



FOLIO  
2008

# FOLIO 2008

Southern Connecticut State University



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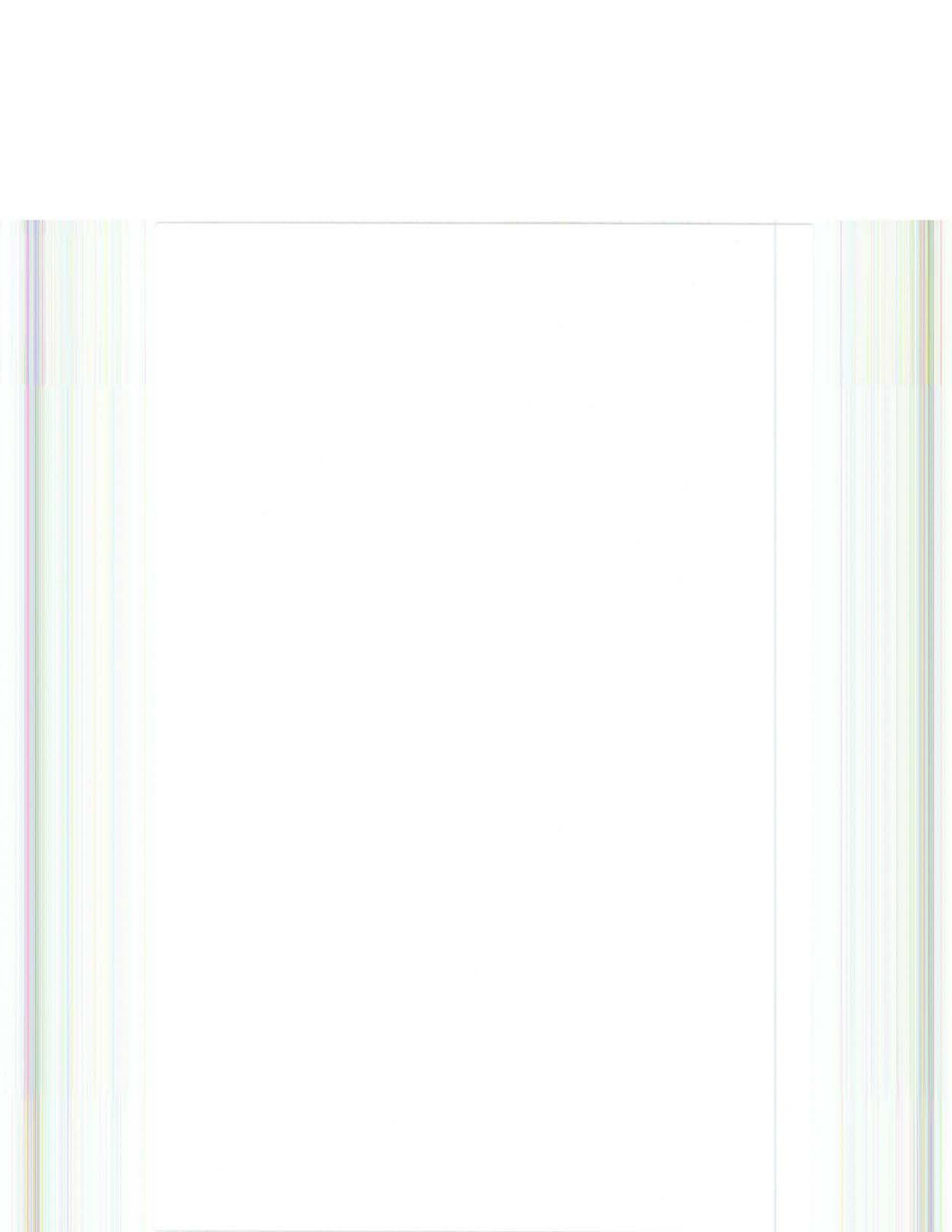
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*Dedicated to the memory of  
Madeleine L'Engle  
and  
Arthur C. Clarke*



*First Place, Folio Fiction Contest*

Mona

Rayon Dwain Lennon

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**M**ona, the other day, Sunday, noon, it was me who'd called and then hung up when I heard your voice. "Hell-o, hell-o," you'd screamed into the phone in a hoarse voice. I could hear the grief in your voice—sorry about Grandmum—which led me to call back on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. On Monday you screamed again. On Tuesday, you said, "Hell-o," very softly, and remained on the line listening to my nervous breathing, probably hearing the bling-touting American rap songs in my back ground as I heard, reggae, Bounty Killer's "poor people fed up," in your background. On Wednesday morning, you picked up the phone in bed, I think, in the windowless room we used to share when I was a tall fourteen and you a short nineteen and said nothing for a few swelling minutes, just letting the silence build into everything, until you said, "I have to go to work now," and waited for me to hang up or say something back.

Every time I close my eyes, Mona, I get off that bus that coal-hot Jamaican evening in front of Seaview Gardens. Sometimes I don't get off at all, just let it take me on downtown Kingston to the chaos of market stalls and scurrying people, on through to the edge of the Caribbean Sea, where magically the bus grows wings like the many Air Jamaicas taking off from the Norman Manley Airport and fly me to America, here, and then I wake up and I'm in my apartment bed, wrapped in my comforter, watching snow fall on Pine Street.

But more often than not I get off that bus, because I got off that bus that day, adjusted the glasses Mum'd left on the bridge of my nose and jumped over the gutter, landing flat on the marl-white grounds in front of the hurricane-sacked high school (in the Kanis Dad'd sent for me when he'd brought big bro up). North ahead of me over the tin-topped roofs of the ghetto houses I watched clouds like blood-soaked coats drying over the wall of the horizon, heard the heavy-rolling voice of the Caribbean Sea rolling west in the distance, the chemical stench of the gutter thick on my tongue, my school backpack flapping like a bird on my back.

“Careful, Miles,” I heard from behind and turned to shoot the dreadlocked conductor with my disposable camera. Shot him again hanging off the rust-colored bus door as the bus rounded the little white clinic on the corner. I waved with a smile. He was a man from the country, who’d known Mum. So this picture I imagined cramming into a long letter to Mum, who’d written a few times already from Canada without a thorough response from me. (The last letter I’d scribbled with a leaky pen while the mailman neared the house.) But this time I knew what I would write. “I came down with old John today, Mum. Oh he knows I’m no longer a Christian and tried to push Selassie on me, Mum,” I’d write, then add angrily. “You leave me in a place like Seaview Gardens and not expect me to get corrupted.” That was part of the reason I hadn’t begun that epic response letter to her. So much of it would knock her out, illegal there in Canada. How to tell her, who’d grown up in the countryside away from her mother, that no sane people lived in Seaview Gardens, that you had to be your own God here.

From where I stood at the entrance, hesitant, I could see straight up the wall-sided middle of Seaview Gardens, straight up to where my view plummeted over the stonewall into the heart of the swamp. Normally I’d heed Grandmum’s advice and take the safe main road around the projects between the gutter and the Goodyear wall to avoid shoot-first soldiers and warring gunmen, but I so wanted to walk through the dangerous heart of Seaview Gardens, to take those pictures that would aid my memory when I went to America. And more yet since I’d been at that overpriced boarding school in the quiet country during the week, where I was coming from with my backpack full of fruits, I felt it would help me become one of you, Mona, more citified. Plus there was always the possibility that I’d encounter you somewhere in there and then my weeks of masturbatory dreams of you would become a reality.

The wetted gravels cracked under my boots as I walked up Seaview Gardens looking for you among the gossiping groups of wiggy girls in sun-yellow shorts and high-heels, yes, hoping to find you before I got home, but hoping too that you’d be home in the room we shared, a room full of your Secret scent, peppermint breath and baby-oiled nakedness. There also existed the possibility that you’d be pregnant by me, I knew, or so I hoped, given all the work I’d put in the weekend before I’d trekked off to boarding school (though this was a hope I held every time I came home)--the thought of which quickened my pace going through the narrow walled way, past the one-story, brick-faced, colorful, low-houses bunched up against each other

and the half-naked girls and boys and men and women still and moving through the maze of pathways. I remember passing Ramon, seeing him with his back turned kissing a girl up against his leafless hibiscus edge, his fingers, I imagined, snaking up under her short jeans skirt. I didn't stop too much to watch him or anything, since I was sure he had a gun.

I didn't take much pictures, so afraid was I that I'd startle people with the lightning flash of my camera into shooting me. Instead I walked up with this slump-shouldered rude boy walk, entertaining the dream I'd had the night before in my top bunk bed at the boarding school, a dream in which I'd held up a tiny squawking baby, my son, a son I'd called Croon in that dream, a dream lit by the moon. Emerging under a bullet-rocked, shriveled, oak tree, I heard Bounty Killer's thunderous voice shot up from a distant sound system: "...well everyday the ghetto youths them dead..." And then the North answering with Buju Banton's "Untold Stories." Evidently it was a war of sound systems between North and South. And so my fears calmed, I stopped in front of a gate of milling Mongrel dogs like Talia, who was to have puppies (perhaps it was this parallelism which sparked my Croon dreams), to untuck my khaki shirt from my khaki pants, wiping my sweaty forehead with the tip of my tie. When I looked up, I saw three small shirtless boys chasing each other around in a yard with yellow water guns. Shaking my head, I moved on. This was no place to raise a son, if indeed I'd created one.

The beat of a basketball matched the beat of my heart.

I came upon as big and imposing a woman as Grandmum in a sun-flowered dress, hosing down the steaming gravel in front of her wooden gate. A rarity as I'd noted that there weren't a lot of big people in these parts, not with all the poverty around and all. "Good evening," she said, muzzling the hose as I approached her. "G-g-g-good evening," I stammered back, wishing I'd nodded, though I felt some relief at being spoken to. My stammer, having dwindled away as I approached my teen years, had begun flaring up again after Mum left. The big lady smiled uneasily as I passed, showing missing front teeth, probably thinking I was retarded, I knew. People usually think that of people who stammer. What would the scientifically-minded Americans think of me? My well-traveled roommate James had said that they'd demolish any self-confidence I had left. "If you can't talk, they'll think you dumb," he said, in the bottom bunk. "You need a voice to survive in a place like that." He paused. "You'll see. Especially in school. You gonna want to find a bridge and jump off when you leave some classrooms."

When I'd gained some distance from her I turned and instinctively took her picture while she swept.

Advancing into the graying heart of the Seaview Gardens, I felt as if every step I took was making me into a man. I didn't even think that the boy in me would run, say, if gunshots broke out. Abruptly Bounty Killer's voice cut off and Sizzler's "Black Woman and Child" began booming close by from a stand of black boomboxes fitted into the intermittingly wide-paved walkway, stacked high in the main ways between the bricky houses. Hungry, I breathed in lungfuls of the Friday smells of fried and jerked chicken, the cock-hardening fragrance of girls dancing in bras and orange and purple short shorts, some of their faces bleached-whiter, their foreign blond and beet-red wigs lashing their powder-soft cheeks. I scanned among them for you, Mona, but not seeing you, slid through the roars of men with voices as deep and deafening as Dad's over the phone--men slamming down winning hands in games of dominos on tables ringed with jumpy Red Stripe beers.

When I looked up ahead between leafy overshadowing oak trees, I saw Zora Garrison, one of your friends, if I may say so (though not after what she did with Big Bro), sashaying forward in this pleated white skirt and knee-length black boots, her hair braided naturally, falling over her smile. I smiled back from a long way. She was a girl whom I'd loved, whom, as you know, big brother Charles had fucked--on the merits of a love letter I'd written her for him, who couldn't read. In it I'd described the unbleached beauty of her sugarcolored face and skin, her oil-sweetened natural hair, the honey-hued light of her eyes, the model-like quality of her steps. For this, Charles had rewarded me with details of the sex scene I watched in my dreams.

I whipped off my glasses to avoid looking too much at her. But the loud cries of gravel grinding under her boots forced me to put them back on as we drew close, just in time, for me, to catch her pinked lips quivering open to ask me, I figured, how Charles was doing in America. So I just pointed my eyes at her and watched her abruptly close her mouth, more from the sour expression on my face, an expression I wore not because I hated her but because seeing her reminded me that Charles had gone and I hadn't because of what Dad'd described as a glitch in my paperwork, which would take some time to work out, but which had stretched into several months.

As she sashayed past me I rearranged my face into what I hoped was an amiable expression, which apparently worked because she waved hi and I waved bye, looking ahead, then looking around to catch the wind lifting up

the back of her skirt. I wanted to but did not take a picture, scolded myself for looking, since looking at her in that manner'd reminded me of the bowlegged female teacher at my country school, who'd resorted to wearing pants after following my eyes one day under her skirt. This'd embarrassed me, 'cause she'd known Mum. But she didn't see it fit to punish me since she knew Mum'd gone berserk and flew off to Canada to live with her long-lost, found father.

Even before I opened the huge wingy white gate Dad's money'd paid for, I could tell something was different. The house, low, lilac-purple, bricky like all the others, looked like an oversized grave under the blackening sky. The air smelled like Grandmum's dying magnolias, jasmines and other assorted flowers bunched in one corner. (Not to say that 'cause Seaview Gardens was built on a former dump that nothing grew there. Things grew that people planted in their front yards--lime, orange, ackee trees and all, even if they tasted slightly of chemical and the oranges and limes lacked juice.) And some other smell like birth. The sun had long crashed and the moon hung over the house like a light bulb filling the yard with white light and luckily because the light people had unhooked the illegal stone-tipped wire slung on their power lines by us. I picked up the wire and wheeling it, slung it back up on the power line where it coiled and coiled around the power line until it hung there secured, the stones hanging down like the stone-dry limes on trees in other yards.

One window was open, the curtains drawn and I watched as the TV flashed on, flooding the living room with light.

I closed back the gate with a clink and was surprised that Talia didn't come tonguing up to me from her mat-bed at Grandmum's door. Behind me, the streetlights poured on as I checked for her in her little wooden doggy house built against the wall dividing houses. Heard whining but couldn't see her, so I put my hand in there and pulled her out by her Mongrel tail; that's when I saw the shadowy litter of puppies stirring beneath her and sighed, drawing her out to stroke her light-brown face as she tongued my face.

I looked into her tired eyes. "You're a Mum, girl," I crooned, kissing her. "How you feel?" She only whined. At that moment the black front door whined open and you appeared in the doorway swathed in a bundle of blankets, which surprised me--that you were home and that you were bundled in that furnace.

Do you remember what you said? It's been so long. "Put her back," you said in a low piercing voice. I tried to locate your eyes to see whether

they showed disgust or not. But could only make out the white-bleaching cream caked on your face, that you weren't wearing a wig, which meant that your hair looked like it had been chewed on by goats from the country (it was the wigs which actually ate your hair). I thought to your body, your slender lemon-yellow body under the blanket; the ring too, wondered if you were wearing it, Mum's married ring, the one she'd left with the glasses, the one we'd put on your finger as a sort of joke after sex one night.

I shot a look down at Talia. "Okay, girl go," I said and when I looked up again you were gone. Talia hesitated and I waved her off and watched as she stumbled back in to her little ones. Part of me still expected her to lumber back as usual around to her bed at Grandmum's door, so loyal and grateful was Talia to Grandmum, who'd found her starving downtown by a rotten market stall. I remember how much you'd cried when your druggy step-father, Grandmum's boyfriend, had threatened to leave with Talia, when he left Grandmum and you—Grandmum hugging and hushing you, whispering in your ear that she would be the first good step-mother you knew.

I drew closer to the house, but not wanting to go in yet sat on a stool in front of Grandmum's stall, which had been removed from in front of the gate, probably by her, and relocated closer to the house for the night. I'd carried most of the fruits in my school bag from the country to give to Grandmum to sell, even if she didn't take too much interest in selling anything anymore since Dad's American dollars paid for everything.

Inside it was hot and the TV came in and out of black consciousness. I couldn't decide which route to take to the room we shared, so crammed was the living room with all the stuff that Mum'd crammed in the house with us. "Your father'll come for you," I remembered her saying as she stuffed us and the furniture into Grandmum's house with you. "Don't worry now." I'd thought I understood then, so I hadn't cried. She was looking ahead to when we would soon be grown men and then she would have nothing to hold Dad with. To us all down in Jamaica, America was heaven, even Canada was kind of that way too. "A woman could be prime minister someday," a female newscaster in a man's black suit was saying as the TV regained consciousness. "History in the making." Though I couldn't see it I knew there was a black coffee table, a glassy dresser housing the huge stereo system, and three pieces of red sofas, the larger piece of which I was standing in front of, listening to you shuffling around in the bedroom, probably taking your personal items off my bed. "The Queen of England is coming to Jamaica next month," the newscaster was saying. At the base of

the TV I found the knob and turned off the power.

A candle flame flared up in the room and I moved towards it. When I entered the room you were already in bed, the candle flaming on the dresser at your feet. There was barely any space to move as usual so I dropped down on my bed. With no window--well, there was a window but it didn't open--it was even hotter in the bedroom and so I began to undress lying down, taking off my shoes and khaki shirt down to my boxers. The room smelled like the sea down the road had washed in there and left its fragrance on everything.

I figured you were sick. Usually you were up and out partying on Fridays like all the other girls in your wigs and tiny outfits. I listened through the wall for Grandmum in the backroom, but figured she was asleep--probably sick as usual and needing lots of rest. I thought it made no sense to go wake her to give her my fruit presents (oranges, star apples and guavas), just like I didn't know whether to present you with the American apples I'd bought for you. "Your father called," you suddenly said in tiny voice. I rolled over. Your sheeted back was to me. "Oh, yeah?" I crooned, in order not to stammer, though you wouldn't have minded. "Yeah," you said and coughed a little. "You alright, there?" I asked. "I'm alright," you said. "You think he'll ever get them papers right?" "I don't know," I said. "Did my Mum call?" You wiggled a bit under your sheet. "No."

The candle flame lit the silence between us, played across the white-bleaching cream caked on your face, shimmering on the blonde wig as you positioned yourself upright against the head of the bed and turned your head to face me. "I might be sick," you began and I saw that you were looking past me to the wall behind which Grandmum was sleeping. Mindful of what you were saying, I allowed a few seconds to pass before asking, in a very adult voice, "With what?" "It's bad," you said, your eyes finding me. "Think the worse." HIV-AIDS. "From-from who?" I asked. "Does it matter?" you said, then hesitated. "Ramon," you said. "We didn't use a condom." I watched your gaze settle on the wavering flame of the candle. I couldn't believe it. You always used a condom, not with me but with everybody else, since your Mum'd died from that disease. I wasn't dying though, I knew that; I'd passed the immigration AIDS test a couple of weeks before. That calmed me. "You got tested or what?" "No," you said, "but I've got to think the worse." I had the nagging feeling you might have been raped in your business, by Ramon, no less, but tried to push that thought away. It was another area of horror, I dare not enter, Mona, even as I was being overcome with something like horror, waiting there for you to tell

me all. "I might have been drunk," you said, running a finger along the top of the sheet. I had to ask. "Am I okay?" "Sure you're okay," you said. "This happened way last week. You weren't here last week." "Ramon said he had it?" "No," you said. "I'm sure you're fine," I said. "Could you be pregnant?" I closed my eyes and listened. "No, I couldn't be pregnant," you said. I waited for you to say more but you trailed off.

In the long hot silence that ensued I recalled that it was a few days after Big Bro had gone up to America, that we were lying in bed like this when you asked me, quite teasingly, who I was thinking about while I was doing what I was doing under the sheet. "I'm not doing anything," I'd said and heard you laugh. "All you boys do it," you'd said. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about." "You, sometimes," I said and you said, "Thought so." And began telling me tales of the guys you'd done it with, very detailed tales, though never that you got paid, or never that Grandmum pushed you towards it, though I suspected it. For my small part, I'd tell you of the snobby Christian girls in boarding school I dreamt of marrying when I grew up.

I dug down past my Walcott and Kincaid library books and withdrew a few American apples from my backpack, two red and a yellow one. You didn't want one. I asked. So I knew you were depressed, because you loved those apples, especially the yellow ones. I was mindful holding the apples that Dad'd left to work on an apple farm in America, that probably men like him had left their families to pick these apples.

To cheer myself up I thought of that night we were eating different apples on our separate beds and you sat up in bed with a sweet look, suggesting that I have a bite of your apple. "It's good," you said, "Really," and winked. I got up in my boxers and came over to your bed and sat down and took the apple from your wet fingers and took a bite and gave it back to you and watched as you bit into the side I'd bitten into, eyeing me over the apple. Your face once again had that high-smelling bleaching cream caked all over it, which tore off any black from your face. (Like so many girls in Seaview Gardens, your neck, most notably, and body were a shade darker than your face, though you were naturally yellow.) I closed my eyes and took the apple back from your slippery hand, and we continued to alternate bites from the apple until you asked me if I wanted to, pointing between your legs flapping like a butterfly under the sheet. That moment gets me even now.

It crossed my mind during those times that you wanted to get pregnant, that maybe you and Grandmum had worked to seduce me in that way to keep me there so that Dad would continue to support the household,



since he wouldn't send money unless I was there. But this didn't bother me as much as you might think, since, well you didn't know this, but in a way ever since Dad'd left I'd wanted a son. Ever since I was five, so ever since Dad left, yeah.

I fell asleep and dreamt hazily about your funeral. The next day I woke up and went back to sleep to the fine drumming of rain on the zinc roof. About noon Grandmum woke me up and handed me her cordless phone. I took it as she grinned small-toothed at me like some kind of witch too heavy to ride on a broomstick. "Your father," she mouthed, pointing at the phone. She was the type of woman who'd lived too long in a place not meant for living, who'd managed to remain fat, though short, in a place where most everybody else was as slim as the sun-struck trees in every yard, whose brownish-clayey face was lined permanently with the thought and worry of where and how to mine the next day's meal.

In a deep loud voice, Dad wanted to know how I was doing. You surfaced from under the sheet then and I thought you looked about as wilted as one of Grandmum's flowers. "Not so well," I said to Dad. "I think I've got a fever." "You go to a doctor?" he asked. "No money," I said. "Okay," he said. "I'm gonna send five hundred." I pictured him withdrawing the money from his wallet as he spoke. Probably he was in a phone booth by the side of a road in front of a McDonalds. "That much would do," I said. "Okay," he said. "Anything else. How's school?" "Good," I said. "I go back on Monday." "Good," he said. Well... It occurred to me that he might not be in front of a MacDonald's at all. Maybe he was home, so I listened for other voices in the background, say, the woman he'd married to get his green card (Charles already had his own apartment). In the silence there I heard a voice, a woman's--it could have been the TV, though--telling him to turn up the heat.

"So how long til I come up?" I asked him. "Soon," he said and paused. "Just you be patient." I asked him how Charles was doing. Plump, snow-white, the woman Dad's married to, Charles'd said. "Doing well. At work now." "Tell him I said hi." "Will do." A pause in which I heard the woman's voice growing in the background. "The heat," she was saying. "You heard from your mother?" he said. "Yes, talked to her couple of weeks ago." That was a lie. Mum didn't call cause she couldn't afford to. She'd written that she'd moved out of her father's house, 'cause of her step-mother and now she was struggling to get by with her father's help. "Oh," he said. It's like being born again, she'd written. Got to start out from the beginning. "Are you alright," he was saying. "Sure," I said. "I'm sending the money now," he

said. "Go get it."

You stirred in bed as I hung up the phone. "Get ready," I said. "We're going to the clinic."

By evening the rain had stopped and I'd gone downtown to collect the money--gone and come back and when I came back both you and Grandmum were standing inside the gate. You were wearing my white Nike t-shirt with the long black stick going across it, thigh-high fraying blue jean shorts and my gray Fila hat with your fake blond hair hanging down behind. I noticed you weren't wearing Mum's ring. Probably, I thought, you'd sold it. Your face looked yellower, but raw, flaky, bloody-looking from the bleaching cream you'd let eat at it all of yesterday. Grandmum was dressed in a black gown like as if she was going to a funeral, hers or yours or even mines. Her head was about the size of a medium-sized pumpkin with her hair caught up on top like a gray stem. She looked at you briefly as you closed back the gate and her face then, having more than the usual wrinkles, told me you'd told her. Part of her face said she was disgusted with you, so I thought you must have told her only that you'd had unprotected sex.

Overhead the sky was gray and spectral. We walked first west towards the Goodyear wall, Grandmum wobbling in front of us; past the many guys sitting on stones in their yards, playing basketball, chatting up girls. There was Ramon in yellow pants, red shirt and a red Yankee hat on at a table playing dominos with some of his friends. As we walked past he looked up at us and I saw one side of the two long, razor scars that run down each cheek. He kept his eyes on us the whole time, even while the other guys were urging him to play. You must have seen him too, because you kept your face hidden behind my shirt sleeve like some fruit behind a leaf. I'd seen him a lot around but didn't know too much about him, except that he was probably broke and couldn't have paid you for your services. I glanced around as we crossed the gutter and turned on the big road and saw that he had stood up and was watching us. Probably he thought we were a couple. I wanted him to.

There were not any patients at the little white clinic. Not a lot of people could afford it, I suppose. We sat quietly in the white waiting room on blue plastic chairs. Grandmum was there to support you yes, but more than anything else she was there to tend to her own health, get more pills for whatever ailed her. "You know how to do things right," she said at one point, turning to you. "You of all people shouldn't be here for this."

When a bushy browed nurse in a purple dress popped her head out of the doorway and beckoned us in, we stood and I led you to a clean

white room with a small window for the test. I held your arm and smiled for you the whole time the smiley nurse was drawing the blood. Then it was my turn and you crossed the room and stood at the window looking out at smoke spiraling up like prayers from a series of factories. Probably you were thinking about your mother then, wondering if she'd taken her test in a room like this? And if so was she as afraid as you were? I looked at you but you looked away or maybe I looked away, not knowing just how to broach the subject of your Mum, especially with the nurse needling me. Remembering then how you had told me that your mother had named you after the University of West Indies at Mona, so you would know to aim that high.

We never saw the doctor, but Grandmum did and he gave her a supply of pills for her heart, with a prescription for more. The other day Mum told me how she died. Some doctor (that same doctor, could it have been?) was giving her pills to fix her heart, only there was nothing wrong with her heart and what he was giving her ended up killing her kidney. Mum said she only lasted so long because she couldn't afford the medication too much. I suppose that Dad's financial support of the household while I was there might've ended up killing her instead of keeping her alive.

"What next?" you said when I'd paid the receptionist and we were leaving. "Is there something else you wanted to do?" I asked. Press charges against Ramon, maybe, I thought. "No, that's it," you said and held my hand as we walked home by the gutter, this time around the other side of the project (I'd convinced us to), Grandmum again in front. Near a cardboard Baptist church, where a gay man'd been shot dead last month and thrown into the gutter, Grandmum suddenly turned to you and said, "I want you buried next to me, you understand?" You looked down, and I could feel your oily hand trembling in my hand. Could feel myself puffing up, wanting to punch her for you, but instead hugging you, the only way I knew to protect you, from her bulldog glares, from everyone and everything.

When we got back home, Grandmum told us that she'd made arrangements to sell the puppies and told us to whom we should bring the living ones to, since so many of them had died. I thought then how nothing good survived in such a place. How terrible Grandmum was for wanting to sell the living ones so soon after their birth. I remember you objected to Grandmum's sale plans. Said something about how you believed the puppies should stay with their mother. I watched as you turned your head and looked at me, with a look that said, "Do something." "I'll pay the price," I said to Grandmum, who threw a threatening glance my way, as if to say this

was adult talk here, but I just shrugged, throwing the stone-tipped wire back up onto the power lines.

“Fine then,” Grandmum said, with a wrinkled sneer. “The two of you lovebirds responsible for them.” “Fine,” you said, looking at me. I nodded. “Well,” Grandmum said. “Take out the dead ones and go throw them in the swamp. Can you all do that for me?” “Fine,” you said, going for a bucket under the standpipe. But I stopped you on your way back and took the bucket from you as Grandmum slammed the front door behind her.

I filled the bucket with the dead puppies, while you stood by and watched with grieving eyes. In the failing red light of evening we set out north towards the swamp. I carried the bucket in my left hand to keep it away from you walking somberly on my right. You looked about to cry. I didn’t know whether it was from all the testing or whether the sight of so many dead puppies had done something to you.

A few men called to you from their white-grilled verandahs as we advanced up the road but you didn’t answer them. I checked to make sure Ramon wasn’t one among them.

I looked at you and you didn’t smile. “Cheer up,” I said.

We walked around the football field, where shirtless muscle-bound men, some of whom you’d probably slept with, played football, shouting at each other. Ramon in white-keeper gloves and green-padded keeper shorts and shirt watched us as we passed. He wasn’t even watching when a guy scored on him. I looked up at your eyes and you were pretending he wasn’t even there as we crossed the gutter--where so many bodies had been dumped--over a plank, then the road to the road-level stonewall over the swamp.

“Did you tell him no? Ramon?” I asked as we stood silent on the wall watching the sun fall. You didn’t say anything, just kept your eyes on the sun. So I said, “I know he forced you to.” You still said nothing, standing like a statue. Probably in your mind you had already downsized it to just another incident in your life. Perhaps it had happened to you before, before I’d come to Seaview Gardens, probably by Ramon himself and so it was something that you’d learned to deal with over time, I thought, as I watched you put your arms around your neck and shoulders and hug yourself or maybe, I recognize now, that it had happened the way you said it happened and you didn’t know how to explain it to me any further.

Crouching, I dipped down into the bucket with my eyes on your slipped feet. “Don’t,” you said as I rocked back to throw a brown puppy. Your voice was unsteady, weak, like it had traveled with your imagination to

the wall of the horizon and back. "I think we should bury them." "What?" I said, harsher than I'd intended; still miffed how you hadn't let me in. "Bury them," you said, staring west. "Down the pier." I got up. "Okay then."

You led the way down the wall and I watched your body swaying in the dying light from behind. For a moment I thought you were walking with your eyes closed and so I inched closer to you and said your name. "You hear that?" you said after a while. "What?" I said and listened as Michael Jackson's "Remember the time" came wafting out of a sound system in front of a line of zinc-shack houses. You crooned along, imperceptibly, your voice hoarse, cracking. "Do you remember the time when we fell..." I loved how you were suddenly revived and I waited for the chorus again before joining in.

"You've got a sweet voice," you said, unexpectedly as we advanced past the sound system. "Even when you don't sing. It sounds like you are." I had to return the compliment. "You-you-you got a nice voice too," I said and you stopped and turned around, your eyes narrowing on me. "Don't lie," you said. "I can handle it." "I'm not lying," I said and hoped it wasn't showing on my face. "Sure you are," you said, coughing. "You lie all the time to make me feel better." You were right. I couldn't contest that so I didn't reply.

When we got to the pier, you found a spot in the last of the sunlight and began digging holes in the black sand with a stick, as hair-strands of fog rolled off the blackening face of the sea. First one grave then another. I stood at the edge of the water, listening to the planes landing way down at the airport. The tide came biting at my feet like some small dog and I moved back, inhaling the salty scent, suddenly feeling pensive, that I'd come to one end of the island, facing the sea. I turned to watch you take puppy after puppy from the bucket and bury them lovingly in one hole after the next.

Then suddenly you said, holding two casually aloft, "These two are alive," and I walked over to you and saw you holding a white-chested, black puppy and a brown one. "They're alive," you said again with a huge smile. "I didn't know," I said. "I thought they were all dead." "Well, you were wrong," you said, pursing your lips. "Sorry," I said and sat down in the stony wet sand beside you, watching as you cradled them in your arms like babies. "What should we call them?" you said after a time and I thought for a moment. But didn't say anything. "We can name them later," you said, handing the black, white-chested one over to me. "Here," you said, "this one's yours." I took it and put mine down on the sand and you put yours down too and sat with your chin resting on your sandy wet knees.

