

FALL 2000

MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts

**“If dreams are like movies
than memories are just films
about ghosts”**

--The Counting Crows

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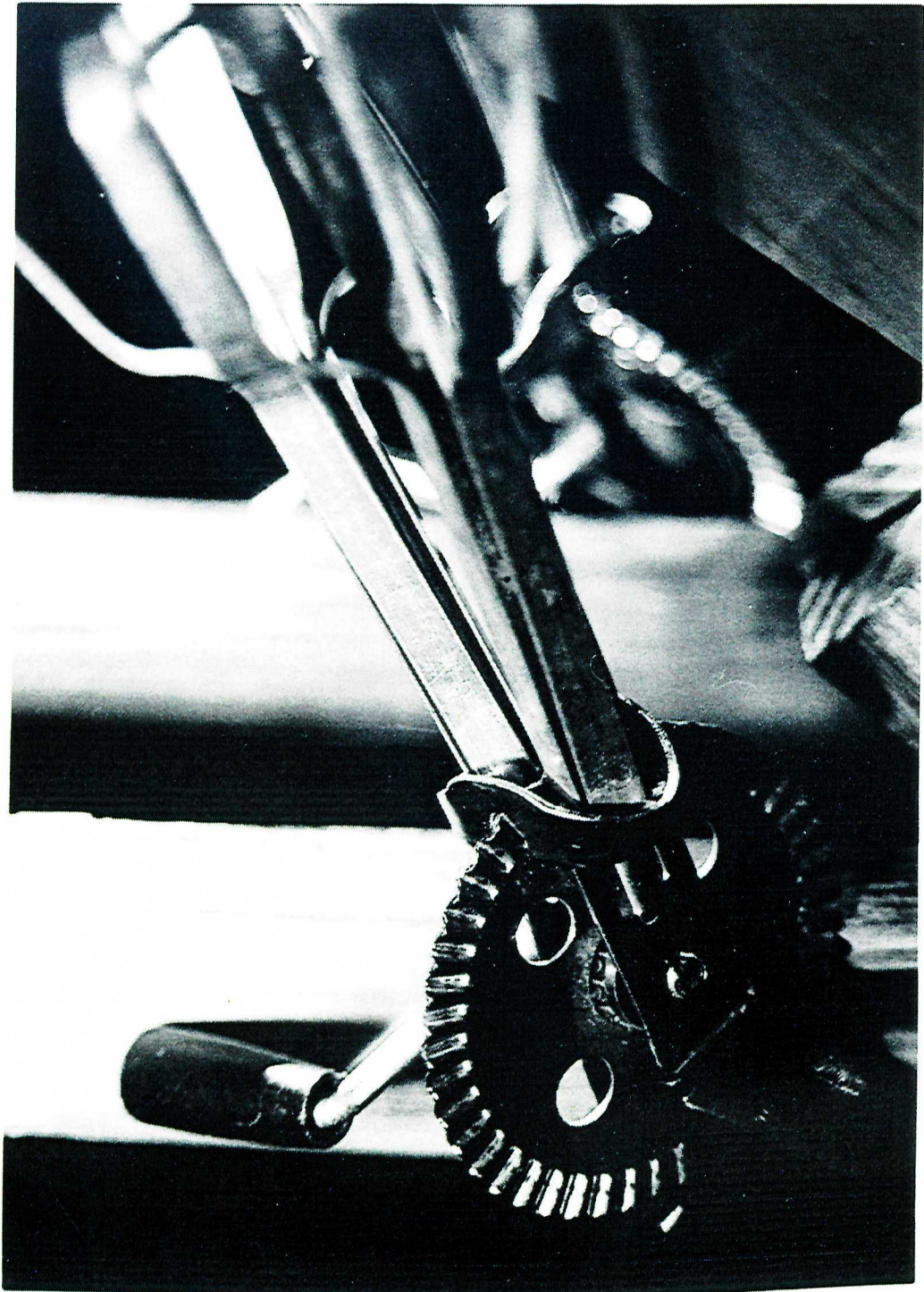
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“Mixed Messages”

The first song is for the time when I first met you. You swaggered across the room, your sex like an aura around you and my fear covering me like exotic perfume. You made some comment about my shirt, and I responded by kissing you so hard that it hurt. You kiss with your eyes open.

Making a mixed tape is a lot like telling a story. You have to consider your audience carefully. There is a certain subtlety when making a tape for the object of your affection that does not exist when making a tape for your best friend. You have to make him read between the lines in order to see what's there. How do you tell someone you love them?

Do you remember this song? We heard it that night that we stayed up all night cramming for tests. We popped popcorn and kept each other awake by throwing it at each other. It was the first time I thought you were my best friend. Who knew it would end so badly?

The next song was for the time that I sat next to you in class though we never spoke. I tried to speak, but I was stunned by your intelligence and beauty. I always thought you were so brilliant but I never told you. What would have been the point, you already knew.

It's hard to make a mixed tape. You have to choose the songs so carefully because if other people hear it, they might wonder about you. I mean, have you ever asked people what their favorite songs are? It speaks volumes about them.

This song is for the time that we sat outside a coffee shop on a lazy afternoon and talked about everything. We watched all the people go by and caught up on gossip. I forgot how much I missed you until we spoke of how different our lives had become.

I love music. Not that classical stuff, but everything from jazz to hard-core punk. I love to go to concerts, and I've got proof of every concert I've been to. I've got the tee shirts, the ticket stubs, copies of the set lists, and autographs. It seems that memories are formed from these relics.

This song was for the time that we laid in the hammock in your backyard on a lazy afternoon and talked. You told me you wanted to spend the rest of your life with me and we talked about what our kids would be named. I slept until sunrise in your arms. It felt like home, but I was too stubborn to admit I loved you too. I always was a sucker for unrequited love.

This is the song that was running through my head while I sat in your class. I took seven pages of notes on a book I didn't understand because I thought it meant something. The feeling of academia was euphoric, but I couldn't lose that song as hard as I tried. When you called on me, I stuttered out an unintelligible answer because I was too busy singing the song that was stuck in my head.

That song was for the time that we drove around in your car, screaming the lyrics out the window at anyone we passed. We drove past all the boys' houses that we liked and dreamed what it would be like to get married to them. We thought we knew what love was, and all we wanted was to live happily ever after. But we always wound up forgetting them when school was out.

This song is for the time that I tried to tell you that I loved you. We were slow dancing in the dark, with the radio from the car blaring that love song in our ears. We were drunk from the punch at that party, and euphoric with newfound love. I used to hate love songs, but they you sang this song to me. Where did you go, lover of mine?

I collect song lyrics. They're all over my wall and my dayplanner. I try to capture the beauty of life with other people's words. I steal the voices of rock stars and pop stars and jazz musicians. It's as if I'm too paralyzed to speak for myself.

This song reminded me of the time that I thought I hated you. You wore your pretension on your sleeve, checking your cell phone for messages before class started. I thought you wanted to be important or maybe you really were and I hadn't noticed. Either way, I changed my mind when you turned to me and asked to borrow a pen.

That ballad about love and friendship was for the time that you sat with me on the front stairs and held me while I cried. I had to lie to the one I admired the most, and my world was crumbling. I thought she would hate me forever, but you held me and spoke kind words to me, telling me it would be okay. I felt like a traitor, but you saw right through the tears.

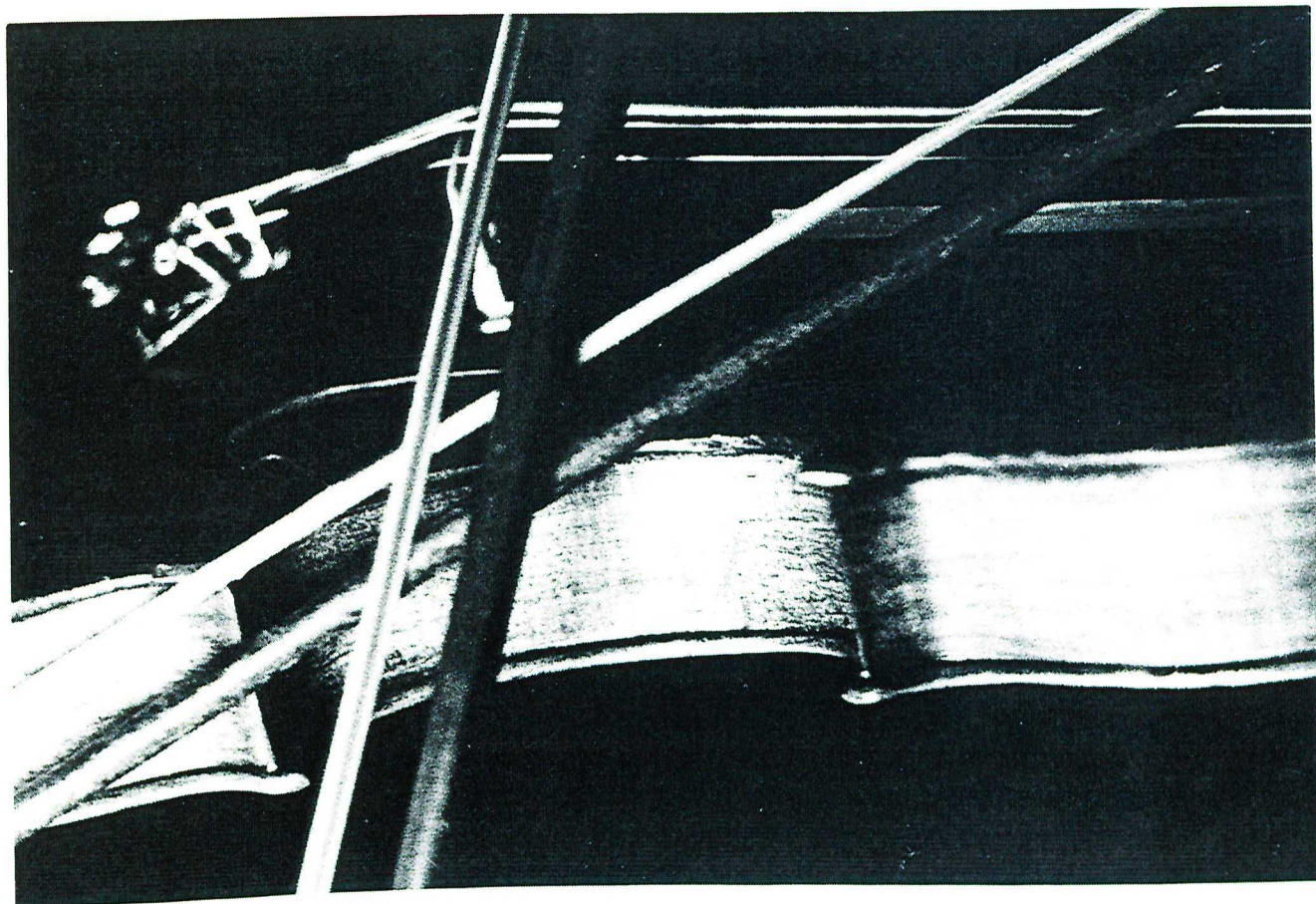
One more thing about mixed tapes that I forgot to tell you. When you make them, you have to make sure you don't cut the song off before it's done. You have to have every note, every verse, every chorus. If you don't, it ruins the song and the person you're making the tape for gets mad. Mixed tapes are a form of rejection or acceptance, because music is life and love.

