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THE LANTERN

off kilter





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Editor’s Note:

Regular editors’ notes are boring. They thank contributors, staff, Volkmer, Alli Guerin, the editors, the impressed copy-editors, and themselves. Then they promise that the magazine will be great. This letter is not one of those letters: this letter is *off-kilter*. Not to say that we don’t appreciate the help of everyone on our staff, or that this issue will be awful, but we’d rather not focus on that. Instead, we want to point out the off-kilter, outsider, helter-skelter, off the wall material between these two glossy covers. The Lantern is always a little crazy, but this time, it’s on purpose! So we invite you to sample the literary delicacies inside, and whether they strike you as zany or otherwise, we hope you enjoy them. So start reading, and get ready to fall off your rocker with us.

- Love, Trev and Tori

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JUDGES' NOTES

Poetry Winner—"Seven Haikus About Insomnia" by Patrick Roesle

As one might expect from a collection of seven haikus, the images are all precise and concrete. This in itself, though, is no easy task. Literary journals are littered with obscure and abstract haikus (not to mention obscure and abstract poems of any stripe). These seven, though, satisfy each time -- there's not a weak one in the bunch. And not only that, but portions of these rise to the level of true surprise. I love "a trail of shattered dewdrops." I've never heard that combination of words before, and I'm heartened by the fact. My congratulations to the poet!

Charles Rafferty returns to judge the Lantern poetry for the second time. He is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *A Less Fabulous Infinity* (Louisiana Literature Press). His many awards include the River Styx poetry prize. He teaches literature and writing at Albertus Magnus College.

Prose Winner—"Green" by Marjorie Vujnovich

I, too, listened at a door once. God was inside, in the room behind the door, talking to a man who looked like my dead dog. Anyway, when God had finished with the man, He stepped back out into the hall. By now, of course, I'd retreated a ways and had my ear to the thermostat. God said, "Any story with a seahorse in it is the winner. Also, any story invoking loss before loss has even arrived, wins. Also," he continued, "too often people get eye color wrong. They say, 'We both have brown eyes,' when, in fact, Person 1 has starfish-brown eyes and Person 2's eyes are the brown of a grubby penny." He was adamant. "Green" wins.

Mike Keeper (UC 2001) is a former Lantern contributor who lives in Hollywood, California. After working on The Ryan Seacrest Show, Mike wrote an article about the experience for *Ursinus magazine*. While he pursues his writing career, he is happy to be playing keyboard in a band which does indeed have a "myspace" page: /afaultychromosome.

SEVEN HAIKUS ABOUT INSOMNIA

- I.
an hour before dawn
no rain or crickets tonight
then a car passes
- II.
leave the faucet on
or tighten it to hear my
eyelids tap instead
- III.
tinnitus has no
onomatopoeiac term
devils whisper ohm
- IV.
marauding raccoon
a trail of shattered dewdrops
towards marici's trash
- V.
eighty specks counted
becoming more acquainted
with the white ceiling
- VI.
yesterday's a mist
condensed into tonight to
rain on tomorrow
- VII.
goddess on tv
mouthing my name on dead air
obscured by the snow

GREEN

When I was little, we did live in a big house on the edge of a forest. And I did wander out of the yard and into the woods, and there was a river. A weekend morning, or at twilight, or in the calm of a full moon, I watched a car float down that river. Four boys laughed inside of it, and I hid behind a tree trunk. Four boys laughed, and a blue Cadillac let the current take it away. I don't think cars float, and it does not matter whether or not this actually happened, and I can't say with certainty that it did or didn't. Arguments can be made for either side. The fact remains that we had to move because I was so afraid of the forest I would not look out our windows, and this is the only thing I am actually ashamed of.

My sister spoke with her whole body, so they said she was sick.

Doctors told my parents Amelia needed medicine, and she took it. I was thirteen, and I thought her eyes were prettier before she began treatment, and I would have liked to steal her amber prescription bottles and spill them into the lake.

I watched Amelia grow up so I would know how to do it. When I was nine and she was fourteen, and this was before she swallowed white pills every morning, when she was a freshman in high school, I pressed my ear against her bedroom door and listened to her talk on the phone. She was always calming someone down and often telling stories.

She'd say, "Okay, here, it's okay." And she would make it up as she went along. "There was a boy, and he had a name, and his name was Gregory. And Gregory lived in a cornfield that was not his cornfield, in a wigwam like an Indian."

But Amelia spoke quietly and caught me nightly, so I never heard the endings.

Once in the middle of the night and a thunderstorm, when I was scared awake with my covers pulled up to my nose, my door opened just slightly, and I saw Amelia peek her head around it. She whispered, "Awake?" and came to sit on my bed.

She tugged the covers off of my face and touched the hair on my forehead. "Okay, little sister?" she said, and I watched her eyes trying to figure me out.

I nodded, asked her, "Who do you tell stories to?"

“Anybody who wants them,” she said.

“Tell me.”

And Amelia moved to sit cross-legged on the floor, her hands free to act out the roles she assigned. “Underneath the ocean, not so deep you can’t see the light, coral lives. It’s pink and blue and alive, even though it looks like it isn’t. In the coral sea-horses play games all through the caves and the twists, and they are happy all the time as long as they are left alone. They throw parties so they can sing songs together about all the things they see.”

My sister, she whispered most things like secrets. Her cheeks were always pink, and I didn’t think anything was wrong with her. I was back then desperate for more of her, but she was speaking me a lullaby, and I couldn’t help it. I fell asleep.

“But there are also sea-cows, under the ocean, and they are the enemies of the tiny sea-horses. One morning just before dawn the sea-cows marched from their houses toward the coral where the sea-horses play...”

So I never heard the endings. And not so long after she started, Amelia stopped telling stories, and only told lies.

The last time I saw my father swell with pride for me, it was a Christmas party at our house, and I was maybe in the fifth grade. One of his friends, or some of my mother’s, gushed at how tall I was getting and patted me on the head. I nodded seriously and said, “*And*, I have a wingspan of close to twelve feet.”

Whatever year that Christmas party was, it was also the year I began to keep secrets. I tore the pages out of my diaries and threw them into the trash, and I refused to wear anything but dresses. I wanted to become the sort of thing Amelia would tell through flashing teeth close to your ear.

When I was eleven, the door I regularly listened outside of was my father’s office in our basement. If the conversations were loud enough, and the ones I was interested in usually were, I could also hear them through the air vent in my bedroom. My dad’s biggest argument was that he just couldn’t understand what Amelia had been thinking when she’d been arrested for vandalism. When she’d had a screaming fight with the principal of her school and got herself kicked out, again. When she’d run away to live underneath a bridge. Any of it.

Amelia didn’t have any big arguments. If she wasn’t in a screaming mood, she was extremely persuasive. My father loved her because she

could explain her thoughts in a way he understood, even when they were in perfect contradiction with his own.

"I had to," she'd say. "I know what you're going to say," she'd always say. "But so I slept on concrete a few times. What's the point, or how can you even have a home, if—well, if you don't know what else there is? I'm here now."

I spent half my life trying to make Amelia like me, and the other half trying to prove to myself I was different from her.

Following the birth of my parents' third child, Justin, my father had to drink for hours every night before he could fall asleep. I am not sure if, in the long run, this was cheaper than paying for the counseling our insurance would not cover to treat his anxiety.

Thinking of this made my stomach turn over, so when I was old enough to go out at night, I came home early, or not at all. I didn't want any part of the middle hours, when our house held a slow clock.

A Czech substitute teacher and I regularly waited for the city bus together when I was sixteen. Dark and mysterious or so I imagined her, she said, "But your eyes! What color are they?"

I told her, "Brown."

She waved her hand to deny this and smoke rose from her cigarette in a sine curve toward the clouds. "My eyes are brown," she corrected me. I liked her accent so much it choked me up some, weighed down my own words. Dark eyeliner circled her eyes like it was protecting them, and her face was thick with powder. She said, "Yours are golden."

"It's just the light," I told her. And although it made me ashamed to say light was, in any way, *just*, her mystery was gone, and I bitterly missed it. She reminded me of myself.

By the time I graduated high school, Amelia owned a small bookstore. She'd grown her hair long. It had been years, I guess, since the days she cut it every time she looked in a mirror. With her short hair, her smart mouth also dulled, and she was left with some foreign, easy laugh. But there were lines around her eyes, already at twenty-three, and whatever anyone might say about Amelia, she did smile honestly. I was proud of her creased eyes like I was proud of the scars on my knees from childhood scrapes.

A few days after graduation I went to pick my brother Justin up from aftercare. Rounding a corner of his school, I discovered him lying prone on the grass amidst the playground equipment. His hair fallen in his face, strands lifting away from his head, catching and holding the

sunlight. I have no memory of the walk from my car to the playground, but for the next several days I saw his still body every time I closed my eyes.

A girl ran over, tripped slightly as she was kneeling to him, tagged him on the arm. And my brother, he laughed as he stood up and chased after her. I stood still for several minutes, until they had moved on to a different game.

I had planned to take him for ice cream, but I was so envious of him then that I felt angry and didn't. He forgets everything as soon as it happens. I would give anything.

LUNCH HOUR

A man doused himself
in gasoline
on a Jersey city sidewalk,
clay-stained skin
glistening like snot.

I could smell the heat
before the burn, cloying
on my tongue, and
when the match was struck,

the sun screamed to Earth—
running circles in the street.

We watched the pop
and sizzle of flesh,
drinking in with our eyes
the burnt offering roasting
before us like a boar upon a spit.

He screamed:
I am Prometheus
watch me *burn!*
I endure the eagle
to give you fire!

At first I thought petty suicide,
but no,
Titans are above that.

Some said self-immolation
and

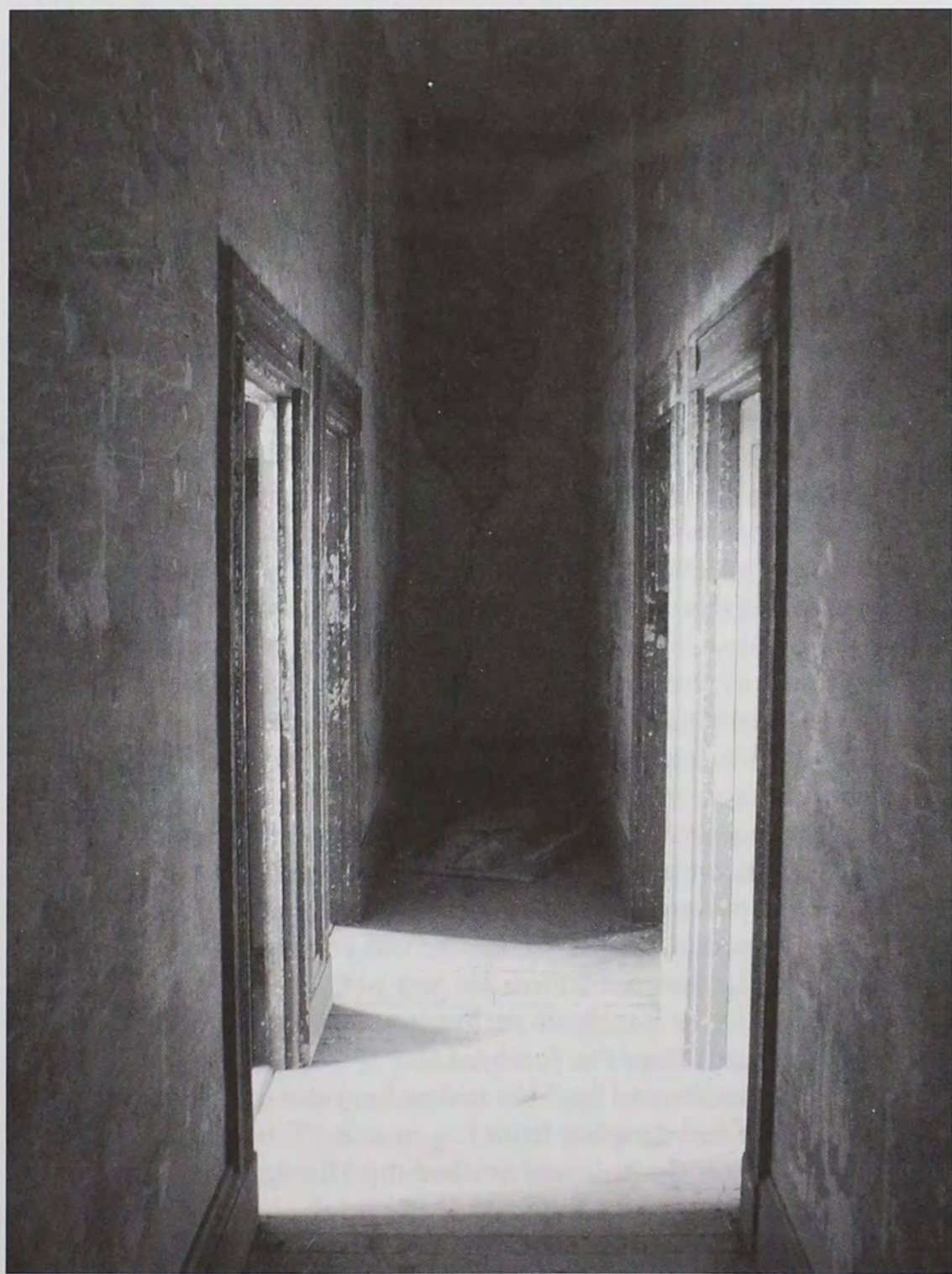
I know
there's no other way
for a god to burn.

When only a smoldering
skull remained, the
crowd began to clear.

Prometheus was
ash on my tongue—
whispered in the mouths
of strangers with the
holiness of saints.

From a storefront
someone quietly crooned
Come on baby, light my fire.

FOUR DOORS



JOB

I found God yesterday. It wasn't that hard. It took me about a half-hour of scouring the phone book.

I don't mean this figuratively. A lot of people, when they say they've found God, are speaking figuratively. They mean they've undergone some spiritual renewal or religious conversion. Not me. I've always been a kind of a theistic humanist – that is, I always believed there *was* a God, but I never really cared to try to figure out His true nature. I never read the Bible or went to church. I just accepted His probable presence and concerned myself with my own personal earthly conduct – namely, not being a jerk to my fellow man.

It's important that you understand that when I say "I found God," I mean I literally pinpointed His exact geographical location. He lives in New Jersey, in the town of Hancock's Bridge near the mouth of the Delaware Bay. He has a one-story bungalow-style house in a large neighborhood of one-story bungalow-style houses. The houses are all dull blues and grays and yellows. God's house is one of the dull blues. On bright Sundays, like the day I went to see Him, you can see the lone cooling tower of the Hope Creek nuclear power plant in the distance, rising over a sea of shabbily-shingled roofs.

He was outside watering His lawn when I pulled into His potholed driveway. His lawn was green in the center, but the outside fringes were beginning to crust over with dirt and dead brown grass. I parked behind a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and a toolbox that was spilling its innards on the pavement.

God was dressed in a white wifebeater and paint-splotted blue jeans. He was muscular, but not toned. He was old, but not grey. His once-golden hair was now largely silver, but it was still thick, and He kept it combed backwards from His forehead.

"'Bout time you showed up," He said as I got out of the car, removing the cigarette He had dangling from His mouth. "C'mon in, I'll fix you a drink." He shut off the hose and crushed out His cigarette.

With hesitant footsteps, I followed God into the house. This being an unannounced visit on my part, His casual reaction was a bit disconcerting.

"What'll you have?" He asked, opening up a small cabinet above the

stove. "I Myself prefer whiskey on Sundays. A nice Jameson 1780, 12 years old, 80 proof. Must be the Irish part of Me."

I sat down slowly at a large card table that I assumed was the kitchen table. "Just a water, please, God," I said. "I don't drink anymore."

God grunted as He poured Himself a glass. "Yes, yes, I remember that now." He took a seat across from me and handed me my water. "I don't usually drink before lunch," He said, "so I'll have to be careful. Last time I went on a bender I woke up and Sodom and Gomorrah were missing." He smiled, but I couldn't tell if he was joking.

The lighting in the house was poor, but by now my eyes had adjusted and I was able to make out my surroundings. The house had a combined kitchen and living room, and the kitchen area was stocked with all the usual appliances in widely varying states of upkeep. Against the far wall, on the same side of the house where we entered, was a couch and coffee table facing an ancient-looking TV. A young man with short, cropped black hair and a soul patch was asleep on the couch. He wore a black tank top that clung tightly to his abdominal muscles and baggy black cargo pants. On his arm was a tattoo of a large snake coiling around a naked woman holding an apple. When the sun moved from behind a cloud and sent light flooding into the room from the skylight, I was able to make a shocking discovery.

The man had small horns sprouting from his head.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. The irony was temporarily lost on me.

God glanced over at the crumpled form on His couch and rolled His eyes. "I told him yesterday he needs to start paying rent or I was going to send him out on his ass. Ever since then, he's been pretending to be asleep so I can't bother him." God took a long drink. "Asshole."

"God," I asked hesitatingly, "is he Jewish?"

God gave me a long stare. "What the hell did you just say?"

"Well, You see, God, I've only been in New Jersey for about four weeks. I'm originally from Morgan City, Utah, and I've never seen a real live Jewish person before. Is that why he has the... well, You know," I said, putting my index fingers behind my head to imitate horns.

God's expression did not change. "Kid," He finally said, "when I made you naïve I had no idea I made you retarded as well."

I froze in my chair, dumbstruck.

"Listen son, never mind Snake Boy over there on the couch. You came here because you, like everybody from Socrates to Douglas Adams, want the answers to all the Big Important Questions that plague

your existence.” He spoke the words in a tired, matter-of-fact manner. He was right, of course.

“Well, here’s your chance, chief. Shoot.”

I gathered what little aplomb I had left. “God,” I said, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

God sipped His whiskey and didn’t look me in the eye. “You mean to tell Me,” He said, “That you, a white male born in the most prosperous nation in the history of the universe, who has never been raped, shot, oppressed, or even had so much as a credit card declined, are asking Me, the Lord God, the Alpha and Omega, et cetera, et cetera, why I send, quote, ‘bad things’ upon ‘good people?’”

I was silent.

“On whose authority do you ask, My good sir?” God said with mock deferential flourish. “What gives you the idea that you can even *begin* to understand the vast complexities that go into My decision-making process? Especially *you*, whom I have been most lenient with in the doling out of maladies?” God finished His whiskey and poured Himself another.

Now I was angry.

“*Lenient?* Two months ago I came back from my mother’s funeral to find my wife screwing the meter reader. I was the laughingstock of Morgan City! I had to move from my home and my life and come out *here*, the armpit of the damn country, to a crappy apartment and a crappy job just because I couldn’t even bear to breathe the same air as the woman I loved anymore. And now You’re gonna sit here and tell me You’re playing softball with me? Get off Your throne and give me a straight answer.”

I could never have imagined myself yelling at anyone, much less the Supreme Ruler of the Universe. I hadn’t even yelled when I walked in on my wife and the meter reader. But He had struck a nerve – a deeply buried nerve. I saw a blizzard swirling in his icy blue eyes.

