

RE:VISIONS

12TH EDITION



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This representative collection of writing by Notre Dame students is published through the Creative Writing Program in the Department of English. Each year, a new editorial board consisting of graduate students solicits and selects manuscripts & oversees the production of the journal in order to encourage creativity & recognize student writing of notable quality.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

We were awed by the amount of submissions we received this year, and each piece exuded magical allure. We are pleased to present to you these pages containing sheer magic, magic shaped into images, poems, and prose. As with all good magic, these pieces enthralled us. We hope they enthrall you as well.

Thanks for picking up Re:Visions.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Jordan Dorney

BIG IRON

Leather cleared.

To Agua Fria come I, and says: “This house’ll do. Out.” And she gets out, screamin’, child’s comin’ with a child herself, and me, and nobody’s husband around to see it, and I point to my hip and says: “See this?” Nods. Shuts up.

Saw the badge. Got out. Mile from town. Fortress. Castle. Set about blockin’ up the windows and the back door. Haul the gear. Tie up the horse. Leave it. Notes in the bag. Leave it. Upstairs. Ladder up the loft, and there—the bed in a toss. Mile from town.

Little mirror. On the bed. Empty patch where it don’t grow yet. End of God’s own plan for a man and his beard. Take the knife. Grunt. Wince. Blood. Not empty tomorrow and after that. Character in the face now. *A couple of soldiers from the East—come see them and it’s just a scar on me.* Remember that. *Soldiers from the East.* Remember that if they ask, but don’t offer it up. Blot it up with the lady’s blouse, the kid’s blouse. “Out,” I said, and she gets out. “Scar’s gonna get them quiet here on out.” Scrape my teeth and head to town.

Mamma come home and daddy don’t like it. Notch.

Mean. Mean. Look in the mirror from the lady’s house. Practice. Quiverin’ lip and show no teeth. Don’t give drinks to kids. Scowl. Practice. And the rattlesnake and the eagle, I can see ‘em fightin’ in the desert and the cool mountain air. And he rises from the rock and she falls, grittin’ her teeth. *Gone to the Lord!* she screamed. *He’s gone to the Great Lord*

at your hand! And I ran to the horse but he wouldn't go and I said *Go!* and he won't go.

Buried him in the backyard, somebody did, after I'd gone. Where drunk he held the shoulders of his boy. *Draw, boy! Draw! Aim now, boy!* Dry ground there and dry ground here. Vikin' blood in him, on me spillin'. Spillin' when she came and he dropped and I drew and cleared leather before glass hit lips and fire down his throat again. Maybe two miles to town.

Work to be had in the mines. Always work to be had. *Pays off. Pays off,* said rattlesnake, but eagle's gone and feedin' the rest of her chicklets and it's an outlaw's life for me.

Sheriff come home and mamma don't like it. Notch.

Sit at the bar and no answer. *What'll it be?* And I: gruff, no answer, turn the cheek to face him. *What'll it be?* And I: gruff, no answer. *What'll it be?* And I: gruff.

Practice. Practice. Deep breath. *Deep breath, boy. Aim now, boy! Practice!* Touch the cheek where the red runs in. Trace it slowly with the little finger. *Too slow now, boy!* and ache in the head for a week in the mornin'. Crack on the jaw and *Two more now, boy!*

Come in and don't sit at the bar and no answer. There's a rancher on the left, the only snake in the place. Two old whiskers in the back, playin' cards, cheatin' each other from the shine of the day, hidin' from the plain sun.

"Two more now, Willie!"

Horse gone runnin' and need another one. Notch.

Post by the back door empty. Be-reft.

"Damn it!"

Goddamn it, boy! You lookin' to shoot off your daddy's foot? Does your daddy look like he don't need no foot for his left leg?

“Damn it!”

Word’s gone out, no doubt. Willie hadn’t noticed and I vamoosed. And the grandee and the old players lifted their eyes. Pretending: *no comprendo*, in the sweet tongue, the bastard tongue in my mouth. From the South, where the river sits. Pretending.

House looked sure enough. That girl call her daddy? Or he wasn’t tied proper. But you’ll die in the desert. Girl: you’ll die in the desert when you head out: *Out*, said I. *You’ll die in this desert tonight, boy! There’ll be no mission bells and no red wine and no damn friars: you’ll die in this desert tonight!* And I in the house if I don’t get that back door bolted up.

“Damn it.”

Dry-mouth miles and money run out. Notch. Notch.

Under the shade of the rock I lay me down. Wet scar. Wet collar. *Blut und Eisen*. Wet scar and wet collar in the dry desert. *Now don’t you go kissin’ that Frenchie like every sorry syphilitic!* Master of the world, *impératrice des Français*. And *Bismarck’s the man, or I ain’t a man*. And *Blood and Iron, boy, it’s Blood and Iron that takes you through!* The only book in rattlesnake’s shake: *The Life and Times of the Prince von Bismarck, Translated from the Original German by the renowned Professor H.C. Everridge of Princeton University*. But it’s blood and water I’ve got in the desert. And water runs dry and blood runs dry.

Maybe roll under the rock and pull it down. A blanket for me. Like when I rolled along and ran away. The mission men, holy fathers, sweet and bitter and sacred tongues, and rattlesnake come lookin’. *Je suis perdu*. Holy year, books. Rattlesnake discovers, end.

But there’s always to be had more banks and more banknotes and more horses and more women and more girls and more red wine and more . . .

Teeth too long and somebody knows me. Notch. Notch.

Killin's for gettin' a square deal. I'll not find me on the Last Day with all the saints and not find me dead in the desert under a rock. Eagle fed me and rattlesnake tore me away and I tore rattlesnake and fled eagle and didn't need to flee rattlesnake no more. I'll not go down into the mines. I'll not go East. I'll not go South. I'll not go West. I'll not save this world and I'll not lead men into battle. Killin's for gettin' a square deal.

Squaw come lightly, hate them to pieces. Notch. Notch. Notch.

* * * * *

Crew don't cut my share of the loot right. Notch. Notch. Notch.

Back in Agua Fria. End of days, says the preacher. *Wherefore repent ye not, O sinners of the Western World! The man of God, he is a-comin': sure is he to sift out from his Almighty choir the treblous from the bass!*

"Boy, you barricade those doors!"

"Yessir."

"Step lively now, boy!"

"Yessir, yessir."

"Boy, have you ever seen a Ranger miss his shot?"

"Nossir."

"Have you ever seen him draw second?"

"Nossir."

"So you'd better step lively now, boy, hadn't you?"

"Yessir."

"Get on then, you little Vike!"

Fire shall rain and stars exult: return ye unto the Lord!

Barman lingers, patrons go lookin'. Notch. Notch. Notch. Notch.

Cry in the distance, shake in the heart. The Law's at our door at last. The others, buried and caught. On the train, or by the bar, or in the street,

and one in God's own church. Not two wives between us. *Je suis perdu*, I said in the dark. *Rose*, said one in the dark. *Joséphine*, I said in the dark, *impératrice des Français*. She stared blankly and I stared blankly. Napoleon and his wife we were not, in the loft, the bed in a toss. Pretending.

Girl has a fine house, bolts to the town. Notch.

“Come on out, Red! Texas Red, you rattlesnake, come out!”

“I'm hit! I'm hit, Father!”

“Boy, you hold yourself there.”

“Red, you'll come on out! It's alive I'd take you to Yuma. Come face your charges, Red, and you'll live your dogged days still.”

“Boy, have they got your picture? Answer me, boy. Have they seen you?”

New York soldiers, pissin' on sand. Notch. Notch.

“There you are now, Red.”

And on his hip comes big iron, feedin' me to song from the largesse of his holster, etchin' forever my *one and nineteen more*.

Leather cleared.

Notched.

Jianna Jihyun Park

EYES OF NARCISSUS.

I love my eyes.

My lips.

My nose.

My hair.

My dimples.

My curves and my lumps of flesh.

A handful of body

soon to be grounded and deciduous, decathected, deceased, desiccated
among those dry and cold

blazing fallen leaves.

NUMBERS

A world consists of numbers only.

A vase is 56, coffee is 4

So that memories hold no scent.

DID YOU KNOW THAT MOST AUDIENCE REACTIONS WERE RECORDED IN THE '50S SO WHAT YOU'RE HEARING IS DEAD PEOPLE LAUGHING?

“And now we’re coming back from commercial. Okay, see, this is the part I was talking about. Jess is home from the mall, she’s all excited about her new clothes, she comes downstairs like she’s royalty but she’s wearing trashy shorts, neon, barely anything. Big laugh.”

Jerome gazed vacantly at his shoes, one leg crossed over the other, ankles visible past the hem of his pants. He exhaled and peeled off his headphones. “I don’t like it,” he said, his voice cutting through the guffaws reverberating from his neck.

Pam tapped pause and turned. The laughter stopped. “What, is the zoom too much? I figured you wanted a good view of the outfit but I can dial that back.” She adjusted a slider, and the teenager on screen shrank, the scenery rushing in to take up the extra space. She was frozen mid-twirl, completing her strut down the polyester carpeted runway. “Better?”

Jerome braced his hands on the seat of his stool and leaned forward. He was hunched, his lengthy torso compressed downward. He squinted, a light blue glow washing over his face. “That’s fine,” he said. “That’s not what I meant.”

Pam sighed. “Oh, this again. I know you don’t like the laugh track, okay? Everyone knows you don’t like the laugh track.” She began running her fingers through her hair, cut short to hide the grey creeping in

at the ends.

“Then why isn’t anyone listening to me?” Jerome cut in. “I feel like no one is cooperating. They’re even rewriting whole scenes!” He stopped, overcome with a fit of coughing. He smothered himself with the inside of his elbow.

He took a deep breath and continued. “Sorry. I’m lucky they even left the plot intact. The laugh track just doesn’t work. You’re not really supposed to laugh here. You’re supposed to laugh at the father’s reaction, the next shot, you know? Like, we’ve all worn a stupid outfit because it was cool at the time.” His voice trailed off. He leaned back, uncrossing his legs, rubbing his right temple.

Pam noticed the footage reflected in Jerome’s glasses, smaller and reversed. It reminded her of the pathetic analog monitor she used when she first got into the industry, seasons and seasons ago. She pivoted her chair. “Listen, Jerome, I know you’re frustrated.”

“I don’t even mind this,” Jerome said. He gestured at the screen without looking up. “It just doesn’t feel like the show I wrote. I wanted to write this like the rest of my stuff. I thought that’s how I got this job. Instead ‘Minivan’ feels like every other show on air.”

Pam put a hand on Jerome’s shoulder. “But that’s the thing. Nobody gives a shit about ‘Minivan.’ All right, wait,” she said, feeling Jerome tense up. “I give a shit about ‘Minivan.’ Everyone else working gives a shit. You too, obviously. But you are making a pilot, which you want to get picked up, right?” Jerome nodded. “So you do what the producers think the networks will like. And the producers want to add the laugh track and rewrite a few scenes. Industry standard. It’s no big deal.” Pam grinned and patted Jerome’s back, then turned back to the keyboard. “So is the zoom too much for this shot?”

Jerome stood up. “I actually think I’m gonna head home for the night.” He lifted his jacket off a stack of speakers relegated to the corner. “Keep going if you want, we can probably finish this off tomorrow night. Can you hand me those papers please?”

Pam pointed at a pile of sheets and scraps scattered across a mixing

console on the far side of the room. “Uh, those papers?” she asked. “I can throw them out when I leave, don’t sweat it.”

“No, I want to hold onto them,” he said.

“If you say so.” Pam did her best to consolidate the mass of Post-It notes and script pages and take-out menus and storyboards into a uniform stack. She handed it to him cautiously.

He patted her shoulder as he passed, papers in hand, and opened the door, letting orange light briefly flood the room. The door closed with a click.

Markus was already asleep in front of the flat screen, a Styrofoam box nestled into his chest. The remnants of a steak sandwich rose and fell in time with his snores. Jerome gingerly slipped off his loafers and tossed them towards the piles of shoes next to the doormat. They hit the wall with a resonant thud.

Markus snorted and sat up. He twisted his torso, spinning over his left shoulder to lay on his stomach, head resting on a throw pillow like a dog in its owner’s lap. The box fell to the floor. “Hey, Jay! You’re back kind of early. How’s editing?” he said.

Jerome shuffled behind the couch into the kitchen and dropped his papers onto one of the many stacks lining the counters and table. He began washing his hands. “Editing was fine,” he called over the bright rush of water. “Pam is great. I don’t really want to talk about it.” He shook his hands dry, propelling water droplets onto some of the sheets sitting next to the sink.

“Shit!” he said.

“What happened?” Markus called back, mouth full of sandwich.

“I got water on some papers.” Jerome grabbed a towel and dried his hands furiously.

“Did you ruin anything actually important?”

Jerome picked up the stack while gently fanning it. Half-finished Word doc, coupons, magazine. His eyes darted to the top right corner of the cover. It was this week’s. Nothing about the show in it. Relief washed over him like sunlight breaking over a hill. He replaced the stack but kept

the magazine.

“What the hell did you mean by that?” he said. Jerome appeared in the doorway leading to the kitchen, one hand clutching the rolled up magazine, the other on his hip. Markus stopped chewing and cocked his head.

“Mean by what?” he asked, his voice artificially high.

“You know what I mean. This is all trash?” he said, gesturing towards the kitchen.

Markus gulped. He hadn’t seen Jay like this since that time he said he preferred Seinfeld to Richard Pryor. Not even that he was better. Just that Markus liked him more. He should have known not to try to disagree. Jay took being funny very seriously.

“I didn’t say that!” he exclaimed, sitting upright. “I just meant it’s all over the place. It’s just piles, everywhere. What is it anyway?” He winced preemptively.

“You know what it is!” said Jerome. He threw up his hands and leaned back on the doorframe. “It’s press clippings, it’s reviews from shows, it’s old ads, it’s jokes. It’s everything.” He disappeared from view, walked towards the fridge.

“No, I know I know I know. But it’s all out, can’t you keep it in boxes or something? Organize? And some of it is so old, do you need it all?”

There was a silence, punctuated by the rattling of the ice maker. “Are we out of beer?” Jerome asked, his voice muffled from the inside the fridge. The door closed with a thud and a hiss. “Well, I’m going out,” he said, tossing the magazine onto the kitchen table. He strode past the couch and retrieved his shoes.

“Jay, wait, I’m sorry! I just meant we need to organize in here!” Markus said as Jerome picked his key-ring off the hook next to the door. “Look, I’m sure this is just stress from today,” Markus continued as he stood up. “I’ll come with you!” he added. If he said anything after that, it was cut off by Jerome closing the front door.

The convenience store was only a few blocks west. Emerging onto the street, he stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets, tucked his head, and started walking against the wind. He felt around for his phone but

damn, he must have left it in the kitchen. He sighed, briefly forcing air against the wind. He had hoped to apologize to the cracked asphalt as he mumbled into a microphone. He didn't want to apologize to Markus's face. One look of disappointment from him was worse than a whole crowd booing, worse than a whole crowd doing nothing at all.

Jerome swung the glass door wide and headed straight to the back of the store. The place was as empty as he had expected for a Wednesday evening, and besides the hum of fluorescent tubes hanging from the ceiling, it was silent. A teenager sat behind the register, his feet up on the counter, threatening to knock over a display of caffeine pills.

The shelves and shelves of bottles stared at him blankly, encased behind glass like newborns in a maternity ward. Jerome reached for the usual but stopped and opened a different door. He would get the apple-flavored stuff, Markus's favorite. He placed each six-pack down on the counter decisively and found his wallet in his back pocket. At least he remembered that.

"Is this it for tonight?" said the employee. He wore a nametag emblazoned with Zackk.

"Actually, no," Jerome said. "Let me also get a pack of Marlboros. And a lighter." The employee groaned audibly and turned to retrieve the goods. He slapped them onto the counter. The rest of the transaction transpired in silence.

Jerome opened the pack as he walked out. He stopped under a street lamp, light pooling around him. The orange glow of the cigarette nearly blended in with the ambient light. He inhaled deeply as the wind picked up, hopefully blowing the smell off of his clothes. Markus would kill him if he came back stinking.

Saving all those papers had started when he clipped an ad for his first open mic out of a grocery store newsletter, as a souvenir. That became a need to save everything, whether it was joke ideas or ads for shows or the newest scraps, articles about his new job writing and directing a sitcom pilot. No matter the source, they all had the same tone, pompous and self-righteous. The TV industry, in its endless grace and wisdom,

had plucked a poor stand up from obscurity to showcase his unique vision by rewriting his scripts and adding in artificial audience reactions. And in return, he would receive the chance to do it over and over again.

Markus was right. There were really too many papers in the apartment. If he promised to clean tomorrow, maybe he could avoid sleeping on the couch. He chuckled. What a cliché.

Three guys, kids really, approached him, laughing and shoving each other. They were all in matching winter hats with the flaps pulled close to their faces. They stopped on the shores of the streetlight. Jerome gave them each a cursory nod and coughed into his fist.

“Hey man, can I get a light?” asked the tallest one, his face outside the reach of the lamp. He began rifling through his coat pockets, searching for his own cigarettes.

Jerome shrugged. “Sure, hold on,” he said, bending down to pull the lighter out of his shopping bag.

The kid closest to him punched him in the gut. He collapsed. All the air rushed out of his lungs, leaving him hollow and brittle. The third forced him upright again, shoving him up against the lamppost. His head rocked backward, smashing into the cold metal. Spotlights lit up behind his eyelids. His jaw slammed shut, teeth tearing into the flesh of his upper lip. Blood started dripping down to his chin.

The tallest kid leapt forward, kicking over the bag. Glass shattered. He forced open Jerome’s coat. Jerome tried delivering a few heavy blows to this kid’s head, but he could barely move his arms. He tried to curse at them, to say anything, but he drew in blood when he tried to breathe and couldn’t say a word. He could only cough. They found his wallet in an inner pocket.

“Got it, let’s go,” one of them said. Jerome heard it as if echoing from very far away. The force holding him against the pole released. He fell to the ground and the impact with the concrete reverberated through him. They rifled through his wallet for cash and cards, taking what they wanted and throwing what was left back, hitting him in the face. He watched them leave the circle of orange light and he heard quick footsteps disap-

pear and then he was alone again.

Slumped against the post, Jerome twisted to the side and spit. He dabbed at his lip with his sleeve, hoping to force the blood back inside him. It hurt to take in air but he couldn't stop. The paper bag was soaked in beer and lighter fluid. Jerome kicked it towards the curb. He realized he still had his cigarette clenched in the fingers of his right hand. He stood and leaned against the lamp, pulse resounding in his stomach. He coughed once and took another long drag.

The next day they were shooting the last scene. Jess and her father Charlie sat on opposite ends of the big brown couch centered in the living room. The set was immaculately cluttered, a suburban home perfectly distilled by designers. Jerome watched from a folding chair. One of the assistant directors was handling this scene while he held a bag of ice against his throbbing head. Pam sat to his left. The man sitting to his right was on the edge of his seat, paying rapt attention with wide eyes.

"I'm just not sure I can trust you with the car yet," Charlie said in a gruff voice. "This is a big responsibility!"

Jess shot her father a glare. "Dad, don't you think I know that? Don't you think I can handle it?"

Pam leaned forward to whisper past Jerome. "Rob, we're all really glad you could come visit the set today."

The man put a finger to his lips, nodded appreciatively, and mouthed "Thanks." Pam flashed a stealthy thumbs-up to Jerome. He didn't react.

Charlie sighed and shook his head. "I guess I'm just not ready for my little girl to be out driving around at night. I worry about you." He spread his arms wide and sank into the cushions, defeated.

"You don't have to worry about me! I'll be so careful. And I'll always be your girl, Dad," she continued. "I just won't always be your little girl." She extended her long adolescent legs and smiled. Both actors froze, leaving room for laughter to be added later.

Jerome forced out a snicker when the man sitting next to him threw an arm around his shoulders.

"What a great line, man! Really hits home," he said under his breath,

squeezing Jerome's shoulder.

"Thanks Rob, but I actually didn't write that. It was one of your people."

"Well, I'm glad the rewriters are earning their keep!" Rob laughed. "Don't worry, you're still getting sole writing credit."

Jerome coughed and went back to flipping through the most recent edition of the script.

This was the part that really tugged at the heartstrings. After a poignant pause, Charlie nodded and beckoned for Jess to come close. The actors embraced in a side hug, their faces still visible to the cameras. One of the caterers cheered encouragingly before being shushed by a superior.

Charlie pulled away, looking Jess in the eyes intensely. "Okay, you can take the van. But no boys allowed in the car. Don't even think about it." Both actors broke into toothy grins. The assistant director called to end the scene, and they walked off towards the food. The girl could be heard asking her co-star if his dealer had come through.

Rob stood up and applauded. He was beaming. Pam clapped along. Jerome, with one hand occupied, used the other to clap by slapping his thigh.

"So you liked it?" Pam asked Rob as he sat down again.

"I couldn't be happier with it!" Rob said.

"That's so great to hear, right Jerome?" Pam nudged him and yanked the script out of his hand.

Rob was still beaming. He started pinching at Jerome's shirt. "Has it hit you yet man? Can you believe that three months ago you were still doing stand up? And now look! This is your vision coming to life!"

He leaned in close to Jerome. "I've heard that you've been less than satisfied with some of the creative choices we've been making. And I totally get that. We think there is a lot of potential here. The changes are just superficial, to make it more marketable. We're just concerned about longevity." Rob sat back, grinning. "We're all confident that come pilot season, 'Minivan' is going to run over any competition!"

Jerome laughed.

Benjamin Kass

POETS DAY

Electric whispers just below the grey-blue air
light nothing but an interest in the two
now passing me by.

Later, after the bathwater baptism
the filthy surface tension is broken
by a priestly hand flicking salvation
into the face of an offending tigress.

Oh, you slay me. The receptacle of bad
poetry, the lemon to an old lime a
redhead fiasco who downs compliments
between shots and runs fire through the
hair of our lesser Hasselhoffs that congeals
in the undefined bits beside the waist.

It's been a long time.

They are not so undefined for her
whose colors run from tickle-me-pink
to fuck-me-fuchsia and back again,
who feels discontent or nothing at all.

She is like me, beside me as we
both writhe on our bellies
caught in the shambles of sleep.

In stalls full of shit and the by-product
of something like a release an Aquinas
has enlightened us with a page from
fuckteenass.com or other poetic endeavor.
His predecessor, the ever-virtuous Aristotle,
saw fit to transcribe a burning cigarette onto
the wall in a refutation of universals and men.

However, my delicate sensibilities,
which fall between Austen and Nietzsche
(both suited to the crassest palates only),
are not fit for this level of discourse.
My weak constitution burns it out
obliterating like ocean tides.

Nor is there college but studying
monuments of our own magnificence.

The MIT Guide to Lockpicking
is only half-discouraged by the patron
and indispensable to the incurably curious
or the simply incurable.

Rooftop-escapades fade to black
against piercing clock-towers and
the pins of secret chambers for a feeling
like trees or God. These are your
mother's children.

Somewhere in the halls
a drunken bastard falls.

Rain falls like rocks on sterner stuff
but umbrella walls defend the innocent
from trials of the iniquitous. The ant-toes
of frost creep up on all without
discernment, but it is not that cold.
Breath comes out solid spirit white
only once, but never really dissipates.

If this night is between the fog
and the forgetting then I much prefer
the fog.

Erin Thomassen

EDUCATION \neq NAVIGATION

My ancestors would
Have no problem getting home.
But my phone is dead.



REAPING IT BIG . . . IN SMALL MOMENTS by Bhargava Narayana



John DiTillo

WIND IN PINE BOUGHS, ETC.

Dear The Baby,

Welcome! I'm not sure what all I can tell you. Few things are certain in life, except death. But don't worry about that. It's basically just like being born, only the reverse.

Life isn't so bad, sometimes. There are sunrises and laughter and music and kisses. Kisses are when you smash your face more or less gently against something, like someone else's face, usually just so that the lips hit the lips. It was invented a long time ago. Not all good things are new.

Music is wavelengths you cannot see, and laughter is for healing.

Sunrises? Right—well, the sun is this big ball of glowing fusion at the center of our solar system, which is part of a spiral galaxy, which is part of the universe. Your teachers will warn you not to look directly at the sun because it will burn holes in your retinas, but actually that's impossible. The sun is many millions of miles away from Earth and it takes about eight minutes for the rays of light to travel the distance. So, no one has ever looked directly at the sun. They've looked at where it was eight minutes ago. Still, it hurts. You'll see.

Oh yeah. So, Earth is the name of the planet that we live on. In the middle there is magma. On the outside there is land, but mostly water, the vast majority of which is salty. It's pretty gross. You can drink it but it will only make you thirstier.

Some of the most important things in life are the easiest things to forget. Like breathing. That's when you draw air (tiny bits of the universe) into your body through your nose or your mouth, and then your lungs transfer it to red blood cells, and they shoot through your veins

like bobsledders distributing oxygen to your capillaries and your muscles and your bones and everything. Then the air goes out, but this time it's mostly carbon dioxide. The trees breathe that in, and then breathe out oxygen. We wouldn't get very far without the trees.

Anyway, don't worry about forgetting to breathe. Even if you forget, your lungs will remember. Pretty cool, huh?

There are some things you will want to watch out for—poisonous snakes, distracted drivers, meteorites, the word “should.” Gravity can be tricky. Some things that grow on trees are good to eat (like mangoes) and some are not (like beehives). Koalas are cute and cuddly-looking (small, bear-like herbivorous marsupials) but actually quite feisty and territorial. And you'll get tangled up in metrics, most likely, which are often incommensurate. Some things are impossible to measure, like timbre and pain and joy.

Contrary to popular belief and the many thousands of advertisements that will bombard you every day (best not to take ads too seriously; listening to them is kind of like drinking saltwater), life is not about winning. Yes, there were about 280 million other sperm vying to penetrate the ovum, which you did—against seemingly insurmountable odds. Remember, though: every single person you will ever meet did pretty much the same thing. We really ought to greet everyone we come across with a high-five and say: “Way to go, you did it!”

So, people. Sooner or later you'll meet other people. This is the best/toughest part of life. Other people are the most wonderful/difficult things about being human. We can be so inspiring/disappointing, and we are capable of such beauty/ugliness. C.S. Lewis was a human, a writer (writers are people who rearrange letters into words, and words into stories). He said that if you never want to hurt, then you must never love anything, not even a dog. Dogs are like people, only with sharper teeth and a stronger sense of smell and a lesser capacity for vice and a greater capacity for compassion, it seems. I don't know. You'll have to make up your own mind about these things.

Ooh, in life there are mountains, which are big rocks, heaped upon one

another as the tectonic plates slowly shift. They are hard to climb, but the view is usually worth it. Sometimes it's cloudy. There are also valleys, and it is hard to see where you're going when you're in a valley. It's kind of like an empty, upside-down mountain.

Some things I simply cannot describe to you. Like "wind in pine boughs," "blue," and "chemistry." Words often fail. Fortunately, there is also silence.

What else can I say to prepare you for what lies ahead? You already know your mother, but maybe you think of her as "everything," because she is all that you know--the warm source of life than encompasses you. She and I will do our best to help you survive the early stages, since you can't procure your own food or even hold your head up at first. We will hope that you grow wings, if you want, and that you don't fly too high. But we cannot make these decisions for you. You will learn that coercion can only inspire resistance.

You will learn many things, much more than we know. Learning is when we build new neural synapses in our brains. Sometimes it is like lighting a candle in the darkness, and sometimes it is like having an apple fall on your head. Sometimes it is like having a tooth extracted. It requires sleep, and dreaming. Dreaming is probably what you're doing right now. I wonder what about. God?

Honestly, I am not sure that I am ready for your arrival, but I will do my best. Life goes on, whether we are ready or not. And I have more to learn from you than you do from me in a lot of ways.

Maybe I'll just burn this letter after all.

Here, then, as your introduction to the waking world of this strange thing we call life, I offer you a song: "Hoppípolla" by Sigur Rós.

Welcome to life, kiddo.

Love,
Your dad.

WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

The police were arresting someone again. I looked anywhere else and crossed to the other side of the street. It wasn't any of my business. They'd be fine, they'd get a fair trial. They'd be fine.

Then a child screamed, and I couldn't help it—I looked. Just for a second.

It was an old couple, probably in their eighties. The wife was on her knees, like she'd just fallen down. There was a police officer just behind her, holding her by the shoulder. Her husband was trying to get to her, but another officer was holding him back. A little boy was standing on the top of the steps, about six, crying and fighting desperately to get away from the officer holding his arms. He obviously had no idea what was going on, but I did. They would bundle the couple into the car and disappear, and then they would sit the boy on the kitchen table and let him watch, crying, while they systematically took his house to pieces. The squad photographer would take pictures of everything in the house and how it was arranged. They'd sort it all into carefully labeled plastic bags. After the boy had seen half the contents of the house—computers, papers, books, CDs, boxes and boxes of random crap, and all the family photos they could lay their hands on—loaded into police vans for “examination,” they would dump him with an aunt or uncle and change his family name. But he'd be fine.

I was about to look away and keep going when I saw something else. Behind them, in the mouth of the alley between their house and the next, was a boy. He was about my age, with dark brown curly hair and broad shoulders. He looked tall, but it was hard to tell because he was crouched on the ground, photographing the arrest. Right before I turned away, he

looked up from his camera for a split second and caught my eye.

One of the police officers followed my gaze and saw him.

I looked back at my own shoes and hurried along the sidewalk, desperate to get home, shut the door, and not see things that weren't any of my business. The boy would be fine, if only he'd go quietly.

Behind me, I could hear fists and boots and batons hitting flesh. The boy was making that almost animal noise you can only make when you're being hit—really hit—for the first time in your life. My stomach turned over. I sped up.

“Hey!”

I ignored him.