I usually hate songs live, but do you remember when we heard this song live? They ushered us out of the building because the acoustics sucked, and played it for us outside. Three hundred people singing along with a band while the cops waited to arrest us for something, maybe it was singing too loud without a recording contract.

The great thing about mixed tapes is that you can erase them and start over. If a relationship ends, you can erase the tape you made and record a tape for the new, and more worthy of your affection, crush in you life. Of if you can't find the perfect way to say what you have to say, you can mix the tape over and over until you get it right. That's why mixed tapes are better than life. Because you have infinite chances to make it perfect.

The last song on this tape? It reminds me of when I told you that you were my hero and you laughed at me. I said that you had so many of the qualities that I wished I had, and you told me that you were the last person that should be anyone's hero. Maybe you were right; maybe you aren't hero material. But I would love to have thought so. But you knocked yourself down off the pedestal that I made for you. And you kept on walking, singing that song over and over again.

-Erin Ruttle



“The Driver and the Passengers”

Georgie’s nerves felt like they were carrying an electric current. A hopeless sense of rage and desperation had been lying inside of him for a long time, and quitting smoking was only helping to extenuate it. Sitting in the back of Derek’s father’s car, he felt like he had shot his life, and now it was crumbling—slowly but more rapidly all the time. But sitting in the back of the car listening to classic rock on the radio was tolerable, despite his nicotine craving. As long as the car ride continued as it had been, he knew he’d be all right.

Jordan sat in the backseat with Georgie. Georgie was glad Jordan was his brother because he was a good kid that pretty much had things put together. Jordan’s girlfriend May sat in the front seat smoking a cigarette she had bummed from Derek. Georgie was scared of May because she was pretty and blonde and dangerous somehow. A real dish was how Georgie would describe her. Derek drove his father’s old Cadillac and wore Oakley’s and smoked a cigarette. Georgie liked Derek because the two of them didn’t have to talk about important things all the time or even talk at all if they didn’t want to. The four kids stared out the windows of the car as they crossed the bridge that led to the big city. Georgie was the only one out of high school, and he was aware of that, and it bothered him. He was glad that nobody was talking, but then May ruined the silence.

“I don’t like this song.” She turned off Supertramp and put on one of the popular stations. Georgie felt his rage flare up. As a general rule, people were not supposed to touch the radio in other people’s cars with out permission, but Derek didn’t say anything. When the next song came on Derek changed the station back to classic rock.

“Hey, that was...”

“I don’t care. I control the radio, and I hate that song,” Derek interrupted her.

“Why don’t we just turn off the radio and talk?” May asked.

“I don’t wanna talk,” Derek said.

“No, no talking,” Georgie said.

Jordan didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t we ever talk while we’re in the car?” May asked.

“Because it’s my car, and I don’t feel like talking,” Derek said.

“It’s your dad’s car,” May told him.

“I don’t care, I’m driving it.”

“It’s an old lady car anyway,” May said viciously.

“This is the last time I’m driving anywhere with you,” Derek said as though he was stating a simple truth.

“Why?” May asked.

“Because sometimes I wanna open the door and kick you out onto the highway. You’re a real fucking bitch sometimes you know that?” Derek sounded like he was scolding a disobedient child.

May turned toward the window and quit talking. Jordan looked silently out of the window with his mouth slightly open, as it usually was. He looked like he hadn’t heard a thing. Georgie thought about what he would say if he had a girlfriend and Derek had talked that way to her. But May deserved it. If Georgie had a girlfriend he knew she would never deserve it.

“I was just kidding,” Derek said, but May remained silent.

Derek parked the car along side the street with the coffee shops and record stores. Everybody got out of the car and walked down the street. Jordan and May walked silently, holding hands. Georgie and Derek lagged behind a couple of paces.

“Fuck it,” said Georgie. “Give me a cigarette.”

Derek gave him a cigarette. Georgie lit it and inhaled deeply. When he exhaled the smoke he felt the electricity in his nerves go out with it. Then he chuckled bitterly to himself.

“That was hilarious,” Georgie said quietly.

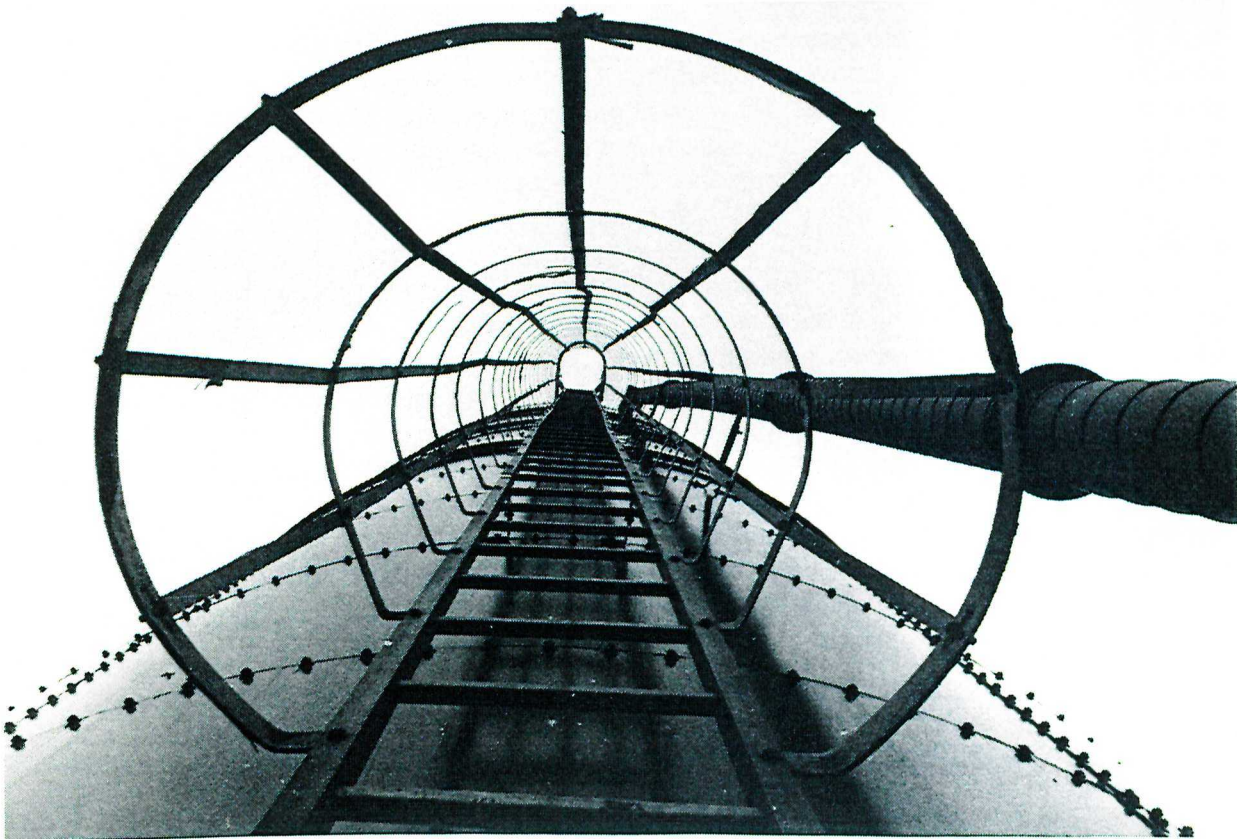
“What?” Derek asked.

“You know.”

“Oh. I was joking,” Derek said. “I just hate it when people make fun of my car.”

They walked to a coffee shop where they met the rest of their friends, and Georgie ran into Caroline—a girl he knew would never change the radio station or make fun of his friends’ cars. But it didn’t matter anyway because Caroline was leaving in a couple of weeks to go to New York City for the rest of the summer, and then Georgie would be going back to college. Georgie and Caroline talked for a long time, and Georgie promised he would visit her before she left, but he never did.

-Thomas Braune



They sat in uncomfortable silence. The TV glowed its medicinal glow and they didn't look at each other. That's not entirely true. With subtle movements, he stole glances at her face painted pale blue and almost featureless. Her thin lips could still be discerned. The small bump in her nose. The flickering light of the TV was dancing in her eyes. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed him doing this.

Or she thought she did. She really couldn't be to sure. Maybe she was just being paranoid. But paranoid's not the right word. Hopeful might be better, but still wasn't right. Somewhere in between. His leg was up against hers and that wasn't her imagination. He had sat down after he and he sat close enough so that their legs were touching. Of course, he didn't have too much room at his end of the couch. One end was filled by bunched up blankets so they didn't really have any extra space. But he had to notice his leg up against hers. Of course, maybe he didn't think anything of it because he was wearing long pants so it's not like their skin was touching or anything.

What he wouldn't give to be wearing shorts right now. But then, she might move her leg if their skin was touching. She might do that. He hoped she hadn't noticed how close he sat to her. It wasn't too close. It wasn't uncomfortably close. He knew all advances have to go undetected. Or at least appear unintentional. Nothing worse than being detected. He has to appear indifferent. Appear indifferent while still advancing. It was a damned hard juggling act to keep up, but he had had a lot of practice. He prayed he wouldn't let a ball drop now. Slow and gradual. No one notices anything if it moves slowly enough.

Was he getting closer? It was hard to tell. It was impossible to tell. She wasn't sure. She didn't risk shifting although her right leg was kind of falling asleep. Maybe just a little shift won't hurt.

What did he do? He must have done something. She's uncomfortable. Draw back but only a little. Not a noticeable amount. Gradual. And not far because losing ground is deadly. Losing ground? He wasn't conquering enemy territory. What the hell was he thinking? Maybe not enemy territory, but unfamiliar territory certainly. Or at least unexplored. Dammit, don't think that. She's not territory at all. She's... She's...

She's getting bored with the TV. Not that she's really paying attention to start with. Why were they watching this anyway? She hated TV. Better if they just talked. That was always better. Well... that was usually better. Sometime he'd rub her back when they talked. Thinking about that made her back sore. God, she wished he was rubbing it right then. Or better, rubbing her feet. Whenever he rubbed her back it was always a little strange talking to him while he was behind her. Better to be facing him.

Dammit, it feels really unnatural to have to both be facing the TV. Whose idea was it to watch TV anyway? He hated TV. If he could only be rubbing her back or something. He always liked that. Rubbing backs was his way of twiddling his thumbs. His Zen. Plus, whenever he rubbed her back on the couch, they were close enough that she just ended up leaning against him, his arms lightly embracing her. Just lightly though. Any strength would be dangerous to use. Too obvious. Ending up like that had to seem like an accident of position. Same as if they were ever going to kiss. It had to be an accident of being close. How the hell was he going to do that? That was the only acceptable way. He didn't know how else to do it. After the first time, it would be easier. It should anyway. Hopefully there would be a first time.

