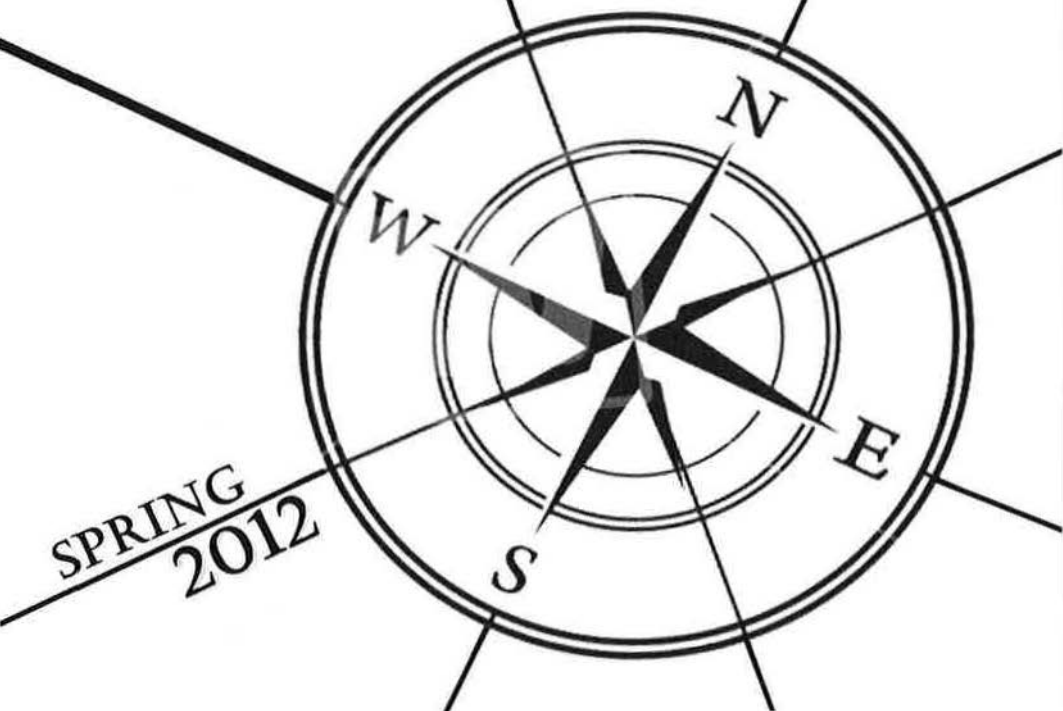


AN
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ORTHBRIDGE
REVIEW



SUBMISSIONS

The Northridge Review accepts submissions of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and art 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:

Northridge Review
Department of English
California State University Northridge
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330-8248

*Manuscripts will be recycled

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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 2012.

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 2012.

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 2012.

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EDITORS' NOTE

We worked on the Northridge Review and all we got was this lousy friendship.

Historians seem to link its earliest origins to September 2011 where we both simultaneously fawned over the work of Jonathan Franzen amidst a class reading discussion and, in turn, made eyes at each other in suspicious admiration. One thing lead to another and by the power of contemporary literature we would now both give a kidney to one another - time permitting.

The power of literature is something strange and mysterious and marvelous all at once - linking the lives of an Armenian angel and a Polish princess under the guise of co-editorship - yet its grip extends far past physical workspace. This is what makes the job of the Northridge Review staff so equally engaging and allusive. We have the chance to present a space for connectivity, between readers and writers and editors akin. Like, say, speed dating at the local banquet hall, The Northridge Review crafts a fruitful forum (both in class and on the page) for discussion on literature and the communal love we all share for it. The reward may seem simple but in an age where the Jersey coast and the cautious debunking of hoarders nationwide control water cooler gossip without fail, a space for writers to publish, to practice, to preach about their latest reads is prime real estate and we couldn't be happier to have our names attached to such a literary gem.

In short, keep writing, keep talking and keep reading.
Especially Jonathan Franzen.

Marina Mularz & Gina Srmabekian
Editors

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A Journey Through Face

ALICE HASMIK KOLANDJIAN

TRAVELING FROM THE black forest of untamed pines,
down the aging meadows of caves and inverted domes,
past the shimmering slope of dark rocks and white sand,
through the tangled canyon of crease and drought.

A transparent drop

of salt, sorrow, and salvation,
falls to soothe the blazing flames
of a smoldering heart.

A heroic quest against all odds.

Holding the remedy for pain

it releases the encapsulated surges of relief,
while wiping out the heavy tides of pain.
Black smears, a patch of water on a white shirt,
a quick flash of a smile in exhalation.

It clears the way for tomorrow's laughter.



CODY DEITZ

SEEING YOUR FACE again,
after this long year,
is like returning to a crime scene.

I broke into a poem
with a crow bar,
and a ski mask,

and stole that line almost verbatim
from Jeffrey McDaniel,
partially for its tempered edge

but mostly because there's
no better way to paint the angle
of your wrinkled brow and lazy smile

than to say I know better than
to jump off the wagon again,
head-first, burning, and eager.



A Naked Man Stood Next to Me →

MIGUEL NOH

AS I HIT the snooze button for the 6th time.

He passes the cranberry sheets

stained with pleased ribs. I need to go home now,

he says, I need to shower, I need some breakfast.

I want some scrambled eggs con chorizo, I say.

He pick up his jeans dirtied with the friction

of my inner thighs. His buckle

scraped from the teeth of my buckle,

flanks next to his curved cock

like an open lock. I need some

coffee. *I still want my scrambled eggs*, I say.

I stare at his linen shirt

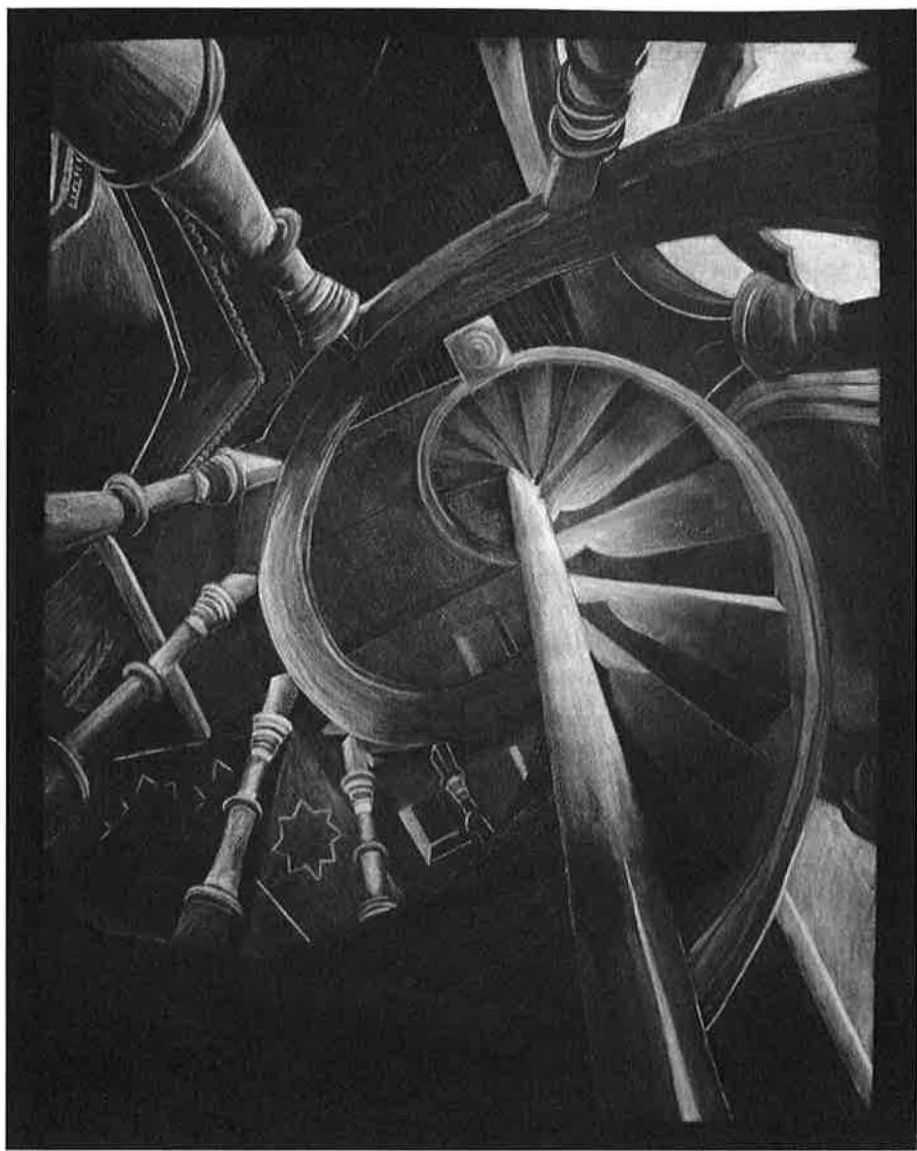
soiled with crinkles.

Where is my wallet, he says.

Where is my ring, he says.

I still want my scrambled eggs, I say.





ARIANA HOLVERSON
Spiral

The Motion of a Titan

BRIAN PALAGALLO

*A supernatural hand seemed placed in mine[...] and the nameless,
unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged,
seemed closely seated by my bedside.*

Hello—oh that silent phantom thing, I didn't write *that*. *That* was Melville. I am a firm believer that literary introductions impress. I've never even read *Moby Dick*, have no intention to either, but I hear it's good if you like whales. I've never been good at this you see, introductions that is. Whether verbal or written, they aren't really my strong suit—neither are conversations for that matter, but as the author, that is, the writer of this historical analysis you are about to read, I feel obligated to at least introduce myself, if even for a fleeting moment. ~~I need to prepare you.~~ I'm sitting here with a character, actually the character, I typed into this ~~whole mess~~ tale, who also happens to have become the narrator, the protagonist and the antagonist at some point; maybe always was... and also none of those. It's also a two-headed titan, one of those classical mythology ones, and it's a two-headed set of real smart asses—though periodically, its heads will come together to form one giant smart ass (...wow, titans really can't take jokes...). Anyway, they've (it's) been prodding at me for weeks to write this story down, maybe months now—I can't be too sure of these things; ok, it's saying months—with a very large sickle, incessantly I might add, right into a guilt-shaped bruise created from my desire to get up and go watch something incredibly useless on television or to go outside and look at the stars

for a bit longer or maybe just stare at a blank wall for a bit. Oh for the love of— I'm being ~~told~~ reminded to start ~~my~~ its story now (you'd think with all of those arms, hands and fingers reaching about it'd be able to write its own damn tale by now)... Ok, Ok...

I think I'll begin with Kurt Vonnegut, who wrote something about the Universe, which is always a nice place to begin when dealing with incessant titans:

I was on par with the Creator of the Universe[...] I shrunk the Universe to a ball exactly one light-year in diameter. I had it explode. I had it disperse itself again. Ask me a question, any question. How old is the Universe? It is one half-second old, but the half-second has lasted one quintillion years so far. Who created it? Nobody created it. It has always been here.

The room is now suddenly filled with the thunderous echo of multiple levels of laughter. My titan says this world wasn't created quite like that but that Vonnegut is closer to capturing that moment than most and pretty hilarious at it too, at times. It says it (I'm assuming that second "it" is the "universe" here) was created with the flip of a gigantic set of deity playing cards (not our mortal deities, I must inform you, but the *real* ones, my titan says). It tells me it was like poker, with more gas and science I imagine, but a catastrophic fold by some other titan some other place, nonetheless—sort of like the legend of a left-handed Billy the Kid, created with the flip of a photo negative and then someone realized the photo was printed backwards and his tale became less infamously right-handed. My titan says creation is easy like that, it's just the destruction that gets difficult, to decipher. I respond here with "maybe not for titans though" and he shrugs—but I'll say this for us mortals, creation and destruction sure make looking at the myriads of stars through the trees of an autumn forest a little bit more syntactically dense—and difficult to do when you've got a sickle poking you in your back, right between the shoulder blades.

Ouch, ok, enough jabbing already. I'm starting already.





I. Three-Ring

*This is the way the world ends
 This is the way the world ends
 This is the way the world ends
 Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Before I introduce myself collectively, let *us* just clarify that I didn't say that, the *bang / whimper* thing stated above—that was Eliot, though I'm sure any reasonable person would already know that, but I will say this, *siht si eht dne. Yllaer s'ti eht gninnigeb. I teb siht dluow eb retteb devres ni esrever, repmihw repmihw*—and, chaos creates who? (Author note: This question isn't directed to you, reader, but please, feel free to answer) BANG! Did *we* fool you? I imagine a few buttons have flown off the sweater vest of Eliot's respective legend by now—BANG! There goes one more.

OK, that's enough musing over Eliot. Hello. "Hello." *Hello*. Once upon a time, a very long time ago if you like, a couple of physics professors named Haken and Haken-Krell created an experiment that transposed the text forms of the words "chaos" and "order;" chaos into order into chaos and back again. *Say it with me*. It was an exercise in perception.

