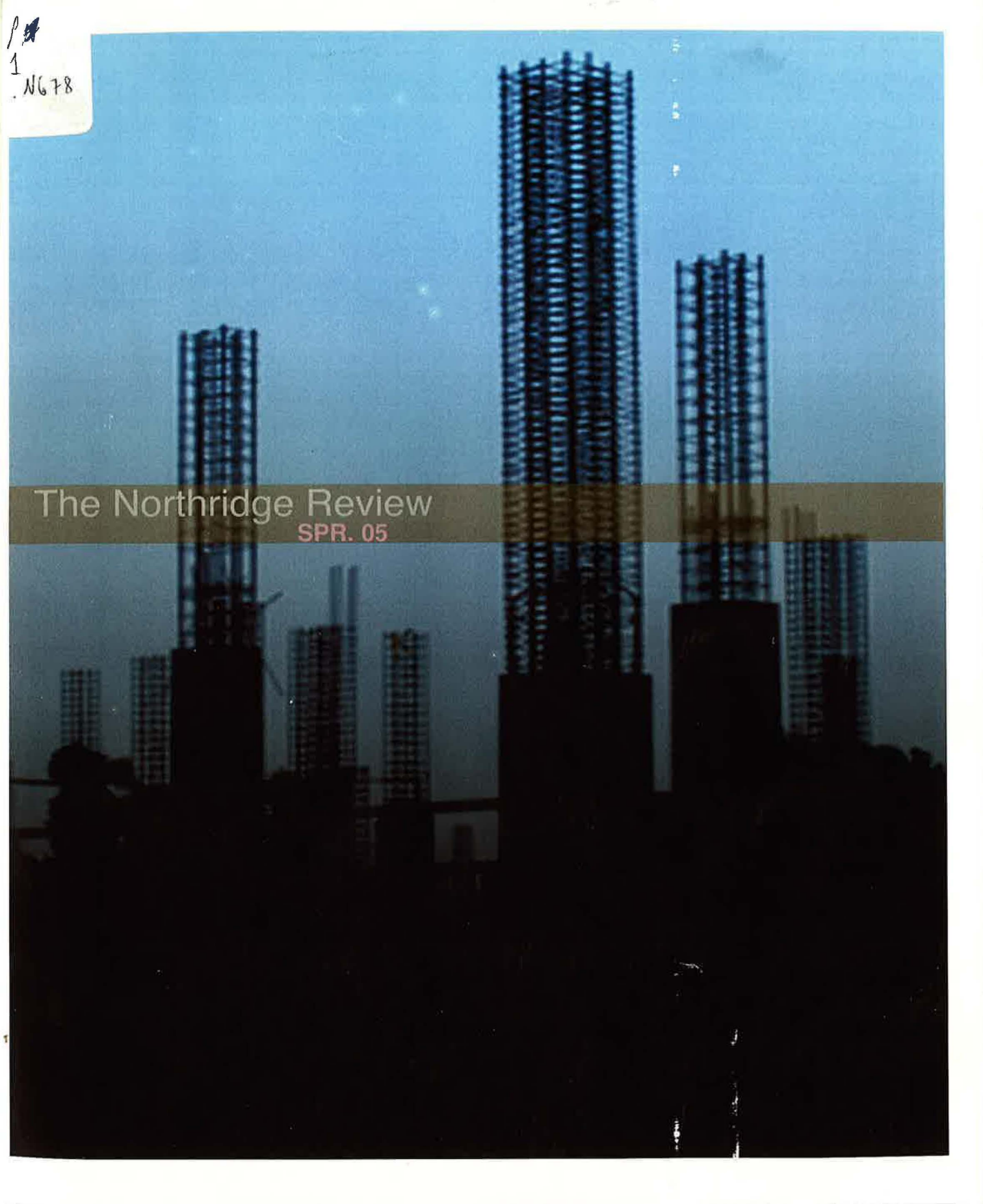


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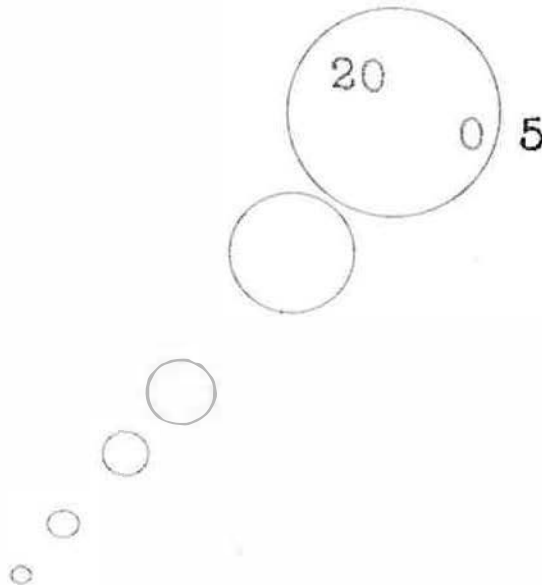
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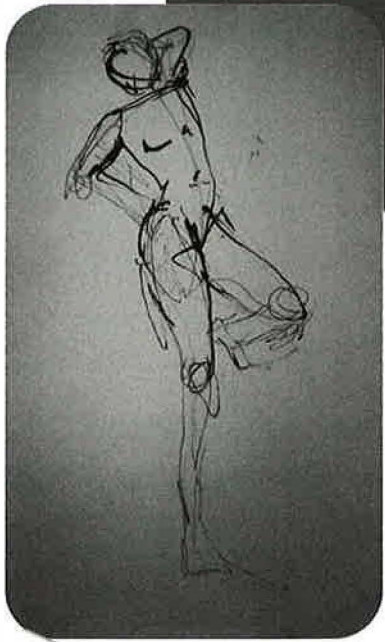
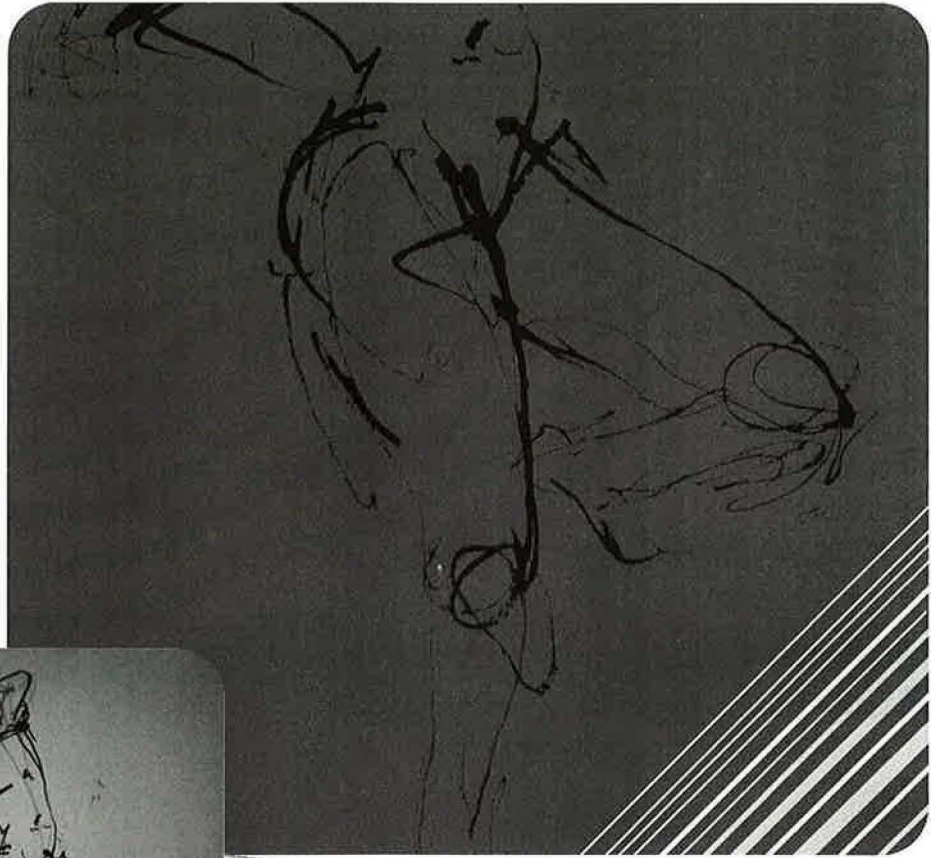
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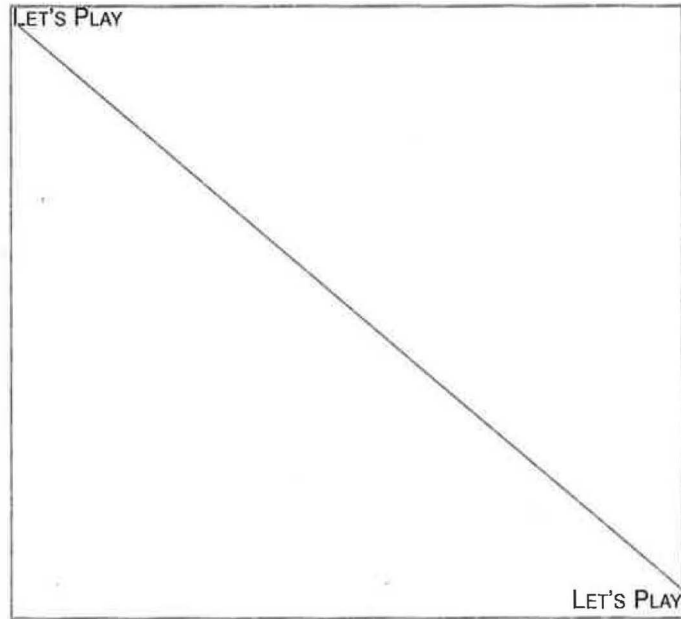
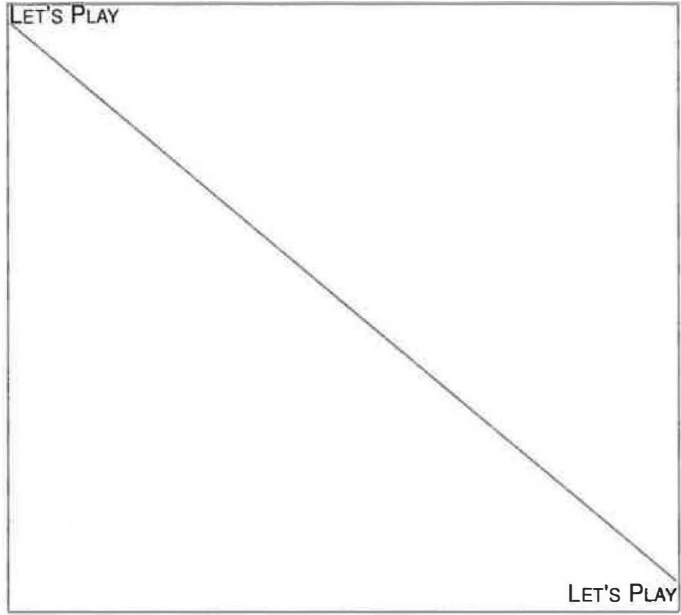
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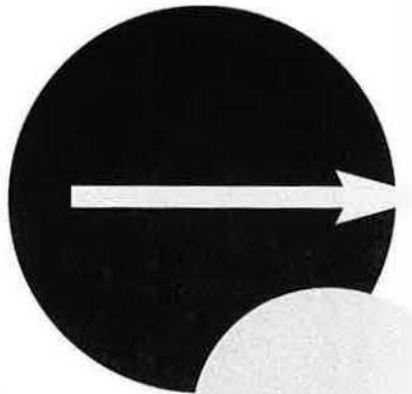
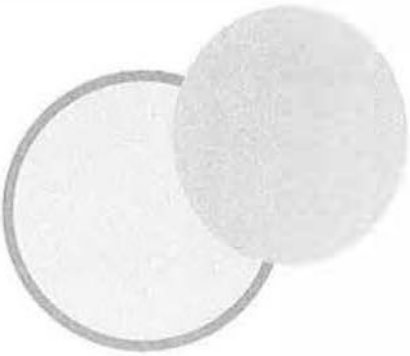
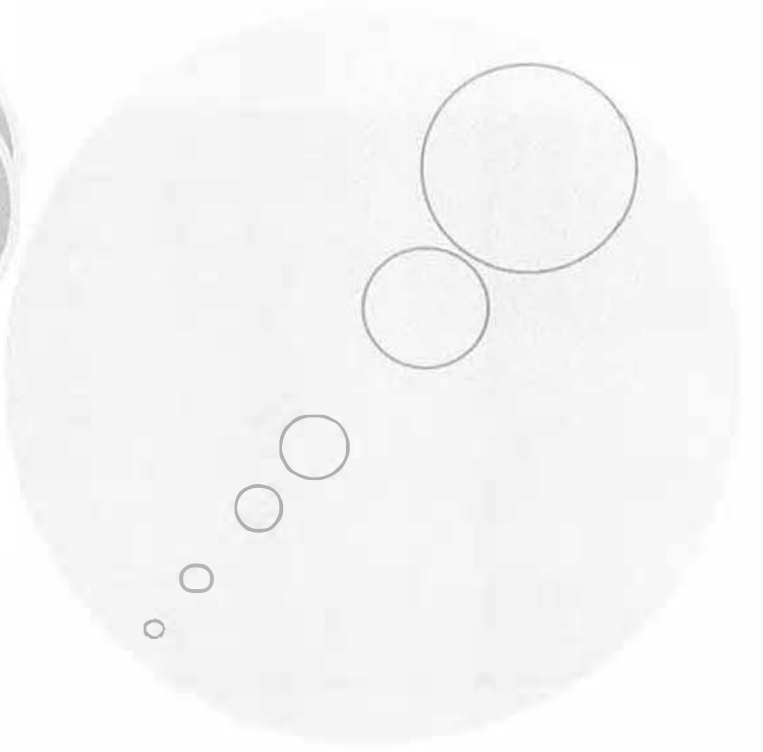
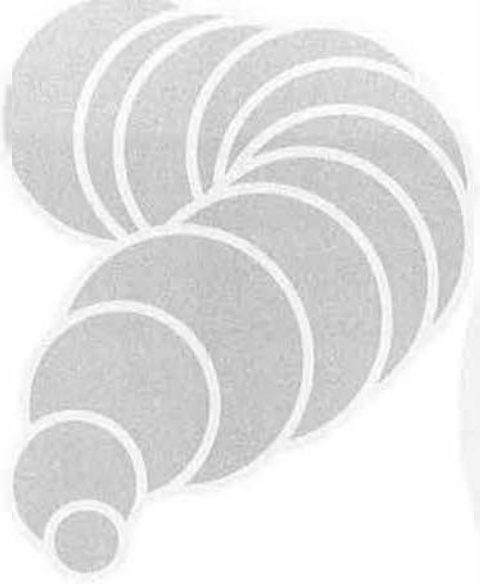
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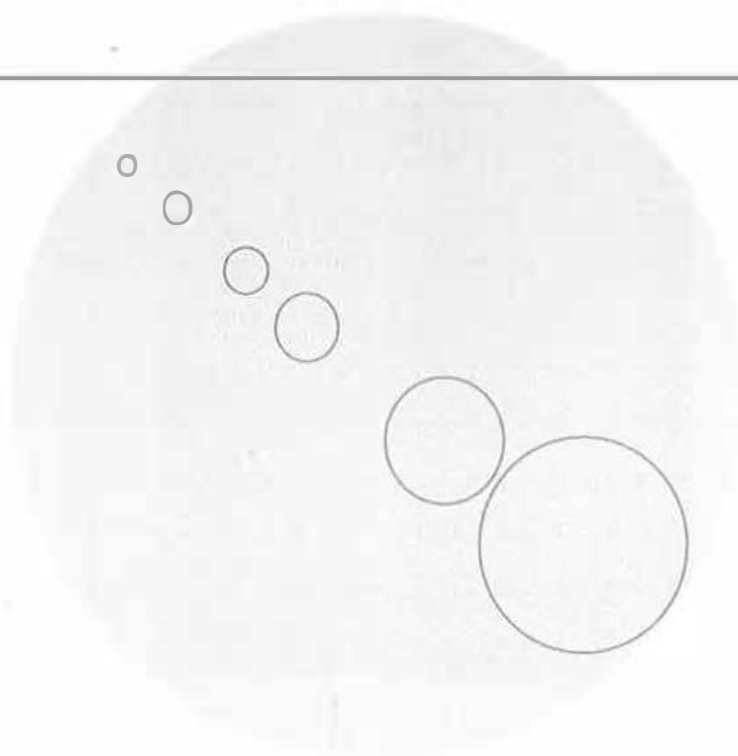
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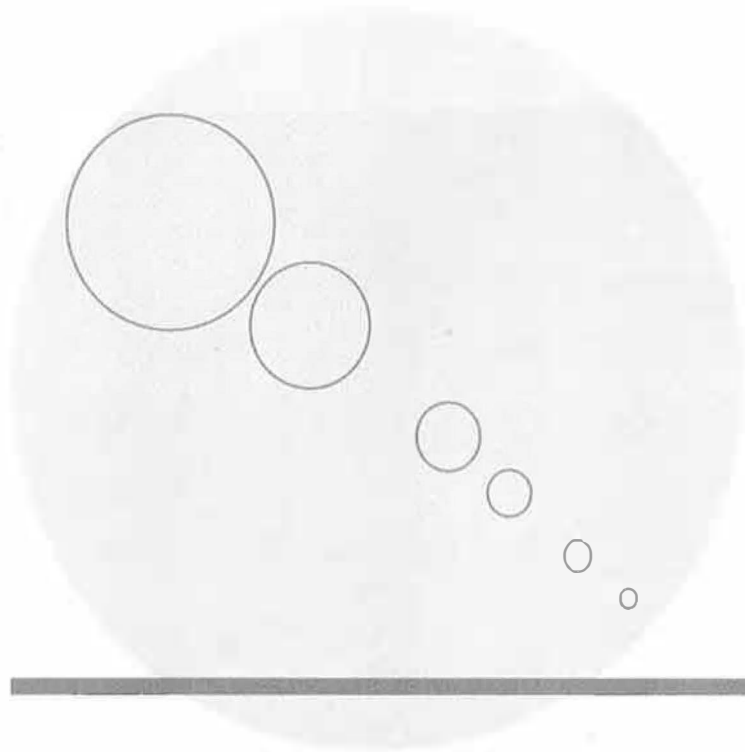


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SHARON VENEZIO
THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

the significance of a bird
flying over a continent
depends upon
the position of the sun
and the angle of the camera.

a person travels west
to California. eight years later
another person travels west
to California. the space between
them depends upon a third event.

the trajectory of a body
through time depends upon
the first event.
the space between
depends upon the outcome.

she was circumstance.
a particle along a curved space.
the horizon forms
around her voice.
could be a remembering.
something that was alive
years ago.

013

01A



a wing-like movement
pushes her away. open space
edged with petal-like sound,
something she did not know before.

the significance of a bird
depends upon
the position of the sun
and the angle of the camera.

AMBER NORWOOD

IN DEFENSE OF THE HARMONY CORPOREAL

910

The frame of the structure is the substance of the structure itself.
The frame is both the outside and the inside of the structure.

It is repeat and coda;
It is mezzo forte and pianissimo.

The bones,
not frail things,
standard hollow flute like
or piccolo singing histories
of reminiscence.

Not reeds that summon movement,
reeds that exist to move
by wind, flame, water,
elemental proxy.

Chalk white living ghost,
hidden belies simplicity
in most detailed composition.

The sound of skeleton:
melody complete,
safety seat in the hunting ground,
parley between brothers:

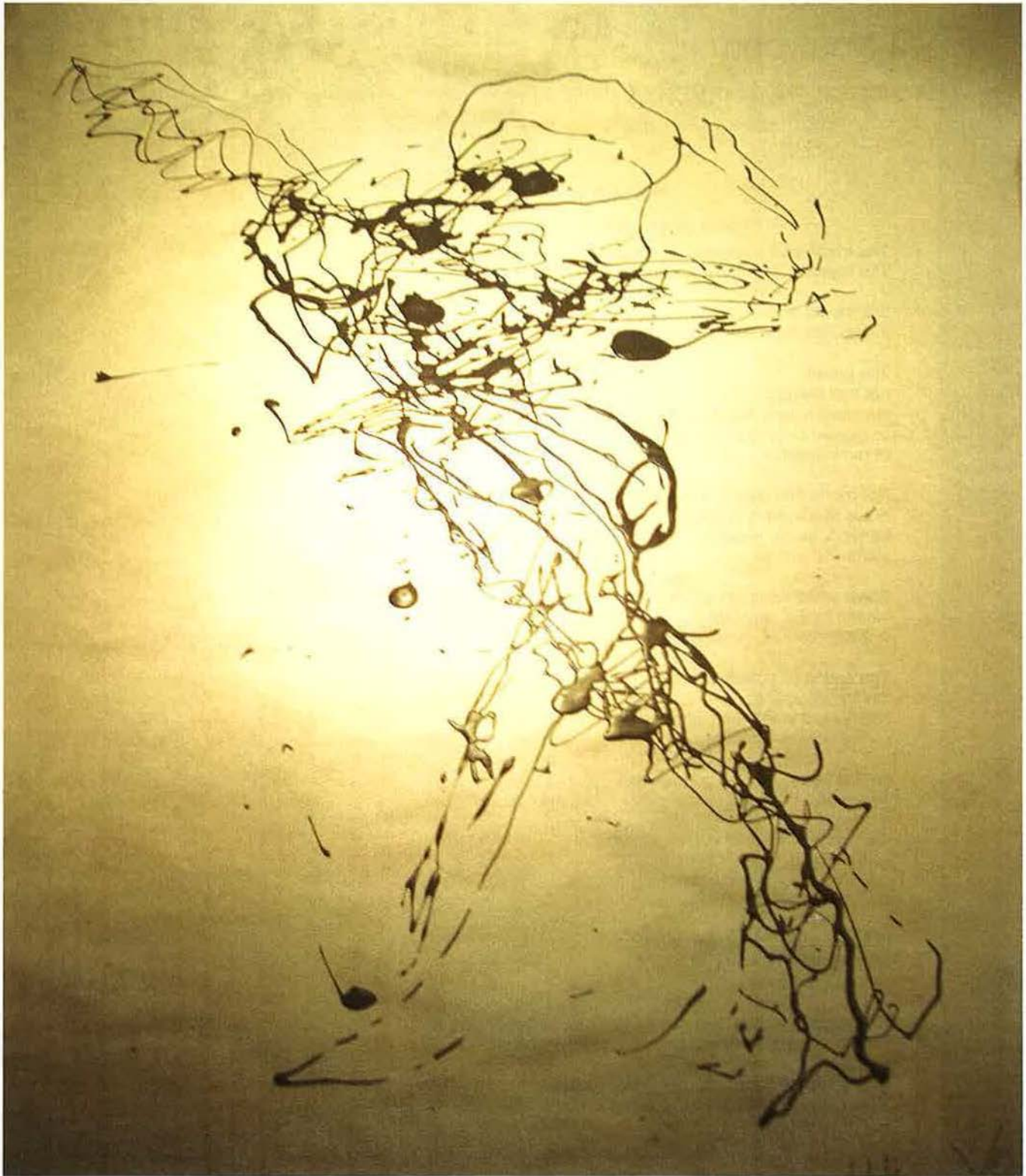
he; the seen. he; yet concealed.
To dance

the rhythm we breathe is to dance
as the organ
plays blood between pipe
respiration.

In-stinct, that song is primal,
chanted tribe motion,
to speak as bodies don't.

The structure is the long-sought hand behind a sloping neck.
The structure is the neck bending closer in the waltz.

These are the faces of solos in high brass.
These are not the back beat bones of delicacy.



Untitled 1, HaNH Vo



Untitled 2, HaNH Vo

KENNETH SIEWERT

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

She walks into my office and sits down on my couch directly in front of me. She crosses her legs and folds her hands and rests them in her lap. First impressions are important and before I speak to my new clients I take a long moment to study them. I believe they find this reassuring. I think about my couch, it's imported and made with the finest leather, soft, in a warm light brown and emanates the very subtle and delicious smell of richness. It is a goodwill gesture conveying, in a subliminal way, to my clients that I genuinely care about their comfort. She reaches out and picks up a short loose white string from the cushion next to her and places it to her lips and slowly works it into her mouth like a child eating spaghetti. I see repetitive movement at each of her cheeks, as she seems to roll the string back and forth, using her tongue, until she has a little ball and then she swallows. I write on my yellow note pad. White string.

Hello, I say. She smiles and reaches out and gently runs her slender fingers along the armrest and then folds her hands and places them back in her lap. I don't know why I'm here, she says. I make eye contact with her and respond, trying not to be confrontational. My time is very expensive, I say. I'm sure your time is also valuable. We can end this before we get started and as I patiently wait for her response, I make mental note of my first impressions. Attractive, middle-aged, rather intense brown eyes, full and inviting lips. No, she says, you don't

understand. I don't know why I'm here, as in being alive. Oh, I say, feeling embarrassed and rather stupid for not grasping the full meaning of her first utterance. Challenged, I respond. That question encompasses a great deal, maybe we can start smaller, really small, I suggest. She has brought with her a rather large black purse and she reaches down and unsnaps the silver clasp and fishes around inside for awhile until she comes up with two nickels and a blue marble. She holds them in the palm of her left hand for a moment, then places the two coins on the tip of her tongue. She seems to suck on them for a moment and then makes some barely distinguishable movements with her mouth as if rubbing them together and flipping them over and over again like candy wafers. Then she swallows. She holds up the blue marble to a beam of sunlight slipping between my venetian blinds as if inspecting it for clarity and then swallows that too. I have one of those fleeting thoughts about how my blinds were specially made by old-world craftsmen from hand hewed strips of walnut harvested from an ancient orchard in Pennsylvania. I write on my yellow pad. Two nickels. Blue marble.

Let us start from the beginning, I say. The beginning, she says. Yes, for example where are you from. Well I left home about an hour ago. Yes. Yes, I say, feeling somewhat frustrated, where were you born. I was born in Middle America, she says. Can you be more specific, I say. I was born in a hospital bed,

she says. Finally, I had something to go on and using that therapeutic device, I ingest her words and regurgitate them back to her in such a way that she can better understand her condition. Good, I say, you were born in a hospital bed in Middle America, good, I say, to reinforce this initial grounding. She reaches behind her ear and pulls out a brown bobby pin the exact color of her hair. She gently shakes her head and her hair falls free revealing a pleasant and very youthful fullness to her face. She has obviously been using the same bobby pin for a long time, taking it out each night, setting it on the dresser, and putting it back in her hair each morning day after day. I know this because one of the two plastic tip protectors is missing due to the incessant stress and wear. She throws her head back making her throat very straight and swallows the pin like a college student might eat live goldfish. I write on my pad. Bobby pin minus one plastic tip protector.

Having made this initial breakthrough, feeling anxious to get deeper into her psyche, I begin more serious probing. Tell me more about yourself, I say. More, she says. Yes, tell me how you would describe yourself. I'm thirty-seven years old, she says. Yes, I say, and. I'm Caucasian, she says. Yes, yes, good, I say, and. I'm a female, she says. Good, I say. You're a thirty seven year old Caucasian female born in a hospital bed in Middle America. Yes, she says, and her eyes brighten some. Are you married, I say. She tilts her head to the left and lets her hair fall over her small and delicate bare shoulder and then works the golden hoop from the piercing in her right ear lobe and wedges it, the thin way, between her perfect white teeth and with slow and deliberate pressure from her jaws, compresses it. She moves it around in her mouth, puckering her lips slightly accenting a popular shade of gloss, until it is comfortable at the back of her tongue and swallows. I write on my pad. Earring (gold hoop). Perfect, compressed.



NR. SPR. 05

Are you married, I repeat. She shifts forward and makes eye contact. I detect some anger in her voice. I thought this was going to be about me, she says. Yes. Yes, I say, it is about you. Marriage is a defining moment. Oh, she says, defining moment, and eases back on the couch. I can tell she does not completely trust my expertise. Trust is a very important tool. Without trust there can be no rapport. Are you married, I say. Yes, temporary, she says. Temporary, I say. Serial, she says. Good, I say, good. Do you love him, I say. He has a good job, she says. Good, I say, a thirty-seven-year-old Caucasian female born in a hospital bed in Middle America and married to a man with a good job. I feel that I am getting to it, the bigger picture.

