

This edition of

folio

is dedicated to the victims and survivors

September 11, 2001

folio

Art and Literary Magazine

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student awards

Connecticut Student Poet 2000

Jason Labbe

SCSU Student Poetry Contest 2001

Winner: Meghann England

Second Place: Megan Raab

Honorable Mention

Shayne Distasio ~ Anthony Michael Szilagyi

Eve Cummings Prize for Fiction 2002

Winner: Travis Meyer...**The Time He Saved**

Second Place: Salvatore DeLucia...**Brother Love and His Travelin'
Salvation Show**

Third Place: Patricia Bjorklund...**Missing Link**

Eve Cummings Prize for Poetry 2002

Winner: Robert Breychak...**Curtain Andy on Fire**

Second Place: Kathleen Butler...**Green Wood**

Third Place: Shayne Distasio...**In the Nets**

Honorable Mention

Stacy Vocasek ~ Tony Fusco

Leslie Leeds Prize for Poetry 2001

Meghann England

Leslie Leeds Prize for Poetry 2002

Kathleen Butler

Shannon Searles Prize for Fiction 2002

Patricia Bjorklund

Hank Roberts Prize for Art 2002

Winner: Noelle Weimann...**Father Cluster and Pom**

Second Place: Irene De La Torre...**Hope & Saturday Morning**

Third Place: Chris Martineau...**Study in Oil on Canvas**

Honorable Mention

Mario Pieres ~ Ian Keoppen

judges

Eve Cummings Prize for Poetry and Leslie Leeds Prize for Poetry

Jack B. Bedell is Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences and Associate Professor of English/Creative Writing at Southeastern Louisiana University where he also edits *Louisiana Literature*, a nationally recognized literary journal. His latest collections are *What Passes for Love* and *At the Bonehouse*, both published by Texas Review Press (a member of the Texas A&M Press Consortium). His recent work appears in *Hudson Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Southeast Review*, and other journals.

Eve Cummings Prize for Fiction

Brad Barkley is a native of North Carolina. His first novel, *Money, Love* was a Barnes and Noble "Discover Great New Writers" selection, a "Booksense 76" selection, and made the "Best of 2000" lists, selected by *The Washington Post* and *Library Journal*. He is also the author of *Circle View*, a collection of stories. His fiction has appeared in such places as *Glimmer Train*, *The Oxford American*, *The Georgia Review*, *Book Magazine*, *The Southern Review*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, which twice awarded him the Balch Prize for best fiction. Work is forthcoming in *New Stories from the South: Best of 2002*. He has won fellowships from the Maryland State Arts Council and the NEA. He has two new books forthcoming from St. Martin's Press, a novel entitled *Alison's Automotive Repair Manual* and a collection entitled *The Properties of Stainless Steel*. He lives and teaches in Frostburg, Maryland.

SCSU Student Poetry Contest 2001

Sheila Squillante graduates this May 2002, with an MFA in poetry from Penn State. She has been the recipient of the Katey Lehman Fellowship in Creative Writing at Penn State and Honorable Mentions from the Academy of American Poets and the AWP Intro. Journals Contest. Her poems have appeared or will appear in such journals as *Quarterly West*, *Clackamas Review*, *Connecticut Review* and *Prairie Schooner*.

Shannon Searles Prize for Fiction

John Searles is the author of the national bestseller *Boy Still Missing* (William Morrow/Harper Collins). Senior Book Editor at *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, his work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other national magazines and newspapers. He is a graduate of SCSU and New York University.

Hank Roberts Prize for Art

Cynthia Beth Rubin is known to the SCSU community as the artist who created *Avignon AfterImage*, the large mural in Morrill Hall. Commissioned by the Art in Public Spaces program of the Connecticut Commission of the Arts, this work shows her early engagement with the computer as a medium for developing a new visual vocabulary. Since then, her work with digital imagery has led to the production of internationally recognized computer animations and still images, as well as web based work. In 2000 she was awarded the first Connecticut Commission on the Arts fellowship in new media. Cynthia Beth Rubin's work in on the web at: <http://CBRubin.net>.

Southern Connecticut State University
creative writing faculty

Megan Macomber was born in Chicago, grew up vaguely midwestern and southern, got schooled in the east, and has taught at SCSU for almost fifteen years. She is proud to live in the All-American Naugatuck Valley, the creative writing vortex of New England.

Tim Parrish's collection of stories, *Red Stick Men*, was released in paperback in 2001. Parrish was nominated by Tim O'Brien for *Best New American Voices 2002*, was a 2001 Walter E. Dakin Fellow at The Sewanee Writer's Conference and received a 2001 Connecticut Artist's Grant. His latest work appears in the anthology, *French Quarter Fiction*. He has taught at SCSU since 1994.

Jeff Mock worked in literary publishing for more than a decade, first as the Editor of *Black Warrior Review*, then as the Assistant Editor of *The Gettysburg Review*; he serves for the Faculty Advisor for this edition of Folio. He is the author of *Evening Travelers*, a chapbook of poems, and *You Can Write Poetry*, a guidebook for beginning poets. His poems appear in *Crazyhorse*, *The Georgia Review*, *New England Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Quarterly West*, *The Sewanee Review* and elsewhere.

Vivian Shipley, Editor of *Connecticut Review*, is the Connecticut State University Distinguished Professor. In 2001, she won the Robert Frost Foundation Poetry Award, the Daniel Varoujan Award from the New England Poetry Club, and the *Charter Oak Review* Poetry Prize from the University of Connecticut. In 2000, she won the Marble Faun Award for Poetry from the William Faulkner Society, the *Thin Air Magazine* Poetry Prize from Northern Arizona University and was named Faculty Scholar at Southern Connecticut State University where she teaches creative writing. She has also won the Lucille Medwick Award from The Poetry Society of America, the Ann Stanford Prize from the University of Southern California, the Reader's Choice Award from *Prairie Schooner*, the *Sonora Review* Poetry Prize from the Uni-

versity of Arizona, the *So To Speak* Poetry Prize from George Mason University, the Elinor Benedict Poetry Prize from *Passages North*, the John Z. Bennett Award for Poetry from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, and the Hackney Literary Award for Poetry from Birmingham-Southern College. She has published nine books of poetry. Her tenth book, *When There Is No Shore*, won the 2002 Word Press Poetry Prize and is forthcoming in Summer/2002.

folio community

Folio is an active club on campus with over twenty-five staffers. The coffeehouse style monthly readings feature poetry, fiction, open-mic, and live musical performances, boasting an average attendance of seventy-five people. These student readings compliment and support the Reading Series sponsored by SCSU's Creative Writing Department. The integration of students, faculty, staff, readers, and writers of all levels of experience and appreciation foster a supportive environment, promoting a sense of community among local writers.

Our teachers of creative writing represent the keystone of Southern's writing community. Folio's expansion as a campus organization and a magazine is a natural outgrowth of the success and support of Professors Megan Macomber, Jeff Mock, Tim Parrish, and *Connecticut Review* Editor Vivian Shipley.

Many thanks to SCSU President Michael Adanti, Vice President Phil Smith, and *Connecticut Review*. Additional thanks to Vice President David Pedersen, Vice President James Blake, Dean Richard Farricielli, and Dean DonnaJean Fredeen for their recognition of Folio as an active part of SCSU's writing program. For the third year, Folio editors have represented Southern Connecticut State University and the award-winning Connecticut Review at the Associated Writing Programs National Conference.

publication

The literary work appearing in this issue was selected through a preliminary round of judging by volunteer students. The cover-sheets were removed so writers remained anonymous. The editorial staff reviewed the results and narrowed the selections by work-shop-style analysis.

All pieces chosen for publication were automatically entered into the contest for the Eve Cummings Prize of Fiction and Poetry. Brad Barkley judged the fiction and Jack B. Bedell determined the poetry prizes. The Hank Roberts Prize for Art was selected from a pool of SCSU art students' works, solely by Cynthia Beth Rubin.

Submission to Folio is open to all SCSU students. Manuscripts are accepted from September through the first week of December. Guidelines are available by calling the Folio office @ 392- 6936, or through the English Department.

folio's featured student readers fall 2001... spring 2002

Windy McGlinsky, Mike McLellan, Rex Krueger, Chris Piccirillo, Anthony Michael Szilagyi, Patricia Bjorklund, Sarah Starr, Carlos Semexant, Rocky Lungariello, Mike Wheaton, Brian LaRue, Kathleen Butler, Irene De La Torre, Megan Toms, Salvatore DeLucia, Travis Meyer, Robert Breychak, Shayne Distasio, Tony Fusco, Stacy Vocasek

special thanks to..

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musical performing artists

The Vultures ~ Left and Right ~ The Sarcastics ~ Earth, Wind and Fire
Aretha Franklin ~ Nina Simone ~ Mike Melillo

fab-fliers created by

Christopher Bjorklund, Sarah Furgalack, Kristen Sizer, April Line,
Chris Piccirillo, Simon Tuozzoli, Meghann England

stebco printing

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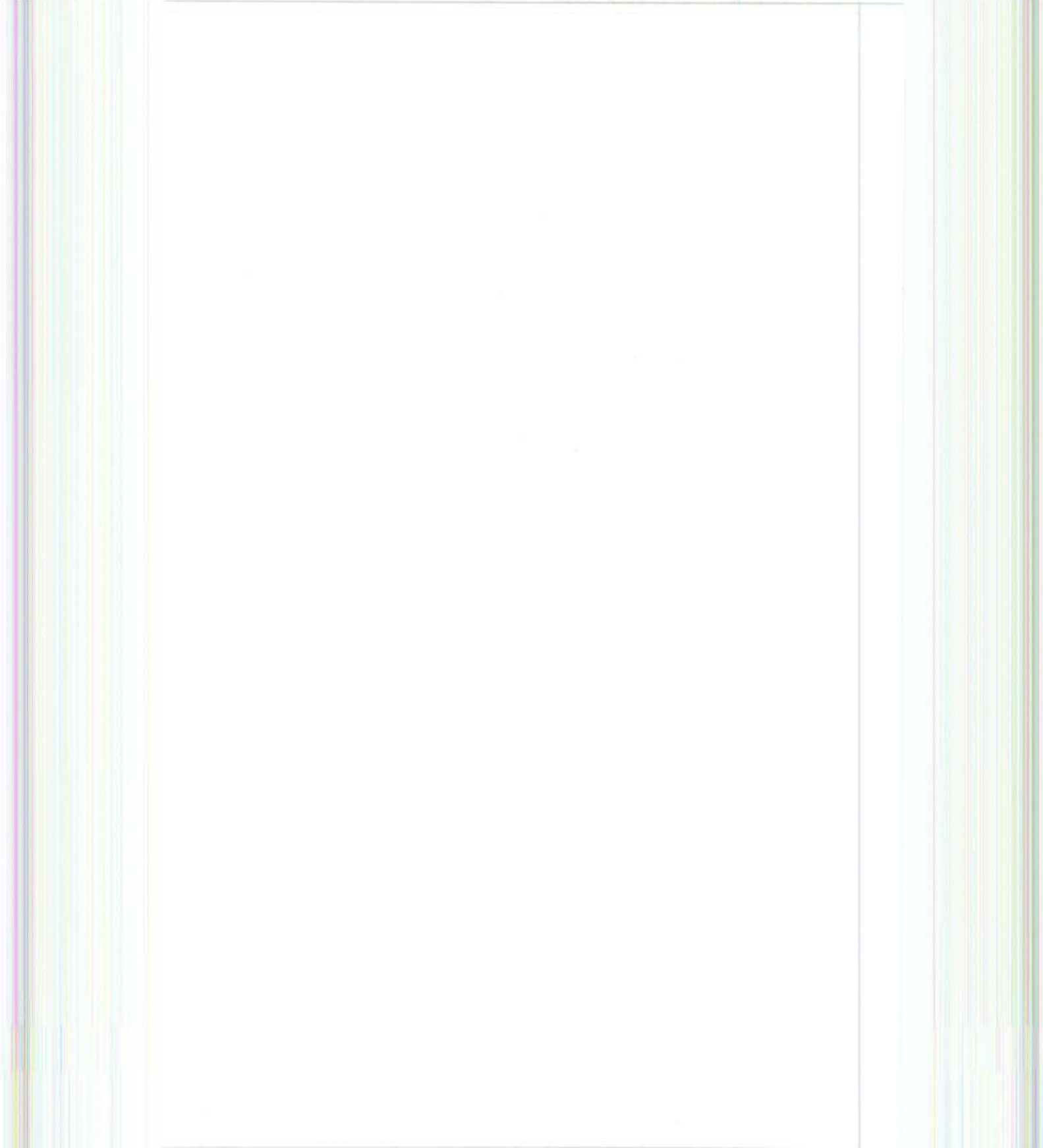
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Salvatore DeLucia

“Brother Love and His Travelin’ Salvation Show”

The big Fall Fair moved into town on a Tuesday afternoon in September of 1977. Me and Jimmy Soprano rode our bikes down to the center green right next to the elementary school I attended a few years earlier and we watched all the buses and trucks and trailers that carried horses or pigs or large metal rods and chains that the long-haired carnival workers transformed into rides that spin and drop and speed.

We saw this one bus, badly brush-painted in royal blue and a coat of white that was so thin you could still see a hint of the original yellow that once covered the vehicle, and we watched as a tall man with long flowing blond hair and a longer brown jacket that stretched to the heels of his thick soled black boots, walked out onto the fall grass. He took a deep breath and raised his arms high to the sky. Then he took out a pack of cigarettes from his inside jacket pocket and lit one, sucking down an impressive drag, holding it all in for a long moment before letting the gray cloud out slowly and deliberately. I remember how Jimmy was worried that the Tall Man would catch us watching him and come after us. I remember how I felt like I could watch the Tall Man all day long, like a Sunday afternoon western on Channel 8 starring Clint Eastwood, when I would sit Indian style on our beige and brown checkered carpet, glued to Clint’s every move, hoping that just once, someone would find out the name of the no-named-man. But Jimmy wanted to leave, he said because he had to be home before the street lamps went on at 6:30—even though we both knew that the sun didn’t set until almost eight o’clock--so we left. I remember peddling home, wondering if I would ever see the Tall Man again.

The next day me, Mama, and auntie Cheryl went to the open-

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ing day of the big Fall Fair. I got home from school and mama was already ready to go, her cheeks a new shade of pink that made her jaw look fake, like a painting in one of the thick art books that were covered in dust at the Westville High School library. Her lips looked red and wet, but she said it was just “passion fruit.” She asked if I liked it. I said yes; I always said yes. She had a shirt that fit tight around her tiny torso with pants that matched, her thin legs, flat stomach and small breasts well defined through the white fabric, and she wore a thin blue scarf tied around her neck, the flowing slack falling onto her bony upper chest. She smiled as I looked at her, not sure what to think, but knowing that mother was quite pretty for her age, which at the time was thirty-one -- she had me when she was twenty years old -- and then she walked over to the door, her round hips rolling and rising, wrinkling the white fabric on one side of her tiny body as it pulled taut on the other. She grabbed her large beige pocketbook from the old wooden table she liked to keep by the front door and dug deep through it, losing almost her entire arm for a few moments before she pulled out her sunglasses and slid them on top of her head, pulling back her bright auburn hair.

“C’mon, Stuart, honey,” she said, “it’s time to go out.”

When we got to the fair it was packed, I mean hundreds of people, and that’s impressive considering that the population of our town wasn’t much more than that. We walked through the crowds on the warm fall day, the sun beating down on the back of my neck and on mama’s bare shoulders as we pet the foul smelling horses and played the games and ate the cotton candy. When we finally rested, we stood right by the blue and white bus I saw a day earlier. We watched as the Tall Man with the long yellow hair and the longer jacket smiled and sang and screamed about the word of the lord.

“He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.” The Tall man preached, waving his arms in the warm air, walking up and down the small plywood stage his men must’ve built for him a day earlier. He looked out into

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the crowd, which after about twenty minutes grew from ten people to almost fifty, and he stared. He stared with his wide green eyes, and smiled. He smiled a lot. Out of all the people standing in the crowd, his eyes always kept coming back to my mother. A few times he switched his gaze to me, smiling like one of my teachers would when Mama would go to my school for parent-teacher conferences; forced, fake, almost like he was laughing at me cause he knew things that I didn't. Maybe he did. Maybe I was just used to things being like that, especially when it came to school. See, I was never the top in my class as a child; actually, I usually had my feet planted pretty tight to the bottom of it. In seventh grade I remember coming home from school, crying cause I was the only student in my class to fail our book report--slash--diorama. I had spent two weeks molding that half Play-Doh, half model-cement clay whale that I placed in the marker-colored and blue construction paper-lined "ocean" of one of my mother's many empty shoeboxes, not to mention that I spent over three months trying to get through Melville's *Moby Dick*, making notes after each few pages, hoping that I wouldn't "let the ideas fall through the holes in my mind" like Mrs. Muddlehead, the pink-skinned, overweight learning disability teacher with the cleft lip used to say about me in the quiet meetings with Mama and Mr. Kelly, the tall, skinny, frizzy-haired principal of Westville intermediate school; the kind of meetings when I sat outside the office, pretending like I couldn't hear through the thin white walls, wanting so much to burst through the oak finished door and hug Mama cause of the way she would always stick up for me.

Mama never pushed me to be a good student, instead she just smiled at every bad report card, hugging me tight and telling me that "it's not like it's the end of the world or anything," I really don't know how far my mother got in school, or how her grades were either. I never asked her. I guess I thought it was something she should bring up, not me. Maybe I just didn't want to embarrass her. She never read the classics like I had to, but she did read a lot. Now that I think about it, she would always have a book in that oversized, fuzzy beige pocket-book she carried everywhere she went. That pocketbook must've

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weighed in at about seventy pounds, clinking and shuffling with every step Mama took. I remember picking it up once and realizing why Mama had such nice muscles in her arms and shoulders. And every time she sat down somewhere to rest her feet for a while, Mama would dig down deep into her fuzzy beige bag and pull out a thick, paperback book with a long-haired, half-naked man on the cover, his skin stretching tight around large round mounds of muscle as he held a yellow-haired woman with big breasts and dark red lips, her eyes closed tight as her head flew back and her hair floated in the air around them. Mama loved romance novels. "For \$1.99," she would say, "I get a little piece of the good parts of life." Romance novels may be considered trash to the classic scholar, but to my mother, they were the key to understanding everything we needed to know. See, my mama believed that the real meaning of life wasn't about success or fame or fortune, that those were just things that lonely people created to make themselves feel better about themselves. The real meaning of life, Mama would tell me, "the real reason we're all here, is to connect with people, honey. Connection, it's all that's really missing in this world."

It seemed to me that the Tall Man with the long hair and green eyes was connecting pretty well with Mama on that warm day at the big Fall Fair. His voice echoed then faded behind the applause and cheers of the small town crowd, but his gaze stayed strong on Mama; she knew it, too. I looked over at her painted face, and she just smiled, her eyes never leaving the stage.

A young man walked onto the foot-high wooden stage. His name was Nick Randall; we knew him from Sunday mass and the Christmas bazaar the church puts on each year. Once when I was little, about four or five, I got to play one of the wise men in the reenactment of the nativity and Nick was Mary's husband Joseph. Nick Randall was twenty-two years old, and he was dying from a tumor that was growing behind his left eye, its claws wrapped around his nerves and scratching at his brain. He stood there in front of the Tall Man, his frail body lost inside a blue t-shirt and a worn-out pair of gray sweatpants, his cheekbones high and sharp under thin pale skin, his head bald and

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spotted from the needle that Mama said was “his only chance,” and he cried.

“Save me, Brother Love,” he said over and over in his small voice, his dull and pasty cheeks lined with tears.

The Tall Man simply looked at Nick Randall, closed his eyes and placed his large hand on Nick’s forehead. “God shall grant thee salvation! Dear Lord, grant this boy the grace of your kingdom and the power to overcome as your son once did.”

Nick Randall stood on that stage and wept as Tall Man yelled and chanted and called for his salvation. I never understood what got Nick up on the stage that day, but I’ll never forget the way he smiled when the Tall Man hugged him and told him “the glory of god is strong within you.” Nick Randall died the day before Halloween that year.

The hours at the Fall Fair in 1977 passed like minutes, and it was a known fact that auntie Cheryl couldn’t go for too many minutes without eating something. Auntie Cheryl used to say that she had a weak thyroid. Me and Mama would just smile and nod at her when she said things like that, even though we both knew that the only thing weak about auntie Cheryl was her willpower when it came to food. Auntie Cheryl was Mama’s little sister; she was about six or seven years younger than Mama, and everybody used to say it was a shame that she would never get a man to stay with her cause of her weight. See, auntie Cheryl was about four foot eleven and she must’ve weighed in at about two hundred and fifty pounds, but she had the biggest breasts you could ever imagine. Mama used to say that the reason auntie Cheryl’s stomach popped out so much was so that her boobs wouldn’t hang down and rip right off due to the science of gravitation. I always laughed when Mama said stuff like that, even though I knew that Mama had no clue about any kind of science, especially that of gravitation.

While Mama and auntie Cheryl went to get some food, I waited by the “Test Your Strength” booth, where all the older high school boys, with their orange and blue football letterman jackets, swung rubber sledge hammers at metal circles, hoping to be the one to ring the bell at the top of the tower. I remember wondering if I was even strong

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enough to pick up the hammer. See, I wasn't the most athletic kid at age thirteen. Actually, I could've been considered an anti-athlete growing up, especially in high school. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I didn't want to be a good athlete, cause I did, more than anything. The truth was that I just had no choice in the matter. I made sure that I stood in the middle of the crowd that September day as I watched Will Curtis, the dark haired starting quarterback of the Westville High Trojans and Kurt Reynolds, Will's best friend and the starting tailback, not to mention Sally Crawly's boyfriend. Sally lived next door to me, and, at least through middle and high school, was my only female friend. Sally was a beautiful girl, with long, straight yellow hair and blue eyes. When we were little and used to play fort and restaurant in the tree house Sally's father built for her, Mama always said that when Sally got older she was gonna be quite the heartbreaker. Mama was right. Sally wasn't there with Kurt on that fall day; she wasn't standing there with all the other cheerleaders blushing and smiling and laughing as the boys tring to see who could strike the hammer harder. I don't think that stuff was important to Sally-- well at least that's what I liked to think. I heard Will and Kurt's voices as they joked and challenged each other, and I just hoped that they wouldn't see me; I didn't want to hear about Stuart Riley and his skinny arms and pale skin and buck teeth on that day, especially from them. I remember thinking how easy life could be if people like Will Curtis and Kurt Reynolds didn't exist. See, I wasn't the most popular kid in school, and there were always certain people who would go out of their way to make sure that I wouldn't forget it, especially when my body became different and the dry spots turned oily and the oily spots were drying up, and my voice began to sound like a violin played by a child who hadn't taken enough lessons. I wasn't exactly the best looking guy around; my legs were too short for my stretched torso, my oversized teeth weren't exactly white, and, well, they weren't really straight either, and my pale skin was almost transparent in places -- my purple and blue veins running clear just under the surface, painting long thin lines and clumped up squiggles on my flat stomach and wiry arms. My hair wasn't straight like blonde Tommy

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Bowdon's, the best basketball player in our school, but it wasn't curly like my friend Jimmy Soprano's, and I'm not sure if you could call it wavy either. My hair was probably the most distinct of my awkward features as a young man, cause half of my head was as curly and rough as the Brillo pads Mama used to clean the stained sink in our small brown tiled bathroom and the other half was as straight and thin as the pieces of "fur" that shed from Mama's favorite mink coat that she bought on one of our bi-weekly trips to the super thrift store. And the color of my hair, well it wasn't brown, and it wasn't really blonde either. Auntie Cheryl used to say that I had dirty blond hair, but Mama always interrupted and said that it was bronze. Bronze hair. Maybe not the most intelligent of observations, but you gotta give credit for creativity. Mama may have not been the smartest person in the world, but she never let anyone put me down.

I remember one day, the first day of ninth grade, just a few weeks before the Fall Fair came into town in 1977, when I was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, a worn-out yellow towel wrapped around my twenty-five inch waist, my dime-sized pink nipples tight from the cool air that snuck in from the crack underneath the door as I stood there, staring at myself, noticing that my eyes weren't blue like Mama always said they were, but rather gray like Thanksgiving day clouds. Then Mama knocked on the door and she peeked her head in. "You fall in, or you just need a spoon or somethin?" Mama had her moments when she could make me laugh, even at myself. She crowded herself in the small steamy room and stood behind my lanky frame, staring into the mirror with me. That was the first time I ever saw Mama look at something other than herself in any sort of reflective surface. I'm not sure how much time passed in that tiny bathroom on that August morning, but it didn't matter. We didn't say a word, we just looked. Then she sighed like she always did before she broke any kind of silence -- Mama always said that a sigh makes the dramatic moments in life that much more impacting-- and she smiled, gently sliding her smooth palms down my bony shoulders, slightly grabbing around my flaky elbows.

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“You are so handsome,” she said.

I smiled wide, lowering my eyes from the pale reflection and the small red-haired woman that stood behind it. She squeezed her hands a little tighter. “Someday so many girls are gonna chase after you that you won’t know what to do with them all.” I looked up and noticed that her dark eyes hadn’t moved from me, not yet.

“You here with your mama and daddy, son?” a deep voice found me in the large crowd between the “Test Your Strength” tower and the fried dough stand.

I turned and looked up. It was the Tall Man, but he looked different than before, maybe it was just because I finally could see him up close. His skin was tan and oily, and his cheeks were covered in grainy gray stubble. His eyes weren’t green at all, but rather gray, like mine, only much darker, and his eye sockets looked as though they had sunken into his skull more than normal, deep bags hanging underneath them. His long hair was frayed and broken at the tips, and it wasn’t yellow like Sally Crawly’s after all, it was darker, almost bronze.

“No, sir,” I said.

I never knew who my real daddy was. Mama never talked about me not having a father, and I never had the guts to ask her about it. “Men are nothing more than what’s between their legs,” she would say. “Well, all men except you, honey.” Mama always had something to say, even if she knew it wasn’t right or proper. “We need to talk our minds,” she would always preach, “say what we feel, do what we want. After all, we only live once.”

“I mean, yes, sir,” I said to the Tall Man, scratching the back of my freshly sunburned neck, “just my mama, though.”

“Is that your mama over there?” He turned his head and nodded towards Mama and auntie Cheryl, who were standing in line to get some fried dough.

“Yes, sir.” I knew that he already knew who she was.

“Call me Brother Love.” He smiled, never taking his eyes off Mama, showing me more teeth than I knew the human mouth could hold.

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“Ok, sir. I mean, Brother Love.”

Just then Mama turned and saw the Tall Man standing there, towering over me, staring at her. She inched out a small smile behind her sunglasses and blue imitation satin scarf. She walked over to us and began talking to Brother Love while auntie Cheryl and her boobs stayed in the food line.

“Why, hello there Mr. Brother Love” Mama said, her left heel rising and falling more quickly with each second that passed.

“Mrs....” It was clear that the Tall Man was reaching for Mama’s name. I didn’t think she would give him the satisfaction.

“Riley. But call me Sheila.”

I was wrong.

The three us, me, Mama, and the Tall Man with the long bronze hair and gray eyes stood there, silent for long seconds.

“Honey, why don’t you go help your Auntie carry the fried dough.” Mama said without ever looking at me. I waited a few seconds to see if she would notice that I hadn’t gone yet; she didn’t. I went over to my fat auntie Cheryl, kicking up small clouds of dirt and sand with every sliding step I took. Once in line, I turned back to see if mama had finished talking with the Tall Man, but they were gone. I quickly stepped out of line, leaving auntie Cheryl, and ran over to where the Tall Man had first spoken to me. I couldn’t see them. My chest began to pound. I was nervous, but I didn’t know why. I knew Mama could take care of herself, and Tall Man didn’t strike me as a man who was going to do anything bad to her. I ran through the crowds, shoving and slicing my way between people, my head shooting from side to side, searching for my mother and the Tall Man who tried to save sick Nick Randall. Then I saw them. The Tall Man stepped into the old brush-painted school bus with Mama following behind him, holding onto his large, bony hand, gliding up the black steps of the blue and white bus. I couldn’t move. I just stood there and watched as the door shut and the sun fell down hard on my face, irritating my pale complexion.

