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The Lantern Vol. 74, No. 2, Spring 2007

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THE LANTERN





THE LANTERN

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Editor's Note: As our last semester as co-editors of the *Lantern* comes to a close, we would like to take this time to express our sadness and gladness to the Ursinus community. The *Lantern* has always been an incredibly challenging process made possible only by the talented creative artists who submit, making our job difficult and wonderful at the same time. Alli Guerin, layout goddess extraordinaire, was an irreplaceable asset to our *Lantern* family. Jon Volkmer's begrudging love and guidance helped us to fulfill our role in a respectable and professional manner, never without a snid—er, encouraging remark. We also have much gratitude for our patient and enthusiastic section editors who are constant subject to our creative shenanigans. This spring's magazine is filled with the best of what Ursinus has to offer and we hope that you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you. Sit back, crack a brew, and revel in the short sweetness of this semester's *Lantern*! - Love, Tori and Trev

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JUDGES' NOTES

Prose Winner—"Complications of a Fish-Only Diet" by Michael Silber

Speculative fiction is difficult to do well; it takes real intelligence and imagination to create a new world and to populate it, not just with believable characters, but feasible rules, or ways of being. *Complications of a Fish-only Diet* does just that; this is a fully realized world. The piece reads, not just as a fable or cautionary tale, but as a very well written and engaging short story.

Kate Musselman is a writer, editor and teacher of creative writing and literature. She graduated from Ursinus in 1999 and received her Masters in Creative Writing from Temple University in 2003. When she is not working on her second novel, she spends most of her time with her head in a book. She also has an unhealthy passion for cupcakes, lipstick, and the movies of Gillian Armstrong. The soundtrack to her life would feature music by Tom Waits, Eleni Mandell, Sleater-Kinney, the Ditty Bops, Ella Fitzgerald, and The Beatles.

Poetry Winner—"La Viuda" by Jan Cohen

"La Viuda" is a well constructed poem in which the speaker comments on beauty, religion, and humanity with authority but without judgment. "La Viuda" reminds us of the connecting nature of the seen and unseen world.

Quincy Scott Jones earned a Bachelor's degree from Brown University, a Master's degree from Temple University, and \$100 once working as supermarket clown. He currently he writes, teaches, and performs in the Philadelphia area.

JUDGES' NOTES

The Alfred L. Creager '33 Prize:

The Creager Prize is an annual award endowed by friend of Ursinus Creative Writing Ray Hamilton in honor of Alfred Creager (UC Class of 1933). A distinguished alumni judge chooses the winner from the contents of the fall and spring issues of *The Lantern* for each academic year. This prize is independent of the poetry and prose prizes for each issue of the magazine.

The winner of The Creager Prize for 2006-07 is the short story "Ashes," by Rachel Heller.

"Ashes" is a compelling story to read. It's beautiful, disturbing, and thought provoking. This work explores the terrifying possibility of being unjustly judged by an unknown entity. My compliments to the author.

Keith Leparulo spent a decade earning his BA from Ursinus in the Evening Division, taking his degree in English in 1997. A Lantern contributor, Leparulo was the original drummer of the group "The Wine Bottles." He also wrote, produced, and acted in the cult hit cable TV local origination sketch comedy program, "No One's Home With Granny" (Ancient Chinese Secret Productions). He was the founder and host of the Black Bear Literary Society, modeled on UC's Lit Soc, in Skippack, PA, that met for five years in Skippack, PA, and published its own anthology.

THE COMPLICATIONS OF A FISH-ONLY DIET

I have never seen the pillar made of fireflies. By the time I return from fishing, autumn has come and the gliding leaves have drifted in to relieve the fireflies, who tumble to the pillar's base and merge into the chocolate soil. I stay in the city for winter, when the pillar METAPHOR is made of cardinals. And of course in spring—dandelion seeds. But I only glimpse the beginning of those. The most of us have to go fishing.

Let me tell you about fishing. The most of us go out from the city to any water we might find. Some have boats, others boots—it doesn't matter much as long as we can find fish. Many veteran fishers have special techniques for nabbing them. I have personally developed a method for catching the rare GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT fish. I roll my eyes to every direction they can reach, exhale until I might implode, dunk my face in the water, and then inhale as I raise my head up again. When I cast my nets after performing this ritual, I never fail to catch a GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT. It's a delicacy which few can claim. I can get at least triple the price of a CUDDLEINAHAMMOCK or a SMELLOFCUTGRASS at the market. I don't take too many, even though I might get rich if I did. I'd rather not kill the last GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT fish.

You know what's funny about that fish? It doesn't even taste that good, but the some of us like it because of its rarity.

I learned that I will never understand the some of us, and I am very happy to be included in the most of us, the fishers. I learned it this past autumn when the fishers returned to the city for market and election. In autumn we sell our fish in the city and vote on the governing word of the year. This word, seated atop the pillar METAPHOR, dictates our actions and how we perceive them, good or bad. The word keeps us in check, a public reminder not to be an idiot. Anyone found ignoring the word, doing whatever they please, is banned from next year's election, and can't sell any fish. Except for the year we elected Forgiveness—nothing happened to *anyone* that year.

This past autumn's market set off so well. The fishers set up the booths all across the city and at the docks for those with boats. You could hear the most of us hawking their catch on every corner.

WARMSANDBETWEENYOURTOES here!
UNEXPECTEDKISS—fresh from the river!
LAUGHINGCHILDREN, going fast!

My booth gets a line without hawking. I'm one of the city's best-known fishers; I even have a regular clientele. They come first to see if I brought a GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT, then strangers see the line and decide to try my fish. Each customer has a preference.

The injured athlete, he likes the firework spice in the SPRINGLOVE—it flashes fast in your mouth, then cools into a gentle memory as you swallow. He buys enough to last the winter, so I always remember to catch plenty. The problem with SPRINGLOVE is they are very fattening. I watch the athlete's middle spill further and further over his belt, and he is sad because he isn't the beautiful man he once was. So he buys more SPRINGLOVE and feels better for the winter. At least he'll stay warm.

MOTHERSHUGS never fail to make up at least a tenth of my haul. One devoted wife in particular buys a sackful each year. MOTHERSHUGS don't have a complex taste, but an enjoyable one nonetheless. Kids usually eat a lot of them because picky eaters will decide they like MOTHERSHUGS and little else. But I don't know if that's why this woman buys so much; she looks too trim to have *that* many kids. She always brings flowers to market, and walks down the road that leads out of the city. Not much out that way—the arboretum, the whorehouse, the cemetery.

Maybe she brings the fish to the girls too ashamed to come to market.

I am one of the only fishers who will catch CONFESSIONS. Most are too afraid to try because they sting if you don't handle them carefully. I was only stung once, but the poison put me out of commission for an entire season. Still didn't see the fireflies though—I couldn't even get out of bed. Now I keep the fish's barb around my neck, like a trophy or a talisman. Only strange folk enjoy CONFESSIONS, like the man who dresses all in black. He told me that you will never taste a sweeter meat than on the bones of these fish. It's haunting, he said. I won't ever try it, but he pays well for them so I'm happy to catch the nasty buggers.

All these people came this year, along with plenty of others. I made a hefty profit, which would go towards taking a year off and exploring new places to fish. I had a good deal of money, but still not enough to compensate the expedition I planned to make. I wanted to buy lots of lumber and build a new boat to go out farther than anyone. I would cast nets in places nobody has ever approached, and return with hundreds of

new fish.

I dreamed this dream on the way back to my tiny home at the edge of the city when one of the some of us stopped me. He never stopped grinning, and he moved like angry water. He grabbed me with frantic energy.

Heyyy buddy, how's it goin'?

His voice had a low giggle underneath every word.

You're that fisher who can catch GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT, yeah?

I nodded.

Come with meee, buddy. Some friends of mine want your help.

Not a social worker, I said.

Reeelax. The help is compensated.

I followed.

Soon we passed by the pillar METAPHOR. The fireflies had all fallen to the ground as usual, and the wind was finishing twisting the leaves into a column that shot into the sky. Soon the new governing word would rest on top of the pillar.

Sooo, what do you think it'll be this year?

I reminded my guide I had been fishing—like the most of us do—and didn't know what was up for election.

Riiight. Sorry, friend. It's Caution, Success, and Justice...again.

Justice is an old favorite. I'm not too fond of Justice because it lets the some of us judge what that is. The most of us get cheated under Justice. I said I would vote for Success if my sales were good, Caution if they weren't.

The strange-talking man smiled like he had won.

He took us to one of the tallest towers in the city. Not as tall as the pillar METAPHOR, but grand nonetheless. It was round and smooth and conical—a giant, windowless spike. I knew immediately I was to meet a very powerful some of us.

After a thousand candelabras and several, *several* flights of stairs, we arrived in a chamber made of gold, where five men sat at a crimson table. In the center of the table, a fire pit roared with flame. Everyone's face was half in shadow.

The biggest chair held a large, pale man. He had no hair on his head, and covered his eyes with a silken sash. He raised his chin as if to smell me.

You are the fisher? he said.

I said I was.

I have had your GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT. The flavor is the rarest I've ever come across. How do you keep them so fresh on the long journey back to the city?

That's my secret, I said. I'm not too protective of that, but nobody wants to know how fresh your spit can keep fish.

The pale man nodded and grinned. Were his teeth sharpened? Maybe the firelight played tricks on me. He bid me to come over to the table. In front of him he had a strange fish which I had never seen before. It was covered in barbed spines—clearly poisonous—and a large fin in the back. This was a fast fish, hard to catch and harder to keep. The scales seemed to change color depending on what angle I looked from.

I asked what kind of fish it was.

The pale man offered up a small plate with cubes of fishmeat. Taste, he said. And don't worry—it's only poisonous on the outside.

Normally I let someone else taste a strange fish before I partake, but I'd never before been offered a taste by the some of us. And oh...

While I tasted the fish, I could see through walls. The existence of existence brought such pain and joy I fell to the floor and wept. It was too much, too much. I welcomed the vomit as it cleansed me of the awful pain.

It's an acquired taste, said the pale man. The other four men at the table mumbled agreement.

I said it tasted like shit to me. Then I asked him again what kind of fish it was.

It's called a TRUTH.

Kind of a strange name.

The pale man stood up and removed the sash from his eyes. They were colorless—or all colors; I couldn't tell. He said this is the rarest fish in the world.

Who cares if it's rare when it tastes like that?

He laughed. You most of us—always thinking about fish sales. We don't wish to sell these fish. We have developed a liquor from the TRUTH that lets people see things as the some of us see them.

How do you see things?

He turned his gaze away from me. Oh, it's all so beautiful. We want to give the most of us this drink as a campaign for Caution.

I said I figured the some of us would like Success, or Justice. Everyone in the room laughed.

My boy! Just imagine if the most of us looked and saw Success atop the pillar. Then they would try to be great and become the some of us. Who would be the most of us? And Justice, well...Justice is a carousel. The most of us do something the some of us don't like, and we go back and forth disobeying and enforcing until the fireflies leave the pillar again. Caution will keep the most of us in line by itself without our help. And since with our new liquor, they will want what we want, they will agree with us. Now you know; you know a great secret of the some of us. It's better for everyone this way, isn't it? It makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

Maybe it was the remnants of the fish, but I said he got it right.

He picked me up from the floor. We will distill the fish, boil them down to a palatable spirit for the most of us. It will let them see the wisdom of Caution over Success or Justice. Your job, he said, is to catch enough TRUTH to make our drink.

I told him I didn't know where they were.

Out past the horizon, in the deepest waters.

My eyes widened. Nobody has been that far.

One fisher has—our man. But only his boat came back. If you agree to help, it's yours.

What kind of boat?

The kind you've dreamt of. The fastest, the finest.

I agreed—as long as I could have some more of the pieces on that platter. The men at the table laughed, shook my hand, and gave me two more cubes of TRUTH. They told me a man would wait for me at the docks with my new boat.

Before I went to the docks, I went home to think. It seemed if Caution won, then I wouldn't be able to catch many of the more exotic fish. No more CONFESSIONS, for sure. And maybe no more GOODMORNINGAFTERALATENIGHT—is it cautious to net a species so rare? That's the problem with these words the some of us put up for election: you never know what will come of them. These were muddy waters. Maybe, just maybe, the TRUTH would help me think it through. If I could keep it down. I braced myself, and swallowed another hunk.

It was easier this time. The taste exploded a voice in my head, and knocked me again off my feet.

What is poison, what is pleasure? I would sail tomorrow to find the TRUTH, and favor with the some of us. But before I slept, I wanted to see my ship.

Most shipwrights use the wood from the deep forests outside the city. The ships are rich brown to start, and covered then with thick pitch to seal it tight. My old boat's pitch was so thick I could not see the ship at night—and neither could the fish. They swam unafraid right into the keel, letting me know with their knocks where to cast my nets. But this ship could not have been wood—it was clear; light shone straight through so that only by the sunset could I see the frame. Maybe it was the glow of the clouds, maybe the material itself, but it seemed slightly pink. No shipwright in the most of us could have formed this thing. It seemed sculpted out of the waves. The water did not even ripple against it as it bobbed in the harbor.

The grinning man stood by the anchor post.

Heyyy, what do you think?

Can I go aboard?

It's yours, man.

The deck felt so fragile, yet so strong along my hesitant steps. I could see nothing between my boots and the water but a slight glimmering. My hand felt wet as it ran along the rail I knew must be there but couldn't see. But feeling my fingers, they were still dry.

Hey. What's this thing made of?

Like it? It's raaare man. Real rare.

What is it?

Watermelon sugar. You gonna do it?

I disembarked, the feel of the rail still on my fingertips, the voice of the fish still stirring in my head. Yeah, I'll do it. Tomorrow.

The next morning I took my new boat and traveled past imagination. No fisher had ever been so far. The ship was so fast I made weeks of travel in hours. I wondered why I'd never seen another ship like this, or heard of them. Usually the some of us parade their most expensive toys around. It worried me. Years ago, when Wisdom was on the pillar, we fishers came up with a saying for dealing with the some of us: "Never trust a treasure hidden."

Night had fallen when I arrived at the mark the men in the spike had charted. Fishing in darkness made sense—it's the hardest kind of fishing, but the most exotic fish emerge from the depths at night. I hoped the TRUTH would glow, but knew rare fish do not call attention to themselves. The first night I caught many fish, but no TRUTH. I caught some UNCONDITIONALLOVE, some PERFECTSONG, some EPIPHANY, some HONESTY. The last two are perhaps the rarest fish any

fisher could hope to catch, so I knew I was in the right place. And even if I caught no TRUTH, I was living my dream.

In the second night, no TRUTH.

In the third night, no TRUTH.

By the fourth night, I realized I would require a very special technique to catch this fish. Time was running short—election took place in two days. With a desperate heart, I swallowed my last chunk of TRUTH and hoped for an answer.

This time I lost control of my limbs. I moved like a string puppet, without thought or desire. I stripped my clothes and lowered myself into the water. Then I grabbed my CONFESSIONS barb, held it out before me. I closed my eyes as the TRUTH's meat plunged the poison thing deep into my chest. My blood leaked out into the water while I hung on the side of my boat. It was all very warm and hazy. A pinprick on my leg shook me from the daze. I struggled back into the boat to see what had happened, as the water was too full of my blood to see. And there, thrust into my leg, was a flapping fish covered in spines. I knew that iridescent scale—I had caught a TRUTH.

Never again, I thought. No fish is worth all that. Weak and fuzzy, I turned the boat back towards the city and set sail. The spiny beast still flopped and pulled against my leg. Its poison ran fast through me, straight to my head. I thought I heard it whisper:

I taste bitter through a blindfold.

That was when I learned I did not like the some of us. I tore the fish from my leg, but the spine remained. I fell unconscious long before the boat crashed into the docks.

I awoke back in the golden room in the spike, naked still. The pale, sash-eyed man held the TRUTH with pride.

You got one! Or it got you. He touched the spine in my leg.

I recoiled. I won't catch these for you, I said.

What do you mean?

It's too difficult. I almost died.

Can anyone do it?

Once.

So we just get more of the most of us to do it. Tell us how.

No.

What?

