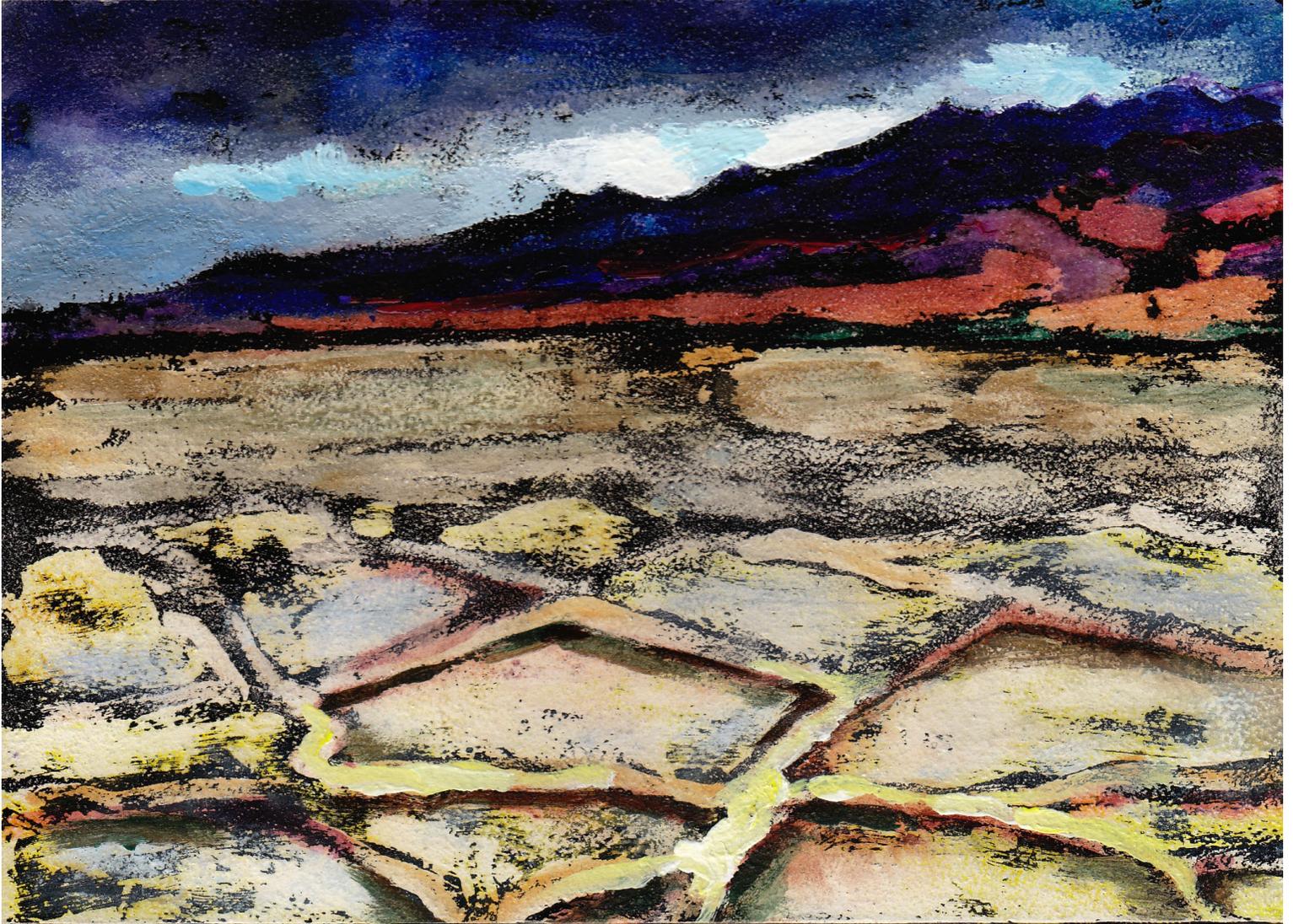


Bartleby Snopes Issue 11



A Literary Magazine

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Submission Information

To submit for future issues, visit our website and click on the 'Submissions' tab.

Bartleby Snopes
Issue 11

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Dialogue Contest Finalists

The first five stories in this issue are the finalists from our Fifth Annual Dialogue Only Contest. We awarded over \$900 to our Dialogue Contest Finalists this year. Finalists are selected by the staff and then voted on by a panel of judges. This year's judges included h. l. nelson (Editor of Cease, Cows) and Bonnie ZoBell (author of The Whack-Job Girls).

Night Orderly by Ronald Friedman (*First Place*)

"It's almost five. You'll be out of here in a couple of hours."

"I'm telling you, this really knocked me on my ass. It's a crummy enough job as it is."

"Artie, I don't understand what happened to you. Why didn't you use the gurney?"

"I don't know. That's just a small part of it, anyway."

"It was in the hallway wasn't it? Outside the room?"

"Yes, of course. I just decided not to use it."

"There are rules for this kind of thing. Protocols. They're there for a reason."

"Look, you don't have to lecture me."

"I'm sorry. I realize it seems like I'm kicking you when you're down. I feel bad for you, but I'm pissed at you too."

"I was sleeping in a chair at the nurses' station up on Five West. The nurse had to wake me. They're usually pretty good about it if you fall asleep when you're not busy in the middle of the night. When she told me they needed an orderly on Two East I hoped it was just for a bucket of ice. That's usually what they call me for. You know, mostly a bunch of crappy errands."

"Our job is different working in Psych. More keeping an eye on the patients."

"There's a lot of overlap. I worked afternoons in Psych last summer."

"You could have said 'no'."

"I thought about that later. I wonder if they would fire me if I refused to do something."

"This isn't the army, it's a hospital. You don't have to obey every order."

"Maybe you're right, but I didn't say 'no'."

"So you went waltzing over to Peds to get them some ice."

"No, not really. I waltzed, as you say, hoping it would be ice buckets. But they had the body ready for me. It was already wrapped in a shroud and had been prepped for me to transport to the morgue. You've done that before. We all have. I thought I was used to it."

"But not when it's Pediatrics."

"Right. Older patients. Sometimes I'd have to prep them. I would stick a few wads of cotton up their ass, tie their hands if they keep flopping off the cart, maybe tape their false teeth to their chest, wrap the body in a shroud, drag them onto a cart and haul them to the morgue."

"Do you know if it was a boy or a girl?"

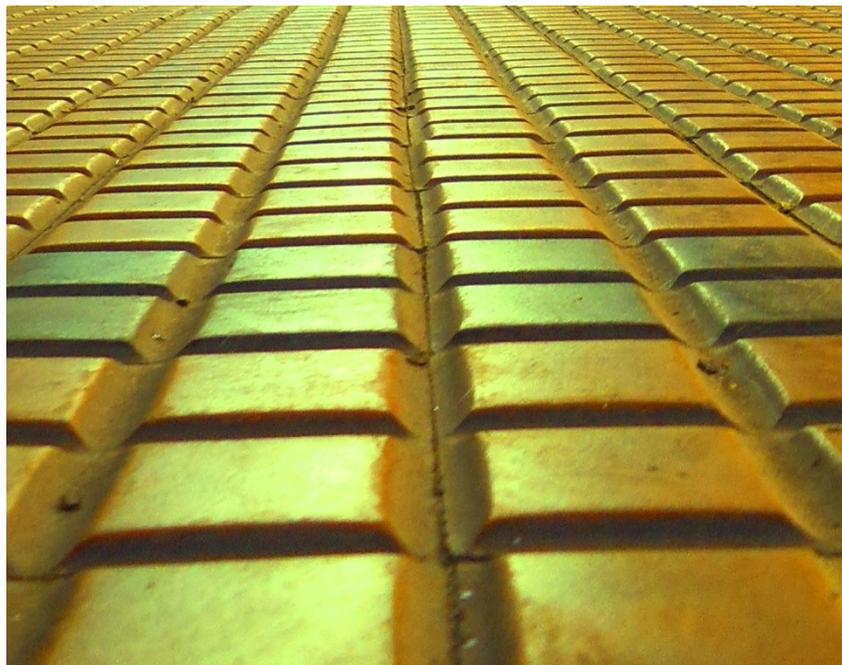
"I asked the nurse. I shouldn't have asked, but I did, like you just asked me. It just seems natural to want to know those things. It was the body of a little girl. Actually, the girl had not been her patient so the nurse had to look at the chart to find out who was inside the shroud."

"How old?"

"Almost three."

"You know how she died?"

"No. Somehow I finally stopped asking questions. I had to pick her up to put her on the gurney, but when I had her in my arms, she was so light that I thought I could carry her. Those shrouds are just rough tissue paper. I could feel her through the fabric. She was still warm."



"Geez, Artie."

"It was the middle of the night. Her parents weren't around. The nurse didn't even know if the kid was a boy or girl. You know me; I don't even like kids. All I could think of was that she was three years old, her parents, if she had any, probably didn't know she was dead and nobody seemed to care."

"Just you."

"I'm not so sure about that. Somebody ought to care, but was it up to me? There was nobody in the morgue when I got there. I needed to wait. If I'd had her on a gurney I could've just wheeled it in and left it there. Or, even without the gurney, I could have set her down somewhere, maybe on one of the tables. But I didn't. I sat down and held her for maybe 15 minutes or so until Lancaster came back and put her in a drawer."

"You did some good. You took care of her."

"No. She was dead. That's all. There was no one for me to take care of."

"You cared about her. That counts."

"For what?"

"I don't know exactly."

"You've got it backwards. That's not what gave me such a jolt. All the time I carried her and then held her in my arms waiting for Lancaster to show up, I was waiting for feelings from inside that would tell me that at least I was someone who cared about the kid. But I've waited right up to this minute and I don't think those feelings are there."

"Artie, you are one sad-luck son of a bitch."

"If they call for me again, I'm going to say 'no'."

No Lips by Ben Orlando (2nd Place)

Offend me.

What?

Disgust me, repulse me.

You're a whore.

C'mon. What's the worst thing you could say?

Filthy whore.

I'm serious, Danny. We're sitting here right now waiting for the doctor to tell us something that could tie us together forever, you know? So what could you say or do to break that?

You're nuts.

C'mon.

Seriously you're a goddamn lunatic.

I'm not saying it's true.

Jesus Elsie. I haven't even known you that long. Or not really.

Long enough for this! You know my mom was eighteen when she got knocked up?

What?

By the gym teacher.

Mr. Nozerand?

No, stupid. How about your mom?

My mom's dead.

Okay. But how old was she when she had you?

I don't...I can't do math right now. Twenty-two maybe.

You said she was killed.

When did I say that?

But you never said how.

Did I say that in my sleep?

You know what? Forget it. Okay I'll start. So I have this thing. Like every night after dinner, I go into the bathroom, and I puke, into the toilet, and then I reach down into the toilet, I scoop it up, and I—

All right stop.

And I pour it over my head, I bathe in it. I *love* the way it feels trickling down over my face and shoulders. It's like—

I said stop!

But say I'm a super model, the most attractive woman you've ever met and smart as hell and funny.

I don't need a supermodel. You're—

Oh please. Listen Danny. Let's not lie, ever, about this kind of shit, okay? I know what I look like, and you know what you look like. We know what we are and we accept that. I'm saying she's your fantasy, the girl you search for in your pornos—yeah I know

about those—perfect in every way, except every night she goes into the bathroom and eats her puke. And she leaves the door open.

You said she bathes in it.

And then she eats it.

This is the kind of shit that goes through your mind? Jesus I don't know, Elsie.

Really? You'd let a little puke stand in the way of a meaningful relationship?

Why can't I stop her? Maybe we can go to therapy.

You can't.

Why not?

You just can't! This is the situation for the rest of your life. She eats her puke and she wants you to watch.

Now I have to watch?

So would you be with the hottest and most disgusting woman in the world?

I don't know.

C'mon.

Well, I guess you can get used to anything, right?

Can't you just give me a yes or no answer?

Aren't I more interesting this way?

Your turn.

Okay. Let me think.

And nothing to do with food.

Why not?

That's what I did.

So?

So do something different!

Alright!

Well.

I'm thinking!

Think faster.

You know what?

Elsie Grames?

Yes?

You can go back now. First room on the right. Dr. Burke will be in soon.

Okay. Thanks. C'mon Mr. Sensitive.

Why don't they ever send you into the room when the doctor's there?

I don't know Danny. Is it colder in here? It feels a lot colder in here.

Do you remember one time, one time when the doctor was there when you came in?

So what?

They make you start a conversation, I mean you can't just sit here and listen to the crinkly paper under your ass, but then they barge in and you have to stop because they're the doctor.

It is what it is.

Do you think this is how it is everywhere? Maybe in Bulgaria or some of those socialist countries you and the doctor go into the room at the same time. What if you're the president? You think the president has to sit in a room and wait for the doctor?

How would I know?

I'm just asking your opinion.

But how would I know! I don't have a clue and you know I don't have a clue.

So what? Nobody has a clue. You know how many people are genuinely informed about what they're discussing? If the only things we talked about were things we were experts on, nobody would talk at all.

Maybe that would be better. Here. Sit on the crinkly paper with me.

I don't like the crinkly paper.

Just sit!

Some carpet in here wouldn't kill them, would it?

And a minibar, because if I have to listen to you bitch for another minute. . . .

Okay. Okay...okay. What about no lips?

What?

If your dreamboat didn't have lips? That a deal breaker?

Oh right. Took you long enough. So what happened to them?

Fire.

Just his lips?

But he's really affectionate, likes to kiss all the time, imagine that. And he always wakes up first, likes to watch you sleep so when you wake up, when you open your eyes...

If you don't have lips, what do you have?

You know, the gums underneath, and teeth.

That's pretty nasty. No lips. Yeah, I don't know. I like your lips. If you didn't have lips...but the vomit girl.

Oh c'mon. The vomit thing is temporary. This is all the time.

Okay. Let me think.

Ready yet?

Shut up dickhead.

I really don't see how you could be attracted to someone like that. I really don't.

Yeah but mine seems more realistic.

How do you figure?

Ever hear of bulimia? Millions of people throw up after eating.

Yeah but they don't eat their puke.

Well I've never seen anyone without lips. I think this should be realistic.

Since when? You're always making up the rules as you go.

Well have you ever seen someone like that?

That's beside the point.

But have you?

Yeah.

Whatever.

Really.

Are you being serious now?

My uncle.

C'mon. You're saying your uncle didn't have lips?

Yeah.

How? I mean, you know.

A fire. When I was six. He was scarred all over the place. His lungs, his neck, his arms, and he never could grow hair again from the chest up. But his lips. . . .

Are you kidding me?

I didn't see him much afterward because we moved.

Were you in the fire?

Me and my brother.

You have a brother? Oh. Oh Jesus Danny.

But once a year I'd go with my mom to visit her sister, they lived on this farm in Michigan and my uncle, he practically lived in his room. But in the morning I'd be in the kitchen reading or something and hear him come down the back stairs, and I'd follow him outside and he knew I was following him but he didn't show it. And I'd watch him feed the chickens and feed the pigs and the stray cats. I saw him talking to the animals and wondered why he never talked to people. And then I'd hide behind the tree when he came back, and when he reached the front door he'd stop, and turn. He used to whittle these wooden flutes. Every year when we came there'd be a new one on my bed, more intricate than the last.

That's how you learned the flute?

When I stayed there I was in the room right next to him, and I saw him every morning, but whenever I thought of him, I couldn't see his face. He was this mythical,



faceless man who carved beautiful wooden instruments and walked through fire. When I pictured him that's what he did all day in that room. Carved flutes. And at night he walked through fire.

Jesus Danny. I hope you're not joking. If this is a joke...

Anyway, that went on for, I guess six years.

Six years. Then what happened?

He died.

Because of the burns.

No. My aunt caught him in bed with another woman. Left the room. Came back with a shotgun. She—

Miss Grames? I'm Doctor Burke. So it looks like...Miss Grames? Are you alright?

Photograph © Chris Fradkin

"Do you think there are bears in Indiana?"

"What? I mean, excuse me?"

"Do you think there are bears in Indiana?"

"No, there aren't any bears in Indiana."

"That's what most folks think."

"Wait. I mean, why did you ask me that?"

"I thought you were interested in bears. I saw that magazine you were looking at there. You look at it every day."

"I do?"

"You do. Every day for the past week. You come into my library. Sit in that chair that was covered with dust before you put your butt in it. Pull that magazine off the rack. Stare at it until the bell for fourth period rings. Past when the bell for fourth period rings, really. I thought you must be interested in bears."

"No. No, Mr. Goodin. I just—"

"Well, that's all right. No need to apologize. It's a free country and all. You don't need permission to come into my library and stare at a picture of a bear, do you?"

"No. I mean, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I've been in your library every day."

"Well. It's not technically my library, is it?"

"No."

"Though some days I wonder. Some days I wonder at the waste of a room full of books in a building full of young people and I'm the only one in here."

"Yeah. Yeah. So, do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you think there are bears in Indiana?"

"Who can say? Who can say? There's what you might call a difference of opinion about that."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. A great bear debate swirling all around us. Did you know that in Yosemite National Park bears attack mini-vans consistently more than any other kind of car?"

"Huh. Why?"

"Well, your black bear is a selective forager. They eat beetles. Ants. Even wasps. But not gypsy moths. Go figure. Bears pick and choose, kind of like my daughter at a Ryan's buffet."

"And mini-vans?"

"Yes, mini-vans. I guess if you were a bear in Yosemite looking for a good meal, your mini-van is the safest bet. Usually lots of french fries on the floor. Coolers full of food. A smart bear would go for the mini-van every time, don't you think? You know what that means. Don't take your mini-van to Yosemite! Ha, ha!"

"Yeah, that's funny."

"Well, I thought it was."

"What about here in Indiana?"

"That's the bell, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"For fourth period."

"Yeah."

"Okay. Okay. Well, some hunters claim to have seen black bears up in LaPorte County. Nothing confirmed, but they're in Ohio, and they're in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota. And of course, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia. Why not Indiana?"

"Huh."

"Yep. What are you hiding from?"

"What?"

"What are you hiding from, Riley Cooper? I know who you are. I know your dad and I knew your grandfather. What are you doing in here every day?"

"Nothing. I'm not hiding. I just—. Nothing, I swear."

"Nothing? You just decided one day you'd hang out in the library with a scary old man? That's it?"

"Yes. I mean, no. You're not scary. Tell me more about the bears."

"Hmm. Right. Officially, the last black bear was seen in Indiana in 1869. But when I was a boy, younger than you, my grandpa showed me birch trees that still had marks from bear teeth on their bark."

"Are they still there?"

"No, no. Those trees are all gone now. They cut them down while my dad was overseas. He said it was the worst thing that happened to him in the war, losing those trees."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, it is, Riley. Yes it is."

"My girlfriend dumped me."

"I see."

"Only she said she wasn't really my girlfriend in the first place. Or, I don't know. I don't know if that's what she said or not."

"Women are complicated creatures. Scariest than bears."

"What I know is that she said I was like a nine-year-old. Like I was stuck at nine. Isn't that a weird thing to say?"

"There is nothing strange in love, young man."

"But why would she say that? Why *nine*, you know?"

"I think you have a theory."

"I guess."

"What is it?"

"I'd like to see a bear."

"Me, too."

"Not in the zoo. Here. In my backyard. I'd like to walk into my backyard one night and a bear would just be there. Hanging out. Staring at me with dark, bear eyes. That would be cool."

"Indeed, it would. Riley, why nine?"

"My mom."

"Ah."

"It's when she left."

"I remember."

"It's kind of harsh, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Yeah."

"I remember your dad."

"You do?"

"Yes. I taught him algebra. And your mother."

"Were they, were they together?"

"Oh, that's hard to remember. You may not have noticed, but I'm old. Things fade away. You impose the present onto the past. You remember the kid who commits suicide as sad and the one who beats his wife as violent. I remember seeing them in the halls together, though."

"What was my mom like?"

"Well, I told you, it's hard, knowing what she did."

"But still. You must remember something."

"She was always looking out the window. She seemed happier in the spring when they were open and the breeze blew in. Who could blame her? It was algebra."

"Why'd my girlfriend dump me?"

"I don't know."

"Why'd my mother leave?"

"I don't know that either."

"Right. Yeah. I'm late again. I should probably go."

"I see. I'm sorry, Riley."

"Yeah."

"Wait just a minute."

"Why?"

"*Officially*, the last bear was seen in Indiana in 1869. But I saw one right here in town when I was a boy."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"Huh."

"Exactly. Pull up a chair."

"**R**ead this manual carefully. Warning. One. To reduce the risk of fire or electric shock, do not leave the vacuum cleaner when plugged in. Unplug it from the outlet when not in use and before servicing. Two. Do not use on wet surfaces or outdoors."

"You're nuts."

"Yes, I'm nuts. I warned you I was crazy. I'm crazy like Edison or the Wright brothers were crazy. Just sit there by the computer and I'll stay on the couch with Teddy."

"You are definitely NOT Edison or a Wright brother. Not even Orville."

"Not even Orville? What, was he the inferior one?"

"Maybe he was. One of them had to be."

"Does Wilbur know you're going around disrespecting his brother?"

"Seriously, Tom, you're nuts. This is never going to work."

"Three. Do not allow the vacuum cleaner to be used as a toy. Four. Use only the manufacturer's recommended attachments, only as described in this manual."

"It's going to work, Lynn. Look, all joking aside, this is not whacky sci-fi stuff anymore. We really can connect people's brains to computers now, or even other brains. You can go look it up. People have connected wires to their heads and operated computers with them. You can play computer games that way now."

"Oh, I can believe that people can connect their brains with machines. I'm saying YOU can't connect a brain with a machine."

"I warned you I was crazy. I warned you this family, or what's left of it, is crazy."

"You did. Maybe I'm crazy for dating you."

"No doubt about that."

"At least Teddy was born the way he is and can't do anything about it. Right, Teddy?"

"Actually, he wasn't born with it. I mean, maybe he was born with the cause of it, whatever the hell that is, but he was a perfectly normal kid until he was almost two. He was learning to talk and ride a tricycle and all that. Then all of a sudden he's spending hours like he's in a trance and banging his hands on his head. It was almost overnight."

"It's so weird."

"I know. It was like I had a son, and then lost him. Like someone kidnapped my kid and replaced him with another one who spent all day in his own little world. If the doctors could explain why, that might make it better. Even if they couldn't fix him, at least I'd know what happened. But they have no idea."

"Five. Do not use with a damaged cord or plug. If the vacuum cleaner is not working as it should, or if it has been dropped, damaged or left outdoors, return it to ExelVac Corporation, 2289 South Wayne Ave., Hollis, Mass."

"Teddy, are you alright? Do you want something to drink, honey?"

"He's fine, Lynn. He doesn't notice all this. I've hooked him up to the machine before to test it. Let him just tell us how to use a vacuum cleaner and he'll be happy."

"When did he start reciting all the manuals like that?"

"About a year later, after he finally stopped hitting himself and all that really crazy stuff. He actually could read really well. He pretty much learned to read by himself. But he read manuals for our appliances. No 'Hop on Pop' or 'Winnie the Pooh,' just stupid manuals. And he memorized them all and recites them from memory, over and over. He's got dozens of manuals like that in his head. And parts of cookbooks. He likes manuals and cookbooks and things like that the most—anything that gives instructions. If they have numbered steps, even better."

"So will all that stuff be in your head when you connect it to him through that machine?"

"I don't know what it will do. I don't know what will be in my head. That's what I want to find out."

"You really believe this is going to work, don't you?"

"I have to try. This is how I've kept up hope for nine years with Teddy. This is how I coped, instead of just giving up and leaving like his mother did."

"Six. Do not pull or carry by the cord, close a door on the cord, or pull the cord around sharp edges or corners. Do not run the vacuum cleaner over the cord. Keep the cord away from hot surfaces or appliances."

"Just listen to him for a minute, Lynn. Listen for a minute. He talks all the time, but the problem is what he doesn't say. He's always talking, and saying nothing! He recites the stupid manuals all day but he never even looks me in the eye or says, 'Hi, Daddy,' when I come home or anything."

"Didn't you tell me he says 'hello' to you sometimes?"

"Three times. I've counted, at least I've counted since he stopped talking and started whacking his head and then reading the stupid manuals. Three times in nine years he's said 'hi' or 'hello,' to me, and only when he repeated it after I said it to him over and over. He just spits it back out at me, like when he spits out the manuals. He just repeats it. He didn't seem to know or care what it means. I don't see any emotion in his face, if he even looks me in the eye, which is almost never. He can memorize every stupid manual for every stupid machine in this house, but he can barely say hello to his own father."

"Yeah, I can see how that would bother you."

"It doesn't just bother me, it made me crazy. Like I warned you. Almost as crazy as Teddy."

"Still, I'm not sure this machine thingy is going to help you, Tom. It might just disappoint you even more if it doesn't work. Besides, it looks really dangerous, and kooky. Really, wires connected to your head?"

"It's perfectly safe. It's like an EEG. It picks up my brain waves, that's all. No electricity going in my head. Then this part transmits signals from the other brain through the computer."

"Isn't that electricity going in your head?"

"Sort of. It's a very very small current. It can't hurt me. Brain waves are electricity after all. Don't worry, I worked on stuff like this when I was an engineer."

"Okay, but I've got my phone right here in case I need to call 911."

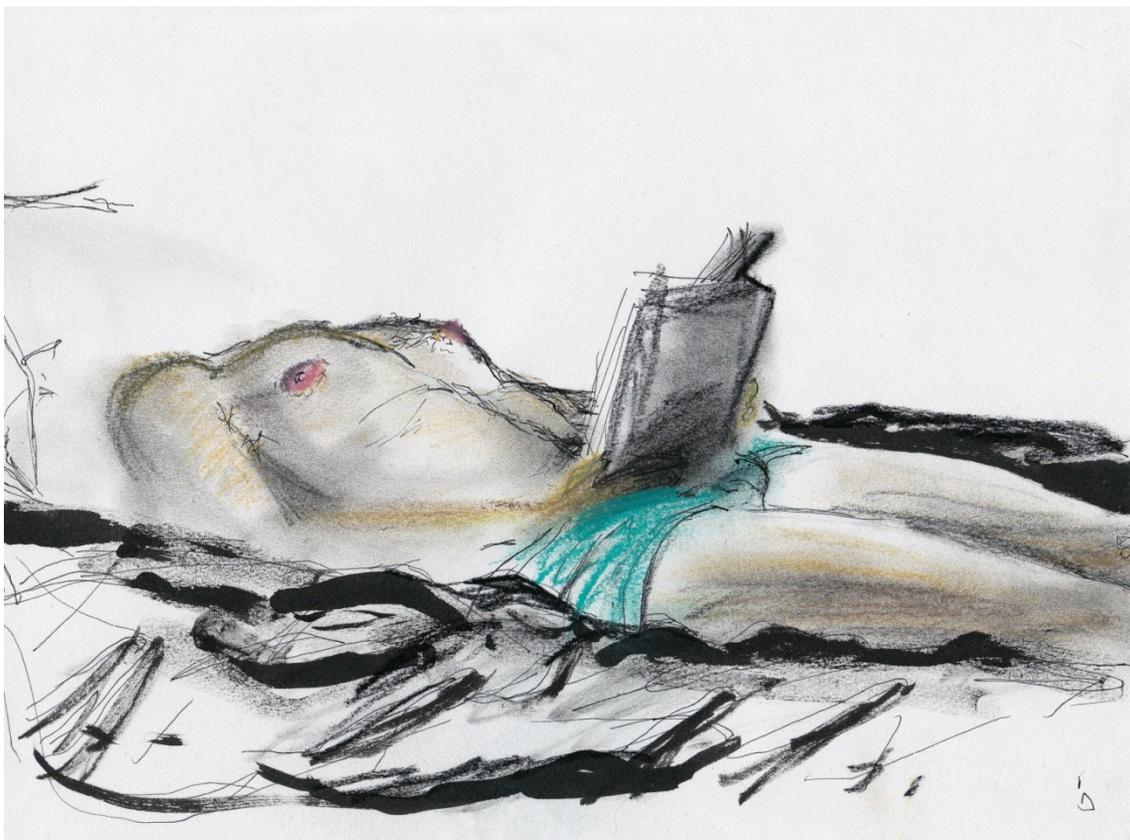
"Seven. Do not unplug by pulling on the cord. To unplug, grasp the plug, not the cord. Eight. Do not handle the plug or the vacuum cleaner with wet hands."

"You're about as obsessed with machines as Teddy is."

"Hmm. Never thought about that. Except he doesn't care about the machines, just the manuals."

"Hey, Tom, is there a manual for your machine? We should ask Teddy to make sure you're doing it right."

"Nope, no manual for this, since I basically built it myself."



"That doesn't inspire confidence either."

"Are you ready to help me? If you don't want to see this, I can do it without you."

"Okay, okay. I'll help you if you're sure, but I wish I could talk you out of it."

"You wouldn't want to if you knew what it was like. I had this perfect little baby and then he turned into someone completely different."

"I think that's pretty much how every parent of a teenager feels like."

"Yeah, but it was more than that. You have to understand. When Teddy was really little, just a toddler, he was a regular kid. He was my kid. I was starting to talk to him. It was amazing. I was just starting to talk to this little creature that I had made. I was

communicating with him. I was going to tell him about all the wonderful things in the world, and teach him about everything I liked and knew. I was going to teach him all the good things in life, the things I like—barbecue, and Miles Davis, and the X-Files, and basketball. He was going to be this perfect kid. He was going to be like a new-and-improved version of me. He'd be all the good things I knew and none of the bad. And then, after I taught him as best I could, he was still going to be himself. He was going to have his own ideas and like things I never did. Isn't it amazing how that happens? You teach a kid whatever you want, and they still become something new. I was going to have this son like no other person had been on Earth before, and he'd be mine. He was going to be a best friend who I'd known since the day he was born."

