

Fall 2012

## Fiction Fix 12

April Gray Wilder

Steven Sherrill

Jon Pearson

Anne Germanacos

Doug Barry

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/fiction\\_fix](http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/fiction_fix)

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

### Suggested Citation

Last, First. "Article Title." Fiction Fix 12 (2012): pages. Web. Date accessed. [http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/fiction\\_fix/4](http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/fiction_fix/4)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fiction Fix by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© Fall 2012 All Rights Reserved

---

**Authors**

April Gray Wilder, Steven Sherrill, Jon Pearson, Anne Germanacos, Doug Barry, Sheila MacAvoy, William Ryan Hilary, Emma Silverman, Nicomedes Austin Suarez, Allie Marini Batts, Anne-Marie Thweatt, Marjorie Dawn Gilchrist-Young, Janae Green, Andrew F. Sullivan, Elisha Wagman, Gene Fehler, William LaPage, Neil Dvorak, Doruk Onvural, Kate LaDew, Sam Diaz, and David Higginbotham

# FICTION FIX 12



## Fiction Fix 12, Fall 2012

[www.fictionfix.net](http://www.fictionfix.net)  
[editor@fictionfix.net](mailto:editor@fictionfix.net)

Editorial Advisor	Mark Ari
Editor-in-Chief	April Gray Wilder
Managing Editor	Alex Pucher
Graphic Literature Editor	Russell Turney
Assistant Editors	Jessica Bayne April Hutchinson Blair Romain
Commissioning Editor	Ann Marie Byrd
Contributing Editor	Chrissy Rand
Copyeditor	Joanna Ring
Assistant Copyeditor	Sam Bilheimer
Editorial Assistants	Leah Clancy Heather Stafford
Readers	Faith Diller Nicole Dominguez Patricia Parrow Brianna Meewes Ben Wolfson
Typesetting & Design	April Gray Wilder

Copyright 2012 Fiction Fix. 1 UNF Drive, Jacksonville, FL 32224. All rights are reserved by this journal and by the authors and artists included herein.

Art. Cover and left detail:  
Paintings by Steven Sherrill (pages 133 and 21)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Note to Readers</i>	6
<b>EDITOR'S CHOICE</b> <i>The Wheel in the Sky</i> Jon Pearson	8-9
<i>Snapshots from a Facelift</i> Anne Germanacos	10-20
<b>Gypsy Sachet Awards</b> <i>in Letters and Biography</i>	22-27
<i>Murinae Financial</i> Andrew F. Sullivan	28-29
<b>READERS' CHOICE</b> <i>Mix Tape</i> Elisha Wagman	30-47
<i>Death Sentence</i> Gene Fehler	54
<i>These Small Rooms</i> William LaPage	56-66
<i>Easy Pieces Comics</i> Neil Dvorak	68-80
<i>Bernard's Nose</i> Doruk Onvural	88-94
<i>The Duck Kerfuffle</i> Kate LaDew	96-97

<i>The Widow</i> Sam Diaz	98-108
Selections from <i>Reno</i> David Higginbotham	110-125
<i>A Woman Unfinished</i> Janae Green	126

## ARTWORK

<i>Paintings by</i> Steven Sherrill	6, 21, 48-53, 63, 82-87, 107, 133
<i>Biographies</i>	128-131

Dear Readers,



*Bliss by Steven Sherrill*

Love, April

# The Wheel in the Sky

by Jon Pearson

It was Sunday when Harold came running down the path, a coolish Sunday with birds. Desire filled his legs like seed corn crawling with ants. “Tombo! Tombo!” he yelled, and it was like lassoing something from out of the sky. His head was full of boy, full of scream. He felt headless, and headless, he could see for miles. It was Sunday, and the angels that he imagined smelling like bath soap were in the trees. “Tombo!”...Oh well. He stopped yelling. And stood there. His mouth felt like the inside of a pumpkin. The dirt in front of him looked lazy. He remembered once seeing a potato bug in the dirt. He had jumped into the air then and run into the house for his mother, but his mother was not there and he threw himself face down on the sofa to get the potato bug out of his head but couldn’t. The ugly thing was right there *in* his head, kicking its legs. And it broke the day in half like a plate. There was the day *before* the potato bug and the day *after* it, which was a whole *different* day.

Anyway, that was a while ago, and it was enough now to just stand there in the sun. He suddenly wondered what people who were forty years old *did*. He imagined them lifting boxes and stacking them. Everyone at forty got a job stacking boxes was his thought, which made him not want to get past ten years old, ever. Somewhere on earth, people must *eat* potato bugs. He learned that from his mother. Or he *thought* of it, thinking of his mother. She would say, “A potato bug has its place in the world.” She never actually *said* that, but she would say that, if she were still alive. She would say something like that, and then Harold would secretly see a pygmy in a jungle putting a potato bug in his mouth. He was always doing that—his mother would *say* one thing and he would secretly *see* something else. It wasn’t like he had a “mind of his own”—more like he had minds and heads that weren’t even *his*. His mother told him it was a *gift* and she would rub his head, and her big, warm hand (when he closed his eyes) made his mother feel like a hat.

His mother would probably say that thing about the potato bugs in an apron at the stove with her arms folded and a pancake flipper in her hand and looking right at him. It wasn’t that she had eyes in the back of her head. It wasn’t that when she left a room she would still fill it. It wasn’t like remembering her painting all those red apples on his toy box. It was like, with-

out a mother, you went through your *whole* life sort of barefoot or walking on your elbows, putting all your weight on some small, soft part of yourself until, finally, that naked, soft part of you turned into a shoe or a scab. Often in the kitchen he could *feel* the stove watching him, like his mother, absent and present as air, his mother.

“You be a good boy, Harold,” was the last thing his mother whispered to him, when he was seven years old. She was holding his hand as he stood by her bedside. And now, at nine years old, life felt like a ladder going straight up into the sky, without his mother at the bottom holding it—but instead, at the top looking down at him. So when she had said, “Be a *good* boy,” it was as if she had given him a very large pumpkin with a tiny candle inside, a jack-o’-lantern, and said, “Now, don’t drop this. It’ll break!” And it was too big, and too heavy, and too orange for a little boy to hold. So he said, “Yes,” next to her bed. And then the day, that was his whole *life*, broke in half.

Mostly, he remembered his mother’s hands and her mouth and her eyes, which now all dissolved into something that smelled like soap. She used to hold his head in her lap and pet it. Made him feel like he had a puppy’s head with a *pirate’s* head secretly inside. He knew his mother *knew* he was making ugly pirate faces the whole time she stroked his head and that he was a *mean* pirate, unshaven and dying in the sand, and it was nice to be six years old and “unshaven” and stuck through with a sword as the fog rolled in. “Tombo!!” he yelled one last time on the path leading down to the water. It was his secret pirate name that he *knew* his mother *must* know, and yelling it, he felt like he was riding on a Ferris wheel up and up and up into the sky.

---

**His mother told him it was a gift and she would rub his head, and her big, warm hand (when he closed his eyes) made his mother feel like a hat.**

---

# Snapshots from a Facelift

by Anne Germanacos

What is it to want a thing, purchasable with money?

The kinds of things people buy: new faces.

She knows people who have and admits to herself that she's not unwilling.

If you could, would you buy a new one?

## Questions

What is the connection between photography and plastic surgery?

How is a psychiatrist like a jeweler? How is a coin like a mirror?

When is the modern world most like a wilderness?

Do orchids speak?

Can a bouncer become a firewalker?

Do most people use a knife and fork when dining alone?

(The comfort of tattoos; the reliability of a good plastic surgeon.)

Would you dare to fly a kite in Pakistan?

What is happening in the brain of a dog that mauls its master?

If the moon had a pocketful of cash, would it buy a new face?

## Jewelry

As a child, her first vision of a jewelry store display window threatened to tip her into an existence that promised to be more real but less permanent. At the time, she thought she was about to fly.

Abundance has always been a thrill and a threat. It took reaching adulthood before she learned the trick, with cheap cameras and expensive ones, of taming what threatened her by stealing it from passing time.

Older now, a grandmother even, she can't call herself anything but a woman though she still thinks of herself as a girl. Behind the lens, she's invincible. In front of it, she's over-exposed.

Now, her ancient father's toothless body is gone; her husband is changing in ways she can't follow or discern: talking to orchids, encouraging her to alter her face.

She could manage it easily in a photograph, but he wants it to be done with knives and sutures.

She is afraid she's losing her husband—her eyes, her jewel.

## Eyes like Printed Pages

One does not put lens to eye at one's own father's funeral, or any funeral for that matter. The point of a funeral is to let one's eyes see and weep.

She's never been much of a weeper, but she wonders if tears would come more easily if she didn't have the imprint of her father's image stored on so many pages.

Captured by the shine of a thin gold chain on a mourner's neck, she vows to give up her cameras, her shooting, her flight from abundance into what she now knows is just one more form of greed.

The little girls, the granddaughters, run in on sturdy legs. She puts one on either side, a hand for each of her hands and Iris holds Sam's so they're all



knit together.

Great-gramps is underground.

### **Gold/Captions**

What could a thin gold chain have to do with anything? As a child, Isaac, father of the girls, found one glinting on the street. He stopped a large, bundled-up woman to ask if it was hers. She said it was, took it and gave him a half-eaten bar of chocolate.

They still laugh about the woman and the chocolate and while the image she conjured remains in her mind with a caption, *Young Boy with Gold Chain Glinting in His Palm*, it's one she never captured on film.

She has a notebook full of captions for images never made and wonders if it wouldn't simplify her life to burn it.

### **Weight**

The ideas, memories, and random twitches of light not marked on film sometimes become unbearably weighty. It's a weight without mass held in the smallest, most conniving parts of the brain. She offers this weight to Dr. Gluck, twice a week.

### **This Moment**

The plum tree outside her window is melodramatic—it waves and davens, prays hosannas and grieves. When the wind subsides, its stillness makes it seem less stolid than pert, prepared. Then again, the tree tumbles against itself, hogging the wind, and an almost-purple-leaved bucking bronco with burnished red leaves farthest from its core.

She leaves it as it is—without a photograph to tame or memorialize it—and makes childish wishes against the promise; she won't even try to imagine the way she would fix it in time.

Is this what her life has come to? Prayers and renunciation?

### **Her Psychiatrist**

His contemplation of the world is accompanied by a swiftly-stirred spoon in a large mug of instant coffee. So many dependent souls require brief drops into thought.

The entire world seems to rest on Dr. Gluck's hunched shoulders: the failing economy, unemployment, the war-torn countries in Africa, the Middle East. Everything that's read in the morning paper.

His patients come and go. He points to the box of tissues or—when they're truly overwhelmed—brings a paper cup of water.

He stirs responsibility into swift spirals.

Or: the world turns in his cup.

Leaving it there on the table, he looks up into the somber eyes of the first patient of the day. "What can I do for you?" Or, if there are years of such lintel-crossings, he adjusts his large frame in the capacious chair, leans slightly forward and raises one thick, tousled eyebrow—silently asking the same question.

As she sheds tears that must, from a distance, intensify the blue, he picks up his spoon, stirs again.

The next day they will read that at that very moment, ten time zones to the future, a bomb falls on people they know, or may know, or at the very least may have passed in the old, covered marketplace where he once bought several embroidered scarves to take home to his wife and she, a few years later, bought still-warm bread and began to eat it as she walked.

Even those who receive news bulletins on their palm-sized machines won't know about the bomb or the corpses in the marketplace for several more minutes. By then her tears will have dried.

She fears her story is suspiciously coherent for a person apparently so broken. She drops the ball of wetness in the basket by his shoes before going out the door.

She comes here to cry, and could as easily step inside a synagogue or church.

The man's (self-)importance entertains her: she, a pile of sand at his feet.

### News

She refuses to neglect the papers, is appalled and fascinated by the dueling Pakistani kite-fliers who kill the competition and sometimes innocent children by doctoring the string or wire used to cast the kites skyward.

She is incapable of turning away from the picture in her mind: a small child in a father's lap, riding a moped into a piece of competition-enhanced kite string. In the article, the mother of the child said she couldn't believe how much blood came from her daughter as she gave up her life.

Some captions are indelible.

### Firewalkers

The cop is short and muscular, the bouncer tall and wide with long hair pulled back. With his hands against the frame, he fills the doorway. As she walks by, she hears the cop say "some uncle of an uncle knew someone once who told stories about it."

The bouncer leans, smirking. She slows, a mature woman pretending to wait for someone on the street outside a topless joint. She leans close, to catch every word, and hears the bouncer say: "Firewalking? Putting coals on the ground and hopping across? What the fuck? It sounds superstitious, like some kind of old word that doesn't even say anything to me."

On the sidewalk beside a street with cars speeding past in both directions, she pictures these ruddy city men barefoot, hopping across orange coals. Something glints from inside the bouncer's mouth: a diamond chip. Where is her camera?

### Orchids

Sam's flowers are orderly; it's his mind that's begun to frighten her.

But is it him? Or her? And how can you tell in a marriage this long and entwined?

He posits that the night-lit orchids listen to every conversation in the house. Those flowers have always been gaudy and eerie to her. Now she avoids passing them in the neon-lit hothouse dedicated to their sustenance.

His lavender, on the other hand, is magnificent from almost any angle, above on the road or below as you walk into the great amphitheatre of flora. No one can help but exclaim over the beauty of his garden—there's a bit of crushed lavender in every one of their pockets.

For a flower, she agrees with him, the orchid is highly evolved. The remote and sometimes difficult beauty of the orchid seems to be almost self-conscious.

Is that why he's cultivated them all these years? His brain, a twist on hers. She's got stacks of their images, unframed and messy, in cabinets and files throughout the house.

Or was that comment a joke?

### Manners

They read the paper, sometimes together.

Dame Mary Douglas (anthropologist) "found proof for her belief that collective interaction defined and governed personal behavior in the fact that people use a knife and fork even when eating alone" (NYT).

In the slip between wakefulness and dream, she fears he's begun telling a different story. She's seen him licking the plate, eyes closed, like a cat.

But doesn't she sometimes lick crumbs off the plate with a wet finger? Is it really any different?

In their grandparents' house, the little girls are free to do as they please: run naked, scream loudly, put their faces into the bowl and slurp up the pretty

mess of vanilla, pink, and chocolate.

Might it be interpreted as bad manners to change a face, midway through a life?

She's sure there are some who would interpret such a change as the very best manners, exquisite. Maintaining decorum in the face of (rotten) old age.

### Notes

She finds notes—to himself? To her?—in corners, beneath a flowering plant, on the stair treads. Is he leaving a chain of command or merely trying to keep himself alert?

This one makes her stand up taller.

Slights:

- a) real
- b) imagined

Fixations:

Slurs?

Amazing meals:

Practical moments:

Thirst:

Awe:

### Photography

She keeps her own stash of notes:

The photographer who ached to capture the world in a myriad of photographs devised the cure for his own resultant madness. For a year, he sat in one place at a window looking out, his eyes upon the street night and day

(Eventually, other eyes looked up and knew his were staring back, through the accoutrement of a lens).

Looking at an anonymous photograph found at the bottom of a box in a shop: two children sitting in a car. To think there was a time, twenty or thirty years ago, when this moment was now.

The photographer's ambition can become excessive. She may find herself in a madness of seeing, a dementia of collecting.

Sight generally crosses space; with photography, it crosses time.

What is the connection between photography and plastic surgery?

The night before the surgery, she wakes up thinking the wet on the pillow is blood but finds it's only tears.

### Surgery

In the newspaper, they read about the French woman whose dog mauled her face. Chewing, swallowing, and breathing became difficult. Having at first worn a mask to hold things together, eventually she opted for a new face, despite the many dangers.

\*

When she is released from the clinic after the surgery has been performed, Sam can't find his way back home. They go around in what must be circles until they circle in on a game of basketball. He thinks it's a dorm, but through her nausea and grogginess, she knows it's a half-way house. Each man, before slamming the ball against the backboard and through the hoop, tells them a different way to get back home. No one notices the bandages over her face.

Or, perhaps it's the bandages that keep them from looking too hard at the color of their own skin.

This is not their neighborhood.

**Buying and Selling**

Modern shopping often feels like a form of hubris, but shopping for a new face surely takes that concept to its extreme.

The people who engage in such forms of buying aren't necessarily pleased with their new faces, but she's never heard of anyone trading it in.

**Etch-a-Sketch**

There are plenty of tattoos around here and various solutions to their permanence: the tattoo-go-away salons, not all of them owned by licensed dermatologists. She reads that many people, especially women, have tattoos lasered off not only to rid themselves of marks related to past lovers, but in order to make a clean field for more of the same.

Like shaking an Etch-a-Sketch, but with a great deal of discomfort.

**Plastic Surgeon**

In the first meeting, he called himself an artist, a sculptor in human skin and bone. He then examined her skull.

Six months later, her face is more her own than ever. Modified, it's her choice. This is the way she's come to think of it, but not everyone accepts her logic.

She finds this note on a long yellow page, both sides.

Food:  
Furnishings:  
House/Roof:  
Protein:  
Carbohydrates:  
Fat:  
Jewelry:  
Clothing:  
Hat/Head-covering:  
Music:

Technology:  
Media:  
Cuisine:  
Tools, implements:  
Nature:

Body/parts:  
Disease:  
Health:  
Nutrition/nourishment:

Music:  
Clouds:  
Rain:  
Weather:

Completion/satisfaction:  
Arousal:

Detriment:  
Benefit:  
Sports:  
Inactivity/activity:  
Nature:  
Sand, earth, dust:

Water:

Billiard table:  
Roof:  
Magnanimity:

\*

When her face is fully healed and beautiful again, her husband hands her the page with the diagnosis. Her intuition wasn't off.

She vows to never allow another picture of herself to be taken.

\*

The little girls are eager to take out the jewelry box and adorn themselves. “Grandma, Grandma,” they shout, running inside. Iris screams and Rina stares.

Their grandmother’s lovely face is recognizable enough to scare them, different enough to haunt them. It takes some coaxing—the emeralds, diamonds and rubies laid out like chocolate—before they jump into her arms.

\*

As she and her husband fall away from each other, the two of them holding on with fingers, gold, petals, sand, blood, tears, coffee, fire, newspapers, and string, she knows she will eventually go back to her machines, her cameras—never evil and only an extension of her paws, which will continue to be scented with the lavender unearthed in pockets.

His orchids will continue listening to their conversations; occasionally, she may allow them to speak their mind.

*Family Circle VIII*



# The Gypsy Sachet Award in Letters and Biography

## Doug Barry

*Letter*

My name is Doug Barry and I've chained my 6,330-word story "The Great American Orchestra" to this email. Kindly set it free, or at least give it some water or something.

Thanks for your consideration -- all the best,  
Doug

## Sheila MacAvoy

*Biography*

Dear Editors,  
I'm 81 years old and have a lot of credits, some of them literary. I have been a golf caddy, a soda jerk at Woolworth's, a factory worker (I hold a union card), a teacher of etching and lithograph, a saleswoman at Macy's Department Store, and finally, a lawyer. I started out as a painter, but painted myself into a corner and took up yarn spinning, a natural habit acquired from my Irish immigrant great grandparents who fled the famine in 1853 and settled in Brooklyn, New York. In fact, the eight of them lived very near to each other, but didn't connect until my parents married in 1927. I was born on March 31, 1931, the same day Knute Rockne, whom you probably never heard of, was killed in a plane crash in Kansas. My parents always mentioned that on my birthday.

My first short story was published in *Writers Forum* in 1988 when I was 57. I had just left a 33 year marriage and needed a place for the anguish. I no longer smoke or drink alcohol, although I have extensive experience with both.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,  
Sheila MacAvoy

## William Ryan Hilary

*Biography*

The gig: A Magical Realist peek at war time Europe:

The conduit of this incorrigible story happens to be named William Ryan—a freak, mick, anti-beat, people's poet. He was born in Belfast in war-torn Northern Ireland in 1983, but found himself quickly transplanted to London in 1988. His most literary self landed in New York at the age of sixteen in a manila envelope with a stamp that said "write. but no whining." Most recently he's been laying his head in the New England boondocks (known as Greenfield, MA). This is on account of a terrible economy. He has worked—as the eyes (digital video camera man) of a New York entertainment website. And he has degrees from Vassar (B.A. English) and Union Theological Seminary (M.A. Philosophy). He's had poems published by *Aquirelle* (in their anthology: *Poets Amongst Us* Volume 3), and *JunkLit*, a journal about addiction. Ryan bows before Borges, Marquez, Nabokov, Faulkner, Gogol and Dostoyevsky. In this regard, he hopes to develop prose that expresses a kaleidoscopic concern with History while refusing to adhere to the bourgeoisie conventions of space and time. He hopes to do for Ireland/New England what some of his heroes did for their locales. Setting the bar high? Yes. He'll probably end up sitting at the bar—low—but he's sure to have fun in the process. Someone once said that the process of writing and revision is: "Fail. Fail better." Adieu.

## Emma Silverman

*Letter*

The following story was written this fall as a birthday present for my mother, who loves the summer and fears the fall.



## Nicomedes Austin Suarez

*Letter*

Dear Editor,

I hope you dig this short as much as I dug writing it. I put it together a while ago, when I was suffering from terrible back pain, lost in a limbo of opiates, somewhat tipsy off Jack and OJ, seated at a public terminal, composing on a crappy old Notepad in the UMass, Amherst Library. Anyway, I hope you like the story. If not, I hope you like this message. If not, I'm all out of ideas.

Who I am: I'm a 35 year-old Doctoral Student at SUNY Albany, where I'm in the process of completing my dissertation -- a detective-fiction thriller set in the wild city of Santa Cruz, Bolivia, with the working title *The Circles of Hell* (the urban layout of Santa Cruz is one of concentric, descending circles, much like Dante's Inferno) -- and prepping for exams. I am the founding editor of *Cement*: UAlbany's Literary Magazine (now defunct).

I am also currently the creator, producer, director, and star of a popular TV show here in Bolivia appearing on Cotas Cable (market share 60%) called "Nicomedes en el Pais de las Maravillas" ('Nicomedes in Wonderland'), a sort of NatGeo-style tourism show. It's a traveling fusion of Anthony Bourdain meets magician David Blaine (I am both a gourmet chef and a close-up magician of note, in the States, Europe, and South America). If all this sounds a bit wild, believe me: I too find it so.