No. I won't tell you.

The pale man and his wailed and steadied themselves against the table.

The pale man stumbled back and lifted his sash. Why not?

Nobody should catch this fish.

But it's so rare, so precious.

You were wrong. It's poison inside and out.

The seated men whispered behind the roaring fire. They beckoned the pale man to hear their secrets. Returning to me, he said, do you remember what the governing word is this year?

Yes.

What?

Obedience.

Obedience. You are disobeying.

Tall men in CONFESSIONS-scale armor slipped through the door and lifted me off the floor. I could not see their faces or hear their breath. But they moved so softly.

The pale man drew close to my face, baring his fangs. They *were* sharpened. He said I hereby ban you from the market and the election. You will spend the year in prison for your impudence towards the word, and the some of us. He turned away and stroked his new fish. I saw him prick himself on a spine just before I was hauled out of the room.

Success won the election, I hear. Now it's winter, and I can see the cardinals spiraling up to the sky from my prison window. My CONFESSIONS barb still hangs from my neck, above the scar it left. Sometimes it burns, but then I just remember how much more painful that TRUTH was. That wound won't heal. I've tried a thousand times to take the stinger out, but it remains, as I remain in this cell—for now. The some of us stole the fish I caught out beyond the horizon, and got even richer than before.

It's funny though—that doesn't bother me so much anymore. I never got to keep the fish I caught anyway, and I used all the money I made to keep fishing. I'll go back to fishing after this year, but I think I'll just eat what I catch and not come in for market. And for now, I sit and watch the pillar METAPHOR go through its cycles and circles. Sometimes I even catch a glimpse of Success, when the sky is clear enough.

And in the summer, I will see the fireflies.

LA VIUDA

My Vieja has skin like Kleenex
and arms brocaded with bulging
veins. Lips pursed, you could never see
the missing tooth on the right side of her mouth.

From the shelf, a glow-in-the-dark
Virgin always watches my Vieja,
 through seventy six years of undyed hair,
 when she wears her blue housedress,
 while she sips her tomato juice.

Plastic saints collect dust by the television
while the Vieja rolls her fingers
over the beads of a rosary,
glancing over at family portraits.
Her son rarely visits,
her daughter never calls,
and she swears that her stillborn babies
wait for her in Heaven.
And yet, every breath of
dusty air is not so lonely.

Not even the Virgin knows
that my little Vieja
asleep in the armchair
still can smell
her dead husband's cologne
in the fibers of her pillow.

THE CURB AFTER LIGHT DRIZZLING

On the curb outside the Double T,
Gouged by unseen hands, “Marlene ‘63”
And down at the corner of Main Street and Musser
“2Pac4Ever” in indelible blue chalk,
Blurred around the edges, true,
But defiant, still witnessing at that lonely chapel.

What drove those hands,
Steered them to their knees and whether on a
Whim or through some concrete conviction bid them
Carve out their niche on the sidewalks of forever?

What other songs still hum underfoot,
Chanted soft by those slab-tongued sentinels,
Those vandal bards,
Those cocksure prophets of hopscotch and graffiti,
Muted by the sweet dilution of the rain or cracked up,
Split and shattered, to the angry ratatat chorus of jackhammers in love?

Perhaps a warning: that all great things happen
At the last second.
The overtime touchdown run,
The death-bed conversion,
The desperate “I love you”
As the train pulls out of the station.

WATCH FOR FALLING ROCKS



ASHES

Ceneri.

We're all used to the ships by now. There's one settled down in the old soccer field. No one tries to play around it. We all avoid looking at it directly. It gives you a feeling of insanity and nausea. It smells of anise.

There are still classes. We used to joke about how no matter what the weather was like, how much it snowed, there'd still be classes, the Dean would never cancel them. There are still classes but there are fewer and fewer people in them every day. People leave, go home. They promised us peace but we're all wary of the gift horse.

That's the kicker. The story is that the only transmission or signal, or whatever they pick up, the first one they could get from our planet was an image – an Italian flag, rainbows, shouting *pace*, peace. Maybe the colors drew them in, maybe the word led them to us, but they came down, shouting

PACE
peace.

I dropped my scarf on the ground yesterday. I picked it up – ashes clung to the fabric, disgusting snow. I brushed them off without thinking too much about it. We're used to the ashes by now.

arcobaleno.
rainbow.

I came here, to this school, full of hope and ideas that hadn't yet been forced out of my mind. Everywhere, all about me, there were signs of love – couples clinging to each other like burrs on a mangy dog, flowers blooming out of the cracks of old retaining walls, the smell of rain. I came with the idea that I could change the world.

There's a river that flows near campus. When I was still a shy freshman,

lonely, far from home, I often took walks down by that river. In the fall, the leaves were every brilliant shade that nature gave them, and they fell in clumps to the earth. I used to take handfuls of them, bring them to my face and inhale, and let the scent of sweet soil fill my lungs. I'd make piles of them and lie out for hours, reading or just admiring, watching the way the light changed going through the leaves. In the winter, there'd be an untouched landscape, covered in a thin flat layer of white perfection, save for the few footprints of the animals not hibernating. I would be tempted to make snow angels, but I never marred it. The river would freeze over, and I would walk out into the center, lie out, and make an ice angel. The stars were clearest there. Now that river flows gray with ash.

It was that spring that the ships came. They landed in fields overnight, and farmers woke up to them taking up their corn plots. Cows panicked and horses bucked at the sight of them, and storm clouds moved in overhead. It rained for three days as they sat inside their ships, waiting. Experts and politicians plotted and argued about what to do about them. It came down between sending in a negotiator and blowing them to pieces. Negotiating won by a narrow margin.

On the third day, a sort of window opened on a ship in Kansas. Someone unfurled a flag down the side. The bright rainbow colors cut against the gunmetal grey of the ship's exterior, a burst of life on a dead plane. I saw the photos of it on the news, but I didn't recognize it. Giuseppe, the Italian exchange student living down the hall, translated it for us.

"It comes from the *pace da tutti i balconi* campaign. 'Peace from every balcony.' You were supposed to hang such a flag from your balconies for peace. It started up after the war."

And that was that. They came down and landed and showed us a sign of peace. That's when the negotiators loosened their bulletproof vests and walked down to the landing sites. They were all surrounded by vegetation and wandering cattle. We, the millions at home, all saw footage of the negotiators wading through bent corn stalks and terrific piles of cow dung to reach the exteriors of the ships. They all had the same expressions – calm, but terrified. One woman had a steady stream

of silent tears streaming down one cheek. The image shook as the cameraman took shuddering breaths. We could hear him breathing. It was so silent.

A burst of light came from the sides, pulsing as they jumped down from the underside hatches. They were almost too tall, too brilliant, too shiny to look at. They were strangely beautiful, and totally unafraid of the cameras. Their eyes were huge and all shades, some blue, some violet, some seafoam green. They spoke in a frequency too harsh for human ears, like cellular phones together bouncing signals back and forth. When the humans spoke, those echoes were reflected in their voices. We all learned to keep silent around them, for fear of our own words being used to communicate in ways we couldn't understand. The PACE flag flapped in the crisp wind, snapping and cracking.

The negotiators gave up camping out after three nights near the biggest ship, the one with the recreated flag. In the light of day, it became obvious that they had created it from whichever materials they had laying around, and all the colors were slightly off. There was aquamarine, not azure, and the red was too dark, almost like blood.

Soon there was a ship in most cities, landing quietly in the night, never moving once they set down, their occupants lying in wait for whichever signals they needed. One landed in our old soccer field, and come morning my dorm mates went outside to stare at it. The sun beat off the metal and gave them all spots on their vision. I got up and got ready for class.

scoppio di luce.
burst of light.

They told us what they wanted through notes pushed through the sides of their ships, out the same window the flag came down through. The big ship in Kansas had the longest note, scribbled in badly structured English, later found to be learned by listening to the negotiators talking outside the ships, holding up signs in an effort to communicate.

WE WILL NOT TO HARM. WE HERE PACE.

We took them at their word. After the night with the burst of light, they hadn't been seen, and wouldn't be seen by most of us for months. They promised us, slowly, over a few weeks, that they were here to help. On the news they showed us satellite images of all the ships they had surrounding Earth, and what appeared to be large cannons mounted on the sides.

They said it would be beneficial to us, that it would cleanse our planet of the ills visible from so very far away, from where they had come. They came thousands upon thousands of light years to help us. We should be grateful. We should allow them to help. It seemed like an efficiency issue.

The first were Death Row inmates. Everyone involved had less of a problem with this than they would have had with anything else. They were, after all, "dead men walking," as Giuseppe said it. I spent a lot of time with him, sitting silently, his hand on the small of my back, stroking with his fingertips in small circles, watching the news reports and the images of ashes falling like rain. My name is Anna, but he would always whisper, "Oh, be calm, my sweet Gianna." Every time.

They showed the inmates walking single file toward a larger ship parked in a field across the street from the first prison. It was raining, and reporters screamed through the torrent at them, asking them what they were feeling. All of them passed by without a word, save one, who looked straight into the camera with dying eyes, and said,

"Fuck you"

clear as day. The rain plastered his hair to his forehead. Drops flowed down his nose. They sprayed in a fan as he snapped his head to the side, back facing the front. The line snaked further along the road and into the dark. Giuseppe's small circles sped up, slightly.

All the reporters who had the luxury of writing in a more flowery style described the scene and the smell of it, how musky it was, strong, enveloping, covering you in a blanket of smoke smelling of anise. It got inside your nasal passages and burned, like small claws in your tissues. Doctors have done studies, and the smoke is less harmful than the

residuals from cigarettes, but I've noticed everyone smoking a lot more. The familiar omnipresent cloud of tobacco seems more tolerable, somehow. That sick sweet blanket of smoke never goes away completely. It's nearly blocked out the sun, save for a few spare mornings when I catch a glimpse of the sunrise, low over the horizon. The pinks and reds are grey and pale now.

They went to every maximum security prison in the country, taking the damned and leading them out to their ships, always in the dead of night. There was little resistance to the idea. The families of the doomed sometimes showed up outside, screaming in misery and longing. One woman, someone's mother, fat and used up, came out on another damp night, her long muumuu clinging to her body from the sweat and the rain, tearing her tangled hair out. She screamed not her baby, not her Lew, no, not him, please, take the others but spare the innocent, until one of the reporters (whose numbers had steadily declined since this started happening every three days) came down and dragged her away, using considerable effort, and gave her a drink of something out of a shiny brass flask. The streaming footage caught only her muffled cries and the shuffling feet of the inmates, marching. They had moved on from just the Death Row persons to using the ones who had committed the most serious crimes – murder with intent, mostly. People had less of a problem with this than originally anticipated. Talking heads had postulated about the possibility of such an event. These programs were usually augmented with satellite images of ships surrounding the Earth, tightly grouped with large glowing cannons pointed at strategic locations.

The politicians and police began to come forward, more aggressively, saying that they couldn't bully us this way, we have our own methods and who are you to say what's right for us, but there came only more garbled notes

WE HERE PACE. WE NOT WANT HARM. PACE ONLY GOAL.

and more satellite images. Strange fires broke out at the Capitol Building and the town hall of the small Kansas town where the biggest ship still sat, waving the flag. We took it as a sign. There were less talking heads and more satellite images.

Soon they moved from maximum security to minimum security facilities. People were surprisingly complacent about this, considering that they had moved on from rapists and murderers to petty thieves and extortionists. There were white collar workers here. More people showed up to the lineups, most in expensive cars, hoping somehow to beg for the prisoners to be spared. There were resistances, riots, supported by the police, but they came down and talked in our mutated language, and they always got their way. Fur coats begged for their husbands to be spared; it wasn't as though they had killed anyone. They stood with mascara running down their cheeks. They couldn't be bothered to wipe it away.

More ships came about halfway through emptying the minimum security prisons. They landed in all the areas in between where they already were. Giuseppe told me about one landing in southern New Jersey, on a dairy farm, spitting out the bright lights. It was the closest one, save for the one in our soccer field. I looked out the window, toward it, and saw only the field lights glaring off the harsh metal. Ours hadn't moved yet. I wondered when it would.

Notes kept coming, mostly from the big ship, all summer, every third day like clockwork. They mostly said what they always said, but occasionally they'd be different, and say things like

PACE. CONTINUE AS NORMAL. WE NOT WANT INTERRUPT.

and there would be images of cannons glowing red.

vigilanza.

vigilance.

Seventeen months after the first burst of light, all the prisons stood empty. They moved on to people on probation or parole, and people who had a criminal history, starting with the most severe. This seemed to cause more panic. People tried to hide, but there would be images of cannons blinking angry, irritated red, and someone would turn them in. Reformed rapists, murderers, thieves, drug dealers, and extortionists were brought to the lineup.

Ashes began to cover everything. It was first noticeable one early autumn day. I had just been considering going back down to the river, where the smell of anise might be less noticeable once I buried my head in leaves, when I passed a parked car. I knew it hadn't been moved in a few weeks. A thin, barely perceptible layer of fine grey ash coated the whole of it. I blew out over the hood and the ash spread out and onto the ground. I let a tear fall and went back inside my dorm.

costante.
steady.

Autumn cascaded into winter, and snow began to fall along with the ash. The ship parked in our soccer field had opened up rather unceremoniously one night, hatches coming open underneath and letting them all jump down. The ground was hard as a rock and their feet made thundering echoes. They stood in small circles around their ship, and sent up a burst of light. It lasted only a few minutes, and every leaf on every branch stood out in sharp relief against the inky black sky.

People afraid to stop the motions of everyday life have kept the school running, but there aren't enough students to warrant proper classes. We've all been drifting, some wandering home, waiting for that ship to open and everyone and everything in it to come and take us all in lineups. We had heard that after they had rounded up everyone with a criminal record, they would be moving on. I didn't want to go home.

The lot of us, about a hundred hangers-on, stand in the lower field, staring up at the ship and the bright light. It goes out as though someone smothered a candle, quick and dead. One of them comes forward, sickly beautiful, and hands our Dean a note. It turned out to be one of many given out that night, all over the world.

PACE. FOR PEACE, WE CAME. WE WILL TAKE THE LAST OF YOUR GRIEF.

We stand, huddled, backs to the freezing wind, as the one who came forward walks down the line of us. Every few people, he reaches out and touches their shoulder, almost in a caring caress. Most pull back

from the touch, but take a step or two forward. He (I know this, I cannot say why) comes closer and closer, touching his way down the line, until he gets to Giuseppe and I. He seems to consider us both for a moment, and then reaches out and lightly grazes Giuseppe's shoulder.

Giuseppe's eyes go wide in fright and he snaps his head toward me, back and forth between me and the being, who has gone on down the line. He knows he has been judged. Those who have been called out, including the Dean, begin moving, single file, toward the ship, but Giuseppe does not move. He stands, clenching my hand in his own, steadfast, steady.

"Gianna."

Someone yanks him forcefully, tearing my hand out of his grasp. He begins to march backwards, toward the ship, getting lost faster and faster in the darkness. I'm rooted to the spot, I can't chase after. I feel my heart shattering, my stomach flipping, the inky black night coming in around me.

"Gianna!"

I can barely hear him in the fading sounds of the footsteps marching steadily away. His thin voice echoes off the buildings around us. I lose the flash of his eyes and olive skin in the dark. I now find I can move, but it is in the other direction I run. I run for years, seasons. I fly past the dorms, down the path to the woods. I jump over branches and logs, puddles and dead and dying animals, faster than I've ever flown before, down to the river. I hear a terrible roar. Ashes begin to fall from the sky in thick clumps, floating down through the bare branches and to the solid earth. They mix with the water and turn it sickly, sordid grey. I collapse and hit the riverbed, solid snow crunching, tears freezing to my cheeks as the smell of anise fills my nostrils.

LOOSE CREAM

Milk for two; Remembered.
An old cream
That paints our
Picture an awkward color.

Off white symbolism
Dies on its way down.
And it becomes a clear disappointment.

When he bit
The texture was fully shown.
He gave away all of
Her thoughts with his smile.

THE PROBLEM OF ANTS

I've been watching ants
die on my windowsill
for weeks now. Black,
boneless bodies rowing
their way to the afterlife.

