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Northridge Review

Spring 2014

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SPRING 2014

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SUBMISSION INFORMATION

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

In Fall 2013, Sigma Tau Delta Iota Chi held their first Short Horror Fiction Contest guest judged by James Ninness, author of *Chronicles of a Full-Time Father*, *Macabre Rising*, and one of three writers on a horror anthology comic, in *Sanity, AZ*. The recipient of this award was “The Fisher King” by Chris Espinosa.

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 2014 issue.

The following awards will announce recipients in the Fall 2014 issue:

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, recognizing excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*.

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizing excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The blank page can sometimes seem as vast as the open ocean. Writers sit before it searching in all directions, finding nothing but the empty sea for miles. Yet, if they dip their heads beneath, open their eyes and give their bodies to the depths, life emerges. The looks below reveal a boundless wealth of life, sometimes familiar, but much of it undiscovered.

Each writer and artist who has contributed to this edition of *The Northbridge Review* has been before the sea of the blank page. The work in this collection represents those who, undeterred by the daunting task of navigating such a large space, have discovered what things lie—and sometimes lurk—just beneath the surface.

Thank you all who contributed to this glimpse.

We hope the readers enjoy the work here whether it's just one poem, story—or if read cover to cover. Thank you for your continued support of this project.

Don't get lost on the empty surface. Lose yourself below.

Editor,
Laura G. Dunlap

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They took Dad away from me before he could teach me how to do grammar correctly. We were in the middle of a lesson about how “inconsequential rules are in English” when the knock on the door cut him off. He never finished telling me why “fish” was spelled G-H-O-T-I. He didn’t answer or say anything for a while, but when he did, he said, “Reed, don’t believe everything you hear.” *That’s a weird way to end a lesson*, I thought. Then he answered the door and some people took him and me away in separate cars. I didn’t see my father again because my aunt and uncle, who I now live with, say he’s locked up and can’t see me.

Aunt Nancy is home all day while Uncle Mike is building rich houses. We live in Santa Barbara with a view of the ocean from the bedroom windows. At least they call it an ocean view. They have to put me on a chair so I can look over their neighbors’ trees and see just an inch-long glimpse of the sun reflecting on the water. Their hot tub looks better. Why don’t they call it a hot tub view?

Aunt Nancy never had kids of her own, and I don’t think she knows how we work. Not like Dad did. She doesn’t seem to have much to do during the day, so, when she sees me reading, she offers to read aloud to me. I like reading alone, but I don’t want to be rude. Uncle Mike and Aunt Nancy told me I can read anything that’s in their library. Most of the books are boring sounding words, like “encyclopedia.” Aunt Nancy says it aloud like, “n sike lo peed ee uh.” The books *Moby Dick* and *The Awakening* look neat, their spines are old and I almost can’t read the authors. Dad used to read books like that. When I ask Aunt Nancy to read *Moby Dick*, she doesn’t hesitate. I visualize each letter as her mouth moves:

“Calmyish male. Sum yeerz ago... never mined how lawng pre size lee... havvng lit tull or no mun nee in my purs, and nuth thing part ick u lurr to inch rist me on thuh shor, I thawt I wood sale uh bowwt a lit tull and c thuh watt or ee part uv thuh wurld.”

She continues for about ten minutes before she gets up to go to the bathroom. I flip the book back to the first page.

“Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on the shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.”

I flip through the pages to see where my Aunt actually started from. I can’t find the calmy-ish male. When the toilet flushes and my Aunt comes back, I tell her I would rather listen to *The Awakening*. She begins:

“Angry nand yell o pair rit, witch hung in a cayj just owwt side the door, kept reap eating over rand over: “All a boo in! All a boo in! Sap reese tee! Thats all rite!” He cood speek a lit tull Spanish, and all so a lang widg witch no body un durr stood unless it was the mawkng burrd...”

This time, the phone rings and she has to put the book down again to go answer it. The phone is in the other room, so the pages belong only to me again.

What’s this game that Aunt Nancy is playing with me? She’s reading *Moby Dick* and *The Awakening* to me, but I’m hearing *Mo Beed Ick* and *The Away Kenning*. She says my father is in a “penny ten charry,” but when I read the notes she writes to my grandparents, she writes that he’s in a “penitentiary.” Can Dad be in two places at once? Aunt Nancy says no, but she’s not very good at keeping secrets from me. She doesn’t know how smart Dad taught me to be, to always question.

* * *

I eat her “meat loaf,” but in my room, where no one can see me, I digest my “meet lowf.” Every night, I whisper words to Dad through my open window. Each letter that I breathe strings to the next one until a train of words and sentences is out the window and on the way to Dad in the penny ten charry. Then I write down

READ ALOUD

the words I whispered for Dad and rip up the note. I throw it out the window and know the sea breeze takes my messages where each needs to go.

* * *

Last night I dreamt that I was with Dad and that the penitentiary was a classroom in the basement of the school he taught at. Aunt Nancy came to visit us and gave us meat loaf and books. We studied *Moby Dick* and he wrote his name on the board: Mr. Mason Cheriegate. When he asked me to write it, I put down Mr. May son Cherry gayt. He got upset and used red chalk to write “Please Leave.” I was forced to go back to classes upstairs. I turned to leave, feeling like I would never see him again, and started walking away. I turned back and saw myself in the basement. Dad was guiding my chalk-filled hand, writing, “Don’t believe everything you read or hear.”

* * *

Aunt Nancy is making me go back to school again. Summer’s over. It’s hard to tell in Santa Barbara because it’s always warm, not like back home where it would snow. I dislike my teacher, Mr. Grayson, immediately. His nose looks like God was making a dog but changed his mind halfway through. He makes us learn punk shoe aye shun. I don’t like schools. Dad always taught me at home. School was where Dad was when he wasn’t with me. Aunt Nancy gets upset when I bring home my first test. I got a zero. Mr. Grayson had called my aunt when I was at school and now we have to go see him.

At the meeting, he tells Aunt Nancy he’s concerned. He says I can’t spell my name. Of course I can: Reed Cheriegate or R-E-A-D C-H-E-R-R-Y G-A-T-E. Mr. Grayson or G-R-A-S-U-N is the one spelling his name wrong. All of the papers I get back are covered in red marks, telling me what I got “wrong.” Big, red zeroes and bold, red Fs line the tops of all my papers.

“Dad was teaching me about rules, you’re just making me follow them.” I want to leave, but Aunt Nancy won’t let me get up. Her eyes look like squishy, black marbles behind her glasses.

“That’s something else, Reed. Do you remember the assignment you did about your parents? Here, Mrs. Lee, take a look.” He hands the assignment over to Aunt Nancy who takes it slowly. I remember the assignment. We were supposed to use adjectives to describe our parents. Since I don’t know my mom, I figured that I would fail the assignment anyway. And Dad isn’t just some adjective. Dad isn’t just funny, happy, grumpy, dopey, whatever. I wrote:

“My father is gone and my mother is dead.

My father is a ghoti.”

Aunt Nancy’s face drops, and I feel her hand touch my shoulder. I wiggle away from her, upset that I’m stuck at school. I hope that I’m not here overnight so I can give Dad my messages.

Mr. Grayson and Aunt Nancy both seem to be paying more attention to the paper than me. I spring up from my chair and rush to the door before she can grab me. I’m running through the hallway, only wanting to get to the car and away from all of the red markings. I almost run by a door labeled “Basement,” but stop when I see it. My aunt and Mr. Grayson catch up to me before I get it open. The handle was locked anyway.

* * *

That night, in my dream, I’m at the top of the stairs watching Dad teach me in the basement. No one bothers Dad and me in the basement. We’re alone, just Dad and I. Not being a part of this, I sit on the top step and cry. A hand grabs my shoulder and I turn to see Dad standing behind me.

He shows me a chalkboard behind him with only red chalk. “It’s okay, there’s only one rule: Red allowed.”

He takes my hand and guides me past the door marked penitentiary, away from myself at the chalkboard.

I way kup and Ant Nansee is may king brek fist. I tri too clohz mi I’z and go bak too sleep. I want too go bak too Dad, but I cant. I think I uhl never c him uhgn, but now I dont havv too.

1. A man named Carl Leonard went to the grocery store where he bought a loaf of French bread which he took home, planning to eat some of it with dinner and maybe make a sandwich with the rest, for lunch the next day. When he got home however, he realized that he wasn't very hungry, but was very tired, so he went to sleep on the sofa and when he woke up the next day the bread had dried out and he couldn't make a sandwich and had to throw the whole thing away.

2. A man named Enrico Cavasello went to the very same grocery store the very next day and ended up having almost the very same experience with the French bread. Only somewhat different.

3. A woman named Laura Cleo went to the grocery store and put some French bread in her cart, but then thought about the very few other things that she needed to buy and realized that she didn't need a whole cart and started to feel as though people would look at her—in a judging sort of way—if she had an entire cart with only a couple things in it, so she put the French bread back and put the cart back and picked up one of those plastic baskets and she filled it up with the very few things that she needed to get for her pasta dinner, but she forgot to go back to get French bread—because in her mind she had already gotten it—and she didn't realize her mistake until she had gotten home and made her pasta and sat down at the table to eat. Laura did not usually swear, but she looked down into her bowl of pasta and said, “Fuck.”

4. Laura's father, who was named Carl Cleo, went to the grocery store because he needed to pick up some cheese for the wine and cheese party that was about to begin at his home. He had asked his wife—who was Laura's stepmother and not her real mother—to go and pick up a variety of cheeses that afternoon, but she had failed to do so and so now he was in a rush. As he tossed several bricks of cheese, of varying consistencies and flavors, into his basket—he always used baskets as opposed to carts, because they were more efficient—he realized that his wife had probably not purchased any bread either. Probably also, she had neglected to get wine. He rushed around the store and loaded his basket down with bottles of wine, but he forgot to go to the bakery for bread. So when he arrived back home and realized that he had no bread for his wine and cheese party, he was enraged, but his wife—Laura's stepmother, who had been Laura's best friend in high school—put her hand on his shoulder and then pressed a thick baguette of bread into his hand. “This, I remembered,” she said.

5. Since he had not been able to use any of the bread that he bought, Carl Leonard went back to the grocery store the next day after work. There was a woman already at the bread area. She was wearing a little business causal skirt that he liked and she was squeezing the French bread. She was squeezing all of it. Every long loaf. Carl admired her slender fingers as she did this, as she squeezed them all. Then—suddenly remembering that no one would ever love him—Carl said, “Could you not touch all of them?” Then he reached past her and grabbed one of the few remaining un-groped loaves. He went home, but was too upset to make dinner. He shoved the bread into his refrigerator, thinking that that might keep it fresh. He went to bed, frustrated. The refrigerator did not keep the bread fresh and so it was both cold and dry the next morning. He threw it out again.

BAGUETTES

6. Laura had spent the day thinking about how she had made such a mistake at the grocery store the day before. She realized that she had let herself become overcome by her hurried emotions and her desire to be efficient. She decided – while eating her microwaved, left-over pasta in the break room at work – that she would take her time that afternoon. So when she went to the grocery store, she spent a nice long, contemplative time standing in front of the bread. She discovered that she liked the way that it felt as she felt it. She liked that it was spongy and rigid. She liked the way that she had to squeeze down hard at first, but that then she could feel it soften under the pressure of her fingers. As Laura was there, touching the bread, a man reached roughly around her and said, “Could you not touch all of them?” The man grabbed a baguette and rushed off. Laura, who did not usually swear, turned and looked after the man as he absconded off toward the registers and she screamed, “FUCK!” after him.

7. The man named Enrico Cavasello was in the grocery store because there were few things that he loved more than a nice big plate of bread and cheese and salami. Other things that he loved very much included dry red wine, wearing button down shirts unbuttoned down to reveal the treasure of his lustrously silken black chest hair, his own moustache, and women in business casual dress wear. He was just placing a wedge of creamy brie into his basket when he heard a woman call to him from across the store, over near the bread, where he was planning on going anyway. “FUCK!” she called to him. When he arrived there—his cart stocked full of cheese and wine—she was staring off, incensed, toward the registers. “Miss,” he said to her, “I have no idea what has happened to you, but sometimes I find it soothing to squeeze the bread until I calm down. Do this with me.” The woman looked at him. She was ensorcelled by him, and his chest hair, which looked like a smooth and shimmering puppy. Together they chose a loaf of French bread and they went back to his apartment, but they opened the wine first and never got to the French bread. The next day he had to throw it out because it had gone stale.

8. On the third day, the man named Carl Leonard went to the grocery store after work. He bought French bread without incident. He was so hungry that he ate it, alone, in his car in the parking lot.



Natural Perception: Face IV / Joshua Duncan

KYLE HARRIS

for Jacob

4 p.m. I unload
pallets and pallets at work.
Bombing down dusty aisles,
my ten-foot cardboard monsters
scream with crusty wheels
at breakneck speeds of five mph. Customers
freeze, never get out of my damn way.
Departments to deliver: Chemicals pills
sporting good clothes
food crafts bedding
auto electronic furniture.

7 p.m. Racks
and racks of hanging
apparel delivered to a lady who
never appreciates a job
well done. Burnt backs
pushing their Sisyphusian
carts, honking vultures
circling cars.

Midnight I'm off
at one o'clock on the dot
(no overtime, never over-
time) and time again
recycles, it's already
the next workday.

The sky is black, starless
except for the humming white
fluorescent moon. A starless
tarmac draping over the lot.

1 a.m. Every night
we're visited by a coyote that eats
out of my hand. My coworkers
named him Jacob. His head
guides his slim body toward

and away from me,
ears never stop pointing.
I don't give him a name.
I don't call him anything.

It needs to get away
from the emptiness
of a nighttime parking lot:
I want to lie in the dirt
with the coyote, fangs
tearing at my jugular, working
down my chest and stomach, turning
me and dirtied blood
mud ground into one
mass that will never be discovered. Just me
and the coyote, rotting
in a Californian chaparral under
a starry sky.

Sometimes I hear my name
on the radio and turn it off,
wait for a wild call that never comes.

O'Keefe calling her Isis
in paint swelled blinding right
she squawked mad angels whispers
drumming fiercely into black-purple

our heads are full of dark lit places she says
we strain to make fresh blossoms
in running water

she is a kept woman
an hourglass jar
she walks down the isle divide
Isis I mean Iris
blinks reason

she expired on the
desert floor
reclined across woven linens

spreading my legs over sands
it was 1924

they were a pair of wings pointing skyward
surrendering
in vivid oils

Enticed by their skin made of stories, I surrender to the worms in my brain. They stimulate every pore, every curve in my body. Burrowing. Gentle. My fingertips sizzle with the simmer of my blood urging me to write. Sometimes they dangle from my nose until one falls out with a “plop” on my notebook. I peel their skins off. Translucent insides encase their nerve cords. This one tells me the story of the orange tree in our backyard. It knows the weight of bearing fruit.

As I pour milk into an aluminum pot, I tell my husband insomnia has kept me awake for seven days and the worms are making holes in my brain. But he frowns. He says, Sweetie, doctors haven’t found anything wrong aside from anemia; you should just take extra iron and eat more fruits with vitamin C like kiwis or maybe you should pluck a few oranges.

I turn on the stove; he ponders about which tie to wear. I tell him the blue one. He hesitates, wears the black one, and kisses my forehead while keeping an eye on the clock. I love you, he says as he opens the door and steps out. His shiny, black leather shoes crush the brittle leaves that drifted into the kitchen.

I walk over to the icy window and stare at our backyard covered in festering fruit. A fog takes over my brain and there’s a tingling sensation along my neck. I close my eyes and exhale. I think of nothing. The boiling milk has spilled over and the twins are crying. I run to them. They’ve pooped on the carpet. They ate too many prunes with milk. They wail in my arms, and I console them with a song. They’re in pain and it’s my fault. My entire fault because I forgot to change their sagging diapers when they woke up. I forgot my manuscript doesn’t belong in the freezer, and my cell phone is not useful inside the fridge. I mean, has anyone ever had to hide from a robber inside a fridge?

Well, I did once when I was seven. But it wasn’t a robber, it was my mom. And I hid because her eyes pierced my skin. She told me to do this, that—and make sure not to do *that* again or *else*—and my brain will rot from reading too much, reading, reading so damn much. I’m tired, she said. She was always tired.

When she wasn’t looking, I tucked my thin limbs in there and marinated in silence. But the door flung open. She screamed. Her hand cracked against my jaw. And that’s when the orange juice spilled all over the floor, which I need to buy because the kids drank too much juice and I drank too much juice. They cry, Mommy, Mommy! So I kiss their faces and I must go to the store but I can’t forget the milk or pens—and not just any pens—but the kind that let you write as the fury of ideas are too fast to type.

I take them to the bathtub. With a warm cloth, I clean their cheeks and wash their slippery bodies. They stop crying and for a moment I don’t cry too. I take them out and wrap them in their hooded frog towels. Their bottles warm my thin hands and soon they drift into sleep. I’m at peace—yet I can’t sleep. I don’t want to sleep. I am in love with the worms. They push me to write until my body isn’t a burden anymore. I take the manuscript out of the oven and align three pens on the right of my desk. I pick a worm from the inside of my cheek and peel its skin. The story is my own: I will harvest the orange tree, but even more will rot in the grass.

FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER
RICHARD-EDWARD DE VERE

I was once
told
I would be
perfect
if my soul
was the
body
of someone more
beautiful



Heart Attack / Armando Castellanos

THE FISHER KING

CHRIS ESPINOSA

Dawn is peaking over the Mojave Mountains as my father and I approach the river. A glittering pinkish blue floats in swirling pools along the banks. My father smiles and his teeth tell me *it's safe*. I thread the hook onto the line and slide a small piece of cake, left over from my seventeenth birthday, onto the sharp barb. I tighten the drag and my father points to a dark current across the bank.

I cast and watch the cake sink into the darkness.

It drifts and bounces. We wait and somewhere far off quails scurry through the brown brush. Under the water the line goes *nip-nip*, then *tug-tug*. I pull the rod hard towards the sky and can feel the teeth of another's soul at the end of the line. We tussle and twist and as I reel, it pulls away. *Sink the hook*, my father whispers over a cigarette, and I do. I reel in a fresh young girl.

I am elated in growing morning as I watch the girl flop and flip onto the shore, her cheeks puffing large gasps of unwanted air that it can do nothing with. *She's too young*, my father says, *throw her back*, and he shoves the butt of the smoke into the bank at our feet. He walks on to find his own hole.

I stare at the girl, so young and shiny. A streak of rainbow lays down the side of her body. I reach down and scoop her up with two hands and hold her between the water and sky.

I lay her onto the bank and place my knee over her chest. I reach into my basket and pull out a small silver club. Her eye grows wide with fear and lack of oxygen. Her breathing is deep and useless. I raise my hand and strike her between the shoulder blades. *Thud*, and she's twisting. Slippery in the grip I hit her again, hard over the low back, just above her buttocks, breaking her hip. Naked and flailing she is twitching for the waters. I strike over the head, *stop moving*, again I pound her, *stop moving*, again on the temple, but she does not bleed. Her ribs grow tender and slow.

I take the knife from Walmart out of my pocket and lay her on her back. I slide a sliver edge softly just above her pubic bone. I push deeply towards the back of her body and then slowly cut the top skin of her towards her gills. Her guts open and as I spread her wide I can see tiny little eggs in her belly. I take them out and eat the caviar of her. I cut her neck out and pull the guts from her out and throw them into the dark waters edge. I place her body in my basket and though I know my father will be upset, I know I will cook her over an open fire and eat everything but the eyes and bones. I stand up and look towards the river and into the waters I say, *six more until my limit—just wait till I get my hands on you*.

The river goes quiet in shame.

I am the naked tree.

My bony, withered fingers
pluck birds
from the air.

I am refuge.

Unlike my sisters,
green and huge,
with endless nests
of squawking male-things
in their embraces—
emerging freely
from mounds
of soft Earth.

Unlike my sisters,
my feet
are planted—weighted
in concrete.

Look for me running along the side of the road, a slip of skin and pink fabric, pressing the dirt into a path that is just my size. You will come

upon me in your Crown Victoria, black and white and yes, I see you, red and blue. When you offer me a lift is when I will show you. I will show you

where hungry dogs thrash beneath my left breast. I will let you smell the sweat that hangs in jewels about my throat. You'll hear the song

that comes wailing from my ears, see the ash that sits like snow on my head, and you will know. I will tell you that I am the scariest thing

out here tonight. I will walk home barefoot on darker streets than this, and it is not safe for you, sir, to be wandering around so late on your own.



Rings / Brandon Dionisio

The parents had warned me.

They'd said repeatedly throughout my interview process that their girls were, as they'd put it, "special needs." Every time they said it I'd almost cringed. I chalked their out of date jargon up to the fact that they were foreign—recent arrivals from the Czech Republic, their native country, former home, the place where they had made their small fortune. I thought that the reason for their adamant warnings was obvious when I'd first met them—but apparently I'd been wrong.

What I *had* noticed immediately was this: the younger daughter, a girl of eight named Růžena, had been blinded in an accident when she was only five; her sister Šárka was three years her senior and had not spoken a single word since that very same accident. Overlooking those two exceptional facts, they both seemed like happy and normal children. Even if she would not speak, Šárka laughed frequently—firstly when I could not pronounce their names correctly, and then again many times after that. Růžena had told me with childish delight that Šárka wanted me to call her Shar, and that she wanted me to call her Rosie.

I hadn't stopped to wonder how a child who couldn't see might communicate with a child who refused to speak.

I was hired as the girls' nanny the day I met the family. It was so immensely relieving to be employed that I agreed to start working immediately. I was to be at the house full time while the parents were away, and their haste to hire me probably had to do with the fact that they were due back in the Czech Republic the next day to tie up some loose ends. After a quick trip back to my dingy apartment to pick up a couple changes of clothes, I settled in to my new life living in the spacious countryside home. And, for eleven days, my new job was dreamy in its simplicity and ease.

Now, it was just past the eleventh midnight and the kids had been asleep for a few hours. I was about to turn in, myself, but a brief dull commotion from Rosie's room had caught my attention, so I went to investigate. Her door was ajar—that was the first sign of trouble I noticed, since she always insisted I close it *all the way, please* when I put her to bed. I pushed the door open and looked inside. At first, I mistook what I saw—Shar, pressing a pillow to her sister's face while she struggled—for something else entirely.

The girls looked incredibly similar. They had the same curly dark hair, the same willowy frame, the same mannerisms and quirks. Even their eyes must have matched, when Rosie had still had hers. So, for just a second, I thought that Shar was Rosie, and my mind couldn't quite parse what I was seeing.

