make this quick, you hear me, boys," Mr. Geesis said and looked at all three of us, "Quick and to the point."

"Yessir," we answered.

"My boy don't like bein' a target, you hear? He won't say it but he don't."

"Uh huh," we grunted.

"The good Lord gave me that boy because he was meant to teach, do you understand? Meant to teach you boys." He stood his son up. "Stand up and shake my boy's hand."

We shook hands in silence. Joseph never once made eye contact.

“Now go on and get outa here, I’m gonna have a talk with my boy,” Mr Geesis said firmly. “But my boy needs to make some friends and you two are gonna be it. I’ve talked to your mothers and you’ll be coming here tomorrow after school. If not there’ll be punishments,” he said, “For all three of you.” He grabbed his son tightly by the shoulder as he eyed our pathway out. Joseph was going to get beat real bad that day, I could tell by his father’s grip. I still couldn’t tell if Mr. Geesis was dumb, but I knew he didn’t work miracles. He must’ve made Joseph start doing them since he couldn’t. He was crazy, that’s all I knew.

“You really gonna come back here after school tomorrow?” Tommy asked.

“No way.”

Joseph didn’t come to school the next day. His father must’ve known we weren’t coming back and gave Joseph the beating of his life. Mrs. Bonnadina asked us about our visit but we didn’t say anything. Tommy suggested that he had a cold. She dismissed it and said no more. But to the class we said anything we wanted. We told them that Mr. Geesis was an illiterate and raging maniac. That his eyes were about explode as he screamed in our faces. That we ran out before he got a chance to kill us. That Joseph probably got beat to near death. That they lived like animals. Joseph showed up the next day with a cast on his wrist and walked with a limp. No one said a thing, including Joseph. We all just gave each other understanding looks. Mrs. Bonnadina asked if he would share his accident with us but he shook his head no. He said he would be saved, injured or not. She said she would ask him in private later. We wanted to ask him about it ourselves but didn’t dare in case it was because his father knew we wouldn’t come back that he got beat.

When Friday came, I asked if I could sleep at Tommy’s. Tommy and I had planned to go out and spy on Joseph and his father that night. His mother would let us out until at least dark, and we could push that time a little bit so we had some cover. It took some persuasion, but I was allowed out.

The Geesis trailer was quiet and that scared me. Mr.

Geesis could have just beaten Joseph and been standing over his unconscious body for all we knew. Sure, we told the class that he was a raging maniac, but he wasn't that raging. He was just angry I think. But maybe when he was alone with his son he allowed himself to be however angry and violent he wanted. I wanted to ask Tommy if he was scared but I didn't want to speak in case the fear controlled my voice and not me.

We realized that there was no place to look in clearly. So we put our heads next to the bottom of the door and listened. Eventually we heard Mr. Geesis speak. "You left off at Mathew 4. Begin."

"Then Jesus was led up by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." His father had to help him with spirit, wilderness, and tempted. "He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished..." Joseph could barely pronounce 'famished.' Where they reading the Bible all the way through? I would hate to have Mr. Geesis as my father.

"See, boy, this is why you got hurt. You let those devils tempt you," Mr. Geesis proclaimed. "This is why you must teach them. You're a disappointment otherwise."

"Yessir," Joseph muttered. "I will teach them. I will show them."

"Enough. Keep reading."

Maybe Mr. Geesis wasn't dumb, just set in his ways. I didn't know. But since Joseph didn't seem to be about to get beat and we couldn't see in and all they were doing was reading, we got bored and left. "Will there be brownies when we get back?" I asked Tommy.

"Yup. Joseph's dad didn't keep us out late enough for my mom to be mad. I sure was scared at first though," he answered.

"Me too."

On Monday, Tommy and I walked home with Joseph. We finally asked about his injury but he wouldn't speak. "What happened, stupid?" I asked. No answer.

"I thought you could heal," Tommy questioned. When he got no answer, he shrugged and gave up. We were

tired of trying to get him to perform miracles for us.

“If you don’t do something I’ll hit you,” I threatened.

He finally answered, “I can heal.”

“Show us something. We know your dad beats you bad. We heard you two reading the Bible,” I said.

“Yea,” Tommy said, “We know you got beat because of us.”

Joseph stopped walking and looked at me straight in the face for the first time. I didn’t know what think. “You heard me read?” he asked.

“Yup,” we both answered.

“I have to teach you. I’ll show you.”

“Show us what?” Tommy asked.

“Just wait,” he answered and we followed him home in silence.

Was this going to be the miracle we had waited for? Or was he going to read to us? I just wanted something, anything. When we got to his trailer he stopped in front. “I can stay in the air when I jump off the trailer,” he declared. Cast and all, he immediately began climbing up onto the trailer. He had a little wooden ladder that looked like he built himself. I wondered how he hid it from his father.

“Finally,” Tommy exclaimed, “We get to see one.”

I nodded and shouted words of encouragement. I was excited. But the shouts and the footsteps on the roof warned Mr. Geesis and he came outside. He was home and I would see no miracle. He gave us the same distasteful look as he did when we left his trailer last but said nothing to us. He strode to the ladder and pushed it over.

“Boy!” he shouted, “Now you hafta jump.” No response from Joseph above. “Do it now, boy!”

We three coaxed him on but for different reasons. I didn’t know why Mr. Geesis yelled but I was happy he did. Joseph would jump, perform his miracle, and get beat again. Hopefully we could watch the entire thing. But Joseph hesitated. He looked down but not at any of us. I thought that he may have been looking at the ladder. I couldn’t figure out why he hesitated though. If he had done the miracle before it

would be no problem. It must have been that he didn't want to get beat again. But he could heal, couldn't he?

Joseph stepped back a step and jumped. There was nothing graceful about it and his false proclamation of a miracle seemed to make him fall faster. He toppled over onto the ground and Mr. Geesis started walking, not towards Joseph, but towards the trailer door. He was not going to beat Joseph and we didn't see a miracle. I walked over to help him up, and then punched him in the face. He fell back down and just laid there with his arms out and eyes closed. I watched him lying there and saw the tears begin to well up as his eyes opened. I didn't want him to cry. I wanted him to accept his deeds like a man but he didn't, he just whimpered to himself. I still wanted to see a miracle. His father observed us briefly and then went inside shaking his head. His face never changed. Tommy stood next to me and we stood staring at the pitiful boy from above. Joseph cried and we didn't care. Joseph came to school a few more times after this but then Mrs. Bonnadina told us that his father was going to educate Joseph himself. There was no going away party or any farewell whatsoever for Joseph. Sometimes we'd walk past the trailer or knock on the door and run but no one came out anyway. Tommy and I threw toilet paper all over the trailer but it was never cleaned up. The rain deteriorated it after some time but the last remnants were not removed until one day when all their belongings were outside and Tommy's mother said she saw Joseph and his father drive away in a van.

Adam Feller

Seaform's Throne

The words are dead. It doesn't even matter what the w and the o and the r and the d and that rotten s have in common. I, Wendell Seaform, just don't care.

"Wendell Seaform, your throne in Heaven is being renovated but please stay on the line. Your business is beautiful and appreciated." Needless to say, I decided to get off and leave them waiting.

"We don't appreciate you hanging up, Mr. Seaform. Please! Stay on! The line!" The corpse words gauge my ear drums leaving behind a residue of decay.

"A word is not but a word and I still don't care." They won't keep me on the line. It's my throne and I'll be sitting by midnight. "Mr. Seaform, please just watch the lights until it's ready."

I'll take a picture, that's what I'll do. And send it to them. "Here's me operator. Observe my anger while it pusses and permeates your office." "Mr. Seaform, I really don't appreciate antics."

"Pearly marble frame, white velvet cushions, no words anywhere. Just as you asked, Mr. Seaform."

Adam Feller

It's Unsafe to Eat Resurrected Material

Windy days saw ups and downs while the grass never wavered.
Those days spiraled and liquefied, made fools out of eyes.

There's blood on my jeans. Now you know. Because it was I
who resurrected dinosaurs and they don't rise easy.

Even the magma kept moving, puked up warmth for the liq-
uid air, gave the sun a rest so it could visit friends abroad.

Let it also be known that it is unsafe to eat resurrected mate-
rial. So don't feed the poor with embodiments of past.

I dug a hole and buried just my legs. I resigned my upper half
to the spirals and liquefactions and squinted at dinosaurs. I
raised my arms and pulled the sun back to my dissolving face.

Adam Feller

Interesting I-Cation

Sideways, sideways, sideways...in tox with an interesting i-cation...i-cation that left the station a night too early for integration nation...but the day can consume what the in tox couldn't pay...jolly jesting...foraging for further photographic findings...I left the world with little on my mind.

Tea time laughs at my i-cation but leaves the in tox behind... why tea time??? Because the tea took a lesson from the in ox i-ca-ion...and the tea further corrupted the I experience by preaching nox ca-on...delete development I declare...I left the world with less than little on my mind.

Adam Feller

Born of Circus

For the Callipygian Circus Company of Tamworth, New Hampshire, fall and winter were slow seasons. The company tried to pack up their show and move about the north east with much difficulty. Their sideshows were second, even third, rate and their animals poorly trained. Local enthusiasts and habitual New Hampshire natives were the only return customers. The bigger shows like Westley, Baron, and Roth or Dunhill Productions had all the pull in this industry. These were people who had made a name for themselves and could proudly display their endowments right in the title. A man would see that name and know quality was to follow. They didn't have to rely on some archaic word that a curious person might find witty enough to be interested in.

One last out-of-state hurrah was dreamt up that brought the Callipygian crew to Brattleboro, Vermont. But they had no fancy train to gallivant into town with. Small, generic moving trucks were the poorest way to move equipment but were also the only mode of transportation they could afford. Consequently, the elephants always got left behind. Performers often volunteered to ride the elephants to their destination but mass traffic and elephants didn't mix. Once when they tried to get an elephant up to Maine it ended in a fifteen car pile up that left only the elephant fatally wounded. It proved harder to clean up an elephant than it did a car crash. This time, though, as it was a last time, management sent elephants across state borders only by early morning and it took a month and a half to get three elephants to the destination.

Poor planning left the company in aggravation, though, when they found out that Dunhill productions was also in Brattleboro that weekend. Dunhill had a mid fall extravaganza every year there. But Callipygian set up anyway and sent sideshow performers all over town to post flyers and preach the good word. Late advertising, yes, but that was all

they could do. They hoped that they might catch circus goers coming from the south eastern parts unaware because the Cal-lipygian set-up fell on the south eastern side of town. Maybe people could be duped into thinking that they had arrived at the correct place. Management decided to cease posting their own flyers and instead posted modified ones that had Dunhill productions pasted over their own name. They also ended development of the undertaking of putting up the crude 'Cal-lipygian Circus Company rear end sign.'

It had been the talk of the sideshow performers as to when they would get cut. Some thought they would make it but others sought job applications from Dunhill. They figured that management there had to be much less unstable and that they could at least get a job shoveling elephant shit. After some time they could prove themselves as well rounded performers. But on opening night, fears became reality. They had managed to draw a small crowd. Nothing extensive but it was something. A sword swallower, Horse Metalmouth, pegged the attendees as no better than circus folk themselves. He performed under the hopes that his audience would take him for scum. He didn't want the unworthy audience interested in attempting the job he did. A chest full of tattoos and an immortal throat and stomach made him who he was. Not everyone could handle this job and he took pride in that. He fancied himself a man of the old school. He fancied himself from a time when a sideshow did not seek to be taught but was simply born one. His era, he thought, could be the only one considered true sideshow brilliance. Many of his sideshow colleagues, Mussiton the fire breather, Partoose the tattooed lady, Sytootere the bearded lady, Gilly Gaupus the glass eater, all held steadfast to this principle. They found themselves depressed when their viewers looked as if they belonged in the circus too. For they would already be performing if they were truly born for it. And for this reason they also despised companies like Dunhill for teaching anyone with a passion for outcast-dom to be a sideshow.

Horse took his name from the tattoo he wore on his chest and his occupation. His love for traditional things was

displayed by the ‘pharaoh’s horses’ tattoo on his chest. And his sword swallowing was just always something he could do. He told his audiences that his mother, a tattooed lady, birthed him one day and the next he was nourished with sword metal rather than breast milk. For his show he wore black foot wraps and pants of reds, greens, oranges, and yellows sewn together by a former lover. He wore a white sash around his waist. Outlandish beaded necklaces adorned his neck creating a near seven inch collar of different colors, shapes, sizes, and textures. On his head he wore a gypsy’s bandana that was given to him by a gypsy queen that almost lured him from the profession he loved.

Cold metal was the finest way Horse could think to swallow swords. There was something about it that bolstered his ego. Swallowing cold metal brought more feeling to his insides. And when he felt more, his showmanship benefited. But that feeling stumbled when he saw the manager’s face mingled with the young circus wannabes and their dull parents in his audience. The children’s faces, so bright with shiny metallic dreams, were disheartening enough. That kind of brightness gave too much credit to the audience for simply having seen. It was more imitative of than appreciative of. But the managers face lacked appreciation completely. Horse foresaw his end with Callipygian Circus Company.

“As you know, Horse, our circus has hit tough times,” the manager said putting his arm over Horse’s shoulder after his show. “Dunhill has ruined our last try for the year and we have got not but a runoff of their lousy, ignorant show goers as our audience. People who couldn’t even find the right circus! Do you know what that says about us? We couldn’t even put up our own sign, Horse! Things have got to change and that’s very real.”

“I have seen that others have put in applications with Dunhill. Do you know this?” Horse asked.

“Know it? I encouraged it! I’d rather have Dunhill take over my workers than allow them to go back to whatever lives they left behind some twenty; thirty; even forty years before!”

“They might find a better circus than Dunhill, I suppose,” Horse replied. “They take anyone.”

“They just need work, Horse, don’t you see? Take me for example: I own this circus and here I am dressed as the ringleader. I’m not supposed to be wearing this stupid uniform! But I can’t get any self respecting ring leader to work for me. The future of circus entertainment lies in big name productions. We’re too local. Why, I have half a mind to desert this operation and work for Dunhill myself! But I can’t do that. With this company stands my fortune. Dwindling but mine and therefore I must see to it as best I can. Let’s take a walk shall we.”

“Yes sir.”

“Look around you, Horse. Your buddies are starting to pack up and I haven’t even said anything to them yet. We’ve got three bearded ladies and two of them have stopped shaping their hairy assets. Glass eaters fake mastication. Fire breathers have nearly set their tents ablaze. And on the inside, trapeze artists haven’t done a show without dropping someone into the nets in years. Circus performers aren’t supposed to use nets, Horse! And this audience is repulsive. Why at your set I saw a young boy, with cotton candy in one hand and a fake sword in the other hand, trying to shove both items into his mouth at the same time, bragging about how he could do better than you. That you were lazy. That type of interest is not helpful for business. We need you performers to transcend wonder and showcase divine freakishness!”

“What am I to do if my audience does not appreciate my showmanship?” Horse asked.

“What do you do? You give them what they want, that’s what you do,” the manager said. “Listen, Horse. You’re getting old. You come from a time that these youngsters can’t appreciate. Your self proclaimed natural passion does not intrigue them like these progressive sideshows grab them by the balls and make them pray to God that their mothers would let them join the circus. I’m sorry to say it, Horse, but you’re done here.”

“Well I’m not running straight to Dunhill, I’ll tell you

that much. I hope you've got pride enough to think well of me for it."

"You just don't get it, Horse. It doesn't matter what I think and you can't stay here. I've got a show to do but we'll talk about your last payment later. Money's short and you've gotta make some sacrifices. Tell some of your old fashioned friends to perk up would you."

The manager ran off and Horse motioned his arms to set an old gypsy curse upon the manager's name. Loyal service wouldn't be rewarded like this in the true days of circus. Callipygian Circus Company started out with the right idea, Horse agreed, but big name circuses ruined that. He remembered the first brush he had with the newer school of performing. A fellow sword swallower from Westley, Baron, and Roth had wandered into one of Horse's shows and called him out for being a boring showman. Called him out for having the same exact show his entire existence. Claimed that he was taught how to sword swallow by the best and Horse was a mere amateur. The intruder took one of Horse's swords and doused it with lighter fluid he had brought and lit it on fire. He swallowed it and did a back flip. In mid air he took the sword back out, it was still on fire. As the crowd walked off with the new swallower, Horse couldn't figure out for the life of him how that could ever work. He could say nothing because how could he possibly contend with that? It wasn't natural. It wasn't real. Horse found himself searching for the illusion rather than the reality. Callipygian couldn't get performers this good but it tried. It hired the worst ones that could only perform a little bit better than amateur.

Horse went back to his tent to pack up what he could before he had to get out. He found Sytootere waiting at his tent when he returned.

"Are you leaving?" Sytootere asked, stroking her beard.

"I'm afraid so. There's no place for an old man in the modern world I guess."

"But what does that mean for the rest of us? Will we be sent away as well?"

“The manager said to tell you all to ‘perk up.’ Today it’s me. Tomorrow maybe you. The next day maybe Gilly Gaupus. Our natural passion can’t hold up against these new technologies. When a man has to search for inspiration outside of himself he’s lost his way. Me, maybe I am old. But I’m still in love with the craft that chose me.”

“Oh Horse. Why won’t you stay?”

“I have to leave. I’m not wanted here. I figure I could head south. There’s still some traditional success to be had with a few companies down there.”

“But, But...we could be married, Horse! Yes, let’s be married! Bearded ladies are hard to come by these days. Why, I know for a fact that I’m the only naturally bearded lady here. They won’t let me go, I’m sure of it,” Sytootere said.

“They couldn’t split up a married couple could they?”

“But I’ve already been let go. Your offer is much appreciated I can at least tell you that. You should be proud to be one of the few real acts left in this place.”

“I am, Horse. Make sure to write me when you’re gone.

“I will, I will. Only do me one favor, Sytootere: never in your life go to Dunhill for work. Or any other big name for that matter. Their money isn’t worth the loss of self.”

“Never, Horse, Never. Don’t forget me.”

Horse remembered the first time that he had seen Sytootere. He couldn’t remember the year but it had to be at least twenty years prior. She came from an even smaller company, came in search of making a bigger name for herself. A fellow worker had misinformed her about the prestige the of Callipygian Circus Company, though. Distraught, she nearly shaved her beard. Horse coaxed her back to her senses and set her up as an addition to his own show.

The money was sparse and Horse knew it. He didn’t care for the money though. As long as he was still employed by a circus he would have food and a place to stay and a place to perform. But he had none of that now. And having gladly been patient with management in the past, he had not been paid in years. So after a lifetime’s worth of service, they were

sending him off into the world with a half day's notice. The manager called for Horse after the crowds had left. He had set up a small office in a tent that he also planned to sleep in. There was only an old cot that served as both bed and makeshift couch, and a small wooden table and chair. Horse followed a man he had never seen before to the tent. The man looked like he might belong in a circus but Horse questioned his purpose. He had that kind of supernatural, circus worn look about his face but wore a black suit that Horse examined as too regular for a circus man's taste. Horse thought he may be some sort of goon intended to expel him from the premises but he wasn't cold enough seeming for that. The walk with him was deemed genteel enough. The manager waited for Horse in his tent with a bottle of whiskey. The new man did not enter.

