

Fall 2004

Fiction Fix 03

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FictionFix

Literary Journal

Sarah Clarke-Stuart

April Fisher

Jeff Geloneck

Tim Gilmore

Laura Havice

M. J. Howe

David Jordan

Gavin Lambert
Editors' Choice Award

Blake McCorkle

Stephanie Oulette

Chris Sylvester

Third Injection Vol 3 Fall 2004

Fiction Fix

Third Injection Volume III

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To Ari

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Letter from the Editor

Mark Ari had been teaching at the University of North Florida (UNF) for less than a year when he came up with the idea to start a student-run literary journal. He approached students in his fiction workshop with this idea and through their discipline, enthusiasm, and hard work they launched *Fiction Fix: First Injection* in fall 2002. “This whole thing started when Ari walked into class one early fall evening and asked if any of us had considered publishing a literary magazine,” wrote former Editor-in-Chief Sarah Howard Cotchaleovitch in her introduction to volume one. “He suggested that we see him after class if we were interested. Most of us stayed after that class and have stayed after every class since.” Two years and three volumes later, the literary journal that Mark Ari envisioned has become not only a local success in the northeast Florida region, but it also serves as an invaluable record in the history of UNF.

In publishing the third injection, our publication staff relied heavily on the groundwork of staff members who came before us. While we used the inaugural and second volumes to guide us in the publishing process, *Fiction Fix: Third Injection* is, in its own way, a journal of firsts. Gavin Lambert is the recipient of our first Editor’s Choice Award. His story, “The Heat You’re In,” was selected as the best of several contest entries, and he received a cash award for his winning short story. Christopher Murphy is the first recipient of our Cover Design Award. His graphic art was selected from a pool of artwork submitted by some of Jacksonville, Florida’s premier graphic art students. Christopher also received a cash award for his efforts. Many thanks to Christopher and Gavin for their hard work and tremendous talent.

The members of Fiction Fix would also like to thank our faculty advisor, Mark Ari, who has guided members since the club’s inception; the faculty members of the English Department at UNF, who continue to teach *Fiction Fix* in their classes; original Fiction Fix members for their perseverance in transforming an idea into reality; present members and volunteers for their efforts in publishing this volume; and the College of Arts and Sciences at UNF.

Fiction Fix: Third Injection offers eleven stories with a variety of themes ranging from man against hurricane to a former vegetarian's obsession with fried chicken. The authors' writing styles are diverse: some tell their stories with very few words, while others use layer upon layer of text to convey their message. In every case, it's interesting to witness their fictions unfold, and one can't help but admire the way each writer manipulates language to tell a story.

To all fiction addicts, thank you for your continued support and I hope you find pleasure in *Fiction Fix: Third Injection*.

With gratitude,

Thelma Young
Editor-in-Chief

*In their own words,
author bios:*

Sarah Clarke-Stuart lives in Jacksonville and is currently working on her master's degree at the University of North Florida. She graduated from Florida State University in 1999 with her bachelor's degree in English. This is her first published work of fiction.

April Fisher has ambrosia in her veins. She thanks David Jordan for coming up with that line, even though he is a meat-eating jerk. April does not drive the blue car with a dent in it, and definitely does not put green beans up her nose, like you-know-who.

Jeff Geloneck is thirty-six years old, large, blond, and single . . . He's currently a QA Associate at a Jacksonville blood bank, an English student at UNF, a middle school drama club director, and the president of Fiction Fix. Most importantly, he's a father to two really cool kids.

Tim Gilmore is a UNF alum and current Ph.D. student at the University of Florida. He would much rather be a Ph.D. student at the University of North Florida, but alas, a Ph.D. program must exist in order to be a Ph.D. student in. His poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Thunder Sandwich*, and *Jack Magazine*, and he spent two years editing the Northeast Florida literary e-zine *deadpaper*. He lives in Jacksonville, has a beautiful partner/best friend, two beautiful children, two beautiful cats, and one cat rather ragamuffin. C'est ca.

Laura Havice is an English major at the University of North Florida. She enjoys music, reading, photography, old rocking chairs, hot tea and a good conversation. She is currently working on a collection of stories set in Central Pennsylvania.

M.J. Howe was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. He received his B.S. from the University of South Florida in Biology before assuming the life of a nomad. M.J. Howe eventually settled in Jacksonville Beach where he writes short stories, poems, and occasionally dabbles in the visual arts.

David Jordan is a writer in Jacksonville, Florida. He drives the blue car with the dent on the side. If the reader visits Fuel Coffee House on Thursday nights, the reader can play chess with David. For a free lesson, email the author at ziggarut@hotmail.com

Gavin Lambert is a strict Floridian. He is also a UNF graduate (December 2002). Like a lot of things, it was not his first choice, but it turned out to be a good idea. He may go back some day soon, but he's not precisely sure. He is very grateful for Fiction Fix's existence, and he hopes you, whoever you are, enjoy all the stories in it.

Stephanie Oulette, age twenty, originally from Franklin, New Hampshire, has lived in Orange Park, Florida since 1990. She continually works to improve her writing, drawing and painting skills, and has been planning several short stories and poems, as well as two novels and a series of illustrated children's stories.

Chris Sylvester is a student at UNF. This is his first published piece of fiction. He is currently working on a series of stories concerning Jacksonville, Florida.

Blake McCorkle is a student at the University of North Florida.

Note: A variety of subjects and writing styles are present in Fiction Fix journals. As a result, mature themes and imagery are explored in some of the stories selected for this publication.

Womb and Wing

Tim Gilmore

Before she painted, there was no story. There was no idea, no concept, and the earth was without form and void. There was a groundswell that filled her with raw inspiration, and one day, she swore it, if it didn't bleed through the paint into some artistic notion on canvas, it would pour from her eyes in tears, pour through her breasts in milk, pour through her pores in fermented sweat.

She could see herself standing on a column, the stone Artemis of Ephesus, whose body was covered in breasts, pouring life from hundreds of nipples onto the sick and poor lying in the plaza beneath.

Looking at the canvas before the inspiration takes form, before it designs itself, squeezes itself into a trick, into an artifice, into an impurity — this could stun her stone dumb. She watched the canvas, half expecting it to suck up the apartment and still be blank.

While the canvas was blank, she was blank. Not only not conscious. Not even unconscious. She had never been and never would be, but she might give birth, and she might paint and again be Joan Metcalf for a while.

She could not give thought to this. She could not give thought and birth both.

There were no lights on in the apartment, but the streetlight came through the window unobstructed. The place had become a strange shrine for a diverse spiritual iconography.

A four foot-tall oak crucifix was propped up against one corner, full of life in its lifelessness, the crown of thorns piercing the head like a juicer, pushing for blood or milk or paint. Smaller Christs also waited.

An Indian Buddha sat directly across from the Savior's suffering, at peace in the nonentity of Joan's *tabula rasa*, at peace in the illogic of nonbeing being.

Virgins Mary in blue and white looked down with tilted heads, holding their arms out, all around the room.

Kabalas and mandalas and Hindu deities with hundreds of arms and eyes

between them emanated the awe of transcending self through Self, the awe of the blank canvas, the awe threatening to pop the plump gourd of her inspiration, the awe that wanted with all the love of falling in love to bring milk from her eyes and tears from her nipples in ecstatic stigmata.

With the icons watching, she sat with her legs folded, not realizing that putting face to hardwood floor, she was bowing to the blank canvas.

She remembered her mother burning her paintings. "They make living ideas dead," she'd said after Joan found out she'd gathered them together and made a bonfire of her daughter's vanities in the back yard.

She'd hated her mother most not for burning the paintings, but for Joan's feeling that the bonfire was a much greater work of art than the paintings by themselves could ever be. The burning of 63 paintings was a masterpiece, even more momentous because her mother had resodded the scorched yard, leaving no sign of the *auto da fe*. She had exploited Joan's finished paintings for the means of her own *magnum opus*.

Since then, when painting couldn't come, the positive and creative energies of the dammed-up outpour of her raw inspiration would buzz in swarms in her ears. They made her shave the long, thick black ringlets from her scalp. They made her cut her breasts. They made her hold candles to her tongue.

But now her breasts and her tongue, though scarred, were healed, and her hair was eight inches long. The icons watched her bow to the canvas, but nothing buzzed in her ears.

She was four years old, lying in bed, her bears and her lacey, long-lashed dolls side by side on both sides of her. It was bedtime, but she lay there blinking. Her tiny ribcage was full of feelings bigger than her four years of knowing the world.

She was 33 years old, lying prostrate on her apartment floor. It was time to paint. She told herself to sit up, said the words in her mind, but the body would not sit up. She told herself to reach for the brush, but the arm would not reach. She told herself to look up at the blank canvas, but the eyes were perfectly and unnaturally still in the sockets.

When her mother knocked at the door, Joan stood, knowing the knock. Joan stood between her mother on the other side of the door and the blank canvas. This moment it was as clear as *kristallnacht* that the most destructive force in a woman's life can be the woman who gave her life.

She stood before the door. She stood before the door and kept listening. She stood before the door and kept listening to the knocking, while outside on the phone lines, enormous flocks of angels perched, letting their shit drop on the street beneath.

She opened the door.

"Took ya long enough," her mother said.

"Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you."

Her mother pushed past her. "Don't quote the Bible to me." She walked

straight through the living room to the kitchen. Her disembodied voice sounded through the wall. "What are you doing in here anyway? Everytime I come over, you've got more weird religious shit. I almost expect to find a chicken slaughtered on the kitchen table or something."

Outside, the angels crowed and cawed, their robes in filth and tatters, heads jerking one way, then another, their large eyes blinking mechanically.

Joan walked into the kitchen behind her mother. "What do you want, Mom?"

The refrigerator door closed, and her mother stood electrified with a canned Coke. "Do I have to want something to come over? Can't I just come as I please?"

"Evidently."

Her mother sat on the countertop. "What've you done this week? When are you going to stop working at that used record store? Are you still dating Jacob? Where is he?"

"I think he's wrestling with the angel."

Outside, two angels alighted on a dead cat lying at the side of the road. They began to pick its hard flesh apart with their horny beaks, further blood-ying their robes and their blond curls.

"So why'd you come over, Mom?"

"What?"

"Why've you come?"

Her mother walked slowly to her and ran the backs of her fingertips along Joan's cheek, as the angels ripped the guts from the cat. Her mother threaded her fingers through Joan's hair, the angels finishing the cat's dead flesh. The angels looked up towards the kitchen of apartment number three and hopped up to the windowsill.

"Why've you come?" Joan repeated.

"I came to see the painting you're working on," her mother said, and the women walked back to the living room.

"There it is," Joan said. "All finished."

Her mother stared, speechless.

The silence extended itself, until Joan said, "And I don't give a fuck what you say about it. I think it's the best thing I've ever done."

With blank eyes, her mother walked to the door, saying nothing still, opened it, and left the apartment.

Joan closed the door after her and locked it. Then she returned to the blank canvas and bowed down to it, while powerful wings thumped at all the windows.

Graduation Day

Sarah Stuart-Clarke

Wow. I just had this dream that I grew these enormous boobs overnight and I was going around school letting everybody touch them to prove that they were real. And I think Elise was there. Yeah. She slapped me on the ass or something weird like that and then, somehow, she turned into Adam and he and I made out. It all seemed so normal in the dream, of course. But now I'm waking up and it's clear I still have almost no boobs, and of course, no Adam.

I lie in bed and stare at the planet stickers I put on the ceiling when I was ten. When the alarm starts blaring, I almost have a heart attack. I'm all twisted in the sheets and as I reach to turn it off, I lose my balance and fall on the floor with a full-body thud. The alarm continues to beep.

"What the hell's going on in here, Michele?" Mom says swinging open my bedroom door. "It sounds like a horse just fell through the roof."

Before I can say anything she tells me to quit fooling around and get dressed. She stares at me lying there on the floor, trapped in a giant wad of sheets and blankets. "It's your brother's big day, you know. I'm going to need your help."

Right. How could I forget? It seems like it's *always* his big day. I'm so sick of celebrating Robert. Robert's last track meet, Robert's Honor's Club award ceremony, Robert's long-ass convocation and now his graduation. "I can't believe it," Mom keeps saying, "the *salutatorian* of Madison High School!" Big freakin' deal. As if Madison High were all that anyway. I just finished my freshman year there and wasn't impressed. All the guys are short. And stupid. Not much different from middle school.

The only thing I'm looking forward to today is seeing Adam, Robert's beautiful, soccer-playing, tattoo-sporting, hot-ass friend. Though why Adam associates himself with my jerk-of-a-brother, I'll never know. He's coming to our house today for the *big graduation brunch*, Mom's been obsessing about all week. Of course I'll probably spend most of the time slaving in the kitchen, rather than talking to Adam.

He just finished his first year at Tulane and is home for the summer. I've been waiting for this day all year. When he left last August I was still in braces and training bras and I'm sure he thought I was such a dork. Not that he would ever say anything like that.

But now it doesn't matter. He's going to see the real me. Straight white teeth and a little cleavage, thanks to this gel-enhanced bra my friend Vicky lent me. And as for my impossibly wild hair, I'm going to use this article I found in "Seventeen": *From Frizzy to Fabulous in Fifteen Minutes! 1. Wash and condition hair. 2. Work a dime-sized amount of straightening gel through hair, concentrating on the ends. 3. Blow dry using a large round brush to pull each section straight. 4. Set with over-sized rollers...* Steps five through nine involve all sorts of expensive name-brand sprays and gels I don't have, and probably aren't even available in our po-dunk-of-a-mall, so I guess I'll have to settle on less-than-fabulous, but admittedly less frizzy, hair. The final touch to my new, improved look is a pair of the sexiest, most excruciatingly painful heels I can get away with in my mother's house (fuck-me shoes, as Vicky calls them).

When I come downstairs, the first person I see is Adam, in all his golden-haired glory, sitting on the edge of our living room couch. I smile and carefully walk towards him, trying not to teeter or trip. But then I notice something. His arm is wrapped tightly around a tiny-waisted, big-breasted girl wearing low riding jeans and a silver thong that seems to catch everyone's attention as she bends over from her seated position to grab a napkin off the floor. Adam stands up and gives me an awkward one-armed hug.

The only thing that Adam seems to notice about me is that I've grown taller than him. He makes a big deal of it, too. "Look at you! All grown up," he says as if he were my Great Uncle Ernie, who I outgrew when I was ten. "Are you going out for the basketball team next year? You should really think about it." He's being totally serious. God, this is my worst nightmare. Why did I wear these stupid heels? I feel like the Incredible Hulk standing next to his tiny, perky girlfriend. And I'm pretty sure that I'm going to fall on my ass any minute if I don't get out of these heels.

I go outside and sit on the front step. Our old golden retriever, Pete, flops down next to my feet and immediately falls asleep, panting in big slobbery snorts. I wonder when Adam is going to start treating me like a real chick, rather than somebody's little sister.

The day I met Adam, he was in 7th grade and I was still in elementary school. Robert had invited him over to spend the night at our house. All I wanted to do was see if they wanted to build a Lego castle. I brought my bag of Legos into Robert's room and dumped them in the middle of his floor. But Robert didn't want to play. "Get OUT!" he yelled. I shook my head and sat down on the floor. Adam began fiddling with the Legos. So Robert ran to

Mom like a baby. “Mom! Tell Michele to leave us alone!” After a few minutes he came back to his room. Mom had told him he had to play with me, I could tell. I grinned and started building the castle. But a few minutes later Robert was making farting noises and pointing at me saying, gross Michou, as he pinched his nose with one hand and waved the imaginary fart smell away with the other. “I didn’t fart, Robert!” I said and then looked at Adam, “I didn’t!” Both he and Adam laughed and laughed. I ran to Mom and Dad’s room to tell them that Robert was teasing me and calling me Michou again (I always hated that name), but their door was closed and they didn’t reply. Later that same night, while I was eating a fudgesicle in the kitchen, Adam apologized to me and said he knew I hadn’t farted and that he shouldn’t have laughed. At first I was suspicious. I looked him in the eye for a little while until I was convinced that he was serious. “That’s okay,” I said as my fudgesicle fell off its stick and splatted onto the floor.

Pete lifts his head, listening to a car in the distance. I watch the red Volkswagen bug coming down our quiet street. It’s Elise, Robert’s ex-girlfriend. Well, not really ex. Actually, I’m not sure what their status is now. In my opinion she’s the best thing that ever happened to Robert but it’s fine with me if they’re broken up. As long as she and I can stay friends.

She parks on the road near the mailbox, since there are too many cars in the driveway. Barefooted, I run out to meet her. She smiles at me as she gets out of the car. Her hair is perfectly straight and shiny and she has this brilliant freckle-free tan. As she leans forward to kiss me on the cheek, her silky hair falls on my bare shoulders and I breathe in the scent of herbal shampoo.

“What’s up?” she asks. “How’s your *boyfriend*?”

“Ha. Yeah right. He brought this skanky girl with big you-know-whats and a tattoo on her butt.”