*It was raining, so I hid
in the warm folds of your coat.
Yet, my mind kept returning.
Your eyelashes were so frail.*

I couldn't disturb them—
piling up into
a battlefield
the day after. My little
ant graveyard where
not all the corpses were dead
yet.

*Darkness crawled in through
a cracked window and slowly
began to carry away the meat
of your arms. My hands groped
for the missing pieces, but grasped
only bed sheets.*

How short are the lives
of ants! Barely born before
I watch their last dance
and wonder at the sound
of their last breath. This
must be how gods feel.

*Some sounds are worse
than Monday morning alarm
clocks. They are: The shriek
of jagged lines straightening,
the screams of a thousand dying ants.*

Death is a moment that
cannot be ignored. Ant-death
is no different. The ants wave
with spindly legs and I can't help
but question if their goodbyes
are painful. Sometimes
I wave back.

*I wake at night
trying to brush
the corpses of ants
off my tongue.*

This time I take a tissue
and begin an archeological dig,
expose windowsill—
It's startling like bone.
Dumping the bodies,
I walk away without
glancing back.

The ants have stopped screaming.

DREAM AND AZAZEL



SIPPIKKUL MUTHU: PEARL WITHIN SHELL

I don't remember the last time I saw my father. I was six when he left. I can't tell the difference anymore between my memories and stories my mother fed me. Sitting at the desk with my feet propped on my broken printer, I like to watch the smoke rise and glide up in abstract thick and thin twirls. They remind me of the luscious and delicate robes that adorned the Virgin Mary in Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Cigarettes are the perfect companion to the Blues at three in the morning. *Filter and fiber your blood* in the words of Whitman. I turn 21 years old in a couple of days. My mother who has eagerly been waiting for this day says she'll be here for my birthday, but flying over 24 hours from Singapore is more daunting than one can imagine.

Smoke gently breezes over photographs of my family on my desk. The most recently taken picture is one of my mother and sister sitting in my dorm room when they had visited the college. Another picture, slightly hidden behind the others, catches my attention. My twenty year old step-brothers protectively stand behind my unrecognizable self. It was taken at my fourth birthday. I don't have any pictures of my father and myself together. He was hardly with us. I'm not sure if I actually saw him leave the house for the last time, but I like to imagine my father and that night.

He wears a thin off-white cotton collared shirt, the outlines of his under shirt peering through. As usual, his neatly pressed brown pants clothe his traveling and fleeting legs. It's late at night and he decides to meet his friends at a bar. My mother stands at the gate of the apartment. For some reason she stays and watches him until he is out of sight. My father walks down the narrow passage, his hands in his pockets, head upright looking straight ahead. Before making the turn, before going out of sight, he stops abruptly, turns around slightly and looks into the eyes of the woman in a worn-out batik dress. Her black thin hair loose in curls, one hand holding onto the grill and the other resting on her hip, she stands and watches silently.

My mother told me once she knew something was not right that night. I'm not surprised; she has special powers of intuition. It wasn't the first time she had these "bad feelings."

Another lit cigarette and more flurries of smoke disappear into the elusive air. Smoke travels secretly through the slight opening in the window, fusing into the grayish white snow. I like to watch the needle

threading across the face of the record as it spins. My eyes follow the words B.B King & Bobby Bland moving round and round in bright colors of red and yellow against the black shiny disc.

I remember being awakened suddenly. My four year old sister cries from being disturbed in her sleep. I tap her arm and tell her to stop crying. We are both hurried by my mother. We are still in our pajamas. In the taxi, I fall asleep. I awaken at my grandmother's house. We lie down with our cousins on thin mattresses. My mother is not there. There must be something wrong. My older cousin next to me whispers in my ear in the dark. Her breath tickles me. She says, "Do you know what is happening? What are you going to do if your *Appa* dies?"

I reply, "I don't know," and sleep a dreamless night.

Appa, that's how we address our fathers. I don't remember ever calling my father *Appa*; I must have at some point. I have few memories of him. I remember his blue and white pills which I stole once to examine their interior, only to be surprised by the white powder and the smell of a hospital. I remember the toy doctor kit he gave me which I used effectively in performing surgeries for my sister's various problems. I remember the chocolate fudge sundaes and his favorite fruit, the pomelo. I remember secretly watching him from behind the cupboard when he buttoned his shirt and combed his gelled hair away from his forehead. I remember hiding behind him when he tried to protect me from being hit by my mother who had been angered by my rudeness. I remember the loose skin under his arms as he tried to grab my mother's arm while she swung the cane. I remember him being hurt too on the sides of his thighs. But most of all, I am most sure I remember his dead body.

The following day, my mother is still not at my grandmother's house. *Where could she be?* My uncle tells us that we are going somewhere important, to the Singapore casket. *Casket?* "What's a casket?" I ask.

Nobody answers the question. I am told to press the button to the third floor in the elevator. Coated in cold metal, the elevator is dull and dimly lit. I watch the orange light on the top of the doors move from circle to circle, and when it finally reaches the circle next to number 3, *ting!* I jolt slightly at the unexpected sound. Into a square and white room we walk. I see my mother appearing smaller and lighter in skin color. She takes my sister and me to the body in the middle of the room. I recognize my father sleeping, his arms straight at the sides of his body, like a soldier. Staring into his face, I am blank, just like him. I

touch his hand gently, in a poking manner, and he is as cold as I am in this bare and white-walled room. There is a soothing silence and I feel draped and wrapped in the gentility and calmness of the air. Like a pearl nestled in its shell, my father is resting comfortably in the chill of the white room.

My father had died because of a sudden heart attack. He was fifty years old. He was dead by the time he reached the hospital. My mother was informed and had gone to the hospital. What would he have said if he had seen her for maybe just a minute?

I imagine him in bed in the ER. My mother rushes frantically to his side with endless tears. He sees her and seeks to speak. The doctors and nurses let them alone. Tears stream from his eyes too. My father gently takes her hand in his, wrapping his fingers around hers. He speaks to her softly and slowly. He says, "I'm sorry for all I've done to you. Forgive me." My mother cries even more at this and squeezes his hand tighter telling him not to worry about these things. He continues to speak saying, "Take care of the girls. Tell them I love them very much and always will. Make them study well, let Mena be a doctor and Shaloo a lawyer... Sita...I love you." Then, his hand loses its grip on hers. My mother kisses him on his forehead and closes his eyes with her hand, making a secret promise to him that she will take care of her children and bring them up to be well-educated and successful.

The track has stopped playing. I've had enough of the Blues. I've been seduced by the drama and enticed by the fantasies of Indian movies. I can see myself looking out the window at the snow falling past the record collection, past the red and white carnations in the blue vase, past the snow globe of New York City, past the glass framed picture of my mother in a blue *sari* on her 50th birthday, past the melted cinnamon flavored candle, past the brass medieval chalice, past the empty bottles of Atomic vodka coated in blue velvet, Yellowtail Merlot and *La Beliere* Bordeaux, and finally past the paint brushes and uncapped cadmium red tube. The cigarettes have left a bitter and sickening aftertaste in my mouth. Washing it down with coffee only makes it worse. The picture of *Lord Ganesha* hung above my desk hovers over me. He is portrayed dancing in this picture. My sister and I used to sing devotional songs together. We don't anymore, but once in a while I find myself humming the familiar tunes.

The funeral takes place on the third day. My sister and I have been staying in our grandmother's house. My mother has not talked to us. Nobody has talked to us. We are once again in the white room with my father, except this time, the room is crowded with people all wearing

white. I realize that even my sister and I are dressed in white. My uncles, aunts, grand-aunts, grand-uncles, cousins, all of them are crying while they stand about in their little cliques looking at my father. We stand next to our father. The elderly men in the family encircle him, fixing his newly starched clothes. Two men work at moving my father's arms from his sides to his chest and interlocking his fingers. I never realized my father was so strong and powerful. My mother asks my sister and me to sing some devotional songs. She says that it will be good for our father to sing these songs. My sister and I begin with a devotional song about *Lord Ganesha*, praising his glories, also invoking his presence before us so that he may bless all those who worship him. I hear and see my mother crying. Suddenly I am overwhelmed and start to cry while singing and looking at my father. I do not understand why I cry. Later, priests arrive and special prayers are conducted. My mother leaves the room with other women. My brothers cry uncontrollably while they perform their rites for my father. My mother reappears, this time dressed in a white *sari* without the red dot on her forehead. She is as plain and white as the room. At the end of the funeral, a familiar friend of my father's, Uncle Saal, approaches my sister and me and apologizes to us. He apologizes to my mother too, asking for forgiveness. I don't take much note of him. When I return home, the house has been washed and cleaned. Pictures of gods and goddesses have been covered. For the next sixteen days, the house remains dark and silent except for a small lamp lit.

Thinking of the funeral now leaves a bitter taste in my memory, for the cloud of innocence has trickled away. I am bothered by the people at the funeral who I discovered were money whores, who fed into the family like parasites. Death was a joke. People there were merely reduced to eyes and their boasting cries. Who were these people anyway? Uncle Saal had betrayed my father by posing as his best friend and had stolen money from the family. The holiness of death and after-death was ridiculed and mocked for the body of my father became a treat to be feasted on in a room, in the white room.

I rummage through my record collection in frustration, trying to find the right one, for the right moment. It's Jimi's turn now. *Good Feeling*, *Good Times*. By my side are some canvases I had stretched a while ago along with some wood panels. Painting on wood is like walking on ice without having skates or knowing how to skate. Influenced by my research in India, I have been painting works revolving around Indian

women as dancers, thinkers, mothers, brides, draped in bright colors and rich fabric, so pure within yet trapped and unable to break that shell that women have grown accustomed to. In every face I see an image of my mother. During the funeral, my mother's marriage necklace was removed, along with her gold jewelry. As a rule, she had to be loyal to her husband and mourn for him by not wearing anything colorful or extravagant. The stigma she carried was her empty forehead, without the red dot, a symbol of a married woman. Cast in shame, my mother resorted to a statue-like existence. Named after the *Goddess Sitalakshmi*, who sacrificed herself to prove her loyalty to her husband, my mother succumbed to her fate. An outcast to society, she remained in darkness for a long time. Eventually, she realized the spirit within her still alive and ready to shine.

A few weeks after the funeral, I return to school. During assembly, the students are bustling and buzzing with new gossip. My friends and I as usual play rock, paper, scissors, before we have to sing the national anthem of Singapore. Behind us are girls of a higher grade. While playing and joking around, one of the older girls taps me on the shoulder and asks me, "Why are you laughing and playing like this? Aren't you sad?"

"Why would I be sad?" I ask frowning.

"Don't you know that your father has died? Don't you know that he's never coming back? He's dead!" Shocked by her questions, embarrassed and confused, I turn away from her. *Dead?* I remain silent during assembly. I remain silent during the day. I remain silent for a long time.

A loud peal of the alarm floods the room, reminding me the sun has begun to rise. Oh sun, *I see you also face to face*. The sky bursts in hues of blues, greens, oranges and yellows, each color taking its turn and merging from one another. And in this brightness I face, I wish. I wish, I, one day, someday, could or would strive out into the light, tearing apart the shell, so that the pearl within may be recovered.

STREETPLAY

He caricatures the Common men
And women.

His eyes have an alarm to spot them,
And steal them as minute's muses of his flash.

Only a trespasser could do that –
Near onto a stranger's space...

Blink!

Exposed inside is

A street drama in a single 35 mm frame

Unnoticed/noticed by his clumsy subjects

Too busy

That they forget and progress their routines

On callous cobblestones/footpaths/sidewalks/lost trails...

An untamed, unashamed documenter that he is

Turns streets into freakshows

Where his women aren't women –

They are hags, nymphs, rebels, wives of men,

Lovers of freedom and loathers of war

Or just apathetic daily goers.

His men,

Lumbering louts in pinstripe suits

Or black overcoats; have foreshadowed their mundane lives or spilled
their plans for life.

He finds his action in their everyday inaction

That translates these ordinary folks that you may have rubbed your
shoulders with

when you walked the zebra crossing

Into actors of unobvious streetplays frozen by gelatin silver print on a
standard polycontrast photo paper.

Where your eyes move along their glances and their surroundings

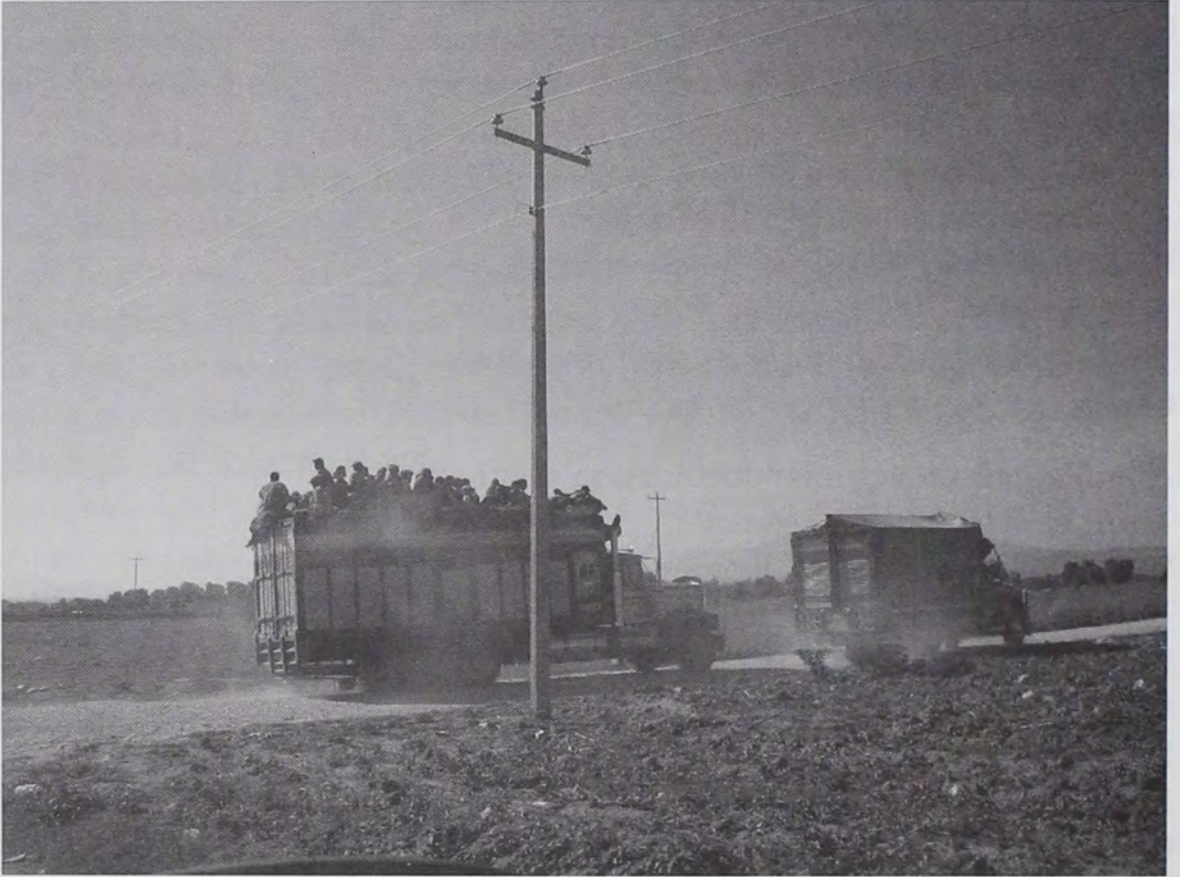
A spontaneous burst of emotions exudes through the paper

Until another look confuses you again -

Thoughtful that they really seem

He only knows that they aren't thinking.

FARM WORKERS ON THE ROAD TO XALAPA



AVIGNON, ANNO DOMINI 1348

The priest will not bless her. He walked away,
Ave María grátia plen strangled
by the sleeve he held over his mouth.
The Holy Ghost, it seems, cannot reverse
the instinct for self-preservation.

At nine years old, she's little more than sweaty
paper flesh in bundled rags – and yet
her weight sinks low his footsteps on the path
from church back home. A heaviness of spirit,
perhaps, made palpable in his arms.