“Well fuck, cry Me a river, son. You think Jersey is bad? Huh? You been to Somalia lately? What about Afghanistan? Iran? China? I feel real bad about the cockroach infestation in your apartment and everything, but when was the last time a complete stranger tried to kill you because of your belief that power following Mohammed’s death fell to his son-in-law as opposed to a community-elected *caliph?*”

“Listen,” I snapped, “maybe I don’t have it as bad as Joe Abdul over in Trashcanistan, and for that I’m really goddamn sorry. But that

doesn't take any of the blame off of *You*. Don't act like you're not responsible for the suffering of those people over there. How many aid workers and innocent civilians - how many pregnant women and kids have You allowed to be killed in pointless wars over there? Huh?"

I was certain I had God in checkmate. Instead, He only smiled a mysterious smile. Taking a swig directly from the bottle of whiskey, He spoke. "So, you want to know how many innocents I have allowed to be slaughtered in those little foreign clusterfucks you see every night on CNN. Well, I'll tell you. *None*."

I was incredulous. "You can't honestly-"

"No, I *can* honestly say that. I have not allowed one innocent person to die, ever in world history." He paused to take a drink, though I suspect He was just being dramatic. "Because I never *allowed* them to die. I *killed* them all Myself."

He grinned. That Holy Bastard was gloating over His body count. Before my righteous indignation could form a retort, He continued.

"I have been responsible for the death of every single living creature who has ever walked, swam, or flown over the face of the planet. I arranged to have all the bullets fired, all the drinking water poisoned, all the tumors metastasized." He had stopped grinning, and was again nursing His glass of whiskey.

After a brief silence, God looked over at the couch. "That guy over there? He thinks he's pretty tough shit. He runs around, raises a little ruckus, breaks a few windows, sells a few joints. And you know what? A lot of people see this, and they start blaming all the woes of the world on him. They fancy him the father of all destruction." The man on the couch smirked and faked a snore. "But it's all an illusion. A cruel farce. It is, in fact, well within My power to snuff him out right now. I wouldn't even have to leave this chair."

God stretched out his hand towards him, as if contemplating the act. "But I won't. No sir, as big an asshole as he is, I won't kill him."

God paused for a long time, and the cloud of water vapor from the Hope Creek power plant swallowed the sun.

"All the genocides you've ever heard about. Every single battle, skirmish, and massacre. Every murder, every plague, every sudden disaster." God put down His drink and lit a cigarette. "You wanna know why tragedies happen in this world, son? Let Me tell you a story. A man and a woman fall in love and get married. All they want is a kid. Every night they get on their knees and pray for a child. A bouncing

baby boy or girl, with her eyes and his hair. And every night after they pray, they fuck. They spend a small fortune on pregnancy tests. Eventually, the gynecologist calls them in and breaks the news that she has an ovulatory disorder. Premature ovarian failure, to be exact. There's medicines they can try, of course, but the when the doctor starts to talk about adoption options, they know. She starts to get depressed. They both get depressed. But you know what? Every night, like clockwork, they get on their knees, pray, and then climb into bed and fuck." God took a long drag on His cigarette before continuing.

"Two weeks later, the tests confirm it. A child will be born unto them. And they cry and hug and give thanks. And before they know it they have a baby boy. A beautiful, seven-and-a-half pound baby boy with bright blue eyes. And for the first six months, everything's right as rain. You could look into that boy's eyes and really see him learning, you know? He would pick up a block or a doll and you could just see the wheels turning in his bald little head. All the relatives tell them what a bright boy they've got there. He'll grow up to be a scientist and one day cure cancer, they say.

"But something goes wrong. One day, the baby gets a fever. The next day, the baby won't wake up. He's in a coma. The doctors don't know what happened. To this day, only I know what caused his sickness. The baby comes out of the coma alright, but the doctors say he's got brain damage now. They don't know how bad just yet. They likely won't know until the boy grows up. *If* he grows up." God didn't say anything for a long time.

"Today that boy is a ward of the state in one of Michigan's less-reputable mental institutions. And I'm gonna let you in on a little secret, son, one that only I know." He took another long drag. "If I hadn't put that boy into a coma, you know what would've happened? He would have grown up to become a famous scientist who cured lymphoma. He even would've won the 2034 Nobel Prize for Chemistry."

I was horrified. "God... how could you...?"

"There's a girl growing up right now in Ohio who is a horrible person. Or rather, she *will* be a horrible person. Right now she's just another Ritalin-addicted social reject. She's going to get lymphoma at age 33, and it will change her life. She'll survive, eventually, but the fight will be long and uncertain, and she will come out of it a better wife, a better mother, and at age 97 she's going to die in her sleep with a smile on her face. Now," God said, turning to me, "You tell Me what would have

happened if I had let that little boy cure cancer. She'd go right on being a horrible person. She'd eventually develop a taste for child pornography, which would escalate to child molestation. And the police would never catch her, either."

"So what's the lesson here, God?" I asked, my fury unquelled by God's anecdote. "The boy who would save millions is worth less than the wannabe child molester? Is that it? Is that your idea of compassion?" I glared at Him hard.

Before God could answer, the door opened. A little boy of about eight or nine with sandy blonde hair entered. He said nothing, but sat down in the middle of the living room and began to play with a huge plastic tub of Legos that was kept to the side of the TV.

God's eyes softened. "Hello, tiger. How was Sunday school?"

"Good, Daddy." The little boy answered without looking up.

My jaw dropped. "Is that—"

"Yes, it's exactly who you think it is," said God.

"Jesus Christ!" I said, part exclamation and part greeting.

"Don't bother," God told me. "He doesn't talk to anyone. He hardly even talks to me. It's not his fault, though. He's autistic."

I felt my blood turn hot again. As much as I wanted to keep my composure in front of the little boy (who was building a pine tree out of his Legos), God was making it very difficult.

"Now You've really lost it," I told God. "The cancer-curing infant was one thing. But Jesus? You gave Your only son autism? Why? How could that possibly be a good thing? How can that possibly be fair?"

God laughed. "Short answer is, it's not. At least, that is, it's not fair to you, or fair by your puny mortal definition of fair. But then again, you're not in charge here, are you?"

"But You're supposed to be everything that's good and right and just in this world!" I protested. "Why the hell would You do that?"

God looked over at His son. He had finished his pine tree and was working on an albatross.

"Imagine a person who loved everybody. I don't mean someone who was just outwardly friendly. I mean he seriously, legitimately loved every single person on the planet, past and present, living and dead.

"But not everyone loves him back. It's not against him personally. They just don't know him. They fear him, because fear is what they're used to. Fear comforts them. Fear gives them hope." God crushed out his dwindling cigarette.

“So to save them from their fear, this boy has to suffer. Pretty standard expectation for heroes. Everyone else has done it. The only difference is the intensity of his suffering. I had him whipped and crucified, and he died under the weight of the world’s sins. Tough love, I guess you could call it.” God smiled the smile of a man who just made an inappropriate joke and didn’t regret it.

“Anyway, the time is nigh for this boy’s Second Coming. And once again, he has to suffer - but times have changed. This time, I made the boy’s suffering much, much worse. I made this boy, who knows nothing but the most passionate love for everything and everyone, *unable to express that love*. Can you imagine the immense pressure of carrying around all that emotion? Can you imagine his suffering? Can you imagine his pain?”

The little boy had placed the albatross in the tree. Now he was making a German shepherd.

“He doesn’t look like he’s in pain,” I said, as calmly as I could.

“He doesn’t know about my plans for him yet. When he’s twelve, I’m going to send him into the church to instruct the elders. Then it’ll hit him all at once.” God leaned backward. “The poor bastard.”

I hadn’t touched my water this entire time. I gulped it down. It tasted like cigarette ashes.

“Mind if I ask You a second question, God?” I asked, hardly able to hold back the tears.

“Go right ahead.”

“What the hell do You want from me?”

God smirked. I hated His smirk. He leaned in close and spoke to me in a voice just above a whisper.

“I want you to ask Me the question that’s been in the back of your mind all day,” God said.

“I don’t know what You’re talking about.”

“Oh, yes you do. You know exactly the question I’m talking about. You’re afraid, though. Afraid of damnation. Afraid of fire and brimstone raining down from the sky. All that cool Old Testament shit.” His eyes looked probingly into mine. “Ask Me. Don’t hide behind your rage. Grow a pair and ask Me.”

I gulped down hard. “God,” I said, hardly believing the words coming out of my mouth were my own, “why are You such a prick?”

God beamed.

“Come outside with Me,” He said. Not knowing what else to do, I

obeyed. As I did, I saw the man on the couch open his left eye and wink at me. I also noticed there was a German Shepherd underneath the tree. The little boy was working now on a humanoid shape.

Outside, God looked out over His lawn. "You know what was here before I moved in, son?"

I did not.

"It was a chemical plant. Made commercial fluoride. The kind they put in toothpastes and drinking water. Also rat poisons." He turned on the hose. As he did, a breeze came swirling in off the Delaware River. It wasn't strong, but it was enough to make God raise his voice a few decibels to be heard. "There was a big scandal when it was discovered they were leaking toxic levels of fluoride into the groundwater, which was seeping into the Delaware. Killed a bunch of wildlife. You're too young to remember, of course. The company that owned the plant went bankrupt and didn't have the money to clean up their mess. This whole area became a Superfund site. The EPA boys came in and cleaned it up as best they could – got it down to 10 parts per million. This year, it will only cause 12 instances of skeletal fluorosis, down from 15 last year. Anyway, they put a few thousand tons of fill over the area and rezoned it for residential development. And here we stand."

He looked up at the afternoon sun as He sprayed the hose in dramatic figure-eights. He looked extremely focused.

"I was the foreman of the construction company that built this neighborhood," He said. "This house was the first one we built. I painted every inch of it Myself. The shingles, all Me. The aluminum siding-"

He grinned.

"Okay, I had some help with the aluminum siding. But this lawn? I planted every seed. And now, I water it every day. I live for those hot summer evenings when I can drag out My charcoal grill, cook up some of My famous kielbasa hot dogs, and just lay on the soft grass and watch the stars come out with My boy." He inhaled deeply, straining to smell a scent that wasn't there. "Did I tell you how much he loves to look for constellations? He knows every single one."

I moved closer to God so I could speak to Him without raising my voice. I was close enough to touch Him.

"God," I said, "You missed some spots around the edges."

"I know," He said. "I did that on purpose."

DIVORCED PARENTS & FLOWER GUTS

She'll dive-bomb a buttercup
just to mash its yellow road paint
like juice on her arm.

She remembers
mashed parent
juice stinging her wrists.
Road paint dividing dad and home.

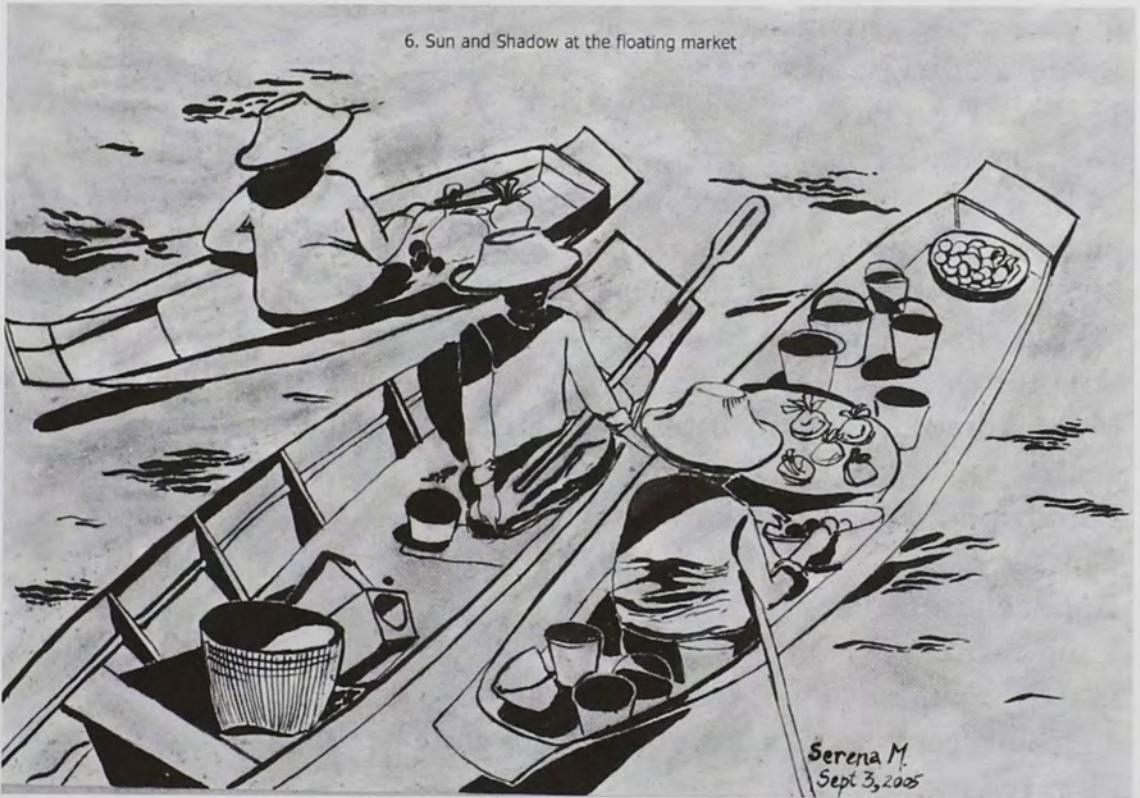
Grime
ghosting a sofaless oak floor.
Cigarette burns and box cutters.

They fought rotten.
A fridge full of disagreements.
Moldy spaghetti sauce,
milk morphing into pickles.
Leftovers. Condiments. Lies.

The buttercups
make flower noises
to fill her.

SUN & SHADOW AT THE FLOATING MARKET

6. Sun and Shadow at the floating market



24

I often lose but have now just found:

8 Colored Pencils.

13 Pens.

3ft. of Duct tape and

next to my contact case sits a wooden jar that my father gave to my mother and my mother gave to me to hold Q-tips.

Inside another jar lay:

11 Black Push Pins

13 White Push Pins

24 Paper Clips (Multicolored) and

photographs of:

My three best friends on Eileen's graduation

My father standing next to me destroyed, pride-swollen before my first semi-formal and

My grandmother and my brother the night before my brother's graduation.

For my photography work I keep:

1 plastic ruler

1 plastic protractor

3 anti-nausea pills.

I rarely use these things. Instead, I write on

8 greeting cards with pizzas on the front and place them in

11 envelopes.

But I have no stamps.

On top of a wooden box my father made for me (It once held my toys.) stands a lamp shaped like a turtle from a friend's mother on my eleventh birthday. I no longer speak with the friend.

In a drawer I keep:

1 portrait of Georgia O'Keefe and

1 painting by Georgia O'Keefe.

3 lighters tease me with the promise of cigarettes I no longer smoke and I keep a box of 19 matches from 1940s Sweden on my dresser.

They still light up but I try not to. Promise.

Begonia, Daisy, and Ivy sit in painted pots on a painted shelf on a desk littered with papers in the middle of which rest my hands that jab at the

keyboard.

On my left hand I wear a ring my mother bought for me in the hospital gift shop while my Nana was rotting 24 floors above.

It comes from a wooden box my father made for me that currently holds:

3 pairs of Sterling Silver earrings

1 pair of turquoise earrings

1 huge ceramic flower stud

9 mismatched earrings (I think they're for my left ear.)

1 necklace from an old boyfriend

3 necklaces from old friends and

6 necklaces from my parents.

There remains one

Pincushion,

Checkbook,

Beta Fish.

THE SHIRE

'Stopping pollution is not inspiring. Sorting your trash is not inspiring. Cutting down on fluorocarbons is not inspiring. But this...thinking of ourselves in a new way, thinking of the world in a new way...This...' - Daniel Quinn

I park my car in a spot much farther away than I'd like. All the way out there in East Bumfuck. Excellent, a long ass walk at 7:26 a.m. in the freezing fucking cold rain. My hair, still wet from the hasty shower I took no less than ten minutes ago, freezes on the way into my penitentiary for the day. None of my classrooms have windows, I won't see day light for another six hours. The bags under my eyes indicate the hours of sleep I didn't get last night. Every night I stay up entirely too late doing homework, just so my adolescent body can wake up at an ungodly hour to yield it to the drill sergeants commonly known as teachers. I still don't know why I torture myself this way. I wish I didn't care.

The rain on the outside makes the hallways smell like mold. The air is hard to breathe, and there's nothing I can do about it. Class, after class, after class. In the two minutes in between I see the kids that hover by the entrance to the bathroom, waiting to take a drag off a cigarette or sell a dime bag to some overly trusting customer who won't realize until the after-school celebratory session that they paid ten bucks for a sack McCormick's oregano. I don't think the bathroom dwellers ever even go to class. I envy them. While I struggle to consume algebra and digest Wordsworth, these guys are in the bathroom smoking the good shit they'd never actually sell.

This clique lives on the threshold of being kicked out of school. And it's not that they're dumb or stupid by any means. Hell, I know most of them; they're a steady source of herb. They just don't give a fuck, and the administration resents that fact. Myself on the other hand, I only pretend not to care. In my comatose state, I sit through classes mindlessly scribbling notes and listening to my pen scratch the paper rhythmically just to stay awake. Somehow I come up with enough energy to think, which they strongly disapprove of at the high school level. My thoughts allow me to rebel, something I'm too cowardly to enact.

I graduate in less than three months. Then, off to college where I can learn more bullshit about the 'real' world. What is so fake about the world I'm in now? Seems pretty tangible to me. They've been lying to me all along. My life as a young suburbanite has been scripted since my birth. Go to school, get good grades, and use those good grades to get into college, and then get good grades in college so you can get a job. Get a job, get married, have kids and start a nice little nuclear family, buy a dog. Give the dog a clever name, like 'Goddamnit.' Confide only in the dog, because good ol' Goddamnit won't tell anyone. Good dog, Goddamnit.

My silent rebellion makes my head hurt at the thought that I'm expected to fulfill this prophecy that is the mundane life of a middle class white kid. Luckily the ringing of the bell over the PA interrupts my thought process and my teacher. Finally it's lunch time and I get to discuss the tragedy of my situation with a few like-minded peers.

"Fuck that class, man. Newton taught himself physics sitting under a damn tree outside, why do I have to listen to some fat ass teach it to me in a classroom full of neon lights?" John thinks he's one of the three smartest people alive, along with Stephen Hawking and Bruce Lee.

"You're far from Newton." I wipe a bit of jelly from my lip. I've eaten six PB&J's this week. Thanks, Dad.

"Newton couldn't solve a Rubik's cube in 90 seconds, could he?" John throws the completed cube in my direction.

"They weren't invented yet."

"Whatever."

I win.

We sit in silence for a few moments, and then Sam joins John and me with his Styrofoam tray overflowing with school lunch. Sam is a little Asian guy that looks like he needs a pocket protector. I think he buys whatever clothes the mannequin at the Gap wears. "We got any bud for after school?"

"John doesn't want to talk about it. Shit fell through last night."

"Dude, talk to that guy Bobby. He's always in the locker room, and he's always trying to sell."

"I'm not buying pot at *school*."

"Pussy."

"Fuck you."

"Fine, I'll do it."

Score: Me 2, Sam and John 0. One thing a public education does teach

is competitiveness. Always keep score, in everything.

Lunch carries on and we continue going back and forth between complaining about anything and busting each other's balls. The bell rings again, only this time it means trudging through the masses on the way to the next class.