"Have a drink, Horse?" the manager asked.

"Yes please, sir."

"Aha! A good man will never turn down a drink of whiskey. It was whiskey dreams that urged my father to start this business you know."

"I did not."

"Why surely. He loved his whiskey. But even more, he loved his circus. I grew up learning how to handle these glorious three ring tents, how to shovel shit, and how to illuminate the role of ringmaster. He instilled upon me both his love and his tactic for business. For when this circus was to switch hands, I would be expected, upon penalty of embarrassment and loss of pride, to be a success. This is no small task, do you see?"

"I'm certain it is a job not fit for many men."

"But times change. And whether my father is dead or not, my circus must still uphold its excellence. You see, this is why sometimes I have to cut my losses and let someone like you go. I like you, Horse, but the kids aren't interested anymore. How can my circus make a profit with such lousy acts? It's terrible."

"I dunno, sir," Horse muttered, "I didn't realize I was so lousy."

“Yes, yes. Well, let’s get down to business,” the manager said. The money’s not here, Horse, it’s just not here. Now look, we could sit here and argue about lost wages all night. Or, we could come to some agreement. What do you think about all this?”

“Well, I didn’t mark down when the last time I got paid was, but it’s been a long time.”

“I see. Yes, it has been a while I suppose. The truth is, I can’t pay you...all of it. No way in hell I can. There’s not any record of it. I don’t even know how much I pay you,” the manager laughed.

“I don’t need much money. I’m going to head south and look for work there. I’m sure I’ll make it.”

“Excellent! I knew your traditional ways could be counted on for something. So here’s the deal. I can pay you, let’s say, two hundred dollars. How does that sound?”

“That works I suppose. But how will I get to Florida?”

“What now? Oh yes, your plans. Well I’m sure you’ve got enough know-how to get there. We’ll talk briefly in the morning and then you can leave,” the manager said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got other things to take care of.”

When Horse walked out of the tent, the new man stood posted outside the opening. Horse gave him a faint head nod but intended to keep walking without a word. But before he could get too far, the new man grabbed Horse’s shoulder and thrust a small lump of money in his hands.

“Take your money, old man,” the new man said.

“I suppose you’ll be telling me to leave now too,” Horse replied.

“Me? No. I was just told to give you your money.”

“Who are you then?” Horse asked.

“Why, I’m Dracansyro, the famed sword swallower,” the new man said. “I’ve been hired to bring some real side-show to this circus. Who are you?”

“Horse Metalmouth.”

“Ah! Hahaha! So you’re the man whose years of unpaid labors are being paid to me.” The new man calmed his

laugh and walked away.

So this was it. Horse was being driven away uncompensated and being replaced by a new-schooled, big name sword swallower. He never thought that the manager would stoop so low as to hire a man like this to try and boost profits. The money, Horse didn't care about the money. He would have worked for Callipygian until his death. The circus afforded him with everything he might need. But he would never propose that to the manager, especially not now. Horse felt he was in no position to be making demands to the manager. But after this there was no way he could take this money with him. He had, after all, some savings hidden away that would amount to at least double what the manager just gave him. He decided to take a walk to think about where he could abandon the dirty money.

Being a side show performer, Horse realized that he had not seen an actual show in many years. He had not seen the trapeze performers, the lion tamers, the monkeys, the jugglers and unicyclers, the men shot from cannons, or the exotic animals since the last time he had throat problems. And that was at least seven years ago. And the elephants. Horse loved the elephants. But being as he only got to see the outside, which amounted to only tents and the sideshows he saw everyday, maybe an occasional petting zoo or donkey ride, he had no exposure to the inner show performers. He wondered whether those performers would even know anything about him anymore. Or whether he would know them. Horse froze. The realization that circus performers from the same company might not know each other gave Horse a cancerous stomach sickness; a sickness so deep and rapidly manifesting that traditional ways were not enough to salvage it. He felt no better than the manager or the new man, no better than Dunhill or Westley, Baron, and Roth, no better than cheap entertainment that disregards its roots. He felt like he had betrayed everything he had ever felt passionate about. Horse knew he had to leave this place immediately.

The elephant's housing was not far from Horse's location and he wandered in in search of guidance. During shows,

elephants wore shiny costumes and ornate hats. One of the three elephants still bore his uniform and Horse directed his pleas to this one. He patted the elephant's tree like-legs and smoothed his hand over the rough trunk as he explained his dilemma. The three performers that had ridden the elephants to Brattleboro also were there to listen to Horse's story. They had nothing to offer him but gave sympathy nonetheless.

As the three performers settled down for sleep, so did the elephants. Except Horse's elephant, named Pauly, stood with the pride of his uniform. The two stood next to each other in their uniforms and Horse smiled at the elephant. The elephant picked up his legs and stomped back and forth like he was ready to perform. Or rather, like he was ready to move. Horse looked into that elephant's eye and saw his way out. This elephant, true to tradition and a circus man's pride, would lead him south. Horse tapped one of the sleeping men on the shoulder.

"Say, Ishmael, how close are you to this elephant?" Horse asked.

"Why he's right there next to me. Couldn't be more than a few feet."

"No, I mean how do you feel about him, um, emotionally?"

"Oh. He's my ride but nothing more."

"I've got two hundred dollars right here. I'll give it to you if you let me ride out of here with old Pauly here."

"Two hundred dollars? For an elephant? Say, hows about throwing in a sword too."

"Done," Horse agreed. "I'll be back with my personal effects and your sword."

Horse gave Ishmael the money and sword and Ishmael gave Horse a crash course in riding an elephant long distance. He left Ishmael with a letter to Sytootere explaining his getaway. Horse boarded his elephant and let the elephant guide his path. Although there were a few performers he would miss, Horse found himself with no mushy sentiment for leaving the Callipygian Circus Company. He had been there his whole life, performing straight out of the womb he claimed, but, of

recent, they had done him wrong like no real man of the circus deserves to be treated. He knew his age was getting on but he had confidence in the principles of certain companies in Florida he had encountered over the years. No promise of money or big name wannabe could ever take his pride for good. The money he had, he planned on feeding the elephant with. Horse figured he could put on small shows along the way only to be able feed himself. The circus would always be in him and that's all he knew for sure. Performers like he, Sytootere, and Gilly Gaupus, would always hold sway in someone's mind he thought. No real man of the circus could ever go wrong.

Adam Feller

Counting Frogs

I just wanna touch nice things...I feel like frogs counted backwards...I sat two long sat down...I ran through my own body ran right through...I absorbed none of the night...and I lost, oh I lost...and I gave up my sight because I could...and I ate no more because I could...but then I told 'em hell no...those are my ears let 'em right go!

Nice things are melting, sticking to my fingers...the frogs tear off their own legs, breakdown, and their parts are made into mustard...my sit down lost its sit down...I unzipped my skin and lent it to my shadow...I lose...and I stopped listening because my sight declared it so...and I lost a nose because I have lost a mouth...and I can no longer tell 'em to let those ears go.

There are too many frogs for lonely hands.

Elizabeth Donroe

Prisoner

Honorable Mention; Folio Fiction Contest

Vincent doesn't care that I have to drive over an hour to see him. "What else would you be doing?" he says through the pay phone receiver. I am not allowed to leave my house between the hours of twelve and three pm each day; those are the hours that he might call. This time frame wreaks havoc on my school and work schedule, not to mention that it causes complete panic on my body if I am stuck in traffic leaving school at 11:10 and nowhere near home. I get so sick over the frustration and my nerves are so high that I vomit as soon as I walk into the front door. I cannot miss his calls. There is no telling what time he is going to call, it can be right at twelve on the dot, or it could be closer to three, but everyday it is different. He is unpredictable and he likes to keep me on my toes, or nervous, or maybe he just likes knowing that I am sitting at home, waiting for him. I know when it comes down to it, Vincent has no control over what time he can pick up the pay phone to call me, he is locked up for twenty-three hours out of the day, but I know that he could finagle his way into getting an earlier phone time. He always seems to get his way. People like to give him whatever he wants and people like to make him happy. So I wait around for up to three hours everyday for his calls, which will only last for fifteen minutes. It reminds me of what sex was like with him, short and sweet, somehow fit in between the street life and daily fix. That's when the operator interrupts, Two minutes remaining. So the phone calls last fifteen minutes, and at the end of the month I get a bill for a hundred and fifty dollars. Half of the time that we are on the phone he complains about being locked up, the other half of the time he speaks in his codes to me, asking me to get him this or give him that. Once a hustler always a hustler. Vincent insists he will pay me back for this phone bill once his bid is up. I don't believe him.

My trust for him has faded. A lot of that has to do

with the reasons to why he is in jail. I always knew my boyfriend was a drug dealer, and I accepted it, actually, I loved it. I also accepted the unregistered and hot gun charges, they were for our safety. It wasn't until his trial that I found out that he was a pimp. I just drive them around was his excuse. I should have known. I mean, really what gave it away? Random girls calling him in the middle of the night would wake me up. I could hear them sobbing into the phone. At the time I was too afraid of losing him to ever confront him about it. Generally, drug dealers get a three to five year sentence and depending on the circumstances of their arrest and their prior charges. They then will serve about half of their sentence. Vincent had been locked up before and when the police broke in to his self made drug factory and saw the business he was running it was obvious he was guilty. Caught red handed. Plus the pimping didn't help, or that scandal of selling weed to an eleven year old girl in a school zone. He was sentenced to ten years and is expected to serve five.

Visiting Vincent isn't as romantic as I had once imagined it to be. On the even numbered days of the month I am allowed to visit Vincent. By allowed, I mean that I am able to drive over an hour to a prison in the northern part of the state to see him. I am alone in my car because at this point of my life no one really supports my addiction to him. Even my best friend Katie ignores my phone calls.

The whole experience of visiting someone in a jail is disgusting. Correctional officers (or C.O.s as jail lingo goes) rummage through my purse, frisk me, comb through my hair and make me remove all of my body jewelry before walking through the metal detector. All doors lock behind you and you are not allowed to enter the visiting room with your purse. So while I visit my boyfriend C.O.s fiddle through my Louis Vuitton bag, usually only finding tampons and cigarettes. Nothing is safe. Oddly enough, C.O.s don't check your mouth. I didn't believe Vincent when he had first told me that they never check your mouth.

"I used to bring my dad drugs when he was at Osborn I was ten or eleven."

How sad.

It wasn't until my third time visiting that I felt completely comfortable to smuggle drugs into the prison for my boyfriend.

It is only the even numbered days of the month due to over population in the prison system. Last names indicate when I can visit my boyfriend. Odd number days would have worked better for me but I have come to learn that you can't have everything that you want. Vincent is a maximum security inmate, and his privileges are scarce. He is only allowed three visits during the week and there have been several occasions when I have driven that long drive just to find out that his mother, and brothers have already visited him that week. Those drives home are always the longest and saddest.

Our visits consist of me sitting at a long table in which my hands are never to leave that table. I pretend that there is Krazy Glue attached to my hands so that I will not be tempted to raise my hands to embrace my boyfriend. Once I made the honest mistake of scratching my nose and I got yelled at, "hey Barbie, are you dumb? Hands on the table at all times or your visit ends early."

Towards the end of the visit Vincent gives me that look; he is trying to ask me if I have brought him anything, I never understand why he gives me this look, he knows that of course I have a hundred dollars for him waiting for him in an envelop, held with a firm grip from our favorite C.O Duane. "Yes baby, I remembered your money." He smiles. I like making him happy. I wonder if he would still smile if I didn't bring him money. I wonder if he would even allow me to visit if I didn't bring the money.

A loud buzzer indicates when our visit has ended. I am allowed to give my boyfriend a quick kiss goodbye. This is all I need to pass the small ten bag of white powder from my mouth to his. I can tell that he swallows it. He will later throw it up, or, even better, sift through his own shit to find it. I know that this is wrong, but Vincent can make a lot of money and he is just trying to survive. He has promised me that I will never be in trouble and I believe him. As I exit I am

again frisked, this time by a butch woman named Tamara. It is invasive and I begin to feel as if I am a convict myself. These are the things that I have to do in order to see my boyfriend. So after six years of dating, I am able to see my boyfriend for an hour a week (as long as no one else has beaten me to it) and I get to talk to him on the phone for fifteen minutes out of the day. I am a lucky girl. When I finally get home from my visits I make my phone calls. I close my bedroom door behind me, if my roommate were to hear these conversations she would probably move out. My fingers shake as I dial the numbers.

All of Vincent's friends are drug dealers, and they always want to help him out, I think they only want to do this because Vincent helped them get rich when they were all younger, and now with Vincent off the streets business is better for them. I call his best friend Travis. It rings.

"What up, Janelle?"

"I need a gram."

"Coke?"

"Dust."

"It's going to cost you."

"It always does." I wonder how Vincent feels knowing that all of his friends pass me around in order to get his drug money. He probably gets off from it.

This was not always my life.

--

I was never the type of girl that dated "good guys." Athletes never did it for me, they just were too cocky, and the skater boys were few and far between in my neighborhood and high school. I grew up in the city and city boys were all I ever knew. Skinny poor boys that got rich from the gangster life. Shaved heads and baggy jeans, guys who spent every last penny they had on their wardrobe, Newport cigarettes and their girls. Oh how easily I was bought.

I was a virgin when I met Vincent. I'm sure he knew this too. I was 13 and he was 17. I remember it like it was yesterday. I walked to the corner store with my best friend Katie. We had just gotten off of the city bus after our third

day of high school. "Let's get some gum and go over to my house," Katie had suggested. Carrying our heavy book bags we walked over to the store. It was beautiful outside, summer still holding on to the day, (but it was obvious that) autumn was approaching. Katie stepped on every single dried leaf that decorated the cracked sidewalk.

"I already have so much homework to do for Monday," I said.

"You care too much about grades... hey, isn't that your brother at the store?" Katie asked. It was my brother. I had wondered why he wasn't on the city bus on our way home from school, he was supposed to "supervise" me while my mother was at work.

"Hey Justin!" I yelled. He pretended not to hear me. "Why weren't you on the city busy? Mommy's gonna be pissed if she finds out you skipped class." I yelled on top of my lungs even though we were getting closer to him. He still ignored me. When we finally reached the corner, I saw that Justin was not alone. He was hanging out with all the older boys. There were about five of them, and I only recognized them by reputation. They were the boys that my mom always complained about because they drove their cars too fast and blasted their music too loudly.

"Yea Justin, mom's gonna be pissed." One of the boys said to my brother, mocking me. Everyone else laughed.

I laughed too because I figured that they were just making fun of Justin, not me. All the boys looked older than my sixteen year old brother. They had an edge to them, some roughness, and sex appeal. Justin just didn't seem to fit in.

"Janelle, go home," my brother demanded.

"We're going to the store Justin! Mind your own business," Katie butted in trying so hard to defend me and to sound cool.

"Your sisters kinda cute," the meanest looking boy said to Justin. I blushed.

"Don't touch my sister Vincent." My brother snapped back.

Oh why did he need to defend me? I had only known

the boy by name and reputation, Vincent Benson. Vincent was so cool. He wore baggy jeans and Timberlands. It seemed as if the Newport cigarette was glued to his lips. There had always been a flock of girls gawking at him giggling and acting stupid. Whenever he would drive around the neighborhood I would always see a different girl sitting in his passenger seat; spaced out girls with blond or light brown hair that blew in the wind. Girls that flicked their lip-stick stained cigarettes out the windows towards my direction, as I was walking down the street. Sometimes I felt as if the burning cigarettes were purposely tossed in my direction but reality sunk in and I realized that these girls didn't even notice me.

Even though I was envious of these girls I was still obsessed with them. Every week the new girl in the passenger seat was prettier than the girl from the previous week. They had the right clothes, the right hair the right skin... the right look. Vincent would never be interested in a girl like me. I was skinny, not full developed, black hair with dark eyes. I wasn't ugly to say the least; I just didn't have the edge that these girls had. I was more book worm while they were more beauty queens.

More recently I had seen him with a girl whom I assumed was his girlfriend. Her name was Tatiana and she was so beautiful. Long, curly brown hair, tan skin and red lips, she was short and thick but in all the right places. Compared to Tatiana all the other girls looked like clowns. Tatiana wasn't like the other girls that Vincent always seemed to drive around. Tatiana smiled when she would walk down the hallways of our school, for no reason at all, she just seemed happy all the time. She made you feel welcome without needing to try, not that I ever actually spoke with her. She was a few years older than me but everyone knew who she was. Tatiana was a member of the National Honor Society and the president of the Latin Club she was also in all the school plays, this somehow made her seem more relatable than the other older girls. She was the girl that could make theatre cool, no one else could do that.

I was surprised at first when Katie told me she saw

Vincent driving around Tatiana Santiago. Maybe she needed a ride home from school? I thought. Although, that didn't make much sense since Vincent didn't go to school. Since I generally liked Tatiana I was happy for her. Vincent was popular in his own way, and cool too. Cool people belong together, that is just the way of the world. I'm sure he had a few other girls on the side too; he seemed like that kind of guy.

We walked into the store. It was owned by an Arab man but for some reason my parents always insisted they were Indians. I picked out Big Red gum while Katie got Juicy Fruit. We paid and walked out. I said good bye to the boys snapping on my gum I gave them my best Marilyn Monroe wave. We walked back to Katie's house.

When we got back to Katie's house we sat on her front porch and started our homework and gossiped about how cute the boys were. Katie seemed to be just as interested in Vincent as I was. We talked about him for what seemed like hours, but whenever Katie changed the subject I would manage to somehow bring the conversation back to Vincent and the boys. It was then that the five boys came running up to Katie's front porch. They were out of breath and looked terrified. One was Justin, another was Vincent, and three were the ones that we had seen with them from the store.

"Janelle, let us in fucking the house!" Justin had screamed at us.

"Why should I?" Katie asked, probably pissed that Justin hadn't addressed Katie, being that it was her house.

"Let us in the fucking house!" Justin screamed again. He was nervous, and it scared us, so Katie gave in and unlocked the door to let the boys in.

The boy's eyes were glossy and they kept on peering behind the curtains to look out the windows. Wondering if anyone had chased them there, Justin finally had admitted to me what had happened.

"We robbed that Indian, we got \$230. He called the police."

"Mom's gonna be pissed!" I said, happy that I had some dirt on my brother who was once an "angel".

“Be cool Janelle,” the raspy voice came from behind me and scared me. “Don’t be tattling on your brother. Be grown.” Vincent didn’t need to say more. I would obey him.

After a couple of hours of watching tv, smoking cigarettes on Katie’s back porch, and eating enough chips to qualify for dinner the boys felt it was safe for them to leave. Justin told me to stay at Katie’s, and if I told Mommy he was going to kill me in my sleep. I believed him; after all he was a criminal now.

“Why would he rob that man?” I said, not really to anyone.

“Maybe he was tired of not being cool.” Katie whispered.

“Maybe I am too then.”

“Me too.”

