



Spring 2002

The Lantern Vol. 69, No. 2, Spring 2002

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Recommended Citation

Dickerson, Erin; Spangler, Cory; Hankins, Kevin; Kauffman, Sarah; Tereshko, Christopher; Napolitan, Sarah; Shaffer, Alison; Scriptunas, Melanie; Ramsey, John; Spera, Christine; Stahl, Monica; Quinn, Patricia; Dixon, Syreeta; Pidal, Raquel; Romeo, Genevieve; Kearney, Dennis; Malachowski, Phil; Diaz, Rosabelle; Pomante, Michael; Lambert, Katie; and Bruno, Daniel, "The Lantern Vol. 69, No. 2, Spring 2002" (2002). *The Lantern Literary Magazines*. 158.
<https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/lantern/158>

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The Lantern



The Lantern

URSINUS COLLEGE

Volume 69, Number 2

Spring/Summer 2002

<http://webpages.ursinus.edu/lantern/>

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Editor's Note:

The Lantern continues to shine its beacon of artistic goodness over the Ursinus campus. Congratulations to Cory Spangler, Rosabelle Diaz, Dennis Kearney, and Aaron Ranck for their award-winning work. My sincere thanks to Marylou Streznewski and Christian Bauman for their selection of the prize winners. My everlasting gratitude to the staff – the executive board for their general awesomeness, the production mavens for their patience and cheerfulness, and all of the readers for their hard work.

Genevieve Romeo

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JUDGES' NOTES

Poetry Winner – “Canard”

As the winning poem I have chosen “Canard,” for its consistent evocation of an elegiac atmosphere. The attention to structure and the controlled interplay of four image patterns (sky, geese, planes and leaves) throughout five stanzas is impressive. In the use of somewhat slangy diction, gentle humor shines through the poignant recall of a day long gone, “Disappeared like the geese, like Jaye.” The loss of the friend adds emotional weight at the appropriate place near the end.” I would also like to commend the authors of “Jacob’s Nightingale” and “Two Minutes from Earl’s Court Tube Station.”

–Marylou Streznewski is a poet, novelist, and the author of a non-fiction book, “Gifted Grownups: The Mixed Blessings of Extraordinary Potential,” as well as being the poetry curator at the Writers Room of Bucks County.

Prose Winners – “Hairball” and “Tickertape”

After much thought, it is clear that two authors must share the prize this year. Both talented and promising, they attack in such different ways that to choose one would be an unfair disservice to the other. “Hairball” starts with the best first sentence I’ve read all year, and is peppered throughout with lines that show not just an eye for detail but the skill to reveal those details in unusual ways (describing a girl laughing: “Her jaw separated, ready to swallow me whole, frizzy hair and all.”) The author never rests on these diamonds, though, relying on action to propel the narrative. In contrast, “Tickertape” has the best *last* line I’ve read all year. The dialogue throughout is sharp, witty, and dead-on. The author took a large risk with an experimental style, and has succeeded with a tight, tense piece of work. Also, honorable mention to “This Year’s Love” and “Imaginary Highway.”

Christian Bauman’s first novel, *The Ice Beneath You*, will be published by Simon & Schuster in October, 2002.

What Was Said in the Court of Riong

Daniel Bruno

Shanâ kúlú ma
Naví hanô mo túkí
Rabanul haä

★ ★ ★

The lights then dimmed
The poets fled out of the court at Riong.
They had been called
By King Thiulao who wished for spoken verse.

The last had sung an old haiku.
Too old; the translation is lost.
King Thiulao called back the poet
While the others slipped back to their homes.

“Oh, poet,” spake the king,
“What was the message of that old revered psalm?”
“My Lord,” spake the poet,
“It tells of a man who has left his love.”

King Thiulao’s eyes lit up in his face
And he beckoned the poet come closer,
“What more can be said of his plight,
My friend; what can be said of his suffering?”

“My Lord,” spake the poet,
“He suffered not, but had willed himself be gone
He had lived with her for many years,
And had stood her many cruelties.

Daniel Bruno

“She would lead on other men
Well within his sight,
And gently kiss them to arouse his jealousies.
Ere long he could take no more.

“He took up bags late at night
And set off for a town far away.
As he stole off he swore by all that he knew
He would never love women again.

“My Lord, that is all that there is to the tale.
What became of him nobody knows.
But some will say, and of this I am unsure,
That he died before reaching the town.”

(stanza break)

“Poet,” spake the king,
“An excellent tale. But I marvel now at its length.
For was not what you told me a translation, I think,
Of that tiny haiku that you sang?”

“My Lord, I think there is much to be said
From a few little lines of old verse.”
And at that the poet walked off in the night
And chuckled at what he had said.

Nietzsche

Bridget Baines



Bridget Baines

This Year's Love

Raquel Pidal

She came with a four month grace period.

After that, it was time to let her drop, and she fell, less than gracefully, and each time with less grace than the time before.

The last fall she'd had was still painful six months later. They had been apart longer than they had been together, and each day the pain was a little less. But what is a little less in a pain that seems to have no depth?

She felt she was destined to fail at relationships, all relationships, romantic or not. The revolving door kept spinning, each floor of the building folding in on itself. Not a solid resume, not her forte. *Not her cup of tea.*

Still, she was never really sure why it always happened the way it did. Her only crime was caring too much. She refused to apologize.

★

She tried to *move on*. She was sure that somewhere there existed a manual with the solution to her heartache, but until the day she found it she had to look elsewhere for comfort. Friends tried to tantalize her with chocolate and blind dates and the glittering, liquor-soaked freedoms of the single life. Cynics scoffed; they didn't believe love could happen so fast.

She tried to seek solace in the knowledge that others had survived it and would survive it and were surviving it right now alongside her, this nursing of the broken heart. She wrote lines from Shakespeare and Donne on Post-It notes and placed them where they could remind her. But even so, they did not know *her* heartache, they never could. She kept a brave face by day with her John Donne lines, and at night she broke into her hands.

★

She had a pet fish named Nietzsche. Her own way of
Raquel Pidal

thumbing her nose at the man who shook his tiny mortal fist and proclaimed that God was dead. Nietzsche was lovely to look at—a blood-red flush of fins and motion. A solitary fighting fish. He swam in a small plastic cylinder on her desk. At times she lost herself in his fluid motions, the red velvety pushing forth of a petal. She imagined that he felt the way a rose does when you pinch it between thumb and forefinger, like private silk. Spreading warm and pulsing gently.

His reality was otherwise. She dropped him in the steely kitchen drain while changing his water and suddenly he turned into a little sliver of nothing. She tried to pick him up, but he was cold and slickly gelatinous, like a glistening pimienta folded into a jar, waiting to be pinched out. She was shocked. She turned the faucet on a drip and called for her friend to come help her. She couldn't touch him. She couldn't touch him. Something was not right.

Her friend picked him up, small pathetic bit of red nothing, and dropped him back in his tank, where he immediately spread into his majestic velvet flush again. She thanked her friend and masked her confusion well.

★

She was a writer, or at least trying to be. After he left her, she was faced with menial writing assignments that seemed insurmountable. Bewildered and immobilized with grief, she hopelessly wondered how she would write five to seven pages, or even one. Her fingers poised on her keyboard like birds about to take flight, like soldiers awaiting an order. They wouldn't move. She couldn't make them move. She was too numb and the paralysis in her heart spread to her hands. It made her ache.

★

She had given him one of her rings, the little metal circle that decorated the middle finger of her right hand. He carried it on his key chain. When it ended, he returned it. She couldn't put it back on. Instead, she strung it on a piece of thread and hung it from her computer monitor, staring at it instead of writing.

Raquel Pidal

★

Her mind simply wasn't working the way it used to. Her heart was worse.

★

And then, someone started to talk to her intelligently. Someone started to smile. It made her sit a little straighter, smooth her hair back over her ear. She began to sing in the car again, songs that made her blood bubble and tickled her throat. She put away her weepy CDs and began to notice the intricacies of daily life again. The depthless pain did not seem quite so bottomless anymore and she laughed. The closed fist of the world was suddenly starting to open into a palm, flat and flexible, and she was fascinated by the lines, the subtle colors, the fleshy curves. Perfect rounded nails with tiny pink moons. Everything was starting to make sense again.

★

One day, her body, not knowing what else to do, ached to run. She was not a runner, but that day she listened to her body.

The glorious stretching and churning of tightly coiled muscles. The rhythm of feet pounding asphalt in 4/4 time. It was winter and the air cut her lungs and throat in sharp, painful stabs. Her cheeks burned. It felt good. She coughed and spit and felt invigorated. Reborn.

In the shower, she used citrus shampoo, slowly rubbing the golden stuff into her hair. On the bottle were pictures of orange slices. She was a marketing target: she liked the bottle, she bought the shampoo. Orange slices. "*Palpable and mute, like a globed fruit.*" She imagined herself as one, falling from a tree, splitting open and spilling forth rich ripeness. The orange smell of the shampoo filled the shower, and she looked forward to the next day.

★

She showed her friend a picture of him and explained him in a voice that turned up at the edges.

Her friend examined the picture and nodded

Raquel Pidal

satisfactorily.

"You *are* only as attractive as the company you keep," her friend said matter-of-factly.



They lay next to each other. He was asleep, lying on his stomach, breathing the serious, oblivious suspirations of the unconscious. Laying on her side, she gazed at him in the darkness. She inched her fingers up the back of his T-shirt and slowly rubbed his back. He shifted slightly, emitting a tiny sigh of pleasure in his sleep. Her mind turned restless circles and refused to stand still. Alien thoughts ran in and out of it, bumping into each other and making her dizzy. Why was she thinking with her head instead of feeling with her heart? Her brain always threw unusual crumbs at her when she was trying to clear it for sleep.

She tried to fill her mind with something else. She concentrated on her fingers and his back. Her skin on his. The skin on her fingers and the skin on his back. She thought of the curving ridges of her fingertips collecting miniscule flakes of his golden skin. His skin on hers. She lay back and held her hand in front of her face, examining it in the darkness. Skin on skin on skin. She smiled, put her hand back on the small of his back, and fell asleep.



She sat at her keyboard, poised and ready.

She looked down at her fingers, long and slender and curved slightly, hovering over the keys like a hawk gliding over its prey. Her eyes were resolute and, for once, calm. They slowly traveled the length of her desk: the dusty lamp, Nietzsche in his tank, the rows of pens and pencils long unused. She paused. She breathed. She felt completely natural and it was good.

Slowly, surely, her fingers began to move over the keys. She almost wanted to laugh out loud. They were working again. It was working.

Her heart surged. She watched words—*her* words—fill

Raquel Pidal

the blank screen. The click of the keys echoed in her head: *I've met someone. I've met someone.* She felt as though a wall had been broken through, a fence torn down, and she watched the words spill out. *I've met someone.* Things would work. She was certain they would.

She reached for the ring hanging from her computer monitor and turned it over and over with her fingertips, the same fingertips that had collected his skin in their ridges, the same fingertips that had forgotten the memory of the skin they'd felt before his. *I've met someone.* She yanked the ring from its thread and slid it back onto the middle finger of her right hand. She studied it for a moment before repositioning her fingers on the keys.

In his tank, Nietzsche flushed his tail fins magnificently into a fan, a velvet flower petal.

Bailan Pies (dancing feet)*Erin Dickerson*

tiny toes
groove

a tip tap tap
a tip tap tap
shiny black Patent leather
buckled strap held together

dancin'
mixin'
fabricatin' a fixin'
musical
angelic collaboration of movement
ballet...

jazz...

modern...

and tap_ _

those toes

a tip tap tap
a tip tap tap
shiny black Patent leather
buckled strap held together

moves(zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz)

on and off

from Sunday school morning dress up
to playing.

Pretending.

Childhood Dreams

Cartoons...

Erin Dickerson

Bailan Pies (dancing feet)

15

Hopscotch...

Porcelain Baby dolls...

and Double-

Dutch

eyes envisioning
flirtin' a skippin'
swingin'
in the street
like the old Chevy car named
Desire
Jivin' to the sweet beat
a tip tap tap
a tip tap tap
shiny black Patent leather
buckled strap held together

those tiny toes
that happy feet groove

Erin Dickerson

Canard*Cory Spangler*

The sky was tall gray and the leaves were dead.
 Gone. The geese weren't, but going.
 And we flew our white planes made the same gray hour,
 While geese, they got gone 'bove us and dead leaves.

The sky was blown smoke in a clear bowling ball. Heavy, tall
 Gray above paper, glued white; wood –balsa wood–
 Too, worked good as our wings, fuselage, and nose. Tips
 V–bent like the geese V went, was the aileron over the leaves.

The sky was old, an old nickel gray, a dull
 Deaf nine–teen sixty four bit. Glue stuck our luck, & sometimes
 T–tails together. 'Neath the calm wash of gray crashed a 317 Bi–
 plane.
 Negative Stagger. Gray days'd see her swagger again, windless
 over dull leaves.

The sky was a tall, mute gray god. God
 Damned if that circular–winged canard didn't get itself
 Disappeared like geese, like Jaye, like the rain. But there it was
 again
 Off Slim Burkeholder's roof, silent and sure as ol' Slim and dry
 leaves.

The sky was a tall, dumb pearl with a flaw,
 Dusk warm blush before supper 'bove the geese getting
 Gone. And the fool skeleton trees yawned back at my street. And
 at
 Me and Jaye, at glue–white planes in the gray,

Our sky and the crunch of their own dead leaves.

Cory Spangler

Vernacular City

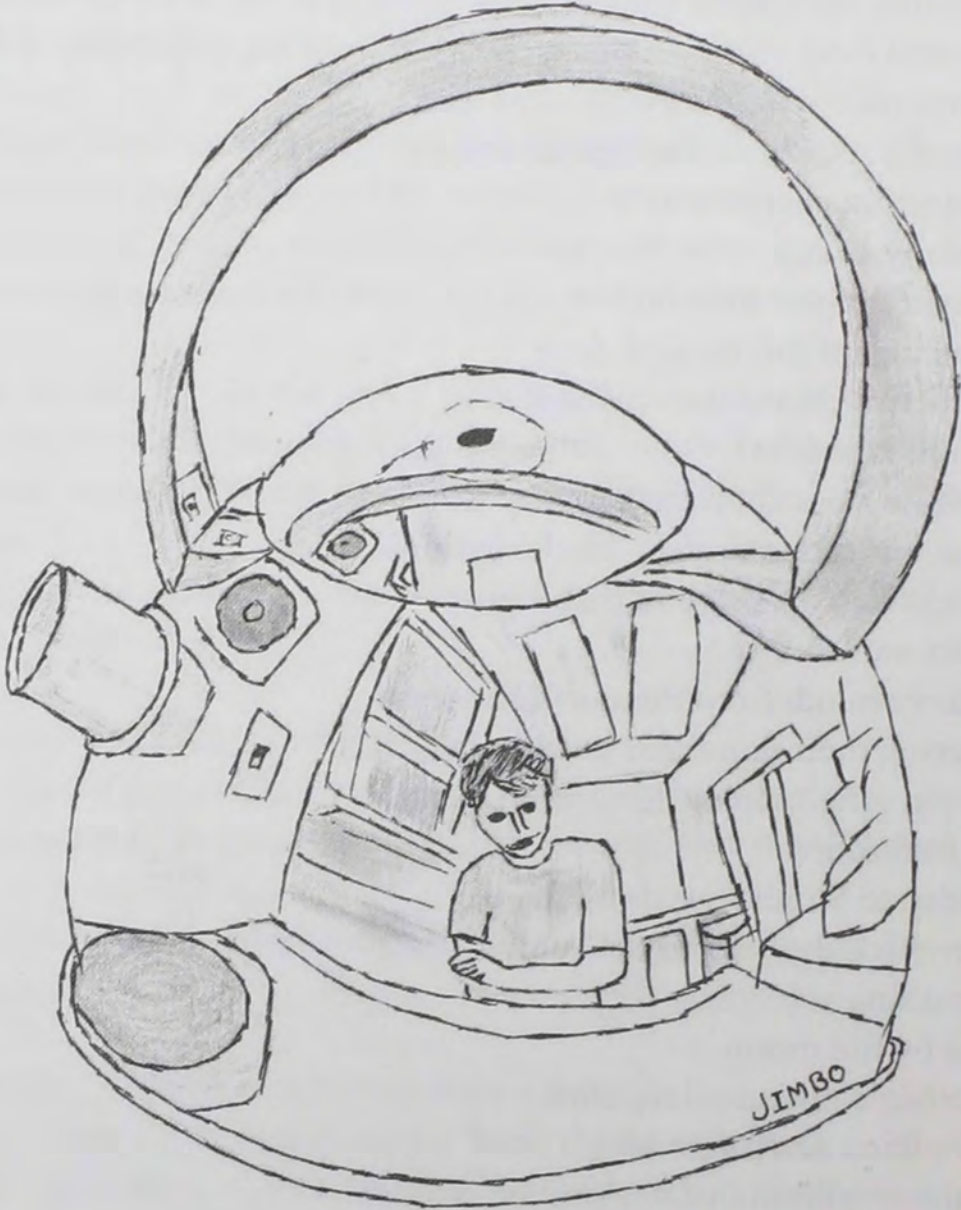
Kevin Hankins

Hypnotizing percussion sound
Tuning to our ears as it moves
Creating the lyricist lounge
Musical food
Notes rooted in blues unleashed soul
Smooth secretions soak guitar strings
Projecting energetic role
Melody brings
Intoxicating to the mind
Dancing off this musical drug
Seductive chorus intertwined
Symmetric love
Release from chores and all day work
Lose our thoughts deep black rhythmic beat
Smells like sex so good that it hurts
From ears to feet
Thirsty minds from the north and south
Leaving their skin color outside
Sippin song, dripin chords from mouths
So funkdafied
Friday to Sunday we don't sleep
Never see the beds in our rooms
Breathing vernacular city,
Fed by the moon
Nostalgic nocturnal nightlife
Amplified adrenaline vibe
Culture spills out of our swelled minds
Notes liquefied

Kevin Hankins

Patience

James Albert



James Albert

The Dimmer Switch

Genevieve Romeo

They sat together, Augustine and Paulette, and watched as people flew kites with absurd tails.