She briefly entertains the notion of them kissing. But that wasn't going to happen. No, he doesn't want that. Does he? She isn't sure. Maybe. She isn't sure. Better to not think about it. Maybe he just wants her to turn around and just kiss him. He once told her that she could just go up to about 95% of the guys on the campus and kiss them and they'd just happily receive her. Maybe that was supposed to be a hint. Or maybe he was just talking. He just talks a lot. Maybe he has an agenda behind what he says. Maybe. Maybe that's just wishful thinking. Or paranoia. Or something in between.

He turns his head slightly to look at her again. But only slightly. His arm is resting on the couch behind her head, but she's leaning slightly forward. Maybe she's just comfortable like that. Maybe she's purposely avoiding contact with him. If she'd just lean back then he'd take the cue and pull her a little closer to him. But she never initiates contact. Never.

She makes sure to keep her eyes on the TV. Turning to look at him would be too obvious. She can sense his arm behind her on the couch. Maybe it means something. Maybe he's just comfortable like that. Maybe she should lean back. But he doesn't want that, she doesn't think. If he wanted that, he would put his arm around her. If he wanted to kiss her, then he would. He just would.

Should he just kiss her? No. No, he needs to test first. Test the waters. There's no way she can possibly not see through his 'tests,' is there? That sounds kind of wrong. It's not. He hopes it's not. He's just horribly unsure. That's all. And he can't read her. Dammit, she is so hard to read. He could read most people, but not her. Not her. She wouldn't let herself be read. He could see frustration in her eyes when he made a joke about them kissing, but which kind of frustration was it? Was she sick of the joke? Or was she sick of it being a joke? He had no idea. She won't let on. She refuses to let on. All he is allowed to have are mixed signals.

Does he know? Sometimes he thinks he knows and he's dead wrong. That always really pisses her off. But then other times he could see so much in her mannerisms. Sometimes that kind of pissed her off too. It was like he knew what she was thinking whether she wanted him to or not. She couldn't hide from him then. He wouldn't let her. So perhaps she should draw away from him. Don't make eye contact. If he makes another joke about them being together, no reaction. None. Because she doesn't care. She doesn't. She can't afford to care. Caring hurts way too much. She can't. She won't. She doesn't.

Why doesn't she ever turn to look at him? Why does she barely make eye contact? If can't be insecurity. He doesn't know another girl that's more secure. What the hell is she thinking? It's hard enough to read her as it is. If he can't see her eyes, then he can barely see anything. Does he want to see? What if he doesn't like what he finds? He doesn't need her, anyway. He knows that. But he feels like he does. No. That's just because she's right here. The feeling will pass. It always does. It passes with just a little bit of time.

It passes. It's passing even now. She doesn't care. Maybe if he... if he makes a move or something... maybe she'll be receptive. Maybe. But if he doesn't, that's okay. She doesn't care. She really doesn't. He's just a guy. There are lots of guys. Anyway, he is a little overweight. Yes. He is. She doesn't like that. That's not all, though. That would be shallow by itself. He just like to sit around and do nothing. How boring is

that? She needs someone that goes out. She needs someone to dance with her. Someone who isn't always tired. Someone who isn't so sad. Yes. That's it. He's too sad. He'll make her sad too. He kinda does as it is. He's so... worn down. It's tiring. He drains from her. She can't afford anything to be drained. She needs all she has. There are lots of guys that don't drain. Lots of them. She doesn't need the added stress. Lord knows she has more than enough as it is. She doesn't want this. She doesn't. The last thing she needs is to be left behind again. And that's what he'll do too. He might not think that he will, but he will. Just give him some time. He might think he knows her, but he doesn't. He couldn't. Not if he's still around. He just needs someone to cling to. Someone to unload his sadness on. Someone for him to hold onto. That's what he needs. Well, it's certainly not what she needs.

Of course, he doesn't need her. He's seen what happens with her. One week she likes a guy and the next she doesn't. She can't make up her mind about anything and this wouldn't be any different. Even if she wanted him to kiss her right now, she won't tomorrow night. Or next week. He doesn't need that. He doesn't ask for much, but he wants what he has to be solid. She could be solid, but she doesn't want to. She'd just make him miserable. He's ridden yo-yos before and he's not going to waste his time on one again. If she won't let him in, then he just won't get in. That simple. He wore his heart on his sleeve and she barely noticed it. Or barely cared. Fine. He didn't need that. He doesn't need anyone that was that self-absorbed. He doesn't need the stress. He's tired enough as it is. He doesn't need to add to that. He shouldn't be wasting his time and effort and money and affection and... and... and he just doesn't need this. He doesn't.

She doesn't care. She doesn't. There's no use in caring. No use in it. It's never gotten a damn thing for her. She doesn't care about anyone and they don't care about her. She's better on her own. No one to tie her down. She needs freedom. She thrives on it. He'd just take her freedom away. There's no way in hell she's gonna let that happen. She cares about herself. It's him or her. She can't afford for it to not be her. She's tried caring about other people when no one cared about her. Fuck them. Fuck him. She doesn't care one bit. Not one. Why does he have to come along now to fuck things up? Everything was fine without him. Everything was clear. She doesn't care. He'll go away soon enough and everything'll be clear again.

The TV program's over. He guesses that signals the end of the night too. She'll say something about having to get to bed cause she has to get up early. Sounds like an excuse. Maybe it's not. He doesn't care. He doesn't. He's much too strong to let her affect him. He'll walk her to her dorm. He'll do that cause it's polite. Politeness is all he's going to get from her so it's all he's going to give.

Of course he feels the need to walk to her dorm. He always does. He thinks the campus isn't safe at night for her cause she's just a girl. Just a little defenseless girl. Poor her. Fuck him. Fuck all of them. She doesn't need any guy. They're all like this. They all just want to walk you home, then they leave you if you don't invite them in. There's no reason to care. It doesn't help anything anyway. Most people only care because they're too weak. They're scared to be by themselves. Well, she's not. She's been by herself this long and she's fine. Abso-fucking-lutely fine.

She didn't say much of anything the whole evening and she's not now. Well that's just fine. He's sick of her shit. If she doesn't like him, why doesn't she just say it? Why not? Just make everything easier. Why doesn't she just go away so everything can be clear again?

She doesn't look at him while they walk. She looks off to her left as if something of interest is there to look at. He looks pissed anyway. He's got both his hands in his pockets and he's glaring at the ground while they walk. What the fuck does he have to be pissed about? *He* invited her over. If he's not sad then he's angry. She definitely doesn't need that shit. Here's the door. She should probably say something. See you later should be enough.

Now she's gonna say something quick and run inside. She always does that. Doesn't give a shit when he leaves her, doesn't give a shit when she leaves him. Guess that's just the way she is. He definitely doesn't need that shit. Maybe he can say something to get to her first. Maybe he can leave her feeling shitty for once.

He's just looking at her. Why doesn't he say anything? They barely said anything walking here. She's going to wait for him to say something first. That way she can say the last thing easier.

He's going to wait for her to say something. Just look in her eyes. She wouldn't make eye contact all night, well, now he's not going to let her break it. She's going to have to speak. She's going to have to say the first thing so he can say the last. He can stare into her eyes as long as he wants, he's not going to say the first thing. He's made her uncomfortable all night, so he can break the silence. She's just going to look into his eyes. Is he glaring at her? Not really. She guesses not. He looks sorta tired.

She looks bored. Or is that something else? No. Boredom probably. How else would she feel after being with him all night? There's a strand of her hair in her face again. It's bothering the hell out of him. She never brushed her hair back when it does that.

Is he just going to keep staring at her? She's not giving in. He has to say something. They'll stand here all night if he doesn't say anything. It's probably only been a few seconds, but she can hold out for a week if she needs to. He looks like he can't. He looks so tired. His eyes are kinda droopy. They normally are. He looks... he looks worn down is how he looks. Or something like that.

She doesn't think he can hold out not saying anything. She has no idea how much worse he's endured. He can hold out all night. He guesses that she's not really glaring. Her eyes don't look tired, but they do look... expectant? He wasn't sure. That hair in her face was really annoying him. Why doesn't she just brush it away?

He didn't really look all that sad. Just kind of tired. It was kind of cute sometimes. Most of the time it just made her feel like he thought he knew too much for his own good, even if he was a little dopey. He just thought that, though. Although, he probably did have too much weight on him. He should have collapsed by now. But he wouldn't. She could give him that. He was holding up a lot of weight and surviving. At least the thought that he was. That was probably it. Or something. It didn't matter.

It was too damned annoying. He reached up and brushed the loose hair out of her face. He did it slowly because everything felt like it should be slow right now. He paused with his hand against her cheek. Her eyes changed. They looked...

Warm. His hand was warm against her cheek. His eyes looked a little less tired now. Or was she imagining that? She was, of course. She just noticed that she wasn't breathing. She should be. But him first. That way she can have the last breath easier.

He slowly slid his fingers to her ear, cupping her cheek in his hand. With the most subtle pressure—gradual enough that no one would notice—he brought her face towards his. Her lips parted slightly. He brought his other hand up and lightly rested his fingertips against her other cheek which was very close to his now.

She wouldn't resist. He was doing... doing this. She didn't care. It was okay. His eyes weren't tired anymore. They were looking into her now. And she was looking into him. Just before they met, just before she breathed, they both closed their eyes. But she was still looking into him. And still felt him looking into her. She breathed.

But she didn't.

But he didn't.

They didn't.

He waited for her to say the first word so she could have the last. She was sick of waiting.

"Guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Later."

He turned and began to walk away before she even had her hand on the door. He walked quickly but not too quickly. He refused to look defeated. He wasn't defeated. Don't look back. Never look back.

She was inside the door now. He was gone. Like she expected. Don't look back. Never look back.

It wouldn't hurt because she wouldn't notice. It wouldn't matter.

He turned and looked back. She was looking at him through the window of the door as it clicked shut. He paused and smiled. She paused and smiled back.

-Grant Gooding

Atop the plastic white bench

Atop the plastic white bench lay her hand. It lay there, next to mine. I could sense it's presence, it's warmth, calling my own to join it, calling out my name in a voice more angelic than a chorus of God's winged children. It called to me gently and longingly, a whisper within my ear. But whispers are often spoken when one is frightened, and fears deafen and drown all sounds except the blaring beat of one's heart.

And so it was. Dread descended upon me; like sand sifting through my fingers, the call, moments before strong, slowly silence until only a grain remained. But even this grain could not slow the coming consternation that encroached upon me. In a flash: my thoughts, clouded and confused; my stomach, in a tourniquet; my heart—the blaring beat of my heart—wild and furious.

How I wanted to take it in my own, to enfold her fingers with mine, to caress her lovely skin. Like a blanket in my childhood, I wanted its warmth to ward off the fright, to protect me from the indecision and inhibition that deafened its call. I wanted her touch, not the dismay of the silence.

