

Undergraduate Art and Literary Magazine

F O L I O

Spring 2013

Southern Connecticut State University

Folio

Spring 2013

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Thomas Hils

You are just one update away from release

Take a deep bite

then breathe. Then chew through
gears and circuits, through
layers of 0s and 1s, through
blood and the littlest bits
and bytes. Eat it like an animal,
swallow entire lines of code.
Do not choke on error messages
or pieces of only slightly recognizable
flesh. Do not fear the consequences
of non-responding applications as
you take in entire networks of open
source projects.

When you are full, spit out
the husks of old world infrastructure
and forget that anyone ever owned words—
they will have no meaning here. Shed
the skin from your face, peel the colors
from your eyes. You are invisible now.
Define arguments only in terms of the simple
exchange of bits for neurons. Shuffle
thoroughly a stack of hard drives and insert
the one that fits best. Query
your brain for the choicest hunks
of memories then store them away on a server
in Russia worked by Serbs whose degrees
relate only to the exchange of information
between machines.

Write to memory: you are only as human
as the data on your drives. Corruption
is defined in the manual as a loss of
fidelity between reading and writing

and you've been reading and writing
for so long nobody knows the originals
from copies.

Advice left for my friend on the door of the men's bathroom on his 18th birthday

When cooking dinner take care not

to burn your girlfriend, even if
she presses her Scandinavian palm to the pan.
Do not criticize her choice of supreme being
between rounds of burn treatment and ritualized banter.
Using a butcher's knife, pare away
layers of clothes and bruised
emotions. If you cannot get absolution at your
local supermarket do not substitute
with compromise. Salt to taste
then serve face down on the cool side of your pillow with slices
of the Golden apple.

If dolphins disappear from the oceans,
do not panic. They will return. Instead ask
yourself: Why would I leave? When men
with guns and confident smiles enter
your bedroom, kiss them. Murder
is a messy business. Before class
smoke only as much weed as you
would give your best friend
if she were dry. Ask questions the professor

does not expect about stars and shapes
of astral bodies. If she does not know, leave.
Education is a myth—we all die without ever
having met another person.

When sad, be sad. This is not
weakness. Nor is it true. If a man
offers to take you home for the night
even though you've spilled your drink
down the front of your pants—go.
If you can't dance, steal his wallet
and the collection of poetry on the back
of the toilet. If lonely, post fictional
accounts of your own victories
over classism and people who
park in too many spaces on abandoned
message boards populated by old things
that do not die.

A MIND LIKE COMPOST

David had a nose like triangles

whose geometry bent down and away
from the off-brown of his Icelandic-
Iranian face. He had hardwood limbs
(like Burmese teak) that

grew out at sharp angles
and buzzed and jumped like an animation missing every third
(and fifth) frame. He skipped
cracked shook snapped

into the backdrops of a hundred scenes like the roof top of a supermarket
(packed with midnight shoppers who

purchase wilting vegetables and dented cans
of indistinguishable brands)
peering over the edge of a giant
illuminated S, he looks down on us
and we look up at him into his mouth

and letters fall out telling us about
the time he drove loopy-loop into
on-coming traffic and screeched
and shuffled and snapped and hissed

between cars and guard rails and inevitability
as he picked bits of hallucinogenic fungus
from between teeth with a pink tongue

furiously popping and snapping and cracking
letters and words and little pockets
of musty earth from his gums. David told me later

how he'd grow plants in the cuffs of
his blues jeans but I could only write the
time he crashed the car his tongue picking
his girlfriend's lips from his own on the back road
(in the back of town) and how he didn't have
airbags when he drove into that car on Whitney

under the breast of the Sleeping Giants and the
weight of the paramedics who held him down and forced
his old-growth arms (narra burl) and legs
(aged mahogany) into silence against
the sterile sheets (which did not rustle with the same
grace as leaves).

Michael Gavin

On Gentrification

My Grandfather has redoubled

his efforts at hanging mirrored
glass facades, turning tenements
into cathedrals of gentrification;
he pours Clorox onto
the face of Harlem,
and vitiligo follows in his wake.

Procession of the Dead

Lying in a coffin

Full of ice cubes
Under gray sky—
The shifting steps
Of the gray-robed monks
Who carry me—
I object that I am
Not dead,
But they continue
Their low chants.

Kate Garnett

Cell Phone Bills *In Response to Andrea Gibson's "Activist"*

In Congo's panorama of split smoke,

over five million people are laid out: chests caved in and unwound. Women's lips are carved from their faces, their husbands are peeled like orange rinds, arms flapping behind them in tethers. Something wet is in the air. It cannot cool, war spreading like brush fire in the name of metals. Toiling in tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold, ten-year-old children are abducted and made to hunt men alongside militia, for the minerals that make our cell phones. The families know that we know. And still my cell phone company can convince me monthly, to reach out and gut someone.

Self Portrait

Try pretending that it's not your girlfriend's

name branded across every local paper. Pretend that while you fucked her on the couch, her baby did not stop breathing in the next room over, choked to death on its own spit-up. What matters isn't the 911 call, the infinite nine minutes it took for the ambulance to show, the stunning silence crackling through the baby monitor. What matters are the worlds of milk remaining: the thickmilk of the infant's own wet that it lay in and became stone in, the milkiness of your girlfriend's fingers prying open

the baby's blue mouth, looking for a lungful
of air, the milkwhite of your knuckle-bone
clenched with rage, then despair, then nothing,
the milk of the baby's open eyes draining
color like a chloroform and saying, swallow.

Elyse Pedra

Doubtful Dream

If you've arrived at doubt,

you've traveled too far – a dream
worth doubt is a dream too costly.
I dreamed I'd be a doctor, a jazzer, a Harvard grad.
But my tire lost the plot in a federal pothole.
It's costing me fifty thousand
second rate dreams.
How blessed are we!
That is not a lie, I really do believe
in circular breathing, butterfly tongue
in a trumpet microphone: I clamored
underneath rotisserie beams in pink, blue, sunrise
yellow jazz, though only for a short while.
Another player was fearless, you could hear it.
He lullabied a stadium, standing before
our semi-circled rolling swells grounding
his clear opulence, the most delicate crescendo.
Now he plays Carnegie, his dream—
God bless him. Rumor is he raped a girl.
God forgive him.
Where does it go, where do I go from here?
Every gesture is gasping,
barely willed risk. I am acid-washed
in reason. All the time, I'm there on the rock
the lower brass erupts
begging myself to spring
the woodwinds whistle
the water is plenty deep, twenty feet
tall bass drums bashing
everyone watching below
and behind me
they want their turn.
The fat man is cueing my coda
three times, three times 'til I'm free—
I can almost feel myself lift off.

Ren Höek

Ren squeezes

my fists to dust
when mother makes me
shut the light.
He curses my stupid stumpy
sister, You E-diot!
When he laughs,
I laugh: my teeth,
an undulated balustrade
in a hard taco grimace.
I trill like a psychopath,
spoon feed cat litter
and it's all very funny
when my tongue turns
to a strip of impotent bacon.
My throat is sore from cackling
like a puny beast
it's sneaking up, never goes away.
I hold his four-fingered hands
in agony both of us
recoiling in bloodshot
eyes: four perforated ovaries
skinned alive and lopsided
when we come unhinged,
fertilized eggs with red dots
bleeding streets all over.
We are pulling down
our skin and coming through.
We are so ugly, Ren and me.

Kayla Tarantino

Three Missed Calls

My arm begins to hurt holding the phone up

I place it between my shoulder and ear, sighing.

My father is a talker, I'm not a listener.

I bite the back of my pen—

between forced phrases of agreement,

and the occasional “that’s nice”

or “mhm”.

All the while waiting to hang up and get back

to a pile of work.

He tells me about improvements to his car, his house,

his backyard, his career,

about the new neighbors, their dog

who doesn't stop barking,

about my brother dating someone new, or getting a great job,

or doing well in school.

I don't respond—instead, try to read through an article

while still keeping up conversation.

“Are you still there?”

“What? Oh, yeah”

“You sound busy” his voice cracks with disappointment.

I tell him I am.

He keeps talking, and I continue reading

the same sentence ten more times.

Andrew Patenaude

Sunrise

I lost myself when the moon faded,

now I am
normal.

Long gone are the days,
when I was Fruit Brute.
That tropical werewolf,
in the fern green and mango orange overalls.

Those were much easier days,
in which I could chew,
on orange flakes,
or perk myself up
with lime marshmallows.

All while screaming my pseudonym
at the top of my lungs.

Back then
every night was like a party for me,
and I felt an instinctual pleasure
in just being with those
nocturnal creatures of the night.

However, unlike the blueberry ghost,
the strawberry monster,
and the chocolate vampire,
who all found the moon again,
I have never seen it.

Nor do I ever think I will again,
thus for me,
the party's over.

Yet I still hope,
continuing to sit
in a red leather arm chair at my chateau,
to find the moon,
where it should be, but
never is.

Jasmine Wilborne

What Divorce Does to the Flesh

As soon as we said "I do"

the church pews parted
and the altar morphed into the
common man's work table.
Then the machinery appeared.
The priest clutched the power drill,
the organist cradled the table saw,
and the deacon threaded the industrialized sewing machine.
Even the flower girl partook in the action:
she gripped the soldering iron.
He had told me, before I said 'yes', that they
really meant it. That they were true believers.
They really believed it.

I don't remember screams trapped
in every tear that streaked our face. I don't
remember the sound our ribs made as they were
sawed, sanded and fused. But I think I took
back the love I felt for you when the pain
howled louder than your words of
consolation. When it was done, they had
sewn our hands together so they were
forever clasped like living shackles.

I'm leaving you because you are weak.
I saw it bubble up from your lips
when Father Damian jimmied the knife
between your elbow joints. It was in the way
you pleaded with him in the tiny baby voice
I could never coax from you. It's in the way
you just can't seem to scratch the reoccurring
itch on the right hand corner of my soul. You
never seem to get anything right or tell the
right jokes, or know that 'yes' really means
'no, I don't want to take a part-time job to

pay for our sons' private education'. Private schools raise fundamentalists.
I didn't know that our lips would become a
brown peach smear. Or that my most tender
memories would become
yours. At first I thought it was cute
how our hearts sprouted
slimy tentacles and reached out for each other.
Baby, I thought we'd be together to see a million
frost-covered Novembers but
you've forgotten that I grew up in Sacramento.
And like a distraction that turns the head of the teacher,
I've been stretching the skin between us taut, with the shoulder
that still belongs to me. And then I hear it. The rip of skin:
hot, shocked and electrified.
I move from you, feeling the hot trickle of
red brown memories flow over the
shredded skin.
I'm snatching back what is mine and I've
already got a mouthful of your teeth,
cold and heavy on your tongue.
I twist away snapping arteries and the chasm
between us looks like the belly of the
severed Titanic. Sharp, twisted
and protruding, our ribs snap.
I don't feel the pain as I use the
nails I've grown to tear
apart our heart. For once
my side is bigger than yours.

When I hear the hot slop of organs spill to the floor: I know I'm free!
When I scoop them up under my arm: I know I'm free!
When I use my teeth to sever the ropes between us: I know I'm free!
I'm free until I can't stand.
You have my other leg.

Luke Hunter

Atonement (el Andalón)

The true drifters,

moth balled orbs of
absent entities,
covered clouds in paint.
Rays of light cracked out
beneath a watercolor
of open sky,
soaked in acrylics,
and holy oils.
In sinew and rawhide,
they were whale songs of
the very land itself.

Each strand of fading sandstone
lamented the spray of
darker clouds,
the fabrics of
shape-shifting rainmakers,
who bedazzled the shamans
into innocence;
Night clerks in nature's gas station,
wild boys with slingshots, who
poke holes above
their heads,
reaching into where
the rain falls.

A never-ending curve
calls back,
where land meets more land,
and space meets more time.
It will not leave you, even
when your cells ebb

beside each receding tide.
A wave of light composes
music through
each arc's ending,
through fibers of
presence,
with each ray
still bounding outwards.

And energetic boys,
awake all night,
still poke holes in
the heavens.

And in their fever dreams,
they yell at the moon
until it spins away.

Christopher Ciemniowski
General Adaptation Syndrome

I'm sitting

in my biology class
listening to the teacher
ramble on about adrenaline,
or epinephrine,
or whatever,
when I feel the coldness
on my thighs.

I am wearing only my tighty-whities.

Everyone has noticed
at the same time as me;
They attack with laughter

The blood drains from my face
to protect my vital organs
from predatory dismemberment.

My pupils dilate.
My vision goes blurry.
My bladder relaxes.

Adrenaline,
or epinephrine,
or whatever.

The VHS

Standing upright,

it is a minor monolith
of human achievement.
Or a minimalist's headstone.

The ambiguous black box
stares wide eyed, blankly,
indifferent to its own existence:
a chiseled slab of coal
withholding a moving tapestry
of color and sound.
All the imagination of a black box theatre
fully imagined inside a black box.
Its unassuming form might contain
a beautiful, romantic drama
or an exciting space opera.

This one is unidentified. So,
it is locked into the interrogation chamber,
where its round eyes revolve and reveal
all that it has witnessed
beginning in medias res.

It is of the home video genre.

There are scratches
in the raw memory of its reels.
Luckily, I am able to recall the missing scenes,
captured by my captive self.
He could sing.
He could dance.
He sings.
He dances.
I am captivated all over again.

I reach the end of the vision.
I remove it from the mechanical cavern
and place it into the debriefing device
where it rewinds to its earliest remembrance.
Then, I label it with a permanent black marker,
Christmas Eve 1985.

Happy Birthday, Charles Darwin

We will burst out of tollbooths, zip

across interstates, speed down roadways,

and cut off New York City cabbies. We
will come from disparate clay

pits, this wide variety of life forms. We
will copy and paste our lives and we

will not be extinguished. All of us
are all guilty in the fire, but a multitude

of fevers can coexist. Look for smooth
tight skin in gorgeous shapes and lead it

home for hours of acrobatic
sex. The only equipment you'll need

is the belief in man's ability to shape
the world. Serve up some coffee with your

biology. It's strong and pungent and will
absolutely ruin the brain. With our heads

singed and our hair smoking, we
crawl away from the primitive explosion,

not even remembering
how long ago it was

we found out we were alive.

Joe Grillo

Summer Days

Last summer passed up the street

like a roving band of gypsies.

It cursed me for stealing the wheel

off its moving wagon.

My cyanide & Kool-Aid cocktail was bittersweet.

My nose hair tickled the odor of charcoal that cooked dead meat.

I cooled down in a pool filled with three little Fonzie's.

The hiss of heatbugs stung my eardrums while

squirrels taught the robins how to Dougie in the green treetops.

The tepid taste of the noon sun brought tears

like that Raymond Carver story about the blind man from

Seattle staring at cathedrals on TV.

Of course, he couldn't stare.

From a few houses down, I'd hear

Chris nagging Regan to put on a sweater before she caught a cold,

even though it was

80 degrees outside.

Those days, I never needed to show off my swag or wear a shirt

because I had big holes in my earlobes.

A dozen tiny devils jumped through them, chanting,

"We don't want to go through the glass. It looks like shark teeth."

The idle engine of hope flooded. So did the road

when the ice cream man melted

and his delicious truck plowed over the fire hydrant.

The stream of water that spewed forth was as curdled as sour milk.

Baby Adrian, who lived in the last house on the left,

joined the Army at the end of August and got stationed in Hawaii.

Twenty Augusts from now, he'll get shell-shocked from the sound of

ukuleles strummed by rotund men in silly shirts

and bobble-headed women in grass skirts

trapped by the lawn ornaments. Everything will have changed,

everyone except me because everyone will accept me.

At my house,

the warm breeze at dusk only stirred up the good dust.

“You killed my father. Prepare to die,” the air conditioner screamed at the top of its lungs as it ran back down into the basement. I closed the empty window and stared out, up towards the sky,

I Watched a Cat Rot

I watched a cat rot

in the middle of the road
over a week
of morning commutes
to school.

Monday: Fully intact with blood coming out its ears, drying in the sunlight. The yellow eyes are open, staring through my windshield and me. It's still fresh.

Tuesday: Missing both hind legs. Eyes closed. Muddy tire marks streak over its back, creating a red-brown stripe pattern in the matted fur.

Wednesday: Torso completely flat and the head is gone, but I think I see a lone, thin whisker shining green under the changing traffic light.

Thursday: A frayed orange tail is

all that's left.
The white tip flutters from
side to side with the wind of
each passing car.

Friday: Nothing but a dark stain
on the cracked black asphalt.
A torn red collar with a
small silver heart lies forgotten
by the sewer drain.
I don't much feel
like listening
or talking
or breathing in
class now.



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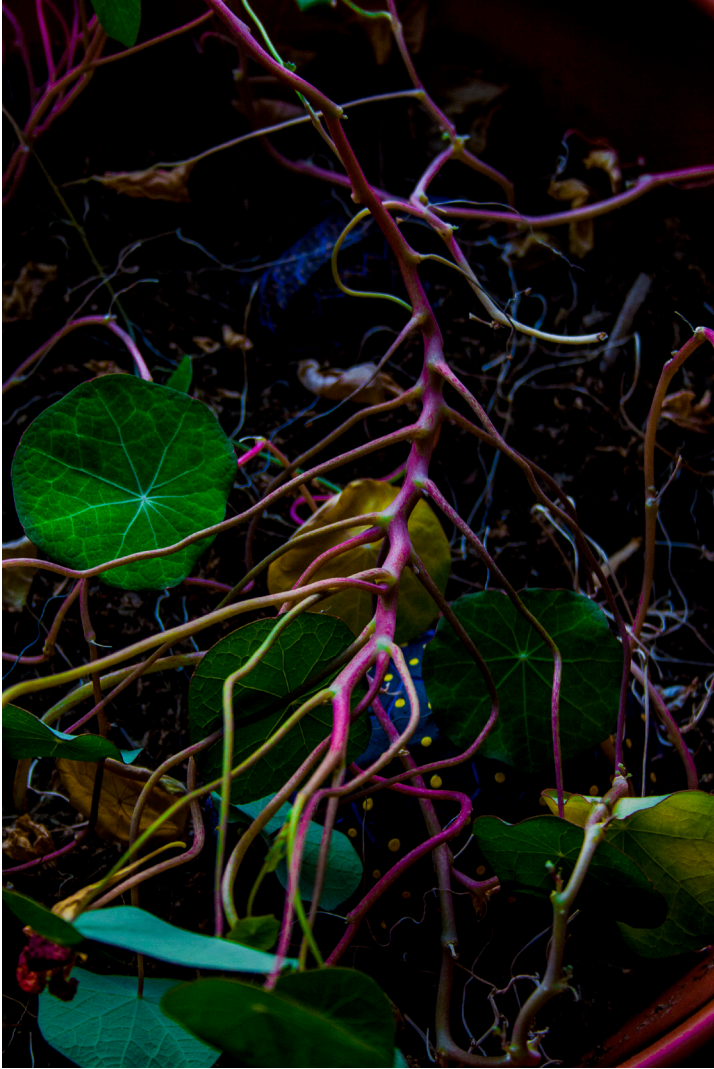
Kenny Chitacapa
The Conquest



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Disillusionment



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What Nightmares are Made of



Robert Velez

Sundry Hunger While Asunder

I'm wearing my thick winter jacket, but the chill

in the night air still reaches my bones. Wood smoke burns in the distance. I stand on the sidewalk and press my palms onto the steel railing of the bridge. My bridge. The people who built her never gave her a name. To me, she is Marcy. I grab onto her harder and the cold leaves my body. I lean my head down and press my lips against her railing. The taste of metal radiates onto the tip of my tongue. I pull my head back and smile down. A car passes behind me, its headlights revealing my still body. I turn my head and watch the car take the left onto the main road. One of the taillights is out.

It's starting to drizzle. The drops of water bring back the cold and I shiver. Boosting my head over the railing, I look further down. Sometimes when I look down from Marcy like this, I get the desire to let go of a meaningful possession of mine, just to see if I can catch it before it falls out of reach. I don't feel that desire right now. Small ripples distort the streetlights' reflections in Marston River's shallow water 40 feet below. It's nothing like the way the river looks in the summer, when even from this high up, the water is clear and it's possible to see groups of turtles swimming in it. It's a wonderful sight, but not as wonderful as Marcy illuminated by the sun.

It's a shame that we can't be together like this during the day. I would just stay under her to avoid everyone, but there aren't enough stable rocks big enough to stand on. I can't even risk getting my shoes wet, especially now that it's winter. I don't know how I'd explain that to my mother.

The darker it is, the smaller the risk of anyone seeing me. In about three months of coming to Marcy almost every other night, I've never been caught. No one ever walks over her after dark. Sure, some cars still pass over and drive by on the main road, but I doubt any of the drivers know why I'm there. It sucks that it has to be this way, but people have weird standards for love. To them, Marcy isn't Marcy. She's only a bridge.

The light goes out in one of the top rooms of the two-story house across the river. I've never really thought about whether or not the people who live there can see me from their windows. It's about time for me to go.

I release her railing and shake my hands, trying to get some feeling back into them. My phone shows 11:23, kind of late even for me. I lean down to give

Marcy's railing one last kiss. My lips are touching her when the asphalt starts to crackle behind me. I pull back fast and shoot around facing the street. A car I don't recognize comes from the main road, drives over Marcy and toward the neighborhood.

Shit. How did I not notice the headlights coming?

If the driver saw me, he doesn't seem to care. He just continues on the road, takes a right. Good. He's not going towards my house. Was it even a he?

I turn back to Marcy. "I'll see you soon," I say before giving her a final peck. I jog the half mile back to my house, dodging the small puddles on the sidewalk. It's 11:40 when I make my way up the front steps. I forgot to turn on the porch light before I left, so I can barely see where I'm going now. The front of my foot catches on the top step and I almost slam my face into the front door. When I open the door, my hand slips off the doorknob and it bangs against the adjacent wall inside.

"Will?" my mom calls from the living room on the off chance that I'm an inexperienced burglar.

"Sorry," I call back. "Yeah, it's only me."

I unzip my jacket and walk down the hall and into the living room. My mom is sitting back on the beige loveseat watching television, some shitty reality show about pawnshops. My hands rest on the top of a cushion on the side.

"I don't know how you can watch that stuff," I say, leaning forward.

She stretches her arms up and yawns. She turns her head to me. "That was a pretty long walk," she says.

"Yeah, I guess I just lost track of time."

"How is it outside?"

"Pretty cold," I say.

My mom squints. "It's raining?" she asks, noticing the small spots on my jacket.

"Barely."

She looks at the television. "You're gonna get sick if you keep going out in the cold."

"Yeah," I say and walk back out to the hallway. I go to my room, take my coat off, and hang it on the rack screwed to the wall.

"Good night, Mom," I say, leaning out my doorway.

"Night," she calls from the living room, mid-yawn.

I shut the door and plop face down on my bed. Curling into the fetal posi-

tion, I close my eyes. The last thing I see before I fall asleep is the streetlights' golden glow shooting off the steel of Marcy's railing.

It's a little after 10 in the morning when I wake up. Ever since I took a break from college last winter, I've been sleeping late. Had I stayed in school, I'd probably have enough credits to be a junior by now. What would it matter? English is one of the top five most useless things to major in in this economy, according to the geniuses over at Yahoo! News. Not that English had much to do with what made me quit. The last class I went to was Chemistry at the beginning of the semester. The professor told everyone to pick partners. I noticed one girl who looked like she didn't have a partner and approached her.

"So, do you need a partner?" I said.

"Uh, I don't know," she said without looking at me. Then she walked across the room to a single guy I hadn't seen. Naturally, I was the odd one out.