Sincerely,  
Nicomedes Austin Suarez

## Allie Marina Batts

*Biography*

Allie Marini Batts came here to kick ass and chew bubblegum, and she's ALL out of bubblegum. She is a 2001 alumna of New College of Florida, which means she can explain deconstructionism, but cannot perform simple math. Her work has appeared in over 100 literary magazines that her family hasn't heard of. She has lived in Florida, Maine and Washington state, but thinks the best trees to climb are in Tallahassee. She is a research writer when she's not playing with her make-believe friends. Allie is pursuing her MFA degree in Creative Writing through Antioch University Los Angeles and oh no! it's getting away! To read more of her work, visit <http://www.kiddeternity.wordpress.com>, or to have her boss you around about the books you should be reading, visit <http://www.bookshelfbombshells.com>.

## Anne-Marie Thweatt

*Letter*

Dear editors,

I'm a writer and a writing teacher living in the desert border of Mexico in Somerton, AZ. I've lived in many places, from Mexico City to Albany, NY, but I write about where I'm from, the Brazos Valley in southeastern Texas and the Texas piney woods. I've been lucky enough to study under some great writers, like Daniel Nester, Barbara Ungar, and Rick Moody. I talk to Flannery and Carson and William on a daily basis. Still waiting on a response. Maybe I need to address them more formally. Thanks for taking the time to read my little story about my little people and my little place, none of whom or which I hope seem little to you.

Anne-Marie

## Marjorie Dawn Gilchrist-Young

### Letter

Dear Editors:

I am the winner of the 2011 Norman Mailer Teacher Writing Award. The first ever. I teach public high school, and I love it, even when I am sending used copies of Tom Clancy and Stephen King to students who are in jail. I also loved it when I got to speak about public education and writing at the Mailer Gala at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Manhattan. Eli Wiesel was there. Arundhati Roy was there. They received huge awards also, as did Keith Richards, whose eyeliner looked as sexy as ever. Bill Clinton gave him his award, and they were utterly charming together onstage, much like my students when they realize they are actually good with words and get to read their work in front of the class. There is no difference in the amount of charm exuded. However, you can see the whole thing (the gala, not my students) and listen to my speech (it was quite moving) on the web.

I am currently almost enjoying a month's fellowship as a writer in Provincetown, Massachusetts. At least I am productive. Very.

I would almost enjoy it more had my husband of thirty years not up and decided two weeks and three days ago that he preferred the single life of a romantic musician to the married life of a middle aged man. It was a cliché, and it has a little humor in it, but only a little. We married when I was eighteen and he was twenty-one, and that is only a cliché for Appalachian people, which we are, but not for industrialized countries and their populations.

A little humor arrived when I went whale watching two evenings ago as a reward to myself for having sent my agent 102 pages of a novel, well, right now, novella, which I understand doesn't sell, even though I would buy any novella by Denis Johnson. And did.

On the whale ship, we were fortunate enough to see nine whales, all couples, except for the one humpback who was old and alone, and therefore, said the naturalist, probably not doing well. All the couples and families on board sighed sadly. I stared fiercely into my cheap digital camera's frame. I thought

about my slight scoliosis. That was the humor.

The story I am sending you is dark, and it has a good dark, though not evil, character named, for no good reason, after the philosopher Zeno. It is a good story about child slavery and matricide in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina, and it is not true.

I have to say, however, that it is not, perhaps, as good as the story that won me ten thousand dollars and this almost enjoyable and very graciously given month of writing as part of the Norman Mailer Writers' Colony.

Please let me know what you think of this story, but only when you are good and ready. I like telling you that because it is what you will do anyway, and it makes me feel powerful to give you an order.

Also, this story is submitted for your fall issue, of course.

With gratitude, (because I do have that in abundance),  
Marjorie Dawn Gilchrist-Young, writer, public school teacher, scorned woman, whale watcher

## Janae Green

### Letter

Dear Fiction Fix Editors and Readers:

Enclosed please find one work of fiction: *A Woman Unfinished*.

Janae Green studies Creative Writing at Washington State University. Her work has appeared in print, regularly, with coffee stains. She hates the smell and won't drink it, but its okay as an ice cream or yogurt.

Thank you for your time.

Best,  
Janae Green  
janae\_green@hotmail.com





# Murinae Financial

by *Andrew F. Sullivan*

We have no use for the dead ones.

There are rumours of labs in Moscow shocking tiny corpses back to life, but few of us believe the stories trickling out of the east. It is cheaper to keep the females pregnant, to keep manufacturing our currency on schedule with fertility cycles. Steroids and hormones are much more effective than any sort of shock treatment. No one is interested in forged currency.

We burn the dead ones in the furnace to keep our facilities warm. Nothing is wasted.

A man's wallet is now a briefcase, filled with mewling creatures. Banks are filled with cages and the stock market floors are thick with the putrid

---

**Banks are filled with cages, and the stock market floors are thick with the putrid fecal matter of the day traders' rats.**

---

fecal matter of the day traders' rats.

They are well groomed and fed every hour. Their values fluctuate throughout the day.

Malaysian gray rats took a hit last night, but we still breed them in the basement. The markets are never stable.

The populations are too volatile, too connected to the world of flesh and disease. Real estate, exports and non-profits are all tangled in their web, waiting for some new parasite to wipe out a sub-species and reset their value in the marketplace.

Lenothrix, anonymomys, sundamys, kadarsanomys, diplothrix and margaretamys—these are the currencies which count, the ones we produce in squirming batches underneath the earth. They drive economies and push hedge fund managers to madness with their fickle natures. They are all consuming—minds, dreams, and flesh all factor into our calculations.

Occasionally, a batch will escape into the streets. Our funds can trickle down. They chew through drywall and hide in the moist places, the pits and channels funnelling waste into preordained receptacles. Our funds trickle everywhere; no one can control the inflation rate.

The government attempts to brand and sterilize their own batches of rats. They are trying to establish a currency no one can duplicate, but there are too many rats, too many wombs, too many places for these little things

to hide. We find the fertile ones and farm them here. We launder funds from human traffickers and arms dealers; we breed them with the pension funds for school board secretaries, air traffic controllers and stevedore unions. Our legal counsel looks into expanding operations, separating familial swarms in the aftermath of expensive divorces.

The rich cannot keep all their accounts on paper. They must build warehouses for their fortunes; they must present their coinage in the flesh. Four paws and a tail are required. The ranks of the elite have been ravaged by the viruses their wealth carries—Lassa fever, leptospirosis and the Hantavirus have cut a wide and bitter swathe through the ranks of old money struggling to adapt to their new and squeaking fortunes. They cling to the growing masses while the analysts and corporate accountants whisper about some new bubonic plague, some greater reckoning the rats bring with them. We would argue the blame lies with the fleas, but the world markets do not always respond well to our semantics. Rats and fleas have become one and the same. They are linked to our residual gains and structured into our IPOs when the bell rings.

Home loans are recalled when the rats begin to feast upon one another. The sight of blood can make them turn quickly; they have no regard for each other. We work to separate the babies from their mothers before they are consumed. Before we took up this new currency, there were monks in India who treated the rats as spiritual vehicles for their god, Ganesh. They were fed milk and grain; they were valued for their souls. These temples have burned to the ground now, overtaken by the greed of our freshly tailed economy. We will not be so foolish. We do not touch them with our bare hands. Our futures lie in their tiny beating hearts. Each one is still so fragile.

The dead are worthless to the market. They can only keep us warm.

# Mix Tape

by Elisha Wagman

I reach for the plastic cup on the tray and notice that my hand shakes and my mother notices it too but doesn't say anything. She pretends to stare at the sheet of paper taped to the wall behind my bed, the one that warns staff not to feed me anything containing gluten. I sip some of the tepid water in the cup and say, "I want a tape recorder for my birthday. And some blank tapes."

My mother, who has been knitting, freezes mid stitch and I'm unsure if she frowns because of what I've just said or because saying it made her lose count. A snake of blue yarn slithers from her fingers and forms a coil in her lap. The loudest sound in the room is the beep of the IV machine indicating steroids are successfully being forced into my veins.

A truck honks its horn. I can barely hear it through the double-paned glass of the windows, and I wonder if hospitals do that on purpose, distance patients from the world by sealing them in nearly sound-proof rooms. I can't decide if that's to keep germs from entering or escaping the hospital or simply to encourage patients to forget that outside of this place children laugh, and birds sing.

"They don't make them anymore," my mother says.

"Check EBay," I say.

"Wouldn't you rather have a book?" my mother says. She unhooks a stitch. The *clack, clack, clack* of the knitting needles reminds me of chop sticks, and I long for a bowl of beef in black bean sauce on chow mein.

"And Chinese food," I say, knowing the nurses will never let me eat it. "That would make a perfect birthday."

Scleroderma has forced me to adjust my expectations. Two years ago, before climbing up stairs rendered me breathless, and my fingers swelled, skin stretched tight over joints, I would have celebrated my birthday by drinking wine with friends at a dark bar on Hudson Street. Now, I hope that I'll be able to fill my lungs with enough air to blow out the single candle my mother will smuggle into the hospital and stick into a cupcake she will bake herself. It will be vanilla with butter cream icing and she will top it with the sprinkles of my childhood, the flecks of blue, green, and yellow I love so much.

"I'll have to check with the doctor," my mother says. That means she will not bring the Chinese take-away. She will not indulge my self-sabotage because she believes I'll get better.

"They won't care," I say.

"We'll see," she says. My mother doesn't make promises she can't keep.

#

Two days later the specialist, Dr. Khomein, strides into my room smelling fresher than fabric softener. Perfume is forbidden in the hospital, but she wears it anyway and I think it's her way of rebelling against the endless rules of this place. I like this about Dr. Khomein, but it's one of the only things I like about the woman. She yanks back the sheet and exposes my legs, swollen and purplish as if they have been immersed for hours in water. I look at the crack that stretches from the upper right corner of the room all the way to the baseboard while Dr. Khomein pinches folds of my flesh between her strong yet slender fingers.

"The edema looks better," she says. "Have you been walking?"

"Yeah, I joined a couple of geriatrics on the sixth floor. We walk every morning and then grab coffee in the cafeteria."

Dr. Khomein stops prodding and I look at her. Her face is only a foot or so away from mine and I smell coffee when she speaks. "You need to try more," she says. Her tone is earnest so I try not to smirk. The nasty look she gives me tells me that I fail. "What time is your mother coming?"

My mother arrives the same time every day. She wakes at six, brews tea and microwaves oatmeal. It's been her routine for as long as I can remember except that before microwaves she made oatmeal in a pot. Then she takes William, her terrier, for a walk, and boards the eight-fifteen bus so that she arrives at the hospital by nine. Taking the subway would shorten her trip, but my mother refuses to ride on anything that travels underground.

"She may be late," I say. "She's making a cupcake for my birthday." I tell Dr. Khomein this because I'm annoyed that she has failed to acknowledge that today is my birthday. Not for the first time, I feel like a prisoner in her presence, another slighted statistic of this disease.

"Have the nurse page me when she arrives," Dr. Khomein says.

This is not a good sign. Whenever Dr. Khomein wants to conference with my mother it's because she is unsure how to deliver bad news. This has been her pattern ever since I knocked a clay paperweight from her desk to the floor. That was the afternoon she told me that an abundance of

collagen in my system would calcify my skin, causing it to stretch so tight that I would one day be unable to hold a pen or smile. I didn't break the paperweight in outrage over the diagnosis but because of the way she tried to lighten the dark mood in the room with humor. "At least you won't get wrinkles," she said, as if this was something I cared about, as if she and I were friends and not forced into this uneasy relationship.

"Just tell me," I say.

Dr. Khomein checks the chart attached to the IV machine, but she does this to avoid looking at me and not because she is concerned the nurses have failed to record the titration of medication. I almost tell her that she needn't worry, that my arms are too weak to whip a cup of water across the room. Instead, I allow myself to enjoy this small moment of power that I have over her. For a second, it is she who is afraid of me.

She looks up from the chart. "The Digoxin isn't as effective as we'd hoped."

"What does that mean?"

"We may need to drain your lungs."

By *drain* she means that a pulmonologist will stick a long needle into my chest to extract mucous. I've only had it done once before, but the memory of it makes me bite my bottom lip until it bleeds.

"Not today," I say.

Dr. Khomein nods and leaves the room. Minutes later, my mother arrives carrying a large shopping bag in one hand and a Tupperware container in the other. Through the plastic container I see vanilla cupcakes. She brought at least four, and I know the extra ones are for the nurses who gently bathe my skin and comb my hair on mornings when my hands are so stiff I'm certain they are frozen.

"How is the birthday girl?" she says in a cheerful voice that is oddly reminiscent of the Muzak they play in the elevators.

"What's in the bag?" I say.

My mother's smile is genuine and reveals the kind of perfect teeth that can only be dentures. "You won't believe it," she says. She places the bag on my lap and I peek inside. And she is right. For a second, it's hard to believe that the ghetto blaster is the very one she gave me for my twelfth birthday. If it wasn't for the Ramones sticker stuck to the speaker, I'd assume that my mother tracked down a replica. The sticker with my initials scratched in blue ink tells me this is the real deal.

"How?" I trail my fingers along the bottom of the tape deck. When I press a red button the tape deck yawns.

"Aren't you glad I never throw things out?"

It used to upset me, the way my mother made me wear her hand-me-down jeans and sweaters. Kids at school called me *Food Stamp* and *Welfare Queen*. It wasn't true. My mother never took a cent from the State. She just refused to waste money. Her jeans weren't patched and fit me fine so there wasn't any reason to buy me new ones. It never occurred to her that my embarrassment was reason enough.

"I can't believe you kept it," I say. "Does it work?"

"How should I know? Get up and plug it in."

I know that my mother wouldn't bring me a broken boom box. I ask her because I can't say what I really want to, that her excavating this relic of my childhood is one of the kindest things she has ever done for me.

For the first time that day, I get out of bed, and my legs immediately ache like someone has whipped them with a rubber hose. I face the back wall so my mother won't see me cringe. She asks if I need help and I almost tell her yes, but if I cannot do this simple thing, then it feels like I won't be able to do anything at all.

The hiss of dead air space competes with the beeping IV machine until Rob Thomas's croon drowns all other sound. My mother covers her ears with both hands but she doesn't tell me to turn the music down. We sit like that for a minute, me staring at the wall listening to Matchbox 20 and my mother trying to block out the noise. Finally she says in a loud voice, "Don't you want a cupcake?"

I lower the volume and smile at her. My mother opens the container and carefully lifts a cupcake from the nest of paper towel she has built inside. She places it on the tray next to my bed and I inhale the real vanilla she used in the icing. It's a scent that always makes me think of her hovering over the stove in our tiny galley kitchen, and I think it's magical that from flour, water, and sugar, she conjures up cake. I bite into the cupcake and relish the way the icing sticks to the roof of my mouth like peanut butter, a sugar coat that soothes the sores that have burst through skin.

"Dr. Khomein wants to speak with you," I say. My mother doesn't ask why. Like me, she knows the request means more bad news. "It's okay. Go find her. I'm going to listen to music."

My mother takes the container of cupcakes with her to the nursing station, and when I hear her speak to Tyrone, my nurse, I turn the volume up on the boom box and search for a pop station.

A year ago, I moved home from New York. Canadians like to boast that Toronto is a mini Manhattan, but it isn't true. The music, like the folks who

listen to it, is uptight, resolutely restrained. I miss the garage bands of the East Village and the underground radio stations. I didn't want to move, but I didn't have a choice. At least that's what my mother said when I could no longer walk to the deli to buy coffee.

She flew to New York and supervised students she hired on Craigslist. Together, they sorted, sold, and packed up my life. Only when my mother haggled with an elegantly dressed man over the price of a painting I bought from a street vendor in SoHo did I protest. It was a crude portrayal of Tompkins Square, a mess of harsh strokes in bright colors, but whenever I looked at it, I heard musicians strum guitars and smelled weed wafting through tree branches.

"It's not for sale," I said. The man looked surprised, as if he hadn't noticed me curled up on the loveseat. At ninety-six pounds, I was easy to miss.

"I'll give you a hundred," the man said to my mother.

She shrugged her shoulders. "You heard her. It's not for sale."

We wrapped the painting in brown paper and carried it with us on the airplane. Now, it rests on the radiator that hugs the wall of my hospital room. My only memento of a life lived.

I set the dial to Vinyl 95.3 and turn up the volume. When I was a teenager, I sprawled on the nubby green carpet in the living room and listened to the radio on my boom box. I did this for hours, waiting for just the right song to record for a mix tape I promised to make for my best friend, Rhanj. Sometimes, the song I wanted came on right away, and other times, I waited for hours as the DJ played every song except the one I needed. It was more than an exercise in patience. It was a testament of friendship.

Now, I'm making a mix tape for my mother, and I know the first song is as important as the last. There is only one song capable of opening this dialogue between my mother and me, and when I hear it, I press record so quickly that the button sticks a little before settling into place.

### **Eye of the Tiger, Survivor**

I was twelve when *Rocky III* made this song famous. The first time I heard it was in the dirty, dark theatre on Bloor Street. The movie opened with a customized version of the song in which a tiger growled, and for reasons I couldn't understand, this excited me. The song made me want to shadowbox, and when I punched the air a few times, Rhanj told me to stop it before we got kicked out.

That night, I danced around the living room in our apartment. I jabbed

my fists in rhythm with the song that played in a continual loop in my mind.

"I want to take boxing," I said to my mother.

She sat stiffly on the sofa and attempted to complete a crossword puzzle in the TV Guide. "Just like you wanted to take violin, and we know how that turned out, don't we?"

I looked at the black case coated in a thin layer of dust that was tucked in the corner next to the bookcase we built from milk crates and bricks. It was true that I wanted to study music, but the violin was not my first choice. I asked to learn percussion, but the music teacher insisted that girls were better suited for romantic instruments like violins and flutes. I hated the way the violin felt like a baby when I held it and how it screeched when I ground the bow against its strings. I longed to bang the drum set, to pound the tympanis but the music teacher Mr. Gorga forced me to play the violin until one night, I begged my mother to speak with him.

"It's sexist," I said.

My mother liked that I knew what that word meant and promised to speak with Mr. Gorga. Two days later, she followed me to school. I kept looking around, afraid the kids in my class would see us. I even walked a few feet in front of her just to give the impression I was alone. My mother called after me and ordered me to slow down. I didn't, not even when I heard her panting as she struggled to keep up with me.

Mr. Gorga greeted my mother with a lecherous smile. She was attractive for someone who spent much of her life scrubbing toilets and washing other people's laundry. She had straight, long brown hair that smelled like lavender, and lips so full that I discouraged her from wearing lipstick.

Her meeting with Mr. Gorga lasted less than ten minutes and when my mother exited his office her face was flushed and I recognized the embers in her eyes. It was the same look she had when I accidentally spilled red paint on the sofa while I worked on a project for art class.

"That man is an imbecile," she said. She walked towards the exit while I followed behind, shoulders slumped. "I should report him to the school board."

"No drums?" I said.

"I'll buy you a harmonica."

#

My mother returns, carrying the empty Tupperware container. Tyrone

follows behind her. In his hand, he holds an oxygen mask.

“Doc says you gotta wear it,” Tyrone says. He connects the long, plastic tube dangling from the mask to the oxygen valve on the wall behind my bed and places the mask over my nose and mouth. “You also need an X-ray.”

“Some birthday present,” I say. He unlatches the breaks on my bed and wheels me towards the hallway. “Get something to eat,” I say to my mother. “I’ll be fine.”

My mother will not waste money on bad food from the cafeteria, and tucked inside her purse is a cheese sandwich made with white bread. When I sleep, she sometimes eats her lunch in the courtyard. I know this because I’ve awakened and looked out the window to see her toss bits of sandwich at greedy sparrows. She doesn’t know that I watch her just like she doesn’t know that I don’t intend to sleep until the mix tape is done.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” she says.

### **Down Under, Men at Work**

My mother was born on a remote farm somewhere outside of Melbourne, Australia. More than once, she has described bushy fields prone to fire and chickens pecking grain at her feet. She never described the house where she lived or the woman who raised her. It’s as if she only remembers what went on outside because what happened inside was too tough to bear.

I never met my grandmother because she died before my first birthday, and I don’t consider this to be a great loss. Whatever she did to my mother in a house I can’t imagine, in a country I don’t care to visit has crippled my mother.

In elementary school, I performed the lead in a play, and my mother didn’t attend the show. She couldn’t sit in an auditorium with other proud parents because crowds terrified her. Even the mere thought of them caused her to hyperventilate. Instead, Rhanj’s mom, Mrs. Kimchi, waved at us from the audience. While on stage, I tried pretending that Mrs. Kimchi was my mother, but she was Korean and didn’t look anything like my mother.

When this song came out I boycotted it like I avoided everything Australian. I snubbed Vegemite on toast, skipped the koala bears at the zoo, and refused to color in Australia on the world map during a geography assignment. When people asked where my mother’s accent was from, I told them England and then switched the topic as quickly as possible.

Today, her accent is barely detectable thanks to years of living amongst people who say *eh* and pronounce about like *a-boot*. But I can still hear Aus-

tralia when she says *appreciate* like it’s spelled with an *s* and not a *c*.

“You should rest,” my mother says. She stands to the side of the doorway and watches Tyrone guide my bed back into the room. As soon as he locks the brakes, I reach over the guardrail and press the record button on the boom box.

“Not tired,” I say, grateful that it isn’t a lie.

“Do you want a sleeping pill?”

I shake my head no. They give me a hangover worse than when I’ve drunk three shots of tequila. I haven’t had booze in months because my liver can’t process it anymore. Dr. Khomein warned me that even a single shot could be toxic and that in my current condition, I may not recover. I think that tequila is an interesting way to commit suicide, something worthy of a poem by Plath.

The deejay on the radio announces that the next song will be Cyndi Lauper’s mega-hit from the early eighties. As the song starts, I scan my mother’s face for signs that she remembers.

