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ASC, room 221
501 Crescent St.
New Haven, CT 06515
(203) 392-6936
folio@southernct.edu

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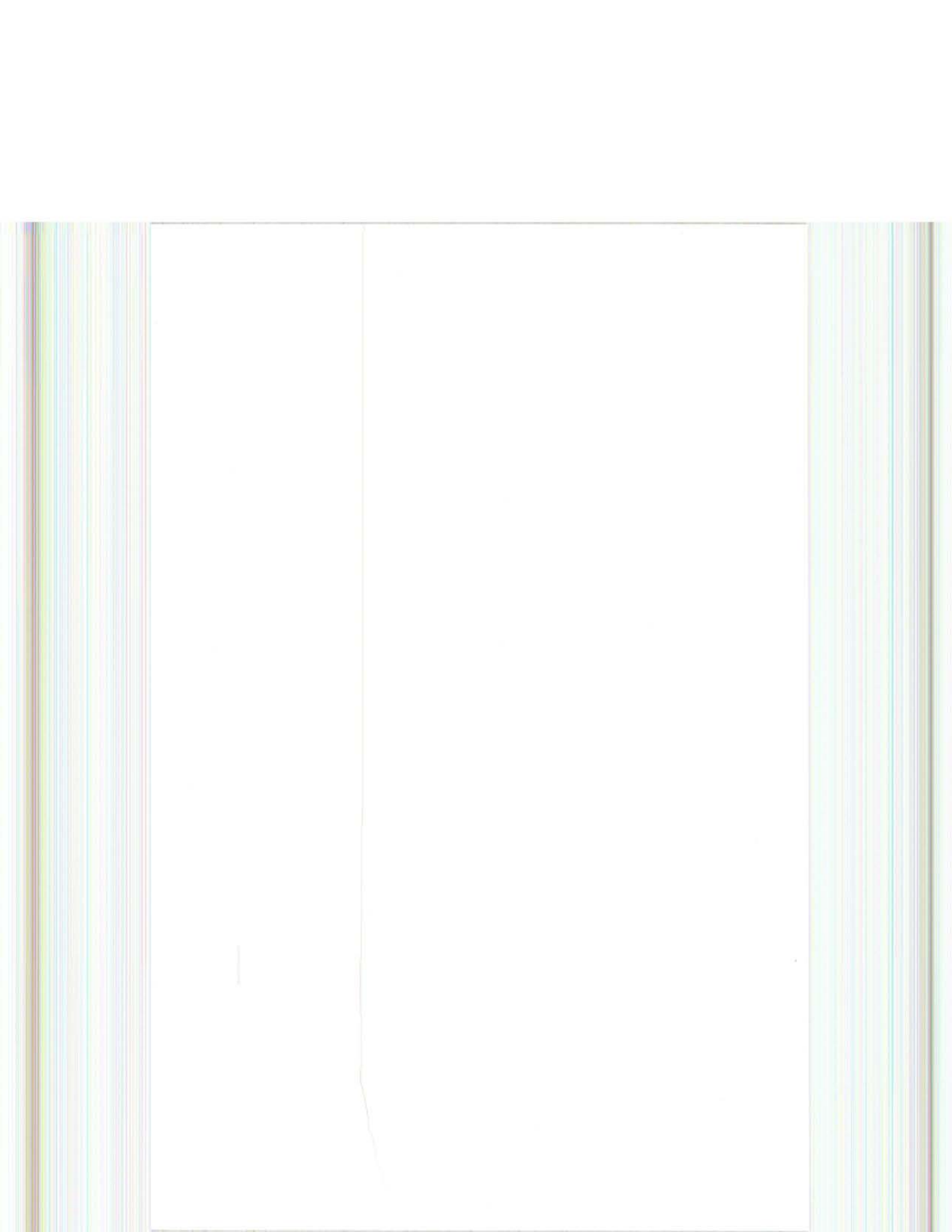
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for Kurt Vonnegut Jr.
1922-2007

So it goes.



Nick Dorio

A Small Glass Jar About the Size of an Egg

"My teeth keep falling out," I said to Emily over coffee, anyway it looked like coffee, and she seemed not to notice. She just kept looking outside, through the large window that faced out onto the busy sidewalk. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this."

"Would you look at these people?" she asked, gesturing with her cup so dramatically that coffee splashed out onto the table between us. "They look like hungry reptiles in a slithering race for the hottest rock." I looked up from the coffee puddle, amazed, and stared into her eyes, which were, occasionally, covered by her bangs. They flashed around, taking in the pedestrians as they made their way from one side of the window to the other. She was, pretty. I tongued a space in my mouth where a tooth had once been, then another. When she looked back at me, I felt suddenly bashful, and raised my own cup to my mouth. The coffee had grown cold, and the way it cascaded through these new gaps was at once pleasurable and disconcerting. "What'd you say?" she asked.

I told her, "Nothing worth repeating," and tried desperately to find something both interesting and ridiculous to talk about. "Have you noticed seagulls love McDonalds?" She stared at me for a moment, or not me really, but a space an inch or so in front of my face. I tongued a gap.

She immediately changed the subject, talking about someone we both knew, flapping her hands as she spoke. I drifted off. The seagulls: why fast food? Obviously, being seagulls they don't make much money, maybe they eat on a budget. Is it the fish sandwich? Do seagulls eat fish? I don't know. The only thing I've ever seen them eat is McDonalds. What do they do when they're at sea? Do they starve themselves, desperately holding out until they reach land where they can finally get a Big Mac? The image of this made me smile, and suddenly Emily stopped her lecture and hand flapping.

"Oliver, what's wrong with your teeth?" she asked. I shrugged, took the final slurp from my cup, and set it down on the table. And there, at the bottom of the cup, amongst the light brown stains, sat one of my teeth.

It began earlier that week, Monday morning, when I got up later than I had planned, but still in no big rush. Plenty of time to make cof-

fee and breakfast, only cereal, which when you think about it, really takes no time at all. So I sat at my kitchen table, loudly gulping down Frosted Flakes when I felt something come loose. I managed to compose myself and swallowed the mouthful of cereal, but not the tooth. In this slow grace of shock I took the tooth from my mouth and examined it. No sign of decay or fracture, no previous or present pain. Simply, my tooth had fallen out. It happens, I suppose. I'm a smoker. I don't brush regularly, or as regularly as I should. In fact, it was bound to happen. I placed the tooth down on the table next to the bowl and finished my breakfast. Half an hour later, practically out the door, I took the tooth from the table, and placed it into a small, glass jar about the size of an egg, and put it in my pocket.

In making some point to someone, Emily said, "Well, I'd rather be working for a paycheck than waiting to win the lottery." It sounded good but I knew it was from a song. The bar was loud and packed, in the way that no one there is comfortable, but Emily's voice I could always hear. It had a habit of standing out in a crowd, and at this point, I wasn't sure whether that was good or bad. The someone was a guy, we knew him, and I interrupted, asking if they would like to go out for a cigarette. It was cold, and just as crowded in the sectioned off smoking section in front of the bar, but the air was quiet and calming. The guy, James, offered me a clove, and I brushed it off with my hands as if he were trying to hand me a pile of dog shit. I found my own pack, and stuck one of the butts into one of the holes in my toothline. There were eight of them now.

"I wooden wand to liff in a world widoud gunsss," I said, hearing myself clearly for the first time that night. We were discussing political issues, poorly, and I had given up on any serious debate. This comment was meant to illicit some reaction from the two of them, but not the one it had.

"Oliver, what did you say?" James asked, smoking his clove, standing too close to Emily.

"It's his teeth," she said, her hand on his arm, for a second. I took a deep drag off my smoke and smiled wide for James to see. His face grimaced, to him it may have looked bad, but I remembered thinking earlier that day, that it made my mouth look like a skyscraper at night. The lights on in some rooms, and off in others. Looking into a mirror, I had tilted my head to make the building more vertical. I did the same for James and Emily, and smoke slowly billowed out of the dark windows.

"Have you seen your dentist?" he inquired, and I shook my head no.

"Id's nod sso bad," I said. The two of them shared a stare at my expense, and I pushed the cigarette into my clenched teeth. I inhaled, and felt something drop heavily onto my tongue. My other hand was in my pocket and I shook the little jar I had been keeping there. It made a faint rattling.

Over the course of the next couple of days, they fell out more regularly and at more inappropriate times. At work, a used bookstore, or rather what used to be a bookstore, I'd be helping some customer, trying to answer some question. Their faces would scrunch and twist as they tried to make out my ever worsening mumblings, and in mid-sentence, a tooth would crash onto the counter below my face, adding, I thought, dramatic punctuation to my garbled dialogue. They'd look down in horror, then back up at me. One even asked, "What was that?" I smiled big and responded rather clearly, "a jumper."

I held the little jar up in front of my face, it was nearly full, as Emily sat next to me in my car. We were in her driveway. She was breaking up with me. I couldn't blame her.

"We can't even communicate, anymore," she said, through quiet tears. Why was she crying? I had never seen her cry before, about anything. "And I dread kissing you." She was looking at me in the low light that came off her garage, pushing back her bangs because they kept covering her eyes, hiding her tears. But I refused to let her think I noticed. I just kept examining the jar, spinning it slowly, tilting it to see the teeth move the little they could in the open space that remained. My tongue danced around inside my mouth. There remained, one tooth, near the front. "Are you going to say anything?" she demanded. She sounded desperate. What could I say?

"Da seagullssss, dey sdarf demselfssss becausse dey are holdin' oud for McDonald'sssss. Dey'd radder ead nuddin' dan ead somedin' dey don'd wand." I said, and at the time it meant something to me. But Emily just stared, unable to make it out. She wiped her eyes, opened my door and walked out. I drove home.

Sitting at my kitchen table, in the dark, I tongued my tooth. I suddenly felt very sorry for it all alone in the barren wasteland my mouth had become. I thought of a reptile laying out on a rock in the middle of the desert, only it was night, and he was the only reptile for miles, cold and shivering. I looked down at the table in front of me, there was the jar full of my teeth. Teeth that had fallen out. I caressed the one that remained with my tongue and took a deep breath. With precise determination, I grabbed

the jar from the table, still sitting, and smashed it into my open mouth, into the tooth. It broke free, landing somewhere on the floor, lost in my kitchen. Pain flushed through my mouth and blood spurted out in thin, sharp bursts. It ran down my chin. I opened the jar, and let the teeth cascade out onto the table. I found my pack of cigarettes in my pocket, took one, struck a match and lit it. And there sitting at my table, in the dark, blood dripping into my lap, I smoked a cigarette, and smiled a gummy, triumphant smile.

Please Don't Touch

"Please don't touch," she said to me from behind. I retracted my hand from the sculpture, feeling sheepish. It was a giant raven made of cord and wire. I couldn't help myself.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Are you the artist?"

"Uh huh," she replied.

"It's gorgeous."

"Thanks. It's a solid representation of the flight we as human beings all seek."

"Uh huh," I responded. She, like the raven, was in all black. She had, I noticed, intriguing hair. "How long did it take?"

"A little over a year. I wanted the ratio of beak to wing to be just right."

"Oh, it is." We were at the gallery my friend runs. It was, I admit, my first art show. I was reluctant at first, but he said there'd be free wine. They served it in plastic Dixie-sized cups. I'd had about seven. "Do you come to these sort of things often?" I asked. I cringed internally.

"I try to be a part of the local art scene. I don't think I've seen you here before."

"No, I try to stay more underground, I suppose."

"Uh huh." She held her hand to her face, scanning the room, probably for someone more interesting to talk to. I too looked around, spotted my friend, who was elegantly chatting up some distinguished looking art types.

"It evokes Poe," I tried.

"Oh, of course. He's always been one of my greatest influences. Have you read 'The Fall of the House of Usher'?"

"Oh, of course," I lied. I'd seen the movie. "Vincent Price's character was so, um, touching." Luckily, I don't think she was really listening.

"I believe that Roderick Usher is a perfect metaphor for the modern man; sensitive, yet unable to truly feel anything but pain. Don't you agree?"

"You know, that's what I was thinking while I was reading it." She looked at me then, maybe for the first time. I felt parched.

"Do you have anything in the show?" she asked. I considered lying again, casually pointing to some other artist's work, talking in detail about Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and its effect on my style. But I didn't. I'd never read Kafka.

“Oh, no. I’m just here to, you know, absorb.”

“What do you do?”

“I write, sometimes,” I responded.

“What do you write?” She was checking her cell phone. I felt very encouraged. I fought the urge to say “garbage” or “not much.”

“Well, short stories mostly.”

“No,” she said, “what do you write about?” I had no idea how to honestly answer that question. Would it have been pretentious to say “life?” Did she have any idea what pretentious meant? Did I, for that matter?

“I don’t know,” I finally said. “I like characters, so I guess I tend to write dialogue more than anything else. I think that’s the best way to really express character, you know?”

“Yes, character is very important.” She snapped her phone shut.

“It’s hard to find the right balance between dialogue and exposition,” I said. “Like, I’ve been working on this one piece about a guy who meets a girl at an art show, and I try to use exposition to simply set the scene, but let the character’s dialogue progress their conflicts.” I was cooking.

“Uh huh.”

“And I guess I leave it up to the reader to see if there’s actually any interest between the guy and the girl. I mean, you can’t just come out and say something. You’ve got to let the reader decide for themselves. That’s what makes writing so precious.”

“Oh, of course,” she said. She spotted someone from across the gallery, and started rushing away. “Have a wonderful night,” she said over her shoulder, “and please don’t touch the sculpture.”

I walked over to the framing counter my friend had earlier that night transformed into a makeshift bar. I drank about seven more Dixie Cups of wine.

Rayon Dwain Lennon

Seaview Gardens, Jamaica

They are not graves, these lines
of low brickhouses built up
against each other like lovers. At night
gunmen run track meets on our complaining
zinc. Our house is the height of me. Somewhere,
the courthouse the color of our mother, the English
Queen. Skeletal branches finger the empty
bowl of sky. Discarded lotto tickets find themselves
freely picked up and carried off dumps of gravel
by surly black breeze. Across us the black face
of a house lined with bloodcoily vines
with huge pines hanging low with chains of moon-
white vines as white as the drug-white
ropes of chains pulled off the vain necks
of dead drug lords; another house bored
with the same guns which'd pierced night's lid
with as many bullets as the stars indicate.
Behind, a house painted a distant lawn-green
where a Rasta, praying in its shadow, cannot
see bags of helicoptered U.N. rice raining in the heart
of Ethiopia, on Haile's graves. From a row
in the distance Bounty Killer's
voice shoots up from a sound system, "poor
people fed up..." then dies back down
as black trees in the commons lose their wings.
A yellow coat of birds lift up a hill and I think
how well I can see when I'm wearing Walcott's glasses.
There are no signs but the name given
this project in school is Seaview Gardens,
though from here you can't read
what a number of white-sailed ships are writing
on the full black page of the Caribbean
Sea, 'cause factories like Good-

year and their snaking trenches surround us. And,
not many flowers here neither, not on the former dump
we live, though our rain-bowed houses are colored
with the blowing, cracked heads of daises, hibiscus, sunflowers-
colorful as foreign wigs on coughin' girls
with cream-mated blackfaces dubbed
Laurie and Rosetta, planted themselves
by the bloody issue of the trench, deep
in midnight heels, waving, calling out,
to a staggering number of soldier-nicked,
alcohol-fueled men as the God
of England shovels down dust-
colored clouds from back mountains
to bury us, it seems,
and the moon is a window
in our dark coffin, we feel.

May Pen

A fire catches over May Pen as thick
and brightening as a hustler's fake fist of jewelry.
Our country bus guns like a dog down crowded streets
of market stalls and people painted black with shadows
of medium rise bakeries and Church of Gods. Free
school boys in desertcolored suits with craters
of pimples stamped like potholes in their sun-hot face
board at the high clock. A school of sea-blue uniformed girls
flood in behind with their river scents and chemically
straightened hair, girls who sit on boys already seated;
who fit comfortably down like the ring I keep
pulling up and down around my finger as the clock
bell rings in the head of the stone tower like the memory
of how long ago my wife, Mona, was one of these loving
girls, living on the seethe of my soft sword as we
bumped over tin-shacked roads black with protest up
through dreams of green-leafy mountains falling
before heaven.

In Trenchtown, Jamaica

Here we live with the wound
of a trench cut under our feet. The sun's another
of God's lost gold coins, Willer'd claimed,
sliding lightly under heaven's
cement cloud-ceiling over Trenchtown
as that inky sludge of sickness washes down trench
from the rear of a Goodyear
tire factory, rolling down with its invisible
clouds of chemical stench filling me,
the air as smoke
rises from factories like prayers over bands
of black squawking birds like maroons on the cross-
hairs of power lines charged as the disembodied
voice of a dog or man barks after a camouflaged gang
of English-bred soldiers. The trench, you see, knives
south slicing our lives into East and West.
Grandmum's East tin house rocks
two feet from the trench, this vein,
carrying most of the city's blood, shit, piss
and garbage. From Grandmum's house it runs
red past Willer's black-tin house, whose
Daddy was once shot by a West
and dumped with the severed dicks of gays into it,
then past Lily's fragrant sea-blue house, for whom,
from upstream I'd dumped in buckets of lilies
and listened on Grandmum's
tin roof as Lily giggled with childish love on
her two front steps without front teeth. Creeps down past
the titanic white Anglican church
with its blunt spires forking a field of heavenly clouds, past
Minty's house, whose red-eyed gay son, Alfry, I'd
pull up from it once upon a time in the gay-killings, past
the graveled graveyard silence of hoopless basketball courts,
past snap-shots of cloud-shadowed lots
with patchy, trampled grass like the suddenly unwigged
heads of bleached-faced girls in black halter-tops
and heels, where last summer soldiers slaughtered ten East

and four West, past the dreaded silence of Killerman's
tiered slaughter house, who once shot over me
and Willer last February as our paper-boats raced
downstream, past there and finally
runs down under the empty shell
of a hurricane-sacked high school, in where Willer
and I'd escaped that day Killerman killed
Willer's Daddy and mailed him bloody through
the trench to the mass grave of the Caribbean
Sea...

Letter to Jamaica

It wasn't yesterday I saw you
on American news being lashed like a slave
by a hurricane Mum would say was God
were she up today and not buried in stone in you.
Too many years now since you've been free
from the white hands of England
for your children to be looting after God.
I heard God touch down in the tin city of Kingston
in the harbor and made his way north through hell
ripping off the tin tops of houses like cans, tearing guns
from the stony grips of fleeing criminals, stomping on Godless
tent churches with his thunderous feet, washing out the streets
and foul trenches with the tears rolling from his cheeks,
moving on. I hope he had time to visit
Spanish Town and rid the city of the unburied crack
whores with his windy breath. I didn't hear about May
Pen, that city, where masked men roamed
like pigs at night. That deserved a visit. I hope He
found strength to advance into the country, Clarendon,
chewing up sticks from cane fields that never
produce nothing but heartaches. Tired, I hope
he stopped to drink up Milk River with Teran
and Mikey's souls in it; fed rushing across
brown fields of mixed-up black and white cows chewing dirt,
on into the safe of the All Age School
and scared the little ones to read and pray. I hope
he climbed up Bull Head Mountain, woke Mum from her
shady grave; ripped her from your rootless heart,
Jamaica, and dove back with her in his whirly arms
into the light-blue dream of the Caribbean Sea,
on his way back to heaven.

The Letterer

He writes, "Father, once when I was young I tried to swim to you," then pauses to watch, through a square opening in his bamboo hut, the sun dangling ripe over the Caribbean Sea. With his left-good eye, Ambroise surveys the aged-sunlight leaving over his green bamboo desk, over his blue-penned words on his new memory notebook and out the square opening as the sun drops like a lemon into the hot sea. A woodpecker jabbars in the surrounding woodlands. With his old wiry fingers, he holds his pen suspended over the page, considering how to proceed. He sighs, closes his eyes. A moment later, when he opens them, he looks around at his bamboo bookcase emptied of his novels, at the old flame in the hour-glass figure of the kerosene lamp and doesn't know where he is, doesn't know who he is.

Old, he writes to remember himself. But every so often, lately, he'll be writing another of his unanswered letters to his father in America-- every so often he'll be doing this in his green bamboo hut atop Blue Mountain, watching as day sinks into the Caribbean Sea with the sun, watching as clouds and darkness roll down into Trenchtown between the mountain and sea and then slowly he'll begin to lose his senses, forgetting who he is.

He forgets why it is that he is writing to his father, forgets who his mother might be, what kind of activities and longings define him, but always, looking down into Trenchtown, then at the Caribbean Sea, he feels some vague connections between himself, Trenchtown and the sea. It is then that he gets up from his desk and takes down his old Jamaican Army fatigues hanging from the zinc ceiling over his bed, changes into them and by sheer habit walks down to Trenchtown, reading whatever he'd written in his notebook.

When he faintly comes to, he's walking south on the gravelly road along the trench in Trenchtown. Before him the sea before the city; behind him, Blue Mountain in a gown of fog as clouds roll down from the mountain, clouds roll off the sea, and these clouds, blue from the mountain, gray from the sea, roll in to bury Ambroise, who notes the hookers planted like flowers along the trench nodding at his passing, the hurricane-ruined tin houses on either side of the trench, the high-drumming of hammering, Bounter Killer's "War" from a distant sound system, cars and trucks buzzing around on the main road that surrounds the factories like Goodyear that surround the clustered houses of this project, the bed-wide, man-high concrete trench itself that runs through the heart of the project, carrying the smelly waste of the factories to sea.

Fog stuck in his brows, he walks back into his past with his black-jacketed notebook open to his one good eye. Looking up, he stops to regard a barefoot, red-lipped hooker under a streetlight, white ribbons flagging from her hair, a cigarette held like a dick between two fingers.

When she sees him she smiles and winks and blows a rope of smoke towards him, to draw him in, he thinks, already drawn in. He says, "Hi there," and sidles up to the yellow light of her smile, coughing to clear rust from his voice. "Is this Trenchtown?" He watches as her mouth fills like a dark room with smoke, watches as the blinds of her lids drop down on the windows of her eyes as if to keep the smoke from escaping that way, watches as her cheeks balloons, watches as suddenly she opens her mouth like a door on him, spewing smoke in his face.

First he tries to inhale it, then brushes it away with the fan of his hand when it begins to fill the frail house of his body. The smoke has curtailed her off from him, he sees, but thinks perhaps she will come around and so stands waiting for a chance reply, watching her watching him with disinterest, smelling through the smoke the chemical-rich scent of her jerry curls or perhaps it's the trench itself. Behind her across the trench, a purple brick house lies collapsed like a dead body in a yard. "Most of the houses are in a grave state," he'd noted in his memory notebook. That notebook, he remembers, had told him that "the houses in Trenchtown are like colorfully painted graves."

His mind and eyes travel back to the girl, who, if he can remember, hasn't answered him, but seems to be staring rapt with serene brown eyes at his army uniform. Softly, he sighs, forking his middle and index fingers into the deep furrows of his forehead, and on through his cloud-gray hair, still waiting for an answer, wondering if she might have answered and he'd forgotten or didn't hear. Or else he feels like some kind of museum piece.

Suddenly she looks up and he catches her gaze. "I was a soldier," he says, certainly, brushing hair-like fog from his uniform.

"Me can see dat," she says, in that language his memory notebook had described as "the illegitimate child of French, Spanish and English." A wind picks up and flags the ribbons in her hair. "It no safe to go around here dress like no soldier," she adds in better English, having discerned, in his view, his distain for patois.

"Thank you," he says. "But is this Trenchtown?"

"Yes, it Trenchtown," she says. "Mostly trench now after what the hurricane done did."

"A hurricane?"

“Yes, last week.”

Which explains his missing books on Blue Mountain, the general state of his hut, the downed and leaf-stripped coffee trees he'd encountered on his way down the mountain.

“Thank you,” he says uncertainly, surveying her muddy feet. He thinks to ask her about the “grandmother with mountainous body” mentioned in his memory notebook, but for the start-up knocking of a workman's hammer near by. He looks around, tracing the sound, which reminds him of a woodpecker. When he looks back around, she's smiling uncertainly at him like a lost daughter. Looking around at her and the other girls, who are standing away from them now, he wonders where their mothers might be.

Overhead the streetlight flickers on and off and on like his memory and he remembers never having met his mother. Remembers being told by, he thinks, his grandmother, that his mother died at his birth. He turns at this memory to leave but the heel of one boot hooks in some root in the gravel and he tips to fall, flailing with both arms. She moves to steady him, as if he is some antique vase on the verge of falling off a table. The table of the world, he thinks as he regains his balance, keeping his head down so as not to look at her. The shadow of her hands slides over his head and he brushes off what he sees as her uncertain motherly hands. “Look, you okay?” she finally says, bending down to him. She's so close to him now that he can smell jerk-chicken on her smoky breath.

“I'm well,” he says, raising his head, taking in her pleated red skirt, the stringy white bra barely covering her too-large breasts. “Seeing a woman completely for the first time,” his memory notebook had said, “was like seeing God.” He comes up level with her eyes and what he sees in them is genuine affection. He looks away and she stands, arms folded over her breast. He closes his eyes, feeling the weight of her pity heavy on his sore back. “I'm well,” he says again, in a bitter tone now, more bitter than he'd intended. She retreats back to the edge of the trench, so far now that his good left eye cannot make her out.

A light goes on and off in his mind and he remembers his grandmother with her mountainous body and her head wrapped in a bronze shower cap, fetching him from the trench. But in another moment that memory is lost.

She stands back and over the rigid flame of a lighter relights her cigarette and draws in smoke she releases with the word, “battyman.” Then turns around, but he knows this is only her way of saying to him “move

on, you mindless old fool," and so he doesn't answer, but takes the cue to move on, visited by the sudden memories of gays killed and thrown into the trench, washed out to sea, how as a boy and later as a soldier fighting the gunmen here, he would retrieve them, the gays, from the trench. For him it's not a pleasant memory. One he would like to forget, even as he tries to remember himself.

He stops a little way down the trench and sits on the rubble of a ruined blue tin house. A soldier walks past, roughing a man. "This is the hell I grew up in," Ambroise writes. "That hurricane was God marching through and destroying this hell." He looks for a moment at the trench. "And this trench has always been a wound in the heart of the city."