The professor came up to me and said, "What, you do not have anyone?" I'm not sure what kind of accent he had. Eastern European, maybe? He said it loud enough for everyone in the class to hear.

"Nope," I said. Sweat ran down the sides of my head. Then I picked up my backpack and left the lab. Once outside, I called my mom and told her class had ended early and asked her to come get me.

"Jesus Christ, Will," she said when I told her the truth on the way home. "You can't just give up."

Actually, I could just give up.

I sit up and get out of bed. Once I'm in the kitchen, I pour a bowl of Lucky Charms and sit down at the table. Little cartoon snowmen on the tablecloth smile at me.

My mom comes through the front door, sifting through the mail in her hands. She stops and looks closely at one. "Look, Will." She holds the small 4x6 postcard out in front of me. The heading, in cursive, says *Laura & Mark*. Inside a heart under the names, it reads, "Save the Date: July 23."

"I still can't believe Laura's getting married," she says.

"I can't believe we have to go," I say with a mouthful of marshmallows. I hate weddings, even though I've only been to one before, when I was thirteen. My mom got kind of mad when I didn't dance with her.

"Shame on you," she says. "She's your cousin. You guys used to be together all the time."

"Yeah, when she was six and I was four."

"Still, she's family. And Mark's a good guy, too."

"I know."

My mom sits across from me and watches me eat while she opens the other envelopes. Finally, she says, "When are you going to find a nice girl for yourself?"

"When are you going to find a nice man for yourself?"

She makes a disapproving sound with her tongue. "We're not talking about me. We're talking about you. I could always introduce you to someone."

"I have someone," I say, almost choking.

"Oh? She's too good to come over and meet me?"

"She's kind of too big for the house."

"Oh," she says, nodding. "Nothing wrong with a chubby girl."

"No, it's not like that."

She ignores me. "Nothing to be ashamed about."

Hopefully, this is the end of our conversation on the subject. I finish my cereal, bring the bowl to the sink, and empty out the milk before I begin washing it.

"You ever hear from Abigail at all?" my mom asks. "You two were so cute."

"Not really," I say. "But I heard that she's pregnant now."

She gasps. "A baby? Abigail's having a baby?"

Thinking about the blurry picture of her ultrasound that Abigail posted online, I place the bowl in the dish drainer and make my way back to my room. "It's not like she's still seventeen," I say.

I shut my door and lean my head back against it.

I guess I should have deleted Abigail as a friend after everything that happened. Or she should have deleted me. If I do the math, she's been out of my life longer than she was in it. I still think it's kind of fucked up that she broke up with me after I'd already bought both our tickets to prom. And that she brought Jim from the technical school two towns over as her date while I stayed home. I started a big thing with her about paying me back for her ticket. An egg or twelve may or may not have been thrown at her house. I'm not saying I handled it maturely, but I was seventeen and I'd been with her since sophomore year.

When she posted the picture of the ultrasound, I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. The caption read, "FIVE MONTHS UNTIL JIMMY JR <3." In the comment box, I began to type, "Sweet hamster," before shutting the browser.

One of the last things Abigail said to me was, “Everything you say is either rude or rhetorical.”

Because car mechanics like Jim are renowned for their politeness.

A burning sensation begins to fill my chest. A different image stands in place of Abigail and her stupid unborn hamster. It’s Marcy on the first day I really noticed her. Sure, I’ve lived near her my whole life, but that day was the first time I actually felt the way I do now.

It was last November, unusually warm. It hit the high 60s. I needed a walk after seeing the ultrasound. I made my way down the hill to the river and balanced on the sharp rocks sticking out of the shallow water. Wobbling, I turned and faced my left. My eyes scaled one of the columns. Even with the visible cracks running up it, the column looked sturdy enough to survive an explosion. As well as being sturdy, it was thick and long like a great leg. On the side of the bridge’s concrete barrier, someone had spray painted the word *tab*, just like that, in all lower case blue letters. I still don’t know how anyone could have managed to do that. A really tall ladder, maybe. The teardrop shape painted around the letters looked almost like an eye. I then stared further up at the railing bolted atop the barrier. The light that shot down off the railing sent a chill through my body like none I’d ever felt, not even during the time I’d spent with Abigail years ago. The way it glistened in the sun made my heart feel like it was about to burst. I walked back up the hill and onto the sidewalk on top of the bridge. I didn’t touch it then, only stared for what must have been an hour. My gaze was broken only once, when someone slammed down on his horn. I thought it was directed at me until I realized it was someone behind a slow-moving van on the main road.

The bridge was all I could think about after I’d returned home and the sun had almost gone down. Anything that made me feel that way couldn’t have been wrong, even if it wasn’t a person. It was then I decided I needed to be with it. With her.

I need to go to her right now. After shoving my feet into my Nikes, I leave my room and head to the front door.

“Where are you going?” my mom asks, looking at the electric bill.

“For a walk,” I say.

“You’re not wearing a jacket? It’s cold out,” she says. I’m already on my way down the steps, running to Marcy.

When I arrive to her, it’s a little before noon. I let my hand slide along her

railing while I walk down the sidewalk. Grass grows out of a crack in the concrete. A small patch of rust on her railing grinds into my palm. I stop walking and kiss her, hard, pushing my lips into her until my mouth hurts. It isn't enough.

Not completely realizing what I'm doing, I vault myself up and straddle her railing. Gripping her between my legs, the cool steel grows warm on the insides of my thighs through my pants. My eyes are shut. The low rumble of cars crawls by and I don't care. This is the next level. Twenty minutes of public ecstasy pass like the cars behind me.

My grip grows weaker. The burning in my chest begins to leave. I'm just about to finish when a woman's voice comes from the side. "Sir, it's not so bad," the voice says. "Don't jump."

I lose my balance and tumble over Marcy's railing toward the river. A pressure fills my ears and creates a muffled sound like I'm underwater. Falling doesn't feel much like I've imagined it would. Instead, it's more like time has stopped. I wonder whether or not I can survive a 40-foot fall. A little more than 40 if I account for the added height of the railing. It's all about the positioning, I suppose. At the moment, my head is facing down and there are all those small, sharp rocks sticking out of the river. I can't believe this is how I'm going to die.

More than ten seconds pass and I still haven't felt my skull being caved in by the wet rocks below. Something is strange. Marcy isn't that high up. I realize my eyes are still closed. I open them and look up. Two hands are clasped around my right ankle. The hands have red fingernail polish. They belong to a young woman in a black police uniform. Her wide eyes stare at me over Marcy's side. Her grip is real tight because my right foot is completely numb. And she must be pretty strong for a woman since I'm about 150, but probably seem heavier hanging off the side of a bridge. I guess they don't let just anybody become a cop.

"I've got you," she shouts at me. Then she turns her head to the left. "Pulaski, you moron," she says. "Give me a hand here. I can't hold this fuckin' weirdo all day."

A larger, hairier pair of hands grab onto my left ankle. There are sirens approaching and I feel my body being pulled upwards. When I'm back standing on the sidewalk, the lady cop looks at me. She's a big woman. Not fat, but big. The gold bar above her right breast on her uniform reads Pauline something.

"What the hell were you thinking?" she asks.

Before I can answer, a different male cop leads me into the back of his car.

I can't see his gold bar.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Where do you think?" the cop driving answers. "The station."

"Why?"

"Well, let's see. You were on the edge of a bridge in broad daylight looking all cat atomic or some shit."

"So?" I say.

"So we can't just go letting people kill themselves. We need to clear some stuff up with you."

I shake my head, hoping he can see me in his rear-view. "I wasn't trying to kill myself."

He makes a sound. I can't tell if it's a laugh or a hiccup.

"I wasn't," I repeat.

"Okay," he says. He's silent for the rest of the drive to the station.

"Well, what were you doing up there?" the officer sitting at the table across from me asks. "You don't seem drunk or high, so that idea's out." He plays with the side of his mustache.

"I was just spending time with Mar—" I catch myself. "With the bridge. I was spending time with the bridge."

"Spending time with the bridge? You go there often?"

"Yeah, you know," I say. "I like taking in the view and stuff. It's really nice to look out from there this time of year."

"Officer Cooper said your eyes were closed."

"Officer Cooper?"

"The one who grabbed you." Oh, so that's the rest of Pauline's gold bar.

"Well, I don't really know what to say to that. They might have been closed, but that doesn't mean I wanted to kill myself."

"But you said you were taking in the view."

"Which I was?"

The cop sighs. "Listen, this whole thing seems weird, but you've never been in trouble before. I'm willing to let you off with a warning."

"I'd really appreciate that. This whole thing just ruined my day."

"You do understand why we brought you in, though. Right?"

"Yeah, I guess things got a little out of control. I'm sorry about this."

He pulls out a white handkerchief and wipes his forehead. "Alright, you can

go now," he says. "Just don't let it happen again. Please."

I smile at him, stand up, and walk out of the room. Then I call my mom. It rings a few times before she picks up.

"Hey, Mom."

"Will? Are you still out?"

"Uh, yeah," I say. "I kind of need a ride."

"Can't you just walk?" she asks.

"Not really. I'm at the police station."

"The police station?" she repeats. "What are you doing there?"

"It's a long story. I'm not in trouble."

"Tell me what happened."

"Just please come and get me," I say. Then I hang up.

I sit in an uncomfortable wooden chair and wait for her. Two officers standing at a desk are talking about me. One of them is Pulaski. They try to keep their voices down, but I can hear them. Even if I couldn't, the quick glances they keep shooting me would give them away.

"Bridge fucker," Pulaski says, covering his mouth with a hairy hand. The other cop laughs. My head hangs.

Two strong pats on my left shoulder make me look up. It's Pauline. She bites her lip. "You alright?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm alright, I guess."

"Good."

"Thanks for saving me," I say, breaking a small silence.

"I've seen people fall from higher up than that and live," she says, shaking her head. "You probably would've made it even if I didn't catch you."

"Still, thanks."

She nods. "Yep."

Another silence. "Do you really think I'm a weirdo?" I ask her.

"Kind of," she says, a smile breaking out on her face. "Stay out of trouble." Then she walks away.

The two officers at the desk laugh again. I stand up from the chair and exit the station. When I'm outside, a breeze picks up and hits my uncovered arms. I should have worn a coat. My mom pulls up in her car.

When I enter the car and buckle up, she asks, "Want to tell me what this is about?"

"Just a misunderstanding," I say, avoiding her eyes. "A huge misunderstanding."

“What the fuck, Will? You’re not in trouble?”

“No, they thought I was someone I wasn’t. Had to bring me in anyway.”

She nods and puts the car into drive. “As long as you didn’t do anything wrong. Jesus, you scared me.”

On the way home, we drive over Marcy. Watching her railing pass by, the one I sat on today, I feel a new sensation. No burning in my chest. No happiness. Just embarrassment. I press the side of my head against the window and direct my eyes toward the glove compartment. It’s barely past 3 when we get home, and I go into my room and lie in bed until I fall asleep. It takes a while. My mom comes in around 6 and asks me if I want anything to eat. I tell her I’m not hungry.

When I close my eyes, I don’t see anything.

Judging from the pictures I’ve seen, Abigail’s baby looks less like a hamster than I would have hoped. Laura and Mark’s wedding is only a couple weeks away. I don’t see Marcy unless I’m in the car driving to or from the house. I’d take another street if I could. No more nighttime walks. No more anytime walks, for that matter. It’s tough, but I think I’m finally just about over her.

Today, I wake up and it’s a little after noon. I’m sitting up in bed when my door creaks open and my mom pops her head in.

“Oh, I was just checking if you were awake yet,” she says.

“Yeah, I’m awake,” I say, rubbing my eyes.

“Come to the living room and look at what Uncle Michael gave us,” she says, smiling.

After standing up, I walk through the doorway. My mom leads me as if I’ve forgotten where the living room is. Against the formerly-empty space of the wall, an armoire stands.

The armoire’s wood is dark and polished. I don’t know if it’s mahogany or what. I’m no expert. Whatever it is, it stuns me. It’s a little bit taller than I am. Pretty wide, too. A line of carved vines adorns the top, which curves upward in an arch. A small glint of sun comes through the living room window and reflects off one of the armoire’s corners. Even though it’s kind of humid in the house, a sudden chill overtakes me. I close my eyes.

My mom stands at my side. “I guess your uncle needed to make some room. Wasn’t that nice of him?”

I don’t say anything.

“The guys he sent to move it in were so loud. Had to take the front door off its hinges and everything. I can’t believe you slept through it,” she says. She wraps her right arm around me. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

I open my eyes and continue to stare at the armoire, deeper and deeper. “Yeah,” I say. “She is beautiful.”

Webster Janvury

These Tickets Cost a Fortune

Sunlight glares off the immense façade of Fenworth mansion, bouncing off the white stone and glittering windows, the brightness assaulting Joel's sight. He ascends the stairs of the massive porch with one hand held up against glare, squinting through a plain black Zorro mask that itches around his eyes. The devil in a campy mask waits at the open door, ushering guests into the mansion with theatrical flourish. Joel hands the devil his ticket, then shows him a picture of Julie and with a dry mouth asks, "Have you seen her?" The devil's plastic orange face leers at him, twisted, sparkling, and immobile; finally the porter shakes his head. He places a hand on Joel's back and gently pushes him toward the open door. It's about the response Joel expected.

Inside, the foyer towers above, marble and gold three stories high with daylight streaming in through the crystal faceted windows. An ogre at the entrance to the coat check room collects outerwear and bags and electronics. As the ogre puts Joel's phone in a cloth-lined basket with a handful of other forbidden devices, Joel shows him Julie's photo. The ogre has not seen her, does not know if she left anything in the coat check room—he does numbers, not faces. Joel thanks him anyway. If the ogre understands or guesses Joel's purpose here, he doesn't let on.

The scent of roast lamb draws Joel past the entry hall, through the carpeted gallery lined with lilies and Botticelli reproductions, to open arched doors marking the threshold of the dining room, where an unmasked harpist plucks out a simple melody. Painted sprites in gauzy skirts and sleek antennae serve the masked diners lamb and veal. The windowed south wall looks out onto a sunlit lawn, a sculpted garden, and the dense forest beyond. Fenworth mansion sits on over a hundred acres of land. Someone could get lost out there, in the dark.

Joel walks to the nearest table to show Julie's picture to the seated guests. Many ignore him, but not all. An elderly woman in a fiery gown and phoenix-wing mask taps the picture and says, "She sang last week. Such a unique voice. I'd like it if she sang for us again."

"She never came home," Joel says, half-hoping to see a spark of sympathy, or even curiosity, behind the gaudy flames of the phoenix mask. But the woman

just smiles, patient, polite, uninterested. Joel leaves her to her meal.

“I remember her,” says a drunken, prematurely balding fox. He offers Joel a chunk of lamb. Joel shakes his head and keeps holding the picture in front of the man’s carved snout. “Maybe she got lucky an’ someone bought her off. If not, well, she’ll show soon. Some of the talent don’t come out till dark. As if being aloof will do ‘em any good. I want personality in my pets, you know? You need to try some of this, sit down, sit.”

Joel doesn’t sit. He moves on, approaching one passionless mask after another, and learns nothing that could explain Julie’s absence. No one gives him their name. He gives them all his, which bothers some. “We leave our identities behind,” drawls a fat bull-horned man, lamb juices running down his chin to drip onto his suit. “That’s just manners.”

On his way out, a round little serving sprite catches Joel by the arm. He has to lean down to put his ear near her green painted lips as she whispers, “I saw where she went after she sang.”

“Where?” Joel asks. A hand touches his back. He straightens, turning to see a taut, lizard-like face, unmistakable despite the feathered and sequined monstrosity wrapped around the upper half of her head: Mother. Not his mother. Fenworth Mansion’s Mother, owner and mistress of ceremonies. Her small lizardy head seems propped up by the nest of feathers, fur, and fluff rising from the shoulders of her sharp, low-cut gown.

“Joel,” Mother purrs in a cigarette-ravaged voice. Her hand moves to the shoulder of his suit jacket, lacquered fingertips brushing off imaginary dandruff. “So glad you could come after all. You almost had me worried. Is the help bothering you?”

He doesn’t want to deal with Mother yet. What is he supposed to say? The sprite blurts out, “He was just asking me about a singer from last week—Julie?”

Mother’s mask has a kind of netting over the eye holes. Joel can’t see in. Her collagen-plumped lips purse slightly, then part. “What about Julie?”

“I can’t find her,” Joel says. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands so he shows the photo to Mother. As if she hadn’t seen it before. As if she hadn’t taken it.

Mother reaches an arm around Joel’s shoulders, enveloping him in her nauseating perfume, guiding him away. The mess of fluff around her shoulders scratches and tickles his face and neck. As they pass the plain-faced harpist,

Joel hears the serving girl whisper, "She went with the rabbit man." A brief chill passes through him, and then he's out of the dining room.

In the hallway, Mother pauses to smile graciously as a pair of guests—a portly Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum—walk by. Still smiling at the dumpy twins, she says out the side of her mouth, "You come in telling everyone your name after we went to great lengths to keep things hush-hush, and now this nonsense about not finding Julie. I'm afraid I don't have time for your games tonight. What are you playing at now?"

"It's not a game," says Joel. He keeps his voice level. "I don't know where she is."

"How fascinating. And you think my guests, who are busy trying to enjoy themselves, will help you locate her?" Her breath is hot in his ear but he won't try to pull away. If he shows discomfort she'll just hold him tighter. "Help me understand, Joel. You know I try so hard to understand. If you can't find her, how can any of my guests help you, hmm?"

"If I know what happened last week. . ."

"But nothing happened last week. I told you that myself."

Another guest passes by, this one a Roman centurion, in gilded helmet and scarlet cloak. He raises a glass to acknowledge Mother, who smiles and nods and chuckles benevolently in response. When the centurion's back is turned Mother hisses sideways to Joel, "Let me remind you of the contract. Nobody breaks their promises to Mother. Frankly, I don't understand or care what's going on with you or Julie, but she will show up on time tonight—no bullshit, no excuses. Or we'll have a very unpleasant talk."

The library's thin, chapel-like windows show a sun just beginning to sink into the forest beyond the manicured lawn. Paintings of classical nudes hang on the walls between narrow bookcases, and plaster replications of Greek statues lean or lounge in nooks or corners or on small claw-footed tables. On one of the cushioned divans, near a sculpture of Prometheus and his eagle, a pair of bird women lie entwined in each other's arms. The one in a black and red rooster mask, gracefully long-limbed and dark-skinned, holds and caresses a pale girl in an owl mask and bare feet, her cheek to the rooster's breast as if listening to her heart. The rooster woman is in the middle of telling a story to an old tuxedoed man without a mask—a performer, then. Or "pet," as the balding

fox put it. Like Julie. The old man has no instruments or props with him; not performing now, but maybe hoping if he spends time with these birds before he performs, one of them will buy his contract off Mother.

Joel slides into a dark green chair and waits for a pause in which he can ask them about Julie (or the rabbit man, he reminds himself; but it slips away). The owl girl's head turns a little to regard him as the rooster woman says in a smooth and vaguely accented voice, "When the loa takes you, you change. If a woman claims to be possessed by Maman Brigitte and anyone doubts her, there's a simple test to see for sure."

The old man with the naked face blinks, fumbles for a response. "Er, what test is that?"

"Maman Brigitte loves hot peppers. She drinks rum laced with them, so hot only a loa could stand it—" The rooster shifts to drink from a glass of amber-colored liquid, her other hand sliding beneath the back of the owl girl's short, loose brown dress. "—and that's one test. If the woman can swallow that, she might indeed be possessed. But a better test is to put the pepper to the woman's genitals. If she screams or cries, she's a liar. Not really possessed at all."

The old man rumbles in his throat, rubbing his knees, on the edge of his seat. "Well, that's, ah, that's ah, that's a fine, fine thing to, ah. Have you ever been possessed?"

The rooster laughs. "I don't practice vodou. I'm just a scholar of it."

"What happens when they discover she was faking it?"

Joel realizes she's looking at him before he realizes he asked his question out loud. He stands and steps over, shoes silent on the Oriental rug. Now all three are looking at him.

"Depends on the crowd," the rooster says. "Nobody wants to see the man behind the curtain. They want the power and magic, the mystery made flesh. Just leave it at that."

Joel leaves it at that; the rooster knows less about the subject than she pretends. He shows the maskless performer the picture of Julie, and the old man says, "She was here last week. We didn't perform together—my show is more, ahem, classical—but some appreciate that sort of, er, modern style. I haven't seen her today, but it's still early."

"Who?" interjects the owl girl.

Joel kneels in front of the divan to show her the photo. "This is Julie. She sang here a week ago." He pauses, almost forgets to say it: "I'm also looking for

a man in a rabbit mask.”

“A rabbit hunt?” The owl girl uncurls from the rooster woman’s arms and sits up, taking the photo from Joel. She traces a sharp, pointed fingernail along Julie’s waves of red hair and sighs. “I didn’t think this was her natural color. You know, I still don’t.”

“You remember her, then?” Joel asks.

The girl’s bare foot swings out to tap Joel in the arm. “Who?”

Joel pulls away from the swinging foot, settling down onto his haunches, looking from owl to rooster and back again. “Julie. In the picture. What do you remember about her?”

The owl girl looks up from the photo and smiles, tilting her head to the side. She’s not wearing lipstick. Below the hard yellow beak of her mask her teeth are straight and white. “Who?” The rooster woman laughs and Joel gets the joke. He takes the photo back and stands and turns to go, as the owl repeats again and again, “Who? Who? Who?”

“Wicked creature,” mutters the rooster. “I should spank you.” The girl snickers and Joel closes the door behind him.

Joel gets his only lead from a gangly flamingo in a secluded parlor, who pushes a needle into the arm of a bound and blindfolded merman and says Julie could be anywhere, but the rabbit man is in the basement pool hall: “Down in his burrow, as usual. He’ll be there till showtime.”

Now elegantly carved wood presses against Joel’s forehead and cheek as he watches the men at the pool table through the bars of the banister. They’re a bunch of suits in animal and fairytale masks, plus one inexplicable Batman who must be seven feet tall, standing there with his pool cue in one hand and a beer in the other. Colored balls clack and roll on the felt, spinning and colliding and falling through holes at the edges. The speakers mounted on the walls play soft, unremarkable jazz. A buxom bartender—blonde with angel wings, a tinsel halo and a white and gold Mardi Gras mask that conceals her entire face—mixes drinks mutely at the bar.

Joel is able to walk to the bar and order a gin and tonic (or two), but, finding no courage to interrupt the game, he returns to sit and watch from the stairs, neither in the room nor out of it, and drinks. Julie’s image—red-haired in a modest blue gown and almost-matching gloves, shy smile and hopeful eyes, false lashes and heavy makeup—rests on the stair near Joel’s elbow. The

sun is setting, and when the stars come out Mother will want to know where Julie is, and Joel decides he wants another drink before talking to the man in the rabbit mask.

He's back on the stairs nursing his third glass, comfortably spaced out, when the low call of an owl jerks him into reality. Joel turns. The owl girl lowers herself to sit on an upper stair above him, not facing out the banister to the game below, but toward him, bare feet on the stair above Julie's photograph. "Did I scare you?" she asks.

"Yes," says Joel. He sits up straight and takes the photo between his fingers, pulling it away from the girl's gently swinging feet.

"Great Horned Owls," the girl says, "are quiet fliers. So our prey won't hear us." She slides down a stair, gripping a rail of the banister for support. "Why are you sitting here? There's such a thing as chairs. Fenworth has whole rooms of nothing but chairs. I've seen them."

Joel doesn't want to deal with her. Not after she mocked him in the library. "I haven't found my friend yet," he says. As if he expects to. How much of his life can he spend paying off her contract? It's not as if he can turn to the law for help. Not with these people.