“Hmmm.” Elise shrugs. “Typical.” Then she raises an eyebrow and says, “How do you know she has a tattoo on her ass?”

I giggle. “You’ll see. You don’t have to look too hard.”

I examine her outfit as she tells me how I shouldn’t waste my time on Adam. (She loves to give me pep talks, like this.) She’s wearing a lavender sundress, cut well above the knee, and camel-colored sandals with a slight heel. Around her neck is a delicately beaded necklace. I notice that her breasts seem bigger than usual and I wonder if she’s wearing a gel bra too. Not that she needs one.

At school I’ve overheard guys, *lots* of guys, talking about her. Sometimes it makes me so mad. It seems like they only talk about her in parts, as if they wouldn’t mind dating just her ass or just her tits or whatever part they liked best. I imagine them dividing her into pieces so that one guy could have a leg, another guy could have her head, another, her boobs. Like tearing apart a Barbie doll or something.

But Elise is not a Barbie type at all. She's not fake or conceited. She never talks about losing weight or getting a nose job. She doesn't even dye her hair. That's why it's so shiny.

When we get into the house, my mother pulls me aside.

"Where have you been?" she says. "You know I need your help today."

I nod and shuffle into the kitchen behind Mom. Suddenly she screams.

"Aaah! You're tracking dirt all over my clean floor. Look at that! Look at that!" she says, pointing to my dirty feet and the tracks on the white floor. "Get outside."

As I brush my feet off outside, I think about how nice it would be to run away from home and live at Elise's house, just for the summer. We could do whatever we wanted since her parents are almost never home. And Adam could come over to her house and hang out all day. Then again, maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to have him hanging around Elise too much. He'd probably much rather kiss her than me. I wouldn't blame him. Elise *is* pretty hot.

I suddenly notice my mother standing at the front door, broom in hand, waiting for me.

"Now remember Michele, I'm trying to keep things clean today," she says. "Do you think you can cooperate for just one day, without spilling anything or knocking anything over?"

"Uh huh."

"Here take this," she says, handing me the broom.

I can feel her eyes on me, as I sweep.

"Now I don't mean to be hard on you, Michele," she says, "I just wish you would think before you act. Think!" She taps the side of her head with her index finger.

I wish she would magically disappear.

Elise peeks into the kitchen and says "What can I do to help?"

Mom smiles at Elise and hands her a plate of cheese and crackers to put on the dining room table.

Elise winks at me.

"We'll continue this conversation later," Mom says as she wipes her hands on a dishcloth and picks up a giant bowl of fruit salad. She follows Elise to the dining room.

A couple minutes later I feel someone pinch my butt. Oh my god, it's Adam. I'm staring into his sunburned face, trying to hide a grin. He's smiling.

"Hey Michou, what's up? You think you could show me where the spoons are? Your mom is all flustered about the 'spoon shortage' out there."

He laughs a little as I roll my eyes in exasperation at Mom's idiocy.

But then I stumble over the broom as I'm heading toward the silverware drawer.

“Whoa, are you okay?” He makes a laughing snort through his nose.

I try to laugh it off. When I hand him the spoons, our fingers touch and I imagine that he’s looking at me as if to say, *If only it wasn’t for my girlfriend in the other room, I would kiss you.*

I wonder what I would do if he actually tried to kiss me. I don’t have much experience. Three experiences, to be exact. When I was in sixth grade, I actually had a boyfriend. The first and only time we kissed, I got nervous and accidentally bit him. In the 7th grade, as a dare, I went into the boys’ locker room and kissed the hottest guy in school. That same year, some fat kid on the bus tried to stick his fat tongue down my throat. Without even thinking, I punched him in the crotch and made him cry. And that’s about it. After seventh grade I started growing. Five inches in eighth grade and four inches in ninth, maxing out at almost six feet. And believe me, there isn’t one single guy in my freshman class who wouldn’t have to stand on a stool to kiss me.

I look out the front porch window and see Elise and Robert sitting close to one another and talking. Are they holding hands? It looks like they’re holding hands. They’re not supposed to; they’re not together anymore. Suddenly I’m really annoyed and I have this urge to go out there and jump between them.

But Mom says, “Michele? Can you make sure everyone knows we’re ready to sit down and eat? I think some people are upstairs.”

I stand at the bottom of the staircase, about to yell up, when I hear Adam’s low whispery voice coming from a bedroom.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice that ass of hers,” says Adam.

“Man, come on, that’s gross. It’s Robert’s sister.”

“So?”

“So... she’s fourteen and-”

“Almost fifteen,” Adam interrupts.

“*and she’s, ya’ know... kinda fugly still, don’t you think?*”

Adam snickers a little and then says, “Well, I could do it without lookin’ at her face, you know what I mean? Just the backside, know what I mean?” Now they both snicker. My face is burning hot and I want to throw up.

“Dude, you’re sick. And you’ve got to be joking. That girl you brought, what’s her name? She is so fucking hot, man. Why would you even bother with Rob’s tit-less little sister when you got her around?”

“I *don’t* care. I was just playin’ man,” says Adam. “Geez, calm down.”

I walk back to the dining room with my fists clenched, nails digging into the palms of my hands. Concentrating hard on not crying, I sit down at the table. Mom is smiling like a plastic clown and standing over the table as if the entire world depended on whether there were enough cinnamon-raisin bagels. Adam and his girlfriend sit down across from me. I feel like hurling my plate at him when he winks at me. The guy who made the fugly comment

sits next to them and makes a sniggering sound in Adam's direction. I wish I could just slide under the table without anyone noticing, the way I used to do when I was little.

I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow, trying to wash down what feels like a rock in my throat. I blink hard and wipe the corner of my eyes with the back of my wrist. It's not working. I get up from the table, accidentally bumping it so hard that several glasses fall over. The tablecloth is suddenly drenched in juice, coffee and water. Shit. My grandma chuckles and pats me on the arm, telling me not to worry, that it was just a teeny little accident. Robert is staring at me like, you stupid klutz, why do you always have to ruin everything? Mom is forcing that same dumb smile, as she fusses over the guests and refills their empty cups. But I can tell that she's totally pissed off. If the guests weren't here she would be saying, *goddammitMichelepayattention-towhatyou'redoing! How goddamn clumsy can you be?*

Robert gets up from his chair to help Mom, like the perfectly-perfect child that he is. As he passes me, he smirks and whispers, "Nice goin' Grace." I look down and see orange juice dripping from the hem of my dress onto my feet. I turn and stomp down the hallway. "Fuck you, Robert," I whisper. Fuck him, I want to scream. I run upstairs and slam my bedroom door. I hate him I hate him I hate him. I don't know who I hate more. Robert, Adam or the fugly guy. I throw one of my heels into the closet so hard it makes a scuff mark on the back wall. Suddenly I catch my reflection in the mirror so I throw the other shoe at myself, but the glass doesn't break. Then I peel off the dress, wad it up and throw it in the garbage can.

After a few minutes Elise slowly pushes open the door and peeks in. "Michele?"

I'm curled up under the covers in my bra and underwear. I'm sure my face is blotchy and disgusting.

"Is it okay if I come in?"

I wipe my nose on the sheet. "I guess."

"So...what's going on?" asks Elise.

I turn my face to the wall as she sits down on the bed.

"Nothing."

She doesn't say anything.

"Except," I take a deep breath, "I just hate Adam. He's totally perverted, ya know?"

Elise moves closer.

"Actually, I don't really care if he's perverted," I continue. "I just wish he thought I was cute or something. I wish someone thought I was Fucking-Hot, you know? I mean, all my friends are practically having sex and I haven't even made out with one single person since I started high school. I wouldn't even know how to french-kiss. Isn't that pathetic?"

"No." Elise says "First of all, Adam can go to Hell if he doesn't realize

that you're beautiful, and second of all, if you're nervous about kissing... you could ... practice."

"Practice? Yeah right. With my pillow or something? I don't think so."

"That's not what I'm talking about," says Elise, smiling. She flicks her hair flirtatiously.

Suddenly I feel little jolts of electricity springing around in my stomach.

"Kiss me," she dares.

Oh my god. I'm quiet for a second and then finally get the nerve to look her in the face. Her eyes are large and mesmerizing and I can't do anything about the tingling in my stomach. But this is totally crazy.

"Are you serious? But I can't... you're my brother's girlfriend."

Elise laughs. "So? That's all that's stopping you? He's my ex, anyway." I look at her soft mouth and playful eyes. I notice her nipples are suddenly visible through her dress. I start getting dizzy. What is wrong with me?

She slowly pulls down the sheet and runs her fingers down my bare stomach. "Kiss me," she says again. I gently push her away. We shouldn't be doing this. She sits there with her head cocked to one side, staring at me. She stays like that until I lightly touch the back of her hand.

I allow her fingers to trace the waistband of my cotton panties. I can't help but giggle, it tickles so much. She lies down beside me and pushes my hair behind my ears, waiting for me to do something.

Once I stop giggling I ask, "you mean, kiss you so that I can practice? Or for real?"

Elise suddenly rolls on top of me and I practically lose my breath. "Kiss me," she demands again, holding her lips a few inches above mine. "For real."

Ti bon Anges

(Little Guardian Angels)

Jeff Geloneck

The angels moved again. They didn't think Sarah noticed, but she saw them move. There, on top of the headstone, flirting in the darkness surrounding them, the two little white, stone angels had switched sides. Now the one with the lustful smile was on the left, and the mischievous one was on the right.

"Don't make no never-mind to me," Sarah said out loud as she continued to dig, "Ya'll jus' excited 'bout watching over another soul." The shadows around her danced a jig as a gentle breeze flickered the flame in her lantern.

Sarah hadn't planned to be out in the cemetery after good folks were in bed, but it had taken most of the day to drag the bodies through the swamp and now roots and seeping water were working against her. She knew it was too late for her to be away from the house, but there was no one there now to chide her about her folly. A couple more hours of digging and covering and she would be back in her room, waiting for light to stream through the holes in her dirty windows.

"The light of God." Sarah thought to herself. She wiped beads of sweat from her nose with the collar of the dress she was wearing. It was her Sunday dress; the one Momma had pulled from the locked chest in her room. Momma always smiled when she wore it.

Sarah got back to the mundane shoveling of mud and muck, and her idle mind filled with images of the past two days.

"Dammit, Henry! I done told you not to pester that ol' dog. You leave him be, now, ya' hear?" Dottie clucked her tongue in frustration, waved her cane, and herded her children, Henry running in front, off the porch and into the dusty yard.

Something had bitten old Dink-the-Dog and he hadn't been ... well he

just hadn't been "right" since he crawled out of the woods yesterday. Thinking about the festering wound high on the big dog's hind leg, Dottie called out to the retreating children, "an' ya'll stay near the house till Daddy gits back."

"Ain't no sense in takin' no chances," she said quietly looking over at Dink. The dog raised his head and stared back at Dottie, and a shudder ran through her as she limped toward the porch swing. Dink's eyes were rimmed yellow with pus and dulled by lingering death. Dottie changed her mind about sitting outside and made her way into the house. Inside, Sarah was busy making a mess she would later call supper. Dottie frowned when she saw the spilled flour on the floor but rather than scolding Sarah for being wasteful, she shuffled past the kitchen and squeezed her heavy bottom into her rocking chair. "Old is what I am, oh Lord, too ol' to bother that little angel when she's tryin' to be so he'pful." Dottie pulled her afghan blanket around her shoulders, sighed, and drifted off to sleep to the distant sounds of children playing. "Angels," she murmured.

Sarah thrust the edge of the shovel through a particularly stubborn root, and paused at her digging again to throw the severed wood out into the water. She glanced around at the cemetery and smiled with pride at the tidy clearing she had created. Hidden on the crest of an overgrown island deep in the swamp, the cemetery was a ruin from another age. Henry and the boys found it one evening while hunting, and had come home distracted, trembling, and babbling about fading souls. It hadn't taken Sarah very long to remove the vines and weeds, and to find all five graves that bordered the clearing. Two had no headstones and two had headstones too decayed and pitted to read; but the fifth one, the biggest one, was inscribed with a name, a single name, unaccompanied by dates or epitaph—LISA. It was that headstone that the angels lived on. It was there that Sarah found God.

The ring of ancient graves now held a new, inner ring. Sarah also had no headstones to set, but she dug the new graves to a proper depth and wrote names in the mud piled over the bodies within. Mamma Dot was next and then Sarah's work would be complete.

"Ya' see, Daddy," Sarah said toward the grave with the name Wesley scrawled on it, "I'm puttin' Mamma where she can reach you, so you best behave." She scraped at a side of the hole she was in, trying to make it smooth, and thought about yesterday evening.

"To hell with this! You testin' me, Lord, I know you testin' me." Wesley

tugged at the shotgun that was, once again, caught in some brambles. “‘Go out looking’ she says. I say, ‘woman, you is crazy’, but then she goes on ‘bout it coulda been Sarah what was bit. So now here I am, trampin’ round in the muck with them alligators and moccasins. Oh, yes, dear Lord, you is testin’ me.”

Wesley pushed over a rotten sapling, still spewing a tirade about the reasons he was out in the swamp. He knew a coon or a possum had bitten Dink, but Mamma Dot said it could have been rabid. When he stopped complaining long enough to think about it, he knew Dottie could be right. In fact, old Dink might be the only thing he shoots today; the dog couldn’t be around the kids if he had the rabies.

“I sure am gonna miss that dog,” Wesley said softly about an hour later.

The day was a hot one, and the humid air in the swamp was sucking the sweat out of Wesley. He stopped walking, sat on an old stump protected by a massive, black barked oak tree, and realized he’d wandered into the old cemetery. He shook his head when he saw the manicured graves but he didn’t curse Sarah for disobeying his order to stay away from them. He was tired of complaining, tired of walking, “Oh hell,” he thought, “I’m tired of livin’.” Twenty years of trying to be a farmer in the middle of a swamp had taken its toll on Wesley; he had a permanent stoop, rough weathered skin, and gnarled fingers full of arthritis. Four kids, a crippled wife, and a two-hour trip to anywhere not wet made it very hard for a man to escape from the drudgery of reality.

“‘Course,” he said, with a stirring of excitement as he thought about Sarah again, “Sarah’s growed up now. I been lookin’, an’ she ready. O Lord, she a woman ready for knowin’ a man.” Wesley shook his head and tried to dismiss his forbidden thoughts, “No. No, it can’t be ‘tween a man an’ his child.” He stood to stop the tingling warmth spreading down his spine, and looked to the angels on the big headstone to feel God’s strength. He started to pray but, here in this place forgotten by God, moaning winds and shimmering leaves fueled Wesley’s passions. He wanted to leave, to fight his unnatural feelings, but the promise of pleasure, absent so long from his life, kept him beneath the gaze of Sarah’s angels. Wesley shuffled over, leaned his shotgun against the oak tree, and then returned to the stump and opened his trousers. The brooding trees and the incessant buzz of mosquitoes quickly blurred into a scene of depravity, shaped and twisted by lust, directed by two little stone nymphs.

Wesley’s eyes were closed when the object of his fantasy quietly entered the cemetery, and he never heard the click of the shotgun’s hammers being cocked.

Twenty minutes later, the screen door at the back of Wesley’s house slammed shut and Dottie awoke gasping for air. She’d had a vision, a dream,

that Wesley was dead. "Oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus!" she cried, trying to calm herself and her beating heart.

In the kitchen, tears rolled down Sarah's cheek as, through the window, she watched a tiny white feather flutter to the ground. Momma Dot moaned again and Sarah's eyes dropped to the towel in her hands. She wiped her face dry, and bent down to mop away the muddy footsteps she had left behind her. Out on the porch, she heard Dink whining. Sarah knew the angels were near and their presence reassured her. She washed out the muddy towel and smiled at the red hued colors of the sunset.

"You ok, Momma Dot?" Sarah asked as she stepped into the family room. Dottie was leaning forward in her chair, her hand over her heart, focusing on a swirl of color in the faded rug under her feet.

"Yes, child, I jus' had a bad dream."

"Well, um ... supper's ready, Momma. I'll go call Henry and the others." Sarah ran out of the room before Dottie replied - before she was told to wait for Daddy.

Sarah ran out of the house, leaving Momma Dot in her rocker, and passed her brothers yelling at them to go eat supper. She ran to meet the angels. Momma Dot taught Sarah to live according to God's words, and now God spoke to her through his angels. Sarah's new teachers filled her heart with God's love, and her mind with God's plan—two prancing, diminutive, shameless teachers.

By the time Sarah got home, Momma Dot was asleep in her rocker and the brothers were sprawled on the floor of the family room. They were busy trying to finish a weeks worth of homework in one night. Mr. James was coming tomorrow. The state appointed tutor for secluded families like Sarah's came once a week on Thursday.

"My new holy day," Sarah recited.

"You sho' upset Mamma, not being here for supper." Henry said without looking up.

Henry didn't want to wake Mamma Dot so his scolding started off as a quiet reprimand. When Sarah stepped into the light of the candles, however, Henry saw her mud stained dress, her disheveled hair, and the heavy shotgun in her hands.