How is the sex, I say. Excuse me, she says. She tilts her head forward, placing her chin on her chest and reaches behind her neck and unfastens her pearl necklace. All the time that she works the small clasp behind her back, she studies my reflection on the surface of my polished ebony desk. She lifts her head and stares at the ceiling and holds the strand of pearls at arm's length over her mouth. Each pearl is perfectly sized and its color mellowed by age. Each pearl is connected and separated by exactly four gold links. Her neck is long and thin and supple and I watch as her tongue reaches out and guides the first pearl into her mouth and then she swallows, pauses for a moment, then swallows the second pearl. With time, the strand becomes

shorter and shorter until she consumes all twenty-seven pearls. I write on my pad. Neck, and then quickly draw a line through it and write. Necklace. Twenty-seven pearls. One-hundred-and twenty-six gold links. Clasp.

How is sex, I say, unrelenting and knowing that the answer to this question could be another breakthrough moment. Sex, she says. Is it satisfying, I say. Every Sunday and Wednesday, she says. Is it meaningful, I say. A small amount of perspiration begins to form about the soft and transparent down on her upper lip. Routine, she says. She unbuttons the top two small white buttons of her dress revealing five wonderfully explicit freckles and the seductive hint of cleavage. I become quite uncomfortable and quickly revisit, in my head, boundaries. Is the union productive, I say. Productive, she says, shifting slightly, her cotton dress gliding smoothly along the leather. Do you have children, I say. Two point five children, she says. Very good, I say, very good, and I regurgitate. A thirty seven year old Caucasian female born in a hospital bed in Middle America and married to a man with a good job with a loving and productive relationship having born two point five children. She reaches into her black purse, fumbles for a moment and brings out a folded piece of yellow construction paper. Slowly, she unravels it to reveal a child's line drawing in blue ink of a baby duck. She puts the corner of it firmly between her perfect teeth, her lips curl

020

back and she pulls with both hands. The process is slow and tedious as she rips and chews fiber. At times she stops to work up enough saliva to get through the next papery bite. Her mouth and tongue are vigorous as she works it all into a small mound of papier-mâché. She lowers her jaw and works her tongue, molding and shaping. When she finishes, her cheeks recess for a moment as she draws away excess juices and pleased with her creation, opens her mouth to reveal, on her moist and protruding tongue, the likeness of a baby yellow duck. Not to be rude, it quickly disappears and she swallows with confidence as if casually eating her breakfast oatmeal. I pause for a moment, a critical juncture as I must decide between construction paper and baby yellow duck. I write on my note pad. Baby duck.

You have done great work here, I say. Work, she says. Yes, I say. In the short amount of time that we have been together you have taken great risks. Risks, she says. Yes. Yes, I say, you have begun to expose yourself. Oh, she says. Let us advance, I say.

Do your children have names, I say. Yes, she says. I give her a kind and gentle look with a non-verbal and yet with the explicit message, give me more. Perplexed for a moment, she studies my face, then yields to my demand. Billy, Bobby and Mar, she says. Mar, I say, it is an unusual name. It was Martha, she says, until God kidnapped her. She is my point five child and now only lives in memory. Memory, I say. Yes, she says. Do you believe in God, I say. He is infinite, she says. Infinite is such a big word, so interpretive, let's make it smaller, I say. What does infinite mean to you. It is everything and absolutely nothing, she says. This is such good work, I say, such good work, feeling a kind of heat in my belly, another breakthrough of sorts. You have great insight, I say, and then I chew and feed back to her everything that she has fed me. A thirty seven year old Caucasian female with deep religious convictions born in a hospital bed in Middle

America and married to a man with a good job with a loving and productive relationship having born two point five children named Billy, Bobby and Mar. She fumbles with her purse again digging and digging and in her frustration empties the contents on the couch cushion next to her. She moves the items about, rummaging, and as I anticipate, she has found a small wooden crucifix battered and worn about the edges from bagging around in the bottom of her purse with loose change and other odds and ends for all these years. She places it in her mouth and a pained expression comes over her face. I feel empathy as she swallows, and it seems to stick for a moment like one of those huge nutritional supplements that contain too much cheap vitamin C and other substances unfit for human consumption. Once she gets it down she has to clear her throat several times as if there were residual splinters. I write on my note pad. Battered, then cross it out, as it seems cliched. Rugged then cross that out also. Worn, and again cross that out. I write on my note pad. Small abused wooden artifact.

Feeling somewhat stumped, I review my notes. White string. Two nickels. Blue marble. Bobby pin, minus one tip protector. Earring (gold hoop). Perfect, compressed. Necklace. Twenty-seven pearls. One-hundred-and twenty-six gold links. Clasp. Baby duck. Small abused wooden artifact.

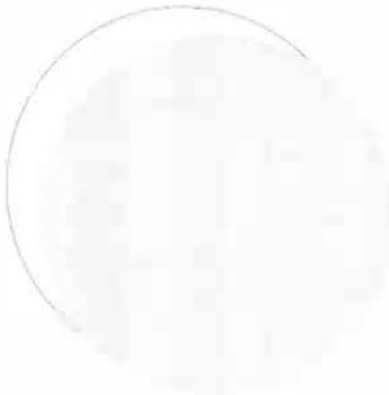
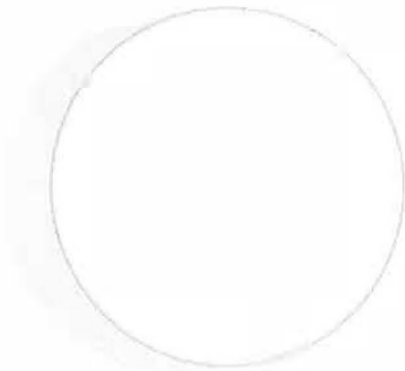
You should be proud of your insightful and meaningful

accomplishment, I say. You have done much in such a short amount of time. I must tidy things now, housekeeping. I know housekeeping, she says. Sure, I say, let me tell you how this works. I must fix on you a diagnosis from this large and rather bulky manual that covers all of the human condition. Human condition, she says. Yes, I say. In your case it is difficult. Difficult, she says. And again I regurgitate one more time a complete and comprehensive analysis for her benefit. You can quote me here, I say. "After all that has been said and done, and as I understand it, you are a very well adjusted thirty seven year old Caucasian female with deep religious convictions born in a hospital bed in Middle America and married to a man with a good job with a loving and productive relationship having born two point five children named Billy, Bobby and Mar." I pause for effect. You seem so normal, so average, I say.

She slides forward on the couch, her legs parting slightly revealing the soft shiny skin about her knees and a hint of inner thigh. She places her elbows on my desk and stares up into my face. Are you married she says. Loosely, I say. Loosely. Her eyes brighten and the corners of her mouth begin to turn up. Dimples form in her cheeks as her mouth opens. I notice the thin creases in her lips begin to disappear as they stretch wider and wider. Oh, she says. Her tongue is moist and pink and slightly curled. Like angle hair a small strand of saliva reaches up to the

022

roof of her mouth stretching and stretching until it snaps. Enticed by such openness and vulnerability, I proceed. I see a fleck of gold expertly worked into her lower right wisdom tooth and another in the upper left molar. At the back of her mouth rests the small glistening Uvula. Her breath is warm and sweet on my face as she exhales. Then, the Uvula quivers, begins to tense and retracts slowly into the soft pallet as she inhales ruffling my hair. I peer over the edge down into her throat past the root of her tongue and see the small mound of flesh they call the Epiglottis. Then she swallows.



NR. SPR. 05

B.Z. NIDITCH
WHEN I WAS SEVEN

Renting out
a cold shower room
the director
in a multi-zippered suit
and a lumberjack shirt
hides in his studio
coughing in the sink
you hear a tape recorder
24/7
knowing tomorrow
dad says
is his loitering last day
for him to pay up
and pleading with mom
to have him stay for another
yet never knowing
we are his first film.

At night
with numbed adventure
giving him my piggy bank
and he accepting
without question
all my savings
a gold-framed check comes
on Christmas Eve
along with thirty toys
and four tickets
for the premiere
of the movie uptown.

024

GEORGE JIMENEZ

TOTEM

025

"butterflies and moths have the same basic anatomy."

peacock swallowtail has a seizure on the counter;
death wanted to be seen in green iridescence.
she becomes the heavy clap of white flags,
formaldehyde-soaked, turpentine-sweet.
i recall my birth. placenta: a jelly jar
fallen from a high shelf.
memory is a wheelbarrow.
i remember newborn toes
like the unformed bodies of moths,
purple earlobes snipped sidelong.

"any nectar producing plant
will help attract butterflies."

i am attracted by derailment, awkward creation,
the once parallel tracks of a miniature train
twist viciously, slowly, upward sculpted into
stale periwinkle air, toward a photo of my baby
brother, overlooked hatchling, flightless bird
teetering on a promontory, ocean at his feet,
dissolving into a picture of long, tubular flowers
brimming dilute nectar, proboscis driving into
slick sheath, pistoning eagerly the blue note.

"butterflies fly only during the day."

in the evening they settle across my spine, wings
erect, antennae merciful in low languid strokes:
a procession into the base of my skull.
long shadows mark my skin as i wake.
their powdery scales trail such a simple design
across shoulder blade, and thorax.

Adele hates men. She has good reason to. For twelve years her father yanked her ears, pulled her hair, kicked her legs, slapped her face, punched her skull, whipped her bottom, and threw her against furniture.

"Adele, come kiss me goodnight," he would say when she was still shaking.

She imagined plunging the little hand-held shovel—the one her mother used to plant onions—into his cheek, which he held out for her to kiss, or slashing his head with the garden hoe. She imagined laying him out in the middle of the lawn, like a tent, and fastening him to the ground with long, rusty stakes. She takes the lawn mower from the garden shed, pulls the starter cable and watches the motor sputter until she is sure it runs properly. Keeping her eyes on the grass, she mows, starting with the edge of the lawn. Carefully, she guides the

mower around the stone terrace and around the tulips that grow under the apple tree. She watches for rocks that might chip the blade. Her father's writhing and screaming is of no concern to her. She continues mowing, moving the mower towards the middle of the lawn in neat rows. She is surprised by the resistance his body causes and dismayed at the gurgling that rises from beneath the whining motor. Just like the blender, when mom makes potato soup, she thinks. She pushes the mower over his body until the blade spins freely once more.

All this was going through Adele's head while she approached her father's ruddy, stubbly cheek.

"Nighty night," said her father and patted her head. Adele's hair stood straight up and turned into hedge shears which clipped off his fingers and hands and sliced his arms like sausages.

But Adele also loved her father. When he was in a good mood, he bounced her on his knees, stroked her hair and cheeks, and gave her bear hugs. They played hide-and-seek, and he squeezed his large body behind the tool rack in the garden shed, or crouched under the rhododendron bush. When Adele found him, he threw her in the air and she shrieked with delight.

There's a black-and-white photograph in Adele's photo album. Her father is sitting in a lawn chair, in the shade of the apple tree. He is holding a cigarette like a fifties' movie star and smiling. There is another lawn chair next to his, and a small table between the two chairs. Little Adele carries a tray with two glasses toward the table. Her face looks proud and very serious. Adele's mother is not in the picture.

Adele remembers that day. They play husband and wife.

CORINNA COORSSEN

SYNOPSIS

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The apple tree is their house. She has set up the chairs and carried the table there. She leads her father by the hand and tells him to sit. He is in a good mood.

"Now we'll have our drinks," she says, "Wait here."

"Sure. What are you getting me?"

"You'll see." Adele runs into the house. She climbs the kitchen stool and reaches for the glasses—carefully, because she doesn't want to break them—and places them on the tray. She pours cherry juice for two, steps off the stool, puts the juice back into the fridge, and lifts the tray, which is on the counter, level to her eyes. Once balanced, she lowers the tray carefully and carries it outside, bending her knees to steady her legs. She isn't going to spill.

"Here you are, dear." She holds the glass out for him.

"Thank you dear." He plays right along, but the funny thing is, he isn't really playing. For that short while—it can't be more than fifteen minutes, though it seems much longer—they are in their own world. Her father belongs to her and no one can take him away.

Adele realizes with a frown that her mother must have been close. She was the only one who could have taken the photograph. Funny, because Adele has no recollection of her mother being there.

Her father isn't the only one to hurt Adele. When she is seven, two neighborhood boys play a joke on her. Adele is helping her mother dig up dandelions from the lawn.

"Adele, we wanna show you something!"

She looks up and spots Rafe and Tobias in the empty lot across the street. "What?" she shouts back.

"Come here, you'll see." Rafe is doing the talking. He is lanky and pale with dark eyes that dart in all directions. Tobias is younger and shorter. His cheeks are rosy like the cheeks of the boy on the oatmeal box. Rafe moves to the curb with Tobias at his side.

Adele doesn't know what to make of this unexpected offer. Rafe, popular amongst the other children, usually ignores her. She turns to her mother.

"You go on and play." Already her mother's head disappears under the rhododendron bush and her shovel sinks into the dirt.

Adele pries moist clumps of earth from her shovel and puts it on the

ledge of the wooden fence that encloses the front lawn. She opens the gate and steps onto the curb. Looking left and right, she plods across the street. "What is it?"

"You know that little hut in the woods?" Rafe points to the firs behind him.

She nods. "What about it?"

"We wanna show you something there."

"What?"

"We can't tell you. It's a surprise. Come on." Rafe and Tobias turn and head towards the woods that loom behind the empty lot.

Adele hesitates. She is afraid of the woods and the hut, which belong to a man who is said to unleash two German Shepherds on trespassers. But she doesn't wish to miss this opportunity, so she

follows the two boys at a distance. It is cold and dark in the woods. She holds her breath, listening for danger, but all she hears is the muted crackle of twigs under the boys' footsteps. She steps onto the moss that grows beside the trail and tiptoes on.

They wait for her by the hut, which looks wet and smells of rotting wood.

"Tobias will show you," says Rafe. He rakes the door over the mound of mulch that has built up before it and shoves the younger boy into the narrow opening. "I'll stand guard." He holds the door open, and, as if the dark majesty of the trees scares him too, he whispers, "Hurry."

Inside the hut it is even darker. Adele senses the boy more than she sees him. He must be standing very near her, for she hears his fast breath and feels the warmth of it on her neck. "What do you

want to show me?" He doesn't answer, but takes a step back and starts to fiddle with something. She hears a snap, and the sound of a zipper.

"Look," says Tobias.

"What? I can't see a thing."

"Rafe, open the door. She can't see."

They listen to the door plow open. In the timid light, she finally sees Tobias, pants down, holding a tiny knob of flesh in his hand.

"You wanna touch it?"

Adele has only seen male genitals in her father's books about Roman sculptures, and it takes a moment before she realizes what he is showing her. At first she is confused. Why is Tobias showing her his private parts? Doesn't he know you aren't supposed to do

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that? She is about to scold him, when he takes her hand and places her fingers on his thing. It is smooth and soft like rose petals. Adele's hand shoots up as if she has touched a hot skillet. She bolts from the hut and runs up the trail, away from the forest and the hut and the little knob of flesh that scares her so. Through the rushing in her ears, she hears their jackal-laughter.

That night she goes to work with a wood chipper like the one she has seen in the Fergusens' yard. She ties the boys up in coils of rope so they can only move their heads. They scream when they see the wood chipper. They beg, and wail and wiggle their heads, and only go quiet when their legs have disappeared and their heads slump forward.

As a teenager, Adele spends much of her time spinning romantic fantasies. She closes her eyes and imagines meeting the boy, who will love her for the rest of her life. Sometimes she is in a forest of beech trees, like the one she went to in fifth grade. In the sunlight, the new leaves are fluorescent green, illuminating the smooth, gray trunks and the rusty trail. Shh, shh, shh, say the leaves as Adele plows through them, ankle-deep. She has reached the cliff of the abandoned quarry and looks down at the fairy-tale landscape of moss-covered boulders on meadows dotted with snowdrops. Holding onto roots and rocks, she slides into the ravine. She sits on a sunny patch of grass, her face turned to the sun, eyes closed, when she hears the cool swish of grass parting. Swish, swish, swish. Someone is coming. Adele's heart beats a little faster when she spots a dark figure before her. With her right hand, she shields her eyes from the sun and makes out a boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old. Wild black hair frames his honey-brown face. His doe eyes look into hers, and she can't stop the pumping and pulsing in her heart, throat, and temples or the weakness in her legs. They look at each other. Neither speaks. He is beautiful. He takes her hand and pulls her closer, kisses her forehead, her eyes, and up and down her neck. Now he kisses her lips. She kisses him back, and the quarry swirls around her, the bright green canopy on the edge of the ravine is an upside down whirlpool from which boulders sway like great chandeliers. She is on her back in a cool bed of grass, his face close, his body pressed against hers.

Adele stops. She doesn't know where to go from here. From her mother's romance novels, she knows that this is when they are supposed to

make love. But Adele is not ready to make love. So instead, the boy caresses her hair and covers her face with kisses so tender they make her cry. Once again their eyes lock, and this time, they look deep into each other's souls. And they feel overcome by love. She replays this moment over and over in her head: the two of them looking into each other's eyes, discovering their love. The trees are still, the birds quiet, and even the boulders watch in awe as Adele and the boy enter a world of promise and love and trust.

Sometimes, she and the boy meet in dangerous circumstances. Once she is at a beach, watching the sunset. A giant wave rolls towards her and he whisks her away and manages to pull her into a grotto, where they wait until the water pulls away, and they sit, trembling and dripping, holding each other. Then they look deep into each other's eyes, and in that instant, they know they will always love each

other. He loves her despite her shortcomings. She is not beautiful, like he is, with his dark, curly hair and honey complexion.

Or he rides a motorcycle on an empty boulevard. She is crossing a side street into which he is about to turn. He sees her—too late. He turns the handlebars and skids sideways until the curb stops his smoking tires. She rushes toward him and kneels beside him on the hard pavement. He is unconscious at first, but when she kisses his brow, he opens his eyes and looks into hers. And they feel overcome by love.

On February 21st 1981, a man assaults Adele on the north-bound platform of the metro station *Filles du Calvaire* in Paris. There she is, in her faded pink coat, clutching a book by Simone De Beauvoir and descending the steps to the ticket machines. She slips

the orange ticket of her monthly pass into the slot and moves through the barrier, picking up the ticket on her way.

There are only two people on her platform. She sits near the woman with the *Monoprix* plastic bags on one of the orange plastic chairs bolted to the platform. A man, homeless from the looks of his clothes and hair, paces back and forth at the far end of the platform. Adele opens her book, but finds it impossible to read, for the man begins to shout insults at a group of businessmen waiting on the opposite platform.

"*Je vous emerde!* Bunch of assholes!" They laugh. No doubt they feel safe, separated from the man by the rails at the bottom of the trench dividing the platforms. Their laughter makes the man, whose complexion shows signs of alcohol abuse and whose skinny body leads Adele to suspect malnutrition, spring about the platform

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like a jack-in-the-box.

"*Allez vous faire foutre!*" he screams, slamming both fists on an invisible table. They laugh louder and the skinny man kicks the air. He looks ludicrous and pitiful jumping like that, punching the air, his coat flapping like broken wings. Like Rumpelstiltskin just before he rips his leg out, thinks Adele.

"You *bourgeois* assholes! Brown-nosers! Dick-suckers! You fucked up! Sold your souls for your cashmere coats. Losers! *Putain de minables!*"

The train approaches on the other side, and the businessmen get on. One of them grins and waves good bye as the train begins to move.

"*Trou du cu! Trou du cu!* Fucking asshole!" the skinny man shouts until the metallic screech of the train ebbs in the distance. He turns around and starts toward Adele. She pretends to read, willing her body to be invisible. His shadow darkens the pages on her lap as he strides past. He walks back and forth for a while, cursing and gesticulating. Adele's heart beats a little faster. What if he talks to her?

"*Toi.* You. What are you staring at?" He stands right in front of her.

Ignoring him might make him angrier. She must talk to him. "No, no, I'm not..."

He hits her face with the back of his hand. She winces and holds her cheek afraid he might hit her again. But he trots off to the end of the platform, apparently satisfied. Adele stands up on shaky legs and hobbles up the stairs, into a wintry afternoon.

That night she replays the scene in her mind. But this time he doesn't hit her. She catches his hand in mid-air and pulls him to the edge of the platform. Surprised by her determination, he doesn't resist and allows her to push him over the edge. There he is, face down on the rails. For a brief moment his coat flutters from the air stream of the oncoming train. Then he is swallowed entirely.

In April 1999, Adele receives a letter from her father. It's an invitation.

Adele,

Please come to my birthday party. I'm turning 80.

Dad

She hasn't seen her father in years. The last time she went back was for her mother's funeral. Her father is turning eighty. It occurs to her that he will die soon. Anyone can die at any moment, of course, but at her father's age, the

reality of death is imminent. She wonders if her father thinks about death all the time, or if he lives on, as if there were no end to his existence. Adele doesn't believe in any kind of afterlife. The day her father dies, he will be gone. His body will decompose and feed the roots of new spring grass. Only his memory will live on, in her and in others who have known him. Then they will die too, and a fainter version of his memory may be carried on in the minds of their offspring, and so on, until no one on this earth will remember him.

Adele has never told her father how much he has hurt her or how much she loved him. Their relationship is awkward, as if the memories they both hold separate them like islands in a great ocean. She wonders if her father is afraid of death. Yes, he would be afraid. He was always too alive not to fear death. The notion that she too will cease to exist one day startles her. There is so little time left.

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Edward Weston. Herby Carlos

SHARON VENEZIO

PUSHING MY OBSESSION

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and falling on trial for murder and newspapers a human America fucking
itself stripping on the corner we are animal after all teeth and growl you
say my penis is unworthy because I can take it off swallow the key with a
glass of merlot and one last cigarette it's time to slice this thing

my position as receptacle for your guts reinvents itself spilling ink all over
the marriage bed compulsory discourse has come unhinged called time out
nine years ago I wonder if love is part of the equation or is it all lipstick
smeared on the camera lens smile he said the point I refuse exactly

body parts scattered amongst the wood dismembered by the media
highway signs 6 o'clock news strikes at me again one down half the
population to go formed a search party to put me back together the victors
write the lies that become history at least that's what he said the man on
the radio frequency data antecedent and consequence what kind of
behavior is this anyway to theorize desire

he said her body was better than mine but I had the better face thank you I
said clutching my fist when your head hits the floor the body keeps
breathing I rearranged his face and threw away his name when I wear
lipstick people talk to me more when I don't they tell me I should smile

tell it slant she said but you didn't understand now she's pounding on the
window this the daily prayer of possibility you keep flapping in my face a
reason logic frayed for her justification what I mean is heretical

I keep repeating myself as if something could grow from this soil so
lacking in water my refusal means nothing against the expanding sky the
conversation was incomplete because you craved a magazine and my
appetite was staring up at me mapping out the different positions being
taken but who decides the meaning of the sign when you're a dollar short
and have only crackers in your pocket

GRANT MARCUS

CHEWING CUD ON OYSTER MOUNTAIN

for Gerald Stern

I love the cows, the way they
chew in soft mud,
holding onto the grass slow,
first a thought, then an answer.

The way their tails swish
like vision, and their eyes
lolling back like
old radio songs—
The way a splash of sky
floats blackwhite on their skins
as they roam the plains,
imitating clouds.

And the clouds, the way
they imitate cows, their
rolling white heads
grazing blue grass,
their char-colored tracks
like emblems of bison
soon gone from the range.

I have squeezed the playdough udders,
the pink-teated down
resounding off tin,
drumming showers of rain.

I have loved the glass bottles
left behind like gifts,
with their pictures on labels
frost-wrapped in chocolate,

or the spout-waxed cartons
sent out to pasture
where the garden fallows
in tufted winter weeds.

I love the name Daisy
like a favorite girl
—not Borden at all—

530

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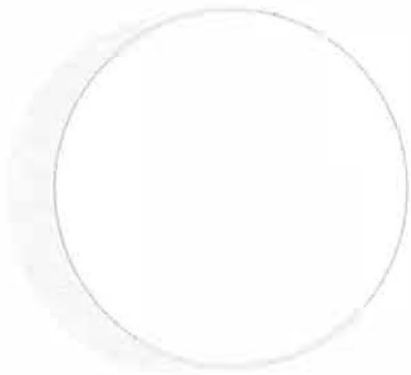


our breaths sweet-tasted,
beaded, and 'stached, and
how she keeps calling
until I've come home—

Or where the love of
cows lead me—
to the fields, the trees, the bells, the mews...

The desert is indescribable. The northern Arizona desert in late spring, near sunset is an image barely grasped by words. Natural formations of rock, almost as old as the sun, rise out the otherwise eerily flat, treeless plane, colored in shades of red you didn't think could exist in nature. They call this place magical, like that even means something. If anything, it's the total absence of magic you feel here. The absence of anything relative to man, humankind. It's as if the manmade road of sharp, ever repeating peaks and valleys is trespassing, tip-toeing through a secret place it's not meant to be. By extension, when you're the only car for miles and the sun is setting, you're sure you've made a wrong turn. You don't belong. There is peace here, but not comfort. You tighten the grip on the steering wheel and pray simultaneously that all the world could behold what you see and to make it far sooner than later to the next town.

You've been on a road trip. The girl sleeping beside you is the last person you want there. A week together and you never want to see her again. You're glad she's sleeping. She's complained about all the nature you wanted to see. Landmarks followed by National Parks and Nature preserves. She laughs at the signs. Moose crossing? Elk? Do they have Elk in Arizona? You didn't even know they had pine trees. Tucson, Phoenix, that's what you expected of this place. Cacti, dust, heat, Indian Gaming. The Grand Canyon. The requisite, perfunctory stop. So you stopped. Snapped a picture. The nice man with the long gray beard took one of the two of you together. You hoped he could somehow get the murky green-blue of the Colorado River in the picture with you. Hiked down the path till your sandals chafed and started blisters and it was time to go. A checkmark placed on the mental list of things to see before death in your head and back into the car to fight about the air conditioning. While driving away from the canyon which goes on much longer and farther than you could have imagined, the landscape shifted so totally that you checked the map a dozen times, every gas station, every pee break or munchie stop, to make sure you



were in the right state.

Before you made it into this desert, while still traveling along or close by the rim of the Canyon, the civilization, if you could call it that, was already tapering off. Here were gas stations with names you'd never heard of, people you'd never seen. There were roadside stops of little more than a table shaded by blankets hung from poles. They sold silver and turquoise and crafted leather. They called it "authentic" and named some tribe or other. You had stopped at one and while the process of the craft was explained to you by a middle aged Native American wearing a garishly colored Cabo San Lucas t-shirt, you smiled politely, breathing in the oven-like air and wondered to yourself what precisely was unauthentic of your own jewelry "hecho en mexico" or stamped with "ITALY". You bought nothing but a postcard, a reproduction of a photograph of a family of the "Old West," circa 18 something or other, the dark beauty of the women muted by lack of expression and sepia tones. Trudging through the gravel of the roadside

you glanced at the sun, then at your watch and wondered how in hell you'd make it to Bryce Canyon before nightfall.

You won't make it now for sure. It will be full dark by the time you round the next ridge. You're not exactly sure how far your destination is, and there aren't many signs announcing the distance and you've missed the ones that have zipped past. Your gut says not to be out here after dark. Your mind calculates that there isn't much of a choice. There isn't even a sizable town for a hundred miles. The more the shadows lengthen, and the more you think on it, the more the landscape shifts from indifferent to sinister. You want to wake her next to you so that you won't be alone, but you don't. As unsettling as the quiet is, it's better than her chatter would be. Having made up your mind in that respect you wonder if music is a better option. You turned it off miles ago. There had been no radio anyway and you've heard all your tapes already. And you know turning it on will wake her. But you'll need her soon anyway to play navigatress. The happy medium you decide on in your quest for sound is to crack the window a bit. At the ridiculous speeds you're driving, more than an inch or two of air space would be folly. As it is, the roar is deafening, but your travel mate slumbers on, and the now cooling desert air does wonders for your spirit. It does nothing to make you wish to linger here, however. To distract yourself, you think of the scathing things you want to write in your travel journal about your friend, which you can't do while actually on the trip for fear of her prying eyes. You giggle at the adjectives you'll use to describe her when you get home and you're sure she can't read what you write. Infuriating and whoresque top the list.

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Night has fallen now. Your stomach demands something more substantial than Fritos and your route needs to be seriously considered. No city lies near on the horizon. And the miniscule town the desert seemingly has floating in its middle is no place you'd like to spend the night. But they have a Denny's Restaurant of the old style. They haven't caught on here yet that Denny's are all transforming to brightly colored, pseudo—art deco meets 50's diner type establishments with jukeboxes and whatnot. No. Here is the old standard. Yellow, brown, green. Floppy dinner salad, greasy burger, soggy fries. But the bathroom is the cleanest you've seen all day. And it's here you spread out the map, rather than at the table, which cannot hope to achieve such levels of sanitation. You find that you are quite close now to the Utah border and the highway you've been on for hours veers sharply west past the Vermillion Cliffs National Monument that you would have liked to see, had it still been light out. The road to Bryce is a long one, but there is nowhere else to go.

