

no. 5

the
Bend

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The Bend

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Number Five

University of Notre Dame

The Bend
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Editor's Note

We come each of us with our own little
histories,
rent a room and sit in it,
then leave all of us owning a common
property—
a place we knew once that others know
now.

If you're reading this, you already know
the Bend.

Jarrett Haley
South Bend, Indiana, May

2008

Tony D'Souza

Of Leviathans and Porpoises

From The Voyage of the Rosa

Many are the days that we see porpoises that dance about the Rosa in the water. And so we look at the sea for mermaids who often travel in the company of porpoises but the cook says that mermaids do not tend to the open sea but to the lee sides of rocks. And I asked if he has ever seen mermaids and he has and their hair is black like the weeds of the sea and they are very beautiful and I asked if he has ever lain with a mermaid and he said that he has that on one voyage they captured a mermaid in a net and all the men laid with her many times over many days despite her protests. And I did ask What did you do with her then and he did say We ate of the fish part of her. And I did ask if it was like lying with a human woman and he said that it was better in some ways but that they are covered with fish slime.

I did tell this to Diego and Diego did say that I was a fool that the cook was teasing that there are no more mermaids in the sea that the voyages gone before us have hunted and killed them so that they are frightened and flee from the ships of men. And then I did ask him about sea dragons to which the soldiers cast alms of salt into the sea to ward them away for sea dragons as all men know detest salt and then we laughed at the fear of the men on those voyages before Bojador for they had lamented of falling off the worlds very edge but the Prince had made them round Bojador and not only had they not fallen off the edge but they had reached the Gold River and only riches had come to Portugal since. And now Portugal has grain from the Grain Coast and Gold from the Gold Coast and one day Portugal will reach even Cathay. And then all the Lowlanders and Angles and even the Spanish counts will

reflect on how they had promised that our caravels would fall off the edge of the world even as the riches of the world have begun to come to us. For Madiera belongs to us now as the Gold River and the Grain Coast and the Gold Coast belong to us and all of it is Portugal. And yet for all of this there is something inside of me that sees the edge of the world before us on every horizon and still there is something inside of me that fears that we will fall off the world though the cook has no time for this and says we will not.

Now the men cast nets for fish and the sea is a vast bounty that cannot be finished and though the nets are often empty that is as it was on Galilee and the fish move about in great congresses of their kind and it is only a matter of providence and when we happen upon a great congress of these fish as the Savior delivered to his disciples we must merely dip the nets into the water to draw up great masses of fish more than can be eaten by anyone. To this we are plagued by shorebirds who foul the whole deck.

Then after a rain there was a leviathan blowing smoke from his flume and Diego and I and even the Extramaduran who shits milk and blood stood at the rail with the men and we were all frightened to be swallowed by it. But the captain set a tack to overtake the leviathan despite the protests of the men and when the leviathan was abroadside we could see its pig eye and then though it was big we could see that it was only a very big fish with its pig eye. There were shell creatures on its skin and it seemed in that way an ancient thing. Then the captain let the soldiers unload their hackbuts into it for sport and the smoke of the shooting clouded the deck and the leviathan dove to the depths of the sea in great swirls of foam and ribbons of its blood. Then I and many of us were greatly frightened of the wrath of the leviathan that it should surface and batter us in its wounded rage but when it surfaced again its smoke was red with its blood. Then

it began to list and the captain tacked us to it and the soldiers unloaded a cannon into the belly of the leviathan. Then the sea was awash in blood and meat and the leviathan rolled and groaned and then it spouted blood from its flume and then it stilled and was dead. Then they unloaded the cannon into it again and its intestines swirled into the sea like cords. I should say that our cannon is such a fearsome thing that it makes one glad that it belongs to us. From that day on I have had no fear of leviathans and though we have seen them again billowing their smoke it is as though they fear us for they keep their distance from us as they should.

Renée E. D'Aoust

Girl Born Dirt in China

The dirt mound of one enters
your embrace, I am digging

your embrace. I am digging
to China where a child mourns.

To China where a child mourns
her body of fluid holes—

the dirt mound of one enters.

Not Fish

Oily, pungent, not fish, but a fisherman and
a memory when sand mixed in hair because he
reached for my body and with it the sand on
which we had fallen together while the ocean
stayed nearby. His hands swollen from nets,
lines, hooks grabbed, unhooked, fish tossed
into the hold, suctioned out to the tender;
while I stayed on the shore, nearby and
watching. Later those fingers began parting
each strand of hair, freeing each lone piece
of sand, pummeled and worn from the sea.

Sean K Henry
My Beach

High noon and Ocean Beach Fishing Pier belong to me for half an hour. Sun way up there, poking through clouds with its big eye, like it's looking for me to tell me I'm late again. I feel the heat leaning on me saying, hold on now, I'm only playing with you, as it tries to singe the little ridge my forehead makes over my eyebrow. Wish I had a ball cap but I'd probably have the thing on backwards anyway. Heat don't bother me at all, at least not this kind. I'm in short sleeves, though, a tie, khaki *Dockers*, but with the pant hem rolled up in two cuffs. Dress code at my work makes it hard to sport a ball cap anyhow. My toes are buried in the sand to keep cool. People are half-naked, but I'm the only fool sitting on my shoes stuffed full of my socks on the beach, ripping through a Carne Asada burrito and a *Coke*. The idle pier to my left looks like a long, wooden ladder spotted with moss, missing a rung, barely submerged on its side in the middle of the ocean. No one, not even the usual bored Mexican or Philippine fishermen are fishing or hanging over the pier to watch and point at surfers straddling and rocking their boards as everyone waits for that righteous wave. Guess everyone has jobs during the week. Even seagulls are employed, toiling their feathered asses off in this sun. Some of them skim the waves and get sprayed as blue water miss them by inches. Natural air-condition for them. I envy birds able to spread their wings so close to the waves like that. A concrete wall with painted signs that don't allow alcohol on or against the seawall straddles the beach all the way up to the Lifeguard Station, a big white building with a Red Cross on it. Nobody home there. People stroll, some tourists, but mostly office folks, walking fast with *Hi* and *Nice Day* greetings. No one even paying attention to palm trees that look like tall, naked stick

men with tattered, straw sombreros on their heads. I drop my *Hilfiger* on my eyes and throw my face to the sun, chewing at it and thinking, yeah, wish this was *my* Beach because nothing in the world beats sitting in sand surrounded by seaweed and the hot sun. Goddamn it! Nothing! Then I hear something, a female voice that's a bit too damn cheerful for my taste.

``What a wonderful day! A beautiful sun, isn't it? It's about time. Now this is why I moved to California. *This* weather I could get used to.'' I wasn't even sure she was talking to me. I'm looking around, chewing still, but slower, trying to see who on the pier or on the seawall put her up to this. But I see nothing but sand all the way up to the seawall. I give her a minute to walk on by, get her ass out of my sun and save face, or start again with *Once Upon A Time* because she's not for real. She must have risen from the sand when I wasn't looking, because this isn't happening.

