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folio



folio

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-student awards-

scsu fiction contest 2003

graduate winners

1st place - julie hill barton

2nd place - sarah wareck

honorable mention - jim barron

undergraduate winners

1st place - patricia bjorklund

2nd place - megan toms

3rd place - shawn taylor

scsu poetry contest 2003

graduate winners

1st place - rich bowering

2nd place - kathleen butler

3rd place - patricia bjorklund

honorable mentions - jim barron & david kimball

undergraduate winners

1st place - gregory a. antonini

2nd place - stacy vocasek

3rd place - megan raab

honorable mentions - jennifer soboleski,
spencer e. carlson, & alexander d. zamachaj

eve cummings prize for fiction 2004

1st place: **i shall be a long time
forgetting him**
kathleen butler

2nd place: **the amazing box wine trick**
michael r. hemenway

3rd place: **reliance**
shawn taylor

eve cummings prize for poetry 2004

1st place: **dipping achilles**
gregory a. antonini
&
today has never happened...
jennifer l. soboleski

2nd place: **without a scratch**
salvatore delucia

honorable mentions: **promise of you**
kathleen butler
&
noble avenue
patricia bjorklund

hank roberts prize for art 2004

1st place: **untitled (abstract)**
matthew thomas

2nd place: **kuriosity**
chris sellas

3rd place: **untitled (metal sculpture)**
micheal donovan

-scsu creative writing faculty-

megan macomber

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

jeff mock

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

tim parrish

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

vivian shipley

is the Editor of *Connecticut Review* and she is the Connecticut State University Distinguished Professor. In 2001, she won the Robert Frost Foundation Poetry Award, the Daniel Varoujan Award from the New England Poetry Club, and the *Center Oak Review* Poetry Prize from the University of Connecticut. In 2000, she won the Marble Faun Award for Poetry from the William Faulkner Soci-

ety, the *Thin Air Magazine* Poetry Prize from Northern Arizona University and was named Faculty Scholar at SCSU where she teaches creative writing. She has also won the Lucille Medwick Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Ann Stanford Prize from the University of Southern California, the Reader's Choice Award from *Prairie Schooner*, the *Sonora Review* Poetry Prize from the 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 from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, and the Hackney Literary Award for Poetry from Birmingham-Southern College. She has published ten books of poetry. Her tenth book, *When There Is No Shore*, won the 2002 Word Press Poetry Prize.

-judges-

eve cummings prize for fiction

brad vice

teaches literature and creative writing at Mississippi State University. His stories have appeared in numerous literary journals and magazines including the *Georgia Review*, the *Southern Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, as well as several anthologies of contemporary fiction such as *New Stories from the South*, 2003, and *Best American Voices*, 2003. His book reviews are frequently featured in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

eve cummings prize for poetry

clare rossini

a native of St. Paul, is an assistant professor of English at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and a member of the faculty at Vermont College's low-residency MFA program. She completed her BA at the College of St. Benedict, before taking an MFA at the University of Iowa and a PhD at Columbia University, where she won the Benett Cerf Award for Poetry and an Academy of American Poets Prize.

hank roberts prize for art

paul duda

received his BFA in photography from Penn State University and his MFA in photography from Pratt Institute in New York. He has been lecturing on and teaching photography for over ten years. He has appeared in over a dozen publications, including the *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Vibe Magazine*, and his own publication, *Four Hundred Years of Silver: Personal Adornment in the Qing Dynasty and After*. He has been featured in over forty shows and has won numerous awards for his work. He is presently the owner of his own studio on Wooster Street in New Haven.

-folio community-

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

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

-publication-

The literary work appearing in this issue was selected through a preliminary round of judging by volunteer students. The cover-sheets were removed so writers remained anonymous. The editorial staff reviewed the results and narrowed the selections by workshop-style analysis. All pieces chosen for publication were automatically entered into the contest for the Eve Cummings Prize of Fiction and Poetry. Brad Vice judged fiction and Clare Rossini judged poetry. The Hank Roberts Prize for Art was selected from a pool of SCSU art students' works, solely by Paul Duda.

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

folio's featured student readers
fall 2003 spring 2004

erika maroney
shawn taylor
danielle n. stone
david m. pacelli
alexander d. zamachaj
katie matican
carlos semexant
josh gister
jennifer l. soboleski
april line

folio's featured artists
fall 2003 spring 2004

katie matican
ashley thomas
ben martin
pamela matican
larissa hall
rebekah butler
chris sellas

folio's live music

echoing august
leftandright
bluddrum
kevin lamkins
david mcMahon & kevin miner
kevin lamkins
mental gypsies

the folio staff would like to thank..

fred agee
ally
pat bjorklund
brad crerar
paul d'andrea
thomas s. dorr
alec chvirko
delaney's staff
paul duda
jerry dunklee
syed hassan
michael r. hemenway
mike imme
april line
jimmy
jeff mock
christy p.
davey p.
david m. pacelli
tim parrish
paul
alecia post
rocky
clare rossini
tony rosso
susan rubinsky
joe santilli
mike shea
southern news
spammy
brad vice
student center staff
open-mic readers

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images of the dead,
crazy and lost..."

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promise of you

4...jennifer h. manes

after

7...vincent convertito

running, like water, away

8...spencer e. carlson

hole

10...ashley page

pugsly

11...jennifer l. soboleski

today has never happened...

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- 112...larissa hall
party #2
- 113...rebekah butler
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- 114,115...robert francis
untitled
untitled
- 116...ben martin
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side-handled tea pot
- 118,119...chris sellas
curiosity
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- 120...noelle weimann
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untitled
- 122...rebekah butler
kali
- 123...matthew thomas
beauty and the priests
- 124...aimee wallace
face collage
- 125...benjamin hecht
center street
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I.

"clouds will roll in and spit out
images of the dead,
crazy and lost..."



eve cummings prize for poetry - honorable mention

kathleen butler

-promise of you-

Let me into your grief.

~Robert Frost

1.

We gather fallen wood from Bethany roads,
load it into your truck,
race home to split logs in our yard.
Nikita watches from the window,
flicking whiskers. Breaking sweat,
we ensure future warmth, light a fire,

devise tomorrow's plans:
petunias, stacking rows of beech and oak,
corned beef and cabbage.
Embers burn, we melt into bed,
bodies fused, and sleep beneath white flannel
sheets you pull over our necks.

2.

I bury you today in the Bethany ground
we chose last summer – *a precaution*,
you said. With the soil turned,
I wrap your naked body
in white flannel, kiss your lips
one last time, close the box of oak.

I turn away when the grave
digger lowers you into earth,
and I promise to sleep
the sleep of the dead
beside you in time.

jennifer h. manes

-after-

I lifted the latch to open the chain-link gate, strolled down the sidewalk and stepped up to Chris's front door. I was cold, shivering. Waiting for someone to let me in, I thought about his brother's high school graduation. Although I was with Chris that day, I spent the entire ceremony looking to spot my ex-boyfriend, Mikey, in the crowd. I loved Chris. I really did. But I never gave my full attention. We had taken a picture that day on our friend's back porch. I was wearing a white fitted tank top and my size five black Express shorts, with just a hint of cleavage peeking out. My gold cross hung from my neck. He was wearing a navy blue baseball cap with the letters "UC" linked together on the front. A white polo shirt with a wide navy blue stripe across the chest was draped on top of his tall, lanky frame. His skin was tanned, his cheeks plump and full of life. I constantly asked him for a copy of that picture. I looked really good that day. I was a lot skinnier then, a lot prettier.

His mother opened the front door and welcomed me to their home. "Christopher's right here," she said, smiling, and pulled the door back, giving me full view of the living room. I gently crept in, I turned and clicked the door closed behind me. In the midst of yellow, green and pink flowers and balloons, lay my best friend. My jaw tightened, lips quivered. Lying in a steel gray hospital bed, his body appeared exhausted. His face was ashen. Complexion milky. His eyes seemed to sink deep into his soul. His head, bald from chemicals, lolled on the pillow. Every muscle protruded from his taut skin. His lips were desiccated and cracked. Vaseline left a dewy residue in the corners of his mouth. I sat down next to him on a hard, wooden dining room chair and grabbed his left hand. It was so cold. I squeezed his hand and pressed the inner corners of my eyes to stop the flow of tears. I told him everything would be OK. The teddy bear I sent him the week before sat on the coffee table next to his bed, inscribed with the words "You mean the world to me Chris," across its chest. My stomach tensed up and I swallowed hard. For nearly twenty minutes, I rambled about a boy I had just met at work.

I picked up my crumpled purple work shirt from the corner of my bedroom floor and shook it briskly to try to get rid of the wrinkles. I pulled it over my head, looked down and noticed béarnaise sauce from the previous night encrusted on my sleeve. I grabbed a wet washcloth from the bathroom and scrubbed off what I could before rushing out the door. When I got to the restaurant, the dining room was completely bare. I grabbed three racks of glasses, a pile of napkins, and the basket of silverware and started to set the tables. My boss yelled out from the kitchen. I had a phone call.

“Katie?” said my friend Amanda on the other line. “Hey, it’s me.” Her voice cracked. “Umm, I wanted to let you know that Chris just passed.”

My stomach muscles tightened and knees quivered. I opened my mouth to respond but all that came out was a muted moan. My arms shuddered. My body slithered down the bar.

“Honey, I’m sorry. It happened about an hour ago. He’s not in pain anymore.” There was silence on the line. “He’s in a better place now.”

“That is such fucking bullshit,” I struggled to catch my breath. “It’s bullshit,” I choked on my own air. “I can’t talk right now. I’m sorry.”

The phone dropped with the tears. I rocked back and forth. My fingertips tried to stop the pounding in my temples. My boss opened the bar door, picked up my limp body and walked me to the back porch. He sat me on the stoop and brought me a glass of water. I gazed at a seagull in the parking lot for nearly an hour. Its white feathers cut through the sky. Another appeared. They circled each other, letting their wings just barely touch, and swooped toward the gravel.

I grabbed the brown shopping bag from next to my dresser and pulled out my new charcoal gray wool trousers. I bit off the tags and spit them on the floor. I unfolded my black cashmere turtleneck and removed the “S” sticker from its chest. The turtleneck and trousers clung to my curves. I zipped up my black knee high Steve Madden boots. I applied a final layer of lip-gloss and smacked my lips. I tied my matching cashmere scarf around my neck, put on my black three-quarter-length wool coat and headed out the door.

My hair kept flying into my mouth when the priest gave his blessings. Every time I pulled a strand off of my tongue, five more flew in its place. Something dripped from my nose. The wind burned my exposed skin, making my eyes tear. As I reached into my pocket for a

-folio-

tissue to wipe my nose, I pulled out a prayer card Chris's mom gave me the night before:

In Loving Memory of... I'd like the memory of me to be a happy one, I'd like to leave an afterglow of smiles when the day is done. I'd like to leave an echo whispering softly down the ways, of happy times and laughing times and bright and sunny days. I'd like the tears of those who grieve to dry before the sun, of happy memories that I leave behind when the day is done. Do not stand at my grave and cry, I did not die.

I left the card, crumpled, in the grass.

vincent convertito

-running, like water, away-

she no longer gets to hear rain
fall to the earth uninterrupted

rather it's the squeaky sound of
windshield wipers pushing away
fallen water

coupled with the noise of
heavy rubber tires
rolling through puddles
once rain

even when out of the taxi
and hurrying inside, she is listening
to water running towards sewers,
splashing hard into streams
below streets

and while fumbling for keys
at the door, it's the trickling of
water down gutters and off
rooftops onto cold, wet asphalt
that reaches her ears

and it's not her fault that cars,
always in motion, drown out
the syncopated patter of rain to earth

while slipping inside to a warm lobby
where heavy doors mute
all that the world outside sings

-folio-

no scenery in the world could compare
to this extraordinary moth.
I watched it clinging
above my jar of pens,
on my ordinary wall.
Luckily I had some sheets of paper,
rolled up in my hand...
I found a hole in my favorite shirt.

ashley page

-pugsly-

A mother, father, and a six-year-old girl
gather around a hospice bed.
The curtains around the body
dangle around the girl's grandmother,
veiling her like on her wedding day.

The girl holds a stuffed dog
up to her damp cheeks,
its cream colored fabric
like the color of the grandmother's face,
frozen in the middle of a breath.

The girl manipulates the dog's face
into different expressions,
pretending it was alive,
to amuse herself in the silence.
The parents watch

the strained face of the grandmother
for similar expressions to form,
a smile, a grimace of pain, even,
anything to hint at life.
The mother claims to see
the grandmother's chest heave.

The girl drops the dog,
its bean stuffing jarring
the family's attention,
as if glass beads were shattering
on the tile floor.

eve cummings prize for poetry - 1st place

jennifer l. soboleski

**-today has never happened and it
doesn't frighten me-**

Crazy as a motherfucker
With dried blood pumping through my veins,
Burning scent, blurred vision,
Chemicals on my tongue,
Sweaty, clicking my razor on the glass,
Tasting candy that drips like cum and snot down the back of my
throat
And tastes the way death smells
When it falls on someone too young.

John Frusciante and I aren't that far apart
Except he shot up in LA like a fiend until his teeth fell out
While James and I stayed in Oakville, CT,
Blowing lines until 5AM when we'd get the shakes
And vomit blood.
James and I would hold each other, crazy-eyed, a hold of passion,
His rough hands in my hair
Until we would manage to sleep for an hour or two
Before waking, groggy, sick, with throbbing heads.

It was a small fucking town and we had nothing better to do.
We could have, I suppose, aimed higher.
We could've been less destructive, too.
In a way, there were better things out there
And I don't mean crystal meth or heroin
(Though he'd tried the former and we had both tried the latter).
We could've gone to the movies or the mall or
Been constructive
But we found no point.
We took a walk around the reservoir
And tossed stones
And danced under the stars.
"Don't run too fast, you're all I have," he said.
Those were the good days

-folio-

They got worse because the sun continued to set.
"I'll come over," I replied, "but you have to promise to stay."
An invisible room rose and closed in around us.
We were so alone together.
We felt as beautiful as beaten whores on a Friday night in July.
We floated above the ceiling,
Facing the wind
Until we crashed to the distinct core of regret
And sadness.

Yeah, the sadness held me and wouldn't let go
And I cried all day.
Not to be outdone,
James hung himself and fucked it all up.

He'll be an angel, sure, but he'll never be my king.
We'll never turn to walk down that aisle.
He's only carried me into this threshold of pain.
When I get there, I plan to kill him
For all the shit he put me through.
That dirty noose be damned!
I should've burned it before he could
String himself up in the basement,
Striking some Christ-like pose
That I never had the chance to see.
He must've been beautiful there
In the corner by the washing machine
Where the beams were hung just right
For what he had to do.

*Je peux goûter votre sang dans le dos de mon cerveau.**

Thursdays will come and go,
Bringing broken, beaten, bloody hearts.
Clouds will roll in and spit out images of the dead,
Crazy and lost.

* I can taste your blood in the back of my brain.

kathleen butler

-i shall be a long time forgetting him-

Outside the Southern Connecticut State University conference room window, wind scattered snowflakes in every direction. I sat devising my exit strategy as Phyllis Gwatkin droned on and on about Classroom Management, a skill I had obviously not mastered. I was the first person ever to have flunked student teaching in the history of the school's Masters in Education program. My students had managed to launch undetected carrots, paper airplanes, and wads of gum at each other, the ceiling, or me at every opportunity. I think it was when Tommy Collar jumped out the ground floor window without my noticing that my failure became official.

I'd come to this mandatory seminar with no coat, papers, or bags. So when Phyllis turned her back halfway through her lecture to write "Take Control" on the whiteboard, I headed for the bathroom, hoping she wouldn't realize that I'd be peeing in a stall on the other side of campus. It was the first day of my French Composition class and I didn't want to miss it.

I ran down the hallway of the Engleman building, skidding into the classroom to find an older man at the front of the class. This was not *Madame*, the professor I expected to be teaching. I stepped back and glanced at the room number I'd written on my hand. "Entrez, s'il vous plaît," the imposter said to me. I baby-stepped my way to a desk near the window. "Madame Ecklund est malade. Je m'appelle Monsieur Boisvert, votre professeur." His accent sounded Parisian, much harder to understand than *Madame's* deliberate pronunciation. 'Sick,' did he say? That couldn't be. Okay, so he was just a substitute.

He continued on in thick French despite about a dozen Pardon's from the six of us students, who sat at our desks eyeing him over, deciding whether to listen. "Madame will be out for the entire semester," he announced in French. This much I understood. I clicked my pen, wondering whether they'd just cancel the class considering the low enrollment. It wouldn't really matter to me since this was just an elective. I was taking it only to be taught by *Madame*, who would stroll down the corridors wearing Marie Antoinette pinafore, beret, and eyeglasses and shoes that never repeated themselves throughout the semester. Each day of her class brought the pleasant surprise of

-folio-

startling outfits that nobody but she could pull off. She had a pizzazz that this Monsieur Boisvert certainly lacked. I studied him—blue oxford button-down shirt, green crew neck sweater, green Dockers. Nothing very Parisian about that. I tried to decide how old he was, with a full head of salt and pepper hair, white beard, thick eyebrows set above rimless glasses. Distinguished-looking, but certainly older than my forty years.

When I finished completing an index card with my contact information, I looked up and asked, “Ou êtes-vous né?” Paris, Lyon, Nice, Dijon? I considered possible answers.

“Pourquoi?” he asked.

I pointed to the board, where he had written ‘L.R. Boisvert.’
“Votre nom. Boisvert est français.”

He suddenly reverted to English. “I was born in Waterbury.”

I felt a smile spread across my face.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“I thought you were French. Your accent, you know?” I had already mapped out his prior life, picturing him sipping Beaujolais at a sidewalk café, reading *Le Monde*.

As he called on each of us to relate our background and experience with the French language, I mentally rehearsed my response, grasping at my limited vocabulary to express it. I began to realize that I was taking this course more for just the presence of *Madame*. I was taking it to vindicate myself from the failure I’d felt with the language during my time living in France.

“Bridget, the bank is very pleased with your performance in the training program.” In typical fashion of my mental state, I expected that David Miller had asked me into his office to scold me. I now let out a puff of air I’d been holding in the back of my throat. “I was wondering if you would consider postponing your stint in Credit Audit for six months.” This can’t be happening; this man has no idea how important this specific job is to my life. It would mean traveling all over the world to exotic cities. It was my ticket to a jet setting life I had always hoped for, a way of seeing the world without the burden of a backpack and holes in my pockets—a way to see it in a style that would be otherwise impossible.

“Whatever the bank needs me to do, I’ll be happy to comply.” I didn’t mean that at all. How did such corporately appropriate comments slither off my tongue so effortlessly?

“We’d like you to work in the Paris office for six months and then come back to New York to work in Credit Audit.”

“Um, I, I, well . . .” I wanted to dance the fandango with this man!

“You do speak French, don’t you?” Oh, here’s the catch.

“I studied French for five years but let’s see, I last took it about twelve years ago. I’m definitely rusty but I’ll start studying up tonight.” He didn’t seem to care about my details. Could I be ready to move in two weeks? Two weeks, two hours, whatever. I was going to live in Paris! Patee, gay wonderful Patee! I was going to stroll on the wide boulevards from April to October, balancing baguettes between my arm and hip, sashaying past the smoky sidewalk cafés. I’d sit on the steps of Sacre Coeur at sunset and stare down over Montmartre and the city below every single night. I’d listen to the street musicians while sipping Cabernet Sauvignon and nibbling on baked Brie. Yes, life was good.

Shoes shined and scents of croissants flirting with the air, I strode into Marie-Pascale Soleil’s corner office. “Good Morning,” I sparkled, thrusting my hand into hers.

“Bonjour, d’accord, vous seriez Mademoiselle Bridget. Bienvenue à Paris.”

“My French is very rusty. Could you please speak English?”

She glared over her half-glasses that decorated her otherwise pasty face. “I’m afraid there has been some error, Ms. Fitzpatrick. We require that you speak fluent French in order to do this job. Rusty French or whatever you choose to call it is simply not acceptable. We need you to be able to work just as quickly as the French employees. I was under the impression that you were fluent.”

I thought I was about to fall on my very English-speaking American derriere. “Well, my boss told me I just needed to have *some* background with the language. I told him I last studied French twelve years ago. He didn’t object at all.” This was coming as a deflating shock. I nervously flicked at my fingernails.

Her pursed lips spat, “Ppppffffff.” She dabbed at her lips with stubby fingers. “You have obviously misrepresented yourself so that you could spend six months in Paris.” Small lines formed on her upper lip, lines that were etched into her face as resolutely as the lines on a trapeze artist’s feet.

“No, I didn’t.” My words scarcely resounded. “My boss asked me to take on this assignment. I’ve misrepresented nothing.” I hoped she didn’t hear the crackle in my voice.

Her reaction was as lively as Playdough. “I will discuss this with Jacques Favillier, the Country Manager. This is a serious problem,

-folio-

I hope you realize. You will not only need to know French fluently to do this job; you will have to understand French financial terminology. We don't have time to wait for you to learn our language." End of conversation. She shifted the contents of her in-box on to a leather bound blotter.

"But I'll take lessons at night, I'll work until late in the night. Please don't send me back." Forget about pride, this woman stood between this opportunity of a lifetime and me. I vowed to study two hours each night—anything to be able to stay the six months. I'd given up my apartment in Manhattan; I couldn't bear to be sent back after I'd built such huge expectations for myself. I had no idea of what to do.

"I've made an appointment with you to look at apartments with a realtor. You may as well keep the appointment for now. The bank can't keep paying for you to stay in a hotel. It's very expensive."

My hotel bill was not going to break THE worldwide Vanderbilt Bank. That much I knew.

I found a tiny studio apartment on a cobblestone twisting side street nearby the Pantheon. On Rue Laromiguière. My tongue savored the words as they rolled through my lips. Roo Laaaaah-row-
www-meee-gccairrrggghhh. Poetry.

"Mademoiselle Fitzpatrick," Monsieur Boisvert called on me.

I tried to slow my thoughts to best summarize my background with the language. In halting French, I managed, "I worked at a bank in Paris for six months. I read financial statements in French and then would write an analysis of the company. It was hard because my French skills were so bad."

"Your accent is very good, though."

"I get so nervous when I have to speak it. I just draw a blank."

"Practice. That's what you need. There's only six of you on my roster. You'll get plenty of chances to speak here." I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

I stayed after class to explain a little more of my background to Monsieur Boisvert. After my first disastrous day in Paris, I started intensive lessons with a French tutor. We discovered that I was much stronger at reading French than I was articulating or understanding it verbally. My tutor agreed to speak to Marie-Pascale Soleil the next day and try to save my face and job.

After a week of dire uncertainty, I struck a deal that if I could finish my work according to a schedule set by Marie-Pascale Soleil, I could stay in Paris. I realized this meant staying at the office until

about ten o'clock each night. Not exactly as I had envisioned my Parisian nights, but I'd do whatever it took to realize this life experience.

"I'm a little scarred from my experience," I told Monsieur Boisvert.

"I can understand how intimidating it must have been. You've definitely got *chutzpah*."

"*Mon dieu*, this office looks like an old Russian army post," I said the first time I went for help.

He laughed, then shrugged. "Adjunct faculty are at the bottom of the food chain around here. Actually, these 1950's chairs are pretty comfortable, though." His baritone voice and deliberate words filled the air with elegance.

I brushed a film of dust off a chair and sat beside him, opening the text on his desktop. "Thanks for speaking English. I really panic when I have to speak French."

"Sounds like your time in Paris was pretty intimidating," he said. "It reminds me of the fear I felt in seventh grade. My school was run by the Sisters of Bonaventure, a French order of nuns. At Easter, we had to memorize and recite the entire first Book of John, in French. The nuns would have rulers that they'd smack us with if we didn't get it right. I barely got the words out of my throat. I understand what it's like to feel fear while speaking French."

"Yikes, that sounds rough," I said. I noticed his hands, smooth, youngish, fingers rubbing against the edge of the desk. No wedding ring. "Would you say you're fluent in French?"

"I can get by pretty well, but I still get nervous when speaking with a native French speaker. I've been retired for about ten years, so I don't have much reason lately to speak it."

I started mentally calculating. Ten years retired? He looked to be in his mid fifties. How early could a person retire, fifty-five? Could he be sixty-five? He just didn't seem old to me. Maybe it was the carefully clipped beard and boyish hair, bangs sweeping across his forehead. Handsome, maybe even distinguished-looking, blue-gray eyes large, set deeply behind rimless glasses. Too bad he seemed so arrogant, though. I felt so sorry for the class members who spoke with a heavy American accent. He'd raise his voice to correct their pronunciation, not in a yelling way, just in an authoritarian tone. I was so glad he'd never done that to me. "I came for help in direct object pronouns," I said. "I'm just not getting it. Can we go over some of the workbook exercises?"

"Okay, translate this passage on page eight."

-folio-

“As-tu envie de quelque chose?’ Do you want something? That makes me wonder – how does a French person know whether to use the familiar ‘tu,’ or the formal ‘vous?’ How would someone know if they’re being too bold by using ‘tu?’”

He laughed. “That’s what’s called ‘tutoyer,’ addressing a person in the familiar as opposed to the formal ‘vousvoyer.’ In general, you wait for the older person to become familiar first.”

“What if you’re not sure of the person’s age? It seems stressful.”

“It can be, I guess. My mother was French Canadian, didn’t really speak much English. She was friends with a woman who lived in our tenement. Every single day, they went for a walk. Madame Ferrier would call up to my mother from the street, ‘Madame Boisvert? Voulez-vous marcher avec moi?’ For over thirty years, they walked every day, but always addressing each other as ‘vous’ and ‘Madame.’ My mother didn’t seem to mind. Neither one of them ever ‘tutoyer’ed’ the other, I guess.” He shrugged.

God, I had been so arrogant back in Paris, a weird mix of boldness and naiveté, I thought as Monsieur Boisvert read to the class. His accent, now familiar to me, was so soothing it coaxed my attention away from my memories. I thought back to my after-class sessions with him, where the talk about French grammar may have been dwarfed by our discussions about life. I told him about living in Paris, my struggles with Student Teaching, my family. I realized he knew more about me than most people did. It was okay; he made it easy to speak openly, easy to listen to him and his talk of his Civil Rights work in Mississippi in the sixties, chopping wood for his stove, his three children. He was *célibataire*, he told me. I’d run home that day, searching for my French-English dictionary. Celibate? Why was he telling me that? Did I want to know? I wasn’t sure, but was relieved to discover it means “single.”

As the weather warmed in early Spring, I decided to wear shorts to class. I wanted to celebrate the nice weather, and also to show that my legs were still shapely for my age. On the way home from class, I stopped at the package store. As I walked through the parking lot, I hesitated when I spotted the familiar blue button-down shirt. I caught Monsieur Boisvert’s startle, debated whether to hop back into my car and pretend we never saw each other. In the eternity of the next several seconds, I decided to greet him. “Hey, you look familiar,” I said, feeling the blood rushing my head.

“Mademoiselle Fitzpatrick, what are you doing here?”

“Buying a bottle of wine. You?” Oh God, is he going to think I’m a lush?

“I’ve got this French blood. I’m also getting some wine,” he said. We walked into the store. “What kind do you drink?”

I decided to avoid telling him I usually bought a cheap brand. “I’m just looking for a Chardonnay with a pretty label.” We headed down different aisles. Monsieur Boisvert was still shopping by the time I’d found a bottle that seemed appropriately sophisticated and paid the cashier. I decided to wait for him at the check-out. As I stood there, I felt self-conscious that I was wearing shorts, wondering if he knew I wore them to maybe impress him a little.

As we walked to our cars, he said, “What road do you take to get home? You live in Southbury?”

I paused over the fact that he knew where I lived. I’d never mentioned it to him but remembered filling out an index card the first day of class. “I take the Merritt Parkway and then Route 8 to Seymour.”

He laughed. “That’s so convoluted. Why don’t you take Route 67?”

“I don’t know where that is.” I didn’t grow up in Connecticut and I was still learning my way.

“Listen, you follow me. I’ll show you how. I’ll drive you to the Stop ‘n Shop in Seymour. Do you know your way home from there?”

“Yes. My car’s right over there. Thanks for doing this.” As I followed his Subaru Outback, I wondered whether I should suggest that we stop for a drink along the way. Then I thought that would be a little too bold. He was my professor after all. The class wasn’t even over yet.

When we got to Seymour, he pulled into the parking lot of an insurance company and came to my window. “Thanks a lot,” I said. “This is so much quicker than the way I’ve been driving for the past year. Did I take you out of your way?”

“Well . . . yes, but that’s okay.” He smiled.

“Where do you live, anyway?” I asked.

“Just over the hill in Bethany.”

“Bridget, please read your English translation of Charles Beaudelaire’s *Enivrez-Vous*.” He’d assigned two poems as homework. I first read it in French, trying my best to reproduce a sufficient amount of nasal sounds to authenticate my hard fought accent.

-folio-

"*Enivrez-Vous*," I read. Get drunk. I wondered if he'd called on me because of our meeting at the package store.

"One must always be drunk. Everything is there. It is the only question. In order not to sense the horrible burden of Time that shatters your shoulders and bends you toward the ground, you must always get drunk.

"But with what? Wine, poetry, or virtue, as you wish. But get drunk.

"And if sometimes, on the steps of a palace, on the green grass of a ditch, in the dreary solitude of your room, you wake up, the drunkenness already diminished or disappeared, ask the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, to all that flee that groan, to all that roll, to all that sing, to all that speak, ask what time it is, and the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, will tell you: 'It is time to get drunk! In order not to be the martyred slaves of Time, get drunk; get drunk constantly! On wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you wish.'"

"*Bonne traduction*," Monsieur said. I smiled, wondering if he now had that *carpé diem* feeling I get when things are going my way.

The next poem we translated had a more somber mood, and I was disappointed in the mood shift of the other students. Ludmilla, the Russian woman who sat beside me, read her translation of "*Demain, des aubes*" by Victor Hugo.

"Tomorrow, at dawn, at the hour when the country
side whitens,

I will leave. You see, I know that you await me.
I will go by the forest, I will go by the mountain.
I cannot live far from you any longer.

I will walk with eyes fixed on my thoughts,
Without seeing anything around me, without hearing any
noise,

Alone, unknown, back bent over, hands folded,
Sad, and the day for me will be like the night.

I will not look at either the gold of the night that falls,
Or the distant sails descending toward Harfleur,
And when I arrive, I will place on your grave
A bouquet of green holly and flowers of heather."

Death. I wondered about Monsieur Boisvert's parents, whom I knew were dead. Whenever one of the students made a terrible er-

ror, he'd look up at the ceiling and cry, "Ma." Then he'd look at the floor, and cry, "Pa." It was something I disliked about him—this apparent swipe against his father—and never knew if he was joking. Probably, but he did it with such a straight face, I couldn't decide.

I went to his office after class that day. "You seemed to enjoy the poetry today," he said.

"Yeah. I really liked the message of Beaudelaire's poem—a real 'Seize this hour' type of a theme."

I sat beside him, noticing his fingers pressing the edges of a yellowed newspaper clipping. I looked into his eyes, wondering whether to speak. After a few seconds he said, "I brought you something I cut out of the newspaper a very long time ago. It's something I wish I'd written myself. I don't do this often," another pause, "but I wanted to share it with you." He slid it toward me. At the top of the clipping, in his writing, I read "20 March, 1980." No wonder it was yellowed. It was from the 'Letters' section of *The New York Times*, and was printed under the title "In Praise of Storms."

I could feel his eyes on me as I scanned it, and then slowed to capture each word.

Maybe it's just a matter of attitude, but those cold, windy streets always appealed to me — at least I knew there'd be fewer (maybe no) people out there, and I wouldn't have to run the risk of putting up with their hearthside philosophies.

Any one who shuts his (or her) door on a good roaring thunderstorm — replete with rain lashing the windows like whips and trees and leaves blown about like paper and sticks — locks out the voice of God. The point is, I suppose, that if he pushed you out in that street, at least you didn't get to stay inside and vegetate.

The universe isn't hostile — just indifferent. Most people don't see that and they don't see that you live alone, truly — no matter where or with whom — and you die alone, truly. The only thing you can't do alone is love.

Dick Russell, Winston-Salem, N.C.

"This is beautiful," I said. "I like it very much."

"Bon, ben, donc, alors, voyons, quoi . . ." he stammered.

"What did you say?"

"It's kind of like an 'oh, um, well' type of French saying. You know, when you don't really know what to say. I've wanted to give you a copy of that. It's the original clipping."

"Do you want me to copy it for you?"

-folio-

“No, I don’t plan to give it to anybody else. You keep it.”

“Well thanks,” I said. “Yeah, there’s something freeing about being out in a storm. I especially like it when it’s snowing—the fluffiness, the absolute stillness of everything. This guy said it so well.”

“I like the grayness of stormy days, and the thick fogginess when it rains.”

“I don’t know about that. I’d rather have a nice blue sky, you know, the color when you can’t even describe it. Those days are my favorites.”

“Hesitation,” I wrote on the paper tablecloth at Delaney’s. A group of us Creative Writing students were writing group poems, some of which miraculously ended up being fairly decent. Michelle pressed her orange crayon, and with deliberation added to my first word, “blows.” I laughed. Michelle knew about my feelings for Monsieur Boisvert, and thought I should absolutely pursue him. Tony hesitated for a second, then wrote, “the sands of time against a wall.”

Tony finished the poem the next day and e-mailed it to me. “Hesitation blows/the sands of time into a wall/that would drag our hearts/ into permanence leaving us/tombs and sepulchers/stiff statues with/dust on our lips/silent but for the whining wind/of the separated soul/searching perpetually/ for the lost moment/when love was a word away.”

“I’ll miss you,” I blurted in the parking lot after making Monsieur Boisvert stay beyond the final exam hours so I could complete my test. I felt my eyes widen as I absorbed the enormity of what I’d said. I’d been so worried that this was the last time I’d ever see him. I was hoping he didn’t notice that I’d parked in a different parking lot than normal, only so we could walk to our cars together after class. He must have known; for the entire semester I’d parked on the other side of campus from him. Today, I bluffed my way into his faculty lot with my father’s handicapped parking tag. I didn’t park in a handicapped space, but was still parked in a lot where I didn’t belong, except as it related to my longing to spend time with Monsieur Boisvert.