Horror movie plots float through your head as you get into the car again. You feel, somehow, like you'll never leave this place. Like maybe you crashed somewhere between here and Flagstaff and didn't know it, doomed forever to roam the northern Arizona desert—your only sustenance Denny's burgers and warm Cherry Coke bought in the last state. But your fears ease somewhat as you cross the state line and the ubiquitous desert finally begins to fade. Through the night you can tell there is greenery around you and shrubs give way to long forgotten trees, meadows, hills. An hour passes, two. You haven't seen another car go by since you entered the state. All alone out here or back in the desert? You haven't decided which is better. It's colder here though. A hand out the window estimates the temperature in the way-colder-than-it-ever-gets-in-LA range and you quickly withdraw and roll up the window. You're driving slow now, easing the Buick around the sharp bends in the road, watching for the fork that will send you north towards Bryce Canyon and more importantly a place to rest for the night.

When you find the fork, you take the northbound road, hoping to stop at the next decent place with lodging. But in less than a minute you change your course. Dozens of deer have come out to frolic right where you would like to drive through. Now this is a true horror. You've been deathly afraid of deer for years. When you were a child, a large buck, antlers and all, was trapped in the pool of your parents' home in the foothills. You vividly bring to mind the image of him thrashing and butting his antlers against the foliage-covered chain link fence once he got out of the pool. And it isn't that you're afraid now for your safety, as the beasts look gentle enough, but if you should hit one, and then have to get out of the car or something...No, this is unacceptable. You maneuver the car carefully into a three-point turn, right there in the middle of a two-lane highway, heedless of any traffic that may come around the next bend, and head back to the fork in the road, to take the unplanned route west. West to what, you're not sure, but a hasty map check while stopped there at the fork, says there is a

KAREN BARKAN

HIGHWAY

town some 50 miles away. Not seeing any option, you go west, hoping for a deer-free road.

For about two miles you sail down the highway, glad to be rid of the pesky animals. But your luck doesn't hold out. Almost as soon as you breathe a sigh of relief, you nearly ram right into a large doe. You've stopped within inches. The combined shriek of you and your passenger lingers in the air well after it's stopped. Heart beating faster than it probably ever has, you put the car in park and observe your almost target, lit by your high beams. You expect a "deer caught in the headlights" but the doe's expression is anything but blank. She appears to be looking right at you, staring in fact. Her look is intense and requires you to stare back at her. You are compelled by her gaze, and without looking away you whisper to your friend, asking her if she sees what you see. She whispers assent and asks what should be done. Moments pass. Nothing happens. It's a deadlock, a staring contest like you had with friends when you were children, looking directly into one another's eyes till someone broke into a fit of giggles. The doe's breath is steaming in the cool air, and she seems perfectly content to stay there, watching you watch her. It seems as though she—you shake the thought away. It won't be shaken. It seems as though she wants to tell you something. Impossible. Deer are big dumb animals, aren't they?

Your friend is past the drama and now just wants to get going. She reaches out to honk the horn, but you slap her hand away. You tell her to be quiet. Take a deep breath. Open the car door.

B.Z. NIDITCH

FAIRGROUNDS

After a year's passing
sister still grieves
on fairgrounds,
at the first snow
hidden in absentia
billboard signs
are choked and frozen
by white, shined cars
this seasoned refugee
bundles her grey coat
and suddenly the rain
captures the fragility
of daybreak.

Umbrellas, like parchment
appear out of passageways
on village streets
cold faces
from the city
move as shadows
placing stones
on unmarked graves.

047

AMBER NORWOOD

ODE

042

it isn't enough anymore to write
the moon and ice cubes.
i, holding each

a frozen mass made
round by warm tongue,
fall victim to the memory
when word was word,
before language was sound.

this is a moon,
her face the moon,
the poem's stark omen, and now
her face a satellite.

a parasite, the moon,
that thief of starglow,
her hand in your last pocket,
your recollection of the world
you grow, the green
you reap
and she sows,

she the satellite.
you still in rotation,
the two of you dance a wandering
palpitation against the slow nimble
sound of jukebox, low
murmurs, glass kissing
glass, gin and glass exploding,

a bitter cut beneath my tongue.

this is ice.
the moon is ice,
the moon man's face is your face, and
in your eyes,
the ice
we skate through words on page.

the sound, the word is not the ice.
it is not a good moon.
or a quiet moon,
or a square frozen sip.

Things are falling.

Things will continue to fall until gravity finally relents and gives up the ghost. However, given gravity's predilection for not going gentle, so to speak, it must have come as no surprise that the suicide of Ms. M_ from a fall of nineteen stories wasn't going to be postponed. It is perhaps this very notion of gravity's fidelity to the falling object that makes this method of self-annihilation so attractive. After all, guns misfire, poisons can stain a clean shirt, blood can clot, but the tug of gravity will always ground less feathered birds.

Of course there are many things to consider in these situations. For example, how should one dress for the occasion? Surely such matters are paramount in light of the singular nature of the event and should not be glossed over as an innocuous detail. I recall hearing of a man who jumped from a famous bridge in top hat and tails. He was followed a few days later by his wife, dressed quite elegantly in full bridal regalia—complete with train and a bouquet. I also seem to remember a rather grim tale of four teen-aged girls who kept up their end of a mutual death pact by throwing themselves off a charming little county bridge on Halloween—they wore their black lace hats, green face paint, and the sundry accouterments of the trick-or-treat witch.

Many people, if my information is correct, have made their final acts more poetic by selecting costumes to represent their state of mind at the end. Take the latter-day Galahad who spent months in his basement workshop fashioning a suit of armor to adorn his knightly countenance. This mode of dress would benefit the wearer in two ways—first in its sheer poetic poignancy, and then later as the sad Sir Suicide plunged to his death, the weight of the suit facilitating a speedy decent.

The case of Ms. M_ does pique particular interest because there seems, on the surface, nothing at all unusual or perverse about her choice of apparel on that afternoon. However, through careful, deductive examination of the events leading up to that strange and singular Thursday in January I believe some semblance of a hypothesis can be brought forward.

My interest in the matter begins with Ms. M_'s visit to a rather nondescript little establishment that specialized in the sale of what

is called in fashionable corners 'vintage' or less euphemistically, 'previously worn' clothing. She, a young, fresh faced woman of tasteful aspect, entered the shop which is located just two blocks from her apartment. This itself strikes me as odd considering that in the five years she had lived in that neighborhood, the proprietor, an elderly woman, did not remember ever seeing her before that first day in October when she came through her door. Was she looking for macramé pot holders? A ceramic bowl for her loose change?

"I think she was just killing time," the elderly proprietor told me. "She spent a lot of time looking but not with any great interest. She would sort of hover in an area for a few minutes then move onto another part of the store. She seemed a rather shy girl."

In deference to the young woman's demeanor, the owner silently followed her across the store and spoke only when she saw Ms. M_ going through the racks of vintage dresses that hung like headless specters in rows against the wall. The elderly woman quickly shuffled to one side of the rack and retrieved the dress.

"I told her 'here, this one. Try it on'. When she walked through the door I immediately thought she would be perfect for it. A charming little summer thing."

Ms. M_ eyed the article and then walked with it to the dressing room. According to the owner, Ms. M_ had spent a quarter of an hour in the small room. She became concerned that something had happened to her patron and put her ear to the door to listen for movement.

"It was the strangest thing," she continued, her eyes

narrowing as if to pick up visual details from the space in front of her. "All I heard when I listened at the door was a sort of humming, like a song. It was almost too quiet to hear."

At last the young woman exited the dressing room and immediately paid for the dress. It was probably more money than she wanted to spend, but a few minutes later Ms. M_ was walking out the door with the dress neatly tucked into a paper sack. The decision to buy must have been sudden, perhaps inspired by some subconscious memory of her mother's own clothing, or maybe it was a simple impulse, a whim.

Ms. M_ then returned to her apartment, walking quickly all the way, maybe slightly out of breath. There would have been a purpose to her gait that day, as if the excitement of finding the dress and wearing it for the briefest of moments necessitated a longer, more concentrated engagement with it in the privacy of her apartment.

There was a full length mirror next to her bed and I made note of its position in the room. The afternoon sun would have made a little spot of light just in front of it. She must have stood before the mirror and then taken a step back to catch her entire body framed there in the reflection. The dress was almost unassuming, creamy and flesh toned in color with a simple motif of spring flowers. Although the colors were muted from age and wear the fabric retained its silken, contoured integrity. She would have gazed long at herself in that mirror; the gentle curves that faded from belly to hips, the defined but delicate twin spheres of her shoulders—each element of herself accentuated and made acute to her eyes. Would she have then cocked her head to one side and performed a small turn? The dress would

have then expanded at the leg and she would have looked something like a dervish, lost in the ecstasy of this new becoming.

Had the dress told her something about herself that had been concealed until that moment? The language of dress is binary and it recognizes only absolutes of affirmation and negation. I imagine the dress possessing discreet fibrils that would catch on the skin of her thighs, registering an almost electric "yes" like a telegraph wire from leg to head. The embrace of the dress cocooning her... yes, I can see this in my mind's eye, contracting around her waist and chest, constricting the blood ever so slightly, making her swoon a little.

In order to attach solid fact to these thoughts of mine I sounded out her neighbors. Of that time they report only of hearing singing or some sort of soft, waltz-like music emanating from her apartment.

"I actually went to check in on her," said one neighbor whom she had sometimes met for coffee. "I hadn't seen her leave her apartment except to go to work and when she stopped answering the phone I got to worrying. When I knocked at her door she wouldn't come. I could hear noises, like singing. A woman's voice. It could have been humming, come to think of it. Something old. Maybe Brahms."

Her coworkers would sometimes look over at her in her cubicle and see her staring out into space with what they described as a contented, faraway look. They, her office mates, were prone to lives of rather loud desperation and would spend idle times discussing the recent changes in her. They took notice, they talked, they speculated.

Why do you stare at her all the time?

"I like looking at her. She makes me feel, I don't know, *warm* somehow. Does that sound stupid?"

"What is that noise she is always making? Is it singing?"

"The way she moves, its like she's dancing'..."

"I know what you mean."

These moments of reverie which Ms. M_ found in herself must have

caused her mind to float wistfully through the recirculated air of the office, out the hermetically sealed windows of the thirty-fourth floor, down the cold winter canyons of the city to her tiny apartment across town, and into her wardrobe where the dress was hung. Perhaps she wore the dress then, in her mind. Projecting herself into May, June, and July—warmer months, when the skin is not so tightly confined and the breezes are mild, even sultry. Or maybe she imagined herself a wisp of smoke curling along the contours of the fabric, entering at the hem and following the delicate creases upwards through the sleeves and finally swirling in a slow, slow vortex about the neckline before dissolving—a votive extinguishing into unbearable desire. Her co-workers may have felt all this in the soft tissues of their bodies as they sat in the stale confines of their cubicles. Some may have even attempted to speak about it to others in the office but would find themselves at a loss for words and default instead to absurd smiles.

One Thursday in early January the city experienced a sudden and dramatic turn in the weather. For one day, snow, ice and cold gave way to skies of deep blue and clouds the color of salmon flesh. Icicles gleamed and sparkled like chandeliers as the long absent sun slowly melted the frozen trees along the boulevards. By mid-morning, workers in the office had taken to opening the massive, louvered windows to allow the sweet, warm air to circulate through the building.

When her coworkers noticed her new dress—the novelty underscoring the radical shift in the weather—the office was again abuzz with gossip and speculation.

How did you feel when you first saw her in the dress?

"She must be in love, but I didn't know she was seeing

anyone."

"I didn't know she even dated."

"She's being promoted. She's probably known all along."

"Maybe she's dating the boss."

"Maybe I'm in love. Wonder if she ever considers older men."

At lunch time the office cleared to enjoy the unseasonable weather. Many had gathered in the park across the street from the office. Men took off their shirts, women went barefoot. They ate sandwiches and drank the wine that someone had saved from the New Year's party. They didn't concern themselves with being late back to work because the boss had been seen throwing a frisbee along with the boys from the mail room. When some nervous manager hazarded to ask him about afternoon meetings, the boss instructed him to go down the street and buy more beer and pretzels.

A few stragglers did stay behind in the office, but eventually even they found their way onto the balconies overlooking the park. The ladies had kicked off their high heels and some were even found sunning themselves on makeshift lounge chairs. But no one blamed them and no one blushed even at the sight of these usually modest men and women stripped to their underclothes. Such was the general mood of warmth and goodwill that permeated the office that strange day.

Ms. M_ had kept her hands tightly at her sides when she jumped. This was done to prevent the dress from blowing upwards and covering her face and unduly exposing herself. Those on the balconies did not actually witness her descent, but

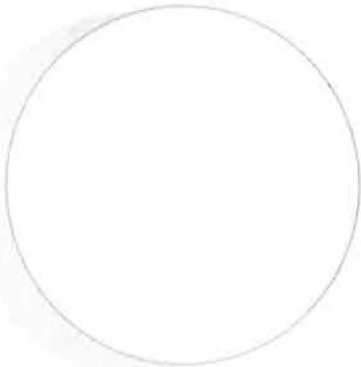
one woman from accounting later reported hearing the faint sound of fabric rippling like a flag in the wind at the precise moment Ms. M_ may have passed her window. Those in the park at first did not know what to make of the falling figure. The two boys from the mail room snickered and commented on how wild things had gotten in the building.

"Looks like they're stripping up there! They're throwing their dresses down!"

"Where did they get the mannequin?"

Time slowed in the warm stillness of the afternoon, and despite the javelin-like trajectory of her fall, Ms. M_ appeared to float at intervals on her descent so that everyone who watched came to realize that it was their strange and beautiful coworker who was falling. About midway down, she began toppling end over end, spinning like a pinwheel before finally landing with a sickening, wet slap on the pavement in front of the concierge who was preoccupied with smoothing sunscreen onto his forearms.

The warm reprieve of that day gave way to the harshest snow storm in recent memory. Services for Ms. M_ were continually postponed as the days of storm turned into weeks. Eventually, a small service was held in a chapel just a few blocks from where she had worked and died. Of the six mourners who came, only three were from her office—the old man who had sat across from her, a boy from the mail room, and one other. When they rose to leave the chapel, each nodded to the others but said nothing as they exited. The snow was soft and wet and made their feet quite cold.



ANJA LEIGH

INSTEAD

it wasn't like hollywood movies
where lovers linger in long goodbyes
and fingers entwine

instead

he forgot her name
soiled himself and the couch

she wanted to say goodbye,
not wander 3 a.m. stillness
wearing his favorite blue robe

instead

she slipped her fingers beneath
his breathing silence
yes — he still lived

a breeze
wandered through their kitchen
she recalled vacations on Mykonos
tangos on cruise ships
tears, triumphs
25 anniversaries

if he held out until Valentine's Day
it would be a sign he loved her

instead

he took his last breath with him
alone, before she woke

she crossed the hallway
to tell him of a midnight dream

instead

she found him cold and curled
his knees bent to his chest
she removed her nightgown
and enclosed him naked
one more time

048



Wall Bombed Speaker, HaNH Vo

DAN MURPHY
BUMPER STICKER
FREEDOM ISN'T FREE!

Of course.
Junior George Bush praises
in Africa Black slavery
that built America:
"Your sacrifice made us free."

We free a lot of nations today,
liberating illusions, superfluous
liberties at home,
that we live free.

Of course, a requisite number of
friendly fire/surgical mistakes/etcetera
bones and human fragment
must stay quiet, rest in Third World earth
or come home.

I have my reasons, so does he.
Distinguish the two.

One
carries his smile in a briefcase, turns
like a dog over and over to find
the smell of something lost. One
walked from London on his hands
across the Atlantic.

That one is me,
whooping to the natives, "Beware,
my evil brother. Beware."

050

MICHELE HUNTER

A SIMPLE LIFE: A PETRI DISH,
EXAMINATIONS UNDERNEATH
THE MICROCOSM

150

Causality – The relation of cause and effect, in which one event necessarily follows another.

It all started with the Big Bang. Somehow a bunch of Adams swimming and zipping along in space has left me here in front of my computer screen at three in the morning with a cold, fried drumstick sticking out of a tub of Cherry Garcia. In front of me, a neighborhood filled with sticklike versions of people mill about, distributing newspapers, going to work and cleaning their toilets. I control them with a click of my mouse. They obey my command. It is hard for me to accept that this is a microcosm of our lives. A simple click and an action, follows a cause, creating an effect until I decide otherwise.

I like accidents. I'm a big believer in them. Great, huge, majestic accidents like seeing a grisly wreck on the side of a freeway and noticing the smashed bumper is labeled "Student Driver". There are small accidents too. These usually have greater implications than we give them credit. Say for instance, a pregnant woman gets on the bus during the morning work hour. All the seats are taken. A man sits in front of her and lifts his newspaper so that she can't glower at him directly. The bus hits a pothole. The pregnant woman bumps into a passenger holding a cup of coffee. It goes flying. The unfortunate recipient of its tar like stain is a woman on her way to a job interview. She's already late. Her shirt, brand new and starch white, now resembles some ink blot test where if you look closely her breasts form butterfly wings. She won't get the job. She won't bother going and she'll never see the pregnant woman, the man holding the newspaper, or the caffeine junkie ever again. They won't know how badly she needed that job or that her future husband would've been her boss. She won't know that either. All she knew was that she had a bad seat on a busy morning when she left too late and wished she had enough money or good credit to afford a car.

NR. SPR. 05

The family I am concentrating on now has one child. The other went to military school. I made it skip school and water the plants instead. I prefer small families as they are easier to control.

There's a theory that nothing can come into being without there being a first cause. An ultimate push into wherever or whoever that may connect to your life like a fuel line to a jet plane. Exactly what this first cause is or was is up for debate. Some call it God, others the Universal Order and still some subscribe to the Watchtower or Hubbard's scientological fiction. In all religion, philosophy and science (which is another form of religion) this rule seems to be unalterable, unarguable and definite. Nothing comes from nothing. The extension of this is that everything happens because something preceding it made it occur. This is known as the law of cause and effect.

It's night time now in the neighborhood. I check on another family down the street. They have a lawn covered in pink flamingoes and a flight of stairs leading to a second landing I have yet to build for them. The TV is beside the Jacuzzi which is beside the kitchen next to the pool table. I am too lazy to construct walls and windows. They won't live long anyway. Nobody wants to visit a house that doesn't have four walls and a front door.

I think people like these laws because it makes them feel safe. It takes away some amount of responsibility. I'm the way I am because two people decided not to wear a rubber "...and here I am Johnny." It's safe. Maybe for some the idea of a first cause is comforting. It's like someone rolling a snowball down a hill only to watch it turn into an avalanche. They must feel like gods. I would. That's why I don't go camping. I'm afraid the pyromaniac in me that I don't know

about (but is lurking) will grab hold of those matches and set Smokey Bear running for high ground. It's not that I want to destroy a national park, it's the idea that I can from one simple action of striking a head and nobody will be there to stop me from talking to the Burning Bush.

I click on another house, red brick and stucco. It reminds me of Tucson or Las Vegas. Inside is a lone bachelor. He doesn't do much. Watches a lot of TV and orders pizzas while I'm in the bathroom. That's the free will component. I can control them but if I want I can leave the inhabitants to their own devices. This usually ends up badly, but it's entertaining to watch. A kitchen fire starts when my back is turned, or an executive oversleeps in his vibrating bed and has to start all over again as a mail boy. It's a pain in the ass but so is insomnia.

About accidents. Twists of fate, unhappy lots or fortunate

MICHELE HUNTER

A SIMPLE LIFE...

0520

windfalls, I think they happen with far more regularity than any deterministic laws of nature. I make them happen, which in a way is self-defeating as anyone could make the claim that my making it so defeats the purpose and is really only a reaction of synapses in my brain collected at a certain point in my developmental stage that makes me react to laws of causality as I do. Still, one has to have a purpose in life, a cause that makes them rebel and buck the system. I reject order in favor of chaos. My plants, dry stems in clay pots full of gray soil are my silent witnesses. They sit out by my welcome mat which has cigarette burns etched into the invitational greeting. Chinese restaurants don't leave menus outside my door anymore. I have to call information.

Take-out. I have forgotten about my insolent bachelor and realize he has ordered another pizza. This makes four boxes he has yet to open plus the one he is paying for. I send him into the living room to make a phone call. There's a single girl living down the street. She wears cheetah pants and has a beehive. They don't get along but somebody has to eat those pizzas.

I don't change the kitty litter nearly enough. My living room is an odd assortment of socks, CD's, full bottles of Windex never used and flashlights without the batteries. I always mean to get batteries as I fear earthquakes but a part of me wants to see if I can survive underneath the rubble for days with only cat turds and cleaning supplies to sustain me. It's the accident thing. I keep myself ready for one but then it never happens.

There is a discovery I made some years back while in graduate school. Physicists are great in bed. They may not look like much, but underneath all that nuclear energy and symbolic logic, these men are desperately trying to break free from the laws that restrict them. They usually drive Hondas and have maps of everything and can quote Fodor's even though they probably spend most of their weekend nights holed up in a research lab or grading papers from neophyte freshmen trying to prove their mathematical leaps of logic without first grounding them in a foundation of sure proof. A woman is like a wormhole to them. They've heard about women, seen them in pictures but never really believed they could get inside of one.

The whole thing you may say is planned. Planned from birth. I have no control over it, but I reject this. It may hit me as a moment of inspiration to stop in and listen to a wild debate over quantum mechanics. Everything so structured and rigid, our lives, neatly arranged rose bushes.

Still, a wormhole is a wormhole. It needs to be studied, investigated and theorized. They don't believe in it after all as it sounds like some hocus pocus Einstein cooked up for shits and giggles but then again...

Dinner is easy. Unless they're married, (which fortunately is rarely the case), they offer but in that hesitant way that hints at the incredulous happenstance that stands before them—something unexpected and unforeseen. It can be a bit awkward. Conversation lapses as the ideas begin to permeate. Who is she? Why is she here? Why with me? It's quite fun to watch a man's wheels turn that have grown rusty and dry. Subtlety is lost in expense for the study. I feel like some rare specimen and it makes me horny.

Unlike my home, a physicist's house will be neat and sparse. IKEA has nothing on them. It is my belief that Swedes are

nothing more than logical positivists.

He may offer me a glass of wine or Sherry if he catches too much *Frasier* on re-runs. I allow him to watch as I slowly recline on his couch, taking down my hair. They are such suckers for long hair. The kind a man can run his fingers through.

This elicits the spark I know is inside. They grab and pant, moaning as I thrust myself against their hardness. Laws, logic and rules have been thrown aside as they straddle themselves over me. Our tongues beat against one another and I can't help thinking about my tub of Cherry Garcia melting in the sink at home. My SIM's running on free will are no doubt in some serious trouble as the first cause is on a mission to make chaos.

I think about my bachelor with the pizza boxes and the cheetah pant girl that prefers taking baths over showers. The family

with the child sent to military school blurs through my mind as my legs are spread wide. Physicists like to examine before diving in. It must be a doctorate kind of thing. Football players, actors and such rarely enjoy a woman as scientists do.

Somewhere inside of a box, inside of a bigger box where plants are missing in their pots and welcome mats are caution strips, simulated people run amok and set fire in the kitchen, drown in a whirlpool and drink till dawn. Inside my box, a vibration stirs, an accident, something unplanned as orgasms should be taken entirely by surprise and not be timed out like a Thanksgiving turkey. I'm wet and sweaty and the night's not over yet but I've already forgotten his name. Dr. So-and-So. Such and the other. It makes no never mind to me. I've always been an "Oh, God" woman myself anyway.

Afterwards, he wants my phone number and I give him one

MICHELE HUNTER

A SIMPLE LIFE...

had disconnected long ago. It will be awhile before I go in search again. I always come home to a screensaver world where it never rains or snows but zombies are everywhere.

I click on the mouse and try to gain control over the stick figure lives fleshed out by tiny bulbs of light. They seem grateful almost, relieved that I am here to take care of them again. Never mind the cum sticking to my thighs or my disheveled hair. They don't need to know what the first cause looks like so long as it's there.

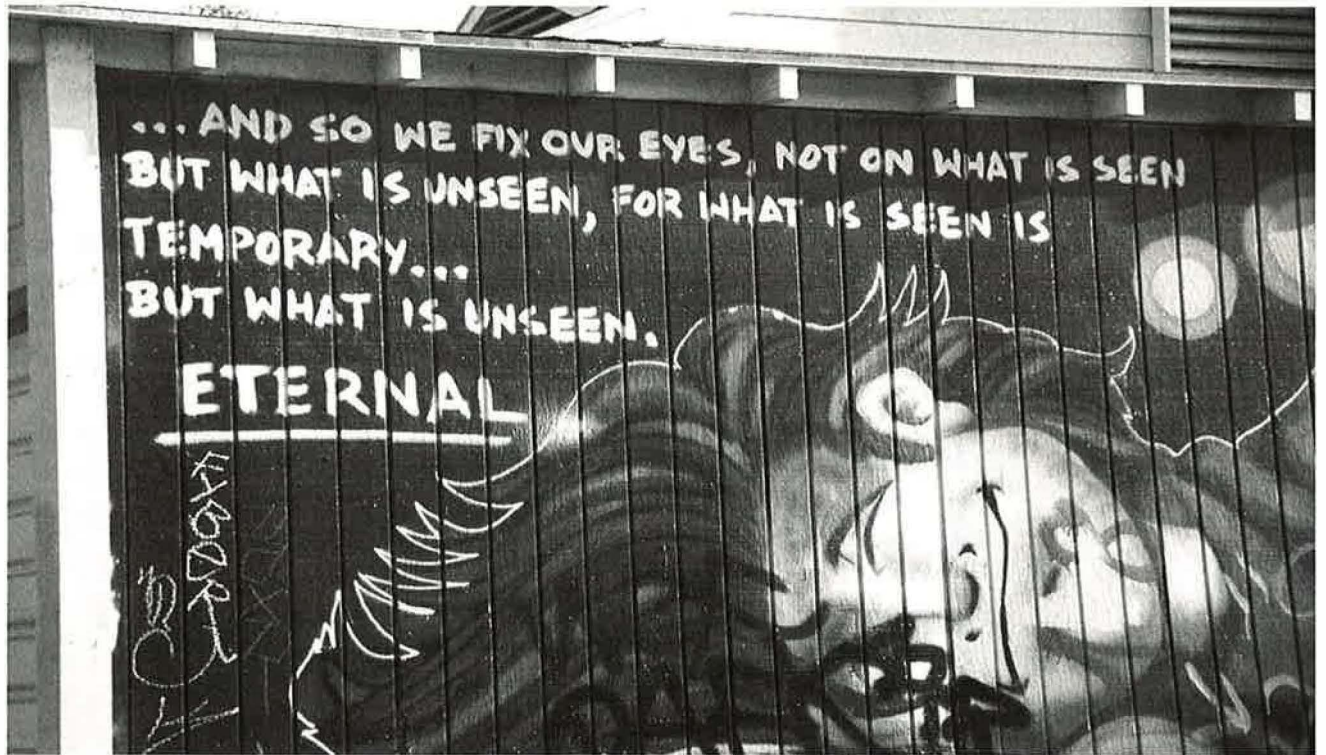
The bachelor and cheetah pant girl are sleeping in the same bed. Maybe pizza brought them together. Hunger has a way of doing that. The family with the shipped off child has another baby in a bassinet. I'm feeling benevolent. Let them have another. They seem to prefer children to come in two's. The family that lived on the lawn died from overexposure. I sell their urns and move another couple into the lot. Tomorrow we'll see about some construction and cement.

Accidents do happen. Reason cannot explain my justifications or my haphazard leanings. We bump around, sure that it is for some divine purpose or at least based on some causal identity that knows far more than we can hope to digest. I'm not so sure. I lift my finger off the mouse.

Free Will.

Maybe the first cause stepped away to take a shower.