Sometimes, when me and Mama would get into fights with each other, usually over stupid things like me not going to a school dance, I

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would climb out my window at night and sit on the roof and think. Every once and a while I would see Sally Crawly through her window as she would change into her pajamas. Sometimes I think she knew that I watched her. Why else would she leave her pink curtains open every night? Maybe I just wish that was the case. Sally was a beautiful girl: flawless skin, soft yellow hair and cloudless-sky eyes that were so crisp, God, you could see every line of deep blue that surrounded her pupils. The nights that she listened to the radio were my favorite ones. Sally loved the classics. She would float around her room in her white cotton bra and panties, slowly sliding them off with each meter of music, until her smooth thighs slid behind silk shorts and her small round breasts would bounce in the bright lighting of her bedroom as she raised her arms up like a preacher to put on her matching pearl top. Those nights it was just Sally and me on the roof; no Kurt Reynolds, no Mama, just Sally, her soft yellow hair, her cream skin, and me. I would sit there on my torn-up, weather-beaten, tar shingled roof and think about all the games we played as little kids and how the only time that I ever kissed a girl, it was with Sally when we were nine years old and I didn't worry about pimples or pubic hair or rubber hammers that measure your manhood. One night she saw me, though. She opened her window and peeked her head out into the warm July night air.

"Stuart Riley, what are you doing out there?" I knew she knew what I was doing.

"Nothing," my voice shook. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath, "nothing."

"You wanna come over? Do I want to come over?"

"Sure," I said.

"Go to the back door," she said, a few strands of hair that escaped her elastic blowing into her face. She wiped them away with her small hand. "My dad is sleeping, I'll let you in."

Sally let me in and we walked through moonlit hallways and silent rooms as I tried hard to follow Sally's instructions to "Be quiet." We went upstairs to her room with the white walls and the pink cur-

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tains. It was the first time in the thirteen years I knew Sally Crawly that I was ever in her bedroom. From my roof I never could see what her bed looked like, and I often wondered if it was too short for her like my bed was, or if it was large and luxurious, laced with soft, thick pillows and lots of frilly things. I usually envisioned the frilly bed in my fantasies. I was right, although her bed wasn't exactly huge and majestic. It was bigger than mine though, and pink, very pink. She sat on her bed in her pajamas and red Chinese robe – almost like the one Mama had, only Mama's was imitation silk and I think Sally's was real, a gift from her grandparents on her fourteenth birthday. Sally was a year older than me, but she stayed back in the first grade and had been my classmate ever since. I stood there, looking down on her as she sat on the feather-filled, pink and white striped comforter, and I waited in the awkward silence that followed.

"Sit down with me," her voice was so sweet, like a violin stringing a soft, sad song.

"OK," I sat down, my hairless, skinny knees shaking just enough to slow my body's movement.

"Are you alright, Stuart?"

"Yeah," I finally made it down to the bed, "I'm fine."

"You've never seen my room before, have you?"

"Nope." Quick one-word answers, I thought. Keep it simple, don't get nervous.

"Maybe I could see your bedroom someday." Sally looked over at me and smiled.

"Where's Kurt tonight?" I had to get back to reality; even if I hated most of it, at least I trusted it.

"Who cares. He's a big jerk anyway." She pulled her red robe tight around her and stuck her bottom lip out like a small child, pouting.

"Is everything alright with you two?"

"No."

Yes! This was good.

"What's wrong?" I asked, wanting so much to hear the worst.

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“He just thinks he can walk all over people and say whatever he wants to say and do whatever he wants to do, and that I’m just gonna stand next to him a smile and be his little prize.”

“Well,” I dug deep down for the strongest voice I could find, “you deserve better than that, Sally.”

Sally turned to me and stretched out a smile, keeping her pearl teeth hidden behind thin glossy lips.

“You’re sweet, Stuart Riley. Someday you’re gonna make a girl very happy.”

She crept closer to me and kissed me on my pale cheek, sending blood racing through them, running down my arms and legs, rushing into my crotch. Her hand fell on the inside of my thigh and I shivered from the inside out, my muscles tingling, sending waves up from my toes, climbing through my bony legs, throbbing in every section of my body, shooting past my neck into my hair, making it stand up and salute the July air of 1977. I slept in Sally’s bed that night, right next to her, each of us waking whenever our arms or legs or feet touched under her cool white sheets.

I remember wondering if those same waves that I felt the night I saw Sally Crawly’s room were rushing through Mama’s body as I sat on the rotted oak tree stump outside the Tall Man’s brush-painted bus at the big Fall Fair, waiting for Mama to come out. I sat there for over an hour, trying to figure out if I should go get her or wait and watch like I did with everything else in my life. I remember how angry I was at myself cause I didn’t have the guts to knock on the door and ask for my mother back.

The Fall Fair packed up on a Saturday night that year; the large buses filled with the carnival workers that scared us with their broken smiles and foggy eyes and the trailers that stunk of dirty hay and even dirtier animals drove off onto the next town. Usually they didn’t jump town until Sunday night, sometimes even early Monday morning, but that year they all left early, even the badly brush-painted blue and white school bus. Mama didn’t go back to the fair that week. When I asked why she didn’t, all Mama would say was that, “it’s not

folio

like it used to be.” I agreed with her; I always agreed with her. We never talked about the 1977 Fall Fair after that, and we never talked about the ride home on the day Mama went into the bus with the Tall Man. Mama just drove the car, quiet, her eyes set ahead, hidden like they were so often behind her \$0.79 cheetah-print sunglasses, her thin blue scarf now untied, hanging over her slim shoulders, flapping in the air that raced in through the driver’s side window. After we dropped auntie Cheryl off at her apartment, I jumped into the front passenger seat of our faded black 1973 Monte Carlo with the quilt-covered seats, cracked tail light and loose front bumper that would vibrate like a prop-jet engine whenever we hit thirty-five miles an hour, and I looked out the window, daydreaming about all the things that I imagined happened on that bus with Mama and Brother Love. As we drove past the Westville Center Market I remember seeing Will Curtis and Kurt Reynolds standing by the store door in their faded blue jeans and leather-sleeved jackets, laughing. Then I turned and I looked over at Mama, hoping that she would feel my gaze and smile like she always did when she “heard my eyes talking to her.”

She did.

Kathleen Butler

“Green Wood”

There will be no other blaze, *mon amour*.

Tonight, you lie across green flannel,
gripping the pillow
of my cinnamon skin to your fevered cheek.
Outside, boulevards of lightning burst
in heat of night into pockets--
tiny puffs that swing in rhythm,
like saloon doors
to cool and soothe cells of carcinoma
that wrestle inside your flesh.

Yellowed gauze curtains sweep
across the sill,
then die
in summer's doldrums.
I press my nose
to the mesh window,
inviting tiny square imprints
that will remain
long past the moment
when your pulse
no longer beats
in time
to insistent crickets
beyond the screen.

*I heard a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the heavens of storms.
~Emily Dickinson*

Kathleen Butler

“Silence in Hollis, Queens”

Grampa Skehan, from dawn to noon,
your gnarled fingers sliced
bananas, apples,
grapefruit, and oranges
on speckled formica tabletop.
Wrens peeked through your sooty
window. Ballgame announcers
crackled through the transistor
until you loaded thirty
glass containers into
your '64 Olds, surprising
neighbors, merchants, and priests.
You delivered
the last fruit-filled mayonnaise jar
to the news vendor on Jamaica
Boulevard.

Later, at The Four and Twenty Pies
Restaurant, Mabel fills your cup.
“Stayin’ longer than usual
today, huh Charlie?” Star
sapphire eyes grin back at her.
You spy four nuns
from St. Gerard’s, dressed
in full-length habits
across the aisle, talking

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over eggs, coffee,
and slices of lemon meringue pie.
Sister Margaret later signals Mabel
to bring the check. "Sisters,
your bill has been paid
already." The nuns look about
the café. Now it is empty.

Kathleen Butler

“Surf’s Up, Paul”

1.

Cake towers faced
his empty seat
at our sister’s
wedding reception.
Tropical storm waves
collapsed Long Beach
sand, pulled
his surfboard like
a plane aloft, bouncing
water while we feasted
and danced merengue.
“Temporarily condemned,”
we declared our big
brother. Selfish.
Fanatical about
hanging ten
and tubing. Stacks
of twenty seven
surfboards cluttered
his garage. He was
nearly fifty. Trade
in the bohemian world;
grow up Paul,
we’d mutter.

2.

World Trade
Center disintegrates
my screen. One,
then another crashes
the ground. I wail --
my brother works inside.
No cell phone. No
word. Collapsed on
thick blue rug,
I command the phone.
Voices crackle.
Receivers drown.
Seven hours, I pick
carpet lint, swigging
Budweiser. Infernos rage
within my brain. Wife,
daughter, son, mother,
father, brother, three sisters;
we survive him. Plan
a funeral? Too woozy.
I answer the ring. Paul’s
voice: “Tropical storm
waves raged today.
I skipped work.”

Irene De La Torre

“Period”

Mami decided that we should go to Cuernavaca for the weekend. She thought it would be great to escape the smog of Mexico-City and spend some time breathing fresh air. So Mami, her girlfriend, Maru and I, piled into our beloved yellow Datsun Station Wagon. I loved this car as if it was another child in our family. It had this banana color that made it really easy to spot in crowded parking lots. We took it everywhere, and since Mami y mi papa got divorced last year, we went on lots of trips.

On the way to Cuernavaca, Mami blasted the radio and sang along to Mariachi songs about heartbreak and lost loves. Her voice rose and fell frequently and passionately as if she sang about her own heartbreak. Maybe she did. Maru was quiet. She just turned her face to Mami and smiled with her big, white teeth. Everybody seemed really quiet when Mami was around.

“Ay...Ay...Ay...Ay...canta y no llores,” she sang. I thought she had the prettiest voice in the world, just like Angelica Maria.

Mami got into Mariachi music after she y mi papa got divorced, and she started to hang out at the lounge of the Maria Isabel, Mexico’s fanciest hotel. She became friends with a group of Mariachis that sang there every night. She would leave me with abuelita, or Juanita, our maid, who also became my nanny once my parents got divorced and we couldn’t afford a babysitter. One night, Mami took me with her and Maru. I couldn’t believe I could stay up past my bedtime that was no later than nine. Everything looked like a dream. Big crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Their lights dimmed, gave the room a golden, hazy glow. Or maybe it was the cigarette smoke. Couples sat on purple, velvet couches, around short, brown tables with candles flickering. Mami

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chose a table really close to the stage. The Mariachis played their guitars and sang, "Amor, amor, amor...nacio de tí, nacio de mí, nacio del alma..." one of Mami's favorite songs. They all wore white blazers and pants embroidered with gold, but each had different colored sombreros. The tall one with the white, velvet sombrero and bushy, brown mustache, looked at Mami and winked. She giggled one of her silly giggles and flicked her hair back.

We sat. I rubbed the velvety purple seat with my palm. It felt so soft that I wanted to press my face against it. I never saw Mami or Maru sit with their backs so straight. Mami wore a green sequin gown and Maru wore a red one. Together they glittered like a Christmas tree with the lights on.

Mami was short, but she filled every part of her dress with curves. Her breasts, large and round, seemed to spring up, peeping from her neck-line, as if they had a life of their own. Her bottom was round and full like a ripe watermelon. Her skin was the color of ivory, and her small green eyes turned upwards on the corners. When she laughed, they looked like two emeralds with sunshine in them. Mami did not look Mexican, because her parents had come to Mexico from Hungary.

In the mornings, when she dropped me off at school, construction workers on the street would whistle at her and yell, "Gringa!" Mami never turned around, but she would look down and smile to herself, as if she had a secret. Instead of eyebrows, Mami penciled two brown arches over her eyes, like two upside down crescents. She used lots of make-up all the time; she painted her whole eyelids with bright colors like blue or green. On that night, she chose green.

I looked just like Mami. I had blond hair, light skin and green eyes. Except I had eyebrows, and since I was just nine, I didn't have any boobs. The only thing I got from my father was his stringy hair, which made it look like I had hay growing from my head.

Maru was the same age as Mami, thirty, but looked much younger. She had a thin body, like a boy's. She had short, dark brown hair and large brown eyes covered by long, black eyelashes. She never wore any make-up. Her skin was dark, like the color of Atole De choco-

folio

late. She looked Mexican. Maru was single and not divorced like mi mama, and had never had any children to expand her stomach. Mami told me that once, when I asked how come Maru was so skinny.

Maru y Mami listened to the Mariachis and sipped drinks in thin glasses, with ice and olives in them.

“A lady never drinks her drink all at once.” Mami leaned toward me, as I took a big chug of my Coke. Her perfume covered me with its thick sweetness. I felt like throwing up. She used perfumes that came in purple or green bottles, shaped like naked women and with names of poisons.

“You sip a little, and then you talk,” she said, as she pursed her lips into a tiny flower bud and barely sucked any of her drink. Then she turned to Maru and mimed a conversation, moving her lips and flapping her hands around. They both exploded in giggles. Some moms teach their kids how to tie their shoes or do their homework. Mami taught me how to drink a cocktail.

Our Datsun slid smoothly along the highway. I lay down and stretched my body on the back seat. I could see a familiar little black hole on the ceiling. I had looked at it for a year. My seven-year-old cousin, Rafa, punctured it with the tip of my umbrella playing inside the car.

The black vinyl of the seat was soaked with sun and felt warm under my back. I closed my eyes and saw an orange ball through my eyelids. The sunlight that came through the window felt like a warm and soft hand caressing my cheek, like Mami’s hand.

I think I fell asleep because when I opened my eyes the car had stopped, and the door opened. Mami towered above me like a tree with blond curls for flowers.

“Quien quire comer?” she asked. I got out of the car. Maru was already ordering six flautas from a stand on the side of the road. A short lady with long, black braids, stood behind a wooden table with a gas burner. She had a baby strapped to her back, wrapped in a pink, yellow and green woven shawl.

A large, deep pan filled with hot oil, bubbled and simmered around the long, browning flautas. Onions, lemon and the salty smell

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of the hot oil filled my nostrils and watered my mouth. The lady's hands moved quickly, as she prepared a new batch. She slapped the tortillas on the floured-covered table, sprinkled white chicken slivers on the tortilla and rolled it with her palm. When she placed them in the boiling pan, it sounded like hail falling down on the pavement. The baby didn't seem to mind; he sucked on his thumb and looked at us while we ate.

"Dies pesos," said the lady, and Mami stuffed a bill into her hand.

We stuffed our faces with the fleshy, crispy flautas, as if we have never tasted them before. Every time a car whizzed by, a cloud of dust rose and landed on our flautas.

"Adds a little flavor, eh?" said Maru. She didn't speak much, but once in a while she said something funny.

When we got to Cuernavaca, Maru y Mami walked in and out of three hotels and came back after a few minutes. Mami said that the hotels were too expensive, so she and Maru decided we should sleep in the car.

We parked in the Holiday Inn parking lot. I wondered how we managed to stay there without actually having a room, and how we got to use the hotel's pool. So I asked Mami, "How come they let us stay here without having a room?"

"Just act like you belong," she said. "Pretend that you are very rich and important, and no one will talk to you." She marched us to the pool, pointing her nose up to the sky and holding her head high, proudly, as if she was the president's wife or something.

She slapped the little green gate open. In front of me appeared a Garden of Eden in the shape of a rectangular pool, surrounded by red ceramic tiles. The color of the water looked like the color of the sky, light blue and almost transparent.

I threw my towel on a chair and jumped in. The coolness of the water swallowed me whole. I swam to the top, took a deep breath and dove again, headfirst.

"Look at me Mami, I'm a mermaid!" I yelled to where Maru

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and Mami lay by the side of the pool on green, cushioned lawn-chairs.

“Si mijita, I see you,” she said without lifting her head. Maru wore a red bikini and Mami a black one-piece. Their bodies were covered in baby oil and looked like the flautas in the frying pan.

I touched my own suit, a one-piece, black Mickey Mouse bathing suit. Rafa’s mother, my aunt, brought it for me from her trip to Disney World. It was thin, almost transparent, and Mickey Mouse’s face started to fade, from constant use, sun and chlorine. I stroked my tummy. The smooth cotton material felt comforting under my fingertips.

I dove again into my quiet under world. I swam bobbing my head up and down, paddling my feet and sending ripples through my body.

“Look at me Mami,” I yelled again. “I’m The Man from Atlantis.” Mami’s head lifted up from the cushion, but the rest of her body stayed plastered to it. Her eyelids opened half way.

“I see you,” she said before her head dropped on the cushion again.

At sunset, tired and more red than before, we walked barefoot to the Holiday Inn’s parking lot-- to our car. Mami y Maru got out of their bathing suits and dressed in the front of the car. I did the same in the back.

We hung our bathing suits, one in every corner, like flags, telling passers-by about our day. Mami drove us to dinner at Denny’s, my favorite place. She told the waiters it was my birthday, even though it wasn’t, so I got a free piece of cake.

I felt like a big red helium balloon about to burst. Mami drove back to the Holiday Inn parking lot and I crawled into the back of the car. I sprawled my arms and legs as if I was in Mami’s king-size bed. My body felt tired, but in a good way; like it had done everything there was to do in a day.

Wet towels hung over my head and over the windows, like little partitions. The hot, dry wind of the summer night blew in. It mixed with the wet and chlorinated towels and made the air in the car

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musty and warm, with a sweet smell, like Abuelita's fruit compote, boiling over the stove. I didn't know any kids who went on vacations and slept in their cars. I couldn't wait to get back to school, so I could tell all the kids about my adventure.

Mami woke me up, said it was morning, even though the car was dark because of the towels. She said it was time to get back.

On the way, Mami sang to the radio, and this time Maru joined her. Halfway to Mexico-City Mami started to scream.

"Ah!" she yelled with her mouth wide open, her hands clutching the steering wheel, turning red and then white.

"What's the matter?" Maru turned toward her on the passenger seat.

"My period," Mami gasped. "I'm getting my period." Her large chest heaved up and down.

"Que le pasa a Mami?" I asked, popping my head into the front.

"She's getting her period," Maru said turning her head back to me.

"What's a period?" I asked, as I watched my mom pressing down on her stomach with one hand, while clutching the wheel with the other. Then she would leave the wheel all together and press down on her lower stomach with clenched fists. Mami was the best driver I ever knew. She always said, "Fifteen years of driving and not even one accident."

"What's a period?" I asked again, this time raising my voice to a higher pitch. Mami y Maru looked at each other and their eyes smiled.

"Period is when you bleed once a month from your vagina." Mami took the lead. I envisioned her whole seat getting drenched with red, warm blood, until the whole car became covered with it.

"Why do you bleed?" I asked in horror. "What's a vagina?"

"Ah!" Mami shouted, before satisfying me with an answer.

"A vagina is... your pipi," said Maru steadying her eyes on Mami.

"When you bleed, that means you can have babies," said Mami

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and then bit her lower lip and groaned.

“Oh...” I said bobbing my head up and down. I felt relieved.

“Ah!” Mami yelled unabashedly and with all her might, like everything else she did. Like last year on our Christmas party. Papa didn’t live with us anymore. Mami was in her bedroom with all the aunts and some of her girlfriends. She decided to pop her boobs out of her black evening gown.

“Now, doesn’t the dress look better this way?” she said cocking her head. Two milky white balloons stuck out from the sides of the top of her dress. My aunts looked at her with mixture of horror and amusement. I wanted to melt into the taupe carpet and never come back.

“Ah!” Another scream was thrust into the car.

“Do you want me to take over?” Maru asked.

“No, that’s O.K.,” she answered. Mami liked to suffer, like the people she sang about in her Mariachi songs.

“So, that means someday I can have a baby brother, or sister...right?” I threw the question into the front of the car. I could see it, a little brother or sister, a baby. I would hold it and bathe it. It would love me. I would always have someone to play with.

“No, I can’t have kids any more,” said Mami keeping her eyes on the road.

“What?” I demanded.

“I tied my tubes,” she said.

“What do you mean ‘tied your tubes?’” I didn’t know what that meant, but it sounded pretty irreversible.

“Your vagina has these tubes, called fallopian tubes, they look like little trumpets. If you tie them at the end, you can’t have babies anymore.” Mami was a nurse, so once in a while she talked medical talk.

“But Mami, why did you do that?” I asked.

“I did it for you niña,” she said as if saying, “I cooked your favorite meal, niña.”

I felt my throat swelling with salty tears.

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“But why?” I asked once again, as if that would do anything.

“Because, after your father and I got divorced, if I met a man, and wanted to marry again, I didn’t want you to suffer by having half brothers or sisters.” Mami had her own logic.

“I never asked you to do this for me!” I wanted to shout, but instead, I slouched further into the back seat. The sweat on my back turned cold and sticky against the black vinyl of the car. I felt alone. For the first time in my life, I was really angry with Mami. She took something away from me. I was never going to have a brother or a sister.

I looked outside the window. The cornfields on the side of the road looked dried and yellow. They looked sad. There was no corn, only stubs standing bareheaded. It reminded me of my seven-year-old cousin Rafa. He came to our house one day, and disappeared. We looked for him in all the rooms in the house, but we couldn’t find him.

He had gotten into Mami’s bathroom and found her long, sharp scissors. When we found him it was too late, he had cut his long brown hair. There was hair everywhere: hair on the white tiles, hair in the bathtub, hair on the toilet, and hair on Mami’s pink carpet. His hair had all these different lengths and he had white, bald patches in between. His mom made him shave his entire head, so it would grow even. He was so ashamed by his bald head that he wore a hood for a month. He walked hunched and looked sad, like a thief or a beggar or something.

Outside the window, two little kids, barefoot and with dirty faces stood by the side of the road selling cut papaya. Their bellies stuck out of tattered shirts that looked too small for them. I felt their big, sad, brown eyes staring at me.

Mami drove on looking at the road. She didn’t see the warm tears that washed my face.

“Ah!” she continued yelling, yelping like a wounded animal. The two hours back to Mexico-City seemed like an eternity and my mother’s screaming never ceased.

Shayne Distasio

“In the Nets”

From his nest of tubes he begins to speak,
his voice barely audible above the sterile hum
of the machines that have attached themselves to him
like a curse. My mother's father.
He has no time for eloquence, he says.
But his words connect like water falling on water, and
eventually an image forms in the ripples...

Each night he left the waters behind,
rising like the surf itself up the incline of the shore.
Even the seagulls and the driftwood knew him--
the lilt of his laughter, the shoulders as wide as the sunset,
the upward tilt of the delicately bearded chin.

Always the nets,
the mending of the nets
as the starlight filtered down to the shack,
brushing the fine muscles of his hardened arms with nacre
and slashing a brilliant sword stroke on the surface of the sea.

The scent of the ocean followed him everywhere.
It was in his shoes at the burlesque house,
where he contemplated radiant crescents of scandalous flesh
from the safety of his seat.
It rose from the holes in his clothes
like incense

as he rode the trolleys, always figuring the ebb of the tide.
He was a ghost but for the smell...

The nets poke out of the dunes,
the individual strings struggling in the sand,
eaten away by bikinis and revolutions
and the wide slow path of the world.

The sand below the shack is part of the sea now,
now again a part of the shore,
drowning in cigarette butts and lost coins.

He is eaten away, he says,
by the rawness of things.
He asks me for a cigarette as he winds
the starched white sheets around him.
"I'm sorry," I lie, fingering the pack in my pocket,
"I don't smoke anymore."

"Forget it," he breathes into the antiseptic air,
as he considers the walls around him.
We are sixty-three miles from any ocean,
watching TV in this dreary box of brick and steel.

Yet when I bury my face in the fold of his shoulder,
where the soft bones flounder
in a skein of disease,
it's the spray of salt I smell.

Shayne Distasio

“Ashes”

During those last days, his skin was almost opaque.
I imagined I could trace the path of the leukemia
through the body that shimmered and sagged
in the detonated May sunshine.
I saw the hollow in his abdomen
where the spleen had nested
(it weighed sixteen pounds, the doctor told us, a whale of a spleen).
I saw the long arteries that traveled the length of the limbs
softly pulsing, tumescent, fragile with radiation.
I saw the symmetrical lymph nodes burning from within,
heavy with the inexorable division of cells.
I stood, traitorous in my vitality, at my father's bedside,
a young boy sheathed in immortality
watching the systole and diastole of useless blood.

Later, when his empty room was no longer such a shock,
my brothers and I scattered the ashes
in a small garden framed by marigolds, tulips, and asphodel.
Some of the ash simply drifted away,
dusting the bees and the butterflies white,
as if with chalk, or confectioners' sugar.
The rest kept falling through the sieve
of our interlocked hands until, finally,
the center broke and
no one could hold on anymore.

Robert Breychak

“Curtain Andy on Fire”

In your painted building
the curtains have names like
Ansel, Andy and James.

The lines of your face fall into place
like some hand-painted canvas in the sun.
All on the floor lie your dreams and cut and paste
remnants of *Spin* magazines, fingernails
chewed from detail and spit out, scissors,
crew socks wherever they may rest.

Clouds brew beneath the rising sun
as it pushes the city skyline outside
your open window, fading blinds to an off
hue of burnt blue, smoke bellowing
horns for breakfast in streets below.

Distracting your eyes are low thumps of feet
at the door rolling nearer and then
creeking farther, dropping newspapers
wrapped in pink plastic and rubber. Still lines

flow from curves in your black dress and settle in
under your smile, stretching across the room,
lighting what's left of curtain Andy on fire.

folio

A sweep of dust erodes from your touch and charcoal laden
stacks of books next to me yelling Basquet and Gar-don'
in every shade of gray possible. Your hands remain
in perfect coordination with your gaze, staring
at me just to make sure
you've got my nose right.

In your painted building I watch the sun's rays
spell your silhouette with an alphabet of rainbow,
seizing my eyes from the pose I save.

Down the shadow of your arm I trace bracelets
of silver and gold, glittering in the sunlight,
marking the ceiling with their reflections and
absence of imperfection.

'Hold that expression.'

Scratching ensues from your side of the room
as application after application of charcoal brick
descends upon the canvas.

'You have wonderful eyelashes.'

I am lost in your voice as I forget not to move
and begin fidgeting with the shoelaces of my crossed
legs: 'Just one more minute...'

'I can stay here forever,' I say and then
continue to tie my sneakers in triple knots like
my stomach, riding
a roller coaster with no end.

folio

And I really *can* stay here forever, with you,
bathing in the sunlight of the morning, breathing
in the charcoal dust, screaming for your next
coaster car glance. I really don't mind

being the subject of your canvas, the figure
for your drawing, the object of your words.

I envy your curtains, especially Andy with his
bedfeather white design, blue within, your favorite.

I want to be a curtain in your window, a regulator
of the sun like you are to me. Let me burn
and I will not care. Let me die

and I will not want to live
because it was you, *you* in the sun who drew
my life for me.

Patricia Bjorklund

“Missing Link”

Arlene bolted through the stockroom door hauling two cartons of holiday greeting cards. Cheryl stood at the opposite end of the beauty supply aisle, parted her red CVS smock with her head thrown back, and unveiled her breasts like Madonna. Teesha and Mindy swarmed Cheryl in awe, reverently petting and poking at her new double-D’s. Arlene muttered as she viewed the spectacle over her nose high bundle. How barbaric they looked in their communal feel-up of Cheryl’s implanted breasts. It reminded Arlene of the cable flick she had seen the night before, the part in *2001, A Space Odyssey*, where the apes’ hunger for knowledge compels them to paw at the humming black monolith.