"Oh, Tom..."

"I just want to try to talk to that other kid one more time. I miss him. Just one more time."

"Okay, Tom. Let's do it then. Lie down and I'll keep an eye on you."

"Alright. I'm ready. Just push that key and wait. If I fall asleep and don't wake up within an hour, wake me up. If you can't wake me up, that's when you call 911."

"What about Teddy?"

"He won't sleep. He probably won't even notice what's happening. Like always."

"Alright. So I push this key and that's it? Hey, are you asleep already? Tom? Oh, this is just crazy. Teddy, are you okay? I think it's just you and me, now, Teddy. You know, I think you're still a kid like no other kid on Earth. Hey, can you say hello to your dad now, Teddy? Say hello. Hello. Hello. Hello."

"Nine. Do not put any objects into the openings. Keep free of dust, lint, hair or anything that may reduce airflow. Hello. Ten. Keep hair, loose clothing, fingers and all the parts of your body away from openings and moving parts. Hello. Save these instructions."

Artwork: Reading Man © Jhaki Schneller

Oblique by Tom Howard (5th Place)

"I think we should talk about it."

"Do you?"

"Ah. And what does that mean *exactly*?"

"Forget it. More coffee, please?"

"So I'm not much of a talker, is what you're saying. I don't like to *communicate*. Is that it?"

"Thanks. Jesus, Nate. It's just, it's been a long night. Forget I said anything."

"You haven't said anything. That's the whole goddamn—"

"Can you use your less psychotic voice in here?"

"Fine. Sorry if I'm *embarrassing* you."

"It's just that people are looking? Is I guess what I'm saying."

"Oh. Wow. I'm sorry, I didn't realize people were *looking* at us. Oh my god. Oh my fucking god. *People are looking*. We're having *breakfast*, Marie."

"I'm having breakfast. You're sitting there glowering and your eye is twitching."

"I'm not *glowering*, Jesus, you've got such a way of—"

"Now the other eye is twitching."

"Okay. Okay, *whatever*. Sorry if I can't just sit here and eat *breakfast* as if nothing happened."

"I'll tell you what I think. Do you want me to tell you what I think?"

"That would be rich. That would be a first today."

"I think we should take our time and finish breakfast, you and me. And not talk about what happened. And then, later?"

"Yes?"

"Later, we *continue not talking about what happened*. Forever."

"And that, that sounds, what, *healthy* to you? Is that it?"

"So now you're Mr. Communication. After how many years of your eyes glazing over whenever I wanted to talk."

"Is that what this is about? You're paying me back for not being *chatty* enough? Oh, that's adult. That's rich. Well played, Marie."

"Sometimes I really hate the way you say my name."

"Marie Marie Marie. Yeah, sometimes I hate it too."

"You've got, uh..."

"Ah. Perfect. Now why would that be, *Marie*? Why on earth would I have *blood* on my collar? What could the fucking reason be for that, do you think?"

"Less psychotic voice. Just down a notch or two. Seriously."

"I *am* serious. I've got, like, post-traumatic *stress* or something, for all I know. I'm *shaking*. And I'm sorry if I feel this insane *need* to discuss it."

"Can't you just, I don't know, keep a diary?"

"You're okay with me keeping a *diary* about this stuff? You can't be serious."

"No. No, I'm not. I just like picturing you with your little diary, hunched over, squinting and everything, a real cute diary with maybe a unicorn on the cover, and oh, so many sparkles—"

"All fun and games for you, Marie."

"Well, not all of it. Check, please?"

"My point is— Thanks. No change... My point, Marie, is that... I think I'm done."

"Right. Usually happens that way, at the end of the meal..."

"I'm done with us."

"Ah."

"Fine, you don't want to talk about it. I get that. But isn't it just getting *exhausting*, Marie? My conscience. My conscience is *frayed*."

"You're saying it wasn't justified, then?"

"Fuck justified, the guy's goddamn *head*—"

"Voice, Nate."

"Right. Can't offend Miss Manners."

"That's sarcasm."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed, Marie."

"Of course you hadn't, Nate."

"Can we just, let's slow down. We're both tired. I assume you're tired."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Nothing, Christ, just relax—"

"Just because I didn't dig the fucking *hole* doesn't mean I'm not tired, Nate. Is that what you're all up in arms about, the goddamn *division* of fucking *labor*?"

"Or the axe. You weren't the one who. Well. No, look, of course it's hard work that you do, nobody's saying otherwise."

"Nate, so help me..."

"Of course there might be a reason why only *one* of us has an appetite this morning, is all *I'm* saying, I guess."

"You think that was a *joy ride* for me? Is that what you think? Did you even *see* the condition of that—"

"Voice, Marie."

"Right. Right. Nate..."

"What? Just say it, for Christ's sake."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe, I don't know. Maybe we're just done."

"Look, I just meant that I think—"

"No. Maybe we *are* done. There was this moment back there, Nate. I was standing in the moonlight beside the highway, and the wind was blowing in off the orchard. And I could smell the orchard, but I swear there was that other smell, too, like we used to talk about. Not just a smell, but the *feel* of it all, the wind on my skin, gave me shivers."

"Marie..."

"You remember that? You said it was a wind from back home, only back home meant something else, not a real home but something more than that. Like the *feeling* of home. Nothing specific, you said—it had to be oblique, that was the word. Being oblique, you said—that's what makes it special. Because you know it means something but you don't *quite* know exactly what it is. You remember that, Nate."

"I do. Long time ago, Marie."

"Well. I was just standing there in that wind. Thinking about things. And you were busy with the axe. And Teddy was howling in the back seat, the way he does, when he's thirsty I mean. And I thought about how you used to look at me, when we'd stand there in that oblique wind, Nate. And I wondered if maybe I was wrong. All this time."

"Marie."



"Let's just go, Nate. I'm tired. Kind of done with the fighting, to be honest."

"Marie?"

"Yes, Nate."

"I'm sorry."

"About?"

"About, you know. About my eyes glazing over. Whenever you wanted to talk."

"That was, just forget about that, Nate."

"And you did look beautiful last night. I should've told you that. One time, I had to set the shovel down so I could snap the—"

"I remember. I looked away."

"Yeah. Took me a few seconds to, you know. And I looked up and saw you. Looking away, into the wind. So beautiful."

"Oh, Nate."

"Despite everything, I mean."

"Understood."

"Home, then?"

"Home."

Story of the Month Winners

Each month we publish 8 stories and host a Story of the Month contest. The Story of the Month winners are chosen by the readers of Bartleby Snopes.

Claire was my weekend lover but I figured she wouldn't mind me turning up on a Thursday. I was pretty sure she would mind about the girl but that was a bridge I planned to cross later.

I could see her sitting in her rocking chair as I approached her building. Cast in the light of her reading lamp, bathrobe draped around her, she smiled out into the darkness at the sound of my footsteps. As if she knew it was me. By the time I got to her bedroom door, she had already crossed the room. She didn't say anything, just sidled in close.

Claire's short. You wouldn't realize it if you looked at her from a distance. She has an athletic physique that makes you think of sharp, sudden action. You'd think she was a big, muscular girl. She's not. I wondered if it affected her tennis game, being little. Maybe that's why she never went pro. I could've asked her, I suppose, but I never did.

Anyway, Claire is short enough that when she slides up next to me, she tilts her head to look in my eyes. Some short people, they look like children when they do that. Not Claire. When she lifts her chin, she looks defiant, not beseeching.

She flicked off her bathrobe, a minor annoyance. She was naked underneath.

We made love, swiftly, fluidly but with no sense of urgency. There was never a sense of urgency anymore. That didn't bother me; I liked the ease I felt around her, even in bed. Especially in bed.

Her head rested on my shoulder, blond hair fanned across my chest. When I told her about the girl, a blank, tight expression pushed away her smile.

"Oh for fuck's sake." She sat up, drawing the sheet around her. Claire had an English boyfriend once and she still used some foreign expressions. It pained me to hear them; it reminded me there was a whole world to Claire I would never know.

"She followed me home," I said.

"She followed you here."

"Yes."

"She's not a cat."

"I know," I said.

Claire waited as I explained.

The girl stood on the corner, under the streetlight. My first thought when I saw her was, that's brazen, a hooker right in front of the station. Not my problem, though; I was off duty. I took in the dirty clothes, the tangled hair, the way she looked everywhere but at me. If she was a whore, she wasn't a successful one.

I don't know when I decided to go to Claire's instead of going home. The idea planted itself in my head before I knew it was there. I drove the few, short blocks to Claire's, floating down city streets the way you do when you're used to operating those boatlike squad cars. The girl trailed behind in the weeknight quiet of Claire's neighborhood. West Philly but they're calling it University City now.

I glanced in the rearview mirror, checked my holster and felt the bulk of metal. It was just habit. The girl was no perp. I could see that. She didn't twitch and scratch like a junkie. She wasn't scrapping for a fight like a cholita. Not that cholitas follow middle aged white men down side streets anyway.

She was just a scared, lost girl.

When I got out of the car, the street was empty. I heard footfall. The girl stepped into the glow of the streetlight. Slumped, clay-colored hair covering her eyes, she still managed to stare right at me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She shook her head. Maybe she was a junkie after all. I couldn't see her eyes to check.

"Don't be afraid." I spoke louder this time. "I'm a cop. I can help you. What do you need?"

She shook her head again, harder. A schizophrenic without her meds maybe?

I turned away. She grabbed my wrist. Up close, her eyes were wild but clear, not junkie pinholes. She didn't smell like the street. Didn't smell like liquor. Behind the forest of hair, she grinned. Something told me she was alright, not crazy, not strung out, just alone, lost, and determined.

* * *

Claire stared at me as I finished.

"This is crazy," she said. "It's straight out of a Victorian novel. Some waif on a corner, under the street lamp..."

What did Claire know about Victorian novels? All I ever saw on her shelves were self-help and sports books: fitness, finance, emotional health, one or two on some spiritual fad, a few copies of *Sports Illustrated*, and a handful of magazines on interests that passed quickly: cooking, interior design, photography.

"It's strange," I said. "I'll grant you that."

"You're a cop," she said. "You're supposed to know what to do."

"Of course, it's a routine part of the job, weird girls following you home." I didn't have a right to be sarcastic but the words slipped out.

"Missing persons? Child protection services? Any of them ring a bell?" Claire scowled.

"I don't want to send her back to where she came from. Whatever it is, it's not good. I mean, why doesn't she have a place to live? What's she running from? Her pimp? Some asshole boyfriend? A creep of a stepfather?"

"What about a homeless shelter?"

"You can't send a girl to a place like that. It's filled with men, perverts, winos, and plain old disgusting men. Not that they ever have a space anyway. Guys line up all day just to get a place to sleep."

I tried to explain what I knew – or thought I knew – about the girl. That her appearance wasn't an accident. She approached me for a reason. Why me among all the cops that came and went from the station?

Claire sat up on her knees and turned to face me.

"Fine, there's nothing wrong with her, aside from being dirty and homeless. Oh, and we don't know where she belongs. Why don't you bring her home, then?"

"You can't just take in some street kid. Not without going through the proper channels."

"Like the ones I suggested?"

"OK," I said. "I'll think of something to do with her."

"And in the meantime?"

"Let me think," I said.

"You can't leave her on the street. You want to be the virtuous cop? Take her home with you."

"Claire, my wife ..."

"Of course." Her sigh was tight and heavy. "It's always your wife. You know, there was a time when I wanted you to divorce her for my sake. Now, I want you to do it for your sake."

"It's not that simple."

"As simple as what?"

"As when you're not married," I said.

"Marriage is being beholden to someone you don't even love?"

"That's not what I mean," I said.

"Are you lying to me?" she asked.

"No," I said. I wasn't.

"It's not like you're staying together for the kids."

"Obviously," I snapped.

"Didn't realize it was a sore point," she said.

Claire got out of bed. She put on her little white socks, then her robe.

"Where is she now?" She asked.

"Outside," I said.

Claire's face hardened, a shutter lowering over a window.

"It's freezing out."

"She's been out all night looks like."

"You care enough to let her follow you but not enough to make sure she's warm? What the hell is wrong with you?"

I lifted myself off the pillow. A foolish thought ran through my head: if I moved quietly and smoothly, I could get out of Claire's apartment and avoid her rage.

Claire opened the door and gestured the girl inside. She stood in the foyer, wrapping her windbreaker around her and shivering, the filth on her skin and clothes all the more obvious in Claire's neat apartment. Claire saw it too; she asked the girl if she wanted a shower.

No reply.

"She doesn't seem to speak," I said.

Claire sighed. She pointed to the bathroom. The girl shook her head. Claire tried to rephrase, or restate, it as a command, stabbing her finger toward the showerhead.

The girl pointed to Claire's bathrobe. It took us a moment to understand: she didn't want to get back into her dirty clothes. Claire pulled an old flannel robe out of the closet and handed it to the girl. While she showered, Claire laid out sheets and blankets on the couch that took up most of the living room.

"You can't let her stay," I said.

"You're the one who brought her here," Claire said.

"She could rob you blind," I said.

"You're going to kick her out?" She asked.

Once the girl was settled, Claire and I went back to bed. Seeing her yawn and stretch out beside me, I could almost forget the girl in the other room.

"I'm thinking about moving to New York," she said.

"You say that every few months." I kissed her forehead. People need to say these things sometimes; it keeps them content.

"I'm serious."

"They need tennis instructors in New York?"

"They need everything in New York." She paused. "Want to come?" She spoke so quietly it could slip by unheard.

"I'm a second rate cop in a second rate town." I laughed but it came out hard and brittle. "I've found my niche."

She turned away.

I woke at five, my arm wedged under Claire's head. Numb.

"Shit," I jumped up.

Claire blinked in the sudden, incongruous beam of light. Its yellow was angry, admonishing me.

"What?" Claire said.

"Early shift," I said. My stomach growled, already feeling weak coffee and Krispy Kreme donuts gnawing at its lining.

"What do you tell your wife?" Claire muttered, as if she were a normal mistress and mine a normal marriage.

* * *

Claire met me at the door the next time I came over.

"The girl moves things," she said.

"What kind of things?"

Claire led me to her bedroom. The dresser jutted out into the room. Underneath, the wood floor was smooth, no skid marks tracking its surface.

My back seized up when I lifted its end. I was relieved to see Claire grimace, too. We lugged the dresser back into place. By the time we finished in the bedroom, the bookshelf was out of place in the foyer and the end table shifted in the living room. Moving them was too much effort. We went back to the kitchen.

The girl sat at the table in a pair of clean, faded Wranglers, a U Penn sweatshirt, and Converse high tops; I guess Claire took her to a thrift store. Her hair hung over her face as she bit into a pop tart. Her mouth was covered with crumbs. She was small and slight.

Not small in a Claire kind of way, packed with tight, explosive muscles. Small as in scrawny.

Tomato sauce simmered on the stove. I opened a bottle of wine. Claire mentioned New York again as she drained the pasta.

"I'm ready for a change," she said.

"Change is one thing," I said. "Moving to New York is another. It's a bit drastic, don't you think?"

"It's two hours away," she said. "It's hardly drastic."

"Do you even know anyone in New York?"

She didn't answer.

"I thought you might come with me," she said.

The girl ate Hershey's kisses from a bag. She pulled them out one at a time, unwrapping them and crumpling up the foil, then snapping the chocolate in half with her front teeth. I glanced at her, then back at Claire.

Claire shrugged.

"Not my kid," she said. "She can ruin her appetite all she wants." She smiled at the girl and the girl, through her curtain of hair, smiled back. At least I assumed it was a smile. With her mouthful of chocolate, it looked like a grimace.

"I've got my wife to think about," I said.

The girl jerked her head up. She turned to look at Claire, then back at me. Wiping the chocolate from her mouth, she pointed at Claire.

I shook my head.

The girl dropped her eyes to the bag of chocolates. She unwrapped a Hershey's kiss, fumbling as she tore at the foil. She bit down hard, cracking the chocolate against her teeth and smacking her lips.

* * *

Often a week went by when I didn't call Claire. Things got busy at the station and I didn't want to call from home. My wife wouldn't have noticed but, with some things, you still stand on ceremony. I guess I could have called from some street corner or while grocery shopping, but it wasn't like that with us. We didn't worry about phone calls. I just showed up and there she was.

On Friday, I stood on her doorstep, a bottle of wine in my hand, ringing the buzzer. Her apartment was dark. I checked the row of nameplates, as if that might tell me something, and listened to the bell echo in the empty house. I let myself in. The space was littered with the debris people leave behind: dust bunnies, receipts, and balled-up wads of notepaper. The girl's red windbreaker lay crumpled on the living room floor. Otherwise, the room was empty. The CDs were gone, so were the end table and the lamp. The phone left a vacant square where the dust built up around it. Reminding me I didn't call Claire; why, just this once, didn't I?

The bookshelf was still there but empty. Almost. There were one or two books left, little beige hardcovers, like they sell at street markets. They rested lopsided and off kilter with nothing to support them.

Questions ran through my head and nightmares came as the answers. What did the girl do to Claire? Who did she know who hurt Claire? Was Claire dead? Kidnapped? Why did they clear out her apartment?

Why did I bring this girl to Claire's home?

Claire's bed was still in her room, naked without its covers. The dresser, too. The rocking chair and the reading lamp were gone.

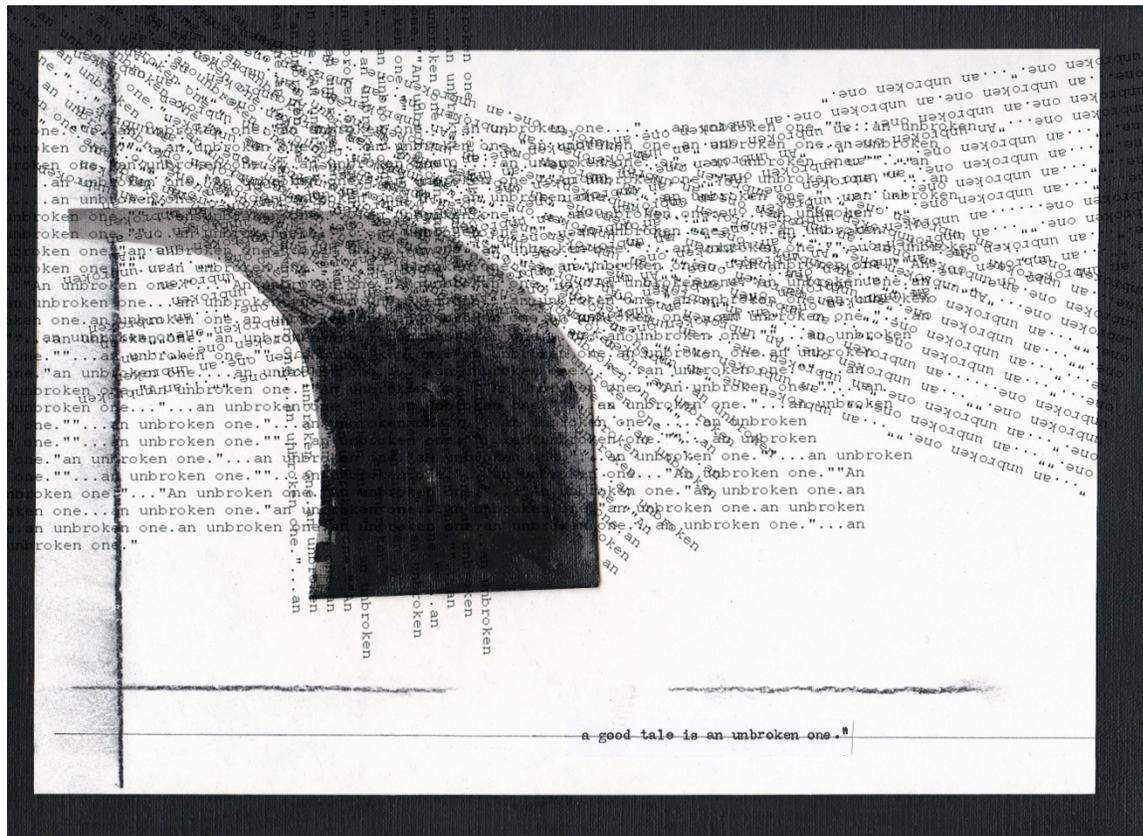
On top of the dresser was a note. Addressed to me.

Gone to New York. Needed a change. It had to happen now. I'm sorry.

That was it. No forwarding address. No let's meet when I'm next in town.

I knew how it would go. I would call Claire's cell but she wouldn't pick up. She would recognize my number – she wouldn't add me to her contacts – and ignore the call. I would spend my days off back in Torresdale, my house with its white siding and tiled roof, sedan parked in the driveway. My wife, her hair limp gray, face pinched, barely noticing I was back. My neighbors drinking beer and barbecuing in cramped backyards.

Second rate cop, second rate town.



Artwork: A Good Tale © Jhaki Schneller

The Bespectacled Man situated the new Decorative Mummy in her own display case, just a few feet from my own. Her skin was still a light pink, unlike mine, which had turned beige several years ago. I felt nervous around her, especially after The Bespectacled Man dressed us both in Adam & Eve costumes. It wasn't as if I minded modeling. After all, that sort of thing was par for the course. I just wish he would've added leaves to the costume, so I wasn't fully nude. That was even more embarrassing than the time he painted me in blackface for M.L.K.'s birthday.

The whole situation just got worse around Christmastime. The Little Brat, who only visited during the holidays, wasn't impressed with my Santa costume, or the tiny elf Mummies scattered around the Christmas tree. Instead of reading her wish-list to me, she stabbed my fake gut with some scissors. She even wrote on my butt cheeks, scribbling all sorts of bad things about her father. Things weren't all roses for the other Decorative Mummy, either. The Little Brat carved a swastika onto her midsection, then blamed it on The Bespectacled Man's new girlfriend, The Trashy Homewrecker. I wasn't upset because that sort of thing hurt us. This was more of a respect thing. We were one-hundred-percent genuine Mummies, made from real human beings, not some throwaway stuffed animal you won at the carnival.

I began working out shortly thereafter, hopeful I could build up strength to make an escape. Each day, when the Bespectacled Man took The Little Brat down to the skate rink at Chelsea Piers, I practiced my calisthenics, upping the intensity each day. Nothing seemed to work, though. I still had that Mummy gait, with brittle bones to boot. It wasn't until I found a collection of 80s workout tapes that things began improving. Sure, I must've looked like a zombie lumbering around the apartment in hot pants, but at least I was now progressing. I could touch my toes after the first week. These new moves brought unexpected results, too. The other Decorative Mummy couldn't take her eyes off me. She always watched from afar, lusting after my new body, especially when I used the Thighmaster.

This feeling, unfortunately, didn't last until bedtime. My Other Half shriveled up in my lap, fearful The Little Brat might barge out of her room, then burn the rest of her pubic hairs right off. Despite the threat, I continued with our nightly ritual, unwilling to admit defeat, especially against a twelve-year-old.

"What do you want to read tonight, My Other Half?" I asked. "How about the instruction manual you came with? I know that's a favorite."

She didn't respond, only gazed into the middle distance, eyes wide with wonder.

"Then the manual it is," I replied, now cradling her head on my lap. "Congratulations on the purchase of your new Decorative Mummy! History will come to life as your children play dress up with some of the world's greatest minds, such as Heisenberg and

Lady Gaga. Each month you'll receive a brand new outfit, along with a history lesson. So remember: *learning is only cool when it's Mummified!*TM"

When I finished reading the manual, I began wondering if she could even comprehend any of this information. More than likely, My Other Half had her brain removed, as per the standard Mummification process. But, for whatever reason, I had a smidge of hope. There was a dormant wildfire within her, waiting for a spark to ignite her flame again, to remove the fog that clouded her consciousness.

Inside that moment, I knew there wasn't ever going to be a right time for our escape. My legs would always be weak, like a young doe walking across ice. But that was okay. She was next to me, with those big, unblinking eyes, supporting my every move, even if I was unsure of my footing. I threw our costumes into an old duffle bag, sure to pack the favorites, along with the new arrivals.

Since My Other Half couldn't move, I carried her around, even dressed her for our first performance outside the apartment. She watched me, with that lovingly blank stare, guiding me through the grooming process. Once she looked gorgeous, I set us up on the High Line, near the entrance to the park, dressed us as a young Justin Timberlake & Britney Spears, with matching jean-jackets and rhinestone cowboy hats. Everyone in the park stopped to view our performance, snapping pictures, hugging the both of us, posing with their friends. They were amazed we never moved, just like those wax figurines you see at the museum, only better.

One of them began stuffing bills into my cowboy hat, which prompted others to do the same. Pretty soon, it was filled with a wad of cash. My Other Part began smiling, her face filled with purpose. Unbeknownst to the crowd around us, I took her hand in my own, then gave it a slight squeeze, as if to say, You look just like Miss. Spears, down to the cold sore on your beautiful lips.

After our performance, two teenagers began following our trail, fixated on My Other Half. I didn't pay attention to them at first, even though they both sported leather jackets with those metal spikes. It wasn't until they began yelling jeers at My Other Half that I grew concerned for our safety. One of them even said he could see her vagina, just like the real Britney Spears.

I tossed rotten lettuce at them, hopeful they'd leave us alone. I was wrong. My insolence only fueled their youthful angst. They ran their hands over her body, pawing each curve, no matter how private.

"Hey, baby," the First Hooligan said. "Wanna hit me one more time?"

He then began dry humping My Other Half, slapping her tush while thrusting. I grunted at him, which, unfortunately, couldn't express the rage developing inside of me. My chest throbbed like a faulty organ, creaking with each breath. The Second Hooligan began mimicking my gravelly voice, twitching as he spoke.

"Stop fucking my girlfriend," The Second Hooligan said, as me. "She's my everything."

I smacked him across the face, but that hardly made a difference. He shrugged off my attack, then pinned me against a nearby trashcan. No matter how much I struggled, I couldn't break free from his grip, not even when I pinched both his nipples.

"Here," I replied, handing over a fistful of cash, "take this and be gone."

That's when they both began kicking me in the head, sort of like a piñata, hoping more cash might come out of my cowboy hat. I could feel the skin tearing off my face, until the skull hidden underneath my wig became exposed. The last thing I remember was her smile, which was still perfect, fading away into the night. Then she was gone, kidnapped by those ungodly hooligans.

I was rudderless after that. There weren't any more outfits that made sense. Why, for instance, would I dress up as young Johnny Cash, if there were no June Carter by my side? Even the Johnny Carson costume was useless. I had intended for My Other Half to don a gray wig and belly insert, so that she could resemble a wrinkly Ed McMahon, but that idea seemed grotesque now, almost perverse.

Instead of maintaining a presence at the park, I lounged in the alley with the homeless men. Some of them cuddled with me, noticing the look of pain etched into my face. They brushed my hair, even kissed along my collarbone, convinced I just needed some confidence, then I'd be back on my feet, performing for the crowds.

Surprisingly enough, I found strength in their encouragement; it gave me the chutzpah to start anew. I began dressing up near my old apartment, with part of my vision trained on the front door.

Not long after I arrived, The Little Brat snuck up on me, now dressed in goth clothes, like the kids in a Hot Topic catalogue. I could feel her mocking me, since I was dressed as Justin Bieber, with swooping bangs that covered the bone protruding from my forehead. My legs collapsed from her presence, causing me to tumble into the street. The crowd quickly disappeared, scattering into the foot traffic, but The Little Brat remained behind.

"I always knew you were alive," the Little Brat said. "I could see it in your eyes."

"I don't remember trying to hide that fact from you," I said.

"Well, anyway, are you coming home or what?" she asked, arms still folded together.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "Has The Bespectacled Man asked for me?"

"Dad? Phfft. He only thinks about his new girlfriend nowadays."

The Little Brat sunk both hands into her pockets, head almost bowed, then inched closer to me.

"So, where's your girlfriend?" she asked. "Is she at your new apartment?"

"I lost her." I said. "Some hooligans took her."

"Oh."

"I'm still formulating a plan to get her back."

"Look," she said, "I know we've had our problems, but I'll let you come back."

"Oh?"

"You just gotta do what I say, though," she replied. "You'll be mine now, not dad's."

I turned away, surveying the crowd, searching for My Other Half. There were only faceless people, zigzagging in-and-out of traffic, oblivious to me. I reached out my hand, but did not shake yet.

"Promise me you'll help me find her," I said, "then I'll be yours."

"Pinky swear."

The Little Brat dressed me in an Edward Scissorhands costume, with real blades attached to both hands. It must've cost her a pretty penny to rent. Luckily, she didn't have to pitch in for makeup, too. Between the beating and New York winter, I'd developed this pale complexion, sort of like my character. These little details, however, weren't appreciated back home, especially after The Bespectacled Man saw me back in the display case.

When he came home, his face became red as a teakettle, frightened by my sudden appearance, which must've seemed like a nightmare. He beat me down with a golf club, not stopping until I was broken.

He didn't even have the decency to clean my body off the floor. The Trashy Homewrecker, in her infinite wisdom, shoved me into the closet, under layers of junk. Parts of my body were strewn about the closet, haphazardly wedged between cleaning supplies and old pictures. I was no longer a replica of a man, but rather a broken toy, stuffed away for the next charity drive.