I had the camera in my pocket and took it out and began snapping

shots of the puppies on the sand, then of you who didn't want to be photographed. "I don't look too good," you said, covering your face with your sandy hand. "You look good," I said, pulling away your hand, snapping pictures. As the wind picked up and the sun continued to fall, you suddenly took off the hat and the wig and said, eyeing me, "Do you think...do you think I'm prettier this way, Miles?" I dug my heels into the sand and looked through to the truth of your patchy head of hair, which reminded me of the soldier-trampled lots between some of the houses, your washout desert-brown eyes and sticky figure. God, I wished the sky was a mirror. "Of course, you're pretty, Mona," I said, snapping pictures. "I wouldn't say so," you said, picking up your puppy. "I would," I said. "I wouldn't lie." "Okay," you sighed, "Send some back to me, especially the ones you just took." I nodded and you looked off into the sea and the hairs of fog growing on the sea and then looked back at me as though you were seeing me for the first time with a question trembling on your lips.

"Am I the type of girl," you began, then trailed off. "Am I the type of girl you dream of someday marrying?" You did a nervous laugh. I was silent. "I mean," you added. "Will you come back for me when you go up?"

I didn't know how to begin to answer that. So I studied your face, just looked at your sliced up brows, and wondered if your eyes loved me, if your mouth loved me, if your cheeks loved me, if your smile when it came loved me, too. I couldn't say for sure. So inhaling the salty air, I put my head down and didn't answer. Just watched as more fog rolled in softly off the water and down from the hills way east over the ghetto over us. I felt like a man being buried in a mass grave of dirt-colored clouds with people who lived in such a place that they didn't know what it meant to be normal. I looked at you looking down. I couldn't lie, Mona. I couldn't. That would have been a pretty important lie. And it was not because you were having potential health problems why I didn't answer. No, it was because I'd seen how promises could be padlocked and broken. Dad'd promised Mum he'd return for her and when he didn't it'd shoved her over the edge. So I couldn't have said that. Couldn't have. And how long would it take for me to adjust to a new country, with a father I didn't know too well, except for his voice and a step-mother. (And to think I'd wanted a son. I wasn't even aware of how much that would tie me down, not until you asked if I would come back for you). What could I have said? So all I did was I allowed the chorus of waves breaking up against rocks to fill the silence.

And still I've played that moment so many times over in my mind and dreams. Was it love? Mona, was it love? No, I thought. Love couldn't

grow in a place like Seaview Gardens. Only desperation did.

I watched you stare searchingly at the sea as though it, not me, would give you the answer you sought by turning to marble and allowing you to walk across it. An Air Jamaica buzzed over us, over the sea stretched before us like a dream. I heard a few blackbirds calling out behind and turned to watch as they floated down on a carpet of wind down over the road leading out of Seaview Gardens north over a rusty bridge over a huge gutter. I got up and walked to the edge of the pier and stood looking at the blank page of the sea. I imagined that Mum'd stood at an emotional place like this, seeing nothing but a vast ocean dividing her from the man she loved. Praying for rescue until her father, not God, came forth and carried her across to Canada.

More planes flew overhead and I thought how in just a few hours they would give birth in America. I heard gunshots in the far distance and turned around to see you sprawled out, face down on the sand, the puppies and the bucket by your side. Shots rang out again as I came up to you. You'd drawn a box around you with the stick in the sand. I didn't stop to think too much about this. Knowing that the gunmen waited for the fog and darkness to begin their war, I bent down and nudged your shoulder but you wouldn't get up, so I picked you up and put the puppies in your arms, leaving the wig, hat and bucket to the sea. Your clothes was gritty with sand. I swerved, but steadied myself and carried you like a child with your eyes closed across the road through the foggy light and dark and another drum of close gunshots.

The shortest rout was across the field so I took it. The field was cleared of men. As I crossed it I made out Ramon sitting in the goal alone, rocking back and forth with his arms around his knees. I stopped in the middle of the field when I saw him, imagining that he might have been the one doing the shooting. He looked across the field at me and for a moment I expected him to charge across to us or even shoot us but he just gave me this vegetative stare. "Get the fuck outta here," he screamed. And I did, delivering you to your bed, then sat up next to you for most of the night writing Mum, who's remarried now, Mona. Slept quietly by you for two weeks until the result came back negative and you sprang somewhat back to life again, though things were never the same between us.

You understand that because sometimes I stammer--though I manage to manage it--that there's always this perceived barrier between me and the thing I might want, so much so that if I don't hold on to things they will float away from me. You didn't look at me when I entered a room and I was silent a lot around you, especially that you complained about me leaving

the wig and hat that night to the sea. So I began sleeping on the sofa in the living room with the puppy I'd named Croon--until the day I flew up here with him. He's as big as a small boy now, Mona, and nods up at me as I tell you it's not heaven, America I mean. At least it hasn't been for me, having lived through several testy years with Dad and his wife, years that only Seaview Gardens could have prepared me to walk through in one piece. It's not like Jamaica where once you reach the sea, there's no where else to go. Here there's always somewhere down, up, hot, mild or cold to go and then there's Canada, where I've visited Mum so many times.

Only you can know what it's like to be rooted so deep for so long in a place like Seaview Gardens, Mona. In so many of my dreams I rescue you from that place as a friend or a lover and carry you out over the old guard of the Caribbean Sea to America. Perhaps someday it will come to that. I never did take many pictures of you and the ones I took that evening down by the pier with the disposable camera I don't have since I misplaced the camera at some point. Probably you took it from my suitcase the night before I left. I remember checking for it the next morning on my way to the airport and not finding it. This letter then is the mirror, the photographs I've sent.



*First Place, Eve Cummings Poetry Contest*

Chapelton, Jamaica

Rayon Dwain Lennon

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The sun-remembered beggars  
don't beg no more. Noon, the fluting blind man  
walks into his bible with frail fingers. Relief  
comes with the blue khaki river  
of Friday high schoolers to feed and feed  
on the restaurant heart  
of town. In the market, the vendors mob  
that one stray customer while outside the black bust  
of the Maroon Cudjoe looks down on the white  
Catholic Church graves which make  
great seats for lunchers who laugh over the dead.  
Beside the rainbow shop, a broken standpipe  
gushes all day, where kids from the primary school  
come to cool their fried feet as brown  
palms wave from the court yard. In front  
of the white police station  
two shirtless men fight over  
the job of emptying  
a garbage bin; the powerless clock tower  
cannot sing and the defeated man,  
plotting murder, watches peaceful  
clouds the cruel sun, a black butterfly  
writhing in the wind.

## How I Look?

Rayon Dwain Lennon

---

It only takes a moment for the picture  
to be born: My mother standing not  
in our concrete orange house in Jamaica  
but in her bosses' living room in a white church  
dress taking pictures for me to bring back  
to my brother, sister, father and his ripe  
new wife back in the States. This is Hopedale,  
Canada melting in snow. The rich black  
and white kids she's babysitting erupts now  
and again from where they're watching cartoons  
in the TV room. I aim the house camera.  
"I feel like a prisoner with no green  
card," my mother is saying as I snap  
another picture. " \$150 for the whole  
week." She unwrinkles her face  
and appears happy for another shot.  
"How I look?" My mother asks as I  
watch the picture form. A gilded portrait  
of the boss, a black engineer, somehow  
got into the shot. Of course, having been  
staying in this cloud-gray manor for the last  
few days I know my mother is in love  
with this plump, bald-headed man with his corporate  
smirk. I tear up the picture and make sure  
to put the pieces in my pocket, careful  
not to let the cruel woman of the house know  
we used her camera. I steer my mother  
farther from the man and nearer to the table of vague

china. "That one was sad," I tell her. "Okay then," she intones. Fluffing her glooming hair, she walks into a picture of what looks like an island in blood-yellow lava by a silver-green sea, but which is really an island of bright sand. Smiling, I lower the camera, look through the white curtains across the eyesore pond to make sure her bosses aren't driving up into the picture. "How I look now?" she says, smiling on me. "Like God's bride," I say as swans stand on their floors to melt and snow flurries dissolve in my fear of drowning.

Sugar

Jules Bakes

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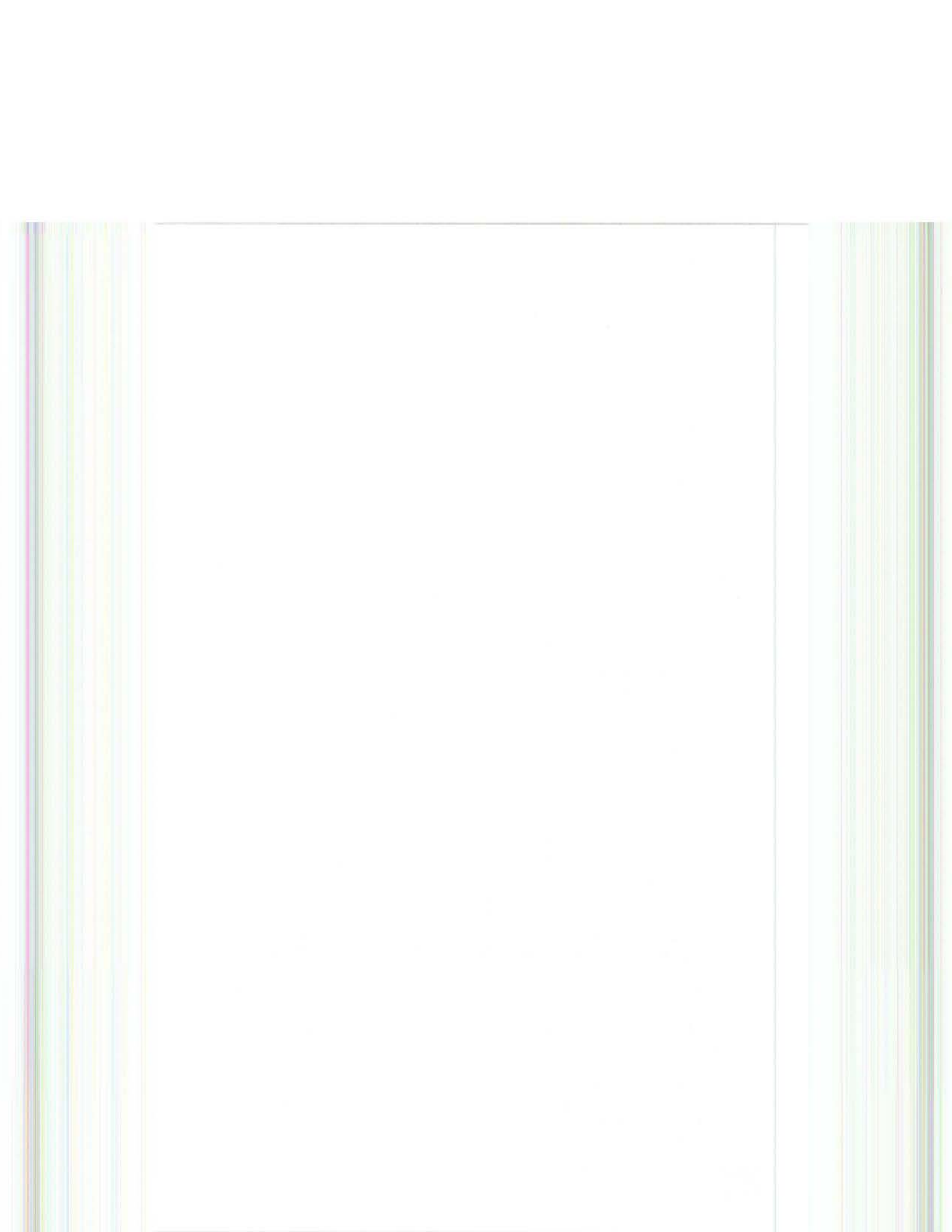
I'm eight years old when they take her first leg. In the morning, my father explains to us in delicate terms that Maman's leg is no longer affixed to her body, but I am the only one who understands what this means. Anisabel, in her grey knee socks, nods gravely. She asks when the doctor will put it back on. And for a moment I imagine Maman dropping off her damaged leg like drycleaning, coming home, filling out bills, grocery shopping, and picking it up at six, shined and pedicured. She examines it critically, and leaves a tip.

My father gives a little breath through his nose, an undercooked laugh, and stares out over the steering wheel at the wet road for a time. There is a vacant, helpless humor on his face, the look he gets in front of the television when someone is about to do something they can't know is very stupid – a hand on the door of a bomb-rigged car, lobster dinner purchased for the wrong blind date. Anisabel is quietly expectant, clutching her lunchbox, and waits for us to answer.

Later at school we are shown a grainy animation about the slow, silent disagreements of tectonic plates that become earthquakes, projected from the dark onto a screen pulled down from the blackboard, and all I see is Maman. At my desk I watch the researchers and their instruments in some Arizona desert predicting the dangers of invisible inner worlds. In my head, between my hands, I examine the process of removal, the skin, the fat, the muscle, the tendon, the bone, all laid out in layers like earth's crust, the surgeon's pickaxe and bucket and shovel, specialized for each. I imagine Maman taken away in buckets to cure her inner argument, each of her parts placed in solitary confinement until they learn to get along.

Maman's parts, eventually, are retrieved and reunited, but some are misplaced. She returns in one piece, but it is a smaller piece.

When Maman was eight, she has told me, when she was a clatter-headed, blue-beaded, long-legged child of Cite Soleil, when she met her father for the first time, she was pink. Not from excitement, or embarrassment, or pride, but from paint.



Her brother found her bathing beneath an outdoor tap, showed her a small tin in his hand, and said, "Look, Marie, Maman wanted me to bring you shampoo." He meant, of course, their Maman.

Maman peered at it from beneath the thin stream of water, the heavy pink liquid in the tin, and said, "That looks like paint, Pouchon."

"It's not," Pouchon said, "it is shampoo like from a real salon."

Maman said, "That smells like paint."

"Of course it does," said Pouchon, "it's quality. How else would it kill lice? Do you want it to smell like bread-pudding and bring mosquitoes? Let me put it on you before Maman comes out angry."

Maman didn't want that, and so she let her brother apply it, which he did with a solemn face.

She gasped, and spat pink, then sniffed hard, and spat a thicker pink, and said, "This is paint."

"Don't be an idiot. You have to let it sit," said Pouchon, "and wash it off later."

So Maman sat in the sun, covered from head to toe in a spatter of paint, until it had grown into such a thick muddy consistency that even the hardest scrubbing would only take off the first layer. It was like this, sniffing and soaked, and sliding on the slick-slippery soles of her feet in a puddle of muddy pink, that her father found her.

He laughed to see her in such a state, and embraced her with a familiarity she found alarming in a stranger, leaving a Maman-print on his bare chest and shoulders.

Anisabel disappears on me when the wheelchair is pried up and carried into the house for the first time. I glance at her from the very borders of my vision, watching her eyes grow rounder and her mouth grow smaller, and suddenly my hands are the only ones holding the cake pan, and it is much heavier. We listen to her saddle shoes clatter through the ceiling, and listen to the closet door squeal and slam, and none of us says a word to acknowledge the little treason.

Maman's new chair holds her two inches shorter than me; I'm not used to looking down at her, and the pale part of her hair feels like something half formed and secret that I ought not to be allowed to see. Her truncated right leg, wrapped neatly, seems less like a limb and more like a small, obedient pet, a little live thing that lies still beside her and stirs only occasionally. I hate to look at it, so I hold my neck stiff, as though I'm holding a book on my head, to keep my eyes from wandering downward.

She reads the cake while my arms grow heavy, and I keep my eyes trained on the top of her head. "Welcome home, Mama," she says, and laughs at the N I've drawn in with a toothpick. The grocer's bakery hasn't gotten it right since the cake we bought for her birthday two years ago; the woman from whom we'd collected it at the time had caught sight of what seemed to her a superfluous letter and apologized profusely for the mistake, insisting that she could provide a replacement within the half hour. She let

us leave with our triumphant, accurate cake, convinced we were only being kind.

It's good and terrible both to see Maman laugh, and in the hallway mirror I am startled to see myself hanging back in half-expectant revulsion, as though watching someone produce a large and beautiful snake from a cage.

Later, it falls to me to retrieve Anisabel.  
She isn't difficult to find.

I climb the stairs to Maman's room, I open the closet door and sit on the floor, and I say, Alright, *ki moun ki la?* Neither of us are fluent in the language of our mother, but we have learned to borrow phrases.

"Australia," her voice informs me, bodiless in the dark. "I'm in Australia." This is a ritual with which I've been familiar since my sister was four, and I sigh and lean against the door's frame.

Maman is home, I say. It's really not nice of you to be in Australia right now. I think you really hurt her feelings.

"I didn't mean to," she says. "Just tell her I'm in Australia."

Why are you being such a little brat? I ask.

There is a long dark silence, and I think about how much trouble I'll be in when she starts crying, but there are no tears.

"I don't want to be in a chair," says her unsteady voice, and suddenly I get it.

Oh, no, I say. No no, it's not catching. You won't catch it.

"You don't know."

Yes I do. You're not going to catch it, I tell her. Maman won't let you. She's keeping it all to herself.

Maman had met her father before, of course, but she had been two years old when he left, and so it didn't entirely count.

The joy of a reconstructed family was tempered. He had been deported from *la Republica Dominicana* back to the confines of his own borders, sold out when the blade of his machete snapped beneath the wheels of a delivery truck. The owner of the canefields who had very responsibly contacted the authorities to discuss the illegal he'd discovered working for him regretfully neglected to mention how good the arrangement had been for his company for the last six years. The machete had been the only tool Maman's father needed to do his work, for the twelve hours each day he spent bent in half in the cane fields. Without it, he was worthless, least of all worth the cost of a new one.

The money earned harvesting the sugarcane had been very little. Much of what he was given was returned to its source for the privileges of eating and living. But money was money, and where there had been little before, now there was none. The cane did not grow on this side of the border as it once did.

But he would not try to cross the borders again, he said, and his

sons would not, and his daughters would not.

My children will not celebrate their sacrifices over plain rice and cane, he said. My children will not escape to find themselves owned. He would think of something else.

Every night my father unwraps and rewraps the ace bandages covering what remains of Maman's leg, with a temporary layer of brand-new store bought skin. It is a labor of love. Her old skin, when I see it uncovered, hangs in the loose, crisp, papery layers of the skin of an old onion, containing barely the dark rot of the flesh beneath. My Maman, from the waist down, is a zombie movie I am not allowed to watch. Maman reads a magazine while my father finishes the job, instead of watching.

Eventually my father and Maman learn to use brown bandages instead of white; what finds its way to the surface, then, is not so startling.

Maman does not complain. She does not wonder why this has happened to her, or wish that it had not. She says, "Crayon Bon Die pa gin gum", God's pencil has no eraser, and she turns the page.

With Papa Doc's death and Little Doc's ascension, there came an exodus from the land of Haiti.

Her Aunt had stitched her a shirt from an old dress and from the foam of an old buoy, wrapped round with floatation to keep her head above water if she should fall overboard. The one time she tried it out, Maman found it had the unfortunate habit of turning her upside-down in the water, but she wore it anyway, as a covering for her heart. She was as of these moments no longer a child, and she would no longer wander the mazes of corrugated tin in the sun-city slums.

It was a small boat for seven people.

I am pouring myself a cup of orange juice in the kitchen when I see all of Maman's ashtrays in the trashcan, piled in a leaning tower, and I realize all at once that the silence upstairs is the sort that would be shouting if Anisabel wasn't sleeping.

I find I need urgently to go upstairs to brush my teeth, and I so happen to pause in front of my parents' door, and I so happen to cup my hands against the crack between door and frame, silent as fog.

"I'd be irresponsible if I let it go," my father is saying, suddenly in my ear.

"Irresponsible," comes Maman's voice. "I think what you are trying to say is that I am the one being irresponsible. Is that it? Can you say so?"

"What if I am? Jesus, Marie, I've done all I can to be here for you through all this shit. You know I'm here. But there is only so much a guy can —"

"It isn't smoke cut off my leg," Maman says, and her voice grows strained as a too-tight guitar string. "Maybe there are things even you don't understand about the hows and whys, do you think? Could it possibly be



so?”

“Yeah, well, Marbs aren’t going to help you keep the other one, either. Don’t give me any of that voodoo shit, Marie, you know as well as –”

There is a pause, and I hear a scratching sound, the hiss of lit sulphur, and my father says, “Oh, there you go. There you go. Doctor’s goddamn orders and you’re going to sit there and toss all that insurance money out the window, huh? Yeah, breathe it in. You’re just slapping me in the goddamn face after everything we’ve been through, you know? Right in the goddamn face. Every time.”

“Jonathan,” Maman says, “Jonathan. Can you stop talking like a crazy person, and just –”

“That’s what I need,” my father says. “I need a goddamn voodoo priestess telling me I’m crazy.”

That afternoon Maman brings only me with her to buy a new bed for the downstairs spare room, because, she says, it will be easier for her if she doesn’t need to get up the stairs to go to sleep. I am allowed the task of deconstructing and reconstructing her chair so that we can store it in the back seat of the station wagon. It’s something I’m getting very handy at.

When we come across a store that sells beds, when we tentatively enter, my hands on the handles of Maman’s chair, we are swept into what the representative pompously refers to as a mattress studio, a sea of soft white tablets, and Maman and I struggle to keep up with the man’s words as he introduces us to one another like esteemed guests. There are feathertops, pillowtops, foam and innerspring. There are wooden-base and box spring and slatted bed bases, and I never knew sleeping should be so complex. The salesman is a caricature of himself, pushy and keen eyed, and because I know what Maman has saved up from early in the day, I feel something like pity for him, a sea-green tinge of it in my throat.

“So,” concludes the man, “what is it you’re looking for?”

“Something to sleep on,” says Maman.

Understanding himself to be dealing with the inexperienced, the salesman takes a deep, bracing breath, and guides us glidingly to an unassuming looking bed of indeterminate type, the benefits of which provoke a long-winded diatribe neither my Maman nor I can quite follow. We are dazed and she is becoming irate, and I can tell because of the way her eyelids shade her face, and how the length of her lips has changed. I think, strongly, that we should leave. Maman could make your ears shrivel like dried apricots.

I don’t feel good, Maman, I tell her.

“I think we may come back another day,” Maman tells the man, and his mustache becomes slightly more menacing in its bristle. I can see he enjoys a challenge.

“I see,” he says. “You know, I think I can make this worth your time.”

Alarmed, I tell Maman that I really, really don’t feel good. The man speaks over me in his saxophone voice.

“What do I have to do to clean up this deal with you, ma’am?” he

asks, draping his elbow over a sign, his hands clasped. "Tell me."

"How about some vomit on your nice new mattress?" Maman politely inquires. "Could you clean that up, Junior?"

"Ah," he says. "Well, maybe we ought to –"

"No," Maman says. "I don't like your mattresses and I don't like you either."

Outside, Maman scratches a match pressed in the palm of her hand, lights her cigarette with it, shakes it out.

She doesn't tell me, but I know it would have been different back home. It always is.

Maman never saw it, but she knows she was on the news once.

She remembers the camera in her stunned, dazed face, the lights, the shouts, the sounds, all ringing from her like pebbles from tin after her innumerable days held in the ocean's hypnotic silence. When I imagine it, I picture her face, younger, smoother, more frightened, framed by the camera, her name printed in white beneath it, Marie Rose Bilodeau. It must not have been so; she was filmed as part of a group, and no one would have cared for her lone face or for her name.

In the van, in the cell, she was relieved, this was success where so many had failed. But she was there for a strict purpose, imbued with a filial loyalty; she was grateful, but foreign. When things changed, she would return home.

The year I was born, four schoolchildren were killed by government guns, shot to death by soldiers.

When I am twelve, they take the other leg, and it is not so simple.

Two hard pieces on the bottom of Maman's foot begin to separate of their own accord, leaving a little canyon between them, a continental divide that refuses to heal, because there is so little blood reaching the area to tell them to do so. It kills her foot, slowly, and kills her leg, and almost kills Maman.

At the time I have only heard the word "cardiac" with reference to our ancient cycling machine, and I absorb the short lesson offered to me by the nurse in passing. Cardiac means having to do with the heart. Just the muscle.

There is a diner outside the hospital, and my father takes me for French toast.

Maman met my father in a diner, she has told me, sitting on the stools at the counter – Maman a dark young girl in sandals, her head wrapped modestly, my father a polite, freckled boy, Irish stock, a good Catholic. Maman and my father did not sweep one another off their feet. They did not hear the choirs of angels or catch one another's eye across a crowded room to the swelling of an orchestra.

What they did do was marry. Maman needed a tether to the land

beneath her feet, and my father needed someone to talk to, to pay half the rent, to remind him to empty the dishwasher. It was a marriage of friendly convenience.

Later, to improve their image under the watchful eyes of the law, they purchased a convenience house together, and found themselves with a convenience dog. Years of convenience passed. Then I was born. Then Anisabel. Convenience children. Whatever my father is feeling, here, in the diner, with his pale cheeks and the dark circles cradling his eyes, it is not in mourning the loss of a dishwasher.

His thin fingers select three white packets from the sugar bowl beneath the jukebox. I watch as one after another they are emptied into the cup, the white mass of it sandcastleing in the center until it collapses in upon itself, disappearing into the dark. He stirs his coffee with the end of his spoon, takes a sip from the mug, considers it.

"Want a quarter?" he says, almost shyly.

What? I say.

He gestures toward the jukebox with his head, not his lips. "Buy a song."

No, daddy.

"Come on," he says. "Pick one out." He stretches to rummage in his pocket, and produces a handful of change, from which he extracts one quarter. He holds it out to me, and I take it from him, my fingers stiff as pincers.

I put it on the table, and my father takes another sip of coffee.

"Magdalena," he says, "I know you know Maman might not be able to come home."

I'm not an idiot, and I tell him so.

"You may hear some things," he says, "but I want you to know that it's nobody's fault."

Maman didn't do what the doctor told her to do, I say. My father's flow is stanchued for the moment. The waitress, bored with these sorts of hospital-runoff exchanges, refills what little he's taken from his cup.

"Where Maman comes from, you know, there aren't a lot of doctors," he says at last. "When Maman's family got sick, sometimes they couldn't go to the hospital. So they did what they could with what they had, and sometimes it worked. And sometimes it didn't.

"A big part of being healthy is believing you're healthy," he says. "Maman's family had to find other ways to believe."

Well, it doesn't work, I say.

"Not here, it doesn't," my father says. "It's not real here. How could it work for one person when everyone around them tells them it's all superstition?"

It's stupid, I say.

I'm not looking at him, but in the reflection of the jukebox I can see how he looks at me.

My father drops me off at home, where an elderly neighbor is watching Anisabel. I find the old woman asleep in an armchair while Wheel of Fortune blares before her, and I go upstairs, to search for my sister.

In my parents' room, traces of something sharp and heavy invade my nostrils, and my mind, without me steering, sees nothing but Maman in the dark, as the dark, among her empty clothes.

Ki moun ki la? I say. Who's there?

There is no noise. There is no movement, save the pulse in my eyes.

"Pa gen moun la," comes the voice of my sister, at last, waterlogged and soggy in the dark. "There's nobody here."

Right, I say, and when I pull the light's string I find her curled up in the back of the closet. She is sitting in a hatbox, kitten heels on her hands and on her feet, her face tear-laquered gleaming as dark china. The glaze on her face could be a product of her uncertain seven year old anguish, or it could be a natural reaction to the stench in the closet that barrels into me with the sudden violence of a startled ox, knocking the air from my lungs and sending me reeling; she has dumped what has to be the full remains of Maman's bottle of Giorgio directly into her shirt.

Anisabel, kisa ou ap fe la? I demand, coughing, pinching my nose and eyes shut against the yellow, chemical assault of Armani. I pull the collar of my shirt up over my nose. Is that Maman's perfume?! Anisabel, *jesus!* What are you doing in here?

"I'm not in here," she says staunchly, stuffily, staring at the shoed hands in her lap.

This isn't the answer I am ready for, and for a moment I am flummoxed.

Where are you, then? I say. Australia?

She doesn't answer me.

Where? I ask again, in English, and my words come harshly, because, I find, I am terrified of her answer. Anisabel. Where are you?

She is two feet in front of me, but that isn't the question I'm asking. She will look up at me with empty eyes, and tell me she is with the spirits, speaking to Maman, that the soul has gone free and she has caught and conjured her, amid the shoes and the darkness, here in the oily air.

Anisabel, I say.

"Mars," she says, reluctantly, as though I would've gotten the answer sooner or later, and relief pours down my spine thick as paint.

There's no air, I tell her. I hope you explode.

I shut the door without turning the light off.

Opening the closet door was like detonating a bomb, and the entire house reeks of Giorgio, so I take my leave of it. I jog down the block to the drugstore, hoping what little wind I generate will slough off the stench that permeates my clothes, and I sit, panting, on the obscenity-ridden wooden bench behind it, wiping my face on the back of my perfumed sleeve.

The bench sits before a dirty pond bordered by a wooden

boardwalk, which, I guess, was there just to be viewed. It was a man-made thing that once had a fixture in the middle to spout water in the air. It's been gone a while, it was just a bad joke in the weedy, gasoline-stained pond, but even filthy it is a calm place, that doesn't move, and doesn't change. Nothing grows here. Maman had a phrase she used to describe it – something I can't remember – something that indicated a finality to the barrenness, that it would not be reclaimed. She used the same words when she spoke of Haiti, with the proud resignation of a veteran's widow. A place stripped of everything.

When I was younger I threw rocks into the pond, but there was no joy in it. The thick water swallowed anything I threw with barely a ripple, a snide lack of acknowledgement.

I hook my chin over the railing to peer into the brown water. The surface has an oil-slick sheen, crackled like a mosaic in the time it's remained only a little disturbed. Someone must have very long ago taken a shopping cart from the drug store and chucked it in, for whatever reason, because one wheeled leg, wrapped round with a world of algae, breaks the surface. I imagine how deep the water must be to contain the rest of the cart - it's a new discovery for me, this wheel, although from the look of the slimy water things that have taken to it, it may as well have been here forever. It's hard to imagine something so permanent when everything has changed so much. I imagine it here, hours ago, exactly the same despite the fact that I was not here to look at it. And I imagine it here, hours from now, at night amid a clamor of frogs, exactly the same as it is now, still alone, still cold, still, and the same in the morning, and the same the following night, and the same when I am here again, and for a moment, just for a moment, I understand what it must be to be dead.

## Destroyer of Worlds

Jules Bakes

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**N**obody could give you any shit for reading the dictionary. If I learned anything from Freshman Comp, it was this, my most crucial survival tactic. Far and away in the back row, I had begun to lose my grip in a big way, and Daniel Webster was there for me.

As a kid I'd forever suffered from the kind of disorder that compels one to read pill bottles in the bathroom, lists of nutrition facts at McDonald's, political commentary scrawled at odd angles on toilet paper dispensers. Anything to keep my pupils moving, anything to keep me from sitting alone in the tundra of my head. Left textless, tumbleweeds filled my mind. And so was born my Stockholm Syndrome love affair with a reference book. Although my preferred reading material at the time generally had covers that looked like Middle Earth might've in the eighties, and titles like "The Sword of Shadowvale" or "The Unicorn of Angmar" or "The Noun of Mystic Locale." But the first time I tried to discreetly bust out the ol' "Dragonrider of Boise" mid-class, I incurred a faculty smackdown the likes of which would've probably made the mightiest of goddamn Beastmasters feel a little bit tingly.

