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Creative Nonfiction edited by **Mark Ari**



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Issue Nine

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COVER
BY **MATHIEU ASSELIN**

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I'm glad Fiction Fix invited me to serve as guest editor for its special creative nonfiction issue. I had a great time. April, Chrissy, Alex and everyone made it easy, and I'm proud of the remarkable collection of work we put together. It feels...real. So polish your eyeballs and get a look at this.

—Mark Ari

Dessert & Sudden Death

by Kate Kaiser

At the time the idea of lunch with Dr. Raccuia made good sense to me. More than good sense – it was a big, bold idea, bright with the promise of an explanation for my husband's death, something my entire being ached for. Of course, I could have met the doctor at his office again, although my previous attempts to get an explanation that way had failed. But lunch with the liver surgeon – that was brilliant, because the very emblem of my relationship with Bob was food: Alsatian sausage at Armstrong's, two-inch Balducci veal chops topped with mushrooms and mozzarella, German rouladen with spaetzle and red cabbage, racks of tiny pink mutton chops, feather-light ricotta gnocchis in red sauce, grade-A D'Artagnan foie gras with fruit compote and buffalo steaks, perfectly toasted baguettes, one side topped with chunky homemade applesauce and the other dripping with melted blue cheese delivered to me in bed. No wonder I gained so much weight in the thirteen years Bob Kaiser and I were together. After becoming his widow I quickly lost those twenty pounds. What remained was the memory of a shared passion for food, and it's that memory that led me to invite the doctor to Capsouto Freres for a lunch that altered my thinking forever.

My husband and I met when I was twenty-four and working as a budget analyst for the Metropolitan Opera. Bob had spotted me on a New-Jersey-to-New-York commuter bus. He used to tell people: "I saw this vision of white. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and a white sweater-set welded to her thin body. She had a warm smile. It was like sunshine. I looked at her and said, this is the woman I am going to marry."

Bob, fourteen years my senior, had a sweet boyish face, little lips that stayed sealed when he smiled, brown eyes and brown hair. The solidness of his body attracted me, his thighs had the density of 100-year-old oak trunks. Bob could be very patient. He watched me on that bus for two months before making his move. I always sat in the front row if I could. The youngest of eight children, I had learned to grab a front row seat when it was available. On the hour-long trip from Glen Rock, I read the New York Times

or Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* when I wasn't writing in my journal or napping. One morning Bob sat in the front row beside me with *The Bonfire of the Vanities* on his lap. Bob had been a Broadway scenery shop owner for seventeen years.

He knew how to use props. I said, "Great book." Bob replied, "Just got it," and our thirteen-year dialogue began.

On our first date at Armstrong's, a dark wooded bar-restaurant near Lincoln Center with a long diverse menu written in beautiful calligraphic script, I remember Bob ordering the sausage platter with three different kinds of meat, accompanied with sauerkraut and sautéed apples. I don't know what I ordered that night, but the next time we went to Armstrong's I ordered



the sausage platter for myself and soon after suggested a dining-out rule: Bob would order any two dishes he wanted and we would share.

Three years after that fateful bus ride I accepted Bob's twenty-five cent vending machine engagement ring, a yellow plastic band with a red rubber stop-sign that read, "I'll Never Stop Loving You." We celebrated with dinner at Carmelita's, an Italian bistro in the West Village. Then we strolled arm in arm down Seventh Avenue to Capsouto Freres for dessert. Bob was never boring or predictable -- except when it came to dessert. He always ordered the homemade sorbet. As he blissfully spooned pear sorbet into his mouth and I ate my warm flourless chocolate cake we talked about our future alongside those French doors and the billowing white curtains.

Nine years later I sat in that same restaurant as a widow and asked a very different man the loaded question I had spent all week rehearsing: *What did you learn from Bob Kaiser?* His unexpected reply literally took my breath away.

Newly engaged, Bob and I moved into a six-thousand-square-foot artist's loft in Hoboken that needed fixing up. Bob with his stage-scenery background knew exactly what to do. He painted the walls white and the concrete floors evergreen, and laid out a thousand-square-foot open kitchen with a food-preparation island in the middle. He installed a long restaurant-style stainless steel sink against one wall, a six-burner Garland stove with a double oven, gas griddle and broiler against another wall, and added fifteen feet of butcher-block countertop with black wire shelving near the dining area. I fought Bob on the costs of the kitchen, but thankfully he won out because oh, the meals that man would cook for me in that space. I've not had Bob's chicken fajitas with balsamic red, yellow and orange peppers in nine years. But if I close my eyes and lick my lips I can still taste their intoxicating tang and today I'd seriously consider marrying on the spot the person who could replicate them.

Bob was not a trained chef. He'd worked in a Long Island deli through high school and college. On Sunday nights the deli owner, an avid hunter, trusted Bob to cook his freshly killed game, usually deer or pheasant. Bob regularly read the Wednesday food section of the New York Times and the Friday restaurant reviews. We did not go out to eat often because Bob's cooking was so good, but when we did, it was to some recently reviewed four-star restaurant that would cost us a couple of hundred dollars. With each bite Bob would study the flavors of the raved-about dish, ask the waiters some pointed questions to nail down the cooking process and the ingredients, and a week later he would reproduce the fifty dollar dish in our

home. People often said to Bob, "You should open a restaurant." Bob always replied, "That would take all the fun out of it."

Bob and I married on Thanksgiving Day, 1992, in our loft, surrounded by sixty family members and friends. The ceremony was followed by a huge turkey dinner, cooked by Bob, complete with all the fixings: sausage-cranberry stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, green beans almandine, roasted brussels sprouts, gravy and four kinds of pie: cherry, apple, pumpkin and pecan. Our marriage was the lead story on the local news that night, because we had rented a dozen video phones and Fedex'd them to friends who lived too far away to travel to New Jersey. The best man, Mark Scott, an old scenery buddy of Bob's, gave the wedding toast from San Francisco. (This was twelve years before Facebook and the proliferation of computers with cameras attached).

Bob loved to throw dinner parties. He would choose the people, plan the menu and order the gourmet meat from D'Artagnan, a supplier to top restaurants that delivered to our door. The reason for the party didn't matter, what mattered was that Bob was in the mood to cook. One Saturday night it was a twelve-course Italian feast for twenty-five: bruschetta, fennel tangerine salad, mussels in white wine, ricotta gnocchis in red sauce, twenty-five Rock Cornish hens, a half dozen other courses, and a dessert of freshly whipped zabaglione poured over fresh berries. I licked my bowl that night.

Another time Bob read a New York Times article by William Grimes, about people who threw great old-fashioned dinner parties. Fueled by goodhearted jealousy, Bob tracked down every person mentioned in the article and invited them to our home. Everyone came except the writer, who declined because he said he ate out too often. Our dining room table was three slabs of pink marble freckled with gray, surrounded by twenty black cloth director chairs, and that night every chair was taken. Bob served venison with a sweet cherry sauce and a mashed-potato dish (creamed red-skinned potatoes with the skins on) that he'd adapted from Cafe Florent. The guests were suitably impressed.

Another time my Mom had friends coming into town for a visit and she accepted Bob's offer to cook for them. Twelve over-sixty-five-year-olds sat around our pink marble table wondering what this amateur chef would serve. After the appetizer—fifty-dollar-a-pound grade-A foie gras with plum sauce—he brought out what looked like the tenderest of filet mignons with a slab of blue-cheese butter melting on top. After everyone raved about the meal and the plates were cleared, Bob took great pleasure in telling them they had just eaten—all of them for the first time—buffalo.

You would think that cancer and chemotherapy would have put a crimp in Bob Kaiser's appetite and sense of humor, but this was a man who had named his company Relentless Drive. The day after Bob's colon cancer surgery his surgeon, Dr. Paty, a dark haired man with a rugby-player physique, visited Bob's room. Looking down at his clipboard the doctor recommended that Bob walk four laps every six hours that day.

Bob, sitting up in his hospital bed as best he could, replied, "I've already walked ten laps three times this morning. Does that count?"

Dr. Paty peered over his clipboard with a smile, "I guess this makes you *The Iron Man of Colon Cancer*," he said, and a respectful friendship between the two men began.

One month later Bob began taking mass transit into New York City for his Monday night chemotherapy treatments. He never complained, only nicknamed himself Bob in a Fog. With good health care insurance the medical bills weren't a problem for me. What I worried about was Bob's route home, which took him past all the new gourmet food booths in the recently renovated Grand Central Station. He would stop and buy us a few goodies, such as chicken-apple sausages, German bratwurst and liverwurst, liver pâté, fancy mustards, sourdough bread, and little chocolate cakes for my sweet tooth. The weekly tab was astronomical, but how could you get mad at a man who planned to eat his way back to health after colon cancer?

Everyone at the hospital knew how much Bob loved food because to distract himself while they poked and pricked him, he would recount in great detail all the meals he had recently cooked. When he began bringing in plastic containers of some of his homemade specialties, like the German rouladen or ricotta gnocchis, the staff swooned. Eight months later, after completing his chemotherapy, Bob said, "I'd rather die than do that again." In celebration he decided to throw an End of Cancer dinner party for all the doctors and nurses and a few close friends.

A few days before the party we drove into Manhattan in our baby blue Econovan to do some food shopping. As I turned onto Second Avenue in the East Village Bob shouted, "Stop the van, Katie. We've got to go to the Second Avenue Deli and buy stuffed derma."

I asked, "What's that, honey?"

"A Jewish delicacy," Bob replied with great joy. "It's calfs intestines stuffed with a breadcrumb dressing."

My brow furrowed. "Why would you want to buy that?"

"Well," Bob said even more joyfully, "the colon surgeon cut my colon. At my End of Cancer party I think it's only fair to serve the colon

surgeon -- some colon!" Then Bob hopped out of the van with the energy of a school kid dashing into a candy store.

What surprised me most about the dinner party was that all the big city doctors and nurses trekked with their spouses to Hoboken on a hot July Saturday night. What exactly did that say about Bob?

He had a special meal planned for our twenty-four guests: beef in a black sauce, lobster in a white sauce. He arranged the sauces on black plates to look like the Ying Yang symbol. But before the big sit-down feast at our pink table, a huge spread of appetizers was laid out in the garden; bruschetta, blue-cheese balls, a terrine of pâté, extra sharp provolone on Hoboken's finest coal-fired brick-oven bread, homemade dumplings, shrimp cocktail and, sitting in the center of that spread, a platter of stuffed derma.

Dr. Paty filled his plate with appetizers, then walked back inside to talk to Bob, who was standing in front of the butcher block in the kitchen. When the doctor forked some stuffed derma in his mouth Bob let him chew a few times before saying, "Do you know what that is?"

"No," Dr. Paty replied, "but I like it!"

"It's stuffed derma," Bob answered. "Calves colon."

Dr. Paty's face scrunched. His chewing slowed down and he said, "Oh, really?"

Then Bob cackled the loudest I'd ever heard and said, "Gotcha!"

Six months after the End of Cancer party, the cancer returned; it had metastasized to Bob's liver. Bob put together a black three-ringed binder of his medical records and research. There were seven tabbed sections. He titled it:

The Iron Man of Colon Cancer

Research for Treatment

Liver/Smiver

This Cancer Must Die

He Fedex'd the book to his four primary doctors, expecting them to read it and figure out how to save him. A week later Bob and I were sitting across from Dr. Paty in his office. The three-ringed binder was on a shelf next to the doctor's desk. Next to it was the unopened magnum of champagne we had arranged to have shipped from Napa Valley for Christmas. Dr. Paty said, "We have to drink this together."

For the next hour I watched these two highly intelligent men talk about how to attack Bob's cancer. They both were pointing and analyz-

ing the x-ray of Bob's abdomen. On pieces of note paper the surgeon drew pictures of Bob's colon and liver and then added arrows. I felt as if I was watching two sports commentators talk about an upcoming game and all the plays each team might try. Then Dr. Paty touched his forefinger to his thumb, making a circle, and said, "This is the percentage of people who live past five years with what you have. I'd take drugs now, save surgery for the next round and then take drugs again." Bob nodded his head and looked out the now darkened window behind Paty's desk. Bob had hated chemotherapy. To him, muddying the mind was worse than losing a limb.

The following week Bob's older sister Anne, a brown-eyed brunette who lived in Chicago, visited us. Bob cooked for her one night and we took her out the second night for a fabulous meal at Bob's favorite restaurant, Lupa in Greenwich Village. Bob ordered saltimbocca, osso buco, ricotta gnocchi with sausage & fennel, pancetta brussels sprouts and sauteed baby carrots that were so sweet and tender they made you not want to share. Our forks crisscrossed all evening. Everyone's cheeks were rosy from the red wine. Bob confided to his big sister, "I just wish I could get hit by a Mack truck. I want a miracle or an exit."

Unhappy with Dr. Paty's recommendation, Bob researched different hospitals and found a Dr. Joseph Raccuia who worked at St. Vincents in Greenwich Village and specialized in liver cancer surgery.

Two weeks later Bob emailed his friends and family:

Dr. Raccuia will do a resection to my liver, remove my gall bladder and attack the lymph node system where cancer attaches itself. It is an aggressive plan. I will be in the hospital six to eight days. Please do not send flowers or any of that crap. If you cannot control yourself, make a contribution to a cancer center or donate some blood.

You never know, in the Chess Game For Life, you may be next! Black or White?

The weekend before the operation, at Bob's insistence, we took a trip to San Francisco to see his brother and enjoy Napa Valley. Work friends of mine gave me an envelope of cash so Bob and I could stay in a fancy bed and breakfast. My high school girl friend Megan (who had moved to San Francisco) gave us her frequent-flyer miles for the airplane tickets. On our last night in Napa, after a wonderful meal with Bob's brother Rick, his sister-in-law Theresa, his nephew Danny and my friend Megan, Bob and I went back to our inn with one thing in mind. Bob, who had the whitest, softest skin because he hid it from the sun, didn't love his jiggly body. He never

worked out and had a big belly. But that night he frolicked around our room naked, stretching his arms out as he told me stories. In the big jetted tub we took a bubble bath and in the blue canopied bed under the clean white sheets we made love for what would be our last time.

The next morning we slept in. Then we drove our rental car to Regusci Winery to pick up wine for Dr. Raccuia and to a gourmet grocery to pick up pâté and a crispy French baguette for us. On the ride to San Francisco Airport Bob got hungry. He lay a white plastic bag on the dashboard, took out his Handyman knife, and began slicing the baguette. After he had about twenty slices, he spread a hefty dollop of pâté and a brown-yellow swoosh of Dijon mustard on each slice, all while I was driving fifty-five miles per hour to catch our plane.

Just as Bob began eating an old friend of his called on his cell phone. Doug and Bob had worked together on Joe Papp productions in New York; now Doug was Scenic Designer for the Broadway revival of "42nd Street." Bob had not talked to Doug in a decade, but the cancer had made him want to get back in touch with his old theatre friends.

I remember turning my head frequently just to watch Bob's facial expressions, his rosy-cheeked smile as he reminiscenced about the good old days while snacking on his pâté spread. There would be big rolling laughter in between many "Do you remembers?" and then silence while Bob listened and then big laughter again. I had not been with Bob during his theatre days. He had given all that up and switched to a career in computers before we fell in love, and I think he had stayed away from his old Broadway buddies for the same reason a heroin addict stays away from the dope scene: to avoid being sucked back in. But now he seemed to revel in those memories. Fourteen hours later he lay on a cold silver table under some bright lights with strangers in scrubs all around him, while one of those strangers cut his belly open in a long-odds effort to save his life.

The surgery lasted eleven hours instead of the expected four to six. Bob didn't die that day, but something had gone terribly wrong because Bob never left the Intensive Care Unit. He died at the hospital seventeen days later.

I had Bob cremated and held a memorial service for him in our loft. The pink marble dining room table was covered with food from a local caterer: gourmet sandwiches, salads, cheese trays, paté and bottles of wine. Everyone was telling stories about Bob, but every-time the doorbell or phone rang that day, and for the whole week afterward, I realized I was waiting for something. I had sent Dr. Raccuia an invitation. Where was he? From the

day of the operation we had talked everyday for seventeen days. On the first day, when Bob was not walking around like he had after Dr. Paty's surgery, I told Dr. Raccuia something is off and he spent time with me in Bob's room, observing his patient and studying the charts for clues. To be released from the intensive care unit Bob had to have a bowel movement and his body was not performing. Every few days there was a new symptom to address with a procedure, then we all would hope for no new symptoms. At one point Bob's colon ripped open. They rushed him into emergency surgery and re-stitched. After that procedure Dr. Raccuia said, "I don't normally say this, but I think it's going to be alright." I had Dr. Raccuia's personal cell phone number, and as long as Bob was alive the doctor would call me back within an hour. The day Bob died we had a brief conversation on the phone and that was it. Not a word since. Shouldn't he have sent flowers? Shouldn't he be checking on me now?

Two days after Bob's service I called Dr. Raccuia's office and left a message. No answer for four days. I knew Friday morning was his quiet day in his office. So I drove into the city, parked my car nearby and knocked on Dr. Raccuia's frosted-glass door.

"Come in," he said. Dr. Raccuia, a petite man, was sitting behind his large brown desk. In his casual clothes of tan slacks and a white dress shirt without a tie, he looked startled at the sight of me and his eyes popped.

"I don't have an appointment," I said, "but I needed to see you today." Dr. Raccuia came around his desk and hugged me. We were two stiff boards, circling our arms around each other like loose ropes.

"Sit," he said and I sat down in his guest chair with the desk between us. I could feel him sizing me up. He asked me how I was doing. He wanted to know if I had family in the area and if I had a shrink. He told me about his own experiences with shrinks. Then he said, "I think I know what happened to Bob and I want to take an afternoon to explain it to you, but I can't today. I'm empty." Then he held up an empty plastic water bottle. "Like this, see?"

A few weeks went by. Then one night, after drinking some red wine that Bob and I had picked up on our trip in Napa Valley, an idea floated into my head. I said very slowly to myself, as if I were solving a math equation, *If Bob Kaiser made the colon surgeon eat colon, then I would make the liver surgeon eat liver*; and then I laughed this oh-my-goodness-that's-good belly laugh. Then I thought, *Bob Kaiser, are you channelling me?*

The next day I emailed Dr. Raccuia, "Do you eat liver?"

"Yes," he wrote back, "I love it and cook it often with onions. Even

my daughters love it."

How twisted I thought.

"Well, Bob taught me to love foie gras," I wrote back, "And I was thinking that when we have our discussion let's add some warmth to it by having it over lunch."

I called Capsouto Freres and confirmed that they had liver on their lunch menu. Dr. Raccuia agreed to meet me at noon on Friday, May 4th, forty-eight days after my husband's death.

When I arrived Dr. Raccuia was standing outside the restaurant in his white Izod shirt and khaki pants looking like an ordinary man, not the superhero of whom his colleagues said in awe, "In an operating room the knife dances in his hands."

We were seated at a table for four and to my right were the French doors with the billowing white curtains that I remembered so well from the night Bob and I were engaged. It felt bittersweet to be there without him. The waiter handed each of us a leather-bound menu, which we immediately began studying as if our lives depended on the choice we made. After a short while Dr. Raccuia asked, "So, what are you going to have?"

"I have to order the liver," I replied, "but I'm not sure I'll like it."

"Order the liver," Dr. Raccuia offered, "and order another dish you know you like and I'll eat the liver if you don't." I closed my menu. When the waiter arrived I ordered the calfs liver and veal scaloppine.

"Pellegrino?" Dr. Raccuia asked me.

I really want wine, I thought. *Bob Kaiser would have ordered red wine. But will wine make me less sharp?* "And a big bottle of Pellegrino," I said to the waiter before he trotted off.

In the bag that sat in the chair beside me I had six pages of questions for Dr. Raccuia that I had been writing and rewriting for weeks. I wanted to go over every detail of the operation. I wanted to understand what happened. I wanted my husband back.

We did the small-talk thing you do when you hesitate to tackle the really big thing you want to talk about. He asked me where the kids and I would be going that summer. The question made me angry. It assumed we had enough money to travel. He told me that his wife and kids went upstate for the summer. He visited them when he could, but he didn't like being away from them for weeks at a time. He was the cook for his family, just like Bob had been my cook. On Christmas Day he always made a goose dinner for his wife who was Scandinavian. On his way home after a day at the hospital he always picked up a carton of milk. Against all my expectations I liked

hearing him talk.

Our arugula salads arrived and we quickly emptied the plates. When the waiter placed the liver entree in front of me I looked at the dish with a feeling of revulsion. Whatever lay under those sautéed onions it was not velvety smooth, fifty-dollar-a-pound grade-A D'Artagnan foie gras. I took one bite. It was mealy and slippery. Dr. Raccuia read my face and said, "Let's switch plates." I exhaled and felt my spirits lighten. We talked some more, about his father, also a doctor, who was emotionally unaccessible, about his grandmother who taught him that "Dried shit doesn't stink," and about how whenever he went to New Jersey he shopped at Costco, "Because the paper towels are cheaper."

At the beginning of the third hour all that was left on our table was the empty Pellegrino bottle and our glasses. I had stalled long enough. I took out my six pages of questions and turned to Dr. Raccuia and said, "What did you learn from Bob Kaiser?"

Dr. Raccuia's eyes closed. He groaned. His fingers drummed on the table. Then he said, "That," and he firmly tapped the table, "is exactly," tapped again, "the right question," tapped a third time, "to ask," final tap. Then he looked me in the eye and said, "I no longer perform two surgeries in one day. It is too difficult to isolate the variables when there is a problem. I cut the only blood supply to your husband's first-surgery colon stitches, which caused that part of his colon to die. This is why he could not go to the bathroom and then the pressure caused his colon to rip apart. I now perform the lymph node and liver surgeries six weeks apart."

A gust came out my mouth. I doubled over. My arms wrapped around my waist and I rocked. I don't know where I went. In the weeks leading up to his lunch I had never thought about his answer. I had thought only about having enough courage to ask the question. He had just told me that he was responsible for Bob's death and I didn't know what to do with this information.

Dr. Raccuia looked distressed. He asked if I felt able to go on. I took a few big breaths and told him I could. On the back page of my questionnaire he drew a picture of Bob's colon and liver. "There," he said, "I cut there and that was the only blood supply when usually there are many." I couldn't believe my husband was gone because of one tiny misdirected snip. Bob had said many times, "I want a miracle or an exit. I don't want a slow drip death." Had Dr. Raccuia done him an unintentional favor?

For another hour we sat at the table as I went through all the other questions on my list. We talked at length about the mixed quality of the care Bob received in the hospital. But everything else seemed so inconsequential

now. It struck me that the famous surgeon had come to this meeting without a lawyer, willing to talk about his fatal mistake. Was this a sign of supreme confidence? In himself? In me?

On the way out of the restaurant, I grabbed some matches. Dr. Raccuia said, "You collect them too?" He got in a yellow taxi. I watched it drive away. I wondered if he ever cried over patients he lost. Then I went to visit our friend Chuck in his painting studio in Chinatown. I told him what had happened with Dr. Raccuia and then I sat and watched Chuck paint. While he worked, he talked about the co-existence of positive and negative space in a painting. He said, "A painting hopes to attain a perfect balance of negative and positive space; both need to be fully present, dancing with each other, for a great work of art to exist." I looked at him and said, "That's what Dr. Raccuia and I just did, but we did it with words."

For the next two days one word kept surfacing in my mind: intent. Dr. Raccuia didn't intend to kill Bob. He'd done the best job he could; I was convinced of that. But I also knew that a person's "best" changes from day to day. The only possible constant is our ability to learn from experience. Was that letting him off too easily? Or was my forcing him to confess to me a harder challenge than a lawsuit that could at worst increase his malpractice insurance? I wondered if he would ever forget the expression on my face when he answered my first question.

Two days later I sent the surgeon a note:

Dear Dr. Raccuia,

I chose to address this letter using your formal title instead of Joe because what you did on Friday deserves respect. Bob treasured the truth. You honored his spirit by revealing it. I honored him by asking for it. It was as good as it gets for us mortals.

When Bob and I went to California in February he went to the Regusci Winery specifically to buy you wine. Your strength, integrity and generosity with me earned this wine. Bob was a big roll-the-dice kind of guy. Maybe you were a gift to him making his exit quick and because you learned, you'll be a gift to the next guy who wants it slow. It is all in how you look at it.

Drink to Bob, a fabulous spirit, who will live on in the lessons we've learned.

*Warm Regards,
Katie*

She Can Have This Calf

by *Alison Bergblom Johnson*

I remember sitting in my Dad's office chair, which was ancient, having belonged to my grandfather before it belonged to my Dad, and looking on the web to make Dad and Boyd's travel arrangements to New York City. I found them a flight, a hotel by the airport, an Amtrak ticket to visit a college in Upstate New York. And then I sent them on their way.