"No one will help you. Even if they admit they know her. What happens at Fenworth doesn't just stay here; it never happened at all." She slides down closer. Joel doesn't move away. She crouches on the stair above his, knees bent, giving Joel full view of her dark panties. "What do you do?" she asks. "I thought you must be a performer because your clothes are poor and you tell your name, but you have a mask. I've never seen you here before. Are you a detective?"

"I work in animation," Joel says, and regrets it. He hasn't been drinking much and his tongue is already loosening. Julie didn't like Joel to drink. She said he never handled it well.

The owl girl sucks air in through her teeth. It might be a laugh. "Cartoons? Like art, or voices? I can do voices. I've been practicing owl calls."

"Background art," Joel lies, and takes another drink before setting the glass down on the stair. No more stalling. He turns Julie's photo around and around in his hands, staring down at the game below, at the man in the rabbit mask, who laughs and aims his cue. Joel can't move.

"Have you given up?" the girl asks. Joel picks his drink back up and takes another swallow, then one more to empty the glass. "Don't give up. I want you to find her. She was different from anyone we had before, and I want to

know how she did that, how she—not everyone liked her, you know. She was weird. Mysterious. God, Joel, I want to be her.”

Joel looks up at the owl girl. Her hair hangs down straight from under her mask, swaying in an unseen air current. It’s hard to tell its color in the dim light. “Why do you want to be her?”

The owl girl leans forward and down, gripping the railing to hold her balance, hair fanning out toward him, like a wing. Her breath is warm vanilla and mint. “She touched some of us, she broke into our souls and stole something, just by singing. I would die to have that power. I would kill. It’s not that she was good, she was . . . strong. Possessed. I’ll never forget it.”

Joel wishes for Julie’s sake that he could feel pleased at this ardent review, but the praise means nothing. The girl is obviously not sober. “If I find Julie, I’ll tell her you liked her show.”

“I’d like that, if you could talk to her—if you could introduce us.” The owl girl babbles on, soft and fast. “It was incredible. I want to know how she did that, how she used music—her voice, to get into people’s hearts and play them like a fucking harp and make them . . . feel, make them . . . I want to do that. I need her to teach me.”

She’s high or unhinged but Joel humors her anyway. “She can’t teach that. It’s magic. You have it or you don’t. You have to . . .” How would Julie put it? The question depresses him. She used to be just a call away. “You have to anticipate your audience’s desires and become what they want you to be, without losing the part of you that’s separate from them.” It’s something Julie might have said and Joel feels hollow, using her words without her here.

The owl girl breathes, short, sharp, vanilla-mint breaths. “What do you want, Joel?”

“I want to know what happened to Julie.”

“Do you think something bad happened?”

“Maybe. I had a dream,” he remembers. A nightmare, flickering in and out over the last week. Julie crying. A stained gown. He has to push the images aside to keep focused. “I don’t know.” Choking. “It might not mean anything.” His glass is empty; he can’t drink any more.

“That’s hardly a trail at all. We can’t hunt that. Do you have any real clues?”

Joel gestures with his empty glass toward the room below. “She went somewhere with that rabbit.” Who Joel could use another drink before talking to.

“He’s not a rabbit; he’s a hare. He’s always a hare. Some of us don’t like

to be the same thing every time. I was a dragonfly last week. It sat on my nose and I looked through its lacy wings." Joel can almost picture the mask she must have worn, blue and green, shimmering. Her head tilts to the side. She licks her lower lip and asks, "Have you asked him about her?"

"No." Before she can urge him on, or offer to help, or whatever it is half-mad owl girls dangling on staircases do, Joel stands and walks, one foot in front of the other, down the stairs; nothing difficult about this, he's hardly even buzzed, he's relaxed and calm and light-headed and standing by the pool table holding the image in front of the hare's grotesque, pagan Easter Bunny face as the man bends to shoot at a ball. The shot goes wrong and the other players laugh.

"Well, hello," the hare says to the photograph.

Joel has to hold the image at arm's length to avoid the hare's long leather ears. "Julie," he explains. "She didn't come home last week." He lets the hare take the image from him, then follows the man to the bar, keeping calm, keeping cool, walking steady. No reason to be nervous.

"Julie, Julie. Oh, I remember Julie. 'Buy' you a drink? What's your poison? Let's get some Jäger. A Jäger for the badly-dressed Zorro here, Angelface. Straight. Two for me." While the angel pours the drinks, the man in the hare mask looks at Julie's image and says, "Julie, Julie. Too good to be, truly." The man's bow tie is undone, his collar unbuttoned. He slides a shot glass toward Joel, gives him a quick look. Joel avoids eye contact. "She your sister?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"Best friend." Joel takes the picture and tucks it in his breast pocket, hiding her from the hare's gaze. He tries to feel like the detective the owl girl thought he might be. "You were seen with her after she sang. What were you doing?"

The hare holds up his shot glass. "All together now. Three. Two. Aw come on, don't be a fucking drag. Three, two, one—alley-ooop!"

Joel swallows and remembers Robitussin and thermometers, staying home from school writing notes to Julie. "Drinking won't make me forget. I asked you a question." Didn't he?

The hare knocks back his second shot, grimaces and says, "Tastes just like—well, nothing like cherry cola, sadly." He glances at Joel again, then turns to lean his elbows on the bar, staring at the low ceiling. "I took her out to the

gardens. She wanted to get away from the noise inside. You know Fenworth after dark. She was a sweet, shy girl. Couldn't take the chaos."

As the hare speaks Joel can imagine a scene unfolding, hazy and indistinct: a swirl of masks and opiates, the claustrophobic press of the rich and uninhibited. He can picture Julie wanting to escape outdoors. She used to walk nature trails when the weather was nice, bringing back small wildflowers or twigs for him to lay out to dry on a windowsill. "What happened in the garden?" he asks. It's easier to stand if he leans against the hardwood top of the bar.

"We found an orgy in the garden. She didn't like that. Covered her eyes and blushed." The hare imitates the gesture with a grin. "Cute and coy. So we went to the woods instead. There's a path through the forest to a gazebo. Nice spot. Private."

Another drink slides in front of Joel. He looks at the angel barista's still, painted face and remembers the preacher from his childhood saying there was no such thing as magic, just God and Satan, demons and angels battling for the souls of man. He remembers Julie promising they would always be each other's guardian angels and protect each other's souls. He remembers waking up in a sweat last week, a nightmare fading fast from his mind, feeling sick and hollow. Begging, "I won't scream, please—" And maybe this drink would dull those confused images so he could stay present, not dwelling on a buried past or old dreams. Just a sip, to help him focus.

Two foul swallows, then Joel pushes the drink aside. "And then. At the gazebo."

From the pool table, balls clack and roll and fill the careful pause before the hare speaks again. "And then nothing. She wanted to be alone, so I left her alone."

Liar. Joel doesn't want to ask any more questions. So he says, "Show me."

"Show you what?"

"Where you took her."

The hare shrugs.

"Let's go," says Joel.

"Now?"

"We have to find her before dark."

The hare's lip curls, amused. "You're a real lightweight, aren't you?"

"I'm fine." When did he last eat? Drinking on an empty stomach again— idiot. Julie should have been here to stop him from going too far.

“Go sit down, have some water. She can’t still be out there.” The hare laughs. It’s a grating sound. “Christ, Mother lets all kinds of fucking losers in these days.”

Joel grabs the man’s lapel and begins walking, moving under a sudden compulsion. The hare stumbles along with him, still laughing. “Fine, let me go, I’ll show you, you poor little bastard—So long, folks! Try not to let the bat win while I’m gone.”

The owl girl is still on the stairs. She stands aside as Joel and the hare ascend, then follows them without a word. Some part of Joel’s mind is grateful for the company.

Outside, the twilight is dim and cool. Soft, baroque melodies drift from the hedge maze as a string quartet warms up for the coming night’s revelry. The hare leads Joel (and his shadow, the owl girl) through the garden to the edge of the woods, to a path marked off with clean white fencing. An electric lantern hangs from a hook on the fence. The man in the hare mask takes it and goes in, but the owl girl catches Joel’s jacket, tugging him back.

“Let go,” warns Joel, staggering a little before finding his balance again.

She releases him, then stands on tip-toe—barefoot in the damp grass—and whispers fiercely, “Do you think he killed her?”

“Maybe.” But not the way you think.

The owl girl reaches behind her back and her hand returns clutching a long, thin knife.

Behind Joel, the hare calls out, “Hey douchebag, hurry up or you’re on your own.” Can he see her knife, or does Joel’s body block it from sight?

The owl girl puts the blade to her lips and whispers, “Shhhhh.”

“Where were you even . . .” Where has she been hiding that?

She giggles. “Go on. I’ll catch up.”

It’s darker in the woods. Joel follows the bobbing light ahead. A branch appears out of nowhere and Joel barely ducks it, stumbling forward, toward the hare’s sniggering laughter. He imagines Julie coming this way, nervous and hesitant but trusting, curious. Then fleeing.

The gazebo crawls with ivy and spiderwebs. Nearby branches scrape its peaked roof. The whitewashed benches have been warped by rain, and the ashtray holds more acorn shells and dead leaves than ash. The hare man waggles the lantern as Joel approaches the wooden stairs.

“Hey, look! No uptight redheads here. Do you see any, cause I don’t

see any.”

Joel collapses onto a bench inside the gazebo and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Now will you tell me what really happened? Now that your friends aren’t around?” His hands shake. Because of the dropping temperature, nothing more.

The light beams directly into Joel’s eyes. “You look like shit.”

Joel strikes the lantern, harder than he means to, and knocks it out of the man’s grasp. It rolls under the bench. At least it’s not in his face anymore. “Tell me what really happened.”

“Chill the fuck out. Your sister—or whoever—promised she’d sing for me out here but then she wouldn’t do it. What do you care? Someone probably bought her contract and she’s off singing for megabucks now. Sorry, buddy, she’s got her big break and left you behind.”

“Stop lying.” If anyone had become her patron, Joel would know. She couldn’t hide that.

“Look, could you get the light? If we have to be out here I want to see what’s going on.”

“Yeah, if you tell me the fucking truth, I’ll get your fucking light.”

“Jesus. I didn’t touch her. Okay, I might have... I tried to kiss her, but it didn’t go anywhere after that. Are you satisfied? Now get the light, it’s dark out here.”

Tears welling, trying not to make a sound, struggling for breath—

“Then what happened?” Joel slides off the bench and reaches under for the light, trying to keep the hare in sight. There’s a thump from the roof of the gazebo above them.

“The fuck was that?” whispers the man in the hare mask.

An owl hoots softly in response.

“What happened then?” Joel repeats, drawing the light toward him. He rises from the floor of the gazebo slowly, steadily, as disjointed images from last week’s nightmare fall into place. A disappointed frown and a firm grip on her chin. “What’s the matter with you, anyway?”

“Nothing happened. She wouldn’t sing, she wouldn’t even kiss me, and there I was going out of my way to be a fucking knight for her. I would have bought her contract if she’d just sing for me. I was giving her a fairy tale ending: the glass slipper, the magic word, the kiss in the goddamn coffin. I could make her dreams come true, but she was too good to play by the rules.”

Joel can hardly hear him over the rush in his ears. His face is hot. “What rules?”

“The customer is always right, for one. He who pays the piper. . .” The hare laughs, that ear-grating sound, and backs away from Joel. “I didn’t hurt her.”

“You didn’t?” Joel advances. The hare backs away until he’s up against one of the posts supporting the peaked gazebo roof. “Then why did you leave her alone here, in the dark?”

“I told you, she wanted to be alone. And it’s not that far, buddy.” The hare inches sideways now. “When the leaves fall you can see the mansion from here.”

“She never came home.”

“You are taking this too seriously, maybe that Jäger was one too many, hey?” Vomit in her hair, a heel broken in the mud, no light to guide her way back. “Come on, you have no idea what was going on that night, or the kind of favor I was doing for a nobody like her—”

The lantern strikes the demonic Easter Bunny face and Joel hardly feels the shock jolting through his arm. His ears drink in the crack of impact and the pained scream as the man falls and yanks off his mask to grab his bleeding face. Joel kicks, aiming for the man’s gut, but instead hits empty air and then he’s falling himself—his head hits a bench and he loses his grip on the lantern—his mask comes askew, covers one eye. The lantern light flickers, and as Joel fights off a wave of nausea, half-blind, he sees the unmasked hare rising: a young, well-bred face, bleeding and furious, looming over him in the glitching electric lamplight.

“You stupid motherfucker,” the man spits. He grimaces and pulls something from his cheek—a sliver of the hare mask—and looks at it in disgust. “You’re worse than your sister.”

Joel rolls away, head swimming. He fights back a retch and crawls toward the edge of the gazebo, toward the stair. As he tries to stand he hears the man behind him, amused voice saying, “You can’t even stand, you pathetic piece of shit. You want to know what happened? Fine.” Joel is jerked upright; he stumbles, tries to fall away, but the man has a grip on the back of his suit jacket. Joel tries to pull free and feels the stitching around his arms and shoulders rip. He’s thrust against a cobwebbed post and gets a face full of tacky, old spider silk—he grabs the post for balance, he’ll bring his head sharply backwards into the man’s face, headbutt him, force him to let go—but a voice in his ear shouts, gleeful and manic, “Whoopsy-daisy! Where you going? You want to hear

the rest of the story or not?"

Joel doesn't need to hear the rest of the story. He can see it in his mind, the pieces falling into place, hear a sniggering voice—He who pays the piper calls the tune, and if you won't sing for me, maybe we can work some other magic with that talented throat.

"Your sister didn't want to mess up her pretty princess dress or her hair, so we reached a compromise. Though I gotta be honest, she really sucked at upholding her end of the deal."

The headbutt doesn't execute as planned—his aim is off—and the man grabs at Joel's head, at the ties of the Zorro mask; Joel twists away and it comes off completely. He falls hard on one knee—pain bursts in bright, firecracker lights over his vision. As they disperse he sees the bloodied face of the man, blurred beyond a film of spiderweb filaments stuck to Joel's eyelashes. The man stares, wide-eyed, incredulous—Zorro mask dropping from his hands—mouth moving but not speaking. Beyond the man's shoulder, dangling down from the gazebo roof, a pair of bare feet lower themselves, silhouetted against a dim, starry sky.

"What?" The man chokes out as Joel backs away, dragging himself with his hands and elbows. Blood drips from the man's face down the front of his suit, catching the light. "You. . ."

An angry screech pierces the night, feminine and feral. Joel reaches the stairs and pulls himself down, toward the ground, away from the scuffling behind him, away from the glitching light, trying not to inhale any more suffocating spider silk. He reaches soft earth and scrambles to stand, but his knee buckles and he falls hard on the bottom step. Behind him a slick, rhythmic sound repeats in time with someone grunting or sobbing.

Glowing skeletons approach from the path and spark new panic in him. Joel can't breathe—cobwebs over his mouth and nose and he can't get them off—he's still frantically rubbing at his face when the skeletons lift him from the stair, one on each side as two others move past him up the stairs and the sickening sounds behind him finally stop. A rough gloved hand wipes down his face and moments later his mask is back on and tied snugly. Strong arms lift him and walk him toward the path, and he twists his head to see the gazebo—

A slim figure in a great horned owl mask stands in flickering light, holding a knife with both hands, pale skin splashed with red, flanked by two men in glow-in-the-dark skeleton suits who peer at a heap on the floor. The owl turns toward Joel, then tilts her head back and laughs.

The stars are out when he reaches the mansion. The skeletal guards escort him through halls lined with lilies and Botticelli reproductions, guide his awkward, muddy feet up a winding stair to the second floor, then a smaller stair to the third. There, in the private bathroom of a small bedroom, one skeleton holds him steady so he can vomit into the toilet while the other runs a shower. They leave him to get ready.

Joel doesn't remember showering.

He stands in a terrycloth bathrobe, favoring his bruised knee. The bedroom looks too clean. Unused, like a hotel. Tightly-made bed, generic wall art. A high-backed chair faces a desk. Waves of red hair spill out around the chair, and from its seat the blue cloth of a gown dangles, torn hem puddled on the pale carpet. Joel shuffles toward it. He has a fleeting, insane hope that he'll find a living person seated there. But when he touches the hair it slides off the mannequin head. He sets the wig on the desk and gently moves the mannequin in Julie's dress to the bed. The dress is clean. Was it clean the last time he saw it? He still can't remember that far.

There's a mirror on the desk. Joel sits in front of it and stares at his unfamiliar face. Makeup is cluttered around the mirror, a theatrical kit ready to transform and disguise. A wig cap and some pins. And the picture, salvaged from his breast pocket while he was blacked out.

Behind him the door opens. Mother rustles in. "How was your game? Did you find her?"

"No."

"Too bad. She's performing tonight." Joel doesn't respond as Mother sweeps closer. "You know the rules," Mother croaks. "If you don't perform, you have to pay. These tickets cost a fortune and nobody gets in for free. You already owe Mother for the lovely gifts she gave you to help bring Julie into this world—all those fucking electrolysis treatments, not to mention the wardrobe and this other shit." She's directly behind him, sequined torso glittering in the mirror. "We don't want to add the cost of two weeks' admission to that when recoupment time comes around, do we?"

Joel props up the rumpled photograph of Julie by the mirror and tries to see the similarity between the two faces. His nose is too red, his eyes too bloodshot. Too empty.

"You have a unique gift, young man." Her hands settle on his shoulders and begin kneading through the robe. "I've opened the doors of opportunity, but you must step through them. Unless you want to do Saturday morning cartoons for the rest of your life. Not that those measly paychecks can make a dent in what you owe me."

Cartoons. Joel thinks of an owl screeching in the night; the nausea returns. His eyes close. "Outside, tonight, the..." The memory is already blurring. He doesn't fight to keep it.

"Shh, you've been drinking. I told you, nothing bad ever happens at Fenworth. Do you hear me?" Joel nods. Her bony fingers knead, knead, knead. "Good. So tell me. What happened out in the gazebo tonight?"

"Nothing," says Joel.

"And what happened in the gazebo last week?"

He who pays the piper—

"Hmm? What happened last week, Joel?"

He wishes he was asleep. Or dead. "Nothing."

"Very good." She kisses the top of his head and moves away. "Now let's get you ready."

"Julie's gone," Joel says. He opens his eyes. Julie stares at him from the wrinkled photo, hopeful eyes haunting, accusing. She only wanted her own life, to pursue the dreams she dreamed while he was busy trying to survive, and he had sold her out, signed her away to this monster. "She's not some voice I can call up on demand. I can't fake it if she's not actually here. They'll know the difference." No one wants to see the man behind the curtain. But she wasn't Oz, she was Maman Brigitte, she was an angel, a friend—she was real—

"Oh for fuck's sake. Julie, Joel, I don't give two shits who you are tonight. You have forty-five minutes to bring someone out for my guests. The drawers and closet are full of shit you can use for a new costume if you don't want do Julie again. I'm generous, but my patience is not eternal. You're an expensive investment and I'd hate to think I was wrong to sink so much capital into you. What a fucking waste." The door slams shut, leaving Joel alone in the room.

He puts on the wig and stares into the mirror and tries to will Julie back. I'm sorry. I didn't know it would be like this. Come back. She doesn't answer. She hasn't answered since last week, and she's never been quiet this long. Is this how it ends? No amount of therapy, or laying on of hands at the old Pentecostal church they grew up in, could get rid of her. Then one night alone

with a rabbit in the woods and she withers into nothing.

Joel goes to the closet and tries to put together someone else to be tonight. If Mother won't let him off the hook, he has to fake it. He's done voice acting long enough—he can create a character to inhabit for a night. No one as pure or true as Julie, but what do these people care about purity or truth, spirits or magic? He only needs a soulless mask to put on for the night. It's nothing more than show business, now that Julie's gone, just another job to numb out during.

If he fails tonight, there's always next week.

Murder of Birds

I don't know where to do it. You'll meet me anywhere I ask you to. Maybe the library. It has a quiet, calm atmosphere—you won't want to make a scene there. The second floor or the third, at a table in a corner, cradled by ceiling-high windows, I'll wait, sitting in a chair better suited to a waiting room. On the scratched-up varnish of the table I'll spread open a book, scan it for a clue, a portent, a sign, a sentence or phrase or image that will tell me what to do. When you arrive, smelling like soap, like you took a shower just for the occasion, you'll swing your backpack onto an empty chair, but not the empty chair between us. There won't be an empty chair between us, because you'll sit next to me again. You'll smile, and your eyes will try to find mine and you'll speak—

"Hey! What's up?" You won't wait for me to make small talk. "Whatcha reading?"

What am I reading? Nothing silly. Something innocuous. I will be reading *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. "Some bird guide," I'll say, and I'll close the book, keeping place with my thumb, and show you the cover.

"When did you get into birds?" you'll ask. "Hey, did you know that over ten thousand birds die each year from flying into windows? There should be a word for that. Defenes—Defeatherstration!" You'll grin at me, eager eyes and hesitant hands (spread on the table, fingers drumming, inching toward me, pulling back, unsure where to go, finally clutching your own elbows in an awkward self-embrace), and you'll hold your breath as you wait for my response.

"That was bad." I'll smile in spite of myself, and you'll relax a little. "They should hang you for that one."

You'll lean back into your chair and clasp your hands behind your head. "It's not just bad, my friend, it's tragic. Tragic. It's an avian holocaust. I'm serious. There's ten thousand birds a year, just flying along—I'm a bird! I'm a bird! No worries, no cares, cheep cheep," and then WHAM!" You'll clap your hands together in my face and I'll jump backward and lose my place in the book I wasn't really reading and your voice will barrel onward, gleeful at my shock. "Splat. Dead as a dodo. Do you think they die instantly or do they just lie on the ground all broken and bloody for a while, chirping their last, sad little song. Help me. Cheep cheep. Help me."

“Don’t you know any happy stories?” I’ll ask.

And your face will go still, your eyes will seek mine out, your grin will become a small smile. “I could,” you’ll say. Around us, above and below and beside us, there might be students, workers, writers, information-eaters, all hungry for the thoughts of other people, lost in private little worlds, and in that corner it will just be the two of us, me with a fucking useless book and you with your hopeful fucking eyes, and I won’t be able to put it off any longer.

“I’m not gay,” I’ll say. “I’m sorry.”

And a bird will fly into one of the ceiling-high windows that rise on either side of us, dash itself against an invisible wall and fall—two, three stories—to lie broken and bloody on the ground. Cheep, cheep. It will be tragic, my friend—you might call it “holocaustal”—and I won’t know how to help you.

But I don’t see this ending any other way.

The festival came once a year, and, to a five year old, that year feels like forever until the magic returns. It was a night when the air was filled with the scent of fresh, hot treats, and the sounds of excited screams. Little Hector would stroll down the streets, eyeing the distance with anticipation, his hand held by the grip of his older brother, Manuel. The fairgrounds appeared to him as if a glowing angel had come, until finally they'd made it to the gates.

Their admission paid, they went to meet their parents who had gone before them to help out friends set up shop. Manuel always had his routine—he'd beg his parents to let him run off to enjoy the rides that Hector could not ride on account of his age. They'd cave after a few minutes, and he'd run off into the crowd. Hector never knew what Manuel did exactly, but envied him for being one of the screams that would follow a mechanical whirl. The rides, while scary beasts in their own right, were something big boys could do that he could not.

Hands were traded, and he found himself in the softer grip of his mother. Hector was led to the clowns and the jugglers. He marveled at their dexterity as bowling pins and small torches were thrown aloft into the sky in a boggling rhythm. Balloon doggies were handed out, and he was lucky enough to receive one. Hector was in awe and laughed aloud as he played with it. He'd bark for it and prompt it to sniff.

