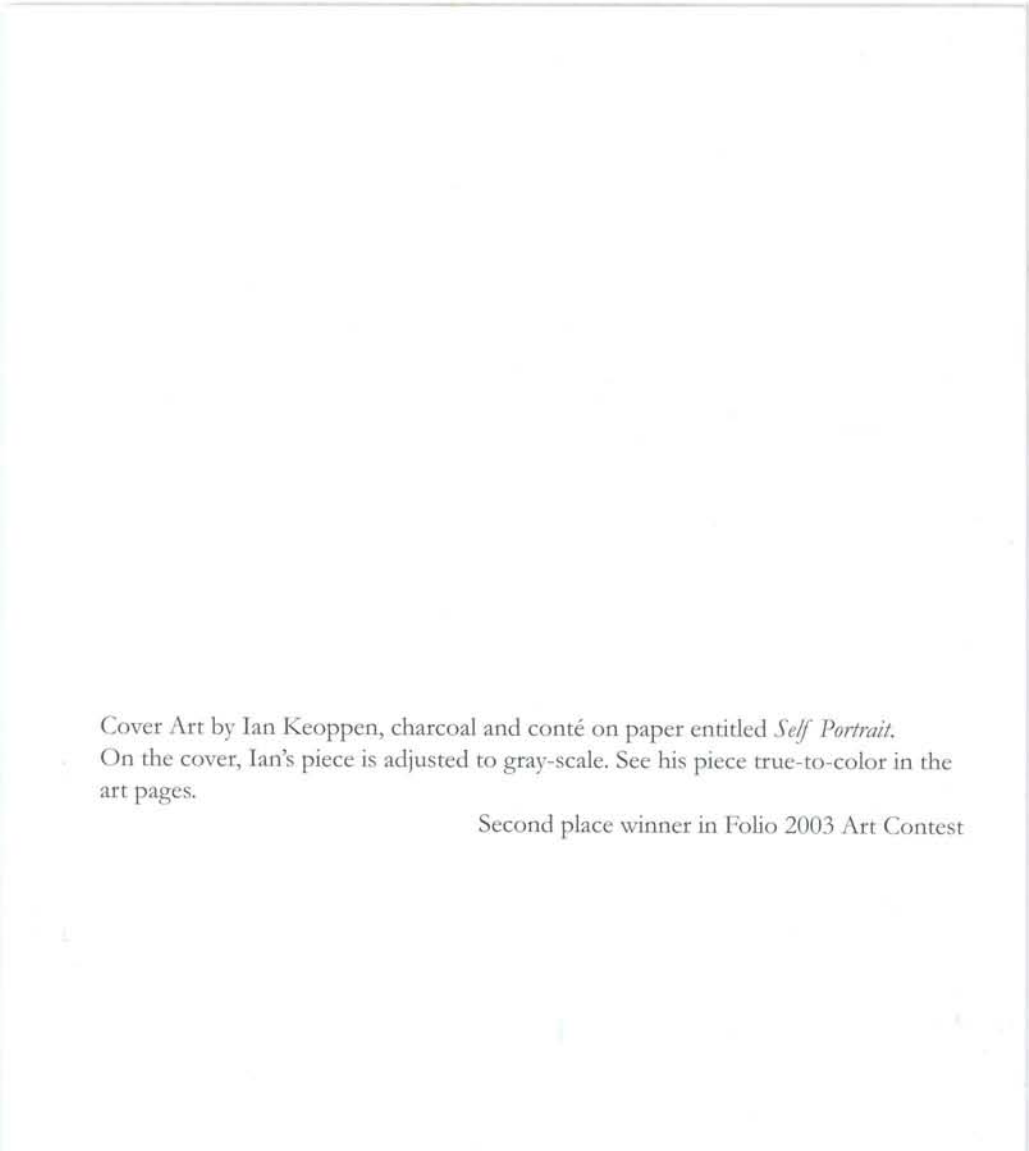


Folio  
Art and Literary Magazine

Southern Connecticut State University  
501 Crescent St  
New Haven, CT 06515  
203-392-6936  
[www.southernct.edu](http://www.southernct.edu)



Cover Art by Ian Keoppen, charcoal and conté on paper entitled *Self Portrait*.  
On the cover, Ian's piece is adjusted to gray-scale. See his piece true-to-color in the  
art pages.

Second place winner in Folio 2003 Art Contest

## Folio 2003

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## Publication

The work that appears in this year's *Folio* was selected through a process of blind judging by volunteer students. The Editorial Board reviewed -- using the input of the volunteer judges -- and narrowed the selections workshop-style. All pieces chosen for publication were entered in the *Folio* annual writing contests. The Judge for Fiction was Bruce Machart, and the Judge for poetry was Constance Crawford.

The Art contest included all works submitted, and was juried by Elinor Buxton.

Submission to *Folio* is open to all SCSU students. Manuscripts are accepted September through the first week in December. Art is accepted September through the end of November. A second round of submissions may be solicited at the discretion of the *Folio* Editorial Board. Guidelines are available by calling 203-392-6936, or e-mailing [FolioMagazine@hotmail.com](mailto:FolioMagazine@hotmail.com), or from the English Department.

## Featured Readers

Jennifer Holley, Mike McLellan, Jeff Voccola, David McMahan, Stacy Vocasek, Mike Hemmencorpse, Josh Gister, Meghann England, Pat Bjorklund, Julianne Coté

## Featured Artists

Julianne Coté, Noelle Weimann, Lisa Anamasi, Andre Eamiello, Larissa Hall

## Featured Bands & Performers

Noisette, Bludhruxm, Left & Right, Tyler Trudeau, Erika Netter & Jay Sasso,  
Cooler Kings

## Judges

### Folio Fiction Contest 2003

Bruce Machart's fiction has appeared in many fine literary journals, including *Story*, *Zoetrope*, *Five Points*, and *Glimmer Train*. He has received a grant from the Ohio Arts Council and the Tennessee Williams Scholarship from the 2002 Sewanee Writers' Conference. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and listed among the "Distinguished Stories of the Year" in *Best American Short Stories*. Mr. Machart earned his M.F.A. at Ohio State University and recently moved to Boston where he teaches creative writing and literature.

### Folio Poetry Contest 2003

Constance Cannon Crawford holds four associate degrees from Harrisburg Area Community College (Harrisburg, PA). Her degrees are in Communication and the Arts; Education: Social Sciences; Executive Secretarial Sciences; and General Education), all with highest honors. She is a non-traditional senior in the Honors Program at Penn State Harrisburg, working toward a Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities. Her prize-winning poetry and prose has been published in such magazines and journals as *Cat Fancy*, *Cats*, *Prize Winning Poems* (a publication of the Pennsylvania Poetry Society), and *Tarnhelm*, Penn State's literary journal. Constance served as editor for the Cumberland Humane Society newsletter for six years, and as staff editor for *Tarnhelm* for three years.

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 *Prarie Schooner*, the *Sonora Review* Poetry Prize from the University 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 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 has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

### Folio Community

Folio is an active club on campus. Each month's Folio sponsored reading spotlights several student readers, a student music group, and a student visual artist. These readings compliment the English Department Reading Series, sponsored by SCSU's Creative Writing Department. Bringing such a varied population of readers, writers, faculty, staff, and thinkers together creates a sense of community among our local and university writers.

The fabulous writers and teachers in the Creative Writing Department are the foundation of Southern's writing community. Folio's growth as an organization and a magazine has been possible because of the support of Professors Megan Macomber, Jeff Mock, Tim Parrish, and Vivian Shipley.

Many, Many thanks to SCSU President Michael Adanti, Vice President Phil Smith, *Connecticut Review*, and the Media Board. We are also indebted to Vice President David Pedersen, Vice President James Blake, Dena Richard Farricelli, and Dean DonnaJean Fredeen for their recognition of Folio as an active part of SCSU's writing program. As in the past three years, this year Folio Editors had the keen opportunity to represent SCSU and *Connecticut Review* at Associated Writing Programs National Conference.

## Special Thanks

in schizophrenic order

Vara Neverow, Alumni Association, Denise Bentley-Drobish, Paul Seringese, Chris Piscitelli, Brad Crerar, Larry Tomczyk, *Connecticut Review*, Kathleen Butler, Vivian Shipley, Student Government Association, Harry & Kathy Line, Jerry Dunklee, Frank Harris, Pat Bjorklund, Jeff Glagowski, Mike McLellan, Brian LaRue, Rex Krueger, Alex Larson, 72 California St., Rachael Vaters-Carr, Sylvia Plath, Anele Harrington, Mike Imme, Jeff Voccola, Claire Criscuolo, Thomas Dorr, Joe Momma, SCSU Police Department and Parking Guards, Bud Diesel, Ed Novotny, Mr. Rogers, Gevalia, Hank Roberts, Tim Parrish, Meghann England, Media Board, Julianne Coté, Carlos Semexant, Dave Corsack, Matt Stevens, Bruce Machart, DeAnna Spurlock, Constance Crawford, Rudy's Bartenders, esp. Jon, Ian, Carlos, Dylan; Mykonos, Bill & Olympia, Basile Jr., The Moms of the OG, Bill Seymour, Dr. Linda Olson, Dr. Rafael Hernandez, Beck, Eric Simms, god, Wendy Weimann, Lander, Shel Silverstien, Dr. Seuss, Marvin K. Mooney, Harry Ragg, All the Prophets, Muses, They Might Be Giants, Ani DiFranco, Dr. Pina Palma, Dr. Jim Rhodes, Paul Simon, The Violent Femmes, *Santa Clara Review*, Rick Blinderman, Jeanne Filek, Shaun Koont, Ellyn Phillips, Stephen C. Adams, Dan Newton, Conan O'Brien, Jack Black, Beth Tinker, Nick Hornby, *The Onion*, Snow Days, Fire Drills, Bjork, William Trowbridge, Erika Dixon, Andreas Daiber, Carolyn Burrows, First Amendment, Flarf, The Owl's Nest, Paul & the Student Center Crew, Art Aducci, Joe Collins, Carl Olson, WSIN, SouthrnNews, Robin Walluck, Dr. Richard Volkman, Dr. Alan Friedlander, Ellen, Jenna & Kenn, Dr. Camelle Serchuk, Dr. Polly Beals, Eric Skelton, Sarah Furgalak, AV Office, Charlene Stack, Syed Hassan, Ken Cook, Jeff Griffin, Ron Dennison, Marie Warner, John Montoya, Darcy Steinke, all the beautiful boys, Jennifer Holley, Dr. Mike Moss, Michael Paolucci, Eliza Triggs, Pilot Pens, Denis Johnson, Kathleen Whipple, Chris 2, and the Dixie Chicks.

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Stacy Vocasek

---

### 1985: A Spy Game

Grandpa fell off the roof last week.

Mama said we were going to spend the weekend with him; a broken leg, arm, collarbone, and some ribs left him in a wheelchair. Grandma and Aunt Marian needed help.

Kerri and I could hear grandma talking to our mothers – *“He’s driving me crazy! I can’t take it anymore!”* Laughter burst from the dining room as grandpa’s voice slipped under the bedroom door, *“Be quiet, I’m trying to sleep!”*

We took grandpa’s wheelchair into the garage, to play, while he was napping. Aunt Marian’s voice, *“It’s not a toy. I catch you two fooling around with that thing and you’ll get the wooden spoon.”* No one saw us take it.

I wheeled Kerri around. We were spies being chased by Russians for a secret we hadn’t

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thought of yet. A crack in concrete forced the chair to flip, landing on me, Kerri's legs splayed in mid-air.

She called my name, I wouldn't answer. The Russians would find and torture us, or maybe Grandma would hear us yelling and tell our mothers. From under the chair, I watched her search, thinking I had hid, never looking under the chair until Aunt Marian stood in the doorway, hands on hips.

Rocky Lungariello

---

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

In Saint Lawrence Parish, Karl consumed the Eucharist like a piece of popcorn, and strolled past the pews to the vestibule, snubbing the font of holy water like some ex-girlfriend. Outside, on the cement steps, he lowered his black eyes and scorned an adorable girl in the arms of a mother.

His car's cold tires chirped out of church and around the Huntington Green. He tossed his cigarette out of his window and headed home with chapped lips. So much for mass serving as some cheap form of therapy.

At home, Karl killed his engine inside the garage while his wife's orange cat waited outside the side door, looking up at him through the glass like a liar—  
didn't even meow.

Don't give me that look, he thought, and went upstairs to fill a teakettle. *Splendor in the Grass* flustered on channel six-hundred-and-thirty-one. Karl undressed and asked Natalie Wood to stop already with all of her weeping. He wrapped a green towel around his hips, gave a thumbs up to Warren Beatty and his masculine indifference, and rushed to the whistling stove, the kettle losing its muscle

as it came off the heat.

He walked downstairs, the hot kettle in hand, back into the garage, where the cat came to his feet, disguising its resentment with some pathetic purring, just to get some dinner. Karl tilted the steamy mouth of the kettle, the orange animal looking up, and really really thought about it.

His vulnerable grasp lost hold of the kettle, even his towel, and the creature took off on the crash. Karl's blood rolled up to his jaw and he stood there naked and empty-handed.

Alison DeBlasio

---

After Asking My Aunt For Dead Uncle Albert's Address

My cheeks were two lumps of red hot coal.  
Five horrified faces stood over me.  
Then I unlaced my  
big black boot,  
and pulled my foot free.  
I rolled my sock off of my  
pink foot and painted toenails,  
and then I was out of control,  
like an addict strung out,  
I couldn't wait  
to taste the salty taste that would slide  
over my tongue like truffles,  
or the teasingly sharp bite of  
untrimmed toenails against my cheek.  
I wanted the scent of salty sweat and  
the inside of leather to  
float around my head like incense.  
I wanted to snack on sock lint.  
I struck an all too familiar lotus-like position,  
knowing that it would not be long before  
my lack of coordination would win  
and I would lose the delectable hors d'hourve.

All We are Saying is Give Peas a Chance

1. 1965

Mom scoops frozen *Birdseye*  
to six of us, ages four to ten,  
squeezed around the kitchen table.  
Dad's moonlighting  
at the textile factory these days.

Mom announces, *No Sloppy Joes*  
*or Popsicles till your vegetables*  
*have disappeared.* Trish drones,  
*Is there any chocolate syrup?*  
*All right, then pass the ketchup.*

Mom pleads, *Offer it up to the souls*  
*in Purgatory. Children in Biafra*  
*are starving.* I think, *If only we had*  
*a dog,* as the cat clock's black  
eyes and tail sway the passing seconds.

2. 2000

I clean my childhood bedroom, dusting  
Popsicle stick animal models I crafted  
in my youth. Mom's cleaning the kitchen-  
one day before their retirement move  
to Connecticut. Her voice shrills,

*Kathleen, come here.* I round the corner,  
find Mom on a step stool just where  
the cat clock had marked our time.