### **Girls Just Wanna Have Fun, Cyndi Lauper**

On the afternoon of my thirteenth birthday, I came home from school with one side of my hair shaved close to the scalp. I tossed my knapsack on the floor and went to the kitchen to get a glass of grape juice. My mother, who was preparing dinner, dropped the piece of fleshy pink meat she held and it landed with a splat on the floor.

“Have you lost your mind?” she said.

“It’s cool.”

“Do you know what people will say?” I remained silent, knowing she didn’t really want a response. “That I don’t look after you. That you’re wild.” I laughed so hard that juice spouted from my nostrils and sprayed the fridge with a purple mist. “It’s not funny. You’d better wear a hat. Do you hear me?”

I smile so broadly from the memory that my taut skin stings. My mother smiles too and I know that she remembers the punk haircut Rhanj gave me in the school bathroom using a pair of scissors and her father’s razor. Then my mother does something I have never seen her do before. She sings along to the chorus and snaps her fingers to the song’s beat.

“How do you know the lyrics?” I say.

“You only played it a thousand times.”

She sashays across the room. For a moment, I get a glimpse of what she

must have looked like when she was younger before the strain of raising me alone dulled her skin and dimmed the light in her eyes to a faint flicker. She looks like someone I'd befriend in a nightclub and the realization makes me sad. Her life was stolen just like the disease is robbing me of mine. The cycle continues like auto-replay on a tape deck.

"You want to dance?" she says. She reaches for me, and I see the veins in her hands, thick as yarn.

"Later," I say. The bones in my arms ache and fuzz denser than lamb's wool blurs my brain. I press the call button attached to my bed. When Tyrone appears I ask him for a pain pill which he brings me along with a cup of apple juice. He knows I hate the stuff but insists it eases the nausea caused by medication. I pull off the oxygen mask and put the pill on my tongue.

The juice stinks worse than pee so I swallow it fast. Tyrone says something I can't hear so I lower the volume on the boom box.

"Sorry kiddo. We gotta drain your lungs."

Tears slip from the corner of my mother's eyes. Seeing her suffer makes me want to cry too, but I don't. I tell Tyrone it's fine even though it isn't.

When I wake, I'm back in my hospital room and gray shadows spot the wall. The sun hides in the distance, behind skyscrapers. My mother is slumped in a chair and her snores sound like the grunts of a small pig. Judging by the fading daylight, I've slept a couple of hours. It is time wasted that I will never get back. Realizations like that are abundant these days, as if illness has given me the gift of insight. I'd gladly trade it for ignorance if doing so would restore my health.

I used to laugh at adults who claimed you had nothing in life if you didn't have your health. They seemed absurdly content in their apartments with furniture bought at Sears and annual vacations to campsites in Wasaga Beach. Today, I'd happily shorten my life by two days in exchange for a chance to dance one last time.

The year I turned fifteen, Rhanj and I spent every Friday night fighting for mirror space in the narrow bathroom of her apartment. Our parents forbade us from wearing make-up, but we coated our lashes in black mascara without being caught. Rhanj often wore a white T-shirt with *Choose Life* written across it in bold, black print that her mother misinterpreted as an anti-abortion slogan. I preferred safety pins and Billy Idol to the sappiness of George Michael. Something about a grown man prancing around in tight turquoise shorts was a turn off. Rhanj insisted it was sexy and I wondered if she even knew what the word meant but never asked her.

We walked into the hall of the United Church like we weren't nervous

and watched gangly boys gyrate spastically on the dance floor. Occasionally, Rhanj pointed at one and whispered "He's cute," and I either nodded or faked puking. Then, at some point in the evening, the deejay played one of our favorite songs and we squealed. We raced to the dance floor even though we knew our eagerness labeled us losers. For the duration of the song we danced like no one was watching, but when it was over, we became aware of the whites of eyes that glowed in the dark and followed us from the dance floor to the snack table where we went to get Cokes. "Wake Me Up Before You Go-go" was always Rhanj's undoing. Something about the song made her swing her hips like Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*.

Including the song on the mix tape is an admission that I've never hated George Michael as much as I wanted everyone to believe. Only my mother knew the truth. I press the record button.

### Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go, George Michael

1984 was a big year in the history of Canadian music. Michael Jackson stole four of the honors at the Canadian Black Music Awards despite being American, Bryan Adams' album *Reckless* sold millions, and CHUM launched the first-ever music video program. Every Sunday evening, I transformed our living room into a nightclub where I danced to music videos of CHUM's top 100 Hits. For almost a year, Wham's "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" made the bottom of the charts. My mother said the same thing every time the video finished. "I'm sure that man is gay."

I hated it when she said shit like that. It made her seem less intelligent than she was. "What do you care?" I said.

"No man I know dresses like that."

"What men?" I said. There hadn't been anyone since my dad left and that happened before my fifth birthday.

"Don't get fresh" my mother said. "Or I'm turning that off." She pointed at the TV screen where under a full moon Michael Jackson morphed into a monster. The song was two years old and got air play. Unbelievable, I thought.

Less surprising was that people treated my mother like a slut even though she was married when she had me. The neighbors who whispered insults when they thought we weren't listening conveniently forgot this fact.

---

**Vague fragments of memory floated through my mind like photos shot with too much digital noise.**

---

I didn't. Vague fragments of memory floated through my mind like photos shot with too much digital noise; a tall, tanned man with a moustache lifting me out of the community pool, strong hands tightening the laces on my sneakers, a brief glimpse of a broad back before a door slammed shut.

"Would you care if I was gay?" I said.

"Are you?"

"That's not the point. What would you do if I was?"

As zombies rose from crypts to give a gruesome jazz performance, my mother said, "I'd learn to live with it."

Today, I know my mother loves me. Even if I run naked through the hospital she will not forsake me. I have never done this, but life has proven that I can't afford to say that I never will. Some of the medications I take have side effects like temporary psychosis and hallucinations. It could happen, and instead of upsetting me, this knowledge makes me laugh.

"How long have I been sleeping?" my mother says. She looks out the window at the shadow of dusk that has fallen over the city.

"A while," I say.

She rubs the back of her neck. Soon she will leave to catch the five-thirty bus that will get her home in time to make dinner and walk William. I don't want her to leave, but I'm not selfish enough to say so. Instead I say, "You ever think of calling him?"

My mother knows I'm talking about my father. She stares at the tip of her shoe that she scrapes against the tile floor. "What good would it do?" she says. "Even if I knew where he was, I doubt he'd care."

I know this, but her saying it so bluntly stings and I look away. Not for the first time since my diagnosis, I wonder what will happen to her when I'm gone. She won't have anyone to share memories with or to help her heave dirt upon my coffin. I almost retch from the injustice of it, that or the apple juice has failed to squash the nausea bubbling in my stomach.

"Remember the biker jacket?" I say.

"It was flea infested," she says squirming in the seat. "I warned you about buying used clothes."

"Couldn't afford a new one," I say.

"And those short skirts you wore. Everyone could see your underwear."

I laugh so hard that I'm afraid that the skin covering my cheekbones will tear. Dr. Khomein assures me this won't actually happen, but I'm not convinced. She does not have Scleroderma, not many people in Canada do, and her statement is based on a guess, not proof or clinical studies. I stifle

the laughter to save my skin.

"You weren't a boring kid, that's for sure," she says.

"At least I never got pregnant," and the second I say it I wish I could take it back. It's the one regret my mother and I share, that I didn't have a child before the disease made it impossible.

"You would have made a great mother," she says.

I press the record button.

### **Papa Don't Preach, Madonna**

The year Madonna released this song, my friend Lola got pregnant by some guy she met at summer camp. She couldn't tell her parents because they were strict Catholics and would have forced her to keep the baby. Lola didn't want sermons on mortal sin. She wanted an abortion.

Rhanj and I were virgins despite our best efforts with pimply boys. We didn't know anything about fucking and even less about abortions. The only adult we could talk to was my mother.

She sat us at the kitchen table and gave each of us a chocolate chip cookie and a glass of milk. Earlier that day, she'd made an appointment for Lola at the illegal abortion clinic on Harbord Street.

"What's it like?" Lola said.

"It shouldn't hurt," my mother said. "They'll give you some medicine first to block the pain."

"But will I feel it?" said Lola. "Will I feel them pulling the baby out?"

"I hope not," said my mother. She used a fingernail to scrape dirt from the kitchen table.

"You ever had one?" Lola said. Rhanj and I stared at each other because we were too embarrassed to look at my mother.

"No," my mother said. "But I know a few women who have. It takes a while to get over."

"Cause of the stitches?" Lola said.

"Because you're killing a baby," I said.

My mother grabbed my hand and squeezed hard. "Who wants another cookie?" she said.

#

Tyrone arrives with a new bag of fluids and more bad news. Dr. Khomein has ordered that I do not eat tonight in case they have to intubate

me. It's not that I'll miss the mushy tofu pretending to be meatloaf or the mashed potatoes I'm certain come from a box, but I feel there is something savage about denying a person dinner on her birthday.

"She's a real bitch," I say.

"Dr. Khomein?" Tyrone says. "Naw, the woman's alright." When he snaps the IV tube into the bag of fluids, it makes a perverse pop that makes me think of Lola's cherry. Who ever came up with that as a euphemism for a girl losing her virginity was a) male, and b) really stupid.

"I don't think she likes me much."

"I think the feeling is mutual," Tyrone says, and I realize that his honesty is one of the things I like most about him. That and the way he says my name like it's an exotic, blooming flower. *Yazmeen*. Everyone else just calls me Jasmine.

"You need to get some headphones before you cause a riot. Poor Mrs. Grady says you been playin' the music so loud she had to turn off her hearing aid."

"I'm making my mom a mix tape."

"Thought those things died with acid wash jeans."

"You hold on to the past when you don't have much of a future."

"No more negative talk," Tyrone says. "Or I'll have to tell the doc you need some head meds."

I mime sewing my mouth shut.

"Happy birthday. See you in the morning."

I listen to songs sung by Peter Gabriel, the Pet Shop Boys, and U2, but none of them make the cut. Outside, small snowflakes fall like dandruff from the sky. In the amber glow of the streetlights the flakes look jaundiced, the

---

### "I love you," I say to a dial tone.

---

way snow looks on the street after a dog has pissed on it. I sit like that for a long time, looking outside and listening to bad eighties tunes. It's enough to make a sane person a little crazy, but as a sick

person, I can barely stop myself from yanking the oxygen mask from my face and hurling my body through the window. The ringing telephone saves me.

"You awake?" my mother says.

"Barely."

"You going to watch TV? *Law and Order* is on."

I hear my mother chew something crunchy while she speaks. "Are you eating chips?" I say. "She wouldn't let me have dinner."

"Sorry," she says.

"Probably would have sucked anyway."

"I'll bring you soup."

"The chicken kind?" My mother makes the best chicken soup in the world. She even stuffs it with alphabet shaped pasta. Thinking of it makes my stomach grumble.

"Is there any other?"

I don't remind her of the horrible lentil soup she forced to me to eat as a child or the failed experiment one winter that involved broccoli and Cheese Whiz. Instead I say, "It may be days before I can eat it."

"Something to look forward to," she says. "Sleep tight."

"I love you," I say to a dial tone.

I'm about to succumb to sleep when I hear the distinct sound of Per Gassle's voice. It sounds like sandpaper and bourbon. I press the record button and close my eyes.

### She's Got the Look, Roxette

The first car I owned was a red, convertible Le Baron that I bought from my friend's dad. For two years, I worked at a dry cleaner, separating stinky clothes into piles and loading them into large, canvas bags to pay for the car, and it was worth every sweat-filled second. The evening I took my first ride, I spent over an hour teasing my bangs to impossible heights and shellacking them into place with hairspray. I doused my cropped peach sweater with *Exclamation!* perfume and slipped my feet into loafers. In my back pocket was a mixed tape Rhanj made for the occasion.

My mother sat in her bedroom embroidering linen napkins she said would one day be mine, and as I passed her room she called out my name.

"What?"

"You promise you'll be careful," she said.

"Yes Mother."

"And you won't speed."

"No."

"Because I know you kids like to drive fast."

I groaned and rolled my eyes.

"Don't make faces at me young lady," she said. "I am still your mother and I can ground you."

"I promise, okay?" I knew that Rhanj was waiting for me in the lobby of her apartment building and would be pissed if I was late. I promised to take us to the Dairy Queen and then to the drive-in to see *Fatal Attraction*.



If my mother kept talking there wouldn't be time for vanilla cones dipped in chocolate. I tapped my foot and the tip of my loafer made a clicking sound against the parquet floors.

"It's just that I worry," she said. "Driving is a big responsibility."

I jiggled the rhinestone-studded keychain that dangled from my index finger and noted it was heavier thanks to the addition of car keys. "We're not even leaving the neighborhood."

"Accidents can happen close to home."

"What would you have me do, Mom? Stay home all the time, like you?" I shouldn't have said it and my face flushed with the shame of what I had done. My mother looked down at the napkin she adorned with small, pink pansies but didn't speak for several seconds. When she did, she tried not to cry.

"I know you think I'm silly," she said. "But one day, you'll realize I only do it because I care."

I wanted to tell her that I already knew, that I was sorry for what I said, but she's the one who taught me that you can't take back words once they've left your mouth. "You can't put toothpaste back in the tube," is how she put it.

"I'll be home by 11:30," I said.

"Not a minute later or I'll call the police."

#

An alarm sounds and I assume it comes from the IV machine. Christine, the night nurse on duty, rushes in, and I cringe. The woman is almost as annoying as Dr. Khomein. She is a born-again Christian determined to help patients find their way to salvation. I reach for the volume button, but I'm too late.

"No more music," she says. She stabs the off button with her finger and the siren sounds louder. She scans the screen tracking my heart rate and then presses her fingers against my wrist, feeling for a pulse. After a few seconds, she clicks her tongue and says, "It's bad for your heart. Makes you too excited." She presses a few buttons on the monitor and the siren stops. "I need to page the doctor."

"Don't," I say. Her stern expression tells me there isn't any point in arguing with her.

A few minutes later Christine returns, and I'm surprised to see that she carries a can of Diet Coke. "Happy birthday!" She hands me the soda and a

small plastic cup containing a pink pill. "The doctor is on her way. She says take this to help you relax." She smiles as I pop the pill in my mouth and sip the bubbly beverage straight from the can. "Jesus loves you."

When she leaves, I spit the bitter, mushy pill into my hand and grind it against my thigh until all that is left is a pink smear on white sheets. Then, I turn the boom box back on and wait for the song that must come next on the tape. It's after midnight when it finally does and I'm so tired that I wonder if I imagine it playing but I press record just in case.

### Never Gonna Give You Up, Rick Astley

The first time I saw Rick Astley's video was the winter of 1989. I was home from college nursing a bad cold and an even worse romance. My mother made a bed up for me on the sofa and kept me company while I watched television and ate junk food.

"He looks like a nice boy," my mother said. She pointed at the TV and smiled. "Look at the hair on his head. Have you ever seen such nice hair in your life?"

Astley's puffy, red pompadour was certainly a sight but not one I classified as *nice*. He looked wimpy, with his pale skin and shirts buttoned all the way to the collar. "A geek," I said.

"Like you're such a good judge of men," said my mother. "Why won't you date Bailey? He's called twice since you've been home and you haven't called him back."

Bailey was the type of man my mother thought I should date: responsible and repressed. His biggest life achievement was catching a giant grouper on a fishing trip he took with his dad.

"He is beyond boring," I said.

"And where has excitement gotten you?" She picked up a pile of chickadee yarn and dug in her knitting basket for needles. She made teeny woolen hats for premature newborns at Mount Sinai Hospital. In my lifetime, she must have warmed the heads of more than a thousand babies.

"I thought you liked having me home." I opened a bag of sour keys and put two in my mouth.

"I like seeing you happy."

I turned up the volume on the television and hoped my mother got the hint. Instead, she spoke louder. "Every time you see that baby you're going to remember."

Musicians who zipped through the city on Ninja motorcycles and got

blow jobs in bathrooms from women who weren't their girlfriends appealed to me. But when my boyfriend Zeek impregnated his latest conquest and dumped me to marry the bitch, I swore off bad boys for good.

I predicted their marriage would last less time than it took for the province of Ontario to officially declare them a family, but I was wrong. The last time I stalked him on Facebook, his profile pic featured the three of them smiling like idiots. The baby is now a boy with the same wild blonde hair as his father.

It still makes me sick and this time I'm certain it's the memory and not the medication that causes me to vomit into the kidney shaped bowl.

After I wipe my face with the edge of a bed sheet and reattach the oxygen mask to my face, I lean over the railing to check the amount of ribbon left on the tape. There is enough for one more song. When I began recording, I knew how I wanted the tape to end. I wait in the dim room for the song to cross the airwaves.

Outside, I see swirls of onyx in the charcoal sky. The earlier snowfall coated the courtyard in a white dust that is pretty to look at, but I know it's cold to the touch. I imagine my mother as she listens to the mix tape. Her reaction to the first song barely registers on the psychological tuner I've affixed to the boom box, but as each song plays, and one emotion is layered upon another, the needle twitches, and by the last song, it quivers so violently that I'm certain it will snap in half.

### **Nothing Compares to You, Sinead O'Connor**

Dr. Khomein walks into my room. She's dressed in street clothes, and I realize this is the first time I've seen her without a lab coat. She is skinnier than I believed her to be, and I can see a bow of rib bones through the thin, fitted T-shirt she wears.

"We discussed the possibility of this happening," she says. By *this* she means intubation. The pulmonologist will stuff a thick plastic tube down my throat and connect it to a machine that will pump oxygen into my lungs.

"How long?" I say.

"That depends on how well you respond," says Dr. Khomein.

A snarky reply comes to mind, but I ignore it and press the stop button on the boom box. There are several seconds left in the song, but I'm out of time. I scribble a note using a ballpoint pen and the blank side of a hospital menu. I hand the letter and the tape to Dr. Khomein.

"Make sure my mom gets this," I say.

Dr. Khomein looks at the note. It reads:

*Dear Mom,  
I made you this mix tape.  
Love Jasmine.*



*Crow Desires the Horizon*

STEVEN SHERRILL  
*Paintings*



*Crow Adores the Child*



*Bull*

# Death Sentence

*by Gene Fehler*

When artist Anne Simmons removed the cloth from her most recent painting, she saw the white-haired, well-dressed elderly woman's eyes widen with shock (or terror) before the woman suddenly reached out and scraped sharp fingernails across the painting, for all purposes destroying it (Anne's painting of the graying, deserted farmhouse – the house that her grandparents had built with their own hands, the one that her parents had lived in, the one where she herself had been born and had lived for eleven mostly happy years, until that day when her father had died in that terrible fall down the basement stairs), Anne reddened, at first with embarrassment at the woman's act – so unexpected in light of the woman's stature in the art world, so out-of-place among the collection of genteel guests in her home – but with an embarrassment that quickly turned to anger, an anger that boiled swiftly and suddenly inside her until she lost control and snatched the defaced painting from the wall, swinging it viciously toward the startled woman, who flung her arms up too late in a futile defense, the sharp corner of the heavy wooden frame catching the woman squarely in her left temple, just beneath her two hundred dollar pink hat with the lacy trim, knocking her to the floor where she lay still, glasses knocked askew, mouth slightly open, eyes staring unblinkingly, a thin trickle of blood staining the thick white carpet in Anne's drawing room, a room filled with a shocked silence that only heightened the noises from outside: the barking of a stray dog, the shouting of neighborhood children, the almost subdued sounds of a lazy street's mid-afternoon traffic, the eerie wail of a faraway siren that seemed to foreshadow and bring sharply into focus to all the people there the knowledge that the room would soon be filled with an assortment of public officials who would be solemnly and systemically investigating the death of one of the country's leading art critics, officials who would be arresting that distinguished art critic's only daughter, who, in an unplanned moment of rage, had, after thirty years, finally unknowingly avenged her father's murder.

# These Small Rooms

by William LaPage

Near the end of summer all the frames and doors in the house expand and fuse together. Modeled more than a century ago to isolate trapped breezes trailing through the inner hull, the house inflates decimals of its average size. I don't know how many nights Emily put Margo to sleep with old-world tales about wood sprites gossiping on all the histories they had witnessed, and, according to Emily, they had seen it all: there were stories about the western expansion, the rail boom, Civil War battles. The city had grown in around the house, she said, like a moss. In the decades since, when the house had finally settled into a sleepy lull, the foundation had started to come apart. Water mites had worked under the earth, feeding and nesting in the masonry. The previous landlord had outfitted the home in cheap durables and left the rooms for the tenets' own conjectures. They had only worsened matters by cutting through load-bearing posts to separate rooms and fashion patios and had mangled the plumbing so arbitrarily pipes herniated through the walls in winter.

Emily christened it the rats nest the winter she moved in. No one could tell us when it had converted back to a single residence, and we still receive mail for the other apartments. We bare-knuckle wrestle with the house for privacy, fighting to the point of collapse. And when we think we've won, we're reminded of who we are, of where we live as the neighborhood vibrates with the odd, dying sound—a scream or horn or bell—that this part of the city is in a permanent state of decay. So Emily has to force the door with both hands, and still the door won't shut. She calls from the bathroom door for no one to come upstairs. She's dressing and doesn't want me to see. And then everything is silent again. No one moves or listens. For a moment my thoughts wander off to other things and put all other thoughts out of mind. There's a remote disturbance, a vacant clamor that takes over in the silence, an omnipresent awareness. When Emily calls out, OK, to say she's done, that it is now permissible again to go upstairs, her voice rings off the high ceilings, out from the open windows, rebounding off the closely packed row houses behind Oak Meade Terrace, drawing us back to our senses. And Margo waits in the kitchen, at the bottom of the stairs, to see her mother in her modest dress. That the wood whispers human tones, Margo says, and

listens and tells her mother in the morning what she heard the house say, she's happy because the house is happy. Margo mimics the chirps and rings to herself as she quietly coos into the back of a fan before running upstairs.