Dad went over the chores carefully with me. Give this much grain to this group of yearlings, this much to the pregnant cows and heifers. I don't remember the whole of the details, just that it was March, and that I was expected to carry pails of feed across the yard. And I was to make sure that any cow or heifer who was calving was separated from the herd. There was only one Dad was worried about. She was a heifer about to have her first calf.

I talked to Dad and Boyd every day. They were probably only gone for about four days, but it felt like a lifetime. This was the time period during which it was pretty much impossible for me to get ready to leave the house in less than two hours. I would start with the simplest thing, with underwear, and then move on to the more complex. Finding jeans, a t-shirt, a sweatshirt, coveralls. This makes it sound as if it was simple, but the reality was that I would find myself fascinated with the cat, with the scene outside the window. Everything in the world was a potential distraction, and I was certainly distracted by it. I found that I couldn't just tell myself that I had to get dressed, I had to go through all the steps with myself, and in the middle of it I would see something else that seemed more interesting.

That afternoon, once I was finally ready to leave the house, being responsible for the farm left me feeling completely out of my depth. I went out and did the chores first, bringing feed in. I found the whole atmosphere around the cattle was different. There was tension, somehow. It was a moment to think of as fraught with something.

But, wait, before the heifer you have to understand the weather, there was snow everywhere. The gravel was frozen, and didn't give beneath

my foot. The dog loved me so much that she kept blocking my path and flinging herself towards me. Sadie was a big dog too.

When I went outside, I kept breathing in the air. Thinking this good country air should make me well. I believed that if I could only keep to a schedule I would be well. And it should not be a surprise that I thought this because this was what my aunts and uncles kept telling me. If I could only do something rigorous for a few hours and then rest for a few more, I was certain I would begin to slowly get stronger every day. But it didn't work that way. During this time, my few comforts were Rabbit, who was a stuffed animal, and the internet, and television.

Outside, breathing in the cold air, I was struck by how beautiful everything was. The snow covering the white farm buildings sparkled in the sunlight. The dog ran circles around me. We headed towards the cows and heifers. Immediately, you could tell something was up. The air was tight. I brought my pails of feed to the gate and carried them into the pen, after unhooking the chain that held the gate fast. It was big gate of metal tubular piping. It was of a certain type that my dad bought from Midwest Supply in Tracy.

As I was carrying the pails across the yard, I caught sight of a heifer hunched up in a corner with her tailhead up. I had to deliver my pails to the bunk, or they would get knocked over in the muck, so I couldn't go to her. I poured the feed into the bunk. Then I went up to the heifer.

"Hi," I said softly. "you don't look too happy." She does not answer me, refusing to be anthropomorphized. I touch her back gently, near her tail. "Come on, Hef," she needs to go up into the barn into a clean, dry pen. If she has the calf out in the wet, it will be much more likely to die. I walk her up into the barn, deciding to pen her across the center area. All the other pens are filled with cows and their newborn calves. I herd this heifer up into the barn. Once she is exactly where I want her I see that this isn't going to work. The gate I thought was fastened opens to her gentle nudge, and she

walks away from me, back out of the other side of the barn, back out again in the cold and wet.

I fix the gate. I go outside again, feeling so weary, I know I shouldn't be out doing this now, but there is no one else. This time, the heifer doesn't want to go into the barn. She simply refuses. She's seen the pen, and as large as it is, as nice as the straw is, she wants the relative freedom of the cattle yard. Every time I think I have her headed in the right direction she balks.

Finally, I leave and go get some grain in the palm of my hand, and I'm able to coax her back into the pen. This time my gate fails again. I've fastened the right side, but not the left. I felt like Sisyphus. So I fastened it. Then I try to think like a heifer, this is difficult because I'm not even able to think like a person. I move through the path I want her to travel, testing all the gates. They all hold. This time it is harder. The grain in the palm of the hand trick doesn't work this time. So I'm left slowly guiding her around the cattle yard.

Ever since I was head-butted by a cow when I was three, I've been afraid of cows. This didn't prevent me from showing heifers in 4-H. Though I was relieved when I quit, and I hated going to the state fair, I did this without letting anyone see my fear.

That day, I was so tired that I forgot to be afraid. A few minutes before I planned to go into the house and call Dad, asking what I should do, the heifer strode into my pen. Luckily, she hadn't had the calf yet. I went into the house, and took off only my Tinglies, which are rubber boot protectors, workboots, and coveralls. Then I collapsed in front of the computer, and read about Unschooling for two hours. I had to go out again and make sure the calf had been born. I suited up. This was helped by the fact that I was still wearing most of my outdoors clothes.

I went outside, crunching through the snow. Feeling the slip of the rubber Tingly against my heel because they were my dad's and too big for me. I opened the small door into the barn. I walked inside and shut it behind me, shutting Sadie out. She whined at me from the other side. I walked inside. The heifer was no longer hunched up. She was standing, as pregnant as before, inside her pen. There was no calf yet. This meant I had to call the vet to pull the calf.

I went into the house, found the phone book, and called him. There was no answer. Finally, I called my uncle Brian. Brian called the vet and came over. While we were waiting for the vet to come, Brian strode around the barn, putting in new lightbulbs, until it was bright and cozy. I stood there thinking, why didn't it occur to me to do that? Sadie barked, announcing the

arrival of the vet. He came into the coziness and looked at us, blinking away the cold air that had come in with him. I told him what I had done, omitting that it had taken me an hour to pen a calving heifer.

He went and took a look at her. When he came back to me, he said, "She can have this calf." "But I found her calving at 4, and it's 8 now." The vet nodded. "Can you save the calf?" I asked. I knew how valuable every new calf was.

"Let me think," said the vet. I had forgotten he was a man of few words. I stood anxiously in the cold night air, outside the door, while he went back in. He came back out again. "I'll need to pull it." I don't ask again if he can save the calf. I don't want to hear that he can't. That night, the calf's survival somehow became intertwined with mine, and I believed that if the calf could be born, survive, prosper, then so could I. And if not? Well then I would shrivel up, probably not die, but live like this forever.

The vet got some equipment from his truck, and pulled the calf; Brian and I stood watching. The calf didn't move at first, the vet stood it on its feet and got it to nurse, though. We all left the barn. Brian and I and the vet stood talking for a few moments out in the cold outside the barn, kicking our feet back and forth to stay warm. Both Brian and the vet drove away, and I stole back into the barn and watched the calf nurse from its mom, who was no longer a heifer, but a newly minted cow.

What I Didn't Know

by Jewel Beth Davis

The psychic led me into the back room of a shop in Portsmouth, New Hampshire that sells essential oils, artsy cards, and Indian prints. The room was empty except for an amber-colored, oblong wooden table and two chairs. Several boxes of merchandise stood piled up against one wall. The clairvoyant was a perfectly normal looking middle-aged woman with no outstanding features and a mundane name, Jean Parsons. If I was paying for kitsch, I wasn't getting it. I told her there was a missing relative in my family that no one will discuss, a family member I just learned about recently.

Sometimes I believe in psychics and sometimes I don't. I don't know how I feel about this particular seer. I was just so desperate to discover something about my Aunt Celia, my father's sister, whom I'd never heard about until I was in my forties. The psychic was the only person who would speak with me about the subject. I was enraged with my father and my Aunt Pauline for keeping someone from me who was my family member. I was frustrated with my brothers for their lack of interest in this unknown family member, and from my point of view, their seeming insensitivity to my needs and feelings about it. If they didn't care about it, then apparently it wasn't important. To whom else could I turn but a stranger?

Jean shuffled the cards and laid them out on the scratched wooden table. "I see someone standing beside you who says she's your family member. She's just behind your shoulder. She's tall and slender with long auburn hair and dressed in outlandish clothing from a long time ago. She looks very dramatic. Is that anyone you know?" she said, pointing to one of the cards.

"No."

She went on, tapping another card, "I don't know if she's the family member you're asking about but she's laying out photographs of family members all around you. She says soon you'll be surrounded by photos of family members."

I felt a deep chill seep into my bones. I could imagine the photographs everywhere around me, but I couldn't see what they depicted. I

didn't know why there were so many photos around me but it didn't feel like a good omen. I felt oppressed by them.

"Have you been looking at old family albums or do you have a lot of family photos displayed around your home?" Jean asked.

I hadn't.

"I don't believe she's the missing family member. She's shaking her head no," Jean seemed to be in the room with me and yet not. She shook her head as if mimicking the relative she was seeing, or perhaps she was trying to clear away the ectoplasm so she could see more clearly. "I don't know if your missing relative is alive but I'm getting Southern California for some reason. Does that make any sense to you?"

It didn't. It didn't make sense that if Celia were alive, that a seventy-five year old Jewish woman, whose only connections were in Brooklyn, would have migrated to California. I thanked her and left the back room feeling terribly uneasy.

There were such big holes in my family's stories. There were photos of Dad with his brother Willy and others with his sister, Pauline. There were pictures of my grandfather sitting in a chair with a curled-handled cane looking lonely and enervated. There were no photos of everyone together and only one photo of Dad's mother when she was young, about sixteen, and one at her wedding. The only pictures of my parents' wedding show the outside of an apartment building and they were both dressed in suits. No gown, no flowers, no tux. No parents of either one. No joy. I never thought to ask about it. There were things like those photos that never made sense, beginnings and endings that never matched up; middles that didn't exist or refused to come into focus. I felt as if I never had firm ground to stand on. People behaved in ways that were incomprehensible. As it turns out, there were reasons, good reasons, for many of the attitudes and actions that seemed irrational.

Eve in the Garden of Eden was trying to tell us something very important. Ignorance is not bliss; it is ignorance. The word has as its root, to ignore. To look away from. Not to know. Secrets are insidious; you can't quite put your finger on what effects they have. They're more qualitative than quantitative. Even if you don't know your family has a secret, it is present in your home and in your life, stealing your sense of well being like a worm in the bowel.

My father died when I was seventeen and we mainly lost contact with his side of the family from that point on. My mother carried a grudge towards my father's family, specifically my Aunt Pauline, Dad's sister. Neither



Aunt Pauline nor my grandfather attended Mom and Dad's wedding. No one ever said whether Uncle Willy or any of Dad's cousins came. According to my mother, Pauline did not want my father to marry my mother. Mom would never say why. There had to be more to it. About ten years ago at my Auntie Yetta's funeral, after both my parents were gone, my Auntie Sylvia told me that my mother, Fran, was pregnant with the twins before she and my father Bernie married. One secret unearthed. Now it all begins to fall into place. Dominoes all click-clacking perfectly in a row as they fall. Aunt Pauline likely disapproved that my mother had premarital sex and may have thought Dad shouldn't buy into a shotgun marriage.

"Bernie," I can imagine Aunt Pauline saying, "She's a tsatsky, a tramp. She's older than you and desperate. She lied to you about her age and now she's tricked you into marriage by getting pregnant."

"But she is pregnant. With twins," my father says, "And they're my children."

"You owe your family more than you owe that woman. I can't afford to care for both Pop and Willie without you."

"I'm not backing out of this wedding. Are you coming or not?"

It was not. Nobody came from my father's side. My mother watered and fed that grudge over a lifetime and so, for most of our lives, we remained disconnected from my father's family.

When we went to college, and out of my mother's watchful presence, Pauline contacted my brothers and me. All three of us began to spend time with her. It angered my mother. She said we were betraying her by having contact with her enemy. I couldn't help it; I hungered for the last possible contacts with my dead father. I wanted to spend time with people who knew him before we entered his world. Pauline never said much about Dad or Willie. She preferred to talk about the present. Just as my mother did. She and Pauline had more in common than either suspected.

In the early 1990s, I was on the phone

with Aunt Pauline, who'd lived in Brooklyn all her life. Both her brothers died many years earlier. I expressed interest in our family tree and she mailed me her version of it. So many names. Families of sixteen and twelve. Where are they and all their descendants now?

Pauline began the story of my grandparents living in Columbus, Ohio with their children in a large mansion. Yes, a mansion... really. She sent me an old black and white photo of it. The photo was hazy but it looked white with black shutters, two to three stories high and spread out from one end to the other, with an enormous green expanse blanketing the front. Someone had to mow that. I pictured my father who was a teenager doing it. My grandfather, Mayer Davis, was a developer of tall buildings. Bernie, my dad, always told us that there were still structures in Columbus with the Davis name on them. I'd never seen them. When we were older (I was ten or eleven), he told us that our Zayde Davis (Yiddish for grandfather) and his partner lost their entire fortune and their business in one day, the day the stock market crashed in 1929. Not an unusual story for that era. I asked very few questions of either parent about their personal histories because when I did ask, I received terse, vague answers. My father said that Zayde's partner jumped off one of their buildings. I often wonder why I never asked him for more details. I was not the kind of child who hung back, afraid to open my mouth. Still, this was the one and only secret my father ever shared with his children. As it turned out, he had many more.

It never occurred to me until this moment what that must have been like for my father. I never knew my father or his family to be anything but dirt poor. I didn't know anything about Mayer, my grandfather, other than he was "unwell" and never worked again from that time until his death. Dad must have been about sixteen at the time. Did his father tell him and the other family members the terrible news directly? Were there hushed discussions behind closed doors that my father listened to with his ear pressed against the wall? Did he panic when he discovered the truth? Did he become numb? The family was extremely well off, living in this monstrous house. They had servants. Now, after the crash, they were penniless. All their resources had been in banks and in investments. All of this was now gone. Evaporated into thin air. They would have to move. Where would they go? Where else could they go? Brooklyn, NY, where most of my grandmother's sisters lived. Where the concentration of Jews living together was so dense, it must have been like returning to the shtetl in Russia. Where Yiddish was the ubiquitous language. Where women wore thick scarves to cover their heads. Where the ragman drove a wagon pulled by his swayback horse and

the iceman brought ice in blocks.

"So," Pauline says, "we packed up a few belongings that didn't have to be sold to pay my father's business debts and my parents traveled with all four of us children across the country to New York."

Wait.

"But there were only three of you," I said. "You, Dad, and Uncle Willy."

Silence.

"Did I say four? I meant three." Pauline's words rushed out like a whooshing wind through the phone lines.

"No, no, you didn't," I said. "You said four and I think you meant four."

More silence.

"I didn't mean for you to know. I never wanted you to know," Pauline said. I could hear the anxiety building in her voice, her tone the verbal form of hand wringing. I think she did mean for me to know. Maybe she couldn't bear not to tell someone in the family.

"Tell me. Who was this other child? What happened to him? Or her?"

Daddy never mentioned having another brother or sister. Why wouldn't he tell us? Why didn't you?" All the questions poured out of me, cold water out of a pitcher. I tried to absorb the shifting of who and what my family was.

Pauline began to cry. "I can't talk about this."

"Please Aunt Pauline, you started."

"Alright already. Your father had another sister besides me."

Can this be true?

A long pause. "Her name was Celia."

"Celia," I said, trying the name out. "Celia Davis. Where is she now? Is she still alive?"

"No, of course not." Pauline sounded as if I'd accused her of something. "She died. Many years ago. I don't remember when. Soon after we'd arrived in New York."

You don't remember when your own sister died?

"She was the third child. Before Willy. There was an accident."

I couldn't imagine myself not remembering the details of the death of one of my siblings, no matter how long ago it was.

Again a pause. "She was ice skating. In Rockefeller Center. She fell and hit her head."

"How old was she when she died?" I asked.

"I don't remember...about twenty-one."

You're too sharp not to remember.

I knew I still wasn't getting the whole megillah. "How long was it from when she hit her head to when she died?"

"A couple days," Pauline said. "Now, I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"But..."

"I told you. It was very painful for us all. She was young when it happened. We didn't want to talk about it. It hurt us too much. Now please no more."

I never got anything else out of Aunt Pauline about Celia. I brought it up in our phone calls hoping she'd soften and open up. I wanted so badly to know the truth. She refused to discuss it, repeating that it was too painful to talk about.

I was frustrated and spoke about it to my friends.

"Do you think she was mentally retarded?" Sue said as we sat having tea in her kitchen. "People didn't talk about that openly back then."

On the phone, from the Berkshires, Jackie offered her thoughts. "Maybe Celia was mentally ill and they had to put her away in an institution. People in those days were always covering stuff like that up."

BJ, another friend, offered this: "Maybe she married someone out of the religion or someone of a different color. You said your grandfather was fairly religious, even though he wasn't Orthodox." My grandfather might have, but I absolutely could not see my dad, Aunt Pauline and Uncle Willy turning their backs on a sister for that reason.

When I broached the topic with my brothers, I thought they'd be as outraged, as curious as I was. In separate conversations, they both said essentially the same thing.

"No, don't be ridiculous, Jewel," my brother Buzz said. "That never happened."

"I'm telling you, it's true. Aunt Pauline admitted it."

"I don't believe it. She's making it up. She's f'blungit" (mixed-up).

I held my ground.

He said, "What difference does it make even if it's true? We didn't know about her. She wasn't a part of our life. Dad didn't want her to be. It's ancient history. It's over. How does it affect us?"

But of course it does affect us. In ways we already know if we look. Years of family depression and anxiety on both sides of the family. Passed

down to the next generation. Hospitalizations. Serious neuroses. High cholesterol and high blood pressure. Early deaths from heart attacks and cancer. Bad backs in the women. Things that would have been helpful to know in treating some of these painful conditions. Something to prepare for.

I couldn't believe his response. This wasn't some long lost fourth cousin from the old country. This was Dad's sister. Like I'm his sister. I could never imagine him not speaking of me to his wife and kids.

Then there was my brother Mike who said, "Mom had a first cousin named Celia. Maybe that's what you're thinking of. There's no Celia on Dad's side of the family."

At this point, I just wanted to murder everyone in my family—Aunt Pauline, my brothers, even Celia, who was supposedly already dead. Why was everyone acting like I was some crazy person making all this up? Why wouldn't anyone discuss it rationally? Wherever I went to talk about it, the discussion snapped shut like a trap.

At this time, my mother was already in her early eighties and in a downhill slide. I spoke with her about it casually because I didn't want to upset her if her own husband had chosen not to share something so important. She had no idea what I was talking about. She said she'd never heard of another sister and didn't recognize the name Celia as anyone in the Davis family. I decided not to push it. Maybe she knew, maybe she didn't. Either way, with my mother's propensity for cover-ups, she would not have admitted it.

And that was it for a very long time. No one in my family would talk with me, and as far as I knew, there was no one else on Dad's side of the family still living that I knew how to get in touch with. What could have been so terrible? Had I the financial resources, I would have hired a private detective. I didn't. Instead, I went to a psychic.

And that was that for several years. I felt angry with my parents and my aunt for withholding. My frustration about this situation never abated.

Then I got a phone call from my brother Mike. My Aunt Pauline had had a massive heart attack on the searing summertime streets of Brooklyn. It was the end of August and my aunt, who had a generous pension, was comfortable financially, refused to spring for an air conditioner, and had walked in 98-degree heat to an air-conditioned movie theater. She keeled over on the sidewalk and wasn't breathing for about three or four minutes until the paramedics arrived. The doctors believed she was most likely brain dead. She was being kept alive by machines. They wanted to know who had

Power of Attorney and what we wanted to do. My brothers wanted me to go to New York to deal with this matter since I was the closest in proximity.

Pauline had no power of attorney, she had no living will, nor any will at all. So I made trips back and forth to NYC from New Hampshire. I wanted to do this because I'd spent more time with her than either of my brothers had. I wanted to make certain that everything would be handled with integrity and dignity; that I would try to do for her what she might have liked for herself, though if I were honest with myself, I had no real idea what that was. After three months on a respirator, Pauline passed away as soon as the doctors shut it off, without consulting us. Again, I felt powerless and frustrated. At least I'd spent time with her, holding her hand and letting her know that I was there, that she wasn't alone. Something I hadn't been able to do for my Dad.

The glorious outcome of all this angst was that I met my most marvelous family member. Florence, my father's first cousin. Her mother and Dad's mother had been very close sisters. Until now, I hadn't even known of her existence.

Florence was a woman of energy, color, style, tremendous strength, and independence. She was the first positive female role model I'd ever met in my family who didn't base her identity on her children and husband. She exuded a creative spark. At eighty, she was still working full time, running the office of a large synagogue in Manhattan. The Rabbi had a crush on her. Who could blame him? She personified pizzazz. I drank her in like lemonade on a summer's day. I saw her every chance I got considering the distance between New Hampshire and NYC, and I called her every week. She accepted me unconditionally and loved me. She never criticized me. For that, I'm grateful.

It was in spending time with Florence that I first learned the truth about Celia. One day, just after Pauline went into the hospital in Brooklyn, we were driving back from the hospital to Florence's apartment in Riverside. We drove across the Brooklyn Bridge towards Manhattan. The bridge was so high it felt like the atmospheric pressure changed. People were zipping by me so I couldn't take the time to gaze at the scenery. I felt a little dizzied moving over the top of this mammoth structure that wasn't grounded but floated over the land. Suspended in the air over the bay in our metal bubble, I began to talk about how frustrated I'd been about the subject of Celia Davis and the whys and hows of her passing. I asked Florence if she knew.

"Yes, of course. She was my first cousin. Our families were always together," she said. "I can't believe it. So, they kept it a secret all these years."

There was a short silence and Florence breathed out an audible breath and spoke. "She committed suicide." She let that sink in. "Right around the same time your grandmother, your father's mother did." She paused once more. "And my mother." She let that hang in the air.

Oh my God. Three, I thought, three close family members. Took their lives. All around the same time. Dad's mother too. That's why no one talked about it.

At least now I knew. The mystery was over. I didn't have to imagine possible scenarios anymore. Celia had killed herself. My grandmother had killed herself. My great aunt had as well. Somehow, the reality was nowhere near as threatening as my imaginings had been. Anything that is known is bearable.

I wondered whether it was connected to my grandfather losing all his money in the Crash. But that wouldn't have affected my great aunt. Florence didn't have many details for me. She knew her mother had used pills. She thought Celia and my grandmother had as well. She couldn't remember the exact time period or hiatus between the three deaths. It must have been so terrible for the whole family. My father must have been so sad for a long time. I can't imagine burying three family members unnecessarily within months of each other. I felt the shock as if it had happened recently. And Pauline had lied to me. That was confirmed.

"No, there was no ice skating accident," Florence told me. "They were very depressed. I don't know why. It ran in our family."

That I already knew. I remember Dad driving the family to a psychiatric hospital somewhere in New York State, so he could visit his brother Willy, who was deeply depressed, while we waited in the car. I remember Dad staying home from work for three weeks because he was so depressed, he wasn't able to function at all and Mom caring for him until it began to lift. She said he wouldn't go for help. I remember Mom saying to me, "It was that family; they all had it."

So I had my answer, and with it, a measure of peace. And in some small way, I had my Aunt Celia back. I could talk about her with Florence and I could establish her existence and demise with my brothers.

Despite Florence's corroboration, Mike and Gene continued to doubt.

"I think Florence must be mistaken, Jewel," my brother Mike said. "Or you misheard her."

"There's no point in talking about this," my brother Gene said. "What good have our relatives ever brought to us?" I was nonplussed by his

attitude. If he felt this way, there was nothing I could say to convince him otherwise.

Then came the moment that my brothers could no longer deny her.

It was the day after Pauline's funeral in a Jewish cemetery just over the line into Long Island. Pauline's landlord grudgingly let us into her apartment, tiny and dingy, cramped with boxes and bags, ancient junky furniture, dust and mildew, still-tagged never-used clothing, untold yards of sewing material piled to the ceiling. Thirty-five years of it, nothing thrown away. Horrifying because it was so unexpected; her person was immaculate. And so depressing. Like all the air and light had been sucked out of the place.

Gene missed it. He'd already flown home to California, having fulfilled his obligation, leaving Mike and me to cope. We had to pack the entire place up in one day and dispose of it all with only Florence's help, and she was eighty.

Mike and I came upon box after box of photos. We spread them on the bed, fanning them out like decks of cards. And then I remembered what the psychic had said. Here I was surrounded by hundreds of pictures. Members of my family, some of whom I'd never met, visiting me in photographs.

Mike and I came upon an achingly beautiful 8 by 10 of my father when he might have been twenty. It took my breath away. All the feelings I'd stored away in some far corner of my emotional attic crashed like water through a dam. My brother choked up.

"Oh, Mike," I said, "Daddy was so handsome."

We both began to cry.

"Get back to work," Florence ordered, a drill sergeant. "We have no time for tears." She was right of course. Still we looked at the pictures like thirsty dogs lapping at a pond.

And then we saw them. Picture after picture of the four children together in homes and apartments, at different ages. Four children, not three. Dad, Willy, Pauline and Celia. Picture after picture of Celia. Celia who looked dreamy, staring off, and a little bit not of this world. She was slender and attractive, with very large eyes, a cross between Dad and Pauline.

There was no denying her existence now. My brothers would have to acknowledge she was a reality, though I doubted they'd ever talk about it again. We saw drawing after drawing and paintings signed by Celia; she was an artist. She had talent. It all fell into place for me. She was the missing piece. I'd never before fathomed where Gene and I received our artistic talents from, both acting and painting. Now I knew. And there we were, just

as the psychic predicted, surrounded by old photographs, and lovely women in old clothing from another time.

