

Winter 2013

## Fiction Fix 13

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FICTION  
FIX 13



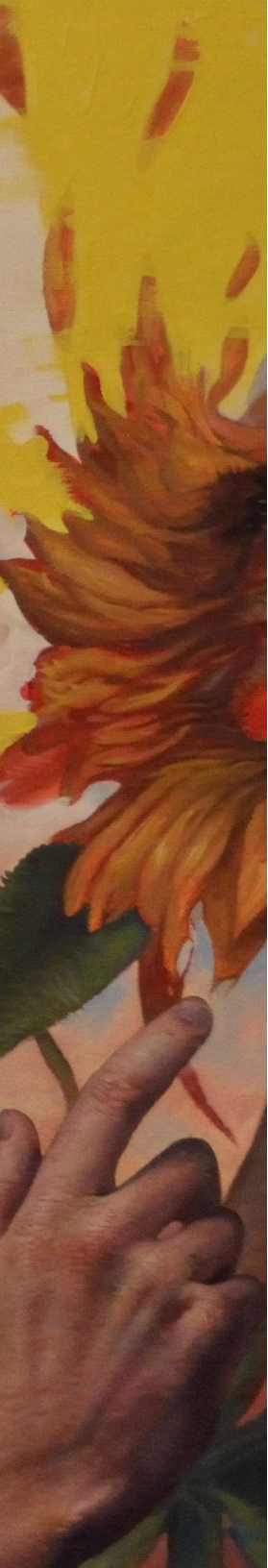
# Fiction Fix 13, Winter '13

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## Dear Readers

There's a certain pressure that comes along every few months—it's not the pressure of deadlines, though that does come with its own fair share of burden. The pressure we're speaking of is whether you will like the stories we have selected for you. The process is thorough, there is quite a bit of back and forth, and even some lost sleep over which of the many superb submissions will make it to the issue. And the nagging question, the one that generates all of the pressure is, "Will this satisfy the readers?" That pressure lasts through every decision we make and all the way up until we launch each issue—at which point, somehow all of the pieces magically come together. After we collectively sigh, we step back to admire with pride the broad collection of stories and art assembled in our digital pages. It is truly our honor to introduce you to this issue's selection of brand new stories.

From the newest members of our reading team to our long-time senior editors, we give you, with great pleasure, Fiction Fix 13. We hope you enjoy, and thank you for reading.

April & Alex

# Flo's Gold

by Jennifer Audette

Tomatoes didn't seem like the kind of thing you'd bring to a woman on a first date. Francis hadn't considered this until the moment he passed in front of Florence Kitchell's house, maneuvered the station wagon through a 3-point turn and did a second, cautious, drive-by. His boss's wife had orchestrated this whole mess, using her tennis club connection with the girl's mother to leverage a date for Francis. She'd proposed the idea at the Company's summer picnic a few weeks earlier. "I don't know about that," he'd said. But the boss's wife said, "You need to have some fun, Francis. Trust me." He didn't, but agreed to this and so now, here he was with the tomatoes and a date.

The stone driveway arched through the deep-pile lawn in front of the Kitchell's house. Francis could not bring himself to drive upon the stones so small and white and precise. His father used to be the Kitchell's gardener. Mrs. Kitchell always needed something weeded, dug, purchased, planted, removed, watered, or trimmed; she was his best client. Every few days someone (not his father anymore) raked the driveway's stones back into perfection. It reminded Francis of the Zen gardens his father had dreamed of visiting in Japan and he wondered if the driveway's design had been his dad's idea. Or maybe the desire to visit the Japanese gardens grew from this driveway. Francis had never thought to ask about the dream's origin.

Francis parked the old woody wagon at the curb and studied the page from his pocket notebook, checking and double-checking that this was, in fact, the correct house. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and snugged his favorite purple tie against his Adam's apple. With a series of short coughs, Francis prepared to practice saying hello. He peered into the narrow rearview mirror. Trying to achieve something casual, he held the smile too long. His mouth looked like a stranger's. The mirror creaked on its old ball joint as he swiveled it for a better angle and moved closer to inspect his teeth. Breath fogged the glass. When had his roots begun to show so much? When was the last time he had a cleaning? He bumped the mirror up to look into his own eyes. Separated like this from the rest of his features, Francis thought that maybe he didn't really know what he looked like. If his face were broken down into its requisite parts, not literally of course, but

in photos, say, would he be able to identify his own eyebrows in a lineup of nothing but eyebrows. Did the curve of his lips come from his mother or his father, and why hadn't he figured that out before they were gone?

"Come on Francis. You can do this. Just smile," he said, patting his cheeks—right left right left right left—the way you'd rouse someone from torpor or for another round in a fight. He forced something big and toothy, willing it up toward his eyes, hoping to see the kind of twinkle his father had. But nothing happened. He closed his eyes and let the smile vanish. It would never work. He didn't have it.

When Francis opened his eyes again, the brown paper bag waited there for him in the passenger seat. He felt a wave of delight roll through him. It swelled up from his heart—no, even deeper down than that—his stomach, his bowels! (He'd read somewhere recently that ages ago, the bowels, not the heart, had been considered the seat of human emotions). Feeling the warmth of the smile radiating to every extremity, Francis looked at his eyes one last time in the rear view mirror. "Close enough," he said to his reflection. Francis stuffed the notebook into his shirt pocket and made his way toward the front door of 332 Gentian Drive with the brown-bag tucked under his arm.

The last syllable of the chime still hung in the air as Florence Kitchell let him in. They looked at each other—Francis slightly up, Florence slightly down. Even in a pair of flats she had an inch and a half on him.

In the grips of his rear view mirror distraction, Francis had failed to practice a proper hello. Now his mind shuffled through possible ways to ease the awkward distance separating two strangers: a wave, a handshake (firm or delicate), a hug, a small nod of acknowledgment. No, none of those options seemed right. He considered the way he'd seen suave foreigners in subtitled movies invade each other's personal space, embracing with a touch of cheek to cheek. No. Too many ways he might botch that sort of thing. He pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"So, you're Frank," she said.

His ears cringed against the hardness of the *k*, the honk of the diminished form of his proper name. Often, he'd correct people, saying, "I strongly dislike that nickname and ask that, henceforth, you call me Francis. Thank you." Today he said nothing, just offered Florence a nod and that was it; there'd be no going back. He'd be Frank to her now.

Her eyes lingered on his purple tie. She laughed a little. He knew the design had lost its style credibility a decade ago, but as far as Francis was

concerned, a gift from his mother never went out of style. He ran his hand across the tie, smoothing it against his chest. His glasses would not stay in place. Florence drummed her fingers against the curve of her hip and nudged the air with her chin toward Frank's tie. He thought maybe she wanted him to remove it, the article offending her that much. But no. Her drumming fingers called Francis's attention to how she'd cinched the waist of her pale yellow dress with a long, sheer scarf the same purple paisley as his tie. Francis, under normal circumstances, did not believe in signs.

Florence was a knockout in that dress with the scarf tight around her waist. He wanted to un-cinch her and pull the silky material through his fingers. A rope of pearls covered the hollow of her throat. The multiple strands clicked together as Florence worried them between her thumb and index finger. Florence lifted her chin in the direction of the station wagon parked at the curb.

"That thing yours?" She paused, looking out the window, away from him, toward the car. "Or your parents?"

"It's mine now, I guess." Her question bothered him. She must have known about his parents, that they were gone. She must have seen his father arriving for work in that car hundreds of times. People were always saying stupid things to him after their death: *a blessing they never had to suffer through old age, at least they died together, they were doing something they loved*, (this one patently false since they'd been killed in a motel fire while visiting their daughter and son-in-law out in California. The son-in-law's new mutt went crazy trying to attack Francis's father and jumped right through a screen door to get at him, then howled for two hours straight until Francis's father left the house, with all his stuff and his wife, for the Motel 6 across town. There was no way anyone could've known about the drowsy smoker in the room next to theirs, but it seemed like someone—management at least—should have known about the faulty sprinkler system). But the stupidest of all the things people said to him was—*they're in a better place now*. Francis thought that one took the cake.

"So you must be Florence. Nice to meet you." He offered his hand but she shook her head, negating his gesture.

"No. I hate that name. Don't call me that."

"So Flo, then?" Francis asked. *What an ugly name. Worse than Frank*, he thought. He adjusted his glasses again, pushing them up higher on the bridge of his nose. He knew how the thick lenses made his eyes seem to jump around in their sockets, grow big and then small, shift from left to right too quickly. Florence looked away. When nervous, his oil glands were

effusive; already he could feel his glasses retrace their downward slide. He remembered how, after he'd gotten home from his parents' wake, he'd taken off his glasses to rest his face from their weight, but still kept reaching up, poking himself between the eyes, to push back against a phantom descent.

"That'll do, I guess. I'm going to change it to something completely different when I get married," she said.

"Oh. Well, why don't you just change it now? What if you don't get married for a long time?"

"Do I look like the kind of woman who might not get married for a long time, Frank?"

"No, you don't look particularly unmarriageable. It's just, why wait?" Francis shifted the paper bag to his other hand.

"I'll wait. It has to be the right match with my husband's. A name has a lot of power, don't you think? I mean, hasn't it been awkward, all your life, having a girl's name?"

"Frances with an *e* is the woman's name. Francis, with an *i*, is the male version. That's the distinction." He smiled a little as he corrected her. *So much for those two years of liberal college education out west*, Francis thought. That's all his boss's wife would say about Florence—that her friend's daughter had dropped out of Reed College four years ago. It had bored her.

"Well jeez, Francis-with-an-i, I know how they're spelled, but they don't *sound* any different when you say them out loud, now, do they?" She sighed and crossed her arms against her chest. "I don't know about this date, Frank. Damn mother's friends! I told her this was a bad idea."

Francis could see into the living room. It was a formal type, for showy guests, the ones who parked their Mercedes and Audis in the white-perfection horseshoe out front. A composed family portrait decorated the space above the mantel. Francis could see the rope of pearls resting expertly against Mrs. Kitchell's airbrushed throat and Dr. Kitchell's scrubbed, white surgeon's hands claiming one shoulder each of his wife and daughter. The room itself was done up in hues with names he imagined like Jersey Cream and Harvard Crimson. Everything about the place felt hushed, pristine and expensive. You'd think it might comfort and reassure with its certainty, its depth; it was a confident house, for sure. But Francis felt cold and pressed-against, like the edges and angles wanted to cut into his skin.

"What's in your fancy package, Frank?" Florence asked.

He opened the bag and looked inside, wishing he'd brought something else—a bouquet of pink roses or one of those yellow, faux-needle-worked boxes of Whitman's chocolates—something that wasn't such a part of him,



didn't give away so much, so soon. But then, the heady scent of perfectly ripe tomatoes drifted out.

"I made these," he said.

"You made them for me?" She took the bag from him. She peered inside.

"Well, no, not specifically for you. I mean, it's just something I do. A hobby, I guess."

"Tomatoes?"

Francis grew tomatoes. His 15' x 25' heated greenhouse started producing perfectly ripe beauties sometime in early June and didn't stop until late October. Crossbreeding for size and flavor had been last season's focus. He

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**They had no time for domestic perfection, no time to put things back where they belonged, easy for the next person to find. When Francis moved back he let everything stay as it was. To him it looked like love and passion. It looked like life.**

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described the tomato breeding process: emasculate the flower of the plant you want to fertilize so that it can't self-pollinate, then carefully collect pollen from the donor plant. "There's even a special pollen vibrator for that job," he told her and then felt embarrassed, perverse. The color climbed from his cheeks toward his forehead, as he told her how he lovingly, delicately, went from flower to flower doing what the bumblebees were meant to do, brushing pollen from one plant against the waiting pistil of another. He told her how he'd do this for as many of the yellow blossoms as possible and then identify them with tags so he could collect the seeds from the fruit. The next season he'd plant his hybrid seeds, wait several months and only then would he get to taste his creations. This is what he'd brought to Flo - his experiment, his treasure.

Francis felt like a locomotive picking up steam. Flo held one of the tomatoes in her hand. She sniffed at it. He told her how he hoped these might be a prized hybrid, maybe even good enough to market once he'd found the right name for them. Francis told his date all this and before he lost momentum, even though he couldn't be sure she'd say yes, he asked her to take him to the kitchen. Florence shrugged and led the way.

Francis rolled on, unstoppable now, his passion for pollination, for

tomatoes, for patience and persistence, carrying him along on an inevitable wave. He didn't think about the likely crash at the end: the looking up, the refocusing of his eyes and mind back to the present where Florence was, the possibility that her face would look just as bored as when he started to talk or even worse, scornful. He didn't think about how his breathlessness seemed ridiculous to her, or how the beads of moisture formed and collected in the divot below his nose. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip with his lower teeth, tasting salt. Could he feel Florence leaning in, wanting to get close to his passion, to catch her sleeve in it, to feel it dilute the boredom that coated her? He would not look at her. It would be too easy to get derailed.

In Florence's mother's kitchen everything was white: white cupboards, white walls, white porcelain sink, and white architectural shelves for holding white gee-gaws—tasteful, elegant gee-gaws. Francis rummaged to find what he needed, disturbing the hush of the spotless kitchen, jostling dishes out of their nested security. The white salt shaker and white china plates camouflaged themselves in the kitchen's background, purity within purity. When Francis found what he was looking for, he laid out an oval serving platter and placed the salt shaker offset like an apostrophe.

"Maybe you shouldn't use those. They're my mother's favorites. I could get you a paper plate from the pantry instead." Florence offered. She glanced over her shoulder toward the stairs to the second floor of the house.

He looked at Florence but said nothing, just shook his head, *no*. Frank pulled several knives from a drawer and ran his thumb against the edge of each one. He asked for a sharpener. Florence found it in the first drawer she opened. He thought of how different this house was from where he'd grown up and where he lived again now after his parents' death. Creative chaos still tumbled from every space—his father's library of dreams and plans for gardens and travel, the mad-scientist bottles of tinctures and essential oils his mother extracted from the things they grew together, the overgrown potted plants indoors and the wild outdoor gardens. They had no time for domestic perfection, no time to put things back where they belonged, easy for the next person to find. When Francis moved back he let everything stay as it was. To him it looked like love and passion. It looked like life. It kept him company.

Francis pulled the Kitchell's best knife across the sharpener's abrasive surface with several deft strokes and tested its edge again. Florence watched him. Her hand rested against the red curve of a tomato.

"You're not going to make a mess of things are you?" Florence said, but

she didn't tell him to stop and so he put the knife against the fruit, ready to slice.

He began with a gentle pressure, feeling the give of taut skin, the give but not the break, like a body pressing down on a trampoline's surface before being shot back into the air. But then the knife's sharp edge broke through and a slice fell onto the china platter. Red pulp and gelatinous yellow seeds spilled into a small pool.

Juices ran onto the counter. The flesh yielded easily and the plate filled with thick, fragrant rounds. Francis halved a slice, sprinkled it with salt and watched the crystals dissolve into the surface. The salt's susuration against the ceramic drew out unexpected memories of mealtime with his parents. He remembered the way his father would shake the salt over his food, as if sodium chloride were its own food group. His father never tasted first, just *sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle*, with a specific wrist action and pinky tapping against the upended shaker. Francis felt himself doing the same motion now with Mrs. Kitchell's streamlined ceramic shaker, nothing like the crazy collection his mother kept. They came

in tacky pairs: two ears of partially husked corn, a lighthouse and foamy ocean wave, prince and princess frogs. And then, of course, all the holiday couplings: Mr. and Mrs. Claus, Peter Cotton Tail and his bunny honey; two ghosts that could twine together. When Francis was ten years old and tasked with setting the Thanksgiving table, he'd reached way into the back of the



lower hutch cupboard groping around for the turkey/pumpkin pair and the Pilgrim boy/girl pair. What his hand pulled out made it burn with embarrassment. Instead of children dressed in buckled shoes and hats, he held something that looked like the bits between his own pale legs—the bits his mother called his *dinkle*. The other half of the salt and pepper duo was a voluptuous pair of breasts. Francis scrambled to shove them back into the

depths of the cupboard, moving all the other salt and pepper sets to cover his shameful discovery. When his mother called from the kitchen, he'd jumped, slamming the hutch door on his fingers. He'd hid his throbbing right hand behind his back all night, eating awkwardly with the other, so no one would see and ask him about the marks. Even now, fifteen years later, in the Kitchell's dazzling kitchen, his date standing hipshot against the counter giving him the skeptical once- and twice-over, Francis couldn't stop the childish flush that fired his face red from chin to hairline as he glanced at Flo's breasts and remembered how that XXX salt shaker's ceramic nipples felt under his fingers.

“What the hell is wrong with you? You're all red and, Jesus Frank, your face. It's so greas—“

Francis shushed her and said, “Ready?”

He scooped the salted tomato half-moon into his hand, cupping the other hand below. A drop of juice leaked between his knuckles and splattered on the floor. Florence sucked in a breath as if she'd pricked her finger.

A small O of panic took shape on her mouth and her glance darted to the doorway as if expecting to see her mother there. She drew her hip into alignment, stood straight and moved toward the stain, with a white dishcloth in her hand, ready to wipe the mess. Before she could reach it, Frank stepped into her path. More tomato juice seeped between his knuckles.

"Florence." he said and then again, "Florence." He felt the warmth in his voice and it surprised him. She stood right there, within a half-arm's reach, he could smell the Dove brand soap on her skin. Her mouth was open just a little and so Francis slid the tomato slice right in. She had no choice but to chew.

The tomato's flavor seemed to dawn on her slowly as it met first her tongue and then her palate, and then finally the message reached her brain. Color rose into her cheeks. She put one hand over her heart and the other on the edge of the counter for support. The tomato's aroma filled the kitchen: vegetal, acidic, heavily ripe, and edging toward the line of inevitable decay.

"Good god damn, Francis. I've never tasted anything like this," she whispered.

Oh, his right and proper name from her lips! He held another slice ready, not bothering with a cupped hand to catch the drips. Juice fell to the floor making small explosions across the tiles between them, collateral damage spotting the mop boards. With her eyes still closed she waited for more. Francis cut and fed into her mouth, slice after slice of the tomato that would make him famous for its unmatched qualities, the tomato that would provide the down payment on their first house, the tomato he would name in honor of his future wife.

When the brown bag was emptied, Florence sighed and her eyes worked open with effort, coming out of a dream. And she saw. Wet, red droplets and puddles dotted with yellow seeds spread over the counter, the floor, and the baseboards. Steel-gray scratches from the knife marred the white platter. She pulled at the pearls around her neck. Francis could see a flake of tomato skin stuck to Florence's eyetooth and wondered if it might still be there when he kissed her goodnight.