“I’ll miss you too,” he seemed to say with as much surprise as I felt.

“What are you doing for the summer?”

“I’m the chief swaps guy for a car dealership. When they need to get a Subaru from one dealership to another, I’m the guy who does it. I drive to Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, wherever, a

few times a week. I also have family birthdays and the like. I keep busy. How about you?"

"I'm hoping to drive cross country with my dog. My friend is a massage therapist. She spends winters in Park City, Utah and summers in Mexico, Costa Rica, you name it. This summer, she'll be in Bend, Oregon. I really want to go and see her. I haven't planned it out yet, though." I shifted my knapsack from my right shoulder to my left hand. "I hope I'll see you around," I said, smiling.

"Yes, maybe next semester," he said. It sounded so far away.

I checked the phone book that night and got driving directions from Mapquest, deciding to drive by his house some time during the next week. It felt so teenager-ish, to do a drive-by, but somehow I could sense the same thrill decades later.

Then, a week later, I turned on my computer and discovered a message from him: "Forgive the format of this *courrier electronique*. I have trouble lining things up properly on this set-up. Your grades: Final Exam: 91 = A-. You were the only student to score in the A range. Final grade: 93 = A. You were the only one to earn a full A. *Je vous felicite*."

"Letter to follow, unless you leave tomorrow for Oregon. Better yet, since this message seems to be going along smoothly, I'll continue, one letter, one finger at a time.

"You did excellent work in the French 300 course. Nobody worked as hard as you, and you truly merited the grades you received.

"Permit me to tell you that you are a very interesting woman – and very pretty – and I am happy that you were a student in my course. I am going to remember you with ... affection. I will miss you, too.

"Maybe I will see you in the future, the fall semester perhaps. If, in the future, you think that I could help you in one way or another, in French or in English, you can contact me.

"A last remark: I am sorry for not being able to respond to all of your questions about grammar. Being 70, I'm old, I'm rusty, and I forget. A last request: I would very much like a copy of your poem, 'Organ Recital.' It is an excellent poem that you should try to get published. You could send it to my home – if you want. My address: 263 Fairwood Rd. Bethany, CT 06524.

Bon, ben, alors, quoi, voyons, donc I leave you with the famous slogan of the sixties.....

Peace and love,
Lucien Boisvert"

-folio-

Thrilled with the prospect of potential interest from him, I replied as soon as I read his message:

“Dear Monsieur Boisvert-

Hello! I hope you are well and happy. Thank you for your e-mail. I am surprised by my good grade; I thought I had failed the final exam. Each word I wrote had a feeling of error to it, and I was nervous. Thank you for staying late to allow me to finish the exam. I learned a lot in your class. You are tough but fair.

“I definitely think you should sign up with the other Freshmen for my Comp. Course in the Spring. The role reversal would be highly amusing, and I would have to start sharpening my red pens immediately!

“Let me make a suggestion. The other day, a friend told me, ‘Hesitation blows the sands of time into a wall.’ I can’t stop myself from thinking about it. Now, at the risk of being absurd and audacious ... I feel like a foolish schoolgirl, but I ask myself, ‘Why not?’ Voila: would you consider meeting me for coffee, and I can give you the poem, ‘Organ Recital.’ If not, I can send it to you, but I would like to see you and chat.

“Okay, yipes!! I’ve never done this before (clumsily asked a man out. No wait ... in tenth grade, I did ask Willem Specht to the Turnabout Dance. It was just as scary then as it is now.) I wrote today’s 21st century suggestion in French to give myself plausible deniability that my meaning was lost in translation. So, if you are laughing at my boldness, I will simply pretend that ... nah, I’ll ‘fess up to my audacity, but my face will probably ignite when I see you next. It’s worth the risk. You are a person whom I would like to know better, Monsieur.

“Bon, ben, donc, alors, voyons, quoi...
Bridget”

I sweated out the next two days, dreading to receive a response. Finally, my e-mail mailbox’s flag stood up, and I read,

“Dear Bridget, My unsophisticated webtv get-up does not automatically record incoming messages (I do not know why) so I just check in every three or four days to see if anything is in there. Usually, when there is, it’s a Red Sox News flash telling me of the latest marginal player whom the Red Sox have just signed. Big deal. But tonight, after watching the Red Sox lose to the hated Yankees (the epithet ‘hated’ is always used whenever the hated Yankees are mentioned), I checked the mail and found your message. (The hated New York Yankees won the game, 7 – 3.)

“No, I am not laughing at your suggestion that we meet for coffee. I know how difficult this sort of thing is. In 1947, Beth Holland asked me to the junior prom. (I was a junior flunking every course except English, including French, but I had an English teacher, Miss Cecilia Jackson, who was about 60 years old, who worked us like hell, and who was tough but fair. I was in a so-called D group, but she worked our asses off, just as much as she did her A group.)

“But I digress. Beth and I spent the whole evening together, went to a state park with two other couples (in a 1939 Buick), talked all night, never touched one another, got her home around 5 a.m., put out my hand to shake hers as I said I had a good time when she bent forward to kiss me, said thanks, went inside. She never spoke to me again.

“Yes, I’d like to have coffee with you, or a glass of wine, though I’m not sure why I’m ‘a person whom you’d like to know better.’ I can tell you that I’m a simple but shallow man. There may be some style there, but not much substance. As to when and where, an afternoon around 2 p.m. or so would fit my schedule. The where could be any place in Southbury that you like. We could meet at that clock in the K-Mart Plaza, just off”

Ten minutes later, he sent the next message:

“I don’t know what the hell I did, but the previous message, unfinished, went through. To finish – Exit 15 off I-84. We can do this at your convenience. I don’t know, of course, what your schedule is. So if you still want to meet (my first thought was tomorrow, Thursday, but that’s too short notice), let me know, either by e-mail or by phone. I’ll check my e-mail daily from now on. I leave you with the famous slogan of the 70’s as well as the 60’s....
“Peace and love, Lucien”

We met under the clock tower as it struck one. He motioned me to come and sit in his car. As I sat beside him, I realized I had sprayed on far too much Opium. I had hoped its clove scent would subtly seduce him. Now I feared it might cause his eyes to tear. Beneath this heavy air, I detected a smoky odor. I’d never noticed a pack of cigarettes in his breast pocket. I decided maybe he’d given a ride to a smoker.

“So what are we doing now?” he asked, hands gripping the steering wheel.

-folio-

"I've got all the makings for a picnic. Kettletown Park is about five minutes from here."

"What about the rain?"

"We'll find some trees to huddle under," I answered in my most cheerful voice, hoping the shakiness wouldn't come through.

For some reason, he wanted to drive in separate cars. I quickly agreed, hoping I could use the time to rub off some of my perfume.

I spread the picnic fixings across the table. "You forgot to bring the wine?" I said. "I could have used a few slugs to ease my tension." I laughed softly.

"You don't need to be nervous with me." If he only knew just how shaky I felt.

As soon as we sat down, he asked, "So why are we here, anyway?"

Yipes, the direct approach. "I like you," I said. "I want to get to know you better. I enjoy talking with you. You're really smart."

"Bridget, I'm very flattered, and yes, I like you too. I've enjoyed having you in class and the time we spent together after class. But," he cleared his throat, "there are certain impediments to beginning a relationship. I once mentioned something to you about my long term companion." He'd told me once that his long-term companion had tried to iron one of his shirts. He interrupted her and said, 'let me show you how I do it.' She never again offered to do his ironing. When he told me the story a few months earlier, I thought he was referring to a past relationship. I never would have asked him out had I known he was involved with someone. I felt like throwing up as he explained. "I've been in a long-term relationship on and off for thirty years. It's on now and I'd never break it off because I feel like I stole her youth—she's sixteen years younger than me—and I never did marry her or agree to live with her. I know you would not want to be 'The Other Woman.'

"Secondly (and this is between you and me), I have bladder cancer. That's why I had to cancel class that one time. I had to go to the hospital for a biopsy."

Oh my gosh. I felt my eyes start to water. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm in remission right now, but I've already had it twice, went through all of the chemo. It's a very recurring type of cancer. I'm definitely at risk."

I wanted to keep on this subject, but he continued. "The third thing, Bridget, is that I'm seventy years old. You're forty. You're in the

prime of your life. Do you know that the life expectancy for a person my age is seventy-three. Statistically, I have only two and a half years to live. I'm just being realistic. You deserve a person who is also in his prime."

"The fourth obstacle is that I smoke. I know you don't." He had smoked two cigarettes while we were there and asked me to turn my head away while he smoked. He said he'd never asked someone to do that before, but he was embarrassed to have me see him smoke. It only made me like him more.

"I'm so sorry about your cancer," I said. "And thank you for explaining your concerns. Of these impediments you describe, the only real one is the first one. I didn't realize you were in a relationship."

"Please don't feel badly, Bridget. Do you know that this is every man's dream? I'm flattered. I don't know why you're interested in me though. I really don't."

"You're smart, compassionate, articulate, funny. You have so many qualities that I admire. The thing is, I don't want to break up your relationship. I don't ever want to be 'The Other Woman.' I've been in that role before, and I still feel haunted by the guilt. I thought nothing about messing up other people's lives. I don't like the person I used to be."

"I have to say, I feel somewhat 'stuck' in the relationship, but couldn't just leave her now. We've shared too much. I hope you can understand."

"No, I didn't bring you here to convince you to end your relationship. I didn't even know about it. I'm really sorry. I feel terrible."

"Don't be sorry. I'm sorry that I led you on a little. Let's face it—I felt the tension between us. I liked it. I encouraged you in a lot of ways. I knew from fairly early in the semester that you came to my office hours for more than just help with your French. I was flattered."

We talked back and forth for about two-and-a-half hours. One thing I really liked about him is that he was a good listener. Few men really are. He told me he thought I was fascinating, beautiful, smart, and kind. When it was time to go, we hugged, he kissed me (briefly, with the softest, gentle lips), we hugged again, another kiss of the same sort. We got in our respective cars; he followed me out to the main road. When we turned to go our separate ways, he rolled down his window. We smiled sadly, waved, and then I blew a kiss toward him. I didn't look to see if he blew one back, but I think he did.

jennifer l. soboleski

-desperation from separation-

The fetus on the counter, screaming, flailing,
Must have been mine at some point.
It looked at me with its clouded eyes, sensing recognition.
The drunk party guests filed into the kitchen
And the deformed child rolled around, desperate to survive,
Knocking eggs to the floor.

That's when I noticed the empty beer bottles:
The brand my fiancée drank before he killed himself last year.
Had he been here?
I had knelt at his coffin.
He is now only ash in a box.
But then he appeared in the doorway:
Sad, detached, alive.
He turned and ran.
I followed.

Instinct told me that he would use the ATM card in his wallet
To buy more rope
So he could hang himself again.
I wouldn't let it happen,
Not this time.
I chased him in circles in my aunt's yard,
Followed him into my car where he hid,
And latched my fingers around his arm.
He tugged and pulled.
I lost my grip.

I followed him up the fire escape of a three-family house.
When I met him at the top floor, he had turned into a cat.
He jumped off the railing and landed on his feet.
By the time I had run down the stairs and met the grass,
He was already across the highway.
I begged for someone to go after him, to catch him.

I turned to a crowd that had been watching.
They hung their heads.
The telephone repairman stepped forward and said:
"If he's gonna go, he's gonna go. There's nothing you can do."
I wanted to fight him, but I knew it was true.
I turned and walked away and returned to the house
With the fetus on the counter,
Screaming and flailing.

alexander d. zamachaj

-another day will do-

One and $\frac{3}{4}$ lbs. of pressure will
Send a bullet from ear to ear.
I tie my shoes and
Wait to see if tomorrow it might rain.

william c. ruggiero

-the reaper on magnolia-

With tears in his eyes and little hope for tomorrow Josh opened the door. He was not expecting company but some would be nice, perhaps an old friend. It was no surprise to him that over the threshold he found nothing but a full moon and a refreshing breeze.

It had been a while since anyone had visited Josh. His mother had died the November prior and his father was somewhere else. Josh had no pets; everything he ever had seemed to die and that made him feel dirty. *The nights are the worst*, he thought as he stared into the darkness. Josh often felt like a prisoner late at night, sentenced to a lifetime of solitary confinement for a crime he did not commit. He decided that perhaps a stroll down the street would do him well. The air was raw and thick that night, he breathed deeply as to reap its full potential.

Only a few people knew Josh for the caring person he was. He had been married to a woman from the city, but she was hard and cold. He loved her very much, so much that he left his beloved country house and moved to an apartment with her in New York. But he grew homesick and she grew sick of him. One day he woke up to find a single rose and a note; she had left him for another man.

Josh did not blame her. He quietly packed his things and took the next bus back to the country.

Josh had a tendency of believing people when they spoke. His ex-wife swore she loved him, he believed that. His mother said she was fine, and not to worry about her on that cold November night. He believed her; as he hung up the phone he kicked himself for forgetting to say "I love you."

But most recently his best friend, Andy, who was a very odd character and now stationed at a naval base in Groton, had told him about the Grim Reaper. He told him that every full moon the Reaper comes out of the shadows and seeks out those with uncertainties. "He only speaks to those who truly need him, and he will only answer one question," Andy said during their last rendezvous as he took his last sip of beer and headed for the exit.

Josh knew that particular night would be a perfect opportunity to meet the reaper, he had just the question.

-folio-

He made his way across the yard towards the street. He was barefoot and the dew from the grass made his feet feel cool. He got to the edge of the road and looked right, and then he looked left. To the right of him was nothing, which made Josh feel empty. However to the left, about 100 yards down at the intersection of his road and a street called Magnolia, stood a tall dark fellow. Josh thought it strange that a man would be out this time of night all on his lonesome. So he, being a caring person, proceeded towards the stranger to see if he needed assistance.

The length of road leading to Magnolia becomes pitch dark at night. So with slow and steady strides Josh cautiously made way. A feeling of uneasy confusion consumed him. Every step seemed to become progressively more demanding. His soul and feet felt heavy. Josh became spiritually drained by a feeling of dread. He began to question his decision to stroll at such an odd hour. Josh became paranoid, as if the fate of the universe was on his shoulders and everyone was expecting him to fail. A deep guttural feeling convinced him to proceed. As he walked further into the darkness the stranger under the street light became more visible; it was in fact the Grim Reaper.

"Hello, sir, how are you?" Josh uttered with complete lack of confidence. The unknown gave no response. Josh all of a sudden became horrified, and turned around ready to flee. At that moment the reaper laid a comforting hand on Josh's shoulder, which paralyzed him with an intoxicating sense of trust.

"What is your question?" the dark one asked. His voice was like no other; deep and penetrating yet calmly euphoric.

Josh spoke his question calm and clear. He had been thinking about it for so long now. Finally getting the chance to pose it was a relief. "When will the loneliness stop?" A tear ran down his cheek.

As the words left Josh's mouth he realized the answer was beyond his own comprehension. The Reaper responded with appropriate silence. Suddenly Josh felt a sense of assurance. As a son embracing his mother, Josh welcomed the Reaper. Together they walked down dark mysterious Magnolia. All Josh could think about was how happy he was to have the company.

gregory a. antonini

-thorn-

The closet was yours,
clothes puffed out like the breast of a bird

and shoes piled on the floor
so the kick of boots hit you

like leather belts when you opened
the doors to look inside.

That's where you kept my roses,
one from every Valentine's Day,

pinned to the wall, hung
upside down to dry, out of the way,

so they wouldn't break
when you touched them.

When you left, I looked inside
to see if you took them with you.

I found them on the floor
where your boots had been,

petals crushed, stems petrified,
leaves swollen to black.

stacy a. vocasek

-bats in the belfry-

At five, I knew St. Mary's school was haunted –
Catechism in a basement room,
No one used it but our class.

Running through halls past offices,
down stairs, ignoring echoing shouts,
Girl, you better walk! Jesus never ran!
Afraid that ghosts would push me into open lockers,
the ones I insisted on hearing slam open
and shut while priests droned on about the miracle of God.

I swore by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost
that I saw long, pale faces hovering in open doorways.
The nuns never believed me; made me sit in the corner
of an empty room thinking about my sins,
praying for forgiveness. And when class was over,
I ran, again, into mother's waiting arms.

The church locked the doors one day.
I watched from the street as movers cleaned out rooms,
took down crimson curtains from long, slim windows,
and brought up desks from the basement classrooms.

Years later, at thirteen, I walked home
from softball practice past the empty building –
windows grimy, some boarded shut because
of foul balls and launched rocks. No more classes
in the basement, a thick-chained padlock
blocking entry and exit.

danielle n. stone

-bobbing along-

She treats herself like a jellyfish
flopping around with her perfect posture.
She passes her time slouching
in the old velvet arm chair
her father bought back when vintage was new.
It stinks of cigars, aftershave, and butterscotch LifeSavers.
The chair's burnt orange hue reminds her of
"Three's Company" reruns on Nick at Nite.
When she smells the fabric,
she hears the waves of her father's laughter.

Elliot Charles sat in that chair in his New York apartment
long before she was born.
It occurs to her that the chair isn't orange velvet.
It's brown leather with a matching ottoman.
Every day she struggles to stand up straight,
but the weight of her father's absence
anchors her down.
Would he have been a *Dad*,
Father, or *Pops*? It's hard to believe
she has never addressed her own father.

"Your father was so proud of you. He couldn't get over
how small you were. Held you up
to the lobster at a dinner party once.
You and the lobster were the same size.
How your father laughed!"
The constant ocean of her mother's memories
washes over her beached body,
helping them bob along
without the boat that tipped
on that stormy day.

-folio-

Last year on her 21st birthday,
sitting in his chair,
she saw her father swimming
through the white carpet toward her.

Pumpkin prays she'll live past 29, unlike her father,
and marry a too-nice man like him.
She *will* walk out of that water,
even if her limbs still feel like jelly.
Oui, Pepe, she sighs leaning her head back in the chair,
accepting its support.

The carpet parts like the Red Sea,
her father's smile wavering in the lamp light,
but, as though trying to swim through sand,
the carpet fibers keep pushing him back.

melissa m. owen

-hold on to something-

I drove for hours in the dark until I came to a circle of flashing blue and red lights, lighting up the sky. All of the sickos coming home from their dates and their Saturday night dinner parties slowed to a crawl and gawked out their windows, hoping to catch just one glimpse of blood. I stared at the upside down car, king to the shards of glass glistening on the road. I thought about how I was alone and how I wouldn't mind being in that car. I imagined myself strapped to the seat, hanging upside down, my nose bubbling a beautiful ruby red. Then I thought about beating myself in the face and driving to Adam's house, just so he would worry.

The final straw had happened earlier today, the realization that no one cared. I had come home from work, ready to wash my hair because all I could smell was last night's funk of tears and a destroyed pillow. I called Lonn, hoping maybe we could catch a movie, but apparently his homosexual side had pulled him to his in-the-closet lover's for a quick lay. I peeked out the window, just as my friend Sarah ran out the front door of her house across the street into the arms of her psychotic, but admittedly hot boyfriend. I threw my phone across the living room and as it bounced off the couch, I considered my options.

Adam was, of course, suspiciously absent. I had called him earlier in the day from work, the second I felt like I might cry. He had cleared his throat twice before he said hello. I had giggled nervously, anticipating the disappointment that he would undoubtedly bring.

"What are you doing, silly?" I asked, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

"Going to John's, I'll be there all day."

And that had been it. He was not my boyfriend and I had to stop pretending that he was. We fucked maybe once a week because I loved him and he loved sex. I called him every day because I wanted to justify the fact that we were touching each other's privates on a fairly regular basis. And of course because I was stupid enough to believe that I loved him. I thought that I loved him because when I was not with him, I was alone again, and when I was alone... well, I should never be alone. I should never be alone and Tori Amos should never have made *Under the Pink*, if for nothing else than to prevent a person like myself

-folio-

from finally finding the sharpest object in the house.

After deciding that trying to track down any of my “friends” was an effort I was too exhausted to make, I pulled my hair back and forgot about washing it. I didn’t want to spend another night soaking my bed sheets, so I dragged myself off of the couch and went to my room to get dressed. I flicked on my stereo, and immediately pressed stop as Tori blasted on. *I can’t believe this violence in mind.* I sighed as my hand plunged into the depths of my closet, feeling for something warm and comforting. I cringed as my hand touched my Stereolab t-shirt. I could still picture Adam and me on the first night I wore that shirt. He had complimented me on my taste and my curves. And then we had kissed. I shook the image of his bed head from my mind. I yanked on my pants, tugged on my shirt, and ran some chapstick over my lips. I just wanted to get out, feel the blister of cold on my face, anything that would make me feel alive.

Unfortunately, I felt more dead than ever as I sat in my car, staring at the people running and waving and shouting. I was such a hypocrite; I was actually trying to make out whether there was anyone still in the upside down car. I hadn’t even noticed what I was listening to until I heard the exuberant syllable-enunciating voice of a DJ announce the number one song of “this club-hopping night! WOO!” I turned the volume up as some chirpy bitch began to “whoa” and “uh-hhh” her way through another pop tart orgasm anthem.

I couldn’t take another second of this. I stabbed at the CD button on my stereo and Tori’s *From the Choirgirl Hotel* rang throughout my little shitbox. *But I feel something is wrong, But I feel this cake just isn’t done, Don’t say that you Don’t.* I tried to remember the frame of mind I was in when I went on this chick-with-a-piano binge and stocked up both at home and in my car. I figured it had to do something with an encounter with Adam and the nagging feeling of screaming my brains out they always left me with.

Traffic began to edge along and I breathed a sigh, though without reason because I maybe was two feet further along. I peered out my window again and felt my insides turn to see a girl about my age slumped against the side of an ambulance, sobbing into her cell phone. She had a large cut on her cheek that was sloppily covered by a falling off piece of gauze. A white blanket hung off of her shoulders like a cape. Her face looked like it exploded and left a mess of snot and salt. Other than that, she appeared to me to be the kind of girl who wore her thong showing on purpose and maybe, even the kind who would get caught giving a blow job in a closet. I say this based on her obvious hair extensions and her even more obvious cleavage packed

into a bright red V-neck. I was always the type of person to choose a book by its fucking front cover. Even so, as I watched her wail, I felt sick with worry. No one was even helping her; they were just letting her carry on into a tiny piece of plastic.

The car in front of me rolled forward and I took the opportunity to pull over. I had no idea what I was going to say. She didn't seem to notice me as I pushed open the driver's side door and got out.

"The car is a wreck, Mom, a wreck!" she screamed, holding the phone in front of her mouth. She gasped as her Nokia stopped glowing. "Hello??"

"Ummm...hi. I was um, sitting in traffic and I uh...just wanted to make sure that you...didn't need anything because I could bring you something if you, you know, wanted me to." She stopped screeching long enough to burn her welled-up eyes into me.

"What?"

"Well, you're like what...nineteen? You just got into an accident, I was wondering if I could help," I mumbled.

"My car is totally fucked up! Something to eat is the last thing on my mind!" she said. But to tell the truth, she appeared interested. I didn't say anything. "I wasn't going that fast! I'm fine, just this ugly cut," she whispered as her eyes spilled over. I noticed that her black eye makeup had congealed right above the bloodied gauze. I thought of a tip I had read in some girlie magazine. Blondes shouldn't wear black mascara. I am so inappropriate sometimes. "My mom actually hung up on me," she said, startling me out of my catty thoughts.

"Um...that's awful."

She nodded. "It's actually her car. She lets me use it when she thinks I'm going to my friends' houses. But I wasn't, I was going to this club. It sounds bangin'. Snatch Club, have you ever been there?" I almost laughed. This whole situation was beginning to make my head pound. I think that if I opened my mouth, it would have trembled and the tears would have begun again. I shook my head.

"Oh, I didn't think so," she sniffed, narrowing her eyes at my jeans and running shoes. I gazed down at her fake snakeskin stilettos and pressed my unopened bottle of water into her hands.

I turned around and walked to my car, pinching my lips. Fuck me if I cried over a girl who wears snakeskin. I climbed back in behind the wheel. My music was still playing. *They say you were something in those formative years. Hold on to nothing as fast as you can.* I looked back at the girl outside, now sipping my water. She caught my eye and smiled, her lips curving over the bottle. I bit my lip over a grin and pulled back onto the road.

kathleen butler

-the outsider-

1.

Reverend Peter announces into rain,
We are gathered here to bury Lucien.
You never wanted fanfare – wake, funeral, hearse –
just your body lowered into earth
in a box we planned to build. We ran out of time.

I slump beside your casket, Matt and Madame
holding me while your children, grandchildren,
siblings watch my sobs from padded chairs.
My legs buckle as I eye one unoffered seat.
I cannot even call myself your widow.

2.

We gather in your home for wine
and cheese, a party you insisted upon. Your smiling
photo on an oak table a contrast to your pallid face
in hospital bed. I gnaw stale cracker,
finger rubber cheese, pour drips of wine

into jelly glasses. Overhearing your sister
tell my mother, *We always hoped Lucien*
would reunite with his wife,
I walk to our bed, the shape of our bodies
still pressed into green flannel sheets.

I can drink no more wine, want to remove
these black clothes. Hugging your youngest,
I wish Tom safe flight back to Florida. *One*
quick thing, he says, *I need to collect*
your key to my Dad's front door.
I reach in my bag, return the opening of our home
as rain drops against the hard, metal teeth.

II.

"learn to type 55 WPM..."



kevin l. lamkins

-right after these commercial messages-

another circus side show slithering
in the skin of democracy,
california's dirty chameleon convention,
where the lines blur between porn-star and politician.
we pay them both to fuck us and

just when you think it can't get any more interesting
the last action hero, in his greatest role,
playing the lead in one of the world's largest economies.
imagine what Spielberg would do with a budget like that.

he's ready made for this,
like Reagan before him.
it's every politician's dream,
to be on the silver screen,
to be the next Martin Sheen.
which West Wing would you like, Arnold?

put Bush on "Jeopardy"
Powell on "Friends"
Cheney on "ER"
Ashcroft on "Law & Order"

is it progress or programming?
termination of sound discussion
for sound-bites, catchy slogans for
a country drowning in its own
indistinguishable fictions.

and democracy turns to the camera,
its cold stare fixed in stoic focus,
beads of sweat collecting on its brow,
and groans heavily, "I'll be back."

benjamin j. kowalsky

-eck-

“What I really lack is to be clear in my own mind what I am to do. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants me to do: the thing is to find a truth that is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die”
- Soren Kierkegaard

Dreaming while awake or wake while dreaming. Fragment. Fragments. Thousands of pieces of shatter. Where? Where are you? Where am I? Fragment, Fragments. Hourglass falling over. Clocks ticking. Can't clear away the minute fog. Cannot see the path. Too deep. Fraggmennt..frragmennt. Misspellling. Faux Paux. The ticking. Clocks. Tick tocking. Empty room. Where am I?

K. Sorensen was searching for something in his dreams again; he would go over this ritual time and time again while he stared at the the popcorn ceiling of his lover's bedroom. He was recalling the details—reluctant to stand out of the nest that was the bed and face the sun now penetrating the curtains. For some reason, unlike other morning sessions, he felt a certain imperative to the examination. There was something waiting behind his eyelids, and if he could simply close his eyes and focus, he might be able to see it. He felt a strange sort of sick sweetness wash over him, in wave after wave. Something was out of place. He checked the bedroom, but everything seemed to be there. The towels were strewn about the floor, the clothing was carelessly tossed about the room. His lover's underwear was still hanging out of its proper drawer. The prophylactics were still resting upon the bedside table. He attempted to assure himself that nothing was out of the ordinary, and yet he could not help but feel that something was missing, or perhaps that something was not supposed to be there, and yet was there all the same.

K. Sorensen's income came from private tutoring, but to supplement his meager income he worked for the Workers Part of America as a writer of their propaganda pamphlets. His supervisor, Comrade Nolan Millicent, would give him a particular issue, and K. Sorensen was to write a pamphlet about the issue proclaiming the Party's standpoint and further promoting the revolutionary cause. K.

Sorensen did not consider himself much of a Socialist, but the job was such that he would not have to consider himself much of anything at all.

The pamphlets came with a pre-prepared schematic of how they were supposed to look, it was almost like filling in a sort of Marxist Mad Libs. "We the Worker's Party of America issue our [condemnation/support] of the [aggressive/supportive] actions of [insert group or nation name]. We want it to be known that the Worker's Party of America [does not condone/encourages] such actions, and will continue to do so in the future. We feel that such actions are [destructive/constructive] to the Party, and to the movement for the liberation of workers around the globe. We take [insert issue] very seriously, and we believe that if everyone would only follow suit, the world would finally see the death of the capitalist superstructure." Needless to say, K. Sorensen did not find much of a meaning in this job that required that he not be much more than a man who filled in the blanks.

He walked clad only in his underwear down the short steps from the bedroom, and caught his morning glimpse of his lover, Rivkah Euphranora. She was looking for something with a look of quiet desperation on her face. Rivkah glanced at him and smiled her pixie-like smile. K. Sorensen always felt that if anything, Rivkah was a pixie: she was the "green-fairy" of absinthe fame.

She was short, with short brown hair framing her radiant fair face. She was pacing the room in fervent search in her panties and green t-shirt with a red cross printed across the front. The kitchen filled with smoke from the kosher ham that she was preparing for the two of them to enjoy. The room was adorned in Rivkah's poetry and artwork. She was one of the most well-known and respected poets in the small community of artists in the city. K. Sorensen was always very proud of Rivkah's achievements, and always felt a certain modicum of primitive pride swell within himself when he reflected on the fact that one of the greatest artists in the city not only provided him with sex, but also with breakfast.

"Honey, would you please take the ham off the burner?" cooed Rivkah.

K. Sorensen obeyed her sweet command with zeal, as he was wont to do. He took the pan from the burner and placed the ham on a plate. The ham slid off the sizzling pan and slapped down onto the plate. He placed the plate upon the kitchen table, and pulled up two chairs. Rivkah twirled across the room into his arms and kissed him gently on the cheek and looked into his eyes.

-folio-

"Thank you, dear. And how was your dream last night?" asked Rivkah, fully aware of K. Sorensen's morning tradition.

"Eck" replied K. Sorensen.

"What was that, darling?"

Surprised, he took a step back and cleared his throat. He attempted to correct himself. "Eck," he said. And with that, a dawning horror began to seep into his thoughts.

"Darling, what's wrong? Is something the matter? What are you trying to tell me?"

"Eck," replied K. Sorensen, "eck."

"Ok, I know you're making fun of me, so just out with it. Talk to me."

"Eck."

"Please, just say something darling. Please just say something!"

Rivkah's eyes began to well up with bitter tears.

"No! No wait. I have an idea. Here, take this piece of paper, and just write that you love me. Just write 'I love you' on that piece of paper. See? It won't be that hard. I'll figure out what to do, don't worry about a thing darling. You're safe with me, just so long as we can still communicate, right?"

K. Sorensen picked up the pad of paper and began to write. For some reason unknown to him, K. Sorensen was finding it difficult to make the pen obey his commands. Rivkah watched in a mild disgust and deep shock as he struggled valiantly with the pen, until he was able to scrawl out a few lines on the paper:

"Eck."

Rivkah fell to her knees. Gravity becoming too much of a burden for her tiny frame. K. Sorensen fell with her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her towards him. While he was doing so, he felt something strange. It was the feeling with which he greeted the morning, the feeling with which some anonymous sandman had infected him. There was something missing, but no, there was something else that was wrong: the sobbing girl, the kosher ham now cursed with the touch of cold, the underwear hanging out of the drawer, everything was clothed in an alien and invisible new cloak. He turned to Rivkah's face to look at her, the red under her eyes becoming more and more pronounced every moment, and saw that her face too bore this intangible mark. He could see tears as they flowed out of those brown pools into which he had oft lost himself in waking dream. Rivkah bit her lower lip and made a sniffing noise. She turned her face away from him, no longer able to look upon him.

When she turned back to look at him, there was renewed resolution upon her face. She was holding back a thousand words and thoughts behind the dam that was her lips. The sickness welled up within him as he watched the nameless sickness envelope Rivkah in its alienating embrace.

"My love," she finally said, "why are you punishing me in this way? Don't you know how much this hurts me?"

K. Sorensen wept as he felt her pull away from his arms.

"Why are you doing this to me? Have I not been good to you? Have I not been sweet? Please, my love, I ask you to write that you love me, and all that you produce is a cruel joke. You play upon my commitments; you mock them and tear them down; you spit upon them with your 'eck'; you spit upon Art. In that, you spit upon me; you spit upon my beliefs; you spit on our life together. Do you even want this anymore? Do you not feel safe under my touch?"

K. Sorensen himself now began to feel penetrated with this sweet sickness, or rather; he merely realized its presence within him. It tore at him, clothed him in garbs that were the invisible unknown. Something had gone horribly wrong.

"I have given you my body day and night; I have breathed my soul into you. Now you reject me. You turn me aside, but why? Did I not wrap you tightly enough? Does not the warmth of my flesh heat you? Have you grown so cold? You have torn yourself from me, and it hurts me to my very soul. And what of Art? Do you have no feelings for poetry? No feeling for the language of my spirit?"

He loved words. He loved Rivkah's poetry. He worshipped every syllable that came from her mouth as he loved every motion of her body. He opened wide to tell her how much he loved and cared for everything she did, for everything that she was, and everything that she had meant to him.

With all of his might, he pushed past his lips a toneless, "eck."

"You destroy me with your poison word. 'Eck'? What is that? Does that mean you hate me? That you are disgusted with me? What are you trying to tell me? That I am ugly? That I don't matter to you? Is that what you are trying to say?"

"Eck."

"Please, just leave. How can you love without words?" she pushed her hands against his chest and thrust him out the door and onto the street.

It was only at this point that K. Sorensen understood that he was in his underwear.