The rest of the day is a blur of statistics and American Government. I time travel to the end of the day, rush out of class and into the parking lot to rendezvous with Sam and John. You'd think it was a prison break the way everyone was rushing to be the next one through the narrow doorway. It stopped raining at some point and the sun decided to make an appearance. It always takes a few seconds to adjust to the change from the artificial lighting to the sun. But fresh air never tastes as good as it does when just freshly released.

"Get the shit?" I ask Sam.

"Of course. Let's hit the Shire." The Shire is our spot. No one goes there without our knowledge. It's tucked back in the woods, concealed by the abundant foliage. The natural pathway we've created over the course of countless journeys is the lone way to get there. Venture off the path and get swept away by the river. Eventually we make it to the gigantic rock that sits just next to the flowing water. Above us there is just a small sliver of sky. The section of visible sky takes the shape of the river since it is the only place nearby where there aren't any trees to cover it. Our rock is situated between bends in the river so from the rock about a fifty yard stretch of water can be seen. On a bright day every stone on the floor is visible through the lucid water. Sure, it's a hike to get there, but a little exercise is never a bad thing, so long as it doesn't involve going out of your way to do it.

John sits his lanky frame on a smaller rock that usually serves as a throne. I hang my legs off the edge while Sam twists up a little mental stimulation for us to puff on. Sam does the honors and sparks up the spliff while John and I wait impatiently for our turn. Once properly toasted we make ourselves comfortable on the seats nature provides us.

"This place is awesome. Untouched by the destructive force that is mankind. We're killing the earth, man." John picks up a fallen leaf and crumbles it in his hands.

"If every country were as developed as America the earth would fall out of orbit. It's just not natural the way we live," I say.

Sam chimes in, "Imagine if the whole country was still like it is here. Life can exist here, everywhere else people run around like chickens

with their heads cut off working for the man. Most of them don't even know who the man is."

I piggy-back Sam's idea, "We're no exception, man. We're headed down that same path. Right now, the thought of sitting in an office all fucking day just to earn money and buy things, buy status, that makes me nauseous."

John stares blankly at the river while he talks. "We, us right here, we need to start our own company. Be our own 'man.' I don't know what the hell kind of company, but it'd have to be revolutionary."

"Revolutionary, eh? What do you want to do, take over the world?" I mock John.

"Fuck you. I'm just sick of answering to everyone. I want people to answer to me, or I just don't want to be bothered by them at all. And taking over the world wouldn't be so hard, people are stupid. They'll believe anything."

"Slow down, Hitler. You're beginning to frighten me." Sam manages to speak through his laughter.

"You guys just don't get it." John whines like a little girl.

"Well explain *it* to us. Enlighten us." I don't care if John throws a hissy fit, I've gotten used to them.

"Forget it; it's not worth explaining anything to you two." His voice rises slightly, "I just know I'm destined for something better, bigger than this shit life."

"The American Dream my friend," I say in utmost seriousness

"That's not what I had in mind." John shoots me a condescending look.

"Well it sure sounds like it. You do a pretty poor job of explaining yourself sometimes, but maybe we just don't understand your genius."

His pale face goes red. Without turning to face and directly address me he says, "I'm not looking to get rich, that's just a byproduct of what I'm planning. I'm not sure how, but I'll change the world. Generally people who do something of that magnitude become rich, at least if they're smart about it. I'll make people realize the faults of their destructive ways, in the process ridding the world of the corruption that's destroying it."

"I'd love to see that." I would, really.

"Well fuck you, man. I'm out of here." He gets up, and storms off. In a matter of seconds he disappears into the trees leaving Sam and me by ourselves.

Score: Me 3, John 0.

“What was that all about?”

“You didn’t hear that? You were sitting right there.”

“Man, chill out. I was playing with this bug.” Sam displays a lady bug crawling on his finger.

“You would. I dunno, John said he could save the world, I said he couldn’t and he got pissed. The usual. Only this time he actually left.”

“Whatever, he’ll be back. I don’t know why he’s so pressed about saving the world; we’re all going to end up living on the moon surviving on a diet of pills for sustenance as soon as we have the technology.”

“Fuck it, dude. Let’s have another joint.”

“I like the way you think.”

The sound of the flowing river soothes us as we smoke. There is something to be said for enjoying the herb of the gods in the outdoors. Unfortunately the sun starts to set and we must leave the Shire behind for the evening. “Let’s go to Wendy’s, I have the munchies.”

“Delicious.” And then, “Fuck. I can’t, I have a paper due tomorrow that I haven’t started yet.”

I drop Sam off at his house and cruise to my final destination. Pulling into my driveway I’m greeted by the presence of both my parents’ cars. The sight of their cars makes me feel like I’m about to enter the gates of Mordor. I make my way through the front door trying not to be seen. But to no avail -- the Great Eye spots me. “Hello, son. Have a seat.” My father is already at the kitchen table while my mother is preparing dinner at the stove across the room.

“What’s up, Dad?”

“You tell me. Why’d you get a B on your history exam?”

“I can’t get A’s all the time. It was hard.”

“You can get A’s all the time; you just need to apply yourself. How are you going to survive college if you can’t get an A on your high school history test?”

“You’re right, it won’t happen again, sorry. By the way, any chance I could get a turkey sandwich tomorrow? I’m not sure how many more PB&Js I can eat before I go crazy.”

“You’re just going to have to deal with it; things are tight right now on the financial front.”

“How much is a pound of deli meat really going to set us back?” My mother interjects.

“Sure, then why don’t we go out and by a new Benz while we’re at it?”

And pick me up a bottle of Crystal too.”

“You’re being unreasonable, dear. I’m not talking about cars and champagne. A little variety wouldn’t be so bad for the diet of a growing boy.”

“If it’s that important to him, he can get a job and buy it himself.” By this point he’s yelling.

“School is his job. We should reward him for his hard work, even if it’s just with a better sandwich.”

“He’ll get all the reward he needs when he graduates college and makes his fortune, and then he can eat all the turkey he wants.”

I roll my eyes at my father’s last comment and slip upstairs to get away from the chaos. I can still hear them arguing but try not to listen to what they are actually saying. I pull out my notebook and a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* and slam them down on my desk. Right about now the last thing I want to do is write a paper. Doing well in school obviously did my parents a lot of good; they can’t even afford lunchmeat. I begin to outline a paper on the ethics of hiring a hooker and not having sex with her, but all I can really think about is the inevitable apocalypse of my life.

LILY

I want to scream at
The injustice that my whiteness imposes on
Three year old Navajo natives who
Hate me because they think I'm an anglo.
The stories that I represent are the ones that give them nightmares
I am a monster creeping out from underneath their trailer just
Waiting to pounce on them and squeeze them like syringes that are
traded underneath bingo tables.
One little Indian, two little Indian, why are you drunk little Indian?
Why is your track mark as long as your criminal record and
Do you still understand the ways of your ancestors or
Has the influence of the world diluted your sense of unity?
I understand why you blame my skin color but not why you blame me.
Just as you cannot help that you are native I cannot help that my
ancestors were
Snow white, and
That this gives me a privileged, poisoned and propaganda-d apple that I
bit into when I was five so
I could fall into a deep and ignorant slumber while
You struggled for life in a barren and toxic desert that you cannot leave
just so you could believe in your history. And in your ideas.
And I'm told that ideas never die, but I'm thinking that they can change
and
It seems to me that you're angrier about my skin than your rights
And to me that seems like a problem but
I'm told that it's acceptable because of all this horror that
The saturation of my skin tone inflicted on your people but
By hating you are not solving and sometimes I wonder if you want to
Or whether you have given up because all you see are
Three year old girls who grow up to be addicts and then get pregnant
and after
Only begin to think about the future that their child will have and
This is a vicious cycle that I cannot solve with your hate

And my non-understanding.
And I feel like I'm trying to put together a puzzle with pieces of all sizes
and colors
But find it's impossible when one piece boycotts the other piece
because
One of them killed one of us but
Nobody can see the big picture because
There are pieces missing that were taken out when our country that was
once your country but is now ruled by my leader
Traded morals for oil and rights for religion
And people for convenience.

VENOM

I'm staring at my monitor for about thirty seconds before Dick bothers me. His hands curl over the wall.

"If you stare long enough into the screen, the screen stares back."

"Dick."

"Snow's looking for you; I think it's about the Venom page."

"What?"

He shrugs and prances away.

My new job is in a skyscraper in Times Square, dubbed Time Inc., a huge conglomerate publishing firm. The entrance is chic, with cascading waterfalls and contemporary art, balloons with happy faces. Gritty heels and shopping bags swarm the lobby. I work on the twenty-first floor as an ad salesman, designing cosmetic slogans and advertisements for *Desire* magazine. The management is a product of the magazine, with a luxurious department that boasts eighteen windows and caricatures of runway models walking the halls.

I look over the Venom layout and check for any slip-ups. Let's see: a jazzy snake, a snazzy photo, some green jade, and of course, my patented scratch and sniff square—definitely nothing wrong here. "Venom perfume for women was created by Jean-Jacques Doisneau in 2006. Venom perfume is a luxurious oriental blend of amber, honey, berries, and spices." I grab the bottle on my desk. It sports a green jeweled cap with fine gold print. "Ingredients: Triclosan, Deionized water, sodium laureth sulfate, ammonium lauryl sulfate, cocamidopropyl betaine, lauramide DEA, glycol stearate, glycerin, PEG-7 glyceryl cocoate, PEG-7M, hydantoin, citric acid, tetrasodium EDTA, sodium chloride, and blue 1." I think the scratch and sniff is my making my eyes tear, but no more than usual.

I walk over to Snow's office and prepare for the weird.

My boss's name is Snow, Snow Peterson. He says it's because his parents were hippies, but everyone knows that's a crock of shit. He's a powder fiend; he'll bump anything. Ingredients: Special K, Coke, PCP, and Crystal Methamphetamine, the weapons of choice. He can't work without it, financially I mean; he's a man on the move. He's married with kids and owns a Porsche he can operate with mobile text. From his oak desk to the Bronx, he is everywhere and nowhere; reliable if

possible, invisible sometimes, and sleazy all the time.

“Hello? Mr. Peterson?”

“Henry! Morning!” He says, grinning like a plague. I hear he’s on probation for desecrating a church.

“You wanted to speak to me?”

“Yesyesyes. Close the door, would you?”

He paces slowly to his desk and sighs.

“Henry, I talked with the editors...and we’ve given this some thought.”

Still standing, staring at the ground. “You see Henry; I need you to give this just one more try.”

I feel weak now and slightly light-headed, “W-what do you mean?”

“Henry. This snake is not just a logo. Our readers need to *experience* Venom. We can’t just rely on visuals anymore; I’m going to need more of that scratch and sniff stuff. And as for the design...yeah why not, give me something fresh. Fresh! Yeah, I like that. Two pages this time, that’s right Henry. Henry! Venom! “It’s the new air,” better than sex and cigarettes! I love it! Henry, I want to see Venom in every home. You got that?”

“Oh, OK, yeah.”

“Great! You know what I mean! Terrific!”

I slowly walk back to my cubicle and sit down, poignantly looking at my screen. My desk is covered with boxes upon boxes of Venom. I had previously ordered seven test samples, but they sent me seven boxes. Three crates, twenty-four bottles in each one.

A few bottles are on my desk, so I carefully pick one up and remove the cap. The fragrance wafts through me. It smells putrid. I take a huge whiff and a migraine hits. Suddenly the lights are blinding and the monitor blurs out. With the screen distorted, I lean back and try to close my eyes.

A quick slap to the back jolts me forward.

“Hey Henry!” Dick grins, tilting over my shoulder.

“Wow buddy, talk about sleeping on the job!” He says, laughing alone.

“Dick, please leave. I’m not feeling well.”

He ignores me and grabs a spare bottle. “Whoa, Whoa buddy, is this Venom? How much is this stuff worth anyway?”

Blood rushes to my head.

“Henry, why didn’t you tell me? You know I bet we could make a pretty penny with these samples...”

I kindly ask again. "Dick. I feel dizzy, not right now, please, I..."

His rant continues. "My wife has been going on and on about this crap and let me tell you..."

OK. Fine, fuck this.

"Dick, please, just stop." Slurring my words, as I grab a bottle from the desk and slam it against his temple. He falls to the ground, moaning loudly.

OK. So I grab another bottle and pitch it at a window. The smash is clean, leaving only jagged glass and syrupy residue. Another bottle at Dick's window and the scent spreads. I grab the crate and walk to the Hallway of Editors. Long legs run to Dick, asking him if he's dead or not.

I strut down the hall, crate in arm, tossing Venom after Venom into office after office, Johnny Appleseeding every corridor. The offices are high authority with Smithson burgundy carpets and Mustadio book shelves. Most of the bottles break, others just injure. The shattering noise is rewarding. Smash. OK, every home in America. Smash. I can't even smell it anymore.

"Free samples! Free samples!"

Smash.

"C'mon people! This shit is expensive!"

Smash.

People cover their mouths and start to scurry away.

I keep making the rounds until every bottle is broken. The ooze stains the carpet a muddy brown.

Everyone on the floor begins to wheeze and choke.

A woman screams, "Please! No! I have asthma!" and I throw a couple more in her direction.

A chaotic din ensues as the more I smash, the more it fumigates. I suppose the past month paid off, it seems I gained immunity to this "luxurious blend of tear gas." People are crawling to the exits. Bridgett the intern holds a Prada scarf to her face.

I finally reach the end of the hall and Snow is blocking my path.

"Henry, calm down...alright? I don't know what the *hell* you're doing, but I'm about to call security, so just wai--"

A rabbit punch to the jugular and he's on his knees, gasping for air. I kick him and spit on the SmarTec fax. Employees are looking at me with wide-eyes and ID cards swaying. I turn to them and they all shudder, or vomit. That's right, Jennifer. Today I am King, a Knight

Templar, a Genghis Khan. She's too far away to explain, and crawls off.

I gleefully snatch a few more bottles, unscrewing the caps, and strewing it over bodies like holy water. The Venom hits and voices are soon muffled by incessant crying. Their offices receive the same treatment. Ingredients: Kodak family photos, G-5 computers with Zelest Plasma screens, lilac felt notice boards, a Maximus K-50 Hole Puncher, sorted AmeriStar binders, Hirohito projectors, green Sharpies, stale coffee mugs, and a small stain on my new Chucks.

Further investigation with Venom led me to the bathroom, where whispers and numerous limbs hid in the stalls. I quietly lob a bottle in each stall, tripping the coughing frenzy that tries to run. I leave with some additional anarchy, break a mirror, or keep a faucet running.

An hour passes and most have escaped; the rest are unconscious. I continue to smash bottle after bottle. Smash. God forbid it goes to waste. Smash. My arm is getting tired, and I take a break in Snow's chair. I light a Rigarro cigarette and hope Venom isn't flammable. Snows got a Z-Net TV in here.

It defaults to Fox News. Breaking story: "THE NEW TERRORISM: COSMETIC WARFARE". Ugh. Click. CNN, "Toxic Tower: The Venom Epidemic". Click. NBC: "Poison Perfume Leads to Hostile Takeover, Four Hostages Still Alive." Click. I think I can hear a helicopter. I jump out of the seat and walk to the corner window. Nothing, not a sound in sight.

Bbbbbbrrrrrriiiiiinnngggg. Bbbbbbrrrrrriiiiiinnngggg. The phone echoes. I waltz over and pick it up.

"HELLO, HELLO! AM I SPEAKING TO HENRY?"

"Yes, hi."

"THIS IS FBI AGENT JACK WALTERS."

"Hi Steve. You think you could stop shouting?"

"OK. What is it you want?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You've got four hostages up there and a weapon we can only guess is your own concoction—"

"No it's not, it's Venom."

"We know its venom! But what is it, really?"

"Um...it's a proprietary blend."

"Who are your correspondences?"

"What? No, no one, I..."

I'm on the phone and a black helicopter swings by, keeping its

distance.

Steve is stalling.

“Just release the hostages and no one will get...”

I slam the phone down and grab another crate of Venom. I run to the stairwell and throw a cluster bomb, followed by six rounds near the elevators. I sprinkle some around the perimeter and a few by the reception desk. I'd say thirty seconds left.

I sit back in Snow's chair, keeping an eye on the main entrance.

The helicopter is louder than ever as walkie-talkies shout my name, garble, screech—“GO! RECON!”—end screech. Maybe if I plead insanity I could poison the court room, make a statement.

The stair door opens and men with black boots pour out. Ingredients: half tactical vest, five helmets, bits of MP-5 submachine gun, and gas masks. They open the door and scatter like roaches.

Screech—“We've got six down.”—screech.

Moving fast, they swarm each room.

I'm slowly twirling in my seat when a unit enters the room. End twirling. He points his gun at me and accentuates every word, loudly.

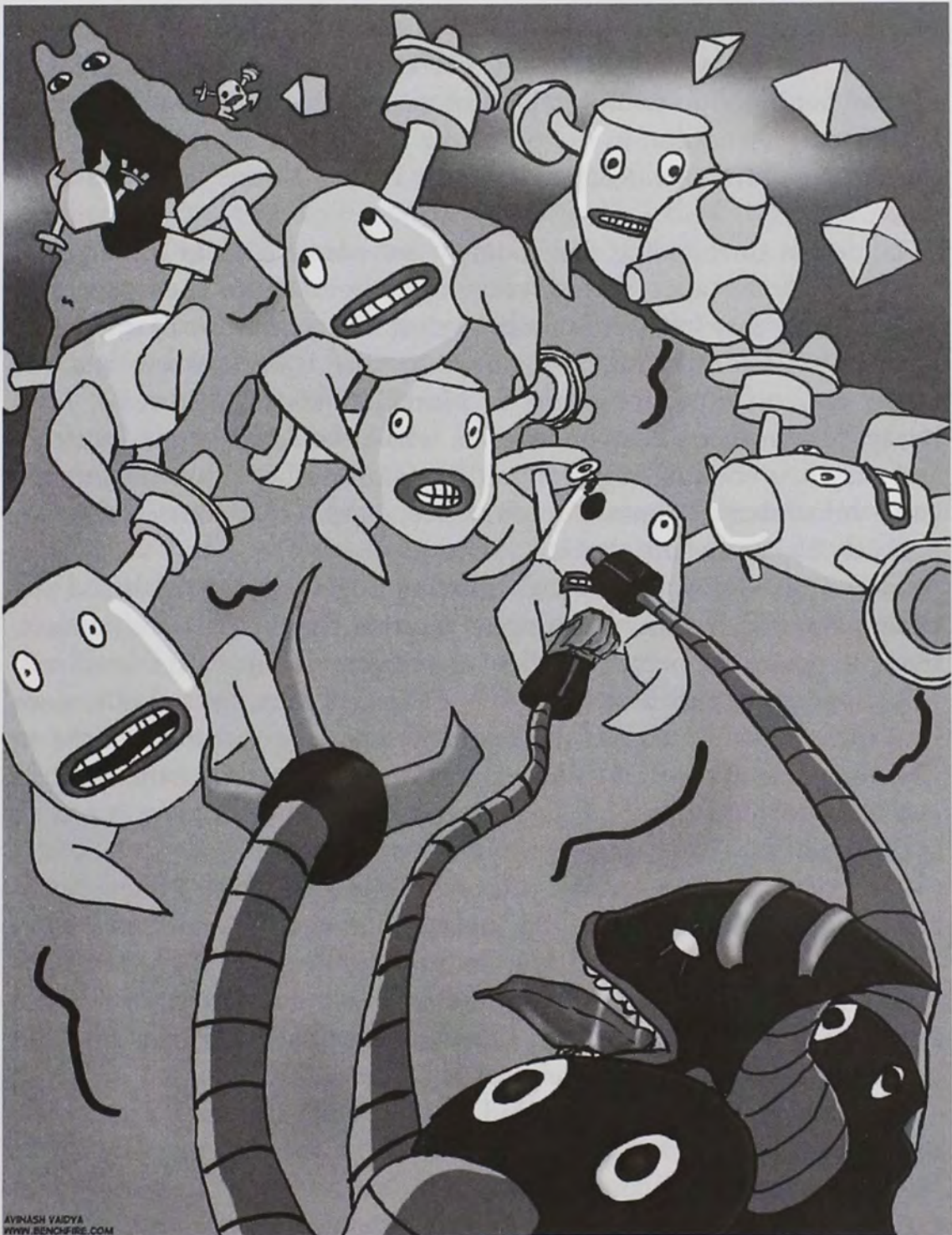
“Hands Behind Your Head, Asshole.”

