



Northridge Review
Spring 2013

Acknowledgements

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Submission Information

The Northridge Review accepts submissions of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and art throughout the year.

The Northridge Review has recently changed the submission process. Manuscripts can be uploaded to the following page:

<http://thenorthridgereview.submittable.com/submit>

Submissions should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, email, and phone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself.

Printed manuscripts and all other correspondence can still be delivered to the following address:

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Awards

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The Northridge Review will announce the winner of this award in the Fall of 2013.

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in the memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipient of this award will be published in the Fall of 2013.

The Northridge Review is also honored to publish the winner of the Academy of American Poets Award. The recipient of this award will be acknowledged in the Fall of 2013.

Editor's Note

I hope that we offend you.

I hope we outrage you. I hope we move you beyond yourself. I hope we pique your curiosity. I hope we charm you to the point of hair twirling. I hope this small paperback pulse will make you hear that soft creak in your chest cavity. I hope we have given you a blanket, a cover of solace, a dust jacket for your nose, your eyes, your mouth and that frontal lobe you are so wild about.

I hope our intentions are clear.

I hope you know that this is a love letter to you. I hope we have seduced you. I hope you check “yes” or “no” instead of penciling in a “maybe” square. I hope you know that it is your name on our notebook again and again. I hope you see that we are a catch. I hope you look at this bouquet and run your fingers over each petal knowing that we chose each bloom with you in mind. I hope our flattery gives you the vapors.

I hope you know that this was not easy.

I hope you know that we are trying to make conversation with the written word. I hope you know that is a daunting shoulder to tap. I hope you see what we can bring to the table. I hope you see what a handsome party guest we can be.

Karlee Johnson
Chief Editor

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Supermarket in California (or Questions for Allen Ginsberg)

Cody Deitz

after Allen Ginsberg

If I could see anyone in the supermarket tonight,
it would be you, Allen Ginsberg, black beard
and peace hands, counting slow steps between earth
stained avocados and freezers
of naked chicken breasts and shrimp,
chanting their electric hum.

But life doesn't usually work that way.
How can these apples be so red, Marlboro red,
Ferrari-in-the-sun red, when I can hear the boy
in the next aisle asking his mother why
the sky is blue and why life is so expensive?

Maybe you are here, Beat-Buddhist, and I keep
missing the back of your windbreaker slipping
behind pyramids of soup cans, heading
for the meat counter asking the questions
of your predecessor.

Maybe you're here with me after all,
reborn as the grocery boy
who takes long smoke breaks
and fresh oysters off the sample table, saltwater
still dripping from their crystalline shells.

Maybe you're here with me beneath
the fluorescent lamps washing shelves
of peaches and plumbs in pure white
like a meditation on consumerism.
What would you say about free-form jazz muzak,
if you were here? I have questions for you, Allen.
Are you my poet-father? Are you my angel?

Life at Sixteen

Juan Alvarado

I can't believe I'm changing.
My mouth opens like a hippo's,
a raptor's smile. I touch
my hickory-chapped tongue,
I feel the stretching in my ears,
I call out to Rita, my mother but I remember
she's not at home. I feel my lips, this time
they're like wax. My jaw unhinges,
opening wide, hitting
the floor. *Chin marín*, I'm only sixteen!
This is normal, nothing out of the usual,
it happens to every boy, mom says. Jaw
stretching my skin like bubblicious goeey
chewing gum, holding it from one end to
another. I walk to the mirror, seeing myself,
knowing mom was wrong, *mála fides*,
lax skin of evolution is stretching my face,
I can't help it if I feel like cheese fondue, anxiety
stretched to its' limits. I open the window,
let my jaw fall onto the lawn,
hitting tiny grassy blades. Good job Ramón,
you know exactly what you're doing,
I will be written in tomorrow's
newspaper. I start to inhale
green caterpillars, flies, leaves, roses,
cabbage, storing it all in my mouth, like
the whale eating Jonah. *Put a madre!*
I keep inhaling, trees hang on by the roots of its' bark,
birds sit in their nests, praying to their avian god,
I close my mouth ingesting,
feeling it slide down my throat,
hoping this happens to every teen.

There Behind the Garden Shed

Trista Payte

He was strong.

He was big and strong, all of him.

Before.

Now his hands seem too large; mismatched parts on a broke down mannequin.

He made his living with those hands, large and rough, and even now you can still see the shadow of his past potency when you look at them.

My grandmother tells stories of before, what he was like before. My father leaves the room, but my uncle and cousins and I stay, stay and listen to the stories she likes to tell. It's the same two or three that she tells, with only the slightest of variations, and I know them all so well I could tell them too, maybe tell them better, because she has to stop sometimes. Sometimes she loses her place, and I know exactly what should be said next, but I hold back. We all hold back.

But mostly we sit. We sit quiet and watch the cancer eat him; it chews away the muscle and fat with equal enthusiasm. He is a skeleton picked almost clean now, a sculpture of ash waiting for an open window and a breeze to set him free.

He was so big.

So big before.

A tower, he loomed over everyone, he was like a tower. Or a tree, he smelled like trees in bloom, that's what my cousin Lisa said.

This I didn't understand.

Before.

This morning I am alone; alone with him, but also just alone. I haven't been alone with him in ten years. My grandmother is still sleeping, and I have been left to watch. Watch what? The breathing, I suppose.

Breathing is all he does anymore, and even that he does not do well. I watch his chest collapse down into the folds of the white sheet. I count the seconds—one, two, three—and then with a rattle he inhales and rises again. I know eventually the rise won't happen. I know this.

I wait for it.

He was a mason, and a boxer, and a card shark, but I don't remember any of that. Everyone who has come to this room has talked about how clever he was, how talented, he could fix anything, build anything, but I only remember him sick; the reek of death around even then, even ten years ago.

My stories of him are untold.

Ten years, I am counting.

I continue to watch—rise, fall, rise. But then the rise doesn't come. I count four. I count five. His mouth is open but the gasp is absent, and no whistle, just open mouth in a vacant face. I feel the air leak out from my own body.

He ignored me for most of my life.

Most of it.

I found him sneaking cigarettes in the small space between the garden shed and the back wall, at the property that I have always called my grandmother's, as if I always felt that he was temporary. As if I sensed that he would go first.

At last I knew what my cousin had meant, there behind the garden shed, but it was the smell of too many trees, the smell overpowered me, and made my head sick with the smell. He was salt and spit and flowers left too long in the vase. "Don't you rat me out, Lisa," he called in my direction, after. And I was not Lisa, but I would nevertheless never tell.

Hands. Such large hands, I take one into mine, I fill both my hands with one of his hands. I feel the weight of it. I feel the emptiness.

His lungs rattle themselves awake; we breathe in together.

I watch the white sheet rise. I breathe in his smell, rubbing alcohol and shit. His skin, white skin, thin like paper, written with want and wait and wrath.

I lean down close to his face. I inhale the stench, ten years of the unspoken.

“I am not Lisa.”

I drop the hand and I pick up a pillow.

Also white.

Family Portrait

Kyle Harris

It's Thanksgiving, I'm going to cut myself
a piece of turkey. My cousin leans
on his old station wagon, smoking.
A pack of Kools in his jacket pocket.
Kauri Lipskin licks her gums
and asks for a light. They kiss
with ashen tongue. Inside, my dad cusses
at a football game he sees on TV.
All I see is a dark reflection
of a morose ex-coach in a recliner, shouting
at his black and blue uniformed team. I was
never one to remember names. As a kid,

I watched my mom pack leftovers in Ziploc bags
labeled "For the birds." The rest of the family
never understood, but she laughed at herself.
Back in the kitchen, the Ziploc bags are gone
and the leftover fowl is in the garbage.
My mom shouts at me for taking too long
to clean the table, waking my grandad,
who traditionally falls asleep during dinner. I
walk around the table, pick up plates,
counting chairs and dishes.
Eight forks, knives, spoons. Nine chairs. Empty

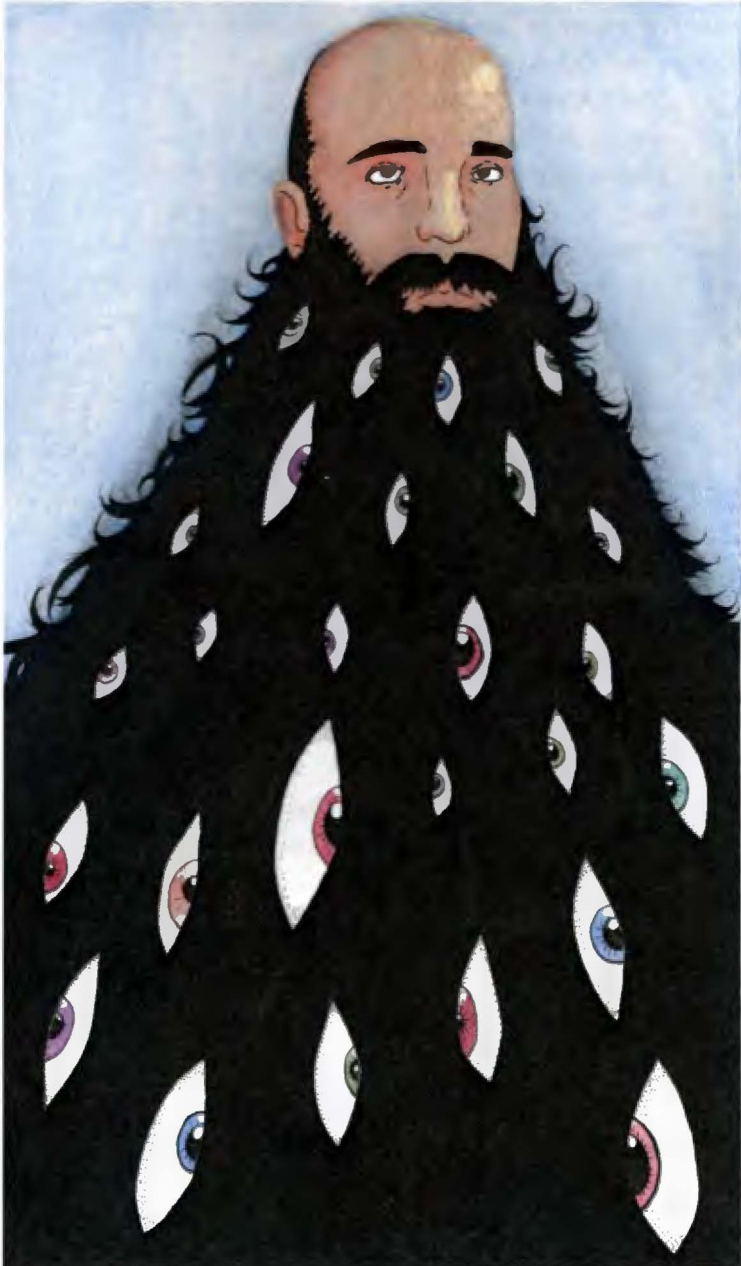
air becomes crammed with a knock
on the door. My uncle wobbles to the handle.
Little Benji Sherbert brought cookies. With alcohol
on his breath, Uncle Frank flips him the bird
and pushes Benji outside. I hear a flush.
My sister peeks from the bathroom door,
slams it shut and runs the water. In my room,

now drenched in night, I listen to padded footsteps
and a deep cough pacing before
my older brother's door.

An animal's dying screech as the door opens
and footsteps fade into a dusty breath.

My brother's bed and my dad's leg
creak like the rafters did,
supporting unwelcome weight. I sleep.

Through December, my family remains.
It's Christmas. I'm going to hang myself
a family portrait.



The Last Straight-to-Video Show

Garrett Clancy

I needed to cut Pixelface from the project. Edit him out. Leave his as-yet-unproduced scenes on the proverbial cutting-room floor. But this would require some serious SFX, some adept fix-it-in-post-ness, as we were bound together by a gaffer-tape like *implied* contract: we were writing partners on Time to Pay. It was *our* story. 50/50 his/mine. And since we were half-way through, smack dab on page 55, my oft-repeated mantra of “a finished script has about a zero chance of selling; an unfinished script less than that,” was about to be put to the (screen) test.

Here he is at the door—rap rapp.

“It’s your two-minute warning, Chuck!”¹ I hear him, in his best John Cassavetes, plenty of faux-whiskey and cigarette growl.

I don’t even need my stovetop digital; I know it’s exactly 8:58. And when I open the door, I know just what I’ll see.

Yep—there he is, aiming down at me with imaginary high-powered scope .30-30 – KA-BLAMMMO!

“Right, right—I’m Jack Klugman,” I say with as much faux-enthusiasm as I can muster, and pretend to fly back in a ballet of gore and death. Already, I wish it were lunchtime.

“Coffee?” I ask, and instantly regret the query.

“Only now he does his killing with his coffee!”² Pixelface blurts, elbowing me in the process. “That you, Hoss? That how you do your killing now?”

Let the Woody Woodpecker titter commence.

Part of me wants to participate in this tiresome game, only I’ve experienced the recent epiphany that, for Pixelface, this is not a game. It’s his life. His pathetic, derivative, low-grade Quentin Tarantino-wannabe life.

¹ Two-Minute Warning: Title of 1976 thriller starring Charlton Heston and John Cassavetes. See it once, you’ve seen it enough.

² Line from The Wild Bunch, spoken by Ernie Borgnine to Bill Holden, about Edmund O’Brien’s character. See this once, you haven’t seen it *nearly* enough.

But still, it's too much to hold my tongue. From what I choose, I know he'll miss the double-entendre.

"A man's got to know his limitations, Todd."³

Ha-ha-ha-HA-ha, ha-ha-ha-HA-ha – haahahahahaha!

Max has little to no sympathy.

"Whattaya want from the guy? He's never been laid. And we all met in *film school*, or don't you remember?"

"But it's too much! He can't ask to use the john without doing Charles Bronson."

"What's that from?" Max asks, with a manufactured force-field of immunity against the deep-cutting burn of endless rejection and perpetual invisibility of obvious genius of talent, said shield result of temp-turned permanent data entry job, and thus "career-change," and so consequently no longer afraid of the derisive glare of judgment of cinematic ignorance. "Not Mister Majestyk, right? Not that I care anymore."

"I'm just saying..."

And Max cuts me off because he *does* care, only not even his therapist could get him to come clean on that.

"Listen, I got a real life now. I've got a date. You film fags have fun writing the next script you'll never sell in a thousand fucking years."

Click.

We're at my desk, which is in my bedroom because, unlike those detestable WGA scribes who've actually "made it," I can't afford an office. I sit before the keyboard, a cut-rate Liberace wannabe at some Midwest Motel 6 piano bar, sans tip jar, and pull up Time to Pay⁴ on the flickering, on-its-last-legs outdated VGA monitor.

"Hey – I'll be our Betty Schaefer today. Give you a break, Mr. Gillis."⁵

³ Clint's Dirty Harry catchphrase from Magnum Force (1973.) I can't believe I'm doing this.

⁴ LOGLINE: An ex-Navy Seal turned Fly-Fishing instructor joins forces with a legally blind Catholic Nun who is an NRA shooting champ to make a delivery of money to a really bad former KGB guy in Point Barrow, Alaska, by car in 42 and one half hours, or else every grammar school student in Moscow, Idaho, will unwittingly be served Tater Tots, each of which contains just enough nitroglycerin to blast the jaws, but little else, off of the K-6 unfortunates.

⁵ He can jump decades, this guy, like Bambi through the scary cartoony flames. This is Sunset Boulevard. You know, when that cute young writer teams up with Bill Holden to, as she implies, help revive *his* career—but of course, she simply wants a writing career of her own. God, everyone in this town has an agenda!

Though I know it'll make cutting Todd loose even more difficult, I give in. Because I feel rotten. Because I have to remember that this is *Todd* here. Todd Sample—and not simply Pixelface, Uber-movie geek. Todd has (or had) a life. A mom, dad, older lawyer-sister, all back in Pittsburgh, P-A.

“So Maxie’s got a date,” I say, and I’m not sure I’m not trying to sting Todd just a little. I’ve never once heard him speak about a girl. Any girl, other than,

“Bridget Fonda!”

Or any other film actress, none of whom he has ever met.

“In Jackie Brown! He’ll be De Niro, getting her from behind at the kitchen sink.”

I sigh with much purpose.

“Max has a date. *With a normal girl*. Not a movie star, Todd. This girl works at the Coffee Bean on La Brea. She’s neither the daughter, granddaughter nor niece of *any* Hollywood Legend.”

“Lana Turner. Working the Schwab’s counter—and Max discovers her! He’s her Johnny Stomp...”

“O-kay,” I cut him off. And I make him read aloud what we’d written yesterday. The slug lines make me want to puke; the dialogue is that very puke.

“CUT TO: Frank blasts his Camaro around the corner like Steve McQueen in Bullit. Sister Drusilla holds on for dear life in the passenger seat. It’s a scene right out of Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry!”

“Stop,” I say. But he keeps on like some amphetamine-whacked combat reporter.

SISTER DRUSILLA

Jeesuz! What’re you, Gene Hackman in The French Connection?!

Frank scowls. He’s king of the wise-acres.

FRANK

No. I’m Dick Van Dyke in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

SISTER DRUSILLA

Well, if you don’t slow down, you won’t be getting any more ‘bang bang’ from me!

FRANK

Naughty, naughty, Sis. What would the Mother Superior say?

SISTER DRUSILLA

I meant my .357, Bozo. You know Goddamn well I did...

Sister Dru turns her head and looks out the window at the world buzzing by.

SISTER DRUSILLA

(sotto voce)

You sex-obsessed asshole.”

“Stop!” And this time, Todd hears me, even over his cartoon-bird falsetto guffaw.

“Oscar time, Billy Wilder.⁶ Best Original Screenplay—right here, right now!”

I fall back onto my bed (I only own one hard-back chair, and Pixelface occupies the that).

“Please...stop...stop.”

Pixelface⁷ jumps up and stands over me. I expect, like anyone would, that he’ll inquire after my health. *Are you okay, [insert movie nickname here]?* Instead, he lowers his face uncomfortably close to mine and closes one eye, and this is what I get:

“We did it. You doan hafta worry ‘bout nothin’ no more. Everything’s gonna be okay, Mickey, ya know? We jiss gotta getcha to a hospital.”⁸

I decide to re-write, mid-scene. On the mental page of my best intentions, it just wasn’t working. I suggest a walk around the block.

⁶ Billy Wilder—second only to Woody Allen in number of Oscar noms (twelve!) for Best Screenplay. As in, I’m no Billy Wilder.

⁷ I’ll be damned if I’ll call him Todd when he’s irritating me thus.

⁸ Rocky III. The scene where Sly Stallone is letting Burgess Meredith know that he’s milked his 3rd (or maybe 4th, if you count Penguin in the “Batman” TV show) career comeback for lonnnngggg enough. Time to retire, old man.

ME

Todd, I need you to listen to me about something.

Immediately, he starts in on the *you talkin' to me? You talkin' to me?* thing.⁹

ME

Maxie's already cashed in his chips, though we're talking Confederate money, of course.

I ignore his rat-a-tat tatt references to Gettysburg and Glory, and soldier-on.

ME

Me, I'm conflicted. It's been ten years, buddy. One option, an episode of Acapulco H.E.A.T.—uncredited, mind you—and Camp of Corpses III does not a career in screenwriting make.

HIM

Eleven scripts. Took Oliver Stone eleven scripts before...

ME

(this is still my show)

Get a grip on reality, Todd. Maybe the universe has a different plan for old cineastes like us.

HIM

Good mag—though *Cahiers du Cinema*—that's serious, *Pilgrim*. The Duke. Il Duce...

ME

So in light of that, I think we should discontinue expending what I feel is only *more* wasted effort on yet *another* un-saleable script.

He wasn't really listening to me, of course. Maybe he never did. Maybe he

⁹ Really? Do you need this? Film 101, people. You know—Bobby, Marty, a grimy Jodie Foster-and-Cybill Shepard-totin' yellow cab?

sees me not as a fellow flesh-and-bloodbrother, an un-appreciated (hell, fucking invisible!) compadre artist in an uncaring, unforgiving town, but as some sort of celluloid construct of his own disembodied imaginings (even the third-rate poets I know have had more success than I), only with an interminably-morphing face. I'm whomever is in whatever movie scene however he views me whenever and why-ever world without end, amen. I am sometimes man, other-times woman, beast, cartoon fowl, or George Lucas-created shiny-gold space robot. I am good, bad and/or ugly. I am many things and nobody all at the same time, but by God, I will be the director of this final scene!