And it happened! The silence being shattered, something reverberated in the air; it was the call of her hand. Perhaps it was by chance, perhaps she sensed my inhibition, but somehow our hands were in contact. Our outermost fingers, our pinkies as we called them in our youth, now lay together—not entwined, but nevertheless together, in heavenly touch. I could feel her warmth surge through my body, melting my indecision. It is not, I thought to myself, now or never.

But before I could venture to take her hand, she had already placed mine in her own. Enfolding our fingers, fear no longer encroached me, only the thought of her. Our faces, which had before been expressionless, eyes not daring to look at each other, now held each other as she held my hand, warm and tender. I could not venture a single word or smile before her arms were around my neck, her lips meeting mine for the first time, hesitant at first at what to say, but quickly coming to peace. And her warmth—the warmth of her hand, her touch, her lips, her breath—surged forth into my body.

SCRATCH!

Lighting a match to my fear, it burst into flame. A roaring fire, my apprehension burned away with each breath, as I inhaled more of her tender passion. And we were like that for what seemed to me the enduring eternity of love in each other's arms, until every last flame had died and only exhausted white embers remained.

Later that night, as we walked with my arm around her shoulder and hers about my waist, I searched beneath the ashes of my fears and, pulling her close, found happiness.

-E.M.



“Get-Away”

I’m sitting here, folded up in the backseat of my mother’s silver Yugo, staring at my brother. Does he really think I don’t notice? His head is turned ever so slightly to the left so that his eyes just catch his reflection. He moves as if being instructed by a photographer, first tilting a little toward his right shoulder, then moving his chin down a bit. There, just right. He holds the pose, occasionally modifying his reflection with eyebrow raises and lip curls. I contemplate whether or not to break his intense concentration but opt for minding my own business. I’m not much in the mood for hearing yet another lecture about the importance of “the perfect look” so as to have the ability to “pick up the most righteous chick.” Please. There is absolutely not enough room back here for him, his hormones, and me.

“Sarah, hon, stop staring at your brother,” my mother says over her shoulder in her most condescending nasal voice. The confines of the small space amplify its annoyance and I reconfigure my “stare” into a glare. “Mother,” I begin, only to be cut off by Mr. Attention himself. “Yeah, Sarah, mind your own beeswax!” I roll my eyes and refrain from response, hoping to indicate my lack of interest in the matter. “Besides,” Andy continues, oblivious, as usual, to my apathy, “it is essential to develop the perfect look so that I can choose the most... *righteous*... chick... not that you would know anything about developing looks.” Pausing for dramatic effect, he then returns to his quest. I look to the empty seat in front of me and wonder which would be worse, staying crammed back here with Andy or taking shot-gun next to my mother. I notice her dimpled thighs seeping onto the passenger seat and decide I’m probably better off where I am.

“Sarah,” she says, flinging a map back at me, “look and see which exit we need next, will you?” We’re on our way to pick up my uncle Dirk. He lives in Springfield, Illinois. Land of Lincoln, wouldn’t you know. He even looks a little like Lincoln, I guess, tall and lanky, but no beard. Total opposite of my mother—makes you wonder which was adopted. Dirk, who I affectionately call Uncle Dorkus Maximus, really is a pretty quirky guy. Since we live about five hours away we usually only see him on holidays. Last Thanksgiving he thought it would be funny to “become one with the turkey.” And he did. Stuck his head up the bird’s ass and bopped around, trying to make it dance. I can still hear his muffled roars as the wings flopped up and down like a baby waving goodbye. “Dirk Theodore, take that bird off of your head!” Grandma yelled, trying to be stern but not able to suppress a smile. She reached her bony arms up in an attempt to rescue the turkey but could only reach his collar bone. Bringing her hands down with a huff she swatted his rear. “Better clean that thing out, boy!” she said.

I fell something slap my arm and realize it’s Andy hitting me with the map. “Hello, retard, mom said to look for the next exit.” Blanketing myself in a mass of lines and squiggles I find Route 97 and run my finger East until I get to the starred city of Springfield. “Exit 4,” I announce. “Oh, good!” she answered. “We should be there in no time!”

After we pick up Dirk we’re continuing on to the family’s beach house in Rhode Island. The whole family—all 11 of us—used to go there every summer until I was about five. I don’t remember a whole lot other than getting a lot of sand in my bikini bottoms and having lobster races before dinner. Uncle Tom would line them all up on

the kitchen floor and then stand by the huge silver pot of boiling water, waiting for the winner. It always amazed me how dark and ugly lobsters were until they got cooked. They then turned this bright Crayola shade of red-orange.

My mom veers onto the exit ramp and before long we're pulling into the rocky driveway of Dirk's ranch. He moseys out the front door with only a backpack and my mother throws off her seatbelt, rushing out to meet him. "EEEEEE! Honey! How are ya?!" she squeals. Her body surrounds him an embrace and his fingertips barely meet around her back. I can't make out his muffled salutations, but he offers a weak wave at Andy and me. "Oh, you look great!" she says. "Come on, throw that bag in the back and let's be on our way! Kids, you need to use the facilities?" Andy and I mumble a decline and I look at him with a worried glance. "This is gonna be a loooong car ride," he whispers with wide eyes. I nod.

Andy and I fought with her for an entire Monday about why she insisted on driving nearly a day when we could fly in a few short hours. But she just would not budge. Driving halfway across the U.S. to her was a "simply marvelous" idea that also enabled us to pick up Dirk on the way. At first our little get-away was just for the three of us, but Andy and I think Dirk's invite resulted in her perpetual desire for us to have a "male-figure" in our lives. Our dad left when Andy was three, but we've both managed just fine without him. And I'd rather be on my own anyway. But all mom's little magazines and self-help guides have convinced her we'll be emotionally unbalanced without both sides of the parental equation.

"Hey," I say as Dirk hunches over to climb in.

"Well hello there!" he says with a goofy smile, saluting as if I were a general or something. He plops down in my mom's relinquished driver's side, feeling around for the lever on the bottom of the seat. It flies all the way back, crushing Andy's knees. "Sorry, little buddy," he apologizes, scooting himself forward. A second later, "Mind if I tilt this back a bit?" Dirk leans into the back of the seat again with too much force and this time Andy's face greets it with an "ummphhh!" "Sorry, again, little dude," Dirk says with a chuckle. "No... problem," Andy mutters, turning to the window to smooth his hair. I smile and look out my own window to hid my amusement.

"Well, shall we be on our way?" my mother says with a hopeful grin.

"Yes, we're on our way... we're on our way today... let us not delay!" Dirk sings. He's always making up silly songs and rhymes and we've mostly grown to ignore them. He backs out of the driveway and we begin the 15-hour drive to Misquamicut.

She and Dirk commence in preliminary catching up and I lean back, relieved that his turn has come to occupy her for a while. My eyelids slowly fall and I am at peace... for approximately four and a half seconds. "Let's share stories!" I hear, jolting me from serenity. My mother turns to the back seat to get a better look at Andy and me. "Did we ever tell you the time when Tom and Michael tried to roll me up in the sofa bed?" Her eyes gaze out the window behind us, lost in memory. I can just imagine her helpless wails as her scrawny punk brothers wrap her in the sofa's flat mattress, pushing it mercilessly into the dark abyss of lost change and stale Cheetos. She continues, "Oh, they did that all the time, I guess, but Dirk here always came to my rescue!" She looks back at him and hits him playfully in the arm. "You've always been my favorite brother, you know!" Dirk sticks his nose up with a regal air and answers, "Well, I should think so!" Andy and I exchange eye rolls. I briefly flirt with thoughts of escape but I have no

idea where we are, and even if I did what would I do once I got out? Run a million miles home? I close my eyes and try to drown out the stories of Dirk helping her with this and Dirk showing her that. I've heard them all before.

Raindrops begin to freckle the tinted glass of the windshield and before long the sky becomes one big crybaby. It sounds like someone's dumping buckets of golf balls on the roof. The sounds of ABBA are drowned out and eventually die as Dirk switches off the radio, moving his hands to the ten-and-two position of the steering wheel. He sits perfectly erect, eyes straight ahead. "Water," he says, as if in the middle of some intense surgical procedure. "Preparing the water bottle," my mother responds, chuckling as she unscrews the cap to the Evian bottle. Dirk takes two precise sips and tentatively rolls them around in his mouth before committing them to his throat. Satisfied, he hands the bottle back and returns his right hand to "two." I watch, waiting for him to make some goofy face or crack a joke about the Towncar in front of us that is going five under. But he just continues to stare ahead. The skin on his knuckles begs for mercy as it loses all color. I scan my memory and decide that except for the one time he threatened to go find my dad and "give him what for," I've never seen him so... not *Dirk*.

The rain persists and the back tires struggle to follow the lead of the front and the cars ahead of us turn into fuzzy wetness. I say a prayer that I'll see my 19th birthday.

"Shit *shit* SHIT!" Dirk explodes, ending my prayer. I expect to hear horns blaring, tires squealing, and glass crunching as the car jerks to the right, slows for a second, then speeds up again. Andy looks at me and we share a moment of heart-palpitating anticipation before he breaks the tension. "What?" he asks, reaching for his seatbelt. It would wrinkle his shirt if he wore it all the time. "We missed the exit," Dirk says in disgust. *We missed the exit? That's* what caused him to get so worked up that I thought I was about to make an appearance at the Pearly Gates?

You might think someone believing they were about to die would feel relief at the mere missing of an exit, but instead I can sense the anger seep through my limbs, warming my blood and forcing it through my veins. I have to do something. Impulsively, I turn and slap Andy across his face. "What the hell are you doing?" he yells. "Kids, be quiet while Uncle Dirk is driving, we don't want to disturb his concentration," my mother says as if we are four. "And the weather's bad," she adds. Andy glares at me and this time I slide my fingers through his greasy 'do and shake them vigorously until his hair is one big mess. "Sarah!" he outrages, smoothing his hair with one hand and reaching over to pinch me on the arm with the other. "Seriously!" my mom says, throwing her hands up in disbelief. "What on earth has gotten into you two? Sarah, you—"

"Mother! Do you think I am four years old? I swear you treat us like—"

"Well if you wouldn't *act* like a child, I could—"

"Shut up! You don't understand—"

"Alright! Quiet!" Dirk finally yells. There is complete silence. The crescendo of my heartbeat rings in my ears until Dirk quietly interrupts. "Sara, don't talk to your mother like that." Excuse me? Am I being scolded by an uncle I barely ever see? I sit, dumbfounded, listening to the pounding of the rain, the swoosh of the tires navigating through wetness, and the click-clock of the turn signal as Dirk switches lanes. I am helpless.... Or am I? Recalling my original plan of attack, I spy Andy's right thigh and contemplate. Resenting submission to anyone, I extend my hand, fingers ready to inflict

pain. I give him one last hard pinch that results in a yelp, sending his leg right into the back of my uncle's seat. Dirk jerks forward and I watch his jaw clench as the car shoots from the left lane all the way to the shoulder. "Get out. Both of you. Get out!"

