



Spring 2009

## The Lantern Vol. 76, No. 2, Spring 2009

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The Lantern



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# THE LANTERN

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**Cover Art:** “So Pale as to be Reflective” by Shira Degani

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

If you've read and committed to memory the *Lantern* editors' notes over the years (and who hasn't, really?), you may remember that last semester I compared the magazine to a baby collectively born from the work of the talented Ursinus students who contributed to it. That is as true as ever this semester – the work of my fellow Ursinians is still a source of pride and inspiration, and this book still owes its beauty to their excellent work. But this semester I will move from the baby metaphor, and suggest that the magazine you're holding is like a huge mural painted on a city wall. It is collaborative and it is for everyone to enjoy; it is to make Ursinus better by celebrating good things. It is not very big though. But we print 1,000 copies per semester, so work with me here. The baby metaphor made more sense, but I've already used that one.

Thanks are, as always, due and overdue to Dr. Volkmer, who is the *Lantern's* biggest cheerleader, for his endless work advising the magazine, me, and the rest of the editors. And to Amber, Callie, Nicole, and Robert: I'm glad none of you are seniors, because you are wonderful editors, and the *Lantern* will always need those. I am channeling the spirit of the *Lantern* to say, thanks for your work. (But also, from me, thank you so much for your work.) And to Chris: You are a senior, and you are also wonderful. And it was always a pleasure working with you, and thank you. Scott Jones, you are a certified genius. MaryKate, you are just actually an angel.

And when I graduate this spring I will miss the *Lantern*, and you (that's right, you). And most importantly: I hope you enjoy the book!

-Marjorie

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## JUDGES' NOTES

### **Prose Winner—"Molly Can't Answer the Phone" by Nicole Dillie**

In bathrooms and the basement office of a funeral home, sick smells and groans, the rings of cigarette smoke and "death" calls surround Molly, who types out labels on a keys in which "every letter of the word 'deceased' ha[s] long since disappeared." It's a story about the life inside Molly, like the orange-red of her high-heels, the end of a cigarette, like something that can't be put out.

***Randall Brown** holds an MFA from Vermont College and teaches at both Saint Joseph's University and Rosemont College. He is the lead editor of *SmokeLong Quarterly*, the author of the award-winning collection *Mad to Live* (Flume Press, 2008), and will have an essay on (very) short fiction in the forthcoming anthology *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction: Tips from Editors, Teachers, and Writers in the Field* (Rose Metal Press, 2009). His essays, poems, short stories, and short-shorts have appeared in a variety of journals including *Quick Fiction*, *Night Train*, *Cream City Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *Evansville Review*, and others.*

### **Poetry Winner—"Coffee and Morning" by Chelsea Catalanotto**

Amidst poetry that embraces the intriguing, witty, stirring and strange, one piece in this spring's issue of *The Lantern* stood out immediately for its confidence and clarity of style. "Coffee and Morning" moves the reader gently but masterfully into that intimate space shared between two people, sketching the tension between familiarity and distance with a simplicity of language that leaves no image out of place, no syllable wasted. Through an attention to detail that relies on subtlety rather than shock-value, the poet captures the slow quietness of the scene. Brief glimpses of dialogue and body-language, placed delicately among the rhythmic pauses of line and stanza breaks, work to re-enchant ordinarily mundane conversation, and evoke the power of all that remains unspoken. Like the couple in the poem, the reader too is left to ponder both the beauty of the moment and the yet-unanswered questions that



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## JUDGES' NOTES (CONTINUED)

"spiral/in soft curves into the November dawn."

I would also like to mention two other pieces strongly deserving of praise: "In the Yellow Kitchen," for its blunt language and skillful shifting of reference and perspective to create a sense of movement and uncertainty; and "The Naming," for its courageous engagement with the visceral, morbid and obscene (I particularly adore the opening stanza).

*Alison Shaffer lives, works and writes in the hilly, sycamore-infested city of Pittsburgh. She continues her life-long study of poetry and creative work as a form of spiritual practice, meanwhile waiting tables at a local family restaurant to pay the rent (please do not follow her example, all you bright-with-potential young writers out there). When energy and motivation allow, she lavishes her writing on whoever will accept it. She writes creative-nonfiction and essays (posted regularly in her blog, Meadowsweet & Myrrh), and publishes a modest literary newsletter, The Particular, for the neighborhood coffee shops. She has recently begun pulling together her first book-length manuscript, tentatively titled To the Infinite Music, a collection of essays and stories focused on the role of aesthetics, poetics, story-telling and song in contemporary Earth-centered spiritual traditions.*

## COFFEE AND MORNING

Sitting out on the back porch  
you look at me sideways and say,  
*You ought to do more  
girl things. Curl your hair.  
Bake cookies. Speak French.*

I switch my cigar to the other corner  
of my mouth and tip backwards  
in the five dollar bucket seat uprooted  
from a 1958 Coupe Deville  
and ease into a grin.  
We tilt our heads—  
yours down to your chest, mine  
up to the indigo, as always  
watching the smoke spiral  
in soft curves into the November dawn—  
Squinting, I balance the horizon  
on my fingertips  
and let it collapse,  
then pull my dark glasses  
from the curve of your nose.

*You know, you say,  
etching warm, familiar  
breath into the contours  
of my shoulders,  
Just because you wear those boots  
don't make you a cowboy.  
Yeah, I say.  
And just cause I came back home  
don't make me yours.*



## MOLLY CAN'T ANSWER THE PHONE

Her fingers were still numb from the attic chill of her cheap apartment. She'd dressed herself under the blankets that morning and her contacts had felt cold on her eyeballs. Tom hadn't even noticed her writhing into her work pants beside him. He was a heavy sleeper. He slept through her sick groans over the toilet. He didn't stir until the unfamiliar sound of high heels on the bathroom tile roused him. They were a new pair, the orange-red of her hair. The match had charmed her into buying her first pair of stilettos.

"Wha- Fairy-girl, why are you wearing heels?"

Molly's face paled. "I just want to get my use out of them."

Tom rolled over to sleep for his remaining ten minutes before the alarm would ring again.

Now, she was in the basement office of the funeral home and she was glad she'd brought her furry boots. The chill that seeped in from the cement floor easily wound its way through her black wool sweater and mixed with the sick smells that escaped whenever the back room was opened. She shuddered, and chafed her fingers. Molly wished Mary would finish her damn cigarette and come back downstairs.

Molly hated cigarettes. Her mother had smoked until she'd died two years previous, in a car accident. Not only was it sudden and unfair, it didn't even give her a good moralizing story on the evils of cigarettes. Whenever she yelled at Tom for stinking up their apartment and turning both their walls and his lungs grey, he'd remind her of that fact. She'd considered finding a new smoker boyfriend whom she could convert by lying.

On the whole, working as an assistant secretary wasn't a bad kind of work. It was largely inane work and left her plenty of time to think about the poems that had failed to get her into the creative writing program of any grad school she had ever heard of. Only she hated the cold and the way when the phone rang you couldn't escape the sound of it. She was superstitious about it; when the phone rang it often meant a death nearby. Even though it usually was a more mundane call, she still hadn't shaken the impression. The cold made her broken knee ache, an old injury that never quite healed; the warm throb made her hands flutter ineffectually, unable to be still. A summer during college and



three months' of regular work after her grad school rejections still hadn't broken her of that shiver or her fluttering hands. Both annoyed Mary considerably.

Mary was the other downside of her job, as if the embalming of her aspirations wasn't enough. Molly thought Mary had spent about thirty years too long in the basement office. Her personality had grown mold in the cold and damp. She was a pale cave-dweller. Her white hair and ice-blue eyes made a sharp contrast with her black clothes. Always black, even when Jim said they could dress casually. Molly suspected that Mary wore only black nightgowns.

"Mare, do you have the death certificate for the Hendersons?" said Jim, clunking down the carpeted steps.

"Mary's upstairs," answered Molly, biting back her smile at the violet-striped tie that appeared before the tanned, square face descended.

"Giving herself cancer again."

"Yep. Here's your death certificate." Molly, snapped a piece of paper off the typewriter, and reached out so Jim could grab it as he passed on his way to the back room.

"You should tell her to quit. It's bad for her... and stinks up this place," Jim called over his shoulder.

Not as bad as the bodies, she thought. "Yep, I know," she muttered. She wrapped an arm around her waist and gently squeezed.

He kicked one of the red heels as he walked away.

"Are these yours?" Jim eyed them a little longer than Molly would have liked.

"Yes. They're new."

"Nice."

Jim continued down the hall. The door opened and out came the scent of embalming fluid and a strange sucking sound that made Molly wince. She got up and began flipping through the files. "Superior Tubing," that's what made that sound. She wrinkled her nose and tried to shake from her head the knowledge of where those superior tubes went. All she managed to shake was her red hair out of the clip she'd knotted it into.

A gentle slapping sound warned Molly that Mary was coming. Her slippers tracked dirt on the carpeted stairs, her black pumps waited at the bottom of the steps.

"Hey, Mary, what should I do next?"



The slapping stopped two steps from the bottom. "Well, did you type the labels?"

"No, you only told me to build the banker's boxes, so I—"

"Well," Mary interrupted, "take the list sitting on the typewriter and type up the labels."

"And then?"

"Just do that first."

Mary reached for the remote and turned on the television that sat atop the filing cabinets. There was some sort of talk show on, some local Jersey channel Molly had never seen before. The patter of voices in the background filled the office space. Mary could find a weird talk show any time, any day. Molly secretly thought that was the only reason Mary was manager over her, that and a vague sense of guilt that Mary had spent thirty years of her life inhaling embalming fluid. The chatter was inane, but monotonous enough not to disturb anyone. It sure as hell beat the sucking sound.

Mary and Molly took their seats, backs to each other at an L-shaped desk. It was the annual tradition, gone awry; in college Molly had worked here one month of the year during winter break to do the end of year secretarial work. Christmas time was the busiest time of year, since there was a spike in deaths leading up to the holidays. Molly used to think that was sad, then funny. Now she didn't think of it. Mary probably never had. Somehow, after college, she'd come back to help out during a heat wave in the summer and stayed. She hadn't planned it, but didn't really mind. It didn't pay much, but Molly liked the filing and, besides, she almost never had to answer the phone.

Mary was always very particular that she hand the phone off to her if it was a death call, and it was easier to just pick up the phone; so long as both were equally busy or equally bored, the phone was Mary's domain, just like the typewriter was Molly's.

The typewriter had been purchased about the same time Molly had entered the first grade. The keys were rubbed smooth. Every letter of the word "deceased" had long since disappeared from its key. Otherwise the machine was a splendid monster, and Molly smiled as she pulled her computer-printed list nearer and flipped through her label boxes before she found the green vendor tags.

Molly began typing and the typewriter rattled like a machine gun. She kept it up for nearly an hour. Jim peeped out from the back room to look, laughed that he'd heard airplane guns make that sort of



noise and shambled back, taking the death-vapors with him. Jim had been in Vietnam, and his casual mentions made Molly cross and uncross her legs uneasily. She'd lost an uncle to Vietnam; PTSD and suicide. Mary turned off her show and shuffled deliberately up the stairs, leaving the black pumps and resuming the black slippers.

There was a faint shriek upstairs, followed by a yell, and thirty seconds later, laughter. Molly stopped her typing for the scream, but once the laughter began she resumed fire. She made it through two columns of labels, before the stair-door opened again. Shaking her head, Molly paused to hear if it was the mailman. He was her favorite visitor. Molly heard a light step that was certainly feminine and a dragging sound, so she recommenced.

A yellow fireman's hat shook at her from the staircase. She started and narrowed her eyes. Next appeared the rest of the uniform, resplendent with an enormous chief's badge, hanging from a metal clothes-dummy.

"Eva?"

"Hmm?" A curly-haired head appeared where the yellow hat had recently been. "Good joke, huh, Carrots?"

"Sure. But when did we get a fireman?" Molly tried to remember the news last night. Tom had fallen asleep and snored through the entire half-hour. Had there been a fire? Any fatalities? The last time they'd had a fireman; the funeral home had been a zoo for nearly a week, well-meaning strangers sending flowers and condolences enough to block the side entrance and tie up the phone line for days. The line for the viewing had wrapped around the building, and that was just a regular volunteer, not a chief. The only thing worse than a firefighter/police officer/soldier in the line of duty was a kid.

"This is all good ol' Mr. Henderson's. He was retired."

"Oh, thank God."

Eva smiled, splitting her thin face in half. She had a chin that vaguely resembled a duck bill. "We'll see how this goes. From the sound of it, he wasn't putting out any more fires, but he was still doing his share of the drinking."

"Here's hoping his buddies don't decide to honor his memory before coming here, then."

Eva gave the clothes-dummy a prodigious yank and turned to head to the back room. "Your lips to God's ears. We'll be fine as long as we don't get any more calls for this week."



Molly sat and listened to the back room door open and shut. There was always too much business, or not enough. No such thing as the right amount of death, not that anyone thought of it in those terms. It was just business and each client could be damn time-consuming.

Mary opened the stairwell door. "I'm going for sandwiches, what kind do you want?"

"Turkey, please!"

"Kay! Be back soon! Don't forget, let Jim know if you get anything important" The stair door shut.

Molly went back to typing. She pounded out the final column, hit the "paper down" key and held it triumphantly. There was a rattle and scuffling noise in the back room. Molly smiled. Mr. Henderson was getting a wardrobe change. There was one of many reasons she would never be a funeral director: changing dead people.

The phones rang. There were eighteen phones throughout the building and only three people. The scuffling noise continued in the back room. There was a scraping noise and a curse.

"Mare! Could you get the phone!" Jim's voice was muffled by more than the door. "Mare!" He was panting heavily. Mr. Henderson was not a small man.

Molly's hand shook. She spun in the office chair and stared at the black multiline phone that was inches from her hand. The phones rang; they trilled and echoed on all sides. Molly swore she could hear the phone in Jim's client office above her.

"Mare! The phone!"

Molly reached out and snatched up the phone.

"Anthony and Sons Funeral Home, how may I help you?" She spoke the way Mary did, with the same slightly raised pitch and gentle, sing-song intonations. She probably sounded like somebody's sweet, cookie-baking Grandma. It was the perfect receptionist voice.

There was a strange sound on the other end of the line. It sounded like a dog whining. There was a rustle and a strained voice whispered, "Honey, hand me the phone, I'll handle it."

Molly gripped the phone so tight her knuckles whitened.

"Hello?" said the whisper from the phone.

"Anthony and Sons Funeral Home, how may I help you?"

"Hello. Um... there's been a death in the family. My son... my son is dead."

Molly's hand shook. "Sir, I am so sorry for your loss." Her mind

raced. She stared at Mary's chair, willing a memory of what she usually said.

"I am certain that this is a difficult time for you and your wife and everyone here at Anthony and Sons is here to help you with your grief." And that of the Hendersons, as well as anyone else who might be stored in the back room, she thought.

"Yes, yes, thank you..." the voice was shaking and the whine in the background had risen to a strange sort of keening sound. "But, well, uh, what do we do now?"

She had no idea. "Sir, where are you?"

"I'm at St. Christopher's Hospital."

"All right, sir. Well, then we will need to come get the body. It's best if we pick it up as soon as possible."

She could hear the phone shake and a snuffling told her she had just broken the man. You're not supposed to call it a body in front of the family. Nor are you supposed to call it an it. She tried again.

"It would be best if we come pick your son up."

"Yes."

"We'll send someone as soon as we can." She scooted her chair over to a memo board to see which driver was on call for pickups that day. It was Carl, a tobacco-chewing man Mary had once dated, probably twenty years ago, and whom Molly would rather not talk to, not that it much mattered in the scheme of things. It looked like Carl liked the newer, more colorful secretary over the vaguely amphibious Mary. The smell of him made Molly nauseous.

The breathing on the other end of the phone was slowing, becoming deeper. The voice that spoke next was the first notably masculine sound he had managed. "So should we come in for some kind of meeting, you know to, to..."

"Plan the funeral?" The silence told her something was wrong again. Again, she had said a word that hurt. They could take about the funeral later. For now it was "making arrangements." It sounded like talking about flowers

She tried again. "To make arrangements, yes, sir."

"When should we do that?"

"If you hold on for just a moment, sir, I will check with the funeral director and see when he is available."

"All right."

She put the phone on hold and fumbled to find the intercom



button and then the button for the back room. "Jim, I have a call. He needs to make an appointment."

"Mare?"

"No: Molly."

"Oh, Molly! My schedule is in outlook, on my computer desktop."

She didn't know that there were calendars in Outlook. She scooted her chair to Jim's downstairs desk and clicked around until she found that week's schedule. Molly was near tears with frustration by the time she found the schedule. Inwardly, she cursed Mary for limiting her to the one desk without a computer in the entire office. She picked up on the line there, on Jim's phone. "Sir?"

"Hello?"

"Would you be able to come in tomorrow?"

"Um..."

"Would you prefer the day after? It would have to be in the afternoon"

"No, yes, no, I'd rather... We'd rather get it over with, I think."

Molly made the appointment and got all the necessary information. The deceased's name was William "Willie" Michael Horniblow and he had died at age nine months. She offered her personal condolences, which she knew were unwanted but necessary all the same. The entire conversation had taken only thirty minutes, including her computer-idiot interlude. Mary still had not returned from getting sandwiches. Molly wondered how many cigarettes she smoked in the process.

The shuffling sound in the back room had stopped. Jim and Eva were probably doing Mr. Henderson's makeup. The viewing was tomorrow and they had to prep him for his big day. Still, there was no one in the rest of the office to keep her company. Molly stood up and stretched. She groaned a little and then fell silent. She sat back down at the typewriter and resumed typing, this time making client file labels. The list was still short as it was early in the year. Once she finished the list, she added the new name.

Molly stood. In reverse of Mary, she put on her heels to go upstairs. She climbed the stairs, turned, and headed towards the bathroom. The light switch for this hallway was at the far end of the hall. Finding herself alone in the dark, Molly began slowly to dissolve.

"Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ!" She stood still in the

hall and clenched her fists. She had told herself she was only going to go and use the bathroom. She suspected she would be sick again. "Oh my God." She wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged herself.

She pulled her cell phone from her pants pocket and flipped it open. She began typing a message to Tom. It was inane at first, a couple commonplaces. Molly didn't quite know what she wanted to say. Finally, she erased the rest of the message and typed, "I took a call today."

Tom's reply was nearly instant; her phone's vibration made her jump. It was written in his usual fragments. "Nice. Smoke break. Talk later."

Of course, Tom's all-sacred cigarette-break; he wouldn't even answer phone calls during it. Stupid cigarettes. Willie's mom probably smoked too. She paced and wrapped her hair around her finger, tugging violently. She snapped the phone open again and jabbed out Tom's cell number.

"Molly? What's wrong?" She could hear the huff of smoke as he exhaled while talking.

"I just wanted to fucking talk, Tom! Is that so much to ask? I'm having an awful day and you can't even put down your damn cancer-stick! You'll make yourself sick! You'll make ME sick! You'll- You have to quit, Tom. You HAVE to! Now, before it's too late..."

"What, Molly? I'll what? Why would I quit smoking? What the hell has you so damn freaked out?" His voice was nearing the point where words were impossible and it became one long growl.

"Nothing, Tom. I'll tell you at home."

"Molly!"

She hung up.

The door opened. In came Mary with an immense brown paper bag filled with sandwiches and bags of chips. She squinted down the hallway Molly was in. Molly continued to pace. Mary froze.

"Molly, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Molly froze. "Nothing. I just answered the phone, that's all."

Mary strode down the hallway, and stopped so close to Molly that they were nearly touching. She reeked of cigarettes and the smell was infuriating. Molly coughed a little and exhaled from her nose.

"Who did you talk to?"

"Mr. Horniblow."

"Who's that?"



“His son’s our newest call.”

“Christ Molly!” She put the sandwiches down. “Why the hell did you answer the phone? Jim and Eva are both here! You said he was the dad?”

“Yes, Mary.”

“How old was he? How old was the kid?”

“Nine months”

Mary froze. “Wait... what?”

“The new call is a nine-month-old little boy, Mary. I could hear his mom crying in the background the whole time I talked to the dad. She sounded like she was fit to die too. They’re coming in tomorrow. I have to call Carl to pick him up.”

“Christ, Molly, a baby? You took a call for a baby?”

“Yes, Mary.” Her hands were still moving in the flighty way her knee made them behave.

“Why’d you answer the phone? Couldn’t Jim have got it? You took a call? I told you to always hand off the phone! You probably screwed up something awful.”

“I know, but no one was answering and it was just me. It was just bad luck I got a new call; it could have just as easily been Carl calling in sick.”

Mary winced. “Could have been, but not likely; the only line safe to pick up is the company supply phone. That’s the only one you’ll ever get something good on. You shouldn’t have taken a call without someone watching you. You probably said something stupid and hurtful and made this day even worse. People remember what you say on these sorts of occasions.”

So that’s how she made it through thirty years here, Molly thought. “Well, Mary, now I know.”

“You do. When you’re done in the bathroom, come down and get your sandwich. You’ve been spending a lot of time in there recently.” Mary bent and, cradling the bag in one arm, she turned and headed down to the basement office.

A cigarette, just fallen from Mary’s pocket lay on the carpet in front of the stairs. When Molly opened the door to head back downstairs, she looked at it and calmly stepped so that the tiny roll was impaled by the heel of her shoe.

# CATCHING THE LIGHT





# CHARLIE BROWN TESTIFIES AT THE TRIAL OF WESTLEY ALLAN DODD, CONVICTED CHILD KILLER

Provided that they show up, after everything  
they've been through,  
and since the death of the dog as well  
this is an open and closed case:  
In and out—good grief.

Provided that he gives us the necessary  
devices, lines, exits (no matter how limited)  
this monster will fry.  
Once the rope is loosed, the fancy  
can fly on topsy-turvy yellow wings.

Provided that he says it verbatim, the truth:  
“He *wahwahwahwah*’d me in  
my *wahwahwahwah*.  
Then he said if I ever

*wahwahwahwah*’d to anyone that he would  
*wahwahwahwah* me  
and Linus too.”As he points us  
to Rockwell’s America, we can keep  
each little disaster in our hearts.

Provided that he use those two magic  
words... an alliterative agony—  
Two cold words: like  
ice cubes jangling  
in an empty glass.



## MARKED MAN

**R**ed marks a man and black takes him off. The deed clung to him like dog shit sticks to a shoe. It was a hazy, no good, no how deed that still sat in the fog in his mind, rolling somewhat material. And on his shoe. People could smell it. But he was a red man, a marked man. So what was the matter with wondering whether or not people could smell him; they would anyway.

He wanted to detox his coffee. The skim milk was resting on the top in little whirls smirking up and he figured the brandy was mulling about the bottom.

Some twiggy, fat lipped woman was spelling things backwards like a lap dog dance to the man sitting next to her at the back of the bar.

“Undulate. E-T-A-L-U-D-N-U. Glistening. G-N-I-N-E-T-S-I-L-G. Tomorrow...”

He thought about masturbating in the bathroom. He would be a guy beating off after work in some bathroom where the lights didn't work right. Feelings weren't for him, but that woman's laugh was. He could whack off in rhythm to her unsettling guffaw; a-wha-wha-wha-wha hoooo-ey!

But the blood smacking against his temples brought him back to the bar, to the night and to the red that clouded his mind. He rubbed at the X he had on the back of his neck. He thought about not having a dick, of unzipping his fly to some blank flesh that laughed all the way to his navel.

It was cold outside and he could hear the gnilleps girl from the corner as he crossed the street. There were people, women in nice jackets and men with jackets for teeth haunting the sidewalks scating their way through Friday night. He had to find another bar. Another bar, another drink, a different man. He could be a jack-rabbit-jolly-two-fuck at the next one. He thought about that. Two women at once twirling about his chest and murmuring something endearing for an hour or so. A hot sake, that's what.

A hot sake was the next place and he got one of those. The people here were dancing and swanking metropolitan conversation to one another. Lanky men hung on to the edges of the bar and a band

played slow smooth on the stage. The women wore nice dresses and cheap heels and the bartender had a smile that smelled like gold. He was a lucky man tonight. He threw down some bills and sucked on a cigarette. Some coughed like rich people and looked at him funny. But at the least, there were others sucking cigarettes too.

The woman singing on stage had a chandelier for a voice that sparkled and dripped onto the walls. She had the mark of grace. And he just had a mark. He thought about pulling the straps off of her shoulders and slipping his finger into one of her soft curls.

The light bounced off of her eyes and found its way to peoples' faces. Everyone looked dark and full of other dimensions. They all had style. So did he and his was red. He thought cigarettes weren't for him and put it out. Maybe the smoke would cover the smell. The shit smell stink that threatened a good night. He looked down at the suede and imagined a stain. A very satisfying red, gurgling fresh stain. A stain right from the guts that fell in beads onto the shoe. But whenever he conjured the red, it was the brown that kept coming back; how dissatisfying.

A woman pulled him off of the bar and brought him swaggering to the floor. Her hands were rough and her hair was stringy but she had a nice mouth. It was puckered and full and he wanted to take her home for it. He was sure he saw her before, maybe even a few minutes ago.

She pulled him to her and he could feel the bones in her hips. Full women were no more. He didn't look at her but fell into the grooves that guided the rest of the feet shuffling on the floor. At some time, his hands met the small of her back and he could feel her breathing.

"That's a nice two-step you got there, honey but would you mind showing me what else you can do," she looked up into his face.

"Sure, and you got a nice ass, would you mind sitting on it for a minute? I'll get us a drink."

"Be a doll and get me a gin sour. You know, a R-U-O-S N-I-G?"

He got her a rous nig and they sipped in silence. Her calloused fingers tapped off at the table and she looked around at the other men in the room.

"So, are you some sort of cleaning lady, what with those hands?"

"You could say that."



Their conversation was interrupted by disinterest. She finished her drink, put the glass down, stood up, brushed off her dress, passed her hand over his shoulder and disappeared into the dancing. So much for that. So much for this place. Out he went.

The back of his neck burned when the cold air hit it. The lust in the eyes didn't do it for him anymore, and neither did the wad of bills he was thumbing in his pocket. It was at most 22 degrees and the world smelled like silence. But there wasn't any quiet on the street as people's heels smashed on the pavement and the lights in the windows buzzed with a bit of boredom. The bums rustled their paper bags and cats wailed in the alleys. There was something special about this night, special like hot dog shit that ruins the day, special like turbulence on an air plane out of control.

It was a long, miserable night and the sky had a long, miserable face: the light grey of snow and silence. A couple whose faces were crawling in swirls about their noses laughed as they crossed him on the sidewalk. He shoved his hands deep into his suit pocket until they wouldn't move any further and felt a piece of rumpled paper. His fingers curled against one another and he thought about the hooker he was with the other night. She had extremely large breasts whose cleavage was like his pocket. He caressed the groove and felt a stiffy coming on. At the nearest light, he made it half way across the street, brought his shoes together in a sharp jerk and made a 180 back towards the bar.

The clouds of his hot breath hung like ghosts under the brim of his hat. Under the red neon of the bar light the spectres folded out from under the hat and moaned their way to the open air. He swung the door open and thumbed through all of the people clinging to one another on the floor and found the bony-hipped, pucker-lipped girl and grabbed her by the elbow. He brought her twiggy limb and heaving chest around to the bar.

"Hey honey, remember me?"

"No, but you Y-L-S-U-O-I-V-B-O remember me," she panted.  
"What do you want?"

"Yeah you do, I had the nice two step, right?"

"All you guys have nice two steps here."

"The gin sour?" He hadn't let go of her arm and was seeing through the strings of her hair.

"Yeah, yeah now I remember. I hate them things. What do you



want, huh?"

"Here, read this." His hands dove back into the breasts of his pockets and pulled out a sheet of paper that had been folded and unfolded so that the cracks of the parchment were like bucked teeth.

Please Join Us For the Holy Union  
of Anna Bergstrom and Sheldon Calloway  
at the Holy Redeemer Catholic Church  
on the Precious Evening of December the 12<sup>th</sup>  
followed by a reception at the Belmont Victorian Lounge  
at 6:00 p.m.

"Yeah, so?"

"Yeah, so, you wanna go?"

"Who is this for?"

"My sister and her fiancée. It's right around the corner and we can dance there. Say, you could even pretend to be someone you're not, like someone I work with or my girlfriend or a whore or whatever. C'mon what do you say?" His arm slithered around and had her by the neck and he just stared into her lips. The people around them became noise that bounced off the bartender's smile.

"How about a cosmo? And then you have yourself a date. Aren't you a regular old Casanova?" She tapped her gravelly fingers as he backed away from her towards the bar. The red was shining on the back of his neck and he couldn't afford to turn around. Not as he was so close to being done with her. He watched as Lips took the cosmo and slugged it down, almost nervous like, but then she took her hands and rubbed them down his leg.

"I need my coat," she said and sauntered to the coat rack. He threw some more bills onto the bar and hung around the door. And then they were out.

Her breath hit the air and made fat little birds that came out and chirped away. They walked arm in arm and her heels clip-clapped on the dry cement as she struggled to keep his pace.

"Hey, where you rushin' to? It's still early."

"You like champagne? I hear there's a lot of champagne," he said and his pace picked up.

"Who's the lucky, guy, taking your sister away?" He stopped and her heels:

"Sheek—sheek—shee"

"He's a prick—some no good dirty fire-crotch. He's nothing

and she's too dish washed to notice." He stared into her face hard enough to make her think.

"Dish washed?"

"Yeah, dish washed-- you put a piece of bamboo in there and it comes out all soggy and stupid. Look," he pointed, "it's right there."

They whirled around a few corners in the freezing cold. Even the litter was hiding on top of the warm, cockroach laden grates. The place was on a boulevard but was not connected to any other building. It had a long sloping staircase that climbed into a huge chandelier that hung down like sparkling teeth. At the door, he pulled out the invitation and gave it to the doorman. The man was dressed head to shoe in a red zoot suit with matching red *calcos* that stared up with a mean glint in their well-shined eyes. The doorman took a deep breath and stared at the man with alcohol on his breath and the whore on his arm and looked at the guest list.

"You must be Gregory. You Gregory?"

"Yessir."

"She said you'd be late. Come on in," he swung the huge door open and a blast of hot air shot at them, engulfed them and pulled them into the building. His neck throbbed as he swirled through the warm room, the weight of the girl a mere flutter to his left. All of the lights were exotic and hard to place; they pierced the shadows that sat underneath the eyes and drank up the darkness in the groove of the ear. The carpet was soft and absorbed the singer's notes wafting out of the next room. The man's voice was ham: sweet and fat and pink and it came out through the double doors where there was other chatter from the guests. He looked down at his shoe and remembered the smell; maybe he wasn't ready for this. Lips cocked her head and became a Cubist painting- her hair hanging lank and mean and her lips puckered at an angle 78 degrees from the horizontal.

The door was open now and everything inside the room was red. Red embers from the ends of cigarettes, red mouths of people that just finished eating— lips flushed red with blood and warmth, the red gloves of women on the dance floor, the quick red of a maraschino cherry that disappeared into a dark mouth. The curtains on the small stage in the corner of the room were red and held a man, fat and red under the lights, zig-zagging through a jazz number. His eyes followed red to red until they fell on the grating red of a wedding veil.

And there she was. Anna. Anna with the red hair. Anna that had



forgotten him for two years. Anna Anna Anna, that bitch. The bitch that called him a darling, the bitch that left scratches on him during sex, the bitch with the red, red hair and the white white fingers that sparkled with little rings tonight. He watched her as she turned her jewellery box head and rested her gaze on him.

The Stiff found him, the Stiff he was running from. For if the Stiff found him the red would, too. He was stiff-legged, stiff-jawed, stiff-dicked, stiff period. He couldn't move. Lips stood in front of him to cover the exposed part of his pants and turned like a spy into his ear. "Is it cold in here or are you Y-P-P-A-H to see her?"

He felt himself being pulled away, from the spinal chord, ripped away from that veil that shrouded him from her. On the way out, Lips grabbed champagne on a serving tray from one of the caterers. She pulled out a hanky and flushed his face in the bathroom with cold water. His face was brutal and green. She was zipping up his fly before he even knew what happened and he took down the champagne in one quick long sip.

"Well at least one thing isn't stiff anymore, huh," he said, rubbing his eyes and trying to move his jaw in circular motions.

"I don't have a calling card, but I'll be on the dance floor. Oh, and give that *sister* of yours a congratulations," she said, closing the door behind her.

He pushed his way out, grabbing another champagne. He washed out the green from his face with the alcohol and looked up when he saw a red shoe cloud the carpet. His eyes went up along a red laced veil and he saw her face, turned upward just past his eyes with a smile that defied logic. "I'm glad you came in more ways than one," her eyes were shining.

"Nice to see you, Anna."

"I didn't think you'd show, but you won't be here much longer, will you?"

"Anna?" It was Sheldon; he was wearing a white tuxedo with a black undershirt that had a red tie smirking on top of it. His head was peering around the corners and Anna perched herself into a corner between two statues. She brought up her hand, removed the glove, pointed her finger at him and brought it back to her face.

"You're leaving, aren't you Gregory?"

"Soon," his hands quivered at his sides.

"You always had a way with words, so many of them. I didn't



think you were going to make it here tonight, you know. But, here you are, just as I remember you.”

“Some people never change, Anna. You aren’t any different, either. Still red.”

“Still red, yes.”

“Anna? ANNA? Are you back here?”

She was leaning into a corner, frail and artless and beautiful. Her bone white limbs dug into the wallpaper behind her and gnawed at the tarnished paint. She began pulling up her gown to reveal some lace panties and an expensive blood red garter belt that crossed her thigh.

“I thought we could say goodbye, Gregory,” her chest was heaving and Gregory could see her hand reaching for something. There was a tear galloping to the floor. He rushed towards her and shoved her against the wall and covered her mouth. He hoisted up her legs and grabbed into his pocket. In a second her eyes fluttered up and his wrist worked its way into her. Her hands flung around his neck and crossed his flesh in a quick slash. She was clenching her teeth and her red hair fell across her face. He looked madly into her lips and pushed in further and further until his hand couldn’t go any where. She was looking at him with crossed eyes, the eyes he had hated for two years. It was done. She gasped and he panted and he lowered her to the ground. Her legs were twitching slight and quiet. He stood above her and saw the small pool forming around her lower abdomen. She was almost facing the floor but just on her side and he leaned down and brushed his thumb and forefinger over the staring eyes. They fluttered like young butterflies but stayed shut. There was a breathing nearby accompanied by a frantic walk.

“I hope you’re satisfied, baby,” he wiped his mouth and turned to walk away.

“Anna?” Sheldon rounded the corner where they were and his shoe met the exposed leg that shuddered red and slow. He knelt down and his knees found the pool and he brought up the head to his ear. His two forefingers found their way to her neck.

“I knew this would happen. The second you walked in and she left, I knew it.”

“Poor planning on your part, Sheldon.”

“No, not really,” and a torrent of policemen inundated the empty hall. There were shouts and buzzes and a sharp click on his wrist. Lips came out from the reception hall and strung her way to the crowd



forming around them, jitterbugging her way to the front. Her cubism returned and her lips parted in confusion. Her eyes ping-ponged between Sheldon, Anna and the handcuffs.

“Oh, honey, shit, T-I-H-S, goddamn--”

The police wrangled around his legs and began dragging him back to the cold, the wad of bills falling from his pocket. Sheldon bent down and flipped through the bills.

“Going away tonight?” His eyes fell down to his shoe and up to his neck and the greens disappeared into the black of his pocket. “I don’t think so. What’s done is done, Greg.”

He felt his shoes slipping down the cement stairs and saw the building get smaller and smaller. They passed a saxophonist with black fingers and a black face. He had dice for teeth and could roll them in his mouth and make you go blind if you looked too hard. There was a campfire in his right eye that burned bright outside his head and he looked like he could catch anyone in a lie. The notes sat stiff and cold in the night and spun crisp towards the cop car. The man’s suit blew up around him in little floral ringlets from underneath a grate of heat. He felt his head being pushed in and his body followed protocol.