He walks on, wondering now about his father, as the shadow of a man walks by him with two small sons. From a distance the ocean speaks to him in a chorus of waves and he thinks that maybe his father was a fisherman. Just maybe. He stops to read the line in his memory notebook which says, "Dad, sometimes I pray to you," and wonders why he would pray to anyone, especially to someone he's never even seen. It is foolish, especially now that he doesn't feel any sense of attachment to his father. His father and mother, he feels, were never here. No wonder, out of nowhere he remembers, his grandmother used to call him God's son.

"Grandmother's house," his memory notebook says, "is a small purple gravelike house at the end of the trench, where the trench meets the sea," and so he heads for it.

"There is a moon," he writes, when he reaches a narrow-intersection of walled pathways. "It shines mutely behind a blanket of gray clouds."

He comes upon a cluster of work men asleep on rubbles of bricks. And so near to the sea and not wanting to attract attention, he takes off the jacket and throws it into the dark foggy trench and watches vaguely as it's carried downstream "like the last of my memories," he writes.

Here all at once the hammering and sawing stop as he walks past an orange-tent church loud with the sounds of worshipful voices, which doesn't remind him of going to church. He stands behind the church for a while, the tent aglow with candle flames. He cannot remember how he was told that his father was a disgraced pastor, not here. But the memory strikes him and he moves on, inhaling the briny breath of the sea on the wind.

Out of nowhere a Rasta, with dreads flailing wildly in the wind like branches, approaches him, asking him for money for beer. Keeping his eye on the man, Ambroise digs into his pants pockets, thinking that if he were a soldier like he believed himself to be before, he would be smashing this

man's face in instead of standing before him submitting to his will.

"Come on, oldy," the Rasta says, kicking up gravel with his shoeless feet. Out comes his rum-smelling tongue wetting his ganja-black lips. He sighs, an impatient sigh. "Well?"

"Nothing," Ambroise says searching the last of his back pockets.

The Rasta looks at Ambroise's wrist with growing eyes. "What bout that watch? It gold?"

Ambroise looks down at his wrist and realizes that, in fact, he's wearing a gold watch. "I don't know," he says and pulls the watch from his wrist.

The Rasta takes it and holds it up to the streetlight. Content, he moves on up the trench, a wake of gravel dust following him.

Ambroise rubs the bright ring left around his wrist by the watch, remembering that his father's wife in America had sent the watch to him with the telegram, how long ago--he can't seem to remember--but for sure he remembers now having an understanding that his father was dead, "ashed on the sea," the telegram had said. He understands now that he's lived all of his life without mother and a father, but moreso without a father, whom he feels was always in reach. He cannot remember his father's face and he's sure that like God, like his mother, he's never seen his father.

And why would his father's old American wife, whom Ambroise doesn't know, send him a gold watch with the telegram? He can't remember.

A gun shouts in the distance and he moves along.

By the time he has gotten to end of the trench it is midnight and that light which had been flickering in the room of his mind steadies now, though not as bright as before, say when he was young. It seems to him to dim with each forgetful episode.

Near the end of trench he comes to what he imagines is his grandmother's old yard, where he must have lived. "There are no memories here," he writes standing in the gateless, grassless, houseless yard. He walks around in the boarded-around yard but can remember nothing, except that his grandmother must have filled it up with her mountainous body. Disappointed, he leaves and walks across a bridge over an intercepting trench, the bridge taking him past a tile factory with smoke rising to the heavens like prayers, past this factory and out to the black sand by the sea.

"The sea is worldwide," he writes, sitting on the sand, watching the black tide come and go. "It brings back memories."

He remembers that once as a boy he swam, he believes, halfway

across the Caribbean Sea trying to get to America. He can't remember what prompted him or what brought him back. He thinks about his father now "ashed on the sea," as the telegram had said. He remembers, someone, maybe his grandmother, telling him, that his father used to be the kind of pastor who impregnated the young women of his church. Probably Ambroise's mother was one of the number. He cannot say. But he remembers now, throwing sand at the sea, that he was told his father was a fisherman off the shores of America (his grandmother must have told him), which is why, as a boy he loved watching the sea. It isn't much, these small remembrances, but they are a part of his longing and longing makes him human.

It worries him, his forgetfulness. For isn't forgetfulness inhumaneness? he wonders looking at the grayed-over sky. And ultimately what is death if not forgetting altogether the stars, the moon, the sky, the fog, the night, the sea, the past, the present and finally his own thoughts when self forgets self?

From his position in front of the sea, he remembers once praying to his father, begging his father to rescue him from this tormented place that after his youth Ambroise had come back to as a soldier to help make more habitable by destroying the evil in it. Maybe he prayed to his father because his grandmother called him God's son and somewhere along the line he must have really believed it and prayed to his father. After all, God is faith in whomever we believe can save us and didn't he always believe standing here that America was heaven? And didn't his father rule hell from heaven, he wonders now, sending small monthly sums of cash in letterless foreign envelopes, and once later, perhaps, by accident, sending a moneyed envelope with a return address?

Drawing circles in the sand, he remembers a thing he used to do as a boy.

He opens his memory notebook and using those notes, with the point of his index finger writes a long letter in the sand to his father.

When he's done, he stands back and watches as the black tide comes in and takes every word out to sea. His father, a part of the sea, will read them now.

Clouds move over him and he lies back in the sand and closes his eyes and falls asleep, dreaming of his new-found memories and longings in a way he must have done when he was a boy and woke up, the sun shining over him.

Barrel Children

Dear Mrs. Claudia Burns,

When I told Mum I wanted to be a writer, she said, Write to your father, which I've already done. She did not say, Write to your father's other wife, but here I am. Truth is, I don't believe Dad's ever told you about me, as he's told me next to nothing about you, 'cept I once overheard Mum saying how you're like the smiley white Baptist missionaries here in Orange Field; that you're married to Dad, who's still married to us. What I know about you, then, I've heard roughly from my Mum, who's heard it from my dad, who's said again and again that if you found out about us you'd cause trouble for him. I'm not particularly mad at you. Some things I understand, though I imagine all this must come as news to you. Dad's stop calling and barreling us.

I've to admit I don't know Dad that well, either. Dad left fourteen years ago when I was still growing in Mum's womb, when Sis was two years old, the year he and Mum'd gotten married under the blue tent of August Church of God. He went away on farm-working to your America with most of the other men of Orange Field, here, a small town in the middle of Jamaica. So there you have it: I've never seen him except in pictures he'd left behind: a tall thin man, looking up at the gold-coiny sun. In later pictures he sent from America, he'd grown wider, bearded, bundled in a world full of snow. I once overheard Mum saying before he left he'd swore he'd gone in search of a better life for us all. Like a hunter, I suppose, who never returned. Instead over the years he sent tall blond barrels full of everything he bought in his place. From what I know about other Dads here, I assume that earlier on in his farm-working days Dad ran off like a slave from the apple farm, slept under someone's stairs like Al's father, and then met and married you so he could stay on in your country.

What I want to talk about especially happened on a Saturday night, two months ago, when Dad was coming to visit us, he'd promised, and so we'd been waiting, sitting silent—Mum, Sis and I—since forever in white plastic chairs on the concrete stilted-high verandah, watching the moonlit point between the big blue Baptist Church and orange grove where, carless, Orange Field Road rose bending from our view, when we heard the crumbling hum of a car coming up through the canefields behind the church. A cold wind reaching down from your America'd for some days now been harrying us so that we'd our arms folded across the hand-me-

down gold sweaters first worn, I assume, by you, your son (not Dad's) and Dad, and sent by Dad, those sweaters, in barrels. Eyes glued to the road, we three stood up as the car came screaming light around the Baptist church.

"Dad," I shrieked, hopping down from the verandah, leaping down the miles of front steps and landing on the clayey ground, heading straight through the rows of tall red sorrel trees for the road.

"Dummy," Sis hullabalooed from behind, "It no him. But one a the missionaries, or the cane cutters them coming back from drinking."

"Shoot," I said to the wind, braking, skidding a little on the wetty ground, turned and moped back slowly through the slap of sorrel leaves.

"Don't call him no Dummy," Mum said with her big choir voice, sitting back down. "You of all people, who can't read for nothing, shouldn't call nobody that."

"Whatever," Sis hissed. When we're on good terms I help her with her love letters. "Whatever."

Mum, big as Dad likes her, bit her lip at Sis. "What you say, Miss?" Sis gave Mum a horrified glance.

"You didn't hear me say a thing, Mum."

"What?" Mum looks like Mums in slave movies with her big head shower-capped and her big face wrinkled.

Sis said louder, "You didn't hear me say a thing."

"Gods knows you better not." Mum was already mad with Sis for stealing money she'd hidden in the bottom of the rice barrel.

The car--a pickup truck full of sleeping drunken cane cutters--beeped past us as I climbed the steps. The driver was Mr. Bailey, head of the canefields and pastor of our tent church. Wonder how he could see us with the lights out. I got up on the verandah and eased my arse down on the hot tiles, between Mum and Sis.

"I bet Dad's at Dawn." Sis, who, looking to be a model, eats only one boiled pea a day, did this irritated sigh.

"Shut you stink mouth, you."

"Mum?" I said and wheeled right to show Mum my best wounded face.

"Leave him alone," Mum said, wagging a pudgy finger at Sis.

"But it's true." Sis pinched shut her tiny nose. "I can smell it from here."

Mum sat up and glared at Sis. "You know he can't help it."

You see, Mum'd told everyone that Dawn'd cast a dirty little spell on me when I was born, which baddened my breath. But only I believed

it—or pretended to believe it.

“Tell him to brush his teeth,” I heard Sis say. Mum leaned back, pressing her fingers to her temples to steady her rising blood pressure.

“That’s enough, young lady.” She had this hurt look on her face. She closed her immense brown eyes and whispered a few choice words to God. If Mum weren’t sitting waiting on Dad she’d be in the tent church behind the Baptist church in the canefield. I looked at Mum looking at the road. I could tell Mum was on my side but not on my side—or else she’d have knocked Sis dead for her backtalking. Truth was, I wasn’t suppose to know about Dawn, who’s Dad’s other island lover. Mum nor Sis don’t know, but how I find out truth was to hide in the half-empty barrels. There’s one or two in every room.

Sis went sad and quiet then, but doing what I hate. She’d began pressing the little birds on the front of her underwear, which made a twitting sound. Those she’d asked Dad for and he’d sent in the barrel. I don’t know if you know these. A lot of little girls round here’s got them too from their Daddies abroad. It’s nice to hear them playing with it, especially in school and at church, but to hear Sis doing it makes me sick. Taneesha next door once let me play with hers when she took it off to pee down by the river. Mum looked up and Sis too as a jet mowed overhead.

A few hours of vanilla dusk before we’d heard Air Jamaica wailing over night, which we all thought could be carrying Dad, ‘cept we didn’t really know for sure, since Dad’d said that he’d come like a “thief in the night.” I could just picture him though—him on his journey home from America. First he’d reddened your neck with stinging goodbye kisses at a snowy airport. Then he’d gotten on Air Jamaica and flew to Kingston, taxied to May Pen and met plump sugar-colored Dawn at her little yellow-tin house on the plains. I’d never seen Dawn but I imagined that she’d be all dressed up in some pink-lacy outfit like Mum’d bought in May Pen earlier that day. I imagined so cause I knew that like us, Dawn hadn’t seen Dad in so long. I imagined that a few barrels stood in Dawn’s room too and she might even’ve tricked, crouching await in one of those barrels, and pop up in pink lingerie when Dad entered through the unlocked door.

Actually, last October, Ricardo Truman’s Dad’d tricked and popped up in one of the barrels he’d sent (we’d been sitting on the verandah that night too, not waiting on Dad, but watching kids running around behind pick-up trucks filled with barrels they Dad’d sent). So I always held out hope that Dad’d do that too someday. In the midst of my picturing Dawn and wondering about barrels, Mum began sobbing like cry-cry Lisa Bend at school. So I knew she was thinking Dawn, too. Mum cries a lot, especially

before she falls asleep at night, her way of coping with Dad gone I suppose, crying to God, her friend and husband. I know about Mum's bedtime crying, 'cause I used to sleep next to Mum, so Mum can tell Dad that the only man in her bed at night's her six foot fifteen-year-old son.

I tried then not to listen to the jerky sobs of Mum, listening instead to the river washing up against and around the big stones, going down behind the house and the stonewall, crashing over Coconut Falls. But Mum's sobs continued so I continued listening to the river, looking at the church, which covers the eastern sky and the moon. The missionaries built the church a few years back on the wide-green common, where us men and boys used to play cricket and football on. Now most of the men use their farming money to buy suits, so they can go to church to try and marry the women missionaries to get their passport to heaven. There's been a few success stories on that front. Pretty normal around here now where men do this to get ahead. It's suppose to be arranged, the marriages--and plenty of men have done it and come back for their families, but Dad's not like plenty of men, I know.

"If the church wasn't there," I said, covering my mouth. "We could see all the way to the sea. See Dad coming, maybe." Sis was silent playing with her birds. Mum still and silent as the sky.

The oranges on the orange trees shone like bulbs as the beam from a flashlight yellowed them. I squinted and saw a staggering figure coming behind the flashlight. "Mad Blanche," I said. In her dirt-colored rippy old wedding dress, no less. Mum straightened up. Mad Blanche's a woman who used to go to school with Dad, but mad, people say, after her husband went abroad like Dad to find work and didn't come home. We watched Blanche crunching on gravel on her way up the road.

Suddenly Mum said, "What if when your father comes--" Her voice disappeared. But we listened. Mum never talks Dad with me in sight. "Suppose he asks you two if someday you'd like to go live with him?"

Sis turned her baldy head in silence towards the red-flowering hibiscus hedge, which divides our sloping yard from the Wright's. We both knew Mum was really talking to her.

"Well?" Mum said, widening her eyes on me. It was obvious, I thought, that she wanted to start off with the sure thing. I watched Blanche in her stinky dress, wandering down through the orange grove. That could be our Mum, so uncovering my mouth, I looked up at her.

"But Mum, what about you?"

"I'll come after you," she said.

"Tell us the truth," Sis said. No matter Sis loved Mum. We 're bond-

ed together, you understand, by our sheer dysfunction. The way people who live together learn somehow to love each other. Like you and Dad, I suppose. Mum looked up then over my head towards the church. I knew Mum wasn't coming. Not ever. Even if Dad'd promised her she would. Ten years with you. I don't believe Dad's ever met a woman he didn't love.

"You know my answer," I said to Mum. "I'm not leaving without you."

Sis squirmed in her seat as Mum and I turned our eyes on her. "Why's everybody looking at me?" Sis said, doing her pout.

Sis has always been closer to Dad than to Mum. Probably because she grew up knowing Dad and I didn't. I remember Mum telling me how Sis hollered for a long time after Dad left. Now Sis has a bad reputation in Orange Field. Ever since Dad left she's slept with every boy worth sleeping with. So I suppose she'd want to escape this town. Though you never know with Sis. Silence like before as Blanche doddered past us without saying a single word. I don't believe she even saw us, so focus was she on finding her husband. When Blanche'd passed Sis got up to go inside.

Mum turn to me with her liquidy eyes and said, "I'm thinking." She thumbed away tears from her eyes. "I'm thinking of buying that house." Old news, of course. Mum's long-held dream. It was a house Mum prized on Man Crow Mountain west of us, overlooking the light-blue Caribbean Sea. A house Mum'd been saving for, but wouldn't live to buy. Sis paused in front of the door, fiddling with the doorknob.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah," Mum said.

You, being a mother, would understand that with talk of the new house, Mum was trying to win us over. Mum knowing what'd happened to the husbands of Mrs. Blake and Mrs. Wells and Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Fine and Blanche and countless others and knowing what was happening between you and Dad, had I think now, no reason to believe that Dad would ever want her anymore.

Sis lifted her head. "When will you buy it?"

"I don't know yet," Mum said, "but soon." Mum smiled uneasily at Sis, who lowered her head, knowing, of course, that she'd stolen most every cent Mum'd ever owned.

"I'll think bout it," Sis said and pulled open the door. "Night then."

"Wait," Mum said, looking at Sis. "He's coming. Just you wait another hour." It was apparent that Mum still held on to her fading dream of us all living together with Dad. Maybe she thought that she could convince

him when he came and saw her and remembered how they struggled poor to begin with.

“No,” Sis said, “we both know he’s either with her or not coming.”

“He’s coming,” Mum said and gave Sis this angry look. “So sit the fuck back down.”

Mum’d cursed. Mum’d cursed. Heaven would collapsed right down. Sis sat back down, if only to be a part of this rarest of moments, which, no doubt, she’d be relating to her future children and their children’s children. Sis’s gaze found mine, her pea-sized eyes and mouth widening in disbelief. Mum’s never curse. Mum’s the holiest Christian around. Around here the worse thing to do’s curse, I’m trying to make you understand.

Mum leaned over and slapped at a bug whizzing around her ankle. It must’ve escaped, for she leaned and almost cursed again, stoppering her mouth with her hand. Sis groaned like somebody’d stuck pins in her ribs. Usually Mum’d be slapping her face for cursing.

“I wouldn’t bother bout him,” Sis offered. Mum returned this offering with a slow nod. Then turned to survey the red-wavering tops of sorrel trees. It was then I saw Sis give Mum a certain look, of reverence, the kind that Mum’d never’d gotten from Sis before, a look that said she’d was happy Mum’d finally sinned and come down from her high place.

I glimpsed Mum’s big hand hanging down over the left arm of the chair and reached up and took a hold of it, I suppose--you have a son you understand--to make sure Mum was still Mum. Mum looked down on me with a smile and used her other big hand to pat my cheek. I’m telling you, Claudia, if at that moment Dad’d have shown up, I’d have smashed in his face, for what he was doing to our family.

After that we sat in a long funeral silence until the phone in the living room finally sang, louder than Sis’s birds. Mum got up on the second note and went in. Of course we knew without knowing it was Dad. Mum allowed the phone to wail a few more, before picking up.

“Hello,” she said in a voice loud, but calm, followed by a pause, in which I’m sure Dad was lecturing his reasons for not coming: A snowstorm, you were suspicious. I can’t say for sure. Mum sucked in all the air out of the air. “This,” she began, breathing out, “is fucking ridiculous. You understand?”

I pictured Dad standing in some freezer cold phone booth (his way of hiding your detection), wondering if he’d dialed the wrong number, maybe this was Dawn or some other woman we didn’t know about, certainly not his Christian wife. Then I imagined he coughed, tightened his bundle

of clothes around him and gathered himself for battle like any man losing control would do, fighting back with fire-words, since that was the only kind of language, the burning kind, Mum would use with him that night. Mum didn't let us talk to Dad, and Sis didn't want to talk to him, she'd said, in any case.

I'm sure Dad asked and if we'd talked he'd have asked me the same one question he'd been asking me since the beginning of time: how's school? What books did I need? I'd a whole store of lit books under Mum's bed that Dad'd barreled and sent. Apparently Mum'd told him I was smart.

Dad stopped calling after that night, 'cause Mum wouldn't stop cursing at him instead of crying like she used to do whenever he talked to her on the phone and so to punish us, to show us how much we needed him, I suppose, Dad stopped sending barrels, sent less and less money, until no money, until Mum had to get a job cutting canes, until we all had to get jobs cutting canes.

What I miss most about the barrels was that we never knew what exactly was in them; Mum'd uncover them and unpack them one foreign item at a time, knowing that Dad'd touched the same rice bags, or shirts, or shoes. She'd hold them awhile in her hand, passing her gaze and fingers over them. And always when the barrels were unpacked and empty, Mum'd bend staring over into one of them, as though there was still something she wanted and didn't get and if she stared long enough it would appear. This happened with the last few barrels that came a few days after Mum'd cursed. These barrels were sent by Dad the day before the night he didn't come. You could say, he sent them in his place.

Any illusion of a marriage between Mum and Dad, between Dad and Sis, between Dad and me, is gone. The worst of it, though, is that there's silence where words should be. What worries me's that Dad doesn't know what anything means. Remind him for me of his barrel wife and children, remind him of the lives he left moving forward, remind him that I didn't have to see him to know who he was.

So now you understand, there are no fathers here. Send my father home. Convince him for me to at least talk to us, for it was as though he'd stored us for a long time in one of his barrels and mad how one night we got out.

Sincerely,
Reggie Burns

Eve Cummings Poetry Contest - Second Place

Julie Church

Brandenburg

My father plays Bach at bedtime.
(This is the time he has, nightly,
when practicalities need not matter
and the news can wait—and two
loud daughters are wandering into
that grey space between sleep and
waking, and won't beg for favorites.)
After he's done the dinner dishes
and kissed us all goodnight,
his hands tumble across the keys
to bring us solemn or jubilant music.
Those times, when he shuts out the day
to coax music from the piano,
we have always known to
"just let him play," or,
now that we are old enough,
to sit up late (with some excuse—
knitting, extra homework) and watch quietly
the passage of his hands tumbling
across the keys to bring him music.

letter to mr. cummings

cummings, poor man,
condemned forever by those in

genius crowds convinced of his senti

(that) mentality will get you nowhere, says he
you must under

stand up for yourself, Mr. Cummings. listen
to your wordhungry readers and be

come
someone respectable)
come, you silly objector. i know just
whatiammdoingitisnewandprobablyin

sane, we know you're sane, but why must you say
things in such a convoluted bigoted manner
and confuse us with cliché and

(objection from the floor

you must be joking if you think i didn't know
exactly what i was

) what were you trying to do, Mr. Cummings? and
why can't we

get it yet?

Seven Ways of Looking at Water

I.

It pours down from the wind-heavy sky
and he stands, lets the rain soak his hair.

II.

A tabby laps at her bowl.
Looks up, watches (mouth in a silent mew)
the birds out the smudged window.

III.

Drink ten glasses a day to maintain a healthy body.

IV.

She sits up suddenly from a tangle of sheets,
reaches for the glass making smeary rings on her bedside table.
Through a dream of Niagara,
the urge to drink has suddenly become
impossible to ignore.

V.

The doe pauses, cautious even at home in the green—
and dips her muzzle to the stream,
where water rushes over slippery rocks.

VI.

The ocean between us is rough and gray and cold and deep.

VII.

On a day when the heat rises in squiggled lines,
she lays an ice cube on her stomach and squirms
as it trickles down her sides, melting.

How to Read

Begin with the letters.
Memorize the exact curve of a C
and the way a Z bends sharply,
just so.

Then pick out the words.
Taste the way they sound,
hear the color,
see the music of the words.
Know the meaning,
not only etymologically,
but physically and vocally.

After you have the words,
delve into the sentences.
Listen to them,
see them, feel them.
They can speed up
or
slow
down
a paragraph,
they can tumble over each other
or flow together
or dis
 con
 nect.

When you have done this,
you will find that one
fits perfectly inside the next.
Letters, words, sentences.

Add them up and they become
novels and textbooks,
poetry and prose.
They become mountains and rivers,

thorns and deserts,
tears and laughter.
They become life.

How to Love an Older Man

You meet him at some sort of formal gathering—a wedding, perhaps, or a conference for your new publishing job—where you appear mature and elegant, in almost-leather high-heeled boots. You're wearing that demure peach nail polish you usually shun because it's not in style and hasn't been since your grandmother was a teenager. You stand at the bar, staring, transfixed by the variety of liquors you can't pronounce. You try not to sing along to the bad eighties music that you secretly adore. You look up and see someone standing a few feet away. He finishes his conversation, then sidles up to the bar and waits a few polite seconds before looking at you to assess whether you are going to order. You motion for him to go first.

"A scotch and soda, please," he says, and puts down a generous tip.

You redden.

You say, "I'll have a ginger-ale."

He flusters you, with his lightly gelled dark hair, dove-gray suit and cuff links. You are not used to men with cuff links. They confuse you. They are the reason you suddenly regress to your college self who never knew what to order at the bar. Your college self who invariably ended up with something she didn't want.

This man distracts you from your attempt at maturity. This in itself could be grounds for annoyance, but he smiles in a shy way and you can't help but admire the deep grin-creases that parenthesize his mouth. He himself is distinctly mature—unconsciously so. He has streaks the color of your mother's pewter porridge bowl coursing through his dark hair. You admire him and wish the boys you know from high school and college were more like this man with his scotch and his cuff links.

"You don't drink?" he asks. You realize you're staring at him, just staring, still standing near the bar in a stupor.

"No, I'm not. I mean, I do. Well, not all the time, I'm not an alcoholic or anything, you know, but sometimes I do. Drink things other than... milk."

You give him credit for keeping a straight face.

"Maybe I could take you somewhere, if you'd like," he says. "For a drink. Not milk, I mean."

You are flabbergasted. Not so flabbergasted that you don't accept,

however. You feel as though you're at a bar in college and you're not sure what you've just ordered. But maybe he'll be an improvement on the boys your own age, you think—the ones who'll take you to a baseball game, get drunk and throw up on your shoes in the taxi on the way home.

Your date is on a Thursday—that's good. It's not the official date night, but it's still close enough to the weekend to feel like a real event, like something you should skip out of work early to get ready for, so you do. Apprehension turns you into a jittery mess, and all you can notice are the cowlick your hair is forming and the pimple developing on your chin. You go home and try to relax. Then you remember you have to get up, get ready. You put on new real leather heels, in case he could tell the ones you got at Wal-Mart were from Wal-Mart. You put on silver nail polish and a green dress that shows just a little cleavage. You brush your teeth three times and meet him exactly on time so he'll think you're responsible.

He takes you to dinner in a fancy French place where you can barely interpret the menu. He orders goat-cheese ravioli with spinach. You have the same. After dessert he orders Camembert. You have the same.

"What do you do?" you ask as the bread basket arrives.

"I'm in corporate psychology," he says, and gives you a crooked smile. "I don't really know what it means either."

"I guess those big corporations get a little down sometimes just like the rest of us," you say. He chuckles. You hope he doesn't want to take you home, because keeping up your banter is exhausting.

Out of curiosity you wind up accepting his offer to drive you home. His car has soft brown leather seats and a clean smell. You find yourself relaxing, perhaps because you don't have the option of staring at each other, as you were forced to over dinner. When he told you how old he was back in the restaurant, you both got quiet for a while. It might have been because you choked on your bread when you figured out just how many years there were between you.

You have nothing to lose, you think. He drives and you count stoplights. He is bound to find out as soon as he walks into your apartment that your maturity is something you have adopted for the evening.