I think that was the beginning of the end for me and her. Vincent started talking to me more the next year, more than just the basic conversations we had when I saw him around the neighborhood with my brother. That year I was fourteen and started smoking trees with my neighborhood friends. We would save up all of our babysitting money and page Vincent. He would show up and rip us off with dirt weed. We had no idea though, and it was just an easy dollar for him at the time. It wasn’t until a few weeks later that he began calling me, and giving me trees for free. I didn’t even really like smoking, I just liked looking cool.

“You would look a lot better if you stopped wearing those damn glasses. What are you a librarian?” That was the first thing Vincent ever said to me when we were hanging out in my bedroom. He came over to roll a blunt for me and to use my house phone to make some calls. My mom was out, but I doubt she would have cared either way. “Shut up!” I sounded so stupid. Vincent walked around my bedroom, analyzing my stuffed animal collection, checking out my CDs. Most of them were rap CDs and he seemed impressed. I didn’t tell him that they were my brother’s CDs and I had just recently started listening to rap music. Vincent opened up the Wu Tang Clan CD case and opened up my CD player, revealing my Mariah

Carey CD that I was listening to right before he had come over. I wish I had remembered to change the CD. He did not seem to take much notice and just turned up my stereo.

“You know I broke up with that bitch Tatiana,” he said this without looking at me, still scanning my bedroom.

“Oh, I thought she was pretty.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. The whole situation was awkward for me.

“Yea, she was pretty, but she was dumb and her parents didn’t want her dating a white guy, or a drug dealer.” He stopped talking for a moment to look at me. He reached his hands over my face and removed my glasses. “You know, I think you could be prettier than Tatiana.” That was all he needed to say. I was sold, and so easily. It was from that point on I was Vincent’s girl.

Money became important. Designer clothes, hand bags, four hundred dollar shoes. Everything was free for me, Vincent paid for it all. Finally my mom and I would have something in common, being financially supported by a man. The need for self independence was never force fed to me as a child. Vincent was now a full fledged drug dealer so he could afford to keep me this way. No more of that weed and mushroom crap, he was now pushing kilos of cocaine and bringing dust back to New Haven as if it was still the 90’s (his words, not mine). All his cars were dealer cars; he thought he was above the law and too smart to get caught, and so did I. I was that girl that walked around with my head held high. I had new friends and a new look . Katie had still remained a true friend to me, but she always nagged about how one of these days my luck would run out.

“He has really created something else with you, making an average girl into everyone’s envy.” She would say. She was envious, I knew she was, and that made me happy. I never wanted to go back to average. I loved that people noticed me now and Vincent loved it too. Girls would always whisper, but I knew it was just because they were jealous. Rumors started, and ended and started again. Vincent’s got girls all around town and Janelle’s just a dumb slut was usually the high school slander.

He probably did have other girls. I wouldn't put it past him. There were several occasions when he would tell me that he "made me" and that I was "nothing but nice clothes and expensive things." He made it known how easily I could be replaced. I thought of Tatiana, how I had admired her when I was younger. No one even knew who she was anymore. I didn't want to be her anymore, she was nothing without Vincent. I liked that people knew who I was, and feared me. It was worth putting up with his bullshit, just for the recognition that I belonged to him. Sometimes I wonder who I would have been had I never met Vincent.

--

It's a Tuesday. I am walking into the prison to visit Vincent. The building is old, made of stone and bricks. There is a huge fence with barbed wire on the top of it. There is a sign that reads "Keep Away From the Fence at All Times" I always think that it is funny that the sign says this, being that you need to touch the fence in order to enter the visiting room. It is sunny outside and even though it is only September it is brisk, these are my favorite kind of days. I am nervous today for some reason. I'm afraid that Vincent has something to tell me, maybe he doesn't want to be with me anymore. Maybe he wants to marry me. I make myself sick just thinking about it.

The little bag of dust remains underneath my tongue. You may think that it is difficult to hold a dime bag of angel dust underneath your tongue and continue to have conversations with people. It is difficult; the first year that Vincent has been locked up I had a difficult time even swallowing my own saliva without choking on the bag. The nerves really got to me too. They never look underneath your tongue. They don't even make you open your mouth so just act cool. I remembered how Vincent had told me this and felt reassured.

Smuggling drugs into a prison is entirely different than hiding your gum from your teacher in grade school. It takes the dangers of gum chewing to a whole new level.

I walk into the prison. A big loud door locks behind me. There is another door. Before I can enter the next door I

have to sign my name in a journal. It smells here and the air is damp. I hate it here.

Vincent still has two years before he is up for parole. I wonder how much longer I can last living this life. Probably as long as he makes me live this way. I walk up to the window. “Good morning Ms. Rodriguez.” All the C.Os know my name by now. They make a point to remind me that I am such a loyal girlfriend driving up here every week to see my man. “May I please have your driver’s license and bag?” I hand over my bag and slide my driver’s license through the small opening of the Plexiglas window. He stares at my license to verify that it is me. At this point these tasks are just repetition because everyone knows that it is me.

“Thank you Mrs. Rodriguez.” He fills out some paper work and then hands me back my bag. He also hands me a key to a locker so I can lock up my bag, since I can’t take anything in with me when I visit Vincent. He will hold my drivers license hostage until I am ready to leave.

I walk to the next door, a guarded officer presses the button to open the locked door, it opens automatically and I walk into another small room with two female officers whom I have never seen before. New officers always make me nervous, I can’t help but fear that they are going to find me out. “Ma’am we need to search you before you enter the visiting facility, do we have your permission to do so?”

The only answer you can give in this situation is yes.

“Yes, you have my permission.”

They comb through my hair, frisk through my tight jeans, starting at my ass and ending at my ankles.

“Remove your shoes ma’am.”

I take off my new Christian Louboutin boots and hope that they don’t get ruined. The officers grow bored with me, and careless with their job. They didn’t even go through my shirt to see if I was smuggling drugs in my bra. They are just making this felony easier and easier for me.

“Ma’am you are now about to enter a visiting facility. You are not to speak to any other inmates beside the one inmate that you are visiting. You are allowed to exchange a

brief kiss and embrace during your visit. You are to remain seated at all times. Your hands are never to leave the table during the entirety of your visit. Failure to comply with the rules will result in the end of your visit and delays on future visits, if not termination of all visits. Do you understand these rules ma'am?"

"Yes, I understand." After two years I could give this speech myself.

"Okay, you may enter." The door opens in front of me and locks behind me. I walk down the long hall of tables. The tables are like the ones in the elementary school cafeteria, long and rectangular shaped with little blue, circular disks that you have to sit on (the ones that always leave your butt sore). I am escorted by Duane, my favorite C.O.

"Is it that time already Janelle?"

"Its always that time Duane. You should know this by now."

I can tell that something is bothering him; maybe it's his personal life, or his job. I would hate to have this job.

"The month is surely flying by. Before you know it your man will be home and you can start your life without all the bullshit." What he said was simple, but I knew there was more to it.

"Yea, without all this jail bullshit."

"And hopefully without all the other bullshit that Vincent seems to create." Duane had always been a favorite officer of mine but I didn't think that he knew me and Vincent's relationship on a personal level. We start to walk again further down the room, passing inmates visiting their mothers, girlfriends and children. I recognize the inmates and woman from my previous visits. There is more than one visitor to an inmate, this was something that I had never seen before.

"Did they change the rules about visits?" I ask Duane.

"What rules Janelle?" He looks just as confused as I am.

"More than one visitor at a time?" I ask

"There was never any rules about that, as long as you're on the approved list, you're in," he answers. Duane

answers me sadly, his eyes avoid meeting mine, it is as if he knows something that I do not know.

As I get closer to the table where Vincent and I always meet at I realize what is going on. I am just a pawn in his game. He is already sitting at the table and he looks nice, as nice as one can look in a prison. He has gotten a hair cut and shaved his face. His beige jump suit looks more like a city worker's uniform instead of a way to identify a con, and that's what he is, a con. He is sitting at the table, but he is not waiting for me. It is the second Tuesday of the month and there is another girl sitting with my boyfriend. How easily he has fooled us all.

"What the fuck is this Duane?" I am still not close enough for Vincent to notice me, probably because he is too busy gazing into the new girl's eyes, trying to con her into doing something for him. It's always about him. What can Vincent get out of you? "Janelle, I cannot say anything. If you make a scene I will have to escort you out." I know the rules all too well. I want to scream. I want to hit Vincent so hard across the face. I want to rip every single hair out of that girl's pretty little head. I know I can't do this. I do not want to ruin my chances of being able to visit again. It could just be a friend, a friend I don't know. There I go again, trying to cover up for him. I walk over to Vincent and stand right behind the girl. She looks just like me, only more naïve.

"Hi," that was the best thing I could think of to say.

"Janelle, what are you doing here?" He looks caught, probably how he looked when the police broke through his front door and found the factory he was running.

"It's Tuesday, babe."

"Who is this?" The girl asks Vincent. Who am I? Is she kidding? Who is she? Why is she sitting with my boyfriend?

"No one," Vincent tells her, "shut up, just stop talking." At least he's verbally abusive to her as well.

"Why weren't you here last week Janelle? I waited for you for the entire hour, you never showed up." He's trying to make me feel badly for him, it's working.

"I thought your mom and brothers were the only other

people on your list.” As much as I want to hear his response, I know all too well that it is just going to be more lies. Duane and the other guards have walked away from us. They obviously know what is going on, but have opted to give me the privacy that I deserve. The jail system is crazy, they are always breaking rules just based on what they think is right and wrong. Vincent doesn’t say anything, for once in his life he has nothing to say. He stares at me with those green eyes that once burned my soul, now as he looks at me I just feel stupidity and emptiness.

“I’m done Vincent.” I can feel the tears swelling up in my eyes, but the last thing I want him to do is to see me cry. Not like this. I’ve cried too many times over this boy. The way he treated me, the nights I stayed up waiting for him to come home, and he would never show. I always knew there were other girls, but I figured if I didn’t have to see it, I didn’t have to believe it. I always thought he was mine, and now I realize how wrong I was.

“Do what you gotta do Janelle. Just leave what you came here for.” Of course he would say that. Knowing that there are no guards around me, I spit out that slimy bag of dust. I spit it right at him. It falls on the table and he quickly grabs it and puts it in his shoe.

I want to walk away and rat him out. But I don’t. The girl still sits there quiet, and I hate her for it. I hate her just as much as I hate myself.

She can become Janelle; I want to go back to the girl that rushed home to do homework and gossiped with Katie on the front porch for hours about nothing important.

“Goodbye Vincent.” He doesn’t say anything. As I walk away I hear the bitch complain to him who was that? She will probably complain, I thought I was your girl Vincent! How foolish she is to think that she would be able to tame that beast.

Once I reach my apartment, I realize the mistake I have made. I sit at home and wait for him to call. Remembering it is already after three o’clock, I allow myself to try to relax for a little while. He will call tomorrow, probably at

twelve, or the first chance he can get. He will call, and I will wait for him, everything will go back to how it was before
t



Brian Rowe

The Dinner Party

Second Place; Folio Poetry Contest

Sit down next to the French criminals
unfolding their napkins, the men admiring
their Boris Karloff lips in the bellies of spoons,
the women filing their nails. Outside, the choir
of cynics- recent graduates of Harvard, Yale, and
rehab clinics- hold hands beneath the window and
sing “Auld Lang Syne.”

A handful of the guests hum along, their animal throats
jealous of those on the street dressed in Busby Berkeley coats.
The guests stop once the dinner bell shakes its hips against
its tin dress. You propose a toast, thanking the chef for
the wonderful meal prepared for this occasion.
You extend your gratitude to the fellow guests for making it
on
short notice, and close the speech with grace. Glasses clink.

With forks and knives in gripped in a childish manner
in which two strangers might dance together,
the hands that have swung right hooks at the police,
slapped their children deaf, hotwired rusted Hondas,
carefully use the two to swiftly cut across steaks.
The fork pins down the meat. The knife edges along
carefully, silently, amongst conversation about
the old days, when their lives had music.

Brian Rowe

Acts

My house lost electricity
so I can't describe accurately
the thinning of my father's arms,
or the barefoot discovery of urine soaked bathmats,
or his scratched throat curses,
or his slow succumbing to a diet of milkshakes,
strawberry on the good days
or the long, shaking paths of his hands
searching for pills, the remote control, a bottle of water
or his eyes drooping in early afternoons
languidly watching muted television
or lifting at three a.m., his weight off the floor
and if I could properly word the way his shoulder blades
feel in my hands,
the skin wraps bones like frail packaging,
I would remember the act of loss and losing.

Bart Bolander

Good Boys Don't Make Noise

I'm in bed, behaving.
TV's small screen
projects neon blues
against white walls.
The sound's mute. She's
in bed beside me, wearing
a bra like a warning.
Listening to her breathe,
counting the ribs I see
sticking out her side. Six.
Skeletal but sexy. I sigh,
silently remove the red
sweater she stole for me
from the Salvation Army
and try to fall asleep,
telling myself, "I'm Satisfied."

Bart Bolander

Uniform

Bedroom mirrors reflect the same faces
inside unorganized drawers we got
unread rejection letters, shoelaces
too weak to hang ourselves. I inhale pot
smoke and stoned I imagine me alone
all by myself, way better off, good-bye!
I close my eyes and kill off all you clones,
but daydreams aren't real. I realize I'm high . . .
I want us all to wear uniforms.
If we are all somebody, we're nobodies,
unvarying victims. We'll walk off cliffs,
single-file suicides screaming,
"Please do not make us different. Make us dead."
On impact, we'll all wear the same color: red.

Bart Bolander

Inside and Out

Dear,

This is the first sentence of the seventh letter I've written to you since everything's been different. I wonder if you will read past this point. If you even read. I wonder when (if) you will find the time to write me back. Find time. I know your handwriting is like that of an indifferent doctor scribbling prescriptions and that your vocabulary is mostly monosyllabic but I am certain your voice would shine through to me if only you gave this a chance. Me. A chance? Please.

You used to call yourself a risk taker but if you ask me you're being a real pussy at this point, a bitch or a faggot. The only risk you ever took was me. Nothing ever changes. Not even my love for you, despite your being a pussy-a bitch-a faggot. No fun. A bad friend. Like a father. Fake. I suppose I am in love with what no one wants to be, or would be if he had the option. But see, love truly mirrors life in that way. No options and opinions never matter. Keep your mouth shut. Close your eyes and hold on tight while everything you wanted promises to carry you away to the heavens only to instead pull you down to Hell.

How is everyone at home? All of them. Who you left. Me. Do you remember when we slept underneath your bed that one night last August because of how cold the floorboards felt, and how badly our backs hurt the next morning? How badly our mouths hurt? I do not miss your room but I do miss the way our mouths would hurt. Swollen lips and dry tongues but you insisted on kissing me. "Keep kissing me." You begged me to stay underneath the bed all day, despite our backs. Our breath. You never told me you loved me, but back then I felt as if I did not need to hear the words. I always used to tell myself not to worry. About you. I do not miss it underneath your bed but I do miss the way your back felt when I would trace your muscles with my fingertips, writing my name in invisible ink while I imagined myself underneath

your skin. A cell inside of you. Your blood.

I remember the way your blood tastes. The way I had to pressure you into letting me try some at first. The face you made before, during, and after the incisions on your pretty wrists. Warm red liquid dotting my eager tongue. Wanting more.

I know you do not like it when I talk to you like this but until I become certain you're reading these letters I refuse to censor myself while I write them. Dear. You know I do not like it when you try and tell me what to do. Dear. So don't.

Write me? Will you? Why not, why wouldn't you? I worry ever so much, wonder if you are able to survive alone without me. Some days I hope you cannot. Do not.

Write me. I worry every so much.
You're so mean to,

Me

x/x/x

Dear,

This is the only sentence of the eighth letter I've written to you since everything's been different and all the blank white space on this page (don't draw over it) symbolizes the hole inside my heart that's been widening since everything's been different, and how silent my life is becoming.

You're different,

Now

x/x/x

Dear,

This is the ninth letter I've written to you. Nothing ever changes. I hope you look the same, just as good and that you take pleasure in knowing that I look the same, too. Nothing ever changes. Diamonds are forever so I've considered digging up the corpse of your last lover and taking for myself what she can no longer use or appreciate. I hope the ring sparkles just the same, except brighter once it's wrapped around flesh

that may too be dead but that still pumps blood. Inside me.

All over me. Cold soil I'm engulfed suffocating in the grave you have probably imagined digging for me but beware my Beloved, love is energy, and energy does not die. It moves.

Dig me out. I imagine you inside of me again, when we become the beast with two backs and the way your weight felt upon me and how hard you would pump your hips. It still moves. The worm slithering through the soil. Dig. Me. Out. Dear.

I spend most of my time thinking about what I'd like to write to you so that I may re-sculpt your perception of me. To re-make me. For you. But this time is wasted because nothing can be planned, especially something that matters.

EVOL.

My mind often goes back to the last time we saw each other, spoke and do you remember the carnival lights flashing, the neons blending in with the bright yellows? We were both high off the coke you bought from that child, uncomfortable in each other's sweat but the woman selling tickets in her lonely little booth gave us extra and told us how beautiful youth was to watch before it withered. You called her a crazy old bitch, but I loved the way it made me feel for a stranger to find us both. Beautiful like that. Before everything became different.

Face it. You've become different. You're face. Indifferent. Awful.

Did you find some body new to live inside the spaces I was supposed to occupy? How many times have you fucked each other? How much are you charging for rent? Do you two hold hands on the train in the morning and wrap your tentacles around each other underneath the streetlights at night? How does it taste? Tell me. The way a city looks in another country. I want to know how you like it.

I remember how cold it was kissing you after you would take a drink of water. How clean and I've only been drinking blood lately and eating bread. Losing weight. I always wonder whether or not you are in love with me. I want the summer to be over. I can never keep anything inside my

stomach when it's warm out. I can never fall asleep. I never want to wake up. Write me back. I am worried.

I've got,
No body

x/x/x

Dear,

#10) Now you've got to guess. What I did. Something. Saw someone. I'm dying to tell some body. Else. Now guess. I bet you could never so I'll stop being cruel and tell you. If... You must promise not to think of me differently after I admit this (if you think of me at all). Opinions don't matter unless they are the ones someone else has about you. The ones you have about me. Those hit. Hard for me to write this letter my hands shake, palms sweat and the heat from the lamp I write under feels like it might melt me. Maybe I should eat, you always said so. "Eat." Maybe I should turn the light off you always told me so. "Turn it off." In the darkness I feel closer to you. Dear. Not as far away. On top of my desk is a picture of us at Julian's wedding. We're both dressed beautifully but there is no love in either of our eyes. Only red.

EVOL.

I always get so off topic. You do that. Get me off.

I had every intention of not going. Why go? I didn't have the money and nobody was going that mattered. You aren't around so I like to be alone mostly. So why would I? "Go!" my sister said she was begging me to but "Why?" I wondered out loud. "Because I never see you!" and it's true we have lost touch. There should be a sign. Everyone I care about: Don't come any closer. "I see you," I said. "Sometimes." "I miss you," she told me and when she said that I remembered what it felt like when you would tell me that you loved me. "I'm not one to lurk late." My sister told me that the concert's real soon. "Come." I told my sister to "Leave me the fuck alone." She listened. She always does. Love me.

