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Northridge

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The Northridge Review
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The Northridge Review



the
Northridge
Review

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2011

Acknowledgments

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Awards

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The Northridge Review will announce the winner of this award in the Fall of 2011.

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in the memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipient of this award will be published in the Fall of 2011.

The Northridge Review is also honored to publish the winner of the Academy of American Poets Award. The recipient of this award will be acknowledged in the Fall of 2011.

Submissions

The Northridge Review accepts submissions throughout the year.

Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, email, and telephone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself. Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be delivered to:

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Notes from the Editors

The process of creating the Northridge Review is comparable to any metaphor on teamwork. I can tell you that the editors are the cruise directors and the staff is your happy crew on your seven day adventure to the isles of poetry, fiction, drama, and art. I can tell you that the Northridge Review and all its processes are like a clock and every gear and cog must turn in its proper place to function correctly. The fact of the matter is that the Northridge Review is solely comprised of people who love literature. The words and phrases of a good piece of fiction, as well as the rhyme scheme and line of a good poem draw them in. I'm sure that you might agree with our passion for literature. That is why you bought this issue, no? What you hold in your hands is the product of many long days of dedication and plenty of long hours of painstaking work. The Layout and Design board worked diligently to create the layout of the book you hold in your hands. The determined Desktop Publishing crew worked long hours in front of a computer making sure every detail was up to par with what we, as a class, wanted the CSUN community to read. In the end, after all of the experiences filled with chupacabras, moustaches, and endless inside jokes, I found that the Northridge Review is an outstanding process of teamwork and unity, all for a common goal. The common goal comes not without the largest spectrum of emotions that a person can feel coming from a university level class. There are times of sheer bliss, accompanied with minor annoyances, and the ever foreboding feeling of dread. But in the end, we produce something to be proud of, something that the reader can find to be as enthralling as we did. Our common goal is to make sure that you, the reader, bask in the pages ahead of you, and come to enjoy its contents time and time again. In my opinion, I think we've succeeded.

Robert Shuttleworth Jr.



Nevermore will I look at a book of any kind and only focus on the content. Composing this review allowed me to experience all sides of the process, from beginning with nothing to flipping through a fully designed, complete book. And I must say, every moment is a learning experience. Though challenging at times (okay, many, many, times), a dedication to creating something beautiful, unique, and thoroughly ours kept the process barreling along. Through the distractions, over the span of wide-ranging detours concerning everything from moustaches to prolonged discussions of the looming zombie apocalypse (which would arise, naturally, from CSUN's very own squirrels), and past the moments that left many of us puzzled, this NR staff managed to both design and fill the pages with engaging content that we are eager to share with our community.

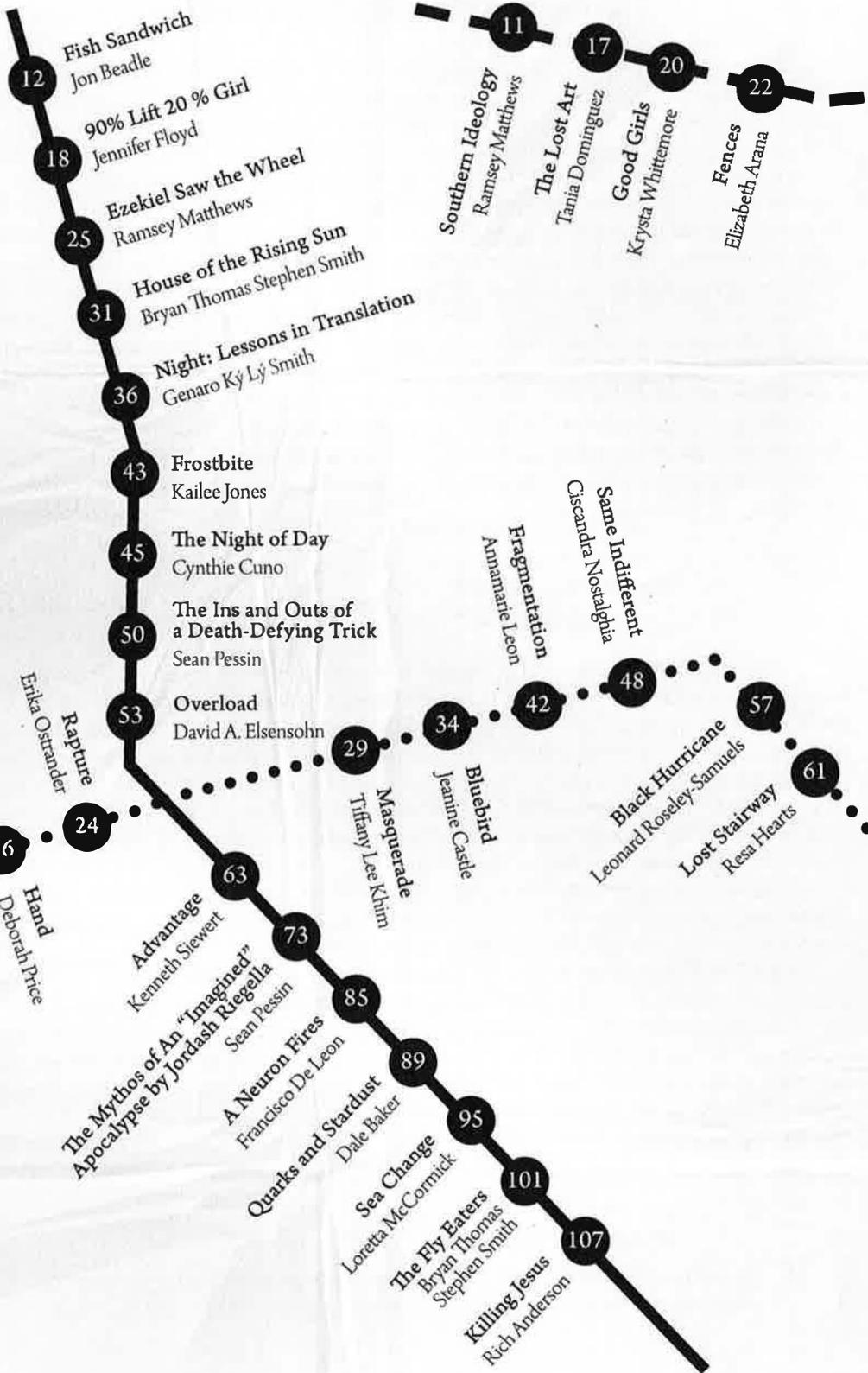
Now, we certainly would be left with nothing if so many talented writers, poets, and artists had not taken the time to send their work in to us, and I am ever grateful for all those who submitted the work they had slaved over for long hours just so we could, well, slave over them for long hours.

Even with such great submissions, this magazine would be half of what it is without the help of a fantastic staff—especially those who spent long hours staring at computer screens and noting minute details. This level of attention to styling pushes a book from practical to awe-inspiring. Immeasurable technicalities are included in the process of making, and I implore you: do not rush through the words on the pages, hurrying from one piece to the next, striving to achieve speed. Instead, take a moment to saunter down the page, exploring how each piece is set, enjoying the subtle delicacies. Despite the occasional moments of frustration, grief, and desperation, I look back on this experience, this amazing process, with the fondest memories.

Stacey Legrand



Now it's your turn to experience what we as group have worked for. Once you're ready, we invite you to take a deep breath and settle in. We hope you enjoy this book as much as we do.



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RAMSEY MATTHEWS

Southern Ideology

That ragged bare-bones black dog
ran past my mail box today.

A mixed ancestor bitch with teats
like August Mississippi rain drops.

Her purple tongue hangs lazy
across slack jaw.

Steel thin wool hardly hides her lean shank
and disappears completely at thigh bone.

My neighbor, Mr. McDuffie, eighty, widowed,
taller than a barn door, round as a rain barrel,
says *stray dogs are for target practice*.

But the old girl comprehends ballistics.

The elusive cur forced Mr. Mac
to switch from pellet gun to shot gun,
trade up four-ten for twelve gauge,
load lead slug instead of bird shot.

If I fed her I would never hear the end of it.
Somewhere within ear shot
tucked tight in pine woods
hunkered neatly beneath the fractured porch
of the abandoned share cropper's house
must hide a litter of hungry runts
taught not to whine.
Taught how to wait.

Fish Sandwich

JON BEADLE

At three in the morning, Thomas Brock briefly awoke with an intense feeling of nausea. The feeling quickly subsided. He rolled over to lie on his right side and went back to sleep.

Five hours later, Tom woke again. This time he knew he would not be resuming his slumber and so lay on his back staring up at the ceiling. He had been having a rather odd dream in which he had grown a thick, bushy mustache and for a few moments his mind frantically tried to separate the dream from reality. Eventually, reassured that he had never had a mustache, Tom got out of bed.

It was a grey morning and a chill haunted the air. If not for the requirement that he be at work in an hour, Tom would have stayed buried in his warm blankets. Having no choice in the matter however, he staggered across the hallway into the bathroom. Tom gazed blankly into the mirror. His first thought was that he was indeed mustache-free after all. His second was that he definitely needed to get a haircut, though it would have to wait until next Saturday. It wasn't until he reached up to brush the hair away from his forehead that he noticed his left hand had turned into a shark.

The transformation must have occurred sometime during the night. At least, Tom was reasonably sure his hand had not been a shark the previous evening as he brushed his teeth before bed. It was a vaguely interesting sight, to see his hand transfigured in such a fashion. About halfway down his forearm, his skin had taken on a grey tinge which ran all the way to the end of his hand, now replaced by the shark's gaping mouth. A triangular fin stuck up from just below his wrist. As he stared into the shark's beady black eyes, Tom wondered how the shark was able to survive out of water. There was no question it was alive; since Tom had become aware of it, the shark had begun shaking its head back and forth, opening its mouth slightly to reveal rows of jagged teeth.

Going to work was no longer a possibility. Tom did not

possess the charisma to smooth over the fact that he had a shark hand or play it off with a laugh. Even the thought of having to endure all the stares and questions from co-workers was making him queasy. Briefly, Tom's thoughts touched on the fact that he would have difficulty typing now, which would almost certainly harm his future employment prospects. But he didn't want to think about that. Instead he picked up the phone and, forgetting he no longer had a left hand to dial with, jabbed the shark's snout into the number seven.

The injured shark let out a startling cry, causing Tom to drop the phone. Was that a normal shark noise, he wondered. What does a normal shark sound like anyway? Tentatively, he attempted to soothe the shark by patting it with his right hand. It responded by snapping threateningly at him. Keeping a wary eye on the shark, Tom retrieved the phone from the floor and awkwardly dialed with his thumb.

He spoke to Susan, the receptionist at the office, and told her to let everyone know he was sick and would not be coming in today. She made some irritatingly sympathetic noises and hoped he recovered soon. Putting down the phone, Tom stared out of the window at the grey morning sky. He suddenly felt incredibly grimy and decided to take a shower.

Assuming, correctly, that he no longer had a place in normal society, Tom resolved to spend his day confined to his apartment. This decision lasted until shortly after noon, when a cursory inspection of his refrigerator revealed his failure to plan for this kind of situation. For a moment, Tom considered skipping lunch or attempting to craft something edible from yellowing lettuce and a bottle of ketchup. As he stood there, peering in while the cold air seeped out around him, a heated debate occurred within. Eventually, hunger won out over shame. The thought of starving to death in his apartment was not particularly appealing.

In the back of the hall closet, partially hidden by a vacuum

cleaner, was an old overcoat. Tom remembered seeing it for the first time in the store, a jet-black robe fit for a gentleman. He had bought it immediately, paying far too much, and rushed home to find that in the dingy apartment light the coat looked like a joke upon his awkward body. The coat had since been locked away. Tom was far too self-conscious to go out in it, but he had held on to the overcoat in the belief that one day he might be worthy of it.

He finally had a reason to wear the coat. The long sleeves concealed all but the tip of the shark's nose, and that could be easily hidden by keeping his left hand tucked into the deep pocket. To keep the shark from fidgeting (apparently it did not appreciate being shut away in a dark, woolen prison), Tom tucked a few lettuce leaves into the pocket. The shark chewed on them peacefully, unaware that it was a carnivore. Perhaps it too was unaware of normal shark behavior.

The outside world was still as dull as it had been when he woke up. A sullen-faced man sat on a hard stone bench waiting for a bus. Why was that man so miserable on this particular day? Had he too woken up to find himself transformed? For the first time, Tom considered that his shark hand was not a unique affliction. He had spoken to no one this morning; in a wild moment he wondered if perhaps there were others. Wait, thought Tom, he had spoken to Susan on the phone after all. He doubted she would have failed to mention an office full of shark hands. Most likely he was unique, or at least uncommon. He felt a sense of bitter pride at being, probably, the only man with a shark hand in the world. The sullen-faced man continued to wait in silence.

There was a taco place on the corner. Hungry as he was, the greasy stench emanating from what was presumably the kitchen drove Tom away. Besides, the thought of giving a taco to the shark seemed ludicrous. Simpler foods were needed.

Tom walked another block and crossed the street to a burger joint. He paused outside; despite having passed by numerous times, he had never consciously taken in the restaurant's name. Shark Burger. This was a joke on him, it had to be. A hot, black ball of rage congealed in Tom's stomach. These self-centered idiots. He hated them all, the whole world. He should go in there and shove his shark hand right in their faces, see how they reacted when confronted with that which they mocked from afar. Instead, he opened the door and entered, keeping his head down and

his hand deep in his pocket.

A young boy, a teenager, waited at the counter to take orders. What did he know of the world, of suffering? There was no point to being angry at such a person. Tom ordered a chicken burger for himself and a fish sandwich for the shark. He had difficulty extracting the money from his wallet with one hand and felt the boy's impatient eyes on him as he fumbled with the notes. Don't look down on me, he wanted to say, it's not my fault.

Only a few customers were in the restaurant at that time, and so Tom was able to find an isolated table in the corner. He sat with his left side to the wall, and, hidden from view, withdrew the shark from his pocket. It had been very well behaved, all things considered. Tom wondered if the shark had fallen asleep and was surprised to realize he was not even sure that sharks slept. When he got home, he would do some research. Absentmindedly, he brushed a few scraps of lettuce off the shark's nose and it turned to look up at him. They watched each other for a moment. Then Tom unwrapped the fish sandwich and set it down on the chair beside the shark. He peeled the wrapper from his own meal and took a bite. They sat there in silence, Tom and his shark, having their first meal together.

Around three o'clock, a ray of sunshine broke through the clouds and briefly provided a bit of warmth to the desperate city. Then it was gone and the grey returned again. Tom shivered despite his thick overcoat. He had not returned to his apartment after lunch and had instead chosen to wander the streets at random. He was likely seeking some human contact, but of course everyone else was busy with work or school. There were some middle-aged women devotedly shopping at the supermarket. Tom passed them by, turning his head so no one could see his face.

It wasn't the women that caused Tom to be afraid. He had worked at that supermarket for one summer and, since then, refused to go back to it. This was fairly typical behavior for Tom. Mostly he was worried he might run into someone he used to work with and be recognized. Such a meeting would inevitably lead to an awkward conversation despite the participants having nothing to talk about. It was best to prevent such situations and so Tom usually stayed away from this part of town. There was nothing to actually be concerned about, however, as most of Tom's former co-workers had left by now and kept as far away from the place as they could. Only two people remained from

Tom's time and they had no memory of the boy who had worked there briefly a few years ago.

Tom's wandering brought him to a movie theater. It was a small, brick building, naturally quiet in the middle of the day. Though he had no real intention of seeing a movie, Tom paused anyway to read the marquee. None of the titles were familiar to him. His mind drifted away as he turned to resume his wandering, but a sudden movement drew his gaze back to the theater. Beneath the sign was the theater

box office and inside that there was a girl. She was watching Tom with what might have been curiosity, though it was hard to tell with several feet and a glass panel between them. An odd feeling of reckless confidence

overtook Tom as he looked back at the girl who had noticed him. He would show her his shark hand, he thought. He approached the box office, walking a little too fast, and requested a ticket (it was no doubt for one of those mediocre films that are seen and quickly forgotten). The girl exchanged the usual pleasantries with him and then, ignoring the thumping of his heart, Tom reached out with his shark hand and took the ticket from her with its teeth. He looked to see her reaction. She smiled and told him to enjoy the film.

Either she had not noticed or she did not consider the shark to be worth remarking on. Embarrassed by his failure, Tom slunk towards the theater door and quickly entered. The inside of the theater was just as empty as the outside world. A couple of kids (delinquents by the look of them) were fiddling with the ancient arcade games along one of the walls. Tom watched them as they haphazardly made their way around the course in some kind of racing simulator. Something about the kids was incredibly annoying and Tom felt the desire to rebuke them. The obvious thing to do would be to challenge them to one of the games, but Tom doubted his ability to win when limited to one hand.

Having a shark hand would probably prevent him from driving his car, now that he considered it. The thought was abstract; it did not generate an emotional response. Tom had never been fond of driving, or, more accurately, he had never been fond of dealing with other drivers. He had tried taking the bus to work, but after a couple of weeks of safe traveling it had culminated in an unpleasant event. A hunched-over old woman, ripe with decay, had sat next to him on the way home one evening despite there being no

shortage of empty seats. Tom had endured the event in silence, nearly vomiting when the bus turned a corner and the woman's shoulder had touched his own. He had henceforth decided that dealing with the impatient tailgaters and assorted idiots of the road was an acceptable trade-off for the solitude of his own car.

The shark had chewed up and swallowed the ticket by now. Fortunately, the theater was so quiet that no one was bothering to check tickets. Still, Tom thought, perhaps

Tom reached out with his shark hand and took the ticket from her with its teeth. He looked to see her reaction...

he should get something for the shark to eat. It had been a while since the fish sandwich and he had no idea of how often the shark needed to eat. What was its normal calorie intake? Where did all the food go anyway?

These were interesting questions but of little immediate concern.

Over at the concession stand, the girl from the ticket booth was handing a bag of putrid yellow popcorn to one of the idiot kids. Was she the only one working here? Tom slipped his shark hand back into his pocket. She had snubbed him once already; he wouldn't give her a second opportunity. He bought the largest bag of popcorn she had in the fewest words he could. Then he entered theater three, where the movie he had paid for was about to begin. Naturally, it was empty; Tom had not expected anything else.

He sat down, balanced the popcorn on the armrest, and stuck his shark hand into the bag up to the elbow. The shark thrashed around excitedly and tore the paper bag in two. As the popcorn poured out onto the floor with the rest of the trash, the shark seemed almost remorseful. Tom picked up a few pieces of popcorn in his right hand and held them for the shark to eat. Overhead, the lights darkened as the movie started. Tom sat through the previews and left during the opening credits.

Tom sat high above the earth and looked at where he imagined the sunset would be behind the clouds. He had been passing by an elementary school and been drawn to the cold steel frame erected in the deserted playground. It had been surprisingly tough to pull himself to the top; the shark refused to bite down on metal and so was useless for climbing. The air grew ever colder and he drew the overcoat tighter around himself. The shark shivered in his sleeve.

He thought of the girl at the theater. Had she truly not

noticed? What if she had noticed and not said anything out of pity? Maybe she was even now sitting at home, a warm fire crackling before her, as she told her friends about the poor guy with the shark hand. Well, he didn't need her pity.

"We don't need her," he said to his shark.

The shark peaked out from Tom's sleeve, curious at the sound of his voice. The words sounded foreign to Tom as well.

Night had fallen by the time Tom returned to his apartment. On the way back, he had remembered his food situation and purchased a loaf of bread; an accomplishment which was slightly devalued by the fact that he had forgotten to get anything to put on the bread. It seemed there was no other option than to resort to the ketchup in the refrigerator (he scrutinized the yellow lettuce for a few seconds, before finally throwing it away). Tom poured the thick, red slime over a slice of bread. He folded the bread over upon itself, lifted it to his mouth, and took a bite. It was cold, sweet and gelatinous, disgusting but not unpleasant.

After wiping the last crumbs from his mouth, Tom prepared for bed. He brushed his teeth vigorously as the reflection in the bathroom mirror attempted to do the same. When he offered the toothbrush to his shark, it bit the brush in two and lunged for a bar of soap. Tom pulled it away and held the shark up to the mirror. In this confined space, saturated with artificial light, the shark's skin looked almost white.

At the close of the evening's rituals, Tom walked through the apartment turning off the lights one by one. Even without them, enough light filtered in from the streetlight outside his window that he could see his way around. He drew the curtains closed, though they were too thin to make a difference. At last, Tom got into bed. He lay on his back with his shark resting on top of the blankets, probably because he was worried that it would bite him if he rolled over on it in the night. Tomorrow he might have to go back to work. He couldn't call in sick forever and sooner or later he would have to deal with his new life. Although, maybe not. Hell, maybe he would just quit. He was the man with the shark hand; why should he endure the mundane trivialities inflicted upon the rest of humanity?

The shark softly chewed at the corner of the blanket, a loose thread caught between its teeth.





Hand
DEBORAH PRICE

TANIA DOMINGUEZ

The Lost Art

Plunk Plunk Plunk Plunk
lines pierce the pond's surface
like spun spider webs, stretching
tree to tree; two worlds connected.
Insects hover just out of reach
teasing its gilled inhabitants
while fishermen use other taunts
to lure them to the hook.
Beneath the ripples, submerged, lies
the prize; rainbows of color dancing
like a ballerina on a liquid stage.
I watch the silent orchestra and wonder
which will Darwin place a bet on?
Theirs is the Art of Catching;
mine the Art of Missing
those wisps of the water.
It takes practice to cast behind
one's head, and capture a branch,
immense skill to snatch a kayak
hidden; floating among the reeds
accuracy is essential when snaring
the most tender, juicy meat
of a fellow fisherman's hand.
Those tantalizing quicksilver sprites;
that succulent treat wrapped in scales
are insufficient trophies at
displaying my Expertise—
my eyes are set on bigger game.

90% Lift 20% Girl

JENNIFER FLOYD

I'm picking at my lazy glazed buttons. They're staring endlessly at the faux gold gate that rattles and clanks as the cables strain. I'm belching out in that strange, lurid tone of the cattle auctioneer. (Second floor, accessories... The kids are staring, the machine's whirring, and, for a moment, the only thing teetering on my tongue is, 'Maybe, with just enough lift, we could go right through the ceiling.'

Another credit card veteran joins the crowd and I'm starting in again like a tired bus driver with Tourette's... Women's coats. Her hat looks like a baroque flying saucer and her skin exudes that mothball smell the whole way down. Her makeup's sliding down through the wrinkles so it looks like little canyons are crawling down her cheeks. She's a cracked classic sculpture, a tragic misconception. Her eyes are flickering like a broken TV set. Her blue mapped arms are cradling a pair of candlesticks that would look better on my mantle. She looks like the type who'd want grandchildren, if only to have some hobby. She's got stubby fingers from the monthly calls to inquire on the state of intimacy and offer thoughts on the baby's room. If she only knew that no one particularly cared she'd have more time to make place-cards for Thanksgiving and buy new china for Christmas Eve.

People should be more ambiguous.

I'm considering elevator dictatorship. Voices shouting bits of mechanical dogma over rusted PA systems. Be the bolts, the washers, and the cables. Be one machine self. It sounds better in German. I could imagine their refrigerator bodies waddling, scraping against the pavement in attack formation, doors crushing down on freedom fighters. They'd heave their dead off the balconies and rooftops, a bitter metal mess. Visions of pulley prison torture swirl through my head. Thoughts of endless records playing mundane tunes swarm through my synapses. There'd probably be storybooks to catalogue a time before revolution.

They'd be well worn volumes or revisionist propaganda. The children would huddle in dark corners to examine the contraband and look on wide-eyed, fascinated, suspicious of the concept that the machines were once docile transport. Mechanical Utopia. It would have to have some inspiring name like that. Elevator World simply lacks flair. I'm thinking of adding the mural to the left wall.

The man and his wool coat enter right from the middle. He shifts just enough to organize my thought divorce. There's a slight breeze; he smells like cedar trees and smoke. I'm sure at 50% power he has time to read my mind. It's slow. The handle is throbbing through my fingers. He looks like an indiscreet detective and his hair is reminiscent of a Miami Ken doll. I like contradiction. I'm fantasizing about the brakes. I'm testing how much weight the railing can take. I'm wrapping one curl around my middle finger. He's making this little squint with his right eye and it's clear he's thinking, 'how pathetic.' I glance back viciously. I think rather intensely in his direction all sorts of sordid insults, only one involving his mother. The wooly man tosses his head to say I'm just jealous. I'm gritting my teeth and considering his first born. The silence is more playful, it's dancing through my head. With a little slip we're picking up speed. By the time the doors open I'm gasping for air. I'm sure he stops for just a moment because he's concerned. Or, maybe, he's just glancing over his shoulder because he has that look in his pants.

I'm jogging the control.

It's evening and the air is getting thinner. I'm pacing the 5x6 space clutching carpet samples. I'm mapping out the fireplace in the corner, the curio cabinet near the maintenance hatch, a wide dining table just in front of the door. With one crusted eye shut tight, I have visions of accent walls and crown molding. My fingers make a little "L" while I consider curtains and recess lighting. I'm thinking of the right lamp shade for a first impression. I'm mulling over

closet space and bathroom renovations. The dream is pocket-sized, portable, right off the rack. On the ground floor the light swallows the edges of the gleaming gate, and for a moment it really looks like an open door.

The meter's spiking.

Maybe I'll straddle the gear for one quick slip in and out between the 9th and 10th floors, and in the sheer ecstasy, make lots of little boxy children that can never move forward or back. Maybe I'll scream when I realize how little comfort metal can give. I'll probably just keep quiet and living off potential. I can't help thinking of the things they said in school, so I'm mapping out all the stuff that wasn't true. I'm laughing at the way they always said, give 110%. It's stinging now how it doesn't really make a difference. The persistent words whirring through my head say 'drive the whole thing right through the ground.'

I'm heaving.

The agitated blonde steps in. She's been riding the lift from first to fifth since nine. She's got both feet in the children's room, and one polished heel right on the embossed duckie wallpaper. We're speeding towards the roof at 70%; she has a cigarette in her palm. I'm considering her frame. It's melancholy and weighted, like clothing hung on the line too long. Her eyes are panicked and she looks exactly like the six-year old that swallowed a penny, but her hands are steady even when the machinery seems to cramp and thrust. A sprig of white chiffon is bursting from her purse, and I'm sure it's trying to escape. She's staring at me but it's all wrong. For a moment, just a moment, I think she can see the front door.



KRYSTA WHITTEMORE

Good Girls

The principal held my hands,
turning them back and forth
between his palms, reading
the hay barn on my knuckles,
scratches of thrown stones
across my nails.

“Be good girls,”

Mom reminded us daily on her way
to sew collars on shirts. Like her,
my sister and I stood all weekend,
every season in fields, twisted up
in a swing, lashing at river water
in a skirt. We spun like records
to Nat King Cole.

“Diana Lynn,”

the principal kept his eye on me,
looking for signs of distress.
Something was always wrong
with my piano lesson hands.
Mom sighed over my farmyard scrapes
from playing cowboys and Indians,
fearlessly firing slingshots in my
Annie Oakley costume.

“Wash your hands,”

the principal reminded me daily,
seeing a future May Queen in a 4th grader.
Once he and his wife threw a slumber party
for the girls in our class; times were different.

Mom always baked honey cakes from scratch
when she got home. His wife made éclairs
from a Betty Crocker cookbook.