``Uh huh. Yeah. Nice day it is.'' There go all my childhood lessons about talking with food in my mouth. I swallow my morsel that's been way over-chewed by now and I'm cautiously thinking about another bite of my lunch. Can't though, because I don't know what to expect. My shoes all of a sudden feel like a wooden folding chair that's splitting down the middle, parting the sand. Big smile she has, with fresh glossy lips. Then she removes her sneakers from her naked feet and does likewise, puts them together then sits on them in the sand but a little ways in front of me so that I have no problem talking to her back if she wants me to. Feet manicured, white like the insides of a medium cooked salmon. Red nail polish on perfect rectangular shaped toenails--even her little toes. On long middle toes, two silver toe rings that look like they cost about a dollar each at a flea market. So now we look to the Public, who *were* minding its business, like a couple whose having some problems dealing with issues. We look like a black and white couple on the verge of breaking up, about to

prove the skeptics right, but I don't know this white girl to save my life. She begins to talk and talk or maybe she hasn't stopped talking since she arrived on my beach, but soon I'll have to get back inside to my cubicle where chaos breathes but I can't even enjoy my burrito in peace. Wish she was a Country Music Radio Station, but I cannot turn her off. I'm nodding, getting the gist of what she's saying, but really trying to keep the sun from wilting the tomatoes in my burrito and turning my guacamole brown. She's saying something about being a newlywed as she glances at the diamond ring on her finger. I could tell that one cost more than a dollar. That one's expensive and heavy. Big hands for a woman, with long skinny arms attached. Only things on her that look malnourished are those arms. Jeans, faded, almost dirty to her knees as if someone's been dragging himself on her lap. Low cut waist that scoot down in the back to her butt line making her white, tank top with stretch sleeves seem shorter than it is above all that skin. Nice warm weather, but she's not used to it. Ugly tattoo of a big moon, the size of a baseball on a whale tail where she won't have to worry about gravity and wrinkles when she's forty. Four beans represent eyes, nose and

mouth on her tattoo. Still talking.

Something about not wanting to intrude.

``I'm a newlywed. Just got married.``

``I know what a newlywed is.`` Damn!
If I look that stupid, why is she talking to me?

``I used to eat that all the time before I got married. But I had to go on a diet to fit into my dress. Now I'm sticking with it. *You* certainly don't have *that* problem, though.`` *Hilfiger* back up on my head. Well bless her heart. I'm flattered. She serious with that backhanded compliment? Her marriage is already in trouble. She's pale but with dark red hair The sun *cannot* be her friend. That's why the moon is sinking down to her ass. Smelly Moon is a good title for

a Country Music song. I already know her lyrics. She's too young to be married. Looks about mid twenties with a big nose and a high forehead, crease-free, like it's been injected with *Botox*.

"Congratulations. When did you get married?"

"Few days ago. August 10th in San Francisco."

"That's last week. Well good for you. No honeymoon?"

"I'm *on* my honeymoon. I'm taking a break." Strangest thing I've ever heard. He must be an Olympian. Should I be feeling special? Something's bothering her, obviously.

"You probably need some sunscreen out here."

"Why? You don't."

"Well that's because the sun is *my* friend." She laughs but there's labor in it. It's a forced laugh, hoarse, as if she's been smoking for years. It screws up her face even though she opens her mouth wide. Sounds like she's coughing up blood. Laugh began genuine, though, but ended up a lie. She has a good dentist, or must have worn retainers growing up. Teeth too straight and white but it looks like she needs to leave the dentist alone and maybe see someone for upstairs.

"I don't really love him. Not the way I should. I mean I love him but, Christ! This is so screwed up! I just tied up my life for about twenty years, and all because, shit! I don't even know anymore." There--there, it's just your manic depression out of whack. We all get neuroses at some point in life. We'll see if we can't increase the dose of your *Prozac*. Is that what she expects me to say? And about that four-letter word that women use too much. Are you kidding me? Why is she telling me this stuff? No sympathy from me! Burrito's gone but I only enjoyed half of it--the half I ate by myself. Glad it's gone because this mess is too heavy to accompany my burrito anyway. I pop open my can of *Coke*. It startles her, makes her glance around. Tide rolling in but

we're fine. Got a ways to go to reach us up on this sand. She looks at me. Are those tears in her eyes? Real tears, or has she been staring at the sun? White girls and tears. Come on! I'm on my lunch break here. There is no way I'm offering her anything, not even a sip of my *Coke*. Where's *her* lunch? She's bringing attention to me--to us, that I don't want. Let's see. If I were my cell phone, where would I be? In my desk at work, that's where I'd be. Damn!

"You shouldn't have gotten married then. No offense, but you look kinda young." Nice ring though. Red nail polish with rectangular shaped nails also on her fingers. Hands are too big and red for my taste. Then there's her color. White girl? White girl with red hair and big hands on malnourished limbs? White girl with tattoo and a big nose? Nice smile, though. But tears, in broad daylight? People will think I beat her.

"No shit! You don't look that much older." She pads the corners of her eyes with the tip of her index as if she's dusting for mascara. I don't even have a napkin to offer her, but that's all I'd be offering if I had one. Nice to hear her swear.

"Why did you then?" Hurry up and leave me to what's left of my lunch in peace, Girl. Please?

"Ball was rolling. Everyone thought I should. And he asked me to."

"All of the above, huh?"

"And then some. Maybe I should have turned him down." There she goes still thinking she is a prize that he won.

"Maybe."

"You married?"

"You see any ring on my finger? All right, once. That's why I'm eating burritos for lunch—alone." Big-ass hint. Sun feels nice. *Coke* is a little tepid.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to intrude. You were the only one really enjoying the weather out here, so I thought I'd join you, if you don't mind."

"It's alright. We can share the sun,

but I got dibs on the moon the minute the tide starts rolling in." Big-ass smile from her. She smiles nice. I want those teeth she has or a set just like it. Bet you they would look better in my mouth.

"Besides, looked like you needed someone to talk to." Big smile from me.

"You can still get out. Get it annulled or get a lawyer or something. Twenty years is a long time."

"I can't. It's too embarrassing. He already gave me too much."

"Yeah. The ring? Nice diamond."

"Thanks."

"Just give it back."

"I can't. Then I'd have to give back everything, his hospitality, a house--place to live, a car to drive, his family whose been nice to me, and his name. He even paid for my mother and aunt to fly out to the wedding. They had never even been to San Francisco."

"What did you give him?"

"Nothing." I could tell she's scanning the horizon, thinking about that one.

"Ennnnh!!!! Wrong answer! Her marriage is definitely beached on the runway. Love, her four-letter word, is the right answer.

"Well, you must have given him something, too." Little beads of sweat on her forehead from all that thick red hair. She must be thirsty as hell, parched. Waves are crashing hard and loud under the pier. Someone's walking a fucking dog on my beach at high noon.

"I had nothing to give him." Like hell. How about your red pussy, White Girl?

"Sure you did. What about love?"

"Oh, love. If that's what you want to call it." Ding, ding, ding, ding! Right answer even if I had to help her get there. And *she's* the prize?

"That's why some people live together first."

"We did. But it was short, about four months."

“Quick love, then. Young love, too. Well you’ve got a fifty--fifty chance, unless well that’s none of my business.”

“No it’s okay. Unless what?”

“Unless you’re pregnant. Is that it?” There goes my lunch.

“No. Ha, ha. You’re funny.” *That* laugh wasn’t genuine. She is really struggling. She needs to bury her salmon feet in the sand like I did. Hide them from the sun to keep them cool. I suppose her toes are too pretty. She pulls her knees up in the sand and hugs them instead. I give her time. Take all the time she needs. I can put in some overtime today, anyway. My boss *should* understand that it’s this sun and a troubled white girl.

“That’s something I will have to give him and his family though. I know it.”

“What? Children?” Nods, and I watch the red hair.

“That a problem?”

“Big problem.”

“How come?”

“I don’t want kids.”

“And he doesn’t know that?”

“Not really.” Shakes her head like she’s suddenly aware of the lies she’s been telling him.

“The ball is still rolling then.” I don’t tell her that the longer she keeps it rolling, the faster it will roll, pick up speed until she’s about fifty. Perhaps she won’t understand.

“Wish I could make it stop.” Her tone has something dire about it. People walking along the beach in front of us raise their eyebrows. Some of the bold ones dangling shoes in their hands smile at us as if we’re celebrities, or an exotic picture that belong on the cover of *National Geographic*. I don’t care. She doesn’t either. I just know that those are real tears.

“I’m sure he’s a nice guy and his family is fun and stuff.” Man, I don’t even know this sucker who must have s-i-m-p-l-e stamped on his forehead if he couldn’t see this coming.

“He is. They are. And that’s what makes it so hard. It would have been so much easier if his family wasn’t in the picture.”

“Where’d you move here from?”

“East Coast.”

“Yeah, you said that. What state?”

