



Spring 2010

## The Lantern, 2009-2010

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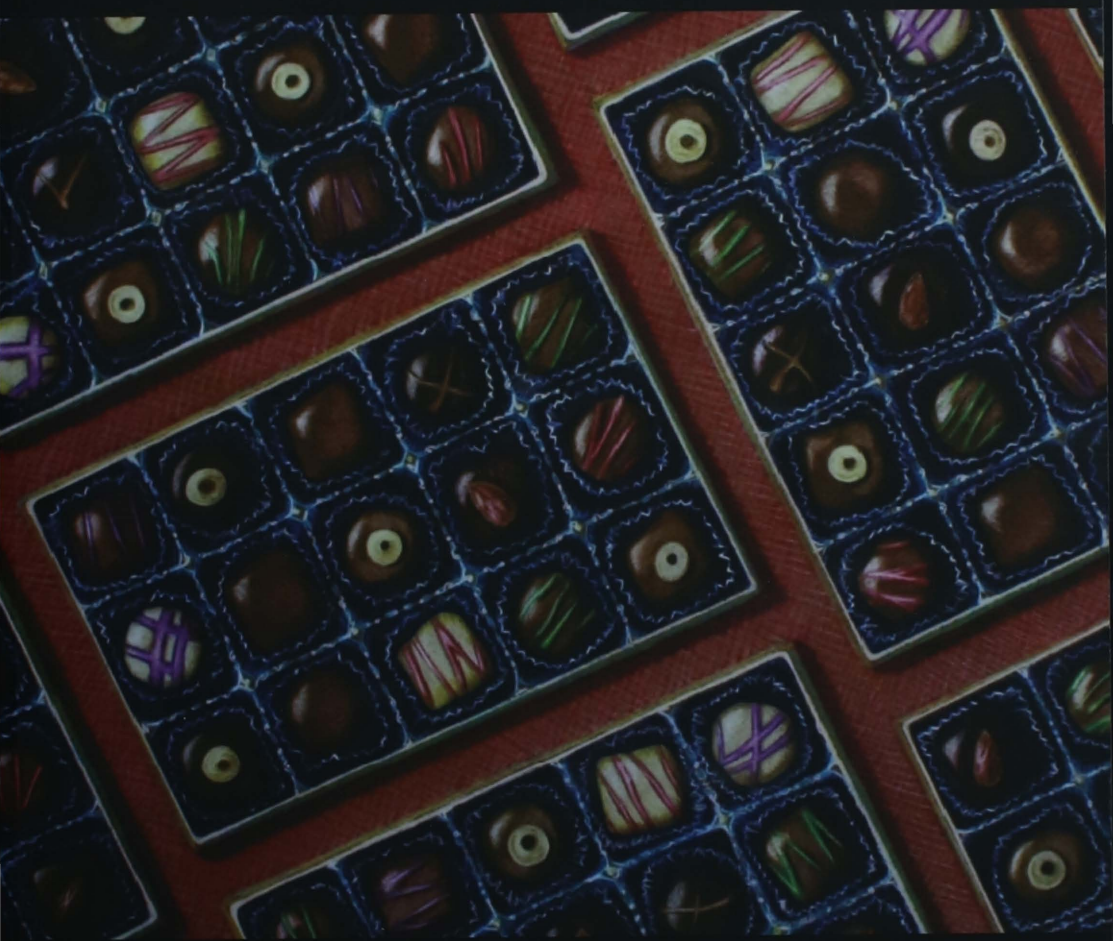
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# The Lantern





# THE LANTERN

Ursinus College  
Volume 79  
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

During the planning stages for *The Lantern* this year, we initially wanted to pitch it to students in the following way: *The Lantern, Change You Can Believe In*. We didn't end up following through with that slogan, what with it being coined by a certain President and all, but the sentiment still rings true. We made a lot of changes to the magazine this year. It's an annual. We've allowed poets, writers, and artists alike to have more than one piece in this year, if merited. The aesthetic has changed slightly. And, perhaps most importantly, you will not see the names of our Editorial Staff members sprawled across the pages of *The Lantern*, or nestled complacently in the Winner's circle that is the Judge's notes. No. This magazine is about you. Yes, you. Ursinus' talented students and the readers that admire and appreciate them.

Still, we, as Co-Editors, need to take the time to thank those who made this year's issue possible. We would like to thank the Section Editors and Readers, our Patron Drive Coordinator and his staffers, the Production staff, Treasurer, and our brand new Copyediting Department. Without each of these dedicated people these pages would not be filled with the high quality work you are about to see. Additionally, we must thank Dr. Volkmer, our Faculty Advisor, for helping us adjust to the changes that made this year such an important one for *The Lantern*. Special thanks go to Robert Whitehead for taking over as interim Poetry Editor after piece selection and Chelsea's transfer to Sarah Lawrence College.

This has proven to be a pivotal year for *The Lantern*. There is no telling what the magazine will be like in the future, no way to definitively say which changes will remain, or whether the

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## EDITOR'S NOTE (CONTINUED)

magazine will revert or transcend. But, since literature at its best is about capturing distinct moments, let us simply relish in the scenes, images and metaphors to which you're about to be exposed.

Peace Out. And, Enjoy.

-Amber and Nicole

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# STAFF

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## JUDGES' NOTES

**Fiction Winner—"Wet Tongues and Sweaty Cotton" by Jared Ellis**

The Lantern's prize for Fiction this year goes to Jared Ellis, author of "Wet Tongues and Sweaty Cotton," which achieves the trifecta of an unusual setting, fine characters, and a heartbreaking plot. The story, moved along by commanding but natural dialogue, dwells not only on the complexities of being different, but also on the weight brought on by silence. "Nothing that my sticky tongue wanted to say could have helped him," says our narrator, but his creator's words help all of us gain insight into the dark, haunted places in the souls of young men.

**Non-Fiction Winner—"One Boy in Four Parts" by Greta Martikainen-Watcke**

The Lantern's prize for Non-fiction this year goes to Greta Martikainen-Watcke, author of "One Boy in Four Parts." Written in an ingenious, fragmented structure, these four pieces of the author's romantic self-- "hot teeth," a dorm room, a "L'Chaim" necklace, and a bed-- provide a harrowing, but heartwarming portrait of a young woman's arc through romance--and her own soul.

A distinguished author, this Fall, *Jennifer Finney Boylan* will be the Hoyer-Updike Distinguished Writer here at Ursinus. Her memoir, *She's Not There*, was the first bestselling work by a transgendered American. In May 2010, HarperCollins will release her eleventh book, *Falcon Quinn and the Black Mirror*. We look forward to having her with us in the near future.

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## JUDGES' NOTES (CONTINUED)

Poetry Winner—"What Death Became After Cyparissus" by Robert Whitehead

The Lantern's prize for Poetry this year goes to Robert Whitehead, author of "What Death Became After Cyparissus." There is so much to love about this poem; its striking imagery, its intimate colloquy with tradition, its intelligence *and* its wisdom, and, best of all, the way it so patiently abides in mystery.

*Constance Merritt* is the author of three books of poems: *Two Rooms* (LSU, 2009), *Blessings and Inclemencies* (LSU, 2007), and *A Protocol for Touch* (UNT, 2000). She lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

## ATTEMPTS AT BRAVERY

The rain falls hard, making the lamp-lit grass cling to our bare feet and ankles. We run to a classroom building and drop our stuff: our sweaters, our cell phones, relinquishing all the delicate things that make us grown-ups. We race to the field, little pieces of grass stick to my feet and the rain drenches my hair and clothes. Rivulets run down our arms, and your skirt is leaking grey ink.

In the fluorescent light, peculiar to rainy nights, we spin and spin and spin, dervishes, worshipping the downpour. I lose my bearings, spin so fast and so recklessly that the trees and the buildings and the lamps are nothing but blurs. It sounds like a scene from a movie and our soundtrack is the sound of rain on cement, the infrequent rush of cars going by and our feet splashing in the watery grass.

I get an idea; one I'm not half brave enough for. I start to spin towards you; like I've just lost control and maybe I have, but not like that. I think I want to knock you down, or at least grab you, so that the only logical thing is to lean down and kiss you on the lips.

My lips part and water runs down my eyelashes and ruins my mascara. My arms are on your shoulders, holding you up, holding me up and you're laughing, happy and oblivious, your skin puckering into goose bumps. The raindrops are illuminated by the lamp light, making the lawn spooky and somehow darker, despite the light.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a couple of inconvenient freshmen coming out of the theater, refugees from the rain. I don't want them to see me, us, spinning, want to let you keep your pride. Or maybe I'm afraid you'll reject me. The fear of rejection, of hurting our friendship, or losing you is overpowering. I push myself off, spin around, and then slip myself down, like I tripped. I'm in the grass, willing for the wet ground and rain to drown me, so that I can stop wanting this night in the rain to go on forever.



## I'M PREGNANT. IT'S YOURS.

The earth's orbit  
will now be square. And in its center,  
will be the moon. The Mets might win something.  
Everything changes. Everything  
that's mine is ours. This beautiful gift  
of money sucking, time consuming joy,  
is It. No Law School. No hot wife  
to show off to friends who have their own.  
People talked about Ed for months. After  
his one night stand turned into lifetime plans.  
This might blow over eventually.  
Maybe they'll go easy on me  
because I'll be a cool English teacher  
that wears fashionable sweaters and  
tweed coats over a button up.  
The students won't know  
that I'm a screw-up. They'll see me  
as a smart guy who is funny and has some fashion sense;  
the teachers will want to be friends outside of work.  
I'll talk about good poems and stuff,  
and inject witty pop culture references here or there.  
I won't be a screw-up to them.  
The baby will think I'm the best dad  
because all his friends can come over and hang  
as long as he gets good grades. No son of mine  
is going to get below a B+. Not everyone  
can get into Law School.

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# WET TONGUES AND SWEATY COTTON

FICTION WINNER

Marlon used to hang around the basketball courts at Mililani 'Uka park and watch our baseball games. He was always alone, shooting baskets, faking out imaginary defenders in his black warm-ups and his white, Nike Air Jordans. After our games, he'd invite us to play with his ball and its built-in air pump, shouting, "BRICK," every time one of us would take a shot. My neighbor, Kurt, and I would play as long as we could, even as the Oahu sky started its purple orange dimming and the laughs from our beer-guzzling fathers and coaches got louder. The older guys on our team would chase Marlon around when he had the ball; they'd pull their jersey collars over their mouths and mash their tongues out against the sweaty cotton until Marlon would start dribbling with only his right hand, his left hand too busy fluttering in front of his pants.

"Stiff dick! Marlon get stiff dick!"

They would scream this over and over, laughing and teasing Marlon. After a while, we all caught on and joined in with our older teammates taunting and teasing. Eventually, Marlon had all 15 of us chasing him around with our shirts pulled up over our mouths pressing our Gatorade stained tongues against fabric. Marlon was around 20. We were in the under 10 league.

One night, on the way home from the park, my dad warned me, "Stay away from that *popolo fucka*."

"What? Why?"

"Just do what I said, damnit," my father snapped.

"Dad it's just Marl-"

A hand materialized out of the darkness and landed flush against my mouth, not hard enough to hurt, but more than enough to flatten my lips against my teeth and get my attention. I scooted toward the car door, struggling to put more distance between myself and any more hands hiding in the dark.

"Rememba what that felt like. I catch you around that punk again and you going to fuckin' get it."

I couldn't figure out what my dad's problem with Marlon was. I chalked it up to a few too many beers with the other dads. And my dad never mentioned it again, so I didn't listen. Every weekend, Marlon would be there in his warm-ups and Nikes offering us his ball to play.

The last weekend of the season, pot-lucking and drinking was in full swing, late into the night. Most of our teammates were fighting their mothers' efforts to make them go home, the fathers stayed behind to keep drinking and laughing. Kurt and I were the only ones left with our shirts pulled up over our mouths.

I heard my dad's voice yelling my name from the dark, somewhere between the baseball field and the courts, telling me, "Time to go home arready!"

As I ran back toward the potluck, I noticed Kurt and Marlon scaling the fence into the 'Uka elementary school. I didn't think anything of it until I ran into Kurt's dad near the potluck.

"Where'd Kurt go?"

"He went to the elementary courts. Get lights over there."

"Who he with?"

As my mouth started to shape the M in Marlon's name, I felt a hard cuff on the back of my head. I wheeled around to see my father's drunk, angry eyes. He hit me again, this time with a closed fist, something he had never done before. The blow sat me on my butt, little ticks of light flashing in my vision.

"What the hell I told you about that sick fuck *popolo*?"

"We didn't d-"

My father's palm laid itself flat against my cheek again before he turned to Kurt's dad. A look passed between them that, at that age, I couldn't recognize. I watched as their eyes hardened. I had seen that look enough to know to keep my mouth shut.

"What you like," my father asked.

"We betta go find my damn kid before he does something stupid."

A series of screams broke up the conversation. It was a scream that I recognized instantly. Kurt would always scream in a

series of short spurts, every time his dad was after him. I could hear it from my house and would laugh at the idea of Kurt running around the house in his BVDs, screaming, being chased by his belt-wielding dad. But nobody was laughing this time.

The chatter around the potluck hushed as all the heads whipped toward the screams to see Kurt vaulting over the fence, shirtless, with his belt buckle undone, his baseball pants sagging around his waist, his cup starting to show. All the fathers stumbled to their feet and ran to meet him. Marlon came around the corner of a nearby building, his bare chest standing out in stark relief under the lights. His hand covering his crotch as always, he skidded to a halt as he saw the mob of drunk fathers sprinting in his direction, their rubber slippers slapping hard against the ground. He wheeled around and took off through the school. The last image I had of Marlon was of him running, slightly bowlegged, both arms pumping, as his black torso disappeared into the night.

The fathers spread out and searched all throughout the area knowing they only had a few minutes to find Marlon before the mothers were smart enough to call the cops. Meanwhile, Kurt was in the middle of a team-mom huddle sobbing, trying to pull his clothes back on as they hugged him. I jostled against the circle of moms, trying to get to Kurt but they kept pushing me back. He refused to answer any of their questions. He just sat there shaking, crying, his shoulders rising up and down in uncontrollable shrugs.

Talk around the league and our neighborhood was hushed for the next few weeks. When Kurt would come to my house, my parents' looks would go soft for a moment before they turned away from him, not knowing what to say. We would play as if nothing had ever happened. We'd throw ball in the street, play video games, whatever. Things went on as they should, but there was something different about Kurt and I could never put my finger on it. So I asked my dad.

"What did Marlon do to Kurt?"

"Kiddo, if you no can figure it out, you stay too young to talk about it. And your mother would kill me if I explained it to

you. Ask me when you older.”

He left it at that, and eventually I stopped asking. I knew, even back then, that if my father wouldn't tell me, it must've been bad. I mean, my father was the dad who told me that a *mahu* was, “one *brada* pretending to be one *wahine*. Those queeah guys, they tuck their *olos* back behind their *okole* so they can fit in *wahine* clothes.” He definitely didn't pull any punches when it came explaining the ways of the world to me.

Kurt eventually moved off of my street. I overheard my mom mentioning to my dad that Kurt's parents just wanted a fresh start for him. I had no idea what that meant. Luckily though, he had only moved a few communities away and I still saw him at baseball tournaments and clinics. We would play against each other during the game and then we'd hang out afterwards. It almost seemed like Kurt had never changed. It was almost like old times.

We lost track of each other after a while and the screaming little boy from that night was the furthest thing from my mind. I was accepted into a nearby private high school to play baseball. My first day there, I reported to the weight room for preseason workouts. Back in the corner, straining under a bar was a short, brutally muscular boy. Every muscle in his torso stood out even under the black and gray tattoos covering his arms and chest. He racked the bar and turned my way. A very different Kurt stood looking at me.

“Howzit,” he said, his eyes shining.

“Kurt? No fucking way.”

“What the fuck you waiting for, braddah? Give me a hug already,” he said.

He grabbed me and hugged me hard, slapping my back and laughing. And suddenly, we were little kids again, wasting the green, Hawaiian fall away on a baseball field. In reality, all we had done was trade the Mililani sunset for a Manoa one, 20 miles away. We hung around at school, spent every afternoon hitting each other grounders, burned the nights away chasing girls along Kalakaua Avenue. The next few years were mellow and unremarkable, except that something had changed in Kurt. Everybody

saw it in his temper; people would call him Kilauea Kurt, "cuz that fucka like go off volcano style, any time." I saw it in the way his eyes would harden instantly when he was confronted. I saw it in his walk. There was this *drive*, a purposeful confidence of movement in his every step. For the most part, he was the same old laughing, smiling boy who grew up next door...until somebody pissed him off.

The rapid unraveling of our mellow lives happened the summer before our senior year. It started out in the water. We were bodysurfing together in the late afternoon sun, taking off on waves in turns and blocking the lineup for each other. A freak wave came through and a huge local guy kicked into it and cut Kurt off, sending Kurt headfirst into the sand. He came up sputtering, his eyes wild and angry. He swam up behind the guy and just started unloading on him. He threw punches in short, vicious arcs until the guy finally pushed him off and managed to swim away. I watched the entire time in shock. Kurt swam back grinning as if nothing had happened.

The guy found us in the parking lot later. He was pissed, no doubt feeling the shame of retreat. And I was no fighter; I was scared. Kurt stripped his top bare and took off his slippers. His eyes went cold as he shifted from foot to foot, his head nodding. Before the guy could say anything, Kurt hooked him. Just sighed, and hooked him right in the temple. He crumpled to the sandy concrete. His friend came in swinging and caught Kurt in the mouth.

"Get the truck started," he yelled over his shoulder before turning to face the huge body in front of him.

I jumped in my truck and slammed it into gear. Kurt threw one last punch before he dove into the bed and slapped the glass partition. I sent sand and gravel flying as I peeled out of the parking lot into the street. At the first stoplight, Kurt jumped into the passenger seat grinning, blood pushing through his teeth, his lips tinted red. I looked over at where the boy who came running out of the night was supposed to be. He leaned out the window and spit a gob of blood into the street. I drove away without a word.

A few nights later my phone buzzed on my night stand. I

answered it groggily to hear Kurt panting into my ear. It sounded like he was running but I could hear his truck's speakers blaring as he told me to get up and get dressed. He'd be outside in a minute. I rolled out of bed and threw a pair of jeans on and headed out front of my house. I heard the squeal of tires as his low-riding Tacoma slid around the corner. He screamed up the street and skidded to a stop in front of me. The door swung open and I stooped down to look in. Kurt looked back at me with sad, drunk eyes.

"Get in."

"I'm driving. Get the fuck out of the car."

He looked into his lap for a second before sighing and getting out. As he walked past me behind the truck, I saw him in his entirety. His jeans and hands were spattered dark, crusty red. His right hand was split wide open across the knuckles. In his left hand he held a tire iron. It was slick and grimy.

"What the fuck?"

"Just get in the car and drive," he slurred.

I got in the driver's seat and gunned it. He leaned his seat back all the way and covered his face in his hands. I rolled the windows down and drove, letting the cool tropical air fill the car. Kurt's car had the heavy iron taste of blood in the air. I drove for nearly an hour, searching for a place to park and the right words to say. I drove until I reached a turn and then alternately turned left and right. I finally found a park with its parking lot open and pulled in. As I killed the engine, Kurt threw his door open and puked onto the concrete. He sat back up wiping his mouth, exhaling hard.

"Let's walk," he said.

We made our way in the dark, crossing the park toward a set of bleachers. He plopped down on the first step and leaned back. His hand still firmly held the tire iron.

"You going to tell me what the hell's going on or what?"

He looked over at me before burying his head in his hands.

"I did something stupid, man," he moaned from behind his fingers.

"No shit. Look at yourself. You're hammered. Your hands stay all bust. You stay covered in fucking blood. What

happened?"

"We was drinking Kahala side and I saw him."

"Who? Saw who?"

"Marlon. I found the fucka."

"And what?"

"What the fuck you think? I followed him. I stayed in my car until he was alone. And I jumped him. I was only going to mess him up. I was just pounding him, over and over and screaming. He was screaming too at first but he wen stop after a while. People were starting to yell so I ran back to the car to dig. I got back in my car and the fuckin' iron was just sitting right there on the passenger seat. I didn't even think about it. I grabbed it and went back and just hammered him until someone yelled that the cops was coming. No one could even recognize Marlon's face when I left. I fuckin' dug out and called you."

"And what? Anybody get your plates or what?"

"Probably."

I stood up and looked at him. I didn't know what to make of him. His eyes were soft and drooping. There wasn't anger anywhere in him. He looked beaten, defeated.

"You need to turn yourself in."

His eyes hardened Kilauea style. He eyed me for a second before he opened his mouth.

"You better be fucking kidding. You know what the fuck I been through cuz of that fucking guy? You want to know what he fucking tried to do to me? We was all young back then but you must've figured it out by now. You never stop to ask yourself why my clothes was all coming off when I made it back over that fence?"

"Bradda—"

"No, fuck you! After all that, nobody would even look me in the fucking eye. My own mom couldn't even hug me without crying! I not turning shit in."

"It's the only way you get out of this, brada."

He glared at me seething, the anger burning in his eyes. He yanked the keys out of my hand and took off in a run toward the car.



“Find your own fucking way home,” he yelled over his shoulder as he disappeared into the darkness of the park.

I spent the rest of the night sitting in that park. I tilted my head back and let the tradewinds roll over my scalp, let it swirl my thoughts around in my head. I listened to the occasional car passing by as I thought about that night that should've stayed in our pasts. The next morning, I caught the bus home and never said a word. Not when my parents asked me where the hell I had been and who was I not to answer them. Not when the newspaper said Marlon was found dead. Not when the police knocked on my door. I kept my silence through Kurt's very public arrest and trial. I never commented on how his defense attorney argued that Marlon's "indecency towards a minor" was what had really provoked this attack. I didn't even say a word when Kurt was acquitted. I knew that Kurt had his own past to bury and that I was part of it. Nothing that my sticky tongue wanted to say could have helped him.

## THE NIGHTMARE

The monster under my bed has become  
the man in my bed & he has terrible alien eyes.  
He flicks cigarette ashes,  
like blackbirds on fire, at my feet.  
His blackberry teeth leave ribbon stitches across my shoulders  
and over my mouth like stains. He pecks my body  
with lips like corners.  
I bluster with my thimble fingertips, try  
to save myself with silver bracelets wrapping my wrists  
but the strikes won't fade. They bleed and cajole  
and vibrate into one raw note & I am unshielded.  
I can feel him inside of me but I cannot sift through  
his skin; I don't know the color of his bones.  
His eyes are stars  
and galaxies and suns & I am no longer on earth.  
His eyes are sparking like lighters between my lips  
& I am charred & I am changed.

# What Death Became After

## Cyparissus

*for Tadd Gero*

Poetry Winner

Are there any more gods for this dying boy?  
Any stories to become?  
Something like Cyparissus in love with the one  
fate-heaviest star,  
something like savior in stasis? Hope  
of yes battered by *of course not*:  
*no*, we all belong now as slaves to hateful time,  
*no*, we can break nothing  
important anymore— the laws of living stay,  
the body always rigidly  
the body despite its small changings in detail.  
This boy was dying as himself,  
twenty-two years old in a hospital in upstate NY:  
septic pneumonia,  
his heart giving out...

but giving out what?

Such words the space  
myth begins in: this boy, his heart a hand  
giving out  
dumb red candies, sugars in cellophane, sweet ruptures  
in the organs' vital ticking...  
or delicious rubies for the deer's neck.  
Any red shiny thing  
can be transformed for terrible blood...  
Or perhaps his dying heart  
giving out warnings— giving *do not*  
*fear this*. Or *fear this*.  
I can't possibly know. Can only start the guesses

---

at what gifts or words  
might or might not have bounded through his heart  
like absurd joy unwelcoming  
him. Me, guessing— *what image could fit  
this moment?*  
What could be yes, *that is the one right story?*

Cyparissus becomes the tree  
for his own sake, begs the gods to let him  
forever remember  
the deer's dying and yet not die as himself.  
Cyparissus dies as myth,  
painful, but lasting. I'd like to think this boy  
had that option, too,  
of stepping into that woodenness so near death  
but not death, of escaping it.  
And maybe he chose not to take it,  
maybe  
he let his lungs fill with water, the aching  
roots of bacteria,  
let his heart give out its last things. Maybe  
he chose this honest death,  
rejecting myth. So that looking at a tree I think  
*Cyparissus trapped,*  
*growing on grief's single awful thought*  
*for eternity,*  
and looking at this boy, in his happiest  
pictures, I think *him, smiling,*  
*gone,* trusting that *nothing* is a sort of peace.

## SUBSTANCES

12:11 AM

Alice, in her wonderland, never got fucked  
up by all the drugs at that tea party.  
She valued her sobriety.  
My mind is not mine -  
controlled by the water of this nirvana  
coming over me.

1:00 AM

Inside now.  
So much noise from trees laughing like the chainsaws cutting into  
them.  
I come here so often, yet  
I can't remember where this road goes.  
Home? Guillotine? Sky so distant?

3:10 AM

ocean floor so murky	discontinuity
synapses slathering	dumb
faces easy to see (sea?)	see?
blissful tide	approaching.

4:33 AM

strings snap purple walls flip fluorescent dogs dodge look how the  
gods dodge violet purity dancing in its holy dress white washed  
fawns fly look how the dodgy walls snap synapses hurricane com-  
ing close crashing snapping water walls glowing so mauve on my-  
self succumbed

# ONE BOY IN FOUR PARTS

## NON-FICTION WINNER

### I. Good Teeth Hot

He was drinking rum and coke. Not from a cup, no, that wouldn't be enough. From a two liter bottle, the brown mixture sloshing back and forth every time he moved. Three quarters of the drink was gone. I knew he was an asshole.

"Hey freshman, you're hot....like good teeth hot."

"Good teeth hot?" I asked, unaware that good teeth was one of the qualities that guys look for in girls.

"Yeah, what's your name?"

"Greta," I briskly replied, anxious to end this conversation with this nameless asshole who wouldn't even remember meeting me. Luckily, his attention had expired and he was already looking at the girl next to me, my roommate Katie. He qualified her "hotness" in terms of some girl that looked like some B-list, has-been actress. This kid was something else.

### II. Hooking up

He was drinking rum again. This time it was in a cup, with ginger ale and ice. The amber liquid had been poured between two red Solo cups until the mixture was the right combination of alcohol to soda. In his cup there was a hell of a lot of Captain Morgan's.

We were in his room. It was a Thursday or some other acceptable drinking day. I was sitting on his futon and he was on his bed. The room was clean. He had snorted a few lines of Adderall the night before and instead of helping him with homework, it helped him with housework.

He was looking at me with that look, the one that would have been seductive if I didn't know better. "You know, we are so going to hook up before the year is over," he said in the cocky way that showed he thought every girl wanted him.

"Ew, no we aren't!" I was disgusted he would even think that. Yeah, I liked him, but we were just friends. Yeah, it was fun

to flirt with him, but I knew too much about his numerous hookups that paraded into his room at night and snuck out at dawn.

“No...wait...I don’t give it past the end of the semester. I’m always right.” I didn’t know how to react to this. I hated how he was so self-assured. I hated how he knew he was good-looking and how he could basically hook up with any girl he wanted to. It seemed no one was impervious to his “game.” I wanted to be the exception.

### III. L'Chaim

I’ve always wished I was one of those girls that always wore a cross necklace; the kind of girl that’s always accessorized. The kind of girl that never takes her cross off, not even in the shower. I wanted to be the kind of girl that wore something that had meaning, and I could say, “Oh my mom gave this to me at my Confirmation, it goes back three generations.” But I don’t have that kind of family.

One day I was searching for a charm for one of my chains and found a funny looking symbol in my mom’s jewelry drawer. It looked like a letter written by the Egyptians, or an ancient Rune. I asked my mom about it.

“Oh it’s L’Chaim. It means ‘to life’ in Hebrew. Robin Delia got it for me when she was living on a Kibbutz in Israel. You can have it if you want.” Finally I could be like the girls with their crosses, except mine wasn’t really religious. Yeah, it was semi-Jewish, but I loved life, so why not have a constant toast to it around my neck?

I brought this charm to college. I would wear it to class, or out, pretending it was a part of me like the girls with the crosses. One day I had it on in class and he noticed it.

“You’re Jewish?” He seemed puzzled, as most people would, as blonde hair and blue eyes isn’t the stereotypical Jewish look.

“No, I just like to wear it,” I went on to explain the story of how my mom got the charm and how she gave it to me. He seemed angry.

“Too bad, I’m Jewish. If only you were Jewish, we could have dated.” He was flirting again. From then on I would wear the charm to piss him off. I wore it on a chain that grazed my cleavage. I think he knew I wore it for the attention.

#### IV. Warm Body Syndrome

He had a queen-sized bed. He would let me sleep over when Katie would be using the room for her own romantic adventures. We had an understanding that we weren’t going to make out or do anything else, we were just sleeping. He claimed to have “Warm Body Syndrome,” some faux disorder that required sleeping company. It was his excuse for all of the less-than-innocent slumber parties with the more-than-numerous girls. I was never one of those girls.

During one of these sleepovers, we finally kissed. Maybe it was because I had too much to drink, or because I was tired of resisting his advances, but finally I gave in. I kept sleeping over, but we only would make out. Still, he was right about us “hooking up.”



## Ain't That A Man? -Muddy Waters

I'm talking about a man, you get that?  
A man who will buy me cough medicine  
when I get sick. A lift when I am out  
there playing mommy for little children.  
Maybe Donald Sutherland, his wide voice  
a house. His dramatic flaw is love; well  
ain't that a man? In all I hope for, boy.  
That's what you get, boy, so I can tell  
when along-haired tall one offers to buy me  
Benadryl, he wants something  
more. *I'm lost*, he says. *Well golly gee, tell me  
about it.* Daddy long legs, keep walking  
because I remember; it's a father  
I need. A woman begins a daughter.

## NORMAN BATES IS MY MOTHER

Mother has five different types of smiles.<sup>i</sup> They go, in order from oldest to most recent: the “fading-40s-starlet” smile, the “task-mastering-utilitarian” smile, the “open-your-mouth-&-say-ahhh” smile, the “is-that-clown-staring-at-me-?” smile & the “leave-me-alone-I’m-pondering-greater-questions-than-your-enlarged-prostate” smile. But this one—the one she has on her face right this instant—was new. The boy had decided it must be new because he had never seen it before. Why had he decided this? Well, it really came down to simple logic, you see. He had read a book on thematic logic & seen the film as well. Although he was slightly undecided, he had actually felt the book was better in its explication of logic as he felt the film was porously directed & the *mise-en-scène* was an utter disaster.<sup>ii</sup> Anyway, as the book states, in a rather bold & uncomplicated scheme: *C* happens because *A* & *B* converge. Now, the boy had thought about this word—*converge*—for a great while & had decided that it was of little use to him & his current predicament. He had thought that *diverge* was perhaps a better explanation of why he had never seen this particular smile on mother before.

So this smile: first, it must be said that mother is maternal—yes, mother may have her own lunar logic to things, that is to say, she goes at things like the moon does...with great lunacy.<sup>iii</sup> But still, it’s a controlled & measured lunacy of which there are few examples. She likes things to be just so but she’s not one of those nitpicky, white-gloving sadists. Although on occasion she has ventured into role-play as a bedroom game. It also must be said that mother has a certain sartorial sense of style that one cannot help but be engaged with. One’s eyes will involuntarily dance in the glitter & neon of her. Of course, she will just continue on her way even in the knowledge of this. But let it not be said that she is vain. Mother, vain? No, no, no; this does not represent her unremarkable attitude towards life & attention in general. If mother looks back at you, it does not automatically mean that she is in love with you.