“Make yourself comfortable, scum sucker,” and the door slammed stiff by his ear. He leaned back and let the chaos of the saxophone swallow him. He brought his arm back at an odd angle and felt the raw flesh on the back of his neck; it must’ve been pink. He stared out the window as the car pulled away, the night swallowing the wedding and the gold of the saxophone guzzled down the light from the streetlamp. The reflection was bright, jewelley and warm. A smile cracked out when the Stiff came back. The deed was done. With a sigh, he looked at the glittering stain on his shoe; it was brown and caked. Like dog shit.

## ZUGSPITZE





## IN A WOMEN'S BATHROOM

In the third stall, sitting on the bowl  
like even my ass knows I don't belong  
here. When I rushed in with my mannish  
fear, I saw a garland of plastic violets  
hung carefully over the vanity mirror,  
I saw two clay pots at the sinks with two  
spiky and alive plants. *This is an exercise,*  
the professor said. *Go somewhere*  
*you've never been, write a poem.*

She must have figured someone  
would do it— push back the heavy door  
to a room meant for the other sex,  
find the blessings of difference  
and be joyful. Bless women! Bless  
their resolute sprucing of a place  
where humanness loses a bit of pride,  
where water dirties and cleans, a place  
of loss and blood. Bless the graffiti-less  
walls, the polite cleanliness. Bless women  
and bless women! Their tiled temple,  
their sleek tabernacle of twenty-five cent  
tampons, their tins for curse, the mirror  
with its cheap brocade of flowers.  
Alone as I am in here, I can see it was never  
Eve who did it. Look how women  
made this small paradise. Look how  
when they enter, they never want to leave.

## THE NAMING

I dream of  
a slant-eyed  
warrior speaking  
in tongues, lifting  
a bloody human heart above  
his head, tearing into the red  
with dirty  
fingernails and pulling  
southern lace (the kind that rests  
on floral couches in living rooms)  
from the organ  
like a magician's pocket.  
He keeps pulling and  
pulling until  
the lace becomes  
one solemn throbbing string  
and snaps.

I was named  
after a great-aunt, hair dyed some chemical  
red, rocking back and forth, on the front porch  
of some hospital in mississippi.  
She was dead  
years before she was dying, years before she was born.  
the acid wash of hair dye, the heart beatings  
of blood clots, the stomach staples of southern  
comfort, drowned the twinkle in her mother's eye.

We are the same, in that way.  
Being born into this



confederacy.

And yet

I am not mesmerized by the static on the television screen.

I could never be distracted by the church arenas or the

big-hair-big-tits-wide-smile-wide-legs

lessons that my teachers tried

to learn me when I was a drawling pig-tailed debutante.

Instead,

I can feel

my eyes slit

into arrows pointing

towards each other.

I let

my tongue wave

wildly in the air and

I open my heart

to the indian summer

sky.

## COLORADO SKY





## WILL YOU WEAR A HELMET?!

**A**mnesia is one of those things that only happens on soap operas. Married people fall off cliffs and lose their memories and only regain them once they're already married with kids to someone else. It creates *drama*.

At least, that's how I always thought about it until it started happening to me. I've had six concussions in my life, and the last four, spanning over three years, have brought along an interesting side effect known as retrograde amnesia.

Retrograde amnesia is a result of head trauma that damages the areas of the brain that contain memory. "Victims," as they're called in articles and case studies, can't remember recent events prior to the head trauma. The time period I've forgotten has gotten progressively worse. During concussion number three, I forgot three months. During concussion number six at the beginning of the Spring 2009 semester, I forgot ten years.

Progressively losing my memory feels like being self-aware in a dream. I feel as though I lose track of what's going on for a moment, but then I'm years younger. My friends ask me the same questions over and over, but since I have no memory of the question being asked before, it's not all that odd.

Having my surroundings and the people around me become less and less familiar, on the other hand, is very disconcerting. At first, it's like *déjà vu*. I know I've been there before, but I can't remember when or why. Then everything becomes completely unfamiliar, and that's when I'm sure I'm dreaming.

Concussion number six, like the others before it, found me talking to a triage nurse in the ER of a hospital that shall remain nameless. This nurse had been asking me questions, but she really hadn't been very nice about it. I didn't know what I had done to make her so upset.

"What year is it?"

Well. That one was easy. "1999."

"Think harder about what you're saying..." the nurse replied, looking at me critically. I had to say, I couldn't say much for this nurse's bedside manner.

I thought.

“It’s 1999.”

“No,” said the nurse flatly.

I blinked, wrong-footed for a moment. No? It was definitely 1999. I have a great memory, but even without that, it was hard for me to forget what year it was.

“Who’s the president?”

“Bill Clinton.”

“No.”

I glanced at Sara, the girl I’d met that night (who was and is also one of my best friends), and she looked annoyed. “She doesn’t know. She hit her head and lost her memory,” she snapped, folding her arms. I briefly wondered whether she was talking about me or the nurse.

“Have you been drinking tonight?”

Wait. What?

“...excuse me?”

“Have you been *drinking* tonight?”

“No! I’m only twelve!” I could not recall ever being so scandalized in my life.

“That’s not my question.”

Sara saved me again. “No, she hasn’t been drinking, and she thinks she’s twelve, so even if she had been, she wouldn’t remember.”

Finally, the nurse with an apparent vendetta sent me to a room to await a CAT scan. I still had no idea what was going on, but Sara was nice enough to keep me informed.

The nurses who administered my CAT scan were even worse. You would think that they would know why I was receiving a CAT scan, but this was clearly not the case. Communication is clearly not high on this hospital’s list of priorities.

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.” I had recovered three years by this point.

“What? When were you born?”

“1987.”

“Okay...so do the math.”

Math has never been my strong point, but it was 2002. Subtraction was not difficult.

“I’m fifteen.”

“You don’t look fifteen.”

“...I’m sorry?”



“Whatever...is there any chance you could be pregnant.”

“What? No!” The last time I had felt this insulted was when I was twelve! Which had been, of course, about a half hour previous. But honestly, what kind of person did they think I was? I was fifteen! I had never even been kissed!

When my memories come back, it’s almost the same feeling as when they disappear. I feel as though I space out for a moment, and when I come to, I have a year or two back. The more recent the memories are, the longer they take to come back, and some never come back at all. I still don’t recall the last half of Christmas Break or the first two weeks of this semester.

It’s always kind of bewildering to be informed that I’ve lost my memory. I’ll be in the hospital, accompanied by people who seem nice enough, but can’t remember ever knowing them. They’ll call my parents, and they’ll tell me that it’s OK to trust them. I haven’t lost my memory enough to forget everyone in my life, thankfully.

The complacency and lack of fear with which I react to this seems to baffle people who know what have happened. It doesn’t seem so confusing to me. When I was younger, I was the poster child of naïveté. I would see no reason not to trust these people. It is difficult when they tell me things that go against everything I believed in (“You’re in a sorority.” “*What? Why?*”), but I have no reason to mistrust or disbelieve what they tell me.

The hardest part is when people come up to me before my memory has entirely returned. I’ll be being guided around the currently unfamiliar campus by a friend, and I’ll be approached by someone else. They’ll generally give me a hug or start talking, and I have no idea who they are. I nod and smile, then ask whoever is guiding me around at that point with whom I had just had a friendly exchange. I also have a habit of knowing entirely too many people, so more often than not, my guide will have no idea who the other person is.

I apparently have to be extra careful with my head nowadays. If I get another concussion, I could have permanent brain damage. However, since my friends have informed me that they’re pooling their money together to purchase a personalized helmet for my graduation gift, I’m really not too worried.

# ARM AND HAND





## AN URBAN NIGHTMARE

Shattered glass bottles on the pavement reflect disco ball light on my face,  
Partially blinding me.

It's a Tuesdays morning and the sun hurts.  
Soles melt and fuse with the black top, making each step tacky and resistant.  
Squatting on a cracked yellow curb, I count each individual bead of sweat  
Sliding down my forehead and getting caught in my eyebrows.

“38,39,40...”

From my eyebrow, I shake the opaque droplets onto the ground below me,  
Sizzling and evaporating.

From a square a window  
Lined with pretty flowers  
On the opposite side of the street,  
A baby faced church boy yells “faggot”  
At two tall, well dressed men walking a Pomeranian.

They pause, shrug at one another, and keep walking.

I play with vials at my feet. A whistle from behind, a cat call  
Comes from two lanky black boys who nudge each other spastically,  
eyes widening,  
Looking alive and healthy, apart from the dead gray concrete walls of  
the old buildings and apartment complexes.

I match the boy's directional gaze with the echo of their screech and  
find the object of their attraction, the prey of a lion's hunt.

Across the street, a sixteen year old girl with pure bronze skin

An Egyptian goddess,  
Struts and bounces her way past the tiny shops and bodegas  
That decorate 6<sup>th</sup> street.

On the corner, she stops and examines her possibilities for the day.

Second hand high tops with the Velcro undone,  
Skin tight faded cut offs that make her thighs look puffy,  
And a zebra striped bikini top two sizes too small.  
Dark tinted sunglasses hide her eyes.  
Although they're hidden, her exhaustion is gleaming from her Atlas  
posture.

In her hand, a drippy red Popsicle, artificial apple, makes a sticky mess.  
In the same instant that she remembers the sugary treat, she holds it to  
her mouth  
And extends her pink tongue, slivering slowly through the dense air,  
Finally touching it.

The Popsicle tremors,  
Emitting red perspiration.

Juice drips from her mouth onto her chin,  
Then to her chest,  
Creating rivers of flowing red.

I stare, mesmerized, unmoved from my previous spot on the curb,  
Anticipating the path of every drip from her chest,  
Forming pools of blood that surround her.

Sweat now collecting in pockets under my armpits and between every  
skin crease  
On my body.

Cleopatra turns her head and notices me staring back.  
In embarrassment, I recoil and direct my eyes somewhere less  
forbidden,  
Keeping her still in my periphery.



Tossing the remainder of the Popsicle into a pile of black trash bags,  
Smelling ripe from baking in the mid morning summer sun,  
She turns her back to me, and walks down  
A wet alley shrouded in shadows  
Cast from the metal staircases above.

Knowing she won't see me staring,  
I redirect my vision to catch a few final glimpses,  
Before she disappears into the horizon.

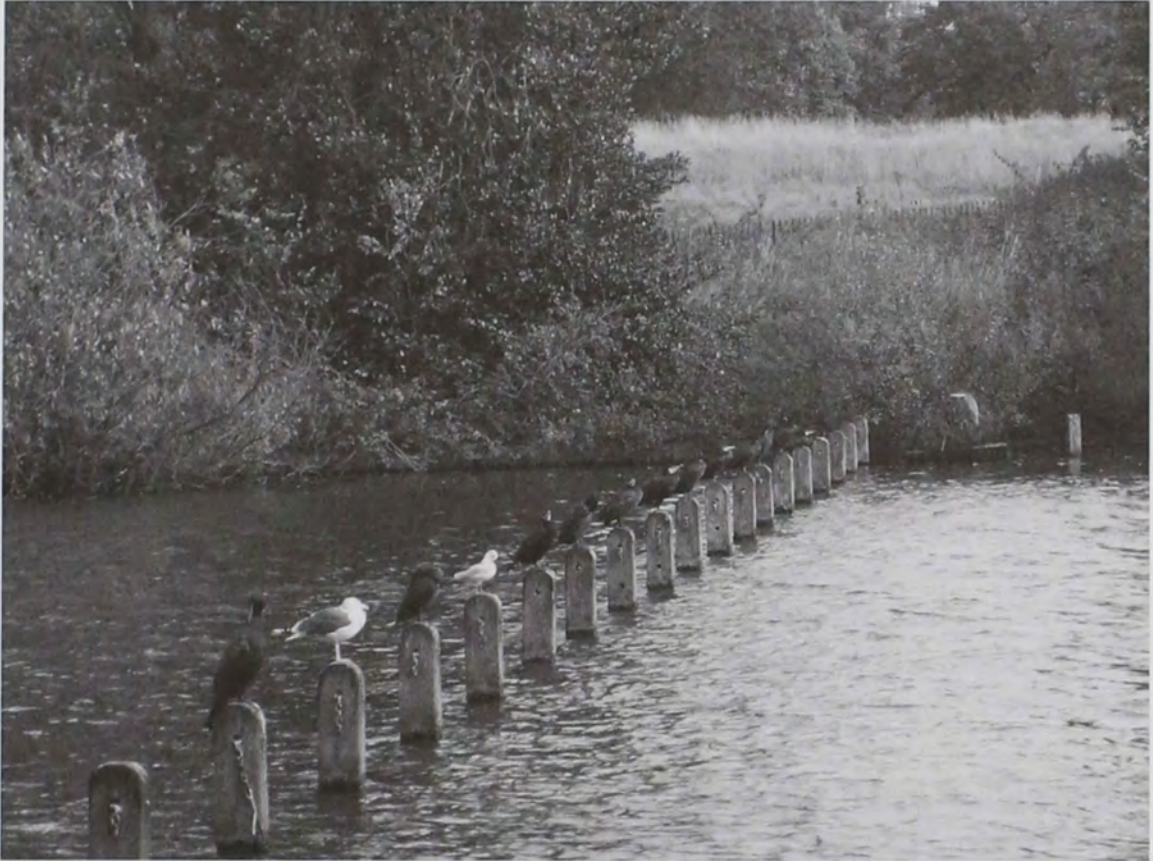
Within the gloomy tomb of the alley,  
Rests a homeless man wearing a pair of ripped up khaki pants,  
And a long sleeved waffle shirt,  
Rolled up,  
Revealing track marks  
Like the veins of an Oak leaf.

Seeing only the outline of the young girl's figure  
As she passes by the man in the alley,  
He yells something, inaudible to me,  
With desperation  
Leaking from his eyes.

Without any change in stride or tilt of the head,  
She reaches into her pocket  
And pulls out two silver coins.  
She release them into the air  
By way of her thumb,  
Flickering in the rays of sun light,  
That penetrate the darkness.

One day the rain will come and cool the streets,  
And the heat will be gone and the mist will float to the heavens.

# BIRDS OF A FEATHER AND THEN SOME





## IN THE YELLOW KITCHEN

He slept on the steps of city hall.  
He was an important man—so he slept  
where the city could see him.

Dull winds rolled  
from the man's yellowed gaping mouth  
until the cancer killed him.

He left after filling his children  
with cigar smoke and amber apologies,  
but he never could steady his wife:

Their mother,  
swinging her wig, and singing Sinatra  
nailing rodents to the door to prove a point.

I found this little mouse  
sick on the cold linoleum  
in the forsythia-colored kitchen.

I thought. When he died—  
I'd bury him in the cemetery across from the Budweiser factory.  
That is where my grandmother is buried.

## HE'S UNDER A LOT OF PRESSURE

**P**rofessor? I'd like to interject, if I may." Janet didn't wait for a response. "I have an anecdote that the others may find interesting. When Captain Picard was—"Professor Nielsen cut her off. The older, short but still blond-haired woman saw her opening and moved to take the British Literature class back on track. Janet looked nonplussed, and fiddled with the garland of leaves she had around her head.

"But...who here agrees with Jane Austen?"

"Professor?" Janet raised her hand.

"Not now, Janet. Let's let someone else have a turn." No one spoke. The class sat transfixed by equal parts horror and mirth.

"Professor? I think I pay quite a lot to speak in class. Now, as I was saying, when Captain Picard became one of the Borg, he still managed to communicate to Data how to defeat the Borg." Janet looked smug. Professor Nielsen's mouth was agape, her arms frozen clasping a piece of chalk. She fluttered for a moment, jaw working soundlessly, and recovered nicely.

"Well! I think that's about it for class today. Janet, will you speak to me after class, please?"

"Ha-HA! Was I the only one that saw that?" Wade said.

"No, I was sitting right there! That was so great! I thought professor Nielsen was going to explode. Her eyes were bulging out of her head!" Todd giggled.

The two dissolved into laughter, tears welling up as they gasped for air. Wade collapsed onto the floor, still giggling helplessly, while Todd slumped against the corridor wall. They were polite enough to wait until they had made it down the corridor and around a bend, but their hysterics still managed to offend the class they had stopped by. Disapproval radiated from the film students as their professor closed the door.

Todd and Wade were oblivious, however. Finally, still gasping for breath, they calmed things down to an occasional giggle. Wade had collapsed onto his backpack and rolled off of it, crushing the half-inch of assorted papers and handouts from last semester's classes. He



looked up at Todd.

“You know...I really don’t look down on freshmen. I really don’t. I remember what it was like. It was only two years ago. But...” Wade dissolved into laughter again as he spoke. “But...I just don’t understand how that comes up. Star Trek? I don’t know why you would think that, and I don’t know why you would even say that! Do you?”

Todd took a deep breath, smile still plastered on his face. “No. God, but that was hilarious. I haven’t laughed like that in forever.” A glare from a passersby, weighted down with coffee, laptop, and backpack settled Todd further. “Do you think she heard us?”

“Who, Nielsen or Janet?” Wade giggled again.

“Either.”

“No, they couldn’t have. We were pretty far down.” Both looked over their shoulder reflexively. “No, we’re safe.”

“Ah, well, what’s the worst that could happen? Janet would just interrupt you again, right?” Todd snickered.

“Oh no!” Wade smirked. “I hope the same happens when we present next week.” A thoughtful, reflective silence fell. “We should work on that soon. I have no idea why the French left Vietnam. Do you?”

“No,” Todd said. “Can you meet tonight, to get started?”

Todd had staked out a corner of the Lucky Bean coffee shop, and sat nursing a chai tea, waiting for Wade’s arrival. Always a conscientious one, he had put his laptop on the opposite side of the table from his tea.