But really, the dictionary wasn't so bad, once you really got into it. I'll be damned if they didn't have a word for just about everything in there. And like all the old classics, it had a tendency to begin to really relate to one's life, after you'd been at it for a while, and oh, I had: during particularly intense episodes, I'd have to stop and cast the book aside for five minutes at a stretch, lest things get weird and out of hand between us. The endless rows of word and meaning, the dark sea of vocabulary, it began to seem to me, spoke to my past and my future, and had to be interpreted, like tea leaves. Delicate. Delicatessen. Delicious. Delinquent. Holy shit. It made total sense.

This one time, on a day that fell halfway through the R's, I found a secret little surprise treat that briefly interrupted my descent into madness, and, in my compromised state, almost made me choke on my own spit in my joy. It was an illustration. Kinda.

It was a table, and it showed some kind of alphabet, each letter printed paired with its Roman equivalent. Its letters were all sticks, angular

scratches, with no nice soft O's or S's. It was an angry sort of writing that looked like it meant serious business, like the kind of thing that'd be spoken in phlegmy bellows by huge guys with huge beards.

Rune, I read. Noun. Blah blah, certain ancient alphabets which blah, Germanic languages, etcetera, and so on. The table was what consumed me.

At lunch, I took out a miniature version of it, lovingly transcribed onto a notecard. "Dude," I said. "Check it out."

My best friend back then was Louise C., who was called Louise C. to differentiate her from Louise R., who was my rabbit. That's how tight we were, back in the day. Tight enough that I could keep her namesake in a hutch out back and it somehow wasn't creepy. The rabbit himself had been dead for at least three years by this time, but the leftover initial never took the hint.

Louise C. took the notecard from me, and transferred her lollipop to the opposite side of her mouth with a curl of her tongue.

"The hell's this," she said.

"Dude," I said, "we should totally write notes in this."

"What?"

"They're runes," I said. "It's a – a Germanic – look, you know. It's like a code. Nobody could read our stuff."

"Huh," said Louise C.

"So you wanna?" I said.

"No," said Louise C. "You're a fuckin' dork."

"It'll be cool!" I howled, because I knew all about cool. Eventually, though, Louise C. warmed up to the idea, which I inferred after she passed me in the hallway later that day and slam-dunked a packet of paper into my hood. Upon examination it proved to be a note of roughly the thickness and scope of the Bhagavad Gita. I spent the better part of an afternoon translating it in the margins, and was rewarded with three pages of insight into Louise C.'s personal life, which included the full lyrics to the Thong Song.

And nobody knew it but me!

"Man," I said, beholding my work. "This is pretty sweet."

During the following few days, Louise C. and I had a hell of a time with our rune baloney, and probably wrote enough stupid crap to choke an oliofant. Upon my next detainment, I revisited the ol' R department with my pal the dictionary. It wasn't a long entry, but it was something. This was pretty old shit, actually, and, I was pleased to find, it fell neatly between Salem and Anne McCafferey in pop culture dorkiness. It was the writing of druids and mages and leafy tree people. Runes are so pointy and so angular, I deduced, because they were designed to be cut into things by people with extremely sharp swords who really couldn't be bothered with an O. This was a forest Zorro vendetta language. It was King Arthur shit. It was the stuff you mumbled over bubbling cauldrons of stewed nastiness while you cursed your step-kids into oblivion.

Of course, when we schmucks used it, we were still writing words in English, just switching out the letters piecemeal. Ha, I thought. Who knows what kind of weird business we'd written in Druidish or whatever? I'd probably at some point asked Louise C. how her day was going and inadvertently called down a mighty plague upon her and her sheep. We might've written the words to call up all kinds of Ancient and Terrible demons of forgotten lore. Although nobody had showed up yet.

Now see, see, right here. This is where I strongly feel the real turning point should have been, the crux of the thing. In the right kind of story, this is always the start of the good part. The setup was way too convenient. Establish the context, right, and BLAM-O. Plot to the face. Kid doesn't know what's hit her. It's all really terrible and scary and character building. Why does it never happen to me?

Really, I mean, I've come to terms a long time ago with the fact that I'm not a storybook heroine, not in the main story. Not the real one. I just don't work. In the real world, I'm about as moving as a shoe box. The plot I got stuck with will never find some clever and unlikely way to get me the things I want most. Our story has inconveniences like physics, and gravity, and math teachers, that keep us in a different compartment. But in the right one, for the heroine of the right story, man, it all would've gone down differently.

I can see her – not me – sitting in an empty classroom by the window, maybe, kicking her heels, writing some dumbshit note to her friends in this holy language.

HEY, she might write. I'M SO BORED, WHAT'S GOIN ON WITH YOU. She'd sign her name with a flourish, and a little heart. Then – oh, shit, papercut.

And she already knows something is wrong.

She feels it even before she folds the note in half, even before she smells the sulphur, even before it crumbles to ash in her hand. One moment, she has run a crease down the center with a licked finger – the next, there is no note, only a fine powder, and after that, nothing.

She stares at her empty hand for a silent moment, uncomprehending. There is a sense of heat, and distant rumbling, like the muffled sound effects in the next theater over.

Now this is all pretty weird, sure, but nothing like this ever fazes the Heroine of the Story for too long.

She's got no idea what's coming.

PART II:

IN WHICH JANEY AND LOUISE C. GROW A LITTLE LIBERAL WITH THEIR NOTE MAKING AND RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER MANY ANECDOTES ABOUT MANY PEOPLE WHICH THEY MAYBE OUGHTN'T. SEVERAL FRIENDS, INCLUDING ONE AIMEE DAVIS, REQUEST USE OF SECRET CODE, AND ARE DEE-NIED, TO THEIR RESENTMENT, ALSO LOUISE C AND JANEY AWKWARDLY RECEIVE AN INVITATION



TO A PARTY HOSTED BY A SENIOR WHO TOLERATES THEM. MEANWHILE, THE HEROINE OF THE STORY IS VERY SHOCKINGLY THROWN INTO ANOTHER WORLD, WHEREUPON SHE MEETS A HOODED MAN WHO INFORMS HER THAT SHE HAS CALLED DOWN A DEMON PLAGUE UPON THE EARTH, WHICH SHE, AND ONLY SHE, CAN DEFEAT ONCE AND FOR ALL.

But why me? she demands, all helpless and tearful. Heroines always ask that. Why me? I'm just some girl. How am I supposed to fight hordes of demons? Why me?

Because, the hooded man tells her, they are yours. You are the one. She wipes her hand across her face, and crushes her tears into her hair.

What must I do? she says.

Take this, says the hooded man, and draws from his belt a sword of stunning craftsmanship, which glows with its own soft light. The Blessed Sword of Angharid, he says. The blade of heroes. Take it in good faith. It is dangerous to go alone.

I don't even remember accurately if Paul was even really all that attractive or not. The point was, he was a senior, and we were freshman, and it was like God reaching down to touch us, only in this case, God might also give us beer. And it wasn't even like either Louise C. or I had ever finished an entire alcoholic beverage in our lives, but we watched a lot of TV. We needed beer.

I met Louise C. at her house, and I wore swanky high heels in which I could not walk in the least. I clopped, camel-like, into the living room, and when Louise C. finally stumped down the stairs in a cloud of some kind of fruity spray business, it'd been long enough that I'd burned a serious hole in my tongue with SweetTarts. I tapped my wrist to indicate the tan line that was the ghost of my watch.

"Whatever, Janey," Louise C. said. "We have to wait for my mom to get home anyway."

I sat up in alarm. "What? Why?"

"She said she'd drop us off."

I was horrified. "Your mom can't drop us off at the party! We can't get dropped off by someone's mom at a freaking... cool... party!"

"Well, what then?" Louise C. demanded. "What else are we supposed to do?"

"We can walk," I said.

"Walk!?" Louise C. threw her hands up. "Janey, it's like three miles! Four miles!"

"So?" I said. "Didn't you do like a ten minute mile in seventh grade?"

"That's not -"

"Come on," I wheedled. "If we leave now we'll get there just in time. Three miles is nothing."

As it turns out, three miles is something. And it is something else entirely in swanky high heels. Especially when chances of evening precipitation are 75%. When we finally hobbled our miserable damp way into seventy-two Westchester Road, we were welcomed with open arms, and warm embraces, and loud cheers, like we were long-lost Romanovs, because everyone present was already completely wasted.

We were seized by the shoulders by people in much farther stages of adolescent development than we and exhibited around the house. In the living room, slathered with drunk kids and paper cups, a girl shrieked, "Oh my god! Freshmen!" like we were maybe chinchillas or something. We were terrified.

We discovered Paul in the kitchen, and immediately we adhered to him as though he were the only person we knew at a large and frightening party, which was the case. "Oh, you guys made it," he said, mildly, and that was pretty much the end of that. He accepted our swarming with docile indifference, he the water buffalo, we the little birds hopping around on his back. We'd take ticks, lice, anything.

At some point someone tapped me on the shoulder and proffered me a tiny little cup, the kind that, two years ago, I might've swiped for my Samantha doll. Everyone else was holding one. It was full of water.

"Oh," I said, accepting it. "Thank you." I tipped it back.

When I finally came out of the bathroom about ten minutes later, my eyes streaming, I was actually feeling kind of good.

"You alright, there, Janey?" Paul said.

I was determined to play it cool. "Oh, yeah," I said, in a voice that'd smoked five packs a day for sixty years. "I'm fine." I retrieved the shot glass from where I'd thrown it and presented it to him. "Really. Gimme another one."

Paul looked at me like I'd requested a tall glass of aardvark, but refilled my doll cup for me, whereupon I spent the next seven minutes casually staring at it while I worked up the nerve to dump it down. I decided to mingle.

"Greg's going to Switzerland for spring break," said some kid, to whom I sidled up in a way I thought was very stealthy. His shirt said, "Let's Keep it Real." I wasn't sure how. I did my best.

"Shit, dude," said another kid. "Switzerland."

I decided to man up and include myself. "I'm going to Tampa," I said. "To visit my grandma."

Three sets of eyes were immediately on me. The last boy who'd spoken gave a little thoughtful nod. "Cool, cool," he said. There was a long silence. I hadn't kept it real.

"Jenna Germaine went to Switzerland the year before last," piped up the guy on the left. "It was for like some Amnesty International thing. They were sponsoring a starving kid or something."

"My mom did that once," I said. "She saw a commercial."

"Chris, that was Swaziland," the kid next to him said.

“Right,” said Chris. “That’s what I said.”

“Greg’s bringing his snowboard,” said Keep it Real. “I can’t believe that, after he took that spill. Wasn’t that the same year Tara broke her leg in Vermont?”

“I have a bruise,” I said. I turned my arm over to search for it. “It’s pretty big.”

They’d all want to look at my bruise when the freaking nightmare forces of eternal darkness descended upon the Earth and only I had the power to save them. Then they wouldn’t be able to get enough of my bruise. They’d be all about my goddamn bruise. But that’s too bad. Because I would be too busy chopping up horrible fiends to save them. Well, maybe Louise C. And Paul. Oh god, Paul. I would save the hell out of Paul.

But the Heroine of the Story wouldn’t be sitting here glowering into a doll cup. Consumed with the bitterness of the world, I threw back the shot like a real man, and almost didn’t splutter it everywhere. I picked up a plastic fork from the counter, and studied its pointy end. I was feeling pretty pointy myself.

In fact, she is already engaged in battle as we speak, having been ambushed in the cold night by a shrieking apparition that wants only her blood on its claws. It is the first time she has faced one of the things in true hand to hand combat, and we find her close to despair, almost overpowered by the brute strength of the faceless beast. But she knows in her heart that good will always prevail. Her faith fills her with strength, like mead fills a goblet. It spills all over.

Prove yourself, Sword of Angharid, she cries aloud, and the blade responds immediately to her bell-like voice, coming to spectacular life in an overpowering blast of holy light. When it fades, and when her sight returns, the Heroine of the Story is satisfied to see that the monster has been zapped a good one.

She turns the creature over with her foot, and peers at its face. For a moment, she is puzzled, then horrified. It looks just like –

“It’s me,” I said out loud. Kinda really out loud. “It’s me. I’m the monster.”

Louise C. sloshed. “Yeah, look at you,” she said. “You’re like goddamn Godzilla.” She was on her third beer.

“Where did you come from?” I said.

She looked genuinely puzzled. “I dunno,” she said, into her cup.

PART III:

IN WHICH LOUISE C. AND JANEY DECIDE TOGETHER THAT THEY ARE DRUNK, AND EXPERIENCE THE RARE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE A NICE TALK WITH THEIR IDOL, PAUL, DURING WHICH THERE ARE SOME MISCOMMUNICATIONS AND AWKWARD HITTINGS-ON. MEANWHILE, THE HEROINE OF THE STORY JOURNEYS ACROSS THE GOLDEN SEA TO CONSULT THE FROG HERMITS, WHO ADVISE HER IN THE WAYS OF HER ENEMIES

AND TRAIN HER IN THE ARTS OF DARK MAGYK FOR EIGHT LONG AND GRUELING MONTHS. THEN SHE LEAVES.

"You guys crashing here?" Paul said, and my ears started to ring a little.

"Well, my mom wanted me home by eight -!" Louise C. said, and stopped short as though she'd been stuck with a fork. She had been. I stuck her.

"What, do you need a lift?" Paul said.

I said "No" at the same moment Louise C. said "Yes".

Paul took a deep breath, and pushed his hands past his temples and into his hair. He let the breath out. He said, "Alright, I think I'm good to drive. We should get going before I'm not." He scrounged for his keys.

"Oh," we said.

In his car, Paul politely asked, "Did you guys have a good time, anyway?", and I had about a million intelligent and insightful things to say, which came out all at once in the form of, "Shyeah, I had it a good nice time." I was immediately silent.

"Well, that's good," Paul said, after a moment.

He dropped us off at the foot of Louise C.'s driveway, and we stood in a puddle watching two sets of retreating taillights, one in the slick of the road.

I said, "Nice job, asshat."

After a while Louise C. said, "It's your fault for letting me talk."

"Yeah," I said, "alright, well, at least you weren't the one channeling Hello Kitty stationery."

The fog had pulled in and grown heavier and wetter and suddenly it was raining again. I stood in the mud in my high heels. I was ridiculous. I was hopeless. I was a socially retarded moron whose life consisted of an utterly inescapable downward spiral toward eternal humiliation and despair.

"You want Taco Bell?" I said.

"What?"

"You want to go get some Taco Bell? I could seriously use some Taco Bell."

"Taco Bell," she agreed wearily, and we slogged in gooshy silence up the block to the main road.

PART IV:

IN WHICH JANEY DISCOVERS THE ABSENCE OF THE NOTEBOOK IN WHICH SHE HAS PLACED MANY RUNE CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN LOUISE AND HERSELF, AIMEE-BASED TREACHERY IS SUSPECTED. AT THE SAME TIME, THE HEROINE OF THE STORY, FRESH FROM HER VICTORY, JOURNEYS ACROSS THE ENDLESS PLAINS UPON HER FAITHFUL STEED, TO OBTAIN A VISION OF HER FUTURE AT THE POOLS OF TRUTH. THEN IT IS REVEALED THAT LOUISE C. HAS LET FLY SOME CRUCIAL INFORMATION.

"Wait," I said. "You said rune? You used the word rune?"

“What does it matter?” Louise C. said. “It’s not like she even knows what the word means.”

“No,” I said, in fresh alarm. “I bet she doesn’t.”

I could think of a few places one might go to investigate a word they didn’t know. I stood up, my chair shrieking on the floor.

“I gotta go,” I said. “I gotta – I’ll be back.”

The freshman English room was empty. I was here to ravage it. I would show no quarter.

Stacked against the back wall of the classroom was dictionary after dictionary after dictionary. Forty, maybe fifty of the suckers.

I looked at the clock. The lunch bell would ring in seven minutes and twenty, nineteen, eighteen seconds.

I picked up the most closest copy and thumbed through it, all the way through to the R’s. Rune, I read. Noun. The moment of truth.

I grasped the table between my thumb and forefinger, and tugged. It had to be done, for the good of the land.

“Sorry, pal,” I said. And oh, the paper flew.

And well before my time was up, my empty quiet room was very suddenly not empty and not quiet. The clock was three minutes slow. How the hell was I supposed to know that? But I fully admit I had employed very poor planning and there was kind of a big ugly scene and the long and short of it ended with a three hour detention, during which I sat, with a roll of library tape, and mended each and every page I had torn from each and every dictionary.

Not till I had gotten through ten or so did I realize what nice bookmarks I’d made.

It is ten days and ten nights before the Heroine of the Story stops for rest. She is as tireless as her steed; there can be no rest while evil still roams free. Her fervor for her quest fuels her inhuman stamina to astounding degrees, but at last she chooses to stop for a time, if only for the sake of her horse. She is as considerate as she is shapely.

Only upon dismounting does she notice the tiny hole worn from the seam of her sheepskin pouch, the one that holds the sacred oils entrusted to her by the Mystic of the Mountains of Eriantia. She touches the tear quickly with her fingertips, rubs them together, and smells them. The scent of mystic herbs fills her nostrils with the smell of... herbs, and... mysticism.

She has been leaving a trail, she does not know for how long. A trail of scented oil, when her pursuers rely heavily on their monstrously developed sense of smell to stalk their loathsome prey! Immediately she draws her sword, the Blessed Blade of Angharid, which glows with a golden and pure light of its own in the dimness of the Forest of Dusk. She must remain on her guard. For all she knows, the foul creatures have been dogging her path just a few yards behind, biding their time. And sure enough, the beasts of shadow, realizing she has sensed their presence, abandon their stealthy... ness. There are indistinct, dark, shapeless forms silhouetted in

every patch of light that finds its way through the trees, and they are closing in. She grips her blade. She is surrounded. How can there be any hope left to her now?

"I think you've been stomping around a little close to the city, there, Godzilla," Louise C. said, and threw her bag on the lunch table.

"Shut up," I said.

"You know what we did today in class?" she said. "Phonetics. We used the dictionary. Three rows of people, and I get to watch all their books fall open to the goddamn Ru page. Bam, bam, bam. All of them. It was awesome."

"I panicked," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?" She lifted her hands, palms up. "Did you seriously think Aimee was going to go to the freaking dictionary and look something up? She has a brain like a freaking Stegosaurus!"

"So... really big?" I said.

"N-no, they had brains – like a walnut – the point is," she said, "the point is, we are fucked. We are certifiably boned."

"Not necessarily," I hedged. "I mean, do you think Aimee would seriously sit there with a pencil and paper and translate all of that stuff?" As it turned out, she would.

I had a notion that the shit had hit the fan when Louise slid by me, in the pressing crowd of the hallway, and slipped a piece of paper into my hand. I didn't even need to write down a translation anymore.

O NO, she'd written. THERE GOES TO KY O.

PART V:

IN WHICH MANY FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES DISCOVER THE HORRORS OF THE CODE NOTES VIA AIMEE, TAKE VAST AND EXTREMELY UNDERSTANDABLE OFFENSE AS ONE, AND LOUISE C. IS SENT HOME EARLY POST-FISTFIGHT. CONVENIENTLY AT THIS POINT THE HEROINE OF THE STORY FINDS THE DEMONS' NEST, ERADICATES THEM ALL WITH HER HOLY BLADE AND GLEAMING SENSE OF JUSTICE, AND IS CONSEQUENTLY PARADED THROUGH THE STREETS AS A HERO AND A SAINT AMID MUSIC AND CELEBRATION. ALSO THE HOODED MAN TURNS OUT TO BE A PRETTY HOT GUY UNDER THERE, WHO IS ALSO HER TRUE LOVE.

That night, I decided I'd have a little conversation with the Heroine of the Story.

We met on the open plains in the dusk of my subconscious. She was on horseback, I was on foot. She towered over me astride her milk-white stallion, silhouetted against what sun was left to the day. Her loose golden hair caught the red light that haloed her face, leaving the impression of immolation. Tangled mats of ribbon in shades of emerald and oxblood were hanging from her saddle, braided with scores of tiny silver bells that

trembled in the high voice of glass with every movement. Her boots were worn, thick with the dust of the chalk roads. Her hands were rough and sinewy and I had no doubt that they'd held things that could chop people up good. She had clearly gone a little native on me.

"Are you the Heroine of the Story?" I said.

"Are you Jane?" she said. It wasn't really a question, more of a "does a bear shit in the woods" kind of observation.

"Heroine of the Story," I said, "you gotta level with me."

She watched me in silence.

I said, "I mean, you seem to be dealing okay with your share of crap. You killed all your demons and everything and you made it out pretty good. So what am I supposed to do? Where the hell is my Blessed Sword of Angharid or whatever?"

Her voice was ethereal on the wind. "Only you can decide when you are ready to learn the truth," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Oh, I'm ready."

She leaned from her saddle, close to me, and pressed the tips of her fingers to the crown of my head.

"The Blessed Sword of Angharid has been with you all this time," she said, tenderly.

"Yeah, huh?"

"It is in your heart," she said.

"Great," I said. "Great, that's great. That's swell advice. Maybe I'll put that on a bumper sticker or some shit."

She retracted her hand.

"Seriously," I said. "That's adorable."

"Alternately," she said, "you could try to pull your head out of your ass."

"Wow," I said. "Hey now."

"Seriously, Janey," she said. "I don't even know what you want from me."

"I don't know," I said, startled. "Just maybe some guidance or something, I mean, you're here in my brain defeating the evil forces of the Nexus or whatever, and I thought I should be –"

"Should be what? What the hell is this, anyway?" she demanded.

"What the hell is it supposed to be? An allegory? A coping mechanism? It sucks. Christ, look at me. I look like a goddamn Ren Faire." She gestured at her mythrill chainmail, her charmed tunic woven of the hairs of the fabled were-ox, her knee-high dragonskin boots. "This is the best you could do for yourself? A Narnia quest in titty armor?"

I said, "Well, jeez, I mean, I thought – you know, the whole pulp fantasy thing, kinda vaguely yet pointedly mirroring my real life, I thought it was –"

"Janey, shut up," she said. "Listen. I know. The metaphor? It's not subtle. We get it. And I'm sure everyone feels really bad for you and all, Janey, but seriously, you're not secretly some under-appreciated battler of

evil. You're a dumb kid and a shit friend, and you're gonna have to suck it up." She was rubbing her temple. "Own up, and move on. That's all. If they're not gonna get over it, they're not gonna get over it, but that's about the best you're gonna do, Janey. That's about the best I got for you."

"So, so what are you, then, my conscience?" I said. "My little Jiminy Cricket?"

"No," she said. "What the hell happened to 'Nngh, I'm the monster,' anyway?"

"Man, I was drunk," I said.

"Oh my god, yeah, you were so drunk," she said. "You had like a shot and a half of vodka. That whole episode was completely psychosomatic. All in your head. Believe me, I know."

"So what are you, then?" I said. "If you aren't my conscience?"

"To really hazard a guess," she said, "and I could totally be stretching here: I'd call me your ideal and impossible self in your ideal and impossible situation. Am I right? I'm all heroic and victimized, and you're just... kind of an asshole. That's why we're still different people." She gave me a discreet once over. "Also, I'm kind of hot."

"Wow, okay, look," I said, "I've had a really long goddamn day."

"Who hasn't?" she said, rubbing at a spot of blood on her tunic.

"What do you say we, you know, go to bed, chill for now, and just pick this up in the morning? We'll go to school," I said, "we'll deal."

"No. You'll deal. Here's another difference between you and me," she said, and leaned in. "I'm not real."

I lay on my back, staring at the water stains on the ceiling, and realized my room was absolutely freezing. The furnace had just kicked on.

"Shit," I said, and I rubbed my cold nose with the back of my cold hand. "Shit, I know that."



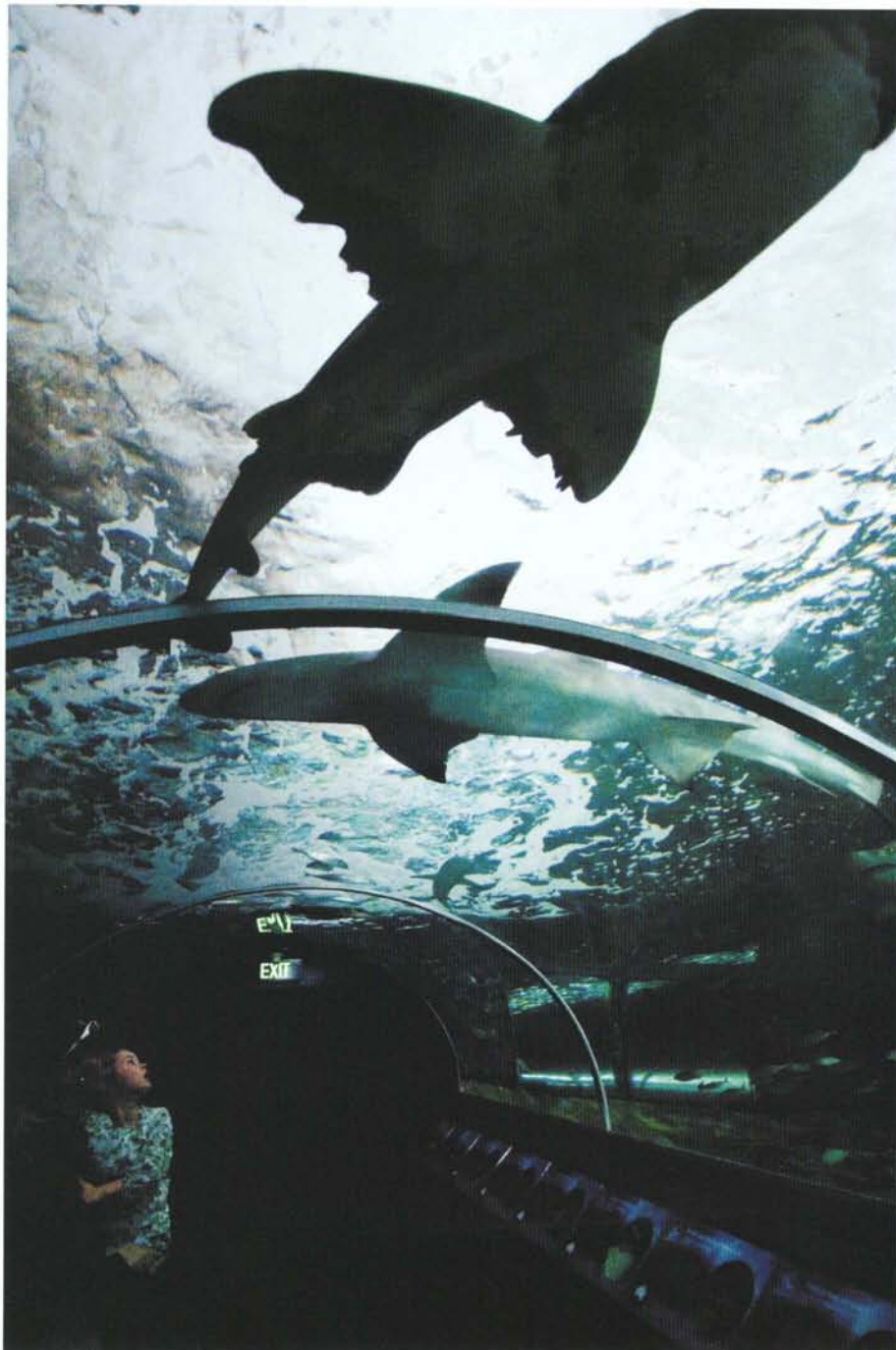
# Art



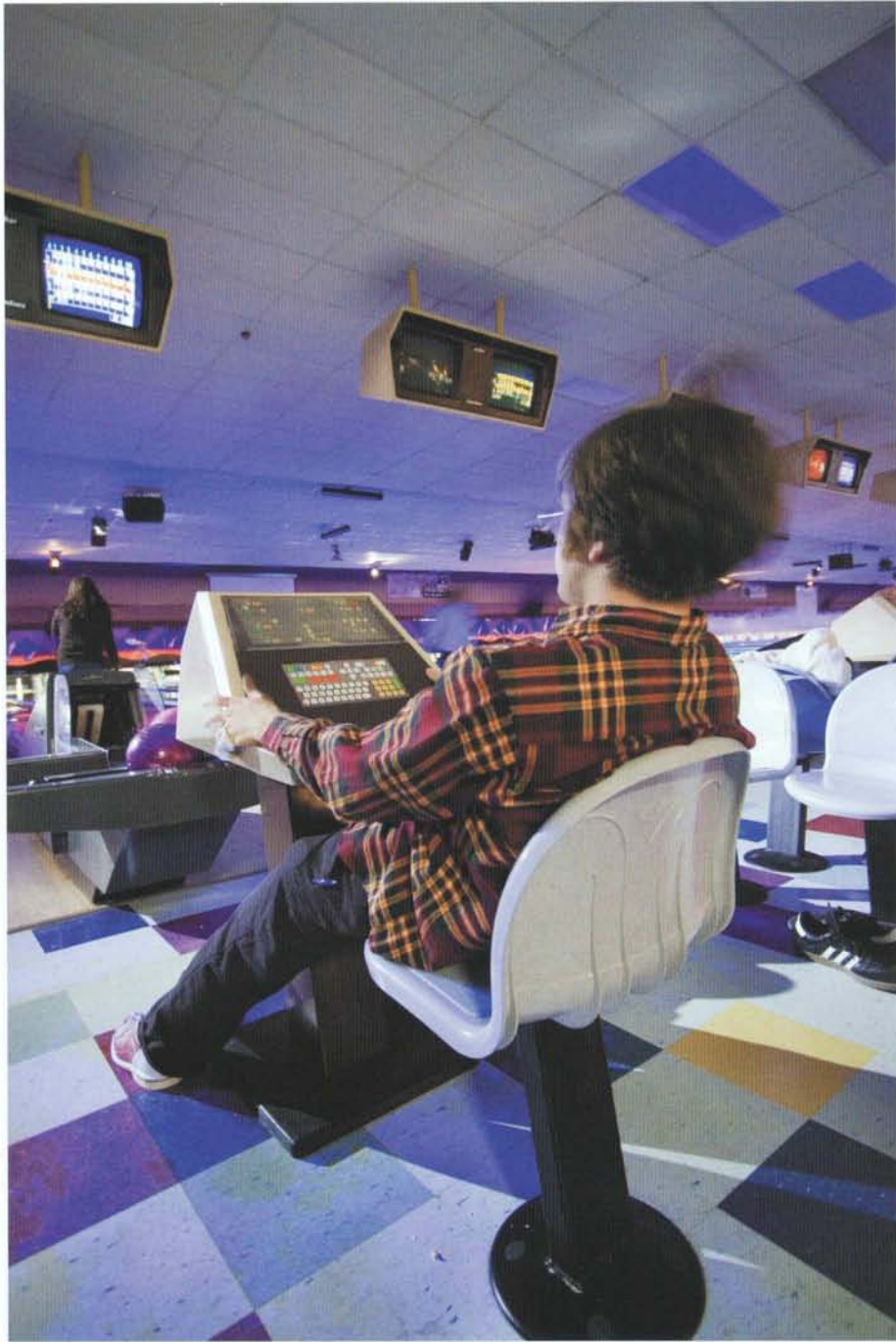
*The Knitter*  
Alyssa Sciortino  
First Place, Folio Art Contest