The rest of the troops surround the office and all I can do is smile.

Two in front, three in the back, and they proudly escort me down the stairwell.

The walls are coated with a thin layer of slime and my vision is blurred again. But no matter now, our readers need to *experience* Venom.

LEVEL 9



AVINASH VAIDYA
WWW.BENCHFIRE.COM

DRAGON MAGIC

“Look Caroline! It’s your ride!”

It’s funny how five words can cause a person’s heart to speed up, and her blood to pound in her ears so that she can’t think straight. I felt a strange sensation in the pit of my stomach, a mixture of joy and pain that I did not understand, even as I took a deep breath to calm myself.

The details surrounding that moment are not as clear in my mind as they once were, after several years of removal from the scene. My parents insist that I was only about twelve, and we were at Dorney Park in northern Pennsylvania. I could swear that I was sixteen, and the family was on our annual trip to Morey’s Piers in Wildwood, New Jersey. My brother thinks he was ten, which would make me fourteen, and only just entering high school. But I remember those five words, and I remember the instant sense of recognition that coursed through my body like an electric shock.

I did not need to follow Mom’s pointing finger to know what she was talking about. I had been staring at the ride for the past six minutes, trying to get up the nerve to walk over and get into line with the others.

This was not as easy as it might sound. Tickets were not an issue, since Dad had already purchased the bracelets that gave us *carte blanche* to go on any ride in the park. Nor was the line that long, since the ride had just been boarded and the gate shut. In fact, there wasn’t any line at all at the moment. The problem was the ride itself.

I’m too old. I thought, straining my eyes for the sight that I knew would end my resolve to stay away as soon as I saw it. *What will other people think?* A teenager simply did not get into line to ride a kid’s merry-go-round. Bright orange tigers and proud yellow lions were not the usual fare for a girl who had long ago abandoned the balloon Ferris Wheel in exchange for a serpentine roller coaster. “I see it,” I said.

“You used to love that ride,” Dad said. He smiled at me. “You rode it seven or eight times once. Remember?”

Did I remember? Of course I did! And it wasn’t seven or eight times, it was more like fifteen or sixteen. I had been stubborn and wouldn’t take no for an answer even when it seemed that what I wanted so desperately would never occur. But that was then, when I was eight

years old and permitted to be a fool, and this—

The ride turned again, and *it* came into view: Sleek, gleaming, green scales; high, proud wings; wide-open mouth with glistening white teeth; long serpentine tail. *The dragon*. It looked exactly as I remembered it, all those years ago, when I watched from the back of the tiger, or the lion, or the horse, dreaming as it flew in front of me, always out of reach. My stomach clenched, and I felt my heart begin to pound again. I knew I was doomed.

Who cares what people think? I took a quick gulp of the root beer I was holding and passed it to my watching mother. “I think I might just go for a ride,” I said, “for old time’s sake.”

I tried to be nonchalant: Just a girl reliving a pleasant past time. I might get on or I might not, it all depended. And the choice had absolutely nothing to do with that beckoning beast. I didn’t care whether I got to ride on it or not. It didn’t matter.

I wasn’t fooling anybody, and I knew it. Mom took the half-full cup, grinning openly now. “Have fun,” she said.

I laughed nervously and headed for the entrance to the ride. I did not laugh because I was worried. I had no need to be. I would be the first on the ride, and I would be able to pick whatever animal I chose. But her words had invoked a stirring within me, hinting at the real reason that I had hesitated for so long.

It wasn’t because of what people would think. I had never cared what people outside the family thought of what I did, and I certainly wasn’t about to start caring now. Besides, I wasn’t *that* old. It was because of what *I* would think. I was not the starry-eyed little girl I had been when I last stood in a line and watched the dragon whirl in front of me, tantalizingly close. I was older now, and I knew that the magic found in such moments came not from the ride itself, but from the belief held in the heart of the rider. What if I couldn’t go back? What if, in trying to relive one of the most wonderful moments in my past, I destroyed it?

The dragon was just a hunk of plastic, after all. And it wasn’t even that pretty. It was a memory, nothing more. And I already knew the cost of playing with memories.

I glanced up and saw my parents watching me, grinning. Slowly, I grinned back. If I could enter a fantasy world in my dreams than I could certainly ride a fantasy creature in my waking moments. Magic wasn’t something you lost as you got older. It just got harder to call out of its hiding place. I would get on that dragon, and I would enjoy myself. And

I would not look at the plastic wings.

Behind me, the line had begun to form, and I could hear excited voices calling out to parents as the ride began to slow down. I smiled, preparing to get on. And then I heard it.

“Look, there it is! Aren’t its wings beautiful?”

“Yes, they are. Maybe *this* time you’ll be able to ride it.”

Maybe this time.

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the words. But they had already penetrated. And with them, came an echo of words I had heard only a few minutes before. *You rode it seven or eight times once. Remember?*

Maybe this time.

I clenched my fists and took a breath, then turned slowly to look at the people who had spoken, already knowing from the high-pitched sound of the first voice what I would see. She stood there with her hand clasped firmly in that of a much older female, possibly a sister, more likely her mother. She had the desperate, longing look I knew all too well, and she was panting, as if she had just run around from the exit of the ride very quickly. Her companion’s look was also familiar. The wearied resignation of someone who knew that her young charge would insist on going on this ride again and again, racing to be first in line, to be the one who got to choose her steed, until she gained the coveted place between those sweeping wings. And only one animal on the entire merry-go-round had wings.

Maybe this time you’ll get to ride it.

Memory is a funny thing. A person can close her eyes and see some scenes quite clearly years later, while others, that seemed so important at the time, fade away completely within a few months, sometimes within a few days, or even a few hours. But there is a saying that nothing is ever lost, only mislaid. And sometimes memories, even those that have been buried for years, can return just when you least expect them to. They come creeping slowly out of the dark to wash over the unsuspecting mind, carrying with them all their attendant emotions of fear, or joy, expectation or despair. They are unavoidable, and unforgiving. And however much you may want to ignore the message they carry, you can not deny your own heart.

Maybe this time.

I swallowed, and looked into the echo of my own eyes.

I was eight. My parents and I stood together in Dorney Park watching the merry-go-round whirl in front of us. I had just noticed it for the first time, and I was enthralled. As soon as it stopped, I hurried to be first in line, not taking my eyes off the gleaming green dragon. But I was not first. A crowd of older boys got in front of me. And there was only one dragon.

The boy with the blue baseball cap got it, while his three friends took the two tigers and an elephant. I ended up on the horse.

Not to be deterred, I closed my eyes and imagined that I was riding a unicorn, or maybe a pegasus. The horse went up and down, and if I tried very hard, I could imagine that we were flying. I petted the mane, and tried not to feel too disappointed. After all, it wasn't the horse's fault that I had ended up with my third choice. As soon as the ride stopped, I headed for the entrance, sure that *this* time I would get to ride the dragon.

My parents encouraged me, calling out to me which way to run when the gate opened and everyone poured inside, urging me to run faster. But the dragon hardly ever stopped right in front of the entrance, and eight-year-old legs are no match for the long limbs of older children, who had ears that heard the same directions as well as mine did. And dragons were popular that year.

On my second try, I got the tiger, displacing one of the four boys, all of whom had also raced to take the ride again. They continued to do so until all four of them had ridden the dragon. On my fifth try I got the tiger again, beat out this time by another girl who was about three years older than I. I stroked the orange ear and glared at her back, wishing I was a faster runner.

After a while, the contest stopped being fun. I hated the elephant most of all, because it was on the opposite side of the ride from the dragon, and when I rode it I couldn't even get a glimpse of a green scale.

"Come on, Caroline!" Mom called, "Don't give up! Maybe this time you'll get it!"

I had no intention of giving up. I was stubborn, and I didn't care that I had run around to the entrance without success fifteen or sixteen times. I *would* get the dragon eventually, even if I had to wait all day. By this time the operator was well aware of my wish, and he tried to help me by showing me where the dragon was. But he had to be fair to all his customers, and he couldn't do anything about the fact that I had

smaller legs than almost everyone else. If someone in front of me wanted to ride the dragon, there was nothing that the operator could do.

At this moment the miracle occurred. I was standing second in line, and praying desperately that the person in front of me had developed a sudden interest in a lion, or maybe a giraffe. But I knew that she hadn't. I had seen her watching the dragon, too.

"Maybe this time, Caroline!" Mom called again. "Maybe this time you'll get to ride it! Just keep your eyes on the wings, and make sure you see where it stops."

I smiled and waved, wondering if it would be fair to trip the awful person in front of me so that she wouldn't be able to run that fast. And at that precise moment, that person turned around and looked at me.

"Do you want to ride the dragon?"

Did I? For a moment I couldn't speak. I just nodded. Then I found my voice. "You're in front of me." It was an accusation, but I wasn't in the mood for being polite. I *had* been here a while. And *she* had just arrived. And I was going to lose out. Again.

The person studied me for a moment, and then, as the ride began to slow down, she stepped aside. "Not anymore."

I stared at her in shock.

"Go ahead of me. I'll hold the others back."

She winked. I felt a sudden warmth spread through my chest. This wonderful person, whom I had been contemplating tripping, was going to give me the dragon! I smiled, suddenly not at all weary, and raised my head.

"You're sure?"

"I've been there."

The words were soft, almost as if she hadn't intended to be overheard, and I blinked, not understanding. Then I shrugged. It wasn't my business what she meant.

"THANKS!" I pushed ahead, and as soon as the ride stopped, I ran towards those gleaming wings.

It was the best ride of my life.

The past echoed the present in the meeting of two sets of eyes, and I knew that I was doomed.

Maybe this time you'll get to ride it.

I glanced at the dragon one last time, as it slowed to a stop a few feet

from the gate. Some part of my mind noticed the oddity of that, and wondered how many laws of averages had just been blown. The rest of me turned back to the girl, and took a slow breath.

“Do you want to ride the dragon?”

Magic never dies, it just changes. And the joy in a young girl’s eyes is worth all the dragons in the world. :

GROWTH

I've longed for it like winter longs for spring
To cut its cold embrace with shoots that grow
Unflinching in their progress; opening
Their colored fingers over dull grey snow.

For when the warm light touches frozen ground
It melts to let the dreams it once held fly
Away from strife and pain with wings unbound
And singing voices rising to the sky

Whose shadowed eyelids part with smiling ease
And raindrops change their name to joyful tears
As whispered laughter echoes through new leaves
Of trees that haven't seen the sun in years.

Still, darkness waits beneath with bated breath,
Composing sonnets that will hail its death.

SNAG



THE SEASONS OF LOVE

Argument

Why is the measure of love loss? Why is everything judged by pain? One can say that one loves, but one will never know how much love one has until it is gone. Love is like a single piece of a jigsaw puzzle -- its value becomes fully apparent only after one sees the hole that it leaves. When one looks at a complete puzzle, he never focuses on the individual pieces, only on the image in its entirety; but when even a single piece is missing, that hole dominates the viewer's attention.

The truth is that the measure of love *is* loss, but why?

The Recession of Summer

The month is early November, and the trees have shed their pale canopies like straw hats. All foliage has died and rotted to the point of brown, but the snow is late this year -- it has yet to cover the landscape in its frigid blanket.

And she is gone. He knows this and he knows that it is the cause of his despair. And such is the cause of the late snow. She has gone with the seasons, fled along with the wind and probably with some new lover.

No, he thinks, *she would never do such a thing to me.*

But the thought of the wind triggers a memory -- a memory of that other fateful wind that once blew through their hair whilst they lay together atop the quilt of fallen leaves -- leaves that were the children of that grim September. He still remembers how beautiful she looked. He remembers her hair, auburn with tints of red and orange throughout, cut so that it was only a few centimeters long. Back then, his hair had been a brilliant robin's-egg blue with dark splashes of leafy green, and he had let it grow long. But now, though still long, his mane was an ugly, white-grey color that contrasted her hair as drastically as a salt lick does a ruby. And he remembers her breath, a cool, pleasant breeze that caressed his cheek; his breath was just a frigid, bitter winter gale that brutally slapped away any face that it happened to touch.

"I guess we just weren't made for each other," he mumbles softly.

He thinks about how she was a work of art, and how he must have dimmed her perfection. He thinks of how she was a shining star, and how he just swallowed up her brilliance.

"I guess we just weren't made for each other," he repeats with a choked voice. "I guess you just don't love me anymore."

He remembers lying with her in bed, side by side with the love of his life, remembers the way that she smelled, the wonderful scent of damp, brown leaves and cool swathes of healing wind. He remembers going places with her, remembers his quixotic way of opening doors for her and the small, flattered, jovial laugh that she would always give in response to his doing so.

He remembers and he weeps. And as the tears stream from his eyes, the temperature of the room drops tremendously, and frost appears on everything. Eventually, even the tears freeze on his face, turning the small droplets into glimmering shards of diamond.

And he curls up in a corner, away from the center of the room, to be alone with his tears. As the tears continue to fall and as the frost begins to turn to ice, the outside of the tree that serves as his home is dying.

And there is a frame standing on the table beside his bed, and in it, there lies one, frost-bitten photo of his lover sitting cross-legged with a sketchpad in her lap.

And he remembers something that he had to tell someone a very long time ago, something that hurt almost as much as this did.

And he whispers, not to her, but to himself, "I don't want to touch your heart, I don't know where it's been."

The Resting Place of Autumn

And from far above, amid the clouds and thunderstorms, she watches. She watches his outburst with an expression full of pain on her face, and she shakes her head. She cannot be joyous, not when the one that she loves is suffering so.

For she does still love him, no matter what he thinks, and she will always love him - but he has forgotten the reason that she had to leave.

Oh well, her mind scolds her. *What did you expect? He forgets every year.* Every year, he forgets that she must leave him. Not because she doesn't love him, but because that is the way that the world works. If she had the choice to stay with him, she would, but she doesn't have that option.

So she watches him, shivering and trembling in the corner of his room, and she too begins to weep. No matter how evasive her maneuvers, she cannot avoid this horrible ache that cannibalistically devours the heart that gave it birth.

That's a good one, she thinks. The matricide of the soul.

Her tears are a sweet, golden-brown, and they turn her cheeks sticky, as if with sugar. She sticks out her tongue and catches one of them before it drizzles past her lips. Her tears both smell and taste of fresh cider.

"I love you, my darling, I truly do! I promise this isn't my decision; I'm sorry! I'm so sorry," she sobs fitfully. "I'm so sorry"

Rejoining and Rejoice

Six Months Later - in Late May

There are really only two seasons: Summer and Autumn. Winter is the depression that Summer feels when Autumn is taken away from him, and Spring is his re-awakening.

He is still cowering in the corner when he hears someone open the door to his room, but he doesn't even lift his head to identify the newcomer. However, as he hears footsteps approaching his huddled form, his curiosity supersedes his apathy. He stares through the sheet of frozen tears that covers his eyes, and, through the wavering pattern, can make out a pair of feet, clad in soft leather, striding towards him. Wherever the feet fall, the frost-coated ground melts, giving the walker a wide, circular berth.

He feels a pair of hands on his shoulders, and, were he able to stiffen, he would. He still cannot see the phantom owner of this mysterious quartet of hands and feet, and that makes him nervous. But then, the bare arms wrap around him, oblivious to the cold from both the room and the living ice-sculpture that they are embracing.

And he hears a voice whisper in his ear, "I'm home darling."

At first, he does not recognize the voice, but as soon as he does, he believes that he is hallucinating.

It can't be her, she's gone, he thinks desperately. And of course, right on cue, something blasts that thought from his mind like a pressure-washer stuck in his ear.

The pair of lips that belong to the phantom appendages embracing him drifts down until they reach his own, ice-coated mouth. Even

though he can now see who this intruder is, the kiss that those lips deliver dispels any need for visual confirmation. It is her.

The frost-covered ice that coats every part of his body begins to melt, and soon there are streams of water running down his form. But he is impatient. She stands back as he blinks, breaking the ice coating his eyes, and starts to stand. Shattered ice falls away from him in chunks as he moves for the first time in six months and blinks the sharp, cold shards of ice from his eyes.

Finally, he stands, fully thawed and yet soaked through to the marrow. But all he does is gaze, stupefied, at his long-absent lover and throw his arms about her. He begins to cry again, but this time, his tears do not freeze. Not even the coldest winter wind can freeze tears of joy.

His hair has returned to its original crystalline-blue and finally, things are right again. The pair of elemental eidolons remain wrapped in each other's arms for what seems like an eternity, until he pulls away to gaze at her face, the reflection of his pain has already fled his own countenance. He kisses her, his once-violet lips now full of color, and the rest of the world awakens from an unusually harsh Winter only to be thrown headfirst into Summer; for he has found his Autumn, and nothing can part that kind of true love.

At least, not until next November.

NARCISSISTICALLY ADMIRING YOU

My body will not break -- you will starve
You Who've Metastasized Beyond means
and
Reasoning
A wonder That
You don't feel the pain you cause us
Reasoning
A blunder but
You can't see the shame in god's face
And can't see the god in yours
Shielded from the pain I feel for you
I feel for you
I can't feel without you
Or see me without you there
But you gotta crack so I can stop lying to Us
Otherwise I'll starve
And my body will be a totality
Unbroken yet
Fragmented
And so muddled
That the righteous
choke and die
On the bones of Cannibals

VARIOUSISMS



THE MYSTERIOUS AVOCADO

Sitting slouched and darkly staring,
Mysterious bruises of black and green,
The Avocado gazes at its neighbor fruit.
Soft Peach, with its pitiful beard,
Dares not make contact,
While spineless Banana just looks away
With not even its usual foolish grin,
Not even angry Tomato, full of
Fiery insults, dares to glare back.
Quiet, yet imperial Avocado need say no word,
Just leaning, watching, and surveying,
That unknown, standoffish, dark produce.

TIME FOR THE MAGIC SHOW

Oranges have so much potential.

How consumed with his art he must have been. Must have seen a sculpture in everything. Who can fathom an artist's purpose? What was the thinking man thinking about? Stomach gyrations? Sick. Maybe I need something more to eat, rather than just the saltines and ginger ale. Is there a sculpture somewhere of a saltine? I can see it being artistic. Square, dimples and bumps of salt, serrated edges. Stumbling there, but not in a stumbling way to others. People would call it a simplistic masterpiece, a piece of art from our everyday lives. At least my everyday life, or at least my life for the past few days. I don't think I want to see a saltine sculpture. Sweatshirt in the trashcan.