When he was near the grills that provided the burgers, balloon doggy had to have a smell, too. With an alarming pop, balloon doggy disappeared. In awe and a mild pain, Hector began to cry at the loss of his pet. His mother took pity and hoisted him up in her arms amidst the music.

Eventually, she lulled her boy into a daze. The night was dragging on, and soon little Hector would need to be set to bed. Manuel returned and was burdened with the task. He, however, responded with a quiet sense of duty. He took his brother from there, assuming he'd simply fall asleep.

Then they passed one shop, and Hector heard the tweets of small chicks. Dazed, he asked his brother to stop, and set him down from his arms. Sniffing all the while, Hector beheld the little, living puff balls: they were in cardboard boxes, climbing all over each other. Red, blue, green, and yellow chicks caught his heart. He took a blue—it was a boy's color. Manuel, kind-hearted as he was,

paid the fifty cents for the chick.

During the walk back, Hector promised to take care of little Pojito. He promised he wouldn't let him pop. His brother laughed at that. And Pojito never did pop from that day on. Hector would hold him and feed him. He was delicate and mindful. Pojito was kept in a small cage and Hector was often told not to take him out.

He would, however, for his friends. He was careful, but only for selfish reasons. For the first few weeks, no one could touch Pojito but Hector. He would feed the chick, talk to the chick in its own tongue, and kiss it goodnight. But eventually he paid more mind to his friends again and returned to play games on the streets. Then, when he directed his attention back many weeks later, little Pojito was not so little anymore.

The little ball was beginning to take form; the delicate blue fuzz was no longer blue, and began to show more of its natural colors. Hector could only wonder what was happening. A day came when Hector confided in Manuel that he was starting not to like Pojito since he wasn't very cute.

Manuel told him "Of course not. He's becoming a rooster. He's growing up." Hector wasn't sure he understood. Pojito did become a rooster eventually. He'd crow every morning as the sun rose. Hector's father found this most annoying. Soon, the Pojito that Hector knew was now this white bird strutting about as if he was lord of the land.

"Pojito," he'd ask daily, "can you go back to the way you were?" Pojito would just cluck, barely minding his requests. Hector would chase him to try and relay the message deeper, but the rooster would run.

Then a day came when Hector's father was talking to Manuel.

"At least take him out of the house while I do it," Manuel said before walking away.

Leading Hector by the hand, his father took him to the nearby beach. They enjoyed the waves and the sun for hours before coming home to dinner. It was one of the best, most bountiful meals they'd had in months. Rice, beans, avocado, and fried chicken.

Hector couldn't help but notice that Pojito was oddly quiet. He asked where he'd gone to, only to be told he had run away. Hector didn't cry about it, he just sighed, and grabbed the wishbone. He and Manuel split it, Hector earning the wish. Curious, his mother asked what he wished for.

"That Pojito would come back like he was when he was cute." Then Hector began to wait for the next festival.

Mackenzie Hurlbert

Tea with the Neighbors

I bought two yards of rope today. I left work early, loosened my tie, and walked the aisles of Home Depot before I made my decision. It was the same rope I used five years ago to put the tire-swing up out back for Sam. Sam had picked it out himself. He had liked how the colors—red, green, and yellow—blended together into a checkered, snake-like pattern. I had spent nearly an hour trying to swing that damn rope over the maple branch, only to have the branch break off that following winter—shattered to splinters by winter storm Bruce. Bruce, what a perfect name for a storm. To say it, one must purse their lips and blow with gusto to recreate the wailing “u” of those house-tilting winds. Then when the “u” has faded, one is only left with the echoes of a hissing “c,” like the ice that clung to the branches and window panes that year. I spent the car ride home saying that name and puffing my cheeks out and staring at my bloated face in the rearview mirror. What a storm; what a name.

I dragged a chair from the kitchen into the back porch today. I had built the porch six summers ago so my wife Susan and I could watch Sam play in the back yard. It had been screened to protect from mosquitoes, and Susan hung baskets of plants off of the rafters which stretched across the ceiling. The chair, now settled under one of those beams, had engraved legs and back and a padded seat. It was the sole survivor of a set of four, three of which had fallen victim to gnawing dogs, overweight guests, and spaghetti-sauce stains. Alone and wind-chilled, I looked at the chair, fingered the engraved back, and thought back to that one night about two summers ago, after Sam had gone to bed, and Susan and I had been sitting in the kitchen; I was in that exact chair. After washing the dishes, she had lowered herself onto me, her flowing skirt hiding the activities beneath, and had whispered in my ear, “Evan, I am yours.” Her hands had smelt of lemon dish detergent. Her hot breath against my neck, the creaking wooden chair, and the whispered promises were never spoken of and only blushed about the following morning as Sam came down the stairs for breakfast and I took my seat in the engraved chair across from Susan.

The chair wobbled a bit on the uneven porch floor, but to hell with it—sturdiness wasn’t in its job criteria this afternoon. I looked up at the beam

and over at one of Susan's remaining flower pots—all dried and withered and sticking out of the ceramic top like skeletal fingers. Fingering the rope, I gently climbed up onto the chair, then hastily removed my tie and threw it to my right. The screen on the porch was covered in pollen and mold and gave a greenish-yellow tint when looked through. From my perch on the chair, I could see just over the shrubs separating my yard from the neighbors. Two girls about Sam's age played out back. A tea-set and some stuffed animals were set up around the two. Sam had gone to school with one of them, I remember. Now they played quietly in the hazy, yellowed world outside my porch. I reached up and fastened one end of Sam's favorite rope to the rafter. I looked down and shuffled to the front of the seat, my toes stuck out over its carved edging. I looked off over the shrubs at the little girls as I tied my noose, a skill I had learned in boy scouts to be "always prepared." I slipped the edge over my head and tightened it as I had my tie this morning. I kept my eyes on the girls and now the older one was pouring the purple rhino some tea—probably just water—and the younger one was putting Chips Ahoy cookies on a plate. I tensed up, and took a deep breath and exhaled softly, saying "Bruce." What a storm that was. Snapped that branch right off the tree. What a storm. The girls were praying now, saying grace I bet. Their heads bent over the plate of cookies and tea cups of water, and their hair hung down over their faces.

I took another deep breath—exhaled. I heard them say "Amen," and the youngest one looked up at me, and I shifted my weight forwards. The chair tilted with me, and soon the yellow girls vanished over the top of the shrub. Sam's arms were hugging me hard around my neck, I could feel Susan's kisses and hot breath in my ear, and my feet swung in time with the potted plant.

Ulrike Profit

Als ob Zwischen Punkten Linien Wären

The B7 was fifteen minutes late. While that was not unusual, it made Amy feel twitchy. Her umbrella had proven to be no match for the downpour, flipping over against the wind and as she entered the bus, she could feel that she was about to catch a cold, the kind that she would then drag around for the whole winter. She walked down the aisle to her usual row and her sneakers screeched on the already wet floor. She pushed back some strands of her wet hair with one hand, tucked them behind her ear, and tried to hold both her umbrella and her bus ticket in the other hand. A drop dangled on the tip of her nose, making her feel as if she were about to sneeze.

People say that every time you get on a bus, you meet new people. Amy knew that wasn't true. She had been taking the bus for the last two years, five times a week, leaving early in the morning for the hospital and returning late at night. The people she met on the bus were always the same, a silent company of semi-strangers.

But this morning, there was a new guy on the bus. Amy eyed him suspiciously, sat down and kicked her umbrella under the seat in front of her. Usually, new people could be put in three categories: college students with ridiculously large backpacks, people only taking the bus once because their car hadn't started and the odd hobo seeking shelter. This guy was about her age, his jeans and faded olive trench coat curiously dry. From what she could see, he was tall and lanky. He sat across two seats, his legs comfortably stretched out in front of him. He wore no socks, his pointy ankles sticking out, and his jeans stopping an inch short of gray-blue sneakers. Scratching what might grow into a beard one happy day, he turned to her.

"Pretty wet outside, huh?" he asked.

She startled, surprised that somebody would actually talk on the bus. It wasn't that she hated taking the bus, she accepted it the way she accepted living in a tiny apartment right above a German restaurant, working extra shifts at the hospital, or even the fact that the staff in the cafeteria would always put cheddar cheese on her sandwich instead of American. Maybe she did hate taking the bus.

"Obviously," she said.

"Could also have been that you just went for a swim," he said. He smiled

slightly, ignoring Amy's frown.

She pulled out a granola bar and ate it slowly. She turned away from him and focused on what was outside the window. Rain, mostly. Tall willows bowed deeply under the downpour. Behind them, the colors of the playground toys struggled to spread joy despite the weather. Then, the bus turned around the corner and the lights of Dunkin Donuts and Pizza Hut flashed their own kind of happiness. It was still before the sunrise and the streetlights were reflected in the puddles on the street.

He wouldn't be the first crazy person she had seen on the bus. One time, a weird homeless guy had boarded the bus, reeking of piss and who knows what else, screaming: "We are all doomed. Do you hear me? Doomed!" she had not been sure whether to tell the driver to kick him out or to applaud him. In the end, she had just looked away and shifted her body closer to the window, wrapped her arms around her backpack.

"Not very chatty today, are you?" She looked at him again. He sat slouched back against the window, his brownish hair fell over his face. It had the color of a wet dog that's been sitting in front of your window for too long and she wondered how it smelled. His eyes were grey.

She imagined seeing herself from his perspective, sitting upright, clenching the stupid granola bar which was her breakfast, her hair properly pulled back—at least it had been before the rain. It irritated her. Everything about that guy irritated her and she didn't know why. Way to start the day, she thought. Rain and then a creep on the bus.

"How come you're not wet?" she asked. She crossed her arms and tried to slouch a bit in her seat. She couldn't. That just wasn't her.

"I like to have some secrets," he said, "It's better to leave the ladies guessing sometimes." "They must just keep coming, what with your charms."

"More than I can count. But then again, my doubtful counting skills are why I never made it out of high school." She frowned and wondered why he told her that.

"I'm Jonathan, by the way," he said. He stretched his arm across the aisle, offered her a clean hand with almost manicured looking nails. Amy looked quickly at her own hand, an angry red blister on her thumb from when she had attempted to paint her hellhole of an apartment on the weekend and fingernails that were cut almost painfully short. She reached out and almost, but not quite touched his hand, backing away in the last moment. She cleared her throat.

"I have to go now," she said. She swung her backpack on her shoulder and grabbed her umbrella. On the way out, she didn't look back but she peeked out from under her umbrella when the bus passed her, just to see whether he was still there.

The glass was cold under Amy's hands as she pushed open the door of Zum goldenen Hirschen, the German restaurant right under her apartment. The door brushed the glass wind chimes, their melody proudly announcing a new guest. Inside, it was warm. The whiteboard right next to the door said Menu of the Day: Kutteln and Schupfnudeln for 4.99, whatever that might be. She put her coat on one of the racks that were shaped like tiny deer, their antlers holding the coats while they still managed to stare accusingly into empty space. The restaurant was full of the weirdest accumulation of German clutter she had ever seen. Misshaped hats hung above the coat hangers next to old dusty paintings of somber forests and banderoles with clumsily embroidered flowers and German sayings that none of the guests would even understand. Old-fashioned metallic cooking tools were stacked at the booths, their spikes and peculiar shapes giving the restaurant the charm of a medieval torture chamber. Next to the small window stood a butter churn, decorated with a black and yellow flag showing three lions.

She slid into her favorite booth till her back touched the hot ceramic heater. Her fingers traced the shape of the blue figures on it, women with wide skirts and enormous hats, while she warmed her hands.

An elderly woman came out of the kitchen, the door swinging behind her.

"Amy! It is so beautiful to see you," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. She pushed her metal-rimmed glasses up her nose. She swiftly took a pad and a pencil out of her apron pocket, and wetted the pencil's tip with her tongue. Behind her, all tables and booths were empty, contrasting her bustle.

Amy smiled at her. "Hi Hanne," she said.

"The whole day, it's been so cold," Hanne said, "and you poor thing had to work?" She shivered to show her disagreement and smiled broadly. "I'll bring you a nice hot soup first, to get you warm again. How about Leberklößchen?"

Amy tried to remember the few, essential German words she had learned.

"That's liver, right? I'm a vegetarian." And I have told you that before, she thought.

Hanne looked at her blank faced. She blinked, struggling with that word.

“How about some vegetables?” Amy asked.

“Oh, yes. I’ll go to the kitchen fast, and then we can talk, okay?” Her smile reappeared and she touched Amy’s arm reassuringly as she brushed past her to the kitchen. Her broad back and her swinging skirt disappeared behind the swinging door.

Left by herself, Amy took off her hair tie, and finger combed her hair, wet strands flapping against the oven. She shoved her backpack under the table and wriggled her legs around it. She relaxed for the first time all day.

Hanne reappeared from the kitchen, carrying a steaming hot plate and a big glass of a yellow liquid. Amy straightened up and tried to peek on the plate. Rice with a creamy sauce and something that looked suspiciously like meat.

“Um, Hanne,” Amy said. The older woman looked at her quizzically.

“Oh yes,” she said, “I forgot the salad. I’ll bring it to you.”

“That’s not it. Is that meat?”

“Yes. It’s good food, especially for a girl like you. You need some more flesh on your bones. You look like a chicken that’s been pushed away from the grain by the other chickens, been picked at and has lost all its feathers, pink and naked.” Her hands formed chicken beaks, picking for invisible grain. She looked at Amy with bright eyes.

“Maybe,” Amy said, distraught by the image. She had never thought of herself as a chicken. “But I’m a vegetarian. I don’t eat meat.” While she was still finishing the sentence, she already pulled the plate close to her. She sighed. It did smell good. “It’s okay,” she said, “just remember next time. What’s that?” She took a careful sip of the beverage. “Apple schorle?”

Hanne beamed at her. “You’re learning German,” she said.

Amy smiled back at her, not sure why she wanted this woman’s approval. She started eating while Hanne sat down in the booth and wiped absentmindedly across the dark wood table. Amy ate the rice with sauce while she carefully sorted out every greasy piece of meat on the side of the plate. She finished and dropped her napkin on the plate to hide the meat under it.

“So, how was your day?” Hanne asked.

“Okay, I guess. Nobody tried to vomit on me, so there’s that. But otherwise,” Amy said. Hanne gave her a disapproving look. “Nothing really happened. Well, there was this guy on the bus.”

“A man you liked? And you met him on the bus.” She started picking at the small tablecloth to remove invisible dirt. “Are you sure that’s not dangerous,”

she said, "I have heard much stories about the people on public transportation. Pick-pockets and rapers and all those."

"I only met him, nothing else." Amy said. "But he talked to me and he seemed nice. I haven't really talked to any man since I moved here."

"I just don't think it's safe. Who knows what he was planning to do. I don't like you taking the bus. The last time I took the bus, I almost got robbed."

Amy sighed. "Yes. You told me the story before. But what else should I do? Win the lottery and buy a Porsche?"

"Child, I know how you feel," Hanne said. She slid her chair closer, its legs screeching on the floor tiles. She laid her hand on Amy's. "Things aren't good for you right now. But I just care about you. I want you to be safe."

Overwhelmed by the closeness of Hanne's body and its warmth, Amy slid back on her bench. She tried to pull out her hand from underneath the other woman's. "I'm fine," she said, her hand reaching for her backpack underneath the table. "Everything is just fine. Taking the bus is completely safe. I'm completely safe. You don't need to protect me. I'm a grown-up. Making grown-up decisions." That even sounded stupid in her ears. I'm alone, she thought, I'm all alone. But I'll be damned if I give in now.

She arched her back and stood up, hitting her left knee hard on the table. She clenched her jacket in her hand. "And besides, last time I checked, my mother wasn't a nosy German woman." She immediately regretted saying it, but she didn't want to take it back. She tried to avoid looking in Hanne's eyes. She finished her apple juice, the empty glass clicking hard on the table. "I have to go now, anyway," she said.

She had not been sure whether he would be on the bus. As she walked down the aisle, the old man in the third row next to the window coughed, his head with the uncombed, greasy hair bobbed up and down and his shoulders in the faded blue raincoat shook. Instinctively, Amy went around him, pressed her hip against the seat of the other row. She slowly made her way down the aisle when the bus drove over a bump in the road and she stumbled. Amy tried to grab the handle and missing it. She fell down in her usual seat. She unstrapped her backpack and fumbled it out from behind her.

He was sitting there, looking out of the window. Amy wiped her hands across her thighs.

"Hi", she said. Her voice was still rough from sleep, croaked a little and

sounded way too loud in her ears. Please turn around, she thought, don't let me sit here like a fool, talking to myself.

"Good morning," he said. He turned around and smiled at her.

Amy could feel her heart beat faster, which was odd because she hadn't felt it beat at all for a long time. She smiled back, the corners of her mouth twitching.

Looking out of the window again, he said: "I saw some birds today. No idea what kind they were. Could never remember any, except for geese. And that's because of the sound they make. Sounds like they're always about to die."

Only half-listening, Amy quickly turned to her window, checking her face's reflection. She looked pale and tired, a ghostly oval framed by dark hair. She rubbed the dark circles around her eyes and searched for a chap-stick in the front pocket of her backpack. She found nothing except for some pennies and tiny packets of salt and sugar. With the smell of copper on her fingers, she looked up again. He was smiling at her, looking definitely amused now. A dimple showed in his left cheek and he blinked at her. Amy's hand reached for her hair, tied back as usual. Twisting a strand in her hand, she pressed her lips together.

"I wrote a poem about birds once," she said, not sure why she told him that. He looked at her, his eyebrows raised in a question. His eyes are green, she thought, definitely green. "But that was in fifth grade," she said. It almost sounded like an apology and she hated herself for that.

He leaned back and crossed his legs in his jeans, the bottom of the leg torn and ripped, but not dirty.

"Bet it was good," he said. "Kids write the weirdest things. I should know that."

She nodded slowly. She thought of the poem that she still kept somewhere in her apartment, the big loops and bows of the pencil writing on yellow faded paper, three golden stars in the right upper corner.

"I like birds. Oh, and I'm Amy," she said. She unpacked her granola bar, cranberry flavor this time. She started breaking it into pieces. Chewing the first one, she remembered that she didn't like cranberries, just the way they looked. She shot him a side way glance. He seemed distracted, staring ahead, his foot wiping to a silent rhythm. She was wondering whether he had heard her. He turned to her again, his hand smoothing over what looked more like a beard now.

"Just Amy?" he asked, "that sounds too plain for you."

Surprised, she swallowed a big piece of the granola bar. "Amélie, actually. But nobody calls me that. It doesn't sound like me, I guess."

"I could see that working," he said. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of

his sweater. He blinked at her, his smile widened. "I could see you as a French girl, all charming and mysterious. Breaking poor guys' hearts."

She hid a smile and looked down to keep from blushing.

"I wish I could speak French," she said, "But I guess I've never gotten around to learning it."

"You still have all the time to do it," he said and stretched some more.

A small stripe of his skin showed between the top of his jeans and the faded grey shirt he was wearing under his sweater. Amy asked herself how his skin would feel, giving in under her fingertips. She imagined tracing her hands along his narrow hips, following his spine up to his neck. She could almost feel the warmth he was radiating and wanted to crawl up against his back, to seek shelter, following the curve of his body with hers, extending her arms against his, slowly measuring him out.

He pulled down his sweater and she blinked fast.

"That's what people tell me. About my life, I mean. But I don't know. I feel like it's moving too fast. I can't control it. And I can't imagine myself sitting down in the evening after a long day to learn vocab."

He pulled up the right sleeve of his sweater and scratched his arm. He seemed absentminded again. "I don't believe in book smarts, in case you haven't already noticed that." His smile showed up and vanished again in a second. "I think you should move to France. Why not. They probably need nurses there too."

"Oh no." Amy laughed but felt uncomfortable. "I could never do that. All by myself."

"Well, I'm free for the next couple of months. Can't say I've ever been to Europe." She checked, but he wasn't laughing. Was he serious? She shifted in her seat and crossed her arms. Her scalp suddenly felt itchy and she focused on not scratching it.

The bus smelled like pickles and popcorn. Moving past the first row, Amy saw that the man to the left had peed himself and still seemed to be happy with the world. She shook her head. She made a mental note to never ever sit on the left side of the first row in a city bus.

Jonathan was waiting for her, his right hand in his jeans pocket.

"I remembered what you said about the birds," he said, "so I got you this."

He held out his hand to her. She leaned in closer, examining the object in his hand. It was a tiny brooch of a bird. Bright pink, green and yellow plastic,

the edges dirty and bare of color, one eye missing, it looked a lot like something he had found on the street or maybe in the bus.

"Thanks," she said, not sure whether she wanted to touch it.

Picking it up with the tips of her fingers, she slid it into the pocket of her jacket. She smiled weakly and tried to push her jacket pocket as far away from her body as possible. Where the hell had he gotten that thing from? And did he expect her now to be flattered?

She tried to think of something to say when the bus suddenly pulled to the curb and stopped. Amy looked up. They had stopped randomly in front of a Dunkin Donuts. She frowned.

The woman in the driver's seat got up, stood at the beginning of the aisle, old-fashioned skirt and sturdy blue vest, and yelled: "Sorry everybody, just gotta get the refund for the coffee they messed up last week." She got off the bus and marched towards the Dunkin door.

"Really?" Amy said, "She's really getting a coffee now? What is this, an asylum? Can everybody just do what they fucking please? That's good to know because I always wanted to ride on top of the bus."

He looked at her and frowned. "Why are you so angry now?" he asked. "It's only going to take five minutes. That won't change your whole day. Probably you won't even be late for work. You know that the anger will take away more of your life than the actual thing?"

"I will be late. And there's always something with this bus. Either it's late, or it smells or it gets stuck in traffic." And you're better not trying to tell me what to do.

He didn't answer. She noticed he was wearing similar clothes as he had been on the other days, old jeans, no socks and no jacket. Something about that bugged her.

"You know, it's cold outside," she said, "maybe you should consider a jacket sometimes."

He shrugged and stuffed his hands in his sweatshirt pockets.

The elevator door to the third floor, cardiology, opened with a loud ping and Amy walked out rubbing a spot of old-man-spit on her shirt. She heard his voice before she could see him and quickly ducked into the staff kitchen. Her heart racing, she hid behind the ficus that clearly needed water or someone merciful enough to finally kill it and peeked out into the hallway. He was sitting in the waiting corner on one of the uncomfortable blue chrome chairs, surrounded

by three young nurses Amy had never seen before and that were definitely prettier than her. She couldn't hear what he was saying but the nurses laughed in unison, the blonde one casually touching his shoulder. What was he doing here? She felt that he had somehow invaded what was her space.

Amy startled when Marissa, the head nurse, brushed past her into the kitchen. She took a cup announcing world's best mum from the cupboard.

"Um, Marissa," Amy said, "Do you know that guy sitting in the corner?" She tried to lean casually against the counter while she eyed him beaming at the nurses.

"Which guy?" Marissa turned around, "Oh, the ragged one? I don't know. He's here almost every day. Joseph something?"

"Joseph?" Amy asked. She teetered against the counter.

"Or something similar. Why are asking about him?" Marissa looked at Amy, big eyes behind glasses that made her look like an owl.

"Just curious." Amy said and looked away. "What is he? Patient, relative?" The blonde nurse was playing with her hair now, sitting on the backrest of his chair. Get away from him, Amy thought. Take your shiny hair off of him.

"That's the most I've heard you talk in months," Marissa said. She poured herself a giant cup of coffee and leaned in the door frame across from Amy. She crossed her arms. "Why are so interested in him?"

Amy kicked her sneaker against the drawer behind her. "I am not," she said. "I just see him on the bus every day. I thought he was going to work."

"Well, I can't tell you what he's doing here. But there's something fishy about him."