“This is gonna hurt, Pixelface, and I'm not even gonna rub it in that though I've had very little success—I've made in ten miserable years exactly \$ 7, 800 and some change—you've had absolutely zero. ZERO ZIP NADA! Ten years of nothing, and what, seventy-five grand, is it, in student loan debt? For film school! You can't even practice law! So my mind is made up. I can't finish the script—with or without you. It's rank, Pixelface! It's utter derivative garbage. Every metaphor, every simile is a direct reference to another movie. And the dialogue—don't let me get started! It's all crap! It's Franken-sewer. Dr. Jackshit and Mr. Horrid. The story—and I hesitate to call it that—is a half-dozen rehashed hackneyed action film plots all mixed into a steaming pot of bullshit stew!¹⁰ We must part company, today. And frankly, the truth of it is, I cannot take hearing you speak again. Nothing exits your mouth save some line of movie dialogue. I don't even know who you are. You only speak as someone else. Some actor, some character in some movie. Jeezus, Pixelface! Did you ever stop to consider why it is you've been dubbed with this ridiculous nickname!”

Pixelface doesn't skip a beat.

“It's because I love movies.”

“What?!”

¹⁰ It is right about this time that I realize that I am talking to myself. I mean, I'm speaking in a very literal sense to Pixelface—but I'm giving my own farewell speech and using my own distorted view of his imagined failings to justify my vicious criticism of both an industry that is unaware of my talents and existence, and the script in question: Time to Pay. And I'm paying, all right. By God, I am paying. My soul aches for...Todd. My heart is pinched in the pain of guilt for Todd. What have I done? And this is my script, too! I have contributed to every clichéd plot twist, every wincingly-trite line of dialogue, every lazy-writer-borrowing-from-movies-that-were-actually-made lame-o description—God! It's madness. Madness! (Last lines of Bridge on the River Kwai. You see—there is no escape.)

And though I'm sure I'm about to fall to my knees to sobbingly beg forgiveness for the vitriol I have unleashed on this quintessential harmless wretch, I've been too long indoctrinated in *film time*. No jump cuts here. I must finish my speech. There will be the requisite beats. A close-up of Todd, his face showing that he gets it. He'll lower his eyes. The camera will cut to me. I'll force a smile, wink. In a two-shot you'll see my arms raise and plop onto his shoulders. An encouraging squeeze. And for some reason, in an upper-class, Merchant/Ivory British accent, I'll say, *You'll make out, ol' boy. You're a survivor. No hard feelings, what?* And the last shot'll be a close-up on him. Those eyes will slowly regain some fire. He'll nod. Smile quiveringly. And he'll say, finally, more in the dialect of a Jack Wild East-Ender, *thank ye, sir, for all you've done for me. I wee-ew not let ye down.*

FADE TO BLACK.

And really, what more do you want from me? I gave the kid the final shot. His face is the last image on the screen before the credits roll. He's somebody, finally, and if that doesn't square my fractured fragmented soul, I don't know what.

"I love movies."

I stop walking, turn to face him.

"I know you do, Todd. I do, too. But maybe we're just not meant to write them."

I was about to call Max, wish him luck on his date, and let him know that he wouldn't have to hear me complaining about Todd anymore, that while we, Todd and I, said we were, like some just-broken up couple, going to remain "friends," I'd joke with Max that that was the last thing that was going to happen. Max would be happy, I know, *not* that Todd and I had parted company, but that by reading between the lines he'd have good company in the land of given-up dreams. I'd as much as called it quits, and now we could hang again, like in the old days, except we wouldn't talk of movies. Oh, no – it is and was and would be too painful a subject.

But there, on the seven o'clock news, was the story. In front of the Laemmle, just before a 25th Anniversary matinee screening of Mother,

Juggs and Speed,¹¹ a man waiting in line loses a leg when a cop using his cellphone jumps the sidewalk and mows him down. The man is, of course, Todd Pixelface Sample.

But it gets worse. Or better, I guess, if you're Todd, and have a Peter Jackson, circa Dead Alive¹² sense of humor.

The man with the severed leg crawls to the aid of the policeman who hit him, who, clearly distraught either at having sheared off with the front of his cruiser, like a pair of giant scissors neatly cuts the ribbon at the opening of a brand new supermarket, poor Todd's left leg, or from the undesired outcome, it was later confirmed, of a phone call with his attorney who revealed to said officer that he would, in fact, be sued by the severely-injured driver of a leased BMW 328i (a successful TV writer, no less!) after having run a red light, while on his cellphone,¹³ then placed his .9 mm service revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger, but the bullet only entered and exited his cheek, for while he was in the act of making void and non-payable his life insurance policy, when one of the giant red letter Gs from "Juggs" fell from the sign and onto the cop's shoulder, and, well, the long and short of it is, Todd dragged himself to the blood-gushing cop, made a makeshift tourniquet from his own shredded pant-leg (he told reporters later, "that I'd remembered how to do from First Blood—and have you seen the last Rambo film? Surprisingly good!"), and saved the man in blue from bleeding to death. There's a shot of him on a stretcher trying to make light of his heroic deed and shattered & soon-to-be-sawboned-away bloody limb. "He drew first blood!" he shouted, and then he was off and running again he was with that Woody Woodpecker power-giggle.

I did finally speak to Max, and he was way ahead of the game. Angry? And how! Seems he heard from a friend of a friend that before Cedars Sinai had officially admitted Todd, he'd gotten an agent at ICM and had made a low-six figure deal with FOX not only for the rights to his story, but for Todd to write the script. Additionally, a deal was struck with Smith and Jones Prosthetics for product placement in a film to star Jake Gyllenhall as Todd that, it was already rumored, had a "green light."

¹¹ This you've got to see. Bill Cosby as "Mother," Raquel Welch as "Juggs" and Harvey Keitel as "Speed"—Seventies films don't get any more Seventies-ish than this!

¹² Oh, come on! Two words: Google search.

¹³ A less-than-plausible movie plot, I know—but these things really happen in L.A.

Page 56.

Frank pulls his Camaro to the side of the road and slams the brakes.

SISTER DRUSILLA

What in Beelzebub are you doing, Frank?! We have less than twelve hours to make Buffalo¹⁴ and we're only in...

She looks around, confused.

FRANK

That's the point, Sis. We've been moving in the wrong direction for far too long. I think we'd do better with a little change.

With that—Frank bags a U-ey and heads the other way.

¹⁴ Hey—it's *my* script now, and I've the right to make changes. After all, I don't want bigshot Todd nosing around, claiming I stole his lame-o ideas. Point Barrow—ha!

5 North

Elizabeth Arana-Moreno

Tell me again why I hurtle myself over miles
of pockmarked freeways, past Flying Js,
Pilots. All around me are last chances:

NEXT REST AREA 35 MILES.

Never mind food, gas, lodging—you are my basic need.

My body becomes one with asphalt at 85 mph. I don't drive
like it's stolen, I drive like every flashing Halogen
mistake I've ever made is bearing down on me
in the fast lane.

Come dusk, water from slaughterhouse sprinklers catch
the sun just right, sending up a thousand blazing rainbows.
Tell me one day we'll be somewhere over them.

Tracing Lines, Drawing Circles

Kelly Moreno

1: Even the trees look lonely

Menard wandered through the forest and wondered which of the trees housed a family. Families, something he had never thought to consider himself a part of, begged for his attention. As he continued to crunch brown and stale leaves beneath his feet, a particular tree gained his curiosity—*fish*, he thought, *the tree smelled of fish*. He inched closer, yet stopped only inches away with a startling question: *could the smell permeate my clothing?* After several seconds he concluded that it was a stupid question and placed his face on the bark of the fish-tree. *Salmon*, he thought.

The tree, he assumed, had no name. But if there were to be a family living inside, hiding from him, he thought that those who dwelled within should at least have his name. “Pierre Menard,” he whispered to the bark. The heat from his breath made the fish smell increase in potency.

The tree and its potential inhabitants did not return a response.

2: Salmon do not swim, they follow

Menard found himself at home and was no longer breaking the skeletons of leaves with his feet and was, instead, doing nothing at all. He sat in a chair that he had long despised. He was, at one time or another, going to replace it with a one of newer fashion—complete with a larger cushion to sit on. However, he realized that to move the chair required much more effort than simply leaving it there. It occurred to him that an employee of the store from which he purchased a new chair could not only deliver his new chair, but also remove his old one, but the thought of someone else in his home caused far more anxiety than was healthy.

Menard thought back to the tree. A sentence, whose intentions were unclear, formed in his head.

Quixote had to kill the cat. The dogs had attacked and almost torn it to pieces, but they hadn't killed it.

What to do with such a sentence, he wondered. Prior to the meeting with the Salmon-Tree, as he called it, the only proper names and nouns that filled his sentences were of war and history. The cat had emerged

from nowhere, without a discernible direction. Menard spun his chair. *The cat*, he thought, *must be a sign*.

3: Sentences

Menard had once regarded himself as a prolific writer—a builder of complex, beautiful sentences. Each that could, and would, warrant considerable time to study and decipher. Yet, Menard had struck a period in his own writing that he detested. The words that he conjured from the deepest parts of his brain were not eclectic enough, were not cryptic enough, and were not scholarly enough. His writing had become veneer, something he had always feared would happen.

Quixote had to kill the cat. The dogs had attacked and almost torn it to pieces, but they hadn't killed it.

Menard had constructed this sentence somewhere in his inferior parietal lobule. Yet, even though the sentence was conceived within him, it sounded so unlike him, and he wondered if he was not cursed, or burdened with a hex.

For months he had planned to abandon his Quixote project, for reasons that were only clear to him. Quixote, a character of unspeakable restrictions, had been belabored, decimated, ruined, and was no longer an object of unadulterated inspiration.

These words, that had once explained and described everything about Menard and his intentions, now described no one—not even Quixote.

He began a new chapter. *Don Quixote rode into the desert, awaiting a...* That page found itself in the wastepaper bin.

Don Quixote found a steed on which he was determined... Another page in the bin.

One after another, balled paper formed a Mount Kilimanjaro confined to the circumference of the trash bin. Menard resided as ruler of the paper mountain and basked in the glory of a waxing trash pile and a waning stack of fresh paper.

Menard kept at his book, hoping that a chapter would suddenly, and ultimately, emerge from somewhere in his brain. Menard, a proud believer of continuing projects that were seen as successful by others, was, at first, too scared to deviate from Quixote.

Menard sat in the chair he had disliked since its purchase and wept.

It was then that Menard decided to revise the sentence he just composed. No longer would only Quixote have the potential for murder of seemingly defenseless animals. Instead, Menard too could possess that

quality.

Menard had to kill the cat. The dogs had attacked and almost torn it to pieces, but they hadn't killed it.

Quixote had officially died.

4: Knowing when to end

Menard had wondered if writing would ever return to him. He had built a monopoly of fortune beneath the feet of Quixote, and hundreds of stories had been written, but now, as he returned to them hoping to reignite the fire within him, the stories were composed only of letters—all of them reigned meaningless. It seemed as though every letter that had been hand-chosen by Menard was now a creation of some other creature, from some other time, and some other place.

Menard had written thousands of sentences after his meeting with the Salmon-Tree. He tried to resurrect his love for Quixote, even though he had deemed the project unsalvageable.

Yet, it seemed as though his brain had already begun something new. *The cat*, he scribbled on a fresh page. *The cat, the tree, something*, he continued. His pen moved faster, and faster and for the first time since he met with the Salmon-Tree, a page emerged, complete.

5: Impunity

Menard had officially removed Quixote from his brain, his spirit, his book. One night after he completed twenty pages of his newest experiment without a single pause, Menard stood from his chair, grabbed his last published Quixote book, and ran to the kitchen. He considered setting the book on fire, but decided against pyromania since he did not want to go outside and, also, did not want to burn his house down.

Menard paced his kitchen, clutching the book he felt had ruined his ability to write but had also portrayed him as a liar, and wondered how to dispose of it. He wanted the book to feel the same pain he felt trying to write something that was not about Quixote; he wanted the book to crumble as he almost crumbled; he wanted the book to disappear forever as his writing had almost disappeared. He wanted the book to vanish from history and study forever.

In his frantic tour of the kitchen, Menard spotted the trash-compactor—something he had not used in quite some time, and was a gift from his former in-laws, as they had pegged him for one who created an incredible amount of garbage, but did not like to take it out, or would complain about the weight. The compactor, as his ex-wife would say, would make

everything related to garbage easier. Menard knew that it would make disposing of his book a quite simple task.

Menard opened the door to the compactor, threw his book in, and turned the machine on. He was, at first, quite startled by the sound and its immediately high volume. Not long after the process began, it was over. The trash compactor had turned Menard's 500 page novel about the travels of Don Quixote into a cube. If Menard had been more proficient in math, he could have deduced its dimensions. Instead, Menard settled for placing the cube on the kitchen table, happy that no one could turn a page and read the latest journey of Quixote.

Menard exited the kitchen, sat in the chair that he still disliked, and began to write.

6: Conscious or unconscious

Menard awoke one morning while still seated at his desk. He could not remember when he fell asleep, or the last word he had written. Ink had stained the part just beneath his chin, and the paper of his current chapter cradled small puddles of drool.

Dreams were uncommon for Menard. Actually, sleep, for Menard, was just as uncommon. On this particular morning, Menard woke feeling refreshed, but also plagued by a feeling that was not created the night prior. He had a feeling that he had not felt in a considerable amount of time, and it was not necessarily either good or bad, but rather, a slight indifference. He wondered if this feeling had arrived due to the exorcism of Quixote. Shortly after turning his most recently published accounts of Don Quixote into a cube, he repeated the act with several other editions that filled his shelves. He even liberated a small collection that he hoarded in his basement. Menard kept those books for just-in-case-of-emergency use only. Menard, at the time his third book was published and pressed, worried that there would be a point in the maybe distant future, when his book would no longer be available. So he convinced himself that it would be best to collect his texts; that way if someone wanted one they could have one—or rather, purchase one. Yet, after he stumbled across the Salmon-Tree, Menard felt no interest in sharing Quixote with anyone anymore.

Menard knew that he was neither regretting nor particularly excited about the deletion of Quixote from his life. He was entranced by a vague memory of a dream that he had. This would be Menard's first dream in ten years.

Menard located a pen and began to write. He, for the first time, did not pay attention to the words he created on the page. These words arrived as a gift from some guttural, unknown place within him.

Cats

Die alone in a river bed.

But I could not locate the cats.

Because the carcasses have disappeared.

Menard read his creation out loud. And although he did not like the sounds the words made as they were read from the page, he was proud. Menard was not yet sure what exactly it was that he finished, but he knew that he could stand behind any page that he warranted as complete that deviated from anything Quixote-esque.

It had suddenly occurred to Menard that the cat was in his dream—a dream that he had not yet fully remembered, but faintly remembered and imagined a dreamlike body of a cat lying on the ground. The cat was beneath a tree that Menard could only assume to be the Salmon-Tree.

7: Artanguage

Menard decided that perhaps poetry could facilitate the appropriate venue for his new, more adventurous, writing. Within the confines of poetry, he would write words refusing to abide by the blue or grey manufactured grid-lines. Menard called it art. At one time or another, he would construct a complex system of letters that were so tightly layered atop one another that only the faint peaks or curves of each letter were clear. He would post these projects on the walls of his writing room, assuring to himself that at some point, these sheets of paper would no longer be independent, but rather pieces of a more cohesive whole. As Menard scribbled on sheets of paper in a multitude of directions, he would whisper to himself, *One day the world will see my genius. And it won't have a fucking thing to do with Quixote.*

Menard gave no regard to plot. His life and journey through his poetic valley was the plot, the conflict, and would provide sufficient characterization of himself for his readers. In place of adhering to the model, as his scholarly professors taught him once, many, many years ago, Menard concerned himself with presentation. In the end, Menard knew that his words were meaningless until he gave them meaning.

Fueled by inspiration and the dream of completing what he knew would be a masterpiece, he wrote for many hours without sleep and soon became overwhelmed with exhaustion—though at no point did he fear

that his writing lost fervor.

A couple of days had passed, and Menard was not at all eager to pause his experiment, but a knock at the door drew his attention away from his project. Flustered, he stood from his chair and took long steps toward the door.

Menard was startled to realize that no one was calling for him at the door. In place of a person, there was a stack of paper on his doormat. Menard had not placed the stack of paper there, but he knew that whoever had must have had a reasonable intention.

He had picked up the stack of paper and began to read. Menard was gifted a novel-length manifesto.

8: An Autoethnographic Poetical Manifesto

As Menard read, his temper grew quite irrationally. Once he reached the last page, he threw the stack of paper to the floor. Menard sat quietly in his writing chair and thought about what the writer had claimed.

Accordingly, Menard thought to himself, he was not quite upset with what the writer was saying—generally—but, rather, how the message so appropriately applied to Menard's life. Perhaps bonsai trees did not translate to good poetry, the same way cats and salmon-trees had for Menard. Maybe Julian and Julio had been the albatross around the neck of the writer, the way Quixote had been Menard's personal cinderblock.

Quixote, Menard deduced, was a devil. A demon sent to shred Menard's life into indistinguishable pieces. *No, he wasn't a devil, he thought, he was an enchanter who came one night on a cloud, after you'd gone away, and climbed off a serpent he was riding and he went into the library and you don't know what he got up to in there, because a bit later he flew away over the roof and left the house full of smoke; and when you made up your mind to go and see what he'd done, you couldn't find any books or any library.*

More frustratingly, Quixote wasn't the only thieving demon in Menard's life. The writer of the suspicious manifesto was also from some undefined place in hell. Yet Menard was not frustrated with the manifesto, but rather what it forecasted. This writer became successful by identifying the central and static issue in their writing; Menard was far too cowardly to acknowledge his faults publicly—but that was only part of the problem.

9: Igneous or ingenious

Menard thought of the parts of speech and writing he had once admired:

noun, adjective, adverb, verb. He considered writing a story or a poem about these words, but ultimately decided that a story about verbs was not a story at all—and was, instead, a writer touting their ability to draw attention to something the reader already knew. Menard never assumed his readership was comprised of only experts in language, or savants in writing, but he never assumed that declaring that nouns were only nouns in writing was something that wholly escaped the reader.

However, more importantly, Menard had an incredible disliking for writing that was about writing. Exposing the painful journey that was almost always present in the creation of a story was not something the average reader would indulge in. Only writers, Menard felt, would empathize with the arduous task of creating a cohesive story, and a story illustrating that task. Menard did not like the exclusivity of the writer-writing genre, but without Quixote, Menard found himself without inspiration. And, although, Menard had created stack after stack of poems about cats and trees, Menard felt that these creations functioned only as a slight deviation from the mundane task of writing adventurous tales about the vigilant Quixote.

Menard was now officially out of inspiration. Menard had officially died.

10: Not yet quite the end

Menard had only functionally died for a few seconds—which meant he hadn't really died at all. He soon realized that writing about writing was, at the very least, writing.

Menard revisited the Salmon-Tree, and whilst in the presence of the oddly soothing smell, he began to write. This time, Menard did not pursue something different, nor did he pursue anything at all—he simply allowed his pen to move and thoughts to generate. Daylight slipped behind the horizon, and soon thereafter, Menard felt that he had, finally, in his possession, a complete project.

With his completed project in hand, Menard returned home. Menard sat in his writing chair, but did not remember the reason for his wanting to replace it. He continued to sit there, in the chair he thought he resented, and looked at his project for quite some time.

Menard, after a day had passed and he had not moved from his chair, stood and grabbed a single sheet of paper from the stack. Menard had no particular certainty as to where his destination was or what he was doing, but soon found that he had slipped into his backyard. He was not sure

why he was particular as to where this page should be placed, but once he found the location he knelt to the ground. He was not sheltered from the sun in any capacity—as no trees hovered overhead. He was not befriended by any landscaped groundcover—as there were no flowers, or grass, or weeds even, in the ground that he chose.

The page that Menard held was slightly bent, and his hand lent to a small sweat stain in the corner. He looked at the ground and began to excavate a small recess. The hole he created was of a considerable shallowness, but he knew, for whatever reason, that the space was of sufficient depth. Menard took the page, the very first page of the project he felt was complete, and placed it into the ground. The page remained uncovered for several seconds, until Menard felt comfortable enough to begin sprinkling the removed dirt back into the hole. Soon after, the page was no longer visible, and to the naïve, it appeared as though nothing had been done to the ground at all.

Menard would repeat this process for 429 more pages.

Seedlings, he thought when his project was completely planted page by page. He had created 430 tiny mounds, and in each was a page from his novel. He was sitting in the twilight of hours that passed by, when suddenly Menard stood, startled. He was not exactly sure what the sound was or where its origin could be found, but Menard was certain that accompanying the sound was the smell of salmon.



As We Walk on Cirrus Clouds

Susana Marcelo

i.

As we walk on cirrus clouds, we're careful lest we
fall through. But it's inevitable. We know while holding
hands like thread through cotton that we'll eventually
fall, from the oldest to the youngest
— the family we have created.

ii.

