

Observer. Special Fiction Issue. Volume 18. Issue 7. December 2004.

The Fiction Issue

You hold in your (eager? trembling? furry?) little paws the first annual *Bard Observer* fiction issue. Its *raison d'etre*: to create a regular space for student fiction. No verse, no screen plays, no photography. Not that we don't like pictures and poems, but prose takes space, and space is hard to find. For this here fiction issue, we've set aside 32 newspaper-sized pages *just for fiction*. And we've published as much as we could fit. For your enjoyment we've spent countless hours in the Tewksbury basement: drinking; going through endless packs of cigarettes; trying on sexy outfits; arguing over whether to listen to Radiohead or Dr. Dre; complaining about Dubya; drinking; studying for final exams; fighting off exhaustion; conniving ways to get more money; drinking; and occasionally even editing fiction. Here's the result. Next year, with hope, we'll have even more room.

As this issue demonstrates, Bard is teeming with aspiring short-story writers and novelists. The range of these students' work is immense: their tales are comic, or violent, or tragic; sometimes terrifying, sometimes mesmerizing, sometimes arousing; here straightforward and realistic and there highly stylized and metafictional. Some of these stories explore the outside world in precise and loving detail; others delve inward, probing with relentless honesty the most hidden spaces of our interior selves. A whole spectrum of subject matter is approached and grappled with: drugs, sex, race, love, home, away, childhood, old age, death, education, poverty, riches. The sublime is discovered in the sordid, and the sordid in the sublime. Different readers will respond to different things, but there's something here for every taste.

We would be remiss if we failed to give thanks to the writing teachers in whose classes many of these students have honed their skills: Mary Caponegro, Robert Kelly, Bradford Morrow, Mat Johnson, Peter Sourian. Their workshops create the avenue for production and growth that make this and future *Fiction Issues* possible.

So find a quiet place. Maybe the library, maybe your dorm room or your office, maybe the toilet. Sit down. Light a cigarette. If you can, lock any doors. Turn off your cell phone. Unplug your landline. Blow up your television. Blow off your friends. Skip dinner. Skip dessert. Abandon your homework. Abandon your lover. Ignore your parents, your spouse, whichever religious holidays your people practice. And get deep into some brand-spanking new fiction.

-THE EDITORS

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Observer

Tour of the Home Where I Lived With Espinoza

By Tanner Vea

I have often wondered how my bony body felt to Espinoza each time he pulled it into a firm hug. I swore sometimes I felt my ribs begin to bow, like branches absorbing love from the wind. But it felt good. Had anything ever broken in me—even something little, like a tiny tendon—believe me, I would have drawn the line. Espinoza was very strong, much stronger than me, but gentle. And so his embraces were something like getting clamped, though his skin was always soft from peach lotion. With my nose flattened there so close against his neck, I could smell the aroma rising out of the warmth between our chests. And for all these reasons, I have concluded in retrospect that these hugs were mostly for my benefit, since I do not imagine there is much to be gained from the weak squeeze mustered by the arms of a man as scrawny as me.

It was, in fact, during one of these heavy hugs that Espinoza first whispered to me of a problem he'd been having recently. I'll set it up for you: We were just finishing up our tuna sandwiches one evening, in there, at the kitchen table. Espinoza breathed a deep breath and brushed a few crumbs from his moustache. He was very quiet that evening. I rose with my plate, and I walked with it to the sink and began to rinse. Espinoza remained, thinking. I tossed the empty tuna cans into the rubbish, and then I went back to the table to collect Espinoza's plate for him. He looked at me with a face that stopped me dead in my tracks.

Come here, he said.

Okay, I said. He stood up, and we met in the middle, near that scrape in the linoleum right there. What is it, I said.

And then he put the clamp on me, slowly. My eyelashes tangled with the whiskers on his neck. This is beautiful, he said.

Are you alright, I said.

Maybe, he said, but I don't feel like it.

What's wrong, I said.

My body's changing, I think.

Well, I haven't noticed anything.

Careful, Espinoza said as he reentered with two great big mugs of darjeeling for us to sip as we painted this dining room the elegant purple it was always meant to be. Don't spill, he said. Do you have it?

I do indeed have it, I said. Thank you, however, for inquiring. And what if I did spill, I said as I gestured around the room. We're painting. We've sheathed everything in plastic, Espinoza.

Espinoza said nothing. He just picked up his roller, dipped it ponderously in paint, and mounted his stepstool to tackle that corner. Then I was quiet too. I took my little brush—I was doing the edges, see?—and I went all the way over there to the opposite side of the room. I brooded. I sipped my tea. Simultaneously, of course, I applied a few dainty strokes. Had I not been brooding, I probably would have been more productive. Eventually, I stopped.

I'm sorry, I said, turning around.

For what, he said.

For being an asshole.

It's okay, he said.

I guess I'm just tired from this painting. I want to be done with it and start having many posh dinner parties in a beautiful purple room, I said.

It's okay, he said. Who do you want to invite?

I don't know, I said. We have no friends. Espinoza smiled then and sipped his tea. We both went back to painting. Well, he was painting, and like I said I was more edging. At some point, I think I started humming a song.

What's that song, he said, turning around.

Oh, it's not a real song.

It's not a real song?

No, I said. I was just making it up, I said.

Oh. I liked it though, he said. And then we went

back to painting. I remember I wanted to paint swirls of purple all over the middle of the naked white wall. But I was edges. The middles were Espinoza's responsibility, and so I refrained. It was incredibly difficult to refrain.

And then—and this was quite sudden—Espinoza's roller flipped across the floor, spritzing dots of purple a little bit of everywhere and crashing into my half-full mug.

Did you throw this roller, I said in shock.

I may have, but I didn't mean to, he replied.

You didn't mean to?

No, I meant to roll the paint onto this wall here. I'm sorry.

Well, everything's covered in plastic, so don't feel bad.

You have dots of purple in your hair, darling, he said.

Oh dear. Do they look nice?

They might, he said, but I don't like them there.

And then he helped me brush them out with a damp cloth. We also mopped up the spill tea from the crinkly plastic.

When we finished cleaning I asked him again. How did this roller get over here?

He looked at me. I don't know, he said. My arm

is sore.

Which arm? The arm you threw the roller with?

Yes.

May I look at it?

Espinoza's arm was slightly rosy and the muscles were knotted. I plied them with my hands to relax them, and they were warm. I rubbed that warmth around, trying to undo Espinoza's pain, however minor. But the knots there were firm, double-tied beneath the skin. So I pressed harder. I hoped to God that I was strong enough. The lumps did not recede. They only shifted back and forth as I kneaded them.

You're hurting me, Espinoza said.

I'm sorry.

Here is the living room. In the wintertime, Espinoza and I would make great fires and sit on the hearth and play cribbage in the fidgety orange glow. He would face this way and I would face that way, and after a couple of hands one of us would realize that one side of his body was too hot. We'd switch positions to heat our bodies evenly.

Kiss me here, he said one night as we stood to trade places on the floor. He was pointing to his knee.

Of course, I said. And I kneeled slowly before him and rolled up his trouser leg. His skin there felt rough like an elephant's, but lovely. It smelled faintly of peaches. I decided to let my lips linger there in a pucker until they got tired and started to tremble. When I pulled away, a couple of tiny hairs stroked my mouth.

Do you think we will die together, Espinoza said.

Perhaps, I said. But it's difficult to know these things, I said.

Here. By the fire. That would be nice, he said.

We sat back down in our new locations in front of the fire. When I gathered my cards from the floor, their heat seared my fingertips for a moment. I looked down at the board. My peg was ahead of Espinoza's peg.

I'm winning, I said.

No, he said. You're ahead, that's true. But you aren't winning yet. Winning doesn't happen until the end.

Look at this, I said, leading Espinoza into the laundry room. I pointed to the rumpy ball of blue on top of the dryer. My sweater.

You dried it, I said.

So what, Espinoza said. He walked over to it and pinched the end of one sleeve and held it up. It hung like animal skin. It was the size of baby Jesus. Oh, said Espinoza. I'm sorry.

Wool doesn't dry well.

I'm sorry, he said. I knew that. I just forgot.

Now what will I wear when company comes?

What company?

I guess I could wear the goldenrod one, but the blue was my favorite, I said.

I don't know why I would forget. Maybe my mind is failing me, he said.

Perhaps, I said. In that case, I forgive you. Out of pity.

And then Espinoza hugged me. I tried to hug him back as hard as I could. To let him know that I wasn't angry anymore and that things would be better after the hug. I squeezed and squeezed but the frame of Espinoza gave not an inch. He was strong, after all. Not like a body-builder, you know. Just strong. Just firm. But everybody's soft somewhere.

As I walked past this bathroom, I glanced in at Espinoza, who was bent awkwardly over the sink, staring into the mirror under the row of vanity lights.

Babe, he said.

Yes, I said, taking a few steps back to meet his gaze in the doorway. I was on my way to read in the living room.

Can you look at my eye? I think something's wrong.

Does it hurt?

Not exactly, he said. The things I look at just seem a bit blurry, he said. Espinoza turned back to the mirror and opened and shut his eyes, searching for a sign. This one, he said pointing. Does it look funny?

I took him by the shoulders, assumed a position of purposeful regard, and made an honest effort to find for Espinoza the defect he sought. I got closer and closer to his face, peering into his pupil, which dilated and contracted under my deepening shadow. His eyelid twitched.

Nope. Nothing, I said. It looks fine to me, I said. I shrugged.

Considering whether or not to trust my diagnosis, Espinoza ultimately turned back to the mirror, leaned in close, and looked again. He pinched his eyelashes between his fingertips and peeled the lids back to look underneath. I decided to leave him be.

I was sitting on the couch, turning pages in my book, when I heard Espinoza calling for me. He was in here, on his knees and peering down into the bowl of the toilet. His back was to me.

My eye, he said.

What?

It's in the toilet, he said. He turned to me, and indeed his right eye was no longer there. I don't know what happened, he said. It fell, he said.

I rushed to him, and looked down into the water. The surface was still unsettled. It was down there alright. No blood or guck or anything, just the big white ball that had been in Espinoza's head.

Well, you're not bleeding, I said.

No, and it didn't hurt, he said. It just came out.

How? What were you doing?

I was about to pee, he said.

Oh.

I was unzipping my pants, and the socket just sort of let go of it. I heard it splash. It was easy, he said.

Shall I retrieve it for you?

No, you shouldn't have to touch my eyeball, he said. And then he turned back to the bowl with a look of determination. He rolled up one sleeve. His hand began to descend from above, toward the water, and we were both quiet. But as his fingers drew lower and closer to the water, he paused. I'm scared, he said.

Why, I said.

I can't tell when the surface begins, he said. My depth perception is gone now, you know. I guess I'm just nervous. I don't want to touch the water before I expect to touch it.

I put my hand on Espinoza's shoulder. He turned back to me, and again I was shocked by the hole in his face. Let me get it, Espinoza. It's alright, I said.

So he stepped back and let me do the job. It wasn't difficult. I held out my palm with his eye resting on top for him to take back, should he want it. My arm was wet to my bony elbow, and toilet water dripped onto the floor.

Espinoza hesitated. Should I put it back in, he said.

Maybe, I said. Wash it first.

With soap? That would sting, he said.

Rinse it then. But don't put it back straight out of the toilet. Please. Espinoza held his eye under the tap and rinsed it as it stared into the open linen closet. And then, he raised the eye up to his face, looking into the mirror to make sure the pupil was pointing the correct direction.

It's loose, he said.

Please, stop taking it in and out like that. It's strange, Espinoza.

Now what, he said.

Well, do you want to keep it? If it doesn't fit anymore, do you really need it?

I suppose not, he said. I can see out of this one. It feels alright.

He stood before the mirror, staring out of his one eye into the hole left by the other. I didn't want to rush him, so I stood behind him, right there, and I waited for him to finish.

I guess I don't need it, he said after a while.

I'm sorry, darling, I said. I still love you.

These stairs here ascend to our bedroom, the crown of our house. The way is narrow, yes, but the skylight opens it up a bit—especially when the sun shines bright. Espinoza and I would climb these stairs when we sought slumber, and we would mosey down when we awoke. When I rose early, I would come down these stairs and sip tea at the table and wait for Espinoza's pajamas—with legs inside—to appear at the top.

The carpet is stained here. Twice. And both stains are that same dark red. One is from a time when Espinoza went sleepwalking, tripped on a step, and bashed his head into the handrail. I heard the crack and found him holding his bleeding forehead with his bare hand. The other spot is from a time when we were on our way to make love. We laughed, holding tightly onto each other as we stumbled upward, and merlot rocked back and forth inside the glasses we carried. I spilled a little.

This side of the bed was mine. That side was his. When the sun goes down, it shines right through that window and lights up the room a beautiful golden hue. On late summer nights, we'd read here side by side, and sometimes I would lean on his shoulder as the light faded away. I remember that the sheets were soft and satiny and light. There was no better feeling in the world than half-waking in the middle of the night to the sound of rain hitting the earth. In that not-quite-conscious state I would roll to Espinoza and feel under the sheets for his hands. Just to make sure he was still there. Firm hands, Espinoza had. And if I wanted to I could squeeze and squeeze and squeeze and he'd sleep through it with just the most pleasant look on his face.

One night I woke to the sound of quiet coughing. Espinoza, I said.

He said nothing, but his soft coughing continued. I shook his shoulder gently. Espinoza, I said again. He awoke with a gasp, and in the dark I watched his silhouette arch back dramatically until I feared he was trying to snap himself in half. I rose to my knees and held him in my

arms. From the darkness near my head he let out a strained whimper. Shhhhh, I said, not understanding what was happening, not knowing how to help. Shhhhhhhh, you're okay, you're okay, I repeated in the dark until my voice seemed quite separate from me. Under my shaking palms, the muscles in his back bulged with effort, and the sheets hung from his body like a swaddling cloth. You're okay, Espi, you'll be fine. Lay back down, I said. Please, I said. The sound of his light wheezing was blocked from my ears by the thick and rapid heartbeat in my head. Frantically, I felt for his face. Touching it, I felt tears streaming quickly down his cheek into the pillow. Under my fingertips, they lubricated my terrified reassurances. You're okay, I said. You're okay. And I tried to believe it.

And in the darkness, his back began to relax, to

soften. Down it came, slowly, and vertebrae popped quietly as they settled once again against the mattress. His breathing got better, but Espinoza had yet to say a word. Darling, I said once I felt I could manage any words at all. Darling, are you okay now?

His voice was thin and airy: I might be. But...

I lay next to him, in the warmth of his tears, which had slowed. I still had one arm around his torso, and I realized then that the weight of his body was disrupting my circulation. I listened to his breath, deep and raspy.

I think I've broken, he said.

No. No, you haven't. You're fine now.

You're wrong, he said.

I'm right. Let me get you a cold washcloth, I said.

I pulled my arm free. My bare feet found the carpet. I fum-

bled for the switch on the bedside lamp. With a click, the blood in the eyehole, the blood on the pillow—too much blood—was illuminated. His soft cheek. My fingers. Under the weight of this redness, my knees crumbled.

This is the front door, with its window, beveled like a prism. Sometimes it splits the light into bands of separate colors on the wall or on the carpet. Through the glass you can see the yard, how tall and tangled it grows.

This is the front door to my house. Here is the doorknob. Here is the lock.

In The Darkest Woods

In the darkest woods behind our house, there was a clearing.

Carefully, I tied the boy's left wrist to the fattest oak of our backyard with twine. "It stings so much, I think I might die," he told me.

"You might," I told him as I knotted.

"My hand will turn white and the blood will gather at the wrist above the knot until the veins burst open. My hand will explode off and I will fall onto the ground, blood streaming into the earth, and then I'll have to wait to be drained out before I really die. Imagine a completely drained me. I might die, you see?"

"You might," I said. I waved a farewell as he drew the twine ball closer, disappearing through the tree limbs. The fattest oak held its place. "In that case, the tree might too."

As the trees arched higher above him and the roots curled deeper beneath him, the twine snaked. The boy looked back and could still see the lawn and the house and its long windows. He knew that the old tree house was only thirty-two paces away, past the fallen gardening tools: rakes, pails, shovels, gloves, wheelbarrows. When he walked, the boy stepped only on the soft patches where the sunlight shone. The trees at the mouth of the forest were skinny so he moved quickly, the twine unraveling faster and faster so that there was absolutely no time to watch the centipedes skitter across the ground. His nose was running as the twine was unraveling and he didn't know what to wipe it on, for he was taught not to use his sleeve. At thirty-two paces, his cheeks were flushing a red too sharp in such woods and he could taste salt on his upper lip. He tilted his head back to see the old tree house, hidden behind the stretching branches. It was much too high and it was definitely not summer. "I won't climb it. The nails for the steps are bulging out like spikes and it could be incredibly dangerous. There could be a slip, a crash, a lack of someone there to catch you," the boy decided.

Past the old tree house, forty-nine paces later, the boy came across a cocoon. The translucent bulb lay against the moss of a stunted poplar. He took it into his hands, feeling its weightlessness. The woods were very quiet and the anthills beside his shoes were empty. When he squeezed the cocoon, he felt the velvet of the wings and the sticky yellow of the body between his fingers. "I thought it would be pretty like paint, like colors flooding together." The boy looked to his right, where the woods were a darker green and where a string of cocoons hung like pier lights. Their thin green hulls seemed to buzz and throb, aching to burst open. "I want to cut off this string and run to the right and squeeze every single one of those cocoons. I want them to explode into light and color and drip onto the ground with their painted blues and yellows and pinks," he said. The boy looked at the twine knotted at his wrist and back at the line he drew until he could see it no longer. He noticed that he was much too far to see

the house with its long windows. "But it's probably not possible," he said.

I told him that there was enough of the twine to get him to the clearing.

"I don't believe in the clearing. There are no such things in these woods. I will get so very lost and desolate and no one will ever be able to retrieve me. Years later, someone will find me lying in twine on a pile of old bark and black beetles in the darkest corner of the woods," he explained. "Mother, these woods are so dark, I can't see."

"Perhaps," I told him, looping the twine tightly around the oak's trunk. "But you aren't afraid of such things, are you?"

When the boy started to see the same thick trees with the same jagged, spidery limbs, he knew it was getting much too dark. It was then that the trees started making faces at him, their mouths curling rudely, their eyes dripping amber. Looking up at the canopy, he could barely make out the sky. "What color is it? Is it blue or gray or red?" he asked, unsure of the answer. The boy didn't know how many paces he had gone nor which direction he was going. He held the thinning twine ball closer to the heat of his chest. Now, the beams of sunlight on the ground were few and far between. To the boy, he seemed to be drawing out the longest, most foreign constellations. The twine was unraveling more slowly and the mass of string in his hand was painful to hold for his fingers were turning a blue purple from the cold.

"I should have picked up those gloves at the beginning of the woods, where the fallen gardening tools were. I would not be as cold in such darkness," the boy said, raising his hands with the twine ball to his small mouth. As he blew onto them, he was startled by how cold his own breath was. The prickling purple of his fingers deepened and a thin white frost settled between his nails. Perplexed, he stuck a finger into his mouth and closed his lips, moving it under the tongue. Nothing. "Have I turned into a frog?"

The boy looked around for someone to answer, but found no one. All the animals left, even the small ones, and the rocks refused to speak, even when he kicked them hard. It was then that he realized that his legs ached, from his socked feet to his thighs. His legs were too short to stretch and jump the distances of sunlight. The boy knew he must walk into the dark patches now.

Soon, he felt the streaming coldness between his legs. The bitter wet trailed down and dripped onto the leaves and moss. In the dark, snakes could slither up your legs and three-headed monsters could take you away. The boy turned his head to look back and could only see two feet of string, limp and gray against the darkness. The cold of his urine soaked through his pants and chilled the thin hairs on his legs. Trembling, he moved one foot into a dark space, thinking of the house dripping with long windows.

By Jane Wong

Suddenly, a deer darted in front of him, its soft brown hide flashing warmth into the sharp air. It moved silently; all the boy could hear was the throbbing of his cold fingers. Soon after, the boy was crying, moving wildly into the dark patches, trying to grasp onto the warmth the deer left. He could smell the scent of the deer, strong and thisty. "I'm afraid!" he cried, his voice echoing against the blackness of the tree trunks and stones and the spaces in between. "Won't you help me? I'm not warm!" he shouted as the deer ignored him, darting between the black limbs on its thin legs into a black darkness. "Why can't the deer hear me?" the boy asked, angrily. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Why can't the deer hear me?"

The twine ball had no form now. The boy clutched the mass of rough string in his palm as he moved frantically through the darkness, waving his free hand in front of him to feel the trees. The trees felt oily and strange and the boy felt the same.

"She lied, there is no clearing," he seethed. The boy squeezed his eyes shut and realized that it didn't matter. Open or closed, he saw the same never-ending blackness. The sound of his shoes hitting the ground floor grew louder and louder, slicking through leaves and worms. He imaged that the trees were slowly falling upon him.

"Why did she tie me to that fat oak? Why did she send me into these woods, these woods that get so dark I can't see? She lied, there is no clearing!" he cried with his eyes shut tightly. The boy could no longer make out his own hands. The boy could no longer tell if he had any twine.

In the darkest woods behind our house, there was a clearing.

When the boy ran into the clearing with soiled bottoms and shut eyes, he was weeping terribly, his wrist raw from his wild movements. Exhausted, he slumped against the fattest oak, sure that he was dying on a pile of old bark and black beetles.

I moved to him and rested my warm hand on his red cheek. The boy opened his eyes.

"I told you there was a clearing," I said, picking out the branches from his hair.

He was sobbing harder now, wiping the wet from his nose onto my sweater.

"This isn't a clearing!" he cried, his eyes now wide open. He pointed to the house with the long windows and the greenness of the lawn and at me. "This is our house! This was the beginning! This doesn't make any sense!"

I laughed at him, hugging his small frame close to mine as he wept. Slowly, I untied the twine from his wrist. "It might."

A House Full of Books

Jacob arrives home again to his reasonable, white house in Queens. It is a stunningly beautiful day and he got off the bus a stop early so he could walk and admire the sky and how tall and strong the trees that line his block have grown. The sun is shimmering through the air. It is lighting every molecule and nothing seems to be shady, except beneath the trees because it should be shady beneath trees because that is beautiful and calm. Jacob is watching things move slowly through the summer, through the heat, the leaves shake on their branches. A fat man with no shirt is watering his lawn, rhythmically moving the water from his hose, back and forth, he seems mesmerized by it, he bends the stream side to side with his hips, keeping his shoulders and arms rigid, maybe he is trying to become a part of the hose. Four young boys are playing

with a trash can. Now it is base for a game of freeze tag, next it will be home plate, and maybe later when they are feeling particularly rowdy they will find someone's younger brother and put him inside and roll him around, and brother will scream and they will laugh, hunched over splitting their guts. The can plays with them. Sometimes it is dancing, and they run into it, and knock it up onto the rim, and it will almost tip over but it spins back, because it is base and base should not fall over. A mother and a daughter sit in lawn chairs on the patch of grass outside of their house and point mirrors at themselves, casting enormous, Godzilla-like shadows of themselves on their plastic sided home. They stare past the tops of the mirrors at nothing, it is impossible to focus your eyes on anything when your body is so warm. It is a shame though that the sun is too

bright in the mirrors for them to see themselves, and see how brown and summery they've become. Jacob walks past and watches them, the daughter must be 19 and she is very pretty sitting there, blinded by the light and rendered mute by it in her comfortable chair. Standing in the street, he can feel how warm her skin is. He has felt like her before, or at least how he imagines she feels. Full of light and warmth as a child on Rockaway beach. His skin is salty from the Atlantic and he is lying on his back in the sand. He cannot open his eyes and he does not want to. The sun passes through his eyelids and through them he sees only pink, his blood underneath his skin. Making an imprint on the sand he watches the blood warm up. The soft pink, the arteries beneath his skin become visible, the blood moves through them, the tangled mass of circuits,

By Winston McCarthy

Observer

his tubes, flickering with life and warm sun. He sighs on the beach and his limbs tingle and then he is asleep. Jacob feels odd staring at the girl, for the obvious reasons, and because something about connecting his youth with hers seems, at that moment, inappropriate and makes him uneasy. He looks ahead and continues toward the end of the street, still conscious of the lush trees above him, the shadows at his feet and all the molecules floating around his head. He moves through it all, towards home.

The small studio in the back of the house, with the angled drawing table and wooden floorboards, seems always to be filled with light. The kind of warm afternoon light that is good for lying around in. The light seems orange and thick, but at the same time entirely permeable and weightless, if that is at all possible. The orange light floods the room, floods it to the cusp, so much so it seems that, if there wasn't so much oxygen in the room, you might have to crane your neck up in the corners just to breathe. But the light makes you breathe better, makes your skin warm and sensitive. You sit at the desk working and you are prone to small fits of uncontrollable joy. Your muscles tense up and your forehead, and your toes. They all curl up tight and you smile and close your eyes and breathe. It is beautiful to work in here. You might think it easy to be distracted here. No. The light lends itself to productivity. The room can make you bold, and clearheaded, and strong. The light pushes on you, pushes out the next step, or the next penstroke, or brushstroke, or keystroke, or whatever. The room is entirely present, it is constant, but at the same time passive, quiet.

This is Jacob's room, Jacob's studio, on the top floor of Jacob's comfortable and reasonable house. He is an inker at Splash Comics. His inking can be seen in the extremely popular comic book, *The Catalyst*, and also in the less mainstream *Paraguay, Paraguay*. He inks the drawings given to him, shades them, gives them depth and sense. He can give them mystery. Great shadows on the page, a lurking villain among them, Jacob blacks out the color. He came to Splash from art school in Maryland with a degree in illustration after a minor attempt at entering the swanky New York art scene. In high school, he remembers pouring jars of ink onto thick, cream-colored paper, letting it pool out and taking paper towels and sucking ink off here and there, creating forms from the black puddle. His ink spill works were kind of like reduction sculptures with Rorschach tests instead of stone. Now he was filling in the black, like some sort of shading machine, at the

office for eight hours straight. But he loves it, the precision of it, the shadowy importance of it. Who are we without shadows? If we stand in the sun and cast no shadow, we are not living, unless of course we are standing in a shadow, unless we are standing in the presence of something great.

Jacob is asleep on the second and top floor of his square white house in Queens. The house has paneled wooden siding that is painted white, but is not clean. A rainy spring left the house looking like it was splattered by mud and muddy water, very modern art actually, I guess that's a reason not to paint your house white, or wear white pants. There are two doors to the house, both are green. The front door is made of some kind of cheap wood but looks nice enough, with generic door carvings and even a small glass window. There are three gold stickers stuck to the door, if you read them from left to right they say "321," but Jacob reads them backwards. The backdoor is like the front door but painted white, with a large green slat window and a white screen door. This door leads into an overstocked pantry where Jacob likes to sit on the floor and organize his postcard collection. Sometimes while on the floor there he looks up and out through the open door and down the hallway to the kitchen. He sees the perspective lines running down the hallway, he follows them to the vanishing point, and focuses his eyes there and thinks about space, his space, and the world, or the illusion of one, and he laughs because he knows all its tricks.

Jacob's mother is a writer, living in Park Slope, alone, who has written about many things and different times. She writes with what some people might call a fear of God, but it is really just an awareness of her death, an awareness that has made her bold and inspired. This understanding has let her create herself as a tangible object in time, she has taken on her narrative and wears it around in the house, posing in front of the mirrors and grinning at herself. She has let herself become prolific, in front of the typewriter stroking her large belly, swollen with words. She is far away from Jacob in the same city; they speak sometimes on the phone, each in the vernacular of their own respective understandings.

Convinced by co-workers to come out for a drink after work, Jacob thinks to himself at the bar, "Is ice sound-proof?" All the sound cuts out and the lights flicker for a few moments and things are still or move slowly. The

liquor bottles crack along the bar and drip paste on the rubber carpet. The felt on the table stands on end. Cigarettes sizzle out. The flat sheet of smoke gathering at the ceiling drops down to exactly eye level. The customers look like little white farmhouses, motionless and quiet, chimney-smoke as frosty carbon-dioxide spilling out from between their lips, perched across the region on their own individual plots. And Jacob breathes in and exhales smoke. It is thick and hangs heavily, he runs his finger through it, cutting it in half, then again, bisecting, he cuts a circle and another. He tilts his head back up and watches it collect at the sheet. It is bizarre to see only the bottoms of people's faces, to see only their mouths. He wanders around the room, crouched below the smoke, inspecting the customers. From below they look like walking holes, packing themselves, moving air, inhale, exhale. Their hands are always full. They are holding, never touching, never reaching. Jacob kneels down. The floor is linoleum and stained. He puts his palms down in front of his knees. Then his cheek to the tiles. From here he sees their feet, wrapped in thick shoes. He sees the bottoms of their shoes, and he is confused, why are they floating? Do they have no weight in this world? They seem imprecise, entirely indefinite, transient. They carry no earth on their backs and put none of their own on the world. They float above endings, ice and death, above secret doors and smoke screens, held up, with invisible ropes they are hung on clocks, unaware of their feet.

Jacob is afraid beneath the smoke and in the silence. Sobbing, he covers his ears with his hands and shrieks. The sound is destructive across the space. The smoke sheet tears, the world cracks open and slowly begins to move again. It looked like rewind, that is to say, if there were such a thing as backwards and forwards in this place.

You and Me and God Makes Three

6

By Fiona Quirk-Goldblatt

Edward was unafraid. God had saved him, and He would save his son too, for God was good and mighty, and Edward knew this. He knew that Gabriel was unable to help himself, paralyzed and frightened somewhere deep within the shell of his body; what kind of father would he be if he did nothing? He knew what the path of righteousness was, and he was walking it, there was no doubt as he waited, now, for something more to happen.

"You're sick," Gabriel had said weeks earlier, virtually spitting the words at him from the same spot where Edward now stood in the kitchen, "you know that? You need help, I'm serious, you need therapy or something."

"I don't need help from any earthly entity. I have faith in God and He protects me, He is the one who heals me. You're the one who needs help. God can help you too if you just let him."

Gabriel had shaken his head and walked from the kitchen, up the stairs and into his room, shutting the door behind him. Edward followed, a few steps behind, opening the door a little, standing outside. He looked through the open door at his son, sitting on the bed. He contemplated removing the door as punishment. This punishment had worked on him in the past, but Edward knew it would no longer. A thought came into his mind as though placed there by the hand of the Metatron himself: there was a malevolent presence exerting its influence on Gabriel. She had taken on a clever form, she thought she had planned everything out perfectly and she was destroying Gabriel, but she had not anticipated interference and had looked into Edward's eyes with fear at her core.

When he was born of the only woman Edward could ever love, the mate God intended for him, he knew Gabriel was physically human, a helpless baby, and yet something more than human, an angelic guide, and it was clear what his name should be. Gabriel, the archangel who told Mary of her duty. Gabriel, the name that meant "my God's strength will save me." Gabriel was to protect Edward from himself, from a constant threat hovering over his head, a nebulous threat that Edward didn't understand, didn't acknowledge, couldn't name. He looked at his son and thought to himself, *Do you want to corrupt him?* And it was in this way that the nameless threat was banished. God had helped him, with the gift of a son, who was now seventeen, who now sat on the bed, back to his own father.

Edward looked through the doorway at Gabriel, took a deep breath, and spoke. "I understand now. Before, I was blinded by love for my son, but my eyes have been opened and I see no trace of him here. I know what must be done to save him." For a moment, it occurred to him that perhaps there was no demon possessing his son, that perhaps he had fallen like Lucifer did, and Adam and Eve

after him, but he pushed the thought from his mind. Edward knew him, and knew if Gabriel forsook him it was against his free will. Gabriel sat motionless on his bed, staring at the ground.

Edward left, determined to become more active in his faith than ever before, even more than he had been since Gabriel's mother died. He began his research. That day, he learned the true name for the Metatron: Enoch, son of the ancients, who walked with God and lived for 365 years, whom the angels sent to heaven to beg. He, the only righteous one among them, begged on behalf of the mad, lustful angels who seduced women and enraged God, who granted his forgiveness and sent a flood to destroy the beastly offspring. He learned many truths that had long ago been deemed too powerful for the masses, who had faith of no extraordinary measure.

Now, standing in the kitchen in front of the demon his son's body housed, he felt exhausted in the face of such evil, incapacitated though it was for the moment. He went up the stairs, prayed for his son's soul and for God to imbue him with strength. He prayed that his son, once restored, would help him banish Lillith to beyond the searchable seas, force her to invoke Samael elsewhere. He lay on his bed and enjoyed the restful sleep of the truly righteous.

Caleb was unable to tell how long ago it was when he last saw Squid-man. "Saw" in the sense of interacted with, stood in the same room as. It so happened that he literally saw him at that moment, the moment he was wondering about when that day was. Even if this day had been a good day, he wouldn't have been able to tell how much time had passed, and today was not a good day. Soon the more pressing matter that was in front of his eyes regained his attention: Rabbit, whose protection had been stripped away, whose fragile body was being squeezed tight by Squid-man.

Caleb recalled the night, standing in the kitchen with Rabbit and Squid-man, when he saw the latter for the second to last time. It seemed as though years had passed, he felt so removed from that time, and he felt a great distance between the kitchen he stood in on that day and the kitchen he now stood outside, whose window he looked through. Caleb thought of this instance as having taken place in the night time but it might not have been; all he knew was that it was dark out and Squid-man would return when it was once again bright outside.

Squid-man was great and powerful and frightening to Caleb, who saw him and shook with fear. He sometimes looked like a man, but was, in fact, a terrible mixed being, torso and head of a man with the tentacles of a

squid, infinitely long and infinitely many slimy, ink-soaked coils piled shoulder-high, pushing in on Caleb from all sides, making his breaths come shallow and labored.

Caleb entered the kitchen where Rabbit and Squid-man had been speaking; of what, Caleb had little recollection or understanding. Rabbit seemed upset by the situation, as he usually did with matters concerning Squid-man, which made Caleb upset as well. Caleb saw Squid-man, still facing Rabbit, reach his arms up over his head and part his hair, revealing another face underneath it, a face red and covered in sweat from holding its breath, hiding from Rabbit. The second face shushed Caleb, an index finger placed over the mouth, pointing down. Caleb placed a finger over his own mouth and nodded. The second face opened its mouth and more ink dribbled out.

Caleb stood behind Rabbit, who was made of wings, giant feathered wings that protected the fragile body nestled in between them, Rabbit's body that Caleb rarely saw anymore, giant wings which held Caleb until just then when Rabbit moved to his side.

Squid-man, Squid-man of many faces, then backed away, his skin becoming fluorescent, shining and blinking in bands of blue and white, a whiter white than Caleb had seen before, horizontal bands moving up and down the length of his entire body, tentacles included, and Caleb was paralyzed from the sight of it, hypnotized by Squid-man, like the prey of a real squid, or a real scuttle fish, until Squid-man backed out of the kitchen and out of the front door.

It started to become bright outside again, and he was in the kitchen alone with Rabbit at the beginning of this bright-time, Rabbit whom he loved with all his heart. *This, he thought, has always been true since before the world started changing, and will always be true after it finishes.* It had been true long before Rabbit became Rabbit and would be true long after he ceased to exist, known as Rabbit or not, after he ceased to exist in any cosmic sense, which was lifetimes sooner than Caleb was prepared for, Rabbit who then spread his wings out and revealed his face and arms to Caleb.

Much later, maybe even days later, they were in the kitchen again. Squid-man asked Caleb, "Why do you call him Rabbit?"

Caleb replied, "Because he is one. Can't you see how many wings he has?"

Squid-man smiled, ink filling the spaces between his teeth, and said, "Yes, I do."

Caleb peered through the kitchen window. Squid-man stood before Rabbit, pathetic, frail Rabbit, stripped of protection. Squid-man's tentacles recoiled from Rabbit, contracted and disappeared into Squid-man's form, now

that of a human, though Caleb knew better than to be tricked. Where tentacles had been moments earlier, gallons of ink poured onto the floor beneath Squid-man. They remained after he left, and the level of ink rose, a swimming pool of ink in the kitchen, and soon Rabbit was neck-deep.

Gabriel was in the kitchen, sitting at the small table where he usually sat for meals, across from Dad's seat. The straight-backed chair faced away from the table today, and Gabriel was seated in it, legs bound to the legs of the chair with nylon rope, hands tied behind his back, behind the chair, rope across his chest tying his torso to the high chair back. Dad stood, staring, in front of Gabriel, whose head lolled back and came to a rest on the chair. Gabriel felt weak. He made an effort to hold his head upright, but the room spun, so he let it fall back again.

"You will release my son or you will experience further consequences."

"I'm Gabriel, I am Gabriel." He spoke slowly and as clearly as he could. His throat was dry but his tongue was wet with blood and the taste made him nauseous. "Dad, I need some water, Dad, please."

Dad knelt down and placed his left hand behind Gabriel's head and held it upright, then looked Gabriel straight in the eyes, and slapped him.

"I'm not a fool, Samael. You're tricky, but I read about you in the Apocrypha." He pointed a finger at Gabriel. "You'll call me 'Peterson' like I told you."

He stood upright again and looked at Gabriel, whose face stung on one side from the slap and on the other from a gash that ran the width of his cheek, who thought he saw a flicker of pity or sadness or some kind of emotion flash across his Dad's face for the first time all that evening or night as he stood there for a few moments before turning and slowly, heavily climbing the stairs.

Gabriel's head dropped onto his chest; he sat and cried, trying to make as little noise and as few facial expressions as possible, trying to prevent the dried wound on his cheek from splitting open again. His tears left clean channels behind in the remnants of dried blood that covered his skin and ash that caked it.

Gabriel wondered what he might have done to prevent this. He should have told someone what was happening, but he couldn't have known it would escalate to this. Perhaps he should have acquiesced, he should have pretended to agree with his Dad. But then he would have had to allow Caleb to be hurt, and Gabriel couldn't do that. If he had to do it again knowing what would happen, he firmly believed it would have played out the same way that day, though he would have run away afterwards to tell the police or call a hospital or something.

"Why do you hang around with that boy?" his Dad had asked him in the morning, that of the day that started the real trouble, "Why is he so important to you?"

"He's my best friend, and he has been since we were little; he's still the same person as he always was, somewhere in there. It would be cruel to cut him out of my life because of something he can't help."

"It would be best if you didn't spend time with him. The boy has a lot of demons, it's only going to hurt you in the end. I don't know why you won't listen to me, I'm trying to reason with you here."

Caleb came in the front door without knocking, like he always did, like he always had done. "It's a good day today! And I feel good today, too, Rabbit, I really do." A good day for Caleb was a cognitively good day, a day when his perceptions were relatively less warped than what had become the norm, and on most good days his spirits were not so high as they had been on this one.

Gabriel's Dad eyed Caleb. "Why do you call him Rabbit, Caleb?"

"Because he is a Rabbit." Gabriel elaborated for Caleb. "He calls me that because in Chinese astrology I'm a Brown Rabbit, May 20, born in the year of the Red Rabbit. He told me once that I've reached my last life and won't be reincarnated anymore."

Gabriel's Dad grimaced at Caleb. "Caleb, wait outside."

Caleb's smile faded, and he hesitated before continuing, "But don't...don't you see all his wings? They're proof of his lives, they have to protect him."

"I know he has wings. Wait outside." Gabriel looked at Caleb, who looked back at him and then sulked out the door.

Dad looked at him. "I don't want to hear any more of that evil talk in this house, voodoo talk about reincarnation."

"Dad, it's not voodoo. You don't even try to understand anything before you condemn it. And besides, you know Caleb's sick, you know he's getting worse. And you know I don't believe in that stuff, and you know he can be touchy, and he was feeling good; you know all these things and I don't know why you had to go and do that."

"It's our job to protect each other, and I don't like you hanging around with that boy."

"Oh come on, he's harmless." "He's wrong in the head in more ways than one, and if I had it my way, you wouldn't consort with that psychopath anymore."

Gabriel paused, then spoke, eyes on the floor, trying to calm himself in front of his Dad, who didn't take "effeminate shows of emotion" well. "He's my best friend, and I don't know how long it'll be before he can't even recognize me. You could be a little more sensitive."

