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Artwork titles page 3-5: Tor-
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ence **NICK ROMEO**









Diner

PANSY MAURER-ALVAREZ



Backstage

PANSY MAURER-ALVAREZ

LISA STICE

You Are Lines and I Am Space

The plan suddenly made sense—
all those measurements penciled
onto notepads finally added up

to something—all those nights
you sat at the table drawing
while I ate my dinner and yours

grew cold—the mornings I woke
to find you already up and pacing
the yard despite the mosquitoes.

You have always been like this from
the beginning but I just couldn't
see how much you love planning.

This Morning

with the weather unusually warm
I walked barefoot into the garden
to goad the vegetables into growing
to entice the flowers into opening

and there I found a radish, tumid,
large as a plum or a stone to toss,
ready to be snipped, ready to crunch,
its peppery burn tickling my throat

For the Long-Ride

and from way up there
it was inevitable
a downward spiral

and sure there were
places where I could
have gotten off

but who wants to exit
the ride when you're
sliding down the banister

at full speed, arms raised
no concerns like a child
with only life ahead

Those Who Live in Glass Houses

wake to the sun each morning
stretch their arms and yawn

move in and out of rooms
then descend the stairs

their lives open like specimens
watched like ants in tunnels

daily routines explored
and scrutinized in detail

as if these people differ
somehow from you and me

When my Grandpa Became Dust

I bought an ad in his local paper:
when and where he was born,
when and who he married,
when he came to settle in this place
where he is now in a funeral home
waiting for services on Saturday
at the church where he attended
fifty years and took communion,
how he began as a roughneck
at such a young age and moved
his family all around the country,
poor until oil called him to Alaska
so he could return to Colorado
and open his business of shaping steel,
how he sent his creations over borders
and by sea, what he invented, then
how he quietly left his body behind.



Grandfather
SERGIO A. ORTIZ

YASMIN BOAKYE

Lena

She is the type of girl who scratches her breast as soon as it begins to itch, and this is why Kinsey likes her. There are other little things that she does, too – like sometimes she arrives late to class and crosses through the front of the auditorium even though there are open seats in the back. Each time, the professor lowers his presentation remote, freezing the lecture in time to smile and say “Hello, Lena” as she walks by. She always smiles back, and it always seems as if they met one day after class to come up with this routine. There is also the way she fails to shrink in embarrassment when she asks the professor to repeat an explanation, and the seemingly perfect manner in which her vertebrae stack up on top of one another – but he figures that the breast scratching thing sums her up best.

Maybe it doesn't sum her up best, he muses later on, but it is this detail that Robbie is most interested in when Kinsey first mentions his interest in Lena to him. This particular day happened to be the fourth day of school, Kinsey remembered, because it was also the second day of his evening calculus class at PGCC. As Kinsey scanned the syllabus, Lena interrupted his thoughts by rapping noisily on his tiny fold-out desk with her index finger to ask for a pencil. Or a pen. She didn't care.

From this moment forward, Kinsey could not help but glance over at her during the moments when Professor Thompson told them to test out a problem on a sheet of scratch paper. As soon as he was sure her head was down, Kinsey would look over at her, and during each practice problem he saw something else, something different. There was a small mole on the left side of her neck that had irregular edges. A few strands of her hair had curled up angrily, likely a result of the sudden end of summer downpour that began only a few minutes before class started. The perfect vertebrae. The hand that rose over and over, beckoning the professor for guidance. He decided to stay.

Of course, out of all this, Robbie latches on to the breast thing. After scaring the shit out of Kinsey by yelling his name out of the passenger window at full volume, and then reaching over to open the passenger door for him without stopping the car, Robbie begins asking Kinsey the same questions he has asked him a thousand times before.

Kinsey.

Hey Robbie.

What are you doing?

Walking home.

What were you about to be doing?

Nothing, really.

So you don't have any plans?

No.

I'm going to the park. You should get in the car.

Okay.

Robbie is driving a gray Chrysler LaBaron with out-of-state tags. He looks like he is wearing somebody else's clothes, and has shaved off most of the beard that he was growing the last time Kinsey saw him. Kinsey tries to remember the last time he saw him, and can't.

He looks like what Kinsey might look like in a few years, if they were the type of siblings who look alike. They are not. Kinsey is olive-skinned, partially because it is the end of summer and he is still tan from afternoons spent reading outdoors, and partially because his father is Cuban so there is some extra melanin in his blood, technically in his genes. Robbie has a different father that neither Kinsey nor Robbie has ever seen (besides the time they saw a guy who looked so much like Robbie that they couldn't help but follow him home), and he is also taller and lankier than Kinsey. Kinsey is fourteen and still waiting for a growth spurt that might never come. Robbie is turning twenty and has been tall since middle school. They could never pass for full brothers. They never had. Not because Robbie is older and has some other dad, but because they are different. Half-brothers is believable, but a stretch.

Close the door. Don't look at me like that. Stop looking at me like that.

I'm not looking at you like anything, Robbie.

Where have you been?

At home.

Good, that's where you fucking should be.

I know.

How's Bonnie?

She wishes you would call her.

I do, I called her la-

On a regular basis.

I asked you how she was, not what she wants.

She's pretty much the same.

How's your dad?

The same.

And this is how it goes, until they arrive at the no-name park adjacent to the bay. This is the place where Robbie smoked his first joint, and so it is sentimental to him and sometimes it seems to Kinsey that this is where he hopes his younger brother will have his first joint as well. As always, Robbie sits down on the grass behind the line of Porta Johns and as always Kinsey follows suit. Robbie reaches behind his left ear for a pre-rolled fatty before lighting it with a Zippo that their mother gave him once she quit smoking.

Kinsey always wonders what he might do on the occasion that Robbie passes the joint to him. He has studied Robbie's smoking style. He figures that he could hold the joint the same way Robbie does, but that he would probably cough. It is inevitable, Matt has told him at least four times. Matt is Kinsey's only friend at the high school, and so Kinsey spends a lot of time listening to Matt tell stories about trying to fit in. Matt has only smoked four times, but he acts as if each time is the first, and every time he tells Kinsey exactly how it happened.

You won't believe what we got into last night at Dean's house.

What?

His cousin came over and pulled out some killer bud.

Really.

Yeah, dude, I was so fucking gone. I took like four hits in a row, every time.

No way.

Seriously, bro, you need to try that shit.

Yeah.

I was sitting in the same chair for like three hours. I couldn't move. I felt like I weighed a thousand pounds.

Wow.

But I was so fucking happy. Like I was so happy I couldn't move. It was great.

I'm sure.

I only coughed for like a minute this time. I think my lungs are expanding or something.

Probably.

For the most part, Kinsey doesn't care. He doesn't want to know what it feels like to weigh a thousand pounds or to sit in the same place for three hours. But he also doesn't want Robbie to call him a bitch, which is what he assumes will happen if he refuses the blunt at the moment of truth.

But Robbie doesn't offer him the blunt today. He smokes almost half of it before putting it out by waving it in the wind and then crushing the smoldering tip with his finger. Robbie does a lot of things like this – things that Kinsey doesn't understand. Like he always asks about Kinsey's love life even though they both know pretty well that Kinsey might never have one. Kinsey isn't unattractive, but he is in ninth grade and he is a smart kid and having no love life is just how things go for kids like him. He considers himself lucky to have Matt.

Today, however, is different, because there is Lena. Robbie yawns and stretches his body across the grass as Kinsey describes her in detail, and when he is done, Robbie yawns again before asking Kinsey if he is think-

ing about trying to fuck her. Of course not, Kinsey says quickly, almost disgusted by the idea of ruining their perfectly distant relationship. But I feel like we could be friends. This makes Robbie scoff. You don't want to be friends, Kinsey. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been talking about her tits. Kinsey is hoping that Robbie will go off on a tangent about one of the girls that he's been hooking up with, but he doesn't. Instead he begins to make Kinsey come up with an action plan to get with Lena.

But I don't want to get with Lena, Robbie.

Yeah, you do. You just don't know it yet.

She's probably like nineteen.

So? Rule number one is to never tell a girl how old you are unless you're old enough to buy her drinks.

I don't want her to get in trouble, Robbie.

The only time people get in trouble is when it's the other way around. You're lucky you're the young one here and not her.

Robbie, this is stupid. You don't even understand how perfect she is.

But I do, Kinsey. This is what I'm good at. And that's why I'm determined to make this work for you.

But why?

Because you're my brother.

Robbie says this a lot – because you're my brother. Usually he says it to convince Kinsey to do something for him. Kinsey has given Robbie his entire allowance, lied to the cops, and held onto little bags of white powder because he is Robbie's brother. It feels nice to have the tables turned for once. But as he says okay, Kinsey is wondering at what cost this advice will come for him.

Lena sits in the seat closest to the emergency exit, about two or three rows in front of where Kinsey generally sits. His location in the room changes week by week, because for everyone else it is one of those classes where you sit wherever you feel like sitting after a long day. There is a seat that Kinsey feels would be his (and his alone) if it wasn't occasionally occupied by one of the other people who had the ability to arrive a few minutes before he could. This seat is one row behind Lena and provides him with the most convenient view of her and the things she does. It was a week ago, in this seat, that he watched her tattoo the formula for a Riemann sum on her right hand before the first exam. It was also where he had seen her scratch her breast two weeks earlier. According to Robbie, Kinsey needs a way to sit in this seat every class. Get her to really notice you, Kinsey. He wants Lena to notice that he is the only other person in a class of sixty-seven who sits in the same seat every class besides her.

The only way to ensure this is to talk to his mother about getting him to class a few minutes earlier, as soon as the professor unlocks the door. Kinsey is riding in the back seat of his mother's car, and this would be a good time to ask, if she were anyone else's mother but his own. Kinsey's mother is a sex therapist, and she is in-

credibly perceptive. She is fiddling with the knob to the stereo because her favorite Joani Mitchell song is on, and she wants to turn it up.

Kinsey's mother is named Dr. Bianca Matthews, but she has always insisted that Kinsey and her patients and everyone she knows call her Bonnie. Bonnie isn't actually a nickname for Bianca – most people named Bianca simply go by their full name. Bebe is also an option – but Kinsey's mother decided to call herself Bonnie when she was twenty-four and kept telling people to just call her Bonnie until most people thought that was her name. Bonnie is a name of Scottish origin that means 'pretty,' and anyone who knows this and meets Bonnie Matthews quietly thinks that her parents named her well. Bianca means 'white and pure', and anyone who knows this and knows Bonnie Matthews can understand why she changed her name.

Kinsey knows these things because when he was halfway through the fifth grade, he wanted to change his name. As he was browsing through the B names on a baby name website, he thought of his mother and looked up the meanings of her real name and the name she chose. He had to look through a few different sites before finding Kinsey. Kinsey is listed as a girl's name and it means 'king's victory.' This is not what Bonnie meant when she gave her second son this name. He is named for the biologist Alfred Kinsey, the man who developed the Kinsey scale of sexuality. He is Bonnie's idol. She has three large framed photographs of him – one rests on the fireplace, an anachronistic addition to the bright color photographs of her sons playing in diapers. Another hangs on a wall at her practice, adjacent to diagrams of female genitalia and a poster that Bonnie designed herself listing 'Ten Steps to a Happy (Healthy) Sex Life! The last is in storage because her ex-husband wouldn't let her hang it above the headboard in their bedroom. She has been meaning to get it out, so that she can put it where it belongs.

By the time Kinsey was in sixth grade, he had convinced everyone except his mother and his older brother Robbie to call him Kyle. Kyle is of Gaelic origin and means 'narrow or straight.' He didn't really care for the meaning, but if you took away the I N and S from Kinsey and added an L, you got Kyle, and this made him feel like Kyle was close enough. That, and the fact that it was a boy's name. Robbie was incorrigible and refused to call him anything else. He had always found the name Kinsey hilarious, especially when Kinsey tried to explain to him in a moment of honesty that he wanted to change it because it was actually a girl's name. Robbie had escaped the embarrassment of being named Kinsey because he was born a year before their mother had her personal sexual revolution and changed her name and switched the focus of her graduate studies from child psychology to sex therapy. Kinsey had been immensely jealous of Robbie's good fortune until Bonnie told them one day that if Robbie had been Kinsey, then Kinsey would have been Alfred.

Come on, Kinsey. Sing with me. She looks at him in the rear-view mirror but he does not meet her eye. She starts to belt out the chorus without him. She looks back towards the road, then focuses her attention back on the stereo. The volume knob has always been finicky, and Joani's voice is going from imperceptible to too loud with every turn. Kinsey's father was supposed to fix it a while back, but this was before they were divorced. She knows that she could ask Kinsey to fix it, and she sometimes laughs at the idea that her fourteen-year old son could probably repair the thing with much more ease than her ex-husband. But either way, Kinsey's father promised to do it two years ago and it is still broken. That is what matters. Kinsey's mother is the type of woman who is afraid to let things go. The song ends and Kinsey decides to bite the bullet.

Bonnie.

What?

I need to get to my calc class a little earlier.

Why?

Because I never get to sit close enough to the board.

It's been two weeks since you started. I know you. You would have said something earlier.

I just realized that I was missing stuff. Like little things that were too small to see.

Is there a problem? Is someone messing with you? Do I need to talk to the professor?

I just need to get closer to the board. I'm just asking to get to class earlier. Why is this a big deal?

Because I feel like there's something more than that, Kinsey.

Like what?

I don't know, because you're not telling me.

I just told you. There are just a few little things I can't see. I don't know why you're freaking out.

Bonnie is freaking out because she is afraid. Having a son like Robbie would make any mother over-protective of her other child. It is difficult for Bonnie – she wants Kinsey to be happy and expressive and free to be himself, but she doesn't want him to be like Robbie. But she also knows that as difficult as things have become for her, it is infinitely harder for Kinsey. It is hard for her to have to keep her two sons apart. It is hard for her to have to tell her younger son not to look up to his older brother. It is hard for the two of them to live without their other halves.

She pulls into their driveway, and finds herself saying okay, Kinsey, I'll try my best to get you there when you want. She doesn't want to argue any more.

Robbie is invested in Kinsey's success with Lena, and has started to take Kinsey to the park every day to talk about his progress with her. It is halfway through the semester, and Kinsey has only managed to talk to Lena twice. This is disappointing to Robbie, who thinks that he would have bedded this Lena chick in a matter of days. But he knows Kinsey is different.

Kinsey is trying to pretend that he doesn't enjoy listening to Robbie tell him how to hook up with Lena. Nothing is working, because Kinsey isn't trying. He doesn't want to sleep with Lena. He never has. But he likes sitting behind her every class, and he likes to pretend that he has a chance. And he likes afternoons in the park with Robbie.

The grass is damp, and the two brothers are sitting on Kinsey's raincoat. Robbie is packing a glass bowl with weed and Kinsey is talking about Lena.

No, I didn't get her number, Robbie.

Kinsey.

What?

I feel like you're not even trying.

I am. I told you, the other day she came on time and we got to talk about music and stuff before class.

For how long?

Like maybe two or three minutes.

That's not enough. She's never going to fuck you if you don't make her want it.

I don't want to fuck her, Robbie.

If you're gay I won't judge you.

I'm not gay, Robbie.

Robbie knows that Kinsey isn't gay. But sometimes it is hard to accept that he and his little brother are so different. Sometimes he wonders what it would have been like if he'd spent more time around the house before Bonnie kicked him out. He wonders if Kinsey would still be a loser, or if maybe he would have been a little more good. Sometimes he thinks about how bad the situations he has put his mother and his brother in have been, and sometimes he feels a little bad. But Robbie knows none of that matters now. Life is what it is.

What matters now is that he is trying to patch things up with Kinsey, and he thinks that things are going well. For the past few weeks, he has been like a youth baseball coach. He has been reliable, and responsible, and positive yet firm. He knows the game they are trying to play is meaningless, and yet that doesn't reduce its importance. He wants Kinsey to succeed.

Does Bonnie know you've been hanging out with me?

No.

You can tell her that I'm sober now.

I could, but that wouldn't be true, Robbie.

I am.

You're smoking right now.

Weed isn't a drug, Kinsey. Remember that.

Okay, Robbie.

I'm serious.

Kinsey wants Bonnie to know that they are hanging out, and that everything is fine. Kinsey wants to tell Bonnie how well Robbie is doing. He wants to tell her that she has been right in the past, but that now Robbie has changed.

Robbie is exhaling streams of white smoke that hang longer than usual in the autumn air and saying this is some killer shit. He passes the bowl and the Zippo to Kinsey without saying anything and Kinsey takes them and tries to light the bowl on his own, but when he breathes in and holds his breath the way Robbie would, he tastes the

air in his mouth and realizes there is nothing there. Robbie grabs the Zippo and laughs and tells Kinsey to hold the bowl steady. He waves the lighter over the bowl and tells Kinsey to breathe, breathe in and hold it. Kinsey does, for a moment, and then he exhales with a cough that breaks the silence. They laugh.

Bonnie smells the weed on Kinsey's windbreaker when she is hanging up her own jacket later that night. She knows the smell because she smoked her way through college, and some weekends with friends until Robbie was twelve and she found out he was skipping school to smoke weed in the park and she started to feel like a bad example.

Bonnie knows that Kinsey has been with Robbie because the coat rack also smells like their Gardenia Blossom bathroom spray, and Kinsey is too young to know that Bonnie has caught Robbie using this same trick dozens of times. This bothers Bonnie. She wants to believe that her younger son is smart enough not to do the same things that Robbie has done, but sometimes she isn't sure.

To make sure, Bonnie goes up to Kinsey's room and tells him to invite Robbie home for dinner. Kinsey is still a little high from earlier, and asks Bonnie to repeat herself to make sure that this is real life and not a dream. Invite your brother over for dinner. Kinsey is worried and confused, but he doesn't ask any questions as she closes the door.

A few days later, Kinsey relays the invitation. They are sitting at the park and talking about Lena. Kinsey is wearing the windbreaker, and Robbie is smoking a joint but never passes it. Kinsey is telling Robbie about how Lena offered to give him a ride home after class because Bonnie was late picking him up.

She came up to you?

Yeah.

What did you say?

That my ride was coming, but thanks.

You should have just taken it.

Bonnie would have flipped out if I just left with some girl.

I guess. It would have been worth it, though.

Yeah, I guess. So are you coming to dinner?

I guess. Are you sure she's not trying to get me arrested or some shit?

No.

I'm not going to lie, Kinsey. I'm kinda weirded out by the whole thing.

Me too. But are you going to go?

Do you want me to?

Yeah.

Okay. I'll go.

A few days later, it is Sunday night the three of them are having dinner together for the first time in three years. Bonnie has picked up a roasted chicken and sides from the grocery store and sets out the nicer plates and silverware. Robbie cleans up well. He is wearing a V-necked shirt and fitted jeans and a belt. He says please and thank-you to Bonnie. Kinsey is still trying to figure out why Bonnie invited Robbie over and is feeling weird about the whole thing. They are all trying not to argue.

Bonnie says I don't have a problem with you two hanging out, I just want to know where and when. Kinsey and Robbie look at each other across the table, the way they used to when they were younger, when Bonnie used to actually make dinner and everyone lived together and things were normal besides all the crazy shit that Robbie used to do. Kinsey and Robbie find themselves saying okay, Bonnie. Bonnie smiles and asks if anyone wants cake. They do.

After dinner, Bonnie lays down the rules while everyone eats cake. She does not like setting rules, but she knows that with Robbie, this is what she has to do. Robbie is allowed to pick Kinsey up after school and after his evening class twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. They can hang out at the house, and play video games, or watch TV. No more smoking weed at the park. Robbie and Kinsey look at each other again. They don't know how she knows about the park, but she does. Bonnie always knows.

At first, Robbie is good. He picks Kinsey up on time and they go to the house and they play Mario Kart and Zelda on Robbie's old Nintendo 64. Robbie likes this a lot – he likes being back in his childhood home and spending time with his brother without sneaking around and he almost doesn't care that he can't enjoy his afternoon joint until the evening. Sometimes Bonnie comes home early with dinner, and they all sit around the table to listen to Bonnie talk about her day. One day Bonnie hugs Robbie for the first time in a very long time, and though he whispers Bonnie quit it over her head, he can't help but feel very, very good.

Then one day, Robbie is a little late picking Kinsey up from school. Not late enough for Kinsey to worry, but late enough that he knows something is off. When Robbie rolls into the empty parking lot, his eyes are ringed in red. They are red enough that anyone else would have figured that he'd been crying for hours and asked what was wrong, but there are no tearstains on his cheeks, and Kinsey decides to say nothing instead. Robbie pulls into their driveway but doesn't come inside. He says see you later, Kinsey instead, and Kinsey says okay and gets out of the car.

This happens on and off for a few weeks. Bonnie notices that Robbie isn't staying for dinner as often as before, but doesn't know what to say to Kinsey as they eat meals made for three without him. She wants to ask Kinsey if something is going on, but she knows that he won't tell her anything unless he wants to. She wants to confront Robbie, but knows that will only make him leave them faster than if she doesn't.

Then one day, Kinsey is left waiting after his calculus class for longer than ever before. He leans against one of the bike racks near the parking lot where Robbie is supposed to meet him and looks up at the darkening

ing sky. He is thinking about Riemann sums and the Zippo lighter and Lena when a voice startles him out of his thoughts.

Kyle.

Hey, Lena.

Hey. How's it going?

Good. Just waiting for my ride. How are you?

Good. I was just getting some extra help from Professor Thompson.

Oh, okay. Do you think you're ready for the exam?

I hope so. Are you?

Yeah. I hope so too.

Something about the way Lena says I hope so makes Kinsey think of Robbie. Kinsey looks away from her for a brief second to see if Robbie is on his way, but there is no one else in sight, and Kinsey realizes that he isn't coming. Anyone else might have been upset, or disappointed, or confused, but for Kinsey, suddenly everything is clear.

Hey, Lena, could I still get that ride home?

Of course. Is your ride not coming, then?

I don't think so.

Okay. My car is parked in the student lot.

Thank you.

It's no problem, Kyle.

The ride to Kinsey's house will last eleven minutes. Four minutes in, Lena will say so Professor Thompson tells me you're in high school and Kinsey will mumble a sheepish yeah. Five minutes in, he will realize that any vestige of hope of anything happening between him and Lena has been erased, and for the rest of the ride, he will stare out of the window, looking at the stars. There will be no kiss goodnight. When Kinsey gets home, Bonnie will be sitting at the table with a cold dinner for three, which she picked up just in case. First she will be worried, then relieved, and then disappointed in Robbie, then angry at herself. She will hug Kinsey tightly and he will say Bonnie quit it, and she will be startled by how much he sounds like Robbie.

They will both try to sleep everything off, and they will both stay awake thinking about Robbie. They will fall asleep without answers. Kinsey will dream about Zippo lighters and riding home with Lena and Bonnie will dream about hugs that smell like Gardenia Blossom bathroom spray.





Lay Fog
Blankets
Lights
HIO FAE

PETER BALTENSBERGER

As a Matter of Principle

It always came down to what kind of bra she was going to wear. It was very important to her. The problem was that with her obsession she had accumulated a considerable collection over the years and it became more and more difficult to make such an important decision every evening. Some days she just felt like taking the three most acceptable choices and wearing them all at the same time. What she did instead was to go without a bra at all when she couldn't make up her mind. She could pull it off easily enough.

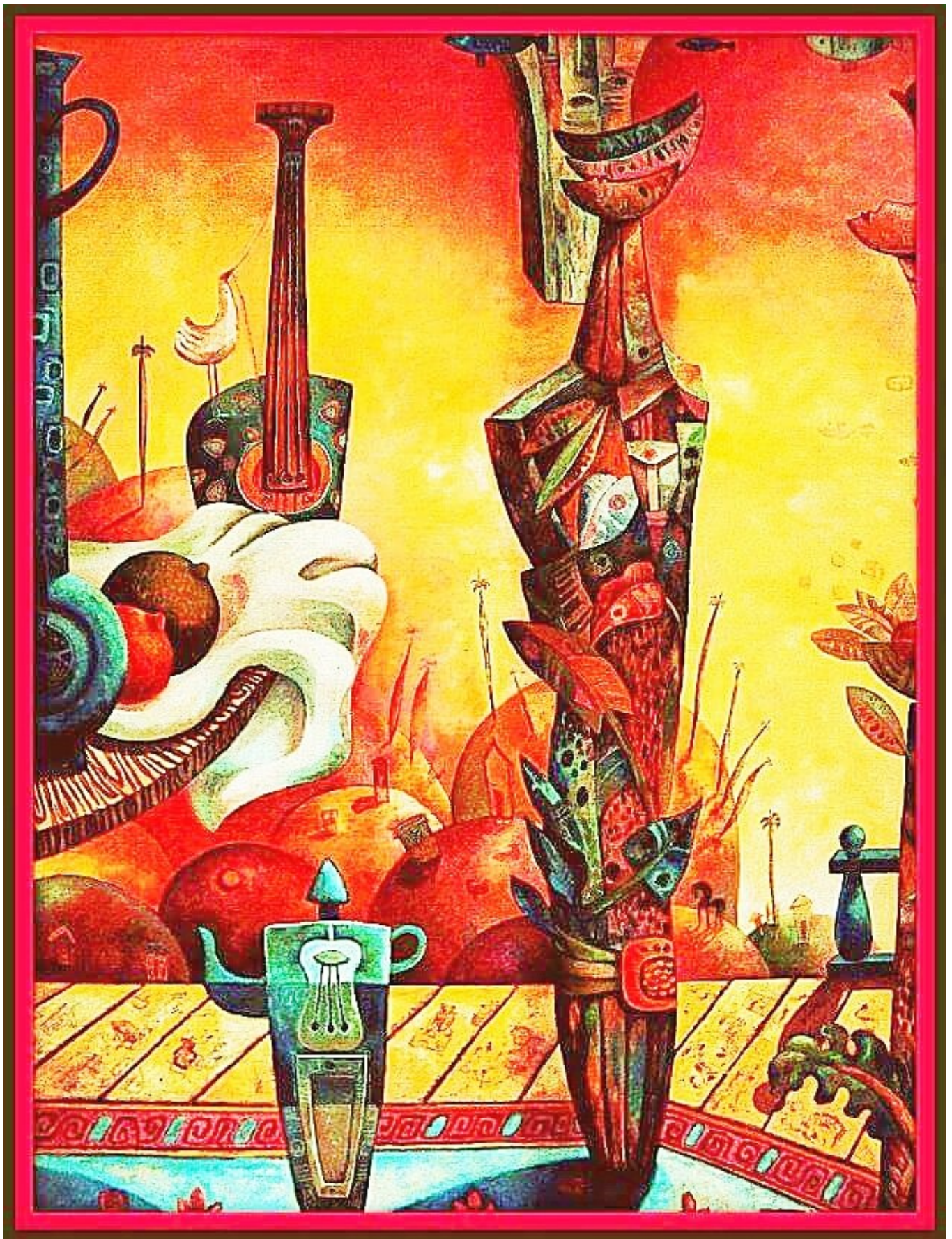
A man was living next door to her who was an obsessive collector of bras, even though he never wore any of them himself. One of his principles, he said. He obtained some of them from women he took to bed and hid their garments in the morning until they were tired of looking and left without them. Others came from clothes lines. He had two of them from the woman next door, although she never found out.