These homes are some of the oldest in the county still standing, relatively intact, and of the five nearest what had been the city limits one hundred forty years ago we are less than a mile from the commercial train yard. The sidewalks are intact, fashioned in red brick and bulging in patches where the moss has exposed the earth to runoff. It's the only view from the upstairs bathroom window, reflected off to the side of the mirror at a sharp angle Emily says catches her eye as she practices getting in and out of her dress. She chose a light, airy summer dress from the catalog as close to white as she thought appropriate. Margo assures me it's beautiful, that her mom is beautiful. She wants to be beautiful, too. I tell her she is and she smiles and runs to the narrow stairwell. The clapping of her soles up the wood boards echoes down. She tells me she's taking a break from playing to help her mom dress up. Their voices recede into the stillness.

All the windows open along the alley. A network of archaic cells trimmed in outdated dark paneling, our doors are propped open most of the summer to let the saturated drafts carry from one end of the house to the other through. There is an indignity to living this way, to exposing our bestial, all-too-human selves, in our most private moments to everyone, as if on stage, reciting dirty jokes. The numbing low treble from machines at the mill mix with the scent of corn feed imbuing the air, and the trains clashing together in the yard on the other side of the refurbished lofts and restaurants in the modernized downtown crane lazily through the rooms. Okay, Emily calls from the balcony. I'm dressed...I'm ready. Sorry. Don't apologize, I mean to say, expecting my voice to carry. But the moisture locks in my words. Mince the sound. Dust to dust.

Later Margo assures me her mom looks like a princess in her new dress and that I'll look like a prince in my old wool suit I haven't worn in more than thirty years and have yet to try on or have retailored to my sickly and shrunken body. She asks if the princesses and princes become kings and queens after they marry. I tell her only after the old king has died or been killed. She looks at me confused, worried, desperate for reassurances. She's skeptical of my explanation. Princes and princesses inevitably become kings and queens the way children believe we become angels when we die, that some sense of what we know of this world continues in some fashion, on and on, because we know nothing else.

Where's your dress? I say.

I'm helping mommy first.

From my window I can see the neighborhood yards and dry dead grass. The gravel drives form conduits fanning out onto the pavement in small deltas deadpan and heat-blushed faces cross less often now that the heat wave has forced even the homeless indoors. The bars and pool halls reach full capacity and feed tensions that amplify tempers until long-seeded rivalries outside the skid row hotels empty out like a cloud of finches in one nebulous mass onto the street at night. Margo says she can hear them below her window. She says they sound like cats when they're angry.

The following morning, empty bottles rest propped against the curb when she goes out to play, and Emily watches from the window shouting out every few moments, Don't touch that, honey!...don't pick that up, leave it alone, baby!...Just leave it! And though Emily has never formally agreed to sell the house and move out, she and I have devoted entire Sunday afternoons to surfing internet brochures and applications for academies far from here.

Eventually, the confidence in Emily's voice fades and we lose interest in savings and budget plans and policy payouts. We know she'll wait, take

---

**Our bodies intuitively calculate its delicate thermodynamic equilibrium, and our voices trail from one room to the other, directed at no one and increasing in complexity and texture until we're dissipated and whispering to be heard and I stammer barefoot onto the back porch, the floorboards sighing under my weight, to retreat like a dying animal.**

---

Margo where she can attend a good academy and get the hours of personal tutoring she'll need, to take Margo and uproot her and implant her somewhere healthy and constructive and good. Moments of clarity diminish by nightfall and I'm left reeling at the domain of this life and death as a thing. Years ago they explained to me the process, the electrical discharges of my brain as the cells are choked of oxygen. They use words like comfort, like transition, that mean nothing. Sell the house, I tell her. Use

the money to send Margo to that academy upstate. She won't be happy at a public school. They won't understand her gifts. But Emily doesn't want to talk about it. The stalled stale air metastasizes in the late summer months. Surfaces waver at a distance. Our eyes compensate for the illusory auras of a continuum made physical. Time perpetuated by its own abstraction. Heat swells until we can't even be in the same room together. Our bodies intuitively calculate its delicate thermodynamic equilibrium, and our voices trail from one room to the other, directed at no one and increasing in complexity

and texture until we're dissipated and whispering to be heard and I stammer barefoot onto the back porch, the floorboards sighing under my weight, to retreat like a dying animal.

She is finished watching Emily change and returns to her room to dress herself. Emily, sitting at the edge of her bed, weighs on the floor and Margo's voice trickles through the crevices in the planks above my office as she counts off the elements from her tables—variations on alchemies, mined and lab-brewed patents of pharmaceutical industry. Plastic faith. She does it with a precise repetition, calling down the names and valences as if saying her prayers. Like an oracle we prostrate at her door for guidance—show us the way, little one.

When Emily cooks at night with all the theater of something like her mother used to perform in the old-country, telling her when Emily was as young as Margo—how eating hot foods like tomato soup and toast and eggs cools the body—the first floor landing fills with the scent of cooking spiced in the fog of corn feed. Disembodied voices surface through the floor ducts and varicose tracks in the wall tile. Wiping her forehead with the lip of her tee shirt, she sets the skillet aside on a dark burner and prepares a pot of black beans and seasoned rice Margo won't eat, even as Emily tells Margo what her mother told her, about hot foods and hot climates. The forced enthusiasm is transparent and Margo stares at her.

I can't breathe, Margo says. I can't breathe and eat.

It's all that's left. Otherwise we won't get any supper.

It's too hot, Em, I tell her.

It'll cool you down, babe. It's good for you.

Don't reason with her...

I need to go, Margo says. Can I go?

The pans and trays on top of the refrigerator rattle when Emily slams shut the door. She closes her eyes against the cold shock to her skin. Relief coaxes and then passes. The day unsettled and pitiless and thick, she draw backs, opens her eyes again. For her it's the freeze of overdue bills, expired notices, memories of waiting rooms and hospitals that keep her up at night, trapped under guilt she can't define, for a pain she can't understand. The air is thick enough to swallow.

The last night we spent in the same room she had pulled the covers off her legs. The buzz of the city beyond radiated off the high ceilings, the freshly painted walls, and the heat had been mollified by short stunted drafts, and the city was constant, tangible, within reach. The street lamp had burned out and the room had dimmed to lattices of shadow.



She arrived when the doctors were finally impotent to save this life. All learning and advances failed, and those words forced out in broad, sweeping gestures—ease, pain, therapy. Doctors say there is no such thing as a miracle drug. No cocktail of drugs will reverse the onset of death. We can only prolong life by inches and degrees.

Now the late evenings after sup are an accumulation of intolerable agonies, the air turning a foggy shade of lime visible against the pane in the den where I suffer television alone and listen for disturbances in the rooms above. Emily stays camped in her room, seldom coming out but to escape the whirr of the ceiling fan, the electric fans she has propped all around the house. And I hide half naked in the one room no one visits. No one comes here because I'm here—another human mass-producing even greater amounts of heat. Any exposed flesh is quickly lubricated in an oily secretion. I consider spending the night here in the den listening to the quiet halls and rooms. Sometime after two in the morning the sound from the floor above goes out. I siphon off a few more painkillers from my already depleted supply, because without cognition and mind there is only late-night television.

They tell me it's in my bones. My hands tremor. Margo stares at the medicine bottles neatly organized against the back of the countertop. Wagging her miniature finger at her cheek she counts the four bottles four times and asks what's in them. Medicine, Emily tells her. There is nothing to say to my doctor, Doctor Lindsey. He has stated a fact that requires no other follow up response than to accept it as fact. You either go on or you don't.

Emily is plain and slight in her dress. Margo stands at her side smiling, turning the two metal bands in her fists that they clank together. Her eyes cut between us and look for a measure of happiness on our faces. I have never seen Emily out of her uniform. And she is pretty and Margo is excited and can hardly stand still waiting for me to say something.

Thomas doesn't know what to say, Margo tells her. He's speechless.

I am, I assure Emily. Blush rises in her cheeks. She takes Margo into the kitchen where Margo notices immediately the arrangement of orange bottles on the counter.

Medicines?

Yes, Emily says.

Who's sick? she says.

Thomas is sick, Emily says.

And Margo counts the bottles again—four by four, she says under her breath. One. Two. Two. One. Four. Two and two. Three and one, she says, working out the combination in her head. That medicine is rhombus. At

night she counts integers in her sleep, dreaming in equations.

It's a problem with my homunculus, I told her the day we decided she should know.

What's that? touching together her fingertips.

It's a grown-up word for a little tiny man who lives inside my brain.

She throws her head back and giggles to herself, puckering her lips around a forced Noooo.

Yes, I say. He's in there kicking around in my brain. He lives in a part called the motor cortex.

And the medicine makes him go away?

It just kind of makes him quiet for a little while.

Is there medicine to make him go away? she says. I'm going to be a doctor and I'll make you a secret medicine that'll make the bad man go away.

One reason Emily doesn't want to sell the house is a floorboard in the sunroom office upstairs where she had written in velvet black ink a heart and the word *love*. A moment or memory or emotion I noted in one of the many journals the doctors have asked me to catalogue the amputations to my mind. As soon as the words are etched onto the page, they're gone from

me and belong to someone else. I'll skim through the pages occasionally searching out a familiar thread to hold on to, to wrestle with and adopt and take in as an event unique to me. But what emerges is the portrait of someone else, an unfamiliar man coping with foreign sensations until the notebooks trail off to an inconclusive end. In the same script by the same hand she had written *heart and love*, which I had responded to a week earlier by scribbling *do not tread here*. The rest is illegible, Margo walks across it so often.

---

**One reason Emily doesn't want to sell the house is a floorboard in the sunroom office upstairs where she had written in velvet black ink a heart and the word *love*.**

---

The boards whine and echo; footsteps distend into the office. I glance at the portrait Emily had framed of my father and set on top of the bookshelf across from where I sit. Its hereditary likeness makes me cringe, and the inference is clear since Emily's only emotional safeguard in this whole mess is practicing a fortification of memory, as she calls it, wanting nothing more or less than to be bunched in and confined and locked into a small room when the sudden terror of instability threatens our peace—one's need to bury one's head somewhere dark, she talks to me like I'm a child, leaving the rest of one's body exposed. With your head down, she tells me, the terror

can't get you.

There is some form of crisis unfolding in every home on our block, men and women and children cut off from the outside world, taking to slivers of shade and inner rooms, anywhere to escape the heat. Smooth Operator beats out from the neighbor's loudspeakers they have to yell over to be heard. As most of the tenants who drink heavily or abuse or worse, their carbon hangs in the air. The voices empty out into yards and the street and snakes their way across the property divide to mew stale in our ears the horrors they endure and share with everyone else on the block, cut off from relief as another AC fails and goes silent. It is a week before a technician arrives, and even then there are no guarantees. Payment options, billing. The cost of labor is twice the cost of the parts. He works through the hottest part of the day. All to which Margo seems immune. She somehow blocks out the tension, crouched in one corner or another in her room, the listless leaves of a book splayed across her bare legs as she looks through the pictures of a National Geographic or the Ripley's compendium Emily's mother sent as a good-bye forever gift before uprooting to God only knows.

Water petals condense on the wire screen. Emily calls from the adjacent room, though I don't respond. A moment later she calls again. I call back. Wait for the rising tension in her voice. She hovers in the doorway to my office so I can lament and pity her for going through with this. She tips a glass of sweet tea to her lips and holds it out in front of her chest, a flat aroma against the smell of corn feed and metal dust from the train yard.

I said call down Margo, she says. Her beautiful semi-white sundress hangs loosely off her narrow shoulders.

I can hear her reciting her elements.

We'll have to be at the courthouse soon.

She's too young to understand, I say.

She's eight.

She needs to be eight. We should take her to the library afterward? She likes going, and it's air conditioned. Emily steps back out of the doorway, fading off into the living room.

I want us to go out tonight to celebrate. You think you can manage, or do you...

I can't manage?

Even as the water beads the pane above my desk the heat barks from all sides and angles off the house. Through the floorboards of Margo's room



glimpses of gold flecks carry from a nearby window and bend around her gravity. She paces the room dressing and gathering laundry. I know she can hear everything we say. Emily calls at her:

Margo, honey, you need to get your things ready and come down. We're going to head out in like two minutes. You ready? Bring me a load of clothes. Get your things ready, baby, and start heading down.

With the windows open the curtains plume and shift, teased by an awkward hot gap between the sill and the window's warped wood frame. Beads collect in the wire mesh screen and hold as the damp soaks into the basin. The septic pump rattles the house. Large pools empty out into the cellar. Rain bleeds down through the cracks in the concrete, belching out in widening streams what the earth can't hold. In winter the cellar floods. In summer the damp pit draws out cave crickets, spiders, and mites Margo traps and jars and sets on her desk to study their physiologies.

You're not letting water into your room, I yell.

No, Margo says. I pulled the storm window.

Emily's disturbances are constant, imbued. With the window parted sound waves converge on the calm, vibrating the patchwork of distillate rain. Murmurs collapse on this small room from the neighboring yards, the school, the expressway. Tracks lap around the city. Iron and concrete. The bypass. We're exposed to the ruminations of a city all but alive, and traffic

currents, passing vehicles loading and unloading, peopled sounds washed in a deluge of inanimate babel. When the ancients referred to the gods, they must have thought of the great cities where time is only the measure of human mortality.

At night sounds crane from wherever the air impels. When classes let out the hum of student voices connect with the low intonations of ACs, repetitive and stale. The noise burns together, and when the static dies out and the humidity crests, that's when Margo hears the voices below her window. When I look in on her she has pushed the blankets down at her feet and rolled on to her side with her back to the door. From her breathing, she's awake and listening for the television in the den below her room.

Are they bothering you? You want me to ask them to go away?

No, she says. It's okay.

You want me to read to you? She turns and brushes hair back out of her eyes and smiles and points to Hooke's book balanced on the top shelf of the far case. Margo tells me she remembers the bookshop, the large smoky glass panel, and on a stand at the center of the display was a picture book. She had discovered it the last time we went two years ago and had been fascinated by the lensing of multiple layers, of the magnification and colored pictures where the detail of the hand drawings from a boy I told her had been twenty-eight when he saw the microcosm for the first time, and she had asked that same year for a microscope. Emily brought her slides of plant cells and onion skins, and I showed her how to make her own. Anyone could have written this book, I told her. But Hooke was the guy who did. For years people'd been pointing telescopes up. But Hooke was the guy who wondered what'd happen if you pointed it down.

So he did. He pointed it down, she said, knowing the story by heart.

And with a little modification he was able to see the smallest details of the smallest creatures.

Is that how the doctors found the man in your head?

In a way, kind of. Yes.

Now there are commercials and print ads for adult gaming systems, memory machines to improve cognitive recall and eye-hand coordination, digital Rubik's cubes training the brain like muscle. Margo followed easily at age six. The solutions already existed in her neuron-pathways. She could pull at the information as at a puzzle piece off the table in front of her and insert it each time consistently.

Because she's learning, Emily said. Starting from nothing. No preconceptions. All this is filtered through what you already know. Pre-formed

assumptions.

Already tomorrow, wild light traces the contours of the lacquered cabinet top. Emily empties the washer, setting flatware on the shelves next to the refrigerator where the pans and trays continue to rattle. She thinks the fridge is off balance. After she had moved it out from the wall to get the oak dining table through the narrow entryway, it'd never properly settled on the floor. A year ago we had torn the linoleum from the floor and hoped to cover the spotted hardwood with Italian sandstone. Only it never happened. Schedules and expenses intervened and other parts of the house stole our attention. The fridge rebounded against heavy steps and slamming doors. With each step from the drawer to the washer the pans rattle.

Where'd you leave off last night in your book? she says, lime scent and the aroma of dry glass lap in her wake.

Eighty-five, or so, I think. About chapter six.

You thought about calling Doctor Lindsey again, seeing if he can make an appointment for you?

I know what he'll say.

So he can answer whatever questions you have.

I don't have any questions. I know how this book ends.

I have some stuff I'd like to ask him. About the progression.

You're on to chapter seven, then?

Just curious. What's normal. What's abnormal. What we can expect. It could be getting worse.

It's not getting worse.

But it could be getting worse. Or evening out. Or whatever.

Margo stands watch. She has coloring books, notepads, flashcards, portable applications and portable gaming systems with age appropriate quest strategies and memory puzzles—of the generations born under unimpeded access to information—and a bag of zoo cards all of which Emily keeps in a plastic tub under the van's passenger seat for long road trips, waiting-room visits, slow afternoons between school and running errands and tutoring, all as a pretense against early onset cognitive degeneration. We had surrounded her with books when she first came to live with her mother and me. Books I'd spent my twenties and thirties hunting. And I had been reading to her from Hooke's *Fantastic Descriptions of the Small* when she asked me what the large book was on the top shelf. After she had placed in her school's accelerated program, I gave her my illustrated copy of *Micrographia*.

A mug half full of coffee rests at the lip of the counter next to the coffee machine I bought for Emily's forty-first birthday. She paces the open floor

between a stack of Margo's schoolwork and rearranging the slices of microwaved bacon and eggs from Margo's breakfast. I can see through the fabric of her nursing gown glimpses of a body distant and unfamiliar. The pale curtain billows around her.

Chapter eight is a good chapter, she says before stalking upstairs after Margo.

Hours, days elapse. I can't hear Emily above the sound of the fans and wonder if she's sleeping, if she can hear Margo asking me to read to her. I steady myself on the bedpost and settle down to where Margo can see the pages lit in the lamplight.

Where do you want to start, I say.

And she thinks.

I say, let's look at cells.

After a short while the voices below her window fade and disperse into the static. The low lull of heat breaks and a cool breeze drifts idly through the rooms. She has looked at the pictures hundreds of times, can almost recite the descriptions from memory. When she's finally asleep, it's after eleven. Emily's room is quiet.

Downstairs I fall asleep in my office waiting for Emily to come down from her room. I turn the station to two seventy-three and turn down the volume. Meditative drums and low humming chants; world music sounds the same in every language. I follow Dr. Lindsey's technique he'd stolen, he said, from a book on positive self-imagining and cybernetics and holistic mental reinforcement. Words on a page. Tracts and phrases leading into the next and the next. Soon we'll have to close the windows. The temperature will drop at night and the swelling will go down and we'll go back again to closing off these small rooms, none the wiser.

# Easy Pieces Comics

by Neil Dvorak

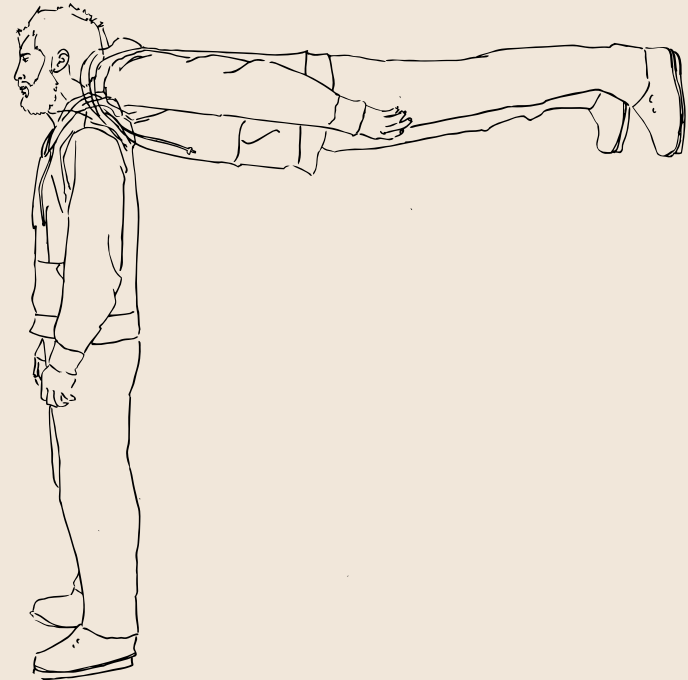
## Question, Where do we come from?

I come from my mother's house: that Neil loves salamanders and brooks, plays with his brother and broke his finger playing football in the backyard.

I come from drawings: hours alone creating maps of nowhere and diagrams for machines that would never exist; that Neil can only see 6 inches past his face, to the paper. He knows his family only as they might appear in a drawing.

I come from divorce: that Neil sees one side of his family pitted, however civilly, against the other, and understands the justifications of both sides. That Neil is grey.

Somehow I am one person. Often I can't understand that the life I've lived can be called one single life. My feet have grown from so many different places, emotions and people, yet I align somewhere, to become one person.



Enough.

I've gotta get out of this body.



...this didn't work...

**JUPITER Org. FORM**

**BODY REMOVAL REQUEST**

Thank you for choosing The Jupiter Organization to process your private & delicate needs!  
 Your form should arrive with this section complete: *Section A*

You will need to ENCOMPASS section A at this time: *21981470000110* Before we can process your request.

**ENCOMPASSING**

Upon arrival to *SEC A*, lay down in designated spot \*

\* A custodian can be provided if you are unsure of exact coordinates to encompass. - see SECTION C

THE PROCESSING PROCESS WILL OCCUR AT THE TIME FROM *SEC B*

POST-PROCESSING YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SIT UP AND GO ABOUT YOUR LIFE BODY-FREE! YOU ARE NOW OFFICIALLY UNBURDENED BY:

<b>BURDEN</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
• Loss, hunger, nerve	STOMACH
• Shortness of breath, lover's swoon	LUNG(S)
• Gnat, relieving sigh	HAND(S), HEART
• Overextension, Overextension	BRAIN, STOMACH
• Indecision	

PLEASE REQUEST FORM 707 FOR FULL LIST!

PLEASE BE PRECISE!  
 TISSUES OUTSIDE THE CUSTODIAN WILL REMAIN ADHERED TO YOU POST-PROCESSING! THIS INCLUDES PARTIAL TISSUES.