*Probably shouldn’t have laughed that close to the room. Saved it until we were out of the building, maybe.* He was gripped by a sudden thought. *What if Professor Nielsen heard us? Her office was way closer to us than the classroom. Are we gonna get in trouble? No...what’s she going to do? Ask to talk to us in her office and lecture us on being responsible students? People don’t do that here...do they?* Todd’s musings were cut off as he saw Wade cross the doorway, sliding his phone into his pocket.

“I saw you outside,” said Todd. “Figured I’d wait in here. Who was that?”

“No one.” Wade sat down with a huff. “What do you have so far?”

“I did the economic analysis, but I didn’t get a chance to look

up the social reasons.”

Wade nodded. “Okay. I can do that. Hey, listen, I’ve got to go, ok? I got some place to be. I’ll email you when I get done tonight.”

“Sure.” Todd shrugged, but Wade had already turned around and was on his way out. “Whatever works,” Todd said, mostly to himself. He busied himself with a reading for British Literature, but was interrupted again.

“Hey! Todd! Remember me?” A brunette girl with thick glasses had approached him.

“Oh...uh, hey Janet. Yeah, I remember you.” Todd coughed, and sipped his tea to cover himself. “Yeah. What’s up?”

She sat down at the seat Wade had recently vacated. “I saw you guys sitting together and I remembered you from class!” Todd broke into a cold sweat. “What are you two up to?”

“Oh, you know. That, uh, group thing. We’re doing Vietnam. You know, why the French left. What, uh, are you doing?”

“I’m putting up fliers! I want to do a production of *Equus* but the theater manager said no. So, I’m putting together a group to protest.”

“Ah. Yeah. Cool.” Todd nodded, lamely. “So...when’s it going to happen?”

“Three days, twenty-two hours, and...uh...twenty-six minutes.”

“Ah.” Todd was unsure if she was serious.

“You should come! It’s going to be right here, two tables over.” Janet said, getting up. “It’ll be great!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll stop by if I get a chance.” Todd was distracted by Wade returning to the shop, furtive look turning to barely concealed glee as he saw who had taken his seat.

“Do it! You would make an excellent Martin Dysart.” She moved off. Wade slid in as soon as he was sure that she wouldn’t return. He grinned.

“Oh? How are you and the missus getting along? Making plans for later? Eh? Eh?” Wade leered at Todd.

Todd laughed. “No! I wasn’t, seriously! She just invited to me to some strange play pre-production group meeting. I wasn’t even going to show up. Unless, you wanted to go, maybe?”

Wade smirked. “No, not really. I’ll probably be too busy writing this presentation. Um, I actually forgot to ask. Could you send me your stuff?”



“Yeah, no problem. It’s not really that hard, if you’ve been doing the reading.” Todd saw Wade suddenly looked pained. “You’ve been doing the reading, right?”

“Well, yeah. I usually get around to it. Eventually.” Todd waited. “Well, most of the time. Sometimes I’m just too busy, you know? Ah, college is all bullshit anyway. Just wait until you get to the real world, you’ll know what I mean,” Wade said.

They both sat there, awkwardly. Todd sipped his chai.

“I have to go.” Wade stood up abruptly. “My mom’s on my case now. She told me not to ‘drag you down.’ Can you believe that?”

Todd nodded. “Yeah man, that’s what my dad was like in eleventh grade. You know how most parents ground their kids? Well, I was banned from the computer for a month after my first physics test.”

Wade winced in sympathy, laughed. “Ouch! I know what you mean. All right, I got to go. I need to finish my lab for Dr. Clark.”

“When’s it due?”

“Yesterday.”

“Oh. Good luck.”

“Thanks. See ya!”

Three days later, Todd had finished most of the presentation. Wade had asked to meet again, naming the Lucky Bean, and Todd had forgetfully agreed without a second thought. Wade had made sure to get there early, to find a table and get a drink to watch the fireworks.

Todd walked in, spotted Wade, and made for the table. He sat down, as Wade pretended not to notice.

“What’s up?” Todd said. Wade studiously gazed at his mocha. “Wade?”

“No, don’t mind me. I’m interrupting your meeting.” Todd had a moment to be confused, and then the sudden revelation sent his head spinning to find Janet.

“Shit! Shit, oh shit! I totally forgot! Oh no! What if she finds me?”

“Finds who?” Janet had approached them unawares.

Todd colored nicely, but Wade recovered first. “We thought we saw Todd’s ex-girlfriend. She’s, well, kind of a black widow. Or that’s what we call her, at least.” Todd nodded vigorously in agreement.

Janet cocked her head. “Well. You two are hardly gentleman.” Janet twitched her nose, a disgusted look passing on her face. “Hmm...

I guess that means you won't make very good actors." She twirled, her bright, multicolored skirt splaying in the air. "Adieu!" The girl flounced out, tapping each chair she passed on the top of the right leg with her hand as she left.

Todd slumped into his chair. "Phew. At least I missed that god-awful meeting." He looked up at Wade. "I did miss it right? She's not coming back in the next half hour, is she?" Todd said.

Wade gave him a funny look. "Dude, that was it. She was sitting in the corner by herself for the last few minutes." He snickered. "She was quiet for a change, too."

Todd stared at him. "You're a dick."

"I know. Same as you."

"No. Really. I mean it. You're a dick."

"Hey, who saved your ass when you were stammering back there? Besides, you were laughing too. When did you become Captain Self-Righteous? One Lifetime movie too many last night?"

"It's not that."

"Oh?"

"No. And I think I'm going to let you finish this presentation on your own." Wade shut up as Todd continued. "Try not to get too distracted when your mom calls, okay?"

Wade looked at his coffee again. Todd stood up, swinging his backpack over his shoulder and turned to leave.

"W-wait. I forgot. I've been busy, my mom was on my case again. What was that one battle? The valley of Ee Dang?"

Todd sighed. "Ia Drang. Didn't you watch the movie at the beginning of the semester?" Wade shook his head. "Wade...you did all your stuff, right? Like, you finished it, correct?"

Wade mumbled something indistinct. Todd leaned in closer. "What?"

"Too busy."

"Doing what?"

"Putting a new spring in my nerf gun."

Todd stared at Wade in amazement. "How long did that take? Twenty minutes? Half an hour?"

"Three hours."

Todd stood up, and slipped his arms through the loops of his backpack. He opened his mouth once or twice, unsure of what to say.

"Um...Wade? If you don't finish your part tonight, I'm telling



Professor Nielsen that you didn't do anything. I don't care what your mom says. I'm done if you aren't."

Wade said nothing, but continued staring at the coffee cup, cheek muscles bunching. Todd turned around, and walked out of the Lucky Bean. He got halfway down the street before he saw Janet sitting quietly on a park bench, one block further. He felt like he should go and say something to her, and paused near an alley. Todd swirled the last of his chai tea around in the cup, trying to decide what he would say. *Hey, sorry I'm an asshole. No, too direct. Hey, sorry we were such jerks. No, then I'd have to tell her the truth. Hey, sorry you're a weirdo. Eh...no.* He looked back, and saw Wade leaving the coffee shop.

"Yes, mom. No, mom. No, I'm doing fine. Yes, I'm getting my work done. Yeah, I was just hanging out with my friend Todd. No, I'm not going to drinking later tonight." Wade's voice receded as he walked the opposite direction, away from Todd and Janet. Todd gulped. He tossed his tea in the nearby dumpster, and approached Janet.

"Hey, um, Janet? Sorry we were acting like jerks. My ex, uh, was really crazy. You'd understand if you met her." Janet sniffed. Suddenly, she turned and dug into the purse she had set down next to her, rummaging around. Todd waited awkwardly a few moments until he was about ready to go, when she pulled out a dog-eared book and half-handed, half-threw it at him.

"Here. Dysart isn't an easy role, you'll have to really get in his head," she said, as he fumbled catching the book.

Todd immediately started backpedaling. "Oh, well, you know, I'm kind of busy, you know. I got a lot of, uh, work this semester. Um. I don't know, we'll see what it's like next semester." He dropped the book on the bench next to her and sped off, a line of sweat cooling on his brow, as Janet picked her book back up. She stared at it, as a dysfunctional streetlight switched off, plunging her into shadow.

"Yeah, I'm busy, too," she said, slowly placing the book back into her bag. She got up, swung her purse savagely onto her shoulder, and stomped off back to her house, only slowing her pace to avoid running back into Todd.

# HAIRY COO ON THE ISLE OF SKY





## CITY STREETS

I slipped through  
like a loose floorboard  
in a line of E.E. Cummings's  
poetry  
into a tumble of cracked sidewalks  
and late night jazz.

The world of old men  
drinking cups of black coffee  
where young boys shine shoes  
before running to catch five-o'clock buses  
and a rainy haze never seems  
to stop falling under streetlamps.

You were New York to me -  
you were libraries and churches,  
the inorganic fog concealing  
a neverending scene inside  
the two-dollar movie theatre.

You meant the neon lighting  
Of a charred pavement street.  
And so I realize the impermanence of  
that dream that makes a city.  
Like Stieglitz,  
and I'm kissing you good bye.

I will always come looking for you  
over rain-wet pavement and worn cobblestones  
and you must forever know  
that I look at these photographs  
and smile.

## THREE FACES





## ENGINEERING

Dad is a black iron locomotive with a rusted tank gut,  
A real 1940s model – steady quiet chug,  
Ground hammering rumble nonetheless.  
God is the only one with the arms to start or stop him.

## LIVE AND LET LOVE





## NE ME QUITTE PAS

It wasn't real. It couldn't be. She was certain of it. Yet, she still felt a raw pinch in the middle of her abdomen. And, she still had an abnormal amount of sweat drenching her collared shirt as she leaned her back against the aged wall of a brownstone apartment complex.

Earlier, as she drifted along the Champs Elysees, the city had shown signs of life. Down the street, cars had scurried past one another as they drove around L' Arc de Triomphe. Pigeons had gathered on power lines and disrupted the atmosphere of outdoor diners at numerous cafes and restaurants. Tourists had jostled past her to secure their rightful place on the sidewalk as they rushed towards la tour Eiffel.

Even now, Nina Simone's haunting yet timeless voice erupted from an open window just above her head. That same apartment's inhabitants, mellowed with wine, were discussing Rousseau and the ailing state of our world today, audibly over the unique melody.

However, Carla Brielle did not notice of any of this. The only thing she allowed herself to focus on was Martin's absence.

Tears streamed down her full cheeks and she turned to her side before wiping them away. Jack Daniels fell from her trembling fingertips as she did this though, crashing against the concrete sidewalk, glass debris stealing smiles and laughs away from passersby.

"Watch it!" A plump businessman of almost forty screamed, rubbing his receding widow's peak after labeling Carla incompetent with his squinty eyes.

"What's your problem?" Scolded another, a young blond woman this time, as she hurried by in her skinny jeans, beige UGGs and a polo with a small eagle logo perched above her bust.

Yet still, Carla barely glanced at her critics, merely closing her eyes and humming softly in response. Her breaths were shallow; but, she could feel the air gather within the deepest recesses of her lungs as she whispered, steadily, "...Ne me quitte pas... Ne me quitte pas... Don't leave me..."

She reached her hand out into the distance, the faintest hint of dry blood revealing itself along the inside of her palm, as she touched citizens and the cool early-afternoon air. In her mind, however, she

could not recognize this. Memories from that night clouded her senses. Suddenly, she could only recall the sound of metal tearing, the smell of burnt rubber, and the sight of burning flesh.

In all of her desperation, she caught a glimpse of his smile, and a hint of that sparkle in his eye, in an unassuming man walking past. She followed him, her steps abrupt and staggered. Her torso swayed back and forth as she ended up in the metro on a train across town to Montmartre and Sacre Coeur.

Somewhere near the Musee D'Orsay, in an apartment shared with Carla, slept Annabelle Foster. The sun, stretching its arms across that clear blue sky and through unsuspecting insomniacs' windows, nudged her awake. Annabelle's eyelids, although heavy with the exhaustion that only a late night rendezvous with Mr. Darcy and his dear Elizabeth could bring, flickered open once or twice before letting consciousness fully seize them. She fumbled for her glasses and placed them on the bridge of her wide beige nose. Her first instinct was to open the end table's sole compartment, grab *Pride and Prejudice*, and flip through to her favorite part once again. But, her visa expired in a week and her better judgment kept her from complying. Her next inclination prompted her to shift her weight and search for her phone. It was cradled in the emaciated grip of her pillowcase.

"Not again..." She willed herself out of bed and into the hallway. "Carla!"

She curved her hand into a fist and pelted it against her roommate's door. No answer, despite several attempts to rouse her. She twisted the doorknob and found only a disheveled bed.

"Where could she be? And why didn't she wake me?" She sauntered towards the right side of the kitchen, taking some Brie from the refrigerator and a baguette off their makeshift dining table nearby. She plunged a torn slice into the Brie, closed her eyes, and then brought it to her lips, savoring its unique taste. When she opened her eyes, her gaze fell upon the floor beneath the kitchen counter.

"What the..." She dusted the bread crumbs off of her hands and onto the floor. She then bent down, crawling like an infant as she moved quickly towards what appeared to be an open journal.

"Why would she leave this here?" Her knees slid against the uneven floorboards as she lifted the small leather-bound journal off the ground. Underneath it laid bits of broken china, and soon her eyes caught a glimpse of fresh, reddish-brown smears along the scripted



pages. Annabelle stood up and threw the journal onto the faux wooden countertop. Her hands were trembling as she noticed large chards of shattered china in the sink. A knife, stained just like the pages in Carla's diary, sat in the sink while the sound of the leaky faucet mocked her with its heightened monotony. The tap's tedious water droplets splashed into a plastic pitcher, filled halfway with water and a black cordless phone. Suddenly, she realized that blobs of water submerged the open space neighboring the sink. Her lungs abused the atmosphere with their heavy deposits and withdrawals as she took in those small elements of her environment that had meant nothing to her just seconds before.

"What the..." She ran her hands through her shoulder-length dark brown hair, her forehead so tense with confusion that her eyebrows nearly combined into one. The journal lay open on that damp countertop. She took it into her hands once again, the smooth leather binding brushing against her frail fingertips as she scanned its contents. Short entries from the past week filled those two pages; but, the only thing Annabelle searched for was that last entry, which somehow seemed to be the most important.

**Sat Dec. 15-- I don't know where my life is headed. Everything is different now...after what I've done. Nat said she'd call as soon as Martin got out of surgery. Maybe I should call the doctor about my results today as well. I can only hope that**

"Hope that what?" Annabelle flipped through the next few pages, yearning for just a little bit more insight into her friend's mental state. "God, she's been acting so weird. Where is her head at? And where's my bottle of whiskey?" She pulled out her cell phone and called Nathalie, anxious for Martin's results, and, in turn, a glimpse into Carla's state of mind.

Carla stumbled out of the metro, her breath reeking of straight whiskey, unable to reach her man. She began to walk erratically past tiny shops and tacky American food-chains, bumping into people who got in her way. He had left her, yet again. Panicking now, she pulled on a nearby man's leather jacket.

"Can you help me?" She tugged on his sleeve desperately, her hair wild in the cool December breeze. The man merely grimaced in return, causing her to fold into herself. For an instant, she became aware, coherent and disgusted by the person she had become.

"I'm so sorry." She backed away from him, away from the flood

of people rushing past her on the sidewalk. She ducked into the closest restaurant and asked to use the restroom. Once inside, she closed the door and turned on the faucet. The sound of the water soothed her as she cupped her hands together and brought the cool liquid to her face. After drying herself with a paper towel, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She saw her usually translucent and peach hued cheeks, flushed, and her lips parched and chapped by the stiff winter cold. She stared into her round, green eyes, telling herself, "You messed up Martin's life, and now..." She then attempted to wipe away the smudged mascara beneath her tired eyes. But, before she could finish, she started to remember again.

That night had started off like a scene from one of those cheesy romantic comedies Martin's sister, Nat, was always watching. For their anniversary, he had ordered Thai food, which they ate under the stars on that long stretch of lawn beside the Eiffel Tower. He smelled like peppermint soap and brandy as she lay in his arms, conversing with him about Valentino, Sarkozy and the state of Darfur. All the while they were watching those outlandish lights sparkle against the tower's rusty brown exterior every sixty minutes. Between them they downed two bottles of Cognac in just a few hours. But, it was worth it at the time. It made him taste all the better as they left their belongings and ran behind a few trees to consummate another year of love.

"Nothing lasts forever," she whispered amidst her sobs as it all flooded back into her memory.

They walked hand in hand along the Seine, stopping every so often to steal a kiss or a hug in the moonlight. He lit a cigarette between embraces, taking occasional drags with his free hand while his other was occupied with Carla's waist. Those who shared the sidewalk with them nodded in appreciation of their love but they did not perceive this. They were too absorbed in what was to be instead of what was.

When they finally reached her apartment, Carla could barely contain her enthusiasm. Her roommate, Annabelle, was spending the night at Nathalie's place, which meant she and Martin could do whatever they wanted, wherever they wanted, without interference. She let go of his hand quickly, and ran into the street. Not crossing at the crosswalk a little further down, just running straight towards the building's front entrance.

"It was so dumb. I ruined everything." She collapsed onto the



bathroom's dirty tiled floor, ignoring the ants that scurried back and forth underneath her jeans.

"Oh Mon Dieu!" She screamed as someone interrupted her thoughts, banging on the door, apparently plagued by an overactive bladder. "I'll be out in a minute!"

She rubbed her stomach gently and then raised her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. Her torso swayed from side to side as it all began to blur in her mind. See, she hadn't seen those cars coming at all. She had forgotten to look both ways. Martin was always telling her that she was too impulsive, too selfish, when she was drunk. And, so, although their evening had been wonderful just moments earlier, her actions would, in the end, bring about the utmost adversity.

All she could recollect now was running, running, and then, shortly after, turning, turning to see if he had followed. When she had turned, the lights from that BMW blinded her, and then she flew, high, suspending time and space for just a few seconds before landing on the sidewalk. Everything went black. And then, when she awoke, she could barely think because the sound of car wheels screeching and skidding damaged her ability to focus. That horrifying sound lasted for a lifetime, as car after car after car banged and slammed into the vehicle before it.