Mrs. Kitchell called down from the upstairs hallway in teasing tones about it being "too quiet down there" and "up to no good". Florence reached behind her neck and unclasped her mother's pearls. She lowered them into a coil. The pearls clicked against the counter with a hard sound like teeth falling into a porcelain bowl. Francis shivered. All his dreams after his parents' death ended with his teeth coming loose, then tumbling into his cupped

hands, a madness of ticking and clacking, so many more than the "32 white horses on a red hill" his mother used to riddle him with as a little boy.

"C'mon, let's go somewhere." Florence said and took Francis's hand. She pulled him away from the mess and out the back door. She ran around to the front of the house with Francis stumbling to keep up, trying to push his glasses back up to their proper spot. He felt sweat gathering on his palm and barely resisted the urge to pull his hand away to wipe it dry on the leg of his pants. At the car, she let go. Florence slid in across the vinyl seat, her yellow dress sweeping sideways so that Francis had to rearrange it back into the car before closing her in.

As Florence settled back into the passenger's seat Francis thought he could smell his mother's scent—a homemade blend of heliotrope and lemon verbena—wafting out the window. There wasn't much left in the house now that still smelled like his parents. Time passes, the look and smell of grief changes, seems to fade. No one asked him anymore how he was doing. For several months after their death, people he barely knew would ask—voices like libraries or church—"How *are* you, Frank?" It used to drive him crazy, all that asking. Now, he'd give anything to have an excuse to talk about their being gone.

Florence smiled at him out the open window, her tooth still smudged with tomato skin.

"Where do you want to go?" Francis asked.

"Hey! You could show me your greenhouse, your tomatoes." she said.

The glow fired up again way down deep in his guts, spreading outward. *Here we are back at my bowels!* he thought, barely stifling a giddy laugh. "It needs a name, you know, the tomato. And I've been thinking..." Francis paused.

"Something good, Francis. The name of things is important." She said.

Francis pushed at his glasses. "What do you think about this? Flo's Gold!" He moved his hand across the sky as if he could see it on a marquee in Broadway lights.

Florence let her head fall back against the seat and laughed. Francis marveled at the delicate distance from the underside of her chin down to the top of her shadowed cleavage.

"C'mon, let's go." She patted the driver's seat.

He hurried around the front of the car, drummed his hands on the faded blue hood and then on the roof before sliding in next to his date. He caught his reflection in the rear view mirror, surprised to see in his own eyes the familiar twinkle of his father's. He wondered if his father had felt this kind

of happiness all the time. Those sparks, that shine, had almost always been there.

Francis started the car. He turned to look at Florence, remembering what she'd said to him back at their awkward beginning. "But, if we name them Flo's Gold, I think you'll have to promise not to change your name when you get married."

"A promise? Oh, I don't know, Frank. We'll have to see." Florence looked out the window. Her fingers fiddled with the memory of pearls and then settled down to rest against her pale throat.

Francis put the station wagon into gear and lumbered out of the Kitchell's neighborhood toward his home, his tomatoes.

# Tendencies

by Jennifer Clark

My tendency began slowly at first. With things. Not people. The first time I realized something unusual was beginning to happen to me I'd been home from work for about an hour when I noticed two paperclips stuck to my blouse. They were easy enough to pull off, but the minute I set them on my bureau, they jumped up and re-attached themselves. It was like they had a mind of their own. After several rounds of this, I took off my shirt, and the paperclips immediately pulled away from the blouse and attached themselves to me. I set them on the bureau again, but this time placed a book over them. That silenced the paperclips.

Over the course of several months, I would return home to find more paperclips littering my clothes. They became harder to pull off.

Pardon? Oh. Yes, I do believe that is your husband's wedding ring on the side of my nose. My tendency has reached a point where I find it almost impossible to remove items that attach themselves to me. I tell you, it is so nice to talk with someone about what I've been going through. I've felt so alone lately. And you are a good listener. Now where was I?

Oh, yes. It was not long after that the people attraction set in. I was at work, in the break room, finishing lunch and listening in on conversations between several of my co-workers when the Equal Opportunity employer poster—that had been hanging forever on the bulletin board—fell down. All conversation stopped. It was a seemingly mundane occurrence, but the air felt different somehow. Even smelled different. Like burning metal. I don't know if others could smell the change, but we all watched the poster as it sashayed back and forth, slowly landing on the floor. At the same time, I felt a sting on my arm, then noticed a tack pressing into the flesh of my forearm. This is going to sound strange, but it felt like it belonged in me. I didn't want to pull it out. At least, not right away.

You go through life, or at least I have, feeling like I'm missing something. With that tiny tack biting into my skin, I felt whole. I could feel this infinitesimal bite vibrating all through my body, tingling even my toes. I realized that whatever was occurring had intensified my senses, particularly my sense of smell. In fact, even though we are, what, five hundred feet apart, I can smell you from here. So at that moment—

Okay. Sure. You smell like a musky marigold swirled in garlic, glazed in lemon sauce. The marigold scent I'm picking up tells me you must be menstruating. The garlic means you had something garlicky for supper last night, no? And you are coated in fear. Fear, I have learned, is citrusy smelling. A bit

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**Fear, I've learned, is citrusy smelling. A bit acidic. Yours is so strong I can taste it.**

---

acidic. Yours is so strong I can taste it. Your fear crackles like bitter lemons on my tongue. Don't look so surprised. I told you I could smell you from here.

Where was I? Oh, yes, the break room. At that moment I felt so alive. I was afraid that if I pulled out the tack I would lose that feeling of wholeness, so I put my hand over it and pressed it in harder. I thought everyone would go back to their conversations, I would remain an ugly little fly on the wall, but, in that moment, everything utterly had changed. A co-worker who had never before acknowledged my presence stepped forward and started stroking my hair. *Your hair is so shiny* she cooed as others joined in, brushing my hair with their fingers.

Push their hands away? Why, no, I just laughed. I don't think it was my imagination, but even my laugh seemed different. Huskier. Up to that moment, no one, particularly men, ever paid me much mind. Think about it. In all these years as neighbors, your husband has never gone beyond offering a half-hearted wave when he'd encounter me.

It was time to get back to work, but nobody wanted to leave. Then it dawned on me—they wanted to be near me. *Near me*. Something deep within me changed that day. I could feel it in my core. I felt shiny and strong. Still do. Maybe that's what my co-workers, on some level, sensed. They eventually tore themselves away. I reluctantly pulled the tack out of my arm. The shiny feeling remained.

Back at my cubicle, that day and for the rest of that month, it seemed that everyone made excuses to stop by. They couldn't keep their hands off me. At first, they made excuses. *Is that lint on your shirt?* one would ask, only to pick some imaginary particle off my shoulder, their hand lingering. *What shampoo are you using?* others inquired while their fingers reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

You can touch my hair if you want to. I see you looking at it. It glistens



in this morning light. No? Suit yourself.

I loved going to work—that attention, those touches, all so delicious. I also couldn't wait to get home, peel off my clothes, stand in front of the mirror and drink myself in. My eyes and hands were so hungry. I had deprived them of me for so long. Just to touch—

Don't look at me that way. Believe me, you would have done the same. To know, to actually *feel* one's beauty, it's, well it's intoxicating.

I wish my life could have stayed like that. It was just the right level of tendency. But, as my mother always said, nothing stays the same. If it had, you and I wouldn't be in this situation now, would we?

My tendency to attract things and people grew. Extra paperclips stuck to my blouse, loose change collected around my ankles, staples affixed them-

selves to my wrists.

Eventually, my co-workers stopped making excuses. They just hovered and touched. Touched and hovered. The boss finally had enough. She came over to my cube and sat down on my lap. With her legs entwined around my waist, hands sunk in my hair, she fired me. I could tell it was quite painful for her to let me go, but I understood. Nobody was getting any work done. I had become too much of a distraction.

My tendency continued to escalate. People, complete strangers mind you, were taking notice. It became uncomfortable to go out in public. I stopped going to restaurants altogether. Progressively more violent fights erupted between wait staff over who should take my order. Customers sitting near me felt compelled to draw closer. Some would feed me; others would blot salad dressing from the corners of my mouth with their napkin. A few even licked stray bits of crumbs from my lips. I'd leave restaurants with spoons dripping from my earlobes, forks stuck to my thighs, knives nuzzled between my breasts, and strangers wondering what had just possessed them.

In time, even simple errands became impossible. Grocery shopping is out of the question. The minute I set foot in the store, scanners stop working, cash registers open, change goes flying.

This tendency that once made me feel special and whole is turning me into a prisoner. Until last night, I hadn't stepped out of my home for over a month.

Of course I tried to get help. Shortly after I lost my job I went to see my doctor. I was sitting on the exam table—donning a highly becoming paper gown I might add—when the doctor knocked and entered. A thwack-thwump sound resonated throughout the room and I immediately felt a heaviness in my, my sex area. I looked down and saw a metal stapler pressed to my crotch.

I thought he would be surprised, stunned by what had just occurred. But, get this, he said I presented with symptoms similar to another patient he had seen only weeks earlier. Imagine that! The case was so unusual my doctor had contacted the county health department. He initially suspected that something might be in the drinking water.

What? No, the water is fine. After further consultation between the health department and several other physicians, they realized that there are clusters of this tendency developing in a handful of individuals across several counties and it has nothing to do with water. They brought in a geophysicist and—

A bit worrisome, isn't it? Clusters of people like me. Yes, I was getting to that. The doctor told me that these tendencies are most likely a response to earth's magnetic field changing. As the doctor's hand wedged slowly between the stapler and my womanly mound, he explained how we are experiencing a magnetic reversal of sorts. He gripped the stapler but did not attempt to pull it away. *Apparently*, he said, *this is what the earth did about 780,000 years ago*. The good doctor's knuckles began to rub back and forth, back and forth on my mound. *We are in the midst of another reversal, a slow flip of the north and south poles, if you will.*

I probably had the same incredulous expression on my face as you do now. It's crazy, I know, but it made sense. Felt right, you know?

*Did you know*, he said, knuckles more insistent, *that over the last one hundred and fifty years, the earth's overall magnetic field has weakened by ten percent?* At that, my thighs began to quiver. I could contain myself no longer. I let out a husky laugh. With great effort, he removed the stapler, put it in a cabinet, and locked the door. *There is no cure*, he whispered into my ear as he removed my paper gown. He then dressed me so lovingly, so tenderly that I cried.

That's right. No cure. He ordered me to stay away. *The only thing I can recommend is for you to stay home, young lady.* He walked me out of the exam room, down the hall, and out of the building. He wanted to come home with me—I could smell his intentions, a briny pool of anchovies mixed with the smell of damp leaves—but he was just strong enough, and I was just weak enough that it was not to be. He seized the handle of the entrance door and pushed me away, his musty regret trailing behind me.

Yes, it is time. Although I don't know if it is wise. Yes, yes. I suppose you are right. As his wife you should know what happened.

I'm tired of feeling so alone. I'm tired of eating food from a can. I'm tired of worrying what I will do when it runs out. I'm tired of being stuck in my house. And I'm tired of not sleeping well.

Last night, once again, I couldn't sleep. Did you know that from my bedroom window I can see your vegetable garden? Well I looked out and it all appeared so inviting: squash carpeting your backyard, cabbage heads bursting, tomatoes still swelling on the vine. Everything so lush and full. *What harm could come*, I thought, *from slipping out into the cool night to harvest a*

*few vegetables?*

And so it was I found myself standing barefoot in the middle of your garden, inhaling a bounty of provocative aromas. The beets, their earthy, sweetness were so enticing that I knelt down and dug one out of the ground. As I rose, not even bothering to brush off dirt that clotted to its blushing skin, I bit into it. That's when I saw him, your husband, standing not too far from where you are now, watching me. I had been so overcome with hunger that I didn't even hear the car pull into the drive. I swear, if I had known your husband wasn't home, was returning late, last night, I never would have gone out to the garden.

I could be wrong, but I don't think my tendency was impacting him. At least not at first. I did wonder what was going through his mind. He always struck me—and please don't take offense to this, it's just my impression—but he struck me as a shallow man. I thought he might even be repelled, was thinking why, in the middle of the night, his homely neighbor was tearing into a beet in his backyard. Ha, hah!

He took one step towards me. And then another. As the distance between us lessened, the attraction grew. We could both feel it. I kept eating the beet. He kept walking. I could smell his salty desire.

Then it all happened so fast. My tendency evoked a ghastly sucking sound from him. His teeth...

His teeth reached me first. Like bullets, they pelted my face and chest, searing my skin. His wristwatch unhinged, hurled itself at me, and struck me on the forehead. In similar fashion, his belt buckle popped, flew into the air and wrapped itself around my upper thigh. His body came to me with such force I staggered backwards. I fell hard, sandwiched between this changing earth and your husband's pulsating body.

Despite your husband's anguish, he wanted me. His throbbing gums gnawed on my earlobes, all the while his blood pooled into my ear. His fingers ached to wander, his hands yearned to stroke, and yet his limbs were immovable. It was excruciatingly painful for both of us, a repugnant feast from which neither of us could refrain.

He yearned to explore. It took all of my strength to help him, but we were able to lift and reposition his arms and legs, allowing him the opportunity to press close to my hips, breasts, and belly.

But, as I am sure you know, you married a weak man. After several hours of this, he grew weary. I tired of him, his weighty, sticky mess. His body resisted my attempts at separation, even protested with agonizing sounds, like pieces of paper being ripped apart.

With great effort, I managed to push him off me. He lay near me, a glossy mass of rawness.

In a tangle of vines and swollen fruit, we lay. Worn out from the tug of earth's strange new dance, I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke, I was thankful that your husband's coppery smell had slipped into the soil. Before I even opened my eyes, I realized another shift, a deepening of my tendency, had occurred. The stars and moon had vanished, the sun had yet to make an appearance, but I knew I was in tatters. I felt shinier than ever but diminished somehow.

With dawn, I could make out pieces of skin—your husband's skin—stuck to mine. Look, even now I flutter in the breeze. See? See how they sway when I move my arms this way or that?

What? Oh, he's in the garden.

One of your hands has slipped, my darling. You want to go to him, but you know you cannot. My dear, you are trembling.

Oh, my. Tsk, tsk. Without even seeing the warmth that has streamed down your fine legs, I can smell your sweetness from here.

Please don't shudder. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to be near you. This has become too much for you, hasn't it? I should go back into my house, but you captivate me, my dear.

As the compass drifts slowly south, I just want to be closer to you.

One step. I'll just take one step.



# The Shop

by Daun Daemon

The two of us are standing under the fluorescent lights of our mother's beauty shop. Our arms crossed, we stand on opposite sides of the counter that splits the shop in half and shake our heads at each other under the quavering bulbs.

*Yes, she did.*

*No, I'm sure she didn't.*

*How can you be so sure? You're always so sure. I think she did.*

*I don't remember it that way.*

*Well, I do.*

While trying to decide what to do about all the stuff in the shop, which is attached by a breezeway to our childhood home, the older of the two of us had remarked that Mama sometimes washed our heads on Sunday mornings, before church. The younger of us remembers only the Saturday night ritual. Once there were four of us, now only two—the oldest and the second youngest.

*When the baby got old enough to have her hair washed, Mama didn't have time to wash four heads on Saturday night. So, sometimes we were out here on Sunday mornings.*

*Well maybe you were. I wasn't.*

*You were just too young to remember.*

*I was old enough to remember that on Saturday nights Daddy stayed in the house to watch Lawrence Welk while we flitted around the shop.*

We pause, recalling those long ago nights of activity and anticipation. Mama and her girls out in the beauty shop dancing around, laughing, reading funny stories aloud from the magazines, making brush roller animals for the baby, pretending to be movie stars like Natalie Wood, flipping our hair around like Cher.

We relax, uncross our arms, smile.

*We had to be done in time for The Carol Burnett Show.*

*Remember how Mama would pop a big skillet of popcorn just in time for Carol's walk onto the stage?*

*She was so glamorous and talented—but as easy to talk to as a regular person.*

*Mama was like that too, wasn't she? The way anybody could come into the shop*

*and she would be able to just start a conversation with her as if she'd always known her?*

*You're right. She could do that, even with men—like the beauty supply salesman or the Tom's Snacks man. That was a talent.*

*Mama certainly was beautiful, too, glamorous in her own way. Every morning she was out here in the shop early, sweeping her dark hair into a perfect French twist before coming in to coiffure our own messy heads into ponytails or braids before we left for school.*

*Is that a verb?*

*What?*

*Coiffure?*

*Yes it is. I know for a fact that it is.*

*You would.*

We grow silent and gaze at the messiness of the shop.

We are both thinking, what do we do with it now? How do we dispose of the faded daisy-print curtains, plastic capes, hairnets, hunchbacked hair dryers? Old magazines, tacky with hairspray and dust, are stacked in the dryers' seats. We are amazed to discover a McCall's from 1972, the cutout Betsy McCall paper doll still inside.

*These are relics.*

*Relics of what?*

*Of a time past.*

*That sounds so trite. These are relics of something else.*

*Of Mama, then.*

*No—of our childhood.*

*That's trite, too.*

*Not really.*

We let it go. One of us pulls a tiny camera from her purse and begins to photograph the shop, aiming first at the handwritten price list on poster paper that our middle sister made for Mama, what, twenty years ago? Even in her 30s—just a few years before cancer took her—our sister was proud of her neat, careful handwriting. Mama hadn't changed her prices since.

*A haircut for \$3.50. Mercy.*

*Well, Mama thought even that was too high for her factory ladies and rural schoolteachers.*

One of us tangles a finger in her own \$95 hairstyle.

We poke around, opening cabinets and examining the aging cans of hairspray, the boxes of hairpins.

We each move to a different corner of the shop, brushing off dust here,

peering into spaces there. We find boxes of unused beauty supplies: permanent solution, toner, styling gel. Gray hairs still cling to some of the brushes lying in a drawer. The linoleum in the corners has gone dark with unreachable grime and is beginning to peel away from the floor.

One of us gasps.

*Look at this!*

Inside a cabinet, behind dye-stained, threadbare towels sits a stash of menthol cigarettes and a bright purple lighter.

*Mama didn't smoke.*

*Did she?*

*No. Of course not. Daddy would have had a fit.*

*Well, what on earth...*

We are silent. We are thinking that we knew this woman, our mother. We are thinking that she had no secrets, that in this shop all secrets were told. We remember hearing confessions, seeing tears, witnessing the moments of truth. But those were the other women, her customers.