**OFFICIAL USE ONLY BELOW:**

A-NODE READING: *ADHESED*

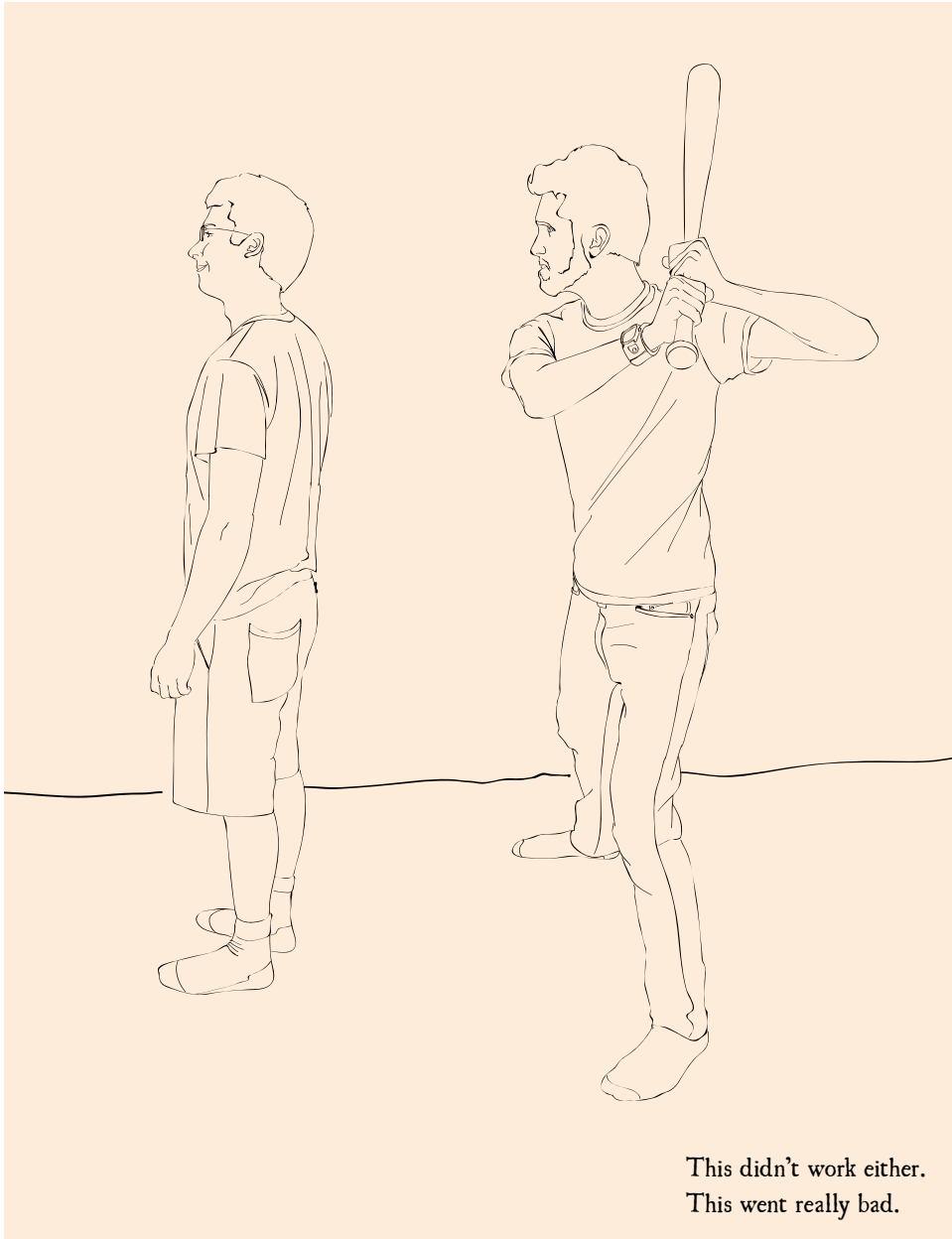
A-NODE READING: *LEAVING (preparation)*

APPROVAL(S): *Kath Koc*  
*Director of Body Burden of Balance*

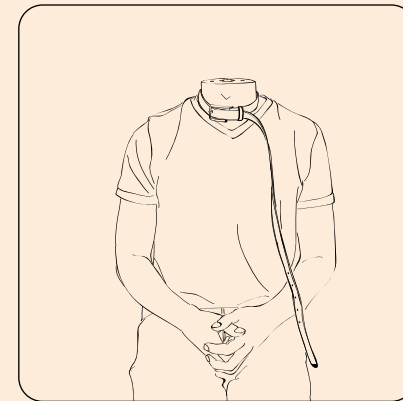
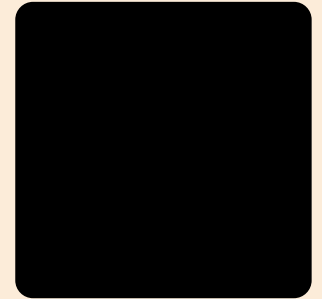
P. No. 1 g. 1001  
 11/09

**OFFICIAL OF THE OFFICE!**

...hmmm... maybe I'll save this one for later



I'll have to do this myself.



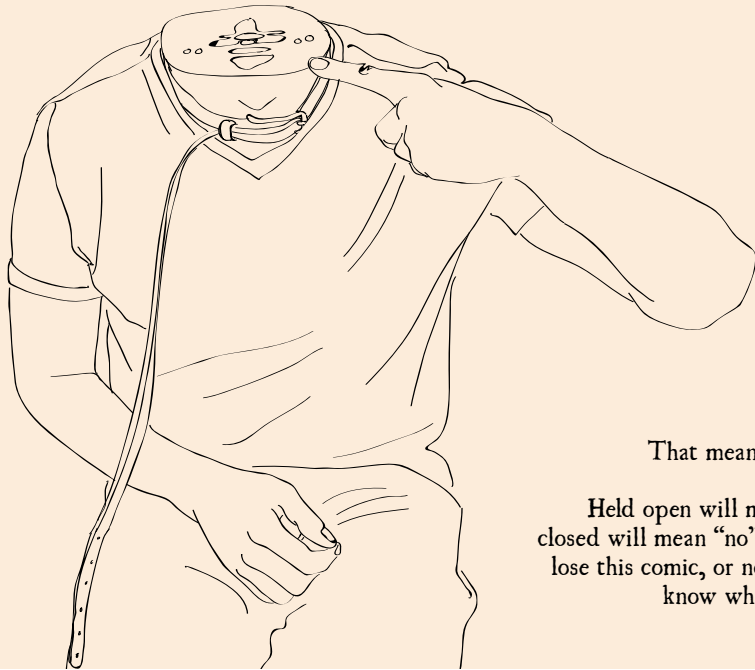
...I have to wait for it to heal...



Now who am I?  
This is perfect.

I've thought this through...

I can still communicate.  
Though tedious, I can move the remains of  
my esophagus open and closed.  
See?



That means "thank you".

Held open will mean "yes" and  
closed will mean "no". Please don't  
lose this comic, or no one will ever  
know what I'm saying...



While I still have some blood in my hands,  
I want to tell you what I feel without the  
burden of my brain...

I feel my breath big.

I feel the lubrication in my joints.

My stomach turns to slush when my lover touches me.

My toes wiggle for hours after we make love

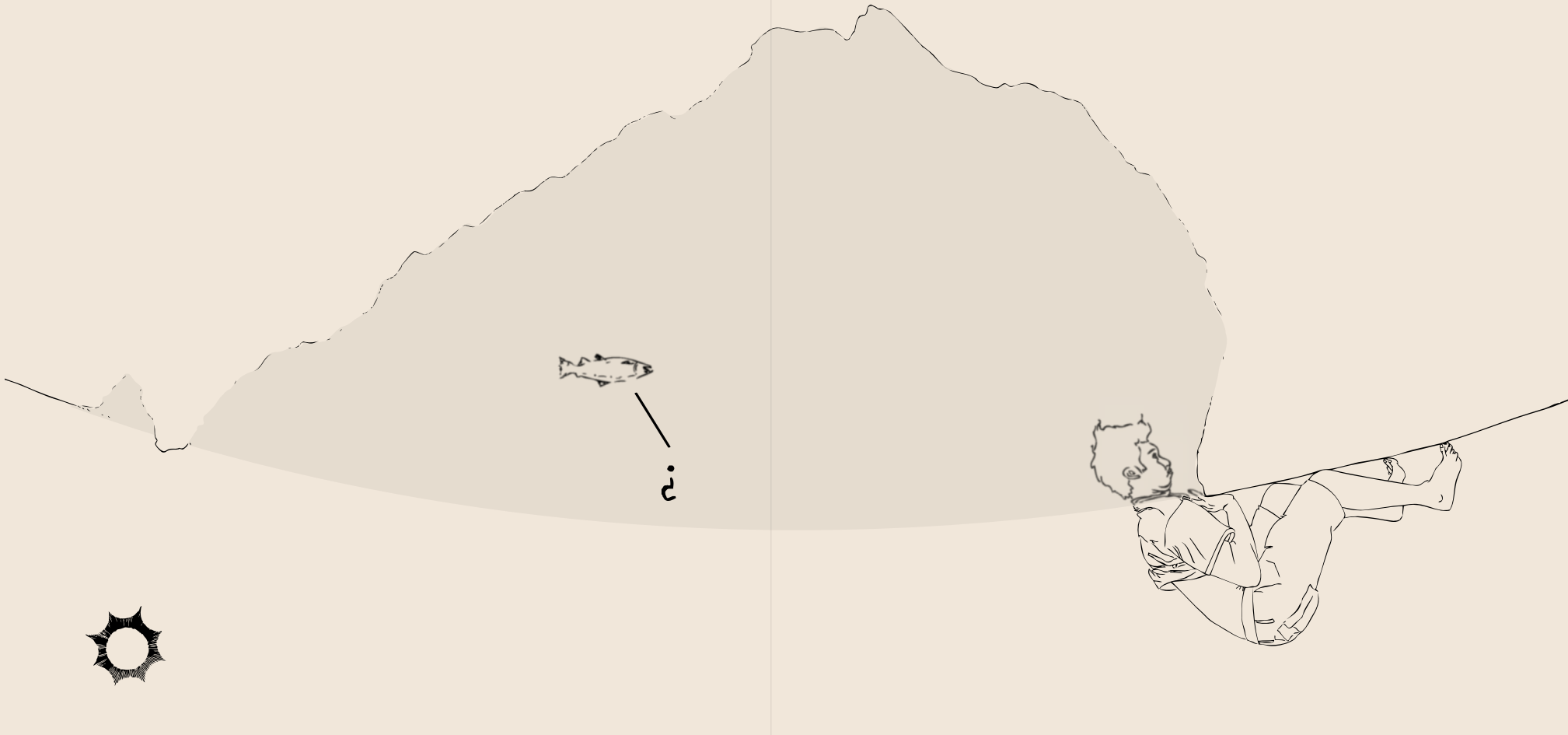
My hairs stand on end when my family is in the room.

*My hands are so big and warm. I think I*



# Question

Is this upright?  
Am I getting this right?



# A Greg & Jett Adventure



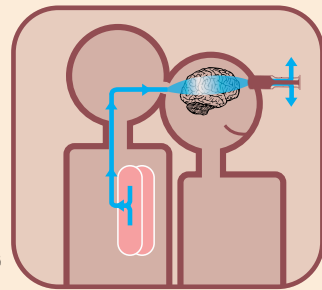
I went into my brother's room one night, he was with his girlfriend Ginette (AKA "Jett"). She had cut a cross-shape into his forehead with an x-acto knife. No one seemed alarmed so I tried to play it cool...



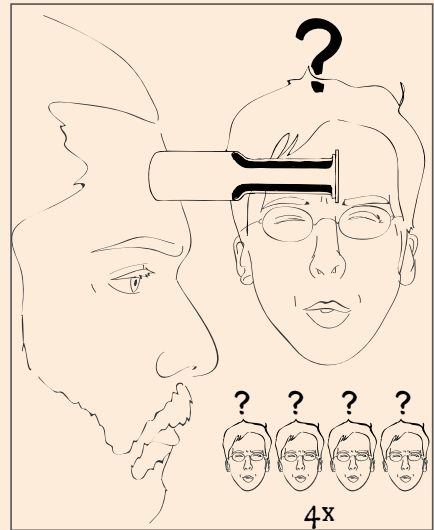
I went in for a closer look and could see...a small tumour? on my brother's forehead, on the bone itself. It was a flat disc, like a large bony coin growing off the front of his cranium.



IT WAS A WHISTLE!!.....?(6x)

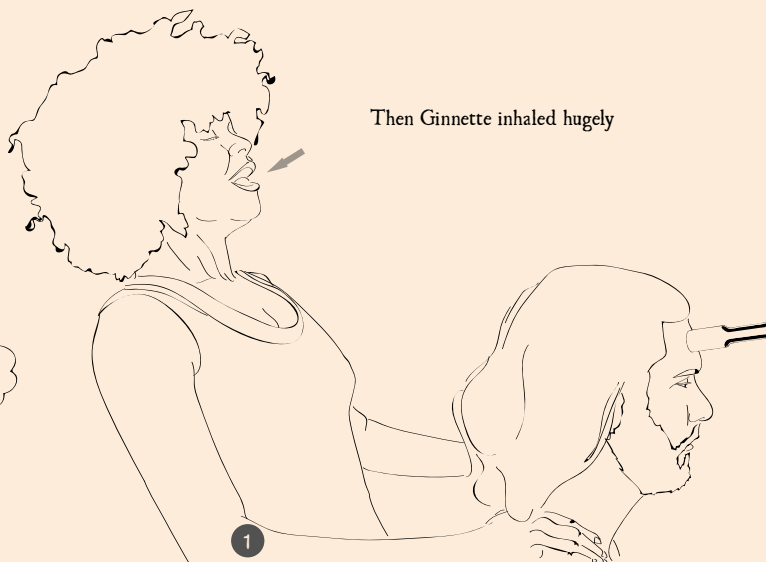


Ginette found a loop and pulled...and something telescoped out of the front of his head!!



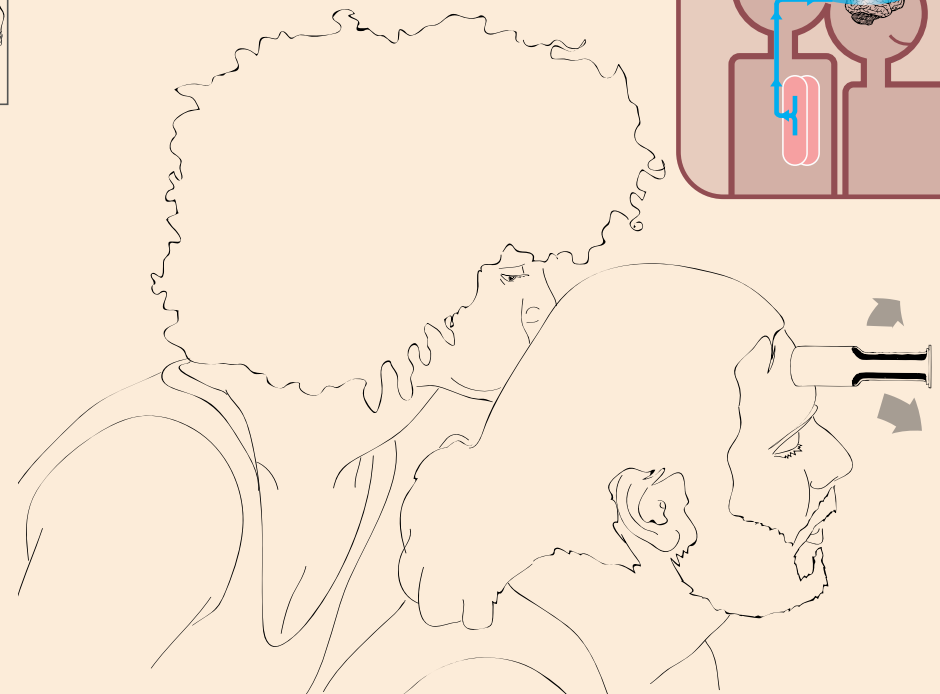
Ginette was wedging through the depths of the back of my brother's head. Neil (off-camera): "what are you looking for?" Ginette: "The hole."

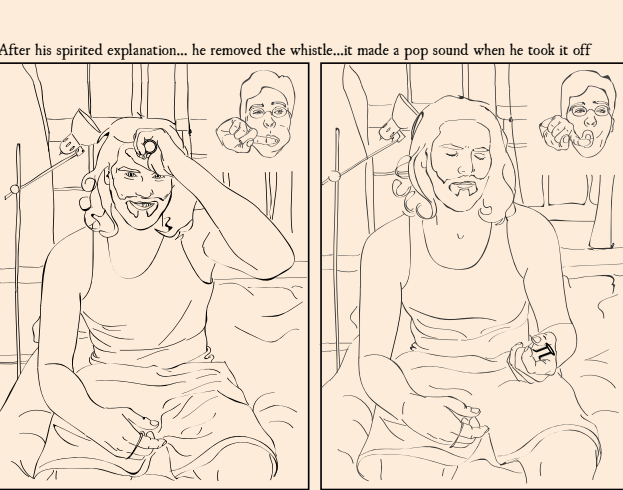
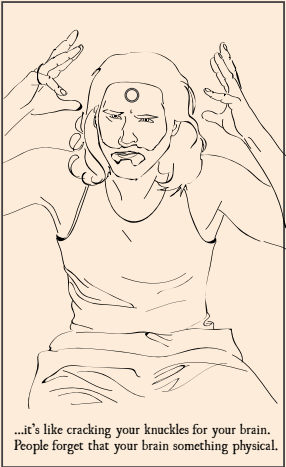
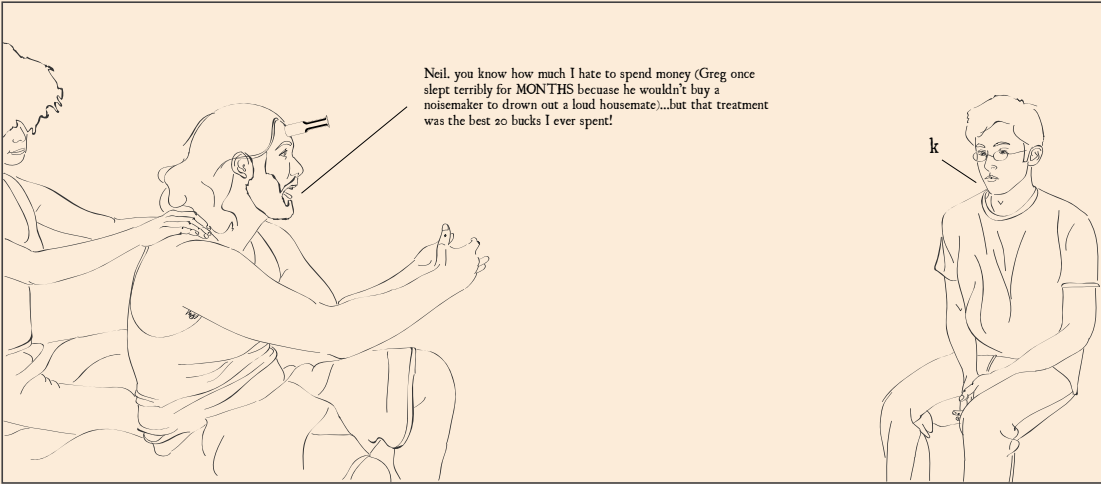
Then Ginette inhaled hugely



? The hole??

? +I=5x







*What I Did Last Summer, XI*

**STEVEN SHERRILL**  
*Paintings*

Fiction Fix



*Dear Abby I*

*Dear Abby III*





# Bernard's Nose

by Doruk Onvural

Bernard Varicose was a typical man in a typical city living what, with much deliberation and judgment, he considered a normal and fulfilling life. Through his job at the bank, he lived simply and happily. He spent nights with women about as often as, or maybe slightly less than, other men who he deemed to be of similar desirability. Not that he looked at men as desirable, but he did sometimes notice things. On weekdays he cooked one of three recipes he knew, and he ate his meals while watching his favorite sitcom. He regularly played tennis at the club, with a retired shoe salesman nonetheless, and he spent long hours in front of his computer, playing games, chatting, and surfing the Internet.

His home was a warm cottage in a family neighborhood; a single large

---

**His snoring was so endearing that when the neighbors walked by his window and heard it, they remembered to tell their spouses they loved them.**

---

room contained his bed, a brick fireplace, and a four-burner stove. The refrigerator – stocked with sausage from his mother in Germany, blocks of cheese, and beer – had on its face a magnet from the bank he worked for. He seldom drank, but he kept fresh beer because his mother had taught him

hospitality, and though he didn't care to have guests over, he did have a few in the past who requested beer when he didn't have any. He spent his nights reading science-fiction books in the oversized grandfather armchair by the fire. His grandmother had given it to his mother, and his mother gave it to him. They claimed it had been in the family for three generations, though it looked brand new. And it was mighty comfortable. The back loomed over his head and when he sat back, his feet didn't reach the floor.

There was more furniture here and there, a street painting on one wall, a window to the sidewalk on another; but the crown of the house, Bernard's pride and joy, his very reason for walking two miles every morning to the bank, was his bed. And what a bed it was! Three times the width of his body; his full length with arms raised; he couldn't fall off if he tried. The mattress was made of Swedish foam and the blanket was thick and filled with feathers. He needn't even keep the fire burning at night. He wrapped himself up

like a burrito, with his head resting on a pillow made of the same material as the mattress, and slept from when the teenagers made noise in the street to breakfast. And he often snored. His snoring made the birds outside jealous. His snoring was so endearing that when the neighbors walked by his window and heard it, they remembered to tell their spouses they loved them.

Life was simple for the banker, yes, and he liked it that way. He was comfortable and happy and the world made sense. In short, everything was as it should be.

One day Bernard awoke to discover that he couldn't breathe out of his right nostril. He realized it while lying on his left side, which was his favorite side to lie on. He wasn't sure why he wasn't able to breathe at first and nearly suffocated because he didn't believe it.

He picked at his insides, pulling out hairs with tweezers. He bought an electronic machine that hummed and trimmed the hairs but left the roots; but when he tried, he still couldn't breathe out of the nostril. He stuck his pinky inside his nose all the way, feeling the rocky interiors until he busted something and his nose flowed freely. There was nothing in there and he still couldn't breathe.