Sure, she might smile your way—give you that portrait of a “fading-40s-starlet”— but she does not, will not love you. But she is also fully in her rights to not love you, love me. Mother is the domina to the dominus as it were & she likes things to be done in an orderly & facile fashion. But if things are not to be done in an orderly & facile fashion, she will do it herself because we all know that the best way to do something is to watch mother do it. She is Van Gogh with the vacuum. She is Monet at the sink. She is Picasso folding the clothes. Picasso without the Blue Period, of course; I’m pretty sure mother never gets blue. Now here, the boy had watched a commercial about being blue & he decided mother was nothing like that. Blue seemed to be a state of insistent frowning, like German Expressionist films—although, do not take me for hating German Expressionist films. He’s just saying that, you know, German Expressionist films seem to be really gloomy & that’s not what he needs in his life right now. Mother likes Italian Spaghetti Westerns. She often will tell the boy how much she likes these films. She sez, “I really like those Italian Spaghetti Westerns.” Mother gives a perfect “leave-me-alone-I’m-pondering-greater-questions-than-your-enlarged-prostate.”

So this smile, yes the smile was different. It sharpened her features as if pixilation was a probable feature in human sculpting. It made the boy wonder: Is the fetus a network? Can it import & download, reticulate & upload? Does it have a mainframe or does it rely on electrical currents outfitted with splice cables? Can cyberspace be reached in there? Is it susceptible to trojans, charging against its ambit crimson walls?

Mother had no patience for the boy’s fascination with the womb. She would say, Get over it. It’s there. See? It’s right there. She showed the boy the womb. It was like a refrigerator & the boy had decided that mother was (again!) right.

After a momentary pause of silent waiting—(one should always wait for mother)—she spoke:

Do you know why I’m smiling like this?  
No, why? No, why? sez the boy. No, why?  
It’s very special news, she sez.

Very special? Very special?

Yes very special—Father's dead! With that, mother jumps up & down once, just once. The boy wrote a poem for the occasion:

I felt a parade in my brain<sup>1</sup>  
& dancers<sup>2</sup>, to & fro,  
Kept waltzing, waltzing<sup>3</sup> till it seemed  
That love<sup>4</sup> was breaking thru.

& when they all were wedded<sup>5</sup>,  
A pulsing<sup>6</sup> like a drum  
Kept *beating*, *beating*<sup>7</sup>, till I thought  
My prick<sup>8</sup> was going numb.

---

<sup>1</sup>A parade in the sense of good fortune, frivolity, & gaiety.

<sup>2</sup>Dancing here is in no way, shape, or form a metaphor for lovers. There is no dancing in the dark here, nor are there any late-night sambas. Why can't people just dance?

<sup>3</sup>Yes, although of course the waltz is danced face-to-face in a "closed position." It is in the sterile tradition of ballroom dancing & thus is not a sexual dance. There is no fucking among high-cloth sorts such as aristocrats.

<sup>4</sup>A docile word. No connotation, just denotation here.

<sup>5</sup>A union made of docile love. No sex here, no, no. The boy remembers mother once declaring in a particularly aphoristic moment: "Marriage is a Straitjacket!" Thus, we have here a veiled mirroring of the "madness" metaphor in the previous form of the poem (see Dickinson's *I felt a funeral in my brain*).

<sup>6</sup>As in propulsive: meaning propelling...towards what, one can only imagine.

<sup>7</sup>As in "beating a drum." A harmless, desexualized verb, I'm sure.

<sup>8</sup>At the time of the writing of this particular poem, the poet had *pricked* his thumb. As the flow of viscous fluid evacuates the body, there is a certain euphoria in the porous resistance of the body. Quite pleasurable to some.

Yes, he knows. It is a strangely cribbed version of a Dickinson poem. The inversion of thematic relations here is also quite interesting if thoroughly shallow. Madness & sexuality seem to go hand in hand here if we are to offer at the former poem's more meaningful rhetoric of "funerals" & "mourners." The boy had always thought that "mourning" was spelled "morning."

So how did father die? He asks mother with a furtive curiosity.

Well. Mother looks exuberant when she's sad. The boy can see waves in her eyes. Well, you see, father left for work this morning but he didn't go to work, do you understand? I nod. Okay, so he didn't go to work, but he went to the mall. You know the mall right? It has your favorite toy store in it. I nod again. Good, okay, well he skipped work & went to the mall & went to the place where they have all those televisions where you can see yourself on the screens. You know that place right? You liked seeing yourself in all of those TVs right? I nod twice. Right, good, okay, well he skipped work to go to this place where all the TVs are & he took out a gun. You know what a gun is—it's a thing you shoot, kind of like bang, bang. I stand still but then nod my head. Okay, well he went to this place & took out this gun that goes bang, bang & he put it to his head, in front of all those TVs right—all those TVs with father on it—and he pulled the trigger on all those TVs.

& like moondrop heaven, Motion Picture Association approved, she allowed the boy to fall into her arms. Swallowing his sorrow in a love that radiated electric; she was neon. The boy thought to himself: *she is neon*. & as he stroked her forearm with his head a memory circuited thru his mind. It was a memory of father & the TV:

Father is sitting in his armchair. A mahogany leather armchair. He's watching the TV. The deep-sea colors of the TV wash over father's face. The boy comes into the living room—although it's hardly a place for the living, quite the contrary actually...not one, not two, not three, not four, but five family folk had been stolen by Death in that "living" room...of course, the incident with

the mouse, lit cigarette, & Grandma Coco was deemed an accident as it was decided it really wasn't her time to go.

With the TV dancing on father's face, the boy asks, is that you?

Father sez: I've seen this episode before. I'm sure I've seen this one because I remember this storyline. Oh yes I do remember this storyline.

The show being watched here is *Rockhaven Bluff*. It is a popular drama consisting of small-town intrigue & mystery in a mid-western town called Rockhaven. Rockhaven is a place where people talk to toilet seat covers, where aliens may-or-may-not-have landed, & where a malevolent killer may be on the loose. Its viewership has increased successively in each of the past three seasons: 4.2 million to 5.0 million to 6.8 million. Father loves it. The storyline in question here comes from episode 26 entitled "Madness Inveracity." In it, a hitman hired to assassinate a prominent businessman - Elrond Jones - becomes suicidal when he learns that the businessman is in fact his long-lost father, who abandoned him & his mother at the tender age of 28. The quandary for the hitman involves weighing his curiosity & innate love of the father he never knew against the \$50,000 he's receiving to dispatch of the same man. Here, the storyline takes another twist as we—the omniscient audience—learn that Elrond Jones has also hired a hitman of his own to dispatch of the hitman (i.e. his own son) who was hired to dispatch of him. His name is Bartholomule deGradus. In a rather convoluted conclusion, the son-hitman dispatches of the hitman who's been hired to dispatch of him, only to be shot & dispatched by his own father - Elrond Jones - who, in learning his son's true identity, turns the gun on himself, dying in a grim tableaux of oedipal destruction. It must be said as well that women on this show are always portrayed to be in trouble: little Marilyn Monroes, dying starlets. This is why mother will not watch it. She sez, "Although I do love Marilyn Monroe & all, I will not watch a show that believes in the existence of aliens."

This was where mother developed her "open-your-mouth-&-say-ahhh." She loved spoon-feeding father & the boy these little trinkets of earthbound wisdom. Mother was & always will be re-

ceptionist, nurse, doctor, dentist,<sup>iv</sup> anesthesiologist, philosopher-at-large, professor of tautological logic, editor, repo-woman, astrological engineer, so on & so forth, etcetera, etcetera.

Mother had developed her “is-that-clown-staring-at-me-?” while making love to father one night. The boy had known this because he had seen it, seen it with his own two eyes.<sup>v</sup> He had been awakened by the huffing & puffing of mattress springs & decided to investigate. In a sad & somber light, he had seen them on the bed. It was kinda pathetic he had thought. He had even whispered to himself in the extrapolating shadows of night, This is kinda pathetic. But he was engaged nonetheless. The act itself was odd & terse. The television had been on, yet only tuned to a low-pitch of white noise. The remote control must have been in the sheets somewhere, underneath everything. A button must have been pushed; pushed, perhaps, by some white & glistening thigh or a groping hand in the muddled light. Perhaps fleshy appendages had danced upon the rubber buttons of the remote & tickled them to life. The three bodies together—enraptured by some unseen & quantum force.

The boy had watched mother, her face. He searched out its cues & responses: a rollercoaster if the boy had ever seen one. & then—like Promethean tenderness, it came: a smile as unforgiving & strangely—almost frighteningly—opulent. The boy was pleased.

But of course, this did not explain at all the magnificence of *this* smile. This smile that mother had on this very instant was a heavenly amalgamation of suicidal charisma.<sup>vi</sup> That was the only way to describe such a smile, the boy had thought. It was one of those smiles that played checkers in your head. One of those smiles that stands there with rubies in its teeth & then slowly proceeds to rip your endocrine system out of your body, gland by gland. It is an exhilarating feeling. The boy thought it really was one of those smiles that just made you want to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, the Golden Gate, the London, etcetera, etcetera. Just too much charisma for one smile. Just too much.

So how about it? she asked.

& you're wonderful, he sez.

& like that they were married. Mother & child reunion at last. But how can you tell the mother from the child? With father gone, mother was free & easy. She had a man of her own creation, which is the very best or so they say. The boy was just pleased to be with mother in holy matrimony—theirs would be a marriage of passion & of energy & of supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. You see, father never really loved mother, the boy had decided. He thought to himself: No, father never really loved mother. But he would love her, yes he would. Because she could teach him things & he would teach her things. She would read to him & he would read to her. & her tussled hair would be long & her full, red lips would be cracking smiles at him & he would giggle & she would read him the book called *Theories On Expository Storytelling, the Doctrine(s) of Professor & Biographer Keaton Whitbread, of the University of Etc., & the Movements Toward Digressive & Interdisciplinary Academic Radicalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century America Or: My Life in the Throes of Acid Reflux*. It is a novelistic book<sup>vii</sup> of essays, unfinished chapters, short stories, etcetera. & non-fictive literature expounding the beliefs of Dr. Whitbread & his extended conceit throughout likening acid reflux to a warring creative process within the artist: two sides, fighting against one another. The boy did not get it but it sounded lovely coming out of mother's muscular mouth.

Of course the reason mother had begun to fill the boy's brain with such erudite longings was his obsession with late-night TV. It was the one movie entitled *Headcheese or: The Gloaming of the Dead*.<sup>viii</sup> The film was—on the whole—a rather pungent & offensive film directed by a man named Stephan Spielblood. The film was quite the horror show indeed as the plot centered around a group of promiscuous young vamps attempting to resurrect the corpse of Bela Lugosi only to, unfortunately, run into a militia of undead hell raisers hell-bent (pun intended) on human flesh. The boy had thought the entire film a farce & an offense to cinema in general but was quite aroused at the one gruesome death of the blonde vamp having her right nipple nibbled off by a particularly grisly ghoul who permeated an energy & resemblance similar to that of Oliver Hardy. The intertextualization, if unintended, pleased the boy. But mother—no, mother did not feel like this was



the type of show a young boy should be watching this late at night. So, she graciously put him to bed, waited until he fell asleep, then quickly turned the movie back on to watch the rather convoluted & digressive conclusion.

The smile, though, that mother has on her face right this instant—the suicidal electric neon blinking smile on her face— charmed the boy to no end. It was the perfect smile. A smile that lures you to your death, but you go willingly without question. Father did not have a smile like this smile that mother has. This could be why he offed himself, the boy thought. He even whispered to himself once, That smile could be the reason why father offed himself.

Nonetheless, the boy & mother lived happily in their arranged marriage. They loved each other & loved some more. The boy finally realized one night that all matters in sexual acts turn out—on the whole—to be sad & pathetic. But he wasn't sad because all he had to do was turn over in their pin-striped sheet set—the one that mother had chosen from a nice variety at the local retail store—& look into her face & see that smile, that smile. That “Ted-Bundy-Charmer” smile. Mother would ask him, while they lay there in love, Do you love me? & the boy would think about it for a minute, a second & he would marimba his eyebrows. & he will say Yes mother, Yes, I do love you Yes, I guess. & they will lay there: two halves of the same set. Divided but not conquered.<sup>ix</sup> & the boy will think to himself as he watches the mystery hum on their face: *division, diverge, di-virgin, diversion.*

Commentary, Fractured Errata, Dissociative Etcetera:

Notes, memories, afterthoughts, & the straight shit on the slanderous “Norman Bates Is My Mother”

The following is an amendment, that is to say, it makes amends for the grave injustices done to the portrayal of the boy in the former “story.” As the only confidant to the family who truly *knows* what happened, this is an attempt at righting the wrongs done in fictive literature such as this. The following is the only

half—the better half, if you will—that you will need to read to understand the leggings of mother’s story. Let me first start off by saying that mother is no saint, mother is no canvas or sculpture of Greek beauty. She is not Venus, but the Chimera. & we all know that the Chimera was three animals in one. Mother is a vague & omnipotent & compelling force in a boy’s life. It is not true that “a boy’s best friend is his mother,” although every mother wishes it to be. To have their own little friend, their own little doll to play with, to talk to, to dress up. A veritable mother’s little helper. You see, little girls aren’t good enough, you see. Mothers know this & so they cast them off to father, poor father. Poor little daddy’s girl. I’ve been with mother, you see, & she is no shepherd to the sheep... as in losing sheep or maybe if...if that’s the way the proverb goes, if it even is a proverb. No, mother is Poseidon: a Neptunian—or is it neptunium?—substance of primordial, no Jurassic & quantum grief. I will tell her story as if it were my story, like the back of my hand as it were. Yes, I will tell this slumgullion of a tale as if I were to eat it: with great precision & acumen in storytelling.

NOTE #1: Because the artificer of the former tale has already used footnotes—& rather insipid & dull ones at that—I am forced to use roman numerals for my corrections & commentaries. So please, do not think me a rapsallion in any sense of the word.

NOTE #2: You—as the reader—will want to compare my narrative voice with the former tale’s more loose-lipped “writer.” Please do not. We are not alike: *his* (or hers...it would not surprise me if mother wrote that fantastical drivel) is the pen of the mud-pig, dirty in his (or hers) own filth & lies while *mine* is the prose of clarity, of hard & rough penmanship. You will thank me for the truth & clarity later.

NOTE #3: If you enjoy my truthful banter here I recommend reading my next attempt at de-falsifying the truths set down by this certain “writer.” It is a short meta-fictive (quasi-essay, short fiction, chimerical verse-prose) called “The Lost Glove Is Happy.”

<sup>i</sup>The masterstroke of artistic artifice is already accomplished in the very first line of the tale. Mother has five different types of smiles? Hardly. Mother is very prone to frowning & has only smiled once in the lifetime in which I knew her. For purposes of posterity, here are some of her frowns, in order from oldest to most recent: the “does-the-roof-really-leak-or-is-it-my-own-consciousness-?” frown, the “he-couldn’t-get-it-up-last-night” frown, & the “liver-or-onions-?” frown. These were my favorite frowns because they were so human. Rarely does she vary her frowns & when she does, it is because she is in a forgiving mood, of which there are also rarer instances. I myself am a very pleasing person to be around & so it has perturbed my every waking moment to understand why mother had not been more pleasant in my presence. She taught me all the very best manners & politesse yet she herself exhibits none of them. Where I am a gentleman of the highest cloth, mother is a ribald woman of fire who follows her passions with great dexterity & un-alertness. Looking back on the whole situation now, I wonder if perhaps I could have had a greater influence on her emotional persona.

<sup>ii</sup>The *mise-en-scène* a disaster? I should think not. While the film’s production value was on the lower end of adequate, I should think that for the price the film cost to make, the *mise-en-scène* was of effective use. This is no doubt mother’s intervention. She loves films with extravagant & wordy scenes of exposition. I like films that area a little less understandable. Take for instance my favorite film of perhaps all time: *Riff-raff*.

The film is in the style of a Preston Sturges/'70s art-house/beatnik/neo-artistic/Hollywood proto-satire/independent/post-realist/David Lynchian/French New Wave/ Felliniesque-chic/with a *Citizen Kane* complex style. It is about identity, but it is also about the artist’s identity. & what of the artist who speaks for no one?—Anyway, the story begins with a writer who is writing this story you see & it’s about something. & so the writer decides to give a character in the story his name because, you know, what’s the harm in that?... it’s not like he’s going to be a character in his own story right. & so he gives a character in his story his own name & we’ll call that name Thelonious Moon. & Thelonious Moon is just a character, right? Well no actually, after awhile that character becomes the writer himself because how can he separate himself from the character on the page right? They’ve got the same name, it’s no mistake. & so this character continues to take on the qualities of the writer himself & it goes so far as to by the end, no one knows

for sure if the writer is the character or if the writer is just the writer. & what of the actor playing the writer? Does he himself feel like he is just an actor playing a writer on screen who may or may not be a character in a fictional book? Or is he just a character? Of course, I could be explaining this wrong, but you get the point nonetheless. Mother does not like this film to say the least.

<sup>iii</sup>Finally, something that is true...& it took only one paragraph. Yes, mother has great lunacy. She's loony in the morning, loony at lunch, & loony by dusk. I know this because I've seen her. You must take my word for it. I have seen her. Have you?

<sup>iv</sup>This memory is quite vivid in my mind, like a wet sock in a shoe. I'm being hovered over. It's mother. She's got a string in her hand & I follow the length of the string to my mouth, where it's mischievously wrapped around a loose molar. I can feel her sharp staccato tugs with the string in my mouth. The tooth won't budge. Father is sitting in a chair saying, "You're doing it wrong." Mother doesn't listen. Her eyes are like the sheen of a blade, Excalibur, & she knows it. She's wearing a smile that is, in actuality, a sharp hobgoblin's grin. This is the only time I've seen her smile: At the end of a long string attached to my throbbing tooth. Do you know forgiveness mother? No, she doesn't as she yanks hard & my head bobs in violence. I see the tooth attached to the string. It is bloody & I see mother. She looks at me. In my mind I see her taking the tooth & sucking the blood from its crevices. She tastes the blood & swallows it & looks at me & sez with her eyes, Peek-a-boo. I sleep with a nite-lite on later that night.

<sup>v</sup>Now, I can't testify to seeing mother & father *in medias intercourse* but I have seen the portrait on the dining room wall. It is a portrait of the three of them, us: mother, father, & baby boy complete with blue bib. Perhaps a year old at this point I look so alien. Mother & father are each smiling furtively. I can picture the photo negative in my mind: veiled, wispy, & chloroformed.

<sup>vi</sup>How apt a word: suicidal. Did father not commit suicide? Or was he—no, of course not, no. Mother has no other lovers except herself. The boy of the story could not commit such an act either. He might go mad, yes. He might go off in the lunacy of mother's light, yes. But he wouldn't... couldn't...right?

& speaking of father's suicide, mother was not so lenient in her grief-giving news. She had ice cubes in her mouth when she spoke. She said: Father's dead. & I said, Father? Dead? & she said: Yes, he's dead. Now go & get mommy's nail polish so you can paint her nails. & I said, Paint your nails? & she sighed in disgust & went to lie down. It is pain-

ful to write such things on paper. Imagine what I must be going through. No, I do not think it was suicide. I really don't. Something's rotten in the state of Denny's...but then again, it's my story against theirs & even against yours.

<sup>vii</sup>More like a bedpan of crackpot ideas & postmodern wanderings. Like this work itself, shallowly-comical in its title - "Norman Bates Is My Mother" - Keaton Whitbread's work is rambunctiously discursive & carries no rhyme or reason unless one happens to be looking for rhyme or reason. It is a tangential & furiously, no, obscenely grotesque work written by a loony-tuned mind. Mother would force-feed this down anyone's throat if she thought it would help them....help them?!? No no no sir, nothing so spuriously deranged could ever help anyone. It is self-indulgent. Like mother, it is self-indulgent. I am not self-indulgent. I am against the self-indulgent. I find the simpler things more life-affirming than anything else: my thoughts, my notebooks with my thoughts in them, my private place where I think my thoughts, my writings where my thoughts are transcribed to paper, &...well, I'll save that for another piece I guess. This is about mother & how she is nothing like a rose petal. I will make it about mother.

<sup>viii</sup>Let it be said, for the record & for posterity that the movie was *A Mexican Werewolf in America* & it was directed by Gore Lucas. It is not a film about undead beings, but of werewolves in America, & the werewolves happen to be of the Mexican persuasion. Yes, it does sound like quite the conservative horror movie but I assure you it wasn't, it isn't. The film was quite lubed with blood enough to no doubt fill the Grand Canyon, etc. Does that sound conservative to you? No it doesn't. Mother is conservative. She likes conserving things, keeping them as they are. It is quite strange. Hymns & Limbs.

<sup>ix</sup>All of this is mother's fault. It is. Really, it is. Mother is no Dorothy, & as much I would like to say that she is Toto, she is not Toto. Mother is Oz herself. The great & terrible Oz. Her magic is in diversion & subversion sure, but what the boy of the above story didn't know then & what I know now is that the real defense is in *conversion*...

If you smile & wink & say, "Ok, I'll paint your nails & 'collect your tears in a cup & drink them later so you won't be sad anymore' " ... that's the real subversion. This is how much I love you mother as you pick out my outfit, this is how much I need you mother as you fix my hair, this is how much I want you mother as you grab my hand, this is how much I love you mother as you give me some applesauce to eat as a snack before dinner. Maybe I've been harsh. She was there, always. Papa was a rolling stone but mama was a brick house. & when papa went roll-

ing, mother closed the shades to her windows & gave me applesauce. Now I think to myself: *convincing, converge, convirgin, conversion.*

I have one other memory where I can remember mother smiling. Father's just died & she's crying or maybe I'm crying or maybe the TV is crying. Either way, mother is in the kitchen. I'm sitting in the living room. I taste the rawness of hotpenny in my mouth. Mother comes out of the kitchen & sits next to me & gives me applesauce. & we just stare into the vague colors of the living room for a while & the TV isn't on. I look at her face & there it is: "Ted-Bundy-Charmer." Something turns in my stomach. I reach for the spoon. I think of father. Somewhere between applesauce & *Where the Wild Things Are*, there was crying.

*An Author's Postscript to Him/Herself*

"It would appear that I've overshot my wad here" :

1. Perhaps I got a little out of hand back there. Overshot my wad a little bit. But no matter—the important thing was that no one got hurt. Right? Good. I have to remind myself of who's speaking sometimes: child, mother, or narrator. Child acting as mother, mother acting as child, narrator acting as the child pretending to be mother, OR narrator acting as mother pretending to be the child, OR even mother acting as narrator manipulating the child, OR better yet child acting as mother pretending to narrate his (or) her own story while realizing now & again that he (or) she is not mother, while still narrating his (or) her own story. All stories are all stories I guess, even Norman Bates' story is someone else's somewhere: the key is to know how to tell that story. Not the story itself, but *how* the story is told.
2. & how about the writer who mothers that story? Can the writer be a good mother to his story? Awake in the middle of the night, when the owls are hooting & the stars yawning, just to rock it back to sleep? Etcetera. & in turn, will the story be a good mother to the writer? Etcetera.
3. We've got to figure out how to complicate this further: get this chimerica off the page & slithering/flying/roaring etcetera. This is a failure. We wonder if the audience will know the things that we know—if they will try & figure *it* out. Probably not—but then again, who would? & *it's* probably better that way, *we* like it that way. You know, it is true what they say: "the lost glove is happy."

## PORTRAIT

My grandmother parks her Buick  
sideways like we're in a rush.  
We step out to the glass tiles  
and brushed stainless steel  
that paint our favorite diner.  
The arrhythmic cadence of her steps  
spurs my worries,  
but she maintains her imbalance  
as we walk through the metallic doors.  
Diners have that distinctly crisp,  
stale air that's been circulating  
for the past fifty years—  
I inhale as much as I can,  
sifting history through my lungs.  
We claim our booth and it begins.  
She shares her bacon and stories  
filtered through her jagged Lower East Side accent.  
I absorb the blue eyes I inherited  
and the lilt of bleached blonde hair I didn't;  
I want to burn this image for the future.  
Every crease of her soft bark is a tree ring.  
She traces a circle around the edge  
of her husband's wedding ring,  
protecting it on a necklace,  
saying she'll leave it to me.  
She leans far over the lip of the table  
not out of weakness, but habit.  
The waitress brings us coffee  
in dense white ceramic diner mugs.  
My grandmother drinks it black, bitter,  
in slow, drawn sips.  
I douse mine in cream  
and take erratic gulps.  
We sit a bit longer

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in our cushy maroon booth,  
soft and springy,  
enjoying silences filled  
with the twanging of silverware  
and sizzling steam  
swirling through the kitchen -  
the Tao of a diner.  
This rhythm guides my thoughts,  
but the woman I've known for so long,  
sitting across from me, is unfazed.  
My grandmother's projector-eyes  
share more stories than the diner air.  
She sips her lukewarm coffee  
and looks through the window  
at nothing in particular.



## THE 100TH CHEMO

“Regrets. Regrets have filled me ever since  
he left. I don’t want you to regret your life.”

You are the smell of coffee and extra virgin  
olive oil. Hands are squeezing mine.  
Browning spots like bruised banana skin.  
Your rings of gold, the one carved with waves  
you promised to give to me when I was five.  
Back then I never could imagine you’d  
be sick. Your knuckles knotted like rope, your skin  
as soft as satin, hairless now. You are as  
strange to me as an articulate infant,  
white baldness is odd among familiar  
things. Your walls are hung with paintings done  
of proud nude women. Windows blink upon  
the bay and in the mornings you are found  
there staring at the lively water—waves  
that foam and curl beneath the daunting sun.

I’m young and living’s all I know, I can  
not take the hurt away or fears of being  
forgotten: You follow home the ones who show  
you love and eat their food until there’s nothing  
remaining like a ravenous stray dog.

Raymond was only trying to help you feel  
more like a woman when he used a brush  
to paint your face with blushing cheeks and lips  
the softest shade of pink and eyebrows too,  
dusted on like a doll’s. He only wanted  
you to feel alive but when I’d seen  
what he had done, I had to turn away  
so you wouldn’t see me crying. Your face  
looked nothing like what I remembered

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before you got sick. Instead you appeared like  
the dead in caskets made up to look  
as if they haven't already left this world.  
The chemo chars your florid skin. Hair,  
once so thick, now comes out in chunks. Your eyes  
without the lashes make you look too young.  
"You think I should purchase a hat?" You say and rub  
your nervous hand across your head. "I think  
you look fine." I smile and wrap my arm  
around your tiny shoulders, pulling you close.

"When I was in my twenties there wasn't much  
I couldn't do. I taught school and used  
to be a waitress too. Had kids when I  
was twenty-two, I gave and gave and felt  
so unappreciated for it all."

Your voice pales, you fidget quietly with  
your fingers. "All I ever wanted was to  
be loved the way I loved everyone else."  
The eyes below your paper thin eyelids  
look fiercely at me saying it's my job  
to love you more. Claiming I'm the problem too.

And when the cancer storms your bones like ants  
you crumble like bread into my hands. Your life  
has been about defeat, beginning with  
your husband leaving you. My words won't  
save you from the terror that surrounds  
your grey eyes. You ask me "must I go  
if I'm not ready?"

Questions singe the air  
like lightning never striking answers. Clouds  
encase the space between your fears and mine.  
"Give me your youth, your light without mistakes  
before I fade away—my bones, my flesh  
you're all the hope I have."

If only there

were something I could say to make you stay  
here a while longer. If there were  
the perfect words somewhere out there waiting  
to be said so that you could be here  
with me until we're both ready to let  
you go. But I can't think of anything  
to say except that I am just as scared as you.

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## LOOKING INTO HER TOY BOX WITH A LOVER

Cicada-song is shrill, a tinnitus  
of the wilds. The aging air is open  
to take my silence to new rooms, roads  
I have not walked since June when I  
was twelve. We didn't know each other then.  
We've cracked the balcony door and let the dark  
wade in with copper streaks from each street-lamp  
so we can take the operation piece  
by piece, divided by our frail half-vision.  
If I see too much at once, I won't  
have time to recollect that early joy before  
the tears can break. Joy, a word too unlike  
contentment I've assumed to take its place.

I glance outside as you tilt up the top  
and you pretend not to stall, to wait  
for my reaction. You wonder why I fear  
the chest I once thought held my young-life's  
reserves and compasses. I can't look up  
from those Victorian dolls and Siamese  
cats with faces stuffed to look so human,  
identical to mine, and time turns  
to moisture in my eyes. Our lungs mimic  
drowning, a soft open-mouthed storm.  
Was this really me? The stable picture  
in my brain has changed its frequency.  
I thought I dreamed this girl up years ago.

It's like we are bent by a river, all the fish  
dead, and while we wait for time to shift,  
to reinvent itself as some romance,  
we shape ourselves a web for two in the sun  
of memories that every child knew,  
communal sighs, and clover, dandelions,  
where we still trust in little plastic things  
worth more to me now, for I give them pity  
and show them most emotion here, in their  
late-years. We wake our river, make it real  
to both of us, and we remember days  
each other lived, though we were never there.

Did I birth you anew just now; did you  
birth me? Your crow's feet crinkle like sheets  
beside eyelids in light so meek but pure  
and only ours. I bellow with my brain  
to reach the siren sound in corn where crickets  
hear my tenderness, and harmonize.

Tonight we know why all eyes have reflections,  
the prism-sheath that will not lie or err--

so we can see ourselves within our loves.

## CASTLES MADE OF SAND

After several hours of agonizing driving through the mid-summer heat, the Feckless family finally, and gratefully, made it to the unending blue of the Atlantic. Mr. Feckless stretched his unusually short arms and sighed happily at the astounding beauty surrounding him and his family, while an agitated Mrs. Feckless puffed out her cheeks and sank low in her seat, still irritated from the long and boring ride. However, their son Ralph could not summon up an opinion to define the impossibly large and imposing place his father had brought him to, this unending ocean. He scrunched up his face and scrutinized the sand, the sun, and the waves, but could not imagine what such a place might have in store for him, only that he felt an innate sense of excitement, as though he might accomplish something very important here. This beach seemed a paradise to Ralph.

“Isn’t it beautiful? Ralph, do you think it’s beautiful?”

“I think so. I’m not sure.”

“Not sure?” Ralph’s father laughed at the silliness of children. “You’ll love it! Trust me.”

Ralph looked at the distant horizon. “I’ll love it...”

His parents exchanged a quick glance. His father coughed and his mother shifted uncomfortably.

“Alright Ralph, go off and play. Lunch will be ready when you get hungry.”

Ralph’s large blue eyes turned inquisitively toward his mother. *To play alone?* He hesitated to open the door to begin playing *alone*, a terrifying concept. The boy supposed it might be because his father, right before the trip, had told his mother – they assumed Ralph was asleep during this conversation instead of hiding on the stairs—that Ralph was no longer a baby and could safely venture out by himself. He’s almost a *teenager* for chrissakes! Well, Ralph didn’t know what all that meant, but he knew that opening the car door now terrified him beyond all his wildest dreams; a lonesome desert lay beyond it.