She scoops a mound from wrought iron  
lamp base hanging above where the table  
had stood. Her hand overflows our cache  
of moldy, once frozen vegetables.  
I hide my wooden brontosaurus model  
behind my back.

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---

Leggy in short skirts and stiletto heels.  
Never overweight during the decades she and Ken had been dating.

Didn't she ever grow tired of being with a man who didn't have a penis?  
A man she knew could never have her children?  
They would have had her flawless genes  
Passed down generation after generation,  
Her perfectly penciled-in eyebrows, too-blue eyes,  
And evenly filled out pastel pink lips,  
Would've been seen in them.

I knew she'd never change, but watched through gleaming eyes  
As her head bounced  
Down two flights of stairs,  
Remembering how I smiled through it all.



Getting Heavy

As my mother's Italian right hand,  
I scrubbed lasagna pans,  
picked tomato scabs with my thumbnail,  
the night of the prom, knowing for months,  
she'd keep saying, *Like hell, you'll go.* I ran

a strawberry bath, stepped into the water  
so high I dared it to spill onto my slippers and dirty underwear  
like it did when I leaned back.  
My legs spread water like breath,  
Sighing into the overflow valve.  
Soap beaded the web of fish-belly skin  
between my fingers. And my big toe  
tripped the drain-  
switch to gravity.

Water descended  
in a goose bump shimmy,  
an itch I wanted  
to scratch, cool heat  
like blowing over Chicken Pox.  
A crinoline slip--I imagined,  
under a princess gown,  
falling unzipped,  
setting off my shoulders,

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---

draping the tail of my bone,  
dripping down my calves,  
like silk stockings,  
the way a man might smell.  
I wasn't all washed up--  
just getting heavy  
in the empty tub.

Mike Obre

~Betty H

*ink & dye on photo paper*

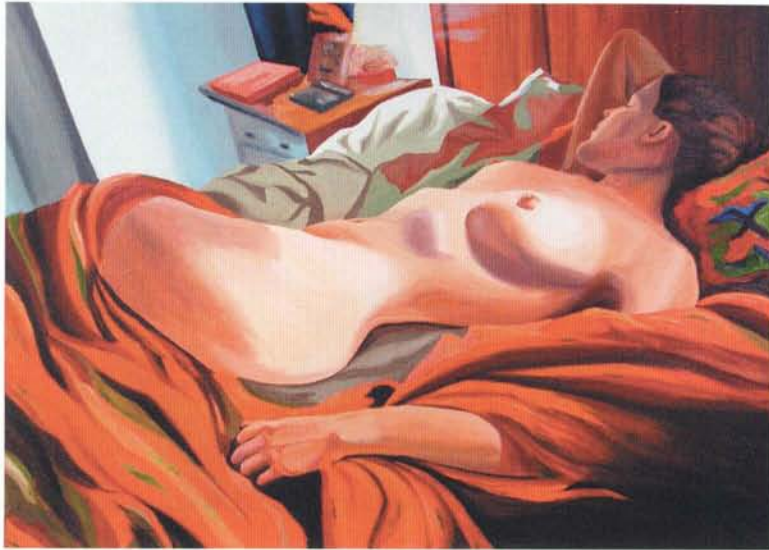


Mike Obre

~Betty A

*ink & dye on photo paper*





Fred Birdschoe

*~Madameoiselle X*

*oil on canvas*



Jeff Glagowski

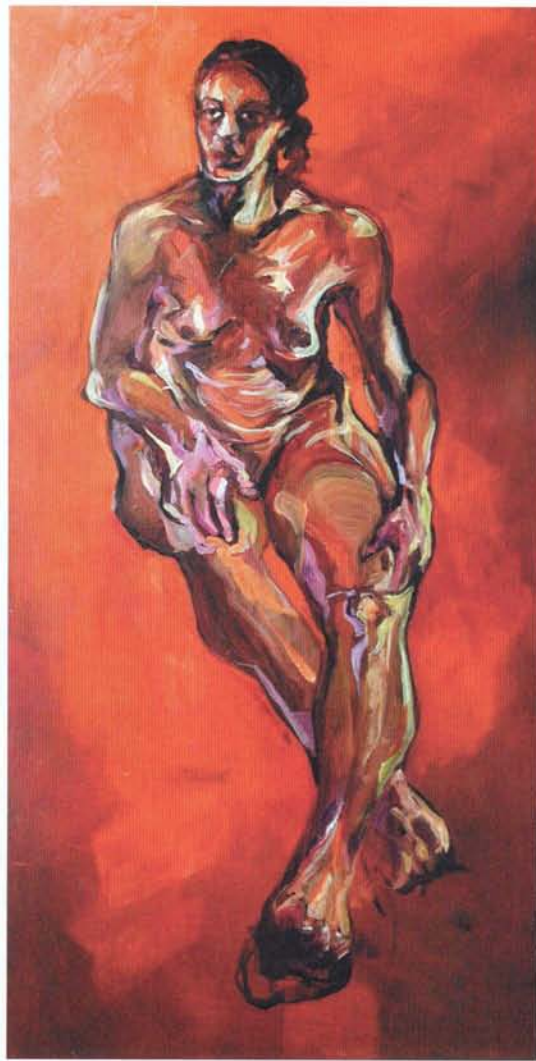
*~Art Nouveau  
Illustration*

*computer graphics*

Mike Obre

*~Figure Study*

*oil on canvas*



Julianne Côté

~Private  
Transition

*oil on wood panel  
double sided*





Julianne Côté

~Private  
Transition

*oil on wood panel  
double sided*





Bruce Graham

~Winged Crater

*wood sculpture*

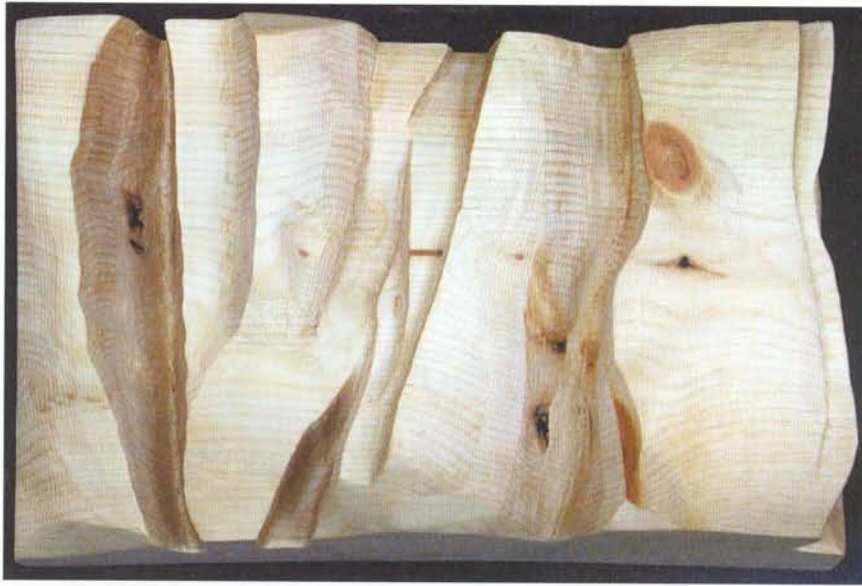


Renee Rossi

~Oxidized

*oil on canvas*





Thomas Greco IV

~American  
Gothic

*oil on canvas  
left*

Lisa Anamasi

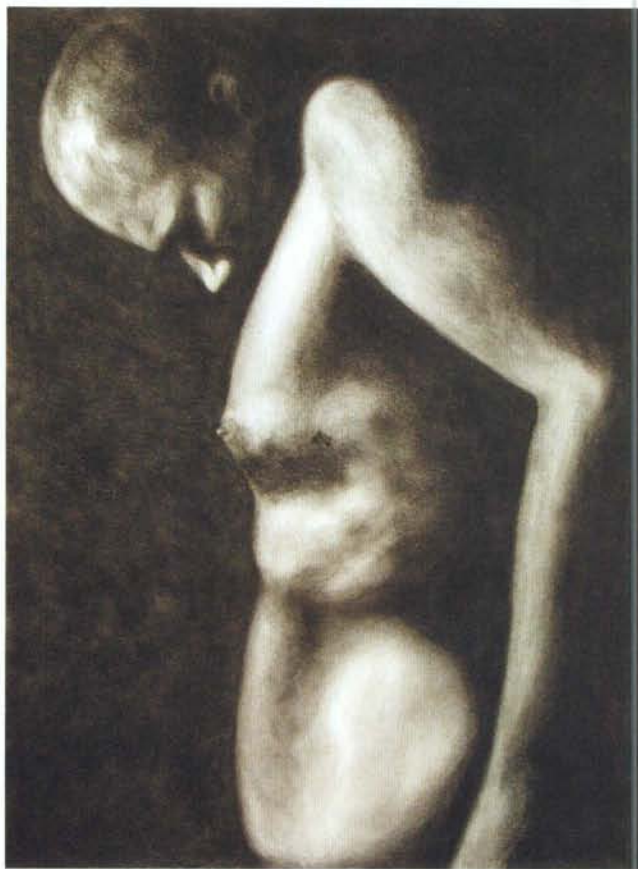
~Landscape

*wood sculpture  
above*

Ian Keoppen

*~Self Portrait*

*charcoal & conté on paper*



Megan Toms

---

Isaiah 53:4, 5

In the dark, dark night  
when the floorboards creak

I watch you from under the stairs

when you softly sneak away  
from that dark, dark door back  
to your dark, dark room

then I move  
with my lockpicking teeth  
and my bright, bright eyes  
and my sharp easy fingers  
and open that door  
that dark, dark door  
and on my knees

I stalk your secrets

crouching behind shaggy winter coats  
knotted in faded scarves  
tangled in moth-eaten wool hats  
twisted into odd mittens  
stuffed down into worn-out boots  
jammed in the pockets of old ripped raincoats

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dried out bones

here is the lover you had when you were nine  
its smooth skull obscenely white

here is the little crooked tibia  
from that time behind the middle school

I will root out these bones  
from behind old roller skates  
propped up just past the rusty golf clubs  
I will search out every fibula  
every scapula  
every sternum  
I will drag out your private pain  
and gnaw it down until I taste  
the stinging marrow of sensitivity

here is the old brittle rib cage from  
that alley behind the bar

that Thursday night  
the left side kicked in

I will grind it to a chalky pulp  
with my strong, neat teeth



here is the tiny spine of that last mistake  
still mostly cartilage  
still faintly stinking of rotten produce from that dumpster  
out by the loading dock  
of the old Sack N' Save

I will crunch it down  
to carry away in my belly

I will pick out every ulna  
every femur  
every last vertebrae  
of these ossified accusations

and when I am done

I whisper  
with my lockpicking teeth  
and my bright, bright eyes  
and my sick heavy belly

'clean'

and creep back to sleep  
under your stairs

He always carried a Roy White model Louisville Slugger,  
chipped and splotted but solid enough.  
Mom, for her part, dragged an ax handle of polished ash.

The bat, driven by the bulk of my father's naïveté,  
fell through the iridescent twilight  
in heavy, deliberate arcs. My mother, now and then,  
interjected with smooth, measured swings of the ax handle.  
Those flashes of willful wood went on for years,  
each solid knock an unforgotten truth...

An education, son, is a stepladder to the top...  
Drive, son, never quit, look out for number one...  
The measure of a man, son, is in his pockets...  
Nice guys, son, always finish last...

I remember the hollow, nearly syncopated beat of the wood.  
I remember the gray mane tangled,  
clotted with sticky blood and massed black flies.  
I remember the frozen curve of the plaited tail,  
graceless against the grass.  
I remember decay pulling back the defenseless lips  
into a graveyard grin, daily growing softer

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and revealing more and more of those enormous teeth.

Over the years I watched the assault  
on those bleached bones,  
thinned to sticks with the seasons and the people.  
When Father died, the coroner peeled back his skin  
and found the letters of my name  
stitched across his heart.  
From the very beginning,  
he doomed me  
to be a better man than he.  
His coveralls went into the incinerator  
with the rest of him.

I have spied my wife from time to time,  
rapping gently with a rubber mallet,  
so as not to break the bones.

My mother, little more than bones herself now,  
still taps at the frame periodically with her cane,  
half-hearted, for convention's sake.

My life keeps leading me back to this place,  
as if by bit, rein, and bridle.  
An empty field. The vague scent  
of copper, blood, decay.  
My sharp suit, a shroud around me.

And the silent bones, the bones  
of our horse, my horse,  
the horse they named for me,  
my poor battered horse named *Succeed*.

---

Julianne Coté

---

Roxiette

She said they called her  
the sweater girl, flaunting  
down 96<sup>th</sup> st., Carona, Queens  
passing oiled crewcuts  
that whistled her bust  
size in grand appreciation.  
I see them lined,  
leaning against concrete  
walls, shoes polished, packs  
of Lucky Strike, Phillip  
Morris, tucked in breast  
pockets. Their stained  
grins brighten to the  
sway of yellow wool hour-  
glass. An unspoiled figure  
nurtured by polenta, and  
weekly beef rations. Her  
sisters Lucy, Josephine,  
and Palma were washing  
dishes to pay her tap-  
dance classes, pooling  
their change for her  
lotto-chance of fame  
by patent leather,  
wearing a way through  
the Roxy Theater.

Second Kiss

~For Lucien

1.

When I entered your French  
Composition class, I gasped slightly,  
stepped back. You weren't  
Madame, the professor  
I expected, who'd stroll the corridors  
donning beret, Marie Antoinette pinafore,  
and eyeglasses that never repeated  
throughout the semester.

You, with salt and pepper hair, white beard,  
wore 1950s style blue oxford button-down  
that repeated itself like a grammar exercise.  
I thought you lacked – *je ne sais quoi?* –  
the pizzazz of your colleague.

You, forty years divorced, clinging to solitude.  
Me, in my prime, and sleeping in fetal position.  
We were strays.

2.

I began planning my outfit  
two days before each class,  
invented questions to sit beside you

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during office hours. You'd talk  
about the Red Sox, chopping wood,  
your Mississippi civil rights work,  
the tenement on East Clay Street,  
oh yes, and direct object pronouns.

I looked up your address  
in the phone book,  
called to listen  
to your machine. So when you  
e-mailed me my final grade,  
I wrote back – asked you for a date.  
I hadn't done that since  
the tenth-grade Turnabout Dance.

3.  
We met under the clock tower  
as it rang one, then drove two  
cars to Kettletown Park.  
Beneath trees to avoid  
rain, we ate brie, paté, and baguettes.  
Then you asked why  
I brought you there. Flattered,  
you deflected  
my admiration – thirty years  
too big a barrier.  
You walked me to my car,

thanked me with blue-gray eyes  
deep, sad. You kissed  
me, chaste as velvet.  
Then, you turned,  
paused, pivoted,  
leaned toward me  
a second time.