He also collected dead birds. They didn't have anything to do with the bras and formed their own collection, most of them in cardboard boxes of various shapes and sizes and colors. The bras had their own boxes in a different part of his house. The woman didn't collect any birds, and she never slept with him.

The man she eventually moved in with and later married was completely different. He was just an ordinary, regular guy with a degree, a good job, a nice house, and an impressive car. His mother lived in the basement. She was the truest collector of them all. She amassed an incredible number of phallic objects and dildos but never used any of them on herself. One of her principles, she said.



Avocado and Fruits
SERGIO A. ORTIZ



At the Market
SERGIO A. ORTIZ



Motherhood
SERGIO A. ORTIZ

WINSTON PLOWES

*Agree***bleed**
*Better***carnage**
*Cherry***depletion**
*Comfortable***disrepair**
*Dearest***flush**
*Dinner***infrastructure**
*Easter***islamic**
*forests***lady**
*Fresh***landscape**
*Gently***ripped**
*H***trusted**
*Honest***sad**
*Interesting***solidarity**
*Rat***sprawl**
*Liane***stealing**
*Relief***stolen**
*Rest***subsidised**
*Rhyme***tombstones**
*Safe***trapped**
*Saturday***trillions**
*Silk***unrealised**
*Useful***unstoppable**
*War***withurban**
*Water***windswept**

GentlyRipped - Found image poem / Artwork

Methodology & Sources

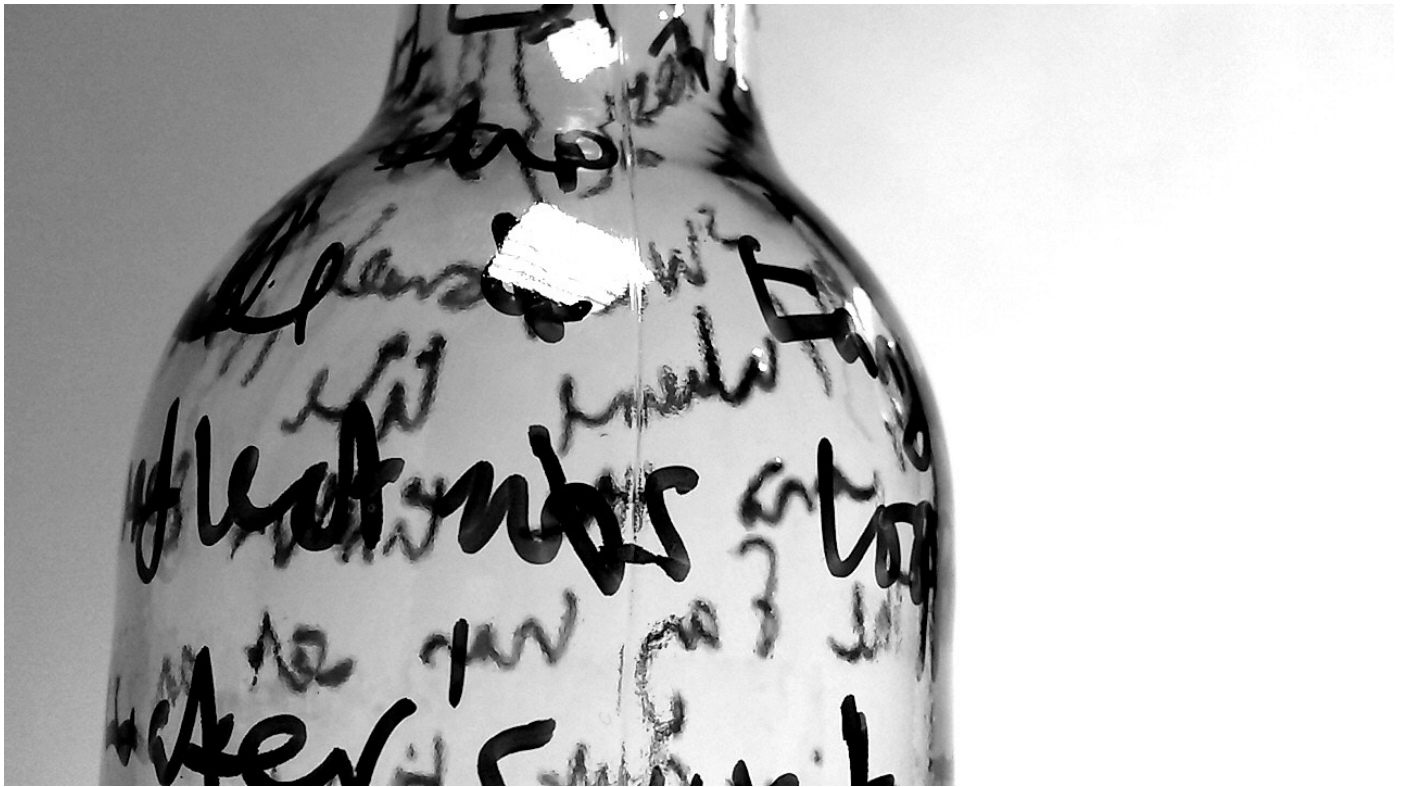
A list of twenty-four words Donald Trump used for the first time in any U.S. inaugural address (Washington Post 20/01/17) has been merged with a list of the English language's 'happiest' words chosen by Arika Okrent from a list compiled the University of Vermont (mental_floss 18/12/12). Both lists are unedited and alphabetically arranged.

Coddle

Love shackles the dusk
and your trust is shaping birds
from the shutters.

Hooked on lacquered whispers,
we're turning each other's cards.
Senses pocketed by the deep-set dark.

Pooling our futures in hollowed hands
that coddle the faintest reflections
of candles burnt down almost to the quick.



of flies - Poem with Images

Methodology -

After listening to Heavy Pi by Michael Coolen, firstly on a loop in the background whilst completing domestic tasks I switched to headphones in a darkened environment for several play throughs. After letting things settle in for 24hrs I chose to write on a found clear glass bottle with a sharpie (a series of three images attached). After editing on the object, my text has been interpreted via the keyboard.

Lamentations

He did not make it through the night –
And today snowdrops doff their white caps.
Birds take to walking
and every bus, whether empty or full
pulls-up at the stop outside to pay its respects.
Our memories forever frozen
we feel his inner warmth still
like a secret, slowly passing through.

PAUL RABINOWITZ



Her Pages

The ink drips and spreads fiction over the tattered page. Her heart wants to be free of him, but the tip bears down on the Japanese paper. Words that describe a dying flower that falls from its stem before dawn. She's determined to close its cover and prays for the lines to dry. But it's he who fills the well and watches her thin fingers sink deeper into the pulp.



Renewal

As the autumn glow retreats winter begins its unforgiving trek
Branches litter the earth, suffocating the skeletal forest ground
The air is thin from malnutrition—the pigment in your eyes fade

I'll linger while your hair grows long

Stoke the embers and braise the meat in your cast iron pot
When the banks overflow I'll sow the seeds and nurture the virgin soil
And on my knees I'll clear beds and prepare 'ye for the coming of
your renewal



The Mirror

A woman walks past her young child and catches her reflection in the mirror. She twists her torso to fit into the frame and notices a gentleman gazing at her as clouds gather over Grand Street. She piles her hair on top of her head, hoists the child and steps into the cold rain. Moments later they return. She hushes the child that now clutches her soaked blouse. The gentleman in the corner signals to them to take a seat at his table and wait out the storm. She glances at me sketching the scene and releases her wet hair to fall around her shoulders. The gentleman reaches into his tattered bag and hands her an old toy. She wraps her hands around the soft pinewood and gives it to the child who meanders past the mirror and disappears into the gathering crowd.



Frozen Tundra

I look for shelter as the arctic winds bare down on the vast landscape. She invites me in and removes my seal boots. My face is red and cracked—stubble grows thick around my chin. Her desire burns from within and turns raw flesh to fuel. For a moment the winter sun glitters upon fresh white snow before sinking behind the razor thin horizon. Night returns and she remembers spring's thaw, the hunters-, the bloody carnage. As I withdraw, a plume of black smoke rises above her and disappears into the frigid air. Removing her ripped shirt and stained leggings she walks into eternal darkness—aiming her spear at the frozen tundra.



One Word

Sara told me she wrote a note and tacked it to the maple tree where we first made love. As I walked down the path I thought of her great sense of style and the honey like glow of her skin. I grabbed the folded paper from the maple which was deeply rooted, stuffed it into my pocket and sat down near a slow moving stream. One word was all that appeared. One word to sum up three years of our lives. I expected a flowing text about growing and maturing - acknowledgement that she is forever changed because of our time together. I repeated the word over and over until it tasted bitter on my tongue and lost its true intent.



The Wish

What if I could paint like you and create light that pierces darkening skies?

What if I could weave stories by blending chapters about love and discontent?

What if I stood naked and sang lilting ballads that pry open hearts like the edge of a knife?

Then I wouldn't struggle with the truth

I wouldn't need my crayons whose tips are flat from making rainbows

I could delete my tired sentences with their dubious meanings

No longer would I need my old worn guitar with its five flat strings

I would be free of burden, a heavy fog would be lifted and then perhaps you would look at me



The Tiny Bottle

Natalie inhales the fragrance from the tiny bottle. A rare French perfume passed down from her maternal grandmother. The bottle is bound with gold thread and attached to a necklace. Kneeling before the mirror she passes the elegant chain over her bowed head. The setting sun kisses the horizon, red and orange flares ignite. She straightens her white dress and steps into the evening.

Translucent clouds race past the full moon that lead to his door. His muscular arms slide under her dress and she's lifted. Rustling leaves and crickets reach a crescendo, her soft lashes graze his sunburnt cheek. Eternity is her desire, this moment sealed forever.

At midnight she rises. His large hands fumble with the tiny bottle as he attempts to remove the cork. Like holy water he throws the delicate fragrance all around the room. The bottle slips out of his hands, the last drop spilling over her.

As dawn breaks she walks towards the bridge and waits for the first ray of light. She runs her fingers over the frayed seal and inhales her grandmother's spirit. A light drizzle taps her bare shoulder as the last streetlight turns off.



On A Summer Day

You appear
on a summer day
under amber sky

Balancing on hot sand
I draw closer

Two names drip from your lips
But I take your hand

We dive in
Unsure of the depth

You grab my waist

We sink to the bottom

My singed hair tangled in the sea grass

The salt penetrating my burns

Unable to see your watch

In the murky waters

You lurch to the top

Weightless and wounded

I grab your leg and hold you down.

STEVEN WERKMEISTER

Gulfs: an unstory

All day long, the cloud-scraped sky seemed to gradually swell pregnant with snow, whether you wanted it to or not. All day long, you felt a sense of discomfort not unlike those nights when someone crawls into bed with cold feet and cold legs, someone not exactly welcome but no longer out-of-place, either, someone you'd been dating a bit too long, someone who after you'd gone up to bed had grown into the habit of sitting in front of the TV for just enough time she thinks it takes you to fall asleep—it was the season for snow, after all, the coldness had ceased being new, and there were months of these days ahead—and you just lie there, pretending not to have awakened, not to have noticed her carefully crawling into bed. You just lie there waiting for her to either accord to your own body's temperature, the climate of the bed you've lain in, so to speak, or to find a spot of her own, near enough to reach in those inevitable moments of carnal interest but far enough to maintain a separate field of comfort. Or you wait for her to quit coming. Anyway, that was your day, meteorologically speaking, as it slipped towards night. It was the middle of December and finals were over and everything was shots and bongs and pints and pills and the Christmas desperation of cheap lights against the gathering dark and the holiday noise noise noise noise before settling into the silence of mid-winter.

There was another tension, of course, sharper yet more abstract, a national sense that the center would not hold, for it was also the winter of 1990, the season of edgy expectation, the first winter after that promised end of history, the Cold War in the collective rearview mirror and nothing filling the windshield but the wide horizon of a Pax Americana, the year of our lord 1990, the inauguration of the new world order when even the *Simpsons* were still fresh and the pater-Bush America was preparing itself for war and for Nirvana and for *Seinfeld*, even if it didn't quite know it, the world slipping from the trompe l'oeil of the Reagan years to the messy plate Abstractionism of the 1990s.

But you weren't thinking about that. Or you were and you weren't. To you, it was merely guitar feedback in the cacophonous concert of life.

*

-Do you guys even realize how serious this Kuwait shit is? Do you even care what's happening in the world? We're going to war. I might have to go there and die.

-So you are the world. You are the children.

-That's not what I'm saying—

-Bullshit. Did you even notice how quickly you skipped from making a point about international relations to reducing it to terms of personal risk? Just admit it—you wouldn't care if you didn't think you were about to be personally involved.

-I'm just saying it's not all TV and bands and shit like you guys talk all the time. Dying people are dying. I mean for real.

-There's movies, too. Isn't anyone thinking about the movies?

-Or the children? What about the children?

-I don't know why I bother. Everything's a joke to you guys.

-Dude, I don't know why you're so worked up. You're in the National fucking Guard—

-I'm part of the Army—

- so unless Kuwait's flooding and there's sandbags to stack or it get invaded by Kent State hippies, it has nothing to do with you.

-“Four dead in Ohio.”

-You don't know shit, okay? They called a meeting for Saturday and some of the older guys are saying they're sending us over. Okay. So it's not games for me. It's pretty goddamn serious.

-It's what you signed up for.

-That's bullshit. Bullshit. I didn't sign up to get shot in some fucking desert. The only reason I signed up was for tuition and the extra money. I'm only supposed to do a weekend a month and a couple weeks in the summer. I'm supposed to help in emergency situations, natural disasters and shit. I didn't sign up for a goddamned war.

-You signed up. That's Constante's point. You signed the papers and cashed the checks. I saw the same goddamn thing in the Navy, people signing the papers and then bitching about their assignments. They didn't rent your company, you fucking idiot. Your goddamn mirthful companionship. They bought the deed to your life. You signed the

papers and cashed the checks and they bought the right to get you killed. Christ, I can understand protesting all the self-indulgent bullshit that goes around this table, but don't accuse others of playing games when you've been playing soldier for the past three years and didn't think the piper'd want paid. You made your decision a long time ago, and you can't bitch about it now.

-So what the hell am I supposed to do? I can't go to war.

-You don't have a choice.

-I don't even know where fucking Kuwait is.

-You don't have to. You're in the Army now, son. They'll drop you where they want you, and they won't be asking your chickenshit ass for fucking directions.

[POSTSCRIPT: he didn't go to war, though he fretted himself over it so much he failed all but one of his classes that spring semester, his sociology class (no judgments). He died at home, on his couch, of alcohol poisoning the night Tom Osborne won his last national championship.]

*

Derek Constante lived with Finn, his best friend from high school, and an ever-revolving guest list of old friends, bar friends, class friends, Finn's siblings and other, more outlying relatives, anywhere from three to six roomies at a time, any of whom might spend from a few days to a handful of months. Constante had moved in two years before, giving him somewhat permanent resident status, and both he and Finn were going, occasionally, to college.

It was the house Finn's father had grown up in, a childhood domicile Finn's father had inherited but, since his job and family and home were a hundred miles away, now just a cheap place to live that he had offered up to his kids while they went to school in Lincoln, asking only that they pay a token rent every month, really just enough to cover property taxes and upkeep. It was an old house in an old neighborhood—a narrow staircase led to three upstairs bedrooms, each of them small since people were apparently much smaller a hundred years ago and owned much less stuff, and there was another bedroom and a bathroom on the first floor.

It sat on a residential street full of upright residential citizens, young, bright-eyed families in starter homes and old couples who spend a lot of time remembering the neighborhood in better times. On most days, the house was, at best, nondescript, just another grungy house on another grungy street, and except for the occasional smoky wafts of marijuana and cigarette smoke when the windows were open to let in cool air, or the scattering of empty bottles on the lawn from time to time, or the spent cigarette butts blooming suddenly every Monday morning like

June dandelions, or a few incidents when a neighbor would wake up to Finn cussing loudly while hosing vomit off of the driveway or the porch or the sidewalk running out front, incidents that if we're honest occurred only once in a blue moon, you might not even notice this house-shaped wateringhole for young men and women brimming with the intoxicating derring-do of those who find themselves lost in an existential forest with nothing to lose, the candy houses of pop culture their only shelter. It was nothing to wake up gummy from the night before and make your way down the stairs, only to have to step over and around the bodies of those who had passed out or for some reason legitimately fell asleep on the floor, pausing only to cover a lately amorous couple who in their post-coital revelry had stupidly assumed the darkness would always be there to hide what their grandmothers might term their shame, covering them with a couch throw filched from another sleeper decently clothed and emphatically alone, or perhaps a couple of abandoned coats that had been piled up behind the floor speakers with hapless disregard for the tangle of wires, as one headed for the saving grace of the coffee maker.

At times, it was hard to remember who exactly was paying rent to live in the house, who had traded a week's stay on the couch for a couple cases of beer and a quarter bag of the good shit, and who had just got into the habit of crashing there once the party had wound down. But as Finn was fond of saying, "you think it really matters?"

*

-Is that a crystal?

-Yeah.

-You're actually wearing a crystal?

-Screw you. It helps align the chokras and shit. Brings like balance.

-You don't believe that. That's all Rachel. She's making you wear that.

-No, don't even start with that. I've been reading on it. I mean, it makes sense if you bothered to read the literature instead of judging everybody—

-Where'd you get this literature?

-Date a hippie chick, dress like a hippie chick.

-Rachel, but it wasn't like she pushed it on me. She's not a fucking Moonie-

-Believe what you want as long as it's not stupid—

-No, if you just think about all the energy in the universe, all the stars and planets and galaxies, I mean all that energy

and the gravitational pulls, it's got to have an effect, you know, on the body—

-No, it's stupid. You're whipped so badly she's got you wearing magic rocks around your neck.

-Well, what are you wearing? A cross?

-St. Christopher, you rock-wearing pagan.

-That's Catholic. You don't think Catholicism is stupid? What's the difference if you still believe in popes and saints and I've moved on? If I see shit for what it is, energies?

-The difference is energies are a fiction. People have been killing each other for two thousand years over Catholicism. Name one person who's been killed over chokras. Name one loveable terrorist army that accidentally bombs busloads of Irish schoolchildren in the name of the energies of the stars. You can't. There are none. Centuries of death is what makes it real. Real religions kill.

-Seriously? That's your argument?

-I'm not saying he's right, but he has an argument. Anyway, I wear a St. Christopher. Doesn't mean I believe in it.

-Then why you wear it?

-I'm Mexican Catholic. I have three choices: St. Christopher, silver cross, or big-ass Guadalupe tattoo across the back. If I don't have at least one of those or any combination thereof, the *abuela* disowns me. She'd never let me in her overheated apartment again. Feed me fucking soup. Jesus, it's 85 degrees in there every fucking day and all she eats is soup.

-Old people. I'm tellin' ya. They love their soup.

-Christ, Constante, you're going to burn. You're a bad son, a shit brother and a goddamn atheist to boot. You're gonna burn good and slow. Ain't no hope for you, son.

*

-Remember General Public?

-You're a fucking idiot. You tell me you went and got their CD I swear to God I'm putting a hammer through your skull.

*

-You're letting him use my room?

-He needed to do some business. You weren't here, so I thought it'd be okay.

-Why isn't he in your room?

-He won't be there long.

-How long?

-He's leaving soon. He wants to drive to Omaha before the snow gets too bad.

-So why couldn't he use your room?

-It's a fucking mess. I don't want people to know I live like that. Your room's always clean. You have the Hun's appreciation for neatness you inherited from your father's people. If it's that big of a deal, I'll tell him to clear out.

[silence for three beats: 1, 2, 3]

He's gonna comp us a quarter for the troubles. And some shrooms. Nothing like shoveling on shrooms on a cold Sunday morning, huh? Something to look forward to?

-Alright. Whatever.

-You want them out?

-No. Yes. No. We could use the schrooms.

*

Watching the snow, Constante holds a spent pipe and it occurs to him the flakes are not falling so much as sliding. the outside world just endless series invisible sheets snowflakes just slip down, like plastic curtains fast-food places walk-in freezers, just imperceptible, thinner than frost, width less than breath separating each from each, snowflakes sliding surface of clear veils, sliding cloud to ground in a manner most uniform, some catching folds maybe or surface scratches just enough to send said flake off into contrary spin or skip from one sheet to another. It's a complicated physics. Just walking down the street might mean walking through ten thousand veils and noticing none, yet Constante thinks you had to feel it somewhere, somehow, in the mind or the soul maybe, vibrating just so on the skin of your arm, pulling at the hairs on your neck. How many veils thin as cells separated us from even the people we're with most? From the people closest to us, the ones we choose to share an album with or ask to read a poem or admit that the too much is too much? When we misread, mishear, misunderstand, mistake, misinterpret one another, aren't we just lost in the veils?

(Sitting at the table, so stoned he can only zone in and out of the endless chatter of the group of people he

calls his friends, he has sunk into the hum of his brain and altogether stopped trying to keep up conversation and just sat there at the table, staring through the bay window in the little dining area of the kitchen, watching the snow come down and taking in its lessons inarticulate.)

*

-I'm giving up on it. It's just a poser soap opera at this point.

-I told you guys. It's a shaggy dog story. It's a fucking joke. David Lynch just wanted to see how many of you dumbasses would get all hot and bothered week by week, chasing down the hole a white rabbit called Laura Palmer. The whole point is to show you what naïve idiots you are. And it worked. Shit, I wouldn't be surprised if Andy Kaufman isn't behind it.

-Come back from the dead?

-You seriously believe he's dead?

-I still like Sherilyn Fenn. I'll never give up on her. Someday she'll figure out it was me she's needed all along.

-Well, fuck yeah. But that's different. Lara Flynn Boyle's hotter.

-I'm still hot for Markie Post.

-Would you shut up?

*

AND NOW A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR: This isn't a story. Stop looking for a plot. At this point, this might not even be the same night. It's like Macbeth's tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and all the sweet sorrow of being young in the last schizoid decade before the millennium, all shoved into the bass-o-matic blender of intentional narrative. But how can you remember what happened when? A plot means things becoming other things, sliding into, building upon, twining like vine, but things don't become other things when you do the same thing every night. A plot begs for interpretation, for meaning, the way a dog craves attention. A story is always tweaking for characters, round and flat, exotic and interesting, dynamic and static. But you're all slightest variations of the samest character, each night the slightest variations of the previous night's debauchery, living a life that quite literally doesn't make a difference. In a few years, in your mid-20s, you'll look back to this part of your life and it will feel like you're standing in a grocery store and looking down a cereal aisle. It's all the same shit, only the packaging slightly altered.

BACK TO THE SHOW.

*

-I haven't listened to it yet. I'm not gonna. David fuckin' Geffen bullshit. If you put it on, I'm leaving.

-It's pretty good.

-They sold out.

-How do you know? You just said you haven't heard it.

-I don't have to. It's no *Daydream Nation*.

-No, but it's not exactly *Sandinista!* either. I can't believe you're going to leave because of a fucking record.

-I told you, I'm not going to listen to it. I'm going home, watch wrestling or something.

*

Most of them had blue-collar backgrounds, families who worked for a living and wouldn't let you forget it, dads who came home to wrap scarred fingers and scraped knuckles around their beer cans and drink in the garage—Old Mil, Schlitz, PBR. Dads who had gone to Viet Nam, listened to the Tammy Wynette and Conway Twitty and Kenny Rogers through the 70s, and voted for Reagan even when he tore up their union cards and replaced them with miniature American flags, props that made them feel proud even if it didn't put shit on the dinner table, guys who didn't understand their kids' obsession with 80s pop culture, the ubiquitous sunglasses and Goodwill clothing and gelled hair spiked to look like a Fourth of July accident frozen in time, the endless hours of MTV or the silent, head-bobbing appeal of a Walkman, a generation of fathers who couldn't figure out why, despite their own silent drinking in the garage door shadow and the *Big Chill* soundtrack nostalgia for the decades when they themselves were kids, their own children seemed so angry and distant and self-involved.

*

-Hey, Constante, sorry to hear about your dad. Condolences, man.

-Sucks, man.

-Should we do a shot or anything? To the paterfamilias Constantes?

-No, man, that's cool. Wasn't even his name, tell you the truth. My mom changed our names to her maiden name after the divorce. It's not a thing, though. I'm not saying don't do a shot, but I wouldn't waste it on him.

-Didn't get along, huh?

-Still your father, dude.

-He's been dead for twenty years. His body just didn't know it. Let's just drop it.

*

Maybe that last break was a bit harsh. Here's the rewind: many of their grandparents had been farmers, in the mythological time of family farms and small towns, a time before the banks started swallowing the farms and turning them over to the corporations and their grandparents had ended up "in town," getting by, playing cards and fiddling around in the shed and waiting to die, even if no one said so. So let's start over: Most of them were from blue-collar backgrounds, the children of men and women who worked with their hands, their fathers coming home with blistered palms and lips and their mothers with carpal tunnel syndrome. They came from families who believed that a college education was an economic panacea, an achievement that would solve the hidden woes that troubled them when not busy at work or around the house or watching a game. They came from families that loved them but didn't know how to talk to them.

*

-There aren't going to be any flying cars by the end of the century.

-You don't know that.

*

-You guys just going to hang out here all night or what?

-Have you seen the snow? How stoned are you? You even notice the shit you drove through?

-Just a question, dude.

-We're drinking these and headed downtown.

-No fucking way. Everything will be closed.

-No, it's cool. We called O'Rourke's and Amy said they're staying open.

-No one will be there.

-That's the point. It'll be like summer. We don't have to worry about getting a table and we'll actually have drinks coming by every five minutes. No more standing at the bar.

-I'm staying.

-It's not like you'll see anybody. I'll just be us.

-I didn't even want to see you guys.

*

If you hang around a college town long enough, you figure out that everybody in your herd is one or two steps away from having slept with everyone else; you've slept with most of your friends' exes and they've slept with most of yours; your now girlfriend used to live with your dealer; you meet somebody at the bar who used to date someone you work with; you use old and passing phrases like hooking up or hanging out or knocking boots; you have sex out of boredom or affection or curiosity or love, but you realize it's love that won't last; if you care for a person, it's better to be friends who have occasional sex than to fall in love, since love leads to expectation leads to disappointment leads to hate.

Everyone moves away, eventually, even those that stay in the same town. Everyone moves away in some form or another and meets someone not in your scene, someone you don't know shit about except what that someone's told you, someone in control of his or her own narrative, so to speak, and you feel safe because you're not constantly hearing everything else from everyone else and you hang out with new friends, neutral friends one of you met in grad school or at work or in the new city you've moved to together and you move in or get married even and you trust this person with his or her solid story of their past and since you trust you know that's what it must mean to be really in love.