“Go on Ralph. It’s okay.”

The old door creaked open with a gentle push from the child's hand. Ralph placed his left foot on the sand. Then the right. Then he slid out of the rusty station wagon and took a few uncertain steps toward the ocean.

With each unsupervised step, Ralph imagined his heart pounding less and less as he left his parents behind. He strode as though he were walking in very deep water, attempting to ignore his childish fears of falling, loneliness, failure. He hoped all possibilities were lying just over the next dune, singing temptingly to him.

Naturally, Ralph understood this freedom was won partly because his parents had some matters to discuss. That was what they said when they didn't want Ralph listening to any arguing - "matters to discuss". Ralph did not quite understand why his parents didn't want him to hear the argument; none of it made a bit of sense anyway. In the car on the way here, they had gotten into some sort of discussion, but Ralph couldn't leave the moving car to *let* them discuss and was thus placed into an intensely uncomfortable situation. He tried pretending to be invisible—like a small tadpole or an octopus— but of course it didn't work and he had felt awkward and strange. He could feel his parents searching him out with their unhappy eyes as they spoke to one another with a low growling in their voices, softly tearing at one another. Ralph did not know. Ralph could not begin to understand the realm of adults.

But he breathed out all these worries, which then promptly caught on a breeze that blew out to sea. Waves splashed playfully about his feet, spraying a net of tiny salt-water droplets up his legs. Ralph found the chill fantastic, as if small snowflakes were forming on his skin and then disappearing, never to be heard from again. Ralph noticed the sun spilt about the sand, as if someone had dropped a large pitcher of light that soaked into everything like warm dye. The stones and sand and calcified bodies scraped the bottoms of Ralph's feet and tried to pull his toes deeper into the damp and salty earth. Everything seemed to beg for someone, some little boy, to spend the day playing until exhaustion. Ralph soon decided to build a sandcastle.

Playing the precocious young architect, the boy quickly

adopted a peculiar seriousness while he scouted for the ideal place for his castle. He felt it was surely the most important undertaking of his life, the crowning moment of his childhood, and that this castle simply must mimic the ones in his dreams. It would have a hundred floors with twelve towers - each with a spiral staircase - too many windows to count, a moat, a bridge, a courtyard. A dining hall with seats for two hundred guests, and halls made of gold, lapis lazuli, with mirrors - like Versailles! And bedrooms the size of tennis courts with comforters adorned with pearls and quicksilver and training rooms to practice swordsmanship for the young, aspiring knights who would one day be known throughout the world. This castle would not house mere men, but gods like Zeus and Poseidon. Ralph, dreams in hand, decided to build on the dark, moist sand close to the water.

Out of the sand grew the beginnings of bricks, mortar, and pestle. Unfinished stairs crawled up around an unfinished tower and ended as an unshapely lump still waiting patiently to transform into something. Ralph used shells as delicate shovels and chiseled tediously with thin beach grasses, his creation sprouting walls and windows indiscriminately and then suddenly remembering to fashion another aspect of the castle, and dismembering entirely the ones already begun. Ralph tired away at his creation for hours, eons, painstakingly giving attention to every insignificant detail until it was perfect. He had forgotten entirely about lunch.

About half way through the building process, a loud, intolerable squawking jabbed painfully into Ralph's admirable concentration. A winged monster, black and white, with some sort of wreath wrapped about its neck, stared Ralph down in challenge, and squawked again. Startled, Ralph quickly grabbed a piece of driftwood he had hoped to utilize as a bridge and decided it would function better as a sword.

Ralph stood squarely with the beast, driftwood sword in hand, returning the challenge of the abomination threatening his castle. He took a step towards the enemy and the monster returned by reeling its beady black eyes and spreading its razor-edge wings, heralding an attack soon to come, all the while screaming, screaming. Ralph took another step and readied himself. This was it! He



began to storm the beast...

"Ralph! That castle is beautiful," Ralph's father laughed as he walked towards his son. "Don't worry, the gull won't destroy it. That poor thing looks like it's trapped in some plastic. Poor bird."

Ralph shook his head, startled. *His father!* The boy had forgotten about him.

Ralph's father made a whistling noise as he knelt down next to the unfinished castle. "This castle sure is something, though, son. Maybe you'll be an architect one day." He laughed.

"I don't know," the boy shifted uncomfortably.

The man stood up and looked out at the sea. "You know, Ralph, you can do whatever you want to do. I mean, you could be anything in the world if you wanted. An architect or whatever. An astronaut."

"I guess," Ralph replied uncertainly.

"Anything, Ralph, anything in the world."

There was a pause.

"You know son, when I was your age I wanted to be a pilot in the Air Force. I worked for years to get there. Every day, I would run as far as I could, exercise. When I was alone, I'd even spread my arms out like wings and run around the yard looking pretty darn silly. I remember looking up at the sky, seeing the jets, and thinking, 'That could be me one day.'" The man laughed and then, paused for a moment as the laugh faded from his face. "Then I go to the recruitment center, and they tell me my body isn't suited for flying." Ralph saw his father's face become very grim. The man turned and went to touch the castle, but his fingers stopped just short of the sand.

"But, you're not like me, Ralph. You're smarter than me. I know you won't make the same mistakes I did. You're going to do something great, I know it."

"Um."

"Say it Ralph. Say 'I'm going to do something great.'"

"I don't want to."

"Say it, Ralph."

The boy repeated his father's words in a quiet, embarrassed voice.

"Well, alright, son. You hold to that."

On the wind, the voice of his mother drifted and swirled like a whirlpool. Suddenly, Ralph became acutely aware how hard the wind was blowing. The vicious wind made her words barely discernable.

*"Look at the sky! We have to leave!"*

Ralph looked skyward. Black clouds ate away at the remaining blue of the sky, as the sun attempted to make his run for the horizon. From far away, lightning arched and zigzagged in ferocious spider webs sent from the gods themselves, while thunder rolled across the sea in a great looming sound. Enormous black waves followed, gathering up sea foam as they went along. Both crashed deafeningly on the shore. Ralph and his father ran back from the sea, the wind pushing the two as if they were unwelcomed guests who had stayed too long. Terrified, Ralph watched his screaming mother from afar walk unnaturally, like a marionette, against the wind to retrieve her violet headscarf that was currently billowing out across the choppy waves. Quickly, the family gathered up their things, and fled from the oncoming storm into the relative safety of the old station wagon.

Ralph's father made another whistling noise. "*Christ*, that storm came outta nowhere!"

"Let's just go before we get caught in it," Ralph's mother replied tempestuously.

The boy glanced back at the shore and saw the tiny outline of his castle, his creation. In all the running, he had forgotten his castle!

He shook his father's arm fervently. "Dad! Dad, will my castle be okay?" Ralph asked, holding back tears.

"Well, son, I'm fairly certain the waves will wash it away. You put it too close to the shore, Ralph," his father laughed. Ralph jerked his small body around to look back at the shore, if only to see it once more. But, it was too late. An enormous black-green wave flecked rabidly with foam rose up and crashed on the helpless castle. When the water washed back into the vast ocean there was nothing left.

## THEY USED TO TALK ABOUT BURNING CITIES

My parents used to talk about a burning city at dinner  
as a metaphor for my brother.  
The legs of the glossed wooden table rose up in four points  
and made the oaky outline of a battered cornered coffin.  
The horizon was on the other side,  
but it would always roll back toward the sink.

I heard my mother and my father talking.  
I can't remember how sick anger made me  
or if the medicine was strong enough.  
I wanted to think about their ability to forget him  
and how their stone faces pushed mercury up my thermometer;  
but the grinding of my teeth and a mortar and pestle drowned out  
my thoughts.  
In children's classics they shipped medicine to cities that were in  
trouble.  
The medicine never made it to cities that burned in the night.

Everyone forgot about the city.  
I wanted to run through its departed streets,  
to laugh at films that never stopped playing in empty theaters.  
Mannequins in ruined buildings, avatars for dust and charcoal  
skies.  
Burnt out dance studios where beautiful pink people had pirouet-  
ted.

My father would go to the sink to wash his hands after dinner.  
He scrubbed his fingers and palms to the point where the red, raw  
flesh looked like blood  
creeping out sore skin.  
I knew what he was trying to wash away.  
Nobody else ever noticed; they had forgotten about hands and the

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city by now.

I wish I could visit but the subways don't run there anymore;  
the routes were all crossed out with permanent black ink pens.  
Those pens always had a crimson tint when they dried.  
They took the city off the map, they said:  
*You need to forget him.*

It was only when my sickness got worse that the hallucinations  
began.

I saw the city but the buildings, parks and people were back.  
Laughing, I ran and crashed into him like a pile of leaves.  
He scattered on a dusty breeze,  
the same way that wind takes ash when everything you love  
burns to the ground.

## SIMS TREK

Donald is the biggest loser in town. Others have the distinction of being the Village Drunk, the Local Idiot, and the Town Harlot, but Donald (not Don) is the Town Loser. However, he is not the Town Nerd, because that's Donald's older brother Tom, whose biggest accomplishment was President of the High School AV club by the fact that he was its only member (Donald was too busy with community theater, where he was constantly typecast as the raving monologue man).

Last Saturday night, Tom was hogging the computer because he had a virtual date with his lady friend from Detroit. Donald stood up from the overused armchair in front of their lone television, turned off ESPN's presentation of the World's Strongest Lumberjack Competition and approached his brother as he sat staring at the computer screen.

"Tom, I'm bored."

"Buy ngops!"

"Tom, the Trekkie convention isn't for another two months. Can we please go out tonight?"

"Well sure, you're literally saying 'The plates are full', but it means 'That's great!'"

"Tom!"

Tom spun around in his chair, one of his pointy ear extensions falling off. "Hab sosli quch!"

The muted screaming from the computer speakers was like a furious cat in heat. Tom turned around quickly, typing furiously and muttering, "No, no, NO, Melinda, I did not mean to say that—your mother doesn't have a smooth forehead—it's just my stupid brother—yeah, he's such a *mug'ato*, I know—"

"AGH, I've had ENOUGH!" Donald stormed over to Tom and stomped on the fallen ear extension. "You speak Klingon more to MELINDA than you talk to ME!" He left, continuing to stomp all the way out and drove off in a fit of rage in their 1983 Volkswagen.

Donald didn't drive for hours, since it was a fairly small

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town, and after going around the same block six or seven times he came to realize that the Depeche Mode cassette was near destruction and his Saturday wasn't getting any more exciting. Looking at the clock, he saw the numbers flip over from 7:48 to 7:49. How to salvage the night?

The woman at the Wal-Mart checkout was nice enough to ask him how his night was going. Launching into a monologue that would have made the community theater director proud, Donald said, "My night is going well, thank you, though my brother is hogging the computer and I'm—he's a big loser. I'm the World's Strongest Lumberjack and I like to watch stuff on ESPN that isn't too invigorating or team-oriented, like the Donald Competition." He gestured to the computer game as it sat in the bag. "I bought the Sims 2 because I am dissatisfied with the way my life is going and how my brother still hogs everything even though I'm older. I'm planning on living vicariously through my characters and showing Tom who's boss."

"Well that's—that's wonderful for you."

"Why thank you. Do you play computer games often?"

"Um, occasionally—" she stuttered, eyes trailing to the long line forming at this single open register.

"Oh, I see, you're busy. Allow me to introduce myself before I go? I'm Donald."

"I'm Rosie," she said cautiously.

"I'm enamored."

"And I say have a great night." She handed him the bag, his receipt, and his dignity all in one fell swoop and went on to the next customer.

The next day, Donald bought Rosie a bouquet of flowers, put on his best suit and top hat and walked right in to Wal-Mart to propose. Rosie gratefully accepted, leaping into his arms and claiming she would gladly be the wife of the World's Strongest Lumberjack.

Or so he fantasized when he watched his doppelganger Sim Dmitri Desiderius propose to his roommate Rosie, whom he had met and fallen in love with in the span of twenty minutes. Spurned and feeling a bit rejected, Donald had created for himself

a look-alike and a potential love interest just to see how far he could get his virtual self. Suave and debonair, Dmitri was a Leo with a Popularity Aspiration—but had too few Active Points to want to be anything more than a world-famous Artist. Rosie, whom Donald had naively assigned a Romance Aspiration, had only wanted to WooHoo with Dmitri and fall in love with him from the start. She took their marriage hard, but found solace in being promoted from a golf caddy to a gas station attendant.

While mildly surprised that Rosie's interests were soon to have two and three other loves than Dmitri, Donald supposed that it was a phase that would pass after years of blissful marriage. To make Dmitri a more inspired Sim, Donald had him sit every day at the piano or stand in front of the easel finger painting his way toward worldwide artistic recognition. What Dmitri seemed to enjoy the most—because it required the least effort—was writing novels on their SimPuter 3000 to escape the daily grind of, well, writing.

*Excerpts from My First Novel, by Dmitri Desiderius*

This is my first novel and it is titled My First Novel and it is a novel about my life writing a novel. My name is Dmitri Desiderius. I live in a one-room house with no roof, no paint, no wallpaper, a pink refrigerator, a leaky shower and a neon pink flamingo on the front lawn. We have the best computer available from the Sim Shop and I'm writing this novel on it. It is lime green. I want to be popular with lots of friends and success in the Art World—that is what kept flashing in my dream bubbles last night—but right now I have the overwhelming urge to be creative so I'm writing a novel. I live with Rosie. She is very pretty and I spend most of my time not writing thinking if she wants to WooHoo with me like I want to WooHoo with her. When I haven't been writing, I've been communicating with her a lot by chatting, sharing interests, bragging, entertaining her with a joke, charming her, and even telling her a dirty joke yesterday (!). We're best friends—we chatted more and even flirted some until my appreciative back rub made two green smiley faces swirl above our

heads. She's the only person I know in the whole entire world and she's my best friend. She learns how to cook while I write my novel and paint my pictures and she makes me grilled cheese. I love grilled cheese and could eat them forever. I hope this novel sells for a lot of money!

Inspired by his counter-ego's love success, Donald was moved to return to the Wal-Mart to visit Rosie, with one lucky Tuesday leaving her ringing him up four times within an hour. On the fifth trip through her lane, Donald finally worked up the nerve to say something to her.

"I see your finger is on the panic button, and your big friend Bernie in Security over there has been eyeing me for some time. Now I hope you're not feeling jealous of the attention Bernie has given me, but I secretly hope you do. Anyway, I like you, Rosie. I'm sorry that I visit you all the time, but I'm bored and lonely at home and my brother is a loser and all he does is talk to other Trekkies online. I prefer the Sims, myself."

She smiled at him and winked. "Do you make a copy of yourself and live vicariously through him?"

He returned her smile and felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Bernie.

While our Don Juan tried to romance the cashiers of Wal-Mart, Dmitri lived the Sim Life of luxury. Though he worked and slaved away at his computer through the day and night, at both normal and 3x speed, his first novel sold for just \$1754 (simoleons). Rosie was in love with both Dmitri and the neighbor, Pete. It was a complicated mess to make sure that Rosie and Pete interact outside or in the bathroom so Dmitri couldn't see them flirting or making out and get jealous. But Dmitri knew—his thought bubbles of Pete were filled with angry flames whenever he saw him!—and he took out his frustrations through attempting a romance novel.

*Excerpts from Saga of a Hopeless Romantic Who is in Love with an Impetuous Peasant*

Once upon a time in a stupendously beautiful cha-



teau somewhere in the Northern Pyrenees a long, long time ago there was a French Duke named Dmitri who was single and lonely and forlorn.

To solve his predicament, Duke Dmitri would go on long pensive walks in the valley to ponder the vast mysteries of the universe and resolve why he did not have a love to call his own. One day he saw a beautiful peasant who seemed to be sulking over her sylvan duties. She was sullen and sultry. He approached her and they shared interests for a very long, long time, long after the light had suddenly switched from day to night. Her name was Rosie, and she was flaxen-haired and fair-skinned and pious and a bit of a spitfire. Time moved very fast, and soon they were in love and she would come to visit at the chateau. She told him she liked his armor and his sword and he said he enjoyed her grilled cheese sandwiches. They WooHooed three or even four times a day—sometimes even in the hot tub!—and they made promises to one another that their love would be virtuous, true, never-ending, and eternal.

In time, the quixotic Duke Dmitri noticed from his balcony that far, far away at the bottom of the valley Rosie would go on long walks—like she had done with Duke Dmitri!—with Pete, her peasant neighbor. Though Duke Dmitri felt an undeniable jealousy of the couple, even burning with rage sometimes at the mere thought-bubble of Peasant Peter—he decided that he had to be happy for what he could get, even if it was a wonderful, romantic, satisfying, and fulfilling connection with Rosie while she had the same with someone else. But he could not stop obsessing over why she could not love him and him alone, why she had to find another for complete romantic satisfaction, and why he should be allowed dissatisfaction once he had found someone that made him so happy.

Duke Dmitri found Peasant Peter one day and beat the gizzards out of him. Then Dmitri and Rosie lived happily ever after and had ten children.

Though Dmitri was ensnared in a tangled web of Rosie's lust and deceit, Donald's life was looking up. He returned to Wal-Mart, dragging Tom with him so that he could engage Bernie in a one-sided discussion of smooth versus wrinkled Klingon foreheads while Donald slipped past. Finding and apologizing to Rosie for the restraining order that had been placed on him, he remained the appropriate fifteen feet away from her register.

"I am sorry!" he yelled. "Can I make this up to you at an Internet Café sometime?"

"Why yes!" she screamed back. "But you must promise me you'll maintain the fifteen-foot approach radius."

Though Donald attempted to keep at least fifteen feet away from her on their first date, it was difficult to hold open the door for her or hold a conversation when they were seated at tables in opposite corners of restaurants. In time, they ignored the mandated distance and sometimes even went to Donald's house to watch TV together (but certainly not ESPN, and most definitely not the World's Strongest Lumberjack contest). Though brought together by their mutual love of the Sims, they soon found that life existed outside of the internet world and found things like nature, cooking, and good books. They went on long walks and discussed philosophy and who made a good cheesesteak.

Whenever Rosie left, and Donald found himself nearly bored to tears, he would sit down to play the Sims and see where it could go. However, he found himself feeling worse and worse about the course that Dmitri's life had taken—he would never want Rosie to want another person while they were dating! In the pursuit of creative mastery, Dmitri was never happy, always hungry, always needed a shower, and was always sitting at his computer slaving away.

To further deepen Donald's misery at Dmitri's plight, he looked at what he had allowed to happen to the Desiderius household. Rosie was now engaged in several illicit affairs with the neighbor Peter, the other neighbor Bill, the maid, the fireman, the police officer, and the gardener (they WooHooed every third day). Dmitri was completely dejected all the time – even his plumbbob (the little diamond thing that hangs above every Sims' head to in-

indicate their mood) has turned from a happy green to an ugly red-dish-orange whenever he saw Rosie with her other loves. One day, Donald tried to make an exhausted Dmitri try to fix the broken dishwasher and watched, helpless, as Dmitri was fried to a crisp when he put the wrench in the outlet. Bolts of energy shot through his body and his hair stood on end. The Grim Reaper even appeared! Donald watched as Rosie begged for his life and Dmitri was saved from Death. After a shower, Dmitri sat down to write another novel cataloguing his experiences on the Other Side.

*Excerpts from Beyond the Grave*

Dmitri saw the other side the other day. In a flash he could nearly see the electrical current as it passed across the silver-plated monkey wrench and into his body, its vibrant blue tone cracking through him as he saw lightning and stars and galaxies far beyond this one. In the infinite blackness that followed he spied a big white rectangle, growing closer and closer. When it came into focus, he realized that it had two arrows forming a never-ending circle and the words RECYCLE BIN printed beneath them.

He flew towards it and was suddenly dumped in, landing in an endlessly tall white room where space and time did not matter. Looking around, he saw piles and piles of papers stacked off in the distance. Approaching the wall, he saw that it was covered with bad pictures of what Dmitri could only identify as the Biggest Loser he had ever seen. Terrible elevator music played at a deafening volume, as he stood alone in the Bin, as he guessed it was called. Was this heaven?

Dmitri awakened suddenly to find Rosie standing over him and the quickly fading shadow of where the Grim Reaper had stood, still smoking with his odious stench. He hugged Rosie tight and felt the tombstone revolve above them. Points of experience and aspiration added above his head, but the curious knowledge of something after SimLife was both intriguing and troubling. He couldn't sleep that night, so he tried to watch the cooking channel and found it

unsatisfying. Painting a still life of their staid living room was his next attempt at normalcy, but he couldn't stop thinking of it. Finally, he went out to the telescope and stargazed all night and into the morning, when Peter the neighbor came over and beat up Dmitri for spying on him through his window with the telescope.

Dmitri knows there's something out there after SimLife. He's just not quite sure what it is yet.

Once he and Rosie were so involved, Donald barely had time to play anymore—nor did he really have the desire to stare at the screen all day long. He was living vicariously for himself, and thus left the computer vacant much of the time. Tom had his heart broken not long after Donald and Rosie began dating because Melinda, his virtual girlfriend, turned out to be Mitchell from Detroit. Distraught, and extremely passive-aggressive, Tom took to playing the Sims rather than chatting with those smoothforeheaded fools online and forced Dmitri to work all day as the gas station attendant. Furthermore, he allowed Rosie to lounge around the house, with her not-so-secret loves answering her every beck and call while Dmitri slaved away to put grilled cheese on their table.

Their new neighbors, Tim and Melinda, who both had strangely pointy ears and spent large amounts of time looking through their telescopes, lived life in the lap of luxury while Dmitri and Rosie struggled to make ends meet. Tom—who could now be Tom the Town Sadist—sold all their wallpaper and windows in order to finance their meaningless lives. Depressed beyond all compare, Dmitri no longer wrote novels—they had to sell the computer long ago. Rather, he sat in the corner and journaled, writing down his concerns for the money and wondering why everything in his house kept disappearing.

*Excerpts from Diary of a Mad Sim named Dmitri*

I woke up to find the kitchen wall missing today. I yelled at Rosie for awhile, with flames behind my speech bubbles and loud shouts about simoleons paired with wild hand gestures, but no one seemed to notice or care—not even the maid. Rosie was upset (though I think it's mostly

because she found out the maid and the fireman are at it again) and tried to make grilled cheese for lunch, but instead she set the entire kitchen on fire—but not the wall, since it's missing—and we all stood around screaming and turning in circles. Rosie tried to extinguish it, but she burned up too and the Grim Reaper came for her. I loved her!

But everyone else loved her too, and I guess with eight Sims all gathered around the Reaper, he couldn't hear my most earnest pleas.

*[interlude: uncontrollable sobbing]*

I guess Rosie's on the other side now in that great Recycling Bin. Will she be used again? Would it be possible to have her back, but only in love with me? Will she fall in love with that manila folder?

Is the manila folder God?

One day, upon returning home after a week-long camping trip to the Adirondacks, Donald found that Tom had moved out, taking everything of his with him to Arizona in order to pursue deep space research. However, in his haste Tom had left the computer on with the game running, and from the looks of the scene on the screen Donald knew it was all over.

Tom had removed the front door, the telephone, and even all the windows, leaving Dmitri alone in a sparse room with a toilet, the pink refrigerator, a sink, the dishwasher, and a bookshelf made of concrete blocks. Dmitri was nowhere to be found, but a small urn sat sullen and alone in the middle of the plywood floor. A notebook lay next to it. Compelled, Donald clicked on it to see what his options were. The only one was "Read This."

I am all alone with nothing but these four walls and my refrigerator. I don't even have a window to admire my flamingo through anymore. I tried and tried again and again to break and fix the dishwasher, but my mechanical points are so built up now that I could probably *be* a mechanic.

But I don't even have a front door!

I'm watching myself grow older and older every day and there's nothing I can do to stop the progression. I'm getting fatter and fatter, but who is there to impress? Rosie is gone, and I can't even let anyone in because I have no front door. My only hope is to write down these feelings of mine and hope that someday, somewhere, the sick bastard who has done this to me is held accountable for everything that's happened in my life. Why was I even created? I just grow and gain skill points and then waste away to nothing here, all alone, with naught but my unseen pink flamingo for company.

Is the flamingo even there anymore?

## MESSAGE: ABSENCE FOR ALLEN GINSBERG

*"In two months, I won't be anywhere, and  
my eyes will be shut, for there is no better place to look."*

You are a plant at my bedside  
with eyes wide and dripping.  
A plant without its roots in the earth.  
I heave wrinkled language at the wall  
and dare say I live:  
my feet, wrapped in cotton.  
You and I row through the mire of absences,  
a mute chasm unfilled  
by god, or books,  
or friends, who divine more passion  
than my fractured mind can try.

But, you will not break under rain's galoshes.  
As when I step to the drenched earth,  
out of nothing pools, my ankle snaps, green filaments flying.  
And when the sun turns over from sleep, you turn back,  
planet in orbit.

I find your message:  
your slim green hand,  
flat and slightly furred between my fingertips.  
All else is a continuous dearth,  
filling and filling, as my feet grow deep  
into the earth. I am crying because I have never loved absence so.  
With my eyes shut,  
my feet, tubers,  
stretched whitely down,  
like the split hairs of old women,  
in all directions.

## LUNCH WITH CANDIDE

*"Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." - Nietzsche*

If cups of tea were measured by Candide,  
he'd dare to touch five thousand sallow lips  
and resurrect their connate thirst for greed.

His hands would gorge the mouths of those in need  
then ask the bemused fools to blindly sip  
from cups of steam as measured by Candide.

Appraisal for his generous works and deeds  
would come from rustics, too quick to equip  
and resurrect his lustful thirst for greed.

With brewing vein he would begin to weed  
the righteous from the filth so they could grip  
their noble worth as measured by Candide.

His words would tell his zealots they were free  
while binding wills with antiquated whips  
to resurrect his mastered thirst for greed

until his finite flesh would start to bleed  
and swollen mouth would slowly start to drip  
exposing resurrected thirst for greed  
in cups of blood as measured by Candide.



# BEHOLD! MAN OF UNBELIEF! BEHOLD!

“Lanyon, my life, my honour, my reason are all at your mercy. Think of me in a strange place, laboring under a blackness of distress that no fancy can exaggerate: yet if you will punctually serve me, my troubles will roll away like a story that is told. If not, you have seen the last of your friend Henry Jekyll.”

-Henry Jekyll, “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”

He only is to blame:  
Jekyll is in deadly peril.  
You are in my power now.  
The greed of curiosity has  
Jekyll in deadly peril.  
Remember your vows, Lanyon.  
The greed of curiosity has  
too much command of you.  
Remember your vows, Lanyon,  
and you shall see and know all  
too much command of you;  
Learn marvels of which  
you shall see and know all.  
Sleep in peace:  
learn marvels of which  
Hippocrates never dreamed!

Sleep in peace.  
Now, to settle what remains.  
Hippocrates never dreamed;  
my impatience has shown its heels.

Now... to settle what remains:  
you are in my power now.  
My impatience has shown its heels  
and only Jekyll is to blame.

## TOMORROW COMES TODAY

*I* walked slowly through the darkness up the Main Street sidewalk, the biting chill of late autumn's fury whipping the slick material of my windbreaker back and forth. I clutched the paper bag in my right hand tighter against the wind. My shadow flashed before me as a vehicle rushed past. The air rang out with an earsplitting eruption from the SUV as it backfired. I stumbled slightly, my shoe catching on a crack in the pavement-

Then I woke up.

Breathing heavily, I blinked back into consciousness, starting up at nothing, my head swimming. My Star Wars T-Shirt was drenched and clinging to my chest. My dorm room was pitch-black, save the tiny glow from my clock. I hadn't had a dream since I was eight years old- I didn't even remember what they were like anymore. So maybe that wasn't a dream at all, what did I know? It was just a flash, a niggling little notion I couldn't hold onto, fading as quickly as it had come.

I raised a hand up slowly, able to feel the slickness between my fingers. Everything looked the same at night, lathered with the same murky, blue-black color scheme. I sighed softly, shifting my head slightly against the pillow, trying to get comfortable again. It was a task I'd been failing at for 3 months, until just a few hours ago.

My room, at the end of the second floor hall of equally indistinguishable doors, was a single, one of only two. Comfort was a difficult commodity to come by, both on a campus of thousands and in my bedroom-sized space. Behind me, on the opposite side of the wall, I heard a toilet flush. That was the guy down in 214, right on schedule. He could take that piss in his sleep (which he might've on occasion, actually).

Outside my door, I could hear two voices—female—firing back and forth in Spanish. They sounded agitated about something; concerned, maybe. Those were the cleaning ladies, hired to come in when no one was supposed to see them and clean up the messes left behind by fifty careless freshmen every day. Invisible,

for all intents and purposes, except to those like me who stayed up too late on weekdays writing papers. Had I stained the carpeting with mud on my way back in earlier?

Between classes and work, most of my spare time was spent in my room, writing papers, reading, or studying. When I needed to stretch my legs I just paced the room, sometimes stopping at the door to glance out into the hall. The floor was old and creaky, especially just outside my door. The girls in 212 always went to dinner at 5:37. Room 206 was always where the party ended up on Friday nights, but it usually started in 216. And so on.

I knew all the routines, all the patterns of this daily life that left me behind while I was out scrounging for tuition money, from my incessant curiosity, fueled by a two-inch thick wooden barrier to hide behind. It made me feel kind of like Jimmy Stewart in "Rear Window," except no one here was hacking up their wife and dumping her chunk by bloody chunk into a river. No one here was that interesting. Almost no one.

I was really only interested in one room anyway: 201, the only other single on the floor besides mine, at the opposite end of the hall. 201 who had pink shower sandals that showed off her crimson-painted toenails; 201 whose laptop, which she carried almost everywhere, looked more like an art collage than a piece of machinery, covered in an eclectic mixture of punk-rocker stickers and chibi anime characters; 201 who lined her door with a short string of orange lights on Halloween.

201 who was an introvert, like myself. 201 who had taken down the nametag on her door before I even got to learn her name...

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*I leaned back in my seat, rubbing my eyes, fighting against the strain of gazing into the blue-white light of my computer screen. I opened my eyes again, staring up at the ceiling. Eight hours ago, coming out of Sociology, she had smiled at me. In passing, maybe even just politely (since I had held the door for her), but nonetheless, I had that small, tight-lipped memory to draw upon at my discretion. It was enough; a smile could keep me going for days. Contact, a cursory conversation or a greeting in passing, longer still. If I ever worked up the nerve to ask her out-*

*better still, if she said 'yes'- I doubt even the angels could see the soles of my sneakers from cloud nine.*

*Tonight was going to be that night.*

*Then I woke up.*

Gasping, wheezing, I shivered against the chill seeping in from the lone window. I reached up with my right hand (I must've slept on its twin, as it wouldn't move), pushing my bangs out of my eyes. Usually the heat in my room was stifling, but tonight... tonight it was so cold I couldn't even feel my toes, my legs...