Mike McLellan

---

Very Much, A Dog

I need a dog  
very much.

I want a greasy mutt  
who will love me  
more for letting my burrito  
overflow onto the rug.

He will stink  
and drink from the toilet  
and won't let his tail  
hang low when I sin  
or fail without trying.

I need a four legged  
fleabag  
to knock me down  
and look me in the eyes  
with his head turned sideways  
and wonder why I work,  
why I work so hard.



The Waiting Room

A nice obese man who goes to my gym slowly caned in a bumpy lot encompassed  
by too many offices. Here in Commerce Park, patients drive their giant cars  
in heavy circles. He wasn't in much of a rush. "Hi. I know you," and he smiled  
back a yes-

you-do. I showed him a name of a doctor I'd written on shred of yellow paper.  
"Right there, forty-six-ninety-seven," he said, "I was just there." And he

continued waddling. I took his directions; it was a sick Monday, mid-afternoon,  
and he looked like a regular. Inside, the ceilings drooped over the crowded  
hallways,

the Dupont nylon in the commercial carpets blended with the seasoned smell of  
aging.

Tiny old women braced the halls of cheap, pretty wallpaper and I coughed like a  
pierced

muffler, zipped-up my coat, and grabbed the handle of 4697. The receptionist  
smiled

when she saw me, a young man with just a cough. I sat with the other patients,  
most of

them escorted by their sleepy daughters. Everyone sat and waited. I killed time  
with

wrinkled *Reader's Digest* until a nurse came out, as if to tell us what we'd won. And  
the elderly

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couple, who'd been discussing John Ritter's comeback, his adorable new show,  
stood up  
together and like children approached the nurse. The wife's ankles were two  
cantaloupes  
forced into thick brown stockings. When her husband is gone, she'll be one of the  
women  
embracing the dirty hallways, walking half crookedly to her giant car, hoping that  
someone

along the way will at least hold a door. After my Doctor mumbled, "I hope you feel  
better," and hurried out of the florescent exam room, I took my two prescriptions,  
paid my co-pay, and learned two nurses' names. In the waiting room, an anxious  
patient blew her nose with one hand, and used the other to hold herself together.  
Her folded eyes were jealous of me—

her doctor made her wait. I bundled up, went outside, and that nice obese man was  
still there. "Did you find it okay?" he asked.

Aquarium

The tank flickered blue light through the diamond shaped window of the back door. Kim shoved the door open wide, the cracked lip of weather-stripping raked sand across the floor, plowing work boots and sneakers aside. Mark never left the porch lit. She once sprained her toe, teeing-off on a muddy Timberland. She left her clogs and whatever they were stepping on, tip-toed over to the oak table, plopped down her keys, hearing them fan out as if she'd emptied a pocket of change. Above the sink, the curtains stood still in shadowy folds like the rest of the house. As she reached to open the window, her fingers met the screen with a thump like June bugs. Kim thought to go up and peek on Andy, make sure he wasn't sweating beneath too many covers. With a hand on the banister, she heard the hallway fan click up another notch, and then retreated into the kitchen. Mark was still awake. She'd been mousing around him for weeks, a fact that felt strange and then familiar, like finding the stub of an old movie ticket in pockets she thought were empty.

Kim pulled off her T-shirt, noticing her warm butter smell, then rested the shirt squarely on the back of the chair. She turned and faced the aquarium, inhaling deeply, fantasizing that as the water in the fish tank evaporated, so would Ragu, the last goldfish. He would become a furry cocoon of decay, a cloud of angel hair, cat gut, molding gray and white, until he just dissolved. So it had gone for the hairy blob by the heater that used to be Progresso. Kim tilted her head back, combed both hands through her straight brown hair as if she were heavy, wet, coming up for air.

She knelt into the night light of the five-gallon tank, three gallons down; she followed the dry ladder of algae to where plastic ivy grew a sueded brown life.

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Mossy threads netted the tall tips of grass: purgatory in a snow globe. She stood up, pulled the plastic hinge open and winced-- the smell, like dried turtles. When she was a kid, she'd left them in their island tray too long without fresh water. She used to have the book, *A Turtle's Life*. She remembered the health pages: the pictures of diseases only turtles could get. In black and white photos, the edges of their shells warped and split, the same as house shingles.

From under the sink, she scrounged up a stiff sponge and rubbed a clear spot into the algae. Kim saw miniature lights strung together-- the flash of three baby fish. Ragu charged and they sparked off like fiery ashes from a cigarette flung out on the highway. Kim rapped on the glass, "Hey, hey! Knock it off, big guy." Last time she'd looked into the tank, about a month ago, there was only Ragu. She viewed the babies from several angles, larval slivers of orange pulp. She put her hand to the glass in awe. Then she noticed the moldy filter and thought there was nothing divine about any of it. Changing the filter was Andy's job. The last time she asked Andy why he hadn't changed the filter, he just said, "I don't know, Mom," and drifted back to TV. While she wasn't satisfied with his answer at the time, she understood it was just plain true. Kim tried to view the aquarium like a work of abstract art; she wanted to embrace it as a full-blown truth, an element that transcended judgment. But Kim saw that the last time Andy *had* changed the filter, he'd packed the white wooly fiber on top of the carbon instead of underneath it. She was sure he knew how it was supposed to go.

There was a time when Kim would have insisted that Andy keep up with his chores, do them right. In her vague, yet profound sense of urgency, an instinct like breathing, she felt that she had to keep everything from slipping away; she often appealed to Mark, tried to enlist him. "Look at Andy; look at the tank. What are we going to do?" she had said.

"Not a Goddamn thing," he told her. "Let it dry up. Make it easier to

take to the dump.”

Kim thought about how Andy was not that far past the age when she and Mark had to ceremoniously bury dead fish out back, in bread bags full of water. Just a couple of months ago, Andy yelled at her for flushing the last Black Molly. But she knew that soon he'd wake up to find good old Ragu buoyed over the rock or tangled in the grass like a lure, and it just wouldn't mean much.

She preferred to think about how sparkling and ambitious Andy was last year. For the fourth-grade science fair, he conducted a sensory experiment with Ragu. He taped a ruler to the table and flashed an index-card-sized shark at various distances away from the aquarium. Ragu's sudden pacing, east-west, nose to glass, provided empirical evidence: Andy's fish could see his cardboard predator from a distance no greater than 6.5 inches.

Kim's eyes shifted from the tank to the small antique table next to it. Mark's stuff was piled on top. A nail gun spattered with paint (or was it putty?), a box of nails with an uncrushed cellophane window, and the leather carpenter's belt that she'd bought for him, though for which birthday she was no longer sure. He had asked for it. Each leather pocket on his belt was worn and rounded, every compartment pouting-full with assorted nails, flat pencils, a tape measure.

Kim's resolve to leave things alone felt the same as the urge, when she was six-years-old, not to scratch her chicken-pox. She could get that water sparkling. She could Chore Boy each leaf back to its glazed pink. She could redecorate with rocks and rubber foliage, shift the cloud-resistant sand into benign peaks and valleys, cover the sediment that the filter couldn't pick up with a fresh carpet of neon gravel. She knew the bag of gravel was crunched between the sixth and seventh steps in the cellar. On her way down, she could bring Mark's things back to his tool box, get 'em the hell off her antique table. She stood in front of the

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tank, alternately stepping on the toes of her slouch socks, scratching the back of her neck, wondering if taking a bath in Instant Quaker Oats had any therapeutic value.

Kim woke up on the couch in the spare room to the sound of hammering in beats of five and six, with the stress always falling on the last whack. She dropped her head back into the fleshy arm of the leather love seat. Even with two sets of flannel sheets beneath her, all night she felt as if she were sleeping on a child's mattress, a bed for wetters. She rubbed her throat as she remembered that she dreamt she was being smothered by a plastic toy, a sweaty pink elephant. She thought about the night when they had first moved in, about four years ago; they all slept in the same bed. Mark talked about the landlord giving him the option-to-buy, how he'd already got the "OK" to build a shed, replace the old tinder in back. Mark lit up over his suggestion of garage-like storage. Andy thought it would be his club house. But Mark hadn't even begun to draw the sketches of the shed until last winter, two semesters after she'd started school—and since then he'd stopped talking about buying the place. The blueprint looked tall on paper, like a miniature house with clapboard siding, ornate trim and a high-pitched roof. Mark joked that he would never build anything he couldn't stand up in. The only thing it lacked was windows.

Kim remembered asking him just a few months ago, "Why are you going to build this now? You know we're not staying." Later, she'd asked, "Are you pouring a foundation?" More than once, Kim wondered if she'd be sleeping in it before they actually split up. Mark wouldn't answer.

Kim thought more about what Mark didn't say than what he said. She knew he never believed that three classes could take up so much of her time. The snipes were easy to read, though she'd hadn't found a way to duck and cover. One

night, in the middle of a juicy grilled steak, garlic-mashed potatoes and an organic garden salad, Mark had said, "The only time you cook is when you want to call a 'family meeting,' so you can ask for help around the house."

Andy had been flipping his wedge of steak with a fork.

"I baked a fresh peach pie," she was almost afraid to say.

Andy left the table and went out into the yard.

"Have you figured out how much more *help* you need?" Mark asked. Kim couldn't recall their talking specifically about the time required to get a degree, but wasn't that always implied? She realized that Mark hoped she'd *try* college like it was venison, and it'd be out of her system.

The hammering stopped and it drove Kim out of her make-shift bed. She put on her summer robe, wrapped herself in the lilac-print, cinched the waist as she came down the stairs. The TV blared. Andy sat on the carpet in front of the burgundy upholstered chair.

"Morning, Andy."

He flagged his head toward her, "Mornin'," and then back to David Hasslehoff's talking car.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked.

Andy lifted a cereal bowl from his lap and motioned, as if he were giving a toast. He caught the spoon with his thumb as it slid along the plastic rim. "Next commercial, I'm gonna put it in the sink."

Kim walked barefoot through the kitchen and out the back door. She looked out into the yard and saw Mark, bent over his power-saw. From the corner of her eye she noticed how he didn't look over as she slowly navigated the peeling deck, wary of getting slivers in her feet.

Mark slashed long penciled lines across the plywood as if she wasn't there.

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She watched as he measured, traced, and then made the cuts. She studied his hands. "You do good work," she said. "The pitch complements the lines of the house, the Victorian roof."

"You've told me."

"Is it okay if I just watch?"

He looked past the demolished shed and into the sparse woods as he straightened his back, rolled his shoulders. "I'd rather you didn't."

Kim followed Mark from the grass, up to the plywood floor, tried to move into his line of sight. "What about Andy? We can't just ignore each other."

"I'm not ignoring you." He walked over to the stack of 2x4s, picked one out and carried it back to his plywood workbench. His tongue rested on his lip as he laid the wood down, and as he leaned forward the flat red pencil slid out from behind his ear and dinged against the level. "I have to see what I'm doing here." Mark snatched up his pencil and looked back at his saw.

Kim stared. She sat in the grass near his work table, measured her comments against the beaten look of his hands, hanging at his wrists like dead cats. She thought she forgave Allan for telling her the story back when they were still dating. His father made him drown the month-old litter in a five-gallon bucket. Poor bastards. Allan's pop died of a stroke six months later. Kim spoke between cuts of Allan's power-saw.

"I'm sorry I've hurt you. But I'm hurt, too," she said.

The wood buzzed through, spitting dust before falling from Mark's hands. His fingers curled around the next piece of trim, guiding it into the blade. Kim followed it. A right angle cut, a pointed drop into a cornmeal heap. Long strands of grass popped through the dune of saw dust. The buzz unwound. She felt the gravity.



“Do you realize that you’ve been saying the same things to me nearly every day?” he asked.

Kim felt a trickle on her neck as her eyes fixed on Mark’s bruised thumbnail. She could see the thumb like a black sun over the horizon of his cuticle. Then, a tarnished nickle sitting in the coin slot of a gum ball machine. When she was a kid, how she loved to spin that cold heavy knob like she was twirling a cowboy gun. She rocked back and forth in the grass.

“Yes, I know,” she finally answered. Tight inside her chest, geared for motion, she closed her eyes and envisioned the glass dome, the rainbow bubbles of candy. She felt the colors stir from the inside, the grind of the coin, and she could hear the sound round the alley, two usually three, sometimes more. Like rolling dice, she’d clack them in her hand until they bled sticky colors.

Mark dragged his cuffed sleeve over his sweaty forehead. Bits of sawdust dotted his sunburned face, scattered in his hair, between his lashes.

The screened door squealed open and snapped shut. Andy stepped out onto the deck, rubbing his eyes and stretching his arms as if he’d just walked out of a matinee. “It’s hot. Can we go to Grandma’s lake today?”

Mark said, “Okay, Andy. Pack some towels and give me an hour to button up here.”

If her paper on Blake wasn’t due Monday, Kim thought, she would have asked Andy if he wanted to go to the park with her. Given just another moment she would have proposed another beach day, promised watermelon and potato chips. Quick responses were as difficult as running in dreams: heavy, waterlogged efforts.

Andy flew inside letting the screen door shoot behind him like a cap gun. Mark looked at Kim and said, “Why don’t you come?” She scratched the back of

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her leg through her robe wondering, bug bite or heat rash or that leather love seat?  
“Maybe I’ll come down later,” she said.

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Kim watched through the white kitchen sheers, followed the teal and red strokes of Mark’s and Andy’s T-shirts as they hopped into the pickup truck, the truck backing out into a muted red blur. Kim walked into the bedroom, took off her robe and panties, put on a modest bikini with a small sunflower print, cut-off shorts and a lime green T-shirt. At the computer, she took the old thermal baby blanket off the arm, opened it up, draped it over the seat of the spindled chair and sat down. She picked up her book, glanced at her highlights from an introduction of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience: ...The life of the imagination was more real to him than the material world*. She looked up and noticed the heavy golden drapes— still drawn, radiant amber filling the bedroom like cream soda in a shot glass. She pressed the spine open to see “Little Boy Lost.” She jotted an uneven chain of words across the page: *Boy wears gown—dark sky above him— brighter below— where the words of the poem set like teeth in soil*. Her pen dipped in and out of the binding, to the white space around “Little Boy Found,” *we live in—in-between places- the space where innocence is bound to experience*.

She had to get up and walk around; she wanted—maybe an iced tea. Downstairs, she stopped in front of the aquarium and pecked into the spot she’d cleared. Ragu rammed the mound where the babies had clustered. He snapped at the peppered flakes with his orange-ish red bottom lip; he swallowed and belched pink gravel. One of the babies shared his birthmark, an identical stain that seemed to mildew around its mouth. She felt her feet, bare against the cool linoleum. In the drain board she found the super-sized Batman cup, filled it, added a few drops of Stress Coat and slowly poured the water into the tank. She poured two more

cups of water in. The whirr of the filter softened to a hum.