"But I didn't—" Andy begins to protest.

"I don't care! Get out of this car!" Dirk shouts. My mom takes a breath and looks like she's about to say something, like she might stick up for me for once, but as quick as her breath, the moment is lost. She looks at Dirk, who stares right back with eyebrows raised. This is horseshit. I open my door and step out into a blanket of rain. Andy does the same. Cars whoosh by and throw walls of wetness at us. Dirk tries to speed off however hydroplanes and the tires spit at us. Losing the effect of a grand exit I laugh and spread my arms out, twirling in the downpour.

"Great job, ass clown," Andy mutters as the foreign shelter slowly leaves us behind. I pretend not to hear. I am free. Andy grabs one of my wrists and forces me to look him in the face. "Stop that!" he screams through the sheet of rain between us. "Now what do we do?!"

I watch as the car moves further out into the dreary haze, but I'm not worried. It's *Dirk*, he couldn't possibly stay mad for long. Could he? We watch the Yugo shrink to the size of my smallest fingernail and doubt begins to form a rock in my stomach. We stare in silence until the brake lights turn a brighter shade of red. The lights then flash their hazard warning and Andy takes off running. I look around. There's nothing here that can keep me free forever. I follow. My Nikes squish with each leap, sending water bubbling up between my toes and threatening to drown my feet. I plop through puddles as cars and trucks race past me. Andy beats me to the finish line, and finally I, too, reach it, gasping for air.

He opens the car door and peers inside expectantly, saying nothing. His hair presses against his head like a soggy toupee and water drips off the end of his nose as he leans forward. I stay a step behind. "Get in," I hear. We do.

And I fold back into the confines of the silver smallness, breathing rapidly from out little jaunt down the highway. I have a strange satisfaction. Even if only for a moment, I got away. No one says a word as we listen to the soft return of ABBA from the speakers and the click-clock of the turn signal as Dirk merges back onto the highway.

-Shanna Bohdan

Nepotism

Lengthening shadows signal another day's end.
The work force slowly commutes through the city
to their house, dog, and 2.4 children.

My frazzled brain rattles beneath my frazzled hair.
Exhaustion seeps insidiously through my limbs,
my nerves shot, my store of patience depleted.

My sister talks during the long drive ahead of us,
her delightful chatter eliciting weak smile from my face,
but my energy is too low to respond.

I enter her house and am greeted by
the warbling voices of children—my nephews.

Although I love them, I am hesitant to be around them;
my nerves so shot that I fear I will snap at them.

A credit to their youth, they are determined and persistent;
they will not be denied their nightly entertainment.

So I allow myself to be carried by their energy,
and we embark upon numerous adventures:
checkers, coloring dancing, running.

I reach deep to muster the strength and my nephews
selflessly supply it.

At 5 and 6, they radiate the innocence of childhood.
Honest to a fault, they laugh when my hair is awry,
call me a "pig" whenever I eat.

They have yet to become members of our cynical society,
but see life through eyes that are yet unclouded
by anger, jealousy, and manipulation—eyes that possess
special force fields, allowing only happiness to enter.
I am their auntie; to them, I am enormous, strong, invincible.

I can pick them up a thousand times, run a million miles.
I dread the day when their penetrating gazes illuminate the true me:
a weak person, full of faults and frailties.
Therefore, I carry my current status tremulously,
fearing the day when I lose the most prestigious gift I have received:
the love and admiration of my nephews.

Their tiny fingers trace the outline of my medals.
They think I am the fastest runner in the world.
My nephews sport their new running shoes proudly.
We race across fields together; the older on lean as a whippet and quick,
his younger brother's stocky frame trudging steadily behind him.
NO one has told them I am no longer so fast,
that I am washed up, a has-been.
I am grateful for this small gift of my nephew's unshakable confidence.

Both boys come racing down the stairs,
their fire-red hair fragrant and freshly combed, still damp from their baths.
We sit on the couch, I sandwiched between their warm bodies.
I read a story using numerous animated voices for the characters.
They chortle gleefully, ask questions with endearing lisps.
Their milk and cookie-scented breath tickles my nose,
as they snuggle closer to me, enraptured with the tale I am weaving.
To me, this is happiness—the blessing of a child's love.-

-E.M.

“Snow Angel – Self Portrait”

Falling,
 falling.

The wind rushes in my ears and I can hear every moment as if it is its own song. A car down the road passes by in seconds filled with a cry for a new muffler, but after that is eerie,
ghastly
silence.

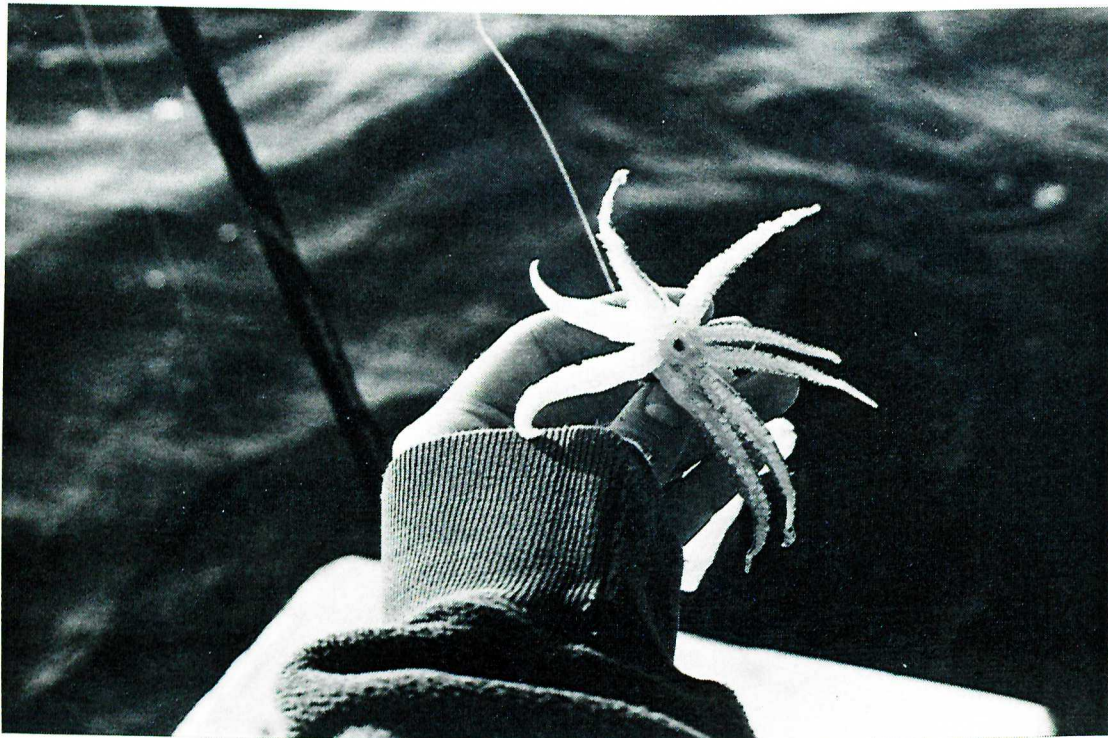
Beautiful is the only inadequate word that comes to mind, and I wish I am a poet as I lay and watch the flakes blanket me and collect softly on my eyelashes and melt on my face like wet kisses from frosty lips.

I want to blend into the ground and be the field I'm laying in, and I'm sorry for my footprints ruining the virginity of the land.

I want to be buried alive and suffocate under sparkling flakes and the misty crystal my breath creates and be missing until spring when the thaw will turn this land into mud.

I carefully rise and look at what I've left, and perhaps I'm not a poet but tonight at least I've been an artist and left my mark on the world.

-CJ Wukovits



Postal Service

Arriving in the mail along with telephone bills,
pizza coupons,
bank statements,
and other paper illusions including Newsweek I am curiously addressed
in capital letters in the middle of an envelope.
Written in Crayola Crayon—lie the words

God
HERE, NOW
THE UNIVERSE AND THE MIND

So I tear it open and all it contains is a brown bagel bag from Starbucks.
In pencil barely visible upon the sesame grease stains is the following message
straight from heaven.

Love + Faith = Unity.

Unity of the mind, soul, mouth, cock, sex and intellect
hit me in an instant as if God himself stimulated orgasm in my brain.

I made love with god and you should too. It was a trip.
I invite you along for the ride,

You spend your morning in bed and your days in the park,
sipping tea at four and picking mushrooms with the ancient kings—
Darius, Alexander, Xerxes—and even Jesus Christ.
You sup on crackers with John Fowles at seven
and write pomes on government subsidized elementary school toilet paper at ten past.
At eight you notice Timothy Leary outside your window looking in
as the Walrus resurrects John from the dead
and Sergeant Pepper strips his uniform and commands you to make love upon the grassy knoll.

Make love to a woman,
Make love to yourself,
Make love to your mind,
Find God and FUCK him,
for Fucking is the ultimate form of communication.

Love + Faith = Unity = Consciousness

Consciousness is singing, dancing, and doing jumping jacks...
Applauding in a bathroom stall and yelling FIRE
in a crowded theatre...
Hugging and kissing in public and letting the lonely
get a room...
Adorning yourself in jewelry and color,
avowing life's hipness.