**We are silent. We are thinking that we knew this woman, our mother. We are thinking that she had no secrets, that in this shop all secrets were told. We remember hearing confessions, seeing tears, witnessing the moments of truth. But those were the other women, her customers.**

*Remember when Shirley, oh what was her last name?*

*Teeter.*

*Yes! Remember when Shirley Teeter came by that Christmas Eve with her beehive askew and her lip bloody? Mama told us to keep watching the Christmas specials and then came out here with Shirley to fix that bairdo. They stayed out here for hours.*

*It would take hours to fix a beehive.*

We laugh. One of us gestures into the air above her head, whipping it into an imaginary bouffant.

*That was the Christmas the year of the drowning, wasn't it?*

*Yes.*

*Imagine how Mama felt. Her youngest daughter lost just a few months earlier, dealing with that grief during the holidays. How did she find the strength to comfort*

*Shirley?*

*I don't know. I guess I've never really thought about it.*

*All I know is that I heard more than one story that I shouldn't have. Sometimes those ladies forgot I was out here doing homework. They told Mama all their troubles—beatings, money problems, illness, betrayal—but I don't remember that Mama ever talked about herself to them.*

*Mama didn't confess her troubles. She was strong.*

*Mama didn't have troubles. Did she?*

We hang around the shop for a little while, searching, not talking. This quiet isn't anything we ever knew out here. Out in the shop. We can't stand it.

*She had her own secrets, I'm sure, but no one to hear them. The women all came here to confide in her, not to listen to her.*

*That seems so selfish, but I'm not sure.*

*It's not selfish; it's human nature. If Mama had expressed her pain, her grief then they would have been uncomfortable. She was touching them, she was intimate with them, she couldn't violate that trust.*

*You're right. I believe you're right.*

One of us picks up the pack of cigarettes.

*What do you think? Should we?*

*Yes, we should.*

We open the pack and pull out two slender cigarettes; the aroma of tobacco is strong enough to tell us that Mama had smoked long after she grew ill. We search for the inevitable ashtray and find it hidden in a box of plastic hair caps.

*Shouldn't we light up five? For Mama and all her girls?*

*That's perfect. Let's do it.*

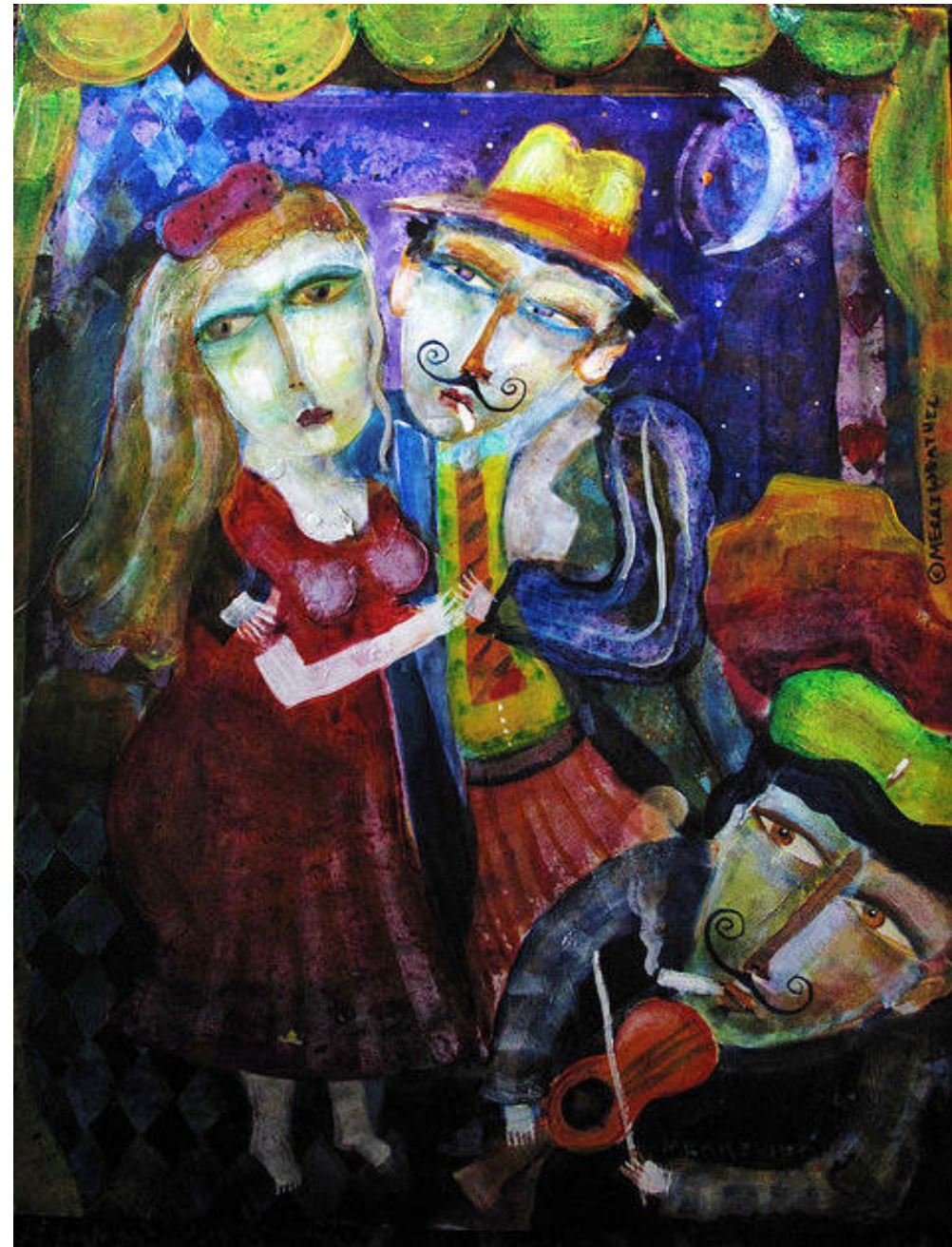
We pull out three more and then flick the lighter. We smile when it flames on the second try.

We've never done this before, smoke together. We may have tried the habit in college or in a stressful time during our twenties. We don't ask each other about that. Instead, we puff, cough and giggle together, two middle-aged women acting like rebellious teenagers.

We watch the five strands of smoke rise up into a singular fog.

Then we begin to tell secrets in honor of our mother.

ALLISON MERRIWEATHER  
*Paintings*







# Freedom's Just Another Word

by Vic Sizemore

Nadine's in a world of trouble now. You might think what she did was stupid—and it was—but you can't say what you'd do in her place. She can't say herself what came over her; she panicked is all, had to get free of him. The one who came up on the porch wearing his Smokey Bear hat, and read her her rights, he's already gone back out to prowling around looking for other people to arrest, she saw him leave. Now there's only a big man about to bust out of his green uniform; he's behind the counter, trying to finish his overnight shift, ignoring Nadine, acting like she isn't even over here cuffed to this hard metal chair that is itself bolted to the shiny tile floor, waiting for what comes next. It's bright in here, too bright, and the tiles reflect the light back up. Like being beside water in the bright sun.

Nadine knows it's over, she's done for. That cop with the bushy eyebrows and the Starbucks cup is dead and that can't be changed. CPS has her kids, and she'll probably never get them back. She has this flash vision of some fat foster mom with a hairy mole on her lip bringing them to visit her behind bars. It breaks her heart and she starts crying.

She leans her head back against the painted cinderblock wall and takes a deep breath. The radio behind the desk chatters—all those different voices of John Law, across the city, talking to himself on the radio. The big policeman takes a hit off a bottle of flavored vitamin water, twists the purple cap back on, wipes his mouth. He's just popped some popcorn, or somebody has—the aroma fills the room. Nadine's tummy gurgles low. She's so exhausted she's dizzy, but she can't fall asleep. She's thirsty, her tongue sticks pasty to the roof of her mouth. She wants to ask the cop for water, but she doesn't. She keeps her eyes closed, hears and doesn't hear the sounds of the cop station around her.

\*

The cause of her trouble has always been money, or the lack of it. She used to console herself when she saw those women scooted all straight-backed up to the steering wheels of their SUVs—looked like something

Maddie might draw, colorful elephants cruising through the Kroger lot with craning turtle necks holding up the pretty little heads of soccer moms—that money isn't real life; it's a fantasy, a false buffer against the patient and changeless reality that is pain and suffering and the inevitable: death. Money is an invisibility cloak that people throw over reality, but that doesn't make it go away; it's still right there, walking beside you, staring at the side of your face while you aren't looking back.

Getting your arm crushed between a car door and a tree before having it mashed off your shoulder will quick yank that veil away, sure. But so will the slow gnawing of cancer. Money can't get you free; money can only put up a screen to make you think you're free. Lots of things can tear that screen down. And the thing is, someday something *will*.

Some consolation that is to Nadine right now. Basically, at thirty three—same age as Jesus and Alexander the Great—her life is over.

This particular trouble started for Nadine over a year ago, in June, when she decided to splurge and go see her sister down in Buford, just this side of Atlanta. Her policy for a long time—at least since Rory's dad went to prison for cooking meth—was that staying home is what keeps you out of trouble. They needed to get away; she needed a break. Now, looking back, she thinks if she'd just lived by that rule—stay home—none of this would have happened.

On that Saturday morning, she and her oldest, Bennie, loaded Maddie and baby Rory into their car seats and hit the WV Turnpike, headed for Georgia to spend a week there and call it a vacation, as they didn't have money for anything else. The van wasn't in the best of shape even then, and her pulse could never quite settle as she willed it mile after mile to behave, to keep running, to just get them to her sister's. She'd been aware of the dark blue car for a couple of miles before it finally forced its way between her and the car that had been tailgating her and hit the flashing lights. It took her another couple of miles to get across the heavy traffic and into the narrow emergency lane.

She put down her window and waited. Cars whizzed by, trucks roared up and clipped the air beside the van with such force it felt like they could suck her right back out into traffic. Bennie fished around in the glove box and found her registration and an old GMAC insurance card, long expired—she'd told them to go fuck themselves after they raised her premium from \$67.00 a month to \$89.00, not because she'd gotten a ticket or had a wreck but because her credit was bad, and they had the balls to write her a letter and tell her as much. She told them on the phone that they were worthless

money-sucking parasites, and they'd never get another cent out of her. And they didn't.

The old expired insurance card was better than nothing at all. She handed it out with her license and registration to John Law, who didn't look much older than her Bennie. He had a blond crew cut and sunglasses. His nose was pink and splotchy where it had burned and peeled. His lips were tight around a big dip of snuff, and he hid his eyes behind those mirrored glasses. Trying for all he was worth to look intimidating.

She said to him, "Officer, you plucked me right out of the flow of traffic. I was staying with traffic to be safe." Which was true. Nadine was not a speeder. It made her a nervous wreck, this traffic. She'd gotten herself into a kind of convoy of cars approaching Charlotte; the car in front of her and behind her hadn't changed for ten miles or more. Everyone was going her speed. And he pulled her over because she had West Virginia plates, plain and simple. They both knew it.

The officer hunched and looked at Bennie. He said, "Who's traveling with you?" God, she had to get a fresh cop, acting like she and her babies really might have been running meth.

She shook her head. "My family." She said, "You know good and well everybody was going the same speed I was."

When the cop peered in at Bennie, he raised his hand a few inches from his *Eastbay* catalogue to make a little wave. In this close space his hands reminded her of a puppy's paws, how they're too big and he'd have to grow into them. Bennie was fourteen and already six even. His feet were size eleven. He was going to be a big man like his daddy.

"Keep your hands on your lap, son," the officer said.

Bennie's eyelids drooped. He let his hand drop like a beanbag back onto his knee and sat motionless, staring straight out the front. Poor people get the same sinking gut that criminals do when they see John Law coming, Nadine figured.

"We're going to my sister's in Atlanta," she said. Hot exhaust blew into the van. Her children were being poisoned where they sat. The officer peered in back at Maddie and baby Rory. They were strapped into their car seats, making owl eyes at him.

"I was staying with traffic," she said. "You plucked me out because of my tags." Traffic was back up to speed right now, pounding relentlessly behind him, his blue sleeve flapping in its wind.

"Who," he asked, "do you have in the car with you?"

"Are you on crack?"

"Answer me."

"My family," she said. "*My children.*" She wanted to be home, back in the little house she rented on the hollow off of Davis Creek. How she missed Davis Creek right then. It was their sanctuary, their little smelly place of safety. She wished they'd never ventured this far away from it. She wished they could all just be there together. They could have spent this money on a good dinner and some movies from Hollywood Video, and still had some left over to help with bills.

He stared at Bennie again for a long instant. Bennie had his head shaved, which made him look like a basketball player most of the time, because he was a basketball player, but right now, looking at him as John Law might be, she could see how he could look like he'd just busted out of juvie. Like trouble.

"Stay here," the cop said, and he disappeared with her license and registration. And the bad insurance card.

Nadine turned slowly to Bennie and said, "When the Law has you pulled, you don't ever make a sudden move."

Bennie was outraged. He said, "I didn't do nothing."

"You didn't do *anything*," she corrected.

He growled in frustration and banged his head against the headrest. A truck plowed through the air just feet from her open window, rocked the van. Diesel wind blasted in. She put the window up to wait.

Rory shit his diaper in one noisy blast. Maddie started laughing at the sound. Bennie imitated the wet burst with his lips, which made Rory join into the laughter, cackling his little baby laugh. Maddie tried to imitate the sound of Rory's shit. Bennie did it again, and the two in back laughed so hard they started gasping.

John Law was back in his car writing. His blue and red lights flashed away in her rearview mirror. The smell of Rory's shitty diaper filled the van. That baby wasn't anything like Maddie had been; he could play with his diaper drooping full of shit and never give it a second thought, squish his ass down in it to ride his scooter.

"My god," Bennie said. "Rory, you are funky."

Maddie and Rory laughed until John Law appeared back at the window. When Nadine put it down for him, they went silent and stared at him again. Trucks blasted hot exhaust into the van. John Law gave Nadine the copy of her citation, and started telling her what her payment options were—just like any other transaction.

The paper was shiny and slick on the printed side. The fine was \$150.00.

She didn't have that much for their entire vacation after gas.

Nadine said, "Couldn't you just give me a warning?" She said, "I was staying with the flow of traffic."

He said, "Drive the speed limit and stay safe."

His job out here was nothing more than to rob travelers with strange tags, bring in the cash. A low-paid bandit for the state. She said, "I was trying to stay safe, Goddamn it."

"Have a good afternoon," he said, and he flew from the window.

Bennie said, "Rory's got to be changed."

She had two diapers a day for him, and no money for more. Last night she'd flipped through Bennie's *Eastbay* catalogue. He had circled four pairs of basketball shoes. The Nike Hyperdunk 2010s were \$124.99, and the Reebok Zig-Slashes were \$99.99. These shoes looked to Nadine more like black moon boots than basketball shoes. He also had circled some St. Patrick's green Adidas AdiPure with black stripes that were only \$89.99. The ones he'd made repeated circles around for her to see were black and red Nike Air Max Wavy, and they had been marked down from \$79.99 to \$59.99.

She knew the cheapest shoes weren't his first choice; he was trying in his way. The high school coach had approached him about playing on the high school's JV team and he was only in eighth grade. He deserved some good shoes. It broke her heart, seeing those cheap shoes circled over and over like that.

She said, "Let me get us out of all this traffic first. Then I'll change him." By which she meant, let's get all the way to Buford and get all the use we can out of that dirty diaper.

After that she tried to stay at the speed limit of fifty five through Charlotte, but traffic ripped and weaved around her until only a few miles after she'd been pulled over, she was back up to almost eighty, trying to keep someone from ramming her right up the ass.

\*

A month after the vacation at her sister's, Nadine's hours got cut because Harcourt & Pritt couldn't fill all their beds. She put in a request to work overnights so she could make some of it up with a shift differential, but no one was giving up any shifts. She called and cancelled the cable. She was getting mail from Charlotte lawyers—"Speeding in Mecklenburg County? We can help"—not to reduce the fine, but simply to keep the points off her license for a reasonable fee, which she was sure would be way more than the \$150.00 of the ticket and the court costs, and she couldn't even pay that. Damn them all; what a fucking scam.





One day in August, another letter came in the mail informing her that the PTO had voted to have all the children wear uniforms and that she could purchase acceptable ones at Wal-Mart or Target or Burlington. “I’m not wearing a damn uniform,” Bennie whined. “Why they making us wear uniforms, like we’re jailbirds or something?”

Maddie was on the floor with her arts and crafts case spread all out, drawing pictures. Rory was scribbling with Maddie’s colored pencils. Maddie said, “I want a uniform.” Rory agreed in his garbled baby talk that he did too.

“They want everybody to look the same. So rich kids don’t look any different than poor kids.”

Bennie said, “So poor kids don’t look like gangsters.” He said, “Rich kids won’t get their uniforms at Wal-Mart.”

Rory stood up and bent over for another pencil. Nadine caught a whiff of him. He needed a diaper change.

Her last paycheck was \$920.39. Her rent was \$760.00, which left \$160.39 for the month. She got some groceries: rice and dry beans; chicken legs and thighs were on sale so she bought them all to stuff her freezer full; two cases of Ramen noodles, a big box of Quaker oats, and three gallons of milk—Bennie could drink a gallon in two days by himself if she didn’t hawk over him. After that she had \$60.15 to buy gas for the month. She couldn’t buy any uniforms anywhere.

“Maybe I could home school,” she said to herself.

Maddie said, “I want to be home schooled.”

Rory babbled his agreement.

Bennie said, “No way.” He said, “I don’t want those broke ass old pants they have at Burlington. We’re going to Target for mine. Or Old Navy.”

\*

In October Nadine got a letter from the State of North Carolina Department of Transportation:

*Effective 12:01 a.m., 11/01/2010, your North Carolina driving privilege is scheduled for an indefinite suspension in accordance with general statute 20-24-1 for failure to appear... During this suspension, you are prohibited from driving a motor vehicle in the State of North Carolina.*

She laughed out loud. Fine, she thought. Fuck you. I won’t *drive in the State of North Carolina*. She crumpled the letter and threw it away.

The van was hemorrhaging oil now. People stopped at lights to tell her

that her motor was smoking, like she couldn’t see it right there in front of her face. But it kept running. A good van. She felt a genuine gratitude and affection for the poor old thing. It was her freedom, that van, what kept her mobile, and, sure, she was thankful for that. The kids weren’t getting sick. They were as strong and resilient as mutt dogs, like poor kids usually are. That much was a blessing too.