Kim scanned the kitchen table, shuffled through the stack of Andy's school work until she found his drawing of watercolor fish. Their bodies dripped aquamarine, their penciled smiles, sequined eyes, their crayon-silver air bubbles looked like smoke rings. From the basket of colored pencils and brushes, she found the Scotch tape and stuck Andy's painting to the tank. The pump still didn't function, but the hose touched the water again, and the loose air bubbles activated Andy's art. Wrinkles in the backlit paper flashed like tiny veins of electricity. Kim stepped back against the wall and slid down to the floor. Chin to her knees, she gazed up at the picture.

The sun had fallen below the tree tops. Kim knew the Good Humor truck and the kids on boogie boards would be gone. Mark and Andy probably doubted that she'd show up at all. As she turned onto the dead end, she spotted Andy heading toward her, his blue-and-white striped towel championed over his shoulders. Mark's mother walked by his side, carrying her aluminum parade chair. Kim pulled over and waved as they approached her open window.

"Glad you could make it," Lydia said, kindly. The setting sun angled light across her face, wove through the dipped rim of her old straw hat, leaving a fine, waffled screen across her spotted cheeks. "Mark said you had homework."

Kim hesitated. "Yes. I've been working all day."

"Andy's been in the water so long that his lips turned blue," Lydia said. "We're heading back to the house for a nice hot shower."

Andy's hair dripped like blonde molasses down his forehead, wetting his brow, matting his eyelashes into delicate thorns. Kim leaned out of the car to touch her son. His cheek was cool but his lips didn't look so blue. "You know,

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Andy, it would be nice if you carried that chair up to the house for Grandma,” Kim said with a wink.

“Oh yeah,” Andy said. “Let me get that for ya, Grams.” Andy took hold of the aluminum bottom. He held the chair in one hand, flexed it over his head like a barbell.

“Well, thank you, Andy,” Lydia said. She turned toward Kim. “Mark is still at the lake. You go on down. Take your time. And you’re welcome to stay for dinner.”

“That’s great. I guess I’ll see you up at the house,” Kim said, and blew a kiss at Andy. She watched them pass in her side-view mirror, then shifted back into drive. She rolled into the parking lot slow enough to notice the rumble and scatter of pebbles; bits of early sunset blazed through the dense pines in blinding orange shards. Erratic patches of tall grass erupted through the sand. There was no one, except for Mark, swimming out near the wooden float. He saw her, bobbed up and flagged a wave as if it were possible to miss him. She pulled her sandals off in the car, left them on the passenger seat, on top of her towel, and stepped into the sand. Mark swam ashore slowly, as if he might scare her.

“Did you get a lot of work done?” he asked as he brushed the water off his pale chest with brisk motioning hands.

“Well, enough for today,” Kim said. She unzipped her shorts and let them drop. She tip-toed through the coarse sand and stepped into ankle-deep water.

“Aren’t you going to take off your T-shirt?” he asked.

“I think I’m cold.”

“You’ll be colder with it on.”

Kim looked behind her at the empty beach. “I can’t take it off.”

“Then leave it on,” he said as he met her in the shallow end. He grabbed

her wrist and urged her in further. The water rose to her thigh, seeping up even higher through her dress-length T-shirt.

“I can see right through it, you know,” he said. She pulled the wet shirt away from her waist, dropped her head, tried to see her feet at bottom. “What? Now I’m not supposed to look at you-- notice that you’re beautiful?”

“I’m cold,” she said as the wet cotton crept up to her bikini top. Kim stepped back. She faced the dock, took a deep breath and plunged into the water. Coming up, she whipped her wet hair back and reached for the driftwood crate. As she turned to look, Mark sprang up behind her. She lay back in the water, trying to catch her breath. He placed one hand at the small of her back, the other beneath her shoulder blades, floating her like a child. She stretched her arms out to each side, her shirt billowing in slow motion.

Mark eased his hands out from beneath Kim and let himself fall into a back-float beside her. She felt the force of his weight in widening ripples. A little at a time, they spread out until he held her by just the touch of a finger. She was unsure if they were drifting farther out or closer to shore. Kim thought she could feel the dizzying swirls of Mark’s fingerprints as the sky deepened with the first stars and the water filled her ears.

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### Fish Without A Bicycle

At one much earlier point in my life, I might have been kind of turned on by getting a cheap feel of this wanna-be prom-queen's tits. The odor of half-digested beer in the air and the puke drizzling down her cheek would have overwhelmed that notion even then, even if I was just wearing a pair of swim-shorts and my watch. I reached through the running shower and hauled her limp body out of the half-filled tub, murky with vomit, and onto the floor.

"Someone call a fucking ambulance."

The small group of teenage men huddled just outside the bathroom door, strained to catch a glimpse of her naked body. Someone shuffled away at the back.

I crouched and supported her head in the crook of my arm. She stared straight into my eyes. "How many fingers?" I put up two, waving them slightly when there was no response. A macho "heh" from one of the guys in the doorway, a big football player type, turned my head.

"Dude, Lindsey's *fucked* up." The jock made another "heh" noise and continued staring at her nicely trimmed crotch.

I put her head down on the bathmat as gently as I could, and then stood. It felt awkward with her lying naked on the floor between me and the gawking children in the doorway. There was a towel and a bikini – this girl Lindsey's, I guessed – on top of the toilet tank, next to the shower. I went for it. The contents of the toilet were the same, rich brown-red as the puke drooling out of the side of Lindsey's mouth. I flushed and grabbed the towel, ignoring the bikini as it fell between the toilet and the sink.

"Okay guys, show's over."

I felt like every older brother and father who I've hated for spoiling the

fun in my years of being a kid.

"Shit man, you crazy? She doesn't know we're lookin', so what's the harm?"

I looked at the lust in the eyes of the three foremost boys. Because you're going to fuck her while she's passed out, that's why. I laid the towel over Lindsey's midsection, making sure all the important parts were covered.

"Look, just let her go get her stomach pumped and go home crying to mommy and daddy – or would you rather have her die while you're getting hard looking at her? Mmm, dead girl. Sounds fucking great to me."

Lindsey made a choking noise and I looked over just in time to see her cough a nice pattern of reddish sludge onto the white tile floor and knock most of the towel off in doing so. It looked like someone had flicked a paintbrush with brown paint in it. I covered her back up as the vomit started to dribble down her chin and onto her great tits. A warm liquid flowed against my foot. Reflexively, I lifted it when I realized Lindsey was pissing all over the floor. There was laughter from the door. After a moment, standing there like a flamingo:

"You think that's hot?"

I kicked my foot toward the little shits and sent a few drops of piss flying their way. They shrank back on cue. I slammed the door and slid the puny bolt.

A muffled "Fuck you man!" came through the door accompanied by the bang of someone's foot, or fist. I waited for someone to kick it in.

I didn't want to come to this party; I knew I shouldn't have: homework to do, sleep to get, that kind of stupid thing. Of course, if I hadn't needed to take a piss, this Lindsey chick would have drowned in the shower.

The water was running, but between the loud music downstairs and my own mild buzz, I hadn't noticed when I walked into the second floor bathroom of my friend Jim's house. The clear shower curtain with fish on it was in the bathtub

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with her. The pink-brown water was almost up to her face. This was only the second time I'd been there, though Jim's parents were also gone the other time. The last pool party hadn't quite entailed me defending a wasted teenager from getting raped by her high-school "buddies," though.

I gave up waiting for the jocks to bust the door in just as Lindsey coughed again and splattered my leg with brown bile. She started to wheeze. I closed the toilet lid and sat down.

"Okay, just you fucking wait for the ambulance to get here before you do anything stupid like die, or whatever."

She gurgled. It wasn't exactly the response I wanted, but it would do. The only clothing around was the bikini that lay next to the toilet, so there was no use in looking for a number in a wallet or purse to call this girl's parents. Damn. I don't usually consider myself a great guy or anything, but I knew I'd hound myself with it if I didn't take this moron to the hospital.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" I mumbled, half to her and half to myself.

Lindsey coughed again and took a breath that sounded like a bong hit. Now my other leg had shit all over it too.

Putting my elbows on my thighs, I rubbed my face and tried in vain to stifle the nausea from the smell in the bathroom. From the puke in the shower, it looked like she'd had spaghetti to go with her beer. I thought about writing that down as a recipe for when I had guests I didn't like: take spaghetti sauce, beer, a little stomach acid, let sit for a few hours, then serve warm with white wine and a side of green beans.

I scratched an itch on my leg, but it turned out to be congealing marinara sauce. Puking was one thing, coughing dinner up was another.

Fuck. I hadn't seen anything other than Jimmy's constant supply of weed



in the way of drugs – excluding the keg – at the party and I didn't know what would make someone cough vomit, but whatever was going on I suddenly had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach that wasn't just from being around so much puke.

I looked down at my watch to see how long it had been since I'd yelled about getting an ambulance. I had no clue when that was, so I satisfied myself by guessing: 3:12 am. That means about five minutes. Three minutes for the kid to get the phone, call nine-one-one, tell the operator where the emergency was and what was going on. Two minutes since then. Shouldn't panic yet.

Fuck. It felt a lot longer than five minutes.

Something else struck me as wrong. Some subconscious alarm was frantically ringing but I couldn't figure out what for. It seemed to have something to do with sound; something missing. I got it: the gurgling had stopped.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

I slid off the toilet to my knees next to Lindsey's head and put my ear right next to her mouth. Nothing. I felt around the brown stained skin on her neck for a pulse. Nothing.

I felt dirty. Not the kind of dirty where you're kneeling in piss and vomit dirty, but dirty like *used* dirty. I didn't love this girl. I didn't like this girl. I didn't even *know* this girl – why did I have to be responsible for saving her life? It felt staged, fake – I was on some fucking twisted episode of Candid Camera. What would the viewers think of me if I just left the lovely Lindsey here to die?

Feeling dirty in the puke and piss way, I pulled away the towel and put my head to Lindsey's chest. *Fuck.* The memory of the CPR and rescue breathing lessons from my life-guarding job years ago felt like an imprint of a pen on the page underneath. Make that more like five pages down. I was sure of the first step, at least, and I stared at the two fingers I was going to use to check for a

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blockage in the back of Lindsey's throat like they were an erect penis. This was fucking weird.

I prayed that she would gag when I stuck my fingers down her throat; prayed it was all a stunt this wasted tart had come up with for attention. She didn't. I scooped out a bunch of spaghetti strands, or spaghetti sauce, or something, on the first try, more on the second. Hey, this wasn't so bad.

The smell of rancid stomach hit my sinuses like I'd tried to drink vomit through my nose. I gagged. I flung the toilet seat up and puked my two hotdogs, a burger and a couple-three beers in one giant heave. I half-laughed, half-choked at the irony of puking in the toilet when the bathroom was so covered in puke and piss already. I flushed out of habit and went back to scooping shit out of Lindsey's esophagus.

Two more scoops and I couldn't find anything else in there. Now I had to start her breathing up again like an ancient, rusty lawnmower that was left outside all winter. She's young, this should be easy – like on Baywatch – right?

Straddling her felt distinctly un-sexual. If I had wanted to pay attention to it, I bet I could have felt my balls retreating the instant my knee touched the ground on the far side of her. A few tries placing my hands on her sternum in different ways – one hand on top of the other, sideways, then one hand above the other – and I remembered the way to link your fingers together so both arms could push behind one hand comfortably. As comfortable as it gets, anyway. The muscles in my shoulders and chest contracted and I pushed down. I felt her sternum give a little; then give a lot as the bones broke. My stomach didn't heave, but my mind retreated into a dark, dank hole where analysis was impossible and reflex was king.

The little shockwaves that rippled through her tits each time I forced down dragged me back to what I was doing – counting the compression of this child's chest. That finally made my stomach twist again.

This girl would have been hot. In my bed. After a long, scalding-hot shower and rinsing her mouth out with Listerine twenty times. Sober. Right now she just looked like she was dead.

She was dead. Fucking dead. I knew it. This was always my luck – I get somewhere and am having a good time, then all of a sudden I'm in the middle of something I didn't ask for, didn't want, and certainly don't want to have anything to do with. First it was Jim pressuring me into coming here with all his under-age high school friends, then this idiot girl trying to die on me.

... 3 ... 4 ... 5. Time to breathe. Fuck.

The brown-red puke drooling out of her mouth confronted my stomach like a mouthful of wasabe, or maybe thirty cans of cheap beer, but I pulled off not retching again through some minor miracle. I wiped her mouth off with the towel and stared at the red stains on Lindsey's chin and cheeks. Leaning over, the smell of her mouth made the hair on the back of my neck retract painfully, forcing me to jerk upward and away. People do this kind of shit for a living?

Tilt head back. Hold victim's nose. Open mouth, long exhale into victim's mouth. *Fuck.*

It wasn't as bad as I'd thought. Lifting up to refill my lungs for poor Lindsey, I tasted her puke on my lips and would have happily launched some more burger onto the bikini lying next to me if there'd been any left in my stomach. Instead it felt like I was trying to tear out my intestines through my throat with a wire coat hanger. I coughed up some phlegm and spit it in the tub. The second exhale wasn't so bad -- now that I was getting used to the taste of recycled beer and tomato sauce. I climbed back over her stomach and pounded on her chest. This really isn't so bad. Maybe it'll even work.

I breathed into her mouth again. Her chest rose, but it was forced back down by the fact she was spitting up in my mouth.

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I'd puked water before, and that was bad, but this was worse. Way worse. It was sort of like farts – your own are bad enough, but other people's are terrible. Except this was farting in my fucking mouth.

I turned my head and retched again, trying to get every last organ in my body out through my mouth. Lindsey started to cough. Her hands covered her mouth and she curled into the fetal position.

"What..." she gurgled again and winced. "What the fuck?"

The first thing that came to my mind to respond with was "you're dead, this is hell," but I refrained from sarcasm for once. I was God at that particular moment. My body felt like it was made of white, untouchable feathers.

"You were passed out in the shower, then you stopped breathing." Her eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp again, but I continued anyway, for my sake. "There should be an ambulance on the way, just sit tight and you should be okay." I hoped. Shit, I was getting attached to this little idiot.

A loud knocking on the door stopped me from covering Lindsey back up with the towel.

"Lindsey? You in there? Hon, you okay?"

Nice. I carefully covered Lindsey with the towel. *Now* the responsible party shows up. I stood to open the door. Any earlier and the bolt rocketing through the bathroom would have nailed me straight in the face. Another jock, this one built like a cigarette machine, took a follow-up step into the bathroom to keep from losing his balance. His second step landed in a pile of half-digested spaghetti and he lunged at the counter to stop himself from sliding right into the murky, brown-red water of the bathtub.