I pawed at the door with the only hand still attached to my body, each time narrowly missing the handle. When that didn't work, I turned the vacuum on, hoping the air might suck the door open. The Little Brat appeared once the vacuum began coughing up smoke.

"Are you crazy or something?" she asked. "You'll wake them up."

"That's the least of my worries, if you can't tell."

"If it's not one thing with you," she replied, "it's another."

"Well then, just toss me outside with the trash. I can search from there."

"My God," she said, "if it's such a big deal, I'll let you search from my window tonight."

"Really?"

Harper, previously known as the Little Brat, rolled her eyes, then began collecting pieces of me from around the closet, stuffing them into an old grocery bag. It felt strange to feel each sensation, yet know the limbs were disconnected. They never felt connected together, not even when she situated me on her bed.

It was just as well. At least I could search for my lost love. The New York skyline was perfect, not a cloud in the sky. I could even see the Cheshire moon that hung between the skyscrapers and apartment buildings. It reminded me of her smile.

The search began the next day. Before we could leave on our expedition, we needed a way for me to get around Manhattan, since I was nothing more than a torso at that point. Harper came up with a brilliant idea, which not only remedied our predicament,

but also allowed me to continue working as a performer. She dressed as a miniature Chewbacca, then strapped me to her back, so I'd resemble a broken down C-3PO, a la *Empire Strikes Back*. People stopped us in the street, asking to take our picture. We made over thirty dollars by posing for snapshots.

Still, I kept dreaming of her, worried she was in New Jersey, rotting in some landfill, or being used as a Sex-Doll by those ungodly hooligans. Harper kept reminding me to look out at the horizon. It was important, she said, to always find that light flickering off in the distance, especially when life seemed cloudy. I tried imagining that light as we walked the streets, but New York always seemed pitch black, even when it was light out.

Harper didn't let me sulk, though. She practiced putting dark makeup on me each morning, with the kit she received for Christmas. I sat for anything, even if it made me look a goth kid who just bought his first Cure album. It was actually kind of nice having those scars hidden underneath layers of heavy makeup.

"Did you check Craigslist today?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"You think those hooligans would've sold her by now, or at least answered one of our posts."

"Well you've always got me," she replied. "Now hold still why I try this eyeliner."

I closed my eyes, attempting to keep them shut. Her hands were clumsy, poking my retina, rather than applying the makeup. When she was done, it looked as if a pen had exploded on my face.

"You're all set," she said. "You want to go out now?"

"I'll do my search from the window."

"Do you want some sort of wig, maybe even one of your old costumes?"

"Nah, that's okay," I replied. "I'll try plain-old-me for awhile."

After she left the room, I saw a young woman emerge from the crowd, who had a pretty bad limp, much like my own. She didn't wear a sexy outfit like My Other Half, but rather had on a down jacket, with the hood cloaked over her face. I scooted closer, resting my head on the glass, hoping I could distinguish her from the crowd. She remained hazy, though, no matter how much I pressed up against the window. Unfortunately, she kept moving away from our apartment, nearing the subway entrance by Peter McManus.

With the thought of her leaving me again now a reality, my breathing became shallow, almost spastic. I fought against the pressure by holding my breath, but no amount of resolve could stop these palpitations. It made me feel hollow once again, like a Russian nesting doll that had lost the people trapped inside its belly, and I couldn't imagine slipping back into that darkness.

A shadow filled the doorway, which tugged my vision away from the window. The hooded woman leaned against the entryway, still cloaked, snow sprinkled across her shoulders. My Other Half had returned. There was a fire now in her eyes, one born from that tiny spark I saw weeks ago. Without hesitation, she undressed before me, shedding

her clothes onto the floor. I could now see that she was damaged, too, missing parts of her torso.

My Other Half then began tearing me apart, filling the empty areas of her chest with my stuffing. The more she took from me, the greater our connection became. I felt each thought, even her memories, going back to when we stood naked in the display case. Since I no longer had arms, I took little nibbles of her flesh, just so she could experience my thoughts as well. This process hurt at first, but any discomfort was pushed aside once we focused on the pleasure within this act. Pretty soon it became hard to discern the division between us. We were a patchwork of skin and memory, both halves separate, yet joined together.



Photograph © Chris Fradkin

Heavy Shoes by Christopher DiCicco

My girlfriend imagines butterflies. She pictures little painted wings falling to the ground, beating against the cement, unable to fly. They're failed attempts, she says, weak tries at propelling their bodies up after their disappearing souls.

Their tiny, winged spirits float away, Sara says—And they never come back.

What? That's terrible, I say trying to imagine what it'd be like to watch my own soul float away from my body.

Sara tells me it's like sprinkling rose petals across a wet bathroom floor on Valentine's Day—the rose is now ruined. Pieces of a whole. Torn. And she explains that, like the rose, this is sad because the butterflies aren't dead—they're only dying.

Death is fine, Sara says. It's the dying part that's terrible, the part where you begin to float away, but your body stays behind, a dead weight left for everyone to stare at.

She can tell I'm sick of hearing her say this—but she believes it, my girlfriend Sara—and she wears heavy shoes.

Sara owns a horse back at her parents' house, or at least she did. The horse belongs to her little brother Ivan now, but when it's sick, he calls asking what to do.

And my girlfriend, it's always the same with her, no matter how slight the injury.

Take him out to pasture, she tells him. He's suffering.

Sara's left foot is wider than her right by half an inch, making it hard to buy her shoes. But that hasn't been a problem lately because, my girlfriend Sara, she's been afraid to take her Dr. Martins off for almost an entire year.

She says, They're the only thing keeping me from floating away.

She doesn't want me to leave. Sara loves me too much. She says it too.

I love you like a thousand pound boulder, she says. You keep me grounded.

What does that even mean? I ask, and we both laugh.

But honestly, it's over. I can't risk being with someone who's only with me because she wears boots that weigh more than my hands, maybe more than my hands holding my heart.

I can't gamble on that.

Because—what if someone were to untie Sara's Docs while we're eating dinner? A forkful of spaghetti and POOF. She's gone.

There goes the wedding plans.

How would I tell my parents that their dream of watching us walk down the aisle floated away between mouthfuls of ACME brand pasta?

I can't.

So, I tell her.

This isn't going to work, I say.

Sara looks down at her feet, says, You have to leave. I don't want you to see this.

Wait, it's not like I don't understand your fear, I tell her. It's just that I'm starting to believe you. I beginning to think you're going to float away if you take those things off.

Sara doesn't look up, keeps staring at her shoes until I do too. It's only then I notice they're wet with little splashes.

Don't do that, I say to her, but what I'm thinking is, Go on, Sara, cry your eyes out. Because I'm starting to believe you more than I should, and it's almost like the only thing keeping me here are your stupid shoes.

Sara, I say, and she starts to bend down.

Wait, I understand, I do, I say. I saw what happened to you at that amusement park. That would scare anyone.

That's when Sara really begins to cry.

She doesn't talk about what happened though or about us—Sara begins to tell me about the butterflies. About heavy bodies. Rose petals. About light-as-a-feather souls.

Then, like Sara's had enough with dying butterflies, rose petals, and me, she begins to fiddle with her laces and I have to bend down to retie them.

But they're wet, the laces, and I'm not sure I can do it.

We drove an hour to the amusement park, taking Sara's little brother Ivan there for his 11th birthday. He played half the afternoon on some obstacle course, and Sara chased him through the thing, swinging from rope to rope on it, because she's fun like that.

I watched Sara jump around the course, high above the ground on a crazy assortment of ropes and nets, getting closer to catching Ivan.

I watched her lunge.

Jump.

Soar.

And in slow motion, I watched her fall.

Sara swung over a part little kids couldn't, grasped nothing, and fell through the air, then onto her back with a wet crack, hitting her head against a piece of unprotected cement.

The blood poured out of her like a broken egg, encircling her head, and every kid and parent looked away. They assumed Sara was dead.

I did.

I thought she had to be. She was so white. Anyone who saw Sara would've thought the same thing.

She did.

Sara thought she'd died—even after the doctors stitched her up and released her from the hospital a few days later. She'd convinced herself that the only reason she hadn't floated away from this world was because her shoes were so heavy they'd kept her on the ground.

Your body or your soul? I'd asked.
And Sara said, Both.

I'd bought Sara these big maroon Dr. Martins the day before the accident. We were looking for a gift for her brother Ivan and found them instead. She'd wanted them so bad that I went back and got them just so I could surprise her the next morning before we took Ivan out.

You should have seen her. The smile. She loved them.

I think they were on her mind when she fell. At least, I tried telling Sara that, but she didn't believe a word—and honestly, neither did I.

In the hospital, it was touch and go the first hour. Sara had lost so much blood they didn't even have time to take her shoes off.

And all I could think then, when she was bleeding out, was that Sara's pale skin seemed a lot paler in comparison, against the maroon leather, like she was a dead wicked witch who forgot to fly away before Dorothy's house crushed her, like she'd forgotten to click her red heels together one last time.

They're heavy things and Sara refuses to take them off. Therapy. Sleep. Showers. She keeps those suckers on.

Until now.

Sara unties one shoe then the next.

Because I can't bring myself to lace them back up. I can't.

You don't have to do that, I say. It won't change anything. Really, it's okay.

I tell her this because I don't want to break up, not because she wears heavy shoes or because she can't get over her fear—I tell her this because I am afraid.

Of what happens next.

I tell her it's okay, that it could be just a temporary break or not one at all.

She doesn't move when I say it, but if she were to, if you were to watch Sara walk, you'd swear she didn't lift a foot. Not at all. More like the opposite. Like she's trying to keep her feet on the ground, as if gravity no longer existed, like she has to fight to stay here, pushing one foot down after the other just to keep herself from drifting away.

She's so pale too, if you look at her.

And really what happened to Sara could happen to anyone.

To me.

It's a thin string tethering us together.

And I understand better than she does now, I think. Because I see her struggle.

I get it, I do. I understand it's sad to see butterflies fall to the ground or red balloons float away. All of it. The rose petals too.

So, I tell her, Don't step out of those shoes. Not for me.

But Sara, she doesn't listen.

And then it's over. Between us.
She's gone.
Just
like
th
a
t.



Photograph © Chris Fradkin

Now You See Me by Joseph Michael Owens

Usually, the only time people in public stop and talk to me is to say: "Hey, guy! What's *that* all about?"

To which I invariably reply: "It's a fuckin' proton pack; the hell's it look like?"

I say it just like that, too; like they're clearly asking a stupid question. I'm not really all that interested in chatting, I just want to see if anyone notices. In reality, it is exactly what it looks like: a backpack with vacuum cleaner attachments heavily duct-taped to one of its smaller compartments.

"It's for bustin' ghosts," I say even when they don't ask, my eyes wide like its purpose is even more obvious than the pack itself. This is the part I usually tell to people's back. After engaging them verbally, they don't typically stick around long enough for me to say it to their face.

I've got no bona fide illusion about what *it* is—or what *I* am, for that matter. I mean, I'm obviously not a Ghostbuster, but being a grown man and pretending to be Peter Venkman in public is definitely a lot of fun, especially when people really believe you really believe you are. The general idea is there.

So it goes or something, right?

Getting a rise out of people for kicks is as old as cheating at cards or prostitution (though I submit it's much less lucrative than either of those).

The other day, this guy who was in a real hurry said to me: "How come people like you only hang out downtown?"

People like me? What people like me? How many people do you see downtown rockin a taped-up Jansport apparition zapper on a daily basis?

Those questions are obviously rhetorical and, consequently, went unsaid.

To be fair, the gentleman *machingschnell*, as it were, made at least half-a-point — even if he was a bit more condescending and smug than any prick in his late twenties ever ought to be: I do frequently haunt the passageways down here in The Old Market. I'm sentimental for cobblestones and horse-drawn carriages and other old-timey shit from way back when. It's like I feel sentimental for an era I wasn't alive to see for myself, but an era that always sounds so nice and quaint.

Nostalgia's crazy like that, I guess.

One day, I was sitting on the corner of 11th and Jackson, taking a break from my routine because my leg was bothering me. Sometimes it just goes numb and I can't feel it like it's not even there. I mean, I can see it, but my brain doesn't register any sensation. It's crazy.

But so I was just sitting there, eating a sandwich someone'd packed away in my ghost-blastin rucksack, minding my own beeswax as I'm wont to do from day to day, just enjoying the fresh air. All that, and whatever. And but so my bag was sitting there on the curb, just like me, and a woman in her forties—who was very attractive by the way, you know, for an old chick—walked by and tossed a quarter, two dimes, and a penny into the

smaller compartment where my zipper attaches to the pack itself. Then you know what she said? She said, "I'll pray for you."

Of course, I was like: "Hey, what gives, lady? I'm not homeless!" Then I looked at the change she threw in and said, "—and what the hell am I supposed to buy with forty-six cents these days?" It's not the 1950s. I couldn't spend it all in one place if I wanted to. I mean, if she thought I didn't have a house, why would she think I had the time machine necessary to go back to when you could buy something for less than two quarters? Because if I *did* have a time machine, I certainly wouldn't have been sitting there having that discussion with her.

I quickly got a strong impression that both she and her charitable god were probably cheapskates.

Forty-six cents... C'mon...

Today, I see my buddy Gary crossing the street, walking toward me with a purpose. His face says it all. Gary is a veteran and likes telling me war stories all the time. I always listen because I don't have much else to do. I'm retired and I live alone. Plus Gary's a real card. He always asks me if I remember this time or that time about this or that thing that happened—Gary tends to mumble when he talks about things he remembers, so I'm never really sure what he's asking me, but that's just Gary being Gary. I don't think he really believes I was there for any of the stuff he remembers, but Gary isn't all there, like *upstairs*, I mean. I always tell him I wasn't even born back then, so obviously I don't remember any of it, which always just cracks his shit right up. Gary's laugh is the best because it comes from deep inside him somewhere, like if he doesn't let it out, he'll pop like an overfilled helium balloon.

I tell Gary sometimes I used to work as a clown selling balloons in grocery stores, and he totally believes it. He nods all seriously and says, "Yeah man... Gotta do what you gotta do..." I'm just kidding of course, but Gary's so serious that I let him have the moment. It's like he remembers it happening even though it never did.

Gary seems to be the only one who can see me when I don't have my proton pack on. It's kind of weird, but I don't mind because I like his company. He's also the only person I've ever let try it on. Gary thinks it's hilarious to throw the straps over his shoulders and pose in front of really high-polished glass, striking movie poses. He always like, "*Who ya gonna call?!"* which we both get a kick out of. It'd probably be even funnier if I could see my own expressions. But when we stand there staring at ourselves in the glass, I can only see Gary staring back. He says he can see both of us and I'm just pulling his prosthetic leg.

"Only vampires can't see their selves in mirrors," he says, "and you ain't no fuckin vampire."

I tell Gary we're lucky that at least we've got one good pair of legs and one good pair of eyes between us, and he just howls at that. Between my numb leg and inability to see my own reflection, Gary thinks I'm a little loony, which is pretty funny itself. Either that

or he's glad to be a one-man audience to my hilarious comedy routine. Maybe it's either or neither of those, it's tough to say.

Now and then, Gary and I like to pass time pretending we're mobsters from the 1930s, made men who've somehow got misplaced in time and stuck here in the present. Gary says something about *anachronisms* or whatever, but hell if I know what that means. Gary can go from vampires to anachronisms and circle around to mobsters in a split second, which is honestly sometimes a little hard to follow.

"Bunch of gizmos and lemmings, man." Gary says, shaking his head, nodding, then shaking it again like he's having an argument inside his head. "Gizmos and lemmings..." he says again. I get the feeling that neither of us is sure whether he's winning or losing.

"And fuckfaces, too," I say, nodding and biting my lower lip.

"Exactly, gizmos, lemmings and fuckfaces—the lot of em."

"Situation is gettin' sketchy, Gary. *Real* friggin' sketchy."

"*Suspect*," Gary chimes in, bobbing his head, "at *best*."

"For sure. *Real* friggin' suspect, Gary."

"At *best*," he says again.

"Shit man, two keys and a baker's dozen. Some serious weight," I say, really just spitballing.

"Some serious weight we're talking about moving here, my friend. *Serious* friggin' weight."

"Gonna be a lotta heat on this, too, Gary. *Lotta* friggin' heat."

"No doubt."

"So we gotta have someone runnin' ghost on this. Catch my drift?" though I don't even know what I actually mean. It all feels like something I could've actually said in a previous life.

"Yeah, man, no—for sure. I hear you, man," Gary says. He's really getting into it today.

"Need to be ready to eighty-six the whole treatment at the drop, if you're pickin' up what I'm layin down?" I say.

"No doubt."

"I mean it's not friggin' amateur night at The Apollo, you dig? Our intel's gotta be rock solid. No excuses."

"*Solid*." Gary starts packing his cigarettes and pacing like maybe it's more real for him today than usual.

"Gotta be friggin' *brick*-solid."

"Yeah, man, no. I can dig. Like a friggin' *brick*."

"Damn right."

"*Damn* right..."

Gary and I take turns being the point-man, depending on the day. There's not much behind the decision; the conversation just sort of flows and our roles just sort of happen.

For the record, I should probably reiterate that I'm not crazy. So then why do I act like a half-crazed vagrant with a thing for '80s movies and silver pipe adhesive? I just

find it's about the only way to get noticed with the world being in such a hurry these days. In Germany they'd say, "mach schnell." *Make haste*. Even the slightest reaction beats none at all, I figure. Parents shield their children's eyes when they walk by, immediately picking up their pace and whispering things like: "Don't look at that man, sweetie, something's not right with him." But typically, the kids can't help themselves. They think my proton pack is awesome. It's a sort of public litmus test, really. It's how I make sure I'm still visible to other people since I can't see myself *for* myself. If nothing else, it's a good way to prove I'm still here.

Living on your own with no reflection stirs up all kinds of lonely feelings. Feeling alone both is strange and intense because of how it makes you feel so empty and massless, like your entire person couldn't displace even a microliter of water if you stepped into a bathtub. Gary told me once that everything you've ever done in your life leads up to *right now*, to the person you see in the mirror every single morning. I never see anyone, though. It's like everything I've ever done has led up to a singular instant where there is nothing—where *I* am nothing—an empty proton pack with a hollow vacuum hose slung over invisible shoulders.

Such a hollow feeling more or less reaffirms my conviction that the lady who wanted to pray for me would've been wasting her time—empty things don't have souls; a soul would take up space, but I suspect there's nothing like that inside of me.

The backpack makes me visible; it's like a bridge between things people can see and things they can't. It's what keeps me between those two worlds—the tangible and intangible. It's what I have in common with ghosts; we're just looking out for one another, nodding and saying, "I see you. You are real to me."

"Ted?" a voice comes from a car to my right.

I look in that direction and see a familiar face. It takes a couple seconds for me to place the name. "Cheryl?"

"Who else would it be, Ted? Get in the car. We need to get you to your appointment."

I feel like I've known Cheryl a long time but she mostly just drives me around places. My leg makes it all but impossible for me to drive myself.

"Cheryl, you worry too much," I say because it seems like the right thing to say. "Besides, I'm kind of busy right now."

Cheryl pauses, looking miffed. "*Doing...?*" she says, waiting.

I look back to Gary for some support, but he's gone. He hates even the smallest conflicts, so if he senses an argument brewing, he slips away without being noticed, like he's a ninja or something.

"*Nevermind...*" I say, getting into the car. "Just so you know, I'm only coming along because you're so pretty," I say, hoping flattery will get me somewhere.

Cheryl snortlaughs and pulls away from the curb.

I hadn't seen Gary in a week until today. It's been really windy lately, especially so downtown where the drafts carom between all of the tall buildings. It gets this way every spring, but it doesn't mean I ever come to like it. It feels like you can lean with all your

weight to the side and the buffeting wind will keep you propped up. It's kind of like walking diagonally, which makes me think of music videos with rapid flashing lights and amorphous peopleshapes for some reason. I say this to Gary and he asks me if I remember something about something that I can't hear over the wind, so I play along this time and nod like I remember.

"*Damn right...*" Gary says, nodding, clearly satisfied.

A kid walks by and stops in front of Gary and I. I'm guessing he's like five or six. I ask Gary how old he thinks the kid is but Gary isn't paying attention. The kid doesn't even look at Gary, just starts giggling at me. I laugh too because I guess something is funny.

The kid points at my proton pack and says, "Can I see?"

Of course I'm reluctant. I've only ever let Gary put on my pack. It's like something he and I do, something that's just *our* thing. I'm just not sure and it's clear the kid picks up on my hesitation. I ask Gary what he thinks but he's still not listening, just standing there mumbling something to himself. Gary is clearly not going to be any help. When he gets in one of his moods, even an up-close gunshot can't break his concentration.

"See with your eyes," I say at last, turning a bit to the side so he can see where the zapper is duct-taped to the backpack.

"I want to see it *with my hands*. *Pleeeeeeaaase?!"* the kid says, appealing to my practical side—that is to say the one that doesn't like to be annoyed by repeated questions and/or whining.

I agree to let him see it with his hands, but I don't really want to. I keep wondering how I'll feel if he breaks it. I tell him he can see it with his hands for ten seconds.

As soon as I hand it over, I immediately regret it. The kid whips it over one shoulder and bolts out into the cobbled Old Market street. The flood of panic is overwhelming and I become instantly nauseated. I realize I can't remember not having that bag; it's somehow become a significant part of me. *It's the only way people can see me*, I think to myself. *I'll be invisible forever if I don't get it back*.

Without looking, I dart into the street after the kid. As I reach out to grab it, I hear a deep horn blast from my left.

Everything happens so fast.

The sound causes me to stumble and my outstretched hand plants palm-first into the kid's back, hurtling him forward, sending him tumbling to the far-side curb. It's the last thing I remember and an avalanche of steel pulverizes my body with an unimaginable force. It feels like I am being squeezed, compressed upon every square inch of my body. Things go black. Intermittently flashes of color appear with noise—*so much noise*—and then black again.

When the world flashes back, a million muddy shades of indiscernible colors begin bleeding into solid shapes and recognizable objects, I realize I'm lying in the street. Tremendous bolts of pain explode back into awareness. I feel like a grenade has gone off inside of me. There are people everywhere, standing above me, looking concerned, talking nervously.

My first thought is: *Now you see me...*

Then a wave of nausea takes me and I start to throw up, just barely able to turn my head to the side so that most of it ends up next to me in the street. I notice it's awfully red. With my head turned to one side, I can see the kid I shoved sitting on the curb, crying, still holding my backpack. The vacuum cleaner attachment is missing and only a few scraps of duct tape remain reminding me that it was ever there in the first place.

"Gary?" a disembodied voice says from nowhere in particular. "Gary, are you OK?"

Gary... Where did he go? Where is he?

"Gary, can you hear me? Gary, are you OK?" the voice says again. I wonder if Gary followed me into the street and got hurt too. Maybe these people can't see me after all. I feel panicked; want to scream, "I'm hurt too! Please, someone help me!"

But all I can muster is, "*Gary...*"

"Everyone stand back," the voice says. "Give him room! *Give him room!*"

I'm so confused. Everyone keeps talking about Gary, but I can't see him anywhere.

A few other people are saying my name, "Theodore," but it sounds wrong; no one calls me that. No one has in years. Usually, I'm just Ted.

". . . Yes, *hello?* Hi," a woman says, talking into a cell phone, "Are you Mrs. Genabackis? Cheryl Genabackis?" *I recognize the woman talking on the phone...* "Is your husband *uhm* Gary Theodore Genabackis?" *She's the one who said she'd pray for me...* "Ma'am your husband's been hurt. A pickup truck ran a stop sign. Downtown. Yes, in the Old Market. Oh, you're close by? OK, Eleventh and Jackson. Yes, somebody called 911."

Gary...

"OK, Cheryl, we'll keep him talking until you get here."

Cheryl...

"Yes, ma'am; will do. You'll just want to hurry."

Cheryl Genabackis. . . that's so . . .

. . . familiar. . . .

Forty-Seven Wives by Catherine Carberry

She asked me on our wedding night, after I had helped her out of her dress, after we had made love twice, after I opened the first bottle of champagne and found it flat, after we drank the flat champagne and then another bottle, after we sobered up and put on the pajamas we had bought for the honeymoon, and after we settled into bed like the married couple we now were.

I was reading our travel guide to Tahiti. We would spend two more nights in New York, saying goodbye to guests and thanking our parents for paying for the wedding, and then we would catch a flight for ten days of living inside a Gauguin painting. I expected the women to have thighs molded from lava. I expected to spread my wife's hair against the sand and imagine she was one of those Tahitian women. I was good with my imagination.

My wife looked up from her magazine, "How many women have you slept with?"

I dog-eared the page on must-see beaches.

I'll admit I was surprised—not by the question, which had been mouthed by many cautiously blithe girlfriends—but that my wife was asking it. We had been together for nearly five years and she never had any interest in the women before her. She hadn't even seemed particularly concerned about my fidelity. When I once confessed to kissing a co-worker at an office party, she shrugged and straddled me and I forgot about the coworker's shea-buttered skin and nervous laugh. It was precisely because of my wife's uncaring confidence that I had remained faithful.

"So, what's the number?" She said. It seemed the question had only just occurred to her. She turned to me and was staring at me with an intensity I had come to expect.

"You're not going to like it," I said, but already I felt the mixture of pride and false shame. I had compared my experience with friends and I nearly always won. I was excited to test her, to see her raised eyebrow.

"Forty seven," I said and leaned into the pillow. My wife showed no shock or surprise, but rather stared at me. She made a small sound, as though working through a difficult math problem.

"Do you wish you didn't know?" I said.

"No. Just, tell me about the first one," she said, and she put down her magazine, leaned her head back against the plush brocade headboard, and closed her eyes.

I had received this question too. Women seemed to think it was romantic, conjuring up the vulnerabilities of that first time, hoping that it would draw two strangers closer together, that then our sex would be tinged with adolescent innocence.

I paused, and my wife opened her eyes, staring at me as though she was going to pounce at my words.

"Fine. Okay," I cleared my throat, and I told her about being sixteen at a ski lodge, meeting the girl from a state I joked did not exist—North or South Dakota, maybe, or Rhode Island. Both her parents and mine mainly went to ski lodges for the bar, so we snuck into her hotel room while our parents were on their fourth White Russians. I remembered her braces catching my lip. I remember wondering for days if what we had done counted for something, if I had really lost it.

"Keep going," my wife said, and until then I had not noticed what she was doing. I almost forgotten she was in the room, but now she was moving over me, and her lips were brushing mine.

"Close your eyes," she said, and when she kissed me I felt the quick burst of frost from the lodge window. I felt the scratch of her braces against my tongue.

"Wanna do it?" The girl from North Dakota said. I sitting on the polyester comforter and I was thinking that yes, I did want to do it. I was wondering what was next. I was saying something about a condom, and she was saying that she didn't need one, and then she was on my lap and I was putting my hands in obvious places and she was taking off her shirt and I saw something like a burn scar, like the world's biggest hickey, under her left breast. And she was saying it was a birthmark, and then she stood up and took off her clothes and looked at me, waiting.

And then I knew what was next; I knew what was going to happen and I knew that my wife was watching somewhere, my wife knew and she was not going to let me forget my awkward climb on top of the girl, the thrusting and the few minutes of the girl sighing, the slickness between her legs and then me bringing my hand up after putting myself in her and seeing the red, not connecting it to the girl's body. My fumble, my pale face, her "Jesus, what's wrong with you?" her knees knocking mine as she got out of bed, her face furious with embarrassment, my jeans around my legs.

I wanted it to stop. I wanted to come up for air.

"Please?" I said, and my lip was between my wife's teeth.

"What's next?" she said, and I opened my eyes and we were back in the hotel room and the wedding dress was hanging from the bedpost.

"How are you doing this?" I asked, but then my wife was Gemma Hawkins and we were in a closet in her parents' basement and she was telling me to finger her.

"But no more than three, okay?" Gemma said, and I counted my fingers as they entered her and I knew I wasn't going to fuck it up this time.

"You play guitar?" she said between gasps.

"No," I said, and I felt cool enough to be someone who might play guitar.

"Then cut your fucking fingernails," and she pulled her hips away from me but she didn't open the closet door. Instead she went to her knees and gave me cautious licks, her tongue rolling around me until she came back up and waited, and this time I knew to lift her skirt. I knew to give her my hand to bite and then, halfway through, I knew with an awful confidence that I was making faces. I heard my wife laugh.

"No, I'm sorry. Keep going," she said.



But I didn't have a choice. I was back there, and then after the closet I was in college and I had a girlfriend and she came over between classes and I learned how to unhook her bra, the kind that unclasped in the front. Then there was the string of girls at parties while the girlfriend was studying in Berlin, then there was Berlin. Then there were the bar bathrooms, the arcade, the video store supply closet, the beds in Brooklyn and Jersey City, the beds in Maine and Texas. There were the hotel rooms of varying rates and there was the stripper in Detroit.

I don't know how long it went on but finally there was meeting my wife at a party we both considered ourselves too young and too cool for, the mutual friends who were married and who served us wine in glasses bought from a museum gift shop. There was my wife and only my wife, and then we were back and we were married and she was writhing on top of me as I lay stunned. Until she rolled off of me. Until she told me, "My turn."