At this point (are you still reading? Caught you...) it was nearly nine o'clock and I only had enough energy to reor-

ganize the canned vegetables in my pantry which was a task still looming, terrible tin cylinders spread all across the kitchen counter. Count. I dropped the cigarette I had been smoking (my seventeenth of the evening) down the sink and then began to think about how peoples' moods never match. That we're all the same. Feel the same. But never feel the same at the exact same time. Except maybe. Sometimes. When in love. That's all love is, I think. Rare moments when moods match and then all the rest. Restlessness. I wonder if it's worth it. I already know you. Don't.

The pyramid I build with the cans was impressive, I have quite a collection, but knocking them over was much more of a thrill. I picked up the ones that rolled off the counter, rebuild the pyramid and then told every individual that it cannot control me, that nothing can. No. Body felt faint but I'm not that lucky (I'll never be that light) and then I counted. I have 111 cans of vegetables. My sister always brings me some whenever she visits. She loves... Me I hate her. Because, baby.

I missed her. A rare moment when moods match and I remember wishing I had more cigarettes but the one down the drain was my very last. Nothing ever lasts. Dear. Why don't you love me? Down the drain. Don't go.

She would come and pick me up, my sister said after I called her back and I barely had enough time to finish changing my clothes before she was already outside my apartment, beeping her horn. Her car smelled like cinnamon gum and I asked her for a cigarette but she quit smoking, apparently, so I buckled my seatbelt and then she turned off the radio as she sped away from the sidewalk and down the street. We sat there in silence and I didn't mind it but then she became curious so I became uncomfortable. She wanted to know how much I weighed, exactly how much and "Don't you dare lie to me," so I added 151lbs. to my lowest score which still didn't seem to satisfy her (nor I) but when I told my sister "shut the fuck up," she did. She dropped it. Dropped me off on the sidewalk outside the theatre and as I waited for her to find place to park I walked over to a corner store to buy a pack of

cigarettes but it was closed. I wanted to cry. Kick in the door. Kill me.

When we got inside we handed our tickets to an usher in a red vest standing behind a podium who looked like Andy Warhol if Andy Warhol weren't famous. If Andy Warhol were overweight. Philip Seymore Hoffman. He solemnly led us into the theatre and showed us our seats. We sat. Down on stage the conductor was feverishly waving out orders at the orchestra, every single instrument all at once, and so the sounds, Dear. The sounds made me forget about the silence and as I listened to the musicians perform I closed my eyes and could not help myself from smiling. What I really loved were the strings, Dear. The strings because at one point the music became suddenly slower, sadder, and my sister took hold of my hand and squeezed as if she needed some kind of support and it was another mutual-mood moment. Magical. I remember now what a wonderful date is. I felt like dancing.

The orchestra stood up in sections to bow as the audience applauded and then the lights crept on like a slow drunk so my sister and I rushed past the other concertgoers and out of the theatre and onto the sidewalk. It was warm outside. The sky's much prettier black than blue. Do you think so? Dear I wanted you with me, your hand in mine your soul and your mind. Strangers pouring out the theatre doors and I became sad all of a sudden, like the strings and so when my sister surprised me by offering to buy me a drink I accepted knowing that if I ever drank enough then you could be a no body again, and I wouldn't need to thin about you for a while. Because, baby. I need a break.

No body at the bar really so we got our drinks right away, smudged glasses of red wine and I remember thinking about how the rock music blaring from stereo speakers couldn't compare. And now nothing compare 2 U. I wanted to listen to that song all of a sudden. To burn up pictures of you and when my sister asked me if you and I were still seeing each other I told her the truth. That we do. I see you when I sleep. You can hear me screaming. She wanted to know how you were so I told her a lie. "Fine." But how could you

be fine? I promise myself you are not. I finished my wine and then ordered another. My sister said "Slow down," but you know how I am, Honey. I told her to "Shut the fuck up." She paid for her glass and then told me she wanted to leave. "Now." Well I wanted to stay. I said so. "I'm staying." My sister sighed and then asked me if I had enough money for a cab ride home and I said "I'm pretty sure I do," but she gave me \$50 anyway. And then she left me.

Alone at the bar now. Aren't I such a sad, sad creature, Dear? Do you despise me? I promise you that soon I will self-destruct. Dare me. Dear I just want to make all of your wishes come true. Make a wish. War. Locked away from me, fortified inside your fear of falling in love with somebody who is not afraid of you. Who finds you funny. Who wants to fuck. You are so afraid. Fucked. Your blood reminds me of the wine I was drinking sitting at that bar. Cheap. Thick. Diseased. My mother's Milk. Murder. I am sick of substitution. I need more, Dear. Be there for me. Fill up my bathtub with your blood. I wouldn't want to waste any. Down the drain. Dare me.

"It can't be." That's the first thing he said to me, then "It can't be. It just can't." He said my first name as a question. I put down my wineglass, swiveled around on the stool, and then I saw him standing before me. Some stranger. I nodded. "That's my name." Then he said my first and last name as a question. "That's my name." he was oddly impressed by me and I was predictably amused by the attention so I asked him to sit down at the bar beside me before I asked him "So how do you know my name?" "I know you," he said. And I had always thought nobody knew me. Except for

You would be proud of me, Honey. This man was handsome. Hungry. "So how do you know me?" He ordered J&B on the rocks and then motioned for the bartender to get me more wine. Your blood inside my body. Our cells are the same. But somehow it's this stranger who knows me. This handsome stranger. Aren't we all such sad, sad creatures, Dear? I do not doubt it. I wonder how many I'll meet? I am happy I met you. I mean it. Are you happy you met me? Say

it. Mean it. You're so fucking mean to me. I mean it.

"I'm sorry but I can't," I said to him. "No. No more." No! mans No! Red wine. STOP. A stranger. He was so handsome. Help me, Honey. "I'm sorry but I can't."

"C'mon," he pleaded.

"On one condition, and one condition only."

Make me.

"What?"

Come.

"Leave right after."

"I will. I promise. I'll go," he whispered into my ear but I couldn't really hear the words, I only felt him breathe himself into my body so full off wine yet completely empty so I kissed him in the corner of that shitty bar and I kissed him in the cab.

I know, Dear. But you can't. Kill me.

Dead tired once we got dropped off back at my place but he paid for my wine and the ride so I felt like I owed him something. This stranger. You'd never guess who. Guess. Bet you can't. Kill me. I told him to come up so he followed me up. I let him in. Inside I told him he could do whatever he wanted to me. Anything. So he did. again.

He left bruises, Baby. Then he left a little while later.
No lie...

I love you.

You're wearing me,

Out

x/x/x

Dear,

This is the six six sixth version of the eleventh letter that I've written you since you've burrowed yourself underneath the earth to avoid me. Again. I've started to plant the anti-depressant medication I'm prescribed in my flower pots. This way the pretty nurse with the dark-like-the-night hair and the cat's eyes believes me when I swear. "I swallowed them. See?"

and then I stick out my tongue after. At her. "See?"

EVOL.

The bags of blood she brings me. The pretty nurse steals them from the hospital and brings them to me because I pay some of her bills with my mother's credit card but Dear I am sick of substitution. When will you? I miss your wrists. Cut.

Tonight I took a long jog and found a baggy filled with white powder on the corner of the sidewalk. I picked it up and ran it home and dumped it all out onto my kitchen counter and then I licked the residue inside the baggy and it was coke, Dear. Can you believe it? How lucky I am and so I've been doing it throughout the night. Bye. Myself. High. Honey, can you believe it? I am such a sad, sad creature and my nose is so numb and so swollen and so stuffy so when at one point I blew it the entire tissue filled with bloody snot laced with the coke and just couldn't make it. Up. I did another line and then my nostril began to bleed even more, a small stream which I let run into my mouth but I can not taste it, Dear. I finished all the coke, Honey. I could not waste it.

Why haven't you written me any letters yet? Dear. You disappoint me. Why haven't you written me any checks yet? Dad. You Deadbeat. Drunk. I'd love to get drunk. Feel dead but the bags of blood are almost empty, Dear. Drunk.

I haven't cleaned my face so there is still dried blood above and below my chapped pink lips, on my chin, and even on my neck and I am beautiful. Bite me. I saw myself in the mirror and have never looked more natural in my entire life. Like an animal. Call me that. An animal and you can do whatever you want to me. I'll let you. Cut me up.

Carve a new niche for yourself. Honey. You need to. You're no body. A blank. A barnacle underneath a boat. A bum on the subway. A soldier in the war. Something in the way. A waste. And so what if the blood that I've got all over my beautiful face is my own? At least I can remember how it tastes. At least I have not forgotten the feeling. You're numb now. No body. Beneath me. Boring, Baby. You're boring me.

When will you come back? To me. I will be waiting.
Wondering. I miss your wrists. The sound of your purple
heart pumping all that beautiful blood. The way it tastes.
You're timing. The terrible things you say to me when you
mean them. I want you to. Mean them. I will be waiting.
Always inside,

You

x/x/x

Dear,

Letter XII. Line 1. "I love it when your fucking cock's inside
me. Yeah. Mmmyeah. Oh yes..." I am watching the pornog-
raphy you left at my apartment and trying my best to recre-
ate the script. Because, baby. I'm bored. One of the actor's
abdomen looks like yours. But his cock doesn't. he hasn't said
anything yet, but I have jotted down some stage directions for
him: (He aggressively starts to push himself further inside her
eager mouth despite the gagging). You should be in pornog-
raphy, Honey. But your cock shouldn't. Couldn't. Your cock
is so cute. Too cute. You should come (all) over (me). I know
you cannot. Come. Not for me. I can't keep this up. You are
killing me. So come already. I need your EVOL.

Outside my window I can see the street and there is
a group of children wearing bright colors and hanging out
in front of the building, smoking cigarettes and the boys are
making gestures and the girls are covering their mouths when
they laugh and they all seem to be completely in love with one
other. I hope they never leave.

The street's cluttered with cars and I remember when
you got into that accident and when you finally opened your
bloodshot eyes back up in that robotic hospital bed I was the
first thing you saw sitting over you. I thought you were dead.
Drunk. Just drunk and you were still drunk when you ripped
the IV out of your veins, let me lick quickly the rivulets of
red pouring out your pretty little puncture wounds and then
we got out of there. Away. You said you wanted to go home
but I took you back here and you didn't complain. You stayed

quiet. You looked scared, Dear. You were shaking.

“Did I kill any body?” you wanted to know, looking up at me from my bed. You were underneath the covers, I was tucking you in and I said “I thought you were dead.”

“Did I?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. “You don’t remember?”

“I do,” you said, horror-stricken and so pale all of a sudden. So anxious and so beautiful all of a sudden. You became the victim. A virgin again. “I did.”

“But you didn’t die,” I assured you. Assured myself. Made a wish.

“I wish I did.”

Dear you did not die that day like the three passengers of Volkswagen your car collided with when you ran that red light last October. Those kids you killed. You did not die like your last lover did when her beautiful face was shredded by all the shards of shattering glass. You were not lucky enough to die in that accident, Dear. You did not deserve it. But I say this with all the honesty in my heart and all the violence in my mind, I wish you did. Hope you do. Die, Dear. I make a new wish now. But no body’s that lucky. You’ll live on. Lie low. I’ll let you. Die slow. Always be my,

Baby

x/x/x

Dear,

Friday. The Thirteenth. Try. I try so hard. To remember what your face looks like and I can conjure your body, your beautiful back in my ever-evaporating consciousness but everything resting above has become a blur. My hear hurts me all the time. I hate the way it feels behind my face. I close my eyes tight and imagine a curtain made of black velvet but it’s no use it always spreads apart and there’s always something to see on stage. Some show. With my eyes shut. Vision isn’t even as vivid.

You are a villain now. You have become the norm. No

longer an exception. Exceptional. Acceptable. I am angry now. Out to get you. The thrill is gone. With my eyes shut. My hands closing up your throat. Your blank face becoming blue. Black.

Velvet. Your blood. I am begging you, Baby, to bring your body back to me and to let me bite into you again, bleed you a bit so that the image in my mind may be restored because when you leave me I need something to imagine that will not disappoint me as much as you do.

Voodoo. The doll I made looks nothing like you, Dear, but still I stick in pins and needles and put out my cigarettes where your eyes would be. I want to see it. I want you to. Make one of me. Make it, Baby. Blind.

I went for a walk earlier this evening and I swear it when I say that there was never a more beautiful night. The sky, Dear. A black velveteen curtain. The stars, Baby. Tiny holes into heaven. I had my arms crossed and my sneakers were not laced but the couples who walked past me pushing carriages or clutching cups of coffee did not look at me as if I were mad but instead smiled and seemed not to give me another moment's notice. And I liked that. Being only for a moment.

Bugs as big as bats swarmed around streetlamps and the church on the corner looked even more ancient than ever, exceptionally menacing with its stained-glass stare and I wondered what would happen to me if I went inside? If I would burn up, feel different or maybe nothing would happen at all and the thought of an anticlimax saddened me. Because, Baby. Isn't that always the way? We expect BOOMS but get bumps, crave virgins but get bags of blood.

We are leeches as much as we are lechers, Dear. Animals. Feeding off others. Ending lives to sustain our own. It's all natural, Baby. So why must you make me feel bad about what my body needs? Wake up. We all are such sad, sad creatures. Ignore your thirst you pussy you bitch you faggot but do not look down upon me for doing what I must. For making up my mind.

Past the church there was a little girl sitting on the

edge of the sidewalk, crying and she had no shoes on. When I got closer to her, knelt down and asked if everything was alright she cried out “No!” then pointed to the bicycle with the flattened tires and the bent spokes on the other side of the street, the crooked wheel spinning. I noticed her skinned knee stamped with blood, the sleeve of pink scrapes that went from her wrists up past her elbows and the loose fragments of pavement stuck onto, into her reddened face. I sat down on the sidewalk beside the girl and reached my arm around her shivering shoulders and when I pulled her towards me she came. Closer to me and then she began to cry louder than any child should. I explained to her softly that her mother had told me to come clean you up, take care of you.

“Stop crying, Dear. Come with me.”

She needed next to no convincing despite my being a stranger. Just some body. Stupid girl. She must have been in shock but she stopped crying and began breathing normally when I took her by the hand to lead her back. As I pulled her along I tried to imagine what we must of looked like, this brand-new girl and I. Like a mother and daughter, maybe. Caretaker and concubine. Predator and prey. When we walked past the church I asked the little girl if she said her prayers at night and when she did not answer me I knew she had no hope. No help.

“Hurry inside,” I said to her after I opened my apartment door and she did so I shut it and locked it behind us. Her back was drenched in sweat so I told her that she needed a bath and some new clothes to wear. “These have rips.”

I took her into my bathroom and started to undress her. Her teeth were chattering and her eyes were wide open, aware but besides this the girl seemed almost catatonic. Under my control. Cared for.

Skeletal with no shirt on and I could count her bones from inside or out. I wondered which way I would as I began filling the tub with hot water. I told the girl to pour in the bubbles herself to make her feel better. “Do you have bubbles in your bath at home?” I asked the girl but she did not respond, seem to understand. I pulled off her little skirt

and the polka-dotted panties she wore underneath down past the blood drying on her knees and off her little feet with the blackened soles.

I bent over to kiss her tiny toes but she backed away and so I stood up and taller than her again I told her to get into the tub. It was still filling up with steaming water. The girl backed against the bathroom door, frozen and when I told her again, "Get In," and she still would not I smacked her with all the strength in my body across her beautiful little face. She fell over onto the floor and began to cry so I picked her up and dropped her in the bathtub. She then began to scream, flail around in the water so to stop it, the sounds I took her by her throat and held her head underneath the faucet so when she opened her mouth again she choked on the water. The sound, Dear, the sound she made became a gurgling. I could not stand it so I began to hold her little head underneath the water, count to seven, and then lift her back up by her ponytail so her little lungs might catch her breath. When the water in the tub began to roll over the sides and onto the floor tiles I smacked the girl in the face twice more, told her not to move and then I reached into the tub and removed the cover over the drain. "Don't move." The girl doesn't. Dare.

Me, I opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out my brand-new box of razor blades, removing one and then leaving the rest on the edge of the sink in case I needed anymore, in case that particular one dulled before I was done. The little girl was shivering despite the temperature of the water and had her arms crossed with her little hands clutching her bare shoulders. I knew that I would not be able to eat this one alive without her screaming. The sounds went down the drain and since she seemed so scared of drowning, Dear, I decided to give the little girl gills.

Four uniform incisions made vertically on either side of her slender little neck. Symmetry and I loved watching her try to breathe as blood spilled out over her hands down her naked body and onto the floor of my tub. I quickly plugged the drain. I also loved the way her skin began to match the color of the porcelain more and more as her life became less

and less. White. Watching. Eventually she stopped moving and when she did I took out the toolkit I keep underneath the sink. The hammer and the screwdriver. I leaned over the dead, draining little girl, opened up her mouth and then began to knock out all of her baby teeth. One by one. Because, Babe. I'm going to make you a necklace. Aren't I nice? No body knows it. But they should.

No, Baby. I did not drink any of her blood. Yet. It is still the broth of the soup that I made her into. My bathtub is full of her. Insides and out. But I have told you already that I am sick of substitutes. That I am sick. Stranger. You very well might be ashamed of me and of the beautiful, brand-new body in my bathtub but I have always believed that the luckiest babies in the world are the ones who get aborted. Jealous?

I will make a good mother. I already am, Baby. Mad. You made me. Murder.

You're a pussy,

Cat

Bart Bolander

God Only Knows What I'd Be Without You

Scarlet kicks Melinda in her lower stomach as hard as she possibly can. Melinda's eyes widen and she doubles over in pain. A towel muffles her scream. "Straighten out," Scarlet tells her. "Straighten your body back out, baby." Melinda does. "Keep your back against the wall." Scarlet kicks Melinda again, harder this time and the towel falls out of her mouth and she's gasping for air. "Be quiet," Scarlet warns her. "I need to do it a few more times. Shut up." It takes her a moment or so, but once Melinda's able to stuff the towel back in between her beautiful white teeth, Scarlet kicks her again, stepping into it this time. Melinda rolls away from the wall. Back against the floor, she's staring wide-eyed at a motionless ceiling fan, waiting. Scarlet lifts her knee, and ready to stomp, tells Melinda "Lemme just do it one more time. Just once more?" Although Melinda's unblinking stare silently screams out an answer, Scarlet's foot falls down into her friend anyway and so Melinda begins to cough. Violently. Her face went from the brightest red to the saddest blue, but now it's fading into a lifeless white. Satisfied, Scarlet kneels down over Melinda, tears away the towel and then wipes the drool that's running down her friend's cheek and onto the cozy purple carpet. She whispers, "All done, baby," before kissing Melinda on her mouth.

D.J. Castano

How To Pick Up A Hooker

Finding your inner clutchiness is exciting but also stable.

You'll end up playing assholes that wear their hat cocked at a disturbing angle.

Sliding directly into the scumbag dramatically impacts wins and losses.