Looking at all the photos of Celia with my dad and others makes me think about images of my father. In my memories, he was only home to eat, sleep and watch TV. But that can't be right. He took us to my mother's sisters in Worcester and Fall River every other weekend or so. I remember him coming to most of my recitals and all of my plays. But I don't remember the two of us doing anything together, just on our own, except he brought me to work with him one day. Even more disturbing to me, past a certain age, I don't have any memories of our talking, except in anger. I do remember him threatening to send me away because I wouldn't stop crying one night. I was so frustrated I pushed everything into hysteria.

I know nothing of his father and mother, his growing up years, his siblings, or what happened to him in the army during the War. I don't know who he was as a person, other than what he looked like from the outside. It is all holes, vacuums, and empty spaces. I wanted that connection, to know him, to be close. To think of him in ways other than hostility and resentment. To be able to love him again the way I did when I was little and he was my hero. That's why it was important for me to investigate these secrets until I knew the truth. At least most of it.

You could have told us, Dad.

It would have explained so much about him. About why he was such a part-time father, often disconnected. Why he was in such pain. It would have been easier to love him and be less angry. I was so angry. Furious with him. And with my mother. For everything they didn't say. For everything they did.

Now we're not ignoring, looking away from. Now we're looking at. Now I know his secrets. I know my mother's. The hiding is so ugly. It is uglier than the secret. I feel the resentment still simmering in my heart. I never knew my parents. Not as people. I lost my father at seventeen but I don't think his living would have made a difference in what he revealed. I lost my mother as a grown woman. She tried to take the secret of her premarital pregnancy to her grave with her. It didn't work. Someone whispered the secret to me. Secrets are meant for whispering. They're ugly so they try to hide. The truth is meant for shouting. It is beautiful and it knows it.

Linea Nigra

by Margarita Meklina

I

First calculation, then calcium. Fetus and figures.

I figured out the day of my ovulation, measured temperature—and then strengthened my spine, spirit and stature with folic acid and calcium tablets in preparation, and calculated your due date.

Several days of elevated hopes and temperature had passed (you were already conceived) when I learned that your great grandfather had a grave form of cancer.

At ninety five, in a hospital bed, he was calling his *Yiddishe mommele* who had a wise look, a light complexion and the last name of Lightman, the one who luckily perished from illness in Byelorussia before the Nazis came to their place.

He lived through it all: waking up to hymns and hypocrisy on the radio, watching carefully prepared, crafty parades on TV, walking with fake and folksy factory workers waving Soviet flags.

Your great grandfather lived through all that and then, following his adventurous, adulterous kids, each with two wives (a live-in, right-in-your-face and a secret one "on-the-side," the one for whom business trips were invented), came to the U.S.

In California his skeptical self embraced Capitalism and capitulated to cancer.

That's what we assumed.

Stubborn and strong as he was, he could not be eradicated by extraneous forces (such as famine or fascists during World War II, or a freak accident later, when at ninety, on a cold rainy night, with a backpack on his shoulders, he was hit by a bus): with his outward strength toward the world, he could only be destroyed by himself, by his home-made cancerous cells.

And as soon as I knew that you'd live, I foresaw his impending imminent death.

Fetal movement or quickening, a manifestation of a quickly growing organism—and the fatal moment, the agony, disintegration.

That's—I foolishly thought—how life is.

2

And those butterflies... Your Italian father learned a new expression from me: butterflies in the stomach, a fragile feeling we both felt when we first met.

He strolled around an abandoned gas station with me, very serious in his suit (which, as I discovered later, he wore only a few times, favoring T-shirts of his beloved rock bands), and carried in his hand a cup with steamy espresso from a coffee house where we planted our blind date (the editor suggests "planned" but I'm talking about planting a seed of the date that in one month sprouted marriage). The cup was his protection: something to cling to, to clutch in his hand. To get a hold of what was awaiting to happen. If we were in the nineteenth century which he, a history buff, dug, quoting the luminaries of that time with the same ease and elation as modern mammoths of history monographs, he probably would be tightening his grip on a rapier.

He was a large thirty-nine-year-old man, strikingly athletic and sturdy, with a Wild West streak sending him successively to all six continents, but weak in his heart, which started accelerating, legs walking slow and giving way, when he saw me. With his full yet not flabby calves and a pronounced, disproportionately large head, he reminded me of a gigantic infant.

Yes, he looked like a baby. And when a would-be baby in a womb moves, the sensation its mother experiences is sometimes referred to as "butterflies in the stomach." It's those tender taps of a thin yet stiff butterfly's wing against a womb's soft walls.

No wonder this story begins with a calculation—there is an arithmetic to life: at eleven gestational weeks, you were around three inches, at seventeen—six, but the quickening was supposed to start, according to a pregnancy book, when you scored eighteen-nineteen. Orchestrated by two skipped heartbeats (I came to a standstill sensing something unusual), it happened before: I felt you move when Yitzhak Perlman went on stage.

We did not surmise that somebody who played such empowering music could be so handicapped. Still, there was no contrast between his musical prowess and physical powerlessness (affected by polio, Perlman laboriously entered the stage relying on crutches). On the contrary, shiny steel "legs" seemed to give him more weight.

You did not move when he, purposely oblivious of the awestruck audience, casually walked to his chair. But right when the violin replied to his touch, I felt the butterflies.

The butterflies...they were there the day I first met your Italian father, and they reappeared, five years into our marriage, when you wanted to remind us of the beauty of love.

3

Linea nigra is a black line, a pigmented path, which runs from an expectant mother's navel to her pubic bone. When the line is undetected (and it is always undetected unless a woman is pregnant), they call it *linea alba*, a white line.

When an embryo is only a few days old, his future is outlined with invisible ink. When he grows, this concealed line—a conceived person's protruding presence—darkens and widens. A wavy green vine on a hospital monitor signifies a heartbeat; *linea nigra*, a black line—a blunt, blasphemous mother's triumph.

Look at somebody's grave: crisscrossed planks (or lines) are like a person's check-out from a hotel: he was here, and then a check mark was put in his place as though he left, deserted, escaped. Lines and arrows, bloody-red, on war maps show soldiers advancing; many will be shot dead.

Your great grandfather stored treacherous tracer bullets in his right shoulder: this triggered the interest of his grandkids. At our dacha in a subtle suburb of St. Petersburg (where a village would turn into a city without announcement), Granddad watered red puffed-up strawberries and green gaunt cucumbers, and we imagined him in his army fatigues and a green field cap with a red Soviet star. The hose in his muscular hands was like a machine

gun.

Flesh flattens even before you succumb to the earth. Eyes become even, pale, teary lakes; cheeks are sunken. The body burrows into the sand, body tissue gives way and disappears, and what is left is a Zen line guarded by dusty digits on bare-boned granite: 1913–2007. And occasionally, you are an unknown hero soldier, and there is no trace at all.

We anticipated your great grandfather dying before you were born (one in and one out, as in an overcrowded warehouse), so we prematurely and erroneously erased him from our senses. He still engaged in conversations on conventional themes like his Medi-Cal or a medal given to him sixty years after the Nazis were crushed; he still cared about us and his contorted-by-illness-yet-continuing life, but his younger son said once, when a polyglot nurse, politely greeting us in Russian, English, and Spanish, turned on the TV for him: "He is already watching some other TV." As though there were some far away fantasies on phantom TVs available only to those who already had crossed a mysterious line.

What color is it when crossed? Is this transition to the other world indeed permanent, like a line drawn by a permanent marker?

For you, whose life is just starting, the line is still black.

...Not so long after your birth you were chaperoned around in your toy-sized infant car seat, and an old man ogling you on his way out of the supermarket and on the way to his demise asked, "How old is she?"

"She is only one month," replied your father, proudly beaming.

"She has a long way to go!" he exclaimed without evident envy.

Linea nigra, a black line.

4

It is almost impossible to believe that something, once non-existent and silent, is finally revealing itself. Sitting late at night in front of a blue crystal screen, I place my right hand on the crown of the world's head (on the plastic back of my warm, amenable mouse) switching languages and shuffling events, playing with a necklace of Internet links, jumping from recovered paintings looted by the Nazis to Nabokov's Berlin in the twenties, and from a Sumatra disaster to South America's currency gains. My left hand is on top of my belly, detecting movements which just weeks ago were absent. But you had already lived in my womb for several full months.

For those months nobody heard you as you held your umbilical breath.

You were like a planet that, as everybody knows, exists, but no one has ever been there.

How, out of nothing, did something come?

Or, as your Italian father's ikebana teacher would say in her brazenly broken English, "How out of nothingness came this mind-blowing somethingness?"

The world looks distant and disengaged. Its sultry surface facing me seems to be uneventful. News reports invariably have to do with somebody else. In my life, everything's neutral; even a big dog of danger is neutered; nothing is new.

But now I'm made aware that something seemingly absent for more than four months (no quickening, no quirky karate kicks) had actually hidden itself and, before the time struck, did not indicate its portentous presence. Could it be that what we consider the lack of miraculousness just hesitates to make itself evident?

In California, in the evenings after my comfy computer petrification at a 9-to-5 high-tech firm, I wasn't used to lifting my head up. Those few basic aluminum-colored stars hiding behind our domestic negligent smog failed to capture my interest—but in Hawaii, happily pregnant and unemployed, I ascended Mauna Kea and, deposited into the freezing darkness with a cup of free tea from the Gemini observatory, wrapped in a warm cocoon of fleece clothes under a sclerotic sky covered with a silver web of capillaries—multitudes and multitudes of unreachable planets—realized that there are many invisible things.

It is never "nothing"—because something hides itself all the time.

5

Is there any connection between a child and a fruit?

Or have I myself become a fruitful tree?

In a magazine for future mothers I read: "Your uterus is now the size of a grapefruit; your embryo is the size of a grape."

6

A graying nurse in scholarly glasses smeared purple-colored jelly on my hemispherical stomach and attached to it, with a cord's help, a metal device she held in her hand.

I was all eyes.

She moved the sophisticated rectangular box away from my blithe belly, as though protecting its unconcerned contents.

Then I was all ears.

I heard a dispersed, shapeless, shy noise and waited for more. Finally, a limping rhythm, unsure of its delicate self, got on track, and I heard precise, clear heart beats.

I had two hearts.

7

Your great grandmother was restless and crazy, but she had lived in a time of unrest.

When the war with Finland came, she was settled right on the border with Finland; when the Leningrad blockade started, she was expecting a baby right in the middle of it—in the mad medley of it—living on the Staronevsky.¹

As the Nazis tightened their grip, the Soviets tightened their belts. And then they boiled those old cowhide belts and ate them, together with starch glue on the walls beneath the wallpaper.

In Leningrad, life dried up, diminished to the size of a shrunken dry fruit discovered on a dusty and desolate shelf by a "kozha da kosti" ("skin and bones"—that's how Russians call a person starving to death). That apricot and a tuft of spring grass that he'll eat is his lucky strike of the day.

Food was scarce and the streets scary; a ghost—an anemic, pale boy wrapped in a white bed sheet so as not to be recognized—could jump on you, bring you down into a snowdrift and take away your bread coupons. Without your hundred grams—several bread crumbs—you would die.

Your great grandmother was evacuated through the Road of Life (also known as the Road of Death, since wagons with provisions and people were relentlessly bombed), but when the war ended, she—who played romances on the guitar and read playing cards like a gypsy, and a traveling gypsy she was, with her Roman nose, romantic ties with the criminal world, restlessness, deep eyes and dark past—placed her daughter in an orphanage with rough-housing kids.

In the orphanage, my mother experienced hunger.

My one-year-old father was evacuated in the beginning of the war from Byelorussia. His relatives who remained there, who had neither the

¹ Staronevsky Prospect, in the center of the city.

guts nor grave premonitions to leave, were led to the edge of a trench. My father's great grandfather, named Naftola, a ninety-four year old Jewish gravedigger by training, was among them and, protectively flanked on both sides by daughters and grandsons, probably did not care why those graves were not properly made. In seconds, all of them were dead and covered up by the earth.

When my father grew up, all he talked about during family reunions



was hunger and food.

How in exile in Novosibirsk, during those cold, bare years of war, they had a hen named Katya and a pig named Borya, and how poor Katya and Borya had to be eaten.

When I visit my parents' apartment, which looks like a resourcefully stocked grocery store, I stumble upon cans and canisters on the floor. I flounder counting dollar-store food containers.

Carrots and nuts, goat's milk, garlic, meticulously washed blueberries in plastic jars, that I have to bring back after consuming this deliriously desperate feast—for them to replenish.

And they are replenished themselves by knowing that they can play a part.

8

My Italian mother-in-law, in every way distant, sits somewhere in her sterile flat in Turin, ecstatic that her grandson caught chicken pox. "I'm so excited he's sick, she explains into a phone receiver. He has to stay home, and I will babysit. Finally, I will be useful."

My father stands in front of me in his subsidized studio in San Francisco and tests a baby sling. It smells like cheap soap, like a thrift store. He stands in front of me and demonstrates, while my mother scolds him for putting the sling on the wrong way.

Then he hands me a dreadful, old-fashioned potty made from bruised, weathered wood. Surely, it served generations of kids. My arthritic mother artistically sits and pretends to defecate.

"It cost five bucks at a garage sale, but a seller 'long-changed' us so that we

'earned' five dollars instead,"² my mother says and continues: "For that money we could purchase one more for our future granddaughter to use here during her visits. But your sister spoiled everything."

And she tells me about my sis, who, being so serious after a miscarriage about everything having to do with children, cried out upon realizing the mishap: "It is for a baby! It is a bad omen!" and ran back to return the folded bills.

During the times of physical changes (in my pregnant body, in my sister's malfunctioning body, in the aging bodies of my agile mother and father), vulnerability looms like never before. I can't fit myself behind the steering wheel, I weep tying my shoes, I slip in the bathtub, I slowly lower myself to the edge of the bed, I bend, trying not to hurt my enormous belly. I'm overwhelmed by an inability to do simple things when the complex job of creating a person takes place inside.

Enveloping the baby, I feel and look very fragile, and my parents become more paternal but also pathetic.

As though the new life turning within me gives their life a different turn.

9

After a visit with my observant obstetrician, I stare at tantalizingly temperamental teenagers outside a bike shop and ponder if I can relate to any of them.

Margalit, will you look like these giddy girls when grown up? Or like those broody or brawling boys? In the future there might be a similarity between you and them, but what bothers me in the present is that you already seem distant.

But how can I feel related to you? There is nothing yet to place on or under a pillow (perhaps, your hospital wrist band or the first diaper shirt) or hug for the night. Surprisingly, I do not even have to follow rules on how to expand a placenta; how to divide growing cells; how to direct them toward your eyes, kidneys, or foot. Everything had already been set by somebody else—and I felt left out of business.

Therefore, to discover how to relate to you in the future, to that you who is now inside (in the womb), I turn outside (to the world).

I'm peeping at proverbial pimples, boys' low pants and girls' posh

² They gave him ten dollars; he thought it was twenty, and gave them fifteen in change.

pumps, and I feel no connection to them.

On realizing it, I get very frustrated, imagining that there will be, at your birth, no connection to you.

IO

A girl from New York, a thriving transplant who had learned an extinct language in Russia (in college, she studied Yiddish, and I—the more viable, virulent Hebrew), casually cautioned me that once my daughter was born, my life would be never the same.

Meaning that piles of poop-stained diapers would shield me from creating fastidious fiction, and baby babbles or cries—from the *New Yorker's* cartoons I flip through before falling asleep: this activity lets me skim characters and situations while staying firmly anchored to a bed

That your breast-sucking will be like a sanction, a sanction to stop being myself, because my life will never be the same either...because now everything would change!

I will be attached by my nipple to you and won't be able to move, when you, in your turn, will be like a puppy who does not want to let go of a glove or a lopsided ball, taking a firm stand on all fours, snarling while the owner tries to retrieve the slobbered-on thing (the slobbered-on thing in this case is my chewed-up breast)

Keeping an eye on you, I will not be able to keep an eye on myself or the world

A sudden tunnel tired vision that I will develop—

A soccer mom's visor will be firmly positioned over my unmade-up eyes

It will be like SIDS, the sudden infant death syndrome that will overcome me, meaning that after delivering an infant, I myself will die and never have my own life, apart from a newly minted newborn

No bold, borderline books that I want to relive

No faraway countries rising like ghosts from those bold books, whose grass is being trampled, like book pages, under my feet, when I finally reach a different continent

No open-air blues concerts with summer drunks lining up in front of port-o-potty green cabins, draining the last water drips from plastic faucets while listening to sad, rhythmic songs chock-full of choked back tears and color

No instant success from my literary stunts, from my bipolar, border-

line books, which would bring me the means to go to different continents—
which, in turn, would bring me more ideas for books

No blues but baby blues—that's what the NY girl says

That's what she warned me about while permanently glued to her
white carton house in a cartoonishly tame neighborhood of exclusively
white, bleached pale whitish neighbors having no sun and no blues

Did HER life ever change?

II

It's as if a fishing bob suddenly dives, and something inside me—the
bait, perhaps—is instantly swallowed by a persistent, strong fish...

It's as if a frog tries to surface, pounding water with its limp, little
legs while gurgling and reaching the top of the pond to gasp some fresh air...

It's as if one takes a polished chestnut speckled with sunlight, one
of those that are infinitely being carried in a pocket in hopes for finite luck,
and shakes it, hearing how something inside it knocks and rolls shyly and
gently...

Everything goes into a boisterous, boiling pan of word witchery:
simmering waters trembling under the sun; crawling crickets touching things
with their cautious moustache; a round, firm bee's nest pulsing under an
open palm...

One can evoke the whole animal world with its cryptic nature and
creatures to describe what is going on.

But it is only a new baby busily moving inside me.

I2

At night, I cannot sleep.

In those popular preparatory books they say that when a mother is
awake, her fetus is usually dozing; when a mother is sound asleep, the unsu-
pervised fetus starts to hiccup and kick.

Not true with us. We are in sync.

You are restlessly swimming and almost knocking me over, water
splashing in the womb.

I am reckless, letting myself rock on the nightly insomnia waves.

Prior to your conception, I segregated my dark self from the world;
days passed in prostration, procrastination, contemplation or writing. Single-
handedly, I faced the dreaded duality of the day, when routine would over-

come depth.

Have you ever watched how a mother and daughter, arms around
each other's shoulders or waists, go to another room to confide secret tales?
They need that seclusion; they unite to discuss.

Only several months pregnant, I am alone, but inside me there is
one more me, and it adds a different quality to my solitude.

I3

...Waking up worried: where are those wiggly movements and wob-
bly karate kicks?

...Living as a schizophrenic, as it is perfectly normal to sense in your
wholesome body somebody else, to paranoiacally listen to "voices," to panic
when not hearing gurgling or tapping...

It's all in reverse: a mental patient is considered healed when they
finally convince him that he is alone, when he is not guided by illegitimate
ghosts; when he becomes so incensed and thick-skinned that he ceases pay-
ing attention to voices or stops believing in little people inside his stomach
or head...

On the contrary, many lend a sympathetic ear to a woman who
claimed that she had heard her child's "voice"; who, still pregnant, imagined
him grown up, coloring her mildly grey, monotonous middle-age.

A man hearing voices suspects that he is becoming insane. Sensing a
separate life inside her, a woman is jubilant.

And in this case, it's not a phantom—it's a fetus.

I4

A fur- and sugar-coated man from Putinesque Russia, an avid reader
and an avian traveler, surely knows the mystery of a woman from very afar...
he is not the first male to inform me that an expectant woman is extremely
autistic: she is oblivious of everything while transfixed on her own transfig-
uring shape.

Men offer thoughts about the miracle of motherhood. About lips
whispering to the whale of a belly. About an inspired gait and a peculiar gai-
ety, about the brightening of a future mom's face—"as though a Madonna's."

I belch, bellow at my Italian husband and move slowly, heavily, as
though carrying a yoke, no lightness in view.

For me the lightening is when a baby is supposed to "drop": this

happens when his head starts its customary descent into the pelvis.

Today my stern, steel-nerved obstetrician (the best surgeon in the department, they tell me) jokes that I'm carrying a basketball player—she is so elongated, he says, that he could even touch the tip of her head with his fingers (fingering me).

That probably means, he speculates, that she dropped and is ready for a new world, a new womb.

How big is the opening? I ask him.

He answers: two fingers.

According to old wives' tales and moth-balled myths, a pregnancy is something hidden, unknown—but this is a passer-by's view. From my point of view, it's mundane manufacturing (counting movements, measuring the uterus, taking a certain number of vitamins and, after thirty five, a certain number of risks); it is motherhood math.

15

Kneeling, your future father looks, from underneath, at my bare belly and says that this marble globe, this moving miniature mountain reminds him of our instincts and of the Stone Age.

He says that when we need to perform primitive calculations, we purchase a powerful Pentium.

When we feel a deep need to connect to somebody, we don't hold hands—we hook up shallow cables.

When we desire healing, we don't pray, because we preach pills.

But this bloated belly reminds us that we are from flesh.

That we have something primordial—it's not orderly circuits or irk-some iPods flicked off by remote control; it is something that develops with diligence, despite our bad grades in Chemistry, Genetics, or Genesis.

"Listen, he says to me, isn't it wondrous? Those cells divide regardless of our trust in divinity, and the body of a fetus matures whether or not we are mature enough to raise a new human being."

And when he climbs the steps of these high-flown words, I nervously click my way through Websites and sink down a dark well of diagnoses:

- 1) prolapsed cord
- 2) low amniotic fluid
- 3) fetal distress
- 4) torn sac, slow heartbeat
- 5) mermaid legs

6) spina bifida

7) two-headed monsters

We are both talking about the same thing: the intricate forces of nature.

16

It emerged so effortlessly; it was never important.

On its own something was going on, unannounced in the first few days or maybe few weeks.

Still, despite this ease, my body revolted: two nights in a row I was rolling on a cool Peruvian rug as on burning coals, with a pain burrowing into my lower back—an embryo, as a mole, was burrowing down the uterus lining.

There was almost no will there—it was a passive submission to chance, a zygote roulette.

But when a clump of cells grew bigger, pity grew together with it.

Bellowing to protect a protruding belly from my spouse's elbows; pushing him away when he trespassed on my side of the bed. There was a pity toward what was within, the pity toward a pit placed there by an invisible, yet inquisitive, force.

Pity and hate.

When I hated myself, I hated it together with me because it shared my dull days and daily depression—but I loathed it only when I considered it to be a part of me. When I thought it to be separate—a unique human being with its own bent—I had high expectations.

And shivered reading a horror story about a loony who wanted a baby of her own so much that she slaughtered a woman and cut out of her a full-grown fetus...Like it was an organ not needed, like an appendix.

I was going slowly on freeways; I pushed the steering wheel with an airbag far away from myself; I sit on a pillow—to keep the baby invincible in case of a car crash.

Something that appeared there by chance (that zany zygote roulette, a twenty-five percent probability every month that a healthy woman from eighteen to thirty five years of age faces by flipping a coitus coin) now was becoming my choice.

Now I wanted it badly.

17

An expectant mother limits the activities she undertakes during the day: no casual sex, no casual wining and raw food dining, nor sightseeing from an unpressurized cabin of a helicopter or scuba diving, no lifting of weights.

No lifting of a world's wanton burden on swayed back shoulders; no accessory sadness tipping off her center of gravity (she already has trouble performing her belly-balancing act).

Taking a fetus' future in her own hands, she consumes great amounts of organic health foods, strongly believing that this will give him a high IQ and an ability to endure high altitude soccer. To make him succeed, for the three-fourths of the year everything should be tranquil.

Thus, sacrificial sacramental parents assume they must limit their horizons to widen those of the newborn.

18

A would-be baby reminds me of danger.

From high school I brought home doggy bags of biology knowledge: meiosis, mitosis, splitting hairs over a double helix, division of cells. Dangers awaiting my daughter inside me (now she is busily duplicating her DNA strands) differ from those that catch me on the outside.

I see myself with a stroller walking blightly lit streets. What if a shabby white man dressed in bleak black (or a brightly-dressed black man with the whites of his eyes blazing) approaches me with a knife. I would be scared to death.

This summer in China, somewhere near the remote remnants of the Great Chinese Wall, we let our dutiful chauffeur take a well-deserved rest (confused by our desire to be left alone, he continued to slowly dribble after us in his dusty "Datsun") and walked empty-handed on an empty road. Only a beat-up car loaded with scary large stones (one fell, jumped high as a ball several times and landed at our feet) or a horse carriage with people of unknown intentions and destinations would pass by, and, giving them way, we stepped onto the dirt.

The buildings around us seemed to be aged military barracks, which, after their retirement, applied for another position—just to be useful. As we could see from afar, children's clothes hung on invisible strings, men swaggered in sweatpants; at that moment, far away from my land of origin, I felt omnipotent, happy.