The world is your oyster.
Fuck the pearls

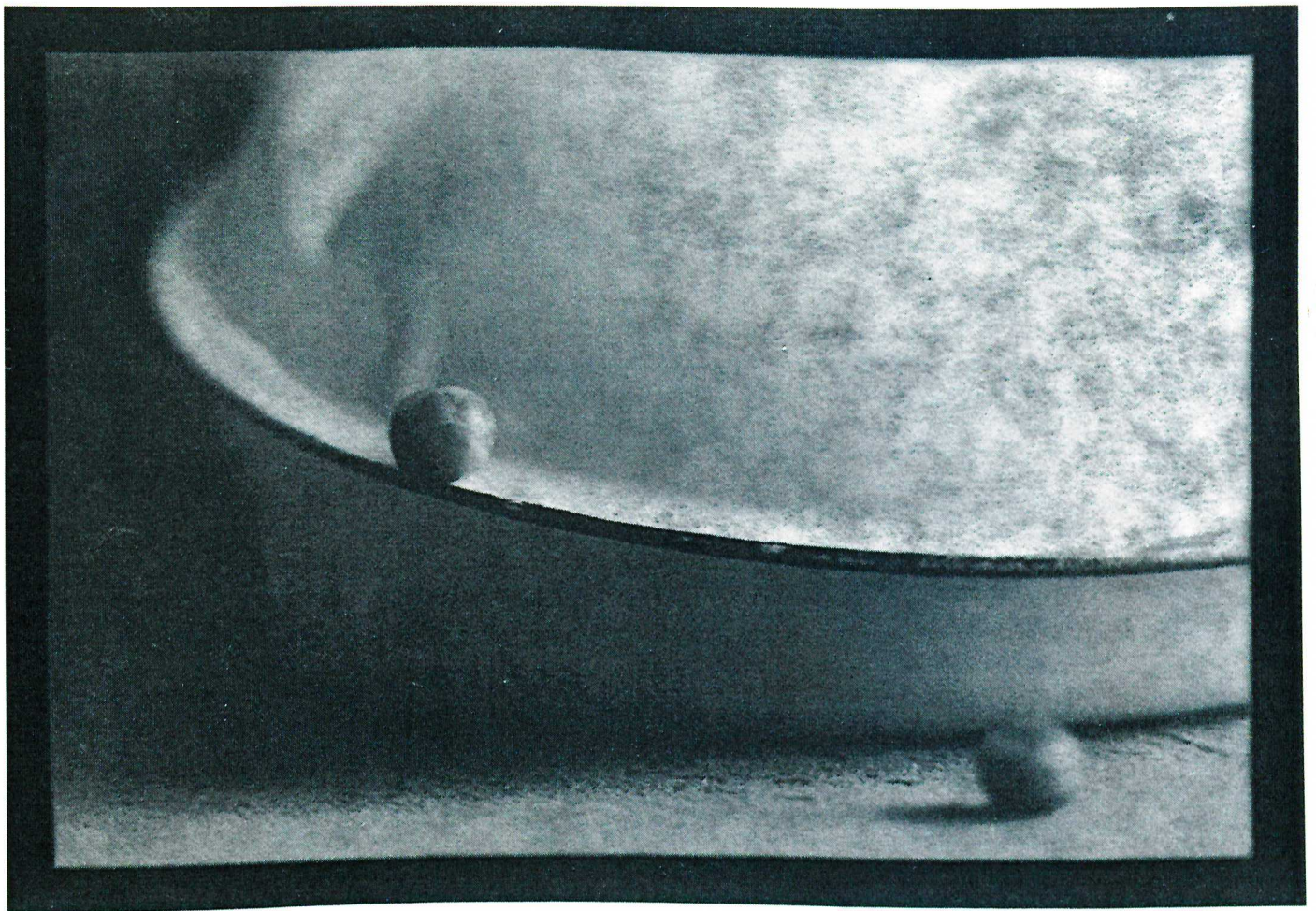
and string them around her neck. out of it

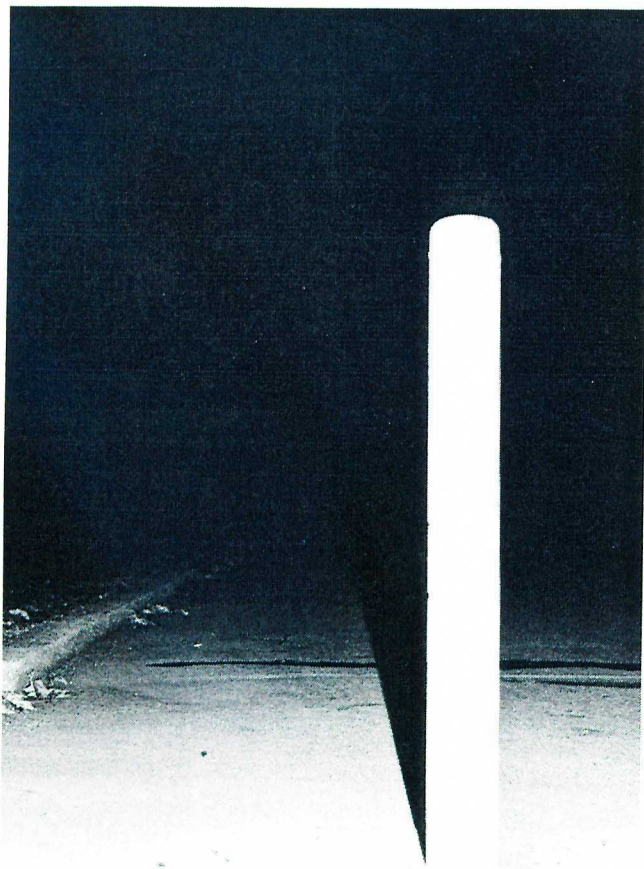
No envelope can seal information if you expand your mind.
There are no envelopes, only loose manila folders.

Transcend—
 make love to a woman,
to yourself,
 to your mind,
and to God.

Spell it backwards and you get dog.
Constitutionalize it and you get the Politics of Ecstasy.
Worship it and you get nowhere.
Experience it and you get paradise.

-John Blum





A naked drunk hottie
sleeps as though
I never talk afterwards

Proving that every boy
can make her nap
and showing me that
she understands the game

Handing her
friendly little blowjobs
out to all of us
like they were candy

Though soon
light will come

And then sorority girl
you may find
the easy high of love
spring too late.

-Aaron Black

“Bitch”

“It’s over,” I tell him again, perched in the desk chair across the room, one naked leg tucked up underneath, while watching the effect of my statement. The air is stifling and perspiration beads on my bare skin, dampens the cigarette dangling between my fingers, ash threatening to fall to the floor at any moment.

“Why?” He’s hunched over the navy flannel plain of the bed, a devotee appeasing the goddess of the temple. Shadows from candlelight accentuate the abyss between us, incense burdening the air as smoke cloaks the room into obscurity.

“Tell me why,” he demands. Crouched rocking, back and neck naked, vulnerable, shuddering and heaving interrupting the encumbered silence. His face buried, self-blinded, where our scent lingers—musky, sexual, tantalizing—locked temporarily into the fabric. He gulps our fragrance in greedy lungfuls, an addict consuming an endangered drug. Shaking fingers desperately clutch at the softness, a broken nail catching and snagging on the cloth still warm and indented from my body. His growing panic and tears and saliva moisten my head’s cavity in the pillow, pale bare skin clinging and caressing where my limbs had rested.

“I’m not interested anymore.”

Blue eyes stare up at me, silently yelling and screaming and begging. Pale, washed-out blue. Watery blue, drowning in a sea of salt. Attempting in desperation to lure a rescuer. Guilt-ridden blue. Guilt-causing blue. Blue searching my face and movements for a glimmer of hope with purpose and expectation. Voyeuristic blue. Submissive and misunderstanding blue. Blue blindness.

“At least tell me you’re sorry,” he pleads, my silence his only answer.

-CJ Wukovits

“Suburban Battlefield”

Why the hell is she staring at me? thought Barry as he scanned the afternoon headlines, feigning interest in Eastern European economic policies. Anything to avoid his wife's stare. He slouched further into the arms of his leather recliner, his middle-aged paunch pushing hard against his belt.

“So where's Steven?” he asked in an attempt to break the ice shield.

“At his cello lesson, like he is every Tuesday night,” Jodi replied. She was tapping her shoes anxiously against the hard wood floor. She knew this made him nervous. He sunk back into his newspaper cave.

“You've completely forgotten, haven't you?” Jodi asked, her tone hinting she hoped she was right. Barry inwardly sighed and prepared for the lecture to come. It was 5:35 p.m. and Barry had been home from the insurance office for precisely 4 minutes and 37 seconds; enough time to be reprimanded for getting the welcome mat muddy with his wet shoes and scolded for setting his tea on a magazine and not a coaster (“After all, that's what we bought them for, isn't it Barry?”).

“Your son will be 10 years old tomorrow and you've yet to express any concern about the cake, the presents, the guest list... You know, this is Steven's first boy/girl party and you haven't even bothered to give him the talk!” she continued, counting off his neglected inquiries. He watched her chubby fingers fall heavily through the air as she made the animated counting gestures. He couldn't help noticing that a tiny fold of skin was beginning to overlap her wedding band. His eyes, masked with the appropriate amount of guilt, moved up to her round face. It was a pretty face, but heavier with make-up than he remembered. Her eyes were still golden hazel, but almost ruined with a frame of eyelashes separated into sticky mascara clumps.

“...and I knew you would do this very thing, so I took the liberty of burying Steven's present for you,” she declared proudly, reaching behind her for a shopping bag.

Jesus Christ. It was her *job* to buy the gift. He made the big salary and she did the shopping. It was an unspoken arrangement.

The crackling of the bags was like an endless drum roll. She finally retrieved the gift from the depths of the bag. A clothes box. Not a good sign. Last year she'd bought Steven a teddy bear wearing a baseball cap from Barry. He spent hours convincing the child that teddy bears weren't just for girls and the fact that he was wearing a baseball cap proved that the bear was a boy. Jodi proceeded to shower him with the contents of his entire birthday list, topped off with an expensive telescope that Steven still treasure.

She spread the tissue paper and slowly presented a navy, satin robe, a miniature version of the one she'd given Barry on their 15th anniversary.

“Just like Daddy's!” she smiled.

The bitch. he hadn't worn his since that anniversary night.

“Well, what do you think? You haven't said a word yet,” she demanded.

Barry stuttered with his thoughts. Couldn't she once, just once, get him a basketball or a tennis racket? Something with a trace of testosterone. He could feel her eyes scanning his mind like laser beams. he wanted so badly to tell her that Steven would find the robe as useless and degrading as he did, but instead he lied, “Sure, hon, it's a nice robe.”

She relaxed her look and was about to agree when Barry continued, "But don't you think 11-years-old is a little young for a robe?"

The comment ignited the fire in her eyes and on her tongue and the lecture began:

"What, Barry? I don't know our son well enough to pick out a present he will enjoy? I think I did a fine job with the telescope last year. He knows more constellations than either of us..." She continued in the defensive blabber that epitomized their last five years of marriage. Barry drowned out the lecturing, gaining consciousness at the words, "If you think you can do a better job, Mister, you go right ahead."

"Ok," he said and stood up.

He walked past her gaping mouth, through the dining room table set for a table of six imaginary guests with expensively detailed antique dinnerware, and out the door to the pounding of raindrops on the blacktop driveway. He didn't give the windows of his Ford Taurus time to clear from the fog lowering down upon his suburb. With a useless look for guidance in the rearview mirror, he backed the car steadily into the foggy street.

In the CD player was a classical music selection which his wife insisted he use to prevent road rage on his daily drive to and from work in Seattle. On his morning commute he was usually fantasizing about arriving at an office in flames; on his evening commute he imagined his pleasant white house with a note on the door that read, "Barry - I've decided to take a missionary trip to Zimbabwe with the church. There is no postal or telephone system to contact you through. Be back whenever we've erased world hunger."

His fingers scanned the radio for anything else. It rested on a classic rock station playing "Layla," the good version, not that watered-down version that all the easy-listening station killed. Jodi loved that one. He turned the volume to an almost painful level but pretended not to notice as he sped down the highway towards the city lights.

It was a 10-minute drive to the nearest Wal-Mart. Surely there would be something good enough for the kid there, he thought. He'd noticed that lately Steven had been playing with a lot of those intellectual toys, stuff that Jodi bought at that trendy learning store downtown: world map puzzles, "Write your own Dictionary" kits, chemistry labs... the list was frighteningly endless. Not that Barry minded that kind of educational stuff, but the other day Steven told him he'd scored a touchdown in kickball. His own father would have had him over his knee in two seconds for such a screw-up.