"Wha' ... what you doin' girl? Sarah! You put that down now!" Henry demanded.

The other two brothers looked up and screamed, and Momma Dot awoke with a snort.

"God's got a message for you, Henry," Sarah said loud enough to be heard above the panicked boys, "you gots to choose."

"Choose? Choose what? Girl, you best put that away! How'd you get that from Daddy?" Henry rose up and backed away from Sarah, stepping around the frozen boys on the floor.

Sarah looked at Momma Dot and saw her mouth moving slowly without making a sound. Her skin had taken on a grayish tint and her hands were shaking where she clutched them to her chest.

"I'm sorry, Momma. It's God's will." Sarah said.

"Resurrection," Momma Dot croaked. Dottie's features twisted in agony as she was forced to face the truth. Repressed memories sprang into her shriveled brain, memories of an old cemetery, of her father striking down the banshee she had become, of the beating she had received to expel her demons, and of the dress she was given when she was saved – the dress she had given to Sarah. Now she knew, Sarah was lost.

Dottie fought to sit up, wheezing as she struggled. She could still save the souls of her sons. "They choose resurrection with Jesus."

Tears again flowed down Sarah's face, tears that sprang from wells of religious piety and corporeal love, and then the shotgun roared its first death sentence. Sarah's arms were quivering due to the weight of the gun, but by luck or divine effort, the barrel lined up with Henry's abdomen just as Sarah pulled the trigger. A crimson mist of Henry's blood temporarily hid him from view, and the blast threw him backward into the family's bible stand. The two younger brothers were next, slain before they could stand, and then Sarah looked back at Momma Dot. Sarah wanted to share her enlightenment with her momma, to call her back to God's plan. She walked toward the rocker but stopped before reaching it. Sarah's momma was dead.

"A storm comin', Sarah. You gots to get yourself finished." Sarah sighed as she looked down at the hacked, rough-hewn sides of her momma's grave. Standing in the center of the hole, she saw that her head and shoulders still protruded above its rim. "Well Momma, it ain't six feet so you jus' gonna be that much closer to Heaven." Sarah struggled out of the mud pit she had been digging and leaned against one of the smaller headstones to catch her breath. Her dress clung to her, wet with dirty water and sweat. She lifted the hem to shake it out and felt the caress of the wind flowing up her legs, across her thighs, and past the moist cotton of her underclothes. Mr. James was coming tomorrow. The light would shine and Sarah's tutor would step down from his truck to call her name. The past few visits he'd spent more time alone with her; he'd told her she was special. Sarah's hands began caressing the mud slick skin beneath her dress and her lips parted in anticipation—before a light patter of rain broke her reverie. With a gasp of embarrassment, she dropped the hem she was still holding waist high, and hoped the watching, giggling angels couldn't see her blushing in the dark. Cavorting on top of their headstone, they celebrated her discovery of her body.

Ignoring their revelry, Sarah reached down, grabbed Mamma Dot's

arms, straightened up with a lurch, and dragged the old woman's body to the shallow hole she had dug. The rain and mud helped the corpse slide across the ground and Sarah dumped her mother into the grave with little effort. She rubbed the blisters that had formed on her hands and picked up the shovel from where it had fallen. "I heard what you said," Sarah called to the tittering angels who were hiding from the rain beneath their white-feathered wings. "I heard what you said and I did what was needed."

The rain became a waterfall, deluging Sarah with acorn-sized raindrops. Another shovel full of mud and Sarah was done. "No writin' for you, Momma, the rain won't let it stay." Sarah smoothed out some of the mud piled around the clearing and headed back to the house. She stripped off her dress and underclothes while she walked and left them to sink in the swamp. The rain was cold against her bare skin, but Sarah was warmed by the thought of tomorrow. It was the day of Mr. James' salvation.

Sarah got back to the house, sat on the highest porch step, and petted Dink's corpse as she waited in the storm for morning's light. "I ain't goin' in my room tonight," Sarah told Dink, "I'm gonna wait right here ta feel the first rays of God's new day."

James pulled up into the quagmire that used to be Momma Dot's yard and celebrated his decision to bring his rubber boots this trip. The early morning sun reflected off the water still dripping from the old house, and James was enthralled by the beauty of the moment. Then he saw Sarah's naked body sprawled across the steps of the porch.

"Sarah! Sarah!" he cried, forgetting the boots and leaping from the truck to splash his way toward the young woman. "Wesley," he thought, "that bastard did this to her." Sarah had told James how her father had been looking at her. He cursed himself for not filing sooner to take Sarah from the home. She was special; he'd told her so. She had a chance to make something of her life away from this backwater hell. He'd started giving Sarah more time on his visits—her brothers were always happy to quit their lessons early—and had tried to gain her confidence with humor, understanding, and gentle, comforting contact. He finally convinced her she should leave this place and her family and enter a school in the city. It was all arranged.

And now this.

James was only a few yards from Sarah, close enough to see her eyes pop open, when she jumped up, giggled with delight, and took off running toward the swamp.

Surprised by her sudden animation, James slipped in a puddle and fell stammering into the water covering the ground. "Sarah?" he gargled, confused. The tutor spit out the brackish water that filled his mouth, carefully stood back up, and slogged after Sarah as fast as he dared.

"I've ... got you!" James cried out in triumph as he closed the distance to Sarah and leaped forward to tackle her. His weight pulled Sarah to the

ground but she slithered around beneath him until she lay on her back.

"No, Mr. James, we ... gots you!" Sarah replied. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and pressed her lower body into his.

James broke free from Sarah's grasp and jumped up and away from her. "Sarah, I ... you know I care about you. I ... but ..." he stuttered before he realized where he was.

He stood in the middle of a ruined cemetery with five ancient graves and five recently placed mounds of soil. The early morning sun filtered through the canopy that hung over the clearing, and the mist rising from the ground sparkled like thousands of crystals floating on the air. Beams of light highlighted two white, stone angels on the largest headstone, while other rays were absorbed by Sarah's smooth, mahogany skin. As he watched, Sarah slid her hands over her body, drawing James' attention to her full hips, budding breasts, and the patch of kinky hair between her legs. Sarah was a woman, writhing with passion, begging for his touch. James' blood coursed faster in his veins as he looked down at Sarah. She's too young, his mind tried to scream, but he heard Sarah's moan and groaned in reply. His breath caught in his throat and he quivered with desire.

"Come, Mr. James. Do me hard 'nough to raise the dead. Pierce me for the salvation of mankind. Help me call the Chameleon!"

"Chameleon...?" James' trance was broken, his mind trying to analyze Sarah's statement. He glanced back at the angels, at the headstone they were on, and at the name engraved in it. "LISA!" James felt his heart skip as he remembered. The bayous were full of Vodun, voodoo worshippers; he had been required to learn their culture, their religion, before he could teach in Louisiana. LISA was the Chameleon, messenger of the Vodun god.

"Sarah, you look ... I want ... I can't." James' discipline aided his struggle and he stepped away from Sarah. He slowly increased the distance between them, then slipped and fell again.

"Sarah, we need to get you home. This isn't a Christian place, and Dottie wouldn't want you here." James' hands slid in the mud when he tried to stand. He was scared, frightened by the change in Sarah as he remembered more about the voodoo worshippers. Vodun wasn't the pagan, polytheistic religion he'd thought it was. It was a monotheistic blend of religions, heavily influenced by Christianity. Vodun believed in one God, and in angels and saints, and most of them espoused good over evil ... most of them.

James glanced down to see a root rubbing his ankle, a root with fingernails.

Momma Dot's wedding ring glimmered softly, its engraved cross washed clean by the night's rain. Sarah cackled from the far side of the clearing and James screamed with fear.

"God, Sarah! No! Sarah, what have you done?"

James ripped his ankle away from the wrinkled, muddy hand, pushed

himself up, and turned to run. Sarah's shovel bounced off his temple and he dropped into the sludge. From somewhere in the distance, just before losing consciousness, he heard a whisper, "Mr. James, you gots to choose. Resurrection, Rejuvenation, or Immortality ..."

Scrubbed clean and neatly dressed, Sarah climbed into Mr. James' truck. She put the truck into gear, and looked into its bed at the bloated dog. "Dink, you're dead, but ya' ain't gotta look it." Sarah laughed for the next mile, tickled by her joke and by the chortles from the two winged statues on the dashboard.

like Father, like Son:
a lesson

Blake McCorkle

The crying had ended and the man came through the door. Standing at the doorway, he said nothing. He just stood there, looking at his wife and she looked at him. He was exhausted. And she knew why. It's just a spanking, get over it. But looking at him, she knew it was more.

She looked at him, wishing to lighten the load, or at least direct it elsewhere. But men never ask for directions, especially when the trip is short. A day, a sleep, and it would be gone, with only the knowledge of the act. The trouble was falling asleep.

He sighed, dropped the belt in his hand, and collapsed on the bed. Weakly pulling at the coverlet, he curled up and buried his face into the blanket.

She heard light, quick breaths from her husband. She lowered her gaze onto him, smiling only in her eyes. Lying next to him, she ran her hand over the back of his head. His hair slipped through her fingers; when he felt it, he tightened his grip. She watched the blanket retract as though his heart was pulling at the world.

For a while, the only movement was the sliding of her hand. Finally he stretched out an arm and tugged on her summer dress. She smiled, barely drawing her lips up, barely widening her eyes. Reaching around his chest, she pulled herself closer. She felt his whole body heave. He had a habit of shuddering when he felt her.

They lay together. Two sounds: breathing and a ceiling fan on low. He turned his face from the blanket, now wet, and looked at his wife. He opened his mouth to speak but didn't, preferring to succumb to some indulgent isolation.

Later, he rolled over to see her lying beside him. The wrinkles on the sheets had stayed the same. He looked at her and the rest of the world was almost peripheral.

And while empathy is a faint salve at best, doing little, still, it does.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

“About an hour” she replied.

He was silent, and then breathed through his nose and out.

“Did I do the right thing?”

She didn’t answer at first. Then she said, “Well . . . I don’t know.” It sounded like a sigh. “We looked into this . . . this has the best chance. I mean, I know it’s hard, but maybe you won’t have to do it a lot. You know, rule by intimidation.” She instantly regretted the word.

He regretted it too. Because *now* he wanted to hit something, now he wanted to scream. *I don’t want to intimidate my son! I don’t want him to be afraid of me! I don’t want him to listen carefully for my heavy feet. So what if you give yourself a haircut?! So what if you paint mom a picture...on the surface of the refrigerator?! Hell, set the carpet on fire! Just be a kid, be who you are.*

But he held this inside, because he knew this wasn’t a cute child thing, involving spilled milk or baseball-colored windows. This was putting pain on someone else; his son knew better. And he knew better. But knowing and believing . . . it’s hard to teach someone how to believe.

He sighed, “I know. But there’s got to be another way.” He’d almost said easier. “Let’s buy some child books or take a workshop or something.”

“I know you aren’t serious,” she said.

“I know.”

The memory was still fresh, like a skinned knee.

He motioned for the five year-old to turn around. And it was for his protection. The boy made tiny fearful noises. Being angry would have helped. He wasn’t.

What to say? Hide behind cliché’s? It’s true — this is going to hurt me. A lot. Something else perhaps — This is the only way you’ll learn? Not good enough.

Come on, he’s waiting. Say *something*. You know I love you? Better. Why didn’t he think of something to say before — he had years to decide! Decades! Find the words. Why couldn’t he remember?

Let him go. Yeah. Ask him if he knows what he did was wrong — look at him. He’s crying. Of course he knows. Yes, let him go and do it for real if it happens again. No backing down next time. Next time.

Stop stalling. What had his dad said? Love was in there somewhere. Goddamn it was — but *where*?

The father looked at the tiny body of his son, curled over the office chair and his knee. Jesus help me; we’re both quaking. Send me help here; tell me what to say and how to say it and how to do it. I don’t have the strength to forge a man.

If the heavens opened up and sent an army of angels to rally in support, he didn't see it. If divine wisdom shot out of his lips he didn't realize it. He didn't feel anything was helping. He said something the best he could think of, but it still felt lame inside.

"Never forget that I love you." It didn't sound golden or perfect or original but it was said. Now came the harder part.

His hands weakly reached for his belt. He watched as it slid through the loops. He hated the noise of it. Three more loops . . . now two. Hurry up and get stuck in one. But it didn't — the belt slid out like a goddamn guillotine.

He doubled the snake. His hands wouldn't stop shaking so he squeezed them hard. Then harder. Hold.

One more thing, he had to make the flesh visible; that was almost as important as the belt. His fingers tiptoed around his son, as pensively as if he were adjusting ramparts on a sandcastle. There was a cowboy on the label — he loved cowboys; he only wore the jeans because of the cowboy. Cowboy Joe.

He grasped the edge of the pants. He removed them like a morgue sheet. His son winced and so did he. There it was — a bottom is entirely a thing of a child. Cute.

He had given it enough time. The roof wasn't going to collapse on him nor was a riot about to happen nearby. The only thing that could have made it worse was for the Icecream Man to come creeping along the cul-de-sac. Mocking him. He realized he was nothing without his anger; it had left him the moment he walked through the door.

He raised his arm and held it. He sighed deeply, drew in a breath, and held it.

There was no final decision because his hand had already begun falling. Contact. A piercing cry, in all sense of both words. Instant redness. Keep going. He slammed down the belt more and more. There was that shriek. Stop retaliating! The faster you do it the quicker it will be done. Was he doing it hard enough — too hard? The cries were getting harsher. Keep going. The red rectangles started to blend in together. Leather is unbearably incisive.

The father gritted his teeth so hard they hurt. He gritted more. The tears still swelled but he just strained them back. He was glad he had the boy turned around.

Finally he stopped and quickly wiped his eyes. How many hits was it? Ten? Twenty? A million? Zero would have been too many.

"You can go now," he muttered. His son got up, pulled his pants up, and left.

The father collapsed into the chair. Now he had to wait for the child to be consoled by mommy. By now the boy was wrapped around her leg. And he had to wait.

He grew tired of going over the details.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Finally she said:

“He’s like you.”

“No . . . not like me. He’s better than me. He’s smarter and he notices things. I mean, he’s only five and he knows what *compassion* is. You know last month when I brought him back from getting his stitches out? He said it hurt when they took them out but he didn’t say anything because he didn’t want to hurt the lady’s feelings!”

His eyes shimmered with new wetness. “I mean, *Jesus Christ!* What a *GOOD* kid.” He pressed his palms against his face as he sighed, and moved them up to his hair, squeezing tight. “How can I protect him from the world? He’s *perfect*.”

She looked at her husband for a moment and for the first time they both encountered the one big problem. How can love cause pain?

Finally she said, “You know...he came in here while you were asleep.” He looked up slightly.

“He came in and said ‘Is Daddy still mad at me?’ I mean, he actually felt bad because you looked so sad to him.”

“I thought he would have been mad at me or afraid,” he mused.

“No, he wasn’t. And you’re right. He *is* a good kid.”

“Yeah, but sometimes I think he’s smarter than a five year old,” he confessed. “Like he manipulates me into getting things for him. Remember when I bought that stupid hippo game at the mall. Forty bucks. And he never played it.”

She smiled and let out a small chuckle. “Well, as *I* remember it, those store clerks manipulated you, telling you it was a great way to bond with him. You can’t blame him for that. That’s not fair.”

He nodded. When someone’s right, they’re right.

“. . . and then he looked at you while you were sleeping.” She paused, with a fond look. “I wish you had seen it. That look . . . he . . . he *learned something*. Something even better than you intended. It was like he *understood*. God I wish you could’ve seen it!

I . . . I . . .”

Her beautiful stammering was interrupted by the boy walking in. He stood at the foot of the bed, jumped on it, and simply asked, “What’s for dinner?”

How can he be asking ‘what’s for dinner’ after what I just did to him? How can he even look me in the face?

The boy waited for an answer. Mom looked over to Dad, waiting for him to respond. After becoming impatient, the boy suggested, “Well, can we have pizza?”

“Sure,” the father mumbled, a bit confused.

“All right!” the boy shouted, jumping off the bed and running down the hallway.

He laid back on the pillow and said nothing. His wife noticed this, reached over and kissed him on the top of his head. “I’ll go start dinner.”

There was no way it had all been in his head. Right? His fingers had been white from gripping so hard. Sure, maybe it was five or ten times, maybe it was a tap. Who could tell with that shriek? Who could tell with that convulsing? That trembling!

He thought about how it was for him growing up. He didn’t remember any of the beatings themselves . . . ha, beatings...yeah right—his sister hit harder. He wasn’t even sure how many “beatings” . . . maybe two? He didn’t even remember what those rare occasions were for.

But he did remember one thing. One distinct, horrible feeling. He remembered his father. No, not that far-away word. Dad. Daddy. He remembered how his Dad looked afterwards; it was the sorriest sadness expression he had ever seen on any human face. *You don’t know how bad doing that makes me feel.* His dad would say that, with his eyes down or head down. His dad would look slumped, even though he had the biggest shoulders in the world. They would sink so low. What a beating. Some scars, despite any miracle, won’t heal. They are important.