Arlene dropped the heavy boxes in front of the display unit. The bang broke her co-workers’ epic trance. Mindy fumbled the money bag and chased a roll of dimes to the foot of a cardboard Scrooge display.

Teesha yelled out, “Arlene, Cheryl’s back! Come see!”

“As soon as I situate these,” she huffed as she slid one box off the other and shimmied both cartons directly in front of the empty card rack with her foot. Arlene felt repulsed yet drawn to the curious premier of craftsmanship, the handiwork of a well-coifed doctor who advertised on local TV stations after two a.m. She flexed her hands, tried to work out the cramping in her fingers. The itchy tingle crawled upward. Her arms seemed to grow weightless, floating up alternately. Frame by frame, like a slow motion movie, Arlene strode past the charcoal shoe inserts, arm slings and neck braces.

“It’s the return of the sixty-two-hundred-dollar woman,” Arlene said.

folio

“And worth every penny,” Cheryl replied, “now that he’s removed the drains from my arm pits.”

Cheryl rolled her white tank top up under her chin and looked down into her new ravine of cleavage. Arlene watched the way she rolled her shoulders back and let her unsaddled breasts, heavy, engorged, expand across her skinny torso. Faint blue veins trailed out like lava under her white ash skin. The spiny pink scars, like fossilized remains, were almost totally effaced by the eruption of flesh.

Arlene remembered a trip to the Metropolitan Museum in fourth grade, Mrs. Zenoff yelling at her for touching an abstract sculpture made of something that was supposed to be harder than iron. Arlene put her hands in her smock pockets.

“Wow! Your voice has changed,” Arlene said.

“I just feel better about myself, that’s all.”

“When the swelling goes down, will your nipples shrink? I mean, Jeeze, what happened?”

“What do you mean? Men like wide nipples, silver dollars you know!”

“Wide, like silver dollars? They’re more like overblown balloons. Men like hard, little nipples.” Arlene loved it when Lance, the store manager, told her to come to work braless so he could whisper in her ear, tell her the exact time they were going to do it, and watch her nipples go pointy. She spun the coiled bracelet around her wrist until she could thumb the cool edges of Lance’s office key.

“Oh come on, you guys,” Cheryl said. She winced as she inched her tank top down. Her face wore the expression of a vandalized clock. Cheryl straightened up, both hands braced her back as if she were nursing a fresh injury.

Pangs of guilt pulsed through Arlene, dragged her back to *2001*, back to that primate scene, as if, with bone in hand, she’d just landed that first simian blow of the movie. Mindy and Teesha tripped like dominos, simultaneously taking their whacks at Cheryl, deciding three-to-one that men do indeed like smaller nipples.

“I can only speak for myself,” Arlene said, “but I told you before

folio

you decided to have this surgery that I'm sure men liked your nipples, and the rest of your breasts, the way they were."

"This goes *beyond* men. I'm thinking about my career."

Like everyone else, Arlene knew Cheryl's resume. She'd done some modeling for Caldor's and had dressed as an oral thermometer at a Halloween party on *One life to Live*.

"How are you feeling?" Arlene said.

"Not bad, but they're still swollen so don't *even* make me laugh."

"They must have given you some serious shit for pain," Teesha said.

"Sure, but it didn't help at night when I'd accidentally roll onto my stomach." Cheryl cautiously placed her hand to her breast. "I woke up screaming like someone was stabbing me in the heart."

"I never thought about how hard it would be to have to sleep on your back for almost two weeks," Mindy said.

"I thought surgery on fatty tissue wasn't such a big deal," Arlene said. "I mean, you said you'd be back to work in three days."

"Believe me, I was more shocked than you. My doctor attached the implants to my chest muscles so my breasts won't sag."

"Sagging implants?" Arlene sighed. She raked her hair off her forehead, pulling through a few knots and scattering some loose ends. "What do you do about that?"

"I don't know what other women will do, but I won't have 'em."

Teesha rubbed the back of her neck and punched in the code to open her register. Coins shifted as the drawer smacked open against her hip. She looked down, started to count the pennies.

"Oh, and I want to tell you guys I can't thank you enough for the gift."

"You're welcome. We missed you," Mindy said.

Teesha stopped counting and looked up. "We would have visited you in the hospital if they kept you longer," she said.

"It's true," Arlene said. "We did miss you. We would have sent you something a little bigger if we could have afforded it. You know how it is."

"Bigger? That was the most extravagant arrangement of flowers

folio

I've ever seen. Even my mother was impressed."

Arlene, Mindy and Teesha looked at each other as if they'd seen the ghost of the Get Well Coffee Mug they thought they'd sent.

"Oh yeah," Mindy said. "We told Lance we were sending you something and he wanted to chip in."

"I don't know how to thank him. I never expected--"

"Bosses are supposed to do things like that," Arlene said.

"But it's like Lance understands that I wasn't meant to be a cashier all my life," Cheryl said.

Arlene's lips flattened into an impatient little line.

"And the rest of us are?" Arlene said.

"I shouldn't be saying this, but Lance worked out the whole problem of my unapproved leave of absence. He fixed it so I could get paid for three personal days." Cheryl gleamed.

Arlene sucked air between her front teeth. She heard the sound, like a cicada. She meant to stop doing that. The knowledge of Lance's gesture sat on the back of Arlene's tongue like a bitter lozenge, making her salivate. She thought about the ordeal of her tonsillectomy. Lance came over with a fruit basket and told her that he couldn't do anything about the workers' compensation policy, that she wouldn't qualify for benefits until she'd missed three consecutive days. Arlene remembered the strong cologne smell of his fingers when he touched the tip of her nose and said he couldn't do without her at the store for longer than that. Arlene smiled. She carried the cellophaned tower of fruit and nuts to the coffee table, then she went to the fridge and served herself some of the tapioca pudding her mother had brought her. They had their first and only fight that night. She must have been in the haze of antibiotics and pain killers. Lance kept switching to *BayWatch* during the Twilight Zone marathon. She couldn't recall how he ended up yelling at her to get with the real world, or why she ripped into the basket and hurled a banana at him.

Arlene tapped on the face of her watch. "OK ladies, show's over. Time to open. Cheryl, you work at a register since you can't bend or lift yet. Teesha and Mindy, open two more registers in case we get

folio

busy. Then, you can finish putting out stock. Start with these cards, then check the cartons in the trim-a-tree aisle. If you need me, I'll be in the stock room." Arlene headed toward the swinging aluminum doors. She turned and looked back, as if the girls would still be standing there when she said, "I want to finish the audit on this shipment before Lance comes in at noon."

Lance's office was a cubicle within a vast, echoing stock room. Arlene had grown to like the damp scent of pulpy cardboard the way she took to licking Christmas stamps. She moved toward the angry light of this shelved, windowless non-place, home for injured Hummel figurines and off-season Hello Kitties. A place where sentiments and promotions lay folded in suspended animation, a place where she once posed naked beside a glossy, six-foot Elvira, just because he asked her to. She smelled a trace of Lance's cologne, Eternity, from the desk drawer. She couldn't even recall when she'd started seeing him, but that's what she trusted about it. Like a birthmark or a mole—whatever confused her about the nature of their love, it didn't shake her belief in its permanence.

Every day, Arlene stacked epsom salts, secured cartons of cigarettes; she discretely helped people attend to their personal needs. Lance slipped into her life so easily or was it vice-versa? That was beauty. It didn't matter. Like stackable Rubbermaid, they were an open fit.

Arlene picked up the clipboard, scanned it several times for the place where she had left off but quickly dropped it back on Lance's invoice-cluttered desk. She sat in his squeaky chair, rested her Doc Martens by the veal-colored rotary phone. She reached around to the small of her back, searching for the power of that day when they did it standing up. Was it two weeks ago? There, that crusted sore where the cold metal shelving left scrapes in the thin skin covering her tail bone. She closed her eyes and saw Cheryl lying on a bed in *General Hospital*, flowers crowding the room, foliage overtaking the life-support-systems, doctors rushing in, life functions--critical. Arlene slid both hands up under her smock, cupping her small, crescent shaped breasts, lifting them up toward her neck, forcing the flesh into firm pouting mounds, pull-

folio

ing till they hurt, till she felt pain like a rocket breaking through gravity.

Patricia Bjorklund

“gumball”

Mark worked on a shed
the summer they agreed to break up.
Kim meandered out back to watch him

slash long lines on the plywood,
studied his hands,
split white knuckles.

Reaching into the five-gallon bucket, he
shifted a nail gun splattered with paint--
or was it putty?-- and a red box of nails,

its crushed cellophane window.
Carpenter's belt hung low on his hips,
each pocket pouting-full,

finishing, shingle, and half-penny nails.
Kim bought the belt for him-- which
birthday she was no longer sure.

Tongue resting on his lip,
he laid the wood down, barely looked at her,
I need to see what I'm doing.

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Behind his ear, a flat red pencil
fell-- dinged against the level.
Kim picked up a stone,

measured her response
against the calloused skin of his hands,
spoke between screeches of the table saw.

I'm sorry, she said.
Wood blared forth, spitting dust
before falling from Mark's fingertips.

He guided another piece into the blade. She followed it,
right angle cut, pointed drop into cornmeal heap.
She felt the gravity.

Two jagged tips of grass peaked through sawdust.
His saw unwound.
Crest-shaped, his bruised thumbnail

blazed a horizon of cuticle.
She thought of a tarnished nickel in a gumball slot,
as a kid. She loved the grind,

knob cold, heavy spin, twirl with cowboy's gun.
Chill spilled where she felt
her lungs should be.

Geared for motion,
clockwise,
she closed her eyes,
saw glass globe, colored balls.

folio

Raspberry gumballs percolated,
wonder bread yellow, red, blue,
slide, roll, drop, change.

She could hear sound round the alley,
metal-flap door coughed--
two, usually three, sometimes more.

Kim sighed
the way they rolled,
sweated sweet colors

in her hand,
lucky die.
Kim thumbs a cool stone,
the round swirls of Mark's fingerprint.

Patricia Bjorklund

“On Jane Street”

I watched.
My mother sat alone
at our clean-faced kitchen table;
her typewriter tssked flowery poetry.

I remember rain.
Almost seven years,
I learned to read
her.
Mutiny in my garden....
conspiracy of daisies...
how the roses complain.
Oh, Rose is my red middle name.

Make me the tulip, Mom.
She cried too clean to see me.
Sharp wooden railing in my hand,
I snuck down two flights,
passed the factory fence of my yard

to the honking curb.
I ripped dandelions from flowerbox cracks,
bared frantic roots,
kicked smooth stones.

folio

Forging a golden return,
I cupped both hands.
Mom took my dandelions,
plucked slivers from my fingers,
girlie'd me round the green table

with its smudges of crushed pearls.
Weeds smell like me, I burst.
—If I could giggle,
a charm, not too loud,
I thought I could make her happy.

Patricia Bjorklund

“poetry reading at age thirteen”

My paisley key-holed diary
hid in a knotty pine desk--
a refugee among poor math scores and a lip-gloss
too dangerous to keep.

Thinking wise,
I planned to scribble over private lines
but played kickball
the day Dad toppled
my desk, drawers
emptied of girlish truth.

I forgot his eyes and face
in the spring of angry fists.
I read my tiny book-- as told--
feeling only the frayed cloth edge
where the strap was ripped from the lock.

Numb by the time he had me
tear out its pages,
chew the paper,
for words,
just words.

folio

I cried secretly
knowing him better than he knew me,
tasting bitter poetry,
dangerous ink,
just words.

Rocky Lungariello

“In Knots”

October 2001

I hear airplanes all the time. And when I spot one in the patriotically blue sky, it is no longer just another flicker amongst stars. I find myself following its lights till it hums away, worried as a mother.

September 30th, a Sunday, and like the two previous, my family prayed at church while I golfed. I left the vacant house, locked the front door, and abandoned an unfolded newspaper screaming from our breakfast table. Smudged, it read in black and white. September 12th 2001, *Hartford Courant*, Act of War: “With chilling precision, terrorists deliver death as America watches helplessly.”

I drove to Whitney Farms, a town over, which had the most perfectly maintained fairways of any golf course I’ve seen in the area. When the timid winds hovered through the tee boxes, across the lakes, and above the trees, it carried with it the richest scent of the greenest grass. Amazing.

Mike and his twelve beers met me in the course parking lot. One of my oldest friends. We laughed at the brittle man behind the counter as we entered the Pro shop. He shot self-righteous stares to anyone setting up tee times undressed in a collared shirt, while politely, maintaining a plastic smile. We delinquents were in his direct line of fire. The sport did display economic status, whether we admitted it or not: Golf balls were like a man’s clothing. His clubs like a man’s car. And his swing; like his lady. I drank Bass, imported English beer. That’s as far up the ladder as I went. Mike, however, seemed to have strong ties with acrophobia.

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We loaded our rented golf cart with our shoddy clubs and our ice-cold beers. The day had already cost us sixty dollars apiece, and a pinch or two of pride.

“Did you call Johnny yet for his birthday?” I asked, stepping into the driver’s seat.

Mike nodded, “Last night.”

“I still have to,” I said, peeling out for no reason.

“Do you believe that guy in there?” Mike said, grasping the chassis, “What’s his problem?”

I pulled up to the first hole, stopped the cart, lit a cigarette, and grabbed my driver and tee from the back. Then I answered Mike, “*Look* at me,” I said, as I pulled at my white T-shirt and faded jeans. Mike had already begun laughing. I continued, “And look at *you* buddy. Your shirt has a picture of a trailer on it, with big, huge letters that say ‘trailer park.’” I barely finished the last of my thought with any clarity, being too busy giggling like a girl.

“What?” he said, wobbling cracking open a Coor’s Light, “I look good, man.” His first sip landed directly over the roof of his trailer as he continued chuckling. “Honestly Dave. This is the first time I’ve laughed in days.”

“C’mon. You’re up,” I said, stretching with my club behind my back.

“So we’re taking Johnny out tonight, right?” Mike swung his club, sending his Titlelist straight for the emerald fairway.

“Good shot. Yeah, we’re taking him to his favorite place. Now get your shit out of the way, you show off.”

Mike shaded the sun from his charcoal eyes, tracking his ball which now delicately settled just beyond a cherry tree, nearly three hundred yards away. “What place is that?” he asked, guarding a grin with the spout of his can.

I continued shaking my head, “Talking while you’re swinging, like it’s no big thing.” I set my tee into the soft soil and laid my ball upon it. I backed away for a second and gave my bottle of beer to Mike.

folio

“Bass,” he said shaking his spiky head, “Whatever Dave.”

“Okay. Simmer down,” I said quietly. The hole was a par three, which meant from the tee box, I could visibly see the flagstick being blown left by the breeze. They were usually a checkered, taxicab yellow.

“Hey Mike,” I said in mid-swing, “Did they put American flags at every hole?”

Eighteen holes later and now comfortably drunk, Mike and I returned the key of our toy back to the skinny asshole in the Pro shop and moved gallantly back to the parking lot.

“I can’t believe we did a three-sixty in a fucking golf cart!” I said, as we found our cars.

Mike let the final drop of his beer fall to the back of his throat, and crushed the can, “We had to look ridiculous,” he said.

“I had a good time though,” I said.

“I know. How much did nothing else matter for those...” he paused to look at his watch, “Wow, for those *five* hours?”

I nodded for a full moment, and we said goodbye.

I came home to the scent of dinner, and yet it contrasted with its usual implications. The foyer tiles engulfed my sun beaten eyes with distorted lines of refracted light, and the seemingly hearty aroma fought with an almost hospital-like cleanliness. I felt obligated to remove my sneakers, and nearly acknowledged a recoiled Hoover which stood atop the lacquered stairs.

“Sit down, David, it’s just the three of us,” my mother said with a short stack of plates in her hand. She circled the table, setting places while still in stride. A green laundry basket full of folded clothes occupied my usual seat. I bit at my thumbnail, standing motionless.

“Why, where is everyone?” my father’s voice asked. Unseen, his audible steps walked up from the bright hallway. A thick and humid air followed him, adding another aroma to the blend.

“Your sisters are out,” she responded, looking to me.

folio

With a crumpled towel in his arms he asked, "Where've you been?"

I raised my shoulders and clanked my clubs, giving the obvious non-verbal answer.

"I'm not hungry and I could use a shower," I said.

"Johnny called, Dave," my mother said.

"Did he? Shit. I have to call him"

My father still worked in his after-shave, almost filling the room with a crisp, clean, manly scent. He walked over to the radio underneath the framing of a kitchen cabinet, and clicked it on. "But come back in here when you're done."

"Okay Dad," I said, imitating Timmy from *Lassie*.

"Jerk," he said playfully.

I dialed Johnny's number, the same seven digits for the past twenty plus years.

"Hello." Unless he wasn't home, he always answered the phone.

"Johnny? Happy birthday old man."

"I know right."

"Twenty-two, holy shit."

"It's such a pointless age. It's like I'm stuck somewhere," he said, with as much energy as a broiled steak.

"You're right. I've felt stuck my whole life. Sorry I didn't call you before. Me and Mike went golfing all day." There was a long break in between every phrase we spoke, like we were waiting for a third party to intervene.

"I was working all day anyway," he said almost offensively.

"So we're taking you to see some whores tonight." I attempted to adjust the subtle tension.

"You're damn right you are," he said, worked up to about a poached egg.

"Alright, so I'll drive, so you and Mike don't have to worry about anything," I said.

"Cool. I'm gonna get retarded."

folio

“Okay John, I’ll be over around nine.”

“Later.”

Now free of dirt and lingering beer, I put my boots on at the kitchen table where my parents sat with their palms clutched around cups of coffee. Immediately my mother’s eyes settled on my waist. “You’re too thin, look at your pants. They’re falling off.” I was, and they were. But they were my good pants.

“He looks good,” my father said with a proud smile.

The radio, tuned to a static-filled AM station, still buzzed. We listened: *America’s greatest terrorist attack, perhaps ever, is now being called America’s New War. Excuse me... my producers are now saying that over six thousand Americans are claimed missing among the twisted rubble of the towers. Over three hundred which included some of the bravest men and women...*

I got up and changed it to an FM station, “I just can’t listen to this anymore,” I said, looking at the pale, expressionless faces. My father fussed with a napkin pressed in red wine, left over from dinner. And my mother stared at the radio as if it were a television.

Though more crisp in bass, and less noisy in treble, the other station brought no restoration: *Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, of New York City, has asked for America’s help. Blood drives were amazingly successful these past several days, but now, we are more in need of donations. Every dollar counts. To contact our station dial...*

I walked out to my car before the monotonous voice could complete the number.

Still warm from my shower and the six previous beers, I drove to Johnny’s with the heat blasting and the windows completely down. Perfect in temperature, the tightness in my gut returned. Unless I held a senseless amount of pressure around my steering wheel, my hands shook. I could feel my pulse in my ears. Cigarettes began to lack taste and density. Songs and silence were one in the same.

folio

"So Scruples, right?" Mike asked.

"Yep," Johnny and I both responded with evil smiles.

"Let's go, finish your beers, I'm driving," I said.

"Can I bring these in the car?" Mike said, carrying a diminished six pack by the strings.

"Just drink them now, or wait until we get there. I don't want beer in my car."

"Fine," Mike said, guzzling his last one down. "It's in Bridgeport right?"

"To the ho's!" Johnny yelled as we drove off his driveway.

From the moment we entered the dark bar, Mike's nerves were pulled tightly, overwhelmed by the casualness. Johnny and I played it cool. I bought three beers, and slid them down to where we sat, twenty yards from the dancing girls. Our eyes didn't travel to the naked bodies instantly; we got a sense of them, then looked away. Just a lot of laughing.

"I didn't know Amstel Light came in cans," Mike said.

"You said cans," I joked.

"Yeah. It's like a rule at strip clubs, safety probably," Johnny explained as he rubbed his light brown goatee. He couldn't have appeared more comfortable even in his own home.

The bar itself held an average, low-lit, smoky atmosphere. It had two televisions hung in either corner, wet sticky countertops, and slow, deaf, bartenders; no less than normal. Almost all of the men hovering and occupying the stools had a girl on their laps or around their arms. Just talking, sipping drinks. They actually looked liked genuine couples; odd, twisted ones of course, but couples no less. We stayed at the bar for Mike's sake, until a decent buzz set in.

I walked over to the three-foot high stage, towards eight breasts, with nothing but a grin. I dreamed this before. Colored lights and disco balls hung ornamentally above the dancers. Behind them were mirrors stained with handprints, from ceiling to floor. Dollar bills scattered the floor, and two firepoles shined. Middle-aged men took all

folio

the spaces around the edges, so we took a table off to the side, one with a decent view.

“Look at Mike. He’s like shaking,” I said.

“You okay?” Johnny elbowed Mike while he sipped his beer.

“This is a joke,” his eyes bulged as he stared straight ahead.

“Look at them!”

I raised an overflowing shot towards my friends, “Happy birthday, Johnny.”

He sharpened the rim of his fitted black hat, and drank with Mike and I. We sat at the highest table, all on one side of its curve. The dark rum warmed my chest, loosening it yet another notch.

Chris Piccirillo

“Our Parents Did Good Drugs”

Mom always told me
Never talk to strangers,
Unless it looks like they have money.
Santa Claus is bullshit.
I think, therefore, I'm stupid.
Santa rewards the well-mannered,
But should be arrested for animal cruelty.
I saw your mommy necking with an elf.
In three months, stockings will be accepted as a form of currency.
Dad always told me
That when I go to strip clubs,
Rather than put bills down the stripper's panties
I should use Susan B. Anthony dollars.
In six years, mistletoe will transform
Impotence to insomnia.
But then again, sleep's a good way to get laid.
Instead of coal for rotten children, I propose mayonnaise.
The gentle hands of my pediatrician
Might have turned me gay if
My father had not been a truck driver.
I recall the excitement from when I opened
My first Christmas gift,
But didn't have the heart to ask my parents
“Who ate the fucking cookies?”

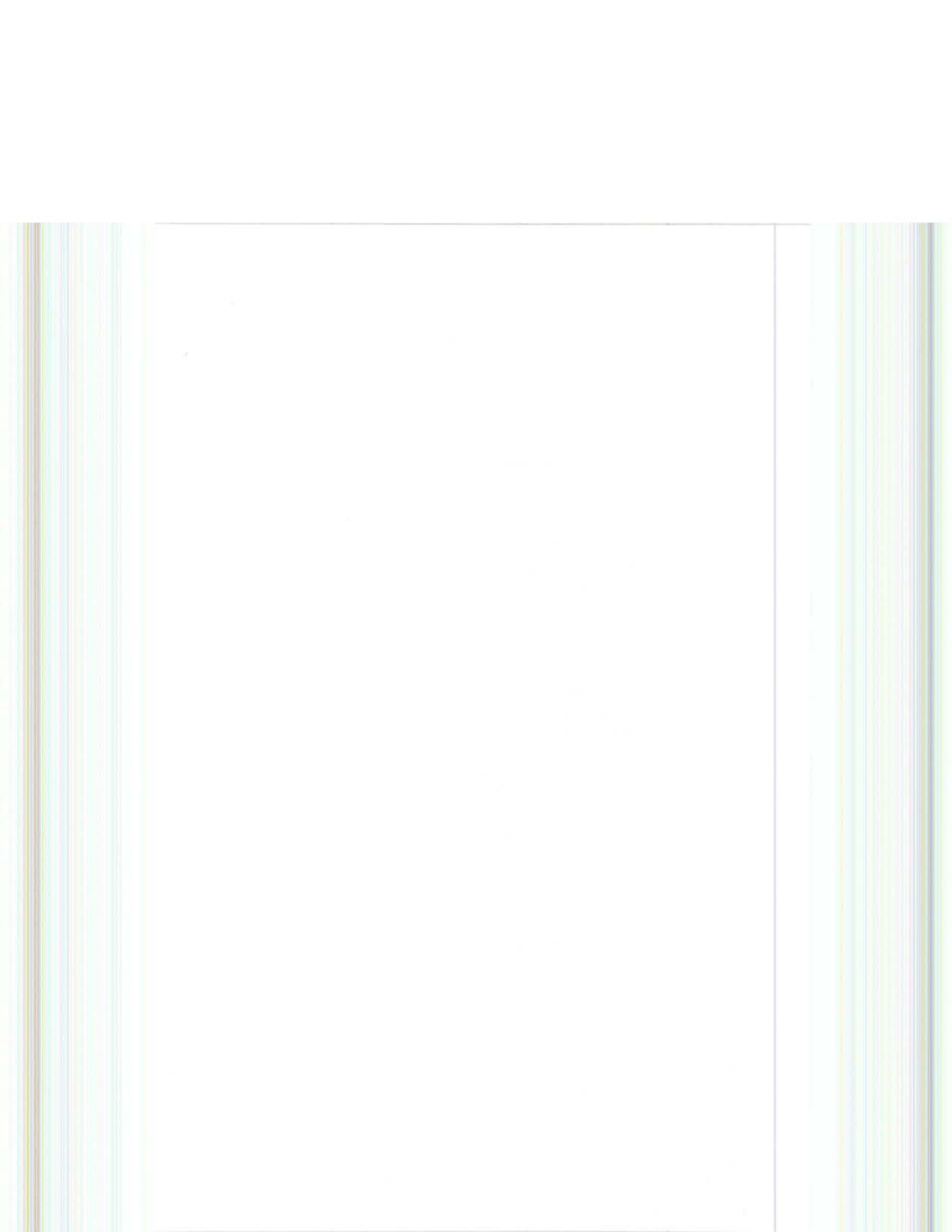
Chris Piccirillo

“Sugared Umbrella”

Two picnic baskets of hormones
Shuffling sideways along the beach,
Bathing in Long Island Iced Tea,
Sipping sugar from the surface,
Making concrete out of castles
With the vigor of our friction.
A seagull’s frantic chirping
Defines our salsa tempo.
My neck hairs dance flamenco.
Our thighs applaud our moans.

I’m licking whiskey off your nipples till
I taste perfume. I’m drunk on your sweat.
The scent reflects the glisten of your kiss.
We’re engraving initials with our hips.
It’s the pilot to the sequel of our
Adolescence.

We’re vanilla pops fresh from the freezer.
You’ve lifted my lime up the straw of your
Libido. Watch me play amidst the splendor
Of your pink, sugared umbrella.