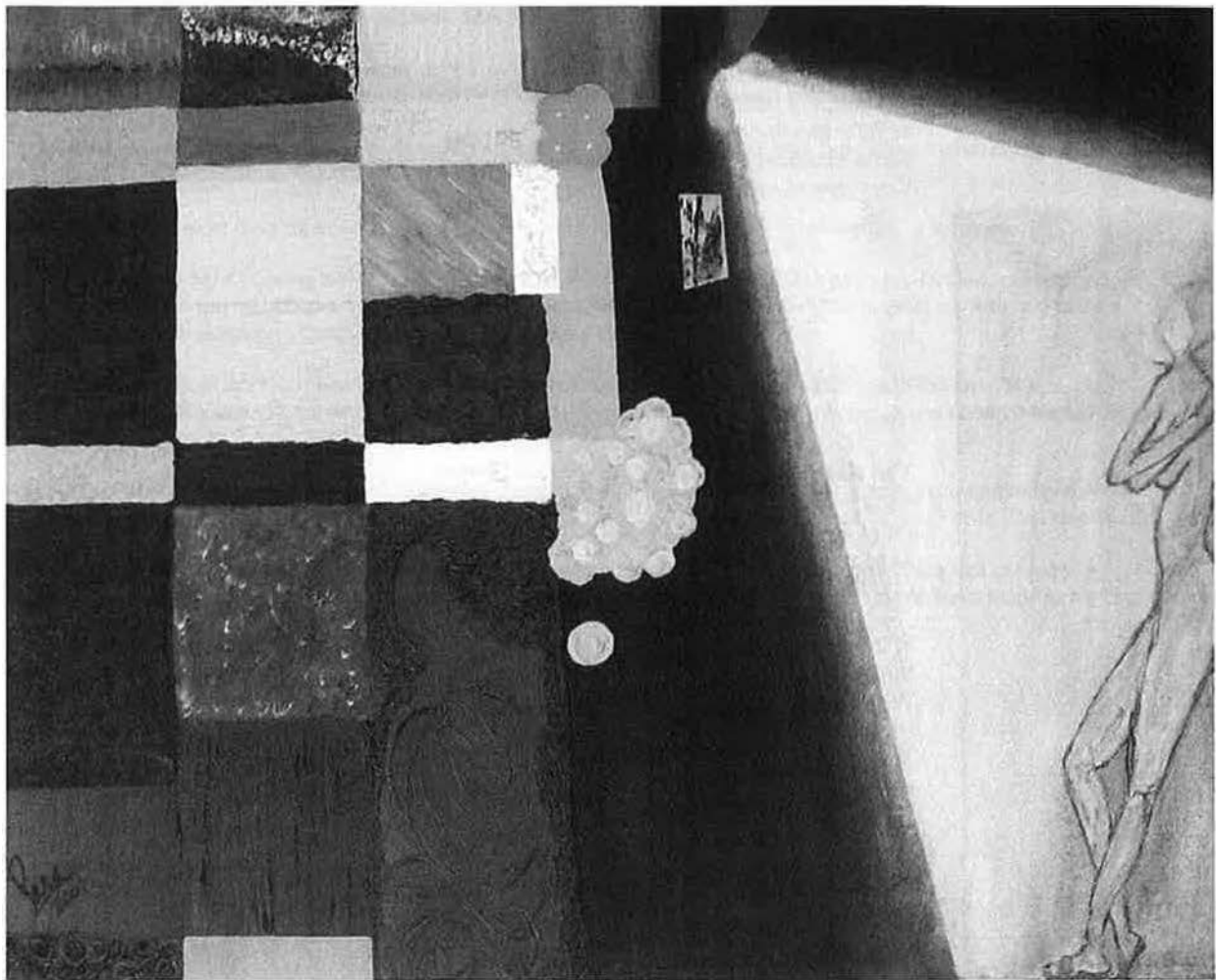




The Unseen. NACXHRUL



GRAF_Tryptic. HaNH Vo



At 23 years. Sara M. Petersen

GEORGE JIMENEZ

THE CANNIBAL JOYS

058

I dream a trap door—
this is you, Language. and below,
a tunnel for escaping.

My tongue dissipates:
the graceful palsy
of Balinese fingers.
flame extending, primitive bridge.
Your idea of invitation.

the Gamelan: is the
Slow exclamation of discovery.
A long, detailed quest.
Cry of a genius infancy.

I have heard it
in your curve.

The distance of flesh a mouth
can measure, reveals the appetite
most divine, in the form
of a serpent's
undulation—

in the knowing by scent
the hour of our death.
What i taste is this:

Hunger is an oxcart.
My will to speak you
is the slope.



Klop klop klop klop klop klop. My boots clack along the linoleum halls. Shhhhhhhh tink! Shhhhhhhh tink! Shhhhhhhh tink! My sword's point drags along the floor, popping into the air when it hits a crack. Wait. No. Not my sword. My Katana.

Samurais carry two swords, positioned at different angles on the same side of the hip. One is the wakizashi. It's the shorter of the two. The longer of the two, the katana, is often thought of as being used by practitioners of ninjitsu. I use a katana.

I just continue to stumble down the dark hall, all alone, dragging my sword. I would worry about that, but I know it's not a problem. It can take it.

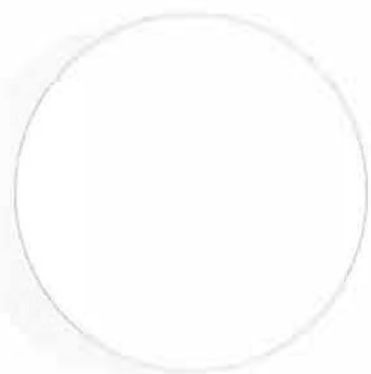
I hear sirens outside. Whoops. I must have tripped the alarm. Oh well. More fun for me. I slowly crack a smile at the floor.

I turn into one of the doors to my right, running into it. Dammit. I forgot to open the door. I open it and go to the window, still dragging my sword. At first I just look at the horizontal, aluminum-gray blinds. Then I lift my left hand and stick out two fingers, my fore and middle. I push them between two of the strips of aluminum. Opening the blinds just a sliver, my fingers split.

Red and blue light invades the room like Napoleon invading Russia. I am Russia. I peer through the blinds into the disturbed night. They must really want me this time. They brought the whole precinct. I close my fingers and remove them. Napoleon has been thwarted once again!

I turn and walk out of the room, leaving the door open. I klop-klop down the hall a few steps, each step getting more and more quiet. I lift my katana off the floor. All is quiet. I keep walking. Off in the distance I can hear the SWAT team's boots klop-klopping closer. Klop klop klop klop.

I come to a dead end. Oh well. One way out. Here they come. They're getting closer. They must have followed the trail of blood I left with my sword. I'm getting sloppy. I feel adrenaline start to flow into my blood stream. I can't hold my sword still. I hear my heart beating. It's deafening.



All I can hear is ba-dump, ba-dump. I use every ounce of energy to stand very still. Flow like water, flow like water, I think to myself. I am a river. I only flow.

The klop-klops get closer. My heart beats faster. They move in sync with each other. Ba-klop ba-klop. I see the lights from the end of their guns. Flashlights must be strapped to their barrels.

Book loads of information flood into my brain. Possible armament, thickness of their armor, any possible pertinent information. I suddenly think of all of it.

Just as suddenly, as if the flood of information was an earthquake in the middle of an ocean, the panic in my mind recedes in anticipation of the approaching tsunami. I'm calm as a hindu cow. Nothing bothers me. Time slows down. My heart is going so slow I wonder if it has stopped. I look up. My eyes feel glazed, as if I'm asleep, dreaming. I can see the light rounding the corner.

They stop when they see me. "Fffffrrrrrrreeeeeeeezzzzze!" I hear. The light from their flashlights momentarily blinds me, but I quickly adjust. I see eight men before me in full combat armor. No matter. In my mind I categorize them by distance. I rush forward. Pop pop, pop-pop pop-pop. I see the flash from their

PAUL CASTILLO

FLOW LIKE WATER

barrels, eight little fires igniting then immediately snuffed. The bullets soon follow, slowly advancing toward me.

I've closed half the distance to them.

I calmly move out of the bullets' trajectories. I hear a whooooooosh as one passes within an inch of my ear. I am calm. I flow like water.

I'm four feet from the point man. I bring my katana to bear. I calmly swing from my foot to my head. Seven, I say to myself. I move another foot forward, bringing the sword diagonally down, from my head to my right hip. Six. The next one is a little farther away and to my left. I see his face in a grimace, lit up by the gun flashes. I slash my katana from right to left. I see the grimace slowly leave his face from the corner of my eye, replaced by shock. Five.

Four.
Three.
Two.
One.

At the end of the hall, I see the final one. He's young, no older than myself, nineteen or twenty. It's so sad. When the young ones die.

And then I'm past him, and everything seems to snap to. Thud thud. I hear sixteen thuds in all.

I fall to a knee, holding myself up by my sword. I breathe out, exhausted. I suddenly hear the tick-tock of a far off clock. It's like time is laughing at me. Tick-ha tock-ha. I don't know how long I'll be able to keep this up.

I struggle to my feet. I inspect my blade but find it already clean. How some of these things happen,



I don't know. I lift my sword and swing it around, sheathing it in the scabbard on my back.

I walk around for a while. They send more troops, but I avoid them. I hide in the shadows. They run by me, oblivious. I walk on.

I work my way upstairs. When I get to the roof, I look over the edge and watch all the cops scurrying about below me. I laugh. I'm sure they're thinking, "Oh no! He's disappeared! Where did he go!"

I jump to the next building, easily flying over the gap. I look over my shoulder and watch the busyness in the building behind me. All the floors have the lights on now, and I can see the detectives looking for evidence. I'm sure they know it's futile. I've never left any before. I'm not going to leave any now.

I bound from rooftop to rooftop towards a certain street corner. I stand on the edge of a building, looking down at a phone booth. Should I, or shouldn't I? I know I have to. I don't have a choice.

I lightly hop down, barely tapping window ledges as I go. I lightly land into a crouching position. I get up and walk to the phone booth. I open the door and the phone begins to ring. I pick it up. It's for me.

"Hello," I say.

"You made quite a scene, didn't you? It's on all the news channels. You must be proud."

I take in a breath. "Yeah," I dejectedly sigh into the phone.

"Awww, come now. That was fun wasn't it?"

"Mmhmm."

"Well, it's time to have some more fun. Go to..."

The night is all enveloping. No one is around to see me. I'm once again klop-klopping along. Klop klop klop klop. I have my sword out. Shhhhhh tink. Shhhhh tink.

1
0
0

DAVID DEWITT FULTON
THE JOURNEYMEN CAN'T WIN

when he fights the ancient, broken,
scab of the ex-champ
because if he wins
it is a happenstance
of muddled gods,
reflective of the champ's
existential darkness,
and if he happens to lose
he goes back home to
footnotes and icepacks

but sleeping in a corner
of the federal mind
he dreams of snapping fingers
that can't recall his name,
or correctly keep the time;
a shuffling of
stroked-out trainers,
golden-glove lunch-pails
from 1931,
cigar-for-sale: unlit, butt-end chewed,
wet, raw, nothing delicate,
and for every gallon of blood-flaked
spit, every graying-out of frozen moments
lost to chalk-board memory
this journeyman will start to wonder
at the sight of untied
gloves, untied boots,
and the fully knotted masses of calcified
muscle that bedevil his calling

it is the root-cellar that beckons him now,

062

063

the last dry bit of him, remarking
on the strange state of affairs
that makes a man fold into himself
and take the contract handed to him,
that allow for youth to turn
on slick, canvas heels,
aching back, arching
like creaking Missouri
gateway staircase,
a landmark without remark,
a heavy weight, indeed

JUNIOR LEE KLEGSETH

BABYLON

I sustain dusk, sweat
dying sand, as the bow-tie

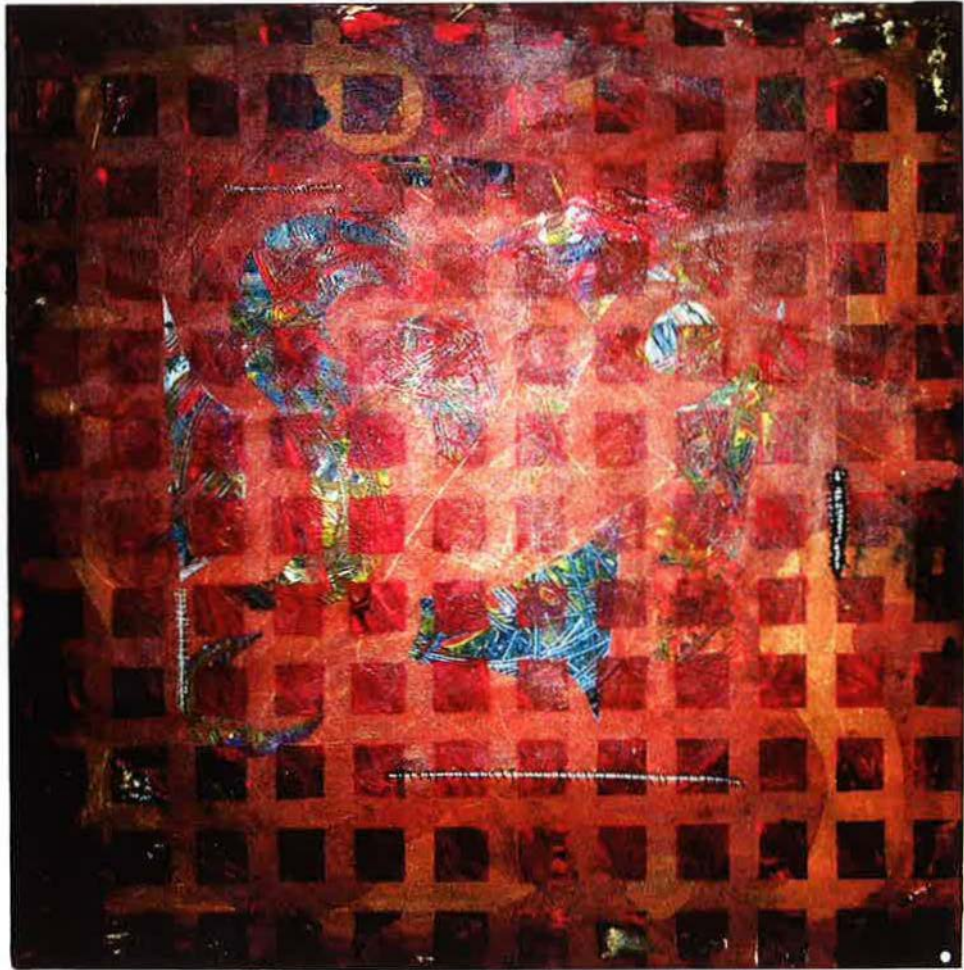
moonlight is blitzed by
luminous tombs.

Blasphemous black wings
of Daedalus flap chaotic

cacophony, in this void that
taunts like loquacious coal.

I strafe the night with fear,
a fading filament.

064



Everything but Dragged by a Car. John Divon

AARON LODGE

SWILL

DAD

BEER

JOHNNY

BECKY

MOM

WHISKEY

(DAD is sitting on couch)

DAD: Life is stupid

(Enter BEER)

BEER: Hey

DAD: Hi

BEER: How's it goin

DAD: Good to see you

BEER: You too

DAD: Have a seat

(BEER sits on couch)

BEER: Anything on TV

DAD: Not a

(Enter JOHNNY)

JOHNNY: Hi dad

DAD: Hey Johnny

BEER: Hello Johnny how's it going



JOHNNY: Hi

DAD: How was school

JOHNNY: Fine wanna play catch

DAD: Ok

BEER: Can I come

JOHNNY: Nah I would

DAD: Sure

(Enter **BECKY**)

DAD: Where are you g

BECKY: Shuddup

BEER: Hi Becky

DAD: Becky where

BECKY: It's none of your business



NR. SPR. 05

AARON LODGE

SWILL

JOHNNY: Hey Becky

BECKY: Hey Johnny I'll see ya later ok

JOHNNY: Ok bye Becky

DAD: Johnny leave her alone if she's gonna talk like that

*(Exit **JOHNNY**, **DAD** and **BEER**)*

BECKY: Where are my keys

*(Enter **MOM** and **WHISKEY**)*

MOM: Where the hell do you think you're going

BECKY: Oh hi mom how's it going good to see you too

MOM: I have this shitty day and I hafta come home to this

*(**MOM** hugs **WHISKEY**)*

WHISKEY: Everything's alright

MOM: Ok

WHISKEY: You had a long day

BECKY: That's just great ma

MOM: Listen

BECKY: Where are my keys

MOM: Listen you ungrateful little I had a long day a tough day ahhh whatever you don't care you won't listen to me I'm just
a stupid old lady right whaddo I know

WHISKEY: Now you've upset your mother

*(**WHISKEY** and **MOM** sit on couch and hold hands)*

BECKY: Who asked you

MOM: Be nice

068

AARON LODGE

SWILL

0699

BECKY: I am nice

MOM: Stop screaming

BECKY: Found em

(**BECKY exits**)

MOM: She's so rude

WHISKEY: I know

MOM: It hurts

WHISKEY: Yes

MOM: I love you

WHISKEY: Everything's ok

(**MOM and WHISKEY kiss**)

JOHNNY, BEER and DAD enter)

JOHNNY: Dad can we play some more

NR. SPR. 05

AARON LODGE

SWILL

DAD: Ya wore me out

BEER: Let's relax

JOHNNY: C'mon dad

DAD: Not now Johnny

WHISKEY: Hey guys

DAD: Howdy

WHISKEY: Hello Johnny how's it going

JOHNNY: Hi

MOM: Honey be nice why is everyone so rude today

(DAD and BEER sit on couch—on opposite side—so WHISKEY and BEER are in middle between MOM and DAD)

JOHNNY: Let's watch tv

DAD: Don't you have homework

JOHNNY: I wanna watch tv

DAD: Go do your homework

JOHNNY: Ok

DAD: Atta boy

(JOHNNY exits)

BEER: He's a good kid

DAD: Yeah

MOM: I love him

WHISKEY: So unlike that Becky

(Extremely long pause- at least 15 seconds)

BECKY enters, very disheveled)

070



Dead or Alive?, Sara M. Petersen

AARON LODGE

SWILL

MOM: Where the hell have you been

BECKY: Leave me alone

MOM: No I'm not leaving you alone you're my daughter and

WHISKEY: Forget it you'll just get upset

BECKY: You shut the fuck up

MOM: Don't ever talk that way in my house

DAD: How was your night

(BECKY exits

Another long pause

Blackout

*Lights up to **DAD** on couch*

*Enter **BEER**)*

BEER: Hey

DAD: Hi

BEER: How's it goin

DAD: Fine

BEER: Can I sit

DAD: Nah

BEER: What

DAD: Not tonight

BEER: C'mon

DAD: Nah I just want a night alone

BEER: Yeah

DAD: Really

BEER: Ok

DAD: What

BEER: Nothing

DAD: It's fine

BEER: I know

DAD: What then

BEER: Well

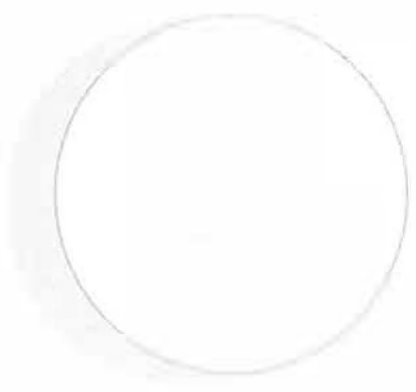
DAD: What is it

BEER: What else you gonna do

DAD: Huh

BEER: Tonight

DAD: What else am I gonna do



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AARON LODGE

SWILL

BEER: Tonight

DAD: Well

BEER: Huh

DAD: I dunno

BEER: Ok

DAD: Ok

BEER: Yeah

DAD: Yeah

(BEER sits on couch next to DAD

Long pause

MOM enters with WHISKEY)

MOM: Whadda shitty day

(Blackout)

074

JEFF SOSNER

DRUG DEAL PANTOUM

075

One day we surrendered to the guns at our heads
and the baggie peeked from my pocket—
a botched drug deal, an anonymous tip
and we got pinched, Tim Wetzell and I

and the baggie peeked from my pocket—
Tim told me to stuff it down deep in my pants because *cops can't reach*
underneath your balls
and we got pinched, Tim Wetzell and I,
as we sat in my car with the windows rolled down—

Tim told me to stuff it down deep in my pants because *cops can't reach*
underneath your balls
but I didn't want to make an ambiguous move
as we sat in my car with the windows rolled down.
Sweat welded my thighs to tan vinyl seats

but I didn't want to make an ambiguous move
as the cop told me to show him my fucking hands;
sweat welded my thighs to tan vinyl seats
and I imagined my imagination splayed over the dash

as the cop told me to show him my fucking hands;
and summer made Tim and me twitchy and wet
and I imagined my imagination splayed over the dash
so we put up slow hands

and summer made Tim and me twitchy and wet
as the sun crept down to get a better view
so we put up slow hands,
Tim Wetzell and I, just to live well into July

as the sun crept down to get a better view
—a botched drug deal, an anonymous tip,
Tim Wetzell and I—just to live well into July—
one day we surrendered to the guns at our heads.

DAVID DEWITT FULTON

LONG CON

in the way he moves you'd never guess
he has left kittens in a bag
down by the riverside
a crooked-instep, a barely perceptible limp
that comes in handy when pitching
certain empathy-based schemes
and that shock of white hair
combed to look like a dignitary
is a tell in the con-man's game
tho' just tidy and neat to john and jane
the schrewdness implicit in his fingers
kept in his pocket and hidden from view
and the long slit of a mouth
no lips to speak of
just a razor-width of purpose and teeth
he says things like "what time is it, please"
and "do you know when the next train leaves"
or "how is the key-lime pie here"
or "would you like to see a picture of *my* baby"
nothing out of the ordinary
nothing you straights would ever finger
he is a bad, bad man,
one of the worst, as a matter of fact
but i've got five bills and his *word*
that says he can find jesus
by judgement day
and the odds favor the house
therefore, my friends,
i have all day to sucker
and grift

076

1.

In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street. Symbols written in chalk to those who would come after. Messages to people I would never meet. Secret signs letting them know what they would find. Letting them know that I had been there first. Sometimes I wrote my symbols on buildings. Other times on sidewalks, concrete steps, brick walls, dumpsters, or the side of the curb. I wrote in an open code that anyone could learn. I wrote in an open code that almost nobody ever did learn. I wrote to people like me.

Once I bought an indelible ink pen and made my mark on the front of a stop sign. I could not sleep for two weeks. Chalk is temporary. Rain is infrequent in Southern California, and chalk symbols can last for months. Eventually, however, the clouds do gather and the water washes away the signs leaving a clean slate for the next traveler. The water washes away the chalk. The water washes away the symbols. The water washes away meaning. The water cleans the street. The water erases all denotation, connotation, and reason. No trace. As if I had never been there. As if no one had ever been there. As if I did not exist—but, of course, I do exist. You do exist. This story exists as an approximation of the actual events that occurred between Charlotte and myself. The names have been changed, of course, so I can call it fiction, and details have been altered or omitted to keep me out of jail, but more or less this is how it all occurred. And no rainstorm will ever wash that away.

I never chalked the same network twice. In the days when I chalked. There are plenty of script kiddies who do. Who show up the day after a storm to put their mark where mine had been. Who chalk as if they had found the node. As if they had measured the exact limits of the network with a GPS connected to the serial port of the laptop hidden in their backpack. As if they had stood on the street—window shopping, waiting for the bus, talking to a prostitute, or reading a map to the star's homes and looking lost—all the while scanning ports. As if



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they were not just losers with a downloaded copy of "Stumbler." As if they could code. As if the Visual Basic class they took in college made them a hacker. As if the copy of Crack_Ware_2000 they downloaded from the Internet made them a cracker. As if they had a modified nine-key in their coat pocket, connected to a serial port, that they used to send commands to their laptop. As if there was a wire running from the laptop, through their backpack, and inside their shirt, that sent coded signals in the form of mild electric pulses to the wire tapped to their skin.

After two weeks of seeing that stop sign in my sleep every night I went back at 3:00 a.m. with bolt cutters and a hack saw, ripped the sign down, and tossed it in a dumpster.

2.

In the beginning, I just wanted to make money without working. The American Dream. Something for nothing and a condo on Venice Beach. A release from the nightmare that is corporate America. A get out of jail free card. Edmund's box of Turkish Delight. To never look at an Oracle database again. To wake up at noon, roll over, and go back to sleep for another thirty minutes. To take a week off when the Science Fiction Channel is playing non-stop, back-to-back episodes of *Star Trek the Next Generation*, and watch them all from start to finish. To stop buying obsolete and surplus parts from Alltronics. To look through catalogs from Jameco, Mouser, or Digi-Key and buy the best de-soldering station, the PIC 18F micro-controller instead of the PIC 12F, the Ultrabright LEDs instead of standard red.

In the beginning I didn't need to get rich—I just wanted to win.

Anyone who can't make money on E-bay isn't really trying. The easiest scam, my first scam—everyone's first scam—is simply to sell items you don't actually own. The first time I did it was with laptops. You log onto one of the corporate networks you have cracked. Create 100 Yahoo email accounts. Then use the 100 Yahoo accounts to create 100 Ebay accounts—1 for selling and 99 shell accounts for bidding. If you script it the whole process takes less than 10 minutes. After that you download pictures of laptops from the internet, post ads offering last year's models at bargain prices, and for two months make sure that whenever any of your auctions ends—one of your shell accounts wins. The shell accounts give glowing feedback to the selling account, and after two months, when the selling account looks golden, you start 20 auctions, over the course of a week, for more of the bargain laptops. This time you let other people win, they send money orders to the post office box you have rented, and you walk away with between 15 and 25 thousand dollars. People complain, and Ebay will shut down your account, but the information is all fake anyway.

I ran the scam with laptops, desktops, video cameras, big screen TVs (this does not work as well—people don't want to pay the shipping charges), rare books, and vintage pinball machines before I got bored with it. One time I had a laptop scam, a video camera scam, and was selling mint condition, first edition comic books, all from different accounts, all at the same

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time. Sometimes I had as many as 500 accounts active, but in the end it became just a job. No challenge. No creativity. Simply an application of a formula. Almost as bad as working in corporate America.

3.

In the beginning I didn't know that I would fall in love with Charlotte. I didn't want to fall in love with Charlotte. I didn't like Charlotte. Her nose is too big, she laughs too loud, and she thinks the Discovery Channel is educational. She is not the kind of girl I would date in a million years. Nor is she the kind of girl who would go out with me in a million years. She has Jennifer Aniston hair. She goes to Karaoke night at the bowling alley because she wants to sing. Neither of her parents are alcoholics. She listens to the Star 98.7 radio station. When she uses the phrase—I love that commercial—she is not being ironic. None of her siblings have been divorced more than two times. She is a loyal Starbucks customer. She buys people gifts out of the blue, just because she was thinking of them when she was at the mall. She goes to the mall. She thinks the Internet was invented in 1998. She has no idea what an open node is.

The clueless call it wardriving or warchalking or warwalking—as if by downloading software from the Internet, lugging a laptop into their car, and checking their email for free on an unsecure wireless network they are somehow at war with “the man.” They don't understand that the prize is not the free access; the prize is gaining the free access. It's not about reaping the rewards, and it's not about playing the game; it's about winning. It is always about winning.

Another easy scam is to sell something you actually own, but to lie about it's value. I did this for a while too, just to see how it worked. The payoff is not as big, but you can keep the same account forever and Ebay will never shut you down. It's the lazy man's scam.

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Or, more accurately, the coward's scam. It actually takes more work than selling vapor, and the payoff is not as big, but neither is the risk. You say the laptop is a Pentium III when it is really only a Pentium II, or you increase the size of the hard drive or the memory. You say the comic book is in near mint condition when it is only fair. You sign the book, baseball card, or picture and call it autographed. Most people never complain. They take what you sell them and are either too stupid to know the difference or too timid to make waves. Even if they do complain—Ebay doesn't care. Ebay's customers are not the buyers. Ebay's customers are the sellers. They tell you not to do it again, or at worst shut down your fake account and force you to open a new one. All part of the cost of doing business.

4.

I started dating Charlotte because I thought she would sleep with me, and I had not had sex in over two years. She had just broken up with her boyfriend of five years and needed a shoulder to cry on. She went, alone, on a Mexico vacation that had been planned for two. When she got to Mexico I was staying at the same resort. I was alone. I was a shoulder for her to cry on. I bought her drinks and told her she had beautiful eyes—she does have beautiful eyes. I went horseback riding with her. We walked along the beach and had Piña Coladas served in coconuts. We went parasailing. We bought overpriced, mass-produced, fake Mexican artifacts, and then mailed them anonymously to our parents in the States.

I extended my stay by two days so we could leave together, and by the time we got back to Los Angeles we were a couple. She was my girlfriend. We were sleeping together. She was in love.