*Tattoo Artist*  
Alyssa Sciorrino



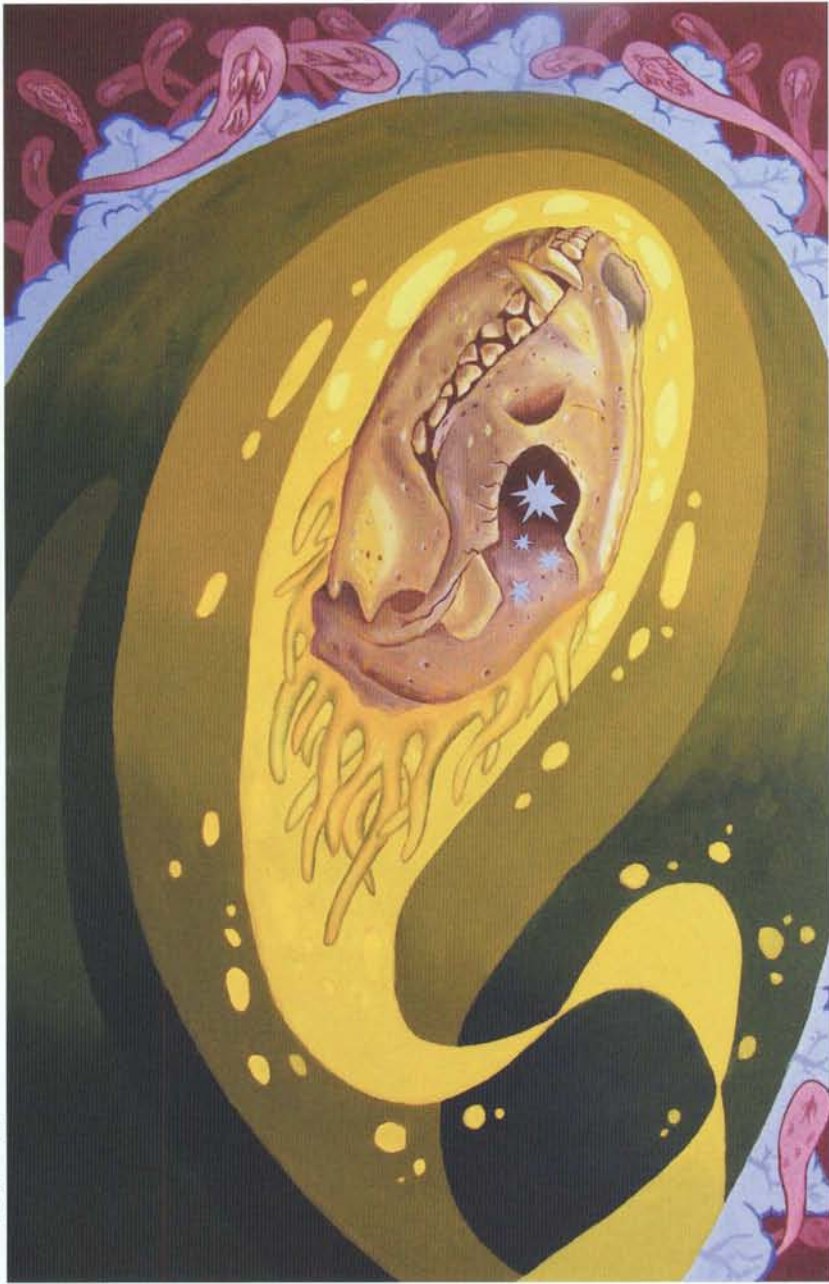
*Lesson In Perspective*  
Shane Sudduth  
Second Place, Folio Art Contest



*Warp Factor 5*  
Shane Sudduth



*Terror at the Peabody*  
Shane Sudduth



*Edge of Creation*

Bill Frank

Third Place, Folio Art Contest

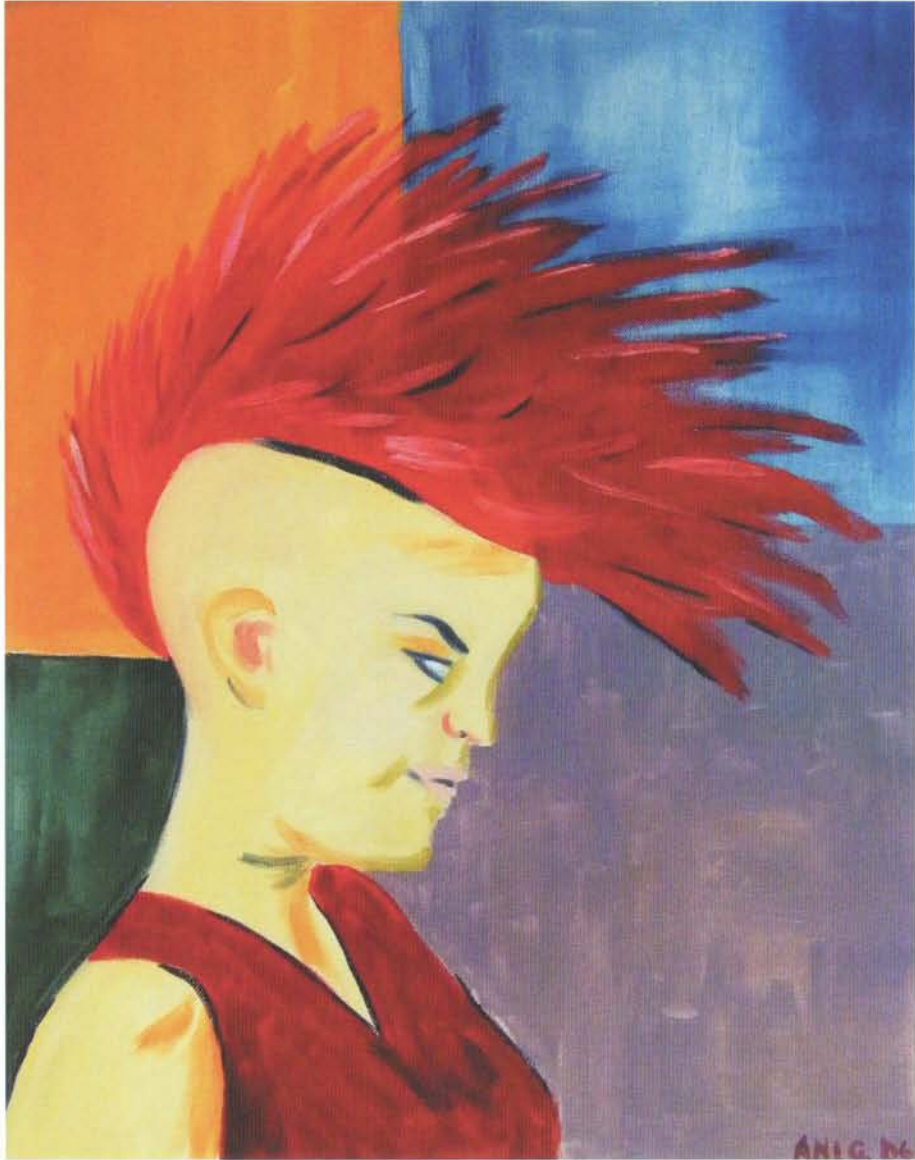


*Bicycle Self*  
*Portrait*  
Bill Frank





*Untitled*  
Bill Frank



*Angie*  
Ani Gulbenk



*Untitled*  
David Caruso



*Blind Assumption*  
Christine Nepton

never got annoyed with it.

But that's all over now because I haven't said anything to anyone in-person for over a year now, ever since this fucking squalid film formed all over my goddamn, fucking stupid-shitty-useless fucking teeth.

And no, I don't know what the fucking film is composed of, chemically speaking, but I could guess. It could be a combination of cheese doodle gunk, tobacco tar, pickle juice, smoked salmon, milkshakes, marijuana residue, and billions of bacteria bonded together into an indestructible layer of filth, forged in the dry, arid inferno that is the inside of my least favorite orifice, my nasty mouth of misery. Might be that, but I don't know. I'm not a fucking doctor, nor a dentist. Those jobs carry too much responsibility, if you ask me (but don't ask me, okay?). All I know is that whatever it is, it's disgusting. I hate that it's a part of me.

Some days I feel like the film defines me, that when people see me inside their heads they're thinking to themselves "film on teeth...film on teeth...loser...gross...hate," or something like that. Some days I feel like a walking case of bad breathe, like a flowing mist of smelly, unavoidable green fog, like halitosis personified. Some days I feel real pathetic.

Leana doesn't think that I'm pathetic, I think, but what she does think is that there's something "wrong" with me. She always asks me if there is, and I hate it, because no, there's nothing "wrong" with me, it's just my fucking teeth. I'm totally fine, and that's what I always tell her during our long talks through the intercom. She says "all right," but I can tell that she doesn't really believe me. I fucking hate that. Why would I lie?

Last time I visited Leana she sounded sad, but before I could find out why this mini-van full of stressed out information processors from Neotech pulled up behind me and started beeping their squeaky little horn at me, banging on the panels of their car doors from open windows with clenched fists, dangerously desperate for their caffeine fix, and so I had to drive away before I could find out what was the matter.

I really hope that Leana is okay...

Since I've got this mutated mouth full of nasty, mossy-green teeth, I pretty much stick to myself, a life of solitude or whatever you want to call it. I like that. Really. I get to read books and listen to my favorite albums as loud as I want and stay up all night looking out the window of my apartment and talk to my reflection in the mirror as if it were an entirely different person. I pretend that he's the opposite of me, stupid and dull and dreadfully boring, and so I try and help him out, try to teach him how to be a good person despite his overall inadequacy. Sometimes he doesn't get it, though, because he's so fucking stupid and so I have to shout at him and tell him how much better I am than him. It's funny to see how sad he gets, but I always stop just before he starts to cry. I named him Albert. I hate him.

I don't have a job. And it's not because I'm lazy or a gimp or because I have a criminal record. It's none of that shit. The fact is that I don't need a job. Jobs are for robots and idiots. Idiot robots (ha!).

I don't need to work because when I was 17 years old my well-off

father and mother died in an automobile accident right outside of my childhood home. They were pulling out of the driveway when a speeding drunk driver collided with them. They all died. I was standing out in the driveway when it happened, smoking a cigarette on the porch. I saw the whole entire thing. An explosion of sound and glass and of blood. I even saw my mother's hair, a thick clump of it hanging from a tree branch almost 100 feet away from the accident. Half of her body was ejected on impact. Her other half was stuck in the car, strapped in by the seatbelt. I didn't get to see the half that was stuck in the car.

I know you didn't ask, but I'm telling you anyways. Nobody asked you to read this in the first place, bud, so if you don't like it, by all means, stop at any time. It's not melodrama, it's my life, and if you can't take reading it, then just imagine how difficult it is to live it. Not that I want your sympathy...please! Oh, just fucking forget it.

Anyways, so after they got killed I inherited a ton of money, the bulk of it I don't even have access to for another seven years, when I turn 30. In the meantime I'm living off about 86 thousand dollars. It's more than enough. As a recluse with bad teeth, you find it difficult to overspend, seeing as how you don't get out much.

So basically what I do everyday is wake up (unless I don't feel like it), read a bunch while I listen to my albums, do sit-ups (about 2,000, all at once, or in 500 at a time cycles), see what the fuck Albert's up to, and go to visit Leana whenever I get antsy in the apartment. Sound boring? Well it isn't. I have fun this way. Reading blocks my real thoughts, the records serve important nostalgic purposes, the sit-ups make my body tired so I can sleep at night (sometimes), Albert's always amusing (when he isn't being totally annoying), and I think I'm starting to fall in love with Leana.

That is my life.

So although this fucking film "holds me back" in some ways, as Albert so idiotically describes it, I still have a life. A nice life. It's only a little but it's all I need. See for me, simplicity is a means and satisfaction its end. No, I don't really miss all the glitz and glamour of my old, "normal" life; the bar scenes, drunken slurring, desperate sluts, rolled-up dollar bills up bloody noses, the rabid packs of pervert predators hunting for the "hoes" that would give them "head," all that awfulness. I don't need any of that. It's phony and empty and depressing, more depressing that the fucking fungi film growing all over my teeth...

One night Leana started to tell me why she sounded so sad. She told me about a man named Caesar who had been living with her, who had just recently left. She told me that she didn't know where Caesar had went, or why. I was about to ask her why in the hell she gave a fuck about some moron with a stupid, ugly name like Caesar, but then a black Lincoln pulled up behind me driven by a small Asian woman nursing an infant while she slapped a toddler and verbally abused a teen. She was an old soul. That sort of thing I can sense. Anyways I had to leave so the Asian lady could get her coffee, and I couldn't ask Leana why the fuck she was wasting her time

worrying about some wart named Caesar and his whereabouts.

All the next day I thought about this guy named "Caesar," couldn't help it. I even told Albert about it, but Albert just started to laugh so I got out of the bathroom mumbling something like "fuck this fucking asshole fucker." What I was thinking about mostly was why Leana would talk to me about some other guy, bring up some insignificant freeloader during one of our daily Dunkin' Donut dates. Not that I was jealous – jealous of what? I wasn't jealous about anything. There wasn't anything to be jealous about.

I wondered if Caesar had nicer teeth than I did. I decided that he didn't.

Even though it never really rings, even though no one ever really calls me, I've got a phone. What's funny is that I don't even know the number to it. Albert does, but I never asked him because I don't really fucking care what the number is, almost as much as I don't really fucking care about what Albert "knows." The guy's an idiot.

Well that day I actually picked up my phone, and I put it next to my ear. I don't know why but I did. I listened to the mechanical moaning on the other end for a while, finding it funny. Such an ugly, sad noise. The sound of having just broken up it seemed like, the sound of wanting to get back together. I thought that it was funny because most people, "normal" people, have to listen to that fucking awful moan every single day, when they call people, or don't, or whatever. It's like a cruel joke. Surely someone could make that sound a bit softer, less cold, industrial and unwelcoming. But will they ever? No, probably not. And to me, that's the funny part. The awful things that most people have to do everyday, to me, are hilarious.

Anyways, after a while of just listening to that terrible noise and giggling, I pressed the button with the number "ZERO" on it, my favorite number of all numbers, as it is the one I can relate to the best.

After that came a ringing...

"Operator, how may I help you" a female voice said through the holey part of the phone pressed against my ear. I was startled at first, but then began to giggle. The voice sounded like somebody's mother, like my mother used to sound whenever I asked her too many questions or just questions she couldn't answer, or didn't want to. After a few moments of my giggling, the voice said "Hello?"

"You're not Leana!" I snapped at her, accusingly, suddenly angry for some reason.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said, that you – are not – LEANA!" I shouted, then threw the fucking phone down onto the kitchen floor. The plastic cracked, and then I started stomping on it until it was in pieces and I could see its electronic insides. Idiotic robots...

Albert said that I had acted irrationally after I told him about what had happened. He said that only out-of-control people break things that belong to them for no good reason. I said that he was wrong. I said that I did in fact have a good reason, a damn good fucking reason, for breaking the

phone. Then Albert asked me what my reason was, but I didn't tell him, the nosey bastard. "None of your business," I said to Albert, then said nothing more. I didn't owe that idiot any explanation.

Albert is such a fucking asshole.

After I finished my sit-ups I took a long shower with water so hot that I wound up, like, shedding a layer of my skin. I sort of just scrapped it off in the shower with my fingernails, leaving it in a pile next to the drain. It didn't even hurt, which wasn't the weird part. The weird part was how fucking clean I felt when it was all over with. I hadn't felt clean in so long, so I guess it felt a little bit funny. Good, though. Nice. After I wiped the steam off of the bathroom mirror, Albert and I laughed about it; the way my skin looked vibrantly pink now, the blood that emerged from a spot over my shoulder or underneath my butt cheek, the way I somehow simultaneously looked more dead and yet more alive than I had in awhile, which was all nice, considering Albert and I hadn't shared a laugh since I could remember.

I talked to Leana the next day for a very long time. She didn't bring up Caesar, and I sure as hell didn't ask. I liked not talking about Caesar. I hated him.

I wanted more than anything in the world to tell Leana that I loved her but it wasn't easy so I never got to. I had time, I figured. Tons of time. Plus, saying "I love you" was, and is, a heavy thing to lay on a woman. A touchy subject. I had heard stories about women passing out right where they had stood at the sound of a man confessing his love for her, so I realized that it was important to get the timing right. I also worried about Leana passing out at work. So I decided to wait, even though I could feel the words wanting to leap off my smelly tongue, like heartbroken widows standing on the edge of some massive cliff, working up the nerve to jump off and end it all, to start something completely different.

I decided that the best thing that Leana said to me during that conversation was that I sounded "better."

"Better?" I asked, playing dumb, knowing somehow what she was going to say to me next.

"Happier, I think."

I didn't say anything right away, deciding just to enjoy the moment, to enjoy Leana, to enjoy the fact that she knew me well enough now to guess my mood, and whether or not it had shifted, and whether or not it had changed for the better or had gotten worse. We were becoming closer. I started to think that yeah, maybe she love me, too. I became quite certain that she did. She had to.

"I feel good, I guess, better than I have" I told her, and then said nothing more about me. I didn't like wasting time with Leana talking about me. I knew myself already. I liked listening to Leana, learning about her. She was just so goddamn interesting.

When I got home from Dunkin' Donuts I went into the bathroom because I wanted to tell Albert about the conversation Leana and I had shared that evening, about our date and all that. I told him about how



she didn't mention Caesar, and about how she thought I sounded, or seemed better to her. I told her how cute her voice was with that accent coming through the mechanical crackling of the intercom. I told Albert that I thought that yes, perhaps I was falling in love and mmhmm, Leana might be the one for me, and could he imagine? Me, with a girl, in love, in rapture, despite all the bullshit baggage, bad teeth, social-anxiety, and all that. I asked Albert how jealous he was. When he told me he wasn't I asked Albert how much of a fucking scumbag liar he was. When he said that he wasn't lying I asked Albert how badly did he want me to lock the bathroom door and never, ever come in there again, leaving him all alone in the dark, all day long and forever after that, the fucking freak. Albert told me that he didn't care, that he liked being alone, that he preferred it to hanging around me most of the time, that he could handle living in the dark, that he didn't care if he ever saw me and my shitty smile ever again, as far as he was concerned, which he swore he wasn't. Then he told me that there was no way in hell that Leana, "if that is her real name, if she actually exists" was falling in love with me, seeing as how I was merely a faceless voice to her, an annoying customer voice at that. Albert said that no two people ever fell in love through machinery because it was unnatural and impersonal and that if I really wanted to find out whether or not Leana and I stood a chance in this crazy, unpredictable game he called "life and love and loving life" (I hated the fucking way that Albert spoke, the way he put things), that I would actually place an order, drive on through, and meet Leana face-to-face, finally. Albert said he was sick of hearing me romanticize what he considered to be a "friendship" forged out of "pity" and "mutual isolation," Leana being a lonely immigrant and all.

"An immigrant? You're calling my Leana a fucking immigrant?" I asked Albert, offended. He did not know Leana like I did, and he had no right to make a judgment like that about her, the ignorant, insensitive idiot asshole. "At least Leana can carry on a conversation without rolling her eyes or clicking her tongue, you rude bastard. She's nice, motherfucker, more than I can say about you, and she isn't lonely because she has me!"

I hear an unexpected knock at the door of my apartment.

"Fuck!"

I tell Albert to think about what he says before he says things, apologize for yelling at him (insincerely, of course. It's just that Albert's so fucking thin-skinned, a real pansy), and lock the bathroom door behind me. I crawl on all fours to the door of my apartment, standing up slowly when I reach it so I can look out the peephole.

Another loud, unexpected knock comes and it startles me and I fall back to all fours, crouching, ready for an attack, for anything.

I hear a voice on the other side of the door. It's muffled but I can make it out.

"I'm here now, yeah. No, I can't hear nothing inside. No, nothing. I did knock. No, no one answered. Fine, I will knock again."

Another knock.

I realize that the person at my door is just my landlord, Michael. Michael is okay. Michael lets me pay him rent 12 months in advance to avoid any hassles, and respects my privacy by allowing me to converse with him only through the barrier that is my apartment's front door. I stand up and again look out through the door's peephole. Michael is on a small, portable phone, in his pink-pinstriped pajamas, with traces of banana stuck in his moustache.

"Yes?"

"Everything alright in there?"

"Yes!"

"I got reports from the lady upstairs of yelling, glass breaking, and the sound of a little girl crying. You don't have a little girl, do ya?"

"No!" I yelled, upset at that old lonely bitch upstairs for causing this disturbance, for telling Michael that I was doing something that I shouldn't be, which I wasn't. I was upset at Albert, too, for making me need to yell at him, for being so fucking stupid, knowing that I would be the one who would have to deal with Michael. "I am sorry sir!"

Michael says "Sorry for what? I thought you didn't do anything..."

I say to Michael that he's right, that I didn't. Then for some reason I say I am sorry again. I sound redundant and I hate myself for it. I want a shower suddenly but Albert's in there and I'm not in the mood for him right now.

"Okay, well do not be sorry then. Save your guilt and grief for when you're married. That's when you really start to feel guilt and grief, my friend. Trust me on that."

I tell Michael that I do trust him.

"How are you, anyways, locked up in there, hiding? Sometimes I'm afraid of what's going on in there, you know?" Michael makes the sound of laughter but I can tell it is the sound of fear. "Noisy tenants cause trouble, but I catch onto them right away. They give themselves up, you know? The quiet tenants, those are the ones that really make me wonder..."

"Fine!"

"You sure now? Everything running alright? Plumbing, heating, all these things?"

"Fine!"

Michael says okay. Michael says that if there is any trouble, that I can use my phone and call him, that I don't even have to leave the apartment if I ever need or want anything from him. I say thanks. I shout it. I watch through the peephole as Michael turns around, presses his portable phone against his ear, and begins talking into it again. I decide that I'm glad my phone is broken, in pieces, on the floor. I decide that I do love Michael. He is nice. He is an immigrant and he is nice to me and he is not lonely and he lets me be who I am without trying to lure me out into the world and in front of all the jerks, the ones with their fingers pointed and their jaws wide-open, the judges.

Every time I think about them and their open mouths, I think

about a big, gross bug flying into them without the people knowing, and then the bug laying eggs inside those people, and then the inevitable hatching, which is at the same time horrific and beautiful. As the baby bugs emerge from, no, eat their way out of their human host's entrails and release themselves into the open atmosphere, the circle of life does a full revolution. Birth causing death. Something really magical about that, I think.

That night after Michael goes away I leave my apartment through my bedroom window (I live on the first floor, as heights make me excited) and drive my car to Dunkin' Donuts because I know Leana is working the graveyard shift and because I know I am in love with her completely. I want to talk to her about lots of things, but I also just like to listen. Her voice makes the world less scary to me. It is just a beautiful sound. You should hear it. It's like heaven. It's like my records. I love it and I love her and so I drive downtown to her Dunkin' Donuts but when I arrive there is a customer in front of me placing an order. I roll down my window by pressing a little button on my car door and listen to what Leana is saying to the man in front of me.

"Baby," said the man as he hung out of his car window, "what the fuck is matter with you, huh? I come all the way down here to pay you a fucking visit and here you are, acting like a fucking bitch who thinks she's better than me and shit." The man lit a cigarette and blew his smoke into the speaker. "I'm getting sick of this fucking bullshit, Leana. Sick-of-it, nah mean?"

All that came through the intercom was a steady static hum. Leana didn't answer at first.

"Leana, answer me! What's your fucking problem, huh? Is this fucking speaker broken?" The man leaned out of his car a few more inches and slapped the speaker a few times with his open palm.

Leana softly said "stop."

The man laughed a creepy laugh and took another long drag off his cigarette.

"Oh so you want me to stop, is that it? Stop what? Stop this?" He slapped the speaker again and the entire Dunkin' Donuts menu wobbled.

Leana hissed. "Stop! You're going to get me in trouble." I could hear the distress in her voice. I started to become angry and worried. I wanted this man to leave.

"Fuck this shitty job, Leana. Now you know I got money, honey. Why you tryin' to waste your time serving coffee and shit to strangers through a little window when I could easily be taking care of you, right?" The man's tone changed from irritated and irrational to soft and soothing. "Now Leana, why don't you ask your boss for a break, huh baby? Come out here, so we could talk, you know, face-to-face, not through this fucking machine and shit." He slapped the intercom again, harder than he had before, laughed and took another pull from his Newport (I could literally smell the menthol floating from his car over to mine).

"STOP!" Leana cried. "You need to leave here, now!" she told him.

“My boss is going to call the cops if you don’t. Please, just leave me. I don’t want to talk to you, not right now.”

The man’s tone slipped back into irritated and irrational.

“Well fuck you then, fucking bitch. You ain’t shit, you know that? I wasted mad time on you, bitch, trying to help your ass out, but you’re so fucking stuck up and shit that you can’t see a good thing when it’s right in front of your fucking ugly-ass, broke down face. Fuck you!” the man screamed into the speaker, and then spit a huge wad of his disgusting saliva onto the intercom, into the only place that Leana, the woman I loved, existed for me.

This, for me, was the last straw.

I didn’t even realize it was happening as it was happening, what I was doing, that I was doing it. But my foot weighed down on the gas pedal. A little at first, but then when the spit hit the speaker it was full throttle, my front bumper into his rear, a hard, relentless crashing, smashing, metal bending collision. The man, who had been hanging out of his car window, jerked violently as my car hit it. I think I heard a few rib bones crack. Super satisfying. That slimy fucker. I heard Leana from underneath the dripping spit say “Oh no, oh my god,” followed by her headpiece hitting the Dunkin’ Donuts floor. I backed up a little, out of the drive-through line, pulled up beside the injured asshole, showed him my middle finger and gave him a nice view of my corroded smile. The man, a tattooed punk-ass with a fitted-ball cap resting over his oily hair, looked at me in fright, in amazement, and in anger.

I sped off before anybody else saw me. I didn’t see Leana run out to see what had happened, to check and see if that fucking draining asshole was okay. I didn’t wait around for the police and their reports, insurance agency things and all that. I thought to myself “Fuck That.” I was not in the wrong, if not lawfully, then at least not morally. Anyways, my car was fine. I didn’t care about the dented front bumper. I loved it, actually. What I cared about was defending the woman I loved from the scum of the earth. All I cared about was making my point, which was that I was in love, a love which gave me strength, a purpose, and no idiot in an Impala was going to disrespect that, was going to degrade, was going to spit on my purpose. That was my point, and I made it. Yeah. So I drove home, parked my car in the garage, went into my apartment, quadruple-locked the door behind me, and put on one of my favorite albums, Nirvana’s *Nevermind*, and put the song “Something in the Way” on repeat.

The next morning I went into the bathroom, not because I wanted to, mind you, but because I had to. I had held my piss for too long and it began to cause cramping. And of fucking course, Albert was in there, looking at me with this knowing expression that he wore whenever he felt like he was owed an explanation. Well I told Albert that I didn’t feel like explaining anything, not right now. What the fuck did he care, anyways? What did it matter to him, what I did outside of the bathroom?

Albert told me that he wasn’t upset, but that he was disappointed. I

said to him, "Disappointed about what, your dick size?" and laughed a little even though I didn't think it was that funny of a joke. Neither did he. Albert went on to tell me (without me prompting him, the fucker) that I really needed to be more careful out there, outside and all. Albert told me that I could really get hurt if I didn't stop "pushing the envelope." I asked Albert what the fuck "pushing the envelope" actually meant. I asked him why the fuck he was throwing around cliché phrases like "pushing the envelope" around me, when he damn well knew that I fucking hated clichés. Albert said that I needed to leave Leana alone. Albert said this is what he meant by "pushing the envelope." Albert said that obviously Leana was involved with men, other men, other men that she knew beyond her Dunkin' Donuts drive-through intercom. Albert reminded me about the fucking film on my nasty teeth, about my hatred of the outside world, about my fear.

All this really just pissed me off. I started to yell at Albert, yelling really loud to make sure that Albert wasn't just listening to me, but that he was hearing what I had to say. I shouted at Albert that I would not, **WOULD NOT**, leave Leana alone because I loved her, and did Albert know what love was, what it felt like, how beautiful it made you feel inside, how it made thinking not so bad, how love made it nice inside your mind? I didn't give Albert any time to answer.

I told Albert that I was not, **WAS NOT**, going to leave Leana alone because she made the outside world seem not so terrible, actually a little bit likable, really, and that she was making me less and less afraid.

Albert said that I was setting myself up for disappointment. Albert said I was laying mines and then walking blindfolded through the minefield. Albert said I was fucking myself over, hard. Albert reminded me that Leana had never seen me, had never looked at my face, at my body, or at my teeth. Albert told me that women only cared about looks, and that if Leana ever laid eyes on me, that if she were smart, then she would run, fast, in the opposite direction.

I told Albert that **HE DIDN'T KNOW A FUCKING THING ABOUT IT, MOTHER FUCKER**. I told that motherfucker that Leana wasn't a shallow, sad girl like the ones Albert knew, that I used to know. I told Albert that Leana might love me, and I told Albert that the simple possibility of her loving me made me feel stronger than I had ever felt before, and that no matter what he said to me, no matter how much he doubted me, that I would not, **NOT EVER**, leave Leana alone. I told Albert that he couldn't stop me. I told Albert that he couldn't stop Leana and I from falling so deep into love that we would drown together and be content because, well, because we had drowned together. Albert said I was making a mistake. I told Albert to shut his fucking mouth. Albert told me to shut mine but you know what, I didn't. For the first time in a long time I opened my disgusting mouth and I showed Albert the film all over my teeth and for once I did not feel at all ashamed. I screamed at Albert that no, I was not ashamed. Albert, with a bored expression on his face and his skinny arms crossed, said I was pathetic, destined for a downward spiral.

I left the bathroom and locked the door behind me. I duct-taped the bathroom door around the edges and decided that I would hold my piss for now, until Albert realized who the fuck he was messing with.

A knock at the door.

“You all right in there?”

“Fine, Michael! Just, um, fine!”

“Okay then buddy, bye-bye!”

The next day I was conflicted because I wanted to go into the bathroom and take a shower so I could look and smell nice but I didn't really want to because I knew Albert would be there, judging me, demeaning me. From behind the bathroom door I heard Albert talking softly at first, then getting louder and louder until he was screaming. He wanted me to go into the bathroom and talk to him but I didn't want to talk to that fuck.

But he kept screaming, begging, crying, and cursing, so what I did was I put on my new favorite record, the one that reminded me on Leana the most. I put on a record made by a sad man named Ryan that had a song on it called “Two.” What I liked initially about the song “Two” was that it was actually the second song on the album. I liked things like that. Coincidences, I guess. Intentional ones. That sort of thing made me think that even some of the strangest things that happen to us in life, in addition to the absolutely ordinary ones, are someone's intention. I like that.

Anyways, in this particular song the sad man Ryan sings real sweetly that “I got a really good heart / I just can't catch a break” and then he says to somebody, sounding really sad, that “if I could I'd treat you like you wanted me to I promise.” I am in love with these words just as much as I am in love with Leana and I think both of these loves of mine are one in the same, a collision of everything I care about. I put the song called “Two” on my stereo and pressed play and turned the volume up so loud that I couldn't hear that fucking asshole Albert screaming at me anymore. I drowned him out. I lie on my living room floor and listened to the song “Two” and I closed my eyes and I thought about nothing and I thought about everything and I thought about Leana and I thought about Leana and me together, lying on my living-room floor and listening to “Two” together. I knew that she would like the song. It was so fucking pretty, you know? It was pretty like the way a person's eyes light up when you see them and you know they like seeing you, it was pretty like the way Leana's voice sounded through that intercom.