“Boston.” Mind drifting.

“That’s not a state.”

“That was a test. You passed.”

Neurotic humor, too. She remembers the sun and shows it her face. Eyes closed. Lids naked to makeup. Red hair coarse but short, flops back as if her neck’s on the sink at a Hair Salon. Green bruise on her neck under the hair. No. That can’t be right. Hickey? She’s on her Honeymoon. Guess anything goes.

“Brrr! Never been to Boston. I like warm weather myself. I could never deal with snow. It’s not in my makeup.”

“You never know. People adapt.”

Well *there* you go white girl. Just write me a check and be on your merry way. My session here is over. She doesn’t need me.

“You know how to surf?”

“The Net?”

“No. Out there,” she points.

“Nope.”

“I know how to ski. I was on my ski team in high school. Haven’t skied in years, though.”

“Nope. I haven’t done that either.”

“I’d like to surf. It’s probably like skiing only on waves.” Her big hands undulate to show what she means by skiing on the water, and the sun hit that ring. Hands moving too fast for me, though. I’d fall on my ass. She would, too, even with hands *that* big. Another bruise peeping out from under her sleeve at the back of her skinny arm, turning purple because it’s pissed at the sun.

“Honeymoon can’t be all that bad, at least not for him.”

“It’s better now.” No you don’t White girl with tears. Don’t even get me involved in your mess. Work it out.

“Maybe this is *your* test. Just bare

with him. It'll work out."

"Thank you. You don't know how it helps to hear you say that." Silence is awkward afterwards because she doesn't really mean that. She's just being polite. Ocean's bare. No one's riding boards out there. Waves are deafening but don't seem all that scary when they roll up on the sand as white froth. Waves remind me of a fluffy dog, big-ass bark but no bite.

"Well hope everything works out." And I'm about to climb off my shoes because, well, my ass hurts and I can't afford to ruin this pair sitting on them longer than my lunch break allows.

"How come you're divorced?" Now wait a minute. Give me a break! A black man under the sun on his lunch break shouldn't be under duress, too. This is supposed to be *my* time at the beach. If I could be anything or anywhere right now I'd want to be one of the fucking seagulls skimming the pier and the waves.

"Make a long story short, irreconcilable differences in the end."

"What? I thought that only happened in movies."

"Yeah? Well I thought *this* only happened in movies."

"Sorry. I'm intruding again."

"It's okay." Damn this white girl.

"Wonder if there's a vending machine around here?" Jesus Christ! If I were a can of *coke* and I didn't want my owner sharing me with anyone, what would I do? Become a smoker and dump my cigarette butt inside the can. That's what I'd do.

"You can have a sip of *coke* if you don't mind my germs."

"Really?" Surprise is as fake as her toe rings.

"As long as you don't mind my germs."

"Germs are good. If I'm lucky, maybe I'll get sick and he won't want me again." Cop-out! But back to her again. *I* certainly didn't take long. It's always about the White girl with tears.

"Well, my lunch break's about over."

Thirst quenched. Hands me back my *coke* and stretches her legs out in the sand. Crosses them, wiggling her toes. People see that they think we're flirting, fraternizing, courting, newlyweds. Left a film of lip-gloss on my can. *Coke* taste like lavender *coke* now. Hell, she got a ring in the deal. Shit! Wait a minute. Where's her ring? I don't see it on her finger now. Lost? When did she take it off?

"I think it's easier for men to get married." If I were a white boy who was tired of skipping to Tijuana on weekends to have a good time and this girl fell into my lap, what would I be doing right now? Exchanging wrong digits and wrong email addresses then hauling ass away from this chick.

"Why is that?"

"They don't go through as many changes. They have the same friends, same habits and we have to change." Sun lighting her up as she relaxes, leaned back, stiff-armed, palms spread out on the sand. Even with her big nose she's attracting attention like an exotic billboard.

"That's no fun. You all can make friends, new friends. Lots of newlyweds out there you can meet, mingle with." She has twenty years to get started. Hmm. If I were a wedding ring that didn't want to be worn, where would I be? This white girl appeared on my beach, under my sun, with no purse and no lunch, looking for therapy. And she's getting it, free. But it's costing me my lunch break.

"I don't like his friends."

"Oh yeah. Tell him to get rid of them."

"Right on. I can't do that!"

"They like you?"

"I don't know. He's not really the jealous type, but I think they have to get his permission to like me." Dude might not be so bad. He can probably sense right off that his new wife isn't completely sold on him. I give him some credit anyhow. I'll laugh at him later when I'm in my cubicle

shuffling papers.

“He’ll get past that. It’s the newlywed jitters. Every young newlywed has them.”

“Did you have them?”

“You’ll have to ask my ex.” Big, bright smile like she’s contemplating the glamour of being an ex. Sympathy smile is what ends up on her face under that nose when the thought passes. Still, white teeth are fetching and make people who stroll past us believe she’s smiling at them, so they smile back.

“I could talk to you all day. You’re nice to talk to. Thank you so much.” Compliments? What else is she after? Where’s the moon at? It’s taking an awful long- ass time to show up.

“Well, I have to get back. Good luck with everything. Nice chatting with you.” Please. Who am I kidding? I’m not going anywhere.

“I don’t think I want to go through with this. I don’t think I want to be married to *him*.” If I were a husband who was about to get dumped on his Honeymoon, where would I be? Burrito feels like it’s a thick burning cigar lodged in my stomach about to come up whole because I ate it too fast. I feel sad for her because her ball is gathering speed. Removing her ring doesn’t even begin to slow it down.

“Give him a chance. You’ll be fine.” Still can’t believe I’m supporting this sucker and I don’t even know him from Adam. Quiet from her because she finally stopped talking. She has a lot to think about. I hear footsteps behind us like a distant jogger getting close. No. Someone running heavy, galloping fast, the kind of mad run you hear on sand when lifeguards are sprinting to save a life. She is silent, still thinking. I turn around in time so see this big white motherfucker about to pounce, but not before he yells out “PUTA!”

Mother's Bark

Listen when I talk.
Quit shaking your head.
Did I say to sit?
Get up off them legs!
Stay off the floorboard!
I just mop the floor-
Just stay on the mat.
Don't walk out that door!
Come back up them stairs!
I'm locking this door.
Okay, stay outside-
Been through this before.
How'd you get back here?
Didn't I lock both doors?
Look at all that mud.
More prints on my floor.
Back out on that porch!
This is no time to play.
What's that in your mouth?
Come back here I say!
Bring that here to me!
You're so damn sneaky.
Look, open them teeth.
Let go my panty!

Jaclyn Dwyer

Holding on to Childhood

''It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone.''

The Girl

FUCK! I don't even like the kid. Can't stand the kid. But the truth is, I feel bad for the kid. Like I wanna take off my clothes and let him look at me, just so he can get used to the idea of being around girls, maybe let him touch me a little, just so he knows what skin feels like. Just to get used to it. Then maybe he won't freak out every time some girl brushes against him in the hall and he gets a boner right there. Right there! And the kids won't laugh and pick on him and then I won't have to follow him around, baby-sitting a twelve year old just to make sure he doesn't get beat up every goddamn day. Then I think, maybe that would just mess him up more, like he'll think we're all freaks, even though we are. But we can't have him thinking that. Gotta keep the kid normal, that's what mom says. So she signs him up for baseball. Of all things, baseball. Such a sad sport. It makes me wanna fucking cry, like Field of Dreams having a catch with dad in the backyard post 9/11 Yankees kind of sad. It's too much of a failed metaphor for America.

The Kid

The best way to explain the situation with the kid is like this: the whole world is divided into dog people and cat people. The dog people seem to always have the upper hand

and always know where they are going and what they are doing and the cat people are just sort of strung along trying to keep their heads above water, and you can't help being who you are. It's like your born one way or another and if you're a cat person stuck in a world of dog people, well, you're just fucked. That's pretty much the circumstances of the kid.