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*I walked up the hill that was Main Street slowly, past a broken street lamp. In the distance, I could see the crosswalk sign on the light that separated the town from the college, the 'don't walk' text lit up in dull orange. The SUV's lights threw my shadow onto the ground sharply, and then created another as the vehicle backfired loudly. I jumped slightly as it tore by, blasting straight ahead, way over the speed limit. They were in such a rush. They must've come too close to the crumbling, concrete curb because it felt like a chunk of rock had just nicked me in the chest, kicked up from the SUV's wheels.*

*Then I woke up.*

That dream still. Odd...I must've drifted off again. My head was turned to the side on my pillow, though I could tell from the tingling in my left arm that I hadn't moved much otherwise. I stared out across my room. Several textbooks lay strewn carelessly atop my desk, open, beside my laptop, which was powered down. A sheet of notebook paper, a checklist filled with reminders of projects (papers, emails, etc.) I still had to finish. But there was always tomorrow.

My dresser was pushed up against the adjacent wall, as both my clothing storage unit and TV stand. Sitting beside my television was my Playstation 2 that, though it was too dark to actually see, must've been covered in a fine layer of dust. I was in the middle of "Silent Hill 4: The Room" but I just never had the time to play it all the way through. It's not like there was a real rush though.

My clock now read "2:01." 201! That's right, 201. 201 who worked the late shift at the McDonalds down the street that I had

walked to an hour ago. There, I knew, she was going to be alone, out in the open for once, approachable and stationary, not just creaking elusively past my door.

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*"Can I help whoever's next?"*

*I stepped forward, smiling at the cashier. 201. I'd seen her almost on a regular basis since term started in August, though usually our positions were reversed. Three nights a week, I worked down at the college library, alphabetizing, sending "friendly" email reminders about late fees for overdue books, that sort of thing. It wasn't any more glamorous than McDonalds, except that it was less greasy. There weren't many on campus who had to scrounge for their tuition money like so, but at least I got to know faces- faces with short, black hair, now hidden beneath a ball cap. Faces with a beauty mark just beneath the left eyelid; an opening that revealed an entryway into the Emerald City. Faces that could stay buried for hours in the crumbling pages of Romances that would've made Charlotte Lennox proud. "Hey, how're you?"*

*The young lady's eyes betrayed genuine emotion, just for me, before her lips wrestled her expression back to corporate emptiness, the usual successor to vacant, college apathy. "I'm fine, thanks. What can I get you?"*

*My usual, a force of habit, was a burger, shake, fries, and salad, to go. She relayed the order to the workers in the back, then punched several buttons on the cash register. After a moment, she looked up at me again, holding out a hand. "That'll be \$7.25."*

*I reached into my coat pocket, feeling around past the unused tissues, dead click-top pen, and lone triple-A battery. I produced a crumpled ten dollar note and offered it to her. I couldn't help but notice that the McDonald's was particularly grungy tonight: the walls and counter all seemed to be covered in...well, it would had to have been ketchup, I supposed, in a place like this. The crimson liquid slipped down slowly, dripping unceremoniously onto the back of my jacket. 201 didn't seem to notice though, as it went out of its way to avoid her.*

*She took the bill and placed it into the register, then counted out my change. We stood awkwardly in silence a moment while the workers in the back prepared my food. She eyed me curiously, then finally spoke again. "...Do you go to the high school?"*

*My cheeks were already pink from the night air on the walk down. Thank God. "I'm up at the college, actually. Freshman."*

*"Really? What building are you in?"*

*"Baleman-Stockard, second floor."*

*"Seriously? Me too!"*

*I feigned surprise. "Talk about a small world," I chuckled, holding out my right hand, "I'm Henry."*

*"Stephanie," she replied.*

*Her hand was smaller than mine, warmer too. Stephanie. It had a nice ring to it. Stephanie 201. Beautiful. I released her hand quickly. "Nice to meet you."*

*"Hang on... You're not in my...my sociology class, are you?"*

*I nodded once. "Usually near the back."*

*"Yeah, yeah, okay, the quiet one."*

*I laughed half-heartedly. "That's me."*

*Another worker passed her the bag with my order in it. "Well, maybe I'll see you around campus sometime." She smiled, a small, inviting smile. The lights above shone off the thin layer of gloss on her lips, and the red liquid leaking over the counter.*

*I swallowed anxiously, working up my nerve. This, this I wasn't going to put off another day, not if I could help it. I at least had to try, "Yeah, sure. Say, um, w-would...would you like to go grab a cup of coffee sometime?" I asked, pulling the bag of fast food a bit closer.*

*She blinked once, perhaps taken aback, then smiled again, "Sure, why not? Stop by my room sometime tomorrow night; I'll be around."*

*I was so overjoyed, so elated, I didn't even notice having to push my way out through four, burly guys a couple years my senior, dressed in black leather, baggy pants, and chains.*

*And then I woke up.*

*Someone was pounding on my door. Months ago, before I got to college, I would've thought it was too early in the week to get smashed and go knocking down doors, but you learn a lot at higher education levels. They would probably go away if I ignored them long enough. Shouting, too, but that was expected. Volume went hand in hand with inebriation.*

*The white noise droning in the background meant that I had left the television on. Had I missed that, before? The 5:30 news*

was on, evidenced by a pair of talking heads onscreen. I thought about getting up to turn it off. I really should've, but I was just too tired. I closed my eyes again. In a few hours it would be morning; my day of triumph...

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*Above me, the hall lights flickered within their ancient, neglected fixtures, blacking out large portions of the corridor. It seemed to stretch on forever, each door indistinguishable from the next. I stopped outside my scratched, worn wooden door, my key missing the hole once, twice. Maybe I was more tired than I realized, or the adrenaline of my jubilee was starting to wear off; my hands seemed to be unusually slick- sweat, it must've been, mixed with that ketchup. Supporting myself on the doorknob, I managed to step back into my sanctuary, as silently as I could. Didn't want to wake up the neighbors, after all. The floor creaked anyway. I just needed a few hours sleep, that was all. Dawn was coming, full of glorious opportunity, and it would get here sooner if only I could lie down for a little while...*

And then I-

The television droned on throughout the early morning.

*"...And if you take a look at the five day forecast, you can see that it's only going to get colder as the week goes on, culminating with a chance of flurries on Saturday night into Sunday morning. Back to you, Tom."*

*"Alright, Tracy, thanks for that update. We've got some breaking news now: tragedy has struck our community: a local college student was found dead in his dorm room early this morning in what police believe may be related to the recent, suspected increase in gang-related violence. According to initial reports, the victim, whose identity is still being withheld, suffered a single gunshot wound to the chest, then, if you can believe this, somehow walked two blocks and climbed a flight of stairs back to his room where he died in his sleep. Campus safety officers were first alerted to the crime after the cleaning staff noticed puddles of blood in the hallway carpet." The male talking head paused, tapping his index cards against the desk, his expression part somber and part disgusted.*

*Beside him, his female counterpart had paled considerably, her eyes wide. "He...he walked two blocks after being shot?"*

*"The Medical Examiner's initial findings would suggest a mixture of shock and adrenaline, but no official autopsy report has been re-*

leased as of yet." Tom continued, shaking his head, "Very sad...and, of course, our thoughts and prayers go out to both the school and his family."

There was a beat of silence as the young woman beside him nodded solemnly. Satisfied, the male news-anchor took the top index card in his hands, slid it to the back of the pile, then looked up at the teleprompter, "In other news, it looks like the Phillies had another wild finish last night, but did they manage to pull ahead in the series? For more on that, we go to Rob Russerford, with the sports..."



## DREAM #1 FINAL STROPHE

The inky trees burn unanswered along the river.  
The bearded trout make the black water move beyond its shiver.  
Take my remember. I can't  
sleep. My rowboat is a coffin  
travelling on its tears. Such still.

A funeral may take years to arrive.  
The drowsy reflections hide when their holders  
approach. Thumb-proofed hills stitched in the blue distance.  
Held together by star-beaten  
wallpaper, this scene, my head, my

fact: my father is dead. Such  
stupor knows no lift of wind, no radio adjustment.  
My palms abide the insistent soft-heeled arguments.  
In the rain's relentless release, I remove my shoes & look  
backwards to see the river.

To hear him speak.

## THE WRITER'S PROCESS

The writer sits in a dark room, lit only by the screen of his monitor and an anemic beam of sunlight that manages to squeeze through a crack between the bottom of the window and the broken shade. His hard chair does little to probe his inspiration, nor do the scattered clothes on the floor of his one room apartment. The shadows of his overflowing laundry basket and empty liquor bottles slowly get smaller as the afternoon sun gives up on trying to permeate his window shade. A pile of ungraded papers sits on the desk, uninspired work from his part time teaching job at the local community college. He will soon be in complete darkness. The story still waits in some queue at the back of his brain, waiting to come forth, to espouse grandly in a flurry of *tap tap tapping* on his keyboard as creativity possesses him, but it hasn't happened yet.

He grudgingly leaves the support of his chair and moves to his bed. He sinks down into it, and immediately feels a change in his demeanor. He grimaces as he smells the stale sweat that lingers, residue of the prostitute that he had brought home last night. The room is lighter over here next to the window. He lets his ideas flow; characters, plots, and settings all glide around the front of his mind in a carousel of thought, and he tries them all. He picks and chooses, trying to find a perfect harmony between people, places, and events. His fingers settle on the keyboard, and at last he begins to write.

•

Carter awoke with a start. He had dreamt that he was caught in a compressor and was about to be crushed. He was drenched in cold sweat. His wife, Cassie, rolled over on her side and...

•

"Fuck that." The writer deletes Carter and Cassie. Cheesy writing doesn't appeal to him, and there isn't much cheesier than beginning with someone waking up drenched in a cold sweat. Sure, it was an easy way to grab a reader, but what could possibly

come of it? Chances are he would have made Cassie kiss Carter, tell him it was just a dream, and roll over to fall asleep again. Carter would probably have stayed up the rest of the night, pondering the meaning of life or some other bullshit.

The writer puts his computer down and rolls out of bed. It's time for his favorite TV show anyway, so what's the point of starting a story now? He flips on the tube, and has to push the 'channel up' button forty-seven times before he arrives at the proper station, his remote having long since disappeared. Alas, another re-run. The writer returns to his computer. He thinks about people he has met in the past, eccentric people that others would enjoy reading about. Possible stories again fly through his brain. His friends, his family, and everyone exciting he has ever met are thought over. His fingers move to the keys again.

•

The laughter was a living thing, existing in the room with us. It bounced from wall to wall, bringing tears to our eyes, cramps to our bellies, and odd looks from passersby in the hallway. I could hardly breathe. At last I was able to hold back my mirth enough to sit up on the floor. Out the window of our room, the couple on top of the parking garage across the street was counting the floors and windows to the hotel, obviously trying to report us to management. Jake's face was glistening. "We were only mooning them!" he had to catch his breath. "Can't they take a joke?"

"Ehhh, it wasn't just mooning," I said. I pointed to the long, cylindrical pillow stuffed into the zipper of my shorts. We all burst out laughing again. I had to double over and clutch the bed for support, the phallus pillow still sticking from the front of my khakis.

Two boys from our class ran in. "Guys! There's this couple on the roof that we've been mooning! They're trying to count the floors and windows to figure out which room is ours!"

•

The writer leans back from his computer, chuckling to himself. That senior trip had been very fun, but would it be enough to write a good story about? He doesn't think so. He deletes the happy memory of his high school trip from the screen. The hateful

blank page glares up at him, illuminating his face. He looks older than he is. Wrinkles at his eyes and along his brow combine with a graying beard to show a man who has worked hard and seen very little come from it. He closes the screen and puts the computer in an old satchel. Getting off of the bed he looks around the room and moves to one of the drawers next to the sink. Inside are a few crumpled bills and some odd change; compensation for a crappy piece he did for some rag. Snatching a few, he shoulders the satchel and enters the hallway.

If his room is a mess, it is nothing compared to the hallway. Only two lights still shine in the long, thin corridor. Both flicker as the writer passes by them. Trash is piled outside the doors, each pile shedding a little light on the type of person that lives in each room. Pizza boxes stacked in an all-white Tetris game in front of the fat man's door. Dirty diapers and smashed toys fall out of black trash bags where the married couple lives. Outside the community bathroom lays a broken plunger, dozens of empty bottles of shampoo and stacks of toilet paper. The last door before the staircase belongs to the landlady. Most people as far behind on their rent as the writer would have tip toed past the door, but the sounds of the Jerry Springer Show blaring from in her room spares him the effort. Besides, judging by the shouting matches he had heard her having with the married couple, he couldn't be the only one late to pay.

The writer takes the staircase down and out the door. Overflowing dumpsters flank either side of the walk. He eyes the house as he moves towards the street. The moldy siding is a putrid yellow color, the gutters hanging off on one side and the one remaining shutter hanging askew across the lower left front window. He turns away from his home and boards the bus.

The writer gets off at his favorite café. Here, surely, his creative potential will be unlocked and from it will blossom his story. He waits in line until it is his turn to order. Steaming cup in hand, he finds a secluded table in the corner where he faces the window and can hear the *pitter patter* of the rain. The writer eyes an attractive blonde teen sitting at the table next to him. Her black top does little to disguise the graceful curve of her bosom. He gives

himself a shake before opening his computer and typing anew.

•

Carter J. Pressmond leaned back, the comfortable leather of his chair seeming to envelop him as he closed his eyes. He exhaled deeply, his hands behind his head. When at last his eyes re-opened, the sunlight from the window had moved from the Western wall to the Northern. How long had he been asleep? He pressed a button on the console in front of him. "Betty, what time is it?"

"Almost 4:45, Mr. Pressmond." If she thought it an odd question, Betty didn't comment on it. She was good like that. Carter had had more nosy secretaries than he cared to remember. It was very nice to have one that would just answer his questions without needing to know why he asked them. He surveyed his room as he gathered his things. It was a handsome office. A rich mahogany desk with various accoutrements...[NOTE: ask someone what lawyers keep on their desks.]... that were lavish in themselves faced away from a large window that observed the city from the thirty-fourth floor of a downtown skyscraper. He always smiled when he looked out the window. It reminded him forcefully of mooning a couple on a neighboring parking garage on a class trip many years ago. A bookshelf that extended from floor to ceiling, also of mahogany, held a collection of, not only various law books, but also several of his favorite reads in first edition. His various degrees hung on the walls, an undergrad degree from Yale and then his masters and law degree both coming from Princeton.

He grabbed his overcoat, the perfect match for the expensive suit he had on today, picked up his briefcase, and left the office.

•

The writer frowns over the lip of his cup. "Something needs to happen here." He deletes several lines. He peers out the window, and checks his inbox as he thinks of a new direction for his work. There is an e-mail from one of his part-time students, wondering what he thought of her story. He exhales.

What happened to his dreams? His grad school education in writing had not yielded a spot on the New York Times best seller list, but instead, a part time teaching job at a community col-

lege. His buddies from high school were all managers and business men; Jake was even a lawyer. They had houses and families. He had sixteen thousand a year, a shitty apartment and no future. "Play with the hand you're dealt."

He smiles at his own sarcasm, and returns to his laptop.

•  
"Betty, what time is it?"

"Almost 4:45, Mr. Pressmond."

"Thank you."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"You have a visitor."

"Darling, I'm about to leave."

"She says it will only take a minute sir, and that it is very urgent."

"Very well, send her in." Carter hung up the phone. He was the image of confidence. From his power suit to his slick black hair, there was nothing that could inconvenience him, even at such a late hour on a Friday.

The door opened, and Carter allowed himself only a moment of shock before he resumed his suave composure. It was the blonde girl from the coffee shop. "Good afternoon...sweetheart."

"Cassie," she said.

"Yes, Cassie. What can I help you with?"

"I'm pregnant Carter."

"Congratulations."

"It's yours you asshole!" Her shrill voice made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of expensive scotch and two glasses. The cool steel of his desert eagle .50 caliber pistol glinted up at him in the sunlight from the shelf under which he kept the alcohol. He resisted the temptation to pull it out.

"Cassie, calm down." His voice was silky smooth as he filled both glasses with the amber spirit. "We can resolve this without making a scene, have a drink."

Tears were forming in her eyes now. "You don't want a scene Carter? Alright, we can avoid that. I don't want to shake the

perfect order of your life, your office, your big car, your house. I don't want to ruin that!" She grabbed her glass and hurled it against the wall, smashing one of his diplomas. "My life is ruined Carter! I wanted to go to school, I wanted to make a life for myself! And now I have to choose between killing our child and the rest of my life!" She was sobbing openly now.

"Darling," he cooed. He moved around the desk and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Get off of me you monster!"

"Cassie, would you like to see my gun?"

•

"Excuse me, can I trouble you for your sugar?" The writer looks up, and sees the blonde girl standing in front of him. She is even more beautiful up close. The blonde hair frames a face that most supermodels would envy, blue eyes that shine like the morning sea meet those of the writer.

"Absolutely, take it, take it." He stumbles over the words.

"Thanks." She gives him a smile that made his heart skip a beat. She turns and the writer's mouth gapes at the swing of her perfect hips. In an instant, the smooth attorney at law and his pregnant visitor are wiped from the screen.

•

"Excuse me; can I trouble you for the sugar?" His brown eyes looked up at my question and I could hardly keep my breathing under control. He was so handsome, so mature. Brown eyes looked up from under a mop of dark hair that was grey in all the right places. His salt and pepper beard curved around a perfect set of pale lips. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top and I could just see the top of a mane of chest hair.

"Of course my dear." His voice was deep and smooth, and it sent shivers down my spine. *Oh god do I look cute? Please ask for my number. Offer to take me home, I won't refuse.*

"Thanks." It was all I could think to say. His presence was overwhelming. As I walked back to my table I put a little extra swing into my hips. *At least my ass looks good in these jeans.* I had been sitting for only a couple minutes when he walked by, and dropped a note on my table. "Meet me in the bathroom." My heart

almost blew through my chest. *Oh god, oh god!* It was all I could do to not run into every table between mine and the bathroom. I looked around before entering.

He was leaning against the sink when I shut the door. "My name's Carter." The light of passion danced in his eyes.

"I'm Cassie," was all I could manage to say.

He smiled. "Turn off the lights. I don't need them to see your beauty."

I felt like I was melting as I turned them off. In the darkness his arms enveloped me. He planted a kiss on my lips that sent shivers all around my body. *Oh god...*

•

The writer smiles to himself. He saves the document and closes his laptop before indulging himself in a bathroom break. He imagines the fantasy currently waiting for him back on his screen, a childish grin forming at the idea of it coming true. He makes mental notes of the bathroom as he relieves himself, intent on beefing up his story with details.

The writer moves back into the coffee shop. His table is empty; both his computer and satchel gone. He bursts through the doors, looking around wildly. Across the street he sees the blonde girl, his satchel around her shoulder. A corner of his laptop is sticking out. He can just make out the green glow of the battery light.

The writer slaps a hand to his forehead as he remembers what he had left on the screen of his computer. "Oh shit."



## PATIENCE (THINGS YOU WILL DISCOVER)

1.

Yes, we may lose our mind's libido when our lover looks so root-like, blanched and thin, then realize we are shifting, being un-owned, and something, like a jade plant, has outgrown that lover's infant-touch. It wants to be made pale and root-like twisted on the knees

of someone challenging, whose pearly nails can show your thighs the myth for curing ails with perfect pressure. All touch blurs to one except the touch I dreamed where jasmine hung and strangled every limb we borrowed from one another, the stranger I'd never know.

2.

And nothing is stranger than seeking out the new (while wondering if I should leave so soon) to sate my inner stray that pleads for more. I still end here, that one familiar door that leads to pink, to egg--my first scents. Our gums scabbed with flowers and edible mints, my brother and I would dodge our chores, we ran to places where high rocks seclude to tan their lazy Formica shells. A lampshade of forested oak and pine could not persuade the hot reminder of our mother's voice to yield to child-impetus and choice. We'd gasp in unison and hurry home, to clean the dust, let the shutters blow, for every window is like a balcony when only air will do as company.

---

3.

The mountain's aftershave of rust dissolves  
beneath hollow beds where chipmunks solve  
an autumn's early puzzle: how can they save  
harvest, but by stowing goods away  
from first iced moss—when dew falls while it's dark?  
If human premonition was so stark  
and lovers able to predict their hearts'  
needs, would they wait, or fall apart?  
Only snow chooses silence we never take,  
a snow whose voice is virgin, ever-awake.

## FOUR YEARS

Let my words be few,  
But laced with thunder.

Let my eyes swallow every shard, rusty nail, holy drunken vision,  
rainbow's tail,  
But please, oh please, do not mouth my faintest thoughts...

I am no mountain,  
I cannot, will not support the sky, shoulder the earth and all her  
woes -  
Though I try...

I am no gambler,  
No greased-up-sliding fingers, no creeping whiplash smile...

I have no lion's mane, no silver grinning bullet,  
No rose-smear'd daggers underneath my shirt,  
No pity-filching vices or strongman virtues...

Only thoughts already voiced and hammered brittle,  
Bound together, all anew...

## HE FALLS LIKE LEAVES

Some things are impossible to explain.  
The way the hills in Pennsylvania  
become overgrown in the Summer;  
the way they hunch like the backs of giant  
green snakes or slugs ready to slither  
away from the places they have slept  
for centuries. The way these hills  
take over is impossible to explain.

The way he took over my life like green  
hills spread across this town,  
like beach towels laid on the sand;  
it's impossible to explain.  
This is where we started. This is where  
I lay beneath him, my ripples and peaks  
smoothed over by his grassy cloth softer  
than astro-turf. This is where  
he covered me and where I gave up  
the smells like autumn leaves  
that fell in piles on my past.

This is where I came out from hiding  
under the bright yellow, hollowed out  
forsythia bush. I came out from there  
and held him in my hands the way I held  
the baby bunny whose eye bled  
like maple syrup across my fingers.  
I held him in his exigent state  
and knew with sorrow thick  
as maple syrup, that he would  
be captured in my memory this way:  
half-blind, bloodied, and paralyzed.

## THE QUILT

She didn't know what she was doing  
as she laid pieces of cloth down to rest.  
She cut once, measured twice,

and put the sewing needle through her thumb  
saying *shit* for the first time since she'd had babies.  
They lay beside her as she knelt and though the sight

of them made her breathless with love, she missed  
those sonogram heartbeats supporting her own.  
The weight of the cloth was almost alive.

His shirt warmed again  
in her shaking hands, her heart swelled  
under her ribs. But much as she tried,

she couldn't see her own veins  
under the skin, blood so close  
to the surface. After singing the babies into sleep,

the house was quiet as a wake. Her beloved work  
spread before her, the colors flowing  
red green blue purple pink.

Nothing like the colors of the rainbow.  
As it grew darker, and darker still,  
she was sure only of this.

Every night while her babies slept, her bed was lifeless.  
She knelt on the hardwood floor,  
breathing icy air like smoke so cold

it burned her lungs, and her hands grew crops of calluses,

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blood bursting into bloom on her fingertips  
and when she was finished

she thought she'd never loved any  
thing so much  
as she loved this quilt.

Erratic stitches scurried through its heart  
and there were bloodstains around the binding.  
She didn't worry.

They would either scar over or wash out.

# ARIEL

## (TURNING TRICKS AT FISHERMAN'S WHARF, MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA)

Life is a cruel number, she had mumbled under her sea-spray breath—arid with the brine and hard-knocks of wasted ambition & love.

I saw her once, nudging an old codger with a soft elbow. Thrusting her purple clam-shell bra in his Ahabed face. He checked the merchandise, but scuttled off with barnacled indifference.

It was hard to watch at the time but looking back, I see a certain serenity in the old gal—like the drift of white foam over the waves, heading towards something greater.

Of course, there were questions and looks of giddy excitement the first few times around: her scales were like gold to virginal eyes.

I remember overhearing one boy asking, "Where does the tail go?" "For the right price, anywhere you want," she had replied, licking her lips like Flipper.

While families would be finishing off their fried seafood dinners at Captain Gig's or Gilbert's on the Wharf, she would be out there, wagging her flaccid tail up and down, miming smooches to the onlookers.

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And then there were the storied  
rumors—fantasies of sea-sick fishermen  
and sailors no doubt—of lobster & cockle-play,  
of the ‘Tentacular Joy’(which cost \$350,  
so I’ve heard) and of one service I’m told is just  
described simply as ‘Jaws.’

I wonder sometimes  
if she minds the currents, the undertow  
that brought her here—if every time she goes  
to eat a fried flounder or stuffed crab-shells  
she is reminded of a hush blue chasm  
where she used to dream of coral-faced princes  
whose reflections  
dissolved & evanesced

                                upon breaking  
the ocean’s surface.



## BLACKTOP ROLLIN'

She was hideous. The grace of rust and the force of my will held her together. Though, the duct tape probably helped, too. Her axles were bent and she handled like an especially adroit walrus in a supermarket trolley. I had to park her with the wheels turned into the curb or she'd run away to the bar at the bottom of the hill to consort with the motorcycles. The little slut always was loose with her brakes.

It was she who taught me more about driving than anyone else in my family. Just starting her the first time was an adventure. I'm sure that when they made her in 1973, they meant for the key to turn in the ignition. I'm also sure they meant for there to *be* an ignition. As it was, I had to lobotomize the old girl with a screwdriver to the brainpan. Or the alternator. Whichever I hit first. If only I could make everyone's brain turn on with a screwdriver.

When opened, the driver's side door made a sound akin to a bull moose in mating season. Only rustier. "Good evenin' to you, too, Dotts." I climbed in and got a look at her all duct tape interior. She had a delicate tape-to-vinyl ratio and I'd brag about it like you'd brag about heated leather. One of the Rules of Dottie, along with mandatory head banging during the appropriate portions of Bohemian Rhapsody, was no sharp objects in the front seat. If anything compromised the structural integrity of the tape, I could imagine the outcome: all of the puffing inside sneezing outward, plastering my face against the windshield, my tongue pinned to the side and my eyes making that moist squeegee sound as I looked back and forth.

Once she was running, I had to put her in neutral and coast her down the hill before I kicked her into second. Trying to shift to first only resulted in her grinding her teeth and growling. I tried to avoid that, as I'd rather not have to resort to getting my car a chewy toy.

Next came the hard part.

There was a stop sign at the bottom of the hill. You might

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be able to see where this is headed. As for Dottie, she was headed straight down to Papito's for a margarita unless I could persuade her otherwise. Not certain of the effects of alcohol on a Dodge Dart's physiology, I rode her clutch, pumped her brakes and was ready to ride her out around that right turn at her top speed of twenty-two miles an hour. I just hoped that I didn't encounter any double parkers. I'd have to swerve around them into the churchyard and, with my luck, I'd take out their Jesus statue with the stolen hand and graffiti mustache.

She'd sustain no damage whatsoever in the collision thanks to her collection of faulty parts being manufactured during the Nixon administration where, instead of safety features consisting of airbags and crumple zones, she featured solid chrome bumpers. Those bumpers could plow through Jesus, Mary, and the apostles and still come out swinging in a round of shopping cart derby. That's what happened when a friend and I would race our respective shit boxes through the Acme parking lot, giving the cart corrals a sound trouncing.

She was so poorly maintained that my mechanic, Wally, wouldn't even inspect her. "Yeah, uh, I'm not even gonna charge you. Here's your sticker. Happy hunting." When the man you pay in booze to fix things for you can tell from 30 feet away that your car isn't going to pass, you know you drive a defective vehicular unit.

Once the drive was over, I had to ass the door on my way out. The latch was as rusted as the rest of her and wouldn't catch unless significant pressure was placed against it. Most of the time I just left it unlatched. Who was going to steal her, right?

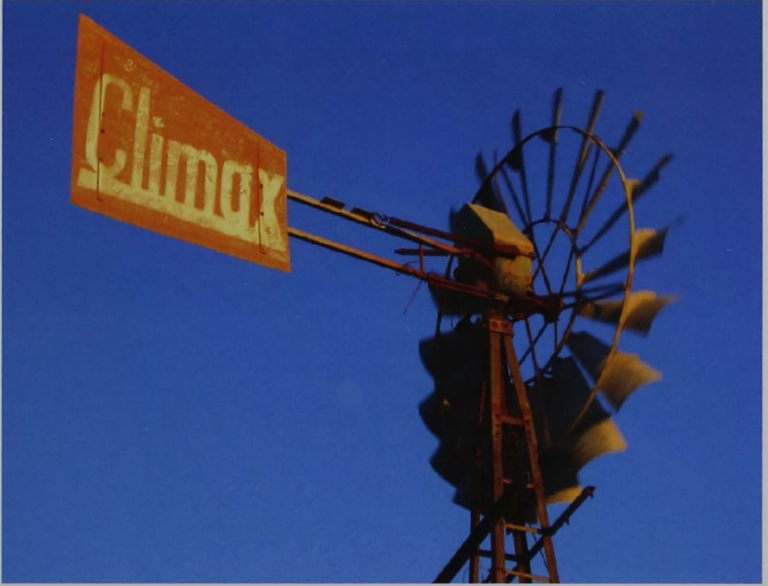
Drug addicts.

I came out of the theatre one night and looked out to see four cars in the lot, all of them plainly not her. "Fucking fantastic. Pfft. Ha! Now maybe I can get a convertible." I reported her stolen and waved a mental goodbye, thinking about all the other kickass cars that might come into my possession now that she was gone. The cops called me the next morning at 11:27. They had found her and oh, by the way, all that cocaine in the trunk wasn't yours was it? I got her back the next Tuesday and Wally

performed the most thorough and dedicated inspection I had ever witnessed.

Shortly after that, the back bumper detached itself from the rest of her while I was rolling down the highway. It flew off into some bushes and fuck me if I was going back for it.

# CLIMAX



# ANDREW



God 00892 BOTTLES



## CALLE DE CUSCO



# THE GOD IN THE MACHINE





# THE 26TH OF DECEMBER



UNTITLED



# LOLLIPOP LOLLIPOP



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# WHEN DINOSAURS ROAMED THE EARTH



UNTITLED



# MEANING



# JEFFREY



Matt Whitman

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LOOKING

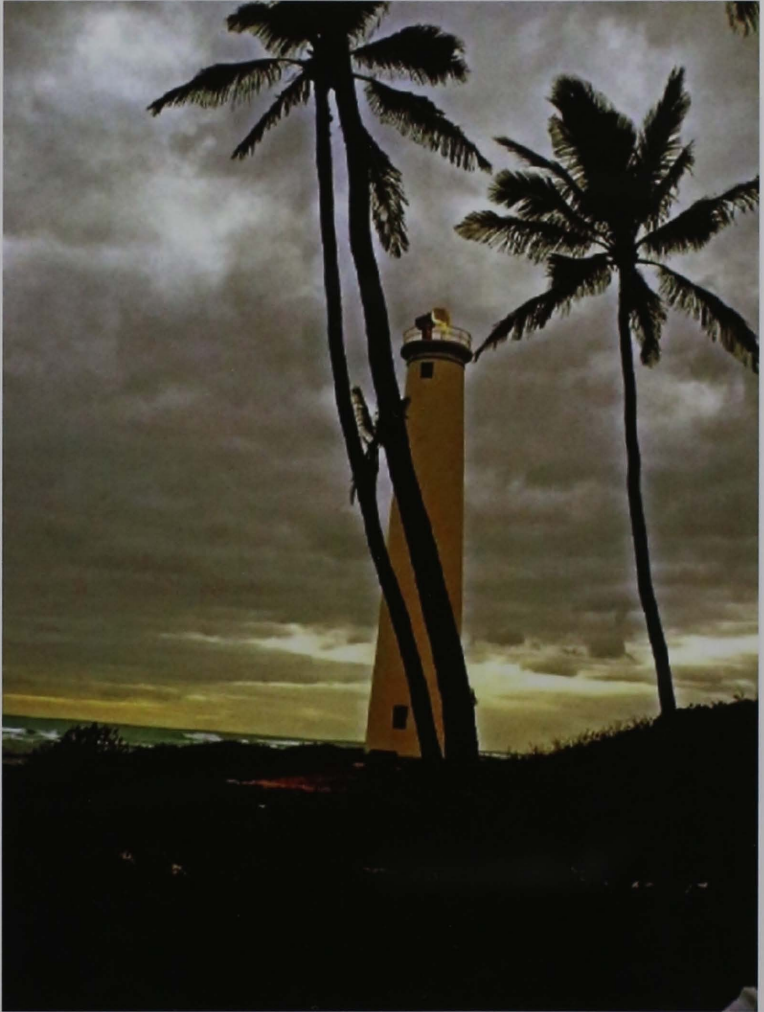




# JAGGED EDGES



# FADING STORM



# SHOES



## THIS TOO WAS REAL

I made a startling discovery when I laid eyes on the Spanish landscape for the first time: everything was brown. I had flown above the gorgeous forests and curly country roads of Southern France and through the misty peaks of the Pyrenees only to arrive at a miserable patch of dust that seemed more like Africa than Europe. *Madrileños* didn't seem to mind the lack of grass – there was still plenty of sidewalk for their dogs to shit on. Land of warm Mediterranean sun and beautiful women? Land of brown, land of excrement. Land of poverty, land of armless gypsies furiously waving change cups with their teeth.