“Catch!”

I turned around.

The boy was curled up on the ground, holding one arm over his head. Somehow he got his feet under him and half stood up. His nose was bleeding all down his face onto his shirt. He had managed to protect his camera. He threw it to me—not a wild fling, but a neat underhand pass that came straight to my hands. Then one of the officers clubbed him on the head and he collapsed.

The camera landed right in my hands, but I wasn't ready for it and it bounced onto the ground at my feet. The lens shattered. I looked up. One of the officers was coming towards me. Behind him, the squad photographer was raising his own camera. I put one hand up to cover my face. I grabbed the boy's camera with the other. And then I ran for my life.

They chased me, of course, but I had a head start and it was my neighborhood. I spent half an hour making absolutely sure I'd lost them. By the time I got home, my uniform blouse was sticking to my back and my hair had become one giant waist-length tangle. I made it upstairs before Aunt Anna spotted me, and changed into a t-shirt and jeans. The boy's camera sat on my desk, staring at me accusingly. I put it inside a sock and hit it under my bed.

In the meantime, I had to get rid of my hair. I didn't know if they had a picture of my face, but they knew my hair and my uniform, and there

was nothing I could do about the uniform. It took almost as long to comb out all the tangles as it had taken to get away from the police. I parted it way over on the side instead of in the center, put it in a ponytail, and chopped the whole thing off with my school scissors. Then I went to find Aunt Anna.

She dropped a stack of pots on the floor when she saw me. “Mercy! Mattie Davis, what did you do to your hair?”

I held out the severed ponytail apologetically. “I needed a change. Will you cut bangs for me? And trim it so it's even.”

She bent down to pick up the pots. “Of course, child. You look like a lawnmower ran over your head.”

I'd been a little worried about what Uncle Jack was going to say, but he barely looked at me before going into his study to work until dinner. He barely looked at me all evening. His jaw was tight. Right before I went upstairs to do homework, he put a hand on my shoulder.

“Why did you cut your hair, Mattie?”

I shrugged my other shoulder uncomfortably. “I just wanted a change.”

“It looks good.” He sighed. “You look like your mother did when she was your age.”

So that was it.

*

I went to bed that night with hair above my chin and a camera full of illegal pictures under my bed. I couldn't sleep. The curtains were open, and there was a big square block of moonlight on the floor next to my bed. I rolled over and looked out the window. What was on that camera?

Finally I heard Aunt Anna and Uncle Jack going to bed. I got up and pulled the boy's camera out. The damage was worse than I'd thought—it wouldn't even turn on. The little door to get at the batteries and memory card was jammed. I tried to pry it open with a nail file. The whole case broke into pieces, but when I poked the memory card with my fingernail, it slid out neatly into my hand.

I stared at it. The thing was so small. It seemed idiotic to be worrying so much about one square inch of plastic. But the police had chased me

to get it back. A boy my age had gone to jail to give it to me. I'd broken the law for the first time and chopped off five years' worth of hair to keep it. I was definitely not supposed to have it, and I desperately wanted to know what it contained.

I booted up my laptop and then stopped. I'd heard stories of people who'd been arrested because of plots or illegal documents that the police had found on their computers. Could they use the internet to put programs on your computer that would let them spy on what you were doing? I vaguely remembered that my parents wouldn't connect to the internet on the computer they used for what they always called "Christmas secrets," even when it wasn't anywhere near Christmas. It took me a few minutes to figure out how to actually turn off the internet connection, but I got it in the end. I think.

I slid the boy's memory card into the slot and started looking at the pictures. The first few were all boring pictures in the woods somewhere, so I skipped to the end to look at the pictures I'd seen him taking. There were pictures he had taken through the window of their house: the police making the old couple sit on the floor in the middle of the kitchen with their hands on top of their heads. The police starting to search the house. The little boy running in. The police grabbing him and making him sit down too. Then the police picking the couple up, pulling them outside. The little boy trying to go after them and being held back. The old woman almost falling down the front steps. The old man trying to help her, police officers holding him back. The woman trying to turn around and go to the little boy. A police officer stepping towards her, fist in mid-swing. Hitting her in the stomach. The old man trying to help her as she falls down. The police officers breaking his knee. The police officers forcing him into the car, his leg twisted to the side. The little boy on the steps, crying, an officer holding him by the collar.

The next picture was of me: I'm on the other side of the street, shoulders hunched, but I've turned my head and I'm looking right into the camera. I hadn't known he'd taken my picture. My eyes are wide, and my mouth is slightly open—not so I look stupid, just surprised. I liked

that picture.

The next picture the boy took was of the police right before they got him: three of them, batons raised, faces ugly. One of them has his mouth open, shouting something. And that was the last one.

They were good pictures. They made me feel sick.

I skipped back to the beginning and started looking at all of them. It started with pictures of some sort of huge ditch, out in a forest somewhere. It looked like it was about five feet deep, and almost wide enough for a grownup to lie down cross-ways. The next photos were from up high, like he had taken them from a tree. There were even leaves in the edges of some of the shots. It looked like the same woods. There was a line of people coming towards the camera, but they were far away, so you couldn't see them clearly. Then he zoomed in.

There were a lot of people, mostly grownups, walking in single file with their hands tied behind their backs. I counted thirty-four of them. They were being escorted by a platoon of grim-looking police officers. The boy had managed to get at least one or two clear shots of each person's face. They looked terrible.

All of them were pale and skinny—really skinny, with their cheekbones sticking out, the kind of skinny that makes your eyes huge. Almost all of them had bruises on their faces, and some of them had broken noses or black eyes. Six of them looked about my age, and two of them looked even younger, ten or twelve. The youngest ones were crying. There was a woman whose neck was covered in what looked like cigarette burns. A lot of them had dried blood on their clothes or in their hair or on their faces. They looked like none of them had had a shower in weeks, let alone a good night's sleep or an actual meal. But most of all, they looked like people who had given up. On everything. Forever.

I had a terrible feeling that I knew what had happened next, but I had to keep looking. There was a picture of them arriving by the ditch, the man in front barely looking at it, like he didn't care anymore. The officers shoving them around, mouths open, giving orders. Lining them up along the edge of the ditch. The officer in charge shouting something, glaring.

The officers forcing all the prisoners to their knees. The little girl on the end trying to fight. An officer grabbing her, taking out his baton. Hitting her in the face. Leaving her kneeling, barely upright, on the edge of the trench, blood streaming from a cut on her forehead. The man next to her saying something to her, his face kind. The officer clubbing him on the outside of the elbow. The man gritting his teeth, his arm bent backwards. The officer in charge shouting again. All the officers taking out their pistols.

Shooting every single person in the back of the head.

It was awful. You could see blood flying through the air in some of the pictures, people falling into the ditch, people with their whole faces blown away. The little girl on the end just lying crumpled up on the edge of the ditch. The officer who hit her, still holding his bloody baton, kicking her into the ditch. Her rolling down the side, leaving a trail of blood. Landing face-down in the dirt, blood-streaked hair spread out around her.

There were so many bodies in that ditch.

So this was what happened. This was where it ended. This was why people in “labor camps” never wrote back to their children. Now I knew where—I tried to take a breath and realized I had one hand over my mouth to keep from crying out loud. This must be what had happened to—and this was what would happen to the boy I’d seen yesterday. They were going to starve him and beat him and torture him and then shoot him in the back of the head and dump him in a mass grave in the middle of nowhere, all because I had looked at him. I had condemned a person to death.

I shut the laptop and hid it under my bed, along with the boy’s camera. Then I cried myself to sleep.

*

The next day, I could barely drag myself out of bed for school. My eyelids felt gummy, my mouth had that awful taste it gets after you’ve been crying, and one of my arms was sore from sleeping on it funny. I still didn’t know what to do with those photos. A boy my age had given his life for them, and I owed it to him to make sure people saw them. I owed

it to everyone lying in that ditch. I owed it to—to everyone else they had done that to. I just didn't know how.

I took a different way to school in case the police were waiting for me by the alley. When I arrived, there were police officers standing by the gates. They were just standing there, looking at all the students going in. I pulled out my phone and pretended to be texting as I went past them. It just about killed me not to look up and see if it was the same officers from yesterday, but I did it. No one stopped me.

“What did you do to your hair?” shrieked Rose as soon as I came into history. Everyone turned to stare at me and my new haircut. Damn.

I shrugged one shoulder lamely. “I wanted a change.”

“It's really cute,” she assured me as I slid into my seat next to her.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” began Mr. Pratchett, “today we're going to pick up at the start of the June Uprising. The June Uprising was only—wow, it was ten years ago. Now I feel old. You probably remember at least some of it. An underground network of radicals tried to overthrow the President. Led by Samuel Axler and his wife Lauren, they started riots in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, and here in D.C. They assassinated several government leaders, but they were stopped by—”

The door opened suddenly. I jumped a mile, certain they'd come for me, but it was just Ryan Jackson coming in late, apologizing and cursing under his breath.

I stayed jumpy the whole day. When I was walking down the hall between math and chemistry, I saw a couple of police officers going into the principal's office. They were probably going to look through all the student records, but even if they saw my I.D. picture, I'd had my hair pulled back for picture day, so they wouldn't be able to tell how long it was. What else could they get from the student records? Addresses. Dammit dammit dammit. They could make a list of every girl who might pass that alley on her way home from school. Damn that uniform!

“Do you know this girl?” One of the police officers outside the school

held out an eight by twelve photo. Thank goodness, they didn't have a shot of my face. What must have been their best shot was me from behind, just as I turned away. My hair was flying out behind me, and my skirt was twirling. You could tell I was moving fast, but it was perfectly in focus. It was actually a really cool photo.

I shook my head, hoping he couldn't hear my heart pounding. "No, why? Is she in trouble?"

"I'm sorry, I can't discuss ongoing investigations," he said. Then he must have misread the worry I could feel on my face, because he said, "She didn't do anything wrong. But she's missing and we need to find her before something happens to her." Liar. He held the photo out to Rose. "Have you seen her?"

She gave me a funny look. For a second I thought she was going to call B.S. on me, but then she said, "No, I've never seen her before in my life."

"That girl in the picture looked a lot like you," Rose said as we walked down the sidewalk. "Before you cut your hair, I mean."

"Really?" I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I see what you mean."

"I have to go," said Rose. "I promised my mother I would buy milk for her."

"Okay, see you," I said. She waved quickly and scurried down the street. I went straight home.

*

Finally I hit on the idea of using a fake email account to upload the boy's photos to as many photo hosting websites as I could find. Using a false name to make an email account made me feel really stealthy, so I did it with five different email accounts. There. Let them try to shut that down.

The next morning, one of my email accounts had been suspended. But photos attached to one of the other accounts had been seen by someone who sent them to someone who sent them to someone who sent them to someone. Hundreds of people had seen them, and there was a huge debate raging about whether they were real or not.

By the time I left for school, someone had printed out all the photos, big glossy eight by twelves, and stapled them to the fence around the police station yard, so you could see the whole horrible procession in a line, and then all the photos of the execution in perfectly straight rows on the front wall of the police station.

When I passed the computer lab, there were about ten boys clustered around one computer, looking horrified. I stepped inside. They jumped and looked up when they heard the door. They didn't look too worried by me, but they lowered their voices.

"Son of a bitch," one of them was saying. "That's sick."

One of his friends shook his head. "It's got to be photoshopped. They can't do stuff like that."

"You can't just take people out in the woods and kill them like that," said a boy on the edge. "Someone would find out."

"Maybe we just did," said the first one grimly.

"I have a cousin who knows Photoshop," said the boy at the computer. "I'm going to ask him what he thinks."

I had computer lab that afternoon, but there had been a long line for the bathroom and I was a little late. Most of my classmates were knotted around one computer. They looked up when I came in.

"Mattie, is Mr. Haysworth coming?" asked Rose. I shook my head. "Come over here, you have to see this," she said.

They were looking at the boy's pictures. It felt like being punched in the face all over again.

"Where did you find these?" I managed.

"Never mind," said the girl at the desk. "Like fifteen people have uploaded the same photos."

"Wait, wait, back up!" said the girl next to Rose. The girl at the computer clicked back a picture or two.

The other girl's eye widened. "I know that man!"

We all turned to look at her.

"He used to go to my church," she said. "He stopped coming about a

month ago but no one seemed to know what happened to him.”

“You should send a message to whoever uploaded the photos,” I said. “Tell them what his name is.”

Rose was giving me a weird look. “That’s got to be illegal.”

“I don’t care,” said the girl. Everyone stared at her. She stuck out her chin. “People should know who he was and how he died.”

As soon as I got home that afternoon, I checked all my fake email accounts. The girl from school had emailed me the man’s name, and five other people had recognized people in the photos and sent their names in. Two people had identified police officers. I added all the names to the photos. About eight people had copied the photos and uploaded them to their own accounts. I sent them all the names I’d collected. Maybe we could identify everyone, I thought. Maybe we could do something for those people.

In the last account, I had an email from one of the boy’s friends.

Hello,

Where did you get my friend’s pictures? What happened to him? Can we meet?

Benedict

I wrote back,

Hello Benedict,

Why was your friend taking those pictures?

Mattie

He answered,

Hello Mattie,

Can we meet?

Benedict

We agreed to meet in half an hour in an out-of-the-way corner of the park. I changed out of my school uniform and set out with the photos on a memory stick hidden in my shoe.

When I got to the park, there was a boy waiting for me. He turned around as I came closer. He was about a head taller than me, lanky, with

big hands. His hair was brown and curly, but not as curly as the boy from the alley. I wondered if they were brothers.

“Mattie?”

I nodded. “Benedict?”

He nodded and looked around. There was no one in sight. “Hold out your arms.”

I frowned. “What?”

“Hold out your arms, I have to make sure you're not carrying a gun.”

“That's illegal,” I pointed out.

“So is what you did with my friend's photos. But for all I know you're the police, and you intercepted my emails to Mattie cause she doesn't have a public key, and now you're going to arrest me. So let me check or I'm walking away now.”

I had no idea what a public key was but I held my arms out from my sides. He patted me down awkwardly, then stepped back and held out his own arms. “Okay, your turn.”

“What?”

“You check me now,” said Benedict. “I could be a police officer just as easily as you.” I patted him down even more awkwardly. We were both blushing. He gestured at a bench, and we sat down.

“How did you get my friend's photographs?”

I told him the whole story. When I was finished, he sat in silence for a little, looking at his hands.

“Well,” he said finally, “I guess when he didn't come back, I kind of knew they got him. Why did he have to go and photograph that arrest? He was—he's such a damn bleeding heart.”

“Are you brothers?” I asked. He nodded. “You knew he'd be out taking those pictures.”

He nodded again. “We hadn't planned to publish them quite the way you did, but I guess it worked out.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“What did you do it for?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You could have given his camera to the police and gone home. You could have taken it home and thrown it away. But you uploaded all the pictures to the internet twenty times. Why?”

I paused.

“Because if I hadn't looked at him, he'd still be free,” I said finally. “I owe him.”

Benedict sighed.

“I have something for you,” I said. He looked surprised. I took off one shoe and pulled the memory stick out and put it in his hand.

He looked at me. “Is this—?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Mattie.”

“Can I join you?” I asked.

He looked at me in surprise. “What?”

“Whatever you're doing,” I said, “this taking pictures business, wherever it's going, I want to be a part of it. I want to help.”

He shook his head. “You're crazy. I'm not in any radical movement. I just have a big brother who's an amateur photographer.”

“I call B.S.,” I said. “You're doing something. I want to join you.”

He shook his head again. “You have no idea what you're asking.”

I grabbed his arm. “Don't you dare blow me off. My—I've known people who have been in this stuff. I know what it costs.”

He looked at me. “Wait and see if they catch you for the photos. If you're clear, then maybe we'll talk.”

“I'll be fine,” I insisted. “I used a fake email account. Five, actually.”

He looked alarmed. “Fake email accounts? Is that all?”

My palms started sweating. “What should I have done?”

He sighed. “Did you use Tails?”

“No, I—”

“Not even Tor?”

I bit my lip. “What's Tor?”

“God help you.” He stood up. “I mean that.”

“Where are you going?” I demanded, standing up too.

"I'm not telling you." He started to walk away.

"Benedict, wait!"

He turned. "You even gave me your real name, didn't you?"

I flushed. He turned around and walked away.

*

Almost as soon as I got home, Aunt Anna sent me out to buy some groceries for supper.

I was coming back, carrying a pound of hamburger and three kinds of vegetables in plastic sacks, when a woman stopped me. "Mattie Davis? You're under arrest."

I froze. A tall man came out of the store behind me and took hold of my arms. He pulled the grocery sacks out of my limp fingers. I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe. I'd known this would happen. Leaving Aunt Anna's dinner sitting on the sidewalk, they walked me to the corner and loaded me into the car waiting there. We pulled away from the curb.

Why didn't I hit them? Why didn't I scream? Why didn't I fight back? Why didn't I even try to run away? What was wrong with me? I started crying.

"Shut up," said the driver.

*

Rose was standing in the lobby of the police station with an officer next to her. Her mouth fell open when she saw me.

"Mattie, I'm sorry, I knew it was you in that photo, but you lied about it, and then I had a bad conscience, and I didn't know what to do, but . . ." Her voice trailed off. I felt like I'd been punched again.

They pulled me past her into the back offices and into a little room. The woman pulled on a pair of gloves and strip-searched me. As soon as I was dressed, another officer came in with a camera. They had me stand against a blank wall with a ruler on it and took mug shots facing forwards and to both sides. I saw those pictures as they were printing them out and I looked scared out of my mind. But at least I still looked like I cared. They took down my height and my weight and fingerprinted me, and then they left me in an interrogation room by myself and shut the

door. The lights went out.

I collapsed onto the floor and started crying.

I heard the door open and booted feet coming in, but it was still dark.

“Shut up!”

“Stop crying!”

I put one hand over my mouth and tried to stop crying. They kept shouting at me. Someone pulled me up, grabbing my wrists and pulling them behind my back. One of the other officers hit me across the face so hard I would have fallen over backwards if they hadn't been holding me. I started crying harder. Then they punched me in the stomach, and I had to stop crying because I couldn't breathe.

I finally managed to get my breath back without crying, and then all of a sudden they were gone. There was blood running down my face, warm and sticky, and my nose hurt like crazy. I pinched it as hard as I could and focused on the pain. A broken nose was something I could cope with.

*

They came back for me in what felt like three days but was probably more like three hours—I could still smell the blood. One of them picked me up and sat me in a chair I couldn't see. Still in the dark, they stood around and shouted questions at me.

“Where did you get those photographs?”

“I don't have anything to do with the photographs!”

“What did you do with them?”

“I don't know what you're talking about!”

“How do you know the boy who took the photographs? Is he a part of your underground movement?”

“I'm not in any underground movement!” I insisted. They hit me across the face, and my nose started bleeding again.

“Why did you take that camera?”

“I don't have any camera!”

They knocked the chair over and kicked me in the ribs. It hurt so badly I thought I would throw up. Still shouting questions, they picked me up and threw me against the wall face-first. One of them grabbed me by the

hair and pulled my head backwards. I could feel my bloody nose running down my throat.

“How do you know Benedict?” he hissed in my ear.

I gagged on shock and my own blood. “How did you find out about Benedict?”

He pulled me across the room, still holding my head back, and jerked me into the chair. All the lights went on, way too bright.

I was sitting at a table. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I could make out an older police officer sitting across from me in perfect dress blacks. Everyone else had gone. I coughed blood out into my elbow. Coughing hurt my ribs too much, but I spat out another mouthful of blood. Most of it went down my chin. The officer kept his eyes fixed on me steadily as I tried to wipe it off. He had gray hair, cut short like all the other officers, and heavy eyebrows. He looked familiar but I couldn't figure out why. I spat more blood onto the floor and pinched my nose.

“Tell me about your friend Benedict,” he said pleasantly.

“Benedict who?” I asked stupidly. “Benedict Arnold?”

“Not quite,” he said, “but not for lack of trying. Tell me about your meeting with him.”

“I don't know any Benedicts,” I insisted.

He looked over my shoulder at the door. It opened. As I turned around to look, I noticed where my blood was smeared against the wall and splattered on the floor. A junior officer came in with a file folder and handed it to the first officer before going out. I looked at it apprehensively. It had my real name on it. He opened it and held out a paper. It was a print-out of my email exchange with Benedict.

“What about this Benedict?” he asked.

“That's not my email address,” I objected. My heart was beating so loudly I was sure he'd hear it. He fanned out a stack of email printouts from all the fake accounts I'd made to publish the boy's photos.

“What about these?”

“No,” I said, “not mine.”

“We both know that's a lie,” he said. I didn't know how to answer that,

so I just kept my mouth shut. He took out three photographs and laid them on the table in front of me, face down.

“Take a look,” he said.

I had blood on my hands, and it got on the edges of the photos as I turned them over.

It was the boy's mugshots. Front, left, right, just like they'd done mine. His face was bruised and his nose was leaning to the side, but his eyes were defiant, and he was half-grinning. Whatever they were doing to him right then, I thought, he would stand it better than I ever could, but if they did break him, if they ever beat the fight out of his eyes—

“I don't know this boy,” I said. He reached out and pulled the photos out of my shaking hands. I tried to hang on to them, and my blood smeared all down the side of the boy's face.

He put the photographs back in the file and closed it. He laid it to the side and held out his hand.

“Give me your hand.”

I pulled both my hands into my lap. “What? No. Why?”

He smacked his open palm on the table. “Give me your hand!”

I wiped some of the blood off on my jeans and held my hand out. He took hold of my wrist tightly. “Look at your hand.”

I looked.

“Can you move your fingers?” he asked. I nodded. “Show me.” I flexed my fingers obediently. “Would you like to keep it that way?” I nodded again. “Then tell me the truth, Miss Axler.”

“That's not my name,” I said automatically, and still hated myself for it.

“Yes it is,” he said. “You come from a long line of people who run off to fight in hopeless would-be revolutions and leave their beloved family to handle the consequences.”

I concentrated really hard on my hand so that I wouldn't have to think about what he was saying. He banged my elbow on the table. “Tell me about Benedict,” he demanded.

“I don't know any Benedicts.”

He jerked me halfway across the table and twisted my hand around so far I thought my wrist would break. My ribs hurt worse than ever, and I was so scared I could hardly breathe. His face was just a few inches from mine. His eyes were a metallic gray, like knives.

“Let me rephrase that,” he said softly. “If you don't tell me the truth, I'm going to make you hurt so badly you'll wish you had never been born.”

*

I gave in after the sixth finger. I hadn't eaten or slept in days, and my breathing had felt funny ever since the day they held my head underwater until I threw up, and then they spread my hands out on the floor and stamped on my fingers one by one. God help me, I told them everything I could.

I told them about seeing the boy, and taking his camera home, and putting all the pictures on the internet, and identifying the people they'd killed, and meeting Benedict (please God let him be in hiding). I told them everything.

They brought me photos, stills from security camera footage, and spread them out all over the table. They were photos of Benedict.

“Is this your mysterious Benedict?” he asked.

I nodded miserably. They'd brought me water when my voice gave out, and even swallowing had hurt my ribs.

“Where is he?”

“I don't know. I told you, I only met him the one time. Now can you please leave me alone?”

“I'm not finished with you, Miss Axler. We still have a lot to talk about.”

They made me tell them everything all over again, into a tape recorder. Then they typed it up and printed it out, and went through it asking for more details. How tall was Benedict? Exactly where did we meet? What were the passwords to all my accounts? When they were finally satisfied, they printed out my confession again and made me sign it. This confession is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I give it freely and without duress or coercion. It was the first thing I'd ever signed

my real name to.

“Thank you, Miss Axler,” he said. He held out his hand and I gave him back his pen reluctantly, wondering vaguely if it would have been sharp enough to cut open my wrists, or if I would have had the guts to do it. It was getting harder and harder to keep my focus on what was going on, but every time I was about to lose it, I’d forget not to move my fingers or I’d cough and the pain would bring me back. He put the pen in his pocket and opened my file to put away my confession along with all the previous versions, the photos of Benedict, the email printouts, the photos they’d taken of my room and of the boy’s broken camera, my mugshots, Rose’s statement, the picture of me they’d shown around at school.

I curled up, broken ribs or no, and put my head on the table.

“Miss Axler, tell me about your parents.”

“I don’t want to talk about my parents.” Maybe if I tried hard enough, I could pass out.

He took me by the hair and pulled my head up. “Do you know where they are?”

“As far as I know, they’re dead and buried in a mass grave somewhere.”

He chuckled and let go of my hair. “They’re in a labor camp.”

“I was at the trial,” I said, sitting up and looking at him. “I heard the sentence. But you probably murdered them anyway. God help them.”

“Are you religious now?” he asked mockingly.

I shrugged. “No atheists in interrogation rooms, I guess.”

“Was it your parents who inspired you to start conspiring against the government?”

“Why do you want to know about my parents?” I asked. “I’m sure you have the files.”

“I wrote the files,” he said. “You remind me of your mother. Determined, completely untrained, and ultimately doomed.”

A red haze started to creep in at the edges of my vision. Suddenly I remembered a younger version of his face looking into mine as I sat on the kitchen table fifteen years ago, feet dangling. You sit there and

don't make a sound. Where are my parents? They're in jail. Why? Can I see them? Because they're traitors. Determined traitors. But they're completely untrained, and ultimately doomed. And no, you'll never see them again. I hate you. I hate you too.

"I take that as a compliment," I said.

"You didn't answer the question."

"No, I didn't," I mumbled. The room started sliding out of focus. The floor tilted.

"Do you know what's going to happen to you?"

I struggled to stay upright. "You're going to send me to a 'labor camp.'"

He split into three and shook his heads, staring into my eyes. "We're going to kill you."

I gave up and slid sideways into unconsciousness.

*

I woke up in a jail cell all by myself. There was a tray on the floor with a little food, and I ate it, hoping for poison. Eventually I fell asleep again. The tray was gone when I woke up. I didn't see a single human being from the day that officer promised to kill me to the day someone came to tape my hands behind my back and march me out to a truck waiting in the yard. I didn't know how long it had been—my eyes weren't swollen shut anymore, but I still couldn't cough without pain in my ribs, and my fingers still hurt if I tried to move them. Those five seconds of fresh air were so sweet I almost started crying, and then they tossed me into the back of the truck and dropped a musty canvas cover down over the back.

There's a bit of light in the truck. I can make out about fifteen other prisoners already there, and a few police officers sitting with their rifles in their laps, tense. I look around at the other prisoners, wondering hazily if I look as defeated as they do. Thank God, none of them are people I know. If Uncle Jack and Aunt Anna could survive being related to the most wanted people in the country, they can survive me, I guess.

No one in the truck says anything. I've lost all sense of time, so I can't tell how long we drive for, but it's almost evening when we stop. They pull back the canvas and drop us out on the ground. We're standing on

the edge of a forest, and they're unloading people from two other trucks. They start marching us into the forest in a line, but I can't work up the energy to wonder why.

We walk way out into the woods until we get to some sort of huge ditch, about five feet deep, and almost wide enough for a grownup to lie down cross-ways. The parts of my brain that keep track of how thirsty I am, how tired I am, how hungry I am, how cold I am, and how many parts of my body hurt are slowly starting to give way to a new part. This part is trying to figure out how I feel about the fact that I am about to die.

They yell at us to kneel down. It crosses my mind that I could refuse, but a heavy hand lands on the back of my neck and forces me down. Someone is crying. They're still shouting at people. I look up and down the row so that I don't have to look into the ditch.

Right next to me is the boy.

His nose is broken and his bottom lip is split. There's something wrong with his right shoulder, and his face is pale, his cheekbones standing out too sharply. He's looking up into the sky through the trees.

"I put your photos online," I say quietly. "Everyone saw them."

He turns. His eyes widen as he recognizes me. "I never meant for you to do anything that dangerous."

"I didn't just do it for you," I say. "My parents started the June Uprising and I changed my family name."

"You published them all?" he says. "God bless you."

"Not quite all of them," I say. "Why did you take my picture?"

He smiles. "Because you're beautiful."

I look at him. His eyes are the exact same blue as in the flag. His hair is dirty and there's blood in it, but it grew out a bit in jail and there are a few curls hanging down his forehead. His lips are slightly open. I lean closer, and he bends down and kisses me. I've never kissed a boy before and it's nicer than I expected, even with my cut lip. Even with my broken ribs. Even with the bound hands and the ditch and the officers with their guns. I'm still trying to decide whether it makes a difference when I hear the first shots.

Tabitha Ricketts

THE "SMART" ONES

We're the kids who go crazy in safety
More likely to burn out over a textbook
Than a bottle
And in the end,
More likely to burn
On a cross of our own making.

LA NAUSÉE II by Shelby Grubbs



Kathryn Haemmerle

WHERE A VIOLET TINGED JELLYFISH LIES

after Sheck

Perhaps there is repose in this first wildness,

An unseen calm, essential and wanted. Yet I feel on me the blazing
Nightly, the rife heat of flames hovering near my skin. Such relentless
wind,

Such rip currents and double red flags.

How can the self trying to prevail in flash-rips not resign, not surrender
the end-shells

Now? Not feel in the lungs the algal bloom, the cutting toxins of red
tide

Where a violet tinged jellyfish *lies*,

Viscid and marred.

PETRICHOR

Semantic confusion after silence resembles petrichor,
or the aftermath of the first rain
when even dirt feels raw.

Like an odor. Or *ichor*,
the tenuous essence that pulses between cracks in tar
and then rises in bruised steam.

You asked for this reunion.

Now, in atmospheric haze
you cannot think of anything to say.
You ask about the tiny clock stopped on the long
chain around my neck.

When you reach for it, I do not
stop you even though the backs of your fingers linger
against my chest.

Our after-separation is defined by the spectrum
of color, desire just beyond violet, visible
only in oily residue.