Keep crawling, Le-loo. Poor diva, oozing blue blood. Always, the beautiful things are destroyed by the ugly. Is that true? 19:55. Time in movies is hardly ever the same as real time. 20 minutes 'til the bomb goes off; it's only 5 or so. I'm just supposed to suspend my disbelief, I guess. Laugh at the villain . . . he forgot to check the box again. I would have checked the box. How heavy were the stones? In real life? Or how heavy were they in the movie, because it's different. Nauseous. The props, they could be very light, or heavy. But in the movie, the actors make them weigh differently. Is that life too? The very essential quality of life, in the hands of different actors . . . aren't we all actors, according to Shakespeare? In the hands of one of us or another, life can be beautiful, or ugly, or well-used, or wasted. But who is the judge? Am I going to puke again? Each of us has a different scale, determined by our own use of life.

- Put the peels in the food disposal.

Grind up your skins to scent the house. A kaleidoscope of judgments. This is why we must all live according to our own determinants, because who is right? Maybe one person, maybe none. 18. But there is no way to be sure; any lifestyle could work for anyone. You must please yourself.

What a ridiculous character! A man named Ruby. Funny how in movies, names of characters relate somehow to the innermost personality of the person. Real people aren't that way. Well, sometimes they are. Nicholas. But do they grow to become their names? If we didn't know our names until we were older, would we grow up

differently? Robin. No doubt. A dorky name sometimes creates a dorky child . . . others make fun, shape him into what he is not so they have an object to laugh at. Or maybe that's wrong. Incorrect. Life isn't like the movies, I know. But sometimes I expect it to be . . . throws many kinks into my relationships.

No, Sandra, every moment you see Mike will not be accompanied by a romantic string orchestra.

Not even a soundtrack. The soundtracks of our lives . . . the notion is silly. But wouldn't you enjoy it for a day? Coughing.

- In the bathroom, that's where he is.

That's the thing with these wishes, you have to qualify them. Always a genie lurking there, willing to grant a wish in exactly the way you didn't mean it. You want a car? Ok, your sister's dead. Have hers. Oranges in the garden, whole, like Easter eggs, hidden besides the rushes or whatever they are. On the other side of the path, peels. Before and after. Insane Easter bunny hiding oranges. What's inside? What treasure? Orange pulp, eaten by maggots. Would Rodin sculpt the rotten inside of a garden-left orange? I believe Picasso might paint it. Probably in blue. I show my ignorance of Picasso's work . . . squeezable grape jelly. Are we this lazy? Or is it truly a time-saver, a mess-preventer? Like the electric toothbrush my mom tells me actually helps get the plaque off.

- Are you sure it's not just another invention for the lazy American?

- Very funny.

Even though I scoff at things like that, I still use them. Hypocritical. I enjoy possessions, especially shiny new ones. I guess I'm a product of my environment. Americanconsumwhiteculturebuyrific. Myself, I am a product. Created to buy. Products consuming products. Shaped by Madison Ave. to need *things*. I hate it. I'd much rather live in Nature, naturally. Lie. Spider the size of a half-dollar in my sleeping bag. Tick behind my left knee, never seen—except the target. Crawling, tickling, frightening. No, I need my barrier. A window is the only thing between you and the world. We take that responsibility seriously. Andersen Windows. I don't want to be separated from the world, but yet it is necessary. Necessary? For my sanity. A creature, a product of my environment. My environment is not the environment at all. Anti-environment. Well, I get outdoors more than many. City girl, she called me. Can I help that I didn't grow up with the Connecticut State Forest across the street from my house? I don't want to be a city girl. I'm not. I

just don't like bugs. Where did my endeavoring get me? Maybe some approval. Definitely Lyme Disease. Knees never the same. Le-loo has a great point. What is worth saving? Love, Bruce Willis says. That's very good, worth saving. Rodin said love was nothing more than coupling; the rest is nice, but not pertinent. Coupling like sex? Or just pairing off? This seems very cynical of you, Augustus. It seems no person in love could ever say such a thing. Love isn't perfect, but it's one of the best things we've got. Again, my opinion. Others disagree. Wind blows yellow, earth green, water blue. Put down the match! Melodramatic fool. But then, it's not real life, is it? RED

- What's the use of saving life when you destroy it? I don't know love.

He loves the perfect woman; she is fragile. Even the perfect woman is fragile. What message is this? Do I misconstrue everything to make it sexist, or racist, or homophobic? 62 miles from impact. Could that be right?

- I find it hard to believe that it wouldn't be pulled into orbit at 62 miles.
- True.

Dark bark, pink blooms. Even rain in the spring is better; enlivens nature's palette. Sunlight. Would colors exist without light? No. What color are things in the dark? Are they colored? Not from the city. Green, like night-vision goggles. Swig the Canada Dry. Dry in a drink; how oxymoronic. Sharks scream?

- Everything lost is meant to be found.

How profound of you, Tombraider. Hopped-up Indiana Jones, if you ask me. Sex object. Not that Indy wasn't, I suppose. Ah, he was nicer looking. Adventures like that don't exist in real life, but we are taught to think stuff that exciting is possible.

- What is that?
- It's mine.

Obviously our heroine has a lesson to learn; no good person would say something like that! No hero would. Oh, to meet half the heroes from history. I'd bet most of them weren't nice at all. Yet, we envision them that way. Get off! Accomplishing good deeds does not mean you are a good person, or nice. How strange of us to think this way. Life isn't that easy, not black and white. No easy button. No abracadabra. I have too much homework. How did my socks get off?

Time for the Magic Show. *Silly little fairy.*

ALOHA ROAST

Burnt my tongue on an overeager sip
of complimentary coffee; played the sore
against tooth and cheek and gums
as I waited for you-who-never-arrived.

An hour later, the coffee's gone, and I abandon
the cup to the (your) empty seat.

CAPTAIN MACHETE ARMS



AARON GARLAND
WWW.BENCH-FIRE.COM

THE POSITION

Ablar didn't even pass his examination on testicles. I passed. I had the highest grade in the class. He didn't even know how the testicles cool off when they get too hot. Cremasteric reflex. He didn't even know that when one is cross sectioned, the testis looks a lot like an oven mitt. Yet he got picked to be the castration official. I think it's because he has tiny hands, very precise. But he didn't even know that by cutting the scrotum at just the right angle you can prevent the vas deferens from spitting blood and semen all over the place, saving the official from quite a mess. They teach those things to children these days. Yet Ablar still got the position over me.

Maybe it was because Ablar was first in his class for *Knifing Things That Probably Shouldn't Be Cut in the First Place*, but that was an easy class. Only jocks or people with tiny hands took that class. What really bothers me is that I didn't even get *Castration Assistant*. That was given to Recessas, who, even more so than Ablar, didn't deserve that position, or any position at all. She didn't pass her examination on testicles either, did mediocre at best on her *Mopping Up Bodily Fluids* final, and worst of all, she didn't even get a single point on the multiple choice *What Color Is This Quiz* quiz. If she can't even tell what color she was staring directly at, how is she supposed to distinguish between a suturing needle and a testicle clamp? Yet she still got the position over me.

Maybe it was because Recessas was first in her class for *Eating Things That Probably Shouldn't Be Ingested*, but that class was a joke. Only jocks and color blind people took that class. What really bothers me is that Anyat got the red namer position. I'd much rather have been red namer over a stupid old *Castration Assistant*. I used to dream of walking around pointing out things that are red. Look at that funny alcoholic on the bench, I'd say. His nose is red. Or look at that dog's erection. It is most clearly a vibrant shade of red. And all the possibilities of red. A vermilion fingernail, a crimson lipstick smudge, a cerise placenta. But I will not be placing tiny signs on these objects identifying that they are a variation of red. Anyat will, most unjustly, have that pleasure. He did horrifically on the *Attaching Tiny Objects With Even Tinier Pins* exam, while I placed them with the precision of

a seasoned castration official. His thumbs, far too big for his hands, always seemed to get in the way. He didn't even show up for the How to Point Things Out Using Only An Index Finger And A Loud Gasp seminar, which was orated by the late Foyo Orthen, who was shot by a criminal when Foyo caught him red handed. I found it to be most interesting and highly informative, my index finger now well conditioned and my gasps much more piercing. I surpassed him in every aspect, yet Anyat still got the position over me.

Maybe it was because Anyat was first in his class for Grasping Objects That Are Probably Illegal In Some States To Grasp, but that class was far too plebian. Only jocks and people who have abnormally large digits took that class. What really bothers me is that I didn't get to be the Snozzit wrangler. Marva, the needle-haired monster of a woman, got that position. I'd much rather be a Snozzit wrangler than point at dog erections all day. I can imagine it now. Chasing after Snozzits with a hand full of metal chains and a look on my face that says I'm better than you because I run after large green balls of fur with reckless abandon and the intent to beat them unmercifully. I'm well aware that the average Snozzit is round, about four feet in diameter, with great tufts of green hair covering the entirety of its body, including its genitalia. I'm well aware that, traveling on thirty short legs extending from all sides of it's body, the Snozzit will always be standing up, which is useful as the legs that are touching the ground rarely work in unison. And I, as I am credited for in the book "Let The Chains Do The Talking: The History of The Snozzit," found that, blind and full of luscious meat which can be pulled directly from the stomach without them putting up much of a fuss, the Snozzit makes the perfect beneficiary of the word "wrangling." Fantastic word. But Marva will be wrangling these terrifically incapable Tranglazoid, not me. She didn't do very well at all on her Beating Things which Had It Coming To Them final. I did exceptionally well, beating things that didn't even know they had it coming. Nor did she excel on her Baiting And Trapping The Blind exam. Yet she still got the position over me.

Maybe it was because Marva was first in her class at Swinging Objects Which Probably Shouldn't Be Swung In A Social Setting, but that class was cake. Only jocks and people who resemble porcupines took that class. What really bothered me was the fact that Sartsky got the pus farmer job. I have much worse skin than he does, and my pimples wield a much higher amount and quality of pus than his. He didn't

attend blemishing school, which is required, at least I thought it was, of all soon to be pus farmers. I did attend, and was the top student in both grease application theory and advanced sullying of the face. I can tell you right now that if you asked Sartsky to explain the relationship between the type of soil and the color of the body's pore excretions he would not be able to. And if you asked him to recite the pus farmer maxim, he wouldn't reply:

I, the pus farmer, will revel in others' filth so that I, the pus farmer, will be able to provide a quality product which will grease the drive train of your vehicle, allowing it to run so quietly that you can hear your dog shit in the back seat, which I will promptly use to repeat the process.

Yet he still got the position over me.

Maybe it's because Sartsky was first in his class at Fending Off Diseases Which Probably Shouldn't Be Brought Near People, but that class wasn't even worth showing up for. Only jocks and people with tiny pores took that class. What really bothers me is that Asglosh was picked to be the head of food chewing. I, more than anyone else that I have ever come across, value the importance of properly chewed food. If the food wasn't thoroughly chewed by another individual then the person actually ingesting the food would have to participate in an unnecessary jaw workout which could, potentially, lead to a bit tongue or improperly pronounced words. I won't even start to go into the damage that unchewed food would do to the digestive system. Ravished. Asglosh, I'm sure, is quite unfamiliar with the appropriate texture that morsels should be ground into, and without this knowledge it must be difficult to produce a quality paste. Even if he was familiar, his breath would make the food most unappealing to all but those who feed off manure. Pus farmers are a weird bunch anyway. I have taken numerous courses on the extraditing of fresh food paste from the mouth into a vast array of containers, my technique as sharp as the castration official's suturing needle. Asglosh has never eaten food in its whole form before, nor would he know what to do if presented with such pleasantries, yet he still got the position over me.

Maybe it was because Asglosh was first in his class at Not Swallowing Things That Desperately Want To Be Swallowed, but that class wasn't even in my curriculum. Only jocks and people with oral hygiene issues took that class. What really bothered me was that I didn't get the giant domesticator job. Zin, through an obvious fluke, was given that job. It

boggles my mind why anyone would give such a weighty profession to such a mindless automaton. It's a scientific fact that people over six feet tall have no control over their emotions and are cursed with limited brain development. These beasts are most clearly unfit for society and need to be dealt with accordingly. I'll admit that the occasional giant will make a good doorman, or perhaps a nice decoration. I keep one in my living room, giving life to a corner that was far too drab. But for the most part, without proper domestication, these creatures will end up as either a speed bump, or a windsock, or some other menial occupation. And Zin is in no way the appropriate administrator of domestic knowledge for these giants. After the castration, you must be very harsh with them, using the fiercest of operant conditioning methods. I've taken four lectures with the worlds leading giant trainer and author of *Why the Tall Ones Can't Even Read*, Tamblar Short, and have excelled in each, especially Advanced Kicking Of Behind The Knees. Zin has taken none of these classes, nor any others dealing with yelling from low places, kicking, or biting of the knees. He being five foot ten himself, I wonder if he is not somewhat affected by some genetic infliction. Yet he still got the position over me.

Maybe it's because Zin was the first in his class at Giving High Fives Which Are Far Too High Up To Give, but that class didn't make any sense. Only jocks and people with easily accessible ladders took that class. What really makes me happy is that I beat out everyone for the two most prestigious jobs that anyone can have. I am the Head of Whining About Other Peoples' Business and newly appointed Associate Professor of Arrogance. Everyone who walks by me shields their eyes from my brilliance, as without the proper ocular device I would look like a flaming sword sent down from above. I'd much rather be head of whining than some idiot Snozzit wrangler, or a red namer, or a lowly pus farmer. So, even though regulations forbid me from saying so, I really can't complain.

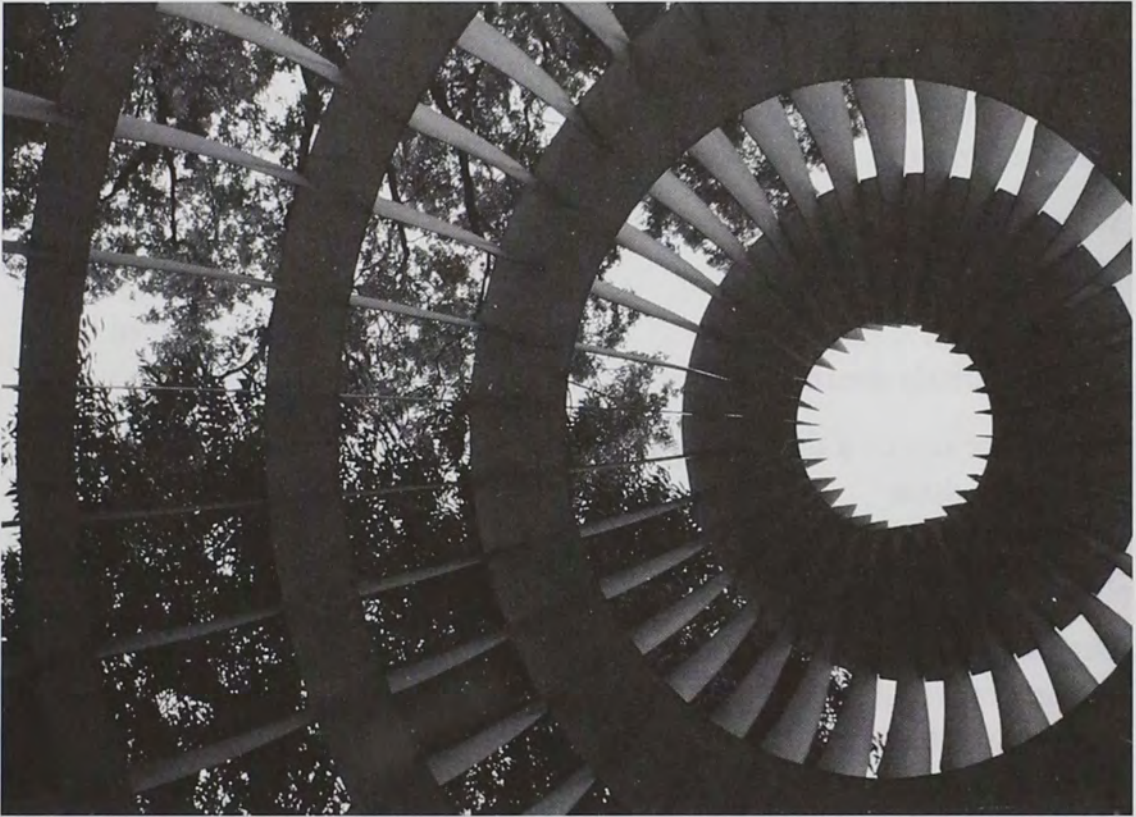
SUMMER

We fled like robbers on the wind
no heavier than dust;
an exposed whisper and
we kissed.

Someone will find us, you said,
hiding in the cupboard
and opening jars to taste
every preserve with a tentative tongue;
your lips smacked of summer and I laughed,
Let them come

all tangled in sin,
'what a sweet jam we're in'
and sung a strawberry song.

INTERNAL



LINES

(Written on the Occasion of Finding a Grey Hair the Day After Tomorrow)

When I dream
(And I rarely dream)
I dream of

Castles float high over the clouds,
And such castles need protection from
Words.

Since I dream
(Rare though it may be)
I am singularly dreaming of

Words are scarce a defense against
What I've done
(What you've done here...!)
So I'm caught in a

Dream, because last night
Being a rare night
I dreamt of something
Something of

A positively striking

Difference in emotion that I
Couldn't quite place.
It wasn't a pang of loss,
More a pang of lost

Potential has a way of
Spinning upwards until
The rubber band snaps and
It falls to

Earth was what I dreamed of
Hard and cold and solid
In all ways like

Words,
Which are hardly solid,
Are said to be able
To lift large structures
Spinning upwards to
Dreams, which have a pang of
Loss, which has a pang of
Earth, which has a pang of
Stoic solidity, which pangs of
Nothing in particular
Tried to stop the castle's fall,
Because it was today,
And tomorrow would bring

An understanding that
It was the morning crept
Quickly into my skin,
And I woke up groggily
With a head of auburn hair that
Glistened with sleep like

Dew on the castle walls
Was said to have broken them down
Far more than the condensation
Of clouds could

Dream of?
Well, it's difficult
Because I dream so

Rarely these days are
Lackluster baptisms which remind
Me that

I rarely ever dream.

FRAGMENTS OF AN ARTIST

She lay there splayed across the sheets; her head nestled in a bed of black curls wreathing her form like an encroaching darkness or tributary halo. She was perfection in her silence and her posture, beauty the likes of which no mortal man should possess the right to behold. Each slender limb spread and open, welcoming to those who might come upon her on that canvas of dirty, forgotten sheets. My black little angel, my sanctuary, my sculpture.

I am in many degrees an artist, though much of the aforementioned community would shun my work, pale in distaste and fear. But to be an artist you must be strikingly unique, original in ways that none else could conceive of before you begin your quest for immortality. My quest began some odd number of years ago, leaving a marked trail of pieces of the most unique quality in my wake: dingy hotel rooms, forgotten basements, the loft apartment. They who fear yet come in droves to witness the opulent, indulgent quality of the work I have laid before them; they whisper, they observe, captivated in their own morbid apparition; it speaks to them though they deny it, and I am a sensation read about the world around.