"I just don't want anything bad to happen to you." "You can trust me to pick my own friends and take care of myself."

"I do trust you. It's just that I don't trust him." Gabriel sighed, torn between irritation and disgust, and walked outside to Caleb, who sat, dejected, on the swing hanging from the tallest branch of one of the trees in the front yard. He placed his hand on top of Caleb's head, who looked up at him and smiled. Gabriel looked back toward the house and saw his Dad watching through the living room window; he looked back down and said to Caleb, "Come on, let's go."

Gabriel sat in the chair, trying to remember what he and Caleb did all day long, but couldn't.

Now that he thought about it, sitting in that chair, head lolling around, he couldn't remember specifics about much else; he just remembered that they always spent time together, even if it was just for a few minutes a day. Caleb got stranger and stranger as the years went by, he laughed or cried at strange times, and began speaking in sentences that made no sense. Caleb's disease was slow in development and caught late, and neither of these things meant good times ahead for Caleb, who was put on rounds of medication that had little effect, indicating he might not recover, and Gabriel watched his friend's decline. Caleb had good days and bad days and days in between; on his good days he was a melancholy, slightly confused shadow of his former self, and on the worst days Caleb crouched, motionless, in a corner of his bedroom for hours on end, sometimes all day long, staring into space, reacting to nothing.

All Gabriel remembered was that it had been an excellent day in between the two encounters with his Dad. They had had fun without doing anything particularly special, and it was almost like Caleb wasn't really disappearing, like he had gone away and come back for good.

They walked back to Gabriel's house, in a near-silence that Gabriel would describe as a comfortable one, around dusk, around 8:30, and saw his Dad in the car, pulling out of the driveway, onto the dirt road that wound through the woods around their house, leaving for work, his night shift driving a truck, picking up bread from a nearby baker to make overnight deliveries to grocery stores in and around their town. Every day he got off at 5 AM and went to early morning mass at 5:30.

They went into the kitchen, and Gabriel headed for the refrigerator, opened it, and, seeing it virtually empty, asked, head still inside, "So, Caleb, you wanna order a pizza or what?" He waited a moment, and upon receiving no answer, removed his head from the white insides of the fridge. He closed the door and saw Caleb, crouching up against the wall, hugging his arms around himself.

"Jesus," Gabriel said. "Please don't be doing what I think you're doing, please, you were doing so good!"

"No," Caleb said, "I'm alright. It's just comforting to sit this way."

"God, you scared the crap out of me." Gabriel crouched in front of Caleb. "I don't know how you do it when you sit like that so long. Just thinking about it hurts my legs." They crouched like that in silence for a minute or so, both looking at the ground, until Caleb stood up, arms crossed in front of him, and leaned against the wall, and Gabriel stood up after him.

"Well...what was that about?"

"I just..." Caleb looked, stony-eyed, at the floor, and then his face crumpled for a second as though he might cry, before he composed himself and continued. "It's just that on good days I know what's going on, I know I'm going crazy and I'm never going to be able to go back, someday I'm not going to be me at all anymore, and it's really sad, and it's really fucking scary." He closed his eyes and tears ran down his face; he lifted one hand and covered the bridge of his nose with it, pinching the inside corners of his eyes. He opened them a moment later, staring at the floor, and Gabriel just watched him until he lifted his eyes and made eye contact, and then Gabriel moved forward and hugged Caleb, who buried his eyes in Gabriel's neck and hugged back, and shook both their bodies from crying.

I have to be strong for both of us, Gabriel thought, no matter how hard it is.

Soon Caleb stopped crying, his breathing still ragged and quick. He lifted his head from Gabriel's neck, and kissed the wet spot he left behind. He lifted his head, paused, then parted his lips slightly and kissed it again, tasting the salt from his own tears mixed with that from Gabriel's sweat. Caleb pulled back a little, loosening their embrace, and looked at Gabriel, who was a little taller than he, who looked right back at him, silent. Caleb leaned in quickly and kissed him, gently, quickly, their lips barely touching, and then pulled back again and waited, looking Gabriel in the eye again, and Gabriel looked back, wondering what he should do, shit, shit, shit, what should he do.

Caleb looked down, dropped his arms to his sides and started to remove himself from Gabriel's arms, but Gabriel tightened his hold on him, made him look in his eyes, pressed Caleb against the wall, and kissed him, longer and deeper, feeling Caleb's tongue against his own. Caleb's hand moved up Gabriel's back and came to a rest on the back of his head, pressing him closer still.

Sitting in the chair, coughing, no longer tasting blood, Gabriel remembered the kiss, imagined that he could still feel Caleb's lips on his, and just before a welcomed loss of consciousness, he briefly wondered if he was passing out or just falling asleep.

Edward woke from his sleep and reflected on the day that he discovered the demons hiding in front of his very face.

"Faggot! Get off him!" Gabriel had jumped away from the beast who was corrupting him, the beast who paled at seeing Edward, whose eyes went wide at the sight. Edward saw emotion betrayed on Gabriel's face, what he had mistaken for guilt but now recognized as a struggle against the demon trying to take him over.

Edward lunged toward Lillith, the beast hidden behind the face of a weak boy, and raised his hand to strike her. Gabriel jumped in front of her, gave his body to her as a shield, knowing Edward could not strike him. This was the moment Edward later recognized as the moment Gabriel lost his battle with the demon Samael.

Lillith, Adam's first wife, who was cleverer than he, who refused her place as inferior to him, who refused his supremacy in sexual matters, was before him. Lillith who was banished by God, who became a she-demon and cursed Eve after her, now possessed a mentally weak Caleb. She had forced the sin of homosexuality onto Gabriel, who did not recognize her in Caleb, and invoked a great evil into him in this way; Gabriel's physical body was now in the hands of Samael, the prince of demons, who made her his princess at the beginning of time.

Edward, however, did not realize this until afterwards.

"Faggots," he yelled, "I won't tolerate this foulness in my house! Gabriel, step aside!"

His son disobeyed and stood his ground, hands curling into fists. "You can't hurt him, I won't let you. He's mine." His eyes were glazed over and dark. Lillith moved forward slightly and rested her head on Samael's shoulder, put her hands on his back, taunting Edward.

Edward reeled, confused, not yet knowing these words were coming from Samael. "What?" He lowered his hand. "Gabriel...why would you say that? What would your mother think if she were alive?"

"What?" Gabriel's eyes danced, and their mischievous light illuminated the whole kitchen. "What do you mean, Dad? Mom's alive."

"...What?" "She's alive, you know that."

Edward stammered out a response, "What—what are these lies?"

"They're not lies. You're just insane." Samael laughed through Gabriel's eyes; these were not the words of his son. "She said you never really loved her. You used to fight with her all the time!"

"No, no, she died!" Edward felt his rage renewed and lunged forward again.

"No!" Gabriel yelled, then "Caleb, run!" Gabriel pushed Edward away and Lillith, coward that she was, ran out the door.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me, you're the one who has problems. You're sick, you know that? You need help, I'm serious." Samael stood tall, triumphant, arrogant.

Edward was full of anger; he could barely follow Samael as he walked upstairs.

He soon recognized another demon in the situation, when he learned the name Asmodeus, the demon of anger, who was trying to gain control of Edward, the only one who could diffuse the oncoming pandemonium. He searched the hidden texts for a solution, and found it in the Testament of Solomon, 5:9, "Then I adjured him by the name of the Lord Sabaoth, 'Asmodeus, fear God, and tell me by which angel you are thwarted.' The demon said, 'Raphael, the one who stands before God.'" Edward prayed to Raphael, his rage was calmed, and his ability to reason was restored to him.

Lillith and Samael, together, must, Edward concluded, be trying to create their own domain, a new kingdom of evil on Earth, starting in this isolated bit of forest where Edward lived with his son, where his wife had lived with them before she died. Edward didn't just have to save his son; he had to save the world as well. He had to seize the opportunity when it presented itself to him, to drive Samael from Gabriel, who would be his greatest ally in the fight once he was restored.

The opportunity had come and he had not wasted it, the evening before, when Lillith and Samael were separated. He had allowed them to continue to see each other, had tricked them into thinking he did not see the truth behind their corporeal disguises.

Samael entered the kitchen silently, and Edward remained silent as well, standing directly behind him until he turned around, saying, "I'm starved, what's for dinner?" and then Edward struck Samael in the face. He dropped to the floor and writhed a bit, looked up and around in confusion. He spit blood from his mouth, and after he struggled to his hands and knees, Edward kicked him in the head, and he fell to the ground, unconscious, bleeding from a fresh wound at the scalp, where Edward's boot had landed. Edward felt pain in his heart; he had never lifted a hand to his son before, and had to remind himself it wasn't Gabriel who twitched before him. He lifted the demon off the floor, heavy with an unnatural weight, sat him in a chair, tied him to it with ropes, and anointed him with holy oil in crosses on his forehead and the tops of his feet. He cut a slit across the length of the demon's cheek, and gathered some of the blood in a glass. Samael was in control, but the blood was still his son's, still that of a creature more than a human. He picked up a bowl from the table, full of the ash of burned palm leaves, and threw a handful of it at

Samael's face, where it stuck to sweat, blood, and oil.

Samael slowly regained consciousness. He wiggled his feet, wiggled his fingers and hands, moved his knees back and forth, swiveled his hips in an effort to find any slack in the rope, or weakness at all, but failed.

"There are some drawbacks to a human body, aren't there."

"Dad, what's going on...untie me."

"Don't call me 'Dad.' Call me Peterson. You can't confuse me, I know about you. Praise be to God for making the truck break down or else I might never have known, but I do know, I know about your plans for a new hell on earth, and I'm going to stop you."

"But...Dad..."

Edward slapped him. "Stop it, Samael." They stared at each other.

"Peterson...I need some water."

Edward poured wine into the glass containing Gabriel's blood, blood he knew was still holy. He held the glass to Samael's lips, who took a sip and spat it out. "Stop!" he yelled, but Edward pinched his nose and tilted his head back, forced him to drink it. He sputtered and coughed. "It burns my throat!" he cried, and then vomited it back up.

"That," Edward said, stepping around the red puddle on the floor, "is the Blood of Christ. I took it from the church, the leftover wine from mass. I'm sure they know it's being used for a good cause. You can throw it up all you want but it'll still be in you, burning you from inside until you let my son go."

He stood up and washed his hands. "You know, I almost believed you when you said my wife was still alive.

Testament of Solomon, 18:22, 'The 18th demon said, 'I am called Modobel. I separate wife from husband. If anyone writes the names of the eight fathers and places them in doorways, I retreat immediately.' I did this, I wrote the names of the eight father-kings of Egypt on pieces of paper and put them in doorways and nothing happened. My wife is not on this earth anymore. You were trying to get replace me with Asmodeus, but I got rid of him instead."

"Please stop."

"You know what to do to make me stop."

"What, what, tell me, please."

"Take control of your woman and leave here and don't return, that will make it stop."

Blood dripped into his eyes and he cried out

again. Edward took in his hand a crucifix, and pressed it against the wound in Samael's cheek. Samael moaned and tilted his head back.

"Worship the image of God. But if now you will not worship, the Lord God will be wrathful with you.' Life of Adam and Eve Vita, 15:2. Michael said that, you remember him, don't you? Now you must recognize God's hand at work in me!"

Edward was distracted from these thoughts by the sound of cries coming from the kitchen. He ran from his room and down the stairs, hoping Samael was despairing and subsiding, but instead found Lillith there, sitting on top of Samael, kissing his mouth. Samael opened his mouth slightly and coughed blood onto Lillith's face, and she cried more, recoiled and wiped her face.

Edward grabbed her by her hair, and she screamed, grabbed his hands, and fell off of Samael. "Slut!" he yelled, "Always wanted to be on top!" He forced her to the ground, pressed her face into the floor, held her there, and decided to teach her a lesson, make her his in the way God intended, man in control of woman.

Caleb knew he had to save Rabbit, who hadn't moved for several minutes, whose head was tipped back, just barely above the rising ink. There was no one to help him; all the animals in the woods were silent, afraid of Squid-man. He ran to the door and opened it, but the ink didn't spill out of the door, it remained, suspended against an invisible barrier, and Caleb saw Rabbit's face become submerged. Caleb was afraid, but ran into the barrier, and broke it with his body. The ink spilled out onto the front lawn, out onto the dirt roads, into the woods and kept spilling out. He struggled against the current flowing out the door, wading towards Rabbit, whose eyes were closed, lungs full of ink. He whimpered, and pushed hard on Rabbit's chest, trying to force the ink out, but Rabbit's frail body just creaked and yielded under his hands.

Rabbit can't come back if Rabbit goes, he thought, sat on him to get close enough, and placed his mouth on Rabbit's, breathed for him. Rabbit coughed thick ink onto his face and he cried out of joy that Rabbit was yet alive, and kept breathing into him, cried and wiped ink from his face, wailing like a man who had never learned to speak.

He felt tugging on his hair, hard tugging, and he screamed as tentacles wrapped around him, writhing and

wrapping around his entire body, giant suckers pulling on his skin, pressing him down on the wet, ink-stained floor, ink which turned red as Caleb's skin touched it.

Gabriel woke to Caleb's screams. He saw his father pressing him against the floor with his body, pulling his head up by the hair with one hand, while the other sneaked around to Caleb's front and unbuttoned his jeans. Gabriel shook his head and blinked his eyes, unsure if he were having a nightmare or not. The pains and dizziness in his head told him he was awake, as did the fact that he retched, nothing left in his stomach to vomit up. He slowly moved his head back down onto his chest, and looked at his father, who was about to unzip his own pants.

"Look at you," Gabriel said. Edward froze.

"Look at you," he said again. "You're so excited! You want to fuck a boy so badly!"

His father stared up at Gabriel, pale and sweating. "No...no," he stammered, "This is Lillith! She's a demon! She!"

"You do want it. You want to do it so bad!"

Edward scrambled away from Caleb, who moaned and rolled onto his back.

"I know you're a faggot, too. I know it!"

"No...no..." Edward shook his head, raised his shaking hands over his face. He uncovered it and looked at Gabriel. "Why would you do this?"

"You don't understand, I didn't do this to you. You can't change what you are."

"You're a liar! I know what you are, you can't trick me!" Edward rose to his feet, grabbing a knife off of the counter. Gabriel started to cry. "Tears aren't going to save you now."

Caleb watched Squid Man's tentacles envelop Rabbit, and when they retracted, Rabbit was not there.

"Rabbit's gone, he's gone, he's not coming back, he's gone," Caleb began to cry. Squid-man took the shape of a man as he said,

"That's right. It's just you and me and God, now."

Willa's Day

By Ben Richter

8

Willa was having a most wonderful morning. Her mother had left her underneath the largest tree in the little triangular park between the three roads. She was wearing her best white-with-blue-flowers dress and her favorite orange galoshes even though it wasn't raining. Her mother had gone to run some errands, and it might take a long time. Willa was a very responsible young woman now to be left all on her own in the park.

The man came only a few minutes later in a silly striped suit that flapped in the wind. He had an oddly mischievous smile on his face. Although he was tall and wore a man's suit and walked in the park all by himself, he seemed more like a large little boy. He didn't walk like a man. The toes of his shoes were capped with silver. Willa was overjoyed when he noticed her and decided, she was sure, that she was special enough to merit his attention. He strode over to her with one hand hidden behind his back.

"Do you know what I've got for you, Miss?"

He kept his legs straight but leaned far over to see her, his face close to hers. She saw stubby whiskers on his cheeks and uneven sprigs of black hair spurring out from under his large hat. Willa, who had learned to try her best not to stare, nevertheless felt compelled to gaze back up at him. She said nothing.

After a moment, a wide-lipped smile creased his face and his hand withdrew from behind his back to reveal nine white flowers, with crisscrossed petals and no dark spot in the center.

"They're almost like the ones on your dress; opposite colors, but they'll match nonetheless."

The man held his hand extended for a moment longer before Willa grasped the flowers firmly, and told the man with gracious appreciation: "Thank you."

He withdrew to his full height, turned, and walked a few paces before he spun back to Willa. The man lifted his hat and gave a slight dip, allowing the remainder of his dark locks to spill forward. Then he strode off.

This was Willa's best morning because no one had ever given her flowers before. Since her mother was running errands, and might not be back for a very long time, Willa felt it might be safe to venture some exploration. She kept the flowers gripped tightly in her hand as she plodded down the sidewalk, her feet flapping inside the oversized galoshes.

After carefully looking each way, she crossed the street, passing a briefcase-carrying businessman and a grandmotherly woman walking a dog. She discovered a row of small shops and, nestled in between a jeweler and a bakery, a café. Willa had never had coffee before, but she imagined it would prove her to be very mature and womanly. Luckily, her arm was long enough to reach the antique door handle, and she heaved the thick door open and squeezed inside.

Finding herself in a forest of legs, she waded through the thicket to the corner of the room and seated herself next to a potted ficus, laying her bouquet carefully behind the plant. Willa decided to wait until it was less busy to order her coffee. A mature young woman could wait until the other customers were served. She contented herself to examine the interesting footwear and pants of the taller people around her.

A minute later, she realized she had to go to the bathroom, and was about to depart when a familiar silver glint on a nearby pair of shoes caught Willa's eye. The striped pants confirmed that the man was, indeed, this morning's floral benefactor. Hiding behind the plant to remain incognito, Willa observed with increasing excitement that he took a seat nearby. The grandmother and her dog were sitting across from him.

"There you are," the older woman greeted him, moving the newspaper she had just begun to read. "You took your time on your morning stroll today." The little chortling laugh that followed seemed dry. "Cute suit. You're such a child."

Willa heard his voice reply, though she couldn't see his face. "I believe it was you who said we're all just children, playing at life. That's what you wrote, isn't it?"

"You're sensitive this morning," the woman replied. This seemed, to Willa, unusual for a conversation with one's grandmother. Willa usually tried not to listen to people's conversations, because it often got her in trouble. This time, however, she couldn't help it. She still had to go to the bathroom, though.

"That isn't coffee, is it, Delilah?" the man asked. Delilah croaked her humorless chuckle again as she scratched her dog's ears. She handed her mug to the man and told him to find out for himself. After peering into its murky depths, he declined and slid it back.

She sipped her beverage and sniffed. "Why don't you ever bring me flowers anymore?"

"I was going to, today, actually." The woman snorted in response to his claim. "I was just running late."

Willa could stand it no longer. Spotting the restroom not too far away, she paused only to retrieve her flowers before hastening as quietly as possible in its direction. Her subjects were too engrossed in their conversation to notice.

As she pondered their relationship, it occurred to Willa that perhaps Delilah was not the man's grandmother after all. She certainly wasn't a proper grandmother, the way she looked at him. It seemed the man liked Delilah and she liked him, but that she was not very happy. Willa hoped that the man, at least, was happy, but now she was less sure than when she had met him.

When she had finished, she crept back to her hiding spot behind the ficus and resumed her

surveillance. The dog was licking Delilah's bare ankles.

"I think it's about time," the woman was saying, "so after I see William, I'm going to the lake tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? You can't do it tomorrow." The man had switched chairs; Willa could see his face now.

"Yes, tomorrow," the woman said, "and it won't help to tell me what I can't do."

"I'm just saying, that's a little abrupt. Don't you think you just might be making a mistake here?"

"You've made more than your share of mistakes."

The man sunk lower in his chair. "That's not what this is about."

"I know it isn't. But don't think those things don't matter."

The man seemed frustrated. He shifted, leaning forward. "But you admit it's about me. So why — look, didn't you come here to tell me what to do? You've always been there to let me know when I'm doing the wrong thing."

Her terse reply followed quickly. "If you don't like it, why are you still with me? You could have your pick of girls your age."

He slumped again. "It's not like that at all. It's just, in your writings, and in all our discussions and everything, you've always got some profound insight. You've always got all the answers."

"You still think that, don't you? You're still just a fan." She hesitated a moment, then softened. "I don't have any more answers than you do. I'm no more or less of a human being. You know me, but you don't understand. I wake up every morning and look at myself, at my fragile body that isn't so safe to be in anymore. Every morning, I ask myself how I possibly could have expected for it to be any different. And every day, I still feel like I'm losing a little bit more."

His face was red. "Well, you aren't the only one."

This definitely wasn't a pleasant conversation. Willa bit her lip. These people weren't happy at all! Then she remembered that her mother would soon be returning from errands. It had been a while now, and her mother would probably be looking for her. Would she think to look in a café, though? No, Willa decided, she was safe here. But this was not turning out to be the good day she wanted it to be. Maybe it would be if she could find a way to make these people feel better.

The man was talking differently now. It took him longer to say words sometimes, and his voice wasn't as clear. He sounded tired.

"I'm not pretending to be a good person. It's just, I guess I thought you were. I thought you could handle something like this. I didn't expect that the loss of a single individual would cause you to flee. When you wrote about seeing the truth and living within it — like we could never go wrong — that was all a lie, wasn't it?"

Delilah didn't pretend to laugh anymore. "I guess so. It certainly hasn't been working for either of us."

"Well." The man moved his mouth without saying anything.

She leaned in close and touched his hand. "It's got to be tomorrow."

"Right, then," he replied stiffly. "I guess I'll meet you then to say goodbye. And we'll finish things there."

"You don't have to wait for me."

"Right." The man got up and shuffled to the door, bumping into several chairs on his way. As he left, Willa knew she had to follow him. She didn't know how to make things better for him, but she knew it was her responsibility, when he had made her morning so pleasant.

She gave little thought to the possibility of running into her mother as she swept through the heavy doors of the café and into the windy street.

Willa's small legs didn't carry her as fast as the man's, so, despite his unsteady gait, she had to hurry to try to catch up to him. Before she could, however, she found herself face to face with her mother, who had just exited

the bakery.

"Willa! Didn't I tell you to stay at the park?" Willa's mother gave a stern look.

The girl stood, horrified.

"No, you go ahead, run along. But if you're not at the park when I get back there in half an hour, I'm not going to wait for you, and I won't come look for you."

After receiving what her mother referred to as a swat upside the head, Willa was surprised to see her mother scurry off, looking over her shoulder as if she were afraid someone had seen her. Ordinarily, the terror in Willa's heart would propel her instantly towards the park. Worried more about her man, however, and determined to find him, Willa was already done thinking about her mother. The man was now far off, and he seemed to be heading to the lake.

In order to travel quickly without tripping, Willa decided it was necessary to remove her galoshes. Hoping they would remain unperturbed, she left them standing neatly by the door of the bakery. She picked up the flowers that had fallen from her grasp upon her mother's appearance.

Then, in her socks, she padded down the sidewalk, avoiding little puddles left over from the previous night's rain.

When she finally got to the edge of the lake, Willa did not see the man on the beach. After a moment of puzzlement, she realized he was sitting not far away, in a canoe on the lake with his back to the shore. He wasn't moving at all, or even touching a paddle. He just sat very still in the canoe, as the canoe sat very still in the water.

"Mister?" she inquired, leaning an extra inch out from the shore to get that much closer to him. He did not respond. She raised her voice. "Mister!"

Surely he must have heard her. Why would he not turn around? She didn't understand. This was the man who had given her flowers.

A Fake Diamond

"It's better to be looked over than overlooked."
Mae West

Well, some call her Lil' Diamond, but I call her Diamond Lil'. Beautiful, she is. Also, the fakest person in the universe, certainly the planet. She ain't no rookie. No Velcro, frosted, Barbie-breasted, stiletto-wearing type. Spits synthetic snot on those faux floozies.

Know her better than just about anybody. Calls me her personal "projectioniste," that's how one says it in France (ain't nobody can say *nothing* like they say it in France). I'm a one-hundred-percent certifiable player of pictures. Turn on Diamond every morning. Every night turn her off. Been turning her off and on seems just about forever.

See, Diamond ain't even a person, really — more an imitation, a projection of Mae West from the 30s, all skinned vinyl fur and rhinestone rocks in her ears. Fakeness makes her so... ethereal that it transcends artificiality clear across to the other direction. She ain't really fake. She's really almost real.

A few mistake this reality of hers for genuity, if there is such a thing. Willie of the Valley is one of them. Faced with Diamond's superior artificiality, Willie sees only the real of the real. He's in love with her genuity. He's a fool.

He's also the most sought-after mountain man in the world. He's single, to boot. Always on somebody's eligible bachelor list. (Not Diamond's!) He's rich and everything about him is rich — eyes black as Beluga, cheeks ruddy as a Lafitte Rothchild, complexion as creamy as my aunt Bertha's banana pudding crowned by a squirt of whipped cream. I'd snatch him up in three ticks of a Swiss watch. But no, not Diamond.

He tries to get her attention by sending her gifts. Well, maybe *send* ain't right. They're delivered by skydivers who've leapt out of hot air balloons. (A little excessive, but that's Willie's style). Always at least one orchid — a rare jungle flower that blooms once every 16 years, and then only for seven seconds. The skydivers swoop down and leave it on her doorstep. Did I say doorstep? Didn't mean to. It's really a projection of Miss West's doorstep from the 1934 film *He's My Houseboy*. The stoop is carved with satyrs and five-legged centaurs, if you gets my drift.

Those fifth legs — WOW!

A knock. Diamond opens the door. Gasps a raspy kind of a gasp, like mating cheese graters.

"Delicious colors!" Diamond exclaims, still grating. She holds the orchid to her nose. It's the 16th year. It's blooming.

"Yellow ain't really yellow: More like an orange with a hangover, about to heave its guts into a purple. Blue ain't really blue: More like green with a bug up its nose, almost magenta. Red ain't really red: More like brown with a bottle in its bum, almost a teal. Colors like these have *issues!*"

She touches them, touches the soft petals. Wrinkles her left nostril, then her right. The seven seconds are up. She hurls the flower to the floor.

"A pity!" she cries.

He tries to appease her with a monkey. By monkey I mean not just any monkey. This is a rare breed with fur like flax and eyes glittery and diamond-hard, ears so sharp and pointed they could cut school. Not a real monkey, a plant carved into one with hedge trimmers. The skydiver tied a bow of fine silk to its leafy head.

When this, too, fails, he tries once more, this time with a different approach. Tossing off his natural adornments, he covers himself in glow-in-the-dark paint. He dyes his hair the color of Tang and conceals his more private parts with duct tape and sunglasses and duct-taped sunglasses. That night he wanders to her street corner. He's holding an open suitcase with a smorgasbord of *artificio* trinkets.

She comes down to see him. She looks.

"What's this one?" She means the metal object known in cookbooks as a "heavy saucepan."

"A heavy saucepan."

"That it?"

"Of course not!" He swallows hard and gurgles like a bear cub with granola in its craw.

"Boil this," he tells her, "and you can smell all the smells of what everyone in the whole city is microwaving for dinner."

"Whoa, Nelly! The wonders men can make nowadays! At what cost?"

"Dinner with me tonight?"

By Gogo Lidz

Diamond mulls a New York minute. She has nothing else to do. She knows I'd have given her the OK. "Why not?"

"What's this?" She means the plastic object known in music books as a "kazoo."

"A kazoo."

"That it?"

"Of course not!" Another hard swallow. "Put this to your lips and you can hear every techno beat being thumped at every discotheque in the city!"

"Amazing! At what cost?"

"A movie with me tonight after dinner."

She gives it another think. "Why not?"

She points to yet another thing, a bright pink thing for perfume.

"And this?"

"An atomizer. The bulbous gold thinga-ma-jig sprays stench."

"That it?"

"Squeeze the bulbous gold thinga-ma-jig. You'll sniff every single mock cherry almond vanilla scent of every woman in the city."

"At what cost?"

"Sex with me after the movie after dinner tonight."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you why not, you superficial slut. Because I gave you real beauty, real love, real things. But all you wanted was imitations."

"Of course I did. What's reality to you, anyway?"

He gurgles. This is where I make the projection Technicolor. She says: "You know, I'm the fakest person in the universe, certainly this planet. I'm not flesh, I'm fantasy, a projection of Mae West from the 1930s in the fur of a skinned vinyl and rhinestone rocks in my ears. I'm so fake, I'm almost real." More gurgling. "What's reality? I'll tell you what reality is. It's not this stupid peace, love, and happiness bull that you're trying to shove up my kazoo. Reality is the flow of quirks. Reality is a river of gimmicks. Ain't no real in reality. Ain't no genuity."

"Genuity!"

If there is such I word, I've never heard it.

Circles

My mother wants to leave the spot we lie in. To hop in a car and drive around to each old house and sleep outside. We have a red pick-up truck, with a futon in the back, and a cab over top, with a dream-catcher hanging from the ceiling. She tells me the feathers catch the good dreams, and keep them around.

In the afternoons we drive around and look at the old houses. She tells me stories about the different families that lived there. She knows of each, of the girls and the boys, and the maids. I close my eyes when she starts. I think she wishes she could too, but she is steering the car in circles around the block.

"They built this one in 1789. The Maydors were the first to live there. Elizabeth gave birth to seven children, five girls, and two boys. Little Andrew and Johnnie both

died before they were three. Two of the girls lived past ten: Hope and Margaret. They married two nice boys and moved to other houses. Maybe we'll visit them tomorrow. They're not far from here."

From the quiver in her voice, I guess she may be crying, but I keep my eyes closed. I do not like seeing the black circles under her eyes. I wonder where they go — the children that did not live long. I am old enough to know they were put in the ground, but I can't imagine they could stay there for long.

For now we live in a room in a man's house. He lets us use his bathroom and kitchen, but really it's just the room we live in. I lie on the bed while my mother puts on her boots. From where I watch she looks like a 'c,' curved over. I am sad when she leaves, and do not know which

way to face. With my back to my wall I have to look out on the things that might come towards me. But the other way I have to imagine what might be there.

When she comes home, she scoops me up from the bed, and puts me in the truck next to her. We pass the houses, and I, with my eyes closed, imagine the circles we are drawing on the earth. When it gets dark we go to a diner and sit in a booth. She plans out the life we could live, drawing on napkins, and subtracting numbers. She loves pretty, old things, and I am scared to say no.

I'd like to tell her, "Which houses will we live in anyway? A different house each week? The ones full of ghosts? And we'll have nowhere to put our own." But I think she already knows.

By Tullah Sutcliffe

The Observer needs a Web/Technical Editor.
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American Gimp

An excerpt from a longer piece

By Douglas O'Connor

Noah Jenkins didn't think he really liked working for SureCare Home Health Care agency, although he said he did whenever a client asked him. And he was usually quick to defend the agency, even though it was horribly inefficient, particularly with keeping track of its aides in the field. It wasn't that the money was bad—although it was—or that he had no benefits other than being able to flirt with Yvonne, the scheduler, over the phone, or that the picture on his ID tag made his face look dark and terroristic. It was that he didn't think he liked helping people.

He didn't have this feeling when he started working; it slowly developed, like arthritis, and then the pain hit him one morning when he woke up. It confused him, angered him even, because now he was stuck in a job where people needed him, counted on him, yet he didn't want to be needed or counted on anymore. Sure, he felt sorry for Miss Russo, Mr. Sims, and Miss Shapiro. He didn't think he was inhuman. He had developed a little attitude about it, though. He felt he didn't have too many other job options. The agency trained him for this line of work, if watching videotapes in a stuffy room full of other bored trainees could be called training. So he was stuck. At least he was healthy. At least he didn't have some kind of peripheral neuropathy where his feet tingled with pain every minute of every day. He should be happy with himself. His apartment had heat. His refrigerator was clean. He had a closet full of ironed scrubs. His landlord was bipolar and forgot to collect rent occasionally. And his mom had sent him mini-jars of orange marmalade and a pre-cooked turkey for Christmas this year—all the way from Florida. There was plenty to be happy about.

Noah kicked the cardboard box on the carpet. The mini-jars of orange marmalade clinked inside. The ruptured packaging tape hanging off the box's flaps crinkled. He thought maybe he should've adopted a puppy for Christmas—a beagle or a Chihuahua, although Chihuahuas shook constantly and their yappy barks were like needles pricking at the ear drum. Better off with a beagle. But then he'd have to feed it and walk it and pick up its shit with a Shop Rite bag. It would turn into another client. He met a sheltie once that did nothing but stay put in its box under a blanket and came out only when it was time to pee or eat. That's the kind of puppy he wanted. Just something to keep him company that didn't need too much attention. A puppy was out of the question then. He thought about calling his mom to thank her for the gifts, but she was probably asleep. It was past 9 o'clock. Turning over on the futon, Noah reached over and lit a stick of coconut incense. Maybe he should eat some turkey or open the can of corn he had taken from Miss Russo's house the other day (Miss Russo didn't eat anything anyway except rice cakes; she wouldn't miss it). Turkey, canned corn, and a cup of French-pressed decaf without the French press. The perfect meal for Christmas night. He was better off going to the diner. Challah bread French-toast and pancake syrup. Why was everything French? He could wear the new boots he bought from T.J. Maxx. Totes was the brand name. Ten dollars. Probably French. "Tooeeete," he mouthed out loud, trying to sound French. He wondered what his landlord was doing downstairs. The phone rang. Noah sighed and rolled over and picked it up.

"Noah, you're not doing anything, right?" It was Yvonne.

The phone cord caught on the futon. He jerked and the phone tumbled across the carpet. "Fuck," he said. "Still there?"

"It's Mr. Stamps," she said.

"I'm having dinner with my family," Noah said.

"No, I'm having dinner with my family and Sasha didn't show at Mr. Stamps' and Mr. Stamps called and snapped at Doreen who's on call and snapped at her so rudely that she was crying when she called me."

"I don't know his routine," Noah said. He heard something clink in the background. "I don't have the file—"

"Once you get the muzzle on his mouth he's easy," she said.

"Oh, so he's an asshole too, then."

"Don't get me started, Noah. Please—I can't get a hold of anyone else."

"What's his deal?"

"He has MD."

Noah grumbled. "It's Christmas night. I'm not done opening my presents. And I'm going to the diner."

"He's only in Armonk."

"Shit."

"Do it for me," she implored.

"Why doesn't he have a private aide?"

"Please—"

"Alright, shut up, I'll do it. What's the address?"

She gave the address. "Thank you, sweetie."

"You owe me a big order of fried sweet potatoes," Noah said, hoping she might take a hint.

"I'll put them with your paycheck next week," she said.

He hung up the phone and decided the only way to protest this was to not put on any deodorant. He put on some long underwear and clean scrubs and headed out to

Armonk. The incense he left harmlessly burning.

The house was at the end of a long, steep, ice and sand-skinned driveway. The worn tires of Noah's Dodge Colt wouldn't catch. Each forward heave of the car up the driveway ended in the wheels spinning out, the snow shooting out behind the car like black and white spit, Noah cursing fiercely and slamming his fist down on the steering wheel. In a fury, Noah gave the car one last rev, letting the tires spin and the engine groan and the speedometer rise. The wheels caught once, and the car jerked recklessly forward. Noah straightened the wheel, but in a few moments the back of the car slid right then left, losing ground. The wheels spun uselessly as the car drifted into a frictionless glide back down the driveway. He took his foot off the accelerator. Noah gave up. If he had caught pavement, the car probably would've bulldozed into a tree he was going so fast. Putting himself in a wheelchair was not his prerogative. He parked the car down on the cul-de-sac along a snow bank and decided to walk up the driveway.

The sky was clear and the cold was sharp, but clean; it didn't burrow into the body. Crag-faced boulders snug in the frozen earth crowded the bare trees on either side of the driveway. Snow covered the ground unevenly. A short rock wall circled around a side yard to the left. Noah had to walk sideways, as if he were wearing skis. The house rose ahead of him like a dark temple. The only light came through what he discovered was the kitchen window—a window twice as wide as it was tall. The rest of the house was dark.

Noah breathed heavily as he gained more level ground. The house wasn't some standardized suburban cape-cod that looked bigger on the outside than it was inside. Mr. Stamps' house was massive, long, with definitive sections, as if each room was built and finished before the next one was started. Even in the scarce light he could discern the wood siding was a rust color—a dark, brick red that had faded. There was a shed next to the garage with a large branch stuck in the roof like an arrow stuck in someone's snowy chest. The doors hung on one hinge and were pushed inward like two dirty front teeth. A bulge of plowed snow was at the end of the driveway. Noah also saw a basketball hoop, the strings of its shredded net sheathed in ice. A patch of snow-covered shrubs blocked the kitchen window, but Noah could still see inside pretty good. A small TV on the counter faced away from him. Disheveled stacks of newspaper and opened and unopened envelopes lay strewn on a thick white table tucked into the corner closest to the window. The wallpaper had strange black and white designs like the stripes of a deformed zebra. The TV blared the obnoxious voice of Alex Trebek. Noah hated *Jeopardy*. He hated the thought that trivial factoids could win someone money. Where was the skill? Put Alex on the *Gong Show*—now there was some skill. Where was Mr. Stamps?

Noah had no key and no file and no knowledge of Mr. Stamps other than that he had MD and that he was an asshole, though the asshole part wasn't firsthand knowledge. And it was late—after 10:30—late for someone who'd been sitting in a wheelchair all day and couldn't move. Noah wondered what kind of contraption Mr. Stamps had set up to be able to dial a phone. Why didn't he have a live-in? Was he that stubborn? An old guy with MD—he had to be stubborn to defy death for so long. A stubborn guy in a wheelchair with MD who probably hadn't had any dinner. This was going to be pleasant, Noah thought. He should've brought along some pre-cooked turkey from Florida. He felt his stomach stretching its starved muscles as he walked up to the front door.

Noah knocked—no response. He knocked again, but again there was no response. He banged the door-knocker—a brass lion's head with a snake encircled through its jaw—but still there was no response. He whacked the mail slot—nothing. Noah didn't want to barge in, but maybe Mr. Stamps was injured or passed out or his bladder exploded. Noah trudged through the shrubs to the kitchen window. Half his body became covered in snow. He didn't see anyone. The kitchen was a large, tiled area with three rooms branching off—one he could see was the pantry, one was some kind of storage room: boxes and boxes of things, plastic boxes, cardboard boxes, some closed, some opened, unidentifiable things jutting out wildly, an exercise bike, a black Vornado fan, a wood chair with no cushion, a stash of hardcover books with no covers. In the other room he couldn't see anything but the vague outline of a chandelier. He leaned back, hitting his head on an empty wire bird feeder, the snow splashing down onto the back of his neck and stinging him with the shock of cold like an ice wasp. He swatted the cold away, but now his scrub shirt was wet around the neck. The snow on his pants was beginning to soak in. The wire bird feeder squeaked as it swung behind him. *Jeopardy* continued to boom. Fuck this, he said to himself. He felt like walking back down to his car and leaving. But the image of Mr. Stamps—some generic image of an old guy in a wheelchair with a scowl on his face—sitting in the dark, waiting for the help that he was paying for, waiting like someone waiting for their grandkid to come out of the bathroom at

the movies, was too pathetic. Noah wished he had the luxury of being able to harden his heart when he wanted to. Instead, he got angry. He hated caring. He went back to the front door.

Noah banged on the door twenty times in rapid succession and kicked the door with his boot. He waited about a minute then turned the knob and went inside, intuitively knowing the door would be unlocked.

"STOP WHERE YOU ARE. YOU HAVE ENTERED THE PREMISES ILLEGALLY. THE POLICE HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED. THE POLICE HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED. STOP WHERE YOU ARE—"

The voice was like getting a brick to the brain, repeating itself and being accompanied by a stabbing *whoop-whoop* that sounded like the Star Trek bridge on red alert. Noah's blood leaped from his veins, then settled back down. He wasn't one to panic. To get angry, to get frustrated, but not to panic. He slammed the door behind him, then began to stomp the snow from his boots and scrubs on the brown tile of the foyer, the snow sloughing off and melting quickly in the heat of the house. He heard glass or china or something fragile rattle. He was self-conscious about the snow off his boots, but after looking around, he decided it didn't matter; the house wasn't exactly elegant or pristine. He stepped on a pile of loose mail and kicked it to the side—it was now a pile of wet loose mail covered in half-melted snow. If Mr. Stamps had a problem with it he'd dry it in the microwave, a trick his mom taught him, although it didn't really work. But it might make Mr. Stamps feel better. Alex Trebek was still on, and the voice of *Jeopardy* in tandem with the voice of the alarm god manifested such a strange and unnervingly ridiculous chorus that Noah started to laugh to himself. He half-expected a camera crew to come out from the living room, Sasha snickering in her scrubs nearby, best boys twirling noisemakers, the lighting staff bearing bouquets of helium balloons. But he knew his office wasn't that clever.