All that was a year ago, or maybe two. We missed our flight to Tahiti. We missed our honeymoon. The hotel bills are outrageous, but somehow they get paid. And I'm still on number one, on Jorge and Mexican sunsets. I hadn't realized how difficult this could be. I hadn't realized what great power my wife had, conjuring forty seven wives in only one night.

The last thing my wife said was, "I was in Cozumel and my parents went snorkeling for the day. He bought me a drink and climbed into my hammock."

It is not an easy scene to recreate. I've gotten close, she tells me, but each time I bring her back there to the beachside hammock, something goes wrong. Once I put an umbrella in the piña colada, where in reality Jorge had dropped a lizard into her drink and she had watched its tail flailing as the hammock rocked. Once I spaced the sound of waves too far apart, and it took her out of the moment, she said, but not before she had undone the drawstring of Jorge's bathing suit. Sometimes I worry she is going to keep me trapped here in the Mexican surf town, with the street dogs and our drinks rimmed with cane sugar, always on the verge of knowing this man who knew her first. Sometimes I think she doesn't want to leave.

I bet if I threw this rock at Scott's head he'd stop believing he's MacGyver. Like right now, he's using that gutter pipe all wrong. The rope's supposed go through the pipe, not around it, but whenever I say something, he says he's right- he's MacGyver. He even calls himself, MacGyver. And now, The Face believes his stupid head. It is a stupid head. It's real wide like it got squeezed on the top and the bottom. Like if I push down on a balloon, that's what Scott's head looks like. His ears stick out too. This boy on the bus, Demetrius, he told Scott his head's so big he can't get it through the bus door without getting his mom to grease it up. I almost messed my pants laughing so hard. But the worst is that brown leather jacket. It's way too big for him. He has to roll the sleeves up and it hangs down to his knees. I offered to wear it for him since I'm taller. I said I'd give it right back when he was tall enough but he told me no. He told me to stop being jealous. That was the first time I thought about throwing a rock at his stupid head.

I've decided not to help Scott and The Face build the RET. That's Russian Enemy Trap. It's not that I don't want to get the Russians. It's a pride thing. Before The Face got here, I had the greatest idea ever to cut a path through the bushes next to the dirt road and set the RET at the end of that path. All our intelligence says the Russians will march down the dirt road at exactly 3pm. Now, everyone knows the Russians investigate all undocumented paths so when they march through, protocol will require them to walk down ours and right into the RET. If you ask me, it was the perfect plan, but Scott shook his head and turned his thumbs down. Said it wasn't spontaneous enough. That was the second time I thought about throwing a rock.

His idea, the idea he and The Face are working on right now, is to build the trap in such a way that when the Russians walk past, the RET will come down on the Russians from our tree house. I told him he was out of his mind. I told him the Russians were sure to suspect it. He said that was the point. Something about the more they expect something, the easier it'll be to surprise them.

The Face keeps looking back at me. I'm like fifty yards away, sitting on an old stump while they're up there in the tree house my father built last year. The Face's hair looks like its glowing, kinda like white smoke, and she keeps pushing it back because it's getting windy. I told Scott his plan wouldn't work if it got windy. There's no way the RET will stay up there in the tree house. It has to hang just below the floor and if the wind picks up, it'll move the RET all over. They won't be able to drop it down on them in the right place. That's when he said if it works, we won't get caught and if doesn't, we won't grow old. I said are you kidding me? Stop talking like you're MacGyver I told him, and that's when I came over here to this stump. Lots of good rocks over here by this stump.

Scott slept over at my house last night and while we were upstairs he asked me to lock him in the bedroom closet. Can you believe that? He wanted me to lock him in the

stupid closet. He brought his sister's hair pin and said he needed to practice escaping. I told him he was nuts and he said just do it- just lock him in. I said I would if he took the stinking jacket off, and he said it was a gift from his father before he died and that he promised to always wear it. Well, that was the dumbest thing I ever heard, and I pushed him in the closet and locked it. But I didn't just lock it, I grabbed a chair and propped it against the door knob and went downstairs. Oh, man it was the greatest. Scott unlocked the door but couldn't get pass the chair. He started crying. He cried so loud my mom heard him and had to come get him out. She made me apologize, but I didn't care.

Look at them over there. They think it's going to work, but I know it's not. The Face just pointed to her book bag. She's got sandwiches or something in there, but I'm not hungry. I'm staying right here on this stump. If anything, I ought to kick them out of the tree house since my dad was the one that built it. It's a perfect tree house. Has two access points where you can climb the rope or the ladder. The rope hangs from the backside of the platform, kind of like a secret entry point.

The Face's hair isn't lit up anymore. Too shady now. I'd never tell her, but I like her face. I like the way it scrunches up when she—hold on. Why is she so close to Scott? Did he just kiss her? I can't see. They moved to the other side of the tree.

That's it. I'm done thinking about throwing a rock. I'll grab one big enough to hurt but not so big they'll think I'm crazy. With their heads close together and around the tree, they won't see me leaving the stump. I'll sneak up to the rope side, and by the time they stop being dummies with each other, I'll be in the tree house. The rock will be upside Scott's stupid head.

I'm like a commando in the jungle. I can't believe how quiet and fast I am. That's it. Keep moving. I can see their heads still turned, facing the road. I check my watch. One minute to three. The Russians are on the way. While Scott's crying about my rock, I'll release their pitiful RET and show them how it doesn't work.

There they are. Jamie, Ace, and Drew. We declared my older brother and his friends Russians after they threw me and Scott in the green pond a couple weeks ago. It's why we were supposed to be ambushing them- to get them back. But then Scott had to get all stupid.

I've reached the base of the tree. Now, all I need to do is climb up the rope. It's easy since I'm so fast. Just give the rope a good tug.

When I open my eyes, I see the Russians standing over top of me, pointing. Their big mouths are all open. I'm trapped in a net that's tied to the gutter pipe which is tied to the tree rope. From above, I can hear Scott bragging. He said his plan worked perfectly. Said he knew I'd try to attack him and that I'd go for the rope. When I grabbed the rope, the RET came crashing down on me. He said something about how a good magician always uses a little misdirection. That it was totally MacGyver. I spot The Face looking over the edge of the tree house. Her nose is scrunched up in that way I like. She's laughing. So are the Russians.

Staff Selections

The following stories were selected by the editors. These stories represent our favorite and most memorable pieces from the past six months.

The Revolution by Rory Fleming

I was standing behind the desk of the Gingko Wireless store and a blonde woman with premature wrinkling and a crying son was coming up to me.

"Listen, you," she pointed, "My son was hitting icons on the screen and it froze the phone up and now it won't work and I want my fucking money back."

"Ma'am..." I started.

"I want a manager."

I turned around to see if my manager was around. He wasn't.

"Okay, ma'am, calm down. Have you checked for water damage?"

She shook her head and glared at me. I wanted to warn all the customers at our displays: *Chernobyl! Chernobyl!*

But I didn't. I grabbed my prying tool and took the phone apart. I found the sensor, which was pink. There was water damage.

"Ma'am, look at this sensor. There's water damage. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to get another phone."

She hollered for the manager.

Well, the manager wasn't in at the moment.

"I will be right back."

Being diabetic, I retreated to the break room for a soda. I was protected by labor laws in doing this. She would just have to wait.

In the break room, I prayed. I prayed that she would die, stricken down by a heart attack and no one helping her in her final moments. Or that she would have a divine realization and whisk her son and self away to an ashram. I prayed for my own sickness, that I would have to go to the hospital for the rest of my shift.

I napped. When my manager woke me up I told him that I am narcoleptic and that someone took my Provigil on the subway earlier. He informed me that if I didn't get medical documentation by Friday I was fired, then he sent me home. In the lobby, the woman had disappeared. I did not care. I headed to the Japanese tea house.

* * *

Summer rain, outside the window of the tea house. It got me thinking about the good days.

I was wet and melancholy, because this flyer on the wall next to me was advertising another underground anime club. It got me thinking about how I missed my old friends, as much as I hated them.

Would I go to the anime club? It was hard to say.

My tea arrived. I thanked the deliverer and sipped it.

* * *

Friday came and I did not deliver medical certification to my manager. He forgot to ask and I worked the whole day without him asking.

At five o'clock, I bumbled around the city for a while then took a cab over to the address on the flyer. I stood outside the apartment and scratched my head. Should I walk up the stairs? I wondered. Probably a bad idea, but I went ahead anyway.

I knocked on the door. Bubblegum J-pop was blaring inside. I adjusted my black tie closer to the collar of my white button-down shirt and wished I had changed into something more casual.

A neck-beard answered the door.

"You look pretty pious in whatever you're wearing," he said.

"Pious as Pontius Pilate," I said.

"Where'd you come from?"

"Work," I told him.

"Okay, come on in."

The apartment reeked of grown men's unwashed testicles. And not just one man's— all five of them on the couches waiting for the anime to start. I hesitated then forced the question.

"What are we watching?"

One of them put his finger to his mouth to *shhhhh* me.

The TV flickered on. Seven girls from space colonies displayed powers like mind-reading, gourmet cooking, and fire manipulation while quarrelling over the hapless protagonist's love. The animal mascot was a giraffe. For the next twenty-two minutes I seriously considered suicide.

* * *

Afterwards they invited me to eat with them at a no-name sushi place a couple of blocks away. One of the guys, who was unemployed and called himself Space Pirate Robert, wore shutter shades and a Hawaiian t-shirt. It was now dusk and I was afraid of getting robbed. A robber could just come up and make a fist and our pockets would drop money for us out of pity.

Space Pirate Robert turned to me and asked, "What's your name, comrade?"

I made up a name: Arnaud.

"French?"

"Yes." (We were just going to roll with Arnaud.)

"Which do you prefer, 2D or 3D girls? We've been debating this for weeks."

Sadly, I knew exactly what he was talking about.

"I have no opinion," I answered flatly.

"But c'mon, bro!" he protested, "You have to understand that this is a hard choice to make. Otherwise I don't get why you're even here."

Walking the dusky streets of Chinatown, I lost myself in the situation. A grown man with shutter shades and a neck beard (all five of them had neck beards) asked me

whether I should fantasize about an animated character on a screen or a flesh-and-blood woman. Not only that, but he was asking whether I would prefer a relationship with a fictional character over one with a real person. My skin was not only crawling but rippling.

I may have been a loser but even I couldn't be okay with this.

But I was also afraid of making the situation awkward.

"I see the appeal of the 2D girl, definitely. At the end of the day, I think I'm split 50/50."

His eyes flashed menacingly under the light of a nearby lamppost and I could tell he was wearing red contacts.

"Hm, this is good," he said. "Then perhaps you can join our revolution."

* * *

I woke up in my own bed. It was tomorrow, Saturday, and I was lucky.

Lucky I had a chance to teach them a lesson before their stupid, delusional existence got out of hand.

Lucky I had spoken to a few women in my life. That I was myself and not those dudes.

I knew what I had to do. It wasn't even a compulsion but a duty to humankind. I got on my computer and typed out a poster:

VERY PUBLIC ANIME CLUB
IS AIRING
"MAGICAL GIRLFRIEND BEACH WEEKEND"

LOOKING TO MAKE A RIFFTRACK

FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 2011
(REAL ANIME FANS NEED NOT APPLY)

I typed Space Pirate Robert's address on the bottom and printed copies until my printer ran out of ink. I loaded the posters into my backpack and went into the city. I posted them on every public bulletin in every hip locale that the anime club would never check. Coffee shops, check. Indie book stores that didn't sell comics, check. Anywhere that women could generally be found, check. I was off to a good start by 10am and kept going. By around 3:30 I was out of posters. I had also drunk multiple cups of coffee and eaten many fine pastries.

After a hard day's work I returned home, cracked open a bottle of sangria and watched multiple Kurosawa films from the Criterion Collection.

It was time to wait.

* * *

I started up the stairs that Friday to see some goddamn bona fide hipsters smoking on the top of the stairwell. Oh shit, I thought, I did it. This was the day of nerd reckoning. I just sabotaged the anime club.

Knock-knock, I hit the door.

"Don't come in," someone whined with a nasally voice.

I let myself in anyway. I glanced at the club huddled together on a corner of the giant couch like scared kittens. Hipsters lit up cigarettes in the house. Hipsters filmed the magical girlfriend harem anime on vintage cameras as they said rude things about it loudly.

"Oh shit, look at those fake animated titties jiggle!" one of them chortled and took a swig of PBR. Another said, "Bet the guys who actually watch this have never seen a real pair."

"Man, this is fucked up," a guy in a monk's robe quipped from the kitchen. I went up to him and asked what his name is. He told me he was "Master O."

He nodded to the screen and said, "I'm homeless, but at least I'm a feminist."

I scanned the room for Space Pirate Robert. He was nowhere to be seen. I sat on the couch apart from my betrayed brethren. I watched as one of the magical girlfriends read the mind of the protagonist, and was fake-shocked/embarrassed when she discovered he was thinking, in his mid-adolescent rage, "I want to have sex with you."

"Is this really what they are watching? Is this really indicative of love?" Master O posited from the kitchen.

I started to feel bad. If these guys wanted to wallow in fantasy, who was I to ruin that? And the hipsters were like human moths that ate away at dreams. I left to take a piss without really having to. I opened the bathroom room and Space Pirate Robert was in there, sitting on the bowl with his pants on.

"Hey man, I'm sorry," I told him.

"It's okay, I just want them to go away," he said. He didn't sound mad, mainly just sad.

"Maybe I believe in your revolution," I said, "But just for today. How's that sound?"

His face lit up. "I appreciate that, Arnaud."

"We're going to kick everyone out of your apartment and then we're probably not going to speak again. But I hope you start thinking about your role in the rest of the world. Maybe get a job, and a shower."

"But how are we going to do that?" he asked, sounding nervous.

I wasn't sure, but then I asked myself—how do characters in these shows generally express emotion when things don't go their way? How do they overcome all odds when there are ten-thousand enemy giant robots against their two or three?

"We are going to grab the lamest stuff you have in your room—Nerf guns, anime girl figurines, body pillows, whatever—and scream *Revolution!* at the top of our lungs."

We busted out with guns blazing. The hipsters flicked their cigarette ashes on the carpet while looking bored. The joke was over—time for them to do cooler things than

this. They insouciantly packed their cameras while we yelped like lunatics. Master O and I were the last to go, after the other undesirables were cast out.

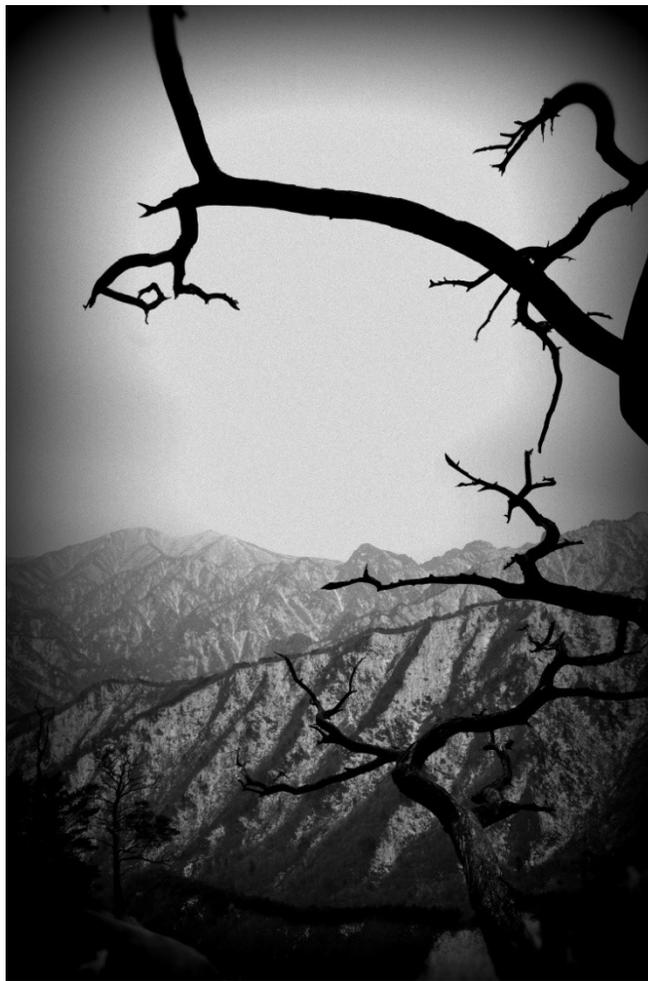
Robert whispered through the crack of the door, "Thanks for your help," then shut it.

Master O and I walked down the stairs together. He asked me, "So, what is your profession? Or furthermore, your True Will?"

I answered, "I am a sales rep for Gingko Wireless."

"That's pretty far out. Well, I am Master O, and I am in the market for a new phone. So expect to see me in your store soon," he said. "Until then, listen to the voice of your heart!"

He bolted when we made it to the ground. I was left standing there, with all my stirring thoughts.



Photograph: "Old Oak Winter" © Frank Cademartori

Because we were Christian girls from fundamentalist churches, we wore our dads' old, floppy t-shirts to the pool at our co-ed Christian camp. When we bobbed in the water, they puffed out around us so we looked like jellyfish with "Cancun" or "DisneyWorld 1998" emblazoned on our chests. As we tread water in our jellyfish hoods, we sometimes wondered aloud why the boys' section of the pool was roped off from ours—if it was just the temptations posed by our sore, new boobs, or if sperm really could swim long distances through water like my mom told me the previous summer.

The pool's main lifeguard was also the camp's assistant pastor because it saved the camp money and God blesses good stewardship. Pastor DeMarco's blue eyes and lifeguard shepherd's crook reminded me of Dick Van Dyke in "Mary Poppins," except Bert probably never told Mary not to masturbate or that the earth is 6,000 years old.

During the day, Pastor DeMarco sat in his lifeguard's chair, surveying the gender-divided pool with a silver whistle around his neck and the crook lying across his lap. In the evening, he took to the pulpit and preached with sunscreen still glistening along his hairline.

To use the pool, your parents had to sign a statement that you knew how to swim, but you had to prove it anyway by taking a swimming test when you arrived at camp. On the second day, Pastor DeMarco lined all of the campers up, girls on one side of him and boys on the other, and we had to jump in, one by one, and swim the length of the pool. As you swam, Pastor DeMarco stood on the edge of the pool, curling his toes around the cement ledge, and watched. When one swimmer reached the pool's halfway mark, Pastor DeMarco directed the next to jump in and begin.

"But if any of you jump before I say when, don't think I won't pull you out," he announced every year, all five summers that my parents made me go to camp with my church youth group. "This is very serious. I need to have my eye on you the whole time, got it?"

Pastor DeMarco was a man of God and a man of his word. I could attest to that. He pulled me out of the pool during my first year at camp. Nobody told me that when it was your turn, Pastor DeMarco would say, "go," but you had to wait for him to blow the whistle. I just heard "go" and went. As I dove in, he screamed for me to stop. I hit the water before my face had a chance to turn red.

All Christian girls know what happens when they disobey, even if it's by accident. We end up pregnant, kicked out of our churches, and used as examples in sermons for what happens to disobedient Christian girls. Eventually we go to hell, where we fall for eternity in a dark, fiery pit, bound in rough chains that tear and burn our flesh, deprived of any human contact except for listening to the eternal screams of other Christian girls who are also bound, falling, and should have listened to their elders.

I thought about that as I sank to the bottom of the pool, and I thought about how a lot more goes into being a Christian girl than just believing in Christ, and when I hit the

bottom of the pool, I thought about how long could I hold my breath. I'd never timed myself, which I regretted. I didn't want to go back up to the surface. It was peaceful and blue at the bottom of the pool, and it wouldn't be up there. I waited.

Pastor DeMarco hooked me like a fish a few seconds later, catching me around the torso and pulling me back onto the pool's cement edge. I closed my eyes as I lifted myself off the ground so I wouldn't see the other campers standing in a line around the pool watching me. My dad's t-shirt clung like a tarp and dripped onto my feet. My cheeks felt warm and puffy, like two hot air balloons burning from inside and rising. I quickly pressed the shirt's baggy sleeves against my face, trying to cool down and hide my embarrassment. Pastor DeMarco leaned in to meet my gaze with his Dick Van Dyke blue eyes.

"Did I say you could go?" He asked.

I could have told him that I didn't know to wait for the whistle, but if you think what happens to disobedient Christian girls is bad, you should hear about what happens to disobedient Christian girls who sass their pastors and parents. I didn't want him to think I was arguing with him. I looked down and shook my head.

"No sir," I said.

"What do you say to me and everyone you've made wait?"

"Sorry sir. Sorry everyone."

"Do you guys accept that apology?" He asked my fellow campers, but no one replied. He turned back to me.

"You go when I say 'go,' okay?"

"Yes sir."

He smiled, straightened up, and leaned against the crook like an ancient prophet with his staff.

"Okay. You can go now."

"Okay," I said, stepping up the ledge again.

He blew the whistle. This time I jumped, springing down on my thighs to gain momentum and then leaping with pointed toes. For a moment, I felt like I was soaring, and I prayed as hard as I could that God would transform my dad's old shirt into a sail and fly me away to Cancun, or DisneyWorld, or anywhere else.

Macaroni & Cassoulet by Michael Royce

By the time of his face-off with macaroni, the warranties on most of Dad's body parts had pretty much expired. He'd shrunk three inches and suffered from a bad heart; but despite partial blindness and decrepit knees, he still walked, levitating himself by power of his will. Deep lines carved his face, and his lips, always thin, had grown finer. His hair was sparse and resisted comb-overs, but he carried himself with dignity even when he wore his favorite outfit in retirement: a pair of tight, faded jeans riding high over white socks.

When I was a child, I would challenge him by covering a caption to a random picture in his boyhood copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*. As if conjuring from within, he would look into space and recite, "He gently places her with her back to the crashing engine that constantly whirrs up and falls." As I listened to him, I contemplated the noble fate of Sydney Carton as he paused beneath the shadow of the guillotine, and I would marvel at dad's memory, which remained intact until his death.

On his 88th birthday, I visited my parents in Belvedere, California. Their home lay on the sunny side of the mist drifting in each morning to cover San Francisco. In the back of the house, a bank of windows framed glimpses of lumbering pelicans and stiff-legged egrets fishing on a lagoon.

Dad's doctors had told him to expect only two more years of life because of his heart, and he relayed this to me in a matter-of-fact way. Perhaps, to lighten his disclosure, he looked over my shoulder and cried, "A bufflehead." I turned and saw that he had correctly identified a bird landing on the water 100 feet away. At this distance, his macular degeneration would not have allowed him to see more than a shadow.

Dad was not big on surprises, either being surprised or surprising others, but he left me stunned when he announced, "Michael, I want to look at the VA retirement home in Napa." Initially, I didn't understand where this idea came from, but when he said something, I believed him. "I'm a veteran," he added; "I've earned it."

My mother's response was totally predictable; she had obviously heard his declaration earlier. "I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, willing to live in the VA, or any other retirement facility." The subject was closed for her.

As the three of us drove to the VA, father's jaw remained firmly shut and mother stared ahead, disgusted by the whole project; I alone was mildly intrigued by our pilgrimage. We headed north on I-5 at 45 miles per hour while I chanted a silent mantra in the back, "Don't let us be rear-ended." I was relieved mom was driving because on a previous visit, I'd driven to San Francisco airport with dad to pick up a friend. Once there, I'd jumped out to rush into the airport and suggested dad take over while waiting. Somehow I had not yet digested his developing blindness. "Ha," he said when I returned, "that was something. I couldn't see a thing when I drove under that overpass."

Dad suddenly interrupted the silence. "It's getting hard for us to live alone." He'd forgotten for a moment that there was no "us" involved in this mission, and mom ignored his comment.

Earlier, he'd told me, "Your mother's becoming confused," his voice low so as not to carry into the next room where she sat reading. He and my mother didn't discuss concerns like "I am not going to live much longer" or "Do you think you're having trouble with your memory?" Four years later when he was two years dead and she had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, I thought I understood what he'd tried to say about dying and leaving those whom you love behind. He sought a place where she would be cared for when he was gone and plunged ahead like a train stuck in forward long after she had refused to board.

When we arrived at the VA, we were greeted by James Raskin, a resident who volunteered to show prospective clients the facility. "Is this for both of you?"

Father shrugged. "No, Margie has other plans." We piled into an expanded golf cart for our tour and puttied around the grounds.

James proudly pointed out the many nice features: "the handicraft room where you can work on airplane models, a large community center for poker, a big screen TV for football, and a garage with an automotive shop." Great, I thought, dad doesn't like crafts, play poker, watch sports, and definitely knows nothing, and cares less, about working on cars.

That is not to say dad didn't know a great deal about automobile theory. What he lacked was an even rudimentary understanding of any practical application such as changing oil. When I was a teenager, he took Jack Smith, a gangly friend about a year older than I, and me to dinner at an Indian restaurant. Aware of Jack's interest in cars, Dad launched into an intricate explanation of the internal combustion engine. Jack was dazed at Father's profound automotive knowledge. I was awed, too, at the extent of his abstract knowledge, convinced that in an idle moment, perhaps during the Second World War almost 60 years previously, father had skimmed and memorized a book on auto mechanics.

As he listened to James recite the glories of life at the VA home, Dad's lips compressed. "Pretty impressive," he said, "but can we skip the community room? I really want to see the apartments." Without hesitation, James circled to a solid but uninspired brick building. I sensed his growing conviction that dad wasn't going to end up in this, or any, VA Home.

As Dad intended to become a resident without his wife, James said, "You'll share a room." We rode the elevator to the third floor and entered an empty room. It was severe, institutional, worn, with green paint and small, dirty windows without a view. None of us asked, "Why is this room empty?" I'm pretty sure none of us wanted to know.

"You get your own dresser and you can have some privacy by drawing this curtain between the beds," James said.

"What happens if you can't get along with your roommate," Dad asked, somewhat tensely I thought.

"You can always request another roommate," James suggested. He moved on to the rules for visitation, which the management allowed only during certain hours. Still steamed at mom for bailing on this project, Dad maintained tight self-control; he wasn't about to express concern about restriction on others visiting him.

James continued with the requirements for residents to leave the facility, and I suspected he was beginning to enjoy himself. "You have to sign out when you go anywhere, but they're pretty good at letting you out whenever you want." I imagined a zoo with guards. Dad's going to blow, I thought; but there was steel in that frame, and he didn't buckle.

I was engaged in small talk with James when I noticed father peering at the daily menu posted on a cork board in the corridor. A slight slump in his shoulders revealed that he'd pieced together the week's offerings through his clouded eyes. A cosmic stillness revealed we were reaching the end of our tour.

"Canned green beans?" Dad asked.

"Yep, every third day."

"Applesauce."

"Yeah."

"Fresh?" Dad suggested.

"From the can," James answered.

"And macaroni?" I heard a slight tremble.

"Kraft's Mac and Cheese. Every Wednesday." I was now sure James was having a good time.

"Thanks," Dad declared, "but we have another appointment." As we escaped, moving quickly for a group led by a man with congestive heart failure and a left thigh strangely offset from the bones of the lower leg, dad called over his shoulder, "I'll get back to you."

Subdued, we returned to the car. "We're going to the French Laundry," father croaked, naming the most expensive French restaurant within 20 miles. We had finished the appetizer of aged goat cheese with basil and the first glass of pinot gris before dad initiated a conversation on changing policies at the World Bank. He embellished his exposition with details from a New York Times article mom had read aloud at breakfast. With the promise of the cassoulet entrée looming bright, he'd begun to recover. We never mentioned the VA Retirement Home again.

Upgrades of the Heart by John Hair

I can't seem to delete the first time I saw her. It was at Costco, on a Sunday. She was trying to decide between name brand and store brand toilet paper. She went with Kirkland's. I felt a little spark when she turned to look at me. I could tell by her wink she felt it too. She asked if I wanted to grab a slice over at the food court. I don't really eat, but I said, "Sure, love to. I'm Bob, by the way."

"Cassandra," she said.

She laughed when I tried to eat the pizza, but it was that nice laugh, the one where a girl thinks you're cute. I was cute. She told me she was a nurse. I told her I worked in a factory. She told me she liked movies. I told her I liked *her*. She turned her head, her hair whipped. She smiled. A small grease fire ignited between my fingers, but I wasn't going to let that ruin my day. I doused my hand with her Dasani. The fire jumped off my hand onto the table. We managed to smother it with our napkins. We laughed. Everything felt right.

I helped download her items into the trunk of her car. A tag from a blouse she bought was hanging out. I tried to flip it back just as the lid slammed down. It didn't hurt. She opened the trunk back up. My left hand was next to the thirty-six pack of toilet paper. I picked it up with my right hand. Between the fire and the trunk lid, it was scrap. She apologized and started to cry. I told her it was fine. It was just a peripheral. I'd get a new one. She said it was my lucky day. I agreed.

She said her boss, Dr. Hans Derma, was performing some remarkable cutting-edge work. She said that, for a nominal fee, he could fit me with a new kind of hand. She was standing very close. Her breasts punched my frame. I said I'd see her doctor friend. She gave me his card with her phone number on back.

Next day, I went to her doctor. It was a success. My new hand only cost two thousand dollars. Cassandra visited me in the recovery room. She bent down and stuck my new finger in her mouth. My head jerked around for some reason. It was a completely new sensation. I liked it. She asked if I wanted to meet over at her place later. I told her tomorrow would be better. I had work that night.

All night at work, I thought about her, her mouth, about my finger, about my finger in her mouth. Ted kept yelling at me to keep up, but I couldn't multitask anymore. I wanted to feel. I wanted to feel that feeling again. When no one was looking, I walked over to Bridget, our twenty-ton hydraulic stamping press, and stuck my old hand through the gate just as she hammered down on a die. It didn't hurt. I grabbed my old right hand with my new left hand. I showed it to my boss. He was upset.