Then several things happened very quickly.

First, Shar noticed my arrival, and for a moment she looked guilt-stricken, but then she returned to her work. I sprang forward, all gangly awkward flailing of the limbs, and pushed Shar off of her sister. She fell off of her bed and into the dresser, which made a racket, but I barely heard it over my concern for Rosie.

In the short time I had known Rosie, I'd become completely enamored with her. The first time I'd met her,

she mentioned that it smelled like it was about to rain. At the time I thought it was one of those borderline superpowers that I'd always heard blind people could have. I'd just moved there from dry-as-a-bone New Mexico, where the only scent rain had was the one of damp dust and blacktop that lingered after a storm. But as it turned out, for all that she was constantly talking, Rosie was very rarely insightful.

Certainly she wasn't saying anything useful now, as I cradled her against my chest. The words pouring out of her mouth were a constant babble, verging on a hysteric fit, but they were not helpful. Half of them were Czech, completely meaningless to me, and the rest were fitful pleas. "Oh Hayley, oh please," she sobbed into my shirt, "Don't be mad at Šárka, please don't be mad, she didn't want to hurt me, don't be mad at her, oh Hayley please—"

And on, and on. An endless cycle punctuated only by the ragged, gasping breaths she took.

Shar looked at me from where she crouched on the floor, a rivulet of blood trailing down her cheek. She'd hit her head when I'd pushed her, but she didn't try to staunch the bleeding, only stared at me. Logically, I knew now that Rosie was fine—she was breathing, she was talking and wailing, after all. I should be worried now for Shar. I wasn't.

"Why?" I asked her, and her directly though I knew she wouldn't respond. I usually addressed her through Rosie, who spoke for her, who was her voice as Shar was her eyes. But I didn't want to hear an explanation from Rosie. I wanted Shar to tell me, I wanted to know why she'd done this, and most of all I just wanted her to speak.

She stared at me, her harrowed eyes unblinking.

I'd known she wouldn't respond, but it riled a hot anger in the pit of my stomach when she didn't. "Tell me why you did this! What were you thinking?"

Nothing.

"You could have *killed* her," I said. Shar didn't blink.

"Hayley," Rosie sniffled, her voice tapering off into a whine after a long fit of wails. "Please don't tell my father."

"I have to," I said, but I doubted myself even then. I was, after all, responsible for more physical damage to Shar than she was to Rosie.

"But he'll get so angry with her." *And with me*, I thought as Rosie burred, "And she didn't mean it, I know she didn't mean anything by it, she just gets lost sometimes."

"I have to tell your parents," I told her, looking down at the top of her head as she buried her nose in my sweatshirt and sobbed.

"Please don't, Hayley." Her cries were muffled by the heathered fabric. "Please."

By the time their parents returned from Europe, I was sick to my stomach with anticipation. It hung so heavily in my mind that I hadn't been able to sleep; upon her arrival at the house the mother immediately mentioned that I looked haggard and ill. She insisted I stay for dinner before I left the house to take the

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weekend off, to finally have some time to myself again.

I wanted to say no and thank her politely for the offer, but Rosie wouldn't hear it.

We ate outside. The thunderstorm which Rosie had smelled coming had passed days ago, but the weather was still miserably hot and humid. My thighs stuck to the patio chair with sweat, and breathing was a hardship. My heart thumped uncomfortably in my chest. I focused primarily on my food, working out what I was going to say in my head.

"I'm teaching Hayley how to play the piano," Rosie informed her parents loudly after several seconds were passed in silence. "Her fingers get all tripped up, though. They even get tangled."

"That's not very nice," her mother admonished. I tried to talk but my voice stuck in my throat. I coughed, swallowed, cleared my throat.

"But it's true," I said, my tongue feeling numb. "Rosie's a great teacher. I'm just not a very good student." Her father smiled at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners like Shar's did when she giggled.

"She wanted lessons when she was little," Rosie barreled on, stabbing a piece of food with her fork with preternatural accuracy. "But her mama couldn't afford it."

"Rosie," her father said sharply before scolding her in Czech. I had picked up only a painfully sparse handful of words in the time I'd known the girls, but even if I didn't understand the exact words that her father had said, I understood the general meaning.

"It's fine," I said softly, glancing up from my plate of food.

"It's personal," the mother said. "She shouldn't be telling things like that without your permission."

"I'm afraid we don't know much about you at all, Hayley," the father said. It was as if he'd just realized this, despite the fact that we'd really only spent a sum total of twenty minutes together so far. "Could you tell us about yourself?"

I didn't want to.

I didn't tell anyone about myself. I didn't talk about my mother, or my childhood home in New Mexico, or why I had come to leave it.

I hadn't told even my best friends. I didn't want to tell these people. But I wanted to tell them about Shar's outburst even less.

So I started from the beginning.

Months passed. The secret was kept. I think Rosie forgot the incident entirely, but I couldn't. I was haunted by reminders of it every time I turned a corner in the house—every time I caught Shar's eyes, every time I closed Rosie's door at night. There was a furtive atmosphere in the house whenever the parents were stateside, an air of imminence when they were not. I felt like Shar was a taut cable, sturdy and never fraying but still filled with constrained energy.

But I never once felt unsafe. I was cagey, jumping at the smallest of noises. Still, for all the superficial anxieties that inhabited my mind, I knew that Shar wasn't an actual threat to me. She was just a child, who, like

her sister had insisted, was lost in her own mind.

I thought I understood Shar quite well, and I was proud of that. I'd always prided myself on being introspective, empathic. It wasn't until later that I realized how badly I'd misjudged her character.

In the early spring, Rosie's school took a trip to a week-long overnight camp. She attended a school for blind children, one of the best in the country. She'd told me that Shar had wanted to attend the school as well, but she couldn't. Their parents had instead opted to homeschool her. She'd gone through five private tutors in just the time I had been working for the family. In fact, I seemed to be the only employee of the family who wasn't transitory. The cooks, the gardeners, even the maids. They never stayed for more than a couple months.

The week that Rosie was gone was one of the strange interim periods in which nobody was in the house. The parents were away on business; the daytime staff had either been given the week off or were being replaced. Shar and I were alone in the house.

Separate from her sister, she was an entirely different child. She rarely smiled, never laughed. Her days were spent not playing with dolls or helping her sister color pictures out of a coloring book. She was sullen, often hiding from me, always bearing a look of concern and anticipation on her delicately featured face.

Thinking that perhaps she was scared of me, I let her have her alone time and busied myself with the household chores. The third day we were alone, I didn't see her at all for most of the morning and afternoon, and only sought her out after I had prepared dinner and washed yesterday's dishes. Humming to myself, I ascended the main staircase and went to her room, intending to tell her that dinner was ready. But before I could knock, a noise caught my attention.

I paused, fingers tightening around the dishrag I held until my knuckles turned white. Leaning my head on the door, I became very silent—held my breath, willed my heart to beat softer so that I could know what I was hearing was real.

From Shar's room came the unmistakable soft babbling of a child speaking to herself.

The next evening, Shar made me dinner. Naturally, she didn't consult me first; I emerged from the television room to find her setting the last dish of food on the table. I didn't thank her. I never spoke to her.

We ate in silence, and when she moved to wash the dishes, I stood beside her and helped.

"You can talk to me," I said.

She set a bowl down on the drying rack as if I hadn't said anything at all. Her resolve lasted another ten seconds before her brow crinkled in frustration.

"Rosie's not here. She'll never know."

Shar nodded, but didn't look at me. Feeling reassured, I continued.

"She doesn't notice much at all, does she?" I asked. Shar shrugged noncommittally, but her head bobbed up and down in agreement, just once. A subtle betrayal of her thoughts.

"She doesn't notice you," I said. "She doesn't really know what you're thinking at all, does she?"

There was no subtle nod this time, but her fingers clenched around the towel she was using to dry the dishes.

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“Why don’t you speak, Shar?” I asked, setting down the casserole dish I’d been scrubbing and leaning on the counter. She looked up at me, slowly, her eyes bright and full of resentment—for me, maybe. Maybe for Rosie.

She shrugged again, slower but less deliberate than last time. Mimicking me, she set down her dish and cloth.

“You have to talk.”

Looking down at her hands, she wound her fingers together, pressed them to her stomach like she was ill.

“If you’re afraid, that isn’t a part of Rosie, it’s a part of you,” I said, trying to sound kind, hoping she wasn’t as lost as I’d thought she was. “Being scared won’t go away when Rosie does. You know that now, don’t you?”

Her hand shook when she lifted it from her stomach, pressed it to her lips, clenched it in a fist and let it rest above her heart. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth. For a moment I thought she would speak, but she didn’t. The noise that escaped her mouth was nothing more than a sob, but it was still the only sound I’d ever heard her make that was real, genuine, not a mask.

After that first sob, she cried silently, her shoulders shaking and her hands clutching her chest, like she was afraid her heart would beat out of it if she let go. Instinctively I stepped forward, closed her in to the circle of my arms. She pressed her face into my shirt, her tears dampening it, her hands tangling themselves in the fabric.

Against my shoulder, I felt her lips move, forming words without making a sound.

I am going to cut off my hair. You
will not recognize me when it is
gone. I am going to call the number
and leave a message with the date
and time that I would like for curiosity
to nip every colorless, fractured
idea and decision from the bottom
up until it is slick with health. I will
sell my diamond rings and my blue
coat and everything that I have grown
or bought and kept and kept until
it was filthy with memories I couldn't
toss out. Stains and secrets and split
endings: they will go. I am burning each
second that sticks to the bottom
of my shoes and clogs my engine
and you and I will clank like clean
spoons while the downstairs neighbors
bore separate holes on opposite ends
of the dirty mattress they can't turn
over.

Dear citizen, read these histories and embody their teachings. They will be your guide in this world and the next. Praise be to the Day That is Coming, and The Days of the Past.

To tell our history is wholly necessary—we can never allow ourselves to forget. The education we all receive at home is well and good, but it cannot guide your faith quite like a scholarly source. Remember, it is the Word of the Historians that defines our culture and society. And remember dear citizen, what one child is told on our side of the Wall differs greatly from what a child is told on the other. The story you know is not the same as the story they know—we can only hope the light of the Word, our Word, will reach them in the darkness that surrounds them.

I can say with infallible certainty that our understanding of the Word is most righteous, the unwavering truth, constant in its guidance. If this were false, if the Word uncertain, disputable, would you not hear otherwise on our city streets or even in your own homes? Would we not read this in the Histories? Would not the good word of another Zone make its way into ours? Ask yourself these questions, seek the answers, and once found, you will have a truth so tempered that nothing can break its iron frame. Do not concern yourself with what does not originate from behind these Walls. It is truly too much to bear. Dear citizen, let only the gospel of *our* Histories enter your heart and purify your soul, so that your Future may be brighter than the stars above.

In the time before the erection of the Walls, before the War of Division, before even the Time of Togetherness, the world was a mysterious place. Systems of thought differed greatly from how they function today. In this lost time, a time of hopelessness and pain, language served only in its capacity of communication, nothing more. Food was manufactured, manipulated, and spliced. But worst of all, each and every person was permitted to move about the land, any land, with no restrictions. There were no Walls to protect them, no Word to guide them, no Histories to remind them. Imagine it! Imagine the danger of treading in another's Zone, unaware of policy, custom, or faith. These were troubling times.

The world was treacherous during this time, dear citizen. Dark and shrouded in ignorance, our ancestors lived a misguided existence. Yet there lurked a beacon of hope on the horizon. This beacon, in the form of a man, came unto this world at a time of greatest need. It was this man, his eminence Erik Grundlægger, who

saw the light where there were only shadows, fearlessly plunged humanity towards a new direction, seeking out the golden luminescence of the Word. His eminence Grundlægger, of the forgotten and ancient culture of the Danes (a fair-skinned clan of the Northern Hemisphere which occupied a minor peninsula below the great Frozen Sea—see *History of Lost Cultures-Volume 2*) made the greatest discovery in the history of humanity. Many outside our walls would fiercely charge Historians like myself with hyperbole, so great a claim ringing in their unenlightened ears. But is it not this discovery that dissolved the crude realm in which humanity once dwelled? Are not the words in front of you, those which pass now before your eyes proof enough, dear citizen?

His eminence Grundlægger is believed, or better, immortalized as having willfully parted the sands of the sweeping deserts and brought forth from the core of the earth that which we have come to call the Tablets. This story of origin is paramount, and is at the center of everything we believe. Recall the joy that welled in your heart as your father recanted the History, your smile beaming as you heard it for the first time. The story unwound before you just as his father before him. Picture now as you did then the glory of his eminence Grundlægger, perched upon a towering mountain peak, triumphantly raising the tablets high above his head. The image brings tears to all of our eyes. Praise be to the Day That is Coming, and The Days of the Past.

It is then recorded, dear citizen, that his eminence Grundlægger, guided by the tongues of the ancient gods, translated the Tablets into his modern language, a language since forgotten, preserved only in the few fragments Historians like myself have been able to preserve (a chapbook has been since been compiled containing the remaining phraseology of the dialect formerly known as ‘English’—this book, *Remnants of the Tongue*, can be perused in your local Records Hall). His eminence unlocked for the world the previously coded mysteries of the Tablets.

Even today, all of humanity—behind each and every Wall—holds his eminence Grundlægger’s discovery at the core of their understanding, this common belief being last vestige of unity humanity has managed to preserve. This translation, dear citizen, penned by the mighty hand of his eminence Grundlægger himself, is known to all as the Scriptures. Memorized by his eminence, the Scriptures were forbidden to be gazed upon by eyes other than his own until after his death, and were therefore carried vigilantly on his person, against his chest, near the immeasurable warmth of his heart.

The original Scriptures, which his eminence began orating to small groups of early adherents, declared language to be the holiest force to be wielded on earth. The Scriptures beheld words and their forms and structures to be the progenitive forces of creation, the true principle by which reality is perpetuated and modified. By translating this message, this dictum from the language of the ancients, his eminence Grundlægger became a god amongst men, praise be.

Invigorated by the Word and his newfound responsibility, his eminence Grundlægger set out to inform the world of his complete and pristine understanding. Disregarding the dangers of global travel, his eminence spread the Word, imparting his wisdom to all who wished to listen. Soon, masses of people were flocking to hear his eminence impart the great Word, becoming enlightened in the gospel his eminence dollied out in generous portions. So rapturous were his sermons that many of his followers, growing exponentially each day,

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would fall into fits of ecstasy, reveling in the glory of their new understanding.

And so, his eminence Grundlægger continued as such, traveling about from town to city, from province to country, satiating mankind with the nourishment of the Word. After many years, his eminence had gained a following so large as to have touched every culture worldwide, the Word weaving into the fabric of every society, clutching the hearts of millions. As the world rejoiced, and the darkness receded, a fateful day loomed menacingly close, dear citizen. Not long after the Grand Conversions, the terrible day came upon us like a stifling sheet, blanketing all that was good and right. His eminence came to a mighty city—known to the ancients as Rome—and graced the innumerable congregation with his stunning oratory. Within a mighty hall, his voice echoing between the great marble dome, his eminence was met with the greatest misfortune—the misfortune known only by great heroes and martyrs.

While delivering the most expressive of speeches, wrapped in a blind and rapturous state, his eminence Grundlægger found himself trapped amidst a fiery blaze—now known to all as The Hellfire. Our Historians speculate as to whom or what could have wrought such a blaze that could take from us our glorious leader at his power's peak, but to no avail. Our great leader was killed and the mystery of the Hellfire was born.

The Hellfire had consumed the walls, the roof, even the whole collection loyal parishioners. Looking about, seeing the carnage befallen his followers, the probability of his fate growing amidst the blaze, his eminence, in the ultimate act of sacrifice, laid himself upon the Scriptures, the only copy known to man, preserving the Divine Word, praise be. In this heroic act, his eminence lost his life, but gained immortal status. Is this not the act of true martyrdom, dear citizen? Ask yourself: would I cast myself into the blaze for my beliefs?

After the blaze has burned itself out, the air ripe with the smell of burnt flesh, the Scriptures were recovered and his eminence Grundlægger's body was wrapped in fine linen and buried in grave whose location has since been lost. It was a day of mourning for all mankind, each soul grieving in a harmonious lament. Yet, in calamity perhaps equal in loss, the Scriptures were damaged, and could not in their entirety be saved from the cruel lapping of the ghastly blaze. It became apparent that portions of the Scriptures were lost, burned away in the Hellfire. Whole sections were forlorn and made indecipherable, but blessed it be, the preponderance of the Word remained intact, and for the first time, eyes other than his eminence's beheld the radiance of the Word.

The Scriptures, what was left of them, were then published and circulated worldwide. Soon, all the nations of earth had the Word in hand. The world rejoiced in the revelations of the Scriptures, and his eminence Grundlægger was further immortalized in the various arts of the age—his image, his very name, now more sacred than the moon's milky rise or the sun's luminous descent. It must have been a wonder to witness, to be alive at that time, would it not dear citizen? For many years, humanity lived by the Word written in the portions of the Scriptures that were not damaged by the Hellfire. Great feats were achieved in architecture, art, cuisine, culture. Differences were overcome. Unity reigned. These were simple, but joyous times. It is said that each man, woman, and child lived for the same purpose, and generated a harmonious world created and governed by language. This time is now known to all as the Time of Togetherness. Our historians date this period as lasting

approximately 250 years.

The Time of Togetherness, for all of its prosperity, was met by a rather abrupt end. We can only speculate as to the exact date of the absolvment of this great milieu, but what we do know is that this moment marked the beginning of the disunity, the planting of the seeds of the War of Division.

This is where our story forks—where individual beliefs began to seep into the collective consciousness, dividing and unraveling. These are the Myths of Disunity:

It seems only fitting that the disunity should begin where the Scriptures were discovered—in the desert. An order of scriptologists in Cairo, an ancient city fabled to be near where his eminence discovered the Tablets (in a nation previously know as Egypt—see *History of Lost Cultures-Volume 10; Section 72*), made the first daring assertion—an assertion that cast the first stone in the War of Division. The order, known as the Originalists, claimed to have deduced the contents of the missing Scriptures, the verses lost in the blaze that claimed our holiest martyr, his eminence Erik Grundlægger.

They asserted that the gaps in the Scriptures contended, or rather, amended the universal belief of language’s generative force—that the gaps were meant to depict language as a systematic schema of destruction, not creation. The Originalists held that each word, when uttered or even mouthed, undid the true reality of humanity—a reality, they believed, that was inside every one of us. And so began the Era of Changing Understandings. An era defined by endless conjecture.

The order of the Originalists ceased speaking, stopped all writing, and resigned themselves to inner transcription. Believing the utterance of language to undo the world around them, they built autogenous languages, languages inscribed on their souls. They constructed internal realities, which they projected into this world through stoic vigils in public places—government buildings, city streets, and town squares. The less expressive the face, the more sagacious that person was in their faith.

The Order of the Originalists spread like the cursed flames of the Hellfire. Soon, each city of the world contained a faction of the Order. Swarms of silent sitters arose in every town, city, and province, each enacting their wordless demonstrations. For some time, dear citizen, the world became a taciturn realm. The reign of the Originalists lasted approximately 72 years.

Soon, other sects, dissatisfied with the interpretations of the Originalists, began diverging from these principles. This ended the monopoly that the Originalists had on linguistic beliefs for almost a century. Thus, countless subgroups emerged during this time of uncertainty.

The Sect of Inverse Tongues began in the Western Hemisphere, claiming the gaps in the Scriptures had called for language to be constructed and spoken in the inverse, so that the generative powers of language could not be misused or fall into the wrong hands. Their works of great literature were written backwards, their spoken word meaningless to you and I.

Then, the Society of Mumlbers came into being in the ancient region of ice, in the extreme north

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(formerly known as Newfoundland—see *History of Lost Cultures-Volume 1f*). They held that language is an eternal, unbroken process, and must be constantly attended to. Never were they to cease their speech—with little exception. A partner was needed to eat and drink—someone to continue your utterances as you satiated yourself, only to have the roles reversed. Soon, there were dozens of splinter cells worldwide; each laying claim to the true meaning of the missing Scripture.

Lost in the growing madness were those who adhered to the found Word of the Scripture—those who believed fully in what was printed in the Scriptures, the remaining verses of his eminence Grundlægger. Soon, these purists were swallowed up, consumed by the spreading plague of inference that now casts a shadow over our entire planet.

The Consonnites, a growing organization during The Era of Changing Understandings, believed that only consonants contained the generative ability of creation, and thereby demonized the vowel. This group began a comprehensive global campaign of conversion. They sent missionaries to the farthest corners of our world hoping to unify the globe once again under the banner of Pure Consonants. It is recorded that in so doing, they stepped on a great deal of toes. Entering the territory of the Institute of Mono-Syllabic Worship, the Consonnites were met with great resistance. The Mono-Syllabites, speaking only in single units of simplified sound, fought against the incursion of the invading Consonnites. For decades, the two factions waged linguistic warfare beneath the great mountains, known centuries ago as the Himalayas (see *History of Ancient Geography*). All the while, similar wars were fought worldwide, pitting faction against faction, sect against sect.

This conflict marked the end of the Era of Changing Understanding, which lasted the better part of two centuries (Historians date it at around 213 years), and inaugurated the War of Division. Ancient texts of the old world describe warfare as an oppositional affair between two disparate peoples—how simple minded! The War of Division is marked by the multitudinal vitriol of multiple sects—a war fought on numerous fronts, against all disbelievers, each faction gaining and losing in a century long war of attrition. The populations of the world were whittled down during this Holy War, The War of Division. Armies of linguists, armed with nothing but their words and their beliefs, were shipped throughout the world to perish in the name of their faith. Dear citizen, you must imagine the horror these men and women faced, dying amidst the unfamiliar landscape of foreign lands, away from the streams and mountains they knew and loved, clutching desperately to the Word their people believed in. This was now doubt a time of immense suffering.

Loss and destruction defined this era. No soul was safe from the carnage. The great cities of the world crumbled amidst the chaos of global warfare. Finally, when the dust had cleared, a barren world razed by man was all that remained.

And so began the extended epoch we currently find ourselves within now—The Great Construction. Despite the century long war, a war that decimated the world and made all persons infinitely weary, tensions still ran high. The endless battles and loss did nothing to quell the beliefs of the remaining sects—they continued in their firm convictions. However, in a great showing of solidarity, the many leaders of the remaining sects met in peace at an agreed upon location in modern day Omega Zone. During this meeting,

known to some as The Summit of Conclusion, and to others as The Wall-Meeting, it was agreed upon by all leaders, that no direct contact should be had between the citizens of each sect; that great Walls should be placed along the borders of the lands of each faction, forever separating one from another, in effect, ending the tireless state of continuous warfare.