Inside,
his wife is still in bed, her hair in braids
behind her head, her pouting lips, her lymph nodes
swelling bursting bleeding black, like coal
on snow skin. Crimson brushstrokes creep from corners
of nose and mouth, and he goes cold – they were
not there before. She is asleep; they're both
asleep, but sleeping in a mimicry
of death - all limp and silent. Eyes do not
flutter, nor is there movement save the shallow breaths
that seem more ceremonial than real.

He does not know what lymph nodes are, of course, nor
yersinia pestis, nor the penicillin
that could wake them from their slumber. But
he knows this - he knows the sepulchral
sound of agony in the wind; he knows,
better than the blood, the curves of his
wife's face; and he knows how to whisper screams
at Mass, where he walks through unvoiced fires, and
where he has heard the awesome silence of God.

The air is still and thick, the sunlight catches
dust and smoke like detritus of hope imploded.
Bodies he has seen collapse, and he
had thought he'd seen the same for faith, but he,
til now, had only seen it hollowed – the termite-
burrow emptiness, the leaking font
drained dry. This is panic boiling
the heart, the copper taste of bile in
the throat, the tightening noose around the skull.
This is collapse.

He lays at bedside porridge,
a leaf or two of brown cabbage, some wine
and gently shuts the door. Now he is finished.
He starts to pray for forgiveness (for old
habits die slow) but stops himself. Instead
he stoops down low and gathers up his words
and slowly flings them, stone-like, to the dark.

OLD WORLD ORDER



UNTO THE FOURTH GENERATIONⁱ

History. Seems like nobody cares about it anymore, like they're too busy to bother finding out where they came from. But not me. If you don't know where you came from, how can you know who you are? I know all the stories, as far back as they go. My family as I know it started when a fourteen-year-old boy named Achilles Pentholokos came over from Greece on a boat. My father tells me his village was called Pendoliphos, which means "city of five hills." It wasn't on the coast, so I doubt there was much there – rocks, I imagine, and perhaps a few goats. I guess that's why his parents sent him over here, whoever they were.

In 1905, Achilles left the Thessaloniki region and steamed down the Aegean to Crete, where he stayed with his cousin's family until it was time to take a ferry to Naples. When the day arrived, they cooked something nice for him, made sure his papers were in order, and sent him off.

The boy had never seen anything like Naples before – the castles and the churches and the modern buildings clustered around the bay, Vesuvius looming over them all. The ancient Greeks thought Vesuvius was sacred to Heracles, whose name, like our intrepid young hero's, is found in Homer, but I doubt Achilles knew anything about that. He had less than an hour to marvel at Naples before he was herded onto a ship full of Italians leaving for New York, and just as his mind stopped reeling, the Manhattan skyline stretched out before him along the Hudson River.

Achilles soon made his way to the growing Greek community in Marlborough, Massachusetts, where he worked in a shoe factory. His arms grew thick from wrestling with the machines all day. He went back to Greece to fight the Bulgarians invading from the north during World War I. Bulgarians used to be Turks, his yia yiaⁱⁱ had told him about the Turks when he was still a boy, and he wasn't about to let them go mucking about in his native land again.

He returned to Marlborough in 1918, satisfied. The Bulgarians had been routed, and the Ottoman Empire was no more. He brought back with him no wounds, a few medals, and when combined with his savings from the factory, enough money to get married and buy a car.

The woman was named Sophia, and wise she was: she could write both Greek and English even though she had had only three years of school. The car was a Model T, and it had to be started with a crank in the front. Achilles would crank up his car and go puttering around town on Sunday afternoons, despite the envious glares from his neighbors. Nobody else from church had a car, not even Father Nicholas. Some of the neighbors whispered that perhaps Achilles was getting too big for his britches, but he just jammed his cigar in his mouth, adjusted his hat, put his free arm around Sophia, and beamed at them as he trundled down the road.

Not quite a year after they got married, Achilles and Sophia had their first son. Achilles named him John, after his cousin who had been so kind to him, and Sophia added Achilles, after her husband.

I only know John Achilles through a photo taken on my parents' wedding day. He stands erect and stately on the right side of the photo, dancing with my mother. A spotlight shines on the two, but John's attention is not on the scene at hand. His severe face is turned above the form of his daughter in law, which is hardly noticeable. What little hair he has left is gray, and his deep black eyes gaze off into the upper left corner of the photograph, at what I'm not sure – it's dark and probably out of the camera's range. His face is stern but softened, his eyes piercing but glinting with tranquility. After looking at the photo for a minute I realize he's not staring at anything; the light in his eyes shines inward. He isn't in the scene at all. But it seems like he's happy, wherever he is.

When John was in high school he loved working with his hands. Chances are you'd find him scurrying back and forth from under an old Ford after school, his clothes stained with grease and a socket wrench in his hand. Senior year his best friend Ben talked to him about opening up a mechanic shop; Ben's father knew some people at the bank who could get them a loan. John tried pitching the proposal to his parents but knew his chances of success were slim.

Sophia was kneading dough for koulourakiaⁱⁱⁱ when John bounded in the door and plopped his books on the table. His face flushed and his heart pounded as his grand plan came spilling out of his mouth to his mother in an earnest clutter of words. She stopped kneading, turned her thin face toward him, and made a nasal "Ah!"

She turned her face back to her dough, and her tight black bun to her son.

“But Ma, we...”

“Ah!” The noise traveled from the tip of her tongue on the back of her teeth out through her pointed nose. “No mechanic for you! You go to college!”

“But Maaaa...”

“Ask your father!”

John tiptoed toward Achilles, who was sunken into his favorite armchair in the next room, flipping through the pages of *Ethnikos Kyrix*, which he bought every day at the newsstand after work. He had worked his way up to management and had a bit of a paunch now. He puffed on his pipe, scratched his moustache, and peered over his newspaper at his son, his gaze ponderous and aloof.

“Yes, your mother is right. College for you.” He went back to his paper, glad he had avoided getting involved in that one. He smiled as he heard Sophia’s hmmph of approval from the next room. John sighed and trudged upstairs to his room, where he started filling out the stack of applications ready and waiting on his desk.

He enrolled at New York University the next fall, majoring in engineering. Back home, Achilles’ newspaper told him there was another war on. John made it through three years at NYU before he was drafted. He fought Turks in Macedonia too, if by “fought” one meant “helped design radar equipment,” by “Turks” “Japanese,” and by “Macedonia” “a laboratory in Onondaga County.” While off duty he met a girl from a nice Greek family in Syracuse. After the war, he finished his degree and married her.

His wife’s name was Zoe but she signed her checks Sue. All the men who had taken her out on dates saw the wedding announcement in the paper and wondered how someone as stolid and unassuming as John Achilles had curried the favor of such a belle while their own efforts had failed, though they bore him no ill will. He was, after all, a hard worker who didn’t bother anyone: he kept to himself, mostly. The two bought a house in suburban Syracuse, whose Greek community was so small they didn’t even have a proper church. John helped build one. He worked for IBM designing computers, some of which were almost the size of the church.

John and Zoe had five children, two boys and three girls. My father was the youngest. They named him Michael after Zoe’s father and Achilles after John’s. Zoe loved Michael well enough but wondered why he couldn’t be a bit more like his older brother Nick. Nick played

football in high school and had a 4.0 GPA. He went to MIT to be an engineer, like his father. Zoe beamed. Michael was on the debate team in high school and had a 3.2. He didn't get into MIT, but he got into Northeastern, and goddamnit, he'd show her.

He failed Calc 101, found Jesus, and decided he was going to Bible college instead.

"You're going where?" Zoe stood in the kitchen with curlers in her hair, hands on her hips and her head cocked to the side.

"To Bible college. In Pennsylvania." His hair – blonde, like his mother's – had grown into a long shaggy mess of a thing. John put his *New York Times* on the kitchen table for a moment and stared at his son, baffled. He opened the paper again with a snap that didn't totally conceal his loud sigh.

"But why?"

Michael didn't know what to tell her. There was Jesus, yes, but He was also a means to an end, a ticket out. No more Ethnikos, no more envious glares, no more priests and neighbors and mothers tacitly telling you what you could and could not do.

Michael's sisters and brother were all married now. None of their spouses were Greek, but times were changing, and besides, they all came from good Orthodox or Catholic families. My dad met and fell in love with a Baptist girl who grew up on a farm near Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania. Her name was Sue, like his mother's, but unlike his mother's, it was her real name.

Meanwhile Achilles and Sophia had died peacefully and reasonably well off, no small thanks to President Roosevelt's new Social Security program. Although he wasn't sure exactly how it worked, Achilles would hear the politicians talking about it on the radio and say "See? I knew America great country." He and Sophia had seen all their children go to college, marry nice Greek people, and make lots of money, everything two immigrants could want. Like his father, John had been promoted to management, but he found the position miserable. He hated doing paperwork and having to fire people. He began to spend longer and longer periods of time alone. When my father was home from Bible college he noticed that his dad didn't talk very much anymore. This worried him, but he didn't want to cause any more trouble at home. He was getting married to the Baptist girl in a few weeks and needed all the support he could muster. His mom was finally onboard, but grudgingly so, he suspected.

When I was growing up my dad would sometimes reminisce about his father in glowing terms. He'd tell me how smart he was: "a lot like you," he'd say when I brought my report cards home. He told me how my grandfather was one of the only people in all of New York state who scored high enough on an engineering aptitude test given by the military to work on radar equipment instead of fight in France. He told me all the things his father had told him, how he'd supported him no matter what he did. At family gatherings my aunts would dust off a framed black and white portrait of my grandfather from his military days and say how much I looked like him. They would stare at me fondly and their eyes would get a wistful look and I could see that though they didn't mean anything by it, they weren't looking at me at all.

John Achilles Pentholokos, so beloved by his family and his community, died of a heart attack in SUNY Upstate Medical University Hospital at the unfortunate age of fifty-three. But he left behind a great legacy, a legacy that sits right here, one that I'm sure he's looking down on now with pride.

My speech is met with polite applause as I leave the pulpit and sit down in the pew next to my parents. It's the thirtieth anniversary of my grandfather's death, and St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church in Syracuse is holding a memorial service. I was the final speaker, chosen out of all my cousins. Perhaps it's because I'm a history major and I'm interested in such things; perhaps it's because I'm the only one who volunteered. I summed it all up, even though I've never actually met the man. My dad's face glows and he whispers "Nice job Charlie" as he reaches over and pats me on the back.

The sweet smell of incense floods the church as Father Andrew strides toward the pulpit swinging a censer and singing in Greek. "Aionia einai mneme" – Eternal be his memory. "Aionia einai onoma" – Eternal be his name. The whole congregation stands up and crosses themselves. My mother looks around and belatedly follows suit, but my father still remembers what to do, even though he's been a Baptist since before I was born.

After the service we're all clustered in the aisle on the way out the door, my aunts and uncles and cousins telling me how much they liked my speech. Just before I reach the door I feel a light touch on my arm. It's Zoe, my yia yia, still elegant after all these years, with her pearls and her makeup all in place and her hair just so. "I... I liked your speech!"

she says, and nearly looks away. Her tactlessness is almost legendary in our family so I wonder what's wrong. Her eyes falter and when they turn back toward me they're glancing back and forth over my face, trying so hard to be genial they're almost frenzied. "You know I was thinking, maybe you should talk to your father about... about the heart attack. I think... it might be good for him, you know? To talk about it." The strain leaves her face as she smiles and kisses me on the cheek, but as I walk away I hear her let out a long sigh, and I wonder.

The next day we're back home in Tunkhannock. It's summer and I don't have to go back to Boston University for two weeks – my friends tried to get me to come out with them again but I told them I don't feel like it. I sit in an armchair reading *Harper's* until my dad returns from one of the late-night walks he likes to take. He takes off his tan suit jacket and hangs it on the rack, exposing his thin frame. I set the magazine on the coffee table and slowly stand up.

"Hi Dad."

"Hi Charlie . . . What's up?"

"I... I have a question."

"Sure, what is it?"

I enunciate slowly, casually, but I know my nonchalance comes off as forced. "Grandpa John was a little young to have a heart attack, wasn't he?"

My father stiffens, and I get a glimpse of the warmth dissipating from his blue eyes before they flash out the window. He muses for a moment, then mumbles, "Well, the nutrition wasn't so good back in those days..."

"Dad, it was 1973. I've seen pictures of the guy, he was in great shape. Your whole family is. And I know he didn't smoke."

His gaze skitters back toward mine. Some of the color has drained from his face, diluting his olive complexion into something more like my half Anglo one. He looks like a child who accidentally broke his mother's favorite vase while he was playing in the guest room, where he wasn't supposed to, and he's truly sorry but he just can't tell her – not for fear of being yelled at or sent to his room, but because he can't bear the hurt he knows would pass over her face, if only for a moment, before she puts on a fake smile and tells him it's okay, she knows it was an accident.

"Listen, can we talk about this later?"

"Come on Dad, I need to know. I... I haven't been feeling so hot

lately.” I haven’t told him about the bottle of gin I keep under my bed at school so I can sleep at night. Or anyone, for that matter.

“It’s tough, you know? Losing a father. I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

“Jesus Christ Dad, it was thirty years ago. You were my age back then.”

All of a sudden he’s hardened; the moment of vulnerability is gone, as if it never was. The nostrils of his angular nose flare and his eyes blaze at me through his glasses. “You watch your mouth.”

“You know I didn’t mean anything by—”

“You know, I bet you’d feel a lot better if you came back to church.”

“Oh God, not that again.”

“And who’s this girl you’ve been carousing with lately? Now Rachel, she was nice. What was wrong with her? You ought to call her and apologize.”

I bristle. Now my nostrils are flaring. “That’s none of your goddamn business.”

“How many times have I told you, I will not tolerate swearing in this household. In this house, we honor God.”

“Oh give me a break Dad. You don’t really believe any of that shit, and you know it.”

The angry glint in his eyes has become dangerous, malevolent even, and the color of his face has deepened from white to olive to red. He takes half a step toward me, pauses, then swivels around and stalks out the front door, slamming it behind him.

My arms are clamped to my sides and my fists are clenched. He almost fucking hit me. I half wish he had: then we could have really had it out.

I take a deep breath and walk over to where my dad walked out. The screen has fallen off the porch door, the screen my dad and I replace the glass with every year when the weather starts to get nice. Not knowing what else to do, I grab a screwdriver from the toolbox in the basement, put the screen back on the door, and start fixing it.

Twenty minutes later I hear tentative footsteps on the porch. I glance away from the TV show I haven’t really been watching anyway, but I don’t get up. I take another deep breath when I hear the key rattling in the lock.

My dad softly slips in as I turn back toward the TV, now muted. My armchair creaks while I slowly rock back and forth with my head on my

hand and continue to stare at the images on the television, images I can't make any sense of and don't really see. I can't see my father either but I can feel his presence lingering in the dark just inside the doorway. He steps into the garish glow of the TV and my eyes are drawn to his and I see that they're swollen and red around the edges and broken.

His loud snuffle reverberates through the otherwise silent house as he wipes his nose with the back of his hand. He strides behind my armchair and I feel his hand – his other hand – on my shoulder. We stay like that for a minute until he says, “Charlie, I...”

And I find myself saying Dad, it's okay, I'm sorry too.

A few weeks after the wedding John received some bad news. Ben, his old friend, had died in a car crash. It wasn't his fault. They hadn't been able to see each other much over the past few decades – Ben was busy with his mechanic shop, after all – but they wrote each other as often as they could. My parents were visiting the day John found out. “He shook,” my father tells me, “like a leaf.”

John had already been seeing the priest for help but after that he started seeing the psychiatrist instead. The psychiatrist did all he could.

One day John got home from work early, when he knew Zoe would be out shopping for a while. He parked his car in the garage and shut the garage door. He drove a Ford too, but it was a Crown Victoria, not a Model T. It didn't need a crank to start. Instead of going through the door into the house John climbed back into his car. As he turned on the ignition he thought of Ben. He hoped he was happy, wherever he was. As things started growing hazy he wondered what Greece was like – probably just a bunch of rocks, he thought, and maybe a few goats. Still, he had always meant to go there someday. Ah well. As he began to slip from consciousness he saw the gleaming Mediterranean crashing against the shore of a rocky beach, and he smiled.

i “For I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.”