"Damn it, Bob! Have you glitched out? Do you know how much paperwork I have to fill out?"

He told me to walk down to maintenance. I told him I wanted a second opinion. I wanted a *real* doctor to have a look.

"Come on, Bob. We're a small company. Doctors? Can't we keep this hush-hush?"

"I don't know, boss," I said.

"What'll it take to make this hand thing go away? How much?"

"Two thousand dollars and the rest of the week off."

"Done."

Next day, I went to Dr. Derma and had my other hand done. Cassandra was there in the recovery room again. She stuck one of my newest fingers in her mouth. My eyes flickered, my leg twitched. My head spun around.

"I get off in half an hour. Why don't you wait for me?" she said.

"Okay."

I sat in the waiting room scrolling through a ringed binder. It felt electric to the touch. Every page contained photos of sad people next to happy people. It said *Before* under the sad people and *After* under the happy people. These people seemed related somehow, but it was hard to tell for certain. I wanted to be one of the happy people, one of the After people.

"Let's go. You can ride with me," Cassandra said.

"Okay."

Her place was posh, very modern and finely furnished, much better than mine. She turned on some music, turned off the lights, and lit candles. She told me to have a seat on the couch. She poured wine. I took a sip. It went right through me. She didn't mind, she was getting a new one anyway, a couch that is. She unbuttoned her shirt, and we kissed. Then she wiggled off her pants and put my hands on her backside. It's what I always imagined kneading dough felt like. My new hands liked it. I liked it. I didn't want to stop.

"Where is it?" she asked.

"Where's what?"

"Your penis."

"My what?" Cassandra seemed put off. I was cross-wired. I thought things were going well. I wasn't sure what was wrong.

"This relationship won't go very far, if you don't have a penis, Bob. You know, Dr. Derma might be able to help you with one." She put my finger in her mouth. My head spun around, twice. "A penis is the greatest thing a guy like you could ever have." She cupped my hands on her breasts.

"How much will it cost?"

"It's the most expensive part we have. Dr. Derma will probably charge a hundred thousand dollars. But baby, it's worth it." She grabbed my left hand and ran her tongue from the bottom of my palm to the tip of my middle finger. My head spun around, thrice. Whatever a penis was, I was going to get one.

* * *

A hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money for a factory worker like me. I thought about sticking both legs in Bridget at work, but I didn't want to go in and deal with my

boss. Besides, I had the whole week off. I thought about walking in front of a taxi and suing. But that would have wrecked my new hands when I hit the pavement and took forever to settle. I needed a penis. I needed a better idea. And I needed it all right then. I sat on the steps outside my apartment building to process data.

I noticed people getting money from an ATM across the street. I watched all day. I counted forty seven transactions totaling two thousand three hundred fifty dollars. There were ATM's all over town. I had an idea.

When it fell dark, I went around the neighborhood kicking in ATM after ATM and taking all the money out. I had over three hundred twenty thousand dollars before midnight. I had enough for three penises, and hopefully some new feet. Those ATM's are solid.

I went to Dr. Derma the next day. Cassandra waved to me from behind the counter. I waved back. I showed her the stack of dollars. She smiled. Dr. Derma was standing next to her. He smiled too.

"What can I do for you today, Bob?" Dr. Derma asked.

"I want three penises, and some feet, if they aren't too much."

"Whoa, hold on there, Bob. You only need one penis. That's it. And new feet are not a problem. Fifteen hundred per."

"Okay. One penis you say. So, what else can I get for all this money?" I asked.

"Cassandra, tell Evelyn to cancel the rest of the day. Bob, here, is getting the *Works*. Now Bob. I'm going to have to shut you down for a while, okay?" Dr. Derma said.

"Okay."

* * *

When I came back online, I had two new feet, and two new legs, and two new arms connected to my two new hands. I had washboard abs and some strange appendage below them, where my new legs came together. I had a chest and a back, pecs and a neck. I had glutes. I saw a face in the mirror on the wall. It was my face. I touched it. I looked like an After happy person. I was an After happy person. I could hear a thumping noise in my new chest. *Ba-dum Ba-dum*. That, I guessed, was what After happy people sounded like.

Cassandra came in, "Oh, Bob, look at you. You look fantastic!"

"Thank you. I am wondering what *that* is though." I pointed at the strange appendage.

"Well Bob, that's your new penis. Let me show you how it works." She locked the door and took off her clothes. The *ba-dum ba-dum* started thumping faster in my chest. I felt it in my head, my legs, my glutes. *Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum*. I felt a surge, and then...

I crashed.

When I rebooted, Dr. Derma was looking at me. "Now, Bob, you need to take it easy for a few days while your chassis integrates all these new upgrades. You just twisted

your neck right off, but I fixed it, no charge. You've been very good client. Great, in fact. Maybe next time we give you some hair. Women really like the hair, Bob. Now put these clothes on, okay?"

"Okay." The clothes felt awkward and burned my new skin.

I waved to Cassandra as I left the office. She smiled and looked down at a file. I was cross-wired again. I couldn't recall what happened. At home, I took the clothes off, sat down to defrag, and stared at the appendage between my legs. I began to think the penis thing wasn't as great as Cassandra said it was.

I turned on the TV. The news was on. The top story was about a droid that kicked in nine ATM's and stolen the money. A city wide droid hunt was on. I was scared. They disassemble and melt rogue droids. I didn't know what to do. I tried to call Cassandra, but she wouldn't answer her phone. I looked out the window to see if the police were coming. They were crossing the street. I was feeling that surge again, and then I noticed my reflection in the glass. It was of After Bob. Before Bob kicked in the ATM's, not After Bob.

There was a knock at the door. I opened it.

"May I help you, officers?"

"Were looking for a droid named Bob," the man said.

"My name is Bob. But clearly, I'm not the droid you're looking for."

"No, I guess you're not. And buddy, you know you should really put on shorts before you open the door, okay?"

"Okay."

After Bob had a new start. After Bob went to bed happy.

* * *

Cassandra didn't return my calls for three days. I watched outside her apartment one night, as she took some other droid inside. The *ba-dum ba-dum* in my chest hurt. Life was pretty tough after that. I quit going to work, quit going out, quit talking to my friends. It took a couple weeks for it all to compile. Then one morning I partitioned the hurt and decided to move on, get a new job, and meet new people.

I took a sales position at a Men's Wearhouse. They offered an employee discount on clothes tailored to fit my new body. I liked the way I looked. Tilly, from my bank, liked the way I looked too. I asked her out while depositing the first check from my new job. We've been dating for two months now.

I took Tilly to the Olive Garden one night last week. It's what couples do. The wine ran right through her. We laughed. I saw Cassandra several tables over with Ted, from the factory. They were laughing too. Ted had a new hand. Cassandra put his finger in her mouth. Ted's head spun around, twice. I got upset, so I asked Tilly if we could leave.

The next morning, Tilly and I were in bed. I flipped on the TV, to the news. Her head was on my chest, her hand in my shorts. The news ran cuts of grainy surveillance

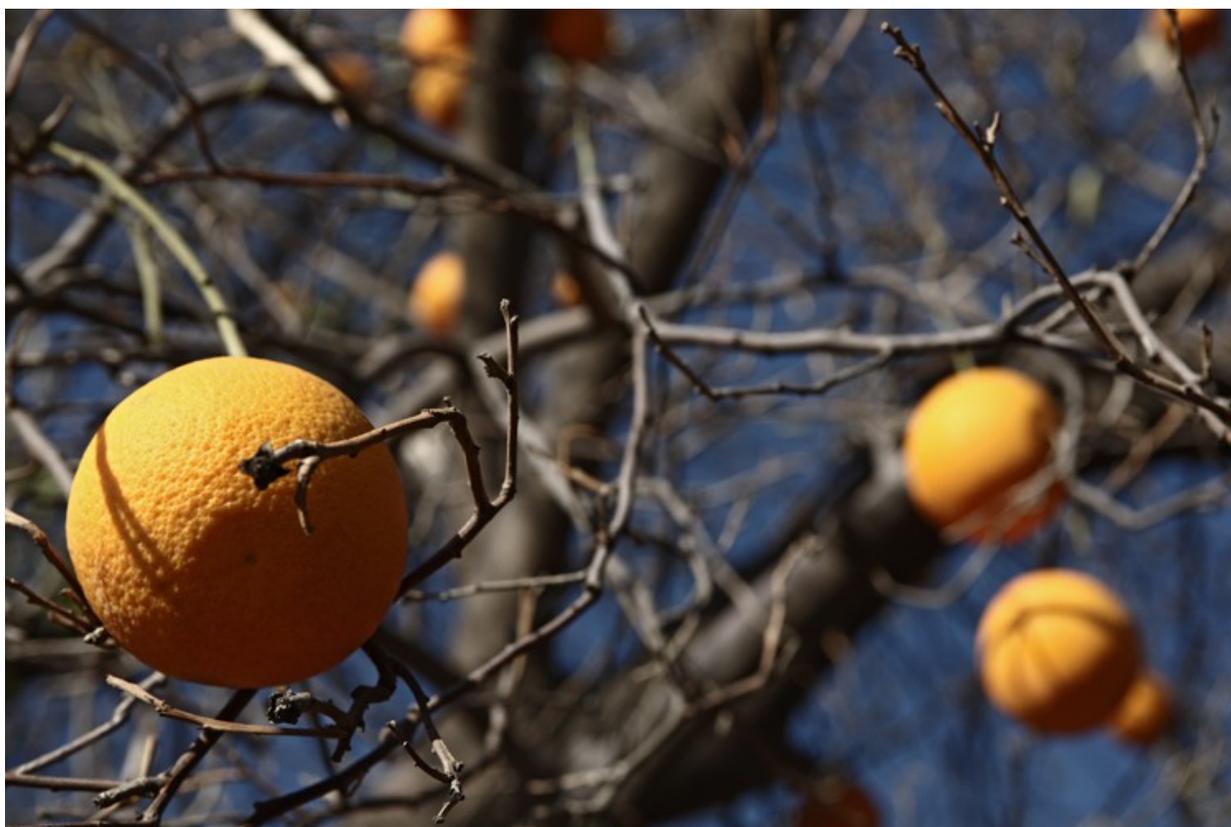
footage showing some droid kicking in a Redbox and a couple Coke machines. I told Tilly her hand was hurting me.

"Are you complaining?" she said.

"I'm just saying."

"You know, I'll get a hand job if you get circumcised."

"Hey, I didn't say it hurt *that* much."



Photograph © James Ducat

Getting a Grip by Kelly Fordon

Maura Elliot finished cleaning up the TV room and brought some dishes down to the kitchen sink. When she looked up from the soapy water, she saw that May Keane, her zany neighbor, was waving frantically to her from the kitchen window across the driveway. May Keane lived next door with her mother Suzanne and her entire life seemed to consist of walking to CVS and back anywhere from four to six times a day. Each time she left the house she sported a jaunty canary yellow beret and a bright pink pocketbook, which she gripped tightly as if warding off assault. Maura had no idea why everyone called her May Keane and not simply May, but it may have been because sometimes when May Keane wandered off in the wrong direction, her mother Suzanne could be heard screaming, "May Keane! May Keane!" from the doorway.

Maura waved back to May Keane and then looked down fixedly at the dishes. When she looked up a couple of seconds later, May Keane was still waving, so she waved again half-heartedly and moved away from the window. She would finish the dishes later when not under surveillance.

Later, that morning Maura stood at the side door saying goodbye to her children as they got on the bus. She had not left her house in four months. She'd been fine for a little while after Steve deserted but then one morning when she went to the door, she found she just could not go through it. It had been the same every day since. It was possible to remain sequestered because of grocery deliveries and her oldest son, Mike, who'd acquired his license the year before. Mike loved driving and never balked at carting his little sister Liz around, especially when Maura paid him so well to do it. Mike and Liz were so caught up in their own high school dramas that sometimes Maura wondered if they even realized she was housebound. They knew that their father had moved out but they seemed to operate under the notion that if they said nothing about it, it wasn't real.

Or it may have been that they were relieved not to be subjected to his mood swings any longer. In either case, neither one had asked her a single thing about him since the day of his departure when she had briefly explained he would be working out of the Dallas office for the next few months.

On this particular day, she did what she'd been doing every day since her agoraphobia had set in. She took out her endless to-do list and attacked the house. She cleaned, she mopped, she descended into the depths of the basement and sifted through fifteen years of detritus, sorting and discarding as much as she could. While she worked, she hummed along with WMJZ, the classical music station. For ten years before she got married and had kids, she'd worked as an architect at Cole Redding, and now the only place she would allow her mind to go was into the buildings she'd designed. While she worked, in her mind she was roaming the rooftop garden and atrium at the Marygrove plant admiring the ceramic glazed bricks, the neoprene gaskets they'd used in lieu of caulk, the futuristic water towers. Other than future and past designs, she refused to

contemplate anything else except the next task at hand. When she ran out of chores, she made up more—TSPing the walls, unearthing and polishing the never-used silver.

For the most part, this was the same way she'd operated during the late stages of her marriage. If she did not want to hear what Steve was saying, she was capable of carrying on whole conversations with him without processing a single word. It was as if someone had drilled a hole in the base of her head so that his words dripped out like water from the bottom of a flowerpot. What he was saying—that he wanted to leave, that he loved someone else; that he felt like he was "self-actualizing" and she was not—washed right through her leaving no residue at all.

Around 11am, the doorbell rang. Maura heard it but she was nearly finished with her final load of laundry. Assuming it was the UPS man, she ignored it. But then it rang again. And again.

And again.

"Shit!" she muttered, tossing a pair of balled up socks into the basket. Who could be that rude? She located her button-down sweater and put it on over her t-shirt, buttoning it up to the collar. She smoothed out some creases in her khakis and put on her loafers. Then she hurried downstairs and opened the door.

It was May Keane. She was clutching the pocket book, and peering repeatedly over her shoulder. Without acknowledging Maura, she threw open the screen door and scurried past her into the house.

"The meeting is starting," she called out, sounding frantic. "Should have started at 9am. You're late! Sit down. Sit down. Wait! You better make coffee. Did you get the pastries? Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

Maura was alarmed, but she talked herself out of it almost immediately. After all, she had no reason to believe May Keane was dangerous. She'd lived next door to the woman for five years without incident.

"May Keane," she said. "There is no meeting going on here. I think you are mistaken. Where is your mother?"

"She went to the land of Costco where all of her dreams come true," May Keane said, walking quickly on into the dining room. Maura followed her. In the dining room, May Keane took a seat at the table so that she was facing the wall. Maura continued around to the other side of the table in order to get into her line of sight.

"Would you like something to drink, May Keane?" Maura said. She needed an excuse to leave the room and call Suzanne from the kitchen.

Yes, May Keane said, she would like a jasmine tea with a side of lime or "cucumber if you have it." She placed her purse on the table in front of her but kept her hands clasped tightly around it.

Maura went into the kitchen and located Suzanne's cell phone number on the list taped to the refrigerator. Suzanne answered breathlessly on the first ring, as if accustomed to emergency calls.

Maura told her what was going on.

Suzanne sighed. "Well, that's a first. Normally she doesn't interact with people."

This was true. May Keane had never spoken to Maura before. Sometimes she seemed to recognize Maura and the kids, and other times she hurried past them looking terrified, as if they were wild animals on the loose.

"I'm in the checkout line at Costco," Suzanne said. "I'll be there as fast as I can...it'll probably take me twenty minutes. I'm so so sorry. I know you have your hands full as it is. Just humor her."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just in her world...I guess what I'm saying is...just go along with it...she doesn't make much sense. You'll see." The answer was so disjointed that Maura was reminded of a supposition she'd made about Suzanne, whose thin hair blew this way and that in the wind and whose outfits were always mismatched, oversized and dumpy-looking. The supposition was that living with a wacky daughter had unhinged the mother as well.

Maura went back into the dining room. She'd forgotten about the tea, but May Keane reached up to take it anyway.

"Thanks so much," she said, taking hold of the imaginary cup, simulating a stirring motion and then leaning down to make loud sipping noise.

"Delicious. Just right! You did it perfect!" she said.

Suddenly, her head whipped around. "You hear that?" she said. "They're here! They're here!"

Before Maura could react, May Keane backed up, scraping her chair on the wood floor.

Maura winced and followed her to the door, catching a glimpse of herself inadvertently in the hall mirror. With the rings under eyes and her thin hair pulled back into a bun she looked like a nun.

"It's a man," May Keane said. She was on her tiptoes peering through the peephole. "I think it's your guy."

"My guy?" Maura said.

"Your guy who lives here," May Keane said.

"I don't have a guy anymore," Maura said. Steve had left her for his malnourished, buck-toothed secretary. It was a pathetic story, so cliché that when people asked what happened, she lied and said there'd been no explanation at all, rather than tell them the stupid, sordid truth.

May Keane opened the door, and of course, there was no one there. But Maura's heart had done a little flip as the door swung open, and she immediately chastised herself for having any anticipation at all at the thought of seeing Steve.

"Come in, come in," May Keane said, waving an unseen person into the room. "Have a seat in the dining room. The meeting is just about to start."

"Isn't it great to see him!" she said, as she passed Maura on her way back in to the dining room.

"Who?" Maura said.

"Your man! Your man!" May Keane said.

"My man is not my man any longer," Maura said. "He lives in Texas."

"So, what are you doing here in Michigan?" May Keane said to the empty dining room chair where the imaginary man was presumably just taking a seat.

She cocked her head and listened for a minute. Then turned back to Maura and whispered.

"Who's he talking to on that cell phone anyway? Seems to me he ought to pay more attention to the people standing right in front of him, you know?"

Some things never change, Maura thought. Maybe May Keane had picked up on Steve's cell phone addiction; maybe she had been watching her neighbors more closely than Maura had realized. If she'd known that, she definitely would have shelled out money for the expensive plantation shutters.

May Keane sat down at the dining room table and looked over at the spot where invisible Steve was sitting. Maura looked down at her watch. Fifteen minutes until Suzanne rescued her. She really wanted to get that laundry done. After that, her plan had been to finish re-grouting the basement bathroom shower stall. It had been an ambitious undertaking for one day, even without an interruption of this magnitude.

"Oh! There goes the door again!" May Keane said, popping up.

"I don't hear it," Maura said and then remembered that Suzanne had said insisting on reality was a mistake.

May Keane hurried to the door and looked through the peephole.

"Good God!" she cried, flinging the door open.

"Who's there?" Maura said.

May Keane didn't respond. She gaped open mouthed at the door. Then she stepped aside and waved another hallucination into the room.

"Who's there?" Maura said again.

"Steadman forgot to let the dogs out," May Keane whispered to Maura. "That's why she's late."

"Oprah?" Maura said, stifling a short, nervous giggle. May Keane *was* spying on her. For the past month she'd been planted on the couch for three to four hours at a stretch watching and sometimes weeping through *The Oprah Show* episodes, which she had been recording on the DVR since 2010.

May Keane put her arm up in mid-air, around what she must have believed to be a shoulder. "I watched you every day, Oprah," she said. "Every single day. Why'd you go off the air? Huh?"

When they reached the dining room, May Keane pointed at one of the empty chairs.

"Maura's man! Maura's man! Hey you! Get off that phone! Oprah's here!"

May Keane pulled out a chair. "Would you like me to get some coffee?" she said to the empty seat. She cocked her head then turned to Maura.

"She doesn't drink coffee. Do you have some peppermint tea?"

Maura nodded and headed to the kitchen. Once there, she stood next to the oven. She felt a bead of sweat trickle down her back. She thought about a church she'd read about in Belgium designed with thin sheets of steel to give the illusion of transparency. When viewed from different angles the church disappeared completely. The architects

said they were exploring the idea that not seeing something doesn't mean it isn't there. Perhaps they'd like to hear May Keane's thoughts on that.

"Doorbell!" May Keane shouted.

Maura didn't move.

"I'll get it!" May Keane called.

Finally, the thought that May Keane might be really unstable and might burst through the swinging door with a weapon propelled Maura forward.

She peeked into the foyer where May Keane was once again on tiptoes at the peephole.

"Holy Mother of God!" May Keane shouted. "It's Thomas Jefferson! Come quick! Come quick!"

Thomas Jefferson, Maura's favorite president, the one who designed Monticello, the one who said, "Architecture is my delight." How in the world had May Keane thought of him?

"Thanks so much for bringing the tea," May Keane said. "Just set it down on the table."

Maura pretended to put a tray down.

"Help yourselves everyone," May Keane said, in a high formal voice before turning to the empty seat to her left.

"I really like those pantaloons and that cravat," she said. Then she motioned to Maura. "Sit down. We can't start without you."

Maura hesitated. She wasn't sure where all of the people in May Keane's mind were sitting. Finally, she chanced a chair on the far left.

"Thomas Jefferson! Holy shit," May Keane said. She nodded a couple of times as if in answer to something, then got up and moved to the chair at the end of the table.

Once there, she pounded on the table.

"Excuse me, madam," she said in a low gravelly voice. "I've been called to this gathering and have traveled a great distance to be here."

Maura glanced at her watch. Five minutes until Suzanne returned.

"Who is leading this meeting?" May Keane called out. She looked at Maura; then cocked her head again.

"Your man says he doesn't have all day," she said.

Maura grimaced. *Get those kids in gear! I don't have all day. Forget your hair. I don't have all day.*

"This small girl cannot be the leader of the movement," May Keane said in her Thomas Jefferson voice, pointing at Maura. Then she jumped up and moved to the Oprah chair where she shouted back in a high, womanish voice. "She can be the leader and she is! She is!"

Maura tried to inhale but it felt like she was sucking on a cocktail straw.

"Your man says he hopes marriage is not on the agenda. What do you have to say to that?" Her eyes narrowed, as she waited for Maura to respond.

"I am honored to have you all here," Maura said.

May Keane got back up and moved into Jefferson's seat. She banged on the table again. "As our enemies have found we can reason like men, so now let us show them we can fight like men also."

Then she bolted up and walked stiffly over to the window where she stood staring out at the empty street. She clasped her hands behind her back in a stance that did in fact remind Maura of an elder statesman. She remembered the rest of the Thomas Jefferson quote: "Architecture is my delight, and putting up and pulling down one of my favorite amusements."

"The question is: Are we going to participate in the politics of cynicism or the politics of hope?" May Keane shouted, turning away from the window. She walked purposefully over to Maura and clapped her on the back. Maura felt her heart catapult into her mouth.

May Keane strode back around to the other side of the table, sat down and took a Bic pen out of her purse. Then she began furiously scribbling on the thick protective pad covering the mahogany dining room table. When she was done, she cleared her throat.

"I have drawn a smiley face," she said, looking at Maura.

Maura stared at her.

"Hold the applause," May Keane said. Then her mouth opened into a big O again. She turned to Maura.

"Your man is saying that you are fat!"

Maura said nothing. In truth, weight was the least of his complaints. He'd called her old, ugly, done-in. He'd told her he was more attracted to the cat. The last time Maura had actually left the house was the day her friend Carol had taken her to Nordstrom's to have a makeover. When the makeup artist was working on her, Maura had made what she thought were just a few harmless deprecating remarks about how much she hated her crow's feet and her neck and her jowls. Finally the girl had put down her makeup brush and put a hand on either side of Maura's face.

"Somebody's really run a number on you," she said. "You have to stop beating yourself up."

Carol had nodded in agreement, but instead of inspiring Maura, the speech had done the opposite. Every time she'd tried to leave the house since then, she heard the words in her head.

Somebody's really run a number on you.

May Keane stood up and pounded on the table. "We have real enemies in this world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued and they must be destroyed."

"I don't know if we need to go that far," Maura said.

"Change will not come if we wait," May Keane shouted. "We are the ones that we've been waiting for. We are the ones we seek." She walked over to the empty seat and simulated picking something up.

"Let's go, Mister," she said.

Maura watched as May Keane made yanking motions. She dug her heels in and leaned back, she tried to scoot the chair out, to no avail. She looked like she was playing tug of war. She wiped her brow and said, "Whew!" over and over again.

In May Keane's mind, there was an enormous immovable object in the chair where Steve once sat. How many nights had Maura sat across from him, wishing him gone and how had she forgotten that?

After a brief respite, during which she slumped over on the floor breathing loudly, May Keane wiped off her hands and kicked the chair over.

"Yak!" she yelled. She took hold of the imaginary object and began dragging it backwards towards the door.

Maura got up. "Let me help you with that," she said.



Photograph © James Ducat

Everyone was waiting for the fight.

Us boys played Wiffle Ball in the pink-light of a fading July evening while the men leaned against their cars and talked. They wore khakis and white t-shirts with cigarettes rolled up in the sleeves, Viceroy's and Camels and Pall Malls. Now and then, one of the dads came into the street where we played, maybe threw a pitch or took a swing. Mostly, the men talked and smoked and drank beer. All their houses looked the same, three bedroom ranches built on slabs, a patch of green for a yard.

As for the fight, most of the men liked Patterson, but favored Liston to win. Patterson was a gentleman, the kind of black man who knew his place in the world. Liston was a thug—imprisoned twice, he carried a gun and kept connections to The Mob—the kind of black man they wouldn't want to meet on a darkened street.

After Liston put Patterson down, he'd fight Clay next. Cassius Clay, the kind of black man they hated, mouthy and flashy, maybe a little crazy. Not Liston's crazy-mean, but his own crazy-crazy.

That would be some fight, the men agreed. They couldn't wait for Liston to put Patterson down so he could go on to put Clay down.

Except Richie Griewank's old man. Old Man Griewank favored Liston over Patterson, but liked Clay over Liston. Old Man Griewank, little guy with a flat face and straight black hair, trimmed trees for a living, liked Clay's brag and swagger. Said he imagined Clay would be the best, maybe the best ever, just you wait.

Big John Ludy—cleaned and dug septic tanks, drove his own truck—said, *Get the fuck out.*

The men smoked and drank their PBRs.

Mike Ludy, Big John's boy, hit a grounder to short. I scooped it up and threw to Richie at first. He'd have made the catch and Mike would've been out, except Mike, heavier by twenty pounds, plowed into him and knocked him to the pavement. Bloodied his nose and busted his lip.

Richie's older brother Ted ran in from right field and pushed Mike in the chest—Ted, a high school dropout, living at home and trimming trees with his old man. Mike, just a sixth grader like Richie and me, but already as tall as Ted, pushed back. Ted popped him in the face. Mike swung and missed, and Ted popped him again.

Big John Ludy set his beer on the fender of Jake Blosser's '58 Chevy. He said, *That ain't right. That's a man on a boy.*

The other men wouldn't look at Old Man Griewank.

Big John walked into the street and elbowed his son aside. Us boys backed away. Big John rolled up his sleeves, motioned to Ted, and said, *You wanna hit someone, hit me.*

Ted looked scared, but tried a jab. Big John blocked it with his forearm, then slapped Ted with his open hand. Ted tried again. Big John blocked again. When Big John backhanded him, Ted started to cry.

Old Man Griewank threw his cigarette to the ground. He called out to Big John, *He's no man. You lookin for a fight, fight me.*

I stood next to my dad, a butcher by trade, hands like hammers.

Old Man Griewank stripped out of his shirt and rolled his shoulders, loosening up, like boxers do before a fight. He tried a couple of phantom punches.

Big John grinned.

Bloss leaned against his Chevy and hollered, *Will you guys knock it off?*

Jim Wiedemeir said, *Hell, let it play out.*

My dad steered me inside. We turned off the lights and watched through the window. It didn't last long. When it was over, Richie and Ted helped their old man inside. His boy Mike next to him, Big John taunted over his shoulder, *Let me know when you want some more, Griewank.*

I didn't have to be told. I knew this meant the end of Wiffle Ball.

I said, *I hate Big John Ludy.*

My dad said, *Don't worry, someone'll fix his wagon some day.*

Then he turned on the radio. We sat at our kitchen table and listened. The year before, Liston had knocked out Patterson at two minutes five seconds of the first round, making Patterson the only undisputed heavy weight champion to lose his title in the first round. In this, their second fight, Liston got him at two minutes nine of the first.

Now, it was on to Clay for the Big Bear. That's what the sports announcers called Liston, the Big Bear. They called Clay the Louisville Lip.

My dad finished his beer and Camel cigarette. He gathered his empties and dumped his ashtray. A few hours, he'd be at work, breaking down beef quarters into steaks and chops. He'd leave for his cutting room about the time Old Man Griewank and Ted left to trim trees, Big John Ludy set off to clean septic tanks, and Bloss and Wiedemeir headed to their factory jobs.

I asked my dad what he thought, Clay or Liston.

He stared out the window into the dark and quiet street. Finally, he said, *I don't like Liston, but I favor him to win.*

It wasn't right how Liston had humiliated Patterson, but I had to favor him, too. No way could Clay stand up to Liston's bulk and soulless brown eyes. No more than Old Man Griewank could stand up to Big John Ludy.

I'll be pulling for Clay, though, I told my dad.

My dad said, *You can pull for him.*

I went to sleep wishing Wiffle Ball wasn't over for the summer and wanting Clay to win. I imagined his jabs splitting skin and his right crosses breaking bones, even if he didn't have a chance with Liston cutting him off when he tried to dance, banging on him in the clinches, and connecting with that big left hook.