Noelle Weimann

“Father Cluster and Pom”



Irene De La Torre

“Hope”

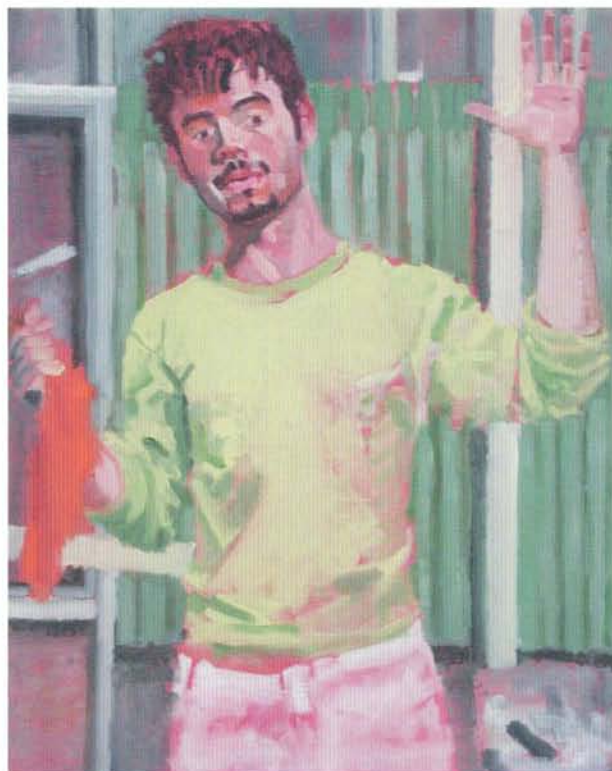


“Saturday Morning”



Chris Martineau

“Study in Oil on Canvas”



Mario Pieres

“Rust in Peace”



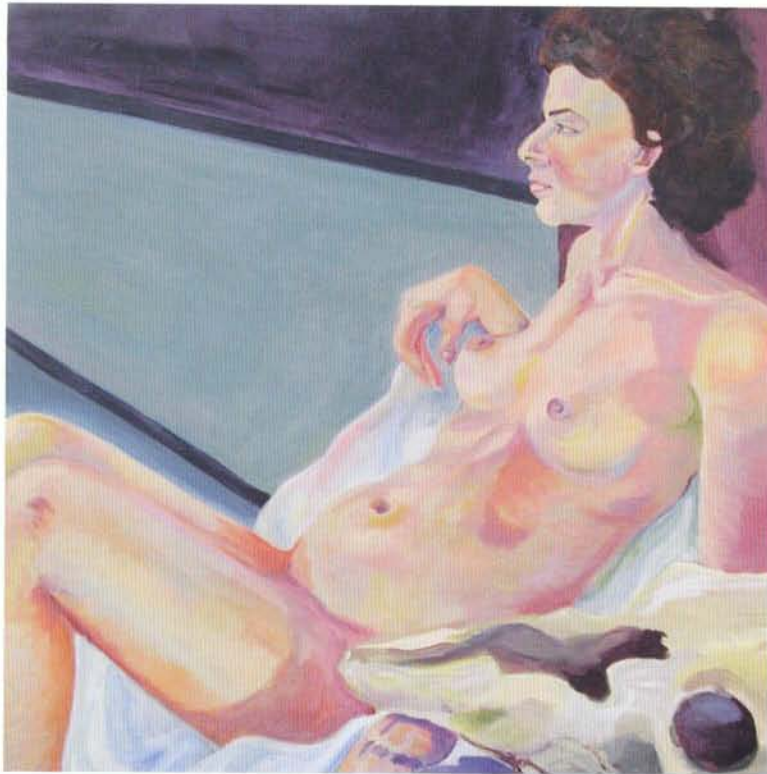
Ian Keoppen

“Noah”



Lynn Ciecreski

“Reclining Nude”



Julianne Côté

“Untitled”



Jacquelyn Ottomeyer

“My Sister and I Listen to Beatles Records”

Scratchy, soft, often skipping,
We sneak the White Album into our room.
We dance and sing
And Mom makes dinner.
You insist on Rocky Raccoon and I always
Give in to you.

Other times it is Abbey Road, and we
Travel together to an Octopus' Garden
Where we (together) avoid Maxwell's Silver Hammer.

When rain interrupts our Barbies' vacation
To the creek, we run inside and dance an invocation:
Here Comes the Sun do-oo doo doo.

When things in the living room are not worth hearing
We direct our full attention to Sgt. Pepper.

Last year I received a phone call on March 29th,
A scratchy familiar sound came through the line:
“They say it's your birthday...
Happy birthday to you.”

Fred Paulk

“Street Life”

My birth name is Damien, but my niggas call me D-Fudge. Why? Cause I'm a black ass motherfucker. I never liked the nickname, but fuck it, I am black as hell. The crew I rolled with was called the Clan. A bunch of neighborhood kids really. There was about 14 of us, well 15 if you wanna count White Mike. Yeah, a white boy rolled with us but don't get it fucked up. He wasn't your average prep. He was straight gutter like the rest of the niggas out here. Trust me, white or not, the nigga held his own. Five foot eight with big balls. We weren't a gang, more like a band of fatherless brothers. We all grew up in the same hood together. Roodner Court, or R.C. for short.

Back in the nine-seven pushing 1998, shit started to change for us. We fell into the cycle of the streets. Our priorities got fucked up. Playing ball used to be all that we worried about here. It was the only good thing we had going for us in the hood. We all used to ball together back in the day. From Jr. Bidy to summer leagues. Shit, the only reason most of us even thought about going to high school was to get that 1.7 GPA to play ball.

And yeah, that's all we needed was a 1.7, but trust me, it ain't as easy as it seems when you don't have anyone at home to push you. On top of that, it's a bitch getting off a yellow school bus seeing the Rovers, CLK's, and Benz sitting on dubs. Oh, for ya'll that don't know, dubs are 20-inch rims. That was all the motivation we needed to join the illegal life. It's the only way for us to survive around here cause we sure as hell ain't gonna get any good jobs. Plus the older Gods did it, and they were making out good. So it makes you feel like “fuck school, get money.” And before you start shaking your head, ask yourself this

folio

question: what's a nigga with no cash or diploma to do at the ripe age of 22? Well, where I'm from, it's either take it or find out the best way to make it. And I ain't into robbing niggas so I guess this drug shit was just meant to be.

Out of the whole Clan I wasn't the oldest but I was the first to be put on to the drug game. I got put on by one of the older Gods in the Court. His name was Joe but everyone called him G.I. He was one of the few big niggas pushing weight in the wack. But I saw him as more than that, kinda like the father I never had; always looking out for me and shit. I didn't get everything I wanted from him but he made sure I got everything I needed. Mom dukes never gave a fuck about what I looked like when I walked to the bus stop in the morning. It was the God that kept my hair cut, and made sure I was looking right. It was the God that gave me deli money so cats didn't laugh at me for eating hot lunch in school. It was the God, not my father, that helped me with my game when I was younger. I was his little nigga, what can I say? And as I got older my runs to the corner store for the God started to turn into trips up-town to pick up his product. That's about when I realized I wanted to become a hustler.

December 26th:

"A Yo, Fudge, what's going on, son?"

"Ahh, what up, Showbiz," I said, giving him dap. "Everything's lovely, just getting this money, that all. Same shit, different day."

"Yeah, I hear that." He said as he started to look around. "Where everybody at, Fudge?"

"Shit, man I don't even know. I just got out here myself." Showbiz was the thief in the Clan. This nigga stole everything; cars, money, clothes. If you had it, the nigga wanted it.

"Yo, Biz, where you cop those new feet and that jacket?"

"Where the fuck you think, Dame? I ran up on this herb on the corner of Ely Ave last night, five-finger discount." He laughed.

"Son, if you gonna keep robbing niggas, you need to get a burner. Word man, not every nigga you run up on is just gonna give

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you his shit.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever Fudge.” he said shaking his head. “You just do your thing, and I’ll do mine. I’m out. One.”

“Aight peace son, and be safe. For real. I’m not trying to see another one of my niggas get bodied over some dumb shit,” I said as he walked away.

See I never felt like the leader of the crew. I just tried to do things the smartest way. I mean yeah I hustle and shit. But I wasn’t like the rest of the cats out here, running up to cars and shit. That’s too hot for me. It wasn’t the Jakes or being bagged that I was worried about, it was mom dukes. If she ever found out what I was doing out here she’d bug the fuck out. So most of the time I was up the hill at the other buildings.

Nobody was outside yet and it was gettin’ cold so I started to roll up to Gotti’s crib. Gotti was a herb that had always wanted to be down with us, but never really could cut it. His mom dukes was never home, and he had a Playstation. So niggas just used him if you asked me. And I’m pretty sure the nigga knew about it too. But he was too much of a bitch to bring it up. While I was walking up the hill I ran into this base head named Tammy. She was Ghost’s aunt on his father’s side. She always smelled like a shitty diaper. I usually didn’t make sells to her out of respect for my nigga. But fuck it. He wasn’t around. And if I didn’t give it to her she’d just go and get it from the next man. So I might as well get that money anyhow.

“Tammy, you straight?” I asked.

“What you got for me, boo?” She asked as she wiped her nasty ass nose. Man, I’m not even gonna hate on it. I did feel bad selling to her. But shit, a nigga gotta eat too.

“Tammy, you gotta get yourself together. Foreal. You ain’t looking good out here right about now.” Most of the time she had on the same outfit. A dirty ass purple sweat suit and a white pair of Keds. The little kids that lived out here called her “The Lady in Purple.”

“Man, fuck you nigga.” She said with a weak scratchy voice. “What you got?”

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“Two for fifteen Tammy. But for you,” I paused, “Ummm... two for fifteen.” Then laughed.

“Well shit, I only got six dollars hunny,” she said.

“Well I’ll be damned, Tammy. How’d I know that shit. Your broke ass is always coming up short.”

“Come on baby just give me two for six. You know when the first comes around I got you.” She said. Two for six I thought to myself. This bitch must be really falling off. She need some help. One for six maybe, but two? Hell no!

“No can do mami,” I said and started to walk towards Gotti’s building. I still heard her crazy ass yelling at me though.

“Come on baby...I’ll suck your dick...Ahhh fuck you anyway then. You and your little ass dick.”

Now see, shit like that is what I have to deal with on a daily basis. It’s either that or these fiends just be trying to sell me shit. TV’s, radios, jewelry, head, pussy. The usual shit. And what makes it worse is that the shit they be sellin’ is never even worth half of what they ask for. They’ll try to sell you anything to get that 10-minute high though. This one base head we called Little Duck was the funniest nigga of them all though. Whenever niggas needed a laugh we made him do some bug shit. He was so strung out on the base that he would run around the court ass naked for it. His crazy ass would even jump off the fire escapes for that shit.

I finally got to Gotti’s building, building seventeen, where all the hustlers and Older Gods chilled. It was the usual Dice and Black Jack games going on, and the hallways smelled like trees. The buildings stayed madd grimy too. Nobody ever bothered to wash them down. I figured all my niggas were in Gotti’s crib playing NBA Live or on the third floor smoking trees, drinking special brews and free styling. As I walked up the last set of steps I heard a bunch of ruckus coming from Gotti’s door. I just figured it was the usual loud nigga shit going on.

“Yo, yo what the fuck is the deal my niggas?” I said as I opened his door. I noticed Mike, Biz, and Ghost were all loading up their heat. Right then I figured some shit was about to go down.

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“So, what up? Ya’ll about to murk on cats and can’t call a nigga?” I said while I smiled.

“Nah, it ain’t even like that Dame” Ghost said. “We just about to go take care of some business. Some B-port heads around the way thinking shit is sweet around here.” Dressed in all black with a ski mask, Ghost started to walk towards the door as he was tucking a gun under his belt. I thought to myself, yeah it’s about that time of year for the stick up boys to come through.

“Ghost, where you bout to go?” I asked him as he opened the door.

“Niggas is meeting back here in a hour, you with it right?” He asked. I just sat there and said nothing.

“Well nigga?” he said as he waited for me to answer.

“Nah man, I’m straight I can’t be catching a case right now.” I said walking over to him.

“Come on Fudge, if you gonna be a fucking pussy about it go put on a skirt.” he yelled as he opened the door.

“Yo, bring all that shit in here. Ya’ll niggas making shit hot, damn man.” Gotti said. So I sat down on the couch and Ghost walked back in the apartment.

“Gotti, don’t be fucking yelling at me. I’ll split your shit, nigga!” Ghost yelled.

“I’m just saying, you making shit hot, Ghost, that’s all.”

“So what’s this shit, Dame? You not rolling with yo niggas? Son done gone and forgot what being a thug is about,” Mike said putting me on the spot and shit.

“It ain’t even like that.” I said.

“Then what is it?” Biz yelled.

Shit, I had nothing to say then. I knew I wasn’t with killing niggas. That just wasn’t me. I sat there in Gotti’s living room with a stupid ass look on my face, just waiting for one of them to bring up the night when I bumped heads with those Bridgeport cats. And just like I thought, it happened.

“Shit, if there’s any nigga who should wanna cap one of those

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niggas it should be you. I know damn well you didn't forget how they got your ass last year. And what? You just gonna let that shit slide?" Ghost said.

"Hell yeah. They took a whole brick from your ass,." Mike said. throwing more fuel into the fire.

"Man, fuck that. Just let that shit go. I was got and it's all part of the game. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," I said as I jumped up out of the couch and started walking towards the door, "Ya'll need to get off that bug shit."

"Yo, on the real Fudge go put on a skirt. cause you a p-u-s-s-y with no heart," Ghost said. They all stood there giving me evil eyes. Right then, I can't even lie, I felt like a straight bitch-ass nigga; a big fucking herb. Mostly because they did have a point. I mean come on. I did get robbed by those niggas. But at the same time I had never shot off a gun, let alone killed a man. So I stood by the door and swallowed my spit.

"Alright, I'm down. Ya'll niggas happy now?" I asked as I made my way out Gotti's door.

"Uh huh, that's the nigga we know. Be back in a hour Fudge." Ghost yelled as the door closed behind me.

The stick-up boys came all the way from Bridgeport, and I can't lie: they were section eight niggas who had everyone's respect, even the older Gods. They'd roll through your neighborhood in the same light green Jetta and be like "run yo shit" every year around the holiday season. Everyone would give up whatever it was they had on them. It was the smart thing to do, especially when you were solo like I was. They've been coming down here for a couple of years now, maybe the last three to four. With all these nosy-ass people that live out here, I know somebody had to let the Jakes know it was going on. But it ain't like they care about what the fuck goes on around here. Shit, I live in the hood and it been three weeks since I've seen a pig. Plus, it's all part of the big game. But this year, niggas wasn't having it, not in this neighborhood at least. There was a new breed of thugs on the block and it was all about holding down the fort.

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I needed a burner and I needed it quick so I went to back down the hill to my crib. I called GI to see where the God was. No one picked up his phone so I went in my room to get dressed for action. I put on my black fatigues and a black hoody. Mom dukes wasn't home yet. She was probably still out at a Christmas party or some shit like that. After I got dressed I called the God's cell and some chicken picked up.

"Is Joe there?" I said.

"Yeah, who this?" The girl asked like she had an attitude or something.

"Tell him it's Fudge," I said. Then the bitch put me on hold for a hot second.

"What up young blood?" He said. It sounded like he was sleeping or in the middle of hitting ass.

"Yo, my bad, Joe, for waking you up but I need a favor from the God." There was silence over the phone for a while as I thought how I'd ask him for a burner.

"Well nigga what is it?" He asked me, like he was in a rush or something.

"Yo, can you meet me outside. I don't wanna talk about it over the phone," letting him know it was something real.

"Yeah man, let me get dressed though, but this better be some important shit Fudge."

"Aight, I'll be waiting in front of your building."

I watched the God walk out his building in sweats and a t-shirt. When he approached me I lit a boogie, took a step back and lamped on a red pick up.

"So what the fuck you bringing me out here for?" He asked as he wiped his eyes with his hand. I paused for a second and took a drag off my cigarette.

"Joe I need to hold a burner."

"WHAT?" he asked, looking at me like he was mad or something.

"What the fuck you got yourself into now, Dame?" I didn't

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know what to tell him cause I knew he'd start with that preaching shit, and I didn't have time for it. He did live the illegal life too but he never wanted me to get involved in any hot shit.

"I just need it," I said, taking another drag, trying to play it cool.

"Nah, I told you to stop fucking around with that hot shit," he said to me as he started shaking his head. Fuck, I thought to myself, why's he acting like he my father with all that bullshit? He started to walk away from me and I just sat there on the truck. When he got to his building he called me over.

"What?" I said like I was mad, but I really wasn't.

"Give me a boogie," he asked me as he reached his hand out. I looked in my pack and only had one.

"I only got my lucky left G.I."

"Yea, whatever," he said, then grabbed my pack out of my hand.

"Give me a light," he said as my last cigarette was sitting between his lips. I went through my pockets to get my lighter and lit the cigarette.

"So Dame, on the real, what you need a gat for?" He asked as he blew out his first drag of smoke. At first I wasn't gonna tell him shit cause he was acting fake. But then I figured he'd let me hold a burner if the reason was good enough. I mean he did ask me why I needed it so giving me one had to be on his mind.

"Those Bridgeport cats," I said.

"What Bridgeport cats?" he asked me while he took another drag.

"The stick-up boys, they coming through tonight."

"So stay yo little ass in house tonight," he laughed.

"Nah. I wanna make a point to those niggas, so they won't be coming down here no more," I said.

"Fudge?" He looked at me like I was stupid. "What you know about war, dummy?" Ah man, here comes this preaching shit, I said to myself.

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“You remember how those niggas stuck me up last year huh?” I asked him. “They got me for a whole motherfucking brick. I had to come to you so I could get back on track. Remember that shit?”

“Yeah I remember it. But fuck it. It’s all part of the game. You really think if you smoke those Bridgeport niggas the court’s gonna be any safer? Hell no. That’s just the world we live in Fudge. Hustlers, pimps, killas, base heads, hoes, jakes, thieves, crack addicts and automatics. They always gonna be here, no matter what the fuck you do. You just gotta learn to live with that shit.” He took another drag off the boogie and then killed it. I hated it when the God would be trying to spit all his fucking knowledge at me. And though I was listening to the God, I wasn’t hearing shit he was saying.

“So you feel me Fudge?” he asked as he reached to give me love.

“Yeah, I feel you.” I said and gave him dap.

“Alright, good, cause you don’t wanna catch a murder case. I get up with you later son,” he said as he walked into his building. About forty-five minutes had gone by and I still didn’t have any heat. So I walked back up the hill to building seventeen to just tell them that. Fuck it right, at least I wouldn’t look bitch. I just couldn’t find a pistol. When I walked through the building I gave dap to some of the older Gods and then made my way to the third floor. No heads were out on the third floor so I knocked on Gotti’s door.

“Who is it?” somebody yelled.

“Man, open the fucking door,” I yelled. Gotti opened the door and I saw Ghost, White Mike, and Biz sitting on the couch.

“You ready Fudge?” Ghost asked me.

“Nah man, I can’t get ahold of a burner. I even went to check G.I. but he ain’t even trying to hear it,” I said.

“Yeah, I figured you’d pull some shit like this Fudge. Here, take this.” Ghost said with a grin on his face. He stood up and pulled out a nickel-plated nine. I paused for a second and thought about what the God had told me. But fuck it: peer pressure in the hood is a motherfucker, so I reached for the gun.

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“Yea, that’s the shit I’m talking about son,” Mike yelled. Then he walked over and gave me dap.

“Damn man! Ya’ll niggas ready now?” Biz asked. He started to get all jumpy. I could always tell when he was getting like that cause his right eye would start to twitch and shit.

“Yea, lets be out.” Ghost said.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” I said as I thought to myself. “What we gonna do?”

“What the fuck you mean? We bout to regulate they ass. Lick shots at the intruders. What the fuck you been thinking about all this time, Fudge?” Mike said, kinda like he was asking me if I was stupid or something.

“What? So we just gonna wait outside for them?” I asked.

“Yeah, why the fuck not?” Ghost said. “Come on, lets motivate.” He started to walk over the door. That’s when I really starting to have second thoughts about all this shit. Those three weren’t the smartest niggas alive, I knew that, but I thought they’d at least plan some shit out. But at the same time you can’t even expect that much from three live wires with guns.

“Nah, man. I’m not fucking with that shit. It’s way too hot out here to be bucking at niggas. You know how Miss Barbara Jean see everything that go on in this motherfucker. Plus, I ain’t shooting up the court, ain’t no telling who might be out here; bullets got no names on them,” I said.

“Fuck Miss Barbara Jean, man. And you think I give a fuck who out here when I start bucking?” Ghost said.

“Yo, listen, those niggas roll through South Main before they try to hit up the court right?” I asked. I figured they did, cause someone out on the South Main block would call and let niggas know the stick-up kids rolled through. “So why don’t we catch those nigga on South Main? Shit, it makes sense to me.”

“Yeah, whatever you say, Dame. You think you got it all set up? You think you got the perfect plan? Lets just stop all the politics and bullshit and move out,” Ghost said.

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Being that we were all dressed in black from head to toe and were all carrying steal, we all didn't roll down the stairs together. Me and Ghost went down first so it wouldn't look too hot in front of the older Gods. I was trying to act pretty cool on the way out, but Ghost kept bugging me out by making shit hot. He gave love to everybody in the damn building; it had to be 10 to 15 niggas.

"What up, Juice? How you, Snake? Sup, Gock? How you, Sauce? What's the deal, E-Bishop? Double, how you? Ahh what up, Dice? Yeah Dred. A'ight, Lep. One love, 5 feet."

It was going on five minutes when Mike and Biz finally came out of the building. Gotti didn't tag along cause, like I said before, he never could cut it. Mike had the wip so we walked over to the middle of the main parking lot where it was parked. I rode shotty and Ghost and Biz sat in the back. It was straight car, maroon ninety-five Maxima with tints, but it wasn't his wip. Some base head rental he had for the night. It was around 9:30 that night when we left the court to take that ride down town.

We jumped on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drive and headed toward down town. Passing by UPS, the South Norwalk train station and the Sono movie theaters. We took a right off MLK drive onto South Main and caught a red light. Honestly, I was still having second thoughts. I really wasn't with all this shit. My stomach had been fucking with me since I walked out of Gotti's crib, and I kept on hearing G.I.'s voice in my head.

"Damn man, what the fuck. This a long ass light." Biz said.

We rode around down town for a while with no luck, down through the MLK block on South Main, seeing one or two Spanish mamis out there on their porches. We drove by Meadows Garden to see if anything was popping out there, but it was dead as usual; just a bunch of rug rats outside running around playing tag. After riding through the Garden, we made a left onto Woodward Ave to see if heads from King Kennedy were out on their block, but it was dead as hell too. Just a bunch of brick buildings, and a basketball court; not a damn soul in sight. We had been riding around for a while by then, a good 20 to 25

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minutes. So we got back on South Main and drove down Washington Street to see if there were birches walking in and out of the clubs on the strip.

“Damn, look at that ass shake,” Mike pointed out., not even paying any attention to the road.

“Hell yeah, fatty banging. Damn girl, can I have a piece of that ass?” Ghost yelled out the window. The girl turned around and gave him the finger and they all laughed. I swear I don’t know how these niggas were pulling this shit off, acting like what we’re about to do ain’t bearing down on them. They were riding around town like they couldn’t bleed. Shit, this 187 mission got me shook right now. I’m even having second thoughts about this nine I got on me. Shit, if Ghost gave it to me, there ain’t no telling how many bodies it got on it.

“Don’t tell me these niggas turned bitch on us,” Biz yelled.

“Biz, just shut the fuck up, they’ll be around. Yo, Mike, I gotta get a pack of boogies son. Pull over when we get to the 24 hour store,” Ghost said.

“Yea, I need a pack too,” I said. Mike pulled the car up in front of the store.

“Yo, get me a 40 oz. while you in there, Ghost,” Mike said.

“Son, sit tight right now. I don’t even got it,” Ghost said.

“I got you,” I said to Mike as I opened the door.

“Good looking out,” he said.

Ghost had already walked into the store without me. I thought I’d get some fresh air and take a quick look around the block before I went in. Right across the street, Solid Rock had just finished a late mass. Next door to the church I saw a couple of base heads in the laundromat. I did have product on me I could get rid of right quick but I was out of my range. Not my block, so fuck it. Plus I wasn’t in the mood to be dealing with they shit anyway. When I walked into the store I saw that Pablo was working behind the counter. He went to school with my mom way back in the day. He didn’t own the store but ran it most of the time. It was the usual fucked up store. He sold trees out of it on the side and their liquor license got taken away so

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everything they sold was on the down low.

“Hey what’s going, Pablo?” I said with a smirk on my face.

“Que pasa? What’s happening, my friend?”

“Chillen, chillen, same o’l shit, you know how it is, baby,” I said.

“Yes, I hear that papi. So what can I do for you?” He smiled.

“Uh, let me get a pack of Newports and two Garcys.” I put a twenty on the counter. I figured I’d smoke a blunt. Maybe that would calm my nerves.

“You know you should stop smoking this shit my friend, it’s no good for you,” he said holding up the Newports. “This is what you need.” Pulling out a bag of chocolate tide from the register.

“Nah I’m straight, we got trees,” showing him a fat bag of Hydro.

“Ok my friend take it easy,” he said as he reached his hand out to give me my change.

“One love, Pablo.” I said as I walked through the door.

I walked out the store with the box of Newports in one hand and the two Garcys in the other. As soon as I got to the car and opened the door I heard Mike bitching.

“Dame, where my 40? Awww, you fucked up.” He shook his head.

“My bad, my bad. Shit I forgot all about it,” I said as I sat down.

“Fuck it man, lets go look for those niggas. We can drink later,” Biz yelled.

“Nah it’s straight. I’ll go get it,” I said.

I put my pack of cigarettes and the two blunts on the dashboard. Reached for the handle to open the door and stepped out. Right when I turned around to slam the door shut. I noticed a black van with a tinted windshield. It was parked at the dead end on the side of Solid Rock. Now on the real, I probably wouldn’t have noticed that damn van. But being that my head was all fucked up, it stood out like wet pussy. Even worse, quick money. And I always had an eye for quick

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results. That's how my instincts worked. I knew it was them. I could taste it in my mouth. And it was written all over the van. So I opened the door and hopped back in the wip.

"Yo, I think that might be them" I said as pointed across the street to the van.

"Fudge, stop playing and go get my 40, man," Mike said.

"Chill son, for real. I think that's them too," Biz said.

We sat with our eyes glued to the van. Not a word had been said for about 30 seconds. I caught myself wondering if my niggas were all as shook as I was, deep down inside. Or did they really not have one bit of bitch in them. Thoughts rumbled back and forward around my head till the silence was broken.

"They just put on the lights. Follow them," Ghost said.

The van pulled out of the street it was parked on and took a right onto South Main. White Mike pulled off after it had passed two or three blocks. The van must have been four or five lights away from us, and we could still see the shit from a safe distance. When the van reached the end of South Main it stopped at a stop sign. Aw fuck, here we go again I thought as I started stressing over what the van was gonna do. If it goes right, I know it's going to the court. But if it goes left, then maybe it's not those niggas. Wait, what if the damn thing goes right and it's not them. And what if it goes left...shit man, what if these motherfuckers see us following them. Damn man, I gotta wake up out of this shit I told myself. I reached in my pocket to get my boogies as the van's left signal came on and turned right onto Ely Ave. That shit just didn't make any sense to me. But shit, at that time not a damn thing did. I heard all my niggas talking but at the same time I couldn't even manage to understand what the fuck was going on. It was like everything right then was happening madd fast.

"Yeah that's gotta be them. Most def," Mike Said.

I started to breath in deep cause it felt like a nigga was losing air. At the same time I was smoking a boogie. And yeah, when you can't breathe, smoking is not something you really wanna be fucking with. But fuck it, I knew I needed it. My heart was banging out like I

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just smoked a dust blunt as we got closer to home. The van turned into the court and park on the side of building twelve right by the entrance. When Mike drove by building twelve I tried to peep a look in the van but couldn't see inside because of the tints. We ended up parking down the hill near my building, building eight. I noticed at the time not that many heads were outside. The niggas that were out though, had street smarts because they took their Asses in the buildings when we drove through in that rental. Shit, now I'm hoping niggas from the court don't get us scrambled up and start bucking at us.

We all thought it would be better if we split up. So we could hit off the van from both sides. Mike and Biz walked through building eight and left out the back. Then walked through the playgrounds, to the back of building twelve. Me and Ghost were gonna walk into building nine and then around the back to building fourteen. Building fourteen was right in front of building twelve, where the van was parked. But I brought up that we should wait in the car for a minute. Just incase Biz and Mike's presence was felt and started some unexpected shit. What I said did make sense at the time, but who the fuck was I fooling? I just wasn't ready to get out the car. My head still wasn't right. We watched the van for about ten minutes and nothing was going on.

"Yo, come on. They should be behind the building by now," Ghost said as he checked to see if his gun was off safety.

We got out of the car and walked towards my building. I looked up at the windows and saw that mom dukes was home cause the lights in her room were on. For some reason, I was hoping she looked out the window and told me to bring my ass in the house. Then all this shit would end.