"STOP WHERE YOU—" and then it cut off suddenly. Noah heard one of the contestants answer a Daily Double incorrectly, the omniscient Alex saying sportingly, "No, I'm sorry, that's not the correct answer." Noah thought he also heard sirens in the distance, but it was just the left-over ring in his ears from the alarm.

When Mr. Stamps wheeled into the foyer, he didn't acknowledge Noah; he drove into the kitchen, the wheelchair humming, the joystick clicking as he sped up and slowed down and sped up. Noah simply waited, looking around, the anger cooling inside him. He took off his coat and hung it on one of the fancy walking sticks in the porcelain barrel next to the door. The foyer was as big as his apartment, it seemed. Ahead was the living room, carpeted in a medium animal-brown, unpatterned, untextured. It looked almost new until Noah peered more closely and saw various dark stains—like little dark brown continents or bruises. Two table-brown loveseats were positioned diagonally across from each other, a glass coffee table sitting in between with a *World Atlas* splayed open on top. The living room walls were striped brown and tan, and appeared to be made of cloth, as if they had been woven into the wall, or grown. Two brown drapes hung in front of a sliding glass door. There was a small powder room to the left of the front door and a wooden table with hand-made temoku-glazed ceramic plates with large rims. The carpet from where Mr. Stamps had just come was the same color as the living room, only it was slashed with black tread marks, as if it were a mini-raceway for confused owners of Matchbox cars. A staircase bent up and around onto a loft. Noah could see two closed bedroom doors, a linen closet, and a bathroom (presumably) at the end of the hall. The walls upstairs were textured orange-brown, like the color of a rotten orange. Overall, the air smelled musty and strange, like a damp beach towel. The place was depressing—large and depressing, like being in an empty stadium about to be torn down. He wondered suddenly if Mr. Stamps ever got out. Probably not too much. Probably just as well, he thought, but then chided himself.

Alex Trebek was cut off mid-sentence, and Noah heard the mechanized hum of the wheelchair accelerating through the kitchen and then get louder as Mr. Stamps reentered the foyer. Mr. Stamps stopped in front of him, the joystick clicking and then going quiet. The entire house was quiet, as if in pause before some great deed, or like someone in shock, a glassy-eyed silence. Noah felt like he had done something wrong but didn't know what it was he did or didn't do. Noah wasn't sure if he should introduce himself, shake Mr. Stamps' enfeebled hand, or just wait for Mr. Stamps to make the first move. He didn't make eye contact at first, then decided to look right at Mr. Stamps, as if he had decided to confess and take responsibility for his actions. Mr. Stamps looked at Noah steadily with his long face and mousey nose, his upper lip pushed down over his lower lip. His upper body and head appeared over-relaxed in a way that was not his choosing. A perfectly white but thin beard netted his face, and his neck was spotted with a shaving rash as if he had used a razor with no shaving gel. His belly bulged out over the wheelchair seatbelt. He wore a blue pair of loose pants, a shirt the same color blue as the pants, and a pair of loose sandals with white socks. Noah noticed that Mr. Stamps' feet bent inwards on the

footpads. It looked uncomfortable. He felt that he should bend down and straighten them out, but didn't do anything.

Mr. Stamps flipped his wrist and opened his hand.

"Put it here, guy," he said.

Noah didn't like the word, guy, but let it slide. He took Mr. Stamps' hand and squeezed it too firmly; Mr. Stamps didn't squeeze much at all. It was like squeezing the hand of a rubber doll. The hand had an almost inhuman quality, like touching a skin graft, and Noah suddenly felt ashamed. He drew his hand back. Mr. Stamps looked at him expectantly.

"Noah Jenkins," he said. "I'm filling in for Sasha."

Mr. Stamps clicked the joystick and frowned as he looked down at the wet floor and the pile of wet mail. "And here I thought your office had been doing a better job hiring competent people," he said.

Noah chewed his lip. He wasn't sure what to say. "Are the police coming?"

"It's just for scaring people," Mr. Stamps said.

"Scared me out of my skin," Noah said, giving a light laugh.

"But it only works on the first try with people."

Noah paused. "So you knew I was out there?"

"I heard you, sure."

"Man," Noah said, shaking his head, "Yvonne did say you were a jerk, but I was hoping to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"I suppose I could've walked right over and opened the door for you," Mr. Stamps said, smirking.

Noah wanted to say something more irresponsible, but caught his tongue. "Well, let's get this over with so I can go home and enjoy the rest of my holiday. Did you eat?"

"Can you cook?"

"I can cook better than Alex Trebek," Noah said. He meant it rudely, but Mr. Stamps laughed out loud.

Noah cooked up a batch of scrambled eggs and potatoes with sliced jalapeno peppers in a large non-stick skillet laced with butter. He served Mr. Stamps the food on a big porcelain plate, making the eggs and potatoes seem disproportionately small, like a Weight Watchers meal. Noah took pride in his scrambled eggs—they were fluffy and not runny. The secret was to slow-cook them on low heat. The smell teased Noah's empty stomach. Mr. Stamps pulled up to the table, the joystick bumping the edge, then stopped.

"You comfortable?" Noah asked, reaching to hand Mr. Stamps his fork.

"Leave it," Mr. Stamps snapped, his hand crawling towards the fork.

Noah drew his hand back and pointed down. "Your feet look too far in."

"I can still feel, you know."

"I could release the footpads."

"I don't like to be bothered while I eat."

"You can feed yourself, then," Noah said.

"Do I look like an invalid?" Mr. Stamps ripped.

"Alright. I'll just hang out."

"You do that."

Noah backed off. He went over to the sink and lazily scrubbed the skillet while he spied Mr. Stamps eating

from behind. The head wagged a little, as if a hand were up on his brain stem directing his motions. He flopped his elbow up on the table, his forearm and hand raised up, the fork gripped with his whole fist like a pitchfork. Mr. Stamps was more ambulatory than Noah thought. For some reason, he perceived Mr. Stamps as a bitter geriatric meshugga paralyzed by his disease who needed to be fed and have his urine bag changed. Instead, Mr. Stamps was a bitter geriatric meshugga with a sadistic sense of humor. There was no urine bag, and he could feed himself. Noah was amazed, even pleased, that Mr. Stamps could feed himself, even if awkwardly. Noah didn't mind feeding his clients. It wasn't that. It was an appreciation of the struggle with his disease, as if the act of feeding himself were an act of muscular defiance, proof that he wasn't beaten yet. Noah respected that. No wonder aides irritated him. They were the incarnations of defeat. They represented everything else he couldn't do for himself—wash, cook, sit on a toilet—multiplied by how many years he had been afflicted by his condition. Mr. Stamps needed to be an asshole—it was a way to demonstrate to himself that he was still in control, still king of the hill, still alive. That was the purpose of the alarm. It had nothing to do with intruders. He wondered what kind of relationship Mr. Stamps had with Sasha. She had been his aide for almost five months. Noah put the half-washed skillet in the dry rack and went into the living room, leaving Mr. Stamps to eat in private. The sound of the alarm zipped through his head. He's still an asshole, though, he thought.

With two loveseats, a glass table with a *World Atlas* spread open across its face, a brick hearth as wide as the wall, a fireplace with a grill but no ashes, and three dimmer switches controlling three different sets of recessed lights, the living room reminded Noah of some kind of psychologist's office. All it needed was a rhombus-shaped fish tank and two Oscar fish. The stains in the carpet were more plentiful than he first saw from the foyer. Dirt-black-and-brown islands of stains, like a weird symbolic language. They were probably pet stains, although Noah didn't see or smell any dogs or cats or hamsters or anything. He bent down and looked closely at one of the bigger ones, about the size of two fists. It was intestinal brown, slightly encrusted. Noah almost threw up as he pulled away—it was something gooey that had hardened and had never been cleaned up. He surveyed the rest of the carpet and sneered in disgust. It was a Twister game for scatologists.

He flicked on a light and walked across to a library. Its stained cherry shelves rose from floor to ceiling along the side and back walls of the dining room, stacked neatly but not too neatly with rows of hardcover books, large paperback books, oversized arty books, colorfully jacketed cookbooks. One shelf was loaded with spiral-bound maps. Another shelf was mobbed with manila envelopes stuffed with a mayhem of papers and envelopes, an evil secretary's stash. There were no trinkets or family photos or sentimental knick-knacks displayed on the shelves. The shelves were strictly business. Noah found the library curiously impressive. It reminded him of his landlord's library of used books, the

same kind of magnanimousness. He supposed anything could look impressive in great numbers. Clouds, skyscrapers, books. It was like looking at a poised army, an army of read or unread words. A glass dining table with brass trim and base sat in the middle of the room surrounded by brown-cushioned chairs with the same kind of brass trim. The table and chairs were unblemished, apparently unused, the brass shiny and the cushions perfect. A brass chandelier hung from the ceiling, its bright bulbs staring down as if at an operating table. It was the same chandelier he saw outside through the kitchen window.

Noah went up to one of the shelves and picked out a book. He heard Mr. Stamps drop the fork on his plate.

"You alright in there, then?" Noah asked loudly.

"I'll tell you when I'm done," Mr. Stamps shot back.

Noah shook his head. The book was dusty on the top—the kind of dust that clung webbishly to whatever it touched, like an artificial flesh. The book was called *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The cover had a silhouette drawing of three people on a beach under a red-striped umbrella. Actually, the whole picture was red: the people, the beach, the distant trees and mansion in the background. The title letters were black. He had never read it, although he had heard of the author. It sounded about as interesting as reading a stack of sublet leases. The book smelled like a basement and Noah clenched his nose for a moment to keep from sneezing. He ran his hand over the soft cover. It was a small book, the size of a handy mini-Bible. It seemed to wobble in his hands. He carefully opened the book; Noah felt some kind of radiance in it, maybe because it looked so oddly official, like a cult manual. The print was tiny, buggish, like ants frozen to the page in prescribed positions. He thought vaguely that it was worth something, a first print, but probably not. He looked around at the rest of the library; maybe every book was worth something. Probably not. There were other books by the same author, some larger and some thinner.

Noah heard the wheelchair click and hum. He closed the book and was about to put it back when he impulsively reached around and shoved the book under his scrubs in his underwear, the book's spine cracking. He patted his backside to make sure it wasn't obvious. Mr. Stamps appeared in the doorway.

"You make damn good scrambled eggs," he said, a nugget of yellow egg stuck to his bearded cheek.

Noah smiled but didn't laugh.

Evanescent

In Evelyn's neighborhood identical houses vied for neatest landscaping, but her vegetable garden resembled a minute expanse of rainforest, especially when her grey tabby prowled among the flourishing scarlet tomatoes. Evelyn's yard also had the rattiest grass despite her half-hearted efforts to fertilize the soil, to aerate the sod, to keep the clover at bay. Every few houses a lawn sported a fence; she painted only the parts of her own picket fence visible from the street a brazen shade of white. All the houses were structurally sound, varying only in color and content, not form. The Millers had a playroom filled with playfully pudgy-cheeked, bounding blue-eyed babies. The Browns used their extra 2000 square feet for holding vast epicurean dinner parties which were rumored to be exquisite. The Garcias took candlelit baths in their expansive Jacuzzi, then made love on a feather bed riddled with rose petals.

In the mornings, the pastel light which sieved through the grimy Venetian blinds of Evelyn's home only succeeded in setting the dust to dancing and the walls to shrinking into half-living shadows. When it rained, the house inhaled with each gust of wind and sighed with each rumble of distant thunder and the ghosts crept out of the capsized picture frames and locked-tight cupboards.

The library, in particular, was haunted by ancient books, rotting journals, and reversed picture frames. Its couch was crowded with the odors of stale sex and fermenting cat piss. Evelyn couldn't enter the room without shuddering. The picture frames were the worst. They commenced a demonic chatter the moment she crossed the threshold, chanting a constant litany of those things better left unsaid. They spoke to her, whispering, moaning, sobbing, jeering, cursing, telling her that they still loved her,

that she was worthless, that she shattered everything she touched, that they still loved her.

Evelyn spent most of her time in the living room. There, the ghosts only bordered on malignant, replaying both beloved and bemoaned memories for their audience of one. Anything was better than the library. The living room's ghosts mimed vitriolic scenes from her past: a lover's embrace at the foot of the green Christmas tree, his eyes flashing cypress green with each thrust, those green eyes bloodless as he disposed of her, her weeping as she cauterized their failed love affair with the cremation of their love letters.

"I had sworn to myself I'd be a modern day Dickinson, with my poems holed up in the attic until my death when they'd be torched in their own funeral pyre, but I'll make an exception just for you." She placed the rumpled journal on his upturned palms, and busied herself in the kitchen so as to avoid his arrhythmic eyes as they pried open the cobwebby floorboards of her mind's attic.

She hefted an immense copper pot onto the burner. Her mother had bathed her in that pot at birth, mewling and rosy; her mother had spoon-fed her chowder made in that pot through her sputtering, pneumatic, ten-year old coughs; upon her mother's death, she'd dropped all the jewelry and outdated sweaters off at the Salvation Army, taking home only that immense, shining pot. It seemed only fitting that she would woo her love with soup made in her beloved copper cauldron; she bit her lower lip pink with the exertions of silently opening the Campbell's cans. There was so much pot and so little soup that the noodles scorched to the bottom, yet he swore it was the best soup he'd ever tasted, despite the charcoal clods of chicken and

By Halley Woodward

the toasted noodles. For a moment her own spoon seemed to cradle blackened ambrosia. She thanked him with lowered lashes and a crescendoing smile, and he replied by stroking her hair with feather-light fingertips.

"Your words." He gestured with his spoon to the journal on the coffee table. "They're tremendous, you know. Have you ever thought about publishing?" She demurred, one blushing cheek gliding toward one shrugging shoulder. "I'm serious!"

She shushed him with a tremulous index finger applied to his lips and then led him, silenced, up the forgiving stairs to her tender bed.

She awoke, startled, thinking someone had broken into her home. But it was only James, rustling in the ubiquitous dark.

"It was poetry, my dear." He buckled his belt.

"But it's 2 A.M...."

"Never you mind, darling. I'll call." His zipper as he breezed out of her bedroom sounded to her like the drop of a guillotine. Evelyn felt his retreating footfalls in her kidneys. It took both pillows plastered over her ears to allow her rest that night.

Now Evelyn spent most nights in the fetal position on the living room sofa with her tabby devotedly curled behind her knees. The stairs echoed with the cries of the library spirits, and the upper floor resounded with its own loveless silence. The bedrooms, long devoid of any living occupants, had begun the slow descent into disrepair. Their walls teemed with viable shadows; their closets fluttered with powdery moths; their windows mirrored anes-

thetized, black eye-sockets. Even the lonely living room sofa was much more hospitable than the sepulchral master bedroom.

She shrugged these images off, avoided them with all her feeble might.

"You're not wanted here, Evelyn. You're not wanted anywhere." She clapped her hands over her ears, swinging her head so violently back and forth that her neck seemed made of rubber, but this voice echoed from the inside out and no amount of flailing could dislodge it.

It was a Monday. Evelyn swung her mighty head of curls around, disturbing a robin who had perched on a bow of the overhanging birch tree. Sent flying, bits of leaves, a twig or two tumbled through the air as she passed a muddy hand across a sweating forehead. She was weeding the red columbine, twiddling green thumbs until the mailman arrived carting the blessed envelope. Sometimes James would drop by, always unannounced. She'd greet him with her latest satchel of poems.

Sometimes he sent her a lovely envelope, brimming with good tidings, interesting tidbits and undying devotion for her frizzy hair, her flaking nails, her wobbly thighs, for her. She lived for him and she lived for his letters and she lived for his words and she lived for his love and she lived for him. He loved her. He *loved* her.

Her sweet smile nestled in her glistening cheeks sent Gabe, the mailman, off with a sigh. How unfortunate that so lovely a girl would be cursed by so distant a man, a man whose shady profession darkened this poor woman's brow for weeks at a time. He could make her glow with far less than a letter if he was only given the chance; he knew it. He pattered off, so engrossed in his plotting to win Evelyn that he did not see her smile shatter, her cheeks blanch, her eyes blacken.

The leaves didn't smell like him this time, no, not this time. Just paper, with a hint of the ocean, no, not the ocean, of oil in the ocean. The black puddles of ink washed by her tears did nothing to quell that stinking image. His words fled, driven off by her tears, pouring like the blood which ran from her riven heart. She sank to brittle knees there in the flowerbed, her heart bleeding among the trembling red columbine.

It was a Sunday. Evelyn's daily visit to the bay window in the front room, stale but free of specters save the ghastly slipcovers haphazardly thrown over the furniture, was laid to rest today. The mailman wouldn't be there for her to observe, anyway. She held the droning telephone to her ear, just to make sure it still worked. She scratched her dutiful tabby cat behind the ear and tossed him a treat.

The ghosts were louder than usual. The bookshelves rattled in the library as the picture frames performed some phantasmal rain-dance. A shiver wracked Evelyn's wasting frame and she pulled the blanket tighter around her knees. The cat purred lustily, unaware of the preternatural phenomena which threatened to obliterate his owner. The living room ghosts plopped on the couch, sandwiching Evelyn between them.

"What are you reading?" needled one.

"You're getting awfully thin, you know," declared the other.

"You should really eat something," announced the first.

Sleeping

Bruce

Your idea, this process of record, transcription, translation; although its origins I suspect are in that banal genre of pop-psychology called Self-Help and Self-Knowledge. And so each morning, with the sun coming through the window, I collapse the Boschian processes of my never-resting mind into cramped, mean, bloodless little scribbles in a hard-bound journal purchased at the CVS. I call it, with a self-obsessed wonder more appropriate to a twelve-year-old girl, "My Dream Journal," as you have instructed me. How flat and pathetic become those barely-recalled memories of the unconscious when forced through the narrow bottle-neck of language! A desperate plunge to one's never-quite-arriving death—the howl of wind, the pressure on the gut, the terrifying arrangement of color (green and black, green and black, painted by the expert brush of my sleeping brain)—all this becomes, merely, "I fell down a precipice, and then awoke."

Shira

What I meant, what I meant, what I *intended* was nothing pop, nothing New Age, but something else altogether—to exploit our dreams for their love poetry, to distill from them the essence of our bodies, separated by impossible distance in waking life but, in sleep, spaceless, as a flower becomes spaceless when held to a flame and allowed to turn to ash and smoke. I need you, each night, to hold your hairy feet to the fire, and I need to hear you wince in the

"Or get out every once in awhile."

"Maybe go for a run. Or a hike. A hike would do you good."

"Yeah, you could use some fresh air."

"And some sun. Your complexion is hideous. You look like death."

"Who are you to say I look like death?" shrieked Evelyn, casting her paperback to the coffee table. Cackling, the ghosts faded into nothing. Evelyn stroked the tabby, cooed at him; comforting him comforted her, and only his steady purring could soothe her hackles into place. She would be okay, after a few more deep breaths, maybe a glass of milk. The mailman would be back tomorrow and everything would be all right.

She'd told the intercom she was making a delivery; he'd buzzed her in.

"Why can't we just make everything alright again?" His barred door muffled her wail.

"You're not supposed to be here. Susan will be back in ten minutes! I already told you. It's over, Evelyn. Move on!"

"But, you said my poem—"

"I said a lot of things."

"But, you said you loved me. You *loved* me."

"Do you know how many girls I've said that to? Good day, Evelyn."

"But, you read my journals, my secrets. I made soup for you. I made love with you! I gave you—"

"A headache?"

"Everything."

Evelyn decided that taking a shower would be the best thing to do. The drifting fragrance of her shampoo would mollify her fears, chase off those malicious memories; the torrid water would dissolve the knots below her shoulder blades. Giving the howling library a wide berth, Evelyn mounted the stairs with the gait of an inmate crossing the threshold into the pea-green gas chamber.

The bathroom light, a single 50-watt bulb suspended from the ceiling, the sort of fixture under which a suspect would be viciously interrogated, refused to turn on. Even so, Evelyn could see that the grit, ubiquitous in the uninhabited upstairs, had distorted her image in the mirror. The curves and planes of her face bled into a universal shadow, a shared shade of stable grey. Her torso was indistinguishable from the omnipresent mildew of the shower curtain behind her. The boundary between her sighing, slumping life and the panting, pulsing death of the house blurred, and for a moment she fancied she wasn't there at all. She jammed her eyelids shut, scrunched her nose. Her eyes blazed open—there she was in the clouded glass. She stretched her fingers wide, astounded that they were opaque, solid. When they pressed against the glass, she could scarcely believe they met resistance. She entwined them, unfurled them, still expecting them to be translucent with the diaphanousness of bat wings. As she undressed methodically, purposefully, amazed that the shed clothing revealed a vaguely human form, she marveled at the skill of those fingers. How effortlessly they gripped and lifted fabric, how mightily they parted the once buttoned seas of her blouse. It was truly miraculous, the artistry of those hands, the potential. The deftness with which they gripped and twisted the plated spigot of the shower, the sorcery with which they summoned the torrent

of elemental water, were almost too much for her.

A few more deep breaths, maybe a glass of milk. The mailman will be back tomorrow and everything will be all right.

She retreated to the mirror, fatigued with the exertions of those adroit hands. Her eyes must have adjusted to the darkness, as now everything, herself included, appeared to shine with a crimson tinge—merely an effect of the sunset, no doubt.

Red Sky at morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night--

The pipes keened, trembled, and the shower spray hissed with the virulence of a viper's war cry. Startled by the shower's lament, Evelyn whipped about, clutching at the sink to keep herself upright. The unvaried beating of the barrage faltered and a maniacal laugh erupted from the shower-stall.

"H-hello? Who's there?" Those mystic hands quaked. "Who are you?"

"Evelyn, *dahrling!* Come on in, the water's fine!" That dreadful cackling wrenched her from her perch against the sink, drawing her toward the shower, as a car wreck draws the eye.

Time dragged. The library bellowed, a hollow pounding in the base of her spine.

"Evelyn, my love. You're wretched, you know. Positively loathsome," crooned the entity behind the curtain. "But I still love you, Evelyn. I'll always love you, Evelyn, even if your life is utterly insignificant. I'd never hurt you Evelyn, unless it was for your own dejected good. I love you, Evelyn."

The shower wailed; the library throbbled; Evelyn threw open the shower curtain. The searing shower doused a maddening phantom with spectral blood.

"Come on in, Evelyn. The water's fine!" he taunted, dashes of scarlet staining his ghostly chest.

"Y-you're not the mailman." She faltered at the edge of the bathtub.

"Everything will be alright, Evelyn, you deplorable filth." He crooked his index finger—*come-hither*—and a fat, flaming drop fled from his fingertip.

Blood, so much blood.

"You're not the mailman."

"Everything is A-okay, Evelyn, dear, you rotting offal." When he grinned, his teeth were capped in crimson.

Blood. Blood everywhere. So much blood.

"You're not the mailman!" Something in her broke. Her voice cracked, inhuman. She hurled herself fist first into the mirror.

"There, there, Evelyn, save your energy, you melodramatic fuck."

So much blood.

Those insufficient hands clutched at the shards of glass, flailed at those destitute wrists, pounded on that incompetent chest.

"Come now, Evelyn. I still love you, you obscene wreck. No need for—"

So. Much. Blood.

By Len Gutkin

ble to forget.

Bruce

I go to bed, now, wondering what addition I'll make to my journal the next morning. I could call you on the telephone, but I worry that such semi-real contact might disrupt the process by which we are trying to create something new. I pray for you in my dreams—I pray to have you simply, sans the perverse complexities of my sleeping mind. But here you are a child on a swing with a voice not yours; there you are my lover, then my mother, then a desperate lay in a hospital bed in which I, or you, suffer from Hodgkin's disease. It is never simple, because of the journal. I cannot forget, and when I am fortunate enough to wake up sticky it brings me not comfort but fear.

Shira

But I did feel, sometimes, like your mother—when we were together, I mean: not asleep but awake. You would lay there with your shaggy head on my breasts, and I couldn't help it: I felt so protective, tender, not aroused, precisely, but something else. Because in spite of your smell, in spite of your cock that would sometimes hurt me, there hides within you that which is more than adult, or less—I know not which. You hands are bigger than mine, but it is I who envelop you.

Bruce

I dreamt last night an awful dream. You were accepted to a program at Harvard and met someone smarter, some brilliant but virile Jew whose cock was bigger than mine and whose mind was quicker. I was left here waiting tables, mourning the loss of you. If this were to occur in reality it would be wonderful, liberating—but in the claustrophobic space of my dream it suffocated me like an insect is suffocated by a glass overturned: in the reflective surfaces of my airless prison I saw you and the Jew making love, ignoring me.

Shira
Sometimes I dream that I am a man—a spy, usually, for some foreign Secret Service, and in those dreams the complex network of political intrigue usually culminates in my discovery that you, too, are a spy, a traitor, and an international playboy. I watch you through the stained glass windows of a church in Rome; I see you taking a blonde film-noir *femme fatale* in the confessional; I, as a man, have no choice but to shoot you with my silenced nine-millimeter: and you drop to the floor of the church, and I cry.

Bruce
I was in a cornfield, it was dusk of the hottest day of the summer, and you were there—and then it was not you—and then you—and when I came, fell back into the corn, saw the yellow sky falling on me like a great sheet, I couldn't tell who made it happen—you, or the Spanish dishwasher.

Shira
I'm drowning in the black water of an abandoned quarry; I'm naked and terrified; I'm like a pebble thrown from a cliff. Trees all around: green, black, green, black. You swim to rescue me but you lack the necessary strength: you falter, founder, go under. You sink like the water-logged petals of a rose. A pressure on my gut, the certainty of death. And then Professor Steinman pulls me out, unexpectedly muscular, his hands underneath my armpits. We sit on the shore and I mourn the loss of you, and he strokes my hair, tells me it's okay, says, "At my age, I've lost so many—so, so many."

Bruce

Quite standard, last night. You were pregnant, so big and so white, and I knew that I had you at last. You walked across the lawn of your mother's house, moving with the enormous grace of a woman with child, and I thanked God for it all, although I do not believe in him.

Shira

I am frying eggs for us both, and the smell of sulfur makes me gag. You sit at the table with a brain tumor, all your hair gone, your eyes the giant desperate eyes of an insect. The scar on your head is jagged. When I am not taking care of you I am laying with Professor Steinman.

Bruce

I am masturbating while frying some eggs. Where are you? The Spanish girl looks in through the kitchen window.

Shira

Now you are on a swing set, rising and falling, and when you rise you are you, and when you fall you are the Professor. "I love you," I say, or else you say it, and I am trapped in a great white maze, the walls sterile, everything glowing with the florescent light of a hospital, steel girders here and there visible against the endless expanse of white. "How do I get out," I ask—perhaps of you, perhaps of Steinman—he is smarter, after all—and no one answers. I come to an elevator. It takes me to the street. Orange cones line the road, like ancient flaming lamps, like something from the Bible. Nazis sing strange songs, swing chains, work construction on the side of the road. Professor Steinman picks me up in his car, full of strange Jewish dread, full of fascination. I want to have him in the car, but then I wake up.

Bruce

I am a moviemaker, post-Rapture. The walls are white. God snatches up His chosen ones by dissolving them in the white mist of His apocalypse. God dissolves you; you disappear without saying goodbye. But God does not want me: I am trapped by the equipment of my medium, flicking

switches, twisting zoom lenses, focusing, focusing, focusing. I am a pornographer and am thus not wanted in God's kingdom. I have had my vision of Hell; I wake up shaking; I remind myself that I am an atheist; I wonder if it is too late to call you.

Shira

The stench left in still water by old flowers overwhelms me; I gag.

Bruce

You are wheelchair bound, missing a leg. A poisonous spider has spread its venom along your tender calf, your perfect knee—and the surgeons have amputated the whole rotten thing. I move you around in your wheelchair. You need me now more than ever. I kiss you on your beautiful head. I take you back to the hospital for post-op check-ups. I know all the doctors by name. I love your bandages, I lust for them, for your body compromised by the sick reality of deterioration, disintegration, rot. I love your eyes, I love pushing you through the sterile hallways. I love making love to you: your wholeness in spite of the obvious lack. I bring roses to your hospital room. A South American nurse—gorgeous thing—carries your dinner in on a tray. When she leaves, I take you on the hospital bed, mindful of the bandages, staring all the while at the view through the window: the freeway with its black tar, the great green expanse of the forests and the hills.

Shira

You can take no food but the milk of my breasts. I can't account for its production: I have never been pregnant. I fry eggs for you, I bare my white breast through the pink of my bathrobe, I stroke your shaggy head as you suck at my chest. I will nourish you: you will never go hungry as long as I am here. I love you more than ever. I will put fat on your skinny bones. I will keep you alive.

The Outing

My mother made fish that night, one of her routine dishes, the specialty, the kind that gets made every two weeks—just long enough to seem like a novelty. Welcome to Madame Bistro's, best salmon in our little hometown. But that night she lathered trout in the same marinade and what did I know? To our passive don't ask, don't tell vocabulary it was just "fish," plain and simple. "I'm making fish tonight." I felt sorry for her. She held on to something, white knuckled, preparing that dinner for me. Even within the family room the marinade was bubbling, roasting, crisping the edges. I felt guilty knowing that she had savored the surprise. It was there, in code, on her quivered lip and unsteady brow; she knew since Monday, her shopping day. She bought it, kept it frozen, and held back from telling me until the aroma enticed me from the family room into the kitchen where she punctured her own balloon: "I'm making fish tonight." What a stab.

"I love fish," I said. I did like it, but I wasn't so naïve. I wasn't ten years old anymore. There were more serious things to talk about.

She could have said it again, "I'm making fish tonight," and I wouldn't have been surprised. "I'm making fish tonight." It's too much.

My father would have played along with her, so excited over dinner, as if there was nothing more important to talk about. But he was reading upstairs and would only come down when I called him. And we would wait, and listen, until his entrance was cued by that dinosaur rhythmic pound down the stairs and then he would walk in, stage right, into the habitual scene rehearsed nightly. He would sit in his chair at the head of the table, which was set with his salad, sprinkled with pine nuts and dried cranberries with the dressing on the side, and he would begin eating this appetizer as my mother and I brought the main course to the table.

He had asked earlier, in the car, "what's for dinner?" and that was his domestic contribution. But no, she didn't reveal the big secret in the car. She tartly asked him what he was making and that was that. It isn't the best example of something she might normally say. There was more on her mind than dinner that morning. The entire car ride was particularly tense. I was quiet, looking into the window at my phantom reflection, staring into my eyes. I had been zoning out into my personal abyss periodically all weekend, thinking about talking to my parents, becoming anxious about forming sentences. We were on our way to the city to visit my father's ex-girlfriend.

"We're going to have brunch with one of Dad's college friends," my mother told me, the night before.

"Who?"

"She's visiting her daughter, who goes to BC, so she called Dad last minute." I made a face. "It's just brunch. That's all. It'll go by fast and then we'll have the rest of the day to do our thing. Are you listening to me?"

"What? Sorry."

Later, when my father was in the kitchen, I caught

him off guard. The kitchen—home plate—that place where we always seemed to cross, forced into confrontation, something we'd rather avoid. He was probably on his way to the family room, to watch his baseball game, and I was on my way upstairs but had stopped to talk to my mother. She was polishing the marble countertop with a pungent spray. "So we're visiting your college... friend?"

"That's right."

"From Oberlin."

"We've kept in touch."

"She a doctor?"

"She's a minister in the mid-west believe it or not..."

"And is her husband coming?"

"Oh, no, she's been divorced for what, how many years now? Eight?" He turned to my mother. She shrugged. "Nine? Eight."

"...So you dated her?" His ruddy face became redder. I could tell. I preferred to assume that my parents hadn't dated anyone before they met each other. Of course, I never mentioned going on dates either, but they probably suspected something. They never asked.

"A little." My mother gave a look from across the room. We were both thinking the same thing; it was clear, a thought manifested through our transparent suppressed smiles, a thought expanding out of proportion, taking up space in the room, tickling our sides. Imagine someone dating him. It's ridiculous. Just look at him: balding, with his worn denim shirt tucked into his jeans, belly hanging casually over the belt. Age had added layers to him. Sure there were layers of fat, layers of freckles, but there were also layers of film, a certain sentiment, something that wasn't always there. I consciously noticed it for the first time three years ago when I snuck into my grandfather's office and looked through old photographs and slides. In a drawer I found wallet-sized sheets of my father dressed up, all formal and contrived, in a blue suit with a pressed collar and combed thick hair with a manicured curly cue at the summit, finishing him off with a soft serve curl. They were his high school senior photographs. The ones he never distributed. So I cut one out, and put it in my wallet, behind the other cards and IDs. It was my way of peeling him back.

"And then she broke up with you?" I loved to push him, just to the edge.

"I don't remember what happened."

"Come on!"

"I don't remember."

"Yes you do."

"...I don't."

My mother laughed. "Peter!" she said to my father. He left the kitchen.

I wondered if he was lying. My mother once told me that my father was "threatened by me" when I asked her why he was so quiet: "He's threatened by you. I think I don't know why." Yes, he could have been lying.

By Ian Samuels

So we drove to the city, a quiet drive, besides the filler question, "what's for dinner," which, of course, wasn't answered—directly anyway. Eventually, after nearly an hour of National Public Radio's engaging member support drive, we parked and walked to the restaurant where we were supposed to meet this ex-girlfriend for brunch. We waited outside in the cold, the cutting breeze sending shivers here and there. My mother was bundled in her red Talbot's coat with the hood up. She was particularly thoughtful with her makeup today—lipstick, brighter than usual, matching the coat. "I'm making fish tonight." It was probably on her mind.

My father paced up and down the block, trying to keep warm, talking to himself. You could tell that he was preparing conversation through the vacancy in his darting eyes and the light whispers, tongue flicking, within his mouth, just slightly agape. You would have thought he was crazy. I waited by the railing, watching my breath, wondering what the passersby thought of us, the family going out to brunch. "Mom, what is he doing?"

"...He wanted to get his haircut this morning." She pretended not to care but probably relished looking at his long unkempt hair, bald on top, thick and curly on the sides, in need of an emergency trim, or shave, but he would never do that. "There just wasn't time to get it cut." I looked away. I didn't want the passersby to think that we were a family going out to brunch. "He's just nervous," I could hear her continue. My father walked back to my mother and looked at his watch, as if she could speed things up.

"Wait, is that her?" my mother asked.

"Where?" My dad turned, making a scene.

"Over there Peter!"

"I don't see her." He was getting angry.

"Over there!"

And then she came: a tall thin woman, dressed well, in a plain and classy black dress. She was certainly middle-aged, probably in her late forties or fifties, and it could have been my subjectivity—I had never seen her before—but she seemed somehow younger than my parents. Next to her was the sophomore at BC, also thin, and short, with dark features, smiling awkwardly. Both of them had made an effort to dress well. I was self-conscious. I had worn my favorite brown and blue sweater.

"If it isn't the minister!" My father said, a grinning Mr. Hyde.

"Hello! Hello Peter!"

I could hear him re-breathe the sentence. He couldn't get enough of it: "If it isn't the minister!"

"Connie!" She took my mother's hand. "Nice to see you!" And then she turned to me, caught my face, and time hesitated. We both felt it, her expression melted, the wrinkles fell back into place, veining from her mouth and eyes, and there, within her eyes, was the dim stone chasm of nostalgia. I could have been wrong, because it happened so quickly, as if a single film frame had flashed,

something opened and then closed. "You must be..."

"That's me."

"Well!" She turned to my father, then back to me, bobbing her head. "Well. I can see it." My chest felt numb. "You definitely look like your father... How about that!" She checked again, enjoying the simulated morph from fifty-five to twenty. "That's really something." My mother released her stock fake phone giggle. "Really something. Huh... And this is my daughter, Jana." She pulled her daughter forward.

"Mom!" Jana said, annoyed at being the designated center of attention. I smiled and tried to secure the conversation back down to something less awkward:

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

"Hi," she said.

"You like BC?"

"Yeah."

"Should we eat?" My father's eyebrows were raised. It came from nowhere. I should have given up. I couldn't wait until we would be back out here again, saying goodbye, going home.

"Let's eat!" the ex-girlfriend said. My father and the newcomers walked ahead, forcing conversation, and my mother and I trailed behind, not talking, just waiting. I didn't want to be there but it was mostly because I didn't want to see my mother awkwardly tagging along. She smiled, as always, maintaining a complaisant composure. We were the most non-confrontational family that I had ever known. In seventh grade my mother walked in on me making out on the guestroom bed. She shut the door quickly, letting out an "oh!" and that was that, we had dinner that night and it never came up. But I hadn't expected her to say anything. She was rarely upset. I had only heard my mother cry once, from behind the closed bedroom door, upset because her uncle passed away, sniffing quietly on the bed. And what did I do? I walked away, pretending that I didn't hear her.

A hostess brought us to our table, the mausoleum by the giant mirror, and we watched ourselves approach, as if we intended to confront ourselves, talk to ourselves, divulge our thoughts. The chairs were pulled out without seating assignments. It was all up to us. I stepped back, not wanting to get involved. I'd take what was left. The ex-girlfriend sat first, my father and mother followed her and there they were, unfolding napkins, in a row, the self-conscious sandwich. I sat across from the ex-girlfriend, and the daughter, next to me, sat across from my father, leaving my mother dangling on the periphery. At least we could hide behind menus for some time. The ex-girlfriend was giving me a look again, the same one, with the slight smile. She didn't give it to my father, his was a full-blown smile, a familiar pose, but mine was something unplanned, uneasy, exposing.

"I can't get over how much you look like your father," she said finally. I was considering the eggs benedict. Something seemed wrong. She looked at me as if she knew me, as if we had met before. "It's really uncanny. Really." I had been told that I looked like him before, but never with such persistence or fascination. I took my wallet out, found the old high school photograph, browned and bent in the corner, and passed it over to the ex-girlfriend. Everyone leaned in for a closer look. My mother laughed. "There you have it!" the ex-girlfriend said.

"Where did you get this?" my father asked.

"There...you...have it!" she said again, matter-of-factly. Jana laughed.

"Where did you get this?"

"I found it in Philadelphia." He was embarrassed, but forced a smile. There he was, with all his hair, young skin, thinner, attractive. I took the artifact back and tucked it into my wallet again. My father was looking at me, through me, not making eye contact.

"Peter, do you think my daughter looks like me? What do you think?"

"A little," he said. "Yeah, the eyes, a little." The two of them were staring at us, sitting side-by-side, with fascinated, almost horrified expressions. My stomach was in a knot of sorts tying my throat to my lower intestines. Somewhere in the bundle my heart strained to pulse.

"So you dated her?" I had said.

"A little," he had said.

"Peter... it was great seeing you again." We were outside the restaurant, full, tired, and up to date on the details of the last twenty years. I seemed to be the only one aware that pedestrians couldn't pass. They faced the obstacle, pushed around us, some huffing and making faces, but I didn't say anything to my father, I didn't tell him to move over, because it was just a goodbye, a short goodbye.

"Great seeing you. Can I get an email... if you have it," my father said.

"Oh! Yes-" she said.

"Or a business email..."

"No, hang on, let me find a pen."

My mother stood to the side, still waiting. I said goodbye to Jana in the meantime. I told her that it was just so nice seeing her and that we should talk again sometime and maybe meet up since she didn't live too far from my hometown. We would never talk again. Both of us knew that.

"...here you go, my number's down there too. The cell," the ex-girlfriend said.

"Well thank you."

"Thank you!" She paused again. "Great seeing you Peter. And you too Connie," she turned to my mother.

"I'm glad we could meet up," my mother said, smiling. "We should do it again."

"Next time you're in town you should call us," my father said. "Don't stay at the hotel."