Weighted by questions
of physicality, your eyes search mine.

Sartrean honesty?

Then let's be carnal beings.

93 SANDY CREEK DRIVE

Our seasonal neighbors
from Texas owned
shelves of labeled glass
jars filled with sand
as dark as crushed
river stone and
pale as ground
gypsum
from beaches
in the Carolinas, California
and probably Portugal
or some other
foreign
coast. We want
to preserve the
distinct sand textures,
they told us.

In a large,
rounded glass vase
in Chicago, my parents
keep shells washed ashore
during Hurricane Ivan and
white sand that,
thousands of years ago,
before eroding and washing

down river streams
to form coastal dunes,
was an Appalachian mountain
in Georgia or
South Carolina.

I do the same—trap
and seal in glass
the place I've left.
I keep trying to contain
the particles, but the glass

only becomes transparent
as hands and numerals spiral.
The place threatens
to slip and shatter
my vase,
releasing the grains
into nothing.

AURELIA AURITA: ON DIRECTION

I'm not sure how the moon
Jellyfish breathes
Or propels itself since it
Is headless
Brainless
Boneless.

Charles Ducey

THE LESSER CHAIN OF BEING

Katy DeYoung was a natural born skier. She had skied since she was six, and before that she had participated in thoroughly regimented balance conditioning. Mother wanted her to go her own way, but father insisted that she liked it. Loved it. At 16 she qualified for the Junior Olympics in Whistler, British Columbia. Or the preliminary training thereof. She carved hitch-back trails in those slaloms. Moguls ran under her shifting skis like butter. By 18 she and her family were being visited by top college recruiters for the sport, of which there were around 7. At 27 she was on a minor talk-radio show discussing the importance of feminine participation in extreme sports. A magazine article featured her at 29, still skiing fine. At 34 she was still unmarried and her father and mother were a split pair. She would go her own way, just like that, down a chasm dividing two runs at Park City. She was 36 at the time, soon to be heralded as a hero of women's athletics.

Hans Bremer was as talented as they come. He sang and painted and played the drums. He was great at chemistry for a time but dropped it for more aesthetic pursuits, though the beauty of synthesized hydroxocobalamin once made him cry. At 8 he appeared on a smalltime German educational video as a background dancer. He did have one sung line. It was "Ja!" At 17 he was the first German minor to sing on a Montpelier street corner to finance his trip back to the Vaterland. He had chased a damsel from Munich to Madrid to Manhattan. She had been on a trip to the Alps, professional in nature. At 24 he had proven his great aunt Hilde wrong by singing at a Munich opera house. Or the pagoda of the English gardens near there. By 27 he was dead broke and frequently hungover

on a concoction of Dunkel beer and Jägermeister. 7 years later he would be strangulated by a utility cord intended for use in musical productions, tied by his own hand.

Johannah Sullivan lived in a mountain town in upper Appalachia. Smiling college students, none of them native, brought food to her doorstep in autumn. Her mother was a pearly faced clock; her father, a stringless banjo. Her sister cooked skillet potatoes in the morning with eggs she'd unnested from a henhouse down the way. At 12 and 9, respectively, the sisters fled to Williamsport en route to the Big Apple. Her sister would not make it all the way, her response to an oral invitation to earn a few bucks ending in her disappearance. At 10 Johannah would be at an orphanage in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, delivered there by a well-meaning and overweight cop, who was very proud of his daughter and couldn't bear to see a little girl in pain. He visited every other Saturday with family stories and chewing gum. At 12 she would run away to New York and be back by 7:00. Most days she went exploring. One day she did not come back. Some say she was 13; others, 14. Still others say she had no age at all. Her story would appear in an under-read Philadelphia paper in autumn of the following year.

Henry Oakely was not born in San Francisco. He was born in Concord, California. At 18 he would tell most every new face he met that he was from the former. He had once been to a 9ers game. Or a children's science fair sponsored by the team. He studied computer science and found numbers fascinating. He once made a poster of them and assigned all the integers between 1 and 125 with various sizes and colors and recalled them mnemonically. At 22 He graduated with honors and had never sipped a beer and was ignorant of the female genitalia. He had been delivered by Caesarian section. Though not afflicted by the aftermath of the surgery, his mother would be crippled by debilitating arthritis at 40. They thought it was such. In reality, it was an unusually fortunate late onset case of Cystic Fibrosis. Henry would see his mother live to 61,

though in great pain. She lived to 67, her relative virility ascribed to a bizarre metabolic irregularity produced by exposure to the air of mountainous terrains. Henry's career was marginally successful. At 25 he had programmed a system used in German medical technology for the data input of patients, mostly those consigned to Bavarian psychiatric wards. He was introduced to the drug scene by a coworker of three years. She suffered mildly from a common social sensitivity. At 30 he had fatally overdosed on a prescription used primarily to reduce the effects of severe skier's blindness. He had elected previously to have his body used for the purposes of science if such a tragedy were to transpire.

Margaret Dao was raised, at least for a time, in an old wooden barn. Her father, a Vietnamese national, worked as the field hand of a well-rooted Chinese-American farming family in the Napa valley. He would marry into the family after his affair with the farmer's daughter turned out to be fruitful. Like the fields on which he labored. By 5 Margaret was working alongside her father and could name every farm animal in Chinese, Vietnamese, and pigeon English. Napa County Child Protective Services found her at 7. The next fall she was enrolled in a small grade school, where she struggled for many years until a classmate introduced her to American print media. Her language skills never did plateau after that. She thumbed through glamour magazines at night and found great beauty in the white faces she saw. As a teenager she spent many hours photographing herself in seasonal outfits with a Polaroid, all of them borrowed. At 18 she was set on fashion school but barred by financial hardship and unresponsive parents. When an underpaid high school counselor discovered an east coast scholarship for promising students of Vietnamese descent, Margaret applied and won. By 19 she began to uncover her blossoming sexuality suppressed by years of farm work. At 20 she was unflowered by a half-drunk patron in the bathroom of a take-out restaurant in Little Saigon. He slapped her thigh and congratulated her upon completion. At 21, with her grades faltering, Margaret tried a bid in raising guide dogs for the blind but ultimately failed when she

treated them like cattle. She sought a tutor whose room she distinctly remembered as having math themed decorations. The room would later be the site of many sexual liaisons, Sappho-erotic in nature. After consulting with a university psychiatrist, she sought closure by confiding in a close female friend who would later reveal her affairs to the public. One allegedly involved a local athlete, 10 years her senior. She dropped out of school the following May. At 23, she was discovered in a tractor trailer outside of Media, Pennsylvania, her body riddled with stab wounds. An old magazine article on professional female athletes was the sole possession found on her person.

Veronica Reyes was Chicana by birth, Chicagoan by choice. Both her parents and her four siblings had names beginning with the letter “P”: Pedro, Paulita, Paco, Pablo, Peppe, Palba. She decided to go to school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and she did not quite know why. She looked into communications for a time, but preferred peace studies. At 21 she pursued an internship in the Windy City. She lived near the old Jackson swamp but Pulaski Park pleased her more. Back at the university the fall thereafter, she decided to embark on a service trip up north. She served food at a shelter for abused women and their families which doubled as a foodbank. She stacked cans of peaches and pears and potatoes precut to fry easily on a griddle. At 23 she was abroad on a mission trip to Patagonia. She did not speak the same sort of Spanish as the rest of them. When she discovered her mother’s infidelity at 26, she left the Church. While visiting Salt Lake City for a job interview in international charity work, she ran into a young woman who asked for a moment of her time. That next spring she was initiated into the faith. On a stake outing after her first anniversary of membership, she went to the slopes for the first time. They were closed due to what were termed “ill-conditioned runs.” She would go on to marry a Missourian, 7 years her junior. Together they had four children and would have had more. When she was 35 she would travel to Munich to oversee the development of a call center there, in an area called Pasing-Obermenzing. She was the only one there with skin

darker than a well-baked pretzel. On her way home one night she would be struck by an erratically driven Audi Q7. The driver was never identified, but it was a presumed theft. Her bones rest in Park City Cemetery near her young family's home on Prospector Avenue. Her children pray for her every day.

The parents of Christopher Uneywu decided that he would live with his mother's family until he came of age. In Kigali Christopher closed his eyes and said nothing when ordered by a neighbor with a machete. At 8 he and his sister were sent to Goma and then to Kinshasa with money from his father. He attended a Christian school there where he wore a collar and read a large book in English. He looked away when told by a classmate that he needed time alone with his sister. She had been born with a birth defect that left her right arm foreshortened. At 15 it was suggested that Christopher pickup basketball. The monsignor once found him at the school court at midnight, where he had been instructed 7 hours prior to practice until perfect. His sister tried, too, with limited success. At 18 Christopher's father had him flown to Trenton, New Jersey, where he served as a pastor to a Catholic parish, primarily Latino in composition. He encouraged the parish's child to enroll in a local community college, where he was immediately enlisted as the starting power-forward. When at 20 Christopher was stopped on the Turnpike by a corpulent cop for driving without a license, he had to explain that he was fulfilling a request for a friend. At 21 he was made the face of the Philadelphia chapter of a group who claimed him as their brother. He had stopped at their meeting place to deliver pizzas on a Tuesday. When group leader Billy Freeman was denied conscientious objector status, it was decided that Christopher would serve in his place. His duties on the home front were paramount. At 22 Christopher entered basic training with another man's legal documents. At camp and in the jungle, he was commended for his obedience. They say he never blinked when firing an M-16. On his way back to the mainland he gave the last of his pocket change to a street performer whose sign commanded him to give alms

in four different languages. Upon his return to community college at 23, he was repeatedly badgered by his former brothers for his compliance in wars against the colored man. At 24 Christopher was moved to a medium-sized Philadelphia university when a scout asked him to play. He would go on to break the school's record for assists given in a single season. With a torn ACL in the winter his scholarship was forfeited. He became a janitor for the school in the spring, a post he would hold for many subsequent decades. At 29 his angry brothers nagged no more when Billy Freeman was arrested for sexual abusing at least 7 minors in multiple Pennsylvanian townships. Christopher is 42 and cleaning full time.

I live in Omaha, Nebraska. I still appreciate a novel, in English or German or Spanish, from time to time. I have donated \$15 to my alma mater in the Keystone State in the City of Brotherly Love every seventh month. I am a journalist by trade but write many other stories, too. I often confuse my sources. I have only ever written one obituary, but only obliquely so. I read somewhere that a chain of 7 personal connections can link you to just about anyone in the world. Living or dead. In recent times. Sometimes, I wonder if that is true.

Lucas Garcia

NORA

NORA: Wife, mother, PTA member, jogger, part-time baker, secretly loves Japanese comics, pronounces “manga” as “mainja.” Heterosexual.

JOSEPH: Her son. Homosexual.

ANTHONY: College student, probably 3rd or 4th year. Has never heard of this Joseph person before. As far as he’s concerned he’s been dating Joe, who only sometimes goes by Joey. Comes from a different sort of family than the one captained by NORA. None-of-your-business-sexual.

The hallway of a house. ANTHONY is waiting for Joseph to get out of the shower so he can use the bathroom; he’s still in his bedclothes (could be just underwear, not specifically any article of clothing in particular). Enter NORA, also dressed for sleep.

A: Good morning Mrs. Carr.

N: Nora’s fine. Call me Nora.

A: Okay, Nora.

N: Is Joseph in the shower?

A: Yeah. I’m waiting to use the toilet.

N: We have another bathroom, right upstairs.

A: I didn’t know if I should. Use that one.

N: Hank and I have our own bathroom, you’re fine to use it.

A: Thank you. I guess I’ll go then. To the bathroom.

N: I wouldn’t. Toilet’s still not fixed.

A: Oh.

short silence

A: You have a beautiful home.

N: You think so? It needs a lot of work.

A: Joe is always talking about how much he misses it. It's exactly how he described it, I feel like I've been here before.

N: How long have you known Joseph?

A: What?—Oh—three years? We met in first year.

N: How long have you been...together?

A: Well we were friends first, but we started seeing each other in the fall last year. So just over a year.

NORA

A: Mrs. Carr?

N: He could have told us. Me. About you.

A: Mrs. Carr—

N: Does he love you?

A: I think—I mean—well he says that he does.

NORA

N: I love my son. I tried to—raise him right.

A: It shows.

N: Do you love him?

A: I don't know. Maybe.

N: Well do you say "I love you" back?

A: I—well no because I'd be lying. No! Not lying—I mean—it wouldn't be true.

N: He loves you though.

A: I'm not going to lie to him.

short silence

N: Why are you here if you don't love him?

A: He asked me to come.

N: Did he tell you we didn't know?

A: He told me he hadn't come out.

N: So you knew.

A: Look Mrs. Carr, I'm sorry I'm not what you expected. I came because I love being with Joe, even if I don't—love—him. Yet. Right now. I'm sorry.

NORA

N: Maybe it wasn't fair of me to ask you all those questions, but this has been—is hard for us.

A: He's still your son Mrs. Carr, he's still Joe.

N: Well that's what you don't understand, he isn't "Joe," his name is Joseph. Joseph. That's what we named him. He isn't—since when does he call himself "Joe?"

A: He's always been Joe to me.

N: Well your always is considerably shorter than mine.

A: What does it matter?

N: I don't recognize him anymore.

curtain

Jordan Dorney

WHEN YOU WEEP FOR ALEXANDRIA OF OLD

of the books in that library:
do not tell me
that they will recur
that the divine spark will reignite
that the augur's lot will fall out the same again

no, let them curl and
burn and be cast to the four winds
no, let them burn
let lost *Ajax* burn and Kafka's letters
and the gospel of the lord
and the love songs of Sappho,
Sappho of the honeysweet hair and eyes

let all this come to pass
the next time some noodle invites the Romans
into her city of the dead
and thinks the brutes deserve one line

of the books in that library:
do not tell me
that they will recur

IF IN EIGHTEEN-HUNDRED SHE SHOULD DIE

forgetting the trees that split
yard from road, road from private
home: the sempiternal rush
of cars went by, like the word
itself, semp-i-ter-nal

inconstant but continual

forgetting the trees
a flash of black, then blue,
then pullover red
come into view

endlessly, it seemed and
no peace to be had
better than at a rowhouse

left on purpose
left for such occasion
of the low and terrible din

then the light would change
somewhere or no one needed
milk or going to school just then

just then, forgetting the trees
and what they could not hide
in ordinary time

warmer climes, or colder,
above all more interesting
that semp-i-ter-nal
word of a grasper for the new
or new-to-her

caught up in the clouds with her
Lord have mercy and dropped
again where she pleased: beyond
the neighborhood or nationhood
and the goddamn passing cars

if into some old century
disappearing though
strike the chorus: from dancing
in the glade with druids
there is return

(whether when unmicrowavable
food grows cold or several hours after,
forgetting the trees)

from the huts of the desert fathers
and the strictliest Benedictine
there is return: so strike the chorus
shake her awake

though we all wish it
we all wish—

but if in eighteen hundred
she should die, or some other age
thought better for sitting,
staring out her window undisturbed

say the iron sickness slew her
as a sixteen-pounder gun arrayed
against spears and bows and arrows

or as though, forgetting the trees
she crossed the yard and left
her private home



THY SLEEP SHALL BE SWEET by Bhargava Narayana



HOW TO SPELL AN UNKNOWN WORD

Enter the world twice. Once in India, once in Florida at age three on a street-parked boat. The stranger woman with blue eyes and the tall stranger man with a dark mustache call you son. Call them mom and dad until you forget they're strangers. But later call the one in India mother.

Your mom and dad have two daughters. Sydney and Alexandra. Sometimes your mom and dad call Sydney Syd. On your first day they walk with you on their boat. You've never been on one before. Your dad gives you the nickname Big Foot because, he will later claim, your feet were as long as the boat. It will be your clearest memory of that first day, being on a boat and hearing Big Foot but not knowing what it meant. Your sisters are bigger than you and practice the piano. It sounds beautiful, but you don't know how to tell them because you can't speak in this place yet.

Learn basketball from your neighbors. Wait at your door and run out to the street when you hear the ball bouncing. Gallop in circles while dribbling the ball on the driveway with them, the ball a leather balloon floating out of control above your head.

Pick up English from your sisters, your mom and dad, the neighbors. Watch movies on Friday nights and repeat what they say. Before bed, after brushing popcorn from your teeth and the buttery smell from your tongue, tell your mom you learned a new word. "What's that?" she asks. Say, "Hakuna matata," and smile. "That's Swahili, silly. But can you tell me what it means in English?" Think for a moment. Then sing. "It means no worries! For the rest of your days."

Struggle to remember India. Then forget India until you see the birth certificate years later.

In kindergarten, your teacher asks you and your classmates to sit on alphabet letters taped to the floor each morning to take attendance. Sit on 'S' some days and 'G' others even though she told you 'T.' The teachers say you learn slowly because you developed language two years later than your classmates. Over the summer, your mom teaches you so you can catch up with your classmates. She walks to the beach with you and fills an aluminum baking pan with white sand. Trace your letters in there and watch the sun glint on the lines and curves. She spells 'mom' in the pan and asks you to write your name. Write such big letters that you only have room for 'Raj.' On rainy days or when the sun is too hot, your mom shuffles through flashcards with letters and addition and subtraction. Sometimes you read a book with three short words on a page. Play the alphabet game at the pool after flashcards and lunch. Your mom knows you love to swim and calls you her little fish. Begin with food. "A!" your mom calls from one side of the shallow end. Yell "Artichokes!" and splash to her side. You mom holds you while you catch your breath. "You know artichokes?" she laughs. "Sydney eats them in the can when you are not home," you say.

Sometimes your babysitter across the street with the basketball hoop tutors you too. Miss Allie has flashcards like your mom and teachers. But she gives you candy if you do well. One day, she brings a paint brush to the pool. Paint letters onto the cement. Write the words that Miss Allie names. Hesitate when she says 'mother.' Ask: "What's mother?" She tells you it's another word for mom and then shows you. She paints the word in quick strokes because the sun is high and hot. The letters evaporate before you can sound out the whole word. When your mom asks how tutoring went, you jump and drip water on the wood floors and tell her about the paint brushes. "Miss Allie's the phonics lady!" you whoop.

When Miss Allie babysits on evenings, you always help her cook dinner instead of watching a movie with your sisters. Tell her at dinner you want to be a doctor when you grow up. Then tell Miss Allie you're going to marry her. You say "muhrry" instead of "marry." She asks you to please eat your spaghetti with the fork. Ask how her boys are doing. She laughs

and says she isn't a mom. She doesn't have boys, just brothers. Still, you call them her boys.

Be a doctor for Halloween that year. "Your name means prince. You don't want to be a prince, Raja?" Sydney asks. Shake your head. "A doctor." Sydney and Alexandra help you make the costume each day after school the week before Halloween. Wear the costume to school for the kindergarten Halloween parade. Parents come and take pictures. After the parade they pose with their children. Stare at them and then at your mom and dad. Even though the other parents don't wear costumes, they match their children's eyes and skin.

Visit a doctor two months later for back surgery. They tell your parents it's a severe spinal curve. They draw a swirly symbol on a board. A really big question mark, they say bending toward you with their hands on their knees. But you haven't learned question marks with your mom or Miss Allie yet. You hide behind your mom's knees and stare at the doctors. "Big, gorgeous eyes," a woman doctor says smiling.

In the waiting room on the day of surgery, ask your mom why your hair and eyes and skin are darker than hers. She hesitates. Then she pulls a yellow file from her purse. You and your sisters always call it 'The File of Important Things.' "You were born here," she says sliding a birth certificate from the file. See strange arrangements of letters followed by 'India,' the only word you can sound out. Say nothing because a nurse calls you. Think little because everything turns foggy and you become sleepy.

Wear a red detachable cast after surgery. The way it covers your stomach and back makes you feel like a turtle. The doctors told you to wear it all the time and to be careful when you take it off to bathe. You slip in the tub once and cry not because it hurt but because you remember the doctor's warning and are scared. Wrapped in a towel and with shampoo suds still in your dark hair, you cling to your mom. She rocks you and sings that it's fine, you're fine, Raja.

Wake up from a bad dream that night. Recount the dream to your mom as she carries you back to your room from hers. A giant red ant was biting your back. It hurt and you couldn't escape. She calmly hushes you

while rubbing the part of your back not covered in cast. Think of happy things and you'll dream of that, she says. "R. Raja. Your turn. S," she then says. Stop crying, lift your head for a moment and think. "Smoothies," you say looking at your mom. Tiny lines appear like when she laughs. "Smoothies?" she smiles. Nod and say strawberry smoothies. "Then dream of strawberry smoothies," your mom says. You feel better then begin to cry again when she starts to leave your room. Cry that you want your mother. "I'm right here," your mom reassures, "It's fine, you're fine, Raja." No, you say, my mother. She looks confused, then understanding, then hurt.

A few years later, when you're in third grade, hear your parents talk about the housing market crash. Feel confused because the houses all seem to be standing. Prepare to move to Boston where your dad finds work. You've been there once because your mom's parents live there. While wrapping dishes with newspaper and packing books into cardboard boxes one afternoon, Miss Allie knocks on the door. She's going out of town, she explains, and won't be here to say good-bye when you leave. Jump when you see her and tell her you're going to Boston. You're excited because there will be snow. She says "I know" and looks at you with a small smile. But it's only a lip smile and you wonder why she's sad.

Tell your third grade class on the last day of show and tell that you're moving to Boston in two weeks. Cry unexpectedly at the front of the classroom. Realize why Miss Allie cried. Sniffle in your desk and watch the teacher's aide take the alphabet banners down from the wall for the summer. The letters are blurred and runny. Play the alphabet game in your head until the letters on the banner are no longer blurred and runny.

*

Summer in Boston seems short because the heat isn't sticky and doesn't last until October. The night before the first day of school, you can't sleep. The unfamiliar tree outside your window casts a shadow on your wall. Count the shadow branches to feel sleepy. Sleep stays away so

you play the alphabet game. A, alligator. B, blimp. C, camp, D, dirt. Fall asleep around J.

People talk funny, and you have to ask them to repeat words. New classmates ask you to say words too—pajamas, caught, mom. “Yes, ma’am! Yes, sir!” they imitate. Enjoy the attention at first. After a month, get annoyed and refuse to repeat words. Raise your hand less often in class and rely on facial expressions and gestures at lunch more than speaking. People assume you’re just really shy.

Jacob sits beside you in science class. He invites you to his house which is in a seaport. Boats and large rocks with rounded edges line the harbor at the town’s center. The sand is darker and rockier than the sand in Florida. Instead of tracing letters, you would have to arrange stones to spell words. Jacob’s dad owns a sail boat, and on windy days in the fall you and Jacob go sailing. The two of you stand at the stern while Jacob’s dad steers. The boat pulls from the harbor, beyond the bay and into the open Atlantic. Ask if it’s possible to sail from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. A bit far and long, they say. The waves are choppy and slap against the sides of the boat. Stare away from the diminishing harbor and look south because both oceans open toward Antarctica. The horizon looks like a stray pencil mark, long and faint, unintentional. Wonder if your mother ever looked at the same line from a different beach. Maybe from a pier, or a boat or balcony. Wonder if your mother and father are living.

Spend so much time with Jacob that by high school you’ve developed a Boston accent. At first you imitate Jacob, store away phrases, mutter his tone and inflection to yourself. Eventually, say “wicked cool” without thinking twice. Miss Florida. Worry you’ll forget it. So fake a mild Southern accent for two years.

Play soccer because your mom won’t let you play lacrosse. “Your bones are too little,” she explains. At ten when you first started playing, you once scored five goals in one game. Now, the high school team is really talented. You’re not the star anymore, but you start and play most of the game. Miss a practice because you broke your nose and had to go to the doctor. At school, feel tough walking around with a broken nose.

Miss another soccer practice for your grandmother's funeral. It's March and still cold. The wake is held at a little brown funeral home between a dentist's office and a taco joint. The clouds and dark paneling make it dim in the funeral home. When you stand before the open casket, look at your grandma's face once then don't look again. Instead, focus on her hands. Small fair hands with a ring on her index finger but nothing on the ring finger because she was divorced. Study your own hands. Even at the end of winter they're tanned and long. Wish yours looked like your grandma's. But they don't look like grandma's because she's your mom's mom not your mother's mother.

The next day is the funeral and it feels more like spring. But when it comes time to bury your grandma, the sun has gone away and it's grey and cold. Crows pick at dirt clods. They squawk when they get too near each other. Wonder if your mother had a ceremony like this. Wonder if she hasn't yet. A knot constricts your throat. Your mom looks at you and puts an arm around your shoulder. She rubs your back as if to say, "It's fine, Raja. You're fine." Swallow until there's no point. Play the alphabet game quickly and begin with soccer players. Andres Iniesta. Bastian Schweinsteiger. Cristiano Ronaldo. David Beckham. Cheat and count last names too. Samuel Eto'o. Run out of names and extend the category to all athletes. Lose focus but avoid watching relatives who aren't really your relatives place roses on the casket. Look at the crows instead. They're mean birds and you want to kick them and scream at them. Don't. Because they blur and disappear anyway when the alphabet game fails. Your mom's hand keeps making small slow circles on your shaking back. Your nose drips. She thinks it's for her mom. Pretend it's from the cold so she doesn't know it's for yours.

*

Return to Florida because your dad takes a new job. Arrive a couple weeks before the start of your last year of high school. Know no one because your old classmates go to a different high school. It was so long

ago they probably wouldn't remember you anyway. The hallways are long and brightly lit and as unfamiliar as the students. Get a detention on the third day because you parked in a teacher's spot by accident. Feel like a freshman again.

Lose the fake southern accent. Try to speak with a Boston one. It sounds real to your classmates. They ask where you're from. Remember India, Florida, and Boston but say Massachusetts. Get confused about which continent is home.

Begin wearing soccer shirts from your high school team in Boston because you're afraid you'll forget you ever lived there. The satellite image on Google Earth of your old house still shows your dad's car parked on the street. The trees are splotchy oranges and reds. The image must have been taken in mid-October when the trees turn.

Ask your mom to tell you about India. Learn that you were premature and your mother wouldn't have been able to care for you. "They didn't think you would survive for long." Believe that India would be home if you could see your mother's syllables spelled out. Ask what her name is. Your mom wasn't given your mother's name.

After school one day, drive to the first house you lived in after India. The one with the boat. The house next to yours has been torn down and a new one is under construction. Two young boys throw a football on your old driveway. Imagine them dropping toothpaste on the counter in your old bathroom or eating in the kitchen where you used to watch Miss Allie cook. Look at your house until it looks unfamiliar. Get a strange feeling. Almost like hunger, but a tightening instead of a hollowing. Distract yourself by starting at Z to make the game challenging. Then say hello to Miss Allie's parents. She works in New Orleans now. The basketball hoop is still on her driveway, its backboard cracked and dirty like a sand bucket left on the beach all through the off-season.

Try to avoid the strange feeling—don't return to your old street, vow not to visit India or Boston. But the feeling isn't rooted in geography.

*

Graduate and attend college in New York City. A black fence and barbed wires surround the college in the Bronx. But within the gates are gothic stone buildings and winding paths and grass quads with trees. Water stains show on the dorm ceiling and walls. Think about the students who lived in this room last year and whether the same marks were there for them.

In September, you walk around the city often after class. It's hot and the air conditioning drips feel like spit. Buy a peach from a fruit stand and explore Central Park. The peach's flesh isn't cool like you hoped, but it's sweet so you eat it anyway. Listen to tourists meet other tourists. Hear them talk about where they're from. In class, in the dining hall, in the dorms, try to decide if you should even mention where you were born. Wonder whether it counts.

Tulips and daffodils in Central Park break through the half-frozen dirt in April. Hate the tulips. Hate them because they're the most intentional of flowers. Evenly planted in one place. They sprout in neat rows like cans on a grocery shelf. Learn in biology class that a tulip bulb dug up in midsummer is not the same bulb planted that fall. It's her offspring. In preparation for the next generation, your professor lectures, bulbs divide while blooming. In mid-April, your mom and dad visit for parents' weekend. Everyone but you looks like tulip bulbs that weekend.

While waiting underground for the 4 train downtown one day, notice a shadow over the subway grate above you. It's an object, indeterminate. Maybe an umbrella someone dropped or piece of trash blown out from a garbage truck. It's a dark spot over the yellowing plastic covering. All shape and no detail.

It's what your mother would look like if you tried to describe her.

Sinead O' Donovan

RIVER

What is waterly swimming frantic
drowning in,
but life?

Because the salmon, fleshy ancient
teeth creak up the gush and press,
up the churning thrall of this.
And life goes on and on and is
anciently, oceanly, endlessly, and
we go on and on and on,
against the push and tumble-press of
this strange and flailing force,
marching the fluid undulations higher,
eyeless, boneless, muscle presses us on
and up and on and we reel and
rail until we reach the source-
or die.

A FAREWELL

We were standing alone in the parking lot. The sun glistened on my wet and bruised pink face as my mom held my hand. She was in her favorite mini skirt and black stilettos. My mom coolly followed with her eyes the wave of cars rumbling past us as I kneeled to the ground and pressed my face between her legs. The pink flowers, fastened across the top of my dress, smashed against her white skin. I gripped tightly to her legs and wished that we were sitting in the backseat of Fred, our 79' Malibu, and I could lay my head down on her leg again and fall asleep with my hand in hers. But now, her tight grip on my hand was fading. I stepped onto her feet before she could walk away. I tried hard to remember all the nights we sang along to Jackson's "Billie Jean" as mom hustled Fred down the road and I helped her scout out a place to park for the night.