And then, silence.

Her hands, which had risen to her ears during the commotion, lowered to the ground as she realized she was alone.

"Martin! Martin! MARTIN!" She screamed as she sat, and then stood, up. People started to climb out of their cars and pull out their phones. Meanwhile, she found herself running again. Only, this time she moved towards the accident. The first vehicle, now above, and perpendicular to, Martin, was surrounded by fire. This was the result of a dangerous collaboration between Martin's cigarette and a growing stream of gasoline droplets from the BMW. Somehow, she made it past the emerging flames and underneath the car. It was only after she saw his body there, all bloody, twisted, and pocked from chards of broken windshield glass, that she noticed that she herself was bleeding. Next thing she knew she was in the hospital, aching all over, but mostly just worried over his condition.

"He saved my life. And, I relieved him of his."

"Mademoiselle! Sil-Vous Plait! I need to pee!" Carla lifted herself off the ground, and dotted her eyes with the paper towel she had



used earlier. She then traipsed out of the restaurant, fighting the numbness gathering around her heart as best she could. The phone call she received seconds later kept her alert.

“Bonjour? Annabelle? I’m a few blocks away from Montmartre. Annabelle. I feel awful. Martin—he’s...” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “Dead.”

Annabelle held back the tears from her own eyes as she stood underground on a metro platform. “I know. Listen, will you meet me on those sidesteps leading up to Montmartre? Good. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Give me an hour or so.” She then hung up the phone and looked behind her. She glanced down at the ground nervously as she approached yet another heartbroken companion on a nearby bench.

“After I take you back to your place...” She knelt down in front of Nathalie, grabbing her limp hands off of her lap. “I’m going to meet Carla.”

“How could you?” She slid her hands out of Annabelle’s grasp and folded her arms across her small chest. “That bitch got him killed.”

Annabelle gasped, as she stood up abruptly and placed her hands over her full lips. She then sat beside Nathalie, reaching her arm around her friend’s broad shoulders. In response, she rested her head and sorrow on Annabelle’s collar bone. They sat there quietly for a few minutes, watching trains speed by and observing people living, laughing, and loving, as if life could somehow go on.

“Do you remember that night, Annie?” Nathalie wiped her eyes with her slender fingertips before moving loose strands of her paprika-red hair out of her face. Annabelle nodded, her inner scrapbook recalling distinct snapshots from that fateful evening: How grateful she had been on the way over that she had found such great friends, like Nathalie and Carla, during her year abroad. The rush of emotion she felt when Nathalie opened the door with a smile spread wide across her freckled face. That hour long discussion they had had assessing French, and then American, men before deciding that both had their own unworthy lot to avoid. And, most poignantly, the strong contrast between the way Nathalie laughed so passionately during that second film and the way her mood shifted so drastically when she finally heard the disastrous news.

“I remember. At first you were stunned, a human tsunami, holding back your tears until suddenly your grief just poured from, completely drained, you. We rushed to the hospital as fast as we could.



Both of them were in bad shape, but... clearly he had taken the brunt of it. Listen, Nathalie, Carla's your friend. She loved him, too. And, she's hurting over this as well." She grabbed her friend's hand and then whispered, "I'm so sorry that this happened."

"It's just that...He...He's never coming back." She turned and wept into Annabelle's neck, squeezing her hand firmly, afraid to let it go.

After a few minutes, another train pulled into the station. Annabelle rubbed her friend's shoulders gently and then kissed the top of her head.

"Come on," she rose promptly, helping Nathalie to her feet simultaneously. "Let's get out of here."

The sun began to set while Carla waited on those concrete steps for her day of reckoning. Her cell phone was glued to one of her small ears as it rang and rang until finally the answering machine picked up.

"Hi. This is Carla Brielle. I... I'm calling for the results of my pregnancy test. I need to be certain about this. Please. Call me back." After hanging up, she rubbed her arms, freezing without a jacket or a scarf to protect her. She could barely recall how she ended up on that side of Paris, and even worse, she was starting to forget the sound of his voice. Oh how wonderfully he used to sing to her over the phone when she couldn't get to sleep. Simple things used to keep her up; now she hadn't slept more than two hours a night since she got released from the hospital.

Her body had aged over those three weeks. She'd been distressed, and had comforted herself with alcohol, and bouts of purging. That was only two days after he went into the coma. When she finally realized that she was two weeks late, she'd been too nervous to take a home pregnancy test, so she went to the doctor. That was earlier in the week. Before she knew for certain that she could kiss hope and a future with him goodbye. Still, even then, while at the doctor's she had let the nurse extract only a few droplets of blood before she chickened out. She walked right out of the office without hearing the conclusive result. What if the accident, her injuries from that awful night, had hurt her in ways she could have never imagined? Had killed her unborn child?

"What child?" She bawled into her hands. "I've made so many mistakes that if it was inside me, it's probably gone by now." She looked at the phone that was still in her hand, turned it off, and then shoved it into her jean pocket. She then rose, not caring whether Annabelle had



arrived or not, just certain that she wanted to venture to the nearest corner store for a precious bottle of gin. She could feel her eyes start to grow heavy, and the people who walked past and up those stairs became mere shadows, remnants of a world she no longer wished to be a part of. She began to drift, just as she had earlier that morning. Her mind was vacant except for her thoughts of what she had done. The physical pain that had plagued her because of her ill behavior could not compete against the guilt that weighed heavily on her heart.

“Carla! Where are you going? I’m right here!” Annabelle ran over to her roommate, her friend, and hugged her for a long while. Carla, born in Monaco, had been looking for a roommate just when Annabelle had needed to find one. The match had felt so right to her all those months ago. She remembered those nights when they would venture downtown with Nat and Martin to a club or bar. How they perfected baking chocolate soufflés, found a common interest in Italian shoes, and swapped books with one another when they didn’t feel like studying. She had been full of life then, but now that spark had disappeared from her eyes. “Carla, are you okay? What happened this morning?”

“We were supposed to go out to all the landmarks today. I forgot. I’m sorry. But, I...I heard from Nat this morning,” She said decisively, her voice eerie and subdued. “I was writing in my diary when the phone rang. I held it to my ear, and grabbed a plate and a knife so I could grab some breakfast, too. She told me he died in surgery early this morning and before I could slice my bread I cut myself by accident when I heard. I dropped the phone and the knife, turned in a panic, pushing my diary and the plate off the counter... It all happened so fast. I did try and throw some pieces into the sink before I started to pick up the diary but then I just backed away slowly from the whole thing. I just walked out of the apartment, managing to swipe your bottle of whiskey off the table as I left. Sorry.” She laughed, to herself mostly. “After that I just... traipsed... everywhere.”

“Oh, my... come on. Let’s go.” Annabelle released Carla from her embrace and then wrapped her scarf around her friend’s bare neck. They then walked, arm in arm, up that long flight of stairs. Carla almost stopped walking but Annabelle urged her to go on. “Come on. I have something to show you.”

They approached the massive, white cathedral piecemeal. Sacre Coeur’s three domes rivaled Florence’s notorious Duomo. Distinctly a



Romanesque/ Byzantine structure, with its rounded arches and a triple arch portico adorned by equestrian statues of Joan of Arc and Louis IX, it could almost resemble a mosque to an unknowing observer. When they entered the peculiar yet overwhelmingly serene church, Annabelle smiled immediately. She knew what her friend needed.

It was time for Catholic mass. The cathedral was silent except for the sound of the nuns' hymnal echoing against the high vaulted ceilings. It was so beautiful that Annabelle wanted to cry. It was her first time inside after a whole year in Paris, but as she looked at Carla's face she knew that didn't matter. When they sat down on a pew, Carla could not control her emotions.

"I've been here before with my grandparents so many times..." she whispered through her sobs, "but, never at a time like this."

"I'm so sorry about Martin, Carla." She gave her a side hug. "Can I ask you something?"

"Oui."

"In your diary, you wrote, 'maybe I should call the doctor about my results today as well. I can only hope that...'"

"Et?"

"Well, you could only hope what?"

Carla looked down at the ground, and then glanced at all those people around them. The families, the lost souls, the newly saved and the devout, who all gathered together to garner His support. She then looked Annabelle in the eye and responded, "I was supposed to get my period a few days after the accident. Last week I was officially two weeks late. So, I can only hope that my mistake that night, and the many nights that have followed, didn't hurt me enough to kill the baby. If there is a baby, that is." She laughed because she was sick of crying. "It could just be the stress."

She then stood up, walking past Annabelle, and towards a bundle of glowing candles nearby. She had a hole in her heart ever since he left her, and perhaps this could fill it up over time. She had never bought into it before when her parents were shoving it down her throat as a child. She placed a few euro coins in a box, and then curled her fingertips around the tea light candle and its metal holder. Before combining them, she stared at the cross hanging above her head on the wall facing her. Shame washed over her body. Yet, somehow, she still felt more at peace in that one moment than she had over the past few weeks.



She recognized the hymn that the nuns were singing, and whispered along with them, as she immersed herself in the history and tradition that surrounded her.

"I need your help," she focused her thoughts on Him, and the mess that was her young life. "Please, guide me. I don't know if I can live with what I've done." She finally lit the candle and placed it beside the others. She slowly backed away from the whole lot of them, bumping into someone by accident in the process.

"You have to stop blaming yourself. It will be hard enough for you to grieve without that on your shoulders. He would want you to live, Carla." She turned around and saw Annabelle with her hands folded across her chest. "So, I walked around, and it's a beautiful church. Maybe I'll come back tomorrow, too. Only one more week until I go back home, you know?"

"Oui. Peut-être, I'll come with you. Tu me manqués déjà." When they exited the building, the sun had fully set. Yet, Montmartre hill gave them the best view of the city, whose well-lit buildings combated the mounting darkness.

"Wow, when did all these people get here?" Annabelle wondered, as she maneuvered through people while descending the steps in front of Sacre Coeur. She noticed that a French band had set up equipment and was taking requests from the audience. Some American tourist asked for Bon Jovi's "Living on a Prayer." The band agreed and the lead guitarist started strumming the opening chords. Annabelle turned to see if Carla had followed her down the steps. She had. "I love this song! Wanna sit down for a little bit?"

"Sure." They sat right in front of the band a few steps down. "You know, Martin loved this. He wasn't crazy about your country's music, but this view he adored. We came up here for his birthday two months ago. It was a great night."

"I'm sure it was." Annabelle said as she watched Carla turn on her cell phone. "Who are you calling?"

"Sorry, I just want to check my voicemail..." She pushed a number and then held the phone to her ear. A smile slowly manifested itself on her face, as she hung up and said, "Well, I'm officially carrying his kid."

Annabelle gave her friend a lingering hug. "See, now I know you'll be okay." She then patted Carla's knee and squeezed her cold hands.



“How are you so certain?” Her eyebrows frowned with uncertainty, with a deep mistrust in herself and her ability to make it through.

“You have to be okay. It’s a conscious decision that you have to make every day. See, it’s not just about you anymore.” Annabelle then turned around and swayed her body to the music. She started singing with the band, chanting with the rest of the group, as she tried to enjoy one of her last nights abroad. All the while, Carla stared up at that starry night sky, placing as much faith in herself as she did in God. She needed both to survive.

# BHUTAN





## WALTER BIXBY WALKS THROUGH HUNSBERGER WOODS

The snow lay to rest as the sun began to roll its way over the horizon.  
Walter's slightly dumpy black lab plucks him from the hot suction of  
the fireplace

and they embark on a shuffle to the park.

An unfiltered Pall Mall cleaves to his lip, clinging for its life off his lip  
precipice.

The smoke slithers, a snake charmed from its basket, and sneaks into  
his greasy chestnut hair.

Snowflakes parachute down and nestle amongst his eyelashes and  
brows.

The cheap leash, fraying at loop handle, has a slight slack  
to which the dog is latched. He canters ahead

leading Walter on an uncustomary route, only stopping to stare down  
the brazen squirrel atop the McMahons mailbox.

They trot down the sloping promenade into the trees,  
where asphalt becomes earth. Walter's heels skid across the ground  
before the arch and toe complete *The Scream* face footprint.

He wanders from tree to fallen leaf and inspects its dead veins,  
and shilly-shallies along the edge of evergreens.

Silently absorbing the delicacy of the wise oak tree in the midst of the  
wood,

Walter's foot fortuitously plunks through paper ice into a small, cold,  
obnoxious puddle.

Not a sound parts his lips, but his eyes burrow deeper into his cave face.  
His toes begin to quiver together, he heads home. His feet become a  
metronome

taunting his patience, squish, pat, squish, pat, squish...

He saunters, following his rain drop footsteps back up the walkway

to the street, and into his home. He peels the soggy sock  
from his raisin skin. The snow continues to flake down outside.  
Walter sits in his cherry finish rocking chair and stares at the un-creased  
pages of Joyce,  
while the dog follows his tail into a deep sleep.



## LAST NIGHT

**T**he chief's head sat above the sign reading Taconic Diner. His face blinked every few seconds, as he gazed out towards the highway, beckoning cars in with his neon headdress. Ed Palmer studied the behemoth sign composed of florescent lights and wood, as he finished a cigarette. A cold breeze ran over his neck and he arched his shoulders, before stomping out the butt and trudging inside.

It was warmer in the diner and Ed smelled bacon and coffee wafting over the countertop. He nodded to the waitress and made his way over to where Lynn was sitting.

"Hi Lynn-"

He slinked down into the seat facing her.

"Ed do you know what time it is?"

"Early I know, I'm sorry-"

"Its six thirty Ed, six thirty on a Saturday morning. For Christ's sake why do you keep doing this to me?"

"I'm sorry I just had to talk you, I've been up all night."

"I don't care Ed. Do you realize you woke me up? And then you sounded so panicked on the phone I couldn't get back to sleep. You're lucky I'm here, but I had to tell you, I had to come down here in person because I know nothing gets through your fucking head over the phone. This is done. No more calling me, or writing, or anything."

"Lynn-"

"No, listen for a second. We haven't been together for three years now and still every couple of months I get one of these calls and somehow get dragged down here or the park, or somewhere to hear you bitch and plead with me to get back together. That's it. No more."

"I'm sorry Lynn, really I am."

"No, I don't want to hear it, I just wanted to say that and now I'm going to go."

She stood up from the booth, buttoning her coat. The sun through the window shone on the back of her head, outlining the imperfect strands of hair that stood up in the wrong direction. Ed bit his lip, remembering a time when he could have reached up and smoothed them back into place. He felt her golden locks between his thumb and

forefinger now, as he rubbed them together under the table.

“Lynn, please.”

“No, I’ve heard it before.”

“Please! It’s different this time, this isn’t about us.”

“That’s some shit.”

“I’m honest to god serious Lynn, I ran into some—uh—some real trouble last night and I don’t know who to turn to. You’re the only person, who’ll hear me out.”

“Well, not this time.”

She glared down at him.

“You’re already here, please just stay for five minutes. Five minutes is all I’m asking. I promise I’m not trying to bring up the past or anything about you. I promise.”

Her eyes bounced back and forth, reading the lines of his sallow face. Dark circles had formed under his eyes and he felt her inspecting the signs of sleeplessness.

“What, were you up watching movies all night?”

“No, no movies. Would you sit down? Please, just me hear out.”

“I swear to god Ed, I don’t know why or how I ever put up with you.”

She sank back into the booth. The waitress came over and they both ordered coffee. She asked if they were eating, but Ed felt sick at the thought.

He stared at Lynn’s face from across the table. Her brown eyes were caked with flecks of last night’s and her hair had been tied up and pulled out of her face. Ed’s stomach turned over as he retraced the different sections of her face he once knew so well.

“Well what? You need money or something?”

“Hm?”

“Do you need-”

“No, no it’s nothing like that.”

Ed scratched his neck. Images of the night before passed through his mind like a slide show—the house, the lights. A wave of heat washed over his face. He pushed his oily hair off of his forehead. Outside a few dead leaves jumped into the sky as a truck sped by, unsettling them.

“Well, last night I woke up covered in blood.”

“What?”



“No, actually that’s wrong it was two nights ago, yeah. I mean I was covered in it, like *The Godfather* or something. It was everywhere on the sheets, the pillow, but the weird thing was it was just a bloody nose.”

“That’s what this is about? You wanted to get coffee at six thirty on a Saturday, to tell me you had a-”

“No, come on. You know that’s not it, it’s just, I mean when I went to the bathroom I looked like a Lizzie Borden victim or something. And then on top of that I found the dog eating some of the tissues the next morning. Just-”

“Look Ed I don’t give a-”

“What I’m trying to say is I’m still not sure what caused it. I mean I never get bloody noses.”

“Everybody gets a bloody nose now and then it’s probably allergies or something.”

“Not me.”

“Alright not you, can I go now?”

“Just hold on a second, I’m trying to talk to you here.”

“Talk, go ahead. Talk then.”

“Look, someone broke in last night.”

“What?”

“Someone broke into the house last night.”

“What did they take?”

“Nothing. That’s just it, I mean they broke in and they took nothing and then I’m frozen upstairs and Sal’s going ballistic. ‘There’s someone in the house, there’s someone in the house’ is all I keep thinking, but I can’t move, I can’t get up or anything, I just-”

“Whoa slow down a second.”

She leaned back in the booth and put both her hands on the table. He looked at her finger nails—cloudless and the cuticles had been pushed down.

“This was last night?”

“Yeah.”

“When you had the nose bleed?”

“No that was the night before, but they’re tied. The two things are tied together somehow.”

“What are you talking about Ed?”

“I’m talking about someone coming into my fucking home, in the night.”

Alarm swept over her face—he was worried he had frightened her. He put his face in his hand and massaged his brow.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Let me just—uh—let me explain it from the beginning.”

She said nothing.

“So it was last night right? Well really yesterday I guess. Yeah, yesterday I was walking Sal up the hill – uh – Mill Hill ya know? It takes a good while to get up that hill sometimes, but we do it pretty regularly. There’s that uh field near the top ya know? Well when they cut the corn I let Sal run free for awhile. He’ll chase a deer or something.