-Exodus 20:6, King James Version

ii “yia yia” – Greek for “grandma”

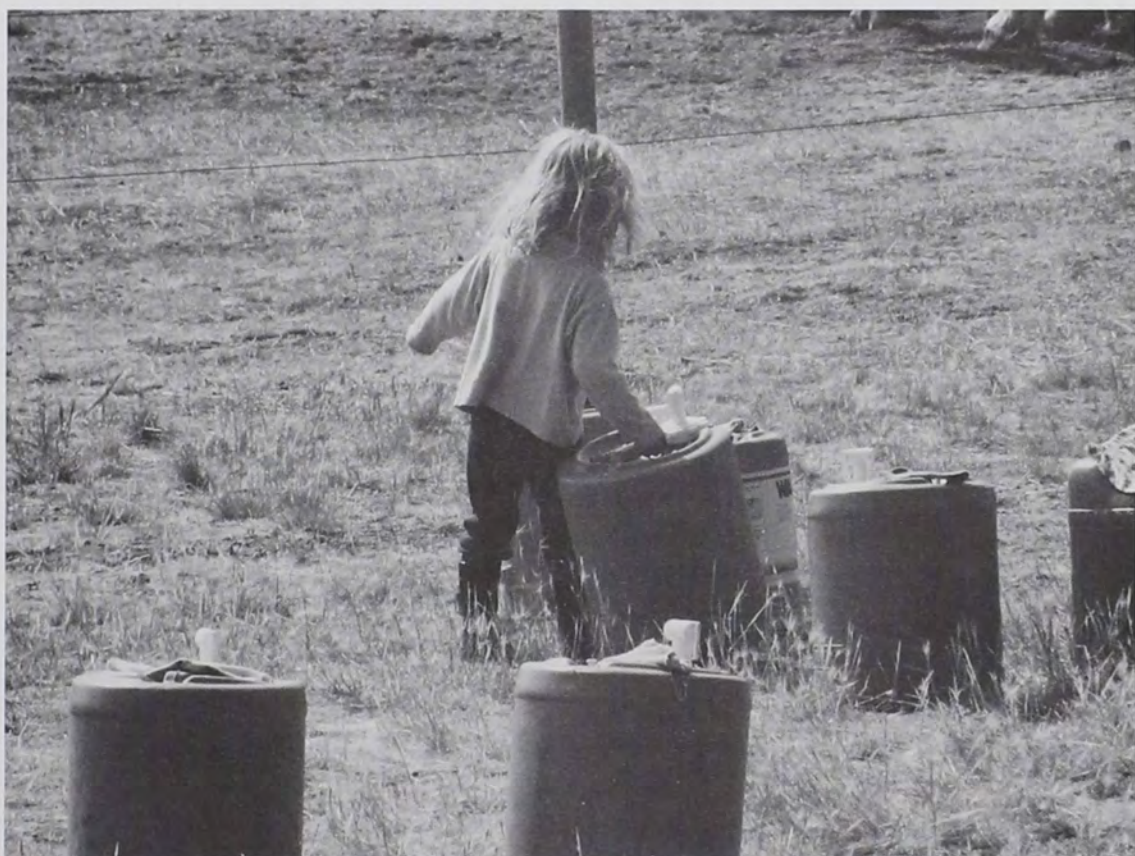
iii “koulourakia” – a lightly sweetened Greek cookie often baked in the shape of a twist

iv “Ethnikos Kyrix” – The National Herald, a Greek-language newspaper founded in Boston in 1915

AUTOPHAGIA

I stand vigil around myself, grinning
like the flesh-starved heathens I am,
pointing ten spears like fingers
between my ribs
digging for substance, soul, blood.
I drag barbed nails down my body
leaving leprous trails in my wake,
craving the crumbling disintegration
of my own skin and skull like
the accelerated deterioration
of my skeletal ruins,
abundant and silent in their unyielding dust.

FARM HAND



SILVERETTE-NEW WAVE FASCIST DATE ROUTINE

Suburban girls hold lust intact
Like robots, boy thing is to react

When the suburbs outside are a black melted sea
Leviathans of light caress the streets
When brothers and sisters draw blood from elites
Ms. Silverette is searching for me

I'm that dolphin who sends out sonar
And gets nothing back
But watery white noise
Which Silverette (haunts)

So you begin building beautiful parts
In your head
And pretentious devices
That Silverette wants

-the date-

I shot a heartlazer
(Into the murky cold suburbia)
It sped ruthlessly away
Like graffiti on a monorail- it's a massive pink storm of metal hands
And red-eyed ghosts with jewelry guitars
And clove cigarettes and boyhood scars

My random hand
Slices and destroys and remakes
My chest is the bureau holding clandestine files
I reach in and do paperwork; my hand's the getaway car,
Speeding through bloody rain and ribcage highways for miles

Pirates and vampires
My face contested the redness of the wine
I stared at her brutally
I felt covered in smoke-tinged mouths

I find the button for 'heartlazer' and I fire at will

A heartlazer is what you shoot when you want to be malevolent
To make the dry corners you can't stand irrelevant

You want that heartlazer to bounce off rain-soaked car metal
Sink into the concrete, electric wet
Do an underground dance to unsettle
Empower and recharge Ms. Silverette
You want her to savor and make solute of the lyric
Really the whole thing is all too vampiric.

The signal reached her, she grabs it with fingernails
And puts it in her pocket; I can hear her smirk
Yeah, heartlazers work, cause they're bright in this murk
And so do all devices inside my tongue
I like to call it "the department berserk"

I fired sick lines
Tongue cannonades
Neurotica napalms
Seduction brigade

She hears my metallic tempo
To that her hips swayed
Time for the date
The seduction brigade

I goose-stepped downtown on a rainbow
And I won't tell her any weird thing, I know
I see my friends: Chant the mathematic chant
To get them off my back, yeah that's that

Light cigarette for Ms. Silverette

These waters are the haunt of H.M.S. Silverette

She laid by the streetlight, thin and demure
She walked arrogant, like a ghost sat on her shoulder
She was undone, careless clothes in some mess
Satin and jeans, cigarettes on her dress

I laughed and shouted bladelike commands
I spat out ideas from my random hand
I scattered it all to a starry old sand

“The heartlazer is your future assassin”

But she still shimmered and danced, and whirred
I waited what would come of it, vision blurred

She saw all my lasers, she spoke low in ice
She spoke matriarch, high priestess, all venomous nice

She said:

“I wanna wire your chest
Push machines in your breast
So I can carry your packaged heart”

She confessed
I said “girl, you’re no surgeon” Cause I thought I was blessed
But then, but then she caressed-
And I woke up synthetic, metallic, possessed.

I woke up distressed
Stolen and misplaced
Rewired and defaced
Like an amplifier dissected
My lasers erased

On the monorail home I smoked to myself
And wondered how that bitch decanted my health
I looked back inside of my ribs for the answer

Realized she was a thief and a sex necromancer

My heartlazers are gone

My hands are abused

Because in my bureau chest I just was robbed of a fuse

For the Silverette machine

I forget how to use

And I just play the heartlazer fascist love blues

Because suburban Silverettes hold lust intact

And like robots, boy thing is to powerlessly

React

BUBBLES



MAROONED ON PIANO ISLAND

Saturday, I reached the Town of Piano Island when it began to rain. Seven hours of jetting up and down highways, byways, freeways and interstates landed me smack dab in the middle of bum-fuck, nowheresville. It had only been drizzling when I reached the main drag, but by the time I could make out the words Main Street on a sign, it began to pour. Main Street was riddled with old buildings, lining both sides of the road. Each one appeared as barren as the now wet sidewalks, but I got the sense it wasn't the rain keeping the streets so empty. The first signs of life were revealed at a stoplight. Some old drunk was managing to sleep through the steady torrents of falling water. A bum, no doubt. The town was probably full of them. I didn't give him another look and hit the gas. The Ford lurched forward. A '76 Country Squire Ford at that. After a full day of driving, she had had enough too.

The Squire rumbled a mile or so down the road. Before she collapsed I spotted the sign for the Piano Island Motel. The rain was picking up now and I had to go even slower in the driveway. I put her in one of the many empty parking spaces. The place was so dark, it looked closed, but the sign had said otherwise. I checked my wallet — a few crumpled bucks.

I got out and drudged to the office. There was one of those screen doors that made bells jingle when you went in. The office was bleak; wood paneling lined the walls and a dirty green carpet on the floor. In the back I could hear a TV mumbling. I pounded the top of the desk.

"Hello?" I yelled. A large black man emerged from the backroom. He wore a five o'clock shadow and a white undershirt with yellow sweat stains.

"Need a room?" He asked.

"Yep."

He reached under the desk and pulled out a key attached to a red plastic number three.

"Number three." He gestured with his thumb, "Down there."

"Thanks." I started walking away.

"Hey, yo, wait a minute buddy, where's the money?"

"Um, could I pay you the money when I check out?"

"No money, no room," he said, taking the keys out of my hand.

"Look, I don't have any cash right now, but I'm definitely getting some...soon. And it looks like you don't have too many customers, so how bout cuttin' me a little slack?"

He pondered this for a minute. "How soon ya gonna get this money?"

"Real soon."

"I'm really gonna need that money, ya know?"

"Yeah, yeah don't worry about it."

He gripped the keys with a fist on the desk.

"Lemme see your license," he commanded.

"I don't have one with me right now."

"Well where is it?"

"I just told ya, I don't have it!"

"Shit man, you show up here like some broke-ass bum and now you're sayin' you don't even have a license? I mean, do you think I'm an idiot? Why in god's name should I give you this room?"

"Look, all I can tell ya is I'll get that cash." I shrugged, he glared. "And I ain't a bum."

"That car yours?"

"Yeah, you wanna go for a spin?"

"Don't get cute wit' me white boy, if that heap isn't yours, I'ma find out in about 2 seconds." He put his hand on the phone, itching to dial the pigs.

"Hey bud, no need to get antsy, the car's mine...it ain't hot or anything."

"Yeah? Well good, then go head and back it up in front, here."

"What? Why?"

"You ain't payin' shit, you don't have a license, I'ma write down the plate numbers on that car of yours. You even think about running off or something without payin' I'll have a whole fuckin' army of cops on your ass."

I wasn't about to lose the room so I trudged back to the car and put her in front of the office. The guy looked hesitant, but forked over the keys.

The room was small. There was that same wood paneling on the walls, and an old water stain on the ceiling, directly above the bed. The bed had some worn out sheets and a little, half-ass table next to it. There was one light hanging from the ceiling and a small bureau in the

corner. I'd stayed in worse.

I lay on the bed. Terrible. Springs pushed around the bones in my spine. With one cigarette left, it'd be a long night. I lay with my eyes open for about ten minutes. I needed a drink.

The Squire had only a quarter tank left. I drove her back towards town nonetheless. When I reached the light at the center of town I looked for that bum again, but he wasn't around. It was still raining, so the guy must have gotten smart. I made the next right onto another desolate street. Nobody was out but the rain.

I made another right and after about a block I spotted a small sign. LIQUOR. Things looked better already.

I pulled in the little parking lot and checked my wallet. Eleven bucks. Eleven bucks could get me about jack shit. I smacked my pockets in the slim chance I had some extra 'moola.' I checked my breast pocket and felt some paper. I pulled out a crumpled twenty. Jackpot. I folded it carefully and jammed it in my wallet with the others.

The liquor store was small. A pretty little girl worked the counter. I snagged the cheapest bottle of scotch they had. The chick rang it up. Up close her face wasn't so hot, but she had some nice tits. Nice enough to fuck at least. I looked her in the eye, but she didn't return it.

"So you live around here?" I asked. She didn't answer.

I smiled and said, "Sorry, I'm Hank."

"That'll be \$16.37, Hank." I gave her the 20.

"Hey uh, I'm not from around here, you think you could show me around or somethin'? After your shift of course." I gave her another little smile.

"Look sir, I dunno what girls you've been winnin' over with these lines, but I ain't some floozy."

"Aha, okay, okay...So what's there to do in this town anyway?"

"Not much."

"Soooo what do you do, when you're not running this fine establishment?"

"My husband, actually."

"Oh, your husband eh? I'm sure he's a great guy. What's he do?"

She ignored me, pretending to be interested in something outside.

"Yeah I know, right," I said. "Raining like a bitch today. So, what did you say your husband does for a living?"

"I didn't say, but since you're so insistent, he's in the military and would prolly break your little face if he ever heard you keeping this talk

up.”

“I don’t doubt he would, but the service takes up a lotta time, I mean I bet he ain’t around much eh?” She glared at me, attempting to look angered. She had a terrible poker face.

“He’s away....but only for a lil while.”

“When’s he due back?”

“...August.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right around the corner, I better high tail it outta here before Rambo shows up and beats my ass. August and April, very close months.” She laughed at this one and I smirked with her. “Well listen, I don’t have much to do tonight, how bout I buy you a drink somewhere?”

“I’m not a bar kinda girl.”

“No? Well who said anything about a bar? How bout you help me finish this scotch?”

“Haha, you ain’t a quitter, are you?”

“Nope. So how ‘bout it? I’m stayin’ at the uhhh... motel-somethin’-or-other, down the road; I could use a drinking buddy tonight.”

“Piano Island Motel? No thanks, place is a shit hole.”

“Tell me ‘bout it... So you got any bright ideas, or is this the part where I’m kicked out and end up spending the night alone?”

She smiled, “You know where Glen Drive is?”

“Nope.”

She took my receipt and scribbled something on it and put it in my hand.

I winked at her. “Thanks, doll.”

I grabbed the scotch and left. In the car I unfolded the receipt. It had her home address and brief directions. On the bottom was the time, 9:00.

My Casio woke me with its beeping. I got up from my post liquor store nap and I threw my pants on. I lumbered back to the old Squire, right in the same place I had left her, in the rain. The day had been wearing on and still the downpour hadn’t quit. My shoes were getting soaked through the soles and my clothes began to stick to my skin.

The car’s back seat was filling with rain. Some fucking leak had sprung. The window always had been a piece of shit, but I wasn’t about to start fucking with it all night. I picked up a roll of toilet paper from the floor. It was stiff and the sheets stuck together; it had been under the damn seat for weeks, maybe months. I ripped out a bunch of pieces

and jammed them into the corner of the window, clogging the leak. It wasn't going to do shit, but it was all I had.

I made it out of the motel with the wipers going like mad. Speeding through the same red light, I drove towards the other side of town. I pulled out the receipt she'd written on, but my wet pants had made the ink bleed. All I could make out was Glen Drive and her house number. I started slowing down at every street sign. They were hard to read through the rain. I would have lit a cigarette, but I had smoked the last one sometime before. I stopped at nearly every street that branched off of Main Street. After 20, frustrating minutes maybe longer, I had lost track of time and I headed back to town.

I pulled up to the only bar in town. The words, Piano Island Tavern, were painted on an old sign on the roof. The windows had an orange glow from inside, making it the only lit up joint in town. I got out of the car and back in the rain. My back was now drenched, and my underwear was feeling damp.

The Tavern was sparsely populated, with a few locals at the bar and some drunkard in denim, shouting with his buddy. The guy looked tanked, blabbering about how he could "whoop" his friend in pool, any day. He kept swinging a pool stick with one hand and spilling beer with the other.

The bartender looked quite old and when I approached him, he seemed to have trouble seeing. A web of wrinkles enveloped his eyes, along with a pair of sagging eyebrows that seemed to hang dangerously low. I approached the meekest looking guy at bar, which wasn't saying much. He puffed on a Marlboro through a yellow beard. I got jealous once I found out this man possessed the ability to maintain a cigarette without ashing, or removing it from his lips once.

I nodded to him, "Hey buddy, ju know where Glen Drive is?"

Smoke billowed up from under his NASCAR cap. He nodded his head in the direction of Southeast, without uttering a word.