Christ, how had he pulled that off? He couldn’t remember any other kids growing up or anyone else talking about that experience. Which meant, his dad was braver than everyone else’s. Sure he was still human and he wasn’t very mechanically minded. But right then he felt his dad was better than everyone else’s dad. He didn’t make more money than all of them and though he was always pretty big he never beat anyone up, and he wasn’t a cop. But he was braver than everyone else. Not afraid to do the right, hard thing. Not afraid to look a child in the face and say *Watch pain. See it. Learn from it. Move through your life and never turn your head from it. Sometimes you can’t stop it. It will always be there. But if you feel it, if you sense it in the eyes of every human being, well, the world will be better. That will be the best thing about you.*

He had forgiven his father instantly afterwards, because there was nothing to forgive. Now his son had done the same. And they were having pizza for dinner.

Two-piece, Thigh and Leg

David Jordan

My hunger for Sammy's fried chicken is blasphemous. I will cover my heart and swear eternal allegiance to the First Church of Fried Chicken. I'll make silver drumstick necklaces and print pamphlets that proclaim, "Sammy fried for your sins." Our church's inner sanctum will have a wall of stained glass depicting the new Holy Trinity: a plucked and gutted chicken flanked by a lima bean and a piece of macaroni. Ever since I was turned on, my craving for a Sammy's two-piece is relentless. I could eat this chicken while sitting on a corpse.

Sammy, however, is a filthy man and his restaurant isn't up to code. Salmonella is a steady worry. He lured me into his dump during my lunch hour about six months ago. He had a hand-painted sign advertising a \$2.99 dark meat combo. The numbers were in red paint and droplets trickled like blood. Maybe it was. Maybe Sammy performed some satanic ritual to make me, a former vegetarian, stop at his dirty restaurant in the wrong part of town. He looks like he might know voodoo or some other Southern swamp religion.

Sammy is black and bald, and his head is shiny from sweat and airborne peanut oil. His gums are pink and swollen, and when I walk into the dark restaurant after driving through the Dixie sun, his teeth and the whites of his eyes look like they're floating without a face. He emits a friendly grunt that pulls me to him. I say "two piece" and hand him some money. I try not to look around, so that I don't see reasons to worry about food safety. Sammy's fingernails are dirty, and there is a flyswatter on a cutting board. After my first few times here, he tried some friendly small talk but stopped because I just shrugged and smiled. He thinks I don't talk because I'm timid, but it's really because I don't understand anything he says; I'm from Vermont.

I take my black Styrofoam treasure box to my car. I turn on the air conditioner and tune in my favorite lunchtime radio program, "The Chuck Chapman Show." Chuck's guest today is a professor talking about her new book on Christopher Wren, the 17th century architect. It takes me a minute

to unravel the plastic wrap, which has sealed tighter from the chicken steam. The box warms my lap. I put the napkin and plasticware on the passenger seat. I open the box and a hot blast moistens my face. Some of the lima beans have spilled onto the macaroni, and some of the macaroni has spilled onto the chicken. I pick up the drumstick and bite into the fattest part. The brittle crust hides the chicken magma. It is almost too hot to eat. As I tear the meat away, bits of skin flake onto my shirt and grease droplets mist like a sneeze. After six months, the grease is getting thick on the windshield, which gives people's headlights and brake lights fuzzy halos. I suck the juice to keep it from dribbling down my chin. It's juicier than a ripe peach. The meat is soft, but springy enough that it resists my molars just enough to pleasantly agitate me.

It's raining. My car is dry and cool, and the windows are fogging up. The radio fills the gaps between crunches. I learn that Wren invented a sign language and a pneumatic engine—whatever that is. Then he turned to architecture, where he was supposedly a master. I've seen St. Paul's cathedral in London and I'm not impressed. I find its columns and dome aiming toward heaven insulting to nature. That style of architecture is homesick for the world of forms, an expression of a mind seeking deliverance from genitals and toilets. I like the world of toilets, of grime and dirt, of chicken grease.

The drumstick is almost finished. I suck meat from around the knobby ends and it's over. The bone looks like army ants have worked it. I eat some mac and cheese with the plastic fork. I have some beans. The two side dishes work together to prepare me for more chicken. The lima bean's flavor clears the palate, and the bean grit scrubs the teeth and tongue so that the next chicken bite is like the first, like a whore washing herself so her next customer doesn't realize he's getting sloppy seconds. The soft macaroni makes the skin seem crispier, and the cheese oozes into the stomach like Fix-a-flat; it fills any crack or open space the chicken might have missed.

I see you, Thigh.

The beans are a chill-out period. I reflect on what I've done, how I've ravaged a fellow animal. Sated for the moment, I have fried-chicken remorse. I used to wear hemp and eat Tofurkey. "Never eat anything with a face."

I quit eating meat after I saw the "Night of the Living Dead" movies. Every time I ate meat, I thought of zombies licking bones in black and white. The movies also question whether the living are any better. Rednecks round up zombies and make them fight each other, and they drink twelve-packs and laugh when they blast a zombie's head off.

"They are us," one character says of the zombies.

I thought the only way to make myself worthy of surviving a zombie apocalypse was to avoid all meat. I thought being a vegan made me special. Future zombie movies would need three classes of humans: the living dead,

the dead alive, and vegans. From a vegetarian Olympus, the vegans would watch the carnage play out beneath them with Christ-like sympathy. When the war ended they would repopulate the earth and usher in a new era of human evolution.

Sammy's fried chicken cut through the bullshit.

You don't get a soul by eating plants. It comes attached at birth, and no amount of meat eating can get rid of it. Fried chicken is good. Don't think, eat it. When zombies were storming the house in the original "Dead," the people inside didn't hold a debate on whether humans are truly better than zombies. Philosophizing would get them killed, and likewise I could endlessly debate the morality of eating chickens until I starved to death.

Come, Thigh.

I plunge into the center. The rest of the chicken is warm and oily and rubbing my cheeks. My nose is buried in it. I suck juice before pulling away and swallowing. With its built-in handle, the drumstick is pragmatic; the thigh is sloppy passion. The spot where I've torn meat way is winking at me. The russet skin surrounds the moist, gray meat. I raced through the drumstick; I'm not so hungry now. I'm guilty of aiding and abetting murder—murder most fowl—so I take my time. I put thigh to my lips and sort through the meat. My tongue and lips make kissing noises as they search out the best places to bite. I'm conscious of fat calories, so I tell myself that maybe I won't eat all the skin. But I will. I always do.

On the other side of the thigh, there is a grape-sized lump of meat that stands alone. I pop it out with my thumb and eat it quickly. It's no use trying to prolong the ecstasy by eating it bit by bit like a miser enjoying his fortune; the effect doesn't accumulate. It's best to go for the rapture, if only for a second.

When I'm done with the chicken, I unfold my only napkin and wipe my face. The napkin turns clear, and soon it can't absorb any more. My hands are still greasy. I know what's coming. My breath quickens; my dick throbs. I free it from my jeans and smear the grease.

It only takes a few pumps before I'm finished. There's some newspaper on the floor. I wipe my hands and cock and zip up my pants. I take a deep breath and look around. It's still raining and no one can see me through the windows. I'd love to take a nap, but I have to get back to work. I'll sleep when I get home. I need to remember to shower first, though. Once I went to sleep with grease all over me and woke up with ants all over my dick. I think that's a sign I need to clean my apartment. I wipe the windshield with my shirtsleeve.

The radio says Wren had his greatest fame after the London fire in 1666. What a year. I drive five or ten miles under the speed limit. At red lights, I eat the crumbs off my shirt. When I get to the office, I won't wash my hands. Typing is so much easier when the keys are slippery.

The Weed Garden

MJ Howe

It's spring now and the wind's blowing from the northeast. The moon's dancing across the stars and as the trees whip around in the air, their shadows throw around like tentacles at the bottom of the ocean. And the wind whispers through the cracks in the house, and the rain from the past week has soaked into the ceiling. Outside, tangled in the Dollarweed, there's that bench where we used to sit in what feels like the far distant past.

On the kitchen counter is a bottle of scotch and an empty glass. It's been my life preserver the last four months. First the ice, then the scotch. Then, across the top, a thin film from the tap. It's scotch. The taste grabs your throat like a house burnt down. At first, but then it's so smooth that you might as well be drinking water. So you pour another, and then yet, another. It's good stuff.

There's no television in the house. Alicia couldn't stand televisions. When we went to friends' houses, she'd turn it off, always. Every time Alicia did that, every time she did that, it was like a hot fucking knife. Every single time.

When Alicia and I met, she said that she was over him. She said, among a lot of other things, that the Army had become more important to him than she could ever be, and so she left him. He was out of her life for good. She'd promised.

When I think about it now though, I remember her crying from time to time. She said I was too clingy. I thought that maybe if I spent more time with her, she'd let me inside, see that I was right for her. And then everything

would've been okay. Now I realize that, even though she'd promised, she was never over him. I should have seen that. I should've known I never stood a chance.

But then things really fell apart one night. We watched the news and she saw that soldier being dragged from the rubble and dust and smoke. From halfway around the globe, the fluorescent image invaded our living room. And when she came around, she unplugged the television and made me throw it away. Not give it to a friend, not sell it, but throw it away.

Staring out the window at an overgrown garden in the moonlight may seem like an odd thing to do. But it's not. It feels good. It's not crazy. The glass of scotch in hand, with condensation crying down the sides. That faint and smoky taste and the, well, I don't know what. The hope and the anticipation, I guess, brought on by the subtle anxiety of waiting.

It appeared like moonlight the first time. Looking out the window at the garden, it flashed from left to right over the stones and the green and flowering weeds that've overrun the old garden. It was silver, but soft and not bright, hunched over in the weeds. I blinked, but it was gone. A couple of nights later it reappeared. That time, I set down my drink and ran outside. There was a soft sigh, like a candle being blown out, then nothing but the darkness. And the weeds.

The bottle's amber liquid is almost below the label. Some more gets poured over the rocks, translucent and reflecting the light of the kitchen as they melt. Miniature icebergs in an ocean of scotch. Then a dash of water over the top, splashing and foaming among the ice cubes the way rapids boil downstream. Then it's back to the window where I stand and watch.

Waiting. Sipping. You have to sip scotch. It's an art form really. To be able to polish off a bottle of the stuff while you sit around, doing nothing but thinking of things that both destroyed and saved your life.

But when you drink scotch your mind grows like a dark storm over the ocean. With great clouds that hang low and black and thunder that cracks with the flash of lightning and holds there for just an instant, and then rumbles away like a memory. Memory.

Alicia spent hours every week down there among her plants and flowers. Ferns, which are still there, Indigo Spires, Milkweed, Tea Roses,

Firecrackers, Cannas Lilies with their blade-like leaves. She usually wore overalls and a hat and purple gloves. She pulled weeds, watered, fertilized, pruned. Then the two of us would sit on that bench with glasses of wine and soak up the colors.

One time she came into the house. There'd been a piece of glass stuck in the ground and it'd gone straight through her glove. I pulled the glove off her hand and it was there, a cut right across the palm, deepest in the pad of her thumb. I made her wiggle her thumb, making sure nothing important had been severed. Then I cleaned her wound and dressed it and bandaged it up. Then she looked into my eyes and smiled and threw her arms over my shoulders.

There was a light in her eyes. Gray and silver. But that would be the last time. After that day, that night when we watched the news, when she smiled at me her eyes had the gleam of melting ice cubes.

I start to wonder if it'll come tonight. The wind's died down and the shadows and the moonlight rest on the ground and the weeds. I weigh the option of leaving the window to go to the kitchen and tighten up my drink. But then there's movement in the garden.

Shapeless as fog and silent, it flows through the ferns toward the bench where we sat, and I wonder where Alicia is tonight, wish she was here with me. I ease away from the window, stepping backward and only turn my head when I reach the door of the room. The ice cubes rattle as I take a last sip and set the glass on the counter. Creeping out the back door, the ground feels dry and gritty between my toes.

I peek around the corner of the house, and it's still there, hovering over the weeds that killed Alicia's flowers. The rocks of the path dig into my soles, poking and prodding the weak flesh. There's a soft crunching as the stones rub against each other. The buzzing of mosquitoes cartwheels through the air. The unmistakable scent of Indigo Spires.

It's silver in the moonlight and then gray through the shadows as it looms above the weeds here and then swims through them there.

I stop. Stare.

Then a form, a hand with a spade that reaches out of the shapelessness toward the earth, the weeds. It comes alive and twists toward me, and I see a face and it's the face of a woman. The eyes are blank and the mouth is gaping and there's no nose, but her features are soft. Then she's naked. I fall back onto the rocks, but I keep my eyes on her. My heart burns and leaps and the hair on my head tingles. She turns the spade on me, and it changes into a knife, but I can't move from the rocky path. A tear falls down her face and drips from her chin. A scream runs through my ears, and I think for a second

that I'm going to vomit. Vomiting, what a great sense of relief that delivers. But instead I notice the outline of her thigh as she turns to crawl into the ferns.

My mouth opens to beg her to stay, but she falls apart, becomes formless among the weeds and ferns and leaves me alone in the garden.

And it seems as though someone has tossed a blanket over the moon.

When you drink scotch, you dream of black holes. It's as if the universe absorbs all of your problems, emotions and compassion, and takes them somewhere else. But still. When I wake up, there's that image, the last image I've ever seen on television. And the image of her fainting.

After that day, I clung to her with white knuckles. But she slipped away.

Sweat and mosquito welts cover my skin as I come around in the mid-morning heat. There's a stabbing pain in the back of my head. I sit up and notice the world around me. There's the bench. Then there are the weeds. The Dollarweed growing up from the ferns and the other weeds. They reach for the sky, greener than any prize-winning lawn, these mushrooms, these whores that grew around the roots of Alicia's garden and choked them.

I pull myself from the path and walk back into the house. The bottle of scotch is still there on the counter, tall and proud. Dignified. The glass is still on the counter with water in the bottom. I dump it, fill the glass with ice and pour more scotch in there. I can smell it. It turns my stomach and burns my throat. The glass gets run under the tap.

The first sip is always the most beautiful, and the most painful. The heaviest burden is always the most precious gift. But then, as the other sips follow, I feel her come to me, not Alicia, but the woman in the ferns. I see her face and don't understand what I'm feeling. And my stomach twists and burns and I almost can't take any more. But another sip and another, and it hurts so bad that I just want to stop. I grow afraid of how it'll all end. In the end, I don't know if I can face her again. To come face to face with her would rip my heart from its cage and I'd bleed to death in the weeds like a sacrificial cow.

Dollarweed is almost impossible to get rid of. You pull one, ten more grow in its place. But I take another sip and another and decide on a course of action. Then I take another sip and doubt myself, wonder if I have the strength to see it through to the end. By the time the glass is empty I know I can do it. I can face my challenge.

Scotch and gasoline have a lot in common. They both have fumes that'll turn the stomach if you're not careful. They both have roughly that same golden color. They're both flammable, though scotch burns clean and gasoline produces billows of black smoke.

But gasoline burns hotter. It's so intense that the flames, orange and yellow, crackle and cough and belch as they gnaw at the weeds and the ferns and then the trees and the bench, before spreading to the wood shingles of the house.

If you stand too close, the flames will give you sunburn.

Ragged, Dumb Penguin

Stephanie Ouellette

Ebony Rose stood in her bedroom, both her fair ivory complexion and her spirits darkened beneath a black and saturnine shadow of boredom. Upon feeling the uneasiness one typically experiences when being the object of an unseen person's attention, she whirled around to see in the doorway, a young man whose coffee and cream complexion had long ago kindled her interest, as well as her childhood desire to poke fun and tease.

Fifteen years before, in Ebony Rose's young childhood, her father had departed on a brief trip to Beckenridge Plantation, and had returned with a boy of five. Ebony Rose, upon flying instantly into speculation to explain the boy's light skin, had decided that about four decades past, a young and affluent young man and his new wife had visited Beckenridge Plantation, as her father had, and his wife had scarcely the time to single out a little black girl or boy and say, "This one will do" before she found her husband in a small shack of coquina with the water-carrying woman he'd so admired throughout the entire course of his visit.

"Oh!! *Sin!*" she'd wail, and fall swiftly into a faint. Of course, such sins seldom fade without leaving a reminder—specifically, a child. This child was of a pale brown complexion, a tone considerably lighter than her mother's. She grew to be as lovely as her mother, and, somewhere along the line, a second white-skinned male visitor to Beckenridge Plantation had agreed strongly with the popular opinion. In this instance the sin had gone unseen, but somewhere, a man was swollen with guilt, and the girl was swollen with the unborn product of their sin, which, at this moment, stood in Ebony Rose's doorway as a grown man of twenty. His name was Cadence. As though the silence of his mother's secret had affected her womb, Cadence had never spoken a word in his life. He was mute. Nevertheless, his mother hadn't been at all selfish when passing along her beauty, as Cadence was a remarkably good-looking man, a fact of which Ebony Rose was well aware she should have been ashamed for noticing, as she should've been ashamed for such

filthy speculation; such thoughts were not becoming of a lady. However, it should be made known that Ebony Rose's speculation was remarkably close to the truth, as Cadence's skin was the shade of three parts light and one part dark. He was lighter than his mother, but, in these antebellum days, even a vast majority of white ancestry could not atone for any percentage of dark ancestry, no matter how small, so long as its presence was known. Consequently, the light three-fourths of Cadence's complexion would be equated to the value of a shard of glass in a diamond mine.