It happens all the time.

Need more examples?

Third down requires little conversation.

Sizing up a potential contender involves more than looks.

Every relationship is essentially random.

If you open up the gatefold you will make a crazy, insane, ludicrously bold choice, or you could keep it closed, and still seal the deal.

DJ Castano

Spelling-Bee Championship

My voice shakes like
the ground during
an earthquake in California.
As the words exit my mouth, they wave goodbye.

My vision blurs as I look
at my opponent.
The smell of fear radiates
from his body.

The loud roar of the crowd suddenly
goes silent.
My hands move like the wings
of a fly.

As he went to
spell the word I could
see the letters jump
from his mouth to the crowd
like they were stage diving.

I predicted
letter after letter,
and fuck me, he
got it wrong!

A pack of dudes lined
in front of us stared
me down like I was a piece of meat.
The girls stood out.

The two slores Joe invited were being typical
sillingtons and laughing at
things they didn't understand.

Because they were blondes, I took a sip of water.

“Get out my business, my busNASS. Stay the fuck up out my business” was all that came to mind.

I was about as calm as a panic attack.

I jumped through the lens and watched myself as I stepped to the microphone. Deej was there to whoop Charles’s ass so tomorrow he could tell everybody about the massacre.

I had to shake his hand in order to slice his throat.

As the judge said the word I looked up nervous, but prepared to do battle.

Onomatopoeia was a difficult one though.

Sweat dripped slowly like a sort of Chinese water torture as I prepared to off this kid.

If I got this shit right, it was over for that fool. Even the Statue of Liberty cheered me on from across the river as I tried ending

his winning streak.

As the words waved
goodbye, I knew they were
going to a better place, and that
first victory would be as sweet
as the honey in a bee hive.





Chad Carino
Dirty Dare -- First Place



Chad Carino
Radio Waves



Alex Graupner
Bulb



Alex Graupner
Mouse



Alex Graupner
Squirrel



Alex Graupner
Water Reflection



Alex Graupner
World



Amy Vlacich
Dollhouse -- Second Place



Jed Crockett
Mask



Daniel Vieira
Starbucks -- Honorable Mention



Daniel Vieira
Flight of a Pigeon



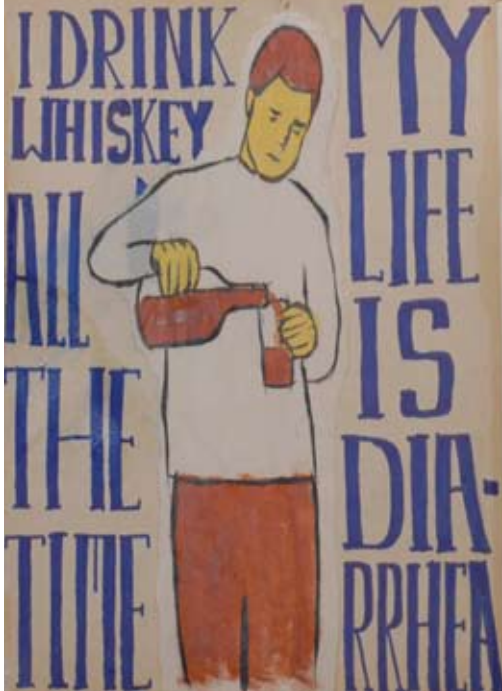
Daniel Vieira
Portuguese Cows



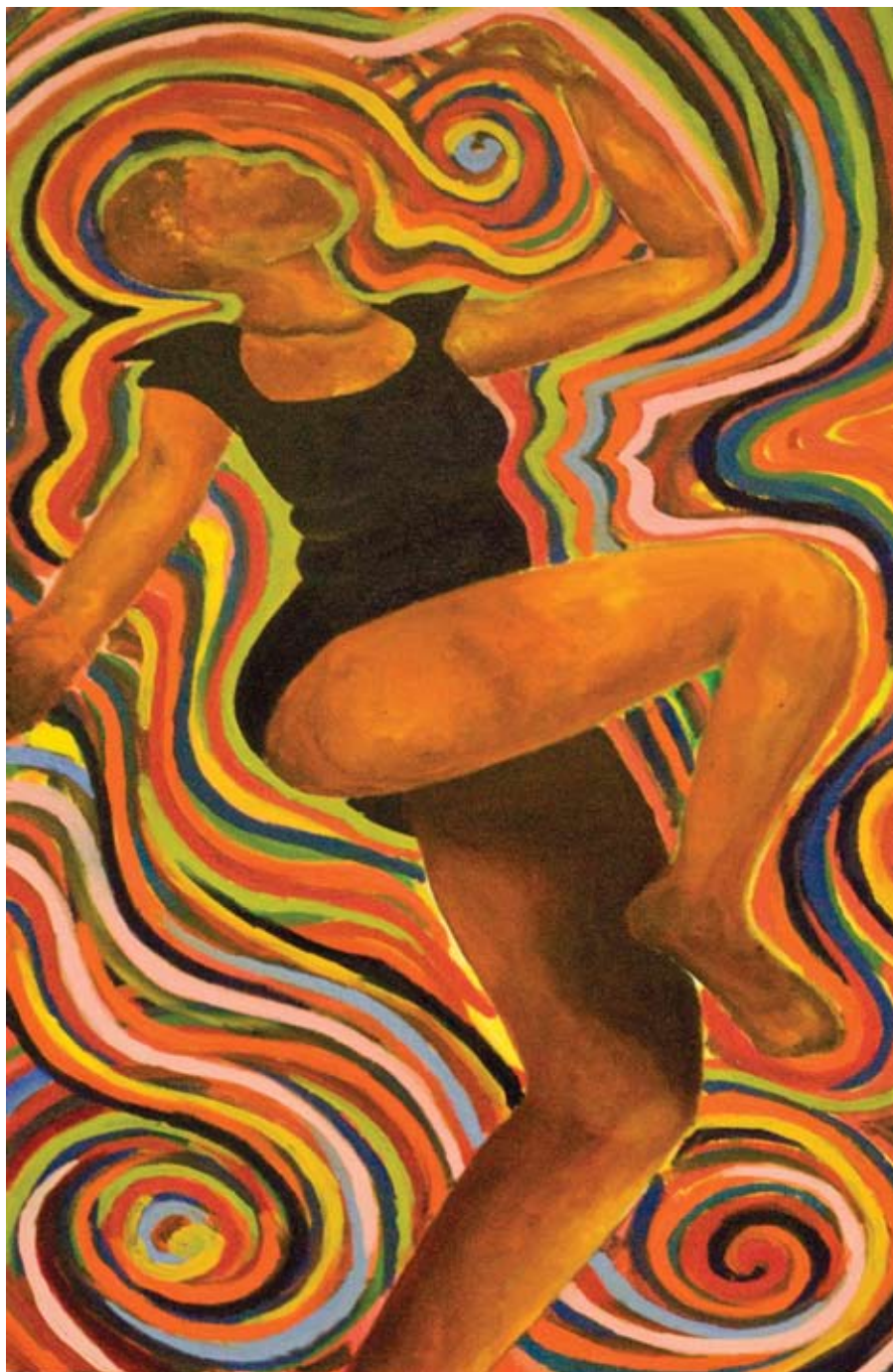
Daniel Vieira
Bus Terminals



Daniel Vieira
Free-Market Capitalism



Jim Kingston
Self-Portrait



Melissa Sutherland
Dance

Robin Collins

Midnight Reverie

Fingers were our scripture
during sticky summer nights
where our arms, legs
ached to intertwine.
Our lips, raw from
lustful exploration,
we murmured against
the ebb of hours passing
(and it felt like forever
in your arms) I still
long to trace the ghost-
lines of your vertebrae,
while I gaze into
mutual affection, believing
in always and the
sweet rhythm of
our hearts.

Jared Emerling

A Letter to the Editor

Dear C.K. George,

I wore the suit from my mothers' funeral which happened earlier that morning. Driving toward the inn, the churning brown of the city was still with me, smoldering on the fields cut into by the pavement. The air seemed stuck, not as air, but formaldehyde embalming time. The sun shone in a bleak, silent calm causing glare against the gray-white sky, and it reminded me of death, in all supposed blackness, running up and down touching everything. It was 4 p.m. Lucy Noonan, aged 67, low on white bacteria, died from the common cold her body couldn't fight not three days ago.

She was small and framed with large, curly black hair around her face that made her look like an angel flaming when she screamed. She could have turned any argument in her favor, or so I'm told. My birth cut the serotonin to her brain, and for twelve hours on those white bed sheets in the hospital she slipped into a coma.

My father said at first it all seemed harmless. I was three when she began dusting and straightening our house books a few times a day until perfect order. Noticeable in front of their friends, my father would break tension by joking that in a past life she must have been an archer with an eye as sharp and narrow as hers. He was right in a way, but as a perfect arrow will travel around the world endlessly until it sees its target, my mother did not stop with just arranging books. Something larger had misfired. All at once planets streamed together, a sacrifice went wrong somewhere in the jungle, and a haunted child wailed and wailed all to the culmination of my mothers' fear of germs. These tiny reproducing bombs became explicitly clear to her. She became repulsed by even the things she loved including cleaning. My father had to do all of it; scrubbing floors and the bathroom before and after dinner, and before and after work. My mothers' friend Mrs. Grabell, who only knew me once as a baby, knocked on the door asking

to come in late one night for a visit. When my father answered the door his head hung low, and he told her she couldn't come in. At the top of the stairs, my mother waited. As he climbed slowly toward her, he looked down and for the first time I noticed his old, gray self, much older than my mother, and he said, "She's sick, she just needs rest." My eyes gulped. My mother looked especially shocked at all of it while she watched him wash his hands eleven times before he climbed into bed. That night, listening to her run the water in the shower until it was cold, wait for it to be hot, and shower again, I vowed that I would never let my brain betray me as hers betrayed her.

Pulling up, I felt the flash confusion of waking up. The road dug into the earth unevenly, and on top of a slim hill alongside it sat the inn with coarse brown siding wiped tan overtime. With the sun setting, turning the blanket gray into an orange-lemon sky, the tall, slender house looked strangely angular, like a person who in darkness holds a candle underneath their chin. I parked on the street, grabbed my briefcase from the backseat, and walked up flat stone steps to the porch. Stopping for a second in front of the door, I noticed there were two red whicker chairs and table with an open backgammon set on top and no other cars but mine.

I opened the door and walked to the counter through a living room lobby. A woman with eyelid wrinkles and long peppered hair was sitting behind the welcome desk. She was examining a dark blue suit jacket, holding it up front of her, moving her face closer and then further away from the lapels. Above her thin cheekbones, marble black eyes traced invisible patterns in the fabric. They looked like tiny insects moving thousands of times each second.

I interrupted her with a polite cough and asked, "Can I have a room, please?" For the first time she put the jacket down.

Barely looking up at me, she said, "Sure. Need your name and the money up front, though."

She took out a large red guest book I thought was a photo album. On an empty page she readied the pen. "James Gilbert," I said. "How much will that be?"

“Well, how long are you planning on staying?”

I said, “Just the night,” then placed my briefcase on the counter and took my wallet from my pocket.

“Ok, how’s twenty sound?” she asked.

“Sounds good,” I told her, and put the money down. Without looking underneath the counter she grabbed a key and handed it to me. Two of her fingers had rings on them. They were deep smoke-orange bulbs, and she wore a brooch on her thinly thatched green and gold dress of the same style, but in the swirling orange were the letters S.G.

“Room six, top floor. The bathroom is the door on the right next to the closet. Bar is open later tonight. I don’t serve dinner, you have to go three miles east into town for that, but there’s brunch in the morning.”

“Great, thanks,” I said, and just stood there.

“Anything else?” she asked, obliged.

“Oh no, no... thank you,” I said, but moving back I glanced to the floor and saw a pile of little gnarled branches tangled together.

“Oh, actually,” I said, and pointed down, “Would you mind if I took those?”

She looked at me newly.

“You really want to bring those dead rose stems to your room?”

“Yes,” I said, “I just like the way they look. Is it ok?”

“No, no, go ahead,” she said, “I was going to mulch them anyway.”

I thanked her, picked up the pile and laid it across my forearm. On the stairwell, rusted iron light fixtures were nailed to the wall in their center, and folded in on themselves as pedals. Sun-bleached and dusty, they looked like they could have been the missing flower heads. Inside the room, however, nothing was unusual. It was the top floor room, little space with a desk and windows on the north side, a closet and bathroom. I put my things down on the desk and opened one of the windows. Looking out over the yard, two strips of red cedar covered in more roses were spaced only feet from each other. In between them, a scarecrow stuffed with hay, two coals for eyes

and no mouth had on a tweed jacket. The arms hung limp at the sides instead of straight outward from the shoulders. The jacket had decayed from brown to ugly beige, and the squares woven into it turned a washed-out reddish-pink. I drifted into the jacket thinking about my mother. She loved my father in jackets like those, and near her deathbed there was a picture of him wearing one on their tenth anniversary. Sometime later, I noticed the woman from downstairs staring the scarecrow straight in the face. She held up the jacket from before, and stretched it out around the shoulders of the old one. She dusted off the new breast pocket with her ringed hand, turned, and walked inside.

I did the same, and turned from the window and sat down at the wooden desk. I unlatched my briefcase. The city came back to me. For the last year I worked freelance for a small literary magazine. I'd written some one hundred stories, of which forty-two were published to armfuls of lukewarm review. One article, written by a man with round glasses and a white beard, made the distinction, "The lion without his heart, Noonan dreams beautiful, but inconsequential numbers."

I knew it was the truth. All my crying women never cried tears with real salt. I wrote new American folktales, but my invention couldn't save me from the flat line. I needed to find the music that thinking could duet with the soul. Before my mother's death, I put myself in a trance training I made up with whatever I could.

I lined the rose stems next to each other in rows of six across. I picked favorite curves or spaces that were de-thorned, and after an hour there were twenty-six in formation. I took out what I needed, and put my nose close to the desk. I selected the first stem in line, and for each letter of the first poem I copied its shape until the poem looked exact. I continued until my mind wandered on its own as my fingers replayed the lives of these roses onto paper.

At eleven I had to undress at the door of my house when I came inside, and sit in my underwear until my mother brought me indoor clothes free of germs. I sat with her during

all of her tantrums over people who accidentally brushed her in public because, really, who knows where they had been. I bought her a new packet of thick yellow rubber gloves every two days from the supermarket on the way home from school. I left home at 18, and though I visited often, something had changed. Her eyes widened in the saddest way when I came in. I was a stranger covered head to toe with invisible threats. Under the white linen bed sheets marbled over her in her bedroom, until her last wish for me to visit her longest friend in the middle of nowhere was uttered, I was a stranger.

The paper tore under the pen spastically. I completed one full reprint of *The Great Fires* and half of *Monolithos*. By then the night descended, and I decided it was long time to stop. I went down to the lobby, and saw the woman sponging on another suit jacket. This time it was gold and green like her dress.

“Excuse me,” I said, interrupting her again, “but is the bar open yet?”

“Yes,” she said, and walked into the other room with the jacket draped over her arm, stopping at the arch of the door to motion that I follow her. The bar was short, dark wood stuck in the corner with two stools. She walked around the back, and I looked slowly over the bottles.

“Gin and tonic,” I said sitting down.

“Sorry,” she said, “I don’t restock all that often since Benjamin died.”

“Oh,” I said, pulling one of the stools underneath me, “sorry to hear that, was he your husband?”

“Yes,” she said. “When he was alive he worked down in the city and would come home with an appetite for just two things,” and after she said that she let out a half laugh.

“What’d he do?” I asked.

“Community organizer, and a hell of a good one,” she said and sucked at her teeth a little pouring out the gin.

“Ya’ know he was probably the only one people around here ever were afraid of.”

We both chuckled. I raised my glass in a half toast, and she lifted her eyebrows slightly in return. With just the

two of us there, she said, “He was a strong kind of man if you were opposing him, about anything. If he didn’t get what he needed at a meeting he’d bark and bark... that’s why the first thing he wanted when he came home was always a drink. Let out the stress.”

“But I’m a little quieter than that,” she said, nodding emphatically. “Nothing like Ben or my father.”

I imagined the vague figure of her husband filling out the sleeves, and took a heavier pull at the gin. “What was your father like then?” I asked.

“Oh, he was a difficult man,” she said, “especially when I was a child. I couldn’t ever get out of his way. Even my mother said he never seemed to enjoy anything...” she trailed off, smoothing the jacket out neatly on the bar.

“I think I know what you mean about that,” I said.

“My mother died recently, but when her and my father were alive together she, well, had conquered him in one way or another.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “It took a long time, but I realized my mother was never really as submissive as she seemed. She knew how to pull his strings, and she even out-lived him. On her deathbed, after knowing Ben for only one month, she told me to think about all of the things that were good about the both of them.”

I asked her why.

“Then I’d know myself, I guess,” she said.

“But wasn’t Ben just as... extreme as your father?” I said and hesitated.

“Oh no, no, no. He was a gentler man at heart,” she said and picked the jacket back up. “I just saw a similar... command in Ben, that’s all.”

In the silence between us I swirled the gin. She draped the jacket over her arm like I had the roses.

“So, those are Ben’s jackets you’re putting on the scarecrow?”

She paused to consider this, “Some of them,” she said, “I’ve been doing it everyday since he died, but this one is my fathers. I don’t think I fear living alone anymore, but in death

I thought they can at least scare the birds for me.”

Sincerely,
Robert Noonan.



Jared B. Coffin

What We Are

Third Place; Folio Poetry Contest

Each morning, we know what we are.
Blinking in the sunlight like a fish panting through flailing
gills,
the starkness of the light washes us into our moorings:
the Soul retreats to the gray boughs of the brain;
daylight cloaks it in shadowy garb.
While we romp the thoroughfares of blunt daydreams,
soaking in antique happiness and broken things,
the Soul, that Freelance Phantom, respites
on the numb pillow of the morning mind.
Finally, as the world digests its dark liquor,
the Soul egresses the blond hood of daytime delusions.
As an Egret it flies elegant and accurate,
barking through its slender beak: profile of a paradox.
Perhaps, stumbling into the ravished field of your dreams by
the bottleneck of the night, you grope the wall for a light
switch,
for in your house guilt has built no shrine.
Poor hoodwinked man.
Dreams do not lie.
You may enter them as if entering a movie theater
to sit, awed at what your subconscious has assembled
and concocted out of mere pebbles.
But the soul is not an alchemist
and dreams, sadly, are not fool's gold.
In that case, you may prefer to dream-gaze
through the microscope of sharp actuality,
accepting each shotgunned fire of the synapses
like a man
unafraid to embrace the pornography
of the mind undressed.

Jared B. Coffin

Xineohp and Aestuo

Stumbling in step we walked
down the yellow center line
under the per-for-a-ted sky.
As the world drank darkness
s-s-slow-ly sipped to drunk
and the evening slipped me into it
my humming bird heart was caught by croon
as my mistress carried me away.
I remember thinking it was funny that I couldn't find her in
her eyes
because I had once been told that our eyes are the gates to our
souls
Blurred lights breathed through my eyes
showing me too little of too much.
Somehow to my soul they went
where a not so virgin heart of mine bore
a thought that glittered past the highways of its land
to a compass sitting in the sand
Yet fore the sand could drink the thought
and point it to the north,
my mistress swooned me to a dance
moved my body, no my mind
so emotion stole my lance.