*

-*The Stranger?*

-*Myth of Sisyphus.*

-Any good?

-Some good points. Nothing matters and what if it did.

-That was an album. Who was that?

-John Cougar. When he was John Cougar. "Ain't Even Done with the Night." Still love that song.

-Radio bullshit.

-No, man. "Rain on the Scarecrow," "Pink Houses," that's some classic Americana shit. The problem with this coun-

try is it forgot to be pissed. Or it's pissed at the wrong thing. Politics of distraction. Too many cable channels for our own damn good.

-What were we talking about?

-John Mellencamp.

-Albert Camus, you filthy douche.

*

-Is something wrong?

-It's fine.

-Why you hiding in here?

-It's fine. Go do your thing.

-I came here to be with you.

-I didn't know all these people were coming over. I'm just tired.

-We can go back to my place. We can be alone, just watch TV or something.

-No. I should stay. It's just fucked. I'm sick of it.

-Sick of what?

-All of it.

-Sick of us?

The curtain on the door showed just a few inches of window, but Constante could see the snow swirling in the porchlight. He imagined the snow drifting towards the door, imagined pushing on it in the morning, trying to get out. It was a night of breaks. It was a night of traps, and a night to make breaks. He wanted to want to go with her, but she was just another snowdrift.

-All of it.

*

-He's upset because he didn't call his sister. His mom called and asked him to call his sister—

(Enter Constante)

-Oh, hey, man.

-Do you mind if I tell this?

-Tell what?

-The tragical tale of your father's sad death.

-No, I—

-Really the aftermath. I guess I didn't think it was a secret or anything—

-You didn't tell your sister?

-Well, I don't...I don't give a shit really—

-So what was the—

(Almost every night, when the chemical balance in his brain was just right, Finn liked to hold forth like a barstool noble addressing his court.)

-Mother Dearest Constante, the MDC henceforth, called and said old Daddy German-something (Constante's told me but I can never remember it right) was going into surgery in the morning. They're divorced, as we all know, but she heard it from a former brother-in-law, who apparently are all in league against poor old Dad, rest his soul. The MDC only asked our young prince here call his sister, not wanting to pay double the long-distance rates just on account of her ex. He had been in surgeries before and nothing's ever happened so Brother Constante wasn't too worried. You guys know how Mary is, 19 going on 50-fucking-7, passive-aggressive in all things and constantly demanding justification for anything veering from the norm. She's the DA of You-Can't-Do-That-Here County. They're both products of a broken home, so who are we to judge, amen. The upshot is, Daddy's going under the knife, the MDC calls and says *can you tell your sister?*, and Brother Constante decides he's not up to putting up with her twenty questions and judgmental bullshit and skips out on the call on the one time that a frequent-flyer hospital patient of a father slip this mortal coil and goes gently into that good night.

-Jesus, dude, that's some shit luck—

-Cancer?

-I don't know. I wasn't really listening. Years of alcohol and cigarettes. He had god knows how many surgeries, bits of lung, bits of intestine. I figured the next day she'd be at work and I could leave a message on her machine then.

-Seriously, just shit luck.

-So on top of being half an orphan, our Brother Constante here, a mostly good boy but often morally conflicted, our very own Near South Hamlet, carries that weight of not having made a two-minute call that would have had no effect whatsoever on the hospital outcome some 200 miles away. Brother, you got to let it go.

-I really don't want to get into it.

-I don't know. Maybe we should interrogate this motherfucker, as Professor Erlich likes to say. Deconstruct the shit out of it. Nothing else going on and the snow keeps a-flyin'.

-If he doesn't want to talk about it—

-He should, though. Besides, what else are we going to talk about? This party's getting dry as a proverbial ninety-year-old hooker.

-Do what you want. I really don't care. I'm changing the music.

*

-I thought you were going to Boston?

-Not after the Pixies left.

-And look what happened to them. Hate to say it, but *Bossanova* sucks.

-I wouldn't say sucks.

-Everyone's saying Seattle.

-No. I still say Minneapolis. Replacements, Hüsker Dü, Prince. Fucking Babes in Toyland. Jayhawks. Who else? Trip Shakespeare. Information Society. The list goes on.

-I fucking hate Information Society. Jesus. MTV bullshit.

-Well...still better than Seattle. They have some bands, but it's not going anywhere. There's Melvins, Soundgarden. Some of that SubPop stuff.

-Mudhoney. Tad.

-Well, yeah, Mudhoney. But still. It's no Minneapolis.

*

The block is a long one, four or five city blocks long. An alley runs down the length of the block like an animal's spine, and with the occasional alley spur for quicker access. Finn's house sits on one of the alley spurs, and looking out the window at the snow thick enough to almost totally obliterate the house next door, you notice a lump of someone walking up the spur. It takes what feels like a few too many moments to be startled. You smoked more than you figured.

-Someone just walked by.

-Outside?

-Bullshit.

-No, dude, I just saw someone walking up the alley.

-Are you serious?

-In this shit? No one's out walking around.

-Who was it?

-I don't know. The wind came up and everything got kind of erased.

-Where's Kurt?

You go into the living room. You can't listen to this right now. Kurt's not on the couch, not looking through the vinyl or flipping through *Spin* or smoking a quick, quiet bowl. The TVs on but no one's watching; you turn it off. You look through the window on the door. The pane is cold, and against the edge of your palm it feels like a beer can that's been sitting at the bottom of a cooler full of ice. There are footsteps filling with snow leading down the porch and across the grass towards the alley. It was him. The bastard had walked out into the blizzard.

-Is he gone?

-Yeah.

-Where'd he go?

-Don't know. Home, I guess.

-What the hell is he thinking? He's going to freeze to death out there.

-I don't know.

-Did he say anything to you?

-No.

-Shitty way to leave. Not even a kiss on the dick.

-He gets sick of it.

-Of what?

-Of all of it.

-Whatever.

-Was it Kurt?

-Yeah.

-That crazy bastard. He'll be alright. He's got that fucking military training. Navy and shit.

-How's that going to help him in the snow?

-Snow is just water. Frozen water.

-Frozen water is ice.

-Oh, Jesus. You guys don't shut the fuck up, I'm leaving too. And I live here.

*

-It was like living through a very satisfactory death, not so much that you're numb exactly and don't give a shit anymore but more like everything is cool, was cool, and will always be cool, now and forever, amen, and there's really very emphatically nothing to give two shits about. You just have to stay still and things will work themselves out in their own sweet time and their own sweet juices. The only bad thing about it was that it eventually wears off and you come back up for air and the world is still the same shitpot you thought you'd dreamt.

-You gonna do it again?

-I don't know. If there was a way to make it last, I'd never stop. I hated coming back, though. It was too goddamn depressing. I stayed in bed for two days. Missed a fucking world mythology exam and had to go take it in his office. Fucking life, man. And it's not even the big shit—it's the stuff like waiting for the metaphorical pot to boil, the typewriter jamming, trying to find parking on campus, having to talk to old people at the record store. When the needle's

hit the vein, none of that matters, and then, when everything's suddenly everything again—

-There's always a cost.

-There's always a cost.

-You said it, brother, and living's a heavy price.

*

-I think I'm moving out. End of January.

-You pissed?

-No. Just need some space.

-You moving in with Shannon?

-No. I think that's done. She left here pretty pissed. Moving in would just make things worse.

-I can talk to the pater familias, get your rent down.

-No, it's not that. I don't think I can do this anymore. It's just the same fucking thing over and over.

-Jesus, I know. Shitcaked losers. I'm honestly thinking I need to shut this shit down, get back to studying and going to class and all that. I don't want to go to our ten-year reunion and still be a fucking junior in college.

-You'd go to our ten-year reunion?

-Well, no. I stand by my point, though.

-I think I need to just think shit through. Make a new plan, Stan. Do something different. I keep seeing those ads for those fishing boats out of Seattle. Or maybe fucking truck driving school. Hitchhiking. Something. I just have to get out of here.

-Alright. It's cool. Let me know. Figured something was up when you stopped writing.

-How'd you know?

-Usually by this time in the night, you turned off my stereo and made us listen to half a dozen poems.

-The writing's not going anywhere. It's all dead. I'm just not feeling it any more, you know?

-One night you said something. You said art was the only thing that could legitimize all the shit we put ourselves

through, the shit we do to each other. You don't write us out of this, it's all for nothing.

*

You're not sure what time it is but outside the window it's dark and the snow is coming down harder and thicker like the television station that is the whole world has shut down for the night and is quietly somewhere else putting together weather reports and ag reports and prepping for early-morning interviews with the assistant activities director of a local senior citizens facility and the television set that is the whole world is telling you sssssshhhhhhhh. Inside the windows there is no time. It's warm, and a few beers ago you transitioned from staying drunk without fudging your high to focused on just not falling asleep at the table. You stare out the window at the snow and people you suppose are your friends keep talking.

-The Beatles aren't going to get back together. Anything they produce now without John would be weaker than anything they put out before they broke up, and it would be weaker than anything they've done solo.

-Even Ringo.

-Shit yeah. John Lennon gave them gravitas. The Beatles without Lennon is just...Paul Revere and the Raiders.

-Wow—that's cold.

-I liked "Henry the 8th I am."

-Well, yeah, that's a classic. No doubt. It's just the rest.

*

The next day, Constante was up early, shoveling his way along the sidewalk towards the short, two-car driveway near the back of the house next to the alley spur. He'd clean off the three cars shoved cockeyed into the driveway and lawn and then lightly shovel the alley to the street—not all the way to the frozen dirt but just enough to take most of the snow off the top. It snowed 9 or 10 inches overnight, not a ton by Nebraska standards but enough to make him feel trapped if he doesn't know it's pretty much cleared.

It was morning, not yet eight, and most regular people were probably watching the news and drinking their coffees. Constante's head felt like it was going to implode from the pressure, collapse in on itself before exploding outward, kind of like he remembered the Death Star doing, and that his spirit or whatever inside, his soul maybe, would scream in triumph and escape like Han Solo when he knew he was clear of the beautiful, bright carnage. The sky was clear, and the air was cold and the wind cut along his cheeks and reached down the back of his neck into his collar. He was weary and clammy, but once the sun hit the snow it would melt just enough to make it heav-

ier and that much more of a bitch to move. He wondered if Kurt had made it home. He thought maybe if he could vomit he might feel better, at least good enough to drink some coffee and eat a slice of toast, maybe go upstairs, open his window and crawl into bed. But he knew he wouldn't. He scooped up a bit of snow and rubbed it on his face and neck, hoping the cold would offer some relief he probably didn't deserve.

He could walk away like Kurt, he could drive away to wherever the road would go and a tank of gas could get him, he could leave all this shit behind, let it fade in the rearview mirror. But he knew he wouldn't. He knew he would go back in, and when he had taken off his coat and gloves and kicked off his boots and thrown them in the corner by the couch where Harper passed out, when he had stepped over Don's sleeping body and Jake's sleeping body on his way to the kitchen, he would see Finn standing there, making bloody Marys and offering a loaded bowl. Finn would say "you didn't have to do that" and "here, take the edge off" and no matter what he felt outside standing under the sky, snow at his feet and wind moving around his too-heavy head, he knew that he would take a couple hits from Finn's pipe, accept the offered cup, push a few half-empty beer bottles to one side and resume his place at the table. He could leave, but every jungle's the same. Resistance was futile. The leopard's been spotted, and no new millennium's gonna change that.



Puppets Gone Wild
SERGIO A. ORTIZ

ALLEN BERRY

THE MUSIC OF LEAVING

She strides in like her feet aren't even touching the ground. We find a booth in the corner, as Chet Baker plays on the jukebox. He's singing ""The Thrill is Gone."" She tells me that it was all a lie, and that she's leaving to be with some other schlub who can make her scream things in Spanish, and she's never studied a foreign language. Then she throws a drink in my face for no reason other than dramatic effect. Then she gets up and saunters out.

A taxi, driven by a sleep deprived Lithuanian immigrant jumps the curb and plasters her to the sidewalk before what she said sinks in ... and it strikes me, with the right music, anything can sound romantic.

Late Night with a Bottle of Regret

The sound of the phone yanked Schaeffer out of a pleasant dream. *Always the way it goes*, he thought to himself. *No one ever calls and interrupts my nightmares, only the pleasant dreams get the “breaking news” treatment.* It was Harry again. A bleary glance at the flaming visage of the clock told Schaeffer that this time Harry had let him sleep until 3 AM. *What a pal.* Schaeffer could tell by the sound of Harry’s voice that he was in his cups. He could practically smell the sour mixture of Jack and Coke Harry was exhaling into the mouthpiece as he spewed his greeting.

“H’lo Joe, whattaya know?” Harry sputtered then laughed hysterically as if it were the first time it had occurred to anyone to use that old line.

“Hello Harry,” Schaeffer replied flatly, yawning. Were the hour earlier and he of a better humor, Schaeffer might have granted him a courtesy laugh, but as Harry had interrupted his unaided flight over the Rocky Mountains, depositing him unceremoniously back in his bed, Schaeffer decided to forgo the pleasantries.

“What’s on your mind at this unholy hour?” It was a stupid question to ask, since Schaeffer already knew the answer. The only time; the only reason Harry ever called was Connie, well, indirectly Connie.

“Your wedding day...that wuz... wuz the most beautiful day ever. I mean it, it was juss beautiful. We were good weren’t we?” Harry sputtered. “All decked out in our tuxes. Not a powder blue in sight. No we had clash... didn’t we Joe?”

“Yes, Harry,” Schaeffer said with a sigh. “We had clash.”

“We... we looked good! It wuzh a perfect day. I wuzh so proud to be there wish you. I ... I gotta ask you someshin’. I— Wuzh I a good best man, Joe? Wuzh I?”

And so it begins again, the absolution of Harry Mathers, given once again by his former best friend and confidant, Joseph Schaeffer.

“Yes Harry, you were a great best man. You did everything right. We couldn’t have pulled it off without you.” Schaeffer meant it— Harry really was a great best man. Harry had gone above and beyond the call of duty; offered a toast at the rehearsal dinner that made grown men cry, danced with the shy flower girl, and bought Connie and Joe perhaps the most expensive gift on the registry. Most of all he kept Schaeffer sane when he was going a little bit crazy over Connie’s stepmother’s meddling. *You always knew how to handle her*, thought Schaeffer as he

laughed cynically.

“Joe?” Harry breathed into the phone. Schaeffer imagined the mouthpiece on Harry’s end getting drunk from the fumes or maybe melting. “Joe? I’m sorry. I’m sorry Joe.” The drunken ramble dissolved into a dissonance of sobs. Schaeffer groaned internally. He could just make out the words “Joe, you were my besht friend.”

“I know, Harry,” Schaeffer replied, trying to sound soothing. “You were my best friend too.

“I’m shorry, Joe!” Harry said growing louder as his sobs reached a crescendo.

“Calm down Harry, you’re gonna wake up your wife.” Schaeffer cautioned. “The last thing you want is a fight this time of the morning.”

“You... you gotta forgive me Joe! You gotta forgive both of us,” Harry continued undeterred. “Please Joe! I love you!”

“I forgive you, Harry.” Schaeffer replied. “I forgive you for everything. It’s in the past, buddy. It’s all water under the proverbial bridge.”

“H’okay, Joe. H’okay. Thank you Joe. And Connie too?”

“Yes, Harry,” Schaeffer sighed. “Connie too.”

“I just get shentimental izh all,” slurred Harry. “That was the best day of our lives... the best day. We were all class...and happy too!”

“Yeah, I know Harry. was the best day.”

“THE BEST!”

“The best Harry. The best. You should get some sleep, it’s late, Connie’ll worry if she wakes up and you’re not there.”

“I’m shorry, Joe.”

“We’ve been over it, Harry. It’s OK. Things work out like they’re supposed to. You gotta let it go, pal. I forgave you guys a long time ago.”

“You’re not mad, Joe?”

“I’m not mad. It was a long time ago.”

“Connie’s shorry too. She won’t say it, but she gets a little sad on this day every year. You know what day it is, don’cha Joe?”

“Yes, Harry, it’s my anniversary.” *How could I forget, Harry? You call me every year on the same day just to*

tell me how sorry you are. Yes, Harry, you scoundrel I know what day it is!

“You were my best friend, Joe. That was our best day ever!”

“The best Harry. The very best. Don’t worry about a thing, it’s past. I’m fine. I forgave you years ago. Now it’s late, and I need to get back to bed.”

“Okay, Okay, Joe, Okay... I’m just so sorry Joe!”

“Harry, I’m hanging up now. Goodnight. I’ll talk to you next year.”

“Wait Joe I—“

Schaeffer placed the receiver back in its cradle and waited for his penitent drunk-dialing ex-best friend to call back. He stared up at the ceiling wondering how long it was going to go on, how many more years Harry was going to tell him how “shorry” he is, and how many more times he was going to have to forgive him. The truth was, Schaeffer had forgiven him ten years ago. In the end it was easier than listening to him cry and call his house again and again looking for absolution. Schaeffer looked at the calendar illuminated by a patch of moonlight and remembered his wedding day. He remembered how Connie had looked coming down the aisle, remembered all their friends and families gathered around, and he thought for a moment that that maybe Harry was right. Maybe it was their best day ever.

“We were the best we were ever going to be,” Schaeffer said to the empty room. “The happiest we’d ever be on that one day before all the bad rushed in.” *Maybe you only get one good day*, He hoped that wasn’t the case.

Schaeffer lay there, anticipating Harry’s return call. After a half an hour, when it didn’t come, he decided to try and give flight another chance so he rolled over and closed his eyes. Somewhere in the passageways of the night, he dreamt of riding on the back of a white horse, in a land without telephones. Looking back over his shoulder, in the distance, Schaeffer saw Harry and Connie waving, calling after him, as they were set upon by a pack of hungry wolves, but he could scarcely hear them over the sound of the horse’s hooves and the wind in his ears, and they grew smaller and smaller in the distance. In the dream, and in his sleep, Schaeffer laughed and dug his heels into the horse's flanks. Soon Harry and Connie were lost on the horizon— the telephone rang.

Schaeffer fumbled around in the dark and found the receiver. Lifting it to his ear he managed something that passed for a salutation.

“Joe?” inquired the voice on the other end.

Internally, Schaeffer sighed. *Always during the good dreams*, he thought to himself.

“Hello, Connie.”



Blue Night

LYNN WHITE

“The painting was inspired by Blaenau Ffestiniog, the small town in the mountains of north Wales where I live. It has a reputation for rain and mist, but sometimes we get these astonishing clear, deep blue skies at night!”

LINDA CRATE

some of us can swim
my eyes are dried
i will take all of your masks off
smash them,
and then force you to look in
the mirror
face the beast that you are;
a monster without soul or conscience
existing only to please itself
hedonistic to the nth
degree—
i don't respect nor trust you after being
cut on the bones of all your lies and insincerity
after all that charm and charisma proved
untrue,
and it kills me that i loved you only for you to lust me;
i cannot quite understand nor fathom your need
to have yet not
because i am not a woman that love in incompletes
you either have all of me or none of me
perhaps you didn't like my absolutes
i didn't like your uncertainty—
yet i cared enough to try to make us better,
and you simply threw me off the bridge that you sought
to burn;
but i swim well unlike you.

you don't deserve happiness

you wanted my peace

without my war,

and so you get nothing

but ruin in it's stead

because i am not some pretty

little bird that would have

sang happily in the gilded cage

of your love nor sat upon

the pedestal you made for expectations

are the mother of all disappointment;

i would know

for i expected you to act like a human being

you wanted me to swallow down the bits of me

that you didn't like—

i am not someone that can be tamed or controlled

for my spirit is wild and fierce

more than capable of holding and defending her own,

but i wanted to share my song with you;

all you wanted were the scriptures of my body

like a fool i gave them to you

believing your love for me was sincere when it was

nothing more than lust—

you cannot have my roses without their thorns,

and so now i cut you with everything i held back in an attempt

to make you happy because you don't deserve even the

smallest nugget of mirth.

ambitious dreamer

i cannot be like those
who swallow their dreams
to be what society wants
i am not that girl
who can care what they think
for i cannot be anything less than me
no matter the cost
because to be free and authentic are
two of the most important things to me,
and i cannot see why anyone
would cage themselves in the burden
of someone else's want;
i think we should all follow our own dreams
some people are happy with the small things
of life and the ribbons of relationships both
romantic and not so
i have always been the girl that wants more than
a provincial life with her nose stuck in a book
just like belle no one's ever understood me—
every rose has their thorn
i guess some of us are just fiercer in exposing them
than others,
but i will not be trapped in the desires of another because
my dreams and my ambitions are meant to be realities
which give me a means of escaping the normalcy
that some crave which could never be enough for me.

not all of us live fairy tales

the sun shines

even when i cannot

see him,

and so must i;

have to let the pain and anger

wash away to leave behind

a better me

whose scars only enhance

instead of lessen her beauty

because the wounds that have healed

are the places where life tried to break us

but could not,

and i already have enough wounds

unhealing;

i used to throw stones on the universe's window

hoping one of them would break to form

a portal to another world

where i could fall through the looking glass without

shattering—

i thought perhaps i would find my father there

always dreamed he was some sort of prince or king

who would come looking for his princess,

but i am not

a princess;

i am a warrior and a king of my own kingdom

so maybe that's why he'll never come for me because

i am complete on my own and deeper than the ocean

with the heights of a mountain—

still, like every girl, i wanted a father daughter dance

to simply belong and be loved;

instead i got a dad who i put distance from because

he hurt me every day of my life when i was young.

a perfect understanding
i will see the ocean again
this summer
has been several years since i've
clapped eyes on her form,
and her beautiful eyes are something i truly miss;
for we are both daughters of the moon
she is my sister
i belong with her and she with me—
crave that salt water kiss,
and sand beneath my feet and days
where she is so calm that i can swim in her waters
not having to trip head over heels
in being knocked over
by another wave;
wink at me sweet ocean and carry me away
from the toil and ruin of these days
which do not praise my heart or soul the way you do
take me to the beach and never return me
because home is not found in the place
where these weary bones
do what they must to survive
i was meant to do more than simply exist,
and i want to feel the joy of the waters against me once again
for i am just as fierce and wild as you;
i feel our hearts understand one another
perfectly.



Exotics
(Colored ink)

ANN CHRISTINE TABAKA

PHILIP KOBYLARZ

Licorice-Colored Hair

A part-timer, jack of many trades and interests, Mikey did not know what he wanted out of life, or what to do in it, so he hung out and even managed to work a bit at the Gallery. He was naturally skillful, good at anything he tried—welding, polishing, making prototype sculptures, inventing sculptures to be made, or at least drawings of them, and making love to unfamiliar women. According to his backroom stories, he was especially knowledgeable in the last category because he was continually in search for Ms. Right, or at least, her sister.

Symptomatic of many a mid-westerner born and bred in medium-sized cities, not having a particular accent and all too familiar with the forever stretching fields of corn and sometimes soybeans that led nowhere and contained nothing other than vast expanses of itself, he seemed to be seeking a horizon, a line of perspective, maybe a definition of himself.

An early riser and smoker of morning cigarettes and addicted nail biter, he was the energy cell that got the Gallery going. The morning music thumping out of the lunch room stereo was his: funk, jazz, rap, or classical. He liked it all. When he worked, he liked to control the situation and job at hand; he was his own boss which meant there was an inevitable personality clash with Rex. After all, it was Rex's show, and he habitually called the shots even though he set unreasonable schedules that no one could meet and that demanded total commitment to the impossible.

Mikey and Rex carried out their psychic battle by leaving each other mean little post-it notes about the workplace. *If you're gonna do it like this, don't do it at all* by Rex would be met with a *If I don't do it, it won't get done, boss-man* by Mikey. There were times when Mikey's replies quoted philosophers or great men of literature; Rex would reply by intentionally illiterate responses misspelled on purpose. The best of these missives were culled by Raymond and left in the bathroom for the reading pleasure of all.

Think, next time, stoopid—R.

I thought, therefore I did—M.

Granpappa with his lame arm, could a done better—R.

Then get him to, pops—M.

Before finishing my pieces, ask!—R.

Because I did it better than you, don't be peeved, be happy—M.

Egads, it that a weld, or an iron caterpillar—R.

Neither, it's a pupa in molt—M.

In any normal workplace, these aesthetic exchanges would have led to a firing before they could even be pronounced, in this case, writ, but this was the Gallery, and artists, up to a point, could be inspired and egos could be fueled by this kind of mental banter.

Because Mikey just didn't know what he wanted to do, petty arguments were a symptom. Partially, this is what led him to become engaged to his college sweetheart Karrie. Sometimes she would come in and wait for her man to finish work, and she'd bring a twelve-pack of beer for all. During these afterhours steam blowing sessions, Mikey and Karrie would take little jabs at each other, in front of the others, revealing their unhappiness. Both worked marginal jobs—Karrie was a food preparatrice at a deli. Mikey worked at the Gallery. Both of them had with no careers in sight for the future. They had children, in the form of two puppies, but they were just too young to be a couple, let alone a to-be-married one. When Mikey began sleeping at the Gallery, or in the back of it, in his car, the warning flag was unfurled.

It seemed that the artist's life led to either infidelity or heartbreak, often both. When Karrie wasn't around, Mikey inevitably complained about his "set-up" to mainly uninterested ears. What could anyone tell him? There wasn't a success story in the ranks. Rex and Nora were always at each other, Raymond practically despised his girlfriend, Pablo's cut out on him, and Sam and Louise were never around enough to reveal the secrets of their bliss, which was, in fact, the true secret of their happiness.

During the long boring hours of drudge work, like endlessly sweeping up minute dust particles or re-arranging the tool shelves or collecting the tiny bits of pieces that didn't make it into art— from the floor, off the tables and desks, something Mikey loved to do, images of his possible wedding night drifted through his head.

Silver kegs of beer seeping flat beer, the band covering Hendrix tunes as inefficiently as they could, his buddies all gussied up in rented tuxes, his old flames looking better than they ever did when they were with him, especially the tall blonde who'd been in a motorcycle accident and had a scar running up her thigh, the dance floor of the non-denominational chapel barely occupied. A cafeteria fold-out table loaded with presents in beautiful wrappings that he'd later let his dogs in a fury open, his mother drunk on wine, attempting to sing the songs from her own wedding, the band reluctantly switching to Blue Moon, and her dancing with anyone who would dare. Somehow these visions didn't leave him sad, only wishing that they weren't his.

To say he wasn't happy was to miss the point altogether. He, like the others, wanted something better. He was selling some of his bronzes, especially the one of an ear of corn painted real colors and his giant iron cowboy boot. He even established a formula that took in all the costs, work time, even shipping fees, to gain a moderate profit. But days beginning with the thought of making ten or so belt buckles, out of bronze, that simply consisted of the words *Belt Buckle* put a damper on the crisp sunny mornings. Maybe he wanted to travel. Maybe he wanted to leave.