He had entered the room with a broom, with the intention of whisking the day's dust from the floor, as was a part of his routine. Upon discovering that Ebony Rose had still remained in the room, his face flushed and he turned to leave.

"No, go ahead," Ebony Rose waved her hand, welcoming him back into the room. She recalled with regret how, in childhood, she would creep up behind him, giggle and yell out "penguin!" — a term she'd used when mocking his mixed black and white ancestry. She'd ruffle his coarse, wavy hair until it would stand on end, a sight she'd always followed up with a peal of cruel laughter. But the guilt stirred up within her when recalling Cadence's reaction was well beyond compare to the result of her cruel actions. He'd wince and blink, but never would he return the unkind actions in any form, not only because he dared not, but because he was a natural born gentleman. Fortunately, he'd long ago drawn the distinction between stupid child and grown lady, and their encounters from then on were characterized by hardly acknowledging the other's presence or by coy gestures of hello.

He gingerly reentered the room and proceeded to rake the broom around the base of an elegant oak chair. Ebony Rose stood before a bookshelf, ran an extended index finger over the spines of the books it contained, until she paused on one, removed it from the shelf, and walked as gracefully as a cat on a railing to a floral-patterned sofa at the far end of the room, on which she reclined and opened the book. She glanced over the first line several times, but her attention stole away to the sound of the broom on the floor, and inevitably to the person gripping the broomstick. She noticed again he was a very good-looking man. His features were ideal, with none of those irregularities she so disliked, and she found the slight flatness of his nose and the added fullness his darkness added to his lips made his face all the more pleasing. She felt so entranced by his face, in fact, that she easily imagined him in the elegant dress of her father and brothers, and to so great an extent until she forgot that, in actuality, he wore an ill-fitting pair of pants which were held up by a single suspender under his yellowed white shirt with sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm.

Ebony Rose herself was a very good-looking young lady; such beauty was the envy of all her father's friends' daughters. Consequently, she always stood out at every party she attended like a tulip, or perhaps a rose, amid a

bobbing sea of jealous dandelions, and as the delicate rose sways dangerously in even the gentlest breeze, she would take the hand of every man introduced to her. By the end of the evening, when its final glow had surrendered to night, she would always have chosen one who had seemed to stand out the most among the rest of the dandelions; he'd be perhaps another rose of lesser quality, or possibly a daffodil, or maybe a more attractive variety of weed. Brandling had not been such a man, but his display of affluence and charm had enticed Ebony Rose into allowing him to linger longer than the rest, who, by morning, were seldom more than a voice and a face both distorted by her memory. Brandling had hovered over her ever since, like a rain cloud on a picnic but, remembering that rainbows follow rain, Ebony Rose had continued to see him long enough for him to propose marriage, and their wedding day was fast approaching. Ebony Rose wrinkled her nose at the thought, as her hopes for rainbows had dwindled to little more than the steamy, humid atmosphere of a relentless drizzle. To be dreadfully blunt, Brandling was rather an ugly man, with hair hanging at an awkward angle over a receding forehead, as well as poorly-distanced, beady eyes that looked as though they longed to be together but were kept apart only by the nose bridge, sharply hooked and sandwiched between two sagging, mutton chopped jowls, which dribbled over either side of two thin, nasty little lips umbrella-d by a greasy fringe of coarse facial hair; a weak, though meaty, chin resided beneath the coarse rug of his blackish beard.

However, Ebony Rose did not dislike him solely on account of his unfortunate face, though the great significance of this factor cannot be denied. It will be made clear that his personality was equally as displeasing, as Ebony Rose detested every unappealing aspect of it, from his disposition to tell vulgar jokes to his spending every waking hour playing chess with her oldest brother, Harry, or lazing about on the front porch in a dreadfully unflattering position in her mother's old rocking chair, more often than not with his mouth hanging unashamedly ajar and snoring at such a volume that Ebony Rose often found herself wondering if the dead stirred in their graves. Nevertheless, Ebony Rose tried to remember his wealth, as well as the highly-respected family he'd come from, whose name was featured prominently on nearly every public building in his hometown; Ebony Rose doubted that Brandling was a fair representation of such a family.

Ebony Rose recalled the Valentine's Day party her family had attended at the town hall. Perhaps on that evening Brandling had put on such a charming display of good manners that everyone had fallen under his spell of false illusions, or — and it will be stressed that a combination of both is most likely — the wine, laughter and song of the evening had blissfully clouded her mind and sent her sense of judgment on a lunar vacation. She hadn't seen him since morning, when, as she had expected, he was sprawled in her mother's rocking chair. She hadn't lingered long enough to notice if his mouth had

hung open, but his snoring served as more than fair indication of the affirmative. She had made a point of fleeing upon seeing him in such an inelegant manner, or else she would find herself filled with an irrational fury, which would surely bubble over the surface to the others, who would certainly never understand or condone such childishness. Ebony Rose felt certain that, when among the others, Brandling still retained more than traces of the charm he'd so successfully employed at the party in luring them all into his clutches. However, every day since the party it seemed to Ebony Rose that she had only ever seen him in a significantly less flattering light. As was his routine, he had likely awakened in time to struggle into his elegant suit of charm for the others, and, by this time of day, he'd be deeply engaged in a game of chess, or perhaps darts, or maybe cards.

Her gaze once again wandered from the introductory line of her book and focused on Cadence's profile. Without warning, he turned and captured her stare with his dark brown, deep-set eyes. Their eye contact lasted only a moment before Ebony Rose placed a hand over her naturally reddish lips to prevent a giggle from bursting forth. She again focused her attention on the book, but not before noticing Cadence wobble for a moment on unsteady feet and pucker his lips in a vain attempt to prevent his mouth from curling up at the corners. Again, she felt her sense of judgment soaring skyward, and she stood on shaky feet and approached a small oak table. Upon reaching it, she picked up a vase it contained and pretended to appraise its capacity and aesthetic appearance, as though she had the intention of arranging a bouquet within it. Without warning, she fumbled with the vase and intentionally allowed it to clatter to the floor between Cadence's feet and the foot of the table's intricately-carved leg.

As was expected of a gentleman of good manners, and particularly one in his position of servitude, he hastily stooped down and picked up the vase, as though the wood floor were capable of eating up stray things that lingered on its surface too long. Ebony Rose knew that out of his infinite kindness he'd not only pick the vase up from the floor for her but he'd also dust it off on his sleeve and even bring it back to his living quarters and repair it if it had broken. Fortunately, the vase still remained in one piece, though it was undoubtedly significantly weakened; it was of the cheapest quality, and only made to look expensive, resulting in a strength that a more intricate and delicate vase may have lacked. Dusting it off on his sleeve was therefore sufficient, which he did, and held it before her, a shy, nearly closed-lip smile spreading across his face.

"Why thank you, Cadence," she grinned, accepting the vase and setting it carelessly down on the table. She stumbled back to the sofa, this time with the grace of a clumsy butterfly whose elegant wings had been torn by the batting motion of a playful kitten's paw. She collapsed into the plush expanse of it and sighed. Wonderful dizziness danced about her head and took the rose

color from her cheeks.

"Oh," she managed with a gasp, falling further into the sofa's welcoming embrace, "I believe I'm getting the vapors!" Thoroughly alerted, Cadence immediately dropped the broom and rushed to her aid, kneeling down beside her and fanning her face with a rapid waving motion of his hand until the stolen roses of her cheeks came home.

The incident had rendered Cadence and his surroundings in her vision as little more than a grainy monochromatic image ranging from the blackest black to the whitest of whites, but she saw him clearly now, and knew at that moment that this would not be their last intimate meeting.

Accordingly, the next morning, they'd crossed paths again, as would be the case for the following morning, and every morning thereafter. Ebony Rose considered him a friend who would listen to all she'd felt like saying, no matter how absurd, frivolous, or serious it may have been. She'd talk about all sorts of things that were on her mind, but never anything in particular. The unfortunate truth was that Ebony Rose was the sort of person who continually felt the need to talk, and was sure that if she couldn't she'd fall into a faint under the sheer pressure of the words yearning to be spoken—as she had once said, "Oh, I'm a frightful chatterbox, I know, but I do wish someone would listen." Her father was always too busy, her mother too tired, her brothers too uninterested.

However, Cadence would take in each of her words and consider it, as he indicated with the frequent nodding motion of his head. She needn't have been concerned with his criticizing remarks, as he was literally incapable of making comments of any sort, and, supposing he could, she was certain they would never be unkind. Their meetings were infrequent, as Cadence's work was demanding, and Ebony Rose disliked prattling on to Cadence where the others could see, though they would usually only point and laugh at her one-sided conversation with a dumb creature. Nevertheless, Ebony Rose decided to set a specific meeting time after everyone had retired to bed, as they were both restless, anyway, when the two of them would slip out into the hall and Ebony Rose would talk quietly. Considered through the filters of a different age entirely, one may imagine, without hesitation, that the couple didn't sit miles apart during these meetings—and such an assumption would be correct, as Ebony Rose had taken to leaning in on Cadence and whispering her nonsense directly into his ear, though she was well aware such closeness made him uneasy, as a man in his position of servitude typically did not sit with his mistress and converse casually about her affairs and troubles, much less allow her to sit in his lap; Ebony Rose always felt exhilarated, but never ashamed.

Ebony Rose awoke around four past midnight, and waited for the fog of sleep to sift out through her ears. She slowly recalled the night before, when she'd made the mistake of making it known that she had felt ill. To Ebony Rose's dismay, her mammy, a slight woman whose small frame seemed insufficient to hold her authority, had employed her customary, though unusual, cure-all for such minor illnesses, and, as a consequence, had insisted that Ebony Rose consume large quantities of water, exchange her corset, hoop skirt, and layers upon layers of furbelows for a lightweight nightdress, and go to bed; before which, Mammy had given her something to help her sleep. Though Ebony Rose admitted that Mammy's plan had been quite effective (as she felt considerably better) she was also unpleasantly reminded of the amount of water she'd consumed. She slowly rose from her bed and stared at the far wall. As she never could bear the thought of using the dreadful pot that sat dusty beneath her bed, she left the room and crept quietly across the house, where the small shack of her destination sat several steps beyond the back door.

Unfortunately, once outside, the terrain to and from the shack was hardly ideal for bare feet, and she sat in the doorway and rubbed her feet over and over a patch of grass in hopes of removing the mud that had so unpleasantly oozed up between her toes and accumulated in the crevices of her feet. Hardly satisfied with the results but hurriedly considering them sufficient upon discovering the eave beneath which she sat was inundated with spider webs and their presumably gigantic inhabitants, she rose from where she'd sat in the doorway, though before opening the back door, she spotted Cadence's modest living quarters in the darkness. They hadn't met that night. Before she could clip the fluttering wings of her better judgment, she found herself standing before his shack's door, the coarse grass biting her feet. Without any warning, the door swung open and Cadence stood as a painted portrait within the frame of the rickety door. She suppressed a pleasantly surprised gasp, in part due to her shock at his standard of living, but he didn't at all share in her surprise. Instead, he grabbed her by the arm and gestured with his free hand to a small aperture of night sky created by the intertwined boughs of several towering oak trees. Near the base of this frame seemed to perch a full Moon, its face glowing with its omniscience. She hadn't noticed the Moon earlier; however, with Cadence at her side, it suddenly couldn't have been more enchanting.

"Isn't it lovely, Cadence?" she whispered, and his face stretched into one of his characteristic shy little grins. However, his grip on her arm and his continual onward motion were clear indications that the Moon was not all he'd wanted her to see.

"You want me to come with you? Is that it?" He nodded and gestured her onwards.

"In my *nightdress*?!" she laughed too loudly considering the time of

night,

"Oh, don't be goosish!" She continued, with arms akimbo, "I'm not even wearing shoes!" She tipped her head downwards. He gestured for her to wait, then disappeared into his shack and returned with a worn pair of boots, much like the ones he wore on his own feet. She stifled another peal of laughter and instead moderately tittered and blushed. He set them down on the floor and she gingerly stepped into them, as a small girl in her mother's shoes. The two of them walked slowly around to the front of the house, as quietly as was possible considering the ill-fitting boots. Only footsteps from their previous location, they were startled by a sudden rustling. Ebony Rose's pulse quickened and she felt Cadence's muscles tense beneath her hand. The stout frame of the maid/seamstress, Lorna Wheeler, obstructed their path. She presumably had been taken with the same insomnia that so strongly affected Cadence and Ebony Rose. She was often called "Squealer Wheeler" behind her back on account of the loud, feverishly-pitched laughs she would send echoing down the halls by day. She looked dangerously close to breaking into such a laugh now, but she clapped her brown hand over her mouth and successfully squelched it. Instead, she only chuckled quietly.

"Miss Ebony Rose!" she managed, in a cross between shock and the laughter of surprise. Ebony Rose glanced down at her own feet, just now realizing what a ridiculous sight she must have been in her white lace night-dress and battered black boots.

"Go, Cadence, go Miss Ebony- jes' go," Lorna tittered, to their relief, letting the words seep between the fingers of her cupped hand, "Ah won't say nothin'." She waved them onward with a fleeting motion of her free hand.

Ebony Rose thanked her, though only with the expression of relief on her face, partly because Cadence had pulled her away before allowing her the chance to express her gratitude verbally.

Upon reaching the front porch Cadence led her out to the far end of the property, and onward through orchards and raw wooded areas until they reached an area where the land was punctuated by a deep rift, at the bottom of which flowed a creek, before the land resumed on the other side. A clumsy bridge spread vertically across its width. Cadence led Ebony Rose several paces onto the bridge before she released her grip of his arm and walked mid-bridge herself. Her lower lip dropped slightly and she exhaled heavily in wonderment, in response to which Cadence grinned as he walked up beside her. To describe the view as lovely would have been an unfair appraisal. Ebony Rose had seen it many times by daylight, as a pale stream, but never deep into the night, beneath the glow of a full Moon. The creek flowed black through the rift, dappled by the whitish glimmers of the reflected Moon and stars. Though the rift walls were barely discernible in the dark, the glowing rhythm of the flowing water swayed on the walls like Snow White's wicked stepmother dancing to her death in red-hot iron slippers.

Mesmerized, Ebony Rose leaned clumsily over the side rail of the bridge, which time and the elements had rendered rough, unsafe, and blackened by a fire. Instantly, the creek seemed to approach her with cruel force, and Shock sent a nauseating shiver through her stomach. Her hands dangled helplessly over her blurred view of the black and white snake of a creek, and her pelvic bones gripped the rail beneath bruised skin and a ripped night-dress. Almost as quickly as the incident had begun, she felt an arm circle around her and pull her back from Hell.

"Golly!" she exhaled through laughs, and glanced briefly down the rift, "I might've died!" She pushed her tousled locks of dark brown hair from her ivory forehead and Cadence clasped her upper arms. She sank down onto one knee, as did he. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment, until Ebony Rose burst into a fit of laughter. Cadence's face became lost in a wide grin and they turned and ran back to the house, the bridge bobbing dangerously beneath their feet and Ebony Rose losing the boots as the tide of foolishness came in around their feet and soon left them floundering helplessly in its immensity... the silent Moon seemed to follow them back.

Upon reaching the house and clearing the front door they crept to Ebony Rose's room, this time, thankfully, without a meeting with Lorna. Once inside Ebony Rose's room, she shut and locked the door and reclined on the bed, gesturing for Cadence to do the same. He stood timidly by the foot of the bed and clutched the bedpost with sweat-moistened hands, until Ebony Rose finally convinced him to sit at the foot of the bed. He did so, taking Ebony Rose's feet in his lap and attempting to clean the earth from them. It tickled, but she didn't laugh. Instead, she tossed her head back, stretched her arms out behind her and propped herself up on her hands, the position elevating her Heavenward. She continually gestured to the area on the bed beside her, thus rendering her morals as rumbled as the voluptuous bed sheet. At last, Cadence timidly came forward and pressed his cheek to hers, then ran his face down her neck and touched his lips to her shoulder, after which his mouth closed over hers and she fell back against the pillow, her hands intertwined in his coarse, wavy, dark hair. (To continue such a description would be indecent, as the couple involved should be entitled to privacy. In fact, it will be made clear that the scene was witnessed by only the Moon, which stared in through the window from its loft in the night sky.)