“It’s about Diana ...”

the principal began. Mom had just risen
from her chair to take the call,
not knowing it was a lesson in motherhood.
She listened politely, staring at her counter
freshly wiped of crumbs. This was not
her first experience with authority,
so when her voice bloomed with color,
she held the receiver demurely
with both hands.

ELIZABETH ARANA

Fences

"There is nothing as white as the white girl an Indian boy loves."

Distances, Sherman Alexie

We jumped the knotted
wood fence and laid
like lizards
on the Reservation
rocks. I watched the desert
sun fancydance
across the bronze
of your skin, each closed-fist
kiss your Daddy gave you
its own zip code on your
stomach.

I wondered how long
I would have to lay there
until I would be brown
enough for you to
love me. We kept one eye
open for your mother.
The other we closed,
and set about making
our temples a
little less holy.

Invoking
Father Sun to turn
alabaster into bronze,
we sheathed our tongues
in words like "Apache,"
"warrior," and "tribal identity."

I said *I want to be Minnehaha.*
You said I should stick to Minnie
Mouse. I said *it would take a*
strong warrior to steal me
away. You said it would
take a strong horse.

I said, *"two weeks late,"*
"free clinic," "I'm sure."

You said nothing.

Your mother said,
"goodbye note," "bus ticket."

My mother said, *"quit school,"*
"factory," "full-time."

Years later, I passed
your mother by the
factory gate, the chain-link
fence casting a shadowed
grid on her face, slicing
it into tidy squares
of ambivalence.

She said, *"murder," "29 to
life"* and *"visitation allowed."*

At Folsom I said,
*"I needed you," "I don't
understand."*

You said Father Sun had
been kind to me.

Now the fence is barbed
wire, but it's still me on
one side, you on the other
and between us, suspended
like frozen particles of light, all
the reasons why you ran
until the road ran out, why you
could never love me, and
why the fence that tears
me apart is the one I keep
climbing, I keep
climbing.



Rapture
ERIKA OSTRANDER

Ezekiel Saw the Wheel

RAMSEY MATTHEWS

SCENE 1

2010. Late August. The Okeefenokee Swamp—deep in the heart of South Georgia. The air is stale with heat and humidity. Bugs, mosquitoes, flies, gnats and yellow jackets are ever present. The ground is covered with sand. There are oak tree limbs with Spanish moss, a beat up moonshine still, a log to sit on, a campfire pit, and a tombstone with the inscription “THE OLD MAN—R.I.P.” A long-barrel hunting rifle leans against the tombstone.

EZEKIEL sleeps on the ground under an old blanket.

EZEKIEL awakes. He stumbles upstage. With his back to the audience, he takes a piss.

EZEKIEL: God damn bull frogs.

EZEKIEL finishes and turns to the audience. He is drunk. He grabs a mason jar and drinks home brew.

EZEKIEL (CONT'D): Ezekiel I am.

PA and the BULLFROG enter. PA wears denim overalls and a fire-red long sleeve shirt. They stand on either side of EZEKIEL.

PA: Trembling Earth. Okeefenokee fucking swamp. Georgia Cracker.

BULLFROG: Swamp of my foremothers.

PA: Black water, cypress birth.

EZEKIEL: Cougars, mosquitoes, gnats.

BULLFROG: Snapping turtles, moccasins.

EZEKIEL: Moon shine all day shine and night time shine.

PA: Seminole Indians and run-away slaves.

EZEKIEL: My brothers, Preacher Amos.

AMOS appears.

EZEKIEL: Warrior Joshua.

JOSHUA appears.

EZEKIEL: My Pa, the asshole ghost.

PA waves.

EZEKIEL: Joshua's bride Doris.

DORIS appears.

EZEKIEL: Coconut thighs, palmetto arms, take a ride on my hardwood knob, bitch.

AMOS, JOSHUA, PA and DORIS exit.

Pause.

EZEKIEL sits and drinks.

BULLFROG: Ribbit.

BULLFROG exits.

EZEKIEL: Damn bull frogs. (sings) Mine eyes have seen the glory / Of the coming of the Lord. / He is trampling out the vintage / Where the grapes of wrath are stored.

AMOS appears in the shadows, but EZEKIEL doesn't see him.

EZEKIEL: He hath loosed the fateful lightning / Of his terrible swift sword.

AMOS hoots like an owl.

AMOS: Whooooo. Whooooo.

EZEKIEL stops to listen.

EZEKIEL: His truth is marching on. / Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!

AMOS switches to ghost noises.

AMOS: Oooooooooooooo.

EZEKIEL is quiet for a moment.

EZEKIEL: Daddy?

EZEKIEL tries to stand, but he can't get up.

AMOS: Oooooooooooooo.

EZEKIEL: Old man?

AMOS enters singing and carrying a Bible.

AMOS: Glory, Glory, Hallelujah. / His truth is marching on.

EZEKIEL: I'll get you.

AMOS: You can't even get up, brother.

AMOS pours moonshine from a jug into a mason jar.

EZEKIEL: When I'm sober...

AMOS: ...You'll be dead, Ezekiel.

EZEKIEL: Won't be soon enough.

AMOS: Talking to ghosts and frogs?

EZEKIEL: Make yourself at home, brother Amos.

AMOS: Good night to gig a bull frog.

EZEKIEL: Daddy's out there, Amos.

AMOS: (points at tombstone) Daddy's under there, Ezekiel. The good Lord giveth and I'm gonna drinketh.

EZEKIEL: There's plenty.

AMOS: For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness / and brought us into the kingdom / of the Son he loves, / in whom we have redemption, / the forgiveness of sins.

EZEKIEL: Right, Preacher Man. Tell it like it is.

AMOS: I'm just saying...

EZEKIEL: ...Yea, you're drinking like I am.

JOSHUA appears in the shadows, but EZEKIEL doesn't see him. JOSHUA imitates an owl.

JOSHUA: Whooo. Whoooooooo.

EZEKIEL: Both of you make terrible bird calls.

JOSHUA enters.

JOSHUA: That's because we don't live in the wilderness like an animal.

AMOS: John did baptize in the wilderness.

JOSHUA: Save your breath for your stupid flock of sheep.

EZEKIEL: Drink this and you won't have to go to war, Joshua.

AMOS: He wants to fight.

EZEKIEL (to Joshua): You're the stupid sheep.

AMOS: Love thy brother.

JOSHUA: Love and war are the same thing.

EZEKIEL: Ain't our fight.

JOSHUA: The assholes attacked us.

EZEKIEL: No they didn't.

JOSHUA: And I'll be an officer.

EZEKIEL: For a capitalist bastard.

JOSHUA: Making three times Army money.

EZEKIEL: Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears.

AMOS: You do remember the good book.

JOSHUA (to Amos): I guaran'-damn-tee you preach fire and brimstone on Sunday.

EZEKIEL: And eat black-eyed-peas and pork chops all Sunday afternoon.

AMOS: The Lord avenges and he is full of wrath.

JOSHUA (to Ezekiel): Why do you come out here if the old man still haunts you?

AMOS: White lightning hallucinations.

EZEKIEL (to Joshua): You see him, don't you?

JOSHUA: No.

EZEKIEL: Don't lie to me. I know you see things.

JOSHUA: I don't see him.

EZEKIEL (to Amos): You have to see him.

AMOS: Never seen him brother Ezekiel.

EZEKIEL: With all that preaching about the spirit of God and arch angels, you never see Daddy's ghost?

AMOS: I wish I did.

EZEKIEL: You're full of shit.

AMOS: There's a few things I want to ask daddy.

EZEKIEL: The old man will kick your ass. That's what he does when I see him.

AMOS: Sssshhhhhh. Hush up, Ezekiel.

JOSHUA: Ain't a damn thing out there but the coons and the cougars and your father, brother Amos.

EZEKIEL: Daddy wanders around till the sun comes up.

JOSHUA: You're always hallucinating.

AMOS: I saw Sheriff Mitchell down the road.

EZEKIEL: He ain't gonna do anything.

JOSHUA: There's an election next week.

EZEKIEL: I give Sheriff Mitchell a gallon a month. Give.

AMOS: All I'm saying is watch out.

EZEKIEL: Daddy's granddaddy made moonshine on this damn spot eighty years ago.

JOSHUA: Everybody in South Georgia knows this spot.

AMOS: It ain't no secret.

Silence.

JOSHUA: I come to say something.

AMOS: Speak your peace.

JOSHUA: Doris and I want to get married in the morning.

EZEKIEL: Fucking fool.

AMOS: Congratulations, Joshua.

JOSHUA: Will you marry us, brother Amos?

AMOS: I'd be more than glad to.

EZEKIEL: Whatever happened to that other bitch of yours?

JOSHUA: Julie?

EZEKIEL: No.

AMOS: Amanda?

EZEKIEL: That buck tooth girl with the pretty dick-sucking lips.

JOSHUA: She married Eugene Mizell.

EZEKIEL: She killed Eugene Mizell while he slept.

AMOS: Good thing you let that one go.

JOSHUA: Doris ain't nothing like her.

EZEKIEL: Traipsing half way around the world to fight those turban top sons of bitches. What's your pretty wife gonna do?

JOSHUA: Wait.

EZEKIEL: Don't seem fair.

JOSHUA: What?

EZEKIEL: That heifer waiting in cold storage until you come back in a pine box.

JOSHUA: Shut your trap.

AMOS: Ezekiel.

EZEKIEL: That sweet piece of ass going to waste and my brother coming back dead.

Joshua lunges at Ezekiel and pins him against the stump.

JOSHUA: I'll kill you, you drunk dumb bastard.

EZEKIEL: Go ahead. It's all the same.

Amos pulls Joshua away.

AMOS: Stop. You know how he is.

JOSHUA (to Ezekiel): Stupid idiot. You'll never amount to nothing.

EZEKIEL: Fucking skin and bones. Just like you.

JOSHUA: You drink all damn day.

EZEKIEL: Don't forget all night.

AMOS: That's enough.

JOSHUA: You're wasting away.

EZEKIEL: My brother is my God damn keeper. Go fight your fucking war.

JOSHUA: I will.

Silence.

EZEKIEL: What time is the wedding?

JOSHUA: What?

EZEKIEL: Your wedding. What time?

JOSHUA: Noon. If that's all right with Amos. (to Ezekiel) If that's all right with you.

EZEKIEL: With your rage you'll wind up dead in an Afghani ditch or some other God forsaken shit hole. Special ops my ass.

JOSHUA: I'm a private contractor.

EZEKIEL: It's still a war zone, ain't it?

JOSHUA: I'm not going to die.

AMOS: We're all going to die.

JOSHUA: You know what I mean... I have visions.

EZEKIEL: You do see daddy's ghost.

JOSHUA: I see other things.

AMOS: What other things?

JOSHUA: Day dreams. I see things and they happen.

AMOS: That is the devil's work.

JOSHUA: It's not. I swear. I see what's going to happen to each of us.

EZEKIEL: I don't want to know. I won't sleep at night thinking about such things.

JOSHUA: You don't sleep, anyways.

AMOS: Straight from hell.

JOSHUA: You're wrong.

Pause. Pause.

EZEKIEL: I'll be there.

JOSHUA: What?

EZEKIEL: Your wedding.

JOSHUA: Good.

AMOS: Good.

JOSHUA: Troop train to Savannah leaves at four.

AMOS (singing): His Truth is Marching On.

EZEKIEL: I'll be at the train station, too. You stupid white trash son-of-a-bitch.

PA (off stage): Oooooohhhhhhhh!

Ezekiel, Amos, and Joshua freeze.



Masquerade
TIFFANY LEE KHIM

House of the Rising Sun

BRYAN THOMAS STEPHEN SMITH

Everybody laughs when you tell them the story about your mom being a witch. When you say she was an actual, actual witch, they laugh and never believe you. Then you tell them about the time your dad locked her in the bathroom and she tried to escape by casting spells.

They laugh.

You try too, but can't.

Because you were scared. Because your dad and older brother, Barry, were trying so hard to keep her inside the bathroom. Because you were only a little boy of six or eight or whatever number happens to pop out of your head when you tell the story.

You tell people about the music, hearing the hum of the organ and odd guitar strums from The Animals' "House of the Rising Sun" blaring in Dad's room. You tell them about how you were in the hallway, watching your dad digging the heels of his cowboy boots into the beige (or was it blue?) hallway carpet. His legs, thick and stocky tree trunks formed from countless sprawls from a long ago amateur run as a Division 1 wrestler, were bulging under his blue denim pants. A weird kind of froth was at his mouth, brought out more by a big brown mustache, and a spot of clawed red at the corner of his temple. But what you remember most, watching him hold the door from just a few feet away, was the redness of his eyes.

He'd been crying.

My mother was a tailor she sewed my new blue jeans. My father was a gambling man. Down in New Orleans.

And you tell people about how the door would shoot open and inward and your dad would be flung in just a bit, letting your mom's cackle come through like a bullet broken free of a silencer. You'd seen her spinach green skin and sharp eyes; you guess it's what she'd *really* looked like all along. That was when you were next to your dad when he first locked her in. When they had been thrashing at each other and your mom's long black nails had scratched your

dad's face, leaving three small red lines near his right temple. Then he'd shoved her inside the bathroom and closed the door. She had charged the door and as it shot open for a moment, you saw that spinach green skin again, warped nose that looked like a gnawed-on pickle, and that pointy hat. Seeing the pointy hat made you run down the hall with Babe at your side. The dog tags on the Jack Russell's neck jingled just as a loud muffled 'bang' came from behind the door. It sounded familiar and in a strange way like the time you and your brother threw firework mortars down a storm drain, hearing the slurred thunder-like bangs, and watching the smoke drift up into the night.

More of the slurred thunder bangs came and your mom was cackling like crazy. Spells, you'd told yourself, she was trying to use her spells to escape. You watched your dad hold the door knob, his forearms bulging under the brown leather jacket he had on. And you remember, as you would tell people many times later, seeing your brother Barry, who was twelve and always braver than you, standing by his side. He kept handing your dad something; you think it was duct tape in little black shards or different keys to try and lock the door. You don't know, but you thought your brother was so brave.

And why not?

He was your father's son, a juggernaut on the football field, a defensive back who could kill any kid coming his way. And he had the look on his face now, had the jersey he wore on too, number 4 with the gold and purple. But that look was the thing. It was just a grimace, just a few teeth under the line of his thin upper lip, but it looked like he could melt steel with just that look.

"Maybe we should let her go," you'd said, yelling it over the blare of the organ solo. "She'll just fly away, she just wants a broom; I know we have one in the kitchen."

"She's a witch Tommy," your dad had said. "If we let her go she'll turn her magic on us," at least something like that.

His eyes were shiny red like thin nail polish and each word was loud and slow.

And the only time he's satisfied is when he's on a drunk.

Your brother and Dad exchanged something, another piece of duct tape to secure the door, and from nowhere the door shot inward on its hinges and the cackle came, and you could see the green skin and the pointy hat in the bathroom mirror for just a second before a 'clang' and the door was shut again.

A few more slurred thunder bangs came and the cackle grew even louder and the organ blared again on volume 12 with Eric Burdon of The Animals speaking of sin and misery in a house in New Orleans.

You tell people all of this, how scared you were, how terrified you were when it looked like she was going to get out. But it's the strangest thing with your brother Barry, because no matter how many times you recollect the story in your head and to strangers, Barry will ever so often call up late at night.

You pause at this point in the story, acting like you're trying to remember the rest. Like the next word is at the tip of your mind, an apple on a tree that's just an inch or two higher so you have to stand on your toes to grab it. But you're just thinking about Barry and those nights when the phone is pressed up against your cheek.

You say how your mom must've found a broom and flown away because you didn't see her after that night. That she must've used one of her spells to escape. To fly away. And as you say this you're hearing Barry crying, his voice husky and wet. And even though you're tired and you know the mind is a little strange at late hours, you swear that Barry is apologizing for the thousandth time. Really, that's all he ever says when he does call. That he's sorry and that he wants you to forgive him.

There is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun.

"What are you talking about?" you say, then laugh. You actually laugh and then he tells you he's sorry because he shouldn't have been handing dad the firecrackers.

It's been the ruin of many a poor boy.

The M-80's he got from Slidell. He shouldn't have been lighting them and giving them to Dad who threw them in the bathroom, the same bathroom, Mom, who was a witch but only for *that* Halloween night, was locked in. And he tells you he should have hid the Jim Beam, because he'd known as soon as he saw that shiny redness in Dad's eyes that something was going to happen.

"Barry, just go to sleep," you say. "Mom was a witch. You were there."

And then he says, no, no, no, a thousand times, along with sorry, perhaps his favorite words. *You look like that queer biker from the Village People.* "That was the fuse," Barry says in his routine choked voice. "Mom's blunt humor coming out that made him do it. Of course Dad looked like Burt Reynolds, you knew how Mom was," he would say, breathing into the phone in deep huffs. And then he tells you how bad he felt because he couldn't stand hearing Mom crying in the bathroom, and he just wanted so bad to cry with her.

And even though people are smiling and interested at this point in the story, you don't see them, because you're really off somewhere hearing the strange juxtaposition between the laughter and Barry's crying. You realize that the two almost sound the same and some part of you just feels off, stilted and awkward. And when it comes to be 12:41 am or on some occasions 3:26am and Barry tells you all of this, you just say "I have to go," and hang up, and when you tell people about that night, the night your mom revealed she was a witch, and your dad did what any dad would've done, you try to laugh when they laugh, but can't.



JEFFREY C. ALFIER

My Grandson Takes Leave of Arizona

That sunset day of parting hit the calendar
like a thief. Long before your father packed
your things to move you both back East, our days
ran in green hunger for tales of summer trees.
It had been a month since we'd laughed
as we ran through that orchard in Willcox,
plucking bright apples in the bone-dust light
of desert air—our small act of defiance.
Afterward, we hit our favorite café for apple
pancakes you always loved the sight of,
but barely touched. When we told the aged
waitress it was our last time there, her eyes
went heavy with our names.

Today shifting clouds urge the slant of sun
through windows of the house we lived in
for a year, where I'd wake you each morning
for school, or Saturday cartoons, your room
stinking with week-old socks and damp
pool towels I'd asked you time and again
to pick up. Now the house, its windows up
to air it out for buyers, can only smell of trees.



Bluebird
JEANINE CASTLE

CISCANDRA NOSTALGHIA

Like Flies on the Wall

Fidgeting for time my father irons his suit
He watches the wrinkles melt into nothing
And applies his sewn smile towards the steam.
The television buzzes bad news in the background
And family photographs rest like flies on the wall.
When his pant legs are perfectly poised
He slides them over his chapped legs barring no hair
Or masculinity.
He applies his sewn smile towards the top button,
Where it dangles like drool
And he sees me, as a shadow, for the very first time in the room.
He tries to mumble through his pressed mouth,
Like a child first learning to gag.
He says he wants thread.
I look to his eyes, and then his mouth.
His eyes, and then his mouth.
His eyes, and then his mouth.
His hands fidgeting for time, claw at his lips, and blood pours onto the ironing board
Onto the iron
Onto the jacket
That got him everywhere he ever needed to
Go.

Night: Lessons in Translation

GENARO KÝ LÝ SMITH

The sun is setting behind the mountains, and the skyscrapers are rust-colored silhouettes. Uncle Ngo stands out on the patio with fists on his hips and a cigarette between his lips as he surveys the bamboo shoots he finished whittling for the irrigation system he is building for Mother. Each time he changes his stance he deflects some of the glare off the living room window.

"Your grandfather is not doing well," Phuong says.

Phuong and I are up against the hallway wall, listening to our mothers talk about the letter in Vietnamese. Phuong translates.

"They think he has pneumonia again. Maybe," she adds. "He has fluids in his lungs. *That*, they know for sure."

Uncle Ngo changes his stance so that he leans heavily on one leg. His fists remain on his hips.

"Some of his ribs are broken. They're not ... mending as well as they should." Phuong leans forward. "He doesn't know how much longer he can stand this. After four years he is not used to this life. How can he be? How can anyone? The uncertainty from one day to the next is enough to kill him."

Uncle Ngo takes a last drag off his cigarette before tossing it on the ground. He sits on the ledge and leans forward to rest his elbows and forearms on his knees.

"Is that all?" I whisper.

"*Shhh*," Phuong brings a finger to her lips. Her shoulders drop, but the lines on her forehead deepen. Phuong leans forward a little more. Uncle Ngo stands up only to take up two bamboo shoots. "He wants to die." Phuong moves back. "He wants to go to sleep and never wake up."

For a long time, Phuong leans forward, mouth open, ready to speak. Uncle Ngo joins the two bamboo shoots together, fitting them into a plastic elbow joint used for pipes. Because of the glare coming off the window, because he is screwing the pieces together, it looks like Uncle Ngo is attaching the bamboo to the end of his finger. Phuong's eyes

widen all of a sudden.

From the kitchen we hear a chair scraping the floor. Phuong suddenly hisses, "*Oh shit!*" and slaps me on the arm as she runs past me and I run as quickly but as quietly as possible back to my room. I try to close the door, but the fear of taking too long to do so and having Mother open it into me makes me leave it ajar. I sit on the bed next to Phuong.

"*Shit, shit, shit*," Phuong mutters.

We watch the door and hear the sound of approaching footsteps. Mother sticks her head in, and Phuong sits up straight, hands in her lap. Mother opens the door all the way.

"What are you two doing?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say. "Waiting for dinner. Do you want us to help you?"

She shakes her head. Her eyes are moist, and rather than use her hand to wipe them dry, she blinks repeatedly. Her bottom lip trembles, and I expect her to say something, but she only manages to shake her head again before leaving.

Phuong and I watch Mother walk down the hallway back to the kitchen.

"Ba Nguyen may not live," Phuong says. "Your grandfather is too sick."

"Anything else?"

Phuong turns to me and says, "Isn't that enough?"

I get up from off the bed and go to the closet. I open the door and look inside.

"What are you doing?" Phuong asks.

I don't answer her. The Samsonite is in the back of the small dark closet. I hold the door open wide enough to let in light. The suitcase stands among the tennis shoes, the Superman and Captain Marvel dolls with capes missing, and the board games with the corners of the lids taped several times. I keep my hand on the doorknob and just stare at what the suitcase holds. Tucked between my mother's long-sleeved gowns are her father's letters bound

together by a rubber band. And I wonder if Mother will come into my room later on tonight and add today's letter to the bundle, or start another collection in her dresser drawer where she keeps her bras and panties.

Then there are the photographs in an envelope. They are pictures of a picnic we had at Griffith Park on Labor Day with Aunt Pham Thi, Uncle Handsome, Mia and Phuong. There is a picture Dad took of Mother and me. We were sitting at the picnic table fixing our burgers with ketchup and onions when Uncle Handsome Harlemitte said something that made Dad take up the camera. He looked through the lens and turned it until he got it in focus and said, "Smile." Mother and I barely looked up in time before Dad pushed the button because we were still surprised not only by what Uncle Handsome Harlemitte had said, but by the way he laughed afterwards.

Mother set her bun and bottle of ketchup on the bench. She moved closer to me, wrapped an arm around my shoulder and drew me nearer. Dad snapped another picture. Her small, straight, white teeth showed when she smiled; my shirt wrinkled from her tight grasp. I stared straight ahead at the camera with shoulders hunched, eyebrows arched, mouth opened. I still held the bun in my hand. That was the last time Mother smiled.

I continue to stare at the suitcase. Although the red, white, and blue tag is still tied to the handle and hangs the way I remember it, a thought occurs to me. What if Mother came in here, switched all the contents of the suitcase into another one, and set this one here to make it seem like the idea of leaving hadn't crossed her mind? Maybe she decided she was going to do this the moment she saw me in her bedroom trying to wake up Dad.

I reach in and grab the handle and lift; its weight relieves me. "What are you looking for?" Phuong asks.

I stoop down and rattle some of the board games and throw the dolls around before straightening up. I grab the doorknob and turn it a couple of times, and without looking at her, I say, "I don't know. I thought we could play a game or something after dinner." I close the door. "But I don't feel like playing."

It's a routine I've learned ever since Mother first received news that Ba Nguyen was placed in a reeducation camp. From the day she gets the letter it may take her a week to put it away in the drawer. But the day she receives it, she spends a part of the evening with Aunt Pham Thi. They immediately

go on their evening walk, something they do after dinner. Their walks take them down the hill to Silver Lake Avenue toward *La Olla*, Spanish for The Stew, but once they get to Hoover Street, they turn around and head back, fearful of the men who linger in the doorways of pool halls and bars with bottles in their hands. Because of today's letter, Mother and Aunt Pham Thi won't be back for some time. Most likely they've just started walking the same route for the second time to exhaust the contents of the letter and what she will do.

Mother and Aunt Pham Thi are half sisters. They have different mothers. Aunt Pham Thi is dark skinned, a sign that her mother was a farmer. Ba Nguyen and Aunt Pham Thi's mother separated when Pham was only two years old because her mother could not stand the mistresses Ba Nguyen had. So Pham never got to know Ba Nguyen as well as Mother did, who lived with him till the day she got married. Aunt Pham Thi doesn't mind hearing Mother read letters about a father she never knew or saw. Though she grew up without Ba Nguyen in her life, Phuong told me that when Aunt Pham Thi listened to my mother read, it was like hearing about a part of your past that you didn't know existed. "It is like a history lesson," Aunt Pham Thi further explained to Phuong, "because you realize you are an extension of something bigger, and things happen whether you know it or not, and whether you think about them or not, they will happen regardless."

As children they played together for months, played hide-and-seek in the large lily and lotus pond. It was months before they understood who they were, and when they realized it, they kept it a secret from their parents. Aunt Pham Thi told Phuong that they had selfishly kept their own history to themselves the way Ba Nguyen and Pham's mother had. They did not need to know.

When Mother gets back, she will turn on the television in the living room and watch *The Bob Newhart Show*, *The Jeffersons*, or *M*A*S*H*. She'll sit there, but as soon as the first commercial comes on, she'll get off the sofa, go to the dinner table, and unfold the letter, leaving me to watch TV alone. But tonight, none of the sitcoms are on because every station is covering the Iran Hostage Crisis, which has been going on for nearly two hundred days now. They show the same images every night: President Carter walking from the White House to the helicopter on the front lawn; newsmen in two piece suits reporting the situation with blank expressions; and the hostages waving from windows

but we never see their faces, only their hands, waving. The hostage situation is the same every night, and it doesn't matter how much they cover, how much footage they show, the stories are all the same—the Americans are hostages.

It's also too depressing to stay up and listen to Mother change a word's pitch so that she gets a different meaning, and by doing so she gets a different story. Sometimes the stories don't make sense and she's stuck with the news she doesn't want: Ba Nguyen is not doing well. Ba Nguyen is sick. Ba Nguyen has been beaten. Again. His bones are not mending properly. So after Mother and Aunt Pham Thi head out for their evening walk, Phuong goes home, and Uncle Ngo is downstairs in his garage-bedroom to sleep so that he can rise for an early morning at the auto shop, I immediately go to my room and lie in bed without bothering to undress or even brush my teeth.

I just lie there with the lights off and watch the night get dark enough to where the moon shines through the only window in my room. But long before this happens, the geckos are already clinging to the window screen. They began coming after Mother built the garden. Uncle Ngo said they were our ancestors who came to protect us, and to make our lives in Los Angeles kind. They crowded my window because they recognized a room where nightmares visited often, so they were there to keep the bad dreams away. I didn't take after them with my tennis shoes whenever I saw them clinging to the stucco walls during the day, nor did I slap the window. Uncle Ngo had one in his room, a fat one that slept on his bed during the day. He claimed it was his father, who was a glutton, someone who drank too much, gambled, and slept with many, many women, and lost a good portion of his wealth because of this.