Literally, they diagramed something like this:

Chaos
 Chæos
 Crçfer
 Order

Crçfer. There isn't much more information I, or him, or *us*, can tell you on the subject of perception—that is, the cognitive link between an individual historical experience and the present individual ability to interrupt signs the way they are interrupted, as Haken and Haken-Krell described it. Though, perception sounds absolutely fascinating when written out like that—like an essay that appeared in one of your monthly science journals on the subject of "Defining the Reciprocity of Individual Relationships". In it, subjects were introduced to social variables of

differing degrees: General small-talk (the weather, sports, personal medical issues), a work environment such as an office space or meeting room (the weather, sports, reporting and meeting scheduling issues), bar flirtations (the weather, sports, meeting scheduling issues), the grocery store (the weather, sports, personal medical issues), heated arguments (sports), car sales (sports), divorces (the weather, personal medical issues), car accidents (reporting issues) and funerals (the weather). In each instance the social variable, referred to as the “commitment motion,” was perceived according to the reactions of both participants, defined as Subject A and B, and cross-referenced with a historical analysis of each subject’s background. It was a fascinating way to say subject A always wants to inhabit (*fuck*) subject B, or maybe B always wants to inhabit (*fuck*) A or maybe the *significance of a good conversation on weather will always be more than a concern about a lack of or an abundance of rain clouds. How’s the weather by you?* (Author note: Sorry about that... that question was probably directed right at you this time). It was a fascinating way to say Haken and Haken-Krell’s commitment motion was the beginning of the breaking of mythology-perceptions, again. *We’ve come undone again everyone. My eyes shine like the suns and the moons of every planet when this happens. Each of my sets of wings flutter, make the stars shimmer in their swoop. Horns sprout from my head—are numerous wormholes to other distances. But please, continue.*

The following quote is taken from “Defining the Reciprocity of Individual Relationships” and describes individual experience as a union-continuum compounded upon other union-continuums of our commitment motion activities:

The commitment motion is what establishes the social dynamic between any Subject A and any Subject B. More specifically, human social relationships create what we can consider whole numbers or, more accurately, whole individuals, when placed in social quandaries of varying personal engagements. Wherein any non-social relationship can be perceived as *the nothingness of* $(-A) \times (B)$ or $(A) \times (-B) = (-AB)$; if any social engagement is thus represented as y , and Subject A initiates the commitment motion, then $A/y \times y/B = 1$; or transversely, $B/y \times y/A = 1$. *When committed properly to the occasion, Me/chaos \times order/”Me” = all of us. Fantastic, isn’t it? An old lady in a bonnet and a young gal with a feather just became*





*one sexy three-eyed commitment motion no matter how you perceive it—her gaze
looking back through you—like that catchy song:*

*You don't look different, but you have changed
I'm looking through you, you're not the same*

Paul was never dead you know, but it was fun to miss him miss him, dead man.

So much space to tell this tale in. *Too much cosmos, and without heavens or hells we
can inhabit nothing and everything. Don't believe me? Not this trick again—watch, this is
only perceived [] space.*

[movementiseasy]

II. The Way Rats Become a Star

It's not something that generally happens with mirrors, but once, a rodent came across a discarded dish of star-reflected water and gazed at it for hours as the last bit of sun fell beyond the rows of dark colored hills in the distance. The twinkle in his eye had never been there before and while he gazed at this new found joy nightly, he slowly starved himself to death. There weren't any flowers in his wake, but something was created in the way his eyes reflected back the starry night.
Whimper.

Once upon a time I like to think that levers and switches in the shape of mortal turntables knew this motion too. Not in patterns of A and B but in patterns of *oot oot*. *This new turntable knew this too, too turn—turn—turntables knew this too. We've only just begun—oot oot—*

If you get that, then there's really not much more I care to say on the subject of rats.

"Well, I've got a story for you"—*that you'll actually tell?*

"Yes."

Let me jump to the next story.

"I'm the patient one. Let me."

Fine.

“This starved rat is also like that old actress Georgia Star in many ways, who infamously played the femme fatale in many of Haken Krell’s (Author note: Not Haken Krell the physics professor, Haken Krell the director) film noir tales. In one scene from an early work, Ms. Star wants nothing more than to leave some vintage black and white Hollywood social scene and so she nervously puts a little sporty convertible into reverse and immediately backs into a large wooden-paneled garage door—not her garage door, but his garage door, the intrepid detective, or maybe it was the jealous husband; the party *rats* scattered when the wooden entrance *or exit* caved in, too. Georgia Star broke it down. Subject B then brilliantly plays hysterical under the illumination of stage lights and painted night backdrop, if not truly heartbroken by her character’s ordeal. *A real method actor that one.* Her sobs forming rhythmic beats as she surrendered to the travesty of the situation in wet, gasping, cinematic breaths. As she calms herself a mysterious hand reaches into the frame and offers to light her cigarette, those doe eyes eating the surrounding light like two smears of Vaseline. This brief bout of hysteria was not over a trivial matter such as a little convertible or an old garage door, or a little convertible breaking down an old garage door, but over a poorly devised murder plot. Subject A’s murder. Or, perhaps it’s exactly like the motion of a backwards body of water, a slow and shimmering belly dance, without dancing, by Subject B for Subject A. Or, like the reversal of waves breaking, or the breaking of the waves wherein Subject B watches Subject A by the water and falls in love as the tide mimics a heartbeat. Water moving backwards can be so profound, if not more beautiful than a belly dance—it would still make that ssshhhhhhss noise as your meditative stare faded into the glimmer of its snaky-mystic charms.”

I would imagine it like that too, but more like *plundered siren calls when the tails match the curtains—but water won’t really move backwards for you, even between moments of chaos and order, but it is the thought of a static rhythm that’s nice—*

“Because frankly Scarlet, Rhett very well might have given a damn had we done this whole commitment motion in reverse the first time. Even a trivial thing such as a mortal ‘doomsday clock’ has been known to fall back or spring forward a minute or two in time, or how an earthquake can shift the momentum of any planet enough to skew its perceptive reality a couple of milliseconds *did you feel that one?* Or even how eggs and meat are either going to kill you or save you depending





on the scientist and the date. This film of Georgia Star's was entombed in headlines because it was the last one she made before overdosing on a bottle of tiny white pills. The cops found her in bed, looking beautiful and tragic, like a doe hit by the light of an oncoming vehicle. Tape was being rewound in an old player at some point, perhaps the movie itself by fans and tragedy collectors, or the detectives' tape recorder that was used while they investigated the death scene. Tape was starting over and is repeating its order for those not yet comfortable with the chaos of death. Please be kind as you take in all of this *chaos and order*. If only Reverse was more than the commitment motion of an automobile's scripted gears, because Georgia Star may have been able to refrain from hysterical action. It was her greatest performance though."

Nebula 1, Nebula 2, Nebula 3. I don't want us to seem rude, but my motion of finger pointing here is towards the vastness of vast places. Beautiful really—rats, missed one—*Nebula 4.* BANG! *Cronus, my dearly departed friend. Have they pieced you back together again? (...and we all know you're like Paul—didn't die. But you never existed either. Life's a bitch)* "Poor Cronus, now fabled into eating cold stars, or rats." We can explain this of course—but first—

III. An Intermission

Are you getting any of this? (Author note: This one is directed to you, and only you.) All the recent stuff about water, I mean.

"I also mean." *We mean.*

After all, this planet, or that planet over there *or that one or that one or that one* are covered mostly in water. Your mortal bodies are composed mostly of water. Without water, you die. Mostly ("If the rat by that dish had known enough to drink the reflection of stars he may have had more starry filled nights—or less, if he drank too much"). Dehydration is like drowning to some degree. Slow, and both involve water. One can assume that in the absence of water you appreciate it more than you will probably ever appreciate it again and the same can then also be said about the excess of water as you fight to escape it. You will be sure to appreciate it more than you ever have—let me ask you, have you ever stood at the shores of one of these great planetary oceans and appreciated the power of the tide pulling

at your ankles? It's an impressive show of excess. *You should try a mercury dip.*

"Desire wins over need every time because there's not a drop to drink and you always stay thirsty for more." The Earth was made like that—life started and then it stopped. It started again and was stopped again, cold in its tracks. Then started again. *Movement is liquid. I am drinking us when I wrap my necks into one ropey twist of scales and feathers. Bull face and snake face are one face. Two mouths one, are making words from a backdrop of stagnant light. Desire isn't here. Need isn't here, only movement. The giant anticipation of a breath from an ocean of galaxies. Millions of prickly pears. The ripeness is all that matters in the cycle of fruit.* (Author note: Shakespeare talked about the ripeness of life in *Lear*. He also talked about suicide.)

IV. Undone

Look, if it's not an image of water that hooks you into this dynamic existence, perhaps a glimpse of beautiful chaos will—you can at least give me that one, I'll bet every knotted horn on my scaly head. It's a set of wind chimes on an old porch before the storm. A poet like Yeats was committed to the motion of chaos and order, but poetry has always had subtle charms in either motions' defense. I promise you though, this story isn't about a Second Coming. There is definitely a gyre and the center isn't held together any more now as it wasn't then, when Yeats wrote about it in his crumbling stony tower. When the real gyre collapsed everyone found little purple flowers inside, a spring of them—you may again, too. All of them desiring to grow, though some would inevitably die. A bestial humanity had sprung, has sprung, is sprung. A wrecked sports car in the belly of a garage made whole again. Tragic actress/film x film/you = your hand lighting her cigarette years later, perhaps many years later.

Rewind.

Once upon some time, some place, maybe in a wooden-paneled garage, someone or some—probably some people, you know how those mortal things go—decided that the mythology you were reading had it all wrong. *I'd eat this story if it wasn't amusing me to tell it againXXXX* (Sorry, *we* took a small bite...). It seems there was too much unwavering chaos in the way literary things were packaged. There were too many fallacies and blatant contradictions, blanket contradictions that





went unanswered—*logic had already left the building ladies and gentlemen; Elvis was the living dead.* It just sort of happened then, during a series of academic discussions, conferences and summits that followed, in which A and B were made one—and the reverse of one, and nothing at the same time. That is, everything that could be described as legend, folklore, fable, allegory, myth and fiction. More than just those too—everything, *even water*—just kidding, we covered that already and determined that water running backwards is impossible for you, though aesthetically pleasing.

“Reverse mythology became an innate way of understanding the world.”

New texts, old texts, were read and re-read and then removed and shelved somewhere vast or simply erased—at least those perceived as internally collapsible by their static forward nature. *What can I say, you remembered to forget the Alamo. Whimper.* It was then that everything remaining was discussed, made the subject of contemporary or not so contemporary popular discourse, then desirably discontented, reconceived, reconstructed and finally rewritten—still is to some extent, too. *Like right now for example, oot oot.*

“Everything was illuminated again, though from within and not from without. Stories were made dishes of water—Say did my curly horn get you in the eye again?” Yes, but I’m used to it.

My voices are the center of origin.

My voices are the center of origin. My voices are the center of origin. My voices are the center of origin. My voices are the center of origin. My voices are the center of origin. My origins are the center of voice.

I should pause here. Origin is a rough word choice. That sounds like a real titan-headed thing to say if you ask me *and please ask me, please ask me, ask me* because you seem agitated that this small tale is trying to pass itself off as a credible analysis of an historical account when in fact it is a credible analysis of an historical account.

“Mouthful.”

Perhaps, but think about chaos and order. I am willing to demonstrate—have demonstrated—that any history is only a culmination of individual experiences

cross referenced with a network of social activities and because of this we can make them perceivable through the order they are arranged in *or not arranged in*. For example, King Arthur at a Round Table in the company of B equals one table of knights or chivalry or a table only or Excalibur or legend or—plague rats. It also equals nothing when the sword is put back in the stone.

You can also think of it like this: Aspects of religion are no longer insecure, for the most part—religious text can change but your nature won't, like that whole backwards water thing. Fables don't remind any of you to be less than greedy *and why should they?* The fox knows he's not getting the grapes so he won't waste time trying—well that last portion about wasting time was all for your benefit. You can't really think of literary characters in terms of wasting time; time is not wasted on such little sweet trivial matters like grapes and not getting grapes. Or on the rabbit, who woke up from a nap to run back to a tie with the tortoise. The Three Little Pigs are just at home, separated, and they know wolves are always out there as they did before and they did after. When this first happened, clichés dissolved quickly *into tiny stars, reflecting a glimmer of hope into the bleeding heart of literature*. Everyone wanted to go back to being farm boys and farm girls instead of heroes. Superman even went a step further—he went back home and wasn't super. These situations were shelved just as quickly once their worth was weighed, but the sitcom is now deeply profound: Happy struggle happy is order chaos order or chaos order chaos depending upon your subjectivity to happiness. The cycle can't be undone. Look, it's not falling from grace or anything, its beautiful flight and landing, the reverse too—the take-off into thousands of twilight soaked horizons by a quintillion starry-winged angels. Additionally, you'd be amazed at the number of heroines that have come back to life and still remain alive when the tale ends. *Heroines are brought in through the womb of a new fabled resurrection and have saturated themselves into the essence of the myths they inhibit, and it's textually stimulating—like Medusa and that sexy laugh of hers, makes her snakes jiggle*. But I'm not saying this because I was there for the conception of this literary flowering—because I wasn't there, I was *Here* (Author note: "Here" can't be explained in terms we can understand). Distance. I'm really just a voice in your head now, or a set of mildly voiced sounds at a whisper's pitch. Probably one of many. Not unique like your mortal conscience thing, but perhaps similar to the voice you use when you animate a child's toy, or maybe it's the generic accent





you use when imitating the mortal who came into that store while you were there and made an ass out of their mortal selves by making obnoxious and irrelevant mortal statements at an irrelevant mortal time of mortal day. Irrelevance. Maybe that's why this happened in the first place. If you're not careful you become irrelevant (Author note: I really hope this one's not directed to you, reader. If it turns out the titan was directing this comment towards you, my apologies in advance). Yep, one night you go to bed relevant and the next morning you wake up irrelevant, castrated by your own son and overthrown, erased (Author note: ???). Just like that, no smoke, no mirrors. Just like Cronus and Zeus falling into an abyss of galaxy and star matter (Author note: Oh, ok, gods). Ruled by titans again, not ruled by titans again. Oh, and by the way, Georgia is the name of a cat "so that line I gave you about her being an actress and backing into the garage door" was bullshit. It never happened, she's a cat—probably on her back licking under her tail right about now.