Her hours stayed cut. She fell further behind on the bills. She got one cash advance, and then couldn’t pay it back. Gas went up to \$3.22 a gallon, and she could barely keep fuel in the van, much less buy the one quart of oil it was bleeding into a black patch of dirt in front of their house each week. She mixed water into the milk to make it go farther. Bennie said, “This tastes like piss.” She said, “No, it tastes like water.” But he kept drinking it. The landlord dropped by some plastic that she and Bennie stapled over the windows, and she was thankful he did it while she was at work so that the matter of rent didn’t have to come up. She blocked off the back room by nailing a blanket over the door so they wouldn’t have to heat it. They blocked off the upstairs with plastic. They lived in the living room and her bedroom, the four of them, and stayed close to the space heaters. It wasn’t so bad; it was cozy. They played games and sang, and watched the two channels of fuzzy TV they could still get. *Cops* was one of the shows they watched. Maddie and Rory called the show “Bad boys, bad boys,” and cheered when it came on.

They had some Ramen noodles and frozen chicken left from her last check, and they still had heat. She didn’t have any money, but she still had \$60.00 left on her overdraft protection at the bank. That would feed them until she got paid again at the beginning of November. North Carolina could go fuck itself, she wasn’t paying them a damn thing; she daydreamed about writing them a letter telling them as much. That would feel good.

She could have written them a letter that would have shamed them. She wasn’t stupid, and she’d done some writing, had even taken a creative writing class one semester during her two years over at State. She’d hated it. All those little kids with money sitting inside those comfortable walls talking about subtlety and insight, using words like *epiphany* and *aba*. They hadn’t liked her story about the guy who made babies he didn’t help care for and cooked meth in his grandmother’s basement, and saw his best friend get shot dead by John Law, and then went to prison while the Law had his grandmother’s house torn down and put a lien on her property to pay for it. “It’s too much,” they’d said to her. “It’s too sensational.” The teacher had said, “It’s like trying to carry an iron safe in a canoe.” “But it really happened,”

she'd said. "That's not the point," the teacher had told her. All the students who had written their little boyfriend/girlfriend/coming-of-age stories had looked at her like she was stupid. What the fuck did they know about her world outside those walls, where people didn't have the luxury of sitting

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**What the fuck did they know about her world outside those walls, where people didn't have the luxury of sitting around waiting for epiphanies to pop like soft little orgasms inside their heads—out in her world is was all wild and violent change.**

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around waiting for epiphanies to pop like soft little orgasms inside their heads—out in her world it was all wild and violent change. She'd dropped the class. One semester after that she'd run out of money for classes anyway. Who was she kidding. Writing a letter wouldn't do her any more good than writing a story. She had other, more immediate, things to worry about.

\*

Her October paycheck was \$772.00. That's what had to get them through November. Her choice was to pay the rent, or buy food and gas so she could keep getting to work. She could look under the van and see oil dripping steadily from two different places now, and when she drove, the smoke streamed white around the edges of her hood like a steady smoldering fire under green leaves. The other day she drove to the library in the rain to drop off movies. Walking across the parking lot, she noticed the oil path she'd left on the lot, a steady string of little rainbow explosions, *kaplow, plow, plow*, leading right to where her van was parked. When she came back out, the oil rainbow had swirled from under the van and all the way to the silver Nissan beside her. The tire treads were smooth, and metal shined through in spots, some places even splitting off in little wiry threads. The next day, driving the kids to the YMCA before school, her hands trembled. She knew it was only a matter of time and they'd be stranded. She gripped the wheel and pressed lightly on the gas, and willed the van along.

That night the mail had three bills: car insurance of \$89.00 three times over, plus an unspecified reinstatement fee (her inspection sticker was four months past due, which she had to take care of before this, but she knew the van wouldn't pass without work, which she couldn't afford); a cut off notice from the phone company if she didn't get them their \$124.00 immediately;

and the electric bill for the last two months of \$170.93. Her heat was electric, she had to figure something out there. There was also a letter from the West Virginia DMV. She tore it open and read:

*Your privilege to operate motor vehicles in West Virginia will be suspended effective December 1, 2010, at 12:01 a.m., because North Carolina has filed with DMV the following non-compliance citation:*

*citation no: 3E43418*

*date of citation: June 23, 2010*

*court telephone no: (704) 686-0600*

*offense location: Charlotte*

*The reinstatement requirements listed in this order may change without prior notice. Any fees owed to the state in which the citation occurred should be paid to that state.*

They were all in cahoots, the fucking bastards. North Carolina had to have the \$150.00, plus a \$100.00 late fee, plus whatever court costs would be, and now West Virginia had to have \$85.00 from her, and she had to go to the DMV and prove that she was in the United States legally. Plus another \$50.00 to the North Carolina Department of Transportation, for whatever—pay some alcoholic to prop himself up in the middle of the road on a stop sign. The kids were all out front playing. Maddie rode her bike around the house, counting the laps to Nadine every time. She rode by, barely keeping her balance. The bike was too big. "One hundred and forty three," she said, which was a skip of about six laps. Rory sat on his yellow school bus scooter with handles on top and kicked it up and down the sidewalk. His little legs straightened behind him like a swimming duck's feet. Bennie was slam-dunking a volleyball on the low basketball rim down by the road. He looked up at her and shouted, "What's for dinner? I'm starving." Rory echoed, "I'm starving."

Inside, Nadine boiled the last three packets of beef Ramen noodles, only using two of the flavor packs because Bennie was starting to act like the taste made him gag. She had chicken thigh meat she'd boiled and frozen, which she thawed and chopped up and mixed into the noodles for some protein. She went to the front door and hollered that it was dinner time. Rory lunged sideward off his scooter and rolled in the grass. He pushed himself up and ran for the door. Bennie walked. Maddie was around back on her bike. It was dark outside now, but they were way out Davis Creek, with no one else around except this family of inbreds a ways down who shied off to themselves like a pack of raccoons. She and the kids were safe out here. She could gather them in and close the door; they had food; the heat was not cut

off; she had four diapers left for Rory: at least for this night, everything was okay.

\*

On December first she got her November pay, which was \$662.17. She made out a check for \$100.00 to AEP, put it in the envelope that came with the last cutoff notice which asked for the \$392.20 past due right now, and told her she had another \$173.43 on top of that for November. The \$100.00 would keep them from cutting her off. She'd worry about the \$465.63 when her next paycheck came. For December, they could block off her bedroom and all just stay in the living room and kitchen to keep it lower. She wrote out a check for \$400.00 to the landlord, which would bring what she owed him down to \$2,640.00, and keep him from throwing them out.

Maddie and Rory were watching *Dragon Tales* on PBS, the fuzzier of their two channels. The sound was good, but Nadine could barely make out the shapes of the dragons sometimes in all the crackling snow. The kids didn't seem to mind. Bennie was outside in the cold shooting hoops on the low rim. Nadine didn't have any stamps to put on the bills. When she deposited her check on the way home, she had kept out a five dollar bill so they could have a special evening. She and Bennie loaded up Maddie and Rory. Bennie's face glowed red from running in the cold, he wafted the smell of boy sweat and cold and grass into the van. With his face all chapped, his wet blue eyes look like an angel's. His nose ran. He snorted, wiped with his sleeve, snorted again.

They drove out the hollow, and out Davis Creek. They went into the South Charleston Kroger and found that Totino's pizzas were on sale for \$1.00 apiece. Bennie grabbed the supreme, and Maddie picked pepperoni. Nadine slid out a plain cheese for her and Rory to share. Bennie said, "We should get a movie tonight." The other two cheered. In the van Nadine fished around in the console and they all dug under the seats, and they found enough coins to add to her \$1.00 and change to get a non-new release at Hollywood Video. Even Nadine was excited. At least for tonight, things would be okay. They would eat pizza and watch a movie.

They spent over an hour inside the Hollywood Video. Maddie was dead set on getting *Air Bud* which she'd seen from the library probably seven times already. Bennie refused to consider *Air Bud*. He tried to be mature about it, offering to watch *My Dog Skip* with her again if she had to have a dog movie. Eventually they all agreed on *Independence Day*, which neither of them seemed all that excited about, but at least they could both live with it.

The Hollywood Video was right beside a Starbucks. In line, they could

smell the coffee.

Bennie said, "Those cappuccinos smell good."

Nadine said, "They cost four dollars apiece." She saw through the window, John Law pull up beside her van and get out. He was a big man—fat—with dark hair and bushy eyebrows. He paused and looked at her inspection sticker. It was bad. She remembered that she didn't have a license anymore. Her heart started racing.

"Damn," Bennie said. "Four dollars."

Rory grabbed a fat pickle in a packet of brine from the candy stand. "Mommy," he said.

She watched the cop walk into the Starbucks. He turned at the door and looked at her van again.

Bennie was telling Rory to put the pickle back and Rory was whining. The woman in front of them got her videos handed around to her and went out the door. Nadine put the video on the counter.

"Is this all?" the register girl asked.

"Yes." Nadine watched the parking lot.

"Twelve dollars," the girl said.

"For one movie?"

"We aren't renting anymore."

Only then did Nadine notice all the signs. This Hollywood Video was going out of business. They were selling off their inventory. They couldn't rent a movie here.

"Come on," Nadine said, as she picked up Rory.

"What about a movie?" Bennie asked.

"I want a movie," Maddie said.

"Get to the van this minute," Nadine said. With Rory dangling from her arms, she burst through the door and ran across the parking lot. He did a singsong, "Woah, woah, woah," with her every jolting step. She put him in the side door and told him to get in his car seat. Bennie started to strap Maddie in, but Nadine said, "She can do it. Get in." He did. She saw the cop at the door, coming out with his big cup with the cardboard ring around it for holding hot shit. He looked right at her and she looked right back at him. She suddenly got an urgent need to pee. He gave her a nod and a friendly wave of his arm, indicating that he wanted her to wait for him just a second, no big deal. Her heart jumped and pounded. She started the van and ripped out of the parking space. As she veered out onto old 60 and gunned it for Montrose, she saw him hurrying to his car, holding out his coffee so as not to spill it.

She flew through South Charleston, running lights. The van motor started clicking and she could smell the oil burning. She got to Davis Creek before John Law's lights came blaring in behind her. She'd driven this road a couple times a day for several years now, and that was her advantage. She knew the curves, and she cranked into them tight as a NASCAR driver. If something was coming the other way, they'd just all be dead, but she couldn't stop now. She had to get them back to that little house, where they could be safe in the living room, and eat pizza, and watch TV. Curve after curve, she took, the van went swaying and listing like a boat in water, and she kept control. John Law's lights would disappear, then swing back in behind her on a straight stretch, come up fast and hard on her ass. His blue and reds flashed and his siren wailed. There'd be others on the way by now, but they had to come out this same road.

Bennie stared straight out the front window with his head back against the headrest like an astronaut, his eyes set and scared. The dollar pizzas slid across the floorboard in their slick plastic bags and fell into the van's door well. She didn't chance a look back at Maddie and Rory. No one said anything. Even Rory seemed to understand how important this situation was for their family. Nadine took a tight curve. The yellow curve sign said thirty was the maximum safe speed, but she took it as sixty, using all of the road and both gravelly berms, and kept control, and punched the gas as she entered another straight stretch. The engine clicked hard, but dug in. Two more curves and they'd be at their hollow road.

John Law's lights didn't appear behind her. In her rearview it was just dark now.

"I think I lost him," she said into the van. No one said anything in response.

She turned on their road, and drove at a normal speed. The van engine clacked even louder. Smoke poured from under the hood. It would carry them the rest of the way to the house. After that, who knew. They were almost there. Her heart was filled with love for the old van. Such a good van, getting her free of John Law in his fast car. Fuck him.

She and Bennie ushered the little ones into the house. Bennie micro-waved the pizzas while she paced and peeked out the front door. The pizza smell filled their plastic- and blanket-shrouded living room.

John Law did not come.

As her breathing and heart rate calmed, she began to feel a small light inside, a little glow of happiness; there'd be hell to pay for running, but tonight they could have their pizza and be safe here together in this hot little

room. Eventually she sat on the couch beside Bennie, and ate a chunk of Rory's pizza.

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Now here she is in the jailhouse, handcuffed to a chair that is bolted to the floor. Last night, after they ate the pizza and tried to watch some fuzzy TV, she and Bennie put Maddie and Rory into their sleeping bags, and the two little ones colored until they fell asleep in the middle of scattered crayons and coloring books. Bennie went into the kitchen and sat at the table and flipped through his *Eastbay* catalogue. His legs bounced up and down on his toes, which he did that all the time anyway. At one point he said, "Guess I won't be playing JV ball."

A little after three in the morning—Bennie was still in the kitchen but he wasn't making any noise, the other two were asleep, and Nadine had dozed in and out sitting on the couch but was awake—John Law came with his bright lights, up the hollow road. Four State Troopers spread their cars in front of her house, shined their lights like it was a gangster hideout. One of them walked around her van looking at it. She didn't see the one with the bushy eyebrows. He was a South Charleston city cop, not a state cop.

Then John Law was at her door. A young man with a military crew cut and razor rash on his neck. He asked her name. He told her she was under arrest and read her rights. Bennie stood watching from the kitchen doorway and the other two didn't even wake up, not that Nadine saw. One of the cops got on his cell phone and said, "Are you on call?" Then he said, "I have three minors over here. How many have you had?" Then he said, "I'm sorry about that. We're running the mother in. You need to come get these minors."

Nadine tries to remember the charges now. It was all so strange and dreamlike, though it only happened a couple hours ago. Failure to something or other, some kind of endangerment, a couple other charges. Those other charges didn't stick in her head because he'd lead off with the biggie: manslaughter. She's charged with manslaughter. Driving her down here, the cop told her the car had rolled, clipped a tree. The man's arm had been smashed and torn from his torso and he was dead. The cop said to her, "He has a wife. One kid. Seven years old. That's a crying shame isn't it? Such a waste. And for what?"

The first thing Nadine felt when he said this to her was rage. She didn't ask the Law to come racing after her. He could have just given someone her license number and gone on drinking his goddamn \$4.00 coffee. All she wanted was one more night of peace and freedom with her kids.

Then she cried because a man was dead and it was her fault, and because

she had lost her kids probably for good this time.

Sitting here, she sees her future: prison time, kids gone. This is when the realization descends on her. Those kids will be taken care of. Maybe they'll all be kept together. Some kind soul will step up and offer to buy Bennie his basketball shoes.

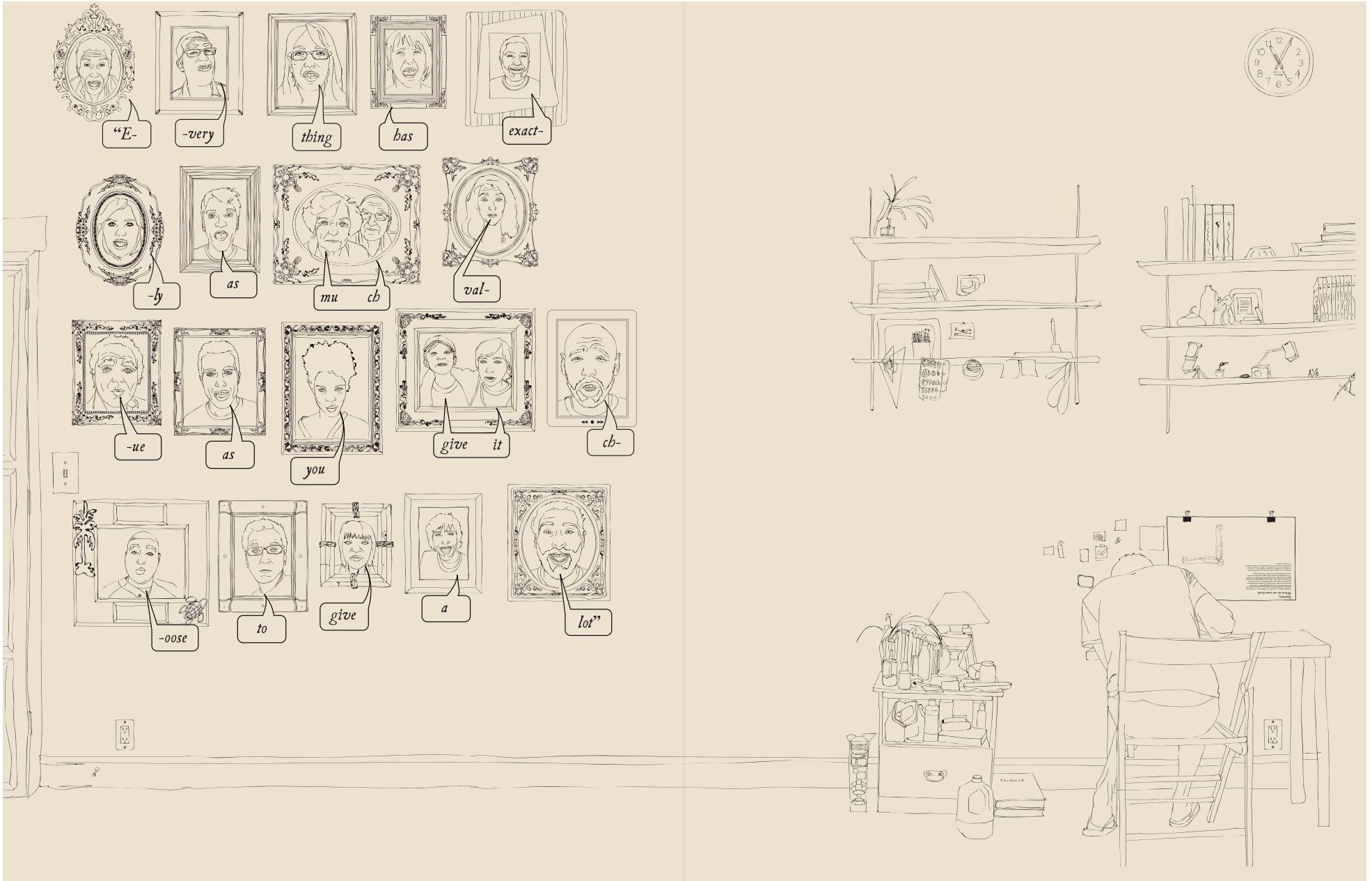
It's not her responsibility anymore, making those hard choices to keep them fed and warm. This is her freedom. For the first time that she can remember, she's truly and utterly free. John Law had to die for it, she had to lose her kids—which is tearing her up inside, the image of that fat foster mom giving them their cereal in the morning instead of her—and that's a hard price to pay. Such a hard price.

Hard as the price is though, she's out from under. It is all out of her control now. All she has to do is sit back and let it happen. They'll bring her some breakfast. Her kids will be eating somewhere, eating real food. So this is what freedom feels like. God she feels so light, she's never felt this light before in her life; if she weren't chained to this chair she feels like she could float up and bounce along lightly against the drop-ceiling tiles.