Walking through my building, I looked at all the names that had been tagged on the hallway walls. The R.I.P. after every name was what really caught my eye. As I walked out the back door of my building I was thinking how just the other day it was just wallpaper to a nigga. But now I'm taking that shit to the heart. Its real funny how tables turn in the hood.

We walked till we got to the back steps of building fourteen.

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That's when Ghost lit up a boogie and I decided to take a piss.

"Damn, it's colder than a motherfucker out here, my dick's about to freeze," I whisper to Ghost.

"Yo, Fudge, hurry up." He said. After I finished I walked into the building and he was already at the front door looking out.

"Fudge, Fudge!!!" Ghost yelled.

"Damn, stop yelling my name out loud like that. What?" I said.

Ghost pointed across the parking lot to building twelve. I saw four heads jump out the van dressed in black from head to toe. They looked like they were strapped with heat too. Two stayed near the van. The other two made their way in between cars towards the front of building twelve.

"Oh shit, those niggas about to go in the building," he said. "Lets move out."

"Nah, hold up," I said as I started thinking what we should do.

"Come on Fudge. What the fuck you waiting for? Biz and Mike back there too," Ghost yelled. I knew I still wasn't fully with it and all but my niggas were back there. Shit I couldn't turn around now.

"Fuck it. Lets go," I said as I took the safety off hold.

We opened the front door, walked down the steps and made our way to the bushes that were in between the parking lot and the building. That's when we saw the two men stop at the front of building twelve. I also noticed the two that were near the van got back in. What the fuck is going on, I was thinking. I had this dizzy feeling come over my body so I paused and took a deep breath. I've been shook before I told myself. But the feeling I had now wasn't just being scared. Now I was shook last year when my ass got robbed. For sure. But this feeling was kinda like the feeling I got before every game of ball. And that feeling would die off as soon as we jumped ball. So I figured that was all I needed. Just wait till shit goes down and I'll be all right I told myself. And that's exactly what it took.

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I almost shit in my pants when I heard the first of six shots go off. But after that, it felt like everything just came to me. I ran out of the bushes not even thinking. Like a rebel without a cause. Ducking in and out of rows of cars till I got close enough to shoot. I've never even shot at a nigga before this but that never even had crossed my mind. Alls I felt was the cold steel in my hand. When I pulled the trigger I felt the power of death spiting out that barrel. You would've never thought it was my first taste of war. And then a shattering window right behind my head brought me back to reality.

"Oh shit." I yelled out and hit the ground. That's when I heard Ghost yelling out my name. I got on my knees and turned around to see if I could see him behind me. I couldn't see him anywhere but I keep hearing his voice. I started looking under the cars and I saw his body laid out about five or six cars away from me.

"Yo, I got hit. I got hit son," he yelled.

When I stood up to try and run over to him I almost got fucking blasted. Shit, I said to myself. Ok now, you gotta think fast Fudge. I gotta man down and niggas bucking shots at me. What the fuck am I gonna do? Right then I was on my knees leant up against a blue Ford Taurus. I figured I'd try to crawl my way around under the cars to get to Ghost. But as soon as I moved another four bullets ran up into the door that I was leaning on.

Now this is when I knew I was pretty much assed out. I still had most of my clip left. But whether or not I had enough heat wasn't the problem. I didn't have enough time to get up and see what the fuck I was shooting at. I knew those motherfuckers knew exactly where I was too. And it would only be a matter of time before I was surrounded and hit. So to buy some time I pointed the nine in the air and let off three shots. Hoping that would make those niggas think twice about just running over. After the shots I couldn't hear Ghost yelling anymore. I looked under the cars again and just saw him laying out not moving.

"Ghost, Ghost, yo, Ghost." I yelled out. "Man I know you fucking hear me. Say something. Ghost, Ghost." And the nigga didn't answer.

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That's when I smelled death in the air. All I could do was just sit there. My eyes started to fill with water as the police sirens rattled my ear drums. Damn, a nigga never thought he'd ever be happy to hear from the Jakes, but part of me was. I knew I probably should've tried to bounce from the scene. But I didn't even have it in me to get up and run. I kinda felt like those sirens were the ending credits to a thug's movie. As I put the nine to rest on the pavement and closed my eyes I started to think about everything that went down: how shit just wasn't gonna be the same for me. It only took a few minutes before the dogs were put out on me. But shit, sitting there felt like years had passed by. When the Jakes finally himbed me up and cuffed me. I saw that the whole neighborhood was out there watching. I was trying not to show any fear in my heart when I was being walked to the police car. But the tears ran down my eyes when I saw the medics zipping up three body bags. Still walking over to the car I put my head down for a while and prayed to the Lord. Hoping that this shit was all just a dream. Mom duke's spa zing out woke me out of the daze and all I could do was watch her try and fight off the police to try and get to me. But that wasn't happening.

When the Jakes' car pulled out the court it stopped at a red light right in front of the neighborhood store. There was an officer at the entrance directing traffic. That's when I looked up over my left shoulder and saw that fucking green Jetta busting a bitch. Then all this foul shit started to fall in place. Alls we wanted to do was to take the law into our own hands. You know, make the court a safer place. That's all. But the truth of the matter turned out to be we just happened to bump heads with the law. Who would've fucking thought we would've got caught up in the middle of a police raid? And outta all the niggas here in the court they were after the God G.I. Now ain't that a bitch. I should've fucking stayed with basketball but now I'm a outlaw looking at a lot more than just a misdemeanor. And though attempted murder on a officer is gonna have me looking at a shit load of years. Fuck it, on the bright side of things, when you're a product of the streets, and your only hope is selling dope, jail is for the lucky niggas. Cause you could be six feet deep.

Tony Fusco

“Audentes Fortuna Juvet”
Fortune Favors the Bold

Fortune is a goddess without a footnote
in any of the mythology books that cram
the dusty stacks in the college library.
No one sings her praises unless
she has made their day or week or once
in a great while when they thought they
would never get anywhere, she threw them
a wink and puckered up her large sweet lips
and kissed the empty air between them
laughing like a hooker under a street lamp
and saying “Hey big boy, it’s your turn.”

Nope, I looked high and low and can say
with certainty she must have stiffed
Thomas Bulfinch real good and maybe
short changed Edith Hamilton’s love life
big time, because pandering to her as much as
writers do, they still were ticked off enough
not to include her in their famous works and one
even mixed her up with fate or some other Greek
babe juggling the balls of mortal man’s destinies.

Robert Graves was more accommodating, but hey,
she took care of him pretty well when you look
at it, one hand and leg and one wanton down
and you know, so long to all that. Little wonder that

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he spent so much time going on and on about
his white goddess and kissing herring and all,
he had to put her in at least one of the two volumes
saying in the end, when it comes to luck, you have
to make your own. So then just go on ahead now
and stick your face out there and who knows,
maybe catch a big wet one.

Tony Fusco

“The Myth of the Clean Underwear”

The yellow cab just bumped his ass across
The street and kept on going. Never too clear
of mind anyway, early morning, his head
even more in a daze, face leaning against
the warm towels and clothes in the laundry basket,
lulling him until: Bam! Right across the street.
Anal retentive his friends would say, laundry
before work, laundry after work, scooting between
parked cars at 4 a.m. to and from The Tumble and Dry
24 hour Laundry, and for what?
Now he was dead. Pressed up against the side
of a parked van. What did it matter his mother
taught him to *always wear clean underwear in case
he was in an accident and they took him to the hospital,*
He wasn't going to the hospital, but to the morgue.

Although the truth be told, while the paramedics
Were waiting for the hearse to arrive, a meter maid
and a fireman did try and pulled his pants down
as best they could to check, and said with a whistle
“Wow, would you take a look at that!”

Looking down as well were the gods who were upset
to see the laughing and the jeering concerning someone
who all his life honored the saying *Cleanliness is
next to godliness.* Jockey-shorted Hermes and

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white brassiere clad Athena in particular were moved to action. Their sunbeam thunderbolt parted the clouds and lit upon his flattened remains and restored him to life, which just really blew the crowd away, and set more than one taxi driver to worry about lawsuits.

But the Lazarus of Fountain Street, as he later became known as, just accepted his gift in stride, dismayed to find his pants down and laundry strewn in the oil and mud of the street, gathered up his life and headed right back into the Tumble and Dry with his load.

Denise Nelson

"High Season"

The Sarasota surf crests aqua
scented salt. Irregular susurrus rise
to touch this crystal
pallet, Lido Beach,
where I lie cool
in naked sun
and turn away
from thong-laced derrieres and
giggling, black-capped gulls--
all swirling circles.

Stern, proper pelicans
in subdued gray
contemplate--penitential,
prehistoric.
A black frigate bird soars
and turns,
like death's ship,
the dark sailer.
An Amish couple
on holiday, heads covered,
wearing somber cotton,
walk gingerly along
the shore toward
a leafy, public park--
barefoot.

Stacy Vocasek

“Ciao Nonna”

You cradle my face in your
age spotted hands, reaching up
as I lean down, kissing each
cheek over and over, murmuring,
Ti voglio bene con tutti di mi cuore.

Not even bothering to speak
English; I love you with all of
my heart, you haven't in a long time.
I don't know if you could find the
words even if you tried.

Tears well in your eyes,
searing a path through the
maze of wrinkles imbedded
in your olive face.

I love you too grandma. I always
speak English to you, forgetting
the Italian I learned in school. You
look at me, angry for not understanding.
Voicing your confusion,
Non ho capisco.

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It's my turn now to cradle your
face in my smooth hands, kissing
each of your cheeks as you've done
to me for longer than I can remember.

Anchio nonna. Ti voglio bene.

Brian LaRue

“Driving”

INTRODUCTION

“Bastard just cut me off!”

“What the hell’s up with this guy?”

“God.” Will leaned on the steering wheel and sighed. The blue Oldsmobile in front of him slowed to a crawl.

“Oh, so first he comes flying out of a side street and then he settles into a good, safe five miles an hour,” said Grant. He leaned back in the passenger seat and propped his knee on the dashboard. “Does he think one evens out the other? I wish that was the way driving works.”

“But it doesn’t,” said Will. “It just pisses people off. Hey, this is a green light!” He commenced shouting through his windshield at the halted blue Oldsmobile in front of his. “Green means go! Red means stop! Green means go!” Cars approached Will’s own and zipped past. Six cars later, the blue Oldsmobile inched forward again.

“Screw this guy,” said Grant. He laughed. “Hey, y’know what would be a good idea? If after you got your driver’s license, you had to take another test to get a license to drive on main roads. The fastest routes should be reserved for really good drivers.”

“That opens up a lot of problems, though,” said Will. “You start with roads, and then you move onto book stores. You’ll need to bring in your SAT scores to buy Shakespeare. Then the grocery store. Vegetarians get the freshest produce first. Then ticket lines at the movie theater on opening night. If you threw Raisinets at the screen when you were eight, you’re screwed. Before you know it we’ve got a fascist society. Hey, look-- he’s stopping at a stop sign! That’s the one

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you're supposed to stop at!"

"That's getting the hang of it," said Grant.

Will leaned out the car window. "*Yes, that's it!*" he shouted. "*The stop sign! That's where you stop! Okay, now go!*" The blue Oldsmobile jerked forward. "*That's it! You're doing well!*"

A teenage kid smoking a cigarette laughed and nodded at Will as Will's car passed the driveway where the kid stood. The kid wore a baseball cap championing a motor oil brand over his long, stringy hair and watched Will pass him by. "You're entertaining Captain Butt Rock over here," acknowledged Grant, pointing to the kid. "Bet you're his personal hero of the day now."

"Glad to hear I'm being appreciated," said Will. He looked in his rearview mirror. Captain Butt Rock stood at the end of his driveway, dragging on his cigarette, watching Will's white Toyota roll away. "He probably thinks I'm a total badass." Will stopped watching Captain Butt Rock and focused on the road ahead of him.

"He's going to spend the whole day thinking of how to be more like you," said Grant.

"He's going to practice sneering in the bathroom mirror," said Will.

"He's going to try putting different inflections on different words in the statement, 'That's it! You're doing well!'"

"He's going to drive around with his window down just in case he has the chance to lean out and shout at someone."

"As soon as he gets his car fixed." Grant laughed. "Shit, Will. You change lives. You're responsible."

"I am responsible," echoed Will. "I am a positive role model for badass seventeen-year-olds. I am a better driver than many people twice my age. I do not make the mistake of owning an American car. I am a Dean's List student. I wait tables courteously. I am a true studious, wage-earning, alert badass. I am responsible."

"You pay rent," added Grant. "I pay rent! Shit, we have an apartment! We're responsible!"

"We're adults, and we're responsible." Will drove. The

folio

Oldsmobile turned right onto a side street. Will did not give its driver a concluding curse. He was responsible.

The road to the apartment was long. Apartments downtown were expensive. Will and Grant were enrolled as full-time college students. That allowed for only part-time wages. They resisted help from their parents. Twenty and twenty-one years of age, they were adults. They were responsible. They could afford an apartment on the edge of town, where the busy road narrowed to one lane on each side, where side streets disappeared and tall grass loomed up to border the road. The house was one of a cluster of houses at the end of the road.

Will pulled into the driveway and parked his Toyota. He and Grant bounded out of the car and thundered onto the rickety wooden porch. Will jerked the keys in his hand until the house key isolated itself. He unlocked the door, stepped into the foyer, unlocked the inner door to their apartment, and pushed the door open. Grant slammed both doors behind them. "This is where we *live*," Grant said proudly.

"I'm going to get ready for practice," said Will. He walked down the narrow hallway leading from the living room to the two bedrooms. Inside his bedroom was dark. The low light betrayed the bright May sun outside. His dresser cast tall shadows on the wood floor. It and the bed were the only pieces of furniture in the room. If he would be living there, Will knew he would need more furniture. He pulled his guitar case from under his bed and snapped it open. The room was small. Under his bed was the only place he could think of stowing his case where no one might trip over it. Touching the floor, the boards felt cool. That made the room feel starker, emptier. It needed to be filled. But this was just the beginning. Will knew he was the sort of person who re-directed the lives of scrubby kids standing on the curb as he drove past. He was a source of inspiration, of growth. He would inspire. He would fill. First he would create. His battered cream Gibson SG leaned against the foot of his bed. Will seized the guitar by its neck and laid it in its case.

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CONCLUSION

It was a good practice. The band had played hard. They had started writing another new song together around new lyrics Grant had written. The new lyrics were about a girl he used to know in high school but didn't know anymore. That was agreeable to Will. He didn't want to play complicated songs. Will had suggested four particular chords. The band liked the chords, and they played the song. Will's amp was not so loud that it drowned out Grant's voice. Will thought the band balanced itself well as far as volume was concerned. He thought that sounded professional.

It was dark. Will drove down the long road to the apartment, thinking about practice. He felt winded from playing, and exhilarated. The feeling made him want to write and play more new songs. But that could be later. Now he had to drive home with Grant. They were already at the part of the road where the tall grass loomed up to border the asphalt. Will heard Grant sniff loudly, curiously.

"Wait a sec," said Grant.

"What?" Will glanced at Grant. Grant was leaning forward over the dashboard, squinting. Will looked back at the road. It was dark. He didn't want to get him and Grant into an accident.

"Shit."

"What?"

"Fuck."

"What?"

"Look." Grant pointed at the yellow line in the middle of the road. There was something there, something sizable, and it was squirming but not moving to the left or right across the line. Will slammed on the brakes and the Toyota slowed to a shuddering crawl. What was that? A cat? The car crept closer. A raccoon. It lay alongside the double yellow line, its legs in the air, tipped on its back diagonally, feet towards Will and Grant and the Toyota. Its legs flailed, panicked, all independently of each other. Like a bug. Will had never seen roadkill while it was still alive, not yet gone, trying to avoid becoming a cliché

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it didn't know was a running joke among cackling junior high school boys the world over. He always sort of assumed roadside death happened instantaneously, as soon as the car struck. The raccoon, living as the Toyota approached, proved him naive. It fought against the cliché. Like a bug. Only it wasn't a bug. It was a raccoon. Will couldn't see the raccoon's face. Its eyes reflected the Toyota's headlights, black, vacant. The car came up towards it tail first. Will stared.

"Raccoon." That's all Grant said, mumbled, awed. Will thought he understood. Awed by death, probably. Only with different words. Something that didn't sound like poetry.

"Guess so." The word "raccoon" from Grant prompted in Will the realization that maybe he couldn't just carry it to the side of the road where it would be safer. He had read about these things. Raccoons bit. Bad things happened. Diseases, possibly. Not rabies, Will thought, no foam at the mouth. They were close enough for Will to see its mouth. But whatever. Striped rodent disease. Something.

Will was probably driving less than five miles an hour now. The thing was on the outs. There had to be something awful that had happened to it, Will figured, for it to be rendered unable to even roll over. Will wanted to think he could just stop the car, get out, and nudge the raccoon upright, send it scurrying, scared and wiser, into the tall grass by the side of the road. Like a bug. He knew that wouldn't fly. So to speak.

"You have to back up and run it over," said Grant.

"Fucking what?" Will stomped on the brake. Grant had said it flat like reading from a tiresome, poorly translated VCR manual. He turned to Grant, his breath quickening. "What are you talking about?"

"It's dying. It'll just suffer longer. You have to kill it." Bad words.

"Fuck." Another car drove up behind them. Will watched a pair of headlights grow larger in his rearview mirror. The lights burned back into his eyes. Will watched them in the mirror until his eyes blurred and red spots flowed across his vision. The red spots moved irrepressibly towards the raccoon. "I've never killed anything. I mean, not like

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a raccoon.”

“You have to.” Will heard Grant say it like Jason must’ve heard the summon to find the Golden Fleece. How the hell does a person *do* something like that?

“Have you ever done anything like this?” asked Will.

“No. But that’s just what you have to do with something like this. I don’t like it.” Grant paused. “I dunno.”

“I have to keep going.” Will stepped on the gas again. The car behind him threatened to press against his bumper. Its headlights filled the Toyota like daylight. “The guy behind me really wants to go.”

“You’ll have to drive back and do it.” Will heard Grant and he powered the car forward and stared at the yellow line curving before him and glanced in the mirror at the headlights of the car following too close and then looked at his own speedometer. Twenty-five. Thirty. Silence.

“We should call animal control,” Will said. Something, he thought. Anything. As long as it was someone else.

“We should. But they wouldn’t care. It’d be dead by the time they got out here.” Silence. Will turned his head around to look through the rear window at the raccoon. He could still see it clearly. Its legs were still, stuck up at strange, random angles. “It’s not moving,” he said.

“It’s breathing,” said Grant.

“Fuck.” Will whispered it. His voice was flat and frank like Grant’s edict to kill and the yellow line curved ahead slowly ahead of him and he decided not to say any more.

Silence. They came upon the house. Will parked the car and he and Grant got out. Will opened the rear driver’s side door and swung out his guitar, then yanked out his amp and set it down on the driveway. Grant hoisted up the amp. They walked to the porch. Will jingled his keys, kept jingling until he isolated the right key. He heard Grant’s breath behind him, sharp, shaky, deep. Will unlocked the door and elbowed it open.

“I have a story to write for my fiction workshop tomorrow,”

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said Grant, quietly, like a private thought spoken by mistake.

“What are you going to write about?” asked Will, opening the inner door.

“I dunno.”

Will wanted to say, *Write about the raccoon. That's a story. That's a fucking story.* But he didn't want to bring it up again. Nothing that would remind him or Grant that maybe they should've done something or should go back and do something anyway.

“I'm going to my room,” said Grant.

“So am I,” said Will. He followed Grant down the narrow, dark hallway.

Will shut his bedroom door behind him and hit the light switch. His footsteps sounded hollow and booming on the wood floor. Too much space. It had to be filled. He walked to his dresser, opened the top drawer, and pulled out his pack of Camels, nestled among his socks. He crawled over his bed, opened the window all the way, lifted the metal screen, and leaned out. He pulled a cigarette from his pack and a book of matches from his breast pocket. He struck a match. It blew out. He tossed the dead match down onto the driveway under his window. He tried again. This one stayed lit. He touched the burning tip to the end of the cigarette in his mouth, shaky hand, inhaled deeply, and dropped the match.

The raccoon. Will thought. Who was seeing it now? Who was driving by? Would someone swerve to crush and scatter its body for kicks? What would Captain Butt Rock have done? What would Captain Butt Rock have said if he had been in the car with him and Grant? Maybe Captain Butt Rock would've run it over in a heartbeat and whooped and laughed as he did it. Maybe he would think Will and Grant were pansies for not acting. But Will was setting an example. Maybe Captain Butt Rock would be impressed by Will's inability to kill. Or maybe they were pansies for another reason. Maybe they were too weak to act, and had their weakness only prolonged the raccoon's suffering. Or not. What's the use in how long suffering lasts if a thing is going to be dead in a matter of minutes, anyway?

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Will took a drag from his cigarette and stared down at the driveway. He remembered the time when he was out with his Boy Scout troop and a raccoon had gotten into their food supply. He had heard a rustling sound outside his tent in the dead of night and unzipped the tent fly, beaming his flashlight into the middle of the camp circle. There was a raccoon, leaping out of an open cooler. Slices of white bread and orange American cheese lay on the ground. How the raccoon had gotten into that cooler Will would never know. Maybe someone had left it partly open. Maybe not. They were smart buggers. Raccoons were a formidable enemy to the food supply in those Boy Scouting days. They and the humans were on equal ground. The humans had the food by day. The raccoons fought for it by night. Will was eleven years old when he saw one in their cooler. Shit. He had been a Boy Scout.

Will stared at the driveway, unwilling to turn back to his echoey room, unwilling to think about growing into it, and he thought about how he had never killed anything. He couldn't even fry ants like a normal American boy. He was eight years old, sitting in the driveway with a magnifying glass lying on an anthill, the August sun baking the tar and the tar baking his thighs. The ants started to walk funny, all erratic and jerky, and he had to take the magnifying glass away. That was a long time ago. Now he was an adult. He was a role model. He was responsible. Whatever that meant. He took another slow drag, sighed out the smoke, and stared down at his car in the driveway. His hand shook as he lowered the cigarette from his lips. He figured it was probably just from leaning on the windowsill and he tried not to think of raccoons.

Will yawned. He wanted to go to sleep. Maybe he would. He was an adult, on his own, setting an example. His time. His apartment. His car. He was responsible.

Brian LaRue

“In the City”

Today you woke up in your hometown. No need to worry about waking up in your hometown anymore because tomorrow you will wake up in the city. Not to say you will never see your hometown again. Whether or not you ever see your hometown again, you will never need to do so, because everything you could have had in your hometown, you will have in the city. No, your hometown is not lost to your forever. No need to worry about your hometown going anywhere. That's the problem — your hometown isn't going anywhere. You, on the other hand, are going somewhere. You are going to the city.

No need to worry that you should have told your boss that you would never again appear at your workplace because you were going to the city. No longer do you have to worry about pleasing your boss. You will not have to see your boss's ugly face in the city. You will have a new boss in the city. No longer will you have to worry about your small-time job in your small-time town. You will find a better job in the city. You will find twelve better jobs, because the city is just that big. You will find a bigger job in the city.

Nothing for you will ever be small again in the city. There will be no small houses in the city. There will be no small social gatherings in the city. There will be no small people in the city. Small people are crushed by the city. You are not small. You will exist and live among the other big things in the city.

You will leave your friends in your hometown. You will not need your friends in the city. You can find new friends in the city. The city is big enough to find new friends. Your old friends would not

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understand the city. If they understood, they would be with you right now, on your way to the city. Your new friends in the city will understand you, because they understand the city. The city will understand you. You will become a part of the city. Soon enough, your old friends will not know what to say to you, because you will belong to the city. Once you belong to the city, all you will need is the city.

No need to worry about not finding a place to stay in the city. The city is a place to stay. You were trapped in your place to stay in your hometown, because there was nowhere else in your hometown to go. The city is a place to go. There are plenty of places to stay in the city, and wherever you stay in the city, there will always be somewhere else for you to go in the city. Remember how large the city is. The city is full of places. One of those places will always be your place to stay in the city.

You will have options in the city. You will have choices in the city. Your hometown had one of some things. The city has many of everything. You will not be trapped in the city. You will not be held down in the city. There are too many people in the city for the city to hold down all of them. Time will be yours in the city. Choice will be yours in the city. You may get lost in the city, but you will never be lost and alone or lost and out of options in the city.

Today you woke up in your hometown and things were wrong. Tomorrow you will wake up in the city and the things that were wrong will not have to be wrong anymore, because you will be in the city. You will start over in the city. You will leave behind the things that were wrong, except for the wrong things you carry inside you, and there will be so much of the city there for you that you will not have to concentrate on the wrong things inside of you in the city. Everything will be better in the city. Everything.

Brian LaRue

"How Can You Talk About Your Feelings
When Joey Ramone is Dead?"

April 16, 2001

How can you talk about your feelings
when Joey Ramone is dead?
Your feelings aren't real.
Four guys using four chords
to play ten songs in twenty minutes,
that's real.

How can you laugh in the hallway
when Joey Ramone is dead?
There is nothing to laugh about anymore in the hallway.
Joey Ramone would've laughed
because standing in the hallway
is so normal it's funny.

Joey Ramone can't laugh now.
How can you meet your boyfriend
at the movie theater
when Joey Ramone is dead?
Joey Ramone would've met you
at the movie theater,
but now he's dead.

How can you smoke a cigarette on the stairs
when Joey Ramone is dead?
If Joey Ramone can't kill time anymore,
no one should be allowed to kill time.
This is it for fun.

Mike McLellan

“Primate Blues”

My original intent
was to swing from elms,

gliding
quickly
from branch to limb
on tense muscled arms
across New England.

Resting on top
of telephone poles,
I'd eat oranges whole
letting the juice settle
in my dark stubble
and run down my neck.

I'd look in
through high office windows
from teetering
300 foot pines
at glowing faces
in front of computer screens,

shirts tucked in
typing data
filing files,
wondering what to do for lunch
and wanting to swing trees.

Rex Krueger

“Lemon”

This girl, Elise; her parents had a party one night. Tents in the backyard, dance floor, flood lights on the trees, food coming out the ears, the whole works. And the next day, a lot of it was still there. So Elise got to call in her friends and as the sun set, we swept down on the thing like ants. We occupied the tents and ate the leftovers and slid around on the dance floor in socks.

So I was sitting there in a chair and talking to Terry. She was saying something about school, looking at me in that way she has of making me feel like she's really interested in me and she's my friend and she cares...just as long as I'm in her line of sight. I reached up to scratch something on my arm. And I felt this hard little lump on my skin. It felt like a scab, but I didn't remember hurting myself. I looked down at it for a second and then jerked my eyes back up to Terry's face before she could follow my eyes. I thought: *Holy shit. There's a glob of dried semen on my arm. I...I...jerked off in the shower. In the shower before I came to the party. I got some on my arm. And then it survived the whole rinsing and drying off and getting dressed process and hardened up right there on my arm. Jesus, I came on myself and it's still there.*

I leaned over my arm and tried to scratch it off, but it was stuck around the hairs -- tangled in there real good. I had to get out of there. I had to get rid of it fast, before someone noticed. You'll have to trust me when I say that the girls at this party knew what semen looks like, dried or otherwise. I looked up at Terry with an apologetic little smile and said: "Hey, I'm sorry, but this beer is going right through me. I gotta go." She smiled and nodded. She bought it, which is amazing considering the fact that I was drinking a Sprite at the time.

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The bathroom was hard to find. Elise was no help: "You saw those Porta-Johns on the way in. Those are it. No one's allowed in the house. No one." I smiled at her and moved fast on my way to the back of the lawn. Just in the woods, under the trees, in the dark, I went at the glob again with my fingernails. I was through fucking around. I pulled the hairs up by the roots and flung the clump into the woods. I think I was bleeding, but I didn't care. I was breathing easy now. If someone saw I was bleeding, that was okay. Much better than having them know I had come on myself. The funny thing was, I really did have to pee. There was no way I was going in one of those plastic coffins full of blue water and shit. I just went where I was standing. In under the trees, in the dark, it was kinda nice. I was free and safe and peeing in the woods. I had nothing to worry about. I didn't even hear come up behind me, and stop a little to my right.