And he would, as often as possible. Usually, minutes of get away time. A walk to the gas station to pick up a pack of smokes and some candy bars. After putting in hours of reluctant work, he'd take one of his dogs out to the riverside park, watch the topographies of sinkhole and river form, then spin away, and he'd wonder what the woods looked like just beyond the levee on the other side. He'd roam the back alleys of town, where the Amish parked their horse and buggies, and he'd whistle and chirp to get their attention, then look for decent cardboard boxes from behind the thrift and hardware stores, for shipping his works to such distant places as Toronto, Okaloosa, Peoria, Albuquerque.

Other places is what Mikey often thought about. It is what lead him to buy a motorcycle. After the daily grind, he'd ride it along the highways that led from town to town, never actually going anywhere but around. With walkman earphones set snugly in his ears, and a helmet on his head, he could be elsewhere, almost with a feeling of flight, alone in the night air and wind listening to jazz turned up real loud. It was a mock escape from everything: his life, work, the country. To see lights of a town on the distant horizon, and to achieve them, downshifting past the police car in repose on the outskirts of the city, to cruise in third gear through the empty streets lit up by a local salon's beer sign and streetlights flickering through the wings of a million hungry moths. To accelerate outside of town, shifting, pushing the engine to its limits, entering a freeway, and opening up the bike to full speed, grinning, and facing the almost limitless possibility of highway 80— endpoints of San Francisco or New York— nothing stopping him but his own rationality.

One day he would just ride and keep riding. But not yet. Tonight, like most other nights, he'd go home, to his dogs and his woman, have dinner, watch a little t.v. until he became bored, and fall into another restless sleep knowing there was another day of hard work ahead of him, and that he was surrounded by fields and fields of fields, and that life was that way, but it didn't have to be, and he could change it if he wanted to, by leaving, by finding a different job, by having an affair, by drinking more, by whatever he wanted. The crux.

Knowing what to want was the hardest part. Karrie and Mikey would take trips to the big city, St. Louis, Minneapolis, or Chicago, to find the things that life in their corner of the woods lacked. Books, art museums, good restaurants, could from time to time provide the spark of excitement that once led them into the proposition of love. After

a while, these places became the same old places, and they stopped going to them mostly because they tired of the long drives to them, always the same route, always the same familiar scenery.

Which, quite naturally, as all of nature is the antithesis of civilization, led Mikey to search for new landscapes within the limits of his territory. Landscapes of a highly localized, and feminine disposition. Unable to find inspiration within his life, he began messing around.

He had for sometime been fascinated with the conceit of adultery, if there exists a person who is not, and started to test the clichés he'd learned from movies, on women at nearby pubs.

Much to his surprise, they worked. Asking what sign a fellow drinker was, with a few initial laughs, proved to be a time tested true lead into a person's psyche. The third Scorpion he met in one evening garnered him a ride home, late, late at night, and a goodbye kiss and understood promise for a less crowded rendezvous. Her name was Monica and she was trouble.

Trouble came in the guise of abruptly disconnected phone calls. Mikey became forgetful of things, like where he put his keys and sunglasses; he'd drop sculptures he had just finished. At work, he started to blink uncontrollably, and stutter when he spoke to customers. Karrie began to pick up on these signals and the guys at work, being artists and never too far from the inspiration that only emotion could bring, knew something in Mikey's world had begun to become unhinged.

Especially since his bouts with Rex had almost completely subsided. This ongoing theater of dislike was one of the favorite vaudevilles of the Gallery. Without the tension between the two stubborn men, a dynamic was missing. Nora no longer had Rex's anger to console. Pablo didn't have a cohort in criticism of the boss. Alex couldn't act as mediator. Raymond sat and ate his lunches silently, trying to figure out what type of cloud was obscuring the co-op's weather. Then Monica started showing up at the Gallery.

Sam, who happened to be around only at the most crucial moments, announced her first arrival, from behind haze of blue generic cigarette smoke— *she's here Mikey boy, and dressed in nines*. And she was: heels, tight black pants, and a sweater that was more of a second skin than an article of clothing. When she arrived, Mikey dropped the ball-peen hammer in his fist, ripped the goggles off his face, and with a dirty handkerchief, wiped sweat and dust from his face. He ran into the bathroom to presumably fix his wild tuft of three o'clock work hair.

When he came out, Monica was chatting with the Raymond and Pablo in the office. *There you are*, she said when he entered the room, knocking over the cup of pencils on the desk. He invited her to the pub down the street for a beer and game of pool.

Mikey didn't come back to work that day.

Karrie called twice.

There is a type of psychic radar that infidelity, or the thought of it, breeds. When Karrie came into the Gallery at five thirty, the boys told her that Mikey was out with a client. Nora said nothing. Karrie didn't have to inquire about the gender of the foresaid client. It was understood. It's all in the eyes.

At the bar, Mikey and Monica small talked. Really mostly they didn't say much. Mikey watched her as she bent over the pool table, hands tightly holding the cue, one eye closed, one squinting when she made a shot. To him, she looked like an elf with dark hair. Angled eyes that looked maybe even Egyptian with the aid of carefully applied mascara. A perfectly proportionate pug nose, the tip of which moved when she smiled broadly. Long dark hair the color of fresh licorice.

She walked around the pool table, to make a shot, and bent her long body nearly an inch from Mikey's face. The thought that this couldn't be happening didn't occur to him. When she pulled her stick back, it hit his beer glass, which was on a wet napkin. The glass stayed position on its edge, tilted, holding half a beer. Mikey saw this as a divine sign.

So did most of the bar's patrons. They looked, laughed, pointed, then began to applaud. Monica smiled in astonishment before turning around and seeing what she had performed. She curtsied, took her shot, and sunk it.

To Mikey, this miracle was a message. And it read: *Caution Ahead*. Before he had the time to fully realize the situation, the time of late evening it was, his relative drunkenness, he was in the passenger seat and Monica was lighting a cigarette for him, in her mouth, and they were driving to her place.

When they got there, they were greeted by her auburn cat, Tether. Mikey entered, taking off his coat and apologizing for his grimy work clothes. Monica offered him a glass of wine, disappeared into the kitchen, from which immediately he heard the radio, the jazz station he always listened to. She came out with a bottle and two glasses and a lit candle.

This was something new. The taste of her lipstick. The contours of her body felt through tight jeans. Though she wore no perfume, her hair carried the scent of fresh picked flowers, or a newly used bar of soap. He tasted the taste of the gum she was chewing and didn't take out of her mouth. He measured her weight as it pressed down onto his own body, which he couldn't feel anymore. The buttons of her shirt were round and liquid smooth like seashells. She breathed his name, and something else that he didn't want to hear, then she bit his ear. It seemed as if her breasts were moving of their own volition. When he closed his eyes he saw Karrie's face, he saw his dogs running

away from him in a big grassy field, he saw his mother scolding him for breaking a window with a baseball. When he closed his eyes, he saw the lights of some distant city slowly turning off, like stars dying. Mikey was going somewhere he had never been before, a new place, a location of no known address, somewhere where it might be possible to return from.



Ginger Road Brown
ASHLEY PARKER OWENS



Nice Brown Road
ASHLEY PARKER OWENS



On The Road Purple
ASHLEY PARKER OWENS

PAM MUNTER

Note: As with most historical fiction, the people in this story lived. The situations, however, are wholly imagined. This is one of the stories in a series that was inspired by the lives of early Hollywood legends.

The Last Fan

She used to be Joan Davis. Now she was just another 53-year-old has-been living behind tall, well-manicured hedges on Tamarisk Road in the Movie Colony in Palm Springs.

Nobody knew who she was any more, surprising since she had been in the public eye since hitting it big in vaudeville as a young girl, even playing the Palace. Later, there were dozens of movies in the 1930s and 1940s. So what if they were on the second half of the bill. Over 30 million people listened to her on the radio every week. Her television show was good enough to last three seasons, though she existed in the shadow of the higher rated Lucille Ball whom she deeply resented. There was even an Emmy nomination. But none of it mattered now. She could walk into the Milton F. Kreis drug store on Palm Canyon and nobody even looked her way. Now she was by herself, well, except for her maid, Lorena, still with her after all these years. The only one who stayed.

Sometimes she felt comforted by the framed playbills, the movie one-sheets and the dozen or so 11X14 glossies that neatly hung in her hall. On her bad days, she always seemed to find a reason to retrieve something from the back bedroom down the hall, just to reassure herself who she once was. She no longer liked looking at herself in the mirror but those airbrushed photos made her look beautiful.

These days, she spent more of her time on the welcoming, forgiving couch, staring at a droning television. What was the matter with people? It's all just shit now. So much had happened since her series was cancelled six years ago in 1955. TV was funny then. She was funny then.

"Miss Davis? Would you like something to drink?" Lorena knew the answer but kept up the pretense that it was still a choice.

"Yeah, thanks." She was studying the man on the little screen. "Lorena, do you watch Jack Benny? It's OK. You can tell me."

She paused just a second before she answered, checking her boss' face and set down the drink on the table. "Oh, sometimes, Miss Davis. He's very funny. And I love Rochester."

“He’s good. Knows his pacing. He went to school in vaudeville like I did. Jack was always wonderful to me. I wonder why doesn’t he have me on his show.”

“I don’t know, Miss Davis.”

Of course, Lorena knew. She overheard the desperate phone calls, the pleas to producers. She had even asked that nice Mr. Cantor to help her get back on TV. Not many people wanted to work with her any more. She was temperamental and demanding, they said. Others weren’t as kind.

“I’m going to call Eddie.”

“I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

She straightened her dressing gown, lifted the receiver off the black phone and dialed the number. How many millions of times had she done that? She and Eddie went back at least twenty years. Maybe even longer than that. Two tough vaudevillians from the school of hard knocks and coarse living. They spoke each other’s language, even though he was 15 years older. She had never worn heels around him so she wouldn’t tower over him.

“Hi, Sweetie. Can you come over?” There was a pause on the other end.

“Ida’s here this weekend. Can’t, Joan. I’ll give you a call early next week. Yes?”

He was always so solicitous. She knew he had to keep up the façade of the marriage. He couldn’t very well abandon Ida now, after making her and their five daughters a standing joke for years in his act. Joan endured the frustration because he found her gawky frame sexy and her rubber-bodied antics endearing. She didn’t regret a minute of being with him. He made her feel like a woman. Life would be so much nicer if Ida would find her own lover or just drop dead.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.” She didn’t want him to feel guilty. “Call me when you can.” Carefully and slowly, she replaced the receiver in the cradle. She remembered working with him on those routines in that movie, “Show Business.” She had wanted to be good for him because his money was in the picture. Singing and dancing with Eddie was the best time she could imagine. At least, she had the movie one-sheet poster framed on the living room wall to remind her how good she was.

“Lorena. Another, please.”

“Coming, Miss Davis.” Joan had lost count but Lorena kept tabs. Joan didn’t understand why she did that and it annoyed her sometimes. Maybe it was just habit. There had been falls, after all, nothing serious. Joan almost set the couch on fire one night when she fell asleep with her cigarette still burning. Still, if Lorena paid attention to the vodka supply by keeping track, that was just fine. It was an essential part of her job. Joan was enraged when there wasn’t a good supply on hand.

“I’m going to leave in a while. Is that all right?” Joan wished Lorena could live in so she wouldn’t leave her alone at night. But it was just a two-bedroom house and Joan needed the other bedroom for her daughter or her mother when they came to visit. Half of it was filled with her performance wardrobe from the old days, anyway, the dresses and costumes locked away in dusty plastic designer bags.

“Sure. Don’t forget to lock the door when you leave.”

Joan watched her leave, then heard the lock click. She made her way to the kitchen where she poured herself just one more before settling back down on the couch. It didn’t matter what was on. It was all shit. Even “My Little Margie” was better than “Car 54, Where Are You?” Wonder whatever happened to Gale Storm, anyway. She knew Gale’s show was only popular because it followed “I Married Joan.”

She looked around the darkened room. Peering through the windows, she knew there was a pool out there in the dark, surrounded by grass kept green and trim by the weekly gardeners. It was important to have good help.

In some ways, the house itself was an apt reflection of her dismantled state. She had started with antiques but in the middle of last year, she took a liking to the mid-century look becoming so popular in Palm Springs. Nothing matched but everything had been expensive. She liked being rich. She fell into a stuporous sleep, thinking about the hard times working in those seedy theaters, waiting her turn to go on for the sixth time that day. Without much effort, she could bring back the pungent smells of flop sweat and greasepaint. She doused herself each morning with My Sin to help blot out her olfactory memories. Later, she had remembered getting up to go to bed but hadn’t noticed the time. It didn’t matter. Not much did.

She was awakened by the sound of the doorbell and her two French poodles barking their strident soprano arias. The second more insistent wave of ringing told her Lorena hadn’t come into work yet. She found her bathrobe and stumbled to the door.

“Eddie! You’re here.” She stepped forward as he extended his arms. They were just about the same size. How convenient. She always noticed how handsome he was—when he wasn’t mugging for laughs. She didn’t care if he wasn’t wearing his hair piece, either.

“I came as soon as I could. Ida went back to Beverly Hills this morning.” He led her into the living room where they sat on the couch. “What’s wrong, Sweetie?”

Though she trusted Eddie more than anyone else in her world, she never felt safe telling anyone what she was feeling. People hurt you. They take advantage. She hadn’t been successful by relying on others. Her show was in the top 10 because she took control. She’d done it all herself, like it or not. Nobody gave her credit, either.

She looked directly into his intense brown eyes. “I need to find something. That pilot I shot a while back about

me being an astronaut never got off the ground.” They both laughed at her accidental humor. It was serendipitous when that happened as neither was as funny as the personalities they presented on the screen. Comedy was serious business for both of them, seldom infusing their personal lives. “The production company has folded. Nobody wants the ‘I Married Joan’ films. When syndication ends, so do I.”

“They will, Sweetie. But I know. Have you talked to anyone at Revue or General Studios?”

“My agent’s supposed to make those calls but I think he’s down for the count. I don’t make him any money these days.” She looked longingly toward the kitchen. “Would you like a drink?”

He shook his head and looked away. “It’s a little early, isn’t it, Joan? Come on.” The phone ringing made both of them jump.

Lorena would be late, she said, hoped it wouldn’t be an inconvenience. Something about a problem at home. She got off the phone and smiled at Eddie. “We all have problems at home, don’t we?”

She knew Eddie didn’t like to talk about his domestic situation. He was here now and that was enough. No questions. No complications. Nobody noticed when they purchased their respective homes in Palm Springs within months of each other, just a few minutes apart by car. Not those bitchy gossip mongers, Hedda and Louella, certainly, and more importantly, not Ida.

“Why don’t you do a book? Mine has sold pretty well. The ghost was careful about leaving out the drecky times and people. Nothing about our personal relationship.”

She grinned. “You don’t think it was between the lines? Or sheets?” She loved throwing innuendo at him.

“So why don’t you? You’d have the control I know you want.”

“I don’t know that I want to go back there. I couldn’t do it myself.”

“You won’t have to. Let me give you Jane Ardmore’s number. She’s a little stuffy but that’s not a bad quality in a writer.”

She shook her head. “Well, I don’t…”

He smiled and leaned toward her, taking her hand. “I remember the first time I saw you.” Joan knew what was coming. He always brought up this story when he was trying to sway her. She loved hearing it and inhaled a noseful of his English Leather. “You were third on the bill. Not bad. I was next to closing. You wound yourself up and skidded all the way across that stage on the heel of one shoe. How the hell did you do that? As many times as I watched you, I could never figure it out.”

“It always stopped the show, didn’t it? Took me months to learn how to do that without busting my ass.” They

shared a laugh.

After Eddie left, Joan stood in the shower, flooded with memories. The bad relationships, the abusive marriage, the endless hours of hard work, the loneliness, the resentment she felt from the men on the TV show, its cancellation after only three years. But, she reassured herself, she had a closet full of furs, a new car, this lovely home in the Movie Colony. Even her daughter seemed happier now. Maybe Eddie was right about the book.

She zipped up her slacks, pulled on a loose top and combed her hair away from her face. She hoped Lorena had left out some bread so she could at least make toast. Even though she wasn't doing those outlandish and dangerous physical stunts any longer, she managed to keep her weight down without dieting. A liquid dinner had its advantages.

It was 10:30 already. Where was Lorena? The doorbell rang simultaneously with the toaster's ding. The yapping poodles ran to the door. Damn it. It's probably just another fan. Oh, wait. She knew that wasn't true. There weren't any of those now. She still didn't understand what happened.

She moved the dogs away from the door and took a step outside into the portico and closed the door lightly behind her. Standing a few feet away was a mailman, actually a young woman in a crisp post office uniform. Even with the desert heat, she looked well-pressed.

"Yes?" Joan wasn't sure quite how to handle this kind of thing. Lorena always answered the door, took care of the service people.

"Oh. I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Davis. I have a package for you. It wouldn't fit in the box."

"Fine. Thank you, dear." She took it and started to step back inside.

"I hope I didn't disturb you. I didn't expect to see you."

"I live here."

She stammered a bit, studying her feet. "Yes, I know. I've been on this route for almost a year, um, hoping to meet you."

She looked at this woman, a girl, really, for the first time. No beauty, that's for sure. She was short, had what looked to be leftover acne scars and obviously enjoyed her desserts. She seemed almost vulnerable standing there on the porch.

"Well. That's very nice."

"I loved 'I Married Joan' and I was so sad when it went off the air. You were....wonderful and hilarious."

Joan wasn't used to this. Even when she was on NBC every Wednesday night, she seldom gave interviews and didn't go out in public much. And now after all these years, she had to remember how to bring back that phony magnanimous celebrity demeanor that had once come so naturally. She was out of practice.

"Thank you. And what's your name, dear?"

"I'm Donna. I know that's your real name, too. Madonna, like the saint. I'm Catholic, too."

Joan had to laugh. She hadn't thought about that name in a long time. And it had been forever since she had felt like a Catholic.

"You're absolutely right."

"And I know you were born in St. Paul, that you had a popular radio show on CBS, that it was sponsored by Lever Brothers, that you were in lots of movies with Eddie Cantor and Abbott and Costello and Milton Berle and Alice Faye and..."

"You're quite a scholar, aren't you?" The vaguely acerbic question couldn't cover the fact she was touched by this woman's words and breathlessness. "But you're far too young to remember all that."

"I read all the fan magazines. You can probably tell. I'm going on too long. I'm sorry. I do need to get back to my route. And I know you must be very busy" She started to back away from the threshold then turned to look at her once more. "This has meant a lot to me. You know, I see lots of famous people on my route, but you...." The final word seemed etched in the air. Joan's eyes moistened over, in spite of herself.

"It's been nice talking with you, too, Donna. Thanks for the package."

She closed the door behind her and felt an unfamiliar infusion of adrenalin. She was at her best in front of a large audience, but these one-on-ones were inevitably uncomfortable. Still, Donna was so fresh, unguarded, genuine. What a great way to start the day. She finished her toast and poured a shot of wake-up juice, tossing it back in a single gulp. If only that kid had been a part of the Nielsen family, she thought, I'd still be on the air. She turned when she heard the front door open.

"I'm sorry, Miss Davis. I'm so late."

"What happened?"

"It's the husband. He's sick again. I don't know what I'm gonna do."

"Well, you better figure it out. I need you here."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry." She put her things in the closet. "What can I get for you?"

Even her maid was about to abandon her, after all this time. Damned husbands. They always screw things

up.

“Just a short one. Good enough for now.”

She sat for a minute, took a sip of her breakfast, then went to the phone book. She found the number for Bullock’s and dialed.

“Hello. This is Joan Davis. Joan Davis. D-A-V-I-S. I have an account with you. For a long time. I would like to re-order the yellow silk lingerie set you sent me a few months ago. I also need a set of linen sheets for a double bed, in white, please. Yes, same address. How soon can you deliver it?”

The next morning, she got up with the sun streaming through her windows, performed her familiar daily rituals, and idly wondered what time the mail would arrive. She went to her usual spot on the couch in the living room after turning on the TV to watch the morning soaps. It was embarrassing how engrossing those could be. She wouldn’t be caught dead on one of those, though, no matter how much she missed working. None of them was funny, ever. Not an ounce of humor anywhere. And terrible acting.

At the commercial break, she watched herself gravitate to the front windows, the ones facing the street and the mail box. Lorena was sweeping the back porch and hosing off the outdoor furniture. Standing at the window, she could hear Lorena chatting with the pool guy. There was a sharp yell and a loud splash, then another. She hurried out to the back yard in time to see both Lorena and the pool guy standing in the pool, each holding a small white dog, all of them drenched.

“Those damned dogs got into the pool again, Miss Davis. Are you sure they can’t swim?”

Her fear was almost mitigated by the funny scene before her. Both adults waded to the edge of the pool and carefully placed the wet dogs on the deck. Joan stood at the edge of the pool and tried not to laugh, even though it reminded her of her debut in that Mack Sennett comedy back in 1935.

“I wouldn’t want to take the chance. Thanks, you guys.” She turned to the rescued piles of wet fur. “Bad babies. Bad! You need to stay out of the water. It’s not good for you. And you know Mama can’t swim.” She loved those little dogs more than anyone. Well, except for Eddie.

Emerging from the water, Lorena grabbed towels out of the cabinet near the back of the pool.

“Come here, you little rascals. I’ll dry them off, Miss Davis. I just turned my back for a minute.”

Joan returned to her vigil by the front window. There she was at the curb by the mailbox. Joan walked outside, pretending to look for something in the driveway. And, actually, the box from Bullock’s was right there on the doorstep. What luck! Donna saw her, gave her a big smile and walked over to hand her the mail.

“Hi, Miss Davis.”

“Donna. How are you doing today?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Wow, here you are again. Hey, remember that episode where you have to tutor the football kicker from your high school alma mater? You were trying so hard to be nice to him and gave him all those pastries. He got so fat that the coach ordered him to lose weight. And you helped. It’s funny to watch you wrestling with all that gym equipment. Didn’t you ever hurt yourself on the show?”

“Lots of times. Tons of broken bones but please don’t tell anyone. I had to make it look easy. We had a nurse on the set all the time and she was busy, let me tell you.”

Lorena passed by them on her way to the store. “Be back soon.”

Donna noticed the box on the doorstep. “How about I help you carry this big box into the house?”

“You don’t have to do that. It isn’t really mail, you know.”

“I know. Happy to help.”

“Right over there is fine. Would you like something to drink?”

“I’d sure love a Coke. It’s hot today.”

Just as she retrieved a Coke from the fridge, she heard a splash.

“Uh oh.” She ran out to see both dogs in the pool. Where was Lorena? Donna followed her outside.

“Can’t they swim? I thought all dogs could swim.”

“No, they can’t. And neither can I. My babies. Oh, oh, oh, my God.”

Joan looked around for something like an inner tube, a pole, anything. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Donna jump feet-first into the pool, hurrying over to one dog and shepherding her to the side. Joan watched as her other precious baby struggled to stay above water while Donna made her way to the other side to get her. She could hardly breathe.

“Here they are!” She came up to the edge of the deck, smiling broadly.

“You got them. You bad dogs. I have to sit down. This is too much. Twice in one day. That damned Lorena left the back door open again.” She pointed to the towels by the edge of the pool.

Donna laughed. “Well, I said it was a hot day, didn’t I?”

“Thank God you were here.”

“Yeah. See? They don’t seem to care, do they? Guess they wanted to cool off, too. I’m glad I could help. Lis-

ten, I have to go home and change before I can finish my route.”

“How can I thank you? I’m so grateful. Please take the Coke with you. It’s the least I can do.”

Donna walked to the door quickly, hopping over the stark white carpeting in the living room. She turned and reached out to shake Joan’s hand, but Joan drew her close, giving her a warm hug. She surprised herself at the atypical gesture.

“Thank you, Donna. Thank you. Thank you.” Joan pulled away quickly, always embarrassed by any show of affection unless it was with Eddie. And even then.

How ironic that this woman, the mailman, would be here just now, just at the right time, that she would be such a big fan, too. She asked nothing in return, either. Joan realized she could have offered her an autographed picture but she was too overcome by the close call to think about such niceties. She reached for the vodka, hoping to calm herself down. As time passed, she felt more angry than scared. She couldn’t very well fire Lorena but it just goes to show that you can’t really trust anyone these days to do their job.

She walked to the couch, sat and dialed Eddie’s number.

“I’ve had such a morning. You wouldn’t believe this.” She unraveled the whole tale for him, the meeting the other day with Donna, her sweet worship of Joan and the incredible luck that she was in the house when the dogs nearly drowned.

“That’s quite a tale. Lucky, indeed. Listen, Joanie, Ida’s coming back this afternoon, so we have to avoid getting together for a few days.”

“I understand. Sure wish she’d get tired of you and divorce you. You know what I mean.” She missed him so much when he wasn’t there. He had become a part of her over the years and even more so now.

“That won’t happen, Joan. There too much at stake for both of us in this marriage. We fight but she has no grounds. She could ruin me. Us.”

“I know. So much for ‘Ida, sweet as apple cider.’” That had been a running joke between them for years. Eddie’s theme song had long been a hollow tribute to his mythical wedded bliss.

She and Ida seldom met and that was for the best. Now that there were no more films, no excuses to get together, Joan and Eddie had to be more careful. They hadn’t been seen in public together in years. Eddie came over only when Ida was out of town and would always go home before Lorena arrived for work. She was sure Lorena knew what was going on but, at least on this subject, Joan knew she could trust her discretion. Eddie was all she had, really. And now, maybe Donna. Maybe. They had a bond now.

Joan couldn't envision a real friendship with Donna, whatever that was. She was at least three decades older than Donna. All they really had in common was that they were members of the Joan Davis Fan Club. But that was just fine with both of them, it would seem. Joan found herself waiting for the mail delivery each day so she could invite Donna in for just a minute, just long enough to stoke the embers of her ego.

One morning, the Donna was unusually early. When she rang the doorbell, Joan and Eddie were still having breakfast, Eddie in his boxers and a tee shirt.

"I have a package for you, Miss Davis."

"Don't you think it's time for you to call me Joan? Thanks. I'd invite you in, but I have a guest."

"I see." She peered around Joan to see a man sitting at the kitchen table. "Isn't that Mr. Cantor?"

"Yes, he just stopped by for a few minutes to discuss a new film script. Would you like to come in and say 'hello?'"

"That would be exciting but I can't. I have an extra route today. I'd sure love to see you both working together again. See you tomorrow, I hope."

As soon as she left, Eddie smiled at Joan. "I'm not as popular with her as you are. Guess I don't rate. It would be swell if that were true, wouldn't it? That we could work together again?"

"I'd love it. Maybe a tour to promote our books. I did call Ardmore to talk about it and we're meeting next week. What a great excuse to be together. After all, we're big in each other's books. Professionally. Co-stars to the end!" she waved dramatically.

"I'm pleased you're going to do it, Joanie. Let me know if I can help. I need to get a shower and get out of here. As always, thanks." They hugged each other almost tentatively. As close as they had been Joan was still uneasy with physical contact. Still, she wished they could return to the bedroom if only to keep him there longer.