Tonight, there are about thirty of them waiting for mosquitoes and gnats to land. They move with such quickness that their darting motions startle me. I try not to blink as I wait for them to move, to hear the scratching sounds their tiny claws make against the screen when they rush to snatch up the insects that barely land. The geckos dart all at once, feeding off the screen. They go at it for quite some time, and then they stop all of a sudden because the window rattles from the front door being slammed shut. The geckos scramble, and all I'm left with is the moonlight through the window and I know Mother has just come home.

She tosses a set of keys on the dinner table. In a moment, the television comes on, the knob clicks several times, and

in between are voices and static, voices and static, until the click settles on a station and there is laughter. I listen to the laughter in the living room and know that as soon as it stops, and there is a moment of silence before voices and jingles, she will be at that dinner table, reading.

The geckos have come back. They crowd only the edges of the screen, and they don't dart around as much. A chair scrapes the floor, a long drawn out rising scratch. Even though the television is on, I can hear Mother reading aloud over the volume. Her language sounds like the language of birds: the constant chatter without any pauses, the repetition of sounds that change with every rise and fall of a syllable. But the words she speaks are just sounds to me. Nothing comes close to "bones mending," "pneumonia," or "water in the lungs." The farther along she reads, the lower her voice gets until she is whispering, and it sounds like prayer.

My closet door is closed. Mother hasn't mentioned the suitcase. She knows it's in there. That is where she found it Sunday morning when she came into my room. I was asleep when I heard the soft pacing of footsteps, the door creaking open on its hinges, the sound of something heavy being budged from its place, and shortness of breath. That was when I woke up in time to see Mother closing the closet door. She turned and stared at me as if daring me to say something.

"I'm leaving now. If you're going to wake up your dad, at least wait until I am gone. You understand," she pointed at me.

It wasn't until I nodded that she let her hand drop. She took the Samsonite by the handle with both hands, lifted the suitcase, and walked out. I waited until I heard the front door open before I got out of bed. I went down the hallway and saw that their bedroom door wasn't closed all the way. I could hear Dad snoring; the noise filled the room and escaped and traveled down the hallway. Mother had left the front door open, and I assumed she had expected me to come and at least stand at the door. At least to watch her for the last time. At least that.

Now Mother has a reason to leave. What's to stop her now? I sit up in bed and listen. Mother's voice is rising again, and I get out of bed and head toward the closet. My heart beats in my throat and my ears grow hot. I open the door and see the suitcase. I tug the handle, but its weight only makes my heart beat faster, and I'm beginning to doubt myself. My ears are clogged up by my heart beating in my throat and I can't hear anything, not the television, not Mother's reading. I swallow but it gets worse. Now it feels

like there is a heart thumping in each ear:

I grab the handle of the Samsonite with both hands, hoping this will stop my shaking, but it's no use. Without setting it down to rest my arms, I carry it across the bedroom, and as I make my way to the window, I watch the light underneath the door, watch for her shadow if she should come. But the light seeping in from the living room isn't disturbed or broken.

We do not have a big backyard. It is more a side yard than anything with a heavy growth of ivy. The neighbor's fence, which is about four feet from my window, is overgrown with ivy that comes down to cover the ground. When I raise the window, the geckos scurry off. The screen is held in place with a single hook to the windowsill, and when I undo it, the screen falls off and into the ivy. It stands up on its own for a moment before leaning against the wall. I reach down and bring the screen inside.

I squat down and take hold of the suitcase from the bottom and lift it onto the windowsill. The Samsonite slips out of my hands and falls onto the ground and I don't know whether it is because it's too dark or if the ivy is thicker than I thought, but I can't see the Samsonite. I turn and check the light underneath my door. Nothing.

Just to make sure, I lift myself up on the windowsill and sit there before jumping and landing on the ivy-covered ground. It takes me a while to find my footing because the ivy is so thick that I have a hard time feeling the ground. My feet keep slipping through the pockets of leaves and the vine tangle around my ankle every time I take a step. I find the suitcase, and just as I figure, it is above the ivy. At first I pull the vines over it, but they are too thick to stay in place. So I tear at the vines hanging off the fence to cover the Samsonite, feel each strand stretch and cut into my hands from pulling until they snap. I keep pulling and yanking at them, hear them break clean, and twice I am thrown against the wall when strands finally give. I pull and yank, stretch and tear until my fingers scrape the wooden fence. When I think I have enough, I throw everything into one big pile—a mound of vines covers the suitcase.

I have to hold onto the sill, hop up and down in one spot to lift myself up and climb back inside my bedroom. The light underneath the door is bright. I take up the screen, and this is more difficult than I imagined it would be. There isn't a hook for the top half. Instead the top half has to stay inside a metal slat, but as soon as I slip the top half into it, the screen stays snug long enough for me to set the hook in place. I

reach up, take hold of the window and shut it.

I'm still shaking. What if Mother comes in tonight to get it? What will I tell her? Lie and say Dad took it? Or tell her if she wants it she should climb out the window and dig it out from underneath the ivy?

I get back into bed. All I can hear is the sound of my own breathing, and it scares me because I believe Mother can hear me over her own voice and the television. Slowly, my breathing settles. My fingers ache and my fingertips throb, and I realize they're filled with tiny splinters. Welts rise and take shape and harden the more I rub my fingers and hands. I watch the window, but it is bare of geckos. They'll come back, I tell myself. They'll come back and cover the window screen, but I am asleep before I can see them return.



BENJAMIN WAGNER

Alone on the Ice

It began and ended with a spiraling flourish.
A delicate red hulk, she danced across the ice,
leaping into the air and crumpling upon each glacial touch.

Vibrant sparks swam away as she skidded,

while a thousand angry bats screeched.

Cold, sharpened steel entered her as she slipped

and the stench of burnt rubber ran rampant.

She could taste the iron in her blood as she lay there listening,

breathing for the far-off red-blue blink of the sirens.

Waiting in the frigid stillness,
she coughed under the impressive heat

If that plane had arrived when it was supposed to,
she would not be floating there broken
with only a layer of leather between her and the frost,
but for that "*Now misseh yer jus goin hafta come back tomorrow.*"
Perhaps if she had known.

Now the wet snow smoldered quietly
She stood beside herself and caressed her ashen face.

It would be a long night out on the ice
amidst that mangled red heap
and she was already feeling quite moist.

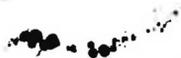
Blood is thicker than oil
but both in the same room made for bad fēng shuǐ.
The stick-shift told her jokes to pass the awkward silences.

Standing there gazing down into her own blue-glazed eyes,
she heaved a sigh of release
as the red and blue light of the fabled ECNALUBMA played across her face.



Fragmentation
ANNAMARIE LEON

Frostbite



KAILEE JAMES

Tonight feels like that night.

We were in the kitchen of a house that wasn't ours. I sat on the countertop. I was still dressed up from a funeral earlier that day. I was staring at my high-heeled feet as they dangled over the side of the counter, forcing a hollow beating on the cupboard doors. You were miles across the dusty tile floor leaning against the sink, crossing one ankle behind the other. I raised my eyes and watched you pass the bottle cap of the Sam Adams you were drinking from finger to finger. You raised the brown bottle to your lips and took a long drink, closing your eyes as you swallowed. You were telling me how I could never understand you, how I'd never last a day in your shoes. I ignored my aching feet. Your eyes looked grayer than green that night, but you tell me I see the opposite of how things really were. They were glossy like you'd been crying, but you never cried over me.

My feet touched the ground. They felt so unfamiliar in those shoes. They clicked across the tile with a sense of urgency I don't remember having. I slid my hands around your waist then kissed your forehead. "So everything will be ok," I said. That night we slept in a bed we shouldn't have been sleeping in, but it was warm. Your eyelids were cracked like they always are when you're dreaming. I laid awake and listened to you breathe, hoping it came easier to you.

Tonight I'm not dressed for a funeral. I meant to arrive unexpectedly, but you were waiting for me in the garage, with the door open, because you love summer nights. I'm sitting on the washing machine, dangling my feet over the edge and you're leaning on the car with your ankles crossed. We're silent like two years ago, but this is our house. And we're supposed to be sleeping in that bed. And no one else was supposed to be keeping you warm. You're telling me that I never really understood, and asking if I remember that night, because to you it was the night you let things fall apart, but to me it was just another time I held you together.

Tonight you cross the sticky garage floor. I can't tell if your eyes are gray or green because mine are stinging from the salt. You're telling me I always hope for too much, and I'm saying, "I don't know how to hope for just a little." We're standing on the curb and you're using only your fingertips to brush the hair off my forehead. I put my hands on your waist. Your thumbs are resting on my cheeks while you lock your fingers together on the nape of my neck. You kiss the space between my eyebrows. "So everything will be ok," you're saying, but it's giving me a headache. Your lips are chilled and I'm wondering if this is what frostbite feels like.



TOBI COGSWELL

Ode to Hardwood Floors

The opposite of insanity
all straight lines and order,
lean and golden
with delicious symmetry.
Not so much
the bearer of rushing feet,
but of dancing and echo.
The odd whiskery line
cutting across here and there
shows the ancient ones—
tattooed and damaged,
clawmarked, worn,
who know where the footfalls
have bent and warped a plank.
Some slightly ashen in cast,
a little dirty in the cracks,
more creaking in their bones
than the younger
but still so lush and buoyant.
The silent film stars of rooms,
sentries guarding borders,
collecting the stories, protecting
and unselfish, the very
foundation of falling light.

The Night of Day

CYNTHIE CUNO

In the end there were only two men left—one alive, the other dead.

They started on opposite sides, the city river between them. The plastic bags and broken chairs snaked around the reeds and dry brush that grew in spite of the concrete riverbed.

It was empty.

The sound of the freeway split the night and day, and both men—one dark, one light—slept surrounded by the river, under the colors of graffiti vigilantes and the shadow of the rusted footbridge.

It was dry.

The plywood beneath kept the tent damp but kept the glass and the pebbles out. He had what he needed in a broken laundry basket, his towel, his hat, some matches. There was never enough but he never questioned it.

This is where he lived.

The dark man never spoke. He had nothing.

He watched him from the other side of the river, everyday and almost all day. The dark man sometimes drifted closer to him and walked along the elderberry and the tall willow trees that grew in the center of the river until he became lost between them. When this was true, he wondered where the dark man went, but this was a silence since no one was there, and no one knew these answers. There were only so many questions that belonged to so many certainties. There was never enough time for all the reasons and the questions, she used to say to him. Like the river he ran the only way he knew how—slow, like the beginning of a stream that sometimes disappears for days. In the center where they both met, it was complicated and dark—like the tunnels under the freeway, where most things disappeared.

That was also the way he remembered her—slowly, until she appeared one day. She was always there, at the end of the dark road in the middle of the night, in the middle of the river. He taught her how to change a flat tire. She taught him how to make pancakes and a good cup of coffee. “You can’t have a cigarette without good coffee and a donut,” she used

to say. She always came back, but like most things at their time of departure that seem different and not what they really are—she was a bright description: young and vibrant. Between her adjectives and nouns, he became darker and heavier. At first she was different, more like him, but like most characters she began to take shape over time. There was a difference between when he remembered her and when he didn’t. It wasn’t clear where she began and where he ended and he often reshaped her words and strung them together. He pictured her when there were other things to do and other places to go—like when he washed his clothes in the river and waded through the twisted hangers and plastic bottles to find something useful, but these were always the most inconvenient of things.

She wandered to the other side, sometimes near the dark man, quietly, never moving the brush and the river. Sometimes he borrowed the clichés and pleasantries of other characters he once knew and transformed her into something else. She always cooked for everyone and never let anyone go hungry, even the other men of the river—she smiled and handed them everything from her pockets. She was an anomaly, larger than memory as her words passed by, too quickly to stop. She was the woman without a name, the one that knew the river and stayed.

No one knew him like her.

She broke the rules that govern most sentences.

But, that was the type of character she was.

She was the other half, the one that jumped out of planes, that loved fresh squeezed orange juice and the sharp smell of gasoline. He was the half that was afraid of swimming in the ocean, of elevators and small spaces. She filled the spaces in between the dark and the light, the day and the night. He rarely slept inside his tent and lay on his back so there was enough space for her. She smiled at him, the way he liked, the way he always imagined.

She was the novel of all novelties.

The dark man watched from the same place across the river.

The light man watched back, sometimes listening to traffic shake the bridge into the night, following him until he disappeared again behind the reeds. The dark man lifted his hand over the bonfire and stretched its flames until they lit the other side of the river. There was a magic that surrounded him.

These things could not be real.

He knew what this meant but he lay on his back to find the stars with the answers. When the "redline" passed by three times a day, he thought about the surf and how its sound, quick and loud like the train, follows you all the way to the beach. He was sure this was the sound of the ocean; that it would be round and whole, like the curve of her hips and the sound of her voice. The trees towered over the water and the streams were full of fish, cold, alone like the hidden lake she found last fall. He often heard her echo bounce around and the notes from her piano drift away. He felt the softness of her hair and remembered how it fell over his shoulders when she leaned over him to teach him how to play. He tried to remember her notes on his guitar, his fingers like sandpaper over the strings as he played for hours until the notes made sense. Some chords cut the air like a bandsaw, sharply, quickly—definitively creating more than one. He went back to previous pages and the same chords, that night in the bar on Highway One where they met. The bartender poured all night, for them and himself. They laughed until they fell into each other. She was the kind of metaphor with a smile that lit sunrises and ignited oceans.

So he took her home.

And so, she never left.

Maybe there was nothing beautiful about him. But she smiled and forgot everything. There were roses, beautiful words and practical things that most stories adored.

There was a romance.

He was a man.

She was a woman.

It was the summer and the heat resurrected the smell of the water as the most unbearable kind of oppression. Most people, even the fish, swam away from the outskirts of the river, where all those things that were finished, that were used, that were broken, swam. He was the second hand of everything.

He kept her sweater and the art history book he once gave her in the tent. It was quiet. He watched the ducks float by and remembered there was something missing. He looked for her name inside the book, but some words he could never find, no matter how much he tried.

One day, just after sunset, the dark man waded through the thickness of the river's garbage. He had been a tiny man,

small and far away on the other side of the river. Up close he was a short description—tall, dark and final. The dark man stood over him and although the light man wanted to ask what he wanted and why the hell he had been sitting on the other side watching him all the time, he stayed quiet.

The dark man said nothing and waited by the tent, while the light man tried to find his words.

It didn't matter. The dark man knew all about her and how the light man ran out of words, and how he would try to remember her and sometimes how he forgot, and how he rewrote her smile and the sound of her laughter. The dark man knew he tried to live inside the margins, but in the end he became darker—even amongst her descriptions.

He became something else.

It was cold.

It was dark.

There was nothing to eat and the words floated away before they came back.

Eventually the kindness of memory faded and he became violent. His voice became the white noise of crowds and stadiums and the sharpness of his words turned the sunny sky into the dark sky of war. He listened to himself and saw his inner weather, a dark storm in slow motion, silent like the shadow between smoke and fire. He walked alone across the river, now with his own darkness. She was the useless afterbirth of his anger, her body an afterthought. His hands moved softly with the light when he pushed her down the stairs and then it was too late. There were no jumps, no breaks; he was too covered, too concrete to go back to the beginning. She waited between his pages, but even her language became darker, more saturated, and it became harder for him to exist and her to be liked. This was who he was—cold, tired, cheap—like broken street lights and wet sidewalks. The air became thick but dry with the uneasiness of silence. The nights became darker when his verbs were harsh, definitive, like a heavy ship waiting for misfortune.

He waited for her to speak.

But, there was a difference now—the beginning was no longer the beginning and the end was no longer the end. He kept her small and quiet, soft and new; broken-in like his weathered boots. She tried frantically to revive his memory, to save his dead adjectives and nouns and she twisted them until they had meaning and pretended they meant something else. But he became too much and lost the power to contain them. There was a darkness that followed him, that became indiscernible from the images and symbols that surrounded him. He slowly slipped into the margins and she into the middle, pressed between the pages waiting for the winds to turn it all around.

Until the day she left quietly. When he found her, she was cold. There was nothing left for him to do. There was no way back to the beginning. This was the difference, between the beginning and the end—it was a controlled burn.

She was the center between the selfish and the selfless, lost versus found, truth versus fiction.

There was a split.

He waited for her.

It was quiet.

But this was the truth: the words were gone.

This was the silence that followed him, when he tried to remember, the color of her hair and the roughness of her hands, he watched the ducks float by and remembered there was something missing.

The ducks seemed so alone.

It was quiet.

It was still.

He thought she loved the ducks.

There was an echo. It was hers when he saw the "redline" passby, when he thought of where she belonged.

She was gone.

The dark man knew it was done. There was nothing more to give and the light man knew this. The dark man lifted the fire from the ground and everything was illuminated, everything was bright. The light man felt it in his chest as the wind forced its way through the trees and pushed the fire towards him. He was a misprint, an interruption, a lost fragment of silence. He was no one but everyone at the same time. The walls of the tent were blank—there were no trees, no music, no names. Every day she stood outside and waited for him to come, to turn around and face her. It was a stand-off. She was the Wild West, a character that was silent, partly obedient, partly hero. She wore her favorite sweater and always smiled when he remembered her. There was more than just the inside, more than just being alive when the outside and the inside mattered. There were only characters in the background, for the most part silent, for the most part shallow. He forgot what everyone else looked like.

These were the things that were important.

These were the things that were gone.

The dark man stood in silence.

She became small and quiet, soft and new, but broken-in. Like most characters headed toward the period instead of the comma it was more than just a pause, more than just an empty space. There was more than just the inside, more than just being alive when the outside and the inside mattered. Her phrases eventually turned into fragments that made no sense. In the end he knew she belonged to him

and he belonged to her.

She was still alive.

When the night became darker, her voice faded. He tried to remember. He tried to imagine her face, her touch, the way she laughed.

She was gone.

This, he knew, he could not fight.

He was alone.

He threw her pages into the fire. Some landed but some danced over the heat, like the soft landing of leaves, missed warnings that land quietly, unnoticed.

There was nothing left to say.

It was hard to breathe.

It was cold.

He ran out of words. The language was gone. He watched the cars go by and imagined the conversations inside—were they lying? Did they know they were wasting time? Would they remember each other someday? Or will the words just go away? She took nothing and left nothing. It was empty and the space she lived in disappeared. She sank into the fire and then into the river and smothered the moss that refused to die. But he let her float away since in another place he imagined her happy, because only when he remembered her, was he still alive.

The dark man sat next to the fire and waited. The light man stared at him and knew there was no more, that there was nothing to save if there was nothing to give.

The dark man knew it was time.

He knew the finality of most things in the river, those things that had expired, broken, or served their use—it was time. He tried to remember her smell, what she looked like, but the river swallowed her whole and it was black and silent.

It was cold at first when he missed. The knife stayed in the middle of his chest, the cheap plastic handle buried between the folds of his red flannel shirt. He felt her warmth again and her hands on his chest. She was there, waiting. The dark man waited and watched him drift toward the edge of the river—between the cans and syringes, lost like a child that wanders until they arrive nowhere and everywhere. There was no ceremony the second time, he fell to the ground, his blood a thick, dark, molasses that slid across the river and faded into the darkness. There was nothing but acceptance in the middle of this strange silence. So the dark man faded and there was peace; there was light on the other side where the air was cool and the "first time" lived.

It ended with two men.



Same Indifferent
CISCANDRA NOSTALGHIA

ELIZABETH ARANA

You or God

*I told you not to touch her
Daddy said, looming over the baby
bird you found in the backyard. Neck's
damn near broken, got your scent all
over her. Best just to put her down
now.*

You stood, shamefaced and bare
foot, entranced as shallow sighs
heaved sparrow bones up twice,
then once, then not at all. *I know
I taught you better than that.*

But remember how you
said you could feel her
staring at you, asking you or
God to stop, asking you or God
why? And when she realized
you *were* God, she stopped
asking.

Like that Muslim girl in Basrah
towards the end of your second
tour. Those same imploring eyes,
how she squawked and
squirmed beneath you, mouth
opening and closing, even after
she fell silent, like she still had
something to say, like she
still believed to you or
God it mattered.

The Ins and Outs of a Death-Defying Trick

SEAN PESSIN

Outside of the man is a box. Or, rather, the man is inside the box. Inside of the box is a man, and inside the man is a key. The man is outside the key, but inside the box. Outside the man and outside the box is a lock that keeps the man in. Outside the key, outside the man, outside the box, outside the lock is the stage. Outside the stage is the audience and outside the audience is the theater. The theater is composed of bars and wood. The audience is composed of people made up of organic compounds. The stage is composed of bars and wood. The box is made up of bars and wood. The man is made up of organic compounds. The key is made of brass, which is an alloy of copper and zinc and lead; the key is made of copper and zinc and lead. The man is a magician.

To complete the trick and release the confetti inside the cannons that are on either side of the stage (the stage is in-between the cannons), the magician must evacuate the key so that he can evacuate the box. Then, the confetti can be outside the cannons and the people and the cannons can be inside the confetti inside the theater. The audience must remain outside the cannons. Fire hazard; it is in the rule-book. The key works its way inside of him. The key is inside of him. The key is only partially inside of him, and partially outside of him. The key exits his mouth. The box remains totally outside the key and the magician. The cannons remain outside the confetti and the confetti remains inside the cannons. The stage remains in-between the two cannons. The audience remains outside the cannons and the confetti. The magician is a sex-offender.

Inside the stage is the second stagehand. Outside the second stagehand is the stage. He is working on the switch for the finale of the current trick. Outside the title "second stagehand" are quotations. Inside the quotations is the word stage. Outside the word stage and inside the quotations is

the word second-hand; his tools are borrowed from the theater union. The second hand on his watch strikes 12, and, inside the watch, cogs turn; an alarm is tripped to trigger a memory inside him that the stage must be ready. The sound is in the air and outside the second stagehand until he hears it. The second stagehand is outside the alarm. The stage is almost ready.

The key is now no longer inside the sex-offender, but it is still in the box. The key is in the sex-offender's palm. The audience inside the theater must not see that the key was inside the sex-offender inside the box. The box, the sex-offender, and the key are placed inside a sheet; the sheet is placed on top of the box. The key inside the palm of the sex-offender inside the box inside the sheet moves toward the lock. The sex-offender is still a magician.

Inside the audience is a transvestite. The transvestite is a man in drag. Inside the woman's clothes is a man, and inside that man are tucked genitals. Inside the word transvestite is "-vest-." Outside "-vest-" is "trans-" and "-ite." "-Vest-" is clothing, while "trans-" is beyond, and "-ite" means to make or do. Beyond the clothing to make or do. Beyond the clothing, she makes do. Outside the penis and testicles is a woman. She reaches inside her purse to find her cell phone, and her hand brushes against a condom. She desires to be outside a penis besides her own, and, in her mind, she knows she must be ready. Outside the hand is a condom and a badge and a purse is outside the two of these things. Outside the purse is the rest of her, and outside the rest of her is her date, who is in her gaze. Her and her date are inside the audience.

The confetti is still inside the cannons. The audience is still outside the confetti. The audience remains outside the cannons. The magician remains inside the box. The

transvestite remains in the audience. The key and the palm are outside the box. The key is outside the lock. The key is inside the lock and outside the lock and outside the box. The palm is outside the lock, but the key and lock are still inside the sheet with the palm. The tumblers in the lock click while the key is in the lock, and the key evacuates the lock and retreats back into the palm. The palm is now in the cage and the key returns back inside the magician. The lock evacuates the box and the box evacuates the sheet and the magician evacuates the box. The key evacuates the box. The magician is in the spotlight.

The switch is tripped by the stagehand. The confetti evacuates the cannons. The audience is inside the confetti. The stage is inside the confetti. The magician is inside the confetti. The confetti is inside the theater. The magician is still a man.

The admiration is a celebration. The celebration is composed of the audience. The celebration is a riot. The audience is in a riot. The confetti is outside the riot. The man is in a panic. The audience is outside the cannons. The audience is inside the cannons. The cannons are still outside the audience. The cannons are tripped by the second stagehand; he is in the stage and the sounds of the riot are not in him. The audience is in flames. The theater is engulfed in flames. The woman outside her penis is in the fire department. The woman puts the audience in evacuation formation. The audience is inside the theater. The audience is inside the theater and the theater is outside the audience. The audience is outside the theater.

Outside the theater is the audience. Outside the second stagehand and the man is still the theater. The man is trapped; outside the man is a pile of rubble. Inside the audience is the theater. Within its gaze is the fiery spectacle. Outside the man are flames encroaching. Inside a ring of flames is the man.

The man and the flames are one.

In a coffee shop the next day, the second stagehand, now unemployed, reads the newspaper. In the paper the next day, the unemployed man notices in the paper outside of him the story of the magic act. Outside the paper, the man waits for light to reflect. Outside the paper, light reflects.

Inside the light, but outside the paper and outside the man, the words reflect. Outside the reflection of light is the paper and the unemployed man. The eyes in the unemployed man receive the light. His eyes are reading; the unemployed man becomes a reader. Outside the eyes of the reader is the story. Between the paper and the reader is the reflected light. Outside of a picture is the story. Inside the picture is the woman (the man in drag) leading the audience out of the riot and out of the theater. In the story, she is given credit for being the heroic fireman in that evening.

In the story is also the man (the magician sex-offender). Outside the article are his sex-offender parts. Not in the article at all, aside from the picture in the article of them being herded, is the audience. The reader wonders about the thoughts of the people in the audience. The man is in the memories of the audience. The memories of the audience are outside the magician.



JAMES MEDINA

Cage that Animal

Make it hungry,
it's so bitter.

Tame it,
make it yours.

So hungry,
and so delirious.

Everything is delicious.

Overload

DAVID A. ELSENSOHN

You prepare the medications The Mother has to take, lining up the bottles on the bathroom counter. Fat white cylinders stand like soldiers, words swarming over them, explaining, cautioning, explicating, diverting blame. Take with food, this many times, these many hours, do not exceed. The capshavehard little beaks to bite your thumb before disgorging their cotton-haired contents; she needs two tablets the color of cream, two tiny greens, two times a day, four dry white pellets with lines dividing them down the middle. You turn each bottle so that its label faces exactly outward. She sits in her wheelchair, watching, impatient with your inability to just get things over with; who should care which way they face, or even if they stand up? Yet she always has you measure out her medicine. She lives in her room. She cannot go out. She never could. Why do these have to be so complicated? she rasps. I know, Mom, you say. You do know. You can feel complication like sunlight through a window.

He lives with his mother are five peals of a death knell marking the abortion of relationships. They introduce unwanted complication. I do not live with my mother, you always want to explain. She lives with me. I do not live with my mother, I do not live, at all. Nothing sounds correct when you try to explain it, which you do for yourself since no one ever asks. There is nothing you can do; she cannot go out. There is something wrong with her legs, too, so you help with a lot of things. You know you have problems, habits you perform over and over again, to clear the world, to make some final act click in your head so you can stop doing them, but at least you can go out.