He had a great nose Bernard did, a boat of a nose. His mother said it was his grandfather's nose, and he was as proud of it as anyone is about anything. Thus losing the faculties of his right nostril was a grave predicament, and it had already begun to adversely affect his life. He couldn't play tennis anymore because he lost his breath too quickly. He couldn't even keep up with the retired old man, who didn't understand the change in his partner and took pity on him and offered to adjust the leather on his shoes. Bernard became self-conscious at work and his productivity fell. His boss had to have a talk with him, and Bernard feared he was on the verge of unemployment. Even his television series became drab. It was as if the whole world was poking fun at him. Suddenly every advertisement featured a nose. All around him people blew their noses and commented on how delightful everything smelled. He snapped at a coworker who, when they emerged from the building for lunch, breathed rather too ostentatiously, with his chest out like a cadet and his arms stretched far into the air. He couldn't even find respite in his computer game, because his character obtained a spell that allowed him to transport to any location on the map by snorting a certain type of powder.

One day, a few weeks after his nostril stopped functioning, as he was picking through his mail at the mailbox, Bernard's favorite neighbor, Martha – who was his favorite because of the authenticity and brevity of their interactions – passed him while walking her dog. She commented that she hadn't

heard him snoring recently.

"Bernard, what's wrong with you?" She looked as if she were about to laugh. "Me and Robert have been so sad. I always tell him, if you ever put a bench outside your window I would sit there for days. You know, I told Robert that if you recorded yourself snoring and played it to a girl, you'd be married in no time. He thought that was so funny. Isn't that funny?"

So they were all laughing at him. He finished every beer in his refrigerator that night and stayed up late poking and prodding his nose in different ways, toying with the idea of taking a fist, or even better, a hammer to it. He found that predicament awkward, and thought it would be easier to smash his face, nose first, into the wall. He ended up not having the courage to do anything. He passed out on his stomach on the floor and woke up the next day too addled to think clearly.

He finally gathered his pride and asked a day's leave from his boss and went to the doctor. (His stomach wasn't strong enough for him to explain to his boss the real reason why he had to go to the doctor. He said there was something wrong with his eyes, and the entire time he spoke he faced the wall, and at the end of his speech he shook hands with the plant, and even ran into the door frame on his way out for histrionics).

The doctor ran a variety of tests. He first struck his patient's knee with a hammer. Bernard felt no desire from the strike and the doctor shook his head and hummed softly and looked worried. He then checked the lymph nodes under Bernard's jaw line and put a stethoscope to his chest and back. He made him stretch his arm from the elbow in bizarre ways until Bernard had to shout, and each time the doctor hummed softly and looked worried. He put drops in his patient's eyes so they would dilate, and then he made him stare into bright lights while he hummed. The doctor clucked his tongue. He consulted books and his computer and had other doctors examine the patient as well. Finally, he shined a light into Bernard's ears down his throat, and then up his nostrils. The doctor looked grave at the end of the tests and crossed his arms and spoke in a deep voice. "I'm afraid you have a rare affliction called Pernys Pernysisifus."

Bernard looked devastated. "Is it serious?"

"It is a permanent paralysis of the right nostril. It is incredibly rare. In fact, this is only the third time I've seen it, and I've worked in Paris. I'm afraid there is nothing we can do about it now. If you had seen me a week ago – even yesterday – we could have taken you into surgery—"

"Surgery?"

"I'm afraid the only possibility, and even then it is slight—no, it can be

done. In the hands of a capable doctor, it is certain to return the functioning of the nostril. But we would have had to operate immediately. And we would have had to remove the nose."

Bernard was going to be sick.

"Just as well, the hospital doesn't carry replacement noses, I'm afraid. For liability reasons. We can order one for you, I'm sure. Or you could have found one yourself. If you are still interested, I can have the nurse give you more information..."

Lying on his right side at home in his bed, Bernard realized how much he hated lying on his right side. He could only stare at the wall, and such an ugly wall it was, plain and dry and bumpy.

He began to envy the left side of things and all the people who enjoyed them. He considered quitting his job or having the doctor sign a note that allowed him special benefits, since he was certifiably disabled now. He was disabled, wasn't

he? He covered his left nostril and inhaled until his chest hurt. He hated everything. He thought of many things—his childhood bicycle, his favorite superhero, his mother—and teared up, and while he was hating himself he also felt a little happy, because he enjoyed self-pity almost as much as he did his nose. Eventually, he fell asleep.

As he was asleep, a fly who had been watching him from the ceiling buzzed down in unsteady circles and alighted on the threshold of his right nostril. The fly was pregnant and looking for a final nesting spot, and the slimy moisture-laden empty space of Bernard's nostril felt to the fly like the swamp where her mother had birthed her. She walked to a space near the middle of that boat of a nose and laid all of the three-hundred sixty eggs in her belly, and then, as is customary in her species, she left the nest, flew to an obscure place in the room, and died.

When Bernard woke up, he felt refreshed and less upset about his nostril, though it was still dysfunctional. The world felt better, and when he looked out from his window he saw the year's first snowfall. He took this as a sign, put on his gloves and boots, and went outside.

With school being cancelled, kids were playing in the streets. They built snowy creations and then bowled them over by pull of garbage can sleds. Their parents walked the sidewalks and Bernard raised his hat to them, all of them, whether they had ever spoken before or not. The trees, with their

---

**[A]nd then, as is customary in her species, she left the nest, flew to an obscure place in the room, and died.**

---



stripped branches now sprinkled with snow, reached across the road. The air was a cool slap in the face. Bernard's tattered old boots squeaked down the street, and he stopped every now and again to sink a foot into a pile of powder. He packed snow into a snowball and tossed it up in the air to himself. He whistled old lullabies his mother had sung him. He saw Martha. She waved to him and he hit her in the chest with the snowball, causing her to take a step back, and him to laugh and say, Splendid, splendid. By and by the children stopped their game and took notice of the odd man who lived in the house their parents told them never to go to, skipping down the street. One of the shorter boys, with his front teeth missing, who had recently moved to the neighborhood, looked at the other boys and, thinking of a way to ingratiate himself, called out.

"Hey mister, why you walking like that?" he said. "Got something in your pants?"

The question startled Bernard and he began tittering maniacally. He rolled himself another snowball and packed it into a sphere and launched it at the child. It fell ridiculously short and this made him laugh more, and he began saying Splendid, splendid, splendid. He was forced to stop and lean against his knees as suddenly he couldn't breathe. He was laughing quite uncontrollably, all the time murmuring, Splendid, and gasping for air. The children soon lost interest and he was left alone in the street, recovering his senses, the same lonely man he was the night before.

When he arrived home, he shed his clothes and sat by the hearth. There was still some soup in the pot from the previous night. He ladled a bowl and drank it without a spoon in front of the fireplace. The fire spat. It warmed his front. He became a little depressed looking into the flames, thinking about the day and how fun it had been. He had never thought he would be good with children, but then how could he explain today? His neighbors were so happy to see him out of the house; they had heard he had fallen ill and stopped going to work. Their concern warmed him. They actually cared. He closed his left nostril and tried to breathe and nothing happened. No matter, he thought; starting tomorrow, I will confess to my friends—yes, my friends—about my nose, and then I'll begin dating again. He didn't speak the words and barely allowed himself to think them, but the day had evinced his true feelings toward family. He had never thought he would have a wife and children, and realizing now how much he wanted both filled him with great joy. He put another log on the flame and went to bed.

In the night a wind hissed against the door frame, the wind that came from the great N— mountain range, with its verdant fields that sloped into

rock faces that lost travelers claimed transformed into their loved ones at night. The wind traveled down streams, gathering the water's chill along the way, so that when it entered Bernard's city it was laden with memories and sadness and forced the denizens into their coats and scarves. The wind rattled the door that night, and in more than one home, the father was forced to turn up the heat. Bernard had a restful sleep, though, and didn't wake.

The fly eggs in his nose felt the change in atmosphere. They, like bubbles, began to burst, and tiny monsters emerged and shambled and lurched toward the light. They fed on any mucus they could find until they breathed their first breaths of fresh air and fell toward his pillow, flapping their embryonic wings. Their wings, being their greatest attribute, developed faster than any other aspect of their bodies, and soon they were all flying, though they knew not where they were flying to. Some innate sense that made a mother know when her baby was crying made the flies swarm to the open trash can. They fed. The night was still with their coming, the wind suddenly dead.

As day broke, Bernard rose, feeling neutral. The bliss of yesterday was gone, but not forgotten. He would have to go to work today. He made himself a breakfast of oatmeal and ate it without thought. When he stepped into the bathroom to wash, he saw himself in the mirror. The right side of his nose was pale, white, ashy, dry. The hole of his nostril was rubbed red. He covered his left nostril and inhaled. He could breathe. He covered his right nostril and inhaled, and he could breathe then, too. He ran out in the living room and looked around. The deadbolt on the front door was secure. Everything was as he had left it the previous night. He tried his nostrils again and they both worked. He stomped his foot and sang and danced about the small room. He rushed out of the house in his pajamas and breathed fresh air in both nostrils for what felt like the first time in his life. Snow had fallen in the night, and the untouched blanket shone in the morning sun. He ran out and grabbed a handful and threw it in the air. The flies felt the fresh air too, and when he opened the door, they all flew out over his head. Bernard didn't notice this and ran to where Martha was on the sidewalk with her dog. He began shouting happily and in an incoherent gabble about his nose and nostril, and she recoiled and ran, horrified. The neighbors who had seen what happened were amazed and befuddled and terribly afraid. An older woman, who had spent the night shaking in fits from the cold, was watching from her living room, and understood what she had known ever since she met Bernard—that the man had taken to following the devil.

Bernard couldn't be calmed, even when the police arrived. He was filled

with joy like a child on Christmas morning. He wanted to shout and play. He aimed to hug everyone in sight. The police were forced to detain him. When he finally could, he explained his story, and the police understood that he wasn't, as the woman who had called them had said, a devil worshiper; he was mentally ill. His story passed through the neighbors' homes, and they were all disappointed in what became of him. They all thought he was a fine man—strange, but fine. Martha, especially, took the news to heart. She felt somehow responsible, since he ran to her before he was taken away. At night she often stopped outside his window, like she used to, with her dog on the leash, and thought about his snoring. She wondered what had become of him, and if he was happy. For what it's worth, Bernard didn't think of anyone from his previous life. After speaking with the police and a city psychiatrist, he was taken to a clinic six miles outside the city, where he now resides happily, breathing out of both nostrils and watching reruns of his favorite sitcom.

# The Duck Kerfuffle

by *Kate LaDew*

Simon Bay Otter had never before heard the expression "...like being nibbled to death by ducks," but Dear Lord, he knew what it felt like. Kick-

---

**"If we just went around saying one word and expecting everyone to understand our intention, it would be a confusing world indeed."**

---

ing at the white feathers, one shiny patent leather shoe flew off, and after making an impressive somersault dove down, down, down into the lake. His left shoe. His best shoe. "Help me!" he cried.

"What's the kerfuffle?" Daisy said to May, holding out her ice cream cone.

Taking it in her long fingered hand, May licked lightly at the vanilla.

"The what?"

"Kerfuffle." Daisy narrowed her eyes in the sun, looking out over the shining water. "There's some kind of commotion."

"Commotion, sure," May shrugged. "But I don't know anything about this kerfuffle."

"It's an expression."

"An expression?"

"Well, a word."

May frowned, nose wrinkling. "One word does not an expression make."

"No," Daisy said. "No," she said again, raising her voice to be heard over the nearby shouting. "It doesn't, I suppose."

"If we just went around saying one word and expecting everyone to understand our intention, it would be a confusing world indeed."

"Yes," Daisy agreed. She wished she had never spoken.

"That man," May said, pointing. "That's the commotion. Maybe kerfuffle – I couldn't say – but definitely commotion."

"They mean the same, really."

"Do you see him?"

"What?"

"Who."

"What?"

"Who," May said, ice cream dripping. "It's a who. A man. The one by the lake."

"Is there?" Daisy said. She wished she had used some other word. Both times.

"There is," May said, watching Simon Bay Otter throw clumps of grass at the flock of furiously flitting ducks. "Just one." Simon hurled his right shoe, sending feathers and himself tumbling into the lake. "Quite a commotion indeed." Two socked feet lay on the shore, pulled up and down by angry beaks. "It seems he's being nibbled to death by ducks."

"Aren't we all," Daisy said.

# The Widow

by Sam Diaz

## I.

Vanessa learned at an early age never to pick up the phone when it rings. It could be anyone—this was before they had heard of Caller ID—a stalker, the tax people, a relative from Florida, a pervert, a friend of her father’s, the Church, or God-forbid someone important. That is why her mother thought it best that she not pick up the phone at all.

But she was alone in the kitchen and her mother was too busy to hear her calling and she was thirteen anyways, practically a grown woman—this was a week after a body fell from the sky. She lifted the phone, ivory and with thin veins like an eggshell put to the light, and said:

“How may I help you?”

“Hello, can I please speak to Miss Jackie DeLaRosa?” asked the voice on the phone—a man’s.

“Who is this?”

“I’m sorry. I work for Cruise Control. Is Miss DeLaRosa available?”

“Yeah, hold on.” Vanessa tripped over her straw-colored sandals going upstairs.

Her mother was with Vanessa’s grandmother in the bedroom at the end of the hall.

“Nessie! Duck! Cover!” said her brother, his face hidden behind a food tray. Their grandmother lay on the bed in her light pink nightgown, her feet pointing outward. She was having her toenails clipped. With each loud click, a hard piece of nail would ricochet across the room, and the lines on her grandmother’s face would crease with laughter. Vanessa’s little brother had already been stung once.

“Ma, there’s a man on the phone.”

“You picked up the phone?” Her mother lowered the nail clipper. “Who was it?”

“He’s still waiting. He said he’s from Cruise Control.”

“Cruise Control?”

“What the fuck is Cruise Control?” asked her grandmother, who had learned and perfected English curse words only recently.

Her mother hurried out of the room and her brother, Will, poked his head out from behind the tray.

In the kitchen, her mother lifted the phone from the table and went to the sink without stopping. Vanessa stood by her, listening.

“Hello? Who is this?” asked her mother. She pointed to the rag that was drying by the window. Vanessa took it to her, guessing the man’s responses.

“Yes, that’s me.” She turned the faucet on and rubbed coarse cereal grains off of a bowl.

“What?” She turned the faucet off.

“What did I win?”

Vanessa’s grandmother made her way into the kitchen.

“Jackie, come on. Do my other foot. It feels weird when only one is clipped.”

“You have to be kidding? I’ve never won anything before.”

“What you won?” asked her grandmother.

“A cruise!” Into the phone she asked: “How long is it? Two weeks!”

Jackie sat down at the table, holding the phone with both her hands.

“So, you said it’s two weeks long, and I can bring one person? Okay.”

She grinned at Vanessa and Vanessa’s grandmother, also named Vanessa.

“120 dollars? For what? I didn’t know I’d have to pay taxes.

“No meals? How much would that cost?” She frowned at the elder Vanessa and shook her head.

“Why did you tell me I won a free trip if I have to pay all that?” The man on the phone gave a long answer.

“No, I don’t think so. Thanks anyway.” She put the phone back in its place. “I knew it was too good to be true.”

“What did he say?” asked Vanessa’s grandmother.

“He said I would have to pay \$799 for food, and pay taxes too.”

“That’s bullshit. Nothing is ever free. I had a coupon for a free two-liter soda,” she said, lifting her foot onto a chair and rubbing her big toe. “I carried that shit all the way to the lady at the cashier. She told me I had to pay 32 cents for the tax. I told her then it’s not free anymore. I left that shit right there and came home.”

Vanessa slammed the window shut to keep the drafts of air out.

“I wouldn’t have been able to take two weeks off work anyway,” Jackie said. “Will, get me the clippers.”

“We’re not gonna go on a boat?” asked Will, poking his head out from underneath the table.

“No sweetie. Get the clippers?”

“No, then her nails will get in our food!” He ran back under the table.

## II.

She remembered it was a blue box, set in between the arcade and the food court. They were celebrating her cousin’s birthday. From the coin machine, she watched each person on their way to the bathroom or the soda fountain stop and look at it. The other children did not spare a glance at it, with the lights of the arcade blinking and beckoning them elsewhere. But the parents always stopped. There was a large picture pasted on it—she knew because she had examined it closely herself. The picture was of a large cruise ship, set in a smooth blue-green ocean. They went up to it in turn, in a broken line, like a procession of lethargic people walking up to receive Communion. They each signed the small blue piece of paper asking for their name and address and number, in return for a chance to be a winner. Her mother, her aunt, her uncle, her older cousin, her second uncle—all of them took a chance at it.

## III.

Even at a young age, Vanessa’s mother, Jackie, decided things her own way. Way back when little girls could still skip the sidewalk alone, she snuck into the market store with a bag of her mother’s Sunday bingo chips in her pocket. Checking first that the manager was busy, she tipped her square-toed slippers past the cashiers. The red chips clinked together softly as she swirled her small fingers in the bag. She took one and slipped it into the slot of the gumball machine, where the penny should have gone. Again and again until the pockets of her pants bulged with candy. It was a good day if she got at least three green ones—her favorite. At home she would eat them all at once and throw water balloons from the roof with her sister. And afterwards, she went to high school and dropped out and met a man and married him because he ate lobster on Thanksgiving and drank imported beer.

## IV.

The next day, the phone rang again, and Vanessa did not answer it because she was taking a bath, though even from the bathroom she heard it ring six times before her mother picked it up. She found out who had called

during dinner.

They were all at the table again, eating and watching the television, which was a small cube, like a bread box. Her mother was scooping the last of the rice out of the pot on the stove.

“Ma, Christina called,” her mother said to her grandmother. Christina was Vanessa’s aunt.

“What she wanted, me? You told her I was sleeping?” Her grandmother continued eating.

“No. You won’t believe what happened. Those Cruise Control people called her and told her she won.”

“Her too?”

“Yes! And when he told her what she had to pay, she told him to kiss her ass!”

They both laughed. When Will started to laugh too, his mother slapped his hand.

“And then check this out. She had put Miguel’s name in that box too, at the party. And they called him.”

“They called him all the way in Florida?”

She nodded. “He thought it was a joke. I think they called everyone who put their number in.”

“What assholes. Did Miguel ask for me?”

“He didn’t call me. He called Christina.”

Vanessa moved the food around her plate and changed the channel.

## V.

Her grandmother learned at an early age not to believe in free things. When she was fifteen, she married a boy who fished. She thought that the marriage itself would allow her to be a woman and do what she wanted. She knew she would have certain responsibilities, but she thought she would be able to spend most of her time watching the waves and picking the ripest fruit from the gardens, like sweet avocado that you have to really cut into, and mangoes that taste better after soaked in cool water, and other things her mother had liked. But she was wrong. She learned that the less you have, the more you have to pay. When she became pregnant with her first child a year later, she learned there was a price even for that blessing. And when her husband left overseas and sent her small checks from his job at a hotel in Manhattan, she learned that even that money came with a price, namely the emptiness of her home and the swelling of her belly, pregnant

again. When she showed up at his hotel unannounced—her children, her girls, hanging from her thin arms, and seasick from the travel—she learned that reunion, too, had a price: her own memory.

## VI.

Vanessa was playing checkers with her brother while her mother sewed a hole in one of her old skirts.

“I wish I could get a new one,” Vanessa told her mother.

“Maybe for Christmas.”

Vanessa’s grandmother came into the living room and sat on the couch.

“Come on, give me it. You can’t sew for shit.”

“Ma, I got it. I’ve been sewing her clothes since she was a baby,” her mother protested. “Tell her, Vanessa.”

“It’s just going to break apart again if you do it.”

“Well if we had a sewing machine...”

“Then call the Cruise Control people and ask them for one.”

Her mother shook her head. “I still haven’t gotten over that. You always told me that nothing’s free. I’ve always known.”

“Then why did you do it?” asked Vanessa, looking up from the game.

Her mother shook her head again.

“Hurry up, it’s your turn,” said her brother.

“Why did you enter a contest for something free if there’s no such thing?” she asked again.

Her mother gave a sort of grunt or sigh.

“It’s not even a big thing anyway,” said her grandmother. “Who the hell wants to spend two weeks on a boat? Who goes on cruises? Rich people? I wouldn’t go on a fucking cruise. Unless Tom Cruise is on it. He was one of the first people I saw in the movies. They were so cheap back then,” said her grandmother.

Her mother’s thread broke. She went to the bathroom, where she kept a couple spools.

“Eew! Who did number two? Damn, it’s the worst thing I’ve ever smelled.”

Will burst out laughing, kicking the checkerboard and scattering the pieces across the floor.

“That was you, Will,” her mother called from the bathroom, her hand over her nose. “What did you eat?”

He grew red.

“Don’t worry Willie, everybody’s shit stinks!” shouted her grandmother, shaking with laughter too.

## VII.

Miguel was Vanessa’s grandmother’s American boy, her third child, and when he was seven she gave him away. She thought it would be better to give him away rather than have the government take him away later. She could not care for all three children, so she sent him packing with his little toys to her sister-in-law—a well off girl who married a white man and wanted a boy of her own. Vanessa’s grandmother told her in Spanish: take him from me; he’ll be better off with you. And her sister-in-law smiled and said she would take good care of him, the best. And when she recounted the conversation to her white husband, he threw a cup across the table and asked what the fuck she was thinking. So she recounted the conversation—again, but this time in the original Spanish. He still wouldn’t understand, although he grew to like the boy, and when Miguel was seventeen and ran off, he was the most upset.

## VIII.

It started years ago, small cracks in the space above the hanging showerhead, bubbles in the paint bursting, pieces of plaster sprinkling down into the tub. There was nobody to fix it. Eventually it became a large hole that Vanessa’s mother covered with black construction paper, concerned that the people in the apartment next door could peer through it. The morning before the phone rang, Jackie was taking a shower and had the urge to peel back the construction paper and scream: “I know you’re watching me, you pervert!”