K. Sorensen walked the streets in his underwear. He wanted to get off of the streets as soon as he possibly could, so that he could avoid further embarrassment. Although he felt embarrassed, what disturbed him the most was the absolute indifference of the people walking by him on the street. Their looks were not focused on him, but past him, beyond him. He reasoned that they were merely ignoring his plight out of a sense of politeness. Such facts being the case, he still felt it necessary to find some shelter, and perhaps some decent clothing.

He stepped into the nearest door and found himself in an odd shop, with a rather oddly dressed man behind the counter. His long beard cascaded down his face, down to where it met with a sea of beaded necklaces in an ocean of colors that was the man's hempen poncho. The man was looking for something underneath a table. The room was surrounded with various glass and plastic objects, pipes, and tie-dyed t-shirts of various American rock bands from the 1960's. There was a strange symbol on the carpeting with the lettering "DMT" clearly visible within the symbol. The symbol looked like some sort of amalgamation of a Christian cross, a Muslim star and crescent moon, a Jewish Star of David, a chain of DNA, and the yin-yang symbol. Above the old man hunched behind the counter, was a sign that read "Welcome to the Church of DMT: Only Madmen Allowed!"

"Welcome to the Church of DMT," said the man in the brightly colored poncho, now rising from behind the counter with a bone colored object in hand. "Unless this is some sort of a drug raid, in which case, welcome to the Happy Dreamtime Destinations Novelty and Memorabilia Store!"

"Eck," said K. Sorensen.

The man in the brightly colored poncho peeled back a pair of caterpillar lips to reveal his white smile, "AH! You rascal you! We have been looking for you for ages! You have most certainly come to the right place! Disgusted with the injustices of language? Dissatisfied with the human condition, your own condition, perhaps? Searching for something greater? Come in! Come in! My friend, you have finally arrived home!" He exclaimed, wrapping his arm around K. Sorensen's bewildered shoulders.

"Now, before we go on, my son, what is your name?" asked the friendly old man in the brightly colored poncho.

"Eck," replied K. Sorensen.

"Oh, I should have known! You stunning creature! Brilliant, simply brilliant, just like I had hoped. Well, I am Eck Eck Eck Eck, ha ha, but most of my followers, fellows, and friends call me Gilbert.

Gilbert Templeton is the name, and my 'game' as it were, is pure psychedelic enlightenment, you know, the alteration of your eternal unconscious spirit! That's the game, my son, that's the game!

"We're just a small community here, just the thirteen of us. We sit here and peddle our wares so that we can buy more of our psychedelic tools. We come from all sorts of walks of life, and you are already one of us. You may not know it yet, but your superunconsciousness is crying out for some sort of awakening. You cry out for Nirvana, for some Enlightenment.

"I see it in you; I see it in everyone. It's all part of living in the 6th Dimension. Don't worry though, we have ways of liberating you. We have perfected what it has taken shamans and holy men millennia to barely understand. We have the tools to break free from this mundane dimension of existence and truly be united in the super consciousness, it's a very exciting time for psychonauts like myself, really exciting."

K. Sorensen struggled to understand the words that were coming out of his new companion's mouth, and yet he found himself strangely drawn to someone as wise as Gilbert Templeton. His voice carried K. Sorensen away on a tide of honey. Perhaps the only good sense is nonsense after all, he reasoned, and decided to stay with the Church of DMT.

"Come, you must meet the rest of us," said Gilbert as he pushed K. Sorensen through the threshold of beads into a back room, a sort of parlor.

It was very hard to see in the back room, because the only lighting available came from candles that surrounded the circular chamber. The parlor was adorned in black light posters, and a thick smoke hung in the air, like a fog made of PCP. It smelled of incense and other various smells that could be identified only by the most highly trained drug enforcement officers. The smell reached into the back of K. Sorensen's throat and pulled at the contents of his stomach. There were twelve people sitting in a circle around some sort of smoking apparatus—a metal object with thirteen hoses extending from the center. Each hose led to one of the twelve people; however, K. Sorensen noticed that there was a space in which a body was absent; he assumed it was the space reserved for Gilbert. Gilbert's space was decorated to be some sort of throne of hemp beanbag chairs. Each of the twelve people seemed to be in a sort of trance, staring off at the metal apparatus in the center, some of them had saliva dripping from their gaping mouths.

"This is the greatest thing I have ever seen," said one of them.

"This is the greatest thing we have ever seen," said the rest.

"My friends, fellows, and followers," Gilbert began, "this is our newest neophyte, a genius who has forsaken the world of language. This man is truly a man of substance, a man who has truly turned on, tuned in, and dropped out of society. His name is, what did you say your name was again?"

K. Sorensen did not remember giving Gilbert a name, but he simply shrugged his shoulders and said "Eck."

"ECK! What a brilliant word! Listen to this man, my children, for he has achieved great knowledge! Tell me my friend; have you ever taken DMT before? LSD? Have you eaten the flesh of the gods before? Hmmm? Well, it makes no difference. You, my friend, are special. You and your brilliant word. 'Eck' you say? I say 'enlightenment'; I say 'spiritual insight'; I say 'collective super-consciousness'! You are the one we have been waiting for! You must be the LORD KRISHNA! ECK! ECK!"

"ECK! ECK!" parroted the twelve sitting on the floor.

K. Sorensen felt a sense of satisfaction at knowing that he himself was the living embodiment of a god, Krishna. He also felt that this Gilbert must have been wise indeed, to turn a seemingly great misfortune into a great blessing, for now he had not a handicap, but a great insight.

He would have felt more ennobled if he did not find everything around him to be somewhat silly. Gilbert walked over to his place around the metal apparatus and one of the twelve other members of the Church of DMT placed a bone colored object in a bowl at the top of the apparatus. Another one of the twelve brought over a candle and lit the bone colored object. They both sat down and began to chant something. At first K. Sorensen was not sure of what they were chanting, but soon enough he became aware of the sound they were making. They were all chanting, "Eck."

Everyone in the circle took their hose to their lips and breathed in deeply. The smoke flowed from the bowl, down the hoses, and into their bodies; some of the smoke began to pour from their noses as the quickly tried to sniff it all back into them. They held their breath until Gilbert gave them a nod, and then they released the smoke into the air. The bone colored object had now completely disappeared. Some of the thirteen on the floor began to kiss and touch one another, others began to take their clothes off. Gilbert simply lay across his throne, observing the hedonistic decadence with a look of paternal approval. He then turned his glazed over to K. Sorensen who was still standing in the doorway.

“Have you seen the elves before? The elves come from our chests. The elves come from our chests when we consume the bones of the gods. The gods desire for us to communicate with them using their language, and the elves have taught us this language. The elves tell us to speak. The elves are the origin of language. Language and meaning are two separate entities, for the sound of language belongs to the physical realm of the flesh, but the meaning belongs to the realm of the eternal spirit. Come, commune with us and understand the truth of your origins as flesh and energy. Ah, the joys of thoughtlessness! The enjoyment of pure spirit! The elves want to speak with you: goo gaa doo ga ga,” said Gilbert.

“Goo gaa doo ga ga,” repeated the group.

“Now everyone,” referring back to the group of the twelve who had also partaken of the drug in the bowl, “breathe with the pulse of the super-consciousness; breathe with the spiritual insight of the eternal ‘Eck’. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe with the pulse of life.” Then he lolled his head over to look at K. Sorensen—his eyes alight with passion and power, “Don’t you know what you are? You are an eternal spirit bound within a temporal space. Let the bone of the gods free you from the torment that is your life. You have already intuited enough. Now come, Lord Krishna, be reborn as one of us. Be reborn among us so that we may worship your pure consciousness.”

The sickness began to creep over Gilbert’s face as K. Sorensen reached for the hose. It crept up the hose and over the faces of the flock of believers, each one tainted by the invisible veil that fell over them. He felt the hose drop from his grip. He reached out to touch Gilbert but it was already too late, the sickness had saturated the room, it had permeated every being in the room and contaminated it with its sweetness. He felt as if he were going to throw up. The mix of the smoke, the stale incense, the dried saliva, it was all too much for him. Something was still wrong, and it was not just the twelve people on the floor writhing about in a drug-induced orgy. Something again was missing; rather, again a nameless superfluity had come to make its roost.

The thirteen people began to crawl towards him, like zombies on ecstasy, or possibly DMT. They began to lick his feet, and he heard one of them proclaim that his feet tasted like peyote. He ran past the beads. While the hands of the community of believers reached out to hold him fast, he was much too fast for them. Grabbing some sort of cloth to cover himself, he then dashed out upon the streets.

He flew from the doorway, leaving a trail of smoke chasing him. He coughed violently, and tears began to drip from his eyes.

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Perhaps it was the smoke, but he also felt that it was something else; it might be a weeping over the unfair circumstances that made him unable to accept the creed of nonsense which had pulled him into its comforting softness. The bliss of psychedelic ignorance had escaped him, and the tears committed the loss to its ethereal grave.

He looked about at the crowd of people shuffling from one place to another. That was just it, they were all going somewhere, and K. Sorensen was going nowhere. He mourned the fate which had left him bereft of a place to call his own, a place to which he could shuffle, and then he remembered: The Worker's Party of America. Certainly, they would take him in, they would shelter him, and most certainly, Nolan Millicent would never turn away an old friend.

It was about a half hour walk before he finally arrived at the nameless industrial building that held the printing presses, offices, and other machines of the Worker's Party of America. The building was of red clay brick made, and of iron fury built, adorned with three smokeless smokestacks—having been condemned many years previous for being unsafe for the employees. Now it was filled with people once again, for 10 years ago the great Nolan Millicent arrived in the city.

Nolan Millicent was a nationally known and acknowledged Marxist/Leninist, but certainly not a Communist. Perhaps he might admit to being a Socialist when he was in good spirits, but most of the time Nolan would deem himself a Marxist/Leninist. Not many people knew of Nolan's early life before he built the Worker's Party of America—most of his followers were so dedicated to him as to never question about his past. K. Sorensen was no devoted lap-dog, and that was why Nolan seemed to prefer him to any of the other Party members. Nolan had come into possession of the condemned factory through unknown means; many said he had worked in the factory as one of the janitors, until he saw the land-owner beating a fellow employee. Nolan killed the land-owner and baptized the factory anew as the haven for workers everywhere. At least, these were the rumors, and Nolan did nothing to stop them.

K. Sorensen opened the door to Nolan's office to find him pacing around the room looking for something. Nolan looked up with a worry wash painted upon his visage and squinted his eyes, as if trying to remember K. Sorensen's name.

It could be said about Nolan Millicent that he was notable for being common. Nolan was dressed as he always had dressed: in his gray coveralls that were always covered in some sort of soot. Nolan always kept himself clean shaven, and his receding black hair formed a slick crown around his head. It could also be said that he was too mild-

mannered looking to be any sort of respectable revolutionary leader. Everything in his office was made of steel. The desk, the chairs, the file drawers, the cabinets, everything was pure steel; the color and shine of the steel had splashed onto Nolan's otherwise pallid skin, and the steel blessed him with the look of a living corpse. He was often heard saying that the discomfort of steel furniture was conducive to hard work, and discouraged any sort of laziness.

"Ah, Comrade Sorensen! Excellent!" he began, "I am in desperate need of your help. You see, I have lost my Manifesto of the Communist Party. Of course, I have many other editions of the Manifesto, but this one was my very first, and I cannot seem to find it. Could you help me Comrade?"

"Eck," said K. Sorensen.

"What was that? 'Eck' you say? Comrade Sorensen, I had no idea you were such a comedian. You should know full well that the Worker's Party of America has no place for humor. We must take things seriously, for the revolution!"

"Eck," replied K. Sorensen. He was, at this point, deep within despair; no one appreciated his situation besides the fervent foolish. He then began to turn away and set his feet to the unknown destinations of loneliness, but Nolan seized him by the arm and pulled him back into the office.

"Wait, just a moment Comrade Sorensen, I am not through. Why don't you say something simple, such as, 'Workers of the world, unite!'"

"Eck," replied K. Sorensen.

Nolan removed his hand from K. Sorensen's arm with a troubled look on his face. His brow furrowed deeply, and his mouth curved into a puzzled grimace. He no longer searched for the Manifesto. Instead, he turned back towards his steel desk and sat down, the chair making a screeching noise as it scratched across the steel floor. As he sat, a cloud of dust shot up around him, further soiling his clothing.

"Now, this is troubling. I apologize, Comrade Sorensen, for not being sympathetic to the plight of a fellow revolutionary. Please, sit down," he pointed to a seat, and K. Sorensen gladly sat down. "My friend, it seems that your predicament puts your purpose as our primary preparer of poignant propaganda pamphlets in a precarious position. But fear not, for unlike the capitalist pig-dogs, we will still find use for you. We will not abandon you to the cold streets, no, for you and I both know, brother, who is responsible for this atrocity."

K. Sorensen was salivating with anticipation.

"The capitalist bourgeoisie is no doubt responsible for your current misfortune," he began his speech while rising from his chair to pace the small office, "Yes, it is no doubt the capitalist class. You have given them countless hours of your labor, and for what? What have they given you besides meager wages? Nothing! They have given you nothing, and now they have stolen your speech. They have taken your very speech, and what does that make you?"

"Eck," replied K. Sorensen, his excitement rising.

"I'll tell you, my friend, it makes you not a man at all but a beast! Yes, the years of work that you have given for them have made you nothing but a beast. Well, Comrade Sorensen, this will no longer be tolerated, I assure you. The Worker's Party of America will fight for you, as you will fight for us. We will fight together, and your 'Eck' will be our battle cry. Yes, your 'Eck' is the 'Eck' of thousands upon thousands of our brothers and sisters wasting their lives away in factories and offices to produce something only for whom? For the capitalist bourgeoisie that exploit them! But no longer, Comrade Sorensen. Together we will fight for a world where no one will fall victim to the horrors you have no doubt experienced from 'Eck'. We will change your tragedy into our triumph! Into our battle cry for social change and equality!"

K. Sorensen then looked about the room and saw it cloaked in the nakedness—that the emptiness had spread itself evenly over everything in the room, stripping it of its former meaning. He felt the sickness within himself as well, as it traveled up his throat and sat as a glob of honey within his deep recess. He pushed his lips back to twist his face into something that looked like a smile, something that would encourage Nolan to continue his marvelous speech, but Nolan needed no encouragement.

"Comrade, we must rise together, all of us! We are going to run a pamphlet, yes! We will run a pamphlet about your plight, brother. We will order the presses to stop, and we will begin our revolution today! Today makes the end of an era of oppression, where the dialectic between the capitalists and the proletariat finally achieves its synthesis in the great classless society that awaits us at the end of history! Today is the beginning of Marx's true dream and of Lenin's pure vision! We will realize it, my friend! We, the Worker's Party of America will realize a new dawn for workers everywhere!"

K. Sorensen yearned for Nolan to keep speaking, for if he could but concentrate on the speech, the sickness might abate, but it persisted. It floated and weighted in his throat.

“Eck’? What is this ‘Eck’ if not the cry of the people who yearn to be free of the yoke of the capitalists? What is this ‘Eck’ if not the utter futility of the capitalist system? What is this ‘Eck’ if not the collective frustration of us all? It is OUR frustration, Comrade Sorensen. The ‘Eck’ is the ‘Eck’ of the proletariat, and therefore it becomes the ‘Eck’ of the Worker’s Party of America! Yes! You will become part of something greater, Comrade Sorensen; you will become part of the great revolutionary movement to liberate the entire globe from the wage-slavery of capitalism. This is the moment of our ultimate victory! Victory for the proletariat, and death to capitalism!”

The world of the steel office was sickening him.

“The capitalist pig-dogs...”

The words of Nolan Millicent each seemed to don the garbs of meaninglessness, they became mere sounds.

“We will not be ignored!”

They could no longer sing their sweet songs of victory to him; they could no longer comfort him.

“...And we must overcome!”

K. Sorensen began to cry as the sickness moved into his mouth.

“Together, victory will be ours!”

K. Sorensen lurched forward and grabbed a hold of Nolan’s coveralls and painted them with the colors of vomit. The fluid ejected from K. Sorensen dripped down Nolan’s clothing and onto the steel floor, forming a pool of emptiness and sickness. He, on his knees, stared at the vomit. For a moment he thought that the vomit somehow made manifest the invisible sickness that haunted his every steps—the sickness that shattered his every comfort. He saw for a moment that it was alive. The vomit was a living mass of sickness against a background of pristine death; it taunted him; it was the filth where otherwise there was only the shimmer, the cold glow of a dead world full of dead prose.

K. Sorensen came to his feet to be greeted by Nolan’s expression festooned with bewildered disgust. He ran for the door, and Nolan screamed at him, “Come back at once Comrade Sorensen! I HAVE NOT YET FINISHED MY SPEECH!”

K. Sorensen did not want him to finish his speech, he thirsted for answers, and he longed to follow the sickness to a place that had not yet felt its touch. He ran past the ashen faces chanting victory, all blending together in a mechanistic choir, past the abandoned industrial lots, past the smokeless smokestacks, and the purposeful shuffling.

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Buildings crumbled around him until there was nothing left but gray and blue.

He found himself sitting alone in an open field, surrounded by nothing but trees and a few animals dashing about from here to there. He sank down to his knees and placed his head down in the grass; the dew collected on his forehead and moistened his hair. The grass was cool and damp and it soaked his clothing. The trees arranged themselves around him in a circle, and they stretched their branches out to him. He could no longer hear the din of purposeful feet, of propaganda machines, or of hippie priests. He could no longer hear the sweet song of a lover's arms, nor could he remember the lyrics to its ameliorating hymn.

"Eck," he cried, "eck."

He was alone, and he suddenly felt the urge to pray, and since he could not pray aloud, he merely moved his lips against the grass—kissing the pure green hues. He prayed and cursed at the same time, he cursed his birth, and cursed his friends, and cursed his property, and cursed the emptiness within him. He cursed and prayed for release. Deep within him the prayer resonated, into the dark recess where the sickness slept.

But no answer came to K. Sorensen. No cloud parted, and no burning bush spoke unto him. He petitioned high empty heaven, and received naught but a cool breeze over his body. The anguish remained with him, tormenting him, raving him of direction and comfort. No panacea rained from the sky. Nothing.

He sat up and then fell back upon the grass; it tickled his ears, and he smiled while staring into the bright blue of the sky. He reflected on his condition, and wondered what it was that he was to do now with the rest of his life. Suddenly he stopped. The anguish remained with him; he embraced it as his only company. He shut his eyes once again and thought back to his dream, to search for a meaning to the anguish.

He realized that for his entire life that he had avoided a single question; rather, he had lacked the courage to face the question in all honesty, and with all of its implications. He rested on the grass, searching the question: "What am I to do?"

The floating baby. Suspended in nameless sickness. Holding in its hands the scepter of meaning. Naked and squirming, fresh and alive. The baby opens its eyes to look upon the dream for the first time. It pierces the sickness with soft pools of blue. There is a pull in the pit of my stomach. All of my words

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fall out of my mouth, and they leak out of my hands. All the beautiful, wonderful words I have given breath fall out of my mouth and into the piercing pools of blue. I am there the baby, and there the lion, and now fear, and now trembling. I let open my furious maw to unleash my roar upon the world:

“Eck”

marilyn c. terlaga

-the real june cleaver-

She always made sure
that Ward had a clean, pressed shirt.
And she always made sure
that the boys had fresh baked cookies.
But deep down she hated the Beaver
'cause he wasn't planned
and she couldn't take the secretarial course
(LEARN TO TYPE 55 WPM)
and get a job in an office uptown
so she wouldn't have to wear
that dumb apron with her
high heel shoes.

danielle n. stone

-finger food-

Girlfriend, I gotta tell you,
I get rabid when I run out
of the pink stuff: incessantly craving
salty snacks, I mindlessly
munch on someone
worth bonding with.
I shout, with a mouthful of meat,
“Order orgasms for two!”
under the silk sheets,
(You should hear me roar!).
This brave new world
of genetic engineering makes
sinking the shot so much more satisfying!
Corn chips can trigger these sweet
yet intense, safe yet special regular romps.
Although the FDA works brilliantly
in bed, I try enhancing the mood
by casually offering some
genetically engineered potatoes.
Take my word for it: I explode
like a sex bomb! I prolong
the magic moment by bringing out
the laboratory lima beans, leaving my
man of the moment screaming
for more. The superb sexual connection
is a total bank shot, baby! After all,
Barry White records, Brazilian
bikini waxes and bottles of Beaujolais
are nothing compared to
the earth-shattering whooping
and hollering brought about by
square pineapple rings, during
a raunchy game of ring toss.
So, here’s the ice cream
of pillow talk: visit ye olde

-folio-

sexxe-toye shop for nuts'
genes in soybeans. There's no finer way
to get your mind blown.

jean copeland

-trailer park tango-

The ruckus outside her trailer stirs Viola from the pit in her worn sofa that matches the shape of her polyester-covered behind. She hurries past her cherished set of "Hee Haw" commemorative dishes and peers out the tiny window overlooking the neglected Louisiana trailer park she considers, "a lovely little place to live."

She saw a flash of light, heard a thud and felt her mobile home rumble only seconds ago. Looking out now though, all she sees is the clutter of other trailers, toys carelessly strewn about the patchy lawn and the jungle of overalls dangling perilously from the neighbors' crooked clotheslines. Mrs. La Croix said she heard some of the gals at the hair salon talking about a flying saucer they saw a few weeks ago. They thought aliens had abducted old man Jenkins till they found him the next day passed out in the middle of Canterbury's cornhusks, an empty bottle of Old Granddad on his chest.

Viola leans against the wall and sighs, rather disappointed aliens hadn't stopped by. It's been such a long while since she's had visitors. She may have been acquitted in the murder of her husband on account of it was self-defense, but she was found guilty by the neighbors and folks she used to call friends. It's not that anybody cares that Boyd is dead. Heck no. They're just afraid that crazy old Viola might flip her lid again, and no one wants to be standing in front of her shotgun barrel when she does.

Viola sighs again as she thinks back, her breath blowing wispy bangs up in the air. It was five years ago on a night just like tonight. The air was warm and sticky, a Louisiana humidity that could hold up a crawfish in mid air. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, just a steamy haze that tried to keep the stars from beaming their little rays of light down on Boyd and Viola's mobile home. Viola awoke on the cold metal steps coming off the trailer, the smoking shotgun on the ground at her feet right near the fuzzy blue slipper she must have lost in the tussle. Her right eye was swollen shut, but she could see clearly from her left that Boyd was flat on his back on the small circle of burnt grass they called the front lawn. She stumbled over the gun as she slowly approached Boyd. Dropping to her knees, she gingerly bent over him, half expecting him to spring up and grab her by the nighty. Not this time. He was

dead all right, deader than the prickly blades of yellow grass sticking in her bare knees. The stench of beer seeping out of the bullet hole in his chest made Viola's stomach turn. She stood up in a daze and made her way over to the support of a nearby tree.

Viola struggled to remember what had happened, but the events before she fell unconscious vanished from her memory. She had an ugly feeling she knew what happened. Boyd came home drunker than the Mayor at Mardi Gras and started smacking her around like she'd earned it... a scene Viola had become far too familiar with. Only this time, she figured her finger met the trigger of Boyd's shotgun before her face met the floor.

The jury had been plenty sympathetic. Some of them even wiped a tear. The parade of defense witnesses told one story after another of how everyone in town knew how Boyd used to beat on Viola. Even Boyd's own second cousin Widgy said she was only surprised it hadn't happened sooner. Four days later and with a wink from the jury foreman, Viola was a free woman.

Stepping out of the prison of the courtroom onto the sunny courthouse stairs, Viola didn't realize that she was stepping right into the prison of her new life. Yep, she was free all right. Free to be whispered about by the town folk and snickered at by those dirty-faced trailer-park kids always stomping in her flowerbeds. But worst of all, she was free to sit abandoned in her lonesome trailer, without a single friend to have dinner with, laugh with or cry to on the endless nights when it felt like even the rising sun wanted nothing to do with her. Viola learned all about free.

She sticks her head out the front door just to make sure those crafty aliens aren't sneaking up on her from the side. She and her cast iron frying pan are ready for them. Instead of a spaceship, she sees a crunched-in Buick resting in the side of her trailer.

"Mr. De La Rue?! Are you all right?" she shouts.

"Yes Mrs. Newsome. I'm awful sorry about your trailer," Mr. De La Rue offers as he rubs the growing knot on his forehead.

"Forget about that. You come inside and make sure you're all right."

"I can't do that, Mrs. Newsome."

"You stop this nonsense, Mr. De La Rue," she scolds. "I know y'all think I'm just a nutty old bird waitin' for another someone to sneak up on and pick off with my shotgun, but you don't have to worry. It's in the shop." She smiles, but her subtle humor is wasted on him.

"I don't think that, Mrs. Newsome. Never did."

"Then you come in here right now."

Mr. De La Rue gets out of his banged up car and goes inside. As Viola puts a pot of water on the stove, she self-consciously smooths out the wrinkles in her newly purchased thrift-shop blouse.

"You damn near killed yourself. What were you thinking?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Hope you figure it out soon. There's plenty more trailers where mine came from."

"Guess it's my way of forcing myself to tell you the secret I ain't had the courage to tell you for five years now," he offers dejectedly.

"What's that? You're a lousy driver?" Viola drops teabags into mismatched mugs and places them on her small, wobbly kitchen table.

"No Ma'am." He looks slightly offended.

"That was joke, Mr. De La Rue."

"Oh. Oh yeah." He manages a languid laugh. "Anyhow, see I've had this secret, and well, I couldn't, uh, ya' see I couldn't find no words to, uh..."

"Cryin' out loud, would you spit it out!"

"I love you Mrs. Newsome," he stammers, "have for a long time now."

"Well that ain't no secret, Mr. De La Rue," Viola says with a coy smile. "Ain't nobody but a fool in love would hang around this depressin' park every weekend if he didn't have to."

Mr. De La Rue's face rivals the tomatoes on her counter.

"S'pose I felt the same way. Didn't realize it till after Boyd was dead and gone."

"But you never said nothing."

"Hardly seemed like the right time. What should I have said? I just killed my husband. Wanna take me dancin'?"

"Well, I guess the timing wasn't the best."

She smiles sweetly at him as she pours the water into their cups. "Sides, I been too busy trying to make amends with the Lord."

"For what?"

"Ain't you a Christian, Mr. De La Rue? 'Thou Shalt not Kill' ring any bells?"

"Course, but it was self-defense, the court said so."

"Courts," she spits. "What do they know? Sure, Boyd ain't beatin' me no more, but ain't nothin' happenin' to me no more. No one wants to be near me, Mr. De La Rue. No one talks to me, no one

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even looks at me. I almost wish..."

"You mean you'd rather Boyd beat you than be lonely?"

His question envelops her in shame. "No, I wouldn't," she replies softly as she sits down at the table, finding comfort in bobbing her teabag.

"Me bein' in love with you is a secret, but it ain't exactly the secret I had in mind."

"Well then go on," she draws impatiently.

Mr. De La Rue starts to shake, spilling tea on the table. He chokes back tears as he explains, "I just couldn't take hearing it no more. Couldn't take seeing the bruises. I know I'm a terrible coward, but I wouldn't take it back even if I could."

"What are you saying, Mr. De La Rue?"

"I heard Boyd's truck pull up that night. I knowed he was three sheets to the wind 'cause we went to the bar right after work. But I left first... got here before he did. I was so scared for ya when you stepped out onto the porch to greet him."

"I don't remember."

"He greeted you with a punch, one solid punch that knocked you out cold. While he was taking a leak by the oak tree, I snuck into your trailer, grabbed his shotgun, and the minute he put his wizzer back in his pants he was out cold too. Only he never woke up."

The shock renders Viola speechless. Mr. De La Rue buries his head in his hands, and weeps like a baby. "I'm sorry I ruined your life. I thought I was saving it. I swear, if I thought you was gonna be sent up the river, I woulda turned myself in. I swear."

Viola contemplates the weight of the last five years of isolation and despair with one deep breath. After a moment, she pushes a tear off her cheek with her palm and then stands. Gently putting her arms around Mr. De La Rue's head, she presses it against her stomach. She lets him cry for another moment and then holds his face with tender hands. "We better be calling the police now."

Mr. De La Rue licks the tears streaming onto his lips and sits up straight. "Yes Ma'am. It's time I make my confession."

Viola looks out the window then turns to him with an angelic smile. "Why Mr. De La Rue, there's nothing to confess. It was an accident... You need a report for your insurance claim, don't you?"

salvatore delucia

-he-man-

Your face never changed. Your expression never showed anymore than it had to. You were always reliable. Even though you fought for a world so far away from me, I felt a part of you when I ran my short fingers over

the six inch plastic frame of your action figure body. You were what a man was supposed to be. I thought of you, every time the plaid-skirted girls sang those words to me, smiling crooked on the playground, laughing — *Fat boy, Pudgy.*

I thought of you, even when you weren't there to defend me, to wield your sword and with a crack of lightning transform me into something else, something better. Then, at home, when I pulled at the bottom of my Thudercats t-shirt, stretching

it, hoping to hide myself in it, I thought of you. Even when the shirts began to fit better, when I would walk past the hallway mirror, my reflection shouting out at me like the guys on the playing field — *Fat boy, Pudgy.*

I still think of you, with each heavy breath from each heavy rep, the bass heavy pumping through my walkman, the iron pressing away from my body, only to come back at me, again. Over and over. I think of you

when I step naked onto the cold fiberglass floor, the warm water beating down on my taut back, beading on top of my tanned skin, running through the tight crevices of my stomach, past my navel, swirling into the silver drain. Now,

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alone, sweat pooling in the small of my back, my
shoulders arched forward, my stomach turning,
my throat burning, outlines of gray eyes
bulging , tearing, crying out to a distorted
reflection in the toilet who screams back at me – *Fat boy, Pudgy!*

I think about you at this moment, throwing my head
back, gasping for air, about your faded yellow hair,
your bent and broken fingers, your scratched
skin, the bed of dust that you sleep on
inside that damp basement box, and I wonder

if you have any idea what you have done
to me. You know, sometimes, I still wish
that my skin was plastic, that way I could feel
comfortable in it.

kevin l. lamkins

-the janitor-

his face, cordial and gnarled,
bright eyes hopeful as he sweeps the floor.
everyday he cleans, picks up the trash
at the University. he smiles to passing students.
under the brim of his Red Sox cap, curious, friendly, his glare
absorbent as the sponge he glides across desks he'll never sit behind.

his notebook is his memory, his assignments are the cafeteria tables
graded only by his satisfaction in a job well done.
his dark hands contrast the gray metallic dustpan handle,
and the bleached cottony napkins, straw wrappers, cups and food
scraps.

his teeth gleam underneath his thick ebony moustache,
as the punk with the foot high mohawk steps by
and sits down at the table he just scrubbed.

it is here that the janitor most feels his blackness.

the work is menial, but it gets him by, and it has its perks:
he's allowed a free meal and a snack for quitting time.
for today he chooses a peach,
glorious in its smooth texture, and its unique spectrum of hues.

he whisks away french fry remnants, crossing
a table where a white and black student sit together.
the white student says "yo" and "brothah," "know what ah'm sayin'?"
while the black student listens, nods, his GMAT prep book leaning
in his lap to the edge of the table.

as he walks home from work on this crisp october evening,
he remembers the peach. the multicolored skin, deep burgundy,
shades of violet,
sunshine yellow and sunset pink like the foliage around him.

-folio-

he cracks the fleshy surface,
but it's beyond ripeness and has lost its sweetness.
the mushy meat slithers through his teeth.

he throws the rotting fruit to the side of the road,
oblivious as to where it will nest, and wonders
if the Red Sox won last night. they did.

james f. dunn

-fences-

Chapter One: Free Bird

“Dis-missed!” echoed across the acre of asphalt-covered earth and, for a second or two, the green and tan lines just stood there. Then, on that warm June day in 1976, just like students on the last day of school, the new civilians broke out in unrestrained freedom.

I stood a moment longer. To me, Seamus O’Doyme, Corporal – *former* Corporal, actually – United States Marine Corps, the breeze rolling in off the Pacific seemed the only familiar thing.

Five years, one word – and it’s over? “Damn,” I muttered, walking across the nearly deserted parade field toward the rows of barracks on the horizon.

Smiling inwardly, I passed an officer, my arm snapping up in salute. *The first time I saw him was what, six or seven days ago?*

“The Sergeant” was standing on a wide, raised porch at parade rest, watching the gaggle of new short-timers gradually blend into the rough semblance of a formation. He stepped forward one measured step and came to attention. Some of the ones in front became quiet but most – me included – stayed loose.

Lynyrd Skynyrd’s, *Free Bird*, drifted out of a nearby barracks.

“*You!* ‘At’s *right*, sweetheart, I’m talkin’ to *you!*” broke through my mental haze; I focused on the porch in front of me.

“Where the hell are your *trouser-blousers*, sweet-pea?” bel-lowed the Sergeant. “What the fuck is your major malfunction? You lose your mind while gettin’ dressed today, or *what?*”

Silence ruled.

“*Hey boy ...* you want me to come down there and kick your ass right *now*, or you gonna *answer* me?”

Damn, I thought, *he’s talking to me...*

“I’m in the air-wing Sergeant,” I answered. “I’m a helicopter Crew Chief. It’s standard operating procedure for aircrew to remove their *trouser-blousers* so they won’t FOD an aircraft engine.”

Nobody in the air-wing liked those little elastic cords that held your rolled-up trousers at the tops of your boots, anyhow. If we

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could find a way around using them, we would. If FOD – FOD killed people – was the reason, so much the better.

But I realized this guy probably wouldn't know FOD means Foreign Object Damage and it would make him look dumb. "Uh-oh..." I whispered as, even from two rows of people back, I saw the grunt's – air-wingers called anyone not in the air-wing a grunt – eyes grow large.

"I'll tell you *what*, 'ere Corporal; I don't give a *big* rat's ass *who* you're with or *what* you are, you're in the mutha-fuckin' *Marine Corps*, and you *will*, by God, blouse your *mutha-fuckin' trousers*. A-fuckin'-*SAP*, do you under-stand me?"