I did know someone who backed into a garage door once. Actually twice. Really. They broke a whole lot of things down that year and without any rhythm to the process whatsoever. It's easy to take out a garage when you don't know what you're doing. In retrospect, maybe it was a cat that did it. *Yawn. Surely some revelation is at hand.*

The important thing to remember here is *nothing*. *For it's greater than the gods one titan, more evil than your devil, the poor have it and the rich don't need it and if you eat it, you'll die.* That's quite an honor for a concept, but that answer is also *everything* too. Remember that and you'll be fine. Ignore the relevance or maybe don't, what do I care? I'm just some voice you're using to mimic the asshole in the store when you tell your friends about your day. You want to know a real truth? Try telling *this* backwards. All of *this*. Start with the stars, the moon, the twilight of early evening. Or maybe start simpler *more mortal-er perhaps*. Wake up. Relive that dinner. Was it good? No? Skip to lunch. Better? You've got breakfast and then off to bed for a good night's sleep. Anything stand out? Perhaps the way in which the middle offers up a double dose of something, anything? I like to consider the middle a form of Molecular Cubism. Geometry meets the common routine of a thirty-armed-and-winged Billy Pilgrim. Did I mention Vonnegut really had it right to some extent, with his mountain ranges I mean, but then it always goes (or went)

and time becomes better served as a simple shape again. A cone maybe. A gyre. Simpler texts will indicate it as a sphere. A reel of film perhaps.

“You know that scene from the Woody Allen film *Sleeper*? The part where he clumsily disembowels one of those large, pre-computer-literate movie computers and black reams of recording tape pool hilariously around him—that’s what you mortals did to myth, but why am I telling you this again?”

You played snake charmer to large reams of time. The clock is venomous. It could have killed Cleopatra just as easily. You run those things backwards and it’s a countdown, and really, who cares about the end? The means have always been so much more justified and interesting. ChaosCrfer.

V. The Greek Myth

I should backtrack first (Author note: The Oxford American Dictionary defines “backtrack” as both “going back the same way one came” and “to back down from an argument or policy.” ~~I think both definitions work in this case~~ That earlier part about Zeus falling into an abyss, or whatever it was that was said, was just sort of mentioned in passing. Zeus isn’t so much irrelevant as he is, well, different now. Maybe nicer. Maybe mortal. For one, that box he gave Pandora captured all the terrible things humankind created; here’s the important part: Hope is still in the box, but it sits there alongside war, famine, poverty, suffering and all the other calamity party favors. Pandora is the keeper of the natural world but *we’re* not quite sure it matters which world that is anymore.

Also:

When he climbed down from the mountain, Zeus grew less potent. It was subtle at first. Then not so subtle. He was not even potent enough to handle a real lady like Leda, in fact she only laughs at the soft bend of his swan neck after he finishes inside her, prematurely—almost upon entry really. Subject B then disengages herself from Subject A by the water and they return home, you see.

Zeus’s grandfather remains. Unmistakably so. We play cards together.

Zeus is eventually brought to his father Cronus and eaten—*his mother turns him in if you were wondering how that happened*—and Cronus is enveloped by grandpa Uranus *he’s an asshole to play cards with*, but neither of these events are really





important, they are irrelevant to the individual reciprocity of Uranus. Mortal child stuff really. Here's a section from an essay on the subject of Greek Myth taken from a survey panel of middle school students who presented on the topic of "Rats, Stars and Everything in Between: The Common Truth in Greek Mythology" at the 9th Annual "Middle School Mythology Conference":

[...]because Zeus and his father Cronus are subject to the inevitable rise of Uranus, their struggle within the mythological paradigm is not a power effort but the diminishing effect of a contextual fallacy and therefore negates any sense of presence they may have in terms of relevance or stability. We see this in their fall from power when analyzing their fates *before the switch* and the fact that they are eventually destroyed by their parents. *They fall apart. Chaos. Who needs to fight for power or grapes or think about fighting for power or getting grapes?* Though Uranus, having been representative of the sky *before* remains the sky after he has had his testicles reattached by his son Cronus. A reverse castration and symbol of his immaculate rising; *his commitment motion*. The reciprocity of Uranus' masculinity is a true motion in the current of mythology. Either way you look at it. *Uranus/Chaos x Order/Uranus = 1 as his children gather back into him and he rises to power over nature.*

This was predominantly the Greek Creation Myth for a time until later experts would argue that Uranus, being parentless, would still fall into Chaos at the very end *and start* of everything:

The following is an excerpt taken from "Chaos: The End of Uranus' Order" presented by Professor S. Oahc at the 34th Annual Mythology and Folklore Conference Association, or MiFChAos:

Before Uranus, there was chaos.

Chaos is the *cosmos*. *The orange flare of a galaxy rising and spinning through my worldly gaze.*

When I said there was true individual reciprocity in the story of Uranus, I lied. In fact, the only true reciprocity that exists in Greek mythology is the back and

forth movement between chaos and order during various discourse on the topic, though later studies have once again looked at the story of Uranus in a new light. Since Uranus was essentially an immaculate creation he is both of the stars and the sky before and after the creation of the universe. His omnipotent testicles are attached by his son before his son is consumed. *He takes life inside himself and becomes everything.* An additional note should be made here about the act of testicle reattachment, which has since called for a reevaluation of the Freudian school of analyses. *Your mothers and fathers are all in love with you. Your mothers and fathers all want to be you, eat you; destroy you. Reverse ejaculation, but with more science and stars.* This is like the Bible in many ways.

VI. The Good Book Revisited

*Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n*

“Ah, Milton. Is Paradise *ever* Found or Lost at this point?” The Bible incessantly reminds everyone to believe that the world is counting down to one enormous Creation scenario. *Place a set of giant testicles on that winged demon and let him fly back into the sky like a wild comet, up into the heavens already. Or just let him lightly suspend himself.* It’s unavoidable really. Everyone likes to have an opinion—mortals stand on streets picketing “The Birth of the world is coming,” always citing the last portion of the Bible that talks about the genesis of *everything* into nothing; blackness I guess, but what does that mean? Blackness is something. New beginnings again, anyway. Universal lunch perhaps. The Bible, you see, came out of a horrible Apocalypse scenario—less stars and light, or gas and science (Author note: And playing cards for that matter) but way more brimstone and flying horses carrying horrible monstrosities. It’s as if the Earth threw up from a bad case of disorderly acid reflux and created the carnal pleasures of sin and one-sided chaos *and commitment motions.* The culminating factor in the Beginning, was there to actually be a Genesis—every film in the last 2,002 mortal years or so says you are definitely there—will be Eve’s





eventual gift of knowledge to Satan, the transaction disguised as one shiny red, ovary-shaped apple drug deal, creating a series of monumental shifts—most noteworthy was (~~Author note: I had originally typed “will be” not “was”~~) the rise of Satan from ruler of Hell into the army of ~~titans~~ God. While the last seven days of Earth fade into darkness, a steady light will shine from the sky and illuminate everything like a comet tail propelling itself into the galaxy to exist forever. It’s religion’s biggest fear.

Things are revealed though, even now. Did you catch that — *There are stars here that eat other stars and once they are consumed they shine brighter—multiply within and without themselves.* Like Uranus, or Greek Creationism or *nothing that was everything at one time.* There is even reciprocity in the story of Christ, because even after the reversal of all of this mythology *before the reversal of myth is not important* Birth, Death, Birth remains Birth, Death, Birth. “Buddhists have always believed in the process of reincarnation, as have Hindus and Buddhists and Hindus.” Enlightenment, Nirvana or Heaven are interstitial, merely the vague centers of a perpetual circle of existence. *There’s a bumper sticker for the ~~moral~~ mortal motorist.*

The same can then also be said about *Subject A*, himself is a Heaven made Hell, a Hell made Heaven is himself—or maybe it’s that the Devil is a system of innate perfect patterning like Uranus or Christ or sitcoms. It is what it is, you know. By the very nature of living evil or evil living *he’s 666 of a guy.* Devil worship can then be said to be a belief in truth *with less science and more black clothing.* For example, if a mortal plays that Slayer vinyl copy of *Hell Awaits* backwards they’ll hear music—just fucking with you, that’s not really true or *funny.* The part about Slayer’s album playing music in reverse I mean. There’s no Hell to await either, only stars and cosmos and stars and cosmos and stars and cosmos and comets undergoing spatial mitosis but still situated perfectly in the horizon like the twilight line between ocean and sky. Let’s say the twilight horizon by an old sea house where the porch wind chimes have started to play music in the dance of the ocean currents.

Devil live on, no evil lived.

And here *we* will end because *this is the end, but really it’s the beginning.* I bet this would be better served back to front, start to finish, tail to heads. You follow? Would we

collapse inward or sprout again? “Luckily, a racecar on the track has always mattered—will always matter. A constant image is the only thing you have now to rely on *though maybe it’s only text that matters*. And you thought NASCAR wasn’t saying anything, only it is saying *everything*. The ebb and flow of the tides is slowing, no quickening, maybe just stopped or backwards.”

(Author note: There was this lady in line in front of me today, or was it—anyway, she asked for a new drink because they put too much caramel flavoring in her damn caramel macchiato. And of course I was already running late for my lunch meeting. What an asshole she was, you know? *Excuse me, excuse me? My macchiato needs to be remade, hello?* No I don’t feel sorry for her—we’re all heading to Genesis in a hand basket someday anyway, right? Might as well let chaos sort ’em all out first. Say, you ever see that film with that actress Georgia Star? I heard she just died...)

Break it down. All of it: Chaos, Order. Take me for example—I’m a *titan*, we’re all a titan who creates chaos.

OK well that’s about all we can tell you. Better luck next time as you say. Watch out as I reach into the next mountainous cluster of stars and swing a large sickle into everything Goodbye goodbye goodbye. A couple of physics directors named Haken-Krell and Haken once created a text experiment that transposed the words chaos and order; chaos into order into chaos and back ~~again~~ *—the whale dies in the end and is brought back to XXXX*

~~Whimper~~



I Am

MIGUEL NOH

THE HUBBA HUBBA prrr, hubba hubba prr of the pervert's gaze,
a doughnut with out a hole
shadows draping across your neckline
a tree making noise when no one is around,
I am
the wicked taste of trouble that is never satisfied
the oh-la-la
the inside
of your inside,
I am
the hush after the dinner mint
the patience you've been through
the pleasure of bodies wrapping
of tongues touching
and bellies scratching,
I am
an interstitial space between your toes
the broken cerebellum leaking honey,
and the blending adjective
I am
the phallic noun
the putrid verb
and the obscene vowel
getting ready to disturb.



Writer's Block

MAYBE I'VE GOT it backwards.

There are times when there is no right thing to say,
no right way to say it (if there was anything to say).

Actions speak louder than end-rhymes.
Everyone's moved on, hallelujah
amen, & etc.

Tell me you've never been tempted to quit mid-sentence,
that a shot of whiskey and some sleep didn't sound
better than trying to be profound.

I think of all the times
I can't bring myself to talk about
and blame myself first and you second,
even when there's no one to blame, really.

When that doesn't help, I just laugh
(and laugh) because — fuck it.

What is it you want to hear?
Who is it you want me to be?

That isn't fair, I know.
Let's just start at the middle:

we used to love in media res
(though we just called it fate).
The plot wasn't complicated.



JOSE MORALES

Maybe too straight-ahead,
the beginning sort of slow;
but the dialogue was fun.
Somewhere along the way,
the narrative got lost.
The mise-en-scène
stopped making sense,
the aesthetics fell apart,
the third act missing altogether.
Who wouldn't walk out on this mess?

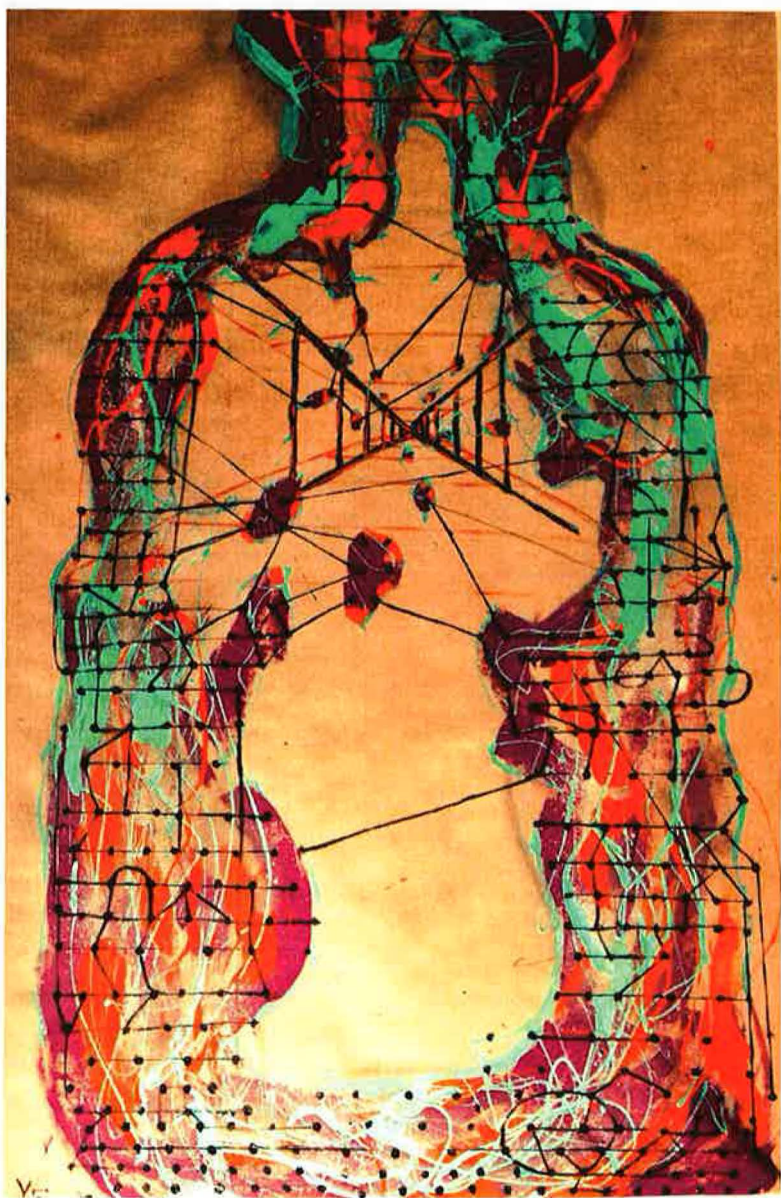
Everyone loves flashbacks
(except me), especially you.