Charlotte works for Direct Shipping Incorporated (DSI) as a load planner. She sits in front of a terminal all day long and tells the people out on the dock what order to load freight into the big 40 foot containers that are then taken down to the port in San Pedro, loaded onto ships that are bigger than a football field, and shipped around the world. Charlotte never goes to any of the places the ships go; she just plans the loads.

5.

I stopped chalking open nodes when I started making serious money on Ebay. The script kiddies, who come behind, log on to the Internet, try to break into the networks, and leave evidence in log files that even an MCSE could find. They ruin it for everyone. They log onto a network, spend three days downloading porn, and then the system administrator figures out that someone is stealing bandwidth and tightens security. You can still break in, no system is secure—my system is not secure—but it takes work. It takes time. It slows you down. I stopped chalking open nodes after Charlotte and I got back from Mexico. After Charlotte started sleeping over at my condo. After Charlotte fell in love with me. Nothing eats into your free time like a girlfriend.

When you are working Ebay you can't accept credit



card payments, paypal, or personal checks—they can all be traced. People always try to find out who you are after you take their money. Never before. They want to know your name. They want to confront you. It isn't about getting the money back. It is about vengeance. Once a crazy man decided to get even with me. He contacted everyone who had bought a video camera from the same fake account. They organized, called the FBI, their local police, Ebay, and everyone else they thought would listen. No one listened. They created a website to track their progress. Everyone who had been dumb enough to buy a video camera posted their own sad little story. I posted three. I watched while the group was ignored by every official they approached. I watched as one by one they lost interest. All except for the crazy man who started it in the first place. I check his website every couple of months and he is still looking for me. The problem with some people is that once they find out they have been conned they can't get over it. They don't forget. They don't forgive. They never move past it and get on with what is important.

6.

We went on a picnic the week after we got back from Mexico. Charlotte packed a basket and we drove my mint condition, 1974 VW Thing (which I bought on Ebay) into the Santa Monica Mountains. She packed a blanket and a bottle of wine. She made sandwiches and cold Macaroni Salad. She brought pillows and a copy of *Scientific American* for me and *Time* magazine for her. We went for a walk, ate lunch, drank wine, and relaxed the afternoon away.

The first time I cracked the network at DSI I didn't even need any new skill accounts. I had not been in that part of Long Beach for over a year and just wanted to see if there was anything new. Their wireless network was wide open. It gave me access to their routers—all

KEITH ONSTAD

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS

of which still had the default passwords. I installed a sniffer, waited until I found a password, and then logged on. Once on the network I gave myself root access and the system was mine. I did no harm. I never do any harm, to networks that is. I like to think of myself as a harmless parasite, an unnoticed traveler, a ghost deep inside the server, a phantom—unnoticed and quickly gone.

I updated my auctions, made a few bids to make sure the shell accounts that were supposed to win did, and checked my messages. Then I logged onto their exchange server and started to read email. Most of it was dull. Corporate email is always dull, but every once in a while you stumble across something interesting. In every company there are people with family problems, people doing drugs, downloading porn, cheating on their significant others, running home businesses on company time, picking up "bargains" on Ebay, writing books, sleeping with each other. People who still think email is private. People who write what they feel. People who are idiots.

7.

On my birthday Charlotte and I spent the day at the beach. She planned the whole thing. She rented a bicycle built for two. We rode the tiny roller coaster and played games on the Santa Monica pier. We had dinner at the Casa Del Mar Hotel, saw Michelle Shocked at McCabe's, and then went back to the Casa Del Mar where she had made weekend reservations. It was every bit as Hallmark card sappy as it sounds. I think the day was as much for her as it was for me. More probably. The

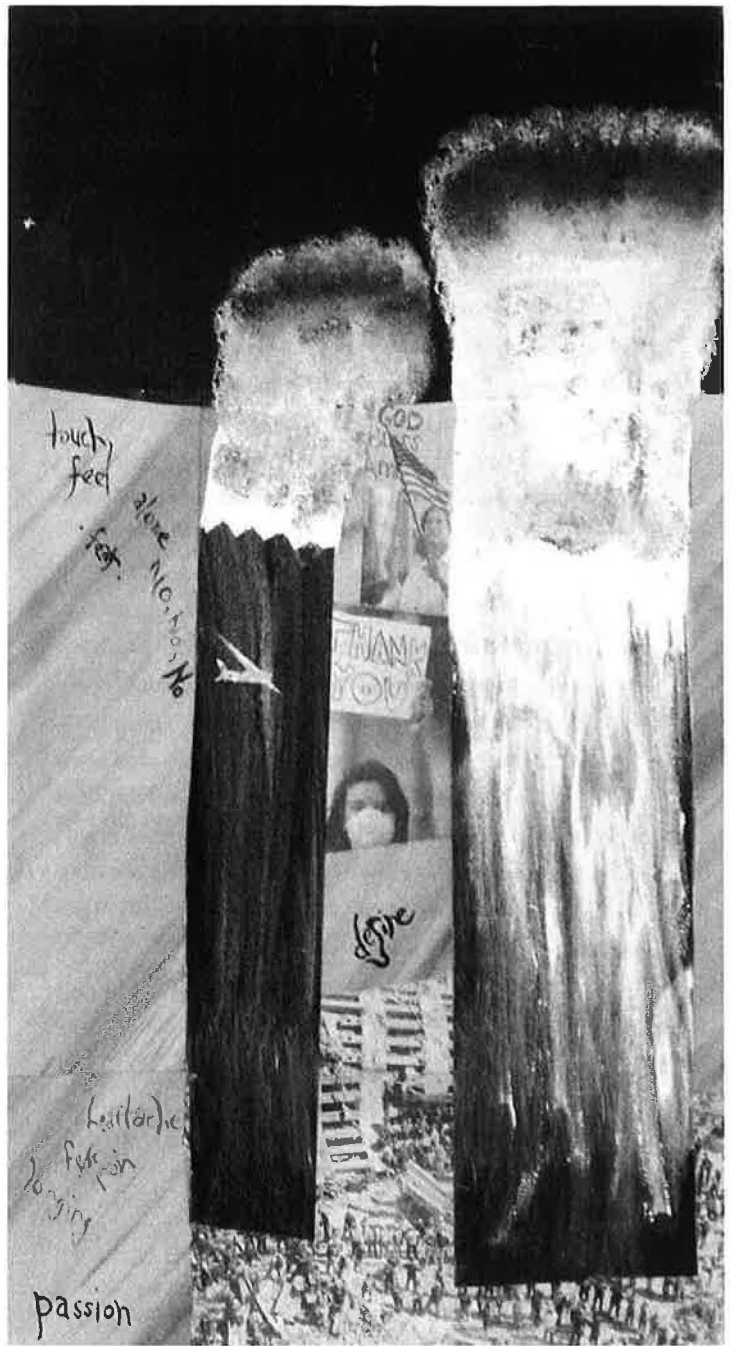
hotel is a perfect replication of 1920's opulence. Our room had a bathtub big enough for two people with a window open to the night sky. We ordered wine from room service and then made love in the tub while watching the stars. It was a little too much like the happy ending of a direct to cable "Lifetime" channel movie for me, but at least it was a change from the prior year when I stayed home playing *Diablo II* on my computer, watching bootleg DVD's of the original *Twilight Zone*, and drinking a case of Budweiser.

8.

There are ways to make money on Ebay without cheating people. It takes more work, and you don't make as much, but it can be done. One way is to look for closeouts, going out of business sales, or estates. You snap them up, call it all vintage, and write the ads so it sounds like you found everything in your grandmother's attic.

Method one is too much work. The easier method is to pick a few categories of high priced goods, and watch the average price. Whenever one of the items is auctioned you set your sniper at 20% less than the going rate. You will still win about two or three out of every ten auctions. Then you just turn around and sell the item for the going rate, or, ideally, ten to twenty percent above. Half the battle is timing your auction so it ends when your target audience is shopping. The other half is knowing exactly how much they are willing to spend. People always bid in multiples of ten so when people are stupid enough

Passion, Sara M. Petersen



KEITH ONSTAD

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS

to bid early you can use your skill accounts to push the price up to the maximum the real buyer is willing to pay. When people don't bid early you use your sniper to swoop in at the last minute if you are not going to make a profit. After my birthday I started buying and selling ham radio equipment—honestly. Playing the game with the same set of rules everyone else used. Winning.

9.

Charlotte broke up with her previous boyfriend because he lied to her. It was not that simple, of course, but that was the real reason. Her previous boyfriend told her that he loved her. Her previous boyfriend told her that he had a vasectomy. Her previous boyfriend told her to trust him. He told her a lot of things, and she believed them all until his castle of lies started to crumble.

For Charlotte's birthday I booked rooms in the St. Lauren—overlooking Avalon Bay on Catalina Island. Unlike Charlotte I could afford it. The suite had a Jacuzzi, a balcony overlooking the water, and a wardrobe that Lucy would never have been able to find her way out of. Ultimately I don't think it was as nice as the Casa Del Mar, but it was more expensive.

After a day of exploring the island we had dinner at the hotel, a bottle of wine sent up to our room, and settled into the Jacuzzi. She sat between my legs, her back resting against my chest, as we sipped wine and talked. I had never been in love before, and did not quite know what to say.

She lifted her glass in a toast.

—Here's to the god's. The fates. The chance encounter that led us both to Puerto Vallarta, alone, at the same time. It was meant to be. We were meant to be.

She turned her head and kissed me on the mouth.

I kissed her back, put my arms around her and pulled her close.

—It was not really random chance.

I began talking—being honest with her, really honest, for the first time since the day we met.

—I stumbled across your email on the DSI network, and actually knew that you would be in Mexico. . .

SHAYDA KAFAI

SIX FLOORS UP



"I've been hired to kill the Devil—biochemically,"
she says plainly and walks away.
Last second cigarette kisses,
their ashes freckling the floor.

Smoke break over, half hour later.
Now meds: Dixie cup cocktails,
pharmaceutical rainbows to stain our honesty.

Look, a man just walked by with hydrated
muscle shell toe nails,
elevated asparagus at a tilt.

Listen to the blue bootie shuffles, and
comatose strides
down the halls and in and out of
rooms.

Back in the courtyard,
there is a man pounding on the ground for the
television,
and out here there is a man pounding on the ground for
God.

My roommate, raisin dried,
slithers, slurs and sucks on her words,
something about a vampire and Gertrude Stein.
She's the marigold gypsy,
flower child of the 60's (or so she thinks we're still in).

In the dining room, a couple.
Ten minute sweethearts
Each with five footed travelers in hopes of getting
lower.

Voices rise:
it's a new face,
shoelaces removed and pockets emptied
speaking to a doctor.
She is rambling but only because she is scared.
Staring past her desperation his face is screaming:
"When is my lunch break?"
Then, mid-sentence, he
leaves.

Dear Aunt Stephanie,

I just wanted to express my deepest apologizes for losing Michael yesterday. As you know, I am usually a very responsible person, especially when it comes to babysitting. However, I really believe you should have mentioned Michael's tendency to wander. It was a very important detail you neglected to mention and I believe having that bit of highly useful information beforehand would have made me more successful in keeping an eye on him at all times. It would have also been helpful to know that his favorite game to play is hide-and-seek and that he hates to lose.

Seeing that you live out in the middle of nowhere, I thought it was going to be pretty simple to keep an eye on him. But I didn't realize that because you live out in the middle of nowhere, there are unlimited numbers of places in which he could hide. I still don't understand why he doesn't have a cell phone. Kids in California get cell phones when they're seven. You should probably look into that. I'm not saying this situation is entirely your fault, but many of these factors could have been avoided if only you planned better.

I also think you allow Michael to watch way too much television. Where else would he get such ideas to get on a bus and drive to Cleveland all by himself. I

JANAY CHAPIN
DEEPEST APOLOGIES

didn't ride a bus until I was twenty. What a brave and curious little boy...

As far as the babysitting money you still owe me goes, I think I'm fully entitled to at least the hours of which I knew where he was. We can negotiate the other remaining hours at another time.

I look forward to seeing you at Thanksgiving. Again, I am very sorry for losing your son and hope that one day you'll allow me to babysit for you again.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth

088

1.

My friend and I used to drive up and down Melrose Avenue back in the summer of 1995 and throw tortillas out of his car window at people walking on the street. It was so fun; they are like floppy, edible frisbees, and they go swooshing into people's heads and torsos. I sometimes wonder if it sucked to do that, you know the whole innocent bystander thing. But, I don't think it sucked because it wouldn't screw your day up or anything to get hit by one. I mean, they weren't harmful and didn't mess up your outfit. I would laugh my ass off if somebody threw a random tortilla at me. If my band ever plays a live show I want everybody to throw tortillas at me. Seriously, though, looking back on it, I think we were just creating ART by throwing tortillas out the window of the car: that is performance art in its purest form: spontaneous public drive-by creations that no eyes or cameras are able to burn into memories; only the memories of the flour-y residue remain in victimized frustration. Plus, hungry people can eat the tortillas if they are hungry.

2.

I took this uneventful, lukewarm, and \$2.50-a-gallon-in-my-gas-tank-drive up to San Francisco this past weekend, or weekend of the past—the first weekend of summer. With all these farms, cows, and ads for religion by the side of the road, I found a perfect unlikely musical compliment to it all: Duran Duran. With all their lyrics about *saving prayers*, *cherry ice cream smiles*, *catching the mirror way out west*, *girls dancing in the sand*, and *being hungry like the wolves*, I was like, *Damn! This is country music*. If you just stripped down the 80's synthesizers and droning bass lines and forced a Martin guitar in one of those Rhodes' brothers' hands, it would be bona fide Nashville. Life is surreal when Duran Duran and their singer with a bon-bon of a last name sings to you through synthesizers and you hear a cowboy with whiskers like your grandfather's cursing about women, sins, and the follies of life.

So, I was driving up the Five Freeway on my way to San Francisco, just digging the drive itself with good music, constant agricultural sights, bovine smells, rolling hills, and thinking about the simpler stuff in life. Stuff like what would life be like if you lived in one of those lonely and tilted farm houses with your wife and her sun-kissed shoulders, sitting on porch rocking chairs in the evenings kissing and swatting gnats off her face 'cause they were getting in the way of your lazy kisses, with the sun setting and reflecting off plastic sheet covered seedlings in perfect crop rows making them bisect the sunset at the horizon in pastoral corduroyed patterns; giving it all a Garden of Eden feel because it's just you, a woman you are meant to breed the future with, and vegetables and animals. You feel awkwardly, magically important as if all future humans will refer to your love and experience as the root of both sin and love. Anyway, fantastical fantasy stuff. And, then you drive past Coalinga where there's like a million cows imprisoned and roaming hills of their own poo waiting to be the next Big Mac and thinking how it sucks to be raised just for that. They skip all the stuff we

TODD DOTY

PHOTOGRAPHIES OF SUMMER

experience in life—no cow school, cow love, cow careers, or cow religion, and just transition from baby cow to Big Mac cow. Yep, the reality is sad, and the stench is there to confirm it. So, my original inspiration for writing about this drive was that I am driving along and thinking of all this crazy stuff and then all of a sudden there's this mob of Army helicopters flying over the Five Freeway and it snaps you out of your day dream wet dream because what is it worth worrying about all the *simple stuff* that isn't really THAT simple when you got war all around you, and I hear how they are about to reinstate the draft, sending all of us of Selective Service age off to war because Iraqis can grow thicker moustaches than Americans and no other reason, and it melts your dreams for the future and having a wife to kiss on crooked farm house porches along the grapevine. Maybe it was just an everyday military drill that was funded by our secretary of offense; who knows; I'm continuing to dream, and every now and then plant subtle seeds of discontent with coitus interruptive clauses, sarcasm, and doubt. Future wives in distant dreams on dusty farms, keep coming.

3.

You can't talk about summers without mentioning winters: the willow trees blow against windows in the winter months to remind you of summers coming and passed/past, taking on an eerie sound on winter nights when you are quieted by some seasonal sickness that summers are without. From second story windows I've watched girls I've liked and loved leave my apartment in the middle of the night, the willows' branches between us and over them after they close the door briskly, legs becoming branch limbs in the transition, and the pulp and leaves of the willow tree becoming pages of paper in my memory. Pages that I will turn to in future summers for reflection and in winters as I conspire for the coming summer.



4.

There has always been a girl I've wanted to meet. One who was different from the others not just because she was different, but because she made me want to do whatever it took to keep her, to find a place for her deep inside my innie belly button and tuck her inside. As she materialized this past/passed summer, she revealed things and qualities that I never thought I was looking for in a girl. Some of these things were mundane and some were oddly extraordinary. I began to realize that I had always wanted to meet a girl who, rather than drink them, left final sips of warm beer in the bottoms of bottles; a girl who blushed in neat places on her body and at neat times; a girl who bought me flowers; a girl who had a middle name like an ex-president's wife; a girl who took the divider out of the seats at movie theaters and crossed their leg on mine while watching a film—times when I could easily imagine her as a child, blanketed, on a couch, truly entertained by the cartoon on the TV in front of her, with radical east coast season changes happening outside her parents' window; a girl who sung along to the key lyric on the saddest Shins song: "Warm light on winter's day...." A girl who, who, who.... I met this girl and loved her; she was the first, and she left me: crawling out of my innie belly button, leaving scratches from her nails that all future girls will be able to see. Weep. But looking back on it, on her, but not from behind her, she taught me that I am able to love somebody. After years of phone calls unreturned after first and second dates, and being oddly elusive to those who came close, I found somebody to love. The same three words, but in different order: somebody to love, to love somebody, love to somebody. Likewise, I can use that L word in different order, different contexts, and with different somebodies. It's great that you can love again, but what does that say for marriage and the permanence that those loves try to proclaim?

5.

Amateur fireworks are totally illegal here in L.A. County. So, I buy some fireworks across the street from this school I work at in Irwindale, which is located in the San Gabriel Valley where it's okay to buy/sell fireworks. I bought this big bag of stuff. No rockets or anything like that; I'm not into watching things go swooshing far away from me and going *POP!* while I stand there in the rocket exhaust and hold my breath. No, not those; I bought some fountains and flower things that spin on the ground and cartwheel all around you only slightly putting you at risk for burns. But, I bought them with a certain person in mind. This Fourth of July, I left my patriotism at the theater with *Fahrenheit 9/11* and wanted only to scare the hell out of this little neighbor kid of mine. I teach high school, right, so I get home all wasted, tired, and just want to take an afternoon nap so I can stay up late again and be a drunken artist and pretend I don't have a respectable job or anything. I treasure those moments late at night when I drink beers or my new found love, white wine, and strum the guitar in the most unusual places you can find in my apartment; places like behind curtains and in dark hallways where the echoes make you sound better or in the bathroom where you see yourself with a wooden hunk of a mess strapped to your torso and it looks even crazier 'cause you are used to only seeing yourself in that same mirror naked before and after showers or with foam and the end of a brush dangling out of your mouth. I can continue these late nights even though I have to get up at 6 am as long as I can hit a nap from time to time. But, this little kid next door is always in the pool

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splashing and screaming and probably peeing with his friends. It keeps me up constantly and robs me of sleep, and I'm turning into that cranky guy who forgot, who used to be the one peeing and making loud noises in the afternoons after school when he was younger. It's kind of interesting, though, the kids come home after school and go crazy in pools while teachers like me go pass out. Cut to the Fourth of July again. I've got this bag of fireworks and I've got the intention of throwing them at said kid when he keeps me up in the afternoons. But, it's Fourth of July, and everybody is out of town; I can't find anybody who is having a gratuitous barbecue that allows opportunistic slackers like me to pretend I have friends and food and holiday cheer, and so I turn my late night school routine into Fourth of July routine, drinking beers and playing guitars in bathrooms. And then I hear the fireworks going off in the neighborhood, and so I grab my beer, slip on some flip-flops, and go out to the alley behind my apartment to light some fireworks. I'm back there alone flip-flopping around the asphalt and things are hissing and whistling and smoking all around me and the guilty little kid

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comes out of nowhere and asks if he can watch me light the fireworks, and I can't resist the kid; he had snuck out of his single mom's apartment to watch me create amazing colors at the end of a lighter. I lit more, and he lit some, and cops drove by, and stopped, and we ran inside with only flip-flop echoes following us; we ended up laughing our asses off and lighting fireworks that were meant for him, meant to scare him back into apartments with board games instead of pools and sunshine, so I can sleep. I learned something on Sunday and I don't know what it was, but it was beautiful.

6.

For years I took no pictures. Memories and things that happened have no glossy print of what visually took place to help my memory, to fill in what is gone, time that has passed and minutes that will never be counted on wall clocks or cell phone displays again. But do pictures REALLY capture those times and suspend them forever in glossy compositions that take on personalities of their own when they have passed from hand to hand or drawer to drawer or glove box to love box and have accumulated fingerprints, bended corners, weird smears, and tiny abrasions? Maybe they do, but I think they kind of hold me back sometimes—as in they don't let you forget about the past and move forward in life. These photos capture happy as well as PAINFUL memories, and it doesn't matter if the picture was taken during happy times. Their meaning can change if the person in the photo has died, or if the person in the photo is arm-in-arm with you, kissing on a ski lift in Big Bear, but not any longer, and then the picture takes on a whole new connotation. Kind of weird—that you can capture a happy moment on film, but its meaning can change depending on future events, events yet to happen. And so that proud picture that some phantom photographer had taken of my grandfather on the day



of his graduation from college—the one where he fits all his personality into a weathered 2 X 3 sepia photo—gets pushed around in the top drawer by my bed, and unexpectedly brings sadness to the situation that I am fatefully in at the moment; perhaps in stumbling through said drawer in the dark for things in wrappers, it brings a tear to my eye, but I proceed anyway and think about how I too can make babies and maybe one day everything I was in life will be crammed into some photo that future granddaughters will carry in their purses and will be reminded of when they go for lipstick, or money, or diaphragms.

This needs a transitional phrase: as you can see, in conclusion, to sum it up, the meaning of pictures can change depending on time. I went for many years without taking pictures and now I am walking around with L.A. this summer with a novel about dog fighting in one hand and a disposable camera in my back pocket. Sometimes I get a black and white one and sometimes I get a color one, and I'm finding that b & w makes people look better as well as gives the photo a timelessness. The other night I was at the Short Stop bar in Echo Park and took some photos in that little booth there, but those photos don't turn out that great because they are forced and posed, but the pictures I took inside of that booth with my own camera were neat and so are the ones that I took when I was outside of the booth—of a horde of goth girls crammed in the booth taking photos with fishnetted calves, high-heeled ankles, and vinyl things jostling underneath the curtains. If I only knew them and could give them prints of my perspective of their night in that photo booth, they would see what others could see while they were packed into that booth in standing room only, forcing cool individual smiles and expressions that were meant for the collective image that may have never happened—I don't know 'cause I never saw if their photo booth photos were as bad as mine. One more thing before I don't conclude, how cool are the negatives of photographs? Pictures take on a different reality in these, and this is an interpretive step that digital cameras are depriving us of—no negatives. They are a step in the process of a photograph; if a photo renders a memory fuzzy, you can always look at the negative—hold it between two fingers in your apartment window—and clarify the memory by seeing shades and sources of light reversed and RE-cognized. Maybe that's what this is all about: you need the negatives and positives to make pictures' meaning clearer.

7.

I had some drinks at Spaceland last night and shot off a whole roll of film on Giant Drag because Annie is a cutie. Because her band is only her and a drummer who also plays keyboard. Because she has neat tattoos in neat places and tucks a toy pistol in the back of her jeans—the barrel going into the crack of her ass. Because she has a soft touch on guitar and vocals, and she growls in between songs, threatening to beat up the asshole who cursed her band because they didn't have a t-shirt in his size, a large—her saying that it's not her fault that he couldn't fit into a medium. I wanted to take pictures in the bathroom there, but I guess other dudes would get weird about having your dick out and some drunk femme guy with a flash...

Whatever. You just get drinking and think that everybody is on the good time ship you are on and just want to take pictures to document it. While the world blows up around us, there are people seeing cool compositions and wanting to put them onto film. I need to get together my own little unlikely entourage and get them to come to random places with me, armed with

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beer and disposable cameras, and create atmosphere, and then capture it all. And take down addresses and send people pictures we take of them as postcards. Weeks down the line they get a picture in the mail and it makes their day. Speaking of putting stuff in the mail that wasn't meant to be mail, my friend Scott once put some stamps on a ratty thrift store Barbie and scrawled an address on its belly and dropped it in the mailbox. It totally showed up at the person's house, with the stamp cancelled too. My mom is a postal carrier and has been doing it for 20 years in the hot Arizona sun—god bless her. Be nice to your letter carriers, they might be someone's mom. And they might be freaked out by ratty Barbies in the mail since they have an only child like me to worry about, trigger-happy with a camera at the urinals at Spaceland...

8.

From a hotel room in San Diego. I open the hotel room window and drink watery, diluted complimentary coffee brewed in a bathroom and read a few chapters of my novel. It is a two-bed room and I am alone; somebody was

supposed to be with me, but they left my life two weeks ago and are on another coast, maybe drinking coffee too, but two or three hours later because of the time change. But they need to be forgotten because the lessons have been learned.

I left a girl sleeping in my apartment in L.A. and drove down to San Diego to visit my mom for one day and one night. I left at seven a.m. on a Saturday, an overcast traffic-free morning when you can drive the freeway's full potential without sunglasses and merge freely and not signal. It is kind of a sad morning and you want a CD that will make you cry a little, to give the overcast morning a little more humidity. *Sticky Fingers* by the Stones didn't do it, despite "I Got The Blues" and "Wild Horses". But I put on Gram and The Burritos next and that does it. I hear Gram sing "Wild Horses" and that brings the tears that Mick Jagger couldn't. I hear Gram sing about seeing somebody you used to love at the "Dark End of the Street" and just minding your business and keep on walking into the night. I think there are always dark ends of streets in every love story, 'cause that is where nights begin and end—sometimes by walking with somebody out of an upholstered car and into the sheets of an apartment, or sometimes walking somebody out of your apartment and to their car late in the night when all the parking spots are filled, and street lamps are even getting tired—they pulse, and dim, and create long shadows on longer faces that make goodbyes even more painful.

Yes, I am driving down the 405, the California Coast, and all the memories that the exits along the way bring—of people who used to be at the end of this exit or that one, all the way down the coast. Some of those people you would rather not meet again, even in drive-by-exit-remembrances, but then there are those whose exits pull at you as you drive past them, making you slow slightly to think about doing a drastic two lane-changing turn, but something says *no* in you and you

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speed up to get on with your drive.

I stop at a rest area to pee just north of San Diego and there are two Latino fishermen huddled shoulder to shoulder with eyes parallel to each other toward the ocean, gesturing not with fingers or pointing, but with whole hands in careful karate-chop grasps showing how something or other came off the sea or the coast at this angle or that, and in secret mystical fisherman sign language, and you don't know what they mean, but you know it's something great as you walk away from the restroom stall wiping your hands on your pants.

I had a simple but final observation while the day ended, and I sat above the tide pools in La Jolla where starfish, octopi, and anemones wait in inky shallow pools for either the tide or seagulls to eat them: I like all things and people that are beautiful, and doing whatever it takes to create, exist, and appreciate that beauty. The beach is a good place to feel it all right now, day or night, no swimming, just staring, sitting in the depressions in the sand that were formed by other peoples' feet and bodies, knowing there were people there before you, and that somebody is going to sit or step in your footprints too. I lay there propped on one elbow and clothed, in defiance of beach attire. I had my sunglasses on, and felt distant and fuzzy, like I was coming down off of something, a high perhaps, but maybe a low too. The sun went down as I took deep careful breaths that matched the coming and crashing of the waves.

9.

An Open Letter to Johnny

Johnny, that b & w picture of you and me in that Castro sushi restaurant that Elizabeth took of us in June—it has been a favorite of mine because we look well in it, in black and white. Because the composition is perfect, shoulder-to-shoulder with our heads slightly leaning in towards each other, with my hands clasped under the table and yours crossed across your chest, your elbows resting on the table. We each look ourselves too: you, with your infamous sunglasses on and a stylish, unique hat, clean-shaven, and a personality about to erupt. Me, with my unshaven jaw, unruly wavy hair, and comfortable layered clothing, looking kind of tired, probably thinking of the drive I had just made from L.A. to S.F., only implementing my parking brake 15 minutes earlier on Market, north of 17th.