The Girl

I want to tell you this, but it's not my story. It has nothing to do with me really, but still I have to go on because no one else will.

I have never been a pretty girl. It's not that I'm ugly or unattractive. Boys like me. In fact, many boys like me, and the fathers at games like these, well. . . It's just that I'm not pretty in that ordinary enviable way. I'm the sexy smart girl. The girl you want to fuck. The girl you picture when you're jerking off in the shower, not the girl you call up for a date to the movies, the girl who gives you clammy palms just thinking about holding her hand, the girl you spend forty five minutes inching your arm around her shoulder. That's not me.

I'm the girl you don't wanna get too close to because you never know what I might say, what I might do next. Like the tattoo at the base of my neck you can only see when I pull my hair up high into a ponytail. This boy I was seeing at the time was in a band. He told me that he liked tattoos so I said, "Let's go." And it wasn't even the fact that I got it right then and there that freaked him out, or that I'd chosen his initials scripted in an open heart, but that I laughed the entire time while the needle buzzed behind my head.

"Doesn't it hurt? It's gotta hurt," he said. "Of course it hurts," I said, giggling still, trying hard to keep still while my ribcage fluttered from my laughing lungs. My abdominal muscles were beginning to tighten,

would be sore the next day from so much laughter. The tattoo artist took a break to switch colors for the initials BC. He scoffed, "I've never seen anything like this." That right there, that's me.

"But I didn't ask you to do it," says Salinger. "I didn't ask for you to feel the way you do. You're influenced by an illusion. Writers are magicians. They write down words, and, if they're good, you believe that what they write is real. . . . But the words on the page have no connection to the person who wrote them. Writers live other peoples' lives for them."

The Boy

His father spends his afternoons fantasizing about a life that will never be his. Two years in the minor leagues and that was it. His dreams fell to the boy, and for a while he tried, but the boy just doesn't have it. He knows this and by now the father knows it too, but he can't say it. Neither one of them can put it into words, but he's stopped coming to the games. No one ever looked at the boy. Now, not even him. The boy thinks this will be his last season with the team, but he said that last year and the year before. He just can't help it coming out like this, hoping, but not quite believing that maybe this year will be different from the last. But it never is. Never. The only reason they let him play is they've got this killer southpaw, 93 mph arm, and no one else wants to suit up and crouch behind that plate with these pitches being hurled at his face. This kid, he's got it. He's something special. People come to look at him. Two recruiters from out of state. The boy's father got sick one day when he thought they might be watching his son and the boy missed a pitch. Bounced and hit him in the chest, and he thought his heart had stopped and there he was shaking the fence like a monkey in the zoo and mumbling to himself and while everyone else was asking, "Hey, man. Are you

alright?" his dad was screaming, "Jesus Christ. All you have to do is fucking catch the ball." It was around that time that he stopped coming to the games.

The Girl

It had to be the catcher. Everyone else I could see their faces shadowed beneath the penumbra of their visors, squinting into the sunlight, glancing in my direction, staring at the catcher squatting behind the batter. He was the only one not looking at me, the only one with his back to me. The only one whose face was completely hidden behind the mask, the only one looking out over the expanse of green fields and the tile factory beyond billowing black smoke even on a Saturday, just like me. I wondered if he too saw the neck of a giraffe, the curled trunk of an elephant, or if he only saw pollution causing him to cough. He was the only one crouching uncomfortably close to the ground while everyone else stood hunched their elbows, leaning on their knees. He even had a special glove without any fingers. As if his hands were all palm, and I wondered what it would be like holding them.

*"Why have you never written about baseball?"
I ask.*

Salinger turns his head slowly and his sad eyes rest on me, a forlorn question mark bobbing corklike in their dark centers. He does not answer, so I chatter on.

"I can't remember Holden Caulfield ever talking about baseball - though the story takes place in December, doesn't it? He wouldn't have any reason to . . ."

The Kid

It came from the big oaf over on third base. Obese motherfucker who only threw hard because he could put his weight behind the ball and hurl it, without much direction,

hard and fast. The kid stood on the bag as the ball crossed his body and the kid wasn't thinking. It was just an impulse, a gut reaction, animal instinct that made him reach his left hand out like that and catch the thing in his naked palm with a loud smack. But it was too late. The runner was already safe, so he lobbed the ball back to the pitcher, and it fell two feet in front of him. That's how he knew his fingers were broken, because he couldn't get them to bend and wrap around the ball the way he needed them to. But he didn't complain. He didn't say anything. He just stood by first base hoping that no more balls came to him for the rest of the inning. And they didn't.

"Whoa! Did you see that? He just caught that with is bare hand. Yo! Kid, Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he said, even though he knew that he wasn't. "It just stings a little. It'll be fine."

When it was his turn to hit, the kid tried to grab the bat, but he couldn't get his fingers to bend. By now, they were purple. His whole hand was swollen and the coach noticed while he gave a few practice swings with his one good hand. "What are you doing?" he asked.

The kid tried to hide his hand, but it was so obvious that something was broken. The coach wanted to know how it happened. "That ball that I caught, I caught it with the wrong hand."

"And you didn't tell us that you were hurt."

"It's fine. I think it will be fine."

"Kid, that's not fine. Somebody get him some ice. Where are your parents?"

"I can still play though. Right? I can play?"

"Not like that you can't."

The Girl

The first time I kissed a boy was in the sewer underground. I'd raced to get a renegade hockey ball, a bright green all-

weather ball that had rolled into the grate at the curb, and my skates got stuck scrambling so fast and he came in to get me out. I was crouched in there, crying, bawling like some baby just because I got stuck in a pipe. My breaks pressed into the back pockets of my jeans so hard I thought they'd tear right through. My knees were squeezed so tight I thought they might snap and I couldn't move. Scott came in and took the ball out of my hands.

"Try to inch forward," he said.

"I can't," I said, because I couldn't. "I'm not usually like this. I mean, I don't usually cry, it's just."

That's when he kissed me, to stop me from crying, and he said, "Hey, it's ok. I would have cried too."

It was a lie and I knew it, but when boys lie like that, it's not so bad. It's better than the truth. Then he tipped me sideways and the cement scraped across my back but it was a good feeling to be moving at all and I smiled because I was finally free. My legs were suddenly loose, so we crawled out together. I took breaks every few inches or so to rub my cheeks with the backs of my hands, but when I emerged, it was obvious that I had been crying. They treated me differently after that, like I was a real girl, no longer one of the boys.

"I don't write autobiography. I'm a quiet man who wrote stories that people believe. Because they believe, they want to touch me, but I can't stand to be touched. They would have been chipping little pieces off me before I knew it, as if I were a statue, and pretty soon there wouldn't have been anything left of me. That's why I chose to drop out."

The Boy

A fly ball. He stood up and slid the mask off his face. Over his head it fell to the ground behind him as he followed the ball down into his mitt. A good catch. Then his eyes came up. He'd gotten turned around and

was now facing the fence like every other boy on the field and he saw me right there, a foot away. My fingers were looped through the holes in the fence, my nose poked straight through the metal diamond. He wondered why someone didn't send me away, tell me to back up. I could get hurt, my fingers smashed, my nose broken. I never thought of any of these things. Sometimes he crashed into the fence, his heavy body rattling the chains. Or if he missed an outside ball, it could crush my knuckles, warp my pretty fingers. Delicate hands. All this in only three seconds and still he noticed that my eyes were uniform blue. The exact shade of the stripes on his shirt. I was impressed.

The Girl

You want him to get hurt so that you can comfort him, but not so bad that you are unable to provide the comfort and care that he needs. You want him to get stuck in a pipe so that you can be the one to crawl in after him to fetch him out. You want him to start crying so that you can kiss away his tears, but he doesn't even look at you. You can't remember the last time you have been this close to a man who doesn't turn to look at you. Not just look, but stare, thoughtfully, and you know what he is thinking.