"What the *fuck* is going on?"

No-neck regained his balance somewhat and took another step toward me. He somehow seemed to be leaning at a forty-five degree angle, his face an inch

away from mine.

"Man, calm down. I just saved her life, asshole. I came in here to take a piss and she was drowning in the fucking shower. Don't be grateful or anything." The jock's face was turning the color of Lindsey's puke. "I just had to do fucking CPR after she choked on her dinner or something."

"*What?*"

"CPR. Her heart stopped."

"*You did what?*"

"You know, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation? She was fucking dead."

He pushed by me and squatted next to Lindsey like he was going to take a dump to add to the piss and vomit.

"Linz, it's me, Kevin. What'd he do to you? Nick told me you were up here with this guy."

Nick. Probably the guy who'd gone to "get the ambulance."

Lindsey tried to say something, but it came out somewhere between a gurgle and a painful sounding moan.

"Linz, what did he do to you? Linz, Jesus, how much did you have to drink?"

"Look," I said, "her chest is broken – her sternum, or whatever – she needs to go the fucking hospital right goddamn now."

Vending-machine-boy stood up so fast, it was like I'd punched him in the balls. Standing and in my face. I opened my mouth to protest, but just ended up pinned against the bathroom wall by the throat, "You're lying to me."

I made squeaking noises out of my crushed throat.

"I know you're fucking lying to me. You... you fucking rapist. I'm gonna beat the *shit* out of you."

I squeezed the last tiny bit of air out of my lungs into something that

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sounded like, "She's going to die if you don—" before he punched me in the stomach, and let go.

The rush of air into my lungs as I slid to the floor was refreshing enough that I didn't mind the pain in my abdomen. I probably would have enjoyed it if it didn't feel like when you get an un-chewed potato chip stuck half-way down. Dimly, I watched Kevin gather up Lindsey's limp body like he were going to power-squat her. As he turned to fit her through the doorway, he spat a look at me that was not quite as insulting as his preemptive conclusion that I'd raped his girlfriend.

*Fuck.* It was the only coherent thought I had. It felt like the only coherent thought I'd had all night. The fish on the shower curtain, stained with puke, stared at me. I put my face in my hands and took a deep breath. The piss water started to soak through my shorts.

Pushing myself up, using the wall, it felt like my heart was overloaded and ready to explode. Either that or it would just sink down into my stomach to be digested and puked like the rest of the evening.

The two guys at the bottom of the stairs looked at me, the red marks around my throat, my puke and piss stained shorts, then quickly looked away. I felt like I was one of those homeless bums on the streets of New York City or San Francisco. Passing them, I found my clothes and my wallet in the living room where I'd dumped them and stepped out the sliding glass door into the back yard. Jim was making out with some underage hooch on a float in the pool, but other than that, the yard was empty.

"Jim, I'm leaving"

Jim looked up from the girl, who kept her eyes closed and continued making stupid kissy faces.

"I'm kind of busy here, dude. Can't you see that?"

"Fuck you, Jim. Fuck you and fuck your party."

## Last Dance

“Wow,” he said in breathy awe.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. This is your first time in a strip club,” Luke practically shouted. He had to compete with Motley Crue. “Girls, Girls, Girls” blasted through the bar. He shook his head and smiled “Well, don’t hurt yourself Alan.” Alan nodded, only half listening. Other things demanded his attention.

“Excuse me,” came a voice from behind Alan. Turning, he started to apologize for being in the way. The words died in his throat. A petite bombshell took away his ability to speak. Her platinum curls came to his shoulder. She turned her body to face Alan as she squeezed between him and Luke. Her breasts brushed Alan’s arm; the blonde looked up at him from under her eyelashes and smiled. Wrapped in an impossibly tight neon orange cocktail dress she sashayed down the steps and made her way into the main room. Alan’s eyes never left her ass. She wasn’t wearing underwear.

Luke, who’d also been watching that dress, looked at Alan and smiled. “What would Mom say if she could see her baby now?” He said through a grin. “Come on, the other guys’re waiting.” Alan followed Luke down the stairs and into the dance area. The smell of cigarettes thickened the air. Tall tables and chairs cluttered the floor, populated here and there. Girls paraded around the room.

A large “U” shaped stage dominated the room. Men rimmed its perimeter. Dollar bills littered the stage floor. At the center of the dip in the “U,” a silver pole ran up to the ceiling. Colored spot lights shot out from the back of the stage, tinging the stripper, a limber brunette hanging upside-down from the pole, alternating hues of orange, red, and blue. Motley Crue had faded into a nondescript techno dance tune. A volley of “Hey babies” and “God Damns” marked the brunette’s descent to the stage-floor.

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Alan stood staring. He couldn't believe how beautiful the girl was. She moved with a fluid grace that captivated him. The girl on stage looked up, and for a moment she locked eyes with Alan. She flashed him a brilliant smile. Alan found himself wanting very much to ask her her name. A sharp slap in the arm ripped Alan's attention away from the stage.

"Dude," Luke said.

"Wh-Huh?" said Alan. Blinking several times, he looked at who had hit him

"I said I found 'em." Luke arched his left eyebrow, "Jesus man, is this the closest you've ever been to a naked chick before?"

Alan blushed and looked down. He started to stammer. "I-I-"

"Whoa, relax Bro. I was just fuckin' with ya'." Luke put his hand on Alan's shoulder. "Come on. They're over here." Alan let himself be led away from the stage. Following Luke's direction. Alan spotted the guys the other guys at one of the tables off to the side of the room. Not directly in front of the stage, but the view was still good. Three guys, a pitcher of beer, five glasses, and two empty chairs greeted the newcomers.

"What the hell took you guys so long?" asked James putting his beer down, then pushing his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose.

"I had to help this guy pop his eyes back in his head." Luke jerked a thumb in Alan's direction. He climbed into the seat next to James on the far right.

"Hey guys," said Alan, taking the chair on the far left. His eyes drifted back to the stage.

"You had no problems getting in?" asked Mike. He poured beers for Luke and Alan.

"Nah, he used my motorcycle license," Luke answered taking his glass.

"Yeah," said Alan taking his without looking at it. "The guy at the door



hardly even looked at it.” He took a sip of his beer. “Hey, Ed,” he said, leaning forward to see around Mike; he spared Ed a glance. “Congratulations.”

Ed, the guy in the middle, swung his head, unsteadily, in Alan’s direction. “On what?” He asked a little too loudly.

“You’re getting married on Friday ya’ freak,” said James, as he emptied the pitcher into Ed’s half full glass.

“Oh.” Ed took a swig of his beer. “Thanks man,” he slurred. “I’m a lucky man. She’s a great woman that...” Ed furrowed his eyebrows in concentration. “What’s her name?” The table erupted with laughter. Alan’s decrescendoed to a chuckle as he brought his attention back to the stage.

The girl began making a slow circle. Her right hand strayed on the pole. Tiny streaks of moisture dulled the gleam of the metal only to evaporate an instant later. Alan watched rainbows glint off the gloss of her nails and imagined the warmth that ebbed from her fingertips.

“...down, and one to go,” came a voice grabbing at Alan’s attention. He saw James look pointedly at Luke, who rolled his eyes.

“Look,” he said, a shit eating grin plastered on his face, “Just because you guys decided that your lives were over...”

“Kiss my ass,” Mike said while trying to swallow. He wiped beer from his chin with the back of his hand. He smiled and looked at Luke. “You couldn’t get a woman to stay with you if you paid her.” Alan looked back to see the girl on all fours gathering the dollar bills on the stage. Her hair curtained her face. Alan looked back to the guys.

“Hey that’s not fair,” broke in James. He pointed a thumb at Luke. “He’s paid plenty of women to stay with him.” He watched the guys laugh at each other. Ed looked like a bobble-head doll watching a tennis match. Alan gave a weak chuckle.

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A voice boomed out from above. "Gentleman, that was the lovely Savannah! Now, let me hear you guys give it up for Diamond!" The other guys turned their chairs out to get a better view. Alan whipped his head around. She was gone.

A new stripper slinked onto the stage. Alan searched beyond her for Savannah, but soon realized it was useless. The same techno music started up again. Diamond wore a black leather bikini top and matching g-string. Her skin, a milk chocolate brown, refused to pick up any of the color from the rainbow lights. Bleached blonde hair stood out in stark contrast. Her long lean frame didn't need the lift it got from her black elevator heels, but it was appreciated nonetheless. Alan listened to the catcalls that shot from the crowd.

He slumped back in his chair, as she began to dance. Slowly, painfully slowly, Diamond began to peel away what little clothing she wore.

"Care for a dance?"

Alan jumped. He hadn't noticed any one come up on him. He turned in his chair.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," she said. "My name is Savannah."

Alan looked into the eyes of a raven-haired catholic schoolgirl, except any girl who went to school dressed like that, Alan imagined, would be expelled. Her hair spilled behind her narrow shoulders. A confining white shirt tied across her chest, revealed a tiny ring protruding from the center of a toned belly. And that she wasn't wearing a bra. Her red plaid skirt, cut dangerously short, did a little better at keeping Alan guessing about her panties.

"Did you want a dance," she asked again.

"Sure," came his awkward reply. Savannah flashed him that same brilliant smile and laced her arm through his. Alan looked over his shoulder, as he was lead away. Luke winked at him. Savannah towed Alan to a spot in the corner of the

other end of the room. Velvet rope sectioned the spot off from the rest of the room.

“It’s twenty dollars,” Savannah told him. Alan fumbled in his pockets and produced all the money he had: thirty dollars. He handed Savannah the twenty. She smiled again and took Alan by the hand. She led him past a slab of man who eyed Alan through narrowed lids. Savannah stopped when she found a chair. Two other guys were getting dances on either side. “Go ahead and sit down,” she instructed.

Alan did as he was told. He plopped into the seat. Savannah looked down at him and said, “I need you to scoot your butt forward a little bit.” Again Alan did as instructed. He brought his hands up and rubbed his palms on the tops of his thighs. “You need to keep your hands down here,” Savannah said, a little tersely. As she did she guided Alan’s hands to the bottom of the cushion on both sides of the chair.

“Sorry,” Alan said. He licked his lips.

She flashed him a tiny smile. “Showtime,” she said. Alan watched as she parted his legs and knelt between them. Savannah’s fingers danced across the knot in her shirt. Slowly, she pulled it open. She looked up at Alan through her eyelashes, and shrugged out of her shirt. Placing her hands on the top of his legs Savannah pulled herself up Alan’s body. She brought her breasts past his face. Her perfume tickled his nose, making him inhale deeply. She smelled like coconuts.

Savannah stood up. Turning around she slid her skirt off, and kicked it to the side. She did the same with her thong. Alan’s hands clenched the sides of the seat. She faced him again. Alan stared at her tits. Savannah put her hands on the tops of Alan’s thighs and began tickling him with her hair, dragging her head all the way down his body to his lap. Alan swallowed hard. His head drifted backwards and he closed his eyes. Almost immediately he snapped them back open. He didn’t

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want to miss a second of this.

Savannah slithered back up his body, and straddled Alan's right leg. She started riding him. Alan's breathing became rapid and shallow. He felt her mouth at his ear. She started to moan, her breath hot on his skin. Again, he licked his lips. This was amazing. She was amazing. Alan knew that she was enjoying this as much as he was. She had to be. He felt a tiny nip at his ear.

"Do you want another one?" Savannah asked in a husky whisper.

"I-I don't have any more money," Alan answered, his own voice breathless.

"Oh," she said, her voice much stronger now. "Maybe next time." With that Savannah dismounted and unceremoniously got dressed.

Alan's insides lurched. He had a feeling very much like the time he slammed his car to a stop to avoid a kid who ran into the road. Sitting up, he tried to slow his breathing. He forced his fingers open, one at a time, and released the sides of the chair. His knuckles showed white. Savannah finished getting dressed, and turned to leave.

"Wait," Alan said reaching out his hand. Savannah turned back. Her arms folded across her chest. She wore a questioning look on her face. Alan knew what the question was. Did you find more money? "I-uh I just wanted to tell you you're beautiful." Alan heard his own voice, and knew how lame he sounded. Savannah smiled at him. But the smile was different some how. It didn't sparkle. It reminded Alan of the smile he got from the teller at his bank.

"Thanks," she said. With that Savannah turned and left.

## Night Visions

The first time I saw her, it was four o'clock in the morning and I couldn't sleep. A loud catfight had jolted me out of bed and I was sure that the wretched screaming was coming from my two children. Terrible images crashed through my head as I fell out of bed; my girls being kidnapped through their window, my girls suffocating in their sleep due to some throat-closing disease they had contracted at the playground. When I pushed their door open, they both lay peaceful and still. I leaned into Jessica's crib and waited until her damp breath reached my cheek. Rachel was in her bed, her legs twisted in the sheets, both arms flung above her head like she was doing a swan dive into a deep blue pool. Her breathing was loud and purposeful.

I closed their door and tiptoed back to bed, careful not to wake Mark as I snuck back under the sheets. He was lying facing me with his hands under his cheek. He looked like an innocent altar boy, his dark hair slightly disheveled. We didn't close our windows or curtains in the summer and in the moonlight, I could see his black eyelashes fluttering under the weight of an eventful dream. I wondered if I was in it. Even after seven years of marriage, Mark still appeared in almost all of my dreams.

I couldn't fall asleep so I slipped out of the sheets as quietly as I could and eased out of the bedroom. I walked down the stairs and decided to go outside and listen to the night. It was July and summer at night in the Midwest was always the loudest time of the year. When I was a little girl, I would lie in bed, still as I could, and concentrate on the chorus of grasshoppers and cicadas that muted the noises in my house. The television, car doors slamming, even my parents' loud voices were no match for their collective song.

As I padded, barefoot, onto the back deck, I saw the shadowy figure of a

little bit crazy out there on the lawn, drenched and rocking herself.

I scooted forward to get a better view but my hand slipped. I banged my elbow on the bench and held my breath, hoping she didn't hear the noise. She turned and looked in my direction. I ducked my head down. Our houses weren't more than thirty feet apart. There was no way I would be able to move without her seeing me. I stared at the bench, my nose nearly touching it, and kept as still as I could. After a while, I slowly looked up and she had turned around and resumed her rocking. One inch at a time, I moved off of the bench and sat down under the table. I figured if I couldn't sleep, I might as well sit outside and spy on the neighborhood's new crazy lady.

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When Mark and I bought this house, we had been married for two years. We had spent each day since the honeymoon saving for the down payment. We lived in a small studio apartment with almost no heat and ate Ramen Noodles, our only consolation the weekly monitoring of our growing savings account. It felt so fantastic and responsible and adult when we finally had the money and found the house. We threw a housewarming party before we even had furniture. Our friends sat on milk crates and unpacked boxes and drank beer from the bottle.