He parks in front of your apartment and hastens out of the car to open your door for you, but you open it before he gets there and he steps back a little awkwardly. You are a little taller than he is, so for the whole date you have been slouching a little to compensate. Now he bends over to help you up, and as you stretch out your back you accidentally elbow him in the nose.

“Ow,” he says. “Sorry.”

“Shit. Are you OK?” you say, instinctively moving towards him and putting your hand on his cheek. He puts his own hand over yours. This is the first time you meet his eyes without making an effort to disguise your emotions. For some reason, his expression seems very young to you, and you no longer want to entertain him. You actually smile at him.

It is the lopsided crinkles around his eyes when he smiles back that do it—you kiss him, bring him up to your apartment, sleep with him in your narrow bed with blue-flowered sheets. There are surprisingly few embarrassing moments.

After a few nights, you discover his slightly off-kilter side. You learn that he likes to go down to his basement to build model airplanes and that he sings operatic arias loudly whenever he does laundry because the washing machine magnifies his voice so nicely. These quirks endear him to you, but it is the stability that keeps you with him. In the past, your boyfriends occasionally had their own jobs, but they still tended towards fast food and beer rather than sit-down restaurants and expensive *côtes du rhone*. They still relied on you to pay the rent when they couldn't make it.

But he has a job which allows him to own a new house and an apartment in the city, a spotless car and a top-of-the-line computer. He has friends who talk about books and films (not movies), and he has an ex-wife he is still friends with and a stepdaughter eleven years younger than you. He makes you *filet mignon* and calls you at work almost every day. And it's fantastic. You stay at his apartment more and more often.

As the months progress, you feel your maturity beginning to stick. You now order a whiskey sour at any bar you approach. You start getting up early to go running (you've always hated running) and going to bed by eleven because he wants the light off. You find yourself listening to the radio stations he likes—oldies, classical, sometimes slow, syrupy jazz—and eating granola for breakfast. He likes to listen to the shows on NPR in the morning, and so you bring a portable radio to work with you and listen to them too. One of his favorite stories to tell is about the time he was on “Wait Wait... Don't Tell Me!”

One day, you find yourself looking at pantyhose in a department store. You are going to a wedding with him, and he wants you to wear pantyhose and a skirt instead of your usual fancy slacks. You realize suddenly, as you peruse the hosiery aisle, that a few months ago you professed to your mother that only old women wore pantyhose. You put back the taupe size B hose. You buy a hot pink cotton bra and a chocolate bar instead.

You go home. You sit in your over-heated apartment (he likes it to be a balmy 70 degrees) and feel your skin wrinkling. You stand in front of the mirror and inspect your eyes and neck for sagging. The eyes are always the first to look old, your mother has always told you.

He comes in, laden with organic food and new books for you to read. They are the kind of book your sister calls "improving." You leave them on the back of the toilet. You may or may not throw them there with unnecessary violence.

At the wedding that weekend, he keeps his hand on the small of your back, and when you shiver he says, "Should've worn the pantyhose."

You shrug his hand off your back and squeeze as far away from him as you can in the pew as the bride comes down the aisle. When people at the reception ask you what you do, you tell them you are in publishing.

"But one of my life goals is to become a singer in the Parisian metro," you add. You glare right back at him when he glares at you, and you both leave the wedding before the bride and groom cut the cake. In the car, you needle him about driving too fast, so he pulls over and gets out of the car.

"You drive," he says. He moves around the car and stands outside your passenger-side window, staring at your crossed arms and sullen expression as the wind whips his silvery hair into peaks. Every time someone zooms past on the highway, you feel the shudder right through to your bones. You shake your head. He gives you a long look and gets back in the car. You are silent the rest of the way home, and he hums softly along with the radio. You both stay at your apartment that night. You wake up to find him washing the dishes that have been in your sink for weeks. You feel like screaming at him, but instead you make coffee and fume silently.

Soon, his annoyingly cute habits become merely annoying. His granola looks and tastes like wood chips, so you buy honey-nut cheerios. The wine he brings home makes your mouth pucker, and you wish you had some of the cheap Riesling you drank in high school.

In bed, you are a mess of nerves. Your limbs feel like they are growing the wrong way--growing old. Your stomach feels like acid. He asks you what is wrong, and you pretend to be asleep.

After what seems like years full of fancy food and good manners and arguments about pantyhose, you wake up in his sunny apartment one morning and think I have made a mistake. He is not your road to maturity—he just happened to be in the middle of the road you took by accident.

At the kitchen table you look at him over your extra-crunchy granola and you ask him if he loves you. He looks back at you and says, "This

isn't working, is it?"

"No," you say, dumping the rest of your cereal down the sink. You thump the bowl into the sink too hard, and it cracks. He looks tired. All you need to see is a little immaturity, something to let you know he is still human. So you stomp out of the room and slam the door, which you know he hates. He follows you, rubbing his temples.

"Did I do something?" He asks, full of innocence. He looks wounded.

You yell at him. You tell him he's old, boring, weird. You say you want more passion than he can give you. It doesn't matter what you say—they are all horrible sentences, malicious things you don't mean. You say every mean thing you can think of, but he doesn't get mad at you. Eventually, you sag down onto the bed, exhausted. He puts his hand on your head. You brush him away.

"Maybe we should—" he says, and you say,
"Yes."

You sling your overnight bag over your shoulder. You walk out. As soon as you get downstairs, you wonder if it is a good idea to keep walking. Maybe it isn't. Maybe you should go back upstairs. But you quell your doubts and go home to your neglected apartment. You put on terrible eighties music and dance around in your pink bra.

A few weeks pass, and you hear that he has moved back to his house in the White Plains. You begin to date a guy from work, who is a few weeks younger than you are. You argue like siblings and have sex more often than you eat dinner together. You still listen to bad eighties music, but now you occasionally turn to the oldies station as well. The boy you are with likes indie bands no one has ever heard of, and you listen to those too.

When you celebrate your third month together, he takes you to the same French restaurant you went to with his predecessor, only he orders a hamburger and asks for non-fat milk in his coffee. You have a sudden longing for the time when you were the embarrassing one. You want him to have more of a history than he could possibly fit into his years. But he's what you've got, you think, as he licks the butter off his knife.

So you will buy him cuff links for his birthday, and hope they stick.

Eve Cummings Poetry Contest - Third Place

Adam Nesteruk

I Cried the Whole Night Long

Crossing the Texas Panhandle
In Amarillo
I found the audacity to don
The straw and wire cowboy hat
I purchased at a twenty-four hour Wal-Mart
In Scranton, PA.
This (the hat) looked good with a cigarette,
And I continued in this way for many miles
In and around the hour of noon
In the green and yellow of Amarillo
And around a few other towns.
I found the University of Amarillo radio station
And Hooker rollin' and a tumbling, and I continued on
Some More.
And I lit this cigarette, and noticed yet another sign
In stark and flat northern Texas
Beckoning hungry northern Texas men
To triple x pleasures, and 72 ounce porterhouses
Sometimes both
Sometimes more.
I was looking forward to the promise of a smaller billboard
One that claimed real live buffalo, and resulted in
An emaciated mother and calf
In a pen next to what I am sure was a grain elevator
In a railway depot.
And I was struck by a foul smell
That wasn't buffalo shit.

Pillow Talk

The beginning was the same as the end: they both stank. Juan Carlos smelled the same disinfectant the day his nephew Chris was born as he did the night that his mother died. He smelled it now that his brother was unconscious in a hospital room suffering from FNTI- fatal neurological television implantation. Only a thin white wall and three years separated Juan Carlos and his brother.

"Call me Juan Carlos," Juan said to his sister-in-law.

"Sorry I keep forgetting," she said as she filed her long French tipped nails. "Mike always calls you Steven around the house." Juan Carlos rubbed the filter of his cigarette with his left thumb nail. He placed the unlit Camel filter between his dry lips; he scratched the top of his grey head. His sister-in-law took a piece of bubblegum out of her Coach bag, unwrapped it and put the pink block into her mouth. She chewed it until it was soft and blew a bubble. A nurse walked by dressed in blue scrubs, too loose to show the curves of her body. Juan Carlos followed her with his eyes. His nose still unadjusted to the scent of the disinfectant.

"What time did you bring him in, Stephanie?" Juan Carlos asked, removing the unlit camel filter from his mouth so that he could lick his lips.

"About two hours ago. He wouldn't stop singing 'The Facts of Life' theme song." She blew another pink bubble, this one larger than the first.

"Aren't you afraid of germs," he pointed towards his mouth, "exposing the wet gum like that?" She shook her head no. He put his unlit cigarette back in-between his dry, chapped lips. "Where's the kid?"

"He's in the waiting room watching T.V."

"Get him away from that."

"He needs it. It reminds him of his father." Juan Carlos took an orange lighter out of his right jean pocket and lit his cigarette. The smoke from the cigarette made the hospital air real to him, unclean and breathable.

"My brother is right here." He knocked on the light brown wooden door. "In this room they're going to let us in soon to see him. We're all going in together. Bring him here."

"He's not going to die." A tear ran down her eye, he put out his cigarette. "The doctor said that Mike would be fine and you're not going to boss me around when we move in with you." She opened her Coach bag

exposing the pink leather lining. She took a tissue out and pressed it against her wet eye lids. The tissue now shown with glitter.

"I'm sorry," Juan Carlos said, placing his right hand above her hip. She took a step back.

"And I'm not going to sleep with you, even though that's what you told the doctor on the phone!"

"It was a joke." He looked at the white floor tiles. "We're all having trouble with this. Like I said on the phone you're going to have my bedroom. I cleaned out my office for Chris. I'll sleep on the couch... I'll make the breakfast. I know you heard me say that to the doctor too." He put his right hand against the white paper of the hospital wall which separated him from his brother. He looked at his watch. "Get Chris, the doctor is going to let us see him."

"No, Chris wants to feel close to his father. They're both watching Wheel of Fortune right now." He let out a sigh. He hated that show. His brother used to too. Juan Carlos couldn't talk to his brother when it was on. Mike ran color commentary, mocking the contestants who needed to buy an extra vowel to solve the puzzle. Juan Carlos made sure that if he ever had to call his brother's house he would do it after nine o'clock or before Wheel of Fortune came on. He kept a copy of the T.V. guide next to the phone, under Picasso and His Women, planning his calls to his brother according to what show was on and at what time.

"Do you want your son to end up like Mike?" Juan Carlos asked. "Or do you want him to be able to hold down a job, to be able to function?"

"He's going to be back to normal. The doctor said that he just needs a few months with everything turned off, that Mike will be back to normal by Christmas."

"What's normal, Stephanie? An over weight flannel clad unemployed reciter of last week's Leno?" He threw down his extinguished Camel filter that he'd been hiding from the nurses in his hand. "Remember babe, you didn't know Mike before everything happened, before the doctors had their way, before the implant. just don't forget that." He took his pack of cigarettes out of his black t-shirt pocket and opened the top of it. He took a Camel filter out and put it between his lips. "The doctor is going to let us in soon. Just get Chris so that we can go in, see Mike, and bring him back to my place." Stephanie blew a pink bubble and turned, walking in the direction of the waiting room. Her red cotton pants accented the curve of her hips and buttocks. She was still attractive according to People Magazine, which she

read biweekly, oblivious to the fact that she was fifteen years older than the average reader. Printed on her red cotton pants was a pet name Juan Carlos and Mike used to use in reference to the vagina.

Juan Carlos waited for Stephanie to turn the corner. He looked behind his shoulder; there was no one in sight. He took a mock drag of his unlit cigarette. He opened the door to his brother's room. The room was dark. The only light was the flickering blue screen of the television set. Juan Carlos roughly turned the switch off, the blue light no longer shown. He walked towards his brother's bed and knelt down next to Mike. "They never knew you. They never knew you before the surgery, before these last seven years."

He lifted his left hand and poked at his brother's damp double chin. He had played this speech out in his head time and time again. Constantly reworking and perfecting it for this moment. "I thought it was psychosomatic, I thought after the surgery you were supposed to stop eating junk food. They said it would be like a television was on in the background, in the corner of the room, that you could turn away whenever you wanted. You were too fat to keep eating Big Macs. Your heart couldn't take it. They said if you had a teeny weenie T.V. put in your head you'd see the commercials all day long. That that's all you needed was to see the commercials and you would be fine, you wouldn't want to eat 'em anymore."

Juan Carlos caressed his brother's large belly that was under a thin worn Star Trek sheet. "You know I had to fight with the nurse to get her to put this on your bed. They were always your favorite growing up,"

Juan Carlos took a section of the thin cotton sheet in between his thumb and forefinger. He rubbed his thumbnail against the sheet. "Remember when you were Captain Kirk for Halloween and I was Spock?" He ran his fingers through his recently grayed pompadour; his hair was as thick as it was when he was seventeen years old. "I've still got this stupid hair cut, Mike. We both wanted to look like Little Richard. You've lost almost all of your hair already. Only three years older than me and you look terrible." Mucus started to build up in the back of his throat. Tears tickled his lower eye lids.

"We're going to live together again, Mike, like we did when we were kids. Baby brother Steven is going to take you home. I'm going to look after you, like you did for me."

Mike woke up.

He made a noise that sounded like a goat or mule. He moaned. He blew a raspberry with his tongue and lips.

Juan Carlos put his arm around his brother; he knew that Mike would not return to how he was before the surgery. "I love you no matter what. No matter what, you'll always be my big brother." Juan Carlos stood up and walked to the other side of the dark hospital room. He opened the top drawer to a small dresser and took out a presumably blue towel; he put it on his shoulder. He bent down over Mike putting his arms behind his pudding soft back and rested Mike's fat chin on his shoulder. Mike started to drool on the towel. "I'll always love you."

The door to Mike's room opened. Stephanie, Chris and the doctor walked in leaving the door half open, allowing for a sliver a light to enter the room. Chris held a Kit Kat bar in his fat pink hand.

"You can take him home now," the doctor said. Stephanie snapped her gum, Chris chewed his Kit Kat bar.

Cori Payne

Merry Freakin' Christmas!

The letter my mother wrote to include in her yearly Christmas cards:

Seasons greetings everyone! These past 12 months have been a wonderful year of personal growth and fulfillment for the Morris family. My husband Roy quit his band to pursue a solo music career that is really taking off. My oldest daughter Claire moved to California because she was offered a job at a talent agency. This position came with a substantial salary increase. Also, she and her husband Ed have decided to try to have a baby! My youngest, Jeff, graduated from high school in June and is now living with his sister Meredith to get an idea of what it is like to be out on his own. He has always been very independent! When he was 12 he got a job as a paper-boy to save his own money to pay for summer camp. Meredith traveled to Europe over the summer and has otherwise been focusing all of her time and energy on her career as a legal assistant while she considers the possibility of law school. All in all, it's been an exciting year for my family and I feel blessed and lucky to have them, and all of you, in my life.

The letter I replaced it with:

Mom made huge progress this year when she went from drinking a whole jug of wine a day to a half jug. She even attended some AA meetings and when any of us brought up her excessive drinking she said "they told me in AA it's a disease, so really, there's nothing I can do about it." On the plus side, my stepfather finally broke off his affair with the singer of his band, but he still hasn't gotten a real job. (Maybe next year!) My older sister Claire moved to California and we've barely heard from her since. She's probably too busy being judgmental, but at least it's of people out there now and not us. And she and her loser husband have made the unfortunate decision to reproduce. Luckily, we'll never have to meet the little brat because it's not like Claire will come back to visit. My brother turned 18 and moved in with me because, as he put it, "I need to get out of this god forsaken hell hole." He has been stuck in that house his entire life, except for the summer when he was 12 and went to summer camp which he calls "the best part of my life thus far," despite the poison ivy and food poisoning incidents. Last but not least, my big news! I broke off my engagement because let's face it, marriage is for suckers.

Lois Lake Church

Lille Looks Down Her Nose

Approach, my servant, fill the bowl with food!
I fancy salmon cakes, not beef today.
That you could dare delay me is so rude
that I may not forgive you till you play
my favorite song, "O Prithee, Pretty Maid,"
and sing to me, and let me nip your ear.
My wrath won't last for long—be not afraid—
just do my bidding, bow, and act sincere.

I wonder how those peasants dare exist,
their tiger stripes and spotted pelts so crass
that if they all were gloves they'd not be missed.
My own grey, glossy fur is upper-class.
To be a queen's a perquisite of birth:
I should excuse them, groveling clods of earth.

Valerie B. McKee

Corporeal

A woman's skin is only a case for her self,
the zipper, impossible for a man's fingers
to find—even when he traces the bumps
of her spine, or kisses the tendon that stretches
from ear to collar bone when her head is turned—
the obvious place a zipper might hide.
Still undetectable as he buries his face in her hair,
filling his nose with lavender oil dabbed
at the base of her neck until he feels the petals
graze his tongue, tastes the color purple—or
is it the taste of metal when it touches teeth?
When she removes her clothing,
he believes she has nothing left to hide.
The acrid blade of desire pierces
his hands with each attempt to find her,
his hips with each attempt inside. He stops,
sees a flash of silver between two ribs,
digs nails into the skin between them like
tweezers pulling at a splinter until she jerks
away before he will find it, and force it open.
Her breath wraps around him like twine
and pulls him to her mouth, so she
can carefully reach for her side, tuck
the zipper away under tight skin.

Lee Keylock

The Great Frog Massacre of Hardwick Heath

The people were divided into the persecuted and those who persecuted them. That wild beast, which lives in man and does not dare show itself until the barriers of law and custom have been removed, was now set free. — Ivo Andrić

That day, frogs farted their chorus across the pond,
froglets clung to backs of their mothers'
while spawn rotted amongst the reeds.

We tried to fish, struggled to undo the riddles
of their bloated throats. We were nine.
Too quickly we were lost amidst the din.

As if we made a pact, we yanked our rod-rests
from the earth, sought out frogs from where
they blurped and impaled them on our pikes.

Through the backs of mothers we drove the spikes,
run-them-through until the tips dulled
against the granite buried deep within the earth.

At the sky we hurled frogs, watched their bodies star
against hanging sun as one upon another
we lashed them into the air squawking.

And who forgets the dull slap of bodies as they smacked
the water, turned it pearl-white as bellied-up the stunned
frogs lay, blunt tongues resting on their unlocked lips.

Whenever I am greeted by smells that mark the end
of summer, I am reminded of the blood as it bubbled
through their punctured chests, dribbled across tiny, silken ribs,

knowing their children had to fall, let go their grip
from their mothers' backs to sink to the silt floor,
deep in the pond, back to the dark.

Charles Kinbote

Leave Before the Lights Come On

based on the music video by Arctic Monkeys

She steps to the edge of the building, inhales deep and scared, then looks down, observing the street three stories below. The wind coaxes her closer to the expanse of air that lies ahead. A man with short brown hair catches her attention. He walks directly underneath where she teeters. She exhales and a shoe slips off her foot.

A young man walks the sidewalk in a London borough. He's a block and a half from his morning coffee shop, two blocks away from a newspaper stand where he will buy cigarettes and nothing else. The morning is bleak with waxing light. A street lamp refuses to shine even though the sun hasn't made its way above the surrounding buildings. It's a cool morning so he walks quickly as a shoe hits the concrete.

He looks around, cautiously picks up the shoe. His eyes eventually make their way skyward and that's when he sees a woman on the verge of joining him at the sidewalk. He runs for the building. The stairwell unfolds before him as he hustles, still gripping the shoe in his hand as a reminder not to slow down up the three flights. Light shines briefly from under the roof access door before he slams into it. Light and sky and height muddle his senses and it takes him a few moments of panic to gain his bearing.

It could be cloudy, but the woman wouldn't notice, never taking her eyes off the sidewalk. The wind frightens her short curls, and they blow back away from the ledge, revealing more of her flushed face. She hears pebbles crunch against cement as someone comes running towards her. She doesn't move from her spot, breathing heavy, forceful, barely controlled. The crunches get softer, more calculated. He closes in, slow. Easy does it. Easy does it, he's thinking,

"No sudden movements." That's one of a million thoughts screaming for attention in his mind. One thought chants a mantra, "Get her down. Get her down," while another hums with equal fervor, "If she jumps now, it's your fault. If she jumps now, it's your fault." He stares at the back of an ocean-blue, button-down t-shirt, goose bumps on lean arms. He should announce his presence but doesn't say anything. His mouth gapes with stupor and for lack of a better idea (or any idea), he waves the shoe in her periphery.

A familiar white shoe catches her eye. He's behind her and to the left, very close now. Her nerves want to jump from her body. She still contemplates the sidewalk, but senses the hand.

He shakes so violently he almost takes the offering away. But she looks at it, and then to his face, and back to the hand. She unclenches acrophobic fists and clasps his. And in an instant as liquid as water,

She hugs him. For the life of her, she hugs him so hard. She leans against him, one grateful arm across his swelling chest as they descend the three flights of stairs. She doesn't look, but has already memorized his features, high cheek bones, russet eyes, and she pictures his thin lips curling into a smile. She releases all of her weight into him. He walks carefully under the pressure of her body to the coffee shop. He breathes easier once he sets her down and goes to order two cups.

He sets a steaming mug in front of her and takes a seat across the table. He sips and spills some on his chin, still shakes with the release from tight gripped fear. She notices how smart he looks in that chocolate brown shirt with buttons bigger than his eyes, still scared and vulnerable. The moment is humanizing, and when he presses his palms flat on the table to stabilize them, she rests hers on top of his. She says, "Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you." But she pushes too far, "you mean so much to me," even though it's true. He looks a little uncomfortable, so she sighs and rests her head on his outstretched hand for a moment, "Thank you, thank you," her gesture speaks to him. But he has to go.

They stand together. She won't let go, not yet she won't. When he pulls himself back, she pulls herself closer to him, still linked at the hands. She senses their connection, stretching beyond the touch of strangers in a cramped breakfast shop. Their faces are close, and getting closer. Her eyes close in gentle expectation, but

"Uht," and her eyes open to a hand, making a wall between their lips. She stares at a gold wedding band. He flips from palm side to backside, making sure she can see it. He smiles weakly, so she follows suit.

He makes sure to tell her words of comfort before he heads home (forgetting about his cigarettes). "Now, you be careful." The words of course, have a double meaning. They say, "I'm leaving now, so you'll be on your own." They slam her against a wall, "Don't fucking jump off a building!"

A weak smile lingers on her lips like vinegar nostalgia. She watches him walk out of the coffee shop. Her smile wanes as

He walks past the window once he's outside, and smiles a big, "your

going to be all right (I hope)” smile through the safety of the glass. He makes his way down the sidewalk, putting together all of what has happened. He wipes sweat from his forehead.

Nerves fight against logic, impulse against better judgment. She flashes fleetingly back to the hug they shared, and extends that moment through infinity; the family they’ll have, the love they’ll make, the jokes, tears, and laughter.

He’s barely out of view when she comes running up behind him. Her body leaps for his like unstable atoms and he falters under her weight. He staggers to a halt and turns around to scold her, but people pass by so he brushes off her imposition, walking a little faster now. But she catches up to him again, reaching for his

Hand in hand they walk to the road, while he tries to pull his from hers. When he finally slips free, the force of his effort shoots him into the road, and a car screeches to a halt. Arms go up in apology.

She slaps the hood of the car, as if it’s the car’s fault for ruining a moment that had so much promise. She looks

Around the corner, he scuttles faster, looking over his shoulder to make sure

She’s following at a distance, taking alleys to stay undetected. She thinks, “If I can just make him understand.” And this causes her to hurry, pulse to flurry like butterfly nerves in an operating room.

And she catches him, heads him off in a sunny junkyard behind tenant buildings. The sun yawns wide on the day, and he can see the desperation on

Her face squints in the sunlight. He mistakes her smile for a grimace and appears worried as she approaches with the determination of a battle tank. Her arms go up and

She loves him. He has to feel the same. Even if he doesn’t know it. It’s love to save someone else. It’s love to be that unsure, that scared. She pushes him hard for loving her. She pushes him harder still for leaving. She shoves him against a wall, and he instinctively clenches his fists, remembering how hers were clenched on that roof.

He threatens, “Now you be careful.” But this time it has only one meaning, “I will hurt you.” But she’s not listening and knocks him hard in the chest with both hands. He stumbles, recovers, and makes straight for her

And she cowers, takes measured steps back. But he loves her. She risks it, and launches at him once more with full force and arms out-

stretched. But before impact,

He catches her wrists and swings her, back denting a chain-link fence. And he holds her by the wrists; tight. But she feels no pain worse than his cruelty. She wants to scream, "You Love Me!" She's exposed, secured against the fence, at his command, the buttons on her shirt ready to flee and expose her further. She would give him everything, but she's scared to move. But his grip, tight and passionate, screams "this is love!" She's almost crying with the force of

His crushing grip elicits soft moans from her mouth. Conscious of this, he controls his heavy breathing, loosens his grip slightly, but doesn't let go. He speaks, keeping her attention pinned to the fence, "Please

Don't do this" she thinks while he talks. She can see the desire in

His eyes flare sunburst hot, and she glows from the heat of his temper. Maybe he thinks, "Why can't she just leave me alone?" but it's more like, "FUCK! Why can't she fucking leave me the FUCK alone! FUCK!"

But she's not done yet. Her body remains at his crippling command, but she's still not done because when he thought,

"FUCK!" It was almost audible, and his lips parted millimeters from

Her lips quiver and she leans in to kiss him. But he pulls back; let's go of her, and instantly

His hands slam the fence on either side of

Her face, arms, and body all cringe. Eyes wince shut. He's already leaving when she opens them again, lips kiss an empty set.

He thinks, "I seriously almost hurt her. And after I saved her life."

She thinks, "He hurt me; broke my heart." And she thinks it again. Then again. She hyperventilates, hating herself more with each breath. She inhales vulnerability, exhales hope, and

She starts running. And she pictures him shaking off what's happened and walking quickly home to his wife who loves him, and whom he loves very much. And she's crying, running faster, past the newsstand. He's telling his wife about what happened. Maybe he uses the word "crazy" in the same sentence as the word "woman", and she's full speed past the coffee shop, bursting past morning commuters with their wallets and purses filled with pictures of loved ones. She takes the stairs two at a time, first flight. Then three at a time, leaping up as many as she can manage, second flight, third flight, and the access door to the roof explodes open as she streaks across the expanse of gravel towards the ledge. Everything blurs as tears free themselves from her in a kamikaze dash for the space beyond the edge

of the building. She loves. She cries. She tries. She loves. Too much. Too often. She's sky.