That's not what I meant,
but things aren't worth fixing
if they're not worth understanding.

One blank page, one lonely hour,
a dozen similes, a hundred
sentence fragments,
too many metaphors,
most of all too many
unresolved questions.

All rough draft and no revision.





YANA GORDIN
Inner Walk

Waiting

RICHARD MCGINIS



They were the first generation that went to college, and there was nothing else they could have done other than move to New York, the New York of the 1950s with Charlie Parker and the Village Gate, and the Beats, and a Communist Party that actually got votes. Train rides for a nickel and jobs for anyone who wanted to work.

They came from the steel towns, from the hearty European stock that had settled in the lands where the cold winds blew, where the ground froze and snow started to fly at Thanksgiving, where there was always snow at Christmas, just like on greeting cards but not really, bitter and frozen and dirty and hard.

Their fathers, men of that era before television, were deceptively learned men, men who read books, men who knew how to build things, men who had brawled on the picket lines with axe handles against other men with guns to get weekends, and the eight hour workday, and their fair share of the wealth they produced. Men who wore the dignity of physical labor on leathery faces and scarred hands. Who knew how to weld and form steel. Those men who in their youth had ridden rail cars out to Saskatchewan to work the wheat harvest, sending money home to mother so she could feed the little ones. Who had gone out into the Adirondack Woods to live as hunters and fishermen so that they were not just another mouth to feed around the dinner table. The type of men who, when the factories fell on hard times, all took the same cuts in the hours they worked so that everyone would have enough to eat, everyone got enough to keep body and soul together. They were the men who came

together to fix leaky roofs, who drank and played poker in the summer time, formed volunteer fire departments and stopped what we now call domestic violence with the administration of the firm peer pressure of a sound beating. Who filled cellar freezers with deer and pheasant and duck, dressed up like Santa Claus at Christmas time and made the children sing for their presents. Their children who later went on to college at the public universities they had fought for, and then to New York City to live lives of culture and grace. The children who bundled their own babies into the way-way-backs of Volkswagen Beetles and drove the nine hours home for Christmas, to sit at the dining room table, and eat ham and sweet potatoes and home-canned green beans while arguing politics.

And then bundled their babies back into the way-way backs and drove back to New York City, to the world of Charlie Parker and the Village Gate and the Beats while the men waved good-bye from the porches of their tidy little houses. Went back to New York, back to their dinner parties, and book clubs, and local stage productions of Moliere and Pinter and O'Casey, back to live in the vibrant City, where their babies grew up and went to school with all the other children from all the other people, some rich, some poor, to learn and to grow and to compete to see who was better at what, as if that was going to determine at last who wound up where. With the self-assurance that they had won out, that their generation was at last the one who had crossed that great divide in class structure and become somehow better. But who had lost the thread of it, who didn't know anymore how to build things, didn't understand the way that owners lie to workers, didn't ever pause to consider the lessons that had been learned by those who had gone before them, as if that was from some other time and place that no longer existed, from a different era altogether. And who were therefore doomed to learn again from scratch the things that those men, their grandfathers and great-uncles and second cousins, had learned the hard way. Were doomed to repeat the same old storyline again, but this time without the benefit of the narrative that their own history would provide, if only they had know it and not been so willing to cast it aside. But it had been removed by the generation who had gone off to college and in the hastiness of youthful exuberance had left all that behind, thinking that it was no longer needed, that it was a dark chapter which would never be repeated. And the fact of their forgetting made it plain that it would have to be learned all over again, harder this time and at an even higher cost.





And the now-grown children of the children of these men trembled in their hearts because they knew that they were not up to it, were not capable of living up to the lost heritage of those men with their leathery faces and scarred hands, who lived in the era before television when men read books. And these children tried to tell themselves that those men had been wrong all along, so that they would not have to reckon with the hard truth of what had been lost, of the legacy that was theirs to live up to. Their new masters thoughtfully removed these truths from them, replacing them with a carefully crafted narrative that better suited their own designs, so that they could enslave the children once more. They chained them with the hardest chain they could invent, a chain made from these children's own minds, a chain that could never be broken except in communion with the ghosts of those old men, who looked on, waiting, always waiting. Waiting for the suffering to reach its limit. Waiting for the children to wake up from this dream, this dream that began when their own children had gone to New York City, to the land of the Village Gate and Charlie Parker, and the Beats.



STEPHANIE PECINA
Mod Background

The Widow

STEVEN BOCKOVER



Tom was a blade of grass, observing much. He rested in the decaying front lawn of a widow's home and observed the sadness of a shell occupied by an empty heart. Firmly rooted to the ground, he understood the widow's pain. He used to observe the happiness between the widow, pre-widowing incident, and her husband as she'd see him off to work in the driveway. And no, those weren't tears in Tom's eyes as he watched the lovers embrace. It was morning dew, glistening all over his thin frame, because the deceased, pre-death, left for work each day super early in the morning. Like around four o'clock. Like on the day of his death.

The widow didn't kiss him extra hard or long that day, nor had they fought the night before (they may have. Tom can't hear that well through walls). It was a routine goodbye, one with little flair because many others would come in the future, so why spend any extra time on it?

In the days after that goodbye, Tom tried to figure out the pieces to the mystery. He would consult his own betrothed, a nice slice of Dwarf Fescue named Abitha, as to where the deceased, a priori la mort, may have gone. Abitha had no answers and little care. She was too frustrated with why Tom didn't spend enough time on his own wife. *Why should he have to spend so much time worrying about someone else?* she would ask herself. After all, who consoled Tom when there was that citywide water shortage? When the neighborhood dog-walker would carry her dozen leashed beasts and leave behind their refuse? It was she, Abitha, and not the lady. And Tom did grow frantic then, as frantic as one can get when stuck in the ground. Abitha would bend to him, nuzzling his neck, and whisper how everything would be all right. Tom would only

look toward the front door, and await sight of the lady in charge of the lawn, for the water that nourished Tom (and his beloved, Abitha) would come only after the lady exited the house and set the lawn sprinkler in the center of the lawn.

For several days, random in beginning and grueling to endure, the routine of Tom's (and Abitha's) life fell into disarray. Tom decided the first thing to go wrong was that the man did not return in his car in the evening. This didn't foreshadow their deaths, however. They had been watered that day, so they would be fine for a while. But when Tom (and Abitha) awoke the next morning, he was dry and stiff under the hot sun, already high in the sky. They had not awoken to the man leaving for work because he had not come home. Nor had they woken to being watered because they weren't. Shy of the water shortage of years past, he (and Abitha) had never gone without water for more than a day. Still, Abitha assured Tom that everything would be alright, as she nuzzled his neck and held his lithe body twisted close to her own. Tom heard her reassure him, distant like a birdsong, but all he could see was the front door, tall and imposing, and hope that the lady would soon emerge to water him.

Tom knew doom when he saw it, and it came after three days without water. Patches of the front lawn, distant clusters of grass whose gossip took minutes to hear, were yellowing. Everyone's roots were strong and would heal quick with water—if it would come. For days Tom had stared at the front door, waiting for it to open, and when it finally did that day he squealed with delight. The lady emerged from the home, speaking on a phone in hushed tones, looking worn. She walked toward the hose with the lawn sprinkler attached, but didn't stop at the sprinkler. She stopped at the end of the driveway, and wept as an engine roared behind Tom's back, a huge one like he'd never heard before. Abitha clung close to Tom then, as Tom turned to see the noise's origin, a gigantic truck with a mangled sedan on its back. The truck stopped in front of the house, and the lady dropped the phone and stood deathly still. She cried madly as the truck shook its back and shed the sedan, each of its windows broken, onto the street. After the giant truck left, the widow floated to and fell on the broken car, despite the shards of metal erect like deadly barbs, and cried for hours. When she ran out of tears she fell away from the car and went inside the house. Abitha said "Oh shit," and Tom about died from seeing his lady's despair.

A week without water passed, and most of the lawn had perished. The patches of yellow turned to brown. Hope was scarce, but not for Tom. Though parched in



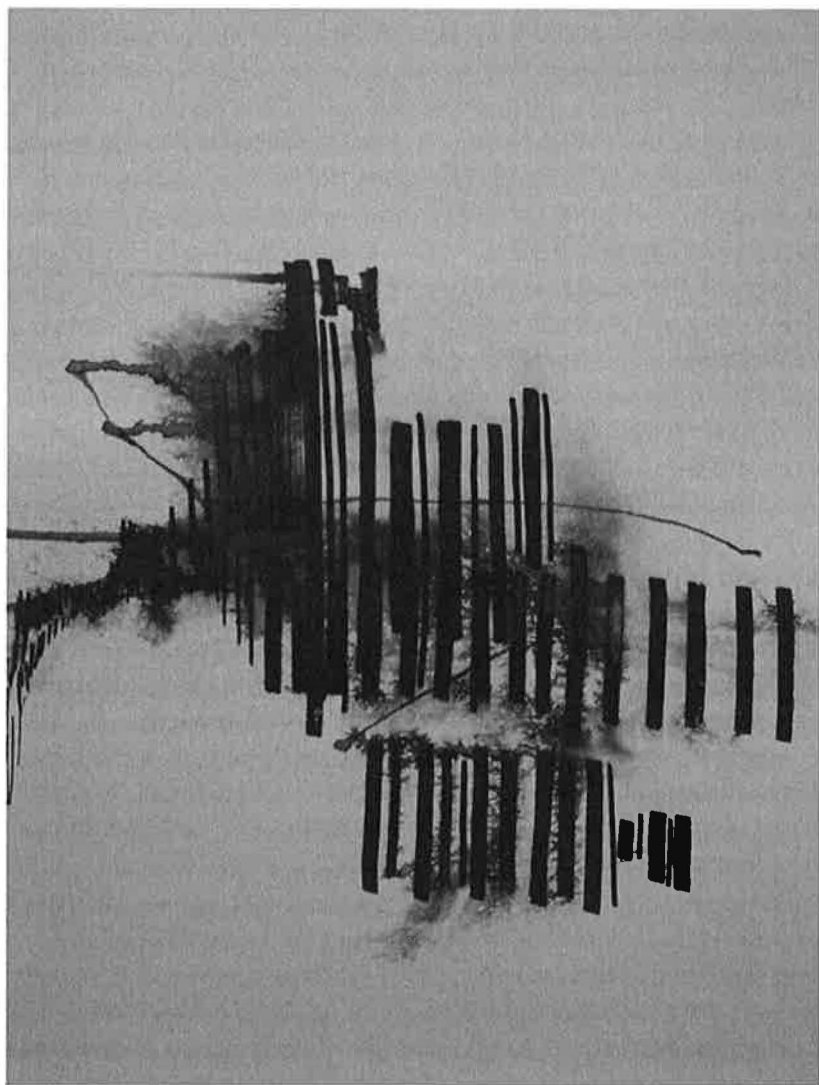


a terrible suburban desert, which days ago was a thriving idyllic rainforest, Tom had to go on. Even as everything died around him, and the wreckage that spelled his life's climax cast long shadows on him in the wee hours of the morning, Tom went on.

On the fifteenth night of the New Drought, as Tom called his current crisis, he slept coolly through his sunburn until a glow like headlights blared into his rest. Tom looked up and saw the man who widowed his lady, glowing at the edge of the lawn amidst the dead blades. The man looked behind him, at his old car, and felt at himself with unsure hands. He looked at the house, the exterior unchanged for his absence, and choked on a tear. When he gazed toward his feet he saw Tom, crisp and jaundiced, and apologized. Tom didn't know what to say, so he didn't, and the man went on. "I didn't want to leave. Do you have a wife? Do you know what that's like?" Tom nodded, because he did, but no longer. Abitha passed away yesterday. "I wish I could tell her something," the man said, but he left instead, a glow walking down the street.

The next morning, Tom felt weak. His meditations could not maintain the strength he used up all night, as he pondered what to do with the time he knew was running out. He thought about the man, a figure of streetlit fog in the night. And then the front door opened, creaking of fresh rust like a cell unopened in years. His lady stood for a moment, peering into the bright day in a clean suit. She put on sunglasses to hide her tears, Tom saw, and couldn't stand to see her suffer any longer. He cursed himself for his roots and, ashamed, began tugging at them, squealing madly until his fibers ripped. The pain exhilarated him. Tom smirked, yanked and stretched, and with a final jerk pulled himself free. He laid atop the newly dead of his kind, brown and brittle. With no arms to propel him, Tom wormed his way atop their bodies, catching the wind when he could, crowd surfing all the way to the widow. He stared hard at her polished heels, seeing in them his gaunt reflection. The wind caught his belly. Tom heard chanting as he was carried atop one of her heels, where he looked up into her eyes, which saw him as an individual stranger for the first time, and with a lasting wheezy breath Tom said "Live."