Lightning threatens to tear our soles. In darkness, we tread on
raindrops drenching our feet
before releasing their symphony on earth. The
water rises, freezing shins, buckling knees,
but no matter. We keep walking.

iii.

When the clouds part in front of us, a rainbow shines over our
heads, and the youngest one's tears gather so we cry. We bathe in
light, lingering on cotton curls.

iv.

I step forward, fall through.

v.

We're tumbling, one after the other like a strand of pearls ready
to burst on wooden floors. It's my fault. I forgot clouds are fragile
after a storm.

vi.

Falling faster, we burst through the Earth's crust. We plummet
towards the core, layer after layer. We hold clenched faith
through fingers.

The taste of iron on our tongues.

Skin falling off our knuckles.

vii.

We burst through the crust on the other side of the world.

Icy air wakes us from slumber. The moon greets us.

Snow kisses our noses.

viii.

We're flying.

ix.

Stars tell us, "You are almost home."

Our eyes crystallize with tears, but we don't dare look down until
we arrive, once again, where
we walk on clouds.

x.

There's nothing left to do but take a step forward.

We keep walking.

Happy Hour at the Tender Glow

Elizabeth Arana-Moreno

— “Father, if all things are possible unto thee, take this cup away from me.”

Mark 14:36

2-for-1 drink specials don't last all night — now that's agony. Our Mary Magdalene wears velour track suits, Chantilly Lace. Orders her deliverance neat with a water back.

Round here, we're on the pay-as-you-go retirement plan.

Tonight, our Peter, James and John think 'designated' means 'least drunk,' think playing chicken with a semi is as good a Friday as any.

Is Jesus the seat belt or the steering wheel?

Good lord — Channel 7 says it'll take a full two hours to shovel that chrome alloy fuck-up out of the number 1 lane. The rest of us will just slug on home, sleep it off. We'd give anything to rise again.

Sunlight

Robin Smith

—*After Max Pechstein*

The arbor is cool and the soil rich
with warmth. Two young women kiss
beneath the shade of a magnolia.
Their lips rush into each other like
swallows diving through the azure
above them. The bells ring, work is
finished for the day.

The two young women pull
apart, smooth their cotton dresses, sweep
away their mahogany hair from their necks
and return to their husbands blaming
the sunlight for their cheek bones and lips
still red and bright with desire.

Scar Maps

Gina Srmabekian

The first time I meet you, you unbutton your cuffs, roll up your plaid shirt to the elbow and turn over your forearm. We are kismet in our scars. We fall ~~into~~ over each other, over other's beers, the ashtray spilling into the lap of the girl you knew before me. You have just moved here; we do not talk like tourists about Third St. Santa Monica or the Hollywood Bowl.

We are travelled too well in all the same sunless countries of ourselves.

This one *here*, you burned your hand on the furnace as a child, *here*, a pink-necked bully wanted to know what color you'd bleed. *Here* and *here* I did myself, I say, *here*, and *here*, you almost died, you say. We laugh like hyenas, the room around us feeling the sudden gravity, each truth peeling out of us like scabs, a monster we are both relieved has found a place to stretch for a while.

We know we have not come from gods like the careful friends who skirt around us, having identified the edges of the map where those guiding strokes are cut out into macabre stars. We follow each other like muses in and out of measures, surprised at first then humbled by how beautiful an elegy we make.

Months later, when the din of discovery fades, I take a Sharpie to your forearm and connect the perforated lines while you sleep.

On your birthdays, your mother would get the squared number of however many years you'd lived outside of her in balloons. After the party—when all the children you'd desperately tried to befriend had inevitably eaten your cake and broken your new transformers—she'd take you out through that screen door of dead flies and gather those cotton candy orbs. Before the tradition was started, she'd tried a different technique, one she'd thought would interest a little boy's natural tendency to destroy and handed you a needle. Every pop was suppose to be a wish coming true, but it sounded too closely like the belt hitting your backside, making you twitch all nervous like you did in gym when the bigger boys laid hands on you.

You look to your right at the shambles of your home, tilting as if in shame and the whiskey snore coming from the open window of your

dietary father. You do not want him to die, you decide. You do not want to die, either, is the problem. You think of the pig-nosed brats, the small-breasted girls who seem to have just learned the word “no,” the sad bags of air puffing out from the bottom of your mother’s irises. You realize you don’t even know what wishes are; you realize you have never known a wish.

As each balloon flies up with its own inertia, you wish for something good, something good that you haven’t known yet. Something better than you can think of in your limited knowledge of good.

You hid this map of lost dreams underneath your shirt sleeves; every balloon that did not return you tallied with a knife, until the first time I said I love you without having to look away.

“I think all of them—all of them,” you responded,
“just came back, all at once.”

Notes:

When you wake, we are both tired-eyed and hungry; I counted three nightmares in the quakes of your eyelids, but you do not tell me what you saw. You move so softly, your hands open-palmed, your voice a marble rolling down the sheet music in my ears.

This is how you taught me how to love you: You soothed me like a wildthing caught in a snare.

“What happened?”

“I can’t say.”

“Then write it.”

“Then it will be there forever.”

“Then write it, then cross it out.”

~~I’m afraid.~~

Of what?

~~Of becoming a razor in your hand.~~



Attachment Parenting

Trista Payte

This, the hour, nestled in the space between one day and the next, a vacant plot of potential dream; here, always here, you come find me. It must be some kind of evolutionary trick, some undiscovered permutation, because you know instinctually when I start to slip away, slide into the crack, the crevice, I'm nestling in; breath slowed, eyes closed, but no, you sound your siren call, because much like you detect the faintest light, the softest movement, so do you also know the precise moment when I reach the threshold that lies between wake and slumber, and you cannot stand to see me go.

No, I, alone never again, you make sure of that, you, wailing wanton, your wish is warrant; voracious feeder, did you ever stop to think that I thirst too? I reach for you and you grow louder, kicking with excitement when I pull you in and you smell the fear and exhaustion on my skin. My soft, squirming succubus laid bare, skin on skin, mouth on flesh, cocked and ready to thrive as I wither, do I live simply to feed you; were you brought here to suck me dry? I, host animal, in this symbiotic relation, you hold on tight, prepare to feed, always, always, it is your turn, but I am just as hungry as you are.

You will swell and fatten, my glutton grows as I fade away, dwindle and wane, while my life pulses through you. Sputter and throb, cough up the excess and relatch, reload, relieve this endless cycle, you taking, I giving, you looming large and I crushed beneath the tremendous weight. How can it be? Such a small thing; I hold you but I cannot ever contain you.

As you burrow into me, releasing the pressure, no longer is it clear where I end and you begin. Now can I relax, let the tension leak out of bones, muscles, blood; the pain peels away and we fall into a rhythm, you and I, no longer are we struggling against each other.

You, making me as I made you.

When We First Met

Robin Smith

you were wearing
a tweed coat with felt elbow patches
your laughter was Summer by Vivaldi
I suddenly wanted to take you up on
a red biplane

venture the Atlantic like Snoopy
or Amelia Earhart but touch down
much more sublimely in Barcelona
or maybe Peru

you were eating
a crescent of orange stolen from the bar
and I wanted to give you an entire island
of orange groves

so we would never have to steal
anything more than warm afternoons
under the trees and kisses full and red
savored like secrets.

The Unwriter

Susana Marcelo

I woke up and found myself living in a theatre with strangers. All I know now are these 18-by-18 walls lined on one end by a burgundy velvet curtain. No other world exists: humanity in a box. In one night, bills crumbled, soccer balls vanished, dirty laundry disappeared and with them the smell of coffee in the morning and our families. Just like that. Here I'm a writer and nothing else. Around me are self-appointed actors who perform my plays. They have to—they cannot write!

They pretend being in this room forever is normal. But they're not very good actors. Their bleary eyes reveal the duplicity of their grins; they brush their hair with cardboard and pour tea made of paper.

"Delicious," says one man wearing a helmet and platform heels.

A woman with bloodshot eyes and hair piled like a beehive looks around. Her fingers tremble. She tries buttoning her coat until she realizes the buttons are missing. I peek behind the curtain.

"No, no, no, that's forbidden," she says, her nails digging in my flesh.

"Get your claws off me!"

"You've been appointed to write," her voice flows through the curtain in waves. "So write! Make us normal again."

The others surround me, waiting for my pen to touch paper. My joints have stiffened with time. I begin and my fingers tremble. The ink is my blood. Is that too emotional? Perhaps I should say: I begin and my fingers produce chicken scratch.

The actors get up and perform around me. Words create euphoria within us like a drug that gives us purpose. We want to be normal again. The actors smile so wide their wisdom teeth show. But like all highs, the low threatens to crash my body. I need to know what's behind that curtain or I'll die. My inspiration spills like a leaky pen. Cliché? Sorry. I'm growing tired.

I have nothing left to fuel my creativity. I'm dying, collapsing from the

inside. My hair, grey. My teeth, loose. Actors fall to the floor like dominoes. Their wide eyes frozen, staring. I slip through the curtain thrusting myself away before the wave of bodies reaches me.

Now there's a door behind me, and in front of me is a world made of two trains: one traveling North and one South, or East and West, depending on which way you point. I'm amazed at everything inside the North train. Wait, that's boring. Better: I went inside the North train and now I'm a teenager. I've been here before. This is good, familiar. But I passed my stop from all the backtracking. I have to write myself back there.

Across the station, a child who looks like me sits inside the South train. My mother is next to her. This makes me happy! Really happy—I'm not changing that because it's important to me. But the train takes off, disappears into the ground like an earth worm made of metal. I feel old. No. I am old. My youth squandered faster than ever.

Determined to find myself, I jump on the side of another train and hold tight. The passengers inside are bears headed to a circus. They're fully dressed like humans. That's strange because they have no sense of style. The bear with the beehive on her head and a coat with no buttons spots me. She's the woman from the theatre. Her claw scratches the window trying to reach my flesh.

"You're very good at acting like a bear," I yell from the outside, nodding and giving her thumbs up. "I hope you get the lead in the circus act."

They grunt and push the side of the train, steaming the windows with bear breath. The glass cracks near my cheek. I should have praised all their acting skills.

The train screeches to a stop. I get off. The burgundy curtain sits high on a hill. I run for it! They're after me. I jump for the curtain, reach it, but I'm shorter, younger, helpless. Their heavy paws swing in the air. Some yell into the clear sky on hind legs. They're beautiful.

"You have no right to write!" the woman bear yells. "A true writer never fails to invent."

"I have every right! I know humanity more than—"

"An animal? You're a monkey flinging your own shit."

"Then the world is a zoo," I say, looking at her face.

I climb the curtain right before the bear can snatch me by the feet.

This is writing that's not good enough. I'm worn out. What can I do? I float to the cushioned teal seats. To my right is an old woman with a braid and a hat. She's sleeping with her left ear on her shoulder, a pen between her bleeding nails. To my left is a little girl holding a notebook and pencil. They are me. I am them.

I'm stuck in between feeling not old or young. I'm a spectator watching the film of my life repeating and unfolding. Always the same actress. Always the same writer. But maybe I should take that out. It's too emotional, fragmented, and dramatic, isn't it?

Fall

Cody Deitz

September is sneaking in behind August,
crashing the party of summer and all its extravagance

while Isaac makes his way through Louisiana,
reminding people of nature's ugliness,

but Los Angeles is still sunshine like a bag of oranges
and can't be bothered with all that water.

We're looking forward to the heat breaking, snapping
clean like a dry branch, bright splinters fluttering as they fall.

Night is coming sooner; autumn is knocking on our doors,
bringing coffee and woodsmoke and leaves to crunch,

and we look forward to those too, like planning
for Christmas holidays and pulling blankets out of the closet.

Soon we'll don jackets and scarves
and drift out into the cold, stopping for friends and chocolate stout,

heavy like dark cream and smelling of malt. Soon
we'll start to wonder how we made it through summer,

how we held our breath while earth pulsed with a joy
that could never be ours, a joy so pure we couldn't relate.

The quiet ache of fall would be more our speed, comfort
in nature's hug at the end of the evening, its promises

of more joy to come. We'll do this again, it will say,
and we will, but now it's time for the human season,

the leaves red and orange and amber singed with
the business of the world, covering the ground

like earth is foaming over with tiny deaths,
fleeting and fragmentary, waiting to be piled

under grey sky and burned like an offering
while apple pies bake inside and our lovers and families

wait for us to come in, take off our coats, and tell them
how cold it is out there, how cold it always is this time of year.

Call Me Amanda

Kimberly Sanders

“call me amanda,” you told me
but first i stumbled over the words. over time
we had learned to communicate by ellipsis—
value judgment laden in things left unsaid:
the stein family tradition.

i was used to calling you jake, uncle
or other forms of endearment at family functions
where you wrapped your arms around me
like you do now, lanky limbs with digits
twined like rope, encasing
me far less matronly.

“would you like to see them?”
i said that i would, observed that
the swollen plush of them was
akin to my own, twin orbs
by design. would grandma shy away,
invoke jesus; would mama sneer
that you were an anomaly? or would
they see a kind of beauty to them, as i did?

Hero Complex

Jennifer Hutchison

The Superhero I married has become fat and stupid and predictable. He no longer darts in and out of our kitchen during dinner to save cities from giant trash-balls or to stop mad men from kidnapping the mayor or the latest beauty queen with water guns. Instead, he sits at home every evening and reads the newspaper with a pair of glasses I've seen so often, they've been memorized, burned into my retinas. When I ask about them, he doesn't seem to listen to me. In exchange he asks me boring questions without waiting for my answer, like how was my day, how is my mother, did I take the dog for a walk? Instead of answering, I sit in silence, listening to him talk about his day. His talks are brief. Terse and full of quiet anger. My superhero has done his job so well that the police aren't needed anymore. The city is clean and silver, crime has been capped, crowned, plugged between the shining towers and now my super husband now has nothing to do but work 9 to 5 and come home to read his paper with his bespectacled x-ray eyes. He ends his days with his pillow underneath his cheek and an alarm clock left untouched.

He saved me four times before we were married. Once when I was walking home from work, and two men in dark jackets accosted me with knives. Another time I was on a crumbling balcony after a villain had bombed it. Then I was kidnapped by a man who smelled of rotten fish. I was always the damsel in distress. It was easy to be. His eyes bulged and veins pulsed under his thick layer of makeup. I found myself laughing along even though my eyes were crying until my superhero came and whisked me off after smashing and scattering the man's teeth into a pinball machine.

Last week he replaced six people's front teeth. He said people were pulling them out with rusty pliers found in basements and dusty tool-boxes. It's a problem, he said, drowning his own in liquid gold. Maybe it's some new cool trend like piercing, I told him. He creased his brow, and I

felt like sticking my finger between the folds and prying them apart, to smooth that skull into placidity. No, it's a problem I can't help, he says. The liquid empties, and I watch as he puddles into his chair in the den.

Something has to be done here, I decide. His belly's getting too large. And his moods are getting too dark. He never smiles, and I'm running out of tequila.

We live in a great big apartment now, with plush furniture and rooms that stretch from window to window, with tall ceilings and real artwork on the walls, far away from where he started. My first apartment sat above that alley in a small dump that leaked when it rained as if the city was so sad it couldn't leave any sanctuary untouched, couldn't let anyone escape the grey sadness. Mildewy stains ran down the wallpaper, and the windows were jammed shut, turning the room into a red hot furnace in the summer.

We met in that apartment on a summer day when sweat ran down my neck, soaking my collar, smoke clogging my eyes and nose. He was a shimmering spot of blackness amid the red, picking me up and bursting through a door to come out clean on the other side. This was the first time he saved me, leaving me to be found by paramedics and fire-fighters while dashing off with his cape staining the edges of my eyes. That cape is full of holes, I thought. He could use a woman to fix that.

Those stains are showing up again in our den, locking my superhero husband inside. I see him shake, the tremors running through his hair and down his hands to his elbows to continue in concentric circles. I sneak glances at him when he thinks I'm not looking, and I wonder what he would do if he once again had crime to solve, innocent civilians to save, and arch-enemies to fight. These thoughts fill my head after he passes out on top of our bed. The patterns of the stains on my wallpaper meld with the thoughts of how happy he used to be. The memories twist and turn and stain the inside of my brain. I need to help him. I need to save him. One night, I place my hand lightly on his shoulder, nails barely grazing down his bicep to his elbow. I circle it, feeling his skin underneath. He shrugs and rolls over further and I pull my hand back, burnt.

I start with small steps. I start telling the food I cook that I love it, that I want to be saved by my pot pie, to fly through the air with it as people

scream for the flaky crust below. I whisper sweet little everythings when I pull it out of the oven with my over-sized yellow mitts. I love you chicken cordon bleu, I love you more casserole, I love you the most my roast. I sing chords and full stanzas of sentimentality to my dishes. I want to rub the food into his chest. To let the food seep into and coat his bullet stopping exterior. I want to feed and cover every part of him. My mother always told me the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I tape this advice close to my chest, right over my apron covered dress, and I cook gallons of soup, buckets of chicken, pounds of ground beef. I cook his favorite—hamburgers with peanut butter and jelly in great dollops under white buns. Nothing is sugar-free. He eats it all, washes it down with more liquor, and the love escapes in little gassy bubbles. None of my food seems to matter. The food takes the love and converts it to belches.

I drink oceans of wine in bed next to his sleeping form. It goes through me like water, and I find twin red stains on my pillowcase in the morning.

After attempting to fill his stomach, I pull out his super-suit and hang it in front of his work clothes, in front of the sports jacket he wore when we had our first date. He's never thrown it away. He never throws anything away. His latex suit with the utility belt containing smoke bombs and grappling hooks still hangs in the closet with the matching boots underneath. The cape has been torn to shreds. I've patched it a thousand times. They say loving a superhero is the toughest thing you can do. I say loving an ex-hero is the hardest thing you can do, to watch as he keeps his 9 to 5 schedule and the hideout under our house starts to mold.

I pour gallons of Lemon Wash over the rock floor. The floor is now so clean that dust won't touch the glossy top.

I try stitching a new costume to hang next to the old one. Each time the needle dives down to catch the bobbin thread I push my fingers into the cloth, hoping to let the love leak out through the grooves in my fingerprints. I design a new emblem, flashier, more modern. I chant anthems of protection, urging the suit to take its place back.

He pushes it to the back of the closet again, and I shred the new suit to pieces with my shears, stabbing to leave great big gashes that are masked in the blackness of the latex.

I empty the bar after shredding the suit. Gallons down the drain in amber-colored streams that warm the tubes and pipes as they swirl and

mix with water and sewage on their way to the ocean. I think about how the liquids clash, combine, and float away. I pour water into his glasses at dinner with my hand shaking slightly. His hand flies out, spilling food and missing me by inches. He breaks down afterwards, apologizing in the dark. I find myself buried in roses later that night. I find myself vocalizing forgiveness.

It's time to ratchet up my efforts. I start to leave cleverly poised hints—sometimes bitter remarks are crossed out with ink on the fridge: *gone to the grocer on the bad side of town, took out half of our savings to take to another bank—should I carry it in a clear bag?* These notes go unread. Instead, he turns one over to scrawl a reminder to pick up orange juice next time I'm out. I start chewing gum, smacking it during long silent dinners. He picks up the paper and gives me a steely glance over those glasses.

I leave a final note: *Help I've been kidnapped, do something about it.* I book a hotel room for a night and keep the champagne handy for my rescuer. He calls my cell phone and leaves a message asking if the casserole in the fridge is for dinner. I ignore it for a few hours, watch the channels we don't have, and then I make my way home. He's already in bed while I sit and throw eggs out the window in the kitchen into the street below, hoping someone will get pissed off enough to yell at me. But then, who could see me up in this tower? I'm trapped with nothing to help me get down, only a shower of eggs are raining down on the street below to dissuade anyone with fairy-tale devotion.

My mother suggests we go on vacation. Maybe breezy palm trees and blindingly white sand will be good. I agree and the superhero, my husband, agrees as well. The sun will be good. He says it may help me with whatever I'm going through since my roasts have been cold and I haven't been sleeping. I bite my lips and ignore him. I breakdown in the bathroom when he's not looking.

I book cheap tickets on a discount airline that refuses to stock peanuts for the customers. I pack, unpack, repack and then pack another suitcase in the span of a few days. He throws things into duffel at the last moment and packs an extra book.