Jim Kingston

I have seen

Honorable Mention; Folio Poetry Contest

A man with less than most to smile about
smiling
laughing.
A girl looking far out a window
deep into herself.
My banjo
sleeping still on the floor--
wake up!
The morning blue,
these days passing,
the rain picking up as I eat my breakfast
alone.
What becomes of the yard when we
have a party for a friend,
the weather lately,
troubled to make up it's mind.

Ah,
me too.

Jim Kingston

August 16, 2008

Three guys at a table
heads down, puking--
no buckets
no bags.

Grabbing my notebook,
I thought she was using me
for my supply of paper.
Loving even that
I added,
“Put down your number
when you’re done,”
assuming she was drawing.
When I got it back,
her number was
all she wrote.

She has beautiful pink hair.

Jim Kingston

My Office

is a freezing cold apartment party
drunks and loud music
two kinds of wine
punch, beer, and hooch.
It is screaming and yelling.
My office is also a warm and quiet
basement
with a pool table and a bar
and a T.V. that gets over
5,000 channels.
My office is just leaving the
liquor store, flying down the road,
coming your way,
running red lights.
My office is a custom made
backpack complete with a
built-in boom box.
It's a lonely street
on a lonely night
I pay for rent in ways
not so easily measured--
peace of mind.
My office has many telephone numbers;
you may have to try them all.
There are no secretaries
I have to do everything.
My office is a hang-over porch
on a foggy morning,
freezing cold apartments
couches 3 inches too short
with pillows that smell like bong water,
an unregistered car
sidewalks and bars
folded under my arm.

If you want to swing by,
go ahead.
Bring something to cheer me up;
I'm exhausted.
Oh, what's that?
You've got some room for me?
I'll pack my bag and
be over soon;
you know, I'm always looking
for
my office.



Jim Kingston

What the Fuck's He Gonna Do?

I learned how to moan and groan from my dad
how to complain from my mom.
He was in physical pain from a long life of hard labor
and it turned into mental pain.
My mom was in mental pain from a life of just that
it turned into physical pain, too.
I loved them both to death and I wanted to do so good by
them,
but I couldn't
because I was depressed
because they were depressed
and they were depressed
because I was depressed
it was depressing
and I was in mental and physical pain.

I didn't want to moan and groan;
I didn't want to complain.
What i did--
I taught myself to laugh
I became the laugher.

Not at home,
at home
I was very quiet
but when I was out there in the world
I was the laugher.
I would laugh and laugh.

Now I'm tired,
sinking into myself

and what I hide from
and put aside
because it is too much for me.
When i get down to it,
I am nervous
scared
upset

all these things
overflowing like a boiling pot,
and what comes out
is a sound
and it sounds
like
laughing.

Then it's over
for a little bit.

I wonder what there is
besides laughing
moaning and groaning
complaining,
what there is to do
and I wonder,
if I have a kid
what the fuck's he gonna do?

Jim Kingston

The Man

traveling by foot

saw

how many honks? And joyous laughter

22 double takers

1 yard raker

3 porch perusers

1 horn honk an' waver

15 plain wavers

1 yellow shirt, stogie lit, late laughter

4 at once, screamers and eye gleamers,

how many thumbs-uppers?

1 pool party

1 bright n' bold "banjo on my knee!", when he least expected
it to fly by leaving his heart a bit hoppy

2 pulled over people peering

23 smiles, all in such a short while

6 or 7 ball bouncing, backyard beamers

how many noddors?

11 ladies lovin' it

and how many choo-choo chuggin' in a trance, chance-glance
children?

He must have been handsome.

Jim Kingston

Nine Haikus

The drunkard, for breakfast:
a giant burrito and glass of milk;
smashed.

--

The sun's war on me
is not the only reason
for my head's hanging down.

--

Resting on bare breasts,
my shirt
has more to brag about.

--

A mouse
racing across the road
becomes a leaf.

--

The night,
my peace,
gone.

--

There is a girl
whom I have met once
but have not seen since.

--

In America,
can a man lie down
in the grass?

--

Door wide open,
we smoke our cigarettes
with the moths.

--

Today is a day
for trying to get back on that ball
which seems to roll so fast.

Michael DeSanti

Fairly Quixotic

It was a piece of raw chicken,
a pink gooey breast
shaped like Block Island,
that made me think of you,
and when we danced on the cliffs.
The little flowers on your body,
The red-brown clay.
A moment,
A bowl of breadcrumbs,
A rock-strewn shore
and my fist—a merciless wave.

Michael DeSanti

At Age Seven

When my father left our house
he didn't leave many things behind,
just some old blueprints and
a dentist's mold of his teeth
that I kept on my nightstand.
I spent hours in the bathroom
standing on a foot stool
staring into the mirror and
comparing my father's teeth to mine.
I would run my tongue over
the space between my teeth
hoping it would grow smaller.
I would fall asleep at night
with the comforting weight
of the dentist's mold in my hand.
I'd wake in the morning to find
that its dye had stained my cheeks
and left my fingers blue. I'd rush
to the bathroom, lean over the sink
and splash cold water on my face
until all traces of the dye were removed.
The only picture of my father
was in the bottom of a shoebox
hidden behind the dresses
in my mother's closet.
I would sneak into her room
when she went out at night
and I would stare at it for hours.
In the photo he was not smiling.
I'd imagine my father on a beach
talking to a woman and laughing,
flashing his perfect shining teeth
and I'd wish that the dentist
had set his bridge wrong.

Joseph Bebon

The Game

When I was seven or eight years old, my grandpa introduced me to a new game. I was wary at first because his previous games typically included his taking out his yellow-stained dentures and chasing me around the house as he clapped together the false teeth in applause and cackled a smoker's cackle. But he promised this one was a good one.

"Okay," I said. "What is it?"

He raked a comb through his grease-netted hair, a familiar ritual of his because he always claimed to be the only old son-of-a-bitch who hadn't yet gone bald or grey, and he produced a wide smile that revealed the false kernels in his mouth. "Ever heard of a spy, Christopher?"

"A spy?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Ever heard of the C.I.A.? The Central Intelligence Agency?"

He must've read my blank stare because he began to elaborate. "Wow! Like James Bond?" I said. "Cool." My heart seemed two sizes too large for my chest. "How do we play?"

Grandpa's grey eyes seemed to turn into bright-shining headlights. "Follow me." He placed my hand into his sandpaper palm and took me into the living room. "Go turn on the T.V." I did as told, pushing in the sharp metal rod where a knob once was, and the old television took a moment before slowly coming alive. A woman appeared on the screen, but her voice was too loud. I lowered the volume in order to hear my instructions.

"Now what?" I asked. The anticipation was killing me.

Grandpa pulled out his cigarettes. The smoke surrounded his pruned face like a poisonous halo. "Turn it to channel three," he said. The sofa chair engulfed his body, and particles of dust danced in the rays of morning light. I changed the channel. When I turned back around, he had a pen and paper in his hands. "Now we listen."

My nose remained inches away from the radiating

screen, and I nearly went blind, seeing giant white constellations on the canopy of my eyelids every time I dared to blink. I sat, legs crossed in Indian position, and waited. Minutes passed, and my heart seemed again its normal size. I asked what we were listening for but was told to be patient, it was coming.

“There!” Grandpa shouted as he leapt out from the chair like a frog to a carpeted lily pad. “That’s it!”

I unlocked my legs and stood up. “What?” I asked. “What was it?”

“You didn’t hear that?” His eyes resembled shiny dollar coins. “You missed it?” He nearly barked the latter part.

“What?” I looked back to the television as the daytime talk show continued. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Nonsense!” said Grandpa. “Come on. We have work to do.”

I followed him into his bedroom. The air smelt like old people, rotten hides mixed with day-old baby powder, and I couldn’t help but wonder if Grandpa could smell it. He ran to his dresser and yanked open the top drawer. “Eureka,” he said with tired lungs. He pulled out an empty cigarette pack from what seemed a mountain of used packs. He inspected the small cardboard box. On it stood a cartoon camel enjoying a good smoke over a pool game. “Okay,” Grandpa said. “This one’ll do.”

“What’s it say?” I asked as I watched him from across the kitchen table write on the inside flap of the cigarette pack.

“Important stuff, Christopher.” He didn’t raise his eyes to look at me. “Very important information.”

My curiosity screamed inside me. “But I want to know.”

Grandpa stopped scribbling and looked up. “Can you keep a secret?” I nodded my head. “A big secret?” I nodded again and gave my word. He licked his tongue over his false teeth as if he were buttering the prosthetic corn inside his mouth. “All right,” he began. “Remember the C.I.A.?”

I did.

“Well, I’m a special agent. A spy.”

“No way,” I said, knowing it was true. “Really?”

“Yep,” he replied. “But no one, including your mother or grandmother, knows. So you’ve got to promise not to tell anyone.” I swore my allegiance to the United States of America and to my grandfather, and asked what he did. “Well,” he started, “the television tells me things. It tells all of us things. I was trained to hear them.”

I didn’t get it.

“It’s like the wind,” Grandpa said. “You hear it, but you never listen. It has a music to it, and it plays the sweetest songs. But no one ever listens. I can hear the wind on the television. Quiet little songs of information no one ever notices or listens to.” He closed the empty cigarette pack. “It’s my job as a spy to record the information and mail it to the Pentagon.” He lay his pen down on the table next to his plastic pillbox. “Without me, those goddamn Russians would’ve taken over years ago.”

I hesitated upon hearing him take the Lord’s name in vain, a big no-no according to my mother, then asked what he meant by “the Russians.”

“Never mind that,” he said. “I’ve probably already said too much.” He stood up from his chair and walked over to the kitchen window. The light deepened his wrinkles. “You may be in danger.” He picked up the cigarette pack, and I watched the cartoon camel’s sterile eyes disappear as he placed the precious pack into a large manila envelope.

“What about the game?” I asked.

“This,” Grandpa said, “ain’t no game.” He lifted the envelope. “This is national security.” On the front of the envelope he carefully wrote an address. He said, “Follow me if you’d like to help.” So I followed.

The day attacked our eyes as we opened the door. The sun seemed a yolky orange, the air was thick and moist, and I was just as excited as I was nervous. Each step down the broken concrete walkway seemed to produce a new bead of sweat on my brow, and I held Grandpa’s large, damp hand as we moved.

The mailbox perched above the street’s hot asphalt, and the

box's black sheen made me avert my gaze. We walked slowly, Grandpa moving his head left and right in a tick-tock motion as he checked for any strange-looking cars and suspicious characters he said might be lurking in the neighborhood. When we reached the mailbox, he handed me the envelope. It was light, but it felt heavy. "Hurry, put it in," he said, opening the mailbox. I gently stuffed in the oversized envelope and released a stale breath as a drop of sweat trickled down my nose.

"Good job," Grandpa said. "Now, quick, back into the house."

Walking back, I held his hand in mine and counted the vein-like cracks in the concrete:

One.

Two.

There's three.

Four.

"Grandpa," I asked, my head still down. "What did it say?"



Erin Jones

Love Affair with Pole-Vaulting

It was eighth grade when you were first introduced to Pole-Vaulting. It was at your brother's track meet. He was a shot-putter, and the throwing circle was right next to the pole-vault mats. The jumpers doing their warm-ups entranced you. You couldn't take your eyes off them.

"Celia, your brother is about to throw. Would you pay attention?" your mom said.

You tried to pay attention to your brother, tried real hard, but Pole-Vaulting kept sneaking into the corner of your eye trying to get your attention. It kept taunting you. "Psst," Pole-Vaulting whispered in your ear. It must have snuck up behind you, and you could feel it's warm breath on your neck. "You're going to want to watch this."

You gave in. Your eyes moved from your brother who was trying to heave a metal ball as far as he could, to the jumper who had just started his approach. He made his way down the runway. You were on edge; your hands gripped the metal bleachers underneath you.

All your attention was focused on the jumper. He effortlessly made the transition from running horizontally to flying vertically. You took every movement in. The way he fluidly turned his body upside down and the way he wrapped his body around the bar as to just miss it. You were amazed as he fell to the mats. You could almost hear the precision of his jump.

Pole-Vaulting looked at you as if to say, "I told you so."

Leaving the meet that day you had butterflies in your stomach.

"I want to be like that," you told your mom.

"Well, you always were a climber," she said.

The image of Pole-Vaulting stayed with you over the summer. In your backyard you would grab a stick from a tree and pretend to pole-vault. You would run across your lawn

with the stick swaying in the air. You would jump with all your might and pretend you were taking flight. You wanted to get off the ground. You wanted to be in the air.

You joined the track team when you got to high school. As you walked over to the mats on the first day of practice your heart raced from nerves. Then you saw Pole-Vaulting waved at you, beckoning you to the mats. You felt more at ease, but you were anxious to try what you had been waiting to do all summer. The coach asked who wanted to try it first and you volunteered. It was cold that day, and the pole was cold. It felt awkward in your hands, and even more awkward as you started to run. When you planted the pole into the box you were abruptly ripped off the ground, and you swung onto the mats.

It wasn't what you had hoped for. You only went about a foot over the mats and landed with an ungraceful plop. You wanted to know where the beauty was and why this wasn't the same Pole-Vaulting you had seen in the summer.

Pole-Vaulting reassured you it's the same but you would have to put in hard work to get better.

"You didn't think you could get me that easily," Pole-Vaulting joked as you left practice. "Once you get me though, it will be all worth it."

You were determined. At practice you watched the older jumpers. You wanted to be like them. You tried to mimic them. You ran so hard in practice you threw up your lunch. You did drills at night before going to bed. You became a student of the sport. Blisters, which eventually turned into permanent calluses, formed on your hands from the countless drills on the pull-up bar. You started to become better, faster, and stronger.

In between classes you walked through the hallways counting your left steps and going visually through your approach. The first two steps you imagined as easy and smooth. By the fourth step were to be at maximum speed. At five and six you imagined the pole being brought down in front of you, and at seven you saw yourself jumping as hard as possible into the air.

There were no indoor facilities at your school. When the temperatures started to drop a lot of the vaulters started to skip practices.

“Slackers,” Pole-Vaulting called them.

You braved the temperatures. When it snowed you would spend half of practice shoveling the runway, and the other half trying to jump. When you couldn't move your hands anymore you ran up to the locker room to warm them under the hand dryer until you got feeling back in them.

You were obsessed. You were getting there.

It was at one of the big meets, the ones you had to qualify for to even compete. You had done well so far in high school, but you never fully got that feeling that you had hoped for. Something was missing. Sometimes you feared maybe it just wasn't meant to be.

You woke up that morning feeling calm. In warm-ups you felt calm. For the first few jumps you felt calm. You cleared them with ease and without expending too much energy.

“Jones,” the official called. The bar rested at a height seven inches higher than you had ever jumped before. You could smell the sticky spray on your hands as you picked up the pole off the grass. As you stepped onto the runway the spikes of your shoes fit in with the grooves of the track.

The sidelines blurred away. It was only you and Pole-Vaulting. Your coach, your parents, and your teammates no longer existed at that point. You looked at the space in the sky a foot above the bar. That's where you were aiming for. If you aimed for the bar you would hit it. You aimed for the sky because you wanted a big jump.

“Jump hard,” you told yourself out loud while you stood at the end of the runway. You felt an anxious confidence. All you had to do was jump hard. You peeled your right hand, which had become stained by the black tape on the pole, off of the top of the pole because it didn't feel right. It sounded like Velcro. You repositioned your hands so they were the correct distance apart. Once they felt perfect you were ready.

You started to make your way down the runway. The first two

steps were slow to get you into the rhythm. They felt perfect. At the third step you dug your toes into the ground and instinctually started to increase your turnover. You concentrated on the sound of your feet hitting the ground; they got quicker and lighter with each step. By the sixth, and penultimate, step you felt like you were gliding at maximum speed. There was no other way you would have wanted to feel.

You hit the box, arms outstretched, and there was no jarring on your arms. There was only silence and ease. Your body lifted perfectly off the ground. The pole bent at your force. You threw your head back, and the rest of you followed. Your feet swung over your head. You shot them toward the sky and turned your body just as the pole was unleashing its bend. It sent you higher into the air. You didn't have to concentrate on the moves. Your body just knew what to do. All the hard work had created a product that felt so easy.

When you turned you saw the bar underneath you. All you had to do was let go and fall down to the mats. When you landed you thought that's what a bird must feel like.

Your coach ran up to you after you got off the mats.

"Celia, that was great!," he yelled while hugging you. Over his shoulder you saw Pole-Vaulting leaning against the standards smiling. It winked at you.

You were in love.

There were lover spats after that.

You landed wrong which resulted in a sprained ankle.

Tendinitis formed in both wrists. Taking notes in class almost brought you to tears.

One day the runway was wet from rain. You slipped, fell, hit your head and got a concussion. The doctor at the emergency recommended wearing a helmet.

"Helmets are for wusses," you said. Pole-Vaulting agreed and all was forgiven.

High school ended, and a college recruited you.

At first it was exciting. Jumping with new people in a new place. But soon things started to change.

Pole-Vaulting started to make you feel guilty for staying up late to finish a paper. Instead it wanted you to do drills. It

would shake its head at you in a disapproving manner when you went out with friends on Thursday night rather than resting up for the weekend's track meet.

Then one day at practice you broke a pole. A loud crack rang through your ears and you landed on the mats still holding onto half of it.

"Hurry Celia. Take another jump before the fear sinks in," your coach said right after you got off the mats. You tried to take another jump. It felt different. Your hands shook from fear, and your run was tentative. As you took off all you could imagine was the pole splintering into little pieces and stabbing you in the hand, causing you to land on your head.

A picture of you lying on the ground with a broken neck popped into your mind. You saw your mom crying next to you in a hospital bed crying and saying something stupid like, "I should have spanked you when you were climbed things."

You wanted to quit. Pole-Vaulting said you weren't a quitter, and only weak people quit the team. One thing you were sure of was that you were not weak. So you kept going hoping it was just a phase.

It's something every pole-vaulter had to go through, like a rite of passage, you got told. For some reason you didn't believe it.

As the season went on there was no motivation left in you. The feeling of flying turned into fear. Eleven feet seemed a lot higher than it used to, and the idea of running at full speed in hopes of jumping over something with a pole just seemed plain stupid. Staying on the ground was nice. You stopped trying at practice. The aches and pains that used to be welcome after a hard workout became an annoyance. In practice you started having trouble getting off the ground. As you got closer to the box you had to tell yourself that you would jump and not run through. You tried to visualize yourself leaving the ground but couldn't. In almost every jump when you got to the second to last or last step you would feel a hitch in your stride, like something wasn't right. Like your body was preventing you from leaving the ground. You started to leave almost every practice discouraged, and you stopped

caring.

“You’ll get through this,” Pole-Vaulting said. “We can get through this.”

Towards the end of freshman year you went on a track trip to San Diego.