The most striking quality of my perfect subject was the lurid crimson liquid in stark contrast to the pallid flesh illuminated in the soft light of the moon. How could such a subject ever be resisted, such a flawless beauty forgotten or left unappreciated? I would immortalize her, as I had done all the others, in iridescent crimson glory, her soul painted across the walls and on display for all those who dared to see. Imperfect in life and now flawless, I had turned what was a useless life into the portrait of a tortured soul, agonizing but at last understood.

Only her silence accompanied my frenzied work, only her long dull eyes watched and recognized me for the tormented soul that I am. The motions must be quick lest the medium run dry. Her eyes watched her soul as it was spread across the once yellowing walls with their peeling paint. I was nearly finished with another one, the perfection of such a thing undeniable as the smears dripped, rolling down the wall in little streams that seemed to desire an escape. They joined one another, mingling, combining and creating a masterpiece within a masterpiece of garish crimson.

I stepped back to admire the completed version, this new art form. I was satisfied. It was time to leave her now, which was forever my least desired part of the process. But it must be done if I was to continue with my work. First to the bathroom, though, to wash free my body of my medium. Showering was the quickest phase in my procedure-- ritual if you will. Turning the nozzle of the shower I waited for the steam to waft around the room, providing the air that heavily-laden feel so that my lungs protested each breath I drew between lips which had not moved in hours. I stepped beneath the scalding spray, the temperature adjusted to scorch my flesh just enough to be painful but never do much damage. Now I watched another of my favored stages, the diluted crimson rivulets that circled the drain before being stolen away forever by the Hudson, and perhaps eventually the Atlantic. I envied those bodies of water, soaked in the crimson hue I wished to drown myself in. But I could not. And life moved on.

The shower only ever took a few moments, most of them spent gazing with unquenchable longing upon the diluted evidence of my work. I dried off with one of the hotel towels that had probably once been white and warm, but now was little more than a frayed scrap of cloth. The towel still wrapped around my waist, I retrieved the bleach from beneath the half rotted cabinet, spraying it with a reckless abandon along the shower's walls and floor; it killed the traces of my existence. I would remain a shadow so long as bleach remained on my side. Satisfied with the state of the bathroom, I dressed again in my black shirt and jeans. The shirt was a plain oxford, the buttons generally left only half done out of laziness rather than any egotistical need to show off the clean-shaven, pale flesh of my chest. The jeans were loose-fitting, so average that most people would never look twice.

I found myself inevitably drawn to the reflection of myself, staring back at me from a mirror cracked from some violent argument only remembered by the unspeaking walls. Strange azure eyes with an almost emerald hue radiating from around the pupil stared back at me, set within a slender--nearly gaunt--face of the palest skin imaginable. I had not seen the sun in weeks; that was no real surprise. It was the thin lips that startled me a bit; drawn into a tight smile that appeared almost pained. Were those my lips I was watching, was it really my face? Slender fingers, my fingers, reached first for the mirror, then paused, faltering for a moment before returning to my face, gently sliding along my own lips. Yes, that was my tight smile and those were my eyes that

told stories even I did not comprehend any longer. My hand moved on its own accord to slip through the silken tresses of ebony. *The warm scent of bread always clung to her hair as I pressed my face into it, somehow making everything seem safe again. She would take my small hand in hers while we walked home from the diner where she spent countless hours raising the money to care for me. I didn't understand then why she had to be away so long, or what made her tolerate the laughs of men that made me cringe. I only knew that at the end of each shift I walked home with her to our tiny apartment, dodging the rats in the hall and clinging to her hand. On some nights she would let me have coffee while I sat at the end of the counter, doing my homework and pretending I wasn't really there at all. That never worked well and the piercing laughter would be with me for years after it was all over. I used to pretend I couldn't hear their laughter, so that I wouldn't have to recognize them again when I heard it late into the night after my mother had sent me to bed.*

I needed a hair cut.

The austere logic had sliced through whatever strange alluring captivation my reflection held over me. I was free again to return to the location of my masterpiece. Pushing the bathroom door open, I found the room in the precise state in which I had left it, though the crimson work had dried in my time in the bathroom. Time that I had lost track of; nearly an hour had passed. My angel lay precisely where I left her; deep, vacant eyes continuing to peer at the mortal display of her own soul; the thick crimson lines along her face and arms making her all the more beautiful. Her own lips were full and with their light pink hue gave the distinctive impression of rosebuds, frozen forever in time.

I stepped a little closer, the desire to again fill my nostrils with the exquisite scent of rust and cheap perfume that now characterized the entirety of her existence in this forgotten place. My steps were slow and almost tired as I approached the side of the bed. There was no spirit left in that body; the soul watched me from the walls where I had placed it on display, wary of what I might do next. There was something askew. Her halo was positioned just a little off. Gently I sat beside her, trying to keep from disturbing any of the polluted canvas while my slender fingers—perfect for playing the piano I never had—reached out to right the few strands which now sullied her face. The hair coiled around my fingers, almost as though it were an untamed beast moving of its own volition. I couldn't help but draw the hair to my face, my nose, inhaling deeply of the stale scent of perfume. And then I released it, brushing it away from her face in the same instant. The hair was easily moved to the side, joining the rest of her blackened tribute. My eyes remained

inexplicably glued to the soft features of her face that, frozen now, seemed much more than human. There was no escaping her then, drawn in for a moment by my very own sculpture as though it sought to draw my warmth to revive itself.

As I watched her, my mind couldn't help but wander to a different time; a past which I had all but forgotten in my pursuit of eternity. And to another woman with black curls that framed her fragile, bird-like features. *We were walking home late one evening, the frost was heavy in the air but soon it would grow warm again as February gave way to March and the Spring came to save us all. There was a community garden on our way, or what passed for a community garden anyway. The land was always barren and wanted for someone with a green touch. But this night was different.*

"Look mummy," I cried with the delight only a child could display. She was tired, dark circles under her eyes, but she always obliged me. "The violets bloomed!"

My mother paused in her heavy footsteps, her green eyes turning tiredly toward what I was frantically pointing at. She smiled down at me, in that patient and somehow enthusiastic way of hers. "You know what these mean, don't you, Nicki?" she asked me, trying to seem mysterious but only succeeding in sounding like an excited child. I shook my head emphatically to tell her I hadn't the faintest idea what the violets meant.

She reached out and patted my head, almost as though indulging a dog. "It means my beautiful boy is going to grow up and get out of here. You'll be famous someday, Nicki, and bright like the violets. Aren't they so lovely?"

She was killed three months later by one of the men I pretended never to hear in the deepest hours of night, while I lay only feet away in the next room with my eyes squeezed tightly shut.

I walked away from her then, my black angel, and back to the night beyond and the world that would receive her soul. Stars were only vaguely visible through the cloud of pollutants that now masked the world from the gaze of the heavens. Sirens blazed in the distance, but they hadn't come to call for me; they were fighting off some small skirmish, or maybe they just wanted to go home. I didn't care. My art would not be found until the morning, and then I would read about it in all the papers, displayed for the entire world to see. Her soul would be theirs and mine; immortalized, as I had promised, in her crimson glory. Gently I slipped my hands into my pockets as I walked for the car, the unobserved silhouette. "Yes, mother, the violets are lovely tonight," I whispered into the frosted air before I climbed into the car. And they were.

INTERNALIZING

The ships – the sailboats, galleys, dinghies –
Are burning, sinking meteors in the grey tides.

Silver-gilled fish move slowly underneath
The drowning bits of cloth and wood.

I am the only fish who, fearful of the current,
Shies from the cool safety of the depths.

Alone amongst the breakers, I swallow hissing embers
Until I burn away, no longer sea-worthy.

WOODED STAIRS



SAN FRANCISCO

You wrote those songs into my hair
As it grew so long that year

With my San Francisco dreams dizzy on the skirt hems
While the waist was slowly tearing.

The memory of you is wholly mine,
Possessible now that the strings have been cut;
And these moments, newly subject to exaggeration,
Are more real now than at their occurrence.

I am fastened more into your arms
Than when we dared to touch.

ee cummings touches me differently now,
Just above the waist,
Just lightly enough to suppress the trouncing fear
Of other men's needs.

In thimbles of silence
Two thoughts:
Of your brown leather jacket still warm from loving shoulders
And that, at night, I still feel your thumb pressed into my breast
As you handle me like the next rung of a ladder.

PEACE

“Look up! Look up!” The effortless toss was picture perfect. The ball landed cleanly into John’s hands as he laid the ball up off the backboard. “Good pass, baby. Let’s go. We up nineteen to sixteen.”

The sun beamed down on the court from almost directly above. It was just past one o’clock, mid-July, and the intensity of this meaningless game was rising. But in reality, the game was meaningless to anyone except the ten guys out on the court. This was no season, no league, no money on the line. Just pride. As with all the games played on this court, pride was the goal of the participants. Since I have played on these courts for about thirteen years, my pride has always been on the line.

A quick crossover and a quicker release, I let the ball arc through the ever so slight breeze. It hit nothing but the bottom of the net for two points. “Nineteen to eighteen. Come on fellas, D up.”

“Good shot, Jay,” Mike yelled out to me as he ran back on defense. Mike’s been my best friend since kindergarten. He lives up the street from me so we have played on these courts thousands of times together. He is not the greatest basketball player I have ever played with, but I always pick him first. He passes me the ball and plays some good defense, so I would never pass up on him.

John was dribbling down the court when the trash talking started. “Game time, boys. ‘Bout to beat these bitches on they own court.” He looked over at Mike. “Stop hypin’ ya boy up, Mike. You know he’s garbage. Let’s go.” He passed the ball over to his one boy, Ray. I tried to stay as tight on John as I could while he didn’t have the ball. A two pointer and the game would be over. And I knew that that is exactly what he was going for. I followed him along the baseline. Next thing I knew, I was blindsided by a screen from some big oaf he brought with him to play.

Lying on my back, with stars circling my vision and my ears ringing from the big screen, I stared up at the net. I must have been down for a second or two because John had already released the ball. Shit. The shot was a little short, but a lucky bounce of the rim and it fell through the hoop.

“Game, bitch. Look at you lyin’ on the ground.” He looked at his boys. “Aight fellas, we out.” John and his boys gathered up their cell phones and keys off the bench and headed towards the street. I sat up but did not feel like standing. John glanced over at me right before walking through the fence opening. “Peace, Jay.”

“Peace, man,” I muffled. Still struggling from the hit, I slowly got up and walked over to the bench where the rest of my guys were already sitting. “Damn Pete, you couldn’t let me know about that screen? That shit killed. I hate losing, man. Especially to them.”

To know the extent of this little rivalry would sum up our entire lives. We lived in a small neighborhood known as Ardsley. There was a group of us that hung out together. There’s about fifteen of us that lived in the area, all within a grade or two of one another. We pretty much all grew up together and formed a pretty strong crew. The beginning of our little rivalry with the Roslyn kids began early. Probably around 3rd grade. Just like our crew in Ardsley, Roslyn had their own group of kids. We were all pretty much friends. We had gone to Roslyn Elementary School for seven years together and everyone knew everyone since it was not a huge school.

Boys are boys and we acted like it. Competition ruled our lives, and about 95% of our competitions involved some sport. As we evolved, so did our games. When we were younger we played stickball constantly. Every day after school we’d rush home, throw our backpacks on the table and head over to the tennis courts. It was always Ardsley vs. Roslyn. After stickball, we moved on to football. Imagine young teenage boys going at it in tackle football. Yeah, things got heated.

I never distanced myself from the guys, but around 8th grade, I began to devote a lot of my time to basketball. I played constantly. Living 100 yards from the courts, I was balling at every moment I could. As all the guys grew up, I’d look forward to days like these where we could get a classic rivalry game going. But these courts were the local hotspot, so I knew that although I wouldn’t get to play with my buddies like we used to, it was guaranteed that the courts would be full come nightfall. That’s when the best competition would show and the time when I would play my hardest.

Pete looked over at my other boy, Greg. “Yo man, let’s go smoke an L and get some Burger King. I’m starving.”

“Yea, that sounds good. I haven’t eaten yet.”

Greg got up and grabbed his keys. “I’ll drive.”

Pete got up and turned his head towards Mike and I. "Either of you trying to come?"

Mike got up and grabbed his phone. "Yea, I'm in. You coming, Jay?"

"Nah, I'm just gonna stick around and get some more shots up. I'll catch up with you guys later." I walked across to the other side of the court where the ball was. It must have rolled over here after John hit his last shot. I picked it up and turned around as the guys started to leave. "Peace guys," I half yelled across the court.

"Peace Jay." Mike was the only one to reply as the other two gave a little head nod. Greg put up his forefinger and middle finger motioning towards me.

I put up a countless number of shots. I practiced at game speed, trying to re-enact different scenarios that could occur in a game. I pictured myself wearing the jerseys that my future college owned. In just two months I would be a freshman, playing for a top basketball program on a scholarship. Yet the scene did not change. My visions always had me at these courts. The blue painted courts, the fiberglass backboards, the shredded nets from the thunderstorms, and the wooden benches were vividly a part of all my basketball visions. Kids imagine themselves hitting the game-winning shot in a packed stadium. I saw nothing more than these courts.

I got lost in my workout. If it weren't for the 50 Cent ringtone coming from the bench, I would never have realized it was already six. I jogged over to the bench, sweat dripping from my head. I picked up the phone and read 'Home' on the face of the cell. "Hey."

"Come on, Jay. It's six already. I told you we were having dinner at 5:00."

Before I could reply my mom had already hung up. I picked up my ball and ran as fast as I could to my house. My legs felt like jello from shooting for nearly two hours. I did my best to block out the pain by praising myself for the hard workout I just went through. My self esteem was always high after sweating my ass off on the courts.

I punched in the garage code and headed straight to the basement fridge. Ahh, nice cold Poland Spring. Nothing is better than coming in during a hot summer day and guzzling down a bottle of this liquid lifesaver. The basement refrigerator was full of this medicine so I yanked another one and sprinted up to the kitchen.

"Your dinner is in the microwave. You'll probably want to heat it up." My mom was already washing the dishes from dinner. "Who were you

over there with?"

"Just a bunch of the guys," I replied, "then I was just shooting around for a little." This small talk was routine. It became the norm for me to come in late for dinner. We didn't eat much as a family in the summer, usually just ordered food, but when we did I was almost always absent. It never was a big deal for my mom. She knew what I was doing and just let me do my thing.

The pork chops and rice sat in the microwave. Yup, it was cold alright. A good fifty seconds in there and it would be ready. After turning on the microwave, I grabbed the remote and switched on the kitchen TV. It was just after six which meant Sportscenter had just started. Change the channel, volume up a few notches, grab my dinner, and enjoy a nice peaceful dinner alone. Dinner alone was the best. I could do anything. Pay attention to the show, read one of the new magazines from today's mail, or just sit there and think about what's going on. It's not that I don't like my family; in fact that is not the case at all. I just enjoyed sitting alone and having time to myself.

Dinner was just OK tonight. I mean, no way am I going to complain to my mom about it, but pork chops aren't my favorite and they seemed as though they could have been cooked a little bit more. But it is what it is. I placed the dishes in the sink, gave them a quick rinse and ran up to my room. My shirt was still soaked from shooting around. The hamper in the hallway was already overflowing, so my second best option was the floor. Once I randomly selected one of my three drawers full of t-shirts, I yanked the one on top and threw it on. A quick stop in the shitter and I was ready to go.

My mom and dad were already sitting in their normal spots in the family room locked onto the TV. It must have been one of those CSI shows or something like that because they were focused. I passed right in front of the TV and headed back towards the garage. I did my best impression of Flash in an attempt not to distract them from whatever show it was they coveted. Hand on the door and I heard my mom, "Where you going Jay?"

"I'm just gonna go back across the street for a little. I'll call ya if I decide to go anywhere else."

"OK, but not too late right? You were out till almost three last night. I don't want to have to wake up and wonder whether or not you're in the house."

"Sure," I slammed the door behind me. Oops. I always forget about

that damn door. It has to be the loudest door this side of the Mississippi. I always feel so bad when I do that. My parents are sitting there, deep into their television program and then all of a sudden my dumb ass goes and bothers them. They were nice and quiet, enjoying their show. It has to be their favorite time of the day. My pop's a steamfitter and works all day. It's hard labor carrying around heavy pipes and materials. He leaves the house around six every morning and doesn't get in 'til about four. He comes in dead every day from working in the heat. Nothing can be more relaxing to him than sitting on our comfortable couch with a cold glass of Rosenberg's Iced Tea. My mom doesn't get all the fun and excitement my dad does by working all day in the sun since she is just a secretary at a local 'bed & breakfast.' But she does work the typical nine to five. She has always had back problems and I know the recliner we have has to be the most amazing device ever created for her. The way she extends the chair and leans to her left gives her this look that she is the most relaxed woman in the world. The two of them just sit there, most of the time there is little conversation, in their own state of relaxation.

My Uncle Denny was in the garage getting some things together to go work on his car. He's from Indiana and came out for the week to go over some financial things with my Dad. I grabbed my ball from the rack and started to head out.

"Yo, Jay. Where you headed?"

I turned and saw my Uncle still getting his things together. No eye contact was made. "Bout to go play some more ball across the street."

"Nice. You've been playing a lot. That's what I like to see. Any good competition over at those courts?"

"Yeah," I replied. "A bunch of the guys from Roslyn usually come by and we get some good games over there."

"Roslyn? Aren't those kids all black?"

"Um, yeah. I guess most of them are, yeah."

He was still working on something over at the workbench. He kept going. "So those guys must beat you all the time, huh? Back in my day, you know, when I used to live here, the Roslyn guys never came over here to play."

I did not know what to make of this conversation. But I answered regardless of his motive. "Nah, we hold our own."

He wouldn't stop. "Don't they got their own courts over in Roslyn? I could have sworn they did. Why do they got to come over here and

play?”

“Yeah, they got courts. They aren’t that great though. We like playing against each other.” In an attempt to end this questioning I told him I was in a hurry and quickly exited the garage. Hmm, that was kind of awkward. I couldn’t quite grasp the reasoning behind all that.

This time I chose to walk back to the courts. No need to run and waste any extra energy that I would surely need for a packed court tonight. The sun was fading fast behind the far trees of the park. You could look in one direction and see a gloomy orange spectrum of colors lighting a small portion of the sky. If you did a full turn you would see nothing. Half the sky was already dark as it neared eight o’clock.

I started to put up a few more shots when I saw a few kids coming from their cars. A few of them were regulars. Only one of the kids was white. He always played with his shirt tucked into his shorts. The others wore some baggy clothes. Never thought of it till now, but it must be tough running up and down the court having to pull up your shorts constantly. They come to the courts almost daily at night during the summer. They were decent guys whom I enjoyed playing with. As long as the games are competitive I don’t really care who you are. As they walked onto the court, I turned from the far net. “Yo, what’s up?”

The four of them all responded with a simple ‘yo’ and began to shoot around with the crappy rubber ball they always bring. As they ran around and threw up shot after shot I went and took a seat on one of the benches. A good ten to fifteen minutes must’ve gone by with me on the bench and before I knew it there must have been at least twelve guys shooting around. Sure enough, the courts were filling up.

“Yo, anyone trying to get a game going?” one of the guys shouted out. Without a single response, everyone flocked to his end of the court. A line was automatically formed and one by one we began to put up a shot. The first five to hit a shot were on one team and the next five would comprise the other team. After some bullshitting around, myself and four other black kids formed a team, the game began and we were running up and down the length of the court.