The flight is boring. I hope for a terrorist to hijack our plane, to turn us around to threaten our home city's major landmarks. My husband will save us, I would boast to everyone around me, huddled behind the

cramped and worn seats. Maybe a young terrorist with nothing to lose and everything to gain in the afterlife would hit me in the head with a gun, the damsel with blood dying her blonde hair. This would enrage my mild-mannered-seeming husband. He'd stand up, and in one moment, he'd shed the weight of his haircut and glasses, unveil his true self in one shining moment. His chest would inflate; the suit would rip to reveal the costume he never took off, the costume that's more a part of him than me. Somewhere a cape would fly out of his suit. Blazing. Perfect. He'd catch the bullets with his teeth. His laser eyes would pierce the swarthy men in two. Arms of the closer terrorists would be snapped, and he would be a whirling dervish of black, white and blue. I, of course, wouldn't see this. The passengers around me would tell me later what a husband I have. How lucky to be protected so! I would come to with a sigh and look up with tears in my mind. Everyone would applaud and we would kiss like golden cinema stars, passionate, fiery under plastic lighting. We'd fly home instantly and make love in our huge bed with the mismatched pillows and carefully coordinated throw that I gleaned from various thrift stores. He would tug at my belt, and I would fall into his self, tripping through stomach and groin and kneecaps and toes. You saved me I'd tell him, and he'd smile that smile that lit up my world so long ago, white teeth carefully spaced and straightened sitting on a chin so chiseled and perfect that Michelangelo's David has nothing on him. I care nothing about his hair or his hands or his eyes. It's downward where I'd be concerned. How his chest would push me into melding with the sheets until I became nothing but a wrinkle in the fabric, a wrinkle breathing heavily with sweat labeling my forehead. We'd make love more times than I have toes, and he'd realize the world needs him as much as I do. My nails would leave rivers on his back.

The vacation was nice, but the food was too spicy or so he says. We spend our nights fanning ourselves in the heat of the tropical night. We fly home, back to our even duller gray city. He sits next to me, stiff and quiet. I fall asleep wondering what would happen if I jerk open the emergency escape door next to me and fling myself out. Would he dive in after me? I'm starting to wonder if he even still has those powers he had when I met him.

He will be a hero again. I've tried food. I've tried sewing. I've tried everything a woman is supposed to do. Except one thing.

I work night and day, going between gym and home. I take class after class, anything that involves my feet or my fists. I learn taekwondo, karate, judo, kickboxing. My mirror smiles more often. I start running up stairs without pause instead of taking the slow elevator.

My sewing machine whirls at high speeds during the night, needles digging into PVC and faux leather. With each puncture, I tell my seams that I'll make the world a better place. For my husband to become the man I used to know. To begin saving lives again. The costume comes out clean; dark colors that mold and shape my body into a svelte female form. The black glosses over and compresses the disappearing hip handles and thick thighs. I think I look good, great even. Black is a good color, it goes well with my pale skin that shines out from the holes in my black mask. It makes my eyes shine like light blue pebbles. I buy brass knuckles, a pair of running sneakers, spray paint, and a can of Mace.

I skip the small stuff and start by robbing jewelry stores. I leave messages on the windows, claiming to be a new cavity in this shining city. The cops are slow to respond, no one believes someone would be so foolish as to commit a crime in this city without heroes. I make off with rubies, emeralds, and diamonds by the handfuls. I give them to homeless people in the streets and dump the rest in the river on the west side of town. I move from jewelry stores to banks. The tellers are scared stiff. They give up bags of cash and paper wrapped coins. I stuff bills into envelopes to send to charities all around the world.

The superhero I married keeps reading the paper. My phone vibrates during a bank robbing; he wants to know if I'm at my mother's. I tell him I'm visiting the bank. He says ok and hangs up.

I wipe out the banks and the jewelry stores and the convenience marts with the shaking staffs. I need something bigger. None of the little stuff is cutting it. It's time to start scheming. Something with antiques and capers and burglary equipment. Something that will make a huge bang, a huge fuss. A huge emerald, a priceless artifact, the largest dinosaur tooth in the world. I obsess over plans. I read building schematics daily. My husband is locked inside his room, refusing to come out, and the stack on my coffee table grows taller until it towers over my head. I trace my descent, I make lists that roll down the stairs and out the door. I buy harnesses and smoke bombs and rob the cobwebby basement of grappling hooks and utility belts. At night we sleep with our backs against the mattress and our eyes on the ceiling. When I look at him, his eyes are always closed.

He only emerges for dinner. I pay close attention to him through the casserole, wondering if he's thinking of the suit in the closet. The police scanner comes out after dinner. He wiggles the knobs. Static envelops him until the police reports start piling up. Robbery on 3rd, no suspect found. Possible homicide on 19th, suspect may have a gun. I've started a new trend.

I go out after dinner. He only nods and shakes his hand. I change in the car and find myself sneaking into the back entrance of the Natural History Museum. I cut the hinges on the breaker box and rip out the fuses, plunging everything into darkness. Within moments, I'm sneaking through rooms, avoiding security guards with flashlights. I find the dinosaur tooth in the middle of a great hall. Large and tan with grooves running down its length. I pick it up, feeling the weight of it in my hand. It's larger than my own head. I almost drop it as someone clears their throat.

"You don't want to do this."

"You know me that well, huh?"

A pause. "I'm here to stop you."

"You can't stop me." He comes into the light and my chest pounds. The black leather suit, the mask, the original emblem on the chest, he's my superhero. Right here, in the flesh, his shining moment of glory. He's fatter than I remember, and I see the seams around his stomach straining to hold his beer gut in. But he still looks magnificent. My stomach flips over, and I feel hot underneath my suit. I'm a furnace in black. A raging wildfire in leather.

"Lady, you must be crazy to rob this place. Now hand the tooth over."

I walk up to him, and he puts his palm out for the tooth. In a flash, I'm in his arms, writhing, murmuring while he stares down at me with utter surprise in his slack mouth and jaw. His eyes are unreadable, hidden behind the lenses in his mask. I reach up and my finger traces that jawline. My other hand clenches around the tooth. His skin jumps and I grin.

"Come and get it then, hero."

A smile widens my face, showing off the perfect teeth he gave me between mouth and mirror. I spin and escape his arms as I run across the rooftops, diving off the ledge into the night.

I know he's behind me as I descend like a diver off the high board, legs together. My grappling hook flies out and I swing away from him. He moves faster than I expected for a superhero gone to seed. My landing is

less than graceful, sending pebbles and tar bits flying. I have one moment to revel in his beauty before he's here, landing in the gravel behind me, swinging a fist to meet my face. I duck and twist. His knee comes up and connects with my solar plexus, driving the wind out of my chest. Pain radiates inwards and I gasp for breath. It's a bright spot of pain inside my dark body. But my fist flies towards him, and I catch him with a right hook that pushes his head to the side with a surprising amount of force. My knuckles burn. We fight, dodging, ducking, blocking before I catch him with a lucky knee to the groin. He goes down and clutching my prize, I run across the rooftop, dashing down fire escapes and through alleys towards my car which sits a few blocks over behind a trashcan with a spare change of clothes.

I make it home only seconds before he limps in. I act concerned and bring him a cool washcloth hiding my own burning middle. I'm still out of breath. He's angry, and I smile with an inward diving smile that dips down to my chest cavity. The police scanner stays on all night long.

The next time we meet, I'm stealing a small painting from the art museum. We fight, he strikes my ribs, and I hear a sickening crack. I shoot electricity into him with a brand new Taser I bought from a man in a black pea coat on the corner. Once again I make it home, moving gingerly around the kitchen when he comes in, limping and exhausted.

After that we get bloodier. Cuts and bruises. Each bruise I count and trace with my fingertips, my lips curved. I go through tubes of concealer and boxes of powder. My closets are packed with all of the things I've stolen. I can't give away the paintings or the tooth or the rare Indian crown I took from a traveling show. So I hide them inside shoeboxes and tubs. During the day, while he's gone and I'm nursing sore parts, I sit and go through my precious stash, counting the diamonds and the emeralds inside the crown and running my bruised fingers up and down, stroking the tooth I took from the Natural History Museum downtown.

I'm staking out another place, my belly on the roof, binoculars pressed to my eyes, cutting the bridge of my nose. My phone rings and I shove it deeper into a pocket. It's intoxicating, belly down on a roof somewhere in the city, planning my next caper. To go through the scenario in my head, decide which window to break and how to do so silently. My phone beeps again with a message. My mouth goes dry. He's found my

stash and wants an answer. I ignore the message but the phone beeps again. And again. Message after message begins to pour out into the still night. I wrap my hand around the phone and toss it over the ledge. The crash doesn't reach my ears, but I imagine the screen shattered and in pieces. Green and black and white. Dead phone. Within moments, I'm climbing down into a penthouse apartment to steal a diamond necklace belonging to an heiress. The alarm goes off.

Within moments, he's there in all his leather glory. I turn to meet him, diamond necklace in hand. He's standing there on the gravelly top of an apartment building, his feet spaced perfectly, hands on his hips. A heroic pose. A practiced pose. A pose that's been photographed and stuck on front pages. I have them all saved somewhere in a closet next to everything I've stolen. He doesn't say a word at first. The diamonds are hard in my hand, matching his disappointed eyes and I realize that I don't want to give up this charade. I like this new life. And why should I go back? I've done more than I should. Than anyone should. I've washed shorts with dark stains; I've mended capes with huge holes. I've baked dishes and dishes of food I don't even like. I've stolen more than anyone has lately. I've wanted to be saved and rescued and reassured that I'm important. My joints ache. My bruises sting. Living this double life, one half wife, one half cat burglar, is wearing on me.. I untie my mask, letting him see my face.

"All I ever wanted was you." He looks up, "I didn't want to be this anymore. I wanted us to be normal, to be happy. What was wrong with that?"

"Who would want to be normal?" We stand there, watching the other breathe and think.

"The city was peaceful, calm for once! Everything I've worked for... why?" I'm afraid of that word, why. It has the power to split my body in two, to drive a cleft down the middle of my brain, peeling the two sides from each other. To force my eyes to look at that pink mass.

"Because it wasn't enough. Because you were so unhappy. I had to do something. All of this was for you! It's all been for you."

"Don't pin this on me. This has you all over it. I should have known." He turns away and I'm stuck standing there, feeling foolish. "We need to talk." He says the words with all the heaviness of a stone sinking in a pond.

"No."

He yells, he stomps, he curses and pants. I stay silent, with the damning evidence in my palm. After he pauses to take in a breath, long-winded efforts of air whooshing in and out of his reddened face, I throw the necklace over the precipice with a flick of my wrist. The diamonds fly out of my hand, cartwheeling over the ledge, following my cell phone. I watch it for a moment, the stones reflecting the street lamp as they are swallowed up by the street

“What the.....why did you do that! Go get it!” He walks over to the edge, looking over. Threatening me. “Jeez, you probably broke it! What were you thinking?! Go get it.”

“No.”

He stares at me. This is something new.

“What is going on with you? I don’t even know who you are anymore. Running around playing super-villain. Don’t you see how childish this is? How childish you’re acting? You’re just doing these stupid stunts for attention. Don’t you realize how you can hurt people with what you’re doing?”

“I’ve hurt people? I’m being childish dressing up in costumes?” My fists clench. I swing a punch at him, aiming for that masked face, praying it to be broken open like china after a hammer hits it. “You hurt me!” He dodges and grabs my fist, holding it in his gloved hand.

“Stop!”

I wrench my hand free, aiming another fist, catching him in the gut. He doubles over and I go in for the kill, hands raised above my head to bring down his world. He lifts one foot and kicks me, planting the boot’s bottom in my stomach. The force pushes me away, across the roof where I crouch on the ground, doubled over and bleeding from my mouth. Twin rivers of blood running down my chin to drip onto anonymous and hidden puddles on my black suit. He stands up again, straight, erect and I’m doubled over, fetal position, my eyes burning and tearing over. “I only wanted us to be like we were before. Don’t you see what we were missing? I have no love to give to a dentist!”

He stops, his fists up in a defensive pose. “Is that really how you feel? You can love a superhero but not a dentist?”

I look up, through my loose hair, my vision swimming. “No, not anymore. You used to be bigger than you are now. You can’t be happy pulling teeth for a living.”

“I am.” He doesn’t sound convincing.

“Join me.” It’s pushed out, through my mouth and past my lips. The last temptation.

“How can you even ask me that? You want me to become a criminal, like you? I’m a hero. ”

“Yes.”

“You’re insane. Give this up and come home. Make your casseroles, do your laundry. Be a regular woman and stop with the stupid games.”

Be a regular woman? Go back to what I was before? The being saved by him, being rescued, not being able to walk down the street without being a target. Cooking his dinner, mending his cape, playing watch-the-clock, listening for the phone in case he wound up dead? Wondering what I would do if I ended up a widow of a superhero? Lying in bed alone and untouched, empty? No. No I have a purpose now. I’ve become the villain. The opposite of the hero, his nemesis. I think of the glittering jewels in my closet, of the tooth I’ve held and stroked and treasured. I think of the fear on the teller’s faces when I’ve robbed banks. How their eyes darted from window to door, praying for someone to rescue them too. They don’t need rescuing. I don’t need rescuing.

I turn and start to walk away, crunching gravel under my boots.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

I keep walking to the other edge of the building, breathing deeply.

“I asked you a question. Get back here!”

I reach the edge and dive off, a perfect swan dive, nose pointed down, and my lips curve into a smile. The air rushes past my face and the ground is coming to greet me with its cool grey face.

My borrowed grappling hook gun comes out, the metal claw shooting above me to grab onto a ledge and my falling descent swoops into a large arc. I’m swinging, singing through the air, the cool air biting and stinging, grip tightened around the gun and cord. I tingle and feel nothing underneath my feet until I land, less than gracefully. I hit the ground running, and I keep running and running across the rooftops leaving behind the superhero I married.



Persian Fable

Sanam Shahmiri

I want to take part in some ritual I can understand
or play with the lights out and candles burning
like when my grandma sewed me a *chador* from leftover sheets;
I would mimic her prayerful movement
kneel towards the north and exclaim in a solemn whisper:
“*Bismillah ar-Raman ar-Raheem,*”
always misquoting but the feeling was right.

I believed in something then,
like my grandmother hiding money in the folds of her breasts,
in the middle of the Koran, and
under the hand-woven rug in the living room.
She fed me plates of peeled and salted fruit
(sealed and skinned)
and lit concealed cigarettes from the stove.

A day dress, washing dishes
she used her wrists to turn rope for me
each jump a revolution tied to a stairway banister.
In the middle of the living room,
at the front door,
she would sit at the steps

and watch my youth bouncing up and down.
It was all games for me then
as she massaged her knees, a leg propped up on the chair across
from her, forming a bridge.
Some nights I still see her in the same recurring nightmare,
she's falling through the bridge across the LA River in Reseda

and I cannot reach her.

Maybe that's why it rained so much at her funeral
to remind me to hold on, even if it's only to a dream.

Persian fables always start:
Yeki bood, yeki nabood.

(There was one, and there wasn't one).
This is what she taught me as I jumped without looking.

The City of Oakland's Memorable Sunsets

Eric Barnhart

Ana dances in the burning
embers of morning as Tom Waits
sings the tune of Oakland traffic.
She speaks in clouds
about the cycle of human
precipitation, I dispel myself
in vapor-rise up
through the branches
of the elm lined streets,
then drip down with the rain
of the afternoon—drunken
fingers dancing across the piano
keys of commune gardens and fall leaves
and recycled cups
of independent coffee shops.

I wonder if I'm over
romanticizing the situation.
Ana and I.

We share our thoughts in second-
hand gestures and single shot bottles
we toast like champagne glasses
chilled with memories
we pulled from ice trays—puddles
poured from our open palms,
because *we* live only in what
we breathe.

Ana moves through my fingers,
across my lips. And even though I can exhale
her body, there's a part of her still clinging
to my lungs that stains my teeth and
lingers.

As the steam clears
from our coffee cups
and the smoke from our lungs,
the moment
of *we*
rolls in with the evening fog.



Pray for Us

Danielle Orozco

Don't scratch the scabs Mijita, pray. Para que?

Abuelita looks me in the eyes, away from her clasped leather hands wired with veins.

For them.

This room has become a prison, with shadows that hide in the walls. The stench of candle wax burns through my nostrils and the image of Abuelita's wooden Christ up on the cross gazes down—tormented, suffering, weeping. The painted acrylic blood glistens as if it were freshly trickling from the wounds on his thorn-adorned head. His image scrapes in my mind.

Scratch, scratch. Abuelita.

She doesn't hear me, her lips moving spastically and silently. Candles which burn day and night scatter light across her face, making her appear like she's stuck in the fire. In the shadows. Silent, but hearing nothing. I get up from sitting cross-legged on Abuelita's quilt rug to try and hear something.

No abras las cortinas! Don't Mijita.

She's pointing a bony, knowing finger at me, rage bordering along the edges of her sunken eye sockets. Her mouth resembles a thin line drawn on old paper.

Scratch. Can't I go outside? Don't you think there are people out there? Who need our help?

No Mijita. Afuera, quieren sangre. Nada mas.

She lights another candle, cupping the flame with her hand so that she can light the wick. Her eyes are black, set in her line-cracked face.

No necesita ayuda. They need prayer.

She lights another candle, steadying the fire.

So that they can see through the Darkness.

Treinta dias. Treinta dias, and the sun still hasn't come back. Mysterious

noises howl out in the night sounding like strangled, tortured souls.

The curtains remain closed while Abuelita sleeps under her quilt. Only wisps of her gray hair poke out from underneath the colorful lump. The candles continue to burn with determination, the wax bubbling to a nub. There are few candles left, and every day the temperature drops 1.5 degrees. I can't even look outside to see if they're even still there.

Estoy sola.

Scratch, scratch. I look down at my arm and remember that Abuelita has placed a bandage over my scabs so that I would stop itching them. The bandage is loose now, with the tape curling at the ends in haphazard directions. I check to make sure Abuelita is asleep before I peel the bandage off, finding the scabs are deeper and more infected. Red, swollen, dried skin surrounds the wounds, and I flake some of the dead skin off. The two puncture wounds are still there, hollow as ever. I hesitate.

Scratch. Scratch.

He's looking at me!

I wake up screaming. Thrashing like a wild dog. Possessed by a demon. The silver chained manacles cut into my wrists and bind me to the wall, but they are not enough to conceal the terror of what I've become. I'm snarling, hissing, like that man in the grocery store. Eyes as rojo as ever. Mis dientes...my teeth like white blades of death. My voice, inhumane like it has ascended from the depths of hell. Abuelita, in tears, crossing herself over mechanically and finally, the bath of holy water. She pours a full bottle on me, my skin sizzling, searing off the bone and I, la monstrea, scream in pain. An inhumane scream.

You cannot know what is in my heart Mijita, en mi corazón.

Her words are black ashes, nada en el fuego. My eyes fixate on the tendon in her warm neck. The blood courses quickly, spastically. My chest huffs violently, animalistically.

I'm only full of thirst.

It took forty days, forty days for the infection to complete.

He's looking at me. Abuelita. Ese hombre allí. That man over there. Me está viendo.

The man with the red eyes, he stares at me from the end of the grocery aisle, the lights blinking haphazardly. A florescent light swings above

him, shorting sparks. The sparks, they land on his skin and disintegrate the flesh on his shoulder into coin-sized pockets. Abuelita, she's hurrying me along, with cans bolstered in her shoulder.

Abuelita.

Suddenly he's upon me like a starving animal. His elongated fangs sear through my pear soft skin, blood coursing along my arm in veiny rivulets. I'm screaming under his stony weight, my sneakers kicking at the air mercilessly.

And then I see my grandmother.

She is behind him, kissing a wooden cross.

Right before she stakes him straight through the heart, with a cold calculating expression.

Vaya con DIOS, she trembles, spitting as she drives the stake deeper until the gory tip has passed all the way through his body. Blood splatters across her unchanging face, soiling her gray hair.

He screams in agony and releases my arm, which hisses blood freely. I clutch at it while the vampire's blackened frame crumples like ash in a bonfire.

Esta muerto. Vámonos.

She sweeps me up in her arms, abandoning the cans like forgotten tin relics.

That's the first time I vomit blood. Black like an obsidian ocean.

Cuando el sol se fue—when the sun left, there was panic in the streets. People flocked to the markets, to the stores, anywhere where they could get food or water. They clawed their way through the aisles, forsaking their neighbors and friends. Bread went first—water second. The meal of prisoners, citizens under house arrest. Because after that, los monstruos llegaron.

La noche—the night, it revealed terrible things, things unknown to humans before the sun permanently disappeared. The substance of nightmares, of horrific realities. Through the night, their fangs tore and still rip open the flesh of our neighbors freely, without a conscience, without a soul.

How then will our humanity be saved? We've sacrificed mothers, fathers, brothers, daughters....When will the bloodshed end?

The temperature continues to drop.

If we will not die by the hands of los monstruos, we will die by frost.

I'm not myself anymore. The gold cross around my neck, which has blackened, remains as a reminder of who I once was and who I can never be again. I lie in my own skin and blood, passed out from torture.