"Hi Dempsey."

"Oh, hi Loraine. Uh, how are you?" (Peeing)

"I'm good."

"How's school?" (Still peeing)

"Oh it's good."

"You?" (In the woods)

"Well, my first year was kinda hard, but I'm getting used to it."

"Yeah, it took me a while to get used to, but I love it." (She must not notice, peeing in stealth.)

"What's your major, Dempsey?"

"Oh, English." (Stealth peeing)

"Yeah? I'm a chem major. You know it's a beautiful night."

"Yup, really pretty." (Beautiful night for peeing in the woods.)

Loraine hadn't changed much. She was short with shoulder-length hair; black hair, really dark. Maybe she dyed it. She'd never win any beauty contests, but she was cute. Or maybe she was just cute to me. Is there any difference? I've always been a sucker for that petite look: the smooth, round face, that black, black hair hanging straight and curling in just a little above her shoulders. No makeup. Simple

folio

clothes. Black pants and a gray shirt. Nothing tight, nothing low cut. But you knew she was a woman when you looked at her. She just didn't advertise anything.

I hadn't thought about her in months. There was nothing to think about. I knew her. I'd say we were friends, but only in the most casual way. I don't think anyone knew her very well. Loraine was always there, but she was always off to the side. She was never the center of attention, but you couldn't forget about her either. She had a presence. You didn't dismiss her.

She looked down meaningfully. "You about done there, Dempsey? I want to get back to the party." I piddled a few last, squeezed drops. And tucked myself back away with an unsteady hand.

"Yeah, let's go."

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Morning is a bleary eyed, sticky tongued, stuffy nosed, angry, moody bitch.

I rolled out of bed. Downstairs, the smell hit me first. It got stronger the closer I got to the kitchen. I rounded the corner and Omar was standing on a chair, in front of the stove. He was wearing mom's "Kiss the cook" apron and he had on his "I'm a maniacal little bastard, but I'm only eight so I'm not really going to get in trouble no matter how creepy I act" smile. He was standing over a boiling, steaming pot, stirring it with mom's wooden spoon. "Omar," I asked. "What are you doing?" He looked up, smile intact, and squeaked, "I'm making breakfast!" I inched closer to the pot. The smell was horrifying. It smelled like something died in the swamp and Omar had fished it out so he could cook it. He moved back a little while I looked at the brown, rolling water. *Holy leaping Jesus*. I whipped my head around, screaming. "Omar, you evil little freak, are you cooking your own shit?" I heard his little footy pajamas on the floor and his cackling laugh. I didn't even see him make his escape.

Grinding my teeth, I grabbed the pot and pushed the backdoor

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open with my hip. I walked across the front yard with the pot held as far out in front of me as possible. I kicked the lid off the Jensons' garbage can and dropped the whole thing in. Let them deal with Omar's breakfast.

I was in the middle of washing my hands for the fifteenth time when I heard noises coming from the dining room. Through the sliding door, my parents were sitting down at breakfast with Loraine. She was still wearing the same gray tee-shirt and black pants from the party. She was sitting across from my mother with her legs folded up to the side on the seat of the chair. She looked at me over the top of an under-ripe nectarine while she crunched it.

"Loraine, what the hell are you doing here?"

My mother was not impressed with my lack of etiquette. She snarled through her lipstick: "*Dempsey*, how can you speak to your friend like that? We found her asleep on the couch this morning. She says she brought you home from the party last night. You weren't feeling well. Apparently." Her voice made that last word a question. As if to say: "Dempsey, why weren't you feeling well last night? What the hell kind of alcohol and amphetamine soaked orgy were you involved in to the point where you couldn't even drive yourself home and this poor little girl (who seems very sweet by the way and you better not be stupid enough to let her go) had to drive you home and then sleep on our couch?" I opened my mouth to tell her that it wasn't what she thought, that I was just...And then I realized that I had absolutely no idea what *bad* happened to me the night before. I had no memory of anything past the point where Loraine and I walked out of the woods. There was a vague picture of me picking up a drink and starting to talk to someone. But things got hazy very quickly after that.

I had been standing there, very still for a while when I noticed that Loraine and my parents were sitting there looking at me. I remembered why I had come in. "Do you realize what Omar was doing in the kitchen?" They just looked at me, but I ploughed ahead anyway. "He was boiling a pot of his own...feces. Couldn't you smell it?"

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They were still looking at me with narrowed eyes. “He was boiling his own poop...and he called it ‘breakfast.’ Doesn’t anyone but me think this is disturbing?” They were still looking at me. I think I screamed.

I was at the back door when the pain started behind my left eye. I got to my car before I realized that I didn’t have my keys. I hoped my parents are neurotic enough people to have put one of those magnetized key boxes on the car somewhere. I was lying on my back, feeling around the doorsills when I heard the jingle. Loraine was standing by my head with my keys dangling from her hand. She said: “Coufff yoff ciff meh uh wide hume?” I stared at her from the ground until she turned her head and hocked a nectarine pit into my front lawn. “Do you think you could give me a ride home? Please Dempsey?” She dropped the keys onto my chest and walked around to the passenger side.

I was barely out of the driveway when she started talking:

“Listen, I think I owe you an explanation.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There’s a good reason you don’t remember anything about last night.”

“And that is?”

“Horse tranquilizer.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“There was horse tranquilizer in your drink.”

“Why was there horse tranquilizer in my drink?”

“I put it there. Actually, it wasn’t your drink, it was Mike Epstein’s. You just drank it.”

“Wait, what the hell are you talking about?”

She sighed like she was trying to explain 2 plus 2 to me for the fifth time. “Right after we got out of the woods, I dropped horse tranquilizer in Mike Epstein’s drink. Unfortunately, you picked it up off the table before he did. He was drinking gin and tonic and you were drinking Sprite. You must have thought his was yours. Actually, it’s kind of a good thing that you got to it before he did. I must have got the dosage wrong. You’re not supposed to take one sip and then pass

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out. You're supposed to drink the whole thing and then die."

I slammed on the brakes, jerking both of us against our seatbelts. "You were trying to kill Mike Epstein?"

She looked bored. "Dempsey, we can't sit here in the middle of the road. Someone is going to come along and hit us. This is dangerous."

"I'm not moving until you tell me what the fuck is going on."

"Don't be a prick, Dempsey. If you get us killed in the middle of this road, I'll never be able to finish Epstein off. So just drive and I'll tell you all about it."

I started the car moving again and Loraine started talking. "It's really pretty simple. We had a difference of opinion last week when he was taking me home from Chris's party."

"You're going to kill him over a difference of opinion."

"Actually it was several differences of opinion. First, he thought he should pull over to the side of the road instead of continuing on the way to my house. I disagreed. Then he thought he should take his cock out and tell me to touch it. Again, I disagreed."

She was coming undone right there in front of me. She looked straight ahead and her lips were pulled in so tight around her teeth that they showed white in the middle. Her skin had this slightly shiny look to it. She was breathing a lot.

"Then, and this was really the big difference of opinion, he thought he should pull me out of the car and rape me by the side of the road. Now, I disagreed with him pretty loudly about that part. But I guess he didn't hear me because it didn't stop him from finishing what he was doing and then dumping me on my parent's front porch. So as you can see, it was a pretty big difference of opinion."

She forced out that last sentence like she was giving birth to something ugly. Then she took a deep breath and looked over at me.

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"Because I was stupid. I was so desperate to get his stink off of me, that I took a shower. I scrubbed a good six layers of skin off of every part of my body. There's no physical evidence. There are no

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witnesses. It's my word against his."

"So you're just going to kill him?"

"I'm not going to let him get away with it."

"So it's about revenge?"

"It's about making sure he never does this ever again. If I can't put him in jail, then I'm just going to kill him."

"By feeding him an overdose of horse tranquilizer? Wait, where did you get horse tranquilizer?"

"I work in a vet's office. And I'm a Chemistry major. If I can't find it, then I can make it."

"Wait. Healthy college students don't just drop dead for no reason. They're going to test his blood. You'll never get away with it." This was starting to sound like a bad movie.

She rubbed her eyes. "You're missing the point, Dempsey. I'm not concerned with getting away with it. If they catch me, that's fine. He'll still be dead and that's what's important."

My logical argument wasn't getting me anywhere. "Lorraine, there has to be some way that you can get Epstein put away. Someone will have to believe you. You can't just kill the guy. I can't let you."

She looked at me. For the first time that day, I saw some emotion in her face. She looked just a little sad.

"Last night, I came to talk to you in the woods because I wanted to walk up to Epstein with someone. I thought if it looked like I was with you, then Mike wouldn't suspect anything. I...I feel bad about that now. I don't think I was really dishonest, but I did sort of use you as camouflage. I shouldn't have done that. You're obviously not the waste of skin that Epstein and most guys are. But listen to me Dempsey. You don't want to get in my way."

"Lorraine, I am *not* just going to let you kill Mike Epstein. If that means I have to—"

"You know that's a stop sign up there, right?"

"What?"

I snapped my head forward and buried both feet in the break pedal. We skidded to a halt a few feet in front of the other street and

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the cross traffic that would have t-boned my car and killed us both.

I heard her seat belt and the car door. She was out of the car before I could stop her. She called over her shoulder. "Thanks for the ride Dempsey. You're a nice boy. Don't make me regret taking you into my confidence."

I watched her stalk off across someone's front lawn and disappear around the corner of their house.

* * *

I needed time to think. I thought that my parents were probably out of the house by now. Most likely they were out at a tag sale or a flea market or some other piece of mind-numbing nonsense that would help them get through the weekend without actually having to talk to one another.

I was right. Dad's 'vette wasn't in the driveway. It was certainly a calculated decision on his part. There wasn't much mom could fit in his mid-life crisis mobile. Maybe she could spend his money, but my old man would be damned if she was going to spend his money on anything *big*.

My room was quiet and dim. The bed was still made; there was just a big depression in the middle where I presume I slept off the horse tranquilizer. I looked at my clothes for the first time that day and realized I hadn't changed since yesterday morning. Looking back, this fact may have saved my sanity. I have no idea how Loraine got me into bed. If she had somehow changed me into pajamas and gotten me under the covers, I don't think I could have handled it.

I dropped my clothes on the floor and padded into the bathroom. I think better in the shower. Ten minutes later I was about three times cleaner and about zero times closer to thinking up a way to keep Loraine from killing Mike Epstein. I could go to the cops and tell them. But even assuming that they believed me, there was still no evidence of the rape. In all likelihood, they would

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just search Loraine's house, find whatever Frankensteinian chemicals she had cooking on the stove, and arrest her. They would put her in jail or a sanitarium and Epstein would still be running around with a head full of ideas and two very strong arms. No one would be safe. I could tell Loraine's parents, but the end result would probably be the same. She wasn't the most stable person in the world and I'd assume her parents were only a hair's-breadth away from committing her at any given moment. My story would likely just put them over the edge. I could tell Epstein. But what would he do? He was a jock and a pretty boy, but he was smart, too. And apparently he was more dangerous than I had ever thought. What would he do if he knew Loraine was trying to kill him? What would he do to me if he knew that I knew what he had done to her? And then there was the final question: Did I really want to stop her? What was she really to me? I can't say we were ever best friends, Loraine was never too good for me. I know she didn't have the best self-image, but she never made me feel small so she could feel better. I don't know about other people, but that's worth a lot to me.

Epstein had raped a friend of mine. He had taken a nice, caring (if slightly unsettled) girl and turned her homicidal. Didn't he deserve to die after that? Probably. But then what would happen to Loraine?

There was a sound in my closet. I may have imagined it, but then there it was again. Clutching the towel around my waist, I pulled the door open—and Omar jumped out, smashing full into my chest and knocking both of us to the floor. We wrestled for a second and ended up with me lying on top of him and him screaming his head off. I spoke calmly:

"Omar, there's no one in the house and you're not fooling me, so you might as well stop."

He closed his mouth almost immediately and looked at me with cold little eyes. That was much better.

"Omar, what were you doing in my closet?"

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"Watching you."

"And why were you doing that?"

He narrowed one eye. "You know Mom and Dad think you're crazy, right?"

"And why would they think that?"

"Well, first you had to be driven home by some girl last night. They know you don't drink, so they think you were having some kind of 'episode.'"

"You mean a psychotic episode?"

He looked annoyed. "Whatever. They think you're nuts. You've always been weird, Dempsey. And then this morning, you told them that I was boiling my own poop when they knew very well that I was still asleep. So obviously you're delusional too."

"You think this is funny don't you? Wait a second, you knew what was going to happen didn't you? You knew I'd start flipping out and mom and dad would think I was nuts, didn't you?"

He just looked smug. "Mom and dad like me more the crazier they think you are." He smiled. "I'm the normal one."

That gave me a bad jolt. The fact of it was, Omar probably did seem like the normal one. I had no doubt that Mom and Dad were starting to think that I was nuts.

"So wait a second, you thought up this whole thing just so Mom and Dad would think I was crazy and you'd get more attention?"

"Pretty much."

"Jesus, Omar. This is not the way eight-year-old kids act. You know that, right? I mean shit, have you always been like this?"

"As long as I can remember."

"Mom and dad have no idea what a manipulative little fascist you are, do they?"

He just shrugged. "The phone's ringing, Dempsey."

The little bastard was right, so I rolled off of him and let him scurry away.

"Hello?"

"Dempsey, its Lorraine."

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“Lorraine. Holy shit, I need to talk to you. You can’t do it. You’ll just go to jail or the loony bin. You have to figure something else out. I’ll help you think of something else.”

“Dempsey, you’re...very sweet. Can you please come over? There’s no one in my house and I’m having these thoughts...”

“Shit, yeah, I’ll be right there. Where is your parents’ house? I haven’t been there in years...”

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The second the phone hit the cradle, it rang again.

“Lorraine?” I asked.

“Hello? This who’s this please?”

The voice was male. Older. I had no idea who it was. “Umm, this is Dempsey.”

“Ahh, Dempsey. This is Mr. Jensen. From next door. How are you?”

“I’m fine...”

“Good, that’s good. Listen. This morning, I went to take out the garbage and the damndest thing happened. I opened up the lid of the can and there was a big cooking pot in my trashcan. I had no idea what it was doing there so I opened the lid. Now what do you suppose was in that pot, Dempsey?”

“Um, how should I know, Mr. Jensen?”

“Well, I can’t be sure, but it appears that the pot was full of hot water and feces. Isn’t that strange?”

“Um, yeah. Listen Mr. Jensen, I was just on my way out and—”

“No, hold on there, Dempsey. This is interesting-- you’ll want to hear the rest. Now, I went in and told my wife about it, and she told me she was almost sure she saw you carrying a pot like the one I found towards the back of our house. Anyway, I was wondering--”

I slammed the receiver down and was out the front door before I even had my shoes tied. Lorraine’s house wasn’t far, but I thought

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I had better get there fast. My conversation with Omar had reinforced something: If Loraine killed Epstein, then he'd be dead, but she'd still get put away. It wasn't enough that he'd raped her. In the end, she'd lose everything else. Epstein would win. He'd smile from his grave. I didn't like that idea.

When I got to Loraine's house, she was sitting on the stone-wall along the road in front of her house. I pulled into the driveway and before I could even get out, Loraine climbed into the passenger side and sat there, looking at me.

I was confused. "Uh, why don't we go inside and..."

She heaved out with this choking little sob and crumpled against me. I put an arm around her and tried to hold her. It was an awkward position and I wasn't used to this kind of thing from Loraine. She talked in halting little phrases. "I had the whole thing planned out. I got the dosage figured out and I figured out how to give it to him. Andrew McDowell is having a party tonight. Did you know that?"

"No I didn't. But I'm really glad you decided not to do it. I mean, you'd get caught and then...We don't have to talk about it. I'm just really happy you aren't going through with it."

"Mmmmm." She snuggled a little closer, and I put my other arm around her.

"Listen Loraine, lets not go to the party tonight. We could get a movie or just sit around. We could talk."

She put her head on my chest. "That sound's fine."

We sat there like that for a while, until something occurred to me. "Hey Loraine? What changed your mind? I mean, it sounds like you've got it pretty well planned out. What stopped you?"

When she looked up at me, her eyes were dry.

"I don't own a car."

I hardly felt the needle. It was just a little prick in my left wrist. It was out and she was rubbing the spot with her thumb before I realized what had happened. I tried to move, but everything was warm and thick all around me. Like I was packed in cotton. She was talking to me through the warmth. "Don't worry, Dempsey. I got

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the dosage just right this time. You'll only be out for a half hour or so and you won't even have a headache."

The last thing I felt was Loraine starting to push me into my back seat.

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It was dark when I woke up. At first, I thought I must have been out long enough for the sun to go down. Then I realized that I was just under a blanket. When I pushed it off, the late afternoon sun hit me full in the face. I was still in my back seat, lying in a palm-sized puddle of my own drool. I pushed my head up to the window and I saw that my car had been crammed with ten or twelve others into the McDowell driveway. There was no one around, but I could hear music through the open kitchen window.

I pushed open the door and spilled out onto the driveway like a loose sack of chicken bones. It took me a few minutes to get my head and my feet talking to one another, but I stumbled to the back door and fumbled my way into the kitchen. Elise, the host of last night's party, was sitting on the counter, nursing a beer. She tried her best not to shrink away from me when I almost fell into the kitchen and slurred out my question.

"Mike?" she asked after taking a pull from the bottle. "He left with Erica a few minutes ago." She looked at the ceiling and I could swear I heard her whisper "slut" under her breath. She bounced her heels against the cabinets and looked me up and down. "Jesus Dempsey, you look like hell. You start drinking or something?"

I was confused. "Yeah or something. Listen, how did Epstein look when you saw him?"

"Like a full size Ken Doll, how does he ever look?"

"But he seemed healthy?"

"Dempsey, are you sure you haven't been drinking?"

"Yeah. Hey, have you seen Loraine?"

Elise rolled her eyes again. "Yup, she's out on the front porch.

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I think she's alone, maybe you can get her to drive you home again."

Ignoring Elise, I walked through the living room and let myself out onto the front porch. Loraine was on the far side of the porch, sitting on the wooden steps that lead down to the darkening yard. She was smoking with her back to me. She looked at me over her shoulder for a second and then turned away again.

"Hi Dempsey. How you feeling?"

"Kinda like some psychopathic bitch fed me horse tranquilizer for the second time in two days." I was shaking and my fingernails were biting into my palms.

"Mmmmm," she puffed on the cigarette. "Sorry about that. You'll feel fine in a minute."

I kept my voice level. "So, I guess you didn't get here in time to catch Epstein."

"Oh no, I got here in plenty of time."

I snorted. "What, is he going to drop dead in the middle of ploughing Erica?"

Loraine didn't even turn around. "Nope, he's not going to get that far."

"You mean he's going to die on the way home? Jesus Loraine, he could fucking kill someone while he's driving." I felt sick.

"Don't be thick, Dempsey. Epstein's not going to die."

"You didn't poison him?"

She snickered, cutting the smoke of her breath into little puffs. "Oh, I poisoned him alright. He's just not going to die."

I took a deep breath. "You know Loraine, in the last twenty-four hours, you've manipulated my emotions, drugged me twice and stolen my car. Hell, I'm still not convinced that I'm not an accessory to murder. Could you stop fucking with me for five minutes and tell me what you gave to Epstein?"

"Potassium Nitrate. Also known as Salt Peter. It's an essential ingredient in gunpowder, but it has at least one other good use. It makes you limp as a hot noodle."

"So Epstein can't uh..."

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“Fuck if his life depended on it? Nope.”

“For how long?”

She shrugged. “He should be out of the race for at least a week with the dosage I gave him.”

“And then what?”

“Well, wouldn’t you know what I found in Epstein’s car today?” She held up a hand with a something in it. I looked closer. It was a little bigger than a roll of quarters, covered in purple foil with some cartoon grapes on the outside. It looked like cheap candy. “It’s a roll of glucose tablets. Seems our boy Epstein is hypoglycemic. He takes one of these when his blood sugar gets low. He’s going to know he lost them in a day or two, but they’re going to reappear in his car soon after that. By then, I’ll have replaced most of the roll with homemade, grape flavored Salt Peter tablets. That should keep him down for the count for a few months.”

I couldn’t think of much to say.

“And you know what the great thing about impotence is, Dempsey? It’s mostly a psychological disorder. By the time the Salt Peter runs out, he’ll be so convinced that he can’t get it up that he probably won’t ever be able to. Wait, it gets even better. Do you have any idea what percentage of impotent twenty-one-year-olds commit suicide? He’ll probably do himself in. I don’t have to lift a finger.”

I stood there looking stupid for a while and then: “You know, Loraine, I think you may have come up with the best possible punishment for what Epstein did. Hell, I would have helped you if you had just told me you changed your plans. Why did you change your plans?”

“Something you said about how there had to be another way got stuck in my head. I got to thinking about it and I decided that I wasn’t going to jail for Epstein. I guess he has you to thank for his life.”

“So, if I changed your mind, why didn’t you let me help?”

“Because, as nice as you are, I couldn’t be absolutely sure you wouldn’t decide it was your duty as a man to save his prick from my potion.”

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“So you just used me?”

Lorraine sighed, “Oh Dempsey.” She stood up and took one last drag on her cigarette before throwing it into the grass. She stepped right up to me and set her lips against mine. I felt her hands twisting into my hair and her mouth opened. I couldn’t help myself, I opened my mouth and pushed my tongue out just a little. Lorraine blew hard, forcing smoke into my mouth and down my throat. It spilled out my nose before she let me go. I reeled back, coughing and spitting. Lorraine walked away down the steps.

Mike Wheaton

“Watching Dad Fall”

I still see your eyes when you read
my first published poem, proud
until you discovered that the poem
was about you. Your eyes dropped to
the floor when they found the last lines,
Love my father, yes I do.
Respect him? Never again.
You refused to look at me. Those lines
weren't intended for your eyes.

Flashback: you slumped
in a high-backed bar stool in our kitchen.
Walking the dog in Hubbard Park,
you slipped on wet leaves. Your femur
snapped in two places, but you still
dragged yourself and a German Shepherd
over one and a half miles of dew wet grass
to that chair, where you spent the
night sitting next to the phone. Morning
brought Ma's, *Why didn't you call someone?*
and your, *You don't care about me.*
Listening from the stairwell, I idolized toughness.

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You shattered that image. Four years later,
a flurry of garbage bags tossed in the trunk
of your Chevy Lumina--*Donations for
the Salvation Army*. Four days after
Christmas, you were gone and I awoke
to my mother crying over the letter you left her.

Six months later, you reappeared
in a silver Benz. I saw your new life
with Ma's best friend, a new car,
and a condo on the beach. Unable to
reconcile the new you with the omnipotent
father I knew, I wadded gum
under your leather seat.

I hated you with all the anger that a fourteen
year-old could muster. I wanted to resnap
your femur to make you as helpless as I was
when I watched Ma lose the house. Instead,
I prayed for fellowships while you
watched the ships dock in New Hampshire.

Mike Wheaton

“Reading Utopia”

9/11/01

Hythloday, I hate you. I can't stand
your logic. You piss me off.
Where were you before the planes fell?
Sitting in a comfortable chair, throwing ideas
off the walls of a silent room? Live
as you please, Hythloday. Keep your promise.
Politicians won't listen,
not worth my time. It isn't my responsibility.
Shut up, Hythloday. The smoke hasn't cleared.

Persistent, Hythloday begs attention.
He dons a blue suit, tosses his copy
of Aristotle aside and struts center stage
on CNN. He barks at stunned America,
Unfair foreign policy.
You brought this on yourselves.
Behind him, World Trade Center
is vacant space and smoke.

I can't listen anymore, but I can't
turn away. An hour earlier, I
set him aside to answer the phone
and watch images of stolen 747s
erase accountants, mothers, fathers.

—*“as it is now, I live as I
please [...] As a matter of fact,
there are so many men
soliciting favors from the
great that it will be no great
loss if they have to do without
me and a couple of others like
me”* Raphael Hythloday in
Utopia.

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I can't shake those planes long enough
to return.

Hands raised like a hind-sighted prophet,
his voice explodes from my TV,
No punishment can keep a man from robbery
when he has nothing to eat.

Carlos Semexant

“In the Beginning”

You plucked on my soul
And played the melodies of perdition.
Stone me if you will!
But in the end there are only a few chosen
To dance on twelve stars and eat moons with
Godly spoons.
The saints come marching in
From the painted slums of broken dreams
In native tongues.
Words slap my face on history's pavement
And bruised the jaws of my identity with X
X like Xgirlfriend, Xboyfriend and
Xfiance
 X the unkown in the Xfile
X you and me
 Will also be known as X
But it's alright to be X.
X is between the number
Nine--and eleven
Xpressed by ten,
Ten commandments with ten lost tribes
In ten trillion blood factories
Pumping life at its best.
Sweet! Like SALT! Is it?
The Roman numeral
Marks the chapters of time

folio

To complete the galaxy portfolio
That's due tomorrow in class--
No! It's due today,
When professor Jesus closed the pearly gates.
Make sure you're not one of the ones to be late,
But Of course!
There are slackers and procrastinators
Who love to sleep on timely breast,
And have social gatherings with fallen angels
on spider's web
and they continue to become
five foolish virgins without oil,
To burn their lamps and to prepare to meet the righteous groom
Who sung the blues in hieroglyphic tune when
You still pluck on my soul
And play the melodies of perdition,
Not remembering in the end
There are only a few
chosen.

David Miller

“McCollister’s”

Ronnie Dymant

“Don’t punch out yet, it’s 7:38. Wait until 7:43, then you get paid for the whole hour,” Ronnie instructed me.

“You wanna get paid for the whole hour, right?”

Half-heartedly I nodded my head.

“Well then wait until its 7:43. You gotta be smarter, Miller. Don’t be like your friend Whitney -- the kid doesn’t know his mouth from his asshole.”

I fidgeted with my time card as we stood waiting by the ancient time clock Ronnie so proudly milked day after day. Other places had computerized systems where employees punched in their secret digits or swiped plastic cards through digital beeping contraptions. McCollister’s Moving Company had Ronnie and I waiting by a rusty old clock with our cumbersome manila time cards in hand.

“See, Miller, now it’s our turn to get those bastards back.”

So we waited and got the bastards back. Ronnie was in his glory, sitting, waiting, and spiting management. These were the times he savored. I pondered whether this would be my last day punching in or out of McCollister’s.

I meekly hummed taps with my chin tucked into my chest and rolled my time card into the shape of a Chinese horoscope. Ronnie told me that the next day was a mileage trip, and warned me that if I wasn’t to work by 6:00 he’d leave the warehouse without me. He’d done it once before to Dave Whitney and I knew he’d do it to me.

Ronnie checked his watch... almost there. 7:42. I unrolled

folio

my horoscope and waited for the second hand to make its way past 12. For a moment the hand seemed to be stuck on the 59th second, then it clicked backwards – it was one of those clocks, and then forward again, and then forward again and again. 12 hours of work, the final seconds just as agonizing as the first. Finally we punched out.

Ronnie and I headed out to the almost empty parking lot. We were the last ones in that night; even dispatch had gone home. Our cars were on opposite sides of the lot and Ronnie broke into a light run toward his end. The cold air dragged Ronnie's breath out of his mouth as he jogged over to his old beat up hatchback.

It may have been the lighthearted jog of a 50 something year-old, who drives a 1983 Honda to work, or the Celtics jacket he wore along with the baseball hat that covered his thick silver hair, but there was a certain boyish quality to Ronnie. One minute listening to his bitter tone, and you could sense that the world had beat Ronnie Dymont down. But for a few seconds in McCollister's parking lot Ronnie looked rejuvenated.