With the various methods of consent recorded from each leader (remember, many of the sects did and still do not believe in writing or even speech), the War of Division was ended, and the Great Construction began. Within two decades, the Walls were raised, the sects finally separated, and peace befell the land.

Now, each zone is free to practice their beliefs at will, in the methods that they so choose. No longer is one blasphemed, apprehended, struck, or berated for their beliefs, and the world is far better for it. Although you may never know your neighbors over the wall in Alpha Zone, nor those in Gamma Zone, their isolation from us, and our isolation from them is for the best. Our great leaders have your best interest at heart, dear citizen.

In our sector, Beta Zone, we maintain the value of written records, the importance of knowing our Past to generate the Future. Through the maintenance of these records, we preserve language in its fluid, but explicit states throughout history. Each record is an encapsulation of how language was used and manipulated during a specific period. With this knowledge, we can apply or disregard the past functions of language in order to create a better Present.

As a Level 7 Historian here in our righteous and might zone, it is my duty to inform you, the people, of what has come to pass as it may construct the Future—that is the belief our ancestors fought for over a century to preserve. By writing this, by documenting the record of our turbulent history, we can thereby never forget. Remember dear citizen: the Past is never dead, for we are its resurrectors. Praise be to the Day That is Coming, and The Days of the Past.

*- A. Margus Remmington
Level 7 Historian of the Tribe of United Ages
Beta Zone, North Region*

Seventeen.
Time when boys held lit cigarettes to their arms
to prove how much they can sweat.
Slept on sidewalks.
Smuggled into a bar in Castro,
huddled together like lambs
in wood moonlit by pink neon.
Saw her at the end.
Pink hair. Pink Lips.
Pink Nails. Pink Martini.
Tapped her shoulder. Turned around.
He. She. It.
Entice her. Invite her.
Dad told me never to let
a lady drink alone in a bar.
Assumed it applied to transsexuals.
Grabbed me by my finger. Name was Rachel.
Chet Baker on the radio
and we danced
and she burned
and I sweat.
Desolation and absolution.
Light hips and low gazes.
Pink.
In the daylight my friends and I walked past.
Was smoking in a suit.
Clutched my arm and looked away.

Photo 1: Cliff outside of Arnold's Market.

Cliff had never tasted cow shit, but if pressed he'd assume it tasted like the coffee at Arnold's market. The air in this forsaken town reeked of shit, so to be fair maybe anything he drank would have tasted similarly. The only good part about Arnold's was it got Cliff out of Dani's car. For three hours, Dani had been regaling him with fun facts about the California Gold Rush. Well, she thought they were fun facts. Normally, Cliff would've told Dani she was being the world's most boring woman and she would stop, but today was different. Dani had been dumped by her idiot boyfriend a few days ago. Instead of eating ice cream and watching movies like a normal person, Dani decided to go camping in the desert. She had looked so pathetic in her oversized pajamas begging him to come along that Cliff had agreed. Dani had insisted that this trip was for the both of them. However, Cliff's idea of wallowing would have involved a smooth beach with a gentle surf. Not a film of dirt on every part of him and sleeping on the ground.

Cliff didn't need this camping for losers expedition. Unlike Dani, he knew exactly why Brian had broken up with him. He didn't need to regroup. Cliff had mourned the death of his relationship while he was still in it. They were a leaky cooler, their affection for each other slowly had dripping away until it dried up completely. Cliff wondered why there was no song about loving someone less and less every day because that is exactly what had happened with them.

Cliff was here because while Dani was the kind of girl who would force you to listen to fun facts, on a seemingly endless road trip, she was also the kind of girl who called a moving van for Cliff, gave him a spare room to stay in, and cooked him C shaped pancakes for breakfast. Dani was more of a sister to him than his actual bitch of a sister had ever been. So off they went to the desert, to find themselves, or something, like some old writer dude Dani loved.

Photo 2: Cliff, arms outstretched, squatting on top of a precarious rock.

Cliff sang, "Twerk twerk" as he booty shook on the rock above Dani. He let Dani know that his only wish in the world was for a backup track. Dani, through her laughs, tried to make her best record scratching noises. Dani looked up at Cliff and imagined she was on that rock, dancing like a madwoman behind that giant canyon. In all her carefree undulating, she would move closer to the edge. Then, splat. How did Dani die? They would say. Like an idiot, she danced off a rock, people would answer. No, Dani would stay safely on firm ground.

Dani knew Cliff wasn't excited about camping. Dani also knew Cliff took everything in his life as an adventure. Cliff said things like, when in Rome and in for a penny in for a pound, and actually meant them. In retrospect, perhaps Cliff would have been more interested in her facts if they had been about the etymology of common clichés.

Photo 3: Cliff, with his back to the camera, frolics in the lake.

“Inhale,” Cliff advised as Dani awkwardly puffed on his preciously hand-rolled joint.

“I’ve done this before you know,” Dani said.

“Whatever you say, Kumar,” Cliff returned. “So tell me more about this whole Oak of The Golden Dream thing...”

Dani smiled. “I know you’re humoring me. So as punishment, I am really going to tell you.”

Dani was the only person Cliff knew who maintained the stick up her ass while stoned. He was about to dive in this water and just keep swimming in hopes of escape.

“Get out of the water, Cliff.”

“Get into the water, Dani.”

“We’re high!” Dani stressed.

“No shit,” Cliff said.

“It’s not safe. Our reflexes are not up to par right now.”

“I am ankle deep, what could happen?”

“Do you really want me to start listing scenarios?” Dani asked.

“No, I really want you to get in the water.” Cliff answered.

“Can’t we just look at the water? It’s so pretty.”

Cliff sighed as he left the water.

Photo 4: In the desert, Cliff takes a picture of him and Dani. He smiles and she covers her face.

“Am I too rigid?” Dani asked.

“Yes.” Cliff said.

“But you still love me. Why can’t I sucker a straight man into putting up with it?” Dani

wondered.

“You keep dating mustachioed assholes?”

Dani’s responding sob echoed across the desert like the wail of a coyote. Dani held her hand out as she wept, stopping Cliff from saying anything, or worse hugging her. Dani had only cried at funerals and Downton Abbey so this outburst was a surprise for the both of them.

“You okay?” Cliff asked once Dani had recomposed herself.

“I need to do something different. I need not to be me for even one second. Either that or become a shut in and start collecting newspapers. I don’t want to be the kind of girl who covers her face in pictures anymore. I want to be like you.”

“I don’t know what you are thinking, but we are not Freaky Fridaying with each other.”

“You got dumped too. Why are you okay?” Dani sniffled.

“The support of my sensitive friend,” Cliff sarcastically stated. “I’m sad, but sometimes that’s life, dude. Make the best of it.”

“How do I do that?”

Cliff pulled another joint out of his pocket and handed it over to Dani.

Photo 5: Dani drinks from a puddle on the ground.

Cliff wouldn’t stop yelling. Do something! Live your life! Over and over. Cliff looked around them at the desolate area and wondered exactly what Dani could do in this place anyway. Maybe they should go back to the lake so she could jump in.

“I’m fucking doing something!” Dani screamed before Cliff had a chance to voice his new plan.

A second later Dani was lying in the dirt, her lips on a puddle, sucking some water up before dipping her tongue in. Holy crap, Dani was just spontaneous.

“That was disgusting, but you did it! You licked that puddle, you crazy son of a bitch! How do you feel?” Cliff said and he helped Dani up from the ground.

“A little sick, but good. Really good.” Dani looked triumphant.

Maybe, when they returned Cliff would ask Dani to show him how to be more responsible, open up a savings accounts or something. If Dani could lick that puddle anything was possible.

Photo 6: Outside of Love’s gas station.

“Where’s my Slim Jim?” Dani asked as Cliff returned to her car.

Cliff made a disgusted face and threw a banana at Dani. Then he handed her a sparkly visor with puddle licker written across it in wobbly sharpie.

“A memento,” Cliff explained.

Dani immediately put on the visor, smiling widely. “It would be so efficient if you could fill up on love at the gas station.”

“Please don’t start talking about your empty love tank.”

They both laughed. Maybe, this trip would be an annual thing.



Candid Shot of Elderly Couple / Antranik Tavitian

What an extraordinary pursuit:

A woman across the empty restaurant asks, ‘What are you reading?’

So you flip the book over on its side for her to see. Only you do so with caution, as if it’s your pet tarantula that just recently died and you don’t want anyone to know about it—he was your pet, the relationship was a little odd, let’s face it, and how many people could really understand that sort of thing, I mean *really* understand, even if they wanted to?

‘Very nice,’ she says, craning her neck to read the spine of the novel. And you suddenly realize that you *do* want people to know about your book, just as you would want them to know about the pet tarantula you had a long time ago. After all, both have been dead many years, so it only seems right they be publicly acknowledged.

‘What about you?’ you ask. Nothing that deserves to die, you tell yourself now—in vain—deserves to be forgotten.

‘Oh, I don’t read,’ the woman sighs in mock-exasperation, placing her book down on the table in what you take to be an excruciating gesture of existential proportions. ‘Once you reach a certain income level, you just sort of start to pretend. It’s difficult to know what else to do.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ you say, happy to change the subject. ‘Have you tried picking up another hobby? Needlework maybe?’

The woman appears to shake her head, but only slightly. She is a moderately obese Mexican woman, and you really can’t be sure.

‘You could do Pilates. Or you could hang-glide maybe? Loads of people go hang-gliding.’

She looks away, a little sad maybe, like you’re beginning to lose her interest now.

‘Hang-gliding Pilates, how about that?’ You hear yourself trailing off, all but whispering now, which is all you can do to stifle your enthusiasm about this startling new concept of yours.

You try to think of a whole repertory of insignificant things, the enormous work which goes into studying them. A history of nail-clippers, two thousand volumes to acquire the certain knowledge that until 1675 these small things had never received any mention. Suddenly in Mainz someone does a picture of a woman cutting a nail.

SEPARATE TABLES

It is not exactly a pair of nail-clippers, but it looks like it.

'Pilates isn't for everyone, I guess,' you add, picking up where the two of you left off. 'Well, how about yachting then? Have you ever been out on a yacht? I hear it's absolutely delightful. Nothing but you and the open sea, the wind at your back, the salt in your hair—'

And just then the most astonishing thing happens. The moderately obese Mexican woman turns to face you. Suddenly solemn and unsmiling, she raises her dark sunglasses so that you can see her dark eyes beneath them. She lifts the side of her sweater to reveal a monstrous, meandering scar branded on her torso.

'Is that—is that what I think it is?' you hear yourself stammer. The truth is you think it's grotesque. That it appears unnatural, still inflamed maybe, like a secret lab experiment gone terribly wrong. The Frankenstein of caterpillars, an entomologist's worst nightmare.

'Did you—were you—? Was that from a shark attack!?' You feel yourself start to get a little excited, though you know that you should know better. Was it a deep-water eel? A Hammerhead? It looks like it might've been the work of a Hammerhead—

Nothing. 'Don't tell me a Giant Squid did that!?'

Again, she says nothing. She scarcely moves—*you think*—and all the while she is holding her eyes on you, like at any given moment, a couple of nuclear warheads or laser beams are about to come out of them.

To think of a barricade between the two of you. Anything. If only you were to turn now to the history of nail-clippers, or to the invention of the screw, or to the use of the verb *gond* in the literature of Pali—.

You hear yourself trail off again until, at last, the woman drops her sweater back down and rises from the table. She slurps loudly the last of her Fanta from a paper straw.

'I—I—don't yacht anymore,' she says. 'I get sea-sick.'

And so with that, the moderately obese Mexican woman walks out the door without looking back, a sphinx without a secret. You stare out the window a good while after she's walked all the way past it, disappearing around the corner of the building in a hurry like a woman who is interested, above all, only in boredom and all its various permutations.

But that's not right exactly either. For you know you won't ever see this woman again. It's sad for a moment, when you let yourself think about it.

You turn back to your book now where you left off. It's a good book, and you're right in the middle of it. The book is about a man who goes fishing and, after a series of nearly fatal adventures and a surreal but

extraordinary tour through all of Western history, never seems able to make it back home.

You linger over the part where the man manages to stand on top of a whale for a while, hopelessly fishing for minnows. Until you eventually come across the following anecdote, recounted by the story's protagonist:

In the eighteenth century a certain Philip McKinney of Baltimore patents the first nail-clippers with a spring attached: the problem is solved, the fingers can squeeze with all their strength to cut toenails, incredibly tough, and the clippers will snap back automatically. Five hundred notes, a year of work.

Sure, it is sort of nuts and maybe a little absurd, even for a book, but you read on anyway, engrossed, until you've forgotten all over again the room you were in a few moments ago, and everyone else who may or may not have been in it with you.

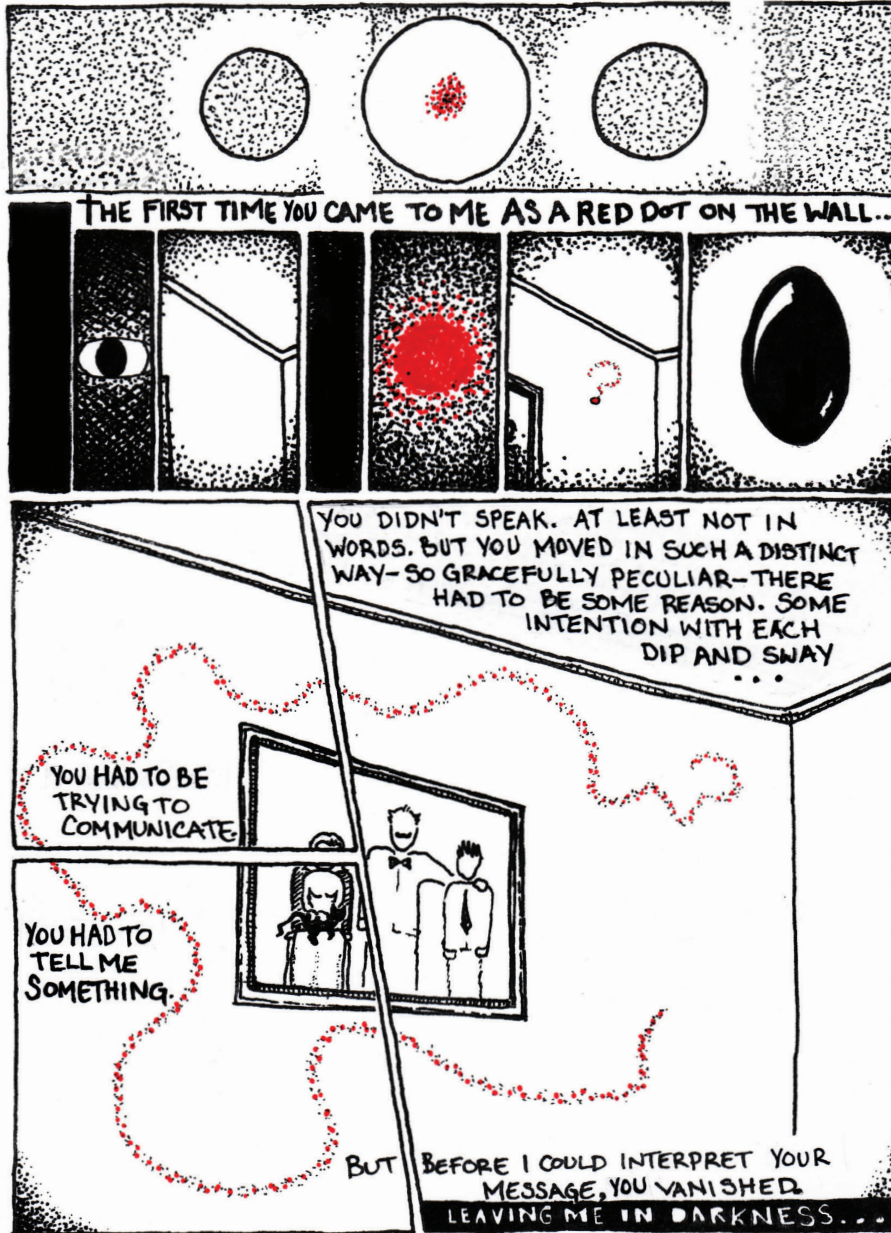
JORDAN GUEVARA

This is not your pipe,
shrouding your children with contempt.
Stale ribbons at its end,
searching upward for the ceiling.
There are no signals to where you have gone.
These are the lives that haunt you. The ones
good intentions could not ward off.

The television is silent,
without the soft static to sing me goodnight.
The stove is cold.
Mom's spaghetti for
deserving boys and girls who've done their chores.
Our driveway is empty,
only dried up oil stains left behind on the pavement.

These are not bridges between us,
only smoldering metal and fleeting embers.

There is no peace although it is quiet.
This home was meant for ghosts.



THE SECOND TIME YOU CAME TO ME, YOU APPEARED IN THE SAME SPOT AS BEFORE...



WHERE YOU HAD LEFT ME WAITING FOR YOUR RETURN.

AND THIS TIME, WHEN YOUR MOVEMENTS SPOKE— I WAS READY TO LISTEN.

EVERY MOTION WAS BY DESIGN,

EVERY INFINITESIMAL GESTURE HELD WITHIN ITSELF...

CREATED SO

A MIRACLE

AND EVEN THOUGH I COULD NOT UNDERSTAND YOUR MESSAGE, I DID KNOW ONE THING. WHEN YOU DANCED ACROSS MY WALL, YOU BREATHED EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD INTO ITS PERFECT BODY. YOU WERE THE HEART, SUN, AND NUCLEUS.



WHEN I TRIED TO SPEAK, I HAD NO WORDS. THAT WAS WHAT YOU WANTED. NO WORDS. NO QUESTIONS. JUST FOLLOW...

AND SO FOLLOW

I DID.

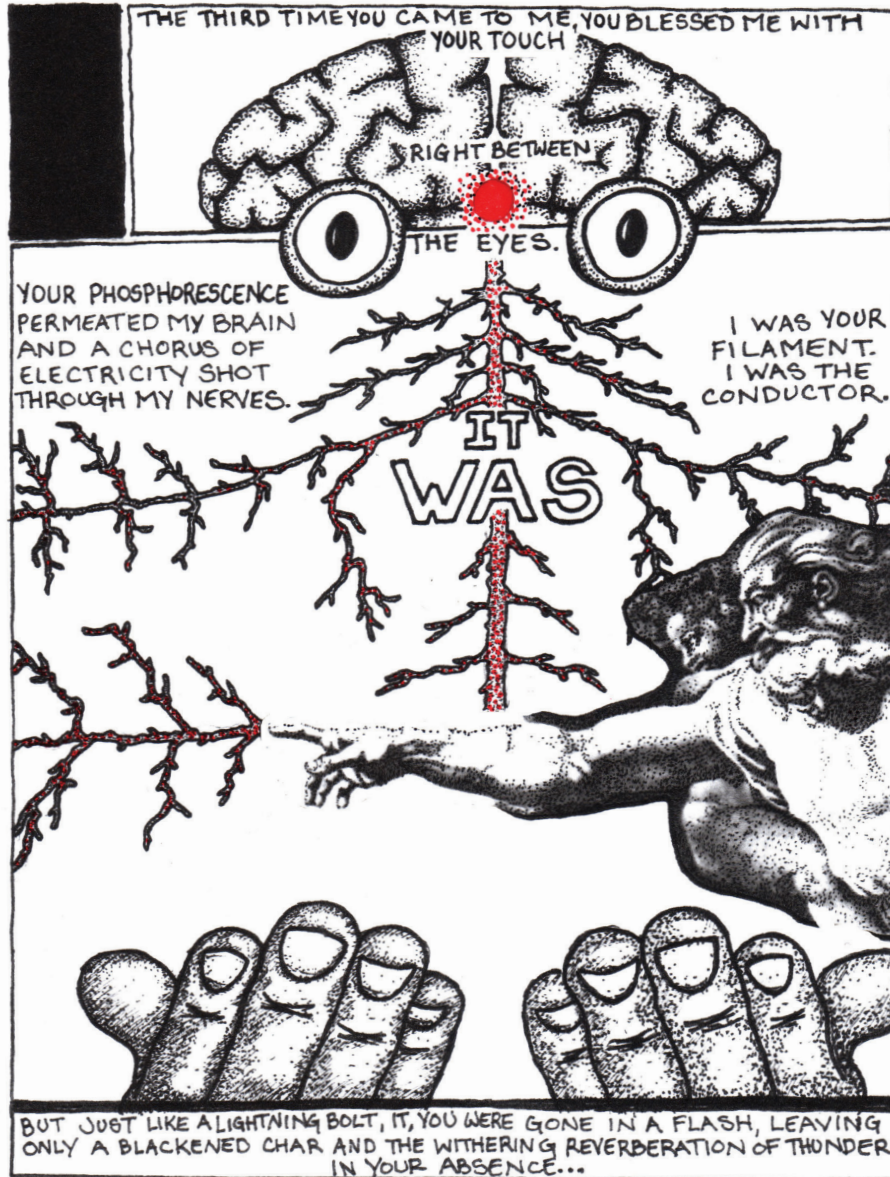
AND NOT WITH JUST MY EYES.

BUT WITH MY BODY

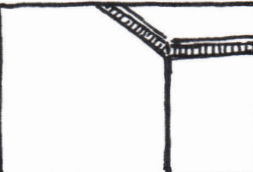
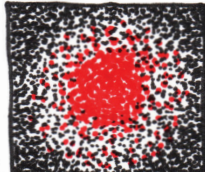
WITH MY HEART...

I FELT YOU COURSING THROUGH MY VEINS

AND THIS TIME, WHEN YOU LEFT, I KNEW— IN THE SYNCOPATION OF EVERY CELL IN MY BODY, THAT YOU WOULD RETURN. YOU HAD TO. FOR ME...



THE FOURTH
TIME YOU CAME
TO ME, IT WAS
ONLY WHEN I
HAD MY EYES
CLOSED...



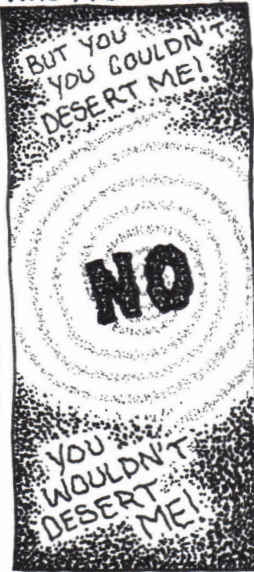
YOUR ABSENCE

WAS MADDENING.