Our eyes locked.

He's boxed me in...

The glaring Sergeant moved closer to the steps on the porch.

"First thing after the formation, I'll blouse 'em, Sergeant," I said. *Motherfucker...*

The Sergeant went back to his business as if I didn't exist. I stood there, my expression neutral, the explosion contained – for now.

A couple of days later, on the last night there before our final formation, one of the guys from my squadron overseas – we called him "Smoke" – came by my bed.

"What's up, Smoke?" I asked, relaxing on top of the bed, my arms folded behind my head.

Looking around to see who might be listening, he leaned down and whispered, "Hey O'Doyne ... ya' wanna get high? I found a guy with some weed." Then he walked away and stood in the shadows. I waited a moment, looking around. I rolled over, got up and faded into the darkness with him.

Two barracks away we went in a side door, down a hall and through a doorway into one of the single-occupant rooms. There was a small hooded light by a desk, but otherwise it was as dark as the night outside. Someone seated by the light turned around, clearly revealing the joint in his hand and a semi-filled baggie on the desktop. Illuminated by the light, he stared searchingly at us in the darkness of the room.

"Hey, I brought a friend," Smoke said. "Don't worry, he's cool." Oblivious to the approaching thunderstorm, he reached for the bag of dope and papers on the desk. I just stood there. The grunt Sergeant was eye-to-eye with the air-wing Corporal again – and neither one of us had forgotten.

Staring into each other's eyes, we fought a silent battle. The freshly rolled joint between the Sergeant's fingers was mute testimony to the damage I, with less than a day left in the Marine Corps, could do to him, a career man, if I went to his officer with the revelation of what this spit-and-polish Sergeant did after work. I had him – we both knew it.

Remembering that first day, I toyed with asking if he lost his mind getting dressed today, or what? *Grovel, you sonofabitch!* I thought. *Beg me not to say anything, motherfucker.* Holding his gaze with mine, I reached over and gently took the joint from his hand. I looked at it, then back at him.

“Got a match, bro?”

Chapter Two: My Turn

The next day, my last one, I went to the Admin building, turned in my green I.D. card and picked up tangible proof of civilian status, the pink I.D. card.

“Pink!” I muttered to no one in particular.

A few days ago I spent several hours walking up and down the aisles of the camping section at the on-base store, the PX, choosing everything I thought I'd need – sleeping bag, tent, stove, freeze-dried food, all that – and now it was all in front of me. Hefting my pack, I adjusted the straps and looked around one last time.

A Gunny on the other side of the counter in the office ignored me, the Sergeant who gave me the I.D. card looked jealous and a nearby Private looked at me with awe. I ignored the Gunny too, shook hands with the Sergeant and, after staring at him for a few seconds, shook hands with the Private.

“Your time's comin' pal,” I said. “Hang in, Semper Fi.” Then caressing the card in my pocket, I walked out of the building and down the street.

There it is, I thought, standing on the side of the street across from the fence that disappeared in the distance to my left and right. With the comforting sense of the pack on my back and the pink I.D. card in my pocket, I stared at the big opening in the fence with the guardhouse in the middle of the road that led to the Main Gate.

I've walked through hundreds of 'em, I thought. *But this time it's different.* Lost in these thoughts I walked right by the Military Policeman manning the post.

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“Just a few more steps,” I whispered, oblivious to the guard. *Just a few more steps and it’s Mister, not Corporal.* “Woo-hoo,” I said softly, the sudden realization of the change corkscrewing through me.

“Hey buddy,” said the MP, “where you headed?”

I expected that – and I ignored him.

“Hey! I’m *talking* to you!”

My nerves jangled, but I kept walking. *It’s my turn now, I thought, a smile beginning to form.*

“Halt! Ah said *halt!*” he yelled. “You sonuva... *halt!*”

Hearing running footfalls behind me, but still walking and not looking back, I dug out the pink I.D. card and held it over my head.

The footfalls stopped. Even MPs knew their limits. That pink I.D. card said it loud and clear: I am a *civilian*; don’t even *think* about screwing with me!

That felt good, I thought, standing by the interstate outside Camp Pendleton, the Pacific Ocean out in the distance in front of me. *Now then,* I wondered, looking at the signs on I-5, as car after car zipped by a few yards away. *What’ll it be O’Doyme, north or south?* One pointed to San Diego, the other to Los Angeles.

I went north.

Chapter Three: It Takes All Kinds

While trying to find a place for the weird sense that came with knowing I didn’t have to do anything or be anywhere unless I wanted to, I walked down the road a bit. Then common sense— some might say laziness – took over. I stopped and stuck my thumb out.

After about 20 minutes, a big white Cadillac – the driver’s head barely visible above the leather-wrapped steering wheel – pulled over and stopped. Rumbling and shaking, it waited for me to jog up to the open passenger window.

Looking in the open window I took in the worn leather seats and, ignoring the two passengers, said to the driver, “Thanks for stopping, man.”

“Ey,” said the driver, looking over the top of his mirror sunglasses, the reflection of his sweat-stained, dark blue silk shirt reflected in their lenses, “no pro’lem muchacho! Jhoo ’ave to come ‘round my side t’get in.” Then reaching around behind him, he opened the left passenger door and waited.

“Ey man, jhoo wanna put ‘dat pack inna trunk?” asked the guy in the back seat when I looked inside the open door.

Looking him over, from his bandanna covered long hair, down the once-white tee shirt, past the faded jeans with the ragged pocket to the sneakers that had seen better days, then back to his face, I studied the specimen in front of me.

“No,” I said, staring at him until he dropped his eyes.

“‘Ey man,” he said in a loud voice to the other guy in front, “turn ‘a radio up, bro!”

I slid in the back – my pack between me and the door. As Sunglasses looked at me in the rearview mirror, the trace of a smirk flashed across his lips. I closed the door and he pulled away from the roadside.

Stretching and yawning like I was a weary traveler, I scratched my chest and sides with both hands. My left hand drifted down and unsnapped the hilt of the Ka-Bar knife in my left back pocket. Wiggling my butt as if getting comfortable, I felt the handle slide out of its sheath a little.

Looking sideways at my new traveling amigo, I bared my teeth in what might pass for a smile then closed my eyes to mere slits and pretended to snooze. All I wanted was a ride. If anyone tried anything, they were in for a big surprise.

Cruising along I-5, the lyrics of Iron Butterfly’s, *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* punching heavy bass holes in the air, I could feel the car’s big V-8 power under me as we occasionally shifted lanes, and I lost myself in the song.

*“In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, honey,
Don’t you know that I’m lovin’ you...?
In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, ba-by...
Don’t you know that I’ll al-ways be tr ...”*
Thump! Thump! Scree-ch...!

My eyes snapped open. “What the fu...” I muttered as my corner of the car banged repeatedly on the road. Reflexively looking out my window I saw a wheel, with a few feet of smoking axle attached to it, zoom past the driver’s side of the old Cadillac. Curving gracefully in front of us, it bounced into a field beside the road. It caught bits and pieces of brush on fire as it rolled. Leaving a smoking trail in its path, it stopped some distance from the road.

Is that ours?

There was no time to wonder ‘cuz that big ol’ Caddy, swerving like a ‘Coon dog on fresh scent, had my full attention. Every detail stood out. Swearing up a storm, Sunglasses was locked in a duel with the steering wheel as it tried to rip itself out of his hands. Bandanna

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was pushing himself hard against the back seat, his mouth and eyes wide and the guy in the front looked like he was praying – or fainted.

Oh no, I thought. This is bad ... this is bad ... I don't wanna die, not now... oh Jeez... oh no ... oh God, help me...

An eternity of cars, honking horns and painted lines zipped by as we careened across the highway. The beast began to slow and Sunglasses steered for the roadside.

Sliding sideways, we ground to a stop in a cloud of dust and, yelling and swearing, Sunglasses jumped out. Bandanna drew a couple of deep breaths then launched himself out the door like a man jumping from a sinking ship. The other guy and I just sat there staring at each other, the gravel dust slowly settling around the car.

Realizing I was holding my breath, I exhaled slowly then inhaled deeply through my nose. Suddenly I understood why the guy in front wasn't in such a rush to get out.

"Damn," I muttered – without breathing through my nose again. Shaking my head, I opened the door, pushed my pack out and got out behind it. Shrugging it on, I started walking. I didn't even close the door.

"Ey!" screamed Sunglasses, "where you goin', man? We need help!"

I didn't reply. I was too busy trying to keep from collapsing in a heap. *Welcome to the world*, I thought, sticking out a thumb that, try as I might, wouldn't stop shaking.

"Wha' 'da fuck is 'at smell?" was the last I heard before the freeway sounds took over.

Chapter Four: It's a Wild, Wild World

A few rides later I was in northern California. *Charlie lives here somewhere*, I thought, staring up at the big green sign that read, "Sacramento Next Three Exits." Charlie and I were together in the last squadron I was in. He rotated stateside just before I did. It's funny, but all I remember about Charlie was his wife was more beautiful than I thought he deserved. He showed me her picture – a lot. They had a son they called "Choo-Choo," and they lived in Sacramento. He was a part of my world, but when he left, "click," that was it. I just turned him off. Now I was right by his hometown. How about that?

Dusk had settled, so deciding to stop for the night, I walked along the interstate looking for a place to bed down. Spotting a lone-some-looking hill in the distance, I walked to it. The closer I got the more desolate it looked, but that, I decided, was what I wanted.

Climbing to the top, I felt the full strength of the wind off the ocean. *Man, I thought, you don't feel that down below.* I found a little nest of boulders that covered me on three sides but left a good view of Sacramento. *This is a good place,* I thought. I set up camp then sat in the dark, looking at the star-filled California night sky. I spent a long time staring at it. *It doesn't change,* I thought, smiling. *But I did. You're a civilian now, bud,* I thought to myself. *'S a weird feeling ... kinda spooky actually.*

"S okay," I said to the stars. "I'll get used to it – I have the rest of my life."

Realizing I'd have to cook in the dark bothered me a little, but I was hungry so I turned to and did my best. I had a flashlight but it was small – I bought it to save weight – and the wind kept moving the beam when I set it down. *First chance you get, 'ere bud, buy a real flashlight,* I told myself as, frustrated and hungry, I fumbled in the dark.

That nearly cost me.

The stove I bought at the PX ... *PX? O'Doyne, you need to start calling them stores,* I thought, smiling. *Man, nobody's gonna know what in the world you're talking about!* Anyhow, it had a little tank for white gas. I also bought a small manually operated pump that pressurized it. This was my first time using the pump. I don't care what anyone says; you can't read labels in the dark. Even the ones with the big letters like WARNING! APPLY NO MORE THAN THREE PUMPS TO PRESSURIZE.

I couldn't get it to light and thought the problem was low tank pressure, to say nothing of the wind whipping over the hilltop that kept blowing out my matches. So I pumped it a few more times – about ten times, actually – but it still wouldn't light.

Baffled, I sat back and stared at it for a minute, then went over the starting sequence again.

Ah-ha, I thought, finding the problem. *The valve from the tank to the burner wasn't fully open; the vapors couldn't get to the burner!* Smiling, I corrected it, moved my body to shield the match from the blowing wind and lit another.

I'll bet folks around Sacramento are *still* talking about that sudden nighttime flash on the hilltop outside town; it was like putting a stick of dynamite between my teeth and lighting the fuse. The flash knocked me backwards and I almost fell down the hill. For the longest time, everywhere I looked there were little white spots...

Aside from singed eyebrows and moustache, and one *highly* erratic heartbeat, nothing was damaged. But I was sure surprised – to say the least. After a bit I went back and, much more carefully this

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time, cooked some food. After eating I cleaned up and crawled into my sleeping bag. *Man, this is so cool*, I thought, looking at the star-filled night sky. It was the last thing I remember before falling asleep.

The next morning when I opened my eyes, I didn't move.

Through the morning mist hovering over the ground, I caught glimpses of a big, dog-like animal rooting around my firepit. *I must have spilled something*, I thought, slowly reaching for a nearby piece of wood.

Not sure what to do, but drawing comfort from the feel of the stick in my hand, I watched the animal root around the ashes of last night's fire.

Suddenly it froze. Crouching, it looked right at me. Seconds ticked by.

What if that thing jumps me? As menacingly as I could, all the while looking into those pale, malevolent eyes – I hissed. Long, low and threateningly.

It growled and advanced.

Shit, Einstein! That worked well...

Gripping the stick, I jumped up yelling – and tripped in the sleeping bag. Swearing and out of control, but swinging that stick and my arms everywhere, I fell. Expecting ripping teeth, I looked for the attack – but it was gone. Only the swirling mists remained.

Woo, I thought, the adrenaline bleed-off leaving me powerless. *That could've ... that could've been ... that ... shit, man. Woo...* (I stayed where I was for a bit.)

Untangling the sleeping bag from my legs, I got up and checked all my gear. The animal had managed to tear apart some empty food packages. *I hung that trash off the ground last night ... not high enough, I guess.*

I was originally headed for Wyoming or Montana somewhere. That close call with all those fangs – near a city, no less – convinced me there wasn't a need in my life for the extremes of nature. Packing everything up I headed east.

Chapter Five: F ½ Street

From northern California I walked or hitchhiked – sleeping wherever I was when the daylight quit – until Colorado. Unless I caught a ride or went into a town for supplies, I generally stayed away from people. Such was life for a few days until I reached the western side of the Rocky Mountains.

Once, in the foothills of the Rockies off I-70, I stopped to get some food. I also saw a street sign. "F ½ Street," proclaimed the new-looking metal pole and sign. About three steps past it, it dawned on me what I just saw.

"Wha...?" I muttered, turning back to look again.

That's different, I thought, staring up at it. I wonder what it means?

Seeing as I had nothing pressing on my schedule that day, I followed it to see where it went. It took a while, but finally the road stopped; I could see the end of it in the distance. Before me to the left was a log cabin with a porch and open door. Not knowing what else to do, I walked in.

A counter with a desk on its other side had a young-looking Park Ranger sitting behind it. His light brown shirt with the big Forestry Service patch on one shoulder was open a few buttons and an old metal fan, slowly rotating back and forth on the desk near the black, government-issue telephone, ruffled his wispy hair every time it blew his way.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

I didn't answer right away. There was a guy, an Indian, from the looks of him, sitting in the shadows of the office and he watched me. I kept an eye on him too.

The Ranger at the desk, a kid, looked at me. I was wondering how to tell him, without coming off as a flaming idiot, that I walked down the road they were at the end of because I saw a street sign with a name that intrigued me.

"I uh, just got out of the service," I started. "I was headed that way," I said, pointing where I thought I was going, "when I saw this street sign, 'F ½ Street'?" It was weird, so I followed it. Here I am."

The kid stared at me like I was a flaming idiot.

"I'm trying to get all the crap out of me," I said, knowing even as I did that this kid had no idea what in the world I was talking about. Then I heard chair legs scrape.

I watched him walk over – he seemed to glide, I don't remember hearing his boots on the wooden floor – suddenly understanding why he was in the shadows. The scars on his face looked like a patchwork quilt. We stared at each other for a minute, sizing one another up.

"I know what you want," the Indian said. "C'mon." I followed him outside to a beat-up looking pickup truck.

“Throw your gear in there,” he said, pointing to the truck bed as he got in. I did, climbed in the passenger side and we drove off – toward the mountains.

You’re a nut, O’Doyme ... a bona-fide whacko! What’re ya’ doin’ with this guy? hollered the survivalist side of my brain. *Nah, it’s alright,* I thought. We’d been on back roads for at least an hour, which is a long time without talking, but it didn’t bother me. I didn’t know this guy, but somehow I felt comfortable. Looking at the wild splendor of the canyon we were skirting the rim of, I glanced again at his scarred face, careful not to stare.

“Where’d the scars come from?” I asked.

“Nam,” he said. “Landmine.”

I learned a long time ago, when you don’t know what to say, don’t say anything. *Some hide ‘em on the inside,* I thought, *and some have ‘em right out in front of God an’ everybody.*

I went back to looking at the canyon. It was growing bigger. We were driving along a relatively straight part and in front of us it was shaped like the bubble that holds the mercury at the bottom of a thermometer. He stopped close to the end of the canyon. Getting out, he reached in back, grabbed my pack, dropped it on the ground and pointed to a trail that disappeared over the edge of the rim. Even now, it was fading in the sunset.

“Go down it ‘til you reach bottom,” he said, then turned and pointed more or less back the way we came. “Follow the sun,” he said. “You’ll be out in about a week. How much food ya’ got?”

“A week of freeze dried,” I answered.

“That’s enough,” he said. “There’s water there,” he added. “You’ll find it.” Sticking his hand out, he looked me in the eyes. “Semper Fi,” he said as we shook hands.

“How’d you know?” I asked – I never told him I was in the Marines.

“I know,” he said. He got back in the truck and started it. It clunked into gear and he drove off. I watched him go until there was only settling dust. I never saw him again. For six days, all I saw was solitude – and what I spent years hiding.

Turning, I looked at the magnificent sky painted in the vibrant hues of a red, orange and yellow Rocky Mountain sunset. I was standing at the edge of a canyon. It curved away from me in a loop for several miles then came back around again on the other side. I figured it was seven, maybe ten miles away. Even from this distance, the sheer cliffs leading to the canyon bottom were awesome.

I dwelt on it no more. The light was turning gray and the trail leading down was getting darker and darker. Hefting my pack, I slid over the side.

I spent my first night on high ground, the top of a small hill at the bottom of the canyon. The wind shooting around the edges of the canyon howled, but I convinced myself it was safe in the dark nylon world of my tent.

Just like hiding behind the skin of a helicopter leaving the LZ, I thought. If the bullets can't see you, they can't hit you, right? It had boundaries. I understood it; the wild was on the *other* side.

Hollow comfort, true, but it was enough – I slept.

Sitting in front of my tent the next morning, a gentle breeze played with the steam from my mug of coffee as I watched the sun come over the top of the canyon. Chasing the shadows from their hiding places, painting the canyon walls dark blue then soft red-yellow, it burst in bright glory over the top and took its place in the sky.

My gear packed, I took a compass reading and started walking. The land amazed me with its tall, wind-sculpted rocks, lizards scampering from sparse bush to sparse bush and silence. The birds circling overhead, the paw prints I saw, some coyote, some big enough for mountain lion, seemed appropriate.

Only the echoing shrieks of a hawk or the lonely moaning of the wind broke the all-encompassing silence – for days.

Chapter Six: John 15:13

Sometimes I'd leave my pack on the ground, take my canteen and climb a tall, angled butte and just sit on top of it looking at everything. There was such a sense of cleansing that some days I never even put my clothes on.

I remember one. It rained that day. I walked in the rain, not thinking of staying dry, just walking. Arriving at a turn in the trail I was following, I saw before and below me a land of boulders, ravines and scrub brush, all under a gray, weeping sky.

Putting my pack under a nearby overhang, I sat, naked, on a rock ledge jutting out over the canyon and stared through the warm rain at everything and nothing.

The rain – and the memories – fell freely.

"...Yankee Whisky zero-three inbound," crackles in the ears of my helmet, "one wounded, repeat, one Whiskey-India-Alpha..."

I cradle his head and hold his hand.

The wheels thump down.

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He squeezes my hand.

Shit! Why him and not me?

I still see him sitting there. He was up in front of the FNG we were dropping – Fucking New Guys, we called ‘em, their boots and eyes always gave them away – sitting on the C-Rats and ammo, his back against the radio closet, using the mailbag for a pillow.

Flight suit open to the waist, flak jacket unzipped and hanging, he shakes with the beat of the helicopter. One hand rests on the port .50, his helmet’s sun visor is down and his face – what I see of it – is slack.

Sonofabitch can sleep anywhere...

Fear tastes metallic and I’m so damned scared my jaw hurts. Zipping up the coast, ocean on one side, jungle on the other, the roar of the rotor blades, the static hiss and click of the radios, the fear, the heat, that damned Rick, so calm...

“On yer toes people, I have the smoke,” says the voice from the cockpit.

“Zero-three, goin’ in,” says another voice from the cockpit.

“Where?” asks Rick, flipping his mic switch, wide-awake and all business now.

“Ten o’clock,” says the voice from the cockpit.

“Rog’.”

“Ramp’s down, Skipper,” I say, keying the mic between the door and the starboard .50.

The wheels touch down and Rick says, “See? Another boring...”

“Shit!” yells the voice from the cockpit. “In the trees... three o’clock... three o’clock... Gunner... shit... flashes... the zone is hot! Zone is hot!”

Thung – thung - thung!

Little round pieces of daylight appear in the helicopter skin.

“Urrg-gh! Motherfu-uh-h....”

Oh God, oh God, oh God...

My .50 bucks and spits. Thumpa-thumpa-thumpa!

Rick...? “Rick’s hit!”

“The load, the load...!” bellows the voice.

“It’s off, it’s off!”

Rick...?

The FNG is on the floor – *is he hit?* He looks at me.

“Run, you sonofabitch, run!” I scream. “Go!”

“The treeline! The treeline...!” the voice splinters with radio static.

“Where, where?”

“The treeline for Christ’ sake, hose the fuckin’ treeline!
Three o’clock, dammit!”

I see nothing; I shoot everything. Thumpa-thumpa-thumpa!
Smoking casings fly into the hopper – thumpa-thumpa-thumpa!
– green uniforms run, ducking and firing, trees, radio static...

“Aaaaa ... you mutha-fuckers,” I scream, mashing the firing
tab on the .50, “D-I-EEE...!” Thumpa-thumpa-thumpa-thumpa-
thumpa!

“He’s off, he’s off, go! Go! Go! Go!”

Oh God, Go!

Thumpa-thumpa-thumpa-thumpa-thumpa!

We’re out... A second? An hour? Don’t know... Rick?

“Oh God... Skipper,” I say hoarsely, “he’s a mess...”

Rick? He’s too still...

Voices, green stretcher, hands, faces...

“It hurts...”

Shit! Rick... “It ain’t bad man, they’ll help,” I lie, his fingers
slipping off my arm.

He looks at me.

My God, his eyes... I see his soul...

I think I was crying, sitting there naked on the edge of that big
rock looking out over the canyon. But I couldn’t tell; it was raining.
To keep the canyon’s moaning wind from getting too lonesome, I left
Rick’s ghost there. Maybe someday before I die I’ll go back. Maybe I
won’t.

The next day, heading toward afternoon on what was – though
I didn’t know it at the time – my last day there, I followed a vague trail
on the side of a hill. It wasn’t high, but the ground was below me and
I had a view of the canyon behind me. In front of me was the edge and
as I drew closer it wound around a corner.

When I got to the edge I took a few steps around it and
stopped. Whoa! I stood there looking and thinking and, to be honest,
I wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.

Turning my back on it, I took off my pack. Rummaging in-
side, I found the necessaries – stove, water and coffee – and crouching
down, brewed a cup. Watching the water boil, I kept my back to it. *It
isn’t going anywhere*, I thought.

With an uncluttered mind and hot cup of coffee in hand, I
sat, stretched out my legs on the dirt, wriggled my back against the
boulder behind me and, once I was comfortable, looked out and let it
fill my eyes and mind.

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What am I going to do about you? I wondered.

Sipping the coffee, I considered the eight-foot, chain link fence before me. It sat maybe, oh, a half-acre away and stretched off into the horizon, disappearing over a nearby hill. So simple, yet so profound, I thought. Sipping the coffee, my eyes never strayed from the fence.

“That’s ‘civilization’ there, pal,” I muttered.

Gazing back where I just came from, I wondered which side of that fence freedom was really on? Toward the canyon, but high overhead, I watched a hawk slowly catch the thermals. It soared and turned, ever graceful; a ballet just for me. Around and around it went – as if it had no agenda.

“Just like me,” I whispered.

Suddenly the slow, lazy circles stopped. Folding its wings, it plummeted down out of sight. For a few seconds I stared where it was. Looking again at the fence I stood and threw my remaining coffee toward the canyon.

“For you,” I said to a hawk that couldn’t hear me.

Stowing my gear, I shouldered my pack, adjusted the straps and walked down toward the fence. Putting the sun behind me, I walked beside it, looking for a way out. A while later I found where an animal – be it four-legged or two, I didn’t know – had burrowed under the fence. Pushing my pack under first, I followed.

No sense in looking back.

kimberly a. goodman

-out back-

Garbage bag
tied tightly shut
so that the infant
inside
will breathe
its last breath
in a dumpster
behind Denny's,
as greedy mouths
chew down
ignorance and grease
to wake up
the next morning
with their worst fear:
A zit.

III.

"to protect the innocents
to catch the new villains..."



david m. pacelli

-to fight the bad guys-

"I've decided what my name will be," Stewart O'Neil said, raising his voice over the discordant conversations in the East Haven High School cafeteria. He glanced up at his friend, a lanky boy clad in a too big flannel shirt. Kurt's blue eyes looked back at Stewart from behind thin wired-framed glasses.

"Name?" Kurt said, placing his lunch tray next to his friend's. "What name?"

"You know," Stewart lowered his voice. "My superhero name."

"You can't be serious," Kurt snorted, sitting down. "You're really thinking about doing this. This is without a doubt the dumbest idea you've had."

"No, it isn't," Stewart said, shoveling a spoonful of still steaming mashed potatoes into his mouth. The scorched, paste-like potatoes glided down his throat. He breathed fire. "This town needs a crime-fighter to crack the on going cases. To protect the innocents. To catch the new villains."

"New villains'? We live in a quiet town. There are no 'villains.' And, besides being 'racist,' nothing happens here. It's small, dead and boring. Come back to reality, Stew."

Stewart sank his teeth into the first of two gooey steak-and-cheese subs. He chased it down with a gulp of Mountain Dew. It was Wednesday, which meant "sub-day," and Stewart's tray reflected just that: two foot-long subs, a couple heaping spoonfuls of mashed potatoes loaded with gravy, salt and pepper; a side order of two slices of toast, dripping with melted butter; and a can of Mountain Dew. "This town has problems – problems I could help correct."

Kurt nibbled at his own food. "You're only doing this to get Julia's attention. Like all your other ideas."

Stewart's eyes fished Julia out of the crowd. Her blonde hair reflected the sun. She looked like an angel, despite sitting next to the popular kids. Casting his eyes down, Stewart dipped the last bite of his first sub in his gravy-mashed potato mixture. He recalled trying out for track his sophomore year. If only the coach hadn't been so demanding about running under a set time, and had been nicer about

Stewart's weight. Sure that had been for Julia. But, Stewart thought, this time she wasn't the sole reason. This time was different. He was different. He had an epiphany a week ago, which he needed to act on. It made perfect sense, he reasoned. He was an outcast in school only to turn him into a superhero. All the great super heroes were outcasts -- outcasts who suffered loneliness.

Stewart scanned the cafeteria, watching the other students speaking and laughing, mindlessly eating their lunch. He was their savior. Their protector. And, like any other superhero, he needed a sidekick. He glanced at Kurt who was eating his lunch.

Stewart needed to keep his energy up in order to fight the bad guys. He picked up his second greasy sub, the warm cheese oozed on his hand and trickled onto the tray. He gnawed it. "Well, do you still want to hear my name?" he asked, spraying particles of chewed food and saliva.

"Fine. What is this great name you came up with?"

"The American Defender," Stewart said, raising his head as if being awarded a prize, his sub the trophy.

"God, that's so lame. Really. You do know you're not exactly defending America," Kurt said between mouthfuls of food. "You're defending East Haven. A safe town."

Stewart took a slug of his drink, swished it around in his mouth, then swallowed. He slammed his can down. "Damn it. Crimes happen here, too. Or, they will. Super villains are here. I have to do something before something happens. I can't just sit here and do nothing, while criminals do something, and innocents suffer. This isn't justice. We're being prepared, you and I, Kurt, to do something. Even if it's in this town."

"What are you talking about, Stew?"

"Look." Stewart thought back to his reasoning. It all made perfect sense. Too perfect. He swallowed. "It all fits." Stewart glanced around the cafeteria. "We're being molded into superheroes. We're outcasts. Shunned by society because we're different. Like the X-Men. Every superhero has suffered. Dr. Strange with his hands. Dare Devil is blind. Batman lost his parents. Super villains must be real."

"Are you listening to yourself?" Kurt asked. "What super villains? This isn't comic book land, Stew. We're not being 'molded.'" He laughed. "We're outcasts because we're not popular. That's it. Simple as that."

Stewart scrutinized the crowd. An open communication between hero and sidekick was a must, Stewart thought. He had to find at least one super villain to show Kurt. Then Kurt wouldn't be able to

deny his role as a sidekick. A homeless-looking kid, hunched over his lunch tray, sat at the brainy kids' table. Unwashed hair drooped down his face, past his chin. A frail, faded long sleeve shirt dangled loosely from his body. Stewart pointed a chubby finger.

"You see that kid?"

"Yeah."

"Look hard," Stewart advised, "but not too hard. He might sense it."

Kurt grunted.

"Look at his excellent cover." Stewart ran his finger all along the table. "No one would suspect a villain among the brains. Plus," Stewart dropped his voice, "no normal kid looks like that. He's a super villain."

Kurt's face etched in puzzlement.

Stewart nodded. "His long dirty hair has to be hiding something. Remember Dr. Octopus and his mechanical tentacles? And look at those long arms. He's probably a stretcher, like Plastic Man and Mr. Elastic." An idea hit Stewart. "He's a composite villain. Made of the strongest super villainous powers." Stewart swallowed again. He had to work fast, now. Complete his costume, protect the school.

"Stewart, I hate to break this to you." Kurt looked down at his tray. "But you're fat, out of shape, and only eighteen. You go to school and have a part-time job. And to top things off, you share your car with your mom." He looked back up at Stewart. "How do you expect to go crime-fighting in your shape and with no criminals?"

"You could be my sidekick." Stewart shoved the last quarter of his sub into his mouth. "We've known each other since we were kids. We'd make a good team."

"You have no superpowers. And no way of getting them." Kurt held up one finger. "No gamma rays." Another finger. "No radioactive spider-bites." A third finger. "You weren't born a mutant. You're not the prince of an underwater world. And you won't get possessed by a spirit of vengeance."

"Batman —"

A bell rang.

"Oh, shit," Stewart said, nearly choking on his sub.

"Come on, or we'll be late for Italian," Kurt said.

"Right behind you." Stewart took the last gulp of his drink, swung his backpack over his shoulder, and grabbed the last two pieces of buttered toast. He stumbled his way into the crowd, following his friend to the exit.

-folio-

Stewart shifted his girth in the stiff-backed, metal chair. He looked around the class. Two seats in front of him, sat Julia. All Stewart could see of her was her glistening blonde hair. He remembered the first day of class. He'd waited by the door, watching to see where she sat. He'd almost tripped trying to get to a seat close by her.

Next to Stewart sat Kurt, who hastily wrote down everything the teacher said. How was anyone supposed to concentrate sitting in these chairs, Stewart wondered. They're cold, hard, and small – too small for Stewart's liking. No wonder he was failing Italian. He couldn't concentrate.

Sunlight bounced off the teacher's bald head. Lex Luthor, Stewart thought. Mr. Borelli, a tall skeleton man clothed in dress pants, a striped button-up shirt, and a bow tie. A fake gold watch, loose around his wrist, jangled whenever he moved his arm.

"Everyone, *ripetete*," he said, standing in front of the class, and shaking his arms like an ape. "*Io. Tu. Lui, lei, Lei. Noi. Voi. Loro, loro.*"

The class broke out in an unrehearsed, unenthusiastic rendition of the ditty.

"No, no," Mr. Borelli said, waving his arms in front of him. "It's pronounced like 'ee-o.' 'Too,' which rhymes with you. 'Lui,' sounding like Louie. 'Lay,' 'lay.' Come on class. *Ripetete.*"

Stewart cast his eyes down. He needed to focus. His costume had to be finished by tonight. With super villains like The Stretcher loose, there was no telling what would happen. Stewart drew a brief figure to represent himself. A cape. Now what?

The teacher turned his back to write something on the chalkboard, squeaking chalk with each stroke.

"Pisst." Stewart leaned over to Kurt. "Give me your idea on this." He passed his drawings to Kurt. "The one underneath is your costume. It's finished."

"Not again, Stew," Kurt whispered. He took the pictures in his hand, looking at them. He burst out laughing. All the students turned, including the teacher.

"What's so funny, Mr. Rini?" Mr. Borelli asked, turning. He stalked towards Kurt's desk. "Perhaps you would care to enlighten the whole class on this little joke."

"Mr. Borelli. Mr. Borelli." Stewart shot his hand up. Sidekicks always needed to be bailed out, Stewart thought. A plan formed in his mind.

The teacher sighed. "What is it now, Mr. O'Neil?"

"I need to go to the bathroom. Can I have a pass?"

“Very well, Mr. O’Neil.” The teacher strode over to his desk.
“I’ll write a pass.”

Kurt leaned over, sighed, “Thanks.”

“Could Kurt come, too?”

The class erupted in laughter.

“What?” Kurt said, turning to the teacher, then back at Stewart.

“What did you say?” Mr. Borelli looked up.

“Kurt needs to go, too.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Borelli cocked his head toward Kurt.

Someone in the back yelled “fag.” The class’ laughter escalated.
Obscene noises were launched.

“That’s enough class!” the teacher yelled, his face red, eyes bulging. “Now, Stewart, let me get this straight. You want your friend, Kurt, to go to the bathroom, with you?”

Kurt sank lower in his desk, hiding his face in his hands.

“Yeah,” Stewart said, still facing the teacher. “That’s why he was laughing.” Stewart smiled. He’d just saved his sidekick. His first noble act. Julia was probably amazed. Stewart sneaked a look over at her. She was writing something in her notebook. Stewart shook his head. She was probably recording his heroic moment. He blushed.

“Oh, really?” Mr. Borelli said. “Well, how about this. I’ll let you go, Stewart, then when you come back, Kurt can go. Okay?”

“What do you say,” Stewart nudged Kurt’s elbow, “sidekick,” he added in a whisper, winking.

The class broke out laughing again. All except Stewart, the teacher, and Kurt, who sounded like he was crying.