"Yeah, I was wondering if you knew where this place was." I shoved the piece of paper with her house number under the guy's face. The man took a long swig from his beer, downing at least a third of it before he even glanced at my paper. He took one look at the receipt and turned a fraction of an inch towards me for the first time.

"It's right up there," he grumbled, moving his eyes in the same direction he had nodded.

"Yeah... Thanks." I slid a few stools down; he looked like a man

who needed his space. I grabbed the stool right in front of the bartender. He looked even more deathly up close.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Can I get a Hennigans on the rocks?”

“Ain’t got it.”

“Shit. Alright, gimme a shot uh your strongest whiskey.” The old man fumbled with a glass, almost dropping it at first. He filled it with a deep brown liquid that resembled whiskey, but was marked with a label I wasn’t familiar with. I put back the shot quick and threw a couple bucks on the bar. I wasn’t planning on getting shit-faced in this place.

Outside the rain was even coming down heavier than before. I stumbled through puddles, blinded by the bullet-like droplets. I reached the Squire, half expecting to find dents from the lethal rain.

She started up alright, running almost on fumes now. I drove through the red light and made a right onto King Street, heading in the direction the guy had nodded. About 7 miles down the road the Squire was on her last legs, but the next bend in the road revealed the beat up Glen Drive.

A few yards up the road, I found the house. It was small. Little to no light emanated from the few windows by the door. I checked myself in the rearview, inspecting my hair, smoothing it down in certain parts. I rubbed any shit off my face and cursed myself for driving into the boonies just for a little pussy. I grabbed the scotch and headed to the door. Fucking rain never let up. I went up the wooden steps, opened the plastic door and pounded the wooden one.

There was a “Come in,” from inside so I pushed through.

“Hello, there,” she said.

“Sorry, I’m late - I, uhh...”

“No, it’s fine.”

I stepped inside, out of the rain. She was lying on this shitty couch in the middle of the room. She lay in this odd way that kind of reminded me of my ex-wife. One leg propped up on the couch’s arm and the other hanging off the end, just like Fran used to do. Her head was turned facing the TV and she had both arms folded on her stomach.

She had on tight blue jeans. The ones that are so tight they hug the girl’s ass, making it look real round. She wore this brownish, sort of lacey blouse that cheap girls will wear to try to look nice. You could tell it was cheap, but it made her tits look good.

The room was small, but from the looks of it, bigger than most rooms

in the house. It had this peeling pinstripe wallpaper lining the walls. The room itself had close to nothing in it but this old yellow couch in front of the TV. The TV was propped on this weird hand-me-down-looking table. Then on the right side of the room the wall opened up to a small kitchen with grime-stained tiles.

“Nice place,” I said.

“Thanks...it’s home... You can sit if ya like.”

“Yeah.” I sat down on the far side of the couch so she wouldn’t have to move from her position too much. “I could make us both a drink... With that,” she said, gesturing to my bottle. I had it cradled in my lab.

“Yeah, please. That’d be nice.” She took the bottle.

She was good with the drinks. Not too much ice, most women load up a drink with ice and it ruins a good scotch. The TV was still buzzin’, and I had no problem with it on. She left it on this one channel that was playing this movie, *Wait until Dark*. It was the only thing worth watching out of the 4 working channels. I hadn’t seen the flick in years, but it wasn’t too bad with a drink in my hand. We’d finish our drinks and then she’d take our glasses to the kitchen and refill them.

The only light on in the house seemed to be this strange lamp, near the sink, in the kitchen. Any other light came from the TV. It colored our faces a grayish blue. Halfway through the movie I started to feel the alcohol warming my veins. We both were getting pretty liquored up. I felt good for the first time today. During commercials I made some small talk with her. Found out her name was Lizzy, she had lived in the town her whole life. A couple times I got her to laugh. I told her about being on the road and how I tried pissing in a bottle once. I had to make good time, on my way out to Flagstaff, so I couldn’t take too many stops. I had to piss so I just put the bottle down there, holding it under my dick and when it seemed positioned alright I let it flow. Fucking pissed all over my leg and nearly drove off the road. She giggled, but I suspected it was the booze laughing.

We both kept silent when the movie would come back on. I kept thinking about if it was hard for ol’ Audrey or Susie Hendrix as she was called in the movie, to act like a blind chick. She seemed real good at it, real natural. I wondered if she ever got fed up on the set or something, having to bump into shit and fake like she didn’t see it.

Somewhere between my 7th and 9th drink I tried a subtle approach, inching towards her. I knew she knew what I was up to, but she didn’t move away or say anything so I figured it was smooth sailing. I got kind

of close to her. A few times I gave her legs a quick glance. They were looking pretty good in those tight blue jeans.

The movie was long but we were almost near its end. Then there was that part where guy jumps out of the shadows. Lizzy got a little scared and sort of jumped in my lap. The movie ended, I finished my drink and went in for the kill. I pushed her head against the couch a little and gave her a big kiss — she didn't resist or anything. I nudged her with my hips to lie back and she did. I felt like I was in fucking high school, making out with some teenager, but I didn't let it bother me. We kept at it and I moved to touch one of those legs when I saw the lights. Above us on the back wall two huge bright lights appeared, like two big yellow tits. I sat up and looked towards the front window. A car had pulled up.

“Who the fuck is that?” I asked.

She just giggled at me. The bitch was drunk.

“Is that your fucking husband or something?”

“No! I told you he's away.” She put on this big grin. I wasn't following.

“Who's here then?”

I heard heavy feet climb the wooden steps before the door swung open and the silhouette of a man appeared. The guy came in, looking pretty haggard. The heavy scent of beer and rain soon stunk up the room. At first I couldn't really make him out. My vision was a little off and the kitchen lamp was lighting his face weird. There were all these long shadows under his nose and eyes. He kind of reminded me of the guy who had lurked in the shadows, from the movie. This guy had on a stained denim shirt, only buttoned half way up. He wasn't too tall, I was probably taller, but he certainly wasn't a small guy. He stumbled further into the room and slammed the door behind himself. I could see his face clearer and my mind unclouded just long enough for me to remember the denim clad drunk at the bar. Up close he had this strange German shepherd look about him, with his head hanging over his chest and his mouth half open exposing a very red tongue.

He gave a little half smirk in our direction.

“Who's your friend Lizbeth?” he slurred.

She was still lying back on the couch. “He's a friend....One of those outta towners. You know em Jimmy...real nice types uh fellas.”

The guy let out a short laugh. “You wanna drink, friend? I'm sure Liz's got some shit in that kitchen... works at fuckin' liquor store for

Christ sake.”

“Actually I’m just passing through. Was about to head out, right before you showed up. But uh, ya know, feel free to pour as many drinks for yaself as you want. Heck I’m not gonna stop ya.”

“Head out, eh? Looks like you were just getting settled.” Lizzy laughed.

“Come on, Jimmy,” she said. “You’re gonna scare my new friend. He don’t have to have a drink if he don’t want one.” She peered over the couch smiling at the guy.

“She’s right, Jim. The last thing I need is another drink, if I’m ever gonna wake up tomorrow.” The guy furrowed his brow, giving me this look like he didn’t understand a thing I said.

“Hey now, friend. You know it ain’t polite to turn down a free drink roun’ here. Matter fact, some peoples consider that an insult... Shit, I got this buddy in the next town over. Ya follow? Well this guy got the shit beat outta him for refusin’ a drink. I mean really, this kid got the stuffin’ beat straight outa him!”

“Like I said, I’ll have a drink...Pour away.”

“Oh, so now he’ll have a drink. You hear that Lizbeth? Your friend will have a drink now.” She had lain back down and let out a giggle in response. She then attempted to nurse her drink, while still lying down and spilled on herself. Some scotch trickled down her cheek, stopping at her ear.

“Say what kinda friend are you anyway, friend?” He started squinting at me and I figured, if I had to, I could punch him in the throat and just toss him out of the way. “Cuz I got this real bad memory, and right now it ain’t workin’ too good, ya see? I just can’t seem to remember ever meeting ya before, friend. And to tell ya the truth, I’m a real close friend uh the family here...reeeal close...you could say I take care of things round here when Bill ain’t around. Make sure nothing screwy happens, ya follow?” I stayed quiet, watching his eyes. “So I figure, you’re a friend, I’m a friend, we’re all fuckin’ friends right? So I musta known you from somewheres.”

I stood up from the couch and kept my eyes locked on his. Silence fell over the room. I didn’t look, but I took a guess Lizzy had passed out. Instead she broke the silence, “You don’t know this guy, Jimmy. I told you he ain’t from around here or nothing.” She let out another laugh, “I bet you could get to know him, though.”

He continued to stare me down without giving Lizzy a glance.

Things were about to get out of hand and if I didn't say something now old Jimbo looked like he would tear me a new one. "I'll tell ya Jim, this girl's smart. She's dead right this time. You don't know me...You don't me at all. Fuck man, I don't even know you. And I gotta tell ya Jim, I plan on keeping it that way. You ain't gonna ever know me. In fact I'm gonna walk right over there, head out that door and you're gonna shut the fuck up and that will be that." He gave me his most menacing stare yet, but I saw through his eyes. I could see it, he was thinking twice about starting any kind of brawl now.

He spoke again in a deep whisper, "I'ma make this easy, friend. I'm gonna open this here door, you're gonna walk outa here, and I don't ever, and I mean ever wanna see your fuckin' ugly ass face around here again." He opened the door and held it for me. I stood without moving. "I ain't gone say it again, you git from this house and I won't break your fuckin' leg." I waited a few seconds, and then took my time walk to the door. My eyes never left his. I passed within inches of him, stepping out through the threshold. I was just clear of the door when he tried to pull a fast one. From some undisclosed location, the drunkard pulled out a beer bottle and with one swift motion raised it above his head like a club, and then attempted to bring it down on mine. Jimbo had had plenty to drink and his arm was slower than my feet. His face distorted in a demented snarl as he focused all his energy into bashing my skull. Just as his beast-like hands were within inches of pummeling my face, I moved. I moved with a speed that I had only known in the early days of my youth. I took 2 steps outside, while simultaneously slamming the plastic door square in Jim's face. The bottle shattered against the door and shards of glass exploded backwards. A few shards tagged Jimbo, or so I presumed by the way he clasped his face with both hands. The drunken bastard stumbled away from the door hollering in pain. Soon I heard Lizzy screaming too. I descended the steps and had to laugh out loud; the fuckin' cocksucker deserved a couple scrapes.

I was so pleased with myself; I almost forgot the rain. In the Squire I could smell the damp seats in the back, but not even that could wipe the smile from my face. I stuck the key in the ignition and turned it. She gasped and went quiet. I tried again; the engine sputtered a little, but refused to turn over. I tried several times, but she wasn't starting. I lit a match and held it to the dash. The little white needle rested on the bottom. EMPTY. I was fucked. I had no doubt in my mind that

Jimbo probably had a few extra gallons, but I wasn't about to ask. I punched the steering wheel and got out. I knew I couldn't stick around here, car or no car. Jimmy was sure to get that glass out and I wasn't about to see how well his face was healing up. Through the rain, I started walking down Glen Drive, at a quick pace. I would have lit a cigarette, but I had been out of them for hours. I checked the Casio, with its glowing light, and read 3:45 AM.

It was over 7 miles back to town. What started as a brisk pace soon became a slow dragging of my legs, through the puddles and the dirt. I had to keep taking breaks as my legs grew heavier to lift with each step. Then when it seemed like I could bear the rain no longer, my prayers were answered. Just like that, only 2 miles out from town, it just stopped. The heavens were spent. I was grateful, but still on the verge of death.

I reached the intersection by dawn. My legs burned and my head was splitting, probably from the Scotch. Once I saw the light at the intersection, I made one last effort to move myself along. I almost crawled through the intersection, groping for the empty bench across the street. I sat down; on the very bench I had seen the day before. I was soaked from head to toe and so was the bench. My beard had been active through the night and now a dirty array of hairs had sprouted from my chin. The bench began to consume me and I yielded to its might. My head fell back and my hands became weights in my lap, impossible to lift. I tried one last time to raise myself and muster some energy, but the bench had me strapped down. The wet, wooden, green boards soon morphed into the softest bed Piano Island had to offer, and I accepted willingly.

MINT SHAVINGS

These gentle scents of sex and
cigarettes were predicted in the quiet
kindling of your eyes. And as the smell dips
down the steps and scoops out the loneliness in this
hollow home, there is a secret memoir of our love, creeping
vine-y along the walls.

I will confide in the chipping
swallows and tell them that I can not say
I have ever loved another stranger more than
you. They pick away springtime with their clumsy
felicity; the gravestone of your faces rubs away, leaving awkward
grooves where your name once perched atop your nose.

A nostalgia grips my throat like
snot and slides down coy and green into
my stomach where the secrets sleep. In the cage
that is my belly I find with its twinkling gurgle that it has
not yet set free the cooing quails that nuzzle the doors of your
unknown.

Oh, to remember the longing
sweep of breath that fell from out the
puckered apple lip of night. I curl the memories
about my forehead into a smoky halo; dancing never
afforded the insane so much victory as the trifles and spoils of love.

But! alas- we know it's just the early morning and those soft charms
sting my skin like mint.

BEACH COMBING



OF LIES

I never really hid my intentions from my mother about leaving. I told her on a walk that I would be dead before I let any children of mine stay in her house. She insisted she could protect them from Dad, and I asked "Like you protected me?" If I could pinpoint the moment our relationship ended, that would be it. I believe in more finite endings.

The men finished moving the last few things into the truck and I supervised while my parents stood around me, filling the air with confusion and sadness.

"I just don't understand why you are taking those things. What use do you have for them at grad school?" Everything with even the mildest sentimental value was loaded in the truck, a wooden barn full of Barbies, eighteen boxes of books and two doll wardrobes, Veronica and Samantha in pink dresses packed within. The men got in the truck and drove away, to Chicago, where a storage room is waiting for most of those things. My best friend and her husband pull in as they leave, right on time. I am not taking my parents' car with me, as they expected.

"I'm not coming back." Mike got out of the car, and I noticed Mindy had brought along one of her brothers too. I took a deep breath and started saying the words that I had practiced for months.

My father's face got red in a preemptive explosion. I pulled a paper out of my pocket, I had signed it days earlier under the watchful eyes of one of my parents' friends. Lawyers.

"This is a contract, about my reimbursing you for the cost of my college. Given my scholarship and my contributions, I figure you paid approximately a hundred thousand dollars. It says that I'll be paying you at least five thousand dollars a year, until I've finished paying it off. Once I'm out of school, I'll try to finish paying it off as soon as possible. I also ask that you remove me from your will. I want nothing from you. If you keep me as beneficiary, know that I'm only going to donate everything to charity." I put the paper in my mother's limp fingers. She stared at me in shock. My father was purple. He started to pace across the driveway, throwing his hands around threateningly though never actually speaking. I didn't pause in my speech; I had practiced this when he was screaming at my mother downstairs every few days, so I knew that I could say it without crying.

“I called the police, Dad, in case you decided to take this out on, Mom. If you want anyone to blame, you should blame yourself. Grandpa and Grandma are coming too since the police can’t stay here forever. They already know. So does everyone in Mom’s family.” Mike came and got the bag of clothes in my hand. “I’ve changed my phone number. Don’t try to contact me. You’ve had twenty years to say everything you needed to; you have no more lies that I want to hear.” The police pulled up the long driveway right on time and the dogs barked menacingly, chasing their car. A tall cop got out. I knelt down and called the dogs to me. Ardamous gave me long wet kisses and B.J. leaned on me lovingly. My father started shouting at the cops. I gave them both kisses, for they were my little brothers. I stood and looked at my mother one last time. The last two minutes seem to have aged her but I saw her so rarely away at college that it is more her unfamiliar old face than my revelations. “Bye, Mom.” I got into Mike’s car. Mindy slid in next to me, her brother closed the door. The cops were holding my father away from the car. Mike backed out of the driveway. My mother never moved.

Life at my house was particularly loud when I was between five and twelve. Screaming started at six in the morning, and often was my alarm clock for school. It stopped at nine with “I’m going to bed” or a slamming door giving way to blissful silence. At five, my parents stood screaming in the kitchen. It was not a new occurrence and in my little kid brain, it was the final straw.