But about a year after we moved in, Mark kissed another woman. He said it happened when he was drunk at a bar and he probably wouldn't recognize her if he saw her again. When he confessed over coffee on a Sunday morning, my initial reaction was indifference. Then I began to cry. He tried to comfort me but as he held me all I could envision was his arms wrapped around someone else so I pushed him away, picked up my coffee cup and threw it against the wall. I ran upstairs and locked myself in our bedroom. Every twenty minutes or so, he would come to the door, weakly knock, call my name and apologize. At about noon, after I got hungry, I unlocked the door. I let him in and told him I just needed

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time and not to talk to me. When we went to bed that night, he told me that I was overreacting. "Watch it," I said, "I haven't decided whether I'm going to leave you yet."

After a few days of contemplating leaving him, or worse, him leaving me for her, I became obsessed with finding out who she was. The bar that was the scene of the crime stood less than a mile from our house. For about a week, I spent my evenings sitting on a bench across the street from the bar's entrance. Mark never knew this, but I would watch every woman who went inside, imagining that she was the one who had kissed my husband. There was one pretty brunette that I was especially suspicious of and whenever I saw her go in, I would yell, "Slutty bitch!" from across the street and then duck behind a bush when she turned to see who was yelling. But after a while, I just got tired of the sick feeling in my stomach and stopped the stakeout from across the bar.

It was right after the surveillance stopped that I found out I was pregnant. Before Mark's tryst, we had decided to start trying to conceive. I had been ready for at least a year but Mark insisted that we wait. He said we didn't have enough money. He said he wanted to take one last trip to Europe. He even said he wanted to get really wasted one last time. I laughed and said he could do it while I was pregnant, that I would have fun watching him puke the next day. Finally after two of his friends' wives got pregnant, he agreed that we could start trying. Now that I look back on it, I wonder if our agreement to try to get pregnant was what made him kiss that woman. After he told me about her, I was so thrown that I forgot we had begun to try. That is, until I realized that the week prior, the week I'd spent staking out the bar, should have been the week of my period.

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By the time I woke up the girls, I already had their breakfasts ready and their clothes from the laundry folded and set out. I hadn't slept since the catfight

and I could feel the fatigue pulling under my eyes.

“Morning Rachel-bird,” I said, kissing her forehead. She grimaced and smacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Her old soul especially came through in the morning as she slowly rolled around in her sheets, protesting my wake up call. Her high-pitched, three-year old energy would only slowly kick in after this long, quiet morning routine.

I looked into Jessica’s crib and she was awake but not crying.

“Well hello, angel face. Listening to the morning birds?” I whispered. I picked her up and carried her on my hip into my bedroom to change her diaper on the bed. Mark had just finished his shower.

“Where were you this morning?” he called out from the bathroom.

“Couldn’t sleep. I’ve been up since about three.”

“Wow,” he said, toweling dry his hair and walking into the bedroom.

“Take a nap today when you put the girls down for theirs.” I laughed, puffing air out my mouth. Mark had no idea how much work I had to do around the house. I tickled Jessica’s belly and she giggled.

“Oh my god, Mark,” I said, remembering the woman in the lawn. “I saw the new neighbor woman out in her yard at four in the morning. She was just sitting in the grass all crunched up in a ball.”

“What?”

“Yeah. She was out there for a good two hours. She was only wearing her nightgown and was rocking back and forth. And when the sun started to come up, she just got up, walked up the back steps and into the house. It was the strangest thing.”

“Great. A new set of freaky neighbors.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” I said, chuckling from deep in my throat.



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That day, after I returned from grocery shopping with the girls, I heard the neighbors fighting. I tried to eavesdrop as I lifted Rachel out of her car seat. She ran to play on the swing set and I yelled after her to be careful. Jessica was asleep, so I opened all the car doors and let her snooze while I unloaded the groceries. As I leaned into the trunk, reaching for a big box of laundry detergent, their voices drifted out through open windows. They were unmistakably angry. I leaned my ear towards their house. It was difficult to understand what they were saying except once he yelled, "No! You're wrong!" and then she said, "Bullshit! Fuck you! I saw you with her!" My first reaction was to smile. I suppose it was because their fighting sounded so familiar to me. But as I stood in my driveway holding the heavy box of detergent, the memory of Mark's kiss hit me like it happened yesterday. My stomach turned. Then the neighbor woman yelled, "No! I don't believe you!" Her voice was thick from sobbing. She sounded so much like me after Mark confessed his infidelity. And Jenny said they had just been married. Poor thing.

Their front door opened and I heard her scream, "Ass hole! I fucking hate you! Go to hell!" She ran out onto their front walkway, only a few feet from where I stood, digging in her purse for her keys. When she noticed me standing there, she put her head down and said, "Sorry" through her long brown hair. When she reached her car, she still hadn't found her keys and her thin arm darted madly inside her purse. "Fuck!" she yelled. When she finally found the keys, she jumped in the car and was out of their driveway in one swooping motion.

Her husband came out as she drove away. He stood on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips. "Shit," he said, as her car squealed around the corner. I turned around and was pretending to be reaching in the trunk for something when I heard his front door slam.

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Later in the afternoon, when I picked up a plant from the windowsill to water it, I noticed that her car was back. I grinned and hoped that they were inside having wild makeup sex. When I brought the plant back to the window, I paused when I noticed that his car was not in the driveway. I felt let down and worried for her, thinking of the one time Mark left me. It was before he kissed the other woman, back when I was so in love with him that I thought I would disappear if he left me. After a fight, he said I was suffocating him and then he left for two days without even a phone call. I just sat at home and cried. I missed work and spent both days making a list of ways to be less dependent on him. The list was eight pages long by the time he returned. I sheepishly presented it to him, hoping that my hand-written plan to change would win him back. He laughed when he read the list, shaking his head and smiling. He asked if the smeared spots were from teardrops and I nodded yes. Then he said he missed me while he was gone. I signed the list in red pen and he thanked me and then we had sex.

As I put Jessica in her play-chair, I wondered if I could help this woman. Maybe I could share my story and help her through this. I turned on the television for Rachel and went to the kitchen to microwave a cup of water for tea. I thought about what I would say to the neighbor, what advice I would give. But the only thing I could think of was, *Wait. Don't give up yet.* As I cursed myself for thinking up such useless advice, I dropped the counseling idea. Surely she didn't want my advice, the advice of some long-ago-scorned housewife from Ohio. The microwave beeped, indicating that my water was hot.

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That night at four AM, I woke up again. No catfight this time, just wide-awake and frustrated. I tossed and turned, sighing loudly until Mark said, "What," his voice frustrated and deep from sleep. "What is your problem?"

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“Sorry,” I said, slipping out from under the sheets and leaving the room. I walked to the bathroom and bunched my nightgown up above my waist and sat down to pee in the dark. I kicked my panties off onto the floor and decided to leave them off. It always felt so airless down there.

When I stood up to wash my hands, I looked out the bathroom window and saw her. She was lying down this time, spread eagle in the yard, wearing the same thin, white nightgown. Peering down on her from the second floor, it looked like she was smiling. Laughing almost. I smiled too and turned my head to the left in an attempt to look at her right side up. She looked like Ophelia in the stream, wet with dew and nearly enveloped by the earth. I had to get a closer look.

I went out the front door so that I could walk around the house and reach the deck unnoticed. My eyes were wide in the darkness as I tiptoed barefoot across our front lawn. I looked up and found a narrow sliver of the moon. It appeared to be rocking back and forth across the sky. I could hear nothing except the crickets and a distant train’s horn. When I stepped on something squishy, I jumped with giddy fright and gulped a big breath of night air. I felt like a kid at summer camp, sneaking out to find the boys. Without my panties on.

Crawling up onto the porch proved difficult for my knees, but I managed. I snuck into position under the picnic table and watched through the lattice as her chest rose and fell. She was taking deliberately deep breaths and I wondered if this was some new form of yoga. I leaned my shoulder into the table’s crisscrossed legs, finding a good hole in the lattice to see her face. She arched her back a little, like an invisible man was there making love to her, and I felt instantly turned on, then ashamed. I put my hand over my mouth and watched her. Moving from square to square, I studied different parts of her body and realized that she was beautiful. She wasn’t extremely thin or busty, but she almost glowed. It was as if she was what Mother Nature intended beauty to look like and every night she

reaped the rewards.

As I swayed under the table, trying to find the best angle, I skipped over four squares in the lattice and watched as she took off her nightgown and became naked. Her breasts fell to each side, and her nipples were dark and erect in the slow night breeze. She had a dark patch of pubic hair that seemed to match the almost black grass below her. I watched in awe. She looked elated. She was smiling wide and turning her head from side to side. She exhaled and made a snow angel in the grass. I wondered if it would be strange if I tried it too. A small breeze came across the lawn and went up under my nightgown. I smiled and put my fingers in my mouth and laughed silently.

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“Couldn’t sleep again?” Mark whispered, as he woke me up on the couch, stroking my forehead.

“No,” I said, rolling onto my side.

“What are we going to do with you?” he asked, walking back to the kitchen. “We’ll have to take you to one of those sleep clinics soon. Put monitors on your forehead and video tape you as you sleep.”

“Great,” I said, stretching my legs. “That way ten people in lab coats can watch me drool.” Mark laughed.

“Want some coffee?” he asked from the kitchen.

“You made coffee?” I asked, finishing my stretch. “Yes, I’d love some. Are the girls OK?”

“They’re fine. Sound asleep,” he said as he walked from the kitchen with two coffee mugs. “What time did you wake up?”

“Four o’clock again.”

“Did you see psycho neighbor out in the yard?” he asked, handing me my coffee.

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“No. Not this time.”

“Too bad,” Mark said. “Could have been a good piece of gossip for the other neighbors.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Too bad.”

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She left him. It happened two days after the night I saw her naked. I watched from my window as she packed her car. She stuffed two big suitcases into her trunk and lots of small boxes into the back seat. He wasn't home while she packed. When he drove up, she was shoving one last box into the passenger seat. He walked slowly to the car and stood there with his hands in his pockets. She looked at him and smiled slightly. They spoke for a few minutes and then she walked around the car, slowly and with her head down. The car started and sputtered a bit. It was probably distressed under all the weight. Then she just drove away. The car slowed at the corner, turned, and was gone.

He stood there for about five minutes, like he expected her chugging little car to turn around and come back. I wanted to go out and tell him that it would. But even though I didn't really know her, I was pretty sure that she wouldn't return.

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“I just don't think it's any of our business,” Mark said after I told him about the neighbors. We were sitting in bed reading our books, propped up by our pillows.

“I know it's none of our business. But I can't believe she left him,” I said.

“Why?”

“I just can't believe she would do that.”

“But you said you thought he cheated on her.”

“Yeah, I'm pretty sure he did.” I paused and then said, “But so did you and I didn't leave you.” Silence. Mark raised his eyebrows and inhaled deeply.

"Maybe I should have," I said. He looked at me like I was being rude.

"Okay," he exhaled.

"No, I mean it. Why didn't I ever leave?"

"Jesus. I only kissed her once at a bar and I was drunk. It was so long ago."

"I was pregnant with Rachel. That's why I didn't leave." I looked straight ahead but could feel Mark radiating heat. I wanted to look at his face and see if he thought this was true, to see if he felt bound to me by our children, but I couldn't turn my head.

"Almost four years later and you're still blowing it out of proportion."

"I don't know," I said slowly, anger charging from my chest up into the back of my throat. "Why didn't I ever leave?"

"Because you just wouldn't have."

"What does that mean?" I asked, finally turning to him. He looked angry.

"Drop it Lorraine. Just drop it." He turned over and flipped off his bedside light.

"Fine," I said, trying to indicate in that one tiny word that I felt differently about the whole thing now.

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I woke up again. Three o'clock. I left the bedroom and went to the bathroom window to look out at their yard. It looked dark evergreen and much bigger without her sitting in it. I contemplated sitting out in our lawn but the grass had dead patches and the dry yellow stalks would probably poke and hurt. I stood at that bathroom window for a long time, my hands perched on the sill that started at my collarbone. I imagined what I looked like from the outside. Probably seemed like a detached head was floating near the windowsill.

I don't know what time it was when I turned around and went back to the

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bedroom. Mark was breathing heavily and I lay down next to him and clasped my hands over my stomach. Outside our window, the crickets and cicadas were singing loudly. I listened to them. I focused on them and tried to fall asleep.

## Bon Homme

Maybe I was an odd shape for man. I could never find clothes that fit me right. I stood in the bathroom doorway in my new work uniform giving myself the up-and-down in the full-length mirror. Even though the coarse brown pants were tight around the thighs, I had to cuff the legs three times. The safari-beige shirt seemed to be made for a woman, almost binding around the gut, but room enough in the chest for newborn Siamese twins. Not only that, but plastic spears seemed to be poking me in the neck, right buttock and left breast. I never thought I would end up in a uniform like this. I traced my finger over the *Barn Owl Snacks* badge on the breast pocket. "I'm Joel and I here to restock your snack machine." I said, flashing a smarmy sneer and knocking a stray vine of hair over my eye with a quick nod. Not so cool. With my ill fitting uniform I looked like one of the Little Rascals. I kicked the air out of frustration, but the tight pants snapped my leg back to the ground. I clawed at my stomach angrily, trying to tear away that suffocating uniform. What could be more humiliating than this, I thought.

Then aged humiliation came out of nowhere and washed out what little confidence I had gathered since waking up. Back in elementary school, when it was raining, we'd stay in the classroom for recess. The girls would play the board games from the back cupboard, and most of the boys would draw lewd pictures on the blackboard. The few others would lurk around the dim cloakroom, cracking pencils Kung Fu style. They called themselves the Junk Yard Five. I, on the other hand, being the runt of the third-grade-litter sat at my desk, working ahead in the math workbook. Not to say I was the smartest kid in the class; I was actually failing everything, even art class. If I were a bit smarter, I wouldn't have gone into the cloakroom for another pencil. I would have worked with the broken nub I was left with. That's a life lesson someone should have taught me by then.



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“What’s your shirt mean?” Tiny Tina Brown, the leader of the Junk Yard Five said, thrusting her finger into my chest. I could hear the other four squeal silently with anticipation.

I looked down into the eyes of the ear-flap-hat-wearing snowman printed on my chest. “It says ‘Bon Homme?’” I itched my stomach out of nervous habit.

“Bo-nam? What is that, Spanish?” Tiny Tina Brown barked. The other four squealed louder this time.

“No, it’s French?”

“What’s it say?” For some reason she was getting angry. The beads in her hair jerked forward violently with her head.

“He’s the mascot for the Winter Festival up in Quebec--”

“What’s it mean?” She yelled.

*Why did I wear this stupid shirt?* I thought. “It means ‘Nice Guy?’”