The sonic boom from a low-flying plane invaded our ears and caught my attention. I knew the passengers on board were happily departing Logan, looking down at me from their upright positions; eager to start living luxurious lives in distant places.

As he unlocked his door and threw his lunch pale into his car Ronnie yelled across the lot to me. My eyes remained locked onto the plane.

“Wake up!”

I came back down to earth.

“Alright, so remember about tomorrow, don't pull a Whitney on me!”

“I won't.”

Dave Whitney

Dave lived in a shitty apartment complex in the center of town with his mother and sister. He met me outside his apartment holding two

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Buds and a cigarette. He handed me a Bud and I lit a cigarette. I'd checked his time card at work and although he'd left at 5:30 he was still wearing the blue McCollister's T-shirt. All of Dave's shirts were fading into light blue. Mine were still royal.

"Doing some free advertising?" I asked.

"Yeah. Where you been, it's 9:00."

"Got stuck in Providence and then Kenny sent us to Franklin."

Dave laughed at my misfortune. Dave was familiar with the torturous drive back to Boston from Franklin, but more importantly he was familiar with Ronnie.

"Did the old man work you hard?"

"No, today was cake. We must have spent an hour at the Wilmington Dunkin' Donuts. Got to Providence and loaded two crates, that's it – but you should have seen Ronnie when Kenny called us in Providence. He was rip-shit. The minute the phone rang I knew we were going to Franklin."

"Speaking of dispatch calls, Kenny called me and Mike Ford this morning while we were sitting in the Mystic Ave. Dunkin Donuts parking lot. He asked where we were and Mike told him we were sitting in 93 traffic. Then Kenny wanted to know why he couldn't hear the engine running in the background."

"Ford is an idiot."

Dave nodded and put out his butt on the corner of the brick exterior of the apartment and held it in his hand.

"I guess the people next to us complained about all the cigarette butts we're leaving on the ground so we have to do this now."

Dave held up the butt and laughed.

"But seriously, we can't leave them on the ground anymore. I know you will anyways, but just try to pick them up."

"Alright."

I wondered how long the cigarette butt thing would last.

Dave started to whistle conversational break tunes. It was a weak inhaled whistle with no melody or direction, almost subconscious. Finally he stopped.

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“Where do they have you guys going tomorrow?”

“Burlington.”

“That’s it?”

“No, I mean Burlington, Vermont.”

Dave laughed on cue at another one of my misfortunes.

“Have fun all the way up to Vermont with Ronnie.”

I decided it was an appropriate time to pull out the Ronnie impersonation, a common pastime for us. I put on the slightly high pitch voice and thickened the accent until I heard Ireland. The key was the way Ronnie sang as he talked.

“Tomorrows mileage.”

More canned laughter on the Seinfeld set.

“We’re getting paid by the mile, not the hour. Okay? You should tell that to your buddy Whitney. He’s still got his mouth on his mother’s nipple.”

The red “APPLAUSE” sign was still blinking. The next bit was comparable to Kramer bursting through Jerry’s apartment door – it would never get old.

“Whitney’s mother probably makes his bed for him in the morning! His mother packs his lunch everyday ya’know. Do you think Whitney knows how to make a sandwich?”

“Yeah, he always asks me if my mother does my laundry.”

“You know she does though.”

Dave lit another cigarette.

“Yeah, I know, but don’t tell Ronnie that.”

I ashed my cigarette on the ground and picked it up.

“I won’t.”

Kenny Cipriani

The next morning I showed up to work at 6:25. All the way there I was on the look out for a McCollister’s truck barreling up I-93 with an angry Ronnie behind the wheel, hell bent on making it to Burlington in Olympic time, with or without me.

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I got out of my car and surveyed the parking lot. I was confident Ronnie had come and gone already, but I noticed his car was missing. I walked into the warehouse and found Ronnie's time card still sitting on the table in front of the clock. Kenny noticed me through the dispatch office window and waved me over to him. I punched in and dragged myself across the warehouse floor. I entered the office, unshaven, lunch-pail in hand and hung over. Kenny was on the phone, talking to someone about funeral arrangements. He motioned to me with his index finger to hold on a second. I sat down across from the dispatch desk, wondering what the hell had happened to Ronnie. Shortly thereafter Kenny hung up and sighed. He shuffled some papers in back of the dispatch desk and straightened his tie. I sat waiting until he came out from behind the desk to talk with me.

"Are you starting to dream on me Miller?"

"Excuse me?"

Kenny slowed down his speech.

"Are you a d-r-e-a-m-e-r. A dreamer. Do you have some great high and mighty plans for your future, cause you sure aren't thinking about McCollister's."

"I don't know."

"Where have you been, you were scheduled at 6:00, right?"

"Yeah."

This was unexpected; Kenny had never reprimanded me before.

"What's the deal Dave? I thought you were responsible. You takin' after Whitney now?"

"I don't know. No."

"Hope not. I think I'm gonna put you with Billy tomorrow-you've had too much vacation time with Ronnie."

Kenny had hired me only a month before and I had been slacking a little. Being in the cab with Ronnie didn't help my cause. During my job interview I had told him that I knew Dave Whitney and that he was my friend. Despite Dave's reputation with the company Kenny took me on board, but not before explaining to me that I should

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not take cues from Dave, because he was on his way out. Kenny was the one who made decisions regarding bottom of the rung employees like Dave and me. He was young, late 20's, maybe 30, but he was behind the desk and controlled all of the assistants and drivers, including veterans like Ronnie.

"Alright, here's the deal. That was just Ronnie on the phone. His mother-in-law passed away this morning."

"Okay."

I couldn't believe it. Ronnie wasn't dead, just late for work.

"He's on his way now, just stick around for him, he should be here shortly."

I left the office and walked outside to smoke a cigarette. Soon after, Ronnie's Honda putted its way into the parking lot. He got out of his car and headed straight for the dispatch office entrance.

"C'mon Miller! We're already late, put that out and load the truck. You've had time, you should already have had that stuff done."

I cursed Ronnie's name to the bowels of hell.

"Where *you* going?" I yelled.

"I gotta go deal with Kenny now, I'll be back there in a minute."

Bitter and helpless, I went to the loading dock and strapped the two-wheeler and some dollies onto the inside of the trailer. I agonized over the thought of a long ride to Vermont and wondered how much longer I could stay at McCollister's and pack boxes full of out-dated monitors and other junk.

After I finished loading the truck I sat on the edge of the dock and lit a cigarette. Ronnie came up behind me wheeling an enormous wooden box full of padding.

"Jesus you're a smokestack."

Ronnie had told Dave that when I was dead and buried, tobacco would sprout up from my burial ground.

"C'mon, get up. Kenny says the freight is gonna go in this box."

Ronnie tossed some straps in my general direction.

"Here, throw these around the box so the padding don't go all

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over the place.”

I fumbled around with the straps, wondering which end went where. I still hadn't gotten proficient at using them.

“C'mon Miller, you're worse than Whitney. Get your head in the game. We gotta go.”

“I know, don't worry.”

“Well then don't half ass it.”

“Alright, I won't.”

Dunk's

I hoisted myself up into the cab and we headed out of the parking lot, down some winding side streets and onto the highway. Ronnie must have been formulating his story because he was silent. I kept quiet because I was going to wait to hear what he had concocted. About 5 minutes up I-93 Ronnie finished formulating and started talking.

“We can't stop at Dunk's today, we're already late as it is.”

“Fine.”

I had anticipated this Mileage trip with Ronnie. The clock didn't matter; we were trying to make it home in time to screw McCollister's. We were getting paid by the mile, and that meant Ronnie would never earn as much money on a mileage trip as he normally would earn getting paid by the hour. As for me, there was a chance I would be getting paid more on a mileage trip considering my hourly pay was substantially less. It all depended on how long our trip took. I suppose that was incentive enough for Ronnie to try his best to get us to Vermont and back as fast as humanly possible. No Dunkin' Donuts, no fast food, no screwing around. The no Dunkin' Donuts clause must have been Ronnie's payback to me for not having had the van loaded, because Ronnie loved Dunkin' Donuts with a passion. The Red Sox and Dunk's – these were Ronnie's two great love affairs. Nevertheless, I had my own contingency plan and on principle I took my coffee thermos out and carefully sipped it while the ever-vibrating cab

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seat sent steaming hot waves of coffee crashing onto my upper lip.

"I told Kenny he should have put someone else on mileage today but he figures we can still make it there on time."

It didn't take long for Ronnie to start politicking as usual. I was about to become another misinformed voter.

"I called Kenny this morning to tell him I wasn't coming in on account of my mother-in-law passing away but he bitched and moaned about Burlington."

Ronnie looked my way for signs of recognition or sympathy, and I glanced down to the floor. Un-phased, his campaign moved ever onward.

"I told him, I says, 'look, my wife's upset, I've gotta make these funeral arrangements and there's a lot to do.' But Kenny said he needs us to go down to Burlington. He says they need it done today." I nodded my head and looked out my window. I saw all of the people cruising down 93 southbound, in their suits and ties and Mercedes, leaving their \$1,000,000 homes in Andover, not having to worry about waiting until 7:43 to get paid for a whole hours work.

"I told Kenny, 'look in the handbook!'"

Ronnie took both hands off the wheel and pointed to his open palm, page 65 of the employee handbook.

"It says you get two paid days off of work for a family member dying but he said it only counts if it's your spouse or children, so I says, 'fine Kenny, have it your way.'"

I kept my eyes on the Mercedes and cell-phones.

"Well, Kenny will be screwed when I don't show up on Friday. See how he likes that."

I had to know.

"What's Friday?"

"Oh, Whitney didn't tell you?" Hitler-like propaganda. Friday is a big overnight move on State Street. We gotta move everything out of an office building and we're not gonna be done until 6:00 Saturday morning."

"And you're not going?"

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“Nope, and I told Kenny so. He told me if I’m scheduled for it, I’d better be there. They need all the movers and assistants for this one.”

“I think I’m going to be sick Friday morning.”

“Good, call in. You have better plans than this anyways, don’t you? You’re a smart kid, you don’t want to stay here. I already told Whitney to put in his two weeks. He might as well quit while the quittin’s good. Kenny’s really gonna be screwed then. Old Mr. Cipriani will be back driving in no time.”

Whether it was Ronnie’s typical false dissemination of information or a genuine *compdetat* against management, I was now intrigued.

“Kenny used to be a driver?”

Ronnie’s eyes lit up in jubilation.

“Are you kidding? Kenny used to be my assistant.”

“Really?”

“Then he got his license, like I’ve been telling Whitney to do so he can go drive for O’Shea. Then he started ratting out other drivers and kissing management’s ass until he got into the dispatch office.” The world according to Ronnie was cloudy and unfair, but I could see a hint of truth to his story. I envisioned a wild-eyed, cutthroat Kenny dropping dimes and sucking up to management in pursuit of personal gain. If anybody in McCollister’s was going to be left holding the short end of the stick it was not going to be Kenny Cipriani.

As we crossed into New Hampshire, I finished my last sip of coffee and Ronnie got off the first exit. We drove down the main road until eventually we pulled into a Dunkin’ Donuts.

“I thought we weren’t stopping at Dunk’s today.”

“I gotta go to the bathroom.”

I sat in the cab fuming, listening to Bachman Turner Overdrive’s ‘Taking Care of Business.’

Ronnie came trotting back to the cab holding a medium coffee and a bag full of donuts. He pulled himself up and threw the bag on the dashboard.

“You want a donut?”

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"I'm all set, thanks."

"Don't complain when we get to Burlington and you're hungry."

"I won't."

Mrs. Kildercrest

With my chin saliva-drenched, I awoke at a Burlington stoplight to the blaring cab radio. Ronnie had been turning the knob on and off fiercely, from silence to ear bleeding and back again.

"Wake up Whitney! Stop dreaming!"

"Huh?"

Ronnie had always scrutinized the way Dave fell asleep on long rides. Now my stock seemed to be plummeting to Whitney-like levels.

"C'mon Whitney, we're here. Wake up so you can actually help me."

Ronnie threw me the Vermont map. The book had already been paper-clipped open to the Burlington page.

"Look for Hillview Ave."

I directed Ronnie to Hillview Avenue, somewhat redeeming myself, and we began to head up the street's steep incline to number 93, a large, white, vacant looking house. Ronnie stopped the truck and I heaved myself out of the cab, missing the first step down and nearly breaking my ankle on the icy pavement. Ronnie and I trudged our way through the unplowed driveway up to the semi-shoveled walkway. A haggard old woman came to the door.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!"

Not only was this woman decked out in 19th century-esque garb, she was wearing large, black, plastic sunglasses with orange rims. She was spanning 1885 to 1985 and doing it with class. Ronnie looked down onto his clipboard.

"Mrs. Kildercrest?"

"That's me."

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“Have you been out of the house at all lately, or...”

None of this seemed to be registering with her. She stared blankly at Ronnie.

“Well, I’m just looking at your driveway and there’s 3 feet of snow piled up. We aren’t going to be able to use any of our dollies or two-wheelers.”

Suddenly, she snapped out of her trance.

“Hello gentlemen! How are you doing? I’m Doris Kildercrest. Please, come in.”

Ronnie’s jaw dropped as he looked at me in bewilderment. As we entered the house, he craned his neck back and whispered, “let’s just get whatever it is and get it in the back of the van. I just hope she can sign her name to the invoice.”

The woman led us onto a screened-in back porch overlooking a quaint stream. She smiled the kind of smile that uses of all the muscles in ones face, an excruciating, forced, ear-to-ear smile, with a crazy gleam in her eye. Her bony finger trembled as it pointed down to a weathered old chair.

“This is going to the Smithsonian Institute. They asked me to donate it and I said I’d be glad to.”

Ronnie shook his head as he picked it up with one hand and then set it down.

“What is this? Are you sure this is what we’re here to pick up?”

“It’s an antique airplane seat. The people from Smithsonian want it and I said I’d be glad to donate it.”

Ronnie shrugged his shoulders and called Kenny to verify the pick up. Minutes later I was high stepping through the snow with the grimy chair on my back. I loaded it onto the truck while Ronnie struggled to fill out the paperwork with Mrs. Kildercrest. Gently I packed the seat into the box and padded it. I wondered if the chair would ever really be on display in Washington, where children who dream of flying could look up at it fixed in the cockpit of some rickety Wright brothers’ prototype and depart to distant lands. I hoped it

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would be, although I knew they would have to first clean it up a bit. I finished packing it, pulled down the van door and raised the noisy gate. Ronnie was waiting for me back in the cab.

"All set?"

"Yup."

"You packed the box and closed the gate?"

"Yeah."

"Did you strap the box down?"

He had me.

"C'mon Miller, wake up."

Ronnie brought the van to a sudden halt and I went back into the cold air and strapped the box down as quickly as I could. I made my way back into the cab as Ronnie shook his head in disgust.

"They sent us to goddamned Vermont for that piece of garbage. Jesus Christ I hope that's what we were supposed to pick up."

"I think it is."

We headed down the treacherous hill. With map in hand I successfully navigated us back to the highway. Satisfied, Ronnie turned up the radio.

"Okay Miller. You can go to sleep again."

I crumpled up my jacket and used it as a pillow. I looked out the window and came to the realization that I would not show up to work on Friday or any other day for that matter. I would encourage Dave to put in his two weeks. We both needed a change, we both needed to get out of the stagnant McCollister's pond that attracted people like Kenny and Ronnie and Mike Ford. Ronnie inched the volume knob even louder.

"Go ahead, go to sleep Miller. Dream. That's what you seem to do best."

"I will."

Megan Raab

“And So I Say Okay”

Around 1984 I paint my bedroom wall with chocolate syrup.
Dad has to clean it up before Mom gets home.

Around 1996 Sister Judith asks me what God looks like.
I say *I don't know*. She says I should think about it,
and so I say okay.

Around 1992 I tell Dad I want to “draw good”. I ask when it will
happen. He says *Be patient, keep the lines flowing and light*, and I say
okay.

Around 1990 I tell my mother I'd rather wear a wreath on my head
than a veil. Most girls have veils. We nearly choke on the stale bread
and then I have to tell the Congregation that if they eat it, they'll live
forever.

Around 1993 I can no longer climb trees and play with younger kids.
I resent bras and cramps. God says I should blame it on Eve, and I
say okay.

Around 1996 I paint “Starry Night” and enter it in the Durham fair.
I get a blue ribbon for my effort and I say to Vincent *It's more than
you ever got out of it*. He says *It could happen to you too, you bitch*.

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Around 1983 I'm Tweety Bird for Halloween. I split my lower lip on the rocking chair and a white scar begins to fuse. Mom gives the rocking chair away. She can't look at it anymore.

Around 1988 I discover that teachers like girls who are quiet and neat. I start shutting my mouth, but it's not quite so easy to keep my desk clean.

Around 1995 I learn how to paint. Brenda thinks I'm improving quickly. I've found something I'm good at. I make Vince's acquaintance soon after.

Around 1985 I tell Mom I want to drive a big yellow bus just like Diane when I grow up. She doesn't say okay.

Around 1999 my Grandmother leaves me and I don't want to look at another college application. Amber goes to Roger Williams. I think she's lucky to have it all figured out.

Around 2000 I tell Susan I want to be a myth painter just like her. She says *Go for it*. Vincent calls me a turncoat.

Around 1998 a minister asks Lisa and me if we have names. We say no. We don't sing. We don't dance. We're Catholic, that's our excuse, and the Congregation can smell the holy water on our clothes from a mile away. I tell God I don't want to be like them, and he says that's *quite* okay.

Around 1999 it doesn't matter that I sold my paintings to a friend (thanks Rod). He thinks I'm pretty damn good. Ha, I say to Vince.

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Around 1996 I pick the name Brigid to be mine. She was a Celtic goddess. I tell Mom that's what I'm going to name my daughter, and she says oh, okay. Maureen already claimed Rhiannon, and I didn't want to be like everyone else. Lisa thinks I'm nuts, she chooses Stacy.

Around 2000 I feel a little better. I don't have it all figured out yet, but then again neither does Amber. She won't look me in the eye anymore, but that's okay with me.

Megan Raab

“Much Ado About Not Much”

I thought I was about to dig my *own* grave. Stevie’s concert was about the only thing that could get my ass out of the house on Friday the thirteenth. My mother was behind the wheel but I was still scared shit...pulling out of the driveway, waving at Dad, convinced by my Italian paranoia that I was seeing him for the last time. Sure enough, some asshole on a cell phone was going to cut my life short. Wouldn’t even be a significant call. He’d be dialing for his voicemail that he couldn’t wait to get at home.

I checked all three mirrors constantly, twisting my neck at every angle that would ensure a clear view, but not so clear that I’d see the crash when it happened. The seatbelt sawed my throat. Decapitation...No, no, hell with that. Just think of something, I said to myself, any random crap, Meg, please.

While my third finger worked to pry an airway between my throat and the belt, I clung to both halves of the liberty dime strung on my neck, the dime that’s split in half. I thought of Isaac

*Rock on—gold dust woman
Take your silver spoon,
and dig your grave.
—Stevie Nicks*

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and how one half belongs to him.
And then I thought of how I'd like to give
it to him; shove it up his ass or down
his throat. His choice of course. I switched
over to reading random license plates instead.
The blue Honda to our left even had a bumper sticker;
two tall towers exhaling smoke, accompanied
by the caption *I'd rather be breathing.*
And then there's the driver, early to mid forties
maybe, sucking down a cigarette. Another said,
For such a small town how could there be so many assholes?

Why do I so dislike the visor
angels that semi-spin in a dilapidated ellipse
on the edge of the counter? Every night
I work, I stare at those stupid clips.
St. Michael, St. Christopher, and a stomach-churning
St. Jude—gnarled and twisted like a witch
tree. Would they bring me back home alive?
Yeah, but...you know...
It's like what Lisa says: *Jesus ain't goin'ta help you
if you're a shit driver.*
Course in my case, I'd be the victim
of a shit driver that Jesus couldn't help.
I wished I had one of those pewter monsters
staring down at me,
all strapped down by a seatbelt
that teasingly dug into my neck. *Should I, or shouldn't I cut
deeper?*

I saw an arrow pointing to Hartford
and thought I was being lead
to Providence.
Oh Christ, thank you, I was alive.
I was to be one of a thousand gypsies.

Lisa Schiavone

“Eraser”

Monday

Lydia wakes up late as usual. She sits down before her computer, and presses the button in to start the machine up. Lydia starts each day the same way. She has to feed her computer, or she can't leave the house. She's around twenty-one years old, and her long dark hair falls into her face as she types into the blank screen. She closes her eyes as she types at random, her fingers finding the home keys by instinct. The glow of the screen lights up her face as she types:

Cauliflower. Broccoli. Broccoliflower. The genetic mutations caused by interference of the human species upon its own kind. War erupts over genetically altered dairy products.

The young woman sighs, leans back in her chair, and wipes the sleep out of her eyes. She opens her eyes and purposely strikes the “delete” button until all her words disappear.

Tuesday

It's 9:45. Lydia's Early American Authors class meets at 10:30. It takes her fifteen minutes to get to school. Before she gets coffee or empties her bladder, she sits down before the empty computer screen. She writes:

Sexuality beckons. His name is Ewan MacGregor. I want him. Like the tomato vines of August want water.

Again, she opens her eyes from her reverie and strikes delete-delete-delete.

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Wednesday

Lydia's running really late. She runs to the computer, tripping over her book bag, which spills books across the floor and hits the on switch. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is calm as she types:

*I often wonder what mother was thinking. Why did she do it?
Is she more of a child than I am myself?*

Satisfied now, she smiles and erases what she's just written.

Thursday

Lydia's been sleeping naked, and her butt sticks to the plastic chair before the face of the computer. Not very pleasant. She turns the computer on, and collects herself quietly for a moment before she types.

Luke is a very strange individual.

She stares at the sentence for a moment, then yawns, and presses down the delete button.

Friday

Cigarette butts float in a cup of water on top of Lydia's computer desk. She's been there all night. She closes the file she's been working on, opens up a new file and writes:

*No more. Please. I'm so very tired. And the grocery stores are
always open. Where are my 'bo-bo's'?*

Lydia runs her fingers through her hair, sticks her fingers into her ear crevices, and works the wax around. Then she hits delete-delete-delete, and trundles off to bed.

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Saturday

The door bangs open suddenly, and Lydia throws her keys and purse onto the couch. She's still wearing her winter coat as she eagerly presses the button that turns the computer on to its blank screen. Hurriedly she writes:

I think it's finally happened. I hope he understands. The clouds are laced with the gold and silver of the gods, and my breath has substance in the early morning.

The eraser button is struck, and Lydia takes her coat off.

Sunday

It's noon. And Lydia stumbles out of her bedroom to type into her computer.

Why must she call so early, when I'm half awake and I tell the truth? I dreamt of fire engines, big dogs, and my father was trying to break down the door to the house. Why do I eat meat? It's a sickening habit, really.

She sighs and leans back. Then she looks at the words one last time before erasing what she's just written.

Lisa Schiavone

“How I Memorized the Multiplication Tables”

- 1: A male number. Concerned about the welfare of the other numbers. Possibly a grandfather.
- 2: Female. Most definitely a grandmother. She wears a hat and goes to church regularly.
- 3: The flirtatious member of the number family. She has no sense of propriety, and blushes a lot.
- 4: The young boy who climbs trees and knows how to build a fire from rocks and twigs.
- 5: The nemesis of 4. He cheats on tests, and likes things easy.
- 6: She doesn't realize how attractive she is really. But all the numbers like 6.
- 7: The sinister number. He's an older man who delights in the trials of others.
- 8: Wise 8. A middle-aged woman who understands the symmetry of the universe. Lives in balance.
- 9: Best friend of 8, but tricky. You never know with 9.
- 10: Identity. This number's all about the ego, kind of like a mirror. See what you will.

Sarah Starr

“The Day of the Sale”

Shadowdance across the flawless carpets,
satin rustling, hairpin clenched in teeth,
baby’s breath and migraine medications;
at last the day has come.

The father’s shaking hands, so steady-sure
on wires,
close over white gloves now with tears,
he seals her new slavery with a kiss,
tuxedos smiling white.
No questions asked.
In wine dress, drunk on distillate of roses,
a pair of pensive eyes has infiltrated.
Bejeweled hand upon the crimson altar,
the sanctum breached.
Humility is rusted.

An ocean crashes on the shore of heaven,
blue waters, salty bathtub, tiny suit.
She smiles with glee and kicks her heels and screams,
submitting to her captor,
thinks of England.
Pulling glass was never quite this easy.

Sarah Starr

"A Ghost"

You always look surprised when we collide
head-on, our gazes locking for that shattered instant
before my mere-flesh eyes must look away,
smoldering from your divinity.

When we are parallel, it is my turn
to look surprised. You touch me
on the shoulder:
pale flesh stiffens over bones
as hot as coals.

I tear the stream of music from my ears
listening to you, each word a love
letter that will never see
the hands of its intended.

You praise my art; I blush and flatter yours.
We talk about the weather, your flat tire,
the ups and downs of quitting cigarettes.
You track my downcast eyes and say goodbye.
We walk back to our dorm rooms by ourselves:
my feet borne up by tides of quarter notes,
your ashen overcoat stirred by the wind.

Sarah Furgalack

“Where You Are”

I’ve traveled these distances a thousand times, slicked myself up and slid swiftly through phone lines, soaring over cities and farmlands to reach you. I’ve cruised over the New Jersey Turnpike effortlessly, ignoring gas stations and stoplights, careening smoothly toward my destination – you, always receptive and hopeful. There were no barriers to dreamy promises and plans we meant to keep, and I twisted fiber optics into love knots and made them quiver with my longing for you. The lack of a touch was transient, somehow charming in its torture because feeling pain for someone you love is beautiful.

Tucked away inside a furnished and carpeted metal chamber, I slid through atmospheres and altitudes to hop the Mason-Dixon line and land on your doorstep. I watched clouds pass over Maryland and Virginia until they broke, revealing a miniaturized version of the life you were familiar with. The distances we had cursed and cried about so many times sped by underneath me and quickly vanished.

I was sliding, rolling over pavement in the darkness as you navigated with ease. The miles had been swallowed whole, and all I could think to do was stare out the window and wonder what it means to be inside my own daydream. There was nothing left to conquer; our geography had been narrowed to highway lines and city limits.

I began to learn those streets. I paid attention everywhere we went, trying to predict when and where you would turn and what would be around the corners, acquainting myself with this new yet familiar place. I had been here before in stories and make-believes. Turn right out of your neighborhood to get to John’s or Katzi’s. Go straight at the intersection to get to the coffee shop. Go left to the

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grocery store. Find Holcomb Bridge Road to get back to your house. Eventually, I was able to make my way over to Carter's. I drove in your car, the pedals looser and the steering wheel more resistant than my own, with the window partly open and my tape playing loudly because I was that confident and relaxed about knowing where to go. I knew that I could stay here, slowly learning to make my way around and always find a trail back to where you are. I could keep up conversations with the friends I knew before meeting and did not feel like the intrusive outsider I could have been. I began to wonder if maybe this was where I belonged.

I felt safe with the people you had chosen as your friends. They were young and wise and crazy and they made me feel that there was something new and worth discovering in the world. I couldn't say if they were the people I would have found in this place and I had to look at you with awe for knowing where to find the good ones. I had always been too shy and too scared to live my life in high school, when you are supposed to be reckless and selfish, and this was my chance to make up for it before it was too late. Still young enough to feel that frame of mind with the added few years to know how to appreciate it.