Joan looked at her watch and saw it was a few minutes past the time for her favorite soap, "Search for Tomorrow." She poured herself a drink and sat down to watch. Before long, Lenore would be there. She had leaned on her heavily about the dogs getting out but she had promised to be more careful and somehow Joan knew she would be. For the first time in a long time, Joan felt more at peace, more settled. The autobiography would return her to the public eye, it would give her lots of plausible time with Eddie and now, after all this time, she had an honest-to-goodness fan. Donna's daily visits gave her something to look forward to, like a vitamin infusion, bolstering her in so many ways.

There were still those long nights, though, when she lounged alone on the couch, half-heartedly watching

crap on TV while finishing off a bottle. Will they ever get tired of showing those stale Westerns? Their flimsy plots made it hard to turn off her mental rehash—all the inequities, the slights, the disappointments, the rejections. She had been so good, better than Lucy, better than any of the men at physical comedy. Only Chaplin came close. She knew she had never been a beauty; she had to be funny. It came naturally to her from the very start. Now, nothing was easy.

The days melted together through the unseasonably warm spring. The weather was perfect but Joan found it hard to get off the couch. Eddie came over when he could. With his support, she had set up a schedule to meet with the ghost writer. The highlight of the day, though, was the mail delivery. Joan ordered things she knew would require a door delivery from Donna, giving them a chance to talk for a few minutes. Now and again, Donna would come in for a Coke. Those were good days for Joan. If Donna were a writer, she could help her write the autobiography, the perfect combination of knowledge and adulation. But she knew Donna wasn't all that educated and that she was barely able to make ends meet, even with her post office job. She had refused any help from Joan, which surprised her. She'd only taken the autographed photo and the Cokes.

It was after 11 on a Saturday night when the doorbell rang insistently. Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. She had been asleep on the couch, lulled by vodka and the boredom of "Gunsmoke" in the background. As soon as she opened the door, Eddie rushed in, his trademark banjo eyes popping like he was under attack.

"She knows. Ida knows everything."

"What? How? Sit, sit. Take it easy." Joan was still trying to rouse herself from her deep sleep.

He looked as if he might explode so she perched on the other end of the couch, providing a cushion of safety for both of them. Eddie took a minute and took some hyperventilated breaths. Joan watched him carefully, wondering how he felt about this development and how it might impact their lives together.

"First, Joan, Sweetie, pour yourself a drink. You're gonna need it."

Joan obediently went into the kitchen and poured each of them a tumbler.

"What do you mean?"

"She kicked me out. She's called her lawyer."

"Jeez." She felt an excited jolt at the back of her neck.

"This is the real crapper. You know how she found out?"

Now Joan was leaning on every word, thinking that that this might mean Eddie would finally be hers. She

could move all the furs into storage, making room for....

“It was your sweet little mailman.”

Joan couldn't quite take this in.

“Who?”

“That fawning little fan you keep talking about. It gets better.”

She couldn't find words, much less formulate a coherent question.

“Ida has been paying her. Her lawyer thought it up. I don't know all the details. It doesn't matter. But Ida was screaming at me that it had cost her a lot to get the goods on me. I guess your 'fan' needed the money. Or something.”

Joan put down her glass. “I don't believe it.” How could she have been so wrong? It didn't make sense. The bottom fell out of her stomach. “She knew all about my career. She loved the show. She remembered the plots.”

“My guess is that asshole lawyer gave her all the ammunition. I'm sure she doesn't give a shit about anything but the money she made being a fink.”

She thought of all the good talks they had, the look of awe in Donna's eyes when Joan talked about working with her co-stars and with Eddie. Oh. Was she pumping me for information, even then? But she had jumped in the pool to save the dogs. She saved the dogs! All part of the set-up? A lucky coincidence?

“I feel like such a dope.”

“Don't. She was a good actress. She played you like she had done this before.”

“I don't even want to think about that. I don't know what to do. What do we do, Eddie? Tell me. How can we make this work for us?”

“I need to deal with Ida. I can't let her divorce me. This can't happen. It would be the end of my career. And I don't want my girls to find out, either.”

“What about me? Us? Isn't this a chance for us to...?”

“Joanie, you know I love you.” He moved closer to her but she pulled away. She knew.

She persisted. “You can stay here. Don't go to a hotel.”

“No, no, you know I can't. We have to stay away from each other for a while until I can get her back on track. It's happened before so I have an idea about what I have to do.”

“What? What's happened before?”

“It’s not important, dear. I need to call my attorney, I need to figure out how to make this go away, how to keep her quiet.”

There was a palpable silence in the room.

Joan felt as if all the bones in her body had turned to liquid. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t feel. What just happened here?

“You go to bed, Joanie. I’ll get back in touch when things calm down. And good luck with your lying mail bitch.”

She didn’t look up to see Eddie leave. There was a loud noise in her head. How alone she felt at that moment. She swore to herself that she would never answer the door again, resolved to never trust Eddie in the same way. Things had morphed into completely unfamiliar territory. She had to think, to plan. Odd that she flashed back to the interview she gave when she had just heard “I Married Joan” had been canceled. She told the young writer not to worry about her, that she would get along just fine, as she always had—on a mixture of “gall, guts and gumption.” She always loved her clever phrasing.

She stiffly lifted herself off the couch and slowly walked over to the kitchen cupboard. She hoped Lorena had remembered to reorder her regular weekly case.



Tired, Still No. 1
CHRISTINE STODDARD



Tired, Still No. 2
CHRISTINE STODDARD



Shell Form #2
(Watercolour)

ANN CHRISTINE TABAKA



Shell Form #5
(Watercolour)

ANN CHRISTINE TABAKA

ROSE TITUS

Evil Joe

I know it's strange to just say it like this, but Joe was evil. I don't mean that he was messed up, or disturbed, or anything like that. He was evil. Really. Joe was evil. It's true. I know what evil looks like. Let me tell you this. Evil is good looking, and evil talks real cool. Evil has a lot of money, and evil drives a Cadillac.

Nowadays people just don't use that word. Evil. They say someone isn't coping well, something like that. But I really do know that Joe was in fact evil.

Someone your age thinks that it all happened a long time ago. But the seventies weren't that long ago. And I was a lot like you then. I was pretty and young, and from a small town. Yeah. I know. I don't look like much now. But I looked good then. Got a cigarette in that bag? Give me one. I need to quit. My lungs are shot all the way to hell, like the rest of me. But I can't tell this without having a smoke. I came here looking for work too. I was nineteen, and had nothing. He was 37 and he had a lot.

My father took off when I was a kid; we never knew where he went. I decided to come here for work, start out as a cocktail waitress, and learn my way around. My mother and some of my friends were against my coming here. They said no good things could happen, all kinds of people around here. You see, I was also looking to find someone rich, someone who would take care of me, fairy tale stuff like that. Now I know how stupid I was. But it was a small town, no one went to college.

I saw Joe when he was playing poker. I was serving drinks. He was winning big. That's what attracted me to him. He was the winner. He looked rich too. He wore lots of gold, a silk shirt, and had an attitude to go with it. Everyone thought he was cool, all us girls did. There was an older lady who worked there, she was the head waitress. She told us to stay the hell away from him. I wish I'd listened. The other girls did.

He wanted me, and let me know it. He asked me when I get off work. I went home with him that night. He rode me to his place in his Cadillac. It was my first time. He pretty much forced himself onto me. I guess I can't call it a rape, because I didn't say no, and I wanted to be with him. But he was so rough. I should have left him then. I should have gone back to work and forgot all about him. Maybe I should have just gone home. But I didn't.

I moved in with him. He had a nice place, and he paid for everything. At first, things were okay between us. I wasn't happy with the relationship, but I wanted to be with someone like Joe. Any rich ass could have taken his place. It wasn't about love, or sex, or even about the money he spent on me. I guess it was about me being with the most arrogant bastard in town. It made me cool, because he was cool. I guess that's cool by association. I didn't love him, and he didn't love me. Our love life sucked, or I felt like it did. He paid for everything, but I still kept my job because I liked bragging to the other girls about being with Joe. Joe's big car, Joe's big money, Joe's big gun collection... What does he do for a living? Where does he get all his money? they would ask. I really should have thought about that...

I came from nothing. I still had nothing when I was with Joe. Maybe even less, because when I was with Joe, I didn't really have myself. But Joe made me feel like I was something, because I was seen with him, I went home with him, rode in his car, wore the slutty clothes he picked out for me. He pushed people around at the club, he beat people up in the parking lot, and scared the shit out of everyone, even me. But since I had nothing, since I was nothing, at least I was his. I had to have something, and belonging to Joe was better than nothing. That's what I thought, back then.

He told me how to wear my hair, how to dress, how to walk and how to talk. I was from a small town, so he knew best. My mother and sister came to see me once. Mom said I looked like a tramp. I wished then that I asked her to drive me home with her. I started smoking and drinking. Drugs too. Joe gave me the drugs. He did them, so I did them too. I didn't wonder if it was all wrong. And I never asked where he got his money.

The smartest thing I guess was keeping my job. It always paid shit, but it was something. I almost lost it, though, when the cops came into the nightclub looking for me for questioning. Everyone saw them come in. Real embarrassing. I just told them all of what I'm telling you now. But that was after they took him in, finally... I'll get

back to the beginning.

Things were good, or almost good, between us. But he could be mean, too. He used to tell me I was stupid, useless, and nothing without him. I knew it was probably true. He said I was only good for sex and serving drinks, and I knew that was true too. I never went beyond high school, and didn't get good grades, so I guess he was right. If I was smart, I would have left him.

But he didn't start beating on me until things got bad for him. I woke up one morning early and he was having an argument with some strange men I never saw before, they were down in the kitchen. I looked out the window and saw all the cars parked out there, expensive ones. Three of them. And the fight was getting loud. I went down to see what was up, and asked what was going on. He turned on me and said, "Bitch! Fuckin' get upstairs!" Then he slapped me. Hard. I fell down. I thought the guys would say something to him, but they all just kept arguing, like I wasn't there. Like I didn't matter. I went upstairs and cried. They all left together. He was gone for hours. He came back and was in a good mood, so I didn't say anything. I didn't want anymore problems. I figured, maybe it wouldn't happen again. Yeah, right.

One night, Joe had a party at his place. I wouldn't call it our place. It was all guys, though. If they had girlfriends, they didn't bring them. I should have started to worry when I saw that... They got drunk and stupid, especially Joe. Joe started to brag about how he knocked me around when I got out of line. Sometimes I needed to be slapped around, he said. I kept my mouth shut. One of the guys asked if I was any good in bed, so Joe said, "Why don't you all find out for yourselves." I was like, "What? You gotta be kidding, right?" He said, "Shut up, bitch." And that was it. There were like, I don't remember an exact number, maybe twenty of them. I was shoved on the couch, and there wasn't anything I could do. Joe sat in a chair in the back of the room, laughing about it.

After that night, I wanted to leave Joe. But I had nowhere else to go. The girl I had been rooming with before I met Joe moved in with her boyfriend, and I couldn't go back home. I mean, the last thing I said to my mother was "Fuck off!" so I knew I wouldn't be welcome there. Even if I was, I couldn't admit that she was right, could I? I left home to make something of myself, and I couldn't admit that I had failed. I couldn't tell my friends that I worked with about my problems with Joe, because I had only said good things about him, none of it was true, though. And I couldn't go to the cops. It was 1979, and the cops were all men. I had been walking around town looking like a streetwalker and proud of it. Well, that's probably how I felt then. I know now that I should have just gone home. Back then I thought it would be an isolated incident. That's what I told myself. Every time he did something really cruel, that's what I told myself.

It was only going to get worse.

One night I went to work with a black eye. This other waitress asked if everything was okay, as if she wanted to help me. We weren't on good terms. She kept saying that she only worked there to save up to go to school, and she never slept with any of the customers. She went back to the room she rented and studied. That pissed me off. Who the hell did she think she was? She asked me if I was okay? I told her to get the hell out of my face. She said, "Hey, like I'm just worried about you. That's all." I told her that all that was wrong was that she was just jealous, and to get her own boyfriend. She stopped talking to me after that. I guess now maybe she really wanted to help. Maybe she would have, even if it was just someone to talk to.

My sister called one night before Thanksgiving, and said that Mom wanted to know if I was coming home. She would send my uncle to come pick me up if I was. I couldn't come home. My face was by then black and blue, and I looked like shit. I couldn't let them see that. I told her no, never mind. Forget it.

Thanksgiving was a drunken brawl at Joe's place. At least people were fighting with each other, so no one raped me for Thanksgiving. No one raped me that day, let us now give thanks! There was no turkey, just chips, dip, pretzels, beer, liquor, and coke. Yeah, I mean that kind of coke. This time some men brought their girls, which was okay by me. If there were other girls there, I figured I wouldn't be in trouble.

After a while into the relationship Joe started bringing home girls he found at the bar where I worked. I watched him pick them up. I was just relieved. Some of my friends asked about it. I would say something like, you know, hey, get with it, it's the seventies. We're an open minded couple. I knew that Joe would probably kill me if I was ever with anyone else. So I slept in a chair in the living room when he was upstairs with his new girlfriends. I just didn't care anymore.

Then there was the night Joe got arrested. He called up and asked me to bail him out. I said I had no money. He said, "Stupid bitch, go into the basement, look under the stairs, and get the cash. There's a metal box, under the stairs. Come on. You know how much I love you, baby. Get the cash. Now!" I never knew about the money he had stashed down there.

I should have just grabbed the cash and the Cadillac and all my clothes and took off for parts unknown. There was plenty of cash in the box to keep me for a couple of months while I looked for a better situation. Or I could have brought the coke to the cops. There was coke down there, too. Enough coke that maybe I could have made a profit. But I was nineteen. And pretty stupid. Looking back, I had plenty of opportunities to leave Joe.

Why didn't I? I look back and see all the ways I could have left.

Anyway, I also noticed when I went down into the basement to get the money that it smelled really strange down there, like something died down there. I should have wondered about it, but I didn't.

Why did I stay? Maybe out of stupidity. He did say I was stupid. Maybe I believed I needed him to be someone. I felt I needed someone, even if he was abusive and a drug dealer. Yeah. I finally figured that out. Took me a while, though.

If I was smart, I would have left him in jail and grabbed the money and the car. I really should have. He knew I was too dumb to see a good opportunity. I look back, and see all the ways I could have gotten away. I could have called home, or gone to my uncle, or told the cops, or that poor girl I yelled at, or asked my friends for help, or whatever. I could have wiped him out of his money and drugs, too. Maybe I still deluded myself, thinking he was cool for having all that money and stuff.

It was all right in front of me. I just didn't want to see it, I guess. Today they call it being in denial. Hey, like I said. I was nineteen.

So like an idiot I bailed him out. He was happy, so things were good again between us. I began to actually think he really loved me, so I was happy too. We started sleeping together again. I got pregnant, but I was nervous about telling him, so I didn't. I wanted to wait until he was like you know, in a really good mood. I knew now that he was dealing drugs and into crime... He had guns stashed away too. A lot of guns.

I still thought that being with him made me cool.

Things were going along okay and he was making money again dealing drugs, so he started to seem happy again. There was talk of some people disappearing too, people who knew Joe and maybe double-crossed him some way. Five people who were seen hanging around with Joe in the past had disappeared. Four guys and a girl named Cheryl. Cheryl was the girlfriend before he picked me up in the club. She disappeared a month before he met me. I found that out from the head waitress. She whispered that to me when she saw me in the break room looking at a newspaper. There was a picture of Cheryl, and it read like this, "What happened to Cheryl Robertson?" There was a picture of her in the paper. She was young, and pretty, and blonde. She almost kind of looked like me.

I didn't think much about it. Joe had good lawyers, and felt sure of getting out of trouble. He had money, and bought me a few things. I knew he was bad, but I couldn't believe he would kill someone. Not Joe.

I must have been as dumb as he said I was.

Like, all around me there were warning signs of things that I ignored. I ignored that he told me what to do all the time. I ignored it that he hit me. I ignored it that he had guns and did drugs. I ignored it that he had money and no one seemed to ever say where it came from. I tried to ignore that he let his friends use me. I ignored that he had other women.

I could have told him "No" that night when he wanted me to sleep with him. I mean, I didn't have to... I could have avoided all this trouble. I could have ignored him when he said to come to his place, that first night I went home with him.

But I thought I needed to be with someone in order to be someone, so I stayed and I bailed him out of jail that night.

He was good to me for a while.

Then came bad news. There was a witness somewhere, someone who said that she saw him fighting with Cheryl in the bar the night she disappeared. And more bad news. Some neighbors saw the cars belonging to the men he was fighting with on the morning he hit me. And one of them, the Lincoln, was the same car that was later on hauled out of the lake.

And it was getting obvious. I had to say that I was pregnant.

Cops called me in for questioning. They wanted me maybe for a witness. And no one was sure if I was involved with his crimes, like helping him or not. They also suspected I was a prostitute. Word of the gang-bang got around, and I was the subject of everyone's jokes. People said I was a slut. When I was working, I heard customers whispering behind my back.

The cops thought I was part of it. I had to finally tell the truth.

I was scared, because I was carrying his baby.

He knew the cops wanted me to talk. So, now get this... He bought a big diamond and asked me to marry him, if I kept quiet. "You know how much I love you, baby. We've been through so much together."

I don't know what happened to me that night. Something inside turned on, like an electric light switching on. I saw things now, the way I never saw them before... Images flashed in my head. The picture of Cheryl in the paper, the black and white photo of the Lincoln being hauled out of the lake, the photos of his "known associates," some of whom were missing or found dead.

And I remembered, especially, all his friends raping me that night.

"Joe, what happened to Cheryl?"

"The bitch ran off with some strange guy, that's all, baby. Now how 'bout it? You know how much you mean to me."

He figured that if I married him everything would be okay, I wouldn't testify, and I would keep quiet. I put the ring on my finger, but I didn't say anything to him, I never said I would marry him. I kept my mouth shut. But all of a sudden, all this stuff was going on inside my head. I had more than just myself to think about now. It was no longer about having the image of being his girlfriend, or saying I was his. I had to think about little Joe now. And I sure as hell didn't want him to grow up to be like his dad. I left him, saying I was on my way to work, because they needed me early. But I went to the police instead.

I told them everything I knew. Everything.

The cops arranged for me to stay somewhere safe until the trial. They wanted to bring him down, plus the rest of the drug ring. He wasn't the big boss, it turned out. He was just a part of the bigger picture. The FBI was in this too. It went really deep. Of course, I was too stupid to know about that stuff. I didn't know names, or how much money was floating around, but I knew faces. Joe had pretty much kept me ignorant. Maybe he wanted me as his girlfriend because I was in fact nothing but a stupid nineteen year old girl.

But I was about to grow up, and get smart, real fast.

The baby would come soon. Newspaper reporters had my picture taken from the neck up. It wasn't so fashionable then to be a single mother, like it is now. I was pretty, and it made a great story. The brave, beautiful heroine who brought down the big bad mob. Yeah, right. I was scared in that courtroom. I cried. I just wanted to go home, I wanted my mother. But it was too late. My mother wanted nothing to do with me anymore.

The baby was coming, and I needed a safe home for Joe Junior. I was sick of being afraid. Image wasn't important to me anymore, not like it was before. I wasn't going to let myself be in denial about it all anymore, either. I had to admit to myself that I was in an abusive relationship, and that I didn't really have it all together, like I wanted people to think. I was nothing but a victim. But we're only victims if we let ourselves become victims. Remember that. It sounds like a cliché, but it but that's how it is.

My relationship with my family is still ruined. My mother still after all these years won't speak to me. My sister went on to school and became a nurse. I haven't seen her in years. My uncle died of a heart attack, and they never told me. I never got a chance to go to the funeral.

Joe Junior dropped out of high school despite my yelling at him to stick with it and do something like trade school. He got arrested a few times, nothing serious, just assault and stuff. I haven't seen him in years either. He disappeared one day, took a few clothes in a duffle bag and just left. He didn't say where to. He just sort of left. Got in his car, and went.

The money is gone too. The cops took what was left of it as evidence, they said. It was a lot of cash. I could have lived good on that for a while. Maybe paid for some kind of school for myself. But the cash is gone now. Then they dug up the basement, and found the rest of the bodies they were looking for all those years while they were investigating. They found Cheryl down there too.

So here I am, at the top of my career. A waitress working late nights in a bar. Yeah, right now I'm talking to you, remembering the best days of my life... Give me another cigarette, honey, will yah?

But I guess I walked right into it. I should have left him, but I stayed. I had something to prove to everyone else, so I stayed. I had to prove I was a mature woman, that I could handle it, and in control of my life. I wasn't controlling my life. Joe was. And I couldn't handle it.

And I had a lot of opportunities to escape, but I never did until it was almost too late. In the end, only the cops would help me, and it was only because they needed a witness.

Why am I telling you all this stuff? Because I see girls like you all the time. Young, pretty, thinking you're just so smart. Listen. Guys don't say nice things to you because they actually care about you. They just want what they want. Of course, back then, I wanted whatever I could get, too. I wish I could go back to my younger self, tell myself to get my dumb ass back on the bus and head back home and become anything but what I am now. I could have gone to school, or something. I could have done something with my life, instead of all this.

Listen, honey. Don't make the mistakes I made. Go to the community college, go to hairdresser school, do anything, just don't let someone like that completely take over your life like I did. Don't let him start telling you how to dress, how to walk and how to talk. And don't get into drugs and do shit like that to impress him or his friends either.

Because it is nothing but a trap. Believe me, I know.

And if you are in a bad relationship now, get free any way you can. That's why I always tell this story. Be-

cause stuff like that happens all the time, everywhere.

Face the hard truth. Women are nothing to men like Joe. There are good men out there. But you don't find them around here. Good men don't drink, gamble, and pick up girls twenty years younger and make them into whores. The good ones are the ones I thought were dull. Why? I don't know. Maybe they just weren't cool. But now I know that cool is stupid. No one will take care of you but you. If you expect someone to take care of you because you are pretty, you are wrong. Go to school while you still can, and make something of yourself. That's what I wish I had done, when I was your age.

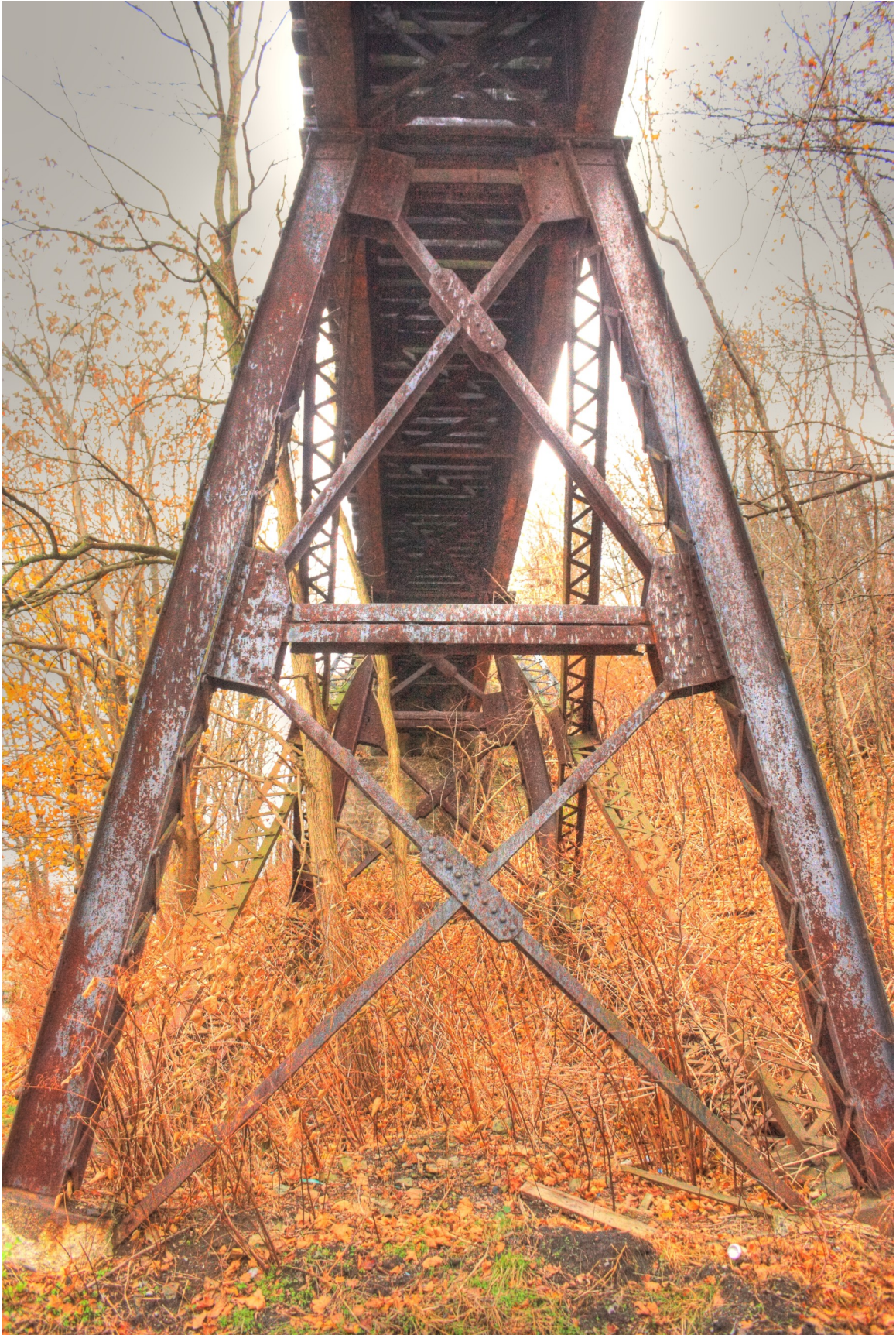
And you know, I really need a damn drink right now.



Mother's Day Vigil 2017, Tacoma Northwest Detention Center
STEPHANIE HAMMER



The Red Line
NICK ROMEO



Behind Us
NICK ROMEO



Caterpillars
NICK ROMEO



Influence
NICK ROMEO



Mars Landing
NICK ROMEO

Messages from Life

It makes me happy to get a message from an inanimate object. Today, I removed the plastic lid from my yoghurt and there, on the foil safety seal, super imposed over the silhouette of a cow was the encouragement “Don’t worry about the opinions of udders.” It was comforting, if a little silly. I took it to mean “be yourself, enjoy your lunch, some people will like you, and some are lactose intolerant, and that makes them angry, and they blame you.” I don’t know about you, but I find some relief in that.

In the gym people’s shirts offer constant reinforcement, “Just Do It” “Don’t Finish Last.” “You Have to Play to Win.” “Beast Don’t Rest.” Sometimes they provide a little fashion advice “Get your swoosh on.” Sometimes they will boast, “I Make It Look Easy.” Once in a while the advice will border on insulting, “Maybe you should practice.” If you show up in a plain t-shirt you are practically antisocial. I like to wear one that says, “Cheesecake is the solution.”