The Junk Yard Five went up in a blaze of laughter. “Hey nice guy,” they cackled. I walked back to my desk, they followed. “Hey nice guy!” I tried to hide behind the mustached lunch lady who was supposed to be keeping the peace. “Hey nice guy.” I broke down, cried, ran out of school and walked three miles home. Until the last day of High School I was “Nice Guy.” I don’t know what happened to that shirt, but I can still see that snowman’s stupid Quebecois grin.

Snapping back into reality, I leaned against the door frame, lit a cigarette, and said to my reflection, “Now you’re the Barn Owl Snack Guy. Who’s laughing now?” I wanted to cry, but I would be late for my orientation.

The gray March sky seemed to make the occasion of working on a Saturday morning even more depressing. Behind the housing complex, it seemed every other car had an uniformed guy inside hunched over in his seat for warmth, running his engine to get the heater going. I stood next to my rusted out Buick

Skylark, habitually patting my side and back pocket for my keys and wallet.

“Those S.O.B.’s said they have the advantage? I’ll give ‘em this, they do have the better bikes but we know the neighborhood. Ain’t no way a bunch of swells in those new houses know the neighborhood like we do.”

I looked through the narrow alleyway between houses and saw a mix-matched group of about five dirty kids on bikes, I guessed around ten years old, all centered around a gangly kid with glasses. He leaned over, resting his praying mantis arms on the handlebars. His dirty audience looked on with wide eyes and serious faces waiting for further orders. He leaned back again, and their eyes got wider and faces more serious. I must admit, I was hooked too. “I say we ride around their street just to let ‘em know we’re there. When they come out, take full advantage of the paths in the woods. We’ll ride in pairs and if you can get one of ‘em alone, show those rich kids what the Sons of the Gun are all about!” They all nodded and looked at each other.

*Sons of the Gun?* I thought. Then he looked over and we locked eyes. “Hey Pops, this don’t concern you. Get in your chump car and take off.” They all laughed. I don’t know why, but I became terrified. An adrenaline rush washed over my body, my eyesight tightened, and my arms were covered with goose bumps. I got inside the car and turned the ignition. When I passed the group of kids, they all raised their arms and gave me the finger. I tried to laugh it off. *Pops?* I thought. *I’m only twenty-four. And when did ten year olds start using the word “Pops”?* But they got me, and I couldn’t figure out why.

I pulled into the Barn Owl Snacks distribution center and immediately began to sweat as if I had just made a horrible mistake. *They did tell me Saturday, right?* The parking lot was empty and seemed to stretch wide to the warehouse almost a mile away. I rolled slowly down the lot, half looking for a guy I was told

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to meet, and half considering going home. "There he go, right there," I heard some one yell. A heavysset guy seemed to be lumbering out of nowhere toward my creeping car. His huge refrigerator-sized body was quaking with every hard step. "Hey hey, right here." He waved, still trotting, quickly adjusting his black framed Bo Diddley glasses.

I carefully pulled between two yellow lines and got out of the car quickly. "You were about to give me a coronary." He huffed, bent over with his hands on his knees.

"Sorry, I didn't see anybody."

"That's all right, no one work here on the weekends except me."

"I mean, I didn't see any cars anywhere."

"Yeah, you know how it is. My wife likes to keep me walking everywhere. Takes the car almost everyday even though I know she doesn't go anywhere."

"Tell me about it," I laughed, trying to seem like I knew what he was talking about.

"The boss comes to work everyday in a helicopter and Verge has to walk," he laughed punching me in the shoulder.

"Oh, you're Verge? I'm Joel." I put my hand out.

"Ha ha, I was just kidding, the boss doesn't come to work in no helicopter." He bypassed my hand and cuffed me in the arm again. *This guy is completely crazy!* I thought forcing laughter along with him.

"A helicopter, I believed you too!"

"I got you though. C'mon Joe, lets load a truck and I'll show you the ropes."

"That's Joel."

"Oh, *Joel*. Well give us a ride in you chariot Mr. Billy Joel to that garage door over there." He laughed and punched me in the arm a third time. I laughed

too. I was terrified.

He unlocked three heavy sounding dead bolts and rolled up the heavy steel door without breaking a sweat. I wondered why anyone would give this guy a key to anything. "We got to load the trucks ourselves on the weekends. It isn't nothing much, though. Just chips and candy. It's the Snickers that's the heaviest, right?" He laughed again and I quickly walked over to inspect the delivery truck, my arm was beginning to swell up and bruise.

"What is this, an automatic?" I said, kicking the tire, still fearing my safety.

"I don't know. They don't let me drive on the count I have poor eye sight. That's why I have these thick glasses. Although, I do drive sometimes," he said in a half whisper and laughed. Coming out of nowhere, he knocked me in the arm again.

On the road, Verge barely missed clipping the other driver's fenders as he wove in and out of traffic. I counted seven missed stop signs on our trip across town. We stopped at small factories mostly with uncomfortable names like Abdecco, Panflux, and Drexle-Mar, and Verge seemed to know everybody we bumped into. "Hey, Philly. You saw the game right. Ha ha. No, this is my student, Mr. Billy Joel. He's a little green yet but he's learning. I make him take the Snickers, because they're the heaviest, right?" Then he would break out in heavy barking laughter.

When we got out of the industrial area he leaned in close to me and said, "You see all these streets?"

"Memorize them?"

"No, forget them, this ain't your route. Ha ha. I think they'll have you working the Old Town area. It's all right, nice people, but they don't have places like this." We pulled into a small parking lot by the railroad tracks. A huge cube-

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shaped building almost blinded my eyes, so used to the grey sky and the dim factories. *Rendezvous* was painted in swishy purple letters with the words *Naked Naked Naked* underneath. *Oh crap*, I thought. "Bet you didn't think they had snack machines in places like this. Everybody got to eat, everybody. Snacks make people happy, and we don't want people unhappy." He laughed and punched me again.

We got out of the truck and broken glass crunched under our shoes. Verge swung open the back door and tossed boxes to me, barely able to keep his eyes off the building. "You saw the game, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Good one too." I lied. I hated sports.

"Uh-huh." He nodded not hearing a word I was saying. His eyes locked on *Rendezvous*.

We walked through the unlocked back door, Verge's arms free; the three boxes stacked just under my chin. "Hey, ladies." He catcalled.

"Oh, look it's Verge with his son." I made out five or six women hanging around the empty bar. They looked bored, smoking cigarettes with faces that looked like the Rolling Stones.

"Ah, you know my name. How're you doing, honey?"

"Fine, you haven't come by and seen us in a while."

"Ha ha, you know how it is. Hey, Mr. Billy Joel, the machine's through that door behind the stage. I'll be with you in a minute, you got the key?" I nodded, walked across the shiny stage and dropped the boxes. I opened the machine, slid bags of Funyons into the coil and looked back at Verge. He seemed to be chatting rather close with the one that looked like Mick Jagger. I saw them argue a bit and heard Verge shout, "Fifty Dollars? Since when?" Then they slipped into the door next to the bar. My stomach sank and I started to sweat.

On the ride home I was thankful for very little. The coarse fabric of the

uniform was a bit broken in from an afternoon of work, but this just caused more plastic string to surface and cut into my skin. I was thankful I would probably never have to ride around with Verge again. It wasn't that I didn't like him, he was an interesting guy. I was just worried he would find I was lying when he asked me, "You want a turn with my lady friend?"

"No," I laughed, "I'm saving myself for marriage," and clipped him on the arm.

"All right." He said in a low voice, looking into my eyes as if trying to see what I was really thinking.

It wasn't like I was turned off by things like that; I mean, I was in a way. It just all seemed so seedy to me. Like it was more of a violent attack than sex. My first girl friend came rushing into my head. We had stayed home sick from school and met up at my house. We sat on my bed eating corn chips and drinking gingerale for an hour and a half watching "The Great Escape." I remember clearly. It was the part where Steve McQueen was on a motorcycle being chased by a dozen Nazis. "Man, that guy is so cool. When I graduate from High School I would like to be Steve McQueen." It was a joke, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Are we going to do something, or are we going to watch this stupid movie all day?"

"What do you mean, something?" My heart froze like a doe just clipped by a compact car.

"Aren't you even going to touch me?" Everything below my neck went numb; I started to sweat feverishly. I looked up at the TV and saw Steve McQueen's motor cycle launch into the air and over a barbed wire fence. I closed my eyes and reached. I touched her, but to this day I have no idea where. I do know wherever I did touch her, it made her break into laughter. Like a shrill, yelping hyena she said, "You have no idea do you?"

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I couldn't speak. I turned away back to the TV. I wasn't sure what happened, but McQueen was pinned under a web of barbed wire, recaptured by the Nazis. Yet, he still looked calm and cool. We sat in silence for another thirty minutes. She started to flutter with giggles every five minutes; I sat still praying for sudden death. She got up and left without saying a word. I had been with women since but not much happened. When things got intimate, *The Great Escape* and my first girlfriend's high pitch giggle would come floating back in.

I pulled into my complex and into my reserved spot. My feet moved like I was wearing concrete shoes, and my thighs were chafed raw. I walked around to the center courtyard and stopped. On my front steps sat The Sons of the Gun. They seemed to be draped over the two steps and the banister like dirty laundry sunning themselves. You could almost see a humid vapor rising up off of their sweaty, dirty faces. The skinny kid turned his head and again, we locked eyes. His intense stare relaxed and he leaned back, stretching his car antenna legs out. "What's the haps brother?" he said as I approached. I ignored him, avoiding his stare, looking at the ground. "Oh, this is your house? The nosey sap from this morning." The familiar squeal of ten year old delight boiled among his small troop.

"Yeah."

"That's a pretty screwed up name on your mailbox. Sharkey, J. That you?"

"Yeah," I said, stepping over them.

"Well that's a pretty screwed up name." I ignored him and slipped the key into the lock. "What kind of name is that? Russian?"

My legs tightened, and I snapped back. "No, it's Irish actually. And it's my last name. Joel Sharkey, now if you don't want me to call your fathers..."

The Sons of the Gun went off in laughter, the skinny kid sat still, stone faced. "Irish, huh? Hey, we got a mick on our hands here boys, and he looks three

sheets to the wind. Should we roll him?" They all stared up at me, with Kool-Aid stained grins.

"Look, what is with you guys? What with that depression era, Jimmy Cagney stuff anyway? 'Three sheets to the wind.' Where the hell did you hear that anyway? My grandmother doesn't even say that." The Sons of the Gun roared with coarse laughter.

"Hey fellas, I think this uptown swell is trying to slip us the business."

"Man, that last one didn't even make any sense!" They laughed harder. The skinny kid got to his feet.

"Look at that badge, Barn Owl Snacks." He tugged at my breast pocket.

"Back off." I swung his hand away. He broke into laughter with the rest. I hurried inside and slammed the door.

I drank quite a bit that night and slept through most of Sunday. In between trips to the bathroom, I would look out through closed venetian blinds for the Sons of the Gun. I didn't see them, but thought it best to stay inside.

On Monday, since I had previous delivery experience, they let me take my first solo route alone. I struggled with every step of the pants as I unloaded the van, my chafed thighs flared up instantly. The neck of the shirt seemed to have ten times more plastic strands, as if they had bred like rabbits over night. I was impressed with the time I was making. In two hours I had hit the two post offices, a firehouse, and a Christian Science reading room/mail order center. I pulled into Tommy Tate Elementary forty-five minutes ahead of schedule. I read the delivery script and saw the restock order for the teacher's lounge. Mostly Hostess snowballs (pink) and Baby Ruth candy bars. I went into the office, arms full and tapped the bell with my elbow. "Yes?" a woman asked.

"I'm Joel, and I'm here to restock your snack machine." She didn't seem



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to get the joke.

"All right, down the hall, third door on the left." I was about to leave when she cleared her throat. "Those better be pink snowballs or I'm calling your supervisor and telling him we're switching over to Tea Time Vending."

I looked back. "Ma'am I do what I like, I like what I do and I do it well." Flashing her a corny smirk. Again she didn't get the joke.

Walking through the halls of the school, I got the chills hearing the teacher's sing-songy voices and cruel laughter from the children. I stopped to tie my shoe by one class, and lingered around hunched over just before the door. I smiled, listening to the young female speak in her gentlest voice about Eskimos. "You know the Eskimos. They live in igloos and kiss by rubbing noses. Uh, yes Gerry." Her tone dropped at "Gerry."

"Actually, Mrs. Wainscot, they prefer to be called the Inuit and the only reason they rub noses to kiss is because their teeth rot and gums start to bleed regularly from age thirteen until death." The class laughed. Mrs. Wainscot pounded her desk.

"All right, Gerry. I'm going to tell you what I've told you before: I'll need to see that in print."

"I can go see Mrs. Corday in the library then?" *Who was this kid*, I thought. Still hunched over, I edged up and peeked into the classroom. Cold heat shot down my spine. There he was, the skinny kid from *The Sons of the Gun*. Only now his face looked angelic, his hair parted nicely to one side and the Bowery Boys dialect gone completely.

"That little fraud!" I growled under my breath, realizing he would be out in the hallway in seconds. I gathered my boxes and headed for the teacher's lounge.

"Look at what the cat dragged in." I heard a small voice behind me. "A greasy mick rat."

“Oh, hi.” I squeaked and walked faster.

“What you got there?” he appeared next to me. “Give me a Baby Ruth and I might not tell the teacher you swore at me.”

He got me. “Look, I really need this job. And by the way, that Eskimo thing? About their gums bleeding? That’s bullshit and you know it. Another thing, you are a fraud!” I said in a whispered growl.

His face turned beet red trying to hold back the laughter. “I am really going to get you sacked now, Joe Blow.”

“Joel, actually.” I knew now, as I look down on his geometrically parted hair, I was completely at his mercy. “All right, I’m sorry. You’re not a fraud. Here take two Baby Ruth’s and a Snowball. I was going to steal a couple for lunch anyway.” He stood still grinning up at me. “God, what do you want? I have a car. I could drop you and you friends off at the mall or something.”

“Be in front of your house at six tonight and maybe this whole incident will just disappear.”

I thought about trying to double-cross Gerry the rest of the day, but I had no idea what he had in mind. I waited for thirty minutes on my front steps growing suspicious. I started to think The Sons of the Gun were hiding somewhere, laughing at me, somehow finding out my former nickname, “Nice Guy.” I looked up and my heart started beating double time. In a single file line, like a shark coming in for an attack rode The Sons. They all skidded to a halt right at my feet. “All right, we got them where we want them, so we’ve got to hurry.” Gerry looked at me with cold steel eyes.

“Where? Who?”

“You ever hear of the Wesley Street Sombras?”

“The Wesley Street Sombras? This is too much.”

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"Yeah, well I could always tell my teacher you tried to kiss me or you can come with us. That ain't no choice at all is it?"

"Fine," I huffed, "where are we going?"