Abuelita, a once composed woman who feared not life itself, huddles in a corner. Never blinking an eye, watching the beast slumber in the darkness. She weeps. Even through the bitter cold, she has been dreaming, dreaming for salvation. She has been protecting her granddaughter, hoping that the deadly sickness would go away. Her prayers, her unanswered prayers have evaporated into the air, and all that's left is silence. She neither blinks nor moves, afraid that any tedious movement could set this demon off. Death is a much harder thing, she thinks to herself, when it is drawn out. Like sangre being squeezed out of a mosquito bite. She realizes that she was a fool for believing her one esperanza en el mundo could actually survive this tierra de muerte. And so through The Valley of Death—

Abuelita, unwillingly, she takes up her stake, brown with dried blood, and raises it high above the sleeping beast.

“Lo siento Mijita,” she sobs into the pocket of her dress, “Lo siento.”

And then the demon's eyes, those red holes of damnation—se abren.



Disquietude

George Fekaris

Because I've a temperament,
I don't need a philosophy.

The dirt mug's a wrinkled mien in rain,
that's all. What's left, omitted from goop
primordial? Nothing. My face isn't other
than dirt, and I'm merely weather.

I can't contrast caring and meandering.

. . . music, like a castle in the dark,
when the mayor took office. The clouds,
so night-grey, might've convinced me
they've never seen a sunset. The whole
city was standing, animal-eyed, in suits.
He spoke. Scandal materialized months later.
Now, budget cuts threaten my little
nothing job, which I love. I walked home,
to my room, sleep, and dreams.

I can't separate the words *awake* and *nauseous*.

"I'm sick, or I'm asleep.
I'm awake, or I'm writing.
Let me be, please,
I enjoy food more than I admit."
— Bernardo Soares
(He didn't write that. He didn't
write half of what he wrote.)

I'm dreaming of membranes
between words, precisely,

as I write. Telling myself of myself
there's a sales block, city shops,
empty except for more
names, briefs, and prices
of products than can fill
the emptiness, as I write.

I don't know what I mean,
and I never will.

Why must the neighbor bison always have the radio on!

A funny thing: laughter.
I prefer laughing at laughing people
to laughing at what they fall for.

Another thing: I'm not morose,
I'm anticipatory.

Living is a ripening of degradations.

Blue Veil

Freddy Garcia

We think there is a man
watching us behind the blue veiled sky,
writing our names in bullet point
like Wednesday's grocery list,
selecting the ingredients
for the industrial sector under his reign.

At night we glimpse at the shine
of heavenly bodies that mirror our synapses,
struggling for junction to ignite the distant yearning for a tear.
We can only stare for so long; when last call for stars occurs
the Sun bounces us for lingering.

The forbidden after-party behind the blue never ends;
the stars glisten like models on walkways waiting
for the specks of our eyes to align with theirs.

Then –
from the cosmos of our memories –
 our odyssey
 – we return,
deciphering how past lovers are
prerequisites for our existential singularity,
gazing out the window into celestial wonder.

What Remedies Extinction in Shelby County

Jeffrey Alfier

There are times when heavy rains like this come,
the kind our congregation prays too hard for,

and your eyes would find your visage pooled
in tractor ruts, face and hands sharing the mirrored
path of crows, as if the birds had sprung from you,

their forms dark against the green hope of cotton
crops to come, your breath the only sound.

Here, we lose words for the shuttered mills,
their pine floors and bricks plundered for other
kingdoms. Come night, trees flanking this field

will gather stars in their branches. Low winds
will lessen the fragmenting of wings.

Datura vs. Primrose

Amanda Beaudet

The sun comes over the mountains, white hot and fast. Ferris watches the desert wake up. The fiddlenecks and lacy phacelia sway with a breeze he hadn't noticed but must be there. The blooms are so top-heavy that their movement is crooked and drunk, pale violets and oranges crashing into one another.

"Happy birthday," Ferris says. His voice booms out over the dirt and the cacti. He doesn't keep it down like he used to, no longer self-conscious or afraid of anyone hearing him. Ferris enjoys his voice now, deeper and stronger like he remembers his father's, and gets his use out of it when he can.

He scuffs a toe in the dirt, reaches a hand out to straighten the wooden cross that serves as a grave marker. He's been meaning to make something better, has been meaning to since the day Shannon died. Ferris feels guilty that he hasn't, like he always does when he remembers about it. The lump in his throat is never enough to motivate him.

It's still early but Ferris can already feel the sun growing hot on the back of his neck. He reaches a hand back to pull up the knot of the bandana tied around his throat to protect the soft skin from sunburn. It's also a nervous habit, learned from looting dead towns. Protecting oneself from the sickness, the plague, and ultimately, death.

He says, "We're twenty-four today." Ferris knows how Shannon would protest that, with a need for order in the world. He was *really only* nineteen and that he'd forever be *really only* nineteen. Ferris knows the style of argument and that's why he says it. Because he always said it and always will.

Breaking out into a small smile, he says, "I tried to bake a cake. I still have your recipe, y'know?" Ferris scratches at his chin, fingers catching on the dark stubble there. He continues, "Didn't work, hard as a fuckin' brick, Shan." His voice cracks on his brother's nickname.

Ferris sighs, says, "Anyways." It is such a forced casual that Ferris himself can't believe it and it makes him laugh. It's been a while since he's had to act. There has been no one to impress for a long time.

He turns from the grave and sets off toward the house. Ferris gets three steps away before he turns around. He looks at the sad, weathered wooden cross and says, “Miss you” before turning back around and continuing on.

Sitting down on the porch steps, Ferris opens a mason jar and takes a swig of tequila. He and Shan had found that stockpile together, twenty-six jars hidden away in the storeroom of a butcher a few towns over.

This is his second-to-last jar and it’s one-third full. Ferris knows this, regrets the ones he’s had in the past seven months just because they’re not there anymore. He figures it must be around seven in the morning and leans to his side and against the railing. Ferris has time.

He drinks and watches the garden. He gets a small thrill from seeing the herbs lined up orderly in their rows. The garden was always Shannon’s. Ferris remembers being fifteen and hormonal, going to town to kiss girls like Susanne Everett and Kathleen March behind the general store. Shannon never went with him, instead stayed kneeling in the dirt, pulling weeds. He remembers being so confused, why would you want to touch leaves when you could feel the electric pulse of real, human skin?

Ferris understands now, has understood for months. It’s no epiphany. There are good people and bad people, and it’s natural to be one or the other. His father was bad. His Gran was good. Shannon was good. He finishes his jar and tosses it off the porch and to the left. The glass clanks when it is reunited with its brethren. He stands, digs his hands deep into his pockets until it hurts and the fabric is straining.

It is easier than he thought it would be to pour out his last jar of tequila. Ferris spreads it over the mullein, over the burdock root, over everything thriving in the shadow of the house. He takes out the matchbook stuffed in his back pocket.

Ferris has never seen something prettier than that garden burning under the rising morning sun.

Post Script

Jaclyn Hymes

You open me
the way you pry
apart an envelope:
thrusting your finger
through the crease
where spit once created
adhesion.

Gutted,
you discard me
into the waste basket
where I remain crumpled
and unread.

Monsters

Freddy Garcia

Under a table concealed by a translucent white cloth swayed by the breeze, two young girls sit playing with their dolls. Here, the rules that govern consist of solace and amusement. Even the sun envies such a blameless reality as it attempts to penetrate. An abrupt jolt from above disturbs the utopia. Both children frantically pierce through the fabric: the sight of a bleeding man violently dragged by another. The wounded man catches sight of the young girls and tells them to hide, he won't see you! as he is dragged away. Both girls simultaneously retract behind the white cloth and eclipse the monsters. A third jolt is felt, more severe than the previous, spoiling the white guise to tumble, revealing all. A tall man jumps off the table onto the pavement holding a 12-gauge shotgun. His attention is caught by the whimpering of both girls and he turns to them as they hold each other dearly. Their white dresses soiled. The man loses himself at this sight of chastity and releases a dormant smile of nostalgia, revealing withering teeth. He turns and continues after the two men as the young girls intertwine with the gloom from the foreign pulse of the world.

Transverse

Kyle Harris

And you take Celeste here,
well, he's gonna end
up Chuck. Chuck'll
just never change. Destiny

on the other hand, crimson
lipstick was just always his
tone. Down the street
you'll see Miss Divine

in Lady D's
bar, bursting
out Midler or Manilow. Most
typical, oh predictable. Me?

Honeybaby, I'm
all yours. Tonight,
listen to me though,
shush, I know all, doll.

Me, I am out
finding a name. Names. Only
words like magnesium sulfate.
I was soaking my sore skin

in this stuff, salt.
Sulfate. Soul. Fate.
My body was never so melo-
dramatic. I want your name,

But you! oh we should
marry. A fabulous!
Gaudy! Fuckitall!
wedding. With a winding

down staircase, my little
cantaloupe.

The Strange Places He Lived

Gina Srmabekian

I

The man wants to remain that way; alone. Nevertheless, the places they occupy are becoming less concrete by day. By night, the skin on her face is the sheets pulled tightly over the corners of the mattress on which his restlessness turns him in his sleep.

Where is the outside?

Darling. The pet names that replaced them, the wobble-wobble of their tongues supplanting gestures of the eyes that expressed a more contained knowledge of one another: this is how it began. She was him and he was another far too long to become her.

This is how it began. Once, when the man was a boy, a lightning bolt struck the outside of their home and emptied his father of piss and emptied his mother of fear and she left and she left and she left in the sky so that always this other would try to replace her; this she that is him only because she is not herself, always remembers to kiss him on the mouth even when he has not yet brushed his teeth. Even when he has not yet called her from his pillow this night, like others, where she is a pincushion against his black-stubble beard, ridden and written off.

When the man was a boy and the lightning struck a tree in his front yard, he buried his hands in the ashes of it; after his mother flew over an ocean and his father became a half-bag of wheat in the corner, every morning for breakfast in a bowl of milk, "Eat, eat you bastard," before school. And those ashes that stuck with sap underneath his fingers, he'd drag across the white surface of her closet door until a discernible leaf started to form and from that leaf came the tree he drew to which that half-bag of wheat replied, "The roots come first, you dimwit."

And that was true, of course, but the man when he was a boy did not

know where his roots had gone, and then, as a man, had realized that it hadn't been a tree he had drawn. He'd drawn a man that ended at every stem with leaves that turned at every corner back around, like sap that without him seeing stuck; like his wife that without him hearing speaks.

"Don't forget the laundry tomorrow," she says finally, but he is staring out the window, out, out, and through the branches of a tree that is a maze that is a maze that is a noose that is a noose.

II

When he does not return she places the dry-cleaning receipt on the kitchen table and waits. She places the dry cleaning receipt underneath the salt shaker; she places the dry cleaning receipt underneath the pepper. She uses a magnet to stick the dry-cleaning receipt onto the freezer door and then she is satisfied that he will see it when he returns and places his sweaty cap in the place for sweaty caps and his keys in the place she reserves for love notes and takes a beer so he can leave her again in a place where she can't follow. She thinks about knocking over the salt shaker to see whether the salt will take the shape of the imprint of his hands, pressed palm down around the bottle, but the salt only spills in the way it is intended to.

She is surprised when she lets the chair fall behind her as she stands, and even more so when the salt is left spilling over the side of the table where he will sit when he returns. She remembers that in her night classes she was told that the brain has already sent a message to her arm to pick up her purse before she has even thought to do so. It cannot be her that leaves the front door open that walks through the gate and to her car. It cannot be her that looks past the neighbors waving and the dogs defecating on the sidewalk.

But she does. It is only when she arrives at her mother's house that she remembers she is a daughter, that she was in the high school choir, that she was once told her voice was not like a siren but that her voice was the sailor's that sang from underneath the water.

"I found this note," she tells her mother at the door.

The note is on yellow paper with no folds; horizontal lines on which his

mismatched letters formed a few brief words; some on the line and some slash through them and some curling back on each other like a noose. Her mother looks at the note and takes two steps back, enough to let her in and still reach the door in time to let nothing else out.

III

The man rises without bending at the back so that if his wife were to have opened her eyes from her dreams she would have thought for one brilliant moment that he was the moon floating over her bed. The outside of his right foot touches the floor first, then the inside of his left. He pushes his toes into a creaking floorboard and the silence is broken for an inaudible moment, as if the house took in one listless breath and never exhaled.

Underneath the floorboard underneath his right foot is the living room ceiling, with insulation in between and

III

The woman stands her hands at her sides, the yellow note sticking out from between her index and her thumb like a bad report card. Her mother directs her attention to the lace curtains, the ones she'd sewn herself, as a wedding gift to her husband. She slides the rungs over the rod and the light disappears from behind it. The mother goes next to the back door, the window seat in the kitchen, and then brushes past the woman to the eyelet in the front door and covers it with a small golden disk.

"Did you look?" she finally asks, her back to her daughter, her eyebrows burrowed because the light is still getting in, getting in from the seams in the curtains, and the cracks in the door and the ruptures that her dead husband had never bothered to seal before he'd gone.

"No."

"Good," the mother sighs with her shoulders, "There's no coming back from there."

The mother walks past her and into the kitchen and soon the sound of water running and the tick of the stove hail the woman, now a girl, in the presence of the mother. But she does not go; instead she stands in the

spot that she stood all her childhood, reciting poetry and singing songs in a language she only knew the sound of.

From this exact point every room in the house is visible; the fireplace mantle curves around the pictures of her at her baptism, graduation, prom queen, a multitude of blue ribbons, bronze medals, and then an entire cabinet of pictures with teachers, with gold trophies, with certificates with words that she never felt were hers. And the eyes, the eyes of all her teachers, the eyes of her father staring solemn from his portrait, the eyes of her prom date and the corsage like a collar and the time she sang at the opera house and the time she wrote for the newspaper but not one picture from her wedding and she realizes that for long, much longer than she'd been her husband, she'd been her own mother, that she'd never been herself, that she'd been her teachers—that she'd never known to leave until he had come and got her and then she'd left, she'd left so she could leave their eyes here behind her.

“And you married him,” says her mother from over her shoulder, two cups of tea and a sugar bowl balanced on a tray. The woman wonders if she were to knock over the sugar, if she were to tell her mother about the salt spilling somewhere, if she were to let the sugar fall into the cracks in the floorboards, if it would make a perfect imprint of herself but her mother wants to talk about his mother, the one who never listened to reason either, the one who was always half-in and then half-out of her way.

“It's a good thing you didn't have kids,” says her mother, “It's a good thing he didn't pass it down to your kids.”

Once, when the man had been a boy, lightning had struck outside his home. The half-bag of wheat had explained that his mother was a whore who left on the train saying something about the tree, something about the tree that caught on fire that had finally broken the silence inside her. Then when the boy could not stop crying, the half-bag of wheat told him she was on vacation, at the spa, on an island, in a desert but still the boy drew those damn leaves and the closet became a shrine. One day, the bag of wheat told the boy she'd never been there, she was a ghost even before him, she was ghost who'd never died—and only then did the boy stop drawing.

“Are you still in pajamas?” the mother asks, pouring a teaspoon of sugar and the woman wants to tell her she needs the sugar to make a cast of herself; instead she explains about the laundry, that he was to get the laundry and that he was probably there now getting her clean clothes so that she could go to the funeral home and start making plans.

“Go get your clothes,” says the mother, “and leave the note with me.”

III

The woman is standing in her pajamas at the dry cleaners. The worker is younger than she has ever been and today she is as old as she will ever be.

“I forgot my ticket,” she says when the silence demands she speak.

“Oh,” he says, “that’s alright,” he coos, because despite herself she is still very frail and her frailty makes her beautiful to boys who can break her. He looks at the screen in front of him, his hands at the ready, and only when she looks at his hands does she realize her index finger and thumb are still holding an imaginary note in between them.

“I don’t have a ticket,” she repeats as if it’s a mantra, as if it’s an apology, “and I didn’t look.”

But the boy thinks that she means look hard enough, and he reminds her again that he has her in the system: did she drop off the dry-cleaning or did her husband and was her husband the strange man who wouldn’t sign the receipt?

“He doesn’t believe in names,” she answers and now her hand is crushing the imaginary note, now her hand is cutting into her wedding band, now her hand is white knuckled with blue vertical lines going down where he marked her with a name he refused to call her.

“Mrs. ****? Would you mind signing here?” He is waving a paper at her and she almost signs kitten and she almost signs with a symbol and she almost signs with a squiggle but then she prints her name.

“Aliona,” he reads, “That’s beautiful, where is it from?”

But she can only say “Please, again” and she can hear each letter of her name like spilt sugar in the hardwood tiles of her childhood, unseen but

sweet and sticking together on his tongue.

“Please, again!” she says louder, and he repeats her name strangely, and then with more passion with every peal of her laughter, and then as if he understands that her name, her name is her, and she has been so tired of being half-out, she has been so tired of being half-out, that she finally wants to be all in.

IIII

The mother is having a dream or she is just waking up when she hears someone call her name. Not her name, no, not a name she has heard for more than thirty years: “Mother” he says.

“Mother, wake up.”

She sits up in bed and stares out into the Prague dawn and waits again to hear her neighbor’s son rouse his mother but no Czech words filter through her thin walls so she is left staring into the blue blue curtains with a spot of growing orange. It is 6 a.m. and she should sleep but she is waiting for the name from the neighbor’s son so that she can sleep before that orange turns into a blistering yellow sun and sets the trees outside of her apartment on fire. She waits and waits but no name is said except she can’t still that crackling blood from flowing hard at what could be—the phone rings—

Mother, wake up.

But there is silence at first, and then a deafening drum that she mistakes for music until she realizes it’s her heart and then a silence that is moving like the wind between the branches of a tree, like the line of the telephone is swinging back and forth between the leaves, like the line of the telephone is hanging from her neck but she can breathe, she can breathe again for the first time since when? And then her ears hot like fire and her throat choked like ashes and then, yes, at first she couldn’t hear it, but there it is the sound of nothing and there in the sound of nothing is the sound of her screaming, finally, screaming, finally, I can hear you! Finally, I can hear you!

“My son!” she cries, “You’ve come home!”

What Would This City

Cody Deitz

be if Jesus of Nazareth never
paced water to meet Peter, poised carefully
on the substance he Himself forged?

Would boys not be guilty
of thought-crime,
instead blessed by dreams of Eve's

wet lips briefly bitten, hips
curved, breasts
held by hooked bra
like two Hail Marys?

What would we do
with all our guilt-
free people, loving their bodies
and their neighbors', afterwards walking
hand-in-hand to the temple
of Tongue and Teeth, leaving wreaths
and offerings of soft peaches
and apples, one liquid bite
gone from their sun-kissed flesh?



The Substance of Shadows

Stephanie Dotto

It wasn't until I got home from the market that I realized I had lost my shadow. It's not the sort of thing that draws your attention right away. Sure I felt a bit lighter, but I figured it was because I had been skipping meals as of late.

We had been arguing quite a bit lately. More so than usual, I would say. Or at least more than one would assume they would have to. She wanted more time in the sun and I had become quite the homebody since Ian and I called it quits, trapping myself between familiar walls and closed curtains. It was hard to get out of bed much less get myself into a matching pair of socks. She hated getting tangled in the linens, contorting her dark form over the curves and caverns of my low thread count sheets. I hadn't changed my bed in weeks and the pillows still smelled like his aftershave. Creepy, I admit, but that was all that he left behind.

The market was the first place I had gone in days. Being unemployed and unattached makes it easy to become lost in your own narrow hallways. But the milk had gone solid and I wasn't ready to start feeding whatever life forms were sprouting on what used to be a loaf of bread. I could feel her getting anxious, dancing restlessly behind me along the linoleum floor. She started leaving notes around the apartment. I stepped out of the shower one day to find a shopping list scrawled in the steam on the mirror:

Milk

Bread

Vodka

Admittedly, my shadow was a drinker. Every time I'd turn away, she'd steal a sip of whatever liquor was in the cabinets. I found myself buying a bottle a week. I never collected enough courage to call her out on it, but it was on my list of things to do. She wasn't harming anyone, merely making it more expensive for me to buy groceries.

I should have paid more attention. She had threatened to leave in the

past, but I never saw her intimidations as substantial. She was mine just as much as anyone's shadow was their own. She must have bolted the second I stepped out the front door. I had been so wrapped up in my own sordid thoughts that I didn't check to make sure she was still behind me. This was probably why parents put their kids on leashes. There was an odd sense of shame in letting a part of you slip away. It was like losing a cherished childhood memory or a sentimental family secret. She had told me once that she wanted to run off to Paris to become a poet. I shook it off as an empty dream, never imagining her to be such a bohemian. Even when I caught her trying to learn French I couldn't allow myself to believe she would ever follow through with it. To be honest, I didn't really know she could even go off on her own. But I was finding the world to be more mysterious than I had previously imagined. The day she left I stared down at my feet for a few seconds, seeing nothing but the tops of my shoes and the carpet underneath them. Stepping back and forth made no difference. It was only me. Sad, lonely, shadowless me.