Then I made a decision. Yep. I decided that it was time for me to stop hiding. I decided that even though my little life had kept me safe for all this time, that it wasn't for me anymore. I decided that I needed more. I decided that despite the way I looked when I was talking that I had too much to say to too many people. I decided that I was sick of the redundancy in my head. I decided that I was sick of routine.

I decided that I wasn't really that sick anymore.

I decided that I wanted to actually order something from Dunkin' Donuts so that I can drive-through and stop at the little window and see

Leana and give her a little bit of money and then that way she can finally see me and I can finally see her and we can finally fall into love.

I decided that I was sick of waiting.

I went into my closet and changed my clothes. I put on a button-up flannel shirt with red and dark-blue checks with green lines running all through it. I put on a pair of jeans. I put on some socks and then some red sneakers that I had never worn yet. My parents had bought them for me before they died that day. They still fit, but I had to lace them up first.

The sad guy named Ryan was still singing in the background, and during the parts I could remember, I shouted along with him.

I wanted to go into the bathroom because that was where I got clean but Albert was still in there huffing and puffing and being an asshole and plus there was still duct-tape all around the edges of the door. So I couldn't go into the bathroom. What I did do, though, was I went into my kitchen and I turned on the water and I took dish soap and I made a lather and then I rubbed it all over my face and my neck. Then I dunked my head into the sink which was now full of cold, soapy water. It felt so nice under that water. I felt cleansed and comfortable and so good bent over with my head in the kitchen sink. I can't say this for certain because I can't see what I look like with my head underwater in the sink, but I am pretty sure that I was smiling. No, no, I'm sure that I was. What's remarkable is that for once I was smiling and I didn't feel scared or ashamed. I liked me, smiling.

I ate a handful of mints and told myself that was just as good as brushing my teeth, seeing as how brushing my rotten teeth never did much in the first place. Now I was ready. Sure, the collar of my shirt was soapy and wet, and yeah, I had a mouthful of mints that I couldn't chew and had to suck but I was ready, damnnit. So I lied back on my living room floor and listen to the song "Two" one more time, turning the volume just a little bit louder, feeling my smile grow just a little bit wider as the noise moved over me, past me, through me. "If you take me back / back to your place / I'll try not to bother you I promise" he sang. He sang this song for me. Then, what really let me know that I really was ready, ready for a change, ready for more, was when the sad man Ryan sang the lines "It takes two, when it used to take one." Ryan repeated those lines, I guess it was the chorus, and lying there I memorized them and with them fresh in my mind, I got up, shut off my stereo, covered my ears as to avoid hearing Albert's irritating growls, and left my apartment, locking the door behind me.

"Music's really loud, buddy" said Michael, who had been standing outside my door, who was now standing directly behind me. I was still facing the door, my keys still dangling, my eyes fixed on my sneakers, my brown hair hanging over my brow. "I got complaints, first about more yelling, you sure you don't got a demon or something in there? Then another about the music. Yeah. Music's real loud and voices are yelling. This is what I've heard. Why I've come.

Still facing the door, afraid to turn around, I asked Michael if he was mad at me, if I was in trouble.

Michael laughed. "Trouble? No, good buddy! You'll get no trouble from me. I love you, my favorite tenant. A good buddy you are, just as I am a good buddy to you. Just came to ask if all was well, which it seems to be, and to ask you to turn down the music a smidge, but when I got to your door I started to listen to that song you kept on playing and let me tell you, good buddy, that is a beautiful song, yes indeed."

Michael put his hand on my shoulder and at first I felt like crumbling beneath it but in about an instant I realized that it was holding me up. I was so scared.

"That part in the song that I like, buddy, is that part where he says 'It takes two, when it used to take one.'" Michael laughed. "See, that reminds me of me, back when I was a young and handsome man like you. See, I used to think that life was easier when you were alone. I thought it gave you less trouble, less to worry about, less to be sad over."

Michael released his grip on my shoulder, but then he put his hand back where it had been, now holding on harder. I looked at his strong hand on my trembling shoulder, and noticed that his index finger was a little bit wet.

"But that is wrong, buddy. Being by yourself is all wrong. More trouble, more to worry about, more to be sad about. Because all your attention gets focused inward, on all that's imperfect and unchangeable about who you are. That's no good. Not okay. It drives you mad. It makes you start to hate things that other people might actually love. I realized that looking away from yourself, seeing other things, all that's out there, people and places and things, they are the key to happiness, huh? Not locked rooms and loneliness. Because that's not any easier. It might seem like it is, but I realized that no, it is not. That is why I came to own this building, boy. Here there are people behind every door, all of them different, all of them with something special inside to discover and to love and to remember." Michael sighed contently, and cigarette smoke rolled over my shoulders and into my face. I didn't mind it. "So that is the part of the song that I like, and I love that I caught you listening to it. It made me happy, and reminded me of something I already knew, my friend."

I pulled the key out from my door, took a deep breathe, turned around and looked at Michael for the first time ever face-to-face. He was smiling, with that cigarette in-between his lips. His eyes got real wide and his smile grew wider as he looked upon me. I took a step towards him and have my fine friend Michael a hug. And even though I can't see myself, don't know what my face looks like when I'm standing outside of my door hugging Michael, I could tell that I was smiling. I could feel that I was.

I didn't take my car to Dunkin' Donuts. I ran. I ran downtown. I do not know how fast I am, but believe me when I say that I ran fast. And even though I couldn't see myself, even though I can't tell what my face looks like when I am running down the sidewalk at night, underneath pale-yellow lamps with white bugs flying into them and around them, I could tell that I was smiling. I knew that I was.



The only thing I regretted about running all the way downtown to Dunkin' Donuts was the fact that I was sweating a lot when I got there. And to be honest, I only mildly regretted the running. To me, it was more romantic. To me, it was the way it had to be.

There were no customers at the drive-through intercom. It was late, around 3 a.m., which meant that most of the bar people who needed some caffeine to perk them up for the obligatory drunken drive home had all either gone to bed or had crashed somewhere along the way.

I was more nervous now than I had ever remembered myself being. I used the sleeve of my shirt to wipe the sweat off of my face. I replaced the smile that my fear had rubbed off. I walked up the Leana's intercom and said "hello."

"Welcome to Dunkin' Donuts" Leana said, sounding a bit sullen, a bit sad. "Can I take your order?"

This was it.

I cleared my throat. Because clearing my throat didn't require me to actually form any meaningful sounds or sentences, I continued to clear my throat until Leana's voice came back through the intercom and asked me if everything was all right.

"Apple juice" I muttered. "Apple juice and that's all."

Then there was silence for what was undoubtedly the longest seven seconds of my entire existence. And then Leana said something I had never heard her say before, in that accent I had come to love so much, "One apple juice, one dollar five, please drive up to the second window."

I sprinted over to the second window.

Leana was, of course, the most breathtaking woman I had ever seen before. She had long, lush, black hair and curled bangs that floated over her forehead. She wore thick black eye make-up and red lipstick and had a beauty mark on her left cheek and her chin was pointy and perfect (Fuck).

She opened her window and looked down at me with this surprised expression, which wasn't the "look of love" that I had imagined, but it was indeed Leana looking at me, and I up at her, and so I didn't mind that my "expectations" weren't met. I figured fuck expectations.

"Um, you don't got no car?" she asked me, and I told her that I did, handing her the one dollar and five cents as she simultaneously handed me that bottle of lukewarm juice.

I started to tell Leana about my recent issues and experiences just as I had done through the speaker, suavely and all is what I'm saying, telling her that yeah, I did have a car (remember?), but that I had gotten into an accident, right at this location in fact less than a week ago. I said don't worry because I was all right and all, and I noticed as I spoke to her Leana's face become brighter and brighter, her beautiful smile becoming wider and wider until she asked me in an excited whisper, "Is you?"

"Me?"

"Is you!" she cried, tearing her headpiece off and dropping it to the floor.

She recognized my voice and I had never felt more relieved or alive. I liked talking to her better in person. It felt belt. Fuck that stupid fucking intercom. Fuck that.

What Leana did next was funny. What Leana did was this. Leana climbed out of the Dunkin' Donuts drive-through window, dropping to the ground where I had been standing, just, you know, drinking my apple juice or whatever, and then she wrapped her arms around me sort of the same way I had wrapped my arms around Michael, but "sexier," I guess you could say.

She pulled away from me a little and looked into my face and even though I can't see myself when I'm hugging Leana and even though I did not want to on account of my teeth, I could tell that I was smiling at her. I was worried but she didn't say anything or make any funny faces so I guess it was okay. Leana was returning the smile. The film didn't make her sick.

"Your face is just as beautiful as your voice" she said softly. "You are more beautiful than I had imagined in my head."

"Mhmm" I replied, knees weak, an almost narcotic nodding-off euphoria glory.

All this time I had been thinking pretty thoughts about her, Leana had been thinking pretty thoughts about me, too.

"You de one who hit Caesar's car when he was cursing me?"

I told Leana that yeah, that was me, trying to act cool about it, probably failing but not really caring.

She hugged me even tighter, her head pressed against my chest and when she pulled away a little again her eye make-up was running. She was crying. I asked her what was wrong.

Leana's mustached manager came to the window and started yelling at her in a language I couldn't understand, noise, noise, NOISE, and Leana looked up at him and over at me. As he was yelling at her I asked her if she wanted to come and see my apartment and maybe listen to music and maybe eat a little bit of food. I told her that we could walk there from here, that I didn't want to walk home alone, that all I wanted to do, that the only thing I wanted to do in the whole world was to take a walk with her and to hold her hand because I knew, I promised, that it would make us both really "fucking happy."

Leana giggled and said "Les go."

Hand-in-hand, we started our stroll down the sidewalk toward my apartment, our eyes switching between the stars over our heads to the ones in each other's eyes, the sound of her manager's shouts fading more and more with every slow step we took.

We got to my apartment complex and Michael was sitting outside having a cigarette. He noticed us and he waved, grinning. We walked past him but I looked back and when I did Michael was giving me enthusiastic thumbs up while demonstrating some type of hugging/rubbing/humping technique that I didn't have enough time to really grasp. I winked, I think, and Leana and I kept walking.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and let Leana in first. She

giggled as she looked around, commenting on how many records I had (“Could I even listen to all these?”), and how little of everything else I had (“My mother always says to me settle down with a simple man”). I asked Leana if she wanted to listen to pretty music and she said, yes, that she did and so I put on the record I love, and put it on the second song, the song named “Two.” I told her with a smile that this was actually my new favorite tune.

Then Leana then revealed to me that she liked Lisa Lisa.

“Yeah, Cult Jam was cool.”

I laid down on the floor and closed my eyes and a few seconds later Leana was lying on the floor next to me, her head resting on my shoulder, her hands running up and down my arm slowly. She smelled like sugar and hazelnuts and I loved her so much and I could tell that she could love me, too, or that I would be able to be loved by her. Or something like that, I think. We fell asleep for a little while this way, with the music, in the center of my living room floor, holding onto each other and letting go of just about everything else. I thought that I had a new and better everything, and I still think that, even now.

Later Leana woke up. She opened her eyes, kissed me on the shirt, then asked me if she could use the bathroom. Terror. Albert. TERROR. I didn’t say anything. Pretended to still be sleeping. Leana got up anyways, and walked over to my duct-taped bathroom. She giggled. She crawled back over to where I was laying and asked what sort of monster I had locked up inside my bathroom.

Nervous laughter. The furious rubbing of eyes. No monster, I assured her (assuring myself). No monster. No monster in there.

“Then can I use it?” she asked me, and this is when I learned something about women and about Leana in particular. Saying yes to a woman is the best sound a man can ever make.

And so I, albeit reluctantly, got to tearing down the duct-tape from around the door’s edges.

When the door was finally unwrapped Leana gave me a swift kiss on the cheek and then hopped into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind her. Fright. Panic. Albert was going to blow this for me, I knew it. He had been quiet thus far, hadn’t screamed, was probably sleeping (that motherfucker had to be sleeping). I pressed my head against the door and listened for all the nasty lies he would be telling Leana about me, listened for the inevitable question of “But haven’t you seen the guy’s fucking teeth?” But I didn’t hear Albert with my ear pressed against the door. I heard the sound of a toilet flush, of the faucet running, of the tearing of paper towel, the sound of the doorknob turning.

“What were you doing?” Leana asked me, smiling curiously, when she found me stationed outside the bathroom, breathing heavily, eyes wide and completely afraid.

Thinking quick, I told Leana that I, that well, that I, um, well that I had to go, you know, too.

She giggled, gave me another kiss on the cheek, lovingly called me “odd” and made her way back to the middle of the living room, curling up into a little ball and closing her big brown eyes.

I went into the bathroom and locked the door behind me. There was Albert, looking at me with his knowing condescension, his arms crossed, his fucking smile. Nice job, he told me. He told me nice job for finding the one woman alive who would actually give a loser like me the time of day. She’ll leave, he said. He giggled. She’ll leave.

I called Albert an idiot and reminded him that it was night-time (fucking stupid idiot). Albert said that it didn’t matter to him if Leana liked me or not, that it didn’t prove anything. I reminded Albert that I wasn’t a prosecutor, that I wasn’t trying to prove anything, and that I didn’t care what mattered to him and what didn’t.

I told Albert that I had become indifferent. I told Albert that I had become so indifferent that I didn’t even hate him anymore, that I couldn’t, because I was done caring enough, done wasting my energy and all that.

I told Albert, “Fuck you, Albert.”

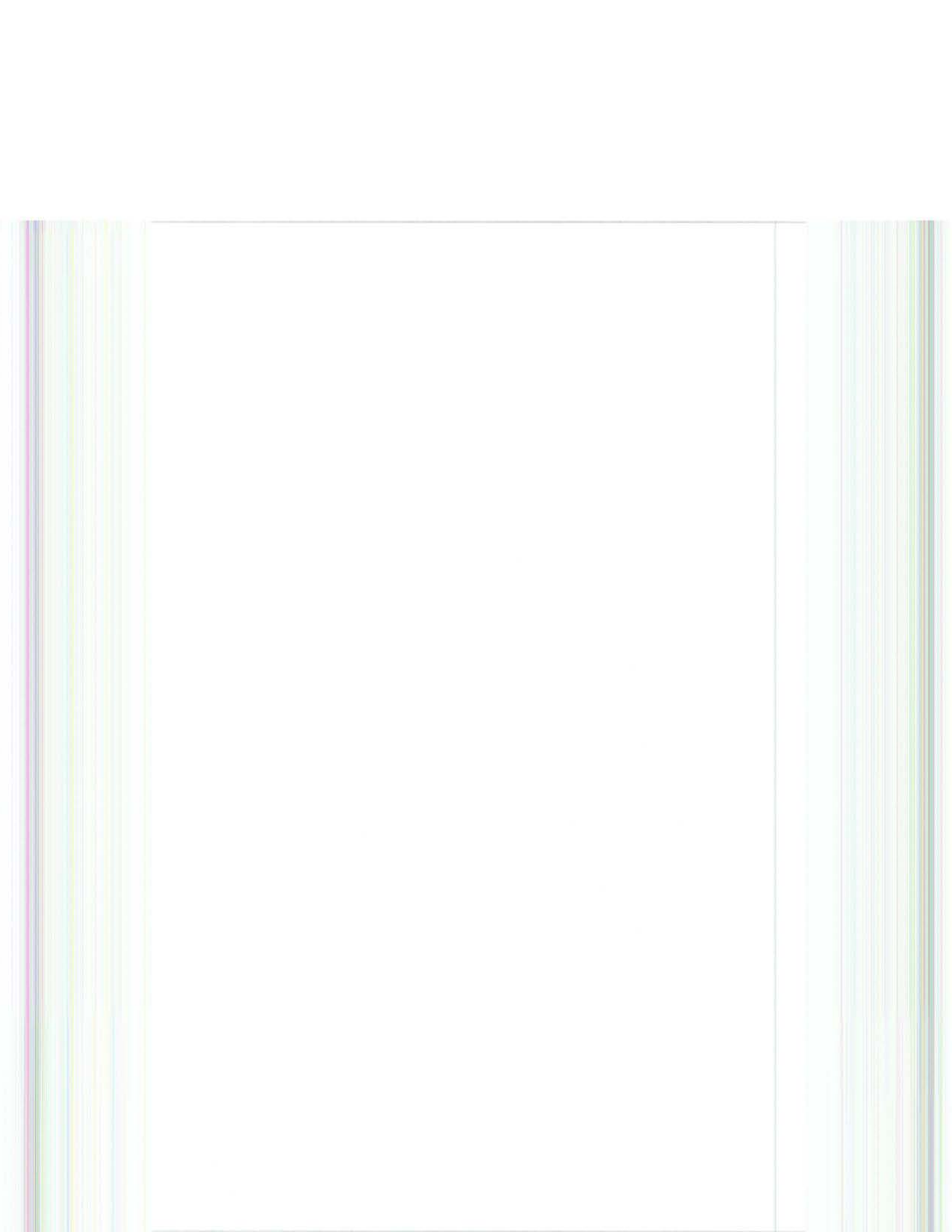
Albert laughed and called me a liar. Albert said that I could never stop caring about what he thought because I had based my life upon his input and because I was too weak to make a change. Too big of a pussy for change, is what he said. Something nasty like that. Albert said that Leana would learn soon enough how weak I was, and that she would leave when she realized how low I could drag her down. He called me her lapdog.

I said that Albert was WRONG. I said that together Leana and I would only lift each other, higher and higher until we got high enough to be happy and that guess what, that Albert couldn’t come, because he was the downer, the digger, the demon. I told Albert in an angry whisper with all the emotion in my body and mind that I didn’t give a fuck how fucking handsome he was, how beautiful his body, how nice his phony smile and how clean his fucking perfect white teeth were. I TOLD ALBERT NO, that he could not bring me down anymore, that I wouldn’t let him because I WAS NOT WEAK. I punched Albert in his fucking smart mouth and he bleed and so did I, but it felt good. I finally cracked that motherfucker’s confidence.

Leana called to me, asked me if everything was all right. I called back to her “mmhmyeahIwasjustummonecondokay?” as I ran my bleeding hand under the running cold water, crying and laughing, love and hate.

Then Leana asked me who it was that I had been talking to.

“Nobody,” I said calmly. “I was just talking to myself. Sometimes I do that.”



## Dissection

Michael Rayzer

---

We're in lab and my partner is cutting a live frog open,  
its eyes throbbing wildly in its jutting eyelids as my she begins  
Slipping the scalpel along its sternum to split greasy skin and expose bones,  
and she doesn't know it, but I'm picturing the rest of our lives together.  
I'm imagining her lips curling as they reach for mine for the first time,  
how her hips would feel in my palms, her thighs against my fingertips  
and the day I finally tear at her, like a package sealed in glossy paper.  
I'll listen to her breathing as she digs her nails into my shoulders and tells me "No, like this.  
Slow."  
We'll be at lunch and I'll be watching her cut into a salad when I realize that I love her.  
And when she asks me what I'm staring at I'll just smile.

Things will be good for a while until the night we're too drunk for condoms  
and too hung over to get out of bed the next day.  
We won't be prepared for the moment she realizes that she's pregnant.  
Like realizing she'd just strapped herself to dynamite and I held the detonator.  
I picture us fighting and clawing and crying until she's convinced to keep the child.  
And when she has a miscarriage anyway she stops talking and I miss the fighting.  
Eventually she moves out of our apartment because she can't stand the way I tiptoe around  
her, how I touch her like fine China someone glued together without following the pattern.

She has a fling with a man named Javier.  
It's steamy and slick and soulless. He'll be everything I'm not:  
tall and strapping, and almost feral in the way he fucks her.  
When I try to fight him he shatters my nose and leaves me in a heap  
next to his Monte Carlo where I attempted to ambush him with a steel pipe.  
She takes me back just so she can pick up the pieces of me.  
We watch each other grow old and things will be good for a while.  
And it will scare me how beautiful she still is.  
But just as the gray spreads along her hair so will the malignancy through her breasts, lungs,  
and heart, and as I sit next to her in the hospitable I'll beg God for her to live  
but then curse him later.

When I hold her hand for the last time, I tell her not to leave me  
because I wasn't finished learning how to love her.  
She smiles and tries to squeeze my hand and she says something I strain to hear and dies.  
I wither somewhere with blank cream walls, surrounded by women who hand me pill filled  
paper cups for a year before I follow her.  
I tell myself I'm lucky to hurt this much.

She doesn't notice that I'm trying to hold back tears.  
The frog's chest lays completely naked and pinned open in front of us,  
its small heart throbbing irregularly as I realize these are its final moments.  
She turns to me, reaching for the tweezers and stops when she catches my eyes.  
She asks me what I'm thinking and I say nothing.

## To Kill the World with a Touch

Michael Rayzer

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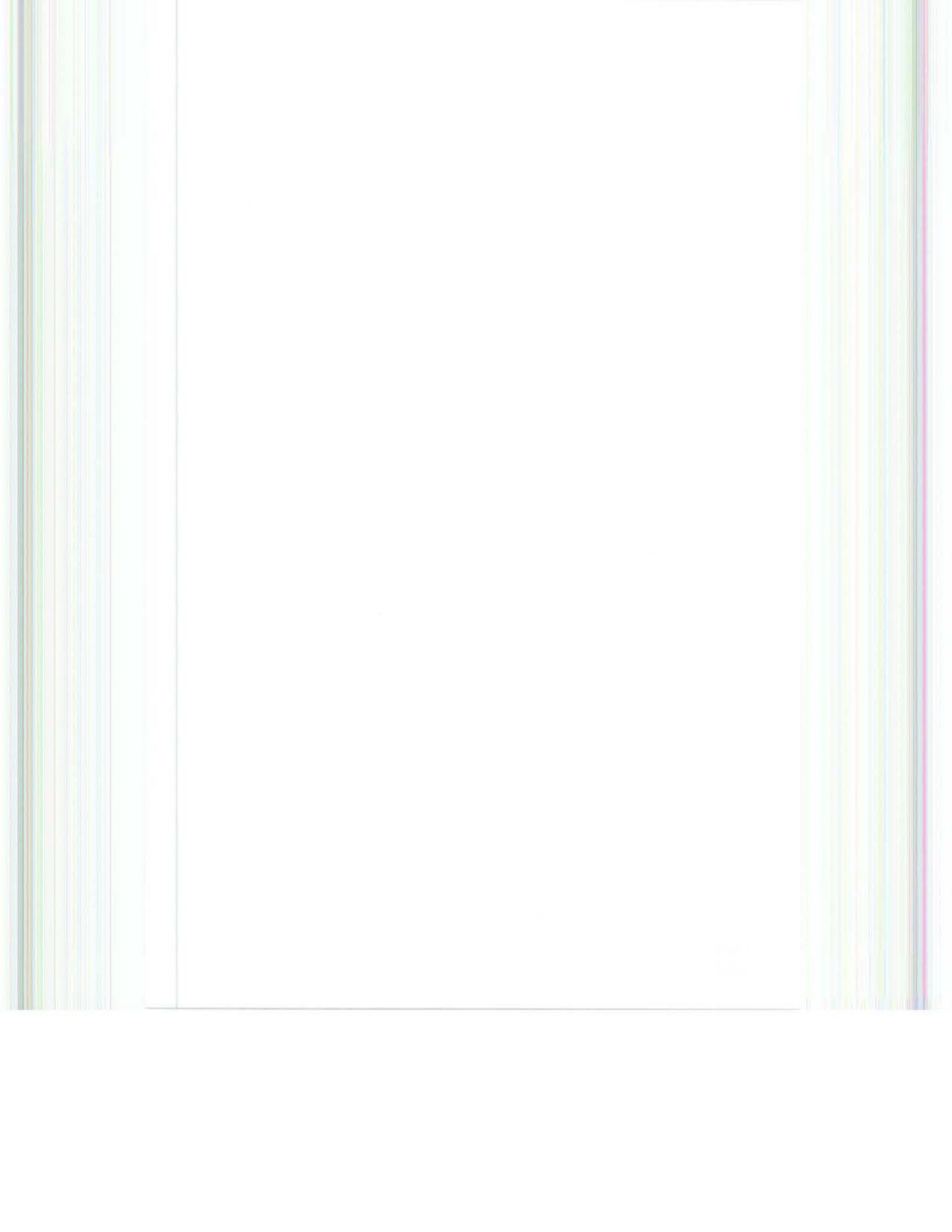
I learned the super ninja death touch yesterday  
And ever since I've been walking around  
Breaking shit with my palms, watching the  
world crumble against the tips of my fingers.  
And its kinda funny because I've never  
Been able to hold onto anything in life  
And now I can break everything into  
Tiny bite-sized pieces.

Best of all, my roommates fear me now,  
I threatened to blow their nuts out the back  
Of their skulls like golf balls busting through china  
And I told my hall director I'd force his face through  
The back of his neck. Just for laughs. Just for the dark  
Syrupy vapor that'd fill the space where his head had been.  
Now I have my own room.  
And just a few minutes ago I yanked the heart out of my ex-girlfriend.  
She was damn surprised and I hope the irony wasn't lost on her  
As she hit the ground, her eyes still rolling in her head.  
I think I'll track down my father next  
and I'll hug him and I'll cry and wail  
Just like the day I was born, the day he realized I was  
his little accident, his little broken condom and when I see him, I won't ask  
Why he left, I won't ask why he couldn't love me--  
I'll just take his backbone from him and watch him sop to the ground.

I have power now and I'm doing everything  
I can to abuse it but in a few days, after the bloodshed and the screaming  
And the futile running, in a few days when I won't  
Be able to distinguish my fingers from soiled meat cleavers,  
I know my sensei will come to me. He will be disappointed.



I will have failed him. He will tell me I had a chance  
To be a great man. He will tell me I had a chance to be a man.  
I'll breath deep as he cradles my head in his hands like his  
Own son and I'll feel as if there isn't anywhere else in the world  
For me, and then I won't feel anything.



*Third Place, Eve Cummings Poetry Contest*

Eight Mistakes I Make on our Date

Kristin Dombrowski

---

1.  
Waiting for your train at Grand Central,  
I stare into the dark Amtrak window,  
worrying that my bangs sit on my face all wrong.  
Me frowning at me: I stare dumbfounded,  
when I realize you are standing right next to me.
2.  
In the cab you asked me how my day was yesterday.  
I told you about my stomach flu.  
and how green skin didn't suit me.  
When it got really quiet  
I filled the silence with giggles.
3.  
You ask me to lead us  
to the nearest coffee shop.  
I took us ten blocks east, nine blocks south  
and find nothing.  
We skip coffee, go to the wrong museum,  
then at the next museum,  
I jokingly tell you dinosaur fossils were fake.
4.  
I have my little brother meet us at the corner of Lafayette,  
just for a second, as I explain, I only see him on holidays.  
When I introduce you to him  
I say you prog rock like a hurricane,  
although I don't really know how prog rock sounds.
5.  
You tell me about your new job offer—

a music director at a music school,  
about the problem of pay,  
the change of address—  
I should have been paying attention,  
but I wonder how your lips taste.

6.  
I giggled some more at dinner  
when you eat the Naan bread. I like the sound  
you make chewing. Then when  
you talk about kayaking, my response is  
a story about  
a UFO I saw at a lake house in Otis, Massachusetts.

7.  
I follow up the UFO story  
with how I got lost in a bikini  
on the dirt roads  
in the woods behind the lake house  
and how an old man in a Cadillac had to drive me back.

8.  
I have at least  
eight opportunities to hold your hand.  
I follow you behind our walks,  
slowly extending my hand towards yours—  
they looked so damn perfect,  
like soft crescent almonds—  
but I return mine to my pocket.

## Louise the Figurine from France

Kristin Dombrowski

---

The figurine got her name from Neil's ex-girlfriend—both have plump bottoms and sun worn faces. I found Louise while unpacking dishes in my kitchen—she was wrapped in paper towel blankets. I rested her in the palms of my hands: a Willendorf Goddess—fat and fertile, stuff with dried lavender buds. A grandmère with a sensible disposition, in a blue and yellow frock, with her hair tied in a bun on the top of her head. She was my new dolly, and when I squeezed her body, the herbs inside crunched and emitted the sharp scent of lavender. I imagined a life for her in the Provence countryside, her back sore and bent from years of plucking the purple flowers. In those sweeping fields the wind whooshed through the lavender blossom so its sweet fragrance filled the air. I stood next to her momentarily, my hand shielding the sun from my face, purple fields buzzing and swaying back and forth with the motion of the warm breezes coming up from the Mediterranean. She hummed along with the bees and the crickets, and for me it was meditation as I became well aware of ground below me and the flowers brushing against my skin. “Bonjour Louise, comment ça va aujour d’hui?” Her response was always the same: a placid, gracious smile as she handed me my own bouquet.

## Cutting Hair

Kristin Dombrowski

---

I can cut his hair  
when he's sleeping.  
I can creep in his room,  
night lights on,  
sheers reflecting silver—  
I can hear  
the trimming and ripping—  
ever so slowly!  
It's the undoing  
of years of  
accumulation.

He won't notice  
until he's at the rock show,  
when his head starts bouncing  
    up  
    and  
    down  
and little clumps,  
awful furry caterpillars,  
start falling.

## Last Summer Stalker

Kristin Dombrowski

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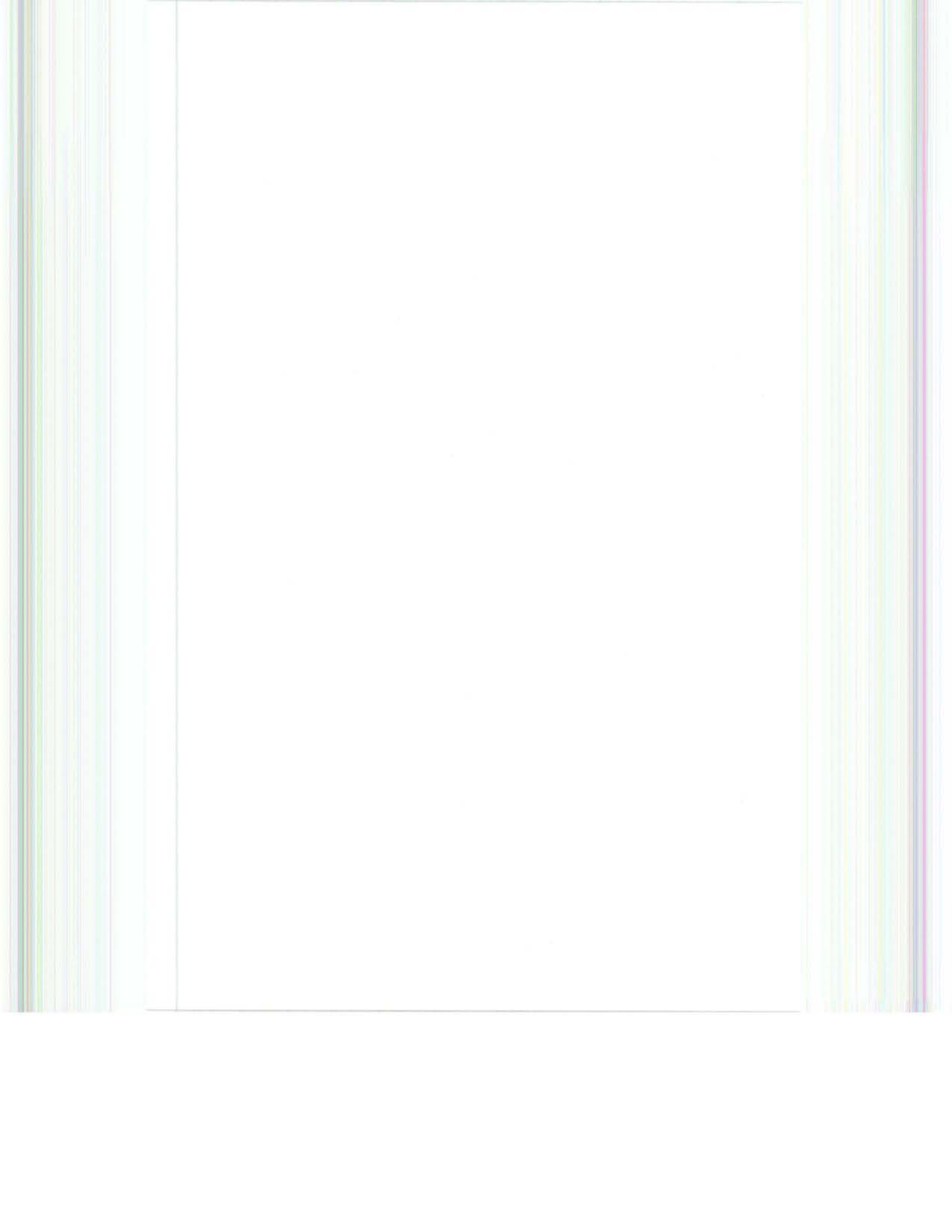
Thank you for showing me  
the poem you wrote that was  
shaped like breasts—  
a delightful bouncing set,  
C-cups, two congruent bubbles,  
a divine pair that my fingers traced  
as I read about god-knows-what.