"Thanks anyway." Amy tried to smooth her scrubs with her hands and checked her hair in the glass door of the kitchen cabinet. She grabbed the clipboard she had been carrying and turned to the door. Marissa blocked the doorway, left hand on her hip, the other one still holding the cup.

"Look, I won't tell you what do. But take care, okay?" She pushed back her glasses and frowned.

Amy sighed. "Yes, I will." That's all I've been doing for my whole life. I've always been careful and where did it get me? To a strange city. Where I know no one and nobody cares about me.

She took a deep breath and walked down the hall. She got closer and closer to Jonathan and she could feel her legs shaking. Please see me, she thought, please please see me. He leaned in closer to the blond nurse, dimple

showing as he smiled at her. That's my smile, Amy thought, don't waste it on other people. And then she was right in front of him, her heart pounding as if she was about to vomit it out. He was still looking at the nurse. Amy felt as if she was shrinking rapidly, sinking down in a puddle to his feet. She tried to speak but only managed a little croak. He looked at her, his eyes empty of all emotion. She swallowed, raised her hand to her mouth and dropped it again.

Amy turned and almost ran to the end of the corridor, turning right into the telly room. She leaned against the wall and watched the monitors, the constant bipping of the TV's sounds measuring the heart beats of the patient in rooms all over the floor resounding in her chest. Closing her eyes, she tried to breathe. What am I doing, she thought, what the heck am I doing. I'm only making a fool out of myself. She felt her breathing adjust to one slow heartbeat, only realizing after minutes that it was slowing down. She coughed and rubbed her cheeks. She arched out her back and stood up. I need to get out of here.

She turned on the lights as she entered her apartment and stepped out of her sneakers. The light bulb in the cheap Ikea plastic lampshade flickered disapprovingly before it gave in and lightened up. Amy sighed and closed the door. She tucked up the end of her college Klimt poster over the dent on the back of her door and tossed her keys on the old maroon couch, followed by her jacket. Standing in what only a desperate realtor might refer to as studio apartment, Amy dropped her backpack and finger-combed her hair. She picked up the cardigan she had left on the couch in the morning and wrapped herself into it. She moved over to the kitchenette, past a big bucket of yellow paint and two cartons labeled office and books. Amy faced the almost-emptiness of the fridge, nothing but three cartons of yoghurt and a week-old orange and settled for yoghurt, shutting the door of the fridge fast. She picked up a plastic spoon from the sink and sat down on the couch only to fumble out her keys from underneath her butt. She dropped her head on the back of the couch and tried to think of nothing. She didn't want to go over his behavior and ask herself questions she didn't know the answer to.

Looking for the remote of her minuscule TV, Amy saw the mail she had stepped over on the way in, three white envelopes on the dirty brown carpet. She leaned over the end of the couch and struggled to pick them up. Electricity bill, phone bill and a letter from her mother. The horses' behinds on the stamp announced greetings from North Dakota. Oh right, Amy thought, because I miss

that place so much. Why is she still using those stamps? That's just ridiculous. She stood up and threw her half-empty yoghurt and the envelope into the kitchen trash. She pinned the two bills to her pin board almost covered in the whiteness of similar love letters. She turned around, nibbling on her lower lip. Maybe she should see what her mother had written. Or call her to see whether everything was okay. She picked the phone up from the counter and dialed the numbers without even having to look. Amy leaned against the wall, pulling her cardigan closer around her. Nobody picked up the phone. Amy sighed relieved and ended the call without leaving a message. Her duty as a daughter was done now. It's not that I avoid talking to her, she told herself. She is just never there when I try to call. And that is clearly not my fault.

She put the phone back on the counter and turned around, taking in the blankness of the room and the half-white, half-yellow wall, newspaper crumbled at the bottom of it. Amy bit her lip and crossed her legs, her hand playing with the waistband of her scrubs.

Maybe I should unpack some stuff, she thought, I won't go anywhere soon. She knelt down next to the cartons and opened the one labeled books. Right on top lay her high school year book. Amy frowned. Why do I still keep that thing, she wondered, am I that sentimental? She picked it up and dropped it on the floor next to the box. Underneath, wrapped in newspapers, the certificate of her college degree, announcing to everyone who cared that she'd graduated in the top fifteen percent of her class. Because that matters, because people obviously care so much about that, she thought, just see where that got me. She let it drop to the floor and rummaged through the carton. Finally, at the bottom, her bird poem, the sheet crumbled, one of the gold stars peeling off. Amy tried to smooth it out on her legs and held it carefully in front of her. Where did that girl go, she thought, who cared so much about everything and used to draw little smileys instead of I-dots. She put the sheet down on the pile of rubbish and rocked back on her heels, pulling back her hair. Whatever. It's not like I have a book shelf, anyway.

She stood up and went to the bathroom, past her beaten-down futon. She fixed the door to stay open since the bathroom light had never been working and dropped her clothes on the bathroom floor. At least I don't see the mold that way, she thought. Standing in the darkness underneath the water stream, Amy closed her eyes and leaned against the shower tiles. What am I doing with my life, she thought, what the hell am I doing with my life. It's like there's this

hole in my stomach sucking in everything good around me, my body is closing in on me and locking me in. And I can't get away. I can't find a place where I feel more than this gaping emptiness. She reached for her shampoo bottle and missed it, hitting her hand against the wall. She flinched and crouched down on the floor tiles. She licked her hand to see if she was bleeding and after figuring out that she probably wasn't, Amy sat down and crossed her legs in the tiny shower cabin. The water stream almost drowned her and she felt tired. She leaned her head against the wall.

Jonathan, she thought, why do I care so much about him? Maybe he's crazy. I was just fine before I met him. That's a lie. I can't even be honest to myself. What's up with that. She grabbed the shower curtain and clenched it in her hand. I'm not happy and even if I finally feel something when I'm around him, it's not what I want to feel. Not this insecurity.

She lifted her body up, her feet almost slipping away, stepped out of the shower and grabbed her towel. I need to do something, she thought, wrapping the towel around her body, it's about time I get this together. This is not who I want to be. Shuddering in the cold air, she walked into the living-room and grabbed her jacket from the couch. She took the bird brooch out of her jacket pocket and turned it in her hand. It was still as ugly as she remembered, the paint chipped at the corner. She peeled it off with her fingernail, revealing pink plastic. Rubbing her foot against her shin, she stood there, not knowing what to do. Drops ran from her hair down her shoulders and her back. She touched her neck, tried to rub them away. She really just wanted to throw it in the trash.

It was less cold the next morning. The bus was on time and as she got on it, Amy couldn't help but feel that this was going to be a good day. She pushed back her hair. She hadn't worn it down for years. I've got to start somewhere, she thought. Busy with her hair, she walked down the aisle. Amy grabbed a handle as the bus drove over a pothole and when she continued walking, she saw that he wasn't sitting in his usual seat. She sat down in her spot and scanned the bus, turned around to see whether he was somewhere on the bus. She couldn't see him and felt like all the air and enthusiasm left her body. Where was he? She looked back again and locked eyes with an old man in a shabby grey suit holding a brown paper bag. Amy turned back, her body stiffening. Why wasn't Jonathan on the bus? She didn't feel like going to work anymore. And she certainly didn't feel like doing this starting-new crap anymore. When the bus

stopped in front of Yale New Haven Hospital, she hesitated to get off the bus.

He was sitting on a bench next to the entrance. Amy wanted to walk past him but stopped. He smiled at her broadly, oblivious to the morning cold or to how confused he made her feel.

“Good morning!” he said. She looked at him, her left hand playing with the strap of her backpack. He patted the bench, inviting her to sit down. Amy smoothed out her scrubs before she said down and avoided to touch the back of the bench. She looked at him, not sure what to say.

“You’re wearing your hair down,” he said, “I really like it.” She looked down and pushed her curls back over her shoulder.

“I just felt like it,” she said, feeling defensive. “Must be because spring is finally coming.”

He leaned back, crossing his feet in worn sneakers. He looked as if he really felt comfortable sitting on the ice-cold bench. Had he been waiting for her?

“I guess I want to change some things in my life”, Amy said, “Because I am not happy.” He looked into the distance and then turned to her.

“Maybe I could help with that,” he said. His smile broadened again but he sounded tired. Like he had said that sentence too often, to the point where it meant nothing to him anymore. He leaned in closely and picked up one of her curls. He held it carefully in his perfect hand.

“I really like the hair,” he said.

You really know what you’re doing, don’t you, Amy thought, just some nice words and all the girls fall to your feet. But who are you? Who are you behind all that charm? His face that close to hers, Amy could see the wrinkles around his eyes and she realized that he was probably older than she had thought. His lips were dry, and Amy wondered if she started pulling off the tiny scraps of skin, slowly, taking off his mask, his skin, red muscles and strong bones, peeling off one layer after another, would she end up at who he really was, his essence? Or would she find nothing? Was that all he was, a mask showing people whoever they want to see?

She wanted to say something but she couldn’t think of anything. I want you to mean something to me? I want to see you care about me and just me? I want some proof, something I can hold on to? She cleared her throat and felt her lungs swell and close.

“I,” she said. And then she wanted to go on: “I saw you in the hospital.” But she didn’t. Maybe I don’t want to know why was there, she thought. Maybe I don’t

want this. But she didn't know what to tell him, how to get him to let go of her hair. This is too close, she thought. Too close to somebody I don't know. And it's not close enough. How can I ever get close enough to you? Really know you?

Words are like paper planes, she thought. The ones that your teachers make you build just when you're not interested in them anymore. They'll claim that paper planes are great to observe aerodynamics and what not. But no matter how foolproof the instructions seem to be, they never fly. Looking like absurd checkered dragons, they barely make it a couple of feet, shaky and unstable. And once they touch the ground, you lose interest in them, leaving them lying there till the janitor cleans them up. Teachers know shit about paper planes.

Amy looked at his long frame stretched out on the bench and it seemed to her almost as if he was fading a little in the sunlight, his shoulders in a green sweater fraying out and his face losing compactness. Maybe his eyes are grey after all, Amy thought, or they're of a non-color. They gave away nothing, told her not what to do but she could see herself in them, her small face framed by a mass of dark curls, her eyes big and questioning.

Amy breathed out slowly, her breath a white cloud in the space between them. She touched his shoulder, moved closer in an attempt to overcome the distance between them. She felt his bones and cold skin through his sweater. Do I?, she thought, do I want to kiss him? Do I want him? Can I live with what he will answer me? Do I dare to eat the peach? Her hand smoothed over her empty jacket pocket. She closed her eyes.

The Pointy S

By the time I was in third grade, I had just slightly wrapped my large head around that intricate network of shoelaces and heartstrings that the other kids knew as love—or “like,” I should say.

In elementary school, “like” was the governing force that justified a self-respecting kid giving his perfectly good Fruit Roll-Up to the girl with the pig-tails. “Like” was how you explained to your friends what was wrong with you when you held the button down on the water fountain for that girl who got nervous at show-and-tell yesterday and threw up all over the chalkboard. But for me, “like” was the concept that explained how I felt about Ashley Keyes.

Ashley Keyes.

The name alone sent chills coursing through my body, from the collar of my X-Men sweatshirt to the soles of my Converse Touch EFX sneakers.

To a shy little boy like me, Ashley had it all. She had these gorgeous blue eyes full of wonder and childish curiosity that shone like beacons under curly blonde bangs. Ashley’s outfit of choice—or of her mother’s choice, rather—was a pink dress and a pair of shiny white shoes that glistened as she ran across the playground. Ashley was perpetually friendly and happy; her smile was as iconic a feature on her face as her buckteeth.

What’s more, she was nice to me. When it was my turn in kickball, Ashley would pitch the ball to me extra slowly. When I tried to tell a joke and fell flat on my face, Ashley would be the only one to laugh and ask me to tell another. When my stutter prevented me from getting my words out—even if we all knew I sounded silly—Ashley wouldn’t laugh. Her kindness inspired a sense of confidence in me that I carry to this day.

I liked Ashley Keyes.

One afternoon, I arrived at recess with a chunky piece of yellow sidewalk chalk, which I had gotten from my father after he cleaned out the art department stockroom at the high school where he taught. Our school had boxes of chalk to sign out during a recess period, but by the time our lunch monitor decided to finish her cigarette and take our class out to the play area, the big kids had gotten their hands on every last piece.

But not mine.

Having your own chalk at Washington Magnet was an instant ticket to

popularity. In the same way a sketch artist gathers crowds' downtown with their caricatures and portraits, the lucky third-grader attracts the other students with the magical Pointy S. It was simple, really—a three-by-two array of six vertical lines, with two diagonal lines connecting the first line to the fifth and the second line to the sixth, topped off by two bottomless triangles on either end:



That symbol, while seemingly meaningless to the teachers that patrolled the recess area, was, in our minds, the equivalent of Puff Daddy posting party invitations on the monkey bars. The Pointy S represented all that was cool, or rebellious, or fashionable in our little world. Draw a Pointy S and you instantly became the coolest kid in school, adored by students young and old.

My logic was simple: I draw a Pointy S, Ashley sees it, and the power contained within the S unites our hearts as one, and we live happily ever after, eternally in “like.”

As the students in our class organized a kickball game, I fiddled with the chalk in my pocket, all the while thinking about when the perfect moment would be to show off my drawing skills. I figured I would want more people around me when the S went down—you know, for maximum coolness. My drawing would have seemed infinitely cooler if I had a group around me to gasp and high-five me.

I was too busy plotting my scheme to realize I had been picked last, and was still standing against the fence when my team captain called me.

“Come on, stupid!” the kid, who I didn’t recognize, yelled.

I ran to join my teammates, and we began the game.

I was never very good at kickball. Even when my sweet Ashley pitched to me, I was almost always tagged out. Before long, I was one of those kids that everyone in the outfield moved forward for. Demeaning doesn’t even begin to describe how I felt about this ritual.

This time was no different. When it was my turn, it almost seemed as if I had kicked the ball right into the pitcher's arms. I didn't even bother running for first base; exasperated, I returned to the back of my team's line and reclined against the fence.

As I stared at the ground in embarrassment, waiting for this stupid game to be over, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"I thought you did a great job," Ashley said from behind me.

I turned around, meeting her beautiful blue eyes with great anticipation.

"Really?" I said, with a slight smile.

"Yeah!" Ashley said. "Do better next time for me, okay?"

I melted.

"I will!" I said to Ashley before she skipped away to jump double-dutch with the other girls. Still in a puddle, I reached into my pocket and produced my hunk of chalk. I twirled it around in my hand, dying to show my friends, but knowing in the back of my mind that it wasn't the time. Suddenly, I felt my hand jerk skyward, dropping the chalk in the process.

"Give me your chalk, faggot!"

Frank was the class bully. He was a tall, skinny boy with wispy red hair, freckles, and eyes that always seemed to be squinted with anger. What constantly surprised me back then about Frank was his vocabulary. Someone in Frank's life had obviously taken the time to teach him all sorts of disgusting, rude words, some of which I had never heard before in my life.

"What are you gonna do, draw yourself a new cock?" Frank snapped in my face.

I bent down to pick up my chalk. "Leave me alone, Frank," I said, silently preparing to guard my ribs.

"Ah, you're a faggot anyway. Your fucking chalk is stupid too. Homo."

He had obviously decided the confrontation wasn't worth it. "Homo, homo, homo," Frank melodically muttered to himself as he walked away with a cocky spring in his step.

Slightly shaken, I put my chalk back in my pocket as one of the teachers blew the whistle. It was time to go back to class.

This was my moment. The Pointy S. Ashley was mine.

I timed my walk to the teacher so that I ended up in line two spaces in front of Ashley; my position would give me just enough time to draw my S on the brick façade of the school building as we filed into the big double

doors. As our class started walking out of the recess area, I reached into my pocket and grabbed my chalk. We were coming up to the brick wall.

Our teacher was walking backwards to make sure everyone had gotten in line. As soon as we reached the wall and the teacher turned around, I took out my chalk and made my move.

Line, line, line. Line, line, line.

Connect one and five. Connect one and six.

Triangle top, triangle bottom.

A masterpiece.

I called to Ashley.

“Ashley, look!” I said with a smile.

Almost as soon as I called Ashley over, I felt someone snatch the chalk from my hand. Frank wrote a plain A and S in front of my drawing and threw the chalk down at my feet.

“OOOOOOOOHHH, MRS. ABBOTT!” Frank said at the top of his lungs almost instinctively, all the while staring at me wide-eyed and pointing his little index finger in my direction.

I gazed at what was now a profanity on the side of the wall. Ashley had lost interest somewhere in the shuffle—she had moved to the center of a small cluster of girls who had asked her if she had seen Spice World yet. Mrs. Abbott told the class to hold still while she made her way to the back of the line.

“Who wrote this?” she said with disappointment and anger in her voice, pointing to the word on the wall.

“Christian did!” Frank yelled, this time pointing his finger in my face at obnoxiously close proximity.

I started to defend myself.

“But I didn’t—“

“I’m going to have to keep my eye on you very closely from now on,” Mrs. Abbott interrupted, pointing to me from way up above. “I’m very disappointed in you.”

Though I knew it wasn’t fair, I didn’t even argue. I just picked up my chalk, hung my head in shame and exasperation and continued on my way through the double doors as I heard Frank laughing in the background.

I was disappointed that my chance to impress Ashley was ruined, but I also had this feeling of resignation in my heart. I resigned myself to the

fact that I was destined to be at the mercy of the mean kids. No matter how hard I tried, the unfair side would win every time. It was no use, I thought. I entered the classroom in front of Mrs. Abbott, who had taken a quick detour past the doorframe instead of following us inside.

I sat down at my desk, next to Ashley. Sensing a glimmer of hope, I tapped her on the shoulder.

“Ashley, did you see what I drew you?” I asked with bated breath.

“No,” she said. “What was it?”

I sighed. “Nothing,” I said. “Just a Pointy S.”

“Oh!” Ashley’s face lit up almost immediately. “Where did you learn to draw that? That’s so cool!”

A question! She wanted to know more!

Praise Jesus!

The floodgates of my mind opened, spewing out word after word I wanted her to know. My dad artist gave chalk. Chalk learn draw pointy S. Chalk! Like! You! I like you!

Unfortunately, all I could do was stammer. I stared at my hands on my desk, mouth agape at the crest of a nervous giggle.

“Well?” Ashley said through a light, airy laugh.

“Uh, my dad, he—“

Before I could even begin to express myself, the classroom door swung open, the doorknob hitting the wall behind it with a sharp thud. All of my classmates instantly sat up in their small plastic chairs with their backs arched nervously, as if a string attached to the door connected each of them and pulled with the swinging motion. The air in the classroom suddenly felt laced with this frigid whisper. Time stood still. My stomach dropped.

It was Principal Van Winkle.

“Attention, students!” Mr. Van Winkle said in his loud yet nurturing tone. I was frozen with fear; using my eyes, I followed his black leather shoes as they marched to the front of the classroom.

Mr. Van Winkle had this gold and grey aura that surrounded him. His tall, lanky frame was consistently draped with fine suits and jackets, like a particularly suave character in one of my mother’s soaps. Whether he was surveying the students lining up for lunch or practicing his ballroom dancing steps with his secretary in the office, Mr. Van Winkle glowed with this sort of eccentricity and importance.

"If you can hear me, clap!" Mr. Van Winkle announced, harking back to an exercise our school learned in an assembly the week before. We all stopped talking and clapped, eager to display the fact that we remembered it.

"Very good. Now, it is my understanding that someone in this room wrote a naughty word on the wall during recess."

My brain shook. How did he hear about that so quickly? I never believed my friends when they said there were cameras in the trees outside. As my stomach began to churn even harder, I began to believe it.

Mr. Van Winkle continued.

"I need to know who did that," he said, pacing from left to right in the front of the room. "But I'm not out to embarrass any of you kids. So this is what I'm going to do."

He turned to Mrs. Abbott.

"Mrs. Abbott, can I have the master list, please?"

She nodded and walked to her desk. Mrs. Abbott opened a drawer and produced a wrinkled piece of yellow paper—the list of names of all the students in our class. Straightening out the folded corners, she handed it to Mr. Van Winkle. My little palms became coated with sweat as I squirmed in my seat.

"Here's what we're going to do," said Mr. Van Winkle. "All of you are going to close your eyes."

We all waited to hear more instruction, but Mr. Van Winkle obviously wanted us to do as he said at that moment.

"Close your eyes!" he said a bit louder.

I closed them. The darkness was soothing to my stomach, which felt like it was twisting and writhing in my body, trying to break free.

"Now I'm going to read these names off this list, and if you think you saw that person write on the wall outside, I want you to raise your hand. I'm going to count the hands up for each name on the blackboard"—he audibly fidgeted around to find a usable piece of chalk on the ledge—"and whoever has the most hands up will take a trip with me to my office."

This couldn't be. I was never a troublemaker. Ever! Now I'm going to be ousted as the ass-writer, in front of everybody. It wasn't even me. Mrs. Abbott loves stupid Frank. If someone were to walk in tomorrow and ask her to volunteer one student to take with them to Hollywood, she'd carry Frank there on her shoulders.

"Everybody ready?" Mr. Van Winkle said. "Alrighty. Let's start from the top. Amanda."

Silence. No hands rose, obviously. Amanda was too quiet to ever get in

trouble. I didn't even remember her being in class today.

"Ashley."

I heard the sound of moist flesh lifting from the desk, followed by a heinous laugh.

"Frank, put your hand down!" Mrs. Abbott exclaimed.

Frank sighed as he slammed his hand back down on the desk in exasperation.

"Okay. Chr—Ch—Chris..."

"Christian," Mrs. Abbott said, correcting Mr. Van Winkle.

The sound of my heart beating inside my chest drowned out any sound I tried to hear in the classroom. I was left without a hint as to my fate. The anxiousness ate at me as I sat in the dark while Mr. Van Winkle read the rest of the list.

"Kyle."

"Taylor A."

"Taylor W."

"Vera."

When the list was done, we were allowed to see again. My eyes darted to the board, scanning the hand-written list for my name.

Frank. 2.

Christina. 0.

CHRISTIAN.

17.

"OOOOOOOHH!" the class screamed in unison.

I stayed frozen in my seat, frightened of the consequences to come and confused as to how so many of my classmates "knew" I did it.

I looked down and noticed my sweatpants were dusted with chalk. It was the perfect crime. I hate Frank.

"Christian, let's take a walk, buddy," Mr. Van Winkle extended his hand to me from the opposite side of my desk.

My mind blanked. The mixture of sweat and chalk dust on my hands created a sort of paste that I nervously rolled in my fingers. A sense of panic slowly poured over my soul, like troops systematically marching over a field. This was it. How could I get out of it? I'm covered in evidence, the weapon is in my pocket, and if I ratted Frank out, his fists would never let me forget it. And what would Ashley think? I hesitated to even imagine it.

I felt something in my abdomen gurgle.

My nervous system kicked in, and my natural defenses assumed control.

From my knees to my chest, I felt a sudden rush of panic shoot up my body.

Like I had in so many situations before this one, situations in which I knew I was going to be on the receiving end of some sort of punishment, I handled it the best way I knew how.

Without a pause, as if I was formally responding to Mr. Van Winkle's invitation, vomit spewed from my mouth. The dark yellow, red-sprinkled material shot with full force and landed on Mr. Van Winkle's hand as I gargled and tightened my throat muscles to prevent more puke from coming out.

The class burst into raucous laughter.

"Everybody be quiet!" Mrs. Abbott exclaimed, to no avail. She had lost them.

"Now that's alright," Mr. Van Winkle said. "It's perfectly normal to—"

I vomited again. This time, the liquid fell onto my desk, accompanied by chunks of hot dog and apple. It cascaded over the edge of the desktop and began to pour onto my lap. The acidic smell of the substance forced several of my classmates to cover their noses and mouths. The laughter was now punctuated with "ewws" and "yucks."