When Jackie was her daughter’s age, she went with her mother and her sister to visit her mother’s friend, a man who belched loudly but had a big house that her mother loved. The man had a lot of his other friends over who drank and played music. They stayed at the big house overnight, Jackie and her sister, Christina, sharing the bed in a guest room. That morning, they each took turns taking a bath. Jackie enjoyed the silver taps on which she could see her reflection, and the bright tiles made her smile so much that she caressed them with her hands and placed her head against them. But then she spotted the holes, the three holes in the tiled wall, the holes the size of nails. When she looked through one and saw eyes peering back,

she ran out the bathroom. Her sister's hair was still wet. She dressed and found her mother and told her, but her mother didn't understand, so she spoke in Spanish until her mother understood. Her mother sent the two girls out the front door—the house was quiet now—and told them to run to the bus stop and catch the first bus home because they should know their way home by now.

“But why aren't you coming?” the girls asked.

“I will. I'll meet you at home.”

And so the sisters sprinted down the pavement holding hands, turning to see their mother still at the door watching them, until finally the woman twisted herself from their gaze and went back into the quiet house. At the bus stop they waited, but the bus didn't show. When at last they spotted it from far away, they also noticed their mother walking towards them, happy to see that her daughters were alright. She saw the bus coming and tried to run but her ankle was hurt and the foot never felt right to her again—but never mind, the bus driver waited and the three of them rode back to the apartment together.

## IX.

Vanessa heard that the police came for the lady on the twelfth floor. They knocked so hard that the peephole cover unhinged and fell. The woman knew it was them immediately, and she phoned her friend in the apartment above as they had planned. She rushed to open the window. The policemen were forcing the door open. Her friend in the apartment directly above her threw a rope down. Crouching now on the ledge of the window, she grabbed onto the rope—thin cords braided together like a girl's pig-tail—and she began to climb up to the thirteenth floor. The bricks scraped against her elbows, and it was harder than she thought it would be, but she had to do this. A hand from above stretched out to help her up and the cord was slippery and she thought she really was too heavy, but she had to, and soon, before they could catch her. But again, the cord was too slippery and she lost hold and fell to the ground with a crack, as if a stone had been thrown from the roof. When the police finally burst through the door, they saw the open window in the bedroom but ignored it and searched the apartment. At least that's the way Vanessa's grandmother told it when they crossed the spot on her way to school.

## X.

Miguel had a dirt-stained knee again. The stain was on his jeans, so he took them off, and then washed the spot in the kitchen sink. The day was sweaty, and he shouldn't have been wearing jeans anyway. He was with a Cubana chick in an apartment not far from the beach.

“Who was that on the phone?” she asked, calling out from the bedroom the only way she knew how—in Spanish.

“Just some motherfuckers.”

Ever since he was a child and his father had taught him to tie his shoes, Miguel had the bad habit of genuflecting whenever he tied them. Because of this, the right knee of all his pants always had a grass stain, or a small scar, or a circle of dirt, or a hole caused from chaffing against the sidewalk. His mother had tried to scold him out of doing it, but when he left her his aunt thought it was precious.

There weren't any drugs left in the apartment, and Miguel wasn't sure if he wanted any—he seemed to have a curious immunity to addiction.

“You want anything from outside?” he asked, pouring a glass of the Florida orange juice he had crossed the country for. She told him, and he left, almost forgetting to put his pants back on.

Later that night, he was on his way back to the apartment with his hands in his pockets when suddenly a man—masked—jumped out from behind a dumpster with a knife.

“Give me all your shit motherfucker,” he told Miguel.

Miguel raised his empty hands.

“I don't have shit.”

The man patted his pockets and felt nothing—Miguel had spent all his money, and the drugs were shoved in his shoe.

“Fucking motherfucker,” he said and slashed his blade.

Miguel jumped back but the knife grazed his arm, and the man ran back into the alley. Clutching his arm, dripping blood—but not very much—he staggered, not so much hurt as confused. When he reached the end of the block, he saw something shining on the pavement. He bent down slowly and picked it up—a quarter. There was a pay phone by the bus stop, so he thought he might as well use it. It was face up, so it was lucky. He called one of his sisters, and spoke to her even as his bus rolled by and his cut became a small dry disk of blood on his arm to wash off later.

## XI.

Vanessa's great-grandmother is buried in a hilly field of green grass on

the outskirts of the village where she spent her life. Sometimes the sun heats her gravestone so bad that if a bird rests on it, the bird will hop and flutter away angrily—even though you would think it would be used to the burn of things left out in the tropic sun too long. The day she died, the villagers mourned for nine days. The first day they laid her out on a table and wrapped her in a blanket she had sewn together herself. They did the rosary while her daughter Vanessa sat in the corner peeling a banana. The second day they carried her—still on the table—to the place by the hill where some men had dug a hole the night before. The body was lowered, and their voices grew terrible as they cried and prayed and sang. Later that night, they hacked the table to pieces and burned it. They did the rosary seven more times for seven more days. It was a torment for the villagers to do this, but they wouldn't have to do it again for a long time. People rarely bothered to die in the village. The next time they had to congregate by the hill, wildflowers had already grown around her gravestone, which was so nestled into the ground they almost thought it was the stump of a tree that had taken root.

## XII.

It was a week later, and the family had just left the beach with hellish burns, sore backs, and sand underneath their toenails. They would not be home for another hour and a half since the train was slow. There were missionary folk by the entrance to the platform. One of them cornered the family as they dragged their summer luggage across the dirt-and-gum floor. Vanessa's grandmother was a ways behind them, carrying a yellow pail filled with lotion bottles and a banana. The man that approached them was tall and black and needed to shave. He asked Vanessa's mother if they wanted the Lord's blessing.

"Oh, of course," she told him, setting her umbrella aside.

He made them stand in a circle—him, Vanessa, her mother, her brother. When her grandmother caught up, she joined the circle without a word, perhaps too tired to speak. Vanessa was stifling laughter, watching as dozens of people rushed past them with odd glances. Her mother gave her a look.

"Heavenly Father, and Our Savior Jesus Christ, bless this beautiful family," he intoned, eyes closed, as her brother shook off a spot of sand that was caked onto his thigh.

"Give them the gift of Your Grace, and Mercy, and Unconditional Love." The floor trembled as trains above and beneath them grinded past. Ahead,



If Then

a woman had to carry her stroller up the stairs by herself because she was alone; behind, a man in a suit charging the entrance dropped his sunglasses and didn't notice.

The missionary made more of these invocations until: "And you Boy, what do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked Will, who looked at his mother as she smiled despite her aching face.

"A firefighter," he said.

Vanessa had spent too much time in the water because she could still feel the push and pull of the waves on her waist as though she had never left, and her heart dipped as though she was being lifted and dropped. Her grandmother had told her that if she cursed at the waves and really got them angry, then they would swell and knock her down. She almost did this right then, and would have been swept away had the man not woke her.

"What about you, Honey? What do you want to be?"

She said the first thing that came to mind: "A doctor." He smiled with

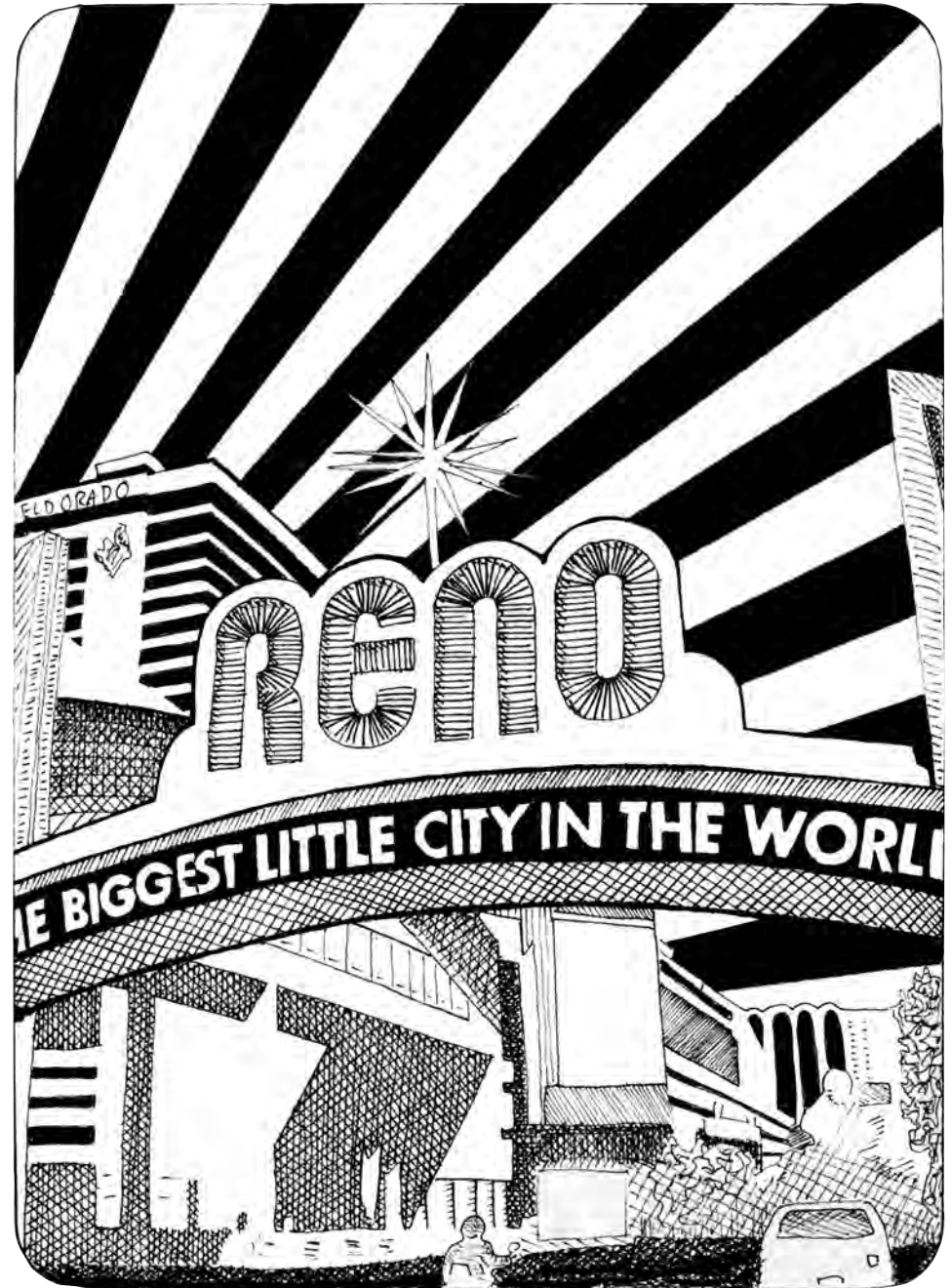


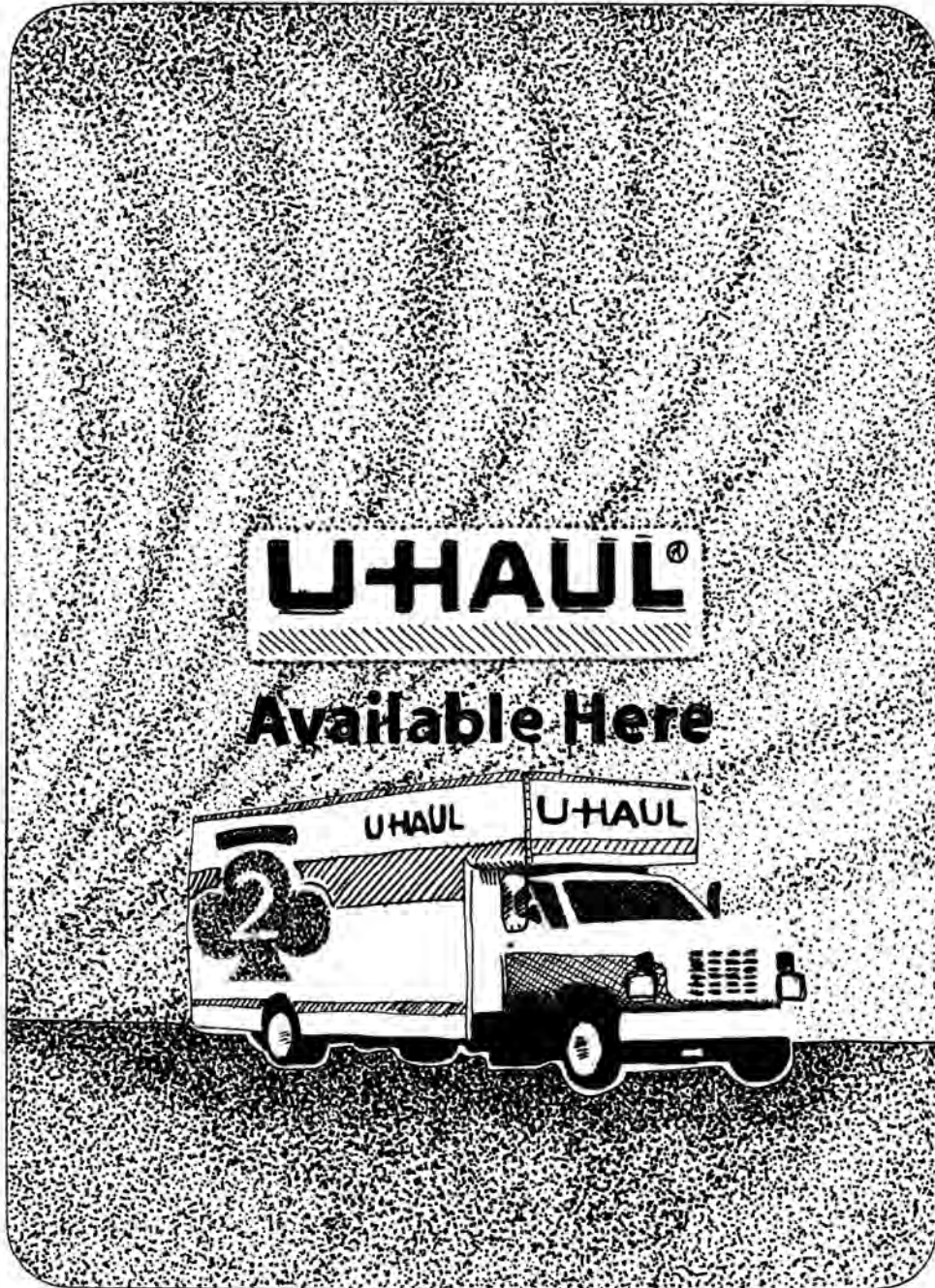
his gold teeth, blessed the two children, and said that it was God's will.

XIII.

It was a sort of fantasy of hers, a small one at first, but one that grew unbearable inside her. In it, Vanessa is romanced by a young and handsome man who is older than her, but only by a little. And she discovers that he has the most beautiful, rich singing voice, a rare treasure to find in a man. And he is in love with her and sings to her every day. That was how it started, the fantasy she spun when she was alone, usually in the bath. But it refused to stop. One day, they are walking in a park and the moonlight is pretty across his dark hair. And suddenly a man—masked—jumps from the bushes to rob them. Her lover refuses and, defending her, is shot in the chest. But Vanessa soon discarded this—surely this could not be how it ends. No, instead, her lover becomes famous for his majestic voice, so famous that she is the envy of all, because he marries her and the wedding is big and he sings and spins her the entire night. And for a few years they live in a rich bliss. But then it is after one of his concerts and they are walking together to their limousine—for she, his muse and strength, is always present at his concerts. They are whispering to each other when he is assassinated, shot in the head, by a man angry and jealous of the love that flew from her husband's voice. And imagine, she is inconsolable at the funeral. I can't live without him, she tells her mother-in-law. Why? Why? And she collapses during the service. It did not matter to her, almost floating in the tub, that it was just a fantasy, and that the water was flowing over the rim and trickling across the broken bathroom tiles, for these things could not match her deep anguish over her husband's death, or stop her savage sobbing—the sound of it barely concealed by the rushing water. And who could not pity her, one so young, who will have to live with this anguish until the end of her days, always and forever a widow.

*Selections from* **Reno**  
*by David Higginbotham*

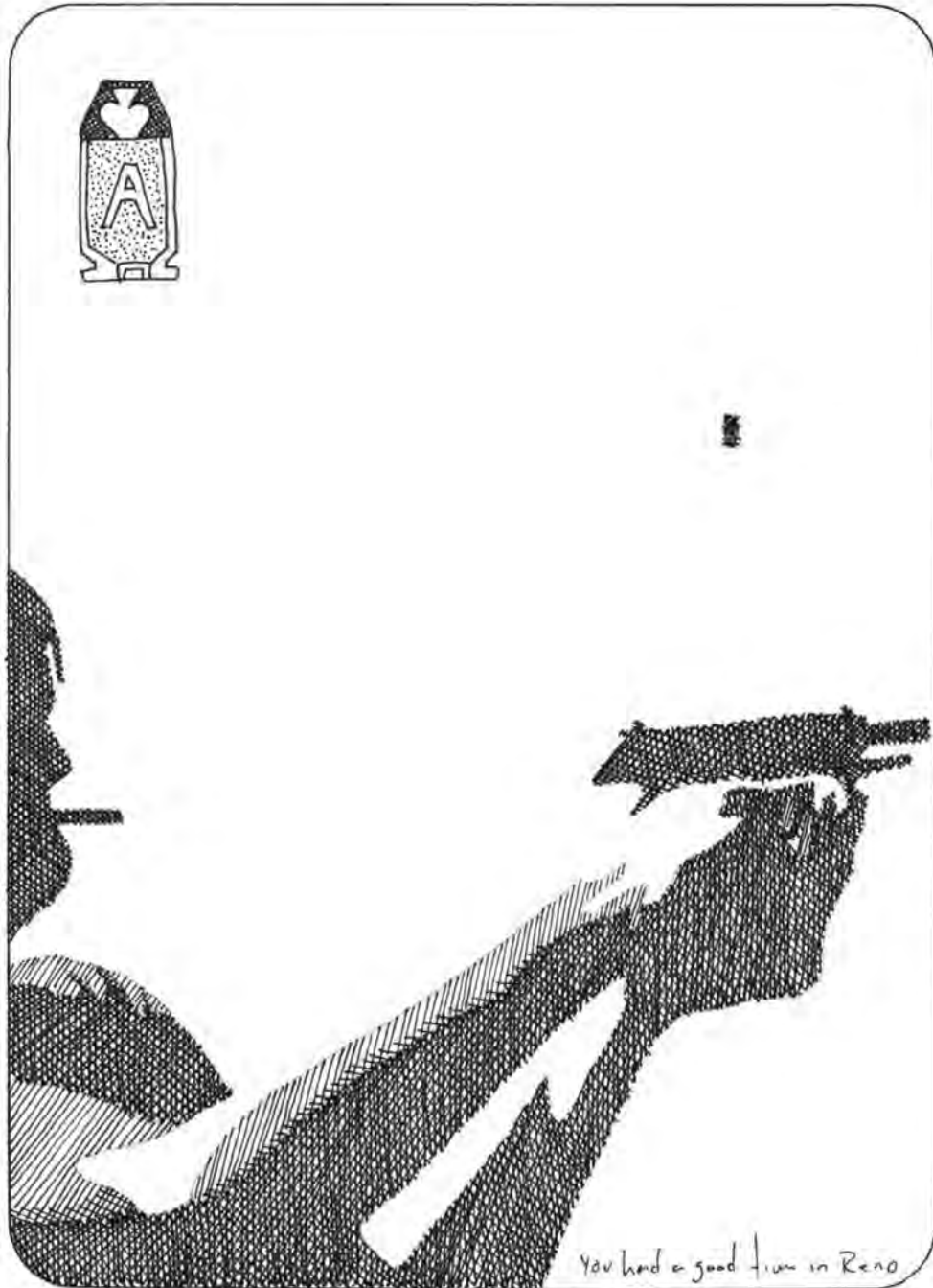




## Note to Self

Do not ignore the signs for highway 93. They will not let you drive across Hoover dam unless they can see everything you are carrying. Since you are nomadic, forever wandering west, you will fill the U-Haul to the point of absurdity and they will place their hands on their Smith & Wessons and whistle through their teeth.

Nope, they say you are going to have to drive around. This, you know, in a U-Haul adds at least four hours to your drive as you have to go back to Kingman, head over and up highway 95 and find your way into Vegas at dawn, which is the worst light for that fat city.



You Had a Great Time

in Reno, once,  
 many years ago.  
 The details are  
 somewhat obscured  
 by the Vaseline'd  
 lens of memory  
 softening hard  
 edged analytical  
 focus. But it's here.

If you hunt it,  
 camouflage yourself  
 in a Ted Nugent concert  
 T-shirt, sleeveless, red flame  
 panty shaped helmet cover,  
 black chaps and a nice pair  
 of tennis shoes,  
 you should have no trouble.