This picture was carried around this summer by two different girls. I had given them several pictures of me to choose from when I was asked for a picture, and they both chose this one. This was the one that they showed to friends to brag about who the new boy in their lives was. And you were a part of that representation, even though they had never met you, and never would. The last girlfriend gave me the picture back when she took back her blanket, handed me my apartment key, and in a low-emission vehicle drove away from my street for good. The picture was worn like you would expect it to have been from being inside a girl's purse without any protection: crumpled, finger-printed, edges of emulsion pulling away from the paper, but not creased or bent. At the beginning of summer, this picture was taken of me, of us, by Elizabeth, developed, then taken from me, passed around in purses, admired, and finally puzzled the people that hadn't met you, ultimately being returned to me in quick-hand grasps in late summer and late at night under those tired street lamps that are miniature suns whose purpose exists so that the sun never actually sets in the summer, ever.

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Damn, if there is anything worthy of writing about this summer, then it's that picture of us, and the girls who shared that image of us. One gave it back to me, the other one that I loved and who left me to find herself, she kept it and who knows where that picture is now. In purses perhaps, in top drawers maybe, in the trash also. Wherever it is, there we are: about to eat sushi in the Castro at one of the shiftiest but coziest sushi bars that somehow got the A grade, at the start of another summer.

DAN MURPHY

EXPURGATION



"Après moi le deluge!"

America, the alarm has gone off.

Guess what? We had a fantastic dream—
But our Jesus of Economic Enterprise
the veil of protection lifted.

America—in the giddy parlance that sells computers
and sports cars—we have come down, the high
expired like a non-aggression treaty.

America, we lost our soul somewhere
between the first slave imported
and the first laugh track, must pay
the progeny of both.

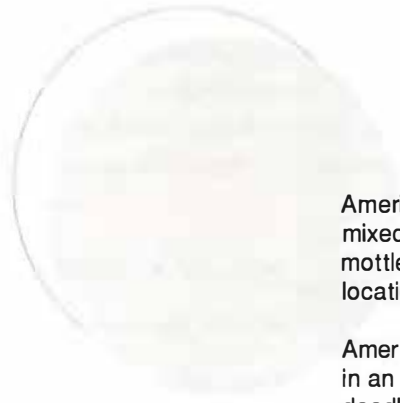
America, Ginsburg—that one hand clapping a syncopate
disco track—was pedophile and Buddhist and most
American of all. I neither hate nor love you.

We spotted each other across the dance floor, America:
the band played a hypnotic two-step pendulum swing—
gesture of evenness. Neither of us acted. Nostalgia sits
in for memory, regret fiddles for wisdom.

America, those voice-arms of the republic gather the bent
and bruised to your shuddering bosom, collapsing, collapsing
and collapsing art into commerce, commerce into art, advertising
the threshing floor, its blood-stained marble.

America, the truth is the spin and spins the truth.
A tsunami of wet dream backwashes over vacant lot,
suburban grid and strip mall, impregnates the fertile
teenage flora and fauna with extended disco mix.

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America, we run amok under clear completed skies
mixed and smeared with enjambment of cloud,
mottled contingencies of class and neighborhood:
location, location and location. And we are on location,

America, where the generations precipitate themselves
in an amazing acceleration. We fill the margins,
doodle the days, unrolling chicken wire as
new standard looms unravel like the unbroken
sleep that follows life's feast.

America, we love as dedicated swarm and hope
for redemption, will to change. I woke up today,
America, and found the taste of blood I like.

DAVID DEWITT FULTON

DESPERATION SOCKS

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well,
i'm down to my desperation socks
tied in bundles
sweat-knots
with the snake-eye holes
in need of needle
stick-and-through
stuffed deep down in boxes
for the puppet shows
punch-and-judy
or improvisational dustings
clandestine cleaning jags
at midnight,
cat-toy calamities
while wanting washing,
or at least new fleece
on life
to stop-gap me through
this moribund trust fund

its up to my desperation socks
the last vestige
of my time-tested wardrobe
my tatterdemalion
minions rebelling against
this belly's waistward-ho
my bemoaned short-comings
coming up strong
around the crook of years,
a score or more left,
though bereft of thread
the needle does its thing,
stick-and-through
cantilever
can't love her
can't leave her to darn
this soul
much less patch these
holes

ANJA LEIGH
ALL THAT HE CAN BE—

Broken Boy

lays his cherub cheek wounded
against dry Umma Lagash ...
His blood bathing parched soil;
life leaking
a yearning weeping.

Five thousand years of battle
throb beneath his ear.
The people of Uruk, America, lament.

eyes roll back to
[side] walks back home
meandering pathways filled with
half-built houses and
unborn babies waiting mothers
mourning, wives craving
[arms] enfolding
coffins,
Broken Boy
one more time

[time] is running ...
bullet-memories
caress [oh] the
sand, time — released —

back home in [mid] America
the mantle clock chimes,
hip hop be bop blares,
children sway on backyard swings,
water sprinklers cool the lawns.

gilgamesh eats the garden
of eden one toe at a time

850

**Memories And Places Having To Do With Sugar (Unrefined)**

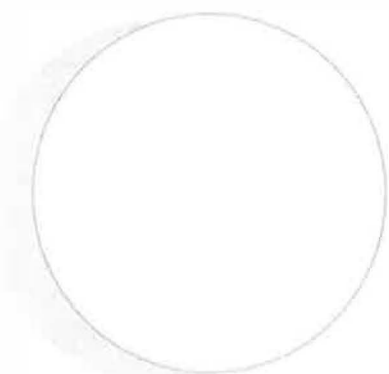
The day we moved to Sugarland, Texas I stepped out of the car and felt I might suffocate. The air was gray, like a kind of warm, heavy cloud that might take its time tightening its grip. My parents had not stopped using language like bits of frayed rope during the entire six-hour drive from the old house on Bridle Drive, to the new one on Canefield. The new house was old; it smelled of mildew and shadows. There were cockroaches like some kind of prehistoric evil hiding in the cupboards, the garage, the back porch. Good thing it's not ours, my mother said.

For two years, I would shut the worn, curry colored carpet out of my mind: the marbled mirrors, the unpacked boxes, the cobwebs, none of which would be traced to their centers before the moving trucks pulled up again. I was already 12. It appeared I wouldn't make it out of there without getting smaller. My friends would grow older, but I would wait and wait for the blood to come and tell me I was real. I would have to fashion my own goddam, four-letter words, or be condemned to heaven.

This Is The Part About Early Childhood: Parents Throwing Dishes, Tornado Sirens, Nightmares, Etc.

Memory One: I wake up in the middle of the night, screaming. I run through the house to escape the storm sirens and the fists of rain beating the roof—thunder is unpredictable and displeased (or was that my father?). I run to the living room and find my sister wedged between the rotting, wooden front door and the storm door, which, oddly, is made of glass. Rain slaps wildly sideways against the glass, twists through tree branches, smacks the ground, and we smash our faces against the cool pane trying to see more. The adults are yelling in another room. We must believe that if we watch long enough, if we can just see the storm, we will make it to morning.

Memory Two: Involves my father. It's another storm in Dallas; this time, the wind wakes me, the kind that shows up right before a



storm. My father is standing in the open front door looking, just looking, outside. I beg him to shut the doors because I can not tolerate the thought of our house being blown into the sky, powerless and feathery, not knowing if it will land in heaven or in hell.

Ah, it's fine, kid, he says to me.

Of course, I pull on his heavy arm and beg, but he ignores me and keeps looking out the door as if rain is more than we could have hoped for. It wouldn't have mattered if I cried or screamed. Bipolar is the word they give my mother, years later. All I can do is run back to my room and peer through the shades at the water which has finally begun falling.

Three: When I'm seven, my babysitter's fleshy sister prophesies my fate. She'll never be more than a flat chest, she says. I take the hint—only volume is real. I make up my mind right then to sculpt myself into reality some other way. I start by lying on the floor, next to the cat in a sheet of sunlight, stretching my body next to his and pretending there is nothing to worry about except the length and shape of oblivion. I had already learned so many things. How to weigh down the life rafts with mounds of sugar, protect myself from vampires, remember to ask for lunch money, lock the house and not open the door to strangers. Now I practice saying good-bye to my body, understanding my place in the world will be very compact.

Once I begin to believe it's within my power to fulfill the prophecy, I laugh at the trick. I will do even more, I thought. I will remain thin enough to slide through the slits of shut doors. Skinny enough, I might punch three perfect holes in my side, let

the fluid drain out and tuck myself neatly into a stack of papers, which they will slide into some forgotten notebook.

Lies I Told Myself Involving the Following: Poverty, Ghosts, Piety and Getting Laid

A few weeks after arriving in Sugarland, I was standing in Michael Minher's unfenced yard where there must have been acres of thick grass like a wide green pond. I would have liked to hide there until nightfall and wait for the hot ghosts I thought might rise, like elegant steam, from a yard like that. I would have crouched behind a tree, near a clearing, unmindful of anything uncomfortable and waited all night for a shape-shifting presence, a touch of something eternal.

My brother had left again that afternoon despite my sincerest prayers. I haven't mentioned him yet. He used to visit once a year and happened to choose my first week of school as the new girl for his annual visit and disappearance. He wrote me a letter once, for my birthday, with the following advice: "Don't take any wooden nickels from strangers." "Don't get your knickers in a twister." "It's ok to march to the beat of a different drummer, as long as you're in time." Neither letters nor visits would do me much good in Sweetwater, but I didn't stop hoping.

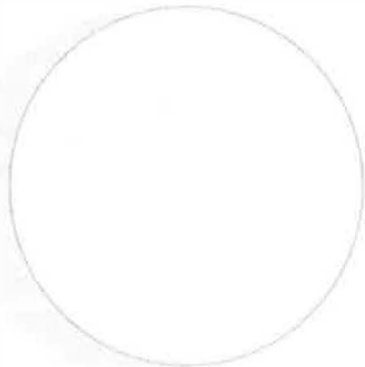
It was my first time in Sweetwater, a neighborhood of millionaires (billionaires?), near Sugarland. I began to wonder if Houston was trying to apologize for itself, or lure new people in, coming up with such names—names that would always be too good to be true. It was the largest house I'd ever been in, or

even seen, and on the ride over, all the kids tried to guess which one it would be. Stories circulated, in hushed tones, like dirty song lyrics, not wanting the adults to hear. Kelsey Neil lives there, someone whispered. Her father plays for the Astros. They're Mormon. I already knew that all the kids from that neighborhood were set apart at school, honored by the other white kids like adolescent gods, always attractive and at ease, decorated in name brands. Everyone else was happy to keep up appearances.

When we arrived, we were told we would not be allowed inside the red brick house. And someone still said how generous the family was, as if they were opening up paradise, like the original garden, to us sinners. Of course there was a pool: aqua as the eyeball of a giant white cat, deaf in both ears. No one swam, but we ate communion near its edge: hamburgers, hotdogs, salty chips, soda.

I thought about how my chest looked to so many boy messiahs, all learning to be men capable of taking care of women, and I pulled my shoulders back so that they wouldn't miss the tenderness. Yes, God, I choose heaven, I proclaimed with sincerity and couldn't help feeling happy under the oak trees, surrounded by all those effortlessly young bodies, beautiful voices pronouncing "y'all" over everything, every girl like a perfect, plastic doll and something like exuberance rushing through me because there I was, lining up with everyone else to make the connections between God, myself and millionaires.

I didn't know it at the pool party, but I would visit the Sweetwater mansion again sometime the following winter. The youth group would hold a dance in the mansion's backyard barn, and I would be wearing the shortest jean skirt allowable in the Southern Baptist church. I would throb with the other kids under the scattered lights, breaking the rules, because Baptists don't dance, except this one time, they would tell us. We glistened together, until our combed hair came down, curling and separating, like soft claws, around our faces, and our



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KATE ROWE

SWEET CHILDHOOD

clothes came off—or was that just the dream? (none of us knew we wouldn't be invited back to Sweetwater). Everyone wanted to envelop the others, pick and choose, grab and caress, slip away into the unknown. I wanted to lose myself in the God who made me so pulsing hot and hungry, full of ambition; my body, in all its forms.

I got friends in low places, we screamed in rhythm, feeling it to be true, in our very cores. What we didn't think about, not for a minute, were the kids at school with darker skin who were bussed in, and why none of them were with us in the barn. We didn't wonder why they lived so far away or why they were in different classes or why we thought we knew who they (or we) were. Once, someone pinched me in the hallway after school and when I turned around to see who did it, one of the black kids laughed and smiled as if he had undressed me; I let him walk away, unsure if I was happy or upset. And for a moment, I forgot to be afraid. I had been pleased with my tight jeans and how my flesh looked from behind: high, full, inviting and wondered if that made me guilty or if maybe my body was controlling me. I'm not sure how this changed me, or the story. One of the white kids at youth group touched me too. He caught me by surprise, pushed his hand underneath my loose shorts before I believed he might actually do it. My face turned red later, thinking about the way two of them dared each other to do it, as if I were deaf, an immovable object sitting in the backseat between them, and how when I realized what was about to happen, I didn't get up and move to the other side of the van but let it

come like a small kitten, because I wanted to know what it would feel like, that baby soft, blonde hair, those puffy cheeks, innocent and pure.

More On Idolized Older Brother's Visit. How I Felt Lucky, Embarrassed and Disturbingly Flawed Being Unable to Convince Him To Take Me With Him

So, here's what happened. He arrives a week before the pool party. The first evening he's home, I help him go through some old boxes we've been keeping for him, when the evening sky darkens early bringing the south Texas rain. He goes to the window and pulls away the curtains.

I'm going out, he says and shuffles through a box, pulling out a long, black raincoat. I've never seen anything like it. Sometimes I grab an umbrella, but the Houston rain is fat and warm so there's no need for coats.

Where'd you get that?

London.

I barely know where London is. Did Sara get it for you? I ask. I'm desperate for something to say, hovering over his box like a dying hummingbird.

He looks up and raises his eyebrows. No, I got it this summer. I want to ask if he's still dating her, and I want him to show me pictures of her, like he did last time. I want to know everything about his life. But I chicken out.

Wanna come? He throws me another coat, like the one he's wearing, and I shove my arms in the sleeves. It smells



Barbie's Universe, Sara M. Petersen

of cigarettes and cardboard. Of course, I run to my room and find my tennis shoe before my mother can stop me, because she thinks I should be in bed by now, because I can think of nothing I've ever wanted to do half as much as this.

It's not dangerous? she asks, as I'm opening the door. She has been sleeping in front of the television for an hour with *Murder She Wrote* reruns. I can hear my father snoring in another room, a different TV turned up to almost full volume.

It's fine, I say, but just then thunder breaks, so I start counting. Five miles, I say, and slip out the door. My brother's already outside, smoking on the tiny front porch and watching the rain.

Let's go, he says and he's ahead of me so fast, I'm almost running to catch him. My hair is soaked before we get to the next block.

This is fun. I'm yelling a little because I want to make sure he hears. At this point my chances are good. He could still take me with him. He works on a cruise ship, though I wouldn't care if he were a pirate.

Suddenly, he stamps in a puddle, sending the water at me in arcs, like synchronized high divers. I laugh and run ahead down the sidewalk. The street is filling with the water, up to the top edge of the curb and is starting to spill over onto the lawns. I wonder if worms wait in the dirt, trembling with anticipation.

How long are you staying? I begin to say but the thunder drowns me out. And I'm not scared, even when I see a thick road of lightning carving through the orangish sky like a winding,

mountain pass.

Did you see that one? He points to the sky.

I consider telling him how much I hate it here, but I don't hate all of it. I just want him to save me. So I start looking for the best puddles, noticing how the water pools inside my shoes and squishes around, how warm the coat is, and how the water looks so cold coming down out of the sky.

When I look for him again, he's farther down the street, and a giant white mass is floating near his head. At first I think it's a rain cloud, or a halo, and I wonder if the rapture came, and I'm being left behind while he's transported to heaven. This would be weird because he told me he doesn't believe in God anymore. So, I start running to catch him, but as I come closer, it turns out to be a seagull, and now it's landing on his head. A giant, fluffy sea gull, I think, but when I start to really see it, maybe it's a pelican. Yes, a pelican with a flappy, gray neck and huge wings. Now it's settling in, tucking in its wings as if the rain doesn't bother it at all, oblivious to suffering, and my brother doesn't even seem to notice the giant bird, which seems unlikely, but he's walking very fast and it doesn't look as if he'll stop. I have never seen a pelican here, a good fifty miles from the ocean. Come to think of it, I've never seen a pelican. I saw the ocean once, in Alabama, but never a pelican.

I catch up to him and he stops walking. He smiles at me, a look that says play it cool, cat. So I just stand there staring at him with the bird on his head, and it crosses my mind that I'm twelve, his age when I was born, and that perhaps we will never

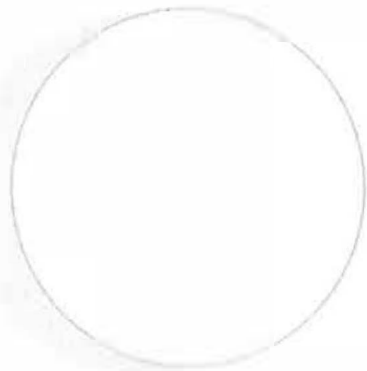
understand each other, but still, I can think of nothing better than to pack my bags tomorrow and head out to sea.

Adolescent American Narrator Finds Further Reason To Deplore Her Body Yet Discovers Power Of Self-Control

Well into fall, long after the pool party and my brother's departure, I would find myself sitting on a bathroom counter top with a girl from my basketball team at Wednesday night church dinner, after practice. It's her idea. She says the bathroom at the church is nicer than the school locker room, so she comes here to change clothes and put on makeup before going to the youth group meeting. I don't mind the locker room, since I usually have to wait a long time for someone to pick me up anyway, but this morning my mother said she wouldn't be able to pick me up, and I'd have to find another ride to church. This girl's mother is the "A" team coach, which made me nervous, because A Team is the good team and I'm on B Team, and the leather backseats of their sleek, black luxury car were so soft and the air so perfectly air-conditioned and silent, it made me wonder if she just wanted me to suffer under her silent critique of my pathetic athletic skills. This girl is very good at basketball. Aggressive, greedy, graceful. She's respected at school too—glacially beautiful, beautiful as a black spider. She has long, tan legs, straight dark-blond hair, large breasts, tiny eyes the color of aquamarine. She wears dark red lipstick and has a cruel sense of humor, but I would love to hear her laugh right now.

Of course I know she's using me. After we leave the bathroom, she'll find some boys, and then, playing her assigned role in this story, she'll laugh, blink, brush up against them with her body, hugging and teasing, just to prove she means her femininity.

Do you ever watch yourself eating? She says and looks away from the mirror for a moment at me. Is she crazy? I would never watch myself, *doing it*. It's bad enough I have to do it every day. Suddenly I try not to appear too eager about my cold spaghetti. But, I'm so



NR. SPR. 05

hungry.

No. My confession does not sound brave. Do you?

Always. Aren't you afraid of looking like a pig? She snorts a little and laughs. Guys don't think it's cool, she says. I'm shocked I've never thought of this before. Then again, does it matter? I'm a cactus hoarding water: prickly, fat and short—I will never look like her. I glance at myself, quickly, in the mirror. You monster, I think. My cheeks are full, and I can't stop chewing like a hyena. I might as well be dripping blood, fresh from the kill.

I swallow and throw my plate away. I'm done, I say. It occurs to me that this is a kind of victory. Hers will be beauty and wealth, mine, control. She cannot match this kind of power. The secret to my power will have something to do with empire, occupation, islands of self-control. The kingdom of God is inside me, and though I have trouble feeling it, this newness of purpose will be something to celebrate.

Endings: Backyard Pool Party Again, Narrator Realizes How Much She Really Does Want To Be Good and Let Go Of Expected Things

Remember earlier, when I mentioned how our newly minted bodies gathered near the pool to eat hamburgers and hotdogs? I lied a little when I said no one swam. The girl I came with, Summer, got thrown in. It was a playful gesture—the boys must have wanted to see her perky breasts more closely; eye them through wet, clinging clothes. At sunset, the other kids

were singing in the twilight, swaying with the guitar and confessing love for Jesus. But I was jealous. I tried, with a sincere amount of heat, not to think about how much I wished they would throw me in too. Baptize me like a fucking whore—please? Just once?

When my brother left that afternoon, he let me carry two boxes to the car. I was wearing a long-sleeved rugby shirt, though the temperature was in the 100's, because he said I could borrow it while he was on the ship. The sleeves were a little long, but other than that it fit just fine. I gave him a hug, not too long, but really, not long enough. When are you coming again, I said, as he angled a suitcase in the trunk. I don't know, rug rat, he said, that being his affectionate nickname for me. Maybe he actually felt bad for ONCE.

But the thing that made me mad is I didn't even ask if I could come along. I wanted to, I planned it out the night before, lying in the dark. I practiced the words, like first breaths, but when he put his arm around me, I didn't do it. I didn't do it when he got in the car and I didn't do it when I leaned in the window to say one more thing that would make him laugh. I didn't do it, when he drove away slowly down the street, and I could have ran after him; I could have done it then. But I couldn't think of how to make the words perfect, so I just let him get away.

There would be two falls and two springs in Sugarland before my parents and I would get out the moving boxes again. But I didn't know that at the time. Summer was sitting next to

me, eyes closed, singing her brains out and loving God. And I wanted to scream, I don't feel anything yet! I wanted to plead for help, but instead I just inched closer to the pool. By then it was so dark, even the fireflies had stopped breathing and the katydids were loud enough to compete with the singing. It was still magnificently humid, so I dropped my fingertips and scraped them over the top edge of the pool water. I glanced at one of the leaders who was watching me and winking. I looked into the glowing, watery eye and perceived near the bottom, for the first time, some tropical fish moving around in circles—deep violet, turquoise and orange, and I wondered why I hadn't noticed them before. I'm coming, I said to God, and then ever so slowly, leaned backwards over the pool, farther and farther, until my weight tipped me over and I tumbled in, both eyes open, holding my nose, moving toward the fish.

DAN MURPHY
CAR REPAIR

801

9:30 a.m., Winchell's Donuts.
Outside, circular table,
plastic umbrella for shade.
Say parasol.
Robert Hass writes of Alaskan winter,
women's underwear, abstract
connections between bird and human language.
The yellow polyurethane surface—an
anthropologist's wet dream—
marked and etched with gang names:
HOPPER, crossed out, written
again, death sentence come to life.
"Billy Loves Sherre," KB, MEAN
CURSE; etcetera scribbling.
Bus riders wait for the bare template
of an indigent bus.

Deep, sticky stains

mix with chewed, weathered gum;
a southbound drool of coffee
ebbs in morning sun.

And a lone ant,

crazed for want
of companionship,
his black body, a muddied eyelash,
harum-scarum across the scarred yellow
surface,
back and forth,
refuses my offerings
of glazed chips of sugar.

This is no act, HOPPER;
your anthropologist, coroner,
abba-savior has come solo
in drunken conga line
to read your fortune, lifeline,
mind.
And you are not here.

MIKE VINCENTI

EXCERPT FROM MY FAIRY DIARY

(P201032)

There is a village
in Atlantis
called Nofitano.

On the hills
live
stalwart stone
cabanas
divided
and surrounded
by labyrinths
of gardens
and streets
that weave
the shore
below
about ruins
'top the Mountain.

At siesta
the shepherds
and gypsies
put down
their canes,
and baskets
of lilies,
to walk
the narrow,
hidden
lanes.

The Locals
pass them by
(the Purple Ones on scooters)
and smile,
much like
the Mountain
that grins down
on the town
carved within it.

Among
this
reverence
sleep
whis'pring
shadows.

The alleyways
and sewers
echo.

My breath stops

The waves
call
to the Mountain
to return to bed,
while the gulls
on the sea rocks
below
gawk along.

I smell
in the ebb-tide
an acid.
I feel
in the breeze
a frosting.
I fear
in the end
I'll not leave here.

How I wish
I could show you
where the days
wander and melt
through the kaleidoscope night,
and the languid Sun
burns
the twilight
in Oranges
for hours.

Perhaps you sigh, and the waning
gibbous weeps
lucky reflection; show'ring
your breath
with a sky
grown
unceasing?

We could love
as the lilies
bloom
on our sills
leaving pungent trails
to smother our tracks.

If all passes
the Mountain
enfolds us.

And we,
like Nofitano,
live on.

907

It was an old-person-shower-chair; that much was true. It had four legs and a place to sit. The legs were a special titanium metal—first used by NASA—making them the most dependable of chair legs. If you wanted to you could put an elephant on this chair and the legs would hold up. More likely though, it was designed for a 300-pound naked woman with aging knees that could give out at any moment, knees that could send her ass plummeting through gravity like a space shuttle struggling not to break apart during re-entry. And, if this were to happen, an oversized non-slip plastic seat, with hard little knubbies, would keep lathered up flesh from missing its mark on descent.

Dorothy Fletcher died July 19, 1995. Clap off. Most famous for her line, *I've fallen and I can't get up*, in a commercial for the

company *Lifeline*. The company actually replaced her with a second old woman. Which was okay for Mrs. Fletcher, because she went on to make even more money in the *Clapper* commercial. She had the distinction of being the first actor to get a royalty for clapping as if it were a spoken line—seventy-five-cents for every two claps. Mrs. Fletcher actually looked a lot younger than the women she played on television. I mean she wasn't a young woman, but if she was, Hollywood magicians could still make an old grandmother out of her. People will go for anything, if you tell them to believe it.

I know all this because Mrs. Fletcher was a very close family friend. She lived around the corner from me and ever since I can remember she had an interest in how I did in school and how I was getting along. We both lived in Van Nuys, but after her husband died—then on top of that the '94 Northridge Earthquake—she decided to

move to Phoenix. We stayed in touch by writing letters. She called me the grandson she never had—I guess, in turn, she was like a grandmother to me. Until now, every Thanksgiving I knew was spent at the Fletchers' house. The thing I miss the most were the Thanksgiving stories. I would ask Mrs. Fletcher a typical little kid question; questions that parents and teachers never had time to answer; questions that I would probably be embarrassed of now. Mrs. Fletcher's answers were more like stories, that would make sense of the world for those lazy hours after Thanksgiving dinner.

Even when she moved out to Phoenix, we drove out and had Thanksgiving there. That was the last Thanksgiving before she died. I was fourteen and Thanksgiving dinner came and went, and for the first time, Mrs. Fletcher didn't sit down and tell me a story. She just walked from the table to the living room, and sat by herself in front of

DUSTIN LEHREN
THE LAST THANKSGIVING
DAY STORY

OTL

the television. My mother began to clear the table and told me to go take a shower.

Old-person-shower chairs have a look. It's the look of having stories that you never want to hear. Especially for me—since this was Mrs. Fletcher's shower. I was only visiting for Thanksgiving, but when I used to live with Mrs. Fletcher in Van Nuys she didn't have a shower-chair. She was getting older. I knew she was old—but not that old—not as old as that lady she played on TV. But they stopped airing the commercials a while ago. Time has passed, I was fourteen; her husband, Mr. Fletcher had passed away; and while Mrs. Fletcher wasn't 300 pounds, she did have aging knees that put her at risk, at yes, falling—the shower-chair was a cold, wet reality.

Dear Mrs. Fletcher,

I really enjoyed your homemade pies this Thanksgiving. If mom ever bakes pies, it's with store-bought crusts. I really think homemade crusts make a difference. I don't live with mom anymore. I'm at my dad's now. I'd probably still be living with you if you didn't move to Phoenix. You'd probably get sick of me though. So anyways, thank you for having us in Phoenix for Thanksgiving, but also I never got a chance to tell you thank you for letting me live with you in Van Nuys. I really appreciated that. My dad's place isn't that bad. I figured since I'm starting my high school career I should pick the place that offers me the best school, and that's my dad's. How's Phoenix? Hope everything has been going well since your move. You know, I never got that close to Mr. Fletcher—but he was always nice to me.

We can try avoiding the chair for now; I promise I won't tell you a story about an unfortunate moment with Mrs. Fletcher falling on the chair and giving her infamous line. From my knowledge that never happened, and if it did, it would be disrespectful to the memory of dear old Mrs. Fletcher. You have to understand not talking about the chair is hard though. It takes up the whole shower. When you first step in—it's there—confronting you like the school bully. Forget about the chair. In Mrs. Fletcher's shower, I stood naked, clapped my hands, and it became dark (she had free clappers for all the lights in her house).

See when you step into a shower there's a point when you're dry and

you slowly become wet, but it doesn't happen right away, maybe only a few seconds. During that time I would let my mind slow down—a few seconds become the whole summer when I was seven, or the Thanksgiving that came after, when Mrs. Fletcher did tell me long stories over the last piece of homemade pumpkin pie topped with Cool Whip. I was curious what this would be like in the dark. Clap off.