As the weeks passed I started to notice a change in my pigmentation. At first I just thought it was a vitamin D deficiency. I was born painfully pale and the lack of sunlight and unfiltered oxygen only emphasized my delicate features. But it wasn't until last Tuesday that I realized I could see the faint outline of the television through my skin when I held my palms up to my eyes. It only got worse as the days went on. Now I wasn't afraid to leave my apartment because I was sad, but because I was becoming increasingly more transparent.

I called Ian in a state of panic and told him I thought I was fading away. He accused me of being melodramatic and hung up the phone. By Sunday I wasn't able to hold solid objects for more than a minute. No matter how tightly I pressed my hand against whatever I picked up, it slipped through my skin before landing on the floor with a thud. I broke a few coffee cups before I realized what was going on. Seeing as I had no experience with any sort of deterioration, I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do. Did the doctors have a cure for transparency? Had they ever even seen it before? Would they even be able to see it now?

By Monday I had convinced myself that I was going crazy. Sure I could see through my arms but hadn't I always been able to do that? I started to doubt whether I had even had a shadow to begin with when her postcard slipped itself through the mail slot in my front door. *Greetings*

from Grand Old Paris. Apparently the wine in Paris was to-die-for.

On Wednesday I decided it was all in my head and it was time for me to go outside. The problem was, I couldn't quite get a hold of the door-knob. Whereas most people would be able to wrap their fingers around the handle, my hand simply passed through it. A state of panic spread through my body. Before, I was unwilling to leave my house. Now it was entirely impossible.

My landlord stopped by at the end of the month demanding the rent that I had neglected to pay. Seeing that it was out of the question for me to even leave my apartment, I had left a few inevitable bills unattended. After a couple of days (and no visible sign of me) he came to the conclusion that I had skipped town and called the people who take care of these sort of situations. I tried to protest, but it seemed that I had lost the ability to be seen by others. I had become a faint outline of a human being, hovering in the corner. I watched as they tore my life into pieces, packing up memories and everything I had ever called my own. Every now and then, one of the repo men would stop and stare, thinking they had seen a ghost before shaking it off and getting back to work.

And finally there was nothing left. Just me and an empty apartment. I couldn't shout, I couldn't scream. I could do nothing more than exist, trapped within the house I had condemned myself to. I wandered through the rooms, trying to remember what it felt like to be human. It all slipped through my intangible fingers: the taste of sweet coffee in the morning and the scruff of a man's cheek against my smooth skin. A few weeks later a young couple moved in to the apartment. I watched as the girl's shadow hung close to her, not defying her or dreaming of a life outside the bond that they shared. She seemed so happy. It was a pity, watching her live her life without any inclination that the dark, shapely form drifting behind her was all that was keeping her from fading away.

Sunday

Lucy Galstyan

*Never cut to the chase,
my mother says,
the day is too short.*

Forgetting the tall glass of lemonade sweating
in the kitchen
I hold a blackberry to my lips,
relishing its tartness.

My mother offers me another, the black juice
staining her hands.

Outside my sisters play hide-and-peek
under a cloudless
sky, tiptoeing
across summertime cement,
shadows close by,
the world in their pockets.

Capes and Comics

Robin Smith

*Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy—F. Scott
Fitzgerald*

The day your adopted mom left you
at a Shell in exchange for fuel
the cars and hours slipped
into inked twilight and coyotes
yipped around emerald dumpsters

you began to wish not for the warm
back seat of her Volvo,
but the comics you left there:

Superman, Batman, and Spiderman
Left by each of their parents
to become something much greater
than a simple Hero.

As the last coyote sang to husk
of moon, you tugged the red cape
closer to your shoulders,

felt curb and sidewalk fall away
the world is so much smaller up
where you are born and held
tight by wind.



Embers and the Fire

Christian Cardenas

It was on fire. It was on fire and I told them this, and it wasn't that they didn't hear me, because I'm sure they had ears, it wasn't that it wasn't important—because they would also be consumed by the flames, spiraling in and out of control like amateur brush strokes, smothered by the black of the smoke crawling gingerly through our pores, through their lungs, up my nose, down her blouse, under his nails, into the cell in my heart and crawling gingerly back to the outside, blinded by the cinders shooting

down

down

down

up and away

ripping apart plastic and flesh, wood, and the cotton on our backs, forced to move, bend, angle, hook, lean, loop, and contort in a new and strange way, because they too would be killed indefinitely, dead, without question, and without fail—it was only that they had already begun speaking.

El's words were quite beautiful to listen to, even then, even though they had to muscle their way through the heavy suffocating humidity, I loved them, as if they were musical notes that did, what musical notes inevitably do, pierce the soul, yes, I loved them that much. El was a very tall man for his age, a six foot tall man I would have expected to lose posture and continuously look as if falling forward, hunched, always forward, but, as if in defiance to my singular thoughts about the matter, he stood triumphantly erect with a receding hairline that no one seemed to care about, with his nose hairs burning up before us. He didn't notice though, he simply continued talking of people and things, of places and obstacles, looking at Em, my beautiful Em, the same Em that understood what it was that Qfwfq must have felt as he fell into the void at a parallel to Ursula, who fell into the same void, though much more comfortable and oblivious to the empty space around her. Everything on Em, of Em, was still perfectly left intact, save for her garments, which ever so slowly began to tarnish and descend to the floor, revealing more and more of her mocha

colored skin, not milk-chocolatey, but mocha; piece by piece it all unraveled before him and me, as I stared, as he continued to pontificate, as she listened, listened to whatever it was that was coming out of his mouth. I suspect that she loved his words almost as much as I did. Not yet nude, Em was sweating profusely, as we all were, I only feel the need to mention this in reference to her since it's much more lovely to think of sweat rolling off of a voluptuous woman's breasts or neck or back or stomach than it is an old man and myself.

Do you understand?

At this point, though the flames were all around us, in every room, down every hallway and around every picture frame and book I owned, on every spine—decimating Murakami as easily as Mazzucchelli—there was still enough open space to walk around, not in complete discomfort, but yes, indeed still burning. The wooden beams above the ceiling, the ones that I'd never before seen throughout my existence living in that place, ripped through the cascading drywall and forced all of us to turn our shoulders inward and then outward, in a sort of rhythm, as the conversation became mobile. Though the soles of my shoes were holding together quite well, it wasn't too long on our walk through the wreckage of the twenty-sixth floor until they eventually smoldered and sank in somewhere amongst the lower layer of smoke that was content hovering just beneath our knees. El, having wrapped up his thoughts, took off his jacket and placed it over Em's shoulders in time to protect her from a rogue ember targeting the back of her shoulder, set to etch itself into her and go wherever she went, do the things that she did, smile and cry at the things that made Em smile and cry, instead it died on the gray tweed jacket that had made its way over her shoulder just seconds prior. It was her turn to talk now, and she didn't notice the longing in his eyes as he did this, as he smiled as I would were I to be doing the same thing. I don't believe people like Em take particular notice when someone like El or even myself gesture ourselves in such a transparent way, only after, way way later, while she's pouring creamer into her half-cleaned coffee cup while reading *The Brothers Karamazov* only partially impressed, will she pause for a second and ruminate on him and me, on us, acting like shy little boys clutching tightly to an arcane notion; she'll do this and smile to herself, realizing that she put in a little too much creamer in a cup of coffee that she wanted more bitter, tossing Dostoyevsky's artifact aside, completely alone because it didn't dawn on her until just that moment that she could

have smiled while we were around, while we were watching her, waiting and waiting while the building was burning, while everything was ablaze to see the lines in the corners of her mouth raise up and create a smile, no matter how small, yes, it still would have been worth it to stand there with my soles melted away somewhere, with El's nose hairs burned up, with my library on fire, it still would have been worth it, but, just now having the chance to talk after El contained the words falling out of his mouth, she seized the opportunity and began to speak just like she always does, with a nonchalant grace, leaving the smile to sit behind the borders of her face and wait until it was called for, and not a second sooner.

As she spoke, I noticed that a tiny combustion lingering on the bottom edge of my t-shirt had grown into a large combustion, I hadn't given it much thought since we all had some sort of fire going on somewhere on our bodies, mine was the little spark that I just mentioned, Em's was on the right sleeve of her new jacket, and El's was the dull gray tie around his neck, almost completely swallowed by this point up to the knot, we were all fine with this, we were walking through a burning building, this was OK, what concerned me was that my attention was being deviated from Em, I was only trying to listen, really I was, I wanted to hear what she had to say about the things she was talking about, I wanted there to be no surprises, I wanted to confirm the fact that I knew everything that could possibly make its way past her pink lips and be OK with it, but I couldn't concentrate with the fire digging into my abdomen and up my side, the flames were too wild, too violent...so I ran.

I didn't bother taking off my shirt, at least not immediately, I merely took down the hall and proceeded to thrust my legs one in front of the other and back in front of the other—barefoot and all—at such a fast pace that I thought maybe I could put out the fire on myself if I just ran a little faster, with a little more speed I'll be able to leave the fire behind, I'll let it fall down off of my shirt and let it feebly crawl its way onto something else that wasn't busy, that wasn't occupied, and then I could return to the conversation; I wanted to be caught up, I wanted to know what I missed, I didn't want to miss anything but my running wasn't doing as good of a job as I had hoped and my skin was beginning to char so I ripped off my shirt to see if that would help any, but the fire continued to roar on top of me even after I had made my way through every single room and corridor on the twenty-sixth floor. By the looks of it, Em was still talking and El was still walking beside her as he listened intently. His hands were

clasped behind his back to emphasize this. I was making my way back to them, running, still searing, to try to see if I could gather what little I could in passing, but I wasn't able to make anything out.

Was she talking about?

No, I'm sure it was something else.

The running was making me breathe in deeper and deeper, every breath I inhaled carried with it a piece of something real that had just disintegrated and reintegrated with the thick of the smoke going down my throat. I coughed but I didn't scream, the pain wasn't bad enough that I absolutely felt compelled to open my mouth and send out sound waves into the air that no one wanted to hear, not even myself, besides, it would have impeded the vigor of the conversation.

The breathing, the coughing, the consumption, all of it tasted of words, that is to say pages, no—wait, yes, the pages! The pages in my books on my shelves! All of it, every single line and sentence was perishing around me while I concerned myself more for the talk between the woman they call Em and the man that seemed to know all of the particularities of this world that interested no one but myself and now, apparently Em—the man we know as El. Would that they knew that I had a bookmark in nearly every book I ever owned and brought back to the apartment, to my library. Scraps of thread, old family photographs of strangers, Post-Its of every fluorescent color, business cards, lover letters, both given and received, receipts, ticket stubs, ID's—those were my bookmarks, the holders of my place in that narrative, the promise to return and finish what I'd begun. How will I know where to begin again?

I paused to think about this.

Was I still running?

I looked over to see how El and Em were doing, Em was completely naked now, the final piece of clothing, a few threads of her panties, still attached to her thighs finally gave in and let itself fall prey to the ash that had built up all around us, still talking, and now naked, her breasts and stomach glistening perfectly against the light while she hammered in her argument to El, who, continuing to allow her words to make their way into his earlobes, was understandably more occupied now looking at the curvature of her body and how he respected what it was trying to do, what it accomplished. Allow me to explain: I'll never know exactly what it was that he meant by this, but being that he and I, El and I, shared a unique love for the woman named Em, I could speculate as to the reason

for this curious thought; in the same way that I do push-ups in the morning or run six miles around the neighborhood to both feel good about myself and to stimulate and arouse a specific emotion in those around me, Em's body was constantly hard at work doing the same, unknowingly to her of course, by tightening up and smoothing out the mocha colored skin across her landscape and making proper use of the fat stored in her body, sending it to the right places, working in tandem with metabolism, biology is a paradigm named Em, yes, this is what he meant, I'm sure of it, again, I can't guarantee this since I can't ask him anymore, and neither can you—not that he'd tell you—but if you believe everything else I've said up to this point, you might as well take my word for it that this is what El felt about Em.

The fire on my back was out. It had extinguished itself sometime between when the floor in the east wing collapsed on itself and when all non-pertinent noise became non-noise, just soundless vibrations. My apartment was becoming hollow.

At least I wasn't on fire anymore, though I should mention that my feet had also been worn down, what with the running and all, they never stood a chance. Hobbling over to El and Em, making my way through the rooms, I was determined to interject or interrupt the conversation no matter where it existed in our three lives. I wanted to speak! I had something to say and I wanted to say it. When I reached them they were silent and suspended in the doorway of my library, looking on at all of the conversations before us baked and then burned, as if they carelessly had been forgotten in the oven. It was the first and only time that they thought of the fire as a fire, as a source of tension, of fear, of somber gazes and crinkled lips. The pages might just as well have been kerosene. The words of the narratives, the words in the narratives, and so, the narratives themselves, pronounced with noble conviction, bled out slowly as if embracing death, and withered humbly before our eyes. What was once an exchange of sweeping ideas and theories, that, although important in its own right, wasn't pressing, became a concentrated dialogue on my library. For the moment, I lost my chance to speak.

The back and forth began with Em, her brow burrowed toward the center of her face and, cleverly, she took us by the hand and proceeded to make several declarations about several topics relating to the library I had so diligently stockpiled for days like the day of the fire, when I could boast of my collection to the intellects and possibly slide in a quote or two from

an obscure text I hoped neither of them knew. Em continued. Her hands were sweaty and warm, and I loved it, and El exalted it, and all of this transpired as her lips relayed that sort of brilliance that only comes when we know not what to say, the kind that we all know we're capable of but oblivious of, that we save up, store away for the chance to unleash it somewhere public and grand, and she was doing this in front of us, only us! I was happily content listening when El interjected, and, to my delight, took the conversation in another direction, a place I hadn't considered or thought possible to exist within the realm of the exchange. I was in a flurry of words that felt like I was walking in a summer rain, wet and fresh and perfectly at ease with being drenched, but I then remembered I wasn't walking in the rain, and the rain wasn't composed of supple words, the rain wasn't rain at all, I was still inside of my apartment, burning as bright as ever, as if it was the fire that always existed and we were coming into being in it! This is what was happening and I had forgotten, but, more so than that, I still wanted to, to what? Oh yes, to speak! I wanted to say something—still, I wanted to speak about what it was that Em was so passionate about at that exact moment, to show her that I had an opinion, to show El that my opinion, though full of holes bigger than the ones at our sides, had manifested itself like a perfect mistake inside my own head, that I hadn't sat in on one of his lectures, that I hadn't stolen it from someone who is more apt to have that sort of opinion, because this was burning inside my chest I was about to let out my tremendous howl. The moment my lips parted my ears popped, and the fire suddenly became audible again. It roared loud enough to eclipse my howl that, in retrospect, was comparable to a yelp. The sound of the fire was accompanied with heavy slashes like solar flares that pushed us all further into my room of books.

I'm not entirely sure what the rest of my apartment must have looked like at that point because we were completely surrounded and couldn't sustain our conversation about the entire floor as we once had. As the fire pressed on, closer and closer, it was a lot easier to see how old El really was, his chest sagged all over his front, both Em and myself were able to see this since his button down had caught flames a while back too (though he didn't run), and it wasn't even that his breathing was heavy or slow or exhausted, it was that I couldn't hear it at all, his long and portly nose had caught fire and burned off and was taken in by our surroundings. He looked sad and embarrassed, and he knew he looked sad and embarrassed,

at least when he looked at me, when he looked at Em, with that large gaping black hole right in the middle of his wrinkled face, he made sure to slant his eyebrows just enough to say, yes, I'm still listening, and no, I'm okay, please continue.

As our space to move and extend ourselves became increasingly sparse, I realized that I would never get to articulate or enunciate my thoughts in front of my friends, that they would remain encased in my burning flesh, that I would never mutter or murmur my conjectures, unless something happened to change the continuum of their speaking, of the fire too, I guess. Something needed to be done. Em was still talking, and surely El would retort with one of his fantastic lengthy counters, or even agree. All the same, it would involve words that are not my own.

The fire drew us closer in, to the point where we were all close enough to catch the micro-expressions occurring on our faces each passing second. I'm not sure what I did, or rather, what my face did, but after about a five seconds of their close, thoughtful examination, Em stopped talking and El made no signs of starting. A kind mercy overtook my friends. There was silence all between us save for the bellows of the light.

Finally.

I would finally be able to let the words I'd formulated in my head spill out and reverberate around both their insides, bounce off of the back of their eyes and stay logged somewhere inside their brains. Everything was finally coming to a head, to the point that I'd wanted it to be at, but I didn't want to say it like this, for pity, in the heat of everything that was going on around us. I didn't want Em to be naked. I didn't want there to be a deep crevice in the middle of El's face. I needed it to be perfect—well, maybe not perfect—but if I could get them out of there with at least their ears and whatever part of their brain is responsible for receiving and making sense of language, I could improvise and make everything work. That's why, having the spotlight on me, I stomped on the wavering floorboards beneath us with everything I had and plummeted us all down a burning building.

During our fall, I thought back to Qfwfq and imagined him falling through the void, through the darkness, positioned as if sitting in an invisible chair, more preoccupied with Ursula than the fall.

By the time I realized that I had made it all the way down to the ground

floor, El and Em were still calling out my name. Heaving what parts of me I could, I reached them standing just outside of the door, outside enough for them to say that they weren't standing inside of a burning building any longer, but rather, next to one. Attempting to return their calls, I realized then that my lips had been sealed together by the heat of non-use, burned up and shut up after I hit the first floor. They had become a single stretched lip on the lower half of my face, that in turn didn't resemble a face.

What could I do now?

If I could speak, what would I start with?

How would I say everything that I wanted to say to them?

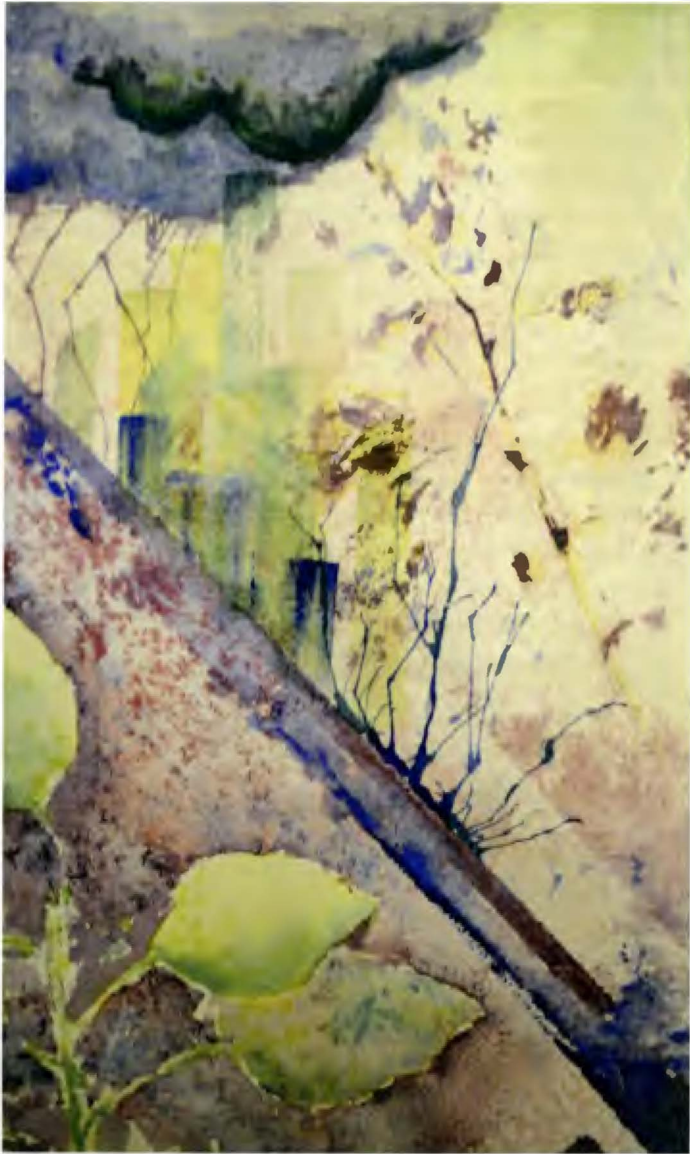
While I thought about my first words, my last words?—my first words, I looked up and didn't know what to say. They waited patiently. We all waited patiently: El, Em, and myself.

Taking the Room by Red Bank Station

Jeffrey Alfier

Late in your fourth decade, you become
a boarder again, ascend a stairway
at the side of a Monmouth Street clapboard,
unlock the outer door to your room, drop
yourself and a duffel bag, like deadfall,
onto a bed flooded with the aquatic
window light of a late seaboard summer.