I packed my red suitcase with the black stripes full of Hess trucks and Barbies, because I had priorities. Sneaking out of the front door without making a sound took a long moment since the door creaked with every moment and I had to do it during the screaming. In my socks, I skipped out to the pond, free at last. Little girls weren’t supposed to be out by the water alone and I parked my suitcase between the pond and the shed and sat on it. Time passed but an only child with two working parents who didn’t have time to play right knew how to self-entertain. My dog Abby also frightened by the yelling came out and lay with me in the summer sun, and we talked about my parents. She mostly listened. It is hard to remember how my parents reacted, realizing their child was missing. I don’t know how I felt finding her just a couple of feet from a thirty foot deep pond that my father had found an 80 pound snapping turtle in just weeks before, but whatever their problem was, it didn’t get better.

My general conclusion on my family is that I arrived eleven years into my parents' marriage and they could not adjust to dealing with a child. That was why there was never the question of having another, as they could barely handle the one they had. If there was ever any love between my parents, I arrived too late to see it.

My family keeps secrets. Even I do. I know all about my mother's every day lies to my father, and how when my father makes any noise louder than a sneeze, my mother's and my heart jump to 110bpm. I know that they aren't entirely forthright with the government about their income and they won't take an animal to the vet until it is too late.

My father's tyranny is absolute and unquestioned. We cower and hide like the dogs when he's on a rampage. I go upstairs to my room and read a book while the screaming goes on downstairs. It's hard to figure out what they are fighting about, but it is probably about me. My father has found me increasingly distant from him, favoring my mother absolutely and he accuses her of stealing me from him. The only stealing that has been done is him stealing any love I might have once had for him. His constant criticism, the yelling whenever he feels like it, the stress of knowing that even a piece of paper left out where he doesn't want it is enough to receive twenty minutes of drill sergeant yelling.

My mother is crying but I'm numb to that now. But then the screaming changes, because my mother is doing it now.

"You almost hit me!"

"I did not. Jesus, Stella. I didn't touch you."

"You were going to!" My mother runs up the stairs away from him.

"I didn't do anything. Stella, get back here." She runs into the bedroom and slams the door. "Stella. I give up!" He storms off and outside. Her door opens and I get off my bed to be the comforter. An unlikely role for the 16 year old daughter who doesn't deserve this either. My mother is naked, and in a towel.

"I peed my pants." She says as she goes into the bathroom, and I follow her. "I thought he was going to hit me." Sometimes it isn't the physical abuse that hurts, it is the threat that he could do whatever he wants to you, destroy you emotionally and then if that doesn't work, his scarred hands can teach you a lesson.

Later, my parents' marital problems became clear. While they fought over me incessantly, over my straight A's, my perfect attendance, my excessive achievement in anything I attempted. My father felt my hate

and blamed it on her. They fought over me within ear shot because they couldn't fight over the truth. At the end of one fight, my mother looked up at me, standing at the top of the stairs and said "Love is never enough, you better remember that." If this is what she called love, I could not imagine her hate.

For the truth about my parents relationship, I had to go to another mom. She was as much a mom as she could be, shameless and mildly ruffled. Baby weight still clung to her, though her house was full of teenagers. In her late 30s, Wendy had her mother's face, laugh and need to give away anything she had. She was my nanny, though I don't remember her as such since she married when I was five, and she was nineteen. Hannah was born too few months later, and Joey, then Suzanne followed after. A shotgun wedding destroyed her relationship with my parents, who had dreams of helping her afford college. When I was twelve, my mother stared me straight in the face and said "If you get pregnant, don't come home."

Of her time spent in my house, I only have a photograph as proof, a single picture of Wendy lying on the kitchen floor with me as a toddler, even though she lived with us for two years. For me, half the secrets come in the form of little white lies about a past I wasn't there for or can't remember. My parents assume I forget things; that it gets lost in a sea of old memories which can't be interpreted by an adult mind. But the things I do remember, that's where the lies come in.

Wendy gave me a sanctuary during my last winter break at college. As if I was finally old enough to make my own decisions to go see her and my parents couldn't stop me. I had never really thought of it that way, but it was true. I hadn't seen her since my graduation party four years before hand, and her kids for more than seven. Wendy was just as lovely and happy as I remembered. I sat in her house with the three teens, three rottweilers, and one Italian husband and soaked in the love she gave everyone. There was never any question of love in her house. It was in every soda she brought me, and every time she listened to what living in my parents' house meant.

Of course, she knew what it was like, having lived there. "Your father does have a temper." The understatement of the year.

"Did my parents live together before they were married?" She rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Of course they did." Three years ago, my parents and I fought viciously in front of their friends over that point. Both of my parents

swore that they hadn't lived together before they were married so they could inflict some moral ruler of which I had to stand up to. They lied straight to my face, repeatedly, even after I admitted to remembering them specifically saying to me when I was young that they had to get married so they could "stop living in sin". They told me I was making up memories. Everywhere I turned, there were new lies.

"Did my father cheat on my mother?" She stood in front of the fireplace and looked in my eyes to give me the truth.

"Yes." It was like the final central puzzle piece got put in to explain everything.

Why everyone acted like I was a fragile glass vase that could break if someone looked at me too hard.

Why my father stopped going to my mother's family Christmas for no reason and by extension we had to stop going.

Why my father would come home late and take unexplained trips that would last for days.

Why my mother was always crying.

I didn't ask for specifics because I didn't care. It didn't matter when or who. It was just that he had. And I was blindingly angry. At my mother.

Emotions are never logical. My father is a bastard, has always been one so the idea of him doing something else equally prickish doesn't really surprise. It's downright expected. But my mother *stayed* and that was unforgivable. She could have spared us everything by walking out and taking me with her. Dozens of relatives could have sheltered us, I would have known a life without the constant fights, the threats and the emotional abuse of never being good enough for the Father who thought he was perfect. I'm old enough to understand monetary problems but I know her finances then and now and neither were an excuse. My mother was a strong woman in every aspect of her life save one: she is notoriously weak in the face of my father, having been worn down by thirty years of marriage into just giving in at every turn.

That she could willingly stay with him while he did that to her is unbelievable. What astounds me more is that my cousin knew about it. For her to know it, my aunt must know it, and if one aunt knows it, they all know it. And no one said a word, no one tried to get her out of there, no one lifted a finger. The greatest challenge of becoming an adult is recognizing the failings of the adults around you. However, I refuse to make the same mistakes as my parents, my mother, because I

too have choices. I will be the first to have the word Doctor in front of my name, but I am not the first one to walk away. There are cousins who have left, who have refused contact long before I was born. I used to wonder why, but in this family full of lies, you have to leave to get a breath of truth.

My mother knew something was going on. When I came home from Wendy's, I lay on my bed reading a book and refusing to acknowledge anyone. My mother stood in the bathroom down the hall, staring at her face.

"Hey, come talk to me." She called, moving to her bedroom to make the bed.

"I'm reading." I said, and tried not to cry, the weight of the things I knew heavy on my tongue.

"Tell me about Wendy and her kids," I didn't move.

"Maybe if you showed some interest and went and visited her yourself you could find out." I mumbled.

"What?" She came into my room.

"I said they were fine. Busy." I went back to reading, and she stared at me for a long moment before walking away. If she had told me the truth right then, I might have been able to forgive her, but she took her secrets and walked out the door. She was so willing to include me in every argument, wanting me on her side and yet she refused to admit the truth, that she had a perfectly acceptable excuse to leave and she hadn't taken it. She looked me straight in the eye and with her eyes told me she didn't care that I will always have a fear of men, of screaming when she could have prevented all of that.

It took me a couple weeks at college to realize what was different. "I love you" was never an abused statement in my house. I heard it more from cousins and aunts than from my parents. I heard once from my father, during a screaming argument at twelve when I told him I didn't think he loved me. He only responded to screaming. My mother would say it on occasion like when I was going in to surgery or leaving for college that first time, though I don't ever remember hearing it when I was small. I'm sure the idea of love was a hard concept for my mother to share at that age, knowing my father's love was with someone else as well. There were never any hugs and kisses in my house and now, I shy away from such contact from anyone but a lover. I never volunteered the phrase to my parents, because they don't feel it, and my father has consistently proven he doesn't know what the word means. Four

months before I walked away from them both forever, I couldn't hang up the phone without my mother having it repeated to me. It seemed like a desperate measure by someone who knew they were running out of time.

FITTER HAPPIER



DOGTAGS

The last line is
87 feet of fucking dog tags,
Last minute appropriation of character
Tattoo on steel,
Fight with folding, inscriptionalia.

Minus seven or plus three,
Even cacophonous,
Uneven silences and I can't quite
Place
Last five letters of my name.

Identity met in propriety:

You told me to suck your feelings out
Through your eyes
But *I* bit a little too low
(Third off the nose)
Can't see it in a profile
But I know it's there.

But *I* know it's there.

MILLENIALS

Let's toast to youth, and drink
Before our time. The insanity
Of this new age wholly supports
That now, we're our most sane.
The transcendentalists said we were all
Connected, and that meant everything.
The bartender sighs last call
And it means nothing.

When spirit is discarded, murdered even,
Will we lick its remnants from behind our lips?
Could Dylan, Young, and Lennon
Ever be more than an obscure allusion
In some pretentious, leather-bound delusion?
We're beatniks, poseurs. Born-again
in a haze of smoke and baptized sitting shotgun.
Open-air confirmation on a mountain, shouting
"YESTERDAY..."

The existentialists said we were all
Connected, and it meant nothing.
The bartender called me buddy, and
That meant everything.

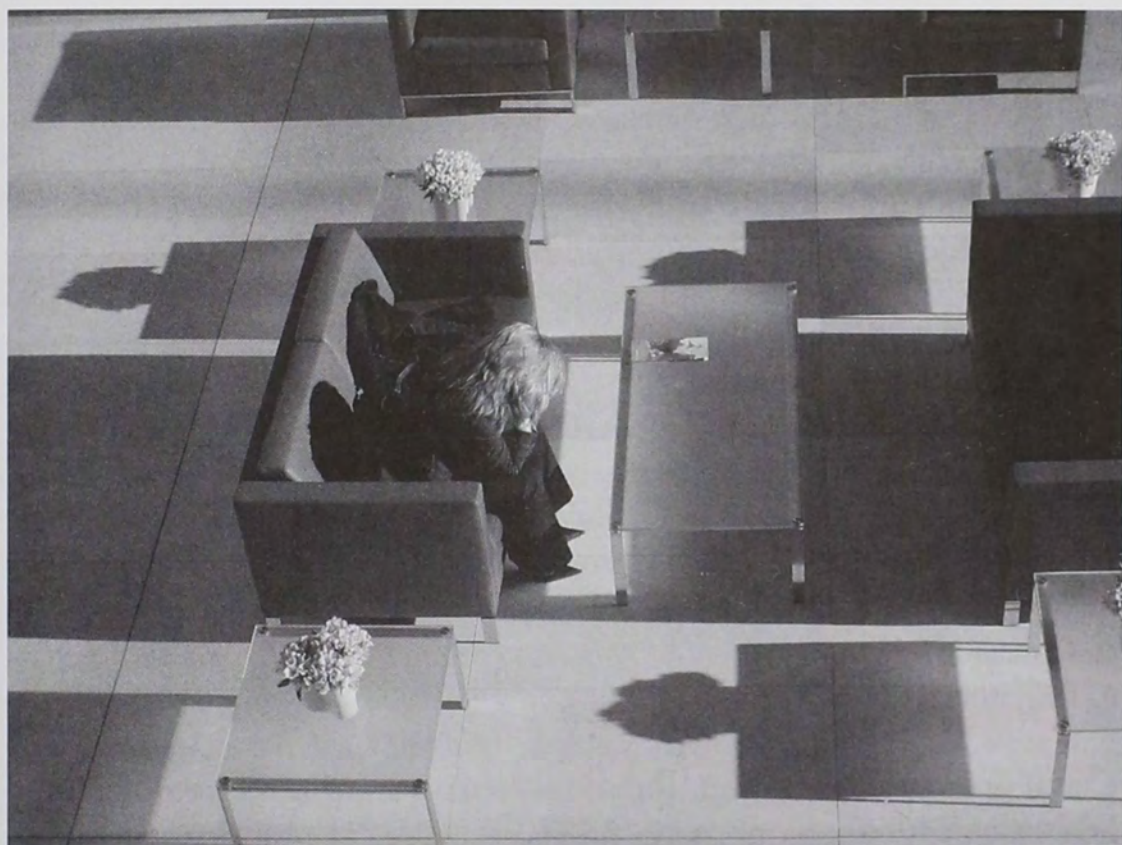
Smiling while it rained inside our head,
Crying barefoot on a beach as spiteful
Tides engulfed entire castles, only to
Build them up again. Construction and
Destruction and repeat ad infinitum.

We focused on free love through rear-views as
Incense smoke seeped between the crevices
Around the doors, across the windowpanes into

The nostrils divinely drilled into our heads, and
Took hold there, as if it thought, "This is right,
Amor. Yes, this is home."

As doves, we mourn the death of freedom, and
Cry, like others before us, until our voice is
Stolen, quick as a drunken cigarette.
It's said we never realize what we owe, instead, we
Shuffle off the debt, and hope integrity
Forgets.

GLOOMY SUNDAY



RAIN THAT SLEEPS BY ITSELF AT TRACK NUMBER 5

Moist seats and clammy clothes.
Muddy footprint mazes
muddle the floor.

Rain alliterates
the disgruntled:
their luggage lumps
and burnished umbrellas.

Like the train schedule ticker
and the ticket window
attendant drumming his fingers

the kind of rain that
missed the four o' clock
to Chicago; fidgets
in line, checks its watch.

Cumulonimbus bosses,
grayscale portfolios--
business the only thing
waiting down the track.

Wallowing rain.
It drivels alone on the bench.
Crumbs. Striped shirt.
Stains from lunch on its collar.

SWEET

Some watched on their televisions. Some, on their way home from work, listened on the radio. Some protested in anger. Some prayed. The ceremony went on nonetheless as it had for years, inexorable as the Machine itself.

It begins, as important ceremonies do, with the national anthem, as the camera fades-in to a warmly-lit and dignified room. The bookcases and moldings are made of thick, polished mahogany. The walls are painted a rich evergreen. In the center, over the oriental carpets on the hardwood-paneled floors, there are two large Victorian sofas with high backs and soft cushions stitched in burgundy. The bookshelves are full of first and second edition pieces of world literature. An antique vase patterned with elegant chinoiserie stands on a pedestal in one corner, an American flag in the other.

The song finishes, and for a moment there is silence. The viewers have time to adjust themselves to this grandfather's study; to sip from a glass of hot liqueur or touch their child's shoulder. To remind them of what is good and wholesome and listen to the crackle of logs specially miked to recall pleasant winters, F.D.R., and apple pie. We are allowed to meditate on this for awhile.

Donald takes off his shirt and stands in front of the mirror, watching the skin on his collarbone bristle and bump. Expressionless, he feels the tuft of scraggly hair at the center of his chest, looking at the spots and pores in his complexion, almost kissing his mirror-self at the part of his upper lip where the stubble is always darker and thicker no matter how close he shaves. Blue eyes. Rough, sandy hair.

He stands back and looks at the shape of his upper torso, pulling the hem of his pants down around his hips so to see the definition of muscle and fat – how the meat of the ribs pulls the skin at mid chest, and how the small excesses of modern living has given a defined line where the two halves of his body connect. He grips his belly on each side, pinching its reserves. He's filled out. He admires the thin line of hair that travels from below the belly button but does not quite reach his chest.

He feels reckless and grandiose. Almost royal.

Someone knocks on the door behind him. An aide opens it. The man is dressed in a black suit.

It's time, he says.

Time.

There are no fireworks or fancy computer graphics. The event begins with the rarefied air of a State of the Union address. Then the camera pans to the right as six young men enter the room with military precision. They are straight and tall, with short hair, clean faces, and handsome mouths. Each wears a matching navy-blue suit, red tie, and plain starched-and-collared shirt. White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, bi-racial, multi-racial – they are culled from the smartest, strongest, and most courageous; the top cut of a wide field of applicants. The melting pot.