This is the optimistic Promise

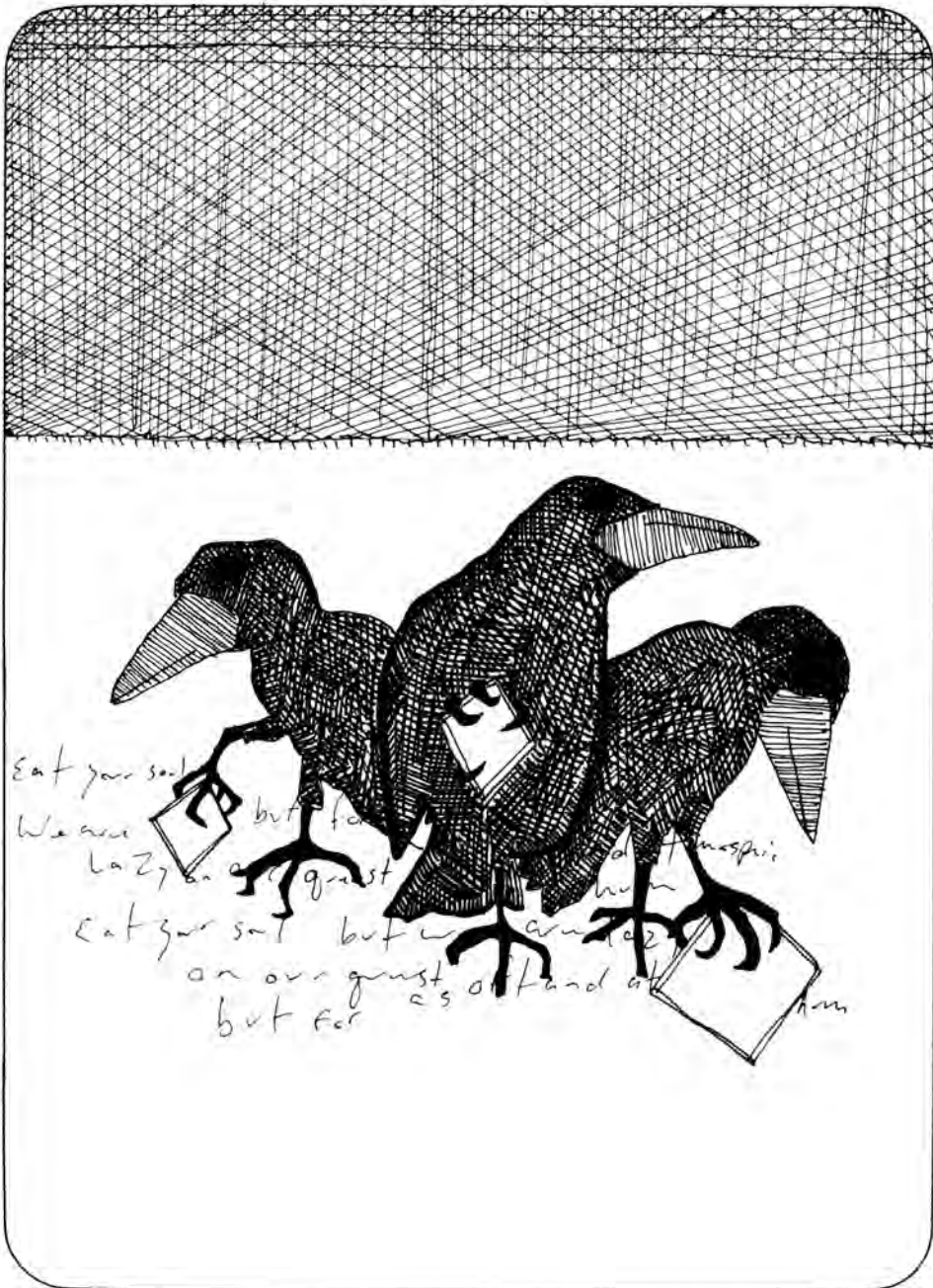
Sun  
Outside  
Burns  
through  
Layered  
ether.



You are ready

First Pages

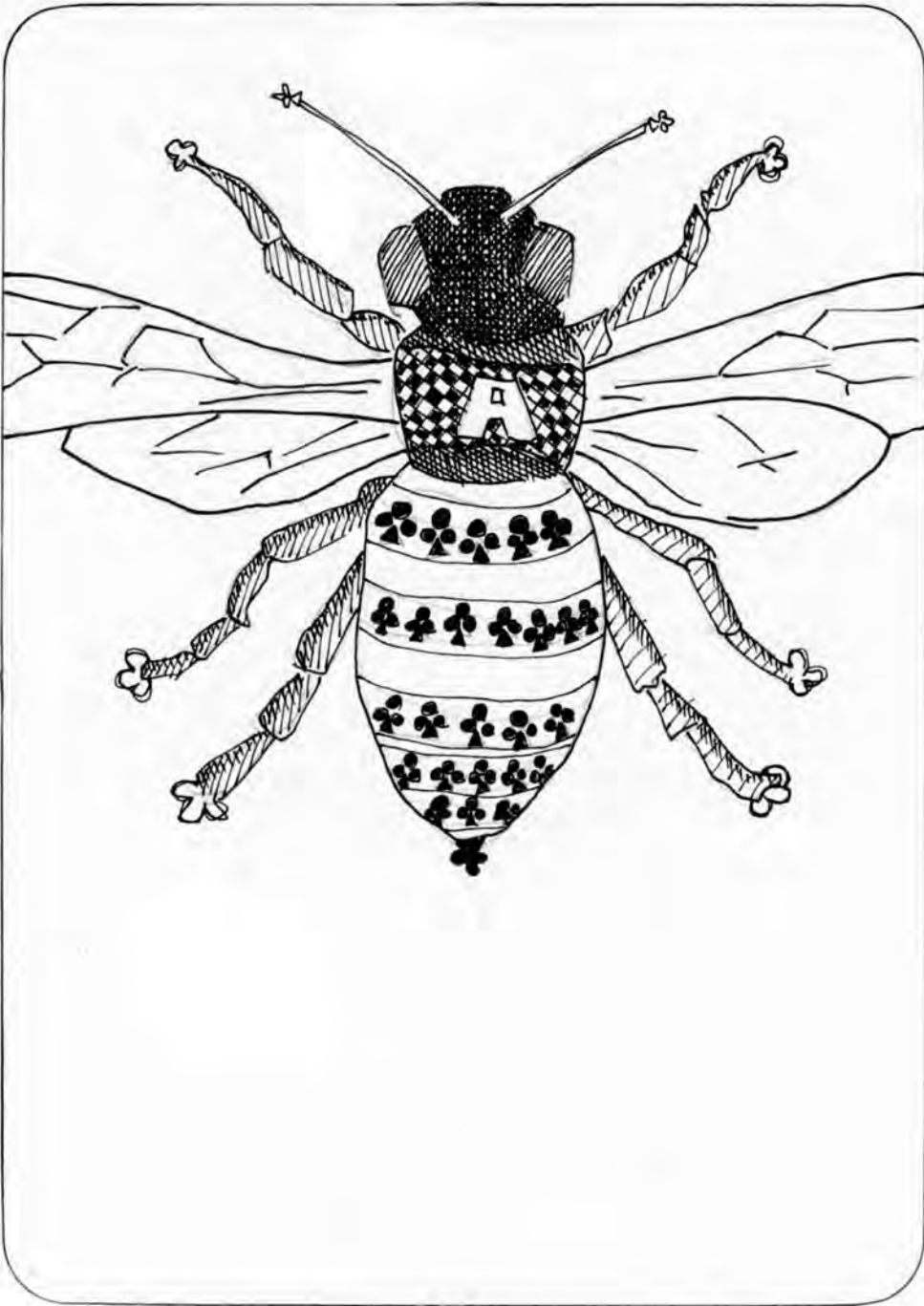
too often laden  
with the optimistic  
Promise of fulfillment  
Window Card  
welcome to my world                    this book  
is best read over a cup  
pale stale casino coffee shop  
brown lipped Pyrex pot  
offered one last time in hopes of a tip  
that isn't coming the sun outside  
burns through layered ether                    but here  
hiding in the heart of the biggest little city  
time is measured by shift change faces  
by their insinuations    you  
have had enough    or not enough  
that you are ready



Reno is, After All, a Promise.

When the sirens, grown old and fat on the souls of sailors, retired, they moved to Reno. Their songs silenced now but for a soft and atmospheric hum.

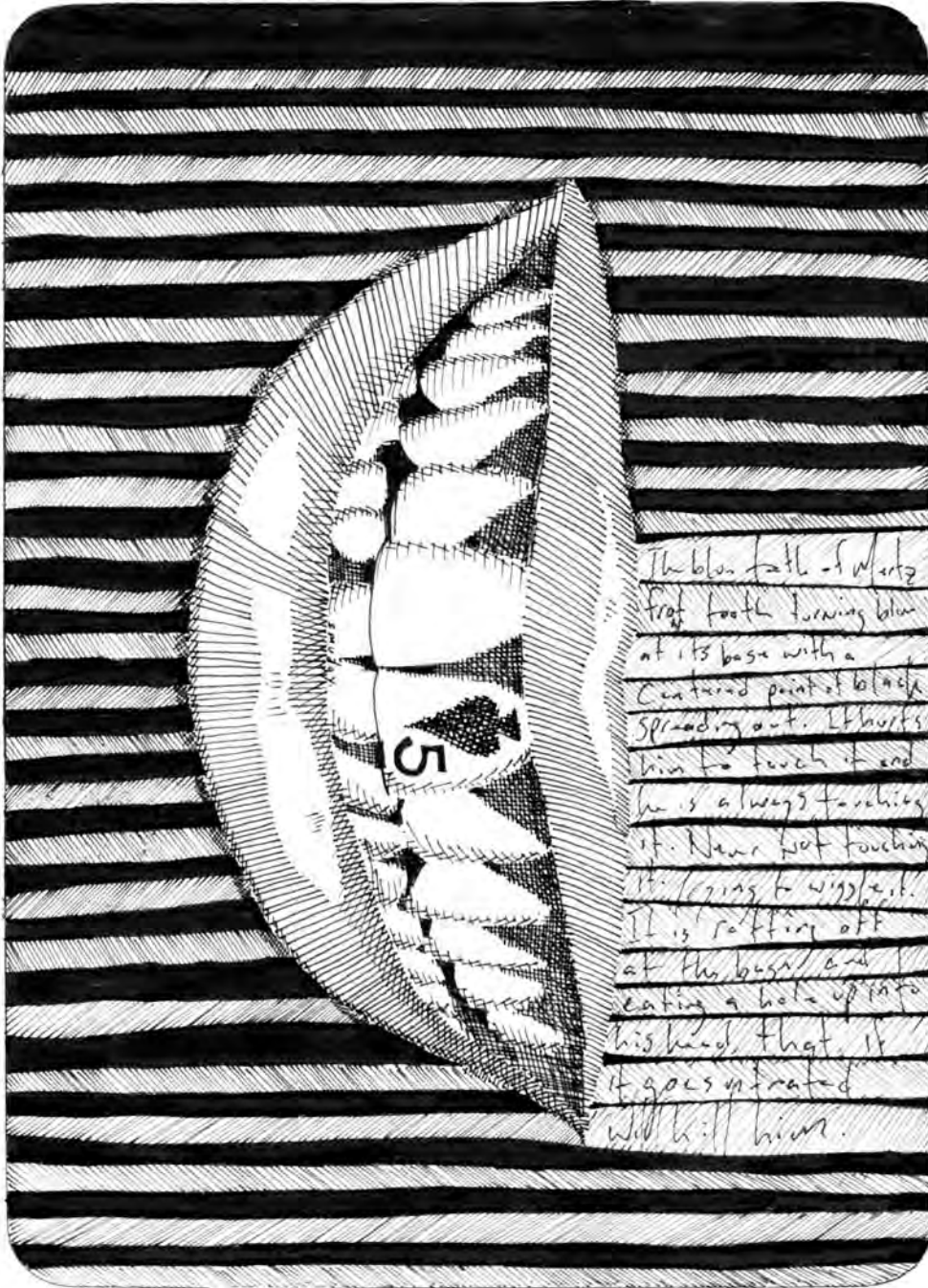
The three dangerous bird women would eat your soul if it wasn't for the effort. But we are lazy on our quest and decide to stay anyhow.



## The Crickets

I'm told, once saved  
 a people. The Saints,  
 having survived a long  
 march of determined  
 self exile, and having  
 the good sense to stop  
 before they got to Reno,  
 were set upon by gulls  
 who mistook the great  
 salt sink for an inland sea.

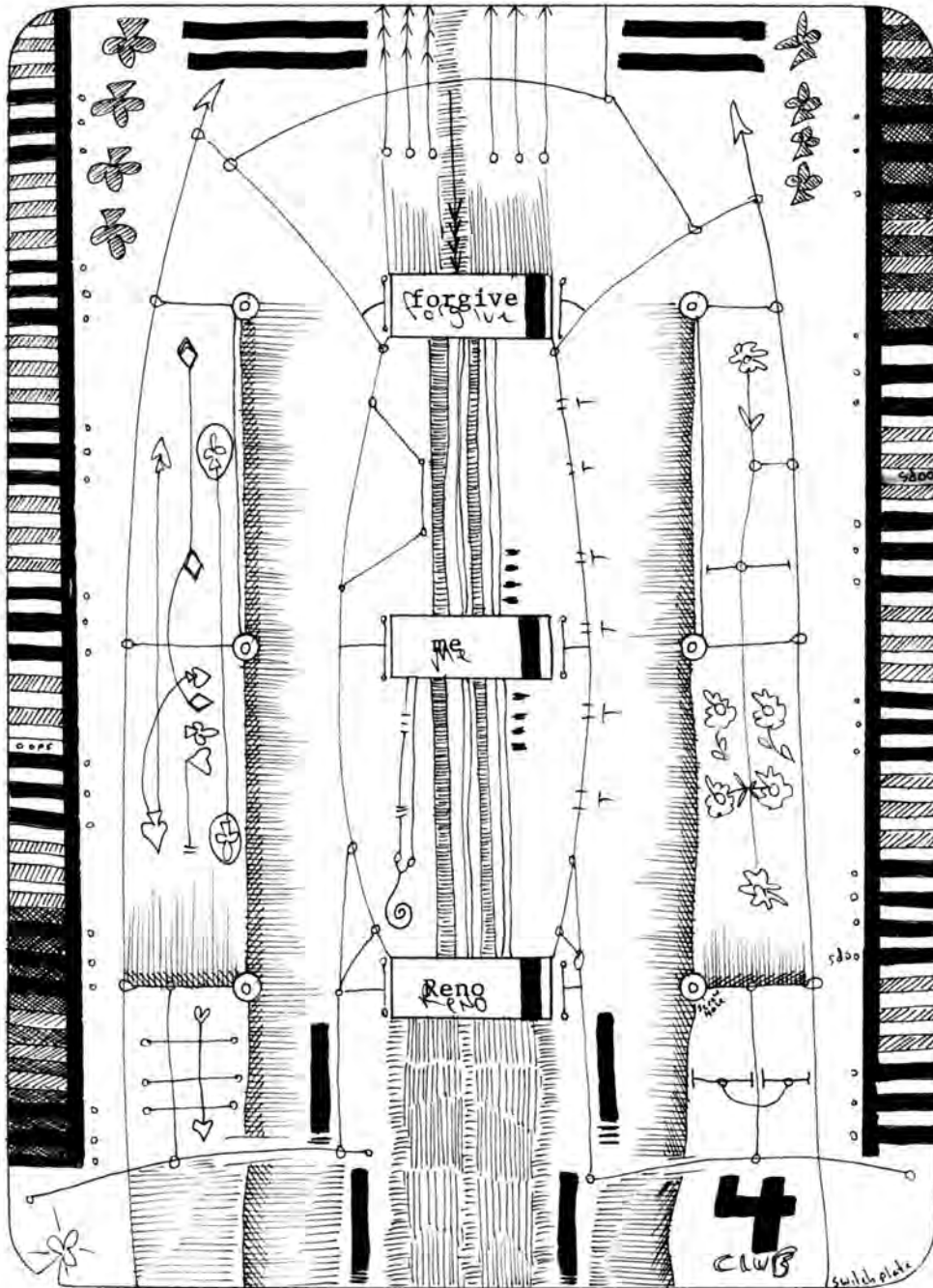
These crickets, besieging  
 swarms, beset  
 these tired travelers,  
 almost deafened them  
 with their incessant song.  
 The Saint's iron wagon  
 rims slipped on the smash.  
 But the gulls, the insatiable  
 gulls, found sustenance  
 in the thick thoraxes  
 of the crickets. And that  
 is why our neighbors  
 are known by their sign,  
 the bee.



On This Page I'm Supposed

to write something about the blue  
 tooth of Mertz. I am a cliché. I journaled  
 about the pendulum swing of the incisor  
 but I'll be damned if I can remember  
 where. I wrote about the tooth.  
 And would you believe me  
 if I told you the kid was really gifted?  
 That such kids can crawl out of Spark's  
 trailer parks and impress the ivy leagued  
 elite hide behind their regalia,  
 who hold out for better job offers?





Forgive Me, Reno

I have judged you. This is not right.  
 I have stood in your midst, indistinguishable,  
 breathing your air, drinking your water.  
 I have brought forth life in you.

I have come through the idiot end  
 with a four flush and put all of my hopes  
 on fifth street.

I walk among you like one apart, a judgmental  
 prophet singing the song of American  
 destruction, the fall. Salvation  
 gambled by our hands. My hands. Not yours.

My tells are too transparent. This is my crying  
 call. I have coveted. I have stolen. I have killed.

# A Woman Unfinished

*by Janae Green*

She remembers being a woman, unfinished, sun-bathing in a blue dress on top of an old pickup bed. The strikes on her legs are burned from twigs. The once-young man is upset about the stains on her dress. Norma thinks if she makes less sound that his eyes will change, but his blackness still gapes.

“You're so beautiful,” the once-young man never says.

Norma watches the woman with swept-back hair. A smile forms with an uneven bend beneath the woman's crooked nose, a smile which never moves when she speaks or laughs. There's not even a wrinkle. Vodka spills from the woman's glass in small pools on the floor. Between her knees, another drink will float the lime that's fallen there. She cradles the wedge in blue fabric, unnoticed.

When the roar of the midnight crowd draws the thigh-man to stand, he pulls Norma from her view of the woman. His fingers scratch Norma's skin. Heels climb the benches from beside. Denim and lingerie dance around them.

“You're so beautiful,” the thigh-man says.

When the sun-dust escapes through the bedside window, Norma peels her face from the pillowcase. She wakes with the night before smeared over the bridge of her nose, with black stains on her skin and in the crust of her eye-ducts. The thigh-man hates Norma when she cries and he's gone, again. His place in the sheets is only warm from Norma's sleep. There's more saliva on the bed than on her tongue; her breath emits the odor of stale, unbrushed teeth. She walks to the bathroom and lays a cheek against the cold tile. Her nose pulls the dust and hairs that rest beneath the cabinets, a place where even the spiders have moved from.

# Biographies

**Sam Diaz** studies writing at the University of Chicago and his work has appeared in several small literary journals and anthologies. He has written and self-published a book, but his mother bought the only copy for three dollars, and is unwilling to resell. He may be contacted at: [samdiazwriting@gmail.com](mailto:samdiazwriting@gmail.com)



**Neil Dvorak** has been drawing since the age of five. While reading *Love & Rockets* some twenty-odd years later it dawned (read:exploded) on him that comics was the medium he'd been searching for. Neil continues to explore this marvelous

medium with *Easy Pieces* while working in the animation and film industries in New York City. Please see his comic at: [www.easypiecescomic.com](http://www.easypiecescomic.com)

**Gene Fehler** plays about 80 baseball and softball games a year. The most recent of his 13 published books is *When Baseball Was Still King* (McFarland & Company, 2012). For more information, see [www.genefehler.com](http://www.genefehler.com) or [www.baseballpoet.com](http://www.baseballpoet.com).

**Anne Germanacos'** work has appeared in over eighty literary journals and anthologies. Her collection of short stories, *In the Time of the Girls*, was published by BOA Editions. She and her husband live in San Francisco and on Crete. [www.annegermanacos.com](http://www.annegermanacos.com)

**Janae Green** studies Creative Writing at Washington State University. Her work has appeared in print, regularly, with coffee stains. She hates the smell and won't drink it, but its okay as an ice cream or yogurt.



**David Higginbotham** is a poet and artist who lives in central Virginia, where he teaches writing at Hampden-Sydney College.

**Kate LaDew** is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, NC with her cat, Charlie Chaplin. Kate is currently working on her first novel.

**William LaPage** is the author of the short fiction collection, *The Vague Terrain*. His latest collection is due out later this year from Studio Pulp. He lives in Austin, Tx.

"Bernard's Nose" is **Doruk Onvural's** first published work. He is a 22-year-old writer living in Nashville, Tennessee. Follow his work at [dorukonvural.tumblr.com](http://dorukonvural.tumblr.com). There are many stories still to tell.

**Jon Pearson** is a writer, cartoonist, speaker, and international creative thinking consultant. He has worked with more than one million people and one thousand schools and businesses worldwide. Secretly, though, Jon is still five years old and believes in the genius of ordinary things. He believes that love will conquer everything and that courage, creativity, and caring just might save us all. He writes for the same reason he played with his food as a kid: to make the world a better place. [jonstuartpearson@gmail.com](mailto:jonstuartpearson@gmail.com).

## Fiction Fix

**Steven Sherrill** has been making trouble with words since 8th grade, when he was suspended from school for two weeks for a story he wrote. He dropped out of school in the 10th grade, ricocheted around for years, eventually earning a Welding Diploma from Mitchell Community College, which circuitously led to an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.



He's been making visual art since 1990ish. Self-taught, he tries to repeat the things that work, and not to repeat the things that don't.

Steven has wanted to make music for his entire life (owned and abandoned guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, banjos, a saxophone, an accordion, etc.), but never felt as if he had the right. What a silly notion.

Now, Steven is an Associate Professor of English and Integrative Arts at Penn State University, Altoona, with three novels and a book of poems in the world.

He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Fiction in 2002. His first novel, *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break*, is translated into 8 languages and was recently released as an audio book by Neil Gaiman Productions. His second novel, *Visits From the Drowned Girl*, published by Random House (and nominated by them for the Pulitzer Prize), US and Canongate, UK was released in June of 2004. *The Locktender's House*, novel #3, was released by Random House in Spring 2008. And in November 2010, CW Books released the poetry collection, *Ersatz Anatomy*.

Much more info can be found at [www.stevensherrill.com](http://www.stevensherrill.com)

**Andrew F. Sullivan** was born in Peterborough, Ontario. His recent fiction publications include work in *Joyland*, *Necessary Fiction*, *>kill author*, *Grain*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Riddle Fence* and *The Good Men Project*. In 2012, Sullivan received an Ontario Arts Council grant for his story collection *All We Want is Everything*. He no longer works in a warehouse, but is currently the associate fiction editor for *The Puritan*.

**Elisha Wagman** is an MFA candidate at The New School and possesses a graduate diploma in Fiction from the Humber School for Writers. She is currently working on a novel and a collection of short stories. Her story "Salvation" appears in the February 2012 edition of *Bartleby Snopes*. She shares an apartment in Brooklyn with her dog and hundreds of books.

# FICTION FIX

---

**Now Accepting**

Fiction, Graphic Literature, Art

**Spring 2012 10th Anniversary Extravaganza!**

See [www.fictionfix.net](http://www.fictionfix.net) for details

---