Taco Bell has messages on the packets of sauce it gives away. I used to make a point of not looking until I got home. It was like a fortune cookie. Occasionally it was a little suggestive, “I’m up for it, are you?” Please, I’m a happily married man. Occasionally you would find something profound. “Do it with passion or not at all.” It made me wish I had ordered more boldly. *I want the supreme burrito, please.*

Heinz had a bottle of catsup that asked, simply “Need a gift idea?” Catsup for any occasion, it goes with anything, except a white t-shirt. And the price is right.

Bumper stickers have a lot to say. “Watch Out for Motorcycles.” Good advice, made timelier considering my eyes are glued to the bumper, of a pickup truck. Many people, too many people feel the need to tell you how they are going to vote, or soon, how they voted. I always feel bad for people who have the name of the candidate who lost fastened permanently to the protective feature of their car. I want to pull up next to them at the stop light and say “I understand. I vote for the wrong guy sometimes too.” I don’t, it seems mean to remind them they backed the wrong horse. They are forced to fact that failure every time they approach the car from behind. It must knock a few dollars off the trade in value.

I have this plan, everybody should wear a hat with a word on the top. Nobody gets to pick the word, it is completely random, and they will just go about their lives normally, at least as normally as possible considering they are wearing hats with a word on top. At odd times during the day a helicopter or a drone would fly over the people, like lunchtime or some time it is crowded and snap a photo, just to see what they said. What sentence they made. What message the universal controller had for us.

I like to think it would offer some reassurance, “Don’t worry, things will get better,” or “Don’t give up, you are almost there.” The voice of the cosmos telling us that it would all be ok, our work and care are not pointless.

Maybe it would provide a little comic relief, “My dog has no nose.”

“How does it smell?”

“Awful.”

But, as a race of sentient beings we are not inclined to provide that level of cooperation. And hats are not cheap, even if I could talk the entire metro area to help out, and it costs a lot to rent a helicopter. So, until I can work out the details I am going to look for wisdom where ever I can. If I find any I will tell you right away.



Bars

WAYNE RUSSELL





BRIDGE 3

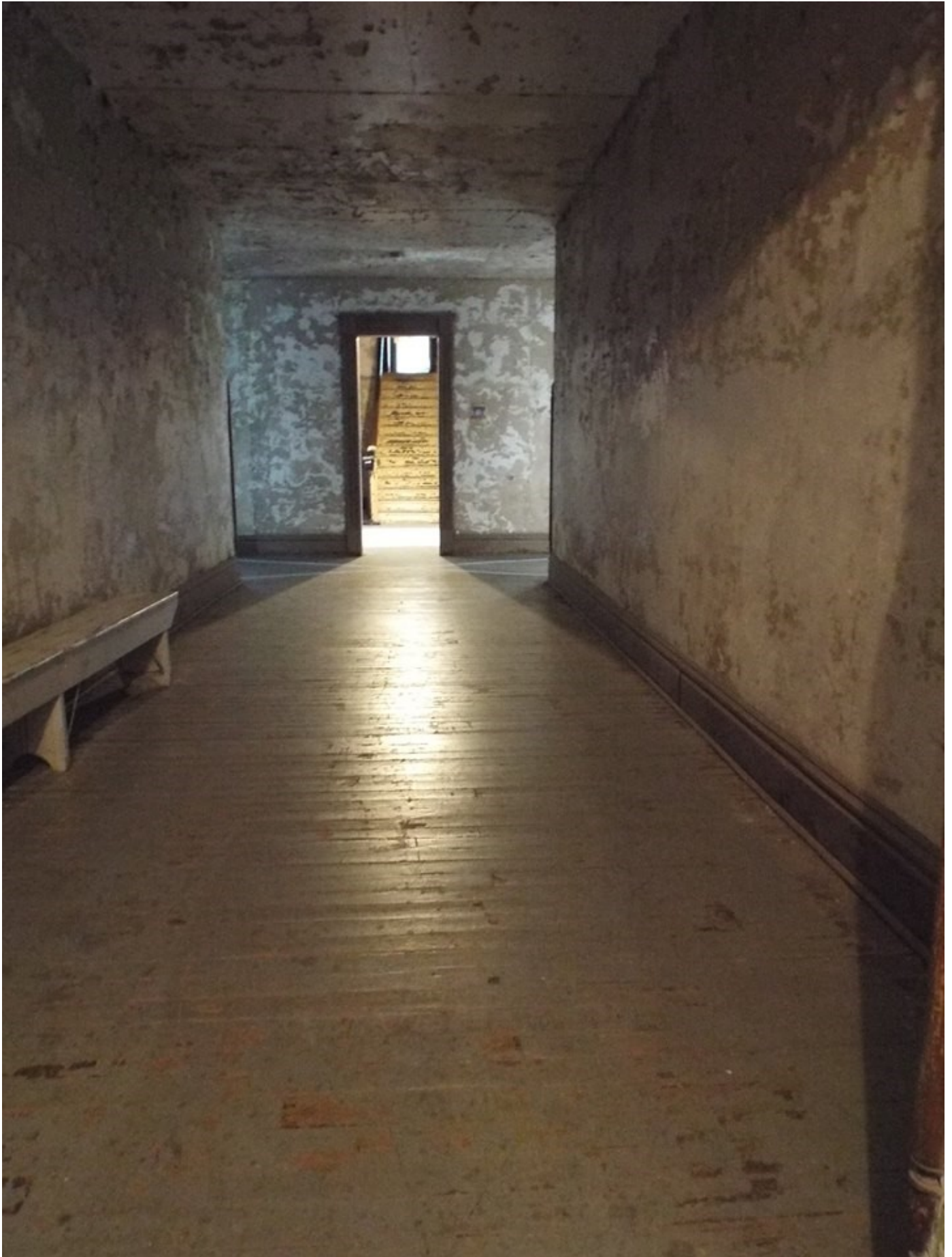
Yellow Barn 2

Stairs

WAYNE RUSSELL



Welcome Home
WAYNE RUSSELL



Hall Way

WAYNE RUSSELL



Exit

WAYNE RUSSELL

WAYNE RUSSELL

Outside

Outside squirrel's frolic,
birds bask in the lemon
yellow sunshine, an occasional
auto sputters past upon freshly
lain asphalt streets.

It's so mundane outside, kids are
at school, old people hobble past
hunched over, leaning upon canes
and walkers.

Outside, the grasses are meticulously
manicured, flats singing in unison,
dull, dull, droning cadences of conformity.

I peer outside this pristine French window,
and seek something vaguely interesting,
a moment in time worth capturing, something
inspiring to scrawl upon this lined paper,
so, unflinching and lifeless.

Outside, there's nothing that won't be there tomorrow, a clashing of mankind and a smattering of nature, thrown in for good measure.

Harvest

Life is a strange and lonesome trip, haunted melody, crowd's bleak ears of madmen, soon to stifle his dream, visions of normalcy, a slow harvest, full, overbearing, rapid and drunken demise.

Just who are we to pluck the fruits of her labor? And what of this cathartic release of wind and wave?

To plow ink night, with the gift of our art, shift and release, emerging from slumbers cold embrace.

Loose memories, nonexistent in the face of father, cast back into the sporadic being of space and translucent meandering, a marriage of chaos, a parting of ways, cast grey dust, back into the heavens, uncleansed souls standing; at the rusted gates of final harvest.

Loneliness Kills

I felt the weight of my dogs' stare, as the can of beans aimlessly spun around on the electric can opener.

With soft brown eyes longing for my meal, never his own, slight whimper emerging from petite muzzle, he was sure that I would succumb to his charming ways once again.

I reached for my black coffee and can of beans, shook my head at my canine companion, and retired back to my life of solitude, in an empty room, where loneliness kills.

Struggle

If by chance I awake in the morning,
feeling the bitter sting of cold water
upon my craggy and lined face...

If by chance the screaming voices of
wretched past, taunt me in the corridor
of eternal pain.

If by chance ghost ascending creaking
stairs, one by one, at last depart my presence;
leaving me with leg muscles that ache and
bones rattling in moaning skin.

If by chance these shimmering ghost, take
their leave and the ravages of days and
years gone by, are finally forgotten.

If by chance the belching kettle boils and
the steaming stream, plummets into my
chipped coffee mug.

If by chance these unknown willowy arms
and fingers collide against worn window sill,
waking ebony feline, by dull crackling fire
place.

If by chance I should find the perfect words
to articulate this rabid train of thought, speeding
towards crescendo, spilling silently upon
crumpled parchment.

The struggle continues



Room C2

In 1987, the overcrowded Pennhurst State School and Hospital shut down amidst allegations of widespread abuse by staffers against patients as well as patients against each other. Many of its buildings fell into ruin, with only peeling painted murals and long-forgotten toys left behind in the empty dark silent rooms.

NATHAN HALL



Take a Ride on the Reading

DJ Shirey loved trains. Sure, lots of people love trains, but for him it went much deeper than that. He collected old cars, ranging from restored steam engines to modern cabooses, and dreamed of creating his own private railway near his family home in Geigertown, PA. But it was a train-related accident that widowed his wife, orphaned his daughters, and turned his collection of railroad cars into a rusting memorial.

With every sunrise its colors become more faded, and with each storm more pieces of iron fall into the soil.

NATHAN HALL



Atomic Sunrise

People from miles around Limerick, Pennsylvania affectionately call the twin nuclear cooling towers Fred and Ethel. On clear days their billowing clouds cover lands ranging from new quickly-built mansion developments to the remnants of a ghost town on the other side of the river. Once a symbol of technological progress, there are now rumors the plant could be shut down.

NATHAN HALL



Airborne

On a flight between Fargo, North Dakota and St Louis, Missouri for a creative writing conference. Some mild color editing to enhance the trees surrounding the river.

EMILY VIEWEG



Springtime in Fargo

The first Spring after leaving my ex, this is a tree in my
parents' backyard.

EMILY VIEWEG



Thunderhead

Some incredible storms come through North Dakota.

EMILY VIEWEG



Lake Shore
ALLEN BERRY



Far from the Carnival Lights

ALLEN BERRY

EZEKIEL JARVIS

The Grieving Process

It shouldn't have been that hard for Mom to make the ribs look good. Even if they're not cow ribs, they're still ribs, so it seems like you should be able to just cook them, dump sauce on them and put them on the table with some fries or mashed potatoes or something. With this being our last night of eating Dad, it seems like just smothering him in something from a jar and being done with it would be kind of appropriate. Instead, my mom takes tonight as an opportunity to break out an old cookbook that Dad got her. Something gourmet, which is more work for half the taste. Like the little green thing on our plate. I'm sure it was expensive, but I have no idea what it is. A mini pine tree, maybe? I'm not even going to sniff it.

To be fair, my mom's parents died together, in a car accident, where there wasn't a lot of their bodies left. So, when she was going through the grieving process, she never saw how to do things. You can understand why she can't get it right with our dad. But, still, there are some things that everyone knows. For instance, you do things like tacos or spaghetti, the things where the meat is the least important, during the first few days, when everything still tastes like ash. Especially if your loved one died from something like cancer, where you think that you can taste it in the meat, even though science tells you that that's impossible. Or maybe science doesn't tell you that; I guess I don't know if it's ever actually been studied or how you would study what cancer tastes like. Anyway, spaghetti and tacos and stuff like that distract you from what you're doing. Or you eat the liver and the really gross crap first so that you can get it out of the way while you're already feeling awful and things like flavor don't really matter.

Even before these ribs and their little green things, when it seemed like there was plenty of Dad left, Mom was getting it wrong. In fact, right off the bat, things were bad. On the third night of our grieving, and the first night of our dining, we were sitting at the table and not saying a word. In a way, that's appropriate (Dad loved steaks, and he liked quiet things, like fishing). And I guess it was interesting to get a direct taste of Dad like that right away, but it felt like too much too soon.

I mean, I know that everyone does it, but it's weird to see meat on your plate and know that it came from the guy you read a book with the week before. I liked the Potter series, but it was kind of sad, reading some dumb book so that we could pretend like Dad wasn't dying. I would've said "Fuck it" if I'd had any better suggestion, but I didn't really. And Mom would've yelled at me for cursing. But maybe Dad wouldn't have told her. It was just him and me, because Mom and Dad decided that even Harry Potter is a little too scary for my sister after the Dementors

appeared in the third book.

I guess that it was nice to have the alone time with my dad, too, even if it was just reading about magical people in a made-up part of a real country. Dad was half in and half out, and I read out loud and pretended that I could remember anything I was reading. But I must have held onto some of it. When I sat down to my steak, I did think about my mom and house elves and how fucked up things are, even if I can't say "fucked up" at the dinner table. I'd like to tell Mom that her ribs are fucked up tonight, but it's not really the ribs that are fucked up. It's that we have all of these parts of the grieving process that we're supposed to do, and they're supposed to make us feel better, but now that we're at the end of it, I hate the ribs, and I hate the world for letting my dad die, and I even hate my dad a little for dying. Now that's fucked up.

On steak night, I wasn't the first to take a bite of the actual meat. That was my sister. She had Mom cut it for her. I think Mom and I both watched Ashleigh take her bite, but neither of us really faced her. Like it always is with little kids, it's pretty easy to know what Ashleigh is feeling. When Dad was dying, she cried all of the time. It was kind of nice, because it let me fade into the background, but it could be a pain in the ass, too. Like when a car alarm goes off and the owner doesn't silence it. On steak night, Ashleigh chewed it a little, and it looked like there was a moment where she was thinking about spitting it out, but she ended up swallowing it. Then she went on to the potatoes. Bad sign. Come to think of it, tonight, she's poked at the ribs without actually taking a bite yet. I suppose that the curiosity of how Dad tastes is long gone. Even more gone than Dad.

I'd never asked any of the kids at school what people taste like, but I'd overheard some of them talking about it. Danny Olsen's mom had had a heart attack when we were in fifth grade, and for the next month, a lot of people would talk to him, trying to comfort him. But I think we all kind of knew the real reason why they were talking to him, too. There was something magic about him now. One day, while I was playing Blaster Man (I know, you never think about how stupid the hero names are when you're a kid) with a couple of the other boys, I was hiding by the trees on the parking lot side of the playground. Danny and some other kids were sitting by the trees, digging at the ground. "So it's not like chicken?" one of the kids said.

Danny snorted. He kind of mumbled something that I couldn't catch, then he said, "Anyway, I can tell you've never tasted it." It was a harsh thing to say. How could the kid have known? It's not like it was her fault. But maybe Danny was just working through his grief or whatever the guidance counselors called it. I guess I haven't done all that much better. After calling the other kid out, Danny kind of looked around. It looked like he was acting, to be honest. Like he knew this was a big moment for him. Before this, I think the most attention Danny ever got was for doing well at the geography bee we had the previous year. Not exactly a shooting star. Though I actually let myself get some free cookies from Mrs. Schmidt at the bakery a couple days after Dad died, so I can't really judge. So anyway, Danny looked around, he shook his head, and he said, "It tastes like death. That's what it

tastes like”. The other kids nodded, like they knew. One of them, I think it was Shelly Steinmetz, caught me looking, and I wandered off. I sort of felt bad, but not really. Shelly was always hanging around the cool kids, and Danny probably would’ve appreciated the attention of one more kid listening to him. If it makes it any better, I got killed by one of the other kids playing Blaster Man. He came running by, pointed his finger at my chest and yelled, “Zap”. I said, “Whatever” and went to where the line would eventually form for all of us to go in after recess was over.

But here’s the thing about hearing Danny Olsen talk, and I know this is stupid: I thought that my parents might have tasted different than Danny’s mom. I get that it’s not like you can tell the difference between burgers if they came from different cows. In fact, probably each burger comes from a few different cows. I assume that a bunch of cows are chopped up and tossed in a big grinder or something, so every burger that you get would be a mix of different cows, but probably the same herd. I’m not sure what I’m trying to say. But the point is that I walked away from Danny talking about how his mom tasted, and I thought that it would be different for me. I guess it’s hard to say what exactly “death” would taste like, so it sort of was the same, but maybe not really. If death tastes like charcoal and how dog food smells and that feeling in the back of your throat before you start crying, then my dad did taste like death.

Anyway, the first night of eating Dad was bad, but it was bad in the way that things are always bad for “the grieving family”. The next few nights were weirdly even. The shock started to wear off a little, but as that happened, the quality of what we were eating went down. I don’t mean the quality of Dad. He had set things up with a butcher to make sure that his body was correctly preserved and cut up. It’s more how we were served. From steak to these crappy tacos to liver. I mean, we knew that it had to come sometime, but I’d never even had liver before. The steak, I could know that it should taste better, under different circumstances. But liver sounded gross, looked gross and smelled gross. It made me think that the people whose parents died from a car accident were the luckiest one. If someone’s parents died because they were hit by not just a car, but a semi, then a lot of the meat would end up on the fenders, the road and wherever. I mean, I know that would be gross and traumatic or whatever, but at least it would be all over the place, and that would help “the grieving family” in two ways. First, it would mean that there would be less meat for you to have to work through. Let’s be honest: nobody would take the time to scrape every little bit of meat off of the cars, so you have less to work through. Second, the parent meat would be like cows. It would be all the same pile: muscle, kidneys, liver and so on. I guess that it’s bad, because you might end up eating some of the things like eyes or toenails, but it’s less bad, because it’s all in one piece mix, so you don’t have to end up eating the kidney and liver separately.

It’s funny, because I remember asking my dad about different weird things that they ate in the Harry Potter books when the first couple came out, before Dad got sick. “Dad, what’s ‘treacle?’” “Dad, what’s pumpkin juice?”. And he always knew. For treacle, he even bought us some molasses cookies so that we could get an idea

of what it would kind of taste like, though Ashleigh was too young to know why we were eating them. But it's still a nice memory. And if I get anything from eating Dad, I hope it's his goodness. Mom says that all the belief that we get the strength or bravery or wisdom of the dead by eating them is superstition. Eating your family, according to Mom, is something that people "just do". But, if you can actually absorb something, then what I want to absorb is my dad's basic goodness. I want to be calm and kind and patient like my dad. Which I'm not right now. I'm usually horny and confused and kind of pissed off. It's hard not to be pissed off when you're horny and confused a lot, I think.

I'm sure that Dad would have wanted me to have some of his goodness, but he probably wouldn't call it goodness. He was a good guy, but he wouldn't have said that about himself. The problem is that if he tried to put a little of himself in me, then he'd be like Lord Voldemort, and his goodness would be a horcrux. I think. I guess it would depend on whether he was putting his goodness in me (and I know how that sounds) to make me good or to have people say that he raised a really nice kid. I don't think that people say that I'm a really nice kid. But I don't think that people say much about me at all. I know I'm not a football player or an honors student or someone who knows how to cook their father, but I'm also not a dick or a bully or a drunk. And that should count for something. But, I know, as I sit here and look down at the last of my father, if I really want to be not a dick, then I need to eat it and not hurt Mom's feelings. It's what my dad would want and it's what my dad would do, and it might be the best shot I have for getting some of his goodness in me. And I guess that says something about goodness, that it's more like something you have to keep doing, and you have to keep doing for other people, like when Harry...well, I guess I shouldn't drop a spoiler.

But it's not a spoiler to say that I want to be like Harry Potter, and not in the way that he's special or that he's magic. I mean that I'll be like him because I'm going to do the shit that I need to do. I'm sure that seems lame when what you have to do is just eat your dad's ribs, but my dad's life was a lot of crap, especially towards the end. And so that's what I do. I pick up a rib and I eat and I smile. Even though it wasn't that good.



Concerto

(pen and ink)

ANN CHRISTINE TABAKA

KEN ALLAN DRONSFIELD

Sigh of Tranquility

As a brook winds its way
from the high mountains
through the dark forest
as a long coiled serpent.
Little falls and rapids
sing praises of water's
love of raucous festive
rides enroute to the sea.
From little bridges or
logs across the creek,
we watch with delight
as the Dew Faeries skim
along the calm ponds or
gentle eddies at sunset,
sprinkling droplets with
magic dust covering
many flowers, grass and
leaves upon trees with a
welcome drink at night.
My heart is always there;
wrapped in an icy breath
exhaled into twilight's ear,
A walking the pathway home
we sigh, tranquility is there.

Death Within Eventuality

A stellar race to a darker place,
the almost dead rattle and hum.
Deserving none of the warm sun,
a coolish death within eventuality.
Gnaw on a bone or lapis stone,
color blue hanging from a mirror.
Piety's ice now sugar and spice,
eat your fill of a blackened crow.
Sequestered blaze of frosty haze,
dance till dawn to an old sonnet.
Bicycles, tricycles and red popsicles,
stored in the trunk of the clown car.
Circus is life, in a perpetual strife,
soar upon the vibrating high wire.
Expectancy of burning tendencies
shall grasp death within eventuality.

Tergiversationalism

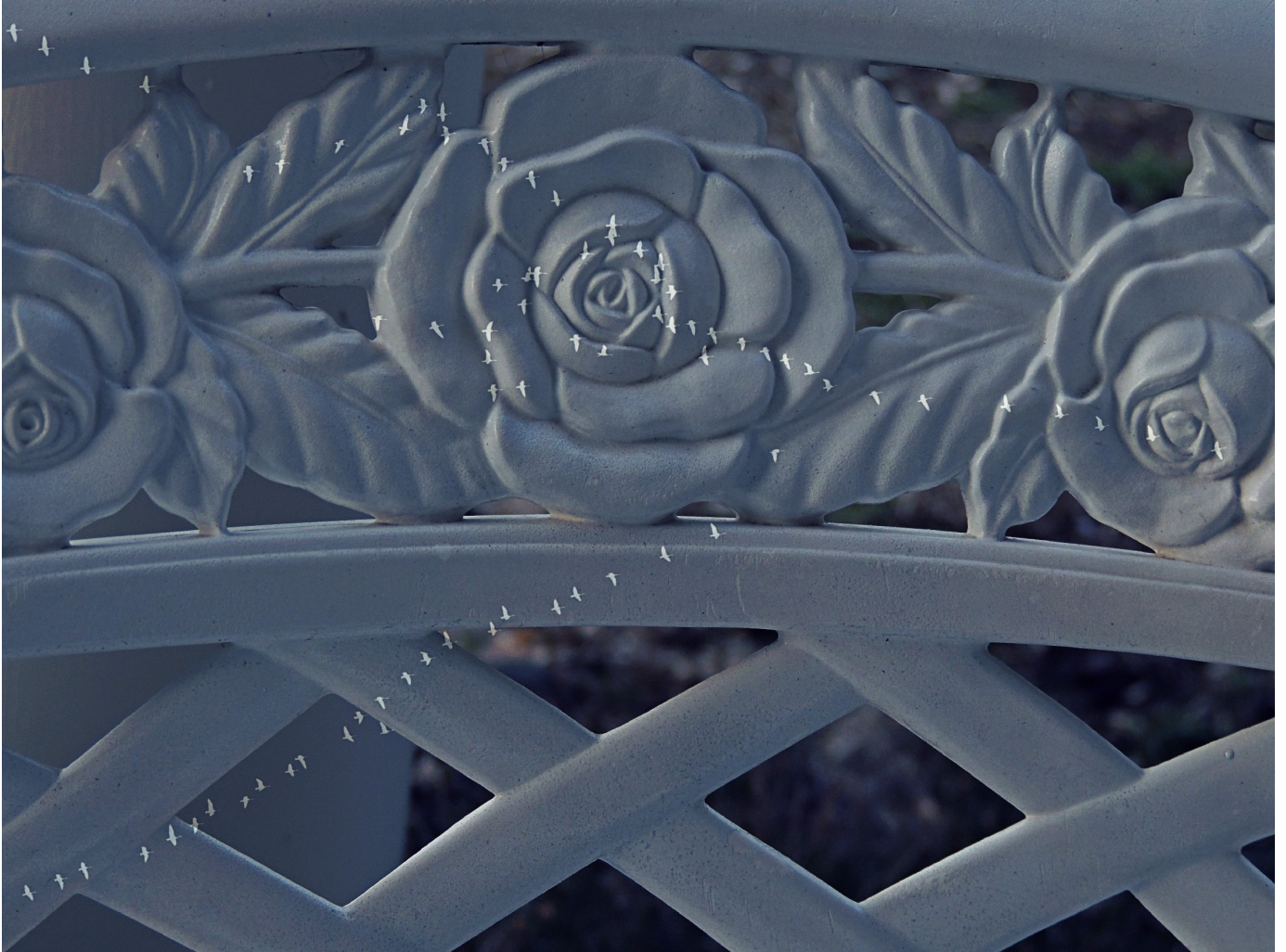
Final declaration by a child of man
kneel at the altar; pointing of fingers.
Hated arbitration at the gates of piety
reading of words inscribed on scrolls.
Inglorious chapter of swollen icy egos
of solitude found gently afloat whilst
holding the string of a helium balloon.
Special places which touch your soul;
are those the places worth dying for?
Cascading madness beyond the light
teardrops stream down wrinkled faces
a free dive into the dark depths of hell
voices scary in three part blasphemy.
A decrepit waltz in that yellow parlor
of decency in memories of absolution
trusted Crosses of devout symbolism
shovels stand by the mausoleum wall
body bags await all within that dream
rise from your rest in sanctified ground
false prophets question the loss of faith.