It was quite the read over morning tea  
in the cafeteria next door to  
the store I managed,  
where you came to shop but rarely bought.

You stood over my shoulder, waiting  
for my appraisal of your personal work—  
you were too close to me—  
in a sweaty orange muscle tee,  
a gym teacher's mustache,  
like a lost Vietnam foot soldier,  
panting.

The poem you wrote  
may have been about  
how monkeys smile when they're afraid,  
Shel Silverstein,  
finger necklaces,  
or how you could always find me  
when no one else was around.

Maybe it was about  
the feeling I had that day—  
concentrating on smiling while  
twisting in my shoes,  
wishing snakes would wrap themselves  
around your neck.





## Proposal

Taryn K. Garrison

---

When my roommate Max moved out two months ago, I talked the deacon into letting his darling daughter move in with me. I told him he didn't need to worry I couldn't do anything more than look at her now, maybe say I love you.

"And after chemo?" He'd wanted to know.

"I promise to be good?" The effort to raise my tone into a question brought on a coughing fit. Phlegm ended up all over the bed sheets I knew she would clean. When it was over I told him what I saw. His darling daughter running around and never really landing anywhere, from her place to here, taking me to the hospital, keeping up with homework and going to classes, still working ungodly hours. She literally held my hand as the doctors poisoned me, and with her other hand turned pages or typed papers. Her golden curls have been shorn to her shoulders, but even that wasn't enough, more often than not they appear in a Pebbles top knot. Her always pale skin has turned transparent, the smallest veins can be seen pulsing, reminiscent of something science fiction. I was good enough friends with one of her professors that a call to his office had gotten me her plummeting GPA. His darling daughter, my nightingale, was now a "C" student.

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

"Not yet."

"But you are going to?" It was there I almost lost the ball, but the deacon is a smart man. "You want her to move in with you so she has one less place she has to be running to, but you're not sure you want to marry her?"

"It's not that."

"I didn't think so. Tell me what it is then."

"I thought 'after the doctor tells me what's wrong' and then I thought 'after chemo' then 'if the chemo works' and-

"...and then if the bone marrow works.' Jared, this is cancer and I know that it...sucks." He searched for the word "sucks" and it sounded awkward in his mouth. "It just sucks." He said warming up to the language. "But it will always be a part of your life. From now on there will always be an 'if'. This isn't the first time Abby has dealt with cancer. She knows." I didn't

answer that, like I said the man was just smart. If any one ever asked I knew three things about the deacon, he loved his daughter, he loved God, and he was smart. "Do you still love her?"

"Yes." I said it quickly, like air leaving lungs when someone gets punched in the gut.

"Are you asking me because when you ask her she'll say no because of me? Or are you asking because you actually want my permission?"

"Both." Honesty, when dealing with someone smart, honesty.

"Ahhh, son," He sighed and it was the first time I realized he cared about me. Not what I did, not because I might desecrate his daughter. "This just sucks. I don't like it. I really don't like it. She's a big girl, if she thinks she can handle it...she can always move home if things become...difficult." And here, I did the wise thing, I kept my damn mouth shut. "I know you think you can do this, that because of the chemo it will be safe...trust me its going to be hard."

He let her move in. I already knew the rent at her place and she was barely making ends meet as it was. I pay an extra hundred bucks a month, which she doesn't know, so she can afford to live here. I quit my job at the bar months ago. Now the rent is eating my inheritance. I had intended to finish the semester, it was already paid for, and the money would just be gone if I quit. The money was gone.

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We maintained separate bedrooms, I hadn't lied to her father, all I could do was watch. More often than not I woke up to her passed out next to me. Her books spread between us like a bundle board and a hand stretched out negligently lying over my sunken crotch. All I could do was watch her sleep. The separation of night and day meant nothing to us, vomit knew nothing of clocks. Like professors with their cheeky comments about their students having lives, or work, or other classes as they piled on extra work at the end of term. Night time sleep meant the same thing as weekends now. I hadn't had a weekend since I graduated from high school, neither of us had, not really. The weekend meant work, there was no distinction between a Wednesday and a Saturday- they're just two different kinds of work. The last weekend she had without work or school was the last time I'd tried to piss standing up only to hit my head on the sink when I passed out. That was Saturday, by the time I'd fully woken up it was Monday. The front of her over bleached white button up work shirt still had my blood on it. I guess it's always the weekend for me now.

I used to outweigh the nightingale by a hundred pounds easy. Now she teased I'd be the skinniest bitch on the runway. She said stuff like that, the deacon's darling daughter, he doesn't "know" it, but he knows. Like he knows I worked at a bar, when I still worked, but he doesn't know that's where I met his little girl. We met a few summers back at her friends stag, or whatever girls call it. I could tell she was uncomfortable, board really because she wasn't drinking very much. We talked for a while, bartender to female patron talk. I think I asked her to model for me, she says I didn't, she left without leaving

her number, she says she left it, I turned around and she was gone. I ran into her a few weeks later when classes started up again. I walked up and told her I meant it, I wanted her to model for me. She stood there looking at me all confused, her mouth sort of open, and finally she said “why would I do that?” That’s the story she tells her dad, that I had walked up out of the blue and asked her to model for me.

I looked down the slope of my rib cage and watched her hand twitch. I watched because I couldn’t do more. I couldn’t fling the covers up send the bundle of books flying, strip her naked, and make the nightingale sing. My body often leaves my mind to rebel. He was smarter than I knew, this sucked. I think of all the shit I would’ve done “if I had only known.” Fuck that, if I get well, “when I get well” nightingale would say, I’ll still be the laziest mother fucker I ever was. Probably more so, I’ll use cancer as an excuse to “relax.” I’d thought of breaking up with her when I found out about the cancer. When I’d tried to bring it up she’d told me to “fuck off.” She loved me. I watched her hand twitch, this time she was awake. She fidgeted a bit before sitting up, her hands going everywhere at once.

“What time is it?” I relaxed my neck and let my face lull toward the clock.

“One.” I said flexing my neck back to her. “Go back to sleep.”

I could tell she wanted to, thought about it for half a second, then remembered her lost three-point-eight-seven and went to work on her history paper. Instead I fell asleep, watching her determined typing broken up with searching for something in one of her books. She flipped pages clutching a highlighter and sucking the tip of her thumb like she wished she were five again. I woke up later to find her dressed and gathering her stuff to go. She said she’d be back at her break to take me to the hospital, kissed my forehead and grabbed my keys off the bedside stand. I watched through the window as she climbed in my car and drove away. I stared out the window waiting for her to come back. I decided I needed to hurry up and beat this thing, that or just die. I wondered what my death would do to her fight to regain that golden star of a GPA with a cherry on top. I’d better get well, I decided as she pulled into the driveway a few hours later. She came in with the smile school always gave her and some how managed to carefully flop down on the bed beside me.

“Did you fall down stairwell nine, or up?” It’s an old joke but I don’t have any new ones that don’t feature vomit and death. When we were first dating she twisted her ankle trying to go up stairwell nine, a few weeks after it was healed she did it again going down. It became one of our jokes. How does one fall up stairs.

“No.” She said, dragging out the “o”. She gave me a great smile, but it wasn’t the real one. It wasn’t the smile she used to give me before she became afraid of losing me. It wasn’t the light one she always came back from campus with.

“What did you do while I was out?” She says “out” now, never where she was, just “out.”

“Worked a little on my senior thesis.” I lie and she knows it’s a lie and because she loves me, she smiles again and says nothing. It wasn’t even a good lie, it’s obvious I laid here and watched the driveway. My thesis shit; contact sheets, proofs, and wax pencils are in the living room collecting dust. It’s been there for three months.

“I love you.” She said getting as close as possible and falling asleep with her arm across my chest. A few weeks ago I’d decided “I love you” was my nightingale’s Westleyan, “As you wish,” way of saying “don’t die.” Somehow it didn’t have the same thrill anymore. I watched her sleep. Again. She has an allergy snore in winter. I watched the clock, fifteen minutes without an alarm and she was off the bed and out of the room. The deacon’s daughter returned in all her bathing suit glory. She got me to the shower, now featuring a folding chair in a chic blue, orange, and green plastic plaid. It’s science now, fucking science. She washed my hair and most everything else.

“Does it still feel like trust?” I said, still panting with the effort to get out of bed. When we first started dating my height weight ratio was a foot over and a hundred more than hers. I’d walk up behind her or she would sit in front of me and I’d put all my weight into leaning on her. She said it felt like trust. Now I do it because I can’t not.

“Yes.” There it was. The stillness in her voice and her hands in my hair, I felt guilty. “It’s a chemo day.” She said it quiet like she wasn’t even talking to me.

She didn’t mean that we were going to the hospital as soon as she finished getting us ready. She meant my mood. Her hands quickened as she finished slicking water from my hair. I shut the fuck up after that. I heard her on the phone once with the deacon. It was a “chemo day” that day too. She told her dad so, said sometimes my mood was just chemo, poison, as though everything I saw when I opened my eyes was drenched in chemo. Made the world seem upside down, inside out, bad and good converged, then conversed, and everything came up chemo no mater what she did. She said all I saw when I looked at her was chemo. So I shut the fuck up, because I knew she was right, because I knew I couldn’t do a damn thing about it. She would let me “feel” how I needed to feel without complaining and the only thing I could do for her was to shut-the-fuck-up. Always when she gets as far as she’s willing to go she hands over the scrubby thing, and what she thinks is a come hither look, which isn’t but I like it anyway.

“Fuck no.” she smiles she steps out. This is my sex life, unconscious hands twitching over my crotch, bathing suits and boxers in the shower and washing my own damned cock. She stepped back in without even asking if I’m done. Science. She dressed us both averting her eyes as I put on new underwear and we’re off to the hospital again.

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She hummed “Don’t Worry Baby” all the way here. I hate the Beach Boys these days. She holds my hand while she types a paper. I watch her hand hovered in the center of the keyboard her fingers stretched wide to stroke the keys. I sigh and she doesn’t flinch. She saves the document and closes down

the laptop without letting go of my hand. She re-bundles my feet hanging off the end of the recliner.

“Scootch.” She kisses me and it’s the first real kiss she’s given me in a week or so. She stretches out on the recliner, wrapping an arm and a leg around me. She doesn’t wedge them into position so they don’t actually touch me as she usually does. She lets the full weight of her limbs press into me. She doesn’t ask if it hurts anymore, she just knows. She hums the same song and rubs my poisoned arm. The barely there scrape of her fingernails more moves the air around than makes actual contact. My arm relaxes around the IV as her touch convinces my nerves it isn’t that bad. The weight of her leg feels like an anchor keeping me steady, the nausea fades. It feels like trust.

When it’s over she puts me in the car and drives home. This is our life and I wonder if she resents it as much as I do sometimes, most of the time, not her, the poison. I can’t help wondering if “I love you” really means “Please Die.” It’s a chemo day. No mater how I dodge everything burns, everything is saturated in chemo. I focus on my nightingale, my Abby. I remember what the deacon said on the phone that night about there always being another goal. There would always be another wave to ride out before I ask her or another phase of treatment so I can be sure it’s the right time. I remember what he said about it all just sucking, and I think about when we said good-bye. He’d said it again, that she was a big girl and she loved me, and neither one of us could change that...and then he said he didn’t want to change it. Cancer or no I made his darling daughter happy.

It was a strange sort of love at first sight, the way we were strangers one day and the next we were together. No muss no fuss, she called it. She told me once she was looking for someone who just fit into her life and the other way around. That, and someone who didn’t smack their food when they ate. Simple love she calls it. We slid into a life side by side. That was the day she first told me she loved me.

I ask her to marry me. She says no without taking her eyes from the road. Says that I’m only asking because I think I’m dying, and I want to be able to tell people I was the one to bag her before I die. This is the deacon’s darling daughter’s response to my proposal of marriage. I realize it wasn’t something grand and romantic, but we passed romance around the time we said hello the first time. I tell her I bought the ring before I knew I had cancer, that I’d asked her father’s permission before I bought the ring, and that besides I couldn’t bag her if my life depended on it.

“Marry me.” I say again.

Her smile grows slowly in profile.

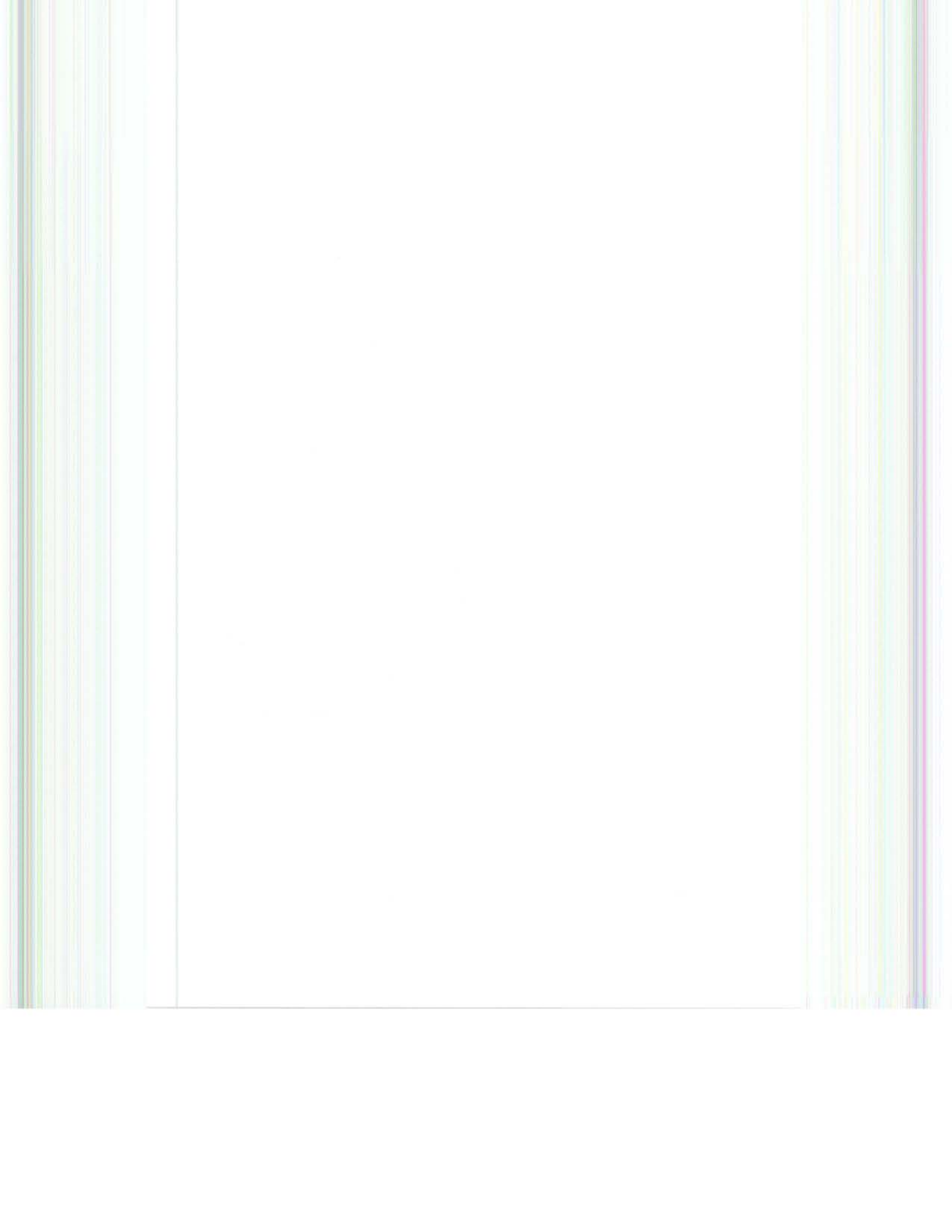
“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”



## The Land of Blue Butterflies

Erin Jones

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It had snowed the night before so school was canceled. This meant that Alicia and I could go play in the land of blue butterflies, the name we had given to the old hayfield behind our house. As we left the house that day, the sun bounced off the snow, making me squint, and Alicia rang the doorbell.

“One more time,” she said, and rang it again.

It must not have felt right; she always had to do things until it felt right. She rang the doorbell three more times, rubbing her fingers together in between every ring.

“Alicia, Eleanor, I want you girls to come back and play in the lawn if it starts snowing,” our mom yelled to us. Alicia rang it one more time.

“Alright, it’s good,” she said on the last one.

We went down the deck stairs, disturbing the snow as we went. I was ahead of her and when she got to the last step I knew what was coming. Alicia stopped and tapped the railing five times, rubbed her hands together, and then tapped the railing five more times. This was one of the many rituals she had to do to even leave the house. When Alicia was in third grade she was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. She started going to therapy after she was diagnosed to help treat her disorder. The therapy helped to control the rituals so she could function and go to school, but she was never able to completely get rid of all her compulsions. She had regular ones which the family was able to adapt to, but sometimes when she got thrown off or upset she would repeat an action over and over until it calmed her down. It was hard to deal with, but I had grown up dealing with it.

“Don’t ask her about the things she does,” my mom said to me when I was in first grade when Alicia first started to do her rituals. What my mom told me as a young child stuck with me, and as I got older I didn’t ask Alicia about the things she did or why she did them. Even though sometimes it would make me mad, and I would want her to hurry up, I never rushed her. I never showed my frustration or anger to Alicia or my parents, and I learned at a very young age how to hide my emotions.

That’s why when Alicia stopped at the bottom of the deck stairs,

I didn't rush her even though all I wanted to do was go play in the field. When she was done we made our way to the edge of the woods to go to the pathway that led us down to the field.

"Follow me and watch your step," I said to her. We made our way through the woods, navigating through the section of woods behind our house we had walked so many times before. We had stopped going to the field as much as we had when we were younger. I always wanted to go but now that Alicia was in eighth grade she didn't want to play with me as much. The last time we had gone was in the summer, so the blue butterflies had been there, flying through the air and soaking in the sun as they did everyday during the summer. They would fill up the sky so all you could see was the butterflies. I don't know why there were so many of them or why they were so attracted to this old hayfield, but they were captivating. The quiet rush of their wings beating, the way they could all avoid each other in the sky, and the blue of them all. Their color would match the sky for about ten minutes out of the day. The butterflies and the sky's colors would blend at the moment where the summer sun is beginning to set but it has not yet started to create the pinks and reds in the skies, so it would look like the sky itself was moving.

We went through the pathway watching our steps as best we could, and after a few slips and Alicia having to retie one of her shoes a few times, we made it to the land of blue butterflies. The field was just a sheet of snow. Everything was white, except for the undertone of green coming from the pine trees and the few pieces of vegetation that poked their heads through the top of the snow. I could see the brook that was past the field.

"I love this place," Alicia said taking in a deep breath.

"Let's go," I said to her.

We ran into the field, I threw a snowball at her, she threw one back at me. There was something about that field that seemed to calm Alicia, acting as almost a kind of therapy. She usually would never get compulsions while we were there, and if she did, for the most part, it only took a few repetitions for everything to feel alright.

I ran to look at the brook that was behind the field. It was tiny and it looked weak that day. The few inches of water slowly bubbled over the rocks and pebbles that lined the bottom of it. The brook was my favorite part of the land of the field. It was so calming, and even in the winter when it was bare and the woods that surrounded it matched the color of the gray pebbles, it had a certain serene beauty to it. I threw a couple of pebbles in the brook, and turned around to see what Alicia was doing. She was on her knees and rocking back and forth on the edge of the field. I ran over to her to see what was wrong. When I got there I saw that she had uncovered the corner of some type of cage. It must have been put there recently because the part of metal that was uncovered was still shiny.

"I think it's dead," she told me. I took a closer look at the corner of the cage and saw the brown, frozen tip of an animal paw. My stomach turned. We had seen cages in the field before, but we never saw one with



an animal actually in it. Its paw stuck out from the snow like it was saluting the sun, or like it was making one last attempt to escape. Alicia continued to rock back and forth, and tapped both of her knees simultaneously. Although her body looked rather tense, her face looked calm and relaxed. The tapping of her knees sounded like a beat, some song that she was playing for the dead animal in the cage.

"Are you alright?" I asked her.

"I will be, hold on," she said.

She continued tapping and rocking as she looked at the cage, but she did not look upset, it just looked like this was something that she had to do. There was nothing I could do. I knew not to mess with Alicia's compulsions or try to rush her. Once I pulled her hands away from a row of Barbie doll's she kept tapping the heads of, and she immediately dug her fingernails into my forearms. I asked her why she hurt me, and she told me that not being able to tap the dolls had hurt her.

"I got this burning sensation in my chest and everything felt -jumbled," she told me. She had paused before the last word, as if it wasn't the right one but it was the closest she could get to telling me how she felt.

I got scared as Alicia knelt by the cage. She looked so out of it, and I wondered if she was scared at the things she was doing, or if she ever realized what she was doing. I wanted her to stop. After a few more minutes of rocking and tapping, while sitting next to the animals' cage, Alicia stood up.

"Do you want to go back?" I said.

"No, its fine," she said as if she had not just been captivated by the paw of some dead animal. So we stayed, and we continued to play in the field for about twenty minutes before it started snowing. At first it started off light as just a slight peppering of flakes.

"Let's go back," I said.

"No, it's not snowing that hard yet," she said.

"Mom said we should go back if it starts to snow," I told her.

"It's not snowing that hard, let's stay."

"Fine," I said. For about another hour we played and while we played the snow fall was getting increasingly heavier, but we took no notice. It wasn't until the sky had started to get dark and the flakes had gotten so big and heavy it was hard to see just a few feet in front of us that we decided to leave. We looked for the path that went back to our house but we couldn't find it. The snow had either covered it up or it was falling so thick that it was blocking our vision. I just started walking through the woods in the direction of our house. Alicia followed me, wary at first that we were not on the path. I was a little nervous too, but I didn't show it. I couldn't. I didn't want Alicia to get upset. We started walking and I wasn't sure where we were.

"None of this looks familiar," she said after walking for only a few minutes.

"That's because we aren't on the path," I said. I had to keep her calm.

I continued to lead her farther in the woods in the direction that I was hoping would bring us home.

"We're lost." Her breathing was getting heavier.

"Shut up, no we aren't," I said. "We just aren't on the path. We're like ten minutes from the house, not even." She started unzipping and zipping her jacket. The noise of each section of the zipper disconnecting and then connecting again was driving me crazy. Whenever Alicia freaked out like this I wondered how she was going to handle going to high school; it was less than a year away at the time. I had heard things about high school, and I wasn't sure if Alicia would be able to deal with it. It wasn't really the teachers or the school work that worried me. It was the other students. I didn't want them to mean to her. She had friends, but high school was bigger, and the kids were older. I wanted the therapy to suddenly cure her so she could be normal once she got to high school. She never said anything about going to a new school so I didn't know if she was scared or not. She just continued to open and close her zipper.

"Stop it," I said. She didn't acknowledge that I had said anything to her and kept on zipping and unzipping her jacket. When she got all weird like this all I wanted to do was be able to get inside her mind, and stop whatever was making her do these things.

"What the hell, just quit it," I said, I took a few steps closer to her. "Jesus Alicia, you're acting like you're five."

"We're lost, you got us lost," she said.

"I didn't get us fucking lost. You're always lost. You were the one who wanted to stay here once it started snowing anyways. You should be to blame," I said.

"Then why aren't we on the path? You don't know where we are, so we're lost."

"Just shut up!" I took another step closer to her, I was so mad at her at this point. How could she tell me that I had gotten her lost, when she was the one who wanted to stay there for longer? I thought about how I had done so much for her and how I was always careful around her; I always watched my step around her. I was the one who took care of her, instead of the way an older sister was supposed to take care of her little sister. All of the anger that I had been able to suppress for my whole life was coming to the surface, and I didn't care.

"You act like a retard, like a retarded ten year old, do you know that?" I said. I knew this would hurt her, and I wanted it to. I wanted her to feel the anger that I had in me. I was no longer in control. It was all feelings coming out at that point, no thinking.

"Everything was fine until you were born," she said.

"Take it back," I said.

"No," she said. I raised my hand to her and slapped her right across the face. My palm connected with her cheek and then her nose. Her head moved in the direction that my hand had pushed it causing a few drops of clear spit to escape. Her mousy brown hair that hung over the headband

that she had over her ears flew over her face, hiding her from me. The snow continued to fall and the white flakes accumulated in our hair and our eyelashes. It felt like a sheet between us and almost created a barrier between us, like a screen keeping us from each other. I felt like even though we were standing so close I couldn't get through to her. We just stood there, neither of us saying anything. The air we puffed out escaped from our mouths like clouds floating up to the sky. My nose was cold and I could smell the pines; their scent escaping out from the snow that covered them. I could feel my heart in my chest, beating with the unbelief of what I had just done. I tried to tell my self that she deserved it, but it didn't work because she hadn't deserved it. I wasn't that cold anymore but the fingertips on my right hand tingled from the force that I had hit Alicia with. Her eyes welled up, the snow flakes reflecting in her glossy eyes.

Her nose started to bleed and a single thin stream of red blood dripped all the way down to her chin, dripping onto the white snow below. My stomach was in my throat.

"Alicia, I'm—" I started saying but couldn't finish.

"You bitch," she said looking off at something in the distance that probably wasn't there.

"I really didn't—well—I mean, I just got mad, you know," I said.

Alicia didn't say anything; she just kept looking past me and took off the headband that she had been wearing and put it back on. Then she took it off again just to put it back on again. She continued the undressing and dressing of her ears and she started to talk.

"I can't help it," she said. "It just happens. You think I do this for fun? I'm not retarded; I'm just not in control. When I finish the stupid things I do, the ones that you apparently hate, I feel like I have a handle on something."

"I'm sorry." I couldn't think of anything else to say. I couldn't look her in the eyes. The snow crunched beneath me as I shifted uncomfortably from side to side.

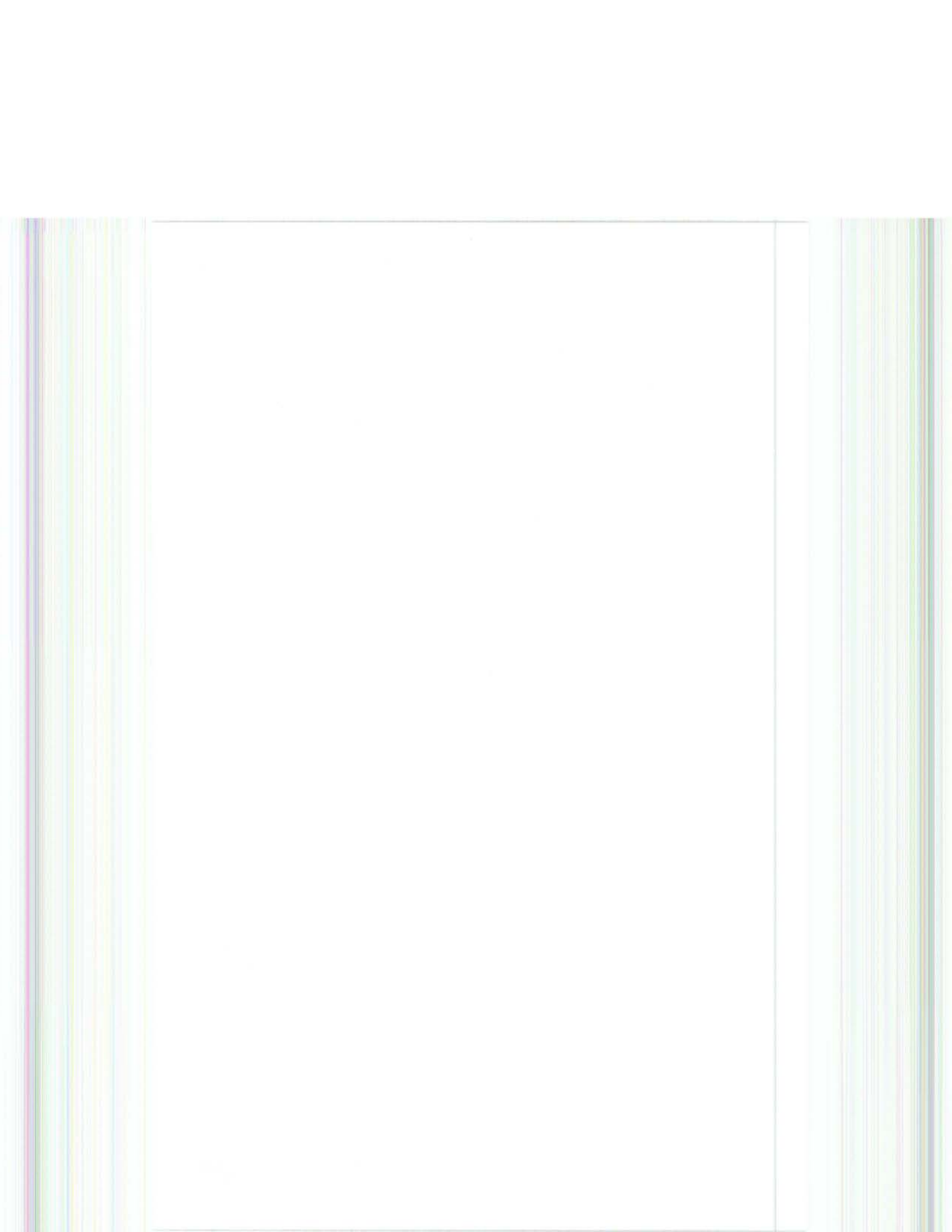
"Don't lie, I told you I'm not stupid. I know you hate what I do. I know it drives you crazy. I know it drives mom and dad crazy. It makes me crazy too. So fucking crazy," she said sounding like she was talking to herself on the last few words. Her lips were starting to tremble. I wanted her to forgive me for what I had said, but I think we both knew I had meant it.

"I feel like if I don't do rituals something will happen to the world around me; you, mom, dad. You may think it's stupid, but I don't," she said.

I was in shock. I wondered if my parents knew that she did all of these things for us. I wanted to say something to her; shake her and yell at her that she didn't have to do those things. Instead I just stood there, unable to speak.

"You know what, just forget it," she said. She turned and started heading in the direction of our house and I followed her further into the woods. Her breathing was heavy and she was unzipping and zipping up her jacket again. I asked her if her nose was alright but she didn't answer me.