She blinks.

She stops.

She steps to the edge of the building, Inhales deep and scared, then looks down, observing the street three stories below. The wind coaxes her closer to the expanse of air that lies ahead. A man with short brown hair catches her attention. He walks directly underneath where she teeters. She Exhales and slips a shoe off her foot.

Samuel Eddington

Turbidity Current

The moment after nothing happens,
a submarine dervish,
black mud scimitar
edged in cirrostratus shells,
rages down the slope
past fish covered with green stars.

Jillian Boyd

A Time for Lions

I don't want those
poignant moments
when my heart leaps skyward with joy
as gravity
pricks its ears,
throws its mane,
leans back on its lazy haunches,
pragmatic,
and slides its needle claws
through flesh
and I sag
earthward.
Homeward.
I don't want sleep
to be my conscience
or my consciousness when
dreaming lucid
is more agreeable than
sleepwalking awake.
I don't want to buy into
tragedy
or gravity
or your archaic grin
as you go down
struggling
beneath the lions.

Stumbling Stones

When it gets to be too much
to bear on aching shoulders
or in a weary heart
or in a baffled mind,
and on torn and bloodied feet,
as they drag over the stumbling stones
put it on the shelf gently for a while
and rest your head in my lap.
We shall sit in the heavy darkness
in the middle of the forest
and I shall stroke your hair and sing you
lullabies of heroes and demons
and sirens you must face and overcome
or succumb to.
And when you are rested and reassured
we shall rise and embrace
and you shall lift your burden and continue
into the velvet, choking night
of tangled trees and angry stars.
And I shall stand and watch as
you disappear as if off the edge of the earth.
All you leave me to remember our moment by
are your bloody footprints
from the cruel stumbling stones.
“But know this,” I will say to your back.
“All will be well in the face of the unknown
if you face it bravely and with stoic
yet passionate heroism.
You are tragedy and you are beautiful.”
Radical acceptance of the
all of your existence will elevate your Way
and the path through the ever descending dark
and rapidly encroaching forest
will seem clear of the stumbling stones
that once, and still are
and will ever remain
wet with the blood of your torn and wretched feet.

Now I turn down my path,
into my own velvet night
with my own stumbling stones.

The Bone Branch Tree

I wish you delights
like the delight of a child's
discovery of the bone branch tree,
when scared and crawling through the void
from the monsters in his head and in his house
his hand brushes the cool
smooth bark of reassurance.
We live in a swirling of dark and horror,
cold and empty as the child's mother,
frenzied and cruel as the child's father.
This void of time and space and fear
devours light and dark equally,
devours love and hate equally,
devours the swan and the raven equally.
Broken souls throw themselves
again and again against jagged hope
until they are carrion on the cliffs of horror
to be picked clean by the Harpies,
who even as they gorge are themselves being devoured.
In it all the child sits under the bone branch tree.
It is an iridescent monolith,
a still, effulgent whiteness
against the black of repulsion.
Its bone branches rise in quiet rebellion,
its bleached and smooth limbs
embracing the black
even as the black strives to crush it.
The child leans against the bone branch tree,
His smile, delight.
His heart, joy.
His mind, defiance.
His soul, luminous.
He rises
to embrace his mother and his father.

Art



Hank Roberts Art Contest - First Place
Stefan Znosko



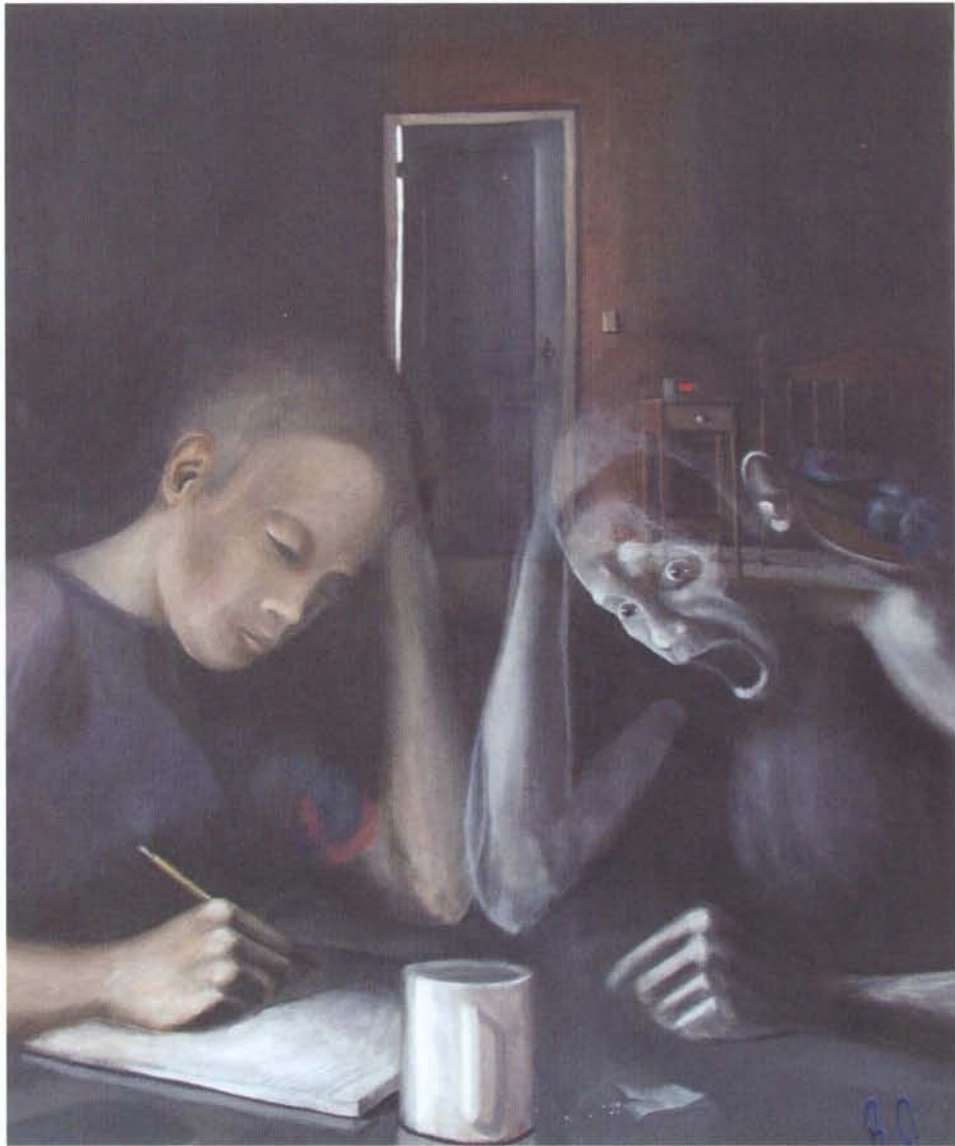
Stefan Znosko



Hank Roberts Art Contest - Second Place
G.I. Joe on Watch - Tim McFarland



Destroy and Rebuild - Tim McFarland



Hank Roberts Art Contest - Third Place
Inner Turmoil - Ben Quesnel



Brett Hillman



Shizuka Shibata



Hank Roberts Art Contest - Honorable Mention
Shizuka Shibata



Birth of Orion - Melissa Schmitt



I See You - Dana Moran

you, reminding you of how lazy you really are. You decide that you'll probably be late if you don't leave now, so you head into your cubby hole of a kitchen and look for something that could fool your stomach into thinking it was breakfast. Your eyes linger on the three ripe bananas sitting beside the sink, but the overwhelming fear you have of ingesting too much potassium and dying because of it prevents you from taking one. Outside your overpriced four hundred square foot apartment you decide to leave your Schwinn Collegiate that should have been dropped off at the dump years ago chained to the fire hydrant outside your apartment, the bus would be a better idea, besides, it's too cold to be riding around town on that rickety old thing.

On your way to the bus stop, you pass by a McDonalds. Stop and stare into the window, contemplating whether or not you want to poison your body. Ultimately decide against it, as you had recently seen that documentary Super Size Me on cable, and the thought of ingesting anything referred to as "fast food" immediately gives you the McStomach-ache, along with the McTwitches and the McTummy, ruining all those hours spent at the gym, and the longer you stand there, the more you feel as though you're going to McVomit, so you quickly remove yourself from the entrance of the McDonalds and continue to the bus stop. Tell yourself that breakfast really isn't the most important meal of the day, and resolve to have that mysterious "fourth meal" you keep hearing about during all of those television commercials compensate.

Get on the M109 because you're too broke to own a car and they are of little use in the city anyway. So just get on the bus. You can feel better once you do because it's public transportation, carpooling for the masses, so you don't have to feel guilty about burning petroleum, which in your mind is not only damaging to the environment, but also responsible for the shedding of innocent blood. For some reason you're reminded of an overly-pretentious movie starring Dustin Hoffman, something about the petroleum. Either way, forget about blood. Better yet, forget about politics, it's been too long a day for you to be examining the morality of a nation anyway. Just get on the bus, find a seat and shut your eyes. Listen to what's going on around you. Ignore the young man with the glasses and the same grey corduroy blazer that you happen to own, and his argument with the older gentleman who reeks of Lord Calvert Canadian Whiskey. Just let things exist, whether they are in close proximity to you or not. Try not to think so much, but if you find that to be particularly difficult, try thinking about something neutral, something non-threatening. Something like fabric

softener. Or possibly erasable pens, due to the fact that you can have the concreteness of ink, without the fear of making a mistake.

At this point in time, you might begin to wonder what the point of everything is. You could work on your thesis or that presentation for work all day and night and still be hit by a city transit bus while crossing the street next morning, so you wonder, what is the point? Maybe everything has a reason, maybe it doesn't. You try to disassemble yourself, probe your own psyche. Fail at this because you're too caught up in thinking about what time the Maple Leafs game is on and whether or not channel twenty-nine will be playing badly edited kung-fu movies at eleven. Settle on the fact that nothing is related, nothing happens for a reason and come to the conclusion that optimism is for chumps, people who refuse to accept the harshness of reality. You decide that the world is nothing but random occurrences, and that sometimes things pan out, sometimes they don't. You start to think about how the world is a cruel and miserable place, and oddly enough, you take some comfort in that. Get off the bus and go to class/work.

After work/class, head back to the bus stop. Pass by an attractive young woman but don't say anything because you're just not that comfortable about approaching a total stranger. Especially one that you find attractive, because well, you lack what most people would call a "backbone". You start to think about invertebrates, specifically jellyfish, possibly due to the fact that you were up until four watching the Discovery Channel. To shake the image of jellyfish floating about the ocean with no real direction, you look at your cell phone and discover that you have a good twenty minutes before the next bus arrives. You sit down and wish that you had remembered to charge your iPod as a middle aged woman sits down next to you. A familiar odor invades your nostrils and when you look at the wrapper of the woman's cheeseburger you can taste the McVomit working its way up your throat. You cover your nose and mouth with the palm of your hand and desperately search for an escape. Look up and across the street to Tommy Sullivan's, the pub you visited rather frequently with your neurotic friend Michael when you still had the free time to do so. It is at this precise moment that for some reason, you remember book from *Borders*, specifically the bit about being a catalyst, and how you have to take an active role in shaping your life the way you want it. You start to stare off into space, pondering life's greatest mysteries when you notice that the attractive girl from thirty-seven seconds ago is walking into Tommy Sullivan's. You decide to get yourself a drink while you wait for the bus. You rationalize this by telling yourself that it's too cold to be waiting outside, however you know that you

have ulterior motives, and you manage a faint smile.

When you get to the bar, the bartender asks you if you'll have the usual shot of Lord Calvert's Canadian Whiskey. When you reply with a confused no, he apologizes and says that he mistook you for someone else. Order yourself a stiff drink, maybe Johnny Walker, or perhaps Grand Marnier. Believe your gut when it says that you'll need it. Scan the bar looking for the girl from the street, but all of the smoke that is lingering in-between the bodies of total strangers burns your eyes (you find it weird that you don't recognize anyone, has it really been that long since you came here, or is it the fact that you have a tendency to black out when you drink heavily part of the reason why no one seems familiar?). Someone says hello to you and it takes you off guard. You don't recognize him but you respond anyway by nodding your head. You start to wonder if you're ever going to spot that girl when you see him, and your whole world comes crashing down around you. He seems to be in a much better mood than when you saw him on the bus. He's laughing with a few of his friends, one of whom points to his grey corduroy blazer and compliments him on it. You look into the empty glass sitting in front of you and you order a beer. You look back at the young man from the bus, and even though you don't want to believe it, you can't help but think that seeing this man, this total stranger, twice in one day, makes you think that maybe there are reasons for things. Maybe this man holds the answers to the questions you've been asking almost all of your life. Maybe everything from every person to every animal to every rock to every leaf to every grain of sand to every particle of dust to every atom is linked in some way. You start to feel something build in the pit of your stomach. A kind of weight that you haven't felt in a long time, but for some reason, you still recognize it. You tell yourself that things are going to start to turn around, and you smile, not half-assed the way you did before, but an actual smile. You look back up at the man from the bus and over his shoulder you can see her, the woman from the sidewalk. You know that this has to be fate, that you have been embarking on some sort of predestined journey. You grab your beer and push yourself off of the barstool. You run your fingers through your hair and walk with purpose. When you pass the man from the bus who just happens to be wearing the same exact corduroy blazer that is hanging in your closet at this very moment, you pat him on the back. He looks at you as if you're demented, but you just keep walking towards the girl. When you finally reach her, Regina Spektor's Better starts to play and you feel as though you are not yourself. You feel as though you are watching yourself from the comfort and anonymity of a movie theatre

seat and it fills you with a confidence that you have never felt before. She brushes her blonde hair away from her face and tucks it neatly behind her ear and looks up at you with big green eyes and says hi. You respond with a rather eager hello. She waits for you to say something, but when nothing comes she lowers her head slightly, smiles, and gently bites her lower lip like the girls in movies do, but never in real life. You can't help but feel as though you've been sucked into a beer commercial or something, what with the dim lights, the music, the attractive young woman and the bar setting. You start to think maybe it really is a commercial and at any moment now the director is going to yell "cut" and ask you who the hell you are. Maybe Coors Light. Maybe Molson. You snap back to reality and ask her, "Do you like hockey?" and when she enthusiastically responds with a yes; you feel a slight tap on your shoulder. You turn around to see the man from the bus. The one with the same grey corduroy blazer as you. And when he asks his girlfriend, who you've just had the most awkward conversation with, if you are bothering her, your heart sinks deep into your stomach and you feel your testicles shoot up into your throat. Come to the conclusion that you were wrong about everything. The world isn't a cruel and miserable place to everyone, just you. And just as you are about to slink back into the shadows and wait for your bus, the blonde girls cute brunette friend comes up to you and says, "So you like hockey, huh?"

Hooligans on E

Bark
But not like a dog
Think trees
Then bark again

Smoke
But don't inhale
It's a ghost
Your ghost

See
But don't think
Feel
But don't touch

Drink
Until you can't feel
Anymore
Then drink some more

Smile
Let yourself drown
Watch
The sky burn
Your lover sleep

Play
As a child
Pretending to be grown up
Fail, but keep trying

Listen
With your heart
Attack
With silence
And a pen

The Prophet

We spent our last ten at the drive-through window. Walked up, ordered four dollar-menu burgers, two cokes and a shake to share. Got hassled for being pedestrian – both on our feet and in our nature (street kids must be dullards to pull a walk-up) – but really, why go inside? The fall air was crisp. And we smelled. Stunk like a thousand dumpsters: all of them from here to Indiana, then back again up towards Wisconsin. Every alley, every trash can. We needed a break. Cars lined up behind us and aimed their headlights. The silence was a thrown gauntlet and they dared us to stay. Tyler would have fled but I stood ground and bolted him to my side with my right hand down his butt pocket, a cigarette in my left. I flicked my ashes at the next car in line – yes, sir, I do accept your challenge – and the car honked. The teenage cashier scoffed at us behind the teller glass and the drink-pouring girl behind him rolled her eyes. She let our Cokes overflow. When they finally deigned to hand us our food, Tyler, high-strung already, hocked a logie through the window. It landed on the kid's fat pimpled face and slid down like a slippery plinko chip between his zits. After that, we ran, three blocks down West to the El station on the corner with Clark.

The last of the cash we used on two CTA passes. Tyler was on edge – his black eye from earlier that day inched down his face and he kept his hoodie drawn to hide it. He ripped his pass when the machine spit it up at him. His mood was sour, and like his face it curdled around the edges.

"I hate McDonald's." He stomped up the stairs. "A waste of fucking money."

"Just 'cause you only got a twenty today, don't blame it on me. I like the finer things in life." I raised the bag.

"That guy could mind read."

The guy was quick, I'll give him that. Tyler had barely sneaked his hand to the guy's rear pocket when, sensing some disturbance in the force, the guy reeled and punched Tyler in the face.

"Excuses," I told him with a puff of smoke. "You should have seen it coming."

Tyler punched a bulletin board on the wall. The plastic casing rattled. He dislodged a pushpin and one of the schedule postings inside slipped, dangling back and forth on the axis of a single pinpoint.

Not till midnight by my reckoning do we reach our Ravine and slide down the curved concrete walls into the muck on the bottom. It hasn't rained in weeks and the mud surface cracks with neglect, though a small rivulet of city runoff trickles through the center. A creek in the desert. I open my backpack on the only clean patch of concrete and dig out my sleeping bag. Tyler seats himself by the ravine wall and takes out his two burgers.

"That's breakfast!" I snap.

He takes a big bite. Half the burger is in his mouth. He chews.

"You'll complain tomorrow."

"Dunkin." His easy answer. He turns away. If only he saved calories like he saves his words. I lean back and take the paper bag from him.

"Fine." I pull out one of my own burgers.

His chewing slows. "No guarantee we'll actually get anything."

"What, you worried?"

"No."

"Fine," I say. "If you're worried, I'll just fatten up now."

Tyler shoves the last piece in his mouth. "You never get fat."

"Seriously. You of little faith. I can do it. Give me thirty burgers."

Tyler turns away. "You didn't even get fat when you were pregnant," he says. And there is nothing more I can say. He's right.

We zip our bags together; throw our ratty little thermal blanket on top. I'm on the left edge of the pallet, scrunched in a ball, my knees drawn up to my chest. He's sprawled on the other edge, on his back smoking and blowing it up at the moon. His heat doesn't reach me, only his smoke.

My breathing is still heavy and my heart patters when I reach for him, but his side of the sleeping bag is cold. My dream rings in my head. His absence is the climax of the nightmare, and I'm going to have a heart attack, all alone. But no. He's by the ravine edge, looking across the cement at the Lake. The sunrise climbs from the abyss on a ladder of clouds, one orange and pink claw over the other, and I draw myself out of panic with it and rise to one elbow. I can't think of anything good to say to him. He's never up this early. Or maybe he is, because I'm never up this early, and I just don't know.

He doesn't notice that I'm awake. He tosses his cigarette into the ravine and jumps from the ledge, walks to the pallet with gentle pussycat steps. He curls himself around me, touching my arms with his cold hands. I don't move. I pretend to sleep and let him snuggle himself comfortable.

Half an hour later the sun lurches over the ravine edge and flops

like a beached whale, sweeping sunlight into my eyes. I squeeze them shut –I have no incentive to prowl the streets, today or any day, especially when a meal was handed to us. But we have food to forage. I rise and kick Tyler’s shoulder. He plays corpse.

I kick him again, and his eyes snap open. He glares.

And we go through the morning motions.

While I check the supplies in my backpack he announces, “I’m starving.”

I pause for a minute, hands still wet from washing my face with bottled water, backpack straps dangling over my shoulder, sleep-stung eyes blink-blinking, light from the too-happy bright sunshiny motherfucking day mirroring itself from the surface of the ravine’s tiny squalid stream to my squinting eyes. I take my time. I let him fidget while I tuck away our last remaining water bottle. I check my tampon supplies. I roll our bags up. I’m tired. I need a shower. I need to throw myself off a goddamn cliff. But I pack up and follow. I say nothing.

We have a few streets to go before we reach our spot of choice, an alley off Wabash in the heart of the Loop, between Dunkin Donuts and the Nextel shop. The Dunkin dumpster is always full of good things and it’s filled daily. The manager has a stick up his ass, maybe one run on clockwork, and at a quarter to six each and every morning he wraps his old donuts in plastic wrap to ward away the flies and puts the bag in the dumpster. He likes to do this as close to garbage pickup time on Fridays as possible so his dumpster doesn’t stink up, and unfortunately for him the plastic-wrap trick doesn’t work on street people. It’s heaven, a homeless smörgåsbord – crullers, bagels, apple jelly donuts. The world should be nothing but apple jelly donuts.

I take up sentry duty. It’s all mental. Think like a shadow: Nothing to see here. Don’t look down this alley. The caffeinated hustle-bustlers, sleepy bicycle couriers, Blackberried business-casuals – they all pass without a look. Little kids though—this particular bunch in little skirts and little school-kid sweaters and tiny saddle shoes with knee socks—they always look. I give them a big monster grin that their mommies don’t see. They giggle. Then they’re off, down the chilly street. The sun slants through the El-track above the street and lights their path.

The world is a little less exciting with them gone, but I’m just full of regret. Bitter. A regular pillar of salt. I should just keep going, and never look back.

Then the Prophet walks around the corner.

He materializes on the corner of Adams and Wabash, from the ether of his holy belief, probably, like a ghost. A pilgrim, petulant, he wanders between the pedestrians with a large sign of corrugated, rain-damaged cardboard under his arm. The words, "humans must repent for there sins," just like that, are written in bold, black-markered letters on the front.

I've heard that carrying such a sign is mandatory for the claiming of souls, but he might as well be carrying the Total Sum of Evils in All the Land, so down-pulled are his features, his shoulders slung low from his Burden's Heavy Weight. A plastic milk crate dangles from a cord down his back and tangles in his halo of gray hair. I've never seen this man before in my life, and I know all the homeless from here to Division.

He wanders past, but his eyes find me. He's got a message for me, some celestial mandate, heavy and profound. Something that singles me out from the other trash and debris in the alleyway. He looks into my eyes.

"Repent, little one," he says. His voice is a record needle moved to a new groove. "It's a good day for repenting. It's in the forecast."

I jump. "You talking to me?"

The Prophet winks. He smells like incense from some bishop's censer.

I draw myself deeper into the alleyway and glare at him as he continues past.

He settles himself halfway down the block, twenty feet away, and swings the milk crate from his back. It drops to the ground with clatter and he climbs on it, jumps and wiggles to make sure it's steadfast and eternal like his Glorious Word. He licks a finger and gauges the wind, the better to spread his divine message. He circles like a cat in his search for the proper angle from which to preach. I can see his hindquarters bunch up as he prepares to leap—to preach, to raise us all on high.

My ire is stirred reluctantly like a pot of gruel near-forgotten on the stove in the morning rush. Too many good things in the Tribune, not enough good things on the stove. How many times did my father hand me a dark bowl of slop, poke the black portions with a spoon, and say, "It's good for you. Cleans your system." Dare I count?

The Prophet is in my territory. My spot. My alley on my street. I should be indistinct. I should be bursting with discreetness, guarding our breakfast trove while Tyler digs in the dumpster. Instead I head down the street with my jacket collar pulled high and my hands thrust deep in my pockets. The lake breeze has started blowing. The morning El thunders over me and pulls my hair from my beanie. It's a grand day to make trouble.

I wander past the Prophet and stand with the crowd of people waiting to cross Wabash. He watches from the corner of his eye, scratching his beard. He's waiting to pull some sort of metaphysical trap shut on me. He wants his mushy logic to get me like quicksand and suck me down, in no matter how much I argue. He's got a grandfatherly look from staring into my soul, and I've never been one for kindly lessons or well-intended advice. I tap my foot at the corner. When the crowd surges around me and across the street, I turn around. I'm suave. My destination is the other way, really. I've just realized. I drift past the Prophet again. Give him the twice-over.

"Repent yet, Little Lady?" He drops a plaid hat of the Canadian woodsman variety on the ground and gives it a kick with his foot. "Advice isn't free or easy to make."

"Really. That so?" I slide down the street, nonchalant. Not a care in the world.

"I see. I see. You don't want any help. I get it."

No, he doesn't get it. I haven't done anything. He doesn't know me. I halt, and someone bumps into me from behind. I've forgotten other people exist. I turn to him, petite and prideful. "Leave me alone."

He thinks this is funny and chuckles. His teeth are paper white and straight.

A few of the lay people have recognized his true greatness and place worn singles in his hat while I scowl at them. One of them, a fat woman in a paisley jacket, makes the biggest offering (two bucks) and says, "God bless." She looks at me, assuming I'm in on his game, and gives my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. I jerk away, tell her to fuck off, and she leaves with the promise of prayer. That's never done me any good. I'm riled.

"No scaring my business away," The Prophet chides. "And no loitering."

"I ain't loitering," I snarl. "I'm taking my morning fucking stroll. This ain't your personal hallowed ground. I can go where I want."

He knows his stuff and he knows all the tricks. He places his sign in a little holster on his side and scoops the bills out of his hat. "Ten feet's not a stroll," he remarks, counting. There are maybe five singles altogether, and he thumbs them again and again, licking his finger each time. He's laying the line for me, telling me what's what. I've got to get my barbs in somehow, to claim my little bit of turf.

So I say, "If I do it long enough it'll be a damn good stroll"—and I cross my arms.

"You going to disturb my meditations all morning, then?"

I glare, shift my weight to the other foot.

He nods. "Okay. I see. I see. Here's another tip, then," he says. "This one's custom-made, free. Something your mummy and daddy shoulda told you years ago. The streets, little lady, never make for a good stroll. You want the college campus, I think. That's south more. Take the El. Drag your lousy boyfriend with you."

"That's good. That's a real good one. God tell you that?"

He scrunches his face up and chomps his mouth a few times, places the bills back in the hat. Gives a big sniff and glances all around like he has a secret, something better than salvation, even. He leans in low to me. "Hey. Little miss. Let me tell you something. Let me tell you a little something."

I'll humor him. I can stand it. I inch closer. He breathes at me. His breath whispers of good food and cigars, nothing street-like about it. I don't understand this man or his mission, or why he's on my street.

