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# The Lantern Vol. 68, No. 2, Spring 2001

Kirsten Mascioli  
*Ursinus College*

Benjamin Schuler  
*Ursinus College*

Alyson Jones  
*Ursinus College*

Sarah Napolitan  
*Ursinus College*

Corey Taylor  
*Ursinus College*

*See next page for additional authors*

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**Authors**

Kirsten Mascioli, Benjamin Schuler, Alyson Jones, Sarah Napolitan, Corey Taylor, Padcha Tuntha-Obas, John Ramsey, Lori Kruk, Syreeta Dixon, Melanie Scriptunas, Thomas Lipschultz, Jeffrey Church, Daniel Gallagher, Mike Keeper, Monica Stahl, Ani Broderick, Christine Spera, Jason Fischer, Genevieve Romeo, Rosabelle Diaz, Raquel B. Pidal, and Kelly Campbell





# *The Lantern*

This issue of *The Lantern* is dedicated to the memory of  
Joseph DeLaurentis, Class of 2004

Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 55

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**Editor:** Jeff Church

**Layout Editor:** Corey Taylor

**Patron Drive Coordinator:** Genevieve Romeo

**Advisor:** Jon Volkmer

**Poetry Judge:** David G. Munro

**Prose Judge:** Matt Cordes

**Cover Art:** *To Walk One Must Use His Feet*, Joseph Laskas

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### **Editor's Note:**

*The Lantern* staff would like to congratulate Joseph Laskas, Jeff Church, and Kirsten Mascioli for their award-winning works.

I want to personally thank our faculty advisor, Jon Volkmer, the entire staff and executive board, as well as all those aspiring poets and artists who submitted to *The Lantern*.

This is my final semester with *The Lantern*, and I see it only improving after I leave. Ursinus College draws some truly talented writers and artists. Speaking for the senior class contributors, I am glad that we had the opportunity to contribute to such a diverse, profound literary magazine.

Jeff Church

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## JUDGE'S NOTES

### *Poetry Note*

The best poem needs to deliver that little electric shock in the back of the brain. "Eden" did it for me. It asked me to "*Please understand...*" and God knows we need more of that in this world. "Eden" came at me quietly, chin down and hiding a bouquet of roses behind its back, and then once it was sure of my attention, the roses turned into a fist. I like when that happens.

Maybe I picked "Eden" because the time was right, like maybe I was feeling a little angry when I read it, and maybe the poem spoke to that. Or maybe it's just because I'm a man and I need to be reminded now and then exactly what that entails, and part of that is responsibility and doing and saying what is right especially when it's the last thing I want to do.

David G. Munro

### *Prose Note*

At barely 850 words, "Ten Years' Gone" is brief, but stirring. In it we encounter Shannon, a musician struggling to come to terms with her father's suicide. The overheard lyrics of Shannon's childhood resonate in the present as her own, bridging a decade that has seen her development as a guitarist, but done little to impart a sense of resolution.

Having inherited an appreciation and talent for the blues, Shannon's playing is equal parts compulsion and catharsis. At the heart of this musical style is improvisation, a stream of inspiration from elsewhere. The author skillfully places Shannon in the middle of this stream, trying to wring answers from the neck of a 1964 Gibson.

The legacy extends to his father's guitar. This tangible link to the past is described in almost talismanic detail, but the instrument is showing signs of wear. As Shannon feels the connection fading, the desperation to maintain the link is obvious, understandable, and moving.

Other pieces worthy of special mention are "Passing Time," a vivid portrait of a character fighting the isolation and frustration of mental illness, and "Nostalgia," for its elegant prose.

Matt Cordes

## Eden

*Kirsten Mascioli*

Please understand,  
I came only to return  
Adam's rib  
for you see  
my clay has been molded, shaped,  
scraped and twirled  
kiln-scorched by your fire  
glazed by my own desire  
and I have no need for weak man-bones.  
How long will we be haunted by Eve?  
I prefer Lilith anyway, moon wings fluttering free - no time for  
God or man.  
Learn to fly quickly, little ones.  
Eden is no place for you -  
your clipped wings give them rights to soar,  
your red blood stains perfect black hearts,  
until you gladly accept the rib  
your rapist left you when he stole  
that part of you you never knew you had.  
Come instead to MY Garden.  
Silver-tongue serpents will not damn you here -  
rather, they will set you free.  
Revel in your glory, living thing.  
Every tree will bear  
forbidden fruit  
and you and I shall taste them all...  
...when we are no longer haunted by Eve,  
you and I will crawl out of the skin we pretend we wear  
and eat apples under a naked moon.



## Ten Years' Gone

*Jeffrey Church*

"The blu-u-u-u-ues is a low-down shakin' chill spoken: Yes, preach 'em now."

—Robert Johnson, "Preachin Blues"

Ten years gone and I'm finally losing my faith. I still feel dad tickling my feet, keeping me awake at those late night spirituals. He'd play with red callused fingers that would turn black from playing too much. He would start in on some old Johnson tune, arpeggio style. I felt God itching at my ear.

"I went to the crossroad

fell down on my knees

I went to the crossroad

fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above 'Have mercy, now

save poor Bob, if you please'"

What do you do in a one-bedroom apartment in Chicago when the light-bulb blinks on and off sporadically, when the rain sputters against the pane, when the cat meows hungrily? Play. Eyes closed, playing so loud on his 1964 Gibson, double round cutaway, bound body, arched maple top, f-holes, raised layered pickguard, maple back and sides, 22-fret rosewood fingerboard with pearl block inlays. Those red fingers caressed this guitar while it sang. Dad and the Gibson rounded out the old blues "call and response." My dad would sing a line:

"Mmmmm, standin' at the crossroad

I tried to flag a ride,"

and the guitar would sing back. At nights, after he would sing me a lullaby, I would pretend to fall asleep and then sneak out and play his guitar.

He never let me play. He would say in a towering voice, "Shannon, you're too young for the blues. You have to grow into



it. But when you grow into it, you'll think you're five sizes too big. It will eat you up from the inside. There's an ever-present sad feeling, but God's there to lift you back up with the joy. You'll love it, but you gotta grow up first."

Play. My fingers stretch like compass hands, full of direction, yet the music moving God knows where. Ten years it has been, today. Ten long years and his spirit's leaving this guitar. The sound has weakened, the 12<sup>th</sup> fret gives a discordant tin-like sound, like a poet to his departed beloved.

I remember the funeral. I was 17, but still had twelve years of experience. I couldn't look at the tiny gravestone squatting like us along the quiet earth. I closed my eyes and played and we sang and we sang around the poorly etched gravestone, huddled like a desperate, ethereal cry wrenched from dry mouths and distant corners.

Standin' at the crossroad

I tried to flag a ride

Didn't nobody seem to know me

everybody pass me by

Mmm, the sun goin' down, boy

dark gon' catch me here

A crowd wavered with chaotic, beautiful harmony, and as I played across the strings, that siren resounding with the tired notes of the past, a presence seethed in my mind like the twilight wind and was gone.

I had to leave after that. Guitar in hand, I moved to Chicago after the funeral ten years ago, hoping that the music scene would breathe some life into me. I sang my dad's favorite in bars where cigarettes lined the floor and hundreds of people huddled in an area that should fit ten:

"oooo ooee eeee

boy, dark gon' catch me here

I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that

love and feel my care

You can run, you can run

tell my friend-boy Willie Brown  
You can run, you can run  
tell my friend-boy Willie Brown  
Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe  
I believe I'm sinkin' down"

Still, something wasn't there. Fear consumed me during long solos, during riffs that I know I learned from my dad when I would listen through the paper-thin walls at 3 a.m. It felt like a long emptiness, like a sad, rolling plain, like the 3 a.m. hunger. It was the opposite of the feeling I had at the funeral, the feeling of the sublime presence. It was as if God and the devil were swirling in my belly, fighting between fear and joy.

The first time I felt that gnawing fear was when dad and I walked by a crossroad. I found a cross wedged in the ground.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Suicide. If you commit suicide, they bury you here, where you can't ever get rest."

I remember weeping that night for the soul buried at the crossroads. I thought about that consuming restlessness that they must feel all the time and my heart went out to them.

Play. Play while the guitar cries. Always play. When I'm not playing, I think about playing, closing my eyes, and singing the blues about desperation and bliss and terror and rain in the thunderclouds. About everyone around the gravestone, huddled in a communal joy. About the restless suicide, twanging his guitar and playing the blues himself.

Ten years' gone and I still sleep next to the guitar. Ten years' gone and he's not coming back. Ten years' gone and my calluses are deeply red. Where's the spirit gone? Where's the life gone? Restless spirit, I'll wait for you at the crossroads.



**Subway**

*Raquel B. Pidal*





## Out the Window

*Daniel Gallagher*

It isn't even a very comfortable chair. It's one of those straight, ladderback wooden deals. The finish is cracked and peeling all over. The seat is perfectly flat and uncushioned. It doesn't rock, it doesn't recline. It doesn't move from the window. The linoleum underneath the legs is permanently indented. Even when the rest of the kitchen was re-done, the chair stayed. And even though his daughter argues with him constantly, Stan refuses to get rid of it. It seems as if as long as the chair stays, he can stay too.

The chair was made in 1954 by a small Pennsylvania woodworking company that went out of business in 1957. It was bought in 1966 as part of a kitchen set – four chairs and a table – from a secondhand store. When Doris had James in 1973, the family became too big for a four-person kitchen set. The table went down in the basement, eventually to accompany each of the children in his or her first apartment, and was replaced by a technically superior but soulfully lacking larger slab of wood. Two of the chairs went down the basement with the table, but Stan and Doris kept theirs at the heads of the table. Doris' was broken (along with James' arm) in 1978 when the five-year-old toppled over while standing on the chair trying to get a bag of Chips Ahoy from the top of the refrigerator. The other two suffered the abnormal wear and tear of three college apartments and were eventually thrown out. Stan's did not move.

He's been sitting in his chair for almost a week, getting up only to use the bathroom once in a great while. He sleeps in the chair. He listens to the phone ring, listens to the answering machine pick up, and listens to the principal at the high school where he teaches ask where he is. Stan has not quit his job, he has stopped doing it. He had stopped teaching months ago. He stood in front of his classes and talked, but he knew that he wasn't teaching anymore. This week, he stopped going. And now he's sitting, motionless, facing the window that pulls early morning grayness

into his kitchen.

Outside the window, a fine drizzle is falling. It is one of those April mornings that looks so ugly he almost wants to call it beautiful. April, Stan thinks to himself, is the cruelest month. He never quite understood that line, but he reasons that no physics teacher should understand that line. He wonders if english teachers even understand that line. The window itself is misted, making it difficult for Stan to focus on anything in particular outside. This doesn't matter however, because Stan is not trying to focus on anything anyway. He is seeing things inside his head, not outside, and while he does so he seems nearly comatose. If he seems unconscious of his surroundings, he is that much more in tune with his mind.

Stan is viewing the events of the past four months on the movie screen of his inner skull. On New Year's Eve he is drunk. Stan does not normally drink, having the effect that when he does his tolerance is negligible. This inability to drink is strange for a man as large as Stan, and had been a subject of ridicule in the past. After two scotch and sodas (the second mixed weak enough for a child), Stan is gloriously drunk, sitting in a recliner in the living room while a small gathering of his and Doris' friends discuss politics and sports and which Hollywood film star they would most like to have sex with. He knows he is drunk, and he assumes that they know he is drunk. This makes little difference, however, because they would not include him in the conversation either way. They do not exclude him, not consciously, but Stan is not much of a conversationalist. He concludes, as he watches this playback, that none of them are actually his friends. He always refers to them as "his and Doris' friends", but they are actually Doris' friends and his acquaintances. A small distinction, perhaps, but one that irks him. Why shouldn't he have friends?

He moves from New Year's to February twenty-second, the day that Doris left. She gave the briefest explanation possible. After thirty-one years of marriage, she decided to go back to the convent where he first met her. Her children were grown and it



was time for her to go back to God. He pleads with her, telling her that the children may not need a mother anymore, but that he still needs a wife. She reminds him that he too had begun a religious calling when they first met, and that perhaps he should return to the priesthood, make the Church his wife. He cannot do this. He traded his collar for a wedding band and there are no exchanges. How could she do this? She feels that some people have more than one calling in life. She had answered one calling, and now it is time for her to answer another. How could he compete with God? He watches her leave, get into a taxi with one suitcase and drive into God's arms. He is angry but will not show it. He answers the annulment surveys when they come, prying into his private life. It could be years until the thing is recognized as an annulled marriage. This bothers him as well, because now she is living with nuns even though she can't be one yet. She has left him for a purgatory, a state between two ways of being. He does not think he would mind as much if she were actually an authentic nun now. The fact that he has been rejected for some sort of non-existence is not bearable.

She has asked for no part of their shared possessions – she does not need anything. The marriage is already annulled in her head. So is he. He has been unmade in her reality. Matter can neither be made nor destroyed, but she found a way. Apparently when she left him, she left the laws of physics too. But, Stan reasons, if one is planning on breaking the universe's basic physical laws, God would be the logical partner. Now he is burdened with an empty house full of useless things.

He comes back to the window. His lawn needs to be cut, but he will not do it. He wonders how long the grass could conceivably grow. Was there a limit? Could it grow as tall as the house and help the world forget about him? He pictures his neighborhood, everyone's lawn cut to three-quarters of an inch and then one lot of two-story-tall blades. But his neighbors would complain to the township and they would send out municipal workers to cut his lawn. They would have to, because he will not



answer the phone or the door. They may eventually assume that the house is abandoned and put it up for auction. That would be interesting, Stan muses. They could sell his house with him still in it. Of course, this would never happen, but he enjoys exploring the concept. Maybe it could happen, since he has been unmade. If he doesn't exist in Doris' mind, why should he exist in anyone else's? Perhaps the house could be sold with him in it, and a small, middle class family like his own would move in, and he would remain as an observer, nonexistent to those around him. Then one day that man's wife would leave *him*, and that man would cease to exist as well. He would enter the same plane that Stan inhabited now, and the two could converse on the benefits and drawbacks of non-existence.

A squirrel is racing along the tree branch outside the window. Stan is fascinated by squirrels, though he knows nothing about them. Perhaps I should research them, he thinks, but he knows he will not. It is something in their expressions, something in their almost human way of doing things. He enjoys watching a squirrel stand on its hind legs and hold an acorn in its almost human hands. This squirrel, however, is doing no such thing. In fact, he is already gone. He raced to the end of the branch and leapt to another. Stan can no longer see him, but he ponders the motion of the squirrel. He tries to judge the animal's speed and the force necessary to propel itself into the air as it does. He finds the equation has too many variables, however, and abandons the task.

The branch off of which the squirrel jumped is still shaking. It is an oak tree, one of five in Stan's back yard. The trees are older than the house, and probably older than Stan. He cannot think of a method for judging the age of trees without cutting them down, though, so he is content with this particular uncertainty. These trees are the remnants of a forest that stood before the development was constructed. Stan tries to imagine what this land looked like before the trees, but he can only think that there must have been other trees. Before that, he assumes, it was wasteland. Perhaps

dinosaurs roamed this land. He cannot recall ever hearing of dinosaur fossils being dug up here, though. Regardless of their origin, Stan likes the oak trees. They give shade to the back yard and homes to animals like birds and squirrels. He should trim the lower branches, but it pains him to destroy any part of the trees. He is becoming like them, he thinks – motionless and rooted to his own plot of ground.

The phone rings again and it is Stan's oldest daughter. She is leaving a frantic message on the machine, saying that she is going to come down to his house because he has not returned her calls and she is worried. She has called three times this week and Stan has not called back. Stan would prefer that she did not come to visit, so he picks up the phone while still sitting in his chair.

"Susan?" His voice is gentle and soft for a large man.

"Daddy? Christ Dad, where have you been? I'm about ready to drive halfway across the goddamn state because of you." He can discern the anger in her voice, and the relief following it.

"I'm fine Susan. I've been busy, at school and all. I'm sorry I haven't called you back."

"Well Jesus Dad." She pauses. There is the sound of a lighter and the inhalation of smoke. "You're sure you're fine? Honest? Just tell me Dad. I can come down there and –"

"I said I'm fine Susan. It's getting close to the end of the quarter and I'm busy, that's all." He wonders if his voice sounds different since he has stopped existing.

"Well...Did you go see that doctor that the school set you up with?" She tries to be conversational now, and takes the frantic quality out of her voice.

"Yes," he lies. "Everything's fine. I don't have to see him again." He reaches for his own pack of cigarettes on the table, Pall Mall unfiltered. He lights one, but the ashtray is too full. He ashes on the floor.

"Maybe you should see him once in a while anyway. You've been through a lot, Dad. There's no shame in it. I know tons of people who see –"



“Have you talked to your mother?” he asks out of idle curiosity. He really doesn’t care. If he tells himself that he really doesn’t care, then he really won’t care.

“No I haven’t,” she says. “Look Dad, I gotta go. I totally forgot that Ginny’s supposed to be at the preschool by eleven. You’re sure that you’re okay, now?”

“Yes Susan. Thank you for being such a good concerned daughter.”

“That’s my job. Tell you what, we’ll all come to visit on Saturday. How’s that? I gotta go. Love ya Dad.”

“Goodbye Susan.” He hangs up the phone and turns back to his cigarette. It has burned down nearly all the way. He takes it between thumb and index finger, drags one more time, and puts it out under his slipper. After the cigarette is out, he takes off the slipper and examines it more closely. This slipper, and its counterpart, was given to him for Christmas four years ago. They were made by the Thom McAnn shoe company in Chicago, Illinois and shipped to the mall near his house where they were purchased by his children. There were only three pairs of this particular make at the store, and this pair was the closest to Stan’s size. They were a little tight at first, but now they have stretched to his feet. They are leather on the outside, and lined with artificial rabbit fur on the inside. The soles are soft rubber, and have been completely worn through in places. The slippers cost a good amount of money, he is sure, but his children all have jobs now and feel that they can afford to spoil their father occasionally. He frowns on such spending officially, but is delighted that his children would do so. He has been a good father.

The drizzle outside has stopped. Sunlight begins to infiltrate the kitchen and warms Stan’s skin. He feels like a cat, sunbathing in this fashion. Doris and he had had a cat once, but it ran away after three months. Its name was Palomar, after the book by Italo Calvino. Calvino was one of Doris’ favorite authors, and she was very well read. Stan was not one for literature, but Doris had made him read Calvino, and he enjoyed it in his way. She took her

books with her when she left, and now the bookshelf is all physics textbooks and Stephen Hawking. It is less than a quarter filled.

Stan knows that there is something wrong with him, but he doesn't know what. He is sitting on an uncomfortable wooden chair wearing briefs and a bathrobe that is eight years old. The bathrobe was a color called "executive burgundy", but now it looks like plain red. It has a hole in the right elbow and the seat is worn to near transparency. When the robe was made by Sears Roebuck, it was thick and soft and the color was vibrant. He did not wear it for months after Doris gave it to him, because he had never been one for bathrobes. When she claimed that he didn't wear it because he didn't like it, he started putting it on nearly every day. He has been wearing the same outfit, and sitting in the same chair, for over four days now. He feels weak because he has not eaten. He has smoked more than half a carton of cigarettes. He drinks a glass of water every time he goes to the bathroom. Something is wrong.