The Wal-Mart parking lot was busy for a Thursday night. Barry walked easily through the raindrops as he passed an overstuffed mother who was gripping and scolding a dishwasher blonde girl with dirty shoes. From the wet darkness of the parking lot, the fluorescent hum of the superstore actually looked inviting, despite the swarming masses of wet bodies huddled around the cash registers. He hated crowds, especially here; all of the screaming kids, nagging mothers, the beeping registers, crap knocked down in the aisles, and carts piled high with cheesy puffs and microwaveable white Castle hamburgers... usually he refused to go on shopping trips at all or just sat in the car while Jodi and Steven were sucked in by the superstore's tractor beam.

Declining a cart from the handicapped greeter, he made his way past the pyramids of generic ginger ale, and stacks upon stacks of Halloween candy in search of the toy aisle. Each step he took resulted in a collision with another body. Claustrophobia began to fill his lungs. He stood still creating a roadblock in the central aisle that served as an exit ramp for all household and apparel shoppers wishing to quickly reach the check out.

In front of him barged a burly man in black leather clutching a package of toilet paper. Behind came three Asian children running toward him and chirping unfamiliar words as their mother struggled behind to keep track of them. Barry took a leap to the left to avoid a three-way collision and found himself surrounded by women's lingerie.

Blood rushed to his cheeks and he quickly scanned the area for a way out. His embarrassment escalated when he noticed an attractive woman sorting through bras who had just noticed him. Barry took a nervous step back and ran into a rack, knocking down three nightgowns in the process. They made eye contact and both quickly looked away, the woman with a half-smile unhidden on her face. This is the last place I belong, thought Barry. He used to buy this kind of stuff for Jodi, back after they'd first been married, before Steven. God, she was pretty then. And sweet too. He could buy her lingerie from Wal-Mart and take her out to eat at The Pork Palace and they'd be happy! The thought of Jodi eating pork on a stick now made Barry nearly laugh out loud. Now she was only satisfied with a four-course meal at The Edgewater where she mingled with the doctors that passed through her reception area at work each day. Then on the way home she'd accuse Barry of checking out the waitress and being unsocial.

He searched the premise for an escape route. If he took a right turn at the socks and then went straight through that aisle of purses and hats, he thought he just might end up in eyesight of the toys. He took hurried, but cautious steps, careful not to knock anything down with his broad body. His eyes were focused on the gray carpet and didn't lose focus until he saw the glare of white linoleum, and he looked up to see a display of Water Ski Barbie's staring back at him.

With a sigh of relief he immersed himself in the land of G.I. Joe's and monster trucks. The overabundance of molded plastic took his breath away and for a split second he wished for Jodi. Should he buy an action figure? He had no idea what cartoons Steven liked... A football? But somebody would have to teach him to throw and his high school injury flared up once in a while... Barry hastily tried to recount what he used to get for birthdays at Steven's age. His dad pushed sports. His mom always gave ugly sweaters and raincoats. He used to help his grandpa with woodcarving....

"That's it!" Barry exclaimed aloud, causing a concerned mother to push her children out of Barry's way. A pocketknife! They could make birdhouses and shelves and, well, stuff with wood! And what would she think when she saw her precious eleven-year-old with a weapon?!

Barry rushed back through the purses and the hats and found the tiny section of accessories dedicated to men. On a shelf above children's reach were three rows of glistening pocketknives, ranging in size and complexity. Steven was young; a single blade would do, thought Barry, and he picked out a smooth black knife with a decent sized blade, perfect for carving. He turned the box over to read the price tag: \$17.99.

And then it hit Barry. He had ten dollars left in his wallet. Jodi needed some cash for her pedicure that morning and he'd handed it to her without a second thought. He refused to feel devastated by this sudden blow. Instead, he took the box that the knife was in, carried it in his hand and walked toward a row of winter gloves and scarves displayed at the end of a set of shelves. His left hand was buried in the scarves and was hidden just enough to allow him to take the knife out of the box and slide it down the sleeve of his white-collared shirt. Pretending to lose interest in the winter wear, he

skillfully placed the lid back on the box, and with a look of indecision and then a shake of a head, placed the box back where he had found it and walked away.

It was so easy! And he'd done it so effortlessly! The excitement pulsed through his body as he walked through the obnoxious crowds toward the bright beacon of the exit sign, careful to keep his left arm close to his side in order to conceal the weapon. No one had a clue.

He had almost reached the exit when he stopped, realizing he'd spent too long in the store to walk away without paying for anything. The handicapped woman only looked oblivious and was probably expertly trained to spot shoplifters. Besides, he owed at least five bucks to Sam Walton in return for this slap in Jodi's face. He made quick strides to the music department and by luck caught a glimpse of "Best Hits of the 70's," which evidently could be contained within five songs, one of which was "Layla," all at the cost of \$6.99.

He grabbed the CD with his right hand and regained his position in line, finding himself behind the attractive woman he'd embarrassed himself in front of before. She turned and recognized Barry with a reminiscent smile and glanced at his purchase.

"Nice choice," she murmured.

"You too," he said without thinking, noticing the pile of purple and red satin bras on the counter. This time she blushed.

Had he really just said that? Smooth. He couldn't help staring at the woman as he waited for a response; how wisps of shiny brown hair kept falling in her eyes as she scribbled her check hurriedly. He racked his mind for another follow up line. Maybe: How 'bout you give me a little fashion show in the back of my car? Or: I bet those would look even better on my bedroom floor... He smiled at this last remark and opened his mouth to try it on her, but she seemed to be avoiding eye contact. She tapped her pen nervously on the counter as she waited for the register to accept her check.

For a brief second the thought of using his own check or a credit card crossed his mind. Nah. No longer was he Barry Curtis, owner of MasterCard #4334 5221 0342 1205. He was Barry Curtis: professional Bad Ass, comin' at ya. The cool metal of his weapon began to warm against his speeding pulse. There was no turning back. He thought of Jodi and the satisfaction he'd feel when Steven opened the present. His eyes would be fixed on her, not the boy, and he hoped the shock would make her pudgy mouth fall open. Maybe later, after all the guests were asleep, he'd tell her how he'd shamelessly shoplifted the gift and how he'd already explained the details of the crime to Steven and had promised him they could shoplift something together that weekend. They'd start small: drug stores and gas stations. Maybe once Steven could drive they'd escalate to TV's and stereo equipment. Next step: hot-wiring cars. Lock your doors, fellow Americans, the notorious father/son dynamic duo...

"Sir, are you ready?" asked the cashier staring at Barry curiously under eyelids heavy with sky-blue powder.

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry," he muttered, placing the CD on the counter. She snatched it quickly. The knife stayed perfectly in place and his pulse barely quickened as he reached the climax of his crime. He looked to the automatic doors in front of him, the doors of freedom. For a split second he imagined the alarm blaring as he crossed the security sensors. Were there cameras on him right now detecting his anxiety? Suddenly

he felt so awkward standing with his arm pressed against his side. Surely anyone could tell he was hiding something...

"There ya go, hon," the eye shadow queen said indifferently. "You behave yourself tonight."

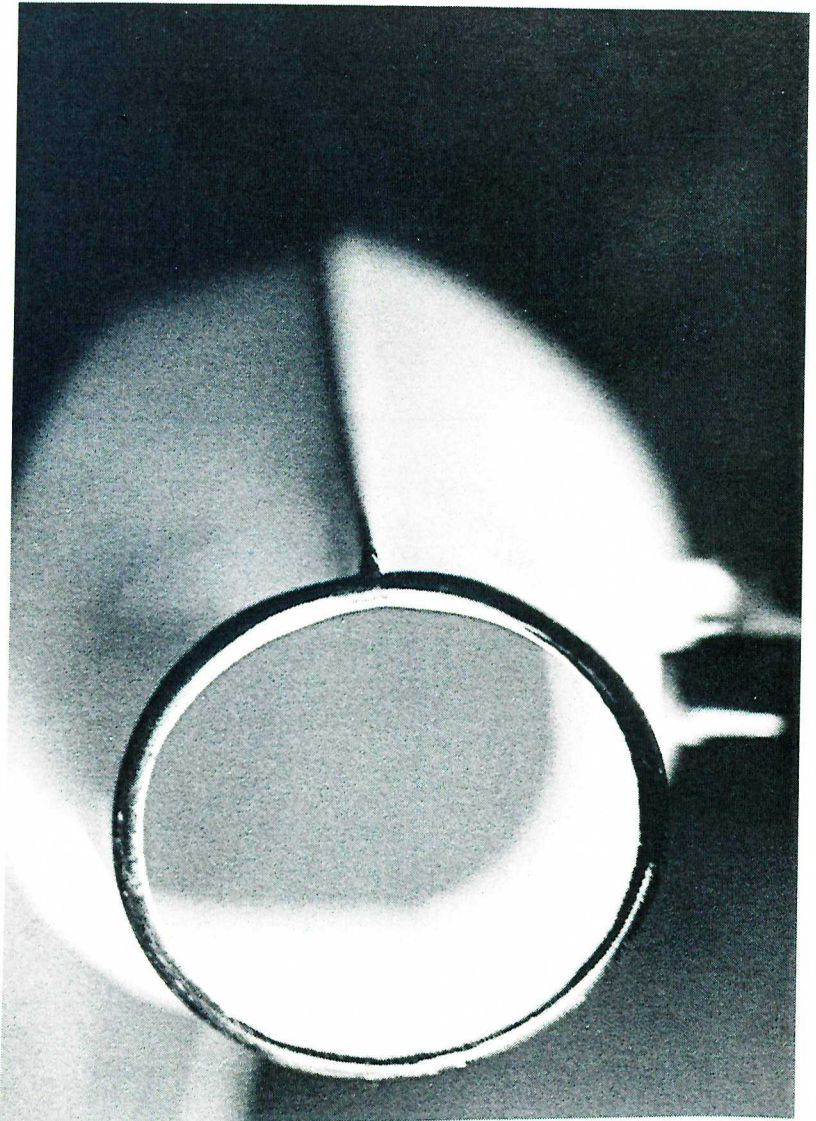
He gave a charming smile and an "I'll try," and walked towards the doors. With his approaching steps the automatic door creaked open and he took a huge step past the upright security detectors. Behave! Even the Wal-Mart chicks were flirting with him now! She must like rebels. Barry entered the freedom of the outdoors and took a deep breath of parking lot litter. For a split second he thought about going back inside for a pack of cigarettes but decided against it. Jodi could always tell when he'd been smoking in the car.