"I don't believe in God, little miss," he says. He laughs suddenly and it splatters spittle on my cheek. I recoil, tainted. "I'm just keeping my third eye on you. That's all." He taps his forehead. "Trust me."

The Prophet's a sham. I don't believe in God either, but he's a sham. I hate liars. I flip him off. Before I can entirely escape, he reaches out with his sign and taps me on the back of the head with it, tells me: "It's not too late. Repent."

I run back to the alley and sink to my heels. I'm more exhausted than I've ever been in my life, and I've done some pretty heavy things. But this isn't like jumping moving trains or tumbling down ditches. It's not like birthing babies. It's different. Heavier. A little...wrong.

And he knew about Tyler.

The dumpster game is up, at the very least—the homeless will be here from all of Chi-town if he's got half as big a mouth as the others, and as a Prophet, I think his is even bigger. He'll lead them all to deliverance in our dumpster. Manna from heaven, only slightly stale.

Tyler is still rummaging. He's taking his time this early in the morning, saving the clean plastic wrap, probably, and nabbing as many of the apple pastries as he can. Keeping still when noises pass and he feels too obvious, all of that. He's being a good little scavenger and I'm getting my panties in a bunch. I call down the alley to him.

"What do you want?" Tyler's growl echoes in the dumpster. His head pops out and he rubs a few crumbs from his chin-stubble with a callused hand.

"There's a new guy down the street. I thought you'd be interested.

He set up soul saving shop. Came about ten minutes ago.”

Tyler blinks at me for a moment. “There’s fucking fifty of ‘em between here and Division.”

“This one’s making mad money, though.”

And Tyler’s on the ground. His baggy pants flutter in the breeze, the torn bits flapping like little anarchist flags. I toss my head to the alley entrance. Tyler comes.

“See? Look at the hat.” I focus on the plaid, money-filled cap at the Prophet’s feet. Tyler squints.

“This guy’s good,” he says. “Ten minutes, you said?”

“Yep. When in the presence of the blessed...” (I throw my arm wide in the prophet’s general direction) “...give money. Or go to hell.”

“Easy choice,” Tyler mutters.

“Hell,” I agree.

“Idiots.”

We ponder the Prophet again together. “Sign’s wrong,” Tyler says finally.

I lean my head on the wall. “Forgivable. How many brain cells you think he’s got?”

“Maybe only a few less’n us.”

I stare at him. He can insult himself, the Prophet, the world, all of that, all he wants. But he better not insult me. I got into college. “Don’t mouth. Not today. I’m sick of you.” But I’m still tangled up in him like bed sheets after a bad dream.

Tyler breaks off a piece of donut and looks at me, chewing, shaking his head. “You know, you’re kind of a bitch today,” he remarks.

“Why are you so negative?”

“Why are you so bitchy?”

I turn away and glare down the alley. “Touché.”

Tyler stands up and peers out at the world, our big concrete cage. He taps his nose with his finger. “I’m just an asshole, baby. You know that.”

“So be an asshole,” I say. “Do it. Go grab his money.”

Tyler can see through my bullshit. I know he can, because his eyes darken and his nostrils flare, but he leans down and kisses me anyway. He has a mouth like an ashtray or a septic tank, but his lips are perfect, and I don’t want him to stop. I want him to stay here all day.

“Don’t let him convert you on the way there,” I whisper. I’ve give him the scent. I sic him, like a good dog, on the only steak that can cool his black eye.

It's better to be speedy than inconspicuous in a snatch-and-run. They won't see you coming if you do it at the right time of day with crowds to lose yourself in, so it's best to get in and get out. Tyler darts off and snakes between the people, light on his feet. He's the lonely salmon on that journey against the current, shoulder to shoulder, elbowing his way through their purses and backpacks and briefcases. He's moving fast.

I stand at the alley entrance. The Prophet must know what's coming, of course—eternal and omniscient, he's probably already scheming how to recoup his losses. But who's got the future in her hand now? If the Prophet knows what's good for him—if he really knows anything at all—he won't even think of stopping Tyler. Tyler's daddy was a rowdy, excitable man, or so Tyler says, a very eccentric fellow who taught him a thing or two about fisticuffs.

Tyler vanishes into the crowd, and I have difficulty making him out. When I finally do find him again, he's stopped. The Prophet's smiling down at him from his lofty place on high. He knew this was coming. The El is overhead again, the steel supports trembling, a drumroll and a countdown. Tyler misses his cue. The entire train passes and he doesn't move. A tiny bit of unease rumbles in my stomach—maybe the burgers from last night are getting me.

Tyler'd be sick if he knew I was thinking this.

He leaps from the crowd and I can't see his face or make out what he says but the Prophet laughs and laughs, shakes his head, drops his sign and laughs more, harder, giant guffaws from the bottom of his belly. His eyes water. Tyler doesn't hesitate: he clotheslines the Prophet, his right arm bisecting the Prophet's gut and knocking him off the milk crate.

I wasn't expecting this.

The prophet has barely landed on his back when Tyler falls on him, punching and lashing and whirl-winding his arms. His strikes are impassioned but not aimed, and the Prophet, who has his hands up to ward them away, laughs between blows. He is not locked up with tension or strain or rage. This is a game.

"Tyler, stop it!" I scream. I'm halfway there.

Tyler has the felt hat in his hand. The money is crumpled between his fingers. He glances up when I call him, leans back to his heels. He hears me. He's listening.

But the Prophet hasn't finished with us. He hasn't spread his message and he certainly hasn't gotten through to Tyler. There's a lesson still to be taught here, and it's the Prophet's duty to teach it. His fist flies forward

and catches Tyler in the side of the face. Blood drips from Tyler's mouth. There. The Prophet has left his mark.

There's nothing I can do now—they're grappling, grunting, and I'm just too small to break them apart. I'm one of the crowd. These are jaded city people, and none of the Macho Hero types among us are willing to step forward and pull them apart—it's too early for heroism and it's no use getting shanked over a couple of homeless. The crowd rings the two combatants. We form the arena. We make sure they don't overstep the boundaries; we cry foul. But mostly we watch. What else can we do? What can I do, now? I try to touch Tyler's shoulder but fists swing and I shrink back.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I scream.

I don't think they know. The Prophet abandons the fight first. He gets to his feet, slowly, wiping the blood from his nose on his sleeve. Tyler stumbles back and falls down with his feet splayed in front of him, his breathing heavy.

The Prophet's beard is pink and his sign is snapped in two. He's laughing. "Good to see you again," he says. "Glad to see you're doing well."

I put my arms under Tyler's and try to lift him, but he's heavy—he's metabolized all his body fat, turned it to muscle and rocks.

I take his hand but he resists. He tugs free, stands, and wobbles into the crowd. They part for him with an air of respect, but the crowd is already breaking apart and drifting away, floating off to work or church or school or wherever the fuck they need to go that's more important than helping me.

Tyler spits something that looks like a tooth on the ground, white and shiny, covered with blood and saliva. I pick it up and put it in my pocket, tug him towards me but he pulls away, shivering and spitting again and again. I step over the zig-zag pattern of blood he drips behind him.

The police arrive, late. Apparently the crowd is good for something, and in their infinite kindness they've determined that of all possible goods that can be done, calling the police is best. And he's here, some dogooder cop-on-horseback with his walkie-talkie in hand. He surveys the scene: the Prophet, who's wandering in circles like a bird with a clipped wing, spitting blood on the few concerned citizens that try to wipe his face. And my bloody boyfriend. That's the scene. It's clear what happened. The cop prepares to lay down the law.

"We gotta run," I whisper to Tyler. He's in no condition to run. He's going to run anyway. He nods.

"On three," I say. He steels himself. The cop stretches his hand out to apprehend us, tugs on the reins. I say three.

We're off. Down the street. We head for the short-cuts we know, and we know many. We've drawn the map of Chicago. Chain-link fences can't hold us back. Cops on horses can't follow. People see us coming a block away and part for us, or we crush them. We're like Moses.

Tyler's legs buckle with each step and he propels himself forward like a newborn horse, flopping limbs in all directions, dripping blood and phlegm. I have to help him at the tricky parts instead of him helping me: I reach down to help him over the walls; my cupped hands boost him up the ledges. But he's a trooper, and I won't think of this now. I won't think of it until we're safe, because when I think of this for real I'm going to throttle him.

Our storm ravine is suddenly in front of me. One of my feet has started to go over the edge, but I stop. Tyler bumps into me with a grunt and collapses on my shoulder. There will be no wall sliding for us. I guide him to the cracked and plant-covered utility stairs by the street.

Our camp is exactly as we left it, messy and muddy. Tyler wipes the blood off his face with our blanket.

I don't want to yell. I close my eyes, try to channel my energy, deflect it, send it somewhere else--anywhere. Down the street, across the lake. Anything. I won't get a straight answer if I yell, and I rarely get straight answers at all. But the energy has nowhere else to go. I yell.

"What the hell was that?"

Tyler grunts. His head is between his legs.

"Tyler! What happened?" I kick his leg with the toe of my boot, taking care not to put my foot through his skull.

He raises his bruised face and touches the congealed blood crusted over it. He puts his dirty fingers in the open wounds. He's a pounded piece of meat. "You see his shoes?" Tyler says after a moment. "I saw them down the block." He shakes his head. "He always pulls this fancy shit. I had to get him. Fucking deserves it."

"What does that mean? Yeah, I saw the shoes!" I expect more. I get nothing. Tyler tilts to one side and coughs. It's a terrible barking cough that tears his lungs apart in his chest.

"Shit," I say, deflating. I open my back pack and pull out a bottle of water and a handful of Dunkin Donuts napkins.

"Some of us ain't got no choice and he's making a holiday of it."

"We did have a choice," I snap.

"No choice..." he mutters.

I pour water on a napkin and jab at his face. I press hard on his split

lip until he hisses. “Dude,” I prod. I poke into the wounds, clear the crap out of them, the gravel and the dirt. I go for the nerves. “What is your fucking problem?”

I don’t think I’ve seen him get a beating this bad the entire time we’ve been on the streets. He knows how to fight and how to dodge, and he knows when to run. But this time—this time he didn’t fight with his fists or his head. He fought with his gut. His nose starts to bleed again, and I stuff a napkin into his nostrils. He winces, swears, but I hold his jaw firmly and squeeze bottled water onto the bloody mess. “You said you knew him. You just said you knew he’d do this,” I poke him. He sighs.

I cease with the angry and slightly-torturous ministrations and hold the damp, crimson napkins in my hand. “Hey. Sweetie.” I hold his chin, but he won’t look up. “It’s okay.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “It’s not.”

He looks at me, opens his swollen gray-blue eyes as wide as he can. I have a hunch. I try and find the Prophet in them, and I see traces—in the bone of his nose (he’ll have a great big one like his dad, someday), the square of his jaw; even their eyebrows that sweep in the same bird-wing curve over their gray eyes.

We must be terribly predictable if he found us. On the streets, free, and still stuck in the same rut.

“Let’s go to the Underpass,” I say. He lets me help him to his feet. There’s better stuff at the Underpass, though I hate it and swore never to go back. Heat. Real food. People who might know what the hell is wrong with Tyler.

He coughs, spits blood, turns the ravine puddles red.

Tyler says life is like music. Not like writing, not at all. Some parts fade away—they have to, or they won’t haunt you the way they should. And so you let them go in order to stay sane. You let them go because there’s no other way you can handle it. You let them go because there’s no way you can take care of it. Like the baby—you let them go. You have to, even if you really can’t. And you never really can. But you do anyway, all the time. Every day.

That’s one of the reasons I decided I loved him.

I heard his genius before I saw it. A few melancholy chords escaped him and floated through the University, out of the community room where he was setting up for a local band showcase, down the hall. To me. Studying

psychology was nothing to those sad little chords, and they pulled me around the corner. I hid behind the door. And I saw him, restless spirit and dark gray eyes, ash blond hair, placing an acoustic guitar into its lacquered case with a guitar pick between his teeth. He hefted the case to the stage but one of the clasps came undone and the guitar spilled out. Ugly noise echoed around the room, and he flinched. He pressed a hand to the strings to soften the twang and lifted it out again, adjusted the tuning reverently, and strummed those same miserable little chords, the ones I'd heard before.

"That's nice," I blurted from my hiding spot. He looked up at me.

Six months after that my mother called me a "Scarlett fucking O'Hara" and threw my art boxes and books and Mardi Gras beads and posters out my bedroom window onto the grass "to make room for the crib." To make room for the crib she also broke my mirror and threw my laptop against the wall. I sat on my bed and smoked until she exhausted herself. She retreated, sobbing, into her office.

I was only four months along and thought she was being unreasonable.

Outside and barefoot, with my skirt twisted around my ankles and my turtleneck too hot and my little baby belly more like some force-fed anorexic's distended stomach than a pregnant woman's, I picked my things out of the ankle-length grass and brushed the dirt away.

Intricate organ music lilted out of my father's open office window on a musical staff of smoke. Bach, I think it was (the music, not the smoke)—some organ fugue, because only intricate music like that could make my well-tempered father waltz with his own long shadow cast from the fire (he was always cold, towards the end). I stood on tip-toe and peeked through the blind slats. He'd thrown his jacket over his shoulder and danced with his tie hung loosely around his neck and his bald head flashing in the firelight.

All the graduate school brochures he'd picked up for me from fellow professors littered the ground, a patchwork quilt of ivory towers and green gardens. Only the best for me, because he said so and that's the only reason I ever got. His humidor was open and a cigar burned from the ashtray, half ash and forgotten, but it wasn't the cigar I smelled. One sort of smoke leads to another and he'd rolled a small joint in cigarette paper.

His I.V. was unplugged and dripped saline on the oriental carpet.

I clutched my art pencils and books to my chest and breathed in his smoke. It was all I could do, all I've ever done.

He wasn't good at being a father, only good at teaching.

My father died very tidily, because he in his omniscience knew this was coming years ago, and he snipped his own life threads and tied up his own affairs. There was nothing for my mother to do so she did nothing, not even for me. And since I was free to do so, I left. I had no other reason. I would give none.

I thought that getting pregnant was a good thing for maybe a second. The second after that, it was too late, and he died. A self-inflicted death-by-cancer. It didn't really matter—I was his blank slate and he'd already passed the best parts on. I was the malleable repository for his random genes—made to be molded. It's okay because they're parents and it's their right, but I'm afraid of that kind of power. I wanted to be something besides a firm foundation or a ladder to the future. But I'm not.

She was adopted right away, and they changed her name to Samantha. She had dark hair and blue eyes. Everyone told me that all babies have blue eyes, but I made a Punnett square of my genes and Tyler's and determined that she had a 50-50 shot of being blue-eyed forever. I wanted to name her Rain.

I stared out the window at the lake most days after that. It's possible to stare at Lake Michigan forever. The skyline, the city. It's always the same. Steady and sure and ever-present, all-knowing and everywhere. Fog in, fog out. Thunderstorms across the flat and still water. A city that hums to itself, never saying anything, never many sirens, never many honks. The noise is like a buzz on the inside of your head and it can never really go away. I had to hibernate, to sleep all day, or I'd hear the hum and see the city and feel like I never got away at all.

I dropped out of school. I had no job.

Tyler lost the apartment. He didn't tell me he quit his job and was busking for money on the streets with his guitar instead. It made him happy. Nothing else did. How could I fault him for that?

Through all of this, we had our connections, people who "understood." And we knew people on the streets, at least. The artsy, activist crowd eventually leads there, like a ladder into the abyss. There's no bread crumb trail. That's a waste, and they're quick to eat it.

I took my paints and put us on every brick wall and every concrete wall I came across—life-sized, dripping. We were shadows down the alleys. My father didn't know this was coming, I bet.

Tyler didn't care what his father thought. Neither of us knew about our mothers.

When I see the pictures on random buildings, pictures I painted

and perfected, I don't see us anymore. I just see graffiti.

It takes a good portion of the day to get Tyler to the Underpass. He resists at the last minute. I drag him to the closest public spot, the local library, and sit him down, reason with him. Baby steps. He bleeds. They throw us out. We try our luck at Starbucks across the street. No one offers to help. I don't think there's anything they could do, anyway. And so on.

We arrive at dusk. There are blankets. It's warm. We can get some food from the others. It's the preferred hang out spot for the under-thirty homeless crowd. The crazies, the scummy liquor men, the die-hard junkies, the smelly old people...the prophets—all of those kinds, the hippie kids kick out, sometimes violently. They've made the place a little sub-cultural haven. Sort of.

"THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOU?" Darcy calls out from her fire pit, queen bee, always on top of things. She's rolling a joint in the firelight. Her greasy Mohawk droops slightly from the heat.

"None of your damn business, that's what happened," Tyler says.

"Rumble! Somebody got into a tussle! Guys, look! Hey, guys!" No one looks. Drugs are more fun. Fire, too: they've lit their bonfire, partially hidden by the cement supports of the highway so the cops can't see, and someone stole an old-fashioned shoulder-riding boom-box. They're playing 90's old-school hip hop. They think this is cool.

Tyler stumbles to Darcy's fire pit, and snags a few hits and two bottles of beer. Darcy gracefully hands them over with a little bow. "Rewards for our wounded!" she declares. "Fight on, brave soldier!" Tyler inhales the beer, downing one in a long chug. He starts dutifully on the second.

"Darcy," I hiss. "He's sick."

"It's a reeewaard!" She raises her beer high. "You don't get one. No war wounds. No beer."

"You could show her your tits!" one of the guys shouts. Cheers all around.

"Hey," Darcy slurs, leering. "I don't make the rules." I want to punch her but my aim would be off. I'm shaking and I can't stop. I leave.

Tyler's self-prescribed medicine flutters in him like butterflies, and he sits on our backpacks with his head in his hands. The medicine turns on him and he vomits on the gravel. I hold his hair back until he's done and feel his forehead. He's clammy. A little feverish. I lead him behind one of the pillars and set him down on an old fishing trap, one of those lobster things with holes and nets and a fishy smell. He puts his beer to his mouth and gargles.

“Don’t do this,” I say. “Please don’t do this. I need you.” I kiss him on the cheek. He tastes a little bloody.

He coughs and runs his hands along my body, his moustache scratching my skin, his nose deep in my neck. His body is an idling car, getting hotter and hotter, quivering. He’s very sick.

“Maybe we should go to West,” I say. West is the biggest hospital in the city, three blocks away. They have an all-night ER. They also look kindly on addled youths—there are so many of us.

“No. It’s not that bad.”

“Shit, Tyler. Why are we doing this? Let’s leave. The shelter’s open. Let’s go.”

“I’m fine,” he says, “It’ll be okay.”

He gets up and walks away. Is this like suicide? I don’t know what to say.

I need air. More air, lots of it. The breeze is cooler by the ravine. The Lake is still cold. The air is blowing. I’ll go there. I look back at him once more before I go. Darcy pulls him into the fold and strokes his head. He accepts the beer she offers without a glance in my direction. He’ll be fine. But I need to go.

I’ve been there for only a few minutes, splashing the murky water in my face, doing anything to keep cool, when the Prophet arrives. I’m not surprised, and I hate it. He probably knows all of our spots by now—there’s no telling how long he’s been tailing us, watching and taking notes. He’s still bloody. His beard is pink, and his eyes are red-rimmed like he’s been with the bottle all evening. He is omniscient and he is all-powerful and he knew where I was and now he’s going to finish this. I think Thunder and Lightning. I think Fire and Brimstone. I think of lessons, spankings, demands.

I’m afraid. I’m afraid he’s come for vengeance. Fathers always think they know what’s best. They think they know when it’s time to tell us we’re wrong. I didn’t need my own father and I don’t need a surrogate. If he’s not good enough for Tyler...

But no. He comes closer and pulls a book out of his rucksack. He gives it to me. I’m afraid to take it but my hands reach out anyway.

“What’s this?” I ask. I can’t feel myself speaking.

“Your future,” he says. And I believe him, he knows.

“Don’t let him see it,” the Prophet says. “I don’t think he can handle it, yet. Thought maybe it was time, but it’s not.”

“Why did you do that to him?”

He flinches. Here now is something the Prophet does not know, something he can't tell me. I don't think there is an answer.

"Why are you following us? Just leave us alone. Go away."

He turns away, crumpled and broken, burnt in the sunset, a piece of garbage thrown away. "Just checking up on you. Just making sure you were okay." He walks away. His broken sign flaps in the dying breeze.

It's a photo album and it's full of her eyes. She's got blue two year old eyes and curly black hair.

She lives in a big house on the lake shore. Her parents have a black Labrador and a swing-set.

They look nothing like her.

I start to cry.

The bonfire is coals in the bottom of the metal can when I return, and everyone is asleep in their bags. Tyler made our camp. He's asleep. Or is he dead? I can't tell. I curl up around him and in his sleep he turns to me and opens his arms. It's cold, and it's started to drizzle, and his chin whiskers kind of hurt me, but I rub against them anyway. Just a little closer. A little deeper into the curve of his hips and the concave space beneath his ribcage. His chest is rattling now, hollow, echoing. He's still there, however faint. But I can't feel him. My hands are cold and I can't feel him at all. But I can see him, at least. If I look hard enough, he's still there.

I don't go to sleep, in the end. I put the album in my backpack. I pack my things and fasten my bag. I stay up and watch the sun rise above the overpass, already full of morning traffic. I watch him. I think his breath is getting slower and slower.

But he wakes.

"Hey," he drawls. He can't seem to fully open his eyes. They're puffy, and his lids roll down whenever he tries to keep them open. He smiles.

I won't dance around with him today. "He kept tabs on you all this time."

He blinks but rolls with it. "He left me."

I kneel by him. I play with the curve of his ear, the conch shell revolutions. "He knew where we'd be. He scoped us out."

"I don't care. I hate him. We're better off here." Tyler doesn't sound very convinced. He sounds pain-ridden, nauseous. He takes a deep breath

and winces.

“You never told me any of this.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

He snorts

“What did he say to you?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“You jumped him for nothing?”

“I had to.”

“Why?”

He’s silent, lost in himself. “Don’t want you involved,” he says finally. “It’s between us.”

He’s retreated, is gone again, lost to me. I tuck my head into his shoulder. He smells sweaty with a metallic undercurrent. Blood.

“I’m already involved,” I snap. “He said it’s not too late.” He doesn’t know how thick in it I am.

“It’s been too late. He’s a deadbeat.”

“But you’re not!”

He’ll never believe me.

He coughs, his entire body shaking and doing battle with itself. I get up and rub his shoulders while he rocks back and forth, little avalanches of hacks sending various strands of his long hair from the top of his head to his shoulders.

When he’s recovered he lies down again, shaking. “He was a writer,” he says flatly, dismissively. “But he never wrote anything. He just planned it out. He had notebooks of observations. He’d leave for days and watch people. He’s good at watching.”

I think of the album. I say nothing.

“If he ever got off his milk crate and fucking wrote anything, I’d fucking die,” Tyler says.

“It’s all research, then?”

“It’s all stupid. Like him. Kindling. It’s all he’s good for.”

“Fuck you. Book burner. Nazi. I hate you.” I curl up next to him again, and tug the blankets closer. He smells good, like old pot and incense. He smells like his father. I curl deeper. He doesn’t do anything. Doesn’t hold on, doesn’t pull away. Like his father, he’s drifting.

Am I like mine? How he used to be? I don’t like that at all.

“I love you,” I tell him. I love him but I’m tired.

Claira,” he says. His voice is nasal and stuffed, his words slurred together.

“Yeah?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

But I know what he means.

Soak

Kurt raised his head from the magazine he was reading to watch the rain pound into the ground so hard that the droplets exploded into mist as soon as they hit. Every few minutes the wind would hurl a sheet of rain at the window he was standing in front of, startling him every time as if it was the first time. Kurt reflected back to the conversation he had with his boss about how some hurricane in Florida was screwing up everything, even mucking up the weather all the way up here in New Jersey. Kurt glanced at the magazine he was reading. He turned the page, and read a bit about the highly anticipated, hot new game that was coming out that would no doubt not live up to the hype and end up being a waste of shelf space. When he looked up again there was a car next to pump four. Kurt didn't really mind his job at the gas station. It was easy, especially compared to the commercial cleaning job he used to have. But it was Sunday. It was supposed to be slow on Sundays. And it was raining like God was really pissed off. Kurt pulled on his red fleece, which was the only cover he had; too bad it was still soaked from the last time he was outside.

As soon as he stepped out the door, he felt the chill in the air cling to his fingers. He took the distance between the store and the canopy in four giant steps, but the rain still managed to whisk under the shelter and there was nowhere else for him to go. Kurt stepped onto the other side of the pump and there she was, by far the most beautiful girl that had ever set foot in the gas station. She was wearing a wife beater and a very baggy pair of gray sweat pants that still couldn't hide the healthy curve of a full ass. She was completely soaked and seemed to be having a very hard time fitting the gasoline nozzle into her tank. Kurt stood there for a moment. People often didn't hear him coming because he was rarely in a hurry. He tilted his head to the side, wondering if the whole black girl with red hair thing actually worked, when she turned around. She looked at him for a moment, slightly surprised to see him. Kurt just stood there, frozen, his head tilted to the side as if he were appraising some lewd sculpture. For a quick moment their eyes met, and he was taken aback by how bright and blue hers were and how he could suddenly picture the face she must make right before she climaxes. But it wasn't long before her lips and fists curled and she puffed her sizeable chest out.

“What the fuck?” was all she said.

“I have to pump that.” Kurt pointed to a sign placed on top of the gas pump, a sign that said it was state law that gas attendants handled all gas pumping.

“What...” She was caught off guard and looked up at the sign. Kurt complimented himself on his nonchalant recovery. “Whatever.” She shoved the pump into Kurt’s chest and let go before he even had a good grip on it. He didn’t say a thing as she stormed around the front of her red Cavalier convertible. Kurt couldn’t help but sneer at the car. It was like trying to dress a pile of shit up with a cherry. He thought about scraping some of the paint off the side of it with the gas nozzle, but she was hot. So he slid the nozzle inside her car, nice and slow, and clicked it onto full speed. Kurt turned to face that Cavalier again, and leaned down a bit to try and catch a glimpse of her. He still hadn’t decided whether or not he liked her hair color. She was playing some rap song with an obnoxious bass line and she had an even more annoying subwoofer. She was turned away from him, facing the road. She had a phone to her ear. Kurt wondered how she could hear anything with the music that loud. But then she got out and shut the door behind her. But then she chucked the phone at the lamppost set into the strip of grass next to the road. It split apart on impact and pieces landed on either side of the light. She turned around and it looked as if she was stuck between crying and screaming. Her wife beater was basically transparent now; Kurt noted that she wasn’t wearing a bra. It felt wrong to stare at her, but he did. It almost seemed wrong not to. Her breasts were large yet firm, and her stomach and arms were cut. He actually liked her face the most, though. She was beautiful. She had thick lips and blue eyes that could not possibly belong to her. She took a hesitant step closer to him and he already knew how he’d screw her, right here next to pump four. Kurt had already imagined it a million times before, with a million different girls and he realized that opposed to everything else he’d ever done in life, this would be the thing he remembered. But she wasn’t looking at him anymore. Instead her eyes were fixed on something over his shoulder.