My stomach was so full of fluid it kept making noises like a boat on the water. It was embarrassing. After a while, it began to sound like pigeons cooing. Then the sound disappeared. My stomach kept gurgling, but you couldn't hear it over the sound of the siren. An ambulance arrived for the kid. By now, both games had stopped. The boy came out, walked around the backstop to where I was standing. He leaned on the fence. "You shouldn't be standing here, you know. It's dangerous to be so close."

"There's no such thing as too close."

"What's going on over there? I hope nobody's hurt."

"Oh, shit. It's my brother." Shit, I shouldn't have said shit just then. I wanted

to stay and talk to him and tell him my name. But I had to walk away. I had to go to the kid. "I should go."

I didn't even look back, even though I wanted to, but I swore that I could feel his eyes on my naked shoulders, burning into my skin and I tried not to sway too much, tried to forget about him as I picked up my pace and soon I was running, hauling ass to get to the kid.

"I'm fine," he kept saying to everyone crowded around him, the coaches and paramedics who kept asking for his parents.

"I'm here," I said. "I'm his sister. I'm with him."

"Don't worry, I'm fine," he kept saying, even to me. "I don't need you to take care of me. I'm not some baby. I'm tough. I can take it."

"You fucking broke your hand." Fuck, I shouldn't have said fuck just then.

I told the paramedics that I'd take him straight home and let my parents get him to the hospital, even though the kid kept insisting that he wouldn't go.

The other kids on the team were impressed. Somewhere in the crowd, I knew the catcher was watching me, his gear still on, the mask somewhere in the dirt of the other field. He was the only one in that crowd who was really seeing me for who I was. A girl he'd want to take to a movie and spend two hours sweating and thinking about holding my hand.

They say baseball is a game of inches. Getting the ball over the plate. Missing the swing. Making the catch or the steal. Finding the right boy is the same kind of thing. There are inches between your heights, closing that space with heels. Inches between your faces before that first kiss, closed by standing on tiptoe, leaning into his body pretending to fall. Letting him catch you. Holding your face up to his. Laying your arm across his two inches of the arm rest, dangling your hand over the edge, encouraging him to pick it up.

I wasn't expecting him to call me when

he said he would. I wasn't expecting him to suggest dinner before the movie, where I'd have to sit and eat and try to hold up a conversation with a table between our bodies. I went through six outfits when usually I'm showered and dressed and out the door in ten minutes. I blow dried my hair so it was straight, flat, and calm, but when I looked in the mirror, I still looked a mess. Like it was in my skin all those men I'd been with. Like you could smell my history. I felt fake, like I could never pull this off. Like I shouldn't even answer the door, but my brother was already there when he knocked and it was too late. I felt stupid and it was that boy's his fault. If he hadn't been so damn nice, I would have never tried to be something else.

I asked him when he picked me up that first time to take me to the movies, "Do you prefer dogs or cats?"

Then I said, "Did you know that if you die alone in your house, after a few days without food, your cat will start to eat you, but your dog will continue barking, trying to get help. He'll starve before he eats you because he considers you a friend. He thinks you're one of them, part of the pack."

He didn't say anything for a while. Neither one of us did. That's how I knew where things were going.

Stacy Cartledge
tramontating

bleary with warmth coming to cold;
watching the lights
of day's long close. the wind has no
rest; the scent of wood

still spices the air and the nesting sap
floats like laps after high school
pigskin games,

pads lightly lifting, then holding me by
my beaten shoulders. the leaves, now
older,

have gone despite the lukewarm winter;
streetlamps' light glances along
branches,

bald and bending of bough. the scent is
deeper
here, darker and secret. you cannot
hear

my whispering, but that does not stop
the words,
an image caught in palimpsest: within
the woods

we found our rest, a blanketing quiet
pulled round ourselves, thick as wool.

but tonight the insulation peels: trees
carelessly
cleared, construction has razed our spot
of osculation.

couplets

intervention is a word of
dismemberment—
extricate the soft, the feel

of pleasure on burnt skin.
whittle stone, carve it. the stones

are used for building,
the stones rough.

say it honestly, without truth
in your transmuted eyes—

the stones become smooth
slide of moss,

the slip of water
over burnt skin.

sincerity a knife; the stones
stacked, cemented.

but more than this, i feel you
like a prosthetic.

ode on distance

1.

hidden morning sun and clouds
pink, pushed flat, straining against
sky;
the birthing horizon
grasps at me, something animate,
adamant, despite the distance.

zeno's paradox assumes a simple
misapprehension—we do not move
in fractions.

once a girl said to me how is it
that i can touch my fingers
to my shoulder, but not to my elbow,
half
away the distance? she knew why
—but she was searching
beyond fulcrum.

2.

the moon is beauty and now
and then i can reach it, touch
its discolored stain on the sky
—taste the scent
of dust & petals.

despite touch, there is no contact
between us.
we are grains of empty space.

once the girl said come to me. . .
but i said that distance is not
the constraint in this equation
—it is the ability to move,
the possible vectors
of motion.

Amy Faith De Betta

The Greater East Albuquerque Co-Prosperity Sphere

Johnny-Cat Comes Clean:

So it's about thirteen months ago when I'm making a delivery to some shit hole on Fourth Street where I'm always worrying about leaving the engine running even though I'm usually out of the truck, package in hand, getting the electronic signatures inside of two minutes flat. There are always at least twelve extended family members home at all times when it comes to making a delivery to Fourth Street. Half of them on disability, the other half under 9 months of age, soaked diaper and actually answering the fucking door then dialoguing with me in utter gibberish before someone over the age of 2 yells in Spanish and comes to the door to sign.

But I pull up to this place and this guy, this white guy with dyed black hair and stark white roots, maybe 33, 34... comes out from the garage pushing his bicycle next to him and says, "Delivery for Rodriguez? Felipe Rodriguez?" (All the while rubbing his nose and scratching his greasy hair, standing maybe 5 inches shorter than me.) So I should ask for some ID, but the fucking truck is running with the keys in the ignition just begging to be stolen and I mean, it's maybe 104 degrees out and I don't particularly care who signs for this envelope from a Pharmacy in Arkansas.

"That's you?" I ask.

"That's indeed who I am. All day. May I?" he asks, really politely, reaching out for the envelope so obviously stuffed with prescription vials.

I shove the electronic pad in his hand and say, "I just need you to sign. And hit enter."

"Of course," he says, then I start to grin when he takes the pen in his right hand, then moves it to his left and carefully

writes what might be interpreted as "Flp Rod-
--."

"And... ENTER. Got it. Great. Thank you," he smiles back as I hand him the envelope.

I'm not even vaguely interested enough to watch and see if he actually enters the house. That would make me all too accountable. I pull out and catch him in the rearview getting back on his 10 speed. Felipe Rodriguez. One of maybe 35 deliveries to make. It was that fucking hair that was so memorable.

Not two days later I'm making a delivery up in the Heights. Now if you don't know Albuquerque, and I hope you don't, the Heights are where all the money is. They've got mansions built into the Sandia Mountains and their biggest problems are that occasionally a bear will wander down the mountain into a sauna and take a midnight soak. They shop in Santa Fe, don't so much as blink at the price of a photograph of the same goddamned mountain they have in the backyard which is now on a museum wall selling for \$1700 in a cut rate frame and, of course, they wear that fucking turquoise jewelry, even the men. Big rings. Pay fortunes for what the American Indians sell for \$15 downtown. Lexis, Hummers, Jags... this is no cars-on-blocks territory and never any chicken wire kind of living. You say the Heights, and people say "Wow."

I pull up to this house that truthfully I think is actually a model home for new homes going up. A good 3 stories with unfathomable windows and you can of course see right through the house into the mountain range behind it. There's a high surrounding wall decorated in Candelabras already set on it ready to be lit.

And what the fuck do you know? There's Felipe Rodriguez with his bike literally parked in the rose bushes next to the front door. He's sitting there typing on a laptop, and I swear he's wearing the same "Icky and the Yucks" t-shirt he was wearing when I met the left-right-handed fucker on Fourth

Street. I turn off the truck and step out, looking at the ground. Two envelopes in hand addressed to "Jonas Showalter" and he stands up. Seeing me from a distance he says, "Jonas Showalter. Delivery for me, I hope? I've been waiting all day... You should really..." And, recognizing me, his fucking face drops.