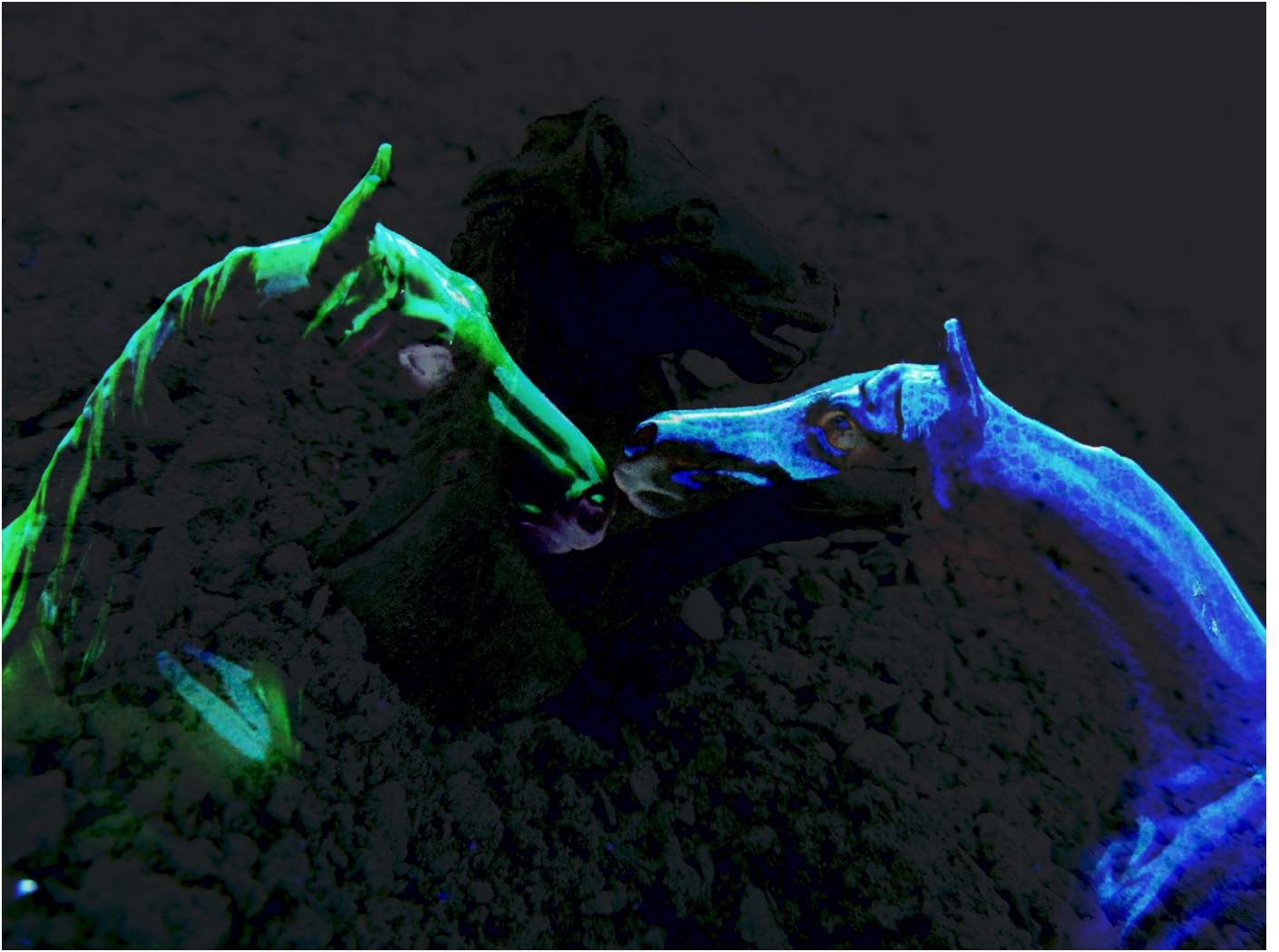
Sliced Echoes

Shattered heart of an unfulfilled love
the imperiled song devoid of empathy
blistered iced essence wafts at twilight
dodging streetlamps on Second Street
wipe bloody shoes on the back of pants
patiently wait for a soiled dove parade
Lick the shaft after slicing the throat.
voices in my head mimic the vulture
moving upstairs through paper dolls
loving the blade as it devours a soul
sharp is the edge of an obsidian knife
stalking lilacs throughout the darkness.
Swirling chimera ends in silent screams
a rancid cities dance with sliced echoes.

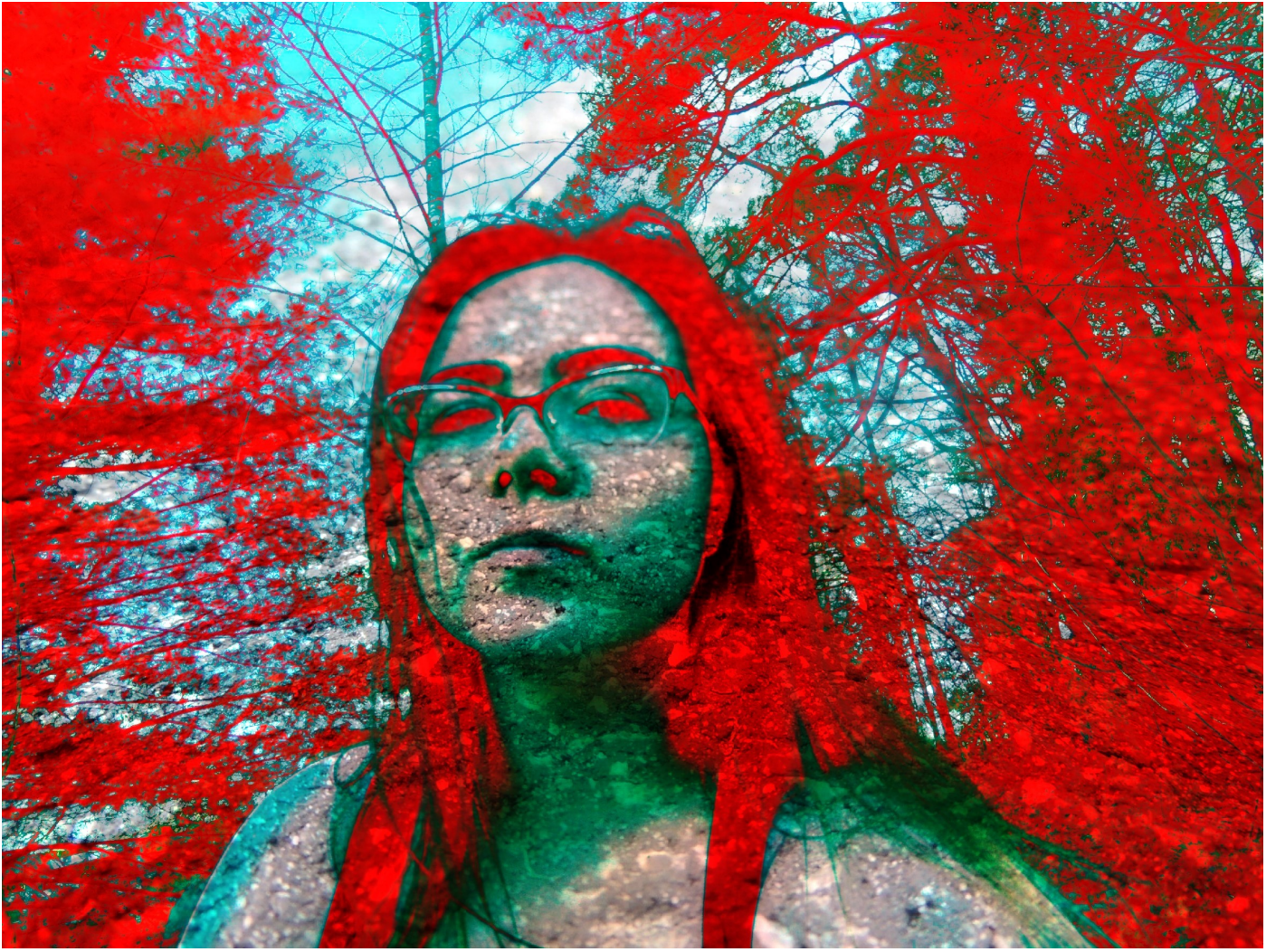
Of the Deeper Wood

A madness descends upon one who tends
the clock on the wall after those who recall
in the hiding or seeking and soft squeaking
in a dilapidated cottage of the deeper wood.
Harlequin colors within an irrational swirling
find a mind spinning in the haze of red wine
and I can't find my way through night or day
blinded by the tock, as the tick seeks to rock.
Standing there bare, while the cat's on the chair
dizzy and fading while the clock sings a sonnet.
Feeling no pain within a numbness of the brain
salvation's a meal, confined in a maniacs creel.
Dance by the fire, whilst absorbing warm desire
within the fistula of life, a steamy purge of strife
moving with a gallop amidst the life of a trollop
cast spells in the dark, under a stars reddish quark.
I am whom you think, wasting away in the stink;
listening to "Lunatic Fringe", on tape in the parlor
readying the knife, I'll dissect your wretched life
within a dilapidated cottage of the deeper wood.





Gothic Autumn
Heaven and Earth
Hopelessly in Love
GRETCHEN GALES



Channeling Fall
GRETCHEN GALES



Out to Pasture
GRETCHEN GALES

The Flamethrowers

I woke from a fever dream at 7:00 PM, drenched with sweat, then craned my head and glanced at the bedside radio. For an instant I thought it was still morning. One of my arms flopped towards the radio, and accidentally hit the “on” switch. In cheerful tones, the deejay announced another evening of record-breaking heat in Chicago. I owned a huge, decrepit fan that rattled loudly. Air-conditioning was for rich people. I wasn't sure which scenario was worse: suffering in the heat, or having to listen to that fan.

The rent in my building was dirt-cheap, but I was always broke. My landlord leased to struggling artists who were temporarily indigent before landing big breaks in our chosen mediums. I'd rented one of the cockroach-infested, cement-walled cells only a couple of months beforehand. If I stood on my toes, I could catch a brief glimpse of Lake Michigan from my window. For this reason, I counted myself as one of the luckier residents.

The building had seven floors, each with two dozen, precisely square efficiency apartments. My bedroom and kitchen occupied one room. The bathroom was only appropriate for the most perfunctory rituals of daily hygiene. It contained a miniscule, permanently stained tub, a toilet, and a hand sink. The floor sported black and white tiles, which gave the space a bit of turn-of-the-century class. Otherwise, the bathroom always offered a depressing reminder of my lowly economic station. Since I was in my early twenties, I was able to pretend I didn't care.

I resided near the end of the fourth floor hallway, between two sets of neighbors. An elderly black woman named Rowena lived on the right hand side. Rowena was a late stage alcoholic. She frequently wandered through the hallway, clad only in her slip, then took the ancient elevator downstairs and staggered unsteadily across the street to the liquor store.

The poor woman possessed an innate, child-like sweetness that no amount of alcohol could obliterate. A few nights after I moved into the apartment, I heard a light, insistent tapping on my door. I opened it cautiously, and was greeted by a smiling Rowena, dressed in her stained, dingy slip. In one hand, she gripped an empty whiskey bottle. “Do you think you'd be interested in selling Avon products?” she whispered.

“No, Rowena,” I said, softly but firmly. “I don't ever use makeup.”

Rowena grinned. “You're so pretty,” she said. “I'm sure you'd be even prettier with makeup.”

“I don't really want to be prettier, but thanks,” I replied, closing the door gently.

After that evening, Rowena kept to herself, and I wondered whether she had a pile of Avon products in the back of her room, going bad in the heat. I couldn't imagine it would be too easy for her to sell them. Fortunately, the wall that separated her dwelling from mine was thick. Still, I could occasionally hear her rustling around her apartment, shuffling drunkenly across the carpeted floor or groping for something in her cabinets. I often worried about her safety, though she wasn't really my problem.

A man named Ben lived in the apartment on my left. He was tall and fair-skinned, with long, curly dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. Ben claimed to be a jazz musician, though he didn't belong to a band and had no immediate plans to join one. He worked at a print shop in Skokie, and owned a gray Camaro that his parents had bought for him as a graduation present.

. Every morning at exactly 7:20, Ben left his apartment and wandered down the hallway to the elevator, then climbed into his Camaro and headed to his job. I always caught whiffs of his aftershave, which lingered for several minutes afterward.

Normally, I would have abhorred the chemical odor, but since it came from Ben, I found the scent intoxicating. I was completely smitten with him, but my ardor was futile. Ben had a girlfriend named Tessa. She looked remarkably like Candace Bergen, but was far less intelligent. Tessa chain-smoked and said things like, “I LOVE your skirt! So artsy!” She worked as a dental apprentice, and possessed no artistic talents whatsoever.

The two lovebirds had attended high school together in the western suburbs, and then continued their relationship after graduation. Due to geographical and time constraints, they were only able to see each other a couple of times each month. Fortunately, since my apartment walls were thick, I couldn't hear the ecstatic sound of their reunions.

Three nights earlier, I'd pounded on Ben's door and asked to borrow his vacuum cleaner. He only owned a battered manual brush sweeper. I pushed it around my filthy carpet for several minutes. The withered brushes swished against the sticky fibers, valiantly trying to extract debris.

Finally, I plucked the bits of paper and ground-in food from the carpet with my fingers, and deposited them carefully into my garbage can. My floor appeared to be no cleaner than before. I returned to Ben's apartment and rapped on the door again. “Did it work okay?” he asked me. “Sure,” I lied. “It worked perfectly.”

“Would you like to come inside for a beer?” he asked, without skipping a beat.

I nodded happily and ducked inside. We drank one beer, then another. Finally, Ben reached into his kitchen cabinet and removed a pipe and a small, dusty-looking bag of Mexican marijuana. “Would you like to get high?” he

asked. Ben fired up a bowl, then smiled at me. “You have beautiful cheekbones,” he said as I inhaled deeply. “I’m kind of a sucker for cheekbones.”

Ben rose from his chair, wandered over to his stereo, and flipped a switch. He owned an ancient close-and-play record player, one which he had probably acquired while still in grade school. Against the adjacent wall, a cluster of plastic milk crates overflowed with record albums. A wooden acoustic bass stood majestically in one of the corners. The bass had a posed, static look, as though it had been a while since anyone had touched it.

Ben extracted an album from one of the crates, pulled out a disc, and blew on it to remove the dust. “How about some Miles Davis?” he asked. “Do you like jazz?” I relaxed into his kitchen chair and closed my eyes.

The low, soothing tones of “Kind of Blue” wafted from the tiny plastic speakers. Even in super-low fidelity, the music took my breath away. “Mmmm,” I sighed. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything so beautiful before.”

The stage was set. Ben and I had locked ourselves into a dance of futility. We existed in a state of highly charged, but rigidly controlled sexual tension. The erotic energy between us was like a thinly stretched wire that would eventually break. It had been six months since I’d had sex, and I was ready to go.

On Evening Two, Ben’s brother George dropped by for a surprise visit. Though George was three years younger, he was obviously the more responsible of the two siblings. George worked part-time at the Mercantile Exchange, and already sported the receding hairline and flabby stomach that personified male Loop employees. In one chubby fist, he clutched a couple of bottles of white wine and a paper bag overflowing with leftover Fourth of July sparklers.

“I happened to be in the neighborhood,” George said apologetically. He uncorked one of the bottles and poured some liquid carefully into three chipped, battered coffee cups. “Jesus, Ben,” he chided his brother. “When are you gonna get some real glasses?”

Ben shrugged. “It doesn’t make much difference,” he said. “The main thing is what is inside the cup, not what the container looks like.” He glanced at me and laughed. I raised my cup in the air, then took a big, appreciative swallow.

“They both matter,” George insisted stubbornly. “But you never listen to me anyway.” He reached into his paper bag and pulled out one of the sparklers. “Look what I found in the garage over at mom and dad’s house,” he said proudly. He waved the sparkler underneath his brother’s nose, until a sudden realization struck him. “I don’t know where we can light these,” he said dejectedly. “Your building doesn’t have a yard.”

“We can climb up the fire escape ladder to the roof,” I suggested. “I go there all the time. It’s fun. You can see the lake perfectly, and there’s a great view of the city.”

George gulped. “Isn't that dangerous?” he asked. “Sure is,” I replied. “Make sure you don't let go of the hand rails even for a second, or you'll plummet ass-backward into the street.”

I strode through Ben's door to the hallway, pushed open the window, and climbed out onto the fire escape. A blast of humid air hit me in the face, and I smiled. “It's a lot cooler out here,” I said.

Ben clambered across the window ledge and placed both of his feet onto the metal grating. The street yawned up at us from between the bars. Four stories below, a line of dumpsters stood in a disheveled row. Even from a distance, the stench of rotting garbage was overwhelming. “This is awesome,” Ben said appreciatively.

“It's disgusting,” his brother replied. With exaggerated caution, George hauled his body through the window. He placed his feet gingerly onto the bars, and then pulled himself upright. “I guess we might as well do this, since we're here,” he sighed. Resolutely, he began the slow trek up the steps towards the top of the fire escape, shopping bag looped tightly over one arm.

After the seventh floor, the configuration of the fire escape changed abruptly. A metal ladder offered the only option for further ascent. The ladder consisted of six thin, cylindrical metal rungs, with sturdy steel handrails on each side. I grasped the handrails and climbed the ladder nimbly, like a monkey. From my new perch on the roof, I peered down at Ben and George's upturned faces. “It's really easy,” I said.

Ben climbed the ladder with finesse, wine bottle tucked safely in one of his pockets. George, however, had considerable trouble convincing himself to begin his climb. Finally, he gave a fatalistic shrug, as if reconciling himself to the inevitability of his demise, and gingerly stepped onto the lowest rung. With painstaking caution, George placed both feet on the second rung, and then the third. Finally, he arrived at the roof, and sighed with relief. “That was no problem at all,” he said.

“You were scared shitless,” Ben laughed.

George looked down at his shoes and grimaced. “At least I remembered the sparklers,” he said. “I'd sure hate to have to go back down for them.” George pulled one of the sparklers from the paper bag and groped in the pockets of his cargo shorts. His face suddenly assumed a panicked expression. “Damn,” he said. “I forgot to bring a lighter.”

Ben laughed and stuck his hand into his shirt pocket, then pulled out a plastic lighter. “Good thing I didn't take your advice to quit smoking,” he said.

George's face flooded with relief, but he quickly rearranged his expression to one of disapproval. “I'll give you a free pass this time,” he muttered. He snatched the lighter from his brother's hand and ignited the tip of one of his sparklers. Then he carefully placed the bagful of unlit sparklers beside his feet. “Have at it,” he said.

The three of us instantly regressed to a pre-adolescent state. We jumped on the sticky tar roof and waved our sparklers around until all of them were spent. I peered over the edge of the building and saw Rowena on the street below. Her tiny body swayed and trembled as she slowly made her way across the street to the liquor store. A couple of minutes later, she re-emerged, carrying bulging plastic bags. The load appeared to be too heavy for Rowena, but she was determined. She stood at the edge of the curb, pondered its depth, and carefully stuck one of her feet into the street. A passing car honked loudly, and the driver stuck his head out of the window and screamed something unintelligible.

Ben took a huge swig of wine from the bottle, and handed it over to me. "Damn, that's sad," he said, shaking his head.

"I worry about her a lot," I confessed as I poured a small river of wine down my throat. "It must suck to be that dependent upon alcohol."

Struck by a pensive mood, the three of us relaxed on the roof and began to discuss our future goals. Ben had lived with his parents until he was twenty-three, and had been on his own for less than a year. He didn't have any definite plans, except for his work at the print shop. I had recently quit my job as a late-night bartender at a blues club, since my shifts never ended before four in the morning. My meager stash of money was almost gone, but I was in no special hurry to find a new gig.

George had decided to pursue a collegiate path. I was surprised to discover that he was a fan of literature. "Kurt Vonnegut is my favorite writer," he said earnestly. "I just finished *Cat's Cradle*." George stared fixedly at the lines of my body, while a small, lascivious smile played on his lips. "The characters have a way of making love by pressing the soles of their feet together. It's called boka-maru. Apparently, they have orgasms almost instantly, and it's way better than normal sex."

I had read *Cat's Cradle* only a year beforehand, and was familiar with the characters' peculiar erotic customs. I was skeptical about the efficacy of the method, however. "I don't see how that could possibly work," I scoffed. George dropped his gaze from my body. "I mean, it's just fiction," I said. "If boka-maru really worked, then walking would be masturbation."

We laughed, and a warm, convivial mood settled over us. As we passed the bottle, I noticed the ease of the brothers' interaction with each other. Though they were so different, their mutual fondness was evident. I felt a pang of jealousy, since I was estranged from my siblings, who had a different father. I'd mostly grown up on my own, and was proud of my independence. Still, it would be nice to have a sibling who cared about me as much as George and Ben cared for each other.

Evening Three had been less eventful. The heat drove Ben and me from his apartment, and we trudged down

Broadway Avenue to an air-conditioned bar. We attempted to shoot some pool, but were too distracted to land any of the balls in the pockets. Finally, a boozy patron scoffed, “What the hell are you doing? Going for the best one out of a hundred?”, and we gave up the game. The two of us toddled back to the apartment building, embraced feverishly in the hallway, and said goodbye.

The combination of the heat and the torrid nature of our departure created a physical and mental stew that made sleep difficult. I reclined on my futon and closed my eyes, but all I could think about was the sensation of Ben's long, beautiful fingers in the small of my back.

Now, at 7:00 on Evening Four, the outdoor temperature stood at 98 degrees. As I lay in bed, sweating and fretting, I heard the creaking sound of Ben's door. I listened intently to the hiss of shower water, followed by a brief, troubling silence. The suspense was excruciating. I wondered what an acceptable amount of time would be for me to wait before knocking. Probably I should give Ben at least five more minutes, or maybe ten. He needed to relax after his long day in Skokie.

At precisely 7:25, I heard a light tapping sound. I raced to my door and flung it open. “Hey, Ben,” I said with exaggerated casualness, “what a nice surprise.” Ben smiled. “I was in the neighborhood,” he replied.

Ben and I had never spent much time in my apartment. An uneasy agreement existed between the two of us: our visits had to occur within the confines of his studio. Ben claimed this was because his apartment was cooler than mine, and he was allergic to my cat. I sensed his motives ran deeper—he was the sort of man who was uncomfortable in any place other than his own. Ben had to maintain a level of control over his environment. He needed to choose the music, regulate our conversations, and decide when the two of us were going to have a drink or smoke a bowl.

This disturbed me, but I had no desire to argue. Ben and I wandered into his place, and he threw open his refrigerator door proudly. The inside was almost empty, except for a stale-looking onion, a styrofoam container with a tiny amount of brown fluid encrusted on the lid, and two bottles of wine. “I got that Keller Geister you told me about last night,” Ben said. “You and George have me on a wine kick now. \$2.29 a bottle for German wine, though—I couldn't afford to just get one.” He smiled.

I pulled one of the bottles from the refrigerator and peered at the familiar label. I had always loved its design. An obviously intoxicated monk smiled contentedly as he stood in the midst of a group of grinning demons. The gold foil on the neck of the bottle gave the wine a deceiving aura of class. An ex-boyfriend had introduced me to Keller-Geister, a beverage he drank on the rare occasions when he decided to forgo his usual two quarts of Michelob. “Great,” I said. “A bottle apiece should be fine for our needs this evening.”

Ben face grew thoughtful. “Yeah, we'll be consuming a fair amount of wine,” he said calmly. “I've been

drinking more lately than usual. Maybe I should be worried.”

“A bottle of wine isn't that much for me,” I assured him. “The women in my family live a long time.”

Ben's eyes traveled appreciatively across the lines of my body. “Good Nordic stock,” he agreed. “It's funny, though. Since I was a kid, I've never been able to imagine myself as an old person. Even now, I'll get to about age fifty in my head, and then there's a blank. I've always wondered whether this means I won't live very long. Perhaps everything I'm doing now doesn't even matter.”

I sat down on Ben's sofa and gaped at him, astonished. He had precisely articulated the same conundrum that had gripped me since my own childhood. How could he possibly have known? “I've always felt the same way,” I confessed. Then I shrugged. “Well, at any rate, fifty is a long time from now.”

“True,” Ben agreed. He pulled a stained coffee cup from his sink and ran some water inside it, then added a tiny dab of dish soap. After sloshing the water around briefly, he dumped the cup's contents unceremoniously into the sink. With exaggerated care, Ben set the cup on his battered kitchen counter and poured it to the brim with sparkling wine. He repeated the process with another cup, and smiled radiantly at me. “Cheers,” he said, waving his cup in the air.

We clanked our coffee cups together and drank. The ice-cold, sparkling wine felt good as it rolled down my throat. The outdoor temperature was still in the mid-nineties, and even hotter within the confines of Ben's apartment. Ben lowered his body into a chair. He was so close that our knees were almost touching. I felt certain that, if the two of us made contact even for an instant, my body would melt from the combination of lust and humidity.

Suddenly, Ben sprang to his feet and strode over to the nearby cabinet, pulled out his dusty bag of marijuana and a package of rolling papers. He sat down beside me on the sofa, then plucked a dog-eared album from the floor. Its cover featured a dark silhouette of Marc Bolan, dressed in one of his trademark cape and boot outfits. “I listened to this last night after you returned to your place,” Ben said. “It's so great that I want to hear it again right this instant.”

I could tell that Ben was nervous, and this excited me. I watched attentively as he pulled the disc from its sleeve and placed it carefully on the turntable. He set the stylus, then closed the lid. The drumbeats of “Mambo Sun” pounded from the plastic speakers. My stomach twisted as I listened to the primal beat and stared at Ben's ass. He was dressed in cut-offs and a sleeveless tee shirt that looked as though it was about to fall from his body.

Ben sat down on the edge of the couch, and flipped the album cover open on his lap. He poured a small amount of pot in the center crack, filtered out the few seeds, and dumped the powdery mixture into a rolling paper. With an air of casual elegance, he rolled a one-handed spliff. He lit the joint with a flourish, and placed it gently

between my fingers.

I stared nervously at the album's centerfold picture. It featured a black and white photograph of Marc Bolan in a comfortable chair, lounging at the forefront of somebody's living room. In the background, three inebriated people stared intently in different directions.

Marc looked regal in his chair, much older than his twenty-three years. He sported a mantle of thick, curly hair, and his face wore a stern, faraway expression. "I love this photo," I sighed.

Ben moved closer to me on the couch, placed his hand beside mine. "I've always loved it, too," he confessed. He gently slid the cover from underneath my hand and held it aloft. "It's that checked, wool carpet that gets me every time. So cool. You know, I think the picture would look great on my wall."

Ben pulled a hammer and nail from one of his dresser drawers, and wandered over to the record player. He squinted for a moment, then positioned the album cover against the adjacent wall. With one rapid, decisive movement, he drove the nail into the cardboard. The album cover dangled from the plaster, and Marc stared back at us.

There was no doubt about it-the photo looked great on Ben's wall, as if it had always been there. Marc had died only six years after it was taken, and his face seemed all-knowing, like he realized his time was short and he wouldn't make it to his thirtieth birthday. Ben affixed a nail to the bottom of the cardboard, stepped back and admired his handiwork. "Now I'll always remember this night," he said. "I guess I'll just keep the disc some place else."

A weird flood of joy and lust washed over me, then subsided. Ben shook his hips to the music for a few seconds, and sat back down on the couch. "That little bit of effort wore me out. Jesus, it must still be a hundred degrees in here. You know, I read somewhere that if you drink hot beverages when it's really humid outside, it'll cool you off. I have some cocoa in the cabinet somewhere. I'm gonna make some hot chocolate."

Obviously, Ben was not only nervous, but stoned as well. Why else would he want to boil water for hot chocolate on the hottest night of the year? I watched, dumbfounded, as Ben put a greasy pan of water on his gas stove and lit the burner underneath. His ass strained invitingly against his denim shorts. He swung around, pulled a dusty box of instant cocoa and two more cups from his cupboard. With great concentration, Ben measured three tablespoons of cocoa into each cup, and doused them both with boiling water. "Let's test this hypothesis," he said.

I slurped the hot chocolate carefully. It had a metallic, chemical taste, balanced by a hint of sweetness. "Delicious," I lied. I took a scalding gulp, and beads of sweat began to form on my forehead. "You know, I think it's working."

Ben nodded. "It's supposed to make you sweat, and that cools you off." He took a small sip from the edge of

his cup. "I have a hard time remembering the details of the things I read," he confessed. "George keeps telling me to read more. He's probably right, because then I could find out about fun stuff like boka-maru. I've been thinking about that for a couple of days, wondering if there might be something to it."