So I’m walking Sal. It must have taken a good twenty minutes just to get near the top, but we get up there and I let him off the leash. He’s cruising all over the field and I was just taking a breather for a second. And I swear it was a clear day, not a single cloud—I remember cause I thought maybe there was a storm coming in or something, but there really weren’t any clouds.”

“Yeah.”

“So we’re up there maybe no more than seven minutes, when I hear Sal barking.”

“Oh god Ed, don’t tell me Sal was hit! He wasn’t hit by a car was he?”

“He wasn’t hit by a car, would you let me talk!”

“Thank god.”

He remembered being in the backyard with her, when she’d throw the sticks for Sal. He’d bring it back every time wagging and smiling. Sal had liked her too.

“So we’re up there about seven minutes, when I heard him barking. Now I wasn’t watching him the whole time, so I didn’t know exactly where he was, but I hear the barking coming from the woods or something. I mean he sounds like he’s going nuts. So at first I think ‘Oh god he’s got a deer.’ So I start hustling on over to where the barking’s coming from—still don’t see him. So I get a little worried. Finally I hit the woods and you know on top of the hill there’s corn fields on both sides, so the woods are really just this thin strip maybe forty yards wide or something of trees.”

“Yah.”

“Well, I get up there, still no Sal. So, I’m calling him, yelling his name, whistling. I mean I hear him barking close, but don’t see



him. So then I think he must be in the other field. So I make my way through the little woods strip, which is more of a pain than anything else cause there's all these thorns and sticks and shit. And right at the edge of the woods is an old stone wall. I get over the wall, get through the woods and there he is, on the other side, but he's spooked."

"From what? A deer?"

"I'm trying to tell you."

"Alright."

"I really have never seen him this way. He was just standing where the woods stop and the other field begins and he's barking his head off. And I try to talk to him, ya know, 'Sal come on, let's go.' But it's like he doesn't hear me. His fur is standing on end and I think he sees a deer that I'm missing, but then I see where he's really looking. Down on Route Three there, which passes just around the bottom of the hill, I see the Thompson farm. Ya know the one with the old silo and the barn roof that's kind of caved?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well I'm looking at it and I swear it looks like the fuckin house is on fire."

"No, are you serious?"

"From where I'm standing, which was still a good ways from the farm; I see four of the back windows all lit up. Just light pouring out the windows, but not like someone had just flicked a switch or anything, it was different. It was so bright, like the sun or something and the light seemed to somehow be drifting up from the windows like fire. It was like a bright white fire."

"Oh my god."

"Now I don't know whether to run down to the house, or run back to the truck, but the trucks a good ways down the hill. So I think to try the house. I start walking down and Sal won't follow me, he just stands up there barking and looking. So I'm walking down, trying to make sense of this thing when I see the light start changing. Out of nowhere the light looks like its fading from white to this sorta bluish tint. And I stop for a minute and I watch. I just felt like I was in a trance or something and I just stood there for a minute or two and then it stopped."

"What do you mean it stopped?"

"It just stopped, it just went out. One second there's blue fire shooting out the windows and the next it stops. It was so strange, like

someone had just pressed a button and it went out.”

“Ed?”

“Hm?”

“Are you full of shit?”

“No, I’m telling you the truth.”

“This sounds like something you saw in a movie. You still watching movies all the time?”

“I know! No, I mean yes I watch movies, but this I didn’t get this from one.”

One night they both had stayed up until the early morning, just watching movies. When one was finished they’d put in another. He remembered laying with her, feeling the soft of her arm, smelling that orange sweater. Mint and lemons, her clothes always smelled like that.

“What?”

“That’s the first thing I thought too though. It reminded me of this one scene in *The Towering Inferno*, where-”

“Ok Ed, that’s it.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to sit here while you rattle off scenes from movies.”

“No, I’m not-”

“Ed look, I worry about you. I’m sick of your shit, I’m sick to death of it, but I can’t stand the fact that all you do is sit up there watching movies with the dog, living off canned goods or whatever. I mean why don’t you do something with yourself. Try to pick up a nice girl, hell I bet the Reid brothers would show you a good time.”

“I don’t give a shit about those assholes.”

“Well maybe you should Ed, because I can’t keep showing up here, to hear about some bullshit and I’m not going to anymore.”

“Lynn-”

“That was bullshit, wasn’t it? The Thompson farm didn’t burn down...you just had to make something up didn’t you Ed? Jesus, it never stops with you does it?”

“I wasn’t lying! I never said it burned down. I said it looked like it was on fire and then it just went out.”

“Oh, right.”

“I’m not kidding Lynn it was strangest thing.”

“Don’t you think the Thompson’s would have called the fire department if their home was on fire?”



“They weren’t home; they go to Arizona for a couple weeks during this time, every year.”

“Well did you call the fire department, or the sheriff for that matter?”

“No, I didn’t call the sheriff.”

“Why not, I’m sure Fred would be perfectly-”

“I wasn’t about to call Fred and tell him I thought I saw the Thompson farm catch fire and then go out.”

“Right that seems crazy, but you figured it would seem normal to me?”

“Lynn, I was just telling you because I think it’s tied to last night.”

“So you think someone lit the Thompson’s farm on fire, then put it out and then later they came to your house and broke in?”

“Well uh, sort of, yeah. It was a bit like that.”

“It’s like talking to a child I swear to god.”

“Let me just explain Lynn. After I saw the fire I got a weird feeling so I grabbed Sal and went home.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Were you drunk?”

“What?”

“Were you drinking when this happened?”

“No! Come on, it was the middle of the fucking day Lynn.”

“Well.”

“No, look I remember this clear as day; I can see everything in my head like a movie or something. It just keeps playing over and over. I wasn’t dreaming, I wasn’t drunk-I know this happened. There was someone in my house last night Lynn.”

“Who? Who was in the house Ed?”

“Uhh”

“No one, no one was fucking there, right?”

He looked at her. Her brow was furrowed and her lips were pursed. He fought back the sudden urge to lean over and kiss her.

“Have you ever gotten sick from nerves?”

“What?”

“Sick, like from uh, being nervous.”

“I don’t know, what’s this have to do with anything Ed?”

“This morning I woke up shaking, my arm was moving like this. And then I finally get to the bathroom and had to throw up.”

“Ed, I-”

“Last night me and Sal were watchin TV in the big chair. Ya know he likes to get up there when I’m there. I think a game was on and then we watched uh..ha, it’s sort of funny now that I think about it, but we watched *Wait Until Dark*, it was on and I always like that movie. Ya know that scene where the guy jumps out, it makes me jump every time.”

“Well there you go.”

“What?”

“It’s the movies Ed, the movies put these thoughts or ideas in your head and then you go have nightmares about em. I’m sure that all-”

“No not this time. I think we watched TV till about 12:30 and then I headed to bed. Sal likes to sleep upstairs too, so he’s got his matt outside my door. It’s a pain if he’s in the room, he breathes too loud.”

“Ha I remember.”

She smiled at him, for the first time.

“I was exhausted and once I hit the light I was out pretty soon. Then about two hours later, I get woken up. I swear it felt like an earthquake. Just WHAM! I hear the loudest cracking noise like someone just fired a canon at the door. Lynn, the whole house shook. It didn’t keep shaking; it was just the one big bang. So I’m in the bed completely freaked. I don’t know what the fucks going on and now Sal is going ballistic. I always uh, I always keep a baseball bat at the side of my bed ya know, just in case. And I go to reach for it, but my arms just would not move.”

Lynn’s face tensed, but only for a second.

“I tried so hard to move them but they felt like stones. My legs too, it felt like all my muscles turned to bones and just locked up while I was sleeping. I swear the only thing I could move were my eyes and my lungs.”

“How could you not move?”

“Well I was in the bed and I could tell Sal was still outside the room because his barking was close. And this whole time I keep trying to get up, keep trying to wiggle my toes, or roll off the bed, but I literally was frozen. Then I’m just waiting and listening, but all I hear is Sal. I don’t know how long I was waiting like that but it seemed like an hour, maybe only five minutes though, hard to say. But eventually I see a light.”



“Oh come on, this has got to be from some movie.”

“The whole house I swear to god, every window room filled with light. Just this pure, white light. It was so blinding I kept squinting, but couldn’t see through it, I had to keep my eyes shut. It was like someone had run-up and held to flashlights over my eyes. Not like headlights, not like fire, or some kind of flood lights it was just this white light, I’d never experienced before. I tell ya Lynn I thought I was dying; I thought I might die right there.

“So it wasn’t like the light at the farm?”

“No, yeah it was. It was the same kind of light except this time it was going into the room and not shooting out the windows, like at the farm. Then I swear, just like at the farm the light went out, but it had been so bright my eyes couldn’t adjust the darkness again. And once the light went out I heard em downstairs”

“Who?”

“Downstairs.”

“Who was downstairs Ed, I bet it was dog.”

“No not the dog, he’s never this loud. It was—Lynn do you think I’m crazy?”

“Yes I do, I think you’re so crazy about movies that they get stuck in your head.”

He sipped some coffee and peered out the window. Across the street a man was cleaning his windshield at the gas station. A wind moved the trees closest the window. The leaves flapped in slow motion, turning over and revealing their lighter sides. Lynn sighed. The sun was higher now, bouncing off the mirrored walls and forming tessellated shapes on her jacket.

“So once I heard them downstairs I thought, well I hope they take what they want and leave. But I didn’t hear anything breaking or being moved like you’d expect. Instead they must have walked around the room once or twice without saying a word and then they just moved to the stairs.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just the dog?”

“Yes I’m sure, I know what Sal sounds like walking around. His claws make that clicking noise on the wood. Sal had stopped barking too, so I could hear them clearly. They just clambered up the stairs and I’m just laying there. Every footstep I heard perfect with that old floor.”

“You still couldn’t move?”

“Yeah, still could not move at all. Then they just opened my door and must have come in, but I honestly could not tell. My eyes still couldn’t see that great and I just heard the door creak open. I couldn’t tell if they had opened it and looked in, or were in the room, but I just kept looking and looking, my eyes started hurting.”

“So, I’m laying there a good couple of minutes before I realize there are about five guys in the room. I think five at least. Just standing around the bed. Each of them my height or taller, and I could just make out their shape. I was scared Lynn. And I kept thinking maybe it’s a dream, but I knew it wasn’t. The worst part was you couldn’t hear any of them breathing and no one spoke. I tried to yell or something, but my mouth wouldn’t move. Then one of them bent over the bed, just real slow like this.”

“Ed-”

“And his face was close to mine; I could almost make out some details. It was dark but he smelled like salt and cut grass. It was such a strange smell, but I can smell it right now. Then that’s the last thing I remember, I just blacked out after that.”

“Were you knocked out?”

The pitch of her voice rose slightly and he detected a hint of sincerity. If he just told her every detail she might believe. She’d have to.

“I think they must have because when I came to again I was outside.”

“Outside?”

“I don’t know what happened. I was in my bed and then outside. I couldn’t even see anything, but I could feel how cold it was, I must have been completely naked. And I knew they were around me I could feel them near. It was almost like I was being carried, the way I could feel the air moving over my skin, but I couldn’t see their arms and I didn’t feel like I was being pulled or anything. At one point I realized that I was bleeding though. From my nose again. There was something like a string running through my nose and I felt the blood running down my face, but I couldn’t move to wipe it or anything. I think it was about then I passed out again. When I came to I was in the light again. Those bright blinders from before were just blasting my eyes and I couldn’t see a thing. I just remember gasping air for the first time, as my mouth seemed to work again, but still not my arms or legs. I gulped some air and then just started screaming. I couldn’t stop, I felt like I was com-



pletely insane.”

“Were you in your room? Where was this?”

“No no, I mean it didn’t feel like my room. There was the same light again, but this place was different. The whole place had that same smell, salt and cut grass. And I felt like I was laying on ice, my whole back was cold.”

“Ice?”

“Yeah it was very cold. So once I start screaming I feel like these hands touch my face. Like boney hands, or like a big insect walking across your head. I tried to move from them, but couldn’t. And then one hand pulled open my mouth like this.”

He pulled his jaw open with one hand to demonstrate.

“I couldn’t resist them either, but I remember it stopped me from screaming in some way. Then this other hand just started inserting like this tube thing in my mouth. I don’t know what it was, but it tasted like metal in my mouth and they kept shoving it down my throat. I kept gagging but I could still breathe. I tried to scream again but no sound came out. My whole mouth was just forced open by this tube which was half way down my throat now.

Then the hands had this other tube full of this black shit. And they just plugged it into the tube in my mouth and I felt it go down. Just this thick black shit, almost like oil or something. It was terrible, I thought I was going to drown I kept coughing, but somehow it went down. I’m not sure where it was pumped down to, but it all went in and that lasted about ten minutes, maybe longer. Once they were finished the hands were on my face again, but this time I saw they were connected to one of them. When the black shit was all through one of them bent over my face. I saw his entire face Lynn. It was uh I don’t know what.”

“What?”

“It uh..christ I feel like a crazy person, but it was just like yours or mine, except the skin was different. Not like some other race, but just not normal. Like this ash color and I remember his face was not normal either. It was human, but it wasn’t, it was like where the cheek bone should be there were just these ripples.”

“Ripples?”

“Yeah, Er, like wrinkles I guess, but not really. It was like his face was moving, but only on the sides. It was like when you fill a balloon with water and then flick it all the water moves around. I don’t

know, that's the only way I can think to describe it. It happened so quick though just as he pulled the tube out our eyes met. He had these big golden eyes, I mean not like E.T. or something, more normal, but just I don't know they seemed like such a shock. I mean his skin was so weird and his eyes were so yellow, like glowing. I swear he looked me right in the eye and then moved away. Then everything was that bright white again. I think I felt more hands on my chest again later, but I must have blacked out because the rest is unclear."

"Ed are you joking?"

"No! I'm not fucking joking Lynn. I just can't figure this out. I don't know what the fuck happened."

"Well you don't remember anything more?"

"No it's like a haze after that and then this morning I'm home again just shivering in my bed."

"Ed this had to have been a dream."

"No, it wasn't."

"Well there has to be an explanation for it Ed. I mean uhh--"

"Well, I don't fucking know Lynn, I don't know."

"Come on now, think about this. You watched that old movie I bet that messed with you. Besides if there were little spacemen that came down do you think they'd put you back in your bed after?"

"Lynn--"

"Now if you want to file a break in or something, I'll take you down to the Sheriff's, but you can't expect me to just believe there was some Third Encounter or whatever at your house last night."

"Lynn!"

"Listen Ed, if you'll just relax we can straighten this out. People aren't just taken from their house. When somebody robs your houses they don't usually take the person with them!"

He ran his fingers through his hair. She didn't understand, he wasn't explaining himself well enough. The waitress returned to refill their cups.

"Besides I didn't feel any earthquake thing. To be honest, I'm trying to keep an open mind with this one, but it just sounds like more of your bullshit."

"LYNN! I never said little fucking spacemen were in my house last night. There was someone in my house last night, I don't know who. I saw a light just like the one at the farm I saw before--"

"Well I bet that--"



"I might be losing my mind, but I just needed to, to uh I just needed to talk to you. It was no fucking dream Lynn."

"See! You just wanted to talk to me. Ed I want to be friend but you never give me any options."

"Well maybe I don't want to just be your friend Lynn!"

"Oh Christ, I knew-"

"I mean we were good together. Look if I had told you this back then you wouldn't doubt me. This shit was real...I can smell that fucking disgusting smell right now, it's in the coffee it's in this fucking Diner. I can see those eyes, and it's not from a movie. I can name em all, ET, Close Encounters, Fire In The Sky, uh Communion. I've seen the alien movies this wasn't it, this was something real.

"Ed!"

"Maybe if you come back to the house I can show you where it all happened."

"I'm not going back to your house."

"Why not?"

"Ed, this might be the last time we can see each other."

"What?"

"We're not together and I've dealt with your bullshit enough times!"

"This isn't bullshit, I swear to you, if you'll just-"

"Lower your voice! Christ do you wanna make a scene?"

"I'm not-"

"I'm going to go I told you, didn't want this. I told you."

"Lynn-"

"Bye Ed."

She rose from the booth quick this time. He searched his mind for something to say.