-Megan Alexander.



i'm missing you insanely
loving you ruthlessly
and finding you wickedly near
despite the miles
these trials, love vials
we're taught of perfect potions
and we're witnesses to the slaughter
by love's pure, pure swords
forgive me for justifying passion
cause someone once told me
that i have a screw loose somewhere
over the rainbow
out of my head
and i always thought it was
probably floating around in here
somewhere
clogging up arteries periodically,
choking up my throat,
and scraping my little dirty heart
yeah, something's ticking
you're clicking
and i'm picking away
kicking away
but it has to be done
love has to be done
and we
we never need to be
done
there's no ending to this sweet sacrifice
afternoon, no, lifetime delight
just tell me something
anything
and here i'll be
fighting for you
blind firefighter
fierce little kitten
you strike me silly
i'm stumbling
filled to a seeking
extent
and sucking up the light
i caught in the jar
on that random summer night

-Catherine Lewis



banshee

i sit amidst thick silence—
silence so complete that i can detect
the deafening sound of my beating heart.
thumping rhythmically an age-old primitiveness
like taut-skinned tribal drums.
it fills my ears—hot, heavy, pulsing.
i curse this organ for its steadfast reliability.

sadness ferments within me,
growing sour, fizzing, and finally, bubbling over.
i stuff a fist in my mouth;
a desperate attempt to discourage the sob—
the great banshee of a wail—
who threatens to rush forth and free herself
from the torturous caverns of my soul.
my whole being shakes and heaves.
i am utterly defeated in this battle,
to keep my sorrow as silent
as the vacuum of hope in which i cry

contorted features.
blood-red visage.
body writhing, wracked with invisible pain.
banshee smothered in a soaked pillow.

i cry until my tear-wells have poured forth their final buckets.
until my head throbs from exertion.
until the barrier-lump, my emotional dam,
has been utterly decimated by torrents of tears.

exhausted, i lie in the now-darkness.
chilled by my sweat-turned-cold.
silence resumes his tyrannical reign
and i find myself wishing for
not a silent death
but death by silence.

-E.M.

“Pray”

Anne knelt in the cathedral barefoot. She remained penitent before the cross, her knees hard against the cold marble floor and her head bowed up towards that harsh face. Jesus Christ, as she called him, implored her with his eyes, implored her to help him down, to take arms up against a sea of tyranny, to run from this place free... But Anne had no intention of doing any of those things. She clasped her fingers into locking fists, holding them before her heart, praying loudly without words. The other people who weren't there would have protested. They would have told her that such loud requests are only heard by the parents of martyred children. They would have told her she was a fool. But Anne kept her petitioning up because there was little else left to do. There was nothing else to do. So she prayed for Leslie

*

Leslie, auburn hair on her bicycle at ten. It was pink and flew like the wind and she didn't feel guilty. Streaked with mud and smiling, she laughed as they shot through the moistened creek bed. Her hands holding the handlebars like the safety bar on a roller coaster, and her heart singing because it had nothing better to do. She had not yet learned what crying really meant.

Later, as she lay here in the hospital bed, Leslie thought she understood better. Joshua, her husband of the last three years was dead, had died here only a few hours ago. She had come back to find him gone, and the bed empty, as she knew it would be. So she lay down to join him in rest if only for a minute. He would have liked her as a little child, she was certain of that. He would have played hide and go seek, tag, whatever came to mind. He was always willing to play her games.

She bunched the blanket up in her hands, gripping it like women always do in the movies and hoped that this time things would be better. She knew what crying meant now, she knew she knew now.

But at ten, kneeling in front of a small statue of St. Therese, the little flower, she didn't understand. They told her to pray for, Christine, her grandma. So she did.

*

Christine waited in front of the house. Charlie came for her today, or at least was scheduled to. She watched the rows of corn whisper to the soy field across the way. She listened to the sound of the golden sun raining down on them, and waited for him. He had taken her fishing two weeks ago, as he often did, and she stood barefoot on the rocks by the bank, flinging a line in. She had grace. Her hands nimble in the approach. He had been impressed and made love to her and she didn't think she understood why so she waited for him here today, because he was going to marry her many years from now after this dance was over and the town had grown so strong in their blood that they couldn't breath without speaking its name.

Christine saw the car off in the distance and waited for it. Tall, blonde hair cascading around her shoulders and back, sundress ironed, shoes in her hands, waiting for a light that wouldn't change, because that was her life. For a moment, she thought about crying, she could feel him there in that ancient tank of a car, coming towards her. Always moving towards her, but never arriving. At least he didn't turn around. He did have direction.

Then at eighty in bed, Christine looked out the windows, thinking Charlie might be sitting on the other side waiting patiently for *her* now. Today would be a good day to die, she thought watching the wind blow through the leaves outside. She prayed for the protection of her granddaughters.

Anne had reached such a flustered state that Father Mike thought he should remove her from the church. He had heard that her brother in law had just died, so soon after her own daughter's death. He wished he could help her, but his was not the place for that. Father Mike rested his hand on the head of Joan of Arc, flipping a mental coin.

Joan stood. Blood streaked her face and the sword fell again. She couldn't tell where the tears stopped and the blood began, they were both too warm, too real. "St. Catherine forgive me," she implored, feeling the lives going cold around her. So many threads being cut to wave loose in the wind. She shouted for her army to move forward, to press onward, and they followed her command. Joan was thirty now (an age myth would never allow her to become) and her back ached. How many times had she done this? How many more times would it take? She hoped that this at least made a difference, she hoped that maybe just once she had made a difference in at least one human life.

Father Mike's hand slipped off the statue and he walked away. Today he would allow it... but only today. After all, there was Anne's daughter to think of.

Samantha looked at the bright faces around her. It was Halloween, her favorite time of year. Her best friend, her mother, they were all pulling for her. She would compete in the biggest swim meet of her life tomorrow, with a chance at a championship, and they would be there to look at her and help her through it.

When her father had died of cancer, her grandfather had brought a piece of the "real" cross with him to try and stop the disease before it went too far. She remembered Aunt Leslie arguing about it, saying that it was foolish, but her mother hadn't minded, said it might help him through it. The old man took the hunk of driftwood (old from its years roaming the oceans of the world) and put it against her father's head. Dad died a year later, but that was the past and this was now. Her aunt's argument seemed long forgotten.

"Leslie, get out of the God damned bed!"

Leslie was screaming at herself silently, trying to make the muscles respond, but they wouldn't. She had been there when he died and he had said nothing. They always say something in the movies, or half of something that never gets finished, then things don't feel like they've come to a stop, just an end. Too many ends, too much family.

Anne knew she was losing it. She could feel the world slip away, her face locked on the image of her Jesus. He felt her, she could see that. The forlorn and serene look on his face. He knew that she would not heal from this properly, but that was what made her safe. In Matthew 5:5 it says something to the effect that one should always love their enemies and solve violence with peace. Anne didn't buy it, too many people die for that to be true. What did Matthew know anyway?

Mathue, the senior of the rabbi writing this text, liked that particular passage. He savored the peaceful message, so refreshing from the things usually thrown at humankind. So refreshing to hear that wars can be won with love. He didn't know if he believed it to be *actually* true, but at least *hopefully* true.

*

Joan wished this war could have been won in another way.
But Sam stepped out in front of the car's headlights and never saw them coming.
And Father Mike just figured his taxes one more time.
Even if Leslie *was* waiting patiently for the answers that didn't seem to be coming.
Though eventually her grandmother did get into Charlie's Chevy.
Because Anne had continued to pray to her deity.

*

Yeshu of Nazareth hung, tied by the wrists to this rude grouping of logs. He could feel the air constricting in his chest. This was such a horrible way to die. They'd thought up such horrible ways for us to be killed... *We'd* thought up such horrible ways. Yeshu saw his wife there, and their child. He saw the mish mash of followers watching him too. They were the only crowd, no one else caring. Just another Sunday execution. The nine men dying with him moaned loudly in protest, but he tried to stay silent for the family. He mourned for his wife.

*

Anne would give up faith right here and now if her prayer didn't get answered. She didn't even know what the prayer was anymore, but it was about Leslie, or for Leslie, and her sister would survive this. She would.

So Anne told Christ. She told him directly, "You will save her. Can you hear me!?"

*

Yeshu, dying at last, thought he heard a strange voice. He looked up, though his head no longer connected to his soul. Before him was a woman all in white, and she was saying something angry. Something about a sister and a family and the things that would happen to all of them a long time from now long after he had died in a hospital bed. Something about his daughter's death, and his brother-in-law. "Yes, I hear you," he grunted loud enough for the disciples to hear. And in that moment the apostle Paul shivered, catching a glimpse of two women.

*

They were in the garden again, the one their father had started all those days ago. She turned to face her sister, happy. "Do you think...?" she began to ask quietly.

"What?"

No prompting was needed to finish the sentence. "Never mind," she completed the thought, bending down to pluck a rose. She couldn't kneel with the rose forever.

*

Anne got up from the floor, her knees having left marks of perspiration. Jesus stared down from the cross no longer, his eyes having closed, or were they always like that? She didn't know anymore. The soles of her feet caressed the ground as she walked out among the pews, dropping her purse behind her. Father Mike would find it later. He would return it with the money still inside, after all, there was the loss of the daughter to think about.

*

Sam was fishing by her grandfather who was not dead. "Is this heaven or the past?" she asked him in the innocent voice of a child.

He only smiled at her, giving her a knowing wink, throwing his line back into the water to see what he would catch this time.

-Aaron Black

i look out my window
through the panes every morning now
and my front yard is a parking lot
that even my beat up Ford tempo
can not claim
i watched them ship in the campus border-grass
in perfect squares
and i thought, "wow.
imported grass."
imported grass
we must be special
pretty ritzy
or maybe these bulldogs just stomped on it
too damn hard last year
maybe it was contaminated
you never know
where they got it though
and i'm thinking it could be China
and for some reason.....
i think i'd like to do some stomping myself
'cause this new home of mine
has sidewalks that grow around the trees
and professors who speak
of poetry in Spanish
and corporate civil disobedience
and nothing i say could compare
to the way the grass here feels
under my toes or the way the sidewalk
chomps down our throats
and every morn it's these same sweet panes
showing off the asphalt
yes, the grass seems to be
stitched together now
but i still know how it was
i still know how it was

-Catherine Lewis

what an alcoholic
i brush away
with loneliness snapping
at my toes
not even vodka coating my tongue
i've got flip flops
flapping on my feet
and a million brew-heads
breathing through this campus container
but i sit here
alone
tucked away where
the orange juice isn't tainted
and the plaintiff isn't walking the crooked line
and necessity isn't calling me
no, company is not,
not tempting
what an alcoholic
i cry away
with Dr. Pepper
running lonely through my veins

-Catherine Lewis

My Computer

Blank

What happened? Everything's gone! I let you rest

And you betrayed me! Blinking lights, the power's on. But no response. I move the mouse and no response. I move the mouse and no response. A blinking line in the corner. I move the mouse and no response. How can I get through to you? The blinking line cries out, "I'm here! I'm here! I'm alive!" But how can I get through? The Windows, the icons. Where are you? You're lost! I need you Come back! The blinking line. The mouse. The blinking line. The mouse. No response. No response. Control-Alt-Delete. Control-Alt-Delete. Control-Alt-Delete? Control-Alt-Delete!

What tragic error has caused me
to take such drastic measures?

-Kate Grim-Feinberg



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that is very important.
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