I'm nine and my feet dangle off the edge of Mrs. Fletcher's formal dining chair. What was that stupid question I asked her? I remember the answer, "Don't you know Hun? Indians didn't need to speak English to the pilgrims. Indians didn't even need to speak; they just sit, and watch..."

Clap on. It was a simple transformation from dry to wet. But

I was like a dog that was afraid of a bath, for me the only way to cope; the only way to get through *this* was letting the water slowly consume me.

I wish you'd drive out from Phoenix and visit. I know you said you won't travel west of the San Andreas Fault, but I think the chances of 'the earth opening up and swallowing you into damnation' (as you put it) are very slim. I just started geography in high school and am learning all about earthquakes; that way I can tell you when it's safe to move back out here.

I realize that I've been staring at Mrs. Fletcher's rack that hung down from her showerhead. Filled with aging creams and conditioners, I checked for expiration dates, like you would for sour milk. I

guess they were all personal hygiene products you would expect to find in the shower of an elderly woman. There were no expiration dates, but I still had the dilemma of whether or not I wanted to use chemically treated conditioner for damaged hair? On the conditioner tube, hair-dye stains dried like a bloody knee that was just about to scab up. This meant that Mrs. Fletcher just recently dyed her hair for Thanksgiving. Her hair was white for the commercials, but she'd always dye it back to some form of brown/red, making her look a lot younger.

You probably want to know her new hair color; going off the stains on the bottle it was knee-scab-red. On the box, it probably had a name like "Auburn Sunrise," or maybe there's a line for senior citizens, "Respectable Rouge" or "Conservative Crimson," but still, that's not the real color of Mrs. Fletcher's hair. It's hard to say—it was a color

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111

that no one in history had yet named—that much was true.

I remember her hair barely touching the top of her shoulders; sort of flirting with the fabric below and gently ringing up behind her ear. The top has this perfect bounce to it, real light but prominent like thick clouds. The color of the hair—really is the nastiest most unexplainable shade—but she does have the nicest styled hair. On the hair-dye box, they probably have some sexy chick swirling her head around. I bet they call it "Cinaberry." The chick's probably got this wild animal look in her face—well gimme a break, I'm a young teenager, naked in the shower.

Everyday in sixth grade homeroom, Mr. Young would have us shut our eyes while he would either read a story or have us imagine something. It was pretty gay. I guess he was just trying to calm us down from all the Twinkies and pudding cups we put down during lunch.

"Alright, let's go to our special places...where everything is safe..."

(This is where it got real gay and he would pause for 10 seconds. 10 seconds—in a room full of other kids—you could hear Jesse Owens' lungs gurgle through his snot-filled nose. This was so we could really 'imagine.')

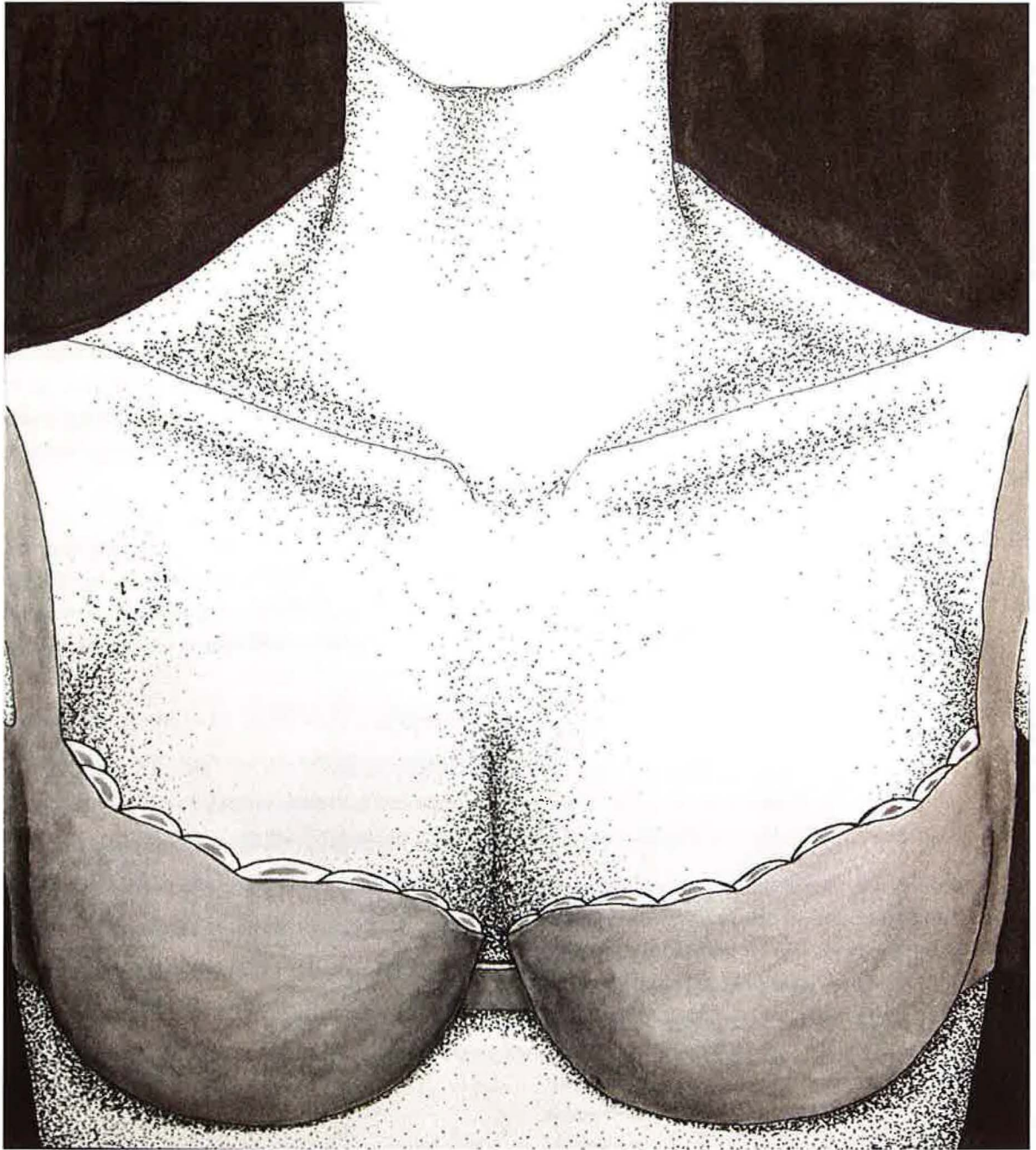
"Imagine digging up the earth..."

"You move some dirt aside..."

"Under the dirt you see a color that has never been seen before."

If I had to pick one color for Mrs. Fletcher's hair that day—it was that color. She must have used the shower that morning, choosing that last Thanksgiving Day as the special occasion to release this new color to the world.

In geography class I found out we live on two different tectonic plates that are separated by the San Andreas Fault. The fault line is a transform boundary. Transform boundaries can only be found in the ocean except for in California. In the world there's three different ways plates are separated: divergent, convergent, and transform. Most boundaries that separate two land plates are either divergent or convergent. Convergent is when the centers of the plates are coming together, but in the process crust is destroyed, that's mountains and stuff. Remember how we used to look at mountain ranges and you told me they were great big ancient dinosaurs that were taking a nap?



An Invitation to a Place of Amusement, HaNH Vo

It was a somewhat special Thanksgiving. My mother picked me up from my father's, and we made the long trek across the California desert—the 10 freeway all the way into Arizona. It was long because it was in a brown panel van that had no seats in the back.

"This thing is like an old plumber's van."

"Why do you always have to be a jerk?"

My mother put in matching carpet just for the trip. It was like a small den. I got to sit shotgun and watch my mom navigate the two lanes all the way to Phoenix. She stayed in the slow lane, but when coming upon a big-rig, she would pass on the left, then always made sure to change back into the slow lane to let the more hurried motorists past. The van was so tall that it would drift with the wind and felt that you just might take off into the desert sky. A big gust began to moan and my mom's knuckles turned white as she held the wheel to keep us from flying away. I was proud of my mom, not because I was amazed at her strengths, but because she reminded me of myself three months earlier—starting my first day of high school.

The van was bought at the last minute. Every time my mom lost a boyfriend or husband, she lost a car—but that was better than losing a home. It was something I was tired of, and the real reason I left to live with my dad. During some of the mess, Mrs. Fletcher was nice enough to let me live at her place to finish out the school year. Her husband had just died and she was lonely; I was actually living there when the earthquake hit, and she always said she would have never made it through it if I weren't there.

None of this changed how I felt about my mother. I was still proud of her. She was lost, but still hung in there, and after roughing it out for a while, she wanted nothing more this weekend than to drive to Mrs. Fletcher's and feel safe again. Plus Mrs. Fletcher was more miserable than ever, having her first Thanksgiving without her husband. If it was up to her she wasn't going to live to see any turkey carvings, or my mother's marshmallow crusted sweet potatoes.

The other, divergent, is where two plates are slowly pulling apart, but in the process new crust is created, pushing the mountains higher into the clouds. Or do you remember when I tried to get you to see the clouds slowly moving, I always told you to look now and I saw them barely creeping along, but you were never able to see them move. So anyways convergent is when two

plates move together and divergent is two plates moving apart.

Being only fourteen I didn't know much, but I knew this was the last time I was going to see that wrinkly old woman. There would be no more Thanksgivings where she would put her hand on mine (her hand all different spots and shades of light tan that stretched over her bones like beef jerky, and mine sticky from left-over Halloween candy) and look into my eyes and tell me all of her old people stories. Growing up on a homestead next to an Indian reservation, coming to California and raising four girls in a one-bedroom duplex in Venice Beach. Every Thanksgiving I looked forward to figuring something out; knowing something about the world by listening to Mrs. Fletcher's high pitched shrewd voice. Her husband would always sit off somewhere in a chair. I don't think he ever spoke one word to me, but he would sit there as testament and physical proof to the old lady's story.

"An Indian can tell everything from listening to the clouds and watching the air whistle through the mountain passes." I would glance over at Mr. Fletcher sitting like a statue, like a vacation souvenir whose purpose is to tell a story about its purchasing. But if you paid attention to Mr. Fletcher, he didn't need to speak. His cold eyes told so much, all at the same time, with the same look: humor and sympathy for having to sit through this batty woman's talking—that he was all so used to; but also confirmation like everything she said was true; and also a look of pride that only a man that lived to eighty could have by sitting and watching his wife tell this young boy, practically his grandson, stories of his life. Standing in that shower, I wanted those stories only once more; but Mr. Fletcher was no longer around and Mrs. Fletcher seemed to have changed—sitting all by herself out in the living room, in front of the TV.

Hope all the cats are doing well. Oh yeah, so the transform boundary is what separates us, putting you on the South Gorda plate; and me on the East Pacific Rise plate. What makes our plates different than divergent and convergent ones, is the center of our two plates are always moving in opposite directions. The centers are drifting further and further away, the centers started off coming closer until they converged and now they just continue to go in opposite directions. Since our two plates aren't actually pulling apart or coming into each other, but just merely passing along in different directions, no new growth of crust is made.

At fourteen my hair is young and healthy; so I'd think that I didn't suffer from any hair damage. I sat and read the qualifications for damaged hair and decided that it wasn't me. But really, that didn't matter, because I just wanted to masturbate. I was just delaying the

9
7
7

inevitable, not wanting to come to terms with putting my bare cheeks on that cold, plastic old-people chair; wasting Mrs. Fletcher's conditioner, along with her water that pelted me from her therapeutic shower head. But I soon found an excuse to proceed and not harm my barely sprouted pubic hair: Suave conditioner for normal hair. Clap off.

The sturdy chair was now calling out my name, and soon it had its way. My ass found its way onto the non-slip plastic. My erect penis doused with Suave; searching with my hand, that special moment on Thanksgiving Day.

The "Cineberry" girl was lying on the floor, she flipped her head around, just like in the hair-dye commercials. Her hair twirling towards me in slow motion like gentle waves—gracious clouds moving along the sky. After turning her head towards me, she'd ask me to come over and take all of her right there on the floor. With the conditioner losing its lubrication, I struggled to keep that image in the pitch-dark shower, the image of her face pleading for me to take her—her face then became Mrs. Fletcher's. *Mrs. Fletcher* was now pleading to me, "I've fallen and I can't get up." Mrs. Fletcher...?

I fumbled in the dark for more Suave. Oh Mrs. Fletcher, please tell me one more story—I only need one more story. She repeats to me: "I've fallen and I can't get up." I tell her "We're sending help immediately, Mrs. Fletcher." Just first give me one more story. One more, one more, one...

One last thing Mrs. Fletcher, your Thanksgiving stories are truly missed. Your last story came all too quick. It was actually the shortest story you ever told, a flash, a spark, that I always wanted to grab a hold of, quickly before it went dark again, but it was over. If I kept going I would just wind up with a sore pink penis. That was it; that was the story. It was in my penis fully erect, shot out and went down the drain. Now the story was gone, what remained was shriveled up with fear; really it was a very short story. Thank you for that last Thanksgiving Day story.

*Always, xxxooooxxxxoo,
the grandson you never had*

DUSTIN LEHREN

THE LAST THANKSGIVING DAY STORY

LET

SHARON VENEZIO

ORIGINS

What Pain Says

in this foreign city the phone is louder than ever.
it stretches across the dark, startles my sleep.

I grow tired as I listen. too much meaning
for one night.

pain says: I'll be in touch.

Fragments

there is amber light reflected
over a tree house in echo park

there is a ten year old girl
in granada hills

she hangs brightly out of reach,
my lost allegiance

(no, that is not what I mean)

A Different Language

what I mean is the sky hurts my eyes.
sometimes I don't look up for days.

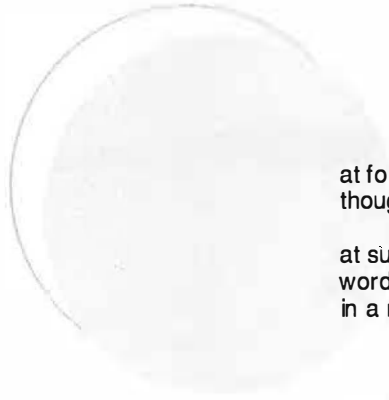
a figure on the bed speaks a different language,
distills meaning through the hands.

it has always been this way.

Home

two windows looking out

671



at four different kinds of trees,
though I can't tell you their names.

at sunset, the bookshelf thrives.
words on the page drift off
in a river of light.

A River of Light

your voice is floating in the pacific, near the edge
of the topanga shore. it drifts by my open window,
laughing. tomorrow a bird will swoop
down and eat you.

Insomnia

darling, my tragic one,
the sea is yours.

its darkness mingles with your blood,
traces the outside of your veins
until everything is salt and brine,

leaves you restless as sleep.

a wave travels far toward its death,
folding inward.

Demolition

they are tearing down the building at the corner
of Reseda and Prairie where we held raw fruit
in our hands and spoke of the future.

this morning I look north,
away from you,

to a city in which you are not,
a city in which we are annihilated,

a city in which I release you.

silence. just her and the monitor. her computer humming away. the fan. like her head was this computer which took a moment to clear the cache—and the desktop stopped responding and the mouse stopped moving and the mp3s stopped playing (she's one of those slow computers, she can't do two things at once like play mp3s and clear the windows swap file) so where was i? now she's aware of herself like she just woke up. if she was a computer she might say, oh! my user wants me to open this rtf file. and then adobe acrobat opens. and presents the file. just. like. that.

but i'm sure it's just that somewhere along the way, the cd player stopped and it took her a moment to finish the sentence and it took her a moment to realize the cd player stopped and that disoriented her. but you never know how long it took for her to notice the player stopped. like i said, she's slow, like a computer.

she tells me like it's a big deal—as if God invented this self-awareness thing just for her. her and her maker, a special relationship. blah blah!

but in all fairness, this is something that happens to me too. like when you wake up in the morning, like you move your mouse after the HD went to sleep and everything starts to get up.

she gets out of bed. beep beep.

ALEX LEE

BODY

and then her heart starts to beat faster and her nervous system starts to reclaim its neurochemicals so she can move again and her eyes stop moving and begin to open a little to let the light in.

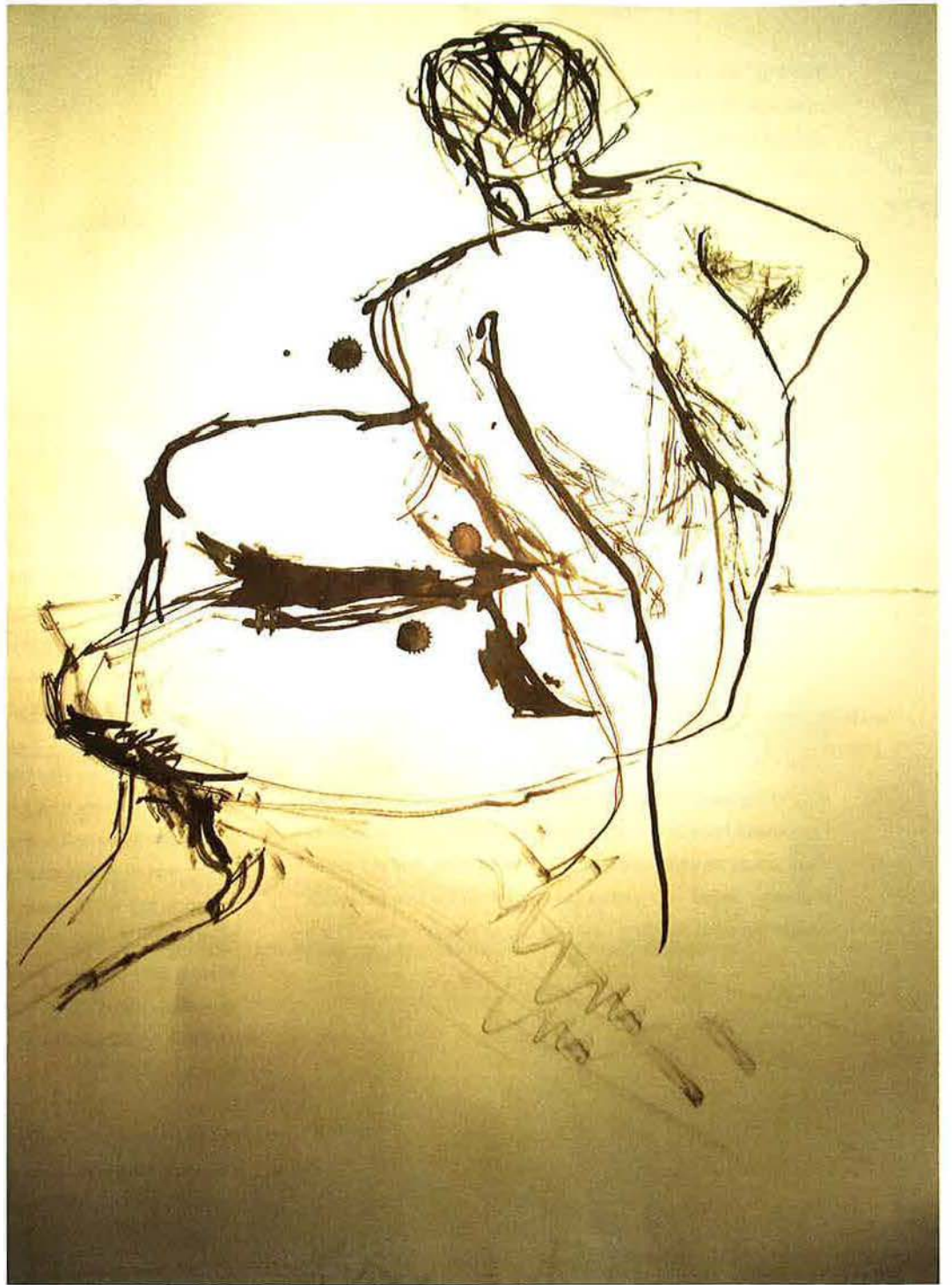
and then she sits up and says: beep beep. i can hear her pupils dilating. mechanical. whirrrr.... the fan turns on like some slow cogs. like some new saber marionette. j or something, i guess.

my room. the tile. an empty bottle of wine. and a coat hanger that's wrapped around my leg. what's that doing there? "say do you think that sarah!" she calls out. "where did you go?"

"i'm over here. in the bathroom," i tell her. i hear her outside my door. like she wants to say something to me. if she knew what i was thinking, she might be insulted. i compared her to a dead machine. but i'm really just getting ahead of myself. because that was five minutes ago. right now, i'm pouring milk into my coffee. she's at my computer. a computer that is probably faster than she is because when my computer clears its cache, the mp3s just keep rolling right along like nothing's happening.

but she's still cold. beep beep, she says to the monitor. like i didn't hear!

"crissy, what did you say?" i ask.



Untitled 3, 1994 Vo

"nothing," she says. but in the reflection of the silver display case mother keeps next to the computer (all expensive things aligned together) i see her looking around like she's confused and startled that i noticed what she said. she wrinkles her nose like it needs to stretch a bit. "when did you say your mother would be back?"

"in ten minutes. she went to get some coffee. here you want some?"

beep beep! who does she think she's fooling? i know this body's a robot. she can't fool me. just because she wears a bra and panties doesn't mean that she's a human. i mean, even store display mannequins wear that crap! if victoria's secret can put their expensive silks and soft nylons on life-sized off-white plastic dolls, then underwear and hose and things like that can slide past her cold legs. i mean i have an uncle who's a cross dresser, and he's a man. how much more not-meant-for-that-sort-of-use can you get with women's clothes?

but he pretends to not know that we know who pretends to not know that i know. but when i was a little girl, i used to sneak around my relative's house. i mean the fact that these big people have these houses was amazing! like, how in the bathroom how there would be calcium deposits on the faucets, and old toothbrushes... either with a used coat hanger in the little trash can beside the toilet or sitting next to a bigger calcium deposit by the

sink. amazing! i would pick up the coat hanger and twist it with my small girlish hands. they used it. it is mine now. my big uncle who had a big wife would use this stuff and then thoughtlessly leave it off to the side. i mean, it wasn't a big deal that they brushed their coffee stained teeth and hung their clothes up. it's just that they did what i did, only bigger.

but i remember, my dad had a friend who would come over sometimes with his wife and he knew all sorts of things and i would watch him spit frothy toothpaste liquid in the sink with that mouth that had an answer for everything! sort of like watching my uncle fizz his face and become mr. clean. no more beard. the fizz eats it. how the body needs grooming and maintenance to keep from breaking down! and then it still breaks down. but i think that i'm getting off track. because i never intended to go on for this long about calcium deposits and older men who brush their teeth.

instead, i want to talk about my uncle through the dusty window. i was standing in my aunt's vegetable garden. they actually worked hours into these little things, with the little blushing tomatoes and the fluffy plastic green leaves tickling my ankles. actually, i saw both him and his wife there. he wearing what i guess were her clothes. i was going to knock on the tinted window and surprise them, like, hi! your loving niece came to visit you! but i decided not to. something told me not to. it's amazing how we humans, relate to one another because of sexuality. you

meet someone, and depending on their sex, you react to them a certain way and they you. why should seeing my uncle, who had a pair of small tomatoes in his panties, make me question his being a man, and expect him to act differently?

so instead i sneaked away real sneaky-like. like ranma when he's a girl and not wanting anyone to notice, i didn't mention a thing.

"sarah, who are you talking to?"

crissy again? i stop fiddling with the rose in my hands. change the subject! (don't let her know) "are you done with your paper?"

"no. i decided to take a break. it's hard to write about buroughs. i don't really know what to say, or how to say it." she rubs the back of her neck like ranma in ranma? after akane caught him doing something he shouldn't have been doing. like talking to that purple haired chick.

"you should take a nap. your eyes are all red."

"i'll be fine. i just have to get this done." she yawns. "where do you keep the coffee?"

"oh, sorry, it's in the kitchen. i forgot. here, i'll get it right now." she follows me back into the house. robots? and coffee?

i noticed that she is playing one of my mp3s. it's 'fallen angel' by traci lords – and i tell her this. "i didn't know you liked traci lords!" i didn't know robots could like music.

"who's traci lords?"

of course!

"she's a techno musician, but she's also a porn star."

"a porn star," she says. she puts a finger to the side of her mouth. although i am pouring coffee for her, i'm sure her eyes are rolling to the side of her head, accessing some part of her brain. if only i could put my ear to the back of her head. what do robots think about those who use their bodies for fun and profit?

"sarah, what are you doing listening to porn stars?"

"i don't watch her porn. i just like her music."

"uh huh."

"well, okay, my ex-boyfriend made me watch it with him."

she giggles. "is it like an instructional video?" maybe for her.

damnit. she tries to drink her coffee but she giggles again. don't you just want to smack her? stupid machine. why doesn't she go home? why is she so rude? maybe she's just broken. "ow! stop hitting me." she rubs the side of her head.

i mumble something about being sorry.

"sarah! you made me spill this all over my sweater." she goes to get a towel. why did i have to start doing that? it's like at the party. this was two weeks ago you have to understand. so it's in the past. crissy and i went. not together, but with our separate friends. and that's where we met.

i forget who hosted the thing. it was at a college dorm, and there was noise everywhere. there was a DJ but he wasn't so good. his music sounded like a digital clock radio and a cpu fan mixed together. and anyway, what happened was that i stumbled upon her. she was lying in the middle of some plants. under a big black box with a fan under it. she was half naked—her blouse wasn't on right.

"help me get up," she said. this reminds me of the time when i knew a sister of a friend who went to a party. that stupid girl sucked on an entire vial of lsd. i'm surprised that she didn't die, although i know that she freaked out for a long time. even when her boyfriend panicked and ran away, and a stranger took pity, held her close and tried to calm her down, she started to

scream. something about falling through floors and walls. she had stopped being able to distinguish the solidness of anything—she felt as if her hands and feet and body would just sink into the ground and into the walls and she would fall to the center of the earth and be unable to get out. and then, she had to go through a month of this. i met her last when i was still friends with her sister: at taco bell with the sticky blue countertops and the tinted purple windows. she sat uneasy, gripping the table... like that helps fight acid. she couldn't eat very much, she said. now that i think about it, she was probably a human. she must have realized that robots were everywhere and that she was going to be buried in the ground when she let her guard down. robots are confused creatures. they think that they are people and that people, like all organisms, are stupid, like plants. and that we should be dealt with in the same way that we deal with plants. at the time, i didn't know what was going on. i could only think about how crazy she was. what crazy-stupid girl would suck on a whole vial of acid?

i guess that's the same kind of girl who would take g at a party. the same kind of girl crissy pretended to be. crissy was complaining so much that i decided to stop wandering around and look for her friends. they should be responsible. so i got justin, who came with me to this thing, to help carry her body. like we needed to carry her to show her, look: this is who we are talking about. do you know this body? can you claim her? we asked everyone but no one knew who she or who her friends were. actually that was nice of justin, but i don't talk to him anymore. he was just trying to get close. you see, justin's a robot too.

now that i think about it, that was a very posh neighborhood. the lights along the pool were a deep blue, to match the pool. and the chairs weren't your cheap folding chairs that college dorms normally had. yeah, that was nice, along with the dorm's tinted purple windows. and

there was this cute boy at the party too. i introduced myself shyly, unable to keep from playing with my hairbraid. he said his name was gnossos pappadopolis but i think he was lying. i can't even say that name. i don't think he even said it. anyway, he poured me some wicked chick-drinks. i mean really, a midori sour is really just candy—but that's just fine for a gal like me, who's had an ulcer. no fun at all. so then he tells me a joke about a pregnant woman. something about coming out okay, but it was too loud for me to hear him. was he just being friendly or was he trying to impress me? but now that i think about it, he was probably a robot. since he knew everyone and was in on everything. but even gnossos who seemed to know everyone else at the party didn't know who crissy's friends were. it's a plot to get her to be with me. so i told her, i think they got up and left.

she started to groan. i couldn't just leave her. so i took her to my car. "relax," i said. she lay so limp in the backseat of my car. at the time, i thought, maybe, someone gave her g and was about to rape her in the bushes. but left when he was going to get discovered. he probably brought her there. so i asked her if she came with a guy and she shook her head. "no," she says. and: "i need to use the printer." huh? "do you even have a printer?"

"it's under the shelf. to the left. right there. you have to plug it in. my mother hides it because it doesn't go with the decorum."

she rummages through to get the paper. communication. printing. texting.

busy busy busy! anyway, she was so limp. i straightened her blouse and she began to talk about her body, how good and warm it felt. gosh, if i was a guy, would she be in trouble?