"Well I'm just glad you made it safely." He says, making a fast recovery. "There's a monsoon coming, I see. I'll just sign for that..." he says, looking down, his white roots all stark against the black edges.

So realizing what the fuck is going on here I ask him for his ID, and goddamn if the guy doesn't open his chain wallet, sift through about a dozen cards, and hand me a state license issued to Jonas Showalter.

"Good security measure," he says. "Can't be too safe." He's rocking back on his heels, looking everywhere but at me.

"Strangest thing." I say, looking him dead in the eye. "I

could swear I know you. Thought your name was Felipe something..."

"No, sir, indeed it is not. Jonas Showalter. Says so right there. Am I going to have to call your Supervisor?" he asks, with this sudden burst of confidence.

"Tell you what, I'll go back to my truck and get the cell. You can go ahead and call him on it..."

So of course, as I head back to the truck, he scrambles for his bike and takes off peddling like a second grader down a gravel driveway and actually makes a left to turn uphill. Amusing. Now, understand, my interest was merely to kill a little time. The cell wasn't charged. It never is. I was more interested in knowing what the hell I was going to pull out of my hat next. I sign for the delivery myself and get back to work.

After my shift I open the envelopes and one is a bottle of 90 Vicodins and the other a bottle of 120 Fioricet with Codeine. I don't particularly care for those drugs myself.

Never understood why you'd dull it down when you can speed it the fuck up, but the deliveries are worth something without a doubt. Maybe a few favors. Car repairs maybe... or maybe I'll just see if I can get a trade for more packets of my own drug of choice.

Next day I'm making a delivery to "Evelyn Brice" who's living in one of those cut rate apartments at Pueblo Villa. Looks cool from the outside, but they're all run down inside and every other mutherfucker has pit bulls in their courtyards. Plural. No one ever has just one pit bull. I walk up the steps to her place and knock on the door and within an instant you hear a dog bark and the door flies open like I'm Ed McMahon with her Clearing House Check. I'm stunned for a second.

She's gorgeous. Every hair in place pulled back into this elaborate twist with short straight bangs and huge grey eyes. Pink lips, a short red dress and heels, and it's only 9:30 AM. I'm thinking maybe she's a stripper, but the way she greets me, melting at the door, smiling at me in earnest and carefully articulating to this huge red heeler, "Quiet. It's okay, doll face. I'm sorry for the barking. She's just protective."

"No, no problem. I have a delivery for Evelyn Brice."

"Evie. Everyone calls me Evie. I didn't expect you so early," she says, with no reach for the package.

"Yeah, yeah, strange route this morning, can you just sign here, please?"

"Certainly," she says, taking the pad gently from my hands and carefully writing her name in this elaborate script before handing it back to me."

"And just press ENTER for me," I say, handing over her envelope.

"I'm so sorry... where's the enter button?"

"Right there," I say, pointing to it.

As she carefully presses it, looking genuinely confused by the electronic pad, Thee Felipe Rodriguez comes walking behind

her yelling something to her about toilet paper. Stops. Looks directly at me and dodges out of sight. I mean, he dives. Literally. For the rug. Face first like he's sliding into home base. She smiles, tilts her head against the doorframe, tentatively takes the envelope and says, "Thank you very much" in this calm, measured speech.

"Oh, listen. Before I go, I think I have something for you, Evie." I reach into my pocket while she stands there dead still and relaxed, and I hand her the two bottles for Jonas Showalter. "There are a few missing, but I think I can make it up to you, if you'll give me the chance. And send Felipe my regards." I smile back at her.

"I'll do just that," she says, closing the door gently. A chorus of "Oh Fuck!" and "God no!" comes from "Felipe," who's obviously throwing an apoplectic fit inside. She's not yelling though. Whoever she is. And at the time I think she's not yelling because she's just fallen that far. Doesn't have it in her. But now I know, she wasn't yelling because... being busted would have been kind of a relief. Crossing the finish line.

I get back in the van, snort the remains of my last packet and hallucinate falling into her dead blue eyes, like a pool of water with an undertow, but breathing in the water, breathing normally. Swimming, looking for something. No idea what I'm looking for but knowing there's something in there I'm supposed to retrieve to keep and have, or maybe to return...

Belle's Song

I like this idea a lot. It's tightly woven and this guy John, he's got what Evie would call my "by in." He's got the perfect job to get our orders faster, smoother, and without all the worry. Evie had to use her own credit card to get her Fioricet after Skunk screwed it all up. Broke the rotation. I was supposed to be at the next house to accept the delivery, but he simply didn't

mention it, got cocky and decided to do it himself. He's lucky he's not in jail. We're all lucky. So before we really turn this into a business, I want everyone to get in the car and drive the hour and a half with me to the town of Chimayo. This is still relatively off the map.

We're going to pay our respect in the Church where there was a sacred crucifix stolen in the 1800s. Being Mexican, the artwork is overpowering, it's spiritually so vivid and striking. So this cross I mentioned... it simply reappears some years later, beneath the Church, literally in the ground as if it had returned itself. As if it had been called home like the very hand of God had picked it up and placed it back in its rightful place.

So every Easter Sunday it becomes this pilgrimage ground. Literally a thousand people ditch their cars and walk on foot to Chimayo for one sole purpose: to retrieve the soil that the Church is built on. A sandwich bag, a paper bag, just a few shovels of this dirt that's said to heal the ailing, to do anything really. The rest of the year, though, it's got trinket shops and some good Mexican food. You can buy spices off the street sellers and wander in and out of a few local artist galleries. Cars don't go through the town, or if they do, it's rare. You just sort of park at this strange area near a brook with the Stonehenge version of huge crosses erected in a line... and walk through the grottos uphill to the Church.

The first time I took them, Evie was just mesmerized with the grottos where people light candles and leave tokens of their prayers. This is more like the dying ground for desperate pleas. People take stones from the brook and write on them in marker, paint on them... whatever... Prayers like "Dear Lord, King of all Kings, my son has taken ill and only your strength and glory can save him. I beg you to save Pedro" plus the date and a first name, or no name at all. One of the grottos has nothing but tiny baby shoes, some new, some looking very old. At other grottos

it's more traditional to leave paper, notes, prayer cards, funeral cards.

Now I'm of Mexican heritage and proud to be but truth be told, it's not a place for a bunch of non-Spanish-speaking white people to be roaming at night. For every faithful person out there, there are three opportunists to steal your car and not all these residents or church caretakers speak English so they won't be able to help you when you're stranded. I've heard some pretty bad stories about belongings, cars, the ring on your finger, being robbed from you at night and so I insist we all go together since I know many of the locals very well and I'm the only one that can speak Spanish among us.

The car ride is a fucking thrill. We're passing these plateaus in the desert, the sort of thing you might take for granted if you were born here but John says, "Look! that looks like the mountain from Close Encounters!" Evie immediately goes into her purse for a pill, holds it in her teeth and sprays sun block on the shoulder against the passenger side window. Says, "Water, please," with the pill still clenched between her teeth.

Skunk hands her a Pabst and immediately launches into a speech on how unconstitutional Income Tax is which is mildly amusing considering the fact every job he takes is under the table. Now I've got his head between the seats and this is the worst because John is a new audience, he really feels that he can enlighten Johnny-Cat... make a fucking difference.

"Wait, before you do this," I say. "I have a perfectly good high going here and I want you to consider that before I seek any sort of revenge with LOUD noises" knowing full well that the louder I am, the more a meth addict will scratch himself like there's something alien on the inside.

"You simply wouldn't do that," he says. "Not only would that disturb your own comfort but you're a fucked up zealot who will later, after this bizarre trip, decide

to turn the other cheek. So shut up and operate the vehicle while I speak candidly with John here. You'd like to speak candidly, would you not, John?" he asks, putting a hand on John's shoulder.