Game after game I was on the court. Not once did I take a game off. The rules of the court are that the winning team stays on and five new guys get next game. Even though I did lose a game, there were only four guys sitting out so I jumped on their team. It was a typical night at the park. The night was perfect. The weather was beautiful, just hot enough with little to no wind, and no more sun glaring down. I realized that

there were only two white kids out of the entire crowd. Me and the kid with the tucked in shorts. But I'm not complaining, I couldn't have asked for a better night. I must have played eight or nine games.

As the last game ended, I did my best to refuel my body at the water fountain and sat down on one of the benches. "Peace Jay." I looked to my left and saw the first four kids that came tonight heading out. I wonder if these kids look at me in a different perspective just because I'm white. I replied the same way and then picked up my phone. Two missed calls. Neither call seemed like it was important so I placed the phone back down and grabbed my ball. The last few kids peaced out and once again I was all alone. Thinking to myself, I wondered if they gave my game more respect because I wasn't black. I laughed out loud. Kind of felt good that a white boy could run these courts.

I put a few more shots up. My legs were shot at this point. I shot one more three pointer. It clanked off the rim and bounced all the way down the end of the court. It was getting late. I figured the lights would be going off any minute. I sat down in the middle of the court, legs sprawled out, leaning back on my arms. Thoughts and memories of good and even bad times on these courts raced through my head. I owe my life to these courts. If these courts did not exist, I may not be going to college next semester.

I could hear the crickets from all around the park chirping one by one. The sky was clear and every star was out. Everything was just so calm and quiet. 50 Cent once again was playing from over on the bench. Another missed call. Nothing could break me from the moment I was having. These were the best times of my life. Just sitting here, relaxing, thinking, enjoying the place I love the most. Peace.

NO BILLS



NUMB CANDLE

You can sit and drive
Steadily
For a great distance between low bleary houses
You desire that there will be showers in the morning
And thud forward, a waxy tower being gnawed,
Being chipped at steadily, laying there
As chipping birds caw
On your endlessly stretching shoulders
And a stomach that is brewing a low moving cloud

You had a great bow with which to split
A blue and red organic, red letter
From your red maw
As your muscles weary from weeks of steady sedentary neutral
Relaxation, try to flex themselves
And you try to carve the wax into the angled petrified tower
Of rank magnificence,
Whose scent is a sweet one
Wishing for the birds to bring forth the girl
The tempered one

You realized the great bow
Had splinters
Would shatter
Would create
Unnoticed breaks in the candle
(Candles) growing from those shoulders
That balance,
On one shoulder
A petrified muscle of exhaustion
And on the other shoulder,
The laugh of birds.

VAGABOND NIGHTS

The Journey to Nothingness

The resolution of misery hardened his face and likened him to a cold section of the wall. It was a great look for him, really. He closed his chewy jacket around him while he hoped that he would become part of the memories he was leaving behind. It didn't work; he didn't wonder or wish to know why. There was a vague fondness for the echoes that the boots left in the hallways for what would be the last time he saw the stained walls and lacquered wooden floors.

Alone was never the problem -- he was a vagabond, nothing more than a shadow that floats in the corner of the eye as one walks to get some ice cream or passes on the grind to work. As the metal hit the aching cement, he felt the pull of the road on his arms. What was not superfluous was decay in the ashtray of his chest, waiting to be choked up at the next rest stop, at the next tombstone village he would call home for a month or a year or two -- long enough, at least, to exhaust the inhabitants of his presence (however unknown) or to extinguish the entire supply of Marlboro Reds the town had to offer (which was much more quickly achieved than the former). It's safe to assume he never settled a crowded area. Contrarily, it's not safe to assume that the peoples of those middles-of-nowhere didn't like to smoke because they did.

His exhausted face did not try to defy any stereotype because he found that stereotypes were the medium through which a person discovered himself (hold the Eureka!). He thrust back his head and let billowing ribbons of air labor over the knotty curls.

It smelled of grey that morning; tendrils of fog still licked the green hills, which appeared unusually deep and rich. The chill clung to the tip of the nose, felt up the giggling windows and picked at the disparate leaves, which begged for one more day of photosynthetic retribution. The clouds smirked: the unmerciful bastards, and let the wind pluck them from their branches. He zipped himself into the leather and felt around in his back pocket for some change. His fingers slid over the cubic box that held three tastefully simple sticks of carcinogen, and found some immigrant quarters on their sojourn to the jukebox of the

free and the home of the overplayed. Unfortunately, they were thwarted. He saw the delicately greasy display of C-O-F-F-E-E on the specials menu and hopped into a seat behind the counter.

The kitchen door slipped open and a waiter with a sloping grin came out, pen ready and drooling.

“Slow morning?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. Can I help you with something?”

“Just a coffee, thanks. And could I bother you for some matches?”

“Box or book?”

“A book’ll work just fine.” Peering around the generic booth-littered building, he noticed the old photos, the cheap wicker baskets and other assorted little nothings. (As if he belonged somewhere) he knew that eventually teenagers, like star clusters, would filter in later that night and inevitably one would light up or order waffles. Travelers, weary, road-whipped would saunter in for something warm and familiar. It is true that a diner is not a singular entity; it is part of The Diner, an epic cultural monument that happens every mile or so.

There was a stringy figure rippling in the napkin holder and his book of matches materialized with a slip on the counter.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“Don’t worry about anything for now.” The coffee pot sloshed away, black and grimy. Half of a creamer gave the preferred consistency. He brought the dry cigarette to his mouth; felt the match hit the striker and smoky deliverance quivered happily in his lungs. At exhale, the carbon plumes sifted into the light, suspended in the translucent heaven of the poetic.

White Lies

It was snowing by noon. The pavement became drafty, moaning under the weight of the flakes that melted on contact with the salt. There are too many silent deaths. He turned to find a bed away from the mess of quiet.

Feathers

The turnstiles in his head churned in chaotic disjunction. A congealed tension clotted in the air, and his sprawled nature on the unreasonably comfortable down became stifled in reflection. Paws of sweat climbed

down his face and shat out a puddle in the dip of his collarbone. He feared that his own perspiration and breathing would throttle him as he went to fall asleep and decided that worrying about it would cause asphyxiation. The imprint his body left in the down made him look like an angel waiting to be dispatched by an impish god on a mission to demonstrate the vengeance of a candy-denied child. His halo twitched, perking up to catch the rhythms from the bar just below the room. The driving chords seized him. His body picked up the natural pound and the repressions in the back of his head fell out like jello as he rolled to his knees to begin jumping on the bed. He screamed into a pillow, but he didn't throw anything. No, throwing things would only vandalize his privacy. His hands tore and the fingernails gnawed until the whole room was an angelic massacre, soft unconscious goose remnants dancing on the currents of release.

Devil Juice

He wandered into the bar, sifted to the stage. Smothered in the blue lights, blood pulsing, he slid down. a pentatonic. An old black hobo with his bare wrangled foot gnarled its way around the stool while the other tapped out a tune and the acoustic banged out devil juice. He was sweating moonshine, muddy rivers curled down his face. His vocals strained so hard against themselves that the vibrations bounced terribly in the biological juke box.

*I ain't got no home, easy ridin' Miss Issippi,
I ain't got no home, easy ridin' Miss Issippi
Them old crossroads gone got me chained to nowhere.*

*Momma never gave me no name;
tell me I smile jus' like a child
Momma never gave me no name;
sold my soul, to play the spoonful game.*

*Had myself a honey dripper, taught me to watch and roam
Had myself a honey dripper, taught me to watch and roam
Asked me for my name, I done lost my baby to no one.*

Midnight train ramble like the moon

*shoot down by the barrelhouse
Midnight train ramble like the moon
heard the secret nothins croon.*

*Ain't got nothin' but this silly grin in my pocket
ain't got nothin' but this silly grin in my pocket
ain't got no pocket
ain't got no nothin'*

The song stuck on his clothes and tumbled into his head. It was time to go.

The elevator smelled of winos: an orgy of Sangria and dandelion piss.

“Ding,” (that’s “get the hell off” in elevator).

End.

PROTECTORS OF THE MOON



MOMENTS NO. 1

“I like it,”
As she simply put her
Obvious distaste for the bright blue
Pontiac that straddled the line of public
Decency.
An open sunroof and full tank of gas
Are cures for an idle mind.
The radio whispered “Moon Dance”
And I put my arm around you.
You huddled close and here
I learned passion.
Cool august air
Blew softly through
Each strand of auburn hair.
Warmed by nothing more than
A plaid fleece throw and each other
In the dew-licked grass of early morning,
You kissed my ear, then sighed, and
Fell asleep. No, *here* I learned.

TANKA

Trusting a Foreign Horse

Pressed in to tense
shifting shoulders, he slows. We
follow the rough path,
a rocky unfamiliar.
He shows me the orange tree.

Filthy

“Eliza, my dear!
Stop twirling so recklessly!”
calls out a mother
parked bottom on a park bench.
A dizzy girl skins her knees.

Au Pair

Her hands are to be
envied, coarse but strong. She
presses their trousers
without complaint and prepares
them cucumber sandwiches.

WAITING



EUPHEMISM

Cast aside, a love that never was
Meant to be, says she
You really must believe
Sugarplums grew sweet
And peach beneath the surface
Of sultry purple skins
Trace trails of juice runs
Down firm forearms
That wrestle with the blues
Summer, she's coming on strong

A long forgotten sense of the
Sensational that fall brings
Gravity felt deep in the pit of
Strong stomachs
Shaken, not stirred to satisfaction
It's best to bathe in seas of honesty
And lie out to dry in the sunshine
Gorgeous greens do abide
Soul-spinning, mind-dizzying
Circles, they turned together

And she thought not of the shadows
Moonshines that glowed bright
Highlight to flaws and follies
Of former lust-lives
Fortune is funny that way
Feeling for warm heart patches
Attraction's long lasting
She sighs goodbye
Black and white declaration
Of uptonogood—nothing

So it would seem she's found
Looking through curls and curves
Of streets she greets with grins
Depth perception reset
She respects the retrospect
Staring forward, straight headed
For the heat, he meets her
Feels the force, bless that boy, he reckons
And these teeth sink deep
Into the sweetest fruit of fall

RERUM CONCORDIA DISCORDS

*As we maintain the chaos, the fire becomes fuel
And our hearts are the engine.
We will flood this system with blood if we have to;
And we will rule the world
With cold retinas and firm beliefs.*
-Slipknot

Observation:
Selene is the catalyst.

Curious Pandora opens a box. There goes the Golden Age. Health conscious Eve eats an apple. So long Eden, on to greener pastures of dust. Helen, the hussy of Sparta, tramps away. A thousand ships pursue. A civilization burns. Polyamorous Guinevere drops the zero and gets with the hero.

Women are the classical catalyst of collapse. Everything's peachy until a woman's thrown in the mix. Then the center no longer holds, anarchy's loosed upon the world, shit hits the fan. Temptation. Tantalization. Confusion. Miscommunication. Dramatization.

Selene: the Romantic catalyst, the Femme Fatale, the White Queen.

La belle dame sans merci.

Everything would change because of Selene. We would reshape history in her name.

But we didn't know that. In retrospect, Selene was probably the final straw. She might be receiving too much credit. Lets antecede before we proceed. *Ab Ovo.*

End Observation.

Part II: Faire is spelled with an 'e' because that's good Middle English (apparently)

"Come one, come all! Come lords, come ladies, come princes and dear maidens. Come all ye, come! This way to the Mt. Olive Medieval Faire! Enter the 13th century world of, chivalry, valor, romance, and wonder! Come! Come! Join His Majesty King Richard 'The

Lionhearted' and the royal court for a day of Shakespearian drama, knightly conquests, and all the splendor of medieval life! Come!"

Yellowbirds beeping in reverse, Barbie Excursions laying on horns, soccer-mom caravans racing for parking; the early bird pilgrimage clouds the parking lot with gravel and dust like the Thunderdome. A line of histrionically garbed high-school teachers encircle a ticket booth screaming simultaneously and pointing to individual brochures. Their students stand twenty yards away doing their best teen angst charades. Rebellious Jim; restless Frank; too-cool for school Juanita; this-is-like-sooo seventh grade Tammy.

Resplendently sheik in his hermetic velvet breaches and a creamy cyan beret, Donny the herald foxtrots through the amassing mob. Chest hair Fred Astaires, cologne scented sweat pirouettes, luring while competing with the reversing repeats. Donny is enticement, a soapbox history-dealer with the frills that thrill.

Incarnations of impatience and car-ride restlessness pour from the dust devil. Mothers rein in children with jerks on child harnesses. Screams shake strollers. Entire processions come to halt when a ringleader drops their extra large latte. Uniformed grade-schoolers celebrate like prison escapees in penny loafers. Yugi-oh Igloos unlatch in the frenzy, Starbucks runs like the Styx, double stuffed Oreos are double crushed. Screaming, crying, laughing, squealing, whining, threatening, smacking, ringing, rebelling, translating, salivating brace-face talking; the *Vox Populi* discordantly funnels through turnstiles.

The 13th century is now in surround sound.

On the entranceway above the turnstiles recently spray-painted graffiti reads: "*Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate!*"

Wincing as he touches the indigo bruise on his forehead, "Dude this is so Ellis Island."

"Yeah," I nod and spit a little more blood.

Observation: Mt Olive Medieval Faire is located in upstate New York. The former Seneca burial grounds are the lucrative habitué of reenactment fanatics, Dungeons and Dragons fundamentalists, history buffs, weekend warriors, and an annual fresh crop of interns. Rabbit and I are two of those interns. We're history majors who receive college credit for sacrificing two months of our summer to jot observations about the accuracies and occurrences within medieval reenactment. Here we're 13th century janitor services, men at arms to the black knight, and reaping all the benefits of feudal serfdom. End

Observation.

“Richard ‘The Lionhearted’ died in 1099,” Rabbit says waving his ink stained fingers in condemnation at the over-excited hordes, “That’s bad history. Shakespeare lived in the 17th century. I guess the experts who organize this shit show failed to notice those little details.” Rabbit is 5’5”. He has Napoleon Syndrome and a crypto-obsession with random historical facts.

“Teachers should face a firing squad for bringing students here.”

“Yeah,” I nod.

His wide shoulders and incendiary disposition make him seem the pugilist, yet in his back pocket are a ballpoint and a journal.

“Half the class gets food poisoning from the meat shanks.”

“No... I know,” I nod and tongue a loose tooth.

Rabbit can mingle at a cocktail party or a kegger, and with equivalent efficiency be kicked out of either.

“The other half waste allowances on shit that breaks before they get home, or on posters of Luc and Donny and all the other scumbags who parade around this place.”

“Yeah, dude,” I nod while prodding at new bruises, “it’s hermit crab type shit.”

He’s protean; in a moment, his jaw may be running or his fists might be flying.

“You know they all go home believing this is how history really went down.”

“Yeah... Absolutely, teachers should be shot. I... Oh shit, there she is,” I divert Rabbits admonishing, “that cutie who almost got us in a fight at the bar last night. Shit, I can’t remember her name.”

“When were we fighting?”

“Rabbit, what’s her name?”

He follows my gaze to the young woman twenty yards away. Sable hair, regally unhurried pace, her lissome gait is sensually serpentine. Her gown is white, like snow seen under a full moon.

“Fuck should I know,” Rabbit responds, “You left with her.”

This is chivalry; Shakespearian drama; rescuing the damsel in distress.

“Hey guys.” Glossed lips faintly smile as she reaches us. “How’s the housekeeping coming?” Her grey eyes probe. *You remember me, don’t you?* She is an optical Inquisition.

Rogue strands of her stormy petrel hair partially conceal her gaze.

This is the distressing situation of seeing the damsel again.

“What’s up,” Rabbit extends his hand, “I don’t think we met, I’m Roger.”

She smiles.

Part I: (the preceding evening)

“I’m Selene. Aren’t you one of the guys who painted above the archway?”

Bottles clink. Flaking wooden crossbeams spread across the ceiling, chandeliers of wax hang overhead. There’s a candlelit luminescence of flickering shadows; everyone is partially shrouded, nothing is fully perceptible.

“This your first time at the Holy Grail?” Selene asks, eyes staring.

“I usually go to the Divining Rod,” I respond, dragging at my cigarette so I don’t stare, “Better specials.”

Splintering stools surround the octagonal bar in the middle. Spilled drinks flow around pewter flagons and shot-glasses emblazoned with the Mt. Olive coat of arms. The remaining space is dominated by two massive tables; rectangular and circular; two points of view.

“I never made it to the Divining Rod,” Selene smiles, “My friend Ariel... she works the Drench-A-Wench, she heard it was dive. But I’ve seen you around.”

“I know Ariel. You girls should come check it out sometime,” I say glancing around, “it is a total dive, but also more chilled out.”

The banqueting table is two steps higher than the rest of the bar. It’s draped with a wine stained cerement. Individual thrones parade along the sides. Philistines refusing to relinquish their garb gulp bottom shelf champagnes from chalices; they nibble on food stamp finger foods; Donny tells yarns and they have a chuckle.

It’s King Arthur gone kitsch.

Observation: The brochure claims to have the crème de la crème of acting professionals. The brochure is blatantly lying. The characters working the Faire are all drama drop-outs. They’re the choir members in musicals. End Observation.

On the opposite wall, temps turned serfs lounge around a circular table the size of a Redwood stump. The wood is scarred from quarters; empty pitchers and saturated cards clutter the surface.

Above the round table hangs a sword twice the size of a person. The plaque beneath reads: Exkalibor.

“So are you a regular or just passing through?”

“Intern,” she responds automatically, “just passing through.” Eyes smile.

“Yeah, I feel you,” I commiserate, “how about I get you a drink, one intern to another, help you dull the pain.”

“I’d like that,” she smiles. *I’ll give you a shot*, she stares.

“What? What is thou intentions knave?” The voice reverberates around the bar as a throne trepans off the floor. Shot glasses suspend half way between the toast and the mouth.

“Dost thou intend to do away with mine wench? Dost thou seek to overstep thine’s glorification in mine savior’s eyes? You lowly pauper, you unqualified slave!”

The crowd parts. Untouchables are shoved aside. Selene is mortified. Rabbit is funneling mead at the back table with Patty the bishop, completely oblivious.

John Two Rivers is tossed aside while he waits for his firewater. His ancestors were Seneca tribesmen whose graves the faire ground is now built upon. He’s been a squire for the last decade.

The tempest is before me, a hybrid butchering of Middle English, Old English, and Elizabethan dialects. He’s wearing lavender, oleander, mollusk, and aqua-marine: the color scheme for his majesty’s royal court.

He’s the court champion. Dolled up for the roller-disco. Ready for 1986. His mullet radiates like afro sheen. His lower lip is bull-frogged, specks of tobacco fiberglass run from his lip into his pointed goatee.

This is the medieval career-move. This is owning a trailer palace in tornado alley but preferring to pomp about a pavilion dressed in four shades of obnoxious.

Enter Luc.

“Step away from mine wench, peasant, or feel righteous penance. You are unworthy to bestow gracious gifts to so wondrous a beauty, to so elegant a swan, to so... pretty a...pretty a...”

I hand Selene her shot glass before facing the champ. I blow smoke into his majesties face.

Selene intertwines our arms with fleeting acknowledgement to his royal champion, “Luc, get a life.”

Il gran rifiuto.

Tobacco spittle runs down the oleander chevron, hides in the mollusk coat de arms. The pauper won out over the prince, and the prince is disbelieving. The prince is infuriated.