"Lynn-"

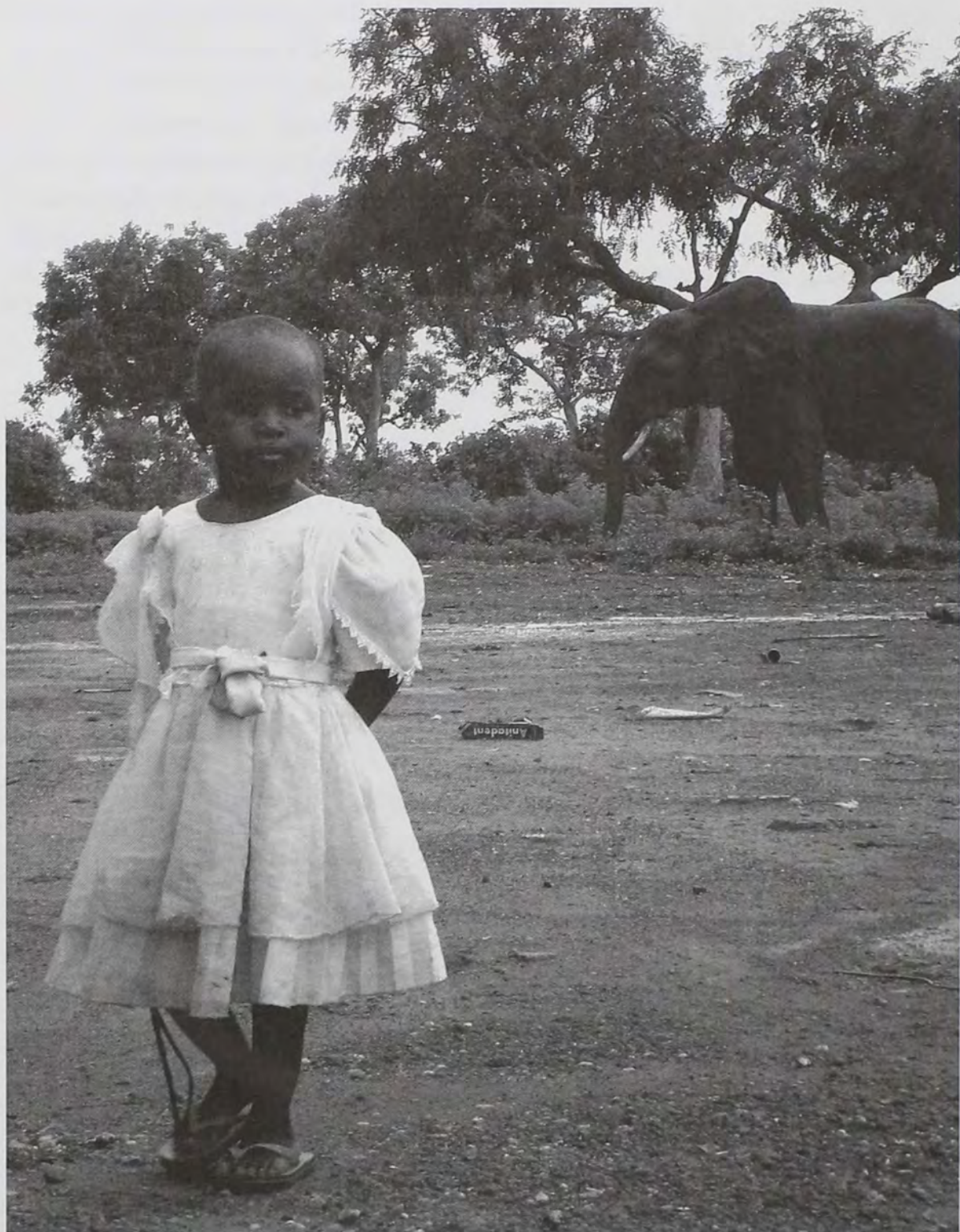
She looked him in the eye and no words would come. He wanted to hold her and make her believe, make her love him again. If he showed her the bloody pillow, but he had washed it already...or had he? He couldn't think straight. Lynn fixed her color, turned and walked out. He made a fist and held it to his mouth.

Outside he lit a cigarette and watched the clouds roll in over a hill. A few cars passed and a man filled his truck at the pump. Ed's stomach wouldn't loosen and he felt like shouting to the man. Call him over, warn him or something. No, no that guy would think he's crazy

too. Maybe he was, no one would know. He looked at the ground and kicked a pebble. Sal would need to go out soon he thought. His heart crept into his throat and he tossed the cigarette before leaving.



## THE NEXUS



## SING A HAPPY TUNE

Jesus stands on the Golden Gate Bridge  
Watching the jumpers play their game.  
The first one down to get back up again wins!

no one's ever won.

Still, he carries a tune  
A parable of his wounds  
Carrying on  
Like Mr. Bo-jingle-jangles  
All caught up in the tangles  
Of a pretty young thing

Eyes turned to the horizon,  
to the ships returning from sea  
on a fortune-favored breeze.  
The very same all caught up in your hair  
As you take that first step into the air  
Casting off that rusted halo  
You bought all those years ago  
(It was bought in a pawn-shop.  
Christ knows how it got there...)  
And kissing the ocean waters that draw you down  
With a wave to that savior of souls  
And the penitence he doles  
You're absolved, you're dissolved  
In the salt and the brine

The next morning:  
A runner reads your story  
By the Braille of your toe- and fingerprints  
*And writes it down in a poem*  
That hardly does justice  
To the life you lived and loved and left  
To fend for itself.



## APOLOGY

To the other users of the basement bathroom,  
I'm sorry—I flooded the sink with bubbles.  
Please believe me when I insist there was no ill will intended.  
It started out innocently. I needed to do dishes. I confess  
I should have gone upstairs to the kitchen, but I was running late  
and this seemed so much easier. I must have used too much soap,  
because before I knew it my hands were filled with these phosphores-  
cent fragile things.  
I felt no guilt, just delight—they were so small,  
so light. I lifted them up as if cupping a face, carried them  
in armfuls to the shower, rinsed them away.  
Here could be a metaphor about washing away bubbles, something  
maybe about childhood  
or loss of innocence, but it simply wasn't that complex. Again,  
I apologize. I hope  
they didn't trouble you.  
They were the highlight of my day.

GO





## ALL OF OUR SECOND HAND BOOKS ARE LIGHTLY WORN

**T**he story ends like this: It was as if the great expanse of trackless time was winking, was convulsing in code—the message was clear. It was sending them home. The boy had come back.

My greatest regret, I feel obligated to say, is Elyse, is everything that happened between the birth of our child and now, the seismic activity, the volcanic eruptions and the hateful things said and the slow settling of white ash over whatever contours of my life were left intact.

But it isn't. I'm more troubled by the smaller errant turns, the slight missteps, the bad habits metastasizing into neuroses. How did all these minute fuck-ups coagulate into the sinister bad influence that steered me here, 40 and loveless, balding, chasing what might be, at best, 300 pages of cheap thrills and heavily labored metaphor, prescribed anti-depressants, ignored prescription, prescription for PAH meds, ignored prescription, ignored alimony, ignored friends, a heavy woozy chaff of sublime childish ignorance? Only that book. Seventy-five cent original paperback. The image of a space-amazon's petite hands coiled around the phallic tube of a cosmic zap-gun every night as Conan flickered mute against the bedroom wall, analepsis to lying in bed at the age of ten with a ragged paperback, trying to assimilate every detail, every word, space amazon, petite hands, zap-gun's blue-steel shaft and spark of white-hot laser, tits and tin-foil bikini, etc., etc.. Legion of Planet Genesis, by E.H. Compton (or E.H. Cornell, or E.G. Compton or...)

The plot: quite simple. Space-boy meets space-girl. Boy gets drafted to space-war. Boy knocks girl up on the eve of his departure. Boy dies in valorous combat. Girl, disgraced, finds solace in the arms of the local, kind-hearted space. Everything ambiguously happy until.... The boy comes back. To be continued. It thrilled me at ten, it was a fond memory of simpler times and cheaper hair-cuts when I was twenty, and now this childish thing encroaches at the margins of everything I call up, all those elided friendships, the guitar-lessons I dropped for no real reason, Elyse, Elyse...



To be continued. That's the part I've had some trouble with. What happens next? This is the thing that distinguishes stories from real life. In a story things are learned, the protagonist learns or dies, either way the universe is a moral place. In real life nobody comes back. Things dissolve and stay dissolved. In fiction, loss is barely even loss—the things we lose hold on don't sink back into some sea of memory but fuzz up, bloom into a mental patina. The world lays waiting forever, starred and underlined, if you can find it again.

Which is the problem. As far as I or anyone else knows, this book never existed, let alone its sequel. EBay turned up nothing, Craigslist turned up nothing. Librarians, sensing my desperation through some kind of finely-honed spinster sixth sense, turned me away at once. Even my fantasy was a fantasy. How could the boy have come back? He was never there at all.

I remember in college, Elyse bringing me a poem one day, spring creeping into session, small yellow things in sharp tight clusters coming out of the ground. I read the poem, I read it three or four times standing there.

"I like it."

"What do you like? What could I change?"

"I like the... the words were good? I wouldn't change anything."

She grabs the paper from me, looks hurt. I'm young and I don't get it.

"Do you even get what its saying? It's saying how much I love you, for god's sakes. I swear to Christ, it's like dating a robot."

And then there was a little laugh, unconvincing. We get the stories we deserve.

Consider my career as a "reader," (what a smug sneering word for such a simple elementary act). I recently read a very positive review in the New York Times. The critic wrote of the book that he "devoured it in three thirsty gulps, gulps that satisfied a craving I didn't know I had..." (I've looked it up and noted that the critic's name was Dwight Garner. I feel a duty to get the details right, in this story, because this is a story about getting the details wrong). I feel like Mr. Garner has the right idea. Some books must be approached ravenously, gorged upon in chunks as generous as the mind can comfortably allow, permitting entire evenings to vanish in between French flaps, the reader's feet shuffling on their accord out the door, down the station steps, onto the train, out onto the street, into the café, where the hours will concede



defeat and step lightly past, taking an unobtrusive side-route towards the sudden realization of fallen darkness. It's one of the great overlooked miracles of synergy between the body and the mind that we can do this, can take up a book and fall deranged in it while we move among the cogent unawares. Was this me? Fuck no. "Thirsty gulps?" I approached books like cough medicine, pursed my lips and screwed up my eyes and swallowed them down in gummy nips, a page or two before the beginning of class, half a chapter on a lunch break or a slow Sunday shift without customers or displays to be arranged.

Unbeknownst to me, narratives crumbled apart into almost meaningless, like film the illusion of motion was ruined by the awareness of each isolated frame of words, memories of stories stored away in the frosty higher reaches of the brain, far from the disorderly and balmy sub-levels where I poke at stills of cat-tails on the roadside, glass bottles decanting the smell of the air one moment in February 2004 walking out of a Chinese restaurant and into Cincinnati, childhood friends with two heads and baby teeth whose names have worn off of their images, old lovers, simultaneously appearing in prom-dresses, swim-suits, college sweat-shirts, sandals, heels, hair up, hair down, teasing, blissful, furious—the shabby, untended basement where our fondest things end up.

Like a cup of coffee nipped at too cautiously, set aside too often over the course of a breakfast, these books had gone cold to me by the time I'd reached their end, so that all those years ago I met Gatsby facedown in his pool not with a gasp but with a disinterested hum. Of course it happened that way. I was a machine, a literary thresher, slowly and ruthlessly tearing stories into structure, theme, tone, motif, spitting out those sentences that bring a frisson of ecstasy out like chaff, a dream to high-school teachers and a horror to what they call "the pleasure of the text." Somewhere in my mother's attic back in Ohio I'm sure my old copy of *Ulysses* is still pristine and dog-eared, poor Leopold Bloom frozen forever on that Dublin bridge, watching the Blood of the Lamb in stasis on the meringued water. All the same, there was a certain artful precision to my artlessness, a satisfaction in the grey gleam of a messy, human system slivered into some kind of order. I wasn't much for books, but even as a kid I had the makings of a hell of an insurance claims adjuster.

I'm telling all this to Ray Gun as we smooth 276-West behind us



in his brother's wretched '89 Geo Prizm, really baring my soul. We're two dudes on a mission. Granted—he is a scrawny 19-year old with a pony-tail and questionable facial hair, I am slovenly and old and my body sags like a used paper bag—but there's still an *Easy Rider* element to our cruising, I think. Two bad asses on the prowl for bittersweet sci-fi, listening to A.M. radio. Hell yes. He tilts his chin up and wonders out loud if you'd consider Boston yacht rock or really just, you know, rock you might want to listen to on a yacht.

“When I was young,” I patiently explain, “if you were from the kind of family that would have a yacht, you probably wouldn't have liked Boston. They were the kind of band you'd hear in the parking lot to a Denny's. White guys with perms and little moustaches. The girls who loved them.”

I wonder where they were now—Gerry Stitz, Carmen Facciolo, all those Grease extras I used to move amidst. I only really wondered for a second. And about my slow spiritual disintegration, I'm tempted to continue, let's touch back on that for a sec. What's the soundtrack for that? What would I gently rock out to if my life was falling apart... on a yacht? Maybe some Toto? Some 'What a Fool Believes'?

But I don't. “So what you're proposing,” Ray says with a half-burp-half-chortle, “is a new branch of soft-rock taxonomy? Maybe PBR rock? Wait, hold on—I got it. How about... Rolling Rock?”

He's laughing and I'm staring out the window at the burnt tips of the median grass. Some grey Japanese sedan is half-beached on it, back-end perfect, gleaming, front half crumpled back like the peel of a candy-bar. A man in a Penn State sweater sits sweating on his little island, shouting into his cell-phone and looking obstinately, defiantly lost. It's a look I feel some kind of kinship towards. I want to make Ray pull over, sit down next to the guy and tell him I know where he's at. I know how it is to watch the other cars float past like constellations and think Jesus, I've fucked this one up big-time, except, hey, soon AAA will have his ass back on track whereas myself, I'm not so sure. I get the feeling sometimes I've been fucking this one up big-time since the beginning.

Ray-Gun is Ray is Reagan McHenry, yes, Reagan, college dropout and employee of McHenry's Second-Hand Books and Curios. His brother (oh, say it ain't so), Nixon, the store's owner, is a thick-set, surly anarchist with a painter boyfriend; Reagan sells weed behind the



high-school bleachers, when he's not making acquisition runs for the bookstore at yard-sales, lot auctions, school fairs, library clearances, etc. I imagine his parents are extremely disappointed.

"Dude, are you for real?" he asked from on top of a step-ladder one day, facing a set of Children's Encyclopedias, "My parents are dead. Have some respect."

I made his acquaintance early on in my search, when aimless and blind I visited McHenry's every other day or so, always with the same question—did they have a book called, um, (the feigned casual lapse of recollection, oh it's nothing, I could live without it)—and always, no, Lincoln curling his lip and treating me to a lecture about State Ideological Apparatus and how disgraceful a thing it was to see a grown-man, a grown-man pissing away his time on juvenile escapist twaddle, and would I be interested in buying some used Adorno & Horkheimer? It was after one of these introductory seminars to suburban-guilt, slouching castigated towards the exit, that Ray-Gun put a hand on my shoulder, smiling warmly through a patchy stab at a moustache.

"Listen sir, I'm not good at this kind of thing but, well, you look like a guy who's a little lost right now, a little down, and... and, well... hell, I'll just come out and say it: I'd like to sell you some marijuana."

It was an auspicious start. We went back to his apartment, antiseptic and orderly against all odds, Bomb the Music Industry posters framed in cheap plastic and tarps over every piece of furniture. It smelled, improbably, of artificial lilacs and his pot was dry and fine and strong. I sat bare-foot on his floor and talked about Elyse, about the days we used to love each other, the pub where I dropped her engagement ring in a pitcher and proposed to her with heavy wet sleeves, the decline, the fall, the client who told me, abruptly, at a business lunch to feel her up, right there in the fucking Olive Garden, who said "not bad, huh?" and took me back to her ranch-home, the fights, the broken guitar, the slow eclipse, the embarrassed call from the office saying, apologetically, that well I hadn't shown up in two weeks, they had been calling, and, well, they had no choice, until there I was, sobbing on a 19-year old's freshly shampooed shag carpet. He bit a hang-nail and looked down at me.

"It's ok man. Hold on. Let me get you some water."

He got me some water.

"Let me ask you about books."



I didn't get too many details when Ray-Gun called me a couple of days later, telling me to meet him at Luciano's at two-thirty to discuss a "business proposition," but I was desperate enough to show up on-time, half-an-hour early in fact. When you're recently laid-off there is a sort of psychological grace period, a cooling-down before the economic and practical panic sets in and you start scrambling for a way to feed yourself. Before that, for awhile, you enjoy your days of solitude and contemplation. Watching the supply of Pringles in the pantry slowly diminish, tensing your muscles against the soft accumulation of bills and questioning phone-calls and premonitions of disaster—I'd even call it a little bit zen. If there's one thing about the human condition that being an insurance claims adjustor can teach you, it's that life is a series of collapses waiting to happen, that entropy is not smooth and steady but pounces in conflagrations of metal and mistimed smoke alarms. Everything falls apart and only the cool, rational, reassuring buzzards like me stand to mitigate this process and in the process make a tidy sum per annum. You learn to take failure as a given, so that in a position like mine there is no grinding of teeth, no pulling out of hair at the roots. There's a Stoic meditation. Picture Seneca with a Sam Adams in his hand, watching American Idol and running the numbers in his head—how long can I string this out?

Near the end Elyse found this attitude unbearable. How could I live with myself, she asked me, when the two poles of my life were fatalism and opportunism? How can you live with live yourself, I snapped back, when all you do is teach retarded kids how to pick up trash all day? She looked offended. Understandable.

"They're developmentally disabled, Gregory," she said, levelly, "and you're an asshole."

"I mean, I guess if I was developmentally disabled too I could have some bored middle-aged woman taking care of everything I need too. But hey, I have a wife and two fucking kids so could be the bliss of ignorance isn't an option."

Her eyes flashed. She put her book on the bed stand. I can't remember. Jane Kenyon, or Gary Snyder, poems about the beauty of the woods or the canyons or some such impractical natural idyll.

"How dare you use the kids to justify your raging personality disorders?"

I rolled over, then, and pretended to be asleep until she capitulated and switched off the light and I felt the padded ridge of her



shoulder-blades grazing my arms frostily. It was only then, when I was almost sure that she had drifted off, that I was alone at last, just my body and her body and my petty black spiteful brain, that I muttered I never even wanted them.

I was wrong. But ah—like I said, I met it with the resigned Q.E.D. of the insurance-man. This is how things go. The waitress refilling my hot chocolate was beautiful, with breasts like a French new-wave starlet, and when she made polite small-talk I lied and said I sold jet-skis. I guess that's the most exotic thing I can come up with now. It could've been a worse wait.

Luciano's is a place on Frigate and Eighth, where in April you can see the pear trees in flower from the window and in winter the snow falls fat and languid into black coffee and goes under. The employees are young and attractive and move as if working at a coffee shop was the best possible job in the world, smooth and confident. They are pierced all over and catch the orange café-light like promising nineteen year old Christmas ornaments. On Saturdays there are fresh biscotti from the farmer's market, and all week day-old bagels are buy-one-get-one-free. It's the kind of place that makes 45 feel 30, where long-dead sureties stir in their mossy middle-management beds, where novels are begun to be abandoned.