"Yeah, sure, but can we speak candidly without your face in mine? It creeps me out and you need a mint or twelve."

Evie cracks up in the background, as do I, and Skunk simply fails to hear the constructive criticism.

"I imagine someone has something infinitely more important to discuss here..." Skunk says, crossing his arms like the proverbial five year old he is and looking out the window as if to say, "Too Late. Now I'm not sharing my wealth of knowledge. Now you'll never know who the third shooter was."

"I stole a dog once," Evie announces, rather nonchalantly, sipping the beer and passing it to me.

I almost spit it out but manage just to cough a lot and finally ask, "Your dog is stolen?"

"Oh no, no, not ... I came by her honest. When I was in the... tenth grade, I stole a dog. An ex-boyfriend's dog. Lured it into my car all stealth like, headlights off. Sasha... I think it was named. Stinky dog. Nice pooch. All mottled though."

"What prompted that?" Johnny-Cat asks, genuinely interested.

"Oh, he broke my fuckin heart. The guy, not the dog. I was crazy about him in the sort of way only a highschooler could be. In fact... I think I honestly loved him," she says, kind of tapering off... going back there, like she does. "But he kept badgering me to sleep with him and in my mind, this was honest-to-God true love, this wasn't just hormones and I wasn't thinking on the same level he was. Anyway, it was some kind of sheep dog, I think. And I stole it."

"There are numerous breeds of sheep dogs, Evie. If you're going to tell a story know the facts. What kind of sheep dog?"

"Are you judging at the Westminster, jackass? Let her tell the story," I tell him,

staring right at him in the rearview and passing the beer back to Evie, who snaps it just in time to keep Skunk from grabbing it.

“I don’t know, the big kind where you can’t see its eyes but that’s good because you just know they’re running, so you wonder how the thing sees at all or if it’s just resigned itself to be blind with gooey eyes. And he lived in this really fucked up depressing house that lent itself to his whole persona of punk-as-fuck and rebellious and shit.

“Historical house. It overlooked the Long Island Sound and his parents had all this money but they were so fuckin concerned with the electrical bill, or maybe the conservation of energy... who fuckin knows... so it was always pitch black in there. No lights in any room where no one was sitting, not even a porch light. Anyway, not the point. The point is, at some point, it had come to my acute attention that he was fucking this bald headed chick from another school district. Her name was Kristie. I hate that name to this day. She looked a lot like Sinead O’Connor, truthfully. I mean, she was beautiful—in retrospect, though I wouldn’t have admitted that at the time. Really pretty girl. My same age, probably, and I just loved him so much that I ignored it.”

I crack up and ask, “Because you loved him? This sounds like a bad talk show.”

“Yeah, it really does, doesn’t it?” she says, genuinely laughing at herself. “But when you’re that age, you think so fuckin much of yourself. I mean, you think, it’ll blow over. You’re so amazing... this can’t last... surely he’ll see how wonderful you are... or something. I don’t know, but at the time, it really made sense to me.”

“Textbook,” Skunk mutters before cranking down the window and spitting out it.

“Nice. That’s really classy,” I tell him.

“No, not actually,” she says. “It WAS more complex than that. Someone had to screw him, and it wasn’t going to be me for a variety of reasons.”

“Also textbook,” he mumbles, before Johnny-Cat turns almost entirely around to listen to her and, I suspect, give him a look. “Let her speak,” Johnny-Cat says.

“Did you kill it? You didn’t kill it, did you?” I ask her.

“Oh, God no, Belle. God no. Nothing like that. You just have to understand, he loved this fucking dog. I loved him, and he loved this fucking dog. I mean, I get it, I love my dog, too... but you have to understand. Lighter, please?” she interjects, mumbling her last words like the cigarette is already in her mouth just waiting. I press the lighter in and she says, “He just plain ol’ quit calling. Like high school boys do. Or Skunk, for that matter.”

“Fuck yourself.”

“Can’t hear you. I don’t speak Pig,” she says as the lighter pops out and Johnny holds it for her smoke.

“Thanks. He stops calling and he changes his daily route in the hallways... like a complete pussy. Stops answering the phone. Oh and this was almost before the semester was over so he wouldn’t even have any classes with me, by the way. Stopped hanging out where he used to... the whole nine yards of going MIA on a person and I vaguely recall this final phone conversation where he was really weird and distant and apathetic and bored and all that shit you do to really hurt someone. And I couldn’t so much as bring myself to ask him why, because I had actual pride back then.”

“But not so much pride that you wouldn’t steal his dog?” Skunk asks, more of a commentary, really.

“I think you’re missing the big picture, Stink.” I interject. “She stole it so...”

“So he’d see how fucking much it hurt to lose something you cared about so desperately,” she says, exhaling smoke rings. “So that he’d pine. He’d cry. Meanwhile, the dog was in my backyard getting two squares a day, and it was summer, really lovely out... I even bathed it. Cut its stupid-looking bangs

so it could see for a change. Tummy rubs, fetch. All that cool dog stuff. Kept her for one week and one day, just long enough to take all his hope, and then returned Sasha unharmed, right back inside his parents' gate."

"But he got to feel better," Johnny-Cat says. "You got the heart break and he got his dog back?"

"You should've sent it home with three legs," Skunk says in this disinterested tone, still pissed that he hasn't told some 20-minute story on the last days in the bunker and what REALLY happened.

"Surely you of all people can understand, Skunk. I was just being self-righteous. I thought it was enough to show him lament. I thought it was big of me to return it to him."

"Well that was a very boring petty theft tale. Thanks for that, Evie," he says. And Johnny-Cat still stays turned around in the seat.

"It wasn't that self-righteous. It was big of you," Johnny says, his voice getting quieter. Then he whips back around and pats himself down for a packet.

Some hour and a half later we turn down this single lane dirt road to the parking area. I turn off the car and turn around to Skunk, and tell him, "Listen. This is a place of worship. Every inch of sidewalk these people consider scared. People travel hundreds of miles to see what I can show you, but you have to try and act like a normal person, Skunk. Be quiet, keep your voice down, and be respectful. If you don't want to go into an area, then just don't go in, but don't come in and disrespect everyone who believes. I fucking mean it."

"And?" Skunk demands.

"And then we see Marcos. We get what we came for and we split."

"Yes, mother," he snarls back. "Why are you directing this little soliloquy at me anyway? She's the one strung out on pills,

he's on Coke, and you're high fer
chrissskakes!"

"Okay, Lord's name in vain. If you have any 'goddamns' or 'kee-ristes' to get out, kindly do it NOW, in the car. Not in front of 80 year-old women," I say, increasingly impatient.

"I'll keep an eye on it, Belle," Evie says, gathering her purse and slipping off her heels for flats. "This is a really bad outfit. Belle. Belle," she says, regaining herself. She reaches out and touches the back of my hair, "WE respect what you're doing, even if we're not 100% on what it is we're doing." Then raising her voice and becoming militant, "Each of us will speak in whispers and lay low. You will not regret bringing us here. We thank you." Silence for two seconds before Skunk starts scratching his hair like wild and she adds, "It's hot in here, let's get out already."

We walk the hundred feet to the first grottos with Evie walking beside me, John just slightly hanging back and Skunk stopping every few yards to take it in. He's quiet though.

"Grab a rock, Evie," I tell her. "Look for rocks, everyone..." and without questioning me, Evie spots a pile and asks, "What sort of size? Like pebbles or like this?"

"That size. That's good," I tell her, and we pick out four rocks smooth enough to write on. I lead them up to the first grotto where fifty other rocks lie and Johnny and Evie step forward to read them.

"You think I can reach the brook from here?" Skunk asks, ready to pitch his stone over seven visitors' heads. He's not kidding either. Evie turns directly around, takes him by the wrist and leads him to the stone benches. She goes into her purse and pulls out a handful of sharpies, which wouldn't surprise anyone that knew her. She hands them out and tells him to write his prayer on it like a good boy and the fucking moment he starts in with prayer being a waste of time and potential energy, she tells him very sharply that he should at least shut the fuck

up while she does it.