AUGUSTINE PAUCI was printed in neat black letters across the soles of his shoes, a brown paper bag, and half a pigeon. The pigeon was surprisingly unruffled after the whole ordeal, but did seem a little disappointed that, after Augustine had caught and endorsed him, he had not been given any popcorn. He stood there bobbing his feather-scaled head with question-marked garnet eyes. Augustine thought about kicking the pigeon but instead watched Paulette as she began playing with her lighter.

"My mother is visiting this Friday. I don't think Marco is going to like that much," Paulette said.

"Mmm." The hum was accompanied by a slight nod of his head.

"I guess I'll just have to tell Marco to suck it up. It is my *mother*, after all."

"Would you like a sandwich? I brought two." He offered her a mass of tinfoil and Saran wrap within which lurked a conflation of peanut butter and jelly with no crusts and so much jelly that blobs of grape-glowing harmony were greeting him through the translucent bread. He liked jelly. His personal philosophy was that while the peanut butter held things together, it was the jelly that made life more *grape* and therefore, more worth eating. He began the process of unwrapping the sandwich.

"No thanks. Great weather today. Not too hot, you know?"

"Mmm." He was not a particular fan of the summer, mostly because he preferred to think of his bare fingers as resembling tree branches. Leaves impeded that image. He finished unwrapping the sandwich and began to eat it slowly. The autographed pigeon collected crumbs at their feet.

Genevieve Romeo

“So my mom can sleep in the guest room, you know? And that shouldn’t bother Marco, because it’s practically on the other side of the house.”

Augustine had stayed in the guest bedroom once. It had smelled like vanilla and on the west wall was a round dial. Augustine swallowed a mouthful of sandwich and said, “The Dimmer Switch.”

“Yep. That’s the one. Only room in the house that’s got one.” She passed her lighter from one hand to the other, turning it over and over in her fingers.

“Mmm.” Augustine had not yet told Paulette about his theory, but he firmly believed that when you turn the dial on a Dimmer Switch, it actually makes the rest of the world brighter. Nothing ever actually *dims*. Eventually, if one kept turning it, the brightness of the world would drown out the moon. He thought that if he actually voiced this theory to Paulette, she would nod her head so rapidly that she would begin to look like the small felt-covered plastic animals that people put in the rear window of their vehicles so as to create an amusing effect when they drive over bumpy terrain. He respected Paulette too much to reduce her to this caricature.

“So maybe if I was just extra nice to Marco for the rest of the week, you know? Making him his favorite dinners and not bugging him so much about stuff. Maybe that would make it better.”

“Mmm?” Augustine thought her hair looked like lemon meringue pie, all spikes and eddies.

“Like, he’d realize it was a give-and-take thing. He can be a slob for a while if when Ma comes, he isn’t an ass to her. You know.”

“Mmm.” He wondered if she would be offended by the comparison of her hair to the pie. Lemon meringue was his favorite, but she was not currently aware of this. Maybe if he told her how much he sincerely enjoyed the pie, she would take it as a compliment. “It’s not a bad thing.”

Genevieve Romeo

"No, I don't think so either." She flicked her lighter absentmindedly. Blue-orange flames danced in little fits.

"I mean, one could say worse things, you know? Different kinds of things." Like if he had said her hair looked like something with toasted coconut, she might think he was making fun of it for being dry and flaky. Or if he had said it looked like chocolate mousse, she might take it to mean that he was inferring she used too many styling products. Augustine supposed that some might accuse her of that, but he never would.

"You're absolutely right. I think that *is* what I will tell him. And if he doesn't like it, well, I guess he can go live with one of his boys for the weekend."

"Mmm." The peaks were so stiff but so delicate in their own way. So easy to collapse in one's mouth or fingers. They topped the pie like a glorious crown, hiding a neon filling that was somewhere between sour, sweet, and crushingly beautiful.

"Not that I like any of his boys either. Well, Lujay is ok. But only when he's not soused."

"It's what's underneath that matters," Augustine said. "The rest is just egg-whites."

"I guess you could look at it that way. That's a cute metaphor." Paulette smiled at him and brushed sandwich crumbs off of the bench. The pigeon was delighted. "Weird how there's only one pigeon here, isn't it? Usually there are dozens."

"Mmm." Augustine eyed the pigeon and thought about kicking it again, because really, if something could fly, it should not take that gift for granted. He turned back to the choreography of sparks from Paulette's lighter.

"To be honest, I don't like it when any of them are soused. And when they all get that way together, it's just unbearable. You remember that time you had to lend me forty bucks to get a new pair of work shoes? God."

"I remember," he said. He watched a pair of children running with fish kites. He wondered what it would be like to have your kite inextricably intertwined in a power line. A link in *Genevieve Romeo*

your grasp to the blood of a city; a string from the earth to electricity. He thought he understood what it would be like to have something both in your hands and at the same time precariously caught in something untouchable.

“Thanks again. For the shoes, I mean. You really came through for me. I promise to pay you back real soon.” Her voice sounded like a sad guitar.

“It’s nothing.” He remembered going to buy the shoes with Paulette. Her feet arched softly and gradually. She had a birthmark on her left instep that looked itself like a tiny footprint. Perhaps, thought Augustine, that was infinity.

“No, it was something. Thank you.” She squeezed his hand briefly.

“Mmm.” Augustine remembered walking back to her house with the shoes. He had helped her clean up broken green glass that looked like the scattered shells of Japanese beetles. She had not wanted him to walk home so late at night, and had put light blue sheets on the bed in the guest room.

“Maybe I won’t tell him until the last minute, you know? So he can’t stew about it enough to get really angry. And then when he finds out, well, maybe he’ll just storm off to his boys to play poker or go to a bar or whatever they do instead of yelling at me.” She flicked the lighter again, and held the flame steady until it burned her fingers. “So like five minutes before my mom comes, I’ll just quick throw on sheets and put out towels in the guest bedroom.”

“And vanilla,” Augustine said softly.

“Hmm ... no, don’t think I’ll have time to run out and get more of that potpourri. That would seem really suspicious anyway.”

“And The Dimmer Switch.” Augustine had slept with the lights on that night, not wanting to touch the dial, not wanting to make it so that the sun looked less bright in the morning.

“Yeah. Still there.”

"Mmm." He had left early that morning and slipped out without waking Paulette. She did not go to work that day, but showed up the day after still looking tired. Augustine had not asked her any questions.

They watched the people with the kites for a few more moments. The pigeon was still there, wings folded, waiting for more crumbs. Paulette looked at her watch, put the lighter in her pocket, and stood.

"Well, I guess our lunch shift is over. You coming back?"

"Soon."

"Okay. Thanks for listening to me, Auggie. You're the best." She kissed the top of his head. "I'll let you know how it all works out."

"Sure," Augustine said. He smiled at Paulette. She straightened her skirt and walked away.

Augustine sat at the bench for a little while longer, feeling the sun soak into his skin. He stood, stretched out his legs, and watched as the tiny dot that was now Paulette faded into the grass and kites and laughter.

The pigeon went tumbling in the clear summer air.

Tickertape

Dennis Kearney

SPRINGFIELD, MARCH 4, 1956 (AP)—J. HARRIMAN CROTHERS, of Crothers, Rutherford, and Breckinridge, announced his resignation Tuesday amidst allegations of embezzlement. Crothers' firm dropped seven points within the hour, as investors jumped ship for somewhere more profitable. Heavy cutbacks in staff are expected to depress the morale of the already-striking workers; the future looks grim for this long-standing pillar of the accounting industry. [CRB 46 ½ -27¼] — This firm really needs a shot in the arm, sir. —What this firm needs, Mr. Smith, is a shot in the temple. It'd be a mercy killing. Mayfield slams his working papers onto the table, burying a roach underneath. Crunch. —Convicted felon? I wouldn't tell you if I was. Mayfield speaks with the voice of a heavy smoker. Any experience with typewriters? 92 words a minute, copied flawless the first time every time. [+¼] What's that on your neck? Adam's apple. Everybody's got one, mine just sticks out more. Being wiry will do that to you. —Don't you mean starved? —Wiry. [-¾] — Just so we're all on the same page—if I wasn't so understaffed, your ass would be back on the streets. —Don't do me any favors, bud, I'm just here to collect a paycheck. [CRB 46 -½] Mayfield doesn't talk for the rest of the day. He plugs himself into the typewriter and starts typing. Lean pianist fingers recomposing the works of the old IRS masters. [+ 1¼] Hawk-nosed, peers down, the ski slope far from aquiline. Dips to strike a new line, consistently. Jokes are made likening him to those cheap birds that drink water from a glass—metronomic—monotonous. [-1½] He keeps the time well enough. Jokes are not heard. Mayfield glues his eyes to the paper. Hits a new line. [CRB 45 ¾ - 1¼] —Doesn't he ever talk to anyone? —I think they're afraid of him. —I think I'm afraid of him. He doesn't ever look up. And he hasn't changed that tank top since he started coming to work

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here. [+¼] —You want to ask him to put on another shirt? Smug, coffee mug in hand, Smith approaches. His Oxfords catch on a loose nail, and he tips a bit. Coffee spatters like blood. [-1] —Hey, Mayfield buddy. How many shirts you got, eh? He doesn't look up. —I'm workin. I break at noon. Smith gives a big salesman smile. —Come on, you can take a few seconds. Or not. [-2¾] Mayfield types away with watchless wrists. [+½] His head, like his chin, is forested with stubble, an angry red porcupine. No corners—a crew cut, not a flattop, a crimson sleek tennis ball bouncing in tune with typed keys. [+½] Eighty-eight, ninety pages copied a day. He doesn't notice the secretary's blush as [-3½] she stiltedly steps high-heeled from Breckinridge's office, but he grins anyway, a slow coyote grin. SPRINGFIELD, MARCH 14, 1956 (AP)—RUTHERFORD AND Breckinridge, the accounting firm lately suffering from a severe case of corporate internal bleeding, recently filed for a three-month extension on its income tax return under Internal Revenue Code 6081b. One ex-customer of Rutherford and Breckinridge who wished to remain anonymous commented, "Why should I let that bunch of incompetents file my returns for me when they can't even get their own in on time?" [CRB 40 ¾ -½] Noon. —Seventeen. Smith: What? Mayfield: I have seventeen shirts. They're all the same so nobody will know if I wear the same one for a week. [-½] Smith: Are they all that bad looking? Mayfield: Just the one [-1] I wear to work. Rutherford sweats in his suit and smothers a fourth cigar in his ashtray, sweats from the pressure or the early spring or the always-closed windows. His office smells like smoke even when he isn't smoking. His chins quiver like his hands when he speaks. —Where'd Arnold go? —Gone, sir. He left for Johnson & Zimmerman last week. [-1¼] —Tucker? I thought I could count on him. —Apparently not, sir. [-2½] —Dammit! What about Mayfield? [+½] —Mayfield's still there, sir. The staff complains about the smell [-3¼], but he insists he showers every day. —Smell? What smell? —Ah—that is—hm... Rotting meat, *Dennis Kearney*

sir. They say he smells like roadkill. [-2¼] —I don't care if he smells like a urine-drenched mongrel dog, he works harder than the rest of them put together. He's the only one with any goddamn work ethic in this company. [+3½] Hell, if Breckinridge's mother wasn't so goddamn loaded I'd fire him too. Lazy blind bastard. Joan, give that Mayfield a dollar an hour raise. [-2¾] —Yes, sir... Sir? Can I have a raise too, while you're being generous with what's left of the company money? —When you work for three weeks without needing a meeting with Breckinridge, I'll think about a raise. [CRB 30¾ -2¾] Mayfield takes his glasses off to type, leaning close to smell its inky breath. A hundred, a hundred and twenty pages a day. Three weeks, no errors. [+1½] Four weeks, no errors. [+1½] Employee of the Month: Charles Mayfield. [-5] Employees Fired: 37. [-4½] Breckinridge leaves and takes his secretary with him. [-2¾] To Acapulco. [-2¼] With the strongbox. [-6] Smoke is seen rising from one of the desks on an idle Tuesday—a lot. A fire alarm evacuates the building. Everyone out except one. Firefighters rush in with axes to find Mayfield smashing his typer with bloody fingers. He is told to take the day off. Work resumes. [+1¾] An examination of his desk reveals a three-hundred page return, given to him that day. He had finished all but the last twenty-five. SPRINGFIELD, APRIL 8—AS THE deadline for individual tax returns approaches, Rutherford Accounting is looking lean. Employing less than a third of the workers it had just six months ago and less two of its partners under shady circumstances, it is unknown at this time whether James Rutherford, 47, will apply for bankruptcy under Chapter 11. Rutherford was unavailable for comment, undoubtedly busy scrambling to save his ailing company. [CRB 15 +1¾] No he isn't. He's watching his life's work crumble before his eyes, too horrified a Nero to fiddle. Mayfield's typing a hundred and fifty pages a day, [+¾] but there's only three others working with him. [-1] He's hunched over his typer like a hen loves an egg, ripping sheets through it [+1½] and plucking out [+¼] unjamming the

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keys from time to time. Rutherford watches him, disbelieving. He smokes his cigars in the office and drinks from his whiskey nip in the men's room. [-2¼] Mayfield doesn't notice. He's grinning like a coyote all the time, now. [-½] Between Mayfield and the ex-customers coming to rescue their returns from the sinking ship, the stack of returns winnows away, whittles down from ten boxes to seven to three. [+½] An old widow dressed in furs to hide her fat strays along the outside edge of the room, clutching the cheap wallpaper to avoid inhaling whatever disease Mayfield has. [-2¾] A family man lankywalks in, still greased black from a hard day's work at the auto shop. Sees Mayfield churning at his desk. Jabs a thumb at him. —If you had more people like him, I wouldn't be taking these here forms to somebody more respectable. Hell, I've half a mind to leave 'em here with him. [+½] Rutherford swears he's never running a firm again after this year. The papers stop noticing. [-1¾] Mayfield sweats over his work, a tone-deaf Beethoven improvising a one-note symphony for a lone instrument. [CRB 10 ¼ -¾] Rutherford, drunk [-1¼], begs Mayfield: —Why in God's name are you still here? I haven't paid you in two [-2] weeks, and the returns are done with! Why are you still typing? [-1] What are you typing? [-½] WHY? [-¼] Mayfield stops typing. Miracle. Turns to Rutherford with a grin to fit to shake the steel spine of Atlas. —I'm not here in God's name. I came [4¼ -6] to [3] smell [2] the [1] ashes.