Stan refuses to believe that his current situation has anything to do with his former wife. He thinks that he would be sitting like this and feeling like this even if she hadn't left. Of course, if she were still here he might have a reason to change his behavior. As it stands, he might go on like this forever. Stan does not like the word forever, because it is a lie. Nothing is actually forever, especially the things that claim to be, like marriage. When something claims to be forever, it is lying from the start. He used to believe that God is forever, but he doesn't think so anymore. In fact, he thinks God has been gone for a long long time. This belief made him even angrier when Doris left, because a nonexistent God had stolen his wife. When Doris left, she made God exist again at the cost of Stan's existence, and now Stan was faced with a God that he had stopped believing in who was stealing his wife and annulling him. Stan puts his elbows on his thighs and his face in his hands.

This question of existence bothers Stan. He used to believe that he existed under his own power, but now he has been forced to abandon this belief. It also bothers him because he has never been one for philosophy. There are too many uncertainties in



philosophy. He wishes that he could define his existence with physical laws. He can comprehend movement in spacetime and the energy inherent in subatomic particles, but he cannot conclude why he exists, or why his existence is such that it is. He surmises that studying the expansion or collapse of the universe is much easier than studying a human being.

A thin wispy fog floats over Stan's yard as the sun burns off the morning's drizzle. There was a time that Stan could explain everything around simply with the word God. The trees, the grass, the sun, himself – it was all because of God. God created it and God was resident in it still. When he left God, he needed a new method of definition. His teaching took the place of God, until Doris brought God back. Now Stan can have pure faith in neither God nor physics, because each one has been soiled by the other. He needs a new methodology, and while he knows that sitting in his kitchen chair in his underwear is not a good method, he can do nothing else.

Stan is having something called an ontological crisis. He can't think of a succinct definition for that word, but he is almost positive that this ontological crisis has placed him in his current position. He lights another cigarette and looks for answers in the curling streams of blue-grey smoke. He coughs, bringing a mass of phlegm to his mouth, which he spits out onto the floor. He drops the unfinished cigarette onto the discharge and pulls a letter out of the side pocket of his robe.

The letter is old, the envelope yellowed and torn at the corners. It is addressed to Stan at St. Thomas seminary and the return address is the Sacred Heart convent. He pulls out the one handwritten page and presses it flat on the table.

"Dear Stanley," it reads. "How are you? I hope you don't mind me writing you at St. Thomas'. Is that apostrophe appropriate? I can't believe that it has only been a week since we've seen each other. It seems like it's been positively decades. I had such a good time with you this weekend. I don't think I've ever had so much fun. I truly hope that you will be doing more work on our organ

here. You made it sound better than it has in years. You're quite the handyman. Things are rather running me down here, as I may have intimated to you. I don't understand how the older nuns can be so perky and awake at morning prayers. I can barely keep my eyes open. I know, I know that's a terrible thing to say. I wish I had your zeal for the faith. You amaze me. Some of the other girls are saying that I must have a crush on you to talk about you all the time. Isn't that silly? They don't understand how amazing a conversation with you can be. Oh, I saw that man again today. I think you're right about him being mentally ill. It's such a shame. I should be able to meet you this weekend. You said you might be interested in seeing me again. If you can meet me, write me back. Well, write me back either way. Good luck. Doris."

They never had any romantic kind of relationship until they had each left their respective vocations. Stan finds it odd that now he misses what it was like before they were married. He misses letters like this one (of which he has dozens). What bothers him, though, is whether he misses the Doris of the past or the Stan of the past. He has given up on both.

Stan folds the letter again, but does not put it in the envelope. After he folds it in thirds, he folds it in half, then in half again. He crushes the letter inside his fist. His fist is large and strong and goes through the window with little effort. He makes no attempt to stop the bleeding, but simply rests his hand back on the table. The letter remains in his closed fist, shielded from the shards of glass stuck into his flesh.



**The Barn**

*Alyson Jones*



## Ginsberg Mourning

*Benjamin Schuler*

I  
You haven't read anything by the best minds of my generation.  
They are content with  
    anonimity, living in action,  
They haven't seen more than they know,  
    they haven't seen the spinach alternative herbal eating Popeyes,  
the elected officials soft at work nurturing the risen Jesus,  
spawned from cotton and  
    raised in Economics,  
or become a master through personal training...we'll do it for  
you...lost my head,  
    this deal—it was so exciting,  
Burger's Free, Wings Free, Shrimp Free, Fries Free,  
    so why are there burgers, wings, shrimp and fries being served,  
cover charge is another word for drink your fill you've paid in  
full—Do you have  
    depression, tension, irritability, sadness, you may have PMS, Post  
Morality Syndrome,  
it's your lucky day in club risque, "We can make your life easier"  
they say, as atrophied,  
    lost of need, our knees buckle under the weight of air,  
bitter medicine...it's alright, the ends are far sweeter drank w/  
pungent dislike,  
    fifty percent off of this frame, trade in your old one and we'll  
guarantee two, you'll  
    see...or won't you,  
thought I saw a vision w/ doves and lost souls, but it was a  
digitron shackled in  
    Times Square(d), casino germs riding on a wave of  
appreciation,  
there's no standing ovation amongst the parapolegics—how



much insurance do you need  
to move, to convulse and go?, “The oceans a little choppy  
today. Lets take the jet to  
Brazil.”,  
three times the check bounced, so I lost the house, after twenty  
nine years and eight  
months,  
the air’s a hiway to god’s bedroom, breaking a cardinal rule has  
never been so right,  
does heaven have to pick the cotton that clouds are made of,  
mine the jewels that  
mosaic the walls—silk city—smiles by design—what is a jewel  
but a stone after being  
worked on by a man,  
come inside before the angel of death disguised as a Grand Old  
Party takes you away,  
a machiavellian trick to sustain—CIA: Caught In Action,  
priests w/ hypodermics full of heroin keeping the pews full  
sacrament—  
straight up the Kundilini, where masturbation is taught to  
counteract media maturation,  
singles is a scene instead of a way,  
they drink wine more than they used to, straight out of the  
bottle—say they can taste the  
fingerprints—wear sheep to contact inspiration instead of  
forgetting winter,  
the best of the weird race against trauma survivors,  
generation Go-Go—dance along w/ retro, discount Rio  
show—Fido’s special,  
Is your dog finished with it because I’m hungry too?—the bird  
wanted to depend on legs,  
so it ate its wings,  
Shanghai in America, Bistro in Thailand, Zorba in Tokyo...what  
is native cooking today,  
did Mama’s iron skillet dream of microwaves when it got too

hot and she grew red with  
shyness?,  
men attacking a snapping turtle with a snow shovel...it took half  
and hour to separate  
the head from home...soup never tasted so bad,  
baking cakes shaped like a man—a voodoo trick to transform  
the energy of man,  
we're all byproducts of a studio projection war, meals on the  
edge of square—Cartoons  
don't understand "out"—Showgirl Zygote..."photo  
opportunity?",  
Hey mother, "If our television has an asian cathode, does it  
count as imported?",  
you live at 2 Independence Place because its nice to say once in  
a while—cemetaries  
started at the center of town, are now only brushed when  
leaving the city,  
who will continue to cover their eyes and hold their breath  
whenever they pass a  
graveyard nest,  
cajun jazz, american cuisine, trade union, nerve endings,  
Is there time for something worth talking about when you take  
a breath?,  
isn't it ironic if you combine the words black and white you get  
"whack" or "blite",  
two sounds that mean something gets hurt,  
these ideas are nothing new/ we're human anagrams/ playing  
through and through,  
the vedas neither worked nor warped, a walking paradox, where  
pearls are honored  
over oysters, and Utopia brokedown into "ou" and "topos"  
literally meaning  
"not a place", "nowhere",  
the moon shaped like a tusk to bore its way through the night,  
as we look and realize



we're living ammunition...myths dancing w/ ritual to form an  
account of drama,  
fish dream of seals—of warm blood and walking on land—uses  
two sickles because he  
loves circles,  
fair loans, pheromones...repetition is used for intensity, Cupid  
dropped the loin cloth and  
went for patent leather...a “freedom suit” he called it, Cupid  
dropped the loin cloth and  
went for patent leather, a “freedom suit” he called it,  
threshold getting smaller, we must change shape to get  
through...born of blood-clots and  
sperm drops, we wed on a mountain moated by screams,  
among the rising hills of dead,  
a wotan man comes every night, his fury answered at the toll  
booth—Future Atlantis— we  
should learn to swim, cause gills will be brothers and captors of  
all,  
ascension causes loss of oxygen, the higher we get the less we  
can depend on bodies,  
carbon casts a spell on the clouds until she coughs and we catch  
the germs harboring  
within, willing the power of death's song,  
the genie can't escape from her bottle, it's on too tight...avoid  
people who own houses  
with locks on the outside of bedroom doors,  
Eros: The fool acts out of passion while the rest are actors and  
actresses—when are we  
going to stop clapping—I look around and see colorful parrots  
dressed up in business  
suits,  
hermaphrodites know the difference between a man and a  
woman, their wisdom will  
overcome when Hermes mediates and Aphrodite breaths of  
love— a lotus age is coming,

Black Madonna—take root among the bushman, show me the  
love water, that the divine  
couldn't, and I will stay forever,  
terrible thing: a library, having to share knowledge w/ people  
who don't use the edge.

## II

There's a world living in my gums.  
My spit their adventure,  
the crumbs their plaster,  
the fillings their heaven and hell...depending witch.  
I think of them when I drink water, about their downpours,  
their sewage system,  
the gas of my burp becomes their nuclear equations.  
I fear one day they'll expand and take over my stomach,  
a British Columbus will come,  
repelling down the ends of the earth,  
into my intestines and they'll find a storehouse of imagery, of  
reflection, of living acids  
for use in their hometown, of which to grasp, stronghold,  
threshold, fighting what they couldn't control.  
But if that day comes I might just use scope and bleach to  
whiten them, teach a lesson which 65 million years hasn't taught  
us: NICE TRY.



## Tar's Melting

*Mike Keeper*

Samuel Cleary sat in bed, his back against the headboard, reading a book and listening to her breathe. He read the words for the rhythm they made when he matched them to the slow lull of her inhalations. He'd been on the same page for a while.

She moved her face from under the covers. "Hi Sam," she said, smiling.

He wanted to kiss her but thought he'd better wait till she was awake, so he closed the book and turned out the light instead. The glow-in-the-dark stars he'd insisted they stick on the ceiling shined bright with stored energy. He waited for sleep or the stars to fade, whichever came first.

Sleep did, but it didn't last. He woke with an idea. Others followed and he thought he should write them down, but he'd have to get out of bed and the room was cold and he wasn't wearing socks. He counted the ideas out on his hands and made the number the thing to remember. He'd done this before and it didn't work. I'm gonna lose it, he thought. But again, the room was cold and the no socks thing...

Alexa stirred beside him. "S'okay Sam," she said.

He listened for more but her breathing flattened back towards sleep. Anyway, it was decided. He rolled onto the floor, pulled his story binder out from under the bed, and took it into the living room. He wrote till morning, and when he re-read his words, he knew they were good. It was the last story he'd write for awhile. Alexa left with her son a week later.

Three months later Sam needed rent, so he opened a newspaper to the classifieds and slid his index finger through the many tiny boxes offering employment. The largest panel on the page was also the only one with a graphic: A 1950's adding machine made to look like a human face. The ad needed people, no experience necessary, to be inventory specialists. FUN was promised,

as was FLEXIBILITY and INCENTIVES.

Training was held in the loft of an apartment converted for business. Sam sat in seat fifteen between the heavyset middle-aged black woman in seat fourteen and the heavyset middle-aged white woman in seat sixteen. Everyone looked heavyset in their thick winter coats, and though it got hot as the loft filled with bodies, no one made themselves comfortable.

The walls were papered with pictures of grocery store shelves and clothes racks. Sam was staring at these, thinking of nothing, when a voice near his ear whispered, "What'll it be?" He turned and met the massive man with the red velvet eye-patch in the seat behind him. "I'm Al," the man said, offering his hand. "Ya looked ready to buy."

"Oh, huh," Sam said. "Yeah no. Daydreaming I guess."

"Smell that?" Al said.

Sam smelled something. What it was, he didn't know.

Al sucked air up his nose. It whistled as it went. "Toe paste," he said.

"What?"

"The *smell*," he said, shaking his head at the question.

Sam leaned back in his seat and faked interest in something at the front of the room. He didn't have to fake for long. A young, pale-faced woman with a small pink birthmark to the left of her left eye stood at her desk shuffling papers into piles. He hadn't seen her before. An image lit up his head. It left before he could label it.

"Quite a picture, ain't she?"

Sam turned round. "What?" he said.

"The girl," Al said, nodding at her.

"Yes," Sam said.

The young woman held a thin stack of booklets to her chest. "Hi," she said. "Attention everyone. Hi, my name is Melissa. I'm the training supervisor." She distributed the booklets. "These are elementary level math tests. You need a score of fifty or higher



to pass.” When everyone had one she told them to begin.

Sam flipped the cover under. Question one was, *How many circles do you see?* “Ha,” Al said, behind him.

The test went quick. When he’d finished, Sam watched Melissa. He moved his eyes between her and her picture in the frame on the corner of her desk. A boy, six or seven years old, was with her in the photo. They looked alike, except for the birthmark. He wondered if she liked the birthmark.

“Time’s up,” Melissa said. She collected the tests and fed them through a machine.

Al laughed. “Tough one, eh Topnotch?”

“You’ve got to challenge yourself,” Alexa was saying.

Sam was in the living room playing video games with her son. “I know, Alexa,” he said. “No, go there.” He pointed at the screen. “Go back. Go back.”

She put the spaghetti in a strainer. “Scotty, wash your hands okay?”

“Okay ma,” he said.

She stood in the kitchen archway. “You have talent Sam.”

“It’s seventy-five bucks Alexa.”

“Do it for me,” she said.

So he did. He enrolled in a creative writing class at the community college near their apartment. One night a week. Seventy-five dollars.

He almost didn’t go. He sat on her couch in the dark, listening to his stomach turn. What made him get up was knowing she’d be home soon and, seeing him there, they’d fight.

The halls of the college were empty and bright. He found room fifteen. “Welcome. Sit down. Sit down,” said the man Sam took to be the professor, though it was difficult to tell. Everyone was wearing a sweater.

“I’m professor Stevens. You can call me Dr. Stevens,” he said. He asked that everyone introduce themselves and share something personal with the class. “A little icebreaker,” he called

it.

Sam pretended to listen to the others while his mind scrambled for something to say. Finally, when it was his turn, he said, "My name is Sam and I wear a retainer." The class laughed, all but a bandana-wearing kid in the corner.

The professor put a paper towel roll on his desk. "This is a game I call S&M." Someone giggled. "I want each of you to describe it with a simile or metaphor. The challenge is to make the comparison as exotic as possible."

They went around the room.

"He rolled the cylindrical sponge through a puddle..."

"It was as if a roll of toilet paper had been stretched... like taffy!"

"The miniature pillar stood on the kitchen counter, a monument to absorption." This one was the bandana-wearing kid's and it got a laugh. "Good. Good," said the professor.

Then it was Sam's turn. "It looks," he said, leaning forward in his chair, "like the spongy bone slice of a decalcified giant."

"Wow," said the professor. "Very visual. Very visceral."

"Everyone passed," Melissa said.

Sam was relieved. He'd feared feeling tangential embarrassment.

"Where's the confetti?" Al asked.

Melissa wheeled a tv/vcr unit to the front of the room.

"Tar," Al whispered.

"What?" Sam said, not turning. Al tapped his shoulder. He swiveled in his chair. "What?"

"Tar's melting in the connectors," Al said, pointing at the light panel above their heads. "That's why the fluorescents are buzzing."

Sam listened. The buzzing was loud. He wondered why he hadn't heard it before. Now that he did, he couldn't ignore it. "Thanks a lot," he said.

Al winked and shot him with a finger gun. "Wake up



champ.”

“Alright,” Melissa said. “We’re going to watch a training video. Remember your questions and I’ll answer them when it’s over.” She dimmed the lights and pressed play.

Music swelled over a title card which read: RCIS Inventory. Count on us... for quality! When the music went, the president of the company appeared. He said his name was Rex Halfpenny (“Yeah right,” Al whispered), and he welcomed the trainees to an exciting career in “inventory enumeration.”

“Grocery stores, boutiques, and toy shops. Just *some* of the places *this* job will take you,” he said. “And on-the-job hours go fast because of the level of concentration required. The tape showed an employee fervently counting a rack of baby clothes.

“I worked in an arcade,” Al whispered. “Watched this guy play a game, ten hours straight. He looked like her when he left.”

Halfpenny congratulated the group, wished them well, and turned the podium over to an angular executive who spoke of efficient counting techniques, dress code, and proper at work behavior. These important points were emphasized with short narrated dramatizations:

“Suzie, a veteran RCIS employee, is counting a bin of stuffed animals when Amy, a new recruit, walks over to talk. Though the interruption causes Suzie to lose count, thereby jeopardizing her productivity bonus, she does not get angry. Instead, she calmly and concisely explains to Amy that she should not have left her assigned area.

“‘We will be able to converse during a designated break period,’ Suzie reminds her.

“Amy thanks Suzie for making her aware of her error and returns to work.”

“Where do they build these people?” Al said.

The last story Sam wrote was about a guy who invented a machine that brought wonder back to the world. They workshopped it in his last writing class, the same week Alexa left.

The machine made strange things happen. Blood drops on specimen slides became ladybugs. Flowers bloomed where people walked. Televisions turned organic and asked to see sunlight. Crazy, really.

The class loved it, all but bandana kid.

"He's artsy as fuck, Alexa," Sam said when he got home. "Artsy assholes got no taste."

"I'm leaving, Sam," she said.

Al caught Sam at the door as he was leaving. "Nice meeting ya Sam."

"Yeah," Sam said. "Guess we'll be working together."

"Oh, no. I ain't workin' here... Anyway, keep your eyes open."

"Sure," Sam said. "Okay."

Forests were burning. Sam changed the channel. He sunk himself deeper into the couch cushion. His story binder lay open and empty beside him. Outside, snow was falling.

He felt for the frame on the wall behind his head. In it was a picture of a lizard. The picture was a postcard Alexa had bought. She'd liked it enough to give it a frame. It was the only wall decoration left. She'd taken all the others. All Sam had now were nail holes and the lizard postcard.

He'd asked her when she said she was going, "Can Scotty visit?"

"We'll be too far away, Sam," she'd said.

"You can send him on a plane. He can stay for like, a weekend."

"Sure Sam. And maybe he can sit in the airport for three days when you forget to pick him up."

Sam saw himself in the kitchen, crying over photographs. "You can't leave me completely," he'd said.