"There's a path that cuts through the woods to the baseball field. Word is, The Wesley Street Sombras have been badmouthing us again. Calling us poor, making fun of our parents' divorces."

"What am I doing?"

"You're doing as I say. Now you come with us. They take one look at you and they'll scatter. I bet we won't see the likes a' them for awhile."

"I can't do that!"

"You will do that. They don't know you like we do, I hope, so it might work."

I trotted behind The Sons through the woods into the ball field. The sun was setting low behind a group of four cleaner looking kids. Their state-of-the-art Mountain Bikes glinted in the pink sun. From about twenty feet I locked eyes with a blond boy. He turned to one of the others quickly and they took off. Struggling to gain speed in the damp outfield, my temples throbbed and I held my head high. My eyesight got sharp, and I took off after the Sombras, their tires still slipping out in left field. A round kid, shorter than the rest, fell over on his side. I rushed over and leaped onto his bike like a panther. I picked up the wet bicycle and sent it flying over his head. He looked up at me in shaking fear. I nodded towards his friends. He lumbered to his bike, picked it up, and tried to ride off to catch up with the others until I grabbed the back of his seat. He fell off again, landing on his side. His pink arm was covered with mud. "That's a nice bike," I said, "why don't you leave it?" He never looked up, just took off running.

Gerry ran over to and looked up at me. I felt like I was made of steel.

We met eyes and he kicked me in the right kneecap, hard. I collapsed onto the grass and he snarled, "That's for being a pansy. Thanks for the help, but we're not through yet. I'll be in touch."

And they were. We had our run-ins with the Sombras, but from what Gerry was telling me, not nearly as much. Ceramic garden gnomes were coming back into vogue in the upper class neighborhoods, and to the Sons of the Gun these were like cigarettes to convicts. Anytime we had a run-in with the Sombras their parents' gnomes would disappear. For five bucks or their older brother's copy of Penthouse, we might give them back. Even then it was no guarantee. My basement was still overridden with little men in red cone hats watering plants that weren't there and peeking out from behind the water heater.

As Gerry and I lead the Sons away from Wesley Street at dusk, our bikes, shiny, and gnomes and plastic flamingoes under our arms, I laughed to myself. I thought about Tiny Tina Brown and the Junk Yard Five and wondered what they were doing now. I imagined them probably making their fellow workers at the office uncomfortable, giving them the evil eye in the break room. Maybe they teamed up with my first girlfriend and trade stories about me. It didn't matter at that particular moment. I was a Son of the Gun and felt twelve feet tall.

Mike Hemencorpse

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### A Cone with Two Scoops

Her eyes were landmines, and before I knew it, body parts were scattered all over the heavy glass exoskeleton of the ice cream freezer. I always thought the only way to meet girls was to get into a car accident. Every once in a while I got lucky though, and stumbled on one someplace where she was forced to acknowledge me. Usually I'd rather be in the car accident.

"Anything on this?" she asked with a bright smile. I looked up. Her eyes blasted my face again. I couldn't think and had to redirect my view to the spread of crumbled cookies, M&Ms, and gummi bears to make a decision. The brim of my cap hid my fascinated eyes. I pictured what she'd look like minus the bright purple t-shirt and ratty jeans, perfect body doused in ice cream. The back of my neck burned.

"Sure," I fumbled, "some of those maimed Oreos please." I inhaled a short breath and tried to smile without looking up. At least there was no one else in the store to see me make a fool of myself.

I looked around at the clownishly decorated ice cream parlor. Everything was basically white. The walls were plastered with old circus photographs and posters of smiling children eating their ice cream with cartoon characters. The words "Here we go again" swarmed around my brain and finally made my face turn bright red. I locked my hands into sweaty fists and sunk them into my pockets. *It never fails*, I mutely responded to my thought. She sprinkled the mutilated cookies over the mountain of ice cream. She held the cookie spoon in her left hand the same way I would have.

Behind the counter hung a blown up photo of a guy walking a tight rope above a pit of spikes. He didn't look concerned for his welfare at all. Keep your balance or you'll fall off, I lessoned myself. Situations like this never had any

eventful moments or hilariously happy endings. I straightened up confidently.

“Actually, could I get a little hot fudge too?” I asked.

“Definitely,” she replied, sounding like she foresaw me asking. Her body spun, her shimmering brown pony tail whipping with a quick flash. Her sneakers scuffed to the cube-shaped metal vat of fudge. The sweat squeezing through my skin started to diminish the farther she got from me.

“Is it still hot outside?” she chimed over the drone of the freezers.

Her voice came at me from all sides. The children on the walls were suddenly staring at me. I felt like I was being filmed. I cleared my throat. “It’s not that bad. The sun is going down.” She turned and faced me. My hands couldn’t find a place to lie dormant, my knuckles cracked themselves. “Still really humid though.” I smiled at her, eager for her to turn to me. I nudged the toe of my sneaker into the floor.

“I can take the heat,” she said, “the humidity is what really bothers me.”

“I hear you. When it’s humid my allergies destroy me. Sometimes it gets so bad my sinuses get all dry. I need to carry nasal spray wherever I go.”

“Mine bother me too,” she smiled and sort of laughed.

The phone rang. She startled some, and hot fudge dripped over the edge of the paper dish onto the back of her hand. “I want to live in Hawaii. All they have is dry heat.” She floated toward the interrupting phone. In the corner of my eye, I saw her tongue slip gracefully along the delicate curve of her wrist, licking the spilled fudge. “One second,” she said. She tucked herself away when she picked up the phone. I guessed the voice on the other end to be some kind of boyfriend’s. Girls like her just never seemed to go without. The thought trounced me.

I stood alone on the open, vulnerable side of the counter, looking out the large glass window in front of the shop, thinking things through. There was minimalist light outside, like someone closed a shade on the sun. Cars with bright

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headlights pulled in and out of the parking lot. A couple walked with satisfied steps across the window.

“Sure, let me check,” I heard her breathy voice say. She walked in-between me and the window, pressing a dirty and sticky looking cordless phone to her ear. I could smell her shampoo and a number of grueling hours of shoveling ice cream into cones and cups. She stopped in front of an atrocity of a freezer, the only thing on my side of the counter besides a few small tables and chairs. It held a collection of ice cream cakes that looked like a pile of deformed heads. Her body could’ve melted them all. She reached, pulled it open, and started seeking through the head cakes. She spat prices and flavors into the phone in a casual, friendly voice. A calming vibe swept through the room when I calculated no boyfriend. I sighed. A guy like me definitely should get a fighting chance.

I imagined what it’d be like to lean up against the frosted door of the freezer and kiss her. I wanted our teeth to clatter with the freezer’s vibrating motor. Do things like that even happen? Only to people who get paid for it.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, “the hot fudge started melting your ice cream while I was on the phone. Is that a problem?”

My train of thought vanished. I hadn’t seen her hang up the phone and go back behind the counter. I stuttered. The ice cream didn’t matter. I found myself drowning for something, anything to just say. “Don’t worry about it,” I forced out. “It’s going to taste extra delicious because you made it.” I didn’t know where that came from but it sounded good to me.

She made that face where she sort of smiled but didn’t really. “How about some whipped cream and a cherry to make up for it?” She bit her lower lip.

The relationship underwent a serious breakthrough. “Sure,” I said excitedly. Where the fuck does this go from here? I stood on the tight rope. I erected my posture. Maybe we can talk about if she goes to school, or maybe she’d

be comfortable hearing about my band or my desperate masturbation habits. The pressure overtook me. "Is it hard to work in an ice cream store?" I asked. A black cloud totally stunned the room. Tight ropes are not for me. Under pressure, I come up with some really stupid things to say.

"No, not really. It gets busy sometimes." She coiled the whipped cream around the soupy dish. It made a whistling squish as it came out. The muscles in her forearm became defined as she angled the canister. Any fighting chance I had left the room. I shambled closer to the flaming orange counter and waited for her to come with my ice cream. The silence between us broke when she rang the register.

"\$4.88," she said. I handed her a ten dollar bill with a defeated look. Something seemed wrong about humiliating myself in front of someone, then paying them. She took the cash from my hand and smiled. Hot pressure built at the base of my neck. I could definitely make it through life without ever coming to this place again. Change dripped into the palm of my glistening hand, sticking to it. I quickly pocketed it and grabbed my dish of melted, whipped cream crowned ice cream.

"So, what do you do on your weekends off?" she asked.

I craved to say something along the lines of "What kind of rickulous question is that?" or a remark that I thought was funny but really wasn't. Instead I nobly shook my head and clutched the ice cream closer to my torso. "Not too much," I said.

"We should get together some time. Let me write you my number, can you wait a sec?"

I stopped going anywhere. "Sure," I said. Everything got brighter. Disbelief cascaded from me. She stepped a few steps down the counter, grabbed a napkin and a pen. I could see down her back through a little cave her



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shirt collar made. The skin looked smooth. I watched her jot the number in perfectly measured script. She extended her magnificent arm to me. I love girls' handwriting. My hand instantly cherished it. She smiled. I smiled back like I was stoned.

"Is this a home number or a cell phone number?" I asked.

"It's my cell phone."

"Excellent. My name's Matt Yanarella by the way," I said, then sniffled. My nose began to itch.

"I'm Brie," she smiled

"It's been amazing meeting you. I'm definitely going to call this number."

I started to put my new treasure into my back pocket. "When do you get out of work?" I felt a trickle. Her face manifested into something blank. I looked down and the entire counter top had been covered in blood. It surged from my nose. I tried to suck it all back in. "Fuck," I gurgled. My dried out sinuses had cut themselves open. My confidence deleted itself. She backed away and starting gasping. The blood seemed to just never end. It mixed with the sweat seeping through my face. It clung to my teeth and filled my mouth. It tasted horrible. My ears popped and started to rev. I coughed, causing the blood to project, landing closer to her side of the counter. Her arm straightened toward me, quickly passing a roll of paper towels, through my watery eyes I made out the words "super" and "absorbent" on them. I sneezed and blood shot out to her. The cushiony roll hung microscopically out of reach.

I cupped my other hand underneath my nose to keep the mess out of her way. The napkin and my ice cream plummeted to the floor, scattering when they landed. She finally tossed the paper towels to me; they landed on the floor and started rolling. She disappeared into some back room. I felt the need to apologize but couldn't get anything out besides a stuttering claptrap. I trudged

to the door. The last thing I saw was a small version of the picture behind the counter. I launched the door open, facing the blood, and the summer evening heat. I wished I was in that circus audience, pushing that guy off the rope and into the spikes.

Brendan Boyaji

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I Have a Nightmare

*A Performance Poem*

*to those who Dream*

**I have a nightmare**

where **knitting** a parachute in midair is all **we** do to **combat** the **fact** that we

are f

I have a nightmare

a

where a man dies for a dream

l

only to **leave** his successors

l

i

screeching his song in concentric circles--

n

screeching his song in concentric circles--

g

screeching his song in concentric **circles**--

like a broken record

**forevermore**

while his **perpetrators**

lie in **wait**, unscathed

**behind** Pentagon palace gates

I have a nightmare

where **weapons** of **- M A S S -** distortion

distract us from the **poisoned** waves of **grain**

that lie beneath

our pathogen-ingesting nostrils

as we consume the **polluted**, fruited **plain**

I have a nightmare  
where a **war** is being **waged** along a **ship** that silently **s**  
**i**  
**n**  
**k**  
**s** into the **sea**

I have a nightmare  
**genocide** is in the making, *generating no buzz*  
and in the **end** each and every one of **Us** will have played our part  
in making it possible never even knowing what we have done.

I have a nightmare  
Where a Tower of **Babel** is being **constructed** into the **sky**  
with the screaming **smoke** of **infants**, **rising** from the **ruddle** of **Ground Zero**  
and all we can do is ask **why?**

I have a nightmare  
where the **blood** of **Mother Earth** is being **sucked** dry through man-made  
arteries in arctic **circles** necessities **wrought** upon **Us** by the **Modern**  
**Machine**  
and all **we** can do is **cry**

I have a nightmare so dark  
it will **Blacken** your soul  
**Blind** your eyes  
**Burden** your heart so heavy  
Gravity will reclaim your body for its **own** and **decompose** it

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back into the dirt, that **lie** like a tomb, beneath your feet!  
you see, I have this nightmare

this nightmare is **cyclic** and

**WE  
WILL  
NEVER  
WAKE  
UP  
FROM IT!**

and as history continues to repeat, no I mean repent itself  
over and over again over and over again over and over and over again  
and all we are left to do is sit and wait and pray and sit and wait and pray  
and sit and wait and pray and sit and wait and pray  
but I have this nightmare sweet Jesus will never set Us free  
because He never existed in the first place

I have a nightmare  
where the hippies of the 1960 s grow up to become  
the yuppie s of the 1990 s sucking their martini s down,  
while riding their Yachts into the pit of demons,  
which lies, like a myth, along the edges of planet Earth and all We could  
do is d

I have a nightmare  
someday we will gaze into  
the mirrors of our souls see the ugliness we create  
we ll cast the stone to shatter our reflection

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Carlos Semexant

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Color Me Over

Red tulips  
On burgundy suited mafias,  
Stuffed with bloody guns  
and vegetarian ketchup pastas.  
With red peppered laughter,  
Comes red saliva breath,  
Then red tempered after  
Made a reddish death.

Carlos Semexant

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Who am I?

I am cocoa buttered in skin  
Some call me pecan tan.  
I am far beyond racism.  
I am the monkey in the middle.  
I am the house and the field slave,  
you can tell by the way my hair twist in curls of purls.  
I am the new born baby out of a jungle fever.  
I am the "other" in job applications list of race.  
I am the melting pot.  
The soup.  
And I'm made with red tomatoes, black eye peas, with white lima beans.

## What About Time

Time is running,  
Time is running,  
Time is running,  
Time is tic toc,  
Time is tic toc,  
Time is born baby born,  
Time is die old man die,  
you have known me for too long,  
Time is a duck  
cause he s ducking,  
Time is ducking,  
ancient meteorite of other times that didn't make it  
so time, times itself x amount of times  
so when other stars gang bang, time would swim through flames of scorching suns  
to burn time, cause  
Time is sneaky,  
Time is sneaky,  
even for his own slaves  
He blindfolds so they wont know when their time is at hand  
to give up the ghost of man  
Time is money,  
Time is money,  
but money is just the clothes that he wears  
to pregnate your thoughts with  
the cars you can't drive,



### Folio 2003

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the house you can't buy,  
the woman you can't wife,  
the bank account you can't say, that's mine  
so you can dream your life away from time's booby traps of time  
cause time can be a nigga, what is up my nigga?  
Time can be a cracka, you, you, red devil,  
but time can be both  
a head on collision masqueraded in race, cause  
Time is a fang,  
Time is a fang,  
Time is a fang,  
with his own super hero name  
Suckman!  
You suck man!