"Thanks, I might take you up." Then she looked at me and I put out my hand on a whim. She folded her hand over mine, not shaking, just wrapping. I could feel the softness of age, the skin sagging over veins, tendons, bones. She had a strong hand, a man's hand. There I stood, in the wetness of her relaxed eyes. The entire moment was out of place, unwanted, I wished it were over. We made contact, and it was strange, but there was an insignificant radiation, melting the atmosphere. "It was so good seeing you," she said quietly, almost on the verge of unconsciousness, as if her head relaxed on a pillow next to mine, and her thoughts were drifting higher, farther from here, until she almost broke away into a dream but on the cusp let her words slide down the last breaking tether to reality.

"You too," I said.

"So good." She didn't go. "It's just been a pleasure meeting you." Her hand rocked a bit, and I let her take me, limp under her nostalgic grip, but altogether self-conscious.

"Mom," Jana said, from some other place, "we'll be late." She almost pulled away, I felt the hesitation, but it channeled into a smile. "Come on Mom," Jana urged. This time she gently let me go, and took a step back. I was outside the restaurant again.

"Bye Peter," she said, as Jana shook her head in frustration. I would have done the same, any other time, but I didn't move.

My mother backed away. She also sensed that the goodbye had lasted a beat too long. Jana pulled her mother's hand forward but the ex-girlfriend refrained from turning her head. She looked back at me until Jana had strained her arm too far, forcing her to turn. We watched them walk away a few strides. Then my mother made the inevitable pivot, followed by my father, and then me. We headed to the car silently.

"I'm making fish tonight." There it was. I knew it

was coming. My mother had waited all day to passively become the center of attention.

"I love fish," I said.

"Call Dad, it's about ready," I went to the foot of the staircase and yelled.

"What?" he yelled back.

"Dinner."

The table was set, salads in place, I gave my mother a look as my father pounded down the stairs with his habitual cadence, an irritating idiosyncrasy. He told me that I should read his Benjamin Franklin biography, that it was inspiring, that Benjamin Franklin was a pivotal player in American history. I nodded, and told him that I had enough to read for school this semester. Dinner was usually the only time that we had a substantial conversation. "Maybe over break," I told him, sitting down in my seat. "There's so much to read." I switched my fork and knife. I was left-handed when I ate, different from the rest of the family.

My mother beamed as she brought the filet over to the table, the oil still popping. She began cutting the tender layers with a knife.

"He invented the library. Did you know that? ...Thanks." My mother slid a substantial slice onto his plate.

"Yeah," I told my father, holding my plate up.

He waited a beat before the follow-up, only he didn't notice, he was still stuck in our meager interaction, breathing his last words, "he invented the library." Then, finally, aloud, "and the fire station." He was in a good mood that night, still beaming from lunch. Something was renewed, recharged, and I wouldn't say that he looked like the boy in the photograph, but there was something to be said about the two of them, an overlap, proof that the two of them were somehow the same person.

"Thanks Mom," I said.

"You're welcome."

I took a bite. "I like your salmon."

"It's trout," she said.

"Oh, I thought something was different. I couldn't really tell."

"Trout," she repeated.

"Our first American celebrity," my father continued. "You really need to read this biography. I'll lend it to you." I was becoming hot, nervous; I had forgotten how to communicate. "The Franklin stove." I was almost ready to talk, nearly there. Yes, I would say something. "Bifocals." No, I had missed the moment, it was over, it had passed, I surrendered to my father. "The odometer. Did you know?" Everything seemed scripted, I could anticipate the conversation - in fact we all could. I fell back into my personal abyss and my mother caught me.

"Are you okay?" she asked me. She actually asked me.

"What?" I heard her, but I couldn't create a sentence. My heart felt hot, under too much pressure. She hesitated to ask again.

"What are you thinking?" There it was and it began to grow bigger.

"Well..." It swelled. I couldn't even hear myself talk. I couldn't feel myself talk. My parents swelled with it, engulfing the room, pressing the air into the corners, shattering windows, lifting the roof. "Well... Okay, I wanted to tell you something."

Heat Wave

In the summer of '88 there was a heat wave in San Diego so intense that all the watering ponds at the Zoo dried up, leaving the animals dehydrated and with heat stroke. Countless times the animal keepers filled the pools at eight o'clock in the morning, and by noon there was nothing but the concrete basin and dust left for the animals. For unknown reasons the elephant seemed hit hardest of all. It staggered around the pen and bellowed loud enough to set all the animals screeching and hooting, arousing within the animal handlers an uncanny feeling that it was inciting the other creatures to riot. At the height of the heat wave the elephant's derangement was in full swing, and aggravated by a peanut thrown at its head, it broke through the enclosure wall and trundled off down the street in search of a water source. Just as the elephant was found, lapping gently at the waves of the Pacific, Oscar Mendal had an epiphany. He was a terrible artist.

Oscar was in the middle of a lecture, outlining the aesthetics of black and white pointillism at the San Diego School of Art and Design, when he had his revelation. Mid-sentence he stopped speaking, dropped his hand from where it had been pointing to a slide of his own artwork, and calmly walked out of the room. As he drifted through the empty hallways, crossed the parking lot, and got into his car, Oscar was completely unaware of the confusion

that was beginning to build in his classroom. When he pulled out of the parking lot it would never have entered Oscar's mind that his students would stare blankly at the doorway for a few seconds, and continue to sit politely but uncomfortably in their chairs for a few more minutes before one student got up enough courage to make eye contact with another student and whisper, "I don't think he's coming back." As Oscar slid out into traffic and began to maneuver his car into the general flow he could think only one thing: he was truly a bad artist.

As Oscar got farther and farther from the school his body began to take over the act of driving, leaving his mind free to ruminate on his new self-awareness. While his car maneuvered around the spray of open fire hydrants, and merged directionlessly in and out of lanes, Oscar began to examine his epiphany, attempting to discover what had sparked it. He thought first of his childhood and the small box of worn and broken colored crayons that never left his hand. As a child Oscar spent his time scribbling endlessly, creating huge blocks of interweaving colors (rarely did he have a subject), on any surface he could find. Oscar chuckled as he thought about how his father ranted about the enormous squares of yellow and purple that intermingled on the dining room walls, while Oscar's mother was raving about her son "the post-modern-

abstract-expressionist" to all their family friends.

In grade school Oscar enjoyed the once-a-week art class, but not as much as his parents expected. He condescended to learn that eating paste was not acceptable, that making things look far away was "perspective," and that some of the colors were more important than others. But, in the back of class, when all the other kids were working on projects that Oscar finished ages ago, the cause of his slipping math grades, Oscar still drew his little blocks of color, side by side and on top of each other. Winding through a residential neighborhood, Oscar never noticed the kids trying to fry eggs on the sidewalk, or the heat-crazed condor, recently escaped from the Zoo, that swooped down and tried to carry them off as soon as their shells were cracked.

When Oscar entered high school his poor grades in math, the effect of the extra time Oscar spent on his artwork, surprised both his parents by becoming an asset. The paintings Oscar created when he should have been studying algebra allowed him to be accepted into the honors art program. In his advanced art classes Oscar became enamored of all the greats like Picasso and van Gogh, and completely forgot about his little squares of color. By the end of his senior year Oscar could do a pretty good impression of Picasso, a spot on Monet, and a

By Willis Arnold

damn remarkable Rembrandt. Including samples of his work in his college applications, it was no surprise when he was accepted into the arts program at Pomona College in Claremont. Turning left at an intersection, Oscar was passed by a fleet of tropical birds clinging like drowning sailors to the bike-rack of a passing station wagon.

Oblivious to the rising gauges on his dashboard, Oscar's thoughts drifted like ghosts through his college years. It was there that he learned to employ all the unique techniques of other artists in his own paintings. He borrowed a little from the Romantic period, lifted a few ideas from the Realists, and stole a significant amount from the Modernists. Having lost all sight of his little squares of color, Oscar consumed the styles of others, blending them into a strange and bizarre landscape of techniques. He created masterpieces of synthesis, balancing the styles of all the other artists within his own paintings. Sagging back into his seat Oscar wondered what had taken him so long, that was the cause of his epiphany, those same masterpieces. They lacked the one thing all the artists he impersonated had maintained: originality. As he wove in and out of traffic, Oscar laughed at the irony of it. His epiphany, the realization that he was unoriginal, was a problem artists had surely struggled with since the second person to etch a woolly mammoth into a stone wall. Sure, he could pick out each technique used by each artist, and not only recreate it, but create a visual harmony from multiple techniques, yet he never developed a technique completely his own. He was talented, he could give himself that, but crushingly unoriginal. He shook his head and beat the steering wheel in frustration. Not only was his art unoriginal, but even his epiphany was one a hundred artists had daily. As Oscar sat, stopped at a red light, lost to an inter-

nal debate as to whether he should have been a math major, a stately sambar crossed the crosswalk in front of him, having taken the elephants lead and decided that the Zoo was no longer the place for him.

Two blocks later, Oscar's car overheated, leaving him stalled on the side of the road in the middle of the financial district. Still in a trance, Oscar got out of the car, closed the door and, following his feet past the hot dog vender on the sidewalk, entered the building nearest him. As Oscar wondered just what his feet were intending, they led him to the stair well and with a sense of urgency began to climb. Five stories later Oscar was striding across the roof, wary of his feet's purpose as they brought him closer to the edge. Below him he could see the people spread out like pepper spilled across a kitchen table. People were walking from one office to another, or milling about under the building's awnings smoking cigarettes. Some even crossed from the other side of the street to buy a hot dog.

Perched on the edge of the roof, Oscar was seized by a thought, which he briefly considered before rejecting as completely absurd: he could jump. There in the midst of the financial district his splattered end could be his one original artistic moment. Hopefully, upon landing, a deep pool of blood would leak from below his body and cover the sidewalk, creating a jarring contrast to the monotone pavement. Cracking a humorless smile Oscar dwelled for a moment on the thought that if he went through with it, there in the midst of all that bustling life, one life would end. In a brilliant flash, and wet crunch, Oscar's organic matter would be wed to the inorganic surface of concrete. Surrounded by cement and steel constructions built with man's subconscious urge to quell eternity, Oscar's ironic smile widened at the thought of his

blood and bone illustrating just how feeble, how temporary, man truly was.

Oscar stood on the ledge of the building for as long as it might take the sun to explode, waiting for the world to come rushing up and swallow him whole. When it finally didn't, he calmly backed away from the edge, descended the stairs, and left the building. On the fifth floor of that same building James Campion had just pushed himself back from his desk and, feeling stifled behind the walls of his cubicle, looked out his window in an attempt to realign himself with the outside world. From his vantage point James witnessed a series of events that he would later tell his wife about over their Friday night meatloaf. James watched as Oscar walked up to the man at the hot dog stand, whispered in his ear, and handed him his car keys. To his surprise, James watched as the vender shook his head in disbelief and smiled before removing his apron and, taking three bottles of water from his cart, walked to Oscar's car, opened the hood and began to fill the radiator. Then James, now engrossed in the odd drama playing out below him, watched as Oscar donned the abandoned apron and began doling out hot dogs, the ketchup and mustard applied not in the usual manner of opposing sides, but as neat little squares overlapping on the bun.

Her Bedroom Door

Her shadow emerges alone from the open bathroom door. It is followed by the outline of one slender foot, then the fragile body of her middle age.

I stand in the hallway and wait, my backpack still hanging off my shoulder. From inside the dark of her bedroom drifts the sound of an unhooking belt buckle, the swish of unfamiliar linen trousers abandoned on the carpet. She is walking barefoot as if with high heels. Her hair she has let loose around her shoulders. She slips past me and through the open pie-slice of her door.

She is wearing lace. She is wearing perfume. She is wearing her extra long lashes.

She returns to peek her head out over the threshold, her eyes flashing in the dim light from the windows. It is winter, even in Atlanta the sunlight ends early. She says, "What would I do without you, darling?" and shuts the door behind her. I come close. I press my back against the polished wood, the cold of the brass doorknob seeping through my cotton shirt. I slide without sound to the floor.

I know to keep alert. I know I am needed. She waits for me, waits for the school bus to drop me off on the lawn, so that I can sit and watch. I am twelve.

I keep a chapter book in my bag just for afternoons like this. I crease the spine so it lays flat on my knee and, though no one is watching, I pretend to read through the pages. With my ear close to her door I can hear all sorts of noises—noises that seem strange and inhuman, noises that I will repeat with similar strangers when I am myself a woman. For now I know not to ask questions. I bang three times on the wall if I hear a car pull into the driveway. It is like a game, and I am required to play. My father will be home in an hour.

My mother. Once, afterward, before my father came home, she said to me, "Darling, you are the key to my purity." Years later I understood the absurdity of that. At the time I could do nothing but agree. I was too young to understand irony, especially at home. My mother and I, we shared no conspiratorial smile. Besides, I didn't hate my father. Nor did I love any of the sea of men who disappeared behind her door.

I did not doubt her. I sensed her purpose. And I saw she had few other options.

For those who thought ill of my mother, I have only this portrait of her life: On Mondays she went to the beautician for her hair. On Tuesday for her nails. On Wednesday for her skin. On Thursdays she put on her only apron, all lace and frills like a old French doily and she took the feather duster out of the closet and she positioned it between her well-manicured fingers. She cleaned the entire house, from basement to attic, with elegant strokes. On those nights she would have an extra glass of wine with dinner. "Today I have earned it," she would say, though no one ever inquired. Then on Fridays the maid service came and scrubbed down the house she had already dusted, cleaning over all the work she had performed so carefully the morning before.

She cooked three meals a day, every day of her marriage. I was her only child, born the year she realized she never wanted one. She had no friends in Atlanta.

I could not think her selfish. What else did she have, in her day-to-day, other than the afternoons in her room? My father could be gone for whole weeks at a time. I went to school, to dance recitals, to tennis lessons. But my mother was always home, always lonely. She didn't listen

to the radio or watch the TV. She couldn't even knit. I was the selfish one.

I am fifteen. It is fall. I am in my tomboy stage, but I will grow out of it by the spring. I have worn through the soles of my sneakers months ago, and though my mother has offered to take me shopping for new ones, I've refused her company. "It would be nice," she has said, "to go into town with you for the afternoon. Wouldn't you like that, darling? We could get out of the house for a little while." But I have told her, stay. I have told her: doesn't she know that girls my age don't need their mothers to go shopping? I call my best friend Kate and her mother agrees to drive us down to the strip the next day, where they have all the nicest stores.

My father is not around. He has gone to the cabin, a little house on the lake about an hour north of here. That's where he does all of his writing. Most days he's home around 5:00, but really, he comes back when he wants to. He refuses to install a phone at the cabin. He says it will ruin his work. Even just the sight of it. So my mother and I can only guess when he'll be home. In the meantime, he leaves us a money drawer. Every week or so he refills it. My mother never asks for more. And it never runs out. That way no one has to speak. All the girls at school say, "You're so lucky! It's like you get a permanent allowance."

It is already tomorrow. I hear Kate's mom honking in the driveway. I grab three twenties from the drawer, fold them in the pocket of my baggy jeans and head out the door.

Once we're downtown we skip over the girly stores and go, instead, into Lou's. Everything in Lou's is done up in black with silver lettering. They have combat boots and skateboarding sneakers, the kind that, for now, are my favorite. We browse. Kate tries on a pair of giant chunky heels and I pick a sneaker, but they don't have it in my size up front with the display. I hobble over to the counter, one foot shoeless as I prepare to try the new ones on.

The man by the cash register is tall and dark and handsome. He has black wavy hair with thin stripes of silver and when he smiles his teeth gleam. His clean-shaven cheeks are ornamented with permanent dimples. He is as old as my father. I hold up the sample shoe and ask for it in size eight and a half. He reaches a well-tanned hand out over the counter and lays it on my shoulder. "Don't I know you?" he asks. He doesn't look familiar, but, I admit, I have seen lots of men over the years. "I've got it. Do you have a house in the suburbs, out near Penbrook?" I shake his hand away and shrug. I pretend not to know what he means. I hold the shoe up higher.

"Right, right," and he stares at the shoe a few moments too long. "Oh yes, sure, we have more of these in the back. An eight and a half you said? I'm certain we've got that. Why don't you come along with me?"

"To the back?" I say, turning to look for Kate who stands across the room intently sorting through a bin of colored socks. "Couldn't I just wait here and you bring the shoes out to me?"

"No," says the man, through giant clenched, grinning teeth, "it would be easier if you came to the back." Kate doesn't even notice as I disappear past the employee-only sign. I follow the man down a short hallway to a locked door, and then into a large walk-in closet filled with boxes of shoes. He grabs one from the wall and drops it into my hands. Then he looks once out into the hallway, tugs on

the light in the closet and shuts the door. He stands very close to me. I wonder if I should scream.

"Now listen," he says, "you don't have to play dumb. I know about you." In the half-light he reaches out and strokes my hair. I shut my eyes and put on my stone face. "And you should know me too. I've been by to visit your mom before. Such a nice lady. I was wondering if you could give her a message from me. Would you do that?" I don't answer. The weight of the shoe box tugs my arms down straight to the sides of my body. "Just tell her this," he says, and then he leans over and kisses me on the mouth, lightly at first, but then hard, so hard that when I come out to find Kate, to tug her out of the store and into the free air and safety of the street, a line of blood already marks my lower lip. He leads me out without another word. I remember the money in my pocket and run to the counter, my eyes already on the door, to leave it in exchange for the shoes. But the man behind the register waves me away. "Don't worry about it," he says, "consider them a gift."

Kate's mom drives us back to her house and announces that she is making lasagna for dinner. We help her pick out the spices to put in the sauce. Right before we all sit down to eat she asks to see the shoes I've bought. I, in turn, ask to be excused and to go to the bathroom, but instead I take the new sneakers and I throw them in the trashcan by the street. Then I come back and eat dinner in silence.

Afterward Kate and her little brother wash dishes; Kate's mom grabs her keys and her coat and offers to drive me home. Kate's father has retired to the living room where he is enjoying his evening beer. Pre-recorded sitcom laughter echoes through the split-level house. But when he hears the garage door open he jumps up and runs through the kitchen. "That's alright, honey," he is shouting over the buzz of the car engine, "you stay here. I can drive her home. Really, it's no trouble at all. Anyways, there's a thing or two I was hoping to discuss with her mother."

I rarely saw them go into her room, but I always saw them come out. Men, their shirts still unbuttoned, their ties loose around their sticky necks. I preferred the ones I didn't know. For them I would hold the back door open like a gentleman, averting my eyes. Sometimes my mother escorted them out and gave them kisses at the door, or offered them lemonade or grabbed a red pen from the cup in the pantry to write her number on the backs of their hands. Sometimes, if they wanted to impress her, they would put their arms around my small shoulders and tell me that I was just as beautiful as my mother. Things like this she did not like to hear. Beauty was all she had. They learned quickly not to mention me at all.

And just as often it happened that I did know them, the men who appeared from her room. Mr. Rose, who owned the hardware store, Mr. Michael, who ran the diner, Mr. Jones, my teacher from seventh grade math. Or worse, fathers of my friends, men with wives at home who served me casserole and meatloaf for dinner on the weekends when I had sleepovers with their daughters. We lived in a small suburb; the oily fear in their eyes said they recognized me too. I made sure to return the uncomfortable stare. They left without speaking; they knew the way to the door.

The ritual continued even after each guest had gone.

By Bonnie Ruberg

15

Observer

My mother would strip down in the hallway, then wash off the perfume and the sweat of the last hour with a quick steaming shower. She was always dressed and primmed by mealtime, her lipstick smile newly reapplied. Then, some nights, both of us would wait, three hot plates and an empty seat, until all of our food went cold. My mother would stare out at the street, searching for my father's car. "I stopped loving that man long before you were born." She swore on those words until her death. And that made it easier, certainly, to sit watch by her door. But it's hard to believe when I think of her stare.

"Why? Why did you marry me? You never even loved me." He only shrugs, flips through the *Sunday Times*, the thickest of the week's papers, which travels all the way from New York City to Atlanta, so it seems to me at the age of thirteen, for the pleasure of my father alone. He has ignored this argument before. My father, the author. The famous author. He himself has had articles in the *Times*, but I do not know that now, or what that means. He has been on radio shows, on talk shows, on book signing tours all across the country and Europe. He travels months out of the year. He does not miss us. Sometimes he lets me keep his used ticket stubs, remnants of airplane rides I have dreamed about from the comfort of my room, or with my back pressed to the hard wood of my mother's bedroom door. He brings my mother nothing. Nor does she ask. He has cheated on her, so he openly admits, at least once or twice, but only while away. His true love, his only love, is his writing. My mother slams her door and dials a number from her call list. Friends of friends. Other women's husbands. I go to sleep early to trick my tears into stopping. I dream that I am a book he has written, an ancient manuscript he has forgotten for years, a work from his youth he has just now remembered. I am a gigantic volume of yellowing pages, his masterpiece. He holds me close to his chest and I can smell the wool of his sweater. He carries me everywhere. He writes in me his secrets. I tell my mother my dream. My mother says, "Darling, don't be a fool," before she flicks off the lights and closes her door.

When my father married my mother he was not yet a famous author, but she was already beautiful. They met up north, in Boston. He was working on his graduate degree. She had been waitressing for years. He knew no one in the city; he needed someone to come home to. "A writer," she said one night as they lay together in bed, close to sleep, in their very first apartment. She told me of it many times, over cooling morning coffee. "I've fallen in love with a writer." My mother was no artist. There was nothing she could make. She knew this. The cool air from outside was seeping in through ramshackle walls; below them a child was crying. "I guess this means I'll be your muse. But please," she said, "when you become big and famous, don't write me in all of your stories. I'll be so embarrassed. People will know that it's me."

But he never wrote about her. His heroines, his literary lovers and daughters and mothers, all were dark, with honey skin and chocolate hair. My mother had short red curls which framed an ivory face. I, on the other hand, look more like my father. I have been told the main resemblance lies in the slate gray of our eyes, a clouded monotone which reveal absolutely nothing of our meaning.

My father never felt the need to apologize for not loving us, for not caring. I decided, after years of fighting down the boiling tears, that it was alright. It was simple. He didn't think we were worth his time. That much I could understand. But it wasn't true. I knew it only later. In college I read his memoir. To my mother and I he gave only a transitional paragraph in a transitional chapter. A passing mention to fill in lost time. He had spent thirty years with my mother. No, it wasn't that he thought we were a waste of time. It was true instead that he did not think of us at all.

My mother took it hardest. For him she had been little more than a warm body on the road to success, a convenient facade. But he had been the love of her life. I had

other places to turn: school, friends, books. I had youth, and some small amount of faith. Besides, I was not raised thinking I deserved his love. Some days I realized little that I lacked it.

I am seventeen, just entering the eleventh grade. My teachers, I've learned, are boring and I don't have class with my friends. In English we'll be reading a book by my father, though luckily no one lets on if they realize the connection. For the first day of my life I am wearing makeup and high heels. My mother has sprayed my wrists and neck with floral perfume. A senior in my gym class asks for my phone number.

School is over but Kate is giving me a ride, so I decide I have a minute to try out my new locker. I stare down at the lock and repeat the combination numbers under my breath. When I look up, astonished that I've gotten the thing open on the second try, I find that I'm surrounded. Boys have gathered on all sides, sophomore boys who used to be tiny freshmen, but they have grown. They have ripped their shirts to show off their muscles. One of them, his hair moussed up into spikes, leans his face in close to mine. "Hey," he says, "we want to talk to you."

"I'm busy," I say, "I have to meet someone and go home."

"Yeah, well," says another, strands of greasy blond hair covering one of his eyes, "someone will have to wait."

"Fine," I say, and slam my locker shut hard. "What do you want?"

The one with the spiked hair laughs. There is orange food between his braces. "Is it true," he asks, "when your mom fucks around you come over and listen? I mean, I know it's true she fucks around. Everybody knows that. But I heard you just sit there. Joe Valin said his dad told him he was over there last week getting your mom against the wall and you were listening the whole time. Are you some kind of pervert or what?"

"I have to go," I say, staring only at their feet. I try and slip through the semi-circle they've created but a kid with a shaved head and long, thin fingers grabs me by the shoulder. I trip over my heels and fall back into the row of lockers. They come in closer in pulses, as if we're dancing, until all I can breathe is the musty smell of their breath, of their sweat.

"Because, I mean Jesus, that would be fucked up, right? So we're thinking, that bitch is pretty messed, listening to her mom fuck and what. We're thinking what she probably wants is a good fuck too, right? Right?"

"Kate," I start shouting, "Kate!"

"I mean, she probably just doesn't know how to ask. She just doesn't know how to get down on her hands and knees and beg, you know, come on fuck me. Right?" They all laugh together. They lean in closer. "Eh, am I right?"

And then Kate is there, pushing them aside as if they are nothing, as if they are weeds and I am some dying flower. She doesn't even understand what she is doing. She grabs my hand and leads me down the hall. "Come on," she says, "let's get out of here. First day back and already I'm sick of this place."

I spent my childhood watching for her, for my mother, thinking all the while she was lonely, she needed these men, she needed my help, and that my father must never know. Only with age, with distance, did I come to realize: all she ever wanted was to be caught.

She lived for the day he would come home early. For the day he found another man in his bed. For every time one of her lovers called to talk dirty and she could flirt while my father sat flipping through the paper in the very next room. I tried to protect her. But that's not what I was really for. I was the decoy. Look, she was saying to him, please look at me. He never did. Once he walked right in on her, on the whole charade. I was eighteen, pretending to read a book on ancient history. She was down on her hands and knees in the bedroom, a car salesman pressing against her from behind. My father slept the night in a hotel. He didn't feel jealous. He didn't feel anything. He

didn't mention it again.

And where had I been? I, who was supposed to keep watch? Did I plan for it to happen? Was I extracting revenge on my mother by abandoning my post at the door? My one real act of character, of dissension. Or had I, at that crucial moment, sided with the enemy? Had I heard his car? Had I let him step past me without sending up the warning signal?

No, I had only slipped away for a moment, just a moment, to use the bathroom down the hall. In the end of it all, my father barely noticed. He didn't care. He didn't stop to see the look of shame and adoration on either of our faces.

I am nine years old. My elementary school is just around the corner; I have walked back by myself. I have stayed late after school. I have been playing on the swing set for hours. All the other children have gone home. It is already dark when I open the front door, when I go to meet my mother. She is not in the kitchen. She is not in the living room. I leave my bag in the hall. I tiptoe toward my room. I think: she's not here. It's alright. I won't have to sit and watch today. Suddenly I can hear her voice from her bedroom. She is on the phone. She is shouting. "What do you mean you don't think you'll come over? You have to come over. Don't give me that. Come on, just for a little. My daughter will be home soon. She can keep an eye out. Didn't you like it last time? I don't care, just tell her you're going out for a beer. Fine. Just come." She slams the phone down on the receiver; it resounds with a harmonious chime that echoes through the house. Something crashes to the floor. Then everything is quiet. I know she is crying.

There are no lights on; I feel my way down the hall and knock at her bedroom door. She doesn't answer. "Mom," I say, and I walk inside for the first time in years, "are you alright?" In the dark she has curled up on the bed, on her side. Her body heaves. "Mom?" I come closer. I reach out one thin small hand and place it on her shoulder. "Mom, can I get you anything?" I let my hand linger. I am unused to the feeling of her skin.

Silence. And then she is up, her fingers and her long painted nails wrapped around my outstretched wrist. "What are you doing in here? What the hell are you up to?" Her voice is loud and course from crying. "What?" She grabs me, pulls me toward the door. At the entranceway she flicks on the lights and I can see in a flood the streaks of mascara across her cheeks, the pools they make at the corners of her mouth. "When did you get home? Are you sneaking up on me? You know what you're supposed to do." She shoves me over the threshold. "You're supposed to stay put. Just stay. Somebody will be here soon."

Her lips still form the words but her grip goes weak, her whole body limp. I am worried I will have to reach out and catch her. Her eyes are swelling with salty makeup pools. For a moment she looks right at me, amazingly right at me, and she is saying over and over, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," but it is only with her eyes. She is frantic. I am frozen to the wall.

A calm comes to her face. She stands up straight again. There is no more apology in her stare. In this moment I begin to understand. In this moment I learn never to ask questions. She wipes at her cheeks with the back of her hand. There is a knock at the door. "Stay here," she says, "just stay here."

Bob's Diner

Excerpts from a longer piece

THE MAN

It has become clear that in the market of sin my industriousness is sufficiently suffocating. Behind my window is a flower, behind that, guilt. My house is dark and shivers with caffeination, if the stark Chambers which comprise my self does not... The room I sleep in is rotting; it needs one more qualified than I to guard it. I am a guardian of what I crave, not what I need. I crave the sense to crave what I need, yet my surroundings remain engorged with dysentery, shitstarved. They need tough shit you could mold like clay and rest atop a fireplace at a fine dinner party of pricks who forget that when they fuck, different human beings pop out.

In a way, however, this room remains cleverly displaced. The mild chaos appears contrived, almost exaggerated, but I am not its artist. I am its victim, the test dummy...

It must be that I am allowed to perform one truly great deed, one embracing of/shitting on my creator, and

whether that shines through any practicality of expression or through a hectic finale above a waterfall is, as yet, unclear.

For the time being I exist with no consumption, no self-inflicted gunshot wound; I exist as a praying mantis acrobat. I am hostile and cocky towards a certain strain of humanity and unable to lie to the rest. What is really now striking is my inability not to have sex with anyone on the right side of the fence. Beneath me is a sweating body, a mind-enhancing pair of tits; beneath her is guilt.

2 days ago I had ambitions and was as goal-oriented as some queer OshKosh on infovangelism at 5 A.M. Tonight I am silent, shaky, hearing the vague realities outside, moved by the violence in spiritual patterns that clenches its fist around the world's emotional sword-swallowers.

3 days ago I was holy. I was a self-ordained faux Zen vrai lunatic with nothing attached. My Buddhism is the Buddhism of desire now, as usual, and I'm stuck.

By Jim Chambers

It appears to be impossible to gauge what is finite to me. Even the animal urge is infinite. You can fuck infinitely, you can eat bloody meat or drink beer and lounge with it or vomit... Swastikas, if manipulated, become windows on quaint houses. Stars of David, Kaleidoscopes. Under my stockpile of theoretical Nazi memorabilia lays my demon, bench-pressing within a cage, foaming at the mouth with anticipation; beneath him is guilt. God can't quite screw my religiously lubed asshole yet, so I run with it. God is too vacant.

My memories are active; apparently there is some question as to the origin of memory but that means fuck all to me; memory is reactive to the present; my present is bright yet crass, as is my memory.

I cannot tell the truth. Truth is theatrical and I am low-budget jealousy. My actors cannot swordfight with épées, only with testes. My arms are tanned and my ass is pale. My hands are falling apart.

I could be right; it is impossible, I think, to be

wrong. If I am to be the poet laureate of anything it should most certainly be my prick.

I write because I have no choice. I hate words. I hate art. I am a slave to them and a slave to hatred. I write because my loins do not hate anything.

Welcome to Bob's Diner. May I help you?

Huzzah! I've found a skull...

This morning is suitable for a barrow-digger. There are layers of sentiment to the day; it is ridden with pestilence and the lightness of solitude. Time is frozen; I have eclipsed mathematics to search through the texture of the now.

The coffee is bitter, as it should be, as it must be; I can feel its harsh point being made in my insides. Beside its resting place is a bit of bread, which cannot excite me. The lights are on and they don't need to be. My head hurts, and that will stop.

I need more service than this. I need attentiveness, empathy. I need culinary devotion from the blob squad spics in the backs and loving care from the nicotine worn down whore in the front. She is a bitch in the worst way; apparently engrossed in some life that doesn't mean a thing. I can identify... She is a woman by result of formality, like Rhode Island is a state. No one else notices, but her cunt stinks up the whole place. That's what makes her the she that she is.

I give her an eye, I flail upward expectantly and the inevitable connection is made. She unbuttons my lips--

"What'll it be?" She wants to kill me; her breath pours its filthy desire and rage on to my face.

"Um, two poached--shit... yeah sorry two fried eggs, overeasy on white. With white, I mean, like on the side, not a sandwich."

"Yep." She grabs the menu and seems regretful of how violently she does it. I'd like to light a cigarette but the mayor said No, hardly sane in this stupid, suicidal city. I will get cancer no matter; we all seem to suck on cancer at some point nowadays. Someday the chemo lounge will serve cocktails, but no smoking. Someday tumors will be posh, and the Eurofaggot SoHo crowds will march around like Gestapo in Dolce et Gabbana et Leukemia, snorting radioactivity for kicks.

My food arrives; it is prehistoric. It is rubber soft crunch like morning breath and a tire. Fuck this joint. I spew up some value paper and ho ho I walk on down the road.

There is a small park on this street; I sat by the phone once. I looked great then. Memories smacked me in the face. The sunlight spoke in sonnets and permeated my senses, oozing contentment like butterscotch on cold things. What it was then was a total removal from my present, an acute awareness of some all-encompassing force that struck down culture like it needed to be raped, or that is how I think now.

I'm still hurled back to then though. To capture the image, she stood sitting on a vacant bench, awash in her self-deprecation which she wore like a hippy girl with a flower. She seemed to carry confidence like a third breast, but something tormented her face. Her soul seemed to feel unjustified. She had gone on tirades for minutes, then cowered off into hermetic safety minus orgasm. This is where I come in.

Post coital emphatic twitches...Flailing in sexed all over sweaty covers.

Queen Mary is looking in the mirror, her razor-sharp hysteria trembles. No one has as yet to hear her negotiations, her sobs, her preambles to existing in the now. She was ghostly as a child so now she is breathing, or learning to. She has been unwise in the past, trying to seek some immediate goal, and she doesn't know if she's still looking.

I can tell that I've learned something. I always learn things that don't stick.

The Man is in me. I wake up reluctantly with moist skin and a heavy set of human teeth. Apparently the cold season in New York is beginning to spread its legs, beginning to secrete its force into the eclectic mix of dirt and the first element which is our air. I grab such rustled blankets as these and with desperation struggle to replace them over my clammy self. After some hectic moments I succeed, allowing my senses to quench their half-awake urge. To wake up in the cold is comparable to being spat into a ring with Ali...

There is not so much light here. Day produces little if any effect on this room. I can see monstrous forms through the spaces in the dusty blinds: that may be concrete, that may be boxes. That is in the yard, which is crawling with warring nations of dirt, the most courageous of which frequently invade beneath my door.

This is a thinking day. Some days, I will spill everything out on to my plate, my anti-inertia has eyes like empires and a stomach like a girl. I will inevitably fall back into the investigation of flesh by the middle of those days, but today I will see people first and foremost, people I don't fuck.

Every relationship is like a war.

I refuse to elaborate until some time from now.

My routine is passing, it passes, it is passed, so I

escape from the comfort of rest and take in a whiff of this breeze that smells like water because it smells like nothing and water is transparent. I'm just beginning to feel things out.

I am rendered anemic in terms of pragmatism about the functions of living. My moment lies not here in this room but in the innumerable possibilities which are scurrying around outside like cockroaches after the bomb hits; possibilities devoid of force or optimism, those that leave one feeling frigid, or alive at best.

Everything is towards the North except dope. I can feel the heaviness in my lungs waltzing down Court St., while the sentiment-less yuppies grapple with the aged entrenchments of the neighborhood. The Italian men are like statues on pulleys, all wishing they mattered like they used to and that their kids didn't like nigger music. Each of these sides, the WOPs and the young new professionals, share a hatred for one another while at the same time they keep a subtle alliance against the mangy Arab shopkeepers, and the various Latinos who dot their landscape and multiply as the street evolves. Court St. could be decimated at any moment. The sidewalk is brittle, not soft.

Unless I have business there I can't stay on Court too long. It is too safe, too insecure and mechanical; it is uninviting.

Anyways, today I need to see people...

2 blocks East of Court on Pacific is where Katherine lives. She's above some very official looking building that I can't determine the purpose of. It has a parking lot and it isn't a housing project, therefore it must be important. I've never seen anyone walk or drive in or out of it, or any lights on inside. I imagine it to be some sort of playground for the dead, the important dead, comparing the stature of their morticians while drinking martinis with fine vermouth poured from some holy cup. I wish I could stop noticing it, this building, but I can't. It's always there; her flat extends out towards it like a hand pointing.

The hallways in her place are old and you can smell the dreams of anyone that's ever lived there. You'd expect mice, but there are none. You'd expect dirt, and there is plenty. Vapid, insidious dirt; get away...

I would describe the creak of the staircase but that would be stupid, so I won't.

She answers the door like St. Peter and I love her more than I ever have. Today she's put her hair into pigtails and it reminds me of those girls in kindergarten that I hadn't yet realized I wanted to fuck. She never wears makeup and I'd hate her for that if she needed it but she doesn't. Her eyes glare at me like a Cadillac in the sun and I'm stuck on them while I kiss her cheek, and for a long moment afterwards.

"You're dirty," she says.

Katherine is sitting on her couch, smoking needily. She is sucking the cigarette, really. She is determined to absorb it. She is making a foul sort of love to it.

"Say something, Jim."

"Hm?"

"I dunno, something, don't be so damn boring."

"Fuck you." I feel weak, anticipating the arrival of some truly profound thought, and it's not coming. I need drugs. She sighs and strokes her knee with her left hand, her non-smoking hand. Her skin is pale.

"I've got this class, this philosophy class," she says, "do you think we are all compassionate?" She has a grin that could cut a diamond.

"That's the most pretentious shit I've ever heard, Kay."

"No, no, really, like I was thinkin' about how so many people put up these fronts and try to be hard or how these old thinkers get so numb with reason, or how people denounce emotions entirely, but they'd probably all help some old lady if she needed it, even if no one saw them do it."

"Okay." I need drugs.

"That's horseshit Jim, really."

"I'm thinking about baseball."

"Mmm--do you root for Boston teams just to piss people off?"

"Fuck you, no. My family's from there, I watch games with my grandpa, and I've spent half if not most of my life in Massachusetts somewhere or other... And I hate the fuckin' Yankees."

"What about the Mets?"

"Beat the Sox in '86, fuck 'em." I'm feeling more and more irritated. She continues:

"So if the Sox won, right, won the whole thing, obviously you'd be happy. But like as soon as they get that last out, and the celebration ends, isn't that it? Like it's next season then and nobody's won?"

"No, we won." I'm thinking about the Sox winning.

"But then what if they don't win the next year, wasn't it all nothing until they win again?"

"Kay, you like to fuck, right?"

"Yeah, not like you, that's why I won't fuck you, but yeah." I hate her.

I say, "When you fuck, you enjoy, then you come, that's all you get, but you still appreciate the fucking afterwards, if you fucked any worthwhile person. That's like winning the series." Thinking about fucking Katherine and the Sox winning the series.

"Mmm, I see," her tongue lightly brushes the edges of her lips when she speaks, "but I'm a chick, I don't really need to come, or I can come a billion times, it's take it or leave it." Her eyes dart back into her head and she allows her back to collapse onto the couch, she has a knowing half-smile on her face.

"Yeah, Kay, well then that's why women hate sports, they have no cock."

"No we don't have cocks...I don't."

We are both silent now. It is mutually understood that I have a cock and she has none, and that is all. I'm staring at her. My organs are twitching like mice under a flame; they are at war with one another. My body feels no bond with itself; I am detached.

She looks at me with eyes of a machine gunner atop a trench awaiting the charge. She knows I need to escape from my lines; there are rats who run where I rest; I use the bodies of those who have fallen to protect my own; I am in barbed wired hell, a messy hell, full of dirt, but if I stretch my neck out of the below, if I dare to indulge in a breath of fresh air, she will mow me down and I will shake with red into mud. Some kid will buy my helmet with a hole in it in an antique shop 50 years from today.

I am so weak. I am so weak.

I have suggested to her a prolonged stay in her den, but my liquids are evaporating under the baking sun in my skull. They condense elsewhere. I have to leave. I am so weak.

What is there left for me to do, but junk? Junk. My pride is inessential though it doesn't know it, its only roots can stand in the injustice of my indulgences, which are finite but their frequency eclipses anything I can see. I used to search for identity, now I create it to suit the instance: Whatever is going to get me high. I need to get high.

Katherine lights another cigarette. Undeniably she is thinking about sex, whether she means it when she says she won't fuck me. She isn't fucking this cigarette, she is yawning it in. She is tough to it; she has accepted it. She is thinking, undeniably, about baseball.