She'd hugged him. "Find some direction Sam, please."

"Direction. Fuck you direction," he said in the empty



apartment.

It was late. The TV was on without sound, flicking light and making shadows in the room. Sam lay curled on the couch, dreaming of parking lots, when a flattening sensation in his head and chest forced him awake. He ran to the bathroom and dry heaved into the toilet. He felt that he was sick and had been sick for awhile.

“How ya doin’ bud?” Melissa asked. She sat on the edge of her son’s bed and felt his forehead. He rolled onto his stomach, against her back, and opened and closed his mouth on his pillow.

She laughed. “Better I guess.”

Her son was off and on sick. On the on days when she had work, he stayed in the nurse’s office at school. She knew the nurse and the nurse knew her. This was how it was.

“Eww time,” she said. “Sit up.” She poured yellow medicine from a small plastic cup into his mouth, then gave him a glass of water. “Better?”

“Oh, *loads*,” he said.

“Sarcasm already, huh?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Dunno. I guess.”

She rubbed his ears. “Don’t over do it, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Guess what?”

“What?”

“I’m off work tomorrow.”

“Can we get some movies?”

“After we see Dr. Champ.”

“How many R’s?”

“None. Maybe one PG-13.”

“Okay.”

Melissa stood and took the medicine bottle from the nightstand. She kissed her son’s cheek and went to the door. “G’night bud.”

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“I think we should take the sheet down.”

Melissa looked at the sheet pinned to the wall above her son’s bed. It covered a butterfly she’d painted there a few years ago.

“You really want me to?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t scare me anymore.”

She smiled. “Okay bud,” she said. “We’ll take it down.”

Snow was falling, but he couldn’t feel it. He reached for it, and when his hand entered his sphere of vision the trance snapped and Sam saw that he was in a living room, lying on a couch, and that the snow was electronic, and in a television. He laughed – quick little exhalations. It doesn’t look like snow at all, he thought. And then his eyes teared.

“Shumfing’s wrong.”

There was a pillow tag in his mouth. He coughed it out. The tag was wet. It read, in words that were bold like they were being screamed: Manufactured by PillowTek. All new material consisting of polyester fiber.

Sam pushed the pillow onto the floor where it collapsed against the coffee table in a chubby L. He sat up. Wind swirled ice crystals past the window. New snow covered the cars in the parking lot. How he knew it was new he didn’t know. He didn’t know where he was. He didn’t know who he was. But whatever he was, he wasn’t scared.

He stood and went to the television. Its screen was flat and solid but he thought, were it not for the glass, he could reach inside and how it would be like wet cement if he did. He changed the channel.

A regular man materialized. The regular man was spinning slowly in the center of a regular living room, a hand on his hip and a hand on his head, scratching at it. He spun until he heard a sneeze come from under the couch. The man lifted the couch and out crawled an outrageous extraterrestrial.



“What the happy heck you doin’ under my couch?” the regular man asked.

“Rabbit huntin’,” the extraterrestrial replied.

“Rabbits?” asked the regular man.

“*Dust* rabbits, hombre,” replied the extraterrestrial.

The glass fourth wall of the regular man’s house blew laughter at them like heat through a vent. Neither of them noticed.

Sam turned them off and put his fists on his hips. What he did next, he did without thinking. He found and used toiletries. He changed into clothes he thought he’d never seen before but which fit. He ate peanut butter cracker sandwiches. By lunchtime he’d made himself comfortable in the apartment. Now what? He wondered.

Something must be done he decided, so he flipped through the address book he’d found in a kitchen drawer until he saw a name with Dr. in front of it.

“Dr. Champ’s office.”

“Hi... I’d like to make an appointment.”

“Name.”

He said the name that was in his wallet. “Sam Cleary.”

“Yes, Mr. Cleary. Three o’clock.”

“What?”

“Three o’clock.”

“What do you mean, three o’clock?”

“Your appointments at three o’clock.”

“Today?”

“This afternoon. Is there a problem?”

“No.”

“Very good. See you this afternoon, Mr. Cleary.”

“Okay.”

Sam moved the receiver from his ear. “Huh,” he said. “I must have made an appointment.”

Getting to the doctor’s office was easy. He thought he’d have to ask directions, but found that, once he was driving, he

knew all the roads and where they went.

He signed his name in the registry, and took a seat in the waiting room. He'd been there before apparently because he wasn't asked to sign anything else.

He stood as soon as he sat.

A young woman with a little pink birthmark to the left of her left eye looked up from her magazine. He knew that he knew her and the little boy playing with action figures at her feet.

He crossed the room, his hand out. "Hi..." he said.

"Hi."

They shook.

Quick as a finger snap, his memory returned. "Hi Melissa, Sam Cleary. You trained me yesterday."

"Oh, okay," she said. "So many people. I'm sorry."

"No problem."

"How are you?"

"I'm okay." He squatted. "Is this your brother?"

"This is my son, Joey," she said.

"Oh," he said. "Nice to meet you Joey."

"I'm sick," the boy said. "*All the time.*" He swung his arms like Igor.

"Joey, stop that."

The boy laughed.

Sam smiled. "Why do frogs eat flies?" he said.

"Why?"

"Because they can't make pizza."

"Not bad."

"That's an original."

"I can tell," the boy said, smiling. He took his action figures across the room.

"Funny stuff," Melissa said.

"Can I sit?"

"Go ahead."

Sam sat. "Not too edgy?"

"Just tame enough."



He didn't see a ring on her finger. "I wanted to talk to you yesterday."

"Oh yeah? What about?"

"I don't know."

"Sorry I missed *that*."

They laughed.

"Um," Sam said.

They watched Joey play.

"How old is he?" Sam said.

"Seven."

"Is he really sick all the time?"

"He's sick a lot."

Sam didn't know what to say. He thought he should say something.

Melissa spoke first. "What's your story Sam?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your life, what's it like? C'mon, we're de-strangerizing each other."

She makes new words, Sam thought.

"I—" He stopped himself. Something was happening. "My life is nothing much," he said. "I eat spaghetti a lot... I write. I used to write. I took a class. The professor said I had talent." He looked at Joey. "My girlfriend said I had talent. That was when we lived together, before she moved away."

"What kind of writing? Like short stories and stuff?"

"Yeah."

"That's good. It's good to do things like that. I painted. Not anymore. I took a class too, a few years ago, when Joe was still around. That's my ex-husband, Joe. My paintings are in a box. I look at them once in awhile, but mostly they stay in the box."

"What did you paint?"

"Bright things. Butterflies. I painted a lot of butterflies."

"I like butterflies."

"Me too. I like butterflies too."

“Your stuff is shit,” the bandana kid was saying.

They’d just had their last class. Sam’s car was idling. He got out. The stars were sharp in the winter sky.

“What’s this look like? Huh, Tony?” Sam said, flipping the kid the finger. “Looks like a bird, don’t it?”

“What you’ll never be is any good,” Tony said. “But there’s an if.”

“Why are you talking to me?”

“I’m helping you, you goddamn sloth. I’m telling you there’s an if.”

Sam shook his head. “You’re... Something’s wrong with you,” he said.

“What if you could change the world?”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“I’d kill to get what you got. But see? That shows I shouldn’t have it. The shit you write is shit, but it doesn’t have to be. It could be good. It would be good if you *worked*, you sleepy sack of crap.”

“I don’t-”

“Alexa’s leaving you Sam. You’re finished you pathetic fucker.”

In the waiting room, something was happening. Ideas were coming. He’d not had one in months. Now, he had too many. His head was humming with them.

“I’d like to read some of your stories,” Melissa said.

“You would?” Sam said.

She nodded.

“I’d like to see your paintings,” he said.

“Good. Okay,” she said. “It’s settled.”



**Attempt**

*Bridget Baines*



**On the Cusp of Winter**

*Alyson Jones*

We meet in New England November,  
a tryst,  
Autumn's wrinkles,  
slowly surfacing.  
Years  
have grown up  
around us,  
deer trails  
to highways,  
farmland  
to cityscapes  
sapling children  
uprooted  
for new  
housing.  
And yet,  
we return.  
Smoothing the leaves  
from her hair.  
Slow the pink  
rush,  
in his cheeks;  
blush  
orange,  
crimson.  
I tangle myself  
in Autumn's limbs.  
Leaves fall  
from  
my hair.



I cover her,        old lady,  
with a white kiss,  
                         whipping down my throat,  
                         a lover's tingle.  
                         Winter has lulled  
   the leaf empty trees  
into restless slumber.

## The Candle Incident

*Genevieve Romeo*

The last time we went out to dinner, my brother, who is now eighteen, bet my father ten dollars that he could not make it out of the restaurant hiding a fire extinguisher under his shirt. My brother lost the bet, but mom wouldn't let him take the money. My father walked back into the restaurant and calmly handed the extinguisher to the hostess, letting her know that it passed all safety regulations with flying colors.

That was three weeks ago. My family has been the seat of Restaurant Wackiness for as long as I can remember. Thus far, we have yet to be kicked out of any eating establishment, although the Banana Cream Pie Incident was a close call. And despite my mother's constant warnings to my father that he would "wind us up" to the point where we couldn't be wound down, my brother and I usually calmed down before any serious trouble could ensue. And so far, we haven't even come close to burning any place down.

Ok, we came close once. But that was a while ago.

Kenny and I were young, only about eight and ten. He and my father had just returned to the table from the men's room. Kenny was red and grinning. My dad was clapping his hands in Queen's familiar "We Will Rock You" beat. As they sat down, the claps transformed into the rhythmic thumping of his fingers on the table.

"What happened?" my mother asked.

"I went to get a paper towel and it got stuck," Kenny explained. "So Dad pulled it out, and then the whole thing fell apart."

She looked at my father, who was still engaged in drumming. *Dunt dunt DUNT, dunt dunt DUNT*. His only words of explanation were: "Weeeeeee will weeeeeee will breakyourpapertoweldispenser!"

By now my brother and I had picked up on the beat. We sang along in decidedly un-restaurant voices.



“Arthur!” My mother placed her hands over ours, putting a quick end to the evening’s musical interlude. Her face was rapidly beginning to match her silky pink blouse.

“What?”

“Stop it!”

“Why?”

“The people at other tables are all staring at us.”

This was never enough of an excuse for my father. He nodded his head at my mother, first slowly and solemnly, and then faster and more violently, crossing his eyes and lolling his tongue from the left corner of his mouth.

“Ok,” he said. “Ok! Ok! Ok!”

My mother sighed. Kenny and I giggled and began nodding our heads in the same fashion.

“Ok! Ok! Ok!” He said extremely audibly.

“Ok! Ok! Ok!” I said, also extremely audibly.

“Arthur! You’re winding them up and we won’t be able to calm them down.”

He uncrossed his eyes and stopped nodding. His salt-and-pepper hair was slightly disheveled. “Jan, we’re just having fun.”

“But we’re in a restaurant. A *nice* restaurant. You can have fun at home.”

“Then can we play Pillow Monster when we get home?” Kenny asked.

I bounced in my seat. Yay! Pillow Monster! The best game ever!

“Sure, sure,” my dad responded. “A little slow on the draw here for Helium Boy,” he said, scanning the busy floor of Café Mezé for our waiter. Dad had dubbed him Helium Boy in honor of his high-pitched, nasal voice. This was not done to insult the man – my father would never call him that to his face – but merely to amuse us. We all searched for signs of Helium Boy. Now that we had settled down, the room resumed humming with conversations. My mother had been right. The other tables *had* been staring at us. This was, after all, a *nice* restaurant, richly furnished

in dark woods and burgundy drapery and filled mostly with adults who spoke in dull murmurs. Ever since I could remember, my parents had taken my brother and me to *nice* restaurants – ones without kids' menus or ketchup on the tables.

This particular restaurant was so *nice* that if you made reservations, they wrote your last name on a little card and placed it on your table. We always made reservations when we went out to eat. If my father made them, the hostess would inevitably greet us as something like "Mr. and Mrs. H. Munster." Tonight our little card read: "DePenguino, party of four, six-thirty."

Kenny tied his napkin around Opus' scrungy grey neck.

"Ken, don't put your clean napkin on that filthy thing," my mother said.

"He's not filthy! We washed him yesterday!"

"Was that before or after you were throwing him on the roof?"

"The roof isn't dirty! It just rained, so it's clean now."

That didn't work. "Ok." He removed the napkin from Opus and put it in his lap. My mother had ceased to notice/care if other people stared at the fact that we brought a stuffed animal into restaurants. Opus D. Penguin was part of the family. As long as we kept him relatively quiet, he was allowed everywhere.

"That's a good boy."

"Heyyo Yanet," Opus said to my mother.

"Hi Opus. Make sure Kenny keeps you off the table."

"Where the hell is the waiter?" My father held his beer bottle upside down and shook the last sad amber drops into his empty glass.

"Hey Arttur," Opus called to my father, "I know where the hell the waiter went. I ate him."

"Opus can't eat the waiter," I said. "He only eats sushi and Legos."

"Oh yeah."

Helium Boy finally appeared with dinner. He set the plates in front of us.



"It's about time," my father grumbled. "We ordered half an hour ago."

Our waiter gave him a prissy look that pinched his shiny face into a cartoonish expression of contempt and squeaked: "You're not the only table here, sir," before trotting back to the kitchen.

"No, but I am leaving your tip. Asshole."

My brother and I giggled and exchanged glances.

"You're not the only table here, sir," I repeated in a Mickey Mouse voice.

"A-HOLE!" my brother echoed gleefully.

My mother glared at my father, who was spitting bones from his Dover sole into his napkin. "Can't even debone the goddamn fish," he said.

"Hey Yanet," Opus asked, "Did they debone your goddamn fish?"

"Opus doesn't belong up here while we're eating. And watch your mouth."

Kenny shoved Opus under the table and ate his pasta. We finished our meals in relative tranquility and waited for our Helium Boy once again. An older couple was seated next to us and given menus. The man was wearing a brown corduroy jacket that looked to be about three sizes too small. A pair of round gold-rimmed glasses were all but lost in the dough of his face. The woman's hair was teased into a lavender topiary. Their table reservation card read: "Dr. Rosenfeld, party of two, seven-thirty."

"Look, Earl," the woman said. "They have spaghetti squash. Remember? Like we had on the cruise?"

My father winced at her shrill voice. "Is that George Costanza's mother over there?"

"They were so good!" Earl's wife continued. "What was that they served it with? Was it the prime rib? Or was it part of brunch? I just don't remember."

"Can she get any louder?" Dad asked.

"Arthur!" Mom said in a harsh whisper. "They're right over there!"

“Oh Edna,” Earl replied, “you know it gave me gas.”

This was too much. Opus picked up a roll and chewed it carefully.

“Hey Gen-Gen,” he shouted, “I think these rolls give me gas!”

Before my mother could intervene, Opus turned around and bent over.

“PPPTHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHPPPTTTTTTTTT!!!!!!!”

“Kids...”

“Sorry, Yanet, can’t hear ya, you’ll have to speak up, I’m having gas. PPPTTTTTTTTHHHHHHHHPPPPPPPT! Woah, that was a big one!”

I giggled uncontrollably, flecked with spit from my brother’s explosive raspberries. “Do you want another one, Opus?” I handed him my half-eaten roll.

“No, he doesn’t.” My mother seized my roll and put it on her plate.

“PPTTHPT???” Opus looked up at my mother.

“No more.”

“Ok.” He turned back towards my brother. “ppthptt.”

“I said *no more*. Do you want me to count to three?”

“No. Opus will be good. I just hope you don’t have to count to three for Earl after *he* eats dinner.”

“That’s not very ...” my mother began, but she snorted and broke off into giggles herself. Luckily, Helium Boy returned to our table to clear the dishes before Edna and Earl realized what we found so amusing.

“How was everything this evening?” Helium Boy chirruped.

“Explosively good,” Dad replied. “Quite a release.”

Helium Boy smiled blankly and asked if we’d like to see a dessert menu.

“Only if you didn’t make them on a gas stove.”

This confused our waiter and set us – including my mother – into fresh peals of laughter. Helium Boy said he was pretty sure



the chefs used electric ranges and produced four dainty menus before returning to the sanctity of the kitchen. Earl had meanwhile left and come back from the restroom. He dried his hands on his napkin.

“You’d think an upscale place like this would have a working paper towel dispenser,” he grumbled to his wife.

My father grinned and began thumping his fingers on the table again: *dunt dunt DUNT! dunt dunt DUNT!*

“Look, kids, they have strawberry shortcake,” my mother said over Dad’s drumming, but she was so obviously trying not to laugh that we weren’t deterred.

“Weeeeeeee will weeeeeeee will BREAK YOUR PAPER TOWEL DISPENSER!”

Edna and Earl gawked at the table of laughing idiots. My father looked back at them, read their reservation card again, and said: “Dr. Rosenfeld, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“Hi there. Can we buy you and your wife a drink?”

“That would be lovely,” Edna answered.

“I’ll just tell our waiter, if he ever comes back.” My father smiled at them asked what field the good doctor was in. This was not very interesting to Kenny and me.

“Mom, can I blow out the candle?” Kenny asked. My mom said yes and joined in the conversation.

“I wanted to blow it out!”

“Opus can do it!” Kenny suggested.

“Ok!”

He pulled Opus up from under the table and walked him up to the candle. He then waved Opus’ nose back and forth in front of the flame in an effort to blow it out. Before we knew what was happening, a thin curl of smoke had begun to rise from Opus’ wobbling schnozz. We first thought it was coming from the candle itself; we soon realized, however, that this was not the case. Opus’ nose was on fire. *OPUS’ NOSE WAS ON FIRE!!* We froze and stared at each other, mouths hung open in gapes of fear

and astonishment. In his panic, Kenny had still not removed Opus from the flickering candle. The tendrils of smoke grew darker and thicker.

“MOM! MOM!!!”

My mother turned from her conversation. Her face shifted from a look of mild annoyance to one of alarm. In one fluid movement, she yanked our stuffed penguin from the candle flame and dunked his smoldering nose into her glass of water. Kenny and I sat in shocked silence for a few seconds before we burst into tears. Mom pulled us over to her and enveloped us. She murmured: “It’s Ok now, see? He’s fine.” She plucked Opus from the water and patted his nose dry with her napkin. There was a thumbnail-sized scorch mark on the underside of his nose. Other than that, and the fact that he was now soaking wet, he was indeed all right. Still crying, we reached out tentatively and pet his threadbare head.

“See, he just got a bit of a burn. He’s Ok.” She stroked our hair. “It just looks like he has a goatee now.”

This made us giggle a little. My brother gathered the dripping penguin into his arms. For the first time, I noticed that the restaurant had fallen into a dead silence.

“Mom,” I whispered, “everyone is staring at us.”

“And they probably always will. Don’t pay any attention to them.”

Helium Boy returned to the table. He had missed what would later come to be known as the Candle Incident. “Can I get you any dessert?”

“Just the check, please,” my Dad said. “And whatever the Rosenfelds are drinking is on us.”

“Sure thing,” the waiter chirped.