A strange, non-linear force of fate brought me first to Kazakhstan and then to China—it was impersonated by a wheel-chaired or, better, wheel-chained woman who could not walk herself, but who gave me a gift of being airborne. Olga, whose petite, pitifully fragile, fleshless body was overcompensated by overly large glasses and an acute intellect, arranged a generous grant for me, and I landed first in Almaty, and then Beijing.

My plane could fall in Almaty, in Astana, in Beijing, in Xian.

Back in the U.S., peering into a Kazakhstan life reflected in ripples of Internet news, I read that a flight engineer in Almaty came too close to a plane engine and was sucked in by a freak force. In the city of Beijing there was bird flu and in some villages—leeches poisoning the waters (in China, we were afraid not of criminals, but of creatures: if any native touched a tourist, he could end up in the hands of a firing squad).

Walking through the Forbidden City with a large yellow umbrella with a tattoo on its leg ("this protection from the Sun is donated to plain folk by the president"), I ran risks (which were implied rather than implemented): to be burned by sun rays, to be bitten by an insect, to be hit by a stone before it found solace at our feet destroying the car bumper of our guide.

And what about you, Margalit? The same way I miscarried many promising projects, I could have miscarried you, too. If a spermatozoon rushed to the left instead of the right, when an egg was waiting for it on another sidewalk, like on a blind date which went geographically wrong even before being consummated—you would not be born. What if chromosomes, cosmoses in themselves, did not pair as needed...what if I paired with a different man?

If my cervix were somewhat "incompetent"; if I had a mioma or tumor; if my placenta would be too thin or too old...How many times in a bathroom stall I was afraid that with too much straining you would end up squeezed out; how in the shower I stared into murky, mad waters trying to see if you had fallen...

At any moment an embryo can meet a sudden, sad death; it is preyed upon by the same misfortunes that plague adults: bad nutrition, wrong timing, unforeseen circumstances, not enough faith.

19

Margalit overcomes all the rules of geometry: from a round shape ("you look like you engulfed a cannonball," a passerby informs me), from a

hardened coconut of my belly she constructs a square, showing at once all her extremities.

What is this one: a hand, a foot, a hard head or a soft butt?

My belly extends every possible way—at a visit to the obstetrician, when I strive to align my hard-to-operate body (it's like a complex mechanism with its buttons not working) in the middle of a tissue-covered chair, she jerks to the right, crumpled under the right dome of the uterus, visible as a fish under a thick layer of water.

I feel as though she unabashedly puts herself on display. As though, under inquisitive obstetrical eyes, it's not a fetus, but my internal organ—a kidney or a colon—extending to show its brazenly angular and firm forms through my stretched skin...

I am ashamed.

When she was only four gestational months, she ran away from a rude, rowdy African-American doctor who scared her while attaching a device to listen to her heartbeat. He tried placing it on different spots (I gasped upon hearing silence—is she still there?)—and each time she ran away. She moved inside me eluding his roughness, and I, finally relieved and relaxed after sensing her activities and her acting up, watched with pleasure his impatient and startled face.

When I turn to my left, the left side of my uterus gets heavier as though a cannon ball were slowly rolling into a niche; the left side of the belly grows a bump.

She is not comfortable.

When I turn to my right, I feel funny on the left side: at the moment when she finally finds a new position, when she does not expect any more changes, her cozy capsule betrays her and shifts again.

She is again bothered with no evident reason. And again she has to move.

She can achieve convenient coziness if she follows me: if I turn onto my left, she needs to take a seat on the left; if I turn to my right, she has to shift right; otherwise, she just hangs for her dear life onto uterus walls, like a cat balancing on all fours on an inclined table.

Thus, before her "outer" life even starts, she already has to adjust to her mom...Should I simply outweigh her?

Rather, we have to listen to each other's desires. When I turn without giving her a timely warning, I feel painful discomfort: she tries to keep herself in her former position, her hands and feet, as cat's claws, scratch my innards.

I must proceed slowly, with caution and intuition, repositioning myself inch by inch, inkling by inkling, as though instructing her on what's going to happen next...

This tactic should continue when she is born.

20

A fresh sensation of newness—such clean air—when leaving home, as though a traveler, with a bulky, big-bellied "hospital" bag.

Gates automatically open. No metal noise. It is still quiet. It's seven a.m.

The world has been already informed.

I always had this very same feeling when leaving the obnoxious, boxy apartment complex for Patagonia or Tahiti: something is ready to happen, but you don't know what to expect.

Planes from the nearby airport fly over the Bay, flounder in the mirroring water and add to my feeling of transit. Or transition, perhaps. Black gates and blue bay right in front are the same, yet they are transformed. As in my childhood, at the end of summer when we fled to a city flat from a cold dacha...even the linoleum seemed strange, compared in my mind to the chinky floors at the countryside.

The orderly flat, left on its own for three summer months, had had to learn how to embrace people again. Now, after a long separation, it looked unrecognizable (water pipes crossly grumble when turned on for the first time after a break), and the unused, vacant air was not yet mixed with our breath...Nothing is changed, but our minds have the ability to experience things as though new.

Then, in this transformed or, better, transfixed, world, she appears, snub-nosed and silky. Tightly holding new limbs, snuggling up to platelets and lymph, I'm suddenly enveloped by sympathy toward withered women who once were newborns.

After Margalit's birth I read in a newspaper, almost turned into a police blog to attract receding spores of readers, about a high society lady who had lost her husband in the war in Korea. She was sweet and demented. Young girls in their twenties, gangly gang members in blue baseball uniforms (their rivals favored maroon jerseys), befriended her and moved to her flat. From there they sold crack and routinely turned away social workers who came to check on the old lady and do her household chores.

The sweet lady emanated a bad smell; her potty had never been

emptied; her sheets were not changed; her mattress sported bedsores. She attempted to call the police but hadn't enough memory to continue a comprehensible conversation. She would phone, say "hi" and then hesitate, clinging to her own words and forgetting what she wanted to say.

Months passed before the gang fooling this frail, ailing woman was caught. During the court hearings, it was revealed that girly gang members ate the meager meals brought to the poor widow and even scolded the social workers that it was not tasty. The widow had lost so much weight that she could hardly walk.

Peering into her parchment-like face in the newspaper, I felt pity for her, since now I knew that once she was as innocent, helpless and silky as a baby fresh from the womb, exactly like Margalit.

21

Making good use of vegetation, the book states: "It takes a lot of pushing and stretching to move a baby the size of a melon through a cervical opening that starts out the size of a kidney bean."

22

Lying feverishly in a hospital bed a few hours after delivery, I visualize, again and again, the bewildered look on her frantic face... on her face with unfocused blue eyes and a mouth in the shape of a triangle (even mute, it moves, sending me signals)...

Seeing in my mind's eye her first appearance in this world, I meekly smile, knowing that right at this moment she sleeps in her see-through glass menagerie nearby.

This is the person, who is already drastically different (and several hours older) from the one who emerged from my womb.

This one, looking in her protective container like a shiny museum exhibit on a display, has a fuller face and less puffy eyes than the one placed on my breast by nurses excited by her perfection ("Oh that hair, oh those eyelashes, her beauty is so unreal that she looks like a doll!"). This one already learned how to root straight for my breast, whereas the first one was disoriented in her new world and cried when they tried to orchestrate the moment of closeness.

This growth of life is perceived by my quirky mind as two parallel life events: one minutes, or moments, before (already stored in memory) and

another that takes place just this second (in front of my eyes).

The one before (how she emerged after almost tearing my legs apart, how I exclaimed, disoriented, to laughing nurses, "She has such a big tongue!", how I looked at her, but she was looking away, occupied because her skin color was inspected and her hair was washed) is a rich source of memories.

The one that is now (how she snores in her cuvette, how I adjust to my flat stomach) is full of unpredictability, it is full of the future.

23

She was born a strong girl: she could almost hold her head upright from the first moments of life; she kicked an old, ladylike nurse who tried to wrap her in a used hospital blanket.

She played with her tongue; she already had all the reflexes: grasping the needle an RN poked her with, flinching when touched, annoyed when hungry, crying when wet. She immediately started crawling on my breast on all fours like a kitten, meanwhile entangling herself in my gold chain.

She jumped into life not wasting time, ready to act.

But a gap in perception, a delay between two points in space, the hole between two generations showed herself in her Grandma.

For Margalit, it did not take long to get adjusted to a different life, coming from a dark, confined hollow into a lighted world hallway: she immediately started sucking colostrum and wetting a colossal number of diapers. But it took a much longer time for her Grandma before her motherly milk flowed.

In the beginning, grandmother fussed, refusing to show compassion and motherly camaraderie toward her daughter who was a couple of months short of becoming a mother herself. She said that if there was no morning sickness, the pregnancy was a piece of cake. She said that nobody visited her in a maternity ward—why should she then? Then she proclaimed that perhaps it wasn't worthwhile for her to travel so far to see something that she remembers so closely: her own motherhood.

But as soon as she received the midnight call, she jumped on the last train and appeared in the hospital ward, despite all her earlier warnings that grandmothers and long commutes don't go together.

In no time she was sitting on her daughter's bed, peering intently into her granddaughter's cuvette with words that *her* afterbirth stitches healed right away with no residue and that *her* children did not cry at night.

Her children's diapers were cleaner, their hair much longer, their skin smoother; their stumps fell in three days.

She remembered very well that her milk flowed like a river, her blood after delivery went away like a tide, her baby stopped making sad faces as soon as she would wave her right hand.

Overall, it was a sharp contrast: her granddaughter's instincts kicked in right away, but her own motherly—or grandmotherly—instincts took time to surface, saddened, hardened, restrained by her hard and long life.

24

They all ask: after it passed, what can you say about your motherly feelings, your instincts? How were those nine months?

They all know the known, but whatever is known by them is simply not true. "Nine months is nothing except a physiological marathon," I address those who bought a familiar story of mother's glow and gnawing love. "The body does everything by itself; you have no control. It struggles, it stretches, it stringently aches. The days are measured by weight gain, heavy breasts, high blood pressure, the heavy burden of a womb, by a baby's heartbeat."

It is society—I say—that paints a rosy motherhood with blushing cheeks. It is simply not like that. A mother cannot love what she has yet to inspect. You have to know somebody to love them.

For me, there were no dreams—who will this baby be? There were no dreams of family vacations, of Chanukah gifts, of a son "who will be a mother's protector." Or of a grown girl playing the violin. My body was simply full with a baby; my mind was mulling over this white monitor, those black lines...

Then I stop short: if it is only a physiological marathon, why, instead of catching my breath when crossing a bumpy, rambunctious field, am I trying to catch every thought that crosses my mind?

25

On New Year's Eve you turned nine months, and your great grandfather turned ninety six—or, if we would clock him, we'd say "four until a hundred."

In your age, you count birthdays by months: on the first of each month, your grandparents visit and bring you a cake with several candles,

something that you, still satisfied by mother's milk and baby purees, had no use for.

In your great grandfather's condition, his children celebrated every day of his life: his cancer, for a while in a remission, returned in full force.

On New Year's Eve, gathered around a big table with kosher wine and smoked fish somewhat gentrified by mixed marriages and Russian pierozhki, your great grandfather's family marked the new year: if nothing happened during it, that would be good news.

This extended family was together in Russia, always gathering and gossiping about each other's salaries or salad recipes, and they brought this tradition to the U.S. In the new country, they were still holding grudges against each other, but going strong.

They gathered around your great grandfather, their placid, pale, weak patriarch. Always in an elegant suit, with a wide-brimmed hat and a tie, this time he was dressed in a brand-new coordinated sweatpants and sweat-shirt. This was the sign that this year for him would surely be different. His doctor informed the immediate family that in his condition people may live only days or months.

We did not know what gift to bring him for his birthday: his needs at the last stage of his life were simple and bare. Why clutter his apartment with rubbish? So we gave him a beautifully framed picture of his great granddaughter, who, in a sense, was his last big achievement.

He took it in his tired hands covered by pigmentation and said: "Good, very good." Till very recently he, who came to the U.S. in his late seventies, tried to take classes in English. And he said the word "good" in English—always staying in perfect mental, though no longer, physical, shape.

Then he started eating his birthday cake, carefully dissecting it with a teaspoon, but could not finish. He was too weak and had to go rest in a bedroom. He left the holiday table right at the moment we produced our cameras to take his picture holding his great granddaughter.

Then we decided to wait till he woke up—to take this last picture of the youngest and the oldest of the family clan.

But when he woke up, his nine-month-old great granddaughter, overwhelmed by a big number of relatives previously not seen by her, crumpled in my arms, with hair wet from heat and exhaustion, sound asleep.

Now you both were falling asleep frequently, in the most unusual places and times.

You—in your playpen, on top of a plush toy; your great grandfather—in an armchair, holding your picture and asking the pronunciation of

your Italian middle name.

When you were old enough to pronounce his name, he was dead.

26

The night we brought you home from an impersonal hospital room, where we counted the hours and how many times you wet diapers, I was awakened, not by your cries (you slept soundly in your bassinet), but by your father's exalted and wheezing whispers.

He was saying, "She walks, she walks, she walks!"

I placed a hand on his wet, as though sprayed from a pulverizer, hot forehead, and he woke up. He told me that he saw you in a dream, the real you with your lithe, little, languid, lanuged body—and that you walked, just several days old! He was foreseeing skills you would acquire as you grew, and he was already scared to death of these rapid changes, even in dreams.

The next morning, he touched a dark pigmented path running from my belly button...Once the dear dweller left its coconut-shaped uterus shell, the womb shrank, and the *linea nigra*, not stretched anymore, widened and paled.

He said, "I can't wait to see what ending you added to your fictitious story...after all these perturbations of labor...after she is finally born!"

What "ending" did he expect? It is true that the sueded pigmented line soon will be no more; it will disappear without a trace; scars will heal; previously tight tissues will soften, and with the introduction of solid food (crackers or carrots) the infant will stop looking like an undernourished invertebrate (perhaps a frog)—and will look plentiful, promising, plump.

According to my pregnancy book, after running its course, the *linea nigra* will turn into *linea alba*, a white line. It will be indistinguishable from the white plains of a warm and wide belly.

And this whiteness—a witness to fear of the unknown—teaches me: anything can happen; nothing or nobody is set in stone; nothing is written yet, because for both mother and a daughter the page starts anew:

Like a mother, a daughter also has a white line.

MATHIEU ASSELIN
Photographs











No Means No

by Chris McCann

Had the bag boy begun his two-minute relationship with my father by saying something along the lines of, "May I roll your mechanically-separated, synthetically-preserved, steroid-dripping, heart-dissolving, cancer-baiting sustenance-in-a-cage-on-wheels out to your serial killer cargo van?" instead of, "Can I help you out to your car today, sir?" my father probably would have let out a tremendous, long-overdue guttural laugh, and their relationship just might have lasted a lifetime.

"No," my father replied, glaring down at the cart's handle, at the bag boy's hand on the handle—*touching my father's*.

John tolerates touching from exactly two groups of people: those handing him his change and members of his immediate family. The former a necessary evil of success, and the latter—as he puts it— "Part of the job." Previously rumored for generations but never confirmed, much like ball lightning, Roswell, yeti, I have finally witnessed this phenomenon—someone other than myself actually touching my father—with my own eyes, but only amongst his sisters and brothers. Aunts, Uncles, I think they call them? After being introduced to a boatload of McCanns recently, I am still struggling to correctly define what exactly a cousin is. It seems to be anyone with your last name that you don't recognize. Those other people in all the pictures.

Sincere apologies for my ignorance, but having a family is quite new (and news) to me. As a child, I often wondered if I wasn't so much born, as shat into a truck stop toilet along with yesterday's lunch somewhere in the '70s by some random dude strung out on good pot and bad acid; someone who had never seen the inside of a library, but possibly the backstage of Woodstock; someone who around the time he discovered the illicit beauty of Reaganomics had pulled me out of said toilet on a lark—an inconsequential bet he could then afford to make with himself that a grown man couldn't objectively evaluate his own feces with his own two hands—only to toss me back in.

And there by the grace of God would stay I, floating, waiting pa-

tiently until life caught up with him. Or maybe until he had garnered enough information about life to form a hypothesis as to how life *might* catch up with him. Or until he died. Or just maybe until we had a black president...

Semantics; now that I am rumored to have grown up, I have arrived at a much higher truth: I was a little harsh on my mother, very harsh on my father, and absolutely brutal on myself for existing as a result. I owe it to my mother, and to myself, to lend my existence a little more credence than some petty, obscure scatological metaphor.

The truth is, my father simply forgot to flush.

In the last month that I've spent with him—mostly snowbound in his Minnesota trailer that's older (and, amazingly, worse for the wear) than myself—I have opened up to the possibility that he's come around some in the ten years since we last spoke. This new hope didn't manifest without some hiccups of miscommunication along the way. Stepping off the plane with the most open, most willing of minds I'd mustered in decades of dissolution, I was arrested at baggage claim by just how nice, by just how accommodating, just how darn happy my father was to see me.

I suspected aliens.

Clarification would arrive on the ride home as he talked. And talked. Somewhere along the way, I couldn't help but wonder if his endgame wasn't to drive in a random direction, make his point, then turn around, haul me back to the airport and ship me back to Florida, both of us somehow atoned in the whitewash. I did retain that: he has cried "a million tears" over the "choices" he's made, and that they were "all the tears" he's "ever going to cry," and with this "newfound clarity," he's "officially" through "beating himself up" over these "things."

It used to be you couldn't have waterboarded a simple yes or no out of the man when it came to his past, so I listened patiently and duly front-filed his unsolicited, meandering confessional as an appendectomal apology of sorts. He was at least articulating some fashion of post-Clintonian emo-

tion as opposed to napalming small villages with it. Besides, I'd come to find comfort in viewing our decade-long incommunicado as a *de facto* peace treaty, one I'm sure we would both attest was a resounding success. That night, I was able to fall asleep only after promising myself that I would simply listen for as long as it took for my father to feel like he'd absolved himself. Peace, man. Groovy.

It's those times when he tries to coax from me his memory of all the good times we had—say, our trip to Disney World when I was eight—that the concept of peace more closely resembles that of Israel and Palestine. I find myself listening less, and—with increasing frequency and ferocity—reminding him of all the bad times we had, particularly when the subject of my now-deceased mother arises. This was his first wife after all, the woman whose jaw he once accidentally broke, or, as he wistfully described her recently, directly on the heels of my filling him in on the myriad horrific details surrounding her death: "the fuck of my life."

Thus from beyond the urn my mother surreptitiously catalyzes various "moments" between me and my father, most of which haven't been pretty, but therapy—my father's main selling point for luring me back into his life—isn't supposed to be, right? And it must be working, because despite our confrontations—the kind of which hampered our relationship for years, prior to these Asshole Accords—we usually manage to sit down and talk frankly about why we loathe each other.

Alas, someone's plane finally got accidentally shot down:

"Chris?"

"Yeah?"

"I want you to do something for me. For both of us."

"Torch the place. Collect the insurance. Bali."

"What?"

"Joke, Dad."

"Why is everything a joke to you?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to call me John from now on. Instead of...you know..."

"...What?"

"Dad."

He blinks at me. It occurred to me that a few seconds ago we were having dinner.

"It would help us along. Move us in the right direction."

I blink at him. No way he's serious. Wait—he's totally joking.

Finally! I laugh.

He doesn't.

"That way you could think of me as, you know, a friend. I think that would be healthy. If we saw each other as friends from now on."

I look down. Sigh. Look up.

"Are we breaking up?"

"This isn't a fucking joke, goddamnit! I'm sorry. Obviously this isn't working."

"Has it ever?"

"Friends, by definition, they can't be enemies, can they?"

Aliens. I was right. Aliens have abducted my father and replaced him with this...this...*thing*.

"Wait—we're enemies now?"

John picked up an errant swatch of burnt toast, mopped up what was left of runny egg yolks, some bacon crumbs, and then methodically squeegeed the entire plate with his index finger until the motherfucker was spotless.

I watched. Breathed. Counted to ten. Like we were taught.

"So I should categorically deny that you and I have ever had a past of any kind. This is what you're asking me to do."

"Forgive and forget. Wise words." A tiny bit of egg lands on my face as he says this.

"I have forgiven you. And I've apologized just as much."

"You have."

"But outside of a frontal lobotomy, how the hell am I supposed to just *forget* everything, Dad?"

He put his hand up.

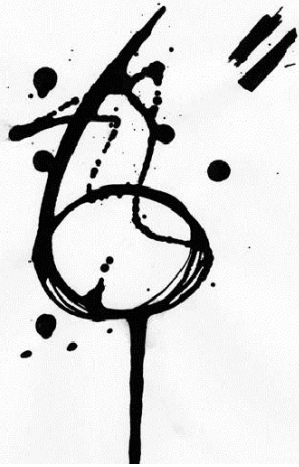
"John."

Was this his endgame? No winners or losers here, just peace. Peace. A concept worth fighting for, no?

Though now longing for a hot shower date with a Brillo Pad, I shake his hand. *Nice to meet ya, John!*

To celebrate the new us, he proposes venturing out for a mid-winter ice cream. I will respectfully decline, give my newfound friend a hug, retreat to my bedroom, close the door, make sure to lock it, manage to squeeze out a tear or two, banks of snow will creep up the rotting trailer walls as winter marches on, the trailer will soon resemble a 1950s nuclear bunker, getting to the mailbox will require digging a cave, I will take long midnight walks in a T-shirt and shorts, turn around at some point, unsure of how far I've come, unsure of how I got here, scan dumbly for my tracks, hoping they've been

extra medium



erased, only to be disappointed each time. I will instead find my way back, numbed to the bone, and properly medicated by yet another experience which should have killed me.

Occasionally, John and I will hug following our spats. Is this friends thing working out? I will reserve judgment at least until spring, until I see just one sign of wildlife, a smart bird, a stupid squirrel. But what then? Will I go? Will I stay? Will I die in this bunker? Nuclear winter, indeed.

Alas, I am unable to recall a single instance prior to this week that my

father has hugged me, so if this is what progress feels like, I'll take it. "Part of the job."

Now if he would only stop referring to me as "son."

"No," my father replied, glaring down at the cart's handle, at the bag boy's hand on the handle—*touching my father's*.

It was here that all matter of time and space paused and stretched out like a rubber band. It was like watching an atom split in slo-mo on the Discovery Channel, while bracing for the inevitable cutaway to the organic fireball, the glorious afterglow of the mushroom cloud. Seconds became decades...

I didn't want to wait that long. My eyes darted toward the exit. *I'll just sprint. I'm a stranger here, no one will know...*

The bag boy, apparently deaf, politely nudged himself against my father and assumed control of the cart. I was too late.

The knuckles on my father's hand turned from cherry red to ghastly white as he squeezed the handle tighter—thereby preventing the bag boy from quitting his crappy customer service job and scurrying off into the night with our provisions.

"Let's try out that new Sureway store!"

Seven words I had hoped I would never hear from my father.

I was instantly consumed by the dread that sunk my heart a couple of weeks earlier upon learning via the local paper that the new Sureway store would strive for excellence with policies such as assisting every customer out to their car. Whether the customers wanted the help or not.

On paper this must have seemed like a swell idea, but the notion should have never made it out of the boardroom. Someone should have mentioned to the boss that there were enigmas like my father lurking out there, and to them this would be akin to going to McDonald's, placing your order, then having the clerk follow you out to your booth, sit down across from you, and hand-feed your cheeseburger and fries to you. Whether you wanted them to or not.

As they approached the exit, the bag boy addressed my father's message-sending grumblings, insisting, "Really, sir, I'm happy to!"

"You shouldn't be doing this," my father insisted back.

"Well, actually its part of the excellent customer service we provide here at Sureway," the bag boy beseeched, his voice squeaking an octave higher, "to—"

"To what? Harass the customers?!"

My father, quite possibly the least socially-conscious man on the planet (there simply is no wrong time or place for a man to belch or fart), reared this with both a wry, unctuous grin, and his signature concoction of earnest venom and ersatz jolliness. Solely meant to confuse the recipient, much like a peacock fanning out its legion of "eyes" when threatened, it forces the offender (however unwitting) to fight or flee.

On paper it's a swell idea, but let it be said that before you yourself attempt to entertain such heightened states of self-aggrandizing/-flagellating fuckyouness, its success is entirely dependent on the delivery. Should you not completely own it—which is to say that if you don't relish preying on another person's most nightmarish insecurities—at best it won't work, and you'll come across as nothing more than a moron, and if it does indeed land,

you will forever be embalmed by the recipient as a Major Fucking Asshole. You have to be okay with either outcome. Enter at your own peril, for it is an art, an art my father mastered long ago, probably soon after learning to walk.

He is the singular member of the family with this gift, or with any trait resembling meanness, really. Although the branches of the McCann tree span the country, they all still somehow manage to make time to spend with each other. They listen to each other, they are kind to each other, they laugh with each other, they cry with each other, they accept each other. They just love one another.