“Beware tomorrow, lowly coward. I will smite thee on the field of tacticians. Beware pawn! This affront will not go unanswered!”

Selene smiles, her eyes smile.

“That dude’s ridiculous,” I smile back, “who wears their costume and speaks...”

Arms intertwined, out the door.

Rabbit’s funneling mead, completely oblivious.

Part III: Shit Shtick

One of the merchant carts weaves around us. Head down, the peddler tries to avoid fragmented cobblestones and grass varicose veins. The hollow rattle of posters in the carts wake sound like bamboo wood chimes.

Like courtesan gentlemen, we walk Selene to A Scent of Icarus, the candle makers.

The drum-roll of wooden wheels on uneven cobblestones is a momentary reveille. It signals the beginning of a new day.

It signals the repeat of every other day.

9am: Opening

9am-10am: Appear historically accurate while sweeping streets and shoveling shit in the petting zoo. Hot box the stables with John Two Rivers; he runs the petting zoo.

10am-11:30am: MTPs at Luc’s Archery Range. ‘Moving Target Practice’ (MTP) is reserved for interns. Luc teaches worshipful adolescents how to hit a target at thirty five yards with a rubber blunted arrow -- moving targets. Rabbit and I are the targets. We wear scarlet bullseyes on minimal padding. We’re lettered with scarlet bruises. Luc fires without warning or when we’re not paying attention. He always hits. He always looks good.

11:30am-12pm: Lunch. The choices are Auto-de-Feta, the salad bar; numerous vendors dealing shanks of meat; meat pastries from Titus’s; candy from Cloye’s Crusading Treats.

12pm-12:45: Grease the gears of the Children’s Crusade (carousel).

12:45pm-1:45pm: Numb ourselves with drinks at the Divining Rod before dressing the black knight in his battle gear for the chess match.

1:45pm-2:00pm: Dress in chess uniforms.

2pm-3pm: Human Chess Match.

3pm-4pm: MTPs at Luc's Archery Range, again.

4pm-5:30pm: Bench warming for Royal Joust, back-up pages and squires, 8th man on jousting crew.

5:30pm-7pm: Sweep streets, again. Clean animal shit, again.

7pm: Close.

Part V: Becoming the Black Knight by way of procuring the sword from the stoned

Rabbit and I slip into the Black Knight's tent. He was summoned for the Human Chess match. Entrance drapes crack like a whip. The conical lean-to shudders as a strong breeze resonates off appliquéd walls.

"He's dead."

"Rabbit, he's not dead. He's breathing."

"Try shaking him again."

The senescent cavalier doesn't flinch. He's comatose. Monolithic. The miniscule slit of his eyes reveals the bloodshot spider-webs covering his whites.

Ghosting up, I glance back at Rabbit. "So you think the royal champ's still bitter?"

"Who knows. Luc holds grudges like a teenage girl." Rabbit fidgets with a sable gauntlet. "Remember the time he snapped because we didn't show enough excitement for his victory in the joust..."

Floating over the antediluvian swordsman, I see drool running like a faucet. He is statuesque; he's a gargoyle.

"...Or when we got overtime trash duties 'cause his armor was buffed counter-clockwise and not clockwise."

I try taking the blade from his petrified grasp. A bottle of pain killers falls onto the grizzly bear carcass.

Even stoned, his right hand refuses to release. He has old man strength; wide hands; eternally imbedded calluses. He is far from obsolete. He's a rock.

The sheath is stiff, antiquated black leather.

Veins stand out along my right arm as I try to take the sword from the stoned old man. His body slumps with surrender and the sheathed sword hovers before me.

Damascened perfection flows like water from the sheath. Diffracted light reveals a complexity of undulating designs endlessly coursing along its evenfall lethality.

This was Tizona, Excalibur, a Hattori Hanzo sword.

Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

Observation: Black knights never flaunted their heraldic symbols. Knights involved in ignominious dealings darkened their insignia so as not to be recognized. Black Knights had no lords, nor ties of loyalty.

The Black Knight is a stygian figure, never eulogized, never receiving a funeral procession. He is beyond the pale. He leads a bubonic lifestyle. He is forsaken. He is invincible.

Every messiah needs a pariah. Judas defined Jesus.

What's a hero sans a villain? Extinct.

Our anti-hero defines the moral paradigm.

He remains nameless.

Song unsung.

End Observation.

Part IV: The Tale of Two

Two months. Two weeks I spent being an insomniac. Two hours since the sword came free from that stoned old man. Two armies. Two kings. Two maidens. Two knights. Two ends. Two on a battlefield. Two tacticians. Two gauntlets fit snugly. Two inches on the vet, twenty five pounds lighter, and the suit of mail lashed securely. Two thousand gate-crashers broke in waves upon our village. Two PM.

Today.

To Arms.

Part VI: Chaos theory: A Cain complex vis a vis a God Complex

*"As Hector is stretched upon the plain,
Who feared no vengeance Patroclus slain;
Then Prince! You should have feared, what now you feel;
Achilles absent was Achilles still:
Yet a short space the avenger stayed,
Then low in the dust thy strength and glory laid."*

The ground of contention is checkered. Bleachers for spectators sit

on either side. One holds the visiting masses; the other the Royal court along with the two individuals who command the movements of the pieces. Today's generals were chosen from a raffle of visitors. They're both freshmen in high school.

Observation: In chess, pawns parallel serfs or foot soldiers. They may go forward, but never back. There is victory or death. *Furcam et Flagellum*.

During battle, cavalry would attack in flanking maneuvers, thus their simulacrum, our knight can move in L movements.

Before the priestly image, bishops were represented as ships. They move on an angle because that's how ships catch the wind. This changed because bishops' conical hats closely resembled sails.

Original rooks were elephants because ancient armies utilized elephants with towers on their backs. They were devastating once they gained momentum, but they couldn't change directions swiftly. Our miniature castles eventually replaced those elephant figurines on chess boards. End Observation.

An order shrills from a megaphone; a white pawn shuffles two spaces. A second follows; a black pawn flat foots two spaces. And another white; another black. The goose-stepping gambits are unnoticed by the packed crowd. They're not here for the JV players.

I'm usually a black pawn. It mirrors my rank in the Medieval reenactment society. Interns are always pawns; always the serfs and slaves, custodians and cleaning crews. We have less value than the horses giving animal rides.

Rabbit has been a black bishop since day 1. Organizers laugh at the irony of his short stature wielding power, so they ensured that the underdog was undersized.

Apparently, Napoleon never existed. Apparently faire organizers struggle with history.

A young tactician strains to sound authoritative while ordering a black bishop. His voice cracks, he's screaming in alto through an overly decorative megaphone. The spectators are on their feet. Cell phones flip shut, children forget about their ravenous hunger for another corn dog. The back row is moving, franchise players get in the mix. The bleachers get progressively louder as voices strain to be heard over straining voices.

The white queen glides four spaces like a swan. The *rara avis*. Selene.

A symphony of masculinity rains from the nosebleed section.

John Two Rivers shuffles forward. The Seneca stable hand, the black pawn.

Silence.

A cheer erupts as a white knight is commanded to do an automated flag pattern. Three up. Two right. A somnambulist shuffle.

The alabaster piece arches and descends upon John Two Rivers. The doomed man rotates slowly, Volta Face. His pike never wavers. He stands at attention. He awaits the approaching hangman.

He won't defend himself. That wouldn't be an accurate portrayal of a Chess Match. He'll stand true, and receive his mock beating.

That's how Human Chess unfolds: never move quickly, dramatize the sword blows, feign a gruesome demise, shake off the dirt and get back to work. How it unfolds.

Vae Victis.

The white knight brings his blade in a shining arc. The air resounds in a metal percussion. The black pawn crumbles to accompanying applause. The stands are on their feet. The black pawn does not rise.

Choreographed step routines of mounted sideline knights hail the gallery hit.

Luc has taken up the gauntlet. He has initiated his vengeance. Beneath him his victim twitches, eyes fluttering beneath their lids, wetting himself. Luc stands tall in pharisaic euphoria.

Chivalrous cheerleaders prance in salute of his glory, manes waving, spirit strips dancing, ignorant. Bloodthirsty cheers are atmospheric, ignorant.

The two armies are transfixed, ignorant.

A megaphone squeals commands in alto, ignorant. Jesters tumble about, ignorant. The stands resound with applause, ignorant.

The two armies are transfixed. Ignorance dissipates. Everything unravels.

Selene stares at the twitching body of John Two Rivers. Luc turns towards her, lionized by the crowds, avatar of chivalry.

Fury rises, a berserker's rage, my vision tremors, *Ichor* courses through my veins.

The stands wane. Silence waxes.

The megaphone sounds off. No one listens.

It will have blood they say; blood will have blood.

This is a curtain raiser. This is a call to arms.

It's on now.

Like the choreographed dance routines of the sideline knights, like a well rehearsed Shakespearian drama, with the certainty of thunder following lightning, the two armies charge simultaneously. Regulars adorned in white lies. Interns blackened and begrimed.

The two armies charge in unison.

Order. Chaos. *Rerum concordia discors.*

Magnus, a black rook, arches out of square, swooping back in to blindsides Simon a white knight.

Patty the black bishop fends off the ecclesiastical bludgeoning of Paul and Zeke, two thespian bishops.

The stands are muted. The pre-pubescent mediators sob powerlessly in shock. The dancing knights have forgotten their routine, their war-horses graze on acrylic grass. The royal court issues arbitrary commands, unheralded by the ensuing ferocity below.

I shortcut across the field: headlong, headstrong. Blood streams across my midnight cuirass as Rabbit shatters the jaw of Niedermeyer, a white rook. I steamroll a white pawn headfirst, crushingly indenting his visor with the crest of my helmet.

The white body creates a channel across the marred checkers. I have defiled the undefiled without losing a step. I have one purpose. One bulls eye. One target. One victim.

Behind me, Rabbit pivots away from Donny's effeminate assault. Ceaselessly rotating around the clock he hamstring the herald, bringing him to his knees. The blur of his staff continues before crushing his clavicle.

Ahead Luc lunges for the wasp-waisted queen. Silkily escaping his grasp, Selene breaks away from the white knight. Surrounded by mayhem, she can't escape. She's cut off when a black pawn clotheslines a white and the air mists with blood and sweat.

Turning again, she's face to face with Luc.

"Ah my lilac, my turtledove, my muse, why dost though struggle? Yon lays thous't peasant, felled by one more worthy than he. I am thy savior and thou art mine wench. Appeal does it not to be the courtesan of the greatest hero in all the land?"

Damascened perfection flows like blood out of the sable scabbard.

I stand face to face with the white champion; throwing my helmet at his feet. My vision no longer tremors; my fury is harnessed.

I don't see a face. All I see is vengeance.

“Tis you! Thou art a craven coward young fool. Thou hast presumed tw’ould be possible to conceal thyself behind shadowed arms? I thinkest not, for I shall spite thee anon.”

I smile.

With a dramatic thrust Luc continues to play his part. His certainty is his downfall. His sword carries his body; he’s aiming to impale. He moves with dramatic intent, like an astronaut running on the moon.

Flowing into his show stopping blow, I deliver the curtain call. Gauntlet and pommel haymaker into the larynx exposed beneath his helmet. He collapses in a gurgle. Skoal trickles to the earth. I stand over his fallen grace.

The tide of darkness finishes mopping up the oleander army. It’s a crusading Cinderella story. The Medieval Faire is mayhem. This was the closest visitors have come to witnessing historical accuracy. Hundreds run for the exits. Richard the Lionhearted is vomiting over the royal platform.

The bishop Rabbit drinks Wild Turkey from his communal decanter. “Blessed Sacrament.”

Luc gurgles. Tears stigmatize his surcoat, permeating the purity with tobacco dribble, John’s urine, and blood churned dirt.

Selene stands on the other side of the bastardized countenance. Her opalescent dress is still queenly, still unmarred. We rewrote history in her name. Because of her we declared our war. The Apocalypse, *Ragnarok*, Hell broke loose; because of her.

We followed her in this *Danse Macabre*.

Crows feet clenched; her eyes dance.

Lips upturned; her eyes smile.

Selene the catalyst.

I smile.

Endnotes/ Translations:

Pg. 94: John Keats; *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* --The beautiful lady without mercy.

Pg. 94: Ab Ovo -- “From the Egg,” i.e. from the beginning.

Pg. 95: *Vox Populi* -- “Voice of the People.”

Pg. 95: Dante, *The Inferno* -- "Abandon all hope, you who enter!"

Pg. 98: Dante, *The Inferno* -- "The great refusal."

Pg. 101: Horace -- "Seize the day, leave as little as possible to tomorrow."

Pg. 101: Homer; *Illiad*.

Pg. 102: "Gallows and Whip," in reference to lowest member of medieval society.

Pg. 102: *Rara Avis* -- A rare bird

Pg. 103: Livy -- "Woe to the conquered."

Pg. 103: *Ichor* -- {Greek} Ichor was believed to be the blood of the gods.

Pg. 103: Shakespeare; *Macbeth*.

Pg. 104: Horace -- "The concord of things through discord."

Pg. 105: *Ragnarok* -- Norse apocalypse.

Pg. 105: *La Danse Macabre* -- The Dance of Death.

CONTRIBUTORS

Hunter Augeri does not want to be called “bro” anymore. He has his own family and is not looking to expand right now.

Trick Barrett is a freshman at Ursinus, and likes to call himself a "freelance writer," even though, he technically no longer is. He has won one award for his writing and doesn't like to brag about it so, no you can't know what it is. If you *really* want to know what award it was that he won, you can find it somewhere on here www.pantomyme.com.

Stephanie Bartusis sleeps a lot. When she's not sleeping, she's probably somewhere eating or teasing things smaller than her, which, in this case, is only rodents. Scratching is a pastime as well as picking split ends and writing, maybe. She is also a commaphile.

Andy Brienza recently had to scrub sundry crusts and a bit of Gak out of his camera because of a recent unfortunate dipping bird chemical spill, so he is very glad that it was all worth it in the end. He enjoys the E harmonic minor scale, shirts and skins, and Gumby.

Sara Jean Campbell is but a vain and doubtful good; A shining gloss that vadeth suddenly; A flower... that DIES -when first it 'gins to bud; A brittle glass that 's broken presently. Conversely, she is not an English major (despite rumors to the contrary). In fact, she thinks most English majors are silly.

Brett Celinski is just swell!

Jason Comcowich is a hopeless insomniac in denial of his insomniachood... it's a long story. He frequently rants about goblins, integrity, and the cataclysm while dreaming of a world in which people's lives are actually, truly, dearly, and hopelessly of value to them... It's a lot of dreaming... long story.

Laura Cruz is busy saving the world.

Chris Curley dedicates his work to innocence and naughtiness.

Tracey Coretta Ferdinand is “doing very well.”

Brittany Fernandez is 19 and was born and raised in Tampa, Florida. Upon her first visit to Pennsylvania, she knew she wanted to live there and transferred to Ursinus to graduate '08.

Aaron Garland aka Starfork, started his career as a herald for Galactus, devourer of worlds. After an unfortunate falling out with the infinitely powerful ravager of planets, Aaron turned his attention to drawing. He works with Avinash Vaidya, utilizing the *power cosmic* for their website, www.benchfire.com, complete with comic book madness and other assorted artworks.

Sam Greenfield is droppin' science on a daily basis.

Ashley Higgins is the month of February, burning into the blackness of the spring.

Georgia Julius swears she way more than half believes it when she says that somewhere love and justice shine.

Liora Kuttler is currently creating a plan for the rest of her life. So far, she has yet to plan farther than “wake up” and “eat something.”

Kerri Landis enjoys random junk emails, although she does press the magic key *DELETE.* She also knows that evil should be afraid of these twin hellfire cannons!

Peter Lipsi is a freshman who misses his mom's cooking. He thinks about it every day.

Ivy McDaniels cries so often not because of what she's lost, but because of all she's found.

India McGhee is a ninja-pirate and skilled moose whisperer from ye olde Switzerland, traditional home of the majestic moose. Appointments for random pillaging and moose consultations are gladly accepted. She lays claim to no useful knowledge about the Swiss or their moose population.

Caroline Meiers is still looking for her place in the universe, somewhere between the magic of *Harry Potter* and the need for a steady

job.

Jen Mingoello is a silly junior who likes lime popsicles, making soup, and Canadian sketch comedy.

Serena Mithbaokar likes total randomness in thought. This mess of thinking is her Bo tree. She likes to calculate the odds of her getting violently happy, traveling to Iceland, having a lucid dream and watching her favorite band live. And yeah – she’s from Bombay!

Ian O’Neill is a vice.

Mark D. Peacock is a super senior with a bio major, latin minor, and a love of photography. Photography is his way of capturing simple moments of balance.

Erin Rafferty is nineteen. Creative writing has been a passion of hers since second grade when she pretended to publish stories. If you want to know anything else you’ll have to find her and ask; she doesn’t bite, she swears.

Phil Repko started an underground fight club in Wismer Lower. His J-Board hearing is next Wednesday.

Tommy “The G!” Richter is a monad. He is composed entirely of immaterial things, yet he is surprisingly corporeal. Everything he perceives is actually internal to him, and the universe was just conveniently set up so that external things happen in exact tandem with his meandering perceptions and appetites.

Pat Roesle is a bad, bad DJ. This is why he walks and talks this way.

Christopher Schaeffer is desperately jealous of the fatwa on Salman Rushdie, and would be very flattered and grateful if anyone out there would like to declare death upon his infidel head.

Kirsten Schuck is known to her friends as Cocco and enjoys cooking and eating Italian food when it is accompanied by Italian wine and legendary times. She also loves the combination of science and writing, and never turns down an opportunity to watch “Will and Grace,” especially when it’s with Karen. Occasionally she takes on the role of

personal penguin, and sings the song. She would like to thank the love of her life for help writing this. Gough!

Dan Sergeant hates freedom and LOVES CAPS LOCK. He will never forget Reservation #11356.

Nick Shattuck is a junior at Ursinus and is holdin' it down for the Men's Basketball Team. You can holla at him at Maples 201. Nick Nice.

Bradley Smith aspires to one day be king of the ants, or at least some sort of duke of the ants.

Dayna Stein has a predilection for brobdingnagian words, and likes to oddly insert them into conversation. She also thinks that "phantasmagoric" is the best word ever. Approach with caution: she is often prone to making snarky comments.

Trevor Strunk is a Senior English major who thinks he is *so big*, but he's not, and one day he'll get his.

Avinash Vaidya danced his way onto Broadway with nothing but a pair of tapping shoes and a little old lady he called "Auntie May." However, when Auntie May expired in his chest pocket during the finale of "42nd Street" he quit the dancing business for good and decided to try his hand at drawing comic books. He works in collaboration with Aaron Garland, their website is www.benchfire.com.

Marjorie Vujnovich likes run-on sentences and fragments, although this one turned out to be neither. ...Eff.

Joe Wasserkrug was born in Columbia, MD in 1985. Shortly after birth, he convinced his parents to stop having children because of his delinquent nature. He lived a life of mediocrity until realizing he was one of the three smartest people alive. Currently, he lives in seclusion in his cave in Collegeville, PA.

Tori Wynne is genuinely disturbed that the liquor store employees insist on calling her "Kiddo." She thinks that there is something innately wrong with peddling Jack Daniels to a Kiddo. Isn't there???

PATRONS

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Ursinus College Literary Magazine
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