Here, Jersey Transit trains follow
themselves off calendars of daylight
or darkness at the times men appoint
them, their wheels a rhythmic labor
over tracks, an earthen beat that pulses
through your hip bones, staying with you
like a faithful lover, like a second heart.



The Boy in the Orchard

Eric Barnhart

It wasn't the bland concrete that drew the boy to the observatory, but the promise of shade. A cold and solitary respite from the sun. The boy looked around the orchard. I'm the only one here, the boy said. A group of ducks responded to the thought with a dull chorus of *guas*—rather different from the more appropriate quack—and the boy, now a poet, realized that his thoughts had possibly derailed the autonomous responses of the ducks, and the subtle difference in accent showed their consideration of such artistry. But ducks abide by a wholly different structure of language than his own, and the boy, burdened by his newfound profession, had a hard time relinquishing the idea that he was possibly being melodramatic. And overthinking.

The boy watched as a green-headed mallard snapped its toothless bill at one of the modestly decorated lady-birds under the shade of an orange tree. The lady-bird was being flirtatious and any time the mallard came close, she would extend her wings and brush her feathers across his face. The ducks erupted in laughter. It was then that the boy in the shade of the observatory noticed the albino pigeon. It was pacing back and forth, filling its chest with pompous phrases and declarations. The two incidents, if they had occurred in isolation from each other, would have simply—been. But due to their proximity, the same shadow of a tree, it was hard, as an observer, for the boy to not laugh as well.

Look at that pigeon, he would whisper to himself, realizing there was nobody around to judge him if he spoke, he doesn't know who he is! The ducks must have realized this too. This was why they were laughing. But there was something else in the resonance of those bursts of laughter. Something that, when translated through the boy's body as the sound waves made their way to the observatory, caused the concrete structure to crack. Small at first—minor—nothing to worry about. But as the pigeon kept on dancing and the laughter grew louder, the boy felt a chill that started at his tailbone and rose up through his spine, flowering in the

root of his brain. He didn't want to think of the ugly duckling story, not because he felt the burden of his own intangibility, but because his mother always used to tell that story every time the stone laughter of the shadows in his memories shook salt drops from his eyes, and maybe that was why he, the boy, was so cold now, hiding in the shadows of the observatory. The pigeon kept on dancing, the ducks were still laughing, and the cracks were growing larger and larger.

The boy stood up and decided to sit in the sun instead.

Dirty Postmodern Bedtime Poem

Christopher Pruitt

You take me to a shotgun wedding
held in your bed; your whole family is there:
a childhood blanket right here,
e.e. cummings dog-eared,
in the nightstand a box of magnums next
to the handgun, a perfect pair.
Your veil is a bodybag with more
dragons in the crease than a
George R. R. Martin joint.
I'm King in the North; you come
alive at my sword point.

Don't try to change the subject on me:
he was the one that taught you to gag,
to run up the pole that pregnant
white flag. Do me dishonor
with a fistful of duct tape,
rocking like the tides of a duck's wake
left in the waters of that shallow lake
where alcohol meets bloodstream
and the weight of the world
makes knees shake. You take
too many pills and never leave
the house, but behind all that
foaming you've got a pretty mouth.

The Newlywed

Lusine Makarosyan

She tip toes around
the shattered shards
of glass
in the kitchen where he
stands,
feet shoulder width apart,
smelling
of vodka and sweat.

She also smells,
but of apprehension, expectation.
It's almost midnight
and stuffy.

The silence breaks:
Why, Why, Why?
And she can't tell
if the question
comes toward her,
or from her.

Naeku

Daniel Guerrero

It had been foretold that Naeku would make the river stop flowing, and so she was forbidden from collecting water. She drank from the gourds others brought, if they were willing to fetch them for her. On hot days, the others would bathe downstream, where the water was shallow and cool. Naeku would dip her hands in water, and rub it all over herself instead. She would often be scolded for wasting the water that others had carried.

It had been foretold that she would make the cattle stop calving, so she was not allowed to milk or bleed them. The only chore she was allowed was mixing their dung with dirt and spreading it on the walls of the homestead. She was always last to get milk or beef.

And once, it was foretold that Naeku would call the hyenas into the houses at night, so she was thrown out of her sisters' bed and told to sleep outside the homestead.

She did not sleep.

"It would be better," she thought, "If I found the hyenas, and had them chase me here. If I did not call them into the houses, at least they would rip me apart, and I would be free from this place."

But she was too frightened to go out looking for them.

So she went to the cattle, all asleep in the moonlight and thought. "I could take a spear, and castrate all the bulls. Then the cows would stop calving. Even if I failed, then the bulls would stomp and kick me to death, and no one would blame me for cursing them again."

But the bull she loved best awoke and had her scratch around his horns, and she was too moved to hurt him.

So she walked to the river, as far upstream as she had ever been, and thought, "If I swam to the bottom and drowned, then I would rot, and make all the water unclean. My body would get stuck in the rocks, and stop all the water from flowing."

So she walked into the water, and sat on the bottom by the rocks. But she could not keep herself from surfacing for air. "Please, river," she asked. "Flow with all your strength, one last time, and hold me under."

Then you can stop flowing forever." But the river did not slow or quicken its flow. She left the river, and kept walking upstream.

She saw a snake, and she asked if he would bite her. "But I have just eaten," said the snake, "and my teeth are dry of their venom."

She grabbed him flailing by the back of his head, and said, "Then you shall stay with me until you have more."

"It will be a while," the snake warned her, but it wrapped itself tightly around her arm and held on. So she continued walking in search of a faster death, but kept the snake with her.

She saw the ghost of a lion, and asked him to call his wives to eat her. "But they are frightened of me," he said. "Lionesses do not marry ghosts."

"If I cannot die, and I cannot live without cursing my family, then what am I to do?" she asked him.

The lion's ghost was moved with pity for her, but did not know how to help. He thought for a few moments before he had an idea. "If you are such a curse, then why have they not killed you themselves?" he asked Naeku. "Why ask the snake, or my widows to do it? It is not your duty to do this task, any more than it is the gazelle's duty to hunt itself, or the cow's duty to oversee its own slaughter. Go and ask them to do it for you."

Naeku was unhappy to further delay her death, but she obeyed the lion and went back to her home. She did not go inside, but sat at the edge of the homestead, her snake wrapped around her arm and shoulders. She waited for the sun to rise and her family to wake.

As the sky began to change colors, one of her father's wives came out of the homestead.

"Naeku!" she called. "I will beat you if you come any closer to my children! Go off into the meadow where you belong, so the hyenas can eat you!"

But Naeku did not pay her any mind. She sat on the ground and watched as the family awoke and began to start their chores. Eventually she grew thirsty, and so she picked up a gourd and went to the river.

"Naeku!" her siblings said, "Do not take the water! Do not touch the river! We will tell our mothers, and you will be beaten."

But Naeku did not stop. She filled her gourd and drank her fill from it. She offered some to the snake, but it only looked and did not drink any.

She went to the cattle and scratched their horns. She realized that it was milking time, so she went and fetched a milk gourd, and began to

milk one of the heifers.

Another co-wife, Resson, came out and said, "Naeku! Stay away from the cattle! You will make them sick! You will ruin your father's property!"

"I will not," said Naeku, bringing the full gourd to the bucket where they put the fresh milk. Resson shoved her away from it, knocking her over and spilling all the milk that she was carrying.

"You are worthless!" Resson yelled. "You spoil and waste everything you touch! You would be better off drowned in the river."

"So drown me," Naeku said.

"What?" Resson asked.

"If I am better off drowned, drown me," Naeku said. She picked up a spear and held it forward to Resson. "Or, you can kill me right here."

Resson did not know how to respond to her. "You are crazy," she finally said. "But I will tell your father you misbehaved, and he will beat you for disobeying me."

Naeku's father would not return for three days, so she resumed sitting and waiting outside the homestead. The co-wives and their children would walk by and stare at her as they did their chores, sometimes shouting at her about the curses she was bringing with her disrespect, and sometimes threatening to beat her. But no one touched her. When one older wife came to slap her, the snake suddenly hissed and reared back at her, and she ran off.

"Naeku, I hope that snake bites you with all its venom!" she yelled.

"You can help it along," Naeku said, holding it out to her. "He will have to bite me if you open his mouth, and press his teeth to my flesh."

But the old woman simply shook her head in disgust and left.

"They won't do it," Naeku said to the snake, "They won't kill me."

The snake did not say anything, but slithered through her fingers and around her arms.

Later that day, Naeku was still sitting on the spot when a lioness ran through. Her eyes were wild, and her fur bristled on her back. She seemed almost surprised to run into the homestead, and looked at the people running in and outside of it with great confusion. But when the women and boys grabbed sticks and spears to chase her away, her confusion quickly turned to aggression.

But even before the entire homestead knew that there was a lioness nearby, another came running in behind her, and also started growling at the spears and sticks. Then came another, and another, until they were

surrounded by them. They backed away when they were threatened with a stick, but then would advance just as threateningly. There were over a dozen of them.

They did not touch Naeku. They each seemed to glance at her, but would quickly pass by, only to threaten one of the wives or other children.

One of the co-wives saw that Naeku was not being bothered by any of the lionesses. "This is your fault!" she said, "You brought them here! We should have killed you! We should have killed you when you were born!"

The youngest wife in the homestead, Tanei, was also near Naeku. She was trapped behind a lioness with her baby on her hip and only a stick to fight. She swatted the lioness' face and screamed, falling backward, when it suddenly ran towards her with a snarl. The baby began to wail, but the lioness, an arm's length away from them, did not attack. It simply stood ready, and growled. "Why are they not hunting us?" Tanei asked, slowly trying to back away. "Why did they come here if they are not hungry?"

She looked at Naeku, who was watching them, but did not move from her seat. "You did bring them here, didn't you?" she asked. "You want revenge. You want us to be frightened, like you were frightened." She put the baby, still crying, at her shoulder. "It's working," she said. "I am frightened." Tanei began to cry, too, as the lioness continued walking toward her. "I don't know if I can ask you to stop them," she said. "But if you would only think of—"

As she was speaking, Naeku slumped forward where she sat. The snake slithered off of her arm and off through the grass. It moved so quickly, Tanei only saw the end of its black tail slipping into the thick brush. It disappeared from her sight within moments, and she could not even see which way it was headed.

I-me-my-write

Trista Payte

For too long, writing was my bandage and my bondage.

Language soaked pages became salve; I slathered them across the years of my life – who needs healing when they can perform their own treatments via the pen?

But when you have to bleed the vein to get to the writing every damn time, what then?

Inward, inward I became a magnet, plunged into coil.
Tight, tighter, tightest, wound up, bound up, locked up.
That is what it took to get a charge, a current, a spark. I simply turn in, curl up, and pull my head inside this casing that is ever-present, away, away from the world and all its convoluted complexity.

(...so familiar; its hum taps into her veins and fills her up up up until she is vibrating, until...)

There. Alone.
I-me-my-write.

When did this stop working? When did I become hermit, without shell, without home, skittering sideways, hiding in shadows, seeking out shelter? Wondering why nothing I am trying on seems to fit?

Am I doing this write thing all wrong? Should I be doing it? Am I doing it?

(... here she is, crammed into this too small place, pushing at edges that refuse to yield to pressure, at least her pressure...)

For a long time, I only wrote about my losses, my mistakes, my hurts. I tried to fill the holes up with sheets of paper I shed off like skin, but the

layers just kept multiplying until I realized.
I was going to bury myself in my own hollow.

(...and that is the problem, inertia, she can barely move, barely breathe, the air beginning to grow sour, stale, she can taste it, smell it, the hot stink of her fear and desperation...)

All I ever wanted to do is tell stories. They, the boundless love of my life, the marrow of my soul, when did they stop feeding me?

When did I stop feeding them?

So much of my time is spent in sentences. Down deep in the diction I dig, slipping and sliding on syntax, wrapping myself up in words, expecting them to carry the weight of the work I think I am doing, but in the end what the hell am I really saying?

Why am I leaving so many important stories untold? Why is it that I dare not write of the pains of my own country? Why is it that I hesitate, even now, to claim a place in my work for “America and American”? Why do I feel that it lacks any kind of legitimacy? How do I find my way back to this country, my country, this place that I both love and loathe?

It’s time to go home.

I didn’t plan for us to be apart. It just kind of happened; a natural drifting. Maybe we needed some space. I was feeling controlled, stifled, staled.

(...she got herself boxed up, walled in, with air that grows thin, thinner every minute, and her chest is crushing under the weight of this realization...)

But America, my America, we have fucked this shit all up. Too much of our literature reflects everything that is wrong with our culture, with our position, with our selves. We can no longer see ourselves from the outside. Our proximity to our problems blinds. We have turned so far inward that we see nothing but our own empty center.

What are we saying? What are we NOT saying?

In the work of other nations, I have seen my distorted reflection.

In the work of other nations, I have tasted the shame of my folly.
In the works of other nations, I have found my own self-centered-ness.

How did we get here? How did I get here?

(...and that's the problem, this unremembered chain of events that led her into this state of immovability, crammed too tight, but she tells herself not to let the scream out...)

I am afraid. I write around things because I fear that to write into them is to expose my shameful secret thought that I have long-accepted and internalized as truth: I am a disconnected, self-interested, neurotic American who doesn't have the authority to speak about problems bigger than her own personal issues. I have stayed here because I don't feel privileged to go further.

(...because she can barely move, barely breathe, and forget about trying to change positions, she is crammed in too tight; she might try to push out, but it is useless and she knows it, she cannot create much more than the most fractional of movements...)

I am awake now. But waking up is not enough. Waking up is not the same as breaking out. Because my message is buried so deep within the very structures of my stories that I am not sure if anyone can hear the cries. It's not enough. My voice needs to be louder, my howl longer.

(...then she hears it, a voice coming from above, out of the darkness, outside of the darkness, and it says, stop...)

But what if I don't know enough?

Is the poetry and prose of my heart a wide enough platform to hold my narrative?

Because the fear says stop and the fear says you don't know what you are saying and the fear says no one likes a feminist and the fear says didacticism kills fiction and the fear says you aren't good enough and fear says you think too much and the fear says you know too little.

I have been listening to the fear for a long time. In low purrs and breathy whispers, it slowed the pulse of my ideas, left my words thick and unspoken inside.

How long can I bend back...at what point will I break?

(...she teems with it, until her skin puckers and she fears the burst more than anything and so she closes her eyes, and she opens her mouth, to swell with one final gasp...)

Stories of my fragmented homeland will be the guide up and out of my ego, the liberation from the wrapped up and strapped down writing, the crumbs that lead me back to a place I can be proud of.

America, I want to write us up out of our dreaming.
And so...

To the voice within that says you are not a writer, it is to you that I vow – to keep writing.

To the inner critic that asks why I am so obsessed with raceclassgender, the one that tries to claim all that is overdone, I ask why do I look around me and see a nation sliding backwards into the darkness – then I keep writing.

To the questions I am so afraid to ask in my writing, you are the questions I must ask – to keep writing.

To those that tell me this war is over, the ones that scream women won, I ask how then is it so that we are losing rights across this nation with great and alarming alacrity – and I keep writing.

This is the way to wake up my American consciousness. I can still roar. I can still rage. But first I need to reclaim my voice. To those who would say I have nothing to say of value – I keep writing.

My footprint, in print, will be indelible.

...and she sings worlds as she writes words that will be both the bomb and the shelter.

The Gesture

Christopher Pruitt

A man of too many words,
I'd never had much use for the gesture,
preferring instead the smoother contours
of spoken syllables,
the sharper edges
of text on the page.

But when the Japanese nurses at the hospital
told me of teenage summer afternoons
spent loitering in the city and flashing it
at tourists, I finally understood.

"We were fascinated by it," they said.
"We had nothing like that in our culture."
I could see it clear as a glass memory:
endless waves of girls
crashing into Kyoto on trains,
hair shadowsilk and eyes pregnant
with the double gleam of mischief and wonder,
middle fingers like wands
invoking insults they barely understood.
Flipping the bird must have felt like magic.

Russian Roulette between God and Satan

Freddy Garcia

Sitting at a lustrous gold table
inside the mouth of heaven's war room;
behind each an entourage of dark suit popes
with wasteland murmur minds
echoing fear and praise
for grace, or so they say.
God wants to chat; a crow perched on his rigid tongue
stops him.
What is he about to say? I don't care.
On with the game!

Satan's guffaw gropes rattling spines;
she wears a satin green dress
ready for her turn
while the world on prayer-streams injected.
Her heroin beauty and his brute hunger
feed starving eyes fetish tears,
bleeding their breath for revenue.

Her eyes locked on the
colt python, waiting
for her claw to caress its trigger.

On his throne –
God polishes his crown with an idle elbow.
Transfixed on the black corset peeking,
breathing the musk from her lungs.
He admires the cozy cleavage of his
once admired companion.

He waits.

She gently bites her bottom lip, grips the python;
ready for the rupture to penetrate her temple.

Click.

Nothing.

Her ache smile makeup
stimulates the barrel against her moist skin—
she slams it in the center.

God applauds.

It's his turn.

His legs crossed – nonchalant.
She knows, he's the rusted, piteous savior
seeking to purge her with vice.
Like a redneck-John-Wayne-wannabe,
he spins the pistol
into his holy mouth:
shining a thousand prayers unheard.
His mouth-eyes eat her statuesque frailty.
Her skin loaded
with powder from an axe used to defile
down the tree; the one that cut off her tail
to emasculate him and free herself of sin.

He winks. Click.

Nothing.

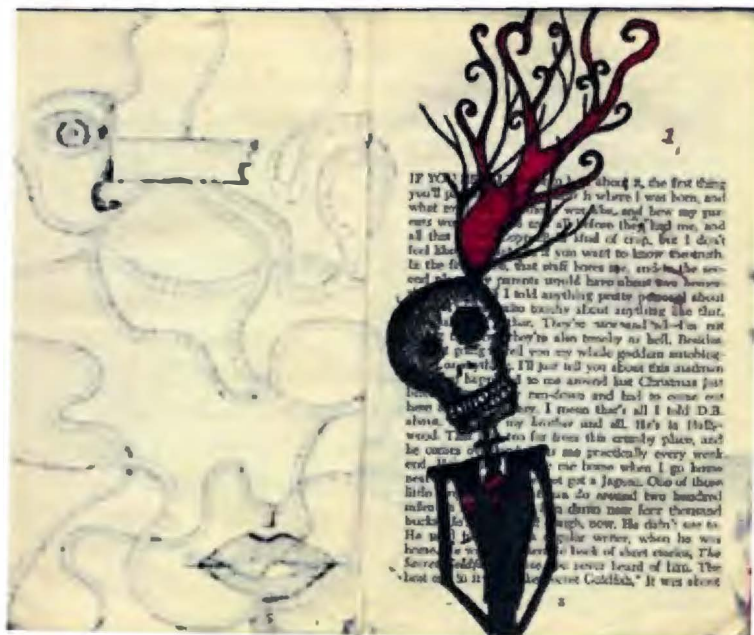
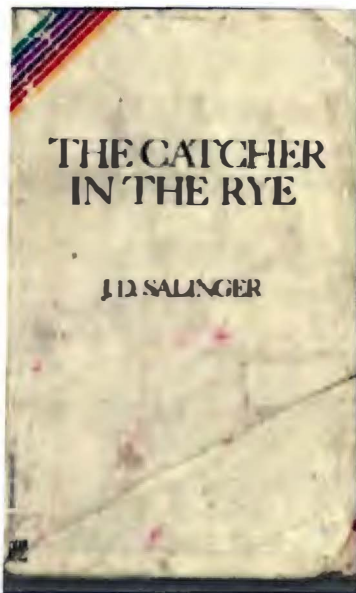
Behind God, a Pope John asks:

“How long does this go on?”

“Forever” another answers.

“If shot, what then?”

“For each bullet taken –
a martyr's end.”