Who knew it was that easy? I am now proud to say, finally, that I belong to a family. A real family. A down-to-earth, well-adjusted, loving, functional, family.

You probably want to puke. That's okay, my father can't stand them, either. He wasn't about to join me at a recent impromptu family reunion in Minneapolis, where I was surprised with a three-course dinner, a cake decorated with a cartoonish image of Chris leaning over a pen and paper (nothing was written on the paper, most appropriately), greeting cards, and an untold amount of hugs and kisses from people, whom, for the most part, I could somehow remember.

Here lie my earliest, and best memories. Here in my trembling hand was the Polaroid of my mom in this same living room—vivacious, bubbling-with-life, 29 years-young Mom—sitting in the same armchair I was sitting in this moment, cradling me in her arms, gazing down at me, beaming as if I were the most precious, amazing thing she'd ever invented. Here was the first time I've allowed myself to cry in the presence of another, since she died five years ago. Here was proof that I was glowingly, unrepentantly happy, once.

Wild rumors had circulated about me over the years. Turns out I had become somewhat of a legend (much to my secret delight). Some had heard I was out in California, which I was for the last decade, until what I affectionately refer to as "The Big Meltdown." Most of my aughts were spent pinballing around L.A. between girlfriends, jobs, and drugs as I tried to make it as an actor, and when I failed at that, a screenwriter, and when I failed at that: "The Big Meltdown." Some had postulated that I might have stayed in New Orleans. Others suspected I was nearby, but refusing to contact anyone. Others were convinced I was dead. Not even my father knew where I was.

Late in the evening, minutes before he swung by to whisk me back

to his trailer, someone across the room asked me about John. Why wasn't he here?

The room fell quiet.

I told them exactly what he had instructed me to tell them. He told me they would understand.

I told them, "He just needed a day to be alone."

Everyone understood.

Like John, I was hoping the Bag Boy From Hell got the message, but he instead responded to my father's charge of harassment just as eagerly as it had been delivered: "No! To help!"

It's called "Minnesota nice," and it's not a myth. His is hardly an isolated case; politeness is actually on the books, here. While within the state's 86,000 square mile area should you happen to curse at someone in public, you can be cited on the spot and forced to appear before a judge. Now imagine for a moment just how much money one would need to procure in order to have a lawyer undertake at \$200 an hour the unenviable task of scouring countless volumes of legal precedence in hopes of proving judicious use of the word "fuck." Especially to a justice weaned from birth on milk, wheat, and corn. Good luck with that.

As a result, should someone mistakenly set your dog ablaze in a YouTube prank gone wrong, or should someone accidentally urinate on your face as you ate breakfast, people here, well, they shake hands and make up over such mere trivialities. They wave to you from their cars as they pass. They hold endless conversations in stores, in parking lots, on the sidewalks. They ask you how your day is going, and they really do want to know. Whether you want them to or not.

But here's the thing. Somewhere along the way, somewhere within those 86,000 square miles, you start to become the one waving first. You catch yourself smiling more often. You find yourself asking a complete stranger how their day is going. And you actually do want to know. Eventually, you manage to catch up with You: who you were before here, who you are now, who you can still become, regardless of how you got here, regardless of whether you stay or go. Life in Minnesota is a deep, peaceful sleep in and of itself, the kind of sleep most of us enjoy only on Sunday mornings when, upon waking, your dreams imperceptibly merge with reality and dance with you, without You, for the rest of the week, for the rest of your life. It's

always Sunday morning in Minnesota.

As they walked, the bag boy continued to smile, though nervous now, sensing a dilemma beyond his proportions, sensing my father's ego-torn anger—each now with *both* of their hands on the handle. Judging from the pale, pasty look on the kid's face as he glanced around hoping none of the managers would notice his inadequacy, this was now officially one of the scarier things he'd had to endure in his young life, something not unlike what the science fair winner must have felt when, upon a dare, he asked the homecoming queen to the prom: a warm, ticklish fluid coursing down his leg.

I wanted to inform my father of the article I'd read in the paper a couple of weeks ago about the new Sureway store, but at this point it wouldn't have mattered. For John this was now a matter of principle. I decided to fall behind and watch as the two—in a duel refereed by a confused, waffling electronic door—awkwardly tried to squeeze through the exit at once, half of me cringing, pretending to have nothing to do with this surly, burly old caveman, and the other half doing all he could to curb a tremendous, long-overdue guttural laugh. *Welcome to my world, kid.*

In John's world, it wouldn't have been worth your second glance should you enter Disney World's Main Street USA to find a man shaking his eight-year-old son's arm while informing him, "Listen to me you little cocksucker-motherfuckingsonofabitch, I will take you straight back to the hotel, pack your bags, and ship you straight back to your mother's. Is that what you want?"

That was indeed precisely what I wanted, but first, shouldn't we see Tomorrowland? How could we leave without seeing Tomorrowland?

As we continued toward the exit, I promised myself that if he were to let go of my arm—even for a second—I would peel off, disappear into the crowd, hide in some bushes overnight, emerge tomorrow, and live here, The Happiest Place On Earth, for the rest of my life.

But he never let go.

Emerging from Sureway I am blindsided by a savagely cold March gale that feels like shards of white-hot shrapnel expelled from a failing jet engine. I fumble blindly for a ski mask, pull it over my head, don my gloves,

rub my eyes until they're warm again, look up, and witness an old man and a young man, far away now, pushing a grocery cart across a frozen parking lot together through the snow, the wind, the night.

From this distance, from the exit, they almost look like father and son.

Sleep

by Sanjukta Shams

At four years of age, I knew that evil lives in the darkness. Sleep deprivation is often used on criminals in order to "break" them down but if you are deprived of sleep each day of your ordinary life what happens to you? I often contemplate that question as I lie on my bed and watch the minutes pass, one at a time.

Windows covered with old newspaper, lanterns burning low and pitch dark hallways are some of my memories from when I was four years old. We spent nearly a year in the darkness while Bangladesh fought for its independence. People in fear of retaliation hid in their homes. Sirens would echo throughout the streets letting the residents know that fighting was about to begin. The streets would clear up within minutes. I was never allowed to go out so the sirens only meant that I should crawl under my bed. In the darkness, terrified of the gun shots and tanks moving outside of our house, I laid there without a soul by my side. Often I would be too afraid to get up and go to the restroom. In fear of the darkness and gun shots, I would pee on myself knowing that Amma, my mother, would punish me later. I didn't move. Still, in my own urine for hours at a time. Often the fighting would last for hours but I remained alert. I would count the gun shots and listen closely to hear if they were moving closer to our house.

Eventually the sirens would ring again letting people know that the fighting was pausing. People would rush to local shops and walk out to assess the damage. Often Amma would find me under my bed, soaked. She would beat me and lock me out of the house. Standing outside, I would see dead bodies and wounded men, bleeding and begging for life. I would bang on the door and beg Amma to let me in but she would ignore my plea. So I watched these men die, begging for their life. I felt helpless; I could not help them or myself. Amma would eventually let me in, saying that "if you do it again, next time I will leave you out longer." I would walk into the house wanting someone to hug me and tell me that what I witnessed outside would not happen to me, except I found no one. No one was there

to console me...no one noticed me.

A year later, I found myself in Dinajpur. Only a few months after Abba's departure, Amma packed her suitcase, along with mine, for what she said would be a short trip to Dinajpur. But Amma had no intention of returning to Dhaka. Leaving my two sisters behind at my Aunt's house, we arrived in Dinajpur late one evening in a rickshaw. I would spend the next two years in this village with my mother as she dedicated herself to a man named Golam.

It is there that I hoped sleep would protect me. I shared a bed with my mother and Golam. Often I would go to bed earlier than the rest. My mother, along with other women, would be in some prayer ritual every night. As I drifted off to sleep, I would hear heavy breathing and Golam's footsteps coming towards me. I would lie there still, hoping that he would let me sleep. But my efforts were always in vain. He would drag me to the center of the bed as he would climb on top. I kept my eyes closed most of the time because I didn't want to remember. He would lift my nightgown and frantically pull down my panties as he would spread my legs. I would cringe and grab the sheets or the mosquito net that hung from the canopy bed. Golam would push down my neck with a rough hand causing me to gasp for air as he went inside of me.

Most of the time, I would feel no pain. I was no longer that girl under Golam. I just sat and watched this horror film. Other times, I would run off with my imaginary friend, Randall. We would run through meadows in search of daisies and sunflowers. Randall and I had always had a contest to see who could spot the most daisies. I was determined to win so I searched very intensely. I didn't pay any attention to the girl lying under Golam bleeding, quivering as her flesh ripped. I paid no attention to Golam's sweat that soaked her nightgown or how his breathing got heavier by the moment. I paid no attention to her small hands and fragile body lying lifeless waiting for it to end. Golam said nothing to her, as he didn't even notice her.

When he finished, he would just walk away. Often he would mumble "shue a bacha" (you whore) as he left the room. I could barely move my legs together. The sting of ripped skin was unbearable. Covered in my blood...wet, I would lie there. No one came for me. No one comforted me. Only Golam's words echoed in my ears, as they still do.

Soon darkness would pass and light would shine over the bed. With crusty, bloody legs, I would take the sheets off the bed and limp to the water well. I used soap to scrub the sheets as well as myself. The clothes line would dry the sheets until the following day when I would return again.

I don't remember how many nights he came for me, nor does it matter. One night was enough to scar me, the rest was just ritual. Eventually, I learned to spread my legs for him as I learned where all the daisies were on that meadow. I learned to put a cloth under me in order to keep the sheets from getting blood stained. I just threw away the cloth and saved myself the chore of washing the sheets every day. I learned to sleep listening for his breath, his foot step. I learned to cry less. Golam eventually stopped holding my neck down, as I learned that resistance was useless.

I do not know why my mother did not come for me. She slept in the same bed. I do not know if she just didn't hear us or just pretended to sleep. I never called for her for she taught me early on that she would not answer. My mother called me her "throw away baby" and she had thrown me away long before Golam entered my life.

Two years after living at Golam's house, I arrived at my Nani's house. Unlike Golam, my uncle insisted that I sleep. He would sit on my bed with a belt and slap my face as if throwing a fish hook into the water. The belt would often hit my eye lids and cause them to shiver in pain. He would continue to hit me until I "fell asleep." In fear of the belt, I lay there pretending to sleep. Focused on my stillness, I lay for hours on end until I felt him get up and leave the room. I lived at Nani's house for two years and in those two years I learned to pretend to sleep for my uncle.

To this day, I cannot sleep without a blanket or a sheet over my face in order to protect myself from the belt. The fear of being hit in the middle of the night still haunts me.

From Nani's house, I moved to America. No one stood over me; no one went inside of me in the middle of the night. I was finally safe under Abba's watch. Yet, I could not sleep. Now, I keep watch throughout the night. I still listen for the gun shots, Golam's and my uncle's footsteps. I still listen for their breath over me.

Lying safely in my bed next to my husband, I still find no relief. My childhood has robbed me of many things but sleep is what I miss.

Glossary

Abba – Father

Amma – Mother

Dinajpur – City in Bangladesh

Nani – Grandmother

Google Earth

by Jane Hertenstein

They say you can't go home again, and there's something to this, but last night I found my old house on Google Earth.

I moved away in the middle of third grade, in the middle of learning the multiplication table, leaving me forever stunted, never able to get past the 6x's. I even found my old school. They say when you revisit as an adult some place you've been as a kid it will look vastly different, diminished, time and memory tend to aggrandize, like a side mirror in a car, making the past appear larger than it really was. On my computer screen Driscoll Elementary looked quaint, its 1950s flat-roof architecture not quite as formidable as I remembered it. Now crowded by plat-style houses, it used to sit on treeless acreage, a sure target for Cuba's missiles. There was a bomb shelter under the school, but we were never trained for an evacuation. Instead we drilled for tornados by ducking and covering in the hallway. In gym class we used to have to run around the playground to warm up for kickball. From Google Earth's satellite view I could peer down on that field, just a patch of grass that seemed no bigger than a double lot.

I journeyed back to the past using the street finder tool. I remembered it was Princewood Avenue where my old house stood, I could even remember how to get there from the school since I'd walked home a couple of times—but I couldn't recall the house number. So I retraced my route by moving the mouse over the map. Down Marshall Road, where it narrowed by the ravine. Narrow shoulders. Ha, I always wondered what that sign meant. And, after that, the sign BUMP, where I encouraged Mom to speed up so that we could catch some air. Past Whipp and Rahn Roads. One led to State Route 48 and the other forked right toward the bowling alley and the gym where Mom had bought a lifetime membership. This workout club of the early 1970s featured the latest in slimming equipment. There was an upright machine with a canvas belt that one strapped around the fanny. When turned on the contraption jiggled the buttocks. Mom would stand there passively vibrating, never breaking a sweat. Then there was something

like an overturned barrel upon which Mom would sit. It was covered in what I can only compare today to those wooden-beaded seats that taxi cab drivers use. Switched on, the barrel cylinder rotated, massaging the bottom, or if straddled, the inner thigh. It was never about exercise. Dad continued to write checks to the club long after we'd moved away.

Princewood curved and in my mind I followed the bend. Those other side streets were a mystery since I'd never bothered to explore them forty years ago. I stopped at a corner and employed the street view. It was disconcerting to go from a map, flat and informational, to a photo. Yes, two-dimensional, but with the ability to swivel 360 degrees, I got a complete picture of both sides of the street. Wait, I recognized something, back, back, that house, that's the one the Bingosheas lived in. I can tell because there was the upstairs mother-in-law apartment above the garage. Or used to be, when the Bingosheas lived there. Etoile and her mother Clara and the kids Kim and Linnie. I always thought it was odd for a boy to be named Kim, but then the Bingosheas were odd. I tried Googling their name. I'm not sure how to spell it as I only heard it pronounced. I expect the old women are dead by now. Etoile's husband had died in an accident before they'd moved to Princewood. I saw pictures of him around the house and was surprised that he was a handsome man as Etoile was a bit horsey with large teeth and a drooping chin. Her mother Clara was batty even back then and often invited me upstairs to have a snack with her. She offered me pop when pop was considered special. I'd watch as she poured it, entranced by the fizz and froth. The first sip was like pure gold, followed later by explosive burps. Clara and Etoile watched me when my parents went away on a weekend trip. As Clara was tucking me in at night I shared with her some comments I'd overheard my mother make, something about Etoile watering the front lawn wearing her swimsuit. Mom didn't like that and thought Etoile should know better than to be showing off. After that my mother's relationship with the Bingosheas cooled and I wasn't left with them.

I spotted on the screen a row of trees. Those must be the last trace of a windbreak of hedge apple trees that ran behind our house. I expect when Princewood was farmland that an old farmer had planted them there as the trees were not random. They lined up exactly one after another for what seemed like forever but from viewing the map probably only extended down a block or two. Us kids could start at one end and go from tree to tree like it was some arboreal passageway, our feet never touching the ground. The name hedge apple is a bit of a misnomer; nubby green grapefruit-size balls that were anything but apple-ish grew on the tree. Except when the heavy fruit dropped to the ground where they soon rotted and turned into another pome euphemism--taking on the resemblance of 'road apples.' The awful truth about hedge apple trees is that they are infested with five-inch stickers that can puncture the skin like nails. More than once I fell and if the fall didn't knock the wind out of me, then the stickers piercing my back was enough to keep me out of the trees for a few days--until I went back to climbing and falling all over again. No wonder my mother was intermittently admitted to the psych hospital. Of course, back then I had no idea she was suffering from depression; I thought it was because of me and something I'd done. But that's another story, not one for Google Earth.

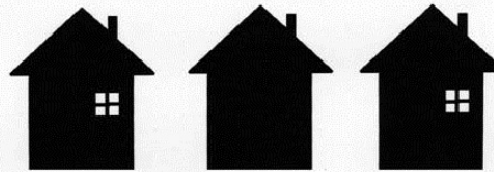
I tried looking for the rock, a glacial remnant left by the last ice age, in front of the Schoening's house where my sister Nancy slipped and cracked her front tooth. Not long after that accident her tooth went black, dead my mother said. Without understanding, I mourned the loss. It took several drives and several treatments to fix the tooth, the last of which involved laughing gas. I remember on the way home in the car from that appointment I plied Nancy with a list of questions, thinking under the influence of the gas I'd get her to reveal all her secrets. She simply nodded off on her side of the car. I'm sure we weren't wearing seatbelts. Our driveway was on an incline. One time Nancy and I were fooling around in the parked sta-

One time I went to my cousin's house

But she wouldn't let me in

So I called my mom and she said

"That's not your cousin"



tion wagon and pulled off the parking brake. The vehicle, loosed, started to roll backwards. Frightened, all I could do was scream at my older sister to steer. She guided us down and into the front yard of the Kohl's house across the street. There it was on my laptop, filling the monitor, of course much smaller than I remembered. Later, in high school the Kohl boys became tennis champions. Even later after that, in college perhaps, one of the Kohl boys died from leukemia. Mom knew and kept up with gossip from the old neighborhood from her friend Miriam Schoening, though, last time I visited Mom at her extended-care living facility, she claimed she and Miriam had never been friends.

I clicked and swung the Google Earth compass west of the Schoening's and found my old house; a two-storey salt-box style, middle-class and modern. Stunned, I sat in front of my screen. I'd come back home, to the house I shared with my mother and father, sister and two brothers, Tom and Steve. My brothers were older, meaning four or five grades above me--thus, our lives hardly intersected, yet I can still feel myself reaching. I remember trying to climb up for something (a Cincinnati Reds pennant? An old coonskin cap from Disneyland?) and falling into a crack between the chair and wall, folded up like a sandwich and crying for help. Tom rushed in and lifted me up and then warned me never to come into his room again, or else. Here it was, before me, as real as day. There was my window, where Nancy and I shared a room and next to our window, Steve and Tom's room. The distance I feel today from my brothers can only be measured in Google miles. Tom, the rebel growing up, has matured into a Republican, an abyss so wide I cannot cross over to him, and Steve, the brother I felt closest to, was eventually so racked by Kennedy's assassination (both of them) that when he left in 1969 for college he left for good.

Tears moistened my eyes, eyes often dried out from staring at a screen too long, especially in a dark room, eyes tired from a long day and only longing for relief. That's why I Google late at night. Looking for

evidence I exist (I type in my name to see what might come up), searching for lost classmates, until one thing leads to another. I am crossing streets, flying like a disembodied soul over years, hovering above my front yard. The irony is that the trees have grown, much larger than I last remembered them. What Dad had planted so long ago are now full-grown tulip maples, the green canopy sheltering the front of the house. If we still lived there we could rest, finally, in the shade of those trees. But we are no more we. The people we are now are so changed and altered that we cannot go home again.

And it is this realization that makes me cry. Through the magic of the Internet, I can locate 580 Princewood Avenue, circle the property, once more look down the street upon which I'd walked many times, coming home late for dinner, pause and zoom in on the front door, but it is forever shut... even as I am standing outside now.

The Lost Sound

by Alysha Hoffa

I suggest getting a person like this as early as possible. Get one as soon as you can form the words. In pre-school if you are brave. Her name will be poetic, unique, better than yours. If it is Amber it reminds you of something you saw on *Discovery Kids*. Like orange juice only darker, this tree-jewel had a bug stuck, crystallized and frozen. You didn't think people could be named after tree resin, but when you meet you are glad she is. Fifteen years later your grandmother will die and will leave you an earring made of this stuff. A beetle death-print surrounded by silver. You add it to a chain and think of this girl and your grandmother every time you wear it. You will be sad.

But, for now you are shy and in first grade and not liking it. Last year you tried to avoid recess because you were too afraid to talk. You heard germs were everywhere so you started licking Formica countertops hoping for a sniffle. When that doesn't work you lick dressers and handles where hands touch. You go to school. Your last name is very close in the alphabet to Amber's. This means you are standing next to her on the first day of first grade when lines for recess separate by family history. For the first time you ignore the "be quiet" rule.

You talk.

She is nothing like you. She has dark, dark hair (like the soil that grew the tree with the Amber-resin, you think). She has olive skin and wolf eyes. Everything about her is dark but you are blonde and pale and look nothing like soil. Minutes pass and you learn her father is dead and she lives right across the street from school. You don't really know death right now. Goldy the goldfish and Leonard the lemon tree (both killed from lack of water) don't count. You don't understand this kind of pain except through its relation to her. You and she both cry when *Amazing Grace* is playing like cogs turning in tandem with the others. Like clockwork.

Amber will lose more people than you. She will lose family members, friends and every time she will call you. She owns more than one black

dress and you own none. The one funeral you attend, for someone you've never met, you are wearing denim. You cry with her because you have commandeered her sadness, as if you didn't have enough of your own. When you are nineteen you see your grandmother unplugged, unbreathing, unliving. You think of all those funerals and all those phone calls. You cry harder. You have seen a dead body and now, only now, you understand.

Back in that first grade line Amber will ask you to play. No one has ever taken the initiative with you like this and you never would have. For the rest of your life people will have to ask you to play before you do. You will be too scared that they will not like you, and then scared you will not like them until you are just scared. You play with Amber and you dance with the wind as if it were alive. The playground is gusty, the wind strong in your circled arms like you cradle the invisible. "Wind Babies" is your favorite game and you no longer dread recess.

You tell your mothers you have a best friend and they ask to meet. You go to play dates and soon have two houses. You each like the other's better. You have more toys and a snack cabinet but she has a jungle gym and happier parents. You start going to church with her but you don't fit in. Church people scare you so you both play games in the hallway. You will get in trouble for being too loud. Something no one accuses you of unless Amber is around.

She will make friends everywhere you go. You will kind of make friends with her friends and she will push you to talk. You go on trips with her family, spend your summers at Girl Scout camp, and call her on nights when your parents won't stop yelling. It gets bad when they throw things. She is the only friend you let into your house because she is the only one who understands. She makes you laugh.

Amber moves to another school and then you move to another school, both of you displaced. She makes more friends and you get jealous because she is yours. You see her every weekend and then gradually less. Her

parents want you to visit often because you are "a good influence." They don't understand it is the opposite. Amber's mother remarries and her last name moves up to A. If you are in line alphabetically she is not standing next to you.

In high school you will both lose your virginity and not tell the other. For two girls who obsessed over menstruation for months this seems like a big deal, this secret. For your sixteenth birthday she will give you a tape she recorded. You don't have a tape player. You forget and stick it back in a box. You are afraid to listen. You both graduate on the same day at different times and make no effort to watch the other's. You go to college and she stays behind to work at Payless. She never liked school.

You are home from your freshman year when Amber calls, tells you she is marrying a man she just met. You drive to the courthouse and hug her mother. You bring your pink video camera because you want to remember. You tell them you will make a tape of the wedding but never do. She hugs you in a black and white dress and you take pictures. You don't cry until you get home and look up this older man on the internet because you are suspicious and judging him. He has three children and you have no right to do this.

You will not find out Amber is pregnant until you get the invitation to her baby shower. You spend hours and hundreds of dollars making a baby book from scratch. You want this to make up for everything but it doesn't. She is having a girl and you will drive to her a few months later after waking up to a phone call. You impose yourself upon a family you hardly know and a girl you hardly know anymore because, at age eight, she told you she wanted you in the room while giving birth. You hold her to it.

You love them both. You are upset her daughter isn't named after a tree part but you understand. You take pictures and video and know then you want to see this baby grow. Once you are back at school and in your other life this seems impossible. You call Amber but she doesn't know what to say. You want her to take her baby and come live with you. You want to give her a better life. You will go anywhere with her. You always have, if she asks first.

You say none of this.

You are moving into your first apartment with a

man when you find his tape recorder. It will play what Amber made on your birthday, that tape you've never thrown away. You take a breath. Her voice fills empty space and tells you she loves you. She sings a cheesy song about friendship which is fitting because you have always been cheesy. She stops singing and you swear you hear tears slide across her nose and fall. She tells you she will always be there and her voice ends. You listen to the white noise and hope there is more, some hidden message. This is when you should call her and you know this but apologies are thick in your throat.

You hit stop.

You listen to silence.

There is no happy ending here.





ALEXIS WILSON
Prints



Eggshells and Ashes

by Jeff Baker

The summer I turned fifteen, I began raising Pharaoh quail in a wooded lot that adjoined our back yard in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Their feathers were a rusty tan color, and they made a pleasing, delicate call that we could hear across the wood fence at our patio. Each evening the pinestraw floor of their pen would be dotted with small eggs that were mottled with chalky brown splotches. When the first few arrived I hollowed them out and set them on my bookshelf, but after that I saw no use for them, and I would throw each day's gathering into the woods, where they would give off a tiny pop when they burst against the branches of the pines, which became striated with dark-yellow scabs of detonated yolk.