The house wheezes, its lungs and passageways constricting around parasitic possessions. Most of them are hers. She likes old lamps and clock radios and small plaques that aren't wood but look like it, that have little waving wires that

display the time using a laser. All of them are plugged into traffic-jammed slots along the wall, the wires an octopus of black and white and beige, too many selections bottlenecked into one space. Some of them are old, and have to be plugged into a hard grey stub that turns their two prongs into three. You want to lessen the coiled heaps of disorder; they fray your nerves, but she has to have them on, all the time. Maybe they move for her, make the world move around a little so she does not have to move out into it. She cannot go out.

he pads to the edge of the river, comfortable and strong in his own bulk; he swings and stamps the wet rock beneath the water; the river is strong, but not enough to move him; cold water plasters brown fur against his neck; eat; fish; explosions of now to be smelled and recognized; fish leap to gather sunlight, for him to catch; when one falls in his jaws he carries it to drier rock and breaks its body by stamping with his two front feet; it is not easy, but it is simple; fish arrive one at a time; if he misses there will be another; the water only flows in one direction.

Usually you call restaurants to bring food, but other times you go out to get something. You often buy your own meal first, eating it at the place you bought it to be somewhere else for a moment. It is full of noise and chaos and is not clean, but the noise belongs to the restaurant, so it does not bother you as much. You then buy her meal, and take it home. Other times you sit in the car in the drive-thru, to get food for both of you. On the way home you place your hand over your cup and press down all the plastic domes on the lid with a pop, selecting all options: root beer, diet, other. You want badly to press down the bubbles on her cup but she does not like it.

Sometimes you remember that book where a mouse is

made smart, and the human along with him, until they both fall back to where they had been before. When you read it, you felt uncomfortable: dimly aware of a maze, comprehending a little when one raises one's head and looks up. You wish you could understand more, but the things you can't help doing, over and over again, get in your way. You wish you looked better. Your hairs have fallen like Autumn from the front of your head, and your chin hides under your lip, afraid. Only your nose is perfect, proud and centurion. The hair on your head that has not fallen out is tied in a limp tail.

At night you can't fall asleep until she stops coughing. She always coughs when she sits up watching television, laughing at the host and his guests. You do not keep a television in your room; there are too many options.

During the day you work in a building, making other people's computers work for them. You feel the other people are not comfortable with you, so you only stay long enough to solve their problem. They have things at their desks, artifacts to customize space they do not own, to give the illusion of happiness, of habitat. Things, at desks. They suggest non-threatening desires to go home, or thank God for the day of the week. Collections. Photos of people they live with, quotations they pretend to live by, drawings by other people who draw them for daily newspapers so people can laugh at them and cut them out to tape to their walls at work. You keep nothing at your desk. No one understands this lack, especially the woman across from you who collects figurines of ducks. Only your headphones sit on your desk when you aren't wearing them, and a small kit of screwdrivers. You keep spare parts and cords neatly stacked in a black file cabinet.

leaves fall past his head to the ground; he stretches high and rakes the sides of the tree, leaving his scent; there is another like him, nearby; at the water others do not make him grow; at the water everyone has enough, but here he wishes to be alone; he lifts his massive head and snuffs loudly; his ears flatten; the other goes away; he is at peace.

The Mother calls in the afternoon to tell you which drive-thru to visit, making sure you know what options she doesn't want on her meal. You bring it home, one cup with its bubbles pressed down, the other pristine, its options

open and shouting their unsolved status. Afterward you throw away the trash, because otherwise she lets it stay in the house to be added to her possessions. You sit in front of your screen at your desk, in your room, where you can still hear her coughing. Sometimes you get up to turn the chair to a precise angle, so the five spokes point exactly correct. On your screen are different places that live in different tabs; you choose between them, feeling sparks of distress at your helpless traveling, punctuated by small clicks. Some places keep track of what everyone is doing. You read the long column of short updates that others have left. You have to finish them all, until you reach the posts you recognize from the day before. You update your own status. You click the buttons on all the games that make a character stronger instead of you. You watch short videos that others have shared. You do not get any work done. You click on, visiting hypertext islands of unreality, an eternal distraction, too many choices, never resolved because they always continue somewhere else. For some, you know, it is freedom, but your index finger always quivers before clicking, knowing you are leaving things undone. You type, and click, into the night until she stops coughing, and you sleep.

You drive to work with the radio off, feeling the cars press against your space. The dashboard burns, but you do not turn on the weak air conditioning. You use the part of your mind that gets you places without thinking. There is no time, otherwise. You throw the word think against the walls of your mind for a while until it stops making sense. It occurs to you that humans do not really think. It is a series of binary switches: yes/no, left/right, meet/avoid, a sea of meaning slowly jostling in orbit. The whys do not exist. Thought is a cloud of fragments whipping by, the funnel of a storm circling not a center, but a dull throb of desire/longing/goal that is never drained, only siphoned off. You turn left, and then left. You don't think you are allowed to pursue joys, only grind away at needful labor so your greatest fears do not come to pass. Every life, maybe, is millions of Satans making bets with God, but you finally roll down the windows to bring coolness to the sweat on your neck, and you forget what you were thinking about. You push the card into the slot so the gate will let you in.

You attend a meeting, which you never like. A burst of sour fire begins in your throat, behind your ribs, swirling and crackling as you tramp into the room with the oval table.

Others speak in their language. Okay, let's *get the show on the road*, sorry I'm late, oh no problem, we're still waiting for Deborah, hello, who just joined? Diego from Wilshire, hi Diego, great, great. You take notes, although none of the notes apply to you. Okay, I wanted to *get us all on the same page* regarding the launch date, after the first round of approvals we need to do some shuffling, QA is going to need two weeks, and we can't *push back on that*. Your phone throbs in your pocket. The Mother knows not to call this early. It throbs again. Each moment of earnest humming squeezes your arteries, but there is nothing you can do. You think everyone can hear it against the denim of your jeans. You answer a technical question, saying what sounds correct. It's all ready on your side, but you have to *bounce the ball back into their court* so the people here can keep playing. Yes, okay, you have the room at two, sure, uh, let's *wrap this up*, can you send an email all around, be sure to CC Alexandra, great, thanks everybody, and you all shuffle out. After the meeting you go to the restroom, and choose the urinal which hasn't been flushed by the previous user. You flush it, three times, to make the water clear again. You wash your hands. You call back. Mom, you know I don't take calls in, okay, I'll pick it up when I come home, I'll pick it up, have the leftover sandwiches for now, I left them in the, yeah, for lunch, I'm sorry, Mom, I have to work. You hang up. It is all wrapped up, the show is on the road, all on the same page, moving forward on the issue. Airy words and vague; whatever sounds correct.

It is the third night of drive-thru in a row, but you do not mind. You can taste the salt in the red ketchup from the packets. You like the waxy paper because you can pull the cheese away from it and make the paper clean and slick again. Instead of crumpling the paper in your fists you always fold it into the smallest square, then stuff it into your empty drink cup. Everything that fits, you stuff into the cup and reapply the lid. She always crumples hers. You wipe off the moisture gathering beneath your cup. Dinner disposed of; you type, and click.

a burial ground; there are no markers, but the scent is there; the psyche has left an impression, like a paw print in moist soil welling up with meaning; he stands and looks, for a long time, enough for the trees to change their conversation; he

watches a thin wisp of smoke questioning its way up through the needles of trees; an old man is sitting at a fire, a shaman; he can smell his nearness; he rumbles; he is being asked for medicine, for vision, for simplicity; call and response; give and return.

A spitting sound, and you turn, tail of hair whipping your neck. You look out into the hallway. The octopus of plugs is wreathed in yellow; the wires have gotten too old and tired to hold in the heat. The yellow runs up the wall and eats the cobwebs. You freeze, knowing there is no red cylinder of rescue nearby to pick up and brandish. Fear and indecision snag at you as you watch, mouth open, yet, beneath the broiling hum and snap of wall being devoured, there is clarity, and silence. Vision. You grab your keys and remember to lock the door. The car is in the alley and spilling out onto the street before you hear the brazen shriek of the fire alarm in the front hall, which you thought had been dead because no one has replaced the batteries in a long time. Grit spatters the underside of the car as you speed away. Your breathing is shallow. You can't go to the same drive-thru; the girl might remember you, and that would compromise the story being built in your head. So you go to another drive-thru, and wait. You turn on the radio. Your phone throbs, twice.

You pull up with a jerk, dislodging yourself and the cardboard tray and the warm bag stained with grey where the moisture of fries has touched it. You dump it all on the hood and run into the yard past the rotating lights of the chrome-striped red trucks and the yelling. You put on an expression that looks correct, and yell as others turn toward you. Is this your house, son, we're doing everything we can, you've got to stay back. You point at the house with The Mother inside it, expressing distress, and everything spins more furiously. We've got someone in there, yes, keep that hose on the bottom floor, I'm sorry, son, we're going to do everything we can, Bill, it's not looking good, we need another hand line, come on, I got one, I'm coming out, lay her down, can we clear the way here, I don't have a pulse. You can hear the voice of one of the neighbors. Oh my God, are you okay, I'm so sorry, do you know what happened, come over here, sit down, they'll take care of it, he just got here, he wasn't here. You sit heavily, and without thinking

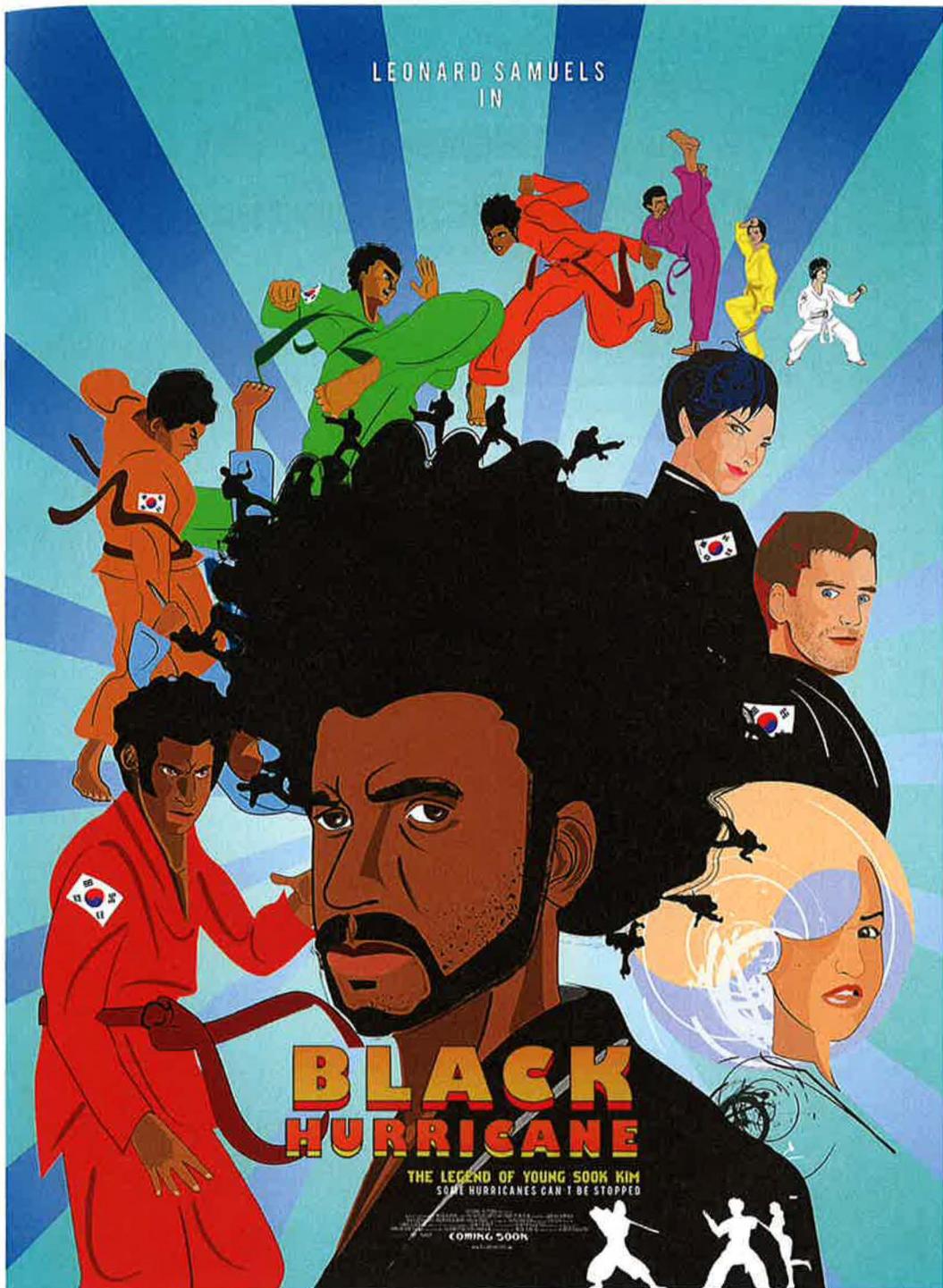
pick up her cup and suck cool liquid from the straw. You press down the bubbles on the lid. Oh my God, he must be in shock, you stay right there.

The fire does not move as you thought it would. It does not lick or gesture wildly, but boils up the side of the house, vomiting smoke. Fire is not chaos, you decide as the last of the soda chuckles its way past the ice and up into the straw. Fire is a struggle to return to order, to sameness. With fire there is only one choice: conversion. You watch, accompanied by the gasping, yammering neighbor, disturbed by something. It is being wrapped up and the issue is being resolved, but something is eating at the peace.

when it is cold he sleeps; he is warm beneath a mound of white; above, the stars spin overhead in the same direction, over and over; they chase the cold sun; he waits.



LEONARD SAMUELS
IN



Black Hurricane
LEONARD ROSELEY-SAMUELS

NEDA LEVI

What My Mother Wore to Her Court-Ordered Separation

Curls in her hair, ringlets of
fire: warm, inviting and tight the
way his hugs used to be.
Violent femme's satin
stain upon her voluptuous lips, the ones that
never missed at enticing his many erections
throughout their disorderly 21-year escapade.
Clay dried upon her aging
hands, holding the statue of a man, his wife
and his daughter, still wet and open to
destruction. Her heart, oblivious to pop's
stance and the blows he had meticulously
prepared: warm and loose, depicting the everlasting
bout with his love for her, feigning complete
impotence.

JEFFERY C. ALFIER

On a Clinical Diagnosis of Arrested Mourning

The doctor had long attempted to recover
all the sanity she could salvage from me
before writing a scrip for a mind *in extremis*.

That night, my lover and I share insomnia.
She says bereavement in her own culture
is shown by covered mirrors and torn clothes.

I thought of a neighbor, who decades ago
went one better, running fully clothed
through his living room picture window.

Side effects become doubt's cavalry
that screens my retreat into the opiate,
grief suspended in the sweat of a fist.

The doctor's signature comes back to me,
signed so quickly, resolutely, that the ink
bled right through to the other side.

LISA SANDINO

Reality

it was a nasty divorce
leaving her with nothing,
penniless

so Cinderella was back
to where she started from
less the brightly colored birds

her circumstances seem bleak
her spirits dampened,
fortunately

depression kept at bay
thanks to a carefully monitored
combination of prozac & valium

she'll miss the feasts,
long tables
filled with fowl, breads, custards

she'll miss the pageantry, glittering
chandeliers, music
and the dancing

time now to reflect, to analyze
why such a focus, sole focus
for a man Dr. Glib asks

Cinderella ponders, she recalls
before her mother died there was a
nightly bedtime ritual

what was the ritual, Dr. Glib asks
mother came to tuck me in every night
and read me a fairy tale

about a handsome prince
who rescues a female
whose circumstances seem bleak

interesting
says Dr. Glib
writing feverishly

how long did you
know this man
before the nuptials

one glorious glorious
evening, her face
radiates joy

memories of that
translucent shimmering
ball gown,

jewels sparkling light
from all directions,
dazzling

and the glass
slippers like diamonds,
glistening

why, Dr. Glib questions
what went wrong
why the divorce

Cinderella's brow furrows
it happened one evening I
came back to the castle early

and discovered my husband
in our bedchamber
wearing my gown

jewels, slippers
even my tiara
I see, says Dr. Glib



Lost Stairway
RESA HEART'S

JOSÉ MORALES

A Lesson in Supply-Side Economics at the Tom Bradley Terminal

some asshole across the aisle from me identified himself as a staunch free market capitalist. he said I couldn't borrow a pencil so much as obtain a scarce good for which he could supply, if I should offer something of comparable value.

i traded two blue pens for his pencil, knowing he was trying to rip me off. but i needed the graphite to draw with, and besides, those pens had run out of ink.

i drew scrooge mcduck grabbing richie rich by the balls and called it supply-side economics.

after we landed, someone asked me for a pencil. he was wearing a che guevara t-shirt. he smiled, said long live marxism. i said che was a monster. he smashed a red fist into my stomach and walked off with a pencil that was never really mine.

i awoke from my rationed nap, realizing i had nothing to write with. I borrowed a quarter from an anarchist, found a phone booth and called dial a prayer. I asked the automated voice of reason for some employment tips so I could earn enough for some pens and pencils and maybe some paper or at least enough to pay back that generous anarchist.

the machine quoted ecclesiastics and hung up on me. with no real hope, i pressed the coin release and fifteen cents fell out. i carry those coins with me so the next time I see the anarchist, I will hand her back her change and tell her

sometimes the system fucks up for the better.

Advantage

KENNETH SIEWERT

Part 1

Resource n. **1** a country's collective means of supporting itself or becoming wealthier, as represented by its reserves of minerals, land and other assets. **2** the ability to find quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties.

Clever adj, superficially ingenious or witty: *a story too clever and tidy to be real.*

Tidy adj. **1** arranged neatly and in order. **2** informal (of an amount esp. of money) considerable: *the story will bring a tidy sum.*

Gold is a precious metal valued for its use in jewelry and decoration, however gold has very limited practical use, a non-corrosive material for conducting electricity and (in some countries) fillings for bad teeth. In an earlier day, gold coins circulated in the marketplace and once, it was used to guarantee the value of currencies. In all of the history of man 161,000 tons of gold have been extracted from the earth, which is about the volume of two standard Olympic swimming pools. There are five-billion-one-hundred-and-fifty-two-million ounces of gold in human hands and there are 6.8 billion people on the planet. If the average wedding ring contains one ounce of gold and if rings were to be distributed evenly among people around the globe, one and a half billion souls would be left wanting. Odd thought, but Jessie's brain goes there. Jessie worries about economic collapse. He worries about sub-prime loans and Ponzi schemes. He worries about the lack of natural resources and the redistribution of wealth. He worries about the distribution of simple things like food and drinkable water. Hidden in his bookcase behind a book he has squirreled away a handful of gold coins. Jessie has two gold teeth. He also has a wedding band that he keeps in a drawer with other memories.

During his graduate years Jessie wandered the "Ivory Tower" perchance to receive an audience with this professor or that and he wore out his back-to-school shoes scuffing the hallways, the heels along the back edges with his clumsy gait and the soles at the very center, holes that allowed gutter water to soak his socks during wet winter months. Shuffling along the hallways, he spent a great deal of time reading the notes and cartoons, quips and quotes, thumb tacked or taped to closed doors and bulletin boards below his or her name plate. Though he has forgotten most of the professors' names, one cartoon in particular stuck to a corkboard with a silver tack burns fresh in his memory. It is a pencil drawing of five people buried in the sand up to their necks, cactus and the desert sun complete the scene with one bobbing head yelling out: "I'm tired of corporate retreats."

Today, Jessie steps out of an elevator on the top floor of the English Department and he looks down the dismal and sterile green hallway and sees a light coming from a lone office, the door sprung and held open with an old chalkboard eraser. As he walks toward the light he notices a poster on a professor's door, probably a picture from the Hubble, some beautiful but remote and inaccessible place in the galaxy with the caption: "Should we change the laws of the universe?" "Wow," Jessie thinks, "if only I could, I would travel back in time," then he sits down with the professor.

"Why do you want to write?" she says.

"Well," Jessie stammers, "construction has gone bust. Real estate has dried up. To make money, I suppose."

"There is no money in writing," she says. "Economics, banking, Wall Street, that's probably where the money is."

"Maybe I just want to communicate."

She is quick to remind him of a quote from a literary great who wrote poems about rundown western towns and rundown people.

"If you want to communicate use the telephone," she says.

Jessie loathes e-mail with its streamline message format and he hates the remote feel of telephones, though he understands their practical use.

"Maybe I want to write," he tells her, "not to communicate, but to connect."

"Probably not possible," she says.

Jessie read a story once about a man who was reincarnated as a parrot and trapped in a cage in the front room of his wife's house. The wife had moved on, found herself a cowboy who was quite entertaining with his flashy boots. So here is this parrot's lot in life, this guy with gaudy red and blue feathers stuck in a cage watching his wife and this naked cowboy cavorting around the house, on the floor, on the couch, and all this parrot can do is squawk and flutter its wings against wire bars until it is exhausted. Unable to utter one intelligent word, the parrot lays down in the bottom of the cage, in shredded paper, in its own mess, its feathers ruffled. The parrot couldn't tell his wife that he still loved her and he couldn't tell this cowboy to put some clothes on and lose the pointy-toed boots. However, this reincarnate man trapped in the parrot told Jessie his sad story full of snide remarks and despair and Jessie felt like he connected. By the end of the story Jessie was in the bottom of the cage with this sad parrot looking through the bars down the hallway out the kitchen window beyond an orange tree with round ripe fruit to a soft blue sky.

Jessie looks around her office at the curious things that decorate her shelves, a doll, a wine bottle, and masks. Hanging on the walls are bright and colorful fabric collages culminating in intricate geometric designs.

"I read stories," Jessie says, "and once I read a story about a sad parrot and his wife and a cowboy, though the cowboy was rather nondescript and I shed tears."

"And your point is?" she says.

"I know this parrot, I know this woman, and I know this cowboy. We connected on the page and it was all told so very clever."

"Cleverness, communication, connection, that's not a story," she says. "What did you do this summer?"

"I got drunk and went on a road trip," Jessie says.

Part 2

Advantage n. a condition or circumstance that puts one in a favorable or superior position. The opportunity to gain something: benefit or profit.

Gain v. obtain or secure something desired, favorable or profitable.

Golconda n. a source of wealth, advantage or happiness: the posters calling emigrants from Europe to the Golconda of the American West. Late 19th century: from the name of a city near Hyderabad India, famous for diamonds.

Jessie grew up in the fifties, he was among the first generation to wet nurse with television and he came of age just in time to get drafted by the Army and do a stint in Vietnam. Until then, Jessie liked war movies, but his favorite programs were westerns and in his developmental years he watched the singing cowboys, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and then, as he matured, he graduated from "The Lone Ranger" and "Rifleman," to "Gun Smoke," "Bonanza," and "Tombstone Territory." There were always clear lines between the righteous and the evil. The good guys wore white hats and the bad guys wore black. Men tried to be better and women were always virtuous even though Kitty owned a saloon. The good guys won. It was the same theme every week and his heroes were Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson and it's no wonder that Jessie's road trip, with his confused dreams of a better day, led him to the Arizona town of Tombstone.



*The Bird Cage Theater, Allen Street,
Tombstone Arizona*

Alone on his road trip to Tombstone, Jessie's mind wandered through time and he thought about a day in February 1878 and how Edward Schieffelin, hiding from Apache warriors, spotted a vein of precious metal protruding from the earth. Jessie wondered what that must have been like to have a Eureka moment and be unable to cry out in excitement for fear of capture. Jessie knew that Edward lived to stake a claim and he called it Tombstone based on his near encounter with the indigenous population and he knew that Edward sold his claim to a mining company for a small fortune and moved on, but Jessie tried to explore that feeling, Edward's excitement in finding the dream while hiding from Apaches knowing that it could be lost with a single mistake. Jessie also thought of himself with his Ray Bans and Birkenstocks marching alone through

the Arizona desert, rope in hand, leading a mule across the barren waste, blistering in the sun and freezing at night, chipping rock and hoping to find the motherload. Like so many of Jessie's fantasies, the thoughts began to go bad as he envisioned losing his way, running out of water and stepping on poisonous snakes hiding in the sand.

Jessie thought about a day in March 1879 and how a town site was laid out in the dirt in the middle of the Arizona desert and at five dollars a lot Tombstone was born along Allen Street. The news of precious metals spread and miners flocked to Tombstone and others followed, tradesmen and those who would separate fools from their money. Jessie thought about the purchase of twenty lots for a hundred dollars and selling them for a thousand apiece as the town boomed. Jessie thought about The Bird Cage Theater and how it began business on Christmas Day 1881 and featured a saloon, a gambling parlor, a brothel, and a stage. The Bird Cage Theater reportedly had the longest continuous game of poker ever played and cards were dealt, in this game of chance, nonstop for eight years five months and three days. The buy-in was a grand and ten million dollars exchanged hands at the table during this single continuous game. A licensed woman cost twenty-five dollars a night and whiskey was dirt-cheap. Jessie thought about the one-hundred-and-forty known bullet holes in the walls, ceiling and floor of this establishment and before the building was boarded up in 1889 there were twenty six premature deaths recorded within its confines. One death was that of a woman by the name of Margarita. Jessie envisioned himself owning the theater with all its excitement and fast money, until he imagined looking down the barrel of six-gun with a drunken cowboy at the other end, cheated at the poker table and cheated at love. Maybe it is this continued draw of easy money and easy love that brought Jessie to Allen Street and The Bird Cage Theater.

The Birdcage Theater put on a live show, sometimes Shakespeare, tragedies and comedies, bawdy and exaggerated, perhaps, in their presentation. In 1882 the *New York Times* printed: "The Bird Cage Theater is the wildest, wickedest, night spot between Basin Street and the Barbary Coast." It was an 1880's Las Vegas with guns and how Jessie dreamed to be there in that heyday. One-hundred-thirty-years too late, Jessie paid a woman ten dollars at the door of The Bird Cage Theater and stepped into history anyway, a dismal room with a worn and rough uneven wood floor.

Jessie thought about the hundreds of people who had passed through the theater doors to take some relief from the drudgery of everyday life. Crowded in shoulder-to-shoulder with other tourists, Jessie waited for the show to begin. His eyes were slow to adjust from the bright Arizona sun and in the darkness shadows seemed to dance. Jessie imagined Wyatt Earp standing at the bar drinking whiskey with Josephine Marcus, a licensed girl, hanging on his arm. It was hot, dry and dusty. A woman, dressed like a showgirl from the day, sporting a bonnet with long droopy feathers and a low cut flowing black gown, paced back and forth stirring the dust as she began to tell stories about Doc Holliday, Diamond Jim Brady, and Johnny Ringo. While she paced and told stories, the sunlight was streaming in from one small window illuminating the motes hanging in the air. For Jessie it was magical as the dust swirled in a single stream of light stirred by the swish of her dress. Beads of sweat appeared at her temples and trickled down her long neck to her chest. She pointed out bullet holes from long finished gunfights and ghosts seemed to appear, quiet and pensive, their reflections barely perceivable in a smoky glass mirror. Jessie watched as lonely men began to fill the room, consuming whiskey, cavorting with theater girls, their laughter forced and muffled in the hot thick air. Oh, this woman could tell a story as if she had been there amongst them plying that age-old trade and slipping gold coins into her bodice. Jessie was spellbound as she molded his imagination with her words.

Jessie is distracted. He sits in her office and focuses on the most colorful and intricate fabric collage that hangs from her wall. He is mesmerized by tiny lettering written across the surface of the fabric in ink that changes colors to match the color of the cloth. The lettering advances from swatch to swatch and he imagines that all the lettering forms words and the words, in turn, tell a story. He imagines the slow and tedious process of applying each letter and then the slow and tedious process of removing each stitch that holds the collage together until the pattern begins to separate and the swatches flutter to the floor. Jessie imagines picking up all the pieces and reconnecting them in some different design and wonders what that picture would look like and how, then, the letters would reconnect and the story would be retold.