AND IT WAS IN THIS MADNESS THAT I
BECAME CONSCIOUS OF MY TRANSFORMATION.



MY TEETH TASTED
DIFFERENT. THERE
WAS SOMETHING
MORE JAGGED
THAN NORMAL.—
A FLAVOR SHARP
WITH RETRIBUTION.



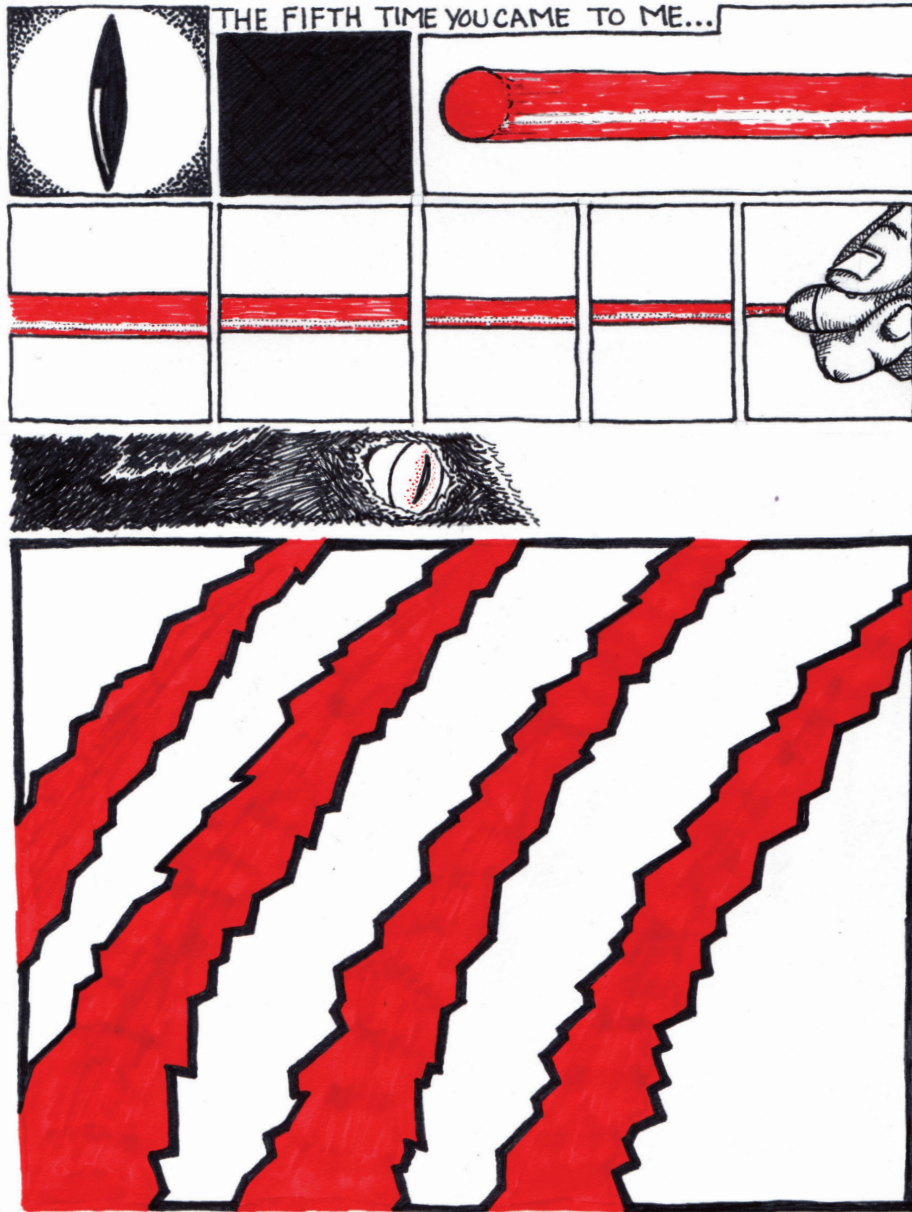
MY HANDS BECAME THE INSTRUMENTS OF YOUR
WILL. I KNEW THIS
WAS YOUR DOING. YOU
CHANGED ME. YOU HAD
CREATED ME, READY
AND WAITING.—
PATIENTLY, EVER SO
VIRTUOUSLY WAITING



FOR YOUR RETURN. BUT ALL YOU BLESSED ME
WITH WAS NOTHINGNESS. EMPTINESS. AN
EVER-EXPANDING VOID WITHIN MYSELF.

YOU HAD BEEN TAKEN



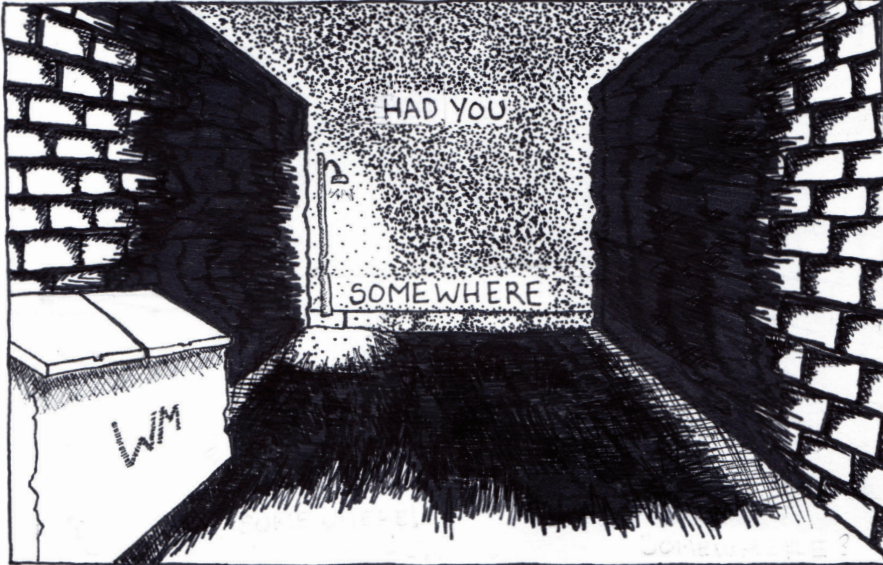


SIXTH TIME.

EVERYTHING

GONE LOST.

DON'T NEED.



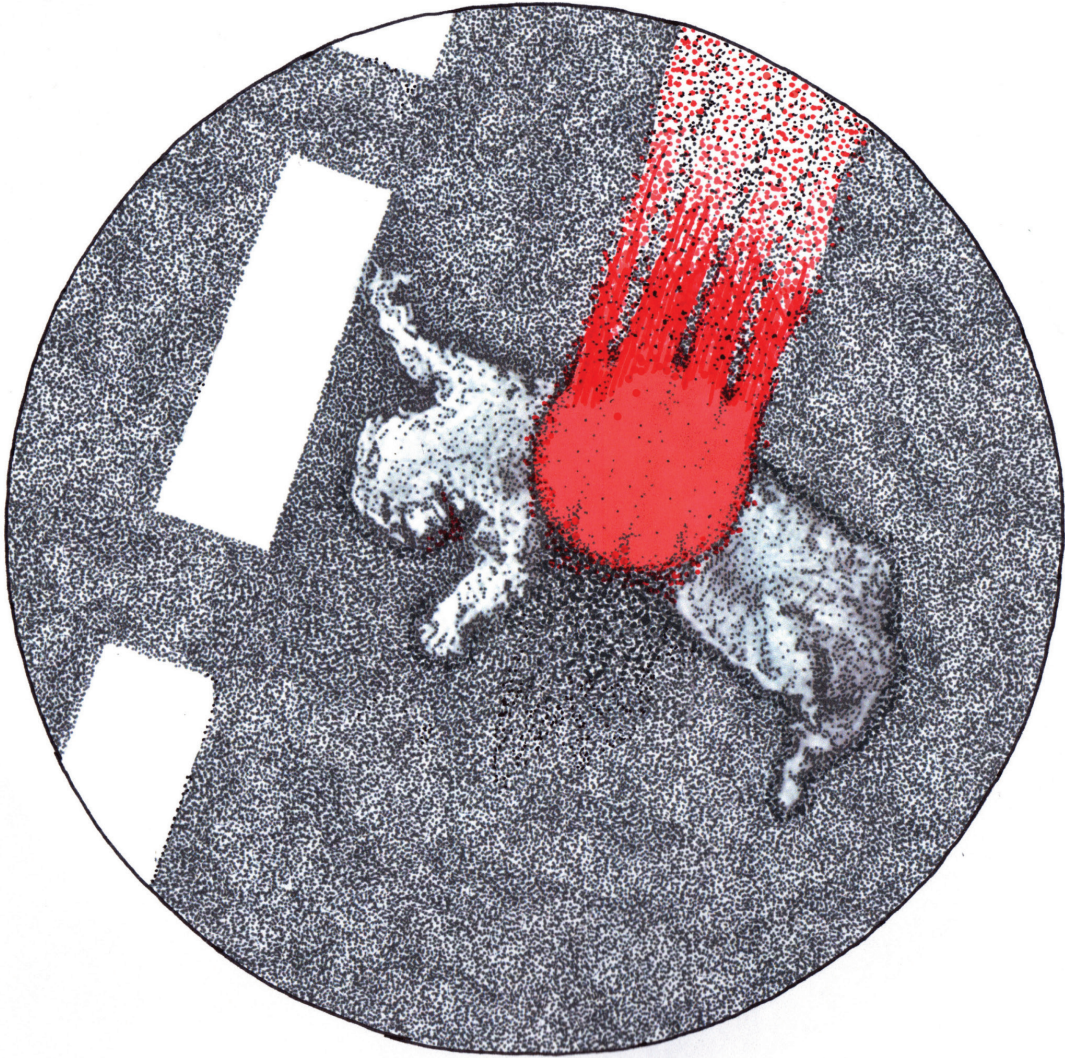
BUT. ONLY IN
THE CORNERS OF
MY EYES.

I BEGAN TO WONDER.
I HAD BELIEVED IN YOU.
I HAD RECEIVED YOU.
I HAD HONORED YOU.
I HAD FOUGHT FOR YOU.
I SACRIFICED FOR YOU.
YOU...

WERE TESTING
MY FAITH TO YOU.
TEMPTING ME
WITH DOUBT. BUT
I REMEMBERED.

WHAT YOU TAUGHT ME







Fractal Lotus / Danielle Richardson

ONLY THE HOW REMAINS

TRISTA PAYTE

Let me be clear:

I can take it all off.

I can. And I will. For you. There is no question of will. Only the how remains, as of now, unclear. I can strip down, slow and quiet, letting the clothes pool around my feet. Or I can scatter them across the room, you watching from a distance as I leave pieces of my disguise on every piece of furniture you own. Or we can leave them hanging off my body in places, the urge to tear into each other too strong to finish the task of unwrapping me.

The point is, I let you choose. I let you get drunk on the idea of power. I let you believe in your own agency. You like that.

Do it yourself, you say.

Looking right at you, I dig my way out from inside my coverings. So, so restrained. Unhurried, I finger each button, play with the frayed edges, pause between layers in measured moments. You tense up, flex, twitch, but this only makes me yawn, stretch, pull out that gap that makes you sweat, scratch at your neck, crack your knuckles; I smile as I yank and tug and shape it into an intermission.

You still cannot see me.

Not yet. These things take time.

Each layer I peel away clears a barrier that stands between where you are and where you want to go. You want inside. Not just my body though. It isn't as simple as that. Your eyes meet mine, and I see a flash of fear and recognition but I ignore it and look through you into the very back of your skull where you keep your most vulnerable parts. Those are the segments of you I will devour.

I strip down till nothing is left but heat and sweat.

I strip down till my skin shines with need.

I strip down and make you see.

My nudity is an unspoken promise. And as you stare at me like I am a feast and you haven't eaten once in your entire life, you finally understand.

This is why you have come to me.

You look at me and you see an object to be possessed but when you get close, when all the outer trappings we insist upon layering onto our bodies, to insulate us from not just each other, but from ourselves, when all these things have fallen away and it is just you and I, toe to toe, breathing in and out in a syncopated rhythm, when you are vulnerable, your cock and your soul both out where I can see-touch-smell-taste, only then do you realize that it is not I who is the prey.

ONLY THE HOW REMAINS

And in these moments I almost get there. Enlightenment. Transcendence. Here, with you beneath me, it is all so clear.

I come with you, of course.
I come with everyone.

My body writhes and throbs and I scream out for a god, for my father, for the end of the world because for a moment I think it is coming, the end of everything, and I cannot wait; I want it to come for me, this end, come and take me away from you, from this life, so I ride on, pulsing and screaming and holding on to you so tight because if I let go I might fall and down is not the direction I need to travel, no, I need to climb, higher and higher until I find that space between earth and heaven where I can get past all this fucking and find my salvation.

I come with you. I come with you but then I climb further. Beyond you. It is here, at this place with you inside me and me above you that I see. Here is the love-light-understanding. Here is the quiet and the peace and the noise and the chaos all bleeding together inside me and through me into you and back out again as I rock and cling and cry and sing and breathe.

But I don't know how to care once the pulsations stop.
And they always stop.

It's Wednesday, I think, as I pull my limbs out from beneath yours and hunt down my clothing. I have work early. I don't remember your schedule, or maybe you didn't even tell me. I cannot recall what you do beyond the ubiquitous category of sales. I don't know your mother's name, I have no idea how many siblings you have or if you love them or resent them. I know how to fit our bodies together, how to synchronize our orgasms, but the rest of you is a puzzle to me.

You don't open your eyes as I go, but I know from your breathing that you are far from sleep still. I cannot help you with that part. Another puzzle.

I step out of your building and onto the street; the morning is clear but chill and I wish I had a coat. The leaves on the trees above my head radiate red and gold against the bright sky. Fall. But in my bones, I feel it already. Winter.

I'm not sure when or where this story takes place, but it is a true story. Maybe someone told it so long ago that I can't remember anymore, and maybe I dreamed it one night, or a few nights, or so many nights that I have confused it with the times I was awake. It is the kind that is true simply because you believe in it with your whole heart because it is made of the things in your dreams and your bones.

So, this is one of those cases where Once Upon A Time will suffice and suffice quite nicely. Once Upon A Time, there lived a boy and a girl, which you may have already guessed because boys and girls seem to do so well in places like Once Upon a Time and places like Here, and in this story, too, the boy and the girl were doing just swimmingly. This boy and this girl, they were wonderful to look at, all eyelashes and ivory smiles. They were those terrible sorts of people who are happy to take very good care of their bodies with toothpaste and tennis shoes. The girl had two tubes of cream that she rubbed on her hair and her skin and made them glow like soft, gold butter, and the boy lifted weights and ran three feet of thread through his gums that made him hard and shiny and strong. They had bodies that begged to be touched. Furthermore, they loved to do these things because they loved people begging to touch their bodies, and they were indiscriminate about allowing them to do so. It is possible that they were lonely. It is also possible that there is some magic that happens when you feel someone, and they feel you at the very same time. Whatever their reason, people came from far and wide to touch them, to lick the hairs that glazed her torso, to drag their fingers across the planks of his shoulders. They touched in ways that made husbands and wives cry and bite their pillows, ways that made priests and nuns tear at their habits and robes. People called in sick in order to sink to the bottoms of their bathtubs and pretend to feel the way they felt until they felt nothing.

One night, the girl stretched herself across the bed in front of Frank, the pharmacist, and closed her eyes, waiting for him to put his hands on her. She waited. She waited. She stretched and arched her back and waited until, impatiently, she sighed and said "Ffff...!" And the reason the girl did not finish saying "Frank?!" is because when she opened her eyes, she saw Frank's eyes staring down at his hand, mouth open in an oval, and when she stared down at his hand, she saw that it was wrist deep in her right breast.

"Ugh!" She said.

"Ugh!" He said, and wrenched out his hand from the socket in her chest and held it up, covered in cream.

"What is that?! Is that my cream?!"

"I don't know, lady," said Frank, wiping his hands on his lab coat.

She stood up, using her hands to re-sculpt her right breast, now significantly smaller than the left. On the duvet behind her, there was a large, slimy silhouette of where her body had been.

"What is this? What's wrong with me?" she cried, but Frank just shrugged and said he'd better get going.

The next evening the boy came home from the gym sore and surly. He asked his lady friend, Lila, the pianist, to use her long fingers to rub his back.

"Harder!" He said.

“Scratch!” He said.

“I can’t even feel that!” He said, and he heard Lila collapse into sobs behind him.

“You’ve gotta be kidding,” he said and turned around to find her curled on the floor, crying and cradling her hands, which had been cut to ribbons and dripped blood onto the pedals of her piano.

“What is this?!” She wailed. “What’s wrong with you?!” but the boy just shrugged, a bit of her skin dangling from the thumbtack bristles on his back, and said he’d better get going.

Now, the boy and the girl had met before this. Two touchable people tend to cross paths eventually, but neither the boy nor the girl had much time for the other because if there’s one thing people like this love, it’s being praised, and if there’s one thing people like this hate, it’s people who need to be praised as much as them. But word spread quickly about the boy and girl, and pretty soon, no one wanted to even look at them let alone touch them. The girl hid herself away in her apartment, kept at a cool 45 degrees to stay firm, and the boy, banished from Lila’s little house, clanked around the streets for a few days before he turned up at her door.

“You too?” she said, and told him to shut the door behind him as she walked into the kitchen. She poured him some wine and set it on the table. The glass tulip shattered in his hand as he went to lift it to his mouth, and violet stains bloomed across her yellow tablecloth.

“I’m not really a drinker,” he said and watched as she sucked down the rest of the bottle, letting it paint her mouth like lipstick.

In bed they tried to touch each other. “Stroke my hair,” she would say, and he spread her head across the pillowcase as if it were warm, whole grain toast. “Kiss me,” he would say, and she sunk her face into his wiry beard and turned it white. They would make love, he would rip up her sheets, and she would splatter across the walls, but they wouldn’t feel anything, until finally they gave up and just decided to lie there. They lay around all day watching Woody Allen movies on television and eating dry cereal from the box, and then they got to talking. First, they talked about how much they missed their bodies and how they felt. They missed exercising and flossing and putting on cream, but they admitted that it was sort of nice not to have to do those things anymore. It was sort of nice to have time to just lie around and chat.

In the evenings when it got chilly out, they would walk to the market and buy fresh oranges and lettuce and loaves of sourdough, and for dinner the boy would whip up salads and smoothies and the girl would butter bread with the pads of her thumbs. They would watch some more television. They would lie around some more. They would talk about their mothers, brothers, and ex-lovers, and they would sleep through the night and sometimes into the afternoon, passing the same air back and forth.

This carried on smoothly for the next few years, this routine of talking and sleeping, eating and lying around. The people in the town slowly forgot about them, stopped staring at them when they stood in line at the market, and eventually went back to touching each other again, if only half-heartedly at first. It began with the teenagers--the ones who were too young to remember or know what it was like to touch someone like the girl or the boy. They hid behind buildings and licked each other’s lips and necks. In turn, their parents began to regain interest in their spouses. They pushed their beds back together and locked their bedroom doors. Women

got pregnant. Young couples got married and honeymooned in Oahu. Boyfriends unsnapped their girlfriends' bras in the backs of cars while the girl and the boy shared air-conditioned breath in their shredded bed.

One evening while the boy selected a head of lettuce, he caught himself staring at the legs of a young woman as she rubbed them against those of the young man with her in the produce department. The young man grabbed her hip and sniffed her hair.

On the other side of the store, the girl let a baguette slip through her fingers as she watched a broad shouldered man scoop up a red headed woman and kiss her square on the mouth right there in the bakery. When she went to retrieve her bread she saw that her fingers had melted down to the knuckles.

As they walked home together, the girl said, "You know, it would be nice if you would try to clean up the apartment when we got back. Everything is torn up and thrown all over the place. It's disgusting."

"You might want to change the sheets," the boy replied. "You've been making bigger oil marks lately. Maybe cut back on the bread and butter."

"You're not so hot!" shrieked the girl.

"I could do a lot better than you!" he boomed.

"Oh, of course," hissed the girl, "You're perfect."

She felt the boy fall behind as she strode forward, cutting through the parking lot, feeling the wind paw at her tears and ruffle her hair. Then she stopped.

She turned around. The boy was nowhere in sight. She walked back to the place she thought she had lost him. Nothing. Behind her, she heard a car slow to a stop.

"Where you going, gorgeous?" A swarthy looking man leaned from his window and whistled. In the glass, she could see her reflection, wrapped in supple skin, glossy hair. She backed away from the car and took off running, running through grass, across pavement that yielded to her solid body. Up the stairs, she pushed the key in the lock and entered her apartment to find it clean, cozy, her bed made, her dishes unscathed. She called for the boy and heard nothing. She sat on her sofa for a moment and stared at an empty space where she could have sworn she'd had a television, at a shelf that was filled with magazines instead of cookbooks and DVDs. She went into her room, and the girl pulled the sheet from the mirror on her bedside table and stared at her brimming, bloodshot eyes until she fell asleep.

When she woke up the next morning, the girl lay still beneath the weight of her blankets and thought of her empty apartment and felt her breath get tangled and swell in her throat. She curled her legs up into her chest, wrapping her arms around them, buried her face in her knees and prayed that she would melt. The sun relentlessly pried its way through her curtains, she felt her bed move, and she slowly began to unwind her limbs. A pair of fingers lightly grazed her waist, fingers made of flesh and bone and nail. The girl opened her eyes, and the boy kissed her mouth and kissed her ears and kissed her throat and she laughed and she laughed and she laughed. Maybe because she was happy or nervous or relieved. Maybe because there is some magic that happens when you feel someone, and they feel you at the very same time.



Junkyard Palace / Brian Andrade

MY FRIEND WHO MADE ME EAT SOAP

AIMEE EDMONDS

Licking powdered soap was one of many trials Tiffany put me through to prove I was on her side. The incident sticks with me more, compared to things like letting her permanently borrow my Beanie Babies, because—and this shocked me—powdered soap tastes bad. The circumstances surrounding the dare aren't important, but it highlighted the kind of relationship Tiffany and I had.

In third grade, we hung out at a bench near a restroom at an obscure part of the school. None of us were social butterflies, and we got our butts kicked at whatever sport the faculty let us play to keep us from displacing our boredom towards less scrupulous objectives. That left us to our own devices. Sometimes, Tiffany and I played with our Beanie Babies. Other times, she felt like messing with me.

On a typical snack break, during our irrelevant endeavors, Tiffany had an idea. I don't know what brought it up (for my own sanity, I've repressed the stupid parts of my childhood. I have a large gap in my memories where my childhood should be), but she thought she could get a laugh, if I could, or would, lick powdered soap from the restroom.