“Fine,” the teacher said, slamming his hand on his desk. “You both can go. Get out. Now!” He pointed toward the door.

“Come on,” Stewart said, shoving his books in his backpack. “And don’t forget the pics.” He left.

Outside in the hall, Stewart extracted a Snickers bar from his pocket. “Damn, it melted,” he mumbled, tearing the wrapper open. Chocolate collected on his hands. He wondered if Mr. Borelli was a super villain, too. A two language speaker. He shook his head. They were spreading fast. But, Stewart wondered if he should do a preemptive strike against them, or wait for them to make their first malicious move.

Kurt came up beside Stewart. His face mutated red like fire. Stewart thought maybe Kurt had a hidden power like the Human Torch.

“What the hell were you –”

“Did you bring the pics?” Stewart asked, holding out the half eaten, melted candy bar to Kurt. “Don’t burst, or people might know your power. Want a bite?”

“Get that thing away from me.” Kurt shoved aside Stewart’s hand. “Now, what were you doing? We just got kicked out of class. What the hell were you thinking?” He ran a hand through his hair. Stopped midway. “Wait. ‘Don’t burst?’ ‘Pics?’ What?”

“Yeah, what I gave you. You know,” Stewart glanced around the hall. He whispered, “My unfinished costume, and your finished one.”

“Oh, you mean the notebook pages.” Kurt pulled out the two folded notebook pages. “You got us kicked out of class for two notebook pages. Two pages with stick figures standing on thin pencil lines, which, I guess, is the ground.” Kurt’s face drained to his normal hue. “Look at his long cape.” He point to the top picture. “It can rival Spawn’s.” He laughed.

“That’s just the beginning of my costume. I have a few kinks to work out.” Stewart smacked his lips, chomping, chewing, taming the moist chocolate substance.

“This is a joke, right?” Kurt said. “The cape’s too long. It won’t work.” Kurt leaned against wall, hanging his head. “This is all a bad dream,” he mumbled.

“Turn to the next one. That’s yours.” He forced the chewed bar down his throat.

Kurt looked at Stewart, then the next page. “A stick figure with a really long cape, and what looks like a baseball cap on backwards.” Kurt looked up at Stewart.

Stewart plunked the last bit of candy into his mouth. Swallowed without chewing. “We have to head home and get ready.”

“What? We can’t. We still have classes left.”

Stewart listened to the classroom. Laughter echoed from the class, floating into the hall. “Must be some joke,” Stewart said, slapping Kurt’s arm. “They’ll let us in on it tomorrow. Anyway, they’re preoccupied laughing at the joke. They’ll never know we left.”

Stewart stood in the shade, under the only tree on the man-made grass island in the student parking lot. Next to him, his loyal sidekick, Kurt, leaned against the tree. Stewart took a deep breath. He smelled the buttery smell of justice. He licked his lips as he stepped into the sunlight. The warm rays tickled him like little fingers. He laughed. One day, he thought, he would laugh a hero’s laugh. But, first things first. Stewart needed a superhero’s way of talking.

Stewart glanced back at Kurt, who was still under the tree's lush shelter. Hands wedged in his jeans' pockets, Kurt traced a pattern on the ground with his foot.

"Step into the light, chum," Stewart said, smiling. "And bask in the glory of mother nature."

Kurt stopped his tracing and looked up. "What did you just say?"

"Release your grip on the dark, chum. The light is what we have to embrace." He surveyed the perimeter. All quiet. "Come. We must go home. Much to do before we are called to duty."

"Do you hear how you're talking?" Kurt laughed. "What are you even talking about? You just got us kicked out of class. We could go back for our last two classes, but I know I have to see some of those kids again."

"Come on. I'll drive us home." Stewart walked to the edge of the grass island. "You know, I need a saying, a battle cry to strike fear into the hearts of the bad guys." He looked back at Kurt. "And you need a name." Stewart thought that Kurt's name needed to strike fear into the icy, black hearts of evil doers. Yet it needed to reflect Kurt. Good guys were loyal to justice, and defended the righteous way. "How's Loyal Defender?"

Kurt strolled up besides Stewart. "You're joking, right? Loyal Defender's as lame as the American Defender." Kurt shook his head. "This has gone too far Stewart. Your past ideas were never this extreme." He gripped Stewart's arm. "Let's go to class."

"Are you nuts?" Stewart couldn't believe his own sidekick said those words. He broke free from his grip. "We've been chosen to do great things for the world." Stewart looked at the school. It loomed like a great pyramid, hiding secrets within. "We could do great things, things we always imagined doing. Jumping from rooftops. Saving innocents from the clutches of evil. It all makes sense. Justice is ours – that's it." Stewart raised his head to the sun. "That's my battle cry. Justice is mine." Stewart laughed. "Justice is mine!"

Kurt looked up at the school, then back at Stewart. "Stewart, listen to me. We must go back to school. It's almost time for next period."

"We can't leave, not when Fate spins her wheel." Stewart squinted at the sun. "We've been called, Kurt."

"We haven't been called, Stewart. We're just kids, going to school." Kurt turned around. "If you're only doing this to get Julia's attention, you've succeeded."

-folio-

Stewart remembered seeing Julia write something down in her notebook. He didn't know what exactly she wrote, but he guessed it must have been how he stood up to a terror, not backing down to save his sidekick. Of course she took note. Stewart was a hero.

“Stew, we can go home after school.”

“You're probably right, chum. After school we go home.” He walked back to school with Kurt.

eve cummings prize for poetry - 1st place

gregory a. antonini

-dipping achilles-

Thetis, your fingers umbilical when you dip me
in the water. I feel the pinch of thumb, forefinger,
as sand rises to my face from the bottom.

I never trusted your hold on me, Mother,
an entire lifetime held in my chest up until
that Arrow, until breath, that straight line to death.

When his arrow struck my heel, Paris
saw me exhale, saw life burst from my lungs
like a drowning man pulled from the water.

He thought it was death, but it was not, Mother.
When I dragged Hector behind my chariot,
sparks from the wheels burned his body.

That was death. I saw your face below the waves,
caught in the embers. You always took water
into your lungs, but here, below the walls

of Troy I have broken in half. I think about you
pulling me from the water, spilling me
across the ground in a gasp. When Priam

comes to collect Hector's body, I will offer
to carry it back over the river. I will cut the chords
to your fingers, dip my feet in the water.

alex pickett

-in search of home...-

Because sometimes five punks from Detroit come and squat your house.

I don't know what the fat one with the shaved head and scraggly little rat-tail was doing with that anorexic girl in the middle our living room floor when my roommates came in. Their horrified faces coupled with my imagination was enough.

It wasn't just the punks that forced me out - they were just an inevitable jolt to the whole downward spiral that started that cold Iowa winter, in a house with no heat and a loose hamster that made its home in my mattress. Maybe it was the curse on the house, the scene of debauchery for over 3 years. A revolving door of street kids, runaway Christians, ether addicts, circus performers, and out of town ravers. Its intermittent electricity and peeling paint haunted the inside, while we haunted the couch, outside on the front porch, drinking 40 oz.'s of O.E. and watching the frat boys get arrested on their mass exodus home at 2 in the morning.

So I had to leave home once again, smashing my furniture and barricading the door with it while I snuck out the window in the middle of my lease.

"Hey, do you want to leave?" she asked, eyes-wide, lips pursed, and a backpack full of stolen food.

"Um . . . okay," and off we went in the first Wagoneer we could find, filled with ocean deprived kids looking for something beyond the cornfields of Iowa.

Eight hours later we were on the side of road.

"What is it Joe?" I asked, but he just stared.

"Well . . ." he started, but didn't finish.

"Where are we?" I asked another passenger.

"We're in Ohio, again," he sighed.

"Again? When was the last time you were in Ohio?"

"The last time I broke down."

Amanda took another sip of merlot.

After explaining to the AAA operator that we were somewhere between the city line and middle of nowhere, a tow truck appeared and dragged us to the nearest Jeep dealer, in Deviance, Ohio. It was the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend and the mechanics were closing up.

“Oh, we could probably have the part you need in the time it takes to drive down from the salvage yard in Michigan, six hours or so, but,” the mechanic cocked his head to the left, “it’s Memorial Day weekend so we can’t start ‘til Tuesday.”

It started to rain.

The truck was too full to sleep in, and I had a tent barely big enough for me. My closest contact was this weird Janis Joplin looking girl I met in D.C. for a few hours who lived near here, in a Cleveland trailer park.

“She isn’t home,” and I hung up the phone.

In the back of the dealership, a car salesman, Dan, had a funny grin on his stern military face, watching us argue with each other about what to do. Find a Wal-Mart and buy a large tent? Get jobs for the weekend at a motel? Hitchhike? Trade in the broken car for another less broken car?

“My dad has this place outside of town. He’s barely ever there. You kids could stay there for the weekend.” Dan found our corn-fed hijinks funny.

Dan’s dad lived in a huge house off a three or four mile dirt road in the middle of a typical Ohio field: nothing in sight. Piled up in the back were refrigerators, car parts, lawnmowers, and spare tires surrounding a giant fire pit. “He has his own pawn store,” added Dan. “But there’s no phone in the house. You weren’t expecting any calls I hope.” Dan was the guy who made fart noises during lights-out at boot camp.

We all looked at each other and heard the door slam.

“Hey ya’ll! I’m Ernie! Wanna see my guns!”

The tall man from West Virginia pulled at his suspenders while he told us about his collection and stories about the local pawnshop he owned. The man had a rich, National Geographic narrator voice and was friendly enough, offering us the dusty bottle of vodka under the sink. We even found a copy of “The Last Unicorn” in his movie collection, which kind of put us all at ease.

The man’s home was a work of art; it had to have been built by hand, by some drunken construction worker who lost his job, his wife and truck, sobbing while he pounded nails into the rich cherry-

-folio-

wood living room. Sure it was beautiful, even if he forgot to finish the stairs in the basement and made the top bedroom floor at a downward angle. Even the walls didn't seem to be cut right. But it had the musty smell of home, not only for Ernie, but the rats I heard squeaking in the walls. A man, alone in the middle of a vast prairie, must like a big Victorian style house with so much character. A home that would keep him company.

After visiting the local redneck bar and grilling out on the lake with an enthusiastic Dan, Tuesday couldn't have come sooner. The car salesman waved to us and we headed East. One by one passengers got off, after finding a friend or enjoying a city's name, finding their new home states, until Amanda and I were left on the side of the road.

We went East till we could go East no more, and ended up at the ocean, in a little tourist trap called Mystic, in one of those states crunched in a traffic jam on the Northeast side of a map. "Connect-i-cut? We're in Connect-i-cut?"

Our new abode was an ancient stone foundation on top of a hill in the middle of a forest right outside the tourist sites. I brushed away the leaves and sow bugs and flopped my tent down. The afternoon sun was still high.

"It'll be a little tight, but we can both fit in here," I said. She just kind of stared at it.

"Come on! It's our new home! Show it a little love." It was the least we could do, I said.

She kept staring at it.

"Come on, it's cozy!"

She stayed silent, reached into her pocket, and took a swig of whiskey.

"We need jobs," and she walked down the hill.

We hiked down the hill to our new florescent-lighted bathroom – the Chevron station – brushed our teeth, combed our hair, and put in some applications at the Dunkin' Donuts nearby.

"It ain't no Krispy Kreme." My southern roots were disappointed.

We walked down further, and put in applications at every place we came to. Nobody wanted us. Managers wouldn't speak to us. What were they looking for? College graduates?! I had no choice but to suck up my pride and apply at McDonald's.

“Well, at least they’re paying \$8 an hour,” I said. “And that’s less food we have to buy.”

“But that stuff isn’t food.” Amanda wasn’t helping much. She was bitter about getting the job at the Dunkin Donuts.

We got a cup of coffee from the ‘Beefyfarm’ diner and sat there for two hours.

“It’s getting late.” I watched the sun go down.

“Let’s go back,” she said.

Outside of the gas station (our new bathroom) we came up to a tall man that walked with a limp. He was taking hits out of a small pipe.

“Hello neighbor,” we said.

“Hell, Jesus dammit!” he said, shoving hands and pipe in his pockets.

We brushed our teeth and went up to our campsite. We dove inside, zipping up the tent fast, so as to not let the mosquitoes in. We slept to the slight tapping of raindrops.

We awoke in the morning and water had seeped in through the tent’s zipper, and every other seam. We were dry, but under the sleeping bag was standing water, and the rain was coming down hard. We gathered up our backpack and ran down the hill; we were soaked by the time we got to the gas station.

“Beefyfarm?” I asked.

“Definitely Beefyfarm,” she answered.

And then we saw a self-serve Laundromat.

“I wonder . . .” I said to myself. All we had were the clothes on our back, they were soaked, and there was a cold wind outside.

Nobody was in the Laundromat.

“Strip down,” I told her when we got inside.

“What?!”

“Don’t worry, we have these!” I handed her the plastic poncho.

“But this is clear!” she protested.

Then a car came up and parked along the side of the building. A lady stepped out with a basket.

“Quick! We have no time. Our fate is in the ponchos!” I yelled and we stripped down, threw our clothes in the dryer, slipped on the ponchos, and sat down on the bench. Amanda started whistling. The plastic wasn’t totally clear . . . I mean, you couldn’t make out our nipples.

-folio-

The lady walked in, and set her basket down. We didn't notice her clothes in the dryer next to ours.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," she replied, giving me a side-ways look.

Amanda and her talked at length about folding laundry and rainy days. She packed up and headed toward the door, and I was amazed she never noticed!

"Do you two need some clothes?" she half-turned to look at us.

"Oh, no thank-you, ours will be done in about 10 minutes," I smiled and she left.

That night, at the still damp campsite, we laid down, looking at all the little creatures that were on the outside of our tent. As both our eyes shut, we heard a growl. Then we heard it again, closer. It was loud and deep, guttural, and straight from the throat, somewhere between a snarl and a yelp. We heard twigs breaking around our stone foundation. Amanda unsheathed her knife and gripped my arm. It sounded rabid, almost human. I ran out of the tent, armed with nothing, screaming: "Hello! I'm a human! You are scared of me!" and threw a stick to assert my humanness. But the snarls would only stop for a minute, then reappear in another direction, never coming into the foundation and keeping its eyes out of sight. Again, the growls came in the completely opposite direction.

"What the fuck is that?" I could only see the whites of her eyes. She clutched her knife, me a stick, and we drifted off, never quite sleeping, never completely awake.

The next morning, we had sleep-deprived bloodshot eyes. Amanda refused to sleep in the stone foundation again. So we moved down the street, to a little patch of grass completely surrounded by pines. It was the Day's Inn front lawn. It was a cozy spot and we even had a pool!

"I like this spot better," Amanda said.

No sow bugs, no leaves, no rabid snarling creature. Only a skunk that came every night to eat our food.

"Let's name him Russell."

The next few days we worked 10-hour shifts at our disrespected jobs. I gave out free cheeseburgers and convinced customers to tip me. Amanda warded off dirty old men by accidentally spilling coffee on them. It was a great symbiotic relationship we had with our 2-week jobs; them making us work in such a shitty environment while

we robbed 'em blind. Jobs that have the sweet stench that trashcans do. Soon enough, our first paycheck came.

"Let's find a new place," she looked at me again with those eyes.

"What about Russell?" I was growing fond of our nightly skunk encounters.

"You want to go to work tomorrow? Serve some more assholes their double fried heartattacks on a bun" she slanted her eyes at me.

"I got this bag, you grab that one, and I'll get the tent."

We were only on the interstate on-ramp for 2 hours when a minivan picked us up. I think the guy did heroin. Maybe that was just the headline on the yellowed newspaper on the dashboard. In 24 hours we were in the Boston train station, and I was haggling to the Traveler's Aid people:

"Don't you understand? I'm stranded! Those dirty hippies just left me here with no money!"

I don't think they believed my story. I certainly didn't, but I got 25% off my ticket anyway. "What about food? How will I eat?" I pleaded with them. They handed me a \$3 McDonalds gift certificate, not even enough for a value meal.

Amanda was waiting in line for the bus.

"Hey, where did you get tickets for?"

"Iowa."

"Iowa! Why?!"

"It's halfway west."

We sat down a seat back from the bus driver, so Amanda could look out the big windshield. Behind us was a small microcosm of America, leaving and returning to their neighborhoods, friends, family. Two pony-tailed Mexican men in the fourth row leaned back talking to themselves about their next job. A lonely grandmother pointed her bony finger towards the teenage dope smuggler in the row next to her, talking about her grandson and the vacations they used to take to Disney World when he was "knee-high to a grasshopper." An Australian couple talked in hushed voices and arranged a huge map of the U.S. across the length of the seats. And in the back, a black woman with an unfamiliar accent ordered her four kids to their seats, two crying, two laughing, handing them juices, and placating them: "Don't worry,

-folio-

we're almost there. Daddy's waiting. We're almost home." I put my head on my backpack and closed my eyes.

Because sometimes your only home is a Greyhound bus to Iowa.

michael r. hemenway

-waterburied-

Matt and I were bored, so we stole
a bunch of magic markers
from the Waterbury Toys R' Us
and took them to where they
cage all the plush toys
and used them to violate the animals
in the most offensive ways possible.
Some of it was pretty vile.
A masterpiece of mine was the
terrorized asshole of a
bewildered and bludgeoned penguin.
The manager saw us, swung his
sweaty, flabby fist, and demanded we
get out of the store, so we dropped
the markers and ran out, down the sidewalk
past Barnes & Noble, Shaw's, and
the Timexpo.
The filthy air forced antique brass into our lungs.
We ran all the way to Meadow St. and spotted
Ziggy the American, shrouded
in stars and stripes waving his
humongous flag on the sidewalk.
He yelled at us to stop being worthless.
People speeding through downtown
honked their horns at Ziggy. We slowed down
in front of city hall, where the former mayor
slept with all of those
9 year olds. We still heard the honks
from Ziggy and his fellow Americans.
The offices in city hall were quiet.
"What do we do now," I asked.
"We can walk to Brass City and visit Walt," Matt answered,
which meant checking out the new Beefheart, then buying records.
Ahead of us stood the Republican American
clock tower. The phallic beacon of the city stood proud.

-folio-

It always showed up on the covers of phone books
We stopped in front of it and lit
cigarettes. The yellow cross of Holy Land
made the sky glow. It projected its
marijuana and LSD graffiti over the city.
Everything began to glow.
The cars going by were full of people we knew.
We blew smoke at them.
The clock tower rumbled.
It felt like home.

jeff m. green

-keds-

The war was freshly begun. We never declared it, not legally. But when the Boss says it's war, he gets a few extra months to see that it actually happens. The rest of us just go where we're told. And do what we're supposed to do.

I don't really believe that peace time would have made things go better. Truth is, our government is always at war to some degree. The underbelly of government is a festering place; sometimes it gives birth to monsters.

No one actually believes himself to be evil. Even Hitler, the greatest monster of our time, could not have intended to be evil, he was just a sick fuck, responding to what he perceived to be external evil. Maybe.

But the monsters I'm talking about can't even be partially excused by lunar retardation. They were supposed to be sound and intelligent men. They, we, were supposed to be the best. Captain Kirk once said it. "There is nothing more dangerous than a good man." At least when he thinks he is doing right. Or when he is following orders. Or just plain scared shitless.

And Himmler was just following orders, too. They fucking *all* were. What does that make us? I want to think that I am a good man.

I remember the night perfectly. I was drunk in the air over the Pacific black. It was the most routine assignment, not a 'mission.' It was our duty merely to scan the coast, or rather, to occupy it. We could never see much in that dark. Only silver and blue glints of wave and ebb. For real sight, we relied on pilot and instruments.

We were not men, though that might have been our real function out over all that water – giving conscience to machinery. What we actually did was sit, bleary-eyed, looking at nothing. We buzzed and hovered a thousand feet over the water. There was nothing *to* see.

The tiny red light in the middle of the cabin was our only source of internal illumination. Outside were the blaring white running lights. That little, red eye stared malevolently at our backs, three dim outlines blurred by thick dark flak jackets. The only external sounds were the whistle of air and the electric *hum* of rotors overhead

-folio-

and behind. Even these stimuli were dim, distant. Habit played more of a role in this dissociation than the oversized headgear we all wore, through which we could hear only each other.

Beads of sweat would gather inside my uniform, trickle haltingly down through the hairs on my legs. It would get into my underwear. It pooled in my boots. I couldn't take anything off, and I wouldn't want to. Probably freeze to death.

We had been here so many times before, suspended alone together over the dimly sparkling water. We talked about the usual things military rough-neck type guys talk about. Art, literature, childhood fears, homosexual experimentation in high school. The usual stuff. We had become extremely close, then detached, then bored.

Tonight we were passing around an open Coke bottle and saying nothing, just warming up for the usual four-hour tour, when Skippy banked it left – away from the coast, out toward the open ocean. The moisture in my clothing seemed to slosh.

We called this particular pilot Skippy, mostly because it pissed him off. In front of the boss, he was McDermott. We couldn't see him through the bulwark. Neither could we help but fuck with him from time to time. It made the hot, slow ride a little easier. And as long as he didn't pull rank, you could say it was all in good fun.

McGinnis crackled over the general comm., "Skip, what is this happy horseshit?"

Skippy's voice was gravelly, even icy, "Orders. Tell you when we get there." That was Skippy's way of saying 'how the hell should I know?' He seemed to slam the comm. off, which took real talent, considering it was chin-activated.

We slumped down and settled in for the interminable haul. These sidetracks had become more frequent during the past few months in escalating hostility and fear. I once knew an alcoholic who said, "Everything escalates." He was talking about his girlfriend's capacity for using his cash and forgetting her own.

There are a million bogeys every day, I'm sure. Some of them are glitches. Some of them are stray cosmic rays hitting the machines funny. Some of them are almost certainly covert nuclear submersibles. So we took these little trips in stride. I disposed of the Coke bottle just in case it was an important call. If it was, we wouldn't be alone. If we had to fly in formation, I did not want that shit around. Then I closed my eyes, mostly unconcerned. I saw myself surveilling a school of whales or something for the rest of the night. I might have even been asleep.

I opened my eyes to the sound of McGinnis sliding one door back, then the other. Thin, cold air misted my cheeks. Blum was harassing the Skipster, "What do you mean, 'orders in a minute?' You little *prick*." He was sitting bolt upright: I'd never seen the little guy look so tall. I realized he wasn't razzing, he was scared.

My back locked up, ruler-straight in a spasm. 'Orders in a minute' really meant 'almost there, guys.' I noticed three things. First, we were alone, not a single airborne ally, which was odd even if it was just whales. Second, McGinnis's form, slender even with all of that gear, was almost hanging at the limit of his gunner's belt, scanning the air ahead. Third, there was no air ahead. We slammed nose-first into a wall of dense blue-black cloud. Our open chamber became a misty little cell.

Skippy shut off the running lights. For the first time ever, my eyes had to adjust to the dark. Until now, I had always been night-blind. Now everything was white and swimming. The ghost-lights played across my retinas, then coalesced with the mist. Together they formed a shifting snowscape of dancing grey and white, like an avalanche. In that instant I actually cried out.

McGinnis grabbed the sissy-bar overhead and hauled himself back onto the rear bench between Blum and I. "Anything yet? McDermott?"

Skippy scratched back at us, "I don-"The comm. crackled and his voice cut off. We waited in silence for nearly two minutes, rushing through grey emptiness and sweating. Then he was back.

"Okay, so this is what I've got. They don't know what it is. Anomaly two hundred miles from the coast-" Two *hundred*? Were we out that far? I could see everything clearly, everything within six feet, anyway. Either my night-blindness was going, or the dawn was beginning to permeate the cloud. "General says most of the screens ain't even picking it up, but they've got a satellite image of it moving through the air. Flitting around over the ocean. No clear pattern."

Blum pulled his lips back. Grinned massively, inhumanly. "If they've got a satellite image, then why do they need us to go investigate? If they've got it that close, they should know exactly what it--over the ocean, did you say?"

"I don't know, I don't know," Skippy ground the syllables up like glacier against hillside. "I figure it must be relatively slow, if they're sending us. I figure they don't know what it's capable of, 'cause they're sending just us. And--the General sounded scared." He grunted. "We're coming down on it just about... now."

We scrambled for the guns frantically. I jumped off the left seat, McGinnis and Blum leaping right. Hanging there. Two minutes. Three and four. Skippy barked out a choking laugh.

He said, "Now," and we broke down out of the clouds. Nothing on my side but budding daylight over endless blue, black, green. I felt a new shudder through my boots, thought the whole thing was going down, I spun on the sissy-bar. It was Blum, that self-proclaimed 'greatest pragmatist of our time.' He had fainted. He lay with his arm stretched out over the ocean a thousand feet below, as if still reaching for his lost rifle

Crackle. McGinnis hissed "Blatchley, get the fuck over here."

I leaned in and then let momentum carry me across as Skippy banked right to track it, slowing dramatically. My harness jerked me to a stop that I didn't feel, rifle aimed straight and down. I instinctively imitated the posture of my comrade as my gaze followed the barrel of the gun. There. Fifteen feet away, maybe twelve feet down, skimming through the lowest vestiges of now-purple cotton.

I don't understand how it could be so small. My mind didn't even attempt to identify it, I'd never seen an aircraft that small, like the size of a man. My eye or my brain skipped, froze for a few seconds, then resumed like something mechanical. Something grinding, rusted.

First I noticed a shoe, shoes. *Red shoes.* My eyes scanned aft to fore. I think I let my rifle sag toward the water. I might have fallen without that harness. It was a man, well, a boy. He let his feet, clad in bright red Keds or something, sneakers like my son wears, trail back behind him like he was a ballerina on point. He wore windblown khakis, grey, like the twilit patches of sky currently superseding the purple. Pink shirt, button down, short sleeve. *Totally inappropriate for this weather,* I thought. The air was cold up here. *Doesn't look like he's breathing too good either.*

His body was perfectly straight, like a level. I guess it would have to be at this speed. Over his limp shoulders hung a small backpack, blue, just like any kid might wear. His neck jutted forward, and I could even see the perfect triangle of a bobbing adam's apple. His posture was not unlike that of superman, except that his arms drooped back with the slipstream in a quavering, unsteady 'V' like exhaustion.

I don't know why he was up there. Maybe he was lost. Maybe he thought he could see land if he could just get higher. But he was soaked with mist, and his frame jittered with cold. He looked up at McGinnis and me with something like gratitude, probably relief. Sort of a half-smile. Sort of a grimace.

The General's voice in my ear. Crackle, "ire if it makes any sudden movements." At the same time, the Skipolator's voice rang out through the radio and over the horn. It echoed through empty morning air, and its first shock seemed to stun the boy with a hail of cold gravel. He faltered in the air.

"MAINTAIN PRESENT COURSE, ALTITUDE, AND SPEED. ANY DEVIATION WILL BE TAKEN AS A THREAT."

His flight smoothed out. His body remained straight, but it seemed to thrum with a new tension. Now he was bolt upright, just like McGinnis and I, only horizontal. The boy's fingers straightened behind his back, clenched, straightened. It was as though he wanted to tell us he was no threat. He turned his face away, Beatles-haircut whipped straight back, black strips pinned to his skull. Several seconds ticked by, and the beads of sweat trickled, in ones and twos, down my ribs.

His face still turned away, he lifted on arm haltingly toward us. He barely seemed to have strength to battle the wind, and his arm was shook. He extended his open palm, and then slowly glided left, approaching. McGinnis tightened his grip on the rifle. I shook, then lifted mine back into position as well.



hank roberts prize for art - 1st place

matthew thomas

-untitled (abstract)-



larissa hall

-party #2-



rebekah butler

-miss france-



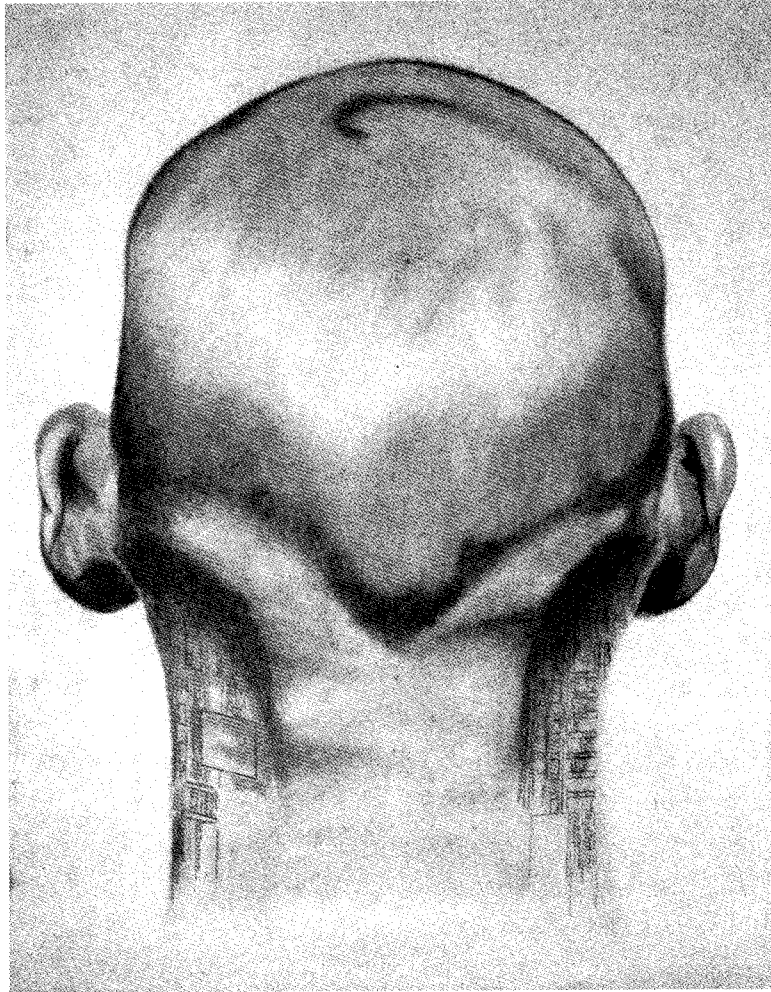
robert francis

-untitled-



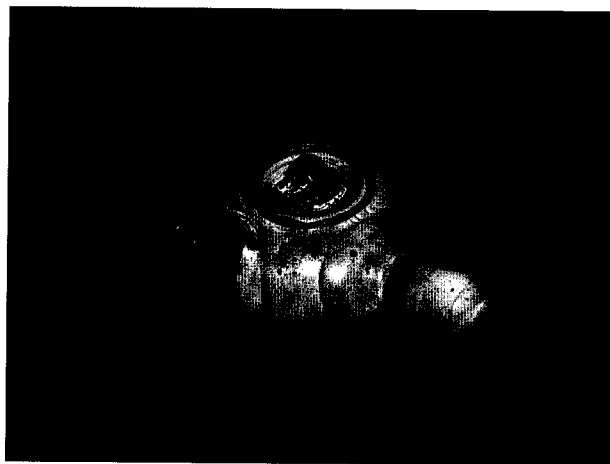
robert francis

-untitled-



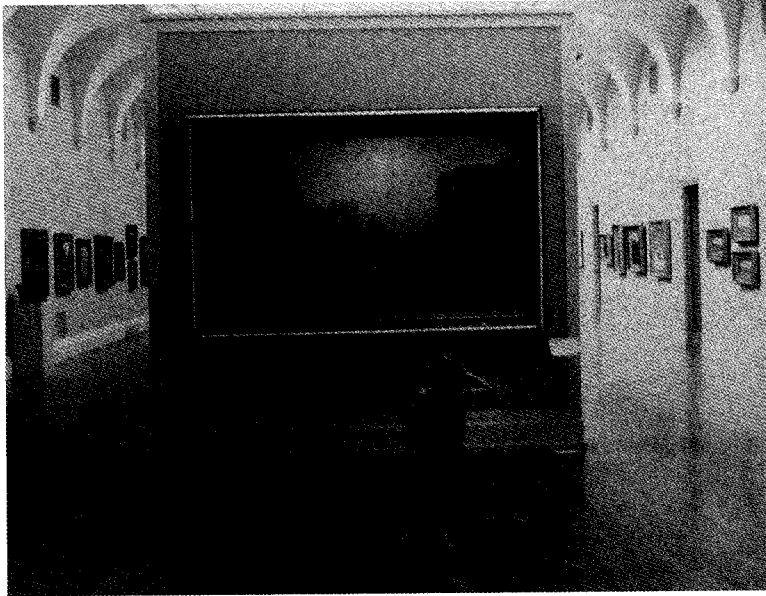
ben martin

-giant head-



jamie cuticello

-side-handled teapot-



hank roberts prize for art - 2nd place

chris sellas

-kuriosity-



chris sellas

-only in america-



noelle weimann

-the green ashtray-



ian keoppen

-untitled-



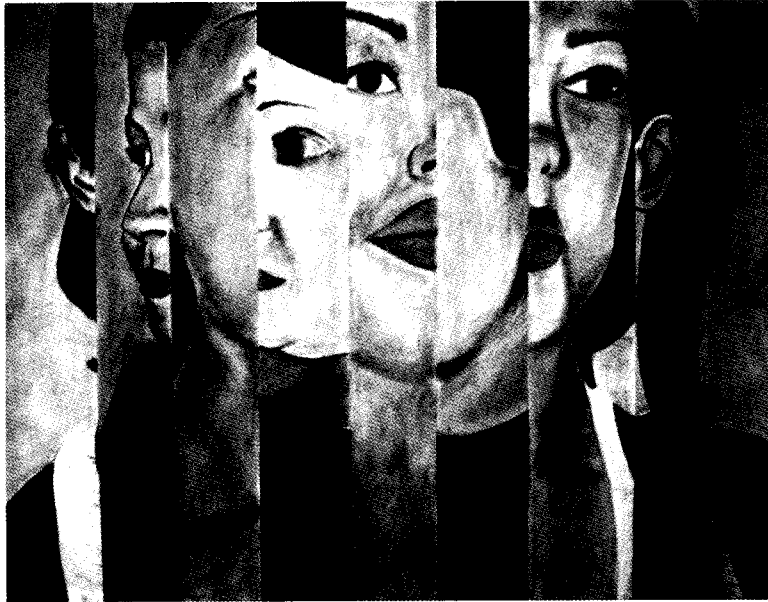
rebekah butler

-kali-



matthew thomas

-beauty and the priests-



aimee wallace

-face collage-



benjamin hecht

-center street-



hank roberts prize for art - 3rd place

michael donovan

-untitled (metal sculpture)-

michael d. rayzer

-linked-

I always wished I could be a Samurai. And not just for the cool sword. Well, okay mostly for the cool sword. But there always seemed to be something appealing about honor. About having a code and living my life by it. Even more, having something that was more important than myself. But yes, mostly for the sword. So why was I now playing a shooting game instead of the Samurai sword one? Well, because I got the shooting game on a continue for only two tokens, and the Samurai game is four. And a waste of money. I slid in the tokens and then I slid my headphones on. It doesn't help me play or anything, but it's loud in arcades. I picked up my gun and started firing. There's a pedal that you step on, and it makes your character come out of hiding, and during this time you can shoot and be shot. You're most dangerous when you're most vulnerable. Pretty much it's all about patience and how much you're willing to try and get away with. I'm not going to say I've got perfect aim, or that I've got the highest score, or that you even care, but I'm good. More from repetition than anything else. I already know where they're coming from. I started playing this game a few years ago. I was on a cruise with my mom and dad. I'm a loner, a real cool guy you know, so I never talked to the other kids. They didn't talk to me. They had this small arcade and the only thing that was worth playing in it, was this. I was half way through the second level now, and I hadn't even taken a hit. It was so grand it was pathetic. I didn't know the story line of the game. No one cared. You got to shoot people, and that put a smile on your face. I had just finished the second level, when something touched me. I jolted away, and brought my gun up, but the chain it was connected to jerked it from my hand. The girl I had nearly drawn on, was looking up at me with a frown on her face. She said something, and I'm sure I made a funny face. Because I couldn't hear her. Then she reached up and yanked my headphones down, and the arcade slowly filtered in.