The widow shook her shoe of the blade of grass and went on her way.



BRITTANY CROWTHER

Untitled

Chest Plate

Inspired by Anne Carson's Nox

ARTHUR KAYZAKIAN

I WONDER WHAT the smell of nothing is.

The smell of autopsy.

I wonder if the cold incision apologizes
before cutting for the empty space.

When my grandfather died, he took
with him the wrinkles, the frowns.

Someone replaced him with a smile.

A careful artifact, an icon. I touched
the platter where his heart used to be.

They did a great job on his body.

I wonder what the smell of creation is.

The smell of finish.

I wonder if his black suit felt obliged
to rest with him underneath our walking.

Is he even there? They made it seem.

I thanked the priest for his sending away.

That is all, to thank, say sorry. I heard
someone say his hands are cold. I wonder
if those were his hands.

I wonder what the smell of melancholy is.

The smell of salt water.

I wonder if tears are part of a relic
where we taste the past.

And I remember thinking of the face
he was given when I walked out of church.





ESAU MARQUEZ
Mystery #2

Roses in Her Eyes

JENNIFER HUTCHISON



Mary's right eye fell out one night as she sat there tapping out little bursts of words from her laptop. A liquid-y plop, and it was free, sliding down the keyboard leaving a trail of t's and g's across the bright screen until finally reaching the space bar. She'd never had that happen before. She panicked. It wasn't a vocal panicking; She just shook, tremors running from her fingers, branching out through her arms and down to her toes, staring with her mouth, wide open, before she could even think. She plucked the offending orb from its resting place between the v and b key, pinning the slimy thing between her thumb and finger. Gross. After a few squelching seconds of trying to shove the thing back in with her hand, she started grinding her palm into her cheekbones until they left an angry red blotch where skin had rubbed skin. The damned thing kept sliding out. It wasn't hurting or bleeding. It was like the eye had never existed. Turning and touching it gave her no clue as to what had caused the initial rejection, except the new information that eyes were squishy disgusting things that left a funny salty smell blossoming across her fingers. Not to mention they didn't stay wet and mucus-y for long. She popped the eye into a glass of water by her bed. Weren't you always supposed to keep severed limbs on ice for reattachment? Would it work with eyes?

The next day she left home, a pirate patch she had found from an old Halloween costume affixed over her empty, irritated eye socket. It wasn't bleeding. Was that a good sign? It was just a puckered, angry hole. Her boss yelled at her, *not appropriate work wear* and since she was so set on dressing like a dime store pirate, then she could

spend the rest of the day pretending she really was one. *At home.*

So she did her errands, not horribly put off by her sudden day off. Work had this effect on her. Didn't it on everyone? Maybe it was because it was called 'Work.' All day long, decisions to be made on designs or layouts, asking, *Was this font too large? Were these thumbnails too small?* It was enough to drive her mad. She went grocery shopping and ended up, instead of bread and milk, with some seeds from a lady sitting in the sunshine outside the grocery store. The little old lady wearing a green raincoat and tan and green pruning gloves promised her posies for sure from the packet. Pretty pink posies that would grow anywhere she planted them. Not just posies, but roses, orchids and marigolds too. The idea was comforting; she wished she could fill her eye socket with flowers so something could fill that void. She could fill jars with seeds, all in a row, and watch her garden grow with her rose eye.

"It's called thyroid ophthalmopathy" Her roommate clicked, flipping through search engine after search engine. "Graves' ophthalmopathy. Says it might be because of a tumor."

A pause. "You mean like cancer?"

"Sure." Click. "Eye cancer. Orbital something." Click, click, click.

"But it doesn't hurt. I feel fine other than the fact I can't see the right side of my nose." She sat on his bed, her feet tapping out a beat against his knee. The eye sat in a jar across the room. "It can't be cancer, right? What am I supposed to do if it is?"

"It doesn't have to hurt; Sometimes you can't feel these things. My grandfather didn't feel a thing until the day he died. Bam. Just fell over one afternoon after he was done watching Bonanza. Dead, just like that." He hit his hand down on the bed, a soft thud wrinkling the comforter. She smoothed it over. "Didn't even know he had pancreatic cancer. Turned everything black, fried his insides. You know, the works."

"That's horrible, Josh."

"Yeah but that's life. You're born, you eat, you fuck, and then you get cancer and die"

He twisted his head to look at her over his black framed glasses. Thick things





that magnified his dark brown eyes.

“Remind me to call you next time I need to remember why we’re still friends.”

“It’s only cause you’re using me for my superior Googling skills. Also I make a mean pot of mac ‘n’ cheese.” He grinned, his lips twisting in that familiar, blood-thumping way before grabbing one of her feet to tickle.

“And I know all your weaknesses, kid.”

She twisted her feet out of his grip, tucking them underneath her.

“I’m really worried about this, Josh. Why are you joking around? This seems serious.”

“I’m just trying to cheer you up. I am worried. Honest. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle....well we could stick one in yours. Eyes don’t just fall out for no reason. You probably should go see a doctor. Or go to the emergency room.”

“I’m not going to the emergency room. I don’t even like taking Tylenol.”

“You took Tylenol last week you little hypocrite”

“Yeah, that was different. I had a headache. Check the medical website again... maybe I can figure this out without spending money on some doctor who won’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“So you won’t go see a doctor; you won’t go to the emergency room and you won’t take Tylenol even though I know you’ve done all three before. Just go. You don’t want to fall over dead cause you’re too stubborn to do something about it. Plus what if your other eye falls out?”

Her right pinkie finger fell off while she was cleaning the dishes from dinner. Plop! She looked down into the glass jar to see a finger already floating, as if put there like some sick gag. Surprise flared up, taking all of her willpower to stop from hyperventilating. What did this mean? Once again with this finger, there was no pain and while the nub on her left hand was a little tender and red, there wasn’t any blood, at least until she rubbed the tip, picking at it until it did bleed. Just a bit. Then it did hurt. She picked at it until the blood kept coming, then plunged it back into the dishwasher, unsure why she had even done that. After wrapping two Band Aids around the nub where the pinkie had been, Mary dried the jar containing the Vienna sausage-sized digit and put it next to the other jar with her eye. Keep them separate; keep the finger germs from mixing in with eye germs. Right?

This time she decided to freeze the jars, placing them carefully on the top rack. Just to be on the safe side, maybe it was better. This worked out just fine, at least until she couldn't stop thinking about the eye in all of that ice right next to her ice cream and frozen peas. Josh didn't like it either, opening the fridge door to see a blue eye staring at him *was just plain creepy and derailed his appetite*. Out the jars came and back to her bookshelf. It only seemed natural that they should go there.

The next day she walked down to the library, pulling book after book full of glossy pictures of dead, decaying flesh and awful, open, oozing wounds. A man she didn't know smiled at her, his eyes huge and framed with clear lenses, giving off the impression that these glasses had simply grown from his ears, a natural extension of his green eyes. He helped her reach a book way up high and asked for her name. She lied and told him "Grace", blushing past her roots.

Mary called out of work that day as well as the day when the next finger fell off. She called out again when the thumb fell off. At this rate she figured she'd be fingerless in two weeks, toeless in a month. Then what? Would she lose her ears? Her nose? Would her picture start to resemble those in the books from the library with the red raw holes? Would her leg begin to resemble the picture of the man from Africa from page 42, whose leg resembled a charred turkey leg, thick and juicy, oozing yellow gunk, the ankle and foot blackened, tendons thin and stretched like an Egyptian mummy? Would her face start to twist and elongate while her nose and cheeks caved in like the pictures of the lepers of another medical text?

She kept each detached appendage in its own separate jar, lining them up on her bookshelf like some strange scientific display, in homage to early 19th century medicine. Purchased and borrowed Biology and Anatomy books littered the floor, red ink scribbled in the margins and stacked up in the corner. Josh kicked over a pile coming in to return something he'd borrowed, not knowing she was there, sitting in a corner. His long legs sent the heavy books skittering across the mess. She held her tongue, helping him set the room back to some semblance of order, hands brushing finger-missing hands as she smiled. He pulled his hand back. The next day she knocked on his now closed door. No answer.





She stopped going out when she had to, and took to wearing a pair of grey and tan pruning gloves almost nonstop. They were stiff enough that she hoped no one would be able to guess that she was losing digits. The pirate patch was replaced with a forest green medical eye patch bought for \$1.99 from the drug store. This was worn in addition to an overly large pair of sunglasses she had picked up for \$7.99. With her disguise in place, Mary figured she'd be able to keep this up for a while. Work kept calling, *her vacation days were almost up, soon she'd be into her sick days, would she please come in?* She ignored them.

The library was now out of anatomy books on leprosy and necrosis. The stranger was there again, reading in the same brown chair. She watched him through the shelves, wondering how he'd feel about the missing parts. Would he hide in his room, afraid to meet her eye? Remembering the seeds, she added a stack of gardening books with bright white flowers and step by step photos. Maybe she'd plant the seeds in pots all along her room. Next to the jars. Brighten up her last few days. Fill her life with flowers of every kind.

Josh kept to himself; his door now always shut. He had stopped walking into her room unannounced and had taken to spending his nights somewhere else. Said her jars gave him nightmares, he didn't like it when she aired out her eye hole. It had grown itchy; she had to air it out and itch it at night. Placing her finger inside that puckered hole was weird, halfway wet, halfway dry; her eyelid had closed shut over the hole some time ago, sucked into permanence. Her eyelashes had fallen out too. Sometimes she felt like Josh was staring at her from the doorframe, like she was going to drop dead any second, but when she looked up, she only caught the back of his head passing down the hall.

Another toe fell off. Mary started to wonder if any of her appendages would be spared. If other small parts like kneecaps and nipples would stay fixed to her skin. She started to think the end was coming. She thought of Josh and his smile. How it stretched and puffed out his cheeks and crinkled his eyes. Her flower pots proved fruitless. Nothing was growing. True, only a few seeds had been pulled from the bottom of her purse, but they should have worked. She started digging her

remaining fingers and nubs into the dark dirt, feeling around for some sort of indicator. The books told her not to do this, she ignored them. She wanted to feel the growing seed.

“Do you like me Josh?” It came out suddenly, pushed by necessity when she cornered him by the door.

“Sure, you’re fine. You never complain when I bring girls home and you keep the fridge stocked.” He kept his eyes down and tried to move around her. To scurry back into his room.

“That’s not what I meant. Not what I meant at all.”

She decided to unplug her phone, so work wouldn’t be able to reach her, to cash out her bank accounts and buy a coffin, which now stood against a wall in her bedroom, ready. Morbid, right? The medicine books were piled up in a corner, untouched now. None of them had the right answers. Josh came home late, shutting all the doors behind him and she listened as his footsteps came closer, boot heels on wood, until they disappeared from her hearing. If only she could send him some sign that she was still here, still alive. Why couldn’t she be like the girls he brought home Saturday nights? Tall, chesty things with long hair and tan legs always coming and going.

Hours passed. She heard his computer shut down, the fan falling silent. An owl outside her own window hooted, making her skin jump. Without questioning or thinking, she opened her door, staring at his. Her feet carried her forward and she opened his door.

He was sleeping on his back, one arm covering his eyes, the other flung out away and across the mattress, so she took the easiest route and straddled him, wanting to surprise him. At first he didn’t respond, shifting and mumbling. She could feel everything underneath but there was nothing. She kissed him awake, enjoying that hot wet feel of soft lips on even softer lips. Her hands went into his brown hair, so unlike her own blonde mess in both feel and weight. Then everything went wrong. She could feel it slipping away at first, pull by pull as Josh awoke, surprised, his excitement growing. It was like stretching out gum from your mouth, each pull stretching and stretching. And then snap! The gum comes





completely away, only jagged traces and thin strings left behind. When she pulled away for air, something large, heavy and slimy pulled out of her mouth, still stuck and wiggling between his lips. At first the thought hit her like laughing gas at the dentist's office. He had sucked her tongue clear out of her mouth. A giggle surfaced past her lips, a sound intended at birth to be fun, but giving way to a gurgle. A sickening, thick flat gurgle. His eyes flew open, spitting the tongue out onto his bed, and he jumped back, kicking her away when he realized what had been twitching inside his mouth.

Mary went to the library again. She was down a big toe in addition to the two fingers, thumb and eye, turning her walk into a pigeon-toed creep down the street. The same man from before greeted her and she smiled, muted and miserable. He rubbed her shoulder and talked about a book he was reading. A book on religion and God. She checked out one on gardening instead.

Her left hand was now just a stump, a fingerless fist, forcing her to walk now instead of drive. The rain came down in heavy bursts, disfiguring the world. She pulled off her gloves gingerly, stiffened with the wetness, while waiting under an awning, digging around in her purse, feeling through the remainders of spilled seeds, M&Ms and lint. Withdrawing her hand and placing the key between her lips, she shook her poor, nubby hand once to dislodge the dry mix before pulling her gloves back on.