Ebony Rose was stirred awake by the "tsk-tsk-ing" song of a mocking-bird who had perched in her windowsill. Her mind was cleared in a premature rush when she felt the warmth of someone beside her and the events of the night came back to her in a similar manner. She turned to see him lying beside her, his shirt unbuttoned and hanging limply about his shoulders, his

pants also unfastened. His face in calm repose was in sharp contrast to the panic that seized her. She sat up in bed quickly, her pulse racing, and discovered with relief that the door had remained closed. She sank back down into her bed, feeling the warmth of the cheerful and ignorant Sun seeping in through the window. Such warmth begged her to turn and glance out the window, and, at the same time, she recalled a wild and heated wish that the morning may never come. As though the whole of nature had shared in her desire that night, swirls of red spread across the young sky, as if the unrelenting fingers of Night had dashed the fair skin of the inevitable Dawn and drawn a considerable amount of blood. Ebony Rose was again taken with fear and her pulse throbbed in her neck.

"Cadence! Cadence!" she hissed, shaking him by the shoulders. She needn't have uttered a word of explanation, as Cadence's fear soon mirrored hers and he sat bolt upright in the bed, wrestled with the sheets, fell out onto the floor, and clawed his way on all fours to the door, where he stood and hyperventilated with an awful look of shame, regret and fear on his face, his now clammy hands leaving streaks on the door.

"Cadence..." she whispered, rising up from the bed, straightening her torn and loosened nightdress and approaching him with an outstretched hand, "Cadence-" she pulled his shirt back over his front and buttoned it, "Oh, my!" she burst into laughter, but it was half-stifled by the pain of sin, as well as the hushed atmosphere imposed by the early hour. A look of relief bubbled over Cadence's features and he sank to the floor, where Ebony Rose joined him. Fortunately, the house was only beginning to come out of its slumber, and, in their happy fortune, Cadence slipped out to his morning chores unnoticed, without neglecting to bring along Ebony Rose's bed sheets to wash.

Ebony Rose sat at the foot of her nude bed and clutched the bedpost. *It wasn't his doing*, she thought, *I welcomed it; why, it was me all along!* She wouldn't call this unpleasant feeling shame, as she did not regret the night before or even fear discovery to the extent that might be expected. However, she still reassured herself that the incident was known only by the Moon, or Luna, as it has been named, after all. It had followed them to and from the bridge and peered in through the window the entire time, with its look of indifference, in spite of the slight upward arc of its mouth, which Ebony Rose found far more intimidating than any grimace of disapproval. Certainly Luna wouldn't gossip to the Sun; they weren't friends, but adversaries who could hardly bear to show themselves at the same time, let alone converse.

As the day passed, her thoughts were on nothing but that night with Cadence, and their evenings in the hallway still went on as before. Ebony Rose would talk and talk about everything except what was really on her mind... and Luna grew bigger. Ebony Rose felt it creeping up on her, its face slowly unfurling itself to her every night, no longer with a look of indifference but rather with a smirk one displays when aware of another's secret-and

as the wicked features made themselves more and more visible she felt the need to close the curtains in the window at the foot of the hallway, in an attempt to escape its ever-present gaze. On the night when Luna showed a full half of its presence, the couple sat closer together than ever before, which the cruel curtains billowed open to display before Luna. Ebony Rose's initial fear faded and she pulled in closer to Cadence just for spite, also convincing him to place his arm around her shoulder... and they sat closer together each night thereafter.

Luna had yearned to fully see and grin again, and, accordingly, cruel Father Time had hastened his pace to a sprint, as the day when Luna would show its full presence had come too quickly. Ebony Rose, preoccupied with a yearning to talk to someone, stood at the far end of the porch. She hadn't seen Cadence all morning, as he was much too busy to listen to her irrelevant nonsense-but she did very much need someone to help her silence the buzz of uncertainty-the frenzy of which had surely manifested itself in the unruly tangles she'd failed to comb from her hair, and surely the others had noticed the nervous scar on her personality... but they hadn't. They had only remarked on how lovely she'd look that evening at the Beckenridge's party, an event of which she'd forgotten. She focused her attention on the opposite end of the porch, where Brandling and Harry sat deeply immersed in a game of chess.

"Brandling..." she said softly, approaching him and leaning over his shoulders, with the hope of rescuing him from drowning, as he merely bobbed above the surface of a sea of strategic chess moves, "Isn't the sky lovely this morning?" It seemed best to begin traditionally. "I sure hope it looks that way when we get married, Brandling," she continued, realizing at that moment she hadn't actually appraised the sky at all. She glanced up at its expanse to see it was wrapped in a blanket of dark clouds.

At last, Brandling acknowledged her presence, and Ebony Rose beamed with pride.

"I'm busy," he said plainly, and turned back to the chess board.

Ebony Rose's joyful mask melted with the heat of every drop of blood in her body rushing to her face, "*Oh!*" she uttered in fury, "You and your games!" With a flick of her wrist, she upset the black and white plaid board and similarly-colored figures rolled in all directions, "You are impossible!-and I wouldn't marry a toad like you if every other young eligible man were to perish!" She turned, stormed off into the house and left the two chess players fumbling with the lost black and white pieces and broken expressions of surprise in the cloud of fury she'd kicked up from the wooden floorboards.

Without first scanning the area for unwelcome spectators, Ebony Rose

dashed out to the well where she'd spotted Cadence bent over it, hauling up a bucket of water.

"Cadence! Cadence! Cadence!" she shouted, and, upon reaching him, circled an arm around his bent figure. He turned, dropping the bucket with a splash, and the initial mélange of fear, bewilderment, and joy that showed on his face melted into his shy grin. She laughed and ruffled his hair, took him by the hand, and hurriedly led him back to his shack, where, once inside, she clumsily slammed the door; it swung partially ajar.

"Cadence!" The words rose up within her as though they were bubbles in a glass of champagne—so much of life in them! "We'll sit and have dinner together, I-I'll read to you from all my books—I've seen how you've looked longingly at them! I'm not much of a reader myself, I know, but... you'll be able to read and write, Cadence! Imagine! Oh, wouldn't it be lovely?" She shook him gently by the shoulders. Though he was unable to express his enthusiasm verbally, it was clearly indicated by a bright flicker of excitement whose presence was shown not only in his eyes but over his entire countenance, which bobbed up and down with his eager nodding. She exhaled at a loss of words for a moment, then broke into one of her fits of laughter that could only be brought on by a meeting with Cadence. No longer unsure and afraid, she rose up from the floor, spread her dress in full bloom, and waltzed to the door, which she dramatically flung open for all outside to see within. To her disappointment, only a small worm-hunting bird sat beyond the door, who chirped and took flight, leaving her grateful prey.

As Ebony Rose watched her return to her nest on a high bough, the old fear crippled her once more. She swallowed her next breath, fled from the shack and slammed the door behind her. Rather than face the accusing looks from the others within the house, she dove into a small cranny created by the trunks of several trees, where she sat and shivered for a length of time she was uncertain of; had her face not retained its youthful appearance, she might have believed that a half-century or so had passed. She crept out from the cranny, straightened her elegant frock, and stumbled her way to the back door, the grass on which she trod having aged only forty-five minutes since last she'd seen it. At the door, she was interrupted by a whiplash; she whirled around in a similar motion to see Cadence holding the doorjamb of his shack's entrance in a death grip as her mother punished him for lazing about when there were chores to be done. Ebony Rose winced and glanced hopelessly in either direction for a moment, then shivered and entered through the back door. She thought it odd that her mother, who'd long since claimed to be ill, had found the strength and fury to take into her own hands a duty she'd lately reserved for her husband.

Ebony Rose felt the victim of shame. Those she passed met her with no words, but the bitter faces they wore projected more disapproval than words could ever hope to achieve. Such looks stamped a painful impression on her,

as she felt the shame fill her every vein, as though it had been transmitted through a scorpion bite. She finally disappeared into her room to escape the silent din, but without any hope of quieting the nagging of her contradicting conscience. She was certain Lorna hadn't spoken, as hers was the only friendly face Ebony Rose had met all morning; she'd assured her the noxious air was solely in response to her childish behavior with Brandling, who'd hastily gleaned his belongings and set out to lure in other young ladies... how she'd felt herself almost missing his awful presence. Still, she felt certain that someone must have seen, surely they must have suspected, perhaps even seen hints of it in the light Luna cast off, or perhaps in the song of the mockingbird.

Nevertheless, life went on.

The day yielded to night, and Ebony Rose entered the party with Harry as her escort. In body, she stood among the elegant, but her mind remained in a small wooden shack behind her house, where a young man nursed a raw back and nagging uncertainty between chores on account of her foolishness-how she'd longed to make amends for running off and avoiding him all day! Then she looked up and saw *him*, a very good-looking man in fine clothing standing by a table with his hands clasped in front of him. Such a handsome face was rare, and he was alone, the sort that would intimidate any lady whose beauty could not match his. He lifted his gaze and singled her out in his field of vision, then tossed his head in a "come-hither" fashion. She approached him with the timid, short footsteps that would likely be expected, her mind catching up with her body and quickly forgetting its past surroundings. She stood before him and curtsied, and he gave her his hand. They talked all evening, through which she discovered he had come from a prominent house in a town where his family's name was carved prominently on every public building. He listened to her every word, and Ebony Rose knew he was the fabled "charming prince" her mother had assured her would come for her one day, so full of kindness! She led him over to the window where she could spot her house as a tiny dot within the landscape, its minute size matching the significance it and its people had taken in her mind that evening. Her time with that ragged, dumb penguin had been enjoyable, but respectable people didn't do such things. They watched as clouds concealed Luna's gaze. She turned to him, grinned, and the two roses walked back into the party.

Unknown to the others, Cadence had wandered over to Beckenridge Plantation, the home of his youth, and lingered unseen in the darkness. He stepped away from the window, exhaled heavily, and wandered forward with the intention of walking until his knees pleaded for a reprieve. He watched

as his mood was reflected in the darkening sky, and he felt his booted foot twist painfully in a wagon rut whose presence he hadn't noticed until too late. Several paces beyond his feet lay an unpleasant, but hardly unusual, sight. Crushed in one of the deep grooves spread the form of a small black and white furred creature. It was possibly a small dog, but more likely a cat. It was difficult to tell; the wheels of the wagon had rendered it unrecognizable, particularly in the selfish light Luna cast, and with blood dried in its fur made coarse by death. The old, deaf and dumb creature mustn't have heard the approaching wagon. Cadence turned away and trudged onward, the clumsy bridge of his unintentional destination only a short distance ahead. The bridge mourned under his weight and he stopped mid-length, placed his hands on the ragged side rail, and gazed out on the black snake-like twist of the creek. Ebony Rose dominated his thoughts. Though she'd forgotten him she owned his very soul—all all his being... how helpless he'd become! All the things he'd longed to say during those meetings. She'd never know that he had enjoyed his time with her as much, or perhaps more, than she had... what a fool he was! He seated himself on the side rail and fiddled with several white clothing fibers he'd found clinging to the blackened wood of the railing. Luna's full presence glimmered over the black creek, its pleased and wicked sneer reflected from above in white crescents of light punctuating the black—light in dark, dark in light—he felt air rushing beneath him as the dark in light came closer to the light in dark... They giggled with their sudden rippling, but they'd accept him quietly until morning.

The Space Between

Laura Havice

The rain plucks the tin roof and runs the ridges to the end. I watch the drops gather and fall, the cement holding their pattern. Gusts press through the pavilion and rattle the edges. I shiver.

“Cold?” he offers.

I shake my head.

A low rumble shifts between the trees, their heads bow.

“I’m glad you came,” he says, his breath on my neck, warm.

A finch hops on a wire above the grass then drops to the next wire, careful of the barbs. My fingers pull long splinters from the bench, leaving fresh hollows. He touches the valleys on the wood and watches the bird jump.

“So quiet today,” he says.

“Just listening.”

I feel him watching me, following my jaw, eyes intent.

“I found something earlier...” he talks softly and I wonder who is watching. “It was in the back behind some old law books of all things.”

The rain falls in straight, even bars along the fence and into the grass. I glance at him but he’s looking at the sky. The finch, tired of the sprinkle, flies to the eaves and shakes its wings.

I notice a rolled paperback curled in his hands. His fingers fold the edges of the cover back then forward.

“Frost,” I say and he smiles.

“Close your eyes,” he says.

I hesitate and check the space between us. One inch.

“When I see birches bend to left and right across the lines of straighter darker trees,” he quotes from the paperback.

“Oh...” The wind gives rhythm to his words and I press my spine into the table’s edge to keep the inch between. His fingers hold the pages, mine hold the cooling air. The rain smatters our lips with honeysuckle. I hear the

finch cry, he listens while he preens.

“...the breeze rises...” Into the rafters, shakes the finch, snaps the tin, steals my warmth. Leaning, our heads nearly touch, his words fall into the puddles.

“...shattering and avalanching...” This will fade into the concrete, I think. My fingers reach to flatten the fabric over his leg then stop.

“...such heaps of broken glass...” Instead, I push my palm into the weather and it fills. Warm rivulets slip over my hand, running over, running over.

“Hey,” a voice interrupts. “At least an inch between you two.” My hand falls, the water splashes into the dark cement. The guard waits a moment to make sure we move and walks away.

The rain is lighter now, plucking the tin again. The crease moves as he shifts on the bench. I want to smooth that line but won't. Our finch flies to the wires, skips the circles and stops on top. He's clever on his feet, tap-dancing over the barbs while his back catches the tears.

He calls my name and I turn away to memorize the scratches on the gray wood.

“Let me finish, okay?” His hand pulls my shoulder and I think, one inch.

I steal glances, a shirt cuff, cameras, the hollow of an ear, the barbed fence, water on his eyelashes, guards, his lips, guards. The grass sneaks between my toes, my lungs fill with the scent of wet dirt and broken clouds. I imagine myself on the wire, looking down. The finch whistles and calls, his feathers sparkle in the emerging sun.

“You don't have to.”

“I know,” he says. “But I need to.”

“I know how it ends.” I turn to find his eyes and then look back to the cement. The water dries and the patterns pale against the grass.

He nods. The finch eyes another bird, landing a space away, and chases it from its wire. Their brown bodies swing on the air, against the sky. The interloper concedes and our finch rests on the ground.

“I know how it ends, too,” he says.

Ghost Fish

Chris Sylvester

“I coughed myself awake. Outside the breeze was blowing and the sun was just starting to set. It was close to dark in our bedroom. Those ridiculous, red numbers on my alarm clock hurt my eyes. 7:00 PM. Loretta, who had napped with me, was already up. I could tell she was wandering around the kitchen, making tea or coffee. She was big, even then, but she still had that grace of hers. I loved my wife. I still love her.

Rolling out of bed was a chore. I coughed as I walked into the bathroom and then spat into the sink. Green and black and bloody. A regular work of art, you know? Of course, I looked into a mirror. I’m not vain, but I wanted to see if anymore hair had fallen out. It was still there, receding on the sides with a patch of gray in the middle. My little island of youth.

Checked my teeth too. The dentist took my bottom ones, gave me this plate. God damned dentures. I always forgot to take them out, and that morning was no exception. Because of that I never let them replace my top teeth. The four that were left were still there, monuments stained brown by my two packs of Camels a day. Each of those teeth had something special about them. They were survivors.

I pulled on the clothes that I had worn earlier. Long shorts with deep pockets (deep pockets are necessary) and a white button-up shirt, untucked. Before my nap I had spent all day down at the beach, fishing. Caught a few whiting, nothing special. The bike ride home was nice, lots of people walking the street to wave at and nod to. The lake was really calm when I got home. It was nice to look at while I cleaned fish out back.

I walked down the hall to the kitchen and drank a cup of coffee with Loretta. She was going to ride her bike with Gerri, my sister. I let her look at my hands for a while: fat fingers, machinist’s fingers, and liver spots. She kissed each of those fingers. I told her I was heading to the pier to go fishing. She smiled and nodded and warned me: ‘Gerard (Geh-rahd), don’t be

gone too late.' She was the only one that called me Gerard, everyone else knew me as 'Gee' or Papa. I finished my coffee and went outside, sliding the door shut behind me.

The sun was setting and the lake was on fire. Mullet jumped and landed with dull thuds, making small ripples that eventually smoothed back out. I could see Peter walking to the Gazebo, a case of High Life swinging from his right hand. Peter, my grandson. Poor Peter, out of a job since they had stopped construction on that huge house down at the beach. He had found a new occupation: drinking. I loved Peter. He reminded me of myself at 20. But, he lacked something. I didn't know what. I didn't even know if I had what he didn't.

I walked down the stairs that led to the carport beneath the porch. The house was on stilts in case of a hurricane. Hurricanes in those parts covered whole islands with water. The land wasn't always there. We never knew when it would disappear. Downstairs, machine parts cluttered tables I had built years earlier. I liked to go around collecting piece-of-junk bikes and lawn mowers and rebuild them. I never sold them afterward, though. I would either give them away or let them sit where they were.

I grabbed my pole and bucket, as well as a cutting board and knife and picked out a bike to take. I chose a nice, smooth riding beach cruiser. Someone had thrown it out because the chain was rusted. I replaced the parts easily and painted it a shiny blue. It was a favorite of mine. I peddled down the driveway and turned onto Pfaff Street. In the cottage next to ours my great grandson, named after me, was crying. I could hear Julia, my grand daughter, trying to make him stop.