Dings, bells, whistles, laughter, stupid little kids. Luckily I still couldn't make most of it out because my ears were ringing. My music was up that loud. She spoke again, and her words slowly drifted to me, and hit me one by one, muffled.

"Mind if I play?"

The game had a joint play option. You either got to be the guy with the blond hair, or the guy with the black hair. Or the blue gun or the pink gun. Don't ask me why the hell there was a pink gun, or why I was using it. I looked at her for a moment, eyes lingered too long on her breasts, but I hoped she didn't mind because they were definitely nice breasts. I mean, why wear a low-cut shirt like that if you didn't want anyone to look, I mean what was the point of it? It even had sparkles for God's sake.

"Hey!" She yelled at me, and I snapped out of my mental rant mid-sentence.

"Sorry, I got a headache," and before she could respond about how that had nothing to do with staring at her tits, "Sure you can play if you want." And I turned around and picked my gun up. She slid her four tokens into the slot and picked up her gun. I don't know why she was playing though. What did girls do at arcades anyway? None of the ones I knew even liked video games. I'm sure she had her whole cliqué somewhere, and she should just go off and chat with them and if anything, she'd only be slowing me down. And at the end of that round she had a higher score than me, without taking any hits, and I'd taken two. Well that just pissed me off. I snuck a glance at her, wondering why in the hell she was so good.

"Think you could aim a little better if you stopped looking down my shirt?" she asked, without taking her eyes off the screen.

My face lit up but I pretended like I couldn't hear her. But that would have worked better if I had kept my headphones on. I reached up and slid them back over my ears.

And as soon as it started, it was over. I had beaten the game on just one credit. My name should go down in history. And I guess it was a kind of history, second place all time in the game. But my partner would've taken first if it wasn't for me. They grouped your scores on link play. I don't think she minded though. You got to start the game over when you won, but that was beneath me. I slammed the gun back into its metal holster and began to walk away from the game. I started towards the restaurant, which was connected to the arcade. A little McDonalds, rip-off type joint. I pushed past the doors, and went up to the counter. I pulled a few quarters out of my pocket and slapped them on the counter. I never said anything to the worker, only pointed to the soda I wanted. I opened it and took a sip. And then something slammed into me, and my soda shot up from the bottle and onto my face. My headphones fell to the floor, and I could hear laugh-

ter from behind me. The girl from the game looked up at me, fighting to keep a straight face.

“You left before I could congratulate you on getting your ass kicked.” She said.

What the fuck. I screwed on the cap of my soda and grabbed my headphones from off of the floor.

“Oh my God! I’m just joking! Here, I was just going to ask you to come sit with me.” She handed me some napkins. I took them.

“No thanks.” I didn’t usually hang around with assholes, and I might as well not start now. And not just because the girl was really hot. I started towards the door, it was already dark, and the best I could hope for the rest of the night was not to get mugged.

“Hey, come on! I’m asking you to sit with me! You’re not even slightly interested? You’re going to just brush me off like that?” She must’ve thought it so amazing that I wanted nothing to do with her.

“Yeah, I guess.” I knew I’d be okay as long as I didn’t look at her.

“Oh come on! What, you don’t find me attractive?”

Please, like I was going to fall for that line. So I turned around to insult her, and she looked up at me. And I sighed.

“Fine, I guess but not for too long. I’ve gotta walk home tonight you know.”

I dropped down into a seat and she sat down across from me. I stared at the table top, but that was too close to her breasts, so I decided to look just over her head.

“You’re still scared of girls huh?” She asked.

“No.” Hell yes I was. I wasn’t sure if I had overcome my fear of guys either. I took a sip of my soda watching the top of her scalp.

“Why don’t you look into my eyes?” She leaned closer to me, her breasts sliding along the table. But I didn’t look or anything. What the hell did she want from me anyway? I clutched my bottle of soda tightly and fortified my eyes on hers, forcing them not to dip.

“I just don’t know what you want with me.” I said.

“Oh, well I could do a lot of things with you...” she giggled softly, and my heart thumped but I only glared. “Oh what?” she asked, “You don’t like girls?”

My cheeks flared and I gritted my teeth. “Yeah I like girls... but its just that I don’t even know your name and...” And the words became harder to come by.

-folio-

“You ever have a girlfriend before? And my name is Victoria, but you can call me Victory. Because I always get what I want.”

“Um, I’m Brian.” Watched a little too many soap operas have we? I fidgeted in my seat. I really should go, I thought. I mean I didn’t like her or anything, obviously she was a slut.

“Brian, you should really relax.” She smiled softly.

“Uh. Yeah, I guess.” Man all of this eye contact was freaking me out.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“No.”

“Well, do you want one?”

The question hung in the air for a long while, despite the fact that I knew the answer, was positive of the answer.

“I guess.” That was the wrong answer.

“You guess?”

“Yeah, I uh, I do. A lot.” Horrible answer. I didn’t need one.

“Well, I guess I can help you out there Brian...” Victory leaned back in her seat and smiled at me.

Oh God. Well, time to change the subject, maybe she’ll forget.

“So, uh, how did you get so good at...” I asked.

“Repetition. You can get good at a lot of things with a little practice.”

Oh my god, her foot just touched my leg! I jolted back, causing my soda to topple over, leaving a semi-circle pool of sugary liquid, which thank God, did not splash all over Victoria, but me instead. She had a pretty laugh.

“Ohhkay, we’re going to have to go slow with you huh?”

“Listen Victoria-”

“Victory.”

“Uh right, um I’ve got to get home. I gotta walk and the darker it is the more dangerous it is you know. So, I was wondering, um maybe I could give you my phone number or something, I don’t know how you want to do it...”

“Not like that.”

“Oh.” Shot down. God, it was so stupid of me to put myself out there.

“I’ve got a car, I’ll just drive you. We’ll take the long way...” She grinned and stood up. She put her hand around mine, and it was soft and made mine want to fall off. She looked at me for a second and grinned.

“Wow, you’re getting turned on from just holding hands? You’re in for a treat then.”

I didn’t say anything, my cheeks told the story. Again. She lead me to the door of the food court and then out.

This could not be happening. I mean, not to me. Anyone but me. But there I was walking with the hottest girl I have ever touched. I’d sheltered myself for so long, that I was sure something like this would never happen to me. And then I was hit hard on the back of the head. I fell to the ground and someone started to kick me and stomp on me. Someones. I didn’t make any sound, but I started to cry as I felt my CD player crushed. And then one of my ribs followed, and then my trigger finger was pulverized. Victory reached down and snaked my wallet out of my back pocket. Her hands were soft.

“Oh, you were right Keith. This guy is actually stupid enough to carry around twenties...five of them.” Victory laughed softly, stalking over to my head in order to peer down at me.

“Aren’t I always?” Some guy named Keith I guess. I could hear chuckling from some other guys standing around me.

“Yeah, too bad this asshole didn’t have any more on him.” Right after that someone kicked me, and I rolled painfully onto my back. I choked loudly, blood filling the insides of my cheeks.

“Why?” I asked.

Victory looked down at me and grinned. “We were bored, and we needed a little cash. I hope you didn’t think you were special or anything.” Hardly.

“Not that...” I pushed myself up to a half kneeling position, and then managed to stagger into a crouch. On the long journey that it took to stand, I found out some other things that were wrong with my body. I can’t say I was really mad. If I was them, I’d probably kick the shit out of someone like me too. Well, not exactly like me. There was the guy Keith that Victory had been talking to, and then this other guy I guess. I almost smiled because now I knew which one had the boots on.

“Oh what’re you doing now boy? Looking for some payback?” Keith crowed, or at least I think it was Keith. I couldn’t see very well. But whoever it was, I truly hoped he was happy. I reached into my jacket.

“Oh, what’re you doing now?” Keith asked, “Gonna get out your little pocket knife that you keep for protection? Well take a look at this bitch.” Keith pulled out a gun. I looked at it. And then I pulled out my own gun. His face melted like rubber, his cheeks dropped, his

-folio-

jaw slackened and his eyes bugged from his skull. My gun wasn't pink, it wasn't blue, but a shiny unforgiving black.

"Oh my god!" Victory squealed. I bet that wasn't even a real nick-name. I had to hold my gun in my left hand, because most of the fingers on my right were dislocated or broken. But that was okay, the pain hadn't set in yet. I really wasn't mad or anything.

"Hey, just put your gun down..." Keith spoke very slowly. He looked jumpy. That wouldn't do at all. "Why do you got one of those anyway, man?"

"Because it's not safe at night, man." I said. He narrowed his eyes and then I shot him right between them. The recoil of the gun was unreal, and it was almost impossible to hold it in one hand. I staggered back and slumped against the outer wall of the arcade. Keith's head jerked back, his legs coiled, tightened and then swung upward, offering themselves to the sky as what was left of his head slammed into the pavement. Headshot. That should be extra points. But, I wasn't disillusioned or anything. I knew this wasn't a game. Then the other guy took off, thinking he could get away. He should've stepped off of his pedal. I shot him in the back and he went down, sliding to a stop in a heap. He would probably live. I turned and looked at Victory, my gun did the same. She looked scared. She looked real cute. She kept saying omigod, omigod over and over again.

"I'm sorry for looking down your shirt. I'm just lonely." I said. The gun was still hot, and so was Keith's blood. "Was he your boyfriend?" I asked and she nodded.

"You know the Japanese in the old days, they didn't frown on suicide you know. They called it seppuku and it was alright there. It was an honor." I collapsed on to the ground "why aren't you running away?"

"I don't know." She said.

Victory bent down and pulled the gun from my hand. I put my headphones on and she shot me.

alexander d. zamachaj

-d-wing door-

A plain wooden door stands before me: lighter grain, lacquered to last, with a dull silver handle beckoning my exploration of the room that waits beyond. I presume that the door is locked, but I haven't yet tried the handle. I want to open the door, yet one feature gives me pause. The door does not open inward as the rest of the doors do in the English hallway at SCSU. Footsteps clap around me, but I can't turn away from that door. What is it in that room that requires a door to swing outwards instead of in?

It must be a cohort of disgruntled English Professors, appalled by students' apathy And lethargy. They must be ugly as well, Because no good-looking group of professors, Male or female, would sequester themselves to Discuss their satanic rituals performed last night on the New Haven green like these professors were. I heard that these "professors" are goblins and devilish fairies that dress as humans to corrupt the innocent minds. That could be why they claim to teach English but really teach French and Italian so that when we have a real professor, we fail miserably, and turn to binge drinking and drug addiction ... to alleviate the pain of walking these halls under the illusion that everything was going all right when, really, a bunch of goblins and devilish fairies prepare us not for careers, ... but for ultimate demise and the condemnation of living as hobos in the bowels of Grand Central Station

-folio-

because we have no means of making money...
or supporting ourselves until the police come
and admit us to an insane asylum where we
will most likely live the rest of our petty lives.

No light leaks from beneath the door.
No lights or windows adorn the room probably
due to the hellish nature of the creatures that
lurk within, who are severely allergic to light. Once
touched by light, I heard from my grandmother's
niece's daughter's friend's brother's roommate,
they disintegrate into a fine dust that is then used
as fertilizer. I don't try to handle out of the fear
that I might glimpse their true nature and be
paralyzed while they hypnotize me and turn me
into a walking carrot or cucumber. It is too horrible
to fathom, nightmares will surely ensue. My life
has taken a turn for the worse, and there is nothing,
nothing, NOTHING that I can do about it.

shawn taylor

-reliance-

Five miles from the road, under the shade of a tunnel of laurels, I leaned against a weathered sign. I loosened the straps of my pack, took a drink of warm water and popped a mint to dull the taste of iodine. Fourteen miles on the day and not yet noon. I hadn't seen a single person in two days, a first since I'd hit the trail in Georgia the month before. It was finally thinning out.

I was nearly a quarter of the way to Maine, a good ways into Virginia, and ahead of schedule; sixteen hundred miles to go. The mountains were getting flatter and I was getting faster. I could do seventeen miles a day comfortably. Eighteen or nineteen wasn't bad on the right terrain. Twenty was a push, it might take a day to recover. Once I did twenty-eight. I'll never do that again.

The trick to moving through the mountains, I found, is to travel light. So I sent the extras home, my playing cards, walkman, watch, camera, tent, water filter, stove, cook set, sleeping bag, heavy clothes, boots and my notebook. I went so far as to cut half the handle off my toothbrush to save an ounce. My pack was down to forty five pounds with six days of food and four liters of water. I'd started with sixty-five. But it wasn't all about weight.

I liked that I didn't have to cook, that my only dish was my spoon and the liter bottle in which I soaked my pastas and rice. I liked that my feet could breathe in sandals. I camped alone at night, under the open sky when I could. I had a thin wool blanket and a tarp for when it rained. I passed up shelters and busy camps for empty crags and beds of hemlock. I slept sounder to crawling creatures in the dark than to the snores of neighboring campers.

Every five or six days I'd hit town for supplies and laundry. It was always brief. I wasn't out there to hang in towns. I'd be twenty one in two months, I was full of fire, and determined to beat the bitter cold to Maine. All I had to do was follow the white blazes north.

I reholstered my bottle, tightened my belt, and smeared a handful of may-flies across my neck. The air cooled, a stiff breeze rising. It smelled like rain, but there was no need to rush. I could have my rain gear on in seconds. I could set camp almost as fast. I could find dry ground in an ocean. I trudged down the muddy trail, breaking cobwebs

with my walking stick held high before me. They lapped my face and clung to the hair on my arms. I must have been the first to break trail that day. And just then, just like that, whistling under the laurels my gut balled up in knots. I dropped to my knees, head spinning, and threw up in the dirt. It came out my nose and burned my eyes. I unbuckled the belt of my pack, but it didn't release the pressure. I was cold, shaking, in shock at the sudden turn, with a giant chunk lodged in my throat. I coughed and my bowels tensed. Clenching myself together I leaned my pack on a tree and made for the cover of an upturned cypress off the trail, unbuttoning as I went, hoping for the best. I hardly made it thirty feet. A stubby laurel was the best I could do. I dug a quick hole with my heel and squatted back on all four just in time, trembling without a free hand to swat the flies on my legs. Head pitched to the side, I puked on my hand, dripping from every pore. A stiff breeze rattled the woods, and then a rumble from the hills, then voices down the trail, and it occurred to me that the toilet paper was in my pack.

Shit! There wasn't a lot I could do. I couldn't hold it long enough to get back to my bag for the paper. I had to make for deeper cover. It's fortunate that laurels have such hardy leaves. I grabbed a branch and a couple of ferns, clenched myself together and went for it, ducking into the ditch of upturned roots, just in time to avoid disaster.

I could smell their cologne over my own barbaric stench. I could smell it over the blooming laurels and the skunk cabbage and the moldy leaves on the ground. I sneezed, but they didn't hear.

"That's odd," a deep voice said when he reached my unattended pack.

The other squeaky voice said, "Probably popping a squat."

"Never mind," said deep. "It's going to rain any minute."

"Shelter's close," said squeaky.

"After you," said deep.

And they were right. And there was nothing but low ground as far as I could see, no good for camping in the rain. I leaned my head back into the dirt of the upturned roots. The two hikers gabbed up the trail. Their cologne made me vomit.

Giardia, I figured, the water born menace. Maybe I didn't use enough iodine at my last fill. It was awfully murky. Who knows what stopped to drink, bathe, or otherwise? There are lots of carriers and not all of them practice proper sanitation. Not a pleasant thought. Or maybe it was toxic shock from all the beef jerky, it did kind of smell like it. Maybe just a bug, a simple passing virus.

The rain came on as quickly as my sickness. Heavy. I was soaked before I could get my shorts up and the ground was flooded before I reached my pack. I put on my poncho and shouldered my load, twice as heavy as before. I'd have to move to keep warm, but I didn't make it a hundred feet before stopping again. At least I remembered the toilet paper. I squatted over a puddle, shaking. I gathered myself together. I had to find dry ground. I stopped several more times, each time growing weaker, until I saw the dark opening of a log shelter. It was empty. I dove in.

The two hikers had been there, their cologne still lingered. But it was dry inside and the outhouse was close. I slid out of my pack and my wet clothes, but even in dry long johns, pants, and a sweater I shook, even after I pulled my wool cap over my ears and crawled under my blanket. I tried to be still, tried to stop my head from spinning, tried to keep my gut in check.

I thumbed through the shelter log as a distraction. It was full of 'sick' entries, mostly hikers blaming the little down home diner just a few miles back off the trail, 'Where you can get everything from grits to grinders, to sick as hell,' as one woman wrote. But I hadn't stopped there. It had to be the water, or something in the air. I ate the last of my French bread and took a reluctant drink. I was glad to taste the iodine and swashed it in my mouth to kill the germs.

It was still early. There was time to wait out the rain. My stomach would settle and I'd hitch into town, re-supply and be out and camped before dark. I lay back and focused on the drumming of rain on the tin roof, and the scratching of mice in the rafters. The gray world outside the shelter bowed to the storm. But I was dry. I fell asleep with my food bag at my side.

Normally I wake up to anything. I was the runt of three brothers, so I'm always prepared for attack. But I didn't hear anyone until I heard the hiss of a stove. I was in the fetal position with my face to the wall. It was dark. My head was spinning. I had the overpowering urge to vomit so I dove for the open and threw up in the mud with my head to the rain before I could even look to see who was there.

My shadow shimmered in the muck to the light of his lamp, white chunks dancing in the rain. His dinner began to boil. Smelled like garlic. He shined his light away. I wiped my mouth and ducked in out of the rain, holding a beam for support. His white beard glowed beneath the blinding star of his head lamp and the shimmer of his glasses. He was rail thin; his bright orange pack was twice as large as him. It hung on the wall.

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“You going to make it?” he asked, shining his light away from my eyes. I recognized the rasp in his voice immediately. “Miles, right?” he asked.

I nodded yes. I’d met Gus at Trey Mt. shelter in Georgia, in the rain my first week out. Twelve unfamiliar hikers in a cabin built for six. It was a long night. He loved to talk. He was sixty-three, a retired commercial pilot from upstate New Jersey. His wife had died three years prior. He retired that day. They had three kids who still lived nearby, and they sent him care packages on the trail. He was going to be a grandfather soon and he was out living his life the way his wife would have wanted. As I said, he loved to talk. I hadn’t seen him since. “It’s been a while,” he said extending a hand across the shelter, “I hope you’ve been better than you are now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

“Mighty fine.” His handshake was firm. “I haven’t seen your name in any of the logs,” he said, shutting off his stove.

“I haven’t been staying in shelters,” I told him, suddenly noticing my food bag hanging next to his under the overhang, just out of the rain.

“The mice were on your bag,” he told me. “Chewed ya’ a couple holes, don’t think they got much, though.”

“Thanks,” I said, realizing I’d forgotten to hang it.

“Tried eating?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I told him, my stomach turning, “didn’t work out too well.”

“Some potatoes might do you good,” he said, “garlic and herbs? You’ve got to eat something.”

“I’m good,” I told him. I saw double when I turned my head, like tracers from a bad trip. He had eight eyes. I felt like someone was draining a voodoo valve on my life. I couldn’t check the flow.

“Maybe in a little while,” he said.

“Maybe,” I said, and then, “excuse me,” as I ran for the outside.

When I got back there was a steaming heap of potatoes on a tin lid laid out for me. “I can’t eat that,” I told him and coughed up a straggler chunk that I spit to the rain.

I hung my poncho and got under my blanket.

“It’s there if you change your mind,” he said.

I remembered being twelve with the chicken pox, puking in bed, missing the bowl, room spinning, screaming while my mother force fed me. Eating was the only thing that would quiet her.

“Still carrying that little bear taco tent?” he asked me.

"No. I use a tarp now. It's lighter. Not so confining."

"That's it, a tarp?"

"Yup."

"And no shelters?"

"Not till today. Not since the Smokies."

"I'll take a dry little shack any day my friend," he cracked his back, ate a spoon full of potatoes, and sighed. "Why not?" he asked.

"They're too crowded."

"Not tonight."

"I guess not," I said.

"I'll take a shelter any night," he repeated.

I decided to force down a mouthful of potatoes to appease him. It helped kill the bile, but it tore at my stomach. "I can't eat any more," I told him, sliding the lid back across the floor. He tossed the potatoes to the rain without a word. I shut my eyes and watched my veins flash red. I didn't sleep long.

I woke to pitch black thunder, head pounding, eyes burning coals. A mouse scrambled by. My gut bubbled like shaken champagne. There wasn't time to put my shorts on. I hardly made it to the stoop before I lost the potatoes. Gus flipped on his lamp. "You're going to eat," he said as I ducked my head back in.

I shook my head 'no', trying to force a swallow as he got up and made for his food bag. He handed me a crunchy granola bar which I reluctantly ate. It didn't stay down.

"I ought to make you eat that again!" he said, half serious. "I didn't carry it up here for you to chuck in a puddle." He laughed awkwardly.

It hurt all over to laugh.

"Really though," he said, "you have to eat, you should see yourself."

"I'm fine."

"You need to eat."

I mumbled that I already did.

"You need to keep something down."

"I need to rest."

He shook his head and said no more, just fiddled with his beard. A heavy mist rolled into the shelter. I shut my eyes and drifted back to sleep with a chill.

I snapped to trembling, fetal on my side, arms crossed tight to my chest, shelter spinning, my head pulsing to the tin rain. I couldn't satisfy my lungs. I could hardly swallow. I heard his sleeping bag unzip and before I knew what was happening he was helping me into

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his heavy down bag. I felt like I was being dragged aboard a boat in a storm, and went along with the motions, outside myself, watching, powerless. He draped my blanket over the bag, sat on the edge of the stoop, and fired his stove. My stomach swelled. He filled bottles with hot water, wrapped them in socks and stuffed them into the bag with me. I held them to my chest. I could hear his stove, could hear the water boiling, my heart beating and my mother telling me to eat.

Then he propped me up against the wall and held a cup to my lips, hot unsweetened Kool-Aid. I drooled on my chin. He made me soup, though I told him I'd cook something for myself later. He wouldn't back off until I ate. I took one spoonful at a time, getting as much on the sleeping bag as I did in my mouth. "I hope this isn't contagious," he said, and when I didn't reply he said, "You should hike into town with me tomorrow. Some town is what you need."

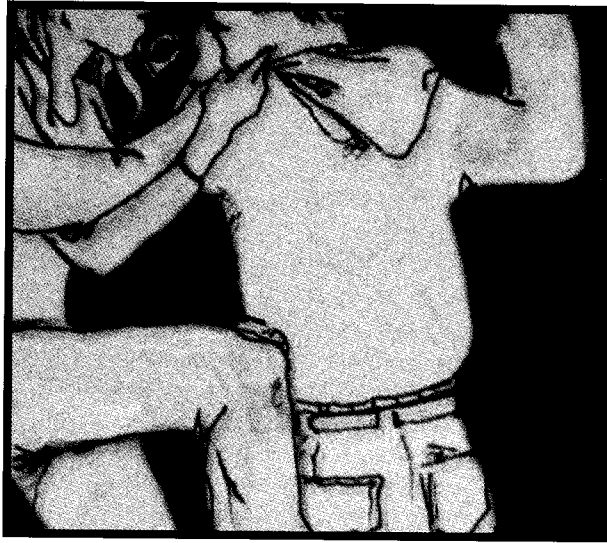
I didn't answer right away. I'd be better in the morning. I'd be strong enough to get myself into town. All I needed was some rest. "I'm obliged", I told him, "but I can take it from here." The shelter was still spinning.

He went to say something, then stopped to adjust his glasses and turned to sit on the stoop with his back against the wall. He turned off his lamp, pulled a pipe from his shirt pocket and stuffed it. It burned sweet, like cedar smoke, rising through the rafters with the mist. He sighed deeply and pulled a book from his giant pack.

I sat in the dark silence deep inside the bag, propped against the wall, the warm bottles cooling by degrees. The night hardened, whipping the open shelter. I couldn't sleep with the shakes. Gus smoked through the night without a word, a silhouette against the flashing storm outside. I never saw him open the book and he never turned on his light. But he didn't sleep. His stove hissed and more water boiled. His pipe glowed and frail smoke rings clung to the rafters as he filled the bottles again and stuffed them into the bag with me.

IV.

"i want to lie next to you
on all the dead lawns of my
neighborhood..."



alexander d. zamachaj

-penis haiku-

Unzipped and whipped
out, I concentrate deeply.
Lilacs happily drink.

michael r. hemenway

-the amazing box wine trick-

The box of wine on the counter beckoned me. Rebecca, with potholders, pulled a pizza from the college issued oven in her dorm's bathroom stall of a kitchen. Her ass bumped into mine as she set the pizza on top of the stove. I filled my glass almost full. The oven heated the entire apartment, a gas chamber of mozzarella. The wine box said, "Red Delicious."

"That thing smells awesome," Caitlyn, Rebecca's roommate, said with a smile. Her head peeked around a corner, her dark, curly hair pulled into a massive ponytail. She wore a T-shirt, and pants that looked like they were made of towels. They hid her feet as she bounced to the living room. I sipped from my glass while Caitlyn bounced to hers.

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

She smiled, "Vodka and cranberry juice."

"That's going to make you more energetic than ever." Caitlyn usually filled the room with energy and I could only see vodka adding more fuel. The aroma of fresh oven goodness suffocated the air. Her towel pants hung from her like some kind of ridiculous cloak. I could only imagine how comfortable she was in them.

"The pizza is secure," Rebecca announced to the both of us. Rebecca had a way with words that always captivated me. The first time we talked, she told me a story about how she always got hit on by professors; since then her words are always planted into my brain. Now, Rebecca is someone I call on a daily basis. She graced by me with a glass of box wine in her hand and led herself to a couch near the corner of the room. Her straight brown hair slowly swayed when she sat down. Her skin looked dark in the dim light. She wore a pair of dark, denim jeans and a red T-shirt that showed off the smooth skin of her arms. She situated herself in an upright fetal position. Something like that is easy for a small person.

"Thanks for the wine," I said to Rebecca.

"I bought it for everyone," she said. "Where is Anna tonight?"

I took another sip from my wine and swallowed. "I haven't talked to her in a few days. She ended up not being into that many cool things." I drank. "Things were pretty much just called off. I probably played a CD she hated."

"Sucks for her," Caitlyn chimed in, playfully blowing me a kiss. I smiled at her. She always paid me compliments and such. Her frame of mind overflowed with positive molecules no matter what. Rebecca nodded her head in agreement. Her smile was full of perfect white teeth.

The pizza gurgled on the stove. My wine was delicious. I felt comfortable being around Rebecca and Caitlyn. The only word I could think of was "warm." Usually, if I get fucked over by a girl I go into this fit of bitterness. Nothing ever seems to matter. I find myself taking sharper turns and blowing red lights. The world disappears.

However, with Anna, I was trying to move on without being solitary or wanting to kill the world. My chest had a hole in it though, and I tried to fill it with wine. I felt good where I was. It was time to stop ostracizing myself from my friends. Rebecca and Caitlyn's excellent company provided a positive environment.

"We should watch *Leprechaun*," I nominated from the apartment floor. "I'm in the mood for watching a midget kill bad actors."

Rebecca flashed a smile. "You love that movie."

"Hell yeah! Warwick Davis is an amazing actor."

"Who's Warwick Davis?" Caitlyn asked. She still stationed herself on the other side of the room, facing us.

I took more wine. "The leprechaun. Haven't you ever seen *Willow*?" I said with a playfully sarcastic tone. I smirked. "Anna never watched *Leprechaun*, or knew who Warwick Davis was."

"She was never full of interesting trivia," Rebecca said. Her brown eyes targeted me from behind her glass. There was a smile on her face.

"No, it wasn't that. She just didn't watch good movies." I stopped talking for a second and redirected my thought. "The guy who played Chubs in *TeenWolf* is in this too. As well as Jennifer Aniston, before she had her nose hacked."

Caitlyn moved over to a recliner against a wall near the kitchen. "How long were you together?"

"We weren't together. I never even kissed her."

Caitlyn frowned and shook her head. Rebecca did the same. I knew they weren't frowning at me, and if they were I would never be able to imagine why. Their faces looked genuinely sorry for me, like I was a bum on the street that wasn't faking it. Anna and I had spent a lot

of time together. I'm not sure exactly how long but she took up most of my semester. However, she made it abundantly clear throughout that time that we weren't together.

"I liked her," Caitlyn said. She tossed her hands up and smiled. "I like everybody."

"You're the friendliest," I said.

Rebecca stood up from the couch. I caught a small glimpse of the smooth skin of her stomach when she straightened herself. Her hair hung delicately over her face. She made her way through the maze of furniture in her apartment. Her ass reflected back to me in the sliding glass door. Rebecca had the most sensational ass. Her jeans were tight, but it didn't stick out too far, just enough to notice it. "There was something about her that just didn't seem right for you," she said as she took a pack of cigarettes from the half wall separating the kitchen from the living room. She opened the pack and pulled one out.

"You never know something isn't right until it goes wrong," I said.

She laughed and opened the sliding door, the cigarette in between her fingers.

"Nice ass," Caitlyn said. Rebecca responded by softly swiveling her hips as she made way for the life size sliding pane of glass.

"I'll be right back," she said. She disappeared into the black night outside.

Caitlyn took my copy of *Leprechaun* off of the coffee table in front of the couch. "Everyone thinks she has a hot ass."

"I was just thinking about that," I said.

Caitlyn stuck the videotape into the VCR. The VidMark logo came up onto the television. I needed more wine in my glass. "Why didn't you ever kiss her?" Caitlyn asked.

I shook my head. Looking back, I probably should've tried to kiss Anna, but I never did. I would've ended up feeling hideously foolish, and afterwards I knew things would never be the same. "She told me that she couldn't bring herself to ever kiss me back, whatever that means."

Caitlyn's face scrunched. I shrugged my shoulders. Warwick Davis, masked in darkness, began walking down a pile of stone stairs, reciting a horrific limerick about stealing his gold and not living through the night. I stood up and went for more wine. "I guess it's better this way," I said. "She saw that she wasn't the one for me. I'm bitter about the way she hurt me though. Some of the things that came out of her mouth drove me crazy. But don't get me wrong, we had fun together."

The wine bladder in the box was almost empty. Caitlyn came towards me, stopping in front of the pizza, which was still steaming on the stove. She looked at me with her large green eyes. I think she saw me hurting.

“I can’t wait,” she said. “I love homemade pizza.”

“I used to make it with my mother all the time.”

“What kinds of things would she say?”

“My mother?”

“No, Anna.”

I smelled the pizza. The garlic did little to clear my head. “I’m buzzed so I can’t think of anything right now, but most of it was stuff that just never seemed to make sense to me.”

The sliding door rolled along its track and Rebecca appeared back in the apartment, like she emerged from some crazy outdoor universe. She smiled when she saw an old man being terrorized by a midget in a creepy Leprechaun suit. Her body looked amazing in the dim lighting, curvy, smooth, everything in the right place. As she came back inside, she kicked off her shoes and headed for the kitchen, her empty wine glass in her hand. Her chest heaved after being inundated with smoke and tar. I could hear her breathing.

“How was your cigarette?” Caitlyn said, leaning on the kitchen counter, her chin resting in the small palm of her hand. Her nails were unpainted. “I’m glad you aren’t letting it take you over. You liked her a lot.”

“She made me feel downright idiotic. Whenever we talked about the nature of our relationship I was always left with a million questions to ask.”

“Are we still talking about Anna?” Rebecca asked. She put her glass underneath the nozzle of the wine box.

“Yeah, about how she couldn’t ever kiss me or anything.” I forced out a laugh, hoping the two of them wouldn’t be able to see the abdominal pressure behind my exhalation of carbon dioxide.

“Is this thing almost empty?” She looked at me and gently shook the wine box. Her eyes were huge. Wine dripped sadly from the box. “I just bought it two days ago.”

“It goes fast,” I said.

“You should have just kissed her,” Caitlyn said.

“You’re right, I’d feel stupid anyway. It’s never going to happen now.”