Josh left. Moved out while she was shaking seeds out of her hand's crevices. He didn't have much, just his computer, clothes and his mattress. She unlocked the door and found a simple lined note, stuck to the fridge, scrawled quickly with tight, cramped writing, *I found a new place, good luck, get well*. As if she had been contagious. As if she was going to get better. Mary tried to tell herself it wasn't because of the kiss and the tongue. That he needed a bigger place, he could afford to live without a roommate now. Sitting in the middle of his blank room, although he hadn't had much, still felt horribly empty. Mary finally figured out at 2:40 am that everything she kept telling herself was simply bullshit. Josh paid less than her, often skipping a month here and there. She had never complained. Josh didn't work; he said he was working on his novel, a detective story involving murder, government

corruption and some dame with long gams. He played her video games and ate her food. She had never once asked him to chip in for groceries; he had never once offered. He had it pretty sweet, living in her second bedroom and she had never once fought with him over how unbalanced the situation was. She should have made him pay for more.

Odd that he would leave now, now that she was finally accepting everything was falling off; maybe this was some sort of new cancer, the incurable kind that took first fingers and toes and then finally the heart. It started small, didn't everything? Within weeks, she wouldn't even recognize her own face, would be stuck in bed, sleeping all day. Dying. If she had gone to the doctors, words like *eternity* and *imminent* would surface. She wouldn't be able to get rid of those words. They'd continue beating at her skull until everything dried up and ended.

She spent the day after Josh left sucking seeds out of her nubs while listening to the rain. The tongue was put into a slightly larger jar and placed after the thumb. Only one seed came out, she wondered if the rest were in Josh's hair. Had he showered them out already?

Seven fingers, four toes, and an ear later Mary found herself sprawled across her bed. Naked with flowers circling their way up her forearms and down the side of her face, intertwining with her hair. Pink posies from her fingers and a white rose where her eye had been. They had started growing, as promised. The little green shoots had been unnoticeable at first, slowly crawling out of crevices and cracks. When they started to bud, she had taken scissors and pruned them, carefully, oh so carefully, snipping as close to her skin as she dared, for a few days, not sure how else she could handle this new spin on events. She continually pulled them out, freaking out more and more as the shoots began to multiply. They only grew back thicker, stronger, more resistant to her tweezers and scissors. One morning she woke to find they had grown over night and had blossomed. Flowers spilling out where fingers had been. Brilliant white and pink and red. Dark red. So she kept them, staring in the mirror as each blossom unfolded, wrapping their way around her head and arms.

The stranger lay next to her, bare back moving slowly as air rolled in and out



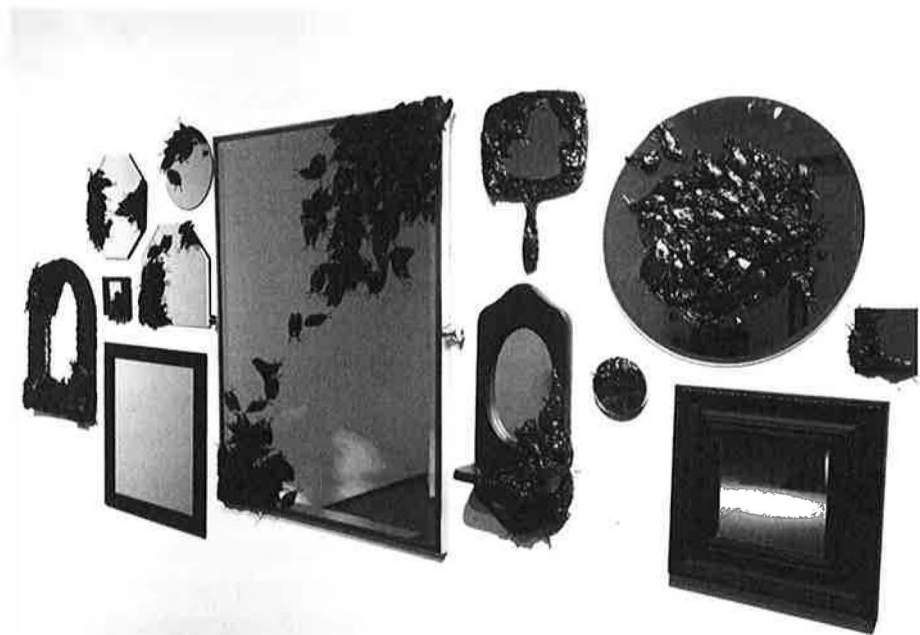


of his nostrils and lungs. He had smelled of whiskey and his eyes had stared at her across the reading section. Staring and not letting go. She had propositioned him. Written on half of an index card with a stub of a pencil. At first he had looked around, like it was a joke, that this young blonde woman in the yellow gloves and huge sunglasses would be asking him via passing notes; he had simply thought the flowers showing at the tops of her gloves and glasses were decoration. *How pretty, how unique, let's go back to my place.* She could almost taste the whiskey rolling off him. They went to hers.

Instead of rejection, he had caressed each petal, sending shivers down her spine. *Flower girl.* He had dug around, parting each stalk with a soft touch, looking at each root sprouting from each nub on her hands, at the white rose in her eye that was in full bloom, the posies covering and melding in with her hair. There was no mute horror in his blue eyes, just utter unadulterated curiosity. *How did this happen? You have roses in your eye.* As if he wanted to undo her and find out how she had become a human plant box. He met her eyes every time she looked up and she could make out the horizontal crease between his eyebrows, what her mom had called the I want line. The attention was more intoxicating than his breath. Mary felt her heart constricting and releasing every second he touched her. Her fingers mimicked his eagerly, feeling chest, shoulders, hair, every detail of him.

He continued to run his palms over her skin, singing off-key, *I had a lover, her name was Grace, she found me down in a lonely place.* His arms clenched and unclenched over the flowers. Mary stretched, mute now that the tongue had been replaced with a pink and white orchid, damp and wilted with the hot moisture of her mouth. He wouldn't kiss her, as much as she wanted him to, to fill her up with his hot intoxicated breath, inflating her lungs and letting her new tongue bath in the warm air of another. Instead he had her open her mouth as he felt the smooth pink labellum, his fingers running up and down each part. All night he had caressed that yellow stalk in the middle of her mouth and told her she was lovely.

Across from their heads, each one of the old digits sat in their watery graves, all lined up in a straight row.



My Ab-Roller Seems Sad

LISA SANOINO

WAS IT WRONG of me
to take it, take it
away from the others

should I have
taken its sister, the
Thigh Master for company

alone in the
corner it sits, so alone
so uninvolved

to compound the
situation is the
humiliation

of gray and pink
socks draped carelessly
over the foam handrails

along with an old
National Enquirer
opened to a spaceship crash

and Hostess Snowballs
teetering on top of a
can of Diet Dr. Pepper

oh, what have I done
what, what have I
done



Pretzel



KARLEE JOHNSON

Salt should not be that white. The sea does not make anything that blinding. It doesn't make anything that granulated. Nothing should dissolve like this white. Its coarseness did not wash ashore this way. Nor should any pretzel be allowed to be this big. Its doughy gold is offensive in this way. It says that I am American.

Sam likes them big. To Sam, pretzels taste like pinwheels and fireworks and baseball and empty black and white streets of Germany. Sam values the lives he has left. He sent one to Deutschland. Sam knows they could have conquered the world with pretzels. "Meow," says Sam.

We eat together, the dough squeaking against our clean teeth. (I clean his—and mine). I am not worried about Europe. If Napoleon still exists, he is covered with fur.

There was a calm that came in embers. In embers and swollen bellies and bare feet and broken glass and broken toes and freezing snow and abandoned streets and aging dust. Sam leaned against his tin, spread his embers and purred.

Sam, the tiny urn of Napoleonic appetite, now just plush with a longer tail. The compressed work of a conqueror in a ball of fluff rolling in dough.

He will not sleep in my bed. Yeast stains the sheets.

Carousel

KRYSTA WHITEMORE



Forthy-nine horses, a lion, a tiger, deer, and two chariots lay sprawled out across the floor of a warehouse just outside of Gloucester, Mass. The aging, wooden animals looked like they had been through a rock tumbler, having undergone years of palming, tugging, pulling, and swinging prior to their abandonment. A pile of dust-covered brass poles were propped in the corner, covered with the fingerprints of the last person to move them. The chariots, carved with flying ribbons and flora, leaned back to back in the center of the floor and invited a precarious respite. One whole corner of the warehouse was littered with mirrors of varying sizes and beams encrusted with gray light bulbs and peeling gold trim. A Wurlitzer stood apart from everything. Nestled near the far wall, it was covered with torn, blue moving blankets like a heart waiting for a body. It would take a monumental amount of care and polish to resuscitate the old novelty; it would take a team of people to tag, package and ship each piece down to Boston, and to change the landscape of a person's life.

I.

It was just after 8am and Jamie Connelly was heading north on the Red Line from Braintree. He had shimmied forward to the edge of his seat to face a kid of no more than three or four. The kid's mother was standing with one hand gripping a pole near the doors of the train; her other hand was absently stroking her son's

shoulder, who was sitting by her side. She was facing a friend and both ladies seemed to be telling each other the same story, charging through it with a mutual zeal. Jamie laced his fingers and leaned across the aisle toward the boy as if concealing a riddle behind his hands.

“How do you know it’s Saturday?” he asked.

The kid looked up at his mom and back at the stranger skeptically, taking in Jamie’s bulky frame, clothed in navy pants and a matching button down shirt. Kids often mistook Jaime for a cop. Adults often mistook him period.

Jamie worked the overnight shift as a security guard at the South Shore Hospital and was heading in the direction of home, or rather the place where he slept. It was a 12x12 studio in the North End. He had a bed, a closet, a small refrigerator, and an old, portable TV, all of which had been given to him. It would have been a turn-off if he ever brought a girl over (which he never did), especially because the bathroom in his building was communal. Jamie considered his place more “fort” than “home,” but if a superior ever asked he made sure to call it “an apartment on Hanover.” People always had good memories of Hanover Street.

“Look,” Jamie said to the boy who still hadn’t made a move to respond to the question. He knelt down on one knee, getting low so the boy could see. He hooked his right elbow around the center pole of the train for stability and made an L-shape with the thumb and forefinger of each hand. Then he joined the two as if making a picture frame and invited the kid to peer through it with a nod of his head. The boy inched his shoulder out from under his mother’s caresses and leaned forward, one hand still clinging to his seat to keep from losing his balance on the rocking train.

“Legs?” the boy asked, looking through the frame.

Jamie shook his head, egging the boy to continue.

“Knees?... Newspapers?...” suggested the boy, looking back at Jamie for confirmation.

“Nah, those are there everyday, kid. C’mon, what are you wearin’?”

The boy looked down at his own pants and his mother looked down in concern. Looking again through Jamie’s frame with renewed confidence, the boy smiled. “Shoes?” Jamie looked up to meet the penetrating stare of the boy’s mother. He smiled up at her, but it couldn’t diffuse her distaste for him. She jerked the boy





back up on his seat and Jamie rose to a standing position, turning his back on her. He gazed down the center of the train at the rows of legs and feet, all swaying in unison, all jeans and sneakers. *A picture perfect Saturday.* He could feel the woman staring at the back of his head and he couldn't resist turning to her.

"Listen, I had a kid once," said Jamie. The woman's distaste quickly turned into a scowl. Jamie turned back around and started walking again. He shouldn't have said that to a stranger – especially a *girl*, but was true. He even had the overpriced crib to prove it. His ex was a real piece of work and he thought of her bitterly as he made his way toward the front of the car, then onto the next, fighting momentum, floating as if going nowhere.

At the next stop, Jamie watched the trio disembark and walk across the platform, the boy making a picture frame with his fingers. *Jamie Connelly*, such an asshole he thought, an uncertain fact, but a predictable one nonetheless. He observed the crowd of people on the outbound platform reading the Metro, leaning in to look down the tracks. Jamie loved watching people watch. Can you hate a place and still find joy in it, he wondered? He hated it for the same reasons people move south: their old home begins to irritate their bones. But they had to love it somehow - for the photos, he figured, the nostalgia, because it belonged to someone's memory and it made them happy there. How could he ever leave this town? Home, Jamie knew, was a real place in your veins, but you never got to see it. That's the tragedy. People take holiday pictures from their front porches, thinking it's there, but they'd get a lot closer by throwing the damn family portrait in the fireplace and smelling the air of it on their evening walk.

It was early October and already the mornings were frosting over. Jamie hoped the kid wasn't stuck outside on the platform for too long; he hoped that they hadn't left on account of him. Outside, the uniform leaves of the trees were starting to break away from one another in rebellious reds and golds. The bright blue sky was so reliable in the fall. Jamie watched a plane in the distance descending across the window of the train, passing over Dorchester Bay and Southie on its way to Logan. He wondered if it was coming or going. The plane's trip was cut short by the rising barrier of a brick wall along the tracks. It rapidly grew up and over the train car window with a rumble and merged into darkness.

Jamie was exhausted. He leaned his head against the glass, looking back at his

own reflection under the fluorescent lights of the train and tried to imagine what normal people did on their weekends. His neighborhood was full of the sound of dishes and babies crying, sometimes an argument. When he was little, he used to look forward to seeing the beam of light from his dad's car draw a path across the living room wall. When his girlfriend used to come home, the lights never came inside, but he could hear the sound of her engine slowing as soon as it left the street. He could never fully hate her, thought Jamie, anxious for his stop. He just hated colliding with the future. He wanted to be in bed forgetting, but he wasn't heading back to his place – not today. He was going to a job interview.

II.