Saturday Night Motorcycles

Sarah Kauffman

begin lower left: girl

eyes defined as in meaning
not eyeliner

explanation in corrugated cheekbones
thinks of sand while smelling her hand
thinks of something like the 1945 kiss in Times Square

guidance councilors counselors don't suggest
this starry yellow and blue café life
with red wine and hors d'oeuvres

black cocktail dresses and cubic zirconias
around oversized flowers that can swallow
your face like a friendly Venus Flytrap
wavy petals gnawing at your face
how water in tide pools swallow feet

eyes up: collect rain in red, beige, and black Kate Spade bags
rain with bowler hats and trench coats
rain with personality traits
rain reading personal ads

two women exhaling pencil lines of smoke
pretty car exhaust pipes
burning paper on tongue
later tonight men will wrap their
arms around slim waists
gaze at movie star eyes
and smell cigarettes

middle: good things are better when devoured

Sarah Kauffman

Saturday Night Motorcycles

29

chocolate

as smell

softly sliced by incisors

melted and molded on molars

at corners of mouth erased by wet tongue

don't brush your teeth

end top right: man in office

black phone making ear hot and watery

brushed his teeth this morning

so phone could experience fresh mint

for an hour and twenty minutes

lost the taste of chocolaty molars

lost taste of her cigarettes

The Muse

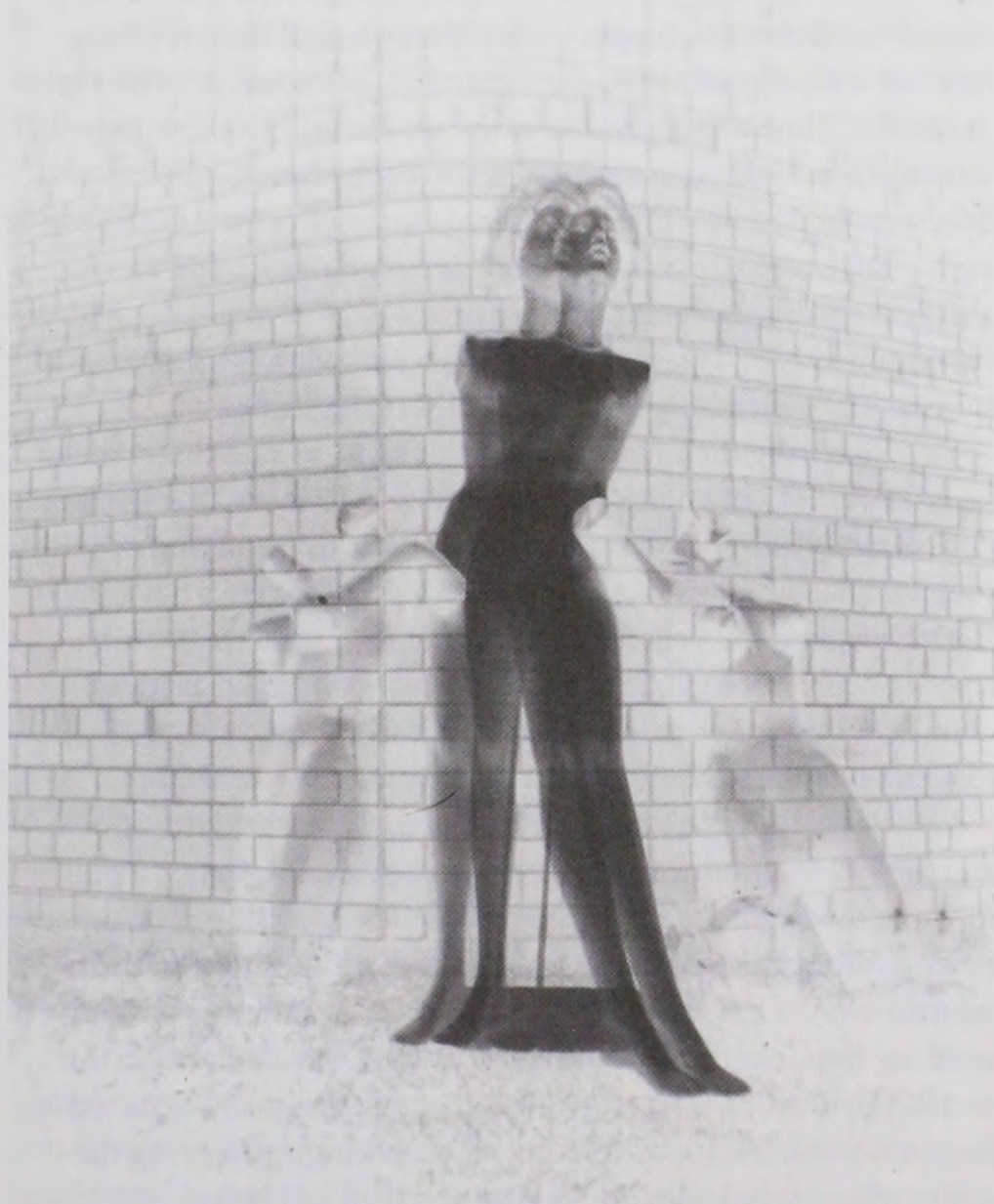
Christopher Tereshko

You kissed me
on the forehead today
like I would break
without your touch.
Velvet lips massaged my temples
to muted arousal
with careless, tender apathy,
inspiring my passions
to daydreams
of those same lips
resting softly on my own.
Your perfume dissipating
as you drift away,
leaving me only
with that faint, roseate odor,
the fading warmth on my forehead,
and those wishful thoughts
now dancing in my mind—
reminders of the day
you kissed me gently on the forehead
without your touch.

Christopher Tereshko

I Can See Right Through You

Natalie MacConnell



Natalie MacConnell

Imaginary Highway

Christine Spera

I wait in the crowd in front of *I Fratelli*, nuzzled between a businessman sipping Chianti, crunching liver on toast, and a sassy mother with children tugging at her knee-length skirt, reaching into her leather pocket-book. *I Fratelli*, also known as "The Hole in the Wall," is just that—a hole in the wall of an ancient stone building lined with Chianti bottles and baby photos where two brothers stand to heat bread and serve sandwiches for 4,000 lire each: roast beef and parsley sauce, tomato and mozzarella, rucola and goat cheese, prosciutto and artichoke heart. Fast food Florentine-style. I fear I will not taste a sandwich this good, and for two bucks, in a long while. It is my last day in Florence.

Savoring the square hunks of cold butter and thinly sliced salami freckled with black pepper, I am on my way to the Piazza della Repubblica. The piazza had been gradually emptying of tourists since my arrival in September, although I see a new bus-load of bright clean-cut American students, lined along a curb, lapping overpriced gelato. I sit along the loggia, still tearing off chunks of my sandwich, the most delicious sandwich I can remember tasting.

John Bologna's *Rape of the Sabine Woman* looms above and behind me, the woman reaches for an invisible hand to pull her to safety, the frightened older man crouches below, the young man looks as though he has raced into the composition to steal the woman away. I had spent hours staring at the sculpture, sketching it until my buttocks turned numb. I was somehow attracted to the woman in *The Rape* since my first day and am equally attracted to her on my last. Perhaps I resemble her, coming and leaving the same twisted way: escaping, seeking, terrified and brave.

I thought that I would enjoy the attention from Italian men when I arrived in Florence. I stored various fantasies in my mind that I could re-play as I anticipated my departure. I imagined

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myself strutting down small streets confidently, wearing all black with sunglasses, long hair blowing in the wind. I imagined sipping Chianti in candle-lit, cozy cafes, slinking myself over some dark and handsome man that would never be my type. I thought at the very least, I would make a few heads turn. But when I arrived, I was not bothered as much as expected.

I liked to think it was because I am a 5'3" brunette with tough curvy calves and that most people would mistake me for an Italian in Italy, but I too often exhibit the naïve enthusiasm of an American, not to mention the fact that I wear sneakers... a dead give-away.

Before Italian class one day, I confessed to my friend, Bridget, that I was disappointed about the absence of drooling Italian men in my life.

"I'm beginning to become self-conscious," I told her. "What's wrong with me?"

Bridget furrowed her eyebrows in concern the way good friends do. "You gotta lose the pants," she said, gesturing to my navy corduroy bellbottoms.

I looked down to my pants, fringing on the floor at their bottoms and falling three inches below my bellybutton at the top.

"You need tight pants," she said.

I looked at her curvaceous figure in blue jeans and agreed to sacrifice my beloved Levis. After class, I stopped in one of the many boutiques on my way home and picked up a pair of tight denim-and-spandex blend pants and paid for them with my grocery stipend. Although I would never be tall or blonde, I made heads turn. I looked great in them, and I hated it.

One night, I stood on Via dei Bardi, outside of the Montecarla club, enjoying the fresh air, when I became engaged in conversation with a Florentine man who began attempting an intellectual approach. He told me that he studied philosophy at the University of Florence. In three months, I met many students of philosophy, literature, art, and oh yes, my favorite, gynecology.

"The relationships between the sexes is so poor here, you
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would think that it was a third world country," he told me. "The men are growing more and more aggressive and the women grow more and more defensive."

"Tell me about it." I sipped a glass of water. Although his conversation was refreshing, I was drunk, and I just wanted him to leave me alone.

"The American students are targets. I have a friend who brings home a different American girl every night of the week. Sometimes two at a time. They are always drunk."

I thought I was going to be sick.

"You know that you have something on your back," he said.

"Huh?" I turned around facing my back to him, craning my neck to see what it was.

"Nice pants." He grinned. "They suit you."

I quickly turned around and leaned back against the stone wall. I bumped my head in doing so. I usually did not drink this much, and I felt queasy.

"You don't look too good. Would you like to go have a bite to eat?" He asked.

"No, no thanks. I have to get back to my friends inside."

"You have grandparents from Italy? Parents?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You look Italian." This pleased him.

"I am. My grandparents are from the south." I said, gazing uninterestedly above his head, nursing my ice water.

"Ahhh." He smirked. "*Napoli?*"

If the nuisance continued to stand in front of me much longer, he would soon learn that I have the temperament of an Italian as well... *Siciliano*. "No. Bari, actually."

"You probably think that I want to bring you home, too," he said, slowly sucking his cigarette between thumb and forefinger.

"I'm sure you wouldn't mind." I looked him straight in his bloodshot eyes and his pupils darted away to the ground.

"Yeah, well, goodnight."

My tone was enough for him to know that I would never

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cave in to his sensitive, intellectual-gig and he took off, smoking his cigarette like I had hurt him deeply. But before doing so, he shot a quick look at my nipples, erect from the cold, and smiled slyly as if he had just gotten the last word.

After three months, I am angry at the world for my inability to wander the streets of Florence in confidence. I feel raped of my femininity, of my freedom. But also, I am angry with myself for my inability to go to cafes and play the game, talk to men, lighten up, take risks. I am always aware of the struggling Sabine woman, whether I am in the piazza or not.

I had sat at that particular spot along the loggia of Piazza della Republica at least twenty times already, in the same exact spot like someone mechanically returning to the same stall in a public bathroom. I gaze at Bologna's sculpture with feelings of premature nostalgia. I will miss this spot dearly, and yet, I cannot wait to move on. I have a flight with Air France to Frankfurt in the morning. I cannot wait to bundle up in an unattractive winter jacket and go for long walks in the woods alone. Lost is the sense of adventure and freedom of exile generally associated with travel. I had turned full circle, back to the Puritanical mindset from which I unfortunately came. On my last day, I need to redeem myself: no planning, no hesitation. I want to wander and let the day take me where it will. I want back the bohemian mindset that I had in my first week. In order to fully do this, I have to be alone.

Going towards the Arno River, I stop in front of Santa Croce and snap a photo. Two Indian men taunt me from the front door of a leather jacket shop, "That's a pretty church, isn't it?" one says in a condescending tone.

"Yeah." I smile. "I have seen it already a hundred times."

"Oh!" He mocks me. "A hundred times!"

It was a childish thing to say, but they are stunned enough that they cannot proceed to try to sell me a leather jacket, or maybe they are wise enough to see that I am not the type of girl to wear a 300-dollar leather jacket. I feel silly, but walk away in feigned

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confidence.

I stop at the Jolly Café and sit at one of three round tables. I love the woman working in the Jolly Café because she offers me chocolate and gives student discounts. She smiles too, unlike most Florentines who work with the general public. She gets flustered when I try to pay with a 20.000 lire note and I feel bad for making her hunt for smaller bills.

Signora Jolly disappears across the street to find change at the internet café and a tall man in a pressed grey suit and starched white shirt dashes in the café, exclaiming, “I gotta go! Ahh! Fuck!” in Italian. When the Signora re-enters, the man is pissing in the back of her café with the bathroom door wide open. He sighs loudly. “Thank God! Uh!”

Signora Jolly calls back, “*Café macchiato* as usual?”

He jogs up to the bar, zipping his fly and searching his inner jacket pockets for a cigarette with one already in his mouth, “Where the fuck is my cigarettes?”

She lights his cigarette. He smokes as if he knew it was there all along.

I am zoning in the moment, journal open and blank, cigarette disintegrating, gazing at Signora Jolly while she smacks an old pancake of espresso into the trashcan. The back of the bar is one huge mirror, and I can see her patient face reflected there. The menu is written with colored chalk on a chalkboard to my right. The display case presents a few picked-over pastries on my left. The Jolly Café attracts those of us that seek a coffee for less than 3.000 lire. I could never find a place like this at home. The steamer whizzes milk so loudly that I don't realize someone has entered.

“Can you offer me a cigarette?” A voice speaks gently from the side. “A cigarette? Please, *signorina*?”

A man stoops down to me, smiling grandly. I would have given him anything.

He is glowing, an older man in his early-forties, wearing a black leather jacket with metal studs and zippers unlike the sleek

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fashionable ones of today, a ring of knobby silver framing an oval of Corinthian, facial hair of Russel Crowe— dark, dark inquisitive eyes like my best friend from childhood, dimples adorable and innocent as the ones on my nephew's behind. This ageless man suspends me from everything that I know or think I know (which at this particular moment, feels like nothing anyway).

I stand up. We go to the bar, each with a cigarette. The longer he holds me in his vision, I become someone that can speak Italian, some woman sexy and brave, a mysterious wanderer on an insidious pilgrimage. He is why I am here at this critical moment. I am the woman he took a break to see.

“Sophia,” I tell him, extending a clammy hand.

“Lorenzo.”

“*Il Magnifico?*” I ask, alluding to the infamous grandson of Cosimo de' Medici.

“*Si.*” He shifts in his place in false pride, buffs his fingernails on his shoulder and then holds them up in admiration. *Magnificent.*

We laugh. All four of us: myself, Lorenzo, Signora Jolly, and the nervous man in grey. Signora Jolly smiles coyly, wiping her white marble-topped bar. The man in grey stamps out his cigarette and leaves.

“Do you write?” Lorenzo gestures to my journal flopped open and long forgotten.

“I try.”

“For whom?”

“For... school. I mean, for myself, of course,” I drag lovingly at my cigarette, thankful for the nasty pacifier. We are far away from the blaring white pages of my journal.

“What do you write?” He is earnest.

“Nothing... everything.” I am not. I am entranced by his failure to size me up and down.

“You write about truth, I bet... love and art maybe?”

Signora Jolly watches us casually like we are there to be watched.

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“What do you do?” I ask.

Lorenzo hesitates. I feel hot, and prepare for an enigmatic reply.

“I am an artist. I do etchings. I work with poets making artist books. I don’t get paid very often...” Signora Jolly smiles, scrubbing at a testy chunk of pastry glued to her bar. “But that’s what I do.”

All three of us smile dopily as if drinking wine.

“Sohpia?” He asks.

“Si?”

“Do you drink tea?”

“From time to time.”

“Do you like honey?”

“Very much.”

“Come, let’s look at some books.”

At that, we walk briskly out of the Jolly Café, casually passing Santa Croce and the two staring Indian men, and jog up twelve stone flights of steps to reach Lorenzo’s studio and home.
What would my father think?

At Lorenzo’s place, I smell turpentine, black pigment, and rubber cement: all of the vertiginous smells of a studio. I pull my sweater tighter around me. He shuffles papers and swats brushes aside to light candles and discover light switches. Lorenzo shows me his most recent etching of a gladiator. I realize that he resembles the man in the etching. I look around for an ashtray to rid of my cigarette and Lorenzo stops me.

“Over here.” He directs me to a collection of standing cigarette filters with towers of ash of varying heights.

“Put it there.”

I place my butt with the others. “What’s this all about?”

“It’s for my anxiety,” he tells me.

For his anxiety, Lorenzo delicately lifts a mini tower of ash and brings it to be dumped into the trash can, about two feet away from the table’s edge. The ashes cannot spill until they are above the trashcan. The whole thing is ridiculous: imagining Lorenzo

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with anxiety and imagining him gingerly dumping ashes in a huge trashcan.

“Well, what do you do for your anxiety?” he asks me, defensively.

Most people don’t openly address anxiety. I feel nervous and relieved. “I do yoga.” I feel my face become hotter.

Lorenzo is impressed. “Everyday?”

“Yes.”

“Do you meditate too?”

“Uh—huh.”

“Do you have visions?”

“Yes, every morning.” I joke, pushing him away from the subject of myself. “This morning I found my spirit animal and we went on a journey together.”

“What?”

“Your spirit animal, you know, one of the animals that would be on your totem pole if you had one, an animal that best represents you at that particular moment of your life. You meditate on a cave or a hole, and your spirit animal greets you to take you on a journey where you have a vision and become enlightened. It’s Native American business, but now it’s California bullshit.”

“My spirit animal would probably be a road—kill or something... The other night I actually thought that I was having a vision. I thought I would create the most beautiful art with this one vision. Finally!” He is acting dramatic. “My father told me that something like this would happen to me one day. But then I realized that I was food and sleep deprived... and then I saw on television the next day that Florence had a minor earthquake...”

We laugh at him. Silence. *How old is he? I want to hug him and talk to him forever. I want to be his mother, or do I want to make love with him?*

Arabic music plays loudly. I love it.

“I listen to this same song over and over everyday for a week now. It is new each time. I love it.” Lorenzo grooves around his studio, looking for things to show me, smoking, humming.

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I look at one of his artist's books. This particular book is about utilizing color and has English translations in it. I lean over the large book spread out on a high table and read some of it aloud, "Because the illusion, however much we deny it, always retains a powerful attraction for the senses. I suspect that I would do again that which I have done and would do again that which I will do... *Mi piace*." That means "I like," in Italian. I use this phrase all of the time. At the baker, the girls chuckle at me because I point to a loaf of bread and say, "*Mi piace*," smiling happily like a fool.