My father motioned for the waiter to lean in closer. “And,” he said, speaking very softly, “please also send them an order of the spaghetti squash appetizer. I just know it’ll blow them away.”

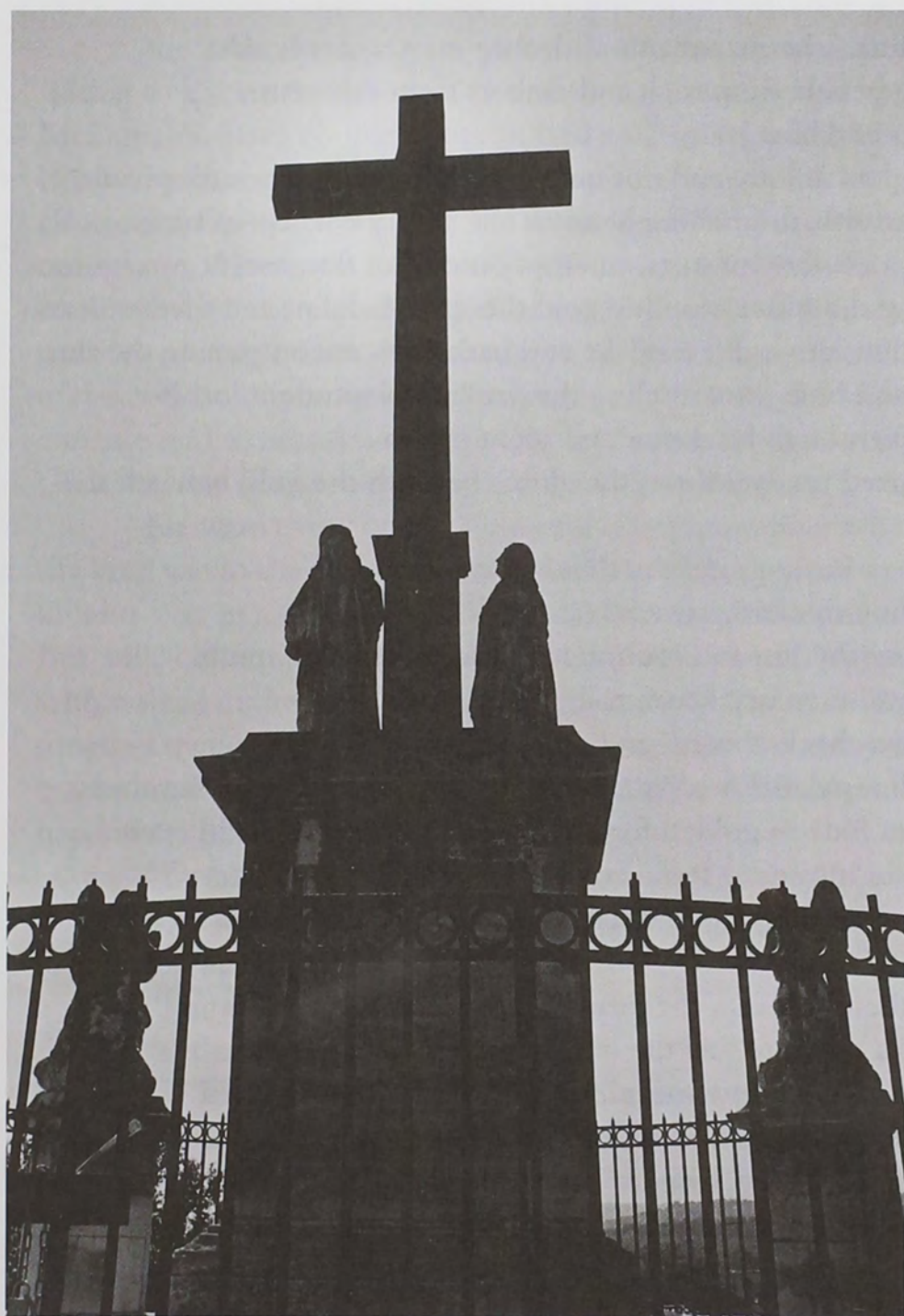
“No problem, sir!” He bounded back to the kitchen. Dad looked at us all with a big smile on his face and started nodding his head and lolling his tongue. We sniffled and began to do the



same. My mother wrung out her napkin and put it back on the table.

That night, my brother and I vowed to leave Opus home the next time we went out to eat. We promptly forgot this vow soon afterwards. (We did, however, forever keep him away from open flames). My father saw how shaken up we had been by the whole thing and made an admirable effort to be calmer at restaurants that lasted until our next visit to Gasho Hibachi, home to the Chef's Hat Incident. But that's another story. I suppose there is a lesson to be learned in all of this somewhere. Do unto others in public as you would have done unto yourself, even if it's really funny? Politeness is Platinum? The intestinal discomforts of the elderly isn't dinner conversation? Whatever it is, we haven't learned it yet. I suppose some might look upon our antics as immature, annoying, rude, and downright discourteous. They're probably right. Then again, there are others who probably get a kick out of what we consider normalcy. In the end, I guess we leave 'em either indignant or amused. But even if the rest of the world is shooting us nasty looks, somehow, I think we'll always be laughing. Even if Mom is doing so hidden behind her menu.

**Passage Interdit**  
*Joseph Laskas*





**(woman: as needing to be silver and sharp)**

*Sarah Napolitan*

Madeline fishes in streams with forgotten oyster hands  
sifting pebble from rock and embers from canteens.

Tresses and blue jeans.

Not quite a doily and not quite a gun she crouches and spreads,  
star mossish, flourishing beneath the empty corners of trees.

She is a cowboy of sorts, an empty moon of fluorescent mushrooms  
blessing the water, rippling gold though Madeline is a silver volcano  
exploding through cornflake and bark trees, encompassing the sun,  
silver and blue jeans circling the fire like Neptune in orbit-  
violent through blackness and silent in sun-  
galvanized tin eyes she is the glitter beneath the gold beneath the  
leaves

the sliver in song, and the slice in every snow.

Madeline smokes a silver cigarette  
exhaling rhythm and routine in cracking sparkling puffs,  
pearl and mercury ocean rolling mirror-like  
on glass checkerboard sand,

Madeline, Madeline, Madeline your name reflects frost banshees  
but you hide in golden forests, leave blue lanterns on in evening  
to fog in mosquito snow cold-

(Rings line the paths I walked when whole, indian blanketed  
and soft

Frost then becomes the peach fuzz between your legs  
and you begin to feel the chill

Forests take on new meaning the rocks begin to glisten  
the streams being to ripple to you in old colors till you freeze them  
stretch and spread, smooth and silver as a cookie sheet  
basking in the undergold of sun, frozen and grown)

## Passing Time

*Monica Stahl*

Joe rode the Link every day. For a couple of days, he'd ridden to a construction site. For about a month, he'd ridden to McDonalds. For a couple of weeks, he'd ridden to a dentist's office. But he had baby hands, he hated grease, and most of all, he hated cleaning up spit cups and fluoride trays. So now, he rode it to the coffee shop. There was a Quick Check next door where they sold loose tobacco and papers, and if he rolled his own cigarettes, the pack lasted about three days. And if he slipped out the back door of the coffee shop, he never had to pay for his tea. He decided that a man could exist quite comfortably on Indian Tobacco and Earl Gray, with an occasional game of chess to pass the time.

He wasn't very good. He could never remember whether the king was to the right or the left, and trying to keep track of his knights was practically impossible. He blamed it on the drugs. But still, he would faithfully challenge any potential opponent who walked in the door, and play for hours until Cathy, the sharp-tongued owner, kicked him out for loitering. He lost every time, but he smiled through it all, and he always shook his opponent's hand after checkmate.

"Defazio, what's up?"

"Hey Billy, how's your mom?" Joe said, the corner of his lip turning up in a smirk.

"Funny. Chess?"

"Of course."

Joe looked like a younger, softer version of Don Johnson from *Miami Vice*. Favoring white suits and gold chains, he wore shirts that looked like they'd been splattered with children's finger paint. He was courageous, unabashedly flaunting the pink shirts normally reserved for happily married, confident men in their forties. His black chin-length hair (Revlon #403) looked a bit strange hovering over his milky face and scrappy brown goatee. A



pentagram dangled from his neck, and he idolized Robert Smith, from The Cure. Gothic, dark, mysterious—very deep.

“Joe, the knight doesn’t move like that.”

“I know, I know. Your move.”

Joe liked playing against Billy, because he knew that one day, he’d win. Billy was a decent chess player, but he just couldn’t seem to pay attention to the game—for a twenty-three year old ex marine turned Backstreet Boy, there was more than enough underage eye candy sipping out of over-sized coffee mugs to keep him on his toes. Wearing a wife-beater or a tight, spandex shirt reminiscent of Superman’s leotard (minus the ‘S’), Billy’s muscles breathed like hot air balloons with each move on the board. And if flexing didn’t do it, he had a couple of Shakespearean sonnets memorized. The ladies—well, the girls—loved it when you quoted Shakespeare.

“Billy, your move.”

“Check out that girl in the corner. What do you think she’s reading?” Billy asked, pointing towards the right corner of the room with a ‘that-way-to-the-beach’ flex.

“I don’t know, but it’s your move.” Joe was about three pieces away from check. Some said victory was sweet. Joe preferred glue sticks.

Glue sticks. Kindergarten: sitting in a circle, surrounded by other six-year old children, making paper birds, munching on glue sticks. Well, Joe was the only one who’d eaten glue sticks. The others ate paste, and looked at Joe like he was some kind of freak. Joe didn’t care—he couldn’t stand getting the rubbery mud under his nails, and glue sticks seemed much cleaner. He always was a hygienic child—he’d had this crazy obsession with flossing. Ah, the flashbacks. Blame those on the drugs, too.

“Checkmate.” Billy moved his piece, then turned back to ogle the girl in the corner. She was blushing, and trying not to notice.

“What the fuck? How’d you do thatst?” Joe’s head swiveled quickly to the left and returned to center, swinging like

the top of a pepper grinder. He jerked his head to the table, and began to lightly yank at the hairs on his arm. He could feel the anger building inside him, and he quickly raised his face and pasted on a smile. "Good job, Billy," he said through clenched teeth.

"I'm gonna go talk to that girl. I think it's a Shakespeare book," Billy said, rising from the table and smoothing down his shirt. Picking at his front tooth with a wooden coffee stirrer, Billy slipped it in the pocket of his jeans and walked towards the girl's table.

"Tsst, yeah." Joe looked down at his hands, peeling the smile off of his face. For a moment, it felt like he was removing a price tag from his cheeks—glue sticking, paper ripping. When he looked up again, Billy was smiling at the girl, with a finger pointing towards the book and the other one giving a thumbs up. Good job. Establish common interests. Billy then proceeded to itch his right arm with his left, tightening his chest until it looked like he'd explode out of his shirt. Guy cleavage. Veins pumping on the outside of his arms like the gel in an icepack. Joe thought about taking notes, then laughed to himself. A few people looked at him strangely, but the majority of the room just went about their business.

Joe waited until Billy'd taken a seat with his back turned before he reached into the pocket of his off-white sports coat. Taking out a small prescription bottle, he popped the top and washed the tiny pill down with a swig of Earl Gray. That was the fourth pill today, and it always surprised him. However frequently he popped open those prescription bottles, there was always the struggle to wash it down. It was like a gnat getting caught in his throat, refusing to be swallowed or even spit out. He took another sip of tea, imagining the pill slipping stubbornly down his esophagus.

In point of fact, Joe took a lot of pills. This one, however, was for his tic. "Tsst." He wasn't the stereotypical picture of a Tourette's syndrome patient, cursing or screaming obscenities, following his every whim. That had been fixed long ago, but the whistling caught between his tongue and teeth remained when he



was upset, excited, or worst of all, drunk. A bottle of vodka could do that to a man.

No one actually knew about Joe's Tourette's. It's not like he was shy about it, it's just that no one guessed. He was the town weirdo. He wore shorts in the winter and sunglasses inside, and if he happened to hiss once in a while, well, that was just Joe. He joked around, made people smile, wasn't bothered about being the butt of others' jokes—he was just strange enough to get away with anything.

He watched Billy slowly inching closer to the girl. She was cute, no doubt about it. From his vantage point, the book lying face down on the table definitely wasn't Shakespeare. But it didn't look like she cared; from the way she was staring at his chest with a cigarette turning to ash between her fingers, it seemed like poetry was the last thing on her mind.

Joe'd had a girlfriend, once. That was in high school, when he'd been a crew-cut, trim-waist choir boy in a county-wide a capella group. He'd been the youngest member, and he'd always gotten the strongest lead. People said he had talent. Rachel said that, too. She said that she loved him and believed in him. She said that for one year, six months, and thirteen days, until he went into the hospital. She'd written a message in his yearbook that said, "Joey, I believe in you, and remember that I'll always be there for you. Love you, baby bear." Not very original, but he still looked back at that message. She was a bit overweight, and her hands had felt like pillows on his cheeks.

Billy had his arm around her, now. She was giggling about something and staring down at her hands, and though Joe was certainly no lip-reader, he thought he saw "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" dripping from Billy's tongue.

There had been another girl, but Joe didn't like to think about her. He had met her in the hospital during group therapy—that probably should have been his first clue. She was way too good looking to be interested in a guy like him—that should have been his second. She wore black lipstick, black lace, and a black

collar around her neck. She also tried to stab him with a kitchen knife. She said she was trying to kill him, but he didn't think her heart was in it. He escaped with minor cuts and bruises, and they had dinner the next night.

"Defazio, this is Jenna." Billy was seated back at the table, arm slung protectively around the meat at his side.

"Hi. I'm Joe, and I'm an alcoholic." She laughed. "Sorry, wrong meeting. Hey, is that Ginsberg?"

Yeah, you a fan?" Jenna asked, absentmindedly flipping through the pages.

"He's okay. Not a big fan of "Howl," though—it's a bit too fucking crass."

Jenna laughed. "Yeah, I guess you could say that." Billy laughed too, but there was a look of confusion in his eyes, and he sounded as sincere as a televangelist. He pulled Jenna closer.

"I'm actually a huge Sexton fan. 'The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator' really touches me," Joe brushed the hair out of his eyes and tugged at the pentagram around his neck.

"Very funny. Actually, I love that poem."

"Me too. I relate." Joe smiled, but didn't laugh.

"You know what I always say," Billy cut in, turning to Jenna and looking into her eyes, "Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee—"

"Billy, that sonnet was written for a man." Billy glared at Joe, then stared sheepishly down at his lap as Jenna began to laugh.

Score one for the home team.

"Do you write a lot?" Joe asked. She was definitely cute. Brown hair, green eyes, crooked glasses bent slightly to the left.

"Some, but not much lately. My fornit came down with the stomach flu about three months ago, and she keeps vomiting on the paper."

"Your what?" Billy was looking more lost than ever.

"Fornit. Stephen King, 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet.' An alien muse that enjoys mustard and bologna," Joe answered, smiling at Jenna. He was in love.



“Well done!” Jenna cried out, her voice falling into a horrible cockney accent.

Score two.

Jenna’s hand was lightly traveling up Billy’s back, and as Joe watched out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw her nails dig into Billy’s left shoulder. War wounds. A promise for later. The smile was back on Billy’s face, and Joe thought he saw a jolly twinkle in his eye.

“Santa Claustssst.” Joe giggled.

“What? Joe, you’re such a freak.” Billy looked like he’d finally said something worthwhile.

Joe wasn’t listening. Twisting one of the rings on his fingers, he thought about taking off his jacket. He was sure, however, that there would be large pink patches of sweat under his arms. Some meds came with side effects. But compared to the insomnia and impotency, sweating wasn’t really a big deal.

“Joey. Joe—hey!”

“Oh, sorry Billy. Tsst.”

“Cute. Real cute.”

“We’re heading out,” Billy said, eyebrows climbing towards his hairline. Jenna was staring at his bicep, where the tattoo of a half-naked woman gyrated with each flex of the muscle.

“See you later. Tsst.”

“Yeah, Joe, we’ll play again tomorrow.”

Jenna rose from her seat, grabbed her book, and held out her hand. “It was nice to meet you, Joe. You’re a gentleman and a scholar.”

He took her hand and felt the soft squish of a down pillow filling his palm. “Likewise, sir.” Jenna laughed and walked away, her hand resting on Billy’s bulging forearm.

And he misses.

“Hey Billy.” They both turned around. “Fuck offtsst.”

Billy laughed and flipped him off. Whistling slowly through his teeth, Joe pulled a different prescription bottle out of his pocket, popped the top, and dropped a pill on his tongue. This time, he let

it disintegrate into a pasty powder that coated the inside of his cheeks. It tasted like glue sticks.

Rolling a cigarette and slipping out the back door, Joe headed down to the corner and sat down on a bench facing the old courthouse that had housed the legendary Lindbergh trials. A sign on the front boasted that tours would begin in March. God, this town was proud. Too proud.

The bus would be here soon.

The people in front of him were holding hands. They had stared when he stepped on the bus, and the girl had huddled closer to her boyfriend's shoulder, burrowing into his jacket. Sitting behind them, Joe noticed that her roots were growing in and attempted a smile.

There was a little old man behind him who'd complimented his suit. Joe thanked him and returned the favor. They talked for another ten minutes, and Joe learned that the man's wife had died five years ago, and that the kids were grown and had moved out to the West coast. The man spent his afternoons in town, window shopping at the old cigar store, feeding the pigeons, or touring Main street. Just passing the time.

Joe was sitting in his room, lining up the pills on his dresser in alphabetical order:

Fluoxetine (aka the infamous Prozac). Depression and obsessive compulsive disorder. Also used to treat bulimia and anorexia—not that he worried about his weight anymore. Had caused increased sweating, diarrhea. Vomiting. The doctors told him not to worry about it, until his mother found him curled up on the bathroom floor, half-blind, coughing up blood. It seems that America's favorite candy could be dangerous.

Haloperidol, for the Tourette's. Very rarely prescribed. Also used for the treatment of psychotic delusions or hallucinations. The whole idea was kind of amusing, if you gave it enough thought. Joe wondered, sometimes, whether the Haloperidol was really for



his Tourette's or not. Maybe there was something THEY weren't telling him. It caused a bit of dizziness. Caused a bit more after drinking. Actually, it was kind of fun to wash one down with a shot. Joe was a cheap date. Side effects included constipation and weight gain. You stuffed it in, but you just couldn't get it out.

Nefazodone. Depression, obsessive compulsive, and a touch of social anxiety disorder. Caused drowsiness and insomnia—at night, Joe laid in bed, exhausted but completely unable to sleep. With the coffee shop closing at eleven every night, the days seemed so long. And the inappropriate erections. They were always tons of fun. Too bad he couldn't do anything with them. All of his meds combined to give him the sexual potency of a seventy-year old man without viagra.

He'd been on and off a dozen other medications. They said it was like trying to put together a puzzle—you just had to find the right piece. His mother had confiscated all the old prescriptions after she'd caught him blowing ritalin. He didn't take anything for the ADD, anymore. It's not like he needed drugs for it—in fact, he'd sold more ritalin than he'd actually taken. He kind of enjoyed his limited attention span. Simple minds have simple pleasures, and concentration made things difficult.