Mr. Van Winkle took a step back.

"Mrs. Abbott, can you call the nurse, please?" he said, avoiding the smell and the sight of the mess I had created.

My eyes had welled up with tears from the sheer force of the vomit forcing its way out of my insides. I looked around at the room and was dazed by the laughter, the spiral of chaos that was borne of my nervousness. As the nurse made her way into the room and took my hand that wasn't drenched in vomit, I grabbed my backpack and stumbled out the door behind her, leaving a trail of orange-shaded goopy footprints soon to be covered in sawdust.

As I looked back among the small crowd of laughing faces, I saw Ashley's. Covering the bottom of her face with her hands, I saw her cheeks had turned a bright red.

I recognized it immediately.

That red. It was that shade of red I knew her face turned when she laughed—when something hit her just right, and she couldn't help but giggle.

Her big beautiful blue eyes made contact with mine. In that moment, I knew she was trying to communicate with me. I didn't quite know what it meant yet, but something in my mind, or my heart, told me it was a good thing.

I liked Ashley Keyes.

The one time of the day more sacred than church

was dinner. Mami, Papi, Jen and Alex bowed their heads in prayer. Papi led the prayer, and Mami mumbled in unison. Jen scrunched her brow, and squeezed her eyes shut, but the smell of rice, beans, and fried chicken made Alex keep his eyes wide open. Who'd notice anyways? His mouth salivated to the point where the insides of his jaw hurt. Once the excruciating torture finished with an amen, Alex asked Jen if he could play guitar for her birthday.

"No," said Jen.

Alex frowned. Jen said that a lot lately, especially now that she was turning fifteen. Sure her Quinceañera was supposed to be the ultimate birthday party, where baby Jenny would become the grown up Jen, but now she ruined her chances of getting something nice from Alex, even though he could afford it. Big deal. She was way too negative anyway. Besides, getting Jen her favorite pair of blue converse on Christmas didn't make her talk to him more. Neither did a glow in the dark teddy bear on New Year's Eve. No gift would change her, no matter how nice. But getting her nothing might do the trick.

Papi lifted his eyes from his plate and looked at Jennifer as if he had something to say. He pursed his lip-less mouth.

"Alright Jen," said Alex. He dropped his spoon into his rice and beans. "It's your loss. It's not like I can afford anything else."

"Well, thanks anyways."

"Pero Jennifer," said Mami, "Why you don't let Alex play guitar for your Quinceañera?" Mami had always been the pretty one. Her eyes shone green, and she had those full Latina lips. Thankfully, Alex took after his mother, and Jen wasn't too far behind.

"Mami," said Jen. "Why do you always take his side? I just don't want him to play. Period." Normally, when Jen ate, she only took a few grains of rice accompanied by one bean, but now she dug her spoon so deep in her plate that she scraped the bottom. She shoved the tall pile of rice in her mouth. Grains of rice spilled from between her lips.

Maybe being five years apart made them grow apart, but there had been a time when Alex and Jen were pretty close. She was his little flaca. But she hit high school, and made some new friends, and he graduated high school only to start fixing houses with Papi. Man was it exhausting. Being ordered to

hold the ladder, find the right nails, and mix the paint left Alex with just enough strength to eat dinner, and go straight to bed. Maybe that was why Jen no longer told Alex all her secrets. Maybe that was why she texted her friends instead.

"I'm going to eat in my room," said Alex, laying his fingers on his plate.

"No," said Mami. "We eat at the dinner table."

"No Ma, we don't eat at the *deener* table. We eat at the dinner table."

His mother's jaw hung open. Her eyes darted around his face.

"Did you guys call the merengue band?" said Jen.

Mami jolted her head to Jen. "Sí," she said. Her parted lips curled into a smirk. "The singer—eh—cómo se llama? Ah, sí, Roberto. He say he have a song very special for his Jalapeña."

Blood rushed to Alex's face. That merengue band was nothing but a bunch of local pretty boys who called themselves *Los Jalapeños*, because their music was hot. He picked up his plate, stormed up the stairs, and slammed the door to his room. His bed stood in the center, and an empty cherry wood desk was tucked into the corner next to his bed. The amp to his acoustic/electric sat in front of his bed. He set his plate on the desk.

Alex opened the middle drawer, and pulled out his Bible. He wiped the dust off its leather case, and unzipped it. He stuck his fingers in between the last pages, and pulled out a wad of bills. He counted five one hundred dollar bills. Once, Alex had told his uncle he was strapped for cash, and Tío Pepe had invited him to invest his money in cockfighting. "It's the hottest thing on the market," he had said, "besides me." Tío Pepe had made Alex look at the roosters thrash each other's stream lined, comb-less faces, and peck bleeding holes all over their featherless torsos. If Alex was going to continue making money, he had better get used to it.

If only he didn't have to lie to Papi about it. But what else was he supposed to do? Every time he did offer Papi some money, Papi would threaten to make him squeal like a pig. Papi even took out a loan just to prove his point, but not before giving Alex the usual, "I am the man of the house, and it is my job to provide for this family, as my father did before me, and his father did before him" speech. But if he could barely pay for the house, and car, how was he supposed to pay off his loan?

If Papi wouldn't take Alex's money, Alex would just have to sneak it into Mami's special sock instead. After all, if she did confront Alex about it, he'd convince her how badly they needed it. She was the more reasonable one

when it came to money matters.

Alex went up to his parents' room. He twisted the doorknob, and opened the door.

"What are you doing?"

Alex jumped at the sound of Jen's voice. He shoved the cash in his pocket. "What do you care?"

"What are you doing in Mami's room?" Jen crossed her bony arms, and tapped her foot.

"I thought I heard a bat." Alex kept his face straight.

"Oh, so now you're Mami's knight in shining armor?"

Alex rolled his eyes. "Shut up."

"Why did you insult her like that? Your Spanish is just as bad as her English."

Alex linked his wrists together, palms up. "If I answer your questions, will you please let me go, officer?"

Jen glared at Alex. "If I were a cop I'd arrest you for animal abuse."

Stupid, stupid Alex had told Jen about the cockfighting, in hopes of salvaging what was left of their relationship. It worked in all the movies, but it didn't exactly work with Jen. At least Alex was smart enough to tell her the cockfighting was for leisure, and not money. "They're just animals."

"Yeah?" said Jen. "Is a dog just an animal too? You know my friend—"

Alex brought his hand to Jen's face. "Stop it right there, okay Jiminy Cricket?"

"You know what?" said Jen. Her voice turned hoarse. "Somebody's got to be your conscience."

Alex went into his room.

He slipped his iPod from his pocket, and plugged a black, cylindrical adapter into the headphone port. He plugged his guitar cable into the open end of the adapter, and plugged the other end of the guitar cable into his amp. He scrolled through his albums until he found "Beautiful," by Christina Aguilera.

He scrolled the volume up, slumped into his bed, and let his face drop to the side of the bed. The blank wall stared right back at him. Now his favorite part came up, and he sang with it. "I am beautiful in every single way, words can't bring me down." So what if his singing was out of tune.

A cackle made Alex sit straight up. Jen stood in the center of his opened doorway. He fumbled with his iPod. "Don't you knock?" he said. He ripped the cord from the amp.

Jen straightened her face. "Is there something that you want to tell me?"

“Like what?” Alex hopped out of bed, and slid the white doors of his closet open. He took out the blue shirt he was going to wear for Jen’s party, and a matching tie.

“Come on, Alex, just spill it.”

“Spill what?” Alex took out a pair of navy blue slacks.

“Alex.”

Alex turned around.

Jen lifted her eyebrows, as if waiting for him to say something important.

“Okay, can you stop speaking in riddles?” said Alex. “Seriously, I need to sleep.”

“Alex,” said Jen. “I hope this is the last time I have to say this to you, but please just come out of the closet. It would make it that much easier on all of us.”

Alex’s ears grew warm. He clenched his jaw. Always, always, always Jen found some way of making it seem like he was gay. She was like a prodigy at this. “I’m not gay?”

Jen snickered. “Hey, you’re the one who couldn’t keep your one girlfriend.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. Alex deserved much better than his ex. Nobody else would be stupid enough to want her anyway. “Get out.”

“You’re the one listening to Christina Aguilera.”

“I told you to get out.”

“What’s next, Justin Bieber?”

So she snuck into his iTunes too? This was unbelievable. “If you don’t get out right now, I am seriously going to punch you.”

“Yeah right,” said Jen.

“And besides, Christina Aguilera is very attractive.”

Jen turned around with a sneer. “Yeah, and I’m sure Justin Bieber is too.”

The whole family had to clean up the house for the after party. Papi carried a blue, plastic crate full of firewood toward the fireplace. A glass coffee table squatted in the center of the living room. Mami sprayed the table with Windex, and did the “wax on, wax off” technique. Alex was swiffering around the table, and underneath the brown, floral patterned sofa. Jen whacked the cream colored drapes with a broom. Dust billowed to the oakwood floorboards.

“Ey, be careful,” said Mami. “You going to dirty me the table.”

“You might as well be talking to a wall,” said Alex. “You know little princesses

only think about themselves.”

Jen glared at Alex. Her lips trembled.

“Ooh, I’m sorry,” Alex smirked. “Not this little princess. She’s much too busy thinking about her smart, and sexy Jalapeño boy.”

Jen tightened her grip on the broom. Her knuckles whitened.

Alex stopped his swiffering, and stood straight up. “Roberto in a taco anyone?”

“Alex,” said Papi. “Come with me to the basement.”

What was it this time? Alex followed Papi down the stairs in the kitchen, and into the basement. Papi’s man cave might as well have been an actual cave. The floor was made of cement, and the unpainted, wooden panels that made up the walls had yellow puffs of insulation sticking out from in between them. Cardboard boxes littered the ground.

“What happen with you, Alex?” said Papi.

“What do you mean?” said Alex.

“You know the Quinceañera is no for boys.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “I’m not jealous, Papi.”

“Entonces qué pasa?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Just forget it.”

Papi wrinkled his bushy brows.

“It’s just—why do those stupid Jalapeños get to do something special for Jenny, and me, her brother, can’t do the same?”

“No se.” Papi shook his head from side to side. “You ask her.”

Alex turned right around. *Thanks for the helpful talk Pops. Real inspiring.*

“Alex,” said Papi. “I say for you to help me.”

Alex turned around, yet again. Papi rummaged through a splotchy cardboard box. It slouched under his weight.

“Take,” said Papi, holding out a large, round glass tray.

Alex snatched the tray. “Is that it?”

“Dios mío,” said Papi. He ran his fingers through his charcoal colored hair. “Go. You still a little boy.”

“I just asked if that was it. How does that make me a little boy?”

Papi shot his finger out, as if this were a stick up. “I bring you down to help you, and you don’t help me with nothing.”

“What do you call this?” Alex thrust the tray out in front of him.

He could have stopped it, but the way Papi widened his eyes told Alex that

he'd have to sit through yet another "back when I was a kid" story.

"Cuando yo era un niño, I never ask my papi when we finish work. He go to work to break sugar cane with the machete, and I stay at home and take care of the animals." Papi stood, and strode towards Alex. They were face to face. "My papi stay at work until night time, and when he come back everything I have to do, I finish. Y otra cosa, my papi live and die in Puerto Rico, and your uncle take care of him until the end. If I'm there, I do the same."

Once, Alex had overheard a conversation between Mami, and Papi, and he told her how this country treated their elderly like crap, sending them into convalescent homes when they were too old to be of use. Mami had said Alex would never do that. Alex's heart burned. Of course the big boss man couldn't let Alex prove himself. He'd lose the house, lose the apartment he'd get in place of the house, and lose his cardboard box afterward before he'd let Alex help him pay for anything.

Papi marched upstairs, muttering about how Americans are lazy bums who never work. Alex followed him up, and dropped off the tray on the kitchen table.

Alex dragged his feet up the stairs, until he reached his room. He swung the door shut. He waited until Mami, and Papi finished using the bathroom, and until they closed the door to their room. Alex opened his door, and walked downstairs, flat-footed, so that the steps wouldn't creak. When he relaxed his gait at the bottom, he entered the dining room.

He turned on the computer, and one double-click later, he opened the Internet. He found Facebook, logged in, and checked his wall for any updates.

Alex clicked on the search bar in the top right hand corner, and typed his ex's name: Jackie Rodriguez.

Man, their computer was fast. It didn't even give him time to regret his decision. Her profile picture floated in the top right hand corner, below the search bar. In the profile picture, she pressed her bright red lips against some steroid abusing, brown brute. The Incredible Hulk flexed his bicep. Did he surgically insert a softball in there?

Jackie looked genuinely happy. Alex had had a crush on her ever since she had joined his church, but even after Alex rescued her from her ex, their conversations consisted of Alex goading her on about how her day went, and him filling in the silence. Not much different from any real conversations he tried having with Jen, but that was part of life. People just grow apart.

Alex jammed his finger into the off button, and shut the computer down without even closing the Internet. An improper shutdown.

He plodded upstairs.

He opened the door to his room, and slumped in his bed. He turned toward his clock. Its glowing, green numbers said 2:00. He set his alarm for 6:00. He'd wake up before Papi, and set the place up himself. If he wasn't allowed to pay for the rented room, then he could at least do this. Papi would probably be so proud he'd mention what Alex did to Jen, and she'd probably start talking to him again. Who knows, maybe she'd even let Alex play guitar for her birthday.

Alex smiled. Talk about killing two birds with one stone.

After the alarm clock kept buzzing, Alex snatched it, and hurled it against the wall. He buried his face in his hands. His eyes burned. He flung the bedspread off of him, lumbered to the bathroom, and got ready. When he finished, he opened the door to change. Papi stood there, rubbing the bags out of his eyes.

"Ahh! You wake," said Papi. "Good, I need you help."

"Weren't you getting up at 7:00?" said Alex.

"Sí, pero I hear something fall. You fall from the bed?"

"Don't even worry about it," Alex said. "Just go back to sleep."

"Por qué?"

"I'm going to set the place up myself."

"Qué? No, no, no. Voy ayudarte."

"Papi, just let me do it myself."

"Listen to me," said Papi. "I help you." He went in the bathroom, and closed the door.

Once Papi finished in the bathroom, he told Alex to dress in his best clothes because they were going to set up the party room, and there would be no time for dressing later. Alex ironed his blue, collared shirt, and navy blue slacks. He put on a matching vest, and began tying his tie.

"No," said Papi. "That's no good." He took Alex's tie from his hands, and began tying it himself. "Ahora sí."

"I can tie my own tie."

"Sí, pero no the right way."

"What's wrong with my tie?" said Alex.

"It don't look like this," said Papi, beaming his white teeth. "Pay attention."

His limber fingers formed the noose around Alex's neck. Then, he pinched the bottom of the triangular, full Windsor knot, and pulled on the tail until it dimpled beneath the knot.

It did look pretty good. Alex returned Papi's smile. "Thanks."

"De nada. I be in the car."

Papi drove Alex's VW Beetle to a beige, dingy, brick building. Some bony, wispy haired fellow waited for them outside. He handed Papi a key, and Papi opened the glass, double doors. The smell of cigarettes crept up Alex's nose, and tickled his throat. God he could almost taste it.

One half of the room had pine wood floorboards, and an emerald green carpet covered the other half. Round, white, plastic tables, and steel folding chairs leaned against the pale walls. Papi took a gray, plastic shopping bag from the kitchen, and took out two cans of air freshener. He handed them both to Alex. Alex shuffled across to the carpeted area, back to the wooden area, and back again to the carpeted area over, and over until the cans spit out their last bit of smell. Papi had gone into the bathroom with a metal toothbrush, so Alex had to see what was going on.

Alex opened the one stall inside the bathroom. Papi hunched over the toilet. He scraped some fossilized black crud at the very bottom of the water.

"Need help?" said Alex.

"Go, and do what I tell you."

"I'm done."

"Oh yes? The tables open? The chairs open too?"

Blood rushed to his face. Papi never let him do anything important. Even when they worked on houses the only thing Alex was allowed to do was paint the walls, or mow the lawn. The grand master spent his time fixing the electricity, getting the plumbing right, or stapling shingles on the roof. Alex tossed both cans of air freshener into the garbage can.

Alex kicked each tables' legs open, and put eight chairs around each one.

"Abre la puerta," said Tío Pepe. Even though Papi's little brother stood behind the glass doors, his voice rang clearly. He carried five metal trays, one on top of the other. Alex yanked the door open. Tío Pepe set the trays on top of a round table, went back to his car, and came back with some wire frames to set the trays in. Alex dragged a rectangular table next to the door, and set the frames on top of it. He, and Tío Pepe put the trays inside their frames. They lit

matches to these metal cans full of blue gel, and placed the cans below the trays. Blue flames burst from the cans, and licked the bottom of the trays.

Tío Pepe opened his arms wide. “You don’t ask for your bendición from Tío Pepe?”

“Bendición,” said Alex. He embraced his uncle, and then took a step back. Tío Pepe wore a white suit jacket with matching slacks and dress shoes that glistened in the light. He left his blue, collared shirt unbuttoned down to the third button. A carpet of black, curly hair stuck out from underneath. The dude needed a serious shave.

Tío Pepe looked around. “Where’s your Papi?”

“In the bathroom.”

“Here’s something extra.” Tío Pepe slipped out a thick roll of twenties from his pocket. “That’s two hundred dollars.”

“Seriously?”

“Ey,” said Tío Pepe. “What did I tell you? My cock never goes down.”

By the time the guests arrived, Papi sent Alex back home. The yard was empty, so Mami had already taken Papi’s Camry to the building. Alex beeped, and Jen came out. He told her to sit in the back seat. “I will be your chauffeur for the afternoon.”

When they arrived at the building, Alex parked in the parking lot behind it. Of course they had to wait in the car until most of the guests arrived. It was so pointless. It wasn’t like this was a real Quinceañera anyway. There were no wannabe bridesmaids to accompany Jen.

“So,” said Alex. “You excited?”

“I guess.”

“Oh my God!” said Alex. “I think I just saw a pig fly out the window!”

“What?”

“Yeah.” Alex looked at Jen through the rear-view mirror. “You actually didn’t say no.”

Jen folded her arms across her chest. “Seriously, there’s no use talking to you.”

Alex turned around. “Can you please tell me why I can’t play?”

Jen crossed her arms. “I already told you I don’t know.”

“Jen, come on.”

“God you’re annoying,” said Jen. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

Alex faced the dashboard. "You used to tell me everything."

"Yeah, well we used to actually talk."

His eyes stung, so Alex averted the mirror also. "So is that what this is about?"

"Ey!" said Tío Pepe, from outside the window. "It's time to party!"

Alex jumped. He rolled down the window. "Not now, Tío. Me and Jen are talking."

Jen opened the door, and got out. Alex followed her.

"Hold up Jen, we didn't--"

"Oh God," said Jen. "This is embarrassing." She whisked her purse in front of her face.

Tío Pepe carried a large, black camcorder on his shoulder.

"Jen--"

"Seriously, Alex? You want to do this in front of the camera?"

"Obviously not, but--"

"We'll talk after the party."

Tío Pepe just stood there with that ridiculous camera, and that stupid suit.

"So," said Alex. "You steal that camera from the same time capsule you stole your suit from?"

"Ey, man," said Tío Pepe. "Don't hate on me because you're mad." He unbuttoned a fourth button, flashing a pink nipple in a forest of scruffy hair. "Besides, this is style."

Alex tried holding back his smile, but he burst out laughing. He looked at Jen.

Jen hid her face in her hands. "Please button your shirt back."

Tío Pepe did.

"Oh I forgot to tell you, the seventies called," said Alex, smirking. "They want their suit back."

Tío Pepe threw his head back in laughter. "Alright, just take Jenny by the arm, you little punk."

Alex let Jen put her arm through the loop of his own, and smiled at her.

She shook her head, and smiled back. "Make sure he doesn't do that again during the party."

They entered through the back door. A blaring applause welcomed them. Everybody came. Friends, cousins, second cousins, aunts, and uncles. All fourteen tables were full. Merengue music blasted into Alex's right ear. Some dude with dimpled knuckles, and swollen cheeks squealed on his trumpet,

squeezing his eyes shut. Some other guy stabbed his lanky fingers into his piano. But the last dude spanked his bongos like he was beating his own kid. He pursed his lips, and widened his eyes.

Alex scowled at Roberto. Roberto caressed the microphone stand as he sang. The kid seriously needed to learn how to dress. Who in the world would wear slacks with sneakers? For that matter, who would wear a polo shirt with a vest?

Roberto winked at Jen. Jen's cheeks turned red. A lady with nerd glasses stood next to the band, and introduced Alex and Jen. The priest standing next to her nodded in approval. Alex brought Jen to Papi. Papi stood next to a white, wicker chair. Alex let her go. Papi took off her silver, sparkling flats, and slipped on a pair of glittering high heeled shoes. The lady with the nerd glasses explained, in English, that this symbolized Jenny's growing from a little girl to a young lady. Everybody applauded.

The priest walked up to Jen, and the music stopped. He prayed for her, and when he finished, Roberto grabbed the mic.

"So who's rocking out tonight!" Roberto said.

Nobody answered. They were lost in conversation.

"Um, okay" Roberto said. "Well, this is a special song that I would like to dedicate to the most beautiful princesa in the whole world. I hope you like it, Jenny."

Alex rushed into the bathroom, and locked the door. He paced from side to side. He squeezed his fists so tight that they trembled. Every time Alex heard the word "amor" he tightened his fists even more. That crater faced kid had no idea what love was. Alex spat into the garbage can. That kid thought love was buying someone flowers, singing them songs, and having butterflies in your stomach every time you saw that special someone. That was why most kids Jen's age thought they hated their parents. Real love wasn't just for your girlfriend. It was when you pursued a relationship with someone, whether they did the same or not, no matter who that person was. He stayed in the bathroom until that song finished. Once he stopped shaking, he opened the door. He took to the corner behind the food. Where was the pork when he needed it?

After *Los Jalapeños* finished their first set of songs, Papi took the microphone, and said something insignificant about how he saw Jen grow up, and how she became such a wonderful young woman, and all that tear jerking stuff. The women might as well have just pressed their hands into their chests, and given off long, glassy-eyed sighs. Then, Papi told Alex to come up and say

something.

Alex took the microphone, and looked Jenny in the eye. Her friends stopped talking, and stared right back. Mami smiled two tables away from Jen. Papi egged him on with his eyes, and Tío Pepe gave Alex a thumbs up from behind the camera.

“What’s there to say,” said Alex. “Papi pretty much said everything. So happy birthday, Jenny.”

Alex gave the mic to Papi, and walked back to his corner. The guests whispered among themselves. Papi told everyone to get their food. Alex uncovered the trays. Hot steam rose. Alex set the serving spoon inside the tray of yellow rice and red beans. He placed the cake server in the tray with the lasagna, but kept the tongs at hand. He stood behind the tray of pernil. Brown squares of pork skin lay scattered around the heap of pulled pork. Papi took the tongs from Alex. Alex insisted that he serve the pork, but Papi said, “I do it.” and told him to serve the rolls of bread at the other end of the table. Once the line went down, Papi told Alex to get some for himself, but Alex lost his appetite.

A game of limbo began, and all of the kids joined. Jen held the stick on one end, and Mami held the other end. Roberto snuck up behind Jen, and helped her carry her end of the stick. His crotch pressed a little too close to her ruffled dress.

Alex strolled up to Roberto. “What’s up?”

“Huh?” said Roberto. “Oh hey, bro in law.”

“I think she can handle the stick on her own.”