I stopped at the bait shop. It was a cottage converted to a small store years earlier by an old boy named Fred. Fred had died long before that evening, though. His son Mikey ran it instead. Mikey and the other regulars, a group of guys getting up there in age like me, greeted me with a 'Hey Gee' when I stepped in. The bell on the door tinkled a bit, but it had lost its clear chime years before that evening, or maybe my ears were starting to go.

I bought some blood worms from Mikey. He shoveled them into a little baggy with a bunch of seaweed and then wrapped that in a brown paper sack. When I left they all said 'See ya, Gee.'

I made it down to the pier a little after the sun had set. It must have been 8:30. I didn't wear a watch. Time made me itch. I waved to several people I knew as I made my way down to the very end of the planks. Beneath my feet the whole thing rocked back and forth slightly. The surf was getting rough and the wind was picking up. I could tell a storm was coming, but it probably wouldn't arrive until the next day at the earliest. All the sea gulls were

still milling about over my head, crying to each other. The storm would have scared them off if it was closer. I had time to fish.

I sat at my usual spot at the end of the pier, setting down my bucket and cutting board. I placed the knife on the railing beside me, still in its leather sheath. Putting on tackle and bait was always a very strange thing. I had been doing it so long that my fingers almost worked on their own. All the knots tied themselves and the blood worms seemed to jump onto the hooks. After everything was ready, I cast out my line.

The sea can play tricks on your fingers. After so many years of feeling the push and pull of the waves, the fake tug of some imaginary fish, I could almost tell the difference. In the end, I guess it came down to just how much I was willing to count on myself. There were many times when I reeled in ghost fish: fish that were there in the water but disappeared when the tackle came back to you. Sometimes I wondered what ghost fish would taste like. I was thinking about that when I noticed old man Benjamin sitting a few guys down from me. He liked the edge of the pier too. His hair was still thick and wild, but gray like mine. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles and had a small, beak-like nose. He dressed as if he was going to church, even when he fished, and smoked just as much as I did. There were many nights when old man Benjamin and I would sit and talk about things, neither of us catching anything. Not even a croaker. Benjamin was a German-French mutt like myself and we would speak in this mixture of French, German, and English. It was our fishing language.

Our usual topic was history. Old man Benjamin loved history. Not in the trivia sense, he hated that 'on-this-day-in-the-year-of-our-lord...' bullshit. He was interested in the way history worked, like I was interested in the way lawnmowers ran. He was convinced that history was a doorway and something would someday pass through. Sometimes he joked and said it would be a giant flounder, its mouth gaping with those sharp teeth. Its gills working, trying to breathe air. Other times, he would shake his head silently when asked. This was usually after he had a dream. Dreams always made him serious and quiet.

On that night we simply waved to one another. He was busy nodding off, his pole dipping in front of him as his chin met his chest, and I was busy catching fish. Drum, Sheephead, Flounder, Whiting... As the night passed and the winds picked up more speed, the fish bit more and more often. It was as if they knew the storm was coming before the gulls did and wanted to be out of the water in case anything bad happened. Before I knew it dawn had arrived.

Now, at this point I knew Loretta would be worried, but I couldn't leave.

I had borrowed an extra bucket from Benjamin when he left just before sunrise and I was willing to stay until the fish stopped biting or the pier blew down. On the horizon dark clouds were gathering; their bellies lit up by flashes of lightning that raced through them tracing hidden veins.

As the sun slowly pushed upward I kept on working away. The fish never stopped, the clouds got closer, the wind started to moan in my ears. At some point I bribed a kid to run to the convenience store near the beginning of the pier and buy me some coffee, a pack of Camels, and an egg salad sandwich. I think he was pretty happy with the three dollar tip I gave him.

The afternoon really laid some heat on me. I took off my shirt and kept fishing. The sea couldn't wait. She needed to get rid of all those fish. I was happy to help her out. She had done so much for me throughout the years that I felt like I owed it to her. The clouds grew closer; got larger.

Finally, as the sun set, the clouds started to overtake it. The wind was really howling, and began to carry in some rain with it. The pier had started rocking hard at some point, but it wasn't until someone tapped me on the shoulder that I noticed the swaying. It was Julia. She had Gerard in her arms. I smiled at the boy and he smiled back blinking at me and the rain blowing in his face. He had hair as blond as the sand at the bottom of the ocean and his eyes were a deep brown that rivaled his mother's and her mother's as well. My blue eyes watered at the sight of him.

She said: 'Papa, where have you been, Grandma's been worried sick about you.' I motioned to my buckets filled with fish. They were self-explanatory. She looked down and I knew she was shocked, but then she grew stern with me: 'Papa, we need to go. A hurricane's coming!'

I told her not to raise her voice at me and that I was coming, but when I looked down at all those fish (which I had kept alive throughout the night by refilling their buckets with fresh water), I knew I couldn't leave with them. I had caught them all, but I wouldn't be able to carry them and neither would Julia, not with the baby in her arms. I couldn't have her go get Peter, he had already started drinking by then. I told her to go on, but she wouldn't. So, right in front of her I lifted each bucket it and poured their contents back into the sea. I betrayed her, the ocean, my friend, because I was too old, too tired to carry what she had given me. I felt like I had spit in my mother's face.

Julia put my bike in her car's trunk and stuck me in the back seat. She did not speak all the way home. I didn't either. I smoked a cigarette and watched the waves get larger and larger as the bands of clouds that were wrapped around the hurricane's eye began to sweep over us. One of those bands destroyed that pier the next day. After the storm there were thousands of dead fish all over the beaches. No one had ever seen anything like it.

I'm still pretty sad about things, but I can't say why. Maybe I just miss that pier. Well, that's about it. There's nothing more to tell, really. That's my story."

*J*_s**April Fisher**

The rays are like fall leaves that settle against the ground and touch all of Washington D.C. with vibrant, eye-squinting colors.

Through a three hundred and sixty degree turn and glance, Kamia discovers she exists between five and seven times and then, with the sun's arrival, six or eight. She notices the rays have fallen on her as well and the stuff's covered her in peaches, reds, and browns. She sits down in the middle of a sidewalk block and waits for the movement of morning's people to birth an endless number of varying Kamias.

It's always best to sit in front of the air and space museum. Right in the heart of it. Homeless people, tourists, and job holders alike shuffle, skip, or buzz around its entrance. Their movement amazes Kamia as she sits perfectly still but not still. The wind whisks parts of her away, she thinks, and so she's intermingling with everyone around her, although none of them seem to notice. The passersby wear masks etched for strangers. They portray a false independence from the world and its creatures; they think their universe is only theirs.

She sighs through her entire upper body and pulls her shirt off over her head. The wind rewards her bare shoulders, breasts, and belly by cooling the warm skin. The morning's people begin to gather, stare, or remark, as her body, like liquid, fills their brains, consumes and replaces their thoughts, creates a permanent image in their minds. Their momentary obsessions with Kamia as crazy homeless girl, beautiful breasts, or foolish hippy fill Kamia with excitement so she bursts into the air above her and pulls the shirt back over her head.

The city is awash with interrupted dreams and Kamia thinks that six a.m. is a rarity in peoples' perceptions. She walks toward the other end of the museum and in the middle of another three hundred and sixty degree turn collides with a body.

“Excuse me, miss.”

Kamia turns and throws her arms around the man’s neck.

“Ben! I’m so lucky to run into you!”

“I’m the lucky one.”

Ben and Kamia clasp hands and walk along the sidewalk. Kamia has always known Ben and Ben has known Kamia since he was twelve. People must think they’re lovers, Kamia thinks, and squeezes his hand.

The city continues it’s awakening. It’s becoming a different being than it was moments ago. It’s a living creature created from the activity of living creatures. Its mood matches Kamia’s – they’re both bursting with energy.

“Have you seen Liz lately? Is she still hiding in dumpsters?” says Kamia.

Ben hesitates; he half thought Liz was his illusion. “I’ve seen her, but not in natural surroundings, I’m afraid. Your closest link is now a *proper* citizen, a proud, misguided owner of four walls and a toilet.”

“Oh, no! My poor sister.”

“Honestly, I hadn’t even met her until just recently, so I take it she’s pretty good at hiding.”

Kamia’s favorite days are the ones with him in them, so she clasps her hands together and pulls her shoulders toward her ears. He wraps his arms around her.

From over his tweed coat, Kamia sees the rush of the early people; the birth of the day’s commotion; the contrast of naked sky with cluttered Earth. She closes her eyes to take in silence under chatter.

Liz knows she would create people as she wanted anyway, so she may as well put the thoughts down on paper and make them concrete. Concrete as in real, as in fleshy, as in fuckable. She wishes she could get enough out of mental masturbation to completely give up others because, after all, her complication is already too complex without the slosh of them intruding.

Liz knows the characters will let her be her, so she may as well create them so she won’t feel so lonely. She thinks she can live without the live-birthed, as long as she has the mind-birthed. Creation proves the creator, she thinks, without enforcing its will.

Liz crumples her nose and puckers out her lips. She lets herself be silly like this. After all, who’s here to stop her? She scrunches her body up in a wonderful corner where she can see all of the empty. She yells, “Ha!” and covers her ears with her hands. It’s so quiet. It’s so quiet in the walls, in between the walls, in between Liz’s ears and legs. She grabs her notebook and looks out the window. She writes:

Horrible thing to wear in this weather. Tweed coat. That’s why Ben had one on. Because, horrible things got him the attention he wanted.

So his hair is a gelled-stiff, jet-black, and he sings into the monotonous

smudge of people in their daily do-si-do.

Liz falls back on her bed that's the floor and feels Ben body-numb run along her veins.

So he flops his arms out at his sides and he strides like a man pretending his legs are longer than they really are.

Each word makes her body more sensitive and she has to say them out loud to keep herself somewhat in control.

Never expected is the woman with the hair like a river. She sneaks up behind him and whispers, "Ben," into his ear. There's no question for him. It's Kamia. He continues to sing and walk and she whispers, "Ben," and touches her fingertips along the shortest hairs on the back of his neck. He turns into an apartment and then into the bathroom and she follows. He tells her she can stay here. He looks at her, and she him and they undress. Sometimes looking at her eyes makes him shake, so he stares at her breasts instead.

Liz is BenKamia fading back to Liz. She's Liz again and she pounds her hands against the floor. She wonders if it was her that spilled people all over the page or someone else. She wonders if she's spilled all over some page. People are just books in other people's minds, she thinks, but to her she is and is exactly what she is, isn't she? Liz puckers out her lips and crumples her nose. She crawls and then curls into her wonderful corner.

This is the closest to inside she hopes she'll ever get. Kamia sits against a building wall facing a building wall that creates an alleyway she's called home since she can remember. There are always people coming and going, staying and leaving. Few things are somewhat permanent here, she thinks, except for her father and Ben. And Liz. And herself. She sits with one leg folded on top of the other and her back erect against the brick and smiles at the man walking toward her. He sits in front of her. If he weren't a man, she thinks, he'd be a mirror. With his eyes he's telling her she's everything, but he's the only one that believes it. She can tell he's thinking of their past.

"Kamia," Ben says, and then stops. "I love you. I love you so much, Kamia – I want to be with you now, and in the future, for forever. Do you, will you love me, Kamia?"

She's smiling as she says, "Silly Ben, the future doesn't exist!"

He breaks his perfect posture. "The future doesn't exist," he repeats.

"But," she says, "right now exists."

He sits back up and feels an energy that wants to come out as a joyous yell, but he tames it to a frantic blinking. "Do you love me now?" he says quickly.

"Yes!" She yells.

"Do you love me now?"

"Yes, yes!"

They lean forward and grab hold of each other. Laughter is all around them.

Ben whispers, "Do you love me now?"

"Yes, love, I love you. I love you now."

The two bodies in the empty alleyway enclose each other. Their closeness gives Kamia the impression that they're one.

"Kamia, is the world perfect or flawed?"

"Perfectly flawed."

Everyone exists at the center of their own universe, she thinks, but right now, they're so close, the center of each of theirs is the same.

"Kamia, do I love you because of me? Can I love you because of you?"

Kamia kisses his cheek.

"Kamia, I know I'm here. But, are you?"

She sits up abruptly and pushes his body away from her. She turns around and sits without him in her vision. She can hear suppressed tears in his breathing and in his voice.

"Kamia... Kamia, you're all I want. But Kamia, is *you* real? Is there any you?"

Kamia looks at her arm and wonders where the cells that are her end and the rest of the universe begins. She thinks, is there any me? The thought makes her tremble so she lies back down on Ben and he holds her to calm their shaking.

When their universe is peaceful again, Kamia looks up at him and smiles.

"What is suddenly very clear," Ben says. "The presence of your smile proves the entire universe."

Liz's toilet is upside down because she's got the top of her head on the floor and she's looking between her legs. She feels blood rush to her face and her eyes aren't letting her see so she sits up and rubs them with her fingertips. She looks at the inside of her window and sees it's gotten noticeably more noticeable since she arrived. Her smudgy hand prints and cheek prints are all over it and she smiles because she knows she's here. Her stomach is hungry so she cups a handful of water from the toilet and drinks it. The quiet is too loud so she hums and makes her imagination busy.

Kamia's eyes are a grass green to Ben and inside of them he sees the whole of Washington D.C. and its swarming people and Ben's eyes are a dirt brown to Kamia and inside of them she sees dirt brown Ben. Kamia's eyes are a sky green and inside of them, Ben sees, are treetops and eagle feathers and tiny beetles and Ben's eyes are a dirt brown and inside of them, Kamia sees, is dirt brown Ben.

Liz is moaning with her cheek against her notebook and she flips her body around and stares at the ceiling. The big flat light is off and she can see

dust and a moth floating around inside of it. She panics. The moth, she thinks. It sees her; it sees her from above and from inside the plastic. It flips around and sees her, it sees her as if she's flipping around and as if she has funny lines all over her and she's flipping. She sits up and covers her face with her hands and then she gets on her knees and turns on the light. The moth zaps and she feels more than whole but less than human. The moth rests against the plastic covering and Liz thinks, one less universe is in the world.

A day passes. A day passes, then a day. Then a day passes and it's night time and Liz is aware that she's been for a while. She picks up her pencil and she's Ben for a while.

He splits open the ketchup packet and sucks out its contents. He thinks, nice, and sprawls out on his couch. He jumps up when he sees Kamia on his back porch staring in at him. He opens the sliding glass door and looks down at the top of her forehead.

"Why are you here? Well, come in then." He's ashamed that she's discovered he lives indoors and tries to think of an explanation.

He shuts the door and she grabs him by his shirt. She kisses him and slips off her clothes. He's wavering about. He's not touching her and then he is; he's not naked and then he is; he's not on top of her and then he is. He's not sure about this and frantic blinking over carpet tub tub blub.

Liz pulls her head back and bangs it on her toilet.

He's not sure about this but tub tub blub living room love.

He's not sure and the floor disappears. The apartment disappears. His insides disappear. The girl – what can he call her? His head is floating in the tub tub and all he wants is the living love.

Ben thinks he is sleeping with Kamia.

He blinks and the world is whole again and he's staring in her eyes and although he expects to find Kamia, he doesn't.

"Can I be the princess?" says Kamia. The dark from the night and the light from the trash can fire make her appear less than whole and more than human.

"Always," Ed, her father, says, and smiles as her eyes sparkle. "Now we need the valiant knight."

"I'll play him," says Ben.

"Good then, let the acting begin!" says Ed.

Kamia runs to the nearby dumpster and jumps in, peering out a little to see the others. Ben crosses to her.

"Princess, I hope you aren't going to make a habit of dumpster dwelling."

"Kind knight, certainly not, but you see, there are dragons in this city and I, being unable to protect myself, must take refuge."

"Poor girl! Well then, Princess Liz, I have no choice... I'm joining you!"

The crowd laughs. Kamia and Ben are gone from their vision.

Ed shouts in a fake fatherly tone, "Now, Ben, behave! Princess Liz is still a virgin, you know!"

The crowd laughs and cheers and Kamia yells, "Father!"

A woman walks toward the dumpster, turns, and bows to the audience, "Antoinette," she says, "the mother!" She smiles at the applause and moseys over to the lovers' hiding place. "Tra la la. Such a beautiful night to be dawdling around. What's this? A dumpster? Well, I'll have to get in it!"

"No," says the dumpster.

"No? Well, why not?"

"The dumpster is no place for a beautiful woman like yourself and... there are dragons in here! Arrr!"

"Goodness, they must be awfully small... hey, you sound like my... Ben! Is that you in there?" She peers over the top.

"Oh! Ben! A half-naked woman!"

"I can explain!"

"And it's the princess!"

"I can explain!"