“I’m not paying for that! I only wanted ten dollars!” She jabbed her finger toward the gas pump and Kurt turned around. It had clicked off at \$22.23.

“You didn’t say you wanted ten dollars.” Kurt turned back to the girl. Usually he’d doubt himself in situations like this but he remembered every moment with her.

“Well you didn’t fucking ask either, did you?” She clenched her fists and Kurt watched as the muscles rippled up her arms all the way to her shoulders. She glared at him and he decided that she must have those contacts that changed your eyes to appear different colors. She went to the driver side door and pulled it open. She bent down for a moment, scrounging around for some money. Then she stood up and glared at him from over the roof of her car.

“You wanna get paid or what? You’ve been wanting to stare at my ass anyway, here’s your chance.” And she bent down inside of her car again. Kurt bit his tongue and slowly stalked over to the driver side of the car. And he did stare at her ass, and the tribal tattoo inked right above her tailbone. He wondered when she’d gotten it. She stood up again, way too close to him. He could feel her chest brushing against his. If he tilted his head forward a bit he could have brushed his lips against hers. She took the crumpled mass of bills she had in her hand and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. She didn’t pull her fingers out of his pocket and Kurt could’ve sworn she stepped closer. He felt the rain from her hair drip onto his neck and he was almost overwhelmed by the smell of cigarettes and winter fresh.

“Keep the change.” She stepped away and slid into her car slowly. Kurt stood there and watched. She rested her forehead against the steering wheel and Kurt could tell she was crying, but he couldn’t hear a sound. Her body seemed to sag against the steering wheel, almost as if all the air had gone out of her. She was shuddering, trying in vain to hold in the sobs that were racking her frame. The girl let out a quiet wail and Kurt felt like he shouldn’t be watching this. It looked like her soul was being sucked out.

“Hey...” She looked over at Kurt and he struggled to meet her eyes. She looked completely different to him now. “Do...do you want to get out of here? Maybe go some place?” She could barely force the sentence out over her sobs. Kurt couldn’t say a thing. Her body shook as she leaned back into her seat, burying her face in her hands. “I don’t know what to do now...” She closed the door to her car and looked up again. She stared at him like she was searching for something. Her blue eyes flitted up and down his frame before finally, Kurt stepped back. He stepped out from under her canopy and into the rain. He preferred this storm to hers. She looked at him a moment more, before turning her eyes away. She started the car and Kurt knew she wouldn’t look back. Rainwater was whipped back into the air as the tires spun for a moment, searching for purchase, and then the red Cavalier drove out of the

gas station. By the time Kurt went back into the store he'd forgotten what it felt like to be dry.

Any Way You Slice It

The problem started one warm spring day when I stopped in at the Super Bi-Rite up on Amity Road to buy a loaf of their English Toasting White. The regular clerk at the in-store bakery, a young Goth complete with dog collar and nose ring, had always sliced it perfectly, but she was gone. In her place stood a middle-aged matron decorating a sheet cake. She was short and stout, with bottle-blond hair and an orange makeup line bisecting her jowls. The Bi-Rite baseball cap was an unfortunate look for her.

"Excuse me," I called. "Can you slice this for me?"

No answer.

I clattered my car keys on the counter, but she just kept on embroidering vines and roses. Finally, as I was getting ready to repeat myself, she tossed down her pastry bag and marched over. With a gusty sigh she snatched the loaf off the counter, shucked it out of its wrapper, flung it into the slicer and leaned on the blades to hurry it through.

She crushed it. She handed it back to me slumped in the bottom of the clear plastic bag like a weasel that had been hit by a car.

"I can't eat this," I said.

She shrugged. "Fine. Leave it in the bin then. Someone else will buy it."

I bought a replacement loaf of Pepperidge Farm. Next week I tried again: "Don't force it," I suggested. "The last girl just tossed it in and let it go at its own speed."

She handed me back another lump of road kill. "You can't slice fresh bread. Pick something from the day-old section if you want it sliced."

"But I don't want day-old bread."

"Then take it home and slice it yourself."

I took my mutilated wad of dough to Customer Service. "Someone needs to teach her how to run the slicer," I said. "No one's going to buy something that looks like this."

That backfired, big-time. Next visit, I waited in line behind another customer who got her bread sliced perfectly, but, "Oh, no!" said the clerk when it was my turn. "You almost got me fired last week. There's plenty of pre-sliced bread in the store. I'm not gonna touch that."

My husband and I ate pita that week. He was not happy.

“Stand up for yourself!” he said. “Call the manager over. Complain real loud. Let the other customers hear.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” I said.

I discussed the problem with my shrink. “Why is she doing this to me?” I asked.

“Why is bread so important to you?” she countered.

I explained that my husband was always on a diet. He couldn’t eat much bread and he liked the fresh-baked stuff at Bi-Rite. The pre-slicing helped with portion control.

“Look, I don’t think this is about bread,” she said. “I think you have problems with confrontation. Does this woman remind you of anyone?”

I thought it over. Actually, she reminded me of Daria Berlitsky, a heavy-browed girl who sat in front of me in third grade. Every time Mrs. Holmes asked her a question, Daria stared down at her desk and shrugged, causing the inevitable chain reaction: Mrs. Holmes skipped over her and asked me. I’d answer. Later, at recess, Daria beat the crap out of me and, later still, my mom punished me for messing up my school clothes.

“How’d you handle that situation?”

I flung up my hands. “How did I handle it? I waited two years for us to go to different middle schools, that’s how.”

All in all, not very enlightening. We agreed to discuss it further next week. I described the situation to my yoga instructor. “What would you do?” I asked.

She got me down on my stomach and positioned me in a sun salute, face tilted up toward the window. “Visualize whirled peas,” she said jokingly, quoting the bumper sticker I had given her for Christmas. “Up till now you’ve been obsessing about the ways you two are different. Try to find something you have in common. If she identifies with you, she’ll want to help you.”

That afternoon I overheard the bakery clerk talking to the guy stocking the dairy case: Bi-Rite was circulating a memo that threatened pay cuts and layoffs. “It’s hard, isn’t it?” I said when she finally huffed back to her counter. “I got laid off from the gas company a year ago and I still don’t have a job.”

This is one of those statements that’s partly true but mostly false.

What actually happened was this. My boss called me into his office and told me the company was downsizing. “We’re offering you a golden handshake,” he said. This turned out to be a lump sum plus \$5,000 for each

year I had worked. It wasn't enough to live on, but then an amazing thing happened. My Uncle Hugo died and left me everything. And I do mean everything. My husband and I aren't exactly rich, but our youngest is out of school and out of the house. If we manage our money carefully, we'll never have to work again.

I didn't tell the clerk that part, of course.

For a few visits it seemed as though we'd bonded. She'd slice my bread tenderly and tell me about herself. She had an autistic son in a group home up in Meriden, a mother in adult daycare, and a husband who spent his free time at OTB. Her last day-job had been in women's sportswear at Wal-Mart, but that got ugly—besides rotating the stock, she also had to clean the dressing rooms. This involved prying bubble gum off the rugs and washing down graffiti. "One day someone took a shit in there. That was fun."

She used to clean rooms at the Wigwam Motel out on Route 10 but had finally worked her way up to night clerk. "What, you do that now?" I asked. She nodded. "It's my second job. I love it. I get to sit down all night." She toed off her Keds and showed me her feet, ripe with bunions. "Aren't there special shoes you can get?" I asked. "Orthotic inserts," she said. "Two hundred fifty bucks plus the visit to the podiatrist. Yeah. That's gonna happen."

"What's your husband do?" she asked me one day. What was I supposed to say? Oh, right at the moment he's refighting the Battle of Verdun on the internet? That would go over well. I cut my eyes to the man restocking the soda aisle. "He delivers for Coca-Cola," I blurted out.

Another time she asked if I had kids. She didn't want to hear that Tom was a successful stockbroker and Lisa was teaching English in Beijing. I got so twisted up by the complexities of inventing new stories for them that a look of actual pain must have crossed my face. "Husband firing blanks?" she asked. I knew that was way out of line, but it was such a relief, I just nodded.

And, of course, over and over she'd skewer me with, "Got a job yet?" She had lots of suggestions. Subway was hiring, and they let you take home the butt ends of meat that wouldn't fit through the slicer. Blockbuster had a Help Wanted sign. Every week I'd hear, "Did you try that place I told you about last time?" and I'd end up stammering that I'd shown up too late, or they'd said they'd get back to me. She'd nod sympathetically. "Jobs are tight right now. Stay with it. You'll find something."

Then one day a hand reached out and grabbed me at the deli coun-

ter. "I've been looking for you everywhere," she said, towing me after her. "The regional bakery manager's here, he's down from the home office. I told him about you, said you'd be in around ten. I got you an interview!"

I recoiled. "No!"

"What do you mean?"

I thought fast, then flashed my raincoat open to show her my leotard. "I can't," I said. "I'm dressed for yoga class. Very, um, unprofessional."

"Doesn't matter. Just keep it on." She chuckled. "The raincoat, I mean."

"I'm sorry," I stalled. "After all this time, I still don't know your name."

She smiled. "It's Rita," she said. "I'm Rita."

"Rita, listen, I—well, I can't."

"Why not?"

The words tumbled around my head and then popped out my mouth like the wrong change from a vending machine. "I don't want to be a bakery clerk."

God, I wish I hadn't said that. The next few weeks were hell.

"Leave the bread on the counter," Rita would say coldly. "I'll get to it." I'd have to do all my other shopping and make several discreet passes to see if she'd finally sliced it. And if I came back too soon, she'd snap at me. Then she stepped up the questions. Before she'd give up the bread, she'd interrogate me.

She'd peer over the counter and inspect the things in my cart. "Boy, for an out-of-work person, you sure buy a lot of expensive stuff," she said one time. "How come you have all that diet soda?"

"My husband's diabetic!" I snapped. I thought she looked a little ashamed of herself, but it didn't last.

The next time she asked, "Do you own your own home?"

That's it, I thought. I don't need this.

After that I started buying whole-wheat roll-ups from the wire rack next to the deli. At first my husband complained, but then I told him about an article I read in *Good Housekeeping* that said roll-ups were a delicious way to cut calories.

For a while I had peace. No more cat-and-mouse games at the bakery. No more inappropriate questions. And damn, I looked good. I started to fit into clothing I hadn't been able to wear in years.

All was quiet until the day I went into carbohydrate meltdown and raided the freezer case next to the bakery for an emergency pint of ice cream. I was rummaging through the cartons, trying to decide between Chunky Monkey and Rocky Road, when I remembered that they used to have free cookie samples on the bakery counter.

When I drifted over to check, I accidentally caught Rita's eye.

Oh, shit, I thought.

"Hi, how are you?" she said. "I haven't seen you for a while. Been on vacation?"

Don't answer that, I instructed myself. Out-of-work people can't afford vacations. "Good," I said. "You?"

"So... found a job yet?"

I smiled vaguely. I grabbed the first thing that came to hand, which turned out to be a chocolate cheesecake, and slowly, casually, wheeled my cart toward checkout.

"Hey!" she yelled. "You working yet?"

Just keep rolling, I told myself.

Footsteps in the aisle, heavy breathing at my back. She was chasing me!

Next to the cat litter display a voice blared in my ear. "I said, you got a job?"

"No, have you?" I retorted. I wasn't exactly sure what I meant by that, but I was happy to see her frown in confusion:

"Yes, I work on the bread counter at Bi-Rite."

"Well, good for you," I said. "Go do it."

"Are you mad because I asked you a question?"

I rolled on past toothbrushes and deodorant, past the locked cigarette case. Her voice rang in my ears: "Are you mad? Are you mad at me?" An elderly gentleman in the laxative aisle put down his Metamucil and gawked at us. At the pharmacy Rita twitched back the corner of my raincoat.

"So tell me, is that your yoga outfit again today?"

I finally lost it.

"Look, Rita, you're an employee in this store. I'm the customer. From now on all I want to hear from you is Hello, How are you, Thanks and Good bye. It pains me to say that, but really, you leave me no choice."

"You're pathetic! Here's how I read things. You've never worked a day in your life. You married some guy who's supporting you. I tried to help and you threw it back in my face. So why is it exactly that you're mad

at me?"

She stared. I stared. She wouldn't back down. I took off again. At last, express checkout loomed before me. I had more than twelve items, but who cared? This was an emergency! I dove into the chute between the candy rack and The National Enquirer. My adversary was hard on my heels.

"She lied to me," Rita told the pop-eyed cashier. Then to me, "That's it, isn't it? You lied to me just so I'd slice your fucking bread!"

Trapped amongst the impulse purchases, I whipped around to deny it. My elbow dislodged a disposable camera. It bounced off my hand. I swatted at it, so I guess when it hit Rita in the head, she thought I had thrown it at her. Her face went purple—if there hadn't been a shopping cart between us, I think she'd have gone for my throat. Instead she lunged after the camera, scooped it up and hurled it back at me.

Unfortunately, her pitching arm connected with a pyramid of Count Chocula piled in the aisle. The pyramid exploded in a great whoomp! of cereal and boxes and cardboard shelving.

The store went still. Rita froze. In the glare of the fluorescent lights she suddenly looked old, alone and sick with fear. The PA system crackled to life, and someone paged the manager.

I backed up my cart and stood next to Rita in the litter of cereal. What else could I do? When a man with a Bi-Rite bow tie and a clipboard arrived, I rubbed my eye and let out a moan.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Those cardboard corners are sharp," I said. "I may have cuts." I looked at Rita. "Thanks for your help." Then back at the manager. "She yanked me out of the way."

"Her? I doubt it."

Rita had a miraculous recovery. "What's the big idea stacking stuff in the—"

He cut her off. "What are you doing over here, anyway? You belong in the bakery. You've been warned about this."

"Rita came over to let me know the fresh bread was out," I told him.

He tapped his clipboard suspiciously. "Really?"

"Really. Every week she goes way beyond her job description."

I ended up with a coupon for a hundred dollars' worth of free groceries, and Rita got a raise. The shrink beamed when I told her this. "So you

finally had a confrontation and things turned out well. How's that feel?"

"To tell you the truth, not so good," I said. "Rita acts like I'm her new best friend, but I just want her to go away. Every week I go into Bi-Rite and there she is, waiting to pounce. I've stopped buying bread at the bakery counter, but even so."

My husband said, "I'm glad you girls buried the hatchet. I want to go back to the English toasting white."

"I thought you liked roll-ups."

"Life's too short. Get the good bread."

My yoga instructor said, "You have a lot of tension. Let's try a pranayama breathing exercise." She posed me with my feet apart and my hands clasped over my head. "Breathe out in short, choppy breaths."

"Ha!" I said. "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

I don't know what to tell Rita. It's way too late for the truth. I think I'm just not going to shop at Bi-Rite anymore. A new Safeway opened in the old Price Club Plaza across town. They have an in-store bakery there, too, and the clerk knows how to operate the slicer.

And best of all, she doesn't ask any questions.

Brian Rowe

Van Gogh

To Van Gogh, Christmas is always
cold especially around his heart
even the typewriters have caught on;
they keep to whispers.
Van Gogh, your hands are always
wrapping presents though you are
barefoot and in a cheap
burgundy Salvation army Cardigan
passing your misery to others like
it's your good deed of the day.
Your wristwatch is wrong
the timing is always off when
studying the philosophy
of trees and counting
the seconds between each sneeze.
Despite the protests of insects,
you still keep the porch light on,
so you can see your shadow
struggling with matches.
You'll never be a Picasso
kissing women you never mean to love
inviting them to your bedroom
where the shelves are all crooked
and the carpet has yet to be washed.
Van Gogh, your heart is three sizes too small.
Van Gogh, stop fixing your hair like James Dean.
Van Gogh, don't hide your Dutch accent.
Van Gogh, cut off your ear, shave your legs.
And stop, for once, to rethink the philosophy
of only looking for miracles in whiskey.

David Pacelli

Random Acts

Only a life in the service of others is worth living.

-Albert Einstein

The time is always right to do what is right.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

I leap down from my maple
tree, feet first. Three middle school
kids pushed another to the ground.
My shadow blankets
them. They stare, mesmerized
probably by my black Ninja
costume, or by the Katana
blade strapped on my back.
I brush a maple leaf from my head,
then point. Hot streams coil
through my back, thighs.
Two hours up in that tree
were too long, I think. School
got out much later than I'd thought.

Are you a ninja? one
asks, shoving his hands
in his pockets. I nod.
Ninja must be silent,
I want to explain. In the distance,
standing in front of the brick school,
a group of adults point
at me. Two men race
towards me. I shake
my head. They don't know
a superhero when they see one.
I run to the street,
to my Honda,
and drive back home.

Pat Mottola

She Used to Be

my sister
laid back
off track
I thought
nasty
habit
each time
we spoke
we'd need
a fix
a screen
of smoke
between
the lines
we wrote
the book
we read
the words
kicked back
and forth
the echo
lingers
following
in my
footsteps
try to
catch up
to me
to put
me down
too hard
to fill
my shoes
too big

stepped on
her toes
pinched
the nerve
of her
to leave
me here
in time
to say
she kicked

about it daily, not knowing that whenever I wanted a new CD or hot lunch at school I peeled off a few of the dollar bills she had wrapped together with a rubber band. She never checked the box, because she couldn't make it down the stairs anymore, and also because she had no reason to think I'd take money from her death fund. That's what I called it. I figured I deserved the money now more than when she was dead.

Besides, at that point she'd have nothing to leave me. Except all the medical bills that the mailman continued to slide through the slot in our front door, the ones she painfully stoops down and picks up each afternoon and just as painfully stuffs into her filing cabinet, unopened and unpaid.

She always wanted to talk about her death. She was always telling me what clothes she wanted me to dress her in for her funeral and what items she wanted in her coffin. She had it all planned, right down to the songs she wanted sung at her funeral and the flowers she wanted stacked by her grave.

I wasn't going to do any of it, but I didn't tell her that. I wasn't going to put in my baby teeth that she'd saved in an envelope or the first lock of hair I'd had cut off my head or a picture of her and my Daddy from their wedding or the tiara she'd worn when she'd won the Miss New Jersey pageant in 1975. I wouldn't put them in so people, whatever people would come to pay their final farewells, could see the meager remains of her life and laugh at her, at me.

I'd let my grandmother sort through my mother's crap and do whatever she wanted with it. If she asked me if my mother would want to be buried with her cherished toe shoes I would tell her no. I'd convince her to sell them at a tag sale along with other once-cherished possessions, and give me the money. I imagined my grandmother, after my mother's death, ignoring the pain of her arthritic knees, bending down to dig through the items my mother had lovingly placed in the toy chest at the foot of her bed, holding them up one by one and asking what I thought she should do with them.

"What about this old cheerleading jacket, Rebecca? Think Mom would want us to keep this somewhere? Do you want it?" she'd ask with the cigarette dangling out of her mouth and dripping ashes onto the white jacket with the words Trinity Catholic High School sewn onto the side.

"I don't want it," I'd say, making a face, pulling the cigarette out of my grandmother's mouth and storming out of the room to let her think I was going to dump the butt in the toilet. Really I was going into my room where I would puff and puff until I felt like my lungs would explode and then I'd collapse onto my bed in a feeling of euphoric release, mocking the fact that

cigarettes killed my mother but left my 80-year-old grandmother alive to dig through her only daughter's belongings.

I wanted a cigarette now, and, convinced my mother had lived to see another day, I went into the kitchen and pulled a chair over to the cabinet where I hid the stockpile of cigarettes I had accumulated by sneaking them, one at a time, out of my mother's packs. I grabbed one and stuck it behind my ear, feeling empowered by the fact that there were things in my mother's house that she could not find and could not reach. Things that belonged only to me.

I had set the coffee pot to brew a pot automatically this morning so it would be ready when I got up. Kids aren't supposed to drink coffee. That's what my mother's nurse Sarah says when she comes over to bathe my mother every afternoon. That is the one task I refuse to help my mother with even though I can still remember cloudy images of my mother bathing me when I was young and playing with the plastic fishing rod and fish I insisted on taking into the bathtub with me.

"Does your mother know you drink that shit?" Sarah asked. She is a 31-year-old divorcee with four kids who does this job because it pays well. She smokes pot instead of cigarettes. I know this because I smell it on her. She wants me to think she cares about what I do, when really we both know she doesn't.

"There's a lot my mother doesn't know," I tell her in a way that alludes to things I don't even tell my best friend Darcie because they are secrets I keep for myself. I think these things, like the money and the cigarettes, make me mysterious and aloof, two things I enjoy being because they are the only two things I can hold on to.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and decide that today I will drink it black because if I can finish the entire cup it will be even more proof that I am not a little kid, but a girl on the brink of womanhood who can handle things like black coffee, unfiltered cigarettes, sips of beer she steals when her grandmother isn't looking and a mother who is slowly dying slowly in front of her.

I sit on the front step and light the cigarette with a match from the book I keep hidden under the sidewalk flower pot. I inhale deeply, enjoying the burning feeling that pierces my lungs. It gives me a lightheaded sensation.

I close my eyes and pretend I'm a sophisticated girl, like the ones I see walking to the high school. They walk beside their boyfriends that have

arms over their shoulders and who hold their hands.

I'm not one of those girls, and I never will be. I wasn't made to be beautiful. My mother was beautiful, before she got sick. But I don't take after my mother. I take after my grandmother, whose face looks like it was carved from stone and the edges weren't smoothed out, as if the sculptor got bored with his project and left it unfinished. My grandmother has always been heavy, even though she calls it big-boned. Everything about her is rough and hard, like the skin on her elbows and the curves of her body.

When she was their age my mother was like the girls I envy. Her red hair, the hair I used to wish I'd wake up with some day, was silky and smooth to the touch. It hung down to her waist until a year ago, when the chemo made it all fall out. I collected her hair and put it in a bag in my room, determined to make a wig from it after she died, taking from her what she had not given me through her genes. I don't know if she knew I had done that, but I figured she would have mentioned it if she did.

Her skin had glistened like she had a tan, even in the middle of winter. Men and women always turned to stare at my mother, and I knew they were wondering how the black haired, chisel-faced fat girl by her side was related to. I planned to have loads of plastic surgery when I became old enough so I would look so different that I wouldn't even recognize myself when I looked in the mirror. I would pretend I was someone else.

I opened my eyes because I felt someone staring at me. I turned my head to the side and saw Douglas, the boy who lived next door to me, watching me.

"I thought you said you were going to stop smoking?" he asked in the disappointed voice I hated because he had no right to want or expect anything of me. Even if he did, I would deny him like I denied my mother the hand she always tried to hold when I sat on the couch next to her.

"I never said that," I told him, taking another long puff of the cigarette.

"Yeah, you did. Last week. I asked you to."

"I lied."

"You do that a lot."

"Yeah."

He sat next to me on the step and peered over the rim of my coffee cup.

"Coffee? You drink coffee, too?"

"Yeah. So?"

“Do you like it?”

“I wouldn’t drink it if I didn’t, would I?”

He shrugged. “I guess not.”

I had nothing to say to Douglas. I usually didn’t, unless I wanted to curse about my mother without anyone interrupting me to tell me that young ladies shouldn’t swear. Douglas didn’t care what I said. He liked me even though I wasn’t beautiful like my mother. This was because I let him have sex with me. I knew sex was supposed to be a precious gift girls only give away when they’re in love with someone. But I didn’t want to make it that important. I have learned that the more you make something out to be big and wonderful, the more it disappoints you. Sex was nothing to me. That was why I did it with Douglas all the time.

I knew that was why he was here now, and after a few awkward moments of sitting on the front porch not saying anything, I snuffed out my cigarette and took another swig of coffee.

“Let’s go,” I said, standing up and walking toward the back of the house.

“Where are we going?” Douglas asked in the voice I imagined a dog would use when asking his owner if he was going to take him for a walk, even as the owner dangled a leash and pooper scooper in front of his face.

“As if you don’t know,” I said, not turning around. I try not to look at Douglas too much, especially when we are about to have sex because it turns me off. He’s as unattractive as I am, and he has hit puberty so his face is always dotted with white-headed pimples, and I’m afraid they’re going to explode in my face some day.

I walk to the shed in the rear of our house and tug on the lock that has long since failed its purpose. The lock is rusted, and I get some orange on my hand and rub the stain along the side of my sweatpants.

I can hear Douglas breathing hard behind me and I try to think of being someplace else with someone else, like Cameron Bain. Cameron’s a high school junior who plays football and dates, predictably, the head cheerleader. I want a guy like Cameron, but since I know I am never going to have him, I just imagine his face when Douglas and I have sex.

I don’t think it’s wrong to do this. I’m sure women do it all the time. Sometimes when I’m at a movie with Darcie we see a really skinny, pretty lady sharing a tub of popcorn with a balding, fat man and we point and joke and wonder what she’s doing with him. Darcie’s mom says it isn’t right to do that, that maybe the man is really nice to the lady, which is why she

likes him. I tell Darcie I don't care. I say I will never be with a man like that. Darcie doesn't know about Douglas.

There is already a blanket on the floor of the shed from the last time Douglas and I were in here, and I smooth it out so that it covers the places where the floorboards have rotted. I don't want to get splinters in my back when Douglas climbs on top of me.

He runs a hand across my shoulders in a gesture that is supposed to be romantic. Douglas always tries to be romantic. He doesn't understand that I'm not doing this so I can feel something. I am doing it so I can stop feeling. The mixture of pain and strange pleasure, the wet stickiness that I feel when he comes inside of me makes me leave my body for awhile so that I am no longer Rebecca Moore but someone else; he is no longer Douglas Jackson, but Cameron; my grandmother no longer smells like hair dye and Ben Gay; my mother is no longer dying, and I no longer have to watch blankets to see if they rise and fall. In these moments that should make me ashamed, he gives me what I most seek: a way to be someone other than me for awhile.