Her body goes limp. The smell of buttered popcorn and the sound of John Law chattering to himself over the radio swirl all around her. She takes a deep breath, keeps her eyes closed, and smiles.

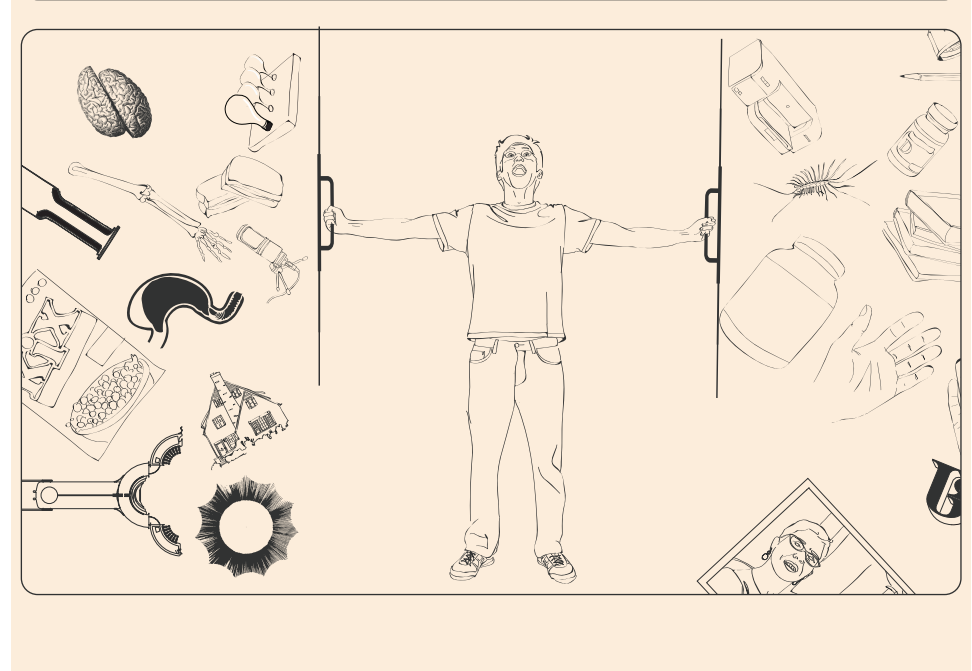
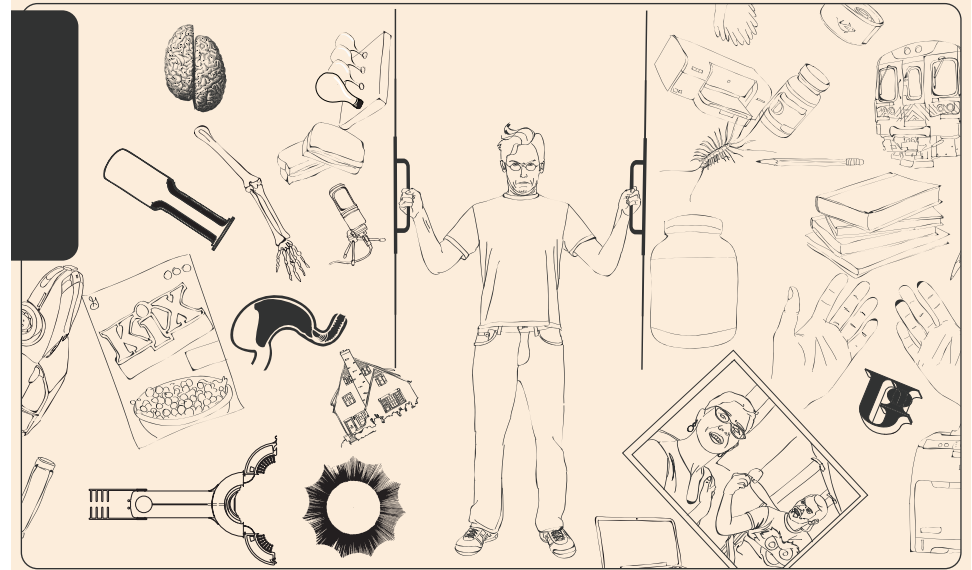
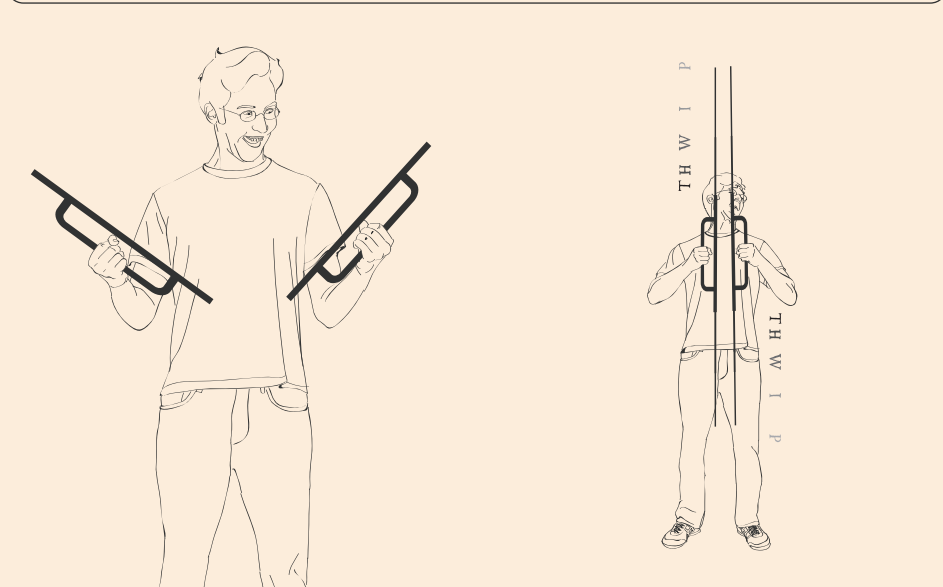
# Easy Pieces Comics

by Neil Dvorak

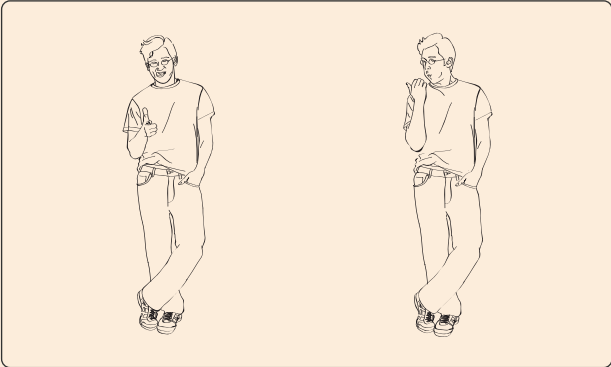


You know where I am.

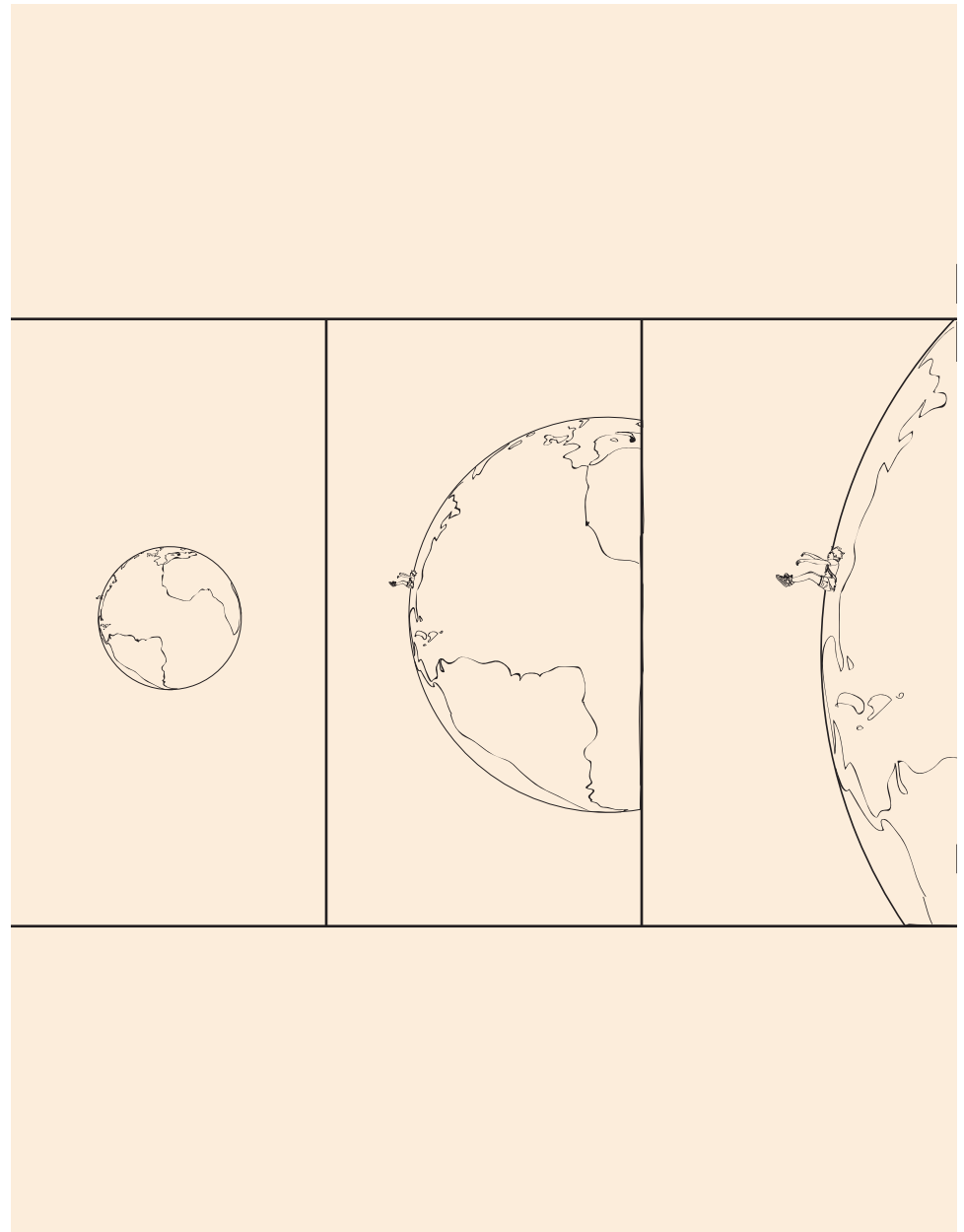
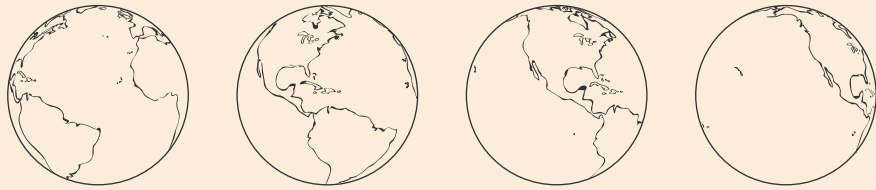


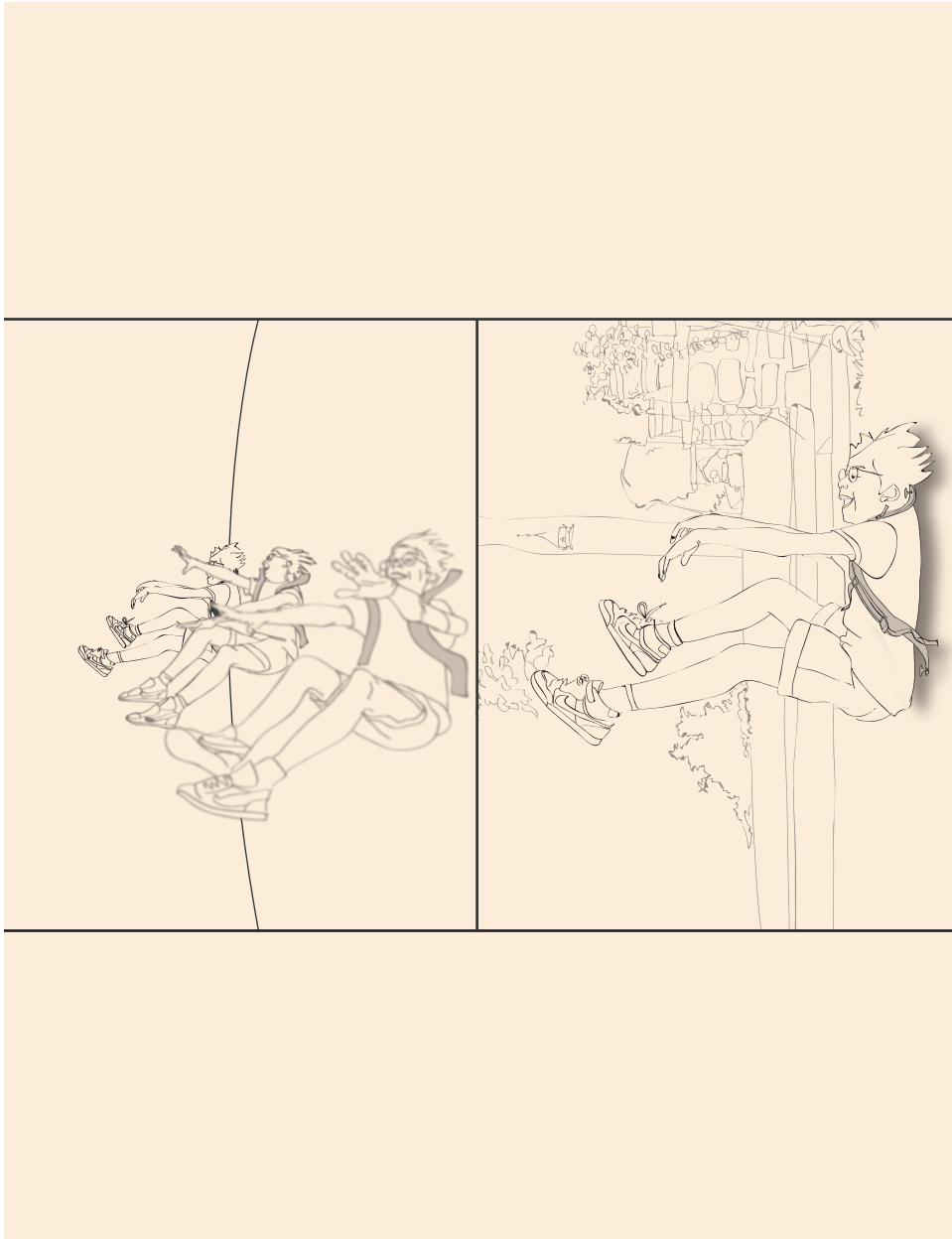






Me &  
My Dad &  
A long time ago







# Tell Us What You Want

by Ira Sukrungruang

I don't tell Maggie about our three-year-old son failing to use the potty again. I don't tell her about the conversation that ensued, the lecture on the necessity of informing me, his parental unit, when he needed to poop and that pooping his pants was not what big boys do. I don't tell my wife what our beautiful boy said in his beautiful boy way: "OK, Dad, I'll poop next week then" or how I stood there fuming with his soiled slacks in one hand and sanitary wipes in the other and baby powder lodged in my armpit or how frustration washed over me, building first in the chest, radiating like a tsunami throughout the rest of my body until I was sure my eyeballs would burst out. I don't tell Maggie it wasn't just about our son refusing to use the toilet for the second time that day, but also, it was about the restaurant closing down; it was about this feeling that something was adrift in our lives, something uncomfortable, like food stuck in teeth. I don't tell her what I said to our son about his scheduled poop next week—"No, JJ, you poop every day. You are a pooping machine"—or how I made him go to his room and he asked, "Can I pee in my room?" and I said, "No, JJ, you pee and poop in the potty," only to find later that he did pee in his room.

I don't tell Maggie any of this because she doesn't let me. As soon as she comes home from rehearsal she launches into the narrative of her evening at the community center with the other wannabe thespians. The effects of being on the stage still must have carried over because she projects her voice, as if she's talking to an audience member in the back row of the theater, instead of to her bedraggled husband no more than a few feet away. Maggie talks with a slight French accent, even though she's not French but Thai-American, even though she has been cast as Liat, one of the lovers in the musical *South Pacific*, and Liat is neither French nor Thai but Polynesian.

"Lower your voice," I say, disrupting her. "JJ's in bed."

Maggie puts her hand to her mouth and whispers, "Sorry. The theater follows you home. That's what the director tells us." She moves as if she is gliding on a dance floor, the same way she did when she worked the restau-

rant, effortlessly, floating on the very tip of her toes. "Don't you think that's funny?" she asks.

"What?" I look out the dark window, distracted.

"You weren't listening."

"Long and messy night," I say.

"I was telling you about the new cast member." Her smile widens and I can tell the weekly whitening treatments are working. "You won't believe who it is."

I shrug.

"Bradley Custer," she says.

I don't know the name. I don't know much, only that I want to put my head down on a pillow and drift away, my wife beside me or not.

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**I don't tell her what I said to our son about his scheduled poop next week—"No, JJ, you poop every day. You are a pooping machine."**

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"My ex-boyfriend."

"Oh," I say. "That Bradley."

That Bradley. The one before me. The one Maggie almost married. The one who skipped town one afternoon and left a note saying he was heading to Hollywood to make it big and to hell with this Podunk town because he wasn't coming back even if they dragged him kicking and screaming. That Bradley.

"He hasn't changed a bit," she says and does a little spin without spilling a drop of wine. It's a dance move, I'm sure, something the director choreographed. I can't help but be irritated with anything she does. Her voice, her stories, her theatrical-ness. It's as if she is playing the role of my wife, as if she is playing the role of JJ's mother, but her real character, the one I fell in love with, is diluted in this act.

"He's gotten pudgier," she says, "but, man, he can sing. That voice of his, I swear." Maggie sits on the sofa next to me and leans back looking at the ceiling, the wine glass held between two fingers. I wonder what she's thinking, wonder whether she regrets marrying me, having JJ, the restaurant, regrets the path she has taken in her life. She's Buddhist, and she talks a lot about paths and roads and how everything is predicated on an individual's choice, and I wonder if she were presented with a choice—me or this other

life—which would she choose?

“Bradley’s taking the role of Cable,” she says, “my opposite. Donny Wilson dropped out because his mom died. Couldn’t sing to save the world. Now, the show is saved.”

“It’s community theater, not Broadway,” I say, though shouldn’t.