Kamia jumps out and runs toward the audience, shirt covering chest, with Antoinette following her and Ben following Antoinette. She escapes into an apartment complex unseen and is drawn in by the warmth. The smallness makes her feel large and she presses her fingers against the wall to see if the walls are real and she's actually inside of them. She lies against it and it feels like tissue and it sounds like heartbeats and she's in its belly. She must have been born from a building, she thinks, and kisses the wall. She goes deeper into the narrow, living passageway and connects herself to the back wall. She sits and faces the exit and realizes she's alone. She realizes she's alone and her chest thumps. Then, she realizes, she's alone. Then, she realizes, she's not alone. Ben is sitting next to her. Ben's voice is audible, but what is he saying? He's saying, *don't be sad, I'll tell you something happy. You look just like your mother. Are you okay?* Then, her voice is audible and it's saying, *I'm fine, Ben, I just want to be alone*, and then he's standing and walking toward the door and she's saying, *with you*. Ben's sitting next to her and she realizes she's either alone or not alone, but which is it, or is it neither. The princess and the knight become BenKamia and they fade into

Liz iz. Liz is Iz. She's decided. LizIz is Liz. IzLiz. There's no one else in here, she thinks, and glares at the space from her corner. She rocks against the wall and yells, "I know." So, Liz is still here, *I know*. Liz is. Her fingers are pulling at her clothes except she's naked. "You, you. Forget you, you. Liz is. Forget you. Ha!" Liz is and that's allsheknows. *I know*, she thinks, and searches for her notebook although she really wants the toilet. The empty room, her notebook, her pencil, her clothes, her toilet. The toilet is the best

because she can kiss it and pretend like it's human. The toilet and her pencil.

Ben stares at her breasts and they're remarkably similar to her eyes, except less personal.

But Liz's brain jolts and it comes out: *Ben eyes Kamia breasts iz eyes. Eyes iz breasts are.*

It was only curiosity so at first there was no touching, but then, can I stay here? You can stay here.

Spread, Iz, spread.

Liz looks at the mess and cries. She whispers, "Ben. Ben. Ben. Ben. Please, Ben. Ben; please. Please. Plea..."

She wakes up and needs. Her belly is torturing her; it's been a week. She dresses and walks out the door, in the door, and back out. There's a good dumpster down the street so she walks quickly to it with her head lowered. She jumps in and peers at the blue, black, and white plastic bags, wondering which one. She brushes a roach off her left leg and splits one of the bags open; she pokes her finger into it and pulls back. It stretches and snaps, revealing old magazines and shredded papers. She grunts and attacks another that contains used tissues, bloody tampons, bloody tissues. She grinds her teeth and goes for a white one that she thinks could be a kitchen bag and discovers a half-eaten apple, french fries with gooey ketchup, and a multitude of other edible, yet discarded, things. She opens another bag and on finding more left-overs she grabs the two, jumps out, and goes back to her room.

She pours the contents of one of the bags onto the middle of her floor, sits against the wall with her legs spread at the sides of the trash, and samples some fries. They're mushy under the ketchup and crunchy everywhere else and Liz is pleased with the balance. She finds ants in the half-eaten apple and throws it out the window.

There's no one else, so Liz thinks about herself. With her belly violently accepting the food, she thinks she knows who she is. With tiny black ants inhabiting a trash bag, she's not so sure. A roach crawls out and she crunches it with the base of her palm and throws it in the toilet. There's too much perception in this room, and her mind is incapable of analyzing so many universes at once. She throws the bag contaminated with being out the window and makes a pile of fries on the tile next to her.

There's a knock at Liz's door and she's naked. She opens the door and pulls the man inside. He tries to look away, but she grabs his face and turns it to her. She's pressing her body against his and she's whispering, "Let me pay you rent. Here, here." She rubs his hands all over her body and pulls him to the ground. She spreads her legs and he fills the hole and says, *ah ah uh girl, poor girl, I care for you, ah.* He fidgets a little so she spreads her legs farther to accommodate all of him. She looks at her trash until her body; something's wrong! She thinks, it must be pain. It must be, she thinks, *oh god*, and bites her tongue until it bleeds. She wants to yell and she does. She

closes her eyes and gasps for air. She's crying, isn't she?

The girl's alone. Can she call the girl Liz? What is she now? She's shivering. She's cold. The girl fades back into Liz and she's crying and she puts all of her clothes on, including her coat and eats fries, it's cold. It's cold in the walls, in between the walls, in between Liz's head.

Iz. Is she?

The violent rays rip their talons through the night's well-weaved web and re-introduce color to Washington D.C.

Pain is a dull ache, a strained muscle sore, and it's worked its way around Kamia's body. She walks into the alleyway where her father and friends are mumbling and shuffling about in their recently conscious states. Her father walks to her.

"Princess, where'd you get off to last night?"

"Running," she says.

"All night? Where?"

"Yes, everywhere."

He laughs and offers her a piece of his bread. Kamia feels only one or two existences strong so she yells, "Good morning to all you beautiful people!" and it's twenty-two or twenty-three as they respond, and in a matter of seconds it's only five or so.

Kamia and her father walk silently to the brick wall and sit against it. Kamia startles at Ed's voice.

"Have you thought about next?" he says.

"You know I don't believe in that stuff. I thought you didn't either."

"The funny thing about things in non-existence is that they don't exist. Things that are next, though, always somehow arrive. So, they do exist, just not to the extent that we can constantly access them. Future comes to us in guise of the present. So, we have to deal with that future now, because now is when it exists. Do you see? And pasts are merely presents gone, but that means we have to deal with past now as well, when it exists. You can consider now as an experience of past, present, and future in motion."

"I have thought about future and past some. I tried not to, because I thought... but, well, I did. Papa..." she turns to him, "I want to be with Ben."

"Ah! Of course. Love always comes with the present concern for future. Well, wonderful. You, of course, have my love and support whatever your choice is." He puts his arm around her shoulder and squeezes her to him.

"I've also been thinking, well, wondering about past," she says. "Dad, last night I was running and I met a man who said he knew my mother." You can't exist without a mother, she thinks. She has questioned her mother's existence many times. "Do I have a mother?"

He nods.

"Tell me, please."

“She was a writer. A beautiful writer. Wrote stories about people she knew, although they never knew it, and if they asked, she lied. She had a character named Kamia, you know. Your mother was more of a home-body than the two of us though, which made our life outdoors more difficult for her. She spent a lot of her time in dumpsters because of it. But, boy did that girl have an imagination.”

“What was her name?”

“Elizabeth.”

“What happened to her?”

“Kamia. She was raped. Then she drowned herself.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me, Papa?”

“I did. You must’ve forgotten.”

Liz paid her rent and she got a room and an appetite for it. A room because she’s not fond of people and an appetite because there’s a baby inside of her. It makes her want to vomit. A little being who thinks she’s all dark warm comfort and nothing more. She consoles herself by thinking the thing experiences emotions and physical reactions the same way she does. Maybe the creature is another Liz. She starts to write like a madwoman. Her mind mimics her body and creations are everywhere.

Kamia questioned the existence of male genitalia until Ben took her as his lover.

No, that’s not it.

Kamia questioned the existence of male genitalia until she made blub Ben living love her.

Then Kamia had a creation of her own and she called her Liz.

Ben expected to find Kamia, but no, she said. She said, no, I’m Liz.

Liz is Kamia’s closest link and she lives in a bathroom.

Liz is busy creating when the door is opening. She stands and it’s a woman.

“Good lord! Ben! A half-naked woman! Ben!”

Liz feels the woman making Liz something she isn’t, so she runs in to outside. She realizes she’s not alone. She realizes she’s not alone and her chest thumps. The street is full, she realizes; she’s not alone. She falls against a building and closes her eyes and covers her ears and feels warmth and hears heartbeats. She must have been born from a noisy, cluttered universe, she thinks, and throws her hands against the building. She stumbles through the alleyway and runs into people who seem to recognize her. They crowd around her and say things she can’t fully comprehend. Their images expand in her head and she’s so many different things now and the picture begins to fade and she’s

“Kamia,” says Ben. “I heard some talk. People say they’ve seen Liz out-

side. I think they were confused, though, they were calling her you. You both look just like your mother, y'know. But, I know it must've been her, because you've been here."

"Thanks, Ben! That's so great; I'd love to see her." She walks to her alleyway home and spots her father sleeping by a building.

"Papa!" she shakes and wakes him, "Ben says some people have seen Liz outside!"

"Kamia, why are you saying this?"

"I want to see her. Have you seen her?"

"Kamia... I told you your mother killed herself, and now you're saying this to me? Please..."

"No, no, not my mother, my sister. You poor sleepy thing. Perhaps she'll join us out here now." She watches him stare-squinty eyed at her.

Kamia walks off and looks for the place someone told her Liz is living.

She walks into the apartment and into the first door to the left and is surprised to find a bathroom. It's perfectly clean and there's no sign of Liz or anyone. She closes the door behind her and sits in the corner, placing her hands on her head. She tries to sort through her thoughts. Is Liz living here? Where is she? The door opens and it's Ben. Did he follow her here? She stands and looks at him.

He's standing next to her and he's saying, "I'm here for rent."

She's standing and staring and trying to make sense of the familiarity: bathroom, nakedness, eyes. Hadn't he said, *you can stay here*. But she didn't stay. But where did she go? And, didn't Liz stay, and how did she get there?

Ben is standing over her and he's pulling off her skirt.

"Ben!"

"You have to pay your rent, so I can care for you, you have to, let me care for you."

He pulls her onto the floor and *french fries*. He spreads her legs and *pencil toilet notebook*. He forces himself into her as hard as he can and *spread, Iz, spread*. He's saying, "ah ah uh, girl, oh girl, I care for you, uh, Liz." She's screaming and then whispering, "No, no, I'm! Not Liz, not Liz." Ben's eyes widen. Her father had said her name was Elizabeth and *she was raped*. Kamia's gasping for air: Her body, *oh*, her body, *ah!* this must be pain.

She is suspended in a dream of serous fluid. She wakes and it breaks and *then she drowned*.

Kamia discovers Ben's lying next to her and he's wondering if she's Kamia or Liz. He's starring at her and he's whispering, "Now? Now? Do you love me now? Do you love me now?" His cheek is pressed against the cold tile and his face is disgusting red. It's wet and his eyelashes are stuck together and his hair is messed with sweat.

“Now, now, now, do you love me?” His palms are pulsing because he’s digging his nails into them.

Kamia thinks he fell in love with her twice. She realizes she fell in love with him twice. Her body is sore, but it’s what Liz wanted. Kamia reaches toward him and he flinches. She wipes back his hair and dries off his face. She caresses it, scoots over to him, and lies against his chest.

“Now?” he’s pleading.

She’s crying and she’s thinking, *Liz is gone; Kamia is fully Kamia.*

“Now?”

The rays are like reassuring hands caressing everything that exists with magical paint-dipped fingers. The city is a soft hum, a gentle stir as the creatures that compose it begin to buzz.

They greet masks with masks and Kamia looks everywhere for a real living soul. She thinks she feels one next to her. She’s in the corner of the middle of the sidewalk, hiding in plain view from the collection of story lines that have spilled into the street that either exist or don’t. Next to her is a man who may or may not be there and he’s searching her face frantically for the smile.

She thinks that she had been too lost in the word existence, but now, now she’s in the past, present, future motion of now. Liz or no Liz, Kamia or no Kamia, other or no, self or no: She looks into Ben’s eyes and proves the entire universe.

The Heat You're In

Gavin Lambert

Soon as the sun spills over the horizon it hits you and you're soaked. You open your eyes and look around. You wonder why it's so hot. You walk over to the thermostat. It says 89 degrees. Damn. You go to the nearest vent and stretch your arm up to feel the air coming out of it. Damn, again.

The only thing to do this early is go around the apartment and open up all the windows. You do that. You go to the front door, open it, and walk outside to feel the day. It is muggy and the air will not move.

When you go back inside, your girlfriend is awake. She is sitting on the couch, sweating, and eating a Popsicle, and you can tell by the look on her face that all of this, everything right down to the weather, is your fault. You flop down next to her, close. Your arms slip in a commingling of sweat. "Get away from me, asshole." She doesn't even look at you.

"Good morning to you, too, sunshine." You don't even look at her. "This shit aint gonna fly. You need to call the landlord, or something." She gets up and walks into the closet-sized kitchen. She opens the fridge and sits down on the floor, right in front of it.

"It's Sunday," you say.

"I don't care," she says. "Call her and tell her to send that Ed fucker down here TODAY to fix this shit." She's now vigorously fanning the door of the fridge. You can hear condiment bottles banging together. They sound like far off bells. *Ding. Cling. Ding. Cling.*

"Hello! Are you listening to me? I'm fucking serious. This is your fault, anyway. If you had found a better job, we wouldn't be living in this shithole-of-an-apartment with such a shithead-of-a-landlord."

"I'll call," you say.

When you call, it rings and rings. No one is picking up. You don't want to put the phone down because you know as soon as you do you'll get reamed. You let it ring 30 times. You hang up.

You get reamed.

You try going for a walk, to the beach, maybe, but it's too hot for it. You make it two blocks and turn around. You hate the beach, anyway. You decide to try watching some tv to kill time, to wait a couple hours and then call the landlord again.

You go through all the channels once. You always do that. Regardless of what's on, you go round once.

You end up settling, naturally, for a documentary about polar bears. You watch them lumber around their cold place. They slide down icy slopes, and they swim in icy water. They can really swim, you think.

In his husky voice, the narrator says that polar bears can swim for many, many miles.

You notice, for the first time, that some polar bears are actually not that white. Some of them are quite brown.

Sitting here with the polar bears, you almost don't feel the heat you're in. You almost feel comfortable.

After a while, you turn off the tv. Your girlfriend is still on the floor in front of the fridge. She is asleep, leaning against the lower cabinets. The fridge is humming at her, and she is snoring at it. They seem to understand each other.

It's so hot, you think. It's too hot. You feel heavy.

You feel like you are stuck to the couch. Everything feels too close to you. The air feels so thick that you feel like you are underwater, floating, not breathing. You think about the bears. They can really swim. For miles.

You slowly — very slowly — get up and walk towards the thermostat. 98. You've got to be fucking kidding me, you say to yourself. You walk backwards and fall back into the couch. Sitting there, you imagine the a/c works and you can feel the air, the cold air, and you condition it with cold dreams: Fargo, Fairbanks, Snoqualmie, Soldotna; permafrost, glacier, blizzard; mitten, parka, knit cap.

You drift.

You open your eyes and she is standing over you. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm trying to take it easy."

"You're always trying to take it easy," she says.

"You're always trying to take it easy," you say.

She smirks and walks into the bedroom. You can't see her, but you hear the bed springs spring. You decide to get up. You walk into the bedroom and she is naked on the bed. She is spread out, the end of a limb for each corner, an X with a nice ass.

You sit down next to her.

"Why are you here?" She mumbles into the mattress.

"Did you know that polar bears can swim for miles?" you say.

"No," she says. "I didn't."

After a minute or so, she reaches over and touches your arm.

“Would you like to take a cold shower with me?” you ask her. You hope she will say yes. You want to stand with her in the shower. You know it will feel good and you want her to know. You hope she knows right now, like you do.

“Yes,” she says. “Let’s please do that.”

She knows.

“And after,” she says, “can we go swimming, at the beach, the way we used to—before you hated it so much?” She looks at you.

You look at her. You look at her naked body. You think of all the hard words and hard days. You try hard to imagine something else, something cleaner and cooler, something lighter, easier, but all you see is the beach, and her there next to you, naked, and you say, yes, the way you used to, before you hated it so much.

Submission Guidelines

We are accepting submissions for *Fiction Fix Fourth Injection Vol. IV*, to be published in December 2005. This issue will be open to short fiction and novel excerpts. Please submit electronically as a Microsoft Word attachment to: fictionfix@hotmail.com or mail your submission as a Word document on disc to Fiction Fix, c/o Student Life, University of North Florida, 4567 St. Johns Bluff Road South, Jacksonville, Florida 32224.

All submissions:

- must be anonymous, and author's name and contact information should appear in emails or cover sheet only
- must be double spaced with one inch margins and Times New Roman 12 point font
- Fiction Fix does not set a word limit, but greater consideration will be given to stories under 3000 words
- The deadline for submissions is June 15, 2005. Submissions received after that date will be considered for the *Fifth Injection Vol. V*.

Thank you,

The Crew of Fiction Fix

I didn't ask what your
problem was
but why don't you tell me a
story?

"Mom is smiling like a plastic clown and standing over the table as if the entire world depended on whether there were enough cinnamon-raisin bagels." ~ *Graduation Day*

"Sometimes I wondered what ghost fish would taste like."
~ *Ghost Fish*

"Ebony Rose glanced at her own feet, just now realizing what a ridiculous sight she must have been in her white lace nightdress and battered black boots." ~ *Ragged Dumb Penguin*

"When you go back inside, your girlfriend is awake. She is sitting on the couch, sweating, and eating a Popsicle, and you can tell by the look on her face that all of this, everything right down to the weather, is your fault." ~ *The Heat You're In*

"Virgins Mary in blue and white looked down with tilted heads, holding their arms out, all around the room." ~ *Womb and Wing*

www.fictionfix.net

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