I write on mine, "Jesus Lord, please protect my mother whose life has been so hard and please forgive me my endless sins. I am a thief."

John writes on his, "Thanks for having us."

Evie writes, "We know no other way. Please let Patrick be there with you. Tell him I still love him." Adds a heart and a scribbled signature.

Skunk writes, "This sucks." And Evie quickly encourages him to see if he can make the rock skip in the brook, which he thinks over, and decides to do, turning around to add, "Wow. These are truly charming vestiges of New Mexico's gilded age."

We pile the rocks among the others. I light a candle and we head up the hill to the actual Church. The Church itself is humbling but not just in that way that all Churches are. Mexican art celebrates Catholicism in a way that other cultures fail you. The Saints are always depicted in murals or tile, and our Lady of Guadalupe, your Virgin Mary, is held in the highest esteem. Her face always smiles, forgives... loves you. She is not so holy that she will not hear your prayers. All crucifixes transfix the onlooker not solely on his suffering, but on the beauty of the hundred hours of labor that went into carving him of wood. It's as if to not just say, "He died for your sins," but more so to say, "Look at how the simplest person has carved this, after another minimum wage 12-hour shift, because they believe."

I lead them through and off to the side corridor, which would be cramped if we weren't all alone. There's only one woman in there, maybe 65, 70, on her knees at a shrine. She's crying, quietly muttering a prayer. You don't have to speak Spanish to know that she's lamenting a death. Thousands of plastic rosaries have been left. The walls are covered in prayers and photographs of all kinds. Some children, some family pictures, others photos of young men in military uniforms stating when they served and died.

Saints are in makeshift grottos, dolls, baby slippers, and flowers left everywhere. There's a single wooden bench where Skunk sits down, and I turn my head just slow enough to miss his snorting Meth out of a baggy, sitting there, with the Spanish woman not eight feet away swaying on her knees.

"There," I point out to John, showing him where people tend to cluster prayers for the soldiers killed in Iraq. He gazes over the wall awhile, reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a bunch of newspaper clippings. One of them has the word "Riscorla" highlighted on it. He tucks it into the other pictures and asks Skunk if he wants to wait outside. I lead Evie into the chamber in the back, a room maybe 5 by 4 feet with a hole in the ground, dug through the 30" of adobe floor. There are two small shovels left in the dirt and I reach in first and say, "We need something to pour the dirt into. Give me one of the bags."

She leans closer to me and whispers, wide-eyed and interested, "Belle, why do we want dirt?"

"Because it has power. It's the soil they found the cross in. It's sacred, Evie." I tell her, pouring some over her hand. She stares back at me silently for what may be 10 seconds, then reaches very quickly into her purse and pours out a prescription bottle into a pocket in her purse. She holds out the empty bottle of cherished pills and says, "Will this be okay?"

I smile at her and we fill the bottle together. She puts the lid back on and slides it into her purse again. "Thank you, Belle," she whispers, and we both emerge back into the sunlight where Skunk is telling John about Roswell and area 51. John looks endlessly relieved to see us and puts his arm around my waist. "This is really beautiful," he says. I never would have known to come here. Up the hill more?" he asks, as he guides me that way, like he can smell our hookup.

"You go," I tell him. "He'll be sitting out front of his gallery, always

sitting there, always in a red shirt. Look at his art, compliment him a lot. Ask him questions, he loves discussing his work. He's incredible, anyway. I'll be there very soon. And Johnny, please, just leave Skunk outside if he can't act like a human for 9 minutes.' They start up the adobe path, sunglasses all on, looking too obvious. I head back around the Church to where you bury your Milagros, drop to my knees in this sea of silver charms, and put one in for each of us. Unification makes our prayers stronger. One for my mother's leg, one for my back, one for Skunk's brain, one for Evie's heart, and because I barely know John, I bury a Sacred heart in his name so that he can at least have peace of the spirit. The sun is searing and reflecting off the bits of silver Milagros reemerging after rains and winds and tons of visitors. It looks like the night sky in contrast to the desert sun.

I light up a roach and inhale a few deep puffs. There are no police here. There's no particular interest in me here, other than the fact that I'm escorting three gringos on a pilgrimage for both forgiveness and drugs. I say a prayer to Our Lady and pay it all forward. Feel smooth, relaxed, excited to see Marcos again.

And by the time I walk up the hill, as expected, Evie is in deep conversation with Marcos, and he's smiling like he's never seen a woman before. Her glasses are pushed up into her hair so he can look into her grey eyes, linger there like all men seem to do. Skunk is already at a roadside stand across from Marcos' gallery buying chili ripe pistachios, each wrapped in seal-locked bags, proving, once again, that he's always good for something.

Sarah Bowman

The Oak Spirit

For Niall

By halves we cannot live.

—Edwin Muir

I. The years without summer

to the cold
wasps slow
and the world
barely old
seems so
white at dusk

the solstice turns
to sleet newly
on this place

meadow salt leaches in
to fog the dampened tree flesh

through a cavern of roots
the wind comes in

through the marsh's ice skim
a stone falls

such is winter—
breath settling into sleep

neither the ground
or air or I give
much attention
to its immediacy

I have forgotten how
it threatens
the seven junctions
of my tent

the oxford nylon rip-stop
a reflective web
I'm curled within

no weight
no feather against my skin
stillness

and a scale that needs
fine-tuning and more
that I have missed

I learned to pray
no, I learned to want to pray
to what—

so I prayed
to the green a hawthorn makes
its red varnished thorns
glancing and mean

to roots
coming out through rock

to silence

and I walked
to the edge of the world
where trees had grown
and one now stands

so slight of color
the cliffs and birds
and eggs and shit

the sky already
low and dropping
a granite vein
run through

I gathered
a leathery oak leaf
and fit my fingers
to its lobes

palm against palm
some reassurance of

all before and all before
and so on and so on
in the same way
here

and at last I found a human habit
birds going through
my life

II. *The church of the oak*

a storm sky
in winter
is pearl

I follow
instead of men
birds

beyond which
I can go
no further than

for nine years
your fingers
in the margins
kept the pages
slow turning

until I
a spear turned
plucked out my heart
and set it in the ground
and walked from the place
of its beating

even now and today
I am hollow

a great tree has grown
through me

its roots draw
at the moon's wobbling
the suggestion of a tide

I have spied myself
in the oak's scoring
and when the season's last
acorn falls

in gathering the gallnuts

I have brought to the great oak
the failings of my life
and set them down

I understand
how the heart resides
in the singleness of a sorrow

how fruit that never ripens
turns to ink

and in this instant
man—
I break from you

the nameless trees
the broad rivers
the birds in mid-flight
wounded

the dark surviving eyes

my two good wings
my false starts

great oak—
I have been wrong

for nine years
I sent out prayers
on the night wind
to a godless world

I lived aside
an imagined life
when the folded wings
of a hen blackened in a flare up
her quills unplucked
fluted steam

nothing belled the loss
and I, a coward
kept to the hedges
cataloguing my silence
in the wren and nettle
in bleating
I could not answer—

to disentwine my life
from yours
is not purpose

but when I turn to search
for my wild heart
I find an entire world
pitched between our leaning

frames

III. Undoing the spell

what clouds
what sky keeps
the outside of your circle's reach

you speak
of woods confined to zones
of cold water

of fluted growths
amid the rock and tangled weeds

I have slowed before a clutch unguarded
marsh grass within a marsh bush
and found the egg was diamond white

against the rain, I have seen
a hill become a pock marked strand

and a sound
a human sound insisting
I turn to seek it

I turn to spring
tumbling from the brush
deep of the earth's clay waking
I

want of the masculine
I

my lips unconfined
my hips and ribs searching
for sorrow to keep

for a lover kept
in the presence of his sex