She narrows her eyes. It’s the Shirley MacLaine look, the one from the movie *Terms of Endearment*. She used it a few times in the last play, *MacBeth*, as Lady MacBeth. I hate that look. I hate how her lips purse together like an unwelcomed kiss, hate the consternation etched into her forehead, hate the deepened crow’s feet around her eyes. “The director says we should never think about what we do as only a community play.” Hate her indignant voice. “He says what we do is art for the world.”

I look away. Aim my eyes at a photo of us from three years ago. There she was a plain Jane, wearing the soft flannel I loved so much, her hair straight and long and black, her face clear of makeup. The woman next to me now is someone I do not know. Her bangs are teased blond, her shirt’s low-cut, her jeans too tight, her face layered in foundation. She talks with her hands, her entire body. She says everything with the tongue of melodrama. I call this woman The Actress, stressing the slither of those two S’s at the end of the word, like those on Lifetime TV, who cry without tears, who are more spark than splendor.

Outside, the autumn breeze blows down more leaves from our hickory, and I know tomorrow I will spend two hours raking, only to have JJ jump into the piles so I’ll have to rake again. And I know tomorrow won’t be any different from today, and the thought makes me slump further into myself, into the cushions of the couch.

JJ cries in his room, loud and breathy. A bad dream cry. Maggie knows it’s her turn, knows this cry will last only minutes before he will drift back to sleep. She saunters to our son’s bedroom, The Actress, with the poise and elegance of an Audrey Hepburn, wine sloshing in her glass with each calculated step.

\*

Four years ago, I would’ve woken up at six in the morning, kissed Maggie’s forehead and told her I’d see her later, and then driven to Mike and Maggie’s on the main strip to prepare for the day. I’d chop vegetables. Knead dough. Start the ovens. I’d get the stock going. Weigh meat and fish into appropriate portions. Devein shrimp. Debone chicken. I’d ground up spices. Refill the salt and pepper shakers. The soy sauce bottles. The sugar containers. I’d wash windows, dust counters, vacuum floors. I’d come up with

the daily specials, which I’d write on the chalkboard by the entrance of the restaurant.

Mike and Maggie’s was an everything restaurant, which meant it served all types of cuisine—Italian, Mediterranean, Asian Fusion. We catered to the meat and potato conservatives. The eclectic foodies. The meatless vegans. My menu was seven-pages long—descriptions of dishes like erotic poetry. There was even a *Tell Us What You Want* option where our customers could order something off menu and we’d try to prepare it, try with all our power to please our customers. Sometimes, we couldn’t; sometimes we failed because we were missing an essential ingredient. But even then, our customers left satisfied.

I spent my days at the restaurant. Maggie, too. She waitressed, bartended, cooked. She played these roles perfectly. It was us and the food and how the food made people feel. We’d end each night in the bedroom—each night!—making love despite our exhaustion, despite our skin smelling of oil and spices. But what was better than the subtle taste of ginger on the nape of the neck, a hint of mint behind the ears, garlic-infused sweat? This was pleasure at its most heightened state. This was, I suppose, how JJ came to us, those passionate nights after work.

The restaurant closed for reasons restaurants close; they just do. Happiness does not pay bills. Happiness does not bring consistent customers. JJ is not the reason for the end of Mike and Maggie’s. JJ is not the reason for where Maggie and I are now. He isn’t. If anything, he is the product of the happiest time of my life, and because he is, every moment I’m with him is heartbreaking.

Like this morning.

I’m watching him in his room. He doesn’t know it. I’m watching him look at his toys, deciding which one he wants to play with: the plastic spatula, the pudgy bunny, the army man. He turns from the toys and to look out the bedroom window, where the sun is filtering dust into gold specks. He looks at the gold specks, swiping at his nose. He picks up the spatula and tries to hit the specks with the spatula. He laughs to himself and then stares at the gold specks again, mouth slightly parted, frozen, his brain computing, memory cataloguing. He smiles and then realizes I’ve been watching him all this time.

“Daddy,” he says.

“JJ,” I say.

He points at the gold dust.

I nod.

“Mommy,” he says.  
 “At the bank. Work.”  
 “Me and you again.”  
 “Every day, buddy.”  
 “Hungry,” he says.  
 “Carrots?”  
 “No.”  
 “Peas?”  
 “No.”  
 “What then?”  
 “Cookie.”  
 “Cookie?”  
 He nods.  
 “Of course.”  
 “Daddy,” he says and reaches out for me.

And this is what I miss—to be needed. To be wanted. To matter. Because to this beautiful boy, I do, despite what the day will bring—frustration, annoyance, fatigue—this keeps me going.

I pick him up. I kiss his cheek. I get him a cookie.

\*

I despise the sound—the ting of Maggie’s phone indicating another text message. The ting is sharp and I feel it vibrate in my bones. She’s holding JJ in her lap, as he watches Saturday morning cartoons. JJ doesn’t like the sound either, and turns and glares at her—that Shirley MacLaine indignation.

“Sorry,” Maggie says. “Mommy’s friend needs help.”

Mommy’s friend always needs help. Mommy’s friend is “depressed.” Mommy’s friend is “broken hearted.” Mommy’s friend’s dream came crashing down on him because he failed as an actor. Mommy’s friend has been needing help for the last two weeks because Mommy’s phone tings every minute, because Mommy is on the computer typing long emails. Sometimes Mommy’s friend calls and I listen to Mommy’s laughter. I listen to Mommy’s side of the conversation that always sounds like she’s consoling a baby deer.

JJ points to the phone. “Quiet phone,” he says.

Maggie doesn’t see or hear him, but is rapidly tapping away at a message.

I pull JJ on my lap and hold him tight. He smells like dirt.

“Poor guy,” Maggie says more to her phone than to anyone in particular. “Some floozy ripped his heart out. Just what he needs right now.”

“Poor guy,” I say.

JJ crawls off my lap to get closer to the TV. He takes the remote and turns the volume up. I don’t like how close he is, don’t like what it is doing to his eyes, but I let it go this time.

“He tells me he vomits hourly,” she says.

“Poor guy,” I say.

“The director says to use that sorrow, and Bradley has, and his performances have been phenomenal, but all that sadness. It’s hard.”

“Poor guy,” I say.

“He’s come back broken.”

“Poor guy,” I say.

Maggie looks at me and tilts her head. She opens her mouth to say something, but the phone tings again—that fuckin’ ting!—and I’ve lost her.

I move to the kitchen. I take out the cutting board. I try to imagine myself inside Mike and Maggie’s again. That small kitchen. The warmth from the burners. The smell of bread and curry and grilled meat. I work on JJ’s

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**Keep going until you've hit someplace, and that someplace will provide all the answers you've been searching for, and that someplace will love you and need you, and you will know why you exist on this planet.**

---

afternoon meal. I take out the carrots and chop them into two-inch sticks. I slice cheddar cheese into small squares. I cut a hotdog into four pieces and slice little X’s into the ends, so they’ll flower open when cooked. I pour milk and chocolate syrup into a sippy cup. All for JJ. My boy.

I’m retreating, I know. I’m not saying what I need to say, afraid to say, afraid of what I might hear.

Maggie’s on the phone now, repeating, “It’s OK, it’s OK,” and I want to say it isn’t OK. None of this is OK. I want to say I need you, not JJ, but me, the other poor guy, whose dream came crashing down on him too, who now is unemployed and unhappy, who feels alone and adrift.

“You have every right to feel this way,” Maggie says to the phone.

No, I don’t. This sadness, this deep, deep well, is not anyone’s right.

\*

I go on car rides in the middle of the night because I can’t still my brain, which whirls and whirls and whirls, and I become angry that Maggie is snoring softly beside me, oblivious to everything. I think I can drive off,

## Fiction Fix

take the highway out of town and not turn back. It would be that simple, an act of the body without the brain. Press the accelerator. Don't look in the rearview mirror, no matter what. Not even if you see your son back there waiting for you. Not even if you see your wife. Your restaurant. You keep going until you hit someplace and that someplace will provide all the answers you've been searching for and that someplace will love you and need you, and you will know why you exist on this planet. It's a bit existential, I realize. Maggie would evoke the great director. She would say, "The director tells us we should never run from what we fear, but face it head on." The director is a tool. He is a half-balding man who teaches part-time at the community college and drinks too much. And I think this is stupid. She's stupid. Bradley is stupid. The play. Our life. My whatever. Just stupid. But I always reach a certain point on the drive where I round back, and then I sit inside the car in the driveway, looking at our home, noticing how tall the grass is, noticing JJ's toys scattered in the yard, and sometimes I nod off, waking when the sun butters the horizon, and sometimes, like this morning, Maggie finds me before she heads off to work. I think I'm dreaming because there is a cloudy haze around her head and she says something I'm not hearing. I roll down the window, and for a split second, I think she's come to me and this is the very moment I wake from this bad dream, like the ones JJ often has, the ones that jolt him into tears.

"JJ is hungry," she says. "He peed his pants, too."

"OK," I say.

"I'm late for work," she says. "I would've cleaned him if I wasn't late."

"OK," I say. I get out of the car and close the door.

"I'll call to check on you guys later."

"OK," I say.

"Bye," and Maggie doesn't move to leave but stands there, looking at the ground, and I have the urge to hold her, to reach out and touch the back of her neck, but my hands remain deep in my pockets.

\*

It's been raining, and JJ wanted to go the park, but I told him it would be muddy. He has Maggie's fastidiousness, so he cringes at the word muddy. He doesn't like wet messes. Ironic.

I take him on a car ride instead, and in the backseat, he stares out the window, naming things. Car. Tree. Sign. Leaves. Clouds. I sneak glances at him, and he's content with where he is and what's he doing. Contentment comes easy for him.

I turn down the main strip. I point to the large brick building on the

corner. "Library," I say.

"Library," JJ says.

I point to the gas station.

"Gas station."

"Gas station," he says.

I point to grocery store.

"Grocery store."

"Grocery store," he says.

I know this area well, know it for the 1,098 days I had driven these streets, past these places en route to the restaurant, and I know that on the 1,098th day, I drove away from the restaurant for the last time.

It is up ahead. I can see the red-tiled roof in the distance, the blinking neon sign that says open. It's now a flower shop.

"Mommy," JJ says.

I look to where his finger is pointing, and it is Maggie. She's sitting on a bench, outside the bank, a purple sweater wrapped around her shoulders. The rain has eased up, spitting, and she's eating a sandwich.

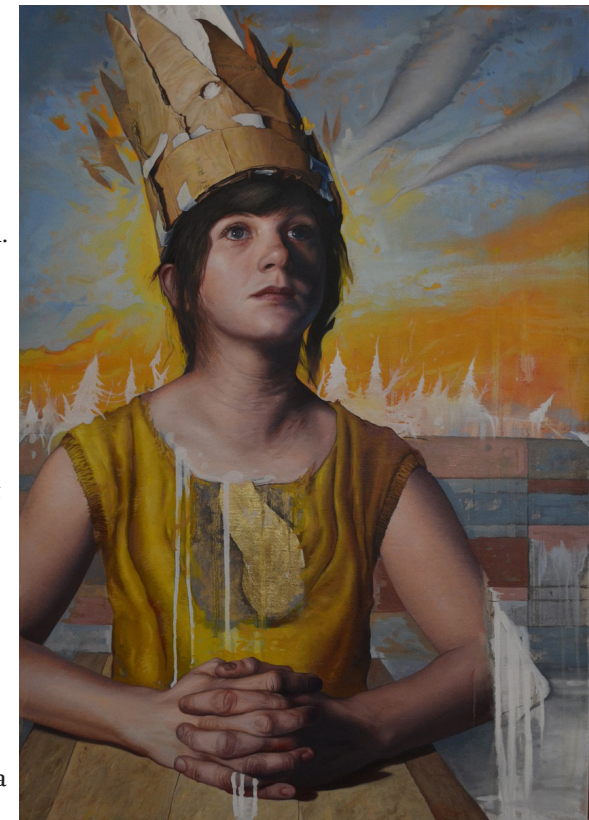
"Mommy," JJ says.

I slow the car down. Park it in front of the hardware store across the street.

"Mommy," JJ says.

When the restaurant first closed, the two of us did not do anything for a week. We held each other. We sobbed. We lamented. We were a we. After a week, Maggie said she was through with the sad sap mentality. She said it was time to put our lives back together. She wrote a list of rules for herself, and has been following that list ever since. But I was stuck. What were our lives without the restaurant? What were our lives when our dream no longer existed? Perhaps I'm projecting. Perhaps it wasn't her dream at all. That week, Maggie found a job at the bank, tried out for *Grease* and got the lead part of Sandy, and from then on our lives changed.

I remember Maggie telling me about her sadness once, a time before





me, before JJ, before even Bradley. “Sometimes you have to look inward,” she said, but as hard as I’ve tried, I see nothing.

Maggie doesn’t notice us. She doesn’t raise her eyes up from her sandwich, and when she finally does, she turns toward the restaurant and takes another bite. Right now, she’s the girl I met five years ago. I thought then, as I do at this moment, that this woman was/is miraculous the way miracles are. I should tell her this. Instead, I watch. JJ watches. Even he knows this is what we are meant to do. Eventually, she rises, brushes the crumbs from the front of her blouse, and returns to work. There is nothing more for us here, so I turn the car around, head back home, the red of the restaurant disappearing in the distance, and JJ, again, begins to name the things he sees along the way.

\*

The play opens in two days. *South Pacific* posters have found their way into every open space in town, onto the bulletin boards at the cafes and grocery stores and stapled on the telephone poles. Maggie’s in character most of the time, talking with a soft Asian accent that makes JJ laugh and say, “Funny talk.” She asks that I make Hawaiian food for the week, so I prepare luau pork, poi, lomi lomi. She asks if it’s OK if she sleeps in the other room to mentally prepare. “The director says immersion is what makes successful actresses.” And there she emerges, The Actress, who floats across our house, who sings melodic tunes, who brings a guest with her after rehearsal before opening night.

“This is Bradley,” The Actress says.

“Brad,” I say, sticking out my hand.

“It’s Bradley,” he says and takes it firmly.

“My apologies,” I say.

Brad turns from me. “And this must be the little man,” he says.

JJ hides behind my leg. Brad is big and blond and without a chin. Brad kneels down and his knees pop and he groans. “Can you give me five?” he says, and puts his hand up high. JJ shakes his head. I love him in this instant more than any other time in his life.

“JJ,” says The Actress. “Be cordial.”

JJ shakes his head.

“He’s shy,” I say to Brad.

“He normally isn’t,” says The Actress.

Brad rises and grunts. “That’s cool, you know. I’m scary looking.”

“Don’t be silly,” The Actress says and gently puts a hand on his shoulder. “You’re wonderful.”

Brad is kinda scary. He looks like a baby man child. Put a bonnet on him, stick a pacifier in those pouty lips, put him in a diaper, and that’s what he’d be—baby man child. This thought makes me smile.

JJ tugs on my leg. He wants me to lift him up. I do. He points at Brad. “Tell man to go.”

“JJ,” The Actress says. “That’s not very nice to say.”

“Man go,” JJ says.

“You’re not being a good boy,” The Actress says.

“It’s OK,” says Brad, smiling his baby man child smile. “I’m not offended.”

“You’re going to think we’ve raised a heathen,” The Actress says.

“Never,” says Brad.

“Our son is not a heathen,” I say. “Isn’t that right, JJ?”

JJ nods, though he doesn’t know why.

The Actress stares at me, as if this is my fault, as if I have implanted this behavior into our son. “He’s not normally like this,” she says. “He’s normally a good boy.”

“He is a good boy,” I say and kiss his cheek. He squirms and giggles.

“Kids, you know,” Brad says. “Maybe I should go.”

“Sit.” The Actress points to the couch. “We need to practice.”

“Mommy,” JJ says. “Man go home.”

“You aren’t being hospitable,” says The Actress, “He’s our guest.”

“I want Mommy and Daddy,” JJ says.

Brad sits crossed-legged, laughing and holding the bridge of his nose. It’s an actor’s laugh—fake, controlled.

“JJ,” the Mom eyes come out, “you’re being disrespectful. You know what happens to disrespectful boys?”

JJ’s little forehead crinkles.

“No cookies. Forever.”

JJ begins to cry and I start rocking him. His cry has never sounded so beautiful. It’s like the sizzle of garlic, the bubble of boiling broth. It’s loud and messy, full of snorts and snot.

The Actress looks at me, widens her eyes. “Can you do something?”

“I can,” I say, but I don’t. I stand there with my crying son, bouncing him up and down, as he hides his face in the nape of my neck, and I can feel the wetness run down my back, and I’m OK with this. More than OK. This is my exclamation point. This is my message.

“I’ll go,” I say after a minute. “Nice to meet you, Brad.” I turn with JJ in my arms to the kitchen for a box of cookies, and for the rest of the day, we

will gorge ourselves in crumbly delights until our bellies ache.

\*

Later that night, after I put JJ to sleep, I check on The Actress and her friend only to see him crying on her shoulders, the baby man child, and I'm almost tempted to ask if he needs a pacifier. My wife rocks him, her arms around the fleshy parts of him, and I'm left in the silence of the house, watching.

\*

On opening night, JJ and I sit in the front of the theater, in a special section reserved for family members of the cast. He is in a shirt and tie, though he's been wiggling the tie around so it's askew. The Actress has been nervous the entire day, pacing the house, reciting her lines over and over to herself. She's like this before every play, a ball of unraveling yarn. She's so frantic that I think there's no way she'll get it together, but when the curtain parts and the music begins, she is the most elegant character on stage, the lights kissing her white skin, reflecting off her black hair. JJ claps and points and says, "Mommy," and I shake my head and say, "Liat."

I'm moved, despite off tune singing, despite fumbled lines. I'm moved by Bradley, and understand how he thought he might make it because he is damn good. I'm moved by this community play because somehow I feel it is singing to me some essential lesson.

When I used to cook at the restaurant, I sometimes cried during the busiest moments of the day, not because I felt overwhelmed, but because I mattered to people. What I was doing mattered, and I remember Maggie passing me in the kitchen and giving me loving touches before delivering plates or making another drink, and how at the end of the day, she would sometimes cry, too.

"Why are you crying?" I'd ask.

"Because," she'd say. "Sometimes a girl has to cry."

And sometimes a boy does too. Like at this moment, when Bradley's character dies and Liat is left to mourn her lost love, and I'm thinking it isn't Bradley's character, but me, on stage, and I'm thinking I have died, and Liat, Maggie, no matter how hard she sings, I won't wake because there is nothing in me to wake.

"Daddy," JJ whispers, "I pooped my pants."

I hear him.

"Daddy," he says again.

It is as if he's at the other end of a tunnel.

"I pooped my pants," he says.