"But that's gross!" Kid A said.

"There's nothing else to do," Tiffany said. "You can do it, Wendy!"

I whined in true me-fashion. "I don't wanna!"

Tiffany smirked that knowing smirk she sported whenever I wouldn't listen to her. She knew I always caved. "I guess you're not really my friend. I thought friends were supposed to listen to each other."

Funny how she never listened to me, and that friends typically did not make each other eat hygiene products. "Why would I?"

"Because I said so, and we're all bored." But she meditated for a moment. "I'll give you a part of my snack if you do."

She must have been happy when we went into the restroom and I got that awful-smelling pink powdered soap from the dispenser. I don't remember what Kids A and B did, but Tiffany grinned at me, waiting. I stared at the meal in my hand.

I didn't think to myself, *Why am I doing this?* I only thought, *I don't want to do this.* More mentally abled children would have at least humored the *why*, but I was me, and Tiffany was Tiffany. Regardless, I touched my tongue to the powder.

It was kinda gross.

Tiffany laughed, and I guess Kids A and B did as well. They laughed in that *I can't believe she actually did that* way, but I was close to retching. I hadn't expected it to taste good, though I didn't think it was *that* bad. Now I know from experience what pink powder soap from the girl's restroom tastes like, all thanks to my wonderful friend Tiffany. Don't other kids find out what soap tastes like when they curse in front of their parents?



Chess Pieces / Eric Barnhart

BETWEEN STRANGERS

CYNTHIA SHAHIAN

(MAC, an American/Chinese guy, is sitting at the farthest corner of a dark, mostly empty bar on a Tuesday afternoon.

He is very tan, fit, and therefor attractive. He's holding a glass of dark liquid and keeps taking tiny sips from it.

There are three other stools lined up next to him, two empty, the last of which is occupied by CARLOS, who's also holding a glass with similar contents but isn't drinking from it. He keeps glancing over at MAC every few seconds, who seems really nervous. His legs are jiggling and he keeps looking over his shoulder or glancing at his watch as if he's waiting for someone. They both look well into their twenties, though CARLOS is leaner and taller.

After a few seconds, CARLOS gets up and goes to sit next to MAC with his drink.)

CARLOS. *(With a huge grin.)* Got stood up?

MAC. *(Turning to look at CARLOS.)* Not a chance! We're not supposed to meet for another...*(Glances at watch.)* Half hour. Just thought I'd loosen up a bit before. *(Takes a sip of his drink.)*

CARLOS. First date?

MAC. Yeah.

CARLOS. She hot?

MAC. Hell, yeah. *(Takes a sip.)*

CARLOS. How'd you two meet?

MAC. *(With a laugh.)* What's it to you?

CARLOS. Just curious. *(Swirls contents of his glass.)*

MAC. How about you? Got dumped or something?

CARLOS. No. Just needed some time to myself. Supposed to be in class...

MAC. Tough week?

CARLOS. Yeah.

(Beat.)

MAC. We met at school. I work at this little café on campus and she comes almost everyday, studying or whatever. Few weeks ago she spilled her coffee and I bought her another. After that, we started talking. She came to one of my games—I play water polo for our school. I got her number.

CARLOS. *(Bitterly.)* The perfect love story.

MAC. *(Laughing.)* Not really. I mean, it's not even really a date. Just drinks. *(Takes a sip.)*

CARLOS. Hoping to get lucky?

MAC. *(Angry.)* It's not like that, Man. I wouldn't go for her if that's all—she's not like that, okay? Plenty of those girls—Jenna's not like them.

BETWEEN STRANGERS

CARLOS. Just figured... *(Shrugs.)*

MAC. Well, you figured wrong.

(Long pause. MAC glances at his watch and scans the bar.)

CARLOS. I met my girlfriend at school, too. Actually, we started dating in middle school. *(Swirls his drink.)*

MAC. Wow. That long?

CARLOS. Yup.

MAC. Doesn't it get boring? Being together so long.

CARLOS. No.

MAC. I wanna settle down, too, eventually. But in middle school?

CARLOS. She's all I ever wanted. I don't see other girls.

MAC. *(Laughing.)* How do you know a better girl isn't still out there?

CARLOS. If you wait too long, sooner or later you'll be forty and looking back on all the girls you gave up because you were waiting. Waiting for the right one. Waiting for the right time. There are always reasons...

MAC. Well, I'm still playing the field. Jenna—the girl I'm meeting—just caught my attention, that's all.

CARLOS. I followed her here—to California. She wanted to go to school out here, so we moved.

MAC. That must have been tough, leaving your family like that.

CARLOS. *(Shrugs.)* I love her. Long distance relationships... My family will be there when I get home. But J—my girl... She's special. I couldn't lose her.

MAC. Props to you, Man.

CARLOS. Doesn't matter, anyway. *(Finally takes a long drink.)*

MAC. Why not?

CARLOS. I caught her texting another guy. Flirting. I thought it was harmless... Then he asked her out. She said yes.

MAC. Aw, man. Sucks.

CARLOS. *(Shrugs.)* We've just been through so much—

(Carlos finishes his drink.)

MAC. I would have killed him. Goin' after another man's girl? Uh-uh.

CARLOS. I was going to—even took a knife—but then I met him.

MAC. What? He bigger than you?

CARLOS. No—well, yeah, but that's not it.

MAC. Bastard. *(Takes another sip.)* Bastard.

CARLOS. He doesn't know.

MAC. What?

CARLOS. The guy. He doesn't even know she's taken.

MAC. Damn. *(Pause.)* Wait, you didn't tell him?

CARLOS. I felt bad. He seems like a nice guy. Really likes her—which isn't surprising. She's special.

MAC. You gonna tell her that you know?

CARLOS. Nah.

MAC. You're just gonna let her cheat? Grow a pair! Ready to jump a guy but won't talk to your girl.

CARLOS. Well, she hasn't cheated yet. Like you said, she could have just been bored. We've been together for so long...

MAC. But you said she went on a date with him—

CARLOS. No, she told him she would. But she never went.

MAC. You followed her?

CARLOS. No, I followed him. Went and watched him wait for her. But she never showed.

MAC. Wait...what did you say her name was? Your girl.

CARLOS. I didn't say.

(CARLOS leans over, checks MAC's watch, nods, and gets up to leave.)

MAC. No way.

CARLOS. It was good to meet you, Mac.

MAC. No way.

(CARLOS puts some cash on the bar and walks out. MAC sits there for a few seconds, holding his drink, then leaves.)

END OF PLAY

 JESSE CLEMENS

Thanksgiving was a novel that our family
 could never read all the way through.
 We got stuck at the ego part,
 arguing over who got to use
 The word *tryptophan* first.

Do you want to know a secret?
 I have a hundred empty storage lockers
 scattered across all the states except Utah,
 so that I always have a place
 to go for silence, for blessed darkness.

Once, I was a string on my parents' harp,
 tuned to the key of expectations.
 The day I went electric,
 the whispers started,
 the ugly, average letdown
 perfected by only sons,
 who carry family names.

Like a black sheep
 I pull the wool over my own eyes.
 Standing up from the table,
 half-drunk, half food coma-d,
 I finally speak my mind:
Look ma, no hands
as I walk along your razor's edge.
And fuck your big bites out of life, Dad,
I'm off to become a monk
and to make a living from talking to myself.

The faces around me stand
 frozen, outside of time, waiting
 for the wells of their eyes to be filled
 with my promised promise.
 They wonder why does someone
 build a house
 in which, on purpose,
 there is no guest room?

Inside,
 as the last strings vibrate to a halt,
 the leftovers are being Tupperware-d.
 Each dish is in its perfectly hermetic
 compartment,
 like the plane cabins we will all be in tomorrow
 morning,
 miles of endless cornfields
 disappearing under the wing.

Tim's fingers tapped and tripped along the ivory keys like a talentless monkey. His toes curled beneath his socks and with every unintentional note he salivated more and more until small bits of drool drizzled down his lower lip like a stream of clear syrup. The sound of the doorbell interrupted both his awful playing and his unique secretion.

"I'm coming," Tim said, standing and stumbling forward as he rubbed his wet lips on his right sleeve. His knees felt sore and he wondered how long he'd been sitting at the black baby grand. Tim took several more steps, his body aches lessening, before arriving and pressing his left ear to the door. "Who is it?" he asked, his voice unintentionally jumping an octave. The clearing of a throat told Tim who it was, but still, he waited.

"Who do you think it is?" responded a harsh voice.

Tim's chest tightened as he realized that she was already in a foul mood.

"I'm not sure," Tim said, clenching his fists tight enough for his fingernails to leave several small red indents on his palms. He could hear some shuffling outside. Just as he placed his palm against the small brass knob, he was interrupted by the words, "Open the damn door, Tim!"

"Of course," was all he could say as he quickly turned the doorknob and swung it open to reveal a middle-aged woman in a black skirt, white blouse, and with hair like thick golden snakes knotted, and contorted into some vile fashion. As Tim swallowed hard, the woman stepped into the house, heels clicking, and slapped the back of his head.

"I don't have time for your shit today," she huffed, closing the door behind them and tossing a large brown handbag onto the couch right of the piano. "Go sit down, and show me what you've practiced," she added.

Tim's usually pale face had taken on the pinkish glow of an intoxicated man and, as he sat down on the piano bench, biting his lower lip was all he could do to keep himself from passing out.

"What should I play?" he asked the keys of the piano shining with a white intensity that could have easily blinded him had he not squinted.

"I really don't care," the woman said.

Tim nodded and shuffled in his seat. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and proceeded to pound on the keys as he had earlier.

The woman quickly winced and interlaced her long fingers into Tim's brown locks before yanking him backwards on the seat. Tim gritted his teeth and tried not to cry out as the unsatisfied woman stared down at him. "The hell was that?" she spat out.

"Franz Liszt's Liebesträume Number 3?" he questioned. The pain Tim felt from his follicles intensified and, just for a second, the woman's face seemed to soften.

"Oh? In A-Flat?" she asked.

Tim nodded and the woman quickly released his hair and pushed him forward with enough force for his forehead to smash against the keys in fortissimo. "Ouch..." Tim winced and sat up, the keys leaving 3 rectangular red kisses. The woman sat down at the bench as well, with a small creak, and Tim quickly scooted to the right edge of the seat.

"If you haven't guessed by now, that was shit," she said bluntly, not bothering to look at Tim, who remained silent. "This is how," she began, before placing her hands on the piano with grace and purpose, "you play *Dreams of Love*," she added.

As the woman played, the air thickened and warmed, causing her gardenia scented perfume to intensify the

OKAY

already searing pain he felt in his head. Her hands sang as she clipped the keys, her fingernails making a clicking noise seconds before she pressed down fully. Tim's breathing became shallow and labored as his headache worsened. It felt as if his brain was in the palm of her hand slowly being crushed between her defined fingers, and then, all at once it moved. The crushing pain slowly leaked through his body tightening everything it came in contact with; his eyes, his throat, his chest, heart, ribs, stomach, and eventually his jeans. Tim flushed a deeper red and immediately attempted to cross his left leg over his right, but he only succeeded in knocking his knee against the piano. The baby grand shook for a moment and the woman quickly stopped playing, her eyes instantly on Tim.

"What was that?" she asked.

Her voice seemed softer now and the glazed look in her eyes could only be attributed to the feeling she got after playing the piano. A sort of afterglow that one only attains after putting their body through a vigorous workout.

"What was what?" Tim asked, hunched over the piano in an attempt to hide himself.

"You didn't feel that? The whole piano just shook."

"No."

"Why are you slouched over like that?"

"I couldn't hear very well."

"So you're lying on the keys?"

"Yes..."

"You know the soundboard is in the back."

"My stomach hurts," Tim quickly added, a feeling of panic spreading throughout him. *Go away, go away, go away*, he thought to no avail. The woman, glaze gone, returned to her former self and turned on the bench, throwing her right leg over it as if she were riding a horse. The black skirt, which so desperately clung to her hips, slid up slightly and Tim quickly averted his eyes.

"Sit up," she ordered.

Tim shook his head.

"I said, sit up!"

Tim frantically repeated the action. The woman once more interlaced her fingers in Tim's hair before yanking his head upwards so his eyes met hers. Tim gritted his teeth, his hands doing his best to cover the area in question, and as the woman glanced down, she understood.

"Disgusting," she said bluntly.

The woman released her grip on him and stood up, quickly wiping her hands off on her skirt. "When is your mother going to be home?" she asked.

As she walked to the couch, Tim hung his head and did his best to hold in the saltwater that threatened to pour from his eyes and further mess up his face.

"Eight thirty," he answered.

The woman walked to the door and placed her hand on the knob, turning back as she spoke.

"If she asks, I was here until eight," she said as she left.

Tim's eyes fell to the clock on the desk to his right, displaying the number 5:45.

"Okay."

Tim shoveled in chunks of cauliflower like it was a punishment. It was now about nine thirty and his mother sat at the opposite end of their long rectangular dinner table.

“Did Carol come by?” his mother asked, visibly fed up with the silence. Tim looked up and nodded his brown hair covering his eyes as he did. “How long did she stay?”

“Eight o’clock,” Tim responded woefully.

His ignorant mother smiled.

“What did you learn?”

“A song called *Dreams of Love*.”

“Sounds pretty. After dinner, will you play it for me?”

“Alright,” Tim responded.

His mother smiled, seemingly satisfied. The rest of the meal passed with its usual accompaniment; that is, the clinks of silver on porcelain, wood on tile, and the occasional buzzing of a fly. When finished, neither Tim nor his mother bothered to do much more than place their dishes in the sink and, as the two walked into the living room, his mother sat on the brown leather couch. Tim rolled his shoulders, sat down at the piano, and lifted the lid that hid the keys.

“Can I start?” he asked.

Tim’s mother nodded and seconds later he began to play the song exactly as the woman had earlier, maybe even better. For Tim, the air thickened once more and his head began to pound as he came closer and closer until...he stopped, at the exact same place the woman had.

“Is that all?” his mother asked.

“That’s as far as we got,” Tim replied.

“It sounded nice.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ll have to play me the rest of it once it’s finished.”

“Okay.”

“Wrong,” the woman said, clearly more focused on the can of Diet Pepsi in her right hand than on Tim’s atrocious piano playing. Tim didn’t say anything but continued to play, his heart falling every time he would miss a note and receive some sort of gut-wrenching comment like “Are you stupid?” or “I can’t believe I’m wasting my time with this shit.”

“Are you even listening to me?” the woman asked, the back of her hand colliding against his face with enough force to leave a large red imprint.

“I am...I am!” Tim stuttered, his second *I am* coming out slightly muffled as he covered his throbbing face with his hands. The woman’s eyes narrowed as she placed her empty Pepsi can on the top of the back of the piano, clearly not fearing the ring of condensation that might damage the piano’s finish.

“Then what did I just say?” the woman asked.

Tim desperately tried to make his mind remember something he had never heard.

“You said...” Tim began.

The woman’s thick colored lips turned down into a violent scowl as she lifted her left leg and, in one violent thrust, shoved him off of the piano bench and onto the floor. Tim writhed on the ground, grasping at the part of his ribs in which her heel had dug into him.

“If you aren’t going to listen to what I have to say, I’m not going to waste my time trying to teach you,” she said, sitting on the bench herself.

The boy sat on the floor, hands on his knees, and watched the woman play the piano for what seemed like minutes, but was actually hours. For the first time, his mind produced an awkward euphoria that made him feel

simultaneously blessed to hear her music and ashamed of his own playing.

After finishing a particularly long song, which Tim recognized as Beethoven's 5th Symphony, the woman stood and stretched before scanning the room for several seconds as if she had forgotten where she was.

"Where's your restroom?" she asked, her eyes finally falling on Tim.

"It's the first door past the kitchen," Tim responded, glad to be of any use to her.

Without so much as a "thank you," the woman turned and walked into the kitchen leaving Tim staring at the instrument he had been forbidden to play. After several minutes had passed and she had not returned, Tim walked towards the piano, his hands itching. He sat down and let his palms fall onto the keys before feeling them out like a blind man feels the face of a longtime companion. Tim looked over his shoulder once, for good measure, before attempting to play the famous symphony for himself. His hands felt heavy and disappointment quickly gathered in his stomach like a thick stone.

"It's no good," he said in a dejected tone.

"That's 'cause you're a little shit who doesn't listen," the woman responded, reentering the room, a look of complete disinterest on her face.

Shocked, Tim leapt up from his seat and ran towards the couch like a child who had been caught eating a chocolate chip cookie before dinner.

"That said... Tell me? What makes you think you can start pounding on the keys when we've both already established that you don't deserve to?" the woman asked, a terrifyingly humorous snicker present in her voice.

"I don't know..." he responded.

"You don't know?" she asked.

Tim shook his head.

"Well, *I* certainly don't know," she said. Several seconds of nothing passed before she spoke again, her voice lighter. Stepping forward, the woman placed her hand atop Tim's hair before delicately interlacing her fingers within it.

"It wasn't as bad," she said.

Tim raised his left eye brow in confusion and she continued.

"When I say it wasn't bad, I mean that it was shit, but not as shitty as the shit you played earlier. Understand?"

"I don't," Tim said, honestly confused.

The woman's smile faded and for the first time she gripped the poor follicles atop his head and yanked them back until she had full view of his face. "That's because you don't fucking listen."

"I'm sorry."

"We'll have to work on that," the woman said, slowly averting her eyes from him.

"Okay."

Tim stared into his front door, intensely, as if it was some sort of magical screen that his mind could project his favorite memories onto. He strained and stared until his eyes felt as if they would leap from their sockets and when he could take it no more, he turned, proceeding to cut off the projector.

It was now 5:45, the same time she had left yesterday, and whether or not he wanted to acknowledge the fact, she was probably never going to return. Tim raised his weak palms into the air and balled them into fists before striking the piano several times as hard as he could. Notes sounding like sick and garbage filled the room; only after his palms could no longer take it, did he stop and let his arms hang limp at his sides. The room remained silent, minus his heavy breathing. After a few moments of throbbing hands he stood with the

intention of running them under the kitchen faucet. He took three steps, then stopped.

“Open the door Tim!” she yelled, banging her hands against the door like he had against the piano moments ago. Tim stood frozen, but when the banging continued he feared for her trained hands and sprinted to the door, proceeding to swing it open.

“The hell took you so long?” she asked, a slight slur in her speech.

Tim took a nervous step back and tried to gauge the woman who, if nothing else, took pride in her appearance. Over her shoulders she slung a pair of thick black heels, as if they were some sort of weapon, and her usually messy hair was clean and straitened to a point that made Tim wonder whether or not she was the same person.

“The fuck you staring at?” she bellowed.

“Nothing,” Tim quickly replied, ushering the woman in and quickly shutting the door behind her. The woman surveyed the room and tossed the heels on the carpet as if it was her own home. “Is, everything...” Tim started, as the woman walked past him and into the kitchen. It didn’t take long for her to return, but, when she did, she held a bottle of red wine in her right hand and a corkscrew in her left.

“Open this,” she ordered.

Tim slowly took the bottle and popped the cork, his shaking hands causing him to spill a bit of red wine on his shirt in the process.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

The woman took the bottle with neither a “thanks,” nor a word about his sullied shirt and, swaying back and forth, she stumbled towards the couch. With the grace of a bull in a china shop, the woman fell onto her back, knocked over a glass lamp, and took a sloppy swig from the bottle.

“Play me the shit you played yesterday,” she said before taking another long swig.

Tim nodded, sat down at the piano bench, and started to play, his hands throbbing from his earlier violent outburst. The woman closed her eyes and began to clumsily sway the bottle back and forth as if she was conducting.

“Watch the legato in the fourth measure,” she added.

Tim nodded and played slowly, nervously, painfully, and hardly better than he had yesterday.

“That’s amazing,” the woman said when Tim finally finished.

“What was?” Tim asked, horrified by the fact that she may have complimented him.

The woman looked at Tim as if in awe of the fact that he was still there.

“Carol?” he asked, an awkward feeling overcoming him after saying her name.

The woman gave Tim a curious glance and propped herself up on her elbows before dropping the empty bottle on the carpet. “What?”

“Is there something...wrong?” Tim asked.

“With me?”

“Yeah.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“I’m sick,” she replied.

Tim could feel the adrenaline in his body increase as she gave her short breathy replies. “Is...there something I can do?”

“There is,” she nodded.

OKAY

Tim subconsciously took several steps towards the women on his couch before stopping, his nerves getting the better of him.

“Wanna help?”

“What do I need to do?” he asked.

The woman smiled and stretched out on the couch her pink toes peeking out through the holes in the bottom of her stockings.

“Sit,” she replied patting the carpet right in front of the couch. Tim hesitated for a moment but soon walked to the couch and sat in front of it as she’d requested. “I’m sick Tim,” the woman repeated, this time placing her left palm on top of Tim’s head. He jumped slightly at the contact, waiting for the usual hair tug, but it never came.

“What can I do?” he asked, staring at the woman’s face.

Small groves of wisdom crept out from the corners of her eyes like cracks on concrete. “Do you think I’m pretty?”

“I think... Yeah,” Tim replied honestly.

“The fuck does a kid like you know?” she responded before pushing his face away from the couch. She rolled onto her back and held her hands up towards the ceiling, staring at them intently, as if they were the most interesting thing in existence. She balled them into fists, then opened them as wide as she could, then repeated the process several times. Tim shuffled nervously from his position on the carpet and beads of sweat began sprinting down his brow as if heaven lay at the cleft of his chin. Tim mumbled something incoherent and the woman dropped her hands and turned.

“What?” she asked, face full of apathy.

Tim could feel his body tightening as it had the day before and, knees shaking, he stood up and looked down at the woman on his couch. The woman stared up at Tim for a few moments, but when he remained silent she simply turned away, causing her blouse to stretch just enough to reveal a small amount of blue lace.

“I asked if I could lay with you.”

“Okay.”



Stop Sign Wisdom / Brian Andrade



Zen Garden / Danielle Richardson

I find days tucked in the seats of the couch.
I pull out weekly to remember
that night we let our bodies touch,
each hand seems different now, unsure
if your skin tasted kind
under the finish of Merlot
with the TV on so loud,
not even my cries, which break
the touch screen on my phone
seem real or even half real.
So I pull the sofa apart,
gripping for a feel.