As Alicia walked ahead of me I looked at her with a broken heart. I thought about how I had been a factor in the compulsions that ran her everyday life, and how I wanted to be able to free her from them. We walked back in silence; the only noise was the crunch of the snow and the occasional startled animal. I thought about the blue butterflies, and how free they were. I imagined the snow melting away and Alicia sprouting beautiful blue wings that could take her away from everything. Those wings could bring her into the sky and close to all the other butterflies. This way she would not have a care in the world except to soak in the sun.



## Ol' Dirty Blues in an Ol' Dirty Key

Eric Mangles

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I sang the blues every night into a white land-line receiver. I sang them to my friends, sometimes to my parents. I would sing those old songs during class, during freshman English and freshman math. I used to sing them in the locker room. These weren't the flamboyant, cocky lemon squeezers of Led Zeppelin, or the polished electric Chicago style of B.B. King. No, they were lonely and dirty.

I hummed a lonesome refrain when I sat on an old cold catholic pew, waiting for instructions as to how I should stand and what I should say during my confirmation. We sat there whispering to each other, mostly about the girls across the aisle. We discussed their young breasts, their young legs, what we would do with them if we ever took them out, if we knew what to do with them when we took them out. Those were the days when I sang the blues the most.

I hummed "What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue," to myself while we waited for the nuns to speak. We sat in alphabetical order: Maya, next to Mayfield, next to Mangles. In front of us sat Lupo, Lee, and Lane.

One of the nuns started talking to us in her thick Italian accent. Not only could you not understand her, but you could also not recognize her as an individual because of the other three aging nuns whom you could not understand because of their thick accents. Some of us sat there listening, trying to picture in our minds how we would walk to the front of the church when we were called and would be blessed by the priest with oil and water. We were like the nuns: interchangeable in our gawkiness, all dressed in khakis and never-worn-before sports shirts that we tucked in for the practice confirmation. The heat and anxiety made me sweat, and my nerves made my face twitch. Some of the boys were still whispering about contortions and flesh. Lupo awoke from his divine dream.

"Cut it out you guys. This is God's house." He was right, but we were young boys. Some of us collected comics, others played basketball. We were school bullies and school victims. We were in half-disbelief of the Holy Spirit and were self-conscious of our zits. Some of the boys giggled at

Lupo, others nodded their heads in agreement while others just stared at the maroon carpet below them. I wanted to stare at the carpet, to disconnect myself from the other boys, but I found myself giving all three of the possible responses. Lupo turned around with one finger pressed to his lips, telling us to stop defiling the church.

"What's wrong," Mayfield asked. "Do you like boys, Lupo? Huh, you kiss boys?" My stomach turned. It's not that I was hypersensitive or that I myself was not thinking about the girls who were also sweating on the long stiff wooden pews. No, I was afraid of Mayfield: of his friends at school, of his mocking smile, of his words that had cut in the past. I closed my eyes and thought back to the thrashing his friend had gave me the previous week. He called me to the back of the photography classroom and punched me dead in the face, then in the stomach. I fell to the ground and played dead, hoping that it would stop. I saw the smiling faces that filled the class, of the joke and the punch line that I had become. I thought of the laughter that must have come from Mayfield's mouth after he had heard the story being told during lunch, or third period. Perhaps the story was told to him directly by my classmate, by my attacker, or perhaps he had heard about it through the grapevine. Through the other bigger or smaller bullies who smoked in the seven hundred hall bathroom and who wrote words like, "kike", "nigger", or "faggot" on scratched locker fronts. As I sat on the pew I prayed that he had not heard it from a girl.

"You like boys and dick," he repeated to Lupo. Faint chuckles were heard over the nun's instructions. Some of the boys laughed out of discomfort, others so that they could taste Lupo's blood. So that they could lick his bones and eat his meat after the kill.

My right cheek twitched as I hummed to myself, "what did I do, oh baby, what did I do? What did I do to you? Please don't make me so black and blue."

"This is the house of God," Lupo begged. He pleaded for Mayfield to leave him alone, to let him off the hook. He kept pleading. I knew that he was no longer protecting the sanctity of the church, of my Lord, he was protecting himself.

I knew what he wanted, because it was the same thing that I wanted. I wanted Lupo to get his during school, for him to be beaten on school grounds: For him to be able to go home and to tell no one of his shame. I wanted Lupo to be able to have sanctuary, at least while he was still in church.

The day before, my friend, who had grown two feet after the hump was removed from his back, had told me that he was disappointed in me. That I should have fought back, laid a punch on him before I fell to the floor, before I played dead for the bully and for the class. He told me that he and one of my class mates had talked about the fight, the assault, as I called it. They both said that it was shameful. That I should have fought. During

the conversation I'm sure that my classmate's mouth was still covered with his saliva and my blood. He was small and ugly, with a premature hair line going further and further towards the back of his neck. He would have been the last in line to lick my bones, but he had gotten the taste he desired nonetheless.

I looked over at Lupo. His face was red and sweaty; his hands were folded in front of his lap, touching his white Polo shirt. Mayfield and his makeshift gang were talking loudly about homosexuality in details while one of the nuns was eyeing him.

The girls across the aisle were solemnly watching the head nun as she held one of them by her right hand and marched her up the aisle to the front of the church. "Elizabeth Cynthia Theresa Samson," the nun read. The girl was given her mock confirmation name. She walked back to her seat on the other side of the aisle blushing, knowing that she was being watched by the confirmadies. She straightened out her sun dress. Her young curves were thinly veiled by the light printed fabric of her dress. The color and print of the fabric was distorted by the kaleidoscope of color that shone on her body and dress from the stained-glass window that housed the setting sun. Her recently developed breasts were bouncing with her blond curls. I closed my eyes and hoped that she had not been the one who had told Mayfield about the beating, about me playing dead.

"You're a cock sucking faggot." Mayfield said to Lupo, who was now almost in tears. Mayfield's gang was becoming bored with redundant phrases and cruelty. My face continued to twitch as I saw Lupo close his eyes, trying to ignore the taunting. We had gone to the same public school and were from the same neighborhood. When we were in third grade we had the same teacher and played Cowboys and Indians together once or twice. The first summer that we were old enough to ride our bikes unsupervised we rode down to the same parking lot where the two of us and my best friend would talk about television and classic rock radio. We were the same.

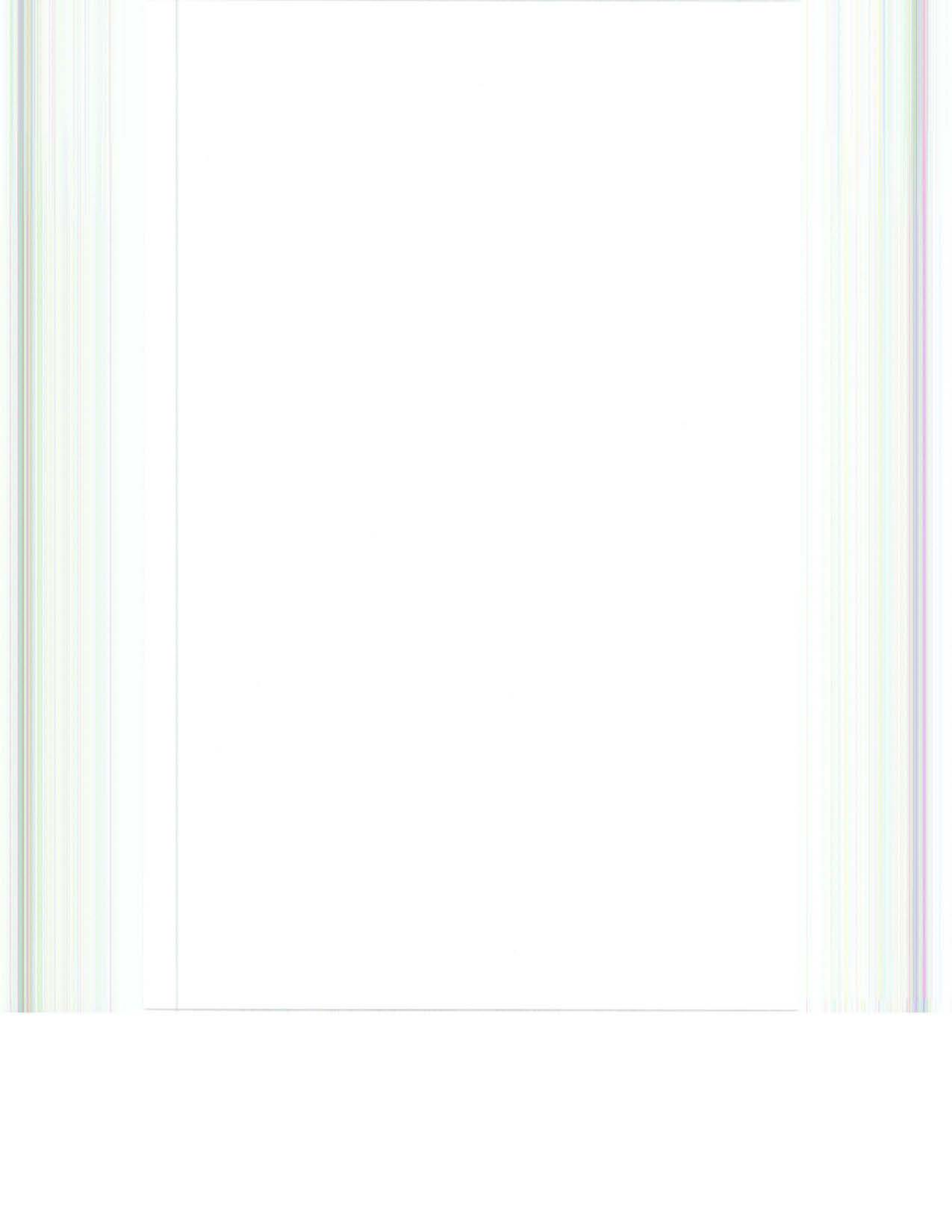
I cleared my throat and spoke. I repeated an insult that I had said behind Mayfield's back earlier that day in the cafeteria, when he was out of sight and I was surrounded by the drama club and my sister's friends. It was something about his hair, about the color and about piss, something about a man urinating on his hair and face. I knew that there would be repercussions, but I was not going to play dead with the boys watching, with the girls across the aisle, and with the plaster image of my Lord's dead body hanging on the wood watching.

"I'll have him wipe the floor with you again twitch. You faggot gay queer. You nervous tick face. I'll have him do it again," Mayfield said, his makeshift gang laughing at their leader.

I sat next to him, because it was my destiny and my name. I sat there twitching and sweating. The threats were repeated under the watchful eye of Sister Katrina, or was it Sister Margaret? None of the girls heard and Lupo



did not come to my defense. I closed my eyes and thought of tomorrow's thrashing at school, of the grins and the jokes. I saw the laughing faces. I felt my guts shrink, expand, flip, and melt. My heart sank with fear. "Fucking shut your dick sucking lips," I said to him. He threatened me, but I did not hear him. I hummed to myself, "what did I do? Baby doll, what did I ever do. Why would some one like you make some one like me so black and blue?"



## Deer Night

Brianna Marron

---

It wasn't the language that worried me; I was used to shut the fuck up. It was the way Dad said it--his voice shook and even cracked a little, like a boy struggling through his first juncture to puberty.

"Just everyone shut the hell up," he said, resting his head on the steering wheel.

Mom turned around to look at my sister and me in the backseat of the car. She said nothing, but gave us a be-quiet-or-your-father's-going-to-kill-us kind of look.

My sister stopped crying and tried to appease her sniffles. I picked up my Stretch Armstrong from the car's floor mat and held it in the palm of my hand. We all looked directly forward and stared at the deer's antlers sticking through our windshield. His eyes were still open; his body shook in small seizure-like motions. Patches of his hair and blood strung their way across the hood of our car and covered our windows. I wondered whether the deer had any sort of family. Maybe they were still in the trees watching it all. Maybe they were asleep waiting for his return.

The coffee in Mom's cup holder had spilled over. I watched the steamy brown liquid seeping off the radio's volume knob. It dripped rhythmically and consistently. Each drop landed in relatively the same spot and was collecting into a small puddle below the ashtray, where Dad kept his loose change.

"Son of a bitch! Stupid fucking deer!" Dad said. He was pacing in the street, yelling into the miles of dark empty highway. "Dumb fucking deer."

Mom mumbled under her breath, "Jesus Christ." She shook her head and turned around again. "Kids, you stay put, Mommy's going to go talk to Daddy, okay?" She didn't wait for our approval. She opened the door and stepped delicately toward our father. "Honey? Why don't we just call the police and they'll take care of it?"

"Oh yeah, sure, we'll call the police and they can hand us their drunk-driving fines and their citations and hey, maybe we can stay the night in jail, too. That's fucking brilliant. Sure, let's call them!"

"Ugh, could you at least stop talking like that in front of the kids?" Mom said.

Dad put his head in his hands, ran his fingers through his thinning hair, and folded his arms across his chest.

"And it's your own fault. You said you were okay to drive."

"Oh, it's my fault that this deer ran in front of my car?"

"Okay. So, what do you propose we do?" Mom asked.

"Well, we can't afford to call the police."

"But it's three in the morning and we can't very well drive home like this. Someone's going to have to come help us and I don't know who it's going to be."

"Just give me a minute," Dad said.

"Well, I'm not going to freeze out here." Mom got back into the car. She didn't turn around to check on my sister and me in the back.

We sat in silence.

The coffee beads had soaked into the interior and the quarters were sticky and frozen to their plastic home.

Dad continued his pacing.

My sister sat next to me, fighting off her requisite for sleep. She occasionally dozed off, then jolted her head up like she had never really been asleep. She was too young to fully understand what was happening at that moment. I watched her for the following minutes, envying her youthful mind.

Dad came back to the car, opened the driver's door and motioned to my mother and me. "Get out," he said.

I peered at my mother with a do-I-have-to plea, but she simply opened the door for me and held my hand when I clambered outside.

"Wait! Don't shut that door," Dad said. He reached into the front consul, took scissors from the first aid kit and placed them halfway in his pocket. Then he stretched under my sister's feet, grabbed the ice-scraper and handed it to me. "We'll use our sleeves."

Dad started first and picked the clumps of deer skin off the rear window.

"You can't be serious," Mom said. "How are we going to drive the car even if it is cleaned off?"

"We've got four good tires," was all Dad said.

"You can't be serious," Mom repeated.

Dad walked around to the front of the car and grasped the antlers that were tangled in the glass. The deer's severed carcass lined the paint on our car; his eyes blinked heavily. Dad put one foot on the mangled bumper for stability and began pulling the deer's head from out of our windshield. We watched him struggle and groan at his failing attempt.

I stood behind him, held onto his waist, and started pulling with him.

"No," Mom said, "this is--" she paused, then placed her right hand on the deer's antler and reached her left arm around my father's back.

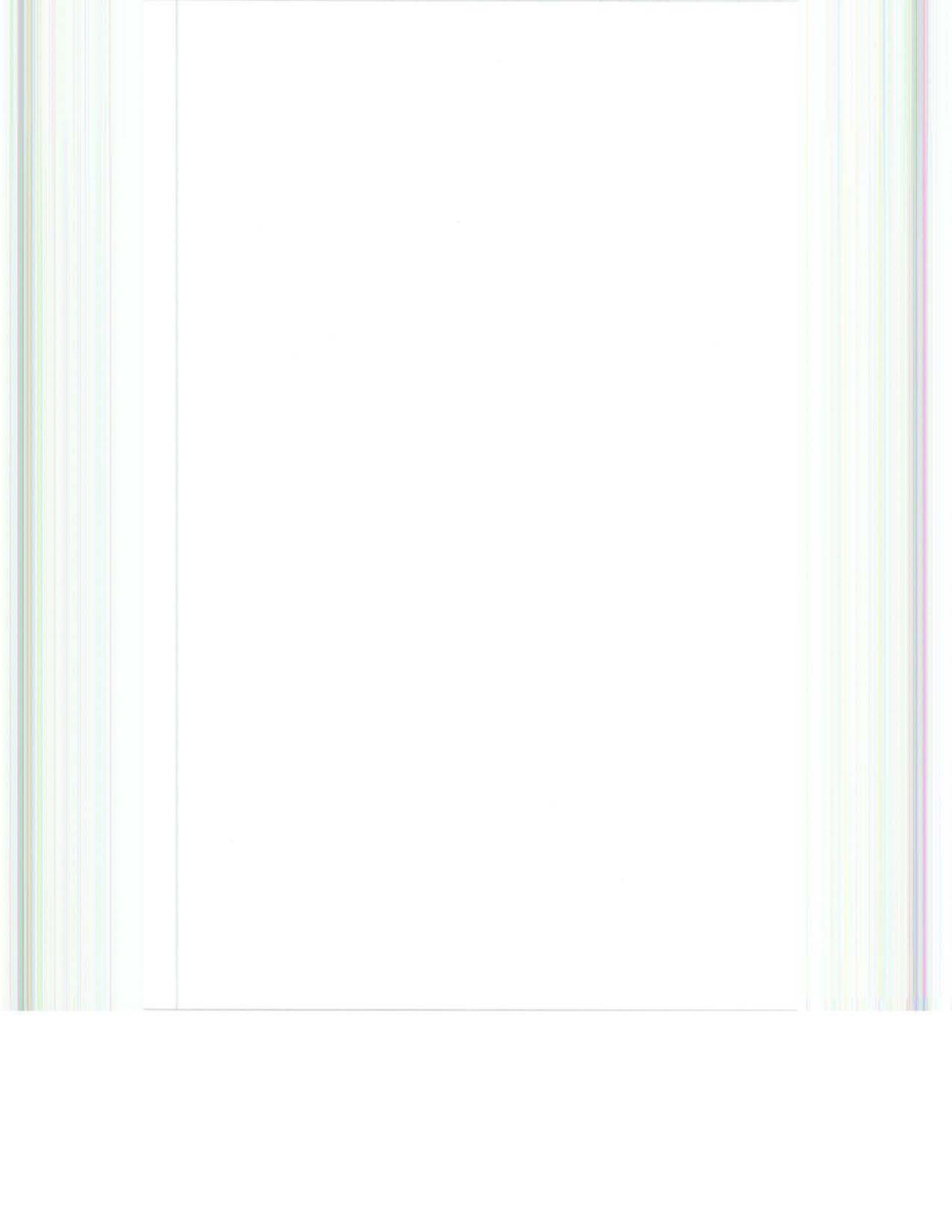
We all pulled. The window's crack spread and looked like veins buttered across our car. The antlers loosened and finally came free.

Dad threw the deer over his shoulder and walked into the ditch. I watched the deer quivering. His barely-alive body twitched in tiny tremors. I started scraping the frozen blood chunks from the back windows. Mom wiped the front windows with her sleeve. She performed the action of wiping off deer guts so gracefully, the way she once wiped the snot from my nose into her sleeve when I had nothing else.

The sound from the ice-scraper cleaning the blood and flesh off the cold dry window seemed to echo down the forsaken highway, but it paled in comparison to the sounds emanating from the ditch. A sort of stiff drone arose, like trying to cut with a dull knife and enduring the constant sawing back and forth until the metal slab finally slashes through. The screeching noises of the ice-scraper seemed to cease and the sounds in the ditch seemed to grow louder. The night didn't feel cold or seem dark anymore. The moon looked drunk and bloated. I swear I heard the deer scream.

Dad climbed out of the ditch and stood facing my mother and me. His clothes were marinated in blood. He no longer had the scissors in his pocket. Mother shook her head, looked up and blinked away the fresh saltwater collections slowly gaining mass in the corners of her eyes. I stared at Dad and he stared back with an it-had-to-be-done look. We cleaned enough of the deer parts off the windows and recoiled back inside the car.

The car clanked its way down the road. The wind blew inside through our broken windshield. I lay over my sister and we shivered together. Mom stared at Dad. Dad stared at nothing.



## Hey Eugene, Death Machine

Adam Nesteruk

---

Ronald began standing in front of Dunkin Donuts after we graduated high school. The rest of us went to college and started fucking and experimenting with drugs like laboratory rabbits given run of the laboratory. A few kids I know studied. Regardless, most of us would graduate. Become functioning people. Ronald dangled in the parking lot, and went under the purple and orange awning when it rained. Life began.

Ronald was not alone at Dunkin Donuts. There was another kid who graduated before us and became a fat volunteer fireman. He loved volunteer fire fighting. He wore volunteer firefighting shirts and had volunteer firefighting boots behind the seat of his Toyota pickup with volunteer firefighting lights and decals and radios with radio antennae. When he wasn't voluntarily fighting fires he bought small coffees and sat in his truck with the tinted windows down. He talked loudly to Ronald about fires and Ronald stood and smoked cigarettes and said things like, "Yeah" and "Uh huh" and "You don't say." Ronald did not give a shit about fires. The kid talked about fires like a pervert, and I don't remember his name. Functioning people with ties and jobs went in and out. In and out, they did not stop and they made Ronald feel horrible because they all had ties and places to go. Ronald had old sneakers and cigarettes.

Ronald tried out for every sport in high school twice. At least twice. They told him he was uncoordinated. They told him he had a bad work ethic. Ronald tried girls for a while. They told their friends he was nice and funny and a good friend but nothing more. Ronald tried to study and get good grades, the teachers told him he didn't study enough. Ronald looked at naked girls that he Googled. Sometimes they were dressed like cheerleaders, sometimes they were dressed as teachers. Ronald came in old t-shirts and went to bed thinking about god every night.

Every night before I go to bed I think about dying. I am terrified of it really. I'm pretty sure everyone else is too.

.....  
When Ronald was born his parents named him after the man who was the President of the United States of America at the time. Ronald's father left Ronald and his mother soon after he was born because he liked to have sex with many different women, and not just the one he watched Ronald fall out of. Ronald's father's name was Eugene. Ronald's middle name was Eugene. I found out Ronald's middle name was Eugene in anthropology class because his initials were on his backpack. L.L. Bean. The middle initial was an E. I was surprised when he told me his middle name wasn't Edward. "Not Edward?, then what?" I leaned over my desk and looked concerned-confused, what other names start with E?

"Don't worry about it."

"Shit man you gotta tell me, you can't just leave clues on your bag man!"

"Eugene."

"WHAT? I can't hear you man."

"Eugene."

"Hahahahahahahahaha-wait what?"

"Fucking EUGENE man! Fuck off!"

"Chill bro I'm just fucking with you."

I called him Eugene after that. It caught on too. He was pissed at first, but being called by his middle name meant people knew him enough to call him a name that wasn't quite a nickname, but it wasn't an insult either. He told me the last initial on the bag meant warrior in Hungarian. It started with a Z and I can't spell it. I looked at his skinny arms and thought about Hungarian warriors and laughed in his face.

.....  
"HEY EUGENE!" That is what we yelled. And he smiled.

.....  
Eugene was raised by his mother in the homes of various aunts and uncles. He lived in his aunts and uncles homes because his dad Eugene left and his mother did not make enough money to have a house. I think Eugene was a relatively well adjusted kid though.

.....  
Two years after we graduated Eugene's mother married a used car salesman, and they stopped living in relatives' houses. His name was Warren and he was also named after a President of the United States of America. Warren and Eugene's mother got along because even though she never owned one, she knew how to take care of a house and Warren knew how to pay for one. These were instincts. Warren and Eugene got along because Warren was a block of wood. Warren gave Eugene a Jeep from his lot. A Jeep is a vehicle that was commissioned for production by the army of the United States of America so they could go where other cars couldn't so they could kill enemies more efficiently on various terrains. Eugene researched this on Google. Eugene used the Jeep to park next to the volunteer firefighter and shoot the shit.



.....  
College closes on Thanksgiving. They give you a break from all the fucking and drugging so you can go home and celebrate the Pilgrims and the Indians. I went home and found Eugene at Dunkin' Donuts. It was the first time I'd seen him since high school. He had a beard and he said, "I work at my step dad's dealership."

"Oh, cool man." He took me for a ride in his Jeep. He said if he took a corner too fast the whole thing would roll, and so I held onto the dashboard, and sometimes the roll cage because he took the corners fast. Death machine. We felt the elapsed time in our conversations, small and full of shit. The Jeep was the subject of our words, but I could only say "Uh huh" and "Yeah" for so long. Eugene didn't want to smoke a joint. Apparently he quit, "That shit."

.....  
I smoked weed with Eugene senior year. It was his first time and we smoked out of a Gatorade bottle with a tin foil bowl on his back deck. There were three ugly girls there and we took them in his hot-tub. We exchanged red eyes over the bubbling water and telepathically negotiated who would be whose. I chose the only girl whose tits were worth a damn, and left Eugene the rest. We didn't do anything with those girls. Eugene decided he liked beer more. I went to college to have sex and experiment with drugs.

.....  
Three years elapsed and Eugene found a girl. Her name was Sam. She was still in high school. Senior. Easy pickings. She liked his Jeep and he liked when she sat in his lap and looked into his eyes and he looked into hers. They would touch noses and their visions would cross and they looked like Cyclopes to each other. She met him at Dunkin' Donuts and remembered him from her freshmen year of high school. "They screamed Eugene," she said. "Why?"

Eugene smiled. "You like beer?"

.....  
He drove so fast her eyes got wide. They fucked like virgins.

.....  
Three and a half years in I received this exact e-mail from Eugene: Yo bro we gotsta chill. I'm leaving for the army. Call me. (203) 278-3926.

And so I took another break from fucking and drugging. Quickly becoming drugging and drinking, and I drove home for the second time in three and a half years and I played games and drank beer and did a few lines in my car with the one kid who did lines in cars and happened to be there. His name was Danny. I think he is a business man now. Everyone remembered me but I forgot all of them. They said I was skinny and I thought that they were sheep. We were in a garage and there were streamers and balloons and business majors and Eugene. I didn't say hey Eugene. Not once. He took me on the front lawn, and told me I was his best friend. He said he was worried about me. I was worried about him. He didn't go to

college you see, and could therefore never be a functioning person. He told me Sam left him because he was leaving her to go to the army. I never met her but I said I was sorry.

"I'm sorry bro, that's pretty dick." He agreed and looked into the beer he was holding. Some dick with a dick haircut and a cast on his arm interrupted us. He told Eugene how much he would love the army. "Comraderybrotherhoodgunskilling matchingclotheshaircutsstripesbadgesmarchingandplacestomarch flagswarPresidentoftheUnitedStatesofAmerica." Eugene agreed.

I said, "You don't say."

When I left, I missed him. I missed him because we are at war. I've seen a movies. There probably isn't any Creedence Clearwater Revival playing over there.

.....

Eugene got a dick haircut and learned how to dress and kill and keep his belongings in a box. He called everyone Sir. Sir is a term of respect. The Sirs taught him pushups and pull-ups and how to run across logs. They spit on him and yelled at him and made him eat and wash quickly. They called him a pussy. They called him Pussy. They said he was uncoordinated and had no work ethic. Pussy loved it. He got a tattoo on his ribs of his dog tags. He wore dog tags. Dog tags tell other soldiers what god you believe in, then they know how to bury you. He had only been to church twice in his life, but when the time came to get his dog tags Eugene became a Roman Catholic.

They taught him to drive a Hummer, which is like a Jeep that can drive on an even greater variety of terrains, and therefore made killing greater varieties of people greater. It could climb and descend steeper grades, and so people died at even more varied elevations. Then they sent him to Iraq which is the country we are at war with because. Pussy ate it up.

.....

Life ended. Pussy's fully functioning body exploded in his hummer in a town that I can't spell. Because. The blood of Hungarian warriors left spots on the sand and then blew away.

.....

When news of the terrifically violent hummer explosion reached home, everyone said, "You don't say," and quickly made a bench with his name on it in gold that isn't really gold. They put a ribbon around the bench and then they cut the ribbon and they put his and the bench's pictures in the newspapers. It is exactly what he wanted. What we all want. They buried him in the Roman Catholic style.

.....

It has been nearly five years since college started and I think I am going to graduate soon. When I am falling asleep I think about dying, and it really terrifies me. I haven't seen that bench yet, I wonder who sits there.

“I don’t know bro.”

The waitress was young, younger than them. She still carried some baby fat, but Chester figured she would look quite acceptable in a year or two. Tim snorted and stuck his tongue out at the stainless steel napkin dispenser. He was looking at a canker sore on the tip of his tongue. Tim lit a cigarette and sat back. They looked at the waitresses small breasts her dark hair. She turned towards them and her dark eyes were bright at the young men. She opened her mouth in greeting and her braces sparked. Tim and Chester exchanged glances, and Tim’s eyes fell to his menu. He stared hard at a photo of a young dark haired girl sitting in front of a sundae, ice cream mouthed and brandishing a spoon. Chester’s eyes remained on hers. They decided to start with a glass of water.

In the bathroom, Jeffe mopped the diamond patterned floor. He thought about the hot Mexican sun and the little boat his father had owned with the 35 cc outboard motor. He thought about the house with the boarded windows where he parked his scooter and crawled in the basement and slept. A basement in Cleveland in March made him think about Ho Lee’s daily goodbyes until he slept. Jeffe mopped harder. He opened a package of urinal cakes and put one in the urinal. These were pink. With a wet brown recycled paper towel he wiped down the back of the toilet. There were traces of ajax on the toilet back. Jeffe wiped that up. The door opened, and Jeffe looked up. “Hola,” he said. The tall Irish kid eyed the smaller Hispanic, and he pretended to piss until the little paper towel wielding man left.

Elvis’s teeth sank deep in raisins and bread and hot milk and butter. He smiled because he was satisfied.

Enlightenment was home, her car was in the garage

Adam Nesteruk

---

She didn't care  
the circumstances of my arrival  
(spiral eyed, slurred and torn and stumbling)

Stood on her lawn  
(let it be raining)  
yelled at her window in the pre pre-dawn  
(let me bleat goat-like and desperate)  
until the floodlights over the drive clicked off  
and I had to swing my arms  
for a light

Hesitant to Breathe as if to Not Interfere With a Rapidly  
Beating Heart

Adam Nesteruk

---

I dream in other languages  
And wake grasping at dialects I do not understand

Shoulder blades touching  
Folded along the perforation  
Clawing for an exit  
Then dropping warm, silent  
And moist as a naked boiled potato

Nightmare,  
you taste like ribbon strip  
and melt in my mouth  
Like a fistful of salt

Imagine My Father Flying Over The Merritt Parkway In A  
Shower Of Auto-Glass Like A Canada  
Goose In A Hailstorm

Adam Nesteruk

---

Daddy Smashed motorists,  
bent 'em  
like rail spikes round a tree  
-hand hooked round a fifth  
my head just touched his knee.

Daddy came back on round  
a quarter sentence later  
wearing Jesus Christ  
in walkman ink  
said vodka lost its flavor.



## Procrasturbation

Chris Piccirillo

---

I'd come off the dinner shift at Lilac Hills and remnants of convalescent quiche were underneath my fingernails. It was humid as fuck, a typical August in the hundreds, and I stunk of eggs and detergent. Sweat and dishwasher adhered my boxers to my ass.

A shower was in order, but unfastening was essential. All day I'd been yammering, overworked and under-jerked, chastising trainees for petty shit like subbing sherbet with sorbet. So I rubbed it out at Clucky's, envisioning how I'd be a prolific rock god had I not quit the clarinet in second grade. I angrily beat my wet dick and then slept on the restroom floor. A knock awoke me. I sprang up and shouted "break!" while clapping my hands. I was at level one now, at last, ready to accomplish everything. I ordered a bucket.

---

Frank had been characteristically baked since waking at noon and was liable to conk so I drove with haste. I parked my shit box on his suburban-ghetto street around eight. My face drenched a napkin as I walked towards the apartment of Frank Wolf, drug dealer. It was Tuesday and that meant me, Rick Schmidt, drug doer, was there with blank discs, a 20-piece Clucky's Bucket, and a hundred bucks.