She pulled me off her legs and hastily straightened out my dress, reminding me of when my mom bought me my first and only dress. Stepping out of Fred, we needed to stretch our legs after a chilly night. A man and a woman, freely swinging a little girl in a pink dress in between their arms, wandered happily down the sidewalk by us. I stared at the family, even after they passed us. Turning me around, my mom urged me to keep walking but tears gradually leaked down my face. She held me and asked me why I was crying and I could only tell her that I wanted the pink dress the girl was wearing. That night, my mom bought me my first dress. Now there I was, wearing my pink dress but my shoulders trembled forcefully in my misery, confused by the deadness plastered across my mom's face.

"Life's a bitch, sweetie."

The smoke of her cigarette flew away from me. The stilettos echoed in the parking lot as she returned to Fred, never turning back.

Joshua O'Brien

THE WATERING HOLE

We were sitting near the watering hole. In Wisconsin they call it a bubbler. The sun was nowhere to be found, he'd been down for hours.

The age old question came up. What kind of animal did you want to become? We'd settled on a point when the wild things arrived. They emerged, transoms slamming, reeking of hullabaloo, beckoning towards us with their kaleidoscopic eyes, as if to ask their own question, are there any eyes on the bubbler? They brought mates and risked carpet covered vomit in order to lap at the watering hole.

We soon came to the conclusion not to be a wild thing—but it was so hard not to see through those telescopic eyes into the water and see our own face rippling with the starry dynamo behind us. It was so easy to get lost in those glazies, emptied completely yet spilling over with black.

To look over her vibrating shoulders, and see a golden dame, face rain speckled, begging the sun to rise. And ask the age old question again, go ahead. Why, and are we the lost generation? And when will we crash smelling of hullabaloo and Russians-white, waiting, wondering.

By the watering hole we sat and wept. Chills ran over our bodies like malarial mosquitoes, and we thought that we were immune because of our name, and because of Our Father.

Meanwhile some of our friends had it all figured out, but we tried to listen with eyes, impossible, our chest tried beating drums with fists,

hollow, as our wills accepted an easy fix, checkmate.

The wild things tortoise crawled, receding back into young plastic shells.
But they never learned how to swim, so they gasped for air intermixed
deserted dry heaves. And we're left to wonder the age old question

THE WEDDING by Douglas Angulo



ADEQUATE SOLUTIONS

Once there was a boy. He was normal-looking, as boys go. He had short brown hair, and short baby feet, and short eyelashes, and a tiny sense of humor. He lived in a little glass box, next to a monkey named ‘The monkey’ and a tri-coloured Netherland Dwarf rabbit named ‘The rabbit.’ If the boy had any parents at all, they were taken away from him when he was very young. For, after all, it was unreasonable to expect a boy *and* his parents to live in a little glass box. In addition, the boy’s parents (if he had any at all) were far from interesting and certainly not worth the extra funding. It was their unique spawn that caught the attention of the scientific community. Somehow, in a fated bout of inebriation, a (perhaps) hairdresser from North Olmstead, Ohio and a (perhaps) accountant from Pittsburg made, in a short and frenzied eight seconds, a child who could understand everything.

“A child who can understand everything?” said Joe, “Impossible.”

What Joe didn’t account for was the distinction between ‘know’ and ‘understand.’ A child who can understand everything is at least a somewhat comprehensible notion. We somehow can wrap our heads around the idea that we humans have different degrees of intelligence and that—generally speaking—this is correlated with how well we can concoct a perspective on the natural world that actually makes sense.

A child who ‘knows’ everything—as in a child who bursts forth from the womb spewing Avogadro’s number and quotes from Airwolf - is preposterous.

And the boy was far from preposterous.

Every day, at eight-thirty, he woke up and ate a bowl of cereal and an orange. At eight forty-five, he got dressed and brushed his teeth. At nine

o'clock, the boy would sit down in a silver chair and a stork-ish looking man would ask him questions and poke him through a small slot in the wall. At noon he ate a vegetable and turkey sandwich without mayonnaise, and from twelve-thirty to six-thirty were the tests, the scans—MRI, CT, PET, among others—after which he ate a bowl of pasta. And from seven to ten he learned about history and friendship and science.

And all the while the boy never left the little glass box.

Perhaps it is important to take a moment and address the stork-ish man. He was a doctor of thirteen years and a smoker of twelve. And—if that paradox weren't enough—had two lovely children of his own that he often wished he too could place in a little glass box, although they wouldn't be half as interesting. Each day he took the expressway to the lab, which presented several notable problems of its own—the most irksome of which was the traffic.

"Sorry I'm late dear," the stork-ish man said often to his wife, "Traffic, you know."

"I don't know why you don't take the back roads, Ron," she would reply tiredly, "They're much quicker."

But if the stork-ish man was anything, he was careful. His greatest fear was that someone would follow him to work, and then discover that he smoked cigarettes. And, as the stork-ish man knew too well from all the police shows that his wife made him watch, it was much easier to trail a car on deserted back roads than on the expressway. He drove back the same way because he thought it would look suspicious if he drove to work one way and came home another.

In any case, the stork-ish man liked his job. He liked it even more since they got the boy: people had always been more interesting to him than animals. He especially loved dissecting the cadavers in medical school, but he wasn't allowed that privilege until the boy's mind had developed fully, at which point a live brain would cease to be useful. The stork-ish man also felt a sense of importance in his work, as he was the only one allowed direct contact with the boy.

He would show the boy flashcards and pictures, and teach the boy

about jet-propulsion engines and human behavior, among lots of other things, to which the boy would respond with whether or not he understood. After that, just to be sure, the stork-ish man would push a worksheet and a pencil through the slot, and the boy would demonstrate his understanding of the matter through application. The boy would only complete these exercises when appropriate, of course - they were suited more for Lorenz equations and less for softer things like religion and pants.

A typical exchange would go like this:

“Pajamas: a set of clothing, usually soft and loose-fitting.”

The stork-ish man would then peer over his clipboard into the little glass box.

“I understand,” the boy would reply, “Pajamas are for sleeping in.”

-or-

“...the theory, developed in 1927, stated that the momentum and position of a particle cannot be known simultaneously.”

“I understand,” the boy would say, “Electrons, for example, exhibit wave-like and mass-like tendencies, and so their observation (involving light) also can change their velocity.”

-or-

“Love is a feeling of strong and/or constant affection.”

The stork-ish man then held up a picture of a man, a woman, and a rose.

“I understand. He gives the rose to her because he loves her.”

“And what does he feel?”

“Attachment, sentimentality, devotion.”

“In light of that, explain the phenomenon of ‘unrequited’ love . . .”

Most of the time, the boy’s knowledge outstripped everything the stork-ish man knew himself. And, as the directive from on high was to develop the boy’s brain in every way conceivable, the stork-ish man often had to read books aloud as opposed to tutoring the boy himself. The censorship on books was very strict: the stork-ish man, as well as his su-

periors, believed firmly (and correctly) that books tended to give people ideas. The dull, drab, dismal, dry, and dreary textbooks he gave directly to the boy to read, as they proved little threat.

Notwithstanding, the boy heard and read his fair share of books. In particular, the stork-ish man was often impressed—although he made great effort not to show it—by the boy’s dissection of philosophy. And, although considerably abridged, the boy listened intently to them all—Hume, Locke, Rée, Nietzsche, and pronounced them sensical or otherwise. Often—and this was truly fascinating—he would predict the supporting arguments merely from the conclusions.

This was most evident with a summary of J.L. Mackie so heavily pre-digested that a baby bird would chalk it up as inedible. It was an especially stormy day, and the stork-ish man was especially irritable. His last smoke was eight hours ago, and unsuccessful. The lab didn’t have any eaves, and every time the end would catch the rain would put it out. As such, he was more gruff with the boy than he usually was.

“ . . .that the existence of a Being is inconsistent with known logic. To say that evil can still exist despite a Being held to be omnipotent, omniscient, and—”

“Omnibenevolent,” the boy said. He was perched, just at the edge of the silver chair, and his short little elbow rested softly on the slot.

The stork-ish man felt slightly peeved—mostly due to his acute lack of nicotine. He pursed his lips and continued on; “ . . .and omnibenevolent is absurd. If it is certain that evil exists, reason dictates that an all-powerful Being would be capable of eliminating all evil. He is also assumed to be benevolent, which indicates that He would be obligated to eliminate as much evil as possible. As all is possible for an omnipotent Being, the presence of evil means that a Being that would want to eliminate evil and is capable of eliminating evil couldn’t possibly exist. It wouldn’t make sense.”

“I understand,” the boy said quietly, “The three are mutually exclusive.”

The stork-ish man shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. “There is

an adequate solution to the problem of evil, namely—”

“To abandon one of the premises.”

“Namely,” the stork-ish man plowed on, becoming more irritable by the minute, “to—” he squinted and cleared his throat again, “abandon one of the premises,” he grumbled. “If one argues that evil does not exist, or that this Being is actually not omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then the remaining two premises can coexist quite happily.”

The stork-ish man put down that script to move on to the next one.

“John Searle, born in July of 1932, is most known for his argument ‘The Chinese—’”

“That’s it?”

The stork-ish man paused, annoyed. “What do you mean, ‘That’s it?’” he snapped, “Of course ‘that’s it.’ That’s all he had to say.”

The boy looked away.

“What?” the stork-ish man snapped again, “What is it?”

“I would have thought that there could be more than one adequate solution.”

The stork-ish man willed himself to be patient. “There are more than one. There are three.”

Here the stork-ish man meant that each of the three solutions was the abandonment of a separate premise. Technically there were seven solutions—because one could also abandon two or even all three premises, but the boy had no desire to bring that up, not when the man was already upset.

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

The stork-ish man waited.

“I thought—”

The stork-ish man sighed. “Do you understand it?”

The boy nodded.

“Well, then,” the stork-ish man said.

“John Searle, born in July of 1932, is most known for his argument ‘The Chinese Room . . .’”

The boy had never hated anyone before, but after that he started to

hate the stork-ish man. He began to hate his pristine lab coat, and the way the smell of smoke wafted through the slot in the little glass box. He began to hate each question, each sandwich and orange and pencil that was pushed through the slot. He began to hate the little glass box, and how the air was always still and humid. He began to hate making his bed in the morning, and he hated the florescent lights and the once or twice a month when they forgot to clean The rabbit's cage.

But all the while the boy was learning, and he learned most importantly to never ask questions, because that was what upset the stork-ish man most. He learned about special relativity and general relativity and classical mechanics and quantum mechanics and astrophysics and theoretical physics. The stork-ish man's superiors pulled a few strings and got a hold of some groundbreaking research on the stock market. The stork-ish man asked the boy to cure cancer and he did. The stork-ish man asked the boy to solve P vs. NP and he did.

And every night, when the boy was sure that it was too dark for the security cameras to make out his face, he shook with tears that wouldn't come, and when he finally fell asleep he dreamed of rain and chocolate-chip pancakes and little brick houses until eight thirty the next morning.

"I know that perhaps you wish you were like the other children."

The boy looked up. The stork-ish man was sitting on the other side of the little glass wall like he usually was, but his clipboard was down on his lap and there were bags under his eyes.

"Do you think that we have to understand things for them to be true?"

The boy furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"All of this," he gestured about the room, "All of this is for science. The answer is yes." The stork-ish man began to tap his clipboard with his pen, in beats of ten. "We must understand. We have to understand. Otherwise..."

He looked at The monkey.

"Everyone wants what you have," the stork-ish man said, "Don't you see?"

The boy looked at the stork-ish man, and—though he hated him with

all his heart—he understood. The boy had never experienced it himself, but he wagered that if he was ever faced with a problem he could not solve he would certainly go mad. He nodded.

“I understand,” the boy said heavily, “This is for science.”

The boy’s life changed in the middle of lunch. He was halfway through his vegetable and turkey sandwich without mayonnaise when the door burst open without warning. The hinges came clean off, and the wood splintered into shards and rained down through the air. Bits and pieces landed on the little glass box, and a few found their way into The rabbit’s cage.

The boy had only seen pictures of the police, so he was surprised by how deafening the noise was, even through the little slot. They were dressed in black, with black helmets and guns and they were shouting at the stork-ish man, who was frozen in shock and disbelief. The monkey began to screech and The rabbit buried herself under her bedding. But the boy watched, silently, as they crossed the room and grabbed the stork-ish man by his arms.

There was a beat or two before the stork-ish man went berserk, but as soon as the third policeman took hold of him he began to thrash and scream.

“I was going to quit! I was going to quit!”

He kicked his legs out wildly, writhing in their grip.

“Don’t take me away, I was going to quit I swear!”

His eyes rolled back in his head. His body contorted bonelessly—violently—back against their armored chests.

“Check my desk—I’ve got the gum, the patches—”

His hand smashed against a sharp corner of The monkey’s cage. He screamed. Blood spurted from his palm and arced delicately over the walls of the little glass box like a painter might grace a canvas. The boy stared numbly at him.

“I was going to wean myself off! No—I was going cold turkey!” Spittle flew from his mouth and landed on the little glass box. “Full-on cold

turkey! I swear!”

The boy cocked his head and watched the thick, sticky puddles inch their way down.

“I swear!”

“I swear!”

“I swear!”

The boy woke up in a hospital. The police let him alone for a while, but after that they wanted to know what happened. They gave him food, and blankets, and ice water, but the boy was still mute. He stared sightlessly ahead while doctors and nurses bustled about. And, once the confusion had died down a bit, a male officer bent him down and asked him for his name. The boy told the officer that he didn't have one; the officer looked sad to hear that.

“You stay here,” he said to the boy. Once the officer had left, the boy wondered why he would ever leave or where he would possibly go. He began to laugh uncontrollably, and the nurses and doctors increased their bustling and the policemen increased their question-asking.

Finally a woman stepped through the doorway. She had long, black hair with streaks of gray, and a large, quiet face. And when she held up her hand the doctors and nurses stopped their bustling and the policemen stopped their question-asking. The crowd parted slightly for the two of them—for the boy noticed that in her wake was the kind policemen from before.

And, with such dignity and poise that he could hardly refuse, the woman took the boy's hand and lead him out of that place.

They drove for two hours in silence. The boy, even for all his fear, could hardly tear his eyes away from the flashing scenery. There were llamas and grass and roads and clouds and homeless people. The boy, accustomed to the lab and the little glass box, couldn't decide whether to run and shout or be still. He compromised by being fidgety.

The woman's name, he learned, was Patricia. She never said it, but once they arrived at the house he was able to peek at some of the return

addresses on a few letters that she hadn't mailed yet. She was a judge, and part-time professor, he had deduced, and had settled down after she had retired.

The house was beautiful. It was small, and tight, but it felt earthy like the little glass box never did. When the boy opened the window it smelled delicious, and it reminded him of a time when the stork-ish man had slipped up once and brought an unedited copy of a poem about the forest. The words dripped over his mind again, and he realized that the author had to have smelled the same sweet, dull smell as the boy was smelling then. It wasn't a kind of smell that could be mentally manufactured.

After a day, the boy went downstairs.

"Patricia?" he asked. Patricia looked up, slightly surprised, from slicing up carrots. Her hair was swept back, and her smooth skin was beginning to sag a bit with age.

"Yes?"

"How do you know that officer?"

She smiled slightly and wiped her hands on a towel.

"He's my cousin."

The boy nodded.

"I understand. He's one of your parent's sibling's children."

She chuckled softly. "Yes, I suppose so. He told me that you didn't have a name."

The boy suddenly felt very shy.

"I don't have a name."

"Did you ever want one?"

The boy remembered then the stork-ish man, and the little glass box.

"Do you think that we have to understand things for them to be true?" the boy asked quietly. Patricia thought about that.

"I'm not sure," she said, "We would love to know, wouldn't we?"

A few minutes passed.

"What do you like to eat?" she asked.

The boy swallowed. He hadn't eaten in nearly two days, and was quite

hungry.

“I’ve never had a vegetable turkey sandwich with mayonnaise.”

She grinned. “Is that right?”

“I’ve had one without mayonnaise. But I’ve never had mayonnaise, and I imagine it would be delicious.”

“Mmm.” Patricia nodded. She called up her neighbour—a sleepy old woman—to watch the boy while she was gone, and four hours later she returned with some turkey and a jar of mayonnaise.

The sleepy old neighbour had left an hour ago to coop up her hens, but the boy, who was quite used to being left on his own, didn’t mind.

Patricia set her grocery bags down on the counter and smiled.

“Time to make them, now.”

The boy began to smile as well and Patricia unearthed two butter knives and two plates. All in all, it was a sloppy mess, but not too terribly awful (seeing as this was his first attempt at making a sandwich, and including mayonnaise, which can be quite tricky to get on just right). Even though the boy was shy and scared and nervous, he was also very excited, and—for the first time in a long time—he felt indescribably happy.

“Anyway, why were you gone so long? Mrs. Lauller snores.”

Patricia laughed. Her eyes crinkled pleasantly at the corners.

“Well, the market here didn’t have any mayonnaise, and the nearest supermarket is an hour and a half away. I had to stop for gas on the way back.”

The boy paused, the butter knife hovering above his sandwich.

“An hour and a half times two is three. Three hours.”

“I—yes, I guess it is.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “Three hours.”

“What is it?” Patricia asked, putting down her two slices of bread.

“You drove three hours to get mayonnaise,” the boy said.

“Are you alright?” she asked. She put a hand on his shoulder.

“You drove three hours to get mayonnaise,” the boy said again, “You drove three hours.”

“What’s wrong?”

He thought of the stork-ish man, and the slot, and the smell of rabbit urine and rubbing alcohol. He remembered how the little glass box threw reflections onto the walls of the lab, and the sound that the door made when the stork-ish man walked through. He remembered each number, each formula, each tiny qualifier that the stork-ish man spoke, and his face in the end.

He looked down at the mayonnaise in his short little hand and, a wet feeling began to prick at the corner of his eyes. His small chest began to shake and shiver, and hot tears spilled over his cheeks until he couldn't see.

"I don't understand," he said numbly, "I don't understand."

Kate Girdhar

WITHIN AND WITHOUT

A mountain beyond the moon.
A finger on my lips.
And everywhere before me,
the people start to dance.
To dance, forgetting pursuit.
at once ignoring and celebrating their
own imaginings.
And I, I see the mountain.

A valley through the fog.
A whispered lullaby in my ear.
And everyone around me lies
on blankets beneath the
star-speckled sky.
To gaze, enveloped and enveloping
with the sky above and the earth
beneath.
And I, I put one timid foot
forward
and stumble on.

A horizon up ahead.
A breath of wind through my hair.
And everything near me stops
to bask in
the majesty of the cool heat and

listen to
the desert's sound.
And I, I focus on that
ever blurry line.

A message in a bottle.
A poem caught in my mind.
And all with me rejoice in the
mystery and grandeur of the
predictable unknown that
has washed up in the tides kissing
their toes.
And I, I open the bottle
with one swift motion.

Olivia Godby

DAVID OF THE COFFEE SHOP

David of the coffee shop thought it was Halloween.

It was October 3rd.

But for all intents and purposes, that was close enough for the both of us, I suppose. I should have asked him why he wasn't wearing a costume. I was wearing a purple raincoat and pigtails. I was dressed up as my childhood self.

David of the coffee shop held my hand and introduced himself.

I told him I liked his name because it's a very good name. It's also my dad's name. I told him my own name and he used it often. I like those kinds of people. Calling someone by name is like looking someone in the eye. I should do that more often. It makes me uncomfortable that that makes me uncomfortable. But not David of the coffee shop, no siree. He just stood by my solitary table in the back room and tried his best to look me in the eye even though he couldn't stop moving his head and he said my name like it really mattered.

So I asked David of the coffee shop if he wanted to sit with me.

He hesitated, took a seat diagonal from me at the table, and asked me if I went to Notre Dame. I asked him if he went to Notre Dame. Neither of us answered. It wasn't important because we were both still humans regardless of where we intended to get a piece of paper certifying that we were valuable.

David of the coffee shop did not go to Notre Dame. I knew that for sure. In a way it was a relief because then he wouldn't ask me what dorm I lived in or what I was studying. Instead he asked me if I liked baseball.

I told him yes I liked baseball but that I didn't know much about baseball. He was going to watch the Pirates game later so he had to go home

and get his hat but he didn't have to go just yet so I was glad he could sit and talk with me for a while. I came to David's coffee shop because I had lots of work to do but I was doing the work with the intention of trying to understand humanity a little so I thought why not just talk to a real person instead because that was probably better anyway.

David of the coffee shop picked up my copy of the *Phaedrus* and then he put it back down and he said this:

“Plato.”

And to be honest I was surprised he could read and just when I thought about how arrogant it was of me to assume he was illiterate he surprised me again and said something about philosophy. I smiled and agreed because I probably knew just as much about philosophy as David of the coffee shop but he didn't have to write a paper to figure out that he knew about it.

Then I asked him what else he knew about which was probably a dumb question but I wanted to know what David of the coffee shop knew so I could know it too. He told me he knew about World War I so I thought back to my high school world history class and remembered something about Germany and maybe Austria and in my head there were images of men in gray-green suits falling into ditches and there was smoke everywhere. I mumbled a half-formed question to David of the coffee shop and asked him wasn't there some king that got shot and that's when the men started falling. Before I could finish I heard him say, “Archduke Franz Ferdinand” and I thought oh yes that's him and then I thought about the band that bore his name.

A woman who seemed important walked past us and told David of the coffee shop to let me do my work. Apparently she saw him a lot. I wondered if I'd see him a lot, too, if I came back more often.

I was hoping he wouldn't take her advice so I laughed and told him that he could stay as long as he pleased. He looked down at his coffee cup and asked me where I was from. I told him I was from California and he responded that he was going to the BYU game. He asked me if I was going to the USC game when he remembered that I was from California

and part of me wanted to lie and say yes because I just wanted to make him happy but I told him the truth that I was going to be home for fall break and that I would watch it on TV just like him.

I could have seen the stadium if I looked out the window and I would have given David of the coffee shop my season tickets had I had them with me. He showed me that he was wearing his Notre Dame sweatpants even though they were just plain blue with a few miscellaneous white stains on them and I wished I had Notre Dame pants. Then he said he had to go and he said it was nice to meet me and he gave me a kiss on the cheek and walked away.

I touched my cheek and noticed how it stung with gentility and I could feel the resonance of the human being responsible as he stumbled away.

David of the coffee shop came back with a hat on a little while later and called my name from across the shop and told me goodbye.

“Goodbye, David!” I sang.

David David David.

LIVING FAITH: WOMEN CARRY THEIR HOLY MOTHER IN TUSCANY



by Declan Feeley



OPALFRUIT CATASTROPHE

Shining pearls of sugar drip from trees, drop to the glistening forest floor below. Solid reds, yellows, oranges, and pinks paint the tropical mosaic. The parrots that flit through the thick branches are soft dun-colors, to stand out. Their cries and the steady plinking of saccharine plops are a soft sort of music. This is the gift of one of the last gods, whom we have no wish to kill. Our weapons are tired, and sweets are plenty. King Candy sits with taffy scepter atop chocolate throne, casting his benevolent caramel eye over her happy subjects and marzipan lands. The beautiful owls and hawks of the night still sleep, with tawny wings and sour beaks. They will not awaken. By the end of this day King Candy shall have perished and the land be left in ruin, lost to an opal fruit catastrophe.

Fanatics don't want faith or doctrine, just something to die for. But the old causes faded, swept away by minds' undiscerning mop-water. New rocks were needed to cling to. And so, Manners arose as the modern religion, almost too simple for daily devotion. Simply, do good and make the world a kinder place for those around you. What clean beast, slouching towards Britain to be born, could have imagined the consequence? It was enough to twist, for those men and women who eat with lurking mouths and frowning eyes. Such spoiled slime were almost happy, to begin their little war. They had never liked sweets, anyways.

They met in places that felt dark, though fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. To plot and plan, frothing themselves by bits and whips into a frenzy of action. It needed to be no just bold but a blast, to last as a threat to what others they defined as Other. With the power and promise of the implacable force they imagined themselves to be.

A Bomb
Nothing Simpler

A BOMB!
NOTHING SUDDENER

a bomb.
nothing sweeter.

They died as they dreamed, under sweet syrupy trees insensible of the
opalline fruit just ripening. The blast lifted the forest to the heavens for
an instant
glorious sucrose sunrise
then collapsed into smoke and ruin
our doom
hurting as they wanted us to.

Vienna Wagner

HOW TO CAST A PRAYER

Remove your shoes,
your hard heels, your softened
sneakers, your knee-length
leather boots and let dark
water swallow your shins.
Plant both legs in a garden of gunky
green algae, an altar cloth
flung across the sharp
reflection of a Baton Rouge
sky. Hear bullfrogs belt
blues, deep bass
bridges to a chorus
of blackbirds atop cypress
columns with wide-ribbed
roots. Feel the wet
wind slap your face like hot
breath, a humid kiss
on an August afternoon.
When you've sunken too deep,
unwind along the bayou bank
by cagey crawdads, and rest
your clay-coated soles on a hollow
log. Let the Louisiana sun bake
all ten toes in God's great kiln
until jeweled dragon
flies creep across your earthen
hide.

PORTRAIT OF A POET

I wear a scholar's
frown, lips cinched in a slim,
straight line behind some book,
The Confessions of Augustine, or
Space from Zeno to Einstein. I try
to smile, but my face feels taut
like a canvas pulled across too broad
a stretcher. I bear Minerva's grey
eyes and insomniac circles I conceal
behind thick plastic glasses, the kind
my mother wore before featherweight
lenses and invisible frames. My spectacles
swallow my eyebrows, twin bushes, I prune
with small, steel pincers; I am a hermit
crab—a crabby poet—the worst
kind who—like Dickinson—thinks
dashes are sexy. My mouth is a dash,
and my pupils are periods that dare
you, Dear Reader, to ask,
“Where are the words?”

SAINT MARY OF EGYPT

I sold myself to Alexandria.
A public prostitute, I never refused
a soul, but when I tried to enter
Jerusalem's Church of the Holy
Sepulchre, the sacred threshold
shunned my courtesan feet.

The Virgin Mother told me to take
my body back, to shed my silk
robes and journey naked
as Eve across the Jordanian
desert. For forty-seven years,
I slept in an ancient ocean
bed and let sand massage
my muscles until my skin
turned soft as suede, velvet
leather tanned in the unending
Arab summertime.

I sunned myself on red rocks
and braided my long white mane
until I loved every fraction
of the hoary figure God molded
for me when his hands broke
Adam's rib and fashioned
an hourglass around that bent
bone.

Madeline Hirsch

A LIGHT THAT NEVER GOES OUT

I first committed arson when I was eleven, lighting the porta-potty in the St. Francis Assisi's church parking lot aflame with a stolen Bic. I have always loved the way fire curls and waves, a smoking, tangerine ocean of my own creation. A glossy armoire, as its curves combust in fiery glory, is more beautiful aflame than when it occupies your beige living room, keeping your grandmother's copy of Frankenstein safe. Arson is art by destruction. I liberate the objects I set on fire and the people who own them. The modern world deifies possessions, holding them up as evidence of our control over nature, but man has never conquered fire. That's why I set fires, because I can, because no one else has the courage.

The urge to ignite, that's what my friends and I always called it. No pyromaniac has the same reasons, but all have the same destructive compulsion. With age, I found that a true inferno requires more than one arsonist, and sought others to help me. I met Mercy first, tossing lit matches into a rusty dumpster outside our school, when I was fourteen. Mercy liberally peppered her sentences with profanity, and her violent copper hair either came from a box or genetic good fortune. Allegedly, she set fires and dressed in black to express "mourning for our generation." Despite her pretensions, she had an uncanny knack for avoiding the police, and I valued her contribution.

A few months into our friendship, Mercy and I met Jack and Thomas. Scoping out an abandoned garage, we found them, shitfaced off cheap gin and sniffing glue. Jack was a few years older than us and banned from half the pubs this side of London. Chaos and Bacchus were his two loves, and he pursued them relentlessly. Thomas was Jack's mountainous best friend with a 10-year old's reading level. They didn't even think twice

about helping us burn their hideout, and immediately became part of our crew. Fiercely loyal and relatively harmless to those who knew them, Jack and Thomas became our resident window-breakers.

I met Reed last through Jack and Thomas. Jittery, caustic, quick in responses both mental and physical, Reed made most people a little uneasy. He had an almost mystical insight into how a fire would spread. I once asked him the reason for his pyromania. I'll never forget the response. With a hand-rolled cigarette still between his lips, he said "I have dreams. Dreams of inferno and conflagration, where the Holy Spirit compels me to burn. It's my calling, my Pentecost.... whatever you want to call it." I never questioned motivations a second time.

In the beginning, our fires were pitiful, destroying dumpsters and the few small trees left in our London suburb. From the outside, it probably seemed as though we burned as a form of vague teenage rebellion, a youthful craving for entropy, but the fact is, we never grew out of it.

By eighteen, we were breaking into abandoned warehouses and boarded-up pubs and experimenting with gasoline, matches, wood, kindling. My favorite method, which eventually became our arson signature, was attaching a lit cigarette to a box of matches, wrapping the whole thing in brown wrapping paper, then cotton bedding, and tossing it through a window. It gave us just enough time to scatter, meet at the designated watchtower (what we called the safe, usually elevated rendezvous point), and watch a red and orange aurora borealis light up the night sky.

Inevitably, the police took notice. The summer after secondary school ended, our devotion to fire became rabid, bolstered by the loss of control and disillusionment that comes with entering the adult world. I was the only one with the grades for University, and the recession guaranteed our unemployment. Free from the chokehold of school, we began burning homes, and not the seedy apartment buildings in our own neighborhood. By mid-summer, we had hit several multi-million dollar homes in Kensington, and a few newspapers ran stories. "Baffled fire department," "cotton calling-card," and "arsonist ring" were just a few choice excerpts. Flattered by the attention, we believed ourselves immortal, for-

ever elusive to the bumbling authorities.