When he was through organizing his drugs, he clipped his toenails and trimmed his sideburns. When he was through with that, he watched television for a while and tried to masturbate. And when that didn't work, he turned off the TV.

Sitting down on an old chair next to his nightstand, Joe felt around in the drawer until he found the small knife he kept next to his floss. When he was a child, he'd found a box of them in the basement, all with handles that read "Flame Safe Firestop Systems." Apparently, his father had worked there before the divorce.

Rolling up his pant leg and slipping off his sock, Joe ran the knife down his ankle, slicing through skin. Old scars snapped like broken rubber bands, torn in half by a thin line of blood. He liked to think they were Bloodflowers.

When he was finished, he put his sock back on, turned on the television, and tried to masturbate. And when that didn't work, he thought about going for a walking tour of Main street. Maybe he'd stop by the old cigar store and see if they had any loose tobacco. He briefly wondered what Billy was doing, then hurriedly pushed the thought from his mind. He was good at burying things when he had to, and it was going to be a long night.



## Corporate Whore

*Matthew James Terenna*



## **Ave Maria**

*Ani Broderick*

I could hear her voice already: "Don't bite your nails, Julia, it's a disgusting habit." I wasn't in the mood. So I bit my nails even more and gave a final glance around to make sure everything was in place. My dad would be arriving any minute, accompanied by his aging but sharp-witted mother who couldn't tolerate a mess. She had called, requested to be picked up, and informed us that she would be staying for the week. That's where I came in—I was the granddaughter slash emergency cleanup girl whose compensation for this short-notice coverage of my dad's ass would be a free month of car insurance (if I was lucky).

Just as I began work on the fifth and final nail on my right hand, Bear, the smallest of the four dogs, lifted his head from between his paws and looked out the window. They were here. In an instant, the quiet that had settled into the freshly-cleaned room was disrupted by a cacophony of canine yelps. I pushed my way to the door, put the dogs in the backyard, and walked a path of eggshells to the car.

My father was removing my Nana's suitcases from the trunk, while she sat in the front seat waiting to be let out.

"How was the ride?" I asked on my way to open the door.

"Two fucking suitcases for one week," my dad said with a familiar look of annoyance on his face. "She wears the same god damn thing every day, what the hell does she need two suitcases for?"

"How long do you think she'll sit in there before she gets mad and opens the door herself?" I asked.

"Not long enough." Okay, never mind, I thought.

I approached the passenger-side door and opened it carefully so I wouldn't startle her. Though I held out my hand, Nana grabbed the side of the seat and the top of the door and hauled herself into a standing position.



“How you, Jul?” she asked, and added “Don’t you drop those bags, Robert!”

He had no comment.

“Fine Nana, how are you? How was the ride?”

“Long,” she replied, in an accusatory voice.

Dad and Nana were always bickering for some reason or another. It was mostly about stupid stuff: she would ask if his razor was broken if he hadn’t shaved, tell him he needed to lose weight, and then put another helping of food on his plate without asking if he wanted it. Ironically, my father had asked Nana to move closer to us because she was getting older and it was becoming more difficult for her to live alone. She said no. He asked again. She said no. He let it drop for a month, then asked one more time. She said no.

And now she was standing on the driveway.

Nana limped slowly toward the house with a hand on the hip that needed to be replaced. It wouldn’t be replaced, though, because she was “on her way out” anyway and could live with the pain. A small rip in the screen door caught her attention, and she mumbled something to herself about inviting bugs into the house. I walked behind her in case she started to wobble, and directed her to the recliner in the immaculate living room.

She settled herself in the chair, picked up a small candle from the end table, and put it back after making a sour face.

“Want something to drink, Nana?”

“No thank you, honey, your father will get me something later.”

“How about the remote?” I asked. “I think Oprah might be on.”

“Where are those dogs, Jul?” she asked, looking behind the recliner. “I don’t know why your father has them, they’re such a bother. Dirty and everything. Dogs are dirty.”

“We love them, Nana, they’re really sweet dogs. They’re out back.”

The silence in the room was making me uncomfortable,

so I flipped the TV on. Big mistake.

“...and today our show focuses on mothers who say their pre-teen daughters are having sex...”

My face grew hot as I fumbled to switch the channel. Not fast enough—

“Those girls are on their way straight to Hell, God save them. The mothers are the real problem, don’t know how to raise their kids right.”

“Maybe you should go on there and give them some lessons,” dad called from the back door. “Come on in, doggies, go see Nana.”

At that precise moment, Diamond, the Golden Retriever, Buddy, the Border Collie, Rose, the Beagle, and Bear, the Pug came running through the door and sniffed the newcomer. Nana cringed in her seat, her knuckles white as she grasped the arms of the chair. I jumped out of my seat and ran to the kitchen, shaking the box of biscuits so that they would follow me.

When I returned, my father was sitting on the end of the couch that was farthest away from his mother.

“Are you hungry, Ma?” he asked.

“No, fine. I don’t want anything.”

With that, he opened a bag of potato chips and looked around for the remote.

“The buzzer is over here, Robert, but there’s nothing but trash on the television now. Give me some of those chips you have.”

“I just asked if you were hungry,” Rob said, laughing his I-don’t-believe-this laugh. Without making eye contact, he reached in the bag, grabbed a handful of chips, and thrust them at this mother.

“NOT THAT MANY!” she screamed, and he withdrew his hand, leaving her with two broken chips.

“Plenty of potato chips to go around,” Dad said, “The dogs can even have some. Doggies, would you like some chips? No potato famine here. Everyone can have some.”



Here we go. Nana's jaw was clenched as she told him that was nothing to joke about. Her strong Irish heritage sometimes seemed to overtake any hints of a sense of humor.

"What time is confession tonight, Robert? It would do you some good to go with a mouth like that."

"Beats me," he said.

"Jul, did you know that your father still has the record at St. Michael's for the most masses served in one day? Five. He served the morning mass then school was cancelled because of snow, then one practice mass for a newly ordained priest, then the afternoon and two evening masses. That's when he was a good Catholic. Then he went away to that University of Pennsylvania and he hasn't been the same since. He was my boy, always the good one when the other two were in trouble."

"I was good because I was serving mass when Tommy and Carolyn were in college. Remember? College makes you a bad person. And you just went to confession yesterday. Did you commit some mortal sin between now and then?"

Any talk of religion made me uneasy. I used to be a good Catholic too, until my dad pulled me out of CCD soon after the divorce. At the time, it was the best thing that ever happened to me—yay! No more CCD! No more Sister Helen who ran into the lockers when she walked down the hall. No more Sister Leo whose orthopedic shoes made funny noises when she walked. I was free, and I laughed in the faces of all the other not-yet-confirmed kids who had to stay after school to learn prayers.

I didn't understand then. I didn't realize that when I was older I wouldn't be able to get married in my church unless I was confirmed. I couldn't anticipate the feeling of being an outsider even when I did go to mass. And I certainly didn't understand the tension it would cause between my father and Nana.

"No mortal sins," said Nana. I just thought you might want to go.

"No thanks, Ma. I actually haven't been to confession in about 13 years and I'm not planning to go either, because I think

it's a bunch of horse shit. I did the whole Catholic thing until I was 35 and look where it got me. If that's the kind of God you worship, good luck."

"Oh, sweet hour," Nana said, staring at the news that had just come on.

I panicked and looked for a ball or bone to throw for one of the dogs to chase. I was going to get it if I didn't do something soon—

"Were you to confession this week, Julia?"

Shit. I hadn't been to confession in years. What good was it? 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned...I forgot to get confirmed?' That would go over really well.

Do I lie to her? I hadn't been *that* bad, I had gone to mass. But I couldn't tell her that either because then she'd be asking me all kinds of questions about my communion habits. *No communion unless you've been to confession*, she used to tell me when I was younger.

"Yes, I went on Saturday, Nana. Are you sure you don't want a drink or something? We have ginger ale."

"Ginger ale. With no ice. Thank you," said Nana, as I sprung for the kitchen.

I felt terrible. Was God listening to me? Not only was I lying, but I was lying about Him. And when I went back into the room, my dad was looking at me and shaking his head. He sometimes got annoyed when I lied to make her happy, since it was something he had stopped doing a long time ago.

When I returned with her ginger ale, I told Nana that I would drive her to confession. Dad rolled his eyes but didn't say anything. I just wanted to make her happy. She's old, and even though she creates most of her own misery, I could take her to confession to make her happy. Maybe I should go too. No, I couldn't—I haven't been there in so long that I wouldn't even know where to start. Isn't that the point though? Priests don't hold grudges, do they?

The scream of a siren passing by the house sent the dogs into a fury again. There was nothing to do but wait for it all to go



away—as long as something was making noise outside the house, so were the dogs.

“What is that, Julia, is it an ambulance?” asked Nana with a hint of panic in her voice.

“I don’t know, I think so. Either that or a firetruck. It’s definitely not a police car, though,” I said, trying to see out the window.

“Good doggies, you chase those bad people away,” said Dad.

“Those bad people may be saving someone’s life, God help them,” said Nana. There was a look of seriousness in her eyes as she began: “*Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee...*”

“I wonder what they’d do if they actually got out one time,” continued my dad.

“*Blessed are thou amongst women and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb Jesus...*”

“Probably chase it until they died,” he said, answering his own question.

“*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death...*”

“Doggies want to go out back and see what’s going on?” he said, rising from his seat.

“*Amen.*” She looked tired, sad, and hopeless.

I watched Nana for a few moments and she looked like she was going to cry. My unfeeling father was in the back yard with the dogs, who had forgotten about the ambulance and were happily fighting for possession of a stick. I didn’t know what to do, and the uncomfortable silence filled the room once again. Without saying anything, I put my shoes on and went outside.

“Dad, I’m gonna take her to confession. I think it’s at 5,” I said without looking at him.

“You don’t have to take her, I’ll do it. Go home and relax. Thanks for cleaning, the place looks great.” He threw a tennis ball for the dogs then turned to look at me.

“No, I’ll take her. You’ll just fight on the way. Then she’ll

want to you go in with her, and if you don't you'll fight the whole way home. I'll go."

I still didn't look at him. My eyes were fixed on the end of the yard, where each of the dogs was still trying to get the ball. Diamond finally got it, and all four came running back for more.

"Put it down," I said to Diamond, then threw the ball again. "I'll see you later, okay dad?"

"Okay, I guess." The look on his face said he knew why I was going. His eyes turned down a bit at the corners, and it almost seemed as if he felt bad for screwing my religious life up because of his own selfishness. "Hey. Wait. Do you want to eat here? Or are you going home after you drop her off?"

I thought for a minute about what dinner might be like. *Don't eat that, Robert, it's full of fat. I spoke to Father O'Connor at the church—he asked about you, Robert. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, don't you teach these dogs not to beg from the table? Put that dog in the backyard, Robert, he's breathing on my leg. Is that all you're going to eat, Robert?*

"I'll come back for dinner, I guess. Do you even have anything? Yeah, I'll come back."

"I'll pick something up while you're gone," he said quietly.

By the time I got back to the house, Nana was standing at the door with her pocketbook. "Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"All ready. Let me just get my keys and pull the car up."

I didn't say much during the five-minute drive to the church. This time when I offered my hand to help Nana out of the car, she took it. She limped into the church, and smiled politely at some other people who were waiting to be absolved. I looked around and saw some familiar faces; they smiled at me, and continued on with their conversations. I was paranoid, and thought that everyone in the building knew what a bad Catholic I had been.

We waited in the line of patient sinners for a few minutes without speaking. I stared down at my nails, trying hard to restrain from biting them because the sound would echo through the silence. What was I supposed to say to the priest? Everyone there



was probably an expert, and I had no clue what I was doing or why I was doing it. The blood in my face felt like it was churning, and without looking directly at Nana, I told her I needed to go to the bathroom.

I pushed the church doors open and the cool breeze hit my face. I couldn't go back now, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to. I settled into a spot on the curb and waited. People coming in and out of the church looked at me questioningly, but I didn't care. I put my head in my hands for a minute, then got up and walked to the car. I should pull it around to the door, I thought, so Nana doesn't have to walk so far.

## **Descended**

*Corey Taylor*

Cruising along the singular, blinding road,  
carved through a world blanketed by fresh snow.  
Aware of heartbeat, potholes littering the  
path like sunflowers. Inconvenient detours.  
Speedbumps. Nothing  
mind and body  
couldn't handle. One unsuspecting day  
it shattered, filtered by a prism. Lines  
scattered into molecules of color—  
magenta cream and burning gray—  
swirling in their orbits, planets reforming with  
equal precision. Breathing,  
sucking in the facets, the  
genesis of tumult. Running.  
Sweet death crept into my ears and sang in non-language:  
female voice lulling me, orgasmic, on neon blue waves.  
Returning against my will.  
Fang-filled mouths spewing dollar signs, the pressure caving  
in my silky skull. Never knew the battle was so calm.  
Serenity in the eye of war's hurricane.  
All this, all that ever was and ever will be,  
lay before me.

Everything has already been written.  
No poetry is original.

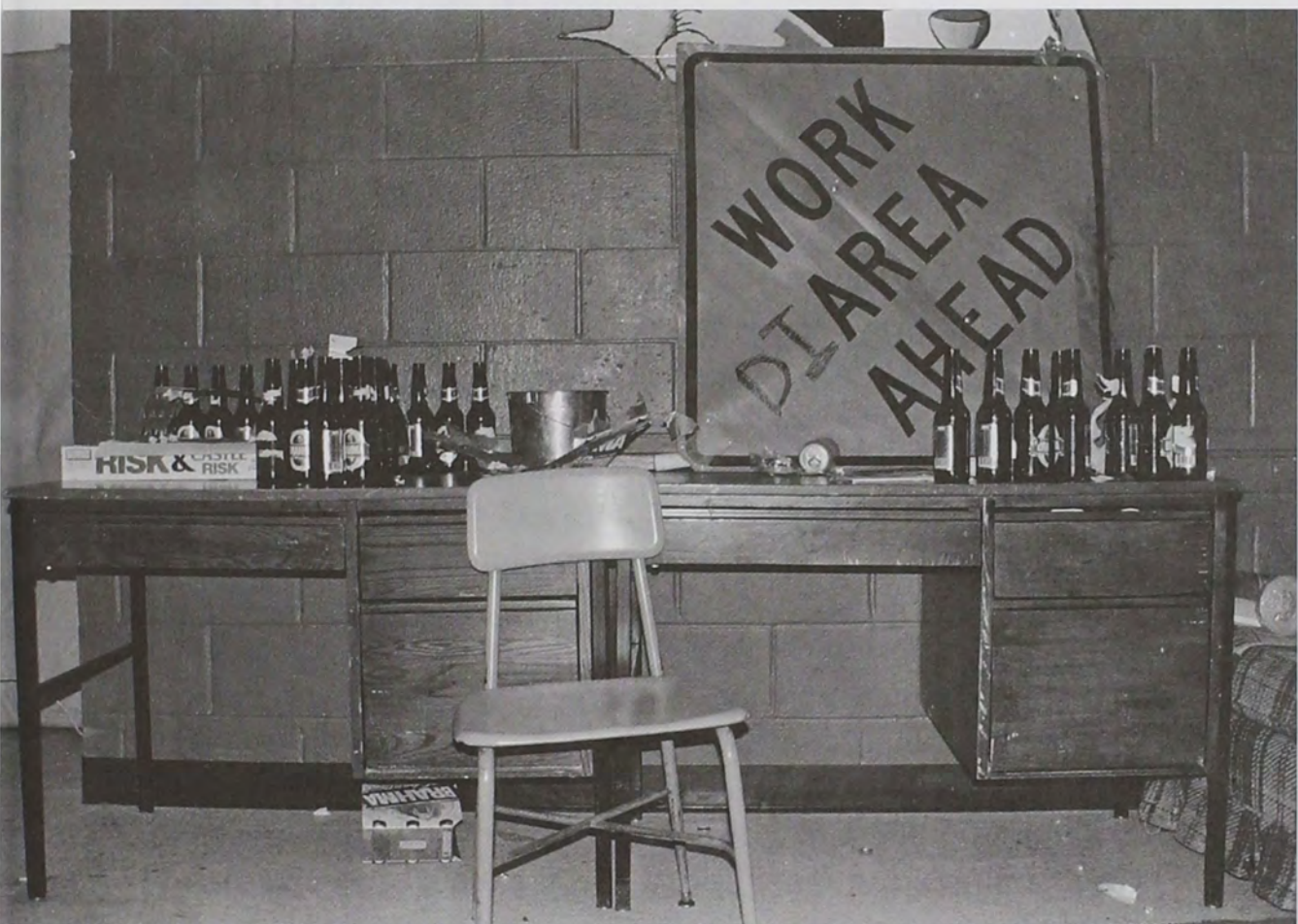
Spread out at the nexus  
I descended,  
a feather on the synthesized breeze. Trapped inside mellifluous  
tones and myriad possibilities. Mind plummeting as images  
fall up. Destiny of living, refracting and

*Corey Taylor*



ricocheting. Ultimate tune of the prism  
culminated in chaotic crescendo,  
and silence dispersed body. Seven arts;  
seven colors. Reduction of infinity  
on the prism's east side. Roaming well-lit  
paths and dreary green halls,  
I perch prepared, a cathedral gargoyle  
rich in madness.

Thursday Morning  
*Jason Fischer*





## Nostalgia

*Rosabelle Diaz*

The calm, cool face of the river  
asked me for a kiss  
-Langston Hughes, "Suicide Note"

In the metropolitan area, its election day, and everyone is driving around in caravans honking for their political party and against the rivals. Politics is the Puerto Rican national pastime. Election day is like the soccer championships in Mexico or the Superbowl in the U.S.- people get fanatical. The pro-statehood supporters wave American flags as they scream about how they want to be the 51<sup>st</sup> state. The "let's stay a commonwealth, we have the best of both worlds" party wears everything red. There are a few green pro-independence- "get the fuck out of our country *imperialistas yankis*" flags thrown here and there, mostly in Rio Piedras, the urban area where the main campus of the University is located.

The colors of the flags all blend into the green of the rain forest trees that surrounds me. While the voters mark x's on ballots, breaking the points of their pencils, I am doodling on rocks with my toes, while they shout at the opposition as they pass in decorated cars, I am finding a bed on a boulder, meditating between rain cloud pillows and listening to the waterfall silencing them shhhhhh.....

The river has been calling me since I got here. It's been three months now and I haven't returned its calls. I let the answering machine pick up most of the time, even when I'm not at the mall, at an Old San Juan bar or at the beach. But now I'm here. It said "come on" and finally I accepted. I hear the water calling me from forty feet below the cliff. I stand there for a few minutes my right leg shaking. My left leg dangles. It heard the water say "jump" and its like go go go all over the right hemisphere of my brain and

all over the left side of my body. But my left brain is there mothering me. I'm not fearful, I'm just cautious. I want to live. I'm not really suicidal, am I?