Lorenzo imitates my *Americana* accent and holds my chin delicately in his hand. "Mi piace, mi piace, mi piace," he says and winks. We still smile like people in love, bent over the book in between us.

"Look here." He pulls a newspaper clipping from the back of the book.

"What? The Uffizzi! This book was in the Uffizzi!"

He blushes. "No, no, no. We had it critiqued by a panel in one of the rooms on the first floor."

"Still... the freakin' Uffizzi! Michelangelo is in the Uffizzi. Giotto is in the Uffizzi. Caravaggio is in the Uffizzi. Just to be associated with that genius is incredible."

"Yeah, but I could have never did it if it was not for the poet. He has connections. Here, look at some of my etchings. When I do the books, I have to collaborate." Lorenzo pulls out a few large pieces that are incredibly intricate. He is into technique. "I like to do stuff about magic. This one is of Nostradamus."

I see that he likes the pieces that he chooses to show me. He is amused by my excitement. I love the swirling patterns and calculated compositions, the celestial designs.

"This one is about the *malocchio*." He pulls his bottom eyelid down with his index finger, the sign of the evil eye, or rather, the sign that means, "I see what you mean" in Italian.

I notice a colored print on the wall that I particularly like: green, red, blue, and black, a crouching woman with many hands

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twisting all around her like the Hindu god Ganesha, remover of obstacles. "Do you like Balthaus? Your work resembles his."

Lorenzo excitedly pulls a newspaper clipping from his back pocket and presses out the creases, an article on the Balthaus exhibit in Venice.

"I was there," I tell him.

He nods and laughs to himself. "Of course you were there, Sophia. You would not miss the Balthaus exhibit in Venice."

We talk for hours, with the excitement of a minor language barrier. At the next silence, I randomly read another line aloud from the book spread open on the high table, "In faces I am looking for an imaginary highway: I try to see myself there."

"You like," Lorenzo tells me.

I silently agree.

"I think... I think you are a part of nature," he says, resting his hand on mine. Warmth spreads in my hips. I want to feel his scratchy beard on my stomach and thighs. I want his hands to touch my bare feet, to smother my back. "What are you doing tonight?"

My heart sinks. I look out the window and see the sky is navy. Two pigeons coo and pace on the windowsill outside of the next room. I have to meet my Italian class for dinner anyway, but they would not miss me much if I did not go. "Actually, I should leave soon."

"They are hungry," Lorenzo says, not hearing me.

"Huh?"

"My doves. They're hungry."

He walks out of the room and comes back with a handful of crumbs. He goes to the window and I follow him into the small yellow room. The pigeons coo excitedly but won't hop into the apartment, onto his arm. I turn around and see an unmade bed, a hanging plant, a painting of a lion.

"They're scared of you." He laughs. "They aren't used to visitors."

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Lorenzo sprinkles the crumbs on the sill. *Look at the way he holds himself. Look at that priceless smile.* If I stay any longer I will long for him when gone.

“I have to get going,” I say.

He makes a small noise.

“I have to meet my friends for dinner.”

Lorenzo recognizes a touch of urgency in my voice and gathers his things, wallet, keys, and cigarettes. Humming the serpent-like tunes from upstairs, we enter the noisy night of buzzing vespas and crowded cafés. We walk for a bit in silence and I stop us in front of Santa Croce.

“Where are you going?” I ask him.

Lorenzo looks right, then left, then points straight ahead. “I think I go that way.”

“I go this way.” I point to the right casually, but my pulse throbs in my neck.

“Okay, then, we say goodbye.” Lorenzo says, looking into my eyes, still smiling, still glowing, even at goodbye.

We hug hard. I feel his beard in my neck and quiver. I feel a kiss somewhere in between my cheek and left ear. “If you ever return to Florence—“

Don't even say it. “No, no... I am leaving tomorrow.” I look at my sneakers. “I have to.”

I make him walk away first so I can see his back recede in the distance. I am leaving tomorrow, dammit, going home to be a stranger all over again. I see him stop and hope that maybe he will turn to look at me just one more time, but he does not. A cloud of smoke rises above his head... he starts walking again. I see him wave, passing the Jolly Café, he turns a corner and is gone.

I Stuffed my Face in the Herbs

Sarah Napolitan

I stuffed my face in the herbs I stuffed it in I licked the leaves
I tipped my tongue on their tastes of rainless sunless window life
I totally took their souls and it tickled

I sleep with folded drink umbrellas in my nose
in case my brain leaks daiquiris but it only does after I water my
herbs
and the joy comes trickling down from our passages
from our music
from watching through the jovial realistic window painting of life

Sarah Napolitan

First Kiss, and Related Terrors

Philip Malachowski

“Katie!” a female voice called at last from one of the benches farther down Mill Creek.

“Think it like, hurts him?” Katie asked, mesmerized by the inky excretion that stained the creases of his fingertips.

“Probably.” Furtive, seventeen year-old Mike Armstrong kept his eyes on his work but managed to prick himself anyway. Half a worm fell in the trimmed park grass. Wiping his hand on jeans, he looked at Katie and then at a small radio beside him. He considered turning up the volume in order to tune out this little trespasser—this little stranger with gawking eyes and wheezing nose, this little intruder reeking of hand lotion and grape bubble gum.

“Katie, come on, hon!” the voice called again.

“Someone’s calling for you,” Mike said, his eyes motioning to the approaching figure, then glancing at the radio. The Coasters’ “Searchin’” was playing on 95.5 FM. Mike loved Oldies. The positive, youthful energy of the music made him feel like dancing, and he would have, except Mike Armstrong didn’t dance.

“Is your finger hurt?” asked Katie. She blew a large, purple bubble and cracked it in her teeth. “Hey, Mister, is your like, finger like, hurt?”

“Like, a little.” A German Shepherd pulling a roly-poly man passed behind the table. The man nodded to Mike, who pretended not to see and turned back to Katie. “Maybe you should go now,” he said. “Don’t you think?”

Katie’s hand darted into the mud-caked tackle box. “What’s this thingy?”

“A lure.” Mike turned up the radio.

Katie spoke up. “There aren’t like, any hooks on it.”

“No, there aren’t.”

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“Katherine!” the voice repeated. Turning up the radio even more, Mike glanced over Katie’s head, at the approaching young woman, her hair brown and straight—

“How’s it work then?” Katie asked.

“It has personality.” Reddish-brown, rather—

“Yeah, I like the green glittery stuff. Ooo, the sparkly blue is cool, too.” Katie rubbed the lure with her tiny index finger. “Like my make-up at home.” She looked at Mike. “What was that worm stuff on your hand?” And straight except for the curling ends that tumbled around her shoulders, some of the thin strands clinging to the damp skin around a lavender tank-top. “Hey, Mister, what was that worm stuff—”

“Crap. Blood. Other worm stuff.”

“Why, was he like, scared?”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Mike said, trying to look mean. He gave up and moved his hand to the volume knob, but missed it, turning the tuner instead. Oldies crinkled into alternative pop. Katie screeched and began jumping up and down, up and down while pounding an air-guitar.

“Ooo! Turn it up, turn it up, up, up!” she squealed, her dirty-blond hair lashing the air. “Blink’s new song! Omygodturnitup!” Mike obeyed. An elderly couple picnicking farther downstream glared; the roly-poly man turned and snickered. Mike looked helplessly at Katie, urging him, “Turn it up like, even more, even more!”

“Katherine Ann!” the young woman yelled.

Mike turned down the volume. Katie pouted, looking at him while addressing the young woman. “He was turning it up anyway.”

If there was anything that could have made Mike Armstrong more uncomfortable at that point than the disequilibrium of careful human attention, it was the disequilibrium of being made the bad guy. Mike’s little sister, Emily, would employ the same tactic, to stare him down with the same wounded expression, whenever he refused to switch the
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Discovery Channel to MTV, or when he prioritized his reading *National Geographic* over toting Emily and her minions to Park City Mall.

“Hey, do you know why the worm crapped that black stuff all over me?” Mike had no idea of where he was going with this.

“Cause he was scared,” answered Katie, her pout evaporating. “Cause you like, stabbed a hole in him.”

“Yeah, yeah, but do you know how the black stuff works?”

Katie shook her head no.

“It works like bad-tasting goo,” Mike said, knowing that what he was saying held true for toads, anyway. “So that if a predator tries to eat the worm, the predator will, uh, spit it out—”

“What about birds? Birds eat worms. Fishes, too.”

“Well, maybe not all predators—”

“You talk like Mr. Carry.”

“Mr. Carry?”

“Katherine!” the young woman called once again, close. “Come. Here. Now.”

“Mr. Carry, my science teacher,” said Katie. “He’s always like saying stuff that goes against other stuff that he says. He’s always talking about how like everything in nature comes down to predator and prey, and how like, sometimes predators turn into prey, and prey turn into predators. Sometimes, things are like predator and prey at the same exact time. And he says, too, that predators and prey make like, a circle in nature. He even like, drew a bunch of pictures and stuff.”

“Well,” Mike said, alighting from the bench to retrieve the worm he had dropped. “Mr. Carry sounds like a very interesting teacher.”

“Mr. Carry’s a loon!” Katie rolled her eyes, stuck out her purpled tongue, and made gagging, gurgling noises. She foamed at the mouth as well.

“Katie. Please.” Pushing a solitary braid behind her ear,

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the young woman joined them, breathing with some heaviness, though she didn't look out of shape. *Au contraire*. She looked about Mike's age, seventeen or close to it. Putting her hands on Katie's shoulders, she tried to veer her the other way. Katie resisted.

"How'd you think it'd feel to be like, thrown into the water and have the fishes nibble away at you?" Katie asked Mike.

"Not good?" he said.

The young woman smiled at Mike, and then said to Katie: "If you don't leave this guy alone, like this—" She fell upon Katie, tickling her till she collapsed, wriggling in the grass.

"Only worse," Mike Armstrong said, looking up, "Because the fish aren't nearly as pretty as your sister." He looked away, into his hands, automatically threading the rest of the worm onto the line, and tried not to let on when he pricked himself again.

Katie popped up. "Hellooo. Adela's not my sister. She's just watchin' me while my mom goes to the bar and tries to pick up a new daddy. She goes Tuesdays and Thursdays—Thursdays if Tuesday goes really bad—and usually Fridays. And sometimes Saturdays if she's not like, too tired from Friday." Katie looked to Adela, who touched her forehead. "Adie says, too, that my mom's hor—horm, horm—what? Well they're kickin' like spring bunnies, it turnin' May and stuff, and Adela says she like, understands 'cause I heard her sayin' on the phone to Melissa—Melissa's her best friend, or at least she was till she stole Adie's boyfriend, now they're just normal friends—but Adie was sayin' how like, what *she* needs is like, a real good —"

"That's nice of Adela," Mike said. "To watch you."

"Not really," Katie replied. "My mom pays her."

Adela stepped between Katie and Mike, and knelt before her charge. "We're going now. Say bye."

"Is it true," asked Katie, "if you like break a worm in half each half will turn into a whole worm?" She craned her neck to see Mike over Adela's shoulder, freckled and bare around the

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lavender spaghetti straps. Before he could answer, Katie moved to the next question: "Are guys worms? My mom said that all men are worms."

Adela turned and caught Mike contemplating the patch of skin between her Hanes underwear band and the bottom of her tank-top. She smiled subtly, restraining his eyes with a force that struck him like a knee to the groin.

"See you around," she said, and walked back to the parking lot with Katie's little hand in hers.

When the Escort pulled away, Mike turned off the radio, threaded the rest of the worm onto the hook, pressed the line against the shaft, opened the reel, and raised the rod over his shoulder. The line hissed, and plopped into the stream.

The following week found Mike Armstrong at the same picnic table, picking water weeds off his line. Having cleared most of the algae, he baited the hook and cast it beneath some heavy tree limbs that dipped solemnly into the water. It was evening time, and the May sun blazed on the stream. Mike sat quietly, thinking about how to stop thinking about Adela, half-wishing she would show up, half-wishing she never had. He couldn't even listen to his Oldies anymore. All that romantic energy. It made him feel like falling in love—that is, if Mike fell in love, and he didn't do that either. Fishing: yes. Dancing and falling in love: no.

"Here," came a voice behind him. Adela placed the lure in the open tackle box and sat beside Mike on the bench top. One of her spaghetti straps, lavender, slipped, and Adela pulled it up, holding it till she saw Mike's eyes go to it. "Must have slipped into Katie's pocket when you were looking away," she said. Applying some lip balm, she touched Mike's knee. "She'll have a police record before her eighth birthday."

"Hi," Mike said.

Adela pocketed the lip balm and extended her hand. "To clear formalities. Adela Taylor."

"Mike Armstrong." He took her hand, and Adela shook

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it for him.

“Have the gods blessed you today?” Adela chewed her peach-flavored lip. God, how her teeth pinched the supple flesh. She motioned to the stream. “Any catches?”

Mike shook his head no.

“Yeah, I suppose this isn’t the best hole in Lancaster county,” Adela said, digging a worm out of the foam Turkey Hill container. “Not the healthiest worms either.” And those gleaming fox-eyes. “You have to get out to some of the farms off 23.” Tiny freckles along the bridge of her nose, down to the defiant tip. “Or back towards Bird-in-Hand.” Nostrils pulsing as she spoke. “South of 501 and there-about. The Amish sell ‘em by the bucket-full. Nice and plump.” One of the straps slipped from a bare shoulder, falling oh so, so slowly... “—from around here?” Her fingers trailed the skin as they pulled up the strap, surely tickling.

“Sorry?”

“Are you from around here?”

“Just a stone’s throw up that way.” Mike pointed down Mill Creek Road. “We rent a place on Church.”

“Church. Intersects with Monterey, right?”

“Correct,” Mike said.

A Taurus pulled into the gravel lot, and a man with an orange, pointed goatee and leash in hand squeezed out of the car. He pushed the seat forward, and a Retriever pup exploded out, making for the stream into which he leapt, barking thinly.

“For Christ’s sake, Rocky!” The man tossed the leash into the car, slammed the door, cursed, realized Mike and Adela’s presence, shut up, and bowed his head as he hobbled toward the stream.

“So,” Adela said, “What do you get out of it?”

“Fishing?” Mike reeled in the line.

“Sure.”

“Or just Mill Creek?”

“That, too.”

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“Out of life, you mean?” he asked.

“Hm...”

“Is this a get-to-know-you question?”

“Maybe.”

“Because I don’t like those questions.”

“Why not?” Adela bit her lip.

“Listen to the Oldies?” Mike reached for the radio, which wasn’t there.

“The gritty, unpolished stuff. Particularly till ’60 or so.”

“When the great ones started disappearing,” Mike said.

“Buddy Holly, plane crash—”

“Little Richard, light of God—”

“Chuck Berry, Mann Act—”

“Elvis,” Adela sighed. “Army.”

“Jerry Lee Lewis.” Mike bowed his head. “Incest scandal.”

This was followed by a moment of silence.

“So,” Adela returned, “What do you get out of it?”

“Guess I like to get away from things.”

“Emotional noise?”

Mike shrugged. “From my mother, sister, two cats, one Shepherd, one Retriever, one step-father—alcohol twenty-one percent by volume—a two-bedroom place. It gets crowded. I like quietness. I like my solitude.”

A little boy dashed around a bend in the stream, yelling, “Doggie! Doggie!” and shedding a baseball mitt as he blew past Mike and Adela with his father on his heels, panting and excusing himself as he retrieved the glove and rushed on.

“And you pursue your solitude at Mill Creek—kids, and cars, and dogs, and persistent, nosy, high-school senior females.”

“It’s as good a place as any,” Mike said.

Adela looked down into her hands.

“What I mean,” he said, “is that it’s not a bad place to get away from what you want to get away from, and sometimes distraction’s the easiest way to do that.” He stared into the water.

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Adela waited. "You know how they say that if you want to be a good person," Mike said at last, "you have to surround yourself with good people and good places? I guess that's what I get out of it, or try to, anyway."

"Fetch!" the little boy shouted, pitching a tennis ball into the water while the father apologized to Goatee man, gesticulating and nodding magnanimously.

Having managed to tangle the tangle-proof spindle, Mike set about exacerbating matters. "Though I'm still not sure how or where, or who, or whether it's more essential to surround yourself from without or from within or from both without and within—if this makes any sense." Mike blushed, looking back into the water and tracing the reddening, deepening wavelets with his eyes. "It doesn't matter, I guess. Sometimes you shouldn't have to think...just enjoy something for its simplicity. Why can't a youthful, spring day be for what it is, you know?"

Adela drew his gaze and smiled.

"Stupid doggie!" yelled the boy. "Ball, *ball*, no stick!"

"Hey, my sister liked you," said Adela.

"Katie?"

"Yup." Adela patted Mike's knee. "She said you were cute."

Mike felt his ears turn crimson. "Oh?"

"She said you look like Indiana Jones." Adela winked. "Must be that hat and crooked smile."

By now the spindle was an impossible mess. Mike laid the rod between Adela and himself and rummaged through the tackle box for his Swiss Army knife. "Katie is your sister, then?"