However, the good times couldn't last forever. On August 3rd, we planned to set a swanky London townhouse aflame, the type with a Georgian facade, sterile but charming trellises, and aristocratic tenants. It began like any other fire. The five of us circled the building, masked and each holding an unlit fire pillow; Jack and Thomas poised with their bricks. Assigned to the townhouse's back, east wall, I was the only one with a view of the street. The boys let their bricks fly, and to the sound of shattering glass, I noticed three identical vans with tinted windows parked out front. To this day, I'm still unsure how the authorities knew, maybe they had the whole neighborhood on lock-down, but somehow they were ready for us.

I felt fear for the first time. Cold water rushed through my veins, an iceberg constricted my throat. As everyone lit their pillows, waiting for Mercy's whistle signal, I dropped mine and turned away, not pausing to warn them. With my back turned to my friends, my passion, my life, I sprinted down an alley, reaching the end as I heard Mercy's whistle.

My terror turned the stifling August night clammy and frigid, and I only vaguely remember hearing sirens as I tore down the streets of London. I scrambled into the first tube stop I found, not knowing or caring where it was headed. I rode buses and trains through the night, too terrified to go home, too guilty to stop moving.

I spent seven straight hours that night agonizing over what I had done, drowning in pain, self-pity, and self-loathing. Yes, I felt guilty for deserting my friends, but we had all known the consequences of our lifestyle. I later read in the papers that my friends were arrested, convicted, and jailed for millions of dollars' worth of property damage and several counts of arson, but no one ratted me out. Long ago, we had agreed to keep silent; we would protect any one of us who got away. Leaving my friends was necessary; the cops would have arrested me too, had I stayed to warn them.

No, the main reason for self-loathing was my cowardice. A true arsonist does not run for cover until the fire is lit. Where was my commitment

to the cause? With this incident, I had shown that I was no better than the average Londoner. I was like the suits working on Canary Wharf, the drunk club-goers in Camden, or even slimy politicians in Westminster: unoriginal, selfish, material—just like everyone else.

Since that night I've built a comfortable, socially acceptable life for myself. I'm a downright model citizen. I am gainfully employed. I have a résumé saved to my laptop. I wear vanilla pencil skirts and sensible kitten heels. I live in a swanky flat with a welcome mat in West London, just blocks from a house I burnt to ashes. I buy things I don't need, and go to restaurants with people I don't like.

This existence is a penance I can bear no longer; this letter is my confession. My mind is clear for the first time in five years because the lie will soon end. I'm throwing this letter out the window and smoking the final cigarette in my pack. Then, I will burn down this apartment. Whoever you are, reader, take my advice: *when there is nothing left to burn, you have to set yourself on fire.*

Jacqueline Cassidy

THE SEA

the glitter shore
caresses my mouth bruised.
it seizes
my lips to kiss.
the mouth yellows and
drinks the sea away.

THE TEXTER

Hurry the shit

Batch add

Bitch ads

Bitchass

Autocorrect hates me almost as much as god

You side with autocorrect?!

doesn't love me.

lover me

LOVE me

fuck me.

I'm obviously totally fucked.

just tried eating 99% piece of cacao cock late

choke ate

violate

Cool.

It's like eating melts dirt

I'm awake at least.

THE WIND

A wave deadens the savage sea,
since though forever tireless,
it is pacificatory; yet all subordinate
parts create a composed whole,
when a force commands unity to its domain.
Water numbly bears the coarse wind.
Neither can the clever wind feel its force,
and know its calm without existing in each its wrinkles.
Seas ever carry the tides of the placid water.
The sky, the fish, the clouds, display the translucence
in its best light, as much as they had yielded
a mastery to its strength.

THE TEXTER

Let's argue

Arguing is more about the argues

Argue era

ers

Argue-ers

Voice on.

But dude. Free will. Dude

earth doesn't matter it's all about the end game.

Voice off.

I'm pummeling despite majorly texting

majorly=mostly

I thing everyone hates me

Maybe because I'm loud or twitchy or unpredictable

=byebye awesome girls

stuck-uptiness would have turned me off eventually

Clearly there is no endgame

or I guess I've already given up or lost or whatever.

PLAYFUL HOLES

we are at war.

the Dolphins—the people of the sea.

it's only a matter of time before—the people of the land.

if Dolphins take over—seems pretty clumsy.

WHAT CAUSETH THY ANGER by Bhargava Narayana





THE AGE OF BLUE LIGHT

Caught in the undertow. Caught in the undertow. Some song like that rings out through my head as Paco and Me sit on a park bench after hours chewing Now and Laters, waiting for the bait to arrive. The bait is not jailbait, drugs, alcohol, or beady eyed crack heads, but dogs. Lost dogs to be more precise. Some people just can't live without their little chows. I remember this fifty-something divorcee—I could tell she was divorced because she had no ring, and everyone in this town has been married at least once—was feebly tossing a bone to little Sparky when the pup caught a glimpse of a tennis ball being juggled around by some tyke in a stroller. Dogs that age are nothing more than walking vats of biochemical waste, so I was tad bit surprised when that pitbull leapt fifteen yards into that stroller and tore the face off that baby. Poor kid. I think the family dedicated a tree to him or something to commemorate his memory.

Despite billboards plastered with LA's virtues as a creative refuge—closer to a Jonestown in my book—the people who make their chops here tend be simple-minded and predictable. Sure the groomed broads strolling down the parkways make the other woman in America look like some bastard subspecies, but they're just like flash paper, and with the slightest flick of a Visa Black Card or a spark of intelligence you can make them poof, poof! into nothing. The men with their sun-bleached scalps aren't much to write home about either—always concocting dream jobs for themselves where they'll be emotionally and financially fulfilled, but never getting farther than drawing *Hello Kitty* characters in the foam of some schmuck's double chai latte at Starbucks. But who am I kidding? I love it here. Where else in this fine country could simple hucksters like Paco and myself make such a killing off people with such superior facials

and manicures? One night over a couple shots of cheap Russian vodka, our roommate Jonas called us “emotional neurosurgeons” for the way we pick and prod around our subjects, but, c’mon, I prefer the term polite society has for people like us—con artists.

Take Paco for example. He was born in this very city, but never got too far in life because his parents were *illegales* and he was what they called an “anchor baby;” he got full US citizenship and all of its perks just because he plopped out of his mom in a different part of this desert. I suppose there’s a political point to be made here, but all Paco says is that he was literally born cheating and deceiving and he hasn’t looked back since. I take exception to the cheating and deceiving lingo, but the point’s still the same—we were born into this line of work. Anyhow, Paco spent a lot of time as a kid working at his parent’s fruit stand selling oranges out of the back of the family minivan, but your car is just a toothpick in a trash heap when you got ten thousand other families hitching up their cars and doing the same thing. It didn’t help that their oranges tasted like packing peanuts. College was out of the question for kids like us, but like me, he was blessed with the innate ability to make cash.

Everybody in this sprawl is self-consciously hateful of big companies, I’ll never know why, but it doesn’t approach moral outrage that bubbles up to the surface when someone mentions fast food—that’s when people start frothing at the mouth. They get so agitated that they start shelling out more of the money they don’t have to buy “organic” food. I’m always willing to stuff my gullet with cheap shit that has been living an Arctic existence in a freezer, so I was a bit skeptical as to why people would pay more money for food that doesn’t taste any better and starts to expire before you’re even home from the grocery store. Paco thought the whole thing was bullshit too, but he quickly learned that bullshit is a hot commodity and exploitation is the currency here. He took that one annoying word “organic” and stuck it on every single apple, orange, and grapefruit his family picked from their tumbleweed encrusted husk of a farm.

Short story short, it popped. The oranges still tasted like sandpaper,

but they sold like hotcakes. Seriously, lines piling up on top of lines. It was mostly comprised of poor people trying to wean their families off the type of shit that I eat, but you could spot a few neck bearded hipsters and Xanax'd housewives among the bunch. The fruit made you gag, but most of the poor people had never tasted this organic stuff, and thought that was how real oranges were supposed to taste, and spurred on by an ethic of “pain for pleasure” and a chance to mingle with the elite, never fell out of line. Paco used that money and his never-too-robust college savings to move the family fruit market out of that dingy soccer-mom van and into a respectable stand and started weighing the money after that. On top of it all, local community activists and politicians actually praised him for “making organic food accessible to the everyday person!” He was scamming the shit out of these people and was getting patted on the back for making moral progress. Sheesh. Long story short, drugs, yada yada yada, overpriced ottomans, blah blah blah, and the whole business goes to shit. Then someone opened a Whole Foods (not the Ferrari like ones you see in the Hills, this one was more of a souped-up Toyota) not too far away from his stand and poof! Just like flash paper again, nothing there. But ah! The bait! The bait!

The dogs don't come back as often as they used to. Jonas says that new street lights that cut through the park are too bright. They used to give off this distinctive yellow glow that made the street grid look like rows of corn from up above, but these new blue-tinted lights make you feel like you're in a sensory deprivation chamber or one of those electrical mosquito zappers. Good for the nighttime joggers in fear of the dudes lurking behind bushes, but bad for the dogs, whose domain resides among the industrial dumpsters scattered behind the pawn shops and taquieras. Jonas says we're living in the age of eternal light, the age of crow's feet and red eyes, the age of androids and giant armadillos. He never joins us here, because he's too busy writing a manifesto called something like “The Zen of Flying Kites at Night.” Most people think he's crazy, and me and Paco think the same, but he's not the type of crazy that rolls into a mall on Black Friday with nothing but a trench coat and an

AR-15—he's got more of the vibe that there are things in this world we can't see, 'cept for the little trails of smoke they leave behind. Makes me think we're all just ghosts with fancy wrist watches in this town. But to the matter at hand.

People come out to this park every day to get their cooped up dogs away from the apartment complex and toss around the Frisbee. It's a picturesque scene for Paco and Me to sit by and watch all day—we're professionally unemployed—but since most of these owners are more into the idea of having a dog than into the realities of scraping poop off their kitchen tiles and going for forty-five minute walks in ninety-five degree weather, there's always gonna be some control issues. We wait for the dogs because we are the ones who lose them. We set up a scent station a few blocks outside of the park—usually some red meat—and drip a bag of the juices from there into the park. Once Fido catches onto the scent its off to the races. Poof. Funny thing about dogs, though, is that if you wait long enough they'll return to the last place they saw you. People will staple ten thousand posters about a missing dog across all of Los Angeles County when all you need is a decanter of coffee, a warm sweater, and some patience. But they're too busy flipping through their Zagat guides to mind. Our nightlife comes in idle conversations on a park bench. Always waiting for the chink and jingle of the lost dogs' collars to mosey their way back where we can then pick them up and cash out by handing them back to their owners for a healthy fee. We stake out for poodles because they pay best—and the best barely pays the rent.

Paco says he can't eat any more Now and Later's. Says the brisk night is turning them from inedible to diamond cutting. I tell him to look at the shadows cast by the park lights here in the dark—how they look just like the shadows cast right around 4 p.m. Paco asks why I'm surprised and I tell him I'm not, but I feel like I'm always casting a shadow in this city and it bugs me.

Paco says his shadow has fangs.

Jonas says the best shepherd is the wolf.

I look back up at the sickly halogen light and then at Paco fishing out

bits of candy from his teeth and it strikes me that this city is a pasture of wolves, whether tossing dice behind gas station, funneling vodka and Red Bull to the rhythms of some posh club, or yes, even passing the time idly in the middle of an empty park. Everyone stirrin' with nothing to hunt but ourselves.

All of the sudden Paco says he sees a labradoodle we lured out of the park yesterday pissing on the dead baby tree. Half the breed I was looking for, but double the profit for these hybrids. I leap to my feet, and saunter through the wiry shadows of the surrounding trees. Paco rummages through his pockets looking for the doggie biscuits I told him to bring along, but he produces nothing but a few Now and Laters and one of his half-peeled oranges. A wave of anguish pours over my forehead, crashing against my eyebrows, and the thought of bagging the entire profit for myself comes to mind. Comes to mind so I can buy a warmer sweater (monogrammed), a bigger wristwatch, a bigger TV home dinner, and a bigger recliner to eat the TV dinner in. Yet in my mind I see crazy Jonas scribbling poems onto the dead boy's tree about the Age of Masks and Demolition Derbies, of Death and Boxcars, looking at me like I'm a murderer and I coolly gesture to Paco to use the Now and Laters as bait. His oranges sucked so much that they were liable to kill the pooch. Then I pounce, but the labradoodle stops peeing and scampers back to Paco, who dangles the candy above the dog's nose, only to have the dog dash through his legs. I yell at him to move his ass and I join him, because all we could do was run, no matter who was leading us, no matter where they were leading us. To the heart of the city we would run all night—like every other night before that.

GAMMAPHALLUS

Once upon a time there was a girl who would look out the window when it rained and wonder what could ever make the glimmering stars cry so hard even though they were so beautiful. Upon her silk-sheeted bed she would lie and sigh and wonder and wonder.

Her fingers grew soft and pink and fat. At times the birds would sit atop the snow-covered branches which tapped her window and lust for her wormhands.

And one day as she lay in her silk-sheeted bed sighing and wondering and wondering the Pangolin came to her. As if from nowhere it appeared and she marveled at its wonderful scales and soft pink tongue which traced over her skin in places never touched.

Tasting.

And over the years the girl fell in love. And so when the Pangolin began to slowly descend the creaky wooden stairs that led from the girl's room to the place where her grandfather sat by the fire, singing his beautiful songs, she took only the time to wrap her soft pink body in a silken sheet before she followed.

Down and down and down the two of them traveled, and as they went it grew colder, and darker, and after a time the girl realized she could no longer hear the tears that beat against her roof.

By the time they reached the place where her grandfather sat by the fire, the girl had grown thin, and the silken sheet hung like a grave shroud across her bony shoulders. She approached her grandfather slowly, fearing that she would not be recognized, but as the Pangolin's tongue traced the ice on her grandfather's cheeks she realized that her grandfather had not sung his beautiful songs for quite some time.

The Pangolin slowly crawled across her grandfather's grey tongue, down his grey throat and into the grey house of his bones.

The Pangolin feasted, and the girl wept.

But still she was in love, and so she followed the Pangolin when he made his way from the heights where she had lived and sighed and wondered for so long. The road down the mountain was very long, and in only her silken sheet the girl was very cold, but she followed even as her feet grew cold and black because she knew that the Pangolin loved her.

Above the birds circled.

After a very long time they reached the lake which lay below the mountain, and the Pangolin led her into a ferry. The ferryman was a great lecher and leered at the body of the girl with his tongue hanging from his head and his mouth stretched in a wide grin. The girl feared what her love might do and so she reluctantly removed the silken sheet from her shoulders and laid it over the ferryman's eyes so that he could not leer at her any longer.

Above, the birds circled.

By the time the ferry reached its destination the black freeze upon the girl's feet had spread, to her fingers and to her breasts and to her lips. Her hair had fallen out to line the bottom of the ferry and she worried that she was no longer beautiful and grasped at the silken sheet so that she might

cover her body. But as it came away from the ferryman's face she saw only a grinning skull beneath, and as the ferryman's bones collapsed into a heap she recoiled in horror.

The Pangolin's soft pink tongue traced her cracked teeth as her fingers tore away from her hands. She stumbled backwards and as her blackened feet fell to dust she crashed from the ferry onto the rocky shore. The Pangolin sat upon her chest, his sharp teeth shredding the blackened tissue of her breasts.

Spoken aloud, the Pangolin's last word:

“MORE”

Gammaphallus greensharp and glowing against the icy horizon.

Above them, the birds circled.

Sara McQuirk

SHE ONCE HAD SONGS TO SPOON- FEED, MAKE ME

How many eggs found their way down the drain before—

You hatched your eyes

Open, cracked-slice in a single hand—only,

Like those pros in golden aprons, and—looking,

Threw the kitchen sink in—at me,

One full of tomatoes—blood-red tomato slices

Her crinkled onionskin,

While she was too frail to lift the pitcher even,

Too frail, translucent

As she was—

When I made you, why

Did I make you holy?

Laid down grain in slabs splayed with fleshpaste,

Pride feigned—I made that bit-lip pathway to your shrine,

Split with poison-tipped pairing knives and

Bones like bent spoons,

Rickety spines in miniature,

Coiling wind-chimes caressing your

Elbow, blaming the onions

For every—go on say it—sorrow,

If you don't, I will

Eat them—my words
I mean, the words, I mean,
Of your own voice carrying, mimicking
Someone else's

Ventriliquistic—shifted as if from another ether,
This body of work, speaking through the—hands only,
So much is soldiered on the shoulders of the living, breathing
With hands only—being
Otherwise mute

And maybe the mimes had it right
When they stopped speaking—like we do,
Creaking claptrap generations,
Inflection like a question, like a cadence
Beating boxes, bleating:
Tame us, take us

Beg us—mangle me outside of time,
Take me out back and make me writhe
In self-possessive wrath,
Pluck my hard-boiled eyes
Out of their carton cups,
Stitch my lips
Shut—sew me at the seams, stuff me
Up—
I'll be your relic of way back once,
When dust was nothing more than sneezed out bunny-puffs—
Not dead skin cells,
Not living ash.

—Sashay away,

On eggshells
While, behind you, any plan could hatch

Mesmerized-vegetables—whose plug I'd pull, if and when you don't pull
mine,
In preemptive strike, I'll mime your demise,
Dumping crates of rotted
Vegetables and bones,
As the rats pour out for their own viking, rodent funerals

I lay—
Fate-laced, bloodstained, tongue-bludgeoned—scrambled,
Make me mash my
Self in lumps,
Fed-up, fork-fed, drop-dead, spoon-sunk—poached,
Make me de-boned,
Mime-mouthed, Brow-shaved, skin-bound, soul-spayed—deviled egg—
Make me defaced,
Handcuffed, yolk-pricked,
Ketchupped, clutching the armrests, gripping the pan's edge,
Expressionless as breakfast—
As pancakes made for an orphan

Blaming—what else—but the onions
For, go on say it—numbing,
Say it, with your mouth full—
Salivating

Novacane,
Hatch-cracking back
Down the drain where you
Came from—drooling,
Stir-crazed, eye-yolk oozing,

I say:
Make me morphine drip,
Make me holy into-through me
—and unfeeling.

Make me more than plastic spooning lipless,
Wake me up in every morning
To someone more than faceless,
Even if it's made of
Syrup-whip and cherry bacon—
Sunny-side-less,
Make me brave that throat-choke, eye-blaze onion
—Make me less than vegetative—
Ventriliquistic

And I'll speak to you like the pros do,
With my hands—tied,
Make me banana-split-lip smiling,
Make me inanimate, miming
Hard-boiled, shelled, coiled, skin cells—living ash,
Make me anew, at last,
Make me into nothing more than
Nutrients

And I'll feed you with a silent song,
With the silence on and on,
My own silence—only.

I AM A HUMAN BEING—COLD-BLOODED! CRANK THE AC!

The Batman,
The Boogiemán—it's all a game of two-way
Mirrors (3-way, 4-way) the mere orb
Recurring endlessly, the mise-en-abîme of mise-en-scène—
Poetry is all about pronouns and pronouns
Are all just ways
Of trying to encroach upon the unapproachable

Here's a secret: he is, she is (him) and (I) am them—her,
We were nothing if not all the same,
He/she told them in his/her slithered, toad-throat tone
As if frozen in the drainage ditch,
Aged with a wrinkled kiss—
Sludge-slimed up beyond recognition,
Drip-spit thinking (finally) time might give
(Catch) up with (in) to
Where we've all
Been all

Along this wandering mongrel
Sensed them sexless—speechless, his/her
Witch/gypsy/prophet pupils pinned
Back in the cranial pit as he/she whiffed at the pitch of his/her
Own barren, tongueless whisper—serpent lispig:

Honey, baby, lovely, (with terms of gender
Neutral affection, to be certain)
I'd guess,
He/she/it said:

At any moment, the clown cars could rise from these sewers,
Could skewer your first born up in their white-mime
-gloved clutches, facepaint fudging
Them sexless—speech ripped from their beings,
Now, motion (screaming) with their scum-stiff fingertips—
Knock, knock: how many babies does it take to fill a clown car?
Must be buses of them, buckets and buckets of—
He/she/they said:

At any moment, (really! Really any time at all)
The drag queens could overthrow US all—
Could rise from their thrones, their pronouns dangle-roped between . . .
(Well don't be asking, unless you want to know)—what I mean to say,
To poke into the hollow of your brain bowl is:

They could snatch up your children at any moment
(The drag queens) and, (hell) raise
Them up (I bet) to be decent, God-fear
Less human beings.

Unspeakably, we
Talk of horror! House(hold) of horrors—House of cards,
The (Drag) Queen of Spades and the (Drag) Queen of Hearts had a baby
In their funhouse of mirrors—little monsters emerging from every corner/closet/backdoor,
More honest and self-assured
Than half the clowns
You make yourselves OUT to be

Between the sky-scrape ceiling
On that tiptoe-tight-rope of gender, ever-dipping
With the weight of each and every one of he/she/me/they/you(yes, you)/
them/us tiptoe—no!
STRUT-
ting, jumping off,
Dumping the bodies to which we've
Grown oh so attached
Grown (up) oh?
So...attacked
As if from the inside out

COPPOLA'S PROPS UNDERGOING DE(BRIDE)MENT

M is for Mare—
Age is just a numb-ness,
Ad-j-oustering
Every person into something
Like a mar(i)t(i)al
Artist

Playing house, plowing out and
Horse-ing our own voices,
Feeding into (more than)
Nothing, but the troth—chewing at the bit:
Dom(mouse)tic-ation

I don't think I can
Give her hand
In mar-
ket, Kettle
Ex-plo-prickling against me
Down to the twinge-tip
Hand-holding
The brimstone, hand(le)
This wedded, bride(le) smokeshow,
Down the aisle, no—not while
I'd need to use a

Fire-proof suit-or
Oven-muted-mitten with
Which to pluck her up

From this: her
Limp-lance-smitten (M)pire,
The mire-pit singed,
Blow(torch) kisses
Whittling
Ice-tips with each and the ever-rich,
“Your hei(gh)n(e)ous(s)”
Ass (kicking) kisses—

Brittle with teeth-fleck
Breath down your neck,
Star-stud-sand-struck glints of glass,
Neckla-ssso wrapped
Around her hand—her wrist clamp-nailed—
A(veil)ing no room,
A gart-rail, harn(noose)ing
Her finger split by his burred-in
Bull ring

Husband(ry)—he
Spur-jingle-slashes
The pink(ing) sashes—she’s
Gallop-neigh-wag-waving hoofless, hap(help)less
(At the Macy’s
Day Parade)
Upon his float
She’s made to priss-prance,
Foam blazing (saddles) through her throat, quake-stoking
M-bers, N-Voking the

I

Do's—the dosey-does,
Spoonng the doses
To—like (let them eat)
Cake—each other

So close-knit up
In lips synched (with the blinders on,
Pinned over their lids)—
There's some semblance
Of a hook-lipped guppy
Fish (in the body of a bovine)

Flipper-glisten frying,
With wisps rising—smoked
Sal(mon-
ster)-ivating in their mouths, her essence (now)
Already ousted, we
De(vow)red
Her intentions with whizzing
Tranquilizer bullets—

As
She kicks
Backwards at him in the dust,
Tumble-weed-tuft-whiffed-up
Across the plains—her rider's glove spanked his face—
A hoof lump raised—her own
(Let's say,
A) brand

Cling-slap-Saran-ed
With the glow-blazing iron(curtained)

It's a
Bull before the matador—yolk-throw-huff-horn-gore-ing,
Just
Goes to show-er the dowry
(In throes): never coax-poke the beast,
You'll be resting in
Pieces,
Becoming the very
Severed, head(less) horseman steed
In the sheets—bleed-
ing out—
Playing (slaughter)house
Plowing her skirt-dirt seedless, meatless,
Needlessly—

He/she's whipped,
Ca(pit)ulated (in
The stomach-turning) this
Is force-fed—it's the horse head with
Those bulbous, martian,
Eyes like eight-balls—rocking in cradles—
Taming of the shrew(d)
In all those ruthless
Dealings—made an offer you/he/she
Couldn't refuse—for a smooth
Beheading,
On this(!), the day of my daughter's—whetting
The valent(guillo)tine for an even
—Chop—
A clean, swift split, bobbling-head-hinge-whiffed right—
Off

Dakota Connell-Ledwon

NIGHT SONG FOR SATURN'S RINGS

One night a boy came and asked some weird things.
The weirdest of all was about Saturn's rings.

"It's all ice and dust and rocks and stuff.
What does it all mean? Is it all just fluff?
We can't sell them or touch them, we'd probably freeze.
We can't use them for wheels, or hang them on trees.
We can't roll 'em or bend 'em or break 'em or store 'em.
We can only stare, so what are they for, hmm?"

"Calm down, little guy," I said with a smile.
"I'll explain what they're good for, just listen awhile.
It's true that they can't do much down here on Earth,
But that's fine because up in the sky they are worth
Way more than simply the sum of their parts,
Just like you are way more than your lungs, brain and heart."

You see, we're the same, us and the rings.
We're both made of water and dust and such things.
We don't look the same, but the message is there;
From such basic stuff can come something rare.

TALL MAN by Douglas Angulo



DOOM ROCK

Growing up, I never really stood out amongst my siblings. My eldest brother was a star third baseman, one brother skipped Pre-K, and then there was me. The only really interesting thing I had going for me at a young age was the five-inch scar smack-dab in the middle of my forehead. I had split my head open when I was five, running (or as I like to say, tripping and falling) into a wooden post. The Harry Potter comparisons I drew from others were quite flattering, but other than that, I didn't really have anything special: no talents, no awards, athletic or academic, nothing. I exhibited no precociousness, held no promise for a bright or interesting future; I was just sort of there. While my eldest brother was busy winning MVP of his baseball team, as captain *and* with a broken collarbone, and my other brother was tearing it up in pre-kindergarten (he knew his alphabet front to back), I was just drifting through my childhood, content with not being special in any discernible way. Miraculously, fate knocked on my door one day. Whether it really was fate, or divine inspiration, or just dumb luck, I did something that some critics might have called "astounding" and "visionary" and "so avant-garde that my frail mind was incapable of understanding its genius". (As an aside, these hyperboles are, I think, completely unfounded, and I still blush when I think about them today. I'm red in the face now.)

We still pop the ol' tape in the VCR from time to time. My mom always glows with pride about it, despite its obvious flaws (the plot is just completely incoherent). "My son," she says with a smile, "the *auteur*. The filmmaker. The director. I always knew you would be special. At age seven, no less. Simply amazing."

It's really quite hard to watch the damn thing. Simply put, the film is on a small videocassette, which, according to my extensive research on Wikipedia, is of the 8-millimeter variety and was all the rage with amateur videographers from the late eighties into early nineties. To watch said videocassette, one must insert it into a larger, hollowed out cassette whose internal operations are essentially a smaller version of a VCR. Then, finally, at that point, one must put the videocassette turducken into an actual VCR player, which are harder and harder to come by these days, at least in a functional condition, and even harder still to actually operate.

But despite all this, we still watch it every so often. My parents take an odd sort of pride in the thing—my father thinks it's a brilliant satire, or maybe black comedy, that lampoons the big budget blockbusters of the eighties, and my mother simply likes it because it exists, which is such a mom thing to feel. I, however, do not share these perverse feelings; I groan every time my mother mentions it, cringe every time I see it again. Looking back from the vantage of time, the film looks so dated, so cheesy, so amateurish. The special effects—God, the special effects are so bad! I mean, you can clearly see my father's hand flipping the Hot Wheels track with all the cars over to simulate the destruction caused by the rampaging dinosaurs. Absolutely cringe worthy. But, then again, it was the nineties, so I guess I shouldn't be too hard on myself, everything from that era looks dated.

When I was about seven years old (or five, or six, or eight—I don't remember so well; the emotional and psychic toll the film took makes my memory a little hazy), I went through a phase where I was obsessed with the 1993 classic *Jurassic Park*. I mean, I watched the thing like everyday and was just downright fascinated by the concept of bringing dinosaurs back to life. I've always been an imitator, "monkey see, monkey do," I guess. I wanted to imitate what I saw on screen a thousand times: angry T-Rexes, destructive triceratops, and vicious raptors. My family, like many families in the nineties I surmise, owned a portable video camera,

with which we shot numerous family events—Baptisms, Communion, Weddings, and above all else, Christmases, of which, we have five on tape. It really was a popular fad back in the day, and I was engrossed by this seemingly magical device that could record any and every (usually inappropriate or embarrassing) thing you did. I always begged to use it, to no avail. Common responses to my pleas included “No, Gerard, you’ll break it”, or “No, Gerard, your hands are covered in chocolate and I’m not sure anyone wants an hour long shot of your brother’s butt”, or “No, Gerard, your use of *mise-en-scène* is pedestrian at best and your script has glaring plot holes that you’ve not even begun to address.” Ah, the struggles of a young artist.

But with the arrival of *Jurassic Park*, I had my muse (the working title of my film was *Jurassic Park 3*). I had a vision that needed to be expressed. When I proposed my film to the studio (read: parents) they were intrigued by the concept. Even more, they were intrigued that I was demonstrating any sort of talent, talent that would actually, for once, make me stand out. They, much to my delight, okayed the project.

The film was entitled *Doom Rock*. I have no recollection why I changed the title; I guess I thought it sounded more like the name of a blockbuster film. It centered on a group of vicious dinosaurs who had escaped from their holding pens due to a few “screws being loose” (this was the phrase I gave in the opening monologue, where, in a cameo appearance, I set the stage and gave the audience the expository back story. Budget constraints did not allow me to film those scenes). The dinosaurs, in the film, were soon off, decimating New York, Japan, Indiana, Illinois, and a few other major metropolitan areas. I can’t really remember how it all ends, but I think, at a certain point, we simply ran out of tape.