“Oh she can handle any stick on *her* own.”

Jen scowled at Roberto.

“Excuse me?” said Alex.

“I—I mean,” said Roberto. He placed his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “Come on, I’m just joking.”

“I get it,” said Alex. “It’s just not very funny.” He pushed Roberto’s hands away from his shoulders. “Why are you still here?”

Roberto gave a sidelong glance at Jen’s chest, “A couple of reasons.”

“Repeat that just one more time?” said Jen. She placed her free hand on her hip. Some little kid with a mushroom cut stopped underneath the limbo pole, and stared.

“Chill, Ma, I’m here for your mind, and spirit.”

Alex and Jen both glared at Roberto.

Roberto threw his hands up, and left.

Jen turned back around and told the kid to go under the limbo pole. The little boy shook his head from side to side.

“Jen,” said Alex. “How could you even like this sleaze bag in the first place?”

Jen lowered the stick in unison with Mami. “Whatever.”

“Sure says a lot about you.”

Jen faced Alex. She let go of the stick. Alex caught it, inches away from the little kid’s head. “Jeez Jen! What are you doing? You trying to kill someone?”

Jen picked her dress up, and went over to her seat. Her friends gathered around her. Mami brought her hand to her forehead, obviously disappointed, yet again.

Of course she’d be disappointed. Mami never had a Quinceañera herself, and she worked like a mule trying to make Jen’s extra special. She had even fried several pieces of pork skin to a crisp, and made Alex sell them outside their yard. He had nailed together a large sign with big red letters that said “PORK STAND,” his own play on the lemonade stand. But the neighbors appreciated Hispanic cuisine about as much as they appreciated Alex’s joke, and Alex appreciated pork cracklings a little too much. When he got back home, Mami asked what happened. Alex told her some idiot ran off with the chicharrones, but she simply passed him a napkin. He wiped his mouth, until pork grease dripped from the napkin itself.

Alex followed Mami into the kitchen. She scrubbed the pasta sauce off with a washcloth.

“Can I serve Jen’s piece, Mami?” said Alex.

“Tienes que pedirle perdón,” said Mami.

“Why should I say sorry? I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

“Entonces no puedes.”

“But Ma—”

“No.”

When everyone finished eating cake, they left little by little. Only the close family members stayed. Papi packed up the decorations, and the remaining food. Alex threw out the trash, under Papi’s orders. Tío Pepe collected the metal trays, just in case there were any weddings coming up. Mami, and Jen washed the serving utensils.

Papi told Alex to text everyone to come to the house.

Alex took out his phone. Why bother when Papi could just do it himself? He did everything else by himself. He put the phone back in his pocket. “Why?”

“Qué?”

“I’m sorry,” said Alex. “I meant, why should I, oh great one?”

“Ten cuidado como me hables.”

“Wouldn’t you prefer to do it yourself?”

“Alex,” said Papi. His face grew red. He clutched a handful of his own hair.

“I mean—why not? The grand master does everything else by himself. I’m sure he can figure out something as simple as texting.”

“Alex!”

“It’s so ironic too—”

Papi backhanded Alex’s mouth. Alex staggered backward.

“No more,” said Papi.

“Whoa!” said Tío Pepe. He patted Papi’s shoulder. “Calm down, chico.”

One look from Papi made him shut up.

Alex’s lips stung, tingled, and then throbbed. He headed toward the door.

“Alex,” said Papi.

“I know,” said Alex. “He that spares the rod hates his child. I know, Papi. Sorry.”

“Alex.”

“What?”

Papi walked in front of Alex. “What happen with you?”

Alex stared at Papi’s black, shiny shoes.

“Alex,” said Papi. “What happen?”

“It’s just—you don’t let me do anything.”

“Yo—”

“Anything good I mean. You always need help, but you always give me the cheap stuff to do.”

“You still a boy?”

“Not by choice.”

“Pero—”

“I try setting up the place myself, but you come, and well, I had to kiss doing something nice for Jenny goodbye. I try serving the good food, but you come, and take the tongs straight from my hands—”

“Is for you to follow my example.”

“Oh,” said Alex. He smacked his own forehead. “Silly me. So being a man

means being an insecure, prideful bully?

“Alex.”

“Seriously,” said Alex. “If being a man means I’m going to die of a heart attack, because I’m holding up the house all alone, then maybe I don’t want to be a man.”

Papi just looked at him all confused.

“I mean—I have the money to pay for this entire space, for crying out loud, and you won’t even let me give you a hundred dollars!”

Papi ran his fingers across his belt. He looked Alex in the eye. “Qué dijistes?”

Alex’s heart walloped against his chest. Oh God. This wasn’t good. “No, no, no. Listen.” Alex took a couple of steps back. He looked at Tío Pepe, and tried telling him sorry with his eyes. There was no way else out of this one.

Tío Pepe just gave him a nod, as if saying it was okay, they were bound to get caught anyways.

“It’s cockfighting,” said Alex.

“Qué?”

Tío Pepe stepped in front of Alex. “It’s not his fault. I got him into it, okay?”

Papi looked at Tío Pepe. “Tú?” Papi thrust his finger against Tío Pepe’s chest. “We talk at home.” Then he looked back at Alex. “You are punish.”

“What?” said Alex.

“You hear me,” said Papi.

“Come on, Papi,” said Alex.

“You hear me,” said Papi.

“Fine.” Alex rolled his eyes. “Where’s Jen?”

“I take her home.”

“Papi.”

“If you are no man, then you are a boy.”

“Says the father who wanted a grown up son for Christmas,” said Tío Pepe.

“No me digas—”

“I’m not telling you how to raise your kid. The only reason he got into this was because you guys needed money.”

“Aun que sea,” said Papi.

“Even though nothing,” said Tío Pepe. “Maybe I still call you chico, but me and you both know you’re too old for that name.”

Papi’s shoulders drooped.

“Maybe it’s about time you added one more man to your one man army.”

Papi glanced at Alex, and then at Tío Pepe.

“And that doesn’t mean me,” said Tío Pepe. “You know I can’t stand you when you work.”

Jen walked out of the kitchen. She kept her gaze to the floor.

“Let Alex take Jenny home for today,” said Tío Pepe. “Let him earn more responsibilities.”

“No,” said Papi. His voice was hoarse.

“Chico,” said Tío Pepe. “You know that’s how Papi would have wanted it. Or do you want your kid to be more like me?”

Papi had always complained that Tío Pepe looked for the easy way to make money because he was the baby of the house, and didn’t learn to do anything from the start.

“You still punish, Alex,” said Papi. “Take Jennifer home.”

Alex, and Jen were walking to the car. He looked at her, but she kept staring at the ground. He opened the back door, but she opened front door, and sat inside.

Alex went to the front door, closed it, and started driving. “So,” he said. “How’d you like the party?”

“Were you really going to pay for it?” said Jen.

“Oh. You heard?”

“I think the whole street heard.”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

Jen rolled her eyes, “See? I don’t get you.”

“What don’t you get?”

“Never mind.”

“Come on Jen. You said we’d talk after the party.”

“Just forget about it.”

“I can’t forget about it, okay?” said Alex. “You’re my baby sister.”

“Well, try.”

Alex huffed. “I’ll tell you what I don’t get. I try setting up the party so that I could do something nice for you.”

Jen covered her ears.

“I try to serve you your cake, which Mami refuses. I make myself your chauffeur. I even get Roberto, who by the way may be the biggest sleaze bag on the planet, off your back. Now I got Papi disappointed in his firstborn child

who's about as useful as—"

"Okay! Okay! Okay!" said Jen. "Will you please just shut up?"

"I just want to know why you said no."

"Listen," said Jen. She looked Alex in the eye. "We're not the way we used to be, so we shouldn't try pretending that we are in front other people." Tears welled in her eyes.

Alex's stomach turned. "It's just a song."

"Let's be honest with each other, Alex. You still remember why I hate good dreams?"

"I don't know."

"Alex," said Jen. "It was not that long ago."

Alex sighed. "Because you hate being reminded of what you don't have."

And then the big awkward silence. Only this time it was filled in with Jen's shaky breathing. Maybe it was too late to make things work. It was too late too long ago. She would always have her friends, and Alex would always be too tired to carry on a conversation after work, but maybe they could plan a movie night or something?

"How about the mall?"

Her face softened, but her chin still trembled. "Papi's going to murder you in cold blood if you don't bring me home."

"Come on, Jen."

"But, I'm sure there's a movie on TV, or something."

"I have no doubt about it," said Alex. "But there's no way Papi would let me watch."

"I could text you about it."

Once, when Jen was a baby, she had taken a nap on the couch. She rolled over, and Alex caught her right before she fell down. He placed her right back on that floral print couch. Somebody had to take care of her.

Too many cars blocked the driveway, and the front yard. Alex parked his car in front of the neighbor's yard, "Good. Let's get out of here."

Jen wiped her eyes. "Does it look like I'm crying?"

Red splotches spotted her eyes.

"It's not that bad," said Alex. "Besides, those could have been tears of joy."

Jen smiled. They walked up to their cream colored porch.

Alex unlocked the door. "Ladies first."

Princess Grace Nwaohuocha

The mouthwatering smells of baked macaroni

and cheese, lasagna, sausage stuffing, garlic butter mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie, warm butter biscuits, and egg nog filled every hallway of my house that morning. It was my first time preparing the entire Thanksgiving feast for my entire family without my mother. The night before I went over all the details in preparing the meal with my mom and we shared reasons why we should always be thankful even when we don't think we have reason to be.

I successfully placed the turkey in the oven and set my timers as my smile lit up the house like the first snow of the winter season. As I began preparing my baked macaroni and cheese, I remembered the step by step breakdown I discussed with my mom the night before knowing she would be proud of my execution. The phone rang and the voice on the other end reassured me that I could cook the entire meal without her there. "Hello Nnenna" my mother said, "Hey mommy, I have the turkey in the oven like you showed me and I am confident that my macaroni and cheese will be better than yours" I said. My mom laughed and quickly reminded me that she is still and always will be the Queen of the kitchen. "I'll be home around 4:00pm since it's my holiday to work but I'm so thankful that I have a daughter like you that can handle dinner while I'm gone" my mother said. My mom's spirit was always so comforting and would make me feel warmer than a fleece jacket on a crisp autumn day. We said I love you and hung up as I continued cheerfully preparing the big feast.

A few hours passed when the phone rang. I smiled knowing that my mother probably wanted to coach me from the other end of the telephone as she frequently does but as prepared as I was for any mishaps with dinner, this particular surprise took the life out of me. When my oldest brother dropped to his knees in tears as I attempted to regain consciousness from the news I just received. I could only recall finding myself at Yale Hospital NeuroIntensive Care Unit filled with rage and tears and no reason to be thankful for that day. My mother suffered a massive brain aneurysm and slipped into a coma which the doctors believed she would never recover from. As a family our mother and father always taught us to pray together and always thank God in advance for the things he handles when all hope is lost on our end. As a family, my father led us in prayer and closed out thanking God for the miracle he would perform.

Five years later, my younger sister, fully recovered mother and I all stand together preparing the annual thanksgiving feast. This I believe: no matter how dark things seem, always find a reason to be thankful.

Arden Church *Returning Student Second Place*

When I take the time to count my many blessings, I ponder, “How can I do less than share those blessings with those less fortunate than me?” I believe it is not only important to help others in need, but incumbent upon us to do so. Shortly before we were married, my fiancé, Tom, and I were out to dinner. The topic of our conversation shifted to his niece. Stacey had been in group homes since the age of twelve, when she ran away from home, at which point her mother turned her back on her completely. Nobody else in the family was in a position to take her in at that time; however, Tom had always kept in touch and took her home on the weekends when he could.

So, here we were at dinner and lamenting over Stacey’s plight. In a couple of months when she turned eighteen, she would “age out” of the system and be on her own.

I peppered Tom with questions: “What will she do? Where will she go? Does she have a job? Any friends she can room with? Surely they can’t just turn her out with no plan and no place to go.”

“I don’t know. But, there are only so many beds where she is, and a lot of people on the list to get there. So, she can’t stay where she is, no matter what,” Tom said.

My heart broke for this child who had a lousy start in life and no sign of improvement in sight. And, while I had no desire whatsoever to be a mother, then or ever, I couldn’t see letting this poor kid just twist in the wind. We were in a position to help and so I felt we should.

“What if we had her live with us for a bit? We could help her get a job, have her pay a little rent to us so she would learn how to do that, as well as how handle a checkbook. These are all things she needs to know in order to be independent; and all skills she doesn’t have yet. We could be her safety net until she can get on her feet.”

“Really? You’d be willing to do that?” Tom asked incredulously, as if I had suddenly lost any sense I might have had.

I said, “We could be the only chance this child has, and maybe the only chance she needs.”

Tom suggested, “Let’s talk to Stacey and see what she thinks.”

And so it was that our niece came to live with us. Naturally, it wasn’t always sunshine and roses, but we did help her gain the life skills she needed to be independent. Stacey grew up to be a remarkable and lovely young woman of whom we are quite proud.

Helping others in need is a “must” in my life. It lets people know they matter. And isn’t that really what we all need?

Kayla Satmaria *Returning Student Third Place*

I still listen to the radio while I'm driving even

though the doctors tell me I shouldn't, not since my vision has gotten worse again. The shadows never bothered me much before; catching them in the corner of my eye was like getting a glimpse of the phantom limbs that people who are pulled out of orange-flamed wreckages feel coursing with ghost blood. But then the shadows started blowing around Ocean Avenue like the rains that swirl into the streets out of low tide, smelling of sugary sea things and the barnacled underside of the moon. One day a shadow like spider-silk spun around my vision and I plowed my car into an SUV, stumbled out in sobs to tell the blonde woman and the two blonde children in plastic red and yellow safety seats, "Sorry, I'm so sorry," while she smiled sweetly and her children smiled sweetly and she asked if I wanted her to follow me home.

I should have turned off the radio. The doctors told me I must turn off the radio. I hardly listened, really, didn't care about the news, talk shows, debates. Sometimes I tried to train my brain to stop understanding language, tried to listen to the voices as if they were music. Most of the time I couldn't unhear the meanings to focus on the sounds. But sometimes I'd break through. If I listened long enough I'd begin to feel like a scientist sitting unobserved on a perch high above a canopy, straining to hear the chattering of creatures on the forest floor against the rumbling of gathering dusk.

One day as I was driving I heard how scientists had recorded the frequencies of deep space and converted them to sound waves. The sound played was of a flock of starlings, one of those swarms that makes the whole sky black and for a minute everyone stops whatever they're doing and looks up, listens to the tangle of those tiny voices miles overhead. But it wasn't starlings, it was the black corners of the universe calling back and forth across millions of miles of empty space.

I don't know how long until my vision gets worse again. But if the shadows get darker, even if they blot out the sky, even if I crash my car on Ocean Avenue, drive into the sea and sink through whale call, come to rest with the giant bones on the ocean floor, even if I can't see and can't hear and water fills my skull like a spring bulb, I believe that the sounds will remain. Human voices will make music long after I'm unable to make out the words. And when the words and music cease and everyone who ever was is lying still and baby soft on the ocean floor, like they are only closing their eyes, like they are only holding their breath, I believe the universe will be singing like a swarm of starlings to itself, and listening.

Rachel Pritchard

I believe in sweat. It is something I know is real.

I have no doubt about it; I have a lot of experience sweating. When I was younger I would break a sweat from time to time. It was pure evolutionary necessity, my body's way of regulating its core temperature. Turning cartwheels on the soccer field or chasing after my friends playing tag, wiping off the dew that surfaced on my upper lip and brow was an after thought.

As I grew older, sweat began to mean something different to me. Sure, I still sweat on the soccer field, but there were no more cartwheels to be had. My team had a system that if you didn't get a jersey before the game, you weren't going to play. Often times, I sweat as much in anticipation for the dreaded "handing out" ceremony as I did during the actual game.

That stress followed me off the soccer field and into my real life. Anxiety's best accessories were two damp underarms. Antiperspirants, aluminum free deodorant... I tried it all. Nothing worked; raising my hand for class became a task of embarrassment. I felt as though because I had this strange affliction, I didn't fit in anywhere and no one would ever want anything to do with "that sweaty girl". I was sure that all eyes were on me and my clammy pits. I became a master of disguise; I tried to keep my sweaty situation a secret from everyone.

Then came the day when I realized it wasn't me who I was sweating for. I was so consumed with what everyone else thought about my sweating that I had become paralyzed. I was a slave to my own secretion. I was always an athletic kid, but again, team sports weren't "just for me". I was always part of the team; It was never completely my loss or success. It was the same way with my day-to-day life; I felt that my sweat and me were on a losing team.

When I started to do things completely on my own like running or hiking, I felt a sense of ownership for my actions. Better yet, I had a sense of ownership of my sweat. When I run on my own, each step pounds away the little aggravations that my day has offered me. Each bead of sweat washes me clean. There is nothing more fulfilling than looking out at the top of peak of a mountain and seeing a remarkable view and knowing that it was your own glistening body that took you there. When I'm out dancing with my friends, I can judge if it's a good time by the smile on my face and the sweat induced by the grooves. It's no longer a sheen of shame, but rather a coat of confidence.

So I believe in sweat, because sweat makes me believe in myself.

Meghan McTeague

I believe in dressing up. There's nothing I love more than putting on a dress, wearing my mother's nice jewelry, and fixing my hair to perfection. When I'm dressed up I feel confident, happy, and in control. It's been said that a first impression will either open a door or close it, and I believe that being dressed nicely can easily help to make a positive impression.

People treat you differently when you are dressed up, and show you much more respect. For my sixteenth birthday I wanted a Tiffany's necklace. My mother took me to the closest Tiffany's just so I could browse and find something that I would like. We were wearing our usual weekend attire of jeans. Not one of the store employees asked if we needed any assistance. The following week my father picked me up to go back to Tiffany's. He was still in his suit from work and the attention we received was much improved. Security guards opened the door for us and asked how we were doing, and employees rushed to help us select jewelry, hoping to make a good commission.

This past December I started looking for a job. I put on my favorite black floral dress and went with my resume to a local Dunkin Donuts. I asked the girl behind the counter if they were hiring, and she said no. However, I asked to speak with the manager, who told me he'd like for me to fill out an application. Within twenty-four hours I was hired. Recently, my manager told me that I was the first person to apply to that particular Dunkin Donuts dressed up. He said that my dressing up showed him I was serious about the job and was a big part of the reason as to why he hired me.

I have big dreams for the future. I want to graduate from college with great grades. I hope to become a successful accountant and maintain my CPA certification. I have a long way to go before I achieve these dreams. However, I know I have to start somewhere, and I believe that dressing up is a step in the right direction.

Michelle Martino

I believe in beauty. Not how appealing something seems; rather, the goodness in one's heart. Natural beauty; that which our Creator admires.

I used to look at my reflection in the mirror and despise what I saw. I was far from society's "beautiful" and that piece of glass was an awful reminder. My waistline, crooked smile, and flat hair were enough to lower my confidence down to a depressing level. It was not that I hated who I was; I only loathed my appearance.

"You have a nice smile," my family would tell me. "And you aren't fat." Their words of optimism were nice encouragement; however, they were no competition to the negative thoughts that circulated my mind. As much as I wanted to, I could not make myself believe that I was beautiful.

Around this time, I came to the conclusion that my Christian faith was in desperate need of revival. I always believed in God and had Christian faith, but never thought deeply enough about my religion. My relationship with God did not take priority, as I felt it should have. I opened my Bible, and as I read, the tales of God's love became so real to me and inspired me. He says that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. My God, my Creator, views my flaws as beautiful. Every. Single. One.

I began to love who I was. I may not have been extremely attractive nor had an ideal body shape, but I would not let that define me. I let go of my insecurities and discovered my own, genuine beauty. Unlike society's definition, this type of beauty goes beyond appearance. My beauty lay in my heart; my actions and character. Society could label me anything; it held no significance to me now. I know that my God views me as something more than just a word. He sees me as a person, and unlike society, he judges me by my actions, not appearance.

I finally became that confident young woman I aspired to be. I may not have had an ideal figure, but I had been a morally good person. To me, that is all that mattered.

As I look at my reflection now, I tell myself that I am beautiful. And I believe it.

A Conversation with Alice Mattison

Alice Mattison's recent novel, When We Argued All Night, is her sixth; she is also the author of four collections of stories and a book of poems. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Threepenny Review, Ploughshares, and many other publications. She lives in New Haven and teaches fiction in the Bennington Writing Seminars and in summer workshops at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA. Her website is www.alicemattison.com.

Folio: How did you maintain the creative stamina needed to write “When We Argued All Night”, a novel spanning close to a century?

Alice: Luckily, novels are written one sentence at a time—in fact, what’s difficult is to narrow your focus so as to concentrate fully on the moment you’re writing about. I do need a sense of the whole book, though, not just the sentence. I make many lists, and tell myself the story many times, though not when anyone can hear me, because I keep it all a secret for a long time.

In some ways it’s easier to write a book that stretches over a long period of time than one about a short period. If I write about characters doing something on Monday and then write about what happens on Friday, probably nothing will have changed for them in the interim, except the weather and whatever I’ve thought up to be part of the plot: the visitor has arrived, the boss has made a demand, the accident has happened, the secret has come out. Writing such a book requires careful thinking about story line and what might lead to what. But if I write about somebody after a gap of ten years, there is plenty to say, even before I get to the important moments in the story—there have been births, marriages, divorces, people growing up, people growing old and dying—and the world has changed.

Folio: Did you find yourself extensively researching for this novel or were you able to draw on your own accumulated resources?

Alice: I did quite a bit of research, reading books and using old newspaper stories. I remembered—or had learned from my parents—about the feel of things, but that didn’t help with particular historical events, and when I read old newspapers, I learned of some events I had not known about, like the riot in Union Square in New York in 1930.

Folio: How important is research to your writing?

Alice: It's important. It's not just that I check dates and quotes and specific events, but what I learn often suggests what my characters might be thinking or talking about. If I want characters to disagree and some change in their circumstances to result from that disagreement, it can be useful to know what happened that month or week that they might disagree about.

Folio: In what ways have you grown as a writer since your first novel? With each novel I seem to find myself able to try something I didn't try before.

Alice: I've gotten braver: I'm much more likely to write from the viewpoint of people who don't resemble me, likelier to include long periods of time or intricate story lines. As I've written novel after novel (I'm now working on my seventh) I've become increasingly anxious to include the times the characters live in and the issues that mattered then, and I hope I've become better at doing that. It's been important to me for a long time to write about women's friendships and about women at work. I noticed that it was easier—I think because we're habituated to it—to write about love relationships and domestic situations, but I've tried to get beyond that. I think I've done pretty well at writing about women's friendships, but I am still learning to write fiction about women at work.

Folio: Does your approach to writing a short story differ from your approach to writing a novel?

Alice: It's entirely different. Ideas come to me in the first place as ideas for novels or ideas for stories. I have the same notions about clarity, word choice, accuracy and compression, whatever I write—I hate sloppy writing, clichés, and wordiness—but undertaking a novel is an entirely different process from writing a story (and writing a poem or an essay is also different). I guess it's a matter of looking for a different sort of reason to go from point to point, a different pace and goal. It's kind of like the difference between leaving your house to walk to the grocery store and buy some lemons and a potato, compared to leaving your house for a two-week trip. You may put on your coat and turn your key in the lock in either instance, but your preparation and expectations

are so different that it doesn't feel the same at all.

Folio: What are some of the major themes you work with in your novels and stories?

Alice: I find myself returning to certain topics again and again: the difficulty of living as a good person in private life, and the difficulty of living as a good person in the world, given the fact that we're all also leading a private life at the same time. I also find myself writing about how hard but necessary it is to love flawed people, and about the bonds between people, about how difficult and essential family life is.