They liked to roll their eyes at us and tell me how tired they were of hearing you whine about how much you missed me. We smiled at each other and everyone laughed, secretly pleased to see us together and happy. We sat in Carter's basement, while some of them made admirable attempts at rock and roll, or talked late into the night over coffee and home fries at the Waffle House. They were the simple things that had become so mundane, and I was able to add my cynicism to the chorus of complaints of boredom, but I was soaking up every minute of it, cherishing every little overlooked detail. I could hold your hand, lean my elbow into your side when I was trying to be funny, rest my head on your shoulder when it got to be late. And I knew that when we left, I would be leaving with you. I would be sleeping with your arm thrown over me and your cat in a ball at my feet. They were small things, and they were mine.

These nights, when we drove home, I sometimes wondered

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where the chatter went. Things became quieter in a way they didn't when other people were around or when someone else was in the car. Driving along, when I'd stopped needing to memorize roads, frantic drum beats and frenzied singers were the only thing that kept the quiet from overwhelming us. This was not the silence you share with someone you know too well to need to talk. It was the space that let my mind reel and question and wonder what all this was leading to. Some sort of misplaced protocol kept me from knowing how to take your hand or say something simple and comfortable. I stared out the window, wishing you could just know what was in my head, wishing you would know what to do to make me feel better, because in my mind it was simple. All I needed was some small gesture from you to make me know that it was important to you that I was there. I tried to think hard enough to make you hear me and understand. We moved along, silent and still.

It was New Year's Eve and it was ridiculous and I was making my way towards the bottom of a flask of Southern Comfort. I laughed wildly, never feeling out of place. This was a night of smiles and hopes and vague fears about millennial breakdowns pushed to the back of our minds. Every moment of every day we were constantly terrified of what would happen next, while at the same time not worry about anything but what was important right then. All that mattered was that we had a good time, that we forgot that things can be awful and scary, that we laughed until our sides ached and our eyes watered. I watched you move around from group to group, your smile and laugh an echo of my own and it seemed like the safest place in the world. I sat outside with the friends who I no longer felt the need to consider only yours, singing loudly and off-key and loving the way it felt to hear ourselves.

It was nice to know you were confident that I would be okay with these strange people in this strange place, that I was yours in a way that made it safe for us to be apart, always knowing we would end up together again. But suddenly I felt so far away from you and alone and it made sense to blame the alcohol but that didn't make it go away.

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It was New Year's Eve and I was far away from home and I was alone. I sat on a hill in some stranger's front yard with my arms wrapped around my legs, my face bent forward and my knees becoming wet. Music and laughter floated somewhere behind me until I picked out your voice asking people if they'd seen me. I couldn't say anything or do anything because I needed to keep hearing that you were looking for me.

The sound of concern in your voice and the way your arms found their way around me made me cry harder and I couldn't explain it all to you, or maybe I just wanted you to know. My mind spun with my own chaos, pushed and pulled and rearranged by the alcohol. My emotions were beyond mixed up and I was sentimental and scared.

"I know the world ending stuff is all crap and I don't believe any of it," I sobbed and stuttered, trying to string together words that might make you understand how much it hurt to be in love with someone. "I just need you to know that if anything does happen, just in case any of it is true, I just want you to know that this is where I want to be. You are the only person I can imagine being with." I felt each syllable trip out of my mouth and sound nothing like it was supposed to. Everything had been said too many times before for me to find any way to make it honest and real. Saying you understood were just attempts to pacify and to comfort. My apocalyptic confession mixed in with all of the other voices filtering through the night.

We pushed it away with excuses. This was just me, my reaction to hard liquor and my tendency towards melodrama. It was unrelated to what was real, to the thing we had that we believed in fiercely. This was just my paranoia, my self-doubt asserting itself onto you. You could forget about it easily as me letting my worries get out of control.

I knew that we could deny and ignore every ominous signal, that I would welcome you back into my cold, naked New England winter. Curled up in sweaters and blankets, we would continue to believe in ways to make things the way we knew they should be. It was simple enough to think of leaving when we didn't consider the fact

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that we were both attached to where we were.

Sometimes I would sit on your front steps late at night, smoking cigarettes and staring up at the pine trees and beyond them to the sky that rarely revealed any stars. You hadn't wanted to come out there with me, saying it was too cold or you were too comfortable to move. I never acted disappointed. It was quiet and I wanted you to be there next to me. I knew that the quiet would still be there if you were beside me, only heavier and more cumbersome, but it was easier to imagine the conversations as we meandered through all of the crazy thoughts that slipped through our heads. I wanted to hear you laugh, to turn and look at your face, smiling in a way that said everything and would make me drop my head with a blush and a smile. I thought about you inside, just a flight of stairs away from me. Sometimes this seemed just as far away.

Craig Houghton

"The Gondolier"

When the waxy black canal waters
catch sky,
and the passengers
sound like
parrot children
singing
their own names,
'the gondolier makes
the gondolier less lonely'--
he says to his reflection.

Craig Houghton

“A Little Noose”

I like attention, but
last Sunday at my mother's,
she said I needed new shoes, and I do, and my father said
some time I need to graduate already,
and get on with it,
and my mother's brother's other grandmother said something too.
I didn't say much. *I* know
I need a small noose –
not much of one,
a tiny noose, like a finger span across a palm,
and as useful as fingers or a big toe.
I need a little noose,
a hangman's toy –
just something wide as a jar's mouth
to slip over my wrist
like a silly charm of sorts.
I need a conversation piece with a lynch-man's twist –
nothing dangerous, just something
to drag me around town
on errands
and by my mother's house. On Thanksgiving Eve
my little noose on a turkey's neck,
or around some rabbit ears on Easter
or something to snare a reindeer hoof with
next Christmas morning.
I need a little noose

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this Sunday
at my mother's
to bind up the roast and otherwise leave dangling
over my wrist.
Not a panic noose, or an ambulance noose –
just an eggshell noose
so they step lightly
around me,
and forget about my shoes,
and smile more,
and ask me
about my noose.

Marian Bayusik

“Drive”

“Watch it, watch it...Goddamnit, don’t whip the car into those turns!”

I hate it when Dad yells at me like this. It makes it so hard to learn to drive.

“Daddy, I’m just trying my best...” I begin, but my father cuts me off.

“Just pull your head out of your ass and pay attention!” he growls, “And don’t look at me, look at the road!”

I sigh a little. I can’t help but stare at him when he gets upset. His face is all red, and one of the veins on his neck bulges. I try to keep my eyes on the road but I glance back at my father’s face to gauge his reactions. If he looks relatively calm, that’s good. If he looks nervous, upset, or angry, that’s bad. As we practice turning around in the lot, I study him in detail. He’s about five foot eight and he has a bit of a gut. He turns fifty next July. He goes to the YMCA every morning to swim and work out. He claims that he doesn’t have a potbelly, it’s really muscle, but I say that muscle wouldn’t stick out so much. He likes to eat ice cream as well, which must counteract all the exercise. He has blond hair, or rather he had blond hair but now it’s faded to almost completely gray. His blue eyes look a little tired and blood-shot because he works hard all day at work, at this company that makes filters, which he tests. He wears thick glasses like mine and we have the same round face, although I have dark hair and eyes like my mother does. He looks relatively calm at the moment, but it doesn’t mean much because we’re only in a parking lot.

When we go to practice, we drive down to this nearly empty

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parking lot in Casmir Pulaski Industrial Park, in Wallingford. It's a blank, faceless place with buildings that all look the same. The lot we're in is in front of a row of offices with "For Rent" signs in some of the windows. The small offices are either abandoned or the employees have fled for the night. I don't see any other people except us. Just my dad and me. Joy.

My father is the only parent willing to teach me to drive because my mother is too nervous to be in the car with me. The one time she tried to take me on the road, I ran up onto the curb with her new car and scratched up the hubcaps a little. After that, she refused to take me out or let me learn using her car. Since I don't have older brothers or sisters who can teach me, my father sent me to driving school. I did all right, I guess, but the instructor said I needed a lot more practice on the road before I can get my license. That's why my father has dragged me here on a Friday evening in September, in his old gray Dodge Sprit. My father turns to me.

"Okay, your turns are getting a little better, but now we should work on backing in to a parking spot. Drive around and back in one of those spaces down there," he says, with a note of irritation. I wince. First, because Dad can't understand what's taking so long for me to learn to drive, and second, I can't stand trying to park a car. I can't make the car go straight into a space. I get my directions completely confused, turning left for right and right for left.

"Well, come on," he says, "Quit stalling and let's do this." He doesn't seem very angry, but there is an undercurrent of impatience and anger that passes between us in the air. I drive, slowly and carefully, all the way around the parking lot, trying to drag things out to the last possible moment. As I approach the spot, the chewing gum in my mouth devolves into an unpalatable, sticky mess with little gum bits migrating to the corners of my mouth. I'm about to put the car in reverse when Dad shouts at me to turn my head and actually look out the rear window, as opposed to just looking in the rearview mirror. I look at myself in the mirror before I start. My brown ponytail is stuck to the damp sweat on the back of my neck. My dark eyes look wor-

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ried. There's a red, watery glaze to them. My skin is pale and tight right now, mostly because I'm just so tense. My glasses are askew, and I hastily adjust them.

I put the car into reverse and start backing up. The car veers between the parking lines at an angle.

"C'mon, C'mon. Straighten 'er out!" my father's voice says, rising and growing testy with anger, "No, no, wrong! Other way!"

"Okay, Okay. . ." I say, in quick, frantic pants
I change the direction of the wheels. No good. I've managed to cross the yellow line and become double-parked.

"C'mon, Fix it!" he yells, making it obvious that he's losing his temper again.

"FINE!" I say, starting to lose my temper, too.
I've attempted to take the driving test twice, but each time I pass the written part and fail the driving part. Specifically, I screwed up at the part where you back into a parking spot. The test costs forty bucks a pop, and since college looms around the corner, our family should not waste any money. Also, a college student who can't drive has a lot of embarrassment in her future.

I put the car in drive, but to my horror, as I try to fix the car's angle, I only manage to end up in the position I started in.

"C'mon," my dad moaned, "We can't stay here all night!"
I say nothing in reply because I'm beginning to panic. I can't breathe and my face turns red. I can't remember what to do, my mind's gone blank. I don't want to be trapped in this car with my dad. I don't want to learn how to drive. I just want to go home, hug my favorite stuffed animal, Mr. Moose, watch some cartoons, and stay a little kid, free of responsibility.

"Look," Dad said, sounding annoyed at seeing me crying, "you have to learn this. I won't take care of you the rest of your life. You have to act like an adult. You can't collect stuffed animals and play Nintendo all your life."

"But I don't...." I begin to whine. Tears are beginning to form in my eyes.

My father's hand suddenly smacks me on the face, knocking

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my glasses off. It's an open-handed slap, not drawing blood or anything.

"Stop acting like a baby and do it again. If I let you slide and not do this, you'll never learn it." He snaps at me.

I gape at him open-mouthed. He hasn't hit me since I was six and I broke the lamp. I glance quickly at myself in the mirror and see he's left a red mark across my cheek.

He looks at me but I can't read his expressions. He's not furious anymore, but he's still not calm either. His face is all red. I think he might be disappointed in me for making so many mistakes and not learning from them. Maybe he's surprised he lost control and got angry. I just can't tell.

I try to stop crying. I can't immediately, so I keep sniveling for a while. He doesn't say anything else, so we just sit quietly. My father's face gets less red, so I assume he's calming down a little.

After about five minutes, my father quietly says, "It's too far gone to fix, so pull out and try it again." He doesn't sound angry, just kind of drained from yelling and getting nowhere with me.

I pull out with little incident and drive around the lot again. I manage to back in kind of crooked, but my dad says it's good enough and we can go home. I pull out of the spot, but my dad thinks for a moment and says he'll drive home. I guess we're both kind of tired and he doesn't want to yell and scream at me anymore. We switch places and he takes the wheel. We pull out of the lot, onto the main road. We head for home in silence. It's so quiet that it's like I'm the only person in the car.

Sarah Rizzuto

“A Pipe Dream”

At the Naugatuck Valley Mall,
When it was still standing,
We used to ask our mother for pennies.
She'd rummage through the depths of her purse,
Brown, leathery bulk and pull out her wallet.
It matched the leather and she twisted the golden clasp open.
She'd dig for copper, surpassing all silver.
We each got one penny, one wish.

Brick trapped the water,
Black iron bars were a fence.
The brick jutted out further
Than the bars
And my sister would stand on the edge.
Her LA Lights blinking,
She extended her thin, brown hand.
Closing her eyes, she'd make a wish,
Letting the coin meet the concrete bottom
Of the fountain.

Pennies glittered and I wondered
Who collected all those coins.
It was my turn.
I drove my wheelchair as close as I could.
And gave the coin away to my sister.
I made my wish, keeping my eyes open
Watching between the bars as the penny descended.

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I wished I could stand
On the edge and throw it in.
But that wish never came true.

Anthony Michael Szilagy

“God’s Room”

When do you suppose God does laundry?
Does he wait until there is a pile
of debris clogging the corner of his room
before he gets out of bed?
I imagine him sifting through sweaters,
sniffing them to see which ones
are passable. The best one’s only reek
of smoke, no BO present.
What would Jesus do?
Would he lend a hand after watching
his father jumping from one clean spot
on the floor to the next,
or would he just stand there judging
the man and the mess before him?
I’m sure God just has a lot on his mind,
it’s hard to justify vacuuming up cheetos
while his tenants are starving.
Who actually makes their bed anyway?
He can’t even get to his bed
without the sound of cd cases snapping
underfoot. That’s what thunder really is,
no bowling alleys up here.
I don’t even want to know
what lightning is.
Maybe he should just get up
off his ass. It’s already 6pm

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and the dishes aren't done,
he'll catch hell from his roommate.
So he shuffles across his floor
to his bed, crawls into the sheets
and pretends to be asleep.

Anthony Michael Szilagyi

“You’re Crazy”

Nobody wants to lie in bed with you
when your flesh is rotting.
But then who knows, really?
Think of lepers
having sex.
Ears and other body parts swaying
and falling off
in time with whatever music is playing.
The smell of burning baked beans
runs through the room,
colliding with every wall
and corner. Her smile
still makes his heart
want to burst. It just might,
as he watches how her expressions glide
on and off her face
as if in slow motion.

The streaks of sunlight sneak past the window
and collapse on the faded carpet. Each fiber warms
in the glow, and meets your oncoming feet,
a soothing feel
that travels from your heel to your spine.
It’s a good morning to mow the lawn,
and let the aroma of mutilated grass seep
into your throat. That’s fine.

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He'll finish her coffee.
There's a thumbnail in it,
and he's in love.

April Line

"Oligocheta to Mom"

Earthworms:
squirmy, slimy earthworms,
inconsequential,
trivial,
copious.

And yet they
spark this
humanitarian pity
as they seek the
buoyant macadam,
only to be
squashed, smashed
sans moot
by shrieking,
soaking wheels--
rumbling omnisciently above
like driving thunder.

While I go on
I wince,
wondering:
*have I
disemboweled
a mud processing
mom?*

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And I think of my mom,

who for years
has processed
my mud
perfectly,
insightfully and

taken for granted.
Deep
a gut balloon
of sorrowful regret
inspires earthworm
memorial tear tracks:

counterfeit
flattened corpses
like those littering
my journey home.

Travis Meyer

“The Time He Saved”

Chuck woke in pain. The muscles of his back tightened in a throbbing string, pounding inside his head, with the pulse of his heartbeat. He swung his feet off the side of the bed, focusing his eyes on his young brother's face. Walter slept as a four-year-old child should, as if already knowing that in his dreams was the safest place to be. Chuck was nine years older, still a child in years, but more of a man than his family cared to know.

He had fallen asleep in his ripped Wrangler blue jeans just three hours before. Tossing a dirty, striped polo t-shirt across his shoulder and grabbing his sneakers, Chuck passed by the closed door of his parents' bedroom, and into the bathroom. He stared at the dark circles under his eyes and the tired wrinkles in his forehead and shuddered. In 1963, boys his age played baseball and raced bicycles through town, but he had no time for this. He showered and dressed in the same stained clothing he had laid against the bathroom tiles. He felt clean, awake and more alive than most days. Every morning, he would take a shower and dress in dirty clothing and feel as filthy as before the shower. But as he looked in the mirror one last time before leaving, a new life seemed to burn behind the puffy tissue around his eyes.

He knew what picture would lie before him as he prepared to walk out his front door. There were two bottles of Rocking Chair Whiskey, one upright and empty, and the other spilled in a brassy puddle across the only table in the house. Chuck's father lay unconscious by the couch, his hands above his head, forming a cross over the stained living room carpet. He looked like a corpse, a bloated cadaver with its mouth open, the lips crusted and cracked. Every morning he

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passed through the smell of liquor and cigarettes, hoping his father was dead. But this was never a reality, just a sliver of hope in the folds of Chuck's mind. He blinked his eyes and thought no more of the body of someone who was once a man.

He stepped into the August sun and onto the sidewalk. His house was on Silver Lane, the busiest strip of life in East Hartford. In 1963, this was the road residents traveled for their shift at Pratt and Whitney, the nation's largest jet engine producer. Chuck worked a mile down Silver Lane, at his friend's father's driving range. It was nearly seven o'clock and the Torzas would be at work in an hour. Chuck would work in the field with a screwdriver, prying half-sunken golf balls from the ground, until he saw his friend David roll up with his father, in their pickup truck. David was born into a hard-working Italian family. The golf range was the second opened by his father, Acky, who employed few workers, but none with the loyalty and intensity of Chuck.

Being an hour early for work every day earned him lunch and gave him a chance to be home as little as possible. So he would rise with the sun and work by himself, until the Torzas joined him. The sun neared eight o'clock when Chuck spotted the sea-green, rust-trimmed Chevy pickup swinging in behind the ball shed. They both hopped from the running boards. David made his way toward Chuck while his father rolled back the wooden panel that covered the register counter to open for business. He and his father were humorously similar in stature and personality. Both were barely five and a half feet tall with a high-pitched yell as their tone of voice. David gave a wave and a smile to Chuck, telling him to meet half way.

"Hey, you workin' with us tonight?" he asked Chuck with an eager grin.

"Of course," replied Chuck, placing the screwdriver in his back pocket.

They walked back to the shed together, speaking of work and what must be done by the end of the day. Acky was flipping a black switch back and forth. The amazement of his continuous failure showed

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in the slanting eyebrows below his deep curly hair. "David!" he chirped, "What'd you do to the new ball washer? Damn thing won't start." He was too confused to be angry but stood before the machine with his hands locked behind his head.

"Dad, you gotta plug the thing in. I told you last time," said David, throwing a smile back at Chuck.

"I knew I raised ya right kid; smarter than your old man already."

"No, I just mastered electricity and you didn't."

"Excuse me Acky, but I need to talk to you about tomorrow," interrupted Chuck gravely.

"Sure kid, come on with me. We'll talk business".

They walked out the rear of the shed, across the grass to the tee line. There was a row of forty roped-off spots. All had numerous divots like bullet holes shot through the earth.

"I am gonna need tomorrow afternoon off. My mom promised me she'd take me clothes shoppin' for school."

"Oh yeah?" said Acky, turning to face Chuck. "She got some extra money for you huh? Well, good you deserve it kid."

"Well no, actually it's my money I earned from here. She's got it saved for me in a bank account." Chuck smiled as he said the words. He could feel the new clothes across his back; the sweet smell of new cotton passed him with the wind. The soft scents of the department store, with its candles and perfumes, swimming through every aisle, all racing with the feeling of ascendancy over his life.

"Ok, that's reasonable, but I'll expect you back here at nine to go to the ponds." Acky's face blushed a bit as he stood staring, as if wanting to say more; his lips parted to speak.

Turning without being ordered, Chuck walked toward the fence at the far end of the tee line. He filled the next few hours with arduous labor. There were new sacks of golf balls to be hauled from Acky's truck and more barrels of them to be washed. It was nearing noon and the sun was full in the sky. It gleamed off the shafts of every metal club being swung along the line of customers. As he sorted a

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barrel of balls, he glanced across the field. A yellow tinge of sunlight spread like smoke across the landscape, touching every blade of grass and every swaying treetop. This was a new day, he thought, where things might now be possible, might somehow be different. Everything was so beautiful when he was working but so hard to swallow. He knew that this was what he would have to do for the rest of his life; to struggle with time and the ache of labor. He had saved a summer of life that he would soon reward himself for hoarding. So to buy what he never could, Chuck woke at dawn every summer morning and walked to work, his days sweeping through the departing sun. After dinner with the Torza family, he would work harder than in the day. David, Acky, and he would sneak into local golf courses, and recover balls that splashed into the ponds. Acky worked the edges with a metal dredging machine, while David walked in deeper, the water rising past his waist. It was Chuck who stripped to his underwear and swam the bottom, feeling blindly through the soggy muck. The golf balls were placed into sacks, which he attached to a rope around his hips. Each ball Chuck found earned him money; the harder he worked, the more money he could put in the bank. This was the life he lived all summer. After returning home, he was afforded three to four hours of sleep before starting fresh the next day. Chuck resisted the fatigue, the cold polluted water of the ponds, and the dull pains that swelled along his back.

Chuck sat still for those moments reflecting in the sunlight, and then returned to his work. Beats bein' home, he told himself, dragging the barrel into the shed. As he turned the corner to the left behind the shed, he could see two men arguing. The one in the gray suit and wingtip golf shoes was pointing up at the telephone poles that ran along Silver Lane, about fifty feet away. Chuck recognized them as friends of Acky. The other man was sucking the smoke from a cigarette while shaking his head. The one yelling was Frank Granato. He was a bookie and powerful mob boss who ran half of East Hartford's organized crime. Most of his money was made legally from owning all of the cigarette vending machines in the Hartford area. The other man

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was Morty White, a shrewd gambler who would make a bet on anything, but unlike Granato, Morty White played only when the odds could fall in his favor. Granato was even more profane, and a much more avid gambler. He once lost ten thousand dollars on a horse who was a "sure thing." The horse dropped dead of a heart attack, ten feet from the finish line because it was drugged with more than it could handle.

As Chuck turned his head away and continued back to his seat, he caught the wave of Granato, motioning him in their direction. Being in contact with such men as these on a regular basis, he knew not to ignore them.

"Hey kid!" yelled Granato, "I need a favor."

"Yes sir?" Chuck began to sweat, tugging at the bottom of his t-shirt until his knuckles turned white.

As he said this, Morty White reached into his front pocket and handed Chuck a hundred dollar bill from a money clip. Granato shot an intense stare at his friend Morty White and proceeded to do the same.

"Walk over to that pole and pace off the distance between 'em," said Granato sharply, pointing to the telephone poles.

"Go make me some money kid. This fuckin' guy don't know what he's talkin' about," said Morty White with a confident smile.

Chuck began to pace the distance between the poles. His heart was now racing, and his fists were clenched. He was holding in his right palm, with whatever strength he had, more than a month's worth of pond dives and ball-barrels. He could not help experiencing a catastrophic sensation that crept inside his intestines and forced its way through his chest, releasing itself as a throbbing pain in the muscles in his neck. One man was going to lose this bet and Chuck was going to be the one to tell him the news.

He reached the opposite pole, turned to the men and raised his sunken eyes to meet with theirs. "Well kid? Let's hear it." Granato could not wait to hear that he was right.

"Thirty yards Mr. Granato." As he said this Morty White

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motioned Chuck to walk back toward them.

Granato marched over to one pole, with putter in hand, and snapped it in two as he screamed, "You mother fucker!" Chuck and Morty White stood for only a few seconds in silent bewilderment before walking over to the parking lot.

"Come with me kid," said Morty White, wrapping his arm across Chuck's shoulders. He walked him to his car; a shiny black Cadillac that reflected the silver sun from every inch of its chrome. Granato had jumped into his car and screeched onto Silver Lane before they had reached the parking lot. Chuck handed him the money and nodded without saying a word. Morty White looked at him with a half smile, the other half of which was misunderstanding. "Listen kid, don't ever listen to a word Mr. Granato tells you. Just stick to Morty White's word and you'll be alright."

"Yes Sir."

"You take the money kid, I didn't win it fair anyway. Morty White always wins." The smile widened as he spoke to Chuck. "When you bet on someone, always know who you're dealin' with. You got me kid?" But instead of handing him the money, Morty White turned his body to face a car that pulled into the lot and parked beside him.

Morty White leaned his head and nodded in acknowledgment of some unspoken words and sat himself in the car's passenger seat. They drove away as Chuck watched the sun spray off the Chrome trim like untamed sparks.

Chuck returned to his work. There was still more to be done and few hours left in the day. They had done so much before the sun set behind the trees and left shadows in its wake. He walked down the line of tees, towards the ball shed where Acky was waiting. He grabbed the stack of metal baskets from Chuck and winked.

"You're a good worker kid, best I got." His voice was so high, it came out almost as a shriek. "Now if you could just rub some of that off on David, I could get more rest at night."

"Thanks Acky but I'm just doin' my job."

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The moonlight was strong, giving the night a gloomy essence. A few sharp lights reflected from the shed, cutting Acky's face down the center. "Dinner's in a half hour, so let's me and you go play some cards. Franky and Morty and his boys are still at it in the shed."

"Actually I was thinkin' that I would go home for a minute before I ate." Chuck said with an eagerness that he had never associated with his home. "I gotta catch my mom before she's off to work."

"Oh sure," said Acky, with a wink. "Hop in the truck, I'll drive ya down there."

Chuck nodded in thanks and walked with him to the truck. They hopped into the cab and Acky grinded the ignition. As they crept onto Silver Lane, Chuck peered eagerly out the front windshield. He loved to see the streets at night. Everything was so strange and interesting, and the people all seemed so timid. There was a new, brightly lit shopping center to his right, where people were scattering to and from their cars, afraid of what could be between. He looked back to the road and saw his house. It was only 8:30, and he hoped his father would not be home yet. He hoped he would be at the bar still, wasting the money his mother was earning at Pratt and Whitney. And as he sat in the truck, he was hoping his mother would still be there, so he could remind her of tomorrow, so she would know how much it would mean to him.

Acky's voice snapped him from his anxious gaze: "You know Chucky; if there's ever anything you need."

"I know Acky, thanks." Chuck was too proud to ever ask him for anything and Acky knew this.

The truck pulled into the driveway and Chuck ran to the door. It was the first of three doors on the left side. The others were to the upstairs apartments where two other families lived. He walked in and heard nothing from the vacant rooms. The spilled whiskey and the glass bottles had been cleaned, but his father had not moved from the couch. This time he was asleep on his back, in a stained white tank top and boxer shorts. Without waking him, he walked past, determined and eager to find his mother. He opened the door of his parents' room

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to find it empty. The only movement was the dancing of a curtain in front of an open window. The light bled through and reflected off of the small oak dresser that stood beside the bed. The rest of the room was dark and he did not stop to find a lamp. A bankbook lay on top, with papers tucked between its pages. He crossed over the hardwood and picked it up. Chuck knew he needed a withdrawal slip for he and his mother to bring to the bank. He flipped the pages to find the unused book of deposit slips. His head began to pound and a film of sweat had formed above his brow. There was only a small thin, handwritten teller's slip. It was dated the day after he had made the first deposit with his mother, and it showed a closed account. He glanced across the top of the dresser and stared in the mirror. His eyes began to swell and his vision was blurry; there was no expression on the face he saw before him. He just stood there without movement and without emotion. He did not know how to react to the absence of life he saw before him. His heart had slowed and his neck grew tighter as he clenched his fists and swallowed what he could of the thick pain in his throat.

He sat back down and looked into the blackness outside the truck. He rolled the window down as Acky worked the wheel. Chuck reached his hand into the air and settled it across the door-panel. He felt comfortable at the loneliness he shared with the night and smiled across its streetlights and flushed windows.

"I'll be at work all day tomorrow, my mom changed her plans," Chuck said never looking at Acky, but still focused on the night.

"Ok kid," Acky paused, "there's always barrels waiting for ya. You know that." The truck was stopped but Chuck still sat in the cab, his arm fixed to the door.