In the end, it was a nightmare. Production costs spiraled out of control, as we bought Hot Wheels set after Hot Wheels set to simulate major cities. The leading man, my brother, refused to listen to my directions (in one major scene, his dinosaur was supposed to die, but he refused to stay dead. He kept moving his plastic toy T-Rex around willy-nilly. In the back-

ground you can see my hand pushing the T-Rex down and whispering, rather heatedly, “You’re dead, Andrew. No, you’re dead. Stay dead.”). My father, bless his heart, is no cinematographer, and most of our shots are blurry, shaky, and out of focus. I sometimes like to think this was the inspiration for 2008’s *Cloverfield*, but few others hold the same opinion.

By the end, it was all a big mess. Literally. My basement was covered with the carcasses of dead dinosaurs and the twisted metal frames of broken Hot Wheels. The basement could be set right again (and it was, after my mother screamed at the mess I had made), but my film, alas, my poor film could not be. It is my failed masterpiece, my first and last work. Just as it launched my film career, it scuttled any future hope for a life in Hollywood. Though my ears still blaze scarlet anytime someone brings it up, I like to think it was all worth it. “My son,” my mother always says now, “My little director, my little artist. I always knew you were special.”

Alec Vanthournout

mothēR

in my black womb there used to be
dandelions. and little dancing
spiders that would cling to the wafting, fragile
fluff and pray for warm
rain. in a redwoodpaneled station-
wagon our pelvis-bones
protruded through limp pubic-
fuzz and
pollen. and the dog-faced things grinned from the pearlycotton
clouds and warm saliva dripped into our
eyes.

risE.

Father

cancerous mole-heart
ventricles reeking of black-centered
sun-flower-petal-
song. and we would dance in the rain-
skin. pores open to the bone –
in an ivoryblack train. Black horses hitched to our
shattering. flowery aorta
marrow. the aroma in our heads of dandelion wine and whiskey–
crimson
aveoli. Hydrochloric
fever clutched its fingers ‘round our middle and flowed upwards into
our
fingerprints.

SONG 3

Glasswood scalpel nerve
Larval welding bloom-
brains dripping
off their bodies so bright -
terminal sign of nephritic
acid in the neural
generator, the larvae bruised with plastic aortae
It was here I became / excavator

black blade muscles tremor,
woodfault treecold April -
hollowboned, marrowfrozen.
Local nerve softener larvae
Repeat, repeat, repeat, check
motor port
In brainsap dripping off
stillness / welding mask bone
nerve damage

Maternity smooth transition tunnel excavator
I Was Reborn!
zero bloodoxygen
failure of treevein / April's cold Rise:
Their eyes bulging veins!

Sharp pinesap treelight dissipates...

cured skinleathers, the internal black-pink-
feathered retinal paper.

Phagemuscles tear,
skinleathers fatten.

Tundral fire and Rose Ceiling –

Pink roses!

THESE FIELDS OF MINE

The man had come to help Anna. He came with two sons of his own, making a house of five when added to Anna's daughter. Anna told her daughter that things were going to be easier from then on. Anna had owned a good plot of her family's land, land that had once been the most influential in the valley. She could remember her father taking her to the top of the mountain as a child and looking down at her beautiful home. A lovely place, and a successful one, too. Each morning Anna had helped her mother sift through the ground lace that had been harvested the night before. Tendrils of it hung from the trees as the last of the sun was sliding down the other side of the mountain. Point de Gaze. Chantilly. Bruges. Tochon. Anna could remember the lace better than her parents' faces. She could see the yard seeped in white even in the late hours of the night. Outside her bedroom window, the cedars and oaks and maples dripped with lace, their branches burdened and bent. Anna fell asleep to the sound of trees groaning and there were times that she could not fall asleep until she had heard the sharp snap of lace detaching itself from the branches above. It comforted her. She would often try to stay up and watch for the moment the lace fell from the tree but she could never catch it. By the time Anna woke at sunrise, the lace had been coiled, cut and then placed into baskets. Anna and her mother would shove the pieces deep into the soil so that their forearms became permanently darkened by the task. As the years passed, Anna's daughter took the place by Anna's side.

There had been a time that Anna had envisioned a thousand daughters lining the fields and pushing lace into the fertile ground. Mahogany braids falling down their backs as they bent down into the earth. Her

daughters. But instead she saw before her one child. One child with hair that was stiff and straight and a muddied color of yellow. Amira. Her daughter. And the land that was before her wasn't green-hued. Instead she found it overcome with enormous insects the size of her fist, black and textured, crawling over the trees and in the dirt and up the stalks of corn. She and Amira felt their nearly imperceptible legs running over them as they pushed the healing lace into the land. Lace that no longer healed. Land that no longer grew. What could she do but accept his offer when the man came and said he would cup the earth in his hands and place life into it once more? So the man came. With promise and force, the man came.

The woman, Anna, was gone within the year. And the daughter, Amira, continued to plant the lace though it was ratted with shredded ends. Many of the trees did not produce the lace at night. As the months passed along, only a tiny half-acre of land could be coaxed to create a thing. Amira whispered the words of her mothers into the roots but to no avail. She smelled the perspiring leaves and suffered with them beneath the sun. And all the while, the man molded the land to his ways, pushing the hills into new forms until Amira hardly knew the place that was hers.

The years continued on and the girl Amira grew in patience and wisdom until she found the land choosing her, reforming itself around her. In each strand of her hair she saw the intricate details of lace and her skin was the papier-mâché of leaves. On her lips was ever the taste of peach. She walked up on the mountain where once her mother and her grandfather had sat. Amira overviewed the lands. She could see how the man had used the land for bad and how the land had repulsed him. She also saw the tiny half acre that had lived and she was glad. Amira dug in the dirt on the mountainside until she found a tiny pair of scissors in the shape of a long-beaked sea-bird. Carefully she slipped her fingers into the holes and began to snip each strand of lace from her head, placing them gently in a basket. It took Amira 627 days to complete this task. When she had finished, she and the basket came down from the mountain.

Amira tended the plants with the sweetness of her tongue, kissing

each of them and piling the dirt up around their bases. It could only ever be Amira who would do this and so she did this for each one, finding scraps of lace to put into them other than that which she had grown atop her head. These too were added to the plant at its base. The end of the line drew near and Amira sat down in the dirt, holding closely the final braid. Around her the plants grew in height and strength until all Amira could see was the shifting sun through the slim openings. She watched as the moonlight splashed across the thin leaves. In the morning, her hair was spilling across the earth, more vibrant and full than could be remembered.

Kathryn Haemmerle

IMITATIONS

Phone calls from the US to France were expensive, so the call from her mother came via Skype. It was the near birthday of Alana's child. A year ago the baby had been stillborn and then blue.

"I can't see you, Alana dear. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine." The pixels making up her mother's face jumped and shook. When they focused, Alana stared just beyond her mother's shoulder at the tin bucket of flowers in her mother's kitchen. She couldn't bring herself to look at her mother's face, with her creased forehead and eyes that tried to read Alana's.

"Have you been in that apartment by yourself all day? I hope you went outside some."

"I took a walk this afternoon." Alana didn't want to tell her that she'd really just returned from the Luxembourg Gardens where she had sat for hours in a reclined chair facing the sun. Children stood against their mother's legs and pushed sailboats with long sticks across the large fountain. Alana had held a yellow balloon for her child and then tied it to one of the sailboats. She followed the boat to the other end where it bumped the stone side of the fountain. Alana cut the balloon from the sail and released it into the air. She watched it climb and quickly fade because it was a pale yellow to begin with.

"I hate to see you there by yourself. Especially today." Her mother's eyebrows and lips scrunched together at the same time the way they had two years ago at Alana's college graduation when a few of her friends' parents couldn't fly out because of the hurricane.

"I'm ok."

Alana fixed her eyes on the shifting light and soundless images of the

TV she had muted when her mother called. Her mother wanted to know how long Alana would be housesitting. Alana told her she didn't know but would let her know when she'd be leaving Paris. "I've been thinking of you today," her mother said before clicking the end button.

After the call, Alana turned the TV volume up. She had been in Paris for only a few days and developed the habit of keeping the TV on while in the apartment that didn't belong to her. The French voices were unfamiliar and Alana couldn't understand the words. But she liked to hear the life-like sounds that required no communication from herself. Before coming to Paris, Alana worked at a Russian cultural center in New York City, translating Russian art and literary media and organizing ballet camps and performances. She wasn't a dancer. She just knew Russian from her college studies and could translate for those from Russia involved with the center. So much communication and crossing of the brain from one language to the other left her exhausted, though.

Yet that day, the anniversary of her child's birth and death, renewed the part of her that occasionally wanted to communicate with Henry. Alana wondered if he even remembered that day a year ago, or that they had been broken up for almost just as long. The cursor on her laptop hovered over his name on the Skype menu. The icon was green. Chances were he wouldn't answer, though. He used to leave himself signed in on Skype even if he wasn't near his computer. She moved the cursor in slow circles before finally selecting his name and the dial button. No answer. Alana shut the laptop and stared at the word banners flashing across the bottom screen of the French news channel. They resembled urgent warnings but meant nothing.

She stood up and walked to the guest room where the few clothes she packed remained folded in her small suitcase. From one of the dresser drawers she pulled out a small jewelry box that contained a folded card with tiny dark footprints and a replica fossil of a bird feather. The nurses had asked her if she still wanted footprints to be made of her child. Or would she want to sing a lullaby for the child, to create a memory with the baby. Alana couldn't understand how someone could choose to sing

to their stillborn child. But she wanted the footprints. It was the fossil that reminded Alana most of her child, though. She took a week off after the birth and flew home to her parents forty miles south of Gainesville. One day that week, she drove to the Florida Museum of Natural History and spent hours in the ornithology exhibits. The fossils of extinct birds' wings fascinated Alana. The science didn't draw her to the fossils. It was that such small bones and feathers could be engraved in the earth so delicately yet permanently. She bought a replica in the gift shop and kept it with the folded footprint card on her dresser.

The apartment seemed quiet from the bedroom even though the TV could be heard. Alana held the fossil between her fingers. She ran her thumb across the long narrow ridges. A tear fell and gathered along the grooves in dotted pools. She imagined the salty drops bringing the bird out of extinction. It was impossible, she knew. Too fantastical, like something from the Russian legends she had read in college. What she really hoped was for the bird to be revived as her baby.

In the recent year, Alana lost touch with most of her friends. Except for her roommate and the older woman who worked as a secretary at the cultural center, Alana kept to herself. They tried encouraging Alana to take her mind off work and the child. They signed her up for yoga classes, walked with her through the parks, and finally, agreed that time away might be good for her.

Before leaving New York, Alana's roommate arranged for her to house-sit for her cousin. Kamilla lived in the 16th *arrondissement*, an upscale area with large avenues and 19th century stone buildings. The corners of her apartment building curved rather than coming to a point, and black iron balconies lined each window of the building. She was a relative of her roommate who had been working in Paris as an international tax accountant for seven years. Alana met Kamilla only once, in her apartment two hours after landing at Charles de Gaulle. Kamilla was traveling the following day to the south of France to settle legal proceedings with her separated husband about their vacation home. From there she

would travel for a week on business. Three children sat at the table eating breakfast the morning Alana arrived. The oldest looked no older than nine. Alana guessed that Kamilla was in her mid-thirties. Even though ten years didn't seem like much and Alana had once carried a child, she felt young seeing Kamilla who had children and a separated husband and an upscale apartment—a life with enough to call for legal battles.

Kamilla wasn't tall, but she intimidated Alana. She had trim and toned limbs, and her blonde hair grazed her shoulder in a bob that framed a chiseled jaw and high cheekbones. She reminded Alana of the Swedish models on the ad pages of *Elle*. When she spoke, her speech was concise and her voice sharp. "Don't worry about the children. They're staying at their grandparents'. The cat's food is in that cabinet. Set it out at 8 in the morning. Collect the mail, but don't mix each day's together." A typed page of instructions lay on the granite countertop and was so detailed it made Alana fearful of destroying the order of the apartment. But she liked the thought of walking in and out of the stone apartment as though it were hers.

As soon as Kamilla had left that first day, Alana moved slowly from room to room. She stepped quietly through the large rooms with tall windows and high ceilings as though Kamilla were still in one of the rooms. The furniture was modern and black and the decorations spare. A red painting of a woman reclining in a chair hung above the couch. It felt wrong, but Alana peeked inside Kamilla's office where framed diplomas and certificates from college and law school hung on the walls and inside her bedroom. Piles of men's clothing, her husband's, filled a corner of the bedroom and a yoga mat rested against a wall, tightly rolled up.

Frames of varying sizes were arranged in a cluster on a wall beside the glass balcony doors. Some frames were black polished wood, others a distressed wood with muted paint colors stripped down the edges. A cardboard box sat on the floor beneath the cluster. The unconventional and sporadic grouping of frames and the box surprised Alana given the minimalist style of the apartment and Kamilla's precise ways. But looking closer, she could see faint pencil marks on the wall carefully outlining

the arrangement. Alana found it strange that many of the framed photos were of Kamilla herself, occasionally laughing, but mostly unsmiling and focused on the camera. A series were of her three smiling blond children. Black and whites of a small girl and smaller boy holding between each other their baby brother. Of Kamilla kneeling back on her feet with the small girl as a baby. Alana double checked the photos and scanned the room, but there were no photos of her husband.

Nothing clung to the stainless steel fridge. There wasn't much inside the fridge either. Some eggs past their expiration date, left-over quinoa, Greek yogurt, edamame, unsweetened soy milk. All healthy foods Alana tried to eat more of and didn't expect to find in France. Only a bowl of fruit, a coffee pot, and Kamilla's typed instructions rested on the countertops. Alana re-read the instructions, still fearful that one mistake, one small change to the sterile organization, wouldn't go unnoticed by Kamilla when she returned. Realizing she forgot to get yesterday's mail on her way up from the gardens, Alana went downstairs. She found a pen and sticky note in one of the kitchen drawers. She wrote yesterday's date on it and stuck it to the pile of mail. The cat wandered into the kitchen, so Alana nudged a bowl of food toward it and watched.

House-sitting was odd. It was a strange feeling to perform the routine of someone else in their home—watering someone else's balcony plants, caring for a cat that doesn't recognize your voice, passing through rooms decorated on the decisions of another. She felt like a child, doing little chores and being surrounded by the intimidating presence of someone experienced.

After feeding the cat, Alana wandered through the apartment again, admiring the luminous simplicity of the place so different from her own apartment where the curtains needed to be drawn for any privacy. The spare and airy openness and the white light made the walls and door-frames seem like the whalebone arches Alana had seen in the natural history museum. Alana returned to the frame cluster. She looked out the balcony doors toward the tip of the Eiffel Tower and then closer at the photo arrangement. Five stray pencil marks dotted a section to the left

of the cluster where photos had been removed.

A layer of newspaper covered the cardboard box opening. Alana stooped toward the box and found more frames. In one photo, Kamilla and a man with dark hair reclined on beach chairs with drinks in hand. In a black and white, Kamilla with a bouquet and the man with her other hand looked side-long at each other with little pursed, amused smiles. A few unframed photos lay at the bottom of the box. The photos of only Kamilla must have replaced the unframed ones. Alana lifted them and turned the first photo over. In addition to the location and date taken were little written notes addressed to Kamilla and signed Andre. The next photo showed a similar written note, this time addressed to Andre from Kamilla. Henry would never have expressed love like that. He would have found it unnecessary and childish. Despite Kamilla's separation and possible divorce, Alana became jealous of her and wished she had experienced something like the exchange of photo notes. Only once had Henry expressed passion or romance. He dreamt that they dined at the top of the Eiffel Tower, she in a red dress and he in a suit. She knew it was trite, probably an overdone fantasy of many couples, but she clung to it. It was a dream though, so Alana was never really sure if it was true. Most of the time she doubted whether Henry truly cared. Or whether the baby was the only reason he stuck around because they had broken up shortly after the stillbirth.

Alana shuffled the photos to their original order and placed them in the box exactly as they had been. After glancing at the tower, she walked toward the guest room. She paused at the room the oldest two children shared. Bright bedspreads covered the mattresses and puzzles and toys stacked neatly in a chest one of the children must have forgotten to shut. Alana stood in the doorway for minutes. She couldn't bring herself to enter.

The phone rang one day while Alana was standing before Kamilla's open closet, low on clean clothes and searching for a simple sweater to borrow among the silk blouses and stylish dresses. She felt uncomfort-

able borrowing a sweater from Kamilla even though she told Alana the first day to help herself to whatever she needed. Despite the TV sounds, the shrill ring echoed against the apartment walls and seemed to shake the frames hanging from them. Alana's ears pulsed even after she answered.

"How is everything?" Kamilla asked.

"Very well. The cat's been easy."

"I'm glad," she said distractedly. "Listen, we're finished down here in Saint Tropez. Andre will be stopping by the apartment to pick up a few things. Just wanted to let you know before he shows up."

"When do you think he'll be here?"

Kamilla laughed. "No idea. He likes to intentionally hide those details from me." She was soundless for a moment. "Tomorrow is most likely, though."

They hung up and Alana returned to the closet and pulled a long black cardigan from the back, making sure the hanger stayed to mark its place. It was a simple sweater. The pencil skirts and solid dresses and silk blouses seemed so sophisticated in comparison, cut and fitted for Kamilla. But then there were the kids and it was possible to see Kamilla doing morning yoga on the mat Alana saw in the master bedroom and throwing the sweater on afterwards to get the children fed and ready. At first Alana regretted imagining this use of the sweater. Then, for only a brief moment, Alana thought that maybe, with the sweater on, she could play the part, like the ballet campers taught by Russian instructors to lock particular emotions into their movements. By being Kamilla, Alana could be the version of herself she had gained and then lost on the same day a year ago.

It seemed silly though, so Alana ignored the idea and threw a load of laundry in Kamilla's wash machine. The machine hummed. It went in and out of spinning turns and motionless lulls. She was squatting near the floor and luring the cat into the kitchen with a bowl of organic grain free cat food when she heard a key turn in the door. A man with dark hair walked into the kitchen. Alana looked up, startled because she wasn't

expecting Kamilla's husband to arrive until tomorrow. The cat clawed Alana who had rested the bowl on her knee and out of the cat's reach.

"Ah, you are Alana from America." He had a subtle accent, pronouncing and annunciating certain words carefully. She often did the same thing with Russian words that were too complex to speak at a normal speed. He approached Alana and extended his hand. "I am Andre."

"Nice to meet you."

"How long will you be here?" he asked heading toward the island counter. "I can't remember the dates Kamilla said she would be traveling."

"About one more week."

He nodded and pulled coffee grounds from a cabinet. "Want a cup?"

Alana said no thank you and watched the cat eat because she didn't know where else to look.

"Is this your first time in Paris?"

"It is."

Alana could hear how reticent she had become in the past year. Or maybe hours of translating had done this to her over the years during and since college. She hated this, and wanted to say more. But she didn't. It was quiet for a bit except for the coffee pot. The wash machine came out of a lull and jolted Alana. Andre appeared unphased and continued preparing his coffee. He spotted the instructions on the counter.

"So you see how meticulous she is," he said picking up the page. He laughed but Alana could tell he was annoyed. "Did she tell you where a box of photos would be?"

"Box of photos? She never mentioned anything about photos." The partial lie surprised Alana. She wasn't sure what she wanted from him, but she wanted Andre to stay a little longer.

"Well, knowing her the box is probably labeled." He began to leave the kitchen with a cup of coffee and paused.

"Is that her sweater?"

"I'm just borrowing while my clothes are in the wash," she answered hurriedly.

He studied her for a few moments, then nodded, satisfied with something Alana couldn't discern. Then he rummaged through a few rooms and left carrying the box of photos Alana had gone through the week before.

The wash machine buzzed and Alana brought a few sweaters and shirts to the guest room to dry in the small but empty closet. There was a mirror above the dresser, and, catching herself in it still wearing Kamilla's sweater, she mistook herself for someone else. A stranger, or intruder, or an unexpected relative of Kamilla's visiting. Alana stood closer to the mirror, her hands resting on the edges of the dresser top. Studying herself with the sweater on, Alana thought again of Kamilla's possible morning routine. With the sweater on and Andre's presence still recent, it almost felt like Alana's own routine. But spotting the fossil just before her on the dresser top eliminated whatever illusion there had been. Alana picked the fossil up and ran her fingers along the grooves. Then she took the sweater off and tossed it aside. Tired of the TV voices she couldn't understand, she left Kamilla's apartment for a walk.

She went down cobble-stone side streets and along the Seine toward the Tuileries Gardens for a picnic. The weather had warmed since her arrival a week ago and leaves and flowers had grown beyond buds, so the gardens were crowded. Trees lined the boulevard across from the grass and flower beds. Four story buildings with ornate windows and steep slanted roofs rose just above the trees. Alana took a seat in a slatted green chair at the edge of the gravel path and beside beds of yellow and purple irises. Small French children in spring sweaters pushed the model boats across a large center fountain with a long stick. A few children fought for the same boat. Others waited patiently until a forgotten boat bumped gently against the fountain edge, long after its release to the open waters at the center. A small girl tried to pull leaves from a tree by tossing pebbles at them. Alana almost laughed but couldn't.

Alana spotted a young man reclined in a green chair with his feet propped up on the fountain ledge. A book rested open on his knee. His

sharp profile reminded her of Andre. Perhaps a few years younger, but striking like Andre. She imagined having a conversation with the young man, conversation that wasn't translation with herself. Perhaps Kamilla met Andre that way. Maybe she moved to Paris alone, saw him on a bench in some gardens or a chair at some cafe, and started talking to him because there was no one else to talk to. Andre probably offered to show her around Paris, take her to the touristy places first and then his lesser known spots. Then she typed up a plan—a job, kids, the apartment, the house in Saint Tropez. And then maybe she hated it all, or she loved it too much and Andre became jealous that she loved it, loved it perhaps more than she loved him. Alana pictured Kamilla's sharp voice yelling across the kitchen counter at Andre, who then told her she was too American, too type A. And then maybe Kamilla, losing control because she saw how she'd already lost control, shoved a container of quinoa across the counter. It would have fallen to the floor and spilled at Andre's feet.

How likely any of Alana's scenarios about how the marriage fell through were, she didn't know. But she knew there was jealousy, of Kamilla and her cutting voice, of how assertive she appeared beside Alana, whose job translating required little assertion. Mostly though, she wanted to be Kamilla whose children were living and whose marriage threatened to end without the passivity of how Henry had ended things. Thinking of the way Andre had so intently looked at her, dressed in Kamilla's sweater, she couldn't understand why she would want to be the observer when she was already partially living their lives. And she hoped Andre would return to the apartment. If he did, she knew she would talk to him this time.

That night, Alana tucked the fossil and footprints away in her small suitcase and pulled Kamilla's sweater over her pajamas. She wandered from room to room again, turning out all of the lights. The Eiffel Tower shone in a double image against the sky and on the wood floors. She paused at the children's room before getting in bed. Hesitating, she stepped in. The large armchair rocked and she stayed there flipping through a picture book. After turning the lamp out, she shut the door,

leaving it open just a crack. Alana slept in the master bedroom that night. She would play the part she lost. She could nearly have her child back.

Andre returned to the apartment the following day. He brought a few bankers boxes with him to move more things out. Alana was leaning over one of the balcony plants so that the water wouldn't splatter. The sun warmed the iron railing she held for balance. It shone so brightly through the Eiffel Tower in the distance that the iron patterns were invisible. The weather wasn't right for wearing a sweater, but she kept Kamilla's on anyway. A box was tucked under Andre's arm when he knocked softly on the open balcony door to say hello. He stood there in the light saying nothing.

He asked Alana when she planned to return to the US. She shrugged because she hadn't yet bought a ticket back. "Just whenever I'm ready," she said.

"Ready for what?"

Alana finished watering the plant and leaned against the railing. Andre shifted the box to his other arm. She knew he was waiting on an answer. Not because he wanted to pry, but because he probably just wanted to talk. Alana didn't know what she would be ready for. But she welcomed his conversation.

"How long have you lived here?" she said instead. "In Paris I mean."

He placed the box on the floor. "26 years. My family moved here from a town a couple hours south when I was five." He looked past Alana's shoulder with a vacant look. What his eyes rested on, she couldn't guess but wanted to know. He continued. "Beautiful place. Good food, parks, museums. The best places to walk and rest—" He suddenly turned his eyes directly on Alana, as though he finally figured out which person in his life she resembled and needed to look at her again to verify.

"What have you seen since you have been here?"

Embarrassed because she had done nothing, Alana muttered a bit before arriving at a clear answer. "Some gardens, but that's really it so far." Andre shook his head and his expression was something between disap-

proval and amusement. "I was planning on going to some museums later this week," she quickly explained.

"How about I show you around?" He picked up the box. "You need to see as much as possible before you leave. And it is nice to see a new city from someone who knows it."

Alana made excuses and lies only to be polite. That he was probably busy moving his belongings out of the apartment. Or that he shouldn't take time off of work, even though Alana knew nothing of what he did. He waved the excuses away with his hand as though clearing dust particles that floated in a slow-rising haze from direct sun.

"I'll be by tomorrow morning."

With Kamilla gone, it felt almost natural to take her place, to do the touristy things Andre most likely did with her years ago when their relationship felt sound and secure. They maneuvered the lines and crowds at the Louvre and the Musee d'Orsay, circled the cushioned benches at the center of oval galleries to view Monet's water lilies, squinted at the white façade of the Pantheon that reflected equally white rays. They stood outside the Moulin Rouge at night, the glowing red lights flickering across their faces. The city and Seine spread out beneath them from the bell tower of Notre Dame by day, from the Eiffel Tower at night. And only for a moment did Alana recall Henry's dream as she stood with her fist clasped around the wire grate. Andre bargained for a petite antique watch Alana purchased at the Saint-Ouen flea markets where antique stands morphed together in crowded mazes. When Alana asked if he and Kamilla bought any of their furniture from the flea markets, Andre laughed. "She would never buy something used. But she could easily negotiate the price of anything here to get what she wants." Alana then regretted buying the watch. At a café where writers and philosophers used to frequent, they split a croissant and drank café au lait. The back wall of the café was a mirror, and when Alana occasionally glanced toward it, she was almost always absent from it, mistaken for someone else with nothing but the smiles and expressions imprinted on the mirror.

After the Rodin museum, they returned to the same café to escape

the rain. This time they sat at a table on the glass enclosed porch, watching cars splash still water against the curb and people side-step around puddles instead of looking in the mirror. By then, the mirror was unnecessary for Alana to take on Kamilla's role. Living in Kamilla's space was enough to make the children seem like Alana's. Andre had been freely talking about them, and as long as he did this, the children would feel like hers. But Alana refrained from mentioning the children herself, fearing that reminding Andre of them would take them away from her.

As more people filled the café entrance to seek cover from the rain, Andre asked why Alana had come to Paris. She explained that she needed to take time off of work because of something personal, and that her co-worker knew Kamilla needed a housesitter. He said that was the most interesting reason he'd ever heard, because it had nothing to do with the city itself. Most people used a landmark or food as their reason, he clarified. He mentioned his sister who didn't understand why those people were so fascinated with Paris. Except for the rain and clatter of porcelain as waiters cleared tables, there was silence.

"I believe there are two types of people who live in Paris," he said after a while. "Those like my sister who grow so accustomed to it that it becomes any city, or even a false city where it is all romantic tourism. And then there are those who believe it is the only city for them and see that you can escape within it. They know there is an underbelly of the city where you can escape the false parts."

"But didn't you say you love everything about the city?"

"Of course." He paused. "But that does not mean there are not times the tourist parts seem false."

"What have the places been like for you this week?"

He hesitated. "False."

"Why?"

He paused and thought a while before answering. "I have made the places something they are not just so that I do not lose them."

Alana didn't say anything but wanted to so that she couldn't hear the part of her that knew everything she had done the past few days, and

trying to be Kamilla, were false too. And at that moment, they seemed to understand each other as Andre and Alana instead of Andre and his wife played by someone else.

“I will show you a place tomorrow that is different from all you have seen so far.”

And so the next day Andre went into work late and took Alana down a steep, narrow staircase to the Catacombs, stories below cafes where waiters set tables and change the sidewalk menu boards from breakfast to lunch. She had read about them in newspapers and magazines. One of the ballet instructors once choreographed a dance inspired by her visit to the tombs. Alana doubted the young girls knew they were dancing death-inspired floor patterns. Alana and Andre walked for ten minutes before reaching the portal to the Catacombs. Perhaps because of the darkness that concealed her or how much time they’d spent together recently, Alana felt brave enough to ask Andre why he and Kamilla were separated.

“We disagree on things now and argue all the time. We never did before, though.” He squinted ahead in the dark, as though gauging how close they were to the entrance. “I do not think I understand the idea of being alone and loving it like Kamilla does.”

“I’m not following that part,” Alana said slowly. He had answered, but Alana could tell he didn’t want to talk much about it, that the Catacombs were his way of holding that separation above ground.

“I think Kamilla viewed marriage as a requirement. Something everyone must do at a certain point in life. But Kamilla has carried on her life as though she never got married. She likes her space and things to be done her own way.”

When they reached the portal, Andre read the inscription across the stone slab and Alana knew he wasn’t going to say more about Kamilla. “*Arrête, c’est ici l’empire de la Mort.*” He ran his hand across the surface and translated. “Stop, this is the empire of death.”

Alana surveyed the wall of bones, like neatly rolled scrolls, and rows of skulls, all stacked like piles of firewood. Chipped pieces of stone and what Alana presumed to be dry bone littered the ground. Laughter from

tourists behind them echoed off the bones. Stepping over the small pieces, she followed Andre through the tunnels.

“I visited these tunnels often when I was attending university,” he said. “I dabbled in archeology for a bit. More than my father would have liked. Archeology students could enter the tunnels on holidays and outside regular hours.”