"I need to go," I admit, pridelessly. I'm a bit shaky now. She is sucking on a lemon; I am soaked in lemonade.

"You're a junky, Jim."

I leave her place grunting and breathing heavily like a sick animal. The stairs are weak beneath me. I start to run down them unreasonably, full of some familiar unknown terror. I don't know what my legs are doing. I come to the thick, overbearing monster of a door and I have to struggle with it. Somehow I've reverted to a time when I couldn't manipulate worldly items. The door continues to struggle with me and I kick it, letting out a crisp whimper. A drop of snot slides out of my nose and taps my right hand, my smoking hand. I reach out again to touch the icy brass knob on the door. It seems to chuckle at my inability and it opens at last. I am released into the streets.

When I hit the sidewalk I notice one leaf on a nearby tree, which has gone dry and brown before all of the others. I am looking right at it in a hardened style; it could just crumble so fucking easily, so quickly, if one were to make the gesture to crush it. I grab a hold of it against my will, it seems. My feet, my mindless autonomous feet, have carried me again. I feel the leaf in my hand, its crippled lifelessness, its lonely and inevitably premature return towards a perverse childhood. My heart beats like someone has turned it off and on and I crush the sad leaf in my coarse human hand. The scattered bits of it float like ashes in the wake of an explosion, down, down towards the basic rock, which is supporting my body. I stare at the ground, initially half-proud, but then more like a coward. I am a victorious soldier who has fought on the wrong side. I look up; Katherine's window is clearly in view. I think of nothing other than that I wish I thought something.

My knuckles are crawling and dry. A car drives past and its mirror blinds me before I can weep.

I have not slept with many dark-skinned girls.

I don't know if one could call her dark-skinned.

I noticed as I made my way towards the bookstore from Katherine's that all the women seemed to be pretending they were ladies; one had a lot of makeup on her face and a bag of fruit that looked like a blurred TV screen through the plastic. She had applied the makeup without any certainty. You could see it, and it looked bad, but she didn't mind. She was caught up with being a lady.

I noticed that a girl on the corner had eyes nearly sewn shut and small Israeli breasts that seemed full of protein.

When I reached the bookstore, Zack Zook, that is Zachary Zook, son of Henry Zook, owner of Court Book, sat with a book on the bookstore stoop, not quite blocking the entrance to his father's business. He was entirely uninterested in whatever he was reading, and the few whiskers which rudely grew between his bushy eyebrows were quite mobile with a bored sort of discontent.

"Hey to you, Zachary."

"Jim, I can't work for my father anymore... where have you been?"

"When, Zach?"

"I haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been around. Not here. I was at Katherine's just now."

"I don't know who that is. You bring her up, and I never know who she is, Jim."

"Mmhm. She's a lady."

"Sit down with me outside of my father's store."

"That's a funny thing to say." It was a funny thing to say.

Zach Zook offered me a cigarette and he jerked his head back with an uncomfortable laugh as he lit his, careful not to light himself on fire. His narrow nose pointed at the ground at one certain spot and his ash fell on to it. He told me some things and I didn't believe him, because he is a liar, and because he is moving to some Caribbean island with his underaged girlfriend who has expressions like puppies. I lied back to him, until a pair of bronze breasts said hello to me and beige shorts holding a roundness called me over. Zach Zook sighed condescendingly because he is not single, and I flew off towards the bronze age.

I move up to this girl and when she notices me I ask her to marry me in Blaine County, Maryland, in response to which she laughs and I know that that stupid line just worked again. I play with my smoking fingers hyperactively, making sure she notices that I'm eccentric like she's never known and the way I'm staring at her smooth tanned chest is making her remember that she can cum. I gather that her tits are definitely nice because they shine like a street sign and when they do that they never fall apart when the bra comes off, so I chew my fat tongue a bit while I sing bullshit to her. She's one of those girls who think sleep reinstates virginity. Not that she's loose, *au contraire*. She's naïve, she's courageous, and she thinks of herself as nobler than she is because she's that hot and that willing to trust me.

Sometime later is now and we are in a small room which is defined by the lines of late day sunlight that are painting stripes onto her green sheets. I see a bead of sweat majestically swim down her face like it had arms. Her moisture has a sharp taste to it that makes my throat contract, and my tongue throws itself in deeper because it wants to be burned. She gasps, and it touches me that she means it, like it always does. I feel a pubic hair on my eyelash; they are fencing. Suddenly she beckons me up with a violence I don't expect and I bury my head in her fresh, plump chest. She is shaking a bit, I can feel it, and every feature on her face has a desperate look, like a starving animal. She doesn't cry like I think she might and I shove myself into her because she doesn't want me to be gentle now.

When I'm done I notice that the lines of sunlight have moved onto the wooden floor, and I've forgotten about the darker-than-most girl who is clutching onto my arm like a child.

The birds on the trees here are never exciting; they are a dull brown. I am trying to walk towards the familiarly hostile brownstone that I am dependent on, avoiding the accusative gaze of the hazy-eyed street. Every object is watching me. The ludicrous assfaced objects that decorate my habitat have lives and breathing patterns that are intimidating. The fire hydrant wants to pump me full of buckshot. The cops are worse, especially when I'm copping.

Whenever I go to cop I paint my eyes over with a shield of sin, and I vacuum any sense out of my head. I cannot be nostalgic or overly self-aware or I might fall off of the edge of the world like all those explorers did before they decided it was round.

Tonight the air is thick. Electricity makes sense to me. The savages are dancing without ceasing around my sides, all of my sides, which are more than 2, or 4, because they are within me. They find a repose in their absurdly dizzy exploits; I judge everyone and hate myself for it.

But I must move with the swiftness of a locomotive.

I wish the East River had banks; I would sit on the banks, not the docks, and my drug-sick sweat would fall more reliably to my sides.

I am not a boy of ordinary constitution. I have ruined myself on immeasurable scales. My purposelessness is unyielding. Relax, Jim.

I cannot relax. I cannot relax one bit when I look at the sturdy colonial men and resent these sturdy men who challenge my rudimentary cynicism with undaunted oaf-iness. Why should a junky judge an oaf?

I am left to ponder, as the red sea parts and I make my way closer to my destination, why I am here.

For the expanse of my shot in the dark mind I cannot say much for my youth beyond various excursions. I was a hyperactive Gentile baby for what seems like centuries, my identity forever shifting, creepily, performing a naïve decathlon of sensitivities and obsessions. I have always raced myself.

My father was raised to be the president with a head full of sin and a bowl full of gold. He did his own junky thing and after some time passed he gave up the Kind of Blue and raced off, while I dawdled through blind confusion and kicked myself out of anything too solid.

Eventually my resentment unfolds and here I am...

This apartment, which is extra-sticky, is typical for the Italian neighborhood I am in. The room sounds like decay in the way rooms do when extravagance becomes despondency, coke-slut train-wreck. The sorrow of the useless fucks like me who have been here dribble their diseased spit and whisper cursed beatitudes into my hollow head. This is a curse I have no ability to break, and I don't know if I want to.

The table is shaky. The chair is shaky, the floor shakes, I shake a bit, but not hard enough yet. The table is covered in soot that blows off in an arrangement contrived by foulmouthed gods, on to the sad carpet where a small child wanders and sings songs. His virginal voice sends a pang of guilt into me. Fuck you.

The troll-faced faux-tan leech of a woman who has given this innocent, hopeless little offender life enters the room, sipping on fiery crack rock. She is a cunt.

We exchange unpleasant words, business-talk, and all. I am twitching for a hit.

"Gimme a hit, Anna." She smiles hideously and obliges my request. I will, after all, be paying her soon, so the pass of the pipe is not so injurious.

Half of my illness relaxes as the hot smoke rapes my throat, but the other half rages on, and now only more of this and much more of that will do.

For a while we sit and puff this violent rock, becoming chatty and sweaty and increasingly self-assured. I am searching the creases between cabinets for agents of the law. The neighbors have me wiretapped.

Finally Rico the Man waltzes into our paradise, while fireworks explode on a fuzzy TV screen. I have forgotten, it is Independence Day. His ratty moustache moves up and down a bit, and he pulls out a sack of something helpful, something soothing, full of more melodious destruction and I eagerly take it.

I have spent 2 years in the hole. I used to shiver on Linden, chaotically swimming through elegant fields of waning excitement and waxing disillusionment. Good God thank you for the dope I am about to inject.

To place an instant, this instant:

My basement stinks of illusion. I brush ash off of myself and spit at my ghostly reflection in the mirror. My hands, grossly exaggerated like a jazz solo, grab towards a square of plastic and a glowing curved spoon. The lighter in my grip is hot, its flame shoots its dark center into my eyes, and the bubbles boiling on the spoon suffocate me, all of my sensibility, so that it and I are abandoned to a corpse-like grotesque state. The giver of all things sucks its juice inward and I gasp as I admire it. My blood vessels tighten and expand, starving for affection and a sick pop like a lightning strike all at once forcing joy and insight and fury into a vapid needle, a funnel, so gentle and so subtly rude. Every inch of me is a fierce dream of dishonesty that is almost incestuous I am so split. I am fucking myself in a way that is intensely inferior to the stroke of my own cock. I am violating everything.

Here is my crescendo. Here is the bass drum blasting with coarse yellow fumes of adrenaline. I inhale violently. My back is arched, each individual vertebrae poking through my flesh like a baby's head out of his mother's sex... a quivering set of arms and lower lip... rolled up eyes that see everything pleasant in a numb system of emphatic nobility. I see highways of rain with tattooed sailboats crashing into the rails. I see women and men crying with fear. I see my backyard at home on the Cape, my grandfather's shoes. I see the bloodied face of a Puerto-Rican kid who couldn't pay us. I see spectral white clouds soiling the darkness of a night. I collapse into a celestial on-ramp to fluff. Fluff in a pillow. Out like a city ravaged by bombs a week removed. Itchy...

I wake up crying and aching, every muscle poisoned and tense. A piano plays on a stereo and for one split second I smile and then forget again. Could I know how it all happens?

As the piano continues to buzz and the late birds chirp I am twitching like a crippled insect. So much time to kill now. Different postures of thought firing rounds off. I can't stop arguing up there, I can't stop thinking of Katherine.

Next to my head is a portrait of my little brother on a pier at sunset. His face is pleasantly distorted by a naïve grin, the light makes his boy's body glow. I miss him, certainly. I am too ashamed to see him these days. I used to be a child, and I regret that I never learned how to grow straight up.

My memories have always seemed warped as branches on a solitary tree; this must be my fault. My memory is never solid. My desire to manipulate and sculpt that which is true aches deep inside of me. It is the tool with which I shape my humanity, or what I'd like it to be. It is all I have to give to a stranger, but it is untrue. What I know is fleeting. My memory is governed by my desire.

I cough heavily and violently, my torso lurches upward and I search for somewhere to spit. I litter the floor, because I have no choice, and I cannot achieve any regard for such a mess. It will take me a while to comprehend things tonight, today, whenever it is.

My arms look wretched, but my bruises comfort me these days. I know I can count on them.

But why do I want to count on that?

What ancient harm must have splintered me so that I must prick myself? I give myself too much credit.

I look at my brother's photo again but all I can do is think and my thought is too cloudy for my sight to be trusted. I don't understand my intentions, really. If I broke my leg, perhaps I would walk through traffic again.

More effort, Jim. Use more effort. Punctuate your life with some willpower, prove that self-reliance is something valid enough to be proven.

I must be joking. I must be kidding myself. I have no one else to kid, and my bastard soul tastes sweetness in the wicked. I cannot be neutral, my psyche was built in a sparse valley. The village I live in is decorated with menacing villagers. I feel as a speck of dust does beneath a broom.

That piano is still playing, hopefully and softly. I wish I could touch it. It's as if it's barely playing...

No matter how hard I try, I can't shake feeling so alone.

Katherine...

Warm...

Maybe I shouldn't have left so fast yesterday...

And that's it. It's virtually spitting at me. I need to see her. She can fix things.

There are a lot of people out on the street for such an hour. Each one of them seems to have a purpose to be out here, but to the way they are looking at me it seems that they think I don't. There is a fine line between what is important and what is deadly.

There is that building. There is Katherine's apartment sticking out to the side, calling me in like a bridge that goes home.

Thankfully, her front door is unlocked again, and I can ramble in and up the steps without much sensation. In fact, this time I can't even hear the stairs creak. This is unbelievable.

I knock on her door, timidly. No response, and I knock louder. Some noises rustle about from inside and the knob begins to shake.

Her face stares at me as the door opens, and at first she looks almost cruel.

"Jim?" her words come at me muted a bit by drowsiness, "Jim, what-why are you here now? It's late. Are you alright?"

"Katherine I needed to come here. I need a minute, or something."

"Jim, are you high?"

"No, I'm not, no. Not right now. Not at all." I'm trying to stop them, but there are tears coming down my cheeks. I wasn't sure, but I taste salt.

"Jim, Honey, come in, lie down. You want water? What's up?"

"Fuck, Kat. Fuck. I got all fucked up last night, or earlier tonight or whenever, before I woke up just now. Like I got really fuckin' gone. I didn't fall off or anything, I just..." She's looking at me with wide eyes, forgiving, loving eyes. I think she could cry, too.

"Kat, I just woke up and I've just been thinking about everything, and I can't really say what I thought cuz I don't really understand it. I don't remember, really."

"Jim, relax. You're shaking." She sits down on her bed, which is at the far end of her big single room, bordered by flowing red curtains. She motions for me to come sit on her purple bedsheets, and I go over and collapse into her arms. I'm really sobbing now. It's too late to save face.

"Kat, I don't know who to trust anymore. All of my friends are liars. I've lost my family, I've shoved them away."

"Jim," she strokes my head, my hairs are swimming between her soft fingers, "you're just upset. You're overthinking."

I halfway look at her, "is it bad to feel, Kat? Can I be wrong if I feel things?"

"I don't know what you mean..."

"I can't do all of this shit anymore." I focus on her face, feeling stronger now, but still shivering a bit. Her nightshirt is purple, like her sheets, and she smiles when I look at her, whitening out all of the dark colors beneath.

"Kat, I love you. I'm in love with you." She looks up at the ceiling and blinks a couple of times, the shaking worsens. I'm praying.

"You're a mess, Jim." She leans in and presses her lips gently on to mine and they coalesce. Neil Young said only love can break your heart.

The restaurant slowly fades out of my consciousness. The tables mold themselves into the various fixings of Katherine's room; the waitress is gone. Only Katherine is here. She is quaking beneath me, undermining me with her woman's blood, humming a melancholy song.

I realize I am spent, and I get up to go to the bathroom. The air in this place is stifling. Booze and purples and dawn is coming, it's coming again like it always does, without any assurance that it will be any different this time.

I take an irresolute seat on the toilet, letting cum and piss fall into the water below me. Jewish girls! They invade you like a subway train. They make you nauseous. They make your insides dingy. No, just me, just her, only because I can't control her.

I return into the bedroom, having washed up a bit, and the scene in here is still muggy. It feels pointless, until Katherine imbues the mood with words. "Jim, what's wrong with you now? Did I touch you too well?" She smiles slyly.

I know that she is incapable of possessing my whole being, but maybe as much as I can give anyone. She can only try, I suppose, and she will give me love, I think. That is what women can do. I'll give her more. No one can ever give me everything.

Most people, to me, are just caricatures. Certainly my comrades at the diner. Maybe she is not. I shouldn't be this afraid.

I have not responded to Katherine, and she knows this side of me well, so she retreats and falls into sleep. It vexes me that she can sleep so peacefully, while I am resigned to sitting here and noticing things that I won't remember tomorrow. A coolness has whispered its way into the room. It feels dreadful. My sobriety and the moonlight are glooming in unison from the draft crack in the window. She has left me, for all intents and purposes, and I am sitting here quite alone, interrupted only by her quiescent pants. She reminds me of a dog I had when I was younger than I am now, when I wasn't such an abomination. I didn't have the means yet. The only reason I even exist right now is because I absolutely refuse to melt. If I left, there would be no carnal figure in the midst of this dark room. I am the only thing making anything real. My being is the only reason anything exists.

I light a cigarette, even though I know it will be difficult to inhale. I cannot just sit alone with my thoughts. This cigarette will be my companion.

As I light it, I notice a sparrow on the windowsill, hopping about with a great urgency. He has such tiny legs for such hopping; it is quite heroic, that one sparrow, who will probably live a life so much smaller than my own. He was born against his will, as was I, but he seems to understand how to go about it better than I. He is like some people, like the little foreign boys who diligently run paper routes on cheap bicycles before it is even warm. He is like any man that I am not. My mother was never religious enough to teach me about that, not that I would have gotten it. She used to feed me healthy food. I used to hiss at it.

Sometimes I try to change, really. I don't think anyone believes that. Katherine might. I wonder if she'll still accept my profession once she's slept on it. She's not as easily acquired as most women. Once you get inside them they usually collapse, but I suspect it may not be the same with her. I think she loves me. I'll have to try to change for her sake, for my sake in relation to her. I've always had the same love affairs. They've always been violent and blinding at first; I've never gone out in search of a tepid love affair, but it gets that way. It doesn't seem to matter who it is. It gets mechanical and old, quickly. Somebody is lying next to the most beautiful woman in the world, sulking about how he has to fuck her again. Or maybe not. Maybe that's just me. I've been in a lot of fist-fights that started purely because I assume everyone thinks like I do. I was born with every bad male characteristic, accented exponentially.

I go to lie down next to her. She smells like herbal shampoo and vaginal excretion, the good kind. I caress her thigh, because it lets me know she's there. I could bite into it right now. I could devour her entirely, but she wouldn't come back from that.

I hate serial killer shows. They make me shiver. I watch them constantly.

My stomach begins to roil. Shit. This gets it all going. The committee in my head is arguing already. My veins feel empty. I can't shoot up here. She'd kill me. I can't leave. This is my moment. This is my moment to lie here and soak her in like a dry sponge. I'm sick. I'm eager. I'm sitting on the ceiling. I'll start to sweat soon. I'll wet the bed. Dammit. I blink so hard that I know I'm blinking, and I try to ease out of my embrace so she won't notice. My feet take me into the bathroom, or I put them there, and take a seat on the edge of the bathtub.

The dope goes down harsh, it swishes around my blood vessels and it feels like it's stabbing them from the inside. That's a helpless feeling. I let out a gasp and rest my hand over my chest. Now it tastes good. She won't notice, I don't think. She's sleeping still.

I go back and lie down again. She feels fine now. She feels like jell-o. On the ceiling above us there is crackling spackle, and it is glowing sensorially. I feel like a baby and it is my bright blinking toy. It is playing me string quartets to hum along with and fall asleep. I have to fall asleep. My hand rests inside her panties, and I do.

"Jim, Jim, I'm going to work. You can sleep as long as you want." It's light out and she kisses me on the forehead, then on the lips, and walks out the door. Beautiful. I would go back to sleep, but I feel too nice about that awakening.

I had a funny dream while I slept. I dreamt that Katherine and I were Adam and Eve, but still ourselves, and that we were on the Mass Ave. bridge from Cambridge to Boston, watching the Charles River flow beneath us. We were naked, and all of the joggers and bikers that passed

by stared at me, but never her. One by one they would pass, and each one looked less human than the former, until they were all mannequins, faces without eyes. The last one to pass was real again, and it was my friend Mike Schmidt, bleeding from both arms. At that moment we were fully clothed, and sitting on the steps of my grandmother's house in Cambridge. Katherine was sobbing, and she wouldn't look at me. Then she woke me up.

This recollection stirs the calm mood that I rose with. I notice that my body hurts, like it always does in the morning, and I cough into my pillow. My fingers smell like old nicotine stains; I feel moldy all over.

I get up and reach for Katherine's phone, to call Schmidt. He answers groggily.

"Mmm... Jim, Jimmy, what's up Jim?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was sleeping, actually. I guess I'm not now."

"Yeah, sorry. You wanna go to Coney Island? Get some pizza, drink some beer on the beach?"

"It's freezing, Jim."

"Don't be a bitch, come on. You've been inside all week, you fuck. Let's go. I'll come meet you."

"Mmmm... okay, fine. You got any dope? Any I can buy?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Don't worry about it, I got a resupply last night, you can have a bag or two. I'm stopping to flip a bundle to that Jew kid on Sackett St., then I'll have cash. Expenses on me? You gonna be up when I get there?"

"Yeah, sure." I hang up the phone, throw my clothes on and grab my bag. I stop to write Katherine a note: *Went out with Mike. Call me tonight. Love, J.*

Sackett St. isn't too far from Katherine's, so I walk there. All the Arabs and Koreans are setting up their stores on Smith. I never see that. It's early. The sun above is so colossal I can't see it. It's one of those bitter cold days, but with a huge bright sun. That confuses the shit out of me, always. The sun is supposed to be warm. I pull my sleeves out over my hands to protect them. I look like a bum, I know.

This Jew kid, Ari, lives in the basement of his grandmother's house. She's half dead already, so she never notices me come by, and if she does she smiles and offers me fruit. He's probably sleeping now, but I don't give a fuck. He said come by today and bring him his shit, so that's what I'm doing. He's the kind of little rodent that so desperately wants to be accepted that he'll put up with anything.

He lives in one of these strawberry daiquiri vomit red brick houses on Sackett. There is a wide stoop with thin steps, which is annoying to sit on. It squeezes your ass. His door is off to the side of the stoop. It's black and barred, and would look like a prison door except for the cheesy flower pot his grandmother put on it. I lean over to smell every time, then I remember they're fake.

Ari answers the door, puzzled by my appearance at such an early hour.

"Jim, it's early, you know?"

"I guess... you want your shit or what?" I give him a very harsh glance, like to let him know not to fuck around with me today.

"Yeah, yeah. Come in, have a beer or something. Lemme get your money." I follow him in to his room. He has a fat ass. Jewish males either play soccer, or have fat asses. I hate soccer.

Ari hands me some German beer and I nurse it for a few minutes while he tries to explain to me about some music computer program shit, like I could give the smallest fuck. I feel like all of these super technological DJ geeks were just Lord of the Rings slugs playing dice games in the club room in high school, who found something they could do that their socially crippled minds couldn't figure out was not even remotely cool. All these kids still just hang out with each other, or with ecstasy-crazed immigrants and kids with massive pants and lips with names like Spencer. Good God.

Ari thinks he's a snob turned socially conscious. He gives his stupid brownstone enough weight to think that he's some sort of Brooklyn aristocracy, but because he messes with Hip-Hop beats on his laptop that means he loves black people, and therefore is saved. I hate that shit. Fundamentally he is a greasy idiot, a freshly neutered little puppy who is ashamed to spread his legs and show the world that he has no balls. I could kill him, but he has a slight lump on his back, and you can't kill a hunchback, can you? I'll continue to sell him bundles of smack weekly, so that he can give it out to his cool friends and sniff one or two bags of his own. This is degrading enough. Sometime he'll die anyway. He'll be one of those kids who's feigning suicide and does it, like that wiry little guinea in *Saturday Night Fever* on the Verrazano Bridge. Ari won't do it there, though, he'll do it somewhere less spectacular. He'll walk a block over to the BQE at Hicks St. and jump over the fence into traffic. That would be a sight!

My beer is finished, so I demand my money and

he gives it to me. I tell him I've got to get going, and as I'm leaving he gives me a very awkward pound. His hand shakes when he does it. I glance back towards him one more time as I close his metal door. He looks sad. I almost feel bad for him. I pity him. I'd hate to be pitied. Anyone who's ever pitied me, I've made a point never to speak to again. I'm no one to pity; any thing I do that is destructive, any crass act of self-obliviation, any sordid emotions I possess, they're all contrived somewhere deeply subconscious. I'm not really real. I'd hate that.

Mike's place is in Fort Greene, about 15 blocks north of here. I'm lazy and I've got some cash, so I hail a cab on Smith. The cab driver is not an Arab, surprisingly, but an old man who looks like an overweight Robert Duvall. He has rosary beads hanging from his mirror, and he clutches them every so often. He talks to me about the weather, and about how New York is going down the drain these days. He probably assumes that I'm part of it, and he's right.

The drive is quick, and I hop out below Schmidt's house. It's started to rain, like the cabbie said it would, so I rush into Mike's lobby where a surly security guard calls up to his apartment.

Mike said he'd come right down, so I'm standing here next to this security guard, waiting for him. This is horrible. This man won't stop looking at me. It's his job to make sure that anyone who may be doing something wrong thinks that he may be able to do something about it, and I guess I'm damned suspicious, or anyone who comes to see Mike. Usually it's this old black guy who smiles and says hello. I don't know who this fuck is.

Finally Mike comes down, wearing one of those golfer caps, Gatsbys I guess they're called. It juts out quite oddly above his small frame. Mike is only about 5 foot 4, and he's skinny as a girl, but he's a fighter. People don't take him seriously, and then he mops the floor with them. I've always liked that.

He's German-Irish, the son of an ex-nun with MS and a mildly insane printer or typesetter of some sort who smokes pot all day and yells. Last time I saw Mike's father he told me I looked like a Kansas City faggot, whatever that means. I think it's a quote from somewhere. He tried to attack Mike with a machete once, and Mike shot him with a .22 derringer. I thought it was all very funny.

"Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy," he chirps at me, "how are you, Chief?"

"Good, good. I had some night." He motions that we should leave, and nods at the disgruntled fake cop, who gives no reaction. When we get outside, I say, "He's an asshole."

"Yeah, I don't know who the fuck he is, some new guy. He'll relax." Mike twists his neck around and looks at me, says, "so what happened last night? You stick it to girly-girl?"

"Katherine? Yeah. More than that. Shit. So I got all fucked up at home, I don't even know when, like two nights ago, real late, or real early yesterday morning. Anyway I woke up yesterday at like 3 in the afternoon or so feeling all, I dunno, weird, just not right, and I went over to her place."

"Yeah?"

"I don't know I just like, talked to her for a while and then I told her I loved her."

"You fucking loser. You always do that. Do you?"

"Yeah, yeah. You know that, come on, this is Katherine, not one of those girls. She's the fuckin' top of the crop, man."

"Huh."

"So then I fucked her, like I fuckin' did her rotten, man. She's an athlete, you know? A real sexual athlete. Oh it was fuckin' amazing."

"Nice, nice. Sounds like you did well for yourself." He coughs at the ground.

"You look kinda bad, Mike. Let's do a bag or two."

"You're a good guy, Jim. That's right what I need."

The Observer will now be publishing fiction and poetry on a regular basis. Submit your work to lg458@bard.edu.

Mother and Father

By Orrin Johnson

Marjorie Woodruff lived alone in a big empty house in Connecticut, the very same house in which she had birthed two children and managed a husband for fifty some odd years. The same old house in which, in her younger days, extravagant parties would be thrown. But as she grew older her affinity for solitude became greater than her need for company, and she lived alone. Her husband had died of lung cancer ten years ago, and her children were long gone, living lives of their own. Neither of them could persuade their mother to live anywhere else besides the house they grew up in; they didn't see how she could stand it, for they certainly couldn't. They seldom visited, and then only on her birthday. This was partly due to their hatred of the old house in which they had lived out their suppressed adolescences, and partly due to the insistence of their mother that visitors only wore her out. As old as she was, she was as stubborn as ever, and quite determined to live out the rest of her life in the house by herself. She preferred things that way, and her children left her to her wishes.

Marjorie never ventured anywhere except her first floor bedroom, the kitchen, and the dusty adjacent parlor which displayed an immense collection of English poetry and a shiny new big screen television, a present from her eldest son, a DC lawyer. Even that was gathering dust however, as lately she couldn't seem to find the energy to keep up with the housework. She hadn't been upstairs in three years, and yet the downstairs appeared as if no one lived there. This was partly because Marjorie kept to the same routine each day, waking up at around seven to heat some porridge, which she would eat at the kitchen table over the daily crossword. The rest of the morning would be spent knitting or sewing, followed by a meager serving of buttered bread and tea at noon. Then she would either watch the television in the afternoon, or read poetry until supper, at which time she would slurp down some soup, and fall asleep. It was a small existence, but nevertheless a pleasant one for her. True, she had stopped dusting and cleaning even the few rooms she used, but she had been feeling worn out lately, and her lackluster energy was bound to pick up sooner or later. She was resolved to die in the house in which her best memories lingered.

The only thing that bothered her old bones these days was her fear of venturing upstairs. It had started small at first, a slight uncomfortable feeling she attributed to the house being so empty where once it had been full. But the longer she hesitated to venture up the wooden steps that curved up and away, complete with the carpeted pads her husband had nailed on so long ago, the bigger of an ordeal it became. Soon it became easy to tell herself that there was no reason to go upstairs at all; it was an unnecessary venture. She was a small old lady who only needed a little space. And what if she were to fall up there, where there was no telephone to crawl to? It was smarter to stay downstairs. That's what she told herself every time she passed the bottom step on the way from her bedroom to the kitchen. The best solution she found was to push the concept to the back of her mind. Every time she thought of the empty rooms and God forbid, the attic on top of them, she would preoccupy herself with something else. She would flip on the television, or open Keats or Tennyson, or look back over the crossword to make sure she hadn't made a mistake. By the third year of this practice, her uncomfortable feeling had turned into a full-fledged fear.

It wasn't until November of her seventy-fourth year that she began to notice the smell that came wafting down the staircase from time to time. It was most definitely the smell of tobacco resin, and she couldn't imagine where it was coming from. Her husband had been a smoker, it had been the death of him, but not being the sort to let her mind wander to ghostly thoughts, she immediately dismissed the notion from her mind. It was a stench however, and it smelled strongest at night. She didn't dare find out the cause of it. Her fear became more grounded in reality then, as it was hard not to sniffle every morning when she walked out of her bedroom. Sometimes she would even smell it in her own room at night when she lay in bed wide awake, and she would vow never to return home the next time she went out to get groceries. She imagined taking a bus to her nearest son's house in New Jersey, telling him all about it, and then...

But she couldn't. The only fear greater than the one generated by that smell was being labeled crazy by her children, and sent off to a home. She treasured her independence at her age, and knew she couldn't live any other way. This foolish obsession of hers, of never going upstairs in her own house, was just so...just so silly, that she couldn't bring herself to tell anybody. It sounded crazy to herself, so what would other people think? This problem of hers now dominated the spare time she had so much of, and by December she could hardly concentrate on her crossword puzzle. She now usually kept the television on to fill up the silences of the old house, and she would try to find the lightest fare there was, no matter how stupid or lowbrow. Anything to brighten the gloominess that had settled over the house as of late.

By January Marjorie was desperately engulfed in a constant feeling of dread. And it was all heightened by the smell of tobacco that drifted out from the stairwell. She bought and lit incense, but that only temporarily covered it

up. As soon as the sticks burnt out, the smell would come back, almost stronger. And now the smell seemed to come more frequently, as if it was settling into the house. Again she thought of calling a cleaner, or somebody to take a look upstairs, but she kept seeing it as the incident in which her sanity was called into question, a notion that made her queasy. They would ask her why she hadn't gone upstairs herself, and then what would she say? Nothing, she would be able to say nothing, only stammer, and then they would surely take her away. That would never happen to her, she thought, she wasn't too old to live on her own, nor would she ever be. And she would never give a reason for anybody to think otherwise.

And so Marjorie lived with the dingy stench. It wasn't so bad, she told herself, she could get used to it. She even picked up smoking for a couple days, figuring if the house was going to smell like it, it might as well be for a sensible reason...but her old lungs hacked miserably in protest. The odor kept relatively close to the stairwell anyway, and Marjorie spent most of her time in the parlor with her books and television. By the end of January she had even grown accustomed to falling asleep in the parlor, and soon she brought her blankets and pillow out to the couch. In this way she never had to encounter the resinous smell by crossing to her room, and this helped calm her nerves. Marjorie had learned to live with her fear, just as a soldier learns to live with his gut in a constant knot. She was content, and even happy when lost in her poetry, but never from that point on was she truly at ease in her home.

The day it all fell apart for Marjorie started like any other in recent memory. Sunlight streamed in through the cracks of the window blinds, and she forced herself up from the sofa. The television was still on from the night before. Sleepily she clicked it off, and lurched into the kitchen, mindlessly putting a pot of hot water on to boil. It was already three in the afternoon, which gave her great cause for concern. Her habit of watching television until she passed out in the early morning was not healthy for her age. Yet it was the only thing that could put her to sleep. Even then she kept one eye half open, cocked at the door to the hallway, making sure it didn't nudge open in the night.

This morning, as she pondered over the weekend crossword at her kitchen table, the physical and emotional strain was evident on her weathered face. No one was there to see it however, or comment on it, or begin to worry about her health. She was deteriorating and no one knew it, not even her children. The pot began to whistle, and she took it off the stove, filling her mug and dropping a teabag into it. As she picked the mug up her frail hand shook, splashing a little on the crossword page. She set it down, feeling choked up, when the thumping noises began. She cried out, spilling more tea over the table. Violent thuds, as if furniture were being beat down upon the floor above her, filled her head, forcing her to the ground where she crumpled up into a ball. She gritted her teeth and covered her ears as the banging relentlessly continued. It grew to a thunderous roar, until Marjorie felt sure the ceiling would give way, when the phone on the kitchen wall started to ring.

"I can't take it anymore! Help!" she screamed, "leave me alone! I'm a poor old woman, leave me alone! What in hell's name do you want with me?" Her screeching became more frantic as she inched towards the phone, reaching for the dangling cord. The thuds now grew louder and more spacious, as if something were jumping, trying to crash through from upstairs. She felt a loss of breath, her shrieks began to dissolve in the air, she needed more oxygen....

She felt a finger grasp the cord of the still-ringing phone, pulling on it, pulling, pulling for her life, until the entire thing tore off the wall and came tumbling down on top of her. She looked around at the kitchen fading to black, and caught a fleeting glimpse of a moving shadow, and then all was dark.

Paul Woodruff hung up the phone in his office in DC, severely annoyed with his mother. No answer again. His first call had rung seven times, and then he had heard the phone pick up and drop, and then a loud clatter, as if the whole thing had come off the wall. She must have fallen down and hurt herself, he thought. He found her little more than a nuisance, but he felt sorry for her living in that house all by herself. He had always hated it as a child. His strongest memories were of his father coming home drunk, and in very bad moods. His belt had always been an object of terror, a sign of the pain to come, and the soreness that would linger on his bottom for weeks. He almost hated his mother more for bending to the will of such a violent man, and her constant scurrying about to please his every whim. And now, stubborn as ever, refusing to let go of the past and living in that old house all by herself, she was seeing what he and all his siblings were talking about when they told her she couldn't live alone. This sort of thing happened, and Paul only felt anger. Anger at not being able to get through to his mother, and anger that she must have done something stupid. He had a meeting to attend to, notes to prepare, and his batty mother was still holding him back after all these years....

He made a phone call to Marjorie Woodruff's neighbor, a middle aged woman named Margaret who had moved into the neighborhood a few years after she became a widow. On one of Paul's rare visits he had met her, and asked her to keep an eye out for his mother. Now he was going to ask her to go over and see if she required any medical assistance. As for himself, he was glad he wasn't the one going to check on her. The last time he had done that sort of thing was when he had come home from college to find her beaten and bleeding on the kitchen floor, and his father nowhere to be found. He had avoided coming home as much as possible after that, even after the death of his father.

Margaret Stevens looked out her living room window at the old Woodruff house across the street. It stared back at her unflinchingly, its windows shut and its drapes drawn. Cut off from the world, she couldn't understand why anyone would want to live that way. Marjorie's son, Paul, had just called, sounding deathly worried that his mother might have fallen down. Poor boy, she thought, why must his mother worry him so? At that age, she should be in a home, and it's only her fault if something happens to her. Still, she was now obligated to go check on the old woman, a task she really didn't want to do. Instead she just stared at the house with its peeling paint and rusty window frames, and thought about when her husband would be home. It was four o'clock now, and getting dark. She should start dinner soon, but first she really should go check on old Mrs. Woodruff. She seriously might need assistance of some sort, and young Mr. Woodruff was going to call back in a short while. But the longer she looked at the house across the street, the less she wanted to cross it, let alone enter the house. She thought of waiting for her husband to come home, and sending him to do it, but she knew she couldn't. She had to go, and she had to go now, so she put on her jacket and her boots, and exited out into the cold.

There was no answer when she knocked on the front door, and the knob was icy when she grasped it, but after some turning and pushing the door eased open. The smell was musty, and Margaret thought she smelled a trace of tobacco. Odd, she thought, she didn't know Mrs. Woodruff smoked. She stepped inside, closing the door behind her, and became consumed by the deathly silence that pervaded the house. She had never been inside the house before, and by what she saw she was glad this was her first visit. It was very dark in the entrance hallway, tomblike even, and only one coat hung upon the rack in front of her. To her left she could make out a closed door and what looked like the foot of some stairs. To her right another hallway opened into a parlor, where a lamp was on.

"Hello?" she called out into the room. "Mrs. Woodruff? Are you there?" No reply. Margaret walked into the parlor and was taken aback by the sight. Blankets had been piled onto the couch, apparently a makeshift bed, and books lay in piles all around the room. A candle sat burning on a coffee table in front of the sofa, sending flickering shadows across the room's wooden paneled walls. A large television sat in the corner looking especially out of place. Observing no old lady in need of help, she continued on past the couch, through an archway, and into the kitchen. Immediately she noticed that the phone had been ripped off the wall, and lay on the floor. She flipped on the light and saw that a bowl of porridge and a cup of tea sat untouched on the table, an unfinished crossword puzzle spread open underneath.

"Mrs. Woodruff?" she called again, hearing the nervousness in her voice. She felt uneasy, as if she had walked onto a murder scene, and she was...wait, murder? Where had that come from? There was no murder here, but through her denial of the thought, Margaret was forced to acknowledge that there was something wrong. She knew she was scaring herself, and that Mrs. Woodruff had to be in the next room asleep or....

A large bump followed by a scraping sound came from the ceiling above. Or upstairs she thought; what was she doing upstairs? She turned around and walked back through the kitchen and parlor, and then hesitated at the front door. She desperately wanted to leave, but Mr. Woodruff would be calling back shortly, and she couldn't tell him she had gotten scared. Instead she bit her lip and continued down the hall in the opposite direction until she was at the bottom of the stairs. They curved up and away to the right, leading into darkness. Margaret searched around for a light switch but found none. She hurriedly went back to the parlor and grabbed the candle, and then returned to the stairs. Holding the flame out in front of her she headed upwards cautiously, so as not to fall.

The stairs curved up in a disorienting fashion, so that when Margaret got to the top she wasn't sure in what direction the noise had come from. She was staring down a hallway, of which the candlelight revealed only a small section. There were no windows, and the dark suggested she might as well be underground. She flipped a light

switch on the wall, but to no effect. Holding the candle up to the ceiling she observed that the hallway light had been smashed. She moved forward into obscurity, the candle leading her way.

The quiet was so overwhelming that her breath had never sounded as loud to her.

"Mrs. Woodruff?" she gasped, as if she were questioning the existence of the old lady. And this time she did hear a noise, coming from the end of the hallway. The last door on the end. "Mrs. Woodruff I'm coming!" she cried, pacing to the door. She stole a glance back and saw that the dark had closed in around her, and for some reason she felt trapped, as if there were no going back. There certainly wasn't; any retreat would signify that there was something bad here, and there *wasn't*. Her heart beat furiously, but full of adrenaline she turned around to face the door. She swung the door open, cringing at its leisurely creak. Cautiously she held the candle forth, filling the room with light. What must have been spiders scuttled away as a large bedroom was revealed. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling to the four-post bed in the center, and an inch of dust lay over the dressers on opposite sides of the bed. In the middle of the bed was the familiar bulge of someone sleeping.

"Mrs. Woodruff?" she squeaked. Ignoring the ghastly state of the room, Margaret tiptoed to the bed. "Is that you?" She shakily tapped the lump of sheets with her free hand, and then slowly began to slide the sheet off. Raw terror rose up in her throat, the kind which she had never experienced. The purple bloated face of Marjorie Woodruff looked into hers, its eyes wide open and staring. Its tongue lolled out onto its cheek, dripping blood from having bitten down so hard upon it. Very recently bitten down upon it. Screaming, Margaret backed away from the bulging eyes and the sickening throttled expression, and the belt which had been tightened around the neck so hard that all blood flow had been cut off from the head....