Adela rolled her eyes and looked into the woods that ran along the opposite shore. "That's another thing about Katie. She's a compulsive liar. Sometimes I'm her babysitter. Other times, her adoptive mother. Once I was her lesbian lover." Adela nodded. "Two words. Jerry-fucking Springer."

"Springer, eh?" Mike opened the spindle-housing and the Swiss blade, and proceeded to knife through the tangles. The *Philip Malachowski*

blade slipped, slicing into his index finger—the same finger he pricked a week ago, the same finger that strangely caught infection and swelled into the lavender–streaked balloon now opened up, bleeding.

“Can’t figure out why she does it,” Adela said, still looking into the woods. “Not just that, of course, but also her stealing. Ever since Will left...” Adela shrugged. A strap slipped from her shoulder, but she didn’t bother pulling it up this time. Instead, she studied Mike’s forehead, and then his eyes. “You have trippy eyes. Look more blue or green depending on the color of your shirt, right?” Adela had the same colored eyes.

“Correct again,” Mike said. The blood was warm and sticky in his hand, and he clenched his jaw against the sting shooting into his brain, neurons firing haphazardly, making terrific leaps into his feet and toes. “Were you close to Will?”

“He was our father. He was a fucking worm.” Adela played with one of her rings. “Every family has one.” She looked up. “Hey, I’m sorry. I’m exercising zero sensitivity—” Adela and Mike jumped as the tennis ball sailed past their noses.

“Careful, Kevin!” yelled the father. “Excuse me, pardon me!”

“Rock! Get back here!” yelled Orange–goatee man. Ignoring him, Rock bounded up to the table, sniffing Adela’s and Mike’s footwear.

“Okay, Dad!” chirped Kevin.

Rocky barked and took off for the ball.

Adela grumbled.

“Don’t worry,” Mike said to Adela, and then repeated it for the father, while concealing his hand as best as he could in his t–shirt, illustrated with a cow tangled in fence wire. Below was a caption written in jittery, childish letters: “Really, I’m fine.” The shirt was one of several stolen articles for which Todd, Mike’s step–father, was canned from his last job at T.J. Maxx. “What happened to your father—Will?”

“He left when Katie was born,” said Adela. “Got scared,

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tired of family life, went off in search of his ideals. Blamed it on his mid-life crisis. I don't know." Adela smiled and tapped Mike's hand. They pulled away at the same time. "By the way," she said, "you're bleeding."

Mike moved his hand to his side, away from Adela. "It's okay."

"Let me look at it a sec," she said, reaching.

"Rocky, no jumping!" Orange-goatee man shouted.

"No, really—"

"Just give me your hand."

"No. Really. I'm fine."

Adela moved closer, capturing his hand. Their shoulders touched.

"Why the nervousness? Let me see." Adela leaned into Mike, peering at his hand. "It's like you've never touched a girl before or something."

"Not in the water, Kevin!" the father shouted.

"Well, it's getting a little cool out—and late," Mike said, looking at his watch. "Wow, look at that, 8:00. I should probably get going, uh, thanks for the lure here, for returning it, you know." Mike fumbled with the tackle box and spilled a container of hooks onto the bench top, some of them falling between the boards, into the grass. He dismounted the table and crawled beneath on hands and knees, picking up hooks and glancing up: there were Adela's legs, bare ivory all the sweet way up to short, frayed jeans—shorts, uncrossing oh so, so slowly... Mike shot out from beneath the table. Adela watched him: those gleaming fox eyes; that defiant nose; that subtle smile: Oh that knee to the groin! Mike snapped shut the tackle box and grabbed the rod.

"Wait," Adela said, her warm—moist palm falling on Mike's hand, the uninjured one. His skin sucked in the moisture, shooting directly into the blood—stream. "Follow me." Adela unfastened Mike's fingers from the rod and set down the tackle box. Then she hopped off the table, Mike's hand in hers, and led him to her car. She obtained a bottle of water from the front seat,
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pushed Mike against the rear-door, and told him, "Open up."

"Really, this isn't necessary, it's just a little—"

"Open up." Adela took Mike's hand. "Where's the cut?"

Mike wriggled his finger and concentrated on looking manly while Adela poured the water and began rubbing away the blood with her shirttail.

"Yo, that's your shirt," Mike said, pulling away.

"Don't have anything else in the car," said Adela, grabbing back his hand. "Hope you don't mind." Her tank-top was small, so that when she pulled it up to rub, Mike couldn't help but to see what he felt he shouldn't be seeing. He endeavored to look at the trees, the clouds, his hand, the Escort—anywhere but there.

"Good car," he said. "Sturdy. Economic."

Adela looked up, smiled, looked down again, and chewed her bottom lip. "Looks as if it's been infected. Those streaks. Creepy."

"Blood poisoning, I think."

"How'd it happen?"

"As far as I can tell, a hook—last week when we met."

"Poetic. You know," Adela said, "you really should see a doctor. It looks serious." She moved closer, oh so, so slowly, till the tip of Mike's boots touched the tips of her sandals, till he inhaled her sweat and peach perfume, till his skin rose in goose-bumps and his blood rustled like spring leaves, till James Taylor broke out with "How Sweet It Is" in his head, and the soft-focused world moved oh so, so slowly as Adela raised her face and Mike bowed his head, and swallowed, and said:

"Oh hell, I'm bleeding all over you."

"I already told you not to worry," said Adela.

"Your hands—"

"It's okay."

"And your shirt—"

"Hey," she said. "Don't worry. It goes with lavender."

"Look, Adela..." Mike looked at his hand, and then tried to look into Adela's eyes, but couldn't manage it, so he focused on

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her nose instead, but couldn't manage that either, so he looked at her lips, but that was worse than trying to focus on her nose, so Mike just looked back to his bleeding hand. "I really do appreciate your help and talking with you—"

"Duck!" Adela yelled, but not before a tennis ball bounced off the side of Mike's head and rolled under the car. Adela dropped to her hands and knees, reached behind the rear tire, came up with the ball, rushed around the car and to the shoreline where she launched the ball into the woods on the other side. She then erupted into some warrior-ceremonial dance—disquieting—in front of the boy, Kevin. Rocky barked and leapt into the stream. Kevin shrieked and cried. The men turned ferocious and red, shouting angry things at Adela while she sprinted back, chuckling and grinning.

"Busy Tuesday evening?" she said, hopping into the car. Orange-goatee man was hobbling over, his face burning as brightly as his goatee.

"This Tuesday?" Mike said, following Adela around the car.

She slammed the door, started the engine, and rolled down the window. "As in two days from today. 8:00."

Mike glanced through the passenger's side window at Goatee man, closing in speedily. "Not really, but —"

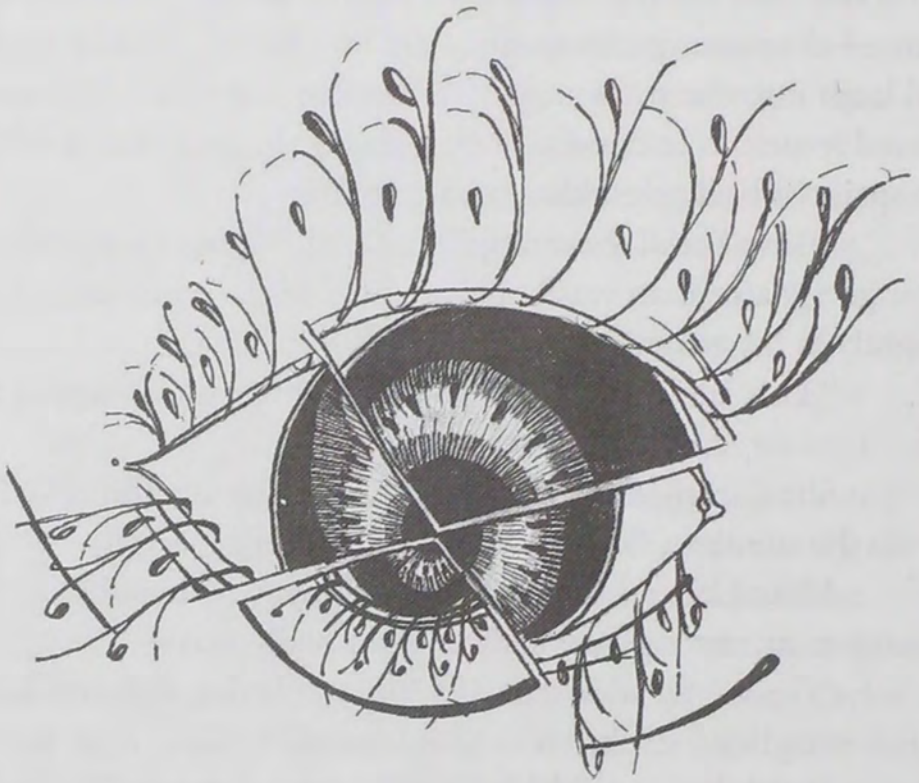
"Good, my address is 424 Vincent Drive, right off Laurel, which is right off 23, know where I mean?"

"I think so," said Mike, hardly daring to take his eyes from the approaching foe.

"Good." Adela backed into the road. She waved Mike over, and he leaned in through the open window. Steadily, Adela looked into his eyes. "And Godspeed," she said, nodding to Orange-goatee man and lightly kissing Mike Armstrong's cheek before taking off down Mill Creek Road.

Perceiving the Eye

Preethy Eddy



Preethy Eddy

Jacob's Nightingale

Alison Shaffer

In the small church concert hall, I sit in one of the back pews and close my eyes as the recorder wails and falls like a bird song into the courtyard with the tolling steeple bells, and I barely hear you breathing between notes, each one dropping to the stones below to bounce back deeper and fuller to your ears between the bodies moving, passing by beneath you, obliviously, through the music. Behind your blind eyes, nothing beats but the pulse of that little bird singing in your mind as you perch, feeling yourself breathless and light, on the bell tower parapets above the rooftops, as below you business continues as always, clattering with horseshoes and cart wheels through the cobblestone courtyard. Nothing to you—feathers fall from your flute, float down to tangle themselves in the feet of the worried walkers who look up towards your tower deafly and wander back towards home, suddenly running for shelter, covering their heads from the downpour, beating the stones like a hundred hands in praise, that breaks the spell.

Alison Shaffer

at Tracey's

Melanie Scriptunas

Certain summer mornings I got to thinking about the kids,
 about dirty diaper McHenna with her orange-cruusted face at the floor,
 picking potato chip crumbs from the carpet
 (pinching them with precision).

When I came through, Bailey was skipping over glass in her open-
 toed sandals (two sizes too small); she saw me she squeezed me she
 shouted delightfully, "Guess what—somebody
 PULLED DOWN MY PANTS!"

And she smiled wickedly, leading me into their cinderblock shelter where
 Travis—a retard—was puffing on cigarette filters, torching them
 at the tainted kitchen table

Where dirty dishes were piled as high as the windows. Where is Tracey?
 he say, "Um, uh TrAy—thee be back (thee went to duh 'sto')"
 and then thumthing along tha lime uv: "I'm baby-thitting."

(Tho I thed: "th-top doin' that, kid," and went up stairs to check on Brady.)

Brady, Bailey's brother, sat cross-legged, naked in a dark room
 (he was nearly five, still in diapers; Tracey claimed he was
 "like three") *big boy!*

"You wanna go outside, Brady? ... Brady, you wanna go outside?" (nothing)

McHenna was there with him, clutching a rolled-up dollar bill in one hand,
 stripping a shelf of videocassettes and throwing them on the floor with
 the other (giggling) oh my God she has a dry dirty
 ketchup stain on her bare ivory chest.

Melanie Scriptunas

(I did not wipe it off—it isn't my responsibility! I frowned.)

She was a baby. (I went downstairs.) A roach crept out from beneath a
pile of trash ... *So I left*— left her to scavenge through plates of
old instant mashed potatoes (and flies), to drink what she
could find (Gatorade or congealing Kool-Aid with
cigarette butts in the bottom) —

Bailey to skid off scooters with bare knees and scrape her shins in the glass —
Brady to stare dumbly at the TV blaring (yeah, he goes to school, she said)

It's not my responsibility. (I hugged Bailey; she sometimes took a bath.)

Spanish View

Kristin Servent



Kristin Servent

Hairball

Rosabelle Diaz

“only individuals exist... if, in fact, anyone does...”
—*Jorge Luis Borges, The Other*

In the 4th grade I stopped crying and started to scratch my head instead. I found the perfect spot, on the right side of my scalp, about an inch past the hairline. It was on a Thursday, during a sharing session with the other 34 students in my class and our Jehovah's Witness teacher, Miss Mitchell, with the short salt and pepper hair. Our classroom was Trailer 4—the last of the long skinny white wooden boxes that had recently been hauled into what used to be the playground to add all of four more classrooms to the overcrowded Taylor Elementary School.

I discovered this little button on my head that turned tears off because I had spent most of the morning crying, outside in the playground, into my bony arms at my desk, or at the vice-principal's office. This constant flood of salty water and boogers had earned me the name of crybaby in one day. It had to be stopped, damned somehow.

It started with my hair. I got up, and my mother refused to do it.

“Nayeli, you're too old,” and “I'm not going to last you all your life,” or “You might as well start now, you gotta learn sometime.” I chased her outside onto the dusty burgundy porch of our North Philly row-home and pleaded some more as she held my older brother Quique by the arm to keep him from running off while she waited for the school bus to pick him up.

“I said no,” she said as Quique's arms went flailing in his blue sweatshirt, already stained with milk from breakfast. He gargled the pool of spit deep in his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down like a buoy. A mini yellow bus stopped in front of our house, popped out the stop sign from its side and

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began to honk wildly.

“Come on, Mami, pleeeese.” I followed, grabbing on to Quique’s other arm as she led him to the bus, my feet crunching the dead leaves that covered the cracked cement steps.

My mother handed my brother’s superman backpack to the plump bus attendant. “His lunch is in there, make sure he doesn’t eat it before he gets to school.”

The woman nodded, balancing it between her elbow and her round hip. “I’ll hold on to it, but ma’am, could I – can I ask – I – I mean talk to you for a minute.”

My mother sighed. “Just keep the plastic bags away from him.”

“Are you sure it’s that?”

She took my brother from my mom. I was still stuck to his sleeve. Quique shook me off with a yell and a grunt then stomped up the black rubber stairs of the bus.

“Mami, what am I supposed to do? Look at this!” I yanked a piece of my fuzzy curly hair up and out of the tangled ball it had scrunched into during my hyperactive sleep.

She pointed sharply at the front door. “GO.” Her green eyes were popping from her head, pushing me towards the stoop. “The brush is in the bathroom closet. I got to listen to you complain, too? I get enough from *these* people. GO!” She turned to the bus attendant. “And I know my son. If I say it’s the plastic bags, then keep the goddamn plastic bags away from him, and you won’t have a problem!”

Upstairs, my twin brother Jonathan was in the bathroom so I couldn’t get the brush. I banged on the wooden door with my fist. It once had a nice polished finish, but my mother had painted over it with peach paint because she was obsessed over the fact that the “ugly” brown of the wood didn’t match with the remodeled pastel-colored hallway. However, she used the same semi-gloss wall paint she had used to paint the bathroom, so the results were not quite as she had envisioned.

Rosabelle Diaz

I gave up on the bathroom. My brother hadn't bathed in about three days and it would take hours to remove all the layers of dirt from his skin. Poor soap. I tied my hair back loosely with a scrunchie, then smoothed the front out with some gel. Maybe doing my own hair wasn't all that bad. My mother always brushed my hair back so tightly my eyes slanted and my cheeks tightened. I could barely blink and I always had the strangest smirk on my face. Also, I couldn't scratch my scalp.

At Taylor we had recess in shifts, since there were so many of us. We played in the spaces between the trailers, running around in the shadowed thin maze that was once our schoolyard. We, the fourth grade trailer kids, had recess early in the morning, only about an hour into the school day. My best friend, Jaqueline, was absent today because of a dentist appointment, so I sat by myself on the steps of the trailer, facing the tall red brick main school building, humming and drawing trees.

Precious came running towards me, her long, straight black hair waving behind her. Her skin was like my brother Jonathan's – deep reddish-brown. She looked more like his twin than I did with my pale complexion.

"Move," she said reaching over my head to grab the doorknob. "I need to use the bathroom." She stopped, though, and started to laugh.

"What?"

"What's up with your hair?"

"My hair is fine. Don't hate." I rolled my eyes.

She swayed her head back and forth, like a snake to the beat of her taunts. "What's wrong, can't afford a brush?"

I rolled my eyes again, and doodled in my Hello Kitty binder. "Go away."

"You look like a poodle! Look ya'll, Nayeli don't know how to do her hair!" She yelled.

"Well, at least I'm not *named* after a poodle, Precious."