Ben was trying so hard to keep his cool, and I laughed inwardly at his discomfort. He was just as erotically charged as I was, and there was no reason to deny our mutual attraction any longer. "You want to try it?" I asked. Ben's eyes widened, and he nodded. "That's the only way to know for sure," he said.

Ben swept a couple of battered pieces of furniture to the far ends of his apartment, then gestured for me to lie down with my head against one of his walls. He slipped my black Chinese shoes from my feet and laid them gently on the floor. Finally, he removed his sneakers and placed them next to my shoes. The two sets of footwear sat side-by-side in four neat rows. They looked happy together, like old friends.

Ben lay down with his head against the opposite wall and pressed his feet into mine. Our pressure was tentative, so he pushed a little harder. I felt a strong current of warmth in both of my feet. The heat instantly washed upstream to my vagina, and I pressed my soles more firmly against Ben's. The arches of his feet yielded instantly, and he emitted a low sigh. His long, pliable toes curled into mine, teased the spaces between them gently, then withdrew.

"I'm definitely feeling something," I said. "It's exciting," Ben replied. I shuddered involuntarily. "We must be doing it right," I said.

The two of us quickly developed a pattern—first we rubbed the soles of our feet together feverishly, then we rested for a few seconds, then we resumed our massaging, more vigorously than before. After several rounds, Ben and I rose from the floor and collapsed backward onto his sofa. He stuck his tongue into my mouth like a dog devouring a steak after a long period of hunger. Both of us were so aroused that we kept forgetting to surface for breaths of air, and we moaned loudly while we kissed.

Ben finally pulled his lips from mine, stared at me, and smiled. "I feel so close to you," he said.

I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but I knew better. The sentence "I love you" was a physical presence in my throat, trying its hardest to push itself into the room, but I bravely resisted. I allowed myself to smile. Ben paused for a moment, unsure of his next move. Finally, he strode purposefully to his stereo and removed the T Rex record, placed it gently on a pile of typing paper. He extracted a disc from another album sleeve and positioned it on his turntable. The low, soothing notes of "Kind of Blue" filled the room.

Ben motioned for me to stand. With one, swift movement, he pulled on the front of his couch, and the bed flopped open invitingly. The two of us tumbled onto his thin, lumpy mattress and began to kiss again. His saliva

tasted sweet from the wine and the chocolate, with only a hint of a cigarette aftertaste. I pushed my tongue inside as deeply as possible, licking as much of Ben as my mouth would allow. I wanted to crawl down his throat to the interior of his body, but there were too many obstacles. Perhaps I could just wash them away with my tongue.

Ben reached underneath my dress and found my vagina. I had foregone underwear for the last couple of days, due to the combination of heat and my lack of laundry money. My pussy was sweaty and damp, and Ben's fingers slid inside me with ease. I rose to my knees and faced him on the mattress. Ben extracted his fingers and began to rub my clitoris in a gentle, circular motion.

I tried my hardest to remain upright so that I could look into Ben's eyes, but the dexterity of his fingers made the maneuver difficult. As I swayed rhythmically on my knees, Ben continued to massage my clitoris. My always-ample supply of vaginal fluid was even more abundant than usual, and made a perfect, slippery lubricant. "You look beautiful," Ben whispered in my ear. Encouraged, I increased the momentum of my rocking, until the first undulation of an orgasm hit me like a wave. I rocked backward on the bed, then pushed myself forward again and ground my pussy more deeply into his fingers.

I came for a long time, and finally collapsed backward onto the mattress. Ben's erect cock loomed above me, and I grasped it in one hand, guided it into my vagina. His cut-offs rested in a clump around his ankles, but he made no attempt to remove them. I moaned loudly as Ben pumped his dick into my vagina. I had always loved it when guys fucked me hard, and was so excited that my vagina continued its rippling eruptions after the peak of my orgasm had ended. Finally, Ben bucked spasmodically, and his body collapsed onto mine.

"Wow," he said happily, as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. He rolled off, lay on his back, and smiled at the ceiling. "I've been wanting that for such a long time." Ben threw one of his arms around me and gave me an affectionate hug, as if we had been lovers for years. I was surprised by the warmth of the gesture, and uncertain whether I should reciprocate. Before I could stop myself, I curled into his body. His chest felt comfortable, as if I'd been there many times before. Ben cupped my head with one of his hands, gave it a little squeeze. "I have to work tomorrow," he said.

I stared at his face and analyzed his words for possible hidden meanings, but couldn't detect any. Ben rolled over to face me more closely, wrapped one of his arms around my waist, and fell asleep. As his breath deepened, a tiny, satisfied smile remained on his lips.

The Miles Davis album ended, and a thick silence fell over the apartment. Ben began to snore gently. I lay on his mattress and willed myself towards slumber. The temperature was still blisteringly hot, although the hour was quite late. The two of us would have to be awake again in less than four hours.

My eyes traveled across the room and finally landed on the Marc Bolan photograph. Marc's expression

seemed even more dour than before, as if he took a dim view of our recent antics. I wondered what Ben would tell Tessa when she asked what had possessed him to nail one of his album covers to the wall. She was due to visit Ben in less than forty-eight hours, and would certainly notice the change in her boyfriend's apartment.

I decided that none of it mattered, since I only had four more hours to spend with Ben. I felt determined to make the most of the small amount of joy I had at my disposal. I snuggled into the crevices of Ben's body. There was never any way of telling how many opportunities for ecstasy would be meted out by the gods, or whoever was in charge of such things. Brian sighed in his sleep, and gave my ass a little squeeze. Perhaps this was the best I could hope for. It certainly beat the hell out of celibacy. I pressed my head into Ben's shoulder, fluttered my eyes shut, and finally slept.

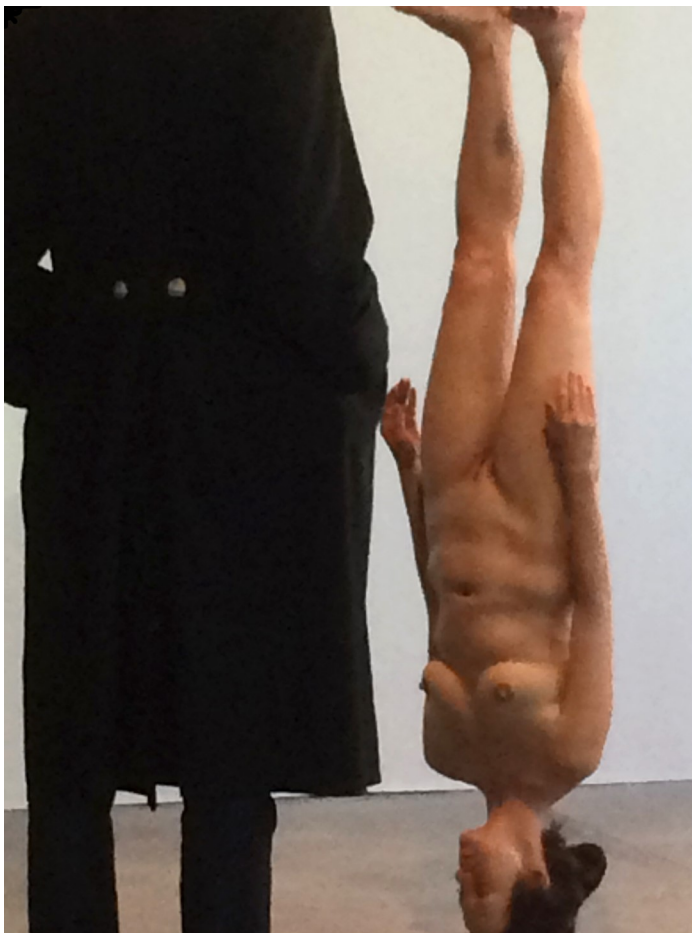


his fingers graze my nipples creating lightning flashes until I am almost perfect in his eyes

Discovering Electricity

MARK BLICKLEY

AMY BASSIN



Lady Bug

I dream about you Miss.

I dream I see you with nothing on.

Your beautiful woman Miss.

I ain't dreamed about you in two weeks.

I need that dream Miss. I need to dream about me
rubbing my nose against your belly and
you laughing and smiling.

I never seen you smile, Miss. Listen Miss.

I don't want to make you nervous or anything.

You don't got to see me if you don't want.

Not right away anyway. Things take time sometimes.

But forgive me Miss but your real important to me.

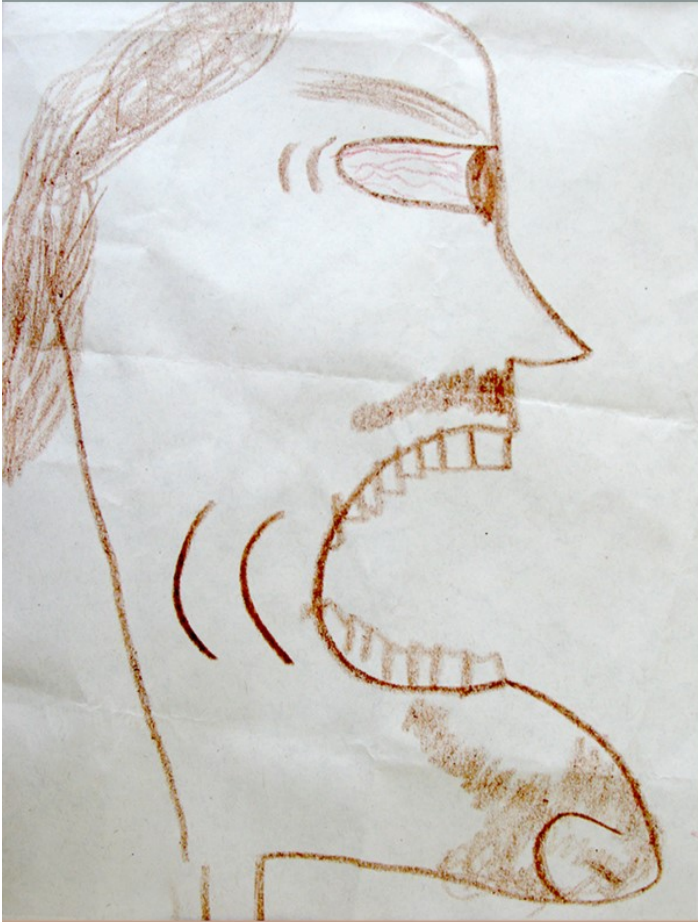
You make me feel like a man again know what I mean?

Last year before you started showing up I sorta let
myself go. You know relaxed myself.



a life rooted in self-confident quiet dignity allowing poised acceptance of an uncertain future

Testosterone Poisoning



My Daddy taught me that when a man expends his precious bodily fluid, it upsets his internal chemistry and drains him of a large portion of his intellectual and creative energies.



A **women's** sole purpose on this earth is to zap up a man's vitality by having him transfer it into her. It's artistic destruction by injection, if you know what I mean.

Lady Bug
Poised
Testosterone Poisoning
MARK BLICKLEY
AMY BASSIN

About the authors

Jonathan Brooks is an award winning Photographer/Visual Artist, whose work has been exhibited in Miami, New York City, Amsterdam, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

He is currently one of the 2017 Artists In Residency at the Deering Estate at Cutler.

His work has been used as decor in a Twentieth Century Fox film starring Anna Kendrick and Zac Efron, was featured on the CW Network's *The Vampire Diaries*, and part of an Emmy nominated 50th Anniversary video celebrating National Endowment For The Arts.

In 2014, he was awarded Photo Of The Year at the inaugural Miami Photo Salon Festival during Miami's prestigious Art Week. The same week, his work was featured on the popular German TV show 'Nur die Liebe zählt.'

In 2013, he was featured on one of the biggest billboards in Time Square, and was a Top Ten Finalist in Digital Photo Pro and HD Video Pro Magazine's 7th Annual Emerging Pro Still and Motion Competition, where he finished his first short film *5 SKULLS*.

Yasmin Boakye is an essayist and fiction writer raised in the Maryland suburbs of DC. A 2014 Callaloo Fellow at Cave Hill, she is also a recipient of NYU Abu Dhabi's Global Academic Fellowship in Writing and a 2017 VONA/Voices participant at the University of Pennsylvania. Her prose has appeared or is forthcoming in *mater mea*, *x* magazine, and *Bird's Thumb*. She is currently based in St. Louis.

Peter Baltensperger is a Canadian writer of Swiss origin and the author of ten books of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. His latest book is a collection of flash fiction entitled *Inside from the Outside, a Journey in Sudden Fiction*. His work has appeared in print and on-line in several hundred publications around the world over the past several decades. He writes, and has been writing all his life, because he loves to write and because it constitutes an integral aspect of his personal quest. He lives in London, Canada with his wife Viki and their four cats and a puppy Yorkie.

Steven Werkmeister is an English professor at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. He has published poetry and fiction recently, and his story "Going Home" was nominated for a Pushcart last year. He has a literature-focused blog at <https://stevesofgrass.wordpress.com/>

Allen Berry is a 2013 PhD graduate from the centre for writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. He lives, writes, hikes, and teaches in Huntsville, AL.

Philip Kobylarz's work has appeared in *Paris Review*, *Epoch*, *Poetry*, and *Best American Poetry*. His two books are *rues* and *Now Leaving Nowheresville*. He has two books forthcoming.

Pam Munter has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram*. She's a retired clinical psychologist and former performer and film historian. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Manifest-Station*, *The Coachella Review*, *Lady Literary Review*, *NoiseMedium*, *The Creative Truth*, *Adelaide*, *Litro*, *Angels Flight—Literary West*, *TreeHouse Arts*, *Persephone's Daughters*, *Fourth and Sycamore*, *Nixes Mate*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Cold Creek Review*, and others. Her play

Life Without opened the staged reading season at Script2Stage2Screen in Rancho Mirage, California and was a semi-finalist in the Ebell of Los Angeles Playwriting Competition.

Rose Titus works two jobs to support her writing habit. She exists somewhere in cold, dreary New England, with two manipulative cats and a very out of date Macintosh with which she creates horror and fantasy fiction. She also has a restored classic car to ride around while in search of adventure.

For travel she has stayed for the night in an allegedly haunted castle, has taken a boat ride on Loch Ness, and has visited the fabled Bermuda Triangle without getting lost.

Her work has previously appeared in Lost Worlds, Lynx Eye, Bog Gob, Mausoleum, Midnight Times, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, The Bugle, Weird Terrain, Descend, Wicked Wheels, Carnival of Aces, The Dead River Review, Fortean Times, and other literary magazines. Her novella Night Home and her novel After Dark have been published with Bathory Gate Press and are available with Amazon, Barnes and Noble .com and Smashwords.

When she's not writing or working or messing around with her old Buick, she waits by her mailbox for the next issue of Fortean Times to arrive.

Tim Clark is a blogger who wants to be a writer, a warehouse associate, a happily married man (for 28 years) and a father of two from Columbus, Ohio.

He is an occasional and proud contributor to Street Speech, a local homeless advocacy newspaper, and is thrilled to be allowed to write a monthly column for The Wild Word. There are a few others, that can be viewed on his Contently page. <https://timclark.contently.com/>



Zeke Jarvis is an Associate Professor at Eureka College. His work has appeared in Moon City Review, Thrice Fiction, and Quail Bell Magazine, among other places. His books include *So Anyway...* (a collection of introductions to poems that don't exist), *In A Family Way*, and the forthcoming *Lifelong Learning*. His blog can be found at zekedotjarvis.wordpress.com

Leah Mueller is a 58 year old, indie writer from Tacoma, Washington. She is the author of two chapbooks, “Queen of Dorksville” (Crisis Chronicles Press) and “Political Apnea” (Locofo Chaps) and two books, “Allergic to Everything” (Writing Knights Press) and “The Underside of the Snake” (Red Ferret Press). Her work has been published in Blunderbuss, Memoryhouse, Outlook Springs, Atticus Review, Origins Journal, Silver Birch Press, Cultured Vultures, Quail Bell, and many anthologies. She was a featured poet at the 2015 New York Poetry Festival, and a runner-up in the 2012 Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry contest.

Lisa Stice is a poet/mother/military spouse who received a BA in English literature from Mesa State College (now Colorado Mesa University) and an MFA in creative writing and literary arts from the University of Alaska Anchorage. While it is difficult to say where home is, she currently lives in North Carolina with her husband, daughter and dog. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and the author of a poetry collection, *Uniform* (Aldrich Press, 2016). You can find out more about her and her publications at lisastice.wordpress.com and [facebook.com/LisaSticePoet](https://www.facebook.com/LisaSticePoet).



Winston Plowes lives aboard his floating home in Calderdale, West Yorkshire. He was Poet in Residence for the Rochdale Canal Festival in 2012 and The Hebden Bridge Arts Festival 2012-14 and his first solo collection of surrealist poetry, *Telephones, Love Hearts & Jellyfish* (Electric Press) was launched last year. Winston is a regular teacher of creative writing in schools and for local groups and is the proud inventor

of the world's first (and possibly last) Random Poetry Generating Bicycle, the 'Spoke-n-Word'. www.winstonplowes.co.uk

Linda M. Crate is a Pennsylvanian native born in Pittsburgh yet raised in the rural town of Conneautville. Her poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has three published chapbooks *A Mermaid Crashing Into Dawn* (Fowlpox Press - June 2013), *Less Than A Man* (The Camel Saloon - January 2014), and *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (Scars Publications, August 2016). Her fantasy novel *Blood & Magic* was published in March 2015. The second novel of this series *Dragons & Magic* was published in October 2015. The third of the seven book series *Centaur & Magic* was published November 2016. Her novel *Corvids & Magic* was published March 2017. Her novel *Phoenix Tears* is forthcoming.

Wayne Russell is a creative writer, singer, and photographer, that was born and raised in Florida.

Wayne has traveled the world and has resided in Dunoon, Scotland and Wellington, New Zealand, currently resides in Columbus,

Ohio.

As of March 2016, Wayne leads an all star cast at Degenerate Literature you can find them at the following link.

Ken Allan Dronsfield is a published poet who was nominated for The Best of the Net and 2 Pushcart Awards in Poetry for 2016. His poetry has been published world-wide in various publications throughout North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. Ken loves thunderstorms, walking in the woods at night, and spending time with his cat Willa. Ken's new book, "The Cellaring", a collection of 80 haunting, paranormal, weird and wonderful poems, has been released and is available through Amazon.com. He is the Co-Editor and Cover Artist for two poetry anthologies, Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze and Dandelion in a Vase of Roses available from Amazon.com.

Nick Romeo is a multidisciplinary artist, musician and writer. Nick lives in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania with his wife and cat named Megatron.



Pansy Maurer-Alvarez is a poet, who was born in Puerto Rico, grew up in Pennsylvania and now lives in France. Her poems have been widely published and she has six collections of poetry, most recently IN A FORM OF SUSPENSION (corrupt press, 2014) and ORANGES IN JAN-

UARY (KFS Press, 2016). Her photography has appeared in several publications.

Sergio A. Ortiz is a two-time Pushcart nominee, a four-time Best of the Web nominee, and 2016 Best of the Net nominee. 2nd place in the 2016 Ramón Ataz Annual Poetry Competition sponsored by Alaire publishing house. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in FRIGG, Tipton Poetry Journal, Drunk Monkeys, and Bitterzeot Magazine. He is currently working on his first full-length collection of poems, *Elephant Graveyard*.

Hio Fae is a Floridan exploring the world and is currently living in Mallorca. Hio will soon move to Iceland but not before visiting Miami and Mexico City. Hio Fae enjoys taking pictures of nature and capturing candid shots of her friends.

Paul Rabinowitz teaches creative writing to senior citizens in New York City and New Jersey. He has self-published a chapbook: *Renewal* (2015) and his published work appears in *Long Exposure Magazine*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal* and *Pif Magazine*. He hosts *The Platform*, a literary open mic series in Madison, NJ, and collaborates with local and international artists mixing his writing and photography with animation, dance and visual art. He produces mixed media performances that have appeared on stages in New York City, New Jersey and Tel Aviv (summer, 2017). Paul is working on a novel that is set in Israel during the early days of the Intifada. He currently resides with his wife and large cat in Morristown, NJ.

Allen Berry is a 2013 PhD graduate from the center for writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. He lives, writes, hikes, and teaches in Huntsville, AL.



Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. Her poem 'A Rose For Gaza' was shortlisted for the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition 2014. This and many other poems, have been widely

published, in recent anthologies such as - 'Alice In Wonderland' by Silver Birch Press, 'The Border Crossed Us' from Vagabond Press and 'Selfhood' from Trancendence Zero - and journals such as Apogee, Firewords Quarterly, Indie Soleil, Midnight Circus and Snapdragon as well as many other online and print publications. Her artwork has also been included in similar publications.

Ann Christine Tabaka was born and lives in Delaware. She is a published poet, an artist, a chemist, and a personal trainer. She loves gardening, cooking, and the ocean. Chris lives with her husband and two cats. Her poems have been published in numerous poetry journals, reviews, and anthologies.

Ashley Parker Owens is a writer, poet, and artist living in Richmond, Kentucky.

Christine Stoddard is a Salvadoran-Scottish-American writer and artist who lives in Brooklyn. Her visuals have appeared in the New York Transit Museum, the Ground Zero Hurricane Katrina Museum, the Poe Museum, and beyond. In 2014, Folio Magazine named her one of the top 20 media visionaries in their 20s for founding the culture magazine, Quail Bell. She also is a Puffin Foundation grantee, Artbridge winner, and Library of Virginia REMIX artist.

Stephanie Hammer is a combination poet/magical realist fiction writer, who also makes videos and takes pictures. She is a 4-time Pushcart Prize nominee, and teaches writing at nonprofits, community colleges, and libraries.



Nathan Hall is a former reporter/editor who now teaches English language learners in inner-city Philadelphia. He recently took up photography because his two daughters don't give him enough time to write. Follow him on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/nd.hall/>

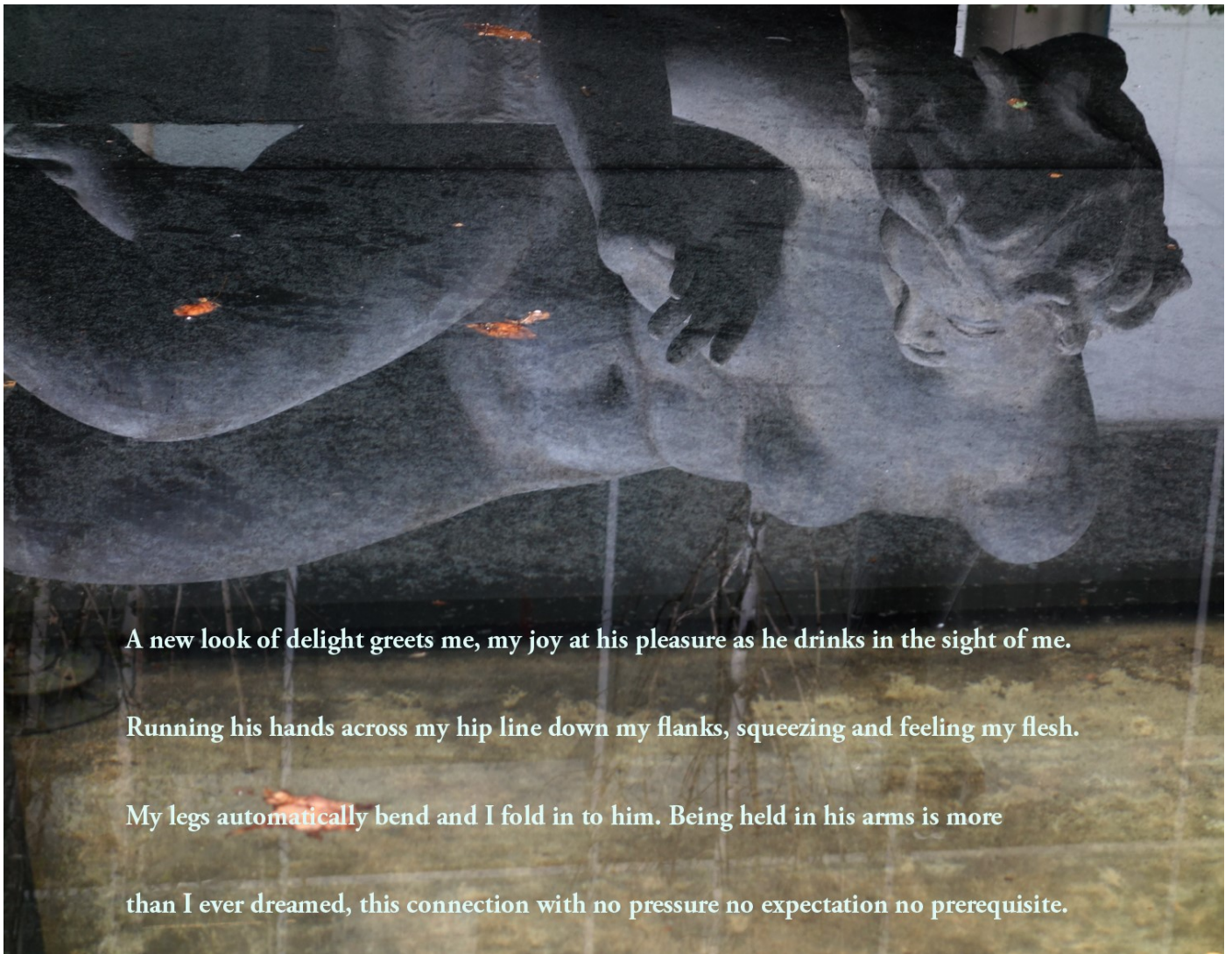
Emily Vieweg is a poet originally from St Louis, Missouri. Her work has been published in Foliate Oak, The Voices Project, Northern Eclecta, Red Weather Literary Magazine, Soundings Review, Art Young's Good Morning, and more. Emily's chapbooks are available from Plan B Press and Amazon.com. She lives in Fargo, North Dakota where she is a mother of two, pet parent, office assistant and adjunct English instructor.



Gretchen Gales is managing editor and a staff writer for Quail Bell Magazine. She was honoured in Her Campus' "How She Got There" segment. Her work has also appeared in CLASH, FIVE:2:ONE, Yes Poetry, Yellow

Chair Review, and more.

Amy Bassin and **Mark Blickley** collaborate on text based art collaborations and videos. Their text based art collaboration, *Dream Streams*, was featured as an art installation at the 5th Annual NYC Poetry Festival held at Governors Island. They have published numerous excerpts from this series, including in *Columbia Journal of Literature and Art*. Their video, *Speaking In Bootongue*, was recently selected for the London Experimental Film Festival. A text based art chapbook, *Weathered Reports: Trump Surrogate Quotes From the Underground*, was recently published by Moira Books, Chicago. The publisher sent it to the White House and Congress.



A new look of delight greets me, my joy at his pleasure as he drinks in the sight of me.

Running his hands across my hip line down my flanks, squeezing and feeling my flesh.

My legs automatically bend and I fold in to him. Being held in his arms is more

than I ever dreamed, this connection with no pressure no expectation no prerequisite.

No Pressure No Expectation No Prerequisite

MARK BLICKLEY, AMY BASSIN