It is exactly like every coffee-shop I have loved, the quirks uniform across the country and across the decades. It could have been in the booth by the coffee-table splayed with handsome hardcovers about ghosts that I looked out on Over-The-Rhine and its resolute Ohio-Germanic churches and pretended to like the same bands as Elyse; looking at the barista with the dark bangs and Anna Karina-breasts, it could be 1982 again, I could be a spidery freshman with a bowl cut exalted by the hot lancets of her indifference. I could slip even further back—if I don't watch myself closely I am suddenly fifteen, talking about Kirby and Kerouac as if I know anything, buying cigarettes for thirty-five cents and praying the smell doesn't stick to my clothes when my mother does the laundry, and then back again, again, to some undefined age of primary-colored shorts and Tang-stained t-shirts, me and the crew-level heads of every blade of grass and Compton/Cornwall's Legion, far from the orbit of coffee and dim lights but following the dangerous motion of nostalgia back to its ultimate source. It was as if all these cafes with their cute names, the Daily Grind, the Common Grounds and their eternally young and melancholy Charlie



Parker best-ofs, opened into one space, as if something was swallowed up here and kept secure under the mahogany-colored lamplight.

Ray showed up, snuck up from behind really, with a bagel heavy with the smell of lox. He wanted to borrow a cigarette.

"I don't smoke anymore," I told him.

"My uncle gave up smoking once," he said, "and he got hit by a moped not one week later. Swear to god dude. You gotta get back on that tobacco thing." I told him I'd think about it. I appreciated the money I saved. I liked to fan my pocket change out with a finger every night on my coffee table, arrange the coins into small symmetrical sun-bursts—it would hurt a little, I thought, to eventually dump them into a Coin\*Star and see them transformed into abstract bills.

Ray took a swig of my hot chocolate and laid out his proposal: ever since he'd started working at his brothers' book-store, he'd demonstrated a certain knack for bargaining, for spying out rarities and finds. Nixon, himself more bibliophile than business-man, put Ray in charge of acquisitions. So, he networked—he struck up friendships with lonely old women, got in touch with public libraries, warehouses, sent out feelers on the kinds of internet back-alleys where faceless names debated the sexual appeal of different Starships Enterprise. He crawled the suburban lock of yard-sales, estate auctions, dumpster-dived, picked through the attics of the sick and elderly. He wasn't much for reading himself—"I like shit where the cat's the detective," he once told me—but he loved that process through which calcified brown paper and the smell of cellar-mold becomes money.

"Now here's the thing: so this old college professor, Winston Thropple," he said, "was a regular customer. Of books, I mean. One of the biggest private collections of sci-fi in the state, except he'd get all bristly if you called it sci-fi around him. Anyway, he was pretty quiet about it, but he knew his shit and had just about everything worth having, to hear him talk. Anyway, he just died."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me; the guy was a complete dick-hole. Anyway, he just died, and turns out he trusted the old McHenry touch enough to request that we sort out the collection to donate to his school, set aside a couple things to sell off for his wife, you know the drill. Now..." he paused and chuckled and threw a stagy wink, "if anybody on the east coast ever had this Legion of Whatever's you've been into, it would've been Thropple. So what do you say you roll out with me to his place, we



see what we can turn up in that heap of his?”

“I thought he was donating his collection to the college?”

“Yeah, well. Maybe you missed my wink, pal, but what I’m subtly inferring is that we, ah, steal the shit out of it.”

I looked at him. He wasn’t joking. He looked like he was joking, but honestly, he always looked like that. This was not Ray-Gun’s joking face.

“Why? Why would you do this for me?”

“Because believe it or not, I like your mopey-ass company. Because I know what it’s like to need something like this. Something... um, something useless but important. Dude, I don’t know...” he scratched the back of his neck, mumbled. “It’s a lonely car-ride, man. Come on.”

“Ok. How long... how long will this take?”

“Dunno. He lives in Kurtzburgh nowadays, in Pennsylvania, so maybe hour-and-a-half drive each way? This is just a prelim visit, little assessment dealy, so we shouldn’t really be there be there too long. Why? You got something to take care of?”

In fact, today was the day Elyse planned to take a plane to Denver and her new home, after a two-month stint at her sister’s split-level with the kids. I had not been invited to say goodbye as such, but I had not been told the date, time, and departing gate by mistake, I felt tempted to believe.

“No, I don’t know. Not really. Where are you parked?”

Ray smiled, teeth showing like a cartoon shark.

“Ah, actually. I thought maybe we could take your car?”

“New Jersey’s basically a desert wasteland too, at heart, just embellished with all these forests and meadows and... oceans and stuff,” Ray says. He’s medium-baked and getting pretty poetic, after pulling over at a closed-down BP and asking me to drive the rest of the way. As I pulled back onto the road, the Prizm shaking and sputtering in my hands like a dying Turin horse, he explained that he always makes a point of being dressed up for this kind of thing, tossing his Bad Religion sweatshirt into the back of the car and, astoundingly, managing to simultaneously button up a crisp white oxford, tie a fat half-windsor (“more assertive look,” he muttered, “great for a wider tie like this”), and light a joint produced out of the air like a nickel behind a child’s ear.

“That’s why Jersey’s such a sympathetic state,” he continues.

“It’s just like us. It doesn’t want to be what it is. A big fat stretch of existential dread. A no-man’s land. The song of the American Goldfinch is the cough of the tumbleweed.”

“What about Princeton, Princeton’s pretty nice.”

“Yeah, well. If you like white people and weird round-about.”

“We’re both white.”

“But we aren’t weird fucking round-about. Look around,” he waves his arms, a broad swatch of smoke like grey silk settling from dash-board to window, “...New Jersey! American Death Valley!”

I narrow my eyes towards the horizon, measuring the tall needle-buildings in parallax across the water. They looked busy. They looked like being so tall and straight and full of people with their hubris and their happiness and their weird hang-ups and all took so much out of them.

“I think we’re in Pennsylvania, Ray. Sorry.”

He looks about in a kind of laconic panic, twisting all the way backwards as if the specter of Pennsylvania herself was breathing down our necks, her name in gilded calligraphy on a sandwich board around her neck.

“No way! Well... my point stands. And anyway, check it out—that means we’re almost there. You pumped? You ready to get your book on?”

I bite my cheek a little sourly, one of those expressions you can never predict the outcome of, will it look like a smile, will it look like a frown? Fortunately Ray is still ass-backwards, arms wrapped around the back of his seat.

“Absolutely, Ray, I am absolutely ready to get my book on.”

I remember my favorite part of the story, retained in sharp-focus and neon even now. It’s when the hero, Gaetano, has just talked a sentient red-dwarf out of committing suicide, going nova on an inhabited solar system. His space-suit is torn, and why this doesn’t cause him to get sucked out into the vacuum of space like a tube of pulverized meat, I never understood. It’s torn ruggedly to show-off his battle damage, I guess. It was a pyrrhic victory; the galaxy has been saved but the tragic sun is living on in immense turmoil and pain, shouldering All Civilized Planets like Atlas. That poor sun.

“I’m sorry,” says Gaetano from inside the retreating, victorious space-ship, space-champagne being poured all around him, space-caviar and space-cheese and space-crackers being munched, the day saved and



in the pocket, "I'm sorry."

Winston Thropple lives, or lived, in a modest house in a modest suburb, the kind of town where everyone picks up their dog's shit and disposes of it properly without even grumbling about it. His widow lets us in.

"You must be the boys from that bookstore in New York he loved so much," she says in a voice trembling between grief and a grandma-ish pleasure in hosting the young. Ray lets the geographical fudging slide. "I've made some sandwiches..."

We all sit and eat tuna-salad on rye in silence, Mrs. Thropple smiling bravely at us. There's an open book of crossword puzzles on the kitchen table, and a collection of cow-shaped cookie jars ringing the counters. Ash-trays everywhere. A five-letter Mary Tyler Moore spin-off ending in D-A...

"Would you young men like to see Winston's collection now?"

We nod respectfully and follow her up the stairs, past framed photos of her, younger, plumper, with her arms around a severe man in brown tweed. "I am an English Professor," his outfit proclaims, "and it is the 70's, as you can see by my outrageous side-burns. I am here to tell you about Proust and D.H. Lawrence."

The Collection, as it turns out, is something of a disappointment. I had been expecting the kind of patrician library you see in British movies, where the stern father looks his daughter's suitor up and down and smokes a pipe, roofs soaring up past the camera, leather-bound tomes from the prop department ringing every wall. Definitely a mahogany desk with a red leather chair. Probably a brass globe. Possibly a gallery of fearsome mounted animal heads. Instead, it is a guest-suite crammed with cheap wooden shelves and plain brown cardboard boxes overflowing with paper-backs, a narrow foot-path winding between them into the next room. There is no meticulous collector's pride here, no glass display-case of first editions. The books in the shelves aren't even alphabetized. Ray lets out a low whistle and begins to pick his way through the boxes, crouching down here and there and riffling through the stale pages.

"There any, um, order to this ma'am? I mean, did you husband keep a... a catalogue or anything?"

She shakes her head.

"Winston had a great passion for buying these books, but I'm afraid he never got around to compiling them. He... well occasionally

he talked about it but as you can see, it never came together.”

Ray shakes his head, holds a fat Asimov omnibus up to his face and skims the indicia.

“Ok, well, here’s the thing, see? This is going to take a hell of a lot of time to comb through... even just to get an estimate could be a day or two’s work.”

“Oh... I understand that. Winston was prepared to pay for your services.”

“We’ve talked price.” He wobbles on his knees over to a shelf. “Are these advance proofs? Jesus...”

There’s something heart-breaking about the scene, Ray-Gun picking at the untagged surplus of a life, the torn covers, the dog-eared pages half-way through, stories abandoned. I pick up a slim book with a bug-eyed creature on the cover, its mouth in a grimace as if suffocating. The inside front cover reads Freddy Timbor, Sinclair Lewis Elementary, Room 104. The widow is standing in the door-frame, looking blank. It takes effort to look that unphased, practice and skill. She is a veteran of these guerilla wars we fight.

“Your husband... how old is all this?”

“Well I suppose the oldest books here are from before the War, but most of them—“

“No, I mean, when did he start this,” I correct her, “what did all this mean to him?”

She crosses her arms. “Well. I can’t recall really. That is, we met over forty years ago, things become slippery. I don’t suppose you know anything about being old, like that. But... I do remember a story he told me shortly before we were engaged.

“It was about a book he’d encountered in college. A story called... oh, what was it. It was a story about two brothers, raised on different planets.” She chuckles. It sounds so silly to her, these little boys’ stories. “He was a graduate student, a pupil of the great Harry Levin! And yet... this book, this little thing he stumbled on working at the public library, fascinated him. He never understood it, he would spend hours reading monographs on Valerie and find lines about twin-moons wandering into his mind. He didn’t know what to do...”

“So what then? How did he...”

“Oh, dear. He stole the book! He slipped it right into his coat pocket and walked out one night, planning to let whoever had checked it out last concern themselves with the fees. He took it back to his dormitory



and read it cover-to-cover, in a fever. He read it every night for a week.” Ray has stopped searching and kneels with his arms crossed atop a stack of books, pretending not to listen.

“But before long, wouldn’t you know it, guilt got to him. He imagined a family, a large, poor family, poor silly boy, pleading to the librarian that they had returned the book, they really had, and how, oh how could they ever afford to pay? Ridiculous, I suppose, but he was young and so earnest. After a week he returned the book to the library and quit the job in shame. What a charming story. He was a fine man, you know. So serious, but kind after his fashion.”

I envy her for a second, and then I envy him. And then I feel a slight convulsion and I realize I envy everyone, even myself, for all the beautiful, small sad moments that pass without the appellation of highlighter or bookmark, without the grounding of ink on paper.

“So let me guess,” Ray says, “all these books, then—he spent the rest of his life trying to find that one book again? All of this is just the paper-chase he left behind him?”

“Oh, no,” she laughs, flashing gums and white dentures, “no. He has several copies. Poor Winston—he just loved books, I suppose.”

I leave. I don’t remember leaving, but I am out the door and gasping for breath. Somewhere in the sky Elyse is buckled in, a stewardess if offering her coffee or tea. She’s picking coffee.

Ray appears and silently offers a cigarette and a Zippo engraved A for Anarchy. I light up and watch as I breathe some part of me out and up into the metered Main Line afternoon.

The next time I see Elyse is at our older daughter’s cello recital, in July. I fly out to Colorado just for the occasion, and Elyse is warm and polite when we meet afterwards. After a few minutes of small-talk a tall blonde man comes up and puts his arm around, his white polo highlighting the all-American splendor of both his pecs and his tan. He looks like a Gaetano, but his name is Todd and he’s a ski-instructor. “Carolyn’s quite the musician, isn’t she? You had quite the pair of dynamite ladies on your hands?”

I smile, and he smiles. Elyse smiles. His teeth are perfect and I feel, impossibly, happy for the two of them. When I say goodbye I kiss her on both cheeks, and suggest that Carolyn come back east for Christmas. Maybe, she says. I return home in a tender mood, and from the plane’s window the entire tan sprawl of the country seems magnanimous. I put my hand against the glass and think “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” and the

ground whispers back “Don’t worry about it. All is forgiven.”

Sometime later Ray Gun calls me up, sounding bored or lonely or both. We sit on the roof of his apartment building and drink, flicking the bottle caps of our beers off into the streetlight-mottled night.

“Remember that book you were all into awhile ago, that space shit or whatever?”

“Yeah?”

“Guess what? Nixon just sold it to some collector from Manhattan, guess how much? Guess.”

I shrug and shake my head.

“\$20,000. Fuck, man. Fuck. Old lady better buy herself a friggin’ solid-gold pony with that cash, right?”

I laugh, a little, and open another bottle, vapor rising from the foam and curling for a moment in front of me. I feel a pang at my ribs, a cue to anger or frustration or bitter rumination but I can’t muster up the energy. The night is too warm, the beer is too cold, and anyway I realize like a caul sloughing off that it no longer matters, the holes in my internal plot have patched themselves somehow, or at least resolved themselves into craters and valleys, permanent features of a landscape, mappable, perhaps mapped. In any case, the ending isn’t a mystery any longer, not one that demands or offers a solution. To the extent that I need to, I know how the story ends.

The story ends like this: the boy has come back.



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Josh Aungst** is a 38 year old sophomore who enjoys a plate of liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti. He has the same disease as Benjamin Button and looks forward to feeling right at home playing in the sandbox on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

**Steph Bartusis** has the life of an overdone steak: dry, rubbery and grey. But she insists that parsley will fix the whole damn thing.

**Kevin Bendis** is watching the detectives, ain't that sweet?

**Liz Brennan** n'est pas une pipe.

**Chelsea Catalanotto** is not good for you. If you must, consume in small quantities.

What's so funny 'bout peace, love, and **Nicole Dillie**?

**Brittany Esser** is here to stay, Brittany Esser is on her way, and she would rather be anywhere else but here today.

**Robert Evans** isn't sure why you're reading this. You should be reading all those wonderful stories. I mean, you're going to read those stories, right? You're not just going to flip through this year's Lantern are you? For shame, dear reader. For shame.

**Raven Felton** is a senior history major who doesn't know what she's doing with her life but wants to make an impact on the world. She might just achieve that one squishy penguin at a time.

My name is **Daniel Joseph Horowitz**, but people call me Dan or Danny. I'm planning on majoring in Business and Art, and I hope to do something with Spanish and English while I'm here. I'm on the Ursinus wrestling team, the track team, and I'm also a member of Rising Sons and STAR. I hope you like my painting!

**Amber Hyppolite** truly has a problem with the notion that at twenty years old she should have a good grasp on what it is she wants to do with her life. This phobia of the future carries over to this present task because she figures it to be quite unfair for her to have to make a decision about what to put in her bio, which you, just so you know, are now reading a few weeks after it was conceived. If she has to put something though a catchy song lyric will do: “Amber is a paper chaser just living her life, her life, her life...”

A slip of the tongue is gonna keep **Callie Ingram** civilian.

Things That **Shane Kowalski** Fears:

- 1) Invisible People
- 2) The Television Trying To Steal His Thoughts
- 3) People He Knows

**Josh Krigman** is where the wild things are. He may not return.

**Liora Kuttler** has a habit of folding things she shouldn't into origami. Like negatives, her brain, and your mom.

**Pete Lipsi** wishes to thank the incomparable city of Florence for all her inspiration.

**CALLIE MATTOX MAKE HIM STRONG**

God's greatest gift to **Kerry McCarthy** is her loving and supportive family. If I don't know where I'm going, I know I can always go back to where I came from- and that's the greatest comfort of all.

**Máire Moriarty** warns you to not even bother trying to pronounce her name. Blame the Irish.

Oh, oh, **Katherine Murphy** does not move me, even though I've seen the movie.

Once **Abigail Raymond** glanced at the jackets of some paperbacks, now she's read every one.



**Ellyn Rolleston** was christened Jennifer Ellyn Rolleston. After being inspired by the six-word story rumored to be penned by Hemingway, she came up with a six-word autobiography of her own: "I just wasn't born a Jennifer." This may or may not say a lot about her.

**Arielle Ross** founded Ursinus College.

**Paul Rossman** likes to chew on the skin that peels off his sunburnt body.

But you don't understand, **Christopher Schaeffer** isn't strong; he's small, and frail.

**Nate Taylor** is currently suffering from a crippling fear of the impending real world. On the other hand, getting published is pretty awesome. They kinda' even out, I guess.

**Marjorie Vujnovich** is the Spanish moss growing low on Savannah trees, draping the graveyards and avenues; she is a boy and three girls on a cold beach. Incidentally, she is also very fond of the person whose bio is right after hers.

I am **Robert Whitehead**, I the leaf caught under the stone caught under the water and breaking and losing, I burned the city and killed the horses, the words I wrote were curses the storms I make surprise, I choose which heart to lose, take the self down from its pinned place it is a dress and I will wear, I will survive my self, the voice that is not of my throat is my voice, and what limits are there to being, what sky is not me what branch of what tree what root or rock, I live in image say love and the image of Mary and the light behind her and I am this to touch would be faithless, say name of word and I see the turns breath takes to image to form I am the breath the turn to form, I am the emperor judge the donkey in the house the toy and its child the eyes of a perfect stranger, I leaned on the stove and the house flooded pain, I opened the window and was air was the shape of air around noun the verb acting on air the adjectives of adjectives I am the grammar of the unbodied world

**Bethani Zeller** is a wanna-be foreigner International Relations major who manages to have too much time free time without actually having any at all.



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