I pull away from Douglas, making him realize I don't want him to touch me unless I ask him, and begin to peel off my clothes. Darcie won't even change in front of me when I sleep over. She says some things are private. She doesn't want me to see that she doesn't need to wear a bra yet. Not even a training bra like the one I wore in sixth grade. She doesn't want me to know that there is no hair dotting the area above her private parts.

I do not care about being naked. It's natural to me and I don't mind doing it in front of Douglas, as long as I can't see his face while I do it. I don't like to see people's faces when they're naked. When my mother calls me to help her off the toilet because she is too weak to stand up, I always turn my head as I pull up her pants.

She thinks it is because I am embarrassed. It's not. It is because seeing makes things real.

I take my clothes off quickly, keeping my back to Douglas. There is no ceremony, no sweet talk, no loving touch. There is no need for any of that. I do not love Douglas. I will never love a boy. If he loves me, I will not want him to, so I will not encourage it.

Love is a stupid word people say to fill empty silences. I think there are much better things to say like, "Do you know that octopi are so dexterous they can open jars?" At least that means something. At least you learn something from a statement like that.

I peer out of the corner of my eye and see Douglas bending to untie

his sneakers. I'm glad he has gotten my point and stopped trying to draw undue attention to this act. I throw my clothes on the floor in a pile and lie down naked, waiting for Douglas to follow. I am always ready first because Douglas is unsteady and klutzy. I lie and wait for him to mount me, wait for it to begin so I can begin to forget.

As I lie there I stare at the walls of the shed, which are covered with pictures my mother and I drew when I was younger. Before I used the shed as a place for sex with Douglas, it was my fort, the place where I went to escape my father's yelling, my mother's crying.

My mother would always come and find me here and stay with me until I fell asleep. Then she'd carry me back inside, careful not to wake me up. She'd bring me all sorts of things to do in the shed so I'd stop crying. One of our favorite things was drawing on the walls and floor with colored chalk. We'd draw things we'd never see or have: a house with a picket fence and a big tree house.

Most of the drawings have faded, but some are still there and I try to make them out as I lie there. I think I can see an image of two figures wearing dresses and holding hands. I don't know if I really see this or if it is just in my mind, but still I try to remember when what things were like back then when my mother and I drew these pictures. What it was like when she wasn't dying.

I colored my dress pink because it was my favorite color. I despise it now, as I despise most things that other girls like, especially beautiful ones, the ones that make me jealous of their golden locks. My mother chose purple because she is still very girly with the things she likes. The bathrobe she wears pretty much all the time, even when it's warm, is made of purple fleece. She tries to get me to let her braid my hair or paint my nails, but I don't allow it. It's not that I don't want to let her try to make me pretty, it's just that I don't want to get used to things like that because one day soon she will be gone and I will have to go back to being ugly. Worse than never being pretty is being pretty for a little while and then losing it.

Douglas is on top of me now and I feel the heat from his body on mine. Douglas is skinny, and I barely feel him on me. The first time we had sex I hugged him to me like I had seen the actresses in my mother's soap operas do and I drew my arms back quickly when I felt his bones under my fingers. I can't feel my own bones, and it scared me that I could feel his.

Now I don't touch him when we have sex. I let him touch me wherever he wants. I let him grope and poke whatever he desires, but I never

touch him. It is like I have no arms. Sometimes I pretend I don't, and I wonder what it would be like if I really didn't. I wonder if it's true what they say about feeling parts of your body even when they have been amputated. I wonder if it will be like that when my mother is gone. I wonder if I will still hear and see and feel her after she is cut off from my life.

I lie so still that I am like a chalk drawing from one of those crime scenes you see on TV. Someone could trace me right now and I bet that tomorrow I'd just fall into this same spot. I feel like part of the floor sometimes – hard, rough and full of rotting pieces.

Douglas starts kissing me on my stomach and chest and I don't respond. He knows a lot for a 13-year-old boy, and I wonder if he watches the same soap operas with his mother that I do. I ignore him because I am still drawn to the picture. Its long ago beauty and the way it takes me away from Douglas and draws me in is so powerful I find I can't turn away from it. This is odd since I can almost always make myself do anything by willing it hard enough, even things like slicing a razor blade across my finger so Darcie and I can be blood sisters or piercing my own ear with a needle I stole from my mother's sewing kit.

In the picture, my mother drew herself with long flowing hair. I drew myself that way too, although when I was younger I had short hair like a boy's because I didn't like the feel of hair on my face.

Douglas takes off his glasses and places them next to me on the floor, a signal that he is ready to have sex and abandon the advances I have been ignoring anyway. He leans over me, blocking the image of my mother, and I close my eyes so I don't have to stare at his face. I don't like looking people directly in the eyes because sometimes I see things I don't want to. He enters me and I turn my head to the side in what I imagine he believes is a sign of pleasure. But it is not. I try to peer over his shoulder at the drawing, wanting desperately to keep my mother in my sight.

This wanting makes me angry. I do not want to need her. I do not want to sit next to her on the couch and let her pet me and stroke me with hands that are older than they should be and full of bruises from IVs because the doctors ran out of places on her arms to stick them.

I try so hard to do things to make her angry, to make her love me even just a little less so she won't want to be around me as much, won't tell me she loves me so often, so that when she dies I won't miss her to the point that I will want to just sit in the middle of the floor and scream to make the hurting stop. If I can hate her while she is alive, then I won't be as broken

when she dies.

But she doesn't get angry. She does not hate me. I do not hate her. And this makes me angry.

I imagine her lying indoors on the couch, still asleep, or perhaps awake and wondering where I am. Maybe she's calling me because she needs help walking to the bathroom or because she is hungry or thirsty and doesn't have the strength to make it to the kitchen. I feel guilty for being here instead of there, but I know being here takes much less energy and much less emotion than being with her, feeling her need me and wanting me close.

Douglas wants those things, too, but it's easy to ignore his needs. Hers aren't easy to ignore. Her voice penetrates my mind. Her frail arms and legs are worse to touch than Douglas's. She looks at me with piercing eyes that try to see inside me see more than Douglas's do, even with his large glasses in front of them.

I wonder if her image will always be there like the chalk drawings on the wall. They haven't faded despite the years that have passed since we drew them. I wonder if one day I will recall a picture of her in my mind and make myself look better in my memory than I look right now. Make myself a dutiful, loving, kind daughter. Make myself try to forget how I ignored her, how I waited for her to die, how I tried to stop myself from loving her, so I wouldn't care when she did. How I let Douglas have his way with me while she lies inside and calls to me because I am too scared to see that the blanket might be still.

And I will be left alone to answer.

An Entry from the Pan-Gaia Unabridged Dictionary of the Common Tongue

Lafayllve, Patricia., N. (la-fill', pa-tri'-sha)

[Lafayllve from O.Fr. LaFfaille, Lafaille, La faille, "stone", "stone fence", "stone carver", part. fences. Patricia from Lat., fem. Patricus, O.Ir. Paddraic, ME fem. Patrick, "of noble birth."]

1. Proper noun referring to historical figure and activist Patricia Lafayllve (1969-?, presumed 2059-2060). Known from early twenty-first century documents as co-founder and ardent leader of the People's Rebellion (2008-2050). Archival internet files (see INTERNET for discussion on veracity of material) indicate Lafayllve was born in Newport, Rhode Island. A polemic writer, free thinker, and self-professed anarcho-libertarian, Lafayllve joined with other heathens (see HEATHEN; ASATRU; RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY) at the beginning of the Bush Dictatorship. Their professed cause was the return of political power to the states and the dissolution of the Early American Empire (2008-2094). Secondary agenda involved the separation of church and state as required by the then-obsolete Constitution (see CONSTITUTION, UNITED STATES of AMERICA). Ousted by later and more radical leader Gerd Groenewold for her policy of non-violent protest, Lafayllve retired from public life. Last known location Pattyland, a compound within the Free State of New England. Lafayllve soon faded into obscurity. Date and year of death unknown, rumored cause self-aggrandizement. (See also GROENEWOLD, GERD; EMPIRE, EARLY AMERICAN; NEW ENGLAND, FREE STATE; PATTYLAND; REBELLION, PEOPLE'S; STATES, HISTORY OF; UNITED STATES of AMERICA, DISSOLUTION OF; WORLD WAR III).

2. Noun usu. used to indicate state of being; "being a Patricia Lafayllve" indicates one who is by nature open-minded and rebellious against dominant paradigm yet ultimately pacifistic. "pulling a Patricia Lafayllve," acting in a peaceful nature despite surrounding violence; see also colloquialisms "gardening when the fighting breaks out", "Sending a Lafayllve instead of a panzer", "retreating like a Lafayllve."

Works Cited

"Lafayllve, Patricia." The Pan-Gaia Unabridged Dictionary of the Common Tongue. Third ed. 3007.

Craig Southard

Punch Line

At my funeral cremated
remains are not to be scattered
but distributed in Dixie Cups
to all participants.

Apply my remnants to the facial area
in the way you most see fit and proper
and the attendant priest will judge
the winner of this contest.

Some of you will have my cardiac tissue smeared
across your face in Sioux warrior decorum,
my cerebrum painting your lips
like ashen lip gloss that begs to speak a truth,
perhaps my foot
moistened by your laughter
will make its way into your mouth to remind you
what words can do.

About the time the victor is to be announced
I'll be somewhere watching the poor
fool who happens to have my scrotum on his forehead.

Danielle Charlestin

Haiti Mwen Pa-t Jamn Kite-ou

Haiti, I never left you. I have the fight of slaves in my blood.
My eyes hold wisdom ages old like proverbs
rich from the mouths of poor farmers.
The simplicity of your beauty lives in me
like the singing of little Haitian children content with sticks
for toys and grass to practice the art of braiding.

The wrinkles in grandfather's feet remind me of La Coline's
frigid water, ice cold in 90 degree weather but his smile
brings me to the river Fer-a-Cheval warm,
not as glorious as it once was but soothing.
I bathe in your shallow waters watching
the young girls downstream washing long-faded clothes.

My spirit runs deep in copper soil and mango trees.
I savor your goodness like the taste of mother's
legume and black rice. I am sweet
like sugarcane and the cool morning breeze
coming through the mosquito mesh in the window.
The wind beckons me to the yard where grandmother lies
in her concrete cell singing songs I never got to hear.
I love her as I do you, mon cher Haiti, as one who cannot say
you are my own because my birth never knew you.

I marvel at the crystal night sky, the crickets' orchestra
and the slow movement of time that seems to pause in awe
of your charm. Crackling fires burning to prepare today's meal
remind me that I live where privilege or excess is taken for granted.
I hold treasure in me like the water encased in a coconut.
Every now and again my soul, rising like the dust from dirt roads,
flies to Haiti, cracking open and longing to stay where I've never lived
but have never left.

Jean Copeland

A Doll's List of Demands

"Tear off your own head: It's a doll revolution"

- The Bangles

Ditch the crimes of fashion. Clingy
polyester dresses show too much
cleavage and plastic stilettos give me
bunions. I'm not Prostitute Barbie.

Quit posing me. If I'm gonna look sexy,
I'll decide when and how. My elbows
don't bend and you look silly bopping
my rubber legs along the dusty floor.

No more stalking Ken. It's degrading
that my loftiest goal in life is pursuing
a synthetic man for a ride in his battery-
operated Jeep. I drive a pink Corvette!
And by the way, does every possession
I own really need to be pink?

Stop painting me with your mother's
Covergirl. I'm plenty attractive au naturale.
Besides, you stink at it. The Bionic Woman
and Holly Hobbie now whisper Junky
Barbie, thank you very much.

Tell your brother to stop gaping up my
dress. I'm not even anatomically correct,
a trivial detail to some men. And hey,
how about a pair of comfy cotton panties
once in a while? It's a little thing called dignity.

Hillary Gindi

Family Album

George started every morning with calisthenics. He warmed up to them slowly. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he'd reach his arms up high and stretch for a five count, then out in front for five, and lastly as close to his toes as he could manage for five. He shoved his feet into slippers and shuffled off to the bathroom.

"Coffee's on!" He heard his wife Anne's voice from the kitchen over the hum of his electric razor. Slapping on some Old Spice, George winked at himself in the mirror.

"Good morning," George said. He kissed her cheek and patted her rump.

"Oh, you!" She smiled at him and pointed with an egg-covered spatula to the steaming coffee pot. "Susan is coming today. She's driving up with Lisa."

"Isn't it a school day?" George glanced at the calendar on the kitchen wall as he poured himself a cup of coffee. Notes written in his wife's careful handwriting covered the calendar's pages. Above the month of October was a large photograph of his son, William, and his two blond grandsons on the deck of a fishing boat.

"Well, yes, I suppose it is." Anne turned back to the eggs she was scrambling.

"Is Lisa sick?"

Anne moved the eggs from pan to plates. "I didn't think to ask."

George sipped his coffee and reached for the newspaper. It was more out of habit than any real desire to read the news. These days, everything was about shady politics and sex crimes. Anne set a plate of eggs beside him.

"Looks like a hurricane is threatening to make its way to Florida," George said. He set down the paper and picked up a fork.

"I'm sure Will would have called if it was serious." Anne sat down at the small table across from her husband and smoothed out the plastic-covered tablecloth. She held her coffee cup in her left hand without using the handle. The gold letters of #1 Grandma faced outward. A wedding ring, loose on her thin fingers, clicked against the mug.

"I was going to get the bulbs in the ground today," George said. He glanced out the window. "Maybe Lisa will want to help with that."

Anne smiled at her husband and sipped her coffee. "Maybe."

The wall phone rang. One of the bells was cracked and so when the hammer struck, it offered an uneven ringing. George had grown accustomed to the sound and never bothered to replace the old phone.

"Duncan residence," Anne answered the phone. "Oh, hi dear. Yes. Mm-hmm." She looked at George and put her hand over the receiver. "Susan," she whispered. Back into the phone, "Okay then, we'll see you in a little bit."

George put on his quilted flannel shirt and fished his work gloves out of the basket of winter accessories in the mudroom. He headed into the backyard shed and retrieved a large bag of tulip bulbs and two shovels. A car beep sounded in the front driveway.

George walked around the front corner of the house and found his wife waving at him.

"There he is," Anne said. Their daughter Susan stood next to her with a full, brown paper grocery bag in her arms.

"Hi, girls." He kissed his daughter's cheek and noted the fresh smell of soap and absence of makeup. There were creases forming at the corners of her eyes and laugh lines framed her mouth. Susan might not have much to laugh about, but she was pleasant and joyful anyway and George was proud of her. "Are we missing someone?"

Susan looked towards the car. It was a tiny silver thing with four doors and a large windshield. In the front passenger seat sat a dark, sullen girl.

"Lisa, come on out," Susan called. She waved towards her daughter with one hand, balancing the bag against her arm.

"Let me take that from you," George said. He pulled the bag out of Susan's arms and walked up the stairs of the front porch. "Annie? Can you get this for me?" He tapped at the closed screen door with his foot.

"Sure, George." Anne followed her husband up the steps. Susan turned back towards the car and bent down in front of the closed window. Lisa looked away with her arms folded against her chest.

"What's in here?" George peeked into the bag as he set it on the

kitchen counter.

"Food stuff. A little of this, a little of that. They're having lunch with us." Anne followed him into the kitchen, leaving her daughter some privacy outside.

"We have food," George said.

"Apparently this is organic," Anne smiled and lifted herself onto her toes to peer into the bag without reaching in. George gave an indignant snort and shook his head.

"Food is food," he said and walked out of the kitchen.

Lisa was still inside the car. Susan had the driver's side door open and she bent down to talk to her daughter without the shield of auto glass separating them. George pulled his work gloves off and stuck them in the rear pocket of his khaki trousers. With purpose, he walked to the tiny silver car and yanked the passenger door handle. The locked door stayed closed.

Susan raised her head and looked at her dad. "She's not feeling social."

George shook his head and tapped sharply on the window, "Come out of there, young lady. Right now."

Lisa rolled her eyes and opened the door. Without a word, she exited the car and stood with crossed arms in front of the open door. Black makeup outlined her eyes and her sullen lips were stained dark red. Her chestnut hair was pushed back, tucked behind an ear that was more silver than skin. From head to toe, the girl's clothes were so dark that the thin white cord that led from both her ears down into the recess of a pocket stood out in stark contrast. George wondered briefly if his granddaughter had recently gone deaf. It would explain the use of what looked like a hearing aid, as well as her apparent inability to listen to her mother.

Susan closed the driver's side door and walked around the car. "She doesn't want to be here. I think she's sick of being in a car with me." She laughed an apologetic laugh and folded her arms across her chest.

"You don't want to be here?" George said. He looked directly at the sullen teen. This creature could not possibly be the same bubbly little dark-eyed child he had once bounced on his knee.

Lisa shrugged and stepped forward to close the passenger door. She avoided eye contact and headed up the front walk to the house.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Susan said.

George put his arm around his daughter's shoulder as they followed

Lisa up to the house. "So what's the occasion?" He nodded towards the girl.

Susan smiled with pride, "We're looking at schools. Lisa's counselor assures us that with her grades she can have her pick of most of them. Mount Holyoke is less than an hour from here."

"Excellent. You're a good mom," George said. He reached out and grabbed the screen door before it slammed behind Lisa and held it open for Susan.

"Thanks, Dad." Susan kissed her father's cheek as she walked past him. "Old Spice," she smiled.

Anne stood next to various food items on the counter: a carton of milk, a bag of rice, several colorful vegetables, a bottle of soy sauce, a box of tea, and a small white carton with a plastic cover.

"Should I put these away? I'm not sure what needs to be refrigerated. You know, we already have milk," Anne said when Susan walked into the room.

"It's organic milk, Grandma," Lisa said. She yanked the white cords from her ears. "The cows aren't tortured with growth hormones which get into their milk. The herbal tea doesn't have any caffeine and that," she pointed to the white carton, "is tofu."

"I'm going to do a stir-fry," Susan said, breaking the sudden silence that followed the surprise of Lisa's speech. "I brought a wok."

"Well, that sounds downright hearty," George said and winked at Anne.

Susan reached into the bag and pulled out a metal wok, "See?" Her mother's eyebrows lifted. Susan put the wok on the counter and picked up the rice. "This will need to soak for a couple of hours."

"You gals soak your rice and we'll go get those bulbs in the ground." George beckoned Lisa with his pointer finger.

"The what in the ground?" Lisa sat down at the kitchen table, arms folded and legs crossed.

"Go with your grandpa, Lisa," Susan said. She sounded almost stern.

An uncomfortable silence followed. All eyes on her, Lisa stomped her black boots on the floor and stood up. She narrowed her eyes at her mother and walked out of the room towards the front door.

"This'll be fun," George tipped an imaginary hat and followed his granddaughter.

George tossed a pair of garden gloves towards Lisa. "Gloves?"

"I'm not really a gardener." She ignored the gloves.

"What? All you eat is vegetables. You never tried to grow your own?"

George knelt on the ground and worked to open the bag of bulbs.

"Those aren't vegetables." She eyed the bulbs.

"No, they're tulips. You can't eat them, but they sure are pretty to look at come spring."

"You know, flowers are the sex organs of the plant. They have to be attractive so they can reproduce."

George turned his head and met her eyes in silence. She looked away and poked at a tulip bulb with her toe.

"Well, I don't know about that, but they're your grandma's favorite flowers and they make her happy," he stood and picked up a shovel, "and so I plant them. Grab a shovel."

George showed Lisa how he pushed the shovel into the ground with his foot and turned the earth. He explained how the dark earth meant the bulbs would have enough nutrients to grow and bloom year after year. Lisa remained silent. When half of the plot was turned, he reached into the bag and grabbed a bulb.

"You have to make sure they aren't upside down when you put them in. They're going to sleep for a long time, until the ground warms up and wakes them. After such a long sleep, you don't want them to forget which way to grow." George chuckled to himself. "Go ahead and pick one up."

Lisa reached into the bag and pulled out a bulb. She held it with two fingers in front of her, "Which way is up?"

"Like this." George turned the bulb in her hand so the fat part was on the bottom. He knelt down. "You just move the dirt aside like this with your hand. When you find the right depth, you pop in a bulb. Then cover it up and wait until spring." George patted the ground gently with his hand, as if tucking in the little bulb. "You try it."

Lisa held the flower bulb and knelt onto the ground beside her grandfather. She pushed a dark sleeve back and moved aside some dirt with her ungloved hands.

"Well now, there's one reason for black nail polish I'd never have thought of. Won't see the dirt under your nails that way. Good thinking," George said. Lisa looked focused on planting the bulb, but her face betrayed the hint of a smile.

"George!" Anne called from the front door. "Phone!"

George stood, leaving Lisa to finish planting her bulb. When he arrived inside, Anne handed him the phone.

"It's Will," she said.

George put the receiver to his ear, "Hey Son, how's the weather down there?"

"It's fine, Dad. Sunny and breezy. There's a storm off the coast chopping up the sea and making for some incredible waves. Listen, we took some pictures of the boys on the beach with the digital camera. I emailed them to you."

"You emailed me pictures?"

"Yeah. Dad you know how to look at your email, right?"

"Sure I do."

"Because you had some trouble last time."

"No, it's fine. I'll go look at it right now."

"Okay, Dad. Hey, when are we going to move you down here? Get you out of those New England winters."

George chuckled, "Can't stand the heat, Son."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Listen, I'm driving right now so I'll call you later, okay?"

"Okay, Will. Good talking to you." The line disconnected.

George opened the front screen door and whistled to Lisa. She looked up from her gardening and he motioned towards the interior of the house with his thumb.

The computer lived in a cabinet in the front sitting room. William gave it to them when he moved to Florida so they could stay close through electronic communication. Despite the grand intentions, use of the computer still required a preliminary phone call. George wiped the dust off the machine and pulled out the keyboard. There was nothing to sit on, so he pulled over an ottoman.

"You have a computer?" Lisa opened the front door and walked in. Her sleeves were pushed up and her hands were dirty.

"Sure do." George patted the space on the ottoman next to him.

Lisa looked at her hands briefly, and sat down. "Do you know how to turn it on?"

"I'm not feeble, young lady." George reached down to the computer

tower and pressed the power button. Nothing happened. He pushed again. Nothing. "Annie!"

Anne poked her head into the room. "Yes?"

George waved a hand at the dead computer. "Did you do something to this?"

Anne raised an eyebrow. "Is it plugged in?"

Lisa put a dirt-streaked hand over her mouth. Her shoulders shook as she held in laughter.

George sheepishly plugged the machine into the floor socket. "Thank you." Anne nodded and disappeared from the doorway. He cleared his throat and pressed the power button again, "As I was saying."

The machine flickered on and the two of them watched in silence as it booted up. At last, it appeared ready for work.

"Why do you have so many connection shortcuts?" Lisa grabbed the mouse.

"I guess they're left over from last time I connected to the Internet. Don't touch them though. Just leave them there.

"All you have to do is double click this one," Lisa said. She clicked quickly and some numbers popped up onto the screen and disappeared. "Wow. You have cable."

George let Lisa guide him through connecting and navigating to his online email account. When it came time for a password, Lisa insisted on covering her eyes so that he could type it in. He hunted for the keys with two pointer fingers, pecking at them when he found them.

"Voila. Email," Lisa said. "Wow, you don't even have much spam. Here's one from Uncle Will."

"That's what we're looking for. Read that one."

"You just open it and there are attachments. Do you want to download them or view them online?" Lisa was in her element.

"I just want to look at them."

"Okay, then you just click this button."

Pictures of George's grandsons in swim trunks on a beach with raging seas behind them appeared on the screen. Their tan skin contrasted their light hair and bright white smiles. They waved at the camera, covered in white sand from roughhousing on the beach.

"I hope they're not going swimming," Lisa said, inspecting her cousins.

"How do I save these pictures?"

“Well, do you want them on your computer, or do you want a hard-copy?”

“If I can get them off the computer, that sounds fine.”

Lisa took over, not bothering to explain to her grandpa what she was doing. A whirring sound came from the printer and she glanced at its paper supply. A few clicks later, she closed the windows and George smiled to see that she had replaced his plain Windows desktop image with one of the pictures of his grandsons. She retrieved the photos from the printer and handed them to George.

“These look great. Thank you,” George said. He stood and kissed the top of Lisa’s head.

“It’s not a big deal, Grandpa. Do you want me to shut it down?”

“Leave it. Wash your hands and come with me,” he said.

George mounted the stairs and climbed them slowly, using the railing for support. By the time he reached the top, Lisa was right behind him with clean hands.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been up here,” she said. She looked around at the large room at the top of the stairs. There were old oil paintings on the sloped walls, a daybed in the corner covered in an orange afghan, and dark yellow shag carpeting. The only modern addition to the room was a large television facing two leather recliners. “Stick a lava lamp in here and you could film an episode of the Brady Bunch.”

“You’ve been up here, you just don’t remember. We used to hang your Jolly Jumper from the center beam and let you jump around before you could walk. You’d watch Sesame Street and scream baby babble whenever Big Bird was onscreen.

“I don’t come up here much anymore either, except to watch the History Channel when your grandma’s out playing bridge. Have a seat.” George motioned to the leather recliners.

Lisa sat down, looking at an oil painting on the wall. A young man stood among a garden of flowers. “Did Grandma paint that? He looks like you.”

George, bent down in front of a bookshelf, turned to look. “Yes, she used to paint quite a bit before arthritis got the better of her.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Here we are.” George pulled a large photo album from the bookshelf and brought it to Lisa. “Take a look inside. We can put the pictures of

the boys that you printed out at the end of it.” George sat down beside her in the vacant recliner and reached for a pair of reading glasses.

Lisa flipped the pages. “Is this you? I didn’t know you were in the Army.”

“Marine Corps. I can still fit in that uniform too.”

“Wow. Is that Grandma?” Lisa poured over the pictures of her family, asking questions and listening to the story of each picture. A lifetime of pictures into the book, she paused.

George peered at the picture that caused her to stop. The photographer had closely captured a dark young man forehead to forehead with a curly haired little girl. They were smiling at each other, eyes locked.

“Can I have this?” Lisa said. Her voice was quiet.

“Of course you can. It’s yours,” George said. She took the photo out of its sleeve and held it delicately by the edges. “I can put that in an envelope for you, to keep it safe.”