They passed through halls of bones, Andre giving the history of the tunnels the whole time. Facts about Resistance fighters who navigated the tunnels during World War II, men digging the tunnels to extract limestone and gypsum for the construction of the Louvre and Notre Dame, and the tunnel systems beyond the Catacombs Andre used to frequent, illegally, to escape everything aboveground.

“Six million people are buried here,” Andre said. “In the 18th and 19th centuries, cemeteries suffered from overcrowding. The solution: dig up the old graves and pour the remains by night into these quarry tunnels.”

He mentioned a professor he had, an archeologist, who extracted information—diseases, accidental causes of death, eating habits—from the bones, stories of long and short lives. Andre stopped to peer closely at a stack of femurs. Alana watched him from a distance, the whole of the tunnels reminding her of the ornithology exhibit. Only it felt more morbid, with human remains instead of animal preservations.

“Don’t be fooled by the orderly designs.” He touched a fat, rounded pillar at the center of the hall. His hands brushed it so lightly Alana could see how his background included archeology. “Someone came in here in the early 19th century to form walls with tombstones and other graveyard decorations. Before then, this was just a mass grave. And now, behind these walls are piles of bones.”

Alana breathed deeply, as though the proximity to such macabre arrangements ossified her lungs. The people interred in the tunnels had been lost twice, she thought. Once, when they were dumped below ground, and twice when the disjointed bones morphed with the disarticulated limbs of other dead. Anonymous. The ossuary was a disarray of bones. Andre continued walking, but Alana remained where she stood,

spinning in place until her eyes fixed on a chipped skull at her feet. It was so chipped that it could have once belonged to anyone—woman, man, child, Robespierre. It could have belonged to anyone but she thought of the stillborn baby. Then the ossuary, with its disarray of bones and once-people, became too familiar, like looking at someone she knew, and she needed to leave. Following the exit signs, Alana left, muttering to Andre that she would wait for him above ground. Something in her voice must have signaled to him that it was useless to convince her to wait because he didn't even try to follow her. Clouds had rolled in and the buildings, sidewalks, everything looked gray and dusty. A dry leaf blew repeatedly against the base of the green metro pole. Alana watched tourists and locals alike descend the metro steps, the whole time thinking of bones.

That night, wearing the black sweater again, Alana slept in the children's room. She brought her own pillow and blanket and laid atop the covers. With the blinds left open, light filtered in and Alana saw the outlines of toys, the arm chair, and the frames along the wall. At that moment, she reclaimed the soft, milky smell of children's breath.

While Alana watered the balcony plants the next morning, the phone rang. It was Kamilla again.

"Has Andre stopped by at all yet?" Kamilla asked.

"Andre? Oh yes, just once to pick up a few things."

"Just once?"

"While I was here at least. He could have stopped by when I was out."

She paused. "Ok, well here's the plan. I'll be home Sunday evening. First I need to meet Andre to pick up the kids. Then I'll be back. The apartment will be fine Sunday with no one there, but you are more than welcome to stay as long as you need to until you find a flight home. I'm always in need of a babysitter."

Alana said ok to the plan and thanked her. It was Friday and Sunday flights home would be expensive. She didn't mind staying longer, though, if it meant watching the children and being one step closer to playing Kamilla's role. Shortly after hanging up with Kamilla, Andre called. He

apologized for the Catacombs the other day, sensing that Alana may not have enjoyed them, and asked if he could make up for it by taking her to dinner. “You need a true French meal,” he had said. She agreed.

So that evening they went to a bistro in the 6th *arrondissement*. Andre ordered a small bottle of rose wine. Alana surveyed the interior while they waited for the wine. The walls above a dark wood paneling were painted an off-white the color of recycled paper. White table cloths contrasted with the gold lighting and dark stained chairs. Alana pulled her sleeves below her palms. Even though it had been warm during the day, it had cooled substantially when the sun dipped behind the museums and monuments. Alana touched her hand to the beige radiator beside her. It was cool, but when the wine came a few sips warmed her. After their first glass of wine they ordered their dinners.

“So,” he began after the waiter cleared the menus from the table. “Do you mind me asking what personal matter brought you here under the particular eye of Kamilla?” He sounded annoyed when he mentioned Kamilla, like he had when he saw her typed instructions.

Alana found it strange that he called the apartment his when he seemed to be the one moving everything out. She thought about this for a moment before answering. Then, perhaps because she had already finished two glasses of wine, she told him about Henry, exaggerating the silent way he had left to hide the real reason she had taken time off from work. She made it sound as though Henry had once been so passionate, had cared enough to the point that his silent slip from her life would be crippling enough to warrant time away.

When Alana felt bold enough, she asked Andre how the children were handling the situation. Then the waiter arrived with the food and there was silence except for the waiter calling out the dish names. She wasn’t sure why she asked it, but she did. It may have been the fact that she hadn’t eaten anything all day except for a smoothie, or that she drank her wine too quickly. Leaving his food untouched, Andre studied Alana before speaking.

“They are so young that they do not understand it.” He cut his rotis-

serie chicken and chewed slowly. “They have been out of sorts though. With their schedule, eating, going to bed on time. I think they sense that something is not normal between Kamilla and me.”

Alana was surprised he had spoken so openly about his children, which she didn’t mind because it allowed her to talk about them. But before Alana could say anything, something reassuring or sympathetic, she started hiccupping. Andre smiled at her and ushered the waiter over.

“Drink this,” Andre said sliding a glass of water near Alana. “How much wine did you drink?”

“Two glasses,” she managed to say between sips and hiccups. “But I didn’t eat much today.”

“You shouldn’t have any more wine then. Try finishing your food. I can ask for bread if you would like.” He was directive without being commanding.

Alana nodded. They ate in silence for a few minutes, he alternating between chicken, potatoes, and cooked vegetables, Alana eating methodically, chicken first, then starch, then vegetable. She thought of what Andre had said on the walk to the Catacombs entrance. Although she felt like a child with the hiccups, Alana could see why Kamilla had chosen Andre, and how Andre may have been right about their views on marriage. There was Kamilla, wanting the idea of marriage, and Andre, who could be caring and loving yet practical and helpful, to fill the space on Kamilla’s plan allotted to marriage. Alana finished her chicken and rested her hands on the table. Andre had already finished eating and asked Alana if she’d like to walk near the river for a short time before it got dark. She nodded. After tossing a few bills on the table, Andre directed Alana to the river.

The restaurant’s neighborhood wasn’t touristy, but the stretch of the Seine closest to it was crowded with people who had exited the Louvre and crossed over to the Left Bank. Alana and Andre stood between locked green book vendor carts and faced the river. The sky was a dried out pink where the sun had already sunk. Neither of them spoke. Instead they watched the sky reflected on the river, purple well on its way to

black. In the partial light with the sun gone, Alana felt less at ease as Kamilla. The river hadn't yet become too dark to reflect anything but lights, but it wasn't light enough out to show the river as only the water that it was. The bridge arches and trees and balconies all appeared clearly over the water. If she were to lean over the cement wall, she feared the river would show only what she herself was.

Someone started speaking behind Alana, and then a man carrying a bucket of roses forced himself between Alana and Andre. He spoke French and Alana pretended she understood. She matched her expression to Andre's tone. He spoke quickly in French and pushed the rose away. His arms swung in sharp controlled motions to shoo the peddler away. The rose peddler kept speaking, and whatever he said, Andre dropped his arm. His face turned into that colorless spot in the sky that marked where the sun had once been. The peddler turned to Alana and spoke again, pressing the rose to her hands. Alana felt her own face discolor, but this time, not through mimicry. She had picked up one word, one of the few words she knew, that almost anyone would know. Madame.

When the peddler finally left, Andre didn't look at Alana. He turned to the river again. Alana stayed where she was and focused on a cigarette butt until it became a filmy color.

"I am very sorry about that," Andre finally said. "There has been a rise in peddlers, particularly the ones selling those roses."

Alana didn't say anything. Andre kept talking.

"I do not mind them, though. It is all about how you handle them. Tourists get lured in or nervous. Sometimes both. You just have to be firm."

He paused. Alana still stood where she was. Watching him speak was like watching him talk to no one.

"I do not mind them," he said again, nodding his head as though in agreement with someone. "Many times, that is how I remember that I am from here."

Alana faced Andre. He looked at her. But not with the familiarity of when he had first met her, when she had been wearing Kamilla's sweater. There by the river, Alana imagined she appeared to Andre as the muse-

ums and cafes had looked to him that week. Alana finally spoke. “What was the last thing the peddler said to you?”

She didn’t need to ask it. They both knew they had fooled the peddler.

“That my wife is beautiful.”

He looked toward the water when he said it. Then he apologized. He excused himself and crossed the street.

Instead of going straight back to the apartment, Alana walked to the part of the Seine in the Latin Quarter where there were mostly tourists. She kept her gaze to the pavement before her. Everything Alana had been trying to do since being in Paris suddenly seemed silly and false. She was tired of intruding on people’s lives. Of using their washing machines and Wifi. Tired of living among their neat frames and clean counters. But she was most tired of stealing Kamilla’s life and pretending their children were her own.

Crowds gathered on a small bridge near the Latin Quarter’s cheap tourist eateries. Alana sat on a stone wall away from the crowd. She cried quietly. A small group of teenage French boys began calling to her from the bridge, and only then did she want to return to the apartment. Before leaving, Alana looked at the yellow lights reflecting on the dark water. The illuminated ripples resembled tiny bones.

Alana didn’t see Andre the next day. That afternoon she searched for flights home. Despite the expense, she would leave Monday. On her last evening alone in the apartment, she walked to the Eiffel Tower to see it one last time. Gray blue clouds on the left bank looked heavier in the thick light. By the time Alana reached the tower, the clouds had won. Trees tossed wildly like the gold monuments of horses at the end of the bridges and the rain and darkness seemed to fall simultaneously. Alana ducked under a crepe stand awning and stood beside an Indian family with backpacks and rain slickers. The crepe stand workers motioned to Alana and the Indian family to step inside their work space to wait out the rain. They were from Africa, they told Alana and the family, and they said to stay in the stand as long as they needed. Alana watched the

rain. The droplets were so heavy they looked white and the black streets so wet it was hard to distinguish them from the blackness of the Seine. She watched people scramble in search of shelter. A few girls posed for pictures before the tower with umbrellas.

When the rain let up, Alana walked back to the apartment. She stopped and turned around to face the crepe stand now hidden by a tree and traffic light lit green. The tower shone white-gold and Alana wondered if Andre was with his children at his parent's place and whether they had a view of the tower.

Back in the apartment, Alana packed her small suitcase. She took the fossil and footprints out and placed them on the dresser while she folded clothes. They would be packed last. The black sweater was draped over the foot of the bed. Alana held it for a moment before walking down the hall to Kamilla's closet, where she hung it on the exact hanger on which she found it. She returned to the guest room but didn't go in the children's room or even pause at the threshold when she passed it. After running her thumb along the delicate grooves, Alana placed the replica and footprints back inside the jewelry box and then nestled the jewelry box inside the tin box she bought from the flea market with Andre. The apartment was ready for Kamilla and the children's return. She felt ready too as she stood in the spare living room after making a final inspection, watching the light fall through the windows and stretch across the floor before her in white stripes like the slight carvings in the fossil.

REFLECTION OF WINTER by Aparna Bhattacharya





Lucas Garcia

DEPRESSION

The muscles in shoulders and backs
Should be strong enough
To support the weight of your respective worlds
As they crack and crumble into
Dust

Dust
It's the taste of food, and laughter, and kisses
When the world weighs so desperately upon
What should be strong enough
In muscles and shoulders and backs

And hearts.

You've been a stranger all my life-with-you
Sleeping, eating, breathing the same air
And you feel warm when I hug you or shake your hand
Because you can't help but have blood that boils
And a heart that heats your filaments and fibers

The cold
The cold in you
The cold that frosts the flickering flame of time in
Your bones.

Your bones,

Your bones that break
I wish I could hear them cracking
Instead of listening to the sound of saccharine smiles
Played out to protect the precious innocents

Gestures simply don't thaw heart-ice.
Words only bounce like skulls in your skull.
All I can do is mean what I say, and weep
When you close the door behind you.
Praying with salt and water for

Light!
Light up your darkness!

Feeling so
Stupid
For praying,
for having lived as if
Truth was something as simple as love,
And love the answer to your echo
The sun to your shadow,
The filled to your hollow.

Elizabeth Troyer

HER LIFE IN PIECES

Wednesday, 3:30 PM

GINNY: K so I talked to Mrs. S. and she said it's fine if I miss class on Thursday and Friday. I'll just turn my paper in sometime next week

MOM: Great! I told you she'd understand. Your teachers are worried about you, Gin.

Wednesday, 3:50 PM

GINNY: We're not getting into this over text

MOM: Fine. But we're having a conversation when you get home.

Wednesday, 5:00 PM

SHELLY: Hi Gin, just got a call from your mom. Sending thoughts and prayers with you this weekend. (And don't worry for a second about tryouts... I think we both know that I'll be keeping my starting point guard on the roster no matter what)

GINNY: Thanks Shelly... Honestly, the worst part of all of this for me is missing tryouts. But I'll be at practice on Monday!

Wednesday, 5:16 PM

SHELLY: Gin, all I want you to focus on right now is getting better, okay?

Wednesday, 5:23 PM

GINNY: Okay. But I'll try to find a way to squeeze in some runs and shooting drills on the hospital grounds... I don't want to lose my conditioning

SHELLY: No! Don't worry about conditioning. I'll make Mar run your lines. ;)

GINNY: Haha, she'll hate me. And thanks again

SHELLY: No problem Gin

Wednesday, 11:30 PM

MARIAH: Hey so what exactly is this thing you're getting done? My mom is asking. The medical terms all flew out of my head after we talked...

Wednesday, 11:39 PM

GINNY: Endoscopy, colonoscopy, blood tests. You know... really casual, not at all awkward procedures

MARIAH: All kinds of scoping, I remember now. Your life has become "Mystery Diagnosis," famished high school girl edition

GINNY: Clever, but not quite. First of all, there's hardly anything wrong with me. And they're looking for minor stomach/digestive problem, not, like, cancer or something. Dr. Thompson mentioned Ulcers, polyps, perforations... anything that would explain the malnutrition. He thinks I might have celiac disease or some other food intolerance

Wednesday, 11:58 PM

MARIAH: Oh god, what if you have celiac? You'll be like Sean... forever turning down donuts, cookies, and bagels... forced to chomp on Chex during class movies and birthday parties... the horror!!!

GINNY: Easy, Kurtz. But you're right; that would be an adjustment

MARIAH: Well, keep me updated. I want you better!!!!

GINNY: K, I'll try. Also - Have fun with Neal tonight. And try to avoid the cops this time. Or don't - I like a good story

Thursday, 12:30 AM

MARIAH: AHHH don't even remind me! I'm going to sleep now. Eat some half-baked Ben and Jerry's for me this weekend, k?

Thursday, 7:00 AM

DAVID: I am jealous of your life

Thursday, 7:11 AM

GINNY: So mom told you? And yes... wearing an open-backed gown, getting tubes shoved into my body, and watching my blood drain into a bag is basically equivalent to a Euro vacation

DAVID: Still not rair

DAVID: *dair

DAVID: *fair. Son of a bitch

Thursday, 7:18 AM

GINNY: Calm yourself bro. I expected you to be psyched about deejaying your solo trip to school

DAVID: Good point sis... my ears have been bleeding at night because of all the One Direction they've had to endure this past month

GINNY: Two days, that's all. So make the best of it. And we both know that you like harmonizing "What Makes You Beautiful" with me

Thursday, 7:29 AM

DAVID: It's called making the best of a bad situation. You're familiar with the cliché, I assume

GINNY: Yes. And life is a box of chocolates

DAVID: He got a daddy named Forrest, too?

GINNY: Huh?

Thursday, 7:44 AM

DAVID: Just let it happen. Skrillex and I are going on a drive now

GINNY: Be nice to my car

Thursday, 8:20 AM

DAVID: Whose car? Oh right, MY car. Anyway, I'll come to St. Luke's after school, okay?

Thursday, 9:00 AM

GINNY: Only if you want to

DAVID: I do

Thursday, 2:00 PM

GRANDMA SMITH: Dear Virginia, I hope everything goes well this weekend.

Thursday, 2:10 PM

GRANDMA SMITH: Paul from next door is teaching me how to use my new iPhone!

Thursday, 2:16 PM

GRANDMA SMITH: You remember Paul, right? I think he's around your age. He's very handsome. I gave him your school picture. Wallet sized.

Thursday, 3:00 PM

GRANDMA SMITH: Pepper says hi. She and I are sharing a bag of peanut Ems

GRANDMA SMITH: Correction: M and M s.

GRANDMA SMITH: Love Grandma.

Thursday 4:11 PM

GINNY: Thanks Grams. And Paul is 12; I'm 17. Also, please stop feeding the dog chocolate. XOXO

Thursday, 7:00 PM

MOM: Can I get you anything from the cafeteria? David and I are going to grab a bite. David says to tell you that he brought the early seasons of "The Office" for you guys to watch tonight

Thursday, 7:15 PM

GINNY: No, I'm fine. Tell David that he's awesome. Also, ask him what kind of bear is best

Thursday, 7:27 PM

MOM: I'm not going to ask him that. And I insist on getting something for you. How about pizza? Cereal? They also have giant hotel waffles!

GINNY: It's an Office quote mom. And I'm not hungry

MOM: You should really eat something, Gin. It will make you feel better

Thursday, 7:34 PM

GINNY: I doubt that

Thursday, 7:41 PM

MOM: If you don't decide in the next few minutes, I'm bringing you a giant waffle covered in peanut butter. We need to get some calories in you!

GINNY: Sounds disgusting. I'll have some toast, I guess... cinnamon, if they have it. Light on the butter

Friday, 9:00 AM

MARIAH: Gin baby! How are you?

Friday, 9:49 AM

GINNY: Eh, fine. Still mysterious as ever... aren't you in class?

Friday, 9:56 AM

MARIAH: Of course I'm in class. So they didn't find anything?

GINNY: I mean, my stomach lining was a little red, and my body is all but depleted of iron... but essentially, no

Friday, 10:12 AM

MARIAH: So no celiac then? *sighs with relief

GINNY: No celiac. My beloved toast is safe

Friday, 10:30 AM

MARIAH: Gin, you need to eat more than toast! Did you have your little date with Ben and Jerry last night?

Friday, 11:04 AM

GINNY: Nah. We aren't on speaking terms

MARIAH: That settles it, I'm bringing you a plate of cookies tonight and you are going to eat the whole thing

Friday, 1:13 PM

MARIAH: So you're mad at me now?

Friday, 1:32 PM

GINNY: No. I just don't want to talk about food anymore

MARIAH: Fine. So when do get to go home?

Friday, 1:40 PM

GINNY: Not sure... my Mom wants them to run more tests. They put me on antibiotics. You know, the doc's usual solution. Everyone seems to think that having a sensitive stomach is some kind of medical emergency

MARIAH: Weighing 90 lbs at 5'6" is a blink away from a medical emergency, Gin. My dad's had patients die from low weight. On the bright side, you can start fixing this by eating my famous chocolate chip & peanut butter cookies

Friday, 3:34 PM

GINNY: Mar, they aren't letting me run today

Friday, 3:55 PM

MARIAH: Ah lucky! Legit excuse not to do coach Shelly's insane conditioning

GINNY: But I always do 60 minutes on Fridays. I run on the treadmill and watch TLC. It's my routine

Friday, 4:09 PM

MARIAH: Let it go, Gin. And get excited for COOKIES tonighttttt!

Friday, 9:00 PM

DAD: Hi sweetie, how are you? I just got out of my last meeting an hour ago. I just got a call from your mom – she filled me in.

Friday, 9:16 PM

GINNY: Hi Dad. I'm fine.

Friday, 9:22 PM

DAD: So they gave you some antibiotics? Are they helping?

GINNY: I don't know... it's hard to tell. Maybe a little

Friday, 9:34 PM

DAD: So I should tell you, Dr. Carlson called me today.

GINNY: Mariah's dad? About what?

DAD: He doesn't think you should be playing basketball this year.

GINNY: What the hell? Why would he call YOU?

Friday, 9:55 PM

GINNY: ??????

Friday, 10:06 PM

DAD: He thinks you're too frail, Gin. He doesn't want you to get hurt. And he's come to his own conclusions about why you've lost twenty pounds over the last three months.

GINNY: Okay... so he thinks I have an eating disorder. Who doesn't? He's wrong though, Dad. You know that

Friday, 10:15 PM

GINNY: Also, I don't know why my natural thinness should get in the way of playing basketball. If anything, I'll be faster. I run every day

GINNY: Also... Mariah was just here and didn't say anything about her dad. I wonder if she knows?

Friday, 11:06 PM

DAD: Sorry, got caught up with work stuff. And I got the impression from Shelly that Dr. Carlson has been getting most of his information from Mariah.

Friday, 11:20 PM

GINNY: Oh. Like what?

DAD: Well... just that you've been running a lot and not eating much other than toast.

GINNY: Oh

DAD: Look, how bout I give you a call sometime tomorrow?

GINNY: If you want

Friday, 11:55 PM

DAVID: Mom, Gin threw away the whole plate of cookies that Mariah brought over. She tried to hide them under tissues in the trashcan, but I can smell them.

Saturday, 12:09 AM

MOM: Maybe she didn't want them. She doesn't have to eat them.

DAVID: No one in their right mind throws away fresh-baked cookies

Saturday, 12:16 AM

MOM: I don't know what you want me to say.

DAVID: I think we both know what's going on here. Why are you spending money on all of these unnecessary tests?

MOM: What? We aren't talking about this over text.

Saturday, 12:33 AM

DAVID: Whatever. I'm staying here tonight

MOM: Tell Ginny that I say goodnight and I'll be back in the morning.

Saturday, 1:30 AM

DAVID: McDonald's service is fucking awful

Saturday, 1:37 AM

GINNY: Unnecessary use of that word. But that sucks.

DAVID: So how are Mar's cookies anyway? She doesn't strike me as much of a baker

Saturday, 1:45 AM

GINNY: Eh... idk

DAVID: Did you try them?

GINNY: Yeah

DAVID: Really?

Saturday, 1:58 AM

GINNY: Fine, I didn't. But I'm not hungry. Hurry backkkk I want to watch the Christmas special from season 2! "Happy birthday, Jesus, sorry your party's so lame"

DAVID: Okay... well I'm on my way to the car now

GINNY: YAYYY you're the best. Big. Bro. eva.

DAVID: Ha, if you say so Gin. Also - we're gonna talk about the cookies when I get back

Saturday, 2:12 AM

GINNY: Gonna be a long night then. Christmas episode tho

DAVID: Off course

DAVID: *Of couch

DAVID: *Of course. Goddammit

GINNY: You have issues, but I still love you

Saturday, 2:24 AM

DAVID: Right back at ya sis. Be there in 2

Monday, 7:15 AM

MOM: Please keep everything under wraps at school today. I still need to call her counselor and her teachers.

Monday, 7:25 AM

DAVID: I wasn't going to say anything

MOM: Not even to Mar. I'll call Dr. Carlson tonight.

Monday, 7:39 AM

DAVID: Got it.

MOM: Well, have a good day at school

DAVID: Right

MOM: No need to take it out on me

DAVID: My little sister collapsed into my arms yesterday because she weighs 97 fucking pounds and looks at food like it's poison. Cut me some slack

Monday, 7:52 AM

MOM: It's not easy for me either. Nor is the fact that now your dad's decided that he needs to come to town.

Monday, 8:24 AM

MOM: We'll talk when you get home, okay?

Monday, 8:50 AM

MOM: Your sister will be okay.

Rachel Krejchi

SOAPY HELL

Rinsing off a spoon?
Wet counter, wet floor, wet socks.
God. Fucking. Dammit.

RIDING THE KRAFT PONY

Snorting cheese powder
And injecting crushed noodles
Chelsea, you need help.

CHRISTMAS-ISH LIGHTS

Colors on a string!
Festive banners of winter!
(Keep 'em up year-round)

WHERE A DAY HAS BOTH SUMMER AND WINTER

“I have to find something. I have something to find.”

It has been quite a few days since Joseph started murmuring. Sonia put down her cup and, annoyed but calmly (for she was a good girlfriend of Joseph’s), continued talking. “Then tell me what it is.”

Joseph frowned. “I don’t know.” He seemed nervous. “What is it? You tell me.” Sitting on a soft chair, he had been rocking his body back and forth.

Sonia snapped. “Have you talked to Dr. Malkins yet?”

“No, no. But I will. Tomorrow.” He replied, looking at nothing. “Yeah, I’ll go talk to him tomorrow morning, as soon as the sun comes up.”

“I believe that.”

“I will, I will—” Joseph grabbed his cup, but didn’t drink it. But it was warm, holding the coffee and sitting by the fireplace. This was why they were often at Gigsby’s. This was the only place that stayed warm even in the morning. Most people didn’t go outside in the morning, for it was too cold. Where Joseph and Sonia lived was too old, so the heater often went off. Those mornings, they had to wrap themselves up in sweaters and mufflers and walk a good walking distance to this small café. The town wasn’t that big anyway.

“I have to find it.” Joseph resumed rocking back and forth.

Enough. Sonia finally stood up. “Let’s go.”

Joseph looked up at her. “To where?”

“To Dr. Malkins.”

“I said I’m seeing him tomorrow.”

“No. We go see him right now.”

“But I— But I—” Joseph looked confused. “But it’s too cold outside.”

“Get up.” Sonia insisted. “I can’t stand this any longer. Get up, Joseph.”

“But—” But Joseph couldn’t find the right answer. “Fine. I’ll go.” They wore their thick coats, and they walked out to the street.

The transformation of the air in the morning was drastic. Everything dark and green and lively froze into white crystals, and the lake turned into a beautifully shaved sheet of ice. Sometimes it snowed until the afternoon. The sun was also cold, if bright. Most people cuddled inside, waiting for the sunset.

When they finally arrived at Dr. Malkins’s, he gave them hot tea and some cake which none of them touched. “So tell me,” he said. “What’s bothering you, Joseph?”

“I can’t—I can’t find it.” Joseph stuttered a little. “That. It. You know.” Sonia thought how much longer she could be a nice girlfriend to him.

“Hmm. She said it’s been a while.” The doctor thought for some moment. “Is it between you and Sonia?”

Sonia intervened. “No, doctor. We don’t have any trouble between us. We’re a good couple.”

Joseph nodded affirmatively and added, “Yeah, yeah, we’re good, good. It’s not about me and her. No, it isn’t.”

“Then what is it? How’s your work going? Do you ever feel yourself incompetent?” The doctor was calm and caring.

“No, no, no. I am satisfied with my job, yeah, yeah, and I don’t have trouble with my colleagues, not at all. Not even a little, no.”

Dr. Malkins asked, “How are you and your pals’ job since the change?”

“We are doing fine.” Joseph said, assuredly. “We don’t have as many students as before, though. Some mothers think it is dangerous, fishing and diving at night, you know, it’s too dark even with the lights.”

“Yes, indeed. Go on.”

“We make sure we get out of the lake in due time. The class starts early, of course, at about twelve, and ends before two in the morning.

We make it sure. There's nothing much to do when it is too dark anyway. So we're on a new business. A research business. We've discovered some new species that live in the dark. Yeah, in the dark. And they make money, you know."

"I know. Yes, it sounds good." The doctor smiled. "As you both know, the economy of the town has been going down since the change. So many people left, but they say there's not much difference out there, either."

Sonia asked, "Do you know why this happened, doctor?"

He sighed. "Unfortunately, nobody knows what exactly has caused all this so sudden. Now everything has changed since then. Houses went renewal, kids go to school at night, and people work at night. Maybe it's the sun. A lot of people became, what should I say, grungy a bit. Depressed. Maybe Joseph, you are also going under the blues that come from staying in the dark too much."

Sonia nodded. "I agree."

Joseph wasn't sure, but also nodded, if reluctantly. "You are a doctor. I guess it is, then." He murmured. "Then it is me that needs to change."

Dr. Malkins affectionately put his hand on Joseph's shoulder. "Get some rest from work. Sleep at night, eat healthy, and go jogging during the day. I know, it is cold outside, but try to go back to your old routine, only for a while, okay? You'll soon find yourself well as before. And try to maintain that energy." He added, with warm intention. "We are all together here. You should not let anything other than yourself take over your body and mind."

"Thanks, doctor, thanks," sighed Joseph. "I should try. Will, definitely."

They stayed for a little longer until Sonia got a phone call. "They fixed it," She announced. "The heater. We can go back now. I have work to do."

"Good," said the doctor. "Take care. It's good to hear the greenhouse tunnels are almost done, isn't it?"

"Truly. We can come see you more often then, just to chat and keep up with things," said Sonia cheerfully.

“Yes, yes,” he chuckled. “Well then, goodbye.”

When the couple got back home, the rooms were already heated enough. Joseph took off his coat and all the suffocating stuff. He crept into the bed. Having put down the key on the table, Sonia took off her coats and gloves and hat and muffler, in that order. “All I wanted was to make you feel better,” she said while hanging her coat on the door. “You know I care about you.” He didn’t answer.

“Joseph?”

“Mm-hmm,” came his muffled voice.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Sonia began to prepare a meal—neither lunch nor dinner. She cooked vegetable stew and sliced bread. It seemed that Joseph fell into sleep again. He slept often these days. Sonia put supper on a tray and went into the room.

“Joe,” she called softly, sitting beside him. He was dreaming; he had been murmuring in his sleep. “Joe?” She called him again.

“It— I— got to— find it—,” he said, his eyes still closed. Sonia was exhausted and exasperated, for she couldn’t be the answer, or the cure, or even mere help. She put down the tray to the side, sighed, and wept silently.