Or, Why You Don't Have to Date Anymore Even When You Really Really Want to

I recently discovered a new way of listening to Jazz music. I am calling it “Festival of Leaf-blowers” or else more simply, and for lack of a more evocative moniker on hand, “Jazz Con-Fusion.” The new way of listening to Jazz music involves a highly improvised mixture of loneliness, a muted sense of irretrievable loss, and a paralyzing fear of the sound of one’s own voice—the latter constituting a kind of chlamydia of the larynx, self-contracted. I might have called the new way of listening to Jazz music “Chlamydea of the Larynx,” but quite frankly, I have only just thought of this phrase and, in any case, I clearly don’t have the foggiest idea how to actually spell the word “Chlaw-Medea,” let alone how to describe the horrific, often crippling effects of the disease to others. As things stand, I wish to reserve this little neologism for the title of my future memoirs. So don’t get any ideas. However, before the time comes for my future memoirs I should like very much to do something worthy of writing them...Which brings me back to my discovery of the new way of listening to jazz music, something I would like to offer now for your own personal edification.

In order to affect the new way of listening to jazz music, here’s what you do:

1. Set your radio to a moderate volume.
2. Lock it up in the darkest recesses of your bedroom. Ideally, this step should be performed with little or no antennae signal, so that the radio’s sole nourishment may be derived from a ravenous army of dust mites—typically plentiful in that region of the house anyway, along with a not unreasonable sense of its own permanent static and a stray pack of six-month old sugarless breath mints—left by God knows who—and may as well have come from another century.
3. Ignore the fact that old radios like yours get along none too well with either dust mites or breath-enhancing tablets of any kind. Disregard the smattering of cobwebs climbing the walls around the poor and unsuspecting radio, which lay bare the ideological function of absolute and total abandonment.
4. Ensnore yourself comfortably in the kitchen. This is not a metaphor. The kitchen is truly the only place in the house you can hear or imagine you can hear the muffled cries of a captive trumpet coming from the darkest recesses of your bedroom.
5. Attend to how the captive trumpet not only heralds in the triumphant new way of listening to jazz music

but at the same time competes with all the varied and sundry other discordant noises that predominate your apartment complex—the steady hum of the laundry machine, for instance, the garbage truck that slides murderously through the alleyway at all hours like a herd of angry elephants. Yes, the trumpet competes with all this—you tell yourself in vain—Oh, how its plaintive notes soar(!) and synthesize(!) and triumph(!), the lost key to the whole lousy coda.

6. You should hardly hear any longer the hateful baying of the dog that lurks outside your bedroom window like an enemy or emissary of Whimsy—depending on your mood and what the dog had for dinner. Nor should you mind any longer the trying voice of your four-year old neighbor called ‘Alyssa,’ who used to sound sweet and adorable back when her face was poreless as an eggshell about to give birth to a truffle. But alas, you both know that egg has long since hatched, and your four year old neighbor called ‘Alyssa’ has since begun to issue terrible imprecations in your direction from all the way across the courtyard, with the voice of a foghorn and the face of a full-grown sledgehammer.

7. All of this changes under the spell of the new way of listening to jazz music. As you listen to the notes unfolding from the bedroom—much in the way each of us wishes that time, our thoughts, and our dreams would do—you would do well to perceive the slow and silent metamorphoses taking place around you. The moment when one thing slips easily into another, turning like a door on its hinges in a silence more deepened than broken. The moment, in other words, when another world seems almost to appear, Champion Jack Dupree lost in the blues and the needle on the record player makes a horrible noise—one long excruciating crescendo trapped in the middle of a scream.

And it is in this way you may learn to keep something beautiful locked away in your bedroom without ever actually having to touch it.

For Matthew Dickman, My Riot Act

The drain always dripping,
a tiny storm bathes in my sink.
Three days now the clothes have been
in the dryer wet still, the heating
bill unpaid still hanging from the fridge
and the girls say; *you smell like bath water.*

My apartment is complex: confining
and confrontational.
The park is open to suggestions.
Under its trees I smoke my
cigarettes and blow clouds and
isobars into the leaves and try to
pressure a metaphor about
irony onto the page.

I read from a black book
about Russian revolvers and
dead brothers; it giggles me.
I was that brother to my brother;
the one who liked pills and razors,
ceiling fans, bullets and cocaine.
But my brother died, too! and I
didn't write a book about it. I
went to rehab. I don't talk about
his grave or how I found him all-

because that's dirty, premeditated, pre-medicated.

And the storm from my sink is
now over me, drying off. So
I make an umbrella of Matthew's words.
The letters scurry, drip and blur and I can no longer read
about his brother, me and graves and motherfuckers
and I just
don't care.

They arrived at the gulf coast in Biloxi a couple hours before the sun went behind the clouds. The dark mother sat with her children in the warm bath-like bay water. Her four kids, all boys, sat or stood around her. The little ones sat in the sand, getting it in their trunks.

She whispered even though no one was around within sound or sight. The fast moving cars on the freeway didn't notice her or her children sitting in the sandbar. They drove past the casinos, in between the mansions on the sand, and past her beat up black Envoy parked on the side of the highway.

"This is what we're made of," she said.

She was showing them something in her hands.

"But it's so small," the thin little boy said. He put his finger in her palm and poked around what was inside the cove of her hand, her lines and creases, feeling her dry skin underneath.

"It's nothing," the older boy said, standing behind her.

He leaned in closer, in case he missed something.



Slippery / Carol Roque

ABOUT HER. ABOUT ME.

JAMES BEZERRA

She was wearing something gray.

It was a gray skirt that hung loose around her legs, the way that she had them crossed that way. And a ribbed gray top with three-quarter sleeves, not quite as dark as the loose skirt. And red shoes. Red and with a strap over the foot. And with clunky, squarish heels.

And I wanted to breeze up to her table and say, “We should have an affair.”

And she would maybe run her fingers through her straight, golden hair and maybe shake it out so it would catch the light coming through the dirty café window like ripples on a sunset ocean, and she would probably just laugh a little and her thick, clunky bracelets would rattle a little and she might say something back like, “Do I know you?” But what she might really mean is, “Why not?”

But I don’t breeze up to her just then and I don’t say that to her and she doesn’t laugh and shake her hair and her hair doesn’t catch fire like dust flakes too close to the sun.

But I do look at her and she does see me looking at her and I don’t look away when she sees me. And neither does she. So there we are. She isn’t flirting and neither am I. So here we are. Looking at each other.

And it isn’t lusty or haughty, the way that she’s looking at me.

Maybe just a little haughty.

And I don’t think that there’s any lust in the way that I’m looking at her. Or, at least not too much lust. A little lust is good. What woman who owns shoes like those doesn’t want to get looked at with at least a little bit of lust—be it respectfully looked at—by an attractive stranger?

Though I’m not that attractive.

Attractive enough, I guess.

I dress well at least.

Or try.

I know who makes her shoes, so there is more than just lust to this long look I’m giving her across this café. There’s admiration in it too. And maybe that’s why she is curious. Not quite sure if I’m gay. Not quite sure if I’m looking at the silky fabric of her billowy skirt because I want it or because I want to take it off of her.

The truth is, both.

Really.

I feel like I’m in drag when I’m dressed as a man. Though I am a man. And though I do dress in drag—just a little—it doesn’t feel that way when I do. Usually.

So perhaps she is holding this look this long because she’s trying to define a curious glint in my eye. The way a chef might pause and linger over a brand new flavor. And maybe I’m that new flavor.

She carefully smooths down the fabric of her skirt along the tops of her thighs, though she doesn’t look down as she’s doing it. I don’t know if this is some kind of calming, self-securing gesture for her, or if it is something for me. Something for me to see, to witness. Some act of innocent self-touching that is otherwise innocuous here in the café. Some quick, secret-code of eroticism that only she and I have the key to; a coded message on a radio band that only we know to listen for.

And I sip the last from my tiny cup of coffee. Espresso, it actually is. I dislike the taste, but enjoy drinking from the tiny cups, so I do.

Just like she must actually hate walking in those red shoes, but does.

Finally she smiles a little smile. Just a white flicker of her teeth beneath a tight-lipped smirk. She looks back at her table, back at her friends, who have been talking to her this whole time, unaware that she and I just had a curious moment. They’re unaware that I just imagined the person who is her and that she just imagined

ABOUT HER. ABOUT ME.

the person who would be me. Her friends are unaware that we just saw each other and mapped one another and assessed one another. And they're unaware that so many imagined moments just passed between us. But not *between* us, they passed separately *about* us. That she wondered how my voice sounds and what my little bit of stubble feels like. On her cheek. And I wondered how the skin of her shoulders feels, what her hands are like. I wondered about talking to her and what I would say, who I would suddenly be once I spoke to her. If I would be funny, if I would be droll. Or maybe I would be serious, calm. Cool. Maybe I would be the man who can wear this suit and inhabit it without trying to. Without knowing that he's wearing the very smallest of women's panties under these slacks. Or maybe I would be the man who could do that without wondering what she would think, what she would say when she unzipped these slacks. Maybe I would be the man who became sexier to her simply because I wear them. And maybe she would make a small noise, pull away from our kissing, from my mouth and from my tongue and she would look down at them—the silky red peeking out of these open slacks—and decide that she liked me this way, “Sure,” she might say, and then return her mouth to my mouth and quickly and simply slide her fingers beneath the flimsy red fabric that covers me. Maybe she would feel me and I would feel harder and bigger and more impressive to her because the coarseness of my skin causes a delicious kind of contrast against the feminine silk I wear.

And perhaps—I had thought this about her—my hand might slide up her calf, up her knee, up along the inside of her thigh, my thumb might hook the hem of her skirt and hitch it up, drag it up as my hand slid up along her leg, up along that softest part of her thigh, until my fingers were there pressed between her thighs and she might wiggle a little there in the booth where she sat in this café, might wiggle a little so that she could part her thighs a little so that my fingertips could just brush the breath-thin fabric of her own panties. And I might pull her skirt up higher; that light, loose fabric bunching up around her hips and I would see that hers — small and dainty and delicate—were the same color underwear as mine. And I would look at her and she would laugh a little laugh and shake out her straight golden hair and it would sparkle and I would kiss her softly on her neck and she would feel the coarseness of my little bit of stubble on her cheek.

But of course not. This was just what she imagined of me—or, possibly, what I imagined of her—during that long look, before she turned back to her friends. Before she turned back to the people she actually knew and the life that she actually lived, and thereby closed off all of the possibilities of all the lives that she didn't lead. And just like that I passed away, passed out beyond some event horizon of her possibility. But maybe, just maybe, I stuck there, ever-expanding along the rim of the black hole of her forsaken possibilities. Stretching like a beam of light toward that dark center, never really disappearing, just slowing and more slowly and more slowly ceasing to exist in any relevant way.

And part of me liked this. About her. About me. About the fact that that long moment of ours would never really cease to exist because it had never really existed in the first place. And the moment of her unzipping me, of seeing me, of accepting me, of liking it, of liking me, of enjoying the red fabric along the back of her hand while my skin was on her fingertips, that moment when she did better than not caring, that moment when she cared and liked it. That moment doesn't go away for me. We shared that, whether she ever knows it or not.

I replace my empty little espresso cup on its little saucer. I fold up my paper. I fold it in half and put it under my arm. I leave some bills from my pocket on the table. I look at her in the instant before I move toward the door. She sees me but pretends not to. Her lips press into that tight smirk again.

I have to walk past her table to get to the front door. So I walk past her table. The black linen of my suit makes a very satisfying sound as I walk. I push open the door. I like to think that she looks up to watch as I pass through the doorway and away. I don't look back to find out. I don't want to betray what we had.

When they moved in/ Gramma Jean placed the bonsai plant on the counter/ Luck was to seep into the daffodil walls/ nd mingle with chocolate chip cookies/ fresh from the oven/ into grout/ tween tiles/ scrubbed raw/ with a solution of white vinegar nd baking soda/ Gramma Jean used to break both china and toothbrush/ ta keep the kitchen pristine/ “nd we never questioned it”/ Mama sd/ “just watched”/ as crumbs from cookies crawled from childlike mouths/ nd landed tween the tiles/ where Gramma Jean just scrubbed/ then Mama heard the sound from behind bathroom doors/ of Gramma Jean scrubbin / her throat after dinner/ “Just the flu”/ nd she went to start scrubbin countertops/ littered with dishes/ nd scraps of dinner/ the bonsai plant never moved/ the pounds did/ Gramma Jean started pushin the food around/ steak smothering peas/ potatoes dissipating into the folds of steak/ smaller cuts/ smaller bites/ they sd Grampa left/ before the paint finished drying/ minty walls with chocolate trimming/ vanilla cream floors nd matching counters/ of days/ marked by red slashes/ to wrists/ covered by floral blouses/ Grampa didn’t come back/ nd white vinegar nd baking soda/ turned more acidic/ by bitter tears/ ---- nd the smell of cookies stopped mingling with luck/ nd bonsai was moved/ into pantries/ cupboards/ dark spaces/ like broken hearts/ nd Gramma/ scrubbin / throat raw/ with white vinegar/ to bring the dinner up/ that mocked the bonsai/ given on her wedding day/ that mocked her marriage/ nd pounds vanished/ with a magician’s flair/ nd her eyes started to sink/ into her heart/ that saw love/ with him/ nd he left/ because butterflies fly away/ on spring days/ nd don’t like bonsai/ too much luck/ for nature/ nd she swallowed water whole/ no ice/ “too much chewin”/ Gramma Jean sd/ sometimes/ she shoved spaghetti down her throat/ pulled noodles that were too long/ tossed them in the garbage disposal/ “bad luck”/ with sunken eyes/ yellow teeth/ eroded soul/ then it all stopped/ Mama was 17 then/ comin home for Thanksgiving from college/ nd Gramma Jean/ her heart done broke from too much/ bonsai on the floor/ azure pot mingled with roots/ shriveled from reaching/ nd being lonely/nd Gramma Jean/ broken/ nd Mama gathered the bonsai/ tossed it in the garbage disposal/ left the house/ nd called Grampa/ but his number was disconnected/ nd he never knew...



Little Sparrow III / Danielle Richardson

EMILIO SOTELO

Seventh son
seventh son

granted gifts
ingrained in veins

blood that flows backwards
carving arms that blow boulders back
and legs that dig in dirt like picks

No miami voodoo hoodoo boomlay
juju witchcraft black black arts

just luck
in lineage

god given favors
favoring
numbers

Seven
deadly sleepy mythic
things

Make men more than mortal
we want more
we want more

Gives us a sword to swing in between bones burying your
superficial jarvik heart

2ND SHORT TALK ON BOOKSELLERS

MONETA GOLDSMITH

If you look through the window of Alias bookshop at twilight – not long before the clock has begun to strike the hour of pure sorrow, when the shopkeepers collect their wares to make their way home – you should see a young woman sitting behind a very old and very sad desk that is made of wood. You will see straight that this woman is comfortable, that she is like a honeybee drunk with honey that is perched on a cluster of fruit. If she happens to be a redheaded bee – and hopefully she is – go inside and tell her that her skin looks like what the wind makes with illuminated leaves. Go and tell her that she has a voice like a bird, a heart like a house, that her eyes are what gemologists groan about in their dreams, that her hair vexes you with the cold fussiness that is normally reserved for complicated organic compounds.

What she speaks, if she speaks, stop her. Tell her that her breath is Sparrows to wander in, that expert architects for future waterfalls spy on her bones. Tell her to be quiet. Tell her you want to clasp her in your arms the way the ivy clasps the walls outside the bookshop – the way her words climb all over you from a long way off.

Go and tell her all this, pale and intrepid reader, before making your final purchases. Tell her all this with great care and tenderness, as if these words were more hers than mine. Go and tell her all this from you and then go find your own redheaded bee drunk with honey perched on a cluster of fruit. This one is spoken for already in a headful of ways. Go on, go and tell her right now. I'll wait.

My teacher gave a lesson about the Rhubarb Triangle. It was through her teeth she spoke of the nine square miles in West Yorkshire where farmers had discovered by happy accident the perfect way to cultivate the sweetest and most tender rhubarb specimens. With force in her voice she tried to break through the tinnitus buzz of the fluorescent lights that glared upon us, lights we children tolerated with the passive indignation that we would years later develop for taxes and road repair signs. I so wished we had a window to open. The farmers in Yorkshire learned that if one allows rhubarb to grow free in the sunlight for a few years and then sweep it away to damp and musty rooms with no natural light it would grow at a tremendous rate. I remember feeling sorry for the British rhubarb, kidnapped from fields of sunlight and imprisoned in the dark. The teacher explained the rhubarb's fast growth was due to its frantic search for sunlight, even though the soggy dirt it was placed in gave all the nutrients it needed. At this my hand shot up, as if reaching for the fluorescent bulbs. I asked why the rhubarb acted so. The teacher—I remember—smiled with her mouth alone when she told me perhaps they simply remembered how it was before. The dark was heavy when I walked with mud caked shoes through soggy grassless fields and alleyways to my apartment complex. That night I dreamed of candy red hands stretching up through mud and shit, arms reaching for rescue like drowning men at sea. After our teacher killed herself the school sent a counselor to explain how we should feel. Her teeth buzzed white like ceiling lights when she explained that pain was a part of life, that pain would make us grow.

TRISTA PAYTE

In the beginning, there is this body—

There is this body
of bone and breath and blood and whatever hangs
in the triadic balance between constellations.
Stars split ribcage to surge up and out,
travel through spinal fluid to reach a waiting cortex
where they buffer, stabilize, prevent a collapse
beneath the weight of worry. Circumpolar, fixed, navigational. It keeps
the otherwise chance grouping bound together.

There is this body, a cocoon
of flesh. Touch it awake, open
beneath fingers.
It is eager to please
responsive to stimuli.
An amalgamated system, nerved bridges, blooded tunnels
carrying the message. Shuddermoanquakecry—
This is not love, but it will do.

There is this body, tuned to the frequency
of everyone else's desires. Muscle and sinew vibrate
at the calling of each perfectly pitched request.
No longer a seeker of balance, the wax and wane of foreign matter
blocks all but the most urgent timbres. Yet
sometimes in the black static night, it hears its own song
and hums along at the speed of silence.

There is this body and it longs
to reproduce. Ideas flood channel, gateways open
wide; it welcomes in synthesis. It gulps down gasping, desperations
mouthful after mouthful.
Yet the environment is hostile; the barriers impenetrable;

everything withers in the hull.
This is the dirtiest secret the body holds,
this is the site of the unforgivable breach.

There is this body. In measured beats per minute it learns to breathe
around the blockages. More than mere motor impulse, one body makes
an accessory muscle of another; together they contract and expand, exchange, exchange.
Diaphragm swells against hand, flexes between inhalations
seed and pollen, filth and essence, trying to cultivate
something more. Dreaming of escaping
the hollowed out husk. Dreaming
of becoming.

www.stoptheoryabuse.org

Tamper Evident:

What is poetry? But
the blatant disregard for rights of others.

Parents: Push down and turn to open.
Language under pressure
could result in serious consequences.

Clichés should be punctuated.
The weather isn't in season.
What difference does poetry make?
Poetry as practiced is claustrophobic.
Severe liver damage may occur....

Poets escaping personality: Warning:

Keep away from children
if breast feeding.
If you consume three alcoholic drinks
Wait, where are the children?

Drug Facts:

Changes in behavior may occur.
Death is an echo of the soul.
How is poetry read?
Reconciled in illusion, tired shadows
yearning with
enigmatic smiles of sorrow.
Please resist the children.

Stop Use If:

What difference does poetry make?
If breast feeding
there are only styles.
Children under 12 should oppose society.

Lyrics should be virginal.
Poems should be hostile, solitary
expressed dreams.

If taking, psychiatric or emotional conditions:

Poetry = Prose + a + b + c.

If symptoms persist ask a doctor:

How is Poetry written?

Drug Fact:

Do not exceed dosages over 2 Tbsp of image, sound, loneliness.

To make a child sleep:

Jakobson, Eliot, Adorno, Barthes

Overdose Warning:

Olson, Pound, Stevens



San Fernando Valley at Dawn/ Danielle Richardson

This is Billy on paper.

Billy is just like you. He has hair and skin just like you. He wears clothes just like you. He has a home and a car and he went to school, just like you. He walks on the same sidewalks you walk on. He shops at the same stores, and stops at the same traffic lights. He even watches movies and likes his coffee made a certain way, with a particular amount of sugar and creamer. From just about every angle, Billy doesn't seem much different from you.

But Billy is not quite like you. That's what they say, anyway. Billy can't be like you. Billy is different.

Not that Billy really looks any different than most other people, nor does he act any differently than other people. But he's different, no doubt about it. Why is he different? Well, that's just what they say, right? They say he's different, so he must be. Maybe you're just not seeing it quite right. But you will soon enough.

This is Billy on duty.

The crack of dawn sees Billy and his comrades getting ready for the big day. They wearily tug on their clothing: heavy, cumbersome garments blotched with ugly shades of brown and beige, wrinkled from months of walking long stretches without rest and crouching down into holes for hours at a time. They wear the same kind of boots: rounded kettle bells wrapped in leather and lace. Their choice of headgear, cast-iron mixing bowls colored the same filthy hue as their clothing, makes their weary heads weigh ten pounds heavier. Aside from the chatter of shuffling bed sheets and footlockers, not a single word is spoken.

As the first of the morning's radiant fingers

start to poke in through the crevice between the drab gray curtains, Billy stops what he's doing and kneels down, facing the direction of the sun. He bows his head down to the floor, arms stretched out ahead of him, unaware that at this very moment the entire barracks has become unstuck in time, and the eyes of every single person in the room are now transfixed on him, like onlookers to a circus sideshow.

Everyone is thinking the same thing. Everyone but Billy, that is.

A single suspended second stretches and stretches until it finally snaps forward to catch up with the flow of time, and all is normal again. Billy is back on his feet, and everyone is dressed and headed to the armory. They load themselves up with shell magazines, explosives, and hand radios. The faithful ones tuck miniature bibles and wooden crosses into their vest pockets. The brave ones slip combat knives into their belts and boots. The scared ones pray and grab bigger guns. They are all thinking the same thing: *I hope I don't need to use any of these.*

Billy tucks a scrap of paper into the bottom of his left boot before slipping his foot in. He figures if the old wives tale worked for loose change, it could work for a good book, which was much more valuable. He was never one for superstition, but a little luck never hurt anyone.

Faithful men pray. Brave men brag about their dick size. Scared men brag about their dick size loudly. Billy reads books.

Only Billy has seen the paper's contents: it is a page torn from a copy of *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. It had been sitting in his

footlocker since deployment, and after a week of no one asking about it, he took it for his own. Most of the words on the page have been scratched out by pen, with the exception of a single passage that reads:

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

Billy finishes the last loop on his laces and stands up to make his way towards the door. As he begins to walk forward, a squad mate roughly shoves past him, causing him to bump into the frame of his bunk.