She just laughed harder, holding her stomach and
Rosabelle Diaz

pointing at my head. Her mouth was tiny, but when she opened it to laugh it expanded, making her flat nose and bulging eyes disappear. Her jaw separated, ready to swallow me whole, frizzy hair and all. I didn't want to end up in her slimy belly so I pushed her away with my arms and ended up grabbing her face, my hand held tightly over her mouth, trying to shrink it. My other hand closed around her neck. She bit my palm, and I dug my claws into her cheeks and neck the way my cat digs into my thighs when he's sitting on my lap and Jonathan slaps him. Her arms started to rise slowly, her eyes bulging more than usual, her chest rising and falling faster and faster. I held her there, my eyes trying to decipher the obscenities and tags graffitied on to the school wall. Maybe it was a different language. I could make out only one of the red and black spray-painted phrases.

"Fuck you," I mouthed, slowly.

She grabbed my hair and pulled it back, slamming my head into the door of the trailer. I let go of her face and neck to hold the back of my head. My eyebrows sunk into my eyes, my chin pushed forward, causing my face to cave in. I opened my mouth, the last of the floodgates, with a moan.

Precious fingered the wounds on her neck and spread the blood around the skin in swirls. She looked at the stain it left on her fingertips silently for a minute then breathed out any pain she could have felt. "Stupid bitch. Good. Cry."

And I did. I couldn't stop. Even after recess, when we were back in Trailer 4, I contained it long enough to walk to the Peace Corner and sit on the hard brown carpet and stare at the pictures the students had drawn to decorate our special reflection spot. Miss Mitchell came over after assigning reading groups. "What's wrong?" she asked leaning over me.

The white patch of salt near her hairline blurred into the pepper black of the rest of her hair. I pointed randomly at one of the pictures on the wall. It was a picture of a rainbow between two olive green mountains. "I like that picture."

"But why are you crying, hon?"

Rosabelle Diaz

“I don’t know, cuz I like the picture!” I looked at the picture again and noticed for the first time the name written neatly in purple marker at the top. “Precious.” Of course it would be her picture, the biggest one, taking up the most space, right there in the best spot where everybody could see it, as if the whole Peace Corner belonged to her. What did she know about peace? Stupid bitch.

I started to cough; there was a hairball caught in my throat, maybe. I coughed until my throat was sore and I was out of breath, but there was still this fuzzy sensation in my throat. I started to yell. Miss Mitchell tried to quiet me down. The rest of the students were snickering and murmuring in their groups. I didn’t care.

She had told us at the beginning of the year that she didn’t celebrate holidays because of her religion, so therefore we couldn’t have parties. I raised my hand and asked her if we could have birthday parties for everyone instead, since birthdays are not really holidays. Everyone started jumping out of their desks and shouting “Yes!” because there were 34 of us and that meant at least twenty parties that year, until she explained that she didn’t celebrate birthdays either. I didn’t understand. “You mean, you don’t believe you’re alive?”

Since she doesn’t celebrate anyone’s birthday, not just her own, that must mean that she doesn’t think any of us are alive!

“Nayeli, you have to calm down, hon.” Miss Mitchell put her hand on my back. “Let me know what’s going on.”

“I don’t know! I hate the Peace Corner. It’s corny. My picture isn’t on here. You don’t think I’m alive.” I shoved her hand off me. “You stupid bitch!”

In the Vice-Principal’s office I sat down on an old couch that smelled like bread. It didn’t have the plastic covers like they do at my house, so all of the crumbs and soda from lunch must have fallen on it over the years. My mom said that’s why her furniture lasted longer than most people’s. She knew how to take *Rosabelle Diaz*

care of it.

“So what’s up, kiddo?” the Vice-Principal asked.

“You should have kept the covers on your couch.” I said.

He laughed. “I don’t know if it ever had covers. It’s very old. It was here before me.”

“Oh.”

But he wanted to talk about Miss Mitchell and what happened in class. I was still teary-eyed and refused to speak about anything but the old smelly couch. He swiveled in his chair and pulled up the curtain on the only window in his office, exposing the security fence that blended into the grey-blue sky. A grid pattern of sunlight fell on his metal desk. He pulled out a black bag from one of the drawers and handed it to me. Inside were three gingerbread men.

“I bought them at the bake sale. Take ‘em. I don’t need any more fat.” He patted his potbelly and snapped his suspenders. “But you have to promise to keep ‘em happy.”

“How?”

“Well, if you’re happy, they’re happy.”

“Ok.”

“Good. Now I hope I don’t have to see you in here like this again.”

I shook my head.

“Good. Now go back to your class and keep those gingerbread men happy.”

I traced their faces with my finger. Their heads were as big as my palm. I could hold them by the waist and make them dance.

I interrupted the usual Friday sharing session when I got back in the trailer. Miss Mitchell sat me in the back near the rectangular windows, away from the circle the rest of the class was in. I sat facing Precious, who, as always, was in the middle of some story. She pulled her hair away from her face, separated it near the hairline. “See, this is where the bullet is.” It was a round

Rosabelle Diaz

spot on her scalp, deformed and wrinkled. "It's still there." Precious had been shot?

I felt bad about the bullet thing. I imagined what it must have felt like to get shot. There must be nothing worse, nothing more painful, nothing else worth crying over. Maybe that's why she didn't cry. She had all the pain holed up in there and couldn't take it out. My eyes started to water, but I blinked. I couldn't start again; the gingerbread men wouldn't like that. Anyway, I couldn't let Precious see me cry again. Especially not over her dumb bullet. She had made fun of my hair and banged my head on the trailer door. She had called me a stupid bitch.

I eyed the spot on her head where the bullet was stuck, focused both eyes on it, without blinking, until the room started to blur and everything split into two. I reached up with my forefinger and started feeling the exact same spot on my head, right above the hairline, moved my fingertip back and forth over it, but my eyes were still threatening to tear, so I dug my nail into my head and scratched it as hard as I could. After admiring the bit of pink blood mixed with dried up gel and dead skin under my nail, I picked it out and flicked it away with a sigh. I blinked my eyes. They were dry.

I got home before anyone else, so I threw down my stuff upstairs in my mother's room and turned on the AC even though it was too cool outside, almost winter. I lay on her pink floral print comforter and stared at the water-stain islands on the ceiling. My mother always said the big one was the main island of Puerto Rico and the smaller ones around it were the smaller islands that belong to it. She told me many people, even Puerto Ricans, don't know that Puerto Rico is an archipelago, a group of islands, not just one main island. I told Miss Mitchell this once, I tried to say the word archipelago and it came out wrong, so she laughed at me. Stupid bitch.

The TV started to sing in falsettos downstairs. They were home. I went down leaving the black bag with the gingerbread *Rosabelle Diaz*

men on the floor of my mother's room.

I stepped over Jonathan, in a cartoon induced trance state – sitting on the floor, cross-legged, his nose nearly touching the TV screen. My mom was in the kitchen removing the innards of a bald, beheaded chicken so she could cut the thing up and cook it with rice. She asked me about my day and I told her Jaqueline bought me some gingerbread men at the bake sale and asked her if she wanted to see them.

I ran to get the gingerbread men. Quique had gotten to them before me, though. Only one gingerbread man had survived, though he was missing an arm. He lay in a pile of his brothers' crumbs. I picked him up and ran back downstairs, away from the noise of the rustling black bag between Quique's hands and crotch. I sat on the covered couch, as the Tiny Toons started to sing their theme song. "*We're tiny, we're toony, we're all a little loony...*"

"What's Quique doing?" my mother asked from the kitchen.

"I don't know."

"You were just upstairs, what was he doing?" she asked again.

"What else does he do? Playing with a bag."

Jonathan turned his head briefly from the TV and laughed. "Oooo, Quique's getting it on with his bitches!"

"Why didn't you stop him?!" Mother yelled from the kitchen.

"Ewww, man," I said. "I'm not going near that retard when he's jerkin' off."

"What bitch is it this time?" Jonathan asked between giggles.

"It's the *morena* my gingerbread men were in."

"Jonathan, go check on your brother upstairs," my mother said.

"Oooo, you had gingerbread men?" Jonathan's eyes were wide.

Rosabelle Diaz

“Not for you. Quique ate ‘em all, anyway. Just one left,” I said, biting the gingerbread man’s head off.

“Jonathan! Do you hear me?” my mother yelled.

“You *greeedy*. Gimme some.” Jonathan reached over and snatched the rest of the gingerbread man from my hand.

“Jonathan, I’m talking to you!” My mother tried again.

“Gimme, that’s mine!” I bounced forward to rescue the gingerbread man.

“Stop it! Mami, she’s scratching me!”

“*Dios mio...* don’t tell me these two, now...”

“My gingerbread man!”

“Nayeli and Jonathan!”

“What the hell, yo! Are you a cat or somethin’? Ma! She’s scratching me!”

My brother pushed me off of him and pinned me down on the couch. “Aha, got you now!” I kneed his belly, and we both stumbled off the couch. I opened my mouth to scream but the only sound that came out was that of our thin bodies hitting the wood floor. There were too many thuds, though, echoing even in the kitchen, as if something besides our two bodies had hit the floor then.

My mother was whispering curses in rapid Spanish. I talked to my brother with my eyebrows and he nodded. We got up and walked over to the kitchen, our steps light and synchronized. The hollowed out chicken carcass was caught inside the squares of the floor tiles. My mother still held the long blunt knife she had been using to cut it up. The blade shook as she wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. Her fingers were red, stained with annatto and blood. She saw us, and her mouth stopped moving to the curses. She slammed the knife on the kitchen table next to the chicken guts and the empty orange seasoning packets. Then she pushed past us, muttering, “Someone else cook, goddammit” and hurried upstairs.

Jonathan and I talked a bit more with our eyebrows, using *Rosabelle Diaz*

our noses to point things out. He agreed to take care of the kitchen if I cleaned the mess in the living room. I reached for the paper towels, taking only one at first, but then ripping off a lot more because they were the thin dollar store kind.

Upstairs, the concert had started. First with my mother's "Enough!" and a loud slap, their feet drumming along in the hallway, then Quique's wailing solo echoing from the bathtub with the shower and the slamming peach bathroom door as backup singers. Jonathan was humming the Tiny Toons theme as he cleaned the chicken off in the kitchen sink. A little green duck giggled on TV about things getting flushed down the toilet. My head was itching, on that spot right above the hairline where Miss Mitchell's patch of salt was, where Precious had a bullet lodged. I bent down with a paper towel in my right hand to scoop up the gingerbread man, now in crumbs all over the plastic of the sofa. I reached up with my free hand to the itchy spot on my head and pushed my hair out of the way with my nail.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if Precious had swallowed me on the steps of Trailer 4. She would have digested my body until there was nothing left of me but my fuzzy tangled up hair. I would be a hairball choking her, making her cough, making her eyes water, forcing her to cry. Stupid bitch.

Ona time, a rhym-mer...

John Ramsey

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II.

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III.

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John Ramsey

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“...Nichts zo, meine freindend...”

IV.

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V.

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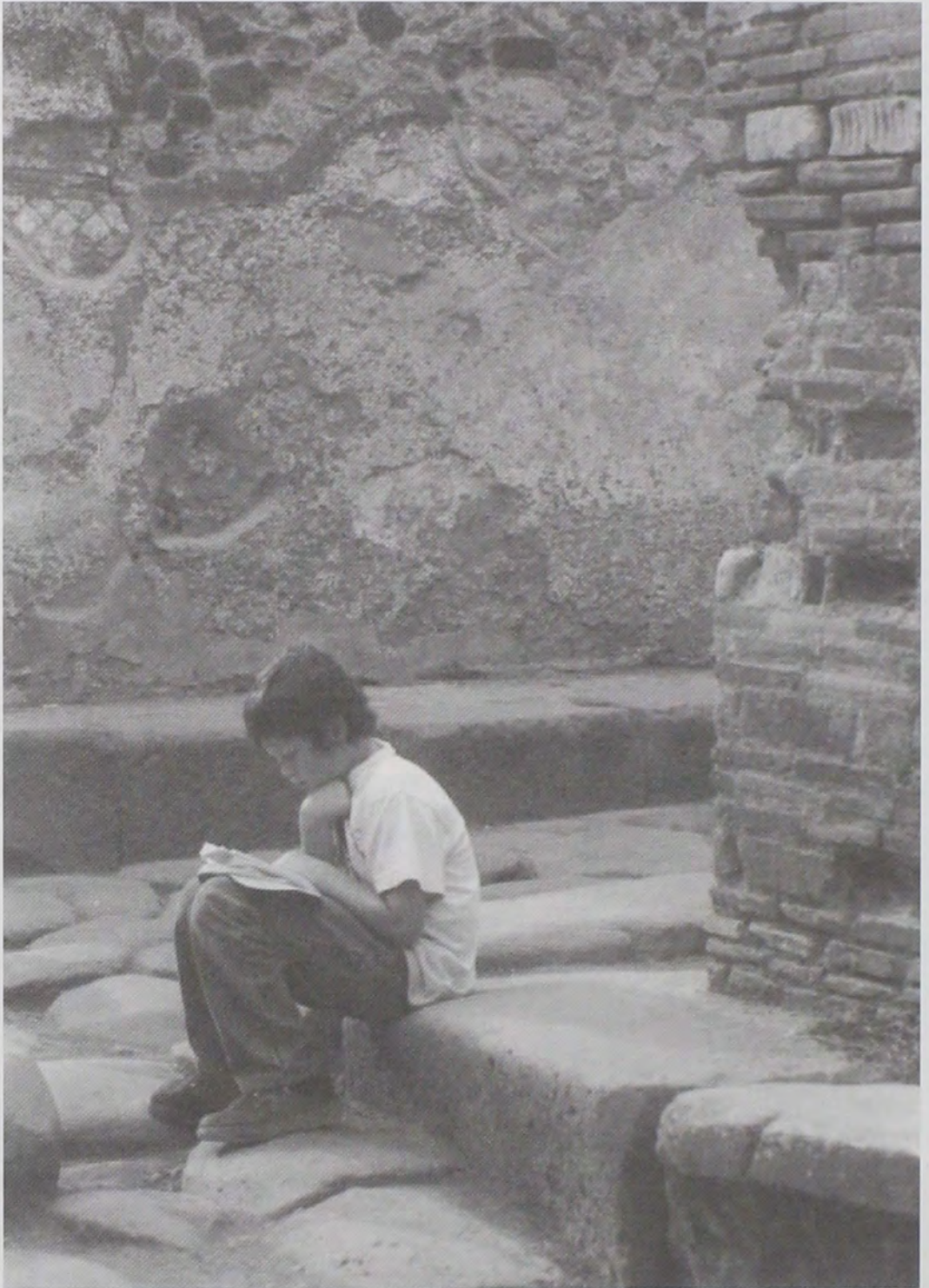
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Bore Him and He is Gone

Bridget Baines



Bridget Baines

his hobbies

Michael Pomante

dec. 13, 2000 – 11:55am

note to self: stop by drug store on way home from work. pick up cigarettes, lube & condoms. hate this job. 15 min. till lunch. monique is whisking me off to spago's. mmmmm. love their pesto chicken panini. "i'm taking you to the east side for lunch today," she said, "i have to tell you all about my boy from last night." jeez, i thought fags slept around a lot. she has *us* beat. it'll be interesting. always is w/ monique. free martini and panini...lol...that rhymes. might as well get some accounts processed before i clock out.

dec. 13, 2000 – 2:02pm

no panini or martini. cheap bitch. jaffe's deli in the west village. not exactly spago's, but the eye candy was divine. jonathan there w/ some child half his age. ugh. when the cat's away. central park at 2am for a hook up is one thing, but holding hands in broad daylight 3 blocks from mark's apartment...that's bullshit. mark has to know. i know. monique knows...everyone knows. what am i talking about? *mark* doesn't know. what an idiot. shameless flirting on the b-train back to work. adorable raver-boy. dark brown eye-brows, bleached blonde hair, blue eyes. cold air blushing his cheeks. fitted top & wide-leg jncos. several ear piercings. and a tongue ring. caught him playing w/ his tongue ring. sooooo hot. never fails to intrigue me. monique got stuck in the john on the train. cheap bitch. that's what she gets. so, i gave the boy my cell number. he asked. devon! that was his name. he said he "can't resist talking to a hottie in a suit and tie." he says he's 22. we'll see. i remember being 22 @ 17. back to work.

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dec. 13, 2000 – 4:46pm

haven't done anything productive for the past 2 hours. monique talked me into smoking a joint w/ her in the janitor's cleaning closet. gonna get caught one of these days. this job is such a joke. smoke more pot now than i did in college. note to self: stop smoking so much weed. devon called while monique and i were in the closet. at first we thought we had set off the smoke alarm. apparently i'm meeting him for coffee after work today. julie called, too. not the smoke alarm – we knew better this time. julie asked if i'd mind her having a little gathering tonite at the apt. ugh. just another one of her dyke parties w/ drunk leather-clad lesbos breaking my stuff. she's such a pain in my ass. asked monique again to be my roommate. "i don't like having roommates. remember, darlin', will and grace are much better neighbors." damn. i'd much rather have monique's chanel #5 bottles cluttering the bathroom sink than julie's used dental dams. shit – had lox & cream cheese on an everything bagel at the deli today. note to self: pick up a pack of dentine before i meet devon.

dec. 13, 2000 – 7:20pm

20 minutes on hands/knees cleaning cat piss off the rug. hate cats. julie's cat. never pisses in julie's room. always on my carpet, my bedspread, in my closet, on my brand new aldo shoes. stupid cat. no. smart cat, stupid roommate. note to self: find a new roommate that hates cats. love winter in the city. snow's falling. city actually looks clean from out my bedroom window. 21 stories up. one doesn't see the filthy details. tar-topped snow mounds. the homeless. whores that wear stilettos and booty-shorts despite the foot of snow on the sidewalks. only in nyc. devon, devon, devon. my god. couldn't stop staring at him. i ordered a mocha latte and chocolate chip croissant. took one bite of the croissant and two sips of my latte. thank you, train-b. he goes to nyu. his senior year as a voice performance major. can't recall exactly what that entails. oh and jesus, lord, that smile.