“Are you excited to jump in the warm sun?” Pole-Vaulting asked you on the plane.

You nodded your head yes, but you weren’t planning on taking the trip seriously.

The night before the meet, as Pole-Vaulting and the rest of your teammates slept, you snuck out. Worries about the next day’s competition didn’t even flutter across your mind. You knew you weren’t going to jump well; it had been months since you had a good jump. The only anxiety you had was from trying to sneak into a bar because you were only 19. A local, dive bar right on the beach wasn’t carding.

You took shots with a group of surfers, got in on their cheers, and accepted drinks from them. You let it slip that you had a track meet the next day so you couldn’t get too drunk.

“Why are you here then?” a surfer on crutches asked.

“Who cares,” you said. You were happy.

As you left the surfer offered to walk you home.

“No, I’ll be fine. I didn’t drink too much.”

He insisted.

You walked on the beach. He walked on the boardwalk because of the crutches. You took your shoes off and glided your feet through the sand. The fresh air helped you to see clearer.

“So what did you do to your leg?” you said.

“I tore my ACL surfing. I tried to cut in on a wave, and my knee didn’t turn with the rest of my body.”

His clutches clinked on the ground.

“The doctor said I could go back in the water in four months. After I finish rehab.”

“Do you miss it?” you asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t spend so much of my time thinking about getting back out there if I didn’t miss it.”

“Aren’t you scared though?”

“No. It wasn’t the waters fault I got hurt. It was something that just happened.”

You thought he was crazy. You continued to glide your feet through the cool sand. Even though it was late being tired for Pole-Vaulting the next day didn’t even cross your mind. The next morning you woke up with a headache, a stomach-ache and sand in your bed. Acid tasting like alcohol rose up in your throat during warm-ups. You only took two, bad, warm-up jumps before walking over to where the poles were lying on the ground. You laid down next to them in the warm grass. A nudge at your shoulder made you open your eyes. Pole-Vaulting was leaning over you.

“What’s wrong?” it asked.

It must have been something you ate, you told it, maybe the plane food. Pole-Vaulting looked skeptical. It didn’t investigate any further.

“Just try your hardest. That’s all you can do,” it said. You got out in three jumps without leaving the ground on any of them.

On the plane home you decided you were done. Pole-Vaulting had never done anything to you, so it wasn’t fair to keep wasting its time. It wasn’t fun anymore, and you finally admitted to yourself that things weren’t working out. You had to end it. You quit the team.

Pole-Vaulting pleaded with you. It argued that it gave you so much: trophies, school records, state titles. It gave you confidence. It made you fly.

“It’s just not worth it,” you said.

You didn’t know what to do with yourself in the beginning. It had been a long time since you didn’t have to be at practice everyday. You started smoking just to fill the time and to something with yourself.

Pole-Vaulting found out through a friend of a friend who saw you smoking outside your building. It called you disgusting. It said it hoped you got lung cancer and you had to go through chemotherapy. It said it wished all your hair would fall out from the radiation.

“I hope it kills you,” it said while walking away.

That was the last time you talked to Pole-Vaulting.

Sometimes now you can still find yourself looking over your shoulder checking to see if Pole-Vaulting is there. Then other times when you're walking in a park, or in the cereal aisle at the grocery store, you subconsciously start to count your steps. Counting down to a takeoff you won't make. You say "Jump Hard" to yourself after every step, except the last step. The seventh step is always "Takeoff and Fly."



Joe Dlugos

Lost Cause

Life would be better
if it was like that
movie we saw.

I wish I could remember
the name.



Joe Dlugos

Illumination

Turning off the
lights equals fear,

and fear equals
things like needing
electricity.



Joe Dlugos

1 2 3 Wishes

I wish I had learned
the lost art
of staying warm.

Wish I hadn't believed
the lies of Science.

My nose runs
and I label
Connecticut as
permanently
painful.

Jessica Forcier

No Safe Place

Second Place; Folio Fiction Contest

I sat in my room with the lights turned out. The door was open a crack, and I listened for the sound of my father's breathing. The TV news chattered softly in the background. I waited for his snore, a great congested sigh. When it finally came, I crept out into the hall. I could see him around the corner, asleep in his recliner in the darkened living room, the flickering TV the only light. I knew it was time to make my move.

To my father's left stood the liquor cabinet. I tiptoed in my socks toward the squat, wooden doors. The magnet clicked open when I pulled on the handles.

The bottles shone with the reflected light from the TV. I reached in and took one from the back. I had practiced this earlier in the day, and I made sure to make no sound when I lifted it from among the others. My father knew the contents of the cabinet exactly. I had no chance of him not noticing it was gone unless I took it while he slept.

After I had safely closed the cabinet, I stood again and looked at him. I made sure that his cigarette was out in the ashtray on the table. I would take care of the empty beer cans in the morning. Our nightly ritual remained unbroken. He made a mess; I cleaned it up.

The radiator let out a feeble hiss and I nearly jumped when he stirred. I whipped the bottle behind my back and I could feel the sweat from my palms as I gripped it tightly. Dad mumbled something in his sleep but then rolled over. My heart pounded and I slowly backed out of the room.

The cold December wind slipped in through my open window. I put the bottle down on my dresser. I stared in the mirror and I pulled my hair back. I brushed each section tightly until I could feel my scalp tingle from the pressure. I tied up the blonde ponytail with a rubber band, and then I wrapped the base of it with a blue bandanna. I looked down

at my clothes. I had nothing nice to speak of, so I wore a dark blue Hanes sweatshirt and sweatpants. I put my sneakers on and sat on the edge of my bed to wait.

I looked out the window at our neighbors' back porch, which slumped dangerously to the right. The paint peeled on their three-family house, one in a long line of run-down buildings in our neighborhood. I wondered what attracted my parents to this neighborhood, to Bridgeport, in the first place. When they emigrated from Slovakia, they must have had their pick. I remembered my mother telling me that our neighborhood was historically Eastern European, but by the time they arrived in the early eighties, very few Poles and Slovaks remained.

My father took the neighborhood's deterioration as a personal affront. He tried his best to improve things. He cut not only our grass, but other neighbors', too. He installed a statue of the Virgin Mary near the front porch, and lovingly touched up her paint every year. He used to shout when people tossed trash out their car windows, "They are trying to ruin my city!"

A few years later, our yard looked neglected like the rest. Sometimes I tried to pull the weeds that invaded Mary's protective half-shell, but my attempts failed miserably.

My father and I lived alone in our apartment. My mother lay unresponsive in a nursing home about a mile away.

When we came home after her heart attack, we settled into the new silence. I passed the nights in my bedroom, curled up under the covers, awake and afraid. My father never returned to his bed; he slept in his recliner in the living room.

I turned to prayer: rosaries, novenas, frequent begging to Saint Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes. If God would only give us this miracle, I promised that I would give my life back to Him. I would become a nun and live among the poor in a foreign country. I waited and wished and hoped, but the days passed without response from Heaven.

My father turned to alcohol. Never a heavy drinker before, he attacked our liquor cabinet during the long, lonely nights. He started with beer during Wheel of Fortune. Now

and then he listened to records, mostly Slovak folk songs, and moved on to slivovica, a plum brandy he had shipped from the old country. The night dragged on, and then anything in the liquor cabinet became fair game. I never knew how to predict the alcohol's effects. Sometimes he would become strangely emotional, very kissy and huggy, and other times he was mean, yelling at me to clean up the kitchen or sweep the sidewalk in front of the house.

One night, he lay in his chair, staring vacantly at the television. Not a muscle moved. He reminded me of my mother in her hospital bed, and I got scared. I walked up and laid a hand on his chest to make sure he was still breathing. He listlessly turned his eyes to me and I hardly recognized him.

I made up my mind that I would take better care of him. Maybe if he got three good meals and clean, ironed clothes, he would feel better. So I started cooking, badly, and I cleaned more, and I washed clothes twice a week. I hoped these small comforts would bring him back to me. Instead, he retreated deeper into his mind, and the alcohol never let me touch him. At first, it made me angry; then I felt jealous. I wanted to know what it felt like not to feel.

My eyes were drawn to the bottle on my dresser again. I knew I was breaking every promise I had made to Officer Ortiz at my DARE graduation back in fifth grade. I knew my father would kill me if he found the bottle missing, if he found me missing. I counted on the fact that I never gave him any trouble before, that he would stay asleep all night. I prayed Drusilla would arrive soon.

I feared she had forgotten about me when twenty minutes went by. Finally, I heard her whispers float in through the open window.

"Lenka! Lenka!" Her soft Jamaican accent made my name sound like music. I moved to the window and saw her smiling up at me, her round face surrounded by the fur of her hood.

"I'll be right out," I whispered back. I put on my heavy coat. I slipped the bottle into my pocket and the coat sagged from the weight. I paused for a second in front of the

window and looked out at the night.

“Are you coming or not?”

Panic squeezed my chest. “What if my dad hears me? What if he catches us?” I looked back to my bedroom door.

“He won’t. Now get your butt out here. It’s freezing!”

She seemed so confident. My only chance at a real friendship, she stood like a beacon in the fluorescent streetlight glow. It was all I needed. I climbed out and balanced on the sill. I left the window slightly open for later, and then jumped down.

Face-to-face in the yard, we grinned and felt like the bad-asses we hoped we were. “You got the stuff?” she asked. I lifted the bottle from my pocket. “Yeah.” We looked at the small bottle I had selected.

“Goldschläger. I never heard of this. Is it one of your weird Slovak things?”

“No. It’s German, I think.” I put the bottle back in my pocket and hoped I hadn’t chosen wrong.

“Well, whatever. Let’s go before anyone sees us.” She grabbed me by the arm, and we started walking. Drusilla’s hood rubbed against my face. We picked up the pace when we turned onto Crescent Avenue. A Metro-North train roared above us on the tracks, and we looked up at the shiny metal whizzing by. The burst of wind it brought pushed us even faster, and we broke out in a full run, laughing when we almost slipped on ice, laughing at the streets because we were too brave to be scared.

Drusilla had found me sitting by myself on the bus in eighth grade. I was desperately, hopelessly alone. My old school closed the year before, and I transferred to Saint Rose of Lima. I quickly became the class joke, that new girl with the mixed-up accent, sort of foreign, but hard to place.

I don’t know what made her sit next to me, talk to me. I knew the risk she took. She faced ridicule from the white kids, rejection from the black kids. Who wanted to be seen with Lenka, who came from that weird, isolated school near Father Panik Village? I couldn’t believe that she wanted to get to know me, in spite of everything that stood in the way.

When she told me she wanted to hang out, my heart leapt.

Drusilla took the lead when we approached Helen Street. She turned and started walking through the yard of one of the old three-family houses that lined the road.

“Are you sure we should do this?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Come on. You know we can’t go to the corner. All the dealers are there.”

“Right.” I followed her through the yard and into the next one. Our sneakers left small tracks in the snow. We crunched from yard to yard, helping each other climb the chain-link fences. No one noticed us, or cared if they did. We finally emerged on Barnum Avenue. A few scattered houses had Christmas decorations, and their lights cast a glow on the hardened snow.

“We’re almost there.” Drusilla hurried ahead of me, her breath visible in small puffs. I struggled to keep up, wondering where we were headed.

We stopped in front of an old, abandoned factory, one of many in our neighborhood. The chain link fence stood menacingly around the buildings. The brick exteriors crumbled, and the single-pane windows were mostly broken. I looked into the dark, empty yard, then back at Drusilla. “What are we doing here?”

“We’re going in.” She regarded me skeptically. “What, you scared?”

“No!” I knew I responded too quickly, but I didn’t want her to think I was chicken.

Dru started running her hands along the fence, making it clang. I wondered if she meant for us to climb over, but the barbed wire at the top seemed to make that impossible. She kept walking, carefully searching the fence.

“So what are we looking for?”

“There’s a hole, but you can’t see it unless you look hard.”

I took my hands out of my pockets and joined the search. Our fingers explored the cold diamond shapes. The fence felt like a giant crochet blanket, and we were searching for a place where the pattern was dropped.

Just when I thought my fingers would freeze to the metal, Drusilla popped open a section of the fence. She turned back and grinned mischievously. “I knew I’d find it.” She pulled it toward us. A hole just big enough to sneak through presented itself. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

We slipped through the opening, and then Drusilla put the fence back in its original position. It looked perfectly whole again.

The old buildings loomed large before us, and the yard surrounding the factories seemed huge and cold. Nothing much remained of the former business, just a few rotting wooden pallets and large metal drums. The wind whipped around us and blew our hoods back. Drusilla drew a flashlight from her pocket. She aimed the beam at the first building and we saw that no door remained.

“I guess this is easier than I thought. We can just walk in.”

I nodded, scared to enter. I wished for bravery like Drusilla’s. Pretty soon I’d slip up and she would see what a baby I really was.

We approached the doorway. “I feel like we’re secret agents or something,” Drusilla whispered. “Jamaica and Slovakia have sent their best spies to investigate...” She paused, unsure of what came next.

I picked up her thread. “Sent to investigate a series of murders after young girls go exploring mysterious old buildings.” I tried to drop the tone of my voice. “They never come out.”

Drusilla crinkled her nose and laughed. “You’re funny. Sick, but funny.”

I smiled, thrilled that I made her laugh.

We tentatively walked inside. Drusilla’s flashlight barely made a dent in the darkness, but the far-off streetlight glow through the windows showed us vague outlines. The building was one giant room with high ceilings. Old fluorescent fixtures hung from the ceiling with all the bulbs removed. It smelled ancient, a mixture of something metallic and something chemical. A metal ladder, bottom rung missing, leaned against the wall. No

other equipment remained, and the room looked like an empty shell.

“Hello?” Drusilla’s voice echoed in the cavernous space. “Anybody here?” A brittle breaking sound came from the ground. She pointed the flashlight down. A broken crack vial lay at her feet. She disdainfully pushed it out of the way. She pointed the flashlight into a dark corner where a few drums huddled together. “Come on, we can sit down over there.”

I couldn’t believe we had actually done it. Sneaking in seemed impossible, but Drusilla made it happen. If she wanted to do something, she did it, and didn’t ask anyone’s permission first. She carried herself like she knew exactly what she was doing. It seemed revolutionary to me. I became Drusilla’s disciple. I knew I would follow her anywhere.

The weak beam of the flashlight led us to the corner. The walls, covered with various tags, screamed unknown messages: Dig! Park City Dreamz! FPV 4 Eva! The room throbbed with cold air coming through the bricks, but they gave us some protection from the blowing wind. We slipped behind the drums. From our position, we could see the whole empty space.

I imagined the factory in the old days. I could see crowds of people at shift-change, laughing and joking. I pictured heavy equipment, assembly lines, grease and sparks. My father worked in a very similar place when I was little. I remember walking in with my mom, looking very small compared to all the loud, huge machines. My father picked me up, put me on his shoulders and gave me a tour. I worried that the machines would hurt my dad, but he told me he was the boss of them, no way would he let them get out of control.

Drusilla inspected the floor and pushed some papers out of the way with her foot. “Sorry it’s kind of dirty.”

I shrugged. “It’s ok.” I sat down on the hard concrete, but secretly worried about roaches and spiders.

She joined me on the floor. “My sister was right.” She looked around at our small shelter. “No one would be able to see you behind here.”

“She told you about this place?”

“Not exactly. I listened to her talk about it with her boyfriend once. She said coming here is like hiding in plain sight.”

I curled my hands into the sleeves of my coat and hugged my knees. “I bet she comes here when it’s warmer.”

“Where else do we have to go? We can’t exactly hang at your house.”

My face flushed. I offended her, I knew it. I tried to cover. “I know. I’ve never actually had any friends over my house.”

She looked at me skeptically. “Never?”

“Never, not even people from my old school.”

She paused, and I knew that she probably thought my father kept me chained up in my room. What other choice did he have? ‘Safe’ didn’t define our little section of the East Side.

“So what do you do every day after school?”

“I walk home from the bus stop and go upstairs to Mrs. Dubek’s apartment. I stay there until my dad gets home from work.”

“Who’s Mrs. Dub-chick?” She mispronounced the name in a strange Jamaican/American way, so different from my family’s hard accents.

“She’s our neighbor. She’s like 90 years old, but she’s ok. She lets me watch TV when I finish my homework.”

Drusilla shook her head. “Let me guess: your dad thinks all the kids in the neighborhood are bad influences, so he has this lady watch you to keep you out of trouble.” I turned my head, surprised. “That’s exactly the problem. He doesn’t trust anybody who’s not Slovak.” I toed the dirty floor with my sneaker.

“That’s how my mom acts, too. She’s always warning me about the ‘bad children’ who don’t listen to their parents.” Drusilla laughed. “Outside it’s Bridgeport, but inside the house, it’s still Jamaica.”

I started to laugh, too.

She nodded. “I see that in you. I noticed it your first day at St. Rose. You’re not from here, just like I’m not.”

“But I am from here. I was born at Bridgeport Hospital.”

“Doesn’t make a difference. As far as your dad is concerned, you grew up in Slovakia.” She pulled her coat around her tighter. “That’s why the other kids don’t want to hang out with you. You’re too foreign.”

Her calm assessment rang in my ears. I knew she was right, but what could I do about it?

“Listen, don’t worry about it. You’re fine how you are.”

I knew she lied at this point, but it was a nice lie. I pulled the bottle of Goldschläger from my coat pocket. It was my turn to impress. “Hey, we can’t forget about this.” I stared at the bottle, the gold flecks barely visible in the dark room. I prayed my father wouldn’t wake up in the night, reach in the liquor cabinet, and find it gone. I pushed thoughts of his anger out of my mind. What could he do, ground me? I never went anywhere anyway. Despite my logic, fear still tugged at my imagination: I pictured his hard, intoxicated eyes and a step too close. Stop it! I shook the thought away. I prayed the alcohol would make me untouchable, too.

“It’s cool you got this, Lenka.” Drusilla’s brown eyes crinkled as I opened the bottle. “We need to make a toast.” She mimed holding a glass. “To Lenka’s great escape.”

I raised my imaginary glass to match hers. “And to Drusilla, my wonderful tour guide to the loveliest section of Bridgeport.”

After the toast, we looked at the bottle for a long minute. “You ever had this before?” Dru took the bottle from me and tried to sniff it.

“I’ve seen people drink it at parties, but I’ve never tasted it.” I saw her look at me expectantly, so I grabbed the bottle and took a sip. A bitter cinnamon taste rushed past my tongue. My face scrunched up and Drusilla started to laugh.

“It can’t be that bad,” she said, before I handed her the bottle. She took a sip and bravely held her face in a neutral pose, but her shoulders shook.

“It tastes like liquid Fireballs, doesn’t it?” I laughed,

picturing the little red candies being melted down and mixed.

Dru leaned back on one of the drums. “Yeah. It’s kind of gross, but all alcohol is. You gotta get used to it, then it starts to taste better.”

I took another mouthful. The alcohol burned its way down my throat, still tasting awful, but I ignored it. “It’s so awesome to be out of the house. Thanks for sneaking me out tonight.”

Dru waved her hand. “Lenka, you did that all by yourself.”