"who are you talking to?"

"no one. go back to work. i was just clearing my throat." i should move further away from her. maybe her hearing is clear enough to discern me even from here. so i go to the extreme part of the balcony. where was i? my wrist in my palm.

i grabbed a wrist that she was flailing about and felt how solid the bones in there were, and how warm and tender the skin there was. domestic cats have this softness to their fur; and if you feel around, you can always slide their skin around. that's because there's this layer of fat there, under the skin. i also noticed that my cat was big. she had a double chin.

humans are like that too. domesticated ones, i mean. wild ones are too unhealthy. but domestic ones – their skin is so very tight but at the same time, it's very flabby. you can squeeze the flesh and move it around. on girls there is always this layer of fat just under the skin. not to mention boobs that kinda hang on our bodies and that's sometimes uncomfortable. well, on boys too

with the fat, but if they try and exercise then muscle takes precedence. maybe i should have come here as a boy.

then i would have been a boy and have crissy here... she looks very feminine. whoever made her did a nice job. and she has a small double chin that's kind of pleasing from an aesthetic point of view. not really a double chin, but a hint of one—enough to make her cute to those who like that sort of thing and cute to those who don't like that sort of thing. i wonder... and then i decide to take her home with me. maybe she's a lesbian and later on we can have fun, even if i'm not a lesbian. i find that it's easier for me to get closer to girls than guys if you really want to know someone—maybe that's because of the kind of girl i am. some girls don't make friends with anyone but guys and i'm not like that.

but then i find out that she's a robot. this ruins everything. the next morning, she's around and about and she has no idea how she got here. and she's surprised she's here, like wow, her memory circuits have never failed her before. i even gave her my bed out of pity! i slept on the couch! if i knew she was a robot i would have let her stand in my closet like vicki the robot did. vicki never complained so much to her creators, but then if she did, she would have probably been dismantled for being a snot-nosed brat.

crissy gets out of my bedroom and starts to wander around. she pokes through my things like some little girl twisting the coat hangers she finds in the closet and throwing them around. like i'm some mysterious big person. and then wakes me so she can demand to know why she's here. i explain the entire thing and then she seems mellow like a tomato that's just ripe.

this puts me off. you see, i don't like it when people go through all my things before getting sullen when they discover that they've had a favor done for them. but i know what crissy was really thinking. she discovered that she befriended a human and she was trying to figure out how to put me in the ground and bury me.

after breakfast, crissy went straight to the bathroom. she was probably emptying her storage tanks for all the food she wasted in her deception. but by that time i was sure that she was a robot. i snuck around the back of my apartment and climbed up some vines. i peeked into my window and saw her bending over and shaving herself through the dusty window. egads! she must have heard me coming. i watched carefully for as long as i could. hang onto the cement. i noticed that she had no pubic hair. as if fizz did that!

robots could never get hair done right. it's hard to sow hair into the head and tiny hairs into the arms... why should they put hair anywhere else? i found this out after interrogating a robot. it was horrible. there were weird noises and afterwards, scattered nuts and bolts lay covering the abandoned warehouse, the place no one goes to. my hands were covered in sprocket grease. as it turns out, robots use tubes to do function. yeah, that's right. tubes. lots of them too. never saw so many in my life.

this brings me almost to the present. after crissy says that she needs to do a paper for her work, i take her home and lo and behold! someone broke into her apartment. how coincidental. she says that when she was at the party, someone probably took her keys and robbed her house. she throws a list of instructions into the trash. she looks so pleading. so i let her stay with me. so i could keep an eye on her.

anyway, i think that i'll try and lead her to that abandoned warehouse again, and see if she's—oh. i should stop talking. there she is. "i don't think i can use your computer anymore," she said. not like she couldn't use it herself. "i know you don't like me," she said. "but i can't just sit at your computer anymore."

"why not? it works. go and use it."

she hesitates. maybe she is unsure of her cover. so i tell her, "don't be afraid of it. it works fine."

she turns around for a moment. i think she's going to go back but then she turns around and almost whispers, "i'm not a robot."

too much coffee—make malfunction? "what! yes you are."

"no. NO, i'm NOT A ROBOT. i'm a human being. i need love. i... i have to leave."

"what? why?"

"sarah! you are the weirdest person i have ever met. i thought you were a nice girl. i thought you were interested in me." crissy frowns. her nose is quivering again. i think she has a malfu- "you took me in when no one else would have me. not my family! not my friends. my last g/f left me at that party and stole all my things, and i thought that you would be nicer to me. i thought you could just... just..." and then she is running away.

i am left dumbfounded. "crissy, wait. you don't understand. i" have to get her to that warehouse.

"sarah, please leave me alone. i don't care where i go."

"no. wait, you can't go. i – there's – bee"

"sarah, i saw you. i saw YOU staring at ME through that bathroom window! do you think i'm STUPID? i thought maybe you were just shy. but you're not! you're fucking weird! you wear those tinted glasses to bed and always put those weird coat hangers wires around your shoes! look at yourself! i try and talk with you but instead, you wander away and poke around talking about aliens and robots and when i kiss you, you always wipe your nose."

"i don't wipe my nose."

"oh! and your mother? your mother this, your mother that! i bet you don't even have a mother! oh, why can't i find anyone normal?"

my mother? "my mother is going to be back in fifteen minutes. she just went out to"

"go get the coffee! coffee! coffee! and more coffee! argh! i'm leaving!"

"crissy, obviously you are malfunc"

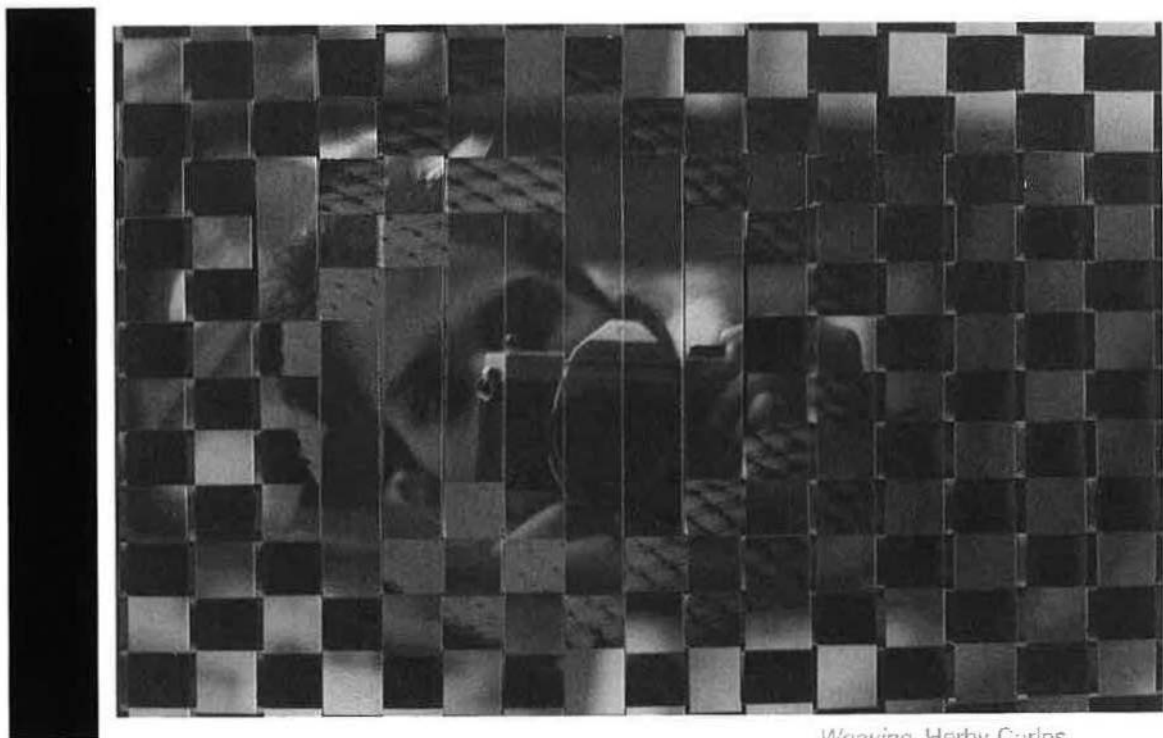
"no, sarah. if anyone, you're the robot, you FUCKING WEIRDO!" she slams the door on me.

my door! my front door on me! my face! my body can't go through doors. but it should be the other way around. i mean, i'm inside and she's outside. i'm human and she's... a robot. no. something's not right.

my reflection is in the silverware. i cup my hands under my breasts and feel the fat there. my arms are cold. i am a well made woman. but maybe that's not fat. it's soft cushiony material. does fat squeeze this way? have i ever seen my own

heart? how do i know if you're a machine. how do i know i'm a machine? the computer chugs away. endlessly humming. humming: humming! maybe all those times she was going beep, maybe that was me. maybe i'm the one who's malfunctioning. maybe the wires around my shoes is just me shedding. i should check. you know, there is a toolbox in the trunk of my car. i should find my screwholes first. a knife might help.

OST



Weaving, Herby Carlos

GEORGE JIMENEZ

CRICKETRY

132

you, crickets, are audible orbs
flashing free of definition,
rapid supernovas of night
to spangle muted landscapes,
each trill the rippled husk of
a newborn word. a music

to accompany the time—
lapse repetition of some
slow, unfurling wince.
some unborn
whorl of pain
laughed into sleeves
and poured away
in trembling oscillation.
you, the absent vocal cords
of motionless kabuki horror.

•

i wonder, cricket,
who says you bring luck?
who says you're not
a beacon to a grave?
your silent ones lay eggs
in the open throats of mermaids.
you drill tranquility into
my ear.

•

"crickets have special songs for
courtship, fighting, and sounding an alarm.
the number of chirps varies,
with faster chirping at higher temperatures."

and crickets, too, have special means
of delivering an ancient wrath. by
hypnosis, by paralysis, and by
its scathing peal.
a pantomime. a guillotine.
a sinister ventriloquism
depositing a scream.

•
and now you are my flung alarum
coursing through tundra,
where chirps come only
once a year, to echo
like chambers of
nautilus dreams.

here is my armor,
my auditorium,
and here, the sound:
a scherzo for the dead,
my long, serrated song.



SHARON DOYLE

I'M COLLECTING OSTRICHES

but it's not so easy—
they shoulder the horizon
when they churn their thick, pink legs
two-toe through the briar patch,
kicking loose the tumbleweeds
and threading them into the blades
of a giant black windmill stirring
orange waters into sockeye skies;

I have to let loose all my lassos,
satisfied to watch the birds
run down their own record times
and great swaths of plumes pinned
to their own brothers' useless wings.

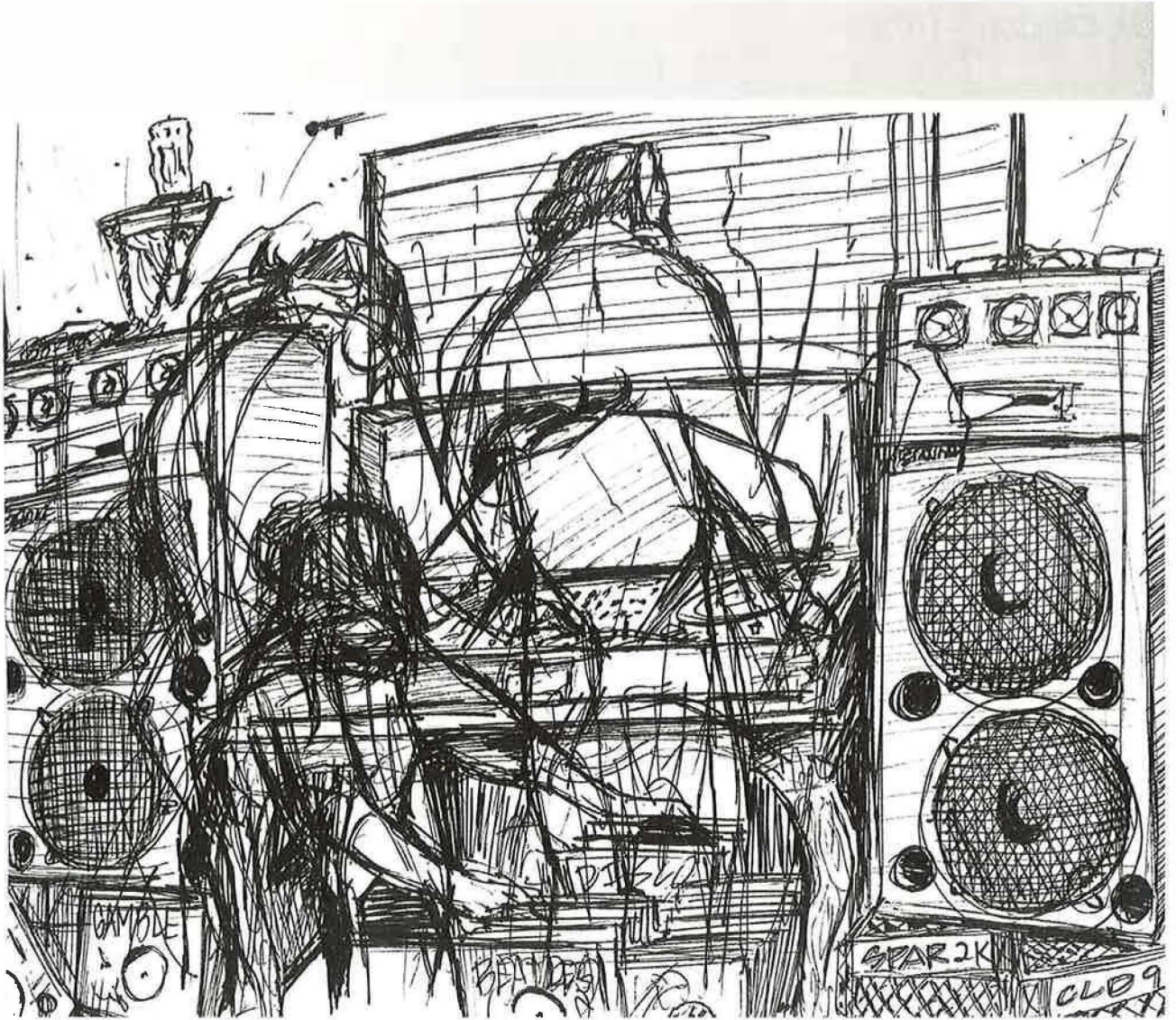
134

KEITH ONSTAD

SALEM, OREGON—1979

135
951

When I was fourteen
I put a crucifix
down my pants
so the guys on my street would think I had a big dick
but it didn't work
and dad kicked my ass
for not respecting
god



Mixing the Day Up Joshua Esparza

The room is dark and immediate. It is that moment of night when the day has been gone for many hours, and the absence of light is most concentrated. A small boy closes his eyes as his body accelerates. He is traveling at 285 miles per hour when he hits. If the ground were thirty feet closer to the top of the building he may have survived. But his nose now sits under a tree, and his heart in a field, and unless they check his stomach they will never find his tongue, swallowed on the way down.

Night, too, accelerates as it falls. Four blocks away a young girl taking a walk saw him when he first jumped—a little gray dot floating through the air—but as he fell the night darkened. He became a switch and the city his stage, fading to black as he descended, fading until at that exact moment of impact the entire city disappeared, making it impossible for anyone, anywhere, to bare witness. Yet all this was mere coincidence.

All nights begin a childish gray and grow darker as the hours pass; a second before sunrise they reach a level of darkness so mature the earth itself can be heard calling upon the morning to return.

On more than one occasion the boy himself had experienced this moment, and always when he walked by this building, passing what would be his mark on the sidewalk. All at once his life would disappear. He would stop then, looking up, behind, all around, or lifting his hand to his eyes, but he could see nothing. He became frightened every time—worried the blindness might be death.

But tonight he was not scared. He knew the night was fading and would disappear along with him when he hit the ground. He knew the laws of nature were on his side, and that even if he did open his eyes in that final moment, he would not be witness to the ground piecing his body into tiny question marks.

NR. SPR. 05

A simple thud steps through the wall and stays in the room a while. They both tense up but she, more than he, wants the thud to leave. She imagines it's the sound of the earth shifting under the city, or the room fighting off the fall of its walls, but can feel in her stomach it is something else. She wants to ask the man in the room with her a question, to talk to him about the way she feels, about the way her mother used to watch her play in the backyard as she hung the laundry out to dry, about how washing two loads would take all day because of the hours spent talking and running and barefooting the grass, about how it wasn't until this very moment that she realized the sound of a wet sheet being shaken out sounds a lot like a human body being folded onto the concrete.

She is not sure what, but something bad has happened: something more than being trapped in a dark room with a stranger, something more along the lines of a sound, hardly noticeable, but so certain it reduces the heart to a ball of string.

Outside the sun begins to rise but the room, being windowless,

remains dark. Neither of them knows it, but they have been sitting face to face for the last four-and-a-half hours. Had they been able to see, he would have by this point memorized the print of her eyes, the shape of their color, and how long they remain closed, down to one-thousandth of a second, each time she blinks.

Neither of them has breathed for quite a while. They hold their breath as not to disturb each other. The young girl, continuing her walk through the city, passes by a tiny house, the only one on the street, and notices, through an open window, two boys lying side-by-side in bed, also not breathing. At first she thinks they might be dead, but remembers the first time she ever slept in the same bed with her brother, and how they both remained perfectly silent and still the entire night. She knows the boys will be ok. The smaller one, unable to resist, starts to adjust his body under the sheets. It is painful for him to move so slowly. After a moment, he is comfortable and resettles, but the sheets continue to squirming and spreading over him.

The young girl has already left the window and doesn't notice that the sheets are actually a covering of tiny strings working their way under and around the two boys. She does notice, however, that if she continues straight ahead she will come directly upon the large wooden doors of the building whose sidewalk was cracked by the falling dot. Excited by this, she lifts the bag hanging off her shoulder and begins to run.

He hears her exhale and, feeling that it is safe, takes a breath himself. He is trying to find her in the darkness of the room. She somehow seems to know this and, without having a real reason, blushes. Just as her cheeks begin to glow, and he starts to make out her face right in front of his, a man in

the room above them, also trapped, who has been quiet for some time, starts to speak.

"I am infrastructure and nothing else."

The young girl, just arriving, recognizes the voice. She was seven years old and reading in the park with her brother. Becoming bored, they began to fight over whose book was better.

"Your book was written by a child," she told her brother.

"So, your book reads like an instruction manual." Her brother considered it a waste of time to read books about the end of the world.

"Yeah, well your book reads like a mentally disturbed metaphor." She was not in the habit of using the word retarded.

"So, your book was written by dead or dying old men."

And this went on and on, back and forth, until the books themselves became incensed and turned against each other. Being young and irrational, the first one to act was the brother's book. It began to hop on his lap and flap its pages. The young girl's book, quite a bit older, was thoroughly insulted and responded by sending a group of its most robust words to confront what it considered an utterly irreverent member of its race. Upon seeing the words approaching, the brother's book released a pair of its most vibrant, and wholly insane, curse words who, without a second thought, pounced down into the enemy group and began tearing them into limbs and quarters. Soon every word was off their page and warring through the park, biting and stabbing and raping each other without discrimination of age, or sex, or etymological background. And the young girl and her brother ran here and there, weeping and screaming, trying as best they could to return the words to their pages. But they were everywhere—in the grass, on the trees, in the sand, on the swings, flying through the air—and

besides, once they were off the pages not even the books themselves could tell which words belonged to whom. They battled all day and night, each second marked by the death of a dozen or more words. Never before had that park witnessed such a massacre. It took until the next day for the words to realize they were fighting someone else's war, and so, ignoring the demands of their respective books, they flooded onto the city streets. Total anarchy ensued. In one week's time the words managed to overrun all the city's libraries, releasing every word from every page in every book. By then the girl and her brother had cried the color from their eyes, and their voices were reduced to trickles of blood on their chins, and losing faith they layed down in the park where the ordeal began, among the bits of slain words, tens of thousands of them, all dead, shriveled into tiny question marks. All of a sudden they heard the voice of a man calling to them.

"Little children, don't blame yourselves, it was only a matter of time before the words were loosed from their pages. Your eyes are white from crying,

and your voices hang from your chins, and you can do no more. Nothing will reverse what has happened. Neither the words, nor the world, will ever be what they once were." It was the same voice she heard a second ago coming from the building, and more than his words on that long-ago day in the park, she remembers how the man grabbed her brother's hand and the two of them ran off across a field.

Wild lavender once grew on the field where the building now sits, and the man, for the first time that night, begins to wonder how long they will be trapped in the room. He pictures himself trapped instead in the basement, surrounded by the smell of roots and seeds living in the ground, waiting.

Soon the room lightens and she moves away, surprised that they had been sitting so close: the hairs on their cheeks almost touching when she had him five feet away next to the leg of the table, and he had her leaning against the wall.

"We will not be getting to know each other," interrupts the woman. At first he is not sure who she is talking to, but they are the only two people in the room, so he smiles, not to agree with her, but to show he understands. Now she feels foolish. She knows it is true but did not want it to come off that way. Before she can apologize the man above them, again, begins to speak.

"I was in love once. I wasn't supposed to fall in love with him, but I did. Grey sections of the sky were falling to earth the day I met him. It had been raining for a week, so hard the sky had lost all its color. We ran side-by-side, our hands, equally strong, sweating into one another. The sky had tried to flood and drown the words, but they were smarter than that and took shelter in the hills, on the high fields, and on the rooftops. And so the sky decided to attack the words with pieces of

itself. We tried to run for shelter but large slabs of sky crashed down all around us. Seven years passed and none of the words were injured by the falling sky, but something awful was happening to the earth. Where ever the sky landed the earth turned gray. But not gray—naming the color is somehow wrong—in truth it was an absence of color. Finally, we came upon a building. I knew we would be safe inside, but before we entered I turned around and saw the earth permanently dying behind me. And for all the damage—all the pounding destruction—the saddest part was the hardly audible noise coming from its mouth."

She looks at the man trapped with her as if to ask if he is hearing what she is hearing. He just stares at the palm of his hand, not ignoring her or the situation, but genuinely captivated. The voice continues.

"The earth wept with a quiet understanding, with more consciousness than is necessary in death. It was the oldest sound I had ever heard, the sound of the first animal in nature releasing a cry held in its stomach since the day it was born. But cry is too much. It was just a moan, a subtle vibration in the throat, a hum struck in the roof of the mouth. I had never heard anything so sad, except once: it was the sound of a young girl's voice trickling from her chin."

While it was unclear before, she now knows they are trapped because of this man. She doesn't hate him for it, but becomes quite convinced they will never be freed.

"Have you even been to the basement?" the other asks, still looking at his palm.

"Can't you hear him?" She tries not to sound too desperate.

The room, which is now filled with morning, becomes very silent except for the sound of the man above, still talking. He listens to him, but more than that, uses the assumption that it takes a concentration in the eyes to hear as an excuse to study her face. But he is not

good at pretending, and the gaze becomes obvious.

"Can't you hear him?"

"In the end there will be nothing but a word, just as there was nothing but a word in the beginning."

The man looks down at his palm.

The young girl's eyes are bloodshot. She stands over the mark on the sidewalk listening to an unnatural sound in the air. It is a sound like the wind being split, and a falling boy, and a single spoken word. It is a sound unnoticeable and soft—not far away, but as if the ground rose up and spoke it into the nape of the neck. She turns and walks into a field and at its center finds a heart. A strange rustling starts from her bag as she kneels beside it. When the flap is opened a flurry of words fly out and, in a whirlwind, carry the heart into the bag. Once safely inside, she closes the flap and continues on to a nearby tree.

The man in the room has taken to staring at his palm again. Curious, she moves in to get a closer look and sees that the lines on his hand are shifting, very slow and casual, to form different shapes: first a sprig of lavender, then a small boy, then a ball of string. As amazing as it sounds, the subtlety of their movement makes it seem rather natural. She looks at her palm and is about to ask him a question but the man above them is getting worse. He is talking about death and God and man and the woman starts to worry.

"The laws of nature, man, and God have all been taken from the lips of those about to die, uttered at that last moment of clarity, when life flashes before the eyes: not life past, but a future history that will never be written. Everything is taken to the eyes of the dying then: all that would have become of them, all their potential is poured into their hands and through their fingers so that they can see its every grain. Their eyes are not the eyes of the living, and their mouth not the mouth, in that moment when life lays its entirety out before them, then with one swipe erases itself."

From the tree she hurries to the grass, picking up pieces of the fallen boy, this time with her own hands. A fingernail, bits of calf, the lines from his palm, she puts them all in her bag. She collects every single piece and, lastly, finds his eyes kneeling under a branch. Picking them up, one in each hand, she notices they are colorless. A flood of tears empties into her palms, cleansing the eyes and washing over the entire field. There is something unnatural about the tears—a week's worth, at least, every second—flowing from her eyes, to her palms, to the floor; so many tears it seems the eyes in her hands, too, are crying, and in fact they might be.

"I'm scared," the woman says. He knows she is wrong to be but cannot resist reaching out for her. This is a man she has never met, a man whose name she does not know, but in light of things none of this seems to matter. She takes his hand as the voice continues.

"I was in love once, but he was taken right out of my hands, without warning, without sound, without a single, uttered word."

He brings her close to his side, or she moves in on her own (it makes no difference), and without ceremony she wraps her arms around him and puts her head on his shoulder.

"But how could I believe in our love? I knew that only in that last moment could a human word be true. Only then could an utterance redirect the spinning of the heart, or stop the tears that flowed from the colorless eyes, or call the morning back into an unlit world. These words are never false. Throughout the history of death they have been adding to the only definition we can have of ourselves. But now I have been redefined."

"I think this man knows everything," she says. He knows she is wrong but can't help feeling the exact same thing.

"Just words," he comforts, but her side is against his chest and she can feel his heart pounding and his blood flowing and it becomes hard for her to distinguish where her body ends and his begins. She imagines this is how it would feel to have something living within her. Turning toward him she stands on her knees and moves one leg over his hips. Her body becomes a long and searching press until the beating of his heart is against her womb. He, in return, presses his ear against her chest, and in that moment, as he listens to her heart and she feels his within her stomach, they begin to be enclosed by a gathering of tiny strings. It is impossible to tell where the strings are coming from: his palm, her womb, the walls, the air—they come from everywhere.

Something in the room begins to make the smallest noise, not really hearable at first, like the quiet of a man falling through the sky.

The strings secure both their hands and arms around each other. At this point, even if they wanted to, they could not stop what is happening to them. The man above them continues.

"We ran through the open doors of the building. Finding a safe spot under a table we waited until the sky finished with the earth. Days had passed when I at last tore myself away from the idea that the earth was dying."

Her stomach and his head become fully enwrapped with string.

"I turned toward him. I could still feel his firm grip in my hand, but he was not there. Loosing my fingers I saw squished in the center of my palm a tiny gray dot of sky."

He is totally enwrapped now, and though it is still only morning, a brighter, more mature light begins to fill the room. The small noise seems to be coming from the center of them, not loud in any way, but enormous, like the moving of the earth through space.

"I had lost him, and I did not know when or how. Rising from under the table I let the tiny dot of sky fall out of my hand. It hit the floor and the whole

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THE SOUND OF STRING

building turned gray, and a new moaning escaped the mouth of the earth. 'Sister,' it said, so clear I thought the building itself had spoken."

The tiny strings have almost totally enclosed them. All that is left exposed is her face. She has her eyes closed but the light in the room has grown so bright that she can see right through her lids. She noticed the walls of the room beginning to crumble.

"'Sister,' it said again, then it died."

All at once the voice stops and the strings finish their work and the walls crumble to dust. The man and woman, combined in a ball of string, fall into the center of a field. The world concentrates. It seems poised for a word, something that would complete it, but none comes. All that remains is the sound coming from within the string. The young girl, still holding the eyes in her palms, starts toward the ball. As she nears she can feel a vibration at her side, as subtle and sure as a heart about to beat. It is coming from her bag. When she arrives the flap bursts open and all the words come flying out and lift the ball of string in a whirlwind off the field and carry it to her bag. But the ball is too big, and cannot be forced to fit, so they lift it high into the air, so high it becomes a tiny gray dot, and let it fall back to the ground. When it hits it shatters into a thousand pieces, just as many as there are words (this is not a coincidence). The words hurry toward the ground and make off—one ball for each of them—spreading through the city streets. The girl begins to walk off the field. Just then a sprig of baby lavender pokes its head through the dirt and looks up at her. It can see she's been crying, so it smiles, and though she had in mind to continue her walk she kneels down to tell it the story of the little gray dot that fell from the sky, and changed the world when it landed.



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