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perfect evil/innocent grin exposing those perfect pearly whites. just perfect. *q: why did the gay man get a job at the loading dock? a: he loved taking deliveries in the rear.* devon laughed hysterically at that one. think he was just being nice. such a moron. note to self: stop being a moron. gotta get ready for dinner w/ monique. she promised spago's this time. i'll talk to julie about the cat tomorrow.

dec. 14, 2000 – 4:13am

what a confusing night. dinner w/ monique was great. finally got my martini and panini. she's dating one of the voice instructors from nyu. "i casually asked him about devon," she said. *you trying to find dirt on my boy?* "i couldn't have even if i wanted to." *why?* "derrick never heard of him." *what do you mean?* "he said there is no boy named devon in the voice performance program at nyu." *that's impossible. why would he lie?* "i don't know. maybe to impress you?" *monique, i'm working at a dead-end job, getting paid about 20k less than i should be considering my qualifications. why the hell would he feel the need to impress me?* "christian, i have no idea. i never understand the boys you date. maybe he just wanted to secure a hot boy to spend the holidays with. we've all done that. shit, that's probably half the reason you're w/ him." *that's not true. i don't have some hidden agenda. you know i don't date simply for sexual satisfaction or to fill some imaginary quota. i really like this boy – at least, what i know of him thus far.* "i never said you don't like him. don't get defensive. i know you're a good boy and one of the only queens in new york city that still considers love and monogamy an option. i'm just saying it's nice to have someone over the holidays. it's a lonely time of year when you don't have someone to cuddle up next to and keep you warm at night." *i guess you're right. but it still doesn't make sense. i've dated some real losers. he doesn't need to impress me of all people.* "yeah, you know that, and i certainly know that (she snickered), but he doesn't know that. you have a kinda nice
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apartment. not nearly as amazing as mine, of course. you have style. you're three years older than he is. and it's new york. everyone dresses to impress in this city." *i guess so.* "trust me. but, keep an eye on this one. you have a tendency to fall for boys that aren't exactly playing w/ a full deck. remember that one boy? what was his name? oh yeah, edwin. his not-so-good-hearted hobby of leaving dead animals outside your apartment door after you broke up w/ him?" *yeah, yeah – don't remind me.* "boys get attached to you too easily. you're such a stud, darlin'." *shut up.* "well, you sure as hell don't do shit to get me wet. too scrawny. but these boys apparently see something special." *ok, enough said. the warning flag is waving – i'll keep an eye on him.* "that's all that i ask." *i just hope derrick was confused or there was some misunderstanding. i like this boy. i've been ready to fall in love since i moved here.* "one is never ready for love. you can't prepare for love. you can't seek love out. love finds you." *ok, miss cleo.* "shut up, bitch." then devon called my cell. asked monique and i to meet him after dinner at tunnel. monique wanted to get laid, so 4 hours dancing w/ some fags wasn't her idea of a productive evening. split a joint in the cab ride to derrick's. dropped her off & headed for tunnel. had a pretty good time at the club. devon and i found a couch near the entrance to the men's room to sit at and chat. not exactly the romantic atmosphere i would have liked. lots of moans and groans. either the sounds of men puking or the sounds of men fucking. "stall sex" – how classy. after undergrad, he wants to travel europe and study under the masters. don't know anything about opera & considering the info that i acquired earlier from monique, i wasn't sure he was even telling me the truth, but i managed to nod and smile enough to seem interested. was interested – maybe not in opera, but in devon. he's originally from braintree, mass. suburb of boston? beautiful boys in boston. maybe not. just bored w/ new yorkers. same clubs – same faces – same attitudes – same bullshit. the moment was perfect. he was sitting on my lap. the song came on and he mouthed every

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word to me: "we're flying above the clouds, so beautiful & clear. we're flying above the clouds - i can see happiness from here." i watched as every word he sang painted a tiny dimple on each side of his smile. any time the lyrics paused for more than a few seconds, he would run the black-light-sensitive tip of his tongue ring across his upper lip. it's really warm in here. julie always turns the heat up so freakin' high. i'd open the window, but it's painted shut. what a dump. maybe the landlord will fix the window when he comes to fix leaky faucet. i won't hold my breath. the night was perfect till devon got a mega-tude when i bought mark a drink. *he's just a friend. he's had a rough day. found his boyfriend in bed w/ someone else.* "i guess." *awww, don't be jealous.* "i just thought you were here with me." *i am.* "then you shouldn't be buying drinks for someone else." *i've known mark for almost four years. he's just a friend. i told you that. if you just found your boyfriend in bed w/ another man wouldn't you appreciate a friend buying you a drink?* "i guess." we changed the subject. he invited himself back to my apartment. *maybe next time.* note to self: gentlemen don't have any fun. i know he's good in bed. has to be good in bed. boys w/ tongue rings have to be good in bed. it's a rule. good kisser. tongue ring. great kisser. i'm exhausted. time to jerk off.

dec. 15, 2000 - 2:19am

monique gave me my xmas present early. 2 vip tickets to see deborah cox perform at twilo on new year's eve. guest list, unlimited free drinks, celebrity after-hours party. she gives the best presents. love xmas. i'll take devon if he's not busy. he told me over brunch today that he never has the money to go anywhere or do anything special. guess all the money he makes at banana republic goes to tuition and books and all that shit. know how that is. if i didn't have \$349/month loan payments to make i wouldn't have to live in this shit-hole. note to self: remember to hide the mousetraps and roach motels before devon comes to the apartment. i guess i was really lucky to have met *Michael Pomante*

monique right after college. i might be living in a shit hole now, but if it wasn't for her handouts when i was first getting started i would have never survived in this bloodthirsty city. must be nice to have rich parents. i can't believe she'll be 27 in about a month and they still support her. and yet, sometimes she can be so damn cheap. the 30k she makes at work is really just to maintain her drug habit and fill her closet with gucci and prada. note to self: find a sugar daddy. told devon what monique told me about what derrick told her. does that make sense? who cares – it's just a journal. he got really defensive. big surprise. “what the fuck does monique know? and who the fuck is derrick? i've never heard of a derrick. i'll ask around school, but i think this boy is lying to your friend.” *don't get defensive. i was just asking. monique was just looking out for me. she's protective that way.* “that's great. it's a nice feeling to know this fat bitch is digging around to find dirt on me.” *that's not fair. it's not like that.* “whatever.” *ok, how about we change the subject? i shouldn't have accused you of lying. mark even told me this morning on the subway to not mention it to you. i should have listened to him.* “yes, you should have. i thought you and mark were just friends.” *we are.* “do you hang out a lot?” *he lives in my neighborhood. i'd say he and monique are my best friends. usually we all go to the club together. sometimes we hang out at monique's place and smoke.* “i see. did you guys ever date?” *a long time ago. we were together for a month or so. just decided we're better as friends.* “i see. well, now that he's single, you better watch out. i'm sure he has his eye on you.” *nah. you don't know mark the way i do. he'll be mourning this relationship for a while. plus, i told you – we both decided a long time ago that we're better as friends.* “i guess.” *anyway, tell me about your family.* “what do you want to know?” (still full of attitude). *what are your parents like? any brothers or sisters?* “i'm an only child. my mother cried for about a month str8 when i came out & my father called me a fudge-packer every opportunity that he had. sometimes he would spice it up and change the disparaging

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comments to fairy or butt-pirate. once my mother finally stopped crying she began to invite priests and psychologists over to the house to try and reform me. lived in that atmosphere for about 6 months before i moved to the city to start college. haven't talked to my parents since. any other questions?" *really sorry, devon.* "what are you sorry about? don't be sorry. i can take care of myself." *do you get along w/ any of your family?* "just my aunt from poughkeepsie. she's a dyke. we don't really see eye to eye, but we don't hate each other. that's where i'm going for xmas." *i see.* wouldn't look me in the eye when he talked about his family. seems a bit unwrapped. note to self: devon seems a bit unwrapped.

dec. 15, 2001 – 4:15pm

busy, busy, busy. went xmas shopping w/ mom and cousin michael. it's just not the holidays w/out a trip to macy's. red bows 3 times the size of my bedroom hanging from the gray marble façade. damn red-cross santa ringing that annoying bell outside the store. a line-up of bums. they get ya before you go inside – before you can give the excuse of having spent all your money. one woman looked so bewildered as a different bum approached her every other step that she took. *should have never given the one dude that first dollar. they're like pigeons. when one finds food, they all come flocking.* "thanks for the advice." jersey tourist. hate them. they come up here once a year to take in the holiday scenery and cash in on the xmas sales. sales? 8.15% sales tax. most expensive city in the country. sales. lol. idiots. it was nice to spend time w/ mom. well, kinda nice. "do you have a boyfriend this week?" "are you being safe?" "how's that monique girl? did her brother get parole yet?" "are you eating? you're wasting away to nothing." *not exactly a boyfriend...yes...she's fine...her brother's getting released in march...yes...i am not.* "who were you just talking to on your cell phone?" *my not-exactly-a-boyfriend.* "what's his name?" *devon.* "and how long have you known this boy?" *he's not a boy. Michael Pomante*

“what?” *jesus, mother – it’s not a girl. i just meant he’s a man – not a boy.* “oh.” *wishful thinking.* “now, you know that’s not true.” *uh huh. i need to stop by the perfume department before we leave.* “for what?” *your shalimar.* “christian – why would you tell me what you’re getting me for xmas?” *i get you a bottle of shalimar every xmas.* “oh.” *swear i thought i saw devon in macy’s. once in the home décor section and again in electronics. impossible. he’s working a 14 hour shift at banana today. so, cousin mike, seeing anyone?* “yeah, their name is jesse.” *oh – that’s nice.* jesse. that really didn’t answer my question. really wanted to know if michael’s gay. my gay-dar has been going off around him ever since he turned 16. damn. jesse. that didn’t help.

dec. 16, 2000 – 1:01am

met mark and monique at the big cup for a latte. i can’t believe i used to live in a town where the closest and only gay club was over an hour away. now it’s hard to walk into any place of business in chelsea or the village without getting hit on by some boy. mark seems to be doing ok. he made a pledge to stay away from guys. says they’re not worth the aggravation. good luck. he’s paranoid though – tells us that jonathan calls him several times a night and just hangs up. *are you sure?* “who else would it be?” *you’ve lived in this city longer than i have – you know it’s full of freaks.* “don’t you guys think it’s a bit coincidental, though? i never had these stalker phone calls when jonathan and i were together. we break up and now i get several every night.” *maybe it’s the guy you caught him in bed with?* “why? he has my man now. he destroyed me enough – he surely has no motivation to drive me insane.” i just think mark is smoking too much weed. he’s high all the time now – i guess it makes it easier to cope. devon called – invited him to the deborah concert. “i thought we could have a romantic evening alone at your place.” *sorry, hun – i already have plans to go to this concert. but i’d love it if you came w/ me.* “i don’t really feel like it. i really wanted to spend

Michael Pomante

quality time w/ just you.” it was w/ that very statement that he started to add a sarcastic (slightly unwrapped) tone to his voice. so tired of it. *i wish you'd change your mind. as many free drinks as you'd like & i wanted to keep it surprise, but we're invited to an after-hours party that's hosting a list of celebs.* “big deal. i'm sure i want to spend 5 hours getting trashed in some filthy/overcrowded club w/ a slim-to-none chance of witnessing the incredibly beat george michael performing oral sex on some minor in the bathroom.” *well – i guess that's a no. ya know, devon? you surely aren't the same sweet boy that sang to me at the tunnel that one night.* “what the fuck is that supposed to mean?” *exactly what i just said. you grow more and more moody and hostile every time i talk to you. i've known you less than a week. we've never talked about monogamy. we never established what we are, and yet, you have jealous/controlling fits any time i speak to another guy or don't do what you want me to do. it's getting old. you're too high strung – there's something wrong w/ you.* “are you finished?” *i suppose so.* “good. you can go fuck yourself, christian. monogomy? ha. so glad i never trusted you. slut.” *what are you talking about? i haven't touched...wait...lemme scratch that...i haven't even looked at another boy since i met you five days ago. not that i owe you any sort of explanation, but it is the truth.* “ok. then who the fuck were you at macy's with?” *what are you talking about? i told you that i was going shopping w/ my mother.* “you're such a fucking liar. i saw you walking around the men's underwear department w/ some boy who didn't even look legal. you're a pervert, christian. you don't deserve me or that twink you were trying to get in the sack.” *what? you have got to be kidding. that was my cousin. i went to macy's with my mother and my cousin michael.* “right. i hate you so much, christian. you're a whore. i thought that i could love you. i had hopes that you'd be the one. you should have stayed in that little hick town in pennsylvania. this city has turned you into a sex-crazed pedophile.” *wait. love? ok – you are a total whack-job. i'm not Michael Pomante*

gonna even try to explain myself to you, cause i just realized you're psycho, and it's not worth it. however, i would like to know what the hell you were doing at macy's. you told me you had to work at banana all day. "where i go and what i do is none of your business, christian. but, if you must know – i took the day off to do some shopping. is that ok with you? i'm allowed to shop, too, aren't i? you're full of shit. monique was right. you really aren't working w/ a full deck. you skipped work to sneak around macy's & check up on me. you have nothing better to do than stalk me and my family as we shop for the holidays? don't answer that. get some help, devon. perfect opportunity for me to end that phone call. so i did. note to self: always listen to monique. called mark. was too worked up to go to sleep. he brought over two bottles of southern comfort and a gram of weed. wasn't long before the bottles were empty and the bong was done with. i think i know who has been calling you every night and hanging up. "who?" devon. "why? he's your psycho fling, not mine. he doesn't even know me." i think he was jealous of you. i know he was jealous of you. "me? wow – he really is a loser if he is jealous of me." loser doesn't even begin to explain or describe this boy. "i don't doubt that. so, are you gonna join the we-don't-need-men-in-our-lives group? i'm the founder of the organization." sign me up. mark offered to stay the night. a nice thought, but i have to be tough.

dec. 18, 2000 – 3:46pm

slowest work day of my life. stared out the window at the empire state building for an entire hour. huge. pointy. phallic. by 10:30 this morning, devon had already called 31 times. think around number 15 or 16 i dropped the phone off in monique's office. she got a kick out of answering it and yelling "psycho-boy" into the receiver. funny for a while. eventually just turned the damn thing off. i'm sure my voice mail is full. don't even want to check. weed. this time in the basement next to the boiler. nice and toasty. opportunity for monique to sneak in a couple i-

Michael Pomante

told-you-so's. i deserved it. "i'm taking you to the tunnel tonight and getting you drunk and laid." who am i to turn down one of monique's tempting offers? who am i to turn down free booze? this day needs to end. note to self: stop by 142nd st. and pick up an ounce of weed from elliot.

dec. 18, 2000 – 7:58pm

picked up side caesar salad from the salad stop. not meeting monique till 11 outside the club. stopped by the admin. building at nyu. "i'm sorry sir – we have no record of a devon andersen attending the university." what a nightmare. moved to nyc to find myself. moved to nyc to experience all there is to experience. where else in this country can you choose from 50 cafés at 4:30am to purchase your brandy mochacino? "new york city has everything." yes, it surely does.

dec. 19, 2000 – 3:12am

monique's in the shower. she promised to stay the night. gotta try to fall asleep. getting up at 7am to call my lawyer. the bathroom stall wall at the tunnel: "christian dean has aids." what a psycho brat. childish. not so childish when he confronted mark in the 80s room w/ a switchblade. i bought mark a drink. he had a rough day.

For Yo Yo Ma's Encore

Christine Spera

Honey slipping,

warm cream in a tablespoon

rocks his cello to sleep

it sings.

Middle finger a fluttering butterfly
new wings.

Tones primal and swallowed inside us,

outside,

sinews of spider's silk,

gasping for breath in a large space.

He pulls the bow over for the last note,

oil on a taunt muscle

tainted yellow

Christine Spera

Untitled*Aya Sato**Aya Sato*

Two Minutes from Earl's Court Tube Station

Monica Stahl

On the corner of Earls Court Road,
the afternoon sky spills like a watermark
into places where buildings blend with sidewalks,
where headlights blend with neon,
where feet blend with faces as they follow one another.

Two minutes (walking distance)
and a few pence in your pockets
will take you to the place
that takes you places anywhere,
and you will follow pea coats and pinstripes
faces that bob like the ends of flashlights
and hands that clutch wallets and purses,
into white tiles, turnstiles,
lines that end as they've begun.