My son is convinced that dinosaurs have taken his mother away. This is the most recent in a list of explanations he has arrived at in the year since Holly disappeared to account for her absence. First it was aliens, sent to Earth with the charge of retrieving its best mother. Nate thought maybe they wanted her to teach classes on Mars about helping with homework or baking oatmeal cookies. Maybe they wanted to give her an award on Jupiter for best bedtime story. But as weeks turned into months, Nate revised. Aliens would have brought her back by now, he said. Aliens are nicer than most people think. Sea pirates were next, never mind that Kentucky is landlocked. He debunked this theory after coming to understand, while studying geography with Mr. Kiel, the bigness of the oceans that could be keeping his mother away, and decided instead that sea pirates only collected mothers from the west coast who, he reasoned, would have no need of Dramamine.

He offered the dinosaur hypothesis this morning in the parking lot of the Catholic school where he is a third-grader and I teach mathematics. I think probably what happened, he said, is that pterodactyls picked her up outside the grocery store and then flew her underground. I agreed that it sounded very plausible. It's as good if not better than anything I've come up with. They're teaching her to be one of them, Nate said, and when she comes back she'll show us how to fly.

We're at the school ten minutes early because it's Nate's turn to lead morning ceremony over the intercom. I walk him into the main office where Barb, the secretary, files her nails with an emery board in the shape of the crucified Christ. On her desk is a plaque that reads, "You don't have to be crazy to work here; WE'LL TEACH YOU," and another that names her "World's Best Secretary," which, in response to often being met by her bad breath and self-righteous tendencies at early hours, I have frequently thought of qualifying with an embossed "quarter-finalist" underneath. There's no one here who couldn't stand to be humbled.

"Remember to annunciate," she tells Nate. "The Lord doesn't like mumbling."

This is the thing about being in a Catholic school: you learn a lot about what Jesus hates.

Nate takes a seat and mouths the words to the Nicene Creed until Barb gives him the green light and turns on the intercom. Sometimes I worry about the theology they inflate him with here, but guess what? The kid's never guessed his mother was taken away by angels. I leave the office and listen to his voice echo through the hallways, filling them with muffled, lisping prayer. He was nailed to the cross under Punching Pilots. He suppered death and was berries.

My task at Holy Spirit for the last ten years has been to instruct advanced eighth-graders in pre-algebra, though my degree was in comparative literature and I am a nonbeliever who still, from time to time, is perplexed by fractions. After Holly's

disappearance, the joke I made to a blonde on a barstool was: I know more about division than anyone in Pike County.

Today is Friday, so class participation is abysmal. They come in groups of fifteen for forty-five minute periods, students with little to offer but their faces, lit by the cell phones they hide in their laps.

"True or false," I say, resting the chalk on my podium and turning to them. "If two sides of an equation are equal, say, $a=b$, you can add or subtract the same amount on both sides and they'll still be equal."

Kate Walden, the sheriff's daughter, raises her hand. "True."

I prod. "Are you sure? Always, no matter what, they'll be equal. You're sure?"

"Wait," she says. "I mean false."

"It was true," I say. I mean for these follow-up questions to inspire earned confidence in answers, but mostly they serve to characterize the students as incredibly weak-willed. Kate looks away, pretends to cough, and tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. Last week, I gave her a uniform violation for hooped earrings that were, in direct violation of the school handbook, the size of quarters, not dimes. Today, she wears silver studs. She is less attractive in person than the framed photo in her father's office would suggest, where the photographer made the astute decision to shoot her from the side. I stared at that picture many times on the sheriff's desk in the weeks after Holly went missing, and thus I feel this is a well-informed observation rather than a misguided reaction to her father's incompetence.

When the bell rings, the students reanimate and file out of the classroom. Nate passes by my door and peeks his head in, asks my opinion of his performance this morning. I tell him great job and that it's not his fault the speaker system has not been updated since Reagan's first term.

"Can we listen to mom?" Nate asks, as I start the ignition and pull out of the parking lot. He means can we listen to Holly's CD. She recorded it herself a decade ago with friends in Nashville; some standards and a few originals. The standards are better. I've kept the CD in the car in the hopes that, if the windows are down and the volume loud, some stranger will recognize her voice and tell me where last he heard it. And because Nate likes the way she sings "I Still Miss Someone." He wants to know that one by heart before she gets back, he says, and then asks if I think pterodactyls can sing.

Lately, he wants to listen to his mother's CD more and more. I mentioned this to my own mother, who calls twice a month from Memphis, and she offered about as much judgment and as little advice as everyone else in my life. There is unanimity in their belief that I'm not handling this well, that I owe my son something I'm not giving him in this process, that I need to invent some hard-line approach on how to handle his terrible optimism. I don't contest that, but what I'm short on is alternatives. Show me the child psychology book with the chapter titled What To Tell Your Son When Your Wife Goes Missing.

What I don't need a book to tell me is that what's happened will ruin my son forever. It will ruin me forever. And if it is to be that Holly returns, as we'd known her or as something devolved with wings, we will be too ruined for her to love us back to whole.

I press play on the CD, because it is what's easiest, and the song ends as we pull into our driveway, where Holly's car is not. Once inside, Nate sheds a layer of clothing and his backpack, spreads himself flat on the couch. "Home sweet home," he says, because he heard it said by an elderly Labrador in a movie we watched together last week where a family's pets critiqued the petty drama of their owners in cartoon voices.

You can vacuum our entire house without switching outlets, which is another way of saying we are lower-middle class. There are two bedrooms, a bathroom, an office, and a backyard that, in summer, Holly called a firefly exhibit with free entry. If I could do it with magic, if I could direct the house with my fingers, I'd shrink it in half. It is a space large enough to suggest that a third person should be occupying it, and the hallway seems disproportional when there's no one else to bump into in transit.

"Dinner isn't going to make itself," Nate says, because this too was said by the elderly Labrador.

* * *

The week before Holly disappeared, we took Nate camping on the banks of the Green River in Muhlenberg County. It is the place that John Prine means in "Paradise," a song we loved, so when we arrived we believed that perhaps we were in the wrong part of it. In other words, he left out the flies, as anyone who's been to paradise might. But the sun was warm and the water cool, the face of the river dotted with mussel drudgers and top-heavy canoes. At night, under blue moon, black sky, stars, I could not think of all three of us as anything but happy. At least, this is what I told the sheriff.

What I left out was the last night of the vacation, when Nate bet Holly she couldn't start a fire. He said she'd be too afraid. He did not know that, when I asked her in high school to prove how much she loved me, what she did was hold her palm over a lit candle and say, Tell me when you're convinced. Holly took the car to the convenience store up the road to pick up lighter fluid and matches.

"Back up, kiddo," she said when she returned, and Nate sat on my lap in the camping chair we'd turned around, five minutes after our departure, to retrieve from our front porch.

Holly squeezed the bottle of lighter fluid over a previous camper's unused teepee construction, arranged a few more scraps, struck a match, and threw it from a few feet back. The wind set the flames dancing from top to bottom, and the whole thing was bright with heat in a matter of seconds. We clapped for Holly, Nate and I, and she took a bow and did a victory dance.

And she was still dancing when, from inside of the fire, there emerged a stray calico mother, a newborn in her mouth and her hind legs trying desperately to shake the flames that had already taken her tail. I covered Nate's eyes instantly, picked him up and held his face into my chest. Holly screamed.

What's worse is that, after depositing the unmoving kitten out of harm's way, the cat went back in for the rest.

"I think some things are better in songs," Nate said, on the interstate with paradise twenty miles behind us.

"Everything is," Holly said.

* * *

A week later, we came home from school to an empty driveway, nothing in the house missing but her. It was hours before the panic set in, but the panic was better than what came to replace it. There was hope in that panic. Hope that the phone would ring and announce her safety, that her license plate would be spotted on the highway. Hope that if she were taken, she would be found, and that if she had left, she would return.

But it has been a year today, and I called the police station this morning and said, I'd like it on record that I still miss my missing person.

So that's where I am.

These days, I like Nate's theories best. The Pikesville PD is getting us nowhere, and I've run out ideas of my own. So tonight, after dinner, I'll set up blankets and pillows in our backyard, make popcorn and hot chocolate and anything else Nate wants, and we'll watch for his mother, for my Jurassic wife, for Holly's pterodactyl wings, spelling her whereabouts in shadows on the moon.



Artwork: Grant's a Dreamer © Jhaki Schneller

Doom Tarantula by Barbara Barrow

I. The Spider

When Mason Arnold Williams III walked into our classroom we all stopped what we were doing and stared at him. "Who's that?" we said. It was late January and we were all wearing shabby sweaters, waffle weave, shrunken pants. Not Mason Arnold. He stood in the doorway like a young judge. A black dress shirt flowed down his arms. His hair was bowl-shaped and even. His slacks were straight and neat; light shone in his shoes. Miss Eckhardt put him next to Eleanor Grundley, and at lunch Eleanor told us that his mother was an actress. "An actress," we whispered, awed.

Soon we learned other things about Mason. With his hands in his pockets, leaning casually against the swingset, he told us that he had a tarantula. "A tarantula!" Eleanor said. "Aren't you afraid of it?"

"No," Mason said. "He has a cage."

"What if he gets out of the cage?"

"He won't get out unless you let him out."

"What's his name?"

"He doesn't have any tarantula," Bruce interjected. "They don't even have tarantulas in the United States."

Mason shuffled his feet and adjusted his lean on the swing set. His eyes went to each one of us in turn. "His name is Doom," he said. "Tell you what. Maybe I'll bring him sometime."

Doom! We gathered at lunch every day and made up stories about the spider. He had hatched from the terrible roost of a spider queen, in the fury of a desert sandstorm. He made his way east on the railroads, chasing snakes across smoky train yards. Scuttering up cactuses, lizards trailing from his hoary maw. Giant.

"He's not that big," Mason said, coming up behind us. He extended his hand, smooth and pink, before us. "He's this big. Perhaps the size of my palm."

Doom! Dread monarch, making his rightful life as a ruler in a vast desert! We pictured Doom atop a peak of sand, waving his paw towards the scrambling ants. Creeping over the seas in the holds of great ocean liners. Coming to Mason's call like a falcon to the falconer, a great predator.

"Doom comes from a pet store in Texas," Mason said. "My mom got him for me when she was shooting a film there."

Every morning we waited for Doom. Every morning we watched Mason step out of a sleek car and walk past the battered Volkswagens and Chevys in the driveway, lunchbox in hand, Doomless. Every afternoon he sailed away in the backseat like a prince. We thought there was no outside where he went. Mason never came to school with dirty hair or with Band-Aids on his elbows. We thought he lived in a windless house where mess

was tamed and arranged: plants tucked into pots, water murmuring in fountains, breezes routed into vents and pipes.

Over time, this tidiness made us a little ashamed of ourselves. It was hard to say why. Maybe it was the way he sat quietly on the swings that made the rest of us want to stop running and shouting and sit quietly too. Or maybe it was the way Mason played games with us. Mason always won, but he never gloated and sang, never slapped hands with anybody, never danced a champion dance around the checkerboard. He just thanked his opponent, folded the checkerboard, and put it away. Fearless. Calm.

December came, and the wind beat against the windows. Outside, the tree branches began to ice and crack, and the playground was covered with frost. One morning Mason came to school with a blanketed bundle in his arms, set it on his desk, and uncovered it with a little flourish.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I present to you Doom, my pet spider."

We stared. A small hairy tarantula limped around a pink castle in a small plastic terrarium. There was a heap of earth against one wall, with a cave carved into it. Pink strings decorated the little cave, making a sort of pale cushion in the dirt.

"Doom can spin silk with his legs," Mason explained. "He uses it to line the inside of his burrow."

We exchanged glances. Silk was what our grandmothers wore to family holidays, silk pastel shirts with rhinestones and shoulderpads, from the shopping channels on TV.

"What's the matter with his leg?" asked Eleanor.

"Doom pricked his paw on a cactus plant my mom put in there," Mason said. "We had to take the cactus out."

Bruce raised his hand. "Can Doom swallow a snake?"

"Sure can," Mason said. "We don't give him snakes, though."

"How do you know he could swallow a snake, then?"

"Any tarantula can. Go find a snake and I'll feed it to him."

"What does he live on now?"

"He eats this stuff," Mason said, jabbing his finger in a corner of the cage. "Tarantula feed." We leaned in and looked at Doom's little dish of pellets.

"Is there crumbled snake in it?" Bruce asked.

"That's enough, guys," Miss Eckhardt said, coming over. "Let's all sit down. Your spider is very nice, Mason. Everybody thank Mason for bringing Doom to show us."

"Thank you, Mason," we murmured. Mason put the cage on the windowsill and went back to his desk. The spider folded his body into a little pile of legs and went to sleep in his silken burrow.

Outside it began to snow, white flurries dusting the windows. The wind rose like an angry whisper. Mason was still talking as he went to sit, saying he would bring his famous mother to show us. No one paid attention. We were done with him then, Mason and his shabby Doom.

II. The Acting Lesson

Every morning when Mason came in Miss Eckhardt said "Hello Mason" and sent him to sit in the front with Eleanor. But when Bruce came in, Miss Eckhardt sent him to the back and told him to settle down. When he got up again, windbreaker fluttering, his bulky body rising from the desk, she said, "Bruce. Sit. You have to know when it's right to stay down or get up, Bruce. You have to know when you get up because you need something, and when you get up just for the sake of getting up." Bruce tried to think about it, but he struggled as he sat in his chair, not knowing if it was right for him to move. We could hear him in class, fidgeting in his chair, trying to stay put, and it was horrible.

The truth was, the teachers were trying to get Bruce to stay in the chair because he was large and he had too many impulses. Wherever Bruce went, things fell down: ketchup bottles, chairs, exercise books. People fell too. They tumbled down on either side of Bruce, knocked in the shoulder, tripped at the heel. Each of us had progress folders in a metal box on the bookshelf, and Bruce's folder had a sheet that said, "Have I been too impulsive today?" Every afternoon Bruce had to sign Yes or No and Miss Eckhardt had to write about it.

Every day we looked at the back of Mason's head and listened to Bruce's feet. Outside the winter days grew colder. The wind blew against the window and made a tree branch tap the pane, ever so slightly, in time with Bruce's shuffling legs. One morning Miss Eckhardt brought a woman to the front of the class and smiled at us.

"Today we have a visitor," she said. "Everybody say hi to Mason's mom, Ms. Williams. She's going to give us an acting lesson."

Ms. Williams waved at us. She was tall and thin like Mason, and she stood very straight and tilted her head down as she looked at us. She was wearing a slinky black dress with a red scarf around her neck that swayed and trailed whenever she moved, and her high heels clacked on the classroom floor. When she spoke we saw that her teeth were perfect, even and dazzlingly white.

"I'm here because I want to talk to you about acting," she said. "Would you like to learn about that?"

"Yes," we chorused.

"Good!" she said. "Now, the first thing I want you to know is that acting is about emotions. And people. It's about your character, about what kind of person your character is. You have to know how your character *feels* and what your character *does*. Once you know this, you must show it with your face and your body."

She waved her arms to demonstrate this. Her bracelets jangled. Bruce shuffled and thumped behind us. Outside the tree branch tapped at the window, a low, even beat that grew faster, like a gathering army.

"We're going to try an exercise," Miss Williams said. "Here's how it will work. I'll call out a feeling, and you try and show me that feeling with your hands and his body and face. Use your body language. Really *show* me! Are you ready?"

"Ready," we chorused.

Ms. Williams raised her arms and cried out:

"Tired!"

We slumped over our desks, yawning and rubbing our eyes. We made our limbs wilt with tiredness. We looked up at Ms. Williams with drowsy, half-shut lids.

"That's very good," she said. "Now, get ready for the next one." She raised her hands, sprang forward:

"Jealous!"

We made our mouths thin and looked sideways at one another. Some of us pointed. We mumbled and crossed our arms defensively. "You guys are looking really green out there," she said. "Get ready."

We waited.

"Impulsive!" she cried.

There was a terrific crash at the back of the room as Bruce jumped out of his desk. He leapt and kept leaping, his windbreaker rising and falling, trampling his chair.

"Bruce! Stop!" Miss Eckhardt yelled.

Bruce didn't stop. He ran to the bookshelf, grabbed the pencil sharpener, and hurled it at the wall. Pencil shavings whirled around him. He threw his head back and yelled. He grabbed the metal box of progress reports and slammed it through the window, breaking the glass. Papers stormed over the playground. The wind blew in and puffed Bruce's clothes as he stomped and hollered.

Ms. Williams was hurriedly getting her coat on when the principal and the P.E. coach came running in behind us, calling out to Bruce. No one paid attention. We were all rooting for Bruce in his endless dance of freedom, as if that one moment could be suspended forever: Bruce in a frenzy of impulses, the pencil shavings drifting around him, the shards of glass singing under his feet.

Mason got his coat on too and left school early with his mom. "You should bring her again sometime," we said.

III. The Pink Rose

On February 14 we made battered valentines. Glitter rained to the floor. Glue slid down the construction paper hearts and dried into white icicles. Mason came to school with a black silk sack of roses. He went around the class, silently, and laid a white rose on the desk of each of the girls. When he got to Eleanor he laid a last rose on her desk and took his seat beside her. Eleanor stared straight ahead and swallowed. We all nudged each other excitedly. "He gave her a pink one," we whispered. Eleanor's ears were very bright.

After school Eleanor said she didn't know what to do with the rose. She said it made her scared. "Mason loves you," we teased.

Eleanor began to cry. "But I don't love Mason back," she wailed, wringing her hands.

We were dumbfounded. "If you do not love him back you must let him know," we said.

The truth was, we had never seen Eleanor cry before, and it made us all afraid. The oldest child in a family of seven, Eleanor always knew what to do. Every morning Eleanor got to school early and sharpened all of the pencils to just that right fineness, thin but not so thin the tips broke. At lunch she wiped off the desks. In the afternoons she helped us with the math. She had scrubbed, sharpened, and studied her way to the top of the class. This is how we thought of her. Eleanor with the cleanest desk. Eleanor with the answers. And now, Eleanor was afraid of the valentine. It was terrible to see.

And then the rose was indestructible. When the white roses began to brown and curl, the pink rose seemed to grow fresher every day. It was larger than the other roses, with lavish curling leaves twirling down its stem. The thorns were snipped, made round and kind. Tiers of buds burst from the stem. Like flowers in the wild, each petal seemed to curve in a different way. And then there was the ribbon: trailing and choking the stem, hurling itself into the curliest flounces and bows.



It was a horrible rose, a laughing and thriving rose.

It spilled from the sides of Eleanor's desk, as if there were vines and wilds within.

So Miss Eckhardt was only echoing our thoughts when she stood still and looked at Eleanor's empty desk one morning, and at Eleanor sitting empty-handed behind it. "Why, Eleanor," she said. "What happened to your pretty rose?"

"I don't know," she said, solemnly.

"How could you lose it?" Miss. Eckhardt said. "A big rose like that can't just up and walk away by itself."

Eleanor blinked and

looked Miss. Eckhardt straight in the face. "I just don't know," she said. "I just don't know what happened to the rose."

But Eleanor did know what happened to the rose. In the grey morning, sharpening the pencils, Eleanor took the rose and sharpened it too, stem-first, grinding the buds and the petals and ribbon into a great heap of debris. Then she stood in the guilty

shadows of the early light, in the empty classroom, the mess of petals in her hands. The janitors had taken the trash cans, and there was nowhere to hide the shattered flower. Panicked, Eleanor dragged a chair over to the heating duct, climbed up, removed the vent, and threw the pile of shavings into the pipes.

Eleanor whispered this story of the rose at lunchtime, and we never asked her to tell it again. But for days afterward, when the heat came on, little pink dots puffed out of the vent over our heads. Light darts of thorn settled in our hair. Bits of stems, like dusty bullets, sailed towards the blackboard, right over Mason Arnold Williams III. Mason in the rosy heat. Mason in the green rain.

IV. Mason's Finale

When Mason said he was leaving we followed him around the classroom like unhappy siblings. "Why do you have to go?" we asked. He looked straight at us, the same way he looked at us on the playground when he told us about the tarantula.

"I'm going to a different school," he said. "A private school."

"A private school!" we said. "Why would you do a thing like that?"

Mason went over to his desk and began moving his notebook and pencils into a black backpack. We followed him. His mother waited at the door, her car keys jangling in her hand.

"It was nice to meet all of you," Mason said. "But I am going somewhere where people believe in what I have to share. I'm going where people will appreciate me."

"No one appreciates you more than we do," we said. Mason zipped the backpack shut and turned away to go. We sighed and watched him walk away. His mother gave us a disappointed look as she pulled the door shut. We ran to the window, with its plastic covering the gaping hole that Bruce had made, and watched as Mason and his mother got into the car. The playground and the car looked wavy and dim.

"Just try to remember," said Miss Eckhardt, coming up behind us. "He's from a different place."

And then we thought of the place where Mason came from, that still house, with neat checkerboards, with clean hands, with rows of black silk shirts and an actress mother. Where the lamed tarantula hobbled in and out of its fortress, and where people gave pink roses to the people they loved.

Outside the wind had stopped, and the leaves were gathered in little piles against the playground fence. We watched the sleek car pull away for the last time, with Mason in the backseat. We waved. If he noticed, he did not give any sign of it. The car turned out into the road, past the row of trees, all of their branches perfectly still. It was as if he took the wind away with him, back to his airless house.

Sickle by Rana McCole

I ride in the passenger seat. My dad drives. I've been crying again. "You're a big girl," he says. I'm nine, but I'm a *big girl* nine. I know what this means, and him saying it just makes it worse for me. My dad says it like it's gonna make me feel okay. I press the bottoms of my shoes harder on the glove box. My knees are bent to my chest for protection in case we crash. I feel like an idiot for wearing shorts. I stare at my calves. They jiggle when I push at them with my fingers. Fat flags. They look like droopy flags of white fat wobbling back and forth.

We stop at the 7-Eleven. Inside, I leave my dad for the Slurpee station to mix all of the flavors in one giant cup. On the other side of the aisle, my dad pours coffee into his metal thermos. This is what we do on Saturday mornings when I stay with him, unless he's sick. I keep one eye peeled. Don't want him to leave me here. My mom is always worried he'll leave me someplace, like the Mc Donald's bathroom. I am, too. That's why if I have to pee, I hold it.

My dad's taking extras from the bins on the coffee counter. Stuffing little pink packets of sweetener, teeny creamer cups and wooden stirring sticks in his biker jacket. I don't know what the point is of taking so many extras that he won't use, or how he can stand the taste of coffee. It tastes like hot dirt and smells like acid rain, which is a real thing because of pollution. He told me, "You'll like coffee when you're older. It's an adult drink." My dad is always saying I'm gonna like things and be different when I'm an adult. Like mushrooms, beer, smoking, and he even told me that when I'm bigger, I'll get bloody noses. He gets lots of bloody noses, but I never had one. He can spit a good loogie, too. When I spit, it's all clear and it dribbles down my chin. My mom says my dad's a pig in the way he acts. I don't know.

I hope we stay out all day driving the neighborhood. Tons of "people to see and places to go," my dad says. North Philadelphia is a big and small place. It's ugly. I've seen how pretty places look on television. I don't like it that much. But maybe when I'm bigger, I will. If we go back to my dad's apartment, he'll disappear or get sick or he might sleep. If he sleeps, I will be very bored and cry. My dad might get himself into trouble at his place. He gets ants in his pants really easy and that's when he starts scaring me. I get stomachaches when I think of all of it. My mom says he's a fiend and that my stomach aches because I'm a worrywart. Maybe my fatness makes my stomach hurt worse than smaller girls. When my dad sleeps, I eat up his entire kitchen, even if I hate the food. He hates the regular grocery store, so there isn't much at his place. The cereal in the cabinet is old and might have moths, but I'll eat it anyway if there's no more jelly and bread. I can always make Ramen on the stove. I pray we keep driving today. We can both keep busy. Keep our mind off our worries.

Across the store, some woman starts talking to my dad. I reach for a plastic dome lid and go near them, but pretend I'm looking at a package of beef jerky. "I need some

money, baby. You know I'm good for it," the woman says. I keep my eyes on the jerky, like I'm real interested in getting it.

"I'm tapped," he says. My dad is smiling like a wolf does. I'm not sure if his smile is sneaky or if he's irritated. My dad can be nice to people at first, but I've seen him hate women so much he bloodied them, so she better be careful.

The woman's hair looks like hay. She's wearing jean shorts too, but they're shorter than mine. She's got a cut-off shirt and big leather boots that come up to her knees. My mom would say they look slutty. She's really skinny. Skinnier than some of the skinny girls at my stupid school. It hurts to look at her cause she's got pointy teeth like a jack o' lantern. I would take her teeth if I could be that skinny, I guess. I'd just keep my mouth shut, and nobody would know to tease me. Being big, you can't hide.

My dad says I'm big because I have big bones. At night before bed, I press at them. My big, dumb bones make all the rest of me look big. It's not fair. I can't even see 'em. Even my stomach is big, and it has no bones at all from what I can tell when I push my fingers so deep I get polka dot bruises. Being embarrassed all the time because I'm such a fatty is probably why my dad gets irritated and has rage. I don't say it, but I'm real sorry.

I see my dad staring at the skinny woman's belly button. He whispers something in her ear. I want to hear because I don't like surprising things. This one time my dad stopped the car in the middle of the street, jumped out and started punching this older kid. I just stayed in the car and watched like everyone else who was around, which was a bunch of people cause it was summertime and right outside Sam's corner store. One boy from my class was there. When he looked at me I smiled at him because I wasn't sure what to do. He gave me a bad look and flipped me the bird.

The skinny woman laughs and coughs at the same time. I can't tell for sure, but I think she takes some money from my dad and then she walks away. My mom would say she walks like a slut in her slutty boots. I don't like the woman. I stand near my dad, sipping from my giant Slurpee mixture. I roll my eyes at my dad cause he's staring at her butt. He wouldn't want me to see him so I walk away, too.

In my most favorite aisle, I can't decide on a flavor of chips. After *eenie meenie miney moe*, I grab a bag and we both get in line. My dad will let me buy anything because he makes "good money" from painting houses, but I can't dilly-dally or be a pest. This will make him irritated.

The skinny woman is yelling at the cashier at the front of the line. She's cursing and being crazy.

All of the sudden, she turns around and points her dirty finger at my dad, and I think she might be telling the cashier that he was staring at her butt, but then she says, "He doesn't think I'm annoying."

"You're a doll," my dad says.

The skinny woman says to the cashier, "You see? This guy's on my side, asshole. He doesn't think I'm being annoying. You're the fucking asshole." She starts pulling on a metal grate that holds magazines, and the famous ladies start sliding to the floor. I look

up at my dad, but he doesn't really seem to care all that much about this crazy, skinny lady.

We get up to the cashier, and the skinny woman is still there and she touches my dad on his shoulder and asks real soft, "You spot me a pack too, honey?" I've never heard anybody call my dad honey before. I wonder if this woman is gonna kiss my dad or something, so I pretend I don't see and like I'm counting the brown specks on the floor.

"Now I *do* think you're being annoying," my dad says.

The woman's face twists up and turns all red. "You fucker. My boyfriend will kick your ass." My dad pays, and the skinny woman runs to the door shouting. I'm a little worried in my stomach, and I hope I won't need a toilet soon.

We leave the store, and the woman is still yelling outside. "You're gonna be fucking sorry, asshole." People are watching her and shaking their heads and all because she's a shame. My dad keeps moving and I keep up as good as I can. She is running to this drunken guy sitting on the curb. I know when someone's drunk. All my family drinks alcohol. My dad, my mom, my aunts and my uncles, too.

"Crazy whore," I hear my dad say and I know he's pissed off, which is worse than irritated. The skinny woman points at us. I'm hurrying as quick as I can to get in the car and buckle my belt. I hate fights.

My dad starts the car. The drunken man is coming at us on his jelly legs. "You a pussy, man?" I put my fingers half over my eyes because he must be nuts saying the 'P' word. The skinny woman is running behind him, but her slutty boots make it hard for her to lift her legs. The drunken man has a big rock and looks like he's gonna throw it at the windshield, so I put my Slurpee in the holder and throw my chips down on the floor and curl myself up like a mouse. My dad doesn't drive yet, and I'm not sure if the car's out of gas or something. And I wonder if the drunken guy and the skinny woman are gonna kidnap me or kill us with the rock. Or if my dad is gonna bloody them both.

The car makes a screech sound and my dad almost runs the guy over. I tuck my head in and press my shoes against the glove box to help us go faster and prepare for an accident. I sink low in my seat and stare at the rolls of my belly—all the worry under them.

After a few minutes, I smell smoke, so I know it's safe. I roll down my window to let the smoke out. I look up at my dad. He has his cigarette in his mouth with lots of ashes at the end and he still seems irritated, but better than before. It's hard to get the straw of my Slurpee in my mouth cause my dad's going so fast and I can't keep it still.

We drive for a while. When we get to a red light, my dad reaches his arm around the back of his seat and pulls out a weapon. "A sickle," he says. He holds it up for me to see, and steers with one hand. Under my breath I practice, *siik kulll, sickul, sickkill...*

"I got this so I never have to run away from anything," he tells me.

It must be heavy because my dad has white clouds on his knuckles. I can't tell if this thing, this sickle, is something bad or something good.

"I would've killed them," he says. He holds up the sickle in between us. And I hate seeing it.