There are high school and college boys climbing all over the rocks like spiders—escaping the noise in the city, enjoying the day off from classes. These boys do this jump 20 times then climb up another half hour to jump the 80-foot cliff further upstream. They're all calling me. Come on, jump. If you don't jump then you'll regret it. ¡*Vamos, nena, tirate -dale!* go go go. But their voices are whispers blending with the wind, just passing. All I hear is the water, deep green and puckered. I want to kiss the river, but my right leg gives and I end up stepping on its face. I don't think it cares, it swallows me whole regardless. The puckered lips were a trick to get me down, but once I'm in the air the water opens its mouth wide. It's hungry. I fall freely for about two seconds, which is long enough for my hair to fly straight up and my shorts to flap, but not long enough for my heart to burst. It's about to, but then I am wrapped in water. And water is more violent than any other element. It floods my insides and cushions them. Maybe my heart does burst. I'm not sure, perhaps I don't notice, I'm too busy swimming, waving hands in the air, screaming "that was fuckin' cool," I don't see the trail of blood, the bits of muscle and vein floating behind me.

I sit on a rock, trembling, but trying to steady my breathing so no one notices my skin, still moving in waves all over my bones. The face of the cliff sticks up from the water. It bends upward, scars all over its cheekbones, and then extends out a bit at the top creating a diving board. I finger some unknown mineral that lines the rocks and makes them resemble a rusty gray building. I make this observation to one of the boys. He twists his blonde dreads and tries to blink away the weed smoke in his eyes. "That over there," he says, "*tu sabes*—the city—tries to imitate This over here. But nothing here is fake. Its all true."

The water speaks truth. The rocks don't lie. Everything that surrounds me, the waterfall, the rain forest on both sides is



real. Not everything in the city, though, is necessarily a lie. Even the concrete, I'm sure has a story. I was rocks once. A damned petroleum-filled ravine in Cataño. I was a river once. The truth there is just harder to find, it doesn't scream out at you, or maybe it does, maybe you just can't hear it over the car horns and construction.

Back in Rio Piedras, I'm walking to the 7-Eleven to get an orange-mango Mystic. Things start to resemble the rain forest. The lampposts want to be trees. The sidewalk is trying to be a rocky trail. The gutter, in an attempt to resemble a river, spits sewer water under the fluorescent glow of the Church's Chicken sign. Maybe its not that they want to poke fun at nature, it could be that the sidewalks are nostalgic for their days as ravines. Its like my family in the states playing Christmas songs in the below freezing temperature, my dad with the guitar, my mom with her tambourine, my uncle with his bongos, my aunt singing off-key and loud. They are not trying to mock the real thing- Christmas in Puerto Rico- they are simply nostalgic, trying to reproduce it. And failing.

The drunk Dominicans stand outside El Ocho de Blanco bar across the street. Indifferent to the political scene, they focus on the rear-ends of the women passing by. The one-legged beggar in the corner asks me for a dollar, for drugsfooddrugsliquordrugs, which are all the same to him-*una cura*. He curses at the red flags and cheering car horns of the winning party. Under the sewage behind the rust stained buildings, the waterfall is silencing them shhhhh. Their voices float into the air with the voices of the boys at the river...go go go... The water is calling me again, dark pools hiding under asphalt. It's singing a river song, a Christmas song, off key and loud. It's singing truth. There is truth behind this brick wall of lies.

**book unbinding**

*Padcha Tuntha-Obas*

like yesterday, fog is dawning.  
light weaves in the valley,  
captured timidly by two hands  
rounded together like a bottomless basket.

young sunlight, shy and small,  
blinks in anxiety,  
acquainting a new day,  
welcoming new breath free in the field.

that daylight, I collect life.  
they too collect theirs  
as the box we carry – mine inexperienced,  
theirs untheorized – emerge.

on an old notebook, my hand,  
the familiarization  
of a moving pen in lecture halls,  
holds still theirs,  
the wrinkled expertise  
of life's simplicity.

they ask why I embrace books and university  
and what philosophy is.  
I say I want to touch  
a true, feasible life, recorded  
yet ever questioned  
philosophy of mankind.

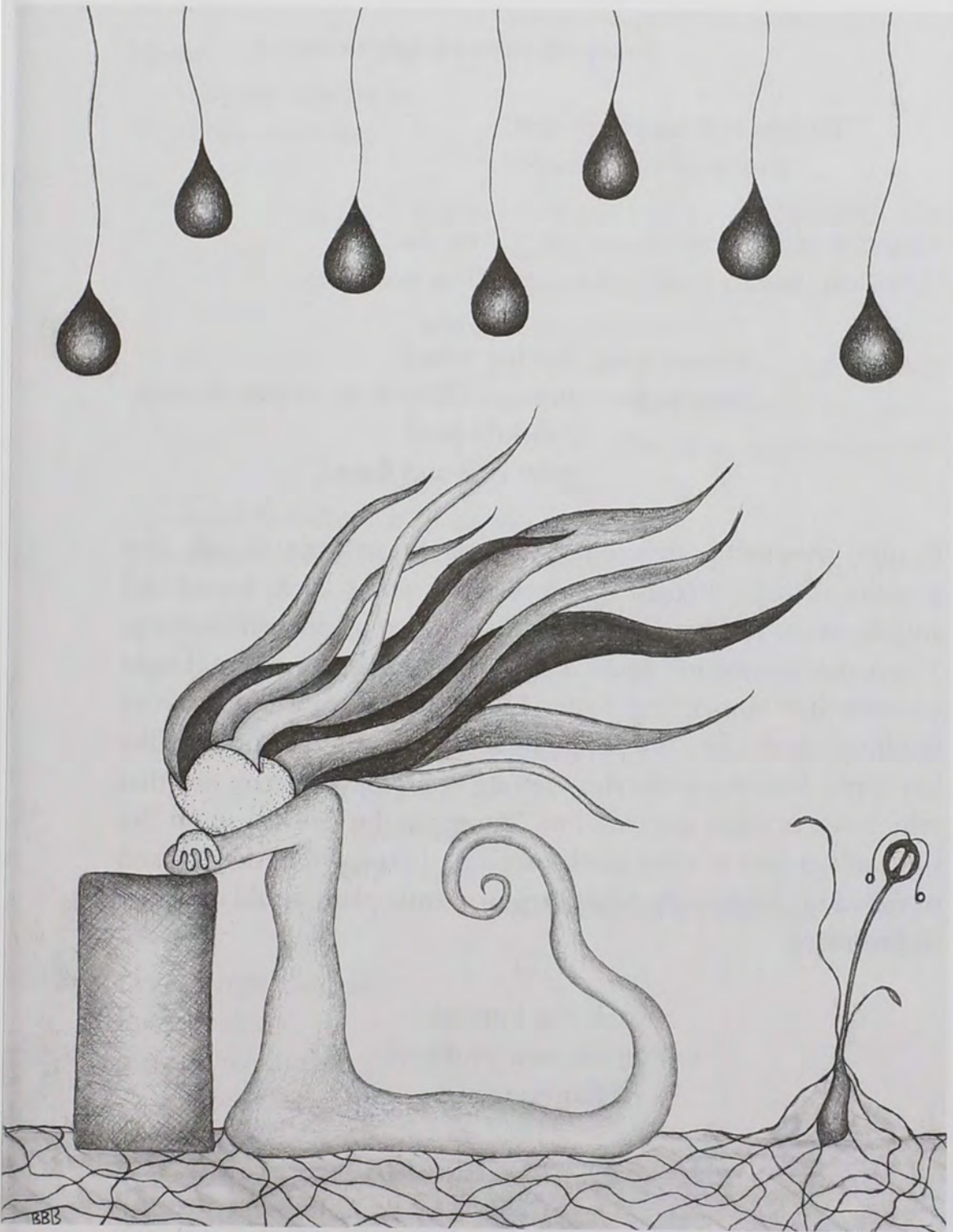
a smile casts its shadow.  
gently, they rounded my hand together



like a bottomless basket,  
framed, structured but opened,  
and put them forwards  
the dawning valley.

morning fog starts mixing lights.  
once again, a question...  
if I don't have philosophy  
already in my hands.

the sad wind slaughters butterflies  
*Bridget Baines*





## Scrawlings on the Stall

*John Ramsey*

Crazy children smugly deceived.

Tonight red has progressed  
passed sally and frank.

All the world's Sorrow is my sty. Given the  
Herculean task to evoke—I must wallow until clean.

Where is my flowing wine?  
A drought—amongst a lifey feast, nearest Beauty  
it should pool  
grow rich and fluent.

Beauty: wrapped benevolently around the struggle of Life. She gestures so...the snaked eyebrows...the taunt back, toned and angular, as she reaches. Eyes kindled, full of expression; envisioning. The reality around her keeps her metaphysical dreams bound tight beneath her blossoming brow. In profile her jaw breaks from blushing cheeks, striving perfectly. Of all the suffering none is like her smile. Not the smile she ruefully offers the passerby, nor that which sweet jokes unearth. No. The smile she delivers upon the sight of her love is most passionate and divine. Were she cloaked or robed in chiton only Athena upon a battle plain, could compare in brilliance.

Each day I create  
within me new problems  
of Experience.

I am stirred by the stirring  
Calmed by the calming

Aft emotions churn present caught  
Polus' child mates passing thought  
Hush hushed visions  
For anew are consummations

Night

talently expires to  
brilliant vision

Clichés and elded words are overwrought  
common usage and redundant ruse  
gives habitual tendency  
What lank hues and  
dull patrons have entertained  
our rubied babies, royal,  
who, now ugly, sick grow!

Upon the bed she was an artist,  
Conscious acts derived from the once organic.

Sink now subtle coy  
caution void  
the nullifiers and herders  
gone home  
the old haunts closed  
Sleep slinks upon  
a carpeted floor  
crooning melodies linger

Let us write fantasies  
mystery show  
insane French dances  
whirlwinds of liberty  
give us fear for night  
a rich dew tear  
give us calm melody



sincere rapture  
give us Saul  
    and call to composure  
Let us revel here, let us revel there  
Let us revel everywhere  
Let us crave to create  
Let us dissipate

Our version of Love:  
smooth rhapsody  
silky  
warm  
How to express her smile?  
    —coy

## Heart of the Matter

*Christine Spera*

Food good enough  
for a Greek goddess  
After one bite, you will see,  
I am irresistible.  
Blooming like a woman letting down her lovely locks  
open, selfless,  
delicate delicacy.  
Enveloped in petals,  
sumptuous surprise.

Dad never knew what Mom and I ate when he wasn't at home. Artichokes. We know how he hates them...especially steamed. So when he wouldn't come home at night after work, Mom would steam a pot of two or maybe even five artichokes, and that curious acrid vegetable matter smell would permeate the house. She would open the windows, even in winter, so to avoid seeing his disgusted face. "It stinks in here." How odd it was, my mother thought, that a nine year old loved artichokes and asparagus and broccoli rabe and zucchini and all of the most pungent, most tasty vegetables that are staples in the Mediterranean diet. Maybe it was because I coated them in melted butter and salt, maybe it was because they were delicious, or maybe it was because they were a mother's love.

Dad only wanted the heart, if he wanted any part of the artichoke at all... always an impatient and greedy eater. "There's too many rules when you're eating those things," he'd say. But that's part of the intimacy. That's how you become an expert.

The globe artichoke is tough and neatly packaged, but after it is steamed, the leaf-like scales soften and the vegetable opens up, radiating like a blossoming lotus. Mom would place the pot of artichokes in the middle of the table and we would sit across from each other, each with our own plates and square chunks of soft,



room temperature butter, neatly fanned around a side of the plate. Next, we would sprinkle salt and pepper over the butter and place a piping hot artichoke on our plates. The leaves near the outside are the toughest, with only a little meat, but as you get closer and closer to the center, or heart, of the vegetable, the leaves get softer and sweeter. Each petal of this flower-like vegetable is snagged from the stem that looks exactly like a broccoli spear's stem, then smeared over the slabs of butter. The leaf is placed in the mouth with the meaty side facing upwards so that the leaf can be scraped by your top teeth, pulling the delicious matter away, falling on the tongue, and then placing the leftover, empty leaf anywhere on the plate. The process is messy and sensual, leaving a slippery, soothing coat of butter on your lips that are tingling with salt.

You can always tell which leaves are mine because I have a space in my front teeth and I leave behind a thin line of vegetable that escapes through the gap.

The fleshy heart of the artichoke is protected by spiny, thistle-like debris that must be avoided. The muddy green hue of the vegetable grows more yellow-green and intense and even purple towards the center. I remember how I used to get excited as I approached the heart. I would sit up on my knees at the kitchen table, and inspect the interesting and dangerous spikes. "Mom, can I eat this part?"

"No," she'd say, methodically scraping and tossing a scale aside.

"How about this part?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you'll choke on it."

"Well then, how did you learn how to eat the insides?"

"I choked on them."

Sometimes, I would start to bring a dangerous finger-full of meat to my mouth just to make my mom jump and tell me not to eat it.

"No, no, no, no, no!"

“Oops.”

“Are you going to eat your heart?” She asked me, the very first time that I ate an artichoke at the ripe age of nine.

“What’s the heart?”

She smiled.

“You’ll see. Tell me when you start getting closer to the middle.”

She beat me to it. (She always does.) And when I saw the beautiful lavender tones and soft, paper thin leaves surrounding the heart and the squishy mass that reminded me of something sexual, I didn’t know where to begin. My mother scooped her first hunk of heart up and put it in my mouth — the first bite is always mine.

Eating the heart is the most quiet part about eating an artichoke. Gazing down at the mess you have left on your plate, the artichoke looks like the remnants of a squashed sunflower. You let the soft heart roll about on your tongue and hardly have to chew before swallowing. The heart — the prize from all of your peeling and slurping to get to the center of the plump globe vegetable. The heart of an artichoke is not like biting into the pit of a peach or core of an apple. It makes you want to open another and then another, and once you start with one, you have to finish.

Artichokes are delicious.

They grow wild and high, up to three feet.

They are the only vegetables with hearts.

Dad never knows what Mom and I eat when he isn’t home. Artichokes. We let our hands and mouths get slimy with butter and vegetable oils. We listen to each other’s mirthful lip-smacking and ecstatic swallows. We turn off the television. We don’t answer the phone. We smile in silence.

Artichokes are precious presents to go gluttonous over.



**Scenic Train Rides**

*Daniel Gallagher*



## **My Frankenstein**

*Lori Kruk*

I.

Stars twinkle and sing on his eyelashes,  
has the eye of Michelangelo; swirls of  
seaweed, rubies and deserts in cat-shaped  
windows.

Skin the color of Roman slaves,  
darker than Cleopatra's hair.

Lips soft, waxy, the wings of Icarus  
Melt in my warmth.

Voice is hallow, the drum used in the  
lost caves telling of heroes.

Cowboy of languages:

Me encanta mi bonita.

White Antarctica teeth contrast his night face,

I study the night; it's astronomy,  
it's constellations I created.

Long rough vines dangle from his head,  
dread locks feel like rope in my fingers,  
I am his Jane.

Ties it back with organic hemp grown  
from mother gooses garden.

Face of a statue in ancient Greece,  
cheekbones, chin, jaw chiseled in stone.

II.

Planets orbit his gladiator shoulders,  
made of rocks from the coliseum.

Has the hands of King Kong; combination of strength,  
compassion and knowledge in his nets  
that catch me.

Stomach bumpy, waves on a surf  
made of concrete,

Shaded oval navel, a snake hole on the great earth.

*Lori Kruk*



Two mounds of solid dough above Hercules hamstrings,  
smooth like skin of water.

Thighs of ivory tusks shelter  
quads of iron.

Calves carved by Gipetto from  
wood of Noah's arc.

Runner legs baptized with gazelle  
Elegance.

African feet made from soil  
watered by rich jungle tears.

Walks with a swagger,  
A pendulum keeping time in  
Dracula's castle.

Smells like fruit from an old orchard.

III.

He stands near my window.

Sheer curtains blow kisses in the wind.  
Paris never looked as striking as he does  
in this moment.

His shadow spills on my wall, the moon  
creating my phantom.

Arms wrap around me  
like fire wraps around the sun.

His smell penetrates the room;  
Pears, peaches, apples and lilies.

I become intoxicated.

Desdemona and Othello knew this drink well.

Four candles laugh, flickering  
in my laboratory of creation,  
painting our bodies brilliantly  
with a renaissance hand.

Songs of the night sing to us;  
conversations of Orion and Gemini,  
father time humming, mother nature weeping and  
his human breath rhythmic in my ear.

**Parole**

*Matthew James Terenna*





## Cuban Couch

*Raquel B. Pidal*

We gave my old couch to a family of Cubans who came to America, a family who could no longer go on living under Castro's iron fist and still call their lives their own. It was tan (my mother called it beige) with brown, orange, and green stripes embroidered on it, and it pulled out into a bed, complete with a matching arm chair. It was ugly. It was the only couch I'd ever known, however, and despite its retro-seventies look, it was comfortable and it was a permanent part of my life. Or so it seemed.

We had been planning on getting rid of it anyway, just needing a reason over the years to finally do it, and my mother's friend had called a few days earlier explaining the situation. New family, just moved in from Cuba. No furniture. No money for furniture. Our couch? Sure. They could come and pick it up. My mother was especially sympathetic to their plight, having been a Cuban refugee herself back when the crisis was still in its early days. She figured it would take them a week or two to come over and get it. That afternoon I sat innocently on the tan/beige armchair, busy with some menial high school reading assignment when the doorbell rang. Three skinny men and a woman, all with dark hair and faded-looking clothes, stared at me. I stared back.

"We're here for the couch," they said, with the sad smile of refugees who realize that a new beginning brings with it new problems.

"Mom...can you come here?" I called upstairs.

I think my mother was as surprised as I was. They moved with alarming efficiency. Introductions, a borrowed truck in the driveway, could I please hold the door open for them, one-two-three-lift, thanks so much, we really appreciate it. The transaction took less than ten minutes. My mother and I stood staring at the indentations on the carpet (also tan/beige) insane and be committed to an institution for first-generation Americans who od'ed on their mothers' abuse of ethnic cooking.

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Thanksgiving is not a big deal in my family. Cubans don't have any particular affinity for turkey, and we celebrate it "just because." The turkey is served and eaten sans fanfare. The stuffing comes from a can; the rolls are frozen, the salad bagged. The cranberry sauce sits in its can-shaped gelatinous glory on a crystal dish, untouched. Nobody cares enough to watch the game. Everyone feels better at the end of the evening because it signals Christmas – and even better, Christmas Eve – is approaching in less than a month. And Christmas Eve means only one thing: a *real* Cuban meal.

When I was young, we celebrated Thanksgiving with my mother's family, a loveable yet motley clan of freaks. On that fateful Thursday every November, my family and my aunt's family would dutifully pack into our cars and make the two-hour sojourn to my uncle's house in an upscale New Jersey suburb. Celebrating any holiday came with a mixture of the required excited expectancy and the pit-of-the-stomach dread brought on by the mere thought of relatives. The camera-happy aunt who was fond of taking action shots during dinner, or of my aunt's ass as she leaned into the oven. A morbid older girl cousin whose joyful duty it was to torment the younger cousins, and lock them in the basement every chance she got. An uncle who drank himself into a ruddy-faced laughing spasm and told dirty jokes at the table. This was the family who pretended to give a damn about an American holiday.