Waiting for Curiosity

Justin David

Newton awoke abruptly to the sound of his dog's howling. Rupert was at the edge of the bed, barking at one thing or another outside the window vigorously with a hoarse like growl, while Newton's father could be heard in the kitchen, clanking pots and pans as he cooked breakfast, singing long and illustrious notes of *The Girl From Impanema*. The mixture of heat from the stove and the endless summer outside trapped the air inside the apartment and Newton felt dizzy and weak as he sat on the edge of his bed, trying to wake himself up. Summer was supposed to have ended a week ago, and yet, the temperatures were rising daily, giving each day an early end, sending all forms of life scurrying inside to croon under shady palms or in air conditioned bungalows before it had reached high noon. He thought about the heat for a moment, consumed in it as the smell of bacon and coffee from the kitchen tickled the droplets of perspiration that were forming around his lips. Rupert came sliding back into the room, his big paws gliding across the glossy hardwood floors, his face dripping wet from slopping up a drink of water. The water and drool dripped down Newton's legs, giving him an awkward satisfaction as he petted his dog's head and then walked to the bathroom to shower. As the cold water hit his body, Newt was slowly becoming more alert and remembered the doings of the day. A dull hum could be heard through the tiny window in the shower, of the outside traffic that was increasingly growing more and more weary in the thick heat. Along with the traffic, Newton could hear the sounds of people gathering in little pocketed crowds all across the sidewalks and the corners by the streetlights. He couldn't hear their conversations but he could have guessed what they were all about. It was a special day, he reminded himself as he washed his hair, scrubbing his scalp, and it was a special day for two reasons. The first, and perhaps less known, was the start of the Autumn Equinox. The Equinox occurred twice a year—March 20th, and today, September the 22nd—and was a beautifully invisible process involving the tilt of the Earth's axis. The axis, our alignment with the Sun, on these special days, is inclined neither

away from nor towards the Sun, and therefore gives the day an equal balance of both day and night. This delighted Newton not only because he was an avid enthusiast of the cosmos and elementary astronomy. No, there was a deeper, even more spiritual reason, one could say, for this excitement in celestial coordinates. Newton's twin sister, Abigail had died a year ago. She had big eyes, the shape and color of pecans and obsessed over pumpkin pie so much so, that they often found empty cans of pumpkin stashed secretively underneath her bed. Abigail had Pegorian's disease, giving her the grotesque look of an old woman with a child's eyes. It gave her a distinguished expression of experience in a brutal world, but it terrified Newton at night since the two of them shared a bedroom. She would awake in a coughing fit, gasping for air, and the gleam of light streaming through their window would cast a glare on her rigid skin that would frighten Newton terribly. He would feel guilty about it for days after, thinking about how terrified he was of his own sister—his twin. One night, when the moon was full and the light gleamed in, Newton ignored his sisters coughing fit by turning over and facing the opposite wall. He covered his ears with a pillow and in the morning they found Abigail, brittle and cold, dead in her bed. Rupert was howling by the bedside when their parents found her. Newton often felt like his sister wasn't dead, that she was still alive somewhere, maybe underneath her bed, too far under for anyone to see, eating an endless amount of canned pumpkins and waiting for Rupert to come sniff her out. He scrubbed his body with the cotton scented soap and turned off the shower to dry. Newton and his sister were avid readers. They had devoured the books given to them by their parents, everything from fiction to science and biology. Abigail dove right in, paying extra attention to all books regarding astronomy. She loved the seasons, how the earth changed its attitude a couple of times a year, she would say, like people. Later, Abigail swallowed through science fiction, gaining a particular thirst for Bradbury. One night, after a month long slew of reading his entire anthology, Abigail unloaded all of the stories onto Newton in a heap of details that lasted deep into the night. The second reason to celebrate the day, what most of the city was celebrating for, was the return of the Curiosity Space Shuttle, back down to Earth after a year-long expedition to Mars. The Curiosity Shuttle had been the first of its kind to land successfully on the Red Planet. All other attempts ended in tragedy, and the success of this particular rover could not come at a better time.

The world had become a vast desert. Windless summers over stepping their reaches far into the fall and winter months had become an uncomfortable normality, and the sustained heat had turned everyone all sour and short tempered as they struggled to ease the burn of their perpetually tanned skin. The news stations aired segments claiming that the Curiosity Shuttle had acquired droves of useful data. One report claimed that an investigative journalist had somehow acquired access to leaked information and even presented distorted images proving the existence of alien life. Newton's father had littered the house in newspaper clippings and printed articles of the anticipated arrival and Newton pondered over both of these exciting events as he dried himself off and combed his hair. It was an orange-red, like the inside of a sweet potato and it was as curly and rebellious as his mother's. He couldn't quite decide which of the events he was more excited about as he cleared a spot of steam from the mirror to brush his teeth. His father was letting him take the day off from school to see the Shuttle return, so for the sake of that, Newt had to side with the Shuttle as the better option. But, he reminded himself, Shuttle or no Shuttle, the day would be long enough for him to enjoy both the day and night, so he smiled with a mouth full of foamy white paste and agreed to enjoy both elements offered on this once in a lifetime occasion. Newton's father, Oscar Cortes, teaches physics at the local high school. He had been rearing the children their entire lives on the principles of Galactic Actuality before Abigail died. Through acquiring countless data on the stars and their distinct behavioral patterns—and, more importantly, through religiously reading the manuscripts of the infamous Doctor Norman Quill, on his Principles of Galacticity—Newton's father had come to see the day that lay ahead as the pinnacle point in Quillian philosophy. The day true Qullians—and to Oscar there were only two of those—would be delivered the news of Cosmic Unity. Quill had been an open drunk his entire life. He had been a rowdy classmate of a young Einstein in Switzerland, both beginning their early ideas in view of the snow capped alps. Newton wasn't sure whether or not the news of the Shuttle could be found in those text books. But he knew for certain that today something was supposed to happen because he could feel it. The news articles and hoopla around school about the Shuttle's return didn't do much to excite Newton. In fact, he felt himself often angry or agitated around his classmates when they would talk of it. But something about his father's earnestness left Newton with a feeling of confused joy. His

father had been acting so strange up to this point, too: waking early in the morning to recite passages as the sun crept up before the heat arrived, singing in the corners of their apartment like a canary freshly released from his cage. It all gave Newton a peculiar feeling to see his father act so strangely, his black hair sweaty with a child's delight from writing out lengthy algorithms, staying up deep into the night memorizing the passages of Quill, mapping out the distances of the stars. To Newton, the day, for both of the reasons combined, had a significance to him that he couldn't quite measure. Through their readings, mostly of which was done by Abigail, the twins had developed their own ideas of space and the heavens. To them, aliens and ghosts were one in the same. Interchangeable forms come to earth to communicate with the humans. Abigail seemed so certain of this as she talked in her bed, sitting up and explaining to her brother with such veraciousness that Rupert felt inclined to bark. But why would they want to communicate with us? Newton would ask. Well who else would they want to communicate with? Abigail would say. And they know if they came down here looking like their regular alien selves, then everybody would panic and everything would be crazy. So, they come down as ghosts, pretending to be dead family members and they tell you things. What kind of things? How should I know? I've never spoken to a ghost before. Newton's parents came crashing down with Abigail's death. His mother quickly gave up the paintbrush for a bottle, as so often painter's do, while his father bottled himself up in smiles and jazz music, humming tunes long into the nighttime as he wept over astronomical equations. With his mom's drinking, Newton often felt like he only had one family member left. His mother's lifeless form was so often in an inebriated waltz around the living room, that he hadn't had any kind of conversation with her in months. Her words were jumbled with her emotions. In the beginning, she was a loveable drunk, showering Newton and his father with endless tears and kisses for the fact that the family still had each other, that everyone else was still healthy, able to live and walk in the park with friends and the sun. But soon she turned violent, treating Newton and his father the way a lioness treats all the other members of her pride once her cub has been killed. She grew weary of them, like they had somehow scoured her fate by accident. Newt's father, Oscar, was calm as can be in dealing with his wife. He loved her immensely, seeing her long ago in a dream, awaiting him at the altar on a lake, before they had even met. The whole ordeal for him was something out of his

control, part of an equation much larger than he could calculate. So he read. He turned the pages of Quill's cosmology with a thunderous hunger for something greater than himself. He held onto a momentary state of shamanism, embedding himself into his principles. To him, the meanings were infinite. The connections were too plain to disregard, like knots connecting separate shards of string. And yet, the loss of his daughter still kept him up at night, bathed in an inescapable void. Doctor Quill was, too, diagnosed with Pegorian's, but for reasons unknown was able to fight it and prolong his life much longer than any others known living with the illness. This gave Oscar Cortes some bit of hope and he clung to it like the lint on the collar of his sloppy crew neck. When Newton entered the kitchen, his father was doing a twirl between the toaster and the stovetop, spreading butter and turning bacon while raptures of broken Portuguese left his mouth in little selective spurts. Heya kiddo, he said. Oscar was tall and slender, with a sad but handsome face and bright sea-green eyes that looked like Neptune. He was always smiling, whether it be into the blank face of his unconscious wife, or at the silent crowd staring at him disdainfully in the dim light of the classroom. He loved that Newton excelled in math and was too tall for his bed frame. The only thing in life he wanted more than intelligence on Mars was a legacy, and his legacy was Newton. Newton sat down at the table with Rupert tickling his feet. His father set down a plate before him consisting of eggs, bacon, toast, and stewed tomatoes. He reached for another plate filled with the same, and sat down next to his son whistling as they ate. You know what today is? Of course, Newton said. Your mother's not feeling well from all this heat again, so it'll just be the two of us. And Rupert, reminded Newton. Oh yes! and Rupert, how could we forget him? After eating, Newton grabbed the leash while his father bent down in front of the mirror and placed a strip of sunblock right across the bridge of his nose. He turned to his son with an index finger covered with sunblock, So it doesn't melt away, and smeared his nose to match. They went down the checklist of items they were to bring with them: water, binoculars, a copy of Quill's final manifesto: The Dusty Titan, sandwiches, and headed out of the apartment into the boiling heat. Outside, the tangled air tasted hot and dry. A cloudless sky hung above them with an air so stale that neither bird, nor mosquito, nor horsefly, dared to make a winged descent. The sidewalks were filled with people, all of whom Newton and his father had never seen before. All of them were older, with dark sunglasses stuck to

their sweaty faces. Some had little battery powered fans that blew hot air at them through little mists of water. And all of them were listening to the radio. Newt and his father turned the corner onto the main street of the city and it too, was littered selectively with pairs of senior citizens in camping chairs. Too many tourists in the neighborhood today, said Oscar. Not enough room for us in our own front yard...Well, why don't we go up to the roof of our building? suggested Newton. Now that's an idea, come, let's get up there now before it gets too hot. We can grab the old beach chairs. Remember when grandpa fell through that little blue one with the hole in it? We'll get a great view up there too, there's not a cloud in the sky. As father and son went laughing along the crowded sidewalk back towards their building, Newton began to notice the faces of the people more closely. They were all old and sweaty, he had noticed that from the start. But they were idle, perfectly still, yet wet like melting statues. Newton couldn't help but think they looked like ghosts. He noticed that nearly all of the people on the street were wearing t-shirts that said USA or God Bless America, or some other sort of patriotic slogan. Why are all the old people waving flags? Newton asked his father. The young are the anarchists, he said, patting his son on the head. And the old folks are the patriots. When father and son reached the roof, they were delighted to see that it was empty. Newton was so enthralled with the day that he and Rupert ran up and down the top of the building, yelling and barking up at the dry wind that hung above them. The sky was still cloudless, and Oscar took a seat and sipped from the big bottle of ice water. Careful now, he said. I don't know how stable the building is and we wouldn't want you and Rupert crashing through into someone else's living room. You might catch a lady in her underwear. Newton laughed and he slowed his pace to a steady walk, zig zagging between the slim chimneys and satellite dishes that littered the roof. The towering palm trees kindly fenced in the city while the mountains in the distance loomed beyond like discerning grandmothers. Newton took it all in. The solitude he felt up there. The quiet hum of the sky. His mother's jumbled angry shouts at God and Jesus and all the disciples, masked, in fact, buried in the decaying heat, whisked away in the slow and steady wind that was beginning to caress his cheeks. At that moment, Newton missed his sister. He'd trade all of the information coming back with that space shuttle to have her back with them now, he didn't care what was on that barren planet. He remembered a story Abigail had told him about Mars being Heaven after

all. She didn't buy it though, he remembered her saying. As much as she enjoyed the story she didn't much think that Heaven would be on any planet, let alone a big dusty red one. He knew how excited she would have been to be up here with them today awaiting the arrival of a space shuttle from Mars, on a day with an equal balance of day and night. He closed his eyes and tried to picture what the shuttle might look like and how his sister's eyes would sparkle, looking up at its return to earth. He knew that the cloud his father was walking on so weightlessly this last week was really a rain cloud awaiting the storm surge. A wave of anxiety swelled over Newton at the thought of the Shuttle not coming, or them not being able to see it due to the smog, or something absurd happening. The chatter of sounds coming from the radios down below echoed off the building walls and Newton asked his father what time they were to expect the Shuttle. They predict two-fifteen. But, who knows whether that's been converted to Earth time or not. We could be waiting a thousand years. Maybe those geezers down there already have been! Measuring time is a tricky thing when you're traveling through space. They passed the binoculars back and forth, trying to spot something in the abyss of sky that hung before them. A breeze had begun to gradually pick up, and the tall palms swayed slightly in the distance. Rupert was the second to tire out from the sun. After bouncing around with Newton for a while, he found his way over to a shaded corner and plopped down to nap. Oscar sat still in his chair, whistling *A Love Supreme*. Newton began looking through the binoculars at various objects and people throughout the city. Everything looked so similar in its stillness, all miserable and broken in the heat. He looked to the left, at his father through the binoculars, and at his smiling face all dreamy-eyed in the afternoon sun. Dad? Yes my boy? Do you believe in ghosts? I believe in anything I haven't seen yet myself, Newt. You do? Sure I do. Do you think Abigail is a ghost? I sure hope so, said Oscar. The thought of her not existing anymore made Oscar want to grab hold of the sky and tear it down from where it hung. The heat could be ignored. But the sky was too demanding. Too infinite and vast to be held accountable for any kind of feelings or ideas. Yes, he said peering out into the distance beyond the mountains. I do hope Abigail is a ghost. Newton began to ponder the thought. He traced the corners of the rooftop, thinking about his sister as a ghost. If they were aliens as she had said, would that make her one? No, that couldn't be. She would have to have been an alien first, in order to be a ghost now. He looked down

just before walking into Rupert's sleeping body, stepping over him to continue his walk around the top of the structure. He could see that his father had dozed off, his head tilted all the way back with his nose in the air, the sunblock dripping down across the sides of his face. Even with the breeze, the heat couldn't be avoided. When an alarm struck on Oscar's wristwatch, he shot up in a dash, jumbling for the binoculars that Newton had taken from his neck nearly an hour ago. Is it here? Did I miss it? I was just dreaming it was here and it landed on the roof. It was somehow small enough to land up here and when it did you and I ran to the opening door, but you called behind for Rupert and when the three of us got to the opened door, everyone inside of the Shuttle was gone. There was a billiards table inside, and all the balls were scattered and the Q ball and pool sticks were missing. Newt told Oscar that they hadn't missed the Shuttle yet. He looked down below at all of the people who were still sitting along the sidewalks and waiting. The heat had reached its peak. Every way that Newton looked, waves of shimmering streaks glared off car windows and the edges of buildings. The thought of the Autumn Equinox didn't seem so favorable to him now, since fall really never came. It was too hot to enjoy anything, and now Newton had to endure it for nearly twice as long as he would on any other given day. He became agitated, kicking the gravel on the roof's floor. It'll come, said Oscar from his seat, his sunglasses were on and the sunscreen streaks could still be seen on his face. What if it doesn't? asked Newton, not quite sure why he had asked. Oscar stood from the seat. Don't let a little heat get in the way of your imagination, Newt, take a splash of water. He squirted the ice cold water in Newton's face in a flash, startling his son and Rupert who happened to be behind him. Wake up fellas, wake up! This is a big day and we're here together. Newton looked into his father's eyes and could see how tired he really was. His head and neck felt cool from the water, but a pain in his stomach had formed. The noise of construction could be heard throughout the city and the echo of metalwork pierced his ears, paining him to think of all the sweat going into that kind of grueling labor. Oscar was pacing the expanse of the roof. Occasionally he splashed water over his sunburnt cheeks and every minute or so he would make sure Newton and Rupert were alright. Newton stared into the sky, noting his father's increasing weariness at the potentially of missing the Shuttle return. It'll arrive any moment, he said. Oscar was on his tippy toes looking into the distance from every corner of the building. Newton looked

through the binoculars searching for a bird or any kind of flighted life like ghosts or aliens and began to think of his sister. A wave of sadness rushed over him and he began to miss her immensely. Now, for the first time, Newton had begun to stomach the sadness of her absence. He tried to quell the thoughts by looking up at the sun, and thinking of the heat, redistributing his pain elsewhere. A large lump, like lard, formed in his throat. He looked out at the expanse of buildings, and at all the other rooftops his eyes could see. There were no other people on any of the rooftops. No father-and-son duos on any of the adjacent structures. Only him and Oscar. He looked down at the people on the sidewalks. It looked as if the crowd had doubled in size and they were standing and waiting in such a way to suggest the arrival of a parade or motorcade of some sort. He searched the faces for one person without sunglasses covering their eyes, but found none. He looked for a face without wrinkles, but found none. He tried to find a body moving, or walking, or humming a tune, but found none. They all stood and sat around soaked in sweat without movement like lifeless clay moldings. Newton remembered how snakes would shed their skin every so often, sometimes leaving the entire frame of flesh still intact, looking like a hollowed-out husk of the snake's 'old' body. Pompeii, he thought to himself. They look like the townspeople buried at Pompeii. He had always remembered that story vividly. He shouted for his father, but got no answer. When he looked up, Oscar was in the far right corner of the rooftop, nearly on the ledge with his hands in his hair. It has to come, it has to, he was shouting repeatedly. Oscar had a desperate look on his face as he turned to his son, after a moment he came down from the ledge. You know, Oscar began as he sprayed himself with water, before I met your mother, when I was still really just a boy, I fell in love with a Japanese woman. She was my sister's music tutor and would come over twice a week to our home after school and give my sister two hours of piano lessons. She would only play Beethoven had the softest hands I've ever touched and when we moved to America, all I could do as I lay in bed at night was think of her hands. Oscar knelt down to rub Rupert behind the ear. But at that distance, Oscar continued, and with that void of black that stretched between us, it was nearly enough to kill me. Newton looked at his father in all that heat and thought about the Shuttle and how it was at one time or another speeding through that great vastness of black and he felt like the Shuttle now, only a bit slower. He wanted that kind of velocity, but it seemed to him that only love of-

ferred it. He was too consumed in confusing thoughts and could never straighten one out long enough to be folded again and put back into his pocket to use for later, so he settled on one word for it all: frivolous. It was an impressive sounding word and one among his list of favorites. In saying it, he felt as though he were doing it. Living the definition of the word itself. The word as it was and should be. He looked over at his father who was sweating profusely. It's a quarter past three! Not a plane or a helicopter in sight, not even a weather balloon. All those light years, it could have simply vanished. Traversed into the great depths of the unknown. We could be waiting an eternity. As Oscar paced the rooftop, Rupert suddenly began howling. Newton ran to the ledge of the building to look down at the people on the ground when suddenly the building violently rattled and a deafening boom pierced the sky. In the expanse of the arid blue was descending the large white shuttle. It was attached onto the back of a smaller jetliner, in order to properly land, and it soared effortlessly. There it is, whispered Oscar Cole. Newton looked up. Oh my god. It was a white he had never seen before. A white like Abigail's smile. We need to get closer, yelled Oscar. Higher up. Newton looked on in silence as the shuttle passed over the mountains. It had the grace of a bird and Newton could see the people down below still in the same position as they had been before the shuttle had appeared. We did it, said Oscar. We finally did it. And then it happened. In a flash of blinding light matched only by the heat itself, the Shuttle exploded into a sea of flames. Wing bits scattered the windless sky and smoke began to bellow down into the city. In the chaos of the situation Newton had lost sight of his father but soon found him again at the far end of the rooftop. He was standing on the ledge now, looking up into the sky in silence, his eyes piercing through the pocket of fire hanging in the air and into the endless afternoon. Rupert was at Oscar's feet, howling frantically. Too much pressure, Oscar said in a quiet breath. Newt walked slowly over to him, uncertain of what to do next. He looked back up into the vortex of flames that had once been the Shuttle and then again at his father who was teetering on the edge of the roof. Newton stood by his father, whose eyes were closed now, filled with tears, and looked over the edge of the building at the old people who still hadn't moved. The intensity of the explosion in the sky had shattered most of the glass of the cars in the streets and the lights. Traffic honked and paused in confusion, the sheer quickness of anarchy spreading itself like a forest fire. Sirens could be heard in the distance.

Newton clung to the weary leg of his father while Rupert stood behind barking up at Oscar. They'll all be ghosts now, thought Newton, not realizing he had thought it aloud. Yes, they will, said his father. Ghosts of the cosmos. Hiding our secrets. He began whistling a soft tune of The Girl From Impanema, and turned to his boy with a sparkle in his eyes. Don't forget how to use these, he said, removing the binoculars from around his neck and placing them into his son's tiny hands. He jumped off the rooftop backwards, facing Newton on the way down with a mysterious smile. Newton waited a moment before looking over the ledge to see where his father had fallen. Rupert was still barking into the sky where Oscar had jumped from and when Newt finally looked down, Oscar's body had vanished.

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