The sky began to fall early today, into yellowish, and then pinkish tinge. The ice and snow had been melting, and the scarlet sun seemed warmer. People started to come out of their houses and began their daily routines. Children went to school and adults to work. The town was slowly waking up as it turned into the night. Sonia was an editor of a newspaper, so she usually stayed home. Joseph, breathing in the warmth of the evening breeze, walked to the boathouse.

“Good evening, Joe! How are you tonight?” cheerfully asked Berry. He was on duty with Joseph this time.

“Good evening, Berry.” Joseph smiled. “What do you think of tonight’s catch?”

“Promising. If we’re lucky, maybe we can catch a giant catfish.”

“It’s all yours. Do you have class tonight? Are there students coming?”

Berry chuckled. "Nah. Not tonight."

Joseph grinned. "Seems like we both are going to do hell lot of fishing then."

As the night grew deeper the ice sheet on the water fell apart and disappeared. The two men equipped themselves with all the gear necessary for fishing and then got on a motorboat. At some point they casted nets here and there and waited, smoking cigarettes and intermittently talking about little things. The air got warmer and richer. The only sound they could hear was the slow and constant flapping and churning of the water as the boat floated up and down, like a cradle.

"Look at that," Joseph pointed at the sky. "Beautiful, as always."

"Can never get sick of it, this job," added Berry, now looking up at the stars also. For some reason the sky got clearer after the change. "It's getting hot." Berry took off his shirt and splashed water onto his torso. "I sometimes wonder how the water temperature changes so fast like this."

"How strange," Joseph said, and they both laughed at the joke.

As Berry predicted, tonight's catch was good and sufficient, though they didn't see a catfish. Now they were resting at the boathouse, Berry drinking a can of beer and chewing dried sardine. Joseph had been lying on the couch, holding a newspaper. He suddenly stood up, and began wearing his wetsuit.

"Why, are you diving?" Berry asked, surprised.

"Yeah, I think I lost something in the water." Joseph's voice was flat.

"What? What are you talking about? It's almost morning!"

"I think I know where it is now," said Joseph, determined. "I have to get it. It won't take that long—probably about twenty minutes."

"What the hell is it?"

Joseph smiled. "I can't tell you now. But it's really important to me." He assuredly added, "Trust me, Berry. I'm not crazy or anything."

Berry was confused, but could no longer insist. He watched Joseph composedly getting into the wetsuit, boots and mask and gloves. "Joseph, you need a driver, the boat."

"Oh, well. Would you take me to the point, then?"

“I mean, yeah, but really, you should hurry up.”

“I know. Don’t worry. It’ll be as quick as a catfish.”

So they were in the middle of the lake again. Joseph put on the fins and cylinder, and got into the water. It was already getting chilly in the air, but he had his wetsuit on. The stars were as bright as usual. The sky was still dark.

Berry said in a concerned voice, “I don’t get it. Just make it quick, pal.” Joseph only made an O with his arms. He was to come up to this spot where the post floated.

Joseph equalized his ears, and descended. Descended until the darkness devoured his whole body. He turned on the flashlight and checked the compass and remaining air—all out of habit. He almost burst into laughter, but the regulator in his mouth prevented him from that; only a big bout of air bubbled out through the regulator. But breathing under water felt more comfortable than breathing outside. Now, where should he go? Descending, descending deeper—

He felt something passing by near him. He flashed light left and right, and got a glimpse of a tail. A catfish. Huge one. Joseph kept moving on. Then there was this giant dark, supple lump again, right in front of him, and then withdrawing, as if telling him to follow. He did. And to where they went, he saw it. Finally. He knew it. He had found that something he had longed for. He almost cried at the sight of it. He actually did, though nobody could see but only the abyss.

It was well past twenty minutes, and Joseph still wasn’t coming out onto the surface. Berry was swearing to himself now. The air got colder quickly, and icy wind blew from the distance. “Shit, Joseph, come on!” He shouted toward the water in vain. A considerable amount of time passed once again. Berry couldn’t help fidgeting madly on the boat, for he was growing too cold. “Goddamn it!” And, among the flapping noise of the boat he heard a small cracking. When ice breaks. The sky was suddenly turning into bluish gray. He looked at the dock. From the surface the pale flowers were blooming fast. Cracking noises from all directions—they were coming closer. He would be stuck in the middle of the

water. The engine would freeze. “Shit, shit, shit!” He could walk on the ice in case everything freezes, save for himself. But what about Joseph, what if he gets trapped underneath?

The white coldness wiped out everything in his mind. The best thing Berry could do for now was to drive back to the dock before the cold trapped him. ‘Forget about Joseph,’ he thought. ‘He’s a gone man.’

The morning had come. Everything went crystalized again—the trees, leaves, roads, and breathes. Everything looked pure, peaceful and serene. Even the wetsuit floating under the clean sheet of glass looked frozen and fulfilled.

MARCEL IN THE TRENCHES by Shelby Grubbs



Jack Riedy

CITRUS

Your skin is a little more orange than it should be
naturally
but my teeth aren't naturally straight or white
my face isn't naturally smooth
I shouldn't even be able to see you without plastic covering my pupils,
sharpening a too-tan blur into you
naturally I shouldn't be able to speak or write, just growl and nibble at
my fingernails and scratch my too-pale skin
but even if I was just an animal, natural, my tongue would work just the
same
and I'd still love the taste of oranges, the taste of you

Theresa Gunty

ASHTRAY BREAKUP

As the tails of our cigarettes crumble,
you say, “Tell me a story.”
So here it is:

Some swear that all ash
was once charred Night,
burnt by She
before fire was born.

She kissed Night’s Pompeii lips, lonely as Sedna.
She bathed him in her lactose lullaby.
Bated her chamomile skin.
Till he, foolish from her whiskey tongue,

surrendered.

It was too easy for She—
his neck a grape to her glass fangs.
She bound Night’s raisin corpse upside down.
He was dead, Night—She knew—but She

Waited.

Until.

vapid veins turned to
time-torn flesh dried to

NAVIGATION

I

I make coffins. My shop is filled with them. Big ones. Little ones. Old cracked ones. Most of them start out as big wooden blocks, newly cut from the cedar trees that have grown down in Alvarato for decades. Their bark is rough and wild and still smells of the animals that left tufts of yellow fur along the ribbed fractures of their dry beaten surface. It is easy to strip it all back though; my hands covered in thick waxy white gloves, and reveal the soft pale ringed wood underneath. It still breathes, aching and pulsing under my fingertips like the wrinkled skin of my wife, Marcee. She and I have been fighting lately. She wants to go up north and live with our daughter, but I have my shop and my coffins.

The bell rings above the door.

A couple comes into my shop and my wife stoops over the counter in the front, her hands pressed firmly on the cool glass. They are looking for a small coffin, no bigger than a picnic basket. There are many to show the couple. An oak with carved birds flying towards the stars, a simple polished small pine that still smells of the forest, a red maple that took me months to hollow out and sand and add a single gold leaf to the glossed front, a white ash that had black beautiful knots along the top and that gleamed like honeyed sap in the sun, a Mexican sycamore that I had found in the woods next to Old Macalister's and that I had carved with so many vines that it looked like it only belonged in the ground, under the dirt, connected to the roots of something living.

The woman starts to cry as she looks at them and my wife hugs her, the handprints she left behind on the glass disappearing little by little.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm an artist for the dead.

II

There has only ever been one real murder in Farfield, but there have been a few fake ones. Billy Joe's wife tried to collect life insurance on her husband when he ran off with the vice principal's daughter. The Klan once said they killed a black boy because his daddy took the foreman's job from a white man, but they just roughed him up a bit.

They were all liars and I didn't know them.

Maybelle and Walker lived next to me though. I didn't know them either, but they had a two-bedroom house with a wide front porch that the paint chipped off of. It was a beautiful house. It was the first built in 1902 when the oilmen created Farfield from nothing but dust and desire. The dust is still here, but the desire left when the Texas Oil Company did and the town hasn't created anything beautiful since.

Maybelle was beautiful, but she wasn't created here. She grew up in El Paso and wanted to see the world, so she followed Walker to Farfield. She used to be a teacher. She used to draw great big scenes of people's faces scrunched up from laughing. Maybelle didn't do any of those things in Farfield though.

"At least we have the most beautiful house," she would say in consolation. "At least it's different than it used to be."

I wonder how it used to be, because everyone knew that Walker beat her.

Maybe in a different town I would have called the police each time I sat out on my own porch and heard the muffled cries of Maybelle, thrown against her hundred year old walls like a sack of unsifted flour. Maybe then the police would have caught Walker red handed with his leather belt and the welted naked body of his wife. She might have even cried and finally confessed that Walker hit her and raped her and liked to watch her face turn pale from lack of oxygen.

Walker would certainly have been handcuffed then and sent off to the jail three counties over. Maybelle would have healed and smiled and I could have asked her to the Railway Diner. We could have sat out on

the porch together, her small white hand tracing the creases of my own, and watched as the neighborhood kids broke open the fire hydrant and laughed in the torrent of water, their reflections blurred and murky and unknowing against the blackened pavement.

This isn't a different town though and it wouldn't have been my place.

III

I wish something catastrophic would happen to my daughter's elementary school. I wish it would catch on fire or that the old bricks would slip out of place like soap and refuse to slide back in. I even wish for both, because the place needs to be destroyed before my daughter graduates from 5th grade on Friday.

Her name is Lucy and her mum's name was Lucy, but now there is only one.

"Look right there." She says each night. "Look at that big star right by Carina. Mum says that it's mine. She says that she bought it in the city and that it didn't matter if she was gone, because she can still give me the best things."

Lucy ran off with Billy Joe a year ago. I heard they got lost in the lake together before they got lost in their love. She left one night when the air was so humid that sweat ran down my back like her fingers used to. I wasn't home. Only Lucy was, and her mum left a star and her daughter behind.

Now there is this graduation and there is this talent show. Lucy doesn't have any talents, but everyone has to have one at the elementary school, so she is going to climb the rope in the gym. She is going to climb it and touch the ceiling and be as close to her star as she ever has been. I watch her sometimes, outside, after I've come home from my shift at the mill, blackened and heavy and distant. She does pushups and sit-ups and runs back and forth through the dust that the sun dances with. She tries to get a good grip on the rough rope I tied up for her. She tries to wrap her legs around it, hug it, cling to it with all her might. She tries to pull herself up so many times that her hands become blistered and leak clear puss onto

the parched earth.

Jesus Christ she tries so hard.

If only there weren't so many celebrations in life. So many ceremonies. They raise things up and up until its unbearable. No one in this town knows what to really celebrate, but maybe that is because there isn't much too.

Lucy received a post card from her mum the other day. It had an apple on the front and the words "YOU ROCK" on it. Her thumb ran over the frayed right corner of the card before she pressed it against her nose, took a deep breath of the apple cinnamon perfume pressed onto the paper, and ran back outside to practice. She has never said a word about her mum, but one time I peeked into Lucy's room and saw her curled up with her mother's old Sunday dress on the floor, the moonlight throwing her body's shadow across the wall in great angry lines.

I wish it didn't have to be so hard.

Friday came and the school did not burn down, but God stopped answering my prayers a long time ago. There is just me, far off by the corner of the bleachers, watching the kids sing and dance and juggle. Lucy is in the middle of the line and all of her classmates stare as she walks over to the tall rope in the corner, by me. It's noon and there are no stars out. Her small little hand brushes the rope.

"Stop." The crowd doesn't quiet though and no one hears me. "It's not fair. She's just a kid. None of this is fair."

No one knows what they should really be celebrating.

IV

I have seen fire rise up, its copper tips like clutching fingers, grasping, writhing, rushing to cover the open mouthed faces of screaming figures. I have seen rows and rows of bodies, each packed like porcelain dolls in a neat grave that goes on for miles. I've seen the sun come up red and wondered if the blood from our battlefield washed up like water against the sky.

Now all I see is Farfield and the scuffed stone of the inside of the

church's bell tower. I'm not Catholic, but I still work there, my hands shaking. I ring the bell every Sunday as people shuffle out, hunched and weary, waiting for the day to end. I watch them and feel the vibrations of each ring through my body until there is no one left but the priest and myself. Sometimes I think he forgets that I'm up here, huddled against the stained ledge and unwilling to come down, because he sneaks Mary Lo in after dark. She is young and wild and the priest is old and wise.

I once saw a couple like them in Somalia. The girl had big brown eyes and long black hair that she wove blue glass beads that clinked together in the wind into her braids. The man was a meat merchant with big veined hands and a shaved head that hair would no longer grow on. They touched each other and knew each other like no one I had ever seen.

The priest too knew Mary Lo like Abram knew Sarah. They talked long into the night and their voices filtered up through the brick and lulled me to sleep. They talked about the city and about places where the priest's hand could run over Mary Lo's without slipping off in embarrassment. They took late walks out in the garden while the moon dipped low and fell upon them like dust.

People were starting to notice. They were starting to wonder.

I would say they should go to Somalia and become weavers and meat market workers, but the couple died along with the rest of the villagers that we could not save.

Maybe Farfield is the best place for them.

At least when the priest is taken away for betraying God he will only have forfeited one life. At least when all three of us cry the bells will be ringing.

V

Marcee and I have been married for seventy-two years. She remembers when Farfield used to string up lights down the main road and it looked like the stars had come down to join us. I remember when she slipped in the street, laughing, her eyes closed, her face turned up, and her pale ivory skin reflecting off the slick black pavement. We got en-

gaged right after high school. We went up to the water tower three days before our wedding and overlooked the scattered clusters of bright new buildings that made up our town. The sun was flush over the horizon and hazy purples and blues smeared their way through the waves of heat that still radiated from the cracked earth below. It was hot. It was summer. Marcee's skin was warm and my inexperienced hands fumbled over the rise and fall of her naked body.

We made love and the town rejoiced.

UNA VIDA

I live on the outskirts of Farfield, about ten miles away from anything anyone else would call “convenient.” I raise cattle. Then I send them down Route 77 to be slaughtered at Eddie’s. It isn’t a pretty business, but I’ve been doing it for about a year now and my dad did it his whole life. He’d name every one of those damn calves and run his rough hands over their small velvety ears as he fed them out of bottles.

Late one night when I was little, I followed him across the dead grass, out under the stars, and stopped in the barn to peek through a broken slat. He was kneeling on the straw, light pooling all around him from his flashlight, while his hands ran over a three-year-old heifer. Her big brown flanks heaved up and down while white frothy spit foamed at her mouth. Still, my dad stayed there, calm and steady, his hands drifting up and down. I stood there and listened to him whisper to the heifer. Like she could understand. He called her Lucy, after my Ma, on account of her eyes being big, round, and dying.

I learned near everything I know from my dad. I know about feeding and watering and fixing what’s broke, but the thing I never realized back then was that once all that feeding and watering and fixing is done you also have to go about living. Just seems like there isn’t near enough time in the day for all those things.

It takes a lot to keep this ranch going. Got near thirty acres out here, eight or nine cows at a time, and one Mexican boy that lives in the loft above the animals. His name is Sandro, or something of the sort, considering it’s hard to understand him most of the time. He has a daughter

about thirteen, but he's real good about keeping her where she belongs. Sometimes I see her looking out the circle window in the loft, her nose pressed up against the glass. I can feel her eyes the entire time, watching me, while I check the cows over for disease and it makes me wonder if my dad, on that one moon-slick night, could feel mine.

“Señor?”

Sandro stood in front of me, his brown eyes gleaming. Sometimes I wonder if God gave some of his children brown eyes or made some folk dark so they could be connected to the earth and always have some place to go back to. Somewhere safe. It's a peaceful-like image when I think about it, but then I remember God died the same month Ma did, in the fire that ate up the old barn.

“*El camión está delante de su casa. Un envío? A—ship-ment?*” He motioned to the house that was all but dwarfed by the large grey clouds that swept across the sky in waves. Storms came like that in Farfield.

“*Ah. Comprendo, mi amigo. I'll go.*” I suppose the cows would be safe in the barn whether or not I watched them.

“*Espara. Puedo traer a mi hija a su casa? Ella ha preparado la cena. La cena, señor.*” I looked at the boy, blinked, and waved my hand in a “do what you may” type fashion on account of I had no idea what he had said.

A few minutes later, when me, Sandro, and his daughter were all walking back up to the house, I had a bad feeling this was something I ought not have gotten myself into. I had never had much interaction with his kid before, but Sandro had already run up to the truck and his daughter had already sat firmly down on the chipping paint of the front porch steps. Her being there was a little disconcerting, but Sandro and I set about unloading the truck he had driven up anyway, leaning the parts for the new barn door up against the house, so I could work on them tomorrow morning.

I have to say I'd never really taken a good long look at Sandro's daughter before, but maybe that was because she was so young and she looked decidedly like a boy. Her limbs were long and bony, stretched out

like someone had pulled them clear to the breaking point, and her face was small and angular. Just about the only thing that made it clear she shouldn't be outside helping her father was her long black hair. It hung down her back in waves from the braid she had picked out while we worked.

“*Se llama?*” I asked, jerking my head towards the girl.

Sandro paused for a moment, wiped the sweat from his brow, and said, “*Se llama Adelina.*”

I nodded and walked past the black haired girl, gesturing everyone inside. Before closing the door, I gazed out over my land, following the dips and mounds of the flat earth that converged so seamlessly with both the gentle purple light from the setting sun and the blackness that drove all else away in the distance.

The girl had put a pot on the stove to heat, so we all sat down in the living room together, blue light seeping onto the floor through the curtains. I could see them both trying not to stare, but sometimes even that was hard for me considering the wallpaper was peeling in most places and picture frames with no pictures lined the walls of my house.

Dad had told me that photographs did nothing but ruin the memory right before he had built a bonfire and burned them all. It had been close to three in the morning and the smell of whisky and gasoline had suffocated the life out of the air. My small hands had shoved pictures and the past into the flames while dad had taken up Ma's old bible and held it over the flames that shone off his shined boots.

“It's all in here, son. Everything you'd want to know. She promised me.” His shadow trembled with the movement of the flickering light and the book fell from his hand and into the waiting fire. It came open and I could see Ma's small spidery handwriting packed in between the lines. I wanted to reach into the hot sticky mess of the fire and save Ma and maybe God too, but all I can remember now is the heat from the fire and my fear as I watched Ma's face shrivel up and turn to ash.

If I didn't know better, I might think that something huge was lost in that fire, something that I needed, but I've come to learn that everything

I need is right here, on the outskirts of Farfield.

“The stew is nearly ready, Señor.”

I switched my eyes back to the black haired girl and stood up, sinking my hands deep into my pockets.

“My father would like us to pray.” The girl stated, her mud-colored eyes not blinking.

I smiled and listened to the rain as it started to fall on the roof. We had had this huge wooden cross that used to sit in the kitchen when I was little. It had been carved out of dark mahogany wood and my small fingers had explored the many vines and leaves that ran over the smooth surface that they were still imprinted with the feel of the cross.

Once, when I had been trapped in the stifling confines of a freshly pressed dress shirt and the sun had caused everything to die, my dad and I had visited the cemetery where that same cross is now. My dad had bent down, low, his black pants soaking up the scant morning dew and pressed his hand against the cool wood of the cross above Ma’s name.

“Your mother....” My dad had begun, but he never finished. Instead, he had paused and the yellow grass had moved under the dull blue sky.

Ma used to drag me out on the porch, when the air was heavy with water and the world smelled fresh, so that she could sit me right between her frail translucent legs and recite: “I am his; he browses among the lilies until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills” from her black bible.

She would hold the book tight to her chest and draw words from a place that no cattle rancher could go as she watched my father work. He would listen, while his hands bled from mending fences and the dirt clung to his pants. The knotted muscles of his neck would loosen and he would smile, his hands performing the task while his body strained towards the porch.

He never turned around though.

Ma used to spend just as many hours outside as my dad did. She would hug me and whisper words to me that I don't remember as she picked flowers in the blue bonnet fields.

"Do you know why it rains, honey?" She would say, the hint of a story creeping up in her voice. I didn't even have to answer before she laughed and scooped up a handful of dirt.

"It rains so the world won't feel so heavy. So the weight of it all won't come crashing down."

Even at the dinner table, sitting with the Mexican boy and his daughter, I can still feel her words forming against my ear as if her breath and her warmth were still at my back.

"*Señor?* Are you okay?" Sandro's daughter sat straight-backed in her chair and let her dark black hair fall in piles around her.

I smiled again and was about to reply when the window filled up with a blinding light and a violent crack was heard from outside. Sandro's daughter jumped and her small hands clutched at her dad's pant leg like I used to do with Ma.

"*Los vacas, Señor.* We check." Sandro stood up quickly.

We grabbed our raincoats and threw the door open to see the sky blackened and the parched ground pooling sheets of water into small ponds. An old barren tree that I used to climb as a kid was split open from lightning and its dead branches creaked as the wind whipped through them. Storms in Texas come as fast as the wild horses that used to run in packs across the plains, but they are about as rare at times as well, so they usually spook the cows. Not wasting a moment, Sandro and I ran right down to the barn and wiped the water from our eyes only to see the gate knocked clear off its hinges and cattle scattered and running frantically into the pasture.

We worked for near two hours atop our horses before almost all the cattle were padlocked back into the barn, their feet stomping anxiously in the mud as the rain fell through the wooden roof, giving the beasts a sheen in the light. All but one of them was accounted for and I went to go

check on the girl while Sandro rode back out looking for it.

When I came in, Sandro's daughter had saved the dinner she had prepared for us and put it in to the oven. I slipped my hand in my soaked jeans and ran my thumb down the rough skin of my cheek, looking for a bowl to serve up the food in. Maybe I would ask Adelina something later, something of interest to a thirteen year old that wasn't about heifers or sows, so I could hear the girl's voice once more. It had been a long while since I had had a conversation with a kid though, so the silence stretched between us like a taut rope.

I could talk to her about flowers maybe, about the evening primrose that bloom next to the house and the quick crunch of dead blue bonnets among the ash. We used to have vast fields of flowers about a mile from our house, spreading out in carpets of colors. But my father burned most of them and we never made the trek out past the cracked dirt to see them again. It was as if their persistence in blooming each year only succeeded in killing my father little by little, but he forgot the plants names and Ma's laugh the day of the fire.

The Mexican girl stared at me for a long time and I could not help but think there was still a pane of glass between us.

I looked at her the same way I had peeked out of the back window when I had been her age. When the old barn had been the same color as a sunset lily and my father's shadow had grown long and jagged in the smoke.

I had found him unconscious on the ground the next day, his face so black with ash that it was like he was sinking into the ground. It had been strange to feel like I had been the only living thing in that place, because it had made me feel old and unprepared for the crushed blue bonnets under my feet and for a life with only a cattle rancher.

Maybe that is how the Mexican girl feels, trapped here with only her dad and the heifers she sometimes whispers too. Averting my eyes, the two of us eventually sat down to eat, Sandro's daughter across the table, when the sound of boots tramping hard across the porch made me get up.

“*Señor. Vaya. Ayudame.*” Sondro stood in the doorway, drenched in blood and mud, while I pulled my boots back on to follow him. Sondro’s daughter stepped forward, smoothed her dress down, and began to talk rapidly to her dad in Spanish.

“He says a calf is hurt, *Señor*. Bleeding real bad by the east fence. It was caught in the wire....” She trailed off as I pulled my rifle out of the closet and walked out the door with Sandro.

By the time I got there, the calf’s belly was all cut up and bleeding while its leg twitched uselessly at an odd angle. It didn’t even make any sound anymore. I paused. The girl saw what I was going to do though and she put her hand on me, stopping me, being better than I ever was, but I still cleared her out of the way. I stepped back and I raised the gun.

I had been about to leave the barn, so many years ago, when I heard my dad begin to weep. He had held that heifer’s head in his arms and rocked her back and forth, his head bowed like he was at prayer.

“God—oh God—” he moaned, the wind and the night answering his grief with silence.

The cow began to shake or my dad did, as I watched his tears mix with the dirt. We each stayed where we were, each frozen, until sunlight began to travel in lines across the floor and up my dad’s back. I don’t know why I never moved or went to him, but I remember that he finally got up and the glint of his gun sparkled in the light. His hands shook and his wedding ring made the only sound in the barn as it clicked against the metal of the muzzle. The heifer looked up at him, its big brown eyes glassy, before its head fell to the ground along with a shell casing.

“Son?” Dad fell against the wall for support while I huddled in my hiding place.

“W-why’d you do that?” I stammered, my eyes stinging.

There was a long pause and my dad dropped the gun, his head laid back against the wood and his chest heaving.

I suddenly ran out into the open and stared at him.

“Why did you do it!?” I screamed, looking at the cow and then back

at him.

My dad let himself slide down the wall and put his head in his hands.
“Sometimes there ain’t nothing else you can do, son.”

THE CITY OF UNFINISHED THINGS

day, life, and a city

Everyone is dead in Farfield.

It can be seen during the day. There are bodies propped up in straight-backed chairs and precariously balanced against the peeling white-washed walls, their heads thrown back and their sharp straight teeth visible in their wide-open mouths. They are frozen with still-cold green beer bottles grasped in their greying goose-flesh hands while radiant red life-wrecking joints hang loosely from their saxophone playing lips.

Anna Maria lives in Farfield. She is on the roof of the hollowed-out husk of the bronze beauty once called the Railroad Diner, her arms and her legs cast out in great breath-stealing angles like she is still trying to run. She is wearing a deep red dress and her baked brown moon-loving eyes are wide open. The city breathes like a great lung below her and bodies nestle lovingly around the plumes of steam that are coughed out of cat shit stained grates. Swings creak and the wind moans against brain-bleating broken schools that the small savage thumb-sucking bodies in the playground tore down long ago.

It is always like this, but not forever, because Farfield is a city where, at night, everyone comes back to life.

alcohol, a saxophone, and loss

“The metaphysical metapersonal metalogical purpose of this city is the cock-swallowing irreversible sun-shattering lie that swaddles our puckered bloated bodies with the screaming ecstasy of swash-buckling music.” Johnny slammed his foot down and his fingers flashed over the surface of his saxophone like they were sliding over the rough troubled

places of a woman.

He had no audience.

The shadow-dripped streets were only littered with the drug-killed limbs of Farfield's best and brightest riding the waves of life for a few more hours. Johnny's music played on anyway and his legs casually carried him to the King Cole Bar way down past 7th avenue.

Angela was there, but only because she always awakened there, in that bricked bar of whittled hours, without fail, so she had started to serve the brightly colored candy-gazing alcohols. They were the stealer of life and nights and ultimately the heart-sheering moon-calling music of Johnny's saxophone, or was it his soul? Because there was nothing more pressing to Johnny than knowing that he was going to die in the morning. There was also nothing more depressing. His music stopped and Johnny covered his aching sun-stilled eyes with his lithe practiced fingers.

There was something missing, but he just didn't know what.

need, a call, and a pipe

Anna Maria cupped her smile-teased lips around the end of a smooth mind-stilling glass pipe. She inhaled. The world sped up and her heart sped up until the deep night seared blues of the crumbling porch she sat on gave way to the red-killing orange-longing colors of the inescapable light of death. It was not morning, no, but Anna Maria could feel the warm wanton rays of the sun-soaked city reflect back in her dark high-seeing eyes. She exhaled. The smoke wrapped and wavered through the air like the red-clinging folds of her knotted dress.

It was then that she heard the music.

"Does anyone hear that?" She asked, the paper stuck streets undulating in front of her ground-heavy body. No one replied, because no one cared much for anything that didn't set their bodies alive with a fierce fire that was stolen from them each day. Everyone just laid as they always did, unmoved and unfinished, in the dark blues and blacks of the mountain of overgrown sky-brushing buildings. The structures peeled and melted and swayed around them, hollowed out and beautiful during

the star-stricken night of the great empty streets of Farfield.

Anna Maria's big blue eyes looked out from under long lashes at these great husks of past-lives while her fingers danced through the narrow stream of moonlight that rested in her lap. She eventually stood up, the motion unfamiliar to her pipe-holding high-loving mess of a pleasure-driven body. There was no way that that she could live her entire sun-splintering life in one night and that made it all the more unfair, because the music had put a soul-driving, craze-cutting, need within her to do just that.

"No one hears that? It's soul-steering, moon-calling, music."

She ran.

music, the past, and vines

It keens, the wind, as it blows through the city with nothing to stop it. It makes everything feel lonely, but then again, everything is lonely in Farfield. It is a city that is covered in darkened concrete and that is slowly being infested with creeping green-forging vines that might eventually just grow over the browned bodies of everyone during the day. There is a stagnancy there, steady and flat like the level of black-bringing alcohol that Johnny keeps his mug perpetually filled with. He doesn't know why he keeps coming back to these broken and bloated walls and he doesn't know how his fingers can still trace the day-sounding notes on the shined brass of his saxophone each day, but the future will be dead in less than an hour so Johnny doesn't worry about such questions.

The musician could feel something was different. He could sense—almost—. His eyes raised and his slippery drunk-dying hands started, once more, to play his music.

Day, death, the end

She could hear the music like it was part of her poison-mixed blood. She needed it and so she ran through the overgrown streets looking for it. But the city was groaning, shifting, breathing like a bright eyed newborn on the edge of waking. Her steps sounded loud as the sad-stricken

people of Farfield made ready for the sun.

“Wait,” cried Anna Maria, her lithe soul-searching body stretching towards an old cratered out bar. She could sense it there, so close, and her body lost its breath at the sight of a sunken-faced body with a saxophone hanging from his lips. He glanced up and his moon-guided eyes connected with her moon-dwelling heart. Johnny stood up, stepping forward.

Anna Maria’s outstretched fingers reached for the knob and Farfield rose up between them. Her hand fell to the ground as the first rays of long lasting future-killing light bloomed on the lonely streets. She looked like she was running, but her moon-kissed feet never again knew where they were going.

CONTRIBUTORS

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