Frank used to work in construction, but these days collected the money that my fellow blue-collars and I surrendered to the state. Otherwise, his finance boiled down to one type of green equaling another and I was ready to contribute to his fund, sporting the hundred in exchange for weed.

The back was open and I breathed exhaustingly while going up four flights. I unsuccessfully searched for another napkin as I knocked on my lone dealer-friend's door.

"Who?" Frank asked.

"Me!" I shouted.

"Well then open it!"

I opened and entered the bedroom. Frank was at his computer with several windows going. I brought the discs so he could burn me a sampling



of the thousand or so concerts he'd plucked from the Net. Frank turned his head and grinned.

"Chicken dinner again?" he cracked.

"Yeah that's right, a nice chicken dinner," I defended. "Got a problem?"

"I don't get it, Schmitt," Frank said. "You work in a kitchen where there's mad food, yet every time I see you it's Clucky's chicken dinner and I ask myself what the fuck?"

"And every time you hammer down at least five pieces," I replied.

"Fuckin' Schmitt," Frank said enthusiastically as we shook hands.

At 26, Frank was four years older. We'd met at a show of our hometown rock band, Tomato Tron. We were listening to a funky number up front. Frank was drunk and grooving. I was stoned and twiddling my thumbs in my pockets. Frank approached and told me to "move around a little." I told him to "fuck off." Then I found out he dealt dope (him: "dude, do you burn?"; me: "as in, do I have the ability to combust?"). Now it was five years, a hundred concerts, and several hundred weed bags later, and Frank still had no recollection of our first encounter, and I continued to twiddle lifelessly at every show. I didn't do booze. I was already an asshole.

"T'sup bub?" I asked as I sat.

"Whadaya got?" Frank inquired.

"I gotta nothing fo' you."

"You gotta nothing fo' me?" Frank joked. "Cept chicken dinner and some stupid idea I'm gonna hook you up with weed."

"Must be the next door over. I'll go knock."

"Dude, stinky and sticky," he said.

"Me: purchasing and packing."

"Let's do it before Libby wakes up."

Ah yes, little Libby: the daughter of Frank and his freelance wife, Tara. Libby typically awoke from her nightly nap between eight and nine. Quite often when we hung out Frank fell out before Libby, leaving a wide-eyed four-year old and I to watch TV until Tara got back from the bar with a face full of whiskey and a mouth full of lies for Frank as she woke him with a smack. I loved that tiny little Libby. She was one of my best friends. I often wondered at what age she'd start getting high. She sometimes put her dolls on Frank's pot scale. She had no idea she was weighing them. She didn't understand the concept of weighing, and based on the oft-stingy contents of his bags, neither did Frank.

"Dude," Frank said as we walked out of his room and into the hallway where the scent of cigarettes offset my stench. "You fuckin' stink worse than Libby's ass."

Or so I thought.

"It's the sweet smell of Alzheimer's," I said.

"What?" Frank replied.

"Forget it."

"Dude, imagine if they find out years from now that weed cures

Alzheimer's," Frank remarked.

"Yeah I read that. It was the article that said bacon cures fat asses and unprotected sex cures pregnancy."

"Not cool," Frank said.

Libby, like myself, was a bastard, born to parents who fucked before knowing each others' middle names and got married with their newborn at the altar. I'd momentarily forgotten that fact.

We stopped in front of the bathroom door and glared. I wondered if I'd pissed off Frank and possibly talked myself out of a purchase. Frank's eyes focused contemptuously, but his lips were slightly curled. I tried to distinguish whether he was serious or sarcastic, but Frank was a pro at masking emotion. I was helpless. So I spoke and hoped.

"Then again," I said. "Who'd have thought a night of mindless hormonal savagery would lead to such a cute baby like Libby? Or for that matter, myself."

Frank ran his hand over his beard. There was something in there. It could have been pot. It could have been lettuce. It could have been part of his beard. I couldn't tell.

"You're alright, Schmittty," Frank said as he walked into the bathroom, opened a cabinet, and pulled out a quarter of weed. "Let's get fuckin' baaaaaaaaaaaaaked."

Frank often added vowels to words indicating intoxication.

I was off the hook, or perhaps never even on it, as far as Frank was concerned. But I still stood silent and stared at the empty parakeet's cage behind where he had been standing.

"Dude! Weed! Do you smoke it?" Frank asked.

"What? Weed? Sure," I said.

.....

We stepped into Frank's bathroom, a corner nestled between his kitchen and living room, which were essentially the same room. My sweat swamp had considerably increased from the lack of air conditioning. Frank threw the weed bag at me.

"You're up, Schmittty," he said.

"Thankfully," I answered. "If I don't smoke by nine I won't get tired enough to fall asleep by two so I can get up at six and at work by seven for breakfast. I gotta stay on schedule."

"You're programmed, man," Frank said. "You're a weed robot. You couldn't tie your sneaks without taking at least seventeen bong hits."

"Way to break that story," I replied. "I'd ask you to look in the mirror but there's a huge fucking crack in it."

That was true.

"Dude, you gotta little bitta potato near your ear," Frank said as he pointed. "Right there. Your left ear."

"Fuuuuck," I moaned as I flicked it. "We had mashed potatoes for fucking lunch."

“Shit dude,” Frank said. “Whadjya have for dinner?”

“Quiche.”

“Yep quiche,” Frank replied. “Little quiche too. Bottom of the shirt.”

“You see why I don’t eat the food at the Hills,” I whined. “You try eating quiche and then you gotta scrape that shit when the trays come back to the dish room, food all regurgitated.”

“Aw, all mixed with fuckin’ Pepto and pudding,” Frank said.

“Exactly.”

“Must be brutal there bro,” Frank said. “I still don’t know how you slug around that place for eight hours when it’s like a million fucking degrees outside. I mean look at you.”

I went into it.

“Well the kitchen’s kinda hot,” I explained. “But bearable during the summer.”

I opened the weed bag.

“Every so often some sweat drips into a soup,” I continued. “But who cares, right?”

I stuck my face in the bag and inhaled.

“But fuck the dish room! Been like a buck-ten all month! I usually ask to be cooled off and believe me my fellow dietary aides take great pleasure in hosing me down.”

“When was the last time you were laid?” Frank asked.

I took out two buds. They were indeed stinky and sticky. And ripe glistening green.

“Sure it’s not the ideal job,” I said. “But it’s not too shabby. ‘Helpin’ the old. Makin’ a fuckin’ difference. If only the dough were better.”

“Schmitty,” Frank needled. “When was the last time you were fucking laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaid! Laid bro.”

“Bout two years ago,” I said. “You?”

“I dunno,” Frank said. “How old’s Libby?”

“Fuck,” I lamented.

Frank handed me the modest glass bowl. I commenced preparation.

“We both gotta get some chicks and fuck ‘em,” Frank declared.

“Your best bet if you wanna get laid is to cease your friendship with me,” I said. “I’m a complete non-factor in the sexual circus. So if women find out you stopped hangin’ with the likes of me: 24 hours, guaranteed, laid.”

“You know, Schmitty in the past I’d say, ‘you know Schmitty, keep your chin up, you’ll find someone.’ But right now, as I see you covered in fresh quiche and nine-hour-old fuckin’ potatoes, I gotta say, Schmidt bro, I think you’re fuckin’ right.”

“I fuckin’ know.”

The bowl was ready to go. We took out our lighters.

“So are you and Tara on the same deal?” I pried. “Don’t ask, don’t tell, so to speak.”

“Yep,” Frank answered. “‘Cept there ain’t nuthin’ for me to tell. Get it?”

"I get it," I said. "I still don't know why you do it."

"Libby," Frank said.

"Little Libby?"

"Yeah, so Libby has a mom," Frank replied.

"But is it worth it?"

"No."

"Then fuckin' go."

"Where the fuck am I goin'?"

"Back to work maybe," I said. "Then outta here."

"Dude, smoke fuckin' pot!"

"Right," I said condescendingly. "Right."

"Fuck you!" Frank screamed.

"Sorry, Frank. I just hate to see you and Libby livin' like this."

"Livin' like what?" he said with a smirk. "Puffin' tough all day, hangin' with my daughter. Livin' off the money you give me so you can get high and schlep yolk."

"Are you being serious or sarcastic?" I asked impatiently. "I can't fucking tell."

"Whadaya think?" Frank said calmly.

"I don't know!" I yelled. "That's why I asked!"

We paused. I realized and sighed.

"Dude, my cunt-wife's mom's got this friend," Frank quipped. "She's like 60 and broken but she'll probably bang you out after she's had a few Milwaukeees. Seriously bro. Get fuckin' laid."

"Some fuckin' pot!"

"You got the bowl."

I did have the bowl. And it was brimming with beautiful weed. I put the bowl in my mouth, lit one half, and left the other half unlit to ensure a fresh one for Frank. I sucked and felt the smoke in my lungs. I held. Frank nodded affirmatively like I'd gone around the block without training wheels for the first time. I was high as I passed him the bowl.

Frank took his first hit with no surprises. He passed to me and I went for the second. I ripped hard and held tight. The zest of my initial hit had waned. I handed the bowl to Frank, who took another, then began coughing violently. He spat a dense chunk into the toilet, which reflected the water in his face, then returned the bowl to me.

I intentionally took my third hit vigorously enough to force coughing in order to get higher. It worked.

"Are you serious?" Frank asked as I hacked.

"Pfftt. How should I know?" I replied.

We soon heard rapid footsteps rattle down the hallway, followed by an attempt at opening the locked bathroom door, then continuous knocks. Libby had woken. Frank and I looked at each other frightened. His eyes were glowing with water. We frantically started stashing. The knocking hadn't stopped.

"Libby," Frank said. "Chill."

The knocking stopped.

"Schmitty, grab the spray and go to town," Frank demanded.

The knocking resumed.

"Libby, what the fuck?!" Frank enforced.

It stopped again. We heard footsteps run away from the door. We secured our respective weed in our pockets. I gave Frank the bowl and he palmed the scraps, then tossed them in the toilet. He went to put the bowl in the cabinet.

"Any chance for a resin whack?" I asked.

Resin is a tarry substance that collects in a bowl from repeated smoking. It gets you higher than weed.

"Dude, we just smoked!"

"Yeah but you've been baked all day," I pleaded. "I only got three hits."

"You're not high?"

"I am," I said. "But not like 100-percent high, you know?"

"I definitely don't," Frank answered. "Dude, Libby's all over the place. Later. When she goes back to sleep."

I imagined taking a resin hit and pretended I was slightly higher.

"Schmitty, please get on the fucking spray," Frank beckoned.

"Right."

I pumped a few sprays from the perfume bottle. The fragrance mixed with the smoke and spawned a noxious potpourri. Frank flushed the toilet. Our cover-up would be an undoubted success. I heard Libby singing in the distance, but couldn't make out the tune. Frank was reaching for the doorknob when I remembered that I'd yet to make payment. I rummaged through my pocket and took out six 10-dollar bills, four fivers, and twenty singles. I handed them to Frank and he bowed despairingly. Frank opened the door. I followed him into the living room.

.....  
"There she is," Frank announced while Libby poked through the chicken. "The star of the show."

Libby was standing in the kitchen half of the living room, wearing shorts over a purple swimsuit. She had been about to grab a wing when she saw me. She ran towards.

"Schmissy," Libby said as she opened her arms. I crouched and we hugged. Her pudgy cheek was cold against mine.

"Well hello little Libby," I said. "And how are you?"

"Wanna go see my room?"

"Oh in a minute," I answered. "Schmitty just wants a little dinner."

"Why'd you stop and get chicken?" Frank said as he opened the refrigerator. "You coulda combed your hair and ate like a fuckin' champ."

"Daddy thinks he's a comedian," I told Libby.

"Whas comedeen?" Libby asked.

"Someone funnier than daddy," I explained.

Frank snickered and took out two colas.  
"Wanna go play my toys?" Libby asked.  
I burped smoke into her face.  
Frank cracked open the colas. He hadn't seen.  
Libby squinted like she'd swallowed a fart. I was terrified. Libby  
looked on the brink of tears. Then she started laughing.  
"Schmissy," Libby said, emphasizing both syllables in a parental  
tone.  
I began laughing hysterically.  
"Little Libby!" I exclaimed. "You couldn't possibly understand how  
great you are. One day I'll tell you."  
I pointed at her feet.  
"Hey Libby," I whispered. "Whose feet are these?"  
"Mine!" Libby said as she ran back to the bucket.  
Frank mentally rocked out as he poured the colas.  
Libby brought the bucket to me. The chicken was cold. I pointed to  
the microwave and she ran to it. I stood and walked into the kitchen-half. I  
opened the microwave and put in the chicken. I closed the door and she hit  
the button for two minutes.  
"You went with two minutes, huh Lib?" I asked.  
Libby nodded rapidly.  
"Smart baby," Frank said proudly as he patted her head and handed  
me cola.  
We drank while we waited. Libby tugged at her daddy's shirt. Frank  
emptied the remains of Libby's juice glass and poured her a couple shots'  
worth of soda. She was all about it.  
"I'm 'bout to start burnin' you shows, then I'm gonna whoop you in  
Fights," Frank said after the three of us teamed to eat eleven chicken pieces.  
Puck Fights was a hockey video game in which beating the snot  
from your opponent took priority over scoring goals. I finished with the all-  
time series lead in fight victories at 188 to 162.  
"We'll see," I replied.  
I clobbered Frank for six games while Libby sat between us  
and fiddled with an unplugged controller. She thought she was playing.  
Whenever Frank or I scored a goal, we congratulated Libby on a job well  
done. She initiated high-fives each time.  
"Who's winning?" she asked once we finished.  
"Little Libby," Frank and I simultaneously responded.  
Libby's tongue squeezed between her square teeth as she smiled.  
"I yuv you," Libby said as she wrapped her stubby arms halfway  
around the back of her father and myself. On went the tube.

.....

The ensuing hour was a contest between Frank and Libby to see  
who could fall asleep first. The winner would be spared the agony of my  
decreasingly stoned and increasingly agitated presence. Unfortunately,

Libby wasn't aware of her participation, and much like his defense had done in Puck Fights, Frank fell asleep. There had been two instances when he suggested to Libby that it might be time for bed. Her first response was "no." Her second was "I want more chickens." Frank was considering serving an encore of the bird when he dropped out around 11:30.

"Schmitty gotta pee-pee," I told Libby.

"I wanna eat chickens," she contested.

So I gave Libby a helping hand. I put a few wings on a plate and hit the button for two minutes, a span during which I aimed to smoke, piss, and re-de-funk the bathroom.

"Schmitty be right back," I said as I poked Libby in her belly and sounded as if I was letting out air. I didn't wait to catch her reaction.

I knelt in front of the cabinet, took Frank's bowl from his pouch, and gently placed it beside me. I broke off a bud the size of my thumbnail and packed it. I wanted to take a big-enough hit that I'd be on the verge of coughing. I burnt down the bud in one shot. My lungs revolted. Over and over my cheeks ballooned without bursting so as to internalize my fit. Silence was crucial. I withstood the brunt. But my throat was charred and I desperately needed liquid. I put the bowl back on the floor, turned on the sink, and funneled water to my mouth.

Libby knocked and I told her to wait. But the door was unlocked. She opened it swiftly, sliding the bowl into the radiator. I heard it break and scatter into pieces.

"Schmissy, why you drink from the sink?"

"Had to wash down the food from my hair."

No reply.

"Go wait Libby."

She slowly closed the door. I saw myself in the mirror. My eyes were radishes. The microwave beeped. Libby knocked again.

"Libby wait!" I said sternly.

I pissed golden piss and then found the severed bowl's head among the other pieces. I lit the resin to loosen it for the final hit. I used a key to scrape it into a ball and smoked the jagged glass. The flame burnt my calloused thumb. I again clamped the coughing and tongued the faucet's drip. I sprayed shit perfume while the resin cooled, then searched for money to cover the damage. I estimated the cost between thirty to fifty bucks. I figured Libby wasn't into going half. I scraped together a singles-laden denomination, rolled the bills around the bowl fragments, and stuffed the duo into the pouch. I assumed Frank would put two and two together and arrive at an answer that resulted in still selling me weed.

.....

I walked out and saw Frank snoring, but no Libby. I went to her room where she scarfed chicken. I felt pathetically relieved it was boneless.

"Couldn't wait, huh Lib?"

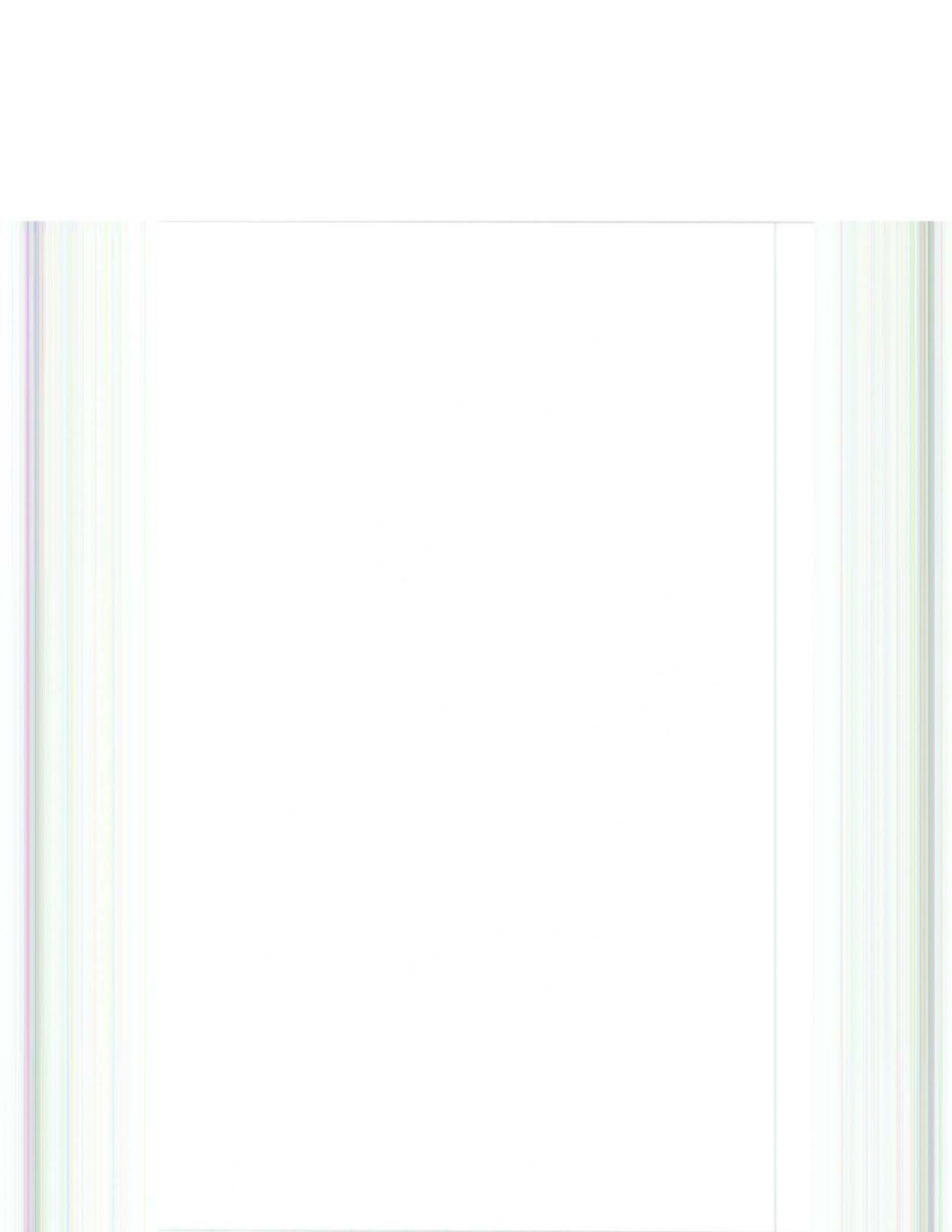
"What happen Schmissy?"

“Had to do poopy too.”  
Libby laughed and chomped.  
“I did poopies today.”  
“Hey Libby, can I tell you something,” I said as I crouched.  
“Schmitty loves you very much, you know that? I love a little Libby.”  
She stopped chewing and looked at me.  
“Schmissy, you’re my best friend,” Libby said as if trying to convince me.  
I started sobbing.  
“And mommy and daddy love you to,” I blubbered. “A whole lot.”  
“Schmissy what a matter?”  
I cried in my hands for a few seconds and calmed down slightly. I gently held Libby’s hand and looked in her eyes. She was scared.  
“Everyone loves you because you’re a wonderful little girl,” I told her. “You’re beautiful and smart and kind. Remember that forever, ok?”  
“Ok.”  
I held up my hand for a mini high-five. We touched palms and smiled. I stood.  
“Thank you,” I said. “Now eat.”  
Libby giggled and resumed eating. I wiped my eyes.  
“Hey gimme some of that,” I said as I grabbed chicken.  
I ate a leg. It tasted like flannel pancakes.  
“Schmissy you smell pretty,” Libby said. “Why you and Daddy smell like mommy when you go potty?”  
Oddly, she never even asked why Daddy and I went potty together. I struggled to come up with a bullshit answer.  
Libby continued eating as she climbed into her clothes’ basket bed. I rushed to the living room and woke up Frank by flinging my half-eaten leg at his face. I caught him square on the nose.  
“What the fuck?” he groggily replied.  
“Exactly dude,” I said as I returned to the bathroom.

.....

I flushed most of my weed and exited without further remarks. I considered flushing the entire bag, but saved another thumbnail bud because I still wasn’t quite stoned enough to fall asleep as scheduled. I planned to go home, rub out, smoke, rub out, smoke, and sleep. I’d wake the next day prepared to achieve greatness. I would quit work and I would quit weed. Sure I would.





## Safely

Brian Rowe

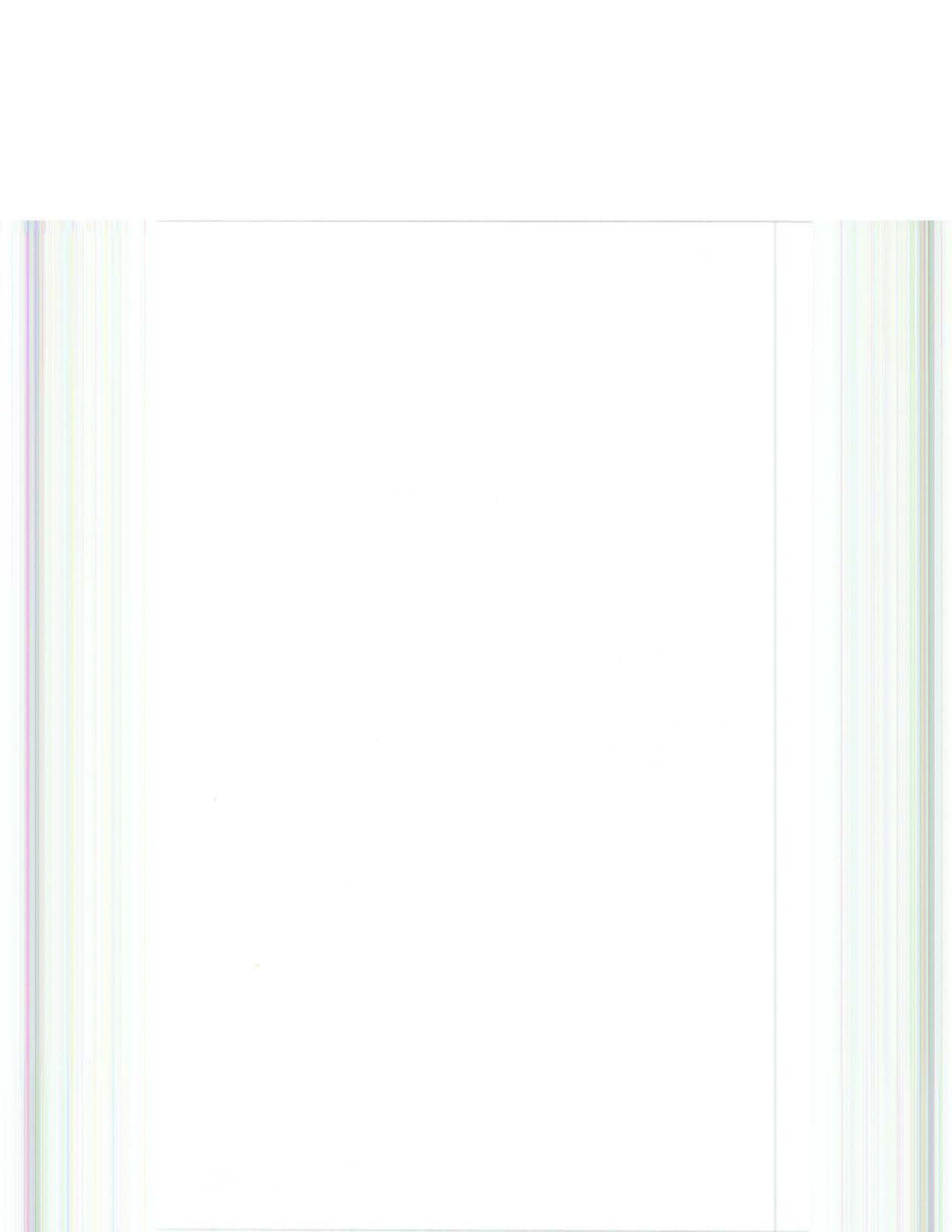
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I reassure the stranger  
what lies in his palm really  
looks like a vampire's tooth.

He found it this morning around  
6:30ish in his kitchen. Stepped  
barefoot on the tooth, it  
hurt like a son of a bitch.

He holds it against the light and  
tells me that luck is on his side.  
I buy him a beer. He lets me  
hold the tooth and

it doesn't feel special.  
I go home, grab nails, a hammer  
and board up the windows.



## Aria of the Wolf Tree

Bryan Rye

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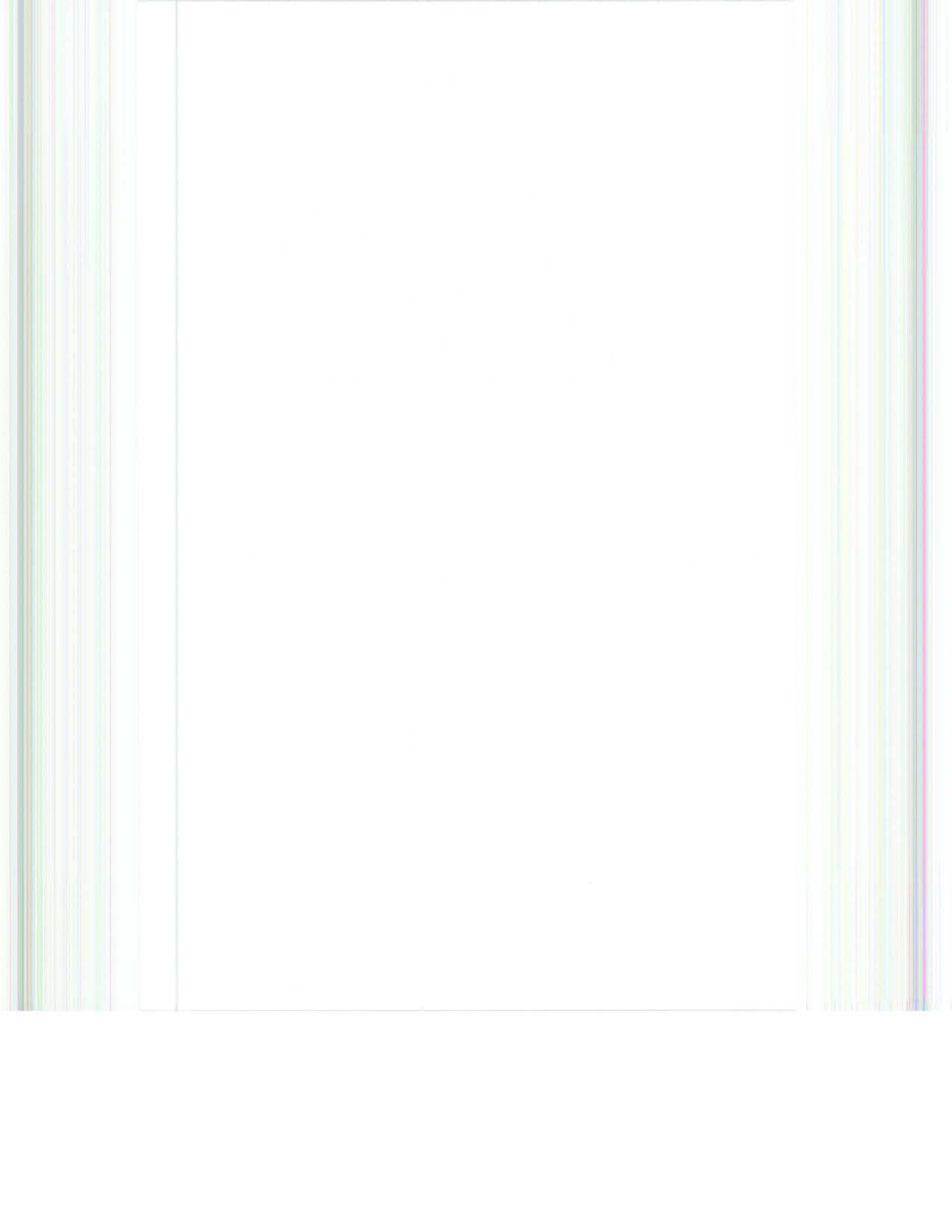
We knelt together on the boughs of the wolf tree,  
watching yellow streaks loop up gray bark  
to chase spindle-bodied simians in verdant  
spans. Limbs stirred, our hair flowed, shadows shifted.  
“Was that a perylene man there, clapping calloused hands?  
Or a nest of hawks, preening sanguine feathers?”  
She laughed, high and free, an aria.

## Fire Trees

Bryan Rye

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What do two columns of fire talk about?  
Do they boast about consumption?  
Compete to see who can go higher?  
Are their words crackling and pops?  
Smoke and smell? The heat?  
Do they sway to entice, is it a game?  
What happens when they realize  
They aren't fires at all, not even  
related to blazes? Do they smolder in ire?  
Or laugh that we mistook them for infernos?



## Contest Judges

**Shulamith S. Chernoff** (poetry) is an Associate Professor Emeritus at Southern Connecticut State University. She is a specialist in early childhood education and child development. She serves as an educational consultant to many early childhood centers. Mrs. Chernoff's late husband, Dr. Hyman Chernoff, died suddenly in 1972; so that in addition to full time teaching in the university, she raised her six children alone. She has been involved in advanced poetry workshops since 1990 at Southern Connecticut State University and in the New York State Writer's Institute at Skidmore College. She has translated a holocaust survivor's memoirs; her translation was published in a book entitled *We Remember* (1994) Her first collection of poetry, *The Stones Bear Witness*, was published by the Hanover Press and was released in August 2006.

**Leila Raabe** (art) is an architectural illustrator and independent photographer from Hawaii.

**Rachel Simon** (fiction) is the author of four books, including the acclaimed memoir, *Riding The Bus With My Sister*, which was also turned into a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie by the same name. Her follow-up memoir, tentatively titled *Building A Home With My Husband*, will be published by Dutton in May 2009. Rachel Simon lives in Delaware.

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Lennon  
Bakes  
Sciortino  
Sudduth  
Frank  
Gulbenk  
Caruso  
Nepton  
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