Jamie checked his watch hand as he entered a lackluster office building on Summer Street. The time read 8:50am and the mere act of acknowledging it felt foreign. He never spent a lot of time running around the city at this stark morning hour and he didn't own a watch for the same reason his ex-girlfriend didn't own a scale. This, however, was Jamie's first job interview in 13 years and for a cheap confidence boost he had purchased a Swatch knock-off from a street vendor near Downtown Crossing. The plastic band pulled at the hair on his wrist and made his skin sweat.

The linoleum in the lobby of the building was a dirty ivory color and peeling in the corners. Whoever managed the property had mentally discarded it years ago. The walls behind the reception desk were covered with faux wood panels and their stagnant appearance comforted Jamie. He was a dedicated employee of the hospital and had no plans of leaving his current position. In fact, there was a 10th anniversary plaque in the employee kitchen with his framed picture on it. He didn't even need to look at it to feel vaguely proud every time he refilled his coffee cup – an act that he repeated several times throughout the night. But Jamie liked the idea of working some extra hours during the daylight; he liked the idea of work in general.

The thin strips of mirror in the elevator didn't offer passengers a fair impression. On his way up to the third floor, Jamie stepped back to review himself. What he saw was a large man, much larger than he remembered, broken into vertical





pieces. The door binged and he smiled at one of the mirrors to check his teeth before stepping out into the hall.

* * *

Unit 302 was labeled simply with a Post-it that read, “Gary Singer’s Office.” Jamie took a deep breath. His knuckles were two inches away from a knock when he heard a voice from the other end of the hall.

“Why do you want to work with kids?”

Jamie’s hand hung in the air as he turned around to see a sinewy, middle-aged man with a handlebar mustache hovering in the doorway to the men’s room.

“Wait inside and see if you can come up with an answer for me,” said the man as he disappeared.

Following the man’s command, Jamie let himself into a room that was smaller than his own apartment. Every inch of the 8x8-foot office was taken up; Gary’s desk and wall space was covered with stacks of papers, held down by a snow globe from the 1989 Texas State Fair and a picture of Gary with his family in matching Christmas sweaters. There was a desk, a shelf, and a chair facing his desk in which Jamie assumed he would be interviewed. Leaning against the length of the wall were at least ten framed posters of fairs and extravaganzas. Behind Gary’s desk hung a plaque that read “For Five Years of Excellent Service, Boston Parks and Recreation, Chief Carousel Operator.”

“Shut the door,” said Gary as he entered the room, snatching Jamie’s résumé as he collapsed into his office chair.

In order for Jamie to shut the door, he first had to slide his chair fully against Gary’s desk, and then back against the doorknob. He sat down and straightened his back, but from all vantage points, Gary was submerged up to his nose in papers. “Here’s what I don’t want,” said Gary, sliding a stack aside to meet Jamie’s anxious expression squarely. “I don’t want any perverts working for me. I don’t want any idiot deadbeats. I don’t want anyone who can’t manage to show up on time. And I don’t want anyone messing up my track record. I consider this to be my early retirement which includes - and will continue to include - working for the city for as long as I can.”

Gary Singer was a hard man to misinterpret.

“Mr. Singer, you probably think I’m crazy for wanting this job.”

“Jamie? That’s your name, right? Before working for Parks and Rec, I spent 20 years traveling the country with fairs, stunt shows, you name it. So if you ask me what crazy looks like, I really couldn’t tell you. Try giving the Heimlich to an 80-year-old grandmother or watching a stuntman fall two stories, crack his skull open, and *live* in front of an audience. Normal. Now, that’s the thing that scares me. And I gotta be honest with you: you’re the most normal-looking guy I’ve interviewed yet. So *why* do you want to work with kids?”

Jamie’s heart was in his mouth. Was he supposed to be normal or crazy? What was he doing here? He didn’t know the first thing about carousel rides or how to run them. He had simply seen an abandoned classified section on the floor of the train two days ago. He needed to see it. He’d sat down with his elbows on his knees, looking at the floor. The ad was in the Real Estate/Property Management section, marred with footprints and sandwiched between Appraiser and Mr. Do-It-All. Jamie’s brain raced: *customer service ...assist with mounting & dismounting ...safety & security ...stand in place.*

He didn’t recall kids in the job description.

“I don’t mean to sound like an idiot, Mr. Singer, but I think your ad said to make people of all ages smile.”

“Are you being a wise ass?”

“No sir. ...I work security right now and I sit a lot. I think I’d like to stand, at least for a little while.”

“You got a problem with kids?”

Jamie could feel himself sweating through his shirt. He thought of his wallet. The picture pocket was empty as of two days ago. His ex girlfriend had called to clarify that he was not going to see the *boy*. He wasn’t a baby anymore and she was engaged. He used to keep a picture of him in a onesie that had ears to make him look like a little lion. How did the kid go from being a baby to being *three*?

“I love kids, Mr. Singer,” blurted Jamie. “I had a kid once.” *Damn it.* He’d never used those words before and now like a jerk he couldn’t stop saying them – to strangers.





Gary stared hard at Jamie and then broke into a smile. “C’mon. I’m just busting your balls. We’re all crazy, normal idiots – at least anyone who wants to work a carousel ride. I won’t need you until December though. Here-“

Gary scanned his desk and then heaved one of the large stacks of papers into Jamie’s arms. The cover page read “1924 Wurlitzer Carousel: Instructions for Assembly and Operation.”

“The operation section covers everything but the Polka music.”

III.

Jamie walked back toward his place in a pleasant fog, cradling the 10 lb bundle of papers in his arms. He trotted down the steps of Government Center, wove through the crowds in Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, and cut diagonally over the Greenway. He failed to notice the excavated patch of lawn in the park not 20 yards from where he was walking. They had already leveled the ground and poured a concrete slab. Next week the ride was being transported to its new home and the frame of a protective shell would be built around it. Jamie didn’t pause to imagine the ride would look like in its new home; he was too excited to stop.

II.

Jamie spent the next two months sponging up every detail he could about the carousel – its location, permits, city ordinances and council meeting minutes, the inner workings of the Wurlitzer, and the renovation of the carousel itself up in Gloucester. Jamie read the manual, Googled, and read blogs; when he couldn’t sleep, he followed the local news. The carousel had been covered in the news as a feel-good story last July, announcing its proposed opening in *late August*. Now the city had fallen so far behind, they were throwing a grand opening over the holidays as part of their First Night, New Year’s Eve celebration. The idea of the carousel had been around so long that people were starting to doubt its existence.

Jamie didn’t doubt, though. He studied the carousel’s development with curiosity, embracing the rare opportunity to watch history get reassembled. The wooden horses and various animals had all been sent out for refurbishment and

were slowly coming in for installation. Other aspects, like the weathered ceiling and flaking mirrors had to be tediously renovated or replaced. Two painters on scaffolding spent nearly a week removing the curling paint from the ceiling, chip by chip, and replacing it with thick coats of a permanent aqua blue sky and puffy clouds, precisely where someone would have seen them over 90 years ago.

On December 1st, Jamie met Gary at the carousel to review some basic training. It was a brisk, 20-degree morning and Jamie was excited to see that the construction crew had finished installing the windows on the shell that housed the carousel. Jamie quickly slid the barn door shut behind him. Although it was just as cold inside as outside, the 360-degree bank of windows gave a warm illusion to the space as it let the sun fan in across the ride's mirrors and back across the floor in all directions.

Jamie found Gary sitting on a stool near the operator's booth, a space heater humming fruitlessly at his feet. Jamie walked over and set his bag down, much to his employer's delight.

"You're reading *Carousel Magazine*?" laughed Gary, catching sight of the periodical, strapped to Jamie's bag.

Jamie smiled. "Hi Mr. Singer," he said lacing his fingers in front of him. "I've been reading the manual, too."

Gary stopped laughing and stared at Jamie just long enough to make him feel uncomfortable. "Jamie, Jamie... I like your style," he said, breaking back into a smile. "And for Christ's sake, call me Gary."

"Sure," said Jamie, trying to place his boss' buoyancy.

At Gary's request, Jamie pulled his new uniform out of a box by the wall and went to try it on the other side of the carousel, a wise precaution for a man his special-order size. With a tiger for a backdrop, Jamie pulled on a pair of black wool pants, a white button-down shirt, a red vest, bowler hat, checkered wool overcoat, and white scarf with matching white gloves.

"What do you think?" shouted Gary.

"It's different from my night uniform, that's for sure," hollered Jamie, staring at the man in the mirrors. He should have found his reflection funny, but he just felt like he didn't belong. The tiger behind him only seemed to magnify the fact. "I read someplace that carousel means 'little battle' in Spanish, like the kids are in





cavalry training.”

“Uh-huh,” said Gary, casually flipping through Jamie’s magazine.

“Whoever said, ‘You know those dusty merry-go-rounds that we had to push as kids and fight the centrifugal force? Well I’m gonna come up with this thing. It’s gonna have circus music and mirrors and gold poles and everyone’s gonna love it.’ Why do kids love these things anyway?” asked Jamie, strolling out to present his attire.

“Because they go slow enough for them to wave at someone and not fall off,” said Gary. “By the way, I think that’s the most I’ve heard you say... you look ridiculous.”

“I feel ridiculous.”

“Nah, don’t. You’ll be identifiable and that’s the point, right?”

Jamie spent the next hour touring the ride with Gary and practicing the foot pedal at intervals of three and a half minutes, keeping an imaginary eye out for the older kids who would no doubt put safety procedures to the test. Jamie had so thoroughly studied the carousel that training was a bit of a joke. Perhaps the meeting was more for Gary, figured Jamie, to assure himself that he had made a good character judgment over a month ago. Jamie watched Gary as he rotated past him on the ride, playing the part of a teenage hooligan who wouldn’t stay seated on the chariot. He was wearing a steady smile, something Jamie hadn’t seen during his interview. Jamie liked Gary’s approval and the simple pleasure he got from the routine pressing of “stop” and “go.”

* * *

The train kept rolling down to Braintree every night, and coming back every morning with Jamie on it, but his heart visited the carousel with greater frequency. He leaned his head against the subway window and watched the harbor pass by in the distance. He had witnessed a nor’easter’s ability to freeze it overnight into smashed chunks of jagged blue quartz. He admired the bay’s gift for being bent and tossed over time, always to settle back into place. The trees had all grown uniform and stickly and the flurries were just beginning to catch on their branches, highlighting their immobility. Snowflakes were piling their way up the corner of

the subway window. As the train ducked underground, Jaime suddenly thought of his son and wondered if he had a snowsuit. He hoped so.

Jamie shut his eyes. Yesterday, December 12th, Gary had invited him to work for a few hours, joking that he'd been stopping by unpaid for the last two weeks, so he might as well *do* something. Jamie went in originally to sweep the pine floor and polish fingerprints off the brass mirrors, but he ended up spending more time listening to a man in a gray jumpsuit tune the Wurlitzer. Jamie's closed eyes belied the crowded subway car; his mind heard only the pings and honks at the heart of the carousel.

Built in upstate New York in the 1920's, The Wurlitzer 153 band organ was a gorgeous relic. Jamie had never seen anything like it. The man had been in the middle of showing a small pipe to Gary when Jamie arrived. It was one of the organ's 164 pipes consisting of trumpet, trombone, flute, violin and cello voices that Jamie had only imagined from the cartoon sketches in the manual.

"The blower is down here," said the man, acknowledging Jamie's presence as he knelt down to point under the organ.

Jamie watched and listened to the man tinker for a good hour, feigning ignorance, before tearing himself away to clean up. "The glockenspiel or melody division is called *the bells* and the volume is called *the expression*." Jamie nodded. *Everything is controlled by perforations in the paper music roll, he thought.*

"This organ uses 150 paper rolls – like a player piano - except the Wurlitzer has 10 tunes instead of just one," continued the man.

"What happens when it runs out?" asked Gary, concerned that he or Jamie would be required to replace the antique rolls on the fly.

"It uses dual-roll frames, so the music is continuous. While one role rewinds, the other plays."

After the man left, Gary let the organ continue to play. Jamie watched him hop up into the operator's chair while he shined the flamboyant, brass and mirrored collar of a lion. Gary looked like he was in a merry mood.

"I think it's a Coney Island style," said Jamie.

"Well, it's mine right now," barked Gary. "It took me three years to get this damn thing down here and I'm going to keep it to myself for a bit!" Jamie stole a look at Gary; his face was instantly flushed.





A touchy subject. The carousel would soon belong to The City of Boston, but for right now, it was Gary's. Jamie felt the ride lurch slowly under his feet. Gary had pressed "go" and was riding the pedal gently.

"You're keeping me on my toes," joked Jamie as he slowly cruised past Gary for the second time. "It's not easy to polish a mirror with a moving reflection!"

"You have to find something to hang onto, Jamie. Otherwise it will tear you apart inside." Jamie looked up, a little queasy, to see Gary fondling a glass pint in his hands, turning it back and forth.

"Hey, can you stop the ride?" asked Jamie in the act of hopping off. He grabbed his bag and walked over to Gary, pulling a Thermos of coffee from inside. He wanted to make light of Gary's Whisky and offer to make him an Irish coffee.

"True story," said Gary as he released the pedal, the blood having drained from his face. "My wife, my kids. They died six years ago." He said it as if ordering a sub for lunch. Jamie sat down on the edge of the carousel, his hands still gripping the Thermos.

"She was coming back from the kids' play date during a snow storm in late March. She lost control of our minivan, rolled it a bunch of times and it ended up upside down in the ditch on the opposite side of the highway. Everyone was killed."

Jamie looked down at his bag, at his coat, at his gloves. "My kid..." He didn't know what to offer, so he just let the words hang there.

"I remember trying to figure out what I was going to eat for dinner. What the hell is that? Crazy or normal?" said Gary, rubbing his forehead. "Listen, you should go home. I'm just going to double check the bathrooms and lock up."