My grandmother, who was visiting us from Mammoth Spring, Arkansas at the time, would have been appalled had she known I was wasting all those eggs. She'd told me once that if it had not been for her parents' garden and the fact that her brother was a good shot and had killed so many squirrels, her family would have starved during the Depression. Even after she married in 1933, she and my grandfather had loaded up their four small children each summer and driven up to Michigan, where there was work picking cherries, apples, tomatoes, and other crops. They would often stay for three months at a time, steadily moving from farm to farm, living in a canvas tent at the edge of the fields.

Ma'amaw was not someone I wanted to disappoint: She hand-stitched quilts for me, took me fishing, advised me on dating ("never be impressed when someone says a girl has a good personality or makes her own clothes"), taught me how to catch a snapping turtle, helped with my botany homework, laughed at the off-color jokes I told her, kicked the soccer ball around the yard with me, and shared my liking for Dwight Yoakam's music. She could be mischievous and was endlessly curious, often at the same time: at one point I'd kept a few chickens in the lot, and when we found one of my roosters dead of mysterious causes, she leaned over to me and said, in a conspiratorial whisper, "We'll just have to do an autopsy on that dude," then sent

me on a mission to sneak a steak knife out of my mother's kitchen to use for a scalpel. (Her official ruling: broken neck. Main suspect: the larger rooster scratching guiltily in the corner of the coop.)

She was particularly interested in my quail, in part because she'd been there when they hatched. Though she'd lived on farms most of her life and had witnessed the phenomenon many times before, she had sat peering through the plastic window of the incubator for two hours, freshly amazed each time another of the chicks struggled out of its shell.

Not long after she arrived, she walked out with me one evening to feed the quail. The sun was going down but it was still hot, and the cicadas in the woods behind us droned so deeply that we had to speak loudly to be heard. "They're layin' good," she said, pointing to the half-dozen eggs in the pen. When I saw shards of eggshell stuck to the bark of a nearby tree, I wondered if she'd noticed and looked over to study her face, which was textured with wrinkles that had been smoothed over with softness. Her gray permanent was smashed down by a plasticine visor, and in the blue shade it cast I could not quite make out her eyes, which were capable of throwing light in spectrums ranging from gaiety to dismay. I stood braced for a reprimand, or for her to walk off, disgusted at how far I had diverged from good sense. "You could've give 'em to somebody," I expected her to say, but what she said was, "Ever had pickled quail eggs? They're real good. You save up about four dozen of those, and we'll make us some." She went on to say that they were a workingman's delicacy, a staple at taverns and beer joints, which made the idea seem exotic, even a little decadent.

We began our project on a Saturday morning. I was not the first person she'd coached—she'd recently taught my father how to make tapioca pudding and sourdough bread—but I was a special challenge, considering that my cooking skills began and ended with glopping a neon-orange sub-

stance called "Pizza Now!" onto cheese toast. She did not seem deterred.

After shooing my parents and my sister out of the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator and handed me a jar that had two dill pickles in it. "First thing you need to do," she said, "is to eat these." When I asked why—wondering if this was some sort of superstition or egg-pickling rite—she looked at me as if she shouldn't have to explain. "We'll need the jar."

She took the eggs out and washed them and lined them up on a dish towel on the counter, then filled a mixing bowl with water. "Our next job is to make sure the eggs are fresh," she said. When I claimed that I *knew* they were fresh because I'd collected them twice a day, she looked at me over the top of her glasses with the expression of a veteran police sergeant interrogating a bad liar. "Do you know what a rotten egg smells like?" she asked. When I nodded she said, "You interested in finding out if they taste any better than they smell?" I saw her point.

She had me drop each egg into the bowl of water. If the egg were fresh, she told me, it would sink to the bottom, if it were old the large end would tilt upward, and if it were rotten it would float. She didn't comment when two of the eggs went belly up.

"You've heard the saying 'a watched pot never boils,' haven't you?" she asked after she'd set a large red pot on the stove. "You're going to disprove that for us. Give it a hard stare, and let me know when that water is boiling good."

I watched the water as if a bass were about to jump out of it. As she moved around behind me in the kitchen, her mind settled like a dragonfly on various facts about eggs before whirring off again: *Egg whites are a good salve for a burn. There's more than five hundred different ways to prepare eggs. Ever told you about the time I was working at the White Frog Café over in Forsyth, Mis-soura and we cooked forty-eight dozen eggs in one breakfast shift? Take and crush up some eggshells and sprinkle them in the garden and it'll help keep deer out. Now, Black Orpingtons are good calm hens, but leggerns are nervous and bad to fly out of the coop. If it thunders hard while a hen is a-setting, not an egg'll hatch...*

When I showed her an egg that was larger than the others, she stopped pulling down spices from the cabinet. Her eyes went somewhere for a moment and then she laughed. "Makes me think about a boy named Grady," she said. "He grew up with us out there at Wirth, and he was, well...*simple*. Grady had him a blue parakeet he just doted over, and one day some on'ry old boys snuck in the window and put a turkey egg in the cage. He went around telling everybody about this huge egg his parakeet had laid, and those boys never had the heart to tell him any different."

Soon after, she was somehow reminded of my grandfather, whom I'd never known. She told me about how he once decided he'd try to make wine out of tomatoes. (She told him it wouldn't work; he tried it anyway. It didn't work.) She remembered the time he was out loading cattle and noticed that their flock of guineas had flown up into the barn loft.

"Well, see, Walter didn't want them up there because they'll get mites in your hay," she said, measuring out vinegar. "Picked up a little old pebble that was laying there and chunked it up there to scare 'em out. Hit one of 'em square in the head—killed it *boneyard dead* right there. Didn't even flap once, just fell out. Only rooster we had."

"What'd he say?" I asked, laughing.

"Best I can remember," she said, "he just stomped his boot, hollered *damn*, and then walked over and started plucking it."

She told me about Mr. Semrau, the eccentric old German bachelor who would ingratiate himself into getting invited to supper by a different family every Sunday. Once, when she asked him if he wanted iced tea, buttermilk, or coffee with his meal, he'd pulled at his old-world collar, stood up, and shouted, "Oh, I bleef I haff all tree!"

Suddenly I realized that she had lifted the pot off the stove and was pouring an amber-colored liquid into the pickle jar. I'd barely been aware she had been making the brine all that time, much less of what it contained; I'd been on the dirt roads and in the dim farmhouses of Wirth, Arkansas, not in a brightly lit suburban kitchen in a college town. She packed the eggs into the jar, sealed it tightly, shook it seven times, and set it in the back of the refrigerator.

There was nothing left to do but wait. My grandmother had a surprisingly astute sense of natural cycles that was a mixture of country lore, intuition, and experience. She said the eggs would be ready "when they were ready," and when I pressed further would only say, "a week or ten days." After five days the eggs had become a blanched tan, and I decided to check on their progress. *She won't miss one, will she?* I thought, and had my hands firmly on the jar when she materialized behind me—I'd thought she was taking a nap. I'd also forgotten my sister's dictum: *Ma'amaw sees all*.

"You aren't getting into them eggs, are you, boy?" she said. As with many of the questions she asked me, she already knew the answer.

"Uh, no," I stammered. "Just checking to see how much Pizza Now! I have left."

"Next time you fool with that jar," she said, "you might just find a rat trap rigged to the back of it." When I turned around, she smiled and pat-

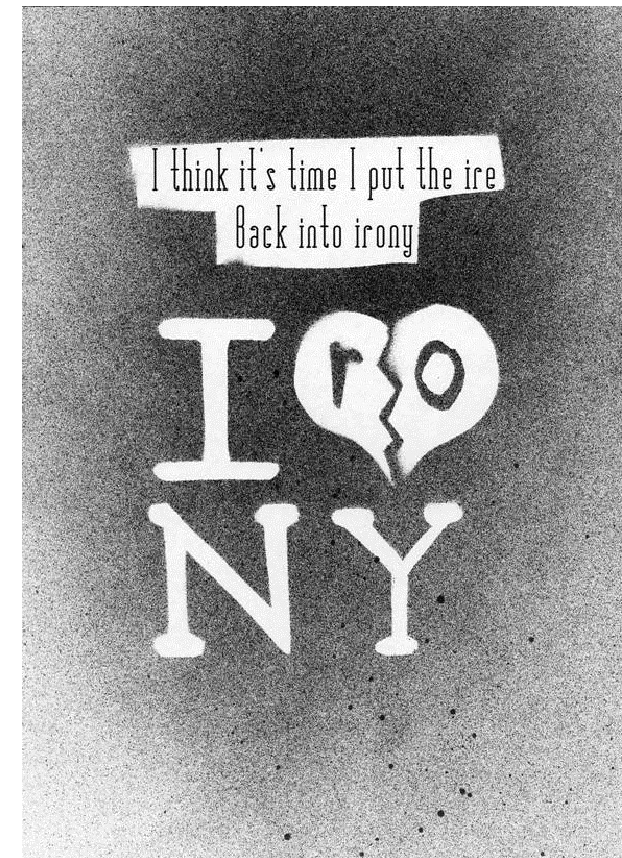
ted my shoulder. "It'll be worth the wait," she said.

On the evening of the ninth day, she set the pickle jar on the table in front of me at supper. When I unscrewed the lid, the jar gave a belch of atomized vinegar that raced up into my face and my anticipation waned a little. They eggs didn't look so great, either: by then the brine had turned cloudy and tiny particles of egg were floating in it. None of was going to stop me. The first egg tasted tart, mildly salty, spicy like a deviled egg, with an afterbite of cayenne pepper and the confluence of several unknown spices. My reaction was to reach for another, then another and another. I fished one out for Ma'amaw's verdict. "Pretty good," she said. "But we should have used a little more paprika." Her use of "we" was typically magnanimous; I'd done little more than collect the eggs, get in the way, and listen, but I was proud to have merely been present.

The eggs lasted only a few days. I'd like to be able to say that we shared the last one in some sort of symbolic gesture, but I'm sure I simply stabbed around in the murky brine with a fork until I realized they were gone.

Soon after we made the eggs, my grandmother went back home to Arkansas, and we never got around to making them again. The next time I ate pickled quail eggs was last fall, eighteen years later, when I bought a jar at a roadside stand. Tasting them again was a tangible reminder of what I gained from her, how I was a slightly different and possibly even improved person when I walked out of the kitchen that day. Our eggs had been better, of course. The ones I bought tasted merely pickled, but I could swear that ours had exuded wild flavors—the shattered shale that crunches under tires on the dirt roads of Wirth, an onion dug from Michigan ground, a limp guinea's blood.

Ma'amaw died in April of 1997 at the age of seventy-eight. Later that year, when I encountered an African proverb that read, "When an elder dies, it is as if a great library has burned to the ground," I understood it completely. I regret profoundly that I cannot have her show me even one more thing, invite me inside just one more story. Aside from some letters and photographs, memories are what I have. I am grateful that this memory is one of many. Some of them are everpresent, others are still buried in ash. This one hovers somewhere in between, and it comes to me now at unexpected moments, as subtle as the soft and distant trilling of a quail.



Leaving and Letting Go

by Geri Lipschultz

The mind of the living carries its own graveyard, a file cabinet of lives and moments that rise like jumping fish. Moments where the body was violated, the heart bruised by a single word, a ridge hardened in the brain somewhere, making an elbow of something that was once soft, once bubbling. The moments are soundless and precise as a fly rubbings its legs—before what? Flight? A meal? Is it merely punctuation? Time eats away at a mind. A hungry thing time is. This is what I wonder about. Memory. Does it carry itself only in the minds of those who hold it. Does it sew its threads into a soul? I know it can't vanish. There is a law, isn't there? Unseen, it must live somewhere, enfolded among the rings in the trunk of a neighboring tree. Trees are witnesses, as the earth is a witness. The flowers and stones, all here before us, all of it here when we depart. The memory. I believe it lingers. I believe it has a life. Does it escape when the tree is blasted, cut down, dying, losing its water, its life, its vessel for sunlight to regenerate its leaves, its branches. Does the memory fly off like its leaves and settle in the ground. Does it smolder there? Does it stay in the house where people sob, in whose dreams the tragedy is remembered, replenished, rewoven into a blanket that hides light from the soul of that person. Does the memory flit about? Does it land in between the letters of a word some crazy-obsessed writer who is typing right now, as I sit here desperately trying to let it in, give it a home among the speed of lights flickering in my brain. Does it sit in a fold of her brain? Can someone spot it?

She wasn't my best friend but my sister's, and some man killed her and carried her, her body that was—and I'm sure she was looking on, somewhere, the violation. She was in her twenties, but I knew her when she was a flower, when she was a bud. She was my sister's friend. They say someone close to her did it, and they couldn't prove it, so whoever did it ran free. And we were all haunted. The family, imprisoned—well, I didn't know. I was sure they did what they could, what they must. They buried their daughter, but her killer walked. They were good people. Citizens. I remember when they

moved to our town. I wanted to make a new best friend out of her older sister. My sister succeeded with the middle sister, the girl whose life would be taken. We palled around, the eldest sister and I. Both of us families with three girls, but I always thought of them as a touch more civilized than we. They kept their garage neat and orderly. Their tools on hooks with plenty of room for a car. Their house let you breathe with civility. Their gardens were spare but symmetrical. Ours were overgrown shrubs, more green and brown, but once we had tulips. Our house was cluttered, heated with the talk, the dialogues, the antiques, the dog, the endlessness of friends and relatives. I didn't know them well, not as well as I knew their next-door neighbors, as that group had come with us from the apartments. That group was like us in their clutter, but like them in their profound ability to order things. This group, the family with the three girls, who'd moved in later, was an understated bunch. I thought they might still live there, in that house up the street. They were not of the original group of settlers. For all I knew, they might have held the record of longevity, as we had left the block well over thirty-five years ago.

I remember that house before they moved into it. It was a pale pink, and a family of three lived in it originally. The first family in that house. They had a fence, just one of those fences that's there for show. They kept to themselves. One child, a girl—she did not participate in our group. Our group that played all manner of games together, from House to War to Clubs—nature clubs, movie clubs, baseball card clubs, scrapbook clubs—our scrapbooks of classic film stars, like Maureen O'Hara and Cyd Charisse. We had a radius of a mile. The town itself was a little over a mile away, but mainly we were drawn into the woods just steps away from our houses rather than parading about the town. We designed the space, brought back souvenirs, like violets, like whips from willow trees, fossils, frogs and snakes and bones. A lot depended upon whom you played with. There was that range, from

four to eight years old. Except she didn't play with us, the girl whose mother was like Old Mother Hubbard. For a while they were our villains, as we were not permitted to walk on their grass. That alone was sufficient to color fear onto that house. Yet the fear didn't materialize, didn't blossom into murder until much later, decades later. Later it would be that new family in that house, and the girl in that family, and she wouldn't even be living there. Still, fear would come to that house. It would come in its worst wrapping.

Streamville. This is the name I gave—in a piece of fiction—to a town that haunted me, the one I had to leave when I most wanted to stay. But your home town is the opposite of cake. You can't have it and leave it. Once I left, I couldn't come back.

We were the third family on the block to settle in. Sometimes the urge to be a kind of historian overcomes me, but it's for the reason of love, rather than a record. I came with love, came into this world with it. With love and terror. Maybe everybody does. Maybe this is common. I want some kind of closure that has eluded me for almost forty years. It's been such a part of my undertow, my interior life, my musings—this perfect childhood with its flame of demons.

It's in fiction that I tried first to put it to rest. I created characters that sprang from a chemical solution. It was not just a mixture of their real life counterparts. There was a triggering change, a chemical change. I took several realities and I tried to come to terms. There were a number of houses struck by tragedy, and in a way, every house is, or will be such a vessel, will be such a witness, will have its innocence taken. But there's something personal,



almost intimate about the houses of one's childhood town—especially when one has watched them rise up from the ground, watched them being built, when one's memory holds a picture of land without ownership, or shall I say without obvious ownership. I tried hard in that novel to protect the privacies of the people I cared for. But I did not try to disguise my passion for the town, my dedication to its physicality. I loved the town like a body, the way a child loves, unconditionally, with some sense it would always be there for you. I loved the people of the town that way, too.

As for me, I've been too sensitive, and I've been wayward, myself, and most of all, I've been lucky. I was so young when we moved there. We moved to Streamville—to this sea of mud—houses sprouting from the earth, it seemed (pieces of them erupting, emerging piece by piece, plasterboard chunks that we'd take into our little fists and use as chalk)—from apartment buildings. Families living in a spread of rooms together, separated by a door with a lock, and each compartment had its own smell. How did I know which door would open into the smell that was ours. Into brick caves, all attached. Large vessels of brick they were. Three stories up we lived. I remember climbing metal stairs. I remember wondering if I could get lost, venture into the wrong set of rooms, find a new mother, never come out. I did not like the steps, and I did not like the underground, the basement where they kept endless washing machines, endless dryers. I loved the outdoors, loved looking out over the vast world. Even then, I had a feeling for earth and sky. I would lie down—here I'm talking three years old—someone with a body memory of things, pairing them up, the images with

my thoughts and feelings. I remember lying down on that Teaneck soil, on a hill, full of cold, short, prickly grass, looking up at the sky. Seeing the tops of apartments against the wide blueness and thinking I was in a huge ship. We were sailing. My body trembled. I flew in my dreams, held a rope. I knew I could escape, knew that someday I could turn into a bird.

Such is sensibility, escalating from awe to terror in a matter of seconds. I'm told the terror would keep me, as an infant, on a washing machine, when my mother placed me there. She could pour in cups of detergent and refrain from worrying about her baby girl yards away from her. She could depend that her baby would not budge, for fear. Did this memory lodge itself in my toddler mind? Might this explain one fear? One doctor had claimed I required multiple testing, as I was too small, perhaps under-developed, something my mother later discovered was a ruse to keep her from changing doctors.

I hated them. Doctors and their syringes haunted my dreams for years. I ran when my turn came up in line. They had to catch me, pin me down. The word injection, the word shot, the word needle—those words themselves with electric currents. Other scenes—when, for example they had to strap wooden boards to my arms to keep me from ripping out stitches (which I had done after the stitching, when they went to give me a shot)—elude me. That scene, however, my attempt to escape, rises up from the miasma of others, like the smell of a new baby doll, like the sheep we would feed—the bunch of us, ranging from three to five years old, the long zig-zag of sidewalks at the bottom of which lived a boy who was a biter. In my bed I thought of him. In my bed, I was paralyzed. A man came to paint the inside of our apartment. A spot of green paint on a ceramic bear my grandmother gave me. I still have that bear, that paint drop. I remember he said he'd paint my face, that man, if I touched the wall. I remember being petrified of paint, the smell of paint. The smell of tar, too, petrified me.

Fear is a free-floating radical. It lodges itself in and wiggles around. It blooms wildly in dreams. In the dark of a many a night, I sprang up from my sleep and called in my father to chase away a stilled lion, a wolf suspended, a circle of strangers seated at my bedside, images that came into my dreams and lingered even after I opened my eyes.

We moved to Streamville, and everything was new. An echo in rooms where there wasn't any furniture. I remember that newness, the smell of lumber, the ragged look of earth recently carved. In those days, they did not level all of the trees. Not since that time have I lived in a new house. I remember the talk about the newness of the house, how "new" colored

something special, my new friends. Later, it would be the talk about a new school, the school they would tear down our woods to build.

And then we who lived grew up. Even the fear grew up. Like a beanstalk it grew. Like the Fortune 500s that took over another area with woods, the profound woods, the woods that we had our private names for ("the glen," "the bear's nest") where celebrities moved in and put up stone walls to keep the world and its children out.

But I would be remiss if I did not add something. I would be disingenuous, at the least. Streamville was where I found true love. It was where I left it, too, where I left that gift of love I was born with, the mate to fear.

It's like our house, now in some other person's hands.

Still, I'm lucky. What if terror, what if love, is born inside the soul. What if we carry it about, like a flag. What if we plant it down, build there, dedicate that soil.

Love grows, too. It feeds on memory and desire.

And beauty.

And truth.

Amen.

It's with this hope that I wrote a fiction, the lie to tell the truth.

My family left, and I did not say goodbye to Streamville. I did not show up on the day they emptied themselves into the moving van and the car and drove away. I'd moved to New York City, and I would make more moves, dozens of them. I would travel more than halfway around the world. It would be almost thirty years after this young woman's death that I finally said goodbye.

Not too long ago, I went back, put flowers on a sister's grave, with the woman I'd hoped would be my best friend. We'd made friends again, after many years of not keeping in touch. Somehow there was still a bond there, for which I am very grateful. She drove me past the house of the old lover, too. It was a house he built, well cared for. I was looking all around for closure.

You don't own a house, and you don't own land. You don't own your children, and you don't own your spouse. You don't own your own body. All of this becomes painfully obvious when it's too late.

And every memory has a life of its own.

Reckless Abandon

by Leslie Tucker

"The order is rapidly fadin'
and the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin."

—Bob Dylan

The guy who exhausted my youth once and for all drove a black Mustang convertible and looked like Brad Pitt. The first time he pulled up to the curb at school and offered me a ride, I knew it was a bad idea, but got in the car anyway. It was 1965, times were changing faster than a Chevy Corvette on Woodward Avenue, and a wild girl crouched inside me, ready to jump out and roar. I was an honor student, an accomplished pianist, President of Proscenium, and a member of our high school's State Champion Debate Team, but the dangerous driver of the Mustang wasn't aware of those credentials. All he saw was that I'd finally grown into my long skinny beginnings and developed a face that more often than not, let me get my way.

From the start, Mr. Mustang and I fit like a tight boot on a sprained foot. I hopped into his car and the sun-baked bucket seat seared my bare legs. He offered me a Marlboro and I shrugged, so he stuck it in his mouth, puffed once and passed it over. I tasted him in broad daylight, and shuddered.

Everyone called him Tipp. It was short for a pretentious family name with nothing behind it but a father who managed a furniture store and a social climbing mother with Camaro yellow hair, who wore all her jewelry, all the time. Tipp was only a year older than I was, but far more experienced in outlaw behavior.

My smart girl plans were made. I would go to college at Berkeley, in California, putting plenty of distance between my mother, in Detroit, and

me; and on the off chance I didn't get in, University of Michigan would be my back-up escape. With eight months left till graduation, I was itching for cheap thrills.

I was sick of the geeky, scholar-athletes who called regularly, drove the speed limit in their father's sedans, and never missed sports practice or harassed me about sex. Mr. Mustang slid through school on charisma and stinking good looks. He didn't care about anything but himself and his car, and I knew it. He ran with a different crowd than I did -- kids who were teetering on the edge of decency, kids who ripped open their need for speed. Tipp's friends -- brutally handsome guys and sizzling hot girls, weren't in any of my classes. They were glib and irreverent, drove fast cars, and had too much time on their hands.

I was a fast skier; Tipp was faster. I drove my car too fast; he drove his faster. I chugged my bottle of Stroh's as his friends pounded the table in rhythm, and slammed the bottle down to find that he'd beaten me by a split second. As a pianist, my small motor skill was exceptional and I taught him how to roll a joint, sleek as satin, no wrinkles, then to lick and seal it with a clean tongue. He taught me how to inhale, hold my breath, expand the cerebral euphoria, and exhale in slow motion. We kissed and the planets shifted into perfect alignment. He unbuttoned his clothes and I unbuttoned mine. No pleading. No promises. Lights on, lights off, daylight or darkness -- it was splendor in the grass, splendor in the car, splendor just about everywhere.

Tipp and I were inseparable for six months. He picked me up for school on frigid Michigan mornings and we cruised with the top down, wind burning our faces ripe tomato red. Mascara ran down my cheeks, so I quit wearing it, and when I got lipstick on Tipp's khakis one day, I quit wearing that too.

Several days a week I cut my lunch period Study Hall, and we raced

to Elias Brothers Big Boy, a drive-in on Woodward, and gorged on double-decker burgers, fries, and chocolate shakes. Windows open, we ordered from the grungy menu next to the car, and cranked CKLW up loud, mainlining our hometown, Motown, music. Diana Ross's buttery soprano crooned *Baby Love* and we wolfed down our Big Boy Specials.

One afternoon our food order was bollixed up and we were late heading back to school. Tipp did a U turn and burned into a Sunoco station even though the gas gauge read half a tank. "Why are we stopping? I'm really late and you know I have a test, and Mr. Bagg is so strict and...."

Tipp rolled his eyes, glared, "Get over yourself will ya? You and your and your grades...it's a huge drag. I need cigarettes and it'll just take a minute." And he slammed the car door and shuffled off to get a pack.

It didn't occur to me that Tipp and I never talked about much of substance until the night we went downtown Detroit to see *Blood Beast from Outer Space* on the mammoth screen at the Fox Theater. There were no spaces on Woodward, so we parked the car on a sketchy side street in front of a blind pig. Detroit was famous for its blind pigs, illegal gambling houses located in rundown residential neighborhoods. The streetlights had been shot out, and the area was blanketed in darkness until one of the monstrous men guarding the door, opened it. Smoky blue light streamed out; patrons skulked in.