Land of cold reality. When I had touched down in August, there had been sultry summer sun. It was now December, and as I swung open the heavy wrought iron door to the apartment building and began my trek to work, a frigid dampness clung to my exposed palms and face. Moisture glistened on the crumbling stone curbs in the dim mid-morning half-light, revealing an intricate system of peaks, valleys, and plateaus in miniature. Reluctantly, I rounded the corner, and the next, passing the corner bakery with the red marquee awning and the Moroccan man whose newspaper no one would ever buy. “*Farola, fahroh-la, fah-rooh-laa...*”

His voice faded as I descended into the mouth of the beast, the urban dragon whose warm breath was at once lovely and sickening. A certain mechanical heat, like that of a computer, and an odd humidity from the damply clothed, milling bodies filled the cramped corridors of the morning rush. I milled, becoming part of the amorphous mass, passing a Korean man singing “My Heart Will Go On” in broken English at absurd decibels. On the platform now, I waited at the brink of the caution-colored rubber strip, pushed to the edge by an abnormally large crowd. From what I could gather from random snippets of muffled Spanish, line 6 had broken down due to flooding.

I looked at my watch. Three minutes until the train

arrived. The woman beside me coughed and extracted a tissue from the depths of her winter furs, sending thousands of white particles floating in my direction. I looked away, focusing on the cold steel rails and the filth that surrounded them. I thought of a news report that I had seen last night: a man caught on camera pushing another man onto the tracks just as the train pulled into the station. I began to sweat. The attacker was a paranoid schizophrenic and did not know the victim. The man was just standing there, probably going to work, staring down at the tracks when he was arbitrarily erased from reality. In milliseconds, obliterated by the face of the front car, blood spurting out onto the platform and pooling, like the pools of dirty rainwater on the bed of tracks in front of him, in front of me, reduced to nothing, the man had done nothing, I had done—

WOOOOSH. The white, black, and blue of the train cars flashed across my eyes, inches from the tip of my nose. I jolted my head and shoulders backwards, almost causing a pile-up of fur-clad elderly, satchel-toting hipsters, and catholic school *pequeñas* in burgundy skirts that were rolled far too high for their age. As the train gradually slowed and I regained my balance, I saw her. Casually propped against the back wall of the train, absorbed in a novel, was just a glimmer of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She wore a ruffled white blouse, a charcoal overcoat, and a simple black skirt and black tights. Her jet black hair was pulled tightly back with just a few strands hanging down on one side, outlining the gentle angles of her cheekbone and chin. She had the delicate air of a dancer or an artist, a romantic essence that seemed out of place in the vulgar mass of steel, plastic, and bodies that surrounded her. As the train bobbed by and people fumbled for the nearest grab bar, her poise seemed impervious to its movement. She slipped off and was quickly reincorporated into the teeming mob.

In a daze, I stepped onto the train, relegating the duties of consciousness and motion to the horde and the machine. I floated above the tracks, indifferent to the intermittent heaving and bouncing of the car, enthralled by a woman that I had seen for mere seconds. An automated voice politely informed me of my

stop, *Guzmán el Bueno*. I walked several feet and was whisked up by an escalator, a second escalator, a third escalator, a fourth escalator. The ground moved below me, the walls changed colors, steps and landings passed underneath me like stones rolling down a mountain. Finally, I reached the cold – the cold with its biting reality: I was walking to work. The sky was gray. It drizzled slightly.

The offices of Sport Managers Magazine were located on *Calle de los Vascos*, which was packed with tiny European cars. A relentless *madrileña* consumed the sidewalk with her gigantic black umbrella and forced me into a parked car. My pant leg was soaked from the rainwater on the car and my skull was bombarded with water cascading off the roof above. Like a mongrel that had been prowling the town all night, smelling dankly of the streets, hair in wet clumps, I ascended the peculiar fire escape stairwell to the office and swung open the industrial style door.

“*Hola, Daniel,*” Emilio greeted me. “*¿Está lloviendo?*”

“*Sí.*”

Emilio was our marketing man at the magazine who also liked to tell jokes. He knew damn well that it was raining. I threw down my coat and brusquely unlatched my laptop. A letter from Elisa: another “Good Health” report from our American affiliate, the International Health & Sportsclub Federation, slated for translation. I mentally prepared myself for a dry, repetitive affair full of clichés, grammatical errors, and vaguely worded sentences that truly had no meaning. These monthly reports were probably written by some corporate schmuck who got a business degree at a liberal arts college and felt that he was in touch with his “artsy” side. My mind sputtered with indifference. I managed to eke out a few paragraphs of utter garbage, barely better than the original text.

Emilio ambled over to my desk. “*Daniel, vamos a tomar café. ¿Vas a bajarte?*”

“*Sí.*”

I followed Emilio and the rest of my co-workers, Elisa, Begonia, and José down to the corner café where they liked to take mid-morning breaks. The café existed in thousands of different

incarnations throughout Spain, each with a different name but with the same fare and décor. The walls of the café would be bordered halfway up from the floor with patterned blue and white tile. There would be a glass case on top of a hardwood bar, containing an assemblage of cold foods – *tortilla española*, *croquetas*, perhaps some clams or mussels. The floor would be littered with napkins and cigarette butts. Everyone would smoke.

“*Un pincho de tortilla*,” I said to the bartender.

I returned to the table with my food and sat down across from Emilio, who was carefully rolling his habitual tobacco joints. Today’s flavor: green apple. Emilio looked up and smiled. I could only stare at his row of tobacco stained, decaying teeth, yellowed with black spots, like old rotting pieces of corn. Smoke enveloped me. I could hardly breathe. Emilio’s mouth moved, I wasn’t listening. I looked around. Each of them had a pack of cigarettes and a cup of coffee in front of them. Perhaps their bodies no longer required food, but rather they had evolved into some type of chemical android, their veins pumping a substance in which no parasite or infection could hope to survive, could ever hope to –

– “*Daniel. ¿Me estás escuchando?*”

No, I wasn’t listening. I had seen her, a flash of the same charcoal coat and flawless curves across the front window of the café. I shot up, bumping the table and rocking their coffee cups, splashing *café con leche* onto the cheap aluminum table. I charged to the front of the café and exploded out onto the sidewalk, just in time to see her impeccable up-do wistfully bounce around the corner. I sprinted after her, under cement coated scaffolding lazily draped with blue netting and through a gaggle of pigeons that waddled off the curb. I reached the end of the block, anxiously scanning faces and bodies on both sides of the street. She was gone.

Dismayed, I returned to the office. Emilio looked up from his computer, “*Daniel, ¿qué te pasó?*”

“*Nada.*”

He shrugged and returned to his work. I sat down at my desk and began to work furiously, trying to revive the limp cadaver of my early morning translation by Friday’s publication

deadline. My mind raced, her energy empowering me like Dalí's *Gala* or Goya's *Maja*. With her flowing through my fingertips, I managed to imbue the report with an imagination and liveliness that masked its corporate roots. The phone rang and José scrambled to pick it up, knocking the base of the phone off of his desk and popping the power wire out of my laptop. My screen went blank. Had I saved it? I hadn't saved it. I may have saved it. I got up and left.

The cold remained, defying the afternoon sun, which had set about drying the clumps of pulped newspaper decimated by thousands of hurried, soggy outsoles. Agitated, I raced along the sidewalk, slicing through the tranquil air of the *siesta*. I reached the apartment, quietly placing my keys down and hanging up my coat. My grandmother lay across the tan-orange suede couch, with her ugly mutt of a dog lying beside her. I tiptoed past her, but stopped when I noticed that her eyes were puffed and dark and her skin in an especially pallid state. I crept closer. Her lips were pale and lifeless, her face wrinkled and dry. I leaned in, trying to hear her breathing. Nothing. I slowly extended my arm, placing my fingers underneath her neck.

Her eyes flashed open. "¿Qué haces?"

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"¿Por qué me molestas? *Que me dejes dormir, por favor.*"

"You don't look so good. Are you sure you're not sick?"

"They're fixing the shower. You won't be able to use it for a couple of days." She closed her eyes and I returned to my room.

This conversation was one of our longest in days. We ate dinner together every night during which she spoke more to the *Telecinco* news anchors and her dog than she did to me. The rest of the time I spent in my room writing while she gossiped on the phone. She had an astounding social network for a sixty-three year old woman. Our apartment was a revolving door of faces - friends, old colleagues, neighbors, and relatives that I couldn't keep straight in my head. She would go out with them into the early morning hours as if she were a teenager. I resented the fact that she seemed to have more interest in their lives than mine, but I also made little effort to talk to her.



That night I lay awake. I tried to put my grandmother out of my mind, scribbling in my notebook about my effervescent sightings of this fantastic woman. She excited a part of me that had starved for some time, a part that withered during the days of mechanically transcribing facts about fitness management and health from one language to another. My dreams had run away from me, gone were my literary ambitions and my respect for language as an art. Yet my hand quivered and cramped in my haste to describe her enchanting elegance, her effortless grace, her sumptuous black locks that would come cascading down and brush my face, her soft lips providing a delicate warmth to my face and neck, her light touch caressing my chest and arms, enraptured by her fingertips, my whole body pulsating with desire. I looked up at her, but her face was not the same. It was old, tired, a relic of the Franco era – my grandmother’s face.

*“Apaga las luces, icono!”*

I sat up, blinking in the harsh fluorescent light that seemed more appropriate for an ER than a bedroom. My glasses were askew and my notebook had tumbled to the floor. She rushed to my bedside table, violently attacking my lamp and plunging the room into darkness. The door slammed. I remained still, blankets bunched around my legs and feet, digesting the last few minutes and lamenting the day that I decided to move to Spain to live with a woman that I had nothing in common with. She was like any other old miser, stingy and self-absorbed. Irritated, I once again lay awake, unable to relax in the inhospitable obscurity that threatened to ambush my mind with another crazed disturbance.

The cold remained. Indifferent to the morning sunshine, it crept through the poorly sealed window pane, sailing over the wrinkles of my shoddy wool comforter and wrapping itself around my ears. Now up, I carefully prepared breakfast so as not to wake my grandmother. I shoved stale bread and super sweet jam into my mouth, washing it down with a slug of milk. As I was about to step out the door, I heard the gentle shuffle of slippers on the hardwood floor and my grandmother appeared in her fluffy pink bathrobe. Her face still looked rather macabre and her dark amber

hair flared out in all directions.

“*Buenos días*,” she said to me groggily.

I stared at her for several seconds then stepped into the hall to leave.

“*¿No vas a decirme buenos días?*” she asked.

I pressed the button to the elevator anxiously, staring at the textured steel door.

“Don’t be rude. You can at least tell me good morning.”

“You didn’t need to wake me up last night.”

“Your light was on all night. *No seas indecente*. Tell me good morning.”

“Don’t talk to me about decency, *vieja*. You could have let me sleep and yelled at me in the morning! But you don’t give a damn about me!” I shouted at her.

She stared at me, wide-eyed. Our neighbor across the hall opened his door, looking warily from me to her.

“*¿Todo bien?*” he asked.

The door to the elevator clicked open and I rushed in without looking back. I drifted down. From there, everything was the same as any other miserable, abhorrent day: the wrought iron door, first corner and the next, the red marquee awning, *fah-roh-la*, the mouth of the beast, part of whole, floating above tracks, an escalator, second, third, and fourth, cramped cars, peculiar stairwell.

“*Buenos días*.”

“*Buenos días, Emilio*.”

I hadn’t saved it. Fluorescent light beat down on me as I once again tried to recover my translation. Hours in, my mind glazed over and the facts of aging, obesity, and diabetes suddenly became indistinguishable. Mid-morning break. Cigarette smoke. Emilio’s mouth moved. Something about how every Spanish man must love three things – beer, women, and bullfighting. I became lost in the noise and the hazy cloud, thinking of her. Distracted, undermined, betrayed by myself, I did not fare much better in the afternoon. My mind floated away with her while my body became an appendage of the machine, tapping on keys and clicking, wires extending from my palms and wrapping around my ankles. My co

-workers began to filter out. I looked down at my translation, which was scarcely half-complete with one day remaining until the deadline.

I retired to my apartment, where my grandmother was preparing dinner. The air was saturated with humid smoke. Like every other day, I laid out napkins, silverware, glasses, serving spoons and a hotplate. My grandmother emerged from the kitchen carrying a plate heaped with greasy fried sardines. Then came two small bowls of *gazpacho*. Was this a message? I took one of the sardines, crunching its tiny skeleton with my teeth. The taste in my mouth was fishy and unpleasant and the bones scratched my throat as I swallowed. I tried to wash it down with a sip of *gazpacho* but all I could taste was acid and salt.

"*Pónte más,*" she said, scooping a handful of sardines on my plate.

I forced down several more. I coughed. She was silent. My face grew red with effort. Finally I finished my plate.

"*Pónte más,*" she insisted, going for another scoop.

"*No puedo más,*" I said, pulling my plate away.

"You don't want the food that I cooked for you?" she asked.

I remained silent.

"You're ungrateful - that's your problem."

I didn't speak.

"I cook, I clean, I do your laundry. And you don't even have the decency to tell me good morning?" she said, raising her voice now. "You are ungrateful and you do not deserve me."

Unable to respond, I got up from the table and started for my room.

"There you go again, Daniel," she said. "Hiding from the world, writing in that silly notebook of yours, lost in your fantasies and your illusions."

"Oh, I have illusions? Your husband is dead. Your son doesn't come around anymore. You fill your life cooking for casual acquaintances, talking to your dog, and watching *telenovelas*. Does it make you feel any less alone?"

My grandmother deflated, sank back in her chair, and began to cry. Her whole body shook horribly.

I couldn't watch, so I grabbed my coat and headed out. A bitter chill embraced me as I stepped out onto the streets. I walked quickly, not knowing where I was going. Soft orange street lamps, bright red brake lights, flashes of white clothing all streaked past me like time-lapse photography. In the darkness I dodged piles of hardened shit, wonderful little surprises from this abhorrent grassless city. My grandmother was probably right about me, cynical, emotionless, alone, never able to finish anything, not even a mundane factual translation, faster now, cars and buildings in fuzzy Technicolor, heart palpitations, a mere appendage, frozen winter shit, alone, her body convulsing terribly, a defenseless old woman, an insolent young cynic, this abhorrent city. I lived for nothing, lived only for a woman I had never met, a cog. I would never achieve anything, only... her.

Through the window, conversing with the bartender, sat the woman of my obsession in a skin-tight white shirt and jeans. It was a trendy place, an unknown local haunt frequented by the sophisticated crowd. The beautiful mahogany bar, sleek pendant lights, and panels of abstract art paled in comparison to the exquisite allure of this Spanish masterpiece. Her radiant features defied the dim light of the bar, giving off their own luminous glow. She laughed and the crowd around her grew livelier, her presence lending energy to everything around her. Perhaps there was one speck of real beauty left in this country after all. I opened the door, floating one step at a time to the barstool right beside her. I spouted, "*Hola, soy Daniel. ¿Cómo te llamas?*"

Her deep brown eyes flickered up at me, glowing like the sultry Mediterranean sun of August. And then she spoke. "*Hola, mi...ummm, nombre es Jessica.*"

"You speak English, don't you?"

"Oh thank God! It's so embarrassing trying to pretend I know Spanish," she said, laughing. "Are you American?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"ME TOO!" she said, slapping my arm playfully.

"So how long have you been here?" I asked her.

"Oh, just a couple of weeks. I've been doing the touristy thing, you know, bullfights, *El Rostro*, the *Prada*."

"Don't you mean *Prado*?"

"What?"

"*Prado* – it's the Spanish word for meadow. They built the museum on top of a meadow. Prada makes designer handbags."

"Oh, haha, whatever. So what do you do?"

"I'm an architect," I lied.

"Oh, I'm an investment banker. I'm just here on vacation."

"Oh." An investment banker. Here on vacation. A tourist, an American girl taking pictures of herself on the *Paseo del Prado* and flirting with the local boys. It all seemed so superficial and vulgar.

"Do you want to order a couple of drinks?" she asked.

I stared at her. I wanted her to be the cultured, romantic intellectual of my dreams. But she wasn't. She was just a girl – a nice, gorgeous American girl, but about as profound and interesting as the corporate newsletters that haunted my days.

"I'm sorry, I can't. I think I'd better be going."

"Wait, do you think you could walk me home? I read in one of the guidebooks that there are a lot of muggings in Madrid."

She read it in one of the guidebooks. I couldn't believe this person. "I'm sorry, I really have to go. I'm meeting friends."

As I turned to leave, she grabbed my arm. "Please? I know that I just met you and it seems silly, but I feel that I can trust you."

Here was the most beautiful woman I had ever met, clasping her delicate hand around my wrist and pleading with me to walk her home. "Okay," I conceded.

"Great," she said. I helped her put on her charcoal overcoat and we headed back into the cold. The walk was awkward. She tried to make pleasant small talk while I hung my head, hating myself for having been so wrong about her. Finally, she asked, "So what's wrong with me?"

"What?"

"You're the only man that I've ever met that hasn't pined all over me. It's quite intriguing really," she said, laughing.

"There's nothing wrong with you," I replied. "I just don't know what I'm doing here anymore. When I came here, I thought

things would be different. I thought Europe would inspire me. Instead, every day is the same – miserably similar, hopelessly mundane.” We had reached the doorstep of her hotel. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

She was looking down at the cracked pavement. Her black hair swooped over her face. After a bit she looked up at me and said, “Maybe Europe isn’t the problem, Daniel. You know, Hemingway once wrote that you can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.”

I was taken aback by her insight, and she had embraced me before I had time to respond. I raised my arms too late, and ended up grasping her elbows awkwardly.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t what you were looking for. But thanks for walking me home,” she said, going inside.

After all of my speculation, I stood alone in a bitter, cold reality that one faulty embrace could not conquer. The cold numbed my hands, my skin cracking. I walked back, past filthy water that had pooled in the sidewalk planters and started to congeal, locking in trash and cigarette butts.

I reached the apartment, where my grandmother sat in front of the television watching her favorite game show, *Pasapalabra*. She had a bottle of *Ribera del Duero* in front of her, half empty. I sat down next to her. She took another glass from the tray, poured it to the brim, and handed it to me. I took a few quick sips.

The contestant on the television stopped, unsure of himself.

“Pasa palabra,” my grandmother and I said in unison.

We looked at each other. “I’m sorry,” I said.

She placed her hand on mine, still looking at me with old, tired eyes. Her soft wrinkled skin provided delicate warmth to my chapped hands. This too was real, I thought.

## EXTRANJERA

"¿Qué andas haciendo?"  
he asked me from the balcón  
and I would have answered  
*pero - no pude;*  
so instead of replying,  
"Cómo se llama usted?"  
I asked.  
"Nica. ¿Y tú?"

---

Así es la vida,  
you find me and you  
taste like Toña  
and you  
smell of sweet sunny skin  
(the salty earth  
that the caballo's hooves turn up -  
or the tempting fruit  
of a jocote),  
your soul as smooth as salsa  
and my gringa corazón  
so new to the steps.  
I missed mi hogar  
- my home, my country -  
and I knew I would miss you  
so I gave in and I  
wrapped myself in your caress  
(calm as waves of agua dulce).

---

"Yo no sé..." contesté.  
"Yo no sé"

## THE TASTE OF MORNING

Your hair holds saltwater like a baby;  
I can smell it before I hear the floor moan  
as your toes massage the knots in its back.

You nest on the stool by the mirror,  
sitting upon a pearl in an oyster shell,  
staring into those Aphrodite eyes, green  
like the Mediterranean sea that birthed you.

I peak through dream weak eyelids  
which shutter like a camera lens  
and I hold this moment like a prayer  
dissolved by silence.

Your eyes are the growing sun,  
warming the freckles that lounge on your nose  
and cheeks, until you fall asleep.  
A smile leaks across my face like winter.

If I could command the gods,  
I would kiss you  
and know the taste of morning.



## VENUS FROM THE WAVES

The sun was bright and high; the breeze was cool. We parked a block away from the boardwalk next to a large, tan beach house with a "for rent" sign on it. The street was empty of traffic and only a few parked cars on the side of the road convinced me that Wildwood was not totally deserted. Percy removed his pants, his purple swim trunks clinging to his lithe, shirtless frame.

"All right, let's go," he said.

We walked away from the silver Pontiac Grand Prix with its Grant University license plate cover towards the ocean and the boardwalk. The faded wooden sign read in blue "The Happiest People in the World Beyond Here."

We mounted the ramp and began to walk down the barren boardwalk. During the summer it would most certainly be filled with thousands of patrons but now it was almost empty. Groups of three or four walked past closed stores, stopping at the few open booths remaining.

Alex straggled behind us, checking each and every store. He was looking to buy some sort of souvenir for himself, a sweatshirt or a hat or something to remind him of his first visit to the New Jersey shore.

"How does this match up to Venice beach, Alex?" I asked him.

"It's totally empty," Alex said. "It's great, no crowds. Not to mention everything is like half off! In L.A. there's never an off-season and no sales. I'll get a sweatshirt or something later."

Percy and I walked ahead, drinking in the scenery. As we walked, vendors shouted at us to buy anything from pizza to sunglasses. A tram rolled past us. "Move away from the tram. Move away from the tram," a speaker mounted atop the engine droned. Three kids ran past us towards a claw grab machine half filled with Pikachu dolls, laughing. We passed by empty roller coasters and Ferris wheels. Finally we found an entrance to the beach proper. I could see and smell the sea at last.

"It's been three years since I've been to the beach, you

---

know," I said.

"No way," Percy said. "Doesn't everyone go to the beach during the summer? My dad always says you need to go to the beach at least once a year to renew your spirit. Let me tell you, Kant, it's important to get in touch with nature, really find yourself, you know? Just stick by me, okay?"

I mumbled a thanks.

The sand looked cool and inviting as it stretched out towards the sea. There was a girl who looked to be about twenty walking past us. She was tall and had mid-length blonde hair. She was wearing a polka dot swim suit and carrying a towel. I stepped down the ramp a bit and stopped. My heart was beating fast. The wind picked up and I shivered a bit. I wanted to run after her.

Alex was taking off his shoes and socks slowly, carefully, not wanting to get sand all over his new shoes "Yo, she's hot," Alex said. "I bet she'd like to get down in the sand. You know what I mean?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know why you guys drool over her like that when I'm right here. Girls will only break your heart," Percy said. "It's absolutely better with a man."

"Girls can only break your heart if you let them in, man. No strings attached, and you're fine. Right, Kant?" Alex said.

"But what about love?" I asked.

"Yeah, man. I have sex with them too, obviously."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Love, not sex."

"Is there a difference?"

Percy finished untying his shoes, laughing with Alex. My face was hot so I turned out towards the sea.

We reached the sand after agonizing for seconds and began to walk down to the sea. Ahead there were red barrels full of trash and one or two umbrellas. I looked down at my shoes and then back up at the sea. The teal backpack made my back hurt, full as it was. We were silent as we walked. Feeling the wind and smelling the sea, the sand beneath our feet. For a second I imagined the beach full and hot. Boys playing Frisbee, sweat glistening. Girls sunbathing with bikini tops unbuckled, the sun caressing their

browning backs.

"It's all right, I guess. But what about adventure?" I asked, "What about summer love?"

"The summer is over, my friend. Time passes and all things fade. You have to focus on the now, you know," Percy said. He ran ahead the last few feet to the edge of the water.

Alex and I laid our single white towel onto the sand. I dropped my bag with a sigh of relief. I opened the bag and pulled out my notebook, fumbling for a pen.

"Kant, let's go in the water!" Percy said.

"Give me a minute, then," I said. I put my notebook down and pulled at my shoe laces. My socks came off next and then my jeans. I was also wearing purple swim shorts. I took my shirt off and went towards Percy. The sand was cool and felt good between my toes. We walked together into the waves. I felt my body tense as I stepped into the cold water. The water was murky and I wanted to get out. Our bare feet stumbled over shells and we yelped, and then laughed nervously. We waded out to our waists before diving in and swimming. Percy was faster than I was and he easily took the lead. I followed behind him, hearing his strong, powerful strokes smashing into the waves as he moved further and further ahead of me.

Alex watched us on the shore and waved. Eventually we returned to the beach. The sand now felt warm compared to the ocean water. I was content to lay down, my back gritty with yellow sand. Percy pulled out his Polaroid camera and began taking pictures of Alex walking along the beach. Water dripped from Percy's brown hair and down his naked chest.

The sun was warm on my face. I dug my sunglasses out of my bag and put them on. I settled back onto the sand and closed my eyes. I could hear Alex complain to Percy about the picture Percy wanted to take. Alex was done posing and wanted to sit on the sand like I was. Percy begged him to take another picture.

Alex walked over to me and sat down on the towel. I opened my eyes to look at him. His long, dark hair brushed against his shoulders. "Go take pictures with Percy. I'm tired of it," he said, hitching his thumb towards Percy.

I stood up and walked over to Percy, brushing sand off my back. His Polaroid camera was hanging from around his neck. In his hand he held a picture of Alex which was slowly developing.

"Okay come over here. I want you to stand right here, like this... no! Like this. Yeah... perfect." Percy continued to place me into various poses until he was satisfied. "All right... let me line up the shot..."

From the way I was posed I had a view of the Ferris wheel against the blue sky. I imagined that I was riding slowly to the top with a girl. We were holding hands and laughing. As we reached the top I leaned in to kiss her. My heart was throbbing. Her hand tightened around mine. I shuddered.

*Flash!*

The camera spit out the picture Percy had taken.

He called Alex over to take a picture of the two of us standing in the ocean. Percy stood with his hands on his hips, chest out, smiling. I pointed over the horizon with my left arm and tried to look adventurous. *Flash.* Spit. "These are great, guys! I can definitely use these for a portfolio. I'm thinking about calling this collection 'Footsteps' the idea being the transitory nature of visiting the beach. I mean here we are and wherever we step, we leave behind pieces of ourselves -footprints—but they all wash away anyway. Nothing we do can last."

"Don't you think it's been done before?" I asked.

"No! Well... maybe someone did it but not the same way I am. These pictures symbolize the futility of everyday life. One day you're playing in the sun and the next day you're dead."

"I think someone's done that before..." I said.

"All right, now, Kant, take a picture of me by myself," Percy said.

I lined up the shot and pulled the shutter when Percy was ready. *Flash.* Nothing came out of the camera.

"What happened? Try it again!"

I clicked the shutter. *Flash.* Again, no picture. "I think it's broken," I said.

"What?" he said. "What a piece of shit! The reason I was using this camera was because of how outdated it was, to further

the theme. I should have guessed it wouldn't work..."

Percy walked back to our stuff and put the camera and the photos away. He sat on the ground for a long while.

Alex and I looked at each other.

"It's futile," Percy said. "It's sort of ironic, really but I can't use a broken camera as an artistic statement."

"Why don't we walk down the beach some more," Alex said. "We can probably see some hot girls or something. I've got my cell on me so we can take some pictures of them instead of your gay photos."

"Whatever, man. You have no concept of art. Right, Kant?"

"Don't bring me into this," I said.

"No, c'mon Kant. What do you think? Would you rather take a bunch of lame artsy pictures or take pictures of some hot girls?" Alex asked.

"I'm really not going to answer that," I said.

"Yeah, Alex, Kant's on my team," Percy said. "Right?" He wrapped his arms around me and blew in my ear. He smelled like salt and sea.

I pulled away from him.

"No way, man. Kant's all about the ladies, right?" Alex said, patting my back.

"You guys are assholes," I said. I walked away from them.

"Yo! Kant! Come back, man. We're sorry!" Percy called after me.

They ran after me, Alex carrying my bag with all of our things packed into it. They stood on either side of me and mumbled apologies.

We passed a man with a metal detector who was looking for treasures in the sand. "This is the best time to find rings and bracelets and stuff, I bet," Alex said. "It's the end of the season so anything left lying around can probably be found pretty easily."

"It's a bit more than the end of the season," I said. "It's the last day of summer. Why do you think it's empty out here?"

We kept walking. Percy would run ahead every so often, thinking he saw something. "Guys! Come look at this!"

We walked towards Percy who was pointing to foam from

the ocean. The white mass of bubbles was moving as if it were breathing. "Isn't that cool? It's like... I dunno. I like it a lot though." Percy took pictures of the foam with his cell phone camera.

"Venus was born from sea foam," I said.

"Yeah? Some girl born from New Jersey sewage would probably be really freaky. I like the way you think, man," Alex said.

I turned away. "Let's keep walking."

Further down the beach there were mazes drawn into the sand. Percy began to run into one. Then he ran back and took my hand. I went with him. I imagined I was holding someone else's hand as we ran together, laughing. She would be my age, maybe a bit younger. And blonde. We would run through the maze till we knew it by heart and then we'd sit on the beach and watch the sun die.

Percy and I reached the end. "That was fun," he said. "Let's keep going."

Percy insisted we write our names in the sand. "It'll be so cool. Like we're trying to find immortality, and then the waves wash it all away..."

"It's been done," I said.

Percy wrote his name in the sand by the water. He took out his cell phone camera and waited until the water began to crash up right onto his last name. *Snap*.

"You're *such* a great artist, Percy," Alex said.

"Fuck off," said Percy.

We reached the end of the beach. Ahead there was only ocean on all sides.

"The end of the world, gentlemen," Percy said.

We sat on the sand in front of the waves. The sun dipped low into the clouds. The clouds turned orange and purple.

"I'm starving, guys," Alex said. "I'll go back to the boardwalk and buy a pizza. Maybe I can get a sweatshirt too." He stood up and began walking back.

"Well, Kant, I'm going to go swimming some more. Wanna come?"

"No. Thank you. I'll just watch."

"Watch me closely, Kant. If I drown I want *you* to perform CPR on me."

Percy went into the water and began to swim out into the ocean. I watched him for awhile and then watched the sky turn colors. Once again I took out my notebook and pen and opened to a blank page. I sat there for a long time, staring, notebook in my lap. Percy was floating on his back.