Chubs was about to get buckled in the face by the leprechaun. “Beck, where is your pizza cutter?” I said, switching the subject. I smelled my wine breath as I slipped open kitchen drawers, and then

slid them shut. My attempts were thwarted. "We need to get this thing started."

"It's on the spice rack, on top of the refrigerator."

"We are on our way to getting bloody," I said.

Rebecca was standing next to Caitlyn at the counter, their faces close together. I couldn't tell if they were talking or not. I was drunk and starving. Caitlyn giggled at whatever Rebecca told her. Girls can be so secretive. I reached for the pizza cutter; its curved handle was made out of black plastic. The blade showed me a squiggled reflection of myself. I rolled the cutter around in my hand, ready to massacre the pizza. A hand smoothly ran across my shoulder blade.

"Could you help me get more wine?" Rebecca asked.

I thought to myself, what kind of question is that to ask anyone? "Sure," I said. I put the pizza cutter down and reached for the cardboard handle of the wine box. "I'll even show you the most amazing box wine trick you've ever seen." I leaned into her with a big smile. "It's great."

"How great is it?" Caitlyn asked. Her green eyes looked right into me. She winked.

"Fucking sweet. And you can't argue with anything that's fucking sweet. You'll never get over this. Watch." I tore open the cardboard and pulled out the clear plastic bag and nozzle. The blood red liquid collected in a puddle in a corner of the plastic. "See, there is still a glassful in here." With the nozzle, the bag looked like some kind of medical device. I squeezed it, putting pressure behind the wine. "Beck, hold your glass underneath the nozzle. This is a two person operation." I could smell her as she came closer with her glass. I remembered the hand soap in her bathroom called Vanilla Lavender. Our shoulders touched as I poured the wine. Rebecca was smiling. "I was right wasn't I?"

"You are always right. Your trick is making me hot, actually," she said. I smiled.

"I've learned some things." Caitlyn stood behind me as I fashioned Rebecca's drink.

"A stunt like that would make any girl go into an absolute frenzy," she said. I felt her hand slowly come around my side, caressing my stomach. It moved in a downward direction. I squeezed the bag a little too tightly, and red wine swelled from the nozzle, squirting Rebecca. She jumped back, her glass luckily landing on the counter without spilling. Caitlyn's hand never went away.

"I'm sorry," I said. I tossed the bladder bag into the sink and pulled a towel from the handle of the oven and handed it to her.

"It's ok. I love being wet with wine." I could hear the stabbing sarcasm in Rebecca's voice.

"I think the bag is empty now," I said. It murmured in the metal kitchen sink, devoid of anything red or delicious.

"Hold on." Caitlyn moved me out of the way. She took the towel from Rebecca's hand and discarded it on the floor. It soaked up the small droplets that had missed Rebecca. She began to lick the wine off of Rebecca's neck. Rebecca's eyes shot up at me. She blew me a kiss and I felt a wave of something come over me. I suddenly felt the wine traveling through my brain. Rebecca had four beautiful eyes. She ran her fingers through Caitlyn's hair as Caitlyn's lips moved across her neck, sucking and licking off the wine. She began to move down to Rebecca's vinous cleavage. I stuttered incoherently.

Caitlyn glanced at me, and then turned back to Rebecca. One of her hands moved all over Rebecca's sopping top. The other reached out for me. I hesitated for a second, wondering if I was too drunk and making this all up inside my head. I pinched myself. Rebecca grabbed my shirt collar and pulled me towards the both of them. She pressed me against her. I breathed deep. The wine scent radiating off of Rebecca filled my nostrils. Caitlyn locked her arm around my neck. I pressed my face into theirs, their cheeks were soft. My hand guided itself onto Rebecca's hip and I curled my finger around the belt loop of her jeans. We became a clothed mass of flesh in the middle of the kitchen.

"What's happening?" I managed to mumble into Caitlyn's cheek. Loose strands of her wavy hair tickled my neck. I moved my hand down her back and over her ass. I squeezed. My tongue moved across her cheek to her mouth. Our lips became sandwiched together. She tasted like cranberry juice.

I made out Rebecca's brown eyes in my peripheral vision. I was still connected to Caitlyn. I brought my hand up to Rebecca's cheek. She kissed the ball of my thumb.

"I didn't know we were close enough for this." I moved my lips to Rebecca's. Her tongue slithered in between my teeth and licked the roof of my mouth. The stale aftermath of a Newport blanketed my lips. "How far is this going to go?" I muffled through my lips, mashed into Rebecca's. Her tongue didn't make any of my words clearer. She responded with a moan from her chest.

"If you want to stop, you still can," Caitlyn told me before she kissed my cheek. She kept smiling. I pulled off her top. Her tits were round and fairly large, situated in a green padded bra that shimmered.

I leaned my head back. It bumped into the kitchen cabinet. "This is the first time anything like this has ever happened," I said.

Making out, or whatever, with two friends at the same time isn't necessarily at the top of my "To Do in Life" list. Although, being emotionally threshed by Anna made me think about how being stuck in a corner between Caitlyn and Rebecca wasn't the worst place to be. I remembered all the times I wanted to kiss her. She never thought about me as a person to be in a relationship with at all. Too many nights were spent pondering exactly what went wrong after she had left my house. Since we stopped talking I'd been in the same spot, not going anywhere. Finding myself in the dorm kitchen with Rebecca and Caitlyn made me want to move. I felt charged.

I clasped Rebecca's wrist and began to lick off the dried drops of wine. I moved my mouth up and down her arm, occasionally gently biting the silky skin. Every time I moved up her arm I saw the movie. It was the scene where the Leprechaun first comes crashing out of the wooden crate in the basement of the O'Grady house. He was polishing Chubs' sneakers. I thought, Red Delicious.

Caitlyn's hands appeared from around Rebecca's hips and moved upward, pulling her damp T-shirt off. Rebecca had on a black bra. I unbuttoned my own shirt and tossed it onto the kitchen floor. Anna never saw me without a shirt on. The two of them started to kiss each other. Their fingers gently raked through each other's hair. My pants tightened. The spilled wine made my sneakers stick to the semi-dingy floor. I moved my mouth down in between the cleavage of Rebecca's breasts, gently sucking on the soft flesh. I felt her heart beating through her ribcage. Her skin didn't taste like nicotine.

The three of us stood entangled together, half naked. Caitlyn's hand slid down my stomach to my groin, she squeezed slightly. Rebecca ground herself up against my leg. She removed her bra and breathed, "This is crazy." I nodded as I kept my mouth to her chest, my teeth gently scraping against her.

"You're both beautiful," I mumbled. Caitlyn looked at me, her smile turned into something devilish. She kneeled down and I felt my belt buckle being unfastened. I broke away from Rebecca. "Are you sure you want to go there? I mean, you have to make a conscious effort to be careful about these sorts of things."

Rebecca put her hand to my cheek, moving her thumb through one of my sideburns. "Nothing will change after this," she said. I didn't necessarily know if her statement was true. The deep and steady stare from her eyes almost had me convinced. The wine definitely had a hold on my brain, which took care of any other convincing

I needed. I thought about how Anna would touch my cheek and that was as far as it would go, without a kiss, or even a look to let me know that she had any desirable feelings for me. The same charge as before shocked me

I moved my mouth to Rebecca's neck, nearly ravaging it. She tilted her head back and moaned. I nipped at the spot behind her ear. Her thin fingers moved through my hair. Caitlyn's hand moved into my jeans. I squirmed, letting them fall to the floor. Her hand touched me and moved slowly up and down. I was thankful the oven still heated the kitchen.

Caitlyn's tongue traced me. Her curly hair tickled the inside of my thigh. I put a hand on the top of her head. Her hair felt soft, like a cat's. She put me into her mouth and my lower torso tensed.

"We should be videotaping this," Rebecca said.

I laughed out loud. "We can send it to Anna."

"That's not the way to solve any problems," Rebecca said.

"I suppose I agree with you." She wrapped her arms around me, and I pulled her close, trying not to knock over Caitlyn. She made a small gagging sound and her teeth slightly bit down. I breathed heavy. Even if I did mail a videotape to Anna, I doubt she would open the envelope, unless the label said something about me being slapped in the face with a shovel. Knowing my foolishness, I'd forget to not put a return address.

I unbuttoned Rebecca's jeans. Her black panties peeked out from behind the dark denim. I pushed them down over her ass. She wiggled and they fell. "I want to go down on you," I said. She smiled. Caitlyn kept moving her mouth over me. "Cait, we have to move."

Caitlyn looked up. Her stare burned itself into me and she let go. "I'd like to see you try," she said. The shiny material of her bra reflected in the buzzing light. I looked at Rebecca and she laughed. Her skin drifted against mine. Caitlyn's mouth made my thighs loosen. Everything was silent except for muffled groans and Warwick Davis.

I attacked Rebecca's chest. She jumped when I pressed her up against the hot stove and sucked air in through her teeth. Caitlyn stayed latched to my crotch. She situated herself in between my legs, her back against the rickety oven. "Careful, we were cooking at 450°," I said. She quickened her pace and slid me into her throat.

"I'll be OK. The heat feels nice."

"Hold on," I told Rebecca and put my hands underneath her arms. I lifted her up, trying to find the best spot for her. She squirmed when my fingertips touched her underarms, causing me to almost lose my balance and almost drop her. I heard her land softly on top of

-folio-

the stove. She ground her teeth together and her facial expression turned red and mutated from extreme lust to utmost repulsion. My eyes moved in between her legs. "I'm so fucking sorry, I forgot it was there." I sat Rebecca down right in the middle of our pizza.

She winced as her thighs settled in the congealed cheese, only to suddenly tense up when too much of her touched the stove. Caitlyn took me out of her mouth, "What's going on?"

"I just put Rebecca into the pizza," I said, flexing my jaw so my bottom teeth stuck out.

Caitlyn laughed almost hysterically. Her voice echoed through the apartment. "That's OK. She likes it that way."

"Should we stop?" I asked. Inside my head I heard a faint sizzling.

"I'm definitely not stopping," Caitlyn said and resumed every wonderful thing she had been doing.

"Don't stop," Rebecca told me.

"I don't want you to get any scars because of me."

"I'm fine for now, the stove isn't that bad," she laughed. I didn't completely believe her. I inspected the pizza underneath her. Her ass was stained with red sauce, the extra mozzarella completely ruined. She was really making no attempt to relieve herself from it or the clackity dorm stove. The pie remained circular.

"If it makes you feel any better, I once told Anna that one of my fantasies was to have sex on a kitchen table covered with pumpkin seeds."

Caitlyn moaned. I felt a tingling vibration from below the belt.

"Fresh or dried?" Rebecca asked.

"Right out of the gourd," I said with a smile. "Maybe we can try it next time." I started to gently kiss her neck and chest. Her fingers traced my ears, stopping at the pressure point right behind my earlobe. I moved downward, smelling her; wine and Herbal Essences mixed with pizza grease. It reminded me of Anna. I don't know why, she just entered my mind. She always smelled like she had just gotten out of the shower, and I was addicted to it. My mouth reached Rebecca's thighs and I tickled them with the tip of my tongue. I looked up at her. She crinkled her forehead and ran her hands through my hair.

Anna was something that had kept me down. She made my intestines twist. I moved my face in between Rebecca's legs. I licked and kissed her all over, getting back gratified moans. I heard the pizza moving underneath her, the cheese from one side mixing with the

other. I tasted the sauce. She tipped herself towards me and pulled my face closer into her, pushing my nose against her pubic bone.

Caitlyn started moving quicker, vibrating myself inside of her mouth. I twisted my index finger around my middle finger. I spread Rebecca with one hand and stuck my fingers inside of her. Her nails dug into my head as I began to move my fingers. Caitlyn kept her pace underneath me. I fluttered my tongue across Rebecca. She let go of my head and braced herself on the stove. I wasn't sure if she grabbed the pizza crust when she gasped.

kimberly a. goodman

**-why the penis is such a
wonderful thing-**

I never get bored of the sight
of a naked man.
Often, I close my eyes to imagine
what it'd feel like to have the weight
between my own two legs,
knowing if I did have one
I'd spin around,
stop suddenly so it would slap
my thigh
with a satisfying smack.
Of course I'd write my name
in the snow,
marvel at the steam rising
from my signature.
I always wondered why
boys in school
would hide an erection
with a notebook,
covering such a glorious sight
from the awe it deserves.
I smile at merely the thought
of an erection
in front of me,
a warm, suddenly hard staff
saluting my efforts,
encouraging me to keep playing,
until it politely squirts out
its gratitude to my undivided attention.
I once had a boyfriend
that when his penis
was worn out,
sprawling across his lower stomach,
I would climb on top of him
and position myself

so that it
looked connected to me.
I grinned and asked him what he thought.
He looked half amused,
half afraid,
would sit up and kiss me
reminding me it was his,
not mine,
although it did enjoy vacationing
inside of me often.
I met my first uncircumcised penis in London.
I giggled at the sight of the skin
flopping over the head
like a winter coat with a warm hood,
the head popping out rhythmically
as my hand pumped up and down
in a game of adult peek-a-boo.
The man smiled,
having never encountered a girl
so thrilled by this,
surely American women
were the clear choice.
I can't help but wonder
if he was right
and perhaps I'm
one of millions of citizens
that are female
and worship
the engorged god,
but then again,
maybe,
it is just me.

katie p. lynch

-period-

Blood and tissue make their way to tampon town.

Ripping tissue, tearing itself,

From the inner lining of the uterus

Ripping,

Tearing.

Psychotic episodes of changing emotions,

Coincide with crying spells over ridiculous Kodak film commercials,

And getting annoyed with the way your roommate laughs on the
phone.

Ripping,

Tearing.

Sweat mixes with tears. The fluid flow,

Every second, an eternity,

The nagging torment of the monthly visit,

Makes menopause seem promising.

You are waiting for the Midol to kick in.

But your insides continue to taunt you relentlessly.

Ripping,

Tearing.

This absence of procreation is painful,

Period.

danielle n. stone

-our wild ride-

The time we fucked at the Firemen's Carnival
in the blue Porta-Potty at the edge of the grounds
was, by far, my favorite memory
of the summer I shared with you.
We planned our big night for weeks
before the carnival came to town,
but it wasn't until I was standing on tip-toe,
my denim mini-skirt hiked up around my waist,
with you inside me, that I realized
we were actually doing it.

The sweet smells of summer, cigarettes, and sex
mingled in the air with the odor of excrement.
I watched your forehead glisten with adolescent sweat,
licking my lips after every candy apple kiss.
The distant screams of kids on rides
were replaced by our heavy breathing
and small sighs of ecstasy.
We banged around the small stall
trying every conceivable position.
Once we settled for girl-on-top
I controlled the speed.
I rode you faster and faster, my head spinning.
The toilet paper dispenser vibrated
against the wall, my grip tightened
on the cross-hatched handicap railing,
leaving imprints on my palms.

When you finished, my face ached from smiling.
I pulled my skirt back down.
You whistled a tune, pulling your strawberry boxers
and orange shorts back up.
We opened the plastic door of our private ride
and set off, holding hands, toward the Ferris Wheel.

michael r. hemenway

-stroke your appetites-

We lie on the bed naked
and run our hands ly-ly-lightly
over each others bodies.
We go to dark
bars with dark booths
and dark be-beer
and grope each other
until we're so obscene
we have to leave.
Sometimes, she
will wa-wa-wa-walk up to me, unbutton my
jeans and go down on me
without wa-warning.
It's fun to get dirty when
we are both so-so-so clean.
We ambush each
other in the shower.
I feel da-da-da-dominated,
and she thrills at total control.
We bring props into the
equation. We give each other
the bull's eye treatment. Goose bumps make us p-p-p-press
into each other tighter.
Our backyard
is private enough.
The back and forth
is unbe-be-believable.
She ends up on her side,
giving me a great view of
her breasts and ass
at the same time.
She may pass out from
pleasure and need
ma-ma-ma-mouth to mouth.

alexander d. zamachaj

-my typical love poem-

To all the sappy make-up, break-up made-love poets.

It's four o'clock in the morning and she is still lying next to me. I sit up in my bed, my dark room enshrouding me like a hand-woven quilt. I can't get Shanquantahana Zulu Mekeepie off my mind since I killed her this morning over a stale cup of too-weak coffee. That Indian beauty, who fought with me all the time and brought out the best of my blood-curdling rage, is gone. I shot her with a .38 special between the eyes. God, I miss smelling her hair, filled with lice and dandruff. Oh, I will miss her nose, thin and pointed, that used to dribble snot and blood onto my parched tongue and warm my empty stomach. Her hands, bony and wrinkled, with yellow nails cracked and disturbed, will not caress my aching back any more. My eyes will not be privy ... to the glorious sight of her abdominal rolls cascading like Niagara Falls over her skin-tight black spandex exposing every divot and lump of her cottage-cheese thighs.

My memories will have to suffice at this point. Shan will no longer launch me onto our bed and jump on top, crushing my bony frame into the mattress. We will no longer fight about the most banal things and enjoy rage spouting like fire from the other's mouth. No more insects will crawl from her clothes to tickle my body and make me squeal in laughter. Oh, oh, oh, why did I have to buy that gun at her behest, knowing that I would eventually shoot her with it? But I enjoyed that as well, until I realized that she would not be there for me to love any more. But I write this in memory of her, Shanquantahana Zulu Mekeepie, and of the loving days and nights we spent together.

gregory a. antonini

**-your habit of holding my right hand
to your mouth at the movies-**

You kept my fingers to your mouth
during comedies, your teeth gently teasing
my nails while we laughed, shot each other
knowing glances, both of us logging this film
as “ours” now, unequivocally, always,
scripted jokes to use in our secret language.

During romances, you pressed my fingers
against tight lips and wept until I turned to you,
raised my hand to your eyes, wiped your tears.
I always wondered if you could taste
the salt of your tears on my fingers.

And in dramas, you kept your lips closed
around the tips, sucked on them until the tension
went by, until they were wrinkled as if I had been bathing
too long. You never took them away until the credits,
the embrace at the end where everything turned out all right.

And you never bit them, never drew blood or broke the nail.

michael r. hemenway

-all the dead lawns-

On the drive to school today,
I thought of a great line for a poem
about how the grass in all the lawns around
was completely dead. It went something like:
I want to lie next to you
on all the dead lawns of my neighborhood.
I made sure I remembered the line,
and I noticed what I was doing
when I thought the line up: driving
fast on Pulaski Highway.
Worrying that I would forget the line,
I repeated it, lying next to you
on all the dead lawns in my neighborhood,
along with the line about what I was doing
when the line about the lawns came to me.
I started a poem in my head about lying on lawns,
while driving fast and double checking the lawns,
I added lines about adding lines as I drove
and tried to memorize them.
I wondered whether or not the poem could become
funny by doing something, repeating it, then repeating
it again by telling someone reading the poem the exact
same thing thrice about driving
and laying down on a dead lawn.
I came to a stop sign.
I said the poem to myself one more time. I had
about twelve lines that all had the same words in them:
Lying on all the dead lawns with you,
driving on Pulaski Highway, adding lines
about lawns and driving.
There was a cop, with quickly flashing
red and blue lights, pulling over a bearded man in a silver car.
When I sped past, my tires kicking up dried leaves,
the cop looked at me and waved me on. I tried to not look back.

-folio-

I held my leather steering wheel and checked to see
if anyone was behind me. No.
Everyone was in front of me.

gregory a. antonini

-she delights in apples-

You do not need to pull
branches to you. Shrunken by rain,
they lower, bow for judgment.

The award for a twist and a pull
is the fate of baskets:
one for sauce, one for pie.

Your palm weighs, your fingers
pulse the fruit. You breathe
on each skin before picking.

With heavy baskets, you follow
the rain, the meat of apples
squishing up through your toes.

brian c. rowe

-exiting-

I was going to make a big political statement. My first sentence "They were huddled together, one was a campaign advisor, one was really a child murderer posed as an antiques dealer, one was a housewife, one was a lion handler at the zoo." It was going to be about how the president was crazy and these people need to escape from the white house but I didn't write it. No, I left it to go talk to a girl where we would 'umm' every other word and I could only think about completing the story while we talked. Like she could be talking about her father beating her with a muffler and I would be wondering how I could work it in and then decide it would be too weird to do so and then think about other things, like how good our sex would be. I would imagine it would be decent, I am not sure. She might be weirded out by the lack of a real relationship, so that means we would have to wait three months, and I can't wait three months, she is bound to find someone in that time who is better looking. How dare she? I make good company. I can definitely tell her which albums to buy if she needed help with that.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked as if sensing that I was not paying attention to the conversation.

I know for a fact that her last sentence was talking about how she didn't like some movie with Jennifer Lopez or maybe Jennifer Jason Leigh. I know it involved a Jennifer. Her question is open ended, maybe I am to respond to said Jennifer comment, maybe not. If I answer I need to stray from the current topic.

"Things."

Oh good one asshole, must follow up immediately. Her eyebrow is narrowing. She is catching on.

"You know, like how crazy this whole college thing is"

Too general.

"Want to go for a walk?"

We're going for a walk. It's thirty degrees out. It would be better if the leaves were falling, like how you drew them in first grade. They were always red, yellow, and orange and you worked so hard during art time to match those exact colors with the 64 colors found in your crayola box. Those are the colors I want. They are slowly turning red, orange, and yellow, not fast enough to make this a romantic

ment, not that it should be, but let's face it, this is where fantasy lives, or where my pathetic one lives. In my head, under my fading baseball cap that has no logo. With my hair strategically combed, hiding my eyes so I look more introspective. And I am half shaven, with black stubble barely poking out of my neck because I was too tired to stand in front of the mirror to see my naked self shaving after rinsing off in the shower. I should hold her hand but I will come off desperate. I know I should but I probably give the wrong vibe. It will slowly enter her hand, the lines on my palm rubbing against hers but it is cold, her hands are probably chapped and I will cut it open and of course the wound won't heal so she will pass out on this sidewalk, with blood slowly working in the fabrics of her jeans, and I will be panicking and in the midst of me jumping up and down like the windup monkey playing the cymbals shrieking, someone will mug me. I knew we should have stuck somewhere closer by campus. Her sweater is cute, hiding her perfect form which she showed off when it was still ninety degrees out. I really wanted to sleep with her, but not in a sexual way. I really just wanted to be with her for a night and learn her quirks and talk about movies over ice cream, with our spoons scraping the bowl's bottom of a quarter after two giggling over how lame Kevin Bacon is in *Footloose* while sitting by her kitchen table with a single light above us.

"What was Kevin Bacon thinking? I mean, c'mon, here is this guy who thought that *Hollow Man* would be something good to be in," she would say, snickering, pulling her gray sweatshirt over her hands, hiding the fact she painted her nails pink and did it very carefully in order to impress me.

"He needed money to help front the studio time," I would reply dryly, making her laugh, flipping her blonde hair back over her head. She would gasp out "Oh my god" and it would be perfectly spaced out from each other.

"There you go again" she says, her mouth spewing out smoke

"There I go what?" I say with a smile, half spread across my face, my lower jaw rattling.

"You're thinking about something. I don't know what. You don't say much Paul. I've been trying to figure you out but you give me nothing to work with."

"I'm sorry. I am a man of mystery."

"Hardly" she says, her tongue lingering on the "ly."

"How are you dealing with the cold?" I say, visibly shaking, wrapping my arms around my chest, one over the other. Maybe she

finds this self-hug charming, like I am a Hugh Grant trapped in this small frame.

She only looks over to me, her eye shadow is shown briefly before her eyes open wider and she just shrugs her shoulders. I am sure that I am losing the future my mind has been promising.

“You’re a cool person, Jen.” That’s right I called her cool, not pretty, nothing that would reveal what I really think, just some schmuck phrase, like I am the class dork and that is what squeaked out of my throat, that great piece of poetry.

We’re right outside a pizza place now. The window is fogged by the wooden frame, the patrons are all busy having good conversation and warm pizza. And we two shivering travelers in the city are staring at our sneakers, her searching through her purse for something. It’s probably a gun. She will aim it at me. It will be a head shot. I will fly against the window and slowly slide down like a useless marionette while she wipes the fingerprints off the weapon. She will pivot and run in the opposite direction to a waiting car and that will be it.

“So are you going to offer to buy me pizza or am I going to have to do things by myself?”

“I didn’t know you wanted pizza.”

“If you don’t know something you fucking ask. You open your mouth and ask.”

My silence is the same silence as before. I don’t know what to say. I should take it jokingly but I know she isn’t joking, I know I am a fuck up date and she knows it too. I could play it off as cool, I know I can. I can think of something witty. That will bring her over and realize I am not that bad. Unless I can’t think of anything, that means I probably am that bad, that I do deserve to be told what to do just to please her for the rest of the night. I should just run away like a complete failure to my car and just drive across borders to get somewhere, knowing that even though things are being said about me I don’t have to hear them.

I weakly open the door.

“So what kind do you want?”

“You’ve made progress, who gave you the study guide?” she said seethingly, her tongue is forked, I never noticed it until now.

“Well I am an amateur at these things, sorry. I am used to being hidden in the shadows.”

“Well stop hiding, people would like you more if you spoke.”

“I suppose, as long as what I say pleases everyone.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you have to please everyone with what you say, you know like they say honesty is the best policy but honesty also pisses people off. When people find out you are lying about what you really think, they are pissed about what you really think, not the fact you weren’t up front with them. Well I guess lying pisses them off too, but its that hidden truth that has something to do with it, too.” She pauses now after my thoughtful answer which I have been reciting for years.

She isn’t thinking about how intellectual thought sounds, the fact that we are in a room with the aroma of melting mozzarella cheese and peppers probably takes away any credit I deserve for it. Who knows if anyone in the booth with the checkered table cloth has heard me and memorized my speech. Perhaps they have written it down, I need to copyright my thoughts before I say them, granted they want to know why this attractive girl is with an overanalyzing moron like me. Granted it works vice versa with me wondering how a prick can get with a girl like theirs.

“Why not put away that pout and lighten up. It’s not that tough being friendly once in a while.”

“I am friendly. Look we are talking. Me make friend with you”

“You don’t know that for sure”

Damn her, she is right, I don’t know how she feels about me and I’ll be damned to ask her how she feels about us, I haven’t been the best of company this evening, acting as if whittling my fingernails with my teeth is better than looking her in the eyes.

“So what’s your favorite movie?”

“You brought that up earlier, we already talked about my love for Jack Nicholson and then we talked about music and you made fun of the fact I like Cat Stevens. But that’s ok, don’t feel obliged to apologize,” she said jokingly and with that smile that made me talk to her in the first place. Of course I didn’t. She had to walk up to me in class and ask if I wanted to be her lab partner.

“Why do we keep talking about pop culture?” she asked.

“It’s fun.”

“Is it really though? Should one feel proud that they saw the Harlem Globetrotters on *Scooby Doo* and brag about it?” She asked as if it was my life’s achievement.

“Not many people know about that episode or cancelled MTV shows. People will never hear about them or read books about them, its something one has to know.”

“Isn’t there a reason for that though? That maybe childhood television shows aren’t that important to remember for a reason?”

-folio-

“You didn’t have a good childhood if you are trying to forget about the Snorkels.”

“Is that all you are capable of talking about?”

“I don’t see why you are getting uptight about things we talked about, sure its pop culture, but pop culture is a universal thing, it’s something to talk about, ya know, like when there is nothing to really talk about. It’s an icebreaker of sorts”

“So you don’t want to know about my past, like what my parents do or if I ever moved around the country, my best childhood memory?”

She says it in a tone where I think she is trying to get a reaction out of me but I am not sure.

“Well yes I do, but this is a first date, not an interview for a fucking newspaper, I am simply trying to not get on bad terms with you.”

“Well if you wanted to get the message across you were an asshole, it has been successful.”

“That was my intention,” I pause, and slowly exhale because yes, I did become an asshole. “Sorry.”

We sit at a booth towards the end of the restaurant next to a family with 3 young kids who pick at their pizza, wiping the grease on their clothes against the wishes of the parents. I sit across from her and we look at each other, trying to read each other’s minds before the waiter or waitress came to take our order. I then broke the spell and looked at her hands as they tapped the table (a sign of impatience) and then her left folded over her right. The waiter came over, a tired teen-aged boy with a unibrow and he took the order, scribbling our cokes and pizza down on the piece of paper. I am sure he was looking at her the whole time. I decide to break the silence.

“So...”

“Stop saying so, that’s how you begin every sentence. I just want real conversation for once tonight, not shallow insights,” she snapped out, showing that I did correctly pick up on impatience.

“Jesus, you won’t let me get a break will you?”

She puts the tips of her index and middle fingers against her temple, and slowly circles them around, wrinkling her forehead and spinning some of her hair around as well. She is grinding her teeth, or maybe she is chewing gum and I haven’t noticed. I knew this was a bad idea. I am no longer Hugh Grant, I am now the insecure young John Cusack. I am now pumping my foot up and down underneath the table. I know I have to do something, trying not to hit the table or doing anything to draw attention. I wonder how she would act if I

just slipped out of the booth and walked away slowly without saying a word. Would she run after me and beg for me to come back, and then we both start talking at the same moment trying to apologize, pause, then laugh, then kiss?

“So if I were to ditch you in the middle of the date, by running away out the door, what would you do?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I stutter, my tongue just bouncing in my rubber jaw, and I am trying to be serious about it, trying to lower my voice, shaping my tone to have impact.

“You see, like, umm, this, is all awkward, like I said, and ummm you are cool and I am not, like once, well this one time I uhhh,” I turn my neck sharply during the course of this. “OH SON OF A BITCH!” I shout, giving my most vibrant performance of the night, grabbing my neck with my hands, massaging furiously, losing balance and hitting my head on the table. “Jesus!!”

She now sat in the booth next to me, worried, lifting me up, hurricanes and lightning in my head. The family, like the rest of the restaurant had now decided to pay attention to my life for a brief moment. Now I can be part of the conversation on the way home or at work the next morning.

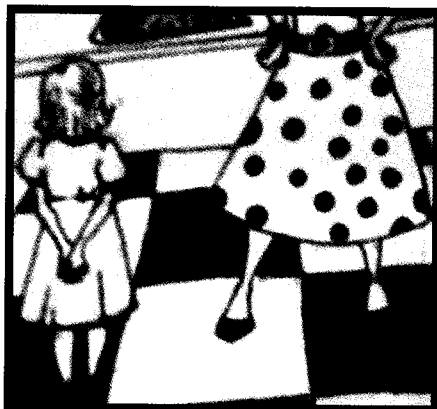
michael r. hemenway

-deerslaughter-

I'm straightening up the cushions of the couch
in the living room when my phone rings. It's you, calling
after hitting a deer on the way to my house.
You're waiting for the cops. The front end
of your car is smashed, with a new driver side door, the kind with
sharp antler dents. I carry the phone into
the kitchen to find my drink but I'd rather
find you, run up and put my arms
around you like you always do to me.
"I killed Bambi," you say.
I reply, "It was an accident. You'll only get manslaughter,"
"Deerslaughter," you answer. I laugh.
All I can think of is
you, sitting there, frantic, with bronzey
highlighted hair under a night sky of
cold metal, a few bright and blinking lights, and
a deer carcass tangled on the side of the road.
I can hear you shaking a smile into your phone.
Your voice trembles through the
satellite waves. I tell you to take a few deep breaths.
I want to be there, taking the clumps of fur and deer eyes
off your car.
I'll use my sleeve if I have to.

V.

"hands, like diaries,
were kept hidden from parents..."



christina bicknell

-perfection-

We hardly ever spoke to one another.

Strangers passing in the hallway
Withholding breath to comply with the silence.
Heads hanging low—
Concentrating on cracks in the hardwood floors,
Gazes fumbling over ivory carpet,
Swept away by the long stretch of mahogany banister,
Avoiding any threat of eye contact.

A glitch in carefully plotted routes
Would occasionally cause a meeting in the kitchen.
Where eggshells crunched along the linoleum,
Prompting a tiptoed escape to my bedroom.
Pushing the door closed,
Breathing a sigh of relief—
Safeguarded by familiar territory.

Instructions for the day were often scripted in stone,
Made light of by
Adhesive notes framing my doorway.
A running list of chores,
“Friendly” reminders,
And those other expectations—
The kind that could never truly be met.

I would often be assigned to polish brass carpet rods
That bound creamy white carpet to the stairway.
Vacuuming imprints of feet out of the foyer,
Removing the evidence
From a home not built for living.

Taking care of the “chores” was an ideal punishment
For a daughter with mistaken priorities
In dire need

-folio-

Of clean-cut guidance and sparkling discipline.
I spent years shining silver and brass,
Clarifying the resentment in my own reflection.

We always had the exquisite house on the hill—
Elaborately decorated,
Maintained to perfection.
I was often reminded of how people would say,
“This house is so perfect it seems as if it isn’t home to a family at all”.
And I knew sadly that it wasn’t.

She would have been happier carrying
A bundle of ivory carpet and wallpaper samples
Home from the hospital.

david j. kimball

-a family waltz-

Uncle, I sit beside your hospital bed,
smell sterile air and steam-pressed linens.

We have been here before, twice for your
brothers, three times for your sisters, one
of whom was my mother.

I brush thick black hair from burlap brow.
Robotic, I pour orange juice, spoon pureed
peas, wipe chin and chapped lips. I have grown

accustomed to oxygen tubes, fluid streams through
IV's to swollen veins of withered hands, catheters
dripping steadily like icicles in the sun. I glimpse my

mother's name in faded marker on the collar of a gray
jumpsuit jacket. Draping it over your flaccid arms,
I wheel you to the car. Even clothes betray me.

kimberly a. goodman

-shopping for grief-

I remember my shoes clearly,
they were black, of course,
and even had a small heel.
I loved curling my toes inside of them,
as I admired their unscuffed shine.
They were a pair of shoes any twelve-year-old-girl
wished she had more occasions to wear them to.

I kept watching those shoes,
thinking about how I had longed to put them on,
show them off.

I doubt anyone looked at my feet that day but me.

Those shoes carried me through the day.
I didn't care to shift my gaze from them
and have to stare into the faces
that I hadn't seen in years
whisper to me how sorry they were
for my loss.
Of course, if I ever needed anything I only had to ask.