I cry. I can't keep it in. I never can, like my tears are heavy too and fall out of me. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I say. But he doesn't say anything. I look away so he doesn't think I'm being a pest. Outside there's a dog tied to a gate licking its paws. It's a guard dog for a mechanic, but it has white fur and doesn't look ferocious. I make whisper noises because I know dogs have good hearing and I wave without my dad seeing. The car makes a screech sound again when we start moving. The dog looks up at me.

The way my dad's driving, I can tell where we're headed. I want to beg him to go back for just a minute and use the sickle to cut the dog free. I want to cry and beg, but we're going too fast and I know I can't stop us.



Photograph © James Ducat

My Brother on the Sidewalk by h. l. nelson

My brother has been lying on the sidewalk for four days. When I first walked down the brownstone steps and up to him, making sure to shade his face from the sun, he just smiled and said, "I'm okay, Shelly. Don't worry about me."

The first day, I asked him if he wanted a book to read, sunglasses, a Magic 8 Ball. Anything. He just wanted a large bottle of water. Filling it up at the sink, I parted the blinds to check on him. He was still there. Still just lying. I brought him his water bottle, and he drained it. I refilled it, and did so every time I saw it, empty, beside him on the concrete.

Later that day, I gave him sunblock to smear on his skin. It was already turning a fierce red. I hoped he would sit up to apply it, would break his strict adherence to the sidewalk. Anything but lie there. He didn't. He spread it on while supine. When he rubbed it in his neck and saw me at the window watching, he waved a white-covered hand.

The second day, a police officer drove by, then reversed and stopped next to my brother. The officer leaned out his window and asked if my brother was okay.

"Of course, officer. Never been better. I'll move along shortly." The officer nodded, seeing my brother had full use of his faculties and wasn't disturbing anybody, and drove on.

I pretended not to notice the darker shade of circular denim that spread from my brother's crotch in the mornings. By noon, it had dried to the original color.

The third day, three neighbor girls asked if he wanted to join their tea party.

"Sure, but I have to drink my tea lying down."

They were fine with this and soon returned with a stuffed animal entourage, doilies, and a child-sized tea set for eight. They decided he was their guest of honor and placed a doily on his chest.

One girl's mom poked her head out of their house, spied her daughter next to a supine man on the sidewalk, and rushed over, adjusting her cardigan around her shoulders.

"Elizabeth, come inside now."

"But Mama, we're playing tea party."

"Now, Elizabeth."

This is also the day that Reinhardt's called and told me I wasn't needed in my position anymore. I hadn't called in those three days. But I slammed the phone down, as if it wasn't my fault. Then glanced through the blinds and thought my brother wasn't needed in his position anymore. Not needed or wanted. I wished he would just fucking get up.

I stalked down the brownstone steps and over to him. I grabbed both of his arms and pulled them as hard as I could, got the upper half of his body off the sidewalk.

"Just get up! Get up!"

He didn't fight back. Didn't say a word. I thumped him back down and collapsed in the grass. I buried my face in my arms and cried. He reached over and patted me until I stopped.

Today, the fourth day, I wake up with a terrible feeling in my throat. Through the blinds, I see he's meditating. There are many times he's asked me to do it with him, but I can't focus enough. He moves his lips, his eyes closed. I drag our reclining lawn chair onto the strip of grass between him and the street. I sulk down into it. We don't speak for a while, then I blurt, "I'm sorry about yesterday."

He turns to me, smiles a slow, patient smile. "It's ok, Shelly."

I don't deserve this brother.

The feeling in my throat eases and we chat about the good weather we're having, who we want to see in the next election, *Star Trek* vs. *Star Wars*. We keep the subject light, circling around the fact that he hasn't moved in days.

Then he says, "Shelly, I know how you can help me."

Finally. "How? I'll do anything if it'll get you off this sidewalk."

He asks me to lean down so he can whisper the question in my ear. This is odd, but not odder than lying on the sidewalk for four days, so I lean down. He asks me.

"No. Absolutely not."

"Come on Shelly, please? For me."

I want to tell him to come inside. I want it to be like it was when we were growing up: snowball fights in winter, water volleyball in summer, and running around the neighborhood together, no matter the season.

But I don't. I do what he asks, because I'm tired.

I go inside, open the coat closet, push aside the hockey sticks we used only two months ago. They'd fallen in front of the thing. I haul it out, but a shiny metal part gets stuck on one of my brother's ice skates. Would we even use them this year? Frustrated, I yank the thing off the skate. I bang it down the steps to him.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Shelly."

I don't respond, and I don't wait for him to get into that thing. But I watch again from the window, as I have these last four days. I watch him sit up, position the thing a few different times. He's so new to this. We both are.

He hoists himself up and into the thing. I feel the sting a hard-launched snowball leaves on skin, even through layered clothes. I close the blinds.

All Throughout the Storm by Denis Underwood

Jack's hairless ankles are white and delicate as chicken bones. The photograph at his feet slipped from the book that's splayed open in his hands. He bends over and his spine looks like a jagged line of stones beneath his flannel shirt. For a second I think I hear vertebrae crackling, but it's only the noise of rain on the roof of Jack's trailer.

"Here it is," he says. "Just dumb luck I flipped through the pages before giving it to Frankie."

"Frankie? I told you I wanted that book," I say.

"Sure," Jack says, straightening himself up. "Here, take it." He hoists the book in the air between us.

"Don't let Frankie in here anymore," I say. Frankie always leaves with something. It was fine when he listened and hauled out the junk. But now, most of Jack's first editions have vanished from the shelves, including my favorites; all except for this one.

"Frankie likes to read—he has great appreciation for art," Jack says.

"Like hell he does—he sells it all on eBay." I've been through this with Jack before. "Frankie's nothing but a junkie."

"The books aren't worth much anyway," Jack says, shaking his head. He seems to have aged five years since I saw him two months ago.

"Bull-shit, Jack." The book clenched in my hand, a 1930 *Moby Dick* first edition illustrated by Rockwell Kent is worth at least fifteen hundred dollars. "You know better than that."

"Since when are you so interested in books?" At every chance, Jack reminds me that I flunked out of college. He lifts the black and white photograph inches from his face and then hands it to me. Four young men holding fly fishing rods stand on a dusty trail. Jack is there, recognizable through a mask of youth. I flip the photograph over. Faded blue ink reads: McCloud River, June, 1962.

"They're all gone," Jack says.

I hand over the photograph. He sighs, slaps it against his leg and then heads to the kitchen, following a dark path worn into the rug.

Jack's dog is curled up on the floor near the easy chair. The dog might be dead.

From time to time, I drive across the Ohio River and into Kentucky to check on Jack. He's no blood relation of mine, but years ago he took an interest in mom after dad left. He was around for a few years, at least. Now though, I often question whether I mean anything to him.

Jack ambles out of the kitchen, a plate of spaghetti in his right hand and the photograph in his left. He's mouth breathing and not wearing his dentures. After placing the dish on the table, he shimmies his bare feet until he's in front of the big chair. Hands out, as if reaching for a ladder, he sits. The dog startles awake and slinks away.

"I never liked that thing," Jack says. "Does nothing but sleep and eat."

Despite what Jack says, he and the animal are inseparable. He often scratches the dog's belly with one of those midget hand back scratchers. I've seen the dog's wiry hairs caught up in the fingers and Jack will slip the thing under his shirt without even rinsing it off.

"I'm the only one left," Jack mutters. "Ass cancer took Stevens four years back. Joey K.I.A. drunk driving in the 70s. And Zack passed in his sleep last month." He plunges



the fork into the mound of pasta and reaches for a can of Keystone beer on the table.

"Too bad," I say.

"Never thought it would turn out like this—me, the last man standing."

"Well, this is how it is, and this is how it will always be, Jack." I step across the cramped living room. On the other side of the bay window, rain slants down beneath a streetlight.

"Hope this passes soon," I say.

"It will—always does."

I turn to face him. His eyelids are drawn tightly over sunken eyes and his jaw moves as if it's out of control. Through all the chewing and sucking and slurping, I wonder if he tastes what he's eating.

Jack places the half-eaten plate of pasta on the floor. The dog, flat as a tick, creeps over.

Jack studies the picture again. "We caught big fish back then—monsters. I would lose count."

"Yeah, you told me."

"Haven't fished since. Never will again, either."

"You took me when I was a kid," I say.

"You tried your best, but didn't have the patience. No one fished like me and these boys did. Like a team. Rivers and lakes were our playing fields." He flings the photograph. It skips along the table top and stops in a ring of beer. "The world sorts things out in its own way. None of it makes any sense."

I want to rush over and save the picture: the ink might smear, the paper could stain. Jack doesn't make a move for it.

"I've got to get going," I say.

The dog is lying on the ground, its legs flailing in the air. The hairs around its mouth are stained orange from the pasta sauce.

Jack considers the empty plate.

"Make sure and wash it before using it again, Jack." He looks at me as if I'm about to reveal the answer to a mystery that's puzzled him his whole life. I wait for his expression to change. It doesn't.

Lightning flashes and a gust of wind rocks the trailer as I gather my things.

Before opening the front door, I tuck the book beneath my coat and glance back. The chair is empty, the photograph gone. Light seeps from the crack beneath the bathroom door. Some country song I don't know blares from the AM radio mounted next to the toilet paper holder.

I slam the door shut and sprint down the stairs. It's still raining quite hard.

Artwork: Stormy Sky © Susan Solomon

Only Heaven by Elizabeth Brown

"Heaven?"

"Yes."

"Like Heaven up there?" Mrs. Goldberg asks. She has silver hair and thick glasses; she points to the ceiling. Her finger is bony and crooked.

"Yes."

"My, what an interesting name. Do you have another name people call you?"

"No, only Heaven."

Papa said I was a gift from heaven, she wants to say, before Mami and Nana died, before Papa got Yolanda. Instead she stares, expectantly, at Mrs. Goldberg's face, fingering the ruffle on the bottom of her dress. Nana bought it last week from the *Nearly New* store. Now Nana is with the angels. Mami is too. Mami was mad, said the rent was due. Nana winked, whispered "First day of Kindergarten is a special day."

She waits to hear Mrs. Goldberg say, I like your dress, Heaven.

"Quiet one, aren't you?" She holds her hand. It is ice-cold.

I lost my tooth, she wants to say.

"Circle time."

Heaven finds her square, Z for Zebra, sits crisscross apple sauce. She finds the hole and moves her tongue over it, repeatedly.

"Miss Rodriguez, I'm surprised. We just talked about the rules. In the garbage, please."

Heaven pretends to spit gum into the garbage, walks back to her Zebra. She looks quick, catches eyes; they glitter like the charms on Mrs. Goldberg's bracelet.

"One two three...count with me."

Heaven found her tooth on the coffee table. Papa forgot it. She crept downstairs after Papa was snoring and Yolanda was draped over him. Nana said the tooth fairy gave her a quarter. "I bought a ball of yarn. Your Nana loved to knit."

"Let's see. Who is our meteorologist today?" Mrs. Goldberg reaches into a can. She pulls out a Popsicle stick, looks at the name written on the side. "Sherman Bassos."

Sherman stands, excitedly, spins, hops, yanks at his pants.

"On the count of three...What's the weather? What's the weather?"

Heaven moves her lips.

"Is it sunny? Is it rainy?"

It rained last night. Papa drank and smoked with Yolanda, the woman he brought home after Nana's funeral.

"Where did you get her, Papa?" Heaven asked.

"Oh, she's a cutie. I want one, Papi. Give me one," Yolanda whined.

"You can't have me," Heaven said in her meanest voice.

"Oh no. Papi, you got to teach her some manners."

"Go outside," Papa said.

Heaven stood on the porch until the rain fell like globs; she crawled inside the car, put her hands on the wheel, pretending to drive. Thunder boomed and she ran inside, left the door ajar.

"Ven aqui, ahora!" Papa yelled later that night. He held a belt, said it was about time.

"You got \$80.00 for a battery?"

He grabbed her arm, she wiggled free, slipped, hit her mouth on the bed post.

"What's the weather today?"

"Stop crying like a baby. Big girls lose baby teeth," Papa said, holding out tissues. "I'll clean it for you."

Blood grew on the tissue, looked like the flower in Mami's scarf, the one she wore on Sundays.

"One two three eyes on me."

"One two eyes on you!"

"Angels have her now," Nana told her. Mami's tanned skin turned white like Mrs. Goldberg's.

"I hate angels." Nana was buckling her in.

Nana held her cheeks, squeezed. "You want to be damned? Answer me!"

"No, Nana," Heaven muttered. She imagined flames burning her skin like Pastor Emilio warned.

"The damned will suffer the eternal flames!" He shouted madly, pointing.

"That's passion for the Lord, baby." Nana closed her eyes, swayed when she said it.

"These are your very own paper feet, boys and girls; you will stand on these every day when we line up in our classroom. So do your best coloring. No scribble dibble."

Heaven paid a penny for him. Ms. Cooper, the neighbor, held him in her fleshy arms.

"I can have him?"

"You don't get nothing for free." She winked.

"How much?"

"How much you have?"

Heaven pulled out two coins, a nickel and a penny. "I only got this."

"Oh, I think kitty is worth at least a penny, don't you, Nana?"

"That sounds right to me."

Heaven handed Ms. Cooper the penny, feeling smart.

"She knows her money." Ms. Cooper laughed.

Nana died that night in her sleep.

At the end of the day, Heaven says "I lost my tooth."

"Already? Mrs. Goldberg smiles. "No gum tomorrow, remember." Heaven waits for Mrs. Goldberg to say her name. "Is Daddy picking up?"

Heaven shakes her head, yes, even though she's not sure. She's not sure of anything anymore, except for maybe the tooth fairy.

Papa never comes. She points to a parent and says "There he is," walks the 1/2 mile home, alone, thinking of Penny, the tooth fairy, what she'll do with her quarter.

At home, she hears Papa and Yolanda noises in the bedroom, across from the kitchen. Penny is under a chair. She coaxes him out, tries to give him dry cereal dipped in ketchup. She catches him by the tail, carries him up the stairs into Nana's bedroom, which is hers now. She puts her dress back on the hanger, hooks it on the closet door handle for tomorrow. She takes out a plastic bag with bread inside, folds one piece of bread into tiny squares, hops up on Nana's bed and nibbles it. When the light is gone, she checks the tooth under her pillow, imagines buying a bracelet with silver charms like Mrs. Goldberg's. Penny jumps up, purrs loudly. Heaven feels the vibration on her feet, giggles. Suddenly, she knows how she will use her quarter. She folds her hands under the covers: "Dear Lord Jesus, please oh please Lord, send the tooth fairy to my house. Penny needs some food to eat so he won't die like Mami and Nana. Amen."

Blue Boy by Kevin Tosca

The shade was Blue Boy, a new creation of Chanel somewhere between baby and air force blue with a touch of cobalt, and this was a first and more or less secret act for Martin: nobody knew he had painted the nail of his middle toe blue except for his wife, Lydia, who had given him the polish and a few pointers on how to use it.

Out of doors, Martin was not a man to expose his feet. Toenails, in terms of privacy, were a few notches below pubic hair, and public, open-toed footwear was the sad domain of hippies, college students, and all those demented people who lived in Florida and Arizona.

Martin wore shoes. Decent, dignified shoes.

But he admired his toe at night, and he admired his toe in the mornings, always pleasantly surprised by that alien splotch of blue waiting for him. He fantasized about walking down to the Stumptown Coffee Roasters on Division Street in the flip-flops that he did, somewhere, own (you can't stop a gift giver), but he restrained himself. It was unbecoming; it was silly; he did not want to be—he *would not* become—a flip-flop guy, but he knew the cause of his hesitation was elsewhere.

Martin continued to admire it, however, and since admiration is an unsatisfactory solitary activity, he began to think, more seriously, of an audience. He began to realize he wanted and maybe even needed one. But he didn't go anywhere with exposed toe, not yet, and he didn't tell Lydia about the growing conflict within.

Instead, he went to his job that rain-soaked week where things ran so smoothly there wasn't much of anything for him to do. He had found a niche in the organic furniture business, had skillfully exploited it, and now not only his work, but also his life, was on a kind of cruise control. Cruise control... Martin thought, seated at his black walnut hardwood desk made by his best Amish supplier. He felt the same way about cruise control as he did about automatic transmissions: It wasn't real driving.

So on Saturday morning, when the rain had stopped and the sun promised to heat his adopted city into the high seventies—a beneficent and auspicious kind of temperature—he walked to Stumptown with his blue toe gloriously on display.

Such decisions, following incubation periods of varying lengths and degrees, often come about suddenly, and such had his. While his wife had been busy grooming herself in the bathroom, he had entered their walk-in closet to pass gas, which he did, and to search it, the recesses, where he discovered the flip-flops behind a box of IRS forms and next to a purple, oversized dildo he thought Lydia had long since tossed in the trash. The footwear looked new and foreign and, much to his surprise and delight, it was blue—sapphire blue.

In Stumptown, where he was a loyal customer of five loyal years, no one noticed a thing: not the coordination, not the uncommon. No one paid him the least bit of new attention.

That night, he painted the rest of his toes blue, and the next morning, Sunday morning, when people were supposed to have the time and leisure to notice such things, he returned to Stumptown, feeling unavoidable, feeling monstrously and exhilaratingly exposed. Once again, no one noticed, no one said a word. No odd looks, either, not even one awkward moment. What the hell is wrong with these people? he thought.

He became depressed, but he didn't ask his wife what was going on. He assumed she would say something simple and dismissive like: That's Portland, but such an answer didn't get at it, what Martin was thinking and feeling, and so he brooded, brooding about action and originality and meaning and meaningful marks, and then he painted, with the utmost care and meticulousness, his ten fingernails.

Lydia did notice that, and she did ask him what he was up to, but Martin just shrugged and thought, I'm pretty, and the next morning, Monday morning before work, he went back to his coffeehouse wearing the sapphire blue flip-flops with his khaki pants and the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to accentuate and highlight the hand area. He queued for his usual Monday morning coffee, but when no one seemed to notice or care what he had so boldly and publicly done, he broke down and asked his fellow customers what they thought about all his painted nails.

Nice, they nonchalantly replied.

I like that shade, one woman added.

Yeah, another man said, what is it? Where can I find it?

Martin, having not shocked or surprised or impressed a soul, said, Is that all you people have to say? I mean—a deranged laugh-chuckle exited his mouth—what the fuck is going on here?

But no one answered his question. They all had their coffees and their muffins, or they were all, like civilized people, waiting patiently for them while the Tindersticks played on the in-house stereo and soothed everyone's Monday morning nerves.

Did these people *have* nerves?

Martin looked down. There was a boy there, wearing more complicated, more sophisticated, open-toed footwear—sandals—with fortified arch supports and straps made of supple leather. He stood as patiently as the adults, holding a white macadamia nut cookie in one of his little hands with his little fingers wrapped around it, waiting for his milk or latte. The patient adults made admiring comments to the boy's father (who looked to be about ten years younger than Martin), and they made big, encouraging, exaggerated eye and smile and hand and whole-body gestures meant for the boy himself. The big toe of the boy's left foot, Martin noticed, was painted green, the color of an avocado's flesh.

The barista, a heavily tattooed and pierced twenty-two-year-old girl named Amanda Lee who had been his friendly caffeine dealer for two years now and who was seven months pregnant and flaunting it in a cut-off T-shirt that read "BAKING", gave him a wistful smile, as if, he thought with dread, she were remembering something.

Martin rushed home. His wife, who worked from home, was surprised and pleased to see him back at such an odd hour and in such an odd state. Like she had done before, she showed him how to remove the nail polish.

People disappoint me, he said when it was all gone.

I know what you mean, she said.

He doubted that.

I don't know what to do next, he said.

Who does? she said, flipping through some papers.

I'm serious.

What is it you want to do?

What can a man do? he wondered aloud. What I want to know is... What's the most radical thing a man can do?

Live, Lydia said.

Is it to accept? he asked. Tolerate? Love? Is it that? What is that?

You know what? she said. Let's take advantage of this, let's get your mind off it, and he knew by the shady and steady look in his wife's eyes that she wanted him to remove all her clothing.

When they were done, he looked at his naked nails, the normal pink tones snug beneath the keratin. He knew they were growing, right then, but he knew he would never see the growth, not in real time. So much was happening. So much was invisible. Where, for instance, did all this tolerance and acceptance come from? When? He would be thirty-eight in July, and Dayton, Baltimore, and Boston felt like three long lifetimes ago, but he only thought about his past when he was feeling sad and nostalgic and lost, which he was, but he didn't want to feel sad and nostalgic and lost. He wanted to feel happy and now and found, so he thought about the boy in Stumptown and that boy's avocado toenail. Martin thought about him and his nail walking through the streets of their Southeast neighborhood to and from school, and Martin pictured all the flowers and the growth—the insane, wild, beautiful flora of Portland. Those sunflowers! Those gargantuan, gorgeous, cockamamie sunflowers! Something good, something possible, was happening in the world, and Martin didn't understand it, but he wanted to be a part of it.

I want to have a boy, he said, and the words, his words, out in the world, didn't shock him.

Lydia, as if she had been expecting it, didn't gasp or protest or cry out for joy or make any other demonstrative sound.

What if it's a girl? she asked.

Martin thought about Amanda Lee, the barista, how she was so unlike the girls he had known at that age and not because of the art on her skin or the metal through her body or the baby in her stomach. She had poise and the right kind of confidence. She was vulnerably open to life, an optimist and an anarchist, like the rest of them, their happiness and hope worth a trillion angry bombs.

A girl, Martin said, would be perfect.

Say Goodbye, Beeby by Dave Witty

Beeby Chambers was working in the kitchen and, although she didn't know it yet, she was recording a diastolic / systolic pressure of 80 / 135. "Calm down," she could hear the voices say, but she had arranged them into a neat, harmonious and repetitive tune and as such she had learnt to ignore them.

The snacks were arranged alphabetically across the table. Beeby had planned them this way. First, there were the almonds and then there were the cashews, each of them in similar mollusc-shaped bowls. Further along were the chocolate brownies, but taking pride of place were the two plates of Malpeque oysters.

Her parents arrived first, just as she was pouring out the pumpkin seeds into the last remaining bowl.

"So, you're feeding the birds this time," said her father. "Last time it was the rabbits but this time it's the birds."

"They're just pumpkin seeds," said Beeby.

"We're supporting you today," said Beeby's mother. "We know that it's hard for you so we're both supporting you all the way. Isn't that right Dennis?"

There were seven memorial cards stacked upon the kitchen table.

"Are you expecting a lot of people?" said her mother in a show of support.

"Six," said Beeby. "And I've asked two of the neighbours to come as well. As the pallbearers."

"Two people to lift a coffin?" said Beeby's father. "I thought Mark was a lot heavier than that."

"Dennis!" said Beeby's mother.

"Well, they could always do with your help," said Beeby to her father. "I'm sure they'd appreciate it."

"I'll tell you what, love," said Beeby's mother to her daughter. "We'll leave you alone for a minute."

"Ok, mother," Beeby said.

"And one of your friends has arrived," said her father. "Juliet, I think it is."

"It's Gillian, dad. I don't have a friend called Juliet."

Her parents left her alone and Beeby, a lone tear running like the slime of a snail across the deep verge of her cheek, continued with her present duty: washing the tea mugs in preparation for the wake.

Now, what is this music?, she thought as she scoured. Only two weeks into her classical music foray, a self-enforced musical retreat which involved an embargo on all other musical forms, and she had been unable to remember if it was Satie or Satre: they both sounded plausible.

"We're all here," said Maggie, out of the blue, her adenoidal voice like the cry of a walrus. Maggie had been a friend of hers since high school. A good friend. "Me, Gillian, Jude and your folks. We're all here. Is there anything we can help you with?"

"I think I'm all done now," said Beeby looking solemn, a look she had practiced several times in the mirror. "I'll be out in thirty seconds."

Maggie departed and Beeby was left with her thoughts once again. *Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark*, she said to herself in a stutter-gun rhythm that reminded her of the sea gulls who used to pluck scraps at her school. *Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark*, she said again, this time altering the pitch to provide a more mellifluous finish. It was only about a month ago that she had been woken up by the actions of Mark's fingers, the tips of his wild and roaming hands that had so softly, expertly and lithely traced a path across her skin. He had been dressed in his suit from Neiman Marcus, looking all smart for his first day of work, and she had been semi-naked, hidden beneath the covers, her soft exposed skin providing such comfort for his needle-like touch. How such a moment, so exquisite and so complete, could be so inconsiderable in the overall frame of life, that such a perfect and special moment, the unspoken intimacy, the ineffable desire, could only be known to them – *them!* – them and no one else, just two people out of six billion other humans, their compatriots having no notion of the feelings that had transpired, what had gone on there, the intense surge of elation, and yet surely this intimate connection, this bond, this innovation of love, was the meaning of everything: life, love and all that was in between. *Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark*, she said once again and she could feel the tears pushing hard against the soft, waning dam of her eye.

No. There was nothing else to do but collect oneself, Beeby Chambers. She looked at her reflection in the glass.

Her solemnity? It was a little severe.

"Let the service begin," she said, as a chill pricked its way northwards along the curve of her spine. "Three point one-four-one," she said as a means of composure. "Five-nine." She paused. "Two-six-five." She paused again. "Three-five-seven." And with that announcement, she was ready to go.

The mourners all smiled as Beeby took her place in the horseshoe alignment. No one noticed Beeby's hand shaking because they were all focused upon the tears in her eyes.

"We're ready!" shouted Beeby's father over the silence, his face looking towards the pallbearers. "Bring him in!"

This was the moment, Beeby thought. This was the moment that would be the absolute hardest she'd ever known. And it wasn't helped, Beeby considered, by how cold the world seemed to be turning at this time. Blue skies, admittedly, and the middle of summer, and yet Beeby's body was frozen, her knees moving quickly, her feet tamping hard. 'Focus,' she thought to herself firmly. 'You need to focus on something. Focus Beeby.'

"Let us all bow our heads," said Beeby's father as the coffin was brought in by the two neighbours, Mr. Foley and Mr. Best, the two volunteers balancing it on the rooves of their heads with their arms jolting out in support, as if indigenous tribesmen taking

their battle canoes out to war. When they arrived at the hole, dug fifty inches deep in the middle of the garden, they carefully slid their heads away from the base at each corner and then lowered the coffin somewhat dramatically into the ground.

"Thank you," said Beeby's mother to each of the pallbearers. "It's beautiful. It's a beautiful coffin."

A vessel, Beeby thought. Not a coffin.

"We are all gathered here today," said Beeby's mother, "to say goodbye to someone who will remain only in our lives as a memory. Mark Howard Chambers. A man who, dare I say it, was the one man who could make our dear Beeby happy, a man who has touched not just the heart of our daughter, our precious daughter, but the hearts of all of us here today."

Beeby shot a quick glance at the three friends of hers, Gillian, Maggie and Jude. The three of them lined up in order of height like Matryoshka dolls: the lank, awkward prettiness of Gillian next to the staccato of Maggie and the short, spoilt pucker of Jude. The four of them had, Beeby included, roamed the school like four horsewomen across the wasteland of Andamont High, and yet now they looked so weather-beaten and tired.

"It is with great pleasure that I will read you all a poem," said Beeby's mother. "One that Beeby has written especially for today."

Mark could be so irredeemably cruel about her friends. She had found it enticing and yet now, on this solemn day, she had found it a little unnecessary.

*'Into a sea of jet black must my life now descend,
Because you, my dear Mark, are now gone...'*

And so the poem started, read beautifully by her mother's lilting voice.

*'That I will again see your face, I cannot now pretend,
Because you, my dear Mark, are no more...'*

Beeby could feel her hand tapping hard against the seat of her thigh, like a conductor, moving in time with the rhythms and the lifts of her mother's voice.

*'How to go on from this pain, I can barely explain,
What am I but a product of love?'*

"Three point one-four-one five-nine-two-six-five," Beeby said to herself as a means of composure. "Three-five-eight," she continued. "Nine seven-nine three-two-three," she said as she picked out a magpie to become her focus on the horizon. Her knee was arcing back and forth but, as to why, she didn't know. A stern, skittish wind appeared to be skating its way out past her stomach, down her leg, and down her hemline, this same skittish wind circling her knee, over and over, but where had it come from she didn't know. How it had been created she was at a loss to explain.

"Three point one-four-one," she said to herself once again. For that's what her counsellor had said at the last session, a session that cost a hundred and twenty one dollars, the session lasting fifty minutes although it had been billed as an hour. "Pi," the counsellor had informed her, "is the key to all relief in this world." That's what he had said. And whenever she felt herself zoning out or feeling stressed then she should think of pi and she should recount it, recount it to as many different places as she could.

Oh Mark, she thought to herself. Mark who had promised to be so different, who had talked of *eternal conjunction*, Mark who had talked about marriage and the entwining of souls unto death. Why had he done it? Why had he lapsed? Gone off with someone else, a younger model, decided that maturity could be forsworn for callow flesh.

And how did Jude ever marry? That's what Beeby began to wonder. Jude, who was so nice to her and yet so plain and so insipid and dull. What did she have that Beeby didn't? Nothing. A nice smell and that was all.

"Small girls," Mark had explained to Beeby one time before sleep. "Men are drawn to them."

"But why?" Beeby asked

"Just because..." he had replied with a smile. "Because they make a man feel better about their manhood. You understand?"

"You mean, they make it look bigger?"

"That's correct. They make it look bigger."

"But that wouldn't be an issue for you," Beeby had whispered whilst sneaking beneath the covers and passing in kisses between his breastbone and crotch.

How ironic then that the colleague he had slept with was so short.