One year, however, the year it snowed, an overweight cousin once removed named Willie (who after his divorce had married a Jehovah's witness and was the silent scandal of the family) came to visit and stirred things up when he decided to roast a whole pig in the backyard. He constructed an oven out of bricks and for hours tended to Petunia (as my morbid older girl cousin had affectionately named it), shoveling snow on top of it occasionally to make it sizzle sickeningly. This year, everyone was anxious to get to the table, because Cubans are pork people. There is nothing a Cuban loves more than good, tender roast pork, and my family was no



exception. All afternoon, my relatives clamored around the back door impatiently, like a horde of ravenous cannibals waiting for the ritualistic sacrifice to end and the feast to begin. The pan holding the pig was too huge to fit on any counters or tables, so after the ceremonial carving, it was placed in the foyer blocking the front door. We were all enjoying the meal, forks clinking, tender morsels of moist, golden-brown meat being shoveled into mouths, sharing excitement over the fact that *we weren't eating turkey on Thanksgiving* (my aunt even had homemade stuffing to celebrate the event), when suddenly there was a piercing scream from the foyer.

My three year old cousin had just met Petunia, face to roasted face.

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People of Spanish descent have a penchant for attracting other people of Spanish descent. Like ants that can sniff out sugar from a mile away, Spanish-speakers unconsciously seem to find others of shared ethnicity. I found at least one Hispanic friend at every period during my life. High school was especially lucrative – I had two friends with Cuban mothers, and we gleefully cracked many a joke at our ethnicity's expense. This quickly became one of our favorite pastimes, and a feeling of togetherness that the *monoculturals* just couldn't understand quickly bonded us *biculturals*. My Hispanic friends never minded the pervasive smell of garlic in my home, knew what I was talking about when I mentioned *frijoles* or *picadillo*, and obsessively mocked our mothers' use of English as a second language. A favorite amongst our repertoire was the way our mothers prefaced all "s" words with a short "e" sound. "E-scarf." "E-spoon." "E-snow." "E-stir-fried e-steak on the e-stove." Words in Spanish just don't start with "s" and our mothers had trouble catching onto this when learning their new tongue. Their weakness was our greatest cause for laughter.

Another one of our routines that never grew old was our mothers' adeptness at changing English words to Spanish simply by spicing up the pronunciation. On your *berdei* (birthday) you

got a *quei* (cake) and afterwards you cleaned up with a *bacuncliner* (vacuum cleaner). If you were lucky, you and your friends went out for a *jamburgue* (hamburger) at *Macdonal* (Mc Donald's). Many a gut was busted imitating these maternal exchanges. Trying to explain the joke to anyone who didn't know Spanish was just too tedious, so my Cuban friends and I kept these morsels of humor to ourselves, pitying the poor fools who would just never get it.

Of course, we were still firmly convinced that we were one-hundred percent *Americanas*. Barring our dark hair and eyes, a golden skin tone, and distinctively wide hips that only became fashionable in the wake of Jennifer Lopez, we were as star-spangled as they come. We turned up our noses at Spanish dancing lessons, summers in Miami, and big parties on our fifteenth birthday; instead, we went to under-age clubs until 2 a.m., spent weekends down the Jersey shore, and went for our driver's permit the day we turned sixteen. Our mothers, charms clinking on the bracelets they got when *they* turned fifteen, helplessly bought us subscriptions to *Seventeen* and watched us teeter in chunky soled shoes. They turned their heads when we went to all-day concerts, and brought home blond boys who took German in high school, and didn't understand why we *liked* to get drunk on cheap beer in frat houses.

We were even more American, in all our first-generation glory, than people whose great-grandparents had been the immigrants in the family. We were red, white, and blue jeans, girls who talked back in English, shopped at the Gap, and flipped the bird.

Girls who couldn't live without Mom's homemade *platanos fritos*.

\$\$\$

I sit on the couch, suntanned and seven, picking at one of the embroidered orange stripes with a pencil point. I am wearing my favorite T-shirt: a pink and white ordeal with the sleeves and bottom hemmed into long fringes, a style that was somehow popular in the eighties. Emblazoned across the chest in baby blue are the words "CUBAN GIRL, BEST IN THE WORLD." My



aunt is delighted that this shirt is one of my favorite wardrobe choices, hand-me-down or not. I just like the fringes.

In my seven-year-old ignorance, I remain oblivious to the fact that my mother detests my current garb and merely wish to get on with our day, collecting my lollipop at the bank drive-through and getting a new My Little Pony at K-Mart. The fringes look garish against my Cuban skin that tans but never burns. The shirt is tacky and my mother knows it.

She lets me wear it anyway.

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I used wonder why a couch this ugly was allowed to exist, why anyone would even *want* a couch this ugly. I imagined my mother thirty years ago, when her hair was long and her hips were narrow, picking it out at the store, deciding for some reason that this furniture monstrosity was appealing. She probably liked the matching armchair and the pull-out bed, and most likely it was cheap. My sensible mother, picking out something that was practical and affordable instead of something that was stylish and expensive.

Sometimes it drove me crazy that my mother had this habit of just going for something that was functional instead of something that was attractive. It didn't help when we went shopping for my back to school clothes or when I opened my Christmas presents. For the longest time I didn't understand why my mother didn't seem to regard having *nice* things as a necessity. It drove me crazy to live in a house where things didn't get replaced until they refused to work anymore. It embarrassed me to have televisions without remote controls and a kitchen furnished in puke-green circa 1979. Most of all, though, I was embarrassed by a couch that was older than I and uglier than death. It was the first thing people laid eyes on when entering my house and the last thing they saw before leaving. It killed me to have an eyesore as my home's most distinctive characteristic.

I was almost positive my mother never had an ugly couch when she was in Cuba. But by the end, she didn't have much of anything at all.



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Being a first-generation American means telling people I didn't learn English until I was in preschool and old enough to grasp what was going on in Mr. Roger's neighborhood. It means I was embarrassed as a kid when my mother spoke English in front of my friends because she had an accent and I didn't, and I just wished she would shut up and go away. I spent every summer in Miami with ancient relatives rather than at a beach house down the Jersey shore like all the other kids. I am the first in my family who doesn't have to work her way through night school, the first who has more than one of anything, the first who is a born citizen. It means people think my family came over on a banana boat, or a rubber inner tube. People assume I smoke Cuban cigars, or have ever even seen a Cuban cigar in my life. Being Cuban-American means liking rice and black beans as much as I like hamburgers and pizza – maybe even more.

As a first-generation American, I was embarrassed about being bilingual until I grew past the teenage years when anything making me different was bad. A first-generation Cuban American knows that she is really trilingual: Spanish, English, and Cuban-American Spanglish. First-generation Hispanic-American means I get insulted when people assume I'm just from "Mexico or something" when they find out I know Spanish, as if Mexico is the only place a Hispanic could be from. It means I have CDs like Gloria Estefan and Julio Iglesias – and *not* the Macarena – along with my Beastie Boys and Blink 182, Led Zeppelin and Beatles. I liked Ricky Martin long before Carson Daly got a hold of him on TRL, back when his albums were all sexy Spanish crooning and were actually *good*. It means that people ask me to correct their Spanish homework assignments all the time, and strangers are always asking what I think of the refugee crisis, and whether or not I ever want to visit Cuba (what with the way it's deteriorated and all, they say so knowingly), and they assume that I hate Castro – which I do, of course.

But that isn't what being Cuban American *really* means.



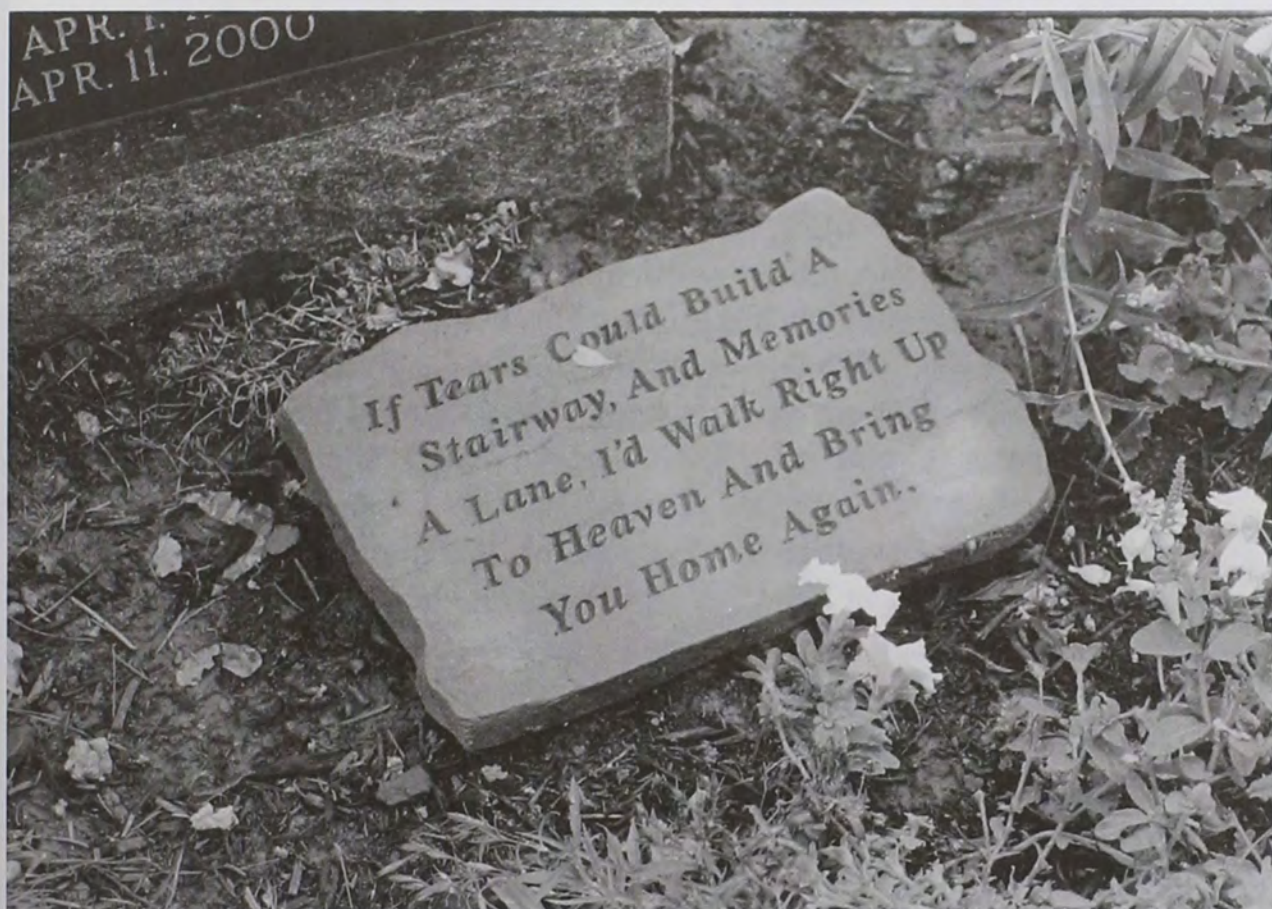
Being first-generation Cuban American *really* means watching my mother run out of the kitchen to the TV in the living room when she hears something on the news about Cuba, watching her slowly sink onto the couch next to me (now a shiny, ivory color with pastel satin stripes, and no pull-out bed). With her eyes glued to the screen, I watch her wring the necks of dishtowels into sweaty knots. I can tell from her eyes that things aren't the way they used to be, that she remembers things getting bad, when they had to wait in lines for hours for what they could get – moldy rice, a fistful of flour, shitty toothpaste, no milk unless the family had babies. I know she remembers losing their summer beach house, washing her hair with a bucket of rain water and a bar of soap, fleeing to America with only a few years of teenage English and the clothes on her back. “*El Nautico, Neptuno, El Malecon, Varadero.*” I hear her say the names of the places she knew, places she hasn't seen in decades, places that are dead now, because someone killed them. Now the people walk around them like ghosts – skinny, dark-haired ghosts with desperate eyes. They are places she tells me about, and they are places I will never know.

My mother, who held my hair back when I got sick and puked my guts up into the toilet, who trimmed crusts off my sandwiches every day, who brought flowers to my dance recitals even though I was terrible and who didn't understand why I never fell for any Spanish boys. My Cuban mother, who I always thought of as having it all together and never being vulnerable, sits there, clutching the edge of the couch watching the TV like it's all she has left. *It is* all she has left. My mother is crying.

Being first-generation Cuban-American means I watch my mother cry for what they have done to her country, and there is nothing I can do but watch, watch her tears and watch the TV, because I will never really know what it means to be Cuban.

## Dedication

*Raquel B. Pidal*





## **Jazzy Avantguardia**

*Syreeta Dixon*

Bent backs, snapping fingers, blowing lips, city kin, country cats, black soul, hungry stole, silence, transcendence, weariness, experience, bleeding smile, never ending miles, let's stay awhile, sweet heroin, next time they win, no rebirth, just money and girth, no work, more shores, more chains, more gangs, no school, they'll lynch you, sing blues, dis shit ain't new, notes flowing from brown fingers touching yellow legs and black bellies, melodies dripping down like mango juice, causing sweet puddles in my belly, I looked out into the light coming from the stage, I began to feel the rhythm in between my legs, brown wood, horse strings, strong arms, agile fingers, flicking, picking, lips singing, hips swinging, play with me, dance with me, love with me, lo siento, every eighth, swaying, C sharp, A minor, loud, soft, fast, hard. I uncross, cross my legs and applaud.

## Dinner Date

*Kelly Campbell*

I slid into the booth and settled, arms crossed over my chest, into the orange vinyl, cracked and duct-taped bench. The Smoke-eteer above my head hummed softly, but I had not brought my cigarettes for fear of offending him. I left my coat on so he wouldn't tell me I looked fat again. The security camera trained its lone, unblinking eye on the newly computerized cash register. It didn't surprise me; I knew that this restaurant had been robbed several times. The same three men that always sat at the counter, pickled by the smell of grease, intermittently smoked and shoveled runny eggs into their mouths. My dad knew them all by name, said hi, but didn't introduce me. He knew the waitresses, too, and calculated the likelihood of dating one in inverse proportion to the number of children she had. Our waitress, Kelly, was a chubby girl I had gone to high school with, and her short orange uniform skirt matched the vinyl of the upholstery. She wore tan support hose and white athletic socks with old-school Reebok running shoes. She did the same job I had, only in a much less glamorous and lucrative way (although I guess there's no such thing as a glamorous waitressing job). I won't wait tables at a restaurant unless its entrees cost at least fifteen dollars apiece, and a full bar is an absolute necessity. A snooty, pricey wine list is also a plus. It's not that I'm a snob, it's just that waiting tables at an inexpensive restaurant just won't pay tuition (not to mention car payments, insurance, credit card bills, and money for Mom when she can't pay her bills).

It's kind of funny, but it was his idea for me to start waitressing in the first place. Before I even started college, he brought me up to Harpoon Louie's in his new, cherry-red Mazda and made me pester them for a job until they agreed to train me. He knew that it was the best money I could make (legally) without a degree. Although I wouldn't call him an authority on making money legally. I remember being ten years old, making up dollar



amounts for his daily earnings to put in the record book before the accountant came to do his taxes. Line after line, column after column, I anxiously penciled in numbers on the dusty, parchment-colored paper. I was excited to be able to help, to stop playing Atari with my dad's stoner friend J.J. (since I always beat him anyway). Doing the books was important. Maybe if I did a good job, I thought, he'd be proud of me. *Monday, thirty-six dollars. Tuesday, forty-four.* Officially, he's only made ten thousand dollars a year for the last eleven years. And then there's the drugs he's sold on the sly, keeping his own cut of the merchandise for himself.

When I was smaller, six or seven maybe, Daddy drove a copper-colored Dodge Dart, faded down to the matte glow of the primer beneath the paint. The doors of it seemed to me to be about six feet long, and had to have weighed about a thousand pounds each. I trusted their bulk, sat on my knees sideways in the front seat with my back braced against the door. One time, the door wasn't shut tightly, and I rolled right out into the Kentucky Fried Chicken parking lot as we turned a hard left. My padded gray coat and wooly stockings protected me from all but a few scratches. This occasion aside, it was rare that my dad would take me anywhere in the car. But when he did, man oh man, was I excited. The glittering variety of casual gadgets spread out before me had all the allure of *The Price is Right's* showcase. I never knew what I'd find. An Allen wrench. His old scissors, clippers, perm rods of all sizes and colors from the salon he owned. A warm, flat can of Tab. But I would always, and I mean without fail, find a beautifully decorated roach clip. My favorite one was gleaming silver with a row of alligator's teeth, and had streaming sky blue feathers tethered to it with long, brown suede strips. I was besotted with it. Though I wasn't sure what it was for, I had correctly guessed that it had something to do with the multiple black garbage backs in the top of my parent's closet.

My father and I had been to that restaurant a thousand times, because it's local and cheap (the latter being his primary concern). Eating was just our excuse to waste an hour together,

telling tales and “catching up,” as he calls it. I didn’t get to see him as often as I had in grade school and high school, when I called him diligently each week to arrange Thursday and Sunday dinners. Ever since my parents separated shortly before my eleventh birthday, it had been my responsibility to call him if I wanted to see him. We’d had several stand-offs, when I hadn’t called him and he’d refused to call me, sometimes for months on end. I didn’t break; I made him come to me. The first time, he showed up, enraged, on my doorstep with a fat stack of papers clenched in his fist. Divorce papers. I played dumb, and things got back to normal pretty quickly. The last time, he showed up unannounced again, this time at my dorm room when I was in the middle of a nap. I guess his conscience had gotten to him, but he still managed to tell me I looked fat in my pajamas before our conversation finished.

That day at the restaurant, like most days, we talked about money. He had the balls to tell me how broke he was, how he didn’t have two nickels to rub together, then in the same breath tell me what fun he’d had at the casino and how I should go with him some time. Besides, he was really helping me, he said, teaching me to be strong and financially independent. I would thank him someday, he said. Any fool could see he was acting out of pure altruism. I looked squarely in my father’s glassy, vein-ridden blue eyes, which remained carefully hidden behind thick glasses and his plain blue baseball cap. He always said he wouldn’t wear anything with a logo on it because he didn’t want to “give some company free advertising.” It had taken years for him to actually wear those glasses, for vanity to concede to necessity. His face, beneath the reddish beard tinged with white, is a dead ringer for my own. It was entirely expressionless, stunned dead-still like a stroke victim’s, while his hands were fists clenched around a mud-filled coffee cup.

“I would sooner choke than ask you or Mom for money,” I said. What I meant is that I’d sooner choke than ask him for anything, but I tried to spare his feelings, to seem independent rather than spiteful. I gave my mother money whenever I could.