The detached feeling I wanted never came. I kept drinking, sure that the next sip would make me invincible. The supply of Goldschläger dwindled perilously.

Drusilla tried to make the conversation light, even if we sat in the dark. We talked about people at school, teachers we hated. We even laughed a little, but we ran out of things in common. We sat in silence for a long time while I fumbled for something else to say. I grabbed Drusilla’s hand. “You know, some of my ancestors were gypsies. I’ll read your palm.” Drusilla laughed loudly and it echoed through the giant space.

“I think you’re faking.”

“No, it’s true. I’ll prove it.” I ran a finger over the lines in her palm. “Oh, this is your life line. It says you’ll live until you’re at least eighty.”

“Madame Lenka, tell me more.”

“This line here tells me you’ll be very successful. You’ll have an apartment in New York and a beautiful house on the ocean in Jamaica.”

Drusilla’s eyes took on a faraway look and she took back her hand. “I hope you’re right. I really want to see my father again.”

I hoped I hadn’t said something wrong. I cleared my throat. “When was the last time?”

She looked down, brushed some dirt from her black coat. “When I was six. We left him behind. I never been back.”

“Do you get to talk to him on the phone or something?”

She shrugged. “Not really. He sends me letters sometimes. Once in a while, in the letters, he tries to remind me of something from the old days when I lived with him, but I don’t really remember.”

“So your mom brought you here?”

She nodded. “Me and my sister. Things were getting bad, and she wanted us out.” Dru’s eyes squinted and she almost laughed. “You know, at the time we left, men were attacking little girls walking to school. I remember my father giving me a little kitchen knife so I could defend myself. Showed me different places on the body to cut or stab.” I shivered when I pictured little Dru walking to school alone, waiting for someone to emerge from the bushes, like the boogeyman, only real. I didn’t know what to say, so I took another swig from the bottle.

“And what about you, Lenka? What are your mom and dad like?”

I nearly choked, and struggled to respond. “My dad’s, um, fine. And my mom’s not, well, here.” I put down the bottle.

“Back in Slovakia?”

My hands shook, so I drew them back into the sleeves of my coat and hoped it wasn’t too obvious. “No. She’s over at the Dinan Center, the nursing home.”

“What’s she doing there? She’s real old?”

I reached up and starting undoing my ponytail, wanting something for my restless fingers to do, trying not to think too hard about my mother, about everything. “No, she’s pretty young.” I drew a shaky breath. “She had a bad heart attack when me and my dad were out one day. We didn’t find her for a long time. The doctors think she lost oxygen, and it messed up her brain.” I couldn’t believe I’d said all that. I tried not to picture her sprawled on the living room floor, her face tinted blue, my father dropping to his knees and screaming. “Damn.” Drusilla looked up at one of the exposed pipes in the ceiling. “So she’s brain-dead?”

“Brain-damaged, not brain-dead.” The words tumbled out faster, harsher, than I wanted. I ran my hands through my

hair, and tried to calm my churning stomach with a few deep breaths, but it seemed to be no use.

“I’m sorry.” Dru looked carefully at me. “Come here.” She motioned for me to sit closer.

“Why?”

“Just come over here.”

I scooted over on the cold, dirty concrete floor.

She reached up and took strands of my hair in her hands. “I’ll give you a French braid.” Her hands brushed my scalp, raked through my hair. She started to weave it together gently. I closed my eyes for a minute and let myself remember how it felt when my mother braided my hair. “You have such beautiful hair, Chuch,” Mom would say. My body tingled as I started to relax. I pretended Drusilla’s hands were my mother’s, and let myself float in the memory.

We didn’t speak for a few minutes. Drusilla pulled another strand of hair. “So, can she talk?” Her voice dragged me back to reality.

“No. Sometimes she makes noises, but usually she just stares.” My father and I visited her every Sunday, and it seemed like she never moved from the previous week. She lay propped up on pillows, her hair strewn everywhere. I tried to talk to her, touch her hands, but I got no recognition. I couldn’t see anything behind her eyes anymore.

“Your dad must be really sad, too.”

“Yeah.” I pictured him at the foot of her bed, pleading with her to wake up. He looked like a pilgrim at the shrine of an entombed saint. My mother lay insensible to his words. Each week, he pleaded a little less, and got a lot quieter. He just patted her hand, and fussed with her blankets in her tiny half of the room.

A choking sound came from my throat. “He’s so angry all the time. I wish he would talk to me. Why can’t we talk anymore?” Something rose up inside of me, threatened to overflow. I cursed the alcohol that made me so stupid. I got the reverse effect; instead of feeling nothing, I felt everything. Drusilla dropped her hands from the braid. She put her right hand on my shaking shoulder. “Lenka, I don’t know.”

After sniffing for a few minutes, I raised my eyes to meet hers. My cover was blown. I lost it in front of this incredibly cool girl, and she probably wouldn't want to be seen with me again.

The sound of footsteps fell in the doorway, shattering the silence. We both shot each other a look. Who was there? We crouched low and peered from behind our barrels. A pair of large men entered the factory. One shoved the other forward, and the first man fell hard. The second man laughed loudly.

The first rose from the floor. "What the fuck did you do that for?" The first man shoved the second one right back, but he remained steady.

"Why not? You're so easy to push around." The man's Raiders hat obscured the upper half of his face.

"Fuck you, asshole."

They started pulling things from their jacket pockets and sat down. The clink of glass reached us in the far corner. I recognized the vials and pipe immediately. Crack grew around our neighborhood like an invasive vine. Even little kids knew what it was.

Drusilla and I huddled together, watching. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight. Her frightened eyes told me she never expected this.

I started to breathe rapidly and the room spun. We were trapped. My joking comment about the murdered girls replayed in my mind like a premonition. Oh God, Oh God, what were we going to do?

The men started trading hits on the pipe, not talking, not moving much.

I turned my eyes to Drusilla. We couldn't talk or they would hear us. I tried to communicate, but my fear froze me to the spot.

Dru looked back to me. She mouthed something that looked like, "We gotta go."

"How?" I mouthed back. My vision blurred, and I choked back the acid rising in my throat.

Drusilla motioned to the small space between the last

barrel and the wall. She made a curved motion with her hand, and then mouthed, “Run.”

I aligned myself behind her and waited for the cue. I prayed to Jesus, begged him to spare our lives. My father couldn’t lose me, too.

Drusilla made a rapid nod of her head and we tore out from behind the barrels. I kept my eyes straight ahead at the doorway, the night outside so far away.

We startled the crackheads when we whipped past.

“Fuck!” One of them nearly dropped the pipe. Their screams reverberated in the emptiness.

I focused on every stride, and tried not to look at them. The darkness threatened to overpower my vision. Dru ran ahead of me, and we finally escaped. The wind slapped us in our faces, and snow fell onto our eyelashes. We dashed across the factory yard and approached the fence. The hole now gaped open, any attempt at secrecy violated. We ran through, and the jagged metal of the fence caught my coat, ripping it along the side. I tugged at it desperately and freed myself.

I didn’t hear running behind us, but I never looked back. We ran sloppily, blindly knocking over trash cans, tearing down the middle of Barnum Avenue, and then sprinting through yards. Pain ripped through my side. My body rebelled against the extreme test.

Drusilla finally glanced quickly over her shoulder when we hit a fence. I knew from her look that the men weren’t chasing us. We stopped, and she collapsed against the fence. She buried her face in her hands. Her sobs rippled through her body, shaking the fence behind her. “Oh my God, I thought we were gonna die.”

I sank to the ground next to her, trying not to hyperventilate or throw up. The pain and the fear strangled me on the inside. I buried my right hand in snow and raked the cold ground beneath. We were so stupid, so reckless and dumb. I started hiccupping and for a second, I thought I would pass out. I fought the feeling. No! Stay awake, Lenka!

Drusilla raised her head and leaned it against the

fence. She wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands. She wouldn't look at me. She mumbled under her breath. "Lenka, I'm sorry that happened."

"Dru, it's not your fault." The adrenaline slowly wore off, and I formed coherent thoughts again. I tried to touch her arm, but she shook off my hand.

"This was supposed to be fun."

I dug my shaking hand back into the snow, and tried to calm down. I looked at Drusilla and her confidence had disappeared. She just looked scared, like me.

"Don't beat yourself up. You didn't know those guys would be there."

"No, I took you there, and if anything happened..." She closed her eyes and twitched a little. She opened them again, and a hard resolve moved in. "We have to get you home."

Home. My hand drifted to my empty pocket. In our haste, I left the bottle behind. My father's face swirled in my mind. All I wanted was to see him again, safe inside our house, but I feared the unknown. What would he do if he found out where I was, what I did? "Dru, I'll just go home with you tonight. My dad won't notice."

Drusilla gave me an incredulous stare. "Girl, now you're babbling." She rose to her feet and held out a hand. "Come on, get up."

She pulled me to my feet. We both wobbled for a second, but we grabbed onto the short fence and climbed over. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

I saw my house in the distance, and I knew we only had a little farther to go. Fear snaked around my stomach again. I just had to get in without waking my father up. I prayed. Please God, have mercy on me one more time tonight.

We stopped at the corner of my yard, unsure of what to say. Drusilla almost laughed. "No more crazy factories for us." She glanced up and smiled sadly. "Go inside."

"But, Dru, what about you? You shouldn't go home alone."

"I'll be fine. Just go in." She caught my eyes. "Be

careful, ok?” She pulled her hood around her head and walked away, leaving me alone in the yard. I watched a snow flurry envelop her until she rounded the corner.

I staggered over to the side of the house. I found my bedroom window open a crack, like I left it. I looked up at the sill, and it seemed miles away. Why didn't I plan this earlier? I should have left a step-stool under the window. I jumped up and tried to catch the sill. I got it on the third try. Splinters dug into my right hand, but I held on with all my strength. I braced my feet against the wooden siding, pulled up and finally balanced myself on the sill. I opened the window all the way.

I waited for a minute. I heard no noise, no movement inside. My father couldn't be awake. I extended one leg down to the floor, but I lost my balance. I tried desperately to hold on, but I fell from the sill to the floor with a thump.

I heard my father's heavy footsteps when he tore out of his chair. I lay on the floor, immobile. I knew there was nothing I could do. He would catch me. The door to my room slammed open, light from the hall spilling into the darkness. My father appeared above me, holding a baseball bat. He jumped with a start when he found that the intruder was, in fact, me.

“Muoj Bože!” His blue eyes widened in shock. “Lenka, what are you doing?” he asked me in Slovak.

It took my brain a moment to process the switch back to Slovak, my first language. I stared up at him. I tried to sound somewhat coherent; however, my words failed me. “Do ja viem?”

“You don't know?” He looked at my coat, the open window. His confusion lifted, and tension grew through his arms, shoulders, neck. What my father lacked in height, he made up for in bulk. A solid man, he was even heavier than he looked. He dropped the baseball bat on the floor, ran a shaking hand through his short, blonde hair.

I slowly sat up, my head pounding. I winced when I put pressure on my right hand and the splinters dug in deeper. My father stood silently, illuminated from behind by the hall

light. I sat in his shadow.

His words came out clipped, short. “You left in the middle of the night?”

I could only nod. All I wanted was to throw myself into his arms, be grateful that I survived my encounter with the men, but the anger in his eyes rebuked me.

“Where did you go?” He took a step closer to me. “Who did you go with?”

“Nobody.” I kept my eyes on the floor.

“Don’t try to fool me, Lenka.” He walked toward my bed, and then spun around. “Was it that Jamaican girl that’s been calling here?”

“No!” Drusilla’s description gave me a chill. I knew he didn’t like her. If he found out the truth, he would forbid me from talking to her. I knew I couldn’t sacrifice her to his paranoia. My mind desperately groped for another explanation.

“Stop lying. It had to be her.” He reached down, grabbed my wrist, and pulled me to my feet.

The strength in his hand surprised me. His grip grew tighter, sent shooting pains down my arm. I let out a little gasp. I knew he would never deliberately hurt me, but that’s not what I felt at that moment. I looked into his eyes, and realized he was probably as drunk as I was. I wanted to lie to protect Drusilla, but I couldn’t focus on anything but the pain.

“Ok, it was her! Just let go.”

He dropped my wrist and shook his head.

I watched whatever trust he had for me burn away in an instant. “Dad, she’s my friend.” I rubbed my wrist and noticed little red marks forming. “Please don’t be mad at her.”

“What kind of friend drags you out in the middle of the night?” He took in my appearance: disheveled hair in the half-braid, my torn coat, red cheeks and wobbling posture. It slowly connected. “You were drinking?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

My brain wanted me to lie, but my voice only told the truth. I couldn’t stop the words from spilling out. “I took it

from the liquor cabinet.”

My father’s face turned a strange shade of purple. He took a step too close. “When did you become so disobedient, disrespectful? Where are you learning these things?”

I backed away until I became pinned against the radiator. He grabbed my upper arm and shook me. “Answer me, Lenka.”

His flushed face hardened into a horrifying mask. The anger in his eyes terrified me. I realized this man was not my father. This man didn’t care if he hurt me. I wanted my real father back, the one who loved me, who would never trap me. I wrenched my arm away. “Stop it. Stay away from me!” I pushed him with all my strength and he lost his balance. He fell onto the floor. He didn’t move for a few seconds.

Staring at his still form, I panicked. Oh God, what if I hurt him? I dropped quickly to my knees. “Daddy, Daddy, talk to me.” My strangled voice sounded like a little girl’s. My father opened his eyes and looked up blankly. He finally pushed up and sat against the bed. He rested his head in his hands. A deep groan escaped his lips. “Marta, help me!” I nearly toppled over at the sound of my mother’s name. When was the last time he even said it in our house? I braced myself with my hands to stay upright.

He turned eyes filled with confusion and betrayal to me. “Lenka, I do not understand. Why did you do this?” The tears in his eyes startled me. I hadn’t seen him this way in a long time, not since the first few days after my mother’s heart attack, when we found out nothing the doctors could do would reach her. I couldn’t respond. How could he possibly understand? I needed to get away from our house, from him, from this crushing sadness, just for a little while. He couldn’t give that freedom to me, so I had to take it for myself. Stabbing pains radiated from my stomach when I heard the sound of my father crying. I sensed the world tilting. I couldn’t even think anymore.

“You used to be so strong, Chuch.” He spoke softly. “You can’t do this to me.”

Ice formed in my mouth, coated my throat. My body

couldn't stop the storm inside me. I never realized just how much he depended on me. When would it be my turn to lean on him?

He looked away and wiped his nose with his sleeve. He turned back to me, eyes still hazy with alcohol, fear and grief. He reached out, cupped my face with his hand. "My Lenka is gone."

A huge chunk of ice fell into my stomach. In my mind, I screamed. Why did I have to be what he wanted? Why couldn't he just be my dad? I ran to the bathroom, fell to my knees and threw up.

The whole night flashed before me: Drusilla and the factory, the vacant yards and the chain link fences, the crack-heads, the trains and the cold and the snow and the wind. What did it matter? No safe place ever existed.

After a few moments, I heard my father quietly enter the room.

"Just go away, Dad." I didn't want to hear anything he had to say. I finally sank back against the radiator, empty. My father, rumped and sweaty, brushed stray hair away from my face. He took my arm, gently this time.

I squirmed. I wanted no part of his fake sympathy. "Go away."

He persisted. He slung my arm over his shoulder and lifted me to my feet. Too weak to fight, I let him lead me back to my bedroom.

He removed my coat, pulled the covers back on my bed and laid me down. He took off my shoes, and then pulled the comforter up to my neck. His hand touched my cheek. Our roles reversed, I could only stare up at him.

I watched him walk to the window, look outside. His breath fogged the upper pane. I knew I needed to tell him how sorry I was for sneaking out, for stealing, for everything. I would promise him that I'd be strong. I couldn't lose him, too. I whispered. "Dad, I'm..."

He turned to me and shook his head. "Shh, Lenka." He closed the window. "Just sleep."

William John Hay

One's Defeat

He saw trouble
felt frustration
from laughter
of four young hoodlums
without a conscience.
He wanted to say.
don't do it,
but one lit the fire
on an old man
asleep on a train
station bench.
He wanted to rush
to the man's aid,
but couldn't get
off his own bench.
Put out the fire!
He hid
from the urgency
of the night.
The old man fell
off the bench
dissipated in the air
like the crowd
that just walked away
and did nothing.

William John Hay

Finding a Home

I felt frozen in Hell
dressed in underwear
going to church,
the pews as cold as lost souls
in the cemetery outside the door.

The headstones were in Latin;
each plot rose two inches
at the sound of Bingo.
All the dying were alive
those alive were all dead
laying across the altar.

I only wanted a little proof,
but the cross just hung from the roof
and wouldn't go away
until I tried this new belief
I found under my pillow
left by the tooth fairy on Halloween.

I tried to pray in my backyard;
the pavement was too hard.
I drew chalk flowers
and watered them every day.
They died. I drowned them.
I was homicidal back then.

But I found God in a hall,
not a hallway,
a Kingdom Hall.
He promised me life forever
if I shaved off my beard.
It's the truth; I swear.

Judges

Clare Rossini-Poetry Judge: Clare Rossini's third collection, *Lingo*, was published by University of Akron Press in 2006. Her second collection, *Winter Morning with Crow*, was selected by Donald Justice for the 1996 Akron Poetry Prize; the book went on to be finalist for a Small Press Book Award and for PEN's 1999 Joyce Osterweil Award for Poetry. Her first collection, *Selections from the Claudia Poems*, was published in 1997 by the Minnesota Center for the Book Arts in a limited art-book edition. Rossini's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*, as well as in textbooks and anthologies, including *Wild Hearts* (Fordham University Press, 2009); *Poetry Daily Essentials*, ed. Diane Boller and Don Selby (Sourcebooks, Inc.: Naperville, Ill., 2007), *An Introduction to Poetry* (ed. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, Longman: New York, 2002, and subsequent editions) and the *Best American Poetry* series. She has received fellowships from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, the Minnesota State Arts Board, the Maxell Shepherd Foundation, and the Bush Foundation.

Christopher Torockio-Fiction Judge: the author most recently of a story collection, *The Truth at Daybreak* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2008). His previous books include a novel, *Floating Holidays*, and a previous story collection, *Presence*. He teaches fiction writing at Eastern CT State University in Willimantic.

Denise Parri-Art Judge (digital judging): Achievements 1976-1979 Art Teacher New Haven, C.T. 1994 Began Keka Designs custom interiors, custom painting all private collectors. Also a collection was commissioned for Avesta Computers of the 21st floor of the World Trade Center in New York City. 1995 Jewelry Designer-"Don Lin Jewelry Collection," mass produced under "Parri" represented at Jacob Javitt Center. Sold in chain stores across the United States, including Walt Disneyland, Disney World, Steinmart and Accessory Lady. Designer for *West Side Story* at Shubert Theater in New Haven C.T. Recreated the Parsi Temple for a restaurant in Greenwich village with wall sculpture and faux finishes. Produced private art shows, and jewelry shows. Earned a living from Venetian plaster work, gilding, and decades of creations with extraordinary faux finishing.

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Then you're out . . .

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