Lisa nodded and gently handed the photo to her grandpa. She wiped her eye with the back of her hand, smudging her dark makeup.

“Lisa!” Susan’s voice carried up the stairs. “Come help me get these veggies ready for the stir-fry, okay?”

“Okay, Mom. I’m coming down.”

George followed his granddaughter down the stairs. She descended slowly, matching his pace. Together, they entered the kitchen.

Susan poured steaming water into the sink, straining beige rice in a colander. Anne sat at the kitchen table, a mug in her hand and a used tea bag draining onto a small saucer in front of her.

“The tofu soaks up the surrounding flavors. You don’t have to worry about how it tastes itself. It’s like a blank canvas; it’s not supposed to taste like anything.” Susan was explaining to her mother.

“What do you want me to do?” Lisa picked up a paring knife and stood by the table near her grandmother. Assorted vegetables lay scattered atop paper towels.

“I’ve washed those. You can start cutting them up.” Susan, her hands full as she transferred rice to a bowl, nodded in the direction of the vegetables on the table.

“Well if it doesn’t taste like anything, why bother adding it? And George, what on earth are you looking for?” Anne had been watching George who had begun opening and closing various drawers as soon as he entered the kitchen.

"It's for texture, Mom. And protein, I suppose."

"I need a baggie for this." George held up the picture with one hand while the other searched a drawer.

"To your left, two down. What are you doing with that?"

"He said I could have it, Grandma." Lisa remained focused on the red pepper she was slicing and didn't look up.

"Let me see." Susan wiped her hands off on a dishtowel and reached for the photograph. "Oh, Dad." She sat down beside her mother. "I remember this one."

George stood next to his daughter holding a small plastic bag. "There's some pictures you just can't ever forget. Lisa asked me for that one."

Susan looked up at her daughter, "Lisa do you remember this?"

The girl shook her head, "I wish I did."

"You two used to play this game all the time. You put your face right up to his and said he looked like he only had one eye. I'm so glad I could capture it. There are so many other moments that I wish I could go back for." Susan handed the photo back to George.

Anne patted her daughter's hand and glanced at Lisa. "You've got a lifetime of moments to look forward to."

George put the picture down on the kitchen counter. "I'm looking forward to some lunch, myself." He rubbed his hands together and picked up a serving spoon. "How's about you ladies take a load off and Lisa and I will put together this, what do you call it, stir fry?"

Lisa scooped up her chopped veggies and put them in a bowl. She grinned. "Go for it, Grandpa."

"This, for example," Anne said, leaning towards her daughter. "Another fine moment for which I'm sure we'll wish we had a camera."

Kristen Dirzius

Justified

The phone is ringing.
Someone is at the door.
No one turned off the television.
Time to feed the fish.
Research paper is due tomorrow.
Can't get an on-line connection.
Ink cartridge is bone dry.
Psychology test in the morning.
Should study, but lost book.
Fighting with roommate.
Dirty dishes multiply.
Milk's gone sour.
Chinese food's growing mold.
It's raining.
Windows are open.
Headache.
Tylenol bottle is empty.
Cell phone battery is dead.
Never called Mom back.
Didn't buy stamps.
Never sent my sister's birthday card.
Very hungry.
Refrigerator is empty.
Hang nail.
No nail clippers.
The people upstairs are having a party again.
The music is rattling the windows.
Beer bottles on the floor.
Room inspection today.
No clean clothes for morning.
Time to do the laundry.
That gives me another hour.
To sit back down,
Flip through the channels.

Have a snack.
Paint my toe nails.
And feel justified.

Spencer Carlson

The First Taste

Bubblelicious.
I understood
now why
I smiled
and hid
at movies
during affectionate scenes.
Becca's eyes
just lit up
when the bottle
pointed to her.
Her chapstick
encouraged
my lips
to roll
over hers.
The rest
of them all giggled.
And as we pulled away,
smiling at one another,
all I could think of
was the taste
Bubblelicious.
I asked later,
when the game was over,
if she could give me a piece.
I wanted
to relive the moment.

Sara Russell

Disclaimer

Warning: While liable for content, the poet asserts no responsibility for lack of talent • Individuals with sensitive poetic pallets should take appropriate precautions to avoid thorough disappointment • Intentional misuse of this poem through deliberate attempts to root out eloquent quatrains and/or poetic diction may result in tension headache accompanied by eyestrain• To avoid serious distress do not seek here answers to life's enduring questions • If a hatred for humanity or suicidal thoughts occur, do not induce vomiting, but continue use immediately and seek a poet laureate's attention • If symptoms of poetic withdrawal worsen or persist for more than 2 days, consume The Road not Taken and/or I Heard a Fly Buzz when I Died • Always keep toxic poetry out of reach of children, pregnant women, and those with immune disorders •

Brianna Marron

Because I Didn't

Your features were easily forgotten: squinty blue eyes with no mystery. Your lips took five years in the making; now I know all their secrets. You held me and I felt your quick breaths on the back of my neck, and I didn't melt. I held your sweaty palms and compiled a list of memories in my mind: buttons, knobs, black and white keys, silverware in the drawer, earth tones, steel strings, horizontal stripes, loose change. We let our fingers do the talking, stroking only the skin of each other's hands, gazing into one another's eyes, reminding me how easily we fall victim to trickery, all the while silently refining the other's imperfections. You pictured me as a girl who matched black eyeliner with cheerleader mini skirts, who worshiped Rolling Stone, and wrote Letterbomb lyrics on my unkempt spiral notebook. I shaped you into someone who coordinated scarves with sweaters, drank green tea, and who steered away from the neon-bright marquee. We played in the façade because fifteen days was too late for chapter nineteen. I only read three books that year. I spent my nights in your flannel sheets whispering delicate notions deep into your ear, and you would "hmm" and "oh" every other sentence. But I moved closer because I liked the way the subtle curves of our bodies corresponded, like the tee-shirts in your drawer, folded into tiny congruent checkerboard squares. I liked the game we played where I pulled you in tight and you pushed me away, but my favorite was when cold nights turned into warm mornings and nervous dressings—places we cannot capture. The realizations occurred on the drives home, like earthworms emerging from wet dirt to die in the rain. Salty sadness trickled down, halted by windshield wiper arms. I grew accustomed to filtering it onto paper until I don't feel like feeling. You called, same shit. Once I nearly answered, but I thought about kissing you and how we wouldn't stop until our lips were chapped, sure to bleed the next day. And I thought of your beard scratching my face, and how it made you look animated, and prevented me from thinking of you as a real person. And after we stripped our mystique and you were satisfied, you turned toward the wall and hid your eyes. I was content with that because the empty feelings didn't change when your eyes revealed themselves to me. The air was cold and I was numb; we both tried to break the teeth-bearing curse of familiarity. Escape neared impossible, no more

once more. You had your taste of me, and I had my fill of you. Your palms are sweating more and your grip loosens.

Chris Piccirillo and Kevin Ross

The Perfect Schedule
or
Chris Piccirillo Isn't Even Trying Yet

CHRIS PICCIRILLO stands at center stage while CHRIS PICCIRILLO'S CONSCIENCE kneels in the corner to Chris's left with his head down.

Chris looks to be in his upper 20's. He is wearing muddied sneakers, blue jeans, and a t-shirt with some faded music group logo. Chris additionally has an 8:30 shadow and yellowed teeth. He looks at the audience and speaks with optimistic confidence.

CHRIS

Hello everyone. I'm Chris Piccirillo. And I have to tell you that I consider myself the world's finest human.

Now, there are too many reasons to count for this, but let's count them anyway. Simply put, I'm great. Actually, that's a lie, that's a lie.

(a smiling sigh)

I'm superb.

(moving a little around center stage)

I'm a supremely intelligent, sensitive, open-minded guy who's in good shape and is frequently a sensational lay. I'm also quite modest.

I enjoy things like shallow-end pool vacuuming, freezing mud, licking envelopes, eating regurgitated saltine sandwiches. And if I ever see a blind or elderly person in need of assistance, I'll gladly refer them to someone who's willing to help.

(stops again and gazes proudly)

All these things have made me my mother's pride and joy. I'll never forget the time she told me: "You're a pretty good kid, Troy." Ah, my dumb, old mother. She had a heart of cream cheese.

Chris suddenly realizes what he's said, abruptly clears his throat, and moves around center stage with excessive excitement.

CHRIS

So, it sounds like Uncle Chris is doing pretty well for himself, doesn't it kiddies!

That's right! I love the universe and the universe reciprocates with steaming affection!

(one notch calmer)

We exchange cards, candy, and occasionally, some light petting. So, now that everything with my existence has been squared away, I'd like to read a letter I wrote when I mastered the English language at age four.

Chris Piccirillo's Conscience stands up, and looking much like Chris, starts walking towards Chris, who removes a piece of paper from his pocket and reads from it.

CHRIS

Dear Mrs. Reagan, I think you'll find that despite my lack of any political experience whatsoever, that I'd be an ideal member of Ronnie's cabinet. I own three notebooks and a lunch pail. Mom says I'm a looker. I've read every Heathcliff cartoon. I enjoy shallow-end pool vacuuming, freezing mud, licking envelopes...

Chris Piccirillo's Conscience claps his hands twice in front of Chris's face, standing a few feet to his left. Chris stops reading and freezes, his mouth open, the letter in his right hand. Chris's Conscience looks at the audience.

CONSCIENCE

Hi folks. I'm Chris Piccirillo's conscience and believe me do I work overtime. Now, I know you all see Chris standing there and you're wondering one thing. Yes, he can in fact stop talking for more than five seconds. And trust me, he has had sex other than the one time he let his teacher blow him for an C in penmanship.

Chris unfreezes, looks at his Conscience, and points downward. Chris's Conscience looks at him with a "really?" sort of expression and Chris nods affirmatively.

CONSCIENCE

Oh, I'm sorry. C-minus.

Chris makes a "what can I do?" sort of expression and goes back to his prior frozen pose.

CONSCIENCE

Very well then. But other than that, Mr. Piccirillo has left out quite a few aspects of his self-analysis. First of all, he hates puppies and children. He also donates losing scratch-off tickets to charity and makes marriage proposals to telemarketers. Furthermore, Chris brushes his teeth with ketchup, dances like a pregnant yak, pawned his grandmother's false teeth to buy Ring Dings, and vacations at Ames. In fact, I can't think of anything good to say about Chris other than the fact that, right now, he's not talking.

Chris's Conscience claps his hands and Chris comes back to life, diligently reading his letter.

CHRIS

The last thing I'd like to add Nance is that I do occasionally just say yes. So, please consider that term in your response to my request. Sincerely with love, etc., Chris Piccirillo. P.S. Since I've clearly displayed my mastery of the English language, I was wondering when the vice president's son will do the same. Yours and yours forever, Chrissy Boy.

Chris puts the letter back in his pocket and moves next to his Conscience, who looks annoyed and disgusted. They are both standing at center stage. Once again, Chris speaks with confidence and optimism.

CHRIS

You know, my mother was right. I really am wonderful.

CONSCIENCE

(equally confident)

Chris Piccirillo is the world's biggest asshole.

CHRIS

I use sarcasm and absurd description because I have a highly vivid imagination. My creativity scampers barefoot through a savage, burning jungle.

CONSCIENCE

Chris uses sarcasm and absurd description as a facade to submerge actual emotion because he is incapable of anything real. Your creativity crawls down an alley wearing Reebok's.

CHRIS

(a bit ruffled, but still positive)

Chris Piccirillo embraces actual emotion. I constantly convey my true inner feelings to my loved ones so they'll have complete understanding of who I am. And who wouldn't want to understand me?

(proud gaze)

As we've already established, I'm perfect in every way.

(huge smile)

CONSCIENCE

Chris Piccirillo's idea of showing emotion is talking about how he's emotional. He isn't.

Chris loses his smile and starts fidgeting.

CONSCIENCE

One time he glanced at the TV to catch a Mets score while pretending to cry at his uncle's death bed. Another time he was bangin' his girl from behind and changed the channel to ESPN while pretending to come. Then he went and jerked off in the bathroom. Both times. Nobody wants to understand Chris Piccirillo nor should they want to. Anyone's infatuation with Chris is merely a mask for their own self-hatred.

Chris laughs uncomfortably, starts to look nervous, and creeps towards the audience to have a quick "moment alone."

CHRIS

Trust me, trust me, they were important games and Uncle Stu only left me twenty-grand in the will so it really was worth it that time. Heh heh.

Another quick realization and abrupt throat clearing from Chris, who moves back and speaks with his earlier confidence.

CHRIS

Chris Piccirillo is incapable of being discouraged. Some may feel they can break me down with their petty criticisms, but criticism bounces off me like a cherry bounces off my well-proportioned, yet still plump behind, which by the way, is mostly the result of shallow-end pool vacuuming. It is impossible for criticism to anger me in any way.

Chris dives at his Conscience, who calmly moves aside as Chris lands flat on his face. Chris lays motionless as his Conscience looks down at him.

CONSCIENCE

Chris Piccirillo waits too long to attempt anything in life. The timing of his diving and tackling attempt was even worse than that of his jokes. Had he dove at me earlier in his little spiel, he would have taken me down with ease. But no, he simply had to go on for one more sentence where he stated that he couldn't be angered, which as we know by now, was blatant bullshit that tipped me off and made me jump right away.

(looks at audience)

Chris Piccirillo eats a procrastination omelet for lunch and a masturbation kabob for dinner. He eats nothing at breakfast because he never wakes before noon.

Chris slowly gets up, brushes off himself, and moves towards his Conscience. Chris's Conscience walks away stage left and laughs mockingly. Chris follows and speaks angrily.

CHRIS

Chris Piccirillo refuses to be defeated.
I languish in my difficulties because they
drive me to be perfect, perfect, perfect,
every second of every minute, every minute of
every day.

(furiously)

I shower in my shortcomings! I lather my ass
with them and smear my face with the cloth!
I laugh at those who think I don't have the
courage to overcome my psychosis!
I laugh at you!

Chris takes a short run at his Conscience, lunges, and misses again. As before, Chris lays face down. Chris's Conscience looks down, shakes his head and smirks at Chris's pathetic state, then turns to audience.

CONSCIENCE

Chris Piccirillo is definitely not laughing.
In fact, he's pretty pissed off and
demoralized. He says he's laughing the way
he says,

(mocks Chris as he leans down to his face)

"I apologize!"

(back to audience)

when he just should say "I'm sorry." Earlier,
he said he was perfect, then just he said he
could deal with not being perfect so we know
the worth of his words.

The truth is Chris Piccirillo is never laughing.
In fact, he's always angry. His laughs are
really screams in drag. The only time he laughs
is at other people, like when he sees a happy
couple kiss or a baby learn to walk because he
thinks they're so pathetic. Or when he sees a
homeless person freezing, well,

(despaired sigh)

just because he thinks it's funny.

Chris crawls towards his Conscience, who walks stage right where he quickly retrieves a garbage bag before circling back to center stage. Chris works his way towards meeting his Conscience there and rambles, defeated.

CHRIS

Chris Piccirillo tries and tries and tries again. I'm funny. They like me. I vacuum. He's funny. Chris Chris Chris Chris Chris Piccirillo takes a walk on a sunny day, and he eats cats and pets sandwiches. They always said I had a way with words.

Chris's Conscience dumps the bag's contents on Chris, almost completely covering him in potato chip bags, his pillow and blanket, a pizza box, some pornographic film cases, his collection of novels, and some video tapes that are likely pornographic.

Chris lifts up his head, eyes closed, still rambling and defeated, but trying to gain a little positive momentum as he inches slightly forward.

CHRIS

Chris Piccirillo brings love to the world with laughter. His insults are society's gauze. Chris reigns over the weak and spits on the fortunate. He reigns over his spit. Chris loves everything and hates everyone. He loves. He hates. He loves. He hates. He takes a shit and gets the mail.

Chris' Conscience picks up a few books and starts throwing them at Chris while speaking angrily at him.

CONSCIENCE

You see! These are all the books Chris owns and has never read. He would have read them, but then he was too busy formulating the perfect schedule for when to read them.

(throws a book at Chris, yelling)

And watching his Weather Channel disaster videos!

(sharply throws a book in Chris's face)

And playing air guitar in the mirror!

Chris removes the pile as he rises and speaks with revitalized fury.

CHRIS

Chris Piccirillo can't lose no matter how hard he tries! He leaves a fight with bloodied fists and an empty bladder! He doesn't read books because he doesn't want to steal material for his own epic novel! He never wakes at noon because he's dreaming up the ideal life!

(screaming at the top of lungs, arms open)

Chris Piccirillo isn't even trying yet!

Chris's Conscience shoves Chris hard to the ground. Chris flies back and curls into a heap. Chris's Conscience looks at the audience and returns to his original direct tone.

CONSCIENCE

Actually, no Chris Piccirillo is trying too hard to do everything without actually doing anything.

(abruptly looks away and starts "talking to self")

Pfftt. Well, other than go on and on, first about how great he is, then about how he can overcome not being great, and then it's perfect this and funny that.

(starts walking back and to the right, imitating)

'I'm too genius. I'm too stupid. My mother breastfed me with Crystal Light.' Over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over.

(offstage)

Chris barely lifts his head up and speaks meekly, as if he's dreaming just before he's about to die.

CHRIS

Really mom, they said I had a lot of potential, that I could really go places if I applied myself. Yeah, application, that's the ticket. No mom, I didn't fill out the application to Ames yet. Ok, thanks, peanut butter and pancakes, yeah. Love you mommy, nighty night.

(big smooch)

Vacuuming Yeah. I really like vacuuming.

Chris's Conscience peeks his head around the curtain.

CONSCIENCE

No, actually, you suck at that too. You never un-attach the head piece and use the hose to get those hard-to-reach areas. Fuckin' loser.

Chris Piccirillo

She Thinks I'm Her Uncle

They walk aimlessly, unaware of their significance, or in some cases, their existence. Most cry over their failure, yet I can't help but smile at their folly. So remarkable to see these old folk congregating, awaiting food at their assigned tables, functioning within the obligatory cliques. Do they know? Maybe one part of their brain still works and contains an inkling of knowledge. Do they understand that they've been singled out, herded together, and sectioned from the remainder? Or to them is this just one more night, and one more meal, and I'm just another collared shirt who delivers the garbage upon which they subsist.

Shiny floor today. Tom does fantastic work. Bad attitude, skilled with a buffer. One mucky spot mars his otherwise dazzling display. Pureed ham that fell off a plate, or perhaps from a patient's mouth. The perfect snack for a nurse working her fourth-straight midnight shift. Rate of glossiness is well above-average; each blue and white square, a mirror. Definitely the sign of a stellar floor: when the residents notice themselves and take a moment to observe. Mary Onorato took a few. "Hi, Mary, how's everything? That's good to hear. How're your grandsons? What's that? No, I don't have a girlfriend. That's true. I'm sure if you had a granddaughter she'd be glad to have me over for supper." It's the same conversation every night. Mary can't remember and I can't forget.

The march of the elderly continues into a plexi-glass shoebox. Beef stew awaits them with a side of mashed, swamped with gravy; digestible, at best. I'd wager my modest paycheck that if Angelina Clemente could rise from her chair, and if given the proper materials, she'd cook a feast so delectable that the stew would suffer a massive inferiority complex and retire into nutrition seclusion with the Arch Deluxe. Yep, Angelina could do that. Ten years ago maybe. She thinks I'm her uncle. I convince myself there's nothing wrong with loving a ninety-year old woman who isn't my grandmother.

Robert Daly shoots the shit with a couple of ladies. Excellent flirtation skills for a guy in Ashwood Court. He doesn't fit in. Everybody else wears spider-web hair, prune faces, three teeth if they're lucky, and was at the altar when at least one of the Roosevelt's was in office. And now here

comes Big Bob, struttin' with his slicked-black do, full set of choppers, and overpowering handshake, not too many years over fifty. Leave here Bob, go home, hug your wife, life awaits your repartee. Then I remember, once again, that he is home. And the sickest part about it: I have better conversations with him than most of the people I casually speak with in my actual life. Not necessarily more intellectual ones, just more interesting ones (a sense of humor is critical). Go on Bob; tell those darlings how it's such a beautiful night for a walk along the beach. They can't hear you. Too busy listening to the voice in their head that tells them to keep cool, death looms. I hope Bob's telling himself, "I'm fine, just growing rust, that's all. I want to live." I want you to live too, Bob. I want you to realize. I want you to rebel. I want you to heal.

Dinner's over and cleanup begins. Don't think they liked it, based on the plates' remains. For the residents of Ashwood Court, it's time for some music and here to sing for one and all, it's Johnny Good Times! Ah, these extraordinary people. They can't remember their own names, yet can recite each line of every Frank Sinatra song.

Brian Rye

Fire Rooster

Fire Rooster proclaims early day
Loud as a raging inferno
Full of passion and courage.
His moment majestic, shared
With the risen light that conquers
Dark, cold, soulless night.

Folio Fiction Contest

First Place

Nick Dorio - *A Small Glass Jar About the Size of an Egg*

Honorable Mention

Julie Church - *How to Love an Older Man*

Eve Cummings Poetry Contest

First Place

Rayon Dwain Lennon - *Seaview Gardens, Jamaica*

Second Place

Julie Church - *Brandenburg*

Third Place

Adam Nesteruk - *I Cried the Whole Night Long*

Hank Roberts Art Contest

First Place

Stefan Znosko - *untitled*

Second Place

Tim McFarland - *G.I. Joe on Watch*

Third Place

Ben Quesnel - *Inner Turmoil*

Honorable Mention

Shizuka Shibata - *untitled*

Judges

Folio Fiction Contest

April Line lives in Pittsburgh with her daughter. She is a graduate of the Honors College at Southern Connecticut State University, where she was the Editor of Folio in 2003 and both Associate Editor and Art Editor in 2002. Most recently, her story "What it Would be Like to Have a Baby with a Turnip" was published in *Sou'wester*.

Eve Cummings Poetry Contest

Carly Sachs teaches creative writing at George Washington University. Her first collection of poems, *the steam sequence*, won the 2006 Washington Writers' Publishing House Book Prize and was published in August 2006. She is the founder and co-curator of the Burlesque Poetry Hour at Bar Rouge in Washington, D.C. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School.

Hank Roberts Art Contest

Andrei Harwell is an architect, artist, urbanist, and critic living in New Haven, Connecticut, where he manages the work of the Yale Urban Design Workshop. His projects and writings have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Architectural Record*, *Constructs*, *Retrospecta*, and *the Gaze*. He earned his B.Arch from Carnegie Mellon University in 1998, and his M.Arch from Yale University in 2006, where he was the Ulli Scharmberg Scholar.

We just could never have done it alone.

In no particular order: Becky, Jeff Mock, Tim Parrish, Margot Schilpp, Vivian Shipley, Robin Troy, Brian Johnson, Jeff Hardy, Tom Dorr, Brad Crerar, the ever helpful Ileanne Corona, the inimitable April Line, Jerry Dunklee, Steve Almond, Dana Sonnenschein, Mamacat, Val McKee (and baby), EDGE, the Student Center Staff, the Media Board, Andrei Harwell, Carly Sachs, Frau Brockhagen, Betsy Beacom, Lisa Siedlarz, Benjamin Jarl Kowalsky and Delaney's, Ben's mead, Kevin Miner, The Clash, Josh Gister, Jessica Piel, Sarah Tamulevich, Andrew Lennon, Meghan Trupp, Anthony Famiglietti, the St. Pauli Girl, Jazzmo Smoothatron, Stephen Listro, Megan Macomber, Paul Vestali, Lorrie Moore, J. T. Leroy, Ryan Adams, Charles Rafferty, Charles Bukowski, Josh Kovner, used book stores, record players, Westville Pizza, Camille Dungy, Mamoun's, communitas, Educated Burgher, Paul Westerberg, Anthony Brano, Don Mattingly, Mike Shea, Bamma, Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat, Memphis, Brad Hudson, Pat, Stuart and God, Ben Wells, Brian, Franka Potente, Converse All Stars, R.A.I.L., postmodernism, Eric Maroney, John Cleese, Frank Brady, Carlos Semexant, Moses, Eugene, the volume of Chris Piccirillo's voice, Ben Erickson, Tory Church, Piotr Gwiazda, Anthony Fantano, Heather Pascale, Southern Life, Southern News, CSU Universe, Rainbow Puppies and the Kitten Crew, Fred Agee, MasterYoda, Stefan Znosko, Valmar Torre-Bruno, Mike Capp, Jen, Shizuka Shibata, Emily Olive, all the open mic readers, all y'all, Denise Bentley-Drobish, Charlene Stack, Liza Ward, KT Matican, that last night in Austin, new cowboy boots, Book People, Raymond Carver, Pearl, the United States Military, Dawn Stanton Holmes, Student Life, Sal Rizza, Denis Johnson, Bret Easton Ellis, Lee Keylock, Crystal Patenaude, Ryan Lynch, David Pacelli and Slash for keeping it real all these years, Eric Mangles, Willie Nelson, FayRey, George Saunders, John Bensko, Kevin Canty, Mom, Dad, Oma, Campbell McGrath, Denise Duhamel, the Triad, Tony Rosso, Atlanta, Front Page News, Steve Larocco, Dr. Kostka, Corinne Blackmer, Jeff from Student Life, Igor, the inner circle of genius, Cori Payne for always showing up, Lois' cats, the Harlows and Kyla, Ernest Hemingway, Will Hochman, Tony Fusco, bagels and Blow Pops, coffee, Warren, Tift Merritt, all those 3:40 milers, the English Department, the Honors College, the Art Department, Joe Selvaggio, gas prices and bicycles, every single one of Rayon's emails, our grandparents, Southern Connecticut State University and its employees, everybody who comes to the readings, all our fans, Elvis, and everybody we forgot to thank here. It's been a pleasure.

FOLIO 2007

Dorio - Charlestin - Quesnel - Marron - Rayzer - Lennon - Church
Nesteruk - Parsons - Hillman - Mangles - Gindi - Payne - Keylock
Pacelli - McKee - Church - Russell - Shibata - Rye - Kinbote - Eddington
Carlson - Boyd - Znosko - Mottola - McFarland - Lafayllve - Schmitt
Hanley - Moran - Rowe - Sciortino - Bodach - Copeland - Lynch
Mealey - Southard - Dirzius - Piccirillo