The leader stops and stands at attention, turning towards the camera and looking past it. The rest file in, lining up shoulder to shoulder, six abreast, and each of their faces are given a gentle zoom and glide. They look sharp, determined; proud.

Now we see it, at the other end of the room. The Machine. It is a particularly nice one, set in a tall baroque hutch, and not the simple molded plastic of the ones that sit in the general practitioner's office. But it has knobs and buttons and colored lights, as most Machines do, and emits a low, vibrant whirr as it rests in standby. So were it not for its ornamental chamber and the great solemnity and refinement of its surroundings, were it not for the great power of its innards – it would seem utterly out of place.

A military doctor in uniform comes in with a stethoscope and blood-pressure pump and pen-sized flashlight and goes over the boys one-by-one, widening their eyelids and prodding their throats, making sure they are fit. But this is fanfare. The boys have been checked and re-checked for weeks.

As the doctor moves down the line, a deep and pleasant baritone voiceover begins:

“Tonight we honor those who have sacrificed themselves for freedom...”

Just a minute, Donald says, as the aide nods and shuts the door. There is still a half hour before the ceremony begins.

He puts on his starched white shirt, buttoning slowly from the top-

down, and tucking it into his pressed blue trousers. His right hand shakes a little as he fastens the tie around his neck, carefully knitting the cravat in the mirror. His expression is stony, but he's aware. *Like Easter Island*, he thinks, and smiles inwardly at the reflection of his long nose.

He sits down in an old hard-backed wooden chair, set up just opposite the mirror. He looks trim.

Dapper, he thinks. A word Grandmas used on television.

We're not really supposed to talk you know, Donald said.

It was his first week at the application compound. He didn't like it. The place was clean, but cold and military, and the boys were kept in general isolation while they were poked and tested. Donald was getting stir-crazy.

Yeah I know, the other boy answered.

They had met in the hallway by accident. Coming back from a piss, or simply restless – Donald was happy for the companionship. They stood for a few moments, just staring, before the other spoke up. His friend was a tall, handsome, black kid with broad shoulders and a square jaw.

Do you want a cigarette? he repeated.

Donald looked at him, then shrugged. Sure.

The other boy pushed himself off the wall and stood up.

Let's get outside, he said. There's only one guy on watch right now.

The two walked down the corridor and out a metal service door. It gave a loud creak as Donald's companion turned the handle and pushed it open. The cold air hit them both, stirring them from the remains of their sleepy daze.

What's your name? Donald asked as the boy pulls out a pack of Camels, rapping the package against his palm.

Thomas, he said, extending the pack. Donald took it. Yours?

Donald.

Good name, he said. Old name. He put a cigarette in his own mouth and lit it.

Donald took the lighter and did his. I guess, he said.

The two stood in silence for a few moments, breathing in the night air and watching the warm breath and smoke mingle.

So why – said Donald.

—did I try out? Thomas said. That's the question everyone wants to know, isn't it? Even from each other.

He smiled. But we're not supposed to talk about it, he said.

Donald took a drag and stared at the ground. Thomas paused and grunted.

If you backed me against a corner, he said, I'd say for my family.

He took a long drag.

Donald takes a deep breath, satisfied with the neat tie-job. He takes the navy-blue jacket off of the hanger in his boudoir and slips his arms through the sleeves. For just a moment he closes his eyes, centering himself. He can feel the minutes ticking away, the orchestra warming up. Truthfully, he's a little scared. And he misses Thomas. He misses his best friend.

He wonders what the sweet will taste like.

Sweet, you idiot, he thinks. But he doesn't smile this time. Not even on the inside.

Man didn't mean to invent God, at least not anymore than he meant to invent the atomic bomb, or the wheel. He was just always tinkering. Always pushing the limits; always uncorking Possibility, regardless of the consequences.

How did the Machine work? People, if they ever knew, had forgotten. How does a DVD player work? A high-definition television? It works, and that's all that mattered. It predicted death, that was a fact. It did that very well.

Impossibly well, in fact. Infallible. All it needed was a bit of you, and it would tell you, in short, cryptic, and sometimes ironic text, just how you would die. Insurance companies began to require testing of every policy-holder.

Some people refused to believe in the Machine's accuracy. Others took it as a sign of the divine. Some saw it as their ticket to moral bankruptcy. Some protested. Others hid.

Inevitably, fear spread. Objectively, the Machine didn't tell people much more than they already knew – that he or she was going to die. But that didn't matter. People rebelled, and there was confusion, riots, and not few deaths before the government got everything under control. Before they began the ceremonies.

"And that's why we value the sacrifice these men have made here tonight," the announcer said.

Not men, boys, Donald says as he sits down against the wall. We're

not men yet, he says.

Doesn't matter, Thomas said. Men. Boys. Bravery. Stupidity. World's fucked anyhow.

That wasn't what I was going to ask, Donald said.

No? Thomas said. Then what?

Donald looked up into the chilly night canopy. The trees, the government housing, his crystallized breath. It all seemed unreal; like a big and complex diorama.

Thomas shrugged.

It just happens, you know? He said. You do this for your family, for your country, and they're set for life. There's purpose to this.

He said it emphatically.

Donald nodded. He flicked his cigarette and opened the door, gesturing with his hand as the fluorescent light spilled onto the asphalt.

And anyway, you've always got a choice, Thomas said. It's just sugar-water, you know.

Donald smiled at the joke.

Too sweet for words, Thomas added with a wry grin. He opened the door back to the compound and gestured inward.

After you, he said, as the last twirl of smoke from an unstamped ember wafted towards a cloudless sky.

A week later Thomas washed out. Someone caught him with a joint behind the dumpster. Not the right caliber, it seemed. Donald never saw him again.

The doctor pulls the stethoscope off of his ears and stands up, nodding off-screen. All set.

The boys click their heels and turn to face the Machine. The black-haired boy in front steps up to the cabinet and places his left index finger in the needle-slot. It draws a drop of blood and prints a receipt. His right hand is at his side, clutched in a fist.

The next boy steps up. He has short black hair and beautiful brown eyes. His mouth has a delicate softness about it, but his jaw is tight. His blood is drawn; he takes the receipt in his hand. One by one the boys draw their lot.

Each boy looks at the strip of paper solemnly for the requisite three seconds, giving the cameras time to show the results to the audience:

Boy Number One:

SWEET

And another:

SWEET

And another:

SWEET

Ad nauseum.

The boys line up behind the couches and wait until the last has finished, then, three-and-three, sit down on the old divans.

There are six glasses on the table and six silk napkins.

The boys pick up the glasses in unison and drink. *It does taste sweet*, Donald thinks. It's the sweetest thing he's ever tasted, yet it doesn't feel sickly. *Like ambrosia*.

The boys hold hands, as the room starts to slip and shake. Donald closes his eyes.

This is it. The Machine is never wrong.

Six glasses sit on a table. Six boys sit on the couches, their hands clasped, their eyes closed. At first their chests rise and fall, gently, like an electronic bellows. Rhythmic. Then the rising stops. Some give a little shudder first, others don't.

"We are still a country able to make our own choices," the announcer says. "To make the right choices. The last country in the world that is still free – we own the Machine. The Machine does not own us."

A boy with sand-colored hair lies amongst the bodies, fingers twined with his two neighbors. As the camera pulls away, almost imperceptibly, a hand moves. Viewers crane their necks toward the set.

But nothing else happens. Just a residual twitch.

"Goodnight America."

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori*

-- Wilfred Owen 'Dulce et decorum est'

AMORPHOUS

Blush blotches stain beneath pearl necklaces
As insight slides to the right side
Three chords sound strongly of
An already rusty rendition, age old
Favorite street light symphony played
In an obscure key

A teaspoon of blood
Still warm and taken carelessly
From a thumbprint pressed against
A clever wind of change
Spreads across her chest and settles
A little to the left

The body pales when held to the light,
Translucent and lovely, brightness glides
Through skin stretched over flexing muscles
And tears easily on swords that accelerate pulse
Beautifully sharpened broken glass from
Window panes in the house where she grew up

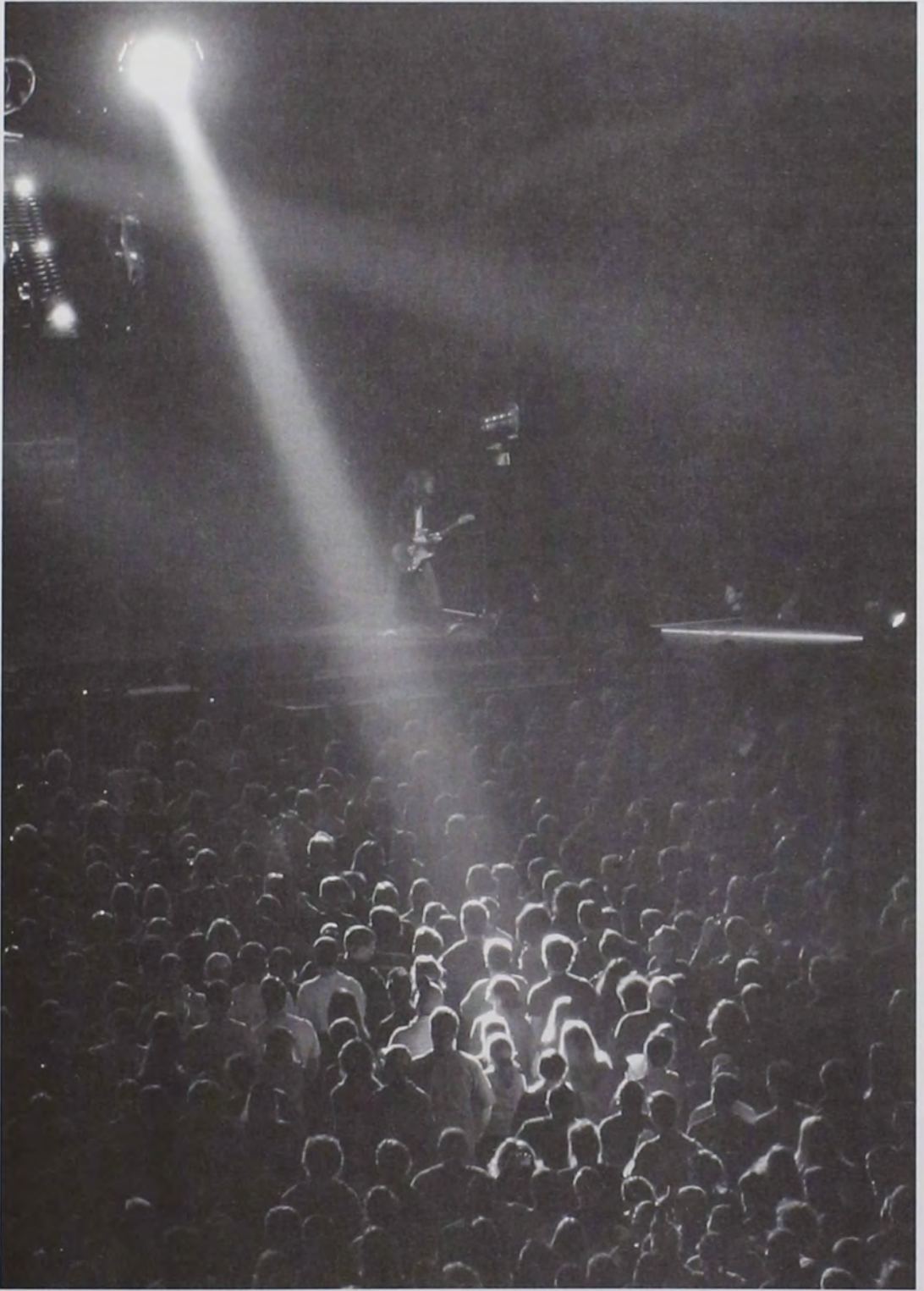
A jaw that sets like stone while sleeping
And bones that crack and broaden tensely because
She wears her feelings slightly off the shoulder
And she's slightly off center when it comes to
Matters of minding manners and holding
Her tongue that parts illicitly loving lips

He looks through her like stained glass
And her eyes turn darkstorm-brewing,
A winter's sky at midnight
She sinks deep into sheets soft

And pink like the scars
On the backs of her knees

Warmth makes her a little less exacting
Than the known necessity of lives past
She'll turn slowly to see a white dress
Drifting downstream, her mother's perhaps
And Atlantic's deepest waters drench the satin
That she rests her head on at night

ME AND MY FRIENDS



** ~ *** *~** ** ~*~* *~ ***** *~ *~** ~~~ ~ ~ *~ ~** * **~*

~ ~~~ ~ ~ ~* *~ *~** *~ *~** ~~⁹, I flashed as

Carbonated elementals created
Volatile dreamcatchers within the
Clouds like safety nets for fallingstars.

Like livewires protected
By rubber casings which
Hang on a final twine
The Lighthouse began responding
And the twine broke and the sky

Fell with Jovian
Ferocity upon the breakers
*~** ** ***** ~ ~* **... sputtered the ¹⁰
Lighthouse before growing dark
~*...~*... it continued in ¹¹
Pained punctuation, **... ¹²
It drawled, accentuating each
Dot as though short of breath

**...
**...
...~*** *~** ** ~* ~** ¹³

⁹ Its like a halo made from napalm

¹⁰ Lihtni...; i.e. lightni...

¹¹ ...n; ...g

¹² I...

¹³ Blind

CONTRIBUTORS

Steph Bartusis likes to pretend she's a reincarnation of the late physicist Richard Feynman.

Kevin Bendis's photo was originally called Shitttt 296.

Sara Campbell is a rapacious pangolin rapidly approaching Valhalla. Love me, fear me, but most importantly: wish me luck.

Brett Celinski is pinstriped and greased up for the occasion, impressing the girl things who were trying to get next to him.

David Chamberlain wants to go for a swim in the world's largest paella.

Jan Cohen was a contestant on *Flavor of Love*.

Monica Crary is of course wearing full body armor. She is not a moron.

Chris Curley has brown eyes with a hint of green in them.

Jon Gagas knows he's risking cliché, but regardless, he means it when he says he wouldn't change a thing.

Menaka Gopalan is her words on paper and paint on canvas. She is currently painting portraits of Shakespeare's Hamlet and Ophelia.

Rachel Heller spends a lot of time thinking about where her hamster thinks he's going on that yellow plastic wheel.

Amy Lynch enjoys octopi, *Wired*, and gong. She aspires to single-handedly unite the fields of mad-science and cat lady-dom.

Colm McCarthy is inexpressively grateful to his family for all they have done for him.

India McGhee is a freshman chemistry major with a fondness for crayons, chocolate milk, and alliteration.

Jen Mingoello is a junior in Ireland and she is learning fun new phrases like half seven instead of 7:30.

Serena Mithbaokar needs a miracle because she is drowning in sins.

Ian O'Neill's always on schedule, never on time.

Tommy G! Richter is taking a year off after college for limited debauchery.

Phil Repko won first prize in a "Colm McCarthy Wannabe" contest.

Christopher Schaeffer is a whole damn town!

Dan Sergeant is not something you just dump something on! He's not a big truck! He's a series of tubes!

Michael Silber says he's real, but don't take his word for it. He's probably just a figment of your imagination.

Commonly presumed to be human, **Katie Simmon** assures you that she is, in fact, composed of a particularly ragged assortment of silk oddments.

Sam Stahler is the boy who talked with animals. One day, perhaps, he will come back from his journey, though I personally doubt it. I have a feeling he's quite happy where he is.

Trevor Strunk has spent all semester writing in bed and watching late night Christian TV with his people. *He* wouldn't change a thing.

Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna Dayna **Dayna Stein**

Dani Tatsuno?! She doesn't even have a Wiki page!

Heather Turnbach has seen the world's true beauty. Her photograph is dedicated to all who sit on white rocks in the Mediterranean, living La Dolce Vita.

Tori Wynne is 60 inches of pure chaos.

PATRONS

Chris Aiken
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Ursinus College Literary Magazine
<http://webpages.ursinus.edu/lantern>