"Maybe I just want to tell stories," Jessie says.

"They have all been done," she says. "In this day and age you can't write a love story that is new and fresh. The tragedies have been done."

"That can't be true," Jessie says. "A parrot told me a story once that no one could tell except a man reincarnated as a parrot."

"There are only a handful of themes," she says. "Loss, redemption and sorrow. There is no parrot."

Jessie visited the poker room where George Randolph Hearst, Adolph Bush, and Diamond Jim Brady sat at a small round table and held cards in their hands. He imagined them looking grim and controlling the pot, not with the best cards, but with exorbitant wagers and bluffs and always with one hand close to their pistols. He made his way to the exit gallery and read the blurbs posted on the walls about the lives of the women who worked The Bird Cage Theater. He scrutinized their signatures; their loops and plunges scrolled across city licenses and he studied the eyes that gazed back from old black and white photographs. It's odd, he thought, how eyes in a black and white photograph seem to retain a clearness and sparkle as if they had trapped a life in that moment. There was Susie, an average but impish looking girl from a proper and well-to-do family in Rhode Island, who decided she was missing out on what she imagined was going to be a short life. After reading that article in the *New York Times* about Tombstone, Susie left home and went west, eventually procuring her own license to do business in that sad and bustling town. She changed her name from Susie to Gold Dollar. She became enamored with a man by the name of Rockne Dahl, a handsome dandy from New Jersey. He was Gold Dollar's regular business and during the course of business she began to fancy the man. One night she saw Rockne at the poker table with Margarita sitting on his lap and their mouths were full of laughter. Gold Dollar went back to her room, whetted her knife and slipped the double-edged blade into her bodice. She approached them with a smile and then with one swift movement she sent the blade under Margarita's rib cage and opened her up. Gold Dollar threw Margarita's heart, and her own as well, on the poker table and walked out the back door where she dropped her knife into the outhouse with all the spent whiskey and beer. There were numerous witnesses to the murder, but Gold Dollar was never prosecuted and eventually she returned home to her parents in Rhode Island with a story she couldn't tell. Jessie stood in front of Susie's photograph and studied this woman, the smile, the sparkling eyes and wondered if she was motivated by love or money. Over the years it has sometimes been reported that, late at night, Margarita and Gold Dollar will, on occasion, appear pale and wispy hovering over a poker table fighting for a lost heart.

"Maybe I want to write fantastic stories, embellish, change history," Jessie says.

"We write and rewrite the stories of our families," says the professor, "and we all fictionalize our lives."

"Maybe that is what I want to write, my memoir," Jessie says. "The way it should have been."

Part 3

History n. 2 the whole series of past events connected with someone or something.

Legend n. 1 a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but unauthenticated: *according to legend he banished all the snakes from Ireland.* 2 an extremely famous or notorious person.

Notorious adj. famous or well known. Typically for some bad quality or deed: *Los Angeles is notorious for its smog.*

Smog n. fog or haze combined with smoke reducing visibility.



Photographic postcard of the Kaloma image, circa 1916

In the exit gallery of The Bird Cage Theater, a poster tacked to the wall of a woman in a gossamer gown visually struck Jessie and he remembered a moment from years ago and another road trip. He and his wife had gone to Mexico and in the middle of nowhere on a dirt road they found an old man selling produce from his orchard. They bought grapefruit and sat in the tall spring grass with the sun at their backs and peeled and fed each other dripping wedges of fruit. The moment was so sweet and refreshing that Jessie has never bought another grapefruit for he knew he would be disappointed.

The photograph was reputed to be that of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp, born 1861, and at the age of fifteen she ran away from her Jewish parents in San Francisco, a family of bakers, to join a dance troupe. She was twenty years old when the Bird Cage Theater opened its doors. A copy of her license and the Kaloma picture hangs in the gallery and a copy of her book *I Married Wyatt Earp* is also on display. Jessie remembered when his oldest daughter ran away from home. He remembered the fear that he felt when his daughters, each in their turn, went off to college and then became enamored with some man. Jessie worries about his granddaughters.

Though Josephine's story may make good reading, much is disputed. As she told the story, she was in Tombstone as a housekeeper for a prominent lawyer and her lover, the town photographer, C. S. Fly, took her photograph. She adorned the dust cover of her book with the Kaloma image and in 1998 Sotheby's promoted the image as that of Josephine and the photograph's estimated value increased. Though the controversy continues, the photograph is probably that of an anonymous woman posing for a World War One pinup. The truth will remain shrouded in the uncertainty of history. Jessie remembered a time when he tried to reminisce with his wife about that perfect moment in Mexico. She, of course, remembered the moment differently. It wasn't grass, but rather they had sat under a palapa for protection from the unrelenting sun and it wasn't juicy grapefruit at all, but pithy oranges. Jessie felt like she purposely tried to erase that memory. Jessie thought how there are so few perfect moments and maybe over time he has begun to remember moments the way they should have been. The postcard image is the only souvenir that Jessie purchased.

Jessie's gaze fixes on a green wine bottle with a blue label that sits on her shelf. A rainbow stretches across the label and starting at the neck of the bottle below a maroon foil cap, green lettering spirals round and round in constant descent until it reaches the base. Jessie realizes that if he wanted to read the whole story he would have to hold the bottle in his hand and, in a visceral way, spin the story to its conclusion.

"Maybe, I want to write a memoir where Doc Holliday is my best friend and I dumped my wife because she was a drug addict and then the prettiest girl in town shouldered up to me as if I were the cat's meow. I want to write a story where I can face down cowboy ruffians with courage and get so close, eye to eye, that I can subdue them with a single blow to the head with the butt of my gun."

"That's not you, or your story, and it is certainly not your memoir," she says. "It would be called a historical fiction."

"I'm old now. I worry about Alzheimer's and convalescent homes," Jessie says. "I want to go out with my boots on, maybe in a bandanna fight with Johnny Ringo, guns blazing at point blank range."

"What is a bandanna fight?" she says. "Sounds rather feminine, actually."

"I put one end of a bandanna between my teeth and you put the other end in your mouth and we growl and grunt and go at it with lethal weapons and the first one to let go of the bandanna, to scream out in pain, or utter words, loses."

"You're right," she says. "It is another stupid masculine game, but those days are long gone."

"No," Jessie says. "Not really, the essence is alive and well and you can read about the game every day or see it played out on the six o'clock news, husband shot wife, wife runs over husband with the family suburban MUV, Multiple Utility Vehicle."

Part 4

Vagabond n. a person who wanders from place to place.

"I found him a loyal friend and good company. He was a dentist whom necessity had made a gambler; a gentleman whom disease had made a vagabond; a philosopher whom life had made a caustic wit; a long lean blond fellow nearly dead with consumption and at the same time the most skillful gambler and nerviest, speediest, deadliest man with a six-gun I ever knew." –Wyatt Earp speaking of Doc Holliday

In 1840 the American Society of Dental Surgeons was formed and members were required to sign a pledge that they would not use mercury amalgams for fillings in teeth. In 1859 the American Dental Association (ADA) was formed and this group did not place any restrictions on the use of mercury-based fillings. In 1992 Jessie learned that mercury gas was released from silver fillings during the consumption of hot liquids or the vigorous chewing of food and the gas, released into the mouth, was inhaled. Jessie had his two silver fillings replaced with gold. Jessie often wonders what Doc Holliday's position was on this controversial issue.

Jessie remembered how Johnny Ringo had challenged Holliday to a bandanna fight. Doc was dealing faro, a game of chance that favors the house by a certain percentage and he invited Ringo to play the gutsiest game in town. Ringo took out his bandanna and told Doc, "This is the gutsiest game in town." Doc decided the game would be settled with knives, but Curly Bill Brocius, a one-time leader of the Cowboy faction, a group of men who made a living by stealing cows from the other side of the Mexican-American border, interceded, convincing Doc that Ringo was drunk. Wyatt killed Curly Bill on March 24, 1882, while Curly was cooking breakfast. Years later they found Ringo suspended from the limb of a tree with a gunshot wound that entered under his chin and exited through the top of his skull. Holliday was accused of the execution, but Ringo wasn't well liked and the matter never went to trial. Jessie tried to imagine shooting a man in the morning with the smell of eggs and bacon wafting in the air and he shuddered at the thought of holding a gun under another man's chin and looking him in the eyes when he pulled the trigger. Jessie thought about the six o'clock news and home invasion robberies, drive by shootings, drug deals gone badly and turf wars.

The love of Doc's life was a woman who went by the name of Big Nose Kate (Mary Katherine Horony). She was a drinker and a prostitute who liked the nightlife and like Kitty in "Gun Smoke" owned a bar in Tombstone. Once Kate vowed to give



up prostitution for Doc, and Holliday, in turn, vowed to give up gambling. The story reminded Jessie of a piece he had read in grade school about a woman who sold her hair to buy her husband a gold watch chain and a husband who sold his watch to buy his wife an ivory brush for her hair. It was a lovely story, but for Kate and Doc, the bond didn't last. After an argument with Doc, Kate, plied with whiskey, signed an affidavit that Doc had robbed the local stage and killed two men. She almost got Doc hanged. Kate, when she sobered, recanted her story, but this little spat ended their



romantic relationship and, though they remained friends, Doc put this dangerous woman on a stagecoach for Denver. Jessie pondered nebulous words like *honor*, *trust*, *loyalty* and *love*.

It is unclear how many men Doc killed and Holliday always thought that he too would die with his boots on. Jessie knew that Holliday's mother killed him, slow and sure like poison. She gave all of her sons consumption (tuberculosis) in their developmental years. In his end days, Doc moved to Colorado to see Kate one last time and he was also hoping that the Yampah hot springs might relieve his symptoms. Jessie imagined that he met up with Doc at the Glenwood Hotel. Holliday, thin and pale, lay in his bed delirious for fourteen days talking to the ghosts that haunted him and then he woke clear-eyed and clear-minded and asked Jessie for a drink of whiskey. Doc finished a good pour and, satisfied, he looked down at his pale bare feet. "That is funny," he said, and then he died. Jessie had formulated several questions for the good doctor, but he simply

could not get an answer. Jessie would have asked him what it was like to hold a gun under a man's chin and pull the trigger. He would have asked what it was like to put the woman that he loved out of his life. He would have asked what it was like to be a transient, utterly alone in a cheap hotel room and know that his time was short. Doc's obituary appeared in the *Leadville Carbonate Chronicle* on Nov 14, 1887:

"There is scarcely one in the country who acquired a greater notoriety than Doc Holliday, who enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most fearless men on the frontier, and whose devotion to his friends in the climax of the fiercest ordeal was inextinguishable. It was this, more than any other faculty that secured for him the reverence of a large circle who were prepared on the shortest notice to rally to his relief."



Hotel Glenwood, 1900

On the very top shelf an antique doll sits with its legs dangling over the edge somewhat precariously. The hands, head and feet are porcelain and the body is made of cloth. Jessie knows it is old by the way the fabric has yellowed. Jessie notices that, like all the other curious things in her office, the doll has lettering on the bottom of its feet and the backs of its hands, across the forehead and rounded over the cheeks. It is done very subtly with the softest shade of pink. Jessie remembers how for years the doll had sat in a child's rocking chair in the corner of the bedroom.

"Once upon a time I knew a man and every day he woke up short of breath and coughed blood and every day he would say, 'this day will be my last.' And no one believed him," Jessie says.

"So he lived the cliché, every minute and his life was short and full," she says.

"No, I think he squandered his time like we all squander our time with the mundane and trivial, but I think he acquired peace with his own mortality. He was willing to risk advantage for a friendship or a loved one. Maybe it's this simple thing that makes a difference in the world.

"And your point is?" she says.

"Maybe simple lives have something to tell even when they end in tragedy."

"We all live tragedies," she says.

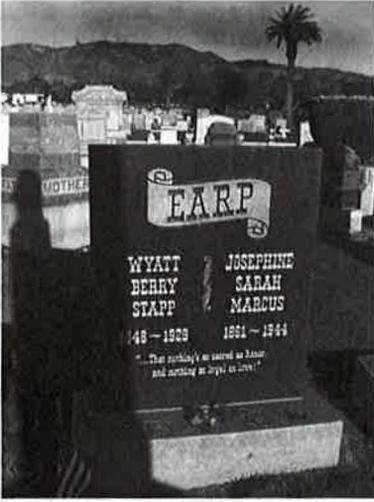
Part 5

Sham n. 1 a thing that is not what it is reported to be. A person who pretends to be someone or something they are not.

Shill n. an accomplice of a hawker, gambler or swindler who acts as an enthusiastic customer to entice or encourage others.

Jessie was dismayed to learn that his hero, Wyatt, was a horse thief, pimp, gambler, cold-blooded killer, lawman, prizefight referee, claim jumper, and, in the end, a Hollywood consultant. Wyatt met a prop man on a film set, a man by the name of John Wayne, which for the Duke may have made all the difference in his career. If nothing else, Wyatt was a storyteller and he appeared to have fictionalized much of his life and left out a detail or two.

Wyatt and Josephine spent 30 years together as if they were inseparable. Wyatt died in his modest apartment (4004 West 17th Street, Los Angeles) of chronic cystitis or possibly prostate cancer on January 13, 1929, at the age of eighty. William S. Hart and Tom Mix were pallbearers and Josephine was so grief stricken that she did not attend the funeral. Josephine died alone in 1944 and Wyatt and Josephine's ashes lie side by side in the Marcus family plot in Colma, California. Jessie remembers his childhood and his childhood heroes of 1955 and how the world seemed simpler, perfect perhaps, and now, somehow, he feels betrayed. Though he won't admit it, Jessie knows that Wyatt was just another simple man looking for advantage.



"I'm not much for legend," Jessie says.

"Really," she says.

"It ranks with fairytales and I no longer believe. The world is grey: good and evil mixed together and my movement through it is often bleak and tiring. There are no dragon slayers to rally the tribe, there are no captains steering the ship, and there are no white hats settling the dust and riding into the sunset. I have come to believe in the occasional chance moment or a spot of luck."

"If that's it, then," she says, "your future seems dismal."

"Exactly," Jessie says. "And at this late date I can't seem to find my own story."

Jessie visited Wyatt's and Josephine's final marker and he had a depressing thought. Once upon a time the world and people were bigger and their stories live on in fragments of records and old photographs. For a select few, their stories are told and retold and embellished while the rest of humanity passes into oblivion. Today the world is smaller and stories are shorter somehow and countless comedies and tragedies, triumphs and romances remain untold. Engraved at the bottom of the Earp marker are the words "...That nothing so sacred as honor, and nothing so loyal as love!"

Part 6

Gangue: n. the commercially valueless material in which precious metals are found.

In Indonesia, the Newmont Mining Corporation extracts micron gold particles so small that two hundred could fit on the head of a pin. Two-hundred-and-fifty tons of gangue is created to recover enough gold to make a one-ounce wedding ring. At this facility, each year, one hundred million tons of gangue is spread over what was once pristine rain forest and residual toxic waste is pumped to the ocean floor to hide and limit environmental damage. Jessie worries about waste. He worries about running out of time. He worries about the numbered days that he moves through in order to find one precious moment.

Jessie knows that all people are connected by the simplest of things. Standing in the middle of Allen Street in the hot Arizona sun, Jessie knew exactly what the people of Tombstone wanted and craved daily, more than anything else, water. Clean drinkable water. For the people of Tombstone, their Golconda and the town's demise came in the form of deep-water wells. They drilled into an ancient aquifer and when they broke a hard rock barrier water began to seep into the mines. Pumps were brought in, but to no avail, it was too late and the mines flooded and became unworkable and extraction of precious metals stopped. That is how Tombstone died, but the essence of Tombstone and The Bird Cage Theater lives on in hundreds of shantytowns throughout the world and they thrive in fragile and remote places from Africa to Siberia, from Indonesia to South America.

In the Peruvian Andes Juan Alpaza lives in the world's highest town, La Rinconada, some 17,000 feet above sea level. Resources are scarce in La Rinconada; there is no police station, no law and order, no Wyatt Earp. Even oxygen is rare. The Incas mined there first, then their Spanish conquerors and now Juan Alpaza. He works below a glacier for thirty days out of each month with no pay and on the thirty-first day he is allowed to have all the rock he can carry on his back in four hours. Each day he chews coca leaves to cut the hunger and fatigue, always with the hope that he may, on that last day, find advantage. He knows that La Rinconada is slowly dying in its own squalor and toxins and pollution is making its way down the mountain. Jessie knows that Juan doesn't care, for he too knows the rush of gold and that advantage is alive and well in the hearts of men and women in the 21st century.

Gold flows, in the form of trade, from Peru to India to adorn young brides, as gold is the bulk of Dowries. There are ten

million weddings a year in India. The springtime festival of Akshaya Tritya in 2008 saw the purchase of 49 tons of gold in a single day. In 2007 India consumed 773 tons of gold, 20% of the world's market and in India goldsmiths work all year round creating the ornaments that are slipped over supple necks and thin wrists or braided into long black hair. Every day on the streets in Chennai, India, Dilli Bai, a middle-aged woman, sweeps the dirt in front of a jewelry factory and pans for the filings that fall from the goldsmith's clothes as they come and go. For some, Golconda is a dirty street in front of a jewelry factory. Jessie thinks it's odd that flecks of Juan Alpaza's misery may end up on Dilli Bai's street and in the cooking pan she uses to swish water and separate gold from dust.

Jessie looks around her office at all the curious things that decorate her shelves, knowing that there is a story in everything. "In the end, when it is all said and done," Jessie says, "that's all that matters."

"What?" she says.

"Your story. My story," Jessie says. "That's all there is."

"Just words on a page," she says.

Jessie stands and looks around the room hoping to hold all the pieces of the image in his mind. He knows it will be his last visit. "I believe our book ends here," he says. "I would hope that you would thumb our story from time to time with fond memory." Jessie smiles. "Each day that passes there are words, images or events that force me to revisit a page or two." Then, he leaves.



JEFFREY C. ALFIER

The Spyglass Inn

Limerick, Ireland

Where green flourishes and stares back—green
of homeland not their own, a troubadour
orders rounds of whiskey for tourists stranded
amid an evening's languor of drink after drink.
The troubadour nods when the barkeep asks
if the sole coffee ordered is for 'the girl
with the long curly hair.' He'll bring it how
she likes it—blackness cut with brown sugar
and pouring cream. her gaze, triggered
by something far, can only mean she's been
here too long—or not long enough, like fingers
that stroke her hair, tumbled to the waist,
in a room that takes shape in the dimming light.

The Mythos of an “Imagined” Apocalypse

JORDASH RIEGELLA

The traditions of storytelling teach us that all stories began primordially as an oral event, passed from generation to generation, as a way of preserving communal histories. The essay that follows these selections will attempt to prove, through interstitial analysis of those commonalities that exist in these local cultural myths, that there are broad gestures embedded, moving toward a similar global event, lost to history but for these small, oral traditions.

Summary of ΠΙΡΟΒΕΒΑΗΜΕΝΕΣ ΚΑΤΑΧΩΡΙΣΕΙΣ’s “The Tragedy of Persephone”¹

Demeter, goddess of grain and harvest and seasons, one day gave birth to a daughter named Persephone, who may possibly be fathered by Zeus, Demeter’s brother and king of the Greek gods on Mt. Olympus. Just the sight of Persephone made Demeter happy, which allowed her to make plants grow and seasons to be generally pleasant. One day, Aphrodite, Persephone, and several nymphs were out in a field picking flowers near the mouth-entrance to the underworld. Hades, the god whose dominion was of the underworld, looked upon her and thought she was beautiful. He knew he had to have her, so he lured her down into his kingdom, in the dark, away from Aphrodite, and away from her mother, Demeter, who would discourage his plans.

He toured her through Hades, through the Elysium,² the Asphodel Meadows,³ and Tartarus.⁴ She became distracted by Sisyphus,⁵ who told her about the unfortunate fate that he had been bound by. He told her of the kingdom that he held domain over, of the trade ships that he organized in the harbors of his land. He confided in her the reason for his condemnation; he had tried to flee Thanatos after he had actually been able to trick Zeus himself into letting him go for breaking the laws. Persephone tried to pay attention to him, for to ignore nobility would be rude, but also she attempted to keep her attentions on Hades. Persephone, by not attending herself first, allowed Hades to trick her into eating, absentmindedly, a pomegranate off of his table. This act married them by tradition. Eventually, when Persephone was supposed to be returned to Demeter, Demeter found out that her daughter was missing. She began to search for Persephone, and in doing so, neglected the seasons, which halted the growth of crops and caused famine. This search was in vain; Persephone had been married off to Hades and been bound to his domain below the Earth. This enraged Demeter, who then decided to raze the surface of the Earth. When Zeus became aware of this calamity, he went to Hades to negotiate the terms of the marriage, so that Demeter may have Persephone six months of the year and this made her warm and happy, and Hades would have her six months, which made Demeter cold and sad. These moods reflected themselves in the seasons, with the warm months being when Persephone was with her mother, and the cool months when Persephone was with her husband. This plan suited everyone but Persephone—all her time had been distributed between the elder deities. Persephone no longer had any time for herself.

This is not entirely true; Persephone was allowed to roam freely in Hades when she was not passing judgments on

¹The “Tragedy of Persephone” is a story, though commonly known, that only exists in fragments and references. This summary is the closest reconstruction of the narrative and its core constituent elements, despite it being in translation.

²The place in Hades dedicated to and reserved for the heroes of the world.

³The place in Hades where the indifferent and average people are sent.

⁴The place in Hades where those who have been judged as needing punishment are sent.

⁵An infamous trickster, sentenced to roll a boulder up a hill endlessly for trying to escape Hades after his death.

incoming souls. In these times, she began to know Sisyphus. He planted the seeds of escape in her, before she became miserable. The constant rumination possible of an immortal calloused her heart to iron and chilled her once warm and delightful demeanor. She became bitter and resentful of the situation that had been laid on her shoulders—it was Atlas's job to hold the weight of the world. Persephone forbade anyone to use her name, and instead forced people to call her "The Iron Queen." Her judgments of the souls and their eternal residence in Hades became harsher the fiercer she became. There was only one soul whom she relinquished control of, that of Orpheus,⁶ who came to win back the soul of Eurydice, his wife.

Orpheus had found himself a widower when Eurydice avoided being seduced by a satyr and, in her flight, stepped on a venomous snake, which bit her, causing her to fall dead. The mourner, who just so happened to be a great musician, composed songs that were so beautiful the gods atop Olympus heard them and wept. They suggested that he go to Hades and play the song for him, to see what Hades could do for this baleful musician. When Orpheus arrived, "The Iron Queen" was judging souls. Orpheus was not deterred, and played the music he had written. The notes, arranged in such a particular order, deliberate and meaningful, caused Persephone to melt. She had fallen in love with him. She also knew of a gambit he could try to break out of her binding to Hades and Demeter, thanks to Sisyphus. Persephone teased Orpheus with her verdict, insisting that he eat a pomegranate from her table, which he did, marrying the two. She then said that she would release his wife from Hades, so long as he led her to the surface and did not look back until they had both exited the mouth of the entrance. And he turned around while Persephone disguised herself as Eurydice, and allowed Orpheus to lead her to the surface. However, she could only disguise her appearance; if she were to speak the game would end and she would be returned to the throne in Hades forever, just like the dead she presided over, so she remained silent. This constant silence weighed heavy on Orpheus, and he could not be convinced of his wife's following without some sort of confirmation. In the split second that it took for him to turn around, Persephone was whisked away, forever bound to Hades. Demeter waited through two springs before she began to grow worried. In the same manner as before, she went searching for her daughter by razing the earth and neglecting the seasons. This time, however, she did not find her, and will not find her, so she will not stop razing the Earth, searching.

*The Tlingit Mystery of the Sun*⁷

This story only occupies such a small section of the whole of the story of the world itself, yet it is the story that we are concerned most with. This world, our world, before the beginning of this story, was beautiful. The end of this story did not give birth to this world; it gave rise to it. By the time that events begin to stack up and become noticeable causes of the effects that we live with today, the world had already been pockmarked by conflicts; these things are mostly forgotten. They are the basis for the weaving of events that play themselves out in all their event-ness. All we know is that the sun was shining, the globe warming, and sky blue with the sun, despite those great and terrible things that had occurred.

Then one day, one woman⁸ summoned the great winds, and then another and another, until every woman who was capable of bringing forth the great gales had done so. Green People⁹ howled in protest. No one was sure why, or who had summoned the airstreams first; it did not matter if the ravens or the wolves or the eagles¹⁰ had; only that it had happened. *Hit saat*¹¹ could only know that the winds had come, seemingly all at the same time, and that they howled fiercely. The gusts were so tremendous that one day they simply blew the sun out of the sky. The stars, like dust, flew up and beyond the horizon, leaving the night impossibly black and the day indistinguishable. The dust looked up into the vacant sky and found itself pulled up; nature abhors a vacuum.¹²

⁶A mythic musician, famous for his ability to play the lyre.

⁷The "Tlingit Mystery of the Sun" comes from the Tlingit tribe, a matrilineal tribe, historically located on the northwest coast of Canada and the southern tip of Alaska. This tradition was relayed through stories knit into Chilkat blankets and translated into the form above.

⁸The title "woman" here is used to confer the matrilineal rights to rule.

⁹The title of "Green People" must be a group that there can be no easy reference to. Information about them is rare and often contradictory: they may have been about peace, but they are also given attributes of pirates and conquerors.

¹⁰Raven, Wolf, and Eagle totems comprise emblems representing various Tlingit moieties.

¹¹Longhouse caretakers in Tlingit society, people who were incapable of "owning."

The Green People wept everywhere. The most reliable of daily occurrences, the day itself, became mysterious. Their cults worshipped the idea of harnessing the sun, an orb that we can recognize now as being so impermanent, like our days.¹³

Now, my children, do not all go getting your bodies lost in the wind just like dust, staring up at the sky and being swallowed by its terrible gape.

*"The Origin of the Lack"*¹⁴ from *Rw Nw Prt M Hr w*¹⁵

Nut¹⁶ and Ra¹⁷ were married, and held dominion over the progression of day and night. Nut did not love Ra, and instead loved Geb.¹⁸ Ra had Shu¹⁹ hold Nut and Geb separate from each other, with Nut being held aloft and Geb being held down. To make sure that no infidelity occurred, Ra circled Nut and Geb, creating day and night. Ra, in his paranoid need for panopticism, forced his way down Nut's throat nightly, so that he may see inside of her (presumably to make sure that Geb was not there also) and be born every morning anew from his wife. Nut did not like this arrangement, nor did Geb, nor did Ra, nor did Shu, but this stasis continued for many eons. Upon one birth of Ra, Nut realized that she had become older, matured beyond the need to constantly give birth to Ra. That night, she swallowed Ra, knowing that she would not give birth to him in the morning, choosing instead menopause. Nut slept well, until Ra, from inside, began to set fire to her uterus, giving her hot flashes. She was swollen with Ra, who grew to occupy as much space in her as he could. This made Nut too heavy for Shu, and the three gods came crashing down on Geb. Nut was a collapsed mess, her stars thrown about everywhere; Shu had dispersed into his domain, and Geb remained at the bottom of this pile, now only consisting of Nut and Geb, where they could finally be together in the timeless and formless Nun.²⁰

Present in all of these stories is the tendency for dream to contaminate reality, evidenced by the fanciful elements that populate them. With modern science, we are aware that the Sun does not disappear at night, nor does it revolve around the Earth, but these are the only ways that the stories above can function; these falsities must be assumptions, even though we are capable now of knowing that these are not true. Here, a sense of bilocationality becomes handy. Once one is conscious of the fact that these stories are fictitious, they become easier to accept and, paradoxically, naturalize. Traditionally, this bleeding effect is witnessed through some sort of portal (if these works are to be taken individually as interstitial), but in all of these works, the portal appears to be absent, until they are placed in a temporal context via function.