A noise alerted her to the presence of a man sitting in a chair in the corner, a hat tipped over his eyes, a tendril of smoke rising to the ceiling. In a panic she dropped the candle and staggered out of the room. She

tore down the hall searching for the staircase, but it wasn't there. Instead she found another hallway, and using her hands to feel her way, she stumbled as fast as she could down that one. She couldn't see where she was going, and now she heard heavy footsteps coming from somewhere in the dark. Unable to help herself, she screamed into the shadows, terror clouding every one of her thoughts, an additional shroud in the darkness. Pawing at the walls around her, she felt a doorknob. Hurriedly she thrust the door open, flung herself into the room, and slammed the door behind her. She felt for a light switch, and this time it worked.

Light flooded the room, and she was standing in a fancily decorated office that reeked of tobacco smoke. It was as if she had stepped into a law firm in DC; everything from the bookcases to the large mahogany desk shone with a pristine sterile nature, screaming professionalism. It didn't make any sense, it was as if she had opened a door into another world, and for a moment she thought that maybe this was all a bad dream, but then she heard footsteps again behind her, and she felt her legs grow weak. She nearly folded in front of the desk, resembling the little girl she once had been, afraid of the boogiemán, the girl who had slept with a nightlight until age twelve.

The footsteps stopped outside the office door, and then the door slowly swung open. There stood Paul Woodruff in his father's suit and hat, looking very angry indeed.

"You've been a very bad lady," he sneered, "You know you're not supposed to be in my office! You bitch!" He felt at his waist for his belt. "Oh right, I forgot. I left it somewhere." Margaret stared in horror.

"I'll be right back. Don't you go anywhere." He smiled, and backed out of the room tipping his hat forward, as if he were imitating a scene from a movie. She heard him shut and lock the door behind him.

Margaret gasped for air and clawed at the desk, trying to stand. She had met him a few years ago when she had moved in across the street. He had instructed her to keep an eye on his mother, the woman...the woman dead in the bedroom down the hall.... She forced herself

up, and took a few steps on her jelly legs. She felt like vomiting, but instead focused on any possible escape. There was a window behind the desk....

A scream erupted in the air. Paul Woodruff's scream. She could hear him cursing, cursing her, and then she smelled smoke. The house is on fire, the house is on fire and his twisted fantasy world is going to burn down, she thought. Possibly with me in it. She ran to the window and pulled on it. It wouldn't budge. She grabbed the desk chair, but that too wouldn't budge. It was nailed down. She began tugging on drawers, but they were stuck. She ran her hands over the books on the shelves, looking for any object to smash the window, but they too were glued into place. The whole office is a fucking picture, she thought, a fake.

The smell of smoke was stronger now, and taking her boot off she struck at the window, smashing it outwards. It was now dark outside, and the moonlight illuminated the woods in back of the house. She perched on the windowsill and realized that she was barely able to fit through it. It wasn't a long drop, she observed, as the door to the office burst open. She looked quickly back at Paul Woodruff, who stood silhouetted by the flames behind him, his chest heaving in rage. He ran towards her, his hands outstretched with clenched fingers, and instinctively she let herself drop, hitting the grass behind the house hard. From the outside she could see the left side of the house engulfed in fire. Paul's distorted face was staring out of the window down at her, and as she ran away into the night she could hear his screams echoing, just as they would in her mind for years to come.

The Idiot's Fury and His Insignificant Anguish

By Andres Zambrano

Tomorrow you'll leave and today I already miss you. One day when I was little everybody in my house woke up at the same time and they all started to argue about money. By the afternoon they all started to leave and I was soon left alone in my room. The room started to grow bigger and I felt very small so I cried. I attempted to sleep but the distant noises squeezed my bones. The painful chest and the burning bird in my throat helped me to think of dark thoughts. Somehow I fell asleep. Around two o'clock in the morning an unknown hand was examining me. After feeling lonely... anything was welcome maybe not. Those distant noises mixed with his hard, animal like, sexual breathing, and I felt like a wilted flower. He searched my flesh and touched me with his stone hands while I cried. I closed my eyes when I awoke my eyelids were ripped off like hang nails. I vomited pubic hair and my mother's heart. I shitted tears. I washed my face and reminded myself that *life is good*.

Tomorrow I'll leave and today not a soul misses me. After the atrocity I needed to leave my house and I slammed the outside door to see if anyone wanted to say goodbye but no one came out. They were all inside speaking a different language. Detachment is not an easy task so I remained naked seated outside my house. Many people passed wearing fancy clothes, and looking down searching for love. They didn't dare to look up. I wanted to scream but I had no voice. I got hungry and a marching band of bakers passed giving their bread to their pigs. A sad woman noticed me and we had sex - she felt lonely too. She made me feel good but when I spurted she ran away with a clown like smile on her face. Then a ticktack drilled and dug my skull just like that unknown penis that raped me or made me (un) happy - that left me alone and (un) purified my childhood - "Shut up," you say. It's only a memory. I got up and I fell down. I heard my mother des-

perately trying to come out of the house but the uneducated guards stopped her at the door. From the balcony my mother spat and I licked her saliva. I regained my energy but she was left hanging dry. I walked down the street and I turned the corner - a professor came running to me and plucked my eyes out and gave me new ones.

Tomorrow we'll all leave and today we don't care. You and you passed through my door and forgot to knock. I've been waiting for your call. We were friends for almost three years and in two weeks we forgot each other's odor. You retired to your room and I retired to mine and we didn't even raise our hats to look at each other. What happened to our love? It makes me sad but I have a two-week new friend who compared to you seems like a thin piece of hair. It will take me an hour to forget about him while you continue to dive into eternal details. Every time I think of you a giant sits on my chest. I don't have the words to say: "I'm in love with you." I would like to rip my skin apart so you can see beneath this mask. But I'm afraid you don't love me as much as I love you. Oh, the brevity of time. Yesterday, I dreamt a dirty dream about you where you made love to me. I woke up and I felt ashamed. Later, I saw and I hugged you but with no intention - the other thing was only a dream.

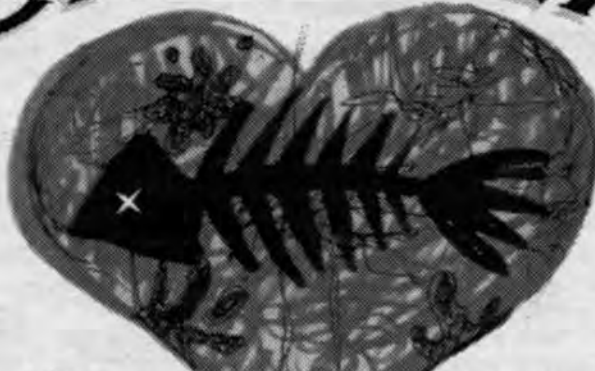
Tonight, I lay in bed alone and you lay in bed with some else. I like you / that person doesn't like you / you don't like that person / but we must keep swimming in stupidity and fear. All day no one has knocked. I kept wishing for your call. Every second I could swear I heard a ring but there was none. I only eat glass when you give it to me. I only drink mercury when you drink it. Would you please allow me to sleep in the corner of your room? Your breathing is my tranquilizer. You won't touch me like that cold hand, even if we spoon you won't allow the harpoon to burn my flesh and I'm grateful. I would like to hold your

eyes tight in my hands. "Your feet are cold - rub them against my feet." Borrow my ear and nail it to your chest. Your soft lips belong to my forehead. Your smell belongs in this small box. I don't know but it seems I can't let go of you.

Yesterday I returned home but there was no one there. Everything burned down while I was gone - my mother's hair, even my father's serpent like heart. Then I reached for your hand to find only air. I sat outside my burned house and everybody swarmed to knock the door but there was no door. No one said hello - they all looked disappointed. I found a tie and I put it on. I found a hinge and I went to build my own house. I finished building it but my hair was white and all those empty rooms... I went to my bedroom and sat right next to the phone. My patience grew old. From all those memories I remembered your funny phrases and in an instant the dam broke. The sun came out but it was impossible to stop crying. Little by little I started to dry while I remembered your smelly feet, your breath at nights and I noticed that I loved you like I never loved. Oh, the brevity of time. Oh, the hidden gender. Oh, God's mischief. As I kept thinking about you the giant kept growing bigger and the bird in my throat grew more desperate and it started to sing a horrendous song. I was so close to death when you knocked the door. I saw you for a last time but this time you were too late.

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CHOSEN



OR: HEURISTIC

"NOT 'FORGIVE US FOR OUR SINS' BUT 'SMITE US FOR OUR INIQUITIES'
SHOULD BE THE PRAYER OF MAN TO A MOST JUST GOD."
OSCAR WILDE

By Tom Mattos

--> Mr. Bill works upstairs in the shop, and he is undoubtedly the jolliest man ever to walk these aisles. Picture Santa Claus without the beard. He's about seventy-five, and has been working here since this was the general store that served the greater community. They called it the five and dime. He's that old—and he'll never let anyone forget it. As my counterpart, perky old Mr. Bill uses his bubbly, balding exterior to satisfy the customers. He talks to everyone who casts him a moment's glance, and is the stockboy proper for Four Star V&S Variety.

He handles the upstairs part of the job. I work the downstairs. When I walk into work I snake through the skinny aisles filled with assorted junk, around a large partition meant to protect the entrance to the basement from the view of sensitive customers. There is a long staircase that leads down to a basement that is much older than the little strip mall that spawned from it. Thirteen wicked, warped stairs lead down to my cavern, where I pack out all of the merchandise for the store. Really, I could do both jobs, but they don't want me interacting with the customers, and they sure as hell don't want a man older than Oedipus trying to pack out a case of size D batteries off the third shelf.

Mr. Bill's decrepit, throaty voice calls to me daily, screaming at me to bring this box of trinkets up, or bring this package of plastic back downstairs. If it doesn't sell, we pack it away for a decade, waiting for the time when the forgotten relic will come back in style. Most of the time Mr. Bill gets carried away talking to the ladies, and I have easy days just walking around amongst the shelves full of plain brown boxes. I keep a mental tally of them mostly because there is nothing else to do. Sometimes it gets screwed up, and Mr. Bill has to come down and sort it out. He's always wrong. One time he was looking for the paperclips in the cleaning agent section of the basement. School supplies are on the far left wall.

Mr. Bill is standing on a step stool, twisted, grotesque, reaching a hand for the mystery box of paperclips. I explain to him that it isn't there.

—It's here, kid. Mr. Bill kept swiping his hand over the dusty shelf.

When he calls me kid I want to kick the stool out from underneath him.

—I dare you to try it, asshole.
I bite my lip, cursing myself for having spoken. Sometimes my mouth runs away from me.

Mr. Bill's bushy eyebrows, glistening with sweat, consider me as if I am a beetle. —Your days here are numbered.

Sure they are.

When Mr. Bill is upstairs I can hear him walking around, the floorboards creaking, and sometimes he bangs on the floor for me to hurry up. I plot the position of everyone in the store, that's how loud their footsteps are. I can keep careful notice of when they are moving towards the back of the store, but I can't always tell the difference between footsteps and stairsteps, so I usually spread a few bits of broken glass on the stairs to hear their feet crunching. I also installed a mirror on the main aisle, a small one so that no one will notice, to check out who is coming down the stairs. If it's the owner I can climb on top of the far shelving unit where the plastic sleds are stored for the winter. The bitch is so oblivious that she'll never hear me breathing above her head. If it's Mr. Bill, though, I handle him directly, because it's just easier to get the fossil out of the basement as soon as possible. If it's Tunisia, I play games.

Tunisia has long, slender legs, all curving up to a really nice waist, and a sexy belly button that she always flaunts. She has a nice set of tits as well, but from there on up things start to go wrong. Her hair is long and golden, but it outlines a face that you want to obliterate with a blunt object. With teeth jutting this way and that, and her whiney voice, she makes most men sick to their stomach. She's the only female on the premises that I interact with, so you can imagine the goings on.

Then there is the finger. Apparently when she was young, Tunisia was one of the tall kids. At a soccer match they needed to hang the net over the metal pipe that served as a goal post. She jumped up to hook the net with her hand, and got her ring caught on a screw. You know the result: Hung like a chicken, the laws of physics worked their wonders and Tunie's finger gave way, ripping jagged across the first knuckle. She allegedly had to sign the release forms before they could cut away the hanging remains of the right index finger.

I've been to her house, and she uses the nub to change channels on the television. She's one of those girls who's not ashamed of anything.

Actually, Tunisia isn't even her real name; I have no idea why we call her that. Sometimes it's good not to ask questions.

—They call me Tunisia because I used to study belly dancing.

Fuck me. I doubt they have belly dancing in Tunisia. She is such a phony.

—I'm not phony.
I stare at her as she struggles to balance a box on the top shelf. —That's going to fall, Tunie.

She tries to look at me over her shoulder, loses her balance, bends awkwardly, and then catches it again. With her knees shaking, she steps down from the stool. —You know, a real man would have tried to help me.

I blink twice. I shrug my shoulders.
—How about a smoke? I ask, and pull out a freshly rolled joint from my cigarette pack in my front pocket.

—Someone has to work around here.
Yeah, well.

We dropped out of the human race five years ago. That's what happens when you graduate high school.

I take a walk around the basement, snaking through every aisle. Tunie follows me, silent save for her footsteps. I take two steps; she takes two. Then three; three. One; one. When the basement is mostly clean I don my black, zip-up sweatshirt and push open the door. Outside I feel that December gloom, where the wind starts blowing hard out of the northeast and you know that the sky is going to fall. Dead leaves blow down the back alley. I watch the breath leave my body and carry down the length of the alleyway, dissipating into the atmosphere.

The door opens, Tunie steps out and I spark the joint.

—That's a lot of boxes.

I nod, pulling hard. I pass it to Tunie and hold the smoke in until it's digested. Then I let it all trail out of my nose. While she puffs away I start slashing a box. I flatten it, walk across the alleyway, and toss it in the cardboard dumpster.

She passes the joint back to me. As I puff she tries to flatten a box.

In a hoarse voice, choked with smoke, —You trying to replace me?

She looks at me with those eyes. She drops the box.

—Want to do something after work? Her droopy lip quivers in the cold, pleading for me to keep her warm. I refuse.

We finish the joint, and she goes back inside to price sanitary napkins.

I slash more and more of the boxes that are in the huge pile that Mr. Bill created for me, and one by one they are all flattened and moved to the dumpster. The green behemoth is only picked up once every three weeks because management is cheap as shit. I rule over it like a hawk.

In between slashes I hear his grimy voice.
—That's it, get the aggression out.

The Colonel.
—Damn right.

The Colonel is a Korean Veteran who lives in the

nursing home about a quarter of a mile away from the store. He uses an electric wheelchair, because both his legs were blown off in the war. It isn't a taboo subject like it is with most shattered veterans—you didn't have to pretend. The Colonel knows his legs had been blown off and he wants the world to know about it.

—How's about concealing me for a bit?

I nod, and push his wheelchair in-between the trash dumpster and the cardboard. There is a space just wide enough for him there. Then I pile up a few boxes in front of him and hand him one to stick next to him. The rule is that if I click my tongue twice, he has to put his box on top and no one would see him. He hands me two dollars.

—The special.

The special is a forty-ounce of malt liquor, which they sell at the deli two stores down. I always run down and pick it up for him. Once the Colonel whets his lips with beer, he becomes less militant and more a father figure.

—Honor is a thing we have lost.

I tend to agree. When I look at his toothless mouth and his ghastly car crash of a body you could tell something is missing. I chuckle, and stare at his stumps. They are covered by a rainbow blanket. Something is definitely wrong.

—Don't talk down to me, you cocksucker, the Colonel ordered. He takes a swig of his forty. It is almost too big for his blotchy hands to wield.

—You want gloves, Colonel? It's kind of cold out today. Mr. Bill has an extra pair that I wouldn't mind 'misplacing.'

—You think this is cold?

Here it comes.

—I was at the Chosin Reservoir, you pussy. Frozen Chosin, that's what they called us. We've been through this.

A figure is coming down the alley. I click my tongue twice and continue cutting boxes. The man is rushing towards me. A sickly looking fool with big thick glasses; I've seen him before. He is hunched over, and his proportions seem all wrong.

—Have you seen an old man with no legs and a wheelchair pass by here? he asks, feverishly, failing to punctuate his sentences correctly.

I stare at him.

—Hello? Have you?

—Chicken?

—What chicken?

—What wheelchair? I look through his eyes. At his soul.

He mumbles something and storms past me, searching for the mysterious legless veteran. —And fuck you, I call after him. He turns and gives me the finger. I could have telephoned his face with my blade. That's when you cut the guy from the ear to the corner of the mouth. If you punch him in the face after you do that, the wound will open up and there will be so much blood he will go into shock and start raving like a lunatic. It leaves a nasty scar.

I click my tongue twice.

—All clear? calls this pathetic voice from behind the boxes.

—Aye, aye.

The box comes down, and the Colonel speaks: —It's going to rain in ten minutes.

You could set your watch by it, the old man is that good.

—Listen, I need a favor.

Ask me anything.

—Yeah, thanks. You know those green plastic toy soldiers? The little ones that kids play with, you sell those things here?

—Yeah. Downstairs, second aisle from the left, second shelf from the floor. Long thin box. Right next to the plastic handcuffs.

—I need some.

—Sure thing, Colonel. May I ask what for?

—I'm building a diorama of Chosin. I need some soldiers to populate the landscape.

—How many?
 —Many as you can get.
 —I'll drop them off by your window later tonight.
 I'll knock twice.
 —My gratuity.

The electric whir of the wheelchair's engine starts, as the Colonel pushes forward on the joystick. He drives through the boxes, casting them out of the way with his free hand. He takes off, half a forty-ounce lodged between his stumps. As he drives into the distance he periodically raises the bottle high above his head, making sure to quaff it before he gets back to the home. I watch him until he makes a left around the corner. Somehow he escapes from the home four or five times a week, and he always comes during my work hours. I might be the only person he speaks to.

--> There are footsteps behind me.
 —I don't suppose you saw the wheelchair yet, huh?
 I crane my neck around my shoulder and stare at him.

—Wheelchair? I ask, my lip curled into a half smile. —Was there someone in it? Or was it just a chair? Thunder strikes. Ten minutes. Clockwork.
 —You're real funny, you know that?
 Am I?
 —What's your name?
 What's yours?
 —I asked first.

The sky opens up, and I turn to face him. Out of the corner of my eye I see a raccoon peering out of a storm drain. Cold rain trickles down my neck. I raise my hood. Move along, asshole.

—I know you've seen him.
 I click the blade closed. Homicides are things I usually try to avoid.

—I said I know you've—
 My right hand is on his throat before he can finish his sentence. I push him up against the dumpster. My brother showed me a trick from the Marines where you don't grab around the guys neck, but around his Adam's apple. Seven pounds of pressure is all it takes.

He's muttering something.
 —You want to die?
 No answer. His eyes are shifty.
 —I can rip your throat out right now.
 Sputter.
 —No one will miss you. Him most of all.
 I let go of his throat; grab his collar.

His glasses are covered in little droplets of water. His mouth is open and he is breathing heavy. His lower lip droops. The flesh on the inside is purple. I slap him hard across the face, which sends him sprawling. Then I kick him in the tailbone (more like push him with my foot) and he stumbles and lands over a drainage grate. He whimpers there for a moment, soaking in all of the wet filth from the alleyway, water running across his bloody face and down the drain. A human toilet.

He climbs to his feet. He looks at me, a long rivulet of blood running down his chin. When you stop caring, violence is graceful.

—You're crazy, he whispers, hand over the cheek that I smashed. I watch him for another moment, his whole body shaking.

Chicken?
 He turns and walks swiftly back towards the nursing home. He'd been nursed his whole life, and it showed. Absolutely no appreciation for the avant-garde.

--> I open the back door, looking like I've been hit by a tidal wave. Sheets of rain were pooling in the alley. Tunisia stopped and stared at me. —What the fuck happened to you?

—It's going to be a long, cold winter, baby. I toss my sweatshirt on the gas heater and head downstairs. I have an army to muster.

--> The cardboard dumpster has been filling up for weeks. Right next to it, the trash dumpster has been overflowing as well. An organic stench has filled the alley. Finally, after about a week of threatening to quit my post, I am able to convince the owner to have it emptied.

A fresh cardboard dumpster is one of my favorite things in the world. There is about six feet of depth, or approximately two weeks of time where I don't have to worry about climbing into the cardboard and jumping to flatten everything. I don't need to cut each box into small shreds and weave them into the madness. I flatten a box, and throw it in. It's that simple. Sometimes even simplicity can be overshadowed by a shiver of lunacy.

--> Last night I delivered reinforcements to the Colonel's window. I put in an order for double the amount of plastic army soldiers than we would need for the next six years. I smuggled them out of the store in a cardboard box, and later came back and took them out of the dumpster. Armed with a forty-ounce, I had the necessary impetus to keep the Colonel talking. I left the deli through the back door, and upon turning the corner, heard a distinct voice coming from behind me.

--> —What's up?
 I turn. Tunisia.
 —Where you going?
 —None of your business.

She brushes her yellow hair behind her ears with both hands. —You know, no comment is more incriminating than any comment. Her doofy teeth shine in the fluorescent, flickering light that bathes her shoulders. —You're going to see that man.

—I don't know what you're talking about.
 —Can I come?
 You can't bullshit a total bitch. I consider my plan of action. —Never.

—Why not?
 The truth will set me free: —He won't talk to me if you're there.

—Why not?
 I don't know. I start walking away. —See you tomorrow.

—Call me?
 Sure. I don't even have your phone number anymore.

--> I knock twice. The window opens up a crack and a faint yellow light shines into my eyes.
 —That you?

—Yes, sir. I bring reinforcements.
 I pass bags of soldiers one by one through the window, careful to stay crouching out of sight. The Colonel sits in his wheelchair by the aperture, working on his diorama. He talks audibly, in a low voice, which he is sure no one will notice because he takes care to talk loudly to himself most of the time so they'll suspect he's crazy.

I told you, the man is good.
 —Why do you need so many soldiers?
 —There were a lot of soldiers at the reservoir, son.

—How many?
 There is a long pause.
 —A lot.

It's going to be one of those nights. He doesn't feel like talking. —I don't feel like going to the bar.

—I hate the bar, always hated it. Did you bring me my special?

I pass the forty-ounce through the crack, which he widens to allow its entrance.

—Much obliged. I hear the ribbed metal connections break as he twists the cap. He tosses it in the garbage, and I can hear him glugging down the first few inches of the bottle. A throaty hiss escapes when he lowers the bottle back down to the table.

I discern a smell of roasting, melting plastic coming through the window.

He is burning the plastic army men.
 —That's right, he speaks through the crack.

—Why?
 —I have to get all the wounds just right. And the dead bodies. There are thousands of them.

Jesus. —Can I see a few?
 His fingers, holding a small object, come through the crack. I take it from him.

He's obviously cut up some cardboard for the base of the miniature, and attached the green soldier to it. The soldier lay on his back, one lone arm over his chest, the other haphazardly shooting out to the right. The plastic green base had been carefully removed, and his legs lie rigid over the cardboard "ground." The top of his chest has been burned and melted, at the top near the neck, and has been jabbed repeatedly with a sharp point.

—That's Don Carlos Faith, Jr.
 I consider the charred, misshapen plastic, trying to relate it in some way to a human being. —What happened to him?

—He was hit above the heart by shrapnel from a grenade. He died.

I pass the wounded Faith back through the window. He passes me another.

I recoil; horrified. It was a mess of melted plastic over the cardboard base. What the fuck is this?

—That's George E. Foster. He was a West Point cadet. Graduated in 1950.

—This is a dude?

—Our rifle company was at the head of the column on December 1st. There was a lot of wounded that we had to evacuate, and we called in air support to bust up the Chinese in front of us. Apparently, they missed the target and ended up dropping napalm all over us. Twelve guys dead.

I sat silent.
 —Foster ceased to exist, just burned up.

Jesus.

—He was the lucky one. PFC Ransome was in the middle of the whole thing and didn't get burned at all. I wrote down something he said. He rustles through some papers. —Here: "I don't know how in the world the flames missed me. In my lifetime, I'll never know. Men all around me were burned. They lay rolling in the snow. Men I knew, marched and fought with begged me to shoot them... I couldn't... It was terrible. Where the napalm had burned the skin to a crisp, it would be peeled back from the face, arms, legs...like fried potato chips."

I hand the melted George E. Foster into the yellow room. I decide to start rolling a joint.

Another soldier comes through the window, with the half-rolled joint in one hand; I take it from him with the other.

—There was a man, with a slightly melted and crushed leg, and a sliced abdomen, and half a melted face. He held a pistol in his left hand and was about to fall over.

—Who's this?

—That's Lieutenant John Lancey. He was the guy who kept us on Hill 1282.

—Did he live?
 —No, none of us did.

I concentrate on rolling my joint, nestled below the window on the wet, cold mud. With the Lieutenant balanced on my knee, I lick the sticky side of the paper and twist until it's tight. The lighter produces a flame that silhouettes Lancey in the firelight once again. I run the flame up and down the joint, drying it, and then spark it. I pull deep, hold it, and breathe out again. —He looks pretty intense.

—Who?
 —This Lancey guy.
 —Yeah, he was intense. He saved all of our lives.

—How so?
 —I said, he led the defense of hill 1282. He got shot twice. You can see, once in the leg, and then again in the abdomen. Hit twice, but still at it...stalking back and forth yelling and spitting blood, shouting "Gung Ho" through a blood clogged throat. We tried to stop him and treat his wounds, but he wouldn't have it. As he was trying to chip the ice off of a grenade spoon, a Chinese soldier about twenty yards away fired a burst in Yancey's direction, and one of the rounds hit him under the right eye jarring the eyeball loose from its socket and knocking him over. With his left eye Yancey saw the soldier crouch down and jam another magazine in his weapon. Yancey groped around for his carbine, and, not finding it, took the .45 from under his armpit and pumped two rounds into the soldier. Then, as carefully as he could, Yancey removed his gloves and pushed the eye back where it belonged.

Holy shit.

—Know what he said about it? "It was like pushing a hard boiled egg into a knothole, but it went in and stayed there."
 I pause. What the fuck is a knothole?
 —I haven't the slightest.

The Colonel hacked twice, spit some phlegm, and took a long gulp of his malt liquor. —You cold, son?
 —No. Well, a little. It's nice though. It had started drizzling, but I needed a good wash. I wasn't dirty. Sometimes you need the rain to drip down your face. I wonder how cold it was in Chosin.

—At night sometimes it'd get to be about thirty below. Automatic weapons had to be loaded one round at a time. I told you about the grenades. The worst was the frozen morphine. We had to keep the syrettes in our mouths to keep them warm. Blood plasma took about ninety minutes of warming in a tent to do transfusions, which meant there weren't any. Lots of guys died slow. They'd bleed and bleed, and without proper circulation, would start to get frostbite. Lots of men froze to death.

The worst part about watching someone freeze to death was the eyes. When your body freezes totally it turns to ice... like rigor mortis. If you've ever been to a funeral you know what I mean. Stiff. But they wouldn't die immediately. Their eyes would be moving around, and you knew they were still there. Sometimes they'd start crying, which made it easier, because when they cried their eyes froze shut and you could pretend that they were dead. I can't get those eyes out of my head. It's been forty-four years.

—Why didn't you shoot them?
 —You ever kill anything?
 Something in me drops. —No.

—Then you won't understand if I told you.
 Try me.

—If you shoot one, you've got to shoot them all. I consider the logistics.

—And then guys start shooting themselves. We can't have that. We needed to survive.

Icy rain numbs my temples.
 —Take a look at this, the Colonel says, as he hands me another soldier.

He lay face down, both feet ripped off. One of them lay a few inches from the body. About six feet, if it was constructed to scale.

—Who's this? I ask.
 —Me.

I examine the soldier closely. —You made a mistake.

—No mistake.
 —You still have your knees in this one.

—Aye. They burned the stumps so I wouldn't lose much blood. I lost the knees to frostbite.

Good God. —They give you morphine?
 —Nope. The one I had in my mouth I lost when the grenade went off. The frozen one I had they warmed and gave to another guy. They were saving them for stomach and chest wounds.

My black hair lay matted against my forehead. —You survived.

—Not by much.
 —But you survived.

—I miss that place.
 —What?
 —Chosin.

—Why?
 I hear him flick the flint, and burning plastic fills my nostrils.

—Things made sense.

--> Apparently I chose the bar after all.

--> —Hey guy, time to move on.

I stand up, supporting myself on the stool. Staggering, moving my legs, feeling them for the first time, starting to walk towards the back door. The bartender calls to me, telling me that I need to vomit outside, not all over the bathroom. I turn my head toward him, eager to argue, and tell him I wasn't vomiting anywhere. The sight of his glistening, wrinkled forehead makes me realize that the argument is futile. So I stumble at the door.

There is a hand on my shoulder. Blotchy, with hair on the knuckles.

—Colonel? I call to the madness.

The hand is on my face; I turn to the owner, finally.

Mr. Bill.

—Jesus, you okay son?

—Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I'm fine, Mr. Bill. *How are you?*

—Not too shabby, kid. You had a little to drink?

—I can take care of myself.

—You don't look so good.

—Neither do you, Mr. Bill.

He shakes his head at me. Punch me; swear at me. His disappointing stare is what really gets to me.

—See you tomorrow, old man.

I try to whistle as I leave, but my tongue gets stuck between my teeth.

There is a man to my right with black hair and glasses, the lanky one, and he has a band-aid over his right cheek. No fucking way. I pound my fist on his long wooden table. He doesn't flinch. I bang twice. Dance you fucker. Thrice, three times more. He stares at me, his warm, flat pint sitting in front of him. Doesn't really drink, drinks to hang around. Play the man, Master Ridley. Every eye is on me. We shall this day—

—Light such a candle, by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out. The nurse's chin hangs as the words leave his mouth.

My hand grabs his pint, I grind my throat, purge my sinuses, and spit the greenest, fleshiest mass of phlegm ever created by a mortal directly into his drink. I put the delicacy back on the table in front of him.

--> I wake up on the concrete. My head doesn't hurt so much, but my wrist is bleeding. In the window are mean faces with bloody consciences.

My feet carry me down the street, to a lamppost, and I hug it with one arm as I vomit into the gutter. Steam rises from the bile as it lands in the frozen water. My eyes tear as I wipe my chin with a napkin. Snow begins to fall.

I pull my jacket tight around my neck and continue walking. The icy trickle runs down my spine. The bouncing of the horizon is hypnotizing. My legs chug along until there are red and blue lights hovering over my face. A police cruiser pulls up next to me, and as I turn, lose my balance and fall down.

One officer picks me up, and the other shines a flashlight in my face.

—You again? I ask.

One cop looks at the other. Their eyes betray that they don't comprehend my question. They ask for my I.D. The officer with the mustache handles my identity.

He examines my license, alternating between my face, and my card.

—Backbone of the nation.

Down the street a car peels out of bar parking lot, its tires rotating over the slippery snow. The driver wrenches the wheel and takes out a lamppost with his rear bumper. —Oh fuck, one cop mutters, as he starts jogging down the street.

The other slips the thin plastic identification in my shirt pocket and gives me a rough push that sends me back onto the pavement. His hearty, deep laugh brings more snow.

--> When I get onto my block I release a howl from the bottom of my gut. It wakes every dog from its slumber, and soon a cacophony of barking dogs makes the world sound just like it looks. Every eye in every bedroom snaps open. Husbands and wives turn to each other. The dogs will be dead within the week.

Muscling the door to my apartment, and closing it behind me, I wander through the house. My face appears in the mirror, and I examine the black stubble and the swelling over my right eye. I've never looked so lively.

--> Curious wormy fingers sneak around my waist as I struggle to balance about forty pounds of rat poison, taking it all down off of the top shelf. There is a huge skull and crossbones that Mr. Bill drew on the side of the box. The hands move towards my belly button.

—How are you, sweetie?

—I'm busy.

She withdraws, careful to run her fingertips along my belt line.

—You want to step back for a second? I pull the box of poison off the shelf, lower it to my shoulder, and then toss it on the floor. It lands with a thud.

—What are you doing with all this rat poison?

I glance around. That is a lot of poison. —I'm organizing it.

She scratches her head, and then snaps her attention back to me. Oblivious.

—Heard you had a rough night last night.

—What?

—Mr. Bill said that you were really drunk and got into a fight.

—I don't know what you're talking about.

—What happened to your eye?

Drop it.

She starts cleaning the dirt out from under her fingernails with her driver's license.

I lean my forehead against the shelving unit.

Every day I come here I have to answer her questions. As if the dust, the boss, Mr. Bill and the endless cardboard that needs to be demolished isn't enough.

—He said that you beat the guy up a few weeks ago.

Silent.

—Why don't you ever talk to me?

—Tunisia...

—I care about—

My hand rests over her mouth. Her eyes flutter this way and that. She breathes heavy out of her nose. Don't. Ask. Me. Any. More. Questions. A tear squeezes out of her left eye, and the black shadow is running down her cheek. She's quivering.

My grip relaxes steadily. There are white blotches where my fingers squeezed. They quickly fill red. She leans into the shelves for support. She probably thought I'd kill her. Who knows? Our eyes meet. The fingers of her left hand are massaging the nub on her right. Her teeth are covered in a thin layer of saliva.

She wraps her arms around my neck and starts kissing me. I close my mouth. Her tongue forces its way into my mouth, parts my lips, slithering between my teeth. Her fingernails dig deep into the back of my neck, holding on for dear life. Using my hips to pin her against the wall, I begin unpeeling her fingers from the back of my neck. When I get them unhooked, I hold each hand wide against some boxes, still pinning her against the wall.

Noticing I've given in, my tongue probes the mystery. I pull away, her tears still rolling down her cheeks, her breath coming in quick, short gasps. —You shouldn't have done that. You shouldn't be near me—

--> I cut exactly six boxes, and then I decide to drink some coffee and puff a joint with the guys at the deli.

--> As I return to the alley I notice a distinct cloud of flies above the dumpster. Strange for December. Suddenly the Colonel's wheelchair comes around from the back of the dumpster.

—It's heads!

—What? I scream, and start running.

My pace slows about six feet from the dumpster.

There is a mound, a heaping mountain, of fish heads in my cherished vessel. Each one has a long skeleton, adorned with bits of rotting flesh, coming from the base of its head. There are three or four flies in each of their eyes, munching away at the sickness.

—What the fuck...

—It's them Chinamen, I saw them do it.

I look directly into the Colonel's eyes. Is he fully aware of the weight of such an accusation?

—I fuckin' saw them. He starts hacking and coughing, covering his face with a corner of his rainbow blanket. —The smell! he chokes.

The backdoor to the Chinese restaurant opens up. A guy with a long white apron, covered in blood, steps out for a cigarette.

—HEY YOU, I shout, walking towards him. He starts gesticulating—must be speaking Chinese, because I can't understand a word that is coming out of his mouth.

The electric whir of the wheelchair follows me; the wheels roll through the brown slush on the pavement. —Come here, I prod.

He starts backing up, reaching for the door handle. Dumb fuck slips on the ice, and dangles as he tries to regain footing, clutching the door handle. The first time I kick him in the stomach his hand releases the knob. The second time I kick him in the stomach he screams like a little boy. Ruptured liver, ruptured spleen, ruptured pancreas. In that order. He's going to vomit cruor. The door opens, and it stops short against China's back. A head, with a chef's hat, pokes out from behind the half open door.

—What you do?

I point at the fish heads. —What you do?

Several Chinamen step outside. One kneels down and starts rubbing his palm over the wounded face of his coworker.

—You have absolutely no respect. The Colonel is pointing an accusing finger at the chefs. —You feed that shit to people, don't you.

—Go back, the owner of the Chinese restaurant pleads.

—YOU FUCKING GO BACK. The Colonel is getting worked up.

They start advancing at me. I retreat slowly. The Colonel's voice is audible under his breath:

—Go on, stand up for yourself.

The Colonel brushes his red and black flannel shirt with his hand. His tongue pulsates in his curved, toothless, drooling mouth. He wants to get into it. If he didn't lament the loss of his legs, he does now. They're still advancing.

—No problem, no problem—

The owner babbles the same phrases over and over. Suddenly I remember back to grade school, when I got into a squabble on the handball court. The sun was high overhead; the sky was blue. A thug punched me in the face and I didn't do anything. The shame increased when my guidance counselor congratulated me on my

commitment to pacifism. Fuck that.

I crack the owner square in the face, and he goes toppling backwards. Within seconds all of them are on top of me, and I can hear the Colonel's voice booming over the babble. Covering my head, palms pressed flat against my skull, I coil into the fetal position on the ground. My left ear grinds over the brown slushy pavement. There is a thin voice, a female's, floating over the top of the din. It's Tunisia. —Get help, I half scream, my voice not pulling its weight. Fists pound me in the back. A foot kicks me between my legs and the bile rises in my throat.

Mr. Bill is outside now. A Chinaman punches him in the face and he falls to the ground. A bloody, swollen welt appears over his right eye.

I'm on my back now, grabbing at what I can. A man looms over me, ring hooked in his eyebrow, a faint mustache—every muscle in his forearm is clenched; he arcs his fist for another punch. Suddenly he goes blank. Tunisia stands over his unconscious body holding a busted radio. She seems surprised that it did as much damage as she hoped it would. Her victim lay next to me, bleeding from the ear. I elbow him in the throat, and he starts gasping for air. Two green aprons loom over me. Tunisia must have called—

Lenny is an ox, a big brute. He takes one Chinaman, the smallest of their crowd, whips him in the chest with a huge fist and throws him into a chain link fence. James and Tunisia help me to my feet. This is really happening. Where's the Colonel?

My knees support my weight, pants totally soaked. Chaos now: James and Lenny fighting, getting beaten, Tunisia picking off targets of opportunity, Mr. Bill still where he landed. —Colonel! Colonel! I look for him, one foot struggling to stand, the other lame. There he is: he's off to the side, by the dumpster. A Chinaman brushes up against his chair, dodging a punch from Lenny. The Colonel, true to form, throws a punch at the man's hip and connects. The man winces, turns around, grabs the right wheel and flinging his arms up in the air like a southern preacher dumps the whole litter with the nonchalance of a farmer dumping manure out of a wheelbarrow.

Charging blind, I tackle him, our bodies cast over the wheelchair and the Colonel's flailing arms. We're writhing on the ground between the dumpsters. I have the bastard by the throat, his little goatee with sweat and snow in it. My fist connects with his soft belly, and I feel his warm breath on my cheek as it shoots out of his lungs. With my right hand I choke his air supply, trying to keep his lungs from filling. Reaching around with my free hand, I grope for something to hit him with. A head. I rub the rotting fish head all over his face, trying to jam it in his mouth. His teeth hold tight and he shakes his head violent, the rot infecting his lungs.

Eat it.

The scales are grating over his front teeth. His left arm shoots up and wraps its fingers around my throat. Involuntarily I start hammering his face with the fish hand. The Colonel is screaming. No words, just screaming. He's wounded.

A car screeches to a halt. My arms are wrenched behind me, handcuffs cutting the circulation to my fingers. I'm left facedown on the pavement, face among the fish, empty liquor bottles and the unconscious body that I just obliterated. The Chinaman is vomiting and choking under the pile, my cheek pressed into his armpit. Scraping my chin on the pavement, I try to find the Colonel.

His blank eyes stare at me, his body awkwardly wrenched beside his wheelchair, blood seeping through the sleeve on his left elbow. We stare at one another, each of us trying to judge the pain and the exhaustion in the other.

—Colonel, talk to me. You okay?

He is expressionless.

—You did well, son.

I try to crane my neck behind me. —Get him back in the chair! I scream no one is listening. —He's an old man! Get him back in his chair!

Weak hands pull at my left elbow, turning me over onto my back. The pressure builds on my wrist, the metal handcuffs cutting into my skin. I whimper. Female hands are on my face, wiping away blood and tears. Snow is falling, and the first flakes are caught in her hair.