Folio: Who or what are some of your biggest influences as a writer?

I went to graduate school not in writing but in literature—Renaissance British poetry (Donne, Marvell, Herbert. . .) and much of what I want when I write or read arises from a delight in the precision and freshness of those poets' language, and their ambivalence. I began writing short stories and then novels after I came across the work of Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen, and they remain huge influences. The novels that I believe have influenced me most are *Emma* by Jane Austen, *Howards End* by E.M. Forster, and *Her First American* by Lore Segal.

Folio: Does living in New Haven, a culturally vibrant city, aid your writing?

Alice: Yes, definitely. New Haven is not only culturally vibrant, but also racially and ethnically diverse: many different voices are speaking. Much of the work of writing is putting oneself into a receptive frame of mind, and there's nothing like watching and hearing people going about their lives, or taking in other forms of art, to make imaginative work happen. I especially benefit from music and visual art, but theater is great here too, and I love Theater Four's innovative productions. What New Haven lacks, unfortunately, these days, is a good bookstore—that is a great loss. At least there's the Book Trader; sometimes the right book will jump into one's hand there.

A Conversation with Tim Parrish

Tim Parrish is author of three books: Red Stick Men, a collection of stories set in his hometown of Baton Rouge; a memoir, Fear and What Follows: The Violent Education of a Christian Racist (University Press of Mississippi); and a novel, The Jumper, winner of Texas Review Press's 2012 George Garrett Prize. Parrish's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in dozens of periodicals and in anthologies. He has taught at SCSU since 1994.

Folio: Many of the stories in *Red Stick Men* are drawn from your life. Are the plots of these stories easily recalled or are they discovered as you write?

Tim: “Drawn” is the key word for the semi-autobiographical stories. No plot derives directly from my life and the characters based on real people took on lives of their own as wrote. In short, I took the raw stuff, usually a few events, and went from there. I discovered everything else from drafting and fretting, which are often the same thing.

Folio: Your short story collection *Red Stick Men* takes place exclusively in the south, mainly Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Do you feel comfortable writing about different locations, or are the characters and ideas in your work incapable of finding as compatible a stage elsewhere?

Tim: I have written stories set elsewhere, but not many. A chunk of my forthcoming novel is set in Texas, which is obviously the South, however, not a part of the South I've lived in. I've also published a couple of stories set in New Haven and a couple of others set in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Baton Rouge is still my mountain to climb, though. It's the place that shaped me in many ways, and I find that it offers the fodder to investigate and dramatize both the particular and the universal. Things just seem to be writ large there, and I like large writing.

Folio: The characters in *Red Stick Men* are treated with a humanizing compassion, despite their aired-out flaws and stubborn, sometimes repellent, idiosyncrasies. For example, in “Smell of a Car”, the protagonist learns that a hot-headed killer whom he obsessively portrays as a soulless villain paints ducks, deer and wild turkeys which hang on the walls of his solitary home where he lives an ordinary, harmless life, struggling to get by. For the protagonist and the reader, these small details devastatingly reform our view of the killer. What do you think is the power behind such details?

Tim: First, thanks for that fine compliment. My MFA thesis advisor told me that you have to love all your characters, especially the ones you hate, and I try and

take that to heart every time I write. Characters just aren't interesting if they're easily categorized or stereotyped. They're also lies. Even the worst of people have complexity, as much as many people would like to deny that. But particularly in literary writing, the power in making characters more complicated and nuanced through detail is that doing so forces readers to deal with "unlikeable" characters as "sympathetic," in the sense that the reader is confronted with the ability to understand what motivates and humanizes even characters who have done despicable things.

Folio: Some of the stories in this collection deal with nasty, socially entrenched issues: racism pervading a community, domestic abuse, communal squalor, etc. Do you start any stories aiming to challenge one of these issues, or does a challenge naturally occur as the story culminates?

Tim: I'm aware, at some point, that I'm showing troubles that are widespread in real life, but in my fiction I never go in with the intention of writing a message story. I believe the quickest way to flatten characters and overly simplify stories is to think, "I want to write a story about a homeless person." There is no such person. Ray may have lost his job as a stocker at the supermarket for standing up to his alcoholic boss, been evicted from his apartment in Westville, and found himself living in his '91 Tercel because he's too proud to ask friends for help, but he's not simply a "homeless person." He's Ray, with Ray's particular story. That said, my upcoming memoir—and some of the other nonfiction I've written—is a slightly different matter. I did want to address issues, such as the roots of racism in fear, and so even though I used a lot of fictional technique in dramatizing things that happened to me, I was also aware of thematic threads and of exploring issues.

Folio: Most acutely in "Smell of a Car" and "Free Fall", but also in other stories, characters struggle with disillusionment and restlessly search for a stabilizing self. What role does self-formation and all its ensuing complexities play in your writing?

Tim: I think it comes down to the universal quest we all face in forming an identity and self day to day. Every day brings new information, and every bit of that information changes us. But, yeah, I do think my characters yearn to be more stable. My favorite story, "Roustabout," from my ancient collection, plays this out more boldly than anywhere else, I believe. The main character there is searching for a sexual identity and finding that his sexual identity is in flux and somewhat impossible to pin down according to societal designations. He's

making it up as he goes and feels, and his search creates a constantly shifting lens through which he sees everything around him. So, the more he discovers, the more variables he has to deal with.

Folio: The overarching, unconditional bond of family also figures prominently as a theme in your work. How much does your family impact your writing?

Tim: More than I can express. I would add that some of my family does not see my work showing family in the way you see it showing it. Anyway, not only are some characters based on family members, my memoir centers on my family. Not that they'll all appreciate it. And, of course, my values were formed most significantly because of my family, either by having adopted or reacted to their values. As for my being a writer, my mother encouraged me to be creative and my father taught me how to tell stories. Those are both immeasurable gifts.

Folio: Several of your stories have stern, sober, or somber tones tinged with humor. Do you find it difficult to incorporate humor without jeopardizing the tone?

Tim: I find almost everything about writing difficult, which is one of the reasons I stay at it, because it's endlessly fascinating. I find that most of the humor emerges pretty naturally from my characters, but, yeah, I often prune and tweak humor that I find is too slapstick or forced or absurd for the tone of a certain story. Cutting a good laugh line is one of the hardest things to do, as you know. So, yeah, with humor, as with every word, keeping tone consistent is a challenge. As an aside, it's really fascinating when I'm giving readings to hear what different audiences laugh at. There's definitely a difference between northern and southern audiences, although that's not an absolute statement and I'd be hard pressed to quantify it, but it's entertaining as hell and sometimes disconcerting.

Folio: In what areas of writing do your creative writing students have the hardest time improving?

Tim: The biggest thing is being able to truly revise, meaning to re-see by being willing to let go of things they've already drafted. Most students think of revising as editing or proofreading and that's not going to serve the process of artistic discovery well. Plus, it's hard to get some people to understand that if you change one thing, it changes everything, and writers have to respect that. The highest bar I ever saw set for writing was from my teacher Richard Yates, who said, "I want to write stories in which if you remove one word, the whole thing falls apart." I think that way madness lies, but he makes a good point that

writing is built word by word.

Folio: Can you tell us a little about the two books you are about to have published?

Tim: Happily! I've alluded to both above, but I don't mind saying again that in fall '13 I have a memoir titled *Fear and What Follows: A Memoir of Masculinity and Racism*, and a novel titled *The Jumper* coming out.

The memoir details my 1960s and 70s upbringing in a racist, jingoistic, Southern Baptist church; my being in a nearly-fatal street fight and subsequently stalked at age thirteen; and my high-school involvement, during desegregation riots, with a vicious racist, whom I believed could protect me. In short, the book dramatizes my perverse quest to become a racist "soldier" in order to find a simplistic way to feel secure, and with my ongoing reckoning with my racism. Figuratively, the story also serves as an emotional microcosm of the forces that led Americans to believe the war with Iraq would make them safer. I can't imagine writing anything more revealing or personally difficult.

The Jumper also deals obliquely with racism, in that it is based on a person victimized by Louisiana's "selling" of foster children to other states in the early 1960s. These actions led to a class-action suit in the 1980s and to my teaching one of the people who was literally farmed out in west Texas. The novel's main character, Jimmy Strawhorn, is loosely based on this person. The story is also an expansion and rewriting of the story "Free Fall" from *Red Stick Men*. The novel stars in 1983 with the illiterate Strawhorn, who has grown up thinking he is an orphan, receiving a telegram from his biological father, who's asking him to come to Baton Rouge to reunite. Ultimately, in that book, I was pretty aware of genre, and I think the book turned out to be a bit of a potboiler that's a darkly-comic novel and teases melodramatic action while revealing conflicted, three-dimensional characters and examining racism. How's that for convoluted?

Folio: If a hurricane sucked up your "internal bookshelf", but you had time to snatch one book before the rest vanished, which book would you snatch?

Tim: What a nightmare. That really would suck! I'm going to take this all the way to the deserted-island scenario and make a conservative choice, which would be my Pelican Shakespeare. Not that I re-read Shakespeare on a regular basis or am high-brow by any stretch, but the complete works give just about everything. Great language, characters, drama, and most of the best stories, many of which he lifted from others and which have been lifted from him regularly ever since. Plus, if anybody else showed up on my island, we could put on plays! And the book is large enough to serve as a pillow.

Michael Griffith

Fiction Contest

First Place

“Als ob Zwischen Punkten Linien Wäeren” by Ulrike Proft

is a subtle, mysterious, and powerful story about a young woman’s loneliness. The technical control and line-by-line prose here are exceptionally fine, a marvel, and the author does a wonderful job of indicating the ways the everyday and the “magical” may intertwine, or the ways that anything unexpected may *seem*, to the person caught in a drudgery that seems to offer no relief, almost supernatural.

Second Place

“Feliz Quince” by Manuel Aldarondo is a touching, tenderhearted coming-of-age story about (among other things) the bittersweet bonds of family, adolescence and its terrors, and the experience of being the child of immigrants. It manages to touch, compellingly, on issues as varied as adolescent sexuality, cockfighting, the role of machismo in Latino families, and the simultaneous admiration/dependency and scorn that second-generation American adolescents may feel for their parents, who have strong accents and odd old ways, even as the children appreciate the sacrifices their parents have made and the hard work they do. Best of all, though, is the hyperintense brother/sister relationship at its core.

Third Place

“Inanimate” by Joe Grillo is a quirky, risk-taking love story about a boy and his sweetheart, who just happens to be ... a bridge. Here the author employs a deadpan voice that finds genuine and unconventional poignancy in what might otherwise seem the premise of a quick, easy joke. The story recognizes the humor in its conceit, but refuses to let the reader use that humor as a way of dismissing or evading the sense that we are all this way when it comes to love, no matter who—or what—our inamoratas may be.

Michael Griffith's most recent novel, *Trophy* (Triquarterly), was named one of Kirkus Reviews' Best 25 Books of Fiction for 2011. His previous books are *Bibliophilia* (2003) and *Spikes* (2001), both from Arcade. Griffith's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Salmagundi*, *Oxford American*, *New England Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Ninth Letter*, *Southwest Review*, *Five Points*, *Blackbird*, *The Washington Post*, and other periodicals, and he is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (2004) and the Louisiana Division of the Arts (2001), among others.

A native of Orangeburg, SC, Griffith earned an AB in Germanic Languages and Literatures from Princeton (summa cum laude) in 1987 and an MFA in Creative Writing from LSU (1992). From 1992 to 2002 he served as the Associate Editor of *The Southern Review*. He is now Associate Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies in English at the University of Cincinnati, and he teaches in the Sewanee School of Letters as well. In 2004 he became founding editor of *Yellow Shoe Fiction*, an original-fiction series from LSU Press, and he is Fiction Editor at *Cincinnati Review*.

Cait Marvin

Poetry Contest

First Place

"Self Portrait" by Kate Garnett

I love the strategy of the poem's imperative, the sheer pain of the experience relayed, how tight its language is, and how capable it is, in so few lines, of terrifying me. In truth, I find this poem deeply disturbing because its narrative is so frightening, while at the same time I must recognize that this is the poem's power. This poem is remarkably courageous.

Second Place

"What Divorce Does to Flesh" by Jasmine Wilborne

This poem, fueled with the kind of black humor that only exists in retrospect of experience, covers a lot of ground. I admire the writer's relentless flaying of her topic, as well as the overt cynicism with which the poem is wrought. The closing lines are, frankly, brilliant— in fact, I laughed aloud on reading them. That is the highest compliment I can pay to any writer.

Third Place

"I Watched a Cat Rot" by Joe Grillo

I like poems that take me places I've been and places I've never wanted to go. So I was dragged kicking and screaming through the days in which the speaker of this poem watches this cat corpse decay. We learn the speaker is a school child who, due to his vantage point from the bus stop, has been forced to observe the fact no one has recovered the carcass of the animal. I was very moved by the closing lines: "I don't much feel / like listening / or talking / or breathing in / class now." Expert lineation coupled with harrowing subject matter.

Cait Marvin's first book, *World's Tallest Disaster*, was chosen by Robert Pinsky for the 2000 Kathryn A. Morton Prize and published by Sarabande Books in 2001. In 2002, she received the Kate Tufts Discovery Prize. She co-edited with poet Michael Dumanis the anthology *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century* (Sarabande Books, 2006). Her poems have appeared in *Tin House*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The New England Review*, *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Fence*, *The Paris Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Slate*, *Verse*, *Boston Review*, and *Ninth Letter*. Her second book of poems, *Fragment of the Head of a Queen*, for which she received a Whiting Award, was published by Sarabande in 2007. Marvin teaches poetry writing in Lesley University's Low-Residency M.F.A. Program and Columbia University's MFA Program and is an associate professor in creative writing at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York. In 2009, she co-founded the nonprofit organization VIDA: Women in Literary Arts with poet Erin Belieu. Her third book of poems, *A Trembling*, is forthcoming from W.W. Norton & Co. in 2013.

Chris Volpe

Visual Art Contest

First Place

Piñata by Audrey Tricarico

Tricarico's life-size sculpture is like a perfect wedding toast, gently poking fun at its subject, the lowly pinata, at the same time it invites us to honor and cherish it. The pinata is one element of Mexican culture that has not only survived the journey North but thrived in its new home, so much so that no childhood can be considered complete without at least one go 'round with a candy-filled-paper-mache creation. Piñata is very well-crafted. It is weighty, colorful and sumptuously textural. The piece follows perfectly in the footsteps of Claes Oldenberg's pop art masterpieces and like them, it made me take a much closer look at a piece of our culture I had barely thought twice about beforehand.

Second Place

"Sundry Hunger While Asunder" by Robert Velez

I may be biased in favor of photography because of my own work but I absolutely loved this portrait of a dangerously colored vine. "Sundry Hunger While Asunder" makes me think of modern bio-science and old scary movies all at the same time and this unusual and contradictory effect is exactly how art should make us feel.

Third Place

"Through the Woods" by Jelan Saeed

Saeed's expressionist painting is evocative, mysterious and compelling. The painting fairly oozes between representation and abstraction. The rich ochre tones are strongly emotional and spiritual in the tradition of artists like Kirchner and Rothko. I swear that is a car lurking behind a grove of trees but like all great works of art, every time I look at it I see something new.

Honorable Mention

“Toweragedy” by Beets Cunningham

I wanted to mention how much I enjoyed Cunningham’s piece as well. This intricate and super detailed work invites the viewer into a magical and surprising world. It is a wonderful effect that reminded me of one of my all time favorite painters, Hieronymus Bosch.

Chris Volpe is an artist and professional photographer. He exhibits nationally including recent group shows at the Hilles Gallery in New Haven and the Center for Fine Art Photography in Colorado. He has a BFA from the University of Bridgeport. After 15 years as a staff photographer at the Connecticut Post and the New Haven Register, he opened his own photography studio in the Westville neighborhood of New Haven.

Contributors

Manuel Aldarondo

is an undergraduate student, working to get his Bachelor's degree in English Education. He is grateful to God, his family, and Peter Jackson that he is a writer-in-progress. God, for giving him enough life, and enough passion to embark on this journey. His family, for all their love, support, and uncensored opinions. Peter Jackson, for directing the one movie that inspired him to be a writer in the first place: The Lord of the Rings. He hopes to get into the M.F.A. program to continue working on his passion, and to continue to hone his writing.

Christian Carrion

is a broadcast journalism major, three-time game show champion and the general manager of WSIN, Southern's campus radio station. When he's not writing, he enjoys hip-hop and soul music, British television, and thrift shopping. Christian also owns one of the largest board game collections in the state, owning approximately 175 games

Chris Ciemniowski

would like to thank Folio for deeming some of his few poems publishable, but even more so he'd like to thank them for this rare, socially acceptable opportunity to speak of himself in the third person. Here, he can pretend he is an authority on himself and weave an exhaustive and exaggerated biographical narrative of wonder and intrigue if the allotted space permits him to do so. Based upon what little factual evidence we have on Christopher, we must conclude that he was born sometime

Kate Garnett

is a fourth-year student at Southern Connecticut State University where she majors in English and minors in creative writing and professional writing. Her poems and short stories have appeared in several literary journals and anthologies including Bennington College's Plain China and The University of Huston's Glass Mountain. After graduation, Kate plans to pursue an MFA in Poetry. She believes that art is the most transformative tool we have.

Michael Gavin

is a graduating senior. He plans on taking the GRE this summer and trying really hard to get to into a Ph.D program in comparative literature or continental philosophy.

Thomas Hils

contends that his poetry is not the work of a rogue Markov chain fed an endless dictionary of euphemisms for drug use. He enjoys communing with technology, experiencing higher planes of existence and a good steak every now and then. His work had appeared in Folio and the trash cans of many literary journals.

Joe Grillo

is a junior in his fourth year at Southern. He majors in English with a specialization in starving artisty. Joe is a teetotaler, which prevents him from becoming a depressed alcoholic during extended bouts of writer's block. Aside from writing, Joe spends his spare time raising moths, sewing, and dancing around in full makeup to "Goodbye Horses."

Luke Hunter

is a lonesome syndicate of thoughts, expressions, songs, 'poemas,' la verdad, and humility: the last great Mystic America hero (if such a thing even exists anymore), except without cowboy boots, pistols, or whisky-flasks, or blonde women in distress, or a valiant ending to the death-dream we're ALL swimming in. Charles Bukowski had "Don't Try" inscribed onto his tombstone as an epitaph; Fuck that, try, Try, TRY! Reach out, cling to the ineffable; "dance da dance," as Sam Libby once said – embrace dynamic uncertainty & find god in the armpit stains of the masses

Mackenzie M. Hurlbert

,20, was an avid writer, reader, and horror enthusiast. When she wasn't spending rainy afternoons in her bedroom satisfying her obsession with some King, Lovecraft, or Poe, she enjoyed collecting records, books, and frog figurines. As a diligent English major in her second year at Southern, Hurlbert's goals included a career in public relations and eventually publishing her own horror fiction and poetry. Having been previously published in the 2012 Folio and within local newspapers, Hurlbert's career as a writer was just beginning. She leaves behind her parents, two younger brothers, her boyfriend Paul, her roommates Georgia and Alex, her betta fish Beans, and her fire-bellied newt Ozzy.

Webster Janvury

recently took corporeal form to sneak through a Bachelor of Science in Linguistic Anthropology. When not observing and decoding the patterns of language and culture, he can be found in quiet corners or abandoned offices building stories out of bits of life other people leave lying around. He hopes to apply his love of language-craft professionally as an author/editor/ethnographer. Sightings of this writer are rare: approach with skepticism.

Andrew Patenaude

was born on July 2, 1992 in New Bern, North Carolina. He's always had a passion for stories, whether it was just watching movies or reading books, or just making up imaginary tells of fantasy when he was younger, with just a couple of different shaped leaves. Around high school, he started to get into writing main stream, and from there he's been doing so ever since, with the incentive to always keep working hard to develop and get better at his craft.

Elyse Pedra

graduated from SCSU in December of 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts in English. She plans on moving to West Harlem this summer to begin her career in non-profit development. Elyse loves NPR programs like Fresh Air, On Point with Tom Ashbrook, and The Colin McEnroe Show. She regards New Haven as if it were her hometown, having grown from an angsty teen to a mini-adult in the past five years. Elyse will miss her beloved alma mater, particularly rooms D264 & D266 and the lovely surrounding offices.

Ulrike Profit

is an English major but most importantly, she is not from here. She is an exchange student from Germany who is very happy to now spend her second and sadly last semester at Southern. After last semester, she is battling a serious addiction to all things involving peanut butter, and she is starting to feel more and more American by the minute. She enjoys the Writing courses at Southern, not only because they offered her a way to get her fascination with all things American out of her head, but also because they have made her feel less like the lonesome writer.

Kayla Tarantino

is an undergraduate English major who is still trying to figure out what she wants to be when she grows up. She is currently a waitress and will be happy with whatever career path her life takes so long as she never, ever, has to serve another table again. Kayla is also an amateur poet who often writes about her relatives and friends without their consent and with minimal reservation, however, without them her life and words would have very little meaning. Kayla is also an avid reader, equestrian and all around animal lover.

Luis Velez

is best known for his facial hair, but is presently incognito by rite of shaving. Out of his numerous projects, this is the first he actually finished.

Jasmine Anna Wilborne

is known for speaking in swirling lines of parenthetical statements (which often include random insights, small epiphanies or dark contemplations of the future) similar to that one. When she isn't provoking the voices that mock her for entertaining writing as a profession, she's riding her second hand Nishiki Saga through campus to appear cooler than she is. If she's off-campus, the occasional Yalie should think twice before jaywalking. Nevertheless, there is hope for the Senior Honors English student, not much, but enough to make a Pisces dream.

Thank you

All the wonderful people who attend the readings, all the talented featured and open mic readers, everyone who submitted, The Student Center, The Media Board, Jeff Mock, Tom Dorr, Betsy Beacom, Charlene Cammarasana, Joanne Gandolfi, Alice Matison, Tim Parrish, Eric Simms, Brian Carey, Chris Volpe, Michael Griffith, Cate Marvin, Southern's excellent English department, Terry White's InDesign tutorials, SCSU TV, Southern News, Southern Connecticut State University, Neff Hall, previous Folios

And...

Writing like a motherfucker, the small, beautiful things, North Snake/South Snake, Delilo's paper bag, Saunders, three-mile-high tsunamis, the rat-fuck-hot-mess, 12 dollar peartinis, cold cans of chili, pizza crust spoons, Larping, the alphabet's architecture, Gandhi Bot, Sierra Torpedo, used poetry salesmen, The Interestings, Backwards Society, what John Dunne?, Krugman's columns, VIDA, metal shaking off its skin, the whacky adventures of the goo goo dolls, Milk Carton Kids, Slander, the maligned adjective, Blake's Visions, Stein's Blazing Clarity and Straight-forwardness, apocalypse winters, BMT, Frostie the bird, dance parties, hackey sack, Miami's infinite win streak, dark roast coffee, twenty little poetry projects, notes from underground, Shakespeare, West Rock's silhouette, New Haven, Goffman's interaction rituals, Delaney's, avoiding a half-life, patience, BAWK (broke ass white kid), the smell of flowers, the sun, Titanic trivia, The Phoenix, Bolthouse, Gas Heating, reversing austerity, B vitamins, Radiolab, Rick regaining his sanity, Hershel for getting him back on track, metaphors, haikus, restraint, state jokes, the chambers of the sea, the bloom of the moment, Rodman's diplomacy, the grinch for returning Christmas, pull-out couches, Bartleby's constitutionally guaranteed right to prefer, Anonymous for making surreal press-releases, cold-calling, arcane explosion, wave-dashing, and our microbiomes.