The functions of these stories are to entertain through cultural traditions. In ΠΡΟΒΕΒΑΗΜΕΝΕΣ ΚΑΤΑΧΩΡΙΣΕΙΣ's version of "The Tragedy of Persephone," the myth is populated by various characters that exist within the continuity of the pantheon established in their heroic traditions. Hades, Orpheus, Persephone/"The Iron Queen," Aphrodite, nymphs, Thanatos, and Sisyphus all make appearances in other stories, and thusly are introduced to an audience (assuming these stories were told) who already know them. This way stories like "The Tragedy of Persephone" have an innate seduction to them; people passively take in the narrative until a section arises that breaks from their previous experience with the work. When handled correctly, this break will not cause consternation, but rather, will increase the amount of investment that the listener is willing to place in the story being told because the story is suddenly made new and different, which both arrests and grabs attention. This is the same with "The Origin of the Lack," where the deities that are mentioned and guided through the compacted narrative can only do so because of the pre-established set of knowledge that the audience is expected to bring to the reading/listening experience. Without

¹² An idea popularly attributed to Aristotle.

¹³ The myth shows a switch from believing in the permanence of the repeating day as a conventional structure to the temporary nature of the day itself as an event in constant flux.

¹⁴ "The Origin of the Lack" is an Egyptian myth translated from hieroglyphics on the walls of the nameless tomb under the sphinx's paw.

¹⁵ *Utterances of Emergence During Daytime*, more commonly referred to as *The Book of the Dead*.

¹⁶ The sky goddess, represented as a woman arched over the earth, wearing a star-covered dress.

¹⁷ The sun god, represented as a man with a hawk head and sun-shaped crown.

¹⁸ The earth god, represented as a man with a goose on his head, lying underneath the sky.

¹⁹ The air god, represented as a man wearing a feather headdress or a lion.

²⁰ The waters of Chaos, represented by a man holding a barque (a type of boat).

the knowledge of Geb being the body of the Earth or Nut being the dome of the firmament, the spatial arrangements of the story can generate no signification, as the signs cease to be able to represent the narrative.²¹ The portal, then, must be the site at which the narrative ceases to be familiar and slips into that which is unknowable until it has been experienced.

This seduction also works when using repetitive symbols to derive meaning. In “The Daybreak” (see Appendix A), Reyes employed the constant use of vertically oriented three-panel segments to generate a visual rhythm, which works to naturalize a patently unnatural story, complete with fantastical creatures like the monstrous vermin and the elephant. Likewise, repetition of similar scenes in these trios of panels generates a sense of rhythm, as the trios usually contain scenes of growth upwards. The seduction here is deftly employed, and that too is subverted, for the reader reaches the bottom of page 5 having been completely drawn into the story when the regular, repetitive format that created a sense of grounding is demolished, giving way to page 6, which undermines one’s sense of security in this fictitious world, but from a new perspective developed in the reader, who is already accustomed to this new world, and is ready for a moment of excessive signification.

In the Tlingit sun mystery, the seduction comes in the form of its method of dissemination. The story was woven into a *chilkat*, thus making a physical copy of an aural story. This sort of preservation is common in Tlingit communities, where property rights are extended to notions and ideas. These property rights create a sense of ownership within communities, where tribal dances are just as likely to be protected property as a longhouse or totem is, and handed down through lineages as family names are. There is a tendency nowadays for the Tlingit to concretize property in the contact zone that arises between their traditional moieties and the laws of the United States of North America (USNA). To protect their abstracted properties, the Tlingit peoples find ways to manifest physically the information they wish to keep control of. The seduction occurs because of the tremendous effort that it takes for such stories to be inscribed into the physical culture, thereby protecting them from those who are not authorized to author them; if it wasn’t important, then the property would not be worth saving and revisiting, and it would lose its authority as well as its place in the memories of the people it belongs to.

So, all of the texts seduce, but to what end? Embedded in the narratives, beyond formal storytelling conventions, are hints of historical probabilities, with the largest one being a possible nuclear war that was somehow lost to history, which is only accessible at the interstice of self and history.

Evidence can be found in each myth when seeking out that which is being focalized on, or otherwise explained. Each myth features a disappearing sun and attributes the disappearance to super-human constructs, as if the scope and breadth of such a thing is outside of their hands. Historical records indicate that nuclear bombs have never been used during war time,²² yet the effects find themselves repeated many times across each myth. In “The Tragedy of Persephone,” the world is doomed to have a permanently destroyed surface, which is perpetual winter. In both “The Daybreak” and the Tlingit sun mystery, the sun is displaced to a locale that man cannot access. “The Origin of the Lack” completely destroys the sun, permanently resolving any access man could hope to have. How could these myths even arise unless there were a prolonged period of time that the globe could not confirm the existence of the sun, like, say, if there were a cloud layer that blocked it from vision, which heated up the earth as well as guaranteeing its drop in temperature? This cloud appears explicitly in “The Daybreak” and the Tlingit sun mystery, whereas general atmospheric confusion appears in all of the texts. There is dark time across each of the myths, which is frequently attributed to a metonymic relationship between eras of good times and light,²³ but this attribution is an incorrect one, since there are almost no surviving records of this era that suggest any enlightenment. In fact, there are surprisingly few lingual artifacts from this era at all, even though the people living at this time were capable of symbolic communication, as evidenced by the retention of such stories.

Another of the hallmarks of nuclear annihilation is the loss of flora and fauna. This is usually due to a combination

²¹This point is rendered false in hieroglyphics, where the image of the sky, the air, and the earth, all personify the trio of the gods; Nut, Shu, and Geb are arranged in human form along the abstract space they would occupy, thus saving the need to necessarily know who is who and where they are placed in the grand schema of the narrative. The same is true for Re/Ra/Amon-Ra/Ra-Horus, who has the image of the sun affixed to the crown on his head, rendering moot the necessity to know that Ra is the sun-god; that information is provided by his initial signifier.

²²There is evidence that primitive nuclear weaponry had been detonated in the southern principalities of the Empires Americans (1492-2012 AD) during the Century of Global War (1910-2012 AD).

²³See *Let the Light be...* by Jorge Carrion-Palomades.

of radiation poisoning due to the contamination of water and its ripple effect through an ecosystem, and scarcity in the food supply. Even if we weren't to believe that creatures like the axolotl and the giraffe existed, the fact that their presence is erased in "The Daybreak" by a barely knowable calamity is a symbolic rendering of extinction via nuclear detonation, as the sun disappears and the animals vanish as well.

Anger is the final mark of interstitiality present in the tales. In "The Tragedy of Persephone," Persephone becomes embittered toward the world because of the conflict she finds herself in, which triggers the events that lead to the annihilation of the surface of the earth. In the Tlingit sun mystery, the women who summoned the winds do so by trigger, with no individual being capable of knowing who did so first. "The Daybreak" has the animals stack toward the sun only after they become "mad." The Egyptian goddess Nut only decides to have menopause when she becomes dissatisfied with her living arrangements enough to effectively murder her husband. The commonality that unites these works centers on the word "mad." In some archaic uses, "mad" was an acronym communicating "mutually assured destruction,"²⁴ something that countries continue to grapple with in the present day. The presence of this motif in such obscure stories would be pure coincidence, if it were not for the fact that so many other things remained eerily similar, though contact between such cultures would have been limited at such times.

The claim had been made at the beginning of this paper that this particular reading of global traditions relies on the interstice of self and history, which seems like a lofty goal to prove, but it is a very simple realization in the context of all this other *proof*: a reading of historical works can only occur as a way of trying to contain the infinite amount of space that exists between then and now. Though works have always sought to produce the excess of signification that one desires in all work, there will also forever be an ever increasing gap between any text and any other reader. That being said, there is clearly enough evidence to begin exploring the possibility of such events in the past. After all, didn't the Bhagavad Gita have the best record of extra-terrestrial contact before our Common Era?

Excerpt by Sean Pessin



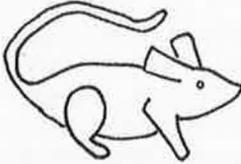
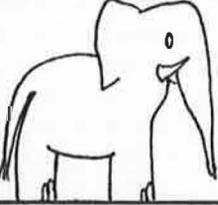
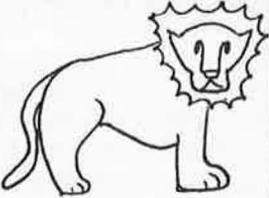
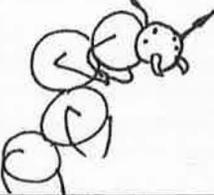
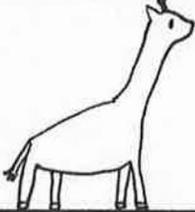
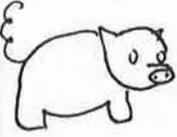
²⁴Used to communicate the near-certain probability that an attack on another body meant the dissolution of one's own.

APPENDIX A

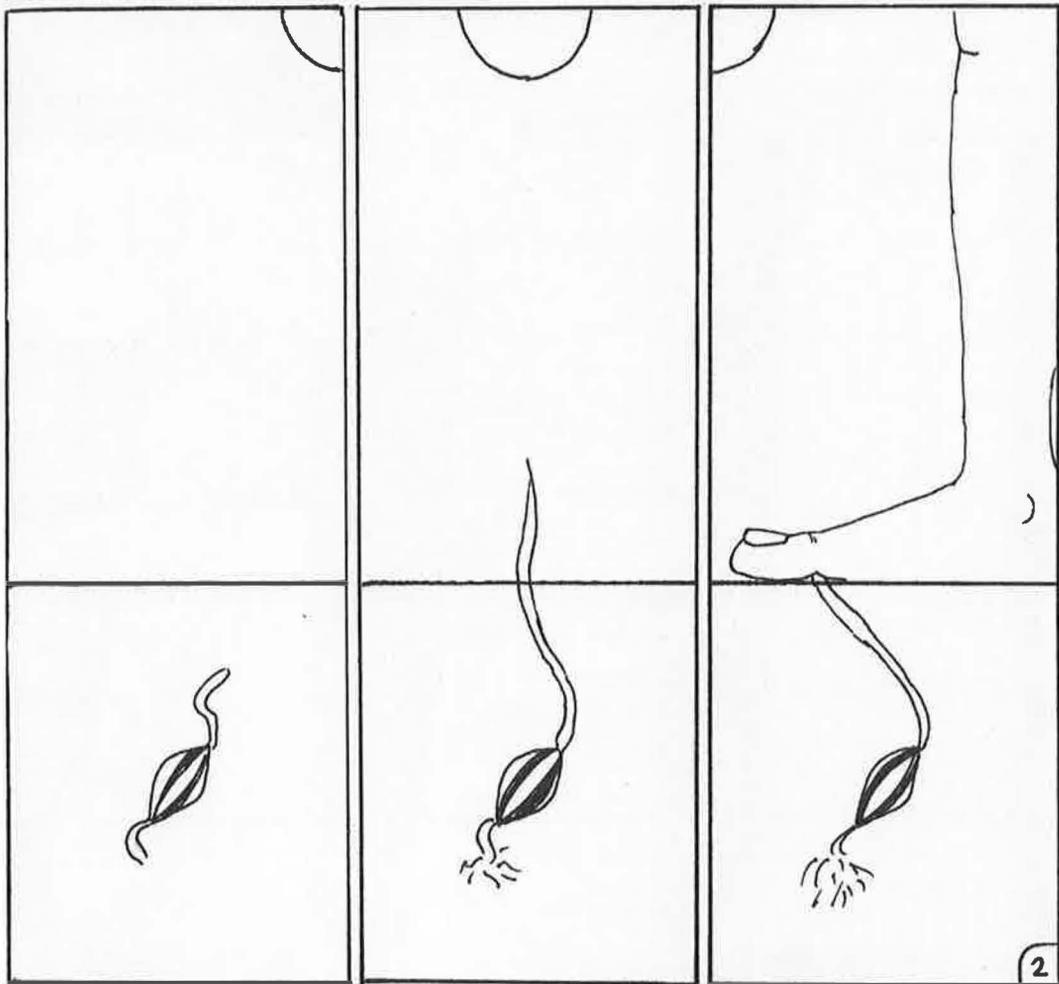
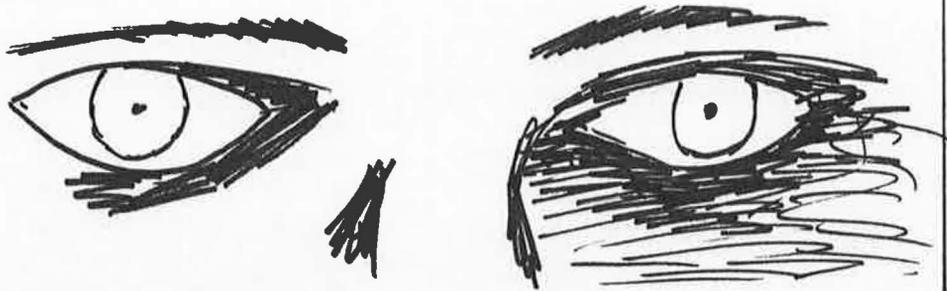
THE DAYBREAK

By EMILIO
REYES

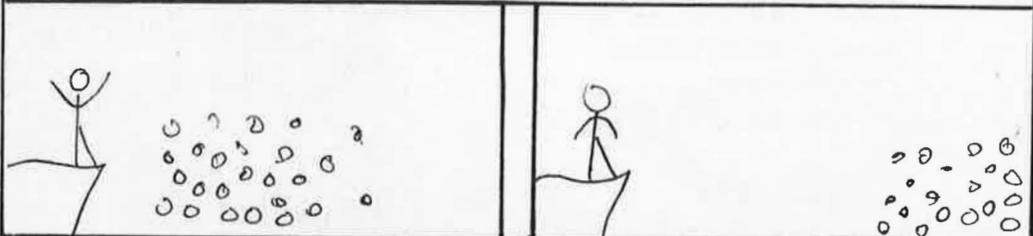


R A T S		M O N K E Y S		E L E P H A N T S	
L I O N S		M O N S T E R S - I N S C R I B E S		A X O C O T L	
C A C T I		G I R A F E S		P I G S	

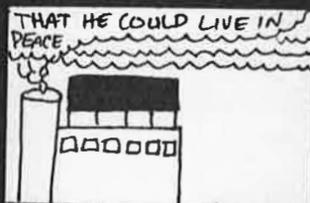
EXCEPT HUMANS.



MAN CAUTIONED: THE SUN IS NOT RELIABLE. IT RISES AND SETS, AND IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED. DO NOT STRIVE FOR THE SUN. ONLY BAD CAN COME OF IT.



SO MAN CREATED TOOL



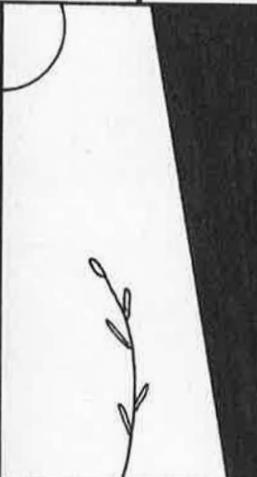
WITHOUT THE UNRELIABLE SUN



AND THE CREATURES



STILL CONTINUED



AT THE SUN

MAN WARNED:

TO GO FOR THE SUN IS DEATH!

BUT THE ANIMALS WERE NO LONGER RECEPTIVE.

MAN CONTINUED ANYWAY: OH! WHERE IS YOUR SUN AFTER IT HAS SET? WHERE IS YOUR SUN DURING ECLIPSES? WHERE IS YOUR SUN WHEN IT IS CLOUDY? WHEN IT RAINS? THIS SUN OF YOURS CANNOT BE TRUSTED! LIVE JUST ON THE EARTH LIKE MAN HAS, IN ALL HIS GLORY. COME MAKE TOOLS WITH US. ABANDON THE SUN. MAKE THIS OUR EARTH!

THIS JUST MADE ALL THE OTHER CREATURES OF THE EARTH

MAD.

KAFA

TOWARI NO TOTORO?

BUT MAN DID RAISE QUESTIONS-

ICH BIN BERLINER? I AM SHIVA, DESTROYER OF WORLDS?

I NNAGADDADAVIDA? JUST DO IT?

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? STOP, DROP, AND ROLL?

MAGIC IS MIGHT? RELIGION IS THE OPiate OF THE MASSES?

WUJJO? MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU?

VIVA LA REVOLUCION?

- WHICH IS WHAT MAN DOES.



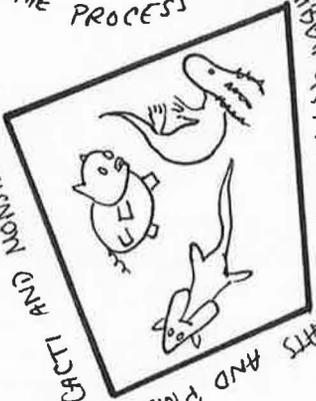
THEY'D GO FOR THE SUN. 4

THE CREATURES JOINED FORCES, BECAUSE REACHING ALONE WAS FUTILE.



SO MONKEYS CLIMBED ATOP MONSTROUS VERMIN WHO HAD CLIMBED ATOP GIRAFFES WHO HAD CLIMBED ATOP LIONS ATOP AXOLOTL ATOP ELEPHANTS ATOP RATS ATOP PIGS ATOP CACTI, AND THEY GRABBED.

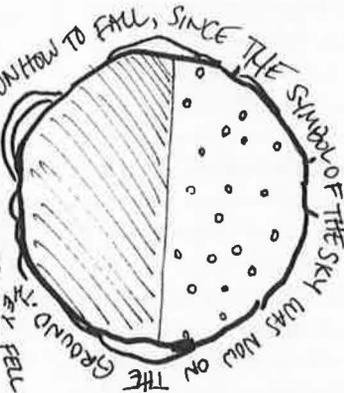
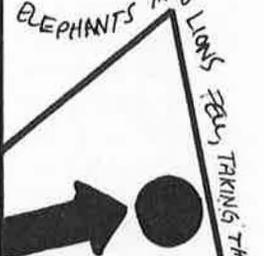
AND IN THE PROCESS OF GRABBING MONKEYS AND RATS AND PIGS AND CATS AND MONSTROUS VERMIN AND AXOLOTS AND GUARRES AND ELEPHANTS



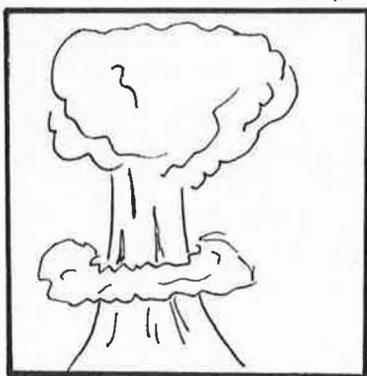
OR BOTH. MAN WAS LEFT ALONE IN DARKNESS, JUST AS HE ADVOCATED.



THEY FELT AWAY FROM THE SUN TAKING THEM, ATTRACTING THEM TO THE GROUND. BUT IN THE CONFUSION OF THE SUN FALLING, THE ANIMALS FALLING BECAME COMPRESSED ON HOW TO FALL, SINCE THE SHROUD OF THE SKY WAS NOW ON THE GROUND.



THE SUN ITSELF THREW UP A GREAT AMOUNT OF DUST BEFORE DISAPPEARING EITHER INTO THE EARTH OR BEHIND THE CLOUDS IT FORMED



ASHLEY ERIKSON

Nectar of the Gods

Press your lips against my mouth, and drink my earthy spices. Let the warmth tickle your tongue as I dance down your throat. Your hands grasp me tightly, fingering the sides of my white body. My brown coat slips off, leaving me naked and burning. Too hot to touch my smooth surfaces, you cover me again. When you lick me up once more, I am cool against the nodules of your tongue. The steam off my body is fading quick, like a sailboat in the far off horizon. "Fill me up," I say. But you don't. You use every last drop I have inside, and you throw me away. Perhaps your sweet lips will meet mine again in another life. But the can you have discarded me into does not say "recyclables."

-Ode to a Starbucks Junkie

A Neuron Fires

FRANCISCO DE LEON

Dinosaur fossils found today are of those who chose to stay. They had a vast array of cities, each spanning areas over 100,000 miles squared, and skyscrapers that pierced the mesosphere. Their vehicles were powered by water and their suits were composed of self-recycling plastics. Their religion was Self in the most selfless way possible with collection trays that overflowed with solutions.

Five thousand years ago, the Egyptians waged war against the dinosaurs. For centuries, they sent wave after wave of attackers before felling three dinosaurs who now rest miles beneath their tombstones at Giza. Realizing impossible cohabitation, the dinosaurs, fully aware of and able to communicate with Self, conjured the schematics of a giant water-powered car capable of spacetime travel. The vehicle, Omnibus, retrieved every dinosaur who raised his hand, and some humans who appeared to be raising their hands, but were actually shielding their eyes from the abduction light. The errant humans were returned and they disseminated a transparent sense of Self, one who confused listening with nodding, and have remained convinced they can communicate with It. Each communiqué shoots through whatever medium is available and some even register in acknowledgment.

A neuron fires and the desire to seek dinosaur reliquaries emerges. Excited, my nephew cuddles his new thought, afraid it'll dissipate in his limited concentration and shares it as quickly as possible. He commits every aspect of the thought to paper, but struggles with a half-forgotten facet as though tracking a phantom itch. His desire now: dinosaur emissaries.

My query bounces around the world at the speed of light and returns with over 200,000 useless results in half a second. My second query fails as well and now I feel like Captain Picard feigning enthusiasm at a failing first encounter. I type maledictions at the internet faster than my nephew can register them. I leave and feel guilty at how

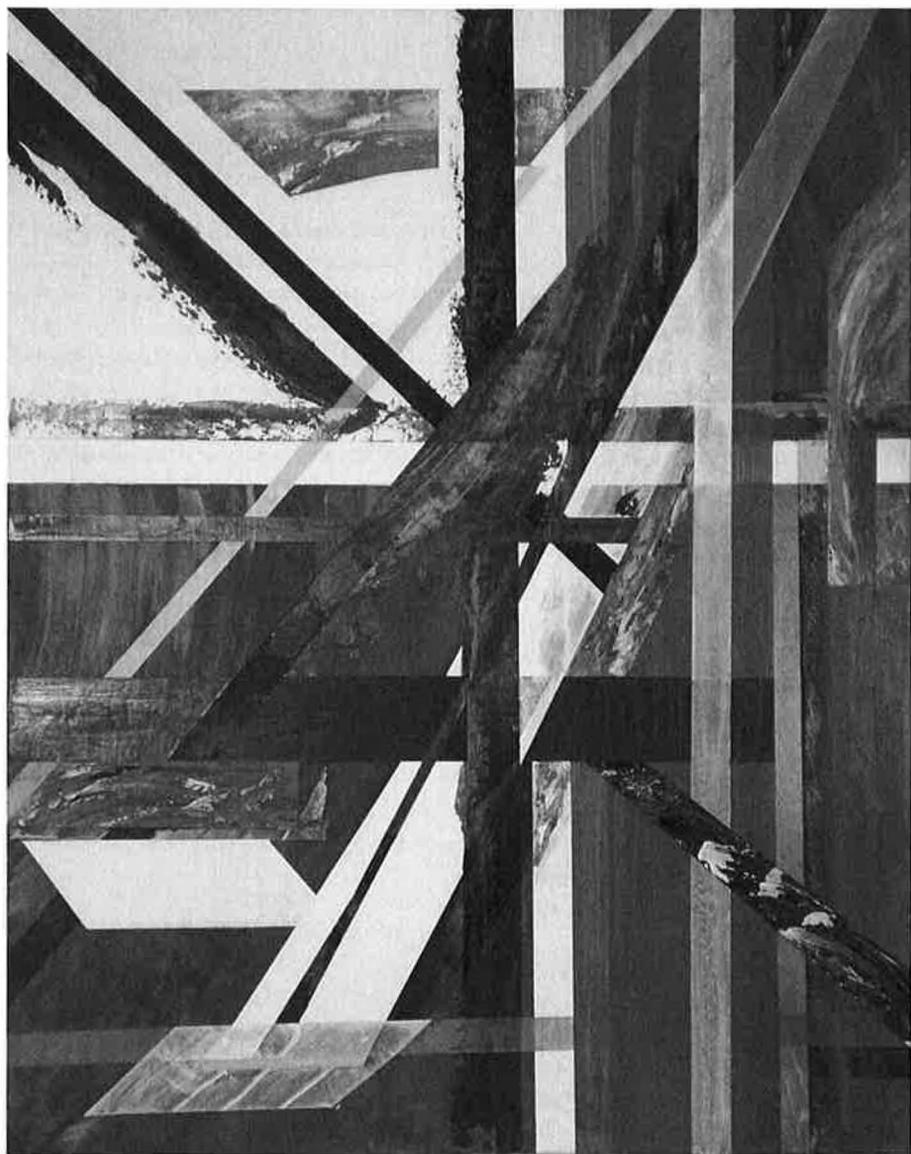
severely I cursed an abortive stimulus-response.

I return from the kitchen to relevant information produced by a query conjured by my nephew. The screen reads:

Her communiqué echoed until the pings became a formless figure that resulted in the epiphany of Itself. The emissary discovered Self with the same surprise as discovering an extra limb. Self fought to keep the emissary from flailing out of perception and performed the equivalent of corralling atoms with a sieve. The effects on the emissary were like tubes of light spearing her dinosaur brain. The tubes were applied among all dinosaurs retroactively through the aether of spacetime thanks to Omnibus who, after retrieving more dinosaurs, summoned a meteor to make way for Us.

My nephew walks out wishing for an Omnibus and I mouse over the screen in hopes of more information, but my computer clicks off with a spark and begins to smolder. I try to turn it on but receive a shock instead. I turn to my laptop. It starts up, tries siphoning the internet and gets nothing but an image of a middle finger. Great.





Santa Monica
JEANINE CASTLE

ELIZABETH ARANA

Galactic Capitalism

Here's a revelation:
vegetation will soon be history.
As our intestines digest those test-tube tacos,
Earth speeds through space
at 75 miles per second.

Forget fretting about
spinal curvature, or that miniature 401k.
The infinite indigo is calling.

Eternity is splendidly careening forward
toward that greedy bitch Andromeda,
lurking in the depths of the murky universe
like an intergalactic Halliburton.

The macrocosm is planning a merger,
and I've been dreaming of liquidating your assets.
Time to cash in a few orgasms.
Only a few billion years remain.
Throw caution to the solar wind!
Let's kiss,
and kiss
again.



Dotted Man
ARMENE GALSTYAN

Quarks and Stardust

DALE BAKER

Up

The direction we headed when she told me she could fly. And I took her hand and we rose higher and higher. Then she told me she could never see me again and I didn't understand it but she was gone. I looked out at the field of wildflowers, with ripples like sea water. They were small speckles of yellow against the pale green. And I thought that it was the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen—the flowers, not her. Whom I hated at that moment. And then, looking back on it, I do not blame her at all. She could only follow her path and I could only follow mine. Ours' was brief but it sparkled. Like the stars. Which, I heard Carl Sagan say, is what we are all made of. Like quarks. Or quirks.