*'Oh land, vast and grand, take my Mark in your hand,
May you bury him deep in your palm.'*

Gillian, Maggie and Jude. All three of them, Beeby thought, appeared as if, although they wanted to support her, they simply didn't know how to act in this setting. How reliable they were as friends – always ready to share stories, go out, catch a film – and yet how unreliable they were when finally tested. That day in April. That day when Beeby sat down with Maggie and said "Maggie, I think that Mark is having – " and within the space of a second Maggie had said it, without prompting or delay... "An affair? I'm afraid it's true Beeby, he's been having an affair for some time now." She had known for approximately two or three months and yet she had not thought to tell Beeby. She had told Gillian and she had told Jude. But not Beeby. Not the person with the most right to know. Maggie, with the sisterly concern and the alleged spontaneity, she had not thought to warn Beeby that eternal love was such a lie.

Beeby could start to feel the cold now in a rather terrifying way. Her fingers were curled up, clawing inwards, trying to wrap themselves neatly into ringlets of bone. It was at this point, too, that the garish summer colours gave way to a chiaroscuro light, and in Beeby's mind the thoughts that were so important moments earlier were now

superseded by weak thoughts, thoughts of repression and space. 'Mark Chambers,' she kept saying to herself. 'Mark Howard Chambers,' she repeated again with each her breath. She was one minute in a womb picking out the sound of her mother, and she was the next minute in a court room, explaining that the scales of love and happiness were against them from the start. If only the ground would stop shaking, Beeby wondered. If only it would stop rocking. Thrashing hard. But it wasn't so much the ground that was shaking but the confused and random thoughts in her head.

A tortoise-like cloud in the sky was now raining tears of blood. Beeby could feel them as they fluttered past her face, tears of loss and paper anguish, shredded confetti, the rose petals that Mark never bought, they were falling now just like bloodied snow upon his *vessel* in the ground. The hours she had spent ripping up these flowers so that her friends could release them into the grave, and yet now, so strangely beautiful did it seem, that Beeby could scarcely believe it might be real. And neither could she fathom how his voice had seemed to emanate from the grave, his stentorian voice, unmistakable, unreserved, the words "have I missed much?" springing like oil from below. And yet could that be her mother as well, her mother's voice, the one that she can pick out from a hundred other tones? Could that be her mother telling him to leave and to respect her daughter's wishes? And could that be her father telling him he's not welcome here today? Her father who has put a hand against the arched back of her mother, who is ready to support her whenever she seems flustered or alarmed. 'My daughter doesn't want to see you here today,' her mother keeps saying. 'Leave us alone, you're not wanted.' But Beeby isn't worried, because his objections are those of a ghost. A ghost who has been killed off long ago. She can kill someone from her mind if she wants to. 'Pi, just think of Pi,' commands Beeby to her brain, hoping for displacement, hoping for escape, but even though she can hear his voice clearly, his voice demanding permission to stay - "it's my own bloody funeral after all!" - Beeby knows it cannot be Mark, it simply couldn't happen, because Mark Howard Chambers is dead to her now, dead and buried, dead and gone, so if that voice is coming from anywhere it must be from the tortoise-like cloud in the air, because Mark is dead to her: no longer will his words clog the narrow hallways of her mind, no longer will his voice fill the empty pockets of the air, no longer will his fingers weave a faint path across her skin.

"It's okay. He's gone now," she could hear her mother saying.

"He won't be bothering you again," her father said. "He's gone now, Beeby."
Her beloved boyfriend. RIP.

Elegy by Ted Lietz

I find my long-lost fountain pen, *Hrunting* engraved upon its golden hilt. *Hrunting*, named for the sword of Beowulf. *Hrunting*, red-ink-bleeder upon mediocre essays, wordsmith-vanquisher on the field of scholarly discourse.

Standing now in the driveway, I try to remember why I sought *Hrunting*.

Where is my car?

I recall a line from "The Wanderer," an Old English elegy. *Where has the horse gone? Where the young warrior?*

As if stung by a dart, I remember that I no longer have a car, no longer drive. That twenty autumns have passed since I last paced the stage of my beloved lecture hall; a score of leaf-falls since I last warmed myself in the fellowship of the Faculty Club; two decades since I last wielded *Hrunting*.

My son has come out of the house and stands beside me. "Dad. What are you doing?"

I search for words to hide my forgetfulness. "Going for a walk."

"I feel like a walk, too. Why don't you put on a pair of pants, and we'll go together."

I return to my room, take gray slacks from the closet. I reflect upon my son's kindness, to speak as if my going about naked below the waist were no greater a sartorial indiscretion than mismatched socks.

Last evening, he and his friend and I were in the same room. Yet my son spoke as if I were no more sentient than the recliner in which I sat.

This is so often the case that I hardly blame him. "The father I knew is leaving me a little bit, every day," he said.

I could shrug at my son's use of that shopworn cliché, hackneyed lament, baby-boomer bromide. But not at the untruth with which the phrase begins. He *never* knew me.

Nor do I know him.

For decades, whenever I approached he has retreated behind his battlement. Eventually I stopped approaching at all, built fortifications of my own.

When my wife passed, I realized I couldn't live alone. My son's offer of the spare bedroom in his home was generous. But, the words accompanying that offer—*if you want* and *if that would appeal to you*—those phrases reflected nothing more than resignation to filial responsibility, the desire to build a bulwark against guilt.

I considered placing myself in the hands of strangers, men and women with whom I shared no history, with whom I might start afresh. But by then I'd identified a new mission, a quest which would require frequent contact with my son. A quest toward understanding, making things whole between us, forming a lasting peace.

So I moved in with him and his family, leveled my walls, filled my moat, dreamed we might drink mead together. But, as if guarding a hoard, he has kept the better part of himself in a cave, hidden from me.

I've tried to speak with him. But these days, my tongue does not always do as I bid. Sometimes, instead of what I intend, I find myself speaking the poetry I love, usually in translation. But sometimes I lapse into the ancient words, into Anglo-Saxon. At this my grandchildren smirk and titter and whisper to each other, "Grandpa's speaking in tongues, again."

If I cannot always speak as I wish, perhaps I can write. Now I remember why I sought *Hrunting*. I thrust him toward the paper.

Dear son,

I want to tell you about my longing. An ache so profound and powerful and painful I can barely describe it. In what time I have left, I would like to know you, and you to know me. But first, I feel there are things between us, things I do not understand. For anything I ever may have done to harm you, insult you, belittle you, I apologize. I also apologize for whatever blindness keeps me from knowing what those things might be. Let us speak of all this. Let us make peace.

My son stands in the doorway to my room and says, "Ready for that walk, Dad? Hey, I see you found *Hrunting*."

I place the paper in his hands. He scans, looks puzzled.

"The words, son! Read the words!"

"These are just wavy lines."

I look again, see that he's right and try to speak my thoughts. "Sorry. So, so sorry."

"It's okay, Dad. It's just a sheet of paper."

He looks at his watch and says, "I have to leave for work. Maybe we can take that walk tonight."

Tonight? I always knew time was not my friend. But now I understand him even better as a pitiless, implacable, unconquerable foe. I want to make my son understand *now*. But when I open my mouth, only lines from "The Wanderer" tumble out. "*Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting, here man is fleeting, here woman is fleeting.*"

Gibberish. But my son nods as if I were making perfect sense. "Gotta go. See you tonight."

Tonight. Will I have the strength, the acuity, the words tonight? Lines from "The Battle of Maldon" come to mind, and I barely keep myself from saying, *Spirit must be by as much the harder, heart by as much the keener, Mood must be by as much the more, by as much as our strength lessens.*

Tonight. Tonight I will rally spirit, heart, mood.

I must.

"Oh, and Dad? Put on some pants, okay?"

The Dinosaur Graveyard by Elizabeth Maria Naranjo

This morning, over coffee, Dillon asked me to marry him. I was still in my pajamas, folded into a dining room chair, staring blankly at the crossword puzzle. Dillon stood at the kitchen window, framed in light, like those pictures of Jesus. He always does that first thing, throws aside the sheer yellow drapes and twists open the blinds, basking in the glory of a new day. I resent sunlight that early. I looked up at him, this grinning beam of energy, black hair wet from his shower, work shirt wrinkled because I'd forgotten it in the dryer. I focused on a curl of steam rising from my coffee cup. I said, "What's a group of geese that starts with an 'S'?"

When I think of forever, my chest contracts; it writhes and slithers like something ancient. This is because I'm obsessed with dinosaurs. Once, I kissed a boy at the edge of a dinosaur graveyard. The ground was not a bed of fossils; the creatures were there, frozen in some medium I would see only once, bent to the rhythm of an artist's hands. In time, the memory crumbled so when I looked back, the dinosaurs were gone. But the kiss I remember perfectly.

"Don't be afraid." At night, Dillon wraps me in a too-warm embrace; he is so sure I find comfort in his arms. I lie there in a sweat, willing myself not to squirm away. It always happens like this, when someone enters my bloodstream; they press so long and hard against me they cross over inside like osmosis. But it's a long way to the heart.

I was seventeen when I saw the dinosaurs. I was in love, and love at seventeen is a curse. There is nothing before it, so how can there be anything like it after?

But love at seventeen isn't *real* love.

I've heard that. I can't prove it was real. Memory eats itself and all that's left are bones. I gather them and scatter them in the dust, like some voodoo priest foretelling the future, though I search for only the past. I brush at the ashes and click bones together and wait for truth to emerge. Every time I capture it, the memory changes.

The first time, the dinosaurs were juniper bushes. This was after my first live-in boyfriend, at nineteen. He had no job, so live-in meant sleeping in my loft during the day, curled inside a hangover. When he smoked, a fog would drift across his eyes, and he could make love for hours. He would pass out and crumble over me and I would hold his limp body and pretend to feel flattered, invoking songs of lovers who writhe and sweat all night, their work forever unfinished. I pretended this didn't feel like failure. I watched him sleep, his mouth hanging open, and drifted into dreams on the waft of his breath: pizza, marijuana, cheap beer.

It was one of these nights that the dinosaurs came back. I hadn't thought of them in years, but now I could hear them, snapping branches and thundering cries, pounding through my gray jungle of dreams. Their vibrations pulsed through me and I woke to a rich flood between my legs, soothing the rawness my lover had left, ashamed, unsatisfied, desperate to see them again.

Every night for weeks they returned, phantom shrieks haunting my dreams. They drifted in shadows and fled with the morning. I would squeeze my eyes shut again, trying to pull them out with me, just enough to glimpse a color, a shape. Eventually I began to guess; after all, there were only so many ways a dinosaur graveyard could be built.

Juniper, then. Creatures crafted from tall, lush foliage; emerald leaves feathered over bruise-colored berries. There were dozens: pterodactyls, brontosaurus, triceratops, stegosaurus, meticulously pruned and trimmed into a bright menagerie. Their leaves swayed in the soft mellow breeze, and the air was heavy with summer. The boy had brought me here, had directed me through the old neighborhood, where pretty gabled houses stood testament to the charm of our hometown. "You've never seen this?" he asked, then shrugged, smiled. "I'll show you."

It was still the beginning, for us, and his nearness obscured everything. He boosted me up onto the block wall, and I looked out over the yard, breathing fast. I saw them, I did, but then he was next to me, tipping my jaw toward his face. I stopped breathing.

Dillon doesn't know where I live. He thinks he sees me in corners of his house, at his kitchen table, on his couch, staring at things he can see. I see a modest single-family detached home with concrete countertops and Saltillo tile flowing red and brown, like a river, through every room. He sees the future. "Children," he says, "or not. Whatever you want; it's up to you." He doesn't know my heart was staked in a past I can't forget, buried with a vision I can't remember.

At twenty-one, the dreams disappeared, along with my boyfriend. I liked being alone. Every morning I walked to work, a local bookstore where I sold music CDs and movies and little wrapped chocolates. Sometimes I stopped at the corner diner for coffee, scratching out answers to the crossword puzzle. I knew the cook liked to watch me. When I looked up, always I could feel him look away, and his shyness began to intrigue me. He was tall and thin and pale; his eyes as blue as his cheeks were pink, and I could see his whole personality, wrapped in pastels.

I knew he would never work up the nerve to ask me, so I asked him, and soon we were taking hikes in the woods behind his trailer. He was gentle and nonbearing, never touching me, always hinting of a future in business or law. Something distinguished. We took trips through the mountains, long, narrow drives among the pine forests, rushing creeks and cool autumn air. Sometimes he would reach for my hand, and I'd hold it like a stone, feeling awkward, feeling nothing else at all.

They came back the last night, a night I sat alone in my apartment, sipping wine. The cool liquid spread over my lips, numb sweet release that turned bitter on my tongue. I called his number, his name, and he came to me, looking restless and unsure. No, I thought with dismay, looking afraid. I told him I was sorry, that I knew I wasn't easy to get through. I told him, "Let's try one more thing." And his fingers fumbled at my jeans, his long limbs tangled for position, his eyes looked anywhere but my face. We struggled silently and I watched the color rise in his cheeks, felt sick with embarrassment for this awkward boy/man. He rested his head on my chest and mumbled something, an

apology. I held him there and when I woke he was gone. I wrapped my body in a blanket and stepped out onto the patio, watching my breath cloud the cold morning air. The last trace of sunrise still colored the sky, a careless watercolor smeared orange above the mountains.

My dreams came clear, the way we had watched a furious sunset on the edge of the dinosaur graveyard. The kiss had lingered, long and slow. I remember the sweet ache that spread through my chest and the feeling that we were above time; no one else existed there. When the kiss broke, I saw the sky bleeding behind us. But this time I was standing because the fence wasn't block. It was wood. I know because I pulled myself up to peer over it, and a splinter pierced my palm. It was wood like the dinosaurs prowling behind it; I glimpsed them briefly before he lifted me down and pulled me against his body. Brilliant, ancient figures carved from ash.

Dillon is a beautiful man. He is clean. He is happy. He rubs my feet. He works.

"What are you waiting for?" my friend asks. "Nothing," I say. "I don't think I deserve him," I say.

I am the luckiest girl alive. I am the luckiest girl alive. I am the luckiest girl alive.

At twenty-three, a new bookstore opened across town and I was sent to manage it. The music manager at the old store came to visit. "Finally," he said, giving me a slow smile. "I can ask you to dinner."

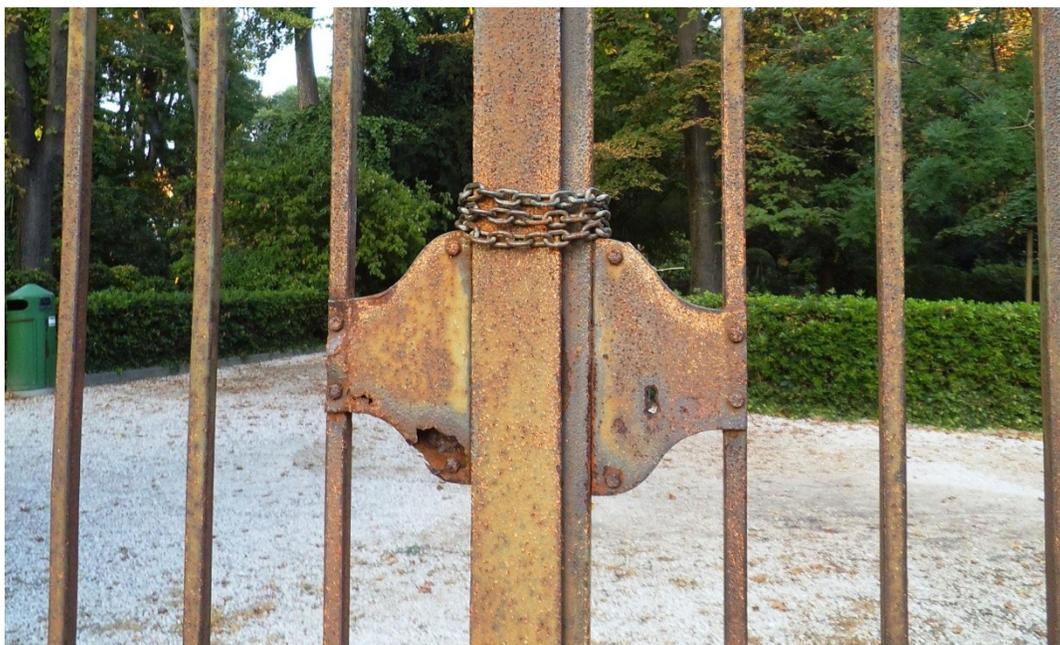
His name was Steve, and he had a way of looking me over with his flat green eyes that made anything seem possible. We went out for Italian, parking downtown and walking the city streets at dusk. He placed his warm hand lightly on my back as we crossed streets, nodding importantly at the drivers idling at the edge of the crosswalks. He talked nonstop, about the industry and new musicians, about his reviews for important publications and the free samples he received from the largest recording companies. He took long strides that left me slightly behind, staring at the curve of his bicep pushing against his black t-shirt, and the lovely sculpted shape of his forearm. His fingers were long, like someone who plays the piano or strums a guitar.

At the restaurant, Steve's eyes teased and smoldered, never drifting toward the shapely waitress who brought chilled glasses of wine, woven baskets with fresh steaming bread and delicate plates coated with olive oil and minced garlic. He ordered for me and touched my knee under the table. When the check arrived he reached behind him, patting the pocket of his jeans. He frowned and patted his front pockets. The frown disappeared and the corners of his mouth turned down. He looked at me, his sultry gaze now like a child's, wide eyed and innocent. I took the check and later, in his tiny room in the city, staring at yellowed walls lined with records, a floor strewn with CDs and music magazines, and his stale breath on my cheek, I let him slip a long finger inside me, shutting my eyes, thinking about the perfect curve of his arms, thinking the best has always been behind me.

What I know for sure is the boy's eyes were the desert sky at noon, a blue mirage. I stole glimpses of them in the car that day, pretending to study the passenger side mirror. We drove through a neighborhood of run-down houses, past a trailer park where

shirtless boys peered suspiciously from faded porches. He pointed out the way, his outstretched arm close to my cheek, and the sun-washed smell of him flared in my throat. I imagined his fingers brushing my skin, touching my hair. I was conscious of the wetness under my arms and kept them pressed down, my hands gripping the bottom of the steering wheel. I had never been so nervous.

What I know for sure is months later, moving underneath him, my arms wrapped around his back and crushing him against me, then pushing him away so I could watch, I thought, if another girl were to ever see what I could see, to own this body, to move this way underneath him, I would die. The tears coursed in silence; I felt crazy, I felt blissful, I felt terrified. I *felt*.



Once they were tin. Pressed silver twisted into claws and flattened along elegant spines, bowed over muscle. They flashed in a brilliant sun that could not have shone in a June twilight. Once they were wrought iron, black metallic pipes snaking over reptilian heads and curved into menacing tails, spikes thrust up like steeples. Or maybe that was the fence I saw them through and they were really paper mache. Crude and clumsy, like a child's drawing. But no, they would disintegrate in the rain.

I reach for them in dreams, desperate to complete the picture of this one perfect time. The more I stand in the memory, the more ethereal it seems, like a cloud. I could be right inside of it, and feel nothing. I could be right inside, and never know.

Photograph © Chris Fradkin

Issue 11 Contributors

Authors

Barbara Barrow's work has appeared in *The GSU Review*, *Zahir*, *NANO Fiction*, and *theNewerYork*.

Elizabeth Brown is a native of Connecticut. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Empty Sink Publishing* ("Fugue" was Editor's Choice), *TreeHouse*, *Contraposition*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Eunoia Review* and others. She is currently working on a collection of short stories and a dystopian novel (not exactly in that order). She can be found blogging updates on fiction and related at www.ebrownstories.blogspot.com and [bethbrown555@twitter.com](https://twitter.com/bethbrown555).

Catherine Carberry is an MFA candidate at Bowling Green and serves as Assistant Editor of *Mid-American Review*. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including *Tin House's Open Bar*, *North American Review*, *Cream City Review*, and *New Madrid*.

Christopher David DiCicco loves his wife and children—not writing minimalist stories. But he does. Work in *Superstition Review*, *Literary Orphans*, *Litro Magazine*, *WhiskeyPaper*, and other fine publications. Visit www.cddicicco.com for more published work.

John Hair is a husband, a father, and a worker of wood. He often plays cards with the voices in his head, but they stack the deck and always win. It's okay. He likes to keep them happy, so he can write. He's currently trying to convince these voices to keep their mouths shut, so he can finish his first novel.

Rick Hodges writes for a magazine in Washington, DC and lives across the river in Arlington, VA, with his wife and two daughters. His other fiction works include "Three Generations of Imbeciles," a stage play about Virginia's legacy of forced sterilization of intellectually disabled people. Rick has also performed in an improv comedy troupe, since people always said there was something funny about him.

Tom Howard's recent stories have appeared in *ARDOR* and *Ampersand Review*, and he received the 2013 Rash Award in Fiction. A software engineer and magazine editor, he lives in Arlington, Virginia, where he can be found walking the hills with his wife beside a funny little black dog named Harper.

William Lemon received his M.A. in Literature and Writing at California State University San Marcos, then began teaching English at Santa Monica College and Irvine Valley College. He has been published at *BlazeVox*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Paragraph Line*.

Ted Lietz is a reformed marketer. Everyone has to live somewhere...he happens to live near Detroit. A number of Ted's other stories are available at no charge online.

Rory Fleming is a writer and law student from North Carolina. He has wanted to write about the weird world of anime in some capacity for a while now and it has finally happened. In the past he has been published at *The Fiddleback*, *Punchnel's*, and *Gone Lawn*.

Kelly Fordon's work has appeared in *The Kenyon Review (KRO)*, NPR's *This I Believe*, *Flashquake*, *The Montreal Review*, *The Cleveland Review*, *The Windsor Review* and various other journals. Her poetry chapbook, "On The Street Where We Live" won the 2011 Standing Rock Chapbook Contest and was published in February 2012. Her poetry chapbook, "Tell Me When It Starts To Hurt" was published by Kattywompus Press in May 2013. She received her MFA in creative writing from Queens University in Charlotte. www.kellyfordon.com

Ronald Friedman is a retired psychologist living in Scottsdale, Arizona. He is the author of two nonfiction books and over 50 articles published in magazines and newspapers, but has been writing fiction for only the past three years. His short stories include "The New Suit" published by *Huff Post 50* and "Time Remaining" in the *Rind Literary Review*.

Rana McCole traded the mean streets of North Philadelphia for the sun-drenched byways of Los Angeles at 18 years of age. She completed her MFA in Creative Writing at Antioch University and is writing her first novel. A strict pessimist, she is rumored to reveal rare instances of positive thinking under the cover of darkness only to her husband and their beloved dog, Fanny.

Elizabeth Maria Naranjo's debut novel will be released this year through WiDo Publishing. Her short fiction and creative nonfiction have also appeared in *Literary Mama*, *The Portland Review*, *Hospital Drive*, and a few other places. Visit her at <http://www.elizabethmarianaranjo.com/>.

h. l. nelson is Founding Editor/Executive Director of *Cease, Cows* mag and a former sidewalk mannequin. (Yes, that happened.) Pub credits: *PANK*, *Hobart*, *Connotation Press*, *Red Fez*, *Bartleby Snopes*, blah blah blah. She is working on an anthology, which includes stories by Aimee Bender, Roxane Gay, xTx, and other fierce women writers. h. l.'s MFA is currently kicking her ass. Tell her what you're wearing: heather@hlnelson.com.

Ben Orlando teaches at George Mason University and produces the podcast "History Repeating Itself" when he isn't working on short stories or novels.

Jay O'Shea is the author and editor of several books on dance. Her essays have been published in three languages and six countries. Her novel *The Alchemy of Loss* is currently seeking a good home. An enthusiastic, if somewhat inconsistent, practitioner of yoga, rock-climbing, and martial arts, she lives and works in Los Angeles. Her short fiction has appeared in *Toasted Cheese*, placed in *Glimmer Train's* 2013 Family Matters competition, and is forthcoming in the anthology *Bloody Knuckles*. You can find her online at www.jayoshea.com.

Joseph Michael Owens is the author of the 'collectio[novella]' *Shenanigans!* and has written for [*PANK*], *The Rumpus*, *Specter*, *HTML Giant*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Grey Sparrow* & others. He is also the blog editor for both *InDigest Magazine* and *The Lit Pub*, and you can find him online at <http://categorythirteen.com> as well. Joe lives in Omaha with four dogs, one wife, and a son.

Gary V. Powell's short stories and flash fiction have been widely published, both online and in print, most recently at *Bartleby Snopes*, *Literary Orphans*, *Thrice Fiction*, *Connotation Press*, *Carvezine*, and *moonShine Review*. Several of his stories have placed or been selected as finalists in national contests. His first novel, *Lucky Bastard*, released in December 2012, is available through Main Street Rag Press at <http://www.mainstreetrag.com/GPowell.html>. His newly-released novella in stories, *Speedos, Tattoos, and Felons* is available at Kindle Books.

Michael Royce is a graduate of Portland's 2011 Attic Atheneum, a one-year alternative to a MFA program. His published fiction and creative non-fiction have appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Fringe*, *PANK*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Prime Number*, and other on-line and print journals and anthologies. His series collectively called "Mississippi Freedom Summer in Eight Vignettes" was published in the "Best of the Net 2011" by Sundress Publications.

Robyn Ryle teaches sociology to college students when she's not writing. She has short stories in *WhiskeyPaper*, *Cease*, *Cows* and *Hamilton Stone Review*, among others. "The Last Bear in Indiana" is based on characters from a novel she's written, which made it much easier to hear what they might have to say.

Vincent Scarpa is a Michener Fellow in fiction at the University of Texas. He is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the 2012 recipient of the Norman Mailer College Fiction Prize.

Daniel Thompson is an urban planner living in Richmond, VA, with his wife and daughter. "MacGyver" is his first published story. His new stories can be found in forthcoming issues of *Literary Orphans*, *Jersey Devil Press*, and *Eunoia Review*.

Kevin Tosca lives in Paris. You can find him and his work at www.kevintosca.com and on Facebook.

Virgie Townsend's writing has been featured or is forthcoming in *SmokeLong Quarterly*-*The Best of the First 10 Years*, *Best of Pif Magazine, Volume One*, and *Bartleby Snopes*, among other publications. She lives in the D.C. area with her husband and dog. She aspires to be Wednesday Addams. See Virgie reading "Because We Were Christian Girls" at the Waterbear Reading Series by visiting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpmzB8CVsaI> or <http://virgietownsend.com>.

Denis J. Underwood was born in Houston, Texas and raised in the United States and France. His stories have appeared in *Identity Theory*, *Intellectual Refuge*, *Gravel*, *The First Line*, *The Paumanok Review*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Carolina*, was published by Wind River Press in 2004. Denis lives in Oak Park, Illinois with his wife and daughter. He is working on what he likes to believe is the final draft of his first novel. He is also the web editor for *10,000 Tons of Black Ink*.

Dave Witty lives in Melbourne where he spends his time as a spin doctor for local government. Previous fiction has been published in *Thieves Jargon*, *Sleet Magazine*, and *Blue Lake Review*. He is currently working on a never-ending novel.

Illustrators

Taira Anderson is fixated on the neglected combined with the glorified, the once-was meeting the now-is. This fixation has led to the development of her criminality, her thievery. She steals old ads from faded magazines, lifts long limbed models from catalogues, tears pages from chewed up children's books and outdated textbooks. With pencil, carbon paper, ink, and gauche, she combines the lines of these pilfered images to make awkward splices of what-ifs, to mix up meaning, to make you wonder. Visit her at <http://tairalanderson.blogspot.com/>. *Taira's art appears on page 49 of this issue.*

Frank Cademartori lives in Seoul, South Korea. Originally from Chicago, Illinois, he now spends his time achieving amateur status at various activities. He has chosen to daily relive the horrors of Middle School from the other side of the teacher's desk. More of his photography can be found here <http://endlessframe.wordpress.com/>. *Frank's art appears on page 57 of this issue.*

David Callihan likes to manipulate nature in a quirky playful way in his pictures. You can see more of his work at <http://www.flickr.com/people/elliott52/> *David's art appears on page 85 of this issue.*

James Ducat has taught photography and writing in Southern California for many years. Almost seems like a lifetime, sometimes. His photography has appeared in *The Sand Canyon Review* and has been exhibited locally. *James's art appears on pages 67, 74, and 90 of this issue.*

Chris Fradkin is a beet farmer who is tending crops in Central California. His prose and poetry have appeared in *Thrice Fiction*, *Monkeybicycle*, *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review*, and *Thrush Poetry Journal*. His songs have been performed by *Fergie*, *The Plimsouls*, and *The Flamin' Groovies*. His photography has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes* and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, and his Emmy-award-winning sound editorial has graced *The X-Files*. *Chris's art appears on pages 8, 12, 36, 40, and 112 of this issue.*

Jhaki Schneller: Despite past degrees in psychology, human ecology, and global studies, Jhaki is still deciding what she wants to be when she grows up. She currently teaches at an international school in Sweden. She writes and paints when she can and sometimes when she can't. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Metazen*. Her art sometimes appears at: punderstandingmyshelfandotters.blogspot.se *Jhaki's art appears on pages 19, 23, 30, and 80 of this issue.*

Susan Solomon, who was raised under neon Las Vegas lights, is a freelance painter of poems. She graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and is editor and cartoonist for Sleet Magazine, an online literary journal. *Susan's art appears on page 94 and the cover of this issue.*