I doodled in my notebook. Percy began swimming back. I hadn't realized how far out he was. I licked the tip of my pen and began to write. I wrote about the sea, the sun, the sand. I wrote about the girl I wished I met and how her hair wrapped around her face in the wind. How she laughed and the way she smiled to herself secretly when she thought no one was watching. I wrote about our love. She was Venus and she never existed.

Alex returned with a pizza box and a large white plastic bag.

Percy walked past me and headed towards Alex.

I ignored them. Two pages of my notebook were full and I started on a third.

"He's really going at it," Percy said.

"I wonder if he's writing something dirty," Alex said.

I stopped writing when the sky was too dark to see by. Alex and Percy had eaten most of the pizza and were having a discussion around the box. I walked over to join them.

"Did you guys eat it all?" I asked.

"You snooze, you lose," Alex said. "We should really get going now anyway. I have class at nine tomorrow."

We walked back towards the car together. Alex and Percy stood on either side of me.

"What did you write about?" Alex asked.

"Nothing, really. It wasn't very good anyway."

"You looked like you were possessed," Percy said.

"It's all raw, though. Nothing that great yet. I'll need rewrites and rewrites and rewrites before I can show it to anyone."

"Is there a car chase in it?" Alex asked.

"No, nothing like that," I said.

"How about sex?"

"No."

"Well what's the point then?"

Percy laughed.

We reached the car and climbed in. I sat in the backseat.

Percy started the car and we drove back towards Pennsylvania, towards home. I looked out the window and for a second I thought I saw the girl from my notes. She smiled. I smiled back. She disappeared. I opened my notebook again and wrote:

*The sun was bright and high; the breeze was cool...*



## SHARK

Dear Sister Aloysius-Bruno,  
My mom and Mother Anne-Marie told me that I could not go back to school until I told you that I am sorry. I think it is a good idea, because I really am sorry. I am sorry that I was not nice to you. I am sorry that I made my drawing of the fall leaves sloppy on purpose and just colored everything blue. I am sorry that I took my shoes off in the house of the Lord. I am sorry that I told you that I could write. I am sorry that I contested you on the point of the social implications of the conservative backlash in the Catholic Church. I am sorry that I peed on you. Next time I go to confession, I will ask Father Scanlon to please tell God I am sorry.

But these things are not my fault because one day of school turned me into a shark. Before I left for school on the first day I got all dressed in my new uniform and I did not think it was too bad. There was our maroon plaid skirt that was crispy and there was our white blouse which was not as crispy but it smelled crispy. There were also my new shoes and they were sort of hard but not too bad because I buckled them loose. My mom tried to put my hair in a pigtail with this curly pink ribbon but I said no because I did not want to look like a stupid baby. I smelled pretty crispy, and I walked pretty crispy, but I let my mom tuck in my blouse because it looked like she really wanted to. She took my picture in the garden, which was kind of embarrassing. She told me that I should tell my teacher that she taught me to read and write. I thought that would be a good idea but actually it was not.

When I got to school everyone was already sitting down in their desks in super-straight rows. I sat next to Christina, who I knew from Sunday school. She is nice, but she picks her nose, which is pretty gross. I just try not to look when she thinks I am not looking. She asked me to be her best friend and I said okay. I asked her if she saw the show on the Discovery Channel about the *Architeuthis dux* (that is what scientists call a giant squid), but she said she did not know what that was. She is also a little stupid. You read us a story about Noah and the Ark. God was angry

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that there were so many bad people on the earth, and he decided that the best way to get rid of them was to flood the whole world and start over. He told Noah to get his family and two of every kind of animal on the ark so they would be safe. Then, as cited in the August 2008 issue of *Scientific American*, the Mediterranean Sea broke through the Dardanelles, filling the then-prosperous dry bed of the Black Sea and submerging entire civilizations. Some survivors brought the story of the great flood to the Holy Land, perpetuating the tale until it surfaced as the Old Testament story we are familiar with today. All the really bad people got flooded by God, though, so the people who got away must not have counted.

I told you that maybe I could read the article for you sometime, because I am a good reader. You said that children in kindergarten cannot read and that I should not tell lies or God would send another flood and I would not be one of the people on the ark. I said that my mom taught me and that I am good at writing too. You said that I better be good or God would turn me into a pillar of salt.

It was a long time until recess, and you would not let me go to the bathroom when we were coloring our leaves. I just colored them all blue and did not even think about the different colors of real leaves like you said we should. I am sorry for this, but maybe I would have done a better job if I did not have to pee.

At recess Christina taught me hopscotch, but you said we could not throw rocks on the parking lot. You cannot play hopscotch without a rock, and it was only a tiny one. You said that it was not my job to make the rules. It is God's job and He tells you what to tell me. You said that in the times of Jesus people killed bad people by throwing rocks at them. And after that you said I had to wear my sweater. It was not even cold out! I do not think God told you that all children must wear sweaters. Jesus did not wear a sweater.

At snack time you made me bless the crackers. Then I had to eat all of them, even though they were pretty gross. God loves all the things that He created, but He only created good things and those crackers were not good. So that means that He would not

mind if I did not eat bad crackers or if I did not bless them. Christina did not like the crackers either.

I thought that maybe you and I could still be friends. I asked you what you thought of the reversion back to the traditionalist school of thought and if you thought the intensified social conservatism would discourage church attendance. You told me that the Church is exactly the way God wants it and that it is sinful for snotty little girls to go around repeating things they hear on liberal radio to try to make themselves sound smart. You told me that if I wanted to see some social conservatism you would hit me in the face with a ruler. I told you that intellectual discussion enhances rather than discourages faith.

At the end of the day we went to church to hear Father Scanlon talk about how it is good to pray. I know it is good to pray (except for bad crackers and bad nuns), and I do not mind being in church, although it is a little boring. What was the problem was my socks. They were too tight, so I had to take my shoes off. If your socks felt so bad, you would want to fix them, too. I do not think you remember what you said to me, because if you did, you would have to write me a sorry letter too.

Then I tried to explain to you that it was not real church because it was not a celebration of the Eucharist, only Father Scanlon telling us to pray. Then you told me that you would paddle me if you could, but that you cannot anymore so you would just take away my recess instead. But I am sorry that I took my shoes off.

After that Christina did not want to play with me or talk to me because she thought that I would get her into trouble. I told her that I would not and that you were mean, but now she is not my best friend anymore. I will have to play hopscotch by myself without a rock and that is your fault.

When I got back to the classroom everything started to feel too tight. My sweater was too tight and my shoes were too tight and especially my socks were too tight, so I took them all off but you did not see. You said that it was time to play make believe that we were our favorite animals. You told us to think about how that animal moves and to go around the rug. I thought that maybe

I could be a bird or a deer that runs really fast or maybe some kind of fuzzy cat. But those kinds of animals are all the kind that Saint Francis of Assisi liked and the kind that everyone thinks are cute and colors in coloring books, so I could not be any of those.

The Discovery Channel had this show with all these sharks, and it said that if sharks lose a tooth, like if they are biting too hard at a big fish, they have a bunch more teeth in the back of their mouths that come right up and fill the hole. My teeth do that too. I have already lost two.

I was a shark. I moved my head with my black stuffed animal eyes back and forth, smelling for blood in the water and feeling for the sound vibrations of dying fish. There were a lot of other animals in the water, but I only wanted one. I wanted the smaller fish to be my dinner and I wanted it to be scared of me because of my big sharp teeth and my black eyes. I practiced shark growls and they sounded like bears so I tried it all different ways. I practiced on some Lego men I found and I bit the plastic. There were bite marks and nobody survived.

I did not plan to pee on you, but you got me angry, and sharks are even meaner than nuns sometimes. I wish you had just left me alone because then I would not have needed to bite Christina the goldfish. She said that she would not talk to me because she thought sharks were ugly and also that she did not want to get in trouble because I was bad in class and got you angry a lot.

I said, "GRAGHLRAHHHH!" because that is the sound that sharks make when they bite stupid girls on the nose and there is a lot of blood.

Then Christina was making a lot of noise and maybe crying because my teeth are super sharp. I am sorry that I bit her. They do TV shows about people who have been bitten by sharks, so I thought maybe she could be on TV at least and she would like that but she could not pick her nose. Then she would not know who is looking, and there would never be a safe time to do it because there would be lots of TV cameras. I thought that I might get in trouble, so I went into the bathroom to hide. I thought I should turn out the lights, because then I could sneak up on any

shark hunters that came in. I sat in there in the dark and you came in. I really was using the toilet when you came (sharks only pee in the water), and you just scared me when you opened the stall door and started to yell at me.

I thought that this time maybe God was telling *me* what to tell *you*, and He was telling me that he wanted a flood to wash away a bad nun. I knew God was on my side because He did not tell you to build an ark when the Dardanelles broke.

Even though sharks are big, they know about how to keep themselves from being eaten by bigger fish. Giant squid ink people, but sharks pee on people.

I am very very very sorry, Sister Aloysius-Bruno. I did not mean to get pee on your dress or to bite Christina or to take my shoes off in the house of the Lord or to color the leaves the wrong way or to know how to write or to question your conservative interpretation of the scripture. I am sorry but sharks do not like crispy clothing and they do not like desks in straight lines. They especially do not like nuns.

Sincerely,

Abigail Raimer

## GETTING MY FEET WET

It was October and my desperation was as thick as my nerves were thin. I turned to Craigslist. Rent would be due soon and I was unwilling to go through all of the harrowing bullshit of smiling for a new manager or filling out tax return forms. No, no, no thanks. I needed to find something fueled by secrecy, perhaps guilt or shame, where the cash was anonymous and out of the peripherals of the respectable, starry glare of Uncle Sam. Bingo: "Looking for cute college girls for sexy foot parties."

I sold my soles to the foot fetish industry and, like Cinderella, I felt destined to fit the part. To prepare for the ball, I spoke to my fairy godfather, a certain "Mike" who asked me about my shoe size, the grace of my arch and the tickle factor of my feet. I was informed that the rate was twenty dollars per ten minute session and that this month was a Halloween theme and I would be expected to dress accordingly. I was on my way to getting my feet wet in the small pool of foot fetish parties held in the city.

The night was brisk and the butterflies churned cream in my abdomen. My pumpkin took me to the northern boundary of Delaware Avenue and I passed some bodyguards on my way to the elevator of what was an otherwise normal business building. Then it got strange. All of the girls were in costumes of fetish related assortment: Red Riding Hood and Superwoman were there along with Snow White and a Belly Dancer. The men sported what appeared to be their best polos and penny loafers. The room was decorated to look like a casual nightclub, with small rooms veiled by curtains for the more intimate sessions. I stood along the wall as a moth ripe for squashing and awaited a prince. It was just like a middle school dance, with the guys avoiding our glances and the girls giggling in impenetrable bubbles amongst themselves.

I put on my best "No-this-isn't-awkward-or-anything" smile and screwed up my eyes in a way I believed seductive. My charm must have been in my stature; I looked sixteen and like I was more than okay with statutory. It worked.

A middle-aged man approached me, grabbed my hand and

led me to a couch. We sat down and I stared into his froggy, sagging face. He was certainly not a prince, but maybe a count or vicar of a small estate. He picked up my foot and carefully removed my shoe. His face lit up like he had just been given an additional fifteen acres. After rubbing my feet for a few minutes, he brought my toes to his mouth and ran them along the edge of his lower jaw. The sensation was comparable to having wet, blunt, uneven scissors traverse the fingertips. I giggled while he had his way orally with my feet, dousing them in a cocoon of saliva. After restoring them to cleanliness with witch hazel (the herb of choice), he reached into his pocket and imbibed me with sixty dollars. He told me he would find me later.

So my podiatric cherry was popped and it wasn't so bad. In fact, it was much easier after that to let a man worship my feet. I watched the clock and imagined a little "kaching" with every passage of ten minutes. My second nobleman had me trample on his back while he instructed me to snicker peevishly. \$60.00 later, I was sucking on another girl's foot while a decrepit booger of a man looked on with an air of vicarious ecstasy. The stranger the requests became, the more intent I was to quell their appetites. Some men wanted me ticklish, while others preferred me stoic and powerful. Obliging their desires was as easy as a cold reading for a theatre audition. They weren't looking for academy award winners and my personality seemed to overcome my overall lack of modern "hotness."

Before I knew it, the clock was chiming two a.m. and I needed to transform back to a regular woman for my regular job in the morning. My pumpkin returned me to my apartment and the cash that I made was enough to cover the rent and buy two weeks of groceries. When I woke up the next day, I felt as if I had been on the set of a David Lynch film. The scenes all blurred together in a bizarre foot orgy and the surreal factor was just enough for me to doubt whether or not it happened at all. The only evidence I had was the security of having my apartment for another month.

Although the parties did not become a steady job for me, they transformed my perceptions of sexual oddity and exploration. I figured if I was willing enough to let a complete stranger rub

themselves on the godliness of my toenails, why should I oppose things such as bondage or threesomes with people I am actually comfortable with? The experience offered me what great novels and fairy tales do: a new perspective on something seemingly ordinary and straightforward. I also let my concept of monogamy lie down and take it from behind. I considered the luxury of being young and interesting and offering myself and my interests to multiple people at once. Since then, I've made it a point to make myself available to multiple men so that what I have to offer romantically is never quite focused in a single, concentrated place and the experiences I have can be as varied as the people I share them with. Maybe one day I will settle down with one person but until then I want to have charming princes instead of Prince Charming. I think the witch hazel and the saliva of the vicars and the counts have something to do with that.



## FEAR OF GLORY

I won't stay here.  
I can't take this fear of glory.  
Purgatory, half-death,  
where the only stories  
are of dead, accomplished  
actors from the Bard's ruins  
and of local sports heroes whose  
donated fields lay abandoned by lawn mowers.

These manacled cupboards  
which you call the suburbs,  
locked with unconquered  
heights and complacency,  
featuring spaces  
which only will open their homes  
for the ghosts in your bones,  
and so I will go.  
I will flee to the city, the country,  
like many brave/foolish ancestors.  
Mine is a legacy of travel and action,  
of gradual unraveling and dissatisfaction.

Your breath smells like Wonder Bread,  
tea lights and PTA fights  
amongst the aristocratic moms  
from the beach side community;  
twitchy blinds and stuck minds -  
not so much closed as only as open  
as they're told to be, not free.  
Freedom of choice and of years yet not spirit.

People are mummified, mumbles the desert wind's whisper,  
of ashes and dust from the decaying cradle,  
of sifting sand slowly sieving through pores

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and pushing towards the oasis,  
rejoice at the shade and the H<sub>2</sub>O,  
almost as green as our exiled home.

And so we are destined to dither in jungles,  
us mumbles. We bumble around  
in the search for a path or a light or a reason,  
a fight or a landmark, a quest,  
but we don't need a nest to grow slow in and tow away children to,  
so they can know the degeneration  
of the torpid and lazy.

Mirages are hazy half-truths of the air  
to convince you to lie down and die  
because finally you're there!  
You are free, you are home,  
safe and simple; but where is your half-full canteen?

We are programmed for teepees and tents  
and small rooms and large rents,  
for the jungles of trees or cement.  
We've a need you'd lament  
for the speed and the clusters and strife,  
for the hustling, wrestling business of life  
and rough bases, wide spaces, thick laces.

And this is no oasis,  
these cupboards bear stasis and stagnant decline,  
a slow winding down, binding down,  
as men melt through their armchairs to claim their  
three square feet of legacy.

Women whose hands have gone raw  
from wish-washing big boxes of dishes,  
their brains have turned off as a lifetime of wishing is dashed.

For a prince, hoping and praying and whining and braying

for someone to stare at you, lie to you, tell you you're beautiful,  
someone to take care of you,  
make the most of you,  
take you back through the ages.

See, this progress is scary.  
Your feet will give way; we  
can't stand on our own,  
we aren't grown from the same home,  
always our lessons defined by our chromosomes.

You cannot handle this sudden commitment, this hardship.  
Resistance is all you can do in your subtle way,  
comb away knots in your hair, in your head,  
in your stares now of men and of dresses and so what  
of greater and more and to learn and explore  
and to travel the jungle in search of an essence to rescue.

You must depend on *yourself*??  
Oh swoon, little women, who knew *this* was coming  
when all that you wanted was trimmings of equality.  
But look! You're a princess now!  
Joy and coy smiles and molded to marble -  
no, porcelain statue,  
malleable to his needs and his whims and decisions,  
his shortcomings prying out strengths from your trembling  
forearms.

Don't shatter don't shatter don't shatter, don't break,  
it don't matter how loud he yells,  
fast he drives, jokes he tells at your expense.

And you're quite expensive now,  
aren't you, you sly dog?  
You dumb hog, you cow,  
what's the value of this?  
And this price tag's ridiculous;

what do you think he is going to want in return?  
Don't you ever learn?  
Don't you watch Lifetime?

No, he don't beat you and yes, you've a job,  
but your mind frame is stuck in a cupboard  
where no one can rob you  
of your secret selfish wish to be submissive,  
to step back and down and just slightly to the right.  
He cannot see you behind the lipstick tube,  
you step here and there,  
anywhere but up and forward into a new world

where Mrs. Princess Barbie must rescue and vote for herself,  
must pull out her own chair and control her emotions and learn  
not to prostrate, not to kneel, not to hide her face in his chest but  
to Look. Him. In. The. Eye.

Oh this is a cupboard that's under the stairs  
and so I want a giant to take me anywhere  
other than this moldy town of damp ambition and stunted  
perfection.  
I cannot abide this hot fear of glory.

## THE RUM BOTTLE'S FORTUNE

Strange, the eye-sore amidst my Sharpies and Bics  
is a Bacardi bottle Piggy-Bank.

The cap and the dizzying scent of 80-proof liquor have vanished  
along with any material value that this item ever held.

1.75 liters, at least seventy-five percent of which is air,  
serve as a daily reminder that there's room for change.

The perfect silver-to-copper ratio helps me to feel more  
accomplished than one whose change collection—\$4.73—can  
afford only two gallons of gasoline or one 6" sub.

The pennies—tarnished like the browning peel of an overripe  
banana—

are the deceivers of the bunch, taking up enough space to  
give the illusion of a savings.

Like the damaged shirts on the Macy's clearance racks,  
they aren't worthless, but they're no Ralph Lauren.

More difficult to transfer from my wallet to my collection  
are the quarters—the Barbary lions of the rum bottle den.

Even when blackened with antiquity,  
they're princess-cut diamonds of exquisite luster beside  
their one-cent competitors.

The nickel—the middle child—

is a slightly pudgy mourner of the outdated Five and Dime.

The dime, literally a "10," boasts its higher value.

Ask the Victoria's Secret model—it *pays* to be thinner.

Some days, when college loans become cumulonimbus creeps  
who anxiously await my graduation to release their storms  
of debt,

I treat my pennies, nickels, and dimes as an infrequent visitor who  
takes respite

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in the envied extendable pocket of a wallet overstuffed with  
\$2.79 in gift cards.

Inevitably, I excuse the guest—a dog-eared dollar bill—for his brief  
visits;

Myrin's copy machine or Wawa's coffeepot have a Siren-  
like lure on petty cash.

Frustrated, I overturn the bottle, shake the miserable maraca, and,  
through the clanging change,  
hear the coins wail, "stay!" to their long-lost friend.

I recount my fortune for certainty,  
finding, expectedly, four dollars and seventy-three cents—a  
three-year collection.

"We don't need cash," I explain, more so to myself than to the  
barely significant metals,  
"We need change."

## WHILE THINKING OF WHAT TO WRITE

I rest my ankle on a bent knee  
and sit contemplating the mood of the sun  
sifting through the stratus clouds.  
Smoke pushes through my nostrils  
and waltzes off with the wind.  
My cigarette, lodged between two fingers  
like a spear in a ribcage, burns slowly.

A middle aged woman, made up younger,  
strolls across the street and stops on the corner.  
Tender eyes, waiting for the bus,  
roam from car to car and down the street.  
Is her poem about the gentle press of the chilled wind  
stroking her blushed cheek?

The somber bus squeaks to a stop  
and the double doors draw like a grand drape  
to reveal a motel-faced conductor.  
She steps on board and the bus tugs  
away from the curb.  
I flick my cigarette onto the porch and watch  
as the frayed butt smokes itself away.

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## DYING IN SPRING

At the end of days where snowmelt air gives way  
to green grass growth, I dream of dying.  
Not in a fantastical way  
but in a way where I'm scared to let sleep  
slip through the cracks in my head, up  
my nose, into my mouth, tears in reverse  
creeping past my eyes. But sleep  
is an addiction and, weak as I am,  
I sink back into that deep-root  
routine. Oblivion sets in,  
wrapping me like a shroud  
and I love the high  
as I go down but crash  
into that sickly realistic  
fiction of dream.

My mother is dead, I don't know how,  
but now we live in a foreign carcass of a house.  
When I surface from slumber and plunge  
back in, the scene is changed  
and my sister is gone.  
Our parents don't cry.  
It is still far from morning  
but I realize I am alone  
and my feet can't find the floor  
as I wrench myself from sleep,  
terrified. I brush bread crust crumbs  
from the corners of my eyes  
until I see you, until I can remember  
what ground feels like,  
your hand pressed against my back,  
your voice rough  
and warm as wool,  
telling me I'm still here,  
we're still here.



## MONDAY'S EXPECTATIONS

The morning was unremarkable as it peeked through the dingy curtains of Ivan Jack's borrowed hovel. Some posters and photos made it his, but he told himself weekly: *temporary, only temporary*. He woke before his alarm, which is always a disappointment in the strongest sense of the word. With hatred toward the impending wail, he silenced the clock before it had anything to say. After a moment's blank stare at the ceiling, he rolled to the left, landed on his feet and headed for the bathroom.

Down the short hall and around the corner sat his father Mike, inspecting newspaper circulars for coupons while cradling his bowl of Lucky Charms. As Ivan splashed his smooth face above the bathroom sink, his step-mother Ann Marie turned away from the kitchen counter to join her husband at the table. "I hear the boy-wonder is awake." Mike nodded in agreement, unwilling to shift his attention fully.

After pulling on a stiff pair of khakis and the thin burgundy polo required of all Henry's Pharmacy employees, Ivan headed to the kitchen hoping to avoid much interaction with his parental roommates. He downed a glass of juice, received an absent-minded, "Have a good day," from his father, and left the apartment earlier than necessary. He walked down two flights of stairs, past the *Thank you for not smoking* sign, and out the door. The pharmacy was only three and a half blocks away from Franklin Court Apartments and even if he walked slowly he would get there early. There was little happening on the streets of Newmanstown at seven o'clock in the morning. He counted cracks in the sidewalk and avoided stepping on them in order to give the appearance of thoughtfulness to any potential onlooker. Yet the absence of such onlookers was what he so appreciated about the hour. The block was empty, as if everyone had been shut out and he alone had been granted access. It was as though he carried a secret in a sealed envelope. He couldn't access it fully, couldn't say exactly what it was, but something about the cool morning air seemed to belong privately to him. He reveled in this.

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Turning onto Main Street, he was glad to see that the pharmacy door was standing open and he would not have to wait outside. He walked in, closed the door behind him and headed straight for the back room to find and attach his name tag. Joe, son of the aging Henry who owned the store, silently greeted him with a broad smile and a pat on the back before heading out to stock some shelves. Checking the clock, Ivan found he had 40 minutes to wait until they would be open for business, so he followed Joe to help with the merchandise. Tearing open a box, Joe inquired, "So, how you doing today?"

Ivan shrugged, "All right," and Joe nodded.

Moments passed in silence before Joe added, "I hear there's a new girl hired."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, coming in today. Can't think though... her name starts with an L. 'Round your age."

Ivan considered for a moment the possibilities of this newcomer. *Pretty? Nice? Too pretty to be nice? Maybe she's fat. Probably fat. So many people are fat...* Joe interrupted this inane thought process with, "So what did you do over the weekend?"

He recalled his hours spent watching soccer on TV, reading conspiracy theory blogs and staring at the ceiling. "Nothing, really."

"Ehh well you should get out, you're young. Wish I could get myself to the movies or something. A horror movie, what do you think? Maybe that way I can find a nice young single mother to comfort through the gruesome parts. Not too young, a'course.

"I didn't really do anything either, though. Last night I went for a drive with Bart. He wanted to get his mom out of the house 'cause it's really the only way to shut her up. You can tell she's really going downhill. But you let her look out a moving window and she seems pretty happy. We went to Wal-Mart. Didn't see your dad."

"He wasn't working."

"Ah. Well, Bart got sunscreen. Guess he was at the beach and let some lady borrow his and then she never gave it back. Course, you gotta have your sunscreen, so we go get him some

sunscreens. Me, I only got some new underwear. Just one pack. All I needed."

Ivan nodded. At times, that was all to do with Joe. Twenty minutes passed and the boxes of merchandise found homes on the shelves. Ivan took his place behind the register and waited for someone, the new girl or perhaps an early customer. He waited on a metal stool, sitting on its red vinyl cushion. He had grown to hate this stool with a singular passion of which one would not expect him to be capable. There were only two options behind this register: standing, or sitting on the red stool. Standing hurt his feet and sitting hurt his back. The only thing to do was alternate and that in itself was irritating because one should be able to simply *exist* behind the register in relative comfort. Despite his frustration with the heinous stool, Ivan began the cycle by sitting.

When Luci Juarez entered the store, Ivan was not overcome by her appearance or her personality, but only because he was determined not to be. *Starts with an L? She looks like a Jennifer... Melissa... something. Not fat though.* She walked to the counter and smiled. "Hi, I'm Luci. I think I'm looking for Joe."

"Hey, yeah, he's in the back." He waved her on with his arm, "I'll show you."

"Thanks."

She stepped forward as he came from behind the counter, and their arms brushed briefly. He jerked instinctually, and quickly mumbled, "Sorry."

"Oops. No problem."

This was the extent of their conversation for most of the day. Luci followed Joe for the remainder of her shift, learning the ropes and helping him with prescriptions while Ivan stood or sat behind the register and took people's money in exchange for various health and hygiene products. At one point, he overheard Joe's attempts at conversation with the new employee. "So," Joe began, "You're what, twenty or so?"

"Yep, about that- I'm twenty-one."

"Oh yeah. Those were the days. You gotta enjoy that while you can."

"I do my best."

"I could really tell you some stories. Those were the days. Back before everybody got married and had kids and got so boring. That's all you have waiting for you, I can tell you. You only get more boring." Luci smiled, unsure of what to say. "Now my college days, that was something. There were always plenty of parties, plenty of girls." Joe beamed with the memory. "It got wild. Skinny dipping and everything. But like I said, everybody got married and now they're all old and boring. But not me. For me, the party continues. I can still go skinny dipping."

Ivan's brow furrowed. *Damn, Joe. Too much.* From the far aisle where she stood with Joe, Luci looked towards the register and saw Ivan's skeptical expression. They both knew Joe should not be skinny dipping under any circumstances. Seeing her eyes meet his, Ivan smiled and shook his head.

Around three, Ivan looked up to see Nicholas Lioni entering through the glass door with his friend Jacob close behind. Nick held the door open while Jacob jumped to hit the bell a few extra times. Joe looked up from the back, "Yeah, okay guys we know you're here, thanks." The boys, satisfied with their entrance, approached Ivan at the register.

Though both boys were fourteen years old, Nicholas was much bigger than Jacob. His blonde hair was unkempt and far too long, his face red from activity. Jacob followed behind, shorter, thinner, mousey brown hair swept to the side. Nick didn't run and he waited until he got to the counter to start talking, so Ivan knew he had taken his medication today. He breathed a sigh of relief, because he didn't have the energy for his hyperactivity. As Jacob surveyed the selection of candy and chewing gum, Nick leaned toward Ivan over the counter. "So, how's it going?"

"Fine, Nick. Can I get you something?"

"I don't think so... I don't think I have any money." He checked his pockets hopefully but soon gave up. "Nope, nothing. Hey Jake, you wanna buy me something?"

"No."

Nick shrugged and turned back to Ivan. "Hey, I'm using the bathroom. Can you keep an eye on my ride out there? Just make sure nobody takes off in it." He turned and headed toward

the back of the store.

Ivan raised his eyebrows and began "Listen-" but was abruptly cut off by Nick's careless "Thanks."

Jacob popped up with two Hershey bars and a pack of Trident. "I think you should consider expanding your selection here."

"We don't specialize in candy."

"Yeah but your location is more convenient than going all the way down the hill to the gas station. You could really get more business off of this rack here if you invested in some Skittles or something."

"This is a pharmacy. You know that, right?"

"Yeah." Neither embarrassed nor disturbed, Jacob simply blinked and waited for Ivan to continue. But Ivan knew the point was moot.

"You'll have to take it up with Henry when he's in. Or Joe. He does a lot of the orders now too."

"Well, maybe I will. Just can't understand how I'm supposed to stay active with this limited selection."

"Yeah, I don't know, little man. Let me know how that works out."

"I will. I will."

"Two seventy-eight."

As Jacob handed over the money and put his purchases in his pocket, Nick strolled up from the back of the store. "You know," Ivan told him, "That bathroom isn't supposed to be for you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well what are you going to do?"

"I'm just saying, don't have all your friends in here using it too."

"Yeah yeah... Listen, we'll catch you later. Bigger and better things, you know how it is."

"Right. So get out." He swung playfully at the boys, who backed up smirking. He came from behind the counter and continued towards them until they pushed out the door. In a

moment they were gone and Ivan stood alone.

"You like them, huh?"

Ivan turned to see Luci standing by the front counter. "Eh. They're okay. Good kids. Little too enthusiastic sometimes."

Luci smiled. "That's not so bad."

"I guess. They do break the monotony every once in a while. But if they are ever in here, just remember: if you give them an inch they'll take a mile."

"Got it."

The day continued without event until it was time to close the small shop and head home. As he entered the apartment, Ann Marie popped her head around the corner. "Oh hi honey, didn't know if it was you or your dad." She paused to lick the large mixing spoon she held in her left hand. Ivan let out a small sigh. *You have to do that, don't you?* Not noticing his disdain, she went on, "So how was your day?"

"Fine. It was a day."

"Yeah? Well I made some ham here if you want any." She pointed over her shoulder with the spoon. "It should all be ready in a little bit."

"Nah, you know I don't eat that stuff."

"Oh, right. Well whatever you say, dear." She turned back into the kitchen as she added, "There's plenty in the fridge so I hope you grab something."

"Yeah I will. I'm not really hungry right now though." As Ann Marie responded with a distracted "Mmkay," Ivan walked back to his room, changed his shirt and grabbed his laundry basket. When he reached the end of the hall he announced, "I'm gonna go wash some clothes." Turning the doorknob he swung the door open and was gone.

The walk to the Laundromat was short- just a block away. The sky had dimmed and he noticed occasional drops of water falling into his dirty laundry, adding tiny, dark polka-dots to his jeans. He loaded the #3 washer and after finding the remote for the TV, took a seat in the corner of the empty room. His eyes shifted to the dingy corner where the once white linoleum was beginning to peel away from the floor and he spotted a large insect

waving its antennae as it clung to the yellowed terrain. *Oh you are kidding me.* He leaned forward and extended his neck so as to gain a better view. *Dude, if you're a cockroach, I can't let that slide.* His lip curled in discomfort. The insect then took a few steps and Ivan jerked back. Having already resolved not to carry the crushed corpse around on the bottom of his shoe, he looked around for a weapon but found nothing. *Alright, you're lucky. But you're not about to crawl up my leg. In fact, you stay over there, I'll stay over here.* He slid another chair closer and propped his feet up to safety.