Down

Is where hell is located in traditional cosmology. And in the town I grew up in it wasn't speculation, it was fact. Every week people would dress their best and sit in large rooms where impassioned men would curse them to spend an eternity in lakes of molten lead or something like that. But Dante said it was cold. And Milton said it was destiny. So I am a little unsure if anyone really knows what they're talking about. Therefore I remain an optimistic skeptic. Which puts me at odds with many of those same people that dress their best and file into large rooms where impassioned men demand their money.

Charm

He had none and she had plenty. Making them quite an odd pair. I would sit in their house and silently long for her while he provided me with liquor while talking incessantly about any random nonsense that he may be entertaining at the moment. And when everyone was good and drunk, he would make her drive to get him food from anywhere that was still open. She would get into the small white car her mother had given her on her sixteenth birthday. And I would opt to go with her and while we were driving we had the opportunity to talk. But the talk was pointless and asinine as she lay in bed with him every night and I had to lie on the couch in the hot room. He wouldn't install the

swamp cooler from sheer apathy.

Strange

How things can get after the tenth hit of LSD in a two day bender. No one has slept and the place smells stagnant and the air kind of hangs, but no one notices when there are rainbows in front of their eyes. There was no me and you, there was only the continuous existence of the eternal. We were all one, if not for a brief moment, and it was beautiful like the flower ripples in the field where she stood and rolled her eyes as if she was getting tired. And she was getting tired and I know that now but then, then I wonder how she felt back then.

Top

Of the launch pad is where we would watch the stars that Carl Sagan once said we were made of. Did you know we were stardust? And it was atop of that roof that I wished I was a star and could see the vastness of existence, which was a brief moment, even briefer than the moment we were one. What if I was left behind on the moon that time we all went there to visit? I would sit on a rock and watch as the earth grew old and tired. Alone. But that would be okay because I was nearer to the stars. And if I could get close enough I would reach out and touch one of them. I bet they feel cool even though I hear that they are not. How can such cool light come from such heat?

Bottom

Is a type of quark and we are all made of those and stardust. Ann Druyan said that the only tragedy of her husband's death was that they knew they would never see each other again. But she was wrong because we are all quarks and quarks are stardust and stardust, I believe, returns to the sky and not below, in hell, where they would have you believe we will go. And I know that eventually the field, the flowers, the man with no charm, the girl that I loved, Carl Sagan, and the drugs will all return to the origin. Where stardust is all there is.



Thanatophobia
TIFFANY LEE KHIM

SEAN AIERN

My Moirae

gathering in the grey
breath that turns checks rosy, she
press lip fed me Kush,
from soft curved glass
heavy with her tongue
pushing the caramel
haze down to lungs,
mouth to mouth
intravenously
where its dark, warm
touching skin and darkness
as fingers on folding seats
in the blue movie glow,
washing the world away,
chests heaving to catch the sky
exhaling.

JOSÉ MORALES

Somniloquy (Sleep Talk)

All the world is a silent film—a story without beginning, middle or end—just a continuous loop of recycled footage and lousy editing, always looking for someone beautiful to rescue from a railroad track, hoping to secure that one monochrome kiss followed by mouthed words of unspoken dialogue and exaggerated expressions you can't believe no matter how high you make yourself, insisting you aren't; and every night you go to sleep to dream in color.

You hold her against the light like a hundred dollar bill, just to prove she's real. A Day-Glo aura surrounds her lucent wings of scented dryer sheets. She breathes a purifying detergent, stronger than dirt, sanitizing stain and smell, one luminous halo askew above her like a jaunty star of cleanliness.

It's no longer enough to sneak water from a garden hose. Morning hits like an electric surge, washing the sepia from your retinas. Where deeper meanings were a myth, encyclopedias erase themselves, passages replaced by all the faces you've known before. Because answers are never easy to come by, and truth is as relative as an ounce of beauty.

Only god can believe in beauty; it hides behind her eyes like a firework caught mid-explosion.



Seaweed
HARUKO HATAKEDA

JEFFREY C. ALFIER

The Boy Wakened by the Chanteuse

for Owen, who came home tired

In his bedroom, painted a deep rich blue,
he wakes to a woman singing, the sound
reaching through windows his mother let him
keep open so he could hear rain patter
on their orange trees. The voice is a neighbor's
from a house two doors down, a torch singer
who practices late at night, old ballads—
masquerades ended, sailboats in moonlight—
laments passing lips wet with crème de fraise,
their easy beauty of grief out of reach.
As he slides back under billowy quilts
her lines remind him he's not kissed a girl,
each high note lacing through his dozing mind
not yetwhelmed by the size of what ended.

Sea Change

LORETTA McCORMICK

In the beginning, there were churning seas, violent storms of lightning, a monstrous ultraviolet sun burning through the delicate membrane of the newly formed atmosphere; and out of this turbulence arose a compulsion. That compulsion began to tighten and it soon coiled into one hard, glittering shell. We were perfect, flawless—an endlessly faceted pocket of life, tossing with abandon in the roiling blue. But we were lonely. To alleviate our loneliness, we concentrated on the outline of our newly formed body. We concentrated as the salty water flowed around us, flooded every cleft or gap, defining our contours. Eventually we recognized the tiny, swaying receptors dangling from us and, most importantly, we recognized the secret of replication folded inside of our almost invisible jewel-like shape. We ceased being aimless and, when we realized that there was nothing for our searching receptors to cling to, we understood that we would have to replicate ourselves.

It wasn't easy. For our impervious exterior could have moved us through eons, unchanging as we drifted through our watery world, omnipotent in our singularity. But the inherent force to produce something new began to push us so we stretched our body, elongated ourselves until we finally split apart. We were two, then four, then countless, forming a chain. We were each the same but quite different. Each a variant of the first—beautiful pods harboring our precious desire within. Some of us were spherical with conical spikes protruding from our outer casing to provide extra protection for our desire. Some of us bumped up against the other new bodies exhibiting much greater strength and aggression. Some of us, jelly-like and opaque, undulated dangerously without coming apart. We grew, constantly changing what it meant to come before. What it meant to come after. We grew until the tenuous chain linking us to each other could no longer hold.

We drifted apart, disappearing in a million directions—

some of us sinking into dark depths and others floating towards the clear, white light of the sun filtering through the surface of the water. In every direction we left behind a shimmering wake. We went years or decades or centuries without ever brushing up to another like us. After all, the sea was vast. But we were no longer lonely. The force of a current would drag us into depths that not even the blazing sun could penetrate. We would eventually hit the sea floor and the weight of the entire ocean kept us pinned to the broken crust of the earth. Impossible to say how long we would remain in the cold blackness but in the dark we continued to replicate. Sometimes we would glide past each other slowly under the crush of water, briefly touching, recognizing how much we had already changed. Our receptors would tangle before we were forced apart again. This contact, as pleasurable as it was, always left an imprint of melancholy on us.

The midnight ocean could never keep us pressed to the cracked nadir of our world for long. The landscape violently shook. It was constantly shifting, creating deep fissures and emitting blasts of magma that would snake from the earth behind globular white bubbles of gas. The upheaval would lift us from the ocean floor and rocket us through the water. From black to midnight to cerulean, we would at last burst through the frothy layer of water into the stringent air. As we came back down, raging waves often slammed against us, sloughing off miniscule bits of iridescent flotsam. In time, the sea, as vast as it was, became choked with life; we were everywhere. Many of us had grown so grotesquely large and unnecessarily complicated until, all at once, we realized a chasm had formed. We had become us and them.

They were truly awkward and vulnerable in their enormous bodies. It could scarcely be believed that they could survive our violent world. They thrashed about with none of our graceful elegance, our acceptance of currents. But we

appreciated the tenacity in their sheer variety. Some had sprouted tails and fins that cut through the water and propelled them forward with great speed. Just one snap of these tails and smaller creatures were overtaken, torn between rows of serrated teeth. There were creatures with scales that shimmered silver and gold, others with smooth thick skin almost invisible in the water, some with ropey tentacles that had the strength to tear apart creatures with chitinous exteriors. They fed off of each other, grew strong and courageous. We were proud, in spite of their obvious weaknesses. Scales, skin or chitin—we moved in and out of them all. Their pores opened up and we traversed every inch of every body. We lingered in throbbing organs, flowed in and out of body cavities, and followed impulses up and down spines, admiring what we had created. They twitched or fluttered, with remote recognition that faded as time passed.

Our watery world was also irrevocably changing. The endless sea that enveloped us and them in its turmoil was shrinking, calming. Magma had finally bubbled up to the surface of the water and broke through in a cloud of briny steam. It spread across the world; more cooling magma surfaced in other distant places, further crowding the teeming sea and splitting the one, expansive world—dry/wet, hot/cold, north/south, east/west. In their unique curiosity, their desire for individuality, the most daring of these brave sea creatures pulled themselves onto dry land, cutting their tender limbs on volcanic rock. From deep inside them, we were slightly jostled and excited as they adjusted painfully to their new environment.

They shook their heads and released the last droplets of water that clung to them then took refuge in the shade of a rocky ledge when they began to turn pink in the hot sun. They were naked and unprepared for the tingling sunlight rapidly branding their skin. But when the sun slipped under the horizon, they cursed the cold, bright light of the stars and shivered in helplessness. But adapting was no small matter of growing warm fur or leathery skin.

They noticed right away that time moves in fits and starts on dry land. Or at least it's measured out in much smaller increments. The sun casted shadows that seemed to play games, first falling from volcanic boulders onto a patch or two of barren earth. They sought these shadows out and huddled in their shade. But they became distracted by the

glorious sun, or by the strange and frightening new shape of the land. Then, suddenly, they would look around and find their shade had vanished. They noticed how it had slipped under their bodies, mocking them with their own dark image outlined on the ground.

In the fluid world of the sea, movement is a constant but adapting meant they had to learn to stay static, crackling in the sunlight until opportunity presented itself. Before it dropped away for the evening, the sun set off in the sky such

*Bursts of vibrant colors begot
frenzied activity begot searching,
begot wanting, begot taking, begot
taming. Blooms burst forth...*

a range of color it burned their eyes but they dared not look away until it disappeared. We could feel their blood heating us up. The brilliant purples, pinks, oranges, and reds, hung frozen across the sky for a few

moments until the sun, again, melted into evening. But that moment brought forth a delicate green shoot from a crumbly fissure in the earth. In the morning, they noticed the tiny shock of color against the barren landscape. The center of its lone purple blossom a riot of oranges, pinks and reds. They moved towards it and plucked the bloom from the ground. They lived in bursts and lulls.

Bursts of vibrant colors begot frenzied activity begot searching, begot wanting, begot taking, begot taming. Blooms burst forth, replacing the one that had been plucked. They gathered as many as they could hold, chewing on the velvety petals as they moved through the bounty. They tasted something short-lived and seasonal. We could feel their bodies aligning themselves with a different cycle. We could feel their love for their measured lives of sun and moon, light and dark. They no longer recognized us, even as a remote memory, a tingle up their spines, a flutter in their hearts. They saved their fluttering for each other. They grew soft downy hair on their heads and around their reproductive organs. They grew plants and animals to eat and thought themselves superior.

Superiority begot loneliness, begot myth-making, begot creator. We tried to remind them we were everywhere. We tried to make them remember that we were lonely too, a long time ago. We felt our long dormant desire well up inside of us and then we couldn't be contained. Sores, wet and angry, burst open upon their soft lips, around their eyes and genitals. Tender glands swelled beneath the surface of their skin and throbbed. Fever brought them to delirium, allowing us to invade their dreams. We swam around their

fever dreams trying to wake them up. They saw the beautiful sea of their birth, fathomless. Open. But they took it for empty. So they were left gasping for air, clawing at their bed sheets, wet with perspiration and overcome with a deep fear of drowning.

They misunderstood our signs for malevolence. Cursed us as evil. With us in mind, they fashioned handmade totems around stories of creatures that lived neither on land nor in the sea. The stories they crafted from their short-term memories and burgeoning language eased their fears and drowned out their nightmares. But the creatures they invented were destroyers and even the creator they had imagined for themselves held grudges and played favorites. How could they know we were not wrathful, merely teeming? They were teeming by then too.

With momentum like a tidal wave, this teeming begot a scientist. But, before she was a scientist, she was a little girl. She grew thick and heavy, deep inside her mother's body. The tubular cleft of her spinal cord puckered down the length of her back. Unique scrimshawed waves began to materialize on each pad of her delicate, glassy fingertips. The soft cartilage of her ears folded into whorled pink shells that drew in every muffled sound from the outside world. As she slept fitfully, suspended in the dark, fluid warmth of her mother, muted stories began to filter through her mother's skin and muscle. They came to her with a low resonance, gently vibrating, making the filaments of her spinal cord shiver and echoing through her soft skull. When she was all flesh and blood and bone and connective tissue and need, she was pushed from the viscous safety of her mother's body. The comfort of weightlessness disappeared and the dry air pulled her skin tight. She tried to gasp but choked on amniotic fluid. Her precious pink lungs, wet and aching, burned for more air and her face screwed up in pain until, finally, she let out a wail.

When she found her voice, she reveled in it. With eyes still closed to the bright world, the baby bleated into her mother's full breasts, pausing briefly to nurse before resuming her cries. The wailing didn't subside; the sound of her own voice gave her an occasional shudder, as if she couldn't tell where it was coming from. As if her own voice could shock her like a bolt of electricity. It grew in volume and intensity until, at times, it did seem as if her voice was some other creature, tossing around the bedroom. Her mother would watch, remote with exhaustion, as the little

girl cried. With eyes dry and squeezed tight and mouth open, she seemed to be trying to catch her own sound—suck it back into her mouth and swallow it whole. She screamed and squalled herself to sleep but her dreams were peaceful. We were conscious of her even then.

When she was just able to push herself up, her mother placed a tiny life-like doll into her arms. She had no interest in it and as soon as she realized the strength in her tiny arms, she tried to push it aside. Its shiny white-blond hair smelled like chemicals and its eyelids clicked as they moved up and down. Her mother folded her tiny fingers around a little pink bottle with real water in it and brought it to the hole in the center of its plastic face. She liked to rip off its clothes and watch the water run out from between its plastic limbs. Her mother looked horrified when she caught her trying to tear open its belly so she satisfied herself by arranging her brightly colored blocks into patterns. She built walls of primary colors then knocked them down with a violent thrust of her arm. She rearranged them into diagonals, zigzags, squares checkered in yellow, green, red, blue. It was the knocking down more than the building that she enjoyed.

In grade school, she began to collect flora and fauna. She created terrariums that went dank and rotten in the corner of her room and made up stories about the snapping jaws of exotic fauna and the venomous nectar of flora. She looked through binoculars at birds in her backyard trees. She inspected worms and ants with her magnifying glass, careful not to burn them with the focused ray of the lens. Her spine tingled and she felt a flutter in her abdomen as she peered through a microscope. Her desire was brutal as she tried to get closer. She cracked the slide into a web. She wanted to classify it all, put everything in a chart and graph every reaction. But we were her special interest.

Others that came after us had already been classified. They had been given their own kingdoms. We had no desire for anything so ridiculous. We were everywhere regardless of their fleeting kingdoms. But, oh, to be opened up, dismantled. The scientist had become thin-lipped and serious. She furrowed her brow and donned her lab coat and protective eyewear like a high priest cloaking herself in sacred vestments. She pulled us out of volunteer bodies, into her gleaming lab and examined us in a small tube of briny water much too contained to accurately simulate the sea. She placed us in a petri dish and fixed us beneath her high-powered microscope lens. Intense white light shone from below, making us more visible, illuminating our simple

perfection. And when she peered through the eyepiece, we turned over in the tiny dish, flashing our brilliant shells for just a moment, making sure our receptors gently oscillated. She studied, took notes, kept accurate records of our replication with a beatific expression on her face. Injected us back into the bloodstream of smaller creatures to see what we could do. But we soon realized that she believed in her discovery, her revelation. Not in us.

Organisms on the edge of life! she declared, and we knew we had been betrayed. She called us poison. Not really alive. Then she worked to discover a way to eradicate us. With steely determination, she tried to peel back our protective shell so she could insert her forceps into our bodies and root around. We were torn apart in powerful machines so she could snap pictures of our bits and pieces with special cameras. Others were invited to take a peek, to try for themselves. She published our pictures in journals and taught young scientists in lab coats everything she had learned from us. She adjusted her lab coat and assured them we were easily manipulated. She convinced them it was a simple matter to conquer an organism that has no life.

For them, we exist only in books, in glass tubes, gleaming labs. As if it were possible to ever contain us. Their spines tingle and an aching memory that they cannot outline haunts them as they shift in their seats. We wait, curled like an embryo, floating inside all of them, waiting silently until we split into something new.



TOBI COGSWELL

The Boy at Cannon Beach

for Owen

He is always left behind,
now he wiggles his toes
in a private gully, so far up
the beach there is no kelp
or crab to keep him company.
Old voices of damp and cold
around him are not visible
beneath the sodden marshmallow
of sky. The occasional clink
of bottles adds to the jazz
brewing in his head that comes
out as blues.

Three blocks away the sun
is chatty and conversational
but here it is stoic as the boy,
offended at being called irresponsible
by a father named for that word.
He walks the punishment as if
it were tattooed on his face,
a Maori tribesman painted with
stigma rather than celebration.
Where is the music this boy plays,
the graceful sounds that bloom
inside, released by fingers long
and graceful.

A lesson in cold-molding, the sand
and boy are packed by stubborn tides,
only the ankles to the toes show
in the wet ribbon of stream on
the wide-packed beach. He reaches
down to touch the water so he can see
the feet that will carry him and the hands
that will save him, his own private clock
in his own human time. And so he walks
toward the sun, arms outstretched
in greeting; damp footprints remind
him and everyone that we love the best
we can and then we're gone.



Organic Chemistry
COURTNEY HANEY

The Fly Eaters

BRYAN THOMAS STEPHEN SMITH

My dad used to say that Buffalo was America's city of the dead. Empty grain silos, steel and concrete factories—all places that once fueled a living city. He would smile with that mouth of his that was missing half the cheek from a smelting accident in '64, sitting in his power chair, holding a cup of Irish coffee with arthritic fingers like withered spider legs. "Hard city to survive in," he'd say.

Now, driving down the I-90 with my cousin Luke, his buddy Val and the union boss tied up in the trunk, I see the old steel factories and grain silos exposed in the overcast light of the morning. I see them, carved out brown skeletons in the distance, cold and alone structures left to stand in South Buffalo snow.

The vision in my left eye starts to blur again and I can hear Val telling his jokes as my mind comes back to the car, the backseat, the mistletoe hanging from the rearview mirror, and the slight stench of whatever kind of cigarette my cousin Luke is smoking. Winston. Camel.

"How is a woman and a tornado alike?" Val says, smiling. He's still rubbing his hands together with one of those winter heat patches. I wonder if his right hand still hurts.

Luke, driving with one hand on the wheel and another sticking the tip of the Winston or Camel cigarette out through a slit in the window, says, "I don't know, Val. How is a woman and a tornado alike?"

Val begins to laugh before he says it and I can hear an old Christmas song on the radio sung by none other than Mr. Union himself, Dick Gaughan. "They both moan like hell when they come, and take the house when they leave."

We all laugh for a few minutes, Val repeating the tail end of the joke. He starts to tell another joke, one about a man and woman fucking in the forest, when we pass by the radio towers near the old Buffalo Central Train Station. Radio static shoots through Gaughan's rumbling voice like the grinder of life itself, breaking up the comfort we managed

to salvage in the few hours since the kidnapping. Luke flicks the FM knob down with his driving hand and the car almost swerves to the side of the road.

"Always happens," Val says, and I can see him breathing hard under his heavy blue jacket, his aged black face looking thin, breakable. "Radio tower interference or somthin,'" and he rubs his hands together and says how cold it is for the tenth time.

"Where we goin' again?" I say. My head is vibrating with the car, shifting the vision in my left eye like a funhouse mirror.

"Somewhere," Luke says.

"Don't *fuck* around, Luke."

"Somewhere," he says again and I wonder if I'm going to catch that smile of his. I think back to when we were kids, playing out near the bike jumps and the interstate. Once past the trees on the north side, there was only a small culvert separating the jumps from the interstate and a person (or a kid) could just reach out and touch the cars as they went by to better places like Rochester or Albany. And Luke would always bring out the BB gun. He would always say he was using the soft pellets, the plastic yellow ones that would bounce off the windshields. But I knew. I knew good damn well that no fuckin' soft pellet cracked glass. But Luke, he would never tell me the truth. Always said the pellets were soft. Even after a windshield got cracked, or a car almost crashed, he'd just offer that grin and say the pellets were soft.

Just a part of the game was his excuse.

And I'm wondering now if this whole thing is a result of one of those old games. If the three of us, all one time union men for the Steel Workers Association of America, are in some way paying for those windshields with our livelihoods. Val, being old, unlucky and black in the wrong part of New York. Luke, getting in a fight with his boss and being all but excommunicated from the steel industry for

the rest of his life.

And me. Can't forget about me. Myeye. That little piece of steel that just made it under my safety glasses from the cutting wheel. My shift was already over that day. I should'a gone home, eaten a New York redneck dinner—Newcastle ale with Stouffer's—and had a little fun with my wife. *Should'a equals all but shit in the grand scheme of things*, as Dad said, and the grand scheme of things came with a little envelope in the mail telling me that the benefits I'd been paying into for the past ten years wouldn't cover my accident. I was on my own. And I was grateful in some way. Grateful that Dad was dead and he couldn't see his one-time college boy son as a 31 year-old used up steel worker in Western New York.

This is supposed to be about revenge, but to what length, I can't say. *Dummy rounds loaded with white powder*, Luke had said, showing me the bullets to the .38, while we watched Boulder visit his mistress at some motel a couple days ago. *We're just goin' to scare him. Fear of God, cousin.*

And I believed him. Maybe because of my eye or because Boulder's signature was at the bottom of the slip that denied my benefits. Luke was my cousin and I guess I trusted him.

Trusted him, though I still wonder what he told Val this was all about.

The union boss is probably half frozen in the trunk. A big man with a Wyatt Earp mustache and the kind of lines in his face that said he either had bad acne or a few good fights in his youth, Boulder had fought hard. Val had hit him with one sloppy right outside of his motel room, just hard enough to break the nose, the bulb, the front part that's more cartilage than any kind of bone. Boulder had all but shut down after that, dropping to his knees, soiling the blue cotton bathrobe that he was wearing in the sleet and snow and blood. Me and Luke had used some twine then. It was the kind he used at his weekend job selling Christmas trees and we tied Boulder's hands behind his back and heaved his big ass in the trunk of the Chevelle, all the while huffing and cussing through ski masks at the bitch coldness of Buffalo at four in the morning.

I can see Boulder's big hands in my head. Hands that signed thousands of denial notices like the one I got. Hands that were swollen and plump from the lack of circulation from the twine and the cold, blueberry colored hands, made useless in a way that couldn't be done through any other means.

"Somewhere," Luke says again, and my mind is back in

the car, with the grinder sound of static on the radio fading, watching the snow out across the opaque orange and purple of the early morning horizon. I see the old Cargill steel factory coming over the next hill, the place where my Dad lost half his cheek, and as I put my ski mask back on, I try to remember if Luke was smiling when he told me about the bullets.

"Cut it," Luke says and Val uses a large spring knife from his belt to undo the twine around Boulder's wrists. The car is parked a half mile into the old lot of the Cargill steel factory, just deep enough to look small and insignificant from Interstate 90. We hoist Boulder out of the trunk, to his feet. He waivers unsteadily, bathrobe falling open, exposing him. The white cotton slippers on his feet are soiled to a dark brown and Luke pushes on his shoulder, causing him to fall down to the snow. He and Val laugh from under their ski masks and I help Boulder back up. Luke puts the mistletoe that was hanging from the rear view mirror around Boulder's neck.

"Watch out," Luke says to Boulder's bloodied face. "They say that stuff's poison." They laugh and I turn away at the sight of the big union boss's face, a violent mess of dark blood and ice and wetness with a fleshy Christmas tree bulb in the center of it.

After a few minutes, Boulder gets his balance and, with a little pushing and coercion from Luke and the .38, starts to walk forward. Luke stays a few feet behind him, .38 pointed forward into the union boss's back, while me and Val trail a few feet behind Luke, huffing deep visible breaths of white as we walk across the snow to the old factory.

It's only then, when I look and see that factory towering so close in front of us, that I get the balls to say something to Val.

"Val, listen. I don't know what Luke is planning, but I'm thinkin' this has gone a bit too far," I say, whispering and looking at Luke's back.

Val nods his head, still circling his hands for warmth.

"This ain't about scarin'. This feels pretty serious."

Val nods.

"I don't want to kill anybody."

Val nods.

For a few minutes, there's nothing but the sound of our feet stepping in the snow and the distant mowl of thunder and then Val stops and turns to me, looking at me with those dark brown eyes set under the black cotton mask. "You were

always a smart kid. Had your chance with school, didn't you?"

My left eye blurs half his head, making him look like he's a caricature of two people smashed together. "I guess," is all I can say, turning to Luke who's about thirty feet ahead of us.

"Had your chance. Lost it. Now you wanna back out."

I try to say something, but I notice the sharpness in his eyes and glance down at the spring knife on his belt.

"I like you Hank. You're a good kid. But some things you gotta see through to the end. Even if it means killing somebody." He lets off another clotted breath of cold air. "You understand?"

There's a silence between us and I can only think of another one of Dad's sayings as I look into Val's eyes:

In desperate times, even the devil eats flies.

Luke's voice comes in a yell. I turn my head and can see my cousin looking at us and waving his free hand for us to come.

We walk on toward the steel factory.

Boulder is babbling and crying. Using the twine from his Christmas job again, Luke ties him to an old fence post near the entrance to the steel factory. With his arms tied behind him around the thick wooden post, Boulder sits sprawled on his butt, robe open, buried in snow. The blood from his nose is frozen to his chest hairs and the mistletoe swings back and forth around his neck like a poor man's trophy of some lost merit.

"I want you to do it, cousin," Luke says. He hands me the gun and even though the ski mask hides his face, I can imagine that smile of his. The one I always saw when we were kids shooting at cars that passed by the interstate.

I hold the .38 in my hand and briefly look up at the old Cargill steel factory, its brown skeleton breathing with the wind, looking just as forlorn as any other Buffalonian structure that I can think of. It's almost alive. And maybe all the dead steel factories are alive. Maybe all those dreams of the people that came before, the dreams of my dad who sacrificed half his face to the industry, are held up in the brown steel bones like sacred marrow.

"Hey," Luke says.

I turn to my cousin and Val. They're watching and waiting and before I can catch up to the moment my hand is pointing the gun at Boulder. I'm squaring the sights over his face and pulling back the hammer, wondering if the dummy rounds or the soft yellow pellets that don't crack

glass are being readied instead of metal and gunpowder.

Boulder is pleading and crying, the bubbles of blood and mucus dripping from that fleshy bulb in his face.

"Do it," Luke says.

I can hear that long ago crack of glass, a windshield breaking from some little round metal BB.

"Do it!"