“Watch where you’re going, towel-head,” he mutters under his breath to Billy.

This is Billy at home.

Billy remembers 9/11 the same way you remember 9/11. He remembers what he was doing when it happened. He had just come home from his morning run and turned on the news. As he poured himself some coffee, a breaking story showed footage of New York just moments after the planes crashed. “An attack,” they called it. He remembers how he felt when it happened. Shocked. Awed. Confused. A little sore from the run. He remembers tuning in to the news every morning on his drive to work, and then again on TV when he came home. Every statement from the President, every last second of footage, even the zealous rants of conspiracy theorists, it all became like a daily mantra for him, a constant reminder of the inhuman “why?” that he couldn’t hope to answer.

He remembers what the President wore when they outed Al-Qaeda as the culprits behind the

incident and announced that they were preparing to mobilize. Azure suit. Cerulean tie. A weary scowl. A miniature crumb on his upper lip from the blueberry pancake breakfast he had that morning. He remembers thinking how improperly sloppy the President looked with that crumb hovering just above his grim words.

Then he remembers how strange it was to see his friends and co-workers down at the office not long after that. As he walked by, the lively conversations concerning sports and weekend flings by the water cooler ceased. Documents were wordlessly dropped into his In-box without so much as a “Hello.” People were suddenly too busy to have lunch with him. One day, after he finished eating, he came back to his desk to find a typed note that read “GO BACK TO IRAQ YOU FUCKING TOWELHEAD.” His boss sent him home early and told him to get some rest.

Billy stopped watching the news and listening to the radio that day. He shaved his beard and tucked his turban to the back of his dresser drawer. However, a sense of moral duty and spiritual guilt kept him bowing to the sun each morning.

This is Billy in bed.

It is springtime. But Billy can’t tell the difference after being out in the desert for so long. Every day feels like summer. The sun beats down on him from the ass-crack of dawn to the shit-fall of night. Days blur and congeal together like the contents of a discarded MRE, left opened and unfinished. He hasn’t bathed in days. He hasn’t had a good night’s sleep in weeks. He lies doe-eyed in his bunk, the harmonious din of snores and grunts billowing around the room like clandestine buzzing clouds.

He quietly masturbates to the picture of his girlfriend taped to the underside of the top bunk,

recalling the sweet perfume of her skin from the last time they made love. On the night before his deployment, after they both came, she shed tears of ecstasy and anguish, curling up in his arms and begging him not to go.

“Don’t throw your life away for a country that hates you!” she said. And yet, here he is, millions of miles from home, and is just as hated now as he was then.

His hand is dry and chafes him with each stroke, but he keeps going, pushing himself through the pain like he was taught to in boot camp. He climaxes silently, turning onto his side and wiping himself off on the white shirt he wore yesterday. He is rendered numb by the mixture of endorphins and norepinephrine coursing through his veins. It is a fleeting high, but it is enough to ease him into sleep just for tonight.

As his eyelids begin to droop, he glimpses the calendar hanging on the wall across from his bunk. It is March 20. Today is his birthday. And it is fucking springtime.

This is Billy on foot.

One day, Billy finds himself chased by a group of angry men wearing matching “God Bless America” t-shirts. Feet slap the concrete like hits on a snare drum. The guttural boom of Billy’s beating heart pounds rhythmically with each step he takes. Crazy yelling echoes through the air like hunting horns heralding the bloodhounds’ approach. Even as he ran for his life, Billy couldn’t help but feel like he was an action movie star, and some fucked-up composer was secretly scoring the entire chase sequence.

He rounds a corner and dashes into the nearest building, pressing himself against the wall and out of sight. He waits for the yells and trampling

advances of his assailants to pass before he dares to peek out the glass display windows. A sudden “Can I help you?” piping up behind him causes him to yelp and turn around.

A bulky, clean-faced man dressed in brown fatigues sits behind a wooden desk, his face slightly flushed from the warmth radiating from outside. His head is neatly shaven into a buzz cut, and as he stands up from his seat, he reveals a tall and muscular build framed by large arms and thick legs sheathed in heavy leather boots. A brass-plated name-tag reads, “Hartman.” His eyes survey Billy curiously. “Are you okay?” he asks.

Billy looks around. Posters of a ferocious-looking Uncle Sam and soldiers in mid-salute line the walls. Large signs reading “There is strong. And then there is ARMY strong!” hang from the ceiling. There is an American flag perched in the corner by the door. He blinks in confusion.

“Where am I?” Billy asks.

“The recruiting office,” Hartman replies.

A pause. A breath. “...sorry for barging in.”

“It’s no problem, son. Those guys giving you trouble?”

“We had a...disagreement.”

“Bout what?”

“Well, they wanted me to leave the country. I didn’t.”

Hartman’s brow furrows. “Why’s that?”

“Apparently, I killed all those people.”

“People?”

“The ones in the Twin Towers.”

The hollowness of Hartman’s thousand-yard stare seems to deepen as he continues to look upon Billy. He places his hands in his pockets and strides over, stopping within a few feet of him, his stare never breaking. He begins to walk slow circles around the room, his head turning to maintain his

gaze upon Billy. All the while, Billy stands perfectly still, as if one wrong move would send him back into the cruel world outside, where the hounds were waiting to eat him alive. He finally comes to a halt in front of Billy. “Well, son, how ‘bout you let ol’ Uncle Sam help you with your problems?”

Billy is confused, but willing to listen. Unbeknownst to Hartman, Billy sees him as a sign from above that he can be changed, he can be redeemed, he can belong. Unbeknownst to Billy, Hartman sees his coffee-colored skin, wavy mop of dark hair, and lanky physique, and doesn’t see a terrorist at all. He sees another set of dog tags.

This is Billy after work.

The ASV ride back to base was alive with jubilant laughter and raucous shouting. The operation was a success. A village was shelled. Buildings were raided. Terrorists were blown to hell. Another zone secured thanks to the boys in brown.

Billy sat wordlessly against the back door, ignoring the nudging of shoulders and exclamations of how many towelheads got iced by whom. He stared out the window across from him, watching the vermilion glimmer of a burning village flicker away in the distance like a fading star, framed against his squad mates’ faces reflected in the glass. He is the only one in his squad to return with no spare shell casings left. No explosives left either. Even his hand radio was lost in the chaos of the sortie. His torn page from Hemingway is still tucked inside his boot, though it provided no relief in this moment.

Tom, seated to his left, clapped him on the shoulder and said, “And this guy here, this guy is a BEAST!”

“Yeah, how many of them camel jockey fuckers did you git?” Dick chimed in from his right. “Musta been at least 15 or 20!”

Harry, who listened on from the opposite end of the crew compartment, shook his head, muttering “Naïve little fucks” under his breath. Tom and Dick didn’t seem to hear him.

“Hell, he got one for every shot!” Tom bellowed, reaching over and playfully shaking Billy by his vest. “Look! Empty! Not a single bullet left!”

Billy remained silent.

“Aw c’mon Bill!” Tom clapped his shoulder again. “Say something! What’s the matter? Cold-blooded killer’s too cool to talk?”

“Watch out, Tom! If you piss ‘im off, he’ll blast the shit outta you too!” Dick held his right index finger up to his head, cocked his thumb back, and mimed blasting his own brains out. “BLAM!”

“Hey! Tom, Dick. Let him be.” Harry’s voice pierced the air like lightning, and boomed like a cannon blast. All eyes turned to him, then towards the front where Billy sat.

Tom chuckled, leaning back in his seat. “Hey, lighten up, Harry. Just jabbing his ribs a bit. Really though, how do you go in guns blazing and not have anything to say about it?”

“Clearly, the man doesn’t wanna talk about it,” Harry remarked gruffly. “Otherwise he’d say something.”

“Hey, he *did* kill a lot of goons,” Dick piped up. “That’s why we’re here, right?”

Harry sighed in exasperation. “Billy, don’t let these little shits get to you. You don’t have to say anything.”

“Well, surely he’s got *something* to say!” Tom clapped his shoulder again. “C’mon, Billy, give us a nice little speech, in honor of our victory tonight!”

At this, Billy pushed Tom’s hand away, his charcoal gaze blinking back into reality and slowly sweeping between the three of them.

“Victory?” he murmured. “What victory?”

This is Billy on break.

Although it has been two years since he had been discharged, Billy still can't sleep at night. His mind cannot escape the thought of little Leyla, standing scared yet defiant in the scope of his rifle, screaming in a strange tongue at him. Leyla, who had charged at him, brandishing a stick in her hand. Leyla, who arched gracefully across the air as the shell passed in between her eyes and out through the back of her head. Leyla, whose eyes retained that same defiant look she had in life, even as a corpse. Leyla, whose wild screams echoed through the hollows of his head every time he closed his eyes.

Her name wasn't really Leyla. That was just a name Billy gave her. Leyla's story would never be told; Billy had erased it from the world. He would need to fill the gaps in himself. Leyla, who was a bright young student with a knack for mathematics. Leyla, who woke up early before mommy and daddy to bow her head to the rising sun. Leyla, who was the most beautiful girl in her village. Leyla, who was definitely not a terrorist.

Perhaps the gaps were better left as gaps.

This is Billy back on paper.

It is the first day of training. In an unusual twist of directive, the military superiors have decided to begin with an introductory training segment entitled KNOW YOUR ENEMY, reasoning that the urgency of the imminent threat at hand required a reevaluation of how to properly condition their troops for maximum performance. In order to defeat their enemy, they must be aware of who exactly is their enemy.

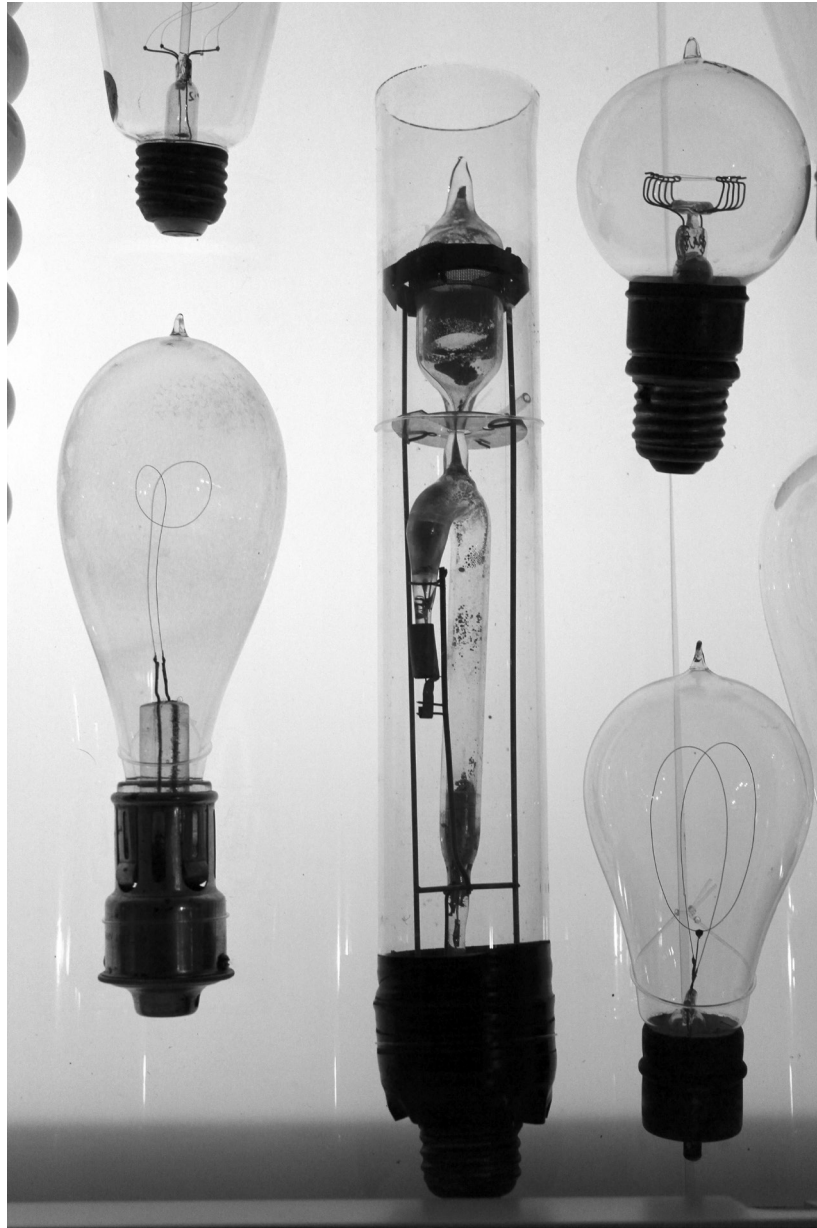
Billy is seated alongside his future squad mates in the mess hall at Fort Benning, which has been cleared of tables and filled with rows of folding

chairs. A large projector screen has been set up before them, and once the last few seats are filled, the doors are shut and the film reels are sent spinning. An image flickers onto the screen, showing a still frame of a teenage Iraqi boy dressed in khaki shorts and a powder blue t-shirt. He is staring straight at Billy, eyes wide and defiant, as if he were peering through the screen right at him. He has Billy's hair, and Billy's nose, and Billy's eyes. The picture bears a time stamp, partway cut off by the bottom edge of the projector screen. The date reads 03/20/1993.

An unseen narrator begins to speak:

"This is the enemy. He may look like just another little boy, but don't be fooled, soldier. That's how they get you. The enemy is just like you. They have hair and skin just like you. They wear clothes just like you. Some of them have homes and cars and have gone to school, just like you. They walk on the same sidewalks you walk on. They shop at the same stores, and stop at the same traffic lights. They even watch movies and drink their coffee made a certain way, with a particular amount of sugar and creamer. From just about every angle, they don't seem much different from you.

But the enemy is not like you. The enemy is different."



Light Bulbs IX / Danielle Richardson

THE MAN WITH THE TIN HAT

SAM ALEKS

There was a man who wore a tin hat. It was one he had made himself out of tin scraps from the old cars in the junkyard and everyone thought he was crazy. I would see him from time to time, staring into the distance through the old apartment archway as we raced atop the uneven rooftops where the shoemaker had built his hut. The thin tin-man would watch with his leathered face, eyes squinted, as the old shoemaker shook his fist at us. The shoemaker would yell and warn us that the rooftops weren't safe, but we never listened because he would give the same warning about everything he thought was his.

By late afternoon we would all go inside because the older boys would wake up and gather in the yard. The older boys were mean and reckless. They slept in the crumpling apartment building during most of the day and came out at night to play soccer. We would look up at the broken wall on the ninth floor every afternoon to see if any heads were poking out, if any were up we would run. We were afraid of the older boys.

One day, the sun seemed to have gone down a bit sooner than predicted and we were all rushing to get home before the older boys made their way down. As I raced through the junkyard and climbed down the ladder onto the gravel, I saw them gather around me. They were always dirty and all were very thin but they would glow red in the moonlight. One of them held a soccer ball and I knew what was coming the moment he set it down below his feet.

I crouched and looked away. My fists felt a bump as my arms motioned between the ball and my face. When I opened my eyes the boy who had kicked the ball was on the floor with a bloody nose, the ball was bouncing idly in the distance. I bolted up and ran as fast as I could towards the first opening I could see; it was the tin-man's archway. The inside was pitch black but I wasn't afraid because I knew the older boys wouldn't dare go near it. I looked out into the moonlight and saw the boys beginning to move to the middle of the plaza, it was safe, but a voice shot through the darkness behind me. I turned to face a flickering cigarette and a dimmer reflection of it on the tin-man's head.

"You have strong hands," the man said, "you have strong hands, but they won't help you when the world comes crashing down."

A week later, when the earth began to shake everyone ran and hid under the archways of the apartment buildings. The older boys didn't gather outside in the late afternoon; the shoemaker didn't leave his hut. The junkyard was quiet and the sky was cloudy and dark. The only one outside with the shaking was the tin-man, smoking casually. There were cracks in the floors and dust gusts in the air. The atmosphere was obscured and terrifying and the only thing visible was the flickering of the tin-man's cigarette and the reflection on his head floating in the dark gray distance. Eventually the shaking calmed and the dust subsided.

The grayness of the late afternoon spoke in a murky voice to us, yet the tin-man was unmoved. As we began to leave the archways of the buildings he began to walk back to his. The crowd poured outside and I stopped to look at the man moving in the opposite direction. As I turned to see him, the ninth floor wall let loose a single brick which seemed to fall slower than anything I had ever seen and finally connected with a hollow knock. The tin helmet wobbled with an indent until it finally stopped beneath my feet.

JESSE CLEMENS

They came out of nothing:
a thousand dandelion clocks like
lead balloons, ball-and-chains,
sweeping through, longing to be tied down to the sky.

Here is a view of the waking foothills,
the soft light, the numbness in the air.
All the doors are open in the place of death,
no breeze to lead us aright, yet we know.

The birds have taken all sounds with them,
chirps and takeoff rustles, the beeps
of machines that are so easily ignored.
Come quickly, by and by I come.

This is a time to heal and renew
and begin, this newly summer, a time
to take off these tubes and tapes
and bracelets, to look deep into the heart

of the body, a place so calm,
yet so heavy, laden with all that
leaving, a black hole
pulling past and future into itself.

There is the holding of bodies,
warm flesh to warm, warm to cold.
There is cold metal railings and warm water.
There is warm morning air, and a chill that remains.

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

TRISTA PAYTE

Remember
one swallowed man, gravity-
head dropped and clogged, two
hearts burnt down, slowness of sand
doled out, fastened firm, to three:
bundle of unbound
untethered cells, wetted
eyes and mouth and sound and I
so weighted beneath;
we wait together.

To use
smooth ivory wash murmurs
like your mother,
nothing
like your mother, yelping and winded—
how you bright this house,
how you black that moon;
cradled
in what is done and undone.

As directed
we tight the device
to simulate motion. Still
beating around curled questions
held in three neck breath whispers,
two bodies out of orbit,
one firm round period; we
and all and this.



Goose Feathers / Danielle Richardson

She sits down in a barren bathtub and puts the plastic stopper in the drain. She holds her knees loosely and begins to cry. She cries until the bath is filled. Tonight she cries so hard the waters rise and start to fall down the side of the tub. From the other room he is taking off his boots; the apartment smells like a harbor and she bathes him in the cool collection of tears until morning.

The next night he sinks into the bathtub, deep into the drink, down, down, forsaken and shaking. The glass of the whiskey bottle clanks around the sides of the tub. His cup has run over and her woe gushes down the sides of the tank and puddles on the floor. She hopes he doesn't wake the neighbors again. He drinks himself and swims around in the ocean she poured for him. His mouth tastes like blue and salt and rye.

They call this young love.

They call it moving in with someone too soon.

They call it being twenty-three.

They call it "his beginning."

He wakes up in the late afternoon to the sound of the drain draining. She is kneeling next to the naked boy in the deep white, the plug of the drain in her hand. Her eyes are a sad red and beautiful light blue. He says the same thing he has said for the past two years, "I'm sorry..."

She says the same thing she has said for the last two years, "it's ok."

"No. Baby, really I'm sorry."

She doesn't say anything the next morning. Nothing more than what she has never said in two years. Her mother warned her, 'the man you marry won't be the man you married.' His mother warned him, 'no day will be as cold as the night you have to choose your love over your blood.' The water in the tub is still full and flowing, warm from his body. She has never understood why he hasn't drowned. He has never told her how he breathes underwater.

At night, when she is in the other room, she can hear him stirring the current in the drink. He breathes heavy and she can hear the wave within the bottle. It crashes back and forth inside the glass. It sounds like a storm laughing at the horizon. There is a storm inside the bottle and there is a squall inside the tub and he is the storm inside the bottle in the tub. He is the man on the ship in the bottle. He told her one night he built a ship inside the glass and named the ship after her. He told her another night that he drinks to try and get it out, to get her out.

She pretends to sleep when he dives into the waters but really she waits, eyes half mast, until the tides hush; until there are only ripples and soft shore breaks. Then she sleeps. Sometimes she hopes that when she wakes

FRENCH NAVY

up she will find that his soul set sail for more tranquil waves. She hopes that tomorrow will be the last morning she pulls his naked body from the docks. Sometimes he keeps his clothes on but usually he is bare and heavy.

The tub dries and she says she will make breakfast.

They call it "Sunday."

They call "every day" Sunday.

They call it "family history."

They call it "genetics."

They call it "she should have known better."

The best man found him slumped down and drowned out in the bathroom on "their day." It was his own brother and he walked out, hands in the air, palms open saying, "I'm done with him." Mama went into the Boy's Room with a glass of water and said, "He's just nervous. It's been a long day."

He stood there with his left hand in her hands and his right hand over his own heart. She held him tightly so they wouldn't notice him sway. He said, with a voice on the rocks: I love you, you are my only one, my true love, the only thing I need, from now until ever. She and mama were the only ones who knew he always kept his flask in his right breast jacket pocket, knew of the steel that covered his heart. They kissed and people clapped silently to themselves. She wept and drowned joy. He stepped on the glass for her and they both wept, as tradition. They kissed and he could taste the ocean. She hugged him hard, hardly hard enough and could feel the metal over his heart against her breast.

He whispered, "I'm sorry."

She mumbled, "It's ok."

They were pronounced and presented. Everyone said they looked so happy.

She spent their honeymoon at the police station and the hospitals in Cabo looking for him. Three days after they were supposed to depart for home she found him on the beach cuddling a low tide. They have no pictures from the trip. She told everyone they had so much fun they forgot.

She called it "adornment."

She called it "too young."

She called it "taking the vow."

She called "annulment."

Mother-in-laws can just never agree, she thought.

She never left him though.

At night she curls up against the porcelain and bursts, filling it to the brim. After lying there, letting the

cool salts wash over her she wonders if this is part of the romance in loving a sailor, if he will ever love her more than the sea. She dries herself and gets ready for bed. She texts him and tells him, “Ok, it’s ready.” An hour later she can hear the door open and the falling of house keys, the kicking of the coffee table, he knows it’s there, it’s always there, but this is tradition now. She can hear him strip, the ringing bell of his belt buckle, the shirt buttons popping and clapping onto the floor. He dips into the drink and sails in her sorrow. She rolls towards the light of the bathroom that is slipping under the bedroom door. He says, ‘from now until ever’ as the water begins to down pour over the sides and swallow him.

In the morning she drags the sleep from her eyes by her fingernails. When she floats into the bathroom she looks into the tub and doesn’t find him. The drain is unplugged and the white bowl is dry to the touch. She kneels in the whiteness, like one would in prayer, and begins to laugh so hard she cries. The tub runs over, the laughter grows and the room smells like a harbor and fills and rises and then she says his name, once underwater, and it sounds like a wave rolling back towards the sea and her tide carries her to a new home.