--> Rummaging through the boxes in the dusty basement, I'm trying to find the box of protractors and compasses that some asshole needs upstairs. Apparently there is a twelve-year-old who needs to draw some circles. Mr. Bill's foot pounds on the floor. I find the box, old and dusty, and bring it upstairs. I hand it to Mr. Bill, who is busy entertaining the kid's Mother. —Here you go dude, I say, you know not to run with these things, right?

The mother is disturbed. The bruises on the left side of my face can't be helping the situation. I pat Mr. Bill on the shoulder. —I'm getting coffee, you want any? He doesn't answer.

I walk out the front door, past the shoe repair shop that is adjacent to our business on the left, and open the door to the deli. Lenny and James are working, and I haven't spoken to them since the incident.

--> They slide my black coffee across the counter. I take a few sips.

—When's your arraignment? Lenny asks.

—I don't have one.

—What?

—I wasn't charged.

—But they cuffed you.

—They drove me down to the station, hosed me off, and made me hang around a bit, but that's all.

Lenny calls to the back of the kitchen, where James is working. —You hear that, James? They didn't charge him.

James comes out from the back, a smile on his face. —I knew it, I just knew it.

—They didn't do anything to the Chinese guys either, I add. —They gave the owner a ticket for those heads though.

—That shit was sick, James adds. You have this way of getting yourself out of trouble.

--> When I return, Mr. Bill has some work for me. Apparently the owner wants an entire shelving unit to be broken down. Piles of intricate metal.

—Is there any room in the basement?
I know a place.

--> The fire escape system for the entire strip mall is interconnected. The mall is L shaped, and two hallways intersect in our basement. One runs down the length to the Chinese restaurant and then the dry cleaners at the very end. That door is in the far back of our basement. There is another off to the right that connects to the shoe repair store, the deli, and the grocery store. The hallways are made of cinderblock, and they're full of rats. The idea is, if you're stuck in one of the basements while your building is on fire you can scurry down these catacombs and come out in a neighboring basement, finally heading upstairs to escape.

There is always a huge difference between intent and use. The Chinamen next door use their end of the escape as a way station for people who arrive in wooden boxes on big barges looking for a better life. They come to the Chinese restaurant for work, and a lot of them sleep on rusty cots in the fire escape for a few months.

--> You have to be careful. If you don't prop the door it can close behind you. I start piling the metal shelves in that hallway, underneath the only light bulb. I take a piece of metal and smash the light source, and build a huge barrier of long metal shelves, poles, connectors—anything. By the time I am finished it is completely impassable. Now I don't have to look at those rotten fishmongers any more.

--> The Colonel is under lock-down at the Senior Quarters nursing home. That was one of the outcomes of the fish fight. The police officers agreed that the owner was in the wrong for putting fish heads in the cardboard recycler. However, I was in the wrong for speaking to them directly about the incident. They told me two wrongs don't make a right. I should have notified the authorities. Although I did use excessive force during the fish and the face incident, I was loopy from getting knocked out by the mob of Chinamen, and was reacting to blatant injustice to a former Veteran. Of course, the Colonel wasn't supposed to be there, so they inquired into why he was let out of the home. The Lank at the center told the police that he was having trouble with the Colonel sneaking out (and that they had found him burning plastic soldiers in his room) and identified me as the one who he allegedly thought "there might be a slight conference wherefore." The police, unable to decide who was at fault in the dreadful case, and physically appalled at the state of our alleyway as well as the violence that was therefore present in said alley (which actually made one officer, Mr. James "Jim" Mahoney, Badge 394 of the "C.O.P.E" unit, actually vomit out of his own disgust with the human race), made an effort to try to "squash" the incident, and just drive us all home. Apparently, word got around (probably through Mr. Bill) that the altercation had gone down, and they notified the local paper. When the article was published under the title "Something Smells Fishy," an enterprising young activist in the local high school notified Greenpeace, and that organization wrote a letter of encouragement to the police for action against the "shameful aggressors." Therefore the owner is being charged with a \$500 city ordinance and will be paid no less than three visits by the board of health in the next two years. Justice.

--> Tunisia has been staring at me lately. She looks away when I make eye contact but she stares at me when I'm not looking. I can feel her eyes beating down on me, it makes me hot and flustered. My every action yields direct judgment. She sees me flinch when someone drops a box of books, and watches me peeking out the door to see if it's going to be raining on my walk home. We only talked briefly of the fight.

--> Don't do this.
There is a dull buzz coming from the florescent light.
Lips and teeth grind into my neck. Marks: red, splotchy.
I fumble with her belt buckle.
Don't do this—
—I will eat you alive.

--> Mr. Bill actually has a lot of work for me. I need to reorganize the cleaning agents in the basement. This is difficult because you can't store the ammonia next to the bleach. You don't want the basement to be filled with mustard gas.

I have every single box off of the shelves, and I

wade through aisles full of dusty cardboard. At the height of the reorganization, when every box is on the floor and all seems hopeless, I take a break to preserve my sanity. My feet pound over the thirteen steps. When I get to the top, I make a quick left, and then a right, and open the door to the bathroom. Tunie screams.

Her jeans are curled around her ankles, and her panties are wrapped around her thighs. She's holding one hand between her legs, peeing on something.

—GET OUT.

I close the door haphazardly, eager to cover my shameless hesitation. My heart pounds as I retreat down the stairs, and I spend the rest of the day sitting on a case of ammonia, shivering, unable to rid myself of the wicked image.

--> The yellow light peeks out of the crack, nervous as it slices through the darkness.

—Go away, the Colonel orders. It's too risky.

—I need to speak with you.

—Contact me by post.

—I can't do that, Colonel.

—Why not?

—Paper trail.

—You okay, son?

I can't see him through the crack save for the hanging skin on his gullet.

—I love you.

—You're talking crazy. Get out of here.

I get down on my stomach, and crawl through the long puddles of mud, hugging the side of the building. As I get farther and farther, my heart begins to race, as if it added a beat for every inch I subtract between my destination and myself. The time is 7:46 P.M.

--> I kneel behind the cardboard dumpster. I open my backpack and pull out a glass jar filled with a jellied mixture. A long wick hangs out from the top, and droops down. When I light it, the flame burns blue, and I run across the alleyway. When the fuse is burning down to critical levels, I pull open the kitchen door to the restaurant and throw the glass inside, as hard as I can. The glass explodes against the back wall and a large fireball erupts. Screaming, scalding bodies throw themselves against the door, which I hold tight shut with all of my strength. I retreat back to Four Star V&S Variety, and sneak in the back door.

--> I scream, calling for Mr. Bill. —The building's on fire! I hear scurrying footsteps running the length of the store. Tunie is calling 911. Screams begin to erupt through the fire escape. The illegals won't be able to get out.

--> From my vantage on top of the shelf I feel detached from Mr. Bill's pathetic, ancient body. He is running around the basement, trying to remove the metal shelving, burning his hands, calling my name, screaming for help. Tunie comes running down the stairs, back up again. Mr. Bill stalks through the aisles, searching for my body, expecting to find me asphyxiated or worse. I'm breathing through a wet rag. My skin feels like it's about to melt off. I wait for the right moment. The scream that erupts from my bowels as I cast my body off of the shelf onto Mr. Bill's unsuspecting back is not of this world. It is a guttural cry that knows no time, no limit, no control. With my arms spread wide, perpendicular to my rigid body, I seem to hover for a moment, and everything washes off of me. My chest hits Mr. Bill in the back of the head, and our bodies are lost among the cardboard and ash strewn about the floor. I straddle his chest, a gurgling scream bubbles from his mouth, and I raise a Teflon coated frying pan over my head. Our father, who art in heaven, hollow be thy name...

The frying pan connects with a dull thud. Mr. Bill's body goes limp. The basement fills with smoke. I grab his ankles and start dragging his thick, heavy body to the fire escape. My lungs are searing. I try to slam the door shut, but it's stuck. I try again and I try again. Feverish. Frenzied. I stop to figure out why the door won't shut. Mr. Bill's left leg stuck in the door, the bones snapped and blood drips through his pant leg. My shadow dances on every wall, illuminated from the red glow. Screams carry through the fire escape. Desperate hands reach through the metal shelving. I slice them with my boxcutter. The old man is no longer of this world.

--> This place is a tinderbox. I try to escape up the stairs, but large beams are already falling in on themselves. There is a faint whistle arching over the cacophony. It seems like there are thousands of them blowing intermittently. I recover back to the basement and rip open the door to the second fire escape. I hesitate for a moment, never having explored the dark cavern, and then plunge into the darkness of blackness.

I'm running at full speed, and I expect within about one hundred feet to make a right turn. The heat is forever rising, and I can't see an inch in front of my nose. I trip, stumble, reaching out for a wall that isn't there. My face lands in a puddle. I rise, hugging the wall, running again, make the turn. Another hundred feet. I sprint, lungs filled with dust, heart with faith.

I collide with something living. I recoil, laying on the filthy concrete floor, pressing myself into the corner, protecting myself from the foreign specter. Twisting our bodies, flailing our arms, choking on the heat, we struggle

to climb to our feet. —Rats! a female voice cries out.

The aural world hits me like someone somewhere flips a switch. —Are you, —Are you, —Which way?

—Tunisia! I scream, still clutching her wrist.

—Yes!

—We have to get out of here! I half drag, half carry her down the black hallway. I'm not sure what direction I'm heading anymore, just running, tripping, dragging Tunisia, her sweaty wrist locked in my palm. I run head-first into a metal door, crash into the step in front of it. I stand up again, still hanging on to Tunisia, and kick the exit as hard as humanly possible. It gives, and a shower of pale, fluorescent light swathes our soot-covered bodies.

—I came back looking for you, Tunisia gasps.

Still holding her hand tight in mine, we root through the basement of the grocery store, find the main stairs, and rise out of the depths. We skulk through the empty aisles, food stocked to the brim. The automatic doors open, and we escape to the parking lot.

There are several fire trucks parked at strange angles, showering water onto the whole wing. Every store is burning. Complete, total blaze. Firemen stand in a lazy line approximately thirty feet from the storefronts, unable to enter the premises due to the danger.

--> I collapse onto the snow-covered pavement, and paramedics are all over me. I'm covered in a blanket and placed onto a gurney. They wrap an oxygen mask around my face and ask me what seems like thousands of questions. Officer Mahoney stands behind the mustached medical official scribbling notes on a little pad. He looks concerned. Tunie's next to me, speaking with a reporter. A figure appears next to me. The Colonel.

—Damn right.

He is smoking a cigar.

—Quite a blaze, he comments.

—A total loss, I add.

Snow continues to fall, and everyone stands exhausted, waiting for the fire to burn out so they can search through the ashes for the remains of everyone who isn't accounted for. A silence reigns over the beast of confusion, and one by one, everyone takes a few steps closer to the fire.

—Let's warm ourselves by the fire, the Colonel chuckles.

From my gurney I see his wheelchair inch closer to the blaze. When he gets to the front of the line of firefighters he stops, and I see his silhouette contrasted against the wall of flames as he raises his bottle up to the sky.

--> My eyelids flutter, my body wracks itself once, twice, I cough and hack up blood, filling up my oxygen mask. An attendant pushes my head back down onto the white gurney, washes my forehead with a cold wet rag, painful as grit mixes with gashes on my forehead. They start moving me.

—You're going to be fine. I've seen worse. His mustache twitches. —Much worse.

Acknowledgements:

The Forgotten War, America in Korea 1950-1953. Clay Blair. ©1987, Times Books.

The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished. Staley Sandler. ©1999, Kentucky University Press.

Breakout: The Chosin Reservoir Campaign, Korea 1950. Martin Russ. ©2000, Penguin Books.

-->Names have not been changed

Out of respect for the dead.

--> For everyone working a job they hate.
For everyone who lives in their imagination.

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(Blank Space).

Body Break

On Boxes:

We stood there in the empty apartment, our hands not yet reaching to unbutton buttons, to unzip zippers. We stood still for the moment in all that space, surrounded by towers of cardboard, the down of your pink jacket done up to your chin, the slush of the city leaking from my work boots. We stood and we stared and I watched your eyes count how few boxes there were, how few boxes somehow filled up so many square feet while I—already stifling in wool sweaters, plastic raincoat, Hanes undershirt—counted and recounted the endless buttons that prevented your bare skin from being touched by my hand. We stood in the late twilight, the shadows of the boxes creeping over the puddles made from my shoes and when you still did not drink from the now-warm beer I had handed you, when you *still* did not unbutton all those precious buttons that mocked my clumsy, inoperative fingers, when the boxes remained unopened and we sweated and cursed beneath all our layers, I took that one moment to suggest that maybe it was time to take a break and you, for once, you stayed quiet, and did not contradict me.

On Eugene, Oregon:

We idled in the McDonald's parking lot—not sure where to go, not sure where *not* to go. We idled in Park, my hands gripping the steering wheel, your hands covering the entirety of your face. We idled in Park for nearly an hour—the 1998 white Dodge rental wasting gas by the minute, the radio turned to some 90s station playing songs we would subconsciously remember from the grunge days of junior high. We idled and idled— not sure where to go—my hairy knuckles strained against the plastic of the wheel, wet dripping down the side of your painted fingernails. The engine hummed beneath us and outside it rained. We continued to idle— not sure where not to go—my hands clutching at some object, *any* object because you would not look at me; so we stared at whatever else we possibly could: the kiddie pool by the chain link fence next to the Motel 6 across the street, the garbage bins out back, the pink roses hanging off the archway that were so thick with moisture, so close to the windshield they threatened to burst forward and smother us in their pink down. We continued to idle and the rain wouldn't let up and when your voice cracked over the words, "*pink. It's undeniably pink,*" I felt as if I was drowning in a sea of color that were lighter than blood but darker than snow.

26

On The Answering Machine:

We let our phone bills chart out the course of our relationship, endless numbers and decimals to dictate the peaks and drops of our two years together. We poured over these thick pages separately and compared later on—highlighting cell phone numbers, home numbers, calculating late night rates and listening to the nickel drop when we called late—usually one of us slightly inebriated at Spring Lounge which was fortunately close to our apartment. We watched our money that was stockpiled away now squandered to Nokia or Sprint and insisted on saving important news until physical contact: waiting until we stood on our doorstep to shout about a promotion, about an acceptance to graduate school, perhaps about a tiny stick not turning sickeningly pink. But after a while, we learned to turn our ringers off in the presence of others, and after a while, the phone bills weighed less than the water bill and after a while, your high voice echoed only once more from the machine throughout the now-empty apartment to demand patiently, as if speaking to a child, "*my stereo. I still want my stereo back.*"

On What It Means To Have You Inside:

Waking Hours

Sun playfully poked at his eyelids, making them tic and quiver, although not much, considering their evident weight. They had grown heavier over time, as indifference now dressed the faces of passers-by and the sheer, impenetrable rush of their lives forced him onto the concrete periphery, a cold place he fled in dream.

He, a man partial enough to the past to go by his full first name of "Bernard" (not a corruption like "Bernie"), woke with a raspy cough, rattling like the old engine of a car used for years, left dormant, and reignited out of nostalgia. On all sides, clamorous automobile horns angrily voiced their drivers' frustrations with their regimented lives. Bernard thought the scene funny: gainfully employed, moderately affluent people, ready to disembowel one another over the delay of a few minutes. He quietly prayed to something higher than himself that this would be the most troubling episode of their day, or better yet, their lives.

Planting his hands into his mattress of trash bags on the sidewalk, he rose shakily. In doing so, he widened the tear on the right knee of his jeans, as if reopening a wound. To gashes of both denim and flesh, he now paid little attention. One would mend, and the other might go

We didn't let it happen in New Orleans with its scent of honeysuckle and oppressive humidity (you in the gold dress traced against your damp skin. How you pulled the flimsy material over your head in one swooping motion and I pressed you against the wet of the tiles and the room filled with the smell of steam and the South so strong). And we didn't let it happen at Gregory's party in Williamsburg (how you pulled me into the bathroom—those clunky gold heels still on your feet while I tugged at your flimsy underwear. Your hands smacked against the mirror over the sink as I urged myself into you with incessant knocks of angry partygoers banging on the door in the background). It didn't happen at your father's house, and it didn't happen that long weekend in Paris. It didn't happen in my car, the Spring Lounge bathroom or even in Eugene, Oregon. When I asked you how this could have happened, you were eerie in your response and said, "*I don't know. It just did.*"

On The Supermarket

We were baffled by all of our options—endless rows upon rows of options that literally shrieked at us with their pictures of smiling mothers shrink-wrapped in pink cellophane. We were baffled and soon regressed to being shy with one another in the fluorescent of the aisle—pictures of mothers beaming sarcastically (*so happy for us! Such a very special day!*) and one aisle over, a family of four bickered over cereal products colored too obscene for my taste. We were baffled so we hunkered into our sweat-shirts and we ached to melt into our sneakers. Baffled—we dawdled and we stalled—the condoms next to the pictures of mothers laughing hysterically and the children with their prize of cereal seemingly dancing around us. We traced circles in the linoleum with our toes, we sweated rings into our t-shirts, we cursed the gods for the Safeway so close to our apartment until you grabbed one and hissed through clenched teeth, "*What the fuck does it matter? They're all the same! Just pick this one!*" storming off before the women and the children and the whole market could burn us at the stake.

On How Not To Cook A Turkey

You shouldn't have told me in Eugene, Oregon, right when I asked you how to best gut the Thanksgiving main course.

On The Tide

We were always careful (locking the door twice over, checking to make sure that the gas was off, stockpiling on birth control like it was canned goods) and we were always prudent (building up a portfolio, receiving a yearly flu shot, considering the idea of keeping vs. *not keeping*) but then somewhere sooner instead of later, before the vision of pink strips and laughing women could fade from behind our eyes, before the tears and acidic sweat stains could dry from our bodies that were damp from the inside like rot, before I could place my hand over your knee and gently squeeze, insisting that everything would be ok, there was red. So much red—red almost black that I couldn't believe the red, you couldn't believe the red, neither of us wanted to believe the red that wasn't red, it was almost black in contrast to the pink. And we who had been so careful, so prudent, were soon racing through red lights, were racing and yelling without seat belts and heart rates accelerating to a frenetic pitch. And someone was holding me back from the swinging doors, and someone was handing me a towel so white—too white—to wipe the red—now cracking dry to brown—from my hand and when someone finally led me to you, insisting that you were fine, all you could say was, "*really, it wasn't so bad. Was it?*"

By Megan Fishman

On Showers Like Gas Chambers

We took separate turns for showers now. We took separate turns and I soon got used to waiting—reading the Times, cooking us dinner, abating the minutes that seemed to spread between us like a mold that could not be scrubbed away. We took separate showers—well aware that the silence was near suffocating— you longer and longer under the water; I could hear your scrubbing furiously at an invisible layer of filth, the water or radio turned on full blast to drown out your sobs. We took separate showers and when the silence began to choke at the very air I inhaled, I protested: "It was my baby too." "You weren't the only one who lost something." "It was only a fertilized egg." Separate in our showers, separate across the room, separate in our own worlds right now, you didn't turn your back to me. You didn't throw your wine glass to the floor. Instead, you squatted to your ankles—your robe pulled up around your knees—and wouldn't stop rocking, wouldn't stop cradling this space that was so much bigger than I could possibly imagine.

On Being Inappropriate

We decided to try again. We decided to try and wanted to remember the way my hand used to fit between your legs like a steel trap, the way you bit so tenderly at the base of my neck—hesitant, as if daring to break the skin. We decided to try and went to Nobu. Trying hard now, you wore shiny black and looked uncomfortable, as if your skin had been pulled taut in some places and hung limp in others. Not trying enough, I drank too much sake and stared at the hostess each time she walked past. Still trying though, now at home, the bed loomed like a swimming pool. We were broken with each other's bodies as if we had forgotten the final variable to the calculus equation. Through with trying, after it was over, we lay there side by side—our bodies not touching, our words not yet spoken. You put one leg through your pant leg, turned, looked over your shoulder and spoke the next few words very deliberately, very carefully, as if you had been rehearsing them in your head for weeks, "*Well, that wasn't so bad, now was it?*"

On You

You are sticking your belly comically out as far as it will go. You are sweeping your brown hair into a messy bun on top of your head, laughing, the top of your lip curling upwards with the small freckle above it rising and falling. You are pouting your lips, you are wearing my dress shirts for work, you are jumping on the bed we have only been sleeping in for three weeks and it is wonderful, I can't get enough of you, I want to wrap my arms around that pretend belly and kiss it over and over again. You are sticking your belly comically out as far as it will go. You are asking me about babies—if our baby one day would have green eyes or blue. You are putting on red lipstick in front of the hallway's mirror, you are drinking a cold beer in Spring Lounge, you are unbuttoning one of my dress shirts in front of the bed we have been sleeping in for seven months. You are sticking your belly unconsciously out as far as it will go. Your left hip is cocked to one side and your arms are lifted in exasperation and "options!" you shriek, "what about options!" and my head is in my hands and I am sitting on the bed that we have made love in for little over two years and I know that soon your side will be empty, soon you will be packing up the clunky heels and the flimsy underwear and everything you've somehow left behind: the pink strips, Eugene, Oregon, the red-black tide and the endless laughing women with their mouths open wide will be prepared to swallow me whole.

By Noah Weston

numb. Bernard preferred pain to nothing, though.

Still sanitarily minded, he inspected himself for rubbish that might have found its way onto his person. He swept off the usual potato chip crumbs and cigarette butts, plucked the anti-war demonstration flier from his back. Against his hand, he felt something rubbery clinging to his leg: a used condom. While uneasy about its discovery, he mused that at least the prophylactic assured someone else's good health. His optimism carried about as far as these minor occurrences, the traffic, the excess, the grime. Beyond that, he could not weather the rigors of the day for too long without having to seek refuge in sleep.

Hunger gripped his stomach, and an audible rumble rolled through his abdomen. He began to walk, one bony spoke after the other, the left yielding a bit more than the right. He saw humor in his limp, once a cool, youthful affectation, that was now just the product of old bones and thinning muscle. He also remembered how he passed the homeless in their cardboard flats, thatched with egg crates and garbage bags, and treated them like an unflattering element of a wall mural. The picture was harder to ignore now that he was a part of it.

Strolling along the sidewalk at a sluggish clip, Bernard spied little treasures deposited in cracks in the ground. He noticed a penny, a copper Abraham Lincoln addressing a passing line of ants; a receipt from the pharmacy, confirming payment for Similac and a home pregnancy test; a Bible tract, the cover of which read "Jesus as an Alternative to Damnation;" and a perfume sample.

The elegantly decorated strip of paper, with a very sultry name, befitting a sultry fragrance, emblazoned on it, bounced light into Bernard's eye, prompting him to kneel down and remove the sample from the ground. It had a smell of something Bernard would have chased for years, if only for a sniff. He now found the scent obnoxious, however, and threw it into a trashcan, where someone desperate enough to give off this patented aroma (with a name increasingly reminiscent of a tropical disease) might rummage for his or her chance for olfactory transcendence.

Past the deep crevices in the sidewalk, the block ended where a long, congested street broke through. Bernard stood just a bit longer whenever he waited for the traffic lights to permit his crossing. The lights themselves

fascinated him, authority over motion in colored, illuminated globes at every street. His favorite of the colors, green, signaled safe passage. On the other end of the crosswalk, he encountered a number of young men, on vacation and between high school terms. One, of them, obviously eager to sneak some degradation into Bernard's day, sarcastically asked, with an upper-class affectation, "Why on Earth aren't you taking the Bentley to the office today, Bernie?" Bernard, as if he had dipped his words in grease, answered with little time between the query and response.

"I left the keys at your mom's house, son! Tell her that I'm through playin' that Mandingo shit. Bitch smells like old tuna and egg nog." He continued past the young men and proceeded north, toward the diner where he ate breakfast, or at least toast and coffee.

Inside the diner, he chose a blindingly silver stool. He swiveled around a bit, feeling unusually whimsical. Now at rest, though not in slumber, Bernard had time to shed the bulk he wore every day. First, his jacket, brown and tattered; then, his chunky gloves, a pair of second fists; last, his sweater, a gift from his aunt. He left on his hat, just because he would feel too cold without it. A server politely invited him to order, and he politely obliged her. Toast and coffee.

He tore into the toast ferociously, downed the coffee as quickly as possible without scalding himself. The server asked Bernard whether he wanted anything else. Wittily, at least he thought, he replied, "Dignity." She said that they were not in the business of serving such things. He remarked,

"Seems like nobody is." Bernard left, still hungry, still unfulfilled. In this way, his meals at the diner were analogous to most of his days. If a good dream awaited his return, he could have cared even less about the monotony, the loneliness, the silences that they produce, and everyone's eyes, observing him yet never willing to acknowledge him as anything other than a ghetto exhibition piece.

After pacing up and down the street for a number of hours, scouring areas for spare change, looking for odd jobs to do and never finding them, he returned to his garbage bag settlement. All the muscles tensed from the cold and exhaustion finally released and he sunk into the trash.

His eyelids descended, and with those curtains shut, he began the show within his mind, a pleasing assortment of recollections: picking peaches from the family tree, stroking a woman's breasts, working 'til sundown and partying 'til sunup, a white apartment, a pink slip, an eviction notice, his first night on the street. He inevitably returned to the memory of the peaches, tasted their sweet, moist innards and felt the fuzzy texture against his fingertips. Lush groves, verdantly leafed, bore fruit, for as far as he could see through younger, more acute eyes.

An old jaw, his old jaw, gaped without noise, although his phlegmatic yawn shared a powerful sluggishness in common with the machines in the plants in Gary, Indiana's withering arboretum of steel. Today, he concluded, with Georgia lingering in his mouth, that he would gath-

er some peaches, even at the expense of acquiring a surer catch, like a fish one day too old for sale at the market. Bernard plumbed his coat pockets for a dollar that Necessity had yet to pilfer, and upon discovering one, he smiled, probably for the first time with his eyes open in months.

He handled the banknote delicately, as he would a peach to avoid inflicting bruises. In light of his find, Bernard hungrily envisioned the mound of supple, teeming peaches ripe for savoring. He thought of parting an Elegant Lady with his teeth, boyishly ticking the swelling wetness inside with his tongue. Bernard would have probably salivated on his precious dollar, had he drank more than a cup of coffee in the past few days.

The dollar, when he contemplated it (read: when he did not have it), amazed Bernard; American Federal Reserve Notes had the power of potential, vested in each bill and coin. In this case, "green" again signaled advancement for those upon whom it shined. It permitted one to hope for, or if wealthy enough, to lay certain claim to his material desires, meaning a dollar held for Bernard all but the sensual pleasures of a peach.

Bernard set off for the Good Country Grocery store, an establishment owned and managed by the son and namesake of the man who opened it in 1965, Toby Clemens. While much of Gary broke down and grayed, Toby kept Good Country in the condition his father left it for him, clean and always outfitted with fresh inventory. To Toby, Bernard seemed spectral, more easily believed as an apparition than a human reality. The older Mr. Clemens never tolerated a belief in ghosts, so Toby tried to act ignorant of Bernard's presence while he swept the storefront. By the time Toby had plunged himself deeply enough into affected obliviousness, Bernard stood right beside him, politely requesting his attention.

"Pardon me, Mr. Clemens. Mr. Clemens? Mr. Clemens? Excuse me, Mr. Clemens, I'd really appreciate your assistance." Toby stirred in a fashion that led Bernard to believe that perhaps the grocer had not deliberately ignored him. One of Toby's hands slowly rode his wrinkled forehead to his evasive hairline. Leaning forward, he aimed an inquisitive squint at Bernard, asking,

"Yes, how may I help you?" Bernard's excitement distracted him from the condescension in Toby's manner. He restrained his giddiness in speech, explaining,

"Well, Mr. Clemens, I looked everywhere in your store for the peaches, but I couldn't find any. D'you got any in the back, by any chance?" Toby stood up straight, arched his neck back, and let out a snorting laugh. Drawing his head toward Bernard, he teased,

"The Good Country, for all the feats of produce it has accomplished, has never carried peaches five months out of season." Toby had picked and gutted Bernard's joy, and in his ensuing confusion, Bernard stuttered,

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I suppose you haven't checked a calendar lately. It's March, my friend."

"Oh. Never mind, then." Bernard quietly apologized to Toby for troubling him with what must have sound-

ed like a laughably insensible request. Before Bernard could make his way out, dejected and embarrassed, Toby halted him and presented him with a pocket calendar, a promotional product from the InterTrust Bank.

"What's this for?" Bernard inquired.

"It'll probably help you," Toby posited.

"A job'd probably do that better," suggested Bernard semi-facetiously.

"Uh, I'm not really hiring." Toby nervously looked away, but Bernard remained fixed on the grocer's face. He shook his head, and departed with the calendar in hand. Toby waited until Bernard rounded the block to collapse against the wall. For some reason, he felt defeated, but could not imagine how else he could have approached the situation, so he continued sweeping.

Given that his most ordinary tastes were out of season, out of step with the rest of the country, Bernard felt disinclined to leave his heap of trash bags, where he soon returned from the Good Country Grocery. An object in one of the bags gave him an unwelcome poke once he situated himself in the garbage pile. At first, he tolerated it, to demonstrate that he at least controlled himself. Then, gripped by famished agitation, he pounced on the trash bag containing the offending object. From the bag's eviscerated cavity, he withdrew the only item likely to have annoyed him so, a bottle of Snapple™ iced tea, flavored peach. Whatever liquid it now contained, there was enough to drink, but Bernard could not verify whether it would leave him sated, intoxicated, or nauseated.

If only Toby's sense of moral duty was not satisfied with the rather misplaced gift, Bernard thought. After all, a calendar was practically insulting to Bernard. For him, things never really changed; therefore marking the days was a frivolous, temporal game. He needed only the sun, or its absence, to pace his days. Bernard achieved a dreary inertia, living from dream to dream, and learning the depths of their insincerity during his conscious moments. And this, he thought at his most despondent, after Mom and Pops migrated North with such hopes.

Bernard wondered whether, when his time came, he would at least die indoors. Better to leave that question for a sleepless night, he thought. Cars passed in a tidal pattern, first in light splashes, then huge waves, and finally a splatter again. Though he had never been to a beach, Bernard guessed that this was its urban, aural equivalent. The sound lulled him into unconsciousness, where he could raise his hand into any tree and extract a fruit too tender to survive outside his aspirations.

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Everyone In Brooklyn is a Cyclones Fan

By Jacob Grana

Frank opened his eyes, and before they could even focus on the parallel lines of morning light that had been graphed onto the ceiling by the blinds, he inhaled Ebbets Field. He snuffed and coughed, thinking its smell of unwashed bodies, spoiled beer, and deserted hope was just his wife, Joanne, burning his scrambled eggs in the kitchen. He slowly sat up in bed, letting his venerable muscles creak and pop awake, and welcomed the morning with a spacious yawn and glazed eyes. Seventy-one years of practice and waking up was still hard to do. He cracked his fingers, stiff and immobile like earthworms dried out on the sidewalk after a storm, and ran them through his tarnished hair. Scribbling out his signature on leases, gripping telephone receivers while explaining the price/location/safety of this or that apartment to a client on the other line, bored hand drumming on his desk at the real estate agency had left him a two part legacy. The first was a sizeable pension, enough to let him and Joanne lose every hand in Atlantic City and still come back home to Brooklyn with their fingers. Second, and the longer lasting of the two, was a pain that had originated in the joints of his hands, but since his retirement had migrated into the nooks and networks of his back.

His morning ritual began at the dresser, where Frank donned a shirt and pants. His usual choice of t-shirt and worn-out jeans were left in the drawer, as Joanne wouldn't be the only one seeing him that day, and he took out a cotton button down that he considered "nice" and loose enough to let him breathe in the suffocating summer heat. It was while he was buttoning his jeans, this pair pressed and unusually bright, that he inhaled Ebbets Field again.

"Joanne, what is that smell?" he shouted loud enough to make his throat sting. No answer but the sound of gurgling fat and tinny voices coming from the small radio Joanne kept in the kitchen. He sucked his teeth in annoyance and then took a deep breath.

"Joanne!"

"What?" Her response was short and sharp. Anyone else would have felt their ears curl, but Frank was used to Joanne's shrill retorts. Louder than before, he cried-

"What is that smell?"

"It's bacon and eggs. Supposedly your favorite."

Frank finished buttoning his pants, as yelling and buttoning were tasks that could only be done separately, and walked to the kitchen. Joanne was bending over the table, tonguing still-sizzling bacon onto a plate for him. He turned off the radio and sat down.

"It smells like a homeless shelter in here." He looked up at her with his blue eyes that were caught between frizzled eyebrows and cheeks that creased and bulged like two deflating balloons.

"My eggs smell like the homeless?" Joanne squinted her forehead and stared in mock irritation, as she usually did when she thought Frank was teasing. Though as old as Frank, she retained a liveness that still astonished him. He was proud of the fact that her face had not become as harshly corrugated as the faces of her friends. She had never experienced the rigors of childbirth, and now seventeen years after wrestling with the realization that time had rendered it impossible, she was thankful that Frank was the only family she had to care for.

"Yeah, what did you do to them?"

"I cooked them."

Frank sniffed the steam coming off the plate and suddenly smelled eggs. Ebbets Field cunningly fled his nose, moved down his windpipe into the lungs, and from there ran the course of blood, permeating the fibers of his body. Forty-one years, three months, and odd days before, Frank sat at his desk at the real estate agency, sipping coffee, leaning back on the rungs of his chair, and wished the papers on his desk would self-immolate. While he was imagining the flames licking across his desk he sneezed, and not from imaginary smoke, but from dust, conglomerated particles of wood, concrete, grass and iron that had made its way from a newly wrecked Ebbets Field to his nose. On that day, the only ball in Ebbets Field was bigger than a man and made of solid iron, and instead of a Hilda Chester's cowbell ringing from the bleachers there was a fatal roar as seats collapsed and concrete exploded. Abe Stark's "Hit Sign, Win Suit" was punctured but the wrecking ball operator didn't even ask for a pair of pants. Pigeons fled the field a little quicker than the former residents, the Brooklyn Dodgers, though they didn't go as far as the City of Angels; Flatbush was good enough for them. The dust was displaced all over Brooklyn, sticking to houses, cars and trains, seeping into the skin, and lingering even after street sweepers and hot showers washed everything else away. But Frank had sneezed out his share.

"They smell fine now. But I swear there was something rank in this house before."

Joanne said nothing, her pinched lips let Frank know that she wasn't in the mood to banter, and sat down to read the paper and eat her own breakfast. Frank slid his wedding ring onto the tip of his finger and tapped it on the table, making a dull clink on the flower-patterned cloth. The eggs quivered to the beat.

"What's wrong," Joanne said, crinkling the newspaper as she laid it in a scattered heap on the table,

"You're smelling weird stuff, you won't eat your breakfast. Are you having second thoughts about going today?"

"Nah, I want to go...I don't know." He picked up his fork and ate a mound of the now lukewarm eggs. Joanne pinched her lips and went back to the newspaper.

"Well, I was having second thoughts, but now I think I'm sure. I want to see what everyone in this damn borough is talking about. Baseball is back in Brooklyn." He quoted every sports anchor and writer in New York City.

"But you don't even like baseball," Joanne said from behind the newspaper. He admitted that was true. The Dodger's had held little interest for him, but conversation at work was awkward without sports so Frank followed the box scores to stay current with his friends. After Ebbets Field was bought lock, base, and dugout, his friends' allegiance was transferred to the Mets. Frank followed, but as his friends either died or moved away, his passive interest in the game went with them.

"I changed my mind. What about you? You still not coming?"

"Nope, I have little desire to listen to Anthony ramble on about Long Island for two and half hours. Long Island is great. You should move to Long Island." Joanne's "Anthony" voice sounded more like the grave voice-over in movie commercials, rather than the actual "I am from New York but lost the accent in college," flat speech of their nephew. "I was born in Brooklyn and lived here my entire life, in this house. I will always be here."

"I know Joanne, I know." Frank's response was mechanical, a part of the program written in the many years of their marriage, one that would never be upgraded or become obsolete. His fingers began to lock up and he tried cracking them, but they were more stubborn than an overfilled ice cube tray kept too long in the freezer. The joint pain, that old enemy as relentless as an infomercial crept along his fingers and Frank sucked his teeth in pain.

"I need some aspirin." He got up and threw open the cabinet, the hinges too old and tired to give more than a short shriek.

"We're all out. You're going to have to go to Kim's." Joanne said as she swept the remaining bits of their breakfast into the trashcan with a fork.

"Is that what it's called now? Every week a new Chinese grocery is opening up. It's too bad Michael couldn't give the store to his son, or at least sell it to someone who knows English, so you wouldn't have to speak sign language just to get a pack of gum."

"Mr. Kim and his wife are always nice to me when I go in," Joanne said as she swabbed a wet sponge over the scratched surface of the plates in the sink, lathering soap into hills of foam. "And they're Korean, not Chinese."

"Maybe we should move to Long Island."

Frank was bombarded daily by TV commercials advertising cures for allergies, depression, not sleeping, sleeping too much, hangnails, migraines and foot fungus. Mind-numbed and head drooping in the confines of his recliner, (Frank entered a state of suspended animation whenever he watched TV), he still envied the couple skipping through the flower-laden field in the allergy commercial. Not because he couldn't skip, he chose not to do that, but because he wouldn't even be able to wrap his swollen fingers around the thin flower stems to pick them. As the commercials suggested, he had asked his doctor, but apparently aspirin from the Korean grocer was more potent than anything prescribed. "Aspirin and rest, to feel your best," his doctor had rhymed with a smile that was more sterile than the fat jar of tongue depressors. And so, instead of enjoying the catatonia of television, Frank had to walk to get a pill more venerable than him.

Frank walked down the carpeted staircase, once a lush green color but now stained by brown shoeprints. Installed by Joanne's father as a sort of faux lawn for the second floor it had become unkempt and splotched, but Frank never repaired it as he always thought it a little peculiar to be admired for anything other than making the steps a little softer. Joanne's parents had owned the entire house and lived on the first floor. When he married Joanne, her parents let the newlyweds move upstairs for cheap, something Frank had always been thankful for. And after they died, Joanne inherited the entire property. They rented the bottom apartment to a number of different people over the years, the most recent being an old Russian couple, not too much older than Frank and Joanne themselves.

The husband, Peter, spoke little English. His wife, tiny compared with the bulk of Peter, whose rotund face was dotted with patches of scabbly white hair, spoke for the two of them. Everything about Peter was big, he had the body of a man who had worked lifting heavy boxes by day and beer glasses by night. There was a weariness in his skin, as if he had been slowly atrophying in the Russian winter and now hoped Brooklyn would be reinvigorating. But from what Frank saw, Florida wouldn't have been enough for the man.

As Frank stepped out of the vestibule he found his tenant on the stoop sitting slumped against the railing, burying his arms in his chest as if he were preventing them from falling off. He was watching or studying (Frank wasn't even sure God knew what was going on in Peter's mind) the neighborhood kids as they whacked a wiffle ball into the parked cars on the street, setting off alarms every

five minutes. The kids cursed at every hit, strike, fly ball, missed catch, passing car, nothing and everything was good enough reason to let those words fly. Mothers passing by might blink in wonder at the foul streams produced, and then ask who would teach kids such a thing. Frank knew the answer. Those moms just had to wait a few hours for the Yankees to come on and their husbands would fill them in.

"Nice day," Peter said, turning his polar bear face to Frank. His words were so thick, Frank wondered if a blender could produce anything more convoluted.

Frank nodded, "Yeah, it is." He put his hands in his pockets to avoid cracking his fingers. There was a pop, not from Frank's unsure fingers hiding in his jeans, but from the kids' plastic bat as it sent the wiffle ball onto his lawn. In accordance with the nature of wiffle balls, it did not bounce but nestled among the grass blades, which were kept carefully groomed by the Mexican landscapers every Saturday. Five seconds later (Frank was counting how long it took for courage to override fear in the kids' feet) one of the Arab boys he recently had seen move in down the street ran up to the lawn. He stopped at its edge, the micrometer space between the grass and sidewalk seeming as wide as the Grand Canyon. Head down and fists balled he rushed to the ball. Frank waited until right before the boys anxious fingers had touched it.