Please, please, Boulder says, but he isn't saying it. He mouths the words over and over and I just keep hearing that fucking crack of glass. I see my father seated in some power chair, still trying to talk normal with only half a face, and me, standing in front of a mirror trying to get the blood and steel chip out my eye with a tissue and some tweezers.

Hard city to survive in.

"Do it!"

I turn the gun towards my cousin.

He sticks his arms out, steps back. Val asks what I'm doing and I tell him to shut up. Just be quiet.

"Stick to the game," Luke says, and it's that word that does it. I take off my ski mask. Throw it to the white snow.

"What are you doing?" Luke says, yelling now.

"All a game, right *cousin*?"

There's that smile under his mask.

"Son, I don't know what you're thinkin', but you need to put that down." Val says, and as I look into his brown eyes I almost pray that he'll tell some stupid joke. That I'll wake up in the car two nights ago, find it was all a dream and be able to tell the guys I'm out. Tell them that I ain't that desperate to get some semblance of revenge. That I'm happy being jobless and half blind.

I point the gun at Luke, right over his face and that mischievous smile hidden under the mask, and even though Val is moving towards me from the side of my vision, the spring knife ready at his side, I can't look away from my cousin.

I pull the trigger.



ELIZABETH ARANA

Eastern European Lovers

Tonight I will lose
myself in the ringed brown
sadness under your
eyes, which is fine—we know
that individuality is for the
bourgeois. We nuzzle
bony-bridged noses and
attempt to warm the Cold
War out of our bones.

We are what happens
when West L.A.
meets East Berlin.

*You have such a Russian
face* you whisper, and I know
that's a compliment.
On 500 thread count Egyptian
cotton, we are white on white
on white, which is also fine—
where we come from, Red
is the only other color
that matters.

Afterward, we press
ourselves against the cool
windowpane, peering out over
a sprawling, wintertime Vegas. The
capitalists look curiously
more like ants than
pigs from the seventeenth
story.

We open a bottle of champagne,
'to a new life!' We drink
with purpose, and wait for the
nouveau-riche hemlock to take
effect. *'Bellagio'* we say, killing
time and any latent Socialism left
in us. *What do you think that
means?* We make
no effort to answer, we just like
the sound of it, it sounds so
important, so American.



For My Sins
ANNAMARIE LEON

Killing Jesus



RICH ANDERSON

The day I met Jesus I finished my apricot and walked outside and there was my daughter on the swings.

Daddy, Lucy called, come here.

I walked out, off the cement walkway and onto the grass. I had some bit of apricot stuck in between my molars and was trying to poke it out with my tongue and the day was hot, the hottest Sunday in weeks.

At first step the grass, the tips of the blades, was warm on my feet, but then I could feel the earth underneath, cool and dark, and still a touch damp from being sprinklered late last night.

She sat on one of the swings, her feet tapping the ground. I walked over to her, enjoying the sun and the grass. Meet my friend, she said, and she pointed to the swing next to her, to the space where someone would be if there was someone actually there.

She had imaginary friends before, though she was getting to the age where she was too old to have these sorts of friends anymore without being ridiculed at school or diagnosed with some sort of psychotic disorder.

But I guess she still had a year or two left before that. She met her first imaginary friend, Darla, when she was five. Darla was heavily, if not entirely, based on Darla Hood from *The Little Rascals*, whose *The Little Rascals: IN COLOR! Box Set* my mother gave her for her birthday that year. After the first few episodes we watched together, my daughter would spend hours talking to Darla about this and that—most of the time about direct storylines from the show. Why did Waldo do this or that and why is she, Darla, putting up with it?

Darla died, though, not long after we finished the three discs. She got a cold after visiting Alfalfa in the hospital and within a day of my daughter bringing all the blankets she could find in the house to Darla's hospital room and administering the best bedside care a five year old could,

that was it. Lucy cried and insisted we bury Darla as soon as possible. I dug a hole near the edge of the yard and nailed a couple 2x4's together for a cross, wrote "RIP Darla" with a Sharpie on the cross plank, and my daughter and I stood there for a while, looking at the hole, before she said, Bye Darla, my friend.

She had other imaginary friends. A few more died on her, as evidenced by the now four crosses marking imaginary graves near the edge of the yard. None of her imaginary friends lasted longer than a couple months. After Darla, I don't think she ever got as attached to her imaginary friends and grew tired of them more quickly. Lucy realized that the quickest, and most permanent, way to get rid of someone was to kill them, or, in her case, draft scenarios for them where death came upon them in some "natural" way, though I don't think she was fully conscious of this.

In any event, I hardly thought I should have intervened, to have a talk with her about the cruelty towards people, imaginary or not, in any of the deaths she was conjuring, or how, in the real world, you just can't get rid of people if you get in an argument or get bored with them. That is not how things work, and if they did work that way, everyone would get rid of everyone else and you and I would not be here. But that's not the role of a parent, to intervene with imaginary friends. If she were going around smashing frogs and lizards and squirrels then yes, sure, I would have talked with her about mortality and how definite and valuable life is.

But she wasn't. Imaginary is imaginary.

Hello, I said, nice to meet you. And I knelt down, with one knee on the grass, first hot then cool, next to my daughter.

And then that was when she told me.

Jesus, this is my dad. He says it's nice to finally meet you.

Jesus. Her new imaginary friend's name was Jesus. I swayed hard and almost fell over, catching myself with my

hand, and my fingers dug into the moist dirt. I tried not to look shocked; I tried not to look concerned.

I wasn't a religious man, and I even tried my best to shelter her from religions, which was getting harder with my mother coming around so much, always offering to take us to church so my daughter could go to Sunday school and meet other kids, and I could meet other single parents. But nothing put me off like someone trying to intervene, someone trying to tell me how to raise my daughter.

It's nice to meet him, Jesus, too, I said. I wanted to ask her who was talking with her about Jesus, bringing up the name so much around her, for her to appropriate the name for an imaginary friend. I looked over at the crosses marking the graves of her other imaginary friends: there they were, written in fading black marker, RIP Darla, then RIP Arthur, RIP Strega Nona, RIP Amelia Bedilia, all other books and things I read to her, and she read alone, countless times.

How did you meet Jesus? I asked, trying to sound as flat and usual as possible. But I couldn't help but squint, though perhaps more from the sun than anything else, and I could feel myself losing control of my tongue, aggressively picking at the little wedged-in bits of apricot.

Grandma brought him over and he just wanted to stay so I told him he could. She pushed herself back on the swing and leaned.

Oh, when was Grandma over? I hadn't seen her in over two weeks, though she had called a couple days prior and I had neglected to listen to the voicemail.

Earlier today.

And I don't remember what I exactly said, or yelled, it might have just been a grunt or some sort of guttural groan, but my daughter jerked her feet to the grass and stood up, still gripping the swing chains. Her eyes were wide and upset.

But you were inside and she said not to bother you and that Jesus would keep me company, she said.

It's ok, it's ok, I'm not mad at you, sweetie.

Don't be mad at Grandma, she brought Jesus over and I like him.

Ok, I won't be mad at Grandma, I told her, I just like to visit with her. I like her to come in and visit when she comes over. That's all, sweetie.

She knew I was lying. She tweaked her head to the side and sort of smiled. You're mad at Grandma, Daddy, I know. Then she kicked herself back in the swing and leaned.

It made me uncomfortable that she could recognize my

anger and the conflict I was in with my mother. But she could, though she didn't ever appear that phased by it. Ever since my wife had left, my mother felt it her obligation to help raise Lucy. She needs a mother's touch, she would say, you can't raise a little girl all by yourself.

But I didn't want her help. As a mother, she was nice enough to me, teaching me life lessons and always providing for me when I was a child. I had no complaints. My childhood was fine and, I guess, normal.

And for the first couple years of Lucy's life she was a nice enough lady, and did help baby-sit in the early years, which I was thankful for. But by the time Lucy was able to talk and understand and think, my mother would only talk to me about how church was needed in our lives and I became more and more defensive. As she's gotten older she's become more interested in mortality and more invested in religion, as I'm sure many people do as they age.

She would invite us every week to her church's Sunday service, but I would decline. I didn't have a problem with Lucy being a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist or an atheist or whatever, but I wanted her to be old enough to truly decide her own philosophy without any sort of childhood fear or guilt. I knew that at my mother's church, just from driving by and looking in the windows, there were a lot of crucifixes and paintings of gory things inside.

Jesus says you shouldn't be mad, Lucy said, and I couldn't help but smile.

Honor thy father and mother, right? I asked.

She laughed. Jesus says that's right, most the time.

I cocked my head.

How did you know that, Lucy? That's in the Old Testament somewhere, did you know that?

No, but Jesus told me.

Ok, I said, and I stood up and stretched in the sun, my toes digging into the dirt, and finally picked out the last of the apricot. I'll be right back; do you want any fruit from inside?

Jesus says he wants an orange and I'll have a plum.

I walked inside the house and went to the phone and dialed my mother. It was mid-afternoon so she was probably home from church, or just getting home. She picked up.

It's me, I said.

Yes?

What's this stopping by without calling or coming in?

I tried calling earlier but you didn't answer or call back.

But you just stopped by and didn't say hi. I paused and looked out the window and there was Lucy, on the swings, talking to Jesus. And you gave Lucy Jesus?

Yeah, I gave her Jesus. I couldn't take it any longer. You let him stay there.

But you know how I feel—just wait until she is older. Jesus loves children, and children need Jesus.

No, no. And why are you giving her Sunday school lessons? Honor thy father and mother?

I don't know what you're talking about. All I did was show up, because I saw her out there, *alone*, and she asked me who I had with me, I said Jesus, and she wanted to play with him and that was it and I had to run to church. I just drove by and saw her out there. You realize she was alone out there? Do you realize I just walked right up and talked with your daughter? Now what is that?

It was true that Lucy was left out in the yard, sometimes for a couple of hours, with my indirect supervision. My office faced the yard, and there was a waist-high fence around the property. So when I would pick her up from preschool, she'd spend the rest of the day in the yard, playing. Or on weekends, when I would try to catch up on work, she'd go out and play from time to time, and I'd be in my office working, and watching her periodically.

There wasn't enough money for daycare, and it was hard coordinating with other parents. Besides, Lucy enjoyed herself outside, coming up with adventures and friends, and usually I kept a decent eye on her. But I had been distracted by my apricots and hadn't watched her as closely as usual.

In part, though, she was right.

I couldn't do it myself—Lucy needed more—but not more in the sense of Sunday school or Bible school or whatever, rather more children her age to play with and be with. She shouldn't be in the yard alone as long, I knew. Perhaps that was why she had so many imaginary friends. That it wasn't just being too familiar with certain make-believe characters, but my own failing as a parent, to socially adjust her, and I hadn't taken the time to notice.

Yes, I know, it's my business, ok?

You need a mother for your girl, is what you need.

Ok, ok, I have to go, and hung up the phone.

I went over to the fridge, where I liked to keep my fruit as they kept there longer and, especially during the summer months, could really refresh if cold enough. One plum for Lucy and one orange for Jesus and I closed the fridge, and the coolness hit my face, and I went back out to Lucy on the

swings and the sun immediately hit me.

I handed Lucy the plum, and I could feel its coldness even after I handed it to her. She took a quick bite.

Where does Jesus want his orange?

He says to just set it on the ground right there, and she pointed. I knelt down and sat, cross-legged, and set the cold orange down where she pointed.

I thought back to what my mother had said on the phone. When I asked her about honor thy father and mother, she didn't know what I was talking about. It seemed weird for her to deny something like that, after admitting to secretly driving to my house and giving my daughter an imaginary Jesus to play with. My mother, if anything, was not a liar. She would tell you if she did something. Sometimes she was sneaky, but not a liar outright.

So Grandma didn't tell you to honor thy father and mother? Lucy looked at me and chewed the bit of plum she bit off. It's ok if she did, I said.

She really didn't tell me. It was Jesus. She took another bite of plum and a bit of juice ran down, off her lips. Then she looked over at the swing next to her and smiled, looking into the air, where Jesus would be if he were there, and she nodded and said, ok, I'll tell him, and then turned to me and said, he says it's Ephesians 6:2. Old Testament.

And then, perhaps from the relief of biting into something so cold after being in the sun for a while, Lucy jumped off the swing and ran to the opposite side of the yard and started twirling in circles, giggling, holding the plum high in the air with one hand and I knew that there was no way, if my mother did tell her about honor thy father and mother, that Lucy could remember Ephesians 6:2, specifically, and I turned my head to look at where Jesus would be, seated on the swing, if he were there.

I didn't even know what book that was in, or what context even. I knew it was Old Testament because that law seemed more direct than any of the parables attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. But who said it and why? Was it the voice of God or a prophet? I didn't know.

I tried to focus on the space between the swing chains, where Jesus' face would be. I was sitting within a couple of feet of his swing, and with the heat from the sun and the cool from the soil I was beginning to feel through my shorts, there was something off. Like I knew Jesus wasn't with my daughter, twirling around in circles, and giggling, but still there, in front of me, looking right at me.

I looked down at his orange and there were beads of

perspiration growing out of each dimple and I could hear Lucy laughing.

Please feed me my orange. It looks so cold and I've been so thirsty, it's been so long.

And I quickly shot up and there he was, sitting on the swing: Jesus.

I will do my best to describe what Jesus looked like, knowing that I'll either miss something or give the wrong impression:

He was very dark skinned, like the color and texture of a charred pine tree after a forest fire, flakey and dry, and almost scaly. His hair was long, down past his waist, and knotted, with what looked like bits of dried leaves sprinkled about. His face was blistered and his lips so dry that they looked deep fried. His eyes were a remarkable gray that cut through everything, and he was looking right at my eyes.

His clothes: he was wearing nothing but tan Bermuda shorts, the kind with cargo pockets on the side, and Teva sandals, with black Velcro, and both, the shorts and sandals, looked new.

And he was there, but he wasn't there at the same time. Sort of like I always imagined a ghost being, except more there, in reality, than I expected. I could see through him, but only a little bit. He was seated on the swing, holding onto the chains, and I could just barely make out the chain through the tops of his hands. Where he sat, on the swing seat, I could make out the blue of the seat through his shorts, but it was hard to tell. But I could definitely make out the grass, dark and green, under his feet. Through his feet.

Please, he said again, feed me the orange there.

I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't feel the grass, the heat from the sun. I must have stood there for a couple minutes, blank, just staring at him, trying to understand, and trying to gather my senses. I first thought I was seeing things, maybe from the sun being so hot and coming out so quickly from the house and the cold fridge, I could have scrambled my mind somehow. So I took some deep breaths, all the while looking right at Jesus, at his eyes, him looking straight back; he was absolutely still and emotionless.

I thought back to the drugs I took in college and how those experiences were much different, the hallucinations were clearly hallucinations, foggy and intangible and never so real. And I hadn't done drugs in years, and there would

be little to no chance at my age of a sudden psychotic break; this wasn't a psychotic break. Someone can't just go in and get some fruit and talk to their mother and go to the fridge and come out into the heat and develop psychosis.

Jesus was there. He was.

I could feel the sun again and the grass and I could hear Lucy singing. I glanced over towards her. She was now sitting on the ground, at the far corner of the yard, under the Jacaranda tree, singing a song I couldn't recognize. And I looked back and Jesus was there, sitting still.

I couldn't decide what to say, should I introduce myself? But I didn't want Lucy looking over and seeing me talking to Jesus, just in case he was fake, even though I didn't think he was. He couldn't be.

I can't move, otherwise you won't be able to see me, and I won't get that orange. Don't be scared. Please feed me some orange. He had a curled accent, and his lips hardly moved when he spoke. Please, I don't do this very often, please.

Can Lucy see you?

The orange, please, just grab it and peel it and take off a wedge for me and I'll be able to eat it, I will.

Ok.

I knelt down and grabbed the orange. It was wet from the perspiration and still cold. I dug my fingernails into the peel and it squirted. I peeled off chunks of the thick skin and dropped them to the ground. When I got to the inner peel I separated a couple of wedges into a bite and Jesus wasn't looking at my eyes anymore but the wedges.

Just put them in my mouth and I can eat them. I can't really touch them, but come close and put it in my mouth.

I took a step towards him and held the wedge out, put it closer to his mouth and then he opened his lips a bit and I put the wedge inside. He closed his lips around the wedge, but I could still see the color of the orange. He started chewing very slowly and he closed his eyes and the orange faded away from within his mouth.

Another bite, please.

I did the same thing, placing an orange wedge between his lips. I tried to see the exact point that it faded away and became part of him, but I couldn't. The wedge would just go away.

How does it work? I asked.

I could see Jesus sitting on the swings. Just sitting, almost like he was relaxing, like he was finally safe.

I don't know, he said, chewing the fruit. I can eat it, though, so I do.

He was on the swing, I thought to myself: *on* the swing. He could be touched with things and touch things—be held by things in the physical world. The sun burned and chapped his skin and lips. He could eat fruit, absorb it. He could appropriate clothes. It made me wonder if I could touch him, feel him, hold on to him. I reached out my hand to his, which was gripping the chain, and covered it, holding my hand over his. He looked up at me. He couldn't move his hand. But I could not feel his hand, his brittle skin. I let go.

Are you really Jesus?

Yes, he said, and he motioned his eyes towards the remaining orange.

Are you dead?

Yes.

I heard the phone ring inside.

Are there more people, dead people like you?

Yes, but not many, Jesus said. You should answer that.

I ran inside the house to catch the phone on the last ring before going to voicemail. I held the phone in my hand a second and looked out the window. I could see Jesus sitting on the swings. Just sitting, almost like he was relaxing, like he was finally safe.

It was my mother on the phone.

Hello, she said. Is Lucy still playing with Jesus?

I couldn't help but choke.

No mother, I'm playing with Jesus, I just fed him a fucking orange. What the fuck?

Oh he stayed still for you? I'll be right over, and she hung up the phone.

I hung up and looked back out the window. Lucy had made her way back to Jesus and was feeding him the rest of the orange. He did look a bit scary, and he looked worn, and abused, and weak. He didn't look like a messiah. I was surprised Lucy was so adjusted to him.

But I suppose it was how he was there, but not, that brought a sense of security. As well as his temperament. From what I saw he was slow and deliberate.

I went back outside, into the day, and joined Jesus and Lucy.

I don't want to answer religious questions, he said as I sat on the grass in front of him. When you sit on the grass like that it makes me think you want a parable. But I don't do

parables anymore. I don't do spirituality. He looked over to Lucy. There's one more bit there, right? Can I get it?

Lucy had been looking at the last piece of orange like she was going to eat it but she said, sure, and plopped the last piece into his mouth.

I do cold things and fruit, he laughed, spitting a spray of orange that landed on my forehead. When you've been walking and seeing things as long as I have you just want to sit and eat something cold, and see the only thing that is pure in the world, and he nodded to Lucy, who sat down next to me. The children.

I wiped the orange from my forehead and remembered my mother.

Were you with my mother? I asked.

Yes, he was, Lucy said, and rocked into me. He was, but I didn't see him at first.

Jesus smiled.

Yes, I was with her. I was at her church. I visit the churches, sometimes, to stand still and whisper things to them. And hopefully some see me and hear me because they're the ones who most need it. He closed his eyes and slowly leaned back on the swing. His head started to fade into the sky and there was nothing there, only his body, and his mangled hair from below his shoulder line.

See but he's still there daddy.

I wanted to ask him what sorts of things he would whisper into the ears of the churchgoers, but I didn't want to push him. I waited for him.

Lucy stood up and leaned in to peer into where his face had gone.

And your mother saw me, and other people in the congregation saw me, and created a stir, like it usually does.

I couldn't see his face, but could see his chest move in and out as he talked.

They gathered around me and got hold of me and took me to the roof and tied me up. For a long time. His face started reappearing, dark and singed, coming out from nowhere and Lucy took a step back and giggled. Your mother helped me escape. She brought me here.

Now my mother's constant invitations to church made more sense. It wasn't that she wanted to convert us. She wanted to literally give us Jesus, to keep him safe. Or to give to Lucy, for her to keep him safe, thinking I would refuse or neglectfully wouldn't notice her playing with a new imaginary friend, and that made me feel slighted and irritated at my mother.

But I noticed all her imaginary friends. I looked over at all the graves, in the far corner of the yard. I was there for Lucy for all of her imaginary friends. Digging holes and holding Lucy's hand and taking her sadness seriously.

Jesus saw me looking, my head turned toward the graves. He looked.

Whose graves are those?

Lucy pointed. That one is Darla's, she said, and then there is Arthur then Strenga then Amelia.

They were imaginary, I blurted, and quickly looked over to Lucy. I didn't mean to strip her of her emotions for her imaginary friends; I didn't want to mock her. It just came out. I think more for Jesus. As if to qualify the graves: they weren't graves of people like you, but of imaginary people.

Lucy's face didn't change.

I don't really miss them anymore, she said.

Jesus sighed. He was tired. His face had completely returned but his eyes weren't as crystalline as before. Now they were dull and gray.

How did they die?

Lucy described each situation. Jesus sat quietly, listening. She told of Darla's sickness, of Arthur's accident in the garden, of Strenga's old age catching up with her, and of Amelia who accidentally drank poison.

Some of those are bad ways to go, Jesus said.

He paused and I could feel the sun starting to cool, the dusk starting to fall.

Why did you pick poison for Amelia?

Lucy sat down, next to me, and rested her head on her hand. She was thinking.

I never asked Lucy that type of question and I didn't know if it was best to question a little girl about that. To accuse a child of premeditated, imaginary, murder.

Jesus had definitely had a rough time over the years. He was burned and damaged, and surely had witnessed horrible things. Wars and murder, plagues and diseases, religious institutions and governments violating human rights and dignity, most of the time in his name.

Amelia made me feel sad and I didn't want that.

I began to wonder if that question was sincere, or a result of delirium and defeat. This was Jesus, and he was not the same Jesus in the Bible. This Jesus didn't have the power of miracles, and I doubted he ever did. This Jesus didn't speak in red-lettering, in only important, profound, teachings. This Jesus was not a healer. This Jesus didn't do parables anymore, or spirituality. I wondered what his real teachings

were. This Jesus wanted to be fed oranges, and rest, and sit still.

Why did she make you sad?

Lucy dropped her head down.

She made me feel alone.

I looked over to try to see Lucy's face, but just as I did, my mother came into the yard, past the gate, and Lucy turned her head towards her. She was running and she started to scream for Jesus to get up and move, to disappear, that the church was following her.

They'll tie you up again, she yelled. You don't have much time.

My mother had a frantic seriousness in her voice that I couldn't remember ever hearing from her, but I was still focused on Lucy, and how rude it was of Jesus to ask her such a question. Rude and aggressive. Not his place.

But Jesus was unmoved and said, Lucy, what makes you feel alone?

When I know I'm by myself.

I wondered if this Jesus was now out to create more chaos in the world, by throwing congregations into fits and scaring them into doing who knows what. Was it that he was taking all of his disappointment of the world out on those congregations, out on me, and out on my daughter, and then demanding, somewhat politely, that I feed him an orange and then he would slowly try to parent, and skew, my daughter?

I jumped up, startling Lucy and my mother. I couldn't take Jesus meddling with Lucy. I didn't want Lucy to cry, and I knew she was about to.

Ok, that's enough, ok, Jesus? And just then, I heard a crowd, loud and angry, coming up through the gate at the end of the yard. They began to point towards my mother, and then they saw Jesus, on the swing.

But, Lucy, you are alone. You'll always be alone.

Get up, go, my mother shouted and she ran and pushed Jesus off the swing. He disappeared.

Jesus, don't go, Lucy cried.

The crowd came into the yard. There were men, and women, and children, all in fine dress. They yelled at my mother that they found out about her going up to the roof and untying Jesus and sneaking him out. They yelled that Jesus, if he was the real Jesus, was cast out down from God and that they knew, from God, that they had to keep him away, away from the world. That for years, they yelled, he had been whispering in their ears asking them rude and

direct things about how they lived and telling them to stop worshipping, to stop tithing, to stop counting sins, to stop being a church, to stop paying taxes, to stop collecting property, to stop owning, stop buying, and that what he was saying was evil and satanic and he probably was Satan and not Jesus. The Jesus they knew had an individual relationship with every Christian, and believed in worshipping God, and all the things that made this Christian nation great.

The crowd surrounded us and Lucy fumbled in the grass looking for Jesus, and the crowd kept yelling, but I could hear Jesus, low to the ground, talking with Lucy.

They'll try to kill me too, Lucy, just like you killed your imaginary friends. But they can't kill me again.

I'm sorry, Jesus, I'm sorry, and Lucy reached left and right, brushing away the orange peels on the grass, trying to find him. I won't get rid of any more of my friends and I won't have any more that are imaginary. I promise, Jesus, I promise.

And I don't know why, perhaps from my frustration over Jesus asking my daughter blunt and adult questions, and the anger I felt from someone meddling with how I chose to raise my child, or from the sun beginning to set, and the heat leaving my body, and the grass getting cooler, but I knew I could see Jesus, lying down, outstretched to Lucy, just beyond the swing. He was barely visible, but I knew I could make him out, and I motioned, just a bit, almost on accident, with my head to where he was, and the crowd saw me and knew. They knocked us aside, my mother fell on the ground and grabbed Lucy, and they trapped him.

We know you're here, they called out. Make this easy and stay still so we can see you.

Lucy, you're not bad for killing. There's too much killing in this world to make it bad anymore.

Stop talking, the crowd yelled. And he began to appear. His black, coarse skin and his Bermuda shorts. His sad eyes and his long knotted hair. He started to curl up, and he looked around, throwing his head about until he saw me and then he stopped and looked in my eyes, and at first I thought he was disappointed or hated me, but then there was a flash, a glow, a sparkle in his eyes and I knew he didn't care anymore what happened. It was like he was happy, or excited that he didn't care anymore: He knew that no matter what they did to him it just convinced him more: that both living and dying were imaginary, and that in a world where children killed off their own imaginary friends because they were too lonely and too little to say so, and where fathers

weren't there, and where the people who were supposed to love him and his teachings most weren't there, he'd rather be locked away, tied up somewhere, stuffed in a box and stored forever, in darkness, and in blankness. Because that would be heaven.

Grab him, the crowd yelled and Lucy and my mother screamed.

I stood up and tried to look over the backs of the people in the crowd. I saw rope and someone yelled to tie his hands, wrap the rope around his body, and tie knots around his legs and feet. The people closest to him knelt down and I heard them talking, figuring out which end to tie where, and two older men in front of me, probably ushers or deacons, were talking about how they should put him underground somewhere, that tying him up on the roof didn't work last time and if they could only bury him deep, deep so it would be too hard to dig him out without one of them noticing, for they would keep an eye on it.

And then one of them yelled, Bury him!

Someone get some shovels, the other older man yelled. And a few younger boys ran out through the gate.

I looked to Lucy and my mother. I wanted to tell them that Jesus would want to be buried. That this world was too much for him and that the best place for him would be with himself. But when they looked back at me I knew they wouldn't understand.

The sun was all the way set, and the air and grass were starting to get cold, and the boys came back with shovels.

Over there, the older men yelled, by the far side of the yard.

So we dug, for hours we dug, and the soil was very cold, colder than my apricot earlier in the day, and colder than Lucy's plum and Jesus' orange. I thought of how cold the fridge was and how nice it felt to be outside, in the heat, feeling the cool soil from underneath the hot grass. I thought that he might like it, that it would probably be pleasant, to be surrounded by such coolness and soil after being in the sun for so long.



NO
UNAUTHORIZED
VEHICLES
BEYOND
POINT

NO
PARKING
ANY TIME