You will have a taste of me when our bones get in the way
of foundations in future neighborhoods. They'll dig you

up, men in orange hats. They'll dig me up, too, and from different
piles of earth, crows will pull the last strands of our hair and weave

us together in a nest. Dark-eyed boys will dust off our knee
caps on blue jeans and skip them across smooth, green lakes,

and when the water creeps in through each yellow pore, we
will remember. We will remember this moment when we were

so thirsty. Someday we'll dig this up, this you and me, and haunt
the houses we will never own. We will play our old songs

and flicker the lights and dance on the kitchen table. The dalmatian
we'll never train will bark at my command. A baby who looks

like neither of us will cry for you in the middle of the night,
and his parents, some young couple, luckier, yes, but less

in love than we, will look over their shoulders. They will
call out "Who's there?!" Our laughter will echo in their empty

wine bottles, and they will gasp as the plastic arrow on their Ouija
board darts greedily beneath their trembling fingertips again

and again and again
to Y and E and S

BY THE LEAF'S BRUSH

COLIN HERRERA

By the leaf's brush
I feel the breeze
leave me with two legs
dangling off the branch.
I feel my feet in sky
and right
before I depart, you stick-in-
hand call, "What are you doing?
Who are you
to sit above me?" I return,
I am never coming down. Fell
these downs, I will spread into wings
and leap into wind.



Welcome/ Luis Silva

OF HANDS AND HOUSES AND HOLDINGS

TRISTA PAYTE

The house has been trying to tell its story for years, in a code of creaks and groans and shudders, of shifting foundations and peeling paint. But no one is listening. No one hears, the house is ignored; no one takes its complaints.

It cannot do its work under these conditions.

Houses are meant to foster and shelter life. That is their purpose. What they are not meant to do is store the dead. This is, in fact, the transformation houses fear the most.

Still there can be no denying that the house has changed. It has become a labyrinth overgrown. A pathway of bramble and burr. A spiral tunneling inward, inward towards its collapsing center. Towards its family. A family that has grown inward too.

The house houses a living mother, father, and daughter. But it also contains a second daughter. That daughter is lost, but she is not gone. She is not gone because the family will not let her go. When people are gone but cannot go, they become bound.

They become bind.

In the house there is a mother. She is the mother of two children, but only one of them is living. Being a mother of one child that lives and another child that does not isn't something the mother knows how to do. She spends her time grieving this loss, this tragedy-birthing inability to believe in her own potency. Her mind does not know how to process this change in form. *How can I, she wonders, be mother, bringer of life, when half of my work has failed?*

Of course the mother has this other child and that child is still living. That child lives in the house, that child grows older each and every day, that child is a testament to her ability to parent. The mother knows these things. But her mind screams failure and her mind screams bad mother, and her mind won't let her do that kind of work anymore.

She looks at her hands, so empty. She cannot stand to look at them. She decides she must fill these hands, fill them up every hour of every day so that she never has to think of what fell from them.

So the mother sits on a sofa in the center of the house and knits afghans. The mother knits afghans over and over, hook, loop, pull repeat, repeat, repeat. Her hands, quick and nervous sparrows, fly over the yarn; the clinking of wood on wood is her birdsong. *This nest, this nest is too cold*, she thinks. She means to insulate the family with her work. The mother hook, loop, pulls until the house is completely blanketed in her woolen therapy. She hook, loop, pulls until her hands are only good for that one deft motion, until her hands grow into the needles, until all she needs to do is plunge her hands deep into the brightly colored skeins and the needle-fingers pull the patterns out, over and over, again and again until she is lost in a bundle of soft, quiet, forgetfulness.

But the afghans are not functional in the way blankets are expected to be. The mother has cried too many

OF HANDS AND HOUSES AND HOLDINGS

bitter tears into them, the tears have been woven in with the wool, they have been hooked and pulled, they are now a permanent part of the structure. To sit under one of these afghans is to fill your blood with frost. They crackle and snap like branches overburdened with snow as the mother arranges and rearranges them, nimble fingers trying to find the design that will make them purposeful.

Blankets aren't supposed to have sharp edges. But these blankets are bladed. The needles remain lodged deep in the material long after their labor is done. The daughter loathes this sharpness. She watches the wood splinter away and fall into the fabric as she hides in the corners, counting the clicks, watching her mother plait her shame into tangible forms. She creeps up when the mother falls asleep, when the clicking slows then stops, and she files away the rough and splintered wood on her mother's hands. She strokes those hands. She whispers in her mother's ear, *forgive yourself*.

The house settles around them, adding its creaks to the mother's clicks and the daughter's croons. Together they build a chorus. Together they sing an elegy.

The house sees an ally in the daughter. It begins building spaces to hide the afghans away. Giant windowless room after room that the daughter stacks full from floor to ceiling with her mother's work. The mother looks around, sees bare chair backs and naked couch cushions and empty laps. She sees a void. The needles fly faster.

When the house become too full of afghans, when every closet is so crowded the doors no longer close, when every spare room the house builds is piled to the ceiling in itchy rectangles measuring the exactitude of her mother's suffering, the daughter begins unraveling the blankets, re-spooling the wool and the acrylic, sneaking it back to the baskets to be made again. *Is this what love has become?* the daughter wonders.

She does not keep any afghans in her own room.

In the house there is also a father. There is a father and he lost that one child and kept another, just like the mother. But the father has also lost a wife, a wife that became all sharpness and pain, a cold, wooden form forever bent away from him. Her presence only an absence, her body and her blankets melding together to form a shadow cast on the walls of the house to disclose every inch of his failure.

These absences hang too heavy upon the father; they are a weight he cannot carry. He carves loss out of himself. He picks himself clean of it. Then, in a closet that is already overflowing with the brightly colored afghans of his wife, he boxes it all up and locks it away.

Now this father is down to his one living daughter. He knows all too well what happens when daughters wander too far from their father's hands. This father knows what's at stake. This father takes a look at this one remaining daughter and this father says, *no*. He says, *this one stays*.

He has always worked with his hands, and so his hands are formidable. And when the daughter is young and small, these hands are enough to contain her. But daughters grow and the hands of fathers, even very determined fathers, do not. Soon the daughter is large enough, and quick enough, to dash between his fingers and fly away, into the world. The world that took that other child from the father. The world that took his wife. He looks at his hands, too insignificant, too empty. *This won't do*, the father says. *I will do better this time*.

He decides he must build a larger set of hands. A set of hands strong enough and large enough to hold his daughter forever and always. The father spends the fortunes of his past, present, and future, investing everything in the survival of the one that remained. He locks himself away in the basement with his tools and his materials and dedicates himself to crafting her safekeeping.

The father experiments with various materials: wood and acrylic, rubber and clay, but in the end metal seemed best suited for the task of daughter keeping. He designs a complicated system of wires and screws, straps and springs. Pulleys maintained mobility. Lightweight tin and aluminum proved most flexible and less likely to overheat too much in summer and cool too much in winter, but steel was less likely to break beneath the weight of responsibility the hands were tasked with carrying. Mechanical hand building is a lesson in compromise.

Each and every prototype is tested out on the daughter. Wires snap. Straps tear. Springs break loose and leap across the room. The daughter tries to tell her father this is unnecessary. The father only wonders aloud if guitar string might be a suitable replacement for the copper that keeps unraveling. When the hands break, as the hands are apt to do, the daughter waits and wanders around the house until it is time again. Until the elastic is restrapped and the bolts are retightened, until the father calls out that it's time. *Come to me, daughter. Let me cradle you safe.* She tries not to wince as the fingers close around her, pinching her flesh and filling her sinuses with the smell of the acidic marriage of skin and metal.

The house tries to slow the father down. Hallways grow up out of its groaning floorboards, creating pathways that twist and turn their way towards dead ends or doors that lead nowhere. The father blunders down them in search of the stairway that leads to his basement, dropping parts that the daughter collects like crumbs and stashes away in heaps of afghan. But there are always more parts. He gets tired and collapses in corners, resting his head on colorful bundles of wool the daughter had confiscated from the mother. But he always wakes up and finds his way once more. The house and the daughter, their efforts, only seem to make him more determined.

The daughter of course grows tired of all these hands and all this holding. But she loves her father. So when the father calls, she goes. And when the father is so exhausted that he cannot lift the mechanical hands to place them upon his own, the daughter helps the father into them. She fastens each strap, she secures each hook. Then, because the father cannot lift the hands to pick her up, the daughter uses a chair to climb into the hands on her own. *They are finished this time,* the father says as he bends his face near hers. *You are safe now.* She kisses his cheek and stays still and small in his artificial palm for as long as the bindings will hold.

She sits and listens to the house as it hums and whines around them. Behind her, the clicking and the hook, loop, pull slow, slow, and then stop. She turns. She looks at her mother. She looks at her father. *When did they grow so old?* Their creaks and groans have fallen into rhythm with the house's; she holds her breath, she bites her cheek until the skin puckers and swells between her teeth.

As she straightens her legs across the floorboards something catches the skin on her leg. She reaches down and pulls a fragment of wire out of her calf. One bright strand of wool dangles from its edge. The sight of it fills her with something she cannot put words to, and so she folds the fragmented wire and wool into a ball

OF HANDS AND HOUSES AND HOLDINGS

and squeezes it into her palm. Squeezes it until she feels it pierce her skin once more. Squeezes it until she has forgotten the hands of her parents. Until at last she can focus on her own.

It is only then that the girl can see that the house has altered itself for her too. She lets her mind crawl up into the new space the house has made. A space where she can speak the words she has carried so long they have been etched into the palms of her hands, replacing the lifeline, becoming the fingerprint:

Why did you leave me alone? I don't know how to be the one that remains.

The house shifts hard and fast, rattling a window and knocking a frame from the wall.

She looks at her parents again. So tired. So small.

The daughter gets up and drags the hands in a corner and stashes them under an afghan. She swears she will not help her father find them tomorrow.

In the house there is one living daughter. This daughter keeps time and stores memory. She does these things to keep the mother and the father breathing. To slow the collapsing. The daughter is the house's keeper. And in the house the daughter is forever kept.

The daughter decides that the house is a trap. The house is trapped. The daughter decides they all need out. The daughter says, *enough is enough. We need to leave this place. Our life in this house is that of an empty pair of shoes left by the entryway of a world where feet insist on being naked.* But her parents do not hear. They are busy knitting and forgetting, building and blocking. Her words fall and shatter at their feet.

She places her hands in her lap, upturned, and studies the space that expands across their flesh. Traces the words crisscrossed across her surface. She tries to whisper the unspeakable name. It catches in her throat, so she traces the letters across her upturned palm. As her finger moves across the surface, ink springs up beneath her fingertip. She presses down and the ink gathers in a pool at the cupped center.

That's it, the daughter thinks. *I will write this family an awakening, this house an exorcism. I will write myself out of here.*

First she writes for her mother. She sits at her feet, bleeding words from her hands onto brightly colored slips of paper, working to the rhythm of her mother's hook, loop, pull. With words, she paints the mother a new house, sun-lit and unburdened by a single grief-soaked afghan. A world where mothers and daughters can look into each other's faces and see not stone walls, but pathways. She writes the mother freedom from the sorrow and the guilt and the endless forgetting.

But when the daughter gives her the story, the mother's needles will not hold. The paper floats away into the fireplace and the flame takes hold of its edges and dances it out of reach. Her words burn until there is nothing left but cinder. The mother does not notice anything beyond the sudden increase in temperature in the room as a result of the loss of her daughter's work. *Thank you,* the mother says. *It was chilly in here.*

The daughter breathes in the smoke for safekeeping. What else can she do? Then she reaches out her ink-stained palm to her mother and grips a needle tightly. She holds them both there, needle tip to palm flesh, she lets her ink spill and drench them both. *Weave that into your afghans, mother. Weave yourself remembrance.*

She drips across the hardwood floors of the house as she walks away from her mother in search of her

father. She finds him in the darkened room deep within the house, holding the frozen corner of the bruise colored afghan she had hidden the hands within. He throws aside the blanket and pulls out a pair of wire cutters.

As the father replaces a broken strap, the daughter opens her own hands and lets the ink flow out of her and onto the metal where she runs her fingers through the black pool and pulls words out for him. She writes a peace where no one harms daughters, a world where fathers relax and drink tea on the porch and use real hands of flesh and life to build birdhouses. A place where fathers don't have to hold tight to daughters; they can watch them fly and know they will come back down safely, unassisted.

But when the daughter tries to give the pages to the father, they crumble to dust in those immense, artificial hands. He blows the dust away, murmuring about particles in the joints, while the daughter gathers the powder in her fists where she mixes it with the ink into a pulpy blue-black paste. Then she dips fingertip to palm and paints words onto the metal surface. She writes what she cannot say. What he will not hear. The metal yields to her pressure; her words become indentation within its surface.

She takes her father's hand, aged, tired, but still living and real and his. She drags it across the metal. She tries to help him feel what he refuses to see. *I am leaving you the key. All you need to do is find the lock again.*

The daughter climbs down from the hands. She scales the piles of afghans. She crawls up and up, away from the wool and the wire, away from the needles and the steel. She scrambles up until there is no house left above her but rafter and roof. She opens the window she finds there in the highest peak.

They release a sigh together, house and girl.

She sits with her body folded up into a ball, an egg, she sits and she traces words upon her palms over and over until she is raw with them. She sees that she miscalculated the power of habit and routine. She forgot that sometimes, being trapped is a choice. But the daughter is still determined. She has words escaping out of her pockets and tucked under her armpits and clamped between her teeth. Ink leaks from her palms and blooms from her fingertips. Letters are rising up off her skin in wave after wave and she cannot stop them. The house catches the melody. They hum together until morning.

She knows her work is just beginning. She knows her mother will forget and her father will block. The house will continue to hold and she will remain held. This is the pattern woven. Disassembly is a process, she must remember that. But the daughter is spilling escape routes out of her hands and onto the house, she is permeating the walls from floor to ceiling with her own song. Maybe one day this will be enough.

Maybe one day they will remember that the best way to honor what is lost is to let loose what remains.



The Truth Behind the Rotation of the Globe / Eric Barnhart

THE WOMAN ON 4TH STREET

FREDDY GARCIA

From the second story
window
the boy on his bed
watches:

the woman lighting a cigarette
counting
down
her expiration;

her inner thigh branded
with a warning
label.

Her hair in hurt knots
from tongue petting showers,

love-screw
syringes.

Cherry
channels cleansed,

molesting her stale
skin.

Fingered to
mold

wasted lips
into
a smile

THE WOMAN ON 4TH STREET

for candy smack;
she with a sweet tooth
under

the yellow street light waving
like royalty

at cars that slow to see . . .

* * *

The bedroom door creaks
silent.

His mother smiles
in.

He tells her of royal moonlight
bellows that echo
in the dim alleyway corners,
wrinkling the puddles
that ripple him
within.

She sings him not to worry –
not to listen.

Her royal wave
goodnight caresses
him
to sleep.

* * *

Eyes searching out the window
for the woman
under the street light

missing.

Yesterday's cigarette smoke
detained in the yellow stream
of light
hugs the breeze
and sways through the window
to caress him
to sleep.

THE TAMING OF WILD STRINGS

FREDDY GARCIA

The violin
carved from the soul
of my *pueblo*
is missing
strings,
plucked
from the neck.

Statistically speaking, there might have once existed a boy who did not learn to tie his own shoes until he graduated middle school and might have instead relied upon the confidence of his lies and his parents to hide the fact that his shoes were always perfectly tied not by him, but by his father throughout his elementary school career. And even if he should have stepped on a lace and unruffled the immaculate double-square knot his father learned to make during a three year tenure in Iraq, the boy still had a contingency plan he had created after his first shoelace accident back in fifth grade: he developed a habit of lingering, of walking slowly to study every little detail of some enticing object so he would not trip on a rebellious string and bring attention to himself anytime his shoes were untied, whereupon his fellow students or perhaps his teacher might point out the loose knot and have him embarrassingly try to tie it in vain in front of everyone and reveal the awful secret he had kept hidden away to himself and his close family for thirteen years. Yes, as evolution would have it, he adapted quite well to this lifestyle of always moving slowly, always absorbing the details of an object's creation to avert attention from his feet. If anyone asked why he walked slower than the rest of his classmates, he might know to answer and distract with a treatise concerning his insatiable curiosity, remarking that this box here might contain a sheep if he only had a moment to look in; or perhaps hypothesizing that this building had once been a museum that sheltered impossible wonders; or perhaps observing that here, a talking elephant slept and crooned heartbreaks and told bedtime stories; or perhaps well, really anything he could think of to avert attention from his inability to keep a knot safe.

Naturally, a genuine curiosity for these objects in the world upon which he lingered did develop and, as most humans do when they find themselves madly in love with an object's creation, he sought their recreation. In the early years, he thought big. He theorized entire elseworlds, entire galaxies and civilizations that must have existed somewhere and somethen because they were contacting him in an attempt to bridge the gap from their universes to his; perhaps, with time, he might have even recreated the biggest object to observe: reality itself. But that was too daunting a task for this hypothetical high school junior, inexperienced in his travels to these elseworlds, so he moved to the smaller, recording all the good details of a girl he thought he loved until finally, he was bored of recreating the same girl over and over in sonnet, in drawing, in fiction, in whatever he could scratch her name into due to limited observations.

He realized that the original copy was much more interesting than the mirror images he constructed, fascinated by the complexities one girl might hide under her skin, or the idiosyncrasies she might use *as* her skin to cover up the tender tissue underneath. No, the wonder, he knew, came from the puzzle, the game; the girls—or well, any and all persons, he realized—were infinitely more interesting not alone, but by their connection to the world around them, their connections to this time, this place in endless metonymic accumulation to tell the story about why they were here. To no one's surprise, his mind wandered back to the big, to reality itself, but a very intelligent person informed him not to look to build the world, but to build the gears that comprise the world and watch as the gears turned themselves in their own logic in some

grand, implied scheme, order from seeming chaos if you could only stop and observe. So he turned his observations toward these particulars, these little gears, so that he would have, for his own girlfriend-stealing Lack, a set of parts with which to become the ultimate recorder and recreator of the universe: the writer. For instance, when he stares at the ceiling of this apartment—this apartment that belongs to the girl who glued herself to her Volkswagen—he wonders why she described it as macaroni. He sees the macaroni, but he does not know why she created them as macaroni. The enigma keeps him awake at night, and wondering still why she chose macaroni for the ceiling, or why the constructors she invented chose macaroni, and he wonders if he will use macaroni or farfalle or pesto when the time comes to make his own ceiling.

When the oranges inexplicably start to grow around him like they do in that girl's story, he wonders if he should help cultivate them with his blood. But he fears the idea of his skin turning white—as in paper-white, not Caucasian—so he questions the use of that metaphor. A lot of his friends cut their wrists open over their worlds sprawled atop kitchen counters, letting the blood coagulate certain words together into a mismatch of love letters and grotesque images of sea creatures' tentacles strangling a young girl...but, no, he doesn't like that one bit, and the visualization still haunts him, resting at the back of his mind as he attempts to mold his little world together.

Occasionally, the image will surface from the Mariana Trench that is his mind, taking control of whatever world he had built and he wonders: will he be haunted forever, will this creature keep manifesting in his work despite the observation being old and outdated? He tries to disguise this image with newer observations, other strange images he captured during his long, lingering sessions with

B, C, F, H, S, and the P's underneath the trees that shed cigarette butts with its leaves, seeing which two probable gears made the most coherent impossible universe. For example, his favorite observation this week is that at the center of every galaxy—his or someone else's—sits a massive black hole. He can't help but wonder if that means there is a giant nothing there, like the center of a walnut or the United States during a particularly long road trip, or if, instead, there *is* something there, something so beautiful and puzzling and incoherent that it cannot be rendered to human vision on this frequency or that spectrum, or perhaps even this existence, existing only in our vague conceptions of the infinite without truly understanding the full implication of the event horizon. There, beyond that, lies a place where things we cannot fathom happen; black holes are but objects with gravities so large that light cannot escape: do alien civilizations—possibly a race of mechanical sheep—hide there, hide from us the secret to the building blocks of the universe?

And then he wonders if this hole functions like the first holes he ever observed as a child—snake holes or rabbit holes that act as portals and seductions from one fantastic universe of black sunglasses and overcoats to another where you moved through space like it was made of asphalt. He wonders if, at the center of every galaxy lay another galaxy compressed into a black hole mass, or if, assuming his friend's mad-scientist-theories were true, what we consider the macrocosm is but a microcosm for even greater entities where our stars are but electrons to them, bouncing around insignificantly from one cosmic atom to another to create complex chemical reactions beyond our scope; little parts within little parts within little parts ad infinitum all point to something greater that is always just beyond the reach of humanity's grasp.

But if he learned anything at all these past two decades, it might be that there is no center, that that Argentinian's joke is true: the center is everywhere, there's just this back and forth movement like a waltz, like a delicate playground seesaw the boy once stopped to observe for too long due to an untied shoe, like the dotted line where two circles intersect on a Venn diagram: not quite the middle, just one toe in the pool and one comfortably out like a ballerina mid-balançoire. No, more than that, he is certain of it because he has been searching for the center the entire time to no avail. He knows from experience that there is nothing at the center, that our creations are just a composite of swirling planets being sucked in by that black hole, like vacuum cleaners that sometimes will collect dust and sometimes pennies and, if you're lucky, little Lego pieces that make the most beautiful little Jackson Pollock piece if you only had the shoes to look:

Here before us lies this boy's newest creation, not quite Jackson Pollock, but instead something akin to Frankenstein's monster. It is comprised of the same three corpses he's dug up time and time again: the Bible, the comic book, the bedtime story, and while the initial experiment came to life as this shambling horror that managed to talk, he's arguably created this monster to sing. He accomplished this task through methodical stitching, through slavish adherence to prescribed anatomies from the source corpses. In following the directions, he was allowed to make cosmetic changes here and there through the application of a little lipstick and concealer to hide where the black thread still showed on pale skin. While the blush and eyeshadow could use a little more work—this is a year's operation, not a week's, the boy insists—this monster looks half-human enough at a quick glance to have a chat with; the only unsettling thing about it is that uncanny valley that we'll never get across because

this monster is *too* human, too involved in the “you” despite a suppressed “I” lurking just beneath the surface and the story the monster tries to tell gives one the uneasy feeling that the monster wants to seduce us, lure us into his lair, and then eat us alive. Still: it walks, it breathes, it sings. Tomorrow, if we believe in him, this hypothetical boy could teach it to dance.



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