We thought no one would notice the gleaming new Mustang parked between two rusted heaps, or the two tall blond kids walking away from it. This was not the part of downtown Detroit I was familiar with, and a surge of conscience overwhelmed me as my mind flashed back to my father.

Since Kindergarten, Dad had taken me downtown with him to his office in the Guardian Building, on Saturday mornings. We went to the thirty-first floor of the Art Deco landmark and he caught up on his work without phone interruptions. I gazed out the windows from the highest place I'd ever been and conjured up scary stories while I rode the mirrored elevators up and down, up and down. After Dad finished work, we walked hand in hand to the Embers Deli and devoured corned beef on rye and the creamy cole slaw that had made the place famous.

I cringed when Tipp parked the Mustang in front of the blind pig and locked the doors. We sauntered toward the theater and despite the moderate evening temperature, I was chilled, my mind churning over how hurt Dad would be if he had any idea where I was.

After the movie let out, we high tailed it back around the block and discovered that the Mustang's glossy, Turtle-waxed finish had lightning bolt key scratches around its circumference, and a hole gaped in the dash where the radio had been. Horror struck, we jumped in, locked up, and made the forty-five minute drive up Woodward in silence. The joints we'd smoked earlier, to maximize the special effects on the big screen, had worn off, and that's when I figured it out – Tipp and I had nothing to talk about. After our outburst of swearing over the paint job and radio heist, it was quiet as a tomb in the car.

A low-cloud ceiling blankets Detroit from November till May, and there were no stars or moon to be seen that night. Forty degrees felt warm

to us as native Detroiters, so when we cruised north of Eight Mile Road, we put the top down. I'd been studying Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, for an upcoming test in my Honors Lit class, and the dark fluff swirling in the sky aroused thoughts of empty blackness in my twelfth grade mind. "So what do you think of Sartre?" I asked Tipp.

"Who the hell is that?"

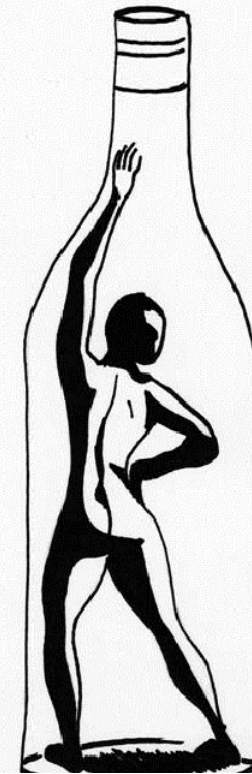
"You know, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Existentialist."

Tipp flashed a snide grin, "Oh give me a break. My dope's worn off and I've got a headache."

She was dancing in the dark corners

Of the midnight bars

In the afternoon



"Yeah, well, what's the last book you read for English?"

He glared, and hissed through clenched teeth. "Are you trying to piss me off? I just told you, I've got a headache."

Dad was sorely aware that my dismal episode of bad judgment was not running its course, as he'd hoped, and put his foot down when I least expected it. He worked his intellectual-communication-with-piercing-eye-contact-approach, placed his hands gently on my mine, and reasoned with me. My smart girl got the message loud and clear, but the renegade was in control, charging hard, exhilarated by the stupid risks she was taking. When my father forbade his smart-girl-daughter to see Mr. Mustang, the renegade reared up and hurled herself into the sensual abyss of the 1960s.

I ignored the intellectual wasteland between Tipp and me because insatiable lust for rock n' roll and each other, dominated our relationship. Bob Seger and his rip-roaring band, our hometown Detroit heroes, played regular gigs at the Walled Lake Casino and the Hideout, before they hit it big and moved out to L.A. In the parking lot, before the band's shows, we slammed back Stroh's and smoked joints, then went inside and gyrated against each other on sensory overload for hours.

Any time The Bob Seger Experience played, we showed up and were dazzled by the fierceness of their music. Our bodies buzzed from cheap beer, and our feet and legs tingled, grew numb, as we absorbed massive bass vibrations through the wooden floor. Detroit and its environs, notorious for oppressive heat and humidity, set records that summer, as we danced, dripped, and shook it down.

When the Rolling Stones came to Detroit and played Olympia, we had fourth row seats. Olympia Stadium, home of the Detroit Red Wings, was a small venue and the plexi-glass shields circling the ice were removed whenever the rink was covered for a concert. For the Stones, a stage was erected over the rink space, and extra seats for the sold out crowd were jammed onto the floor down front. We were breathless with anticipation to see the Stones -- a coarse and energetic band, their front man, feral and sinewy. Static popped from the sound system and I trembled, raw as peeled fruit, waiting for the first glimpse of Mick and the boys.

The audience was wild, and the so-called security comprised of a few half-drunk Rent-a-Cops. Luscious-looking girls, selected from the audience by promoters, were primed, told to gyrate provocatively in front of the low stage. When Keith slinked out and lacerated the room with the opening riff of *Satisfaction*, they tossed panties, bras, tee shirts, you name it, toward his tight leather pants. Lewd behavior by wild chicks in the audience was shocking then; we'd never seen anything like it. Mick, fierce and cantankerous, hair flopping around his shoulders, strutted out on the runway, and the crowd exploded as he pranced over to Keith and kissed him, full, on the lips. We were disoriented and bloated with pleasure as the world tilted beneath our feet. Tipp had grown his hair long, like Mick's, and it brushed his shoulders as his hips shook next to me. It was 1966 and I was eighteen years old.

The world as I knew it had indeed turned upside down. Eric Sevarid crushed our generational naiveté on the evening news, announcing that Civil Rights leader, James Meredith, was gunned down in a peaceful march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. The Apollo space launch failed and three of America's heroic, right stuff kind of guys -- astronauts Grissom, Chaffe, and White, were killed. World Champion Prize Fighter, Cassius Clay, mystified Americans when he became a Muslim and changed his name to Mohammed Ali. And everywhere, even in our conservative, Detroit suburb, everyday-average-guys were growing their hair long and putting it in ponytails.

On Main Street USA, strange change assaulted the cookie cutter propriety I'd been raised with in Birmingham, Michigan. Proud floozies of all ages and good-girl-next-door types too, pranced around in mini-skirts, while Mitch Ryder and The Detroit Wheels rocked the nation with his tribute to them all -- *Devil With a Blue Dress On*. My friends and I had grown up in the Walt and June Cleaver-ish households of the 1950s, and suddenly, nothing we had been taught by our briefcase-toting fathers and pearl-wearing mothers made any sense anymore. We were pioneers in the wilderness of wild behavior.

Without warning, my planet slipped out of alignment. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, the waters around me had grown, I was drenched to the

bone, and as fast as I was swimming, I sunk like a stone. A breath away from graduating with honors and escaping to college in California, I was weak and nauseated, and my beloved Stroh's tasted like piss.

Risk taking is only exhilarating until it becomes exhausting; and suddenly, I was dead on my feet. And my smart girl knew why. So she did all the things that girls did then to bring on their period when they missed it. Steaming hot baths, running fast for miles, hundreds of sit-ups at a time, but I was young and strong and so was my child, and she held on tight.

To be fair, I have to say that I knew exactly who Tipp was and what we were doing. I could look back now and say I was blinded by young love, but I wasn't. I did know then what I know now, and the predictable occurred, and the responsibility became all mine. I made it all mine. When I told Tipp, he turned the whitest shade of pale and did what guys in that predicament did in those days and offered to marry me. The idea made me nauseous, and I threw up on his shoes and refused. I stood up to his parents and mine, refusing all of them, over and over, for weeks and weeks. It burned more energy than I'd spent in my entire life, but to no avail. Years later, I discovered that Dad, at Mother's insistence, enlisted the help of a Probate Judge, and manufactured the documents for a marriage and divorce to legitimize my child.

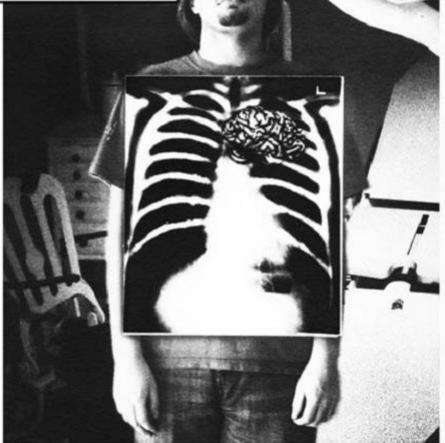
At the time, my world was shattered; I'd blown it up myself, yet I schemed to transcend the wreckage and take my child with me. Collapsing into bed at night, too exhausted to sleep, I vowed to do as the Dylan song said:

"Strike another match, go start anew, 'cause it's all over now Baby Blue."

ROBBIE KNOPF & JUSTIN TOOLE

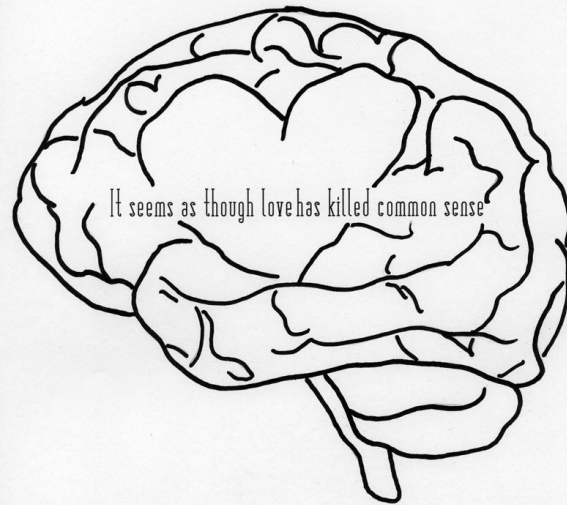
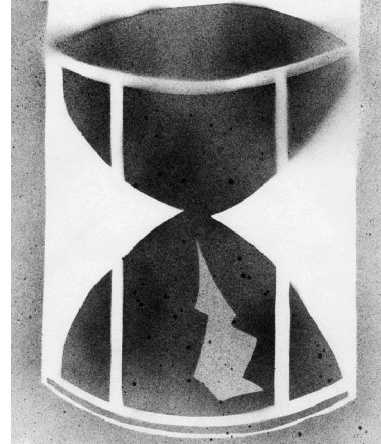
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I've come to accept the idea that brave
men are extinct.



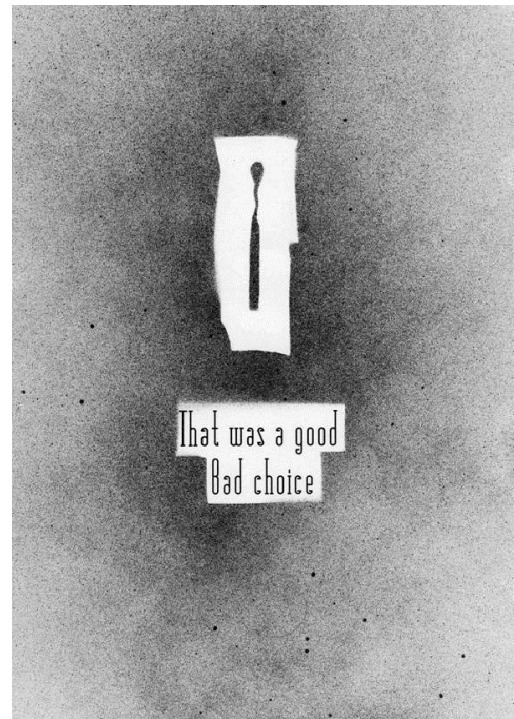
However, I'm still struggling with the fact
that this makes me a coward.

I forgot to be burdened by the obligation



It seems as though love has killed common sense

That was a good
bad choice



Roommates

by Lis Anna

the Shepherd

The Clash plays full volume, every morning at 7AM. Rock the Casbah rocks the walls. In a former life his ancestors were shepherds and tended to flocks. In modern times he herds bad kids all night at the runaway shelter. His vocabulary is massive. He carries a baseball bat to work. His car is a motorcycle. He wants to be famous and giving credit where credit is due he does look like a young Peter Fonda.

Chicks dig him.

The last chick of the day is pregnant. The current chick is not. The roommates have been instructed to be quiet regarding this fact, feign ignorance, shrug, pretend to be deaf. Just whatever you do, don't talk to new girlfriend about old girlfriend. Seriously. The drama with the rest of the roommates is enough to deal with. The Shepherd has to get an operation. He is very vague with the details. *Exceedingly vague*. Post Op he sits with a bag of frozen peas on his crotch. Another roommate thinks it's a gonad problem. A rumor erupts. Gonad removal. We are sure.

The Shepherd eats my leftovers. When I confront him, empty paper carton in hand, he shrugs, tells me I eat at all of the good restaurants. Butt kisser. He tells me I'm not like the other roommates. He is trying to ingratiate, insinuate his way into my lo mein box.

I am not falling for this. Like I said, chicks dig him. There's a pregnant one downstairs to prove it. The shepherd does not clean the bathroom sink or vacuum but he does steal cigarettes if you leave your pack on the breakfast bar in Community Sector One. Community Sector One is a combo of the kitchen and dining area. Don't even think about leaving something in the living room. The coffee table is the Bermuda Triangle.

On weekends we go to really trendy bars, drink overpriced Irish whiskey and play fight club in the front yard until we are so bruised and stupid we can barely move. Our neighbor is the police department. Cops

come and go, day and night, at the Police Resource Center. The Shepherd is not concerned. All of his drugs are prescribed by people who went to go to college and have initials after their names. The Shepherd's father paid a lot of money for him to study psychology so he could pretend to have a host of disorders and get drugs. Legal drugs. One night over a bottle of 18 year Scotch that cost as much as our rent, he takes the drugs because he's a shepherd without a flock. The alcohol picks at his brain. I can see it. Chicks are his flock as far as I can tell but they roam. That presents a problem.

The old girlfriend is in the Shepherds room waiting for her appointment to terminate her pregnancy. The other roommates are annoyed by her presence. Her predicament proves life is messy. We all agree they must have been doing it to the Clash. *Rock the Casbah*. He tells us in a hushed whisper the old girlfriend still loves him.

I say, "If she loved you then she'd have your baby. You're delusional."

He buys her Chinese food after the termination. He says it's the least he can do. Collectively we stand in Community Sector One and roll our eyes. The roommates believe he only has one gonad left, thus diminishing future procreation abilities. Get it while you can. That's the prevailing sentiment. The old girlfriend goes back to the place where old girlfriends go. The new one arrives. We like her. She is sweet and demure and educated in Europe. We stand in Community Sector One with her and drink coffee until she asks us what we've been doing. A tension seizes the group. Um, uh umm uh, we say intelligently. The Shepherd herds her off to drink overpriced Irish Whiskey and not mention the baby that he didn't have. A few nights later he calls at 1 AM. He says he doesn't feel so good. His arm hurts, he's sweating, can't catch his breath.

Heart attack, I say.

No, he says. No way, he repeats. "I'm only twenty-six."

Heart attack, I say.

He does not believe me. Finally, he agrees to let me take him to the

emergency room which is horrifically ugly and bright. The most awful doctor in the world interrogates him.

Then the doctor starts in on me. Can I talk to you, he asks.

Sure, I say, to this totally clueless prick.

How much cocaine has your friend had, he asks.

What?

How much cocaine?

None.

I can't help your friend if you're not truthful with me. How much cocaine?

Fuck you, I say. He was at work.

The conversation is over. The power tripping MD storms off.

An hour later the Shepherd has another heart attack at the hospital and now they believe him. He stays for days. I sit next to his bed reading passages from *As I Lay Dying*, at his request. Finally a different doctor comes in and tells him the infection he had in his upper respiratory system moved to his heart.

Creepy.

He is discharged and made to swear on a stack of bibles that he'll leave red meat and cigarettes alone. Forever. After three days he is such an asshole that I threaten to perform CPR with lungs full of cigarette smoke if he doesn't get a patch. He buys a pack of Camels instead.

When we get home the Crazy Girl is crying, screaming, being a drama queen.

"What the fuck is wrong with her?" the Shepherd yells.

"She's crazy," I say.

None of us know what's wrong with her. A week later she tries to commit suicide. Her sister comes to pick up all of her stuff. She tells us the crazy girl is in an institution.

"Didn't see that one coming." The Shepherd rolls his eyes.

Now we have the entire downstairs to ourselves until my brother dumps his girlfriend.

The Shepherd and I go out for dirty, wet martinis.

"Have you ever been in love?" I ask.

"Why? Are you going to drink too much and tell me you love me?"

"No. I was wondering if you love someone."

He eats honey and bread. "Maybe."

"Maybe has nothing to do with love."

"How do you know?" he asks, flagging down a server.

I order a double whiskey on ice. Conversations about love are always on the rocks.

"I have something to tell you," he leans in, confessing.

"Are you going to drink too much and tell me you love me?"

"I took the job in Japan."

"Deserter. I can't believe you're leaving me alone with those lunatics."

"I knew you'd bring that up."

"So, what's your girlfriend going to do?"

"She says she'll wait but really she'll find a new boyfriend."

"And you?"

"I look forward to the madness of Tokyo."

"The Japanese are going to be terrified of you."

"All the more reason to go."

the Chef

On his day off Hank Williams Sr. blares from his crappy, plastic stereo balanced on a stack of unpacked boxes. His room is directly above The Shepherds. *Hey good looking* does not *Rock the Casbah*. The Chef is a shiny, dark Italian with gypsy eyes. He cooks Tortelloni alla zucca and Ragù alla bolognese at Del Cambio Ristorante. The first night I meet him he tells me he lived in a homeless shelter with his dad who'd had an aneurysm. A year later his dad was well enough to get a job. They got a trailer. The Chef got a girlfriend. Then the girlfriend got a girlfriend. So the Chef did the same. When she found out he'd screwed someone else the first girlfriend smashed his guitar. He took it like a man. He threw her clothes out the front door of the trailer. Eight months later he had a son. Then he met a nice hippie girl named Rose who dished out a sexually transmitted disease. Not the *keep your dick in your pants a few weeks* kind. The kind that never goes away. In exchange for free rent Rose left the Chef with festering blisters on his manhood. Then she blew out of town with no forwarding address. It's funny what people will tell you. The crazy girl has a crush on the Chef. We all know it. She walks around, saying, "We're not going to have any secrets in this house."

The Shepherd tells her to shut up. The Chef has stopped smoking dope and started reading. His inquisitive nature is unmasked. He wants to know everything about me. He walks from the shower to his bedroom naked. I'm pretty sure it's an invitation to stare. He shows me photos of his son. I have never considered having children. It is all so weird to me.

"You're not even old enough to buy beer," I say. Suddenly, beer is such a qualifier. No beer. No kids. How can someone who isn't old enough to buy beer have such grown up problems?

"I'm old enough to buy cigarettes," he says.

"That's reassuring."

"They'll be no secrets in this house," the crazy girl says.

The Chef cooks me dinner. Greens wilted in vodka, roasted Portobello mushrooms. The house is empty. It's weird. I drink my wine, twirling my glass between my fingers. I am thinking that people who are not old enough to buy beer should not be old enough to have kids.

"So what are we doing here?" I ask to change the subject in my mind.

"You make me feel so stupid," he says.

"You cooked me dinner because I make you feel stupid?"

"No, not that," he says, cryptically.

"Let's talk about something else." He tells me his ex girlfriend is trying to take his son away.

Because I've had two glasses of wine, I am sure she cannot do this. I am sure he must not let her remove his name from his son's life. I look at him in the candlelight of Community Sector One and wonder why he isn't hiking across a campus on his way to American Lit or eating a bowl of ice cream. *Why does he have such grown up problems?* How did someone not old enough to buy beer end up with such massive, life-changing decisions.

After an uncomfortable pause, I ask, "What do you know about the guy in the Basement?"

He thinks a minute. "Nothing really."

"How is it you can live in a house and not know anything about someone?"

"Because all I want to know about him is that he pays rent, on time, every month."

"How did you find him?"

"He answered the ad for a roommate."

"And that's it?"

"Pretty much."

"What if he's down there hiding body parts?"

"Makes no difference to me. Rent money," he adds, winking.

Eventually my two and a half glasses of wine go to my head. "I have to go to my room," I say.

"Okay," he says.

And that is that. I am sure I missed something. Maybe not. I am sure that was a date but don't want to be too assuming. I go to see a psychic. The psychic describes the Chef, says he lives upstairs from me and that I will hurt him. He says it's Karmic, that we have known each other in past lives

and that we will not fix our problems with each other in this life.

"That's cheerful," I say. Then the psychic tells me not to move to Texas.

Okay.

"Do not move to Texas," he repeats.

The Chef has no matching furniture, no matching sheets or clothes. Everything he owns looks like it was a hand-me-down. His room is messy, covered in cat fur. He keeps marijuana hidden in a drawer in his closet. Sometimes when he's at work I sneak into his room and sit on his bed. This spawns rumors in the house but I don't care. It's not what they think.

The Chef has the best view in the house. When you sit in the middle of his bed you can see the mountains perfectly through the windows that line an entire wall. Those crazy mountains. Weirdest thing to see. I grew up in Mississippi next to a wide crack in the earth filled with water.

I don't even know where I am when I look through these windows.

One day, I fall asleep. A simple, *I'll just close my eyes for a minute*, nap. Six hours later it is dark in the room. The Chef is sitting on the bed. Into the dark night, he says, "Are you okay?"

I nod, but it's not very convincing.

He turns to look at me, his dark gypsy eyes wet with tears. His soul is windswept.

The next day his son comes to visit. He is a dark haired replica of the Chef but smaller. He screams and screams, red faced, tiny fists clenched. The Shepherd begs me to go with him to the Tornado Room and drink whiskey. "I can't stand to hear babies cry," he says.

I roll my eyes, thinking of the last girlfriend. "I know," I say.

My brother breaks up with his girlfriend and she starts hanging out at my house. One night I come home and the house is quiet. No one appears to be home. While I'm downstairs I hear footsteps upstairs. Twenty-minutes later my brother's ex comes downstairs. "Where have you been," I ask?

"Out," she says.

"Liar," I say.

Three days later she is really sick. The Chef is strangely absent. I drive her to the health department. Five hours later I pick her up. She is crying. It seems the STD gift has been given again. Her fever is 103 and she is sweating profusely, feverish, delirious. The Shepherd takes care of her while I drive to Del Cambio Ristorante. I ask someone carrying crates of vegetables go in and find him. If I go inside I'll make a scene. He comes out and gets into my car. We sit in silence under the streetlamps. I can hear him

breathing. I am so mad I think that if I say one word I am going to explode, so I say nothing. Minutes pass on the digital clock on my dashboard. Each number replaced by a new one, a different one and you can't get the old number back.

Abruptly, I say, "Do you know why I'm here?"

I watch him, mentally daring him to do anything that will justify me slapping his face. His lips tighten.

After a few seconds, he says, "Just because I like you doesn't mean... I mean, we're not dating. I can sleep with other people. If you're not going to date me then you can't be jealous."

I look at him and say, "If you'd really been sleeping then I wouldn't have had to pick her up from the health department today."

The color drains from his face. Again, silence.

"It was so fast though," he says.

"It usually is. How many times?"

"Twice."

Now he looks at me. I see him in the moonlight, this person who has stood by everything I've done since meeting him and my heart softens a bit even though I try to resist.

"Does she know about me?" he asks.

"No. But I do," I say. "No one knows I'm here. I'm going to leave the rest up to you. You're going to have to work this out. You're going to have to do the right thing."

He looks at the ceiling of my car, reaching for the door handle. "I have dinner orders piling up inside."

I watch him walk underneath the warm buttery glow of the street lamps and my heart breaks in a way I can't ignore.

Three days pass. I check his room. I call his work.

Sick, they say.

Yeah, right, I say.

On the fourth day the Chef appears and makes dinner for everyone.

"What are you doing?" I demand.

"The only thing I know how to do," he says.

"You don't seriously think preparing food is going to fix everything, do you?"

He stares at me. Finally, he says, "I didn't know I was going to meet you. I didn't know I was going to love you." His eyes brim with tears. "This just wasn't what I planned."

I am so mad. I hold my breath, grind my teeth. Just to get some air,

I say, "This is so unacceptable."

He follows me into Community Sector One and lays his hand on my shoulder.

"Stop," I say.

"Mistakes. That's all I seem to make," he says.

"Have you lost your mind?"

He shakes his head.

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" he shrugs.

"I don't know. Fix this."

Neither of us says anything. We just stand there listening to the guy from the basement and the shepherd playing fight club outside.

Finally, he says, "What can I do." A resignation. Not a question.

"I can't undo this," he says, matter-of-factly.

"Then what? This is just another imperfect day in paradise?"

"You're acting like someone has done something to you. "

Anger flushes into my cheeks. "No. I'm just asking why."

"Why?" he repeats, raising his eyebrows. "The why is easy. Lonely people do dumb things."

"So, lonely people commit random acts of stupidity. That's how this happened?"

"I begged her to let me wear a condom..."