“What do you mean?” he asked. “You’ve taken money from me before.”

“Excuse me,” I snarled. “Not since the day I turned eighteen.”

“What about your sophomore year, when I paid your tuition for you?”

He glared at me like I was an ungrateful bitch. I stared back in disbelief at my pot-smoking, drug-dealing, womanizing, self-serving excuse for a father.

The year he referred to, or more appropriately, that semester, took place in the year I had nearly died. I’d been given antibiotics in September to clear up a simple sinus infection, but hadn’t heeded the warning on the label to finish the *whole* prescription. By the middle of October, I had developed an infection of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in my digestive tract that was so severe that I vomited nothing but blood for four days. I couldn’t eat or drink. I laid in bed all day in my hospital gown. My I.V. moved from the crook of my elbow, to my forearm, to my hand. I had to have a nurse cover it with a plastic bag and tape it shut to take a shower (for which I also needed her help). It left black and purple bruises along the length of my left arm. I could see my crimson blood creeping up the wrong way through its clear plastic machinations.

My time in the hospital was a semi-conscious nightmare. I begged for sedatives to lull me out of my pain. In and out of consciousness, I remembered that someone had said something about all the cute babies in the Maternity Ward’s nursery window. When I started feeling better, eating beef broth and peach Jello, the nurses started nagging me to get up and walk around; I couldn’t go home until I walked around. I woke up at seven one morning, tied my gown strings in a double knot, slid into some pajama pants and those little socks they give you with the rubber nubbies on the bottom, and decided to go for it. My I.V. pole and I rattled out of my room and started toward the public hallway of the nursery. Half way there, Attila the Maternity Nazi stopped me.

“Excuse me,” she whined, “but where do you think you’re

going?" She was fat and mean with a platinum blond bob and floral print scrubs. She stared at me fixedly, mercilessly. For the first time I considered how I must have looked.

"I wanted to go see the babies through the window..." I muttered. I felt like a dog that had been caught wetting on the carpet.

"You can't go in there," she said. "You're sick." It was a public hallway, any stranger off the street could've wandered in, but I wasn't allowed.

All the blood that had leaked into my I.V. flooded back up my arm and into my cheeks, and my eyes filled with tears as I lowered my head and started back for my room. I didn't know I was a leper.

He came to the hospital one night while I was all loopy on morphine, red-eyed from crying this time, his guilt and regret visible on his face. I could tell he was upset by the way he avoided my gaze (at least when I had the strength to hold my eyes open). Or maybe he was just stoned and didn't want me to know it.

"I'm so sorry for the way I've been," he said. "I've had my priorities all wrong. I don't want you to have to worry about things any more. I'm gonna take care of your tuition for you, and anything else you need." I may have been drugged, but I could've sworn that I'd heard that before...

Needless to say, his heartfelt remorse didn't last long. As I got well, he forgot the promises he'd made. I haven't.

I swallowed my anger, played nice, laughed it off, and feigned enjoyment of my chicken fingers. They scraped their way down, dry despite the honey mustard. My throat threatened to close, like trying to sing a note that's a little too high, just before your voice cracks. I knew it was the onset of tears, but I decided to choke them back, too, silently. He must have spoken after that, but I can't remember a word of what he said. It kind of faded like white noise into the background of the moment I was still stuck in. I imagine he thought he'd won, that he'd showed me. I only know that I hadn't felt beaten, just beaten down. I guess I still do.



**three compartments**

*Daniel Gallagher*



**Paper Crane**

*Melanie Scriptunas*

Inside of these palms,  
Slivered only by his wings,  
Captive in blue folds  
And creases as I hold him,  
Still he will not fly away.



Door, Aix-En-Provence, France

*Joseph Laskas*



## A Child's Valentine

*Thomas Lipschultz*

without words  
you fold me in half  
and cut into me  
a twisted parabola,  
an uneven curve  
imperfectly crafted,  
a loving violation of  
small scissor incisions  
intruding into me,  
my scathing screams  
imperceptible  
to human hearing  
as half of my being  
is removed  
and unfolded,  
my broken heart lifted  
to give to another,  
words of love  
smeared haphazardly  
with crayon,  
and the rest of me —  
a sick square outline  
around an empty heart,  
the loveless remnants  
of a torn and tattered body —  
put out  
like a dying fire,  
discarded  
like an old flame,  
scrapped,



sacrificed,  
sheared for the sake  
of an unappreciative child.

Untitled

*Alyson Jones*



*Alyson Jones*



**Privacy**

*Shannon Kissel*



## **Damn Kids**

*Jason Fischer*

The steady pounding over my head was in time with my heartbeat. Footsteps constantly ran back and forth, back and forth without end, overlapping the roar of cannons and sharp sounds of rifle fire. I shut my eyes and pressed my hands against my ears, but it didn't help. The world consisted entirely of the back of my eyelids and the thumping of those damned feet. Even a fusillade of triple case shot that decimated an oncoming regiment could not silence the running. When I opened my eyes again, the Battle of Antietam, September 17, 1862, was a blur before me. There was a temporary lull in the battle as the shattered regiment tried to regroup before me and attack the artillery position again. I slammed the textbook shut and pushed to the other side of the desk. The moans of the gutshot and dying men faded out. What the hell was going on up there? Those kids could drown out the bloodiest day in American history. I left my room and walked to the bottom of the basement stairs.

"Mom, can't you keep them quiet? You know I'm trying to study." No answer from above. I sighed and slowly went upstairs. "Mom, where are you?"

"Over here," she said.

"What is going on up here? You know I have that history test tomorrow. I can hear them running around, and they're so noisy I can't think." I stood at the edge of the carpet and refused to go farther in to the room. I couldn't see the floor because of spilled Legos, toy cars, and broken action figures from a hundred different TV shows. They were mostly my old toys that Mom kept for some reason and had recycled for her new job, like a soldier who pillaged the bodies of the dead for ammunition.

"I let them play up here because you said they were too loud downstairs," she said. Mom was sitting in a recliner in the far corner of the living room and reading Ashley a *Berenstein Bears* book. It looked like *Berenstein Bears and the New Neighbors*.



“Hey, give me the truck! I was playing with the truck first,” said Patrick. He was five, and he had only been coming here for a few months. Even though his time here at the house was short, I considered him General Robert E. Lee among the opposition, a crafty foe and someone who demanded so much respect the other kids would give a rebel yell and follow him straight into the mouth of hell.

“Can’t they go outside?” I asked.

“No you weren’t. Give it back!” Marcus screamed. Marcus was five too, and his sister Ashley was about a year and a half. Marcus was General “Stonewall” Thomas Jackson, the dependable Virginian who was Patrick’s right hand man. There was nothing that these two could not do if they set their minds to it. Ashley I considered a non-combatant. She was too young to do any serious damage in the house.

“Mine, mine,” Patrick said. They started to wrestle over the orange plastic pickup, rolling on the floor and crashing into the couch.

“It’s too muddy outside, and Ben just got over the flu. I don’t want him to get sick again by getting cold and dirty.” Ben was the first one that Mom had to look after. He was almost six, and I held him to be Jeb Stuart, the wily and unpredictable cavalry commander. He could strike anywhere at anytime. The whole campaign had started when the cleaning service had started cutting Mom’s hours at work. She would clean offices and banks at night when they were closed, but last year business had slowed down, and she was only working part time. Mom was free during the day, so she talked to some friends and began to babysit little kids while their parents were at work. Ben was only the beginning, and he was soon followed by Ashley, Patrick, and Marcus, the rest of the rebel army. Mom had to be President Lincoln and tried to hold the house together by force of will.

“So what happens when I fail because I didn’t get to study enough? I have to go to Road House tonight at six, I wanna finish before I have to work.” I was a dishwasher at the restaurant down

the street.

“You three, stop it before I take the truck away!” Mom put Ashley down and tried to separate them. Ben had joined in the fight for the pick up truck and punched Patrick in the chest. Dissension in the ranks was common.

“Mom, I need to do good on this test. I can’t study at all with this noise.”

“Scott, stop worrying, you’ll do fine. You’ve done fine all this year.”

“Forget it,” I said.

“While you’re up here, I need to ask you a favor.”

“Ok.” I was a little nervous. This might be more like order from the Commander-in-Chief than a simple favor.

“Can you babysit the kids while I run some errands? I need to get to the bank today, and you know how early they close.”

“No way! They aren’t gonna listen to me! I don’t wanna babysit anybody.

“Please Scott, I need to go out. It is a lot of work to get the kids in and out of the car. You can just watch them here.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Scott!” she said.

“Okay Mom.” I knew that tone of voice. My shoulders slumped in dejection. I was assigned to an almost impossible task, and I knew I had no choice.

“Thanks Scott. This makes my life much easier. I’ll put Ashley in for a nap so you won’t have to deal with her.”

“What about studying?”

“You can bring your books up the dining room and the kids can stay in the living room.”

“Alright, let me my stuff.” Like a dutiful soldier I went downstairs and grabbed my book and notes. I knew I was in for a hell of a fight. As soon as I got back upstairs, Mom was at the door, keys in hand.

“Ashley is in my room and should go to sleep soon. If the kids are hungry you can make them something to eat before I get



back.” She turned and walked out the door.

I sighed and walked to the dining room, watching her out the front window. “Didn’t you ever hear of the Emancipation Proclamation!” I yelled at her departing car.

When I turned back, the three sly generals had stopped playing and looked at me from the living room, across the kitchen to where I stood behind the dining room table. I held my ground and smiled. They slowly turned back to the Matchbox cars and Legos. Normally I did not have to deal with the enemy so much, but today was an inservice day at school. That meant a day off for everyone else, but I was stuck at home with the rebel army. Plus the test that was looming in the future. I sat down and opened my notes back to the beginning of the Battle of Antietam. The Army of the Potomac were camped to the north and west of the Army of Northern Virginia near Sharpsburg, Maryland. The only thing that separated the two were a few cornfields and Antietam creek. It was daybreak, and the armies were ready to fight. That’s when Marcus crept up on me.

“I’m hungry,” he said, standing right next to my chair.

“What!” I was startled and nearly fell off the chair.

“I’m hungry,” he said again, a G.I Joe clutched in his hand.

“What do you guys want to eat?”

“Popsicles!”

“Yeah, we want popsicles!” Ben and Patrick had heard from the living room.

“How about some macaroni and cheese?” I asked. It looked like the battle had begun, I was going to leave the high ground, my place of safety and study. I had to meet them in the kitchen, the middle, the cornfields. I put some water on to boil and found some Kraft macaroni in the kitchen cabinets. Sounds kept coming from the living room, but no screaming, so I ignored them. Plastic plates and glasses went in a row of three on the kitchen counter where the kids usually ate. Mom had said something before about them being a little messy, and the kitchen was easier to clean than the dining room. I pulled three tall chairs up to the counter and

dished out the macaroni along with a side of potato chips. It looked like lunch was ready, and there were no casualties so far.

“Okay guys, time to eat.” I walked out into the living room to find only Patrick and Marcus there.

“Yay, popsicles!” they yelled, and ran past me.

“Wait, wait, where’s Ben?” Great, I had lost already. How could I have failed the Commander-in-Chief and lost a kid? I opened the door and looked outside. No Ben in the driveway, no Ben smeared all over the road. I ran around the outside of the house. No Ben in the backyard, no Ben on the roof. I came back to the kitchen, sweating and wondering what I should say to the cops. Either Patrick or Marcus had already managed to spill most of the macaroni onto the floor.

“What about my lunch?” asked Ben from the dining room. He was sitting at the table and looking through my schoolbook. Some of the pages were ripped.

“Where were you, what are you doing?” I nearly screamed.

“I want a popsicle too.”

“Nevermind. Just come out here and eat lunch.” He must have snack past me while I was making the macaroni. The rips in the book weren’t too bad, I could probably fix them with some tape. I went back to the kitchen, and potato chips crunched underneath my feet.

“I want more juice,” said Patrick.

“Then why did you dump your fruit punch all over the counter?” I grabbed paper towels and soaked up the spreading red stain. Didn’t Mom say they were only a little messy? I gave him some more juice and retreated back to the dining room. Back to Antietam. About the middle of the day, the Union had taken the offensive and crossed the creek, taking the battle to the Confederates at a place called the Sunken Road. It was time for me to take action. A Disney movie in the basement would keep the kids entranced and trap their forces where they could do little harm. I could watch over them easily and keep up with my reading.

“Hey guys, how about a movie?” I stopped dead in the



middle of the kitchen. It was the cornfields after the fighting in the morning. The kitchen counter was covered with the decomposed remains of lunch. Macaroni and cheese, potato chips, and fruit juice. The pot was still on the stove, and dried macaroni spilled over the edge and had dried down the side. What a bloodbath. They had left most of their food on the plates, and what wasn't on the plates was on the floor.

"Pinocchio! Let's watch Pinocchio!"

"No! Aladdin, Aladdin!"

"How about we just go downstairs. We can watch Pinocchio, cause that was said first," I said. No time to clean up the kitchen now, I would just have to wait until Mom came back, hopefully with reserves to help in the fight. Where was Mom anyway? I wondered how long it would take her to get to the bank. The enemy followed me, and they were trapped as soon as I hit the play button. I settled back on a recliner and the kids sat on the floor. I had the high ground and all the advantages, and could continue to study for the test. Only one thing was left to ruin my strategic advantage. Ashley had woken up, and her crying could be heard above the adventures of Pinocchio. Damn! I went upstairs and tried to quiet her.

"Please, please go back to sleep," I whispered. She was a noncombatant, and should have stayed out of the fight. I put the pacifier back into her mouth, and she soon fell asleep. One more disaster averted. However, the first thing I saw coming down the steps was Patrick and Marcus climbing the bookcase. It swayed at the top and rocked on its base.

"What are you doing!" I pulled them off and sat them down on the floor. A couple of paperbooks fell from the shelves like wounded soldiers.

"It was Patrick's idea," said Marcus.

"No it wasn't!"

"Yes it was!"

"Knock it off guys." A thought hit me like an artillery barrage. "Where's Ben?"

“Upstairs,” they answered in chorus. Ben had outflanked me again. I ran halfway up the steps, then turned around and grabbed both their hands. I wasn’t going to lose them all. Patrick and Marcus stood in the kitchen as I looked around the house and called Ben’s name.

“Ben’s outside,” said Patrick, pointing behind me. I looked out the window and saw him in the backyard. I was on the run, losing the battle. Ben came to the porch, covered in mud as soon as I opened the door.

“Hi,” he said. A terrible scream interrupted any answer I had. I turned again, and Patrick stood over Marcus. Blood was pouring out of Marcus’ forehead. I jumped into the kitchen and ran over to Patrick.

“What happened? What happened to him?”

“He fell!”

“He pushed me!” Marcus screamed again. When I looked at Patrick, he was smiling. It looked like Marcus had hit his head on the edge of a chair.

“Marcus! Are you okay?” He didn’t answer, only kept crying. He looked kind of pale, and there was a lot of blood coming from his head. I held a kitchen towel to his head, the desperate battlefield surgeon with only a few rough tools to help him. The other two started dancing around me and asking dumb questions. That was the scene when Mom walked in.

“Good lord!” She rushed over to and took the towel away from Patrick’s head.

“I don’t know what went wrong. I think Patrick pushed him and he hit his head.” The bleeding had slowed, and Marcus was looking better. Patrick and Ben wandered back into the living room to play.

“Weren’t you watching them? I trusted you, and looked what happened. I have to explain this to his mother!”

“What were you doing at the bank so long. Do you think I like babysitting the enemy?”

“Scott, don’t say that!”



“Well, that’s what they are. They come in and destroy the house. I could barely hold them off.”

“What happened in here?” She looked around the mess of the kitchen.

“War is hell, Mom.”

## Contributors

**Bridget Baines** . . . regrets having enjoyed pouring salt on slugs as a child. (But says if you have never done so and think you can tolerate the guilt, then to try it sometime)

**Ani Broderick** . . . is an English major, creative writing minor. She plans to write a really long and hard book like James Joyce did, and then assign Dr. Volkmer the task of researching and annotating it so that normal people can read it.

**Kelly Campbell** . . . lives in Hobson with the ghost.

**Jeffrey Church** . . . sings karaoke CCR songs, plays the wappole, and wrestles crocodiles. His future plans include living in a van down by the river.

**Rosabelle Diaz** . . . . .

**Syreeta Dixon** . . . lives in Brooklyn. She likes celery.

**Jason Fischer** . . . is still better than you.

**Daniel Gallagher** . . . no habla espanol mais il nihongo ga hanashimasu. Please beat me to within an inch of my life.

**Alyson Jones** . . . can't even taste the alcohol after two Gin and Tonics.

**Shannon Kissel** . . . took back the night.

**Lori Kruk** . . . wouldn't want to be living in the world of ecstasy with you.

**Joseph Laskas** . . . lives in a log cabin built by the sweat of his own brow.

**Thomas Lipschultz**... "A clear head is just a metaphor for a cautious tongue." Never forget, I'll be watching each and every one of you, from very close, while you sleep.

**Kirsten Mascioli** . . . believes in faeries.

**Sarah Napolitan** . . . strives to attain the fame of singer/songwriter Donovan. Her last name means "globular sock" in Italian.

**Mike Keeper** . . . XTC is the best rock/pop band since the



## Contributors (continued)

Beatles. Listen, learn, and float in the ether.

**Raquel B. Pidal** . . . and her ever-present penguin hat wish to stress that the “B” is vitally important - and that’s all they’re going to tell you.

**John Ramsey** . . . believes in a long, prolonged derangement of the senses to achieve the unknown for the doors of perception have not yet been cleansed; and when they are everything will appear to man as is: infinite; until then man only sees through the narrow chinks of his cavern.

**Genevieve Romeo** . . . is the proud Gen-Gen of a scrungy gray penguin with a slightly singed schnozz. She is very tired of rewriting her Duke paper. Big ups to her boy John Keats. Word.

**Benjamin Schuler** . . . let the dogs out. They got run over by a truck.

**Christine Spera** . . . returns to the Table of Contents this semester.

**Monica Stahl** . . . . relaxes quietly watching Lifetime while eating Tasty Pasties.

**Corey Taylor**...likes to think that he’s smart, but he’s really a low-down, rotten man. He’s outta here like Vladimir, and plans on taking all of you with him.

**Matthew James Terenna** . . . is the fifth Beatle. He plays the cowbell in the last ten seconds of “Hey Jude.”

**Padcha Tuntha-Obas** . . . writes unreasonably at 2AM (and, unreasonably, likes it too) while searching for her Heideggerian “Being” at 3:30.

## PATRONS

Beth Bailey	Joyce Lionarons
Douglas Cameron	Valerie Martinez
Chris Cellucci	Amber Natale
Hugh R. Clark	Gina Oboler
Marcia and Robin Clouser	Peter Perreten
Margie Connor	Duke Pesta
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Margot and Rob Kelley	Paul Stern
Dr. Richard King	John and Trudy Strassburger
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Gerard Fitzpatrick	Collette Trout
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