Two minutes, and you will pass
the old man who lives in his blanket,
a tattered umbrella roof in his hand
as he contemplates the monarchy
on pages from a week-old *Sun*.
Two minutes, and you will hear
the blind man on the corner,
the notes from his Cassio
ringing like coins on Regent Street
as the rusty can at his side remains empty.

Two minutes, and you will be told
"LOOK LEFT", but you won't.
Not much will catch your eye,
not the whores in the phone booths,

Monica Stahl

or the "OFF-LICENSE" signs,
not the empty shops
or the dealers that don't care
if the Bill's on patrol.
You cross Earls Court most every day,
and all you see is "STOP" and "GO."

On the corner of Earls Court Road,
two minutes walking distance
and a few pence in your pockets
will take you to the place
that takes you places everywhere,
and you will follow pea coats and pinstripes,
faces that bob like flashlights
and hands that clutch wallets and purses,
into white tiles, turnstiles,
lines that end as they've begun,
and you will burrow under the heart of this city,
a worker bee hiding from winter.

Spaghetti Dinner

Katie Lambert

Dominick was the kid who first told me there's no such thing as Santa Claus. Satan, yes. Santa, no. In the third grade, he would leave my house after dark, go into the woods behind our backyard, and light up a cigarette. My mom would always catch him, though. She'd watch him from the kitchen window as he left, and as soon as she saw the spark, she'd bound out the backdoor, stomp on his cigarette, and smack him on the butt before she sent him home.

"Go straight home, Dominick. You should have been home before dark anyway. Why don't you ever listen to me?" she'd say.

Dom would just snicker, roll his eyes, and say, "See you tomorrow, Mom." Yes, he called my mother "Mom." And as bad of a kid as he was, and as smart-ass as he could get, he truly, sincerely meant it. I never really understood why he called her Mom, so one day I tried to talk to her about it while she was cleaning the downstairs toilet.

"Dominick's mother is just always busy, I guess," she said, wiping her forehead with the back of her arm.

"Well, what does she do? She doesn't go to work, does she?" I asked.

"Um, no." Mom leaned back on her knees and stretched her shoulders out as she looked up at the glass globe covering the light fixture. "But, it can get pretty hectic sitting around on the couch all day watching trashy programs on the television and smoking unfiltered cigarettes."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. You'll understand when you're older." I got that a lot when I was eight.

Mom went back to the toilet and I shut the bathroom door behind me as I left.

Katie Lambert



Dom and I were having a homerun derby at the little league field after school. He was a damn good baseball player for being eight years old. Sometimes when I complimented him on his fourth homerun in a half hour, and if he was in a good mood, he would come back with, "I guess you're alright, too. For a girl."

I had to bring it up. "What time do you have to be home today?" I asked him as we sat in the dugout to take a water break.

"Doesn't matter," he said. He reached under the bench we were sitting on and pulled out a pack of matches from 7-Eleven that he had stored on a makeshift shelf underneath. He lit one and it instantly flickered out. He lit another and made sure it was still alive before he tossed it on my lap.

"Ah! Dom! What the heck did you do that for?" I yelled, jumping up as I rubbed my bare, shorts-clad thigh.

"Cause I felt like it," he said, laughing heartily. "Hee hee hee."

"You're a loser," I said.

"Ooooooh, man. Hope I don't start crying about that one!"

"Shut up," I said.

"I don't shut up, I grow up. And when I look at you, I throw up," he mocked.

"Then your mother goes around the corner and she licks it up," I retorted. We giggled a little, then we sat in silence for a moment as each of us looked down at our feet and the dugout dirt we were kicking around with the toes of our cleats.

"I hate you," I said.

"I hate you, too," Dom said.

"Fine."

"Good."

"So, what time do you have to be home today," I asked him.

"You already asked me that!" he said.

Katie Lambert

“Well, I forgot,” I said, not forgetting at all.

He fell for it. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, “my mom doesn’t really give a crap when I come home.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I know.”

Silence.

“How come she doesn’t care?” I finally asked.

“I dunno,” Dom said, “she’s just really busy, I guess.”

“Oh.”

Dominick saved what was left of the book of matches and moved to tightening the strings on his baseball mitt.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. “What does your mom do?” I finally asked.

“What?” He looked over at me. Dom never made eye contact with anyone unless he was mad.

I was brave. “What does your mom do?” I asked again.

“What the hell do you mean, what does she do? My mom does exactly what Mom... *your* mom does,” he said.

“What, like cooking and cleaning and stuff?” I said.

“Yeah. Yeah, she does that stuff.” I could tell Dom never saw his mom do anything but lie around.

Dominick looked back down at his glove and weakly pulled on the laces. I felt sorry for him. I tried walking him home that day, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Can I stay for dinner, Mom?” Dom asked my mom one night. It would be the fourth night in a row he’d be staying for dinner.

“Dominick—sometimes you have to go *home* for dinner, you know,” she said as she drained the steaming water from the pot of string beans over the kitchen sink.

“I know, but,” he said, “my mom’s, uh, making this gross casserole thing and I hate it.”

“Oh,” she said, looking at him through the steam, “alright.

Katie Lambert

Set your place at the table then.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, Dominick.” I watched my mother watch Dominick as he got a plate from the cabinet, utensils from the drawer, and milk from the refrigerator.

Mom bit her pinky fingernail as she watched him in a high degree of daze. Finally, she ran her hand over her ponytail (a concerned habit she always had) and got back to the string beans.

Dominick set his place at the table next to Mom’s seat and before he put his fork down, he poked me in the arm with it.

“When you find the skin, you have to put it in a jar with a tiny bit of water, or it’ll never last and it’ll fall apart,” Dominick said to me.

“Well, what about the snake? Where’s he?” I asked him.

“He’s gone. Prolly in China by now. They shed their skin, then keep moving down the creek. They do it all the time. It’s like when your grandmom gets all icky and her skin flakes off.” We both held our stomachs as we laughed. Our pants were rolled up to our knees as we waded through Karakung Creek.

“What about the Lochness Monster?” I asked him, “Does he come out during the day, or just at night?”

“What?!” he said. “You’re so dumb with all that make-believe shit!” He looked further up the creek and saw a black water snake making its way towards us. “Here comes one,” he said.

I walked backwards up the bank a bit; I was never very fond of snakes. Dom surveyed the ground and found a rock the size of a deflated basketball. He bent over and picked it up with both arms, struggling to keep his balance over the edge of the water. The snake was getting closer, and as it made its entrance into the small channel in front of where Dom stood, he swung his arms back and lobbed the rock with as much force as he could. It

Katie Lambert

landed directly on top of the snake, right in the middle of its body. The snake and the rock lay on the bottom on the creek, two feet under. The snake was dead and the rock was still.

Dominick laughed.

I watched him for a moment as he basked in the pleasure of his murder.

“Let’s go,” I said, “you’re sick.”

We walked up the bank, up the hill, up the path, and into my house. Mom had some apple juice waiting for us in the matching Disney World cups when we got there. As we took our last sips, she brought a clean t-shirt and shorts downstairs for Dom and told him to wash up for dinner.

That night as I got into bed, I found a snakeskin under my pillow. I sighed, showed it to my mom, she flushed it down the toilet, and I tried to fall asleep.

The next morning as I walked towards the stairs to go down for breakfast, I heard my mom talking in the living room. I sat down on the top step to listen when I heard Dom’s voice at the other end of the conversation.

“Dominick, why did you put a snakeskin under her pillow?” my mother said.

“I dunno,” he said, “I thought it would be funny,” Dom answered.

“Well, it’s not very funny,” she said calmly, “it’s really kind of disgusting. You don’t know where that snake’s been.”

“I know. Sorry, Mom,” he said.

“Alright, honey. It’s just...you have to stop doing things like that. It’s not nice.”

“Okay. I’ll try. I just...I’ll try,” he said.

That night, my mom sat me down on the sofa in the family room to talk.

“Do you want to talk about what Dominick did last

Katie Lambert

night?" she asked me.

"Nah, it's okay," I said, "I know he's just weird and mean sometimes."

"Yeah," she said, "well, he's not *mean*, he just doesn't really know how to act because he didn't have much of a teacher at home, you know?"

"A teacher?" I asked.

"Honey, Dominick doesn't have a very good life at home. His mom...well, she doesn't really say much to him. And his dad is usually working, so he's not home too much. I just...I..." I looked at my mom as she tried to explain what I knew she couldn't.

"It's okay, Mom. I know he's not as lucky as me. I know," I said. I kissed my mom on the cheek and went upstairs to my bedroom.

"How 'bout I come to *your* house for dinner tonight?" I said to Dom the next day.

"What?" he said as he pulled the magnifying glass out of the sun's rays and off of a baby ant on my driveway.

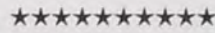
"Why don't I come to your house for dinner tonight?" I repeated.

"No. I mean...I don't think that's a good idea," he said, looking at me in shock before trying to revert his attention back to the ant.

"Come on. We always eat at my house. I wanna meet your mom and dad and eat at your house for a change." I said.

"I..."

"We're doing it," I said. "We're eating at your house tonight. That's it." I left Dom in the driveway and went inside. He put the magnifying glass back in his pocket and let the ant go.



As we walked into Dom's front door that night, the smell of stale air and musky furniture slapped me in the face. I walked behind him as he hesitantly made his way into the living room. Before we entered the room from the foyer, I heard a deep, husky cough and then a loud sigh after the fit ended.

"Who's there?" the voice said.

"It's...it's me, Mom. It's Dom."

"Get in here and bring me some more cigarettes from the kitchen when you come," she said.

Dom hurried into the kitchen, leaving me standing in the hallway surrounded by the glow of the TV from the room next to me. He returned with the cigarettes and told me to follow him into the room where his mom was.

"Who's that?" She sat up from her lying position and squinted her eyes to put me in focus.

"It's my friend Tara, Mom. She...can she stay for dinner?"

"Hi," I said, uncomfortably half-looking at her and half-looking at the floor.

"Dinner! Ha. What dinner? The only dinner you're getting is the one your father makes if he ever comes home tonight," she said, lighting a cigarette from the fresh pack.

Dom folded his hands at his waist and quickly glanced over at me before looking down at his feet. We stood in silence for a moment as Dominick's mom paid no attention to us. Dom finally looked up at me, turned, and left the room. I followed. We sat down at the kitchen table and Dom wouldn't look me in the eye.

"I think you should probably just go home to eat dinner tonight," he said.

"Okay," I said, "yeah. I'll just, uh...I'll just call my mom to come get me."

"Yeah."

I heard my mom honk the horn from her car outside of Dom's house. I said goodbye to Dom and made my way to the passenger's door of the car.

My mom rolled down the window. "Tara, where's Dominick?"

"He's inside. Why?" I asked.

She didn't answer me. She told me to wait in the car as she parked along the curb and made her way to Dom's front door. I watched her through the rolled-up window of the car as she spoke to Dom when he answered the door. I saw him nod, go back into the house, and my mom made her way back to the car.

"What's going on?" I asked her as she buckled her seatbelt.

"Dominick's getting his coat. He's coming over for dinner," she said.

That night at dinner, the TV was turned off, my dad wasn't reading the paper, and the napkins were folded like little nurse's hats. My mom talked about the new way she learned of cooking pasta that would make it nice and soft, my dad talked about the bids he put in for contracts at work that day, and Dominick and I sat and listened to them. We looked over our mounds of spaghetti and secretly smiled at each other while my parents babbled away.

Dom was different those past few days. He taught me things that I actually cared about. I listened to him while he went off about BB guns, baseball, and how he fed his pet snake the weekly rat. I hadn't seen him with a cigarette in couple of days, and there were no freshly-painted coats of graffiti on the tunnel under the Haverford Road Bridge.

Halfway through dinner, Dom put his fork down and looked up at my mom. We all stopped eating. "We never said grace," he said to my mom. "We should probably say grace,

Katie Lambert

right?”

The smile on my mom's face appeared instantly as she put her fork down. “Yes, Dominick, I think we should say grace. Why don't you start?” She folded her hands on her lap, put her head down, and closed her eyes. We all followed her direction as Dom began.

“Dear Lord,” he said, “Bless this...” He stopped and looked up at my mom. Her eyes were still closed and her hands still folded. He reached over with his right hand and took her left one. She kept her eyes closed as she smiled slightly and tightened her grip.

Dominick continued. “Bless this spaghetti,” he said, “and bless this bread and this milk. And bless this fork and this knife and this spoon. And bless this family,” he said, “*my* family.”

Mom kept her eyes closed, but still managed to squeeze a tear through the crease. Dominick looked at her as he continued to hold her hand. He smiled and tightened his grip before he let go and we finished our dinner.

For Two

Patricia Quinn

Four senses for naught—
touch inscribes language.
Sacred book written.

Patricia Quinn

Syreeta Dixon

5:30

I enter and sit in a chair
 in front of the mirror
 others like me
 smile into a camera
 showcasing their rebirth
 a thousand words decorate this reflective glass
 I look to the

right
 curling irons
 hot combs
 simmer
 hair dryers
 hollow waiting

*this morning
 in the mirror
 knew who I*

hands turn my head to the
 left
 push it towards the floor
 I rest my cheek on my shoulder
 snip
 memories fall
 in the corner of my eye
 a woman
 razor
 I gasped
 lift my head to turn

*black**Syreeta Dixon*

Doll in a Trashcan

Rosabelle Diaz



Rosabelle Diaz

Contributors

James Albert ... My mission is to keep the world sane by either destroying it or planting lots of flowers that make everybody happy.

Bridget Baines ... asked her little brother what his favorite color was and he said “white”. she had never heard that answer before. have you ever heard someone answer white?? his explanation was charming. Children rock.

Dennis Kearney ... is searching for Malkavian truths buried in the newfallen snow and getting colder.

Daniel Bruno ... is quite fond of *Hamlet*. Mmm... catharsilicious.....

Rosabelle Diaz ... eats the dead. poke it or bang it.

Erin Dickerson ... By day a hard-working junior attendee at UC. By night a harding-working junior attendee at UC...were you expecting something else? God Bless.

Syreeta Dixon ... 'representin' Brooklyn, gives shout outs to BAP's, THE TABLE, POKE IT, and Quarter Waters, which is what she drinks for inspiration.

Preethy Eddy ... poke it or bang it good.

Kevin Benard Hankins Jr. ... Philosophy and Religion Major, Founding father of the first Black national Fraternity on Ursinus college's campus, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity inc. Shout out to my Line brothers Harry Michel, Brandon Brooks, and my Wonder Twin Jared Devine. YO YO.

Sarah Kauffman ... just walked out of the 1940's and is ready to go dancing in a pink dress.

Dennis Kearney ... is searching for Malkavian truths buried in the newfallen snow and getting colder.

Katie Lambert ... Now has a shore house. That means the real world doesn't have to start until September. Phew!

Natalie MacConnell ... invented the piano-key necktie. What did you do???

Phil Malachowski ... “Complete freedom consists of the ability to do what you like, provided that you also do something you like less.” (Italo Svevo, from “Zeno's Conscience”)

Sarah Napolitan ... hid in the cupboard when she was little and ate entire tubs of icing with her FINGERS, no lie. She is the evil

Contributors

woman who eats the dough out of cookie dough ice cream. the truth is out.

Raquel B. Pidal ... To senseless lunch, TNSC, and all my muses in between. "I didn't know that other people thought things about me. I didn't know that they looked." – Chbosky. Bwayno.

Michael Anthony Pomante ... "I shall wear my hair in a pony-tail. I shall dress myself up in *Chanel*. And be assured—I will not compromise my point of view. Absolutely NOT!"

Patty Quinn... was one of the original 25 women selected to be on the new hit reality tv show "The Bachelor." Needless to say, she was cut during the first round because the bachelor didn't like brunettes, so to deal with her loss, she has been writing depressing poetry ever since.

John Ramsey ... to genevieve & her Keats head; to raquel & the gates of adonis; to cameron who philosophizes w/ a hammer; to padcha, her images; & chrissy. senseless lunch & tns. Thank You.

Aaron Ranck ... will exploit his log cabin, agrarian roots for the rest of his life.

Genevieve Romeo ... laughed at a falling remote. Elephant Juice.

Aya Sato ... is a whisper in the dark. Also, she swirls inedibles into oatmeal.

Melanie Scriptunas ... saw the movie *Clockstoppers* fifteen times. She is currently working on the novelization.

Kristen Servent ... a Biology major that knows how to use a camera in addition to a light microscope.

Alison Leigh Shaffer: ... her song is a half-life.

Cory Spangler ... smokes Reds. fights sleep. doesn't bluff.

Christine Spera ... supports her local literary magazine. There ain't nuthin' funny 'bout free books.

Monica Stahl ... ambles with DonKeyyys, masquerades as a sweet Gerkhin, and embraces scatology. And then she woke up. Chickaboom

Christopher Tereshko ... was looking forward to getting slapped. He feels bad for people that don't drink. When they wake up in the morning that's as good as they're going to feel all day. Thanx Frank! And he's still salty.

Contributors

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