Distracted by the small intruder, he surfed through the channels without paying attention, until a blast of thunder shook him from his trance. He stood up and crossed the room, as if to investigate the sound and confirm his security. Standing inside the door, he looked out into the street thinking of walking a block with clean laundry in the current weather. Should he bother with dryer #3? *It's the only one for the job, of course, but with rain like that... Well, we'll wait and see.* Amid these thoughts he barely noticed a female figure underneath an umbrella approach the Laundromat. The door opened and she lowered her umbrella. It was Luci. Regarding her with forced apathy, he rubbed his nose casually with his right thumb and thought, *she's average.*

"Hi!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I thought that was you standing in here. Just had to get out of the rain for a little bit, it started blowing sideways."

"...Hi," he answered awkwardly. He attempted to give the impression of aloofness by peering out the window again. "What are you doing out in this anyway?"

"I just thought I'd take a walk and get better acquainted with my surroundings here. I didn't know it was going to get serious out there."

"Yeah, me neither. I carried my laundry here and I don't have anything to keep it dry now while I walk home. I hope it slows down."

"Do you live close?"

"Yeah, just a block down. Franklin Court."

"Oh, okay. I think that would put my new place..." she counted on her fingers, remembering her route "two streets away

from you.”

Ivan pressed his lips together and nodded. “Where did you move from?”

“Not far. Richland- it’s only ten, fifteen minutes from here.”

“Okay, yeah I know Richland.”

Luci looked around at the rather desolate Laundromat. “So you’re washing some clothes?”

“Yeah,” he followed her gaze, “I know it’s a little scummy in here, but they just replaced washers and dryers 1 through 3. I always use number three. I figure it’s probably a bit newer than one and two, because more people probably use them, since they come first numerically.” The right side of Luci’s mouth lifted as she half-smiled in amusement. Not noticing, he continued, “I was just trying to decide if I should use a dryer at all though, since I have to carry it home in the rain.”

Considering his dilemma, Luci proffered, “I think it would be worth it. Only the top layer would get wet, and only damp if you’re lucky. Actually, what am I saying? I have an umbrella here; I can walk with you and use it to keep the clothes dry.”

“Oh, it’s not a big deal-”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. It’s only a block away. I’ll walk with you.”

“Alright, well I have to switch this stuff to the dryer. It’s probably going to take 40 minutes or so. I don’t think you want to waste your night sitting here waiting on it.”

Luci let out a small laugh, “Well, I was just out wandering in the rain, so it doesn’t look like I have better plans, does it?”

*Hm. Not average, then. “You’ve got a point.”*

After switching the laundry he settled back into his corner chair. “Is this channel okay? We can watch whatever. I was just passing the time.” She nodded and assured him that the channel was fine. Opting out of any further conversation, they sat and watched TV while his laundry dried.

Half an hour later, as Ivan filled his basket with clean shirts and pants, a copper coin sitting on the change acceptor of dryer #5 caught Luci’s eye. “Hmm,” she muttered as she walked



towards it, "what do we have here?"

"That would be a penny."

"You don't say..." She surveyed it briefly, sighed heavily, and flipped it over. As she turned back towards him, Ivan asked, "What was that?"

"Oh, nothing. Tails up." She rolled her eyes as she added, "So rare that they aren't."

"Ah. Well why did you pick it up and put it back down?"

"Oh I didn't pick it up at all. I don't really go around picking up pennies, although maybe if it would have been heads up, since that's lucky. But even then it has to have been made in an even-numbered year. Oh, and that even-numbered year has to be one that I was alive for."

*Mmhm. Really not average.* "Okay, but you did reach for it."

"I flipped it over."

"Why?"

She smiled and shrugged, "Well, maybe it will be lucky for the next person."

There was a pause. *Well that's likeable.* Ivan nodded in approval.

As they headed out into the rain, they decided Luci would carry the laundry and Ivan would carry the umbrella, as he was the taller of the two. He had thought the image of him, carrying laundry while crouched beneath the umbrella as she held it might be somewhat emasculating, but it all worked out in the end. And thankfully so, for as they approached the corner, the air filled with the rowdy yells of neighborhood boys camped out under one of the shadowed porches.

"Ivan! Yo, Ivan! Hey, I'm tryin' to meet your girl, there." Nick emerged, as expected.

They paused as Ivan responded, "Sorry Nick, she's too old for you."

"Oh, age. Arbicherry number. What's a few years?"

"I think you were going for 'arbitrary' there, bud."

"That's what I said." Unbothered, he nodded in Luci's direction. "Hey, uh..."

A voice from behind him came to the rescue, "It's Luci,

dude.”

Nick continued, “Hey, Luci. How old are you?”

“How old do you think I am?”

Raising his hand to stroke his chin, Nick considered for a moment, then announced, “I’d put you at about seventeen.”

“Hm. Well, I’m twenty-one.”

Condescending snorts rose around him as he responded with genuine surprise, “What?! You’re twenty-one?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Cool.”

An anonymous voice interjected from the background, “You’re hot.”

Wearily, Luci spoke in the general direction of the porch. “Thank you. I admire your confidence. But we’ve got to get going, boys.”

With lively worry, Nick lamented, “So soon?”

“Afraid so. And by the way,” hands full with the basket, she swung her elbow out to indicate Ivan, “I’m not his girl.” She promptly turned and continued up the sidewalk, and without a chance to defend himself Ivan hurried after her to protect his dry laundry with the umbrella.

They reached the door of his building and he teetered on the possibility of inviting her inside. It was a significant gesture of friendship, important to the future of their relationship, and yet there was such potential for embarrassment. She began to cough. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, yeah I’m fine. I just have a scratch or tickle or whatever.”

Painfully, he decided. “Would you want to come in?” He opened the door. “I can get you a drink.”

She hesitated, then agreed. “Sure, that would be great. Not if it’s an imposition, though.”

“No, no, you’re fine.” He led the way up to the second floor. “Aiyo, I gotta warn you though, my folks- I live with my dad and his wife- they’re kind of..”

“Oh,” she laughed, “don’t be ridiculous. I don’t care.”

When they entered, the TV was on but the living room

was empty. Luci sat on the sofa as Ivan dropped his basket off in his room. Seeing Mike and Ann Marie watching baseball in their bedroom, he hoped introductions would not be necessary. He came back out and headed to the kitchen, pointing at her on the way, "Drink, right?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"We have water, milk, some kind of fruit juice..."

"Water is fine."

He handed her a filled glass and she sipped it, pointing to a picture on the wall. "I really like that. Where-" she was interrupted by Mike sauntering down the hallway in shrunken pajamas. Upon seeing Luci, Mike hooted with friendly surprise. "Hoo-hoo! What's this? New friend here?"

Made especially uncomfortable by Mike's entrance, Ivan smiled apologetically in her direction. "Yeah, this is Luci. We work together." He shifted his footing in an attempt to block her view and gestured over his shoulder, "This is my dad."

Mike beamed, leaning awkwardly against the wall. "Well that's great. You're welcome anytime." Luci smiled but remained silent. Mike continued, "Yeah... alright... well I don't want to miss too much of the game, so I'll leave you to your business." He freed himself from the wall and proceeded to the kitchen, humming as he went.

"Sorry," Ivan said, "you we're saying?"

"Oh, I just like this picture. I was wondering where it's from."

"Well, I think-" he paused as his father made his way back through the room and down the hall, scratching himself as he went. He burned with mortification. "I'm sorry," he began.

"Oh," Luci waved her hand carelessly, "its fine."

"That's not even the worst of it. Be glad he didn't take much of an interest."

Luci laughed, "He's your dad, though."

Ivan nodded.

Luci walked to the kitchen and deposited her emptied glass in the sink, saying over her shoulder, "Well, you should be used to it by now, then. Right?"

"I guess so." He waited for her to return to the living room before he continued. "It's just that they are really strange people sometimes. We were never close, anyway. I do my own thing."

Luci nodded, biting her thumbnail as she listened.

"I'm only here temporarily. I had my own place, but things got rough so here I am."

"Ah. Well, it's nice to have somewhere to come back to."

The sound of Mike and Ann Marie's voices penetrated the thin walls as they shouted at the television and Ivan shook his head.

"Yeah, that's true. Anyway, I'm sorry if you were put off or anything. You've probably noticed the amount of stuffed animals Ann Marie uses to decorate the place. Like it's the headquarters of the Winnie the Pooh fan club or something... I just don't think they've got it all together up there." He tapped his temple.

Luci laughed and consented, "Maybe not. But it hardly matters. Besides, the best kept secret about people is that we're all human."

Relieved, Ivan smiled back. "You know, you might have something there."

After checking to see if the rain had slowed, Luci announced that she should be on her way. Ivan walked her down the steps and out the front door. As she stepped out, she turned with a brief wave and said, "See you tomorrow, then."

"Yeah, see ya."

After she had advanced about twenty feet he stepped out after her. With his hands in his pockets, he chewed his lip thoughtfully as he watched her walk down the block, though she did not notice or look back.

## TUTTE LE ETÀ DI FIRENZE

The rain drops fall upon her face and hands  
that stretch beyond her head to touch the sky,  
above the very spot where she still stands  
that never in her lifetime has been dry.

The water never ceases its descent  
upon her body, perfect in its form,  
conceived with careful thought and iron rent,  
so she could be admired ever more.

The people walk along the cobbled street;  
men and women smile and embrace  
while tossing coins like hail around her feet  
that, despite her wish, won't leave this place.

    If given but a chance she'd choose to die,  
    instead of watching all these lives pass by.

## TOKEN

Mom held a pine tree green coin  
between her thumb and finger,  
inspecting each angle of its plastic geometry.  
The coin was a month of sobriety  
molded into a slice of optimism  
she received at her last meeting.

She laid it in my palm,  
delicately as one building a house of cards.  
Her mahogany eyes and hanging  
face urged me to share her struggle.  
They hoped I'd soak it with empathy  
until it was waterlogged, heavy.

My thoughts reeked of white wine.  
I stumbled around my head for something heavier  
than dollar store plastic.  
It wouldn't come to me.  
I waited for a wave of pride or grief  
to carry me to my mother's side.

When I looked into the face,  
I saw my reflection distorted  
by plastic imperfections, cut  
into pieces by green-stained ridges.  
*Mom, I don't know. What do you want?*  
Pulling down my fingers,

I veiled the symbol in my palm,  
hoping green dye would melt  
into my creases, carving out my life-line  
like guttered rain water,  
eroding my grasp

until it was too much to hold. That moment never came.  
I handed it back, mimicking her care,  
afraid of the imperfect circle.

## RECOGNITION

There are moments where, in silence, your mind races on and on without ever seeming to stop. You can think about the fact that she's sick, the fact that her hair is falling out, the fact that things aren't easy anymore. You can think about death and what it means and how it happens. You can imagine her sad, feeling lost and hopeless. You can think about what it feels like to be given a number and then be told this is all you have left. You can think all of these thoughts, allow them to swarm around in your mind, and then you look up at the person sitting beside you and try to communicate with your eyes, your eyes that have yet to cry tears. And when he looks into your eyes, and then looks away, you realize that your eyes aren't good enough; your eyes have failed to give anything away. For some reason, it's then that you feel your heart stir. You feel that bubble coming up your throat, that burning, angry bubble that scratches around and leaks out through your eyes ever so lightly. It's the bubble that forces out those words.

"She's dying, isn't she?" But those words seemed to say a lot more in your head than they do when they're out. His head jerks upwards slightly, like he almost did something, almost said something, but hesitated or rethought it and now has settled on some cruel form of silence. His hands stir; they move around against each other as if they were directly connected to those words you know are spinning around in his mind, trying to make sense of each other. You watch him like that for awhile. He slows down after a moment. You can't help but wonder why, because, for some reason, you're depending on him for any type of acknowledgement, any type of clarification or reassurance, any type of expressed feeling that might put the restrained storm inside you at bay. You want to make this ugliness, this pain, this longing for hope, this absence of life that floats around the house tangible.

He never responds. Instead, he bows his head with his hands on top in an awkward refusal of your presence. You feel



your face wrench up, because there are so many things you want to say and feel and understand and receive from him. Suddenly, that bubble from your throat has spread out and given form to a fire that burns through the muscles in your arms. It's become a pit in your stomach that has swallowed your abilities to empathize and understand that which you cannot change. It has become a force in your mind that makes you want to scream loud enough to wake those who are giving up, those who have lost their drive to succeed. For some reason, when just a moment ago you were ready to sit there and wait, you're now refusing to accept anything less than what you want. You can feel it in your clenched fists; you can feel it in your face, in your lip which you've bitten so hard that the sharp, metallic taste of blood now lingers in your mouth. Your eyes are now piercing into his air of defeat, daring him to deny you or anything you say. And so now, when you speak, you try your hardest to make every word mean something.

"So, this is it? We just let her die?" You're surprised by your words, because they don't sound nearly as cruel, as angry, as you want them to sound. They're hardly convincing and, even more, they sound weaker than you were ever ready to show. As if you're incapable of convincing yourself of anything on your own. As if you have no faith in the powers out of your control. As if you have lost sight of your own unquenchable hope.

"Yeah," he responds quietly in what is hardly even a whisper, looking up at you now. You didn't notice his movements right away, even though you were looking straight at him. Surprisingly enough, it's he who sounds angry, angrier than you managed to sound when you spoke yourself. "That's what we do. We let her die." His words shake you to your very core; they take away all your steady footing and now, here you sit, defeated and lost, without anything to hold on to. He gets up and walks away without ever looking back. You hear his footsteps fade away on the wood floor. Your mouth hangs open, shocked at its own failure to enunciate any sort of sound that would rob the room of its silence and fill the void that has suddenly grown inside of you. Because, in that moment, you feel nothing, and God forbid that void go away.

Now you're alone. Without warning, this fact hits you like a pierce through the chest you thought was impermeable. Suddenly, you're grabbing your head, begging it not to leave you, begging it not to give into everything you've feared for so long. But it does, and it does so in such a rapid fashion that you retch onto the floor. Your stomach wants to empty out that void, you realize, because it's grown so vast that there has been no room for anything else. And, as it empties out its contents, you sob for the first time in years. You let out a moan that you'd forgotten you had inside of you, a cry that echoes not only through the room, but through your mind. Your fingers catch your face; you're nearly as embarrassed by the sound as you are moved by the fact that you're this alive.

When you finally stand, your head is bowed. The anger that you felt minutes ago has left and become a foreign force that you can hardly remember. The pain that seemed to be trapped in you before has faded from a beast to a strange creature that does not appear nearly so threatening. The room appears to be brighter than it was before. As you move towards the hallway, you find yourself less burdened; there seems to be a new order to things, a strength that you can only earn through giving so much of yourself away.

The hallways of the house appear longer than you've ever envisioned them before. The blues in the loveseats that sit in the dining room seem to be a lighter shade, as if they were of the morning sky instead of the deep ocean you'd always related them to. The reds, however, seem deeper and more vivid; they now burn instead of appearing mellow and dull, as you'd viewed them before. These changes barely register, however, as you stand lonely in the middle of the room. You wonder what to do next, holding your arms tight across your chest. The shades are down on all the windows, but no light even struggles to come in. There is no sound in this house.

You move into one of the back bedrooms, hoping for some privacy from a presence that doesn't seem to even be here. You lock the door, even though no one would come in. You turn off the lights, even though light still peers through the windows in a rude,

intruding form. And finally, you take a seat on the bed, noticing the depression your body makes in the springs below the stiff mattress underneath you. There is no noise in this house, you think again, before reaching over to pick up the telephone on the dresser beside you. Running a finger over the numbers, you begin dialing someone, but stop. Your eyes catch a ray of light peeking through the shades over the window and in a move quite unlike your usual behavior, you move away from it. Closing your eyes, you wonder where your friend is that you'd just shared such an uncomfortable moment with. You want to blame him for leaving you, but you can't. You think about her, instead; you think about her pain and her smile, her hair and her pale skin, the songs she sang when she thought she was alone and the way she hated having her picture taken. These thoughts storm your head, and your throat burns again. You want to call her, but you realize you're afraid to hear her voice. You go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until you're dreaming about something else, and then you fall asleep.

Minutes later, the door opens and a figure comes into the house, but you're not conscious enough to hear or even take notice. They come back to the bedroom and realize that you're asleep. They watch you for awhile, observing how your chest rises when you breathe and listening to the sounds you don't even know you make in your slumber. Then they leave. An hour later the phone rings, but you miss it. The caller waits on the answering machine for someone to answer, but no one does. They leave a long message that says a lot of things they want you to hear, but when the recording asks them whether it's acceptable, they delete it. You sleep through the night, and through the sunrise, and through the morning too. When you finally wake, everything has already happened. The windows are open, letting cold air in but no light at all. You wonder whether its morning or night as the things that were inside you just yesterday disappear and become different shades of autumn leaves nestled on the ground outside that house that no one seems to live in.

## A HOUSE GROWS INTO ITSELF

i.

I know now  
the music of Things that Are  
Not Hiding. What the stairs  
mean by their sag and their screech.

“For now,” they say, “the designer  
of your life dances with anger.”

I heed their warning –  
the stairs, the soft  
currents of implication in the air.  
The way a door is closed;  
the way it stays closed.

There is an engine in him.  
In his most helpless rage,  
there is growling –  
thin and lashing –  
there are rapids;  
whitewater cascading  
into the earth with  
enough force to erase me  
completely.

ii.

I blossom unashamedly.  
Time teaches me about  
the canyons of hurt  
in my mother’s eyes.

Sometimes,  
when she talks about

her father – his patience,  
his words rumbling up out of  
hard times remembered, the  
massive quiet of his soul –  
I can hear every inch  
    of the sacrifice  
that holds my bones together.

Chasms, deep ravines –  
I see them now. I wish I could  
see the way to close them  
but the eyes that hold those secrets  
    are vacant.

iii.

There are no engines in my lungs.  
My anger is my own. I possess –  
    am possessed by –  
a fire that is my birthright.  
My palms are warm with it;  
    my heart flares and dances with it.  
I carry their – our – empty days  
upon my back. Artifacts.  
    I'll have enough, someday,  
to dam a flood, or fill a canyon.

## GRAVITY

I am a shape-shifter  
snake-charmer  
polymer.

You are a glass of cold purity  
milk  
homogeneous as silk

in the face of flickering photographs  
moments in time  
plotted white lies.

You are a pair of closed eyes in a dark room  
a smile as constant as the guardians of Khafre's tomb  
weathered and ancient in the face

of my shiny new  
latest attempt at chameleon lure.

I am a butterfly  
Lycan's eye  
woman's sigh,

you are a Redwood  
incorruptible  
sure

permanent certitude vs. eternal latitude

cease your consistency  
commonplace platitude  
(out of the mouths of predictable babes).

I am a red pepper

house fire  
trendsetter  
irregular but for the promise of heat

yes, you are a tree trunk

and I am a phoenix  
reborn from the ashes of yesterday's plumage

while gentle and endless you stand and absorb it  
light and air and uniform wisdom  
stretching time from between your teeth to the end of your  
branches

while I slice it into segmented tidbits  
delicious intervals  
chronological stains on enamel  
(channels that change with every blink)

persistent convictions vs. fickle improvements

steady and stubborn  
your narrow resistance  
(out of the minds of inflexible rebels)

I am a multi-formed  
oft-reformed  
snake - luke-warm

you are a tectonic plate beneath me

flickering photographs, planned and retaken

rough bark, smooth rock, gravity, unshaken

Polymer.

I am a shape-shifter, thirsty  
(so thirsty for milk)



## FATHER WITH THE SKYY

Parked in the gravel driveway with the Skyy,  
my father sits inside his silver car,  
vodka bottle shaking between his thighs.

In her floral bed mother sighs,  
the television's light dances on her.  
Parked in the gravel driveway with the sky

hanging over him, jasmine blooms outside  
but father cannot smell it: swigging hard,  
the vodka bottle shaking between his thighs.

I wash my face and soap burns my eyes.  
I watch mascara stain my cheeks like tar.  
Parked in the gravel driveway with the Skyy

vodka in his stomach, his plaid tie  
dangles out the car window. Ajar  
vodka bottle shaking between his thighs.

My reflection inks the mirror and dyes  
the white sink. My lips are like his, a scar.  
Parked in the gravel driveway with the Skyy  
vodka bottle shaking between his thighs.

## HE SAYS HE DREAMS OF ME

But what do these dreams consist  
of? Is it just the burning? Or is it me, me  
he wants. His arms like tentacles.

I don't need tentacles. I've had them. I've cut  
them off. I've sewn them on. I've hacked at them.  
Again and  
again.

When love realized it had feet - it left me. Water  
flooded my lungs. I was without shell. He says he wants to take

care of me. Orpheus, I am no Eurydice. I am not  
trapped. I am not the gracious earth. I have no  
seasons. Forever cold.

Trust, I am wrung dry of you.

## THE BLACK SHOES

**A**RABESQUE! ADAGE! ARABESQUE! Vaster, belle, vaster!" yelled J.P.

Fran came to a halt in her steps, exhausted. She inhaled deeply, trying to bring her breathing back to normal to continue the rehearsal. She caught a glance from the company's *cavalier*, Tom, who was fighting back chuckles. It was an old joke they had shared for years; the closer to opening night, the more J.P. ranted.

"What is it now?" Fran asked, trying to keep the respect she had held for the choreographer in her tone.

"You look like a sack of potatoes!" he shouted, waving his thin yet muscular arms in the air. His curly orange hair looked frazzled from the long rehearsals even underneath the tight headband he wore to push it out of his face. "You are Odette ze graceful swan, not ze 'Unchback of Notre Dame!"

Fran nodded. When J.P. declared a short break, a stage assistant hurried over, giving her a bottle of water which she wolfed down, fighting the urge to pour the contents down her face, soaking her blonde hair and leotard. She was used to J.P.'s harsh criticisms. He had during his time been a great cavalier, the great Jeane Paul Du Bois of the *Academie Francais*, then decided instead of retiring to accept a position in the English company as choreographer.

It was only a week until opening night for the continuation of the Christmas season in the Royal Ballet Company. Every year, the repertoire was the same: December, opening productions of *The Nutcracker*, then in January the quick change to *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. Fran once again had to swap her costume as Clara the governor's daughter for the frail feathered tutu of the enchanted Odette.

Fran leaned against the frame of the ballet bar. Never sit down during rehearsals; it only stiffened the muscles before dancing again. She was short and petite in body frame after years of training, which had also made her muscles strong. She didn't even look up when Tom approached her.

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“You’d think we hadn’t done this show time and time again,” he said under his breath, though JP’s instructions to the *corps de ballet* ensemble for the next dance easily drowned him out.

As Fran took another swig from her water bottle, Tom began to cough. “Oh god, don’t tell me that cold still hasn’t gone?” she asked nervously.

Tom pounded his chest, smiling weakly. “I’m fine!”

Fran arched an eyebrow. “You’d better be, or else I’ll just have to get myself a new partner!” she said sarcastically.

Tom mimed getting an arrow through the heart, and though he coughed a few last huffs, he recovered well just as the ensemble of dancers flocked like water lilies across the studio floor, beginning a series of *pirouettes* as directed by J.P.

For three years Fran had been the prima ballerina of the English Royal Ballet company. Since she was little, being the daughter of a costume designer and director, the craving to be on stage had flowed through her veins. Attending dress rehearsals for free and begging for pretty tutus for her birthdays and Christmases had made the decision for her about where in the theatre she belonged.

That was when she had met Thomas Kent, part of the male class. Tom had been sixteen at the time, she fourteen. Tom’s mother was Russian, noticeable by his jet black hair and dark eyes, and while his siblings had pursued careers in science and law, he had striven to break the mould while staying true to his heritage. The first time they met the class had been learning *l’air* movements, including lifts. While several of the other pupils had seemed to naturally leap into the boys’ arms, Fran had hesitated. Naturally, she had been shy, knowing she looked awkward and skinny in her leotard. Several times when her partner had smiled, she had worried he was laughing at her modesty. Before then, the only contact she had had with boys was through games of tag in the school yard, and pigtail pulling and shrieks, which had not been pleasant.

After several attempts at running into his arms for a lift, hesitating and slowing down before she had reached him, Tom had walked over to her.

“What’s wrong?”

Fran had blushed. She didn’t know what to say, nervous that he would tease her. But he smiled gently. “Relax,” he said, “close your eyes and don’t think about it.”

“But-but I’ll knock you down!”

Tom chuckled, a low rumble in his voice, obviously amused at the idea of a four foot girl ‘knocking him down’. “Then go for your life!”

He took several steps back, and held out his arms, beckoning her to him.

Fran had braced herself, and launched herself, shutting her eyes tight at the last minute, waiting for impact, when her teacher would yell at her stupidity or the look of agony when she had broken every bone in the boy’s body!

Instead, the floor left her feet. She felt a pair of arms supporting her around her chest, taking her upwards, away from the studio floor, to the banks of Swan Lake.

She looked down when she finally was able to peel her eyes open, blinking in disbelief to see Tom looking up at her, poised and still holding her firmly, before slowly bringing her back down. “Now then,” he asked casually, “was that so bad?”

Fran blushed, but couldn’t help giggling.

That was how it had all started. From then on, whenever she was scared or had begun to doubt herself, Tom’s words had returned to her. *Go for your life*. To let herself get loose and give herself over to the music.

Tom had been the first boy she had danced with, and she wanted him to be the last. He was her dearest friend; she wanted to make every step with him beside her. They did the same ritual before the curtain of each performance. Standing together, stage right in the far wings, holding hands as Tom would say it; “let’s go for our lives.”

Now, at twenty five and twenty seven, they were still a partnership. A perfect yin and yang with Fran’s white pointe slippers and Tom’s black flats.

Until that night after *Giselle*. It was the last performance, before the dancers received the usual two weeks off before starting

rehearsals for the next show, and as tradition, the company would walk down to the *King's Arms* pub in central Covent Garden for drinks, making oaths to never tell J.P. that any of them had been drinking. It was a time to celebrate another achievement, another production done and a short holiday to look forward to. Fran clinked her glass of red wine against Tom's whisky, laughing with the others at the height of her glory. Her and Tom's, that is. Laughing with the members of the chorus as they did imitations of J.P., giggling at Tom's discomfort as, yet again, many of his male admirers approached him, only to be dismissed when he revealed, for the umpteenth time, that just because he was a dancer that didn't make him gay.

They took the tube home together that night, taking the central line down to Holland Park. Tom offered to walk Fran back to her apartment, since his stop was only two stations away and on the same line. Fran, slightly tipsy from her victory toasts earlier, agreed as she and Tom mock tangoed up to her apartment. She lived alone in the studio-sized Holland Place flat, since her parents had retired and moved out to Oxford. She tossed her keys aside as she entered her creamy color-coordinated home, saw the moon streaming through the windows of her dance studio, once her mother's costume designing space. Tom followed. He had visited the apartment before, and liked her cleanliness and taste. As Fran pulled off her coat, he looked at the black and white photographs of her family along the walls, grinning at one picture from Fran's birthday, at a restaurant surrounded by J.P. and other friends.

Fran slumped onto the suede couch, inhaling deeply, knowing her sore muscles had some time to rest. Tom did the same, letting out a relaxed sigh with her. "Can't wait to sleep in and have eggs and bacon tomorrow morning!" he sighed happily.

Fran moaned with the pleasing thought. "And sweets! Cakes, puddings and sweets! At least, for another week!" She turned to grin at Tom, but noticed that there was suddenly a change in him. He was gazing at her with a new...eagerness.

Then it happened. He moved forward, catching Fran's lips with his when she turned to speak to him. At first, she was too stunned to do anything. Then, slightly feverish, she met his eyes

as he looked earnestly at her.

She couldn't move when his hands began wrapping themselves around her waist, as they had so many times before in rehearsal, only now it was different. It was fierce, needy, pulling her body closer to his-

"Stop..."

His hands were running through her hair, and a bobby pin clinked to the floor, letting a single strand of hair tumble down.

"Tom, please," she began quietly.

Tom was still kissing her neck, laying her against the sofa.

"Fran..." he whispered into her ears.

Fran snapped as a china figure had been pushed off the table and crashed against the dark oak floor-

"STOP!!"

Fran didn't mean for her voice to sound so frightened, so shrill, yet as Tom pulled away instantly, Fran was turning herself from him, pulling her sweater tighter around her body. She rushed to pick up the figures of the china piece. It had been a model of a white lily. She picked up the sharp, ruined pieces with her bare hands, putting them aside on the table face. She trembled, horrified at how much, for a moment, she had almost-

"Fran, I'm sorry, I didn't-couldn't-I thought you knew."

Fran heard Tom adjust his seat. "You're the best thing in my life right now, Fran."

Tears were gathering in her eyes. "And you're mine, Tom. God, I wouldn't have gotten half as far without you-"

"Then-" he began reaching for her again, but she twitched automatically.

"NO! God, Tom, I can't, not now!"

Everything she had ever wanted was now hers. She was in the peak of her time as a prima ballerina. Fame, even a set salary, the joy of being able to dance with Tom. She couldn't risk it all now! She had known for years that as a dancer, she could not risk her career by having sex. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't risk it. Dancers before them had suffered for it.

"I can't, Tom, not now!" she repeated, sobbing, "you know how much my career means to me. Being together, we'd be

distracted, it could affect our performance, we could both lose our parts in the company! And-and I'm not on the pill, I can't risk the side effects! And if we-if I got pregnant-"

"Fran, if that happened, you know I wouldn't leave you like that!" Tom declared. She looked over her shoulders. He was running a hand along the suede material. She recognized the gesture at once. He always ran a hand along something, anything, wood, fabric or metal, when he had something difficult to say. "I wouldn't budge. Don't you see, Fran? I-I want to marry you!"

Fran gasped deeply. Was Tom...proposing to her?

Images flashed in her mind. Walking down the aisle in a dreamy white gown, an organ echoing against church walls. Telling J.P her career was over when she still had several years of potential. Walking away from the theatre, her shoes gathering dust in her drawers from neglect...then forgotten...

Tom got to his feet. "You're the only girl I ever could be with, ever *want* to be with, Fran!"

"But, Tom, everything we've worked for-"

"-will be gone in a few years, Fran, you know that! We've had our moment in the limelight, and now I want more. There is more to life than the theatre, Fran. Why can't we be lovers offstage as well?"

"I can't walk away from it all," Fran whimpered, "I...I just can't."

Tom sighed heavily. She could see a fury in his eyes, and she edged away unintentionally from him. Finally he got to his feet, resigned, as if it took all his will power to not shout at her. But that just made her cry more, knowing he'd hate the thought of hurting her anymore.

She was still crying on her couch, curling her small precious body up as Tom closed the door of the apartment.

For several minutes she had remained there, until finally as the grandfather clock in the dining room struck three she clambered to her feet. She walked into her bathroom, and put the tape on to wash off her stage makeup. As she ran a cloth along her face, wiping the smears of lipstick and eye shadow away, her face began to look more and more drained. Her hands began shaking.



She had given her life to the stage. But had it really been enough?

Her hand in its state finally knocked over the bottle of makeup remover, sending it smashing against the white tiles of the bathroom. As the remnants of the bottle licked at her bare feet, Fran continued to look at herself, and with both hands unpinned her hair, shaking it out.