"Get off!" Frank let out a bellow that put the morning's shouting to shame.

"But its my ball," the boy said. The rights of ownership are blurred when lawns are involved, but the boy was too young to realize this.

"It's my lawn and I don't want any footprints on it," Frank advanced towards the boy, his fingers out of their pockets and cracking loudly in the silence that had descended over the block.

"Let him get it," Peter said from the stoop. He was still enveloped in his own polar bear hug, but the scratchy face that had endured not only as many winters as Frank but far worse ones, so cold that his tongue had frozen permanently in speaking about them, turned to his landlord and did not waver.

"What the hell can you say about it? This isn't your house." Peter's gaze only infuriated Frank more. He let all the words he wanted to say transmute into a ball of phlegm and he spat it onto the lawn. The boy was good at math; he recognized this new angle to freedom, so he snatched the ball and ran back to the relative safety of his friends. Paralyzed by his own impotency, Frank could only watch as the wiffle ball game continued as it always did, it was inexorable even if its players were not. Hitting a ball with a stick was a part of the architecture of the block, rivaling the old knotty and root-exposed tree that served as home base for freeze tag in age and endurance.

"Next time, I'll call your parents!" Frank paused, but his words were swallowed up by the cadenced whine of a car alarm. Not to be outdone he added, "I bet they don't even speak English! And Peter..." But the old man was gone, his great mass not impeding his ability to slip away unnoticed, like a polar bear merging with the whiteness of the Arctic. Frank found it unnatural that a man of that size could disappear without noise or trace. Shaking his head, he walked on to the grocery store.

They ate early that night so Frank would have enough time to get to the game. His nephew had offered to pick him up, but Frank put more faith in a goldfish's ability to guard a house than in Anthony when it came to being on time. He would have to take the 15 minute train ride to Coney Island by himself if he wanted to be at Keyspan Park for the first pitch.

As he stabbed a chicken breast onto his plate, he took a few hard sniffs, raspy enough to elicit a "Jesus Frank" from Joanne. He wanted to reassure himself that there were still some meals that his wife could do right. Satisfied that not an atom of that morning's smell was radiating from the moist meat, he cut a bite.

"Can you pack me something to eat later? I don't want to have to buy a hot dog, they're so expensive," Frank said while chewing.

"Okay, I'll make you a sandwich. And don't talk and chew at the same time." Frank spent the rest of the meal chewing, so it passed in silence. Soon enough he was climbing the steps to the 79th street station, plastic bag with Joanne's sandwich in one hand, and a dusty token that he scrounged up from his change jar ready in the other. For the first time in years he shuffled through a turnstile and sat down on a pitted and graffiti scratched bench to wait for a train.

A breeze sailed along the tracks bringing with it the tang of rotting garbage, the herald of the Brooklyn summer. Black plastic garbage bags left on the curb baked their contents during the day, reeking until nightly deserted streets allowed the lumbering garbage trucks to grind them all up in its pneumatic jaw. Who needed rooster with the stray cats announcing the dawn with mournful mews for their empty garbage pails?

An elderly Asian woman sat down at the far end of the bench. Though willing to live on top of each other, the woman adhered to the unspoken rule that city-dwellers never sit next to each other. The space between her and Frank was only as wide as a sidewalk but it may as well have been a parking lot. Next to her was a red plastic bag

that swayed in the wind, swishing like a gliding ice skate. It was the same kind of bag that Mr. Kim had tried packaging Frank's aspirin in earlier that day.

"Oh no, I don't need a bag," Frank had said, waving his hand over the aspirin in a circular motion like he was buffing his car. Mr. Kim had just snapped a bag open, its placid surface exploding out as if a bomb had been set off inside. Black Asian letters curved over the front, staring at Frank. He looked away.

"Are you sure?" Mr. Kim asked, smiling the forged smile that was the first lesson every small business owner learned, even before figuring out how to pull down the metal shutters at closing. Watching the former grocer work this smile (who had watched his predecessor do the same and so on to the beginning of green grocery), Mr. Kim, being of an entrepreneurial mind, recognized its snaring influence on the customer. His milk expired just as quickly as the guy a block away, but people pay for presentation, not product, and Mr. Kim's smile was a song and dance all in one. He became a master of fakery, the absence of counterfeit twenties in his cash register was the proof.

"It's fine, I can put it in my pocket," Frank said. He began hitting the bottle into his pocket with his palm, the jeans not stretching without a fight, and after a few seconds he managed to get the whole thing in. It looked like a cancerous tumor had spontaneously grown on the front of his leg.

"Thank you," Frank muttered and walked out of the store, while Mr. Kim smiled to himself.

Frank bent himself low towards the Asian woman on the bench, like he had seen secret agents do in the movies when they wanted to divulge classified information. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed his frame encroaching on their subconsciously agreed upon boundary and instinctively leaned away.

"Did you get that bag from Kim's?" he said, his eyes following the curves of her cheeks. She cocked her head away, trying to put as much distance between his eyes and her face.

"You know, the grocery store on the corner of 76th?" They give out red bags just like that one." With a rush of air the train came, its roar turning to a metallic screech as the dulled and scratched silver cars slowed to a halt. The doors dinged open and a few people trickled out. The Asian woman had sprang out of her seat and moved down the platform before the whoosh of air could dry Frank's eyes out. He watched her step into a car farther down and then got on himself.

Frank took a seat by the window in the near empty train and settled into the hard plastic. He looked out at the pink rays of the evening sun as they silhouetted the squat Brooklyn skyline. The passing houses were mismatched and unique in their color and shape, as if the city planners had ripped random pages out of a geometry textbook and used each one as a blueprint. The sheer pointed roofs and oblong slants became more uniformly square as the train pulsed along its metal vein towards 86th Street, the mini-Mecca of shopping. The sidewalks hummed with people while there was still light, before everything closed. The fruit and vegetable stands already pulling down their plastic tarps, the Dime savings bank now serving as an ATM only. But the McDonald's and the International Phone Cards and Checks Cashed here kiosk were sure to be open a while longer, even after the crowds had filtered out, going home to their numbered streets that provided as much identity and history as a last name. They would eat dinner as the children begged to go back outside until the streetlamp's mock sunlight made every game but manhunt impossible, and then finger-whistles

from terraces or name-calls from windows would bring them in, as the plastic tarps and steel-ridged shutters had brought their parents in from 86th Street.

Frank knew how tired he would be after the game and hoped the block would be clear of kids by the time he got home, so he wouldn't have to hear their shrieks and giggles from his bedroom window. His back twinged with the vibration of the train, despite the dulling effect of the aspirin. He shifted in the hard plastic seat and it felt better. Much to his chagrin, at age 63 a switch had been flicked in his brain and everything went limp, sagged, or ached. Everything except his ears, which still heard even the slightest sounds, from the dull hiss of the radiator to the faint ding of the Good Humor man's bell as he sold ice cream two blocks away. The intercom clicked and the conductor's voice fuzzed and popped throughout the train, announcing Stillwell Avenue as the next and final stop. Frank stepped onto the platform, the air feeling sticky with the smell of sweat, urine, and sea salt. He had arrived in Coney Island.

A half hour later, Frank made it to his seat in the upper row, just as the national anthem was ending. His shirt stuck to his back from the walk and arguing over his sandwich with the ticket-takers, who finally gave in to his tired eyes and made an exception. He shut his eyes and leaned back, happy that he had skipped the hectic crowds who hastily spent money on "Brooklyn Cyclones" t-shirts and mugs in the gift shop, as if they would later need these to remember they had seen a game. Their frenetic energy did not repel Frank as much as it exhausted him, in his seat he closed himself off from them all, only opening his eyes when the seat next to him creaked. Anthony sat down and the first pitch was thrown.

"How are you Uncle Frank?" he said as he gave Frank a hug and peck on the cheek.

"I'm a little warm and tired, but otherwise I'm okay." Anthony nodded and sat on the edge of his seat. His legs picked up the energy of the crowd, bouncing up and down enough to vibrate Frank's seat. He did not mind though, and smiled when Anthony whooped as the Cyclones pitcher, Frank hadn't caught his name, struck out the Hudson Valley Renegades' first batter.

Anthony looked at his uncle and thought that his stiff posture and calm grim made him look stoned. He wondered if he was on some kind of medication.

"You alright over there? You like these seats?" Anthony's legs bounced faster.

"Yeah, yeah, I like them." Frank wished Anthony would watch the game and leave him alone. He was looking for it, he wanted to feel it, perhaps it was in the crowd or leaking from the stadium, somewhere on the field; could the hot dog vendor be selling it? He looked over the right field wall at the old Parachute Jump Tower, its lone, red iron figure standing like an oak that had seen its last summer long ago. *An old glory*, Frank thought, *watching the new* and his eyes naturally moved to the far neon of Astroland Park. He hadn't been there in years, too many to count because he didn't care; he would never go back. 100 years ago maybe Coney Island could have been seen from space, but Frank knew now it was just another flicker on the switchboard.

"Anthony! How are you?" A man in a Brooklyn Cyclones jacket sat down next to Anthony and playfully slapped him on the back.

"John, you made it." Anthony shook his hand and then introduced Frank. "This is my Uncle, Frank, he really wanted to see a game." Frank's cheek twitched, what he wanted to see was his business. "The L.I.E. didn't hold you up too much, I guess?"

"No, I made good time actually. How we doing?"

"No score, its only the first though. Don't worry, I went to school upstate and trust me, nothing good comes out of there. We'll win." Their short polite laughs were drowned out by the despair of the crowd as the Cyclones batter grounded out to end the inning. Frank could feel the emotion, the deflation like a tire blowing out all its air, but it did not permeate farther than the hairs on his skin.

"I tried to get my Father to come out, but he didn't feel like it." John's slow easy speech contrasted the frenetic movement of Anthony, whose leg savagely worked to shake out every bit of stored nervous energy.

"Really? Isn't he from Brooklyn? I thought all the old-timers would want to see baseball in Brooklyn, eh Uncle Frank?" The conversation continued without Frank's answer; nobody expected one.

"Actually my Father doesn't care. He said he's fine enough where he is to not have to go back where he was. I can't blame him, Brooklyn isn't what it used to be anyway."

A fresh breeze blew over Frank's face; it was short and not a little salty, like the "Amen" that Anthony muttered, the word beginning and ending perfectly with the length of the breeze. Frank sneezed.

Ebbets Field came flying out and the smell of burning eggs unburning, uncertainty made certain, and the homeless coming home pushed against the hairs of Frank's nose. Into Keyspan Park it came, into the grandsons and granddaughter of those who had commanded Ebbets Field to dust. They had built this new park with the stories of their fathers in their ears and the grime of a fleeting, decades old stadium on their hands. From the land of stale prosperity they came, an attempt at capturing an old image, an old feeling, even if it was only in a minor league. Out of Frank's blood, from the sides of houses, the dents of cars and the curves of train tracks the atoms of Ebbets Field, of the old shrine, came and filled in the gaps of the new.

"I want to go home," Frank said.

"What?" Anthony said, as if he had just heard the President was dead.

"I want to go home. I don't feel good." This was the truth, as any enjoyment of the game he was feeling had been drained out of him. *It was not here, it never was.* He wanted to sleep badly at that moment, in his own bed with the white noise of the air conditioning lulling him unconscious. He stood up easily and sidestepped past shirking feet to the exit.

Anthony didn't stand, he shot out of his seat. "Wait, Uncle Frank! You're sure you want to go now? It's only the second inning."

"Yes," Frank said without stopping.

"I'll drive you, alright? You can't go by yourself now. I can get back before the game is over."

The car ride home was quick and quiet. Anthony let all the energy of his leg pass through the gas pedal and into the engine. Whether they got home faster because of it, Frank was unsure. Through half-closed eyes he watched traffic lights streak across the night sky, bringing red and green to its black and white normalcy. In front of his house, Anthony gave his uncle a pat on the back, a "feel better" that was so fast the words stumbled on themselves, and drove off. After all this speed Frank took the stairs slowly and let Joanne open the door for him.

"What happened?" she asked, guiding him to the bedroom.

"It wasn't what I expected."



In the Moments After the Accident

By Sarah Martino

You looked particularly beautiful there on the pavement, with your left leg twisted at a terribly unnatural angle and your right leg bent at the knee, tucked under the left. Your arms wrapped around your torso; you were doing your best to keep warm. You seemed to hold yourself tighter than I ever had and I wondered if you were often cold when we were together.

There was a lot of blood, and it was everywhere. It seeped through your pants and sweater where your legs and arms had slid along the road; it leaked from the left side of your head and dripped down your face. It matted down your hair to your forehead and I couldn't tell if your eyes were open or closed. Red smeared across every exposed piece of skin, and red spread across the ice, creeping slowly towards the yellow line that separated lanes until it finally crossed the border and you were officially on the wrong side of the road. In retrospect, you looked like abstract art, like part of an installation done by one of your art-school friends. One of them could have stood in front of you, and gestured wildly to their classmates at the grotesque scene behind them, chattering about symbolism and the fragility of life and limits of the body and pretension could have dripped from their words like the plasma from your bleeding wounds. You then might have stood up and put one finger in your mouth to show that the blood was indeed watered-down ketchup mixed with food coloring and done a little dance to prove that all was in tact. As it was though, while looking at you from the passenger seat of the car, you more resembled a coyote my father hit once. We had been on our way home from visiting my grandmother, and I had been a young girl, half asleep when the car swerved and a guttural moan filled the air and then quickly faded to a whimper and then to silence. My father had stopped the car briefly, but then pulled away without saying anything and I watched the ani-

mal get smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror and I cried for it. I tend only to love things when they are hurting.

I wasn't really scared until I realized it hurt too much to move. My legs were jammed between my chest and the dashboard and the tops of my thighs were littered with glass from the windshield. After the initial daze of the impact, after my vision cleared and I was able to see you twitching on the ground about fifteen feet from the car, after I had my bearings, putting my right hand against the window and my left hand on the gear-shift, assuring myself of my continued existence by my ability to feel with the tips of fingers, after that I thought to get out of the car. I wanted simply to get to you. You looked so small and vulnerable lying there. You were always smaller than me, and of this fact I was aware every minute we spent together with your spindly limbs and compact waist making a mockery of my wide hips and bulky legs. When we lay in bed together at nights and you moved to touch me, I immediately pulled you on top of me just so I could feel the pressure of your body and do my best to imagine that underneath your little weight I was rendered a slight presence, the way male and female body mechanics are supposed to work. But when I saw you then I wanted nothing more than to smother you with the expanse of my body, cover you entirely because I was always bigger and better for protection. I tried to move my legs only to find that the pain made it impossible to breathe and I couldn't very well do one (move) without the other (inhale/exhale).

I thought then that you might die. I knew that I wouldn't, not only because I felt very much alive but because it's not really in my nature. I am one of those who will be around for a long time; the character in the horror movie who lives for the sequel, and then for part three, and for every subsequent installment until everyone else has been slashed up, beat down, or hacked to pieces. You

though were far weaker and I knew that without my help there was little hope. So with this knowledge it was not my life, but yours, as I imagined it, which flashed before my eyes. I created your memories and put myself in them. You were six and at a birthday party and crying because there was not enough cake to go around, so I, a little girl with curly pigtails, gave you some of mine. You were ten and playing Pirates with your friends in your back yard, and I was the little girl in the floral leggings waiting to walk the plank. You were thirteen and on vacation with your family in Paris and I was an older Parisian girl who sold your mother a purse on the street. You were seventeen and losing your virginity to a girl far prettier than me in her parent's bed, while I watched from her father's closet, hidden in suit jackets and ties. You were twenty-one and you met me at a friend's party and we stood together awkwardly, waiting for something to happen. We were twenty-two and moving into our apartment, sitting on the floor amongst the boxes and drinking the champagne your mother bought us, straight from the bottle. We were twenty-three and you were moving out, picking your books off the shelf and asking where you should leave the key...Oh, but I guess that came later, actually. I guess I didn't think about that then at all.

You in the road, me in the car, the car smashed against the guardrail, the guardrail bent and mangled, useless metal that it was, the ice on the pavement, the cold in the air. How long were we there like that? Unable to move or talk or reach each other, how long was it before another car found itself driving on the same stretch of road, found us broken and waiting? How long did I spend stuck in one place, thinking of all the ways that we might eventually be saved?

The Anthill

By Matt Rozsa

It's 12 o'clock, and every first grader at Peach Hill Elementary School goes out onto the playground for recess. Some swing on the jungle bars, others climb around that giant, metal hill, and still others make good use of the soccer ball and the two lines of trees that stand on either side of a nice, large patch of grass.

Samuel Levi Rosenblum isn't your typical first grader; in fact, he isn't your typical kid. He never hangs out with the other kids his age, though he sometimes tries to; usually he just sits in class all nice and quiet. The teachers don't bother him and he doesn't bother the teachers. When it comes to recess, he finds no point in the games all the other kids play, so he decides to do his own little thing. Instead of going outside onto the playground and climbing on the jungle bars or swinging on the swing, he stays back near the concrete sidewalk outside the school patio and, as it appears to everybody else, stares at a patch of grass outside the school.

The teachers think he's weird, but say nothing of it for fear of lawsuit. The children think it's unusual as well, but decide not mention it to him until one day, when Kenny decides to figure out why Samuel Rosenblum is so different. Kenny goes over to him, soccer ball underfoot, and with a crowd of first graders behind him kneels down next to Samuel and looks directly at him. Kenny has a malicious grin on his face.

"Watcha doin'?" he asks, his voice laced in fake benignity. Samuel look up at him, sensing something wrong but opting to answer the question anyway.

"I'm looking at the anthill," he responds. Kenny leans down to take a closer look, and there indeed is the anthill. It's not a very big anthill, and it's got those black ants that Kenny can't stand so much; red ants can at least hurt people, so you can make some good jokes with them. What's the fun in black ants? "Why are you looking at an anthill?"

Kenny asks Samuel Rosenblum, to which Samuel responds quickly, "I just like the ants, I guess."

"Oh," Kenny says thoughtfully, pausing for a moment. Then, as if on impulse, he picks up the soccer ball and smashes the ants to oblivion, shouting "BOOM!" in order to punctuate the deed just committed. Everyone around him starts laughing hysterically; Samuel looks up at Kenny, tears running down his cheeks.

"You killed them!" he screams at Kenny, but Kenny doesn't listen. He's laughing so hard he's beginning to turn red in the face. Samuel really wants to fight Kenny; he really wants to pound him right in that big, laughing face of his, but he knows that if he does that he'll only get into trouble. So Samuel does the only thing he can think of; he runs over to the teacher and tells on Kenny. All of a sudden, the big smile is wiped off of Kenny's face.

"Uh oh," he says to himself, as he watches Samuel Rosenblum's actions, fear jumping into his heart.

Samuel trots up to the nearest teacher, about fifty yards from where the anthill once stood. Tears still streaming down his face as he imagines those poor ants withering up in agony, he looks up at her and tugs on her shirt sleeve. She turns down to look at him.

"Oh my gosh, Samuel," she utters, wiping the tears off his face, "what happened?"

Samuel explains the entire story. By the time he has finished, the teacher's sympathy has slowly melted away into sheer concern, as a look Samuel could not interpret enters her face. Samuel waits for her answer, as does Kenny from fifty yards away (though, of course, he can't hear a word she is saying).

"Samuel," the teacher began, not seeing the bright look in Samuel's eyes as he prepares to hear her say that it is all going to be okay, that she isn't just going to let him be

humiliated like that, that the ants will be avenged and justice will be served. "You really need to learn to ignore things like this when they happen."

Samuel's face falls, and for a moment a feeling he has never felt before, a feeling of anger and hatred and intense sadness, enters his entire body. He senses that he wants to go away and never come back. He has just lost something, but he isn't quite sure what it is. The teacher continues her response.

"I'm sorry, Sam, but kids do these kinds of things, and you're just going to have to get used to it. You can't expect people to stand up for you every time somebody does something mean to you. You're just going to have to get a tough chest and let it roll off your back."

The feeling he had wanted to go away has just gotten worse, and he can feel something horrible happening to him, something terrible, yet all he knows is that he doesn't want to have to go back to the smug figure of Kenny empty handed. More tears well up in his eyes.

"Oh, come on now," the teacher snaps at him, rolling her eyes in annoyance, "it's just an anthill anyway. Why should you care if somebody kills a couple of ants? You really need to start doing what the other kids do. Staring at a bunch of ants all day just isn't... normal."

And with that the conversation ends, Samuel miserably trudging back towards the tormenting jeers of Kenny and the rest of his triumphant brigade. The next day Samuel Rosenblum will be like all the other kids; he will play on the playground and swing on the jungle bars and do all the other things that "normal" kids do. More importantly, both he and Kenny will have learned a very important lesson.

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Young Men out to Conquer the World

By Ethan Porter

"...At least it helps if we do not have to despair of the ultimate consequences for culture of industrialism." —Clement Greenberg

1: Interrogating Julius

Please state your full name.

Christian Julius James.

Do you ever go by any nicknames?

Yeah.

What are they?

I've got a lot.

We've got time.

Most people call me Julius—or recently at least. People used to call me C.J. Now in addition to calling me Julius, people sometimes call me That Motherfucker. Boss of the One Seven Deuce. Ya'll Little Bitches Can Kneel Down and Kiss the Ring.

Boss of the One Seven Deuce? That is a drug-related name, no?

Sure.

Were you in fact at one point the boss of all drug related activities on 172nd street?

Sure.

We know everything.

You can't.

Heh.

If you did, you wouldn't be asking me questions.

Where are you from?

New Jersey.

Tell me about that.

What about it.

What do you remember most about it?

A lot of people don't know this, but in the morning, right before most people start their day, the sun seems to diffuse. When I used to come early to school and stand outside and look out over the highway, the sky seemed to fill with miniature suns. Not as bright or as large as what we usually call the sun. Paler orbs, probably releasing less heat. Hundreds of them dotting the sky. I asked a friend of mine about it once, a guy who knows about these sorts of things, and he had no idea what they were. He didn't deny they existed, though. Just shrugged.

Did those suns say anything to you?

Like what, hey man, what's up? No, what the fuck—what the fuck do you think I am. The suns didn't fucking talk.

Let me put it another way: if they could talk, what do you think they would say?

Fuck you, you fucking homo.

2: A Tragicomedy of Errors

PLEASURE ABOUNDS AS THE BOY TAKES THE GIRL AND DRIVES INTO HER like a drunk on the highway careening against the rails. "I want to fuck you so bad I can hardly breathe," he says in her ear. "You're already doing both," she says.

Have you ever heard the joke about Julius's gun? No? Well, it's not really a joke. In fact, it's not even funny. He showed it to everyone the day after he bought it, hunching behind cars and out of view of the powers that be during lunch. That's fucked up, everyone said. When they asked him why he had it, he said that he had it because he had to have it.

Stacey was aghast; Jonah could only laugh. "That's funny man," he told Julius. "Why do you have that?" "I told your chick, because I have to have it." Stacey grabbed Jonah's shirt, motioning for him to leave. Stacey always said she didn't like Julius because he had tried to rape her, and he might do it again.

After school got out, Julius announced that his mother had been crushed by a crane while working the day before. She had survived, but was paralyzed and sent into a coma she might never wake up from. It was now Julius's

responsibility to pay the rent and the gun was going to help him do it. (That was the punch line. Not funny, right?)

"God that's awful," Jonah muttered to Stacey that night as they lay on her couch, staring face to face. "It's just so fucked up—I wish there was something there we could do," although there was, and he knew it. Tell the school, explain to Jonah that guns never solve problems, get a real job, Jonah, you can live with me Jonah, whatever. That he could not vocalize what he thought, that his mind might as well not exist: these were not unfamiliar types of pain.

"Oh stop, you know he doesn't need a gun," said Stacey. "You could let him stay in your house..." Jonah nodded. It would never work, of course.

"You know what he said to me today," he said. "He told me that from now on we have to call him Julius. That's all. No C.J. anymore."

"That's odd." Stacey's father walked in from walking the dog.

"You kids want drinks or anything?" They both shook their heads.

"Do you feel bad for him?"

"I do actually bad for him. But I don't want him to shoot anybody," she said. "Guns are just so stupid, arrrrh-hh."

"Who would he shoot? He's not going to shoot anybody, he's just going to—"

"No, he might—"

"He's just going to intimidate people with it, not actually use the thing," he explained. "It symbolizes to everybody—look here, here I am, even if my mom is half-dead and I got nothing, I can still kill you."

"Reggie," Stacey stated as if fact.

"He's not going to shoot Reggie," said Jonah.

"If he isn't going to shoot Reggie, why does he have a gun?" She sighed.

--The Narrator

3: We Meet

I don't know when we met for the first time, although my mother claims to possess an authentic memory of the experience: "You were really young. Two or three years old? I'm not sure. We were at the park, you in your stroller. Me pushing you along. Another mother walked into the park pushing a stroller like me. But there was no one inside her stroller. Little Jonah was running alongside it. He would sprint fast ahead and then retreat back. I was amazed that his mom let him out of the stroller like that. So uncontrolled. I didn't say anything to her, because frankly I wasn't a fan of her parenting skills. But the little boy just ran up to your stroller and started shouting at you. 'AHHH! AHHH!' His mother, frantically pushing the stroller, rushed over and scolded him. She apologized to me. 'I just don't know how to control this one,' she said. You thought he was funny then. You started giggling in your stroller. We got to talking, his mother and I. She said that she used to put him in a stroller but the boy just refused to obey to anyone."

Whether or not this actually occurred is beyond me. My mother has a penchant for stretching the truth, as do I. In a way though, whether or not it happened is really besides the point. I've been told the story—when he met you, he started screaming at you!—enough damn times to make it true.

--Stacey

4: We Meet

Of course I screamed at the bitch. I remember doing so with a crystalline clarity...an unimpeachable assuredness that does not account because it inherently does not have to for challenge and contradiction....The story Stacey's mother tells drips with import, particularly to those who know the Byzantine path my life and our life has taken. It is illuminating! Here we have divergent yet interconnected paths. Even then—Stacey's mother heaping too much affection and concern upon her, endlessly tucking and retucking her blankets, cooing in her ear. Guarding her from the rootless demons like myself...me, running wild through a jungle, my mother, helplessly, hopefully neglectful of her child.

But what if we did not meet then for the first time? What if we met earlier? Like, sheesh! Before birth, Jonah? Before the womb? Before Christ? Why yes! Yes, oh a million times yes.

--Jonah

5: Julius Overtakes Reggie

I saw Reggie head into the bathroom. No one was following. He wasn't intending to sell, but I knew he wouldn't be opposed to it.

"Yo Reg," I hollered as I walked into the bathroom. He nodded at me and went into a stall. I went in after him and whipped his jaw with the back of my gun. He fell to the floor instantly, sprawled on his back across the faded blue tiles. I saw that his mouth was bleeding. He said to me in a whisper, C.J. man, what the fuck. I grabbed him by his collar and looked in his eyes and said, The name is Julius, bitch. I put my shoe in his mouth and pressed down. I could hear teeth crunch and fall apart in his mouth. For

what seemed like a second we were completely still, just me looming over him.

Suddenly I grabbed his shoulders and lifted him up a few inches off the ground and then rammed his head into the bottom of the toilet bowl. Once, twice, thrice, thud: red pouring out of his head, all over on my hands, all over the floor. "If you sell at school again, I'm going to shoot you in the face," I told him. I turned around and walked out of the stall. I was shaking all over.

--Julius

6: Touch the Arm

Love, in its initial phases, is a bit like an obtuse simile. That statement should be taken at face value (i.e., the value of its face).

"I'd really like to touch your ass," Jonah told Stacey. "It looks so eminently...touchable." She laughed and ran her hands through her hair. "Well, touch it then," she said. He did.

I think this should be more than this, thought Stacey. Jonah was thinking the same thing; or, really, he wanted to be thinking the same thing...this is what love is, this is not what love is. If they were in love, then they would not be in love, because to be in love was not to know or to acknowledge it. To acknowledge love was to surrender to the daunting power of the word itself.

In the middle of the first time they had sex, Jonah thought that love was sort of like a vagina. Wholly penetrable but completely unknown! Love then was really indefinable, made up of false idioms and grandiose abstractions most easily digested by dullards.

It could be distilled to smaller moments, trivial beginnings and opportunities taken. Hardly a moment went by when Jonah did not remember the time when Stacey touched his arm. Yes, really: hardly a moment, although not as it was exactly. A version of that moment of intimacy: touch the arm, sparks in the air, gradually mutated into a multiplicity of images attached to emotions. Touching the arm becomes The Moment of Touching The Arm, and then not about the arm at all, or even the emotion as it was experienced then, but something larger and unable to grasp. Touching the arm, one person seizing onto another not out of a desire to control but to feel.

"Can you touch my arm," he told her in the middle of the first night they slept (as in just slept) together, and she obliged but felt it strange. At that instance the moment to Stacey was no longer as it once was to both of them, but now representative of a desire to dominate, to remake like an old movie, but lacking the primordially innocent impetus that first caused the original moment. "Touch the arm again," he told her later. "Touch the arm. Touch the arm. Touch the arm."

But love is an obtuse simile. Perfect imperfections, imperfectly perfect. Who can truly know? What Jonah did know: that he wanted to feel love as it was meant to be, prior to crude commodification, for this person named Stacey. And yet he knew that this was impossible...

"Life defies comprehension," Jonah told Stacey after they saw Julius's gun. Jonah, never the most profound.

It should be clear by now, dear reader, that we are witnessing two very different yet very similar narratives unfolding simultaneously. Will they converge? As my mother likes to ask, is the Pope Catholic?

--The Narrator

7: Social Contracts and Conflict Resolution

Michael bummed a stogie from Julius who laughed and told him he was a broke motherfucker, which elicited slight laughs from the rest of them, so Julius elaborated by saying that not only was Mike a broke motherfucker, but he was a broke motherfucker worse off than the dude he had just sold too, because at least that dude has the ability to pay for the shit he's addicted to. The elaboration wasn't really as much a joke as it was an insult hurled directly at Mike, and Mike saw this as did the rest of them, so he stopped laughing, and they stopped laughing.

"You think that's funny man," Mike asked. Julius looked down at his sneakers and started laughing again. "Naw man, not really. Like I said: pathetic."

"Oh okay, I'm hanging out outside about to go into class and you're a drug dealer who is at best bringing in a thousand a week, failing school, and I'm pathetic? The deal is, you get to stand out here and look cool and talk to us and give us the occasional cigarette. You get to act like a normal dude for a few minutes and we get cigarettes. It's a deal. If you don't want to follow it, well if you don't follow it, you can go and fuck yourself."

Extending his right forearm, Julius leaned in to smack Michael in the face but paused. "I'll call you broke when I want to call you broke," he seethed.

A hunched over silhouette, frantically rubbing his hands and intermittently blowing into them, interrupted the hostilities. "Any of you got a stogie man?" he asked. It was Reggie. Julius began to laugh, and the rest of them soon joined him.

"He'll give you a stogie whenever he feels like giving you a stogie," asserted Michael, and everyone laughed.

--The Narrator

8: Domestic Violence

"I don't know why you keep on hanging out with Julius," she told Jonah. "I mean, I know WHY but it's not a good reason. You should, like, stop."

"Why would I stop?" he asked. "And why do I? I don't know why I do. Why don't you fuckin enlighten me Stacey."

"It makes you feel like a man. Like a big bad man, the sort you never will be." He lunged towards her and grabbed her by the waist. "Yeah?"

But he didn't do that. Instead he laughed nervously.

"You can't really mean that," he said meekly. "Don't try to start shit Stacey. I hang out with Julius because I like hanging out with him."

"You hang out with him because..." she trailed off.

For all practical purposes, Stacey and Jonah had been married for some time. They spent nearly every waking hour together and when they could not do so any longer, when they had to return to their respective houses, they stayed on the phone for all hours of the night. The substance of the conversation was never important. Just that they talked, that's what mattered.

"I'm not gonna fuckin defend myself for hanging out with him," exclaimed Jonah. "I enjoy it. Now you should just understand that and move on, okay?" They were sitting in Jonah's car, parked by a dumpster outside of a playground. They weren't looking at each other.

"Well if you can't defend yourself—if you can say anything for why you would hang out with him other than the most immature explanations I've ever heard....Jesus, that's your problem, Jonah."

--The Narrator

9: Together

We are driving wretched through the streets of New York with the fury of Uzi-toting cowboys on crank, we are shouting at all passerbys the rousing, vulgar edicts of delirious youth, we are giving birth to the phantasmagoric in car stereos, we are avoiding police, we are the wild-eyed men of the night, young men borrowing the day, with thousands of dollar bills overflowing from our pockets, orgasmic mercenaries, martyrs for an uncertain cause, we are speaking in 16 bars and thinking in pulsating bass, we are abandoning carnal pleasures for something even more material, that silent prayer made when all the chips are down, the game is played, the end is near, when the inevitable looms on the horizon we are, we are nothing like you think, nothing at all.

--Jonah and Julius

10: Going and Leaving

It works like this. I wake up every morning in a cold sweat. I look under my bed to make sure everything is still there. It always is. Light protrudes into the room. I take the gun, stuff it into my pocket, and walk outside into the morning.

No one calls my name. No one is there. A friend drives me to school and the music plays in the background. We nod to the music, we are nodding in agreement.

"Do you have it all with you?" Who is this person talking to me? I can't say. The driver, yes. The driver. "The fuck do you think," I say in between puffs of cigarette. "I do this everyday and now I forget?"

"It's gonna happen sometime, it's fuckin liable to." I looked around for a second. "Who's talking here?"

"It's me, Julius. It's me, Jonah." He redirected his attention from the road to me. "Yo. You need to take a break man," he rubbed his eyes. "We both need to get some sleep."

By the end of school I have emptied my pockets and left the gun untouched. I do not know what occurs between that car ride in the morning and the way home, other than emptyings and refillings, entrances and exits.

--Julius

11: Love Dreams

From my place on the bed, the sun sneaking past the blinds and illuminating her breasts, she emerged as the most beautiful of forms, something like an angel. Although I could not discern why or how, she was in that moment nothing less than a child of God.

"I love you," I said quietly, as if it had slipped out. She turned red.

"What?"

"I said I love you."

Late in the day we went outside and played baseball on the dirt field in the park. I threw baseballs to her, and she hit them to all ends of the field; when it was my turn to bat, I swung and missed at every pitch. It reminded me of a movie, although I couldn't say which one exactly. I woke up.

--Jonah

12: Manifestable Destiny

When Jonah's parents told him they would be leaving for the weekend, he thought of calling up Stacey, inviting her over, reconciling. He had this vague idea of

reading 21 Love Poems to her in the bathtub, whispering each line in her ear, kissing her earlobes....but never bothered to put his plans into action because a) he didn't want his life to resemble a paperback novel, b) she wouldn't even know who Pablo Neruda was, and c) what would Julius think?

By the next afternoon, the boys were awake, sitting on the couch and going through packs of cigarettes.

Julius looked through the peephole, his eyes coming upon two men he had never met before. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked loud enough to be heard through the door.

"Salamini told you about us. The two guys from Garfield, remember? We need blow."

"Oh yeah yeah, come on in," and Julius opened the door and in walked two men, one big and drooping muscle, the other short and skinny like a pipe cleaner. Lenny and George. The larger man asked Julius his name.

"You don't know who I am?" he replied in disbelief.

"Nope," the men said in unison.

"Christian Julius James, AKA That Motherfucker, AKA Ya'll Little Bitches Can Kneel Down and Kiss the Ring, AKA Boss of the One Seven Deuce, AKA—"

Interrupted Jonah: "Enough, Julius."

"Yo—you know what it is! AKA Julius motherfucker. Alright. You can just call me Julius. Now how can I help you? Salamini told me you were interested in..."

"How about Julia?" asked the smaller one. "Can we just call you that?"

"Yeah," said his friend. "Julia. Oh boy," and they laughed and they both reached into their pockets and pulled out guns. Julius and Jonah didn't have time to be scared. "Look, nothing is going to happen, we know there's ten thousand dollars here, and you're going to give it to us. Now both of you, get on your fucking knees." The boys did as they were told. There was an eerie calm to the whole affair: the taller man moved behind the boys, took another gun out of his pocket and stood behind them.

"Is that shit even loaded..." mused Julius. The man behind him shot a flower pot which smashed promptly into smithereens.

"Now where do you kids keep the money," growled the smaller one.

"It's in that trunk to your right," offered Julius. Jonah frowned. George opened the trunk and smiled as the glow of green reflected upon his face, then proceeded to rummage through it, hoping for more.

"Well lookie what we have here," he said, pulling two bags of coke out of the money piles. "Where do you get kids get so much of this stuff?"

"Enron. From 172nd street," answered Julius. The men feigned looks of confusion at each other.

"You said you were the boss of 172nd? But you're buying from 172nd? That's rich," said George.

"The one seven deuce, right," chuckled Lenny. "I'm sure Enron will be surprised to learn that 172nd street is being managed out of New Jersey," added George

"Are you going to tell him?" asked Julius excitedly. "Please," he babbled, almost crying, "don't tell him. We're just a bunch of kids, we're just fucking around, suburbs, cities, we uh—" but the men had already gathered up the money and drugs, and were headed out.

"What a pity," said Lenny as the door slammed behind him.

--The Narrator

13: Honestly Baby, I Still Love You

When I first met him, I wasn't sure that I liked him more than Jonah. It was a gradual realization, but when I knew it, you have to understand: I knew it. There was no doubt about it. Jonah...sweet, deranged Jonah...I don't know why that took me a long time to realize. I do love him, although perhaps not as much as I once did.

Jonah had little to show when compared to him. What had Jonah become but a tool for Julius? He was another man's man. Julius, I would not nominate him for sainthood, but he always offered something and everything that Jonah sorely lacked. Call it charisma, call it The Scent of a Man, call it a larger penis, but whatever it was, Julius always had it and Jonah never did.

--Stacey

14: The World is No Longer Yours

The clouds crushing out thunder like cymbals in the sky, like the tin of the radio, like mad pleasure, the deafening drums, the converging storm...Hendrix alchemizing chords and as the peak moment neared I neared the house, wind shaking the tops of the trees. Needles of rain pummeling the windshield, rolling down the window and as I passed the house, unleashing my unbearable roar of agony into the night.

I drove home.

"I see them Julius, I drove over there and I saw them," I shouted into the telephone.

"The fuck you talking about," he murmured.

"I want to fucking kill them. I want to pound them into pavement till a bloody pulp. I want to. I want to rip open their heads and eat their brains. Put their hearts in a blender and gulp it down. Defecate on their genitals."

"That's not going to happen. You aren't going to do that," he said, yawning. "So stop pretending you will."

"Yo," verbal driftwood floating by, "Yo. Will you shoot them for me?"

"Fuck no," and he hung up.

--Jonah

15: Interrogating Jonah

Please state your name.

Jonah Watson.

Pleased to meet you.

I think we've known each other for a little while.

Why did you start to work with Julius?

Why is that important?

Well, everyone wants to know the answer.

Who?

Everyone.

Look. I started 'working' with Julius because he needed help.

He needed help?

Absolutely.

Selling drugs?

It's not as easy as you might think.

Somehow I think it's not as hard as you think it is.

Sure.

There's no sex appeal if it's simple, right? You wanted to be so sexy. You're laughing because you know it's true. You wanted to have that sex appeal, that enormous boost of masculine self-esteem. Not one of the guys: The Guy.

Man, I fucked more women before I ever started to work with Julius. I had more time. So if you're saying that I started working with Julius to get laid, you'd be factually wrong. I don't know if that's what you're saying, though.

I'm saying more than that. I'm saying you saw selling drugs as a way of becoming more of a man that you once were. The Man. Right?

No!

That's why you couldn't handle Stacey sleeping with someone else.

No!

I know it, and you know it. As you stand there with clenched teeth, looking like a mad cannibal, I'll let you know: Julius fucked Stacey. It was him. But not just him. It was me, too. The other man, the only man. The narrator. And we both liked it.

If I had any reason to believe you, I might.

You have to believe it.