"You're not even old enough to buy beer," I scream.

The front door swings open, banging against the wall. I turn.

The guy from the basement jerks his thumb toward the driveway.

"The crazy girl took a bunch of pills and washed it down with a bottle of tequila."

The chef and I run outside. A siren wails in the distance. The crazy girl stumbles around, incoherently in the front yard. Her shirt is down around her waist, exposing her breasts. The guy from the basement runs over to her, then grabs his nose, backing away.

"What?" I yell.

The crazy girl reaches for him.

Basement stumbles backwards. "She rolled in dog shit."

She turns around, like a dog chasing its tail, to look. Her back is smeared with a dark brown goo.

The ambulance turns into the driveway, screeching to a halt. A Medic jumps out. The crazy girl spins again, but this time she goes down for the count. The lights from the ambulance flash over her breasts, bulbous and

strange, surrounded by grass, as she lays on her back, staring blankly at the stars.

the guy in the basement

No one knew anything about the guy in the basement. Including me. All I knew was that every morning there was some guy in the kitchen making a pot of green tea and oatmeal. He'd smile and say, "Good morning."

"We have a basement?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's under the house," the crazy girl says.

The Shepherd has the most information on the guy in the basement because the door to the hall that leads to the stairs that lead to the basement connects through the Shepherd's room.

"What's he doing down there?" I ask.

"He makes Zen pillows and goes around to all of the dumpsters at night to get food the stores throw out."

"There's a guy stuffing Zen pillows in the basement?"

"As far as I know."

I turn into Sherlock Holmes. I ask all of the roommates about the guy in the basement. No one knows. I sneak down to the back of the house. I am sure it is a grim, dark place full of dragons. No such luck. In fact it's not even a real basement with dark, dank corners. It is actually the first floor of the house. It is ground level with windows on two sides. I peer through the windows like a peeping Tom. It's actually kind of cheerful.

I walk back inside and knock on the Shepherds door. "I want to see the basement."

"Sure." He points his baseball bat at a door across the room. I open the door and descend into the basement. From where I am standing on the staircase I can see a neat little palette of blankets on the floor with a heater next to it, stacks of Zen pillows in various stages of creation and an extremely bright, tidy dungeon.

Basement walks around the corner and looks up at me. My cheeks flush hot.

"Hey," I say.

He smiles. "Hey."

"Do you live in the basement?"

"Yeah."

"What do you do down here?"

"Think. Stuff pillows. Write down ideas. I've been making some really cool sculptures."

"Really? Can I see them?"

"I took them downtown to have them fired but I'll get them back in a few days."

"Where are you from?"

"San Francisco."

"You're from California?"

"Yeah. Where are you from?"

"I guess I'm from a lot of places but I moved here from Chicago. How did you end up here?"

"I went to the airport and bought a ticket for the next flight leaving. The ticket agent said Altamont, NC. So I bought a ticket, went home, packed up my stuff and came here. What are you doing here?"

I shrugged. "I was having an affair."

"Are you still having an affair?"

I shake my head.

"Why not?"

"Because it was so convoluted. Married guys can never get their act together."

Basement laughs. "Are you telling the truth?"

"Of course I am. It's too stupid to make up."

"Why do you think people cheat?"

"Because they're afraid to be alone so they hold on with one hand and reach out with the other. What about you? What are you getting away from?"

I expect him to hesitate, stutter, lie.

Not basement. He looks me directly in the eye and says, "My dad's a total mental case."

"Like annoying nut job or certifiably crazy?"

"More certifiable. He thinks people are watching him."

"They are."

Basement laughs. "I don't know. Maybe."

I sit down on the stairs and we talk for hours. I learn loads of information. I learn his favorite childhood toy. Fischer Price record player. Favorite color. Dark purple. Favorite food. Caramel apples. Anyone who eats caramel apples can't be that bad. Two days later the Crazy Girl starts screaming and wailing. "Tell that bitch to shut up," the Shepherd yells, pointing his

baseball bat at her. Because I can't take the madness I ask her what's wrong. She hugs herself tightly and tells me that boys don't like fat girls.

I go to a Sufi dream workshop. Basement comes with me. The workshop is on the top floor of a brightly lit yoga studio. In a room full of strangers we reveal our dreams, the hidden symbols locked deep in our psyche. We meditate, breathe, descend, explore, examine, rise. I look around the room. The winter afternoon drifts. It is serene, quiet, dreamy, so cold outside that I want to fall asleep. Day turns to night and we leave. Beauty exists. I am sure of it. The world is so quiet, the streets so vacant, like the



city has been abandoned. We drive back to the house unwilling to undo the silence we've built. Stars shine in a cold night.

"Thanks," Basement says before he descends the stairs. "I would have never known about that without you."

Immediately I recall a passage from Rumi. *"My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I intend to end up there."*

A few days later Basement is making green tea in his glass pot. I stagger sleepily up the stairs and around the corner to find him there. He is so cheerful in the mornings. I am moving in a thick, dim haze trying to make coffee. I was out late rocking the casbah.

"How did you sleep?" he asks.

I look over. "Okay. It's so damp here."

"San Francisco is wet and cold. It's not too different."

I grunt in agreement.

"The Chef likes you," he says, grinning like a goofy lunatic.

The mention of something so silly wakes me up a little. "The Chef has a pile of personal problems," I say, willing my coffee to brew faster. "I don't think he'll be adding me to that pile anytime soon."

"I see the way he looks at you. It's quite impressive."

"Impressive how?"

"Because I'd like for someone to look at me the way he looks at you."

"Like what?" I press.

"Like he loves you and he is afraid to say it."

"So you want someone to love you and be afraid to say it?"

He laughs, then points out the obvious. "Your coffee is ready."

After tea and coffee are poured and sipped he says, "My statues are

ready. Do you want to go with me to pick them up?"

I nod.

Basement stacks boxes of seated Buddhas into the back of his truck with the rebel flag painted across the tailgate. I wait in the front seat, thinking about how I arrived here in the first place.

the narrator

The big question is: what am I doing in this house full of roommates. Everyone wants to know how I ended up here? I met the Crazy Girl at a party. That's how. My lease was up on my apartment and I was wandering...

But wait. Back up. There's this really important thing that happened before. Dr. Murphy made me take a test. It was the only test I'd failed in my life. It flat out scared the crap out of me. I was sent to the Health Department because I failed a tuberculosis test. Long, putrid green corridors led me to an elevator that descended into the bowels of the establishment. I failed three tests. I was sent for X-rays. A mean spirited nurse informed me that if any spots showed up on my lungs I'd be quarantined and forbidden to leave.

"We'll call whoever you want to pick up your car," she said, sucking down the last of her diet Coke.

There were no spots on my lungs and I was allowed to leave.

The next day I went to the movies to see *Moulin Rouge*. I was Satine. At the end of the movie she dies of tuberculosis. I felt cast adrift from what I'd known before. Now I was in this weird little Southern town acting out parts of movies.

So I meet the Crazy Girl at a party and when I need a place to live the Crazy Girl says I can come stay at her house. She has a huge room that we section off and share. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't agree but since I have TB it doesn't matter anymore. The Chef moves all of my furniture. My rent is officially eighty dollars a month. I am cold all of the time. The cold in this place is never ending. The Crazy Girl begins to cry because the Chef is ignoring her. One night The Chef puts his arms around me in Community Sector One and she sees us. She slams the front door on the way out.

This makes me mad and I follow her out, yelling across the front

yard, "What's wrong with you?"

She stops at her Volkswagon convertible. It is so dented you can't imagine how it was ever whole. She watches me a minute. Her dark hair shines in the moonlight. Her ass is so big it covers the shadows.

Finally, she opens her car door and yells, "We were going out before you came along."

"Who?"

She points at the living room window. I turn and see the dark silhouette of the Chef watching us.

"Oh, Christ," I say, walking back inside. "This isn't junior high."

I slam the door. The Chef is ten feet away. "Are you going out with her?"

"It was only sex. Before my problem."

"You had sex with her?"

He regards me seriously a moment. "Are you going to hit me?"

"Why?"

"Jealousy?"

"What would I have to be jealous about? She's crazy."

"Come here," he says.

I walk into his arms.

"Come watch the moon rise over the mountains with me," he says.

We walk to his room carrying a bag of blueberry muffins and a bottle of wine. At first he plays love ballads on his guitar that make me smile. I lay in his lap and the warmth of his chest so broad and strong and the glaze of the wine makes me tell him my secret.

"You're dying," he whispers, leaning forward to see my face.

"Maybe," I say.

"How do you stop it?"

"I don't. The drugs didn't work."

It is so quiet. The room is awash with blue light from the moon.

That night a fine white powder drifts down from the sky. I wake, still in my clothes, next to the Chef. Outside it is a winter wonderland. We drink bottles of Pinot Noir and read Rumi's poems in the moonlight.

"You should stop smoking," he says.

I raise my eyebrows. "Really? What's the point now?"

He shrugs.

I begin driving to the top of a mountain every night after midnight to listen to the BBC. If I'm going to die then I want to get pissed off at all of the political bullshit I tried to accept before. I want to stand up on top of a

mountain and get mad. For the first time in my life I wonder what it would be like to be in love. Really in love. Under a cascading spray of moonlight, I think about true love. Wonder and awe descends upon me. I listen to the sound of the rain, to my heartbeat, to the sounds of crows calling from tree to tree. I am crushed beneath the sorrow of leaving this magnificently sparkling, bent, beautiful, honeysuckle filled world behind.

epilogue

The night before Basement goes back to San Francisco him and the Chef and I take acid. A cold February night darkens the edges around us. Together we place squares of acid on each others tongues like members of a secret club. We hang around the house until the walls begin shrinking. Basement is terrified he'll go insane, that he dive over the edge and forget how to get back. I tell him that he'll be okay. He asks me to hold his hand. I do. We are watching *The Matrix* in the basement when the ceiling begins breathing and Nemo steps out of the television. I am distracted by a toilet in the back corner of the basement. No partition. No curtain. Just a toilet.

I ask Basement if he ever uses it and he says, "Sure. All of the time." I'm certain that to use a toilet you must also close a door. "Not so," he says, "young grasshopper. I am proof." We discuss the toilet until the Chef comes looking for us.

The night is so dark. I have a copy of *1984*. I read passages aloud until we are sure the end of privacy is near. We drive high into the mountains to escape the think police in my shiny new, red car that I will bequeath to my brother when I am dead. Our altitude is determined solely by how far I can drive. My headlights bounce across the road like a disco. I pull off of the road on a grassy shoulder.

We're a team the, Chef says.

Okay, we're a team.

We stay together, he says.

We get out and find a path that runs along the steep face of the mountain. With only moonlight to light our way we set off into the wilderness. The path is narrow. I stop and sit on the ground. I don't notice that it's cold. I don't notice that I'm not wearing a coat. I only notice the face of the night I am staring into. I look back toward my car and that's when I see it. A man crouched down in between me and my car smoking a cigarette. His

profile glows in the moonlight, ominously. The profile of a man. He turns, looks at me, his eyes narrow. I know I will have to pass him on the path in order to get back to my car. I have forgotten about the others. I listen for the golden embers burning on the end of his cigarette. I listen for the sizzle. A cold dead silence fills the air. I need to get back to my car. He is blocking my way, waiting like a big cat waits. I can't remember how long I've been here. It feels like minutes but could be hours. I have to get back to my car. I have to get out of this place. I can fight him if I have to. He is not real. I can get past him. He begins to fade. He is not real. The burning ember of his cigarette becomes a house light far in the distance. I turn back to the mountain that drops down to the bottom of the earth. Indians rise up in the mist, bare-chested, with war paint, and feathered headdresses. They rise. They are ethereal, light, released from the soil. Each one rises, lingers in the cold air, like an army. I stand up on the trail. The Indians watch me. I look back to my car. The man has completely disappeared. The Indians break up like smoke, their images pulled apart, disappearing. I look around, listening.

When I hear nothing I call out, "Where are you?"

I hear a giggle. The Chef says, "Over here."

"Over where?"

"Up the trail. Beyond the rise."

Our voices echo in the odd still air.

"What are you doing?"

"Building a fort," Basement says.

"I think we should all be together," I say.

I hear footsteps on the path, then they crest the top, moonlight shining down on their faces. I look back and see that the Indians and the man are gone. The psychedelics are leaving my bloodstream. The three of us sit on the path and talk about the lies the media pushes. Now that I can drive we get in the car and drive all of the way to the top of the mountain. A sapphire blue light glows in the east. A dark valley, sprinkled with lights, spreads out beneath us. We have been listening to Kid Rock all night. A song plays on the car stereo. The doors are open. Kid Rock is taking us to the river. The Chef thinks it's the best song he's ever heard. His face is practically glued to the speakers.

Finally Basement says, "Let's make a pact to take over the world. The three of us."

I let out a loud southern girl whoop and say "Let's do it."

The Chef joins in.

Basement's eyes flicker in the naked dawn.

After our pact we get back in the car and drive back into the valley. Basement picks up his suitcases. He's leaving. Going back to San Francisco. Back to where he came from. He's done with the mountains, the basement, the Zen pillows, the Buddhas and the rebel flag.

We pile into the car. Team Psychedelic. I miss the exit for the airport and drive 125 miles per hour down the highway trying to get him there before his plane takes off. Even 125 MPH can't make up for the time lost. His plane leaves without him. We are outlaws. Real Outlaws. The kind that ride into sunrises.

The airline puts him on the next flight out. He hugs me, tells me how much I rock out loud. He is going home. This place is not home for any of us. I get in my car and pull away from the curb. Basement walks up to the sliding doors and disappears. I know I'll never see him again. It is 7:54 AM. A cool blue light shines from the East. I look out at this magnificent world. I imagine that we are the only ones that exist, that we have come to this planet at this very moment when the sun is rising. We are here digging deep down into our souls while colors assemble around us. We have been on a journey all night. There is so much in this moment. I am not the only one who feels it. The silence of the cold, still, winter dawn is stunning.

The house is empty when I arrive. A letter with a Japanese postmark is on the breakfast bar. I open it, make coffee, read. The entire note is written in Japanese. The only English is the closing, which reads: *Live long and prosper, the Shepherd*. Prosper, yes. Live long, maybe not. I never told him my secret. I lean back in my chair and think about skipping town. I imagine the stories people will tell. They will make up details. They will romanticize these days and nights. They will tell their friends that one day I just disappeared. It will be the truth.

Editor Biography

When **M a r k A r i** unlocked his mother's womb, he fell to soft vinyl where he lived under another name and the kitchen table. Women with round faces bent down to pinch his cheeks. Grandpa made Egyptian poses on the landing at the top of the stairs, nodding and winking and making a great show of brushing back invisible hair with his fingers. Mother opened her mouth and sighed: ah-ah-ah-ah.

By the time the leaves in the trees were dry and beautiful—orange and cream and chocolate—he planted his feet, and the world got littler. He did not notice. He did not. Then he did. And he could read French and Spanish but spoke only a stutter of English. So he made shapes with his lips that stenciled words on the air. This has made all the difference.

Author Biographies

Lis Anna's short fiction, films, screenplays, and novels have all been nominated and won awards. She is a five time WorldFest winner, a Wurlitzer Grant recipient, a New Century Writers winner, Second Place Winner of the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Award, First Place winner of the 11th Annual Poet Hunt Award, a four time Accolade Film Competition winner, and a finalist in the Nicholl Fellowships, the Doris Betts Fiction Award, Chesterfield Film Project and the William Faulkner Competition. Her fiction has been published in *Word Riot*, *The Blotter*, *Petigru Review*, *Hot Metal Press*, *The Smoking Poet*, *Eclectic Flash*, *Paper Skin Glass Bones*, and *The MacGuffin Literary Review*. www.lisannafilms.com

Jeff Baker spent his infancy in Bogotá, Colombia, his formative years in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and Sitka, Arkansas, and his (supposed) adulthood in various locales around the country. He currently lives in Seattle. His work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Oxford American*, *Anatomy*, *Booth*, and is forthcoming in the *Coffee House Flash Fiction* anthology and *The Pedestal Magazine*. He can be reached at anejdb@vmmc.org

Alison Bergblom Johnson has been a resident at the Vermont Studio Center in creative nonfiction and at the Arts Retreat at New York Mills Regional Cultural Center on a fellowship supported by the Jerome Foundation. Her work has been published in *Burly Bird* and by Spout Press in an anthology of flash fiction. She has taught workshops on the topic of writing about mental illness to people who have experienced mental illness.

Jewel Beth Davis is a writer and theater artist who lives in Rollinsford, NH. She is an Artist In Education for the NH State Council on the Arts. She has performed, directed and choreographed professionally throughout the U.S. and British Isles. Jewel earned an MFA in Writing at Vermont College and an MA in Theater Movement from Wesleyan University. She also teaches writing and theater at NHTI-Concord. Since 2006, her creative nonfiction and fiction have been published in many literary magazines like *Compass Rose*, *SN Review*, *Moondance Literary Magazine*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Bent Pin Literary Journal*, *RE: Ports Magazine*, *READ THIS: MSU's Literary and Art Publication*, *Midway*, *The Sylvan Echo*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Lilith*, *Scribblers on the Roof*, *Spirits Literary Magazine of IU*, *American Diversity Report*, *Damselfly Press*, *The Smoking Poet* and *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, which just nominated her for Dzanc's *Best of the Web* Anthology.

Jane Hertenstein: Autofiction is the word the French use for a form somewhere between truth and a kind of distilled truth. "Google Earth" is a distilled memoir, forged from my fuzzy memory and itinerate longing. My work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Hunger Mountain*, *Rosebud*, *Word Riot*, *Flashquake*, *Steam Ticket*, *Frostwriting*, the *Write Room*, *Cantara-ville*, and *The Tonopah Review*.

Currently I am schlepping two page-turning manuscripts.
I can be found on Google Earth in Chicago.

Alysha Hoffa is new to the scene and has been published in *Sliver of Stone* and *The Broken Plate*. She is finishing up her undergraduate studies at Ball State University while picking up after her cats and boyfriend. In her spare time she dabbles in web design, makes handmade cards, and reads, reads, reads.

Kate Kaiser is the proud single mother of Rhapsody and Bucky. When they are not sucking her life force (as they should be), Kate is messing around with words, trying to find the sounds in poem, prose and song that suit her. Fitting language is like finding a perfectly fitted dress, it's not too big, it's not small and the color illuminates. Kate has written a small book called *Some Words* and a medium sized book called *Letters To My Mother But Really For My Father* (which she is making into a one woman show). Kate has performed at Art House Productions for the last eight years where she did her show *Intimacy = In-ta-messy*. In 2010 Kate was also given the honor of being listed as *Wierdo #12* in *Jersey City Magazine*. (Wierdo being those people that make Jersey City an interesting place.) www.KateofHoboken.com

Geri Lipschultz is currently a doctoral candidate at Ohio University, having originally received her MFA in Fiction from Iowa. She's published work in the *New York Times*, *College English*, *Kalliope*, *Black Warrior Review*, and others. Her most recent publications may be found online in *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Kartika Review*, and *Umbrella Journal*. She was awarded a CAPS grant from New York State for her fiction, and she performed in her one-woman show produced by Woodie King, Jr. in NYC. She also produced several shows that featured a gathering of women's artistic responses to 9/11 entitled "Rising Above the Shadow."

Chris McCann Chris McCann currently lives and writes in Minneapolis. Both could change.

Margarita Meklina is a bilingual writer originally from St. Petersburg, Russia. She immigrated as a refugee to the United States in 1994 and has been living in San Francisco for the past 17 years. Her English short stories and essays under the names "Margaret Meklin" and "Margarita Meklina" have appeared in U.S., Canadian and New Zealand periodicals, including *Mad Hatters' Review*, *The Context*, *Landfall*, and *Words Without Borders*. In Russia she received the 2003 Andrei Bely Prize for her short story collection *Battle at St. Petersburg* and the 2009 Russian Prize, awarded by the Yeltsin Center Foundation, for her manuscript *My Criminal Connection to Art*. As Russia's first independent literary prize, The Andrei Bely Prize enjoys a special reputation for honoring dissident and nonconformist writers and poets.

Sanjukta Shams is a mother of two girls, wife, children's activist, and writer of fiction and memoir. She was born and lived in Bangladesh until she was 10, when she moved with her family to Memphis, Tennessee. She now resides in Dallas, Texas. Much of her creativity stems from her childhood in Bangladesh. She has a masters degree in women in Islam from Florida State University and plans to complete a memoir within the next two years.

Leslie Tucker, an escapee from the Detroit area, now lives on the side of a South Carolina mountain and refuses to divulge its exact location. She is an avid hiker and zip liner, a dedicated yogi, and recently achieved Life Master status in ACBL sanctioned bridge. She has degrees in music and business, and retired from her career as a classical piano instructor and pianist, in 2005. She is writing a collection of memoiric essays and prefers not to divulge more biographical detail and spoil her story.

Artist Biographies

Born in 1973 in the South of France, **Mathieu Asselin** spent his childhood in Venezuela. At the age of 16 he started working with acknowledged Venezuelan director Alfredo Anzola. The camera became his passion. In his early 20s, Mathieu moved to Europe to begin his career as a photographer. He joined French photo agency L'Oeil du Sud, and worked on a project in Spain covering one of the biggest European drug markets. His pictures have been published in international publications such as *Paris Match*, *Le Monde* (France), *El País*, *Altair*, *Razor Magazine*, *Gente Italy*, *National Geographic Adventure*, among others.

In 2005 Mathieu moved to New York City. He experiments a lot to perfect his lightening techniques and works mostly on portrait photography. In the last several years he established himself as a commercial photographer working with Universities, architects and advertising agencies.

Mathieu Asselin's personal work focuses on documentary portraiture. What keeps his feet on documentary ground, is his attraction to the "special status and the moral superiority" that documentary photography offers him.

But documentary photography, as he says, has strong creative restrictions, which he breaks through with his lighting techniques.

"If documentary is considered as a form of fiction, it is there, where my reality finds shelter."

Mathieu Asselin appears in several collective exhibitions.

Robbie Knopf graduated from the University of North Florida in Spring 2011 with a BFA in photography. His interest in photography first sparked with an interest in street art. Being captivated by these works found on the sides of buildings and subway cars, he started noticing just how beautiful these abandoned structures that had been turned into canvases were on their own. Thus he soon began photographing these rustic surfaces and transforming the mundane into the extraordinary by way of his camera. Knopf soon applied the same principles he used in his street photography like he isolated street scenes, Knopf has evolved a style of visual fragmentation all his own. You can see more of his work at www.robbielknopfphoto.com to more figurative works as well. Through isolating others thoughts and emotions, like the isolated street scenes, Knopf has evolved a style of visual fragmentation all his own. You can see more of his work at www.robbielknopfphoto.com

Justin Toole graduated from the University of North Florida in Spring 2011 with a BA in English. His first inspirations as a writer came from musical storytellers such as Leonard Cohen, Andrew Schwab, and more recently Alex Turner. He became interested in experimental writing styles while taking a workshop on image and text taught by Professor Mark Ari at UNF. It is here that he wrote his first book entitled *I Think We're under the Illusion that We're Doomed*. Justin continues to live in Jacksonville, FL where he hopes to develop a career in writing.

Robbie Knopf & Justin Toole, Artist Statement

The pages included in this issue are part of a larger work; a book entitled *I Think We're under the Illusion that We're Doomed*. This book was created by two University of North Florida students, Justin Toole (the Writer) and Robbie Knopf (the Artist), during their senior years. While these pages are parts of larger whole, we feel as though the single pages themselves, and even the selection and arrangement that they are presented in this journal, are capable of standing on their own, separate from the bigger piece.

The text of a page is not dependant upon the pages around it but it is not disconnected from them either. We wanted to create a narrative that did not necessarily have a start or a finish; with little to no particular linear fashion. Instead the reader could open the book from any point and finish on any page. There is not a definitive story, narrative, or lesson but rather an emphasis on the diversity of a singular personality and the perception of a person's experiences. So for this book we sought to combine narrative, dialogue, poetry, lyrics, and stream of consciousness into a singular piece which would allow the text to escape traditional settings and flow.

While we feel as though the pages can stand independent from one another, we do not feel as though the text could be separated from the images, or vice versa. In fact, often times the images evolve out of the text themselves, occasionally the other way around, and the two serve to complete a single thought or idea. Like the text, we did not want to limit ourselves on the types of outlets that the images could be presented in. The pages that are presented here demonstrate three types of mediums: drawings, stencils, and photographs.

Alexis Wilson, born and raised in Plantation, FL. 21 years old, studied creative writing at FSU for two years before transferring to UNF to pursue her interest in both art and writing. Hopes to graduate in the fall of 2011. Enjoys reading and writing non-fiction, short stories, and essays. Her art combines elements of story and mixed media. "SLOTS" is a print on archival paper, "SPACEY" is ink on transfer paper, and "SPACESHIP" is a print on archival paper.

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