It had been three days, and Fran could no longer bear it. She had wandered through London, avoiding Covent Garden, walked like a specter through Kensington High Street, feeling numb as she sat alone in cafes.

It had never occurred to Fran what she would do when she retired. She had been pushing her career far too much to even consider that one day, whether it was by her choice or not, she would have to leave the company eventually. Tom would likely leave first. It didn't matter that she had striven to ensure her body and mind remained untouched; she would have to leave it all behind someday.

Or perhaps for years she had only been using ballet as an excuse to avoid sex. Used ballet as an explanation for her relationship with Tom, had blinded herself to the truth that offstage he was not just another person in her life. Her best friend. Her... what?

While walking through Hyde Park, she caught sight of him later in the week, recognizing his heavy coat, his short hair. Fog still lifting off the Serpentine lake. She called out his name, a rippling effect in the early morning air, running towards him, ignoring her flapping scarf at her throat. He was shocked as she dove into his arms.

Without a word, she kissed him. He pulled away, surprised. "Fran, you don't have to—"

"My answer's yes."

"What?"

"Yes!" she said breathlessly, "I want to marry you, Tom!"

Tom was silent for a nanosecond, then burst into laughter, causing the pigeons to fly away in fright. He grabbed Fran,

spinning her around wildly. It was ungraceful, noisy, and spontaneous. So unlike everything Fran was used to. And she loved every minute of it!

"Wait," Tom said quickly, interrupting the moment, "look, I've been thinking. You're right. I don't want to give up everything we've worked for either."

"But-" Fran began.

"So we'll wait. We won't tell anyone. Our families, J.P, no one! Next time one of us even brings up retirement, it'll be for us both to decide. I'm willing to wait for it, Fran."

Tom bought her a gold ring, set with an emerald in it. She kept it in the blue velvet box in her drawers. Even wearing it may lead J.P to suspicion. But every evening before she went to bed as the Christmas season began, she took it out, feeling the exciting tingle that she had never experienced, even before going on stage. The thought that she was going to have both; a life with physical pleasure and love as well as fame and fortune.

In the dance studio, Fran frowned when she noticed Tom's left hand flinch suddenly. "You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah!" he replied, "probably bashed it against the bar frame during warm up. No worries!"

She shrugged, but couldn't dismiss the matter. For the three months they had been engaged, when they had begun spending more and more time together, she had noticed little things during rehearsals. How often Tom was out of breath, sometimes from the easiest of movements. How he often dropped things. Why was he suddenly like this? Had the thought of their being engaged began to affect his performance and concentration? But she didn't want to press the matter, make him conscious of his faltering precision. They had more important matters at hand.

They both looked up at JP as he signaled them over. "We vill now do ze *Pas de Deux* in Act 2!" he ordered.

Fran nodded, and prepared herself into position, Tom across the floor. He took on the appearance as the love struck Prince Siegfried. She began doing a series of *points sur les on*

pointe, fluttering across the floor, arms delicate and elegant wavering at her side. She gazed towards Tom, performing the ballet mime of 'I love you' as Odette when she first sees him across the lake.

"TOM!" J.P snapped.

Fran frowned, breaking out of character. Tom had been several seconds late before he had begun dancing over to her. She recalculated her steps, going back into sequence with him. She *pirouetted* into his arms, closing her eyes when he swayed her, supporting her for a high *arabesque*.

"Attitude, belle, attitude!" J.P reminded her.

Fran adjusted her arms, and taking Tom's left hand let him support her in another *arabesque*.

When she met his gaze, however, she found Tom suddenly had a pained expression on his face. His left hand had begun to shake violently. His breathing becoming harsher, his face pale...

The piano keys echoed as he collapsed to his knees, heaving.

"Tom?!"

Fran was kneeling by him, staring in horror as he clutched a hand to his chest, coughing, his muscular firm body suddenly trembling.

"TOM!!!"

It had been hours since the ambulance had arrived. Hours after screaming over the body, hoping that the doctors could shock the life back into him. Hours since the morticians had come and gone. Hours since the final curtain had dropped over Thomas Kent when they had pulled the cloth over his face. Hours since the theatre had been closed. Hours since slowly the members of the company had left, lingering until Fran could vaguely remember them all vanishing from the studio.

She had remained curled up in a ball against the wall, still in her leotard, cold but lacking the energy to produce a quiver. The lights had been switched off, but dimly she could see her reflection in the mirrors against the walls, showing a worn swollen face that had been crying for hours.

In her hands, she was holding Tom's black shoes. She vaguely remembered slipping them off before the morgue took him away from her, the one thing she wanted to cling on to.

She ran her thumb along their frame. Soft leather from being used, slightly worn. The blackness of their material had a slight sheen along them. Good, solid black.

Then she noticed a drop of water had suddenly appeared on the toe. Then another. She brought a trembling finger to her eyes to realize that they were fresh tears starting to flood once again.

Tom was gone. The only man she could have ever married. Within seconds there had been nothing anyone could do. Even when the doctor had reassured them that the heart attack had been quick, not as painful as is usually expected, it changed nothing. He had asked if there had been any signs earlier. She choked the tears back when she realized it. All that time, Tom hadn't been distracted, he was getting weaker. That finally, his heart could no longer support his dancing body. That was why he had wanted to marry her so urgently. While he was certain he still had the chance.

She felt a shiver as the medics positioned Tom's limp arms crossing one another, his hands clenched from the agony he had felt in the last few minutes of his life. The ballet mime for 'death'.

He was gone. Forever. And Fran was all alone. No one would catch her when she fell now.

All their plans...the future they were going to have together. The thought that she could have been with him when she had had the chance but had put it all on hold for their careers. All for nothing.

The bang of the door opening echoed in the studio hall. She recognized JP's footsteps as he walked over. His eyes were hollow, tired. He had hung his jacket over his shoulders, and a half finished cigarette was poking out of his mouth. Without a word he slumped down beside her.

He let out a long exhaust of smoke. Fran could vaguely recall him smoking before, but only in truly chaotic times.

"Dammit, Tom..." he sighed.

Fran turned to see him more clearly now. Though she still

could see the tough exterior of the choreographer, she sensed his sorrow. She slid her hand across the floor, taking his. In turn, he enlaced her fingers with his, giving her hand a squeeze.

"You loved 'im, didn't you?" J.P. said suddenly.

Fran didn't answer at first, and finally she merely nodded. "I 'ave always known, *belle*," J.P. continued gently, "and I would 'ave been more zen 'appy to 'ave given my blezings."

He took out another cigarette from a box in his pocket, and lit it. Now he turned to meet Fran's eyes, and she could see how he was trying to put on a business face despite the circumstances. "Vat are ve going to do?" he asked her.

Fran didn't reply. She didn't need him to clarify his question. The show was opening in only a few days.

Could she? J.P. was putting the decision in her hands. Pushing aside the pain, she had to think rationally.

Find an understudy who could learn the part in just a few days? Never. It was Tom or no one. And she was nowhere near ready to put her faith in another *cavalier*'s hands. No. She was not ready to do that yet. She was not ready to let Tom go that soon.

But then, cancel the show? Tickets had been on sale for months. Could they cancel the month's performance of *Swan Lake*, the show that would have been Tom's last? A chance to substitute the grief and concentrate on another show.

No. At once Fran wanted to smash her fist against the glass. No, Tom would never have forgiven her if she did that. How could the thought have even passed through her mind? She wasn't ready to give him up just yet.

She turned to J.P., and gave her answer.

The usual rush of opening night. Dancers in the wings, wraps protecting their shaking bodies and delicate glistening costumes. Stage hands pushing out the last pieces of scenery for the opening Act. Dancers rubbing their pointe shoes into the dust boxes off stage again and again, a nervous habit that took years to put aside. JP in a tux waited with Fran off stage.

Fran knew it would be at least an hour before she was on, not until *Act II Moderato*. But she wanted to be there when Mr.

Paul Von Harp, the company producer, made his announcement before the prologue.

She closed her eyes, remembering. Tom and her standing side by side, wishing everyone to 'break a leg', him already in his gold-trimmed Siegfried costume for the village scene. The excitement of knowing that the past few weeks of work were finally going to pay off. When they would do what they did best; dance. And that moment when she would take his hand, squeeze it tightly, as he would whisper to her the same words he had said that day at the Academy. "Go for your life."

A stagehand held the thick velvet curtain open for Mr. Von Harp to step through, the headlights blasted down on him.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" his voice rang out in the audience.

JP inhaled his cigarette sharply. Fran braced herself, nervous. Had she done the right thing in the end?

"I regret to inform you that the part of Siegfried will not be performed tonight by the late Thomas David Kent. Mr. Kent unfortunately passed away only a few days ago. However, his partner and dear friend Miss Francine Isabella Parker wishes for the performance to continue as planned. Thomas Kent was a fine dancer, and this performance would have been his last. And so we, the English Ballet Association, wish to dedicate this performance of *Swan Lake* in memory of him, his life and his achievements."

Fran shook in the wings as the audience, after a few moments of silence, applauded.

The conductor must have waved, for the haunting melody of the opening act suddenly struck. The dancers flocked onto the stage, into position, into the scene of the pleasant kingdom.

Amongst them, she saw Tom, hurrying to his place at the top of the steps leading to the frame of the castle.

"Go for your life," she whispered as the curtain rose.

The first act was awkward yet beautiful, watching the headlights follow the place of the invisible dancer. But eventually it looked natural, watching the dancers move aside for the phantom of the ballet house.

Then it began. The *Moderato*. Fran entered the stage en point, gracefully imitating the story line, when Odette emerges

from the water not as a swan but as the beautiful Princess she becomes at night. She performed the piece as she had done so many times.

Then it came to the *pas a deux*.

She closed her eyes. She could feel Tom's arms around her as he supported her in her spinning *arabesque*, arching her back as if she were really leaning on him. She leapt when he would have lifted her. The headlights helped her picturing him there with her on stage. She knew the audience was probably most anxious about this part, how strange she looked dancing with her imagery friend. Or perhaps if they looked closely enough they could make out the faint male figure in the white and gold costume with his arms around her waist.

She wanted to dance with Tom one last time.

At the curtain call, Fran came forward, along with J.P, but distinctively left the space between them. The headlights leaned on each of them in turn, and then they gestured to the space where Tom would have taken his bow.

The audience rose to their feet, their 'bravos' vibrating across the theatre walls. Fran stepped forward, bowing low.

After the stage hand had passed her a huge bouquet of white roses, Fran stepped back as the curtain lowered itself down.

She turned to look at Tom, still in his costume. He was bowing to her as he vanished. "I'll go for my life," she whispered through the booming applause.

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## THE LONG RIDE AFTER ENDING

If either one of them fucking touches me, I'm going to freak out." The words dribbled out of my mouth the second I regained consciousness. I was engulfed in scorching white. My hands and feet were fastened tightly to a stretcher, my head secured by a foam neck brace. The first thing to welcome me back to reality was two kids I used to know from high school staring down at me. Two drop outs who had apparently taken to EMT training. The trainer quickly escorted them out while two other EMTs violently hoisted me onto a gurney. The coppery flavor of blood caked the roots of my teeth, making me immediately nauseous.

The light turned to dark. I felt myself being rolled out of the high school and up the ramp into the ambulance. I heard cheering. There was still a match going on. The ambulance doors slammed shut and the wail of its siren began to screech out through the night. It was pitch black. A knot built in the pit of my stomach. I felt as though I had swallowed a bag full of gravel. My windpipe became shorter before the metallic taste in my mouth coupled with the bitter tang of bile. That was the first time I threw up that night.

"Jesus Christ!" The muffled voice came from the woman riding beside me, but I couldn't tell which side she was on. I wasn't on the stretcher anymore. I wasn't even in Jersey anymore. I floated in an endless, warm pool of semi-consciousness. There was no sight. I barely heard the chaos of a medical disaster hundreds of miles away. I smelled a combination of blood and alcohol wipes, the sickly sterile smell of Western medicine. The acidic taste still remained in my mouth but it had begun to subside. There was nothing except the dull throbbing of my pulse in the back of my skull. However, it was relaxing. I basked to the simple beat of my own mortality.

No one existed but me. There was no world around me, just the world inside my own mind. I began to piece back together what had happened. Del Val vs. Hunterdon Central. The Gold



Rush. Our schools had been rivals since the sixties. I had pinned Bausbach two weeks ago. I had talked all day about how I was going to slam him so hard his hair would turn blonde. I walked onto the mat relaxed. 1,500 people in the stands. It was completely dark except for the spotlight beaming on just the two of us. We shook hands. He shot at my legs. I tried a throw. He was stronger than I remembered. Black.

Cold. My feet were getting cold. No, freezing. The chill started at my toes and crept to my soles, then up my foot to my ankles. It was pleasant though. It was like I was finally going to be able to leave all the stress of this world as the freezing temperature moved up past my knees. The siren's song only grew stronger as the numbing chill began to suffocate every problem in my life. "I think I'm going into shock." My voice spit out the words but I wished it hadn't. As the EMT scrambled to unclip me from the stretcher and cover my legs, I immediately felt myself snap back into the ambulance. I immediately regretted speaking out. The floating was gone and I missed it. I still miss it.

The pitch black occasionally gave way to the hint of yellow granted by the passing street lights outside. The voices all around me became more coherent and found bodies that fit them. I could tell who said what. The scent of bodily fluids became stronger. My nerves twitched as the sweat pooled on my chest. With this ability of thought I tried to move. Nothing. I was still fastened to the board of solid plastic as I tried to lift my arms. Trapped. Fear sprang from inability to even control the smallest aspects of my environment as I strained my muscles to even make the slightest adjustment. My lungs became smaller and smaller.

The thought threatened to break me as the ambulance came to a halt and the siren died with a whimper. The doors behind me exploded open and frigid January air engulfed the entire interior of the vehicle. I began shivering immediately as I was still wearing only my blue wrestling singlet, which was soaked in a musty combination of sweat and blood. Every slight breeze that ran across my body was a razor blade cutting along each line of my musculature.

As I was carted from the outdoors into the emergency

room, my previously starved eyes were overwhelmed by an abundance of sight. My pupils immediately shrunk to the size of a pinhead. The fluorescents lit my mind ablaze. The immediate barrage of lighting stole all stability from my stomach and I vomited again. After that I have a very difficult time remembering what else happened that night. I made the conscious decision to block out the suffering of reality. That way, I could not be harmed by violent white lights or made sick by the smell of rubbing alcohol or taste the insult of my own blood or be kept from controlling myself. That way, I didn't have to worry what I was going to say to defend myself or my performance at school the next Monday. I didn't have to apologize to anybody or worry about letting anyone down. I didn't have to depend on others for emotional support.

All I had to do was float as time drifted on. All I had to do was lazily content myself with the thought that I already had everything I needed. Every day we see unfortunate events of all shapes. We always feel a twinge of guilt but rarely do we ever consider the aftermath, the ride after ending. This is just thirty minutes into the aftermath of one of these events; an event that has haunted me to this day two years later. While it may have taken my athletic passion away from me, as well as a few I.Q. points, it has given me so much more. You rarely get the chance to see the world on the inside for how beautiful it really is.

## MYTH

To furiously demand from you like prisoner and visitor picking up  
the phones  
while staring at each other through plexiglass some complete  
explanation  
punctured with the chime-filled brambles, we wander through into  
the room of your voice  
in which time breaks like a bowl of black water over and over  
again, would be useless.

But I want to fist this glass between us like a fourth-act actor  
breaking the fourth wall in  
a drama like *Waiting for Godot* which systematically and  
hilariously fails by virtue of its magnetic cynicism to resurrect  
from the cannibalism of idea eating idea, enough catharsis,  
retrieval,  
revival, revenant status—so many words for what can't happen.

Not because the blue blooms blown open below every house in  
which I've lived must be forced  
to a fire, but because they must be forced, anyway, somehow,  
always, there must be fumes  
that the two of us in a midnight-made alley behind, say, Van  
Gogh's *Cafe Terrace at Night*, can inhale  
as indefatigable and useless consolations to my gone loved one's  
bodies—father, mother, among

others—that slowly fall from me like fluttering scarves of  
backstory brought without sound  
into sudden relief against the hopeless enclosure of my skin. And  
what good  
does it do me to make you mystical? From Cairo's hot pyramids or  
Nowhere you must  
come like light, crossing summers, crouching heinously low like an  
unforgivable moon

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of sweat and sun, fending off light from your eyes with your  
elbows, radios relentlessly  
static in your ears, blue buds falling from you, each grounded  
against the shadow of its future  
blossom—oh perverted symbol: life and death trapped in a tight  
petal-fist that begs to be  
fan, colored like lack of oxygen.

But I was not born for this, this chasing you the way audio tracks  
chase their images in poorly  
streamed movies, cinéma vérité gone from the hopelessly random  
particularities  
of whenever, cinéma vérité gone, though like a soul looped back to  
body as in Buddhism, you  
return palingenetically, pure as a classically-trained bel canto opera  
singer's vowels, though

you could never sing, as I do apheliotropically, been by been, as if  
to begin again, and if I  
value you as supremely adjectival and life the immutable noun  
petal-fanned out beneath you—No.  
And if I value you as the noun from which we rise like determined  
diacritic kites and life's the panorama  
of twilit adjectives into which we step and bump our heads, hearts,  
and hands, like Alice as a giant,

crammed into the Rabbit's house, forced to give the iris-splattered  
window her wide right eye—if I  
refuse to try to particularize you, I don't fear you. No  
manifestation of you could mimic  
your forgetful actual. So I refuse to be mere vessel into which you  
dump your ceaseless  
dharma as in *Fantasia* in which I'm the golden ten-tiered temple,  
deep and alone in a strange city

of tall trees, infiltrated by your light, which in me, keeps facing  
itself, but does not die. So I

refuse to be sentimental as in flamboyant sunsets of pianos, or just  
plain wrong  
like a rushing E.R. attendant turning to tell her staff over an  
occupied gurney, "They're not dead  
unless I say they're dead,"—I study you, Sensei, as if a believer  
in you, in reincarnation, in the sum

of my listening exceeding my literal heart, a fist of dark  
understanding like a fox's eye,  
and, to begin again, I take as true nothing about you but my  
inconsolable  
focus on a distant door in my sleep, my inconsolable sleep in  
which I turn  
my back to you, like someone enduring, someone else, not me, not  
you, but

someone else—the dead themselves, perhaps, turning, as they do,  
into  
the disappearing dawn of anarchic honeysuckle in protest  
against you and your myth of original wholeness.

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## SUN-VEINS AND WISHBONES

[At Dawn]

If the few wide alleys were bridged with  
 dewy stalks, some faux-garden to fill their  
 missing teeth in beige expanses, I would  
 stumble through those patches even in early  
 bird hours looking for a miniature  
     world of shade. I would not  
 blink away the dawn-line's canines  
 rising red over the morning  
 mouth of earth, her wild  
 poppies framing the curvy  
 hips of the canyon, husky bravery  
 of a Vegas billboard girl.  
 I won't forget the anxious tones  
 and mood swing skies of the Midwest.  
 Too much red  
 tenses the spine, and the eyes begin to starve  
 in their hibernation from pond colors.  
 The tidal-wave blush of horizon breaks  
     a flatness like fear.

[At Noon, We--]

These last two weeks have spiraled  
 their song in mud on my faux leather boots—ordered  
 and hummed the patterns there  
 so they are familiar as  
 old hair that is too dear to cut.  
 We hike all through the day just  
 to anticipate watching its death, knowing its  
     last private moans and ripples. Noon heat  
 is guarded against us, stone cold New Yorker  
 who can't remember names. We take  
 an early lunch; we share a sourdough loaf

with the aftertaste of chlorine and yeast, and  
some potatoes just warmed in  
an heirloom microwave. You tell me that  
the French aren't accurate with *pomme*  
*de terre* because potato seeds  
are on the outside, not within like apples', and that potatoes  
are just  
albino beets that don't bleed. I forget  
to bring my knitting needles  
once again, and even a pen, so we eavesdrop on  
the somehow symphonic chatter from little  
secret summer homes of  
bugs, moles, black squirrels.

I encircle a bumblebee in the ribcage  
of my fingers, listening to  
its tiny code for confusion, letting it  
vibrate against the fleshy cradle and ask  
why the sun will not pour through  
me. What I release  
is a legged ball of pure  
physical will carrying back the hunt.  
Its trail eludes rows  
of freestyle hedges, roots half-exposed to air  
as though a Capricorn.  
Skull-white Morning Glories perch  
like moons in domes of bushy  
sky, waiting for a few blind eyes to notice  
their symmetry.

[And Dusk Sprinkled]

Some thin tightrope to childhood owns this  
all, a view of our dinner table where we see only  
into our own heads, into this town where blanched  
churches slouch  
like dry, hollowed quarters of watermelon,

and mice hunt as owls do, in practiced stillness,  
leaving nothing behind.

The leftover scent of bark smokes  
away as we descend

    from the shrinking gold,  
our berried lips as litmus samples  
of immeasurable forest.

All is in proper proportion, sized by sundials:  
the fringed lines of bats riding the twilight  
over a mountain nine miles east of home, cicadas rowing  
the mist, paddling their throats under these wax-hardened rocks  
and

our missing words to each other coiling  
    within hollow tree-beds.

We remember setting the baby road to sleep beneath our toes  
because it tired of meeting strangers and wished  
to go unconscious, limbless, with no exits.

The skin of our soles bathing the dust  
mingles us with other skin  
that the pebbles still hold onto as  
a friend's blouse, heavily  
perfumed in lily.

I have long sought a lover I knew outside  
of flesh, before my muscles  
learned to tremble at human eyes, stab of soul  
within the mirrored, planet-like iris.

When we eat earth together  
    this is you. Your name brings me forward  
to years of sea-traveling when I am middle-aged  
and a Mediterranean herb garden  
edged with azalea, in place of children.

How can I leave you when you leave my body  
so morning-dusted with your fingerprints



like pollen? And I cry to know  
a place away from land, of moisture  
or songs that I lost  
where my fingers ended.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

To call **Ross Whitehurst** the F. Scott Fitzgerald of our generation would be a grotesque understatement. Already known for his masterpieces *A Brazilian Lover* and *World War II 2: The Sequel*, as well as his infamous screenplay *John Goodman Meets KISS*, he is easily the most invigorating young author in the world today.

**Josh Ecker** matured from his humble beginnings on a small Tatooine space farm to kill the emperor and restore peace to the galaxy. After annexing Hawaii and Alaska and playing a key role in the Louisiana Purchase, he pursued his dream of becoming a professional figure skater but retired after complications from cosmetic surgery. He is also credited with saving a girl from a well and inventing the pun.

**Ciara Adams** is proud to have participated in *The Lantern* this year as both an author and as part of the copy editing staff.

**Elisa DiPrinzio** is a five-foot-tall vegan who can shoot an M16.

**Sarah Brand** is a sophomore and an English major with more minors and music/acting/writing-related activities than she can count. Her agent would like to note that when Sarah received word that one of her poems made it into *The Lantern*, she jumped up and down, cheering, in a very unprofessional manner.

**Niel Rosenthalis** wishes he lived in a Miyazaki film.

**Tanja Johansson** is a graduating senior with a Theatre major and Creative Writing and Studio Art minor. Her writing is inspired by her theatrical experiences, including a brief study of ballet. She plans to pursue a career in costume design after Ursinus.

**Maeve Sutherland** sometimes forces

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Prose into poetic form  
To see who'll notice.

**Judson Monroe** was born on June 14, 1990, in Los Angeles, California. At the age of 5 he moved to Essex, Connecticut where he learned to read and write. His greatest sources of inspiration are his friends and family.

**Callie Ingram** is a sophomore English major at Ursinus College and probably asleep right now.

**Ellyn Rolleston** can't draw, so instead of doodling she writes in the margins of notebooks. This makes her notes for class confusing and hard to follow. But occasionally she writes something in the margin which she likes, and then hopes other people will like it too.

**Shane Kowalski** supports the Establishment.

**Alexis Murauskas** is in love with the ocean and all living things swimming within. She wishes for more nonsense in the world.

**Nicole Feight** is a recovering perfectionist. When she grows up, she wants to be herself.

**Scott Sherman** is still sad that the American frontier is gone.

**Shaun Frank** is the one-time vocalist of defunct glam metal band *Dinörawr!*, which spawned several hit singles from 1988-1990, including "Partying is Awesome," "Fat Chicks? Why Not?," and the #1 ballad "Tender Words." He is currently available for store openings and Bar Mitzvahs, at 555-0123.

**Greta Martikainen-Watcke** loves over-sharing, especially about boys. Since freshman year she has matured, but has also acquired a Warm Body Syndrome of her own.

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**Jared Ellis** wants to let you know that you need to lawe i ka ma'alea a ku'ono'ono.

**Gianna Paone** is a senior who is going into the biomedical writing field. She is also a gymnast but will be forced into retirement on March 27 (something about being old...), which is absolutely devastating. She DOESN'T like long walks on the beach because she'd rather run. She also has a puppy who can sort of say "I love you."

**David Hysek** is a phantom figment of forbidden circumstance.

**Edwin Kosik** has a moon in Leo. Just sayin'.

**Samuel Stahller**, prominent photographer, died last night from complications stemming from his search for the American Dream. He was 23 years old. Yet even in certain defeat, courageous Stahller found out a way to live out there where the *real* winds blow and clung to the belief that life is a tapestry of events that culminate in an exquisite, sublime plan.

**Elizabeth Royal Cannon** was born in Garrison, NY as Elizabeth Royal Cannon, until she enrolled at Ursinus College and was dubbed 'Cannon Royal Cannon.' When she's not being a eukaryote, you can find her making some pancakes and chasing down the Wismer guy to get some Fro-Yo and CTC.

Unbeknownst to the masses, **Ananda Holton** will undoubtedly change the world with sarcasm, orbit gum and \$2.50 in pennies.

**Lindsay E. Hogan** is majoring in Caspar David Friedrich's 'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog', with a minor in high fives.

**Josh Aungst** showers in the morning.

**Amber Spurka** finds inspiration in the simple things in life.

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In her spare time, **Arielle Ross** saves the world one cookie at a time. She is also A Tall Lady, and will cross the wild abyss of Main Street with aplomb and bravery. She loves tom-foolery in precipitation, although this story may or may not have been a tragic embellishment.

**Sophia Lazare** is a senior English major with a Creative Writing minor. Her preferred genre is poetry but she loves literature of all kinds. In her free time she likes to pontificate on the ways of the world.

**Kieslana Wing** is currently drafting plans to create her own turquoise dragon.

**Connor McNamara** ('12) is an Ursinus sophomore named Connor McCormick ('12). He is majoring in Arts and Crafts, or possibly Pre-Med studies, with the ultimate goal of being an *unbelievable* chiropractor. He is also at least one member of the Ursinus wrestling team, competing at 149lbs. and 197lbs. On the wrestling team he is a standout performer or he is very dispensable. His favorite move is *The Switch*. His second favorite move is also The Switch. He is originally from Wegman's.

**Maire Moriarty** is a sophomore working on initiating her very own Middle Eastern Studies major. She feels super honored to have her poem, inspired by an amazing trip to Nicaragua, featured here in *The Lantern*.

No one knows how **Robert Whitehead** got here, who built him, or for what purpose. Our best guess is that at one time he was part of a ritualistic Anglo-pagan ceremony that may or may not have had something to do with the sun in the sky.

**Katie Simmon** was found wandering the Dreaming composed mostly of bits of wool fluff and other oddments. Now back on Earth she's reacquainting herself with this flesh stuff.

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**Pete Lipsi** will miss his days at Ursinus College. All the professors, friends, drunken nights, mountains of homework, books read, strange people/sights seen, curious meals, and adventures (whether local or abroad) have shaped him into someone not so bad. He says, 'Thank you.'

**Allison Cavanaugh** is a freshman at Ursinus who intends to major in Media and Communications. She has been writing poems since the age of thirteen, but has enjoyed reading and writing for as long as she can remember. She also enjoys art, music, and photography.

**Brooke Haley**, like, does good with grammar and makes, like, wicked sweet sentences.

**Sean Rosenberg** is well-dressed, handsome, and modest. He is also obstreperous and unnecessarily flippant. He would like to go down in the annals of history.

**Sarah Schwolsky** swears by her diet rich in silk, lace, and calla lilies.

**Matt Whitman** just wants to be free. Some beer would be nice, too. And his own movie theater. And some pizza.

**Ronak Darji** has been writing poetry for a majority of his life, both for funsies and also to spite his loving parents who wished he would aspire to be something important; like a doctor. He thinks everyone should write from time to time and articulate any thoughts regardless of their level of expertise for nobody but themselves. He believes you will be amazed to see what you learn when the world around you vanishes and all that's left is your mind and the blank page waiting to be filled with truth.

**Katherine Murphy** is a sophomore English major and Film minor. She is going to write until she dies, so it's okay that she's not so hot yet. She believes this little magazine is an alright kind of investment for a little college to have, and enjoys the fact that it

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has multiple submissions accepted within the same genre; who could ask for anything more? In finish, she hopes you remember her, because she'll remember you. She guarantees it.

**Amanda Schwartz** never knows what to write for these things. However, she is Reimert certified (three years!) and is still a very Zealous Zeta.

Did you know that the word slave is derived from the word Slav? And **Stephanie Bartusis** is a Slav(e) in lov(e).

This is the first time he's published his name as **Joshua Krigman**. He thinks he likes it.

A roller-skating jam called "**Abby Raymond**."

**Deanna Hayes** is a senior Studio Art and Business & Economics major.

**Amber Hyppolite** just wants to be happy. Her definition, not yours.

**Anton Teubner** was born and raised in a barrel of honey roasted peanuts. One afternoon he discovered the physics.

**Nicole Dillie** is a rare species of tropical fish whose scales grow transparent in cold climates.

**Anne Johnson** forgot to write a bio because she was in France.

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## PATRONS

Suzanne Calvin	Del Engstrom	Jon Volkmer
Blanche Allen	Brian and Sue	Uma Shankar
Thomas Gallagher	Thomas	Susanna Throop
Wendy Greenberg	Chris Bayless	Yvon Kennon
Carla Rinde	Kevin Small	April Kontostathis
Houghton Kane	Laura Borsdorf	Lew Riley
Heather O'Neill	Chris Aiken	Victor Tortorelli
Cindy Harris	Cathy Young	Amanda Reig
John French	Carolyn Weigel	Don Camp
Kathryn Campbell	Yukino Tanaka Goda	Patrick Hurley
Winfield Guilmette	Douglas Cameron	James Sidie
Eileen Hughes	Matthew Mizenko	Beth Bailey
Sue Thomas	John Wickersham	P.F. Small
Judith T. Levy	Frances Novack	Paulette Patton
Ed Gildea	Colette Trout	Todd McKinney
Annette Lucas	Roger Florka	Kimberly F. Taylor
Debbie Nolan	Kelly Sorensen	Kate Goddard
Sloane Gibb	Hugh Clark	Joyce Lionarons
Sharon E. Pearson	C. Dallet Hemphill	David Seidman
John Strassburger	Ross Doughty	Greg Scranton
Mona Chylack	Carol Dole	Randy Davidson
Melissa Sanders	Patricia Schroeder	Holly Gaines
Phyllis Osisek	Margie Connor	Joseph Melrose