I don't move.

"I pooped my pants," my son says, louder and louder and louder. There are shushes and grumbles, but I remain unstirred.

"I pooped my pants! I pooped my pants! I. Pooped. My. Pants!"

He is so loud the play stops and the ushers are asking me to take care of my son. "Sir," they keep saying, "Sir," and Bradley's man child face peeks from backstage, and the actors and orchestra are looking at one another, not sure what to do because the director never prepared them for this situation, the one where a three-year-old boy is screaming that he has pooped his pants and the father absolutely does nothing because he has recognized something in himself, his life, his marriage, and that recognition has stopped his heart, his brain, his every extremity. Maggie rushes off the stage to JJ, who is crying, and she is in costume, and her face is layered in makeup and it is smeared because of her very real tears, and she says in a voice that is her own and it is loud and anguished, and worst of all, ashamed: "What's wrong with you? Goddammit, what's wrong with you?"



JASON JOHN  
*Paintings*









# The Porta-Potty

by Eric Barnes

We wake up on a Wednesday to find that a massive steel dumpster has been set up across the street from our house. The neighbors are remodeling their home.

“The dumpster is an eyesore,” another neighbor, Shelby, is saying with great frustration, speaking to Nora and me as the three of us stand in the street. “And obviously this is a harbinger of an extended phase of workmen, pickup trucks and discarded fast food containers.”

Nora and I nod in agreement, though my own sense of concern is, in truth, not particularly high.

“But of course,” Shelby says, “none of that is what worries me most.”

I glance toward the dumpster. I turn back to Shelby. After a moment, I offer, “Teenagers going dumpster diving?”

“No!” she says in exasperation. I find that Shelby often speaks to me in exasperation, starting her sentences to me with a short yell, shaking her head as she starts to speak, sometimes absently reaching out to slap me on the arm.

I’ve realized that the more exasperated she gets, the more obnoxious I become.

I say to her, “Nails in the street that will give you a flat tire?”

“No!” she says again. Then she pauses. “Well, actually, I hadn’t thought about that, but yes, I’m worried about that too now.” She points toward the dumpster. “What I’m really worried about, however, is that *porta-potty!*”

I look again. I hadn’t even noticed the tall plastic porta-potty that’s been dropped on the far side of the dumpster.

“Oh my,” I say.

“Exactly!” Shelby exclaims. “The smell, the sounds, just its presence!”

Shelby is one of those people whose young children wear ironed dresses. On Sunday afternoons, she herself is always dressed in a casually elegant ensemble. She says words like *ensemble*. She says words like *harbinger*. She drops Italian phrases into otherwise routine assessments of shrubbery, table settings, and Christmas light displays. She is a gourmet cook. She attended an ancient and obscure liberal arts college in upper New England and, unlike me—who also attended an obscure liberal arts college in upper New Eng-

land—she seems to have remembered everything that she learned.

Despite all this, Nora and I like her immensely. She’s a great observer of the foibles and oddities of the people on our street, a regular sidekick to the observations Nora and I are endlessly making about the comings and goings of the people around us.

Maybe more importantly, Nora and I have realized that Shelby’s perfection is porous. Mutable. And less a source of pride or arrogance, but of deep vulnerability.

“I woke up very early this morning to call my sister in Europe,” she told Nora and me not long after we all met. “But when I got back to the bedroom, I realized I couldn’t get back in bed.”

“You’re one of those people who can’t fall back to sleep?” Nora asks.

“No, not at all,” Shelby says. “It’s just that when I got back to the bedroom, David had already made the bed.”

Nora nods. I stare.

In a moment, I say, “I don’t understand.”

Nora pokes me.

Shelby stares quizzically. “Well,” she says, voice taking on a motherly, vaguely patronizing tone. “The bed was already *made*.”

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**I am, for the most part, without ingrained social graces. The norms and conventions of good behavior were never clearly explained to me. This can be good and this can be bad.**

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“Why couldn’t you get back into a made up bed?” I ask.

Nora steps on my toe.

“Well,” Shelby starts, then stops. “I don’t really know, actually.”

“I think you’re old enough that you can get back into a made up bed,” I say. “Frankly, for me, the fact that it was already made, that would only make it more attractive.”

Shelby pauses. Considering. “What does it say about me that I won’t get into a bed that’s already made?” she asks.

Nora shrugs. I squint my eyes.

“You two think I’m crazy,” she says, looking carefully from Nora to me.

“No,” Nora says with a kind voice and easy smile.

It is a moment before I say, “I think you’re completely crazy. That whole scenario you just described, it clearly speaks of some sort of childhood trauma. As a little girl, did your parents beat you?”

Shelby slaps my arm. Nora slaps the other.

I am, for the most part, without ingrained social graces. The norms and conventions of good behavior were never clearly explained to me. This can be good and it can be bad. I’m prone to making blunt declarations and unexpected announcements. I’m sure I’ve scared off any number of potential friends or acquaintances this way. But without the normal limits of social convention, I sometimes lay out a test of honesty and trust among people I meet. Can you bear to hear what I really think? Are you willing to tell me what you think too?

Shelby’s concerns about the porta-potty prove to have been understated, at best. The porta-potty becomes a de facto public restroom not only to the men working on the neighbor’s renovation, but to people from, it seems, all over the city. Workers from projects around the neighborhood, kids out playing in the street, early morning joggers hitting the mid-point of their run, homeless people passing through on the way to the church shelter half a mile away, the elderly and infirm out for life-extending walks - all have become regular users of our neighborhood porta-potty.

From my window, I see joggers, the homeless, the elderly and the infirm, all stopping by to use the porta-potty in front of the neighbors’ house.

I make sure to take pictures of each of them, then send them, individually, to Shelby.





# Another Trucker Story

by Robert Edward Sullivan

"Breaker 1-9, can I get a radio check?" some ankle biter says. Don't know why I'm on the Sesame Street channel, just am.

"Radio's fine, kid," I say.

I don't take my eyes off of the blue Camry that's now about two truck-lengths ahead of me. Even if there aren't any bears in the air, or in the woods, I can't just gun it. I'm pushing 75 mph, and I think the girl in that Camry is topless, maybe.

I'm driving one of these Major's Yard and Lumber trucks. The ones with massive logos everywhere. There's a multi-racial family and some guy in a Major's apron helping them build a house on both sides of my rig. And it's *huge*. And perfect. Too perfect. Add all that to the 800 number on the back for these four-wheel turds to call if they don't like the way I drive on my roads, so I have to go slow.

Anyway, if I get to my Thursday Major's too quick, they always expect my backslide to the warehouse to be that much quicker. I want to see Loraine for a bit, if I can. She's usually working Thursdays. Sometimes, she won't take her break until I get there. She's a cashier supervisor or something. Used to be the receiving check-in clerk. That's where I met her.

"Breaker 1-9. Can I get a radio check," the same kid says.

"Hey little man, you're coming in loud and proud. Check's in the mail. Now check the off switch."

I can no longer see the Camry. She probably wasn't topless. It's easy to see things that aren't there, sometimes.

"Breaker..." Static. Fuzz.

"Hey little man, I'm talking to you," I say. "I'm replying to your radio check. It's good. Now keep the channel clear, squirt."

One time I delivered to that store on a Wednesday and Loraine wasn't all done up or anything. Don't know if she noticed I wasn't freshly shaved. Our mid-day donuts and chats are the same though, regardless.

She tells me about her prick of a husband.

I end up telling her some shit about my ex.

She tells me about dealing with the "public."

I tell her about my daughter.

She almost always says it's sad I don't see her that much.

And I usually reply, what's sad is I have to deal with my ex to see my daughter.

"Hello?" the same kid squeaks. "I'm looking for my dad. Larry. Over?" Jesus Christ. "No Larry here, little man."

"Are you a trucker?"

"I drive a truck."

"Like a semi-truck? A big one? Over."

"Yes, indeed," I say.

"Do you know Larry?"

I laugh, but not into the CB. "Look, little man, I don't know any Larrys. Sorry."

"He's my dad. He's coming today. Soon. From Atlanta. Over."

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**Once in a while, one of use will say we should go get drinks sometime. We both know what it means. We switch the topic to weather or something.**

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There's been a couple of times that Loraine and I will be sitting up in the cafeteria in the front of the store, and she'll say she needs to check the time, so she'll turn her head and give me a little show, sticking her chest out.

I often say that she should jump in the truck with me and we should drive off somewhere.

She laughs each time I say it. Kind of a sad laugh, though.

Once in a while, one of us will say we should go get drinks sometime. We both know what it means. We switch the topic to the weather or something.

"He's got a big mustache," the kid says.

I got about a half hour until I get to Major's. I'm going to be out of range of this kid soon. Surprised I'm not already.

"What's he haulin'?" I ask.

"I don't know. I'm using the CB he gave me, like he showed me. Over."

I've imagined the scene quite a few times, though. Drinks and...after. She'll tell me how her husband hasn't touched her in months, and when he does, she'll say she's repulsed. I'll say something about how she should be treated like a queen. We'd go to some chain motel. We'd play out the cliché as best we could. All because we just want to fuck each other. But maybe a

little more than that. Perhaps it's the "little more" we're avoiding.

"His truck is bright red. Sometimes he plays the harmonica. He likes salt and vinegar chips."

You gotta be shitting me. I feel bad for the kid. I know he's hoping his little list of details is going to suddenly make someone go, "oh *that* Larry."

"Hey, little man. When's the last time you saw your pops?"

What do a hundred or so half hour talks over a few years add up to? Can I produce a little list of details about her? What kind of chips does she like? It's not like she's going to just leave her husband. I don't even know if she should.

"I saw him two months ago. At my birthday party." The voice is getting weaker.

"How old did you turn, little man?"

"Seven!"

She's got a couple of kids but they're both in high school. It's not like a divorce would totally fuck them up. I mean, it could work.

"He surprised me," kid says through a lot of crackling. "He surprised me on my birthday. I didn't know he was going to be there."

I never had the kind of talks me and Loraine have with my ex. I can tell Loraine things. It's not impossible. There's something there between us.

"Hello...?" The kid says. There's a lot of static. Too much. "Dad? Was that you, Dad? Are you foolin' me?... That was you, wasn't it? You almost here? It's me, little man...Dad?...Breaker 1-9...*Dad?*"

I respond, but there's no answer, just dead air. I call out to the kid a few more times. Still no answer. I switch the channel trying to find him, but I'm out of his range. The rest of the route was silence.

Loraine isn't even working today. She's on vacation, someone says. I ask if there's an empty trailer for me to take back to the warehouse. They say no. Have to wait until the truck's unloaded. Should take an hour or so. I go up to the cafeteria in the store and drink my coffee, eat my donut, and stare out the window the whole God damn time.

# Icebreakers

by Tagreid Hassabo

My uncle George, the day they buried Aunt Etta, told George Jr. to put the rocking chair out on the porch and face it west toward the cemetery. The next morning, when Junior returned, the chair was rocking his dead Papa.

What do you call that? When your world has changed senseless you no longer want it.

I find names for unnamed feelings. Usually, I don't have to look; the words just pop up.

*Joie mokbeef...* *Joie mokbeef*. I got that chilling feeling one time when I woke up in the middle of the night and for moments I could not remember who or where I was, but not because I was comatose, and not because I forgot either. I thought hard and deep, and in that brief time all the characters in my life stood still while I roamed among them looking for me.

Painful *instipitude* is another one. Like when I called my mother to ask if I can substitute rice flour for wheat, only she'd been dead for four years. *Minkoush*, *kooklain*, *phelangoly*, and this and that and this and that, and oh, let

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**Brad doesn't get the whole namotions thing. (That's the word I made up for emotions that cannot be described with regular words.) He doesn't get it; like, he doesn't understand it. He says his feelings are in perfect harmony with language; they don't stray. So I think: Brad's not bad, he's just a child. A goddamn child.**

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me not forget the occasional confusing *houp-houp*.

The rest of the feelings, those that remain nameless, I ignore. Then, they disappear.

Saturday, I napped on the couch, right here in Seattle. But in my dream I was in *Rue D'Agadir* in Morocco. Why Morocco? It was nighttime and there were some kids playing soccer in a dimly lit street. The two goals were marked with stacks of broken up grey bricks. I was stranded and was trying to find my way out, but where to? Not clear. A station wagon drove by, the

kids scrambled to the sides of the street. The dust levitated and hovered against the orange light. I waved, and the car stopped and reversed. I had a bad feeling about the driver, but I got in. Then I noticed there was a little girl in the back seat. She was not crying, though it looked like she had been. I told the driver, who was silent all along, that I forgot something in my hotel room. He drove me back. I took the girl with me and we hid in my room. Then the man came after us. I saw him through the peep-hole. I was not sure what he wanted. It is better to say it like this: I was not sure what he wanted to do with us. I was not afraid, only some vague concern for the girl. It was all about her. The man reverse-peeped and the peep-hole went all black. I jumped. I looked down to tell the girl to shush, and there she was holding my hand to her face and very innocently biting off chunks of my flesh and chewing on it. I woke up. Sweat. Palpitations. I got off the couch and went to the bathroom to splash my face. At the door of my bathroom, in Seattle, I nearly screamed. There he was, squeezing a zit in front of the mirror, the evil man in my dream. It was Brad, my husband. For real.

*Ashtata ... Ashtata ... Ashtata ...Ashtata*. Do you know how twisted that feels? *Ashtataaaaaaaaa*.

Brad doesn't get the whole *namotions* thing. (That's the word I made up for emotions that cannot be described with regular words.) He doesn't get it; like, he doesn't understand it. He says his feelings are in perfect harmony with language; they don't stray. So I think: Brad's not bad, he's just a child. A goddamn child.

Brad took me to lunch at The Grille today. This is a slice of our conversation.

"Do you know how Chihuly lost his eye?"

I thought, There he goes again.

Brad is one of those you hear about on the radio when they say *Support to your local radio station comes from listeners like you*. He is you. Two tickets for a tour of Dale Chihuly's boathouse studio and hot shop, he won that last week during KPLN pledge drive, and now it is all he talks about.

"Pretty shards?" I went along.

"You would think so. But nope, he wasn't blowing glass and it wasn't a fateful creative moment. A car accident. A plain old car accident. He flew through the windshield and it took out his eye." This kind of discovery excites him.

"?"

"I think he plays it up with the eye patch. It gives him an artsy flare"

“But he *is* an artist.”

“Yeah, but come on. Eye patch? It’s like certifiably mad artist.”

“Would it make you happier if he’d plunged a skewer in his eye?”

“Don’t start.”

“What? What did I say?” We were quiet for a while, but the way he kept looking at me with fearful eyes made me say, “You win Brad.” Then, it was *ebrii* again.

*Ebrii*. That’s when I feel like I am two, not one, each standing on either side of Brad, each pulling him by one arm. Like a tug of war. Each trying to bring the other

down. Neither one of us knows what to do with him when the game is over.

When we were young, Brad and I had big dreams. The kind of dreams so big you keep secret so that no one and nothing would jinx them. The kind of dreams you keep secret for so long you forget what they were.

Eight years ago—and three into our marriage—we moved East and put what money we had into a small bee-keeping farm in Queen Anne, Maryland. It is the kind of random decision that ignites Brad and transforms him into someone pleausurably unfamiliar, until it wears off.

Out in the farm we adopted a two year old German shepherd, Aaron, whose owners had recently divorced and neither one could keep him. Aaron was a clever search and rescue.

One day, by the chicken coop, Aaron ran to me and tried—persistently—to sniff my crotch. *Aaron, stop*, I yelled. I pushed, threatened and snapped, but he was frantic, shoving his face between my legs. He prodded, snarled and howled, howled, snarled and prodded until I fell hard on my back and then he ran off and got Brad. Two days later I had a miscarriage. I had no idea I was pregnant.

I never tried to get pregnant again. Correction: I tried to never get pregnant again, and that worked. I would have made a good mom, no doubt. It’s those other sentiments I questioned the sincerity of. The *quosoms*, I’m pretty sure Ma had them too. That’s what made her up and leave, *pouffff*, just like that. Aaron must have known, in the way dogs see what we do not see. And that is why he did what he did, you know, attempted to rescue my baby. From me.

We never had any dogs again either. They know much too much.

Brad can go either way. With or without babies. With or without dogs.

Brad does everything I want. Mostly, I want him to not do everything I want.

Sometimes he’ll try so hard he’ll forget what he was trying to do. Like when he thinks I want him to keep going but then we stop even sooner because it’s starting to sound like an old man smacking. Then he will lie next to me telling jokes or making belly waves to apologize for incomplete sex.

These are the things you find out after the fact. Like Ma said, Picking a man is like picking a watermelon, smooth and polished on the outside but you won’t know for sure if it’s red and juicy or pale and dry until you’ve cut in and dug deep; by then you can’t give it back.

I can’t give him back. That’s what I think every morning in the shower when I look down on the dark crescent of Brad’s hairs fluttering on the



drain-strainer—and it also makes me think that, at this rate, the luminous crescent on the crown of his head will soon be a full moon.

My mother, she likes her similes. She also said marriage is like ice, shines like a diamond at first, then melts away and leaves a cold mess.

Dale Chihuly built a wall of diamond ice. Brad told me this. In Jerusalem. Brad told me this in Seattle; it's the wall that was in Jerusalem. Thirty blocks of pure ice, 6 x 4 x 3 feet deep. Each. It wasn't your ice-factory kind of ice either. Arctic Diamond, they called it, unbelievably pure you could shoot a photo through 10 inches of it, and it would come out crisp clear. Perfect geometrical blocks quarried and transported from an Alaskan pond by rail, barge, ship and truck, all the way across the world, and erected right outside the old city stone wall near Jaffa Gate.

Somewhere in the junk Brad printed, it said the wall represented the “thawing” of tensions in the region. This is all happening right there in the burning desert, where everything flares.

I am all for positive thinking. But ... poor ice.

Guess what? When they finally opened the dark sub-zero containers in the soaring heat, and it found a world so different from what it had signed up for back in Alaska, the ice did a quick Uncle George. Thunder roared in the containers, and when they checked the cargo, the ice had fractured splitting in halves then quarters then eighths.

Hissing, creaking and cracking is what the crowds who gathered to view the weathered wall on the first day heard as the ice continued to break into thousands of pieces; and as the wind whipped it, it cried itself to a puddle until three days later there was not a piece of ice standing. Just the cold mess.

There it is again, that feeling, the icebreaker. When you can't recognize the world anymore that you no longer want it. What do you call that? Sometimes I think it's *rious*, but not quite. This one is tricky.

It's at the tip of my tongue. But since I can't find a name for it, I guess I'm just gonna have to ignore it.