How could I ask for help
when my only thoughts
weren't about the fact I'd never
see my father again,
but of how disappointed I was
that my shoes were now tarnished
with the church's sorrow?

He ruined my shoes.

That night my mother tapped on my door,
asking why I was still in my church clothes
when we had been home for hours.

I didn't move my eyes from their shiny black gloss
that had mesmerized me all day.

She tried to explain
how worried she was,
since I was the only one that hadn't cried;
even though she had divorced him when I was two,
the tears had even visited her.
She followed my gaze,
and after a pause she put my feet into her lap.

"We'll get a new pair tomorrow."

I let her take the shoes
and throw them away.
She guided me outside to the dumpster
to bury them deep inside,
letting the smelly juices of the green metal bin
soak into her hands.

We went back inside to the bathroom,
stuck our hands under the hot tap water
and rubbed soap in vigorously.

"We'll get a new pair tomorrow."

Simple words.
A foot rub.

I would have my shoes.

stacy vocasek

-little girls grow up-

He used to dance with me
before I went to sleep.

Barefoot, I'd stand on his feet;
he'd hold me by my wrists
so I wouldn't fall.

The oldies station on the radio,
we'd dance around the kitchen,
the living room,
and into my bedroom

where he'd tuck me in,
the brigade of teddy bears
surrounding my bed,
protecting me from closet monsters.

But one day,
I'm not sure when or how,
I was too old to dance,
being tucked in was for babies,
teddy bears were stored in boxes.

I never meant to hurt his feelings,
to take away his little girl,
but that's what he thinks.
And now I watch him
pretending things didn't change,
pretending I didn't grow up.

jeffrey r. schultz

-my mother's son-

"Jesse, go to the store and get Mommy a pack of cigarettes and some vodka," my mother said, scratching through her voice.

She hadn't been out of bed in over five weeks. Since the last time her boyfriend beat her up. They wheeled her into the house, and I moved her from the chair into her bed. I was an old pro. I used to help a crippled man in the mornings before school. The boyfriend, now her ex, spent a night in jail and hasn't been seen since.

"You got any money?" I said back.

"There's some in the cup on my dresser."

"I don't see it!"

"It's there, in the tin cup."

"I got it." It was behind some empty bottles and her hair-dryer.

All of the trees except the Sweetgum had lost their leaves and it was starting to get pretty cold out. I grabbed my keys and put my jacket on. Halfway down the street I panicked, thinking I forgot my wallet, but was relieved to feel it in my back pocket. I put the money from the tin cup, all three dollars of it, in the wallet.

I caught a bus at the corner. I didn't have a car. I'd sold it three months before to put a first and last months rent on an apartment for the two of us. The bank took the house in Pleasant Hill that her grandfather built and my family had lived in since the thirties. My mother hadn't worked in years and what little she saved driving school buses ran out a long time ago. All she did now was drink, sleep, and watch TV. She smelled like roadkill and had been shitting and pissing in a plastic bedpan since she came home.

I was accosted on the bus, as usual. Some fat, old man started telling me about his previous life as a swimming pool engineer. He told me a bunch of places where he'd built Olympic-sized pools, though I was sure there wasn't a pool in a few of the places he mentioned. He gave me his business card. It said Bill Bublitz. He had greasy white hair and false teeth that moved up and down off his gums while he talked. He said he was riding into town for a heart exam.

-folio-

"Do you eat butter?" he asked. I was looking the other way out the window, minding my own business.

"Excuse me?"

"Do you eat real butter?"

"Yeah."

"Oh no! You shouldn't."

"What's wrong with butter?"

"My cholesterol is 332. That's what's wrong with butter."

"I have a little butter on my toast in the morning. I think I'll be o.k."

"I seen this stuff on TV and tried it. I can't believe it ain't butter."

"I Can't Believe It's Not Butter."

"Me neither."

"No, that's what it's called."

"Huh?"

"Forget it!"

"Any you guys got a quarter?" some guy said behind us.

"No," I said.

"You eat butter?" Bill Bublitz said to the beggar.

The beggar was talking to himself and didn't respond. He was mumbling something about saving up for a cheeseburger. I took this as my cue to get away, but Bill Bublitz was right back on me.

He talked about his wife and every car he'd ever owned. It even turned out that he lived right around the corner from me, but I didn't let him know it. The last time I'd humored some talkative senior I ended up having to entertain this old Lebanese guy in my apartment every night for a month. He'd bake me a loaf of bread everyday and stop over when I was trying to get out of the house.

I told Bill Bublitz that my parents had died in separate car accidents a month apart last year.

"Did they own a pool?"

I told him I was going to my mother's that night.

"Was it an in ground?"

I told him my leg had been amputated during the war.

"Was it heated?"

"Here's my stop," he finally said.

"Take it easy." Thank God!

I opened the magazine I'd brought with me and scanned an article about some rapper who'd been shot a couple months before in

Las Vegas. It was my stop, too, but I figured I'd get off at the next one and walk back. Anything to avoid this guy.

Cliff was sitting on a bench at the downtown bus station.

"What's up, Jesse?"

"How you doin'?"

"Just got fuckin' fired from Frank's." He'd worked there since he was sixteen.

"What happened?"

"I called Agnes a bitch and she freaked out."

"That Polish waitress?"

"Yeah. She started screaming at me. I couldn't understand a word."

"Fuck!"

"Then she threw a glass at me."

"Really? She get fired?"

"No."

"You been there for six years, though."

"I know. Only job I ever had."

"You thirsty?" I offered.

"Let's go."

We walked about five or six blocks down to Thirteenth Street, got a table by the front window at Max's and lit a couple cigarettes.

"What're you doin' down here?" he said.

"Mom's thirsty too. Really just had to get out though."

"She's still goin', huh? She get up yet?"

"Nope."

"How long's it been?"

"Weeks."

"Can I get you guys drinks?" a waitress said behind us.

"I'll have a beer," Cliff said.

"Make it two."

"Here a little early today..." I heard her trail off as she walked away.

"You still working at that warehouse?" Cliff asked.

"Yeah, the one out by our place. I get nine bucks an hour now."

"Just for sweeping floors?"

"Yup."

"You get me a job out there?"

"I'll ask if they have anything."

"Cool."

-folio-

"I go in the offices and go through everybody's desks. Nobody's there until 6:30 in the morning. This one lady has so many jelly beans in her drawer, she wouldn't notice if I ate a whole bag."

"They never notice?"

"Nope. One guy's got porn in his desk."

"Magazines?"

"Yeah. Gay magazines."

"Shit."

"What time's the liquor store close?" I said.

"Nine."

"We got all day then."

The store was about to close. I grabbed the cheapest plastic bottle of Vodka I could find. I brought it to the counter and asked for a carton of cigarettes—those generic ones that line cooks and truck drivers smoke. Cliff put a couple tiny bottles of Jack Daniel's on the counter. I thought you could only get those in hotel rooms and on airplanes.

"This all together?" the old woman behind the counter said. She sounded like she'd just swallowed a handful of gravel.

"Yeah," I answered.

"You kids 21?"

"Yep."

"Forty-two-sixty-three," she said.

"Here's forty-five."

After we left the liquor store, Cliff said he wanted to go see a movie. We always did this. There's this little arthouse halfway between downtown Eugene and the University. The building used to be a morgue, before that a church. We'd get drunk and go see whatever was playing there. You could drink and smoke in there. They didn't care. The employees would sit up on the balcony and get high while the films were playing. One time, we sat behind a couple dykes going down on each other.

"What's playing at the Bijou?" I said.

"Some British movie. *Trainspotting*."

"Heard anything about it?"

"Jenny said it was great."

"You talked to Jenny?" I said.

"Yeah, she's seen it like ten times."

"Where the fuck did you run into her?"

"At Frank's. She was looking for you."

The movie started at 9:30. We got to the theater a couple minutes before and I bought tickets. There were only three other people in the theater. Two kids with dreadlocks, and Jenny. Oh No, I thought. She saw me and said hello.

“Hey Jenny,” I said, reluctantly.

“You never called.”

I’d dated her for a short time that summer.

“I’ve been busy,” I said.

“Call me?”

“Sure.”

Cliff and I walked to the last row of the theater and sat down. I lit a cigarette and set the vodka and carton of cigarettes on the ground.

“You think she’s gonna come back here?” Cliff said.

“I hope not.”

“She’s so into you.”

“Dude, shut up.”

“What happened? Why’d you blow her off? She’s hot.”

“The girl’s a little weird.”

“What do you mean?”

“She just freaked me out.”

“C’mon. Tell me why.”

“Dude, she kept telling me that I look like her brother and that she couldn’t wait to bring me home to meet her parents.”

“Yeah, doesn’t sound to weird.”

“This is two minutes after we met. A couple days after I blew her off I see her at Bubba’s sharing a milkshake with some guy who does look like me. Turned out to be her brother.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding a little freaked out.

We polished off the whole bottle while the movie was playing. I don’t really know what the hell was going on. They kept saying “shite,” and calling each other cunts. It was a little strange. I don’t know why, but we laughed when this guy wrecked a hotel room near the end of the movie.

“I need to get home. You going back downtown?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Last bus is coming soon. Where you goin’?”

“Probably have a few beers at Doc’s. The bottle empty?”

“Just a couple drops left for Mom.”

“Just add water.”

“She won’t know the difference,” I laughed.

-folio-

“You think she’s still up? She’s probably gonna be pissed that you been out all day to get booze and cigarettes.”

“She’s sleeping or dead. It don’t matter.” The buzz was starting to hit me.

“Alright, catch ya later. I’m goin’ this way.”

“Later,” I said and tossed the bottle into the bushes.

I caught the last bus. It was the express and I was home in ten minutes. I ate a bag of chips and drank a beer from the Circle K across from the station on the ride home. It was 1:30 a.m. when I got in. I walked by my mother’s room on the way to mine. She was sleeping with the lights and TV on. The Conan O’Brien show was on. Some band was playing. I could hear the music from my room

I’ve been down hearted baby. I’ve been down hearted baby. Ever since the day we met. Eeeeever since the day....

I wondered if she was dead. I thought maybe she just gave up and stopped breathing or choked on a mouthful of potato chips. If she did, then it would all be mine. The medical bills, collection notices, and lawyer’s fees. The empty bottles and pill containers. All mine.

I heard her coughing in her sleep while I was changing in my room. If she wasn’t dead yet, she could’ve been any minute. She kept coughing and I figured that she’d probably wake herself up. I walked through the house as softly as possible, not wanting her to know that I was home. The floorboard cried out under my steps, and I stumbled down the hall, knocking a picture of her father off the wall. It didn’t wake her.

Walking through the kitchen on the way out, I saw the empty bottles that had been piling up in the sink. I grabbed one and walked back to her room. I tripped and walked into her dresser. After unscrewing the cap I tossed the empty bottle onto the bed. Realizing I left the cigarettes on the bus, I took the pack from my pocket and threw it down next to the bottle.

I walked over to her, tripped again on one of the clean bed-pans, leaned over, and kissed her on the forehead. I had to be at work in fifteen minutes.

holly a. hajek

-on shaky ground-

The plane banked to the right, leaving my stomach in twisted knots. I listened to the tinny voice of the pilot over the intercom asking everyone to fasten their seatbelts, and I scrambled to fasten mine, as if I didn't do it at that second, I'd fall out of my seat. My mother tucked a loose strand of my long, chestnut hair behind my ear and gave me a gentle, reassuring smile, which seemed to calm my nerves for the moment. The nervousness diminished as I glanced out the window and saw the rolling mountains, tiny palm trees, and sun-drenched land below. Every time we visited southern California, my mother always said in a sarcastic voice, "Don't you just love the thick film of smog hovering over those mountains? Imagine the great health we'd be in if we still lived here."

I rolled my eyes at her. I knew the smog wasn't the reason she moved us out of California, as she always said it was. Even at the ignorant, naïve age of 12, I knew my mother had packed us up and out of California for different reasons. My father died 10 years before, when we used to live in California. I knew my mom hated to be reminded of the life she had with my father, and that it was far too painful for her to think about it. I obviously didn't remember him, but for some odd reason, I felt his presence with me constantly, like he was watching over me. He was my very own personal guardian angel. Once I told my mother this, and she quickly changed the subject, after telling me she didn't believe in angels. I knew my mother was still hurt by all of the memories of my father, because she never remarried, but I didn't understand why she never wanted his memory to be instilled in me.

As we walked through the terminal lugging our bags behind us, my mother commented on how smooth the landing was, although I had different thoughts, being as every bump and turn gave me the worst anxiety. Then I heard a shrill, familiar voice through the crowds. "Olivia, Rory!"

My Aunt Gena ran towards us and embraced us both. She commented on how tired my mother looked, and asked if the flight was ok. The chatter between them continued, but I barely heard anything they were saying. I could feel the warm air seeping through the terminal doors and I wanted to get out of this airport and outside.

There was always something about California that intrigued me and I think it had more to do with the fact I was born there and that the weather was always perfect. We visited every three years or so and stayed with my mom's brother and there was something new about this place I found to love every time we visited.

My aunt smoothed my hair back and stopped to look at me. I waited for her to make a comment on how big I had gotten since our last trip three years ago. Instead, she said something else that I wasn't expecting. "Rory!" she glanced at my mom and back at me. "Do you know that you are becoming an almost exact, spitting image of your father?"

I scrunched up my face. My mother mimicked my expression. I took my aunt's comment lightly for I had no clue what my father really looked like. Often, I studied the wallet-sized picture that I stole from my mom's drawer and now kept in my wallet, trying to notice his features, and all I could see was he had brownish hair and hazel eyes. The picture was wrinkled and a little blurry so it was hard to make out any details. So who's to say if my aunt's comment was an insult or a compliment? I never thought of myself as cute, or pretty, so I imagined my father to be not that good-looking either, because in that one picture he didn't look impressive. But I figured I'd never know. My mother never spoke of him or tried to explain to me what he'd looked like, or if I resembled him at all. She never offered up any real information about him and I realized as I got older, I was beginning to resent that.

I certainly didn't take after my mother. She had the most beautiful figure for someone her age, with dirty blond hair and bright blue eyes. I was gangly, with stringy arms and legs, and boring brown eyes. On good days, they looked hazel. I was 12 and should have been developing some sort of womanly figure by then, like most of my friends back home. If I didn't have long hair or lengthy eyelashes, people would surely think I was a boy. I was a couple of months from becoming a teenager and my chest was still flatter than a cutting board.

After the extensive process of collecting our baggage, we finally stepped foot outside. My mother and aunt were beyond busy talking, so they didn't notice when I stopped in my tracks. I put my bags down, looked up at the sapphire sky, and took a deep breath. The sun was so warm and welcoming, nothing like it was at home in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where winter seemed to last years. I could have easily sat outside at the airport just like I was and enjoyed the beautiful

weather, but I reluctantly climbed into the back seat of my aunt's Accord.

When we arrived at my aunt's, my uncle George stepped outside of their ranch house and greeted us right away. After he finished suffocating me with the smell of Old Spice cologne, I saw my beautiful, blond, voluptuous, 17-year-old cousin Lila jump off the hammock in the front yard. She was clad in a polka-dotted, skimpier-than-floss, bikini and had no problem walking around in public like that. I couldn't help but secretly glare at her beauty and big breasts and be jealous. I obviously got shafted in the looks department in my family, I thought.

The following day I convinced Lila to go to Newport Beach, the closest beach to their house. I would have much rather gone with my mother, but she didn't show any interest and said she was spending the day with my uncle. So I was stuck going with Lila. As I lay on my beach towel in my one-piece bathing suit, I took note of how beautiful California beaches were, compared to our closest beach in New Jersey. I shared my thoughts with Lila, and she grunted.

"Rory, I don't understand what the big deal is about this place. I mean, like, California is cool and all, but it isn't that great. Maybe you would like where you live better if you had more friends, or didn't have such a dysfunctional lifestyle."

I glared at Lila. She could be such a jerk sometimes, and so insensitive.

"What are you talking about? I don't have a dysfunctional lifestyle, what did you mean by that?"

"Well," she sighed, clearly annoyed by having to explain what she said to me. "I just mean that you don't exactly have a normal life. It's just you and Aunt Olivia, and my mom always tells my dad how much you need a father and that your mom should have remarried years ago."

I ignored the stinging tears trying to well up in my eyes. How dare she say that, I thought. What does she know about my family and about my needs? I didn't care about being nice to Lila anymore, or my mothers' rules about no swearing.

"You're such a stuck up bitch, Lila. Who do you think you are, saying things like that? What do you know about me? Just because you have the perfect family, and perfect lifestyle in your eyes, doesn't mean it should be that way for everyone else. Not everyone in this world needs a father."

By now I couldn't hold the tears in any longer. Lila rolled her eyes and muttered something about me being too sensitive. I was fum-

-folio-

ing, so I got up and took a walk down the beach towards the pier. To calm myself down, I tried to concentrate on how soft the sand was and how it felt against my toes. I wasn't about to let Lila ruin my vacation. I then wondered if Lila would still be there when I got back, because it wouldn't have surprised me if she took off and left me. But she was there, sitting on her towel all beautiful and flirting with the lifeguard, as if nothing had happened. I muttered more profanities under my breath.

That night as I lay in Lila's bed nursing my sunburn with ice, I couldn't help but hear the conversation between my mom, Uncle George and Aunt Gena out in the living room. I could hear them talking about some guy named Rich. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying about him, but it seemed every time his name was brought up, my mother's voice raised and the conversation became heated. I had to go to the bathroom, plus I was really curious to know what they were talking about and what was being said, so I crept quietly into the hallway and sat in the hallway crevice leading to the bathroom.

"Olivia, I really think you need to tell her about Rich," my uncle spoke quietly but firmly. "I continuously run into him, and he asks me about his daughter all the time. I know you never want to see him again, and are scared to, but the man has a right to some things. And to be honest, he will eventually track you two down. He seems determined."

"What the hell," I could hear my mother's muffled sobs.

"I'm sorry. You know I want to protect Rory from all of this, but I really think Rich is sincere," he said, pausing. "I think Rory is old enough to understand, and frankly, I think she deserves the truth."

My thoughts were racing. Old enough to understand what? What were they talking about? I was so confused as to whom this man Rich was and what he had to do with me. I was really curious, and I wanted to go out there and confront them, tell them I heard what they were talking about, but I was afraid of upsetting my mom, who was already crying. I heard footsteps coming down the hall, and I dashed into the bathroom, sliding the door shut. I came out, acting half asleep, as if I had just woken up to use the bathroom. I met my mother in the hall.

"Goodnight, sweetie," she whispered and kissed my forehead.

I retreated into bed and stayed up thinking about what was going on, until my eyes were too heavy to hold open.

I woke up to the distant sound of a dog barking erratically, and I rolled over and glanced at the beaming, red numbers on the alarm

clock that read 5:54. I let out a sigh, rubbed my sleepy eyes, and rolled back over. I was just falling back asleep when I heard a really low grumbling sound, and just when I was trying to figure out what that noise was, the room began to shake violently. I sat up with a start and looked around, confused for a second as to what was happening. I was startled to see the stuffed animals on Lila's shelf tumble to the ground. Out in the living room, I could hear glass breaking. The bedroom door flew open, and there was my hairy uncle George, clad only in his tighty whities, shouting for me to get up and take his hand. If I hadn't been so petrified at that very moment, I would have started cracking up at the sight of my uncle in his underwear. But I took his hand, and he almost yanked my arm off as he pulled me down the hallway and practically threw me into my mother's arms, where she was huddling in the kitchen doorway. My Aunt Gena soon joined us, and my uncle George returned with Lila, who of course, even at 6 in the morning, looked absolutely flawless. She was probably annoyed that she had been plucked from her beauty sleep. I was so scared as the ground continued to jolt every which way underneath our feet, and I fought to keep my balance as my mother and I gripped onto each other for support. Lila and I glanced at each other, and I could actually see the fear in her eyes as she nuzzled her face into my uncle's arm. Would this ever stop? I could hear my Aunt Gena quietly praying into my uncle's chest for the earthquake to stop and spare us all.

As if her prayer was answered at that very moment, the ground halted and everything became quiet. We all sat there trembling, huddled in the doorway for a few minutes, afraid to move, as if any movement would make the ground shake again. I happened to look down onto the tile floor and noticed bits and pieces of ceiling that had crumbled and fallen, and then noticed it was all over me too. My uncle walked out into the living room, surveying the surprisingly minimal damage, and picking up broken china that had fallen off the mantle. All of us hugged each other, and my uncle reassured us that everything was all right.

Throughout the remaining, sleepless morning, the phone rang incessantly and I could hear my uncle reassuring family and friends and everyone else that called that we were all fine. My body and mind couldn't relax; my heartbeat hadn't slowed down since the earthquake ended. Every movement I made, I half expected the ground to start shaking again. My uncle came back into the living room and sat beside me, putting his arm around me.

"Are you ok, kiddo?"

I nodded, and he reassured me that everything would be ok. He flipped on the television and the news was on. We both watched as the news anchor, who himself looked shaken by the early morning events, reported on the 5.8 earthquake. The phone rang once again, startling the both of us. My uncle stood up and went into the kitchen. I heard him talking to someone rather sternly; not as nice as he was being to everyone else he talked to.

“How did you get this number?” he yelled. “I think you’re crossing the li...I know but...I don’t think this is a good idea. Yes, fine, here’s Olivia.”

I got up to go outside into the yard, and as I did, I heard my uncle say to my mother, who was sitting at the kitchen table, “Olivia, phone for you,” with a distressed look on his face. My mother, flustered, got up and took the phone.

When I walked back inside, my mother was sitting on the couch with her head in her hands. My uncle knelt beside her, whispering to her. I looked at them, and asked my mom what was wrong. She shook her head without even looking up at me. I figured she was just upset about the quake as everyone else was, so I shrugged it off. I sat down on the couch next to Lila, who was delicately painting her nails. I listened to the news anchor as he explained that there was only one fatality from the quake.

I had apparently dozed off for awhile, because the doorbell woke me up with a start. I opened my groggy eyes and they began to burn from the stench of Lila’s nail polish permeating the air. She too was asleep. I could hear a strange man’s voice in the foyer. Once again, my curiosity got the better of me, and I crept into the hallway behind the foyer wall.

“Olivia, I swear, I don’t want to cause trouble. I just want to see her,” the strange man argued.

“How the hell did you find us?” my mother said, and I could tell by her scratchy voice she was crying.

“Please, calm down. I saw you two days ago with Gena at the grocer. I live a few towns over in Pomona. I wasn’t sure if I would come see you, as George said you’d react this way if I tried, but with this earthquake this morning I knew I had to make sure everyone was alright. And I’ve been thinking about Rory a lot lately...”

“So, you decided to just come here and barge into our lives?” my mother interrupted.

“Listen, I’ve sent numerous letters to Rory in Pennsylvania, but I assume they mysteriously got lost in the mail. I don’t want to

fight with you, but I've realized you have no right to keep me away from my own daughter, no matter what's happened."

I tried to comprehend what exactly was going on, but I was so confused. All I knew was my mom didn't like this man and for some reason he wanted to see me. I felt someone behind me and jumped to see Lila also letting her curiosity get the better of her. I glared at her as if to tell her to go away, but she ignored my ugly glance.

"Olivia, please, please understand," the man's voice grew louder, more impatient. "I am not here to hurt her, I want to see her. She is my daughter, after all. I've already missed too many years of her life, I can't miss anymore."

By now I was reeling from this information. Questions were burning a hole in my brain. I boldly stepped out into the foyer and let myself be seen. My mother whirled around and gasped, apparently not knowing I had heard everything. The strange man clenched his jaw, and I noticed his eyes filling with tears.

"What the hell is going on?" I squeaked, as tears began to roll down my cheeks. "Someone please explain to me, because all I heard..."

"Rory," the strange man uttered, although it sounded like he was saying my name just to hear it.

By now I was beyond confused, and looked at him with a 'do I know you?' look. My mother walked over to me and led me to the couch to sit down. She struggled to speak, but when she finally did, the words hit me hard on the chest.

"Rory," she spoke softly. "This is going to be tough for you to understand, but I beg you to try, and I beg for your forgiveness and open mindedness." She took a deep breath and choked back tears. "Please, you have to understand. And you have to be forgiving...this man standing here is your dad. His name is Richard and he lives here in California. He wanted to make sure we were ok after the earthquake this morning."

My mom had to catch her breath again, and I stared blankly at the man, not knowing what to think or say. My mother continued to explain how this came to be.

"I know I lied..."

"Yeah, no kidding you lied!" I screamed, now losing my composure. "I don't understand, mom. This man is my father, my biological father? Then why the hell have I believed for 12 years now that he's been dead?"

"You told her I was dead?" the man choked. He now began sobbing, and as I looked at all of this, I realized that this was turning

into a bad soap opera. My mother stared at me with pleading, tearful eyes.

I suddenly felt vomit building up in my throat and realized I had to run to the bathroom now or lose it all over the floor. I bolted down the hall. As I hugged the toilet, I thought about how screwed up my life had become in the last 20 minutes.

After I finished, I sat down outside the bathroom and listened to my parents argue. I couldn't believe this was all happening. My mother had lied to me about my father being dead, when clearly, he was very much alive. I have a father, I thought.

"This is bullshit, Olivia! I can't believe you told her I was dead!"

"Rich," my mother sobbed. "I had no choice, don't you see? Did you want your daughter growing up knowing her father cheated on her mother right after she was born? Do you know what kind of guilt that could bring to her?"

"You did have a choice. You didn't have to run out like that! Taking Rory and moving to Pennsylvania... I made a mistake, that didn't mean I couldn't help raise my own damn daughter! And the letters... you threw all of them out and told our daughter her father was dead. Don't you see how fucked up that is? And you don't think that screwed her up?"

"She's fine! You coming here is what's going to screw her up!" my mother fell to the floor sobbing. The nausea passed, but I was afraid if I went back out there, I'd feel like throwing up again. But at the same time, I felt as if I needed to do something.

"Listen!" I yelled, storming into the room. "I heard everything. Both of you are to blame, as far as I'm concerned. Mom, I can't believe you lied to me. I've resented you all of these years for never talking about my dad and telling me about him. Didn't you see that I needed him in my life somehow, even if it was just memory? And then... then you knew he was alive this whole time, and you kept up the lie!"

"Rory, honey," she was still sobbing. "I love you. I didn't want you growing up around your father, a man I had no respect for and who hurt me badly."

"Again, not your choice," my father chimed in. "I may have cheated on you with Lori, but that doesn't give you the right..."

"Why did you cheat on my mother?" I asked, putting him on the spot. My mother stopped crying for a moment to hear his answer.

"Because... because I was unhappy. Plain and simple. But I promise, Rory, it had nothing to do with you. It was a momentary lapse of judgement on my part. And everyday of my life since then,

I've regretted it. It made me lose the most precious thing in my life, although I didn't know it at the time."

I smiled. At that moment, I found myself overcome with all different kinds of emotions. Part of me was overjoyed in learning that my father was alive and standing in front of me. The other part of me felt betrayed. My mother had lied to me for 12 years.

For days, I avoided my mother on our vacation. She was hurt, and often, I could hear her crying at night in her room. I talked to both my aunt and uncle numerous times, trying to get an understanding of the situation. They both told me they understood how I was feeling, but they promised me my mother meant well by hiding this from me. My father tried to contact me again while I was staying at my uncle's, but I wasn't ready to face him yet. It wasn't that I was mad at him, but I still couldn't accept that I had a father. I knew I had to work things out with my mother before I could see my father again.

The night before we left for home, my mother walked into my room while I was reading. She sat on the bed next to me, and as I looked up at her and into her eyes, I realized it was time to try to forgive her. Her eyes were puffy and swollen, and she looked as if she had aged five years in the last few days.

"Hi Mom," I managed to say.

"Hey, sweetie. I...have something for you."

She placed a picture in my hand. It was a picture of a young boy who looked familiar.

"This is your father when he was your age," my mother said. "Your aunt Gena had this picture in an album somewhere, and I figured you'd like to have it. Mostly because it looks so much like you."

I studied the picture and realized it did look like me. The smile on my face grew as I realized I finally had someone in my family who I looked like. I recognized now that I didn't have to complain anymore about not looking like everyone else in my family, because the truth was, I looked like my dad. My mother handed me the phone off the desk and placed a piece of paper in my hand that read: "Rich 729-4532."

eve cummings prize for poetry - 2nd place

salvatore delucia

-without a scratch-

for Dad, from Champ

The beige carpet scratched the sides
of my small knees, crossed Indian
style, my bony back resting against
the rounded angles of our glass coffee
table, the one you ran to when I fell

through. I never said much,
smiling in front of the old television
set, brown cable box resting snug beside
me. We loved this place, where you
introduced me to The Duke and his gunfights

at the O.K. Corral. The same place we learned
to time the laugh tracks cued by the open-eyed
surprise of Mr. Furley, and the rehearsed swagger
of Arthur Fonzarelli, his leather covered elbow
bumping the jukebox, his fingers drawn outward
like the two pistols of the Man with No Name,

a brown-burning cigarette stuck to Clint's
lower lip, the frayed brim of his hat shadowing
his wrinkled eyes. Sitting on the brown broken
couch, you watched as my sandy-toned hair caught
colors off the screen; my narrow shoulders
rolled forward, slightly, body swaying side

to side, the fates of He-Man and The Masters
of the Universe weighing heavy on a 7-year-old
mind. You glanced down, for a moment, at your
stubbled reflection in the long glass surface stretching
across the table, the same glass you replaced
once, after that Friday night when you made popcorn

-folio-

before Miami Vice, when I was doing somersaults
on the couch. Orange sun filtered through
the blinds, shadowing your wrinkled eyes, and as we watched
our shows you remembered how you picked your son
up out of the open frame, shattered glass all around
me, amazed at how I came away without a scratch.

patricia bjorklund

-noble avenue-

When I was eleven, I liked to go with my father
to the three-family where we used to live, way down
Noble Ave to collect rents. I still remembered preschool,
the taste of Mr. Bubble, and the white Chicklet tiles
in the bathroom. Richard Buttery lived in our old apartment
on the second floor. Richard was a joke to all the tenants,
like first-floor Scootch Cappasso, the butcher
with his ring-finger clipped into an extra pinky.
He slipped folded cash between wrought-iron bars,
through the sliced window screen and into my father's hand,
like a prize spit out of a gum ball machine. "Have you seen
the Butterball yet?" Scootch hacked like coins in a box.
My mother told me Richard was a little slow, but still,

he had a kind heart. "Just don't listen to everything
he says because he doesn't know what he means."
Richard told me to call him Rubber Band Man.
He was twenty-two, but he had bad posture,
and Grandpa's belly with his pants cranked way up.
On the third floor, Jim Model was a gorgeous G.I.
who used to live at the Y. He always answered
the door with a hairy chest and his khakis
unzipped. I looked at his trophies while he told
my father he liked to see how fast he could get Richard
Buttery to run groceries up the stairs, bills to the P.O. Box,
steel-toe boots to the repair for a five-spot,
and a slap on the back of the same striped shirt.

I liked my old yard. Our claw-legged bathtub
laid upside-down like a dead animal with Richard
Buttery saddled on top. He lived with his parents,
but I didn't get it, why their names were Gladys and Ray
Smith. They always offered my father a Schlitz,
which he never took. I asked Richard why
his arms were flat-- like the vinyl strips of baseboard

my father was rubber-cementing beneath the metal cabinets in their kitchen. Richard said, when he was bad, his folks ran his hands through the wringer of an old washing machine that sucked him in up to his elbows and stretched him out like an elastic. My mother told me, "Richard doesn't know what a lie is."

In our one-family house, my parents rumbled in their room after Johnny Carson. Mother, who always watched herself with one eye in the vanity mirror, snapped fresh face towels before she folded them. "She's not your son," she said. "Don't you see her growing breasts-- And how she doesn't belong on Noble Avenue?" In my room with Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria walls that my father promised to strip and paint Dunkin Donuts pink and orange just for me, I hid my hands inside our heavy Britannica, all my weight, knee to the cover, to close the book, and press my knuckles white as permanent sheets, my fingertips to keep, like wax-papered moths.

david j. kimball

-a son discusses his mother in group-

In the tub is where I found
her, wrists sliced open, wet
black hair over white porcelain,
blood pooled on the mosaic
tile floor.

Mirror shattered, one shard of
glass still in her hand, I tied
towels around her wounds,
smacked her pale face until she
opened her eyes.

She told me she would
end it. She told me she
could make the voices stop,
but I didn't understand.

vincent convertito

-his hands, like a diary-

his hands, like a diary,
recall a youth far gone,
as he pours another drink,
red wine, memories
streaming from a bottle...

knuckles read of times
when rulers slapped
down hard, broke
skin, spilled blood

hands, like diaries,
were kept hidden from
parents, scars concealed
what teachers taught

his fingers caress
the curvature of glass,
worn fingertips feel
for the past; he loved her
with young, nervous hands,
hands that never let go

calluses layered
deep into palms for every
blistering season, for
every stone set, wrap
tight around the bottle,
preserve memories

wine smoothly slides
from inside the bottle
out, calluses sitting thick
like a mountain range
on heavy leather paws
pressed against neck

-folio-

large, bear-like hands
once choked a drunken
son-in-law away, hands
stronger than law
protecting a daughter

he uncorks a near empty bottle
his granite hands chiseled over time
reflect the exactness of days, mirrors
he looks upon, could never shatter

gregory a. antonini
christina bicknell
patricia bjorklund
kathleen butler
rebekah butler
spencer e. carlson
vincent convertito
jean copeland
jamie cuticello
salvatore delucia
michael donovan
james f. dunn
robert francis
kimberly a. goodman
jeff m. green
holly a. hajek
larissa hall
benjamin hecht
michael r. hemenway
david j. kimball
ian koepfen
benjamin kowalsky

kevin l. lamkins
katie p. lynch
jennifer h. manes
ben martin
melissa m. owen
david m. pacelli
ashley page
alex pickett
michael d. rayzer
brian c. rowe
william ruggiero
jeffrey schultz
chris sellas
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stacy a. vocasek
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