# Light

by Elena Estevez

I look down at my desk to avoid the direct sunlight shining through my grade school window, invading my eyes and causing them to create flashes of circular dots in the darkness of my blinking eyes. I close my eyes again to accept the darkness, and let it take over the invading light spots until they go away completely. As I open them again, they readjust to the lightness of the room. I go on with my studies and dip my pen into the inkwell, conveniently positioned in the hole on the right hand corner of my desk.

I think to myself what it would be like to be stuck in a hole.

\*

It's lonely here. All I can hear are the moans and prayers of the lonely and the disheartened. The cries of the ones begging for forgiveness aren't the worst. It's the ones who have gone insane that get me. The ones who laugh, sing, cry, and scream, because they have been in here for so long staring at the dark, sitting in the cold, and wondering when they are going to have to take that walk.

There is only one window on Death Row. It's at the end of the long hall, right by the door that leads you out of the row. You get led out to die, and you can see pure sunlight one last time before you do. They're cruel like that. Making us sit here day in and day out in the cold darkness. They want us to go insane. They want us to pay for what we've done.

I've been paying for my crimes for fifteen years.

My eyes have grown accustomed to darkness, but still there's nothing to see. Because of my diminishing eyesight, my other senses grow stronger. I can smell everything, especially my own stench. We are in these cells for almost twenty-four hours a day. We do everything in here: exercise, sleep, eat, piss and shit. Some days I'm too lazy to get up so I just piss myself. I'm used to it. It's no different than pissing in what they call "the toilet."

The toilet is commonly referred to as a porcelain throne. The toilet that occupies my nine by five cell is more of a hole, and when you have to aim in the dark, you need more than just a hole. There's no point trying to aim into a hole in the dark when you're just going to soak your shoes. So I piss myself. It gives me a sense of warmth anyways.

\*

There's a guy that has been here for two months. He screams about the smell. The stench of piss, shit, sweat, and rotting food is too much for him. So he pukes, adding to the buffet of smells.

I hate thinking about these things, smelling these things, hearing these things, so I rely mainly on what I can see. I think about the things I see: soft delicate hands reaching out for me, phosphorescent blue eyes, and reflections.

I never thought I'd fall in love...especially in this place.

\*

The first time I heard my love, I was lying in my cot. I was getting ready to die, thinking about dying, preparing myself. As I was about to fall into the dark quiet abyss, I heard a moan. It was a long delicate, almost sexual, moan.

When you've been in here for so long, you learn to pick your sounds. This sound caught me and reeled me in. I was weak at the time. No point in trying to keep yourself healthy when you're just waiting to die. I rolled out of my bed and crawled up the steel door of my cell. I managed enough strength to pull myself up to the small rectangular cutout that they put into the steel door, at eye level, just high enough to give you light and hope.

That's when I saw them, those eyes peering back and that hand reaching out. For who? For me, I was certain.

"Uh, hey." I tilted my head back just enough so my neighbor could see my smile through the rectangle.

No response.

"Name's Parker. What yuh in for?" I knew the answer. Murder. Something needs to be killed for you to end up here.

The eyes widened, and quickly shut. The hand that was so delicate and outstretched clenched up and withdrew itself. I heard another moan and a collapse.

\*

That was three years ago. I never thought I'd care so much for someone. After that moment I started making an effort. I started trying to live. I ate more than I usually did, and worked out in the cell to make sure if My Love ever saw me, I'd look good. My daily routine grew into push-ups, abs, squats, lunges, and the like. Every day. Twenty times a day.

When I'm not working out I'm looking through my window. Usually My Love will look back, and sometimes a hand will peek through My Love's window as well, reaching for me. I sometimes send over a wink, or tilt my head and smile, and sometimes I get a wink right back.

In those moments I can't help but be happy, because nothing else mat-



ters. Not my cell or my sentence. Not the stench or the screams. Just a wink. A singular wink makes that dark cell a little less dark. Those days, The Wink Days, I'll just sit in my bed and picture that wink.

\*

I take My Love's hand and pull it through the county fair my town holds every fall. As a kid my favorite part of the fair was that game with the milk bottles stacked up that you have to knock down with a baseball. I was a pretty athletic kid, but even then it always took me at least fifty cents before I could knock them down. The best part of that game is that it always wielded the largest prize: boys got to choose a baseball card, and girls got to choose a stuffed animal. Boys could choose a stuffed animal if they wanted to, but you'd be marked as a sissy for the rest of your life.

My Love and I walk over to the game, and I hand the vendor one dollar. He hands me the first ball. As I lift my arm to throw the ball, I flex my arm as much as I can and throw my love a winning smile with all my teeth. The windup is the most dramatic part, so I make it count. I give my most professional exaggerated windup and throw the ball with all my might. The ball crashes into the bottles, right in the center, and sends the liquid inside the bottle every which way. I end up getting soaked because of how hard I hit the glasses.

I turn around and My Love has the biggest smile on. The soft hand reaches up and wipes the liquid off my face, slowly and sensually. I know what's coming. I grab My Love's small waist and pull her toward me. My Love wraps those delicate white light arms around me and I pull My Love in for the most romantic, passionate kiss I have ever given anyone in my life. The hands slowly glide down under my ass and squeeze.

Suddenly we're back in my old bedroom ripping the clothes off each other, and kissing all of the bare parts. My pants finally slip off and I feel a delicate cold hand reaching around the base of my penis and pulling. I moan, half out of pain and half out of ecstasy, as an inmate violently smashing his head against his metal door wakes me up.

\*

I won't always be here.

D-day is coming, and it's coming soon. In fact, the preparations have begun. Yesterday they came into my cell to ask me how I'd like to die. I picked what everyone picks: the gas chamber. They say it was created as a more humane way of execution, for me it makes no difference. I'd just prefer to die alone in a chamber than as a spectacle to satiate their lust for death.

Today I'm still sitting, waiting to see what the next step should be. I've

**I don't need to look long before I can see the hand reaching. This hand is my escape, my refuge. In this place I have nothing else to hold onto, except maybe the thought of dying.**

lost the will to live again. What's the point? I'm dying in a couple of days anyways. There's no point working out. There's no point eating. There's no point in trying to love...

I turn to the light directly coming through my hallway window for the first time all day. I don't need to look long before I can see the hand reaching. This hand is my escape, my refuge. In this place I have nothing else to hold onto, except maybe the thought of dying.

\*

It's funny, the things you think about when you know you're going to die. I think about beer: smooth, cold, and refreshing. Taking a nice long chug and letting it sit in your mouth for a little bit to get the bitter taste before it slides down your throat. I love that taste. The best is having some beer after a nice big cheeseburger. When I got little pieces of bread stuck in the crannies of my gums and teeth, I didn't even try to get them out. The trick is to drink the beer while the bread is still stuck in there so they soak up the taste. Then later, when you try and get the bread out you get a little reminder of the beer.

I used to give any excuse to have beer: games, tailgates, parties, anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, remedies for colds, and poker night with the boys. I used to have beer seven days a week. I haven't had beer in fifteen years. Damn. I hear they let you pick your last meal. Maybe they'll let me have a burger and some beer.

\*

It's my last night in my cell. My meal is ready, and although I'm not allowed to have beer, my burger does taste pretty damn good. I got a big cheeseburger with all the fixings: tomato, onions, lettuce, ketchup, more ketchup, and some mustard. I also got some french fries, a chocolate milkshake, and some cheesecake. I really wish I had some beer though.

On the row, we hate the guy that gets his last meal. Just imagine, you're sitting there in the cold darkness just having eaten a mushy excuse for a dinner, and you smell meat, pure unadulterated meat. It's one of those rare smells that reels you in, and everyone gets reeled in on these nights. As the guard walks slowly down the hall you start hearing pounding on all the steel doors, and yelling, "Hey buddy, why don't you throw some of that over my way?"

The guard always smiles when he walks down the hall with someone's "last meal" because it's pure torture; it's torture for the person eating it, and torture for those who have to endure the smell. The guards carrying the meal always walk slowly, just slow enough so the smell settles in everyone's cell for the rest of the night. When my food sits outside of My Love's cell I hear a faint moan, and then crying.

The best part about the food is that it's hot, which is very rare on the row. Every day I'm used to the cold bland mush that has just enough nutrients to keep me from passing out. This food is very different. After the first couple of bites I can already feel my stomach churning, but I don't stop. I let the hot meat sit inside my mouth until it makes my whole body warm and I get goose bumps. I start slowly at first to let the food settle and to let the flavors, that I haven't tasted in so long, soak into my tongue. My primal instinct kicks in, and I start devouring the food. A bite of burger, a fry dipped in my milkshake, and then a handful of cheesecake. I start smearing the cheesecake all over my burger and stack the fries inside. After swallowing it down with a big chug of milkshake, I feel it coming back up. But I refuse it. No. I have to do this. I've waited so long for this. I take one more bite and it all comes up.

What was once a rich delectable aroma now reeks of pure acid and cheeseburger. This is how I spend my final night. I'm weak from all the retching, and my body aches of hunger. I smell like death. I hear laughing up and down the halls, and whispers of what an asshole I am. I know I am. Everyone is before they die, it comes with the lack of caring, and now I understand.

I think of the crying in the cell across the hall and what pain My Love must have been in smelling the food, and what pain My Love feels now that



I am in pain. I can't bear looking across the hall. I can't bear seeing the glint of those sad eyes in the moonlight. Yet something stirs in me. I drag my weak body across the slippery stone cell that is now covered in my vomit. I reach the door and look up. The moonlight reflects off the stone in the hallway, allowing a rectangular light to enter my cell. I look back at my cell, and I see reflections again. This time light reflects off the past twenty years of my life: the thin mattress that has taken to my body shape, my etches on the stone, and the dingy hole, which I had given up on using. My body has touched every cold surface in this cell. My body knows this cell. I'm not sure I'm ready to leave it yet.

I grasp the steel until my hands are suction cupped to the door and pull myself up to my window. I hold on to the corners of my window so I won't fall, and look out. To my dismay, nothing is there. No one is there. I am alone.

\*

I've always thought about how I'd say goodbye.

This morning I think of saying goodbye to My Love. I know that I haven't been the best Lover, and that I don't deserve a proper goodbye. Yet, I know My Love will miss me. In fact, I have no idea what My Love will do once I'm gone. Who will that hand reach towards? Surely to no one else in the row. Who will meet those eyes? No one else cares like I do.

I am back on my cot now, laying in my vomit soiled clothes. I stare at the window and imagine the guard coming to lead me out of my cell. I imagine ripping free of my shackles and going to My Love's door, where the hand will be waiting for me. I imagine demanding the guard to open the door, and moved by pure sympathy, he does. I imagine running in and embracing My Love, hugging tighter as My Love hugs me back, finally kissing.

I hear the door open at the end of the hallway, and as I snap out of my daydreams I realize that I'm hugging myself.

The footsteps reach my door and I sit at the corner of my cot preparing to be taken away. I hear the key go into my lock. The door opens, and two guards come into my cell to escort me for my final walk down the row. One of them immediately grabs his nose and holds back a gag from the stench.

"It smells like shit in here! What the hell happened?" He looks at my jumpsuit and makes the connection, "Strip."

The other guard grabs my collar and yanks me up so the other one can unzip me. I am immobile. I am limp. This is my last touch. They lay cuffs on me and start to lead me out of the cell, stark naked.

I finally bring my head up to look at My Love's door one last time. The

hand is there, reaching for me, begging me to come to it. I start shaking, trying to break free. The guards are surprised, and my left arm manages to get loose. The strength I had worked so hard for comes into play when I pry my right arm from the other guard's grasp. I reach with my cuffed hands to grab the hands, but before I fold my fingers around the hand I'm pulled back by my hair.

"And where do you think you're going," one of the guards growls at me.

"I can't," I said, "I'm not ready. I need to say goodbye!" I start thrashing again, but this time the guards are ready. They drag me screaming down the hallway. In my thrashing I notice the light. This is the first time I see the window that's light had haunted my cell. The light of the window stops me and I catch myself staring at it. I let the light encompass me, show my perfection and my flaws. I take in its warmth. I let the alien invade my body and possess me so that I no longer have to think of my fate. Right before I step through the door I take a long look at the sun. I let it engrave my eyes, before I step back into the darkness.

# Biographies

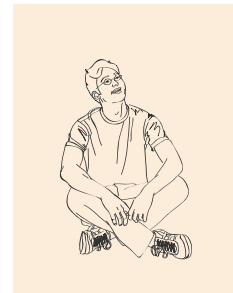
**Jennifer Audette** has an MS in Audiology from SUNY Fredonia. This degree has absolutely nothing to do with writing but does provide an income. She collects feathers that fall from the sky, bleached bones of dead animals and treasures washed up by the ocean. She's learning to be less embarrassed to cry openly when beauty moves her, whether it be a powerful story, a Casals cello recording, or just gratitude for the people in her life. She studies writing mostly in solitude, but sometimes with the great folks at the Writer's Center in White River Junction, VT. This is her first publication.

**Jennifer Clark** lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Her first book of poems, *Necessary Clearings*, will be published by Shabda Press in 2014. *Fail-better*, *Main Street Rag*, *Structo* (U.K.), *Solo Novo*, and *Storm Cellar Quarterly* are a few of the places that have made a home for her work.

**Eric Barnes** is the author of the novels *Shimmer*, an IndieNext Pick from Unbridled Books, and the forthcoming *Something Pretty*, *Something Beautiful* from Outpost19, along with numerous short stories published in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Literary Review*, *Best American Mystery Stories 2011*, and other publications.

Barnes has been a reporter, editor and publisher in Connecticut, New York and now Memphis. Years ago he drove a forklift in Tacoma, Washington, and then Kenai, Alaska, worked construction on Puget Sound, and froze fish in a warehouse outside Anchorage. By day, he is publisher of three newspapers covering business and politics in Memphis and Nashville and, in 1995, he graduated from the MFA program at Columbia University.

**Daun Daemon** grew up in Hudson, NC, listening to the stories told by her mother's beauty shop customers. She spent countless hours after school perched atop a trunk-style drink box, watching her mother, Mickey, whip hair into beehives and other miraculous coiffures. She has published fiction, non-fiction and poetry in various publications since the late 1980s and is now working on a collection of linked stories set in the beauty shop, which was destroyed in 2012. She lives in Raleigh with her husband, four cats, and a dog, and teaches scientific communication at NC State University.



**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)

**Elena Estevez** is studying English at the University of North Florida, pursuing careers in teaching and writing. "Light" is her first published work. She likes long walks on the golf course with her dachshund, and the occasional *Star Wars* movie. She lives in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.

**Tagreid Hassabo** is a writer and translator of fiction. Before she relocated to the United States she lived in Egypt, the Sudan, the United Kingdom, and Greece. In New York, she attended Columbia University's MFA program. She spent many years working and travelling as an international development expert on the Middle East and North Africa. She currently lives in Columbia, Maryland and is devoted to writing fiction full time. Her work has appeared in *Fringe Magazine*; *Kolliope, a Journal of Women's Art*, and in the finalist list of *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers. Her translations include a novel by the Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz.

## Fiction Fix

**Jason John** received an MFA Degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA

His work can be seen at WWA Gallery in Los Angeles, CA and Sylvia White Gallery in Ventura, CA. Recently John was inducted into the Museum of Realist Art in Boston, MA. His work has been on the front covers of *Blue Canvas Magazine*, *Art Calendar*, *Poets and Artists Magazine*, and *Visual Arts*

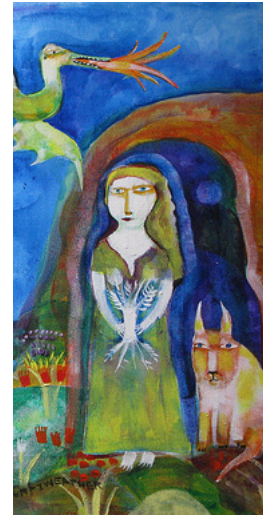


*Overture Magazine*. Jason's work has been featured in *American Arts Quarterly*, *American Art Collector Magazine*, Manifest Gallery's International Painting books 1,2, and 3, *Studio Visit Magazine*, *Creative Quarterly Magazine*, and *Aesthetica Magazine*. John is presently assistant professor of painting at University of North Florida.

**Vic Sizemore's** fiction is published or forthcoming in *Story-Quarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Portland Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Silk Road Review*, *Atticus Review*, *PANK Magazine*, and elsewhere. His fiction has won the *New Millennium Writings Award* for Fiction, and been nominated for *Best American Nonrequired Reading* and a Pushcart Prize.

**Ira Sukrungruang** is the author of the memoir *Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy* and the coeditor of two anthologies on the topic of obesity: *What Are You Looking At? The First Fat Fiction Anthology* and *Scot Over, Skinny: The Fat Nonfiction Anthology*. His poetry collection, *In Thailand It Is Night*, was awarded the Anita Claire Schraf Award, and is forthcoming from University of Tampa Press. He is the recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Nonfiction Literature, an Arts and Letters Fellowship, and the Emerging Writer Fellowship. His work has appeared in many literary journals, including *Post Road*, *The Sun*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. He is one of the founding editors of *Sweet: A Literary Confection* ([sweetlit.com](http://sweetlit.com)), and teaches in the MFA program at University of South Florida and the low-residency MFA program at City University in Hong Kong. For more information about him, please visit: [www.sukrungruang.com](http://www.sukrungruang.com).

**Robert Edward Sullivan** has stories published by *The Southeast Review*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *A Cappella Zoo*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Used Furniture Review*, *The Northville Review*, *EveryDayFiction*, and others.



**Allison Merriweather** is a dreamer and a visionary. Her highly charged, instantly recognizable style has gained wide acclaim among the viewing public. Reality is rearranged and transformed in her mind into intensely personal visions which she then transfers to canvas with directness, freshness, and a "passionate uniqueness" as one critic put it, obeying no rules but those of her imagination. Merriweather's paintings possess a mysterious poetry.

Above all she is a masterful storyteller, putting elements within our grasp and counting on the viewer to draw the correct conclusions.

Merriweather has had an incredible number of one-woman exhibitions, many in California at venues including the Upstairs Gallery, The Lab, the Wells Fargo Exhibition Room, the American Institute of Architecture, and others. Her prints have been featured at the American Visionary Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. At last count, she has participated in almost thirty juried shows with many awards and publications including *Artweek* and *Man In Nature*.

Her paintings are in many corporate collections—among them are The Tanaka Group, Tokyo, Intersource Group, Los Angeles, and Altec Digital Industries, Redwood City, California. More of her work is available at <http://fineartamerica.com/profiles/allison-merriweather.html>

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