"Okay." That was all Jamie could come up with at the time and he kicked himself for it all the way back to his apartment.

Over the next 24 hours, the minivan continued to roll over in Jamie's mind. It came to a final rest just as the Braintree stop was called. Jamie opened his eyes and stood to file out with everyone else. Gary was always moving. How do you move after a person dies, he wondered. Gary moved fast in his mind; he was a goddamn sprinter in there. His smiles and jokes sprang up with the least resistance and came out in his eyes, too. Jamie thought maybe Gary's smile lived its own life without Gary knowing it was there. It was Gary's "home" long before he moved to a place of sadness.

I.

Jamie was officially working two jobs. For the last two weeks of December, he ran the carousel as a “soft opening” on Friday afternoons and all day on the weekends. It was the most ludicrous thing to do in the dead of winter; Jamie knew it and was grateful for it. The ocean wind never stopped whipping its way through the buildings and across the exposed Greenway and even though Gary had purchased two extra space heaters to take the edge off, you could still see your breath inside. Still, Jamie didn’t care. If no one came, the ride still ran on schedule with the Wurlitzer trumpeting “Nights of Gladness,” “Triumphant Banner,” and “Kiss Me Again” for all of Boston to hear.

Outside of the ride’s exuberant music, the first weekend was really quiet. Most of Jamie’s passengers were adults, heading home from the financial district. They all came for the same impulsive reasons; some returned with their kids the following weekend. By the night of the grand opening, Jamie looked like he’d been doing his job for years. He loved the reactions he elicited when hollering “All Aboard!” He enjoyed checking that everyone was seated safely. He liked being the gatekeeper of movement. The ride was only supposed to go 5 miles per hour, but if he only had adult passengers, he would offer them a “dare” to try it out at 10 miles per hour – the ride’s max speed according to its safety regulations. No one, he was shocked to discover, ever said “no.”

The grand opening came and went so fast that Jamie came back the next morning, looking for traces that it had really happened. The sight of paper cups and bits of streamers still littering the ground and thousands of frozen footprints pocking the snow of the Greenway was an instant comfort. New Year’s Eve had been a spectacle worthy of its own framed poster. Gary had turned down the volume of the Wurlitzer so they could enjoy the local bands’ performances on the nearby gazebo. The park was filled with lighted ice sculptures and crowds of people flocking around them. The City had placed a particularly strong carving of Paul Revere on a rearing horse next to the carousel that drew snapshot flashes all night long. Even some ladies at a nearby beverage stand had been kind enough to bring Jamie and Gary a steady flow of hot drinks to stay warm.

Jamie watched it all. By now, he knew the expressions of kids by heart- the





tentative selection of a horse, seldom the tiger or the lion. Mostly, his young riders looked half frozen, and only half smiling. That was mostly because a person out there was smiling at them—especially the kids that chose to sit on the bench. He didn't even know why a kid would choose the bench. But he never judged – not kids anyway. At midnight, Boston Harbor clothed the sky in a profusion of fireworks that glowed on the faces of everyone watching. Jamie had waved and smiled all night long and it felt good. Everywhere was a photograph that he would have framed with the L-shape of his fingertips had he not been working.

At 6pm on New Year's Day, Jamie shut the ride down for the last time until spring. Gary had told him The City still needed to find an operator to run the carousel as a concession. Jamie thought of his tiny place and wondered what a carousel would cost to run. He heaved the barn door shut on the carousel's shell and snapped a padlock in place, jingling the keys in his pocket as he shuffled back to The North End.

Hotels across the city were still decked with trees and playing Christmas carols, stretching out their holiday spirit for at least a few more days. The streetlamps along the sidewalks were still trimmed in white lights and garlands and above the harbor a clear 3/4 moon hung in the night. Jamie peered into a few colonial-style pub windows to admire their decorated trees – a far stretch from the cast iron-barred windows of his own place. Below his feet, the painted red line that marked Boston's Freedom Trail turned abruptly from a painted line to a stream of red bricks inlaid in the sidewalk. Jamie followed it, turning down Hanover Street. The low brownstones and lamp posts were still dusted with snow from a storm a few days prior and twinkling Christmas stars were swinging over the intersection from the occasional gust of wind. He passed a couple staring at a pyramid of cannolis in the window of a pastry shop. A block down, Jamie sidestepped a little old man and woman strolling arm and arm. If you sat on a bench and listened, which Jamie often did, the street bustled with Italian accents and the occasional sound of an imported espresso machine, whirring. At night, Jamie admired most the gold-leafed signs and windows trimmed with strands of lights, faces lit with the sepia tone glow of candles, leaning toward one another. The Italian North End was undoubtedly home to someone.

When Jamie got back to his place, he planned to start the year out with sleep.

It was the first time he could remember not having to ride the train at that hour, having taken time off in order to work over the holiday. He hooked his checkered overcoat and bowler hat on the back of the door and flopped down on his bed. His ears still held the echo of carousel music and he wondered how long it would take to go away. Jamie reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys to the ride, dangling them in the air for a moment before tossing them next to the old picture of his son. They would be warehoused indefinitely on Jamie's dresser. They looked like they belonged to the door of a home, the kind with a real family behind it.

They looked perfectly normal.



Adieu! My Darling Tweed Coat —→

ALEJANDRO ECHEVARRIA

ADIEU! MY DARLING tweed coat.
Once thatched roundst my scapulae,
Lactating no longer the sweet aroma of your must
That sang honeyed thirds and thrush tenths
During those Screamin' Jay Hawkin'd days.
And Adieu! Sweet moments of twerpdom
That were too often neglected the relish
They so cravingly howled from me
Which only now,
I dearly long.
The Seine were waters I never dove,
Murmuring over its sour inked venom
Were my hoarse recitations
Of makeshift barcarolles
Which only now,
I desperately wheeze:
To vanish, to varnish,
To hell and perhaps further,
Be gone, and Pollock my scalpulæ no more.
But Tonight!
Live!
From the Vulva of the Seine
I Falwell, alas, into the opaque
Labyrinth where twerps only starve.
Buon Giorno Black Blazer
For the squares getting rounder
And Adieu, Adieu, Adieu
Adieu!
My darling tweed coat.



A New Bike



STEVEN BOCKOVER

Dad brought a bike home for me. I always wanted one but we couldn't afford it. He smiled when he gave it. His clothes were really dirty.

I rode my bike a lot and kept it clean. The wind in my hair was nice.

A car almost hit me. I cleaned my bike to calm down. Bright rust dripped off it when I used the hose. I scratched at it. Blood was in the rust.

Dad stared at his dented truck. Someone had hit him. I showed him my fingers and he threw away my bike.

A Regurgitated Incident

KELLY MORENO



She held in her hands two small puddles of my vomit. I didn't mean to throw up into her hands, but her words sparked nothing more than an acidic stream that ran from the base of my ribs to the tips of my teeth.

Yet, as I watched my formerly digesting breakfast slowly draining through the spaces between her fingers, she said nothing. She stood, mute. Her silence sat heavily in the air between us.

She was a student of mine and hated the subject I was teaching. At the beginning of the school year, she found herself failing all of the assignments.

One day, after she received a particularly low score on a test, she stayed after class and begged for help. She walked up the skinny row between the desks slowly, reaching up to her face occasionally to wipe away sporadic tears.

When she finally reached my desk, she rambled on and on about how she didn't understand the linear planes and alternate exterior angles; as hard as I tried to listen, I couldn't focus on anything other than her overwhelming smell. The heat of the day must've washed away the better part of her morning beauty ritual.

She leaned over my desk and my eyes met with the slight curve of her breast, and I feared that she would catch me. So, almost instantly, I steadied my gaze on a lone freckle that laid on the under-part of her collar bone.

I sensed her frustration, and as she pressured me to explain a question on her test,

A Regurgitated Incident

I noticed something entirely unfamiliar. When she slid the failed test across the table, she unknowingly mixed her air with mine. Her air, laced with the mixture of coconut and sweat that I had come to admire, was assaulted by another scent. Something I couldn't immediately identify. It was musky and slightly masculine—unlike her.

I wondered if she was still a virgin. I concluded that the virtue of her spirit was enough to cleanse her past of any poor judgments. I assumed that I could help her—clean her of the musk and the legion of scents and uncover her, enlighten her.

My mind wandered to what occupied her time while she was out of my sight, out of my classroom, out of high school. I wondered if she had a boyfriend, a lover—someone who would lend her that musk.

*

She told me that she had a boyfriend, that I had no chance with her, that I was going to end up alone.

My words turned to vomit and ended up in her hands. Snot dribbled from my nose, ran over my lips, down my chin and dripped to the floor. I had no words left. I could no longer smell her sweat and coconut over the bile I had in front of me.

**

I cleared my throat and lifted my head from the perched-vomiting-position I had held for several minutes. Her mouth, gaped, was as empty as mine for words until I met her eyes with my own.

She said that she was going to leave, change schools, never see me again. I sputtered out broken words of protest, but she refused to hear them, and, instead, she turned away from me. I watched as she shook her head and flipped her hands over spilling my only gift to her onto the floor.

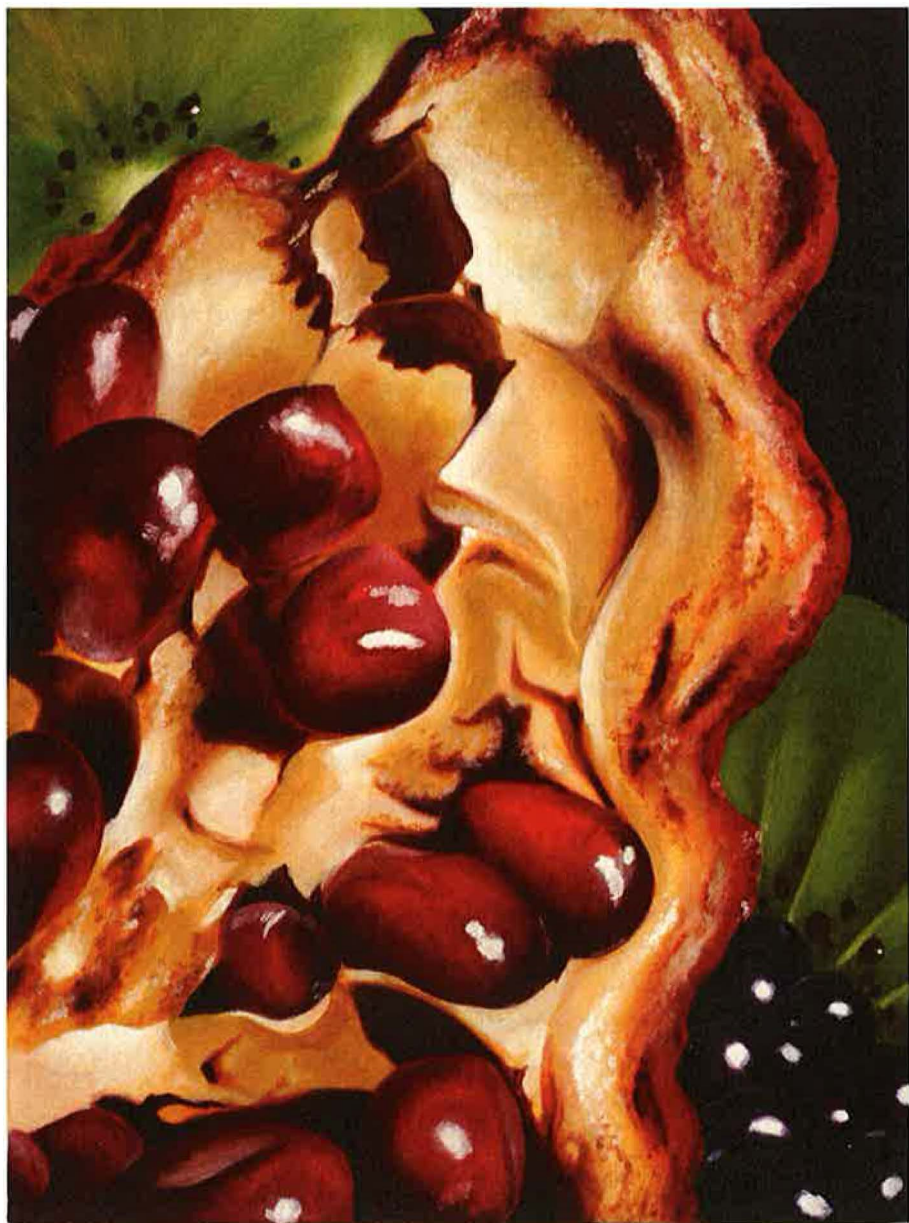


My Documents

JACLEEN JANZER

FOR YOU, EVERYTHING had
To be photographed...
Such is the evidence
Of our perusal of existence
Hours spent
Extracting the mundane
Pictures of food
Of objects
Pictures of ourselves
Now all taking residence
In dots and numbers
In 256-color
Folder icons
From which I call forth
Bright projections
Above 1:30am, in the lower-right corner
Of my screen
This night.





ELAINE CHOU
Temptation

You Are Not What You Eat

KATIE McMAHON



I won a cake in the Easter cake raffle when I was in the seventh grade. It was a coconut cake and I wanted to keep this cake for myself and hide it in my bedroom so I could eat the entire thing. But it's hard to hide a big white cake box when you walk into your house that you share with your brother and two parents who watch everything you eat.

Still, they never watch after you're done.

If I can sneak slivers that are smaller than pieces or paper thin slices that you wouldn't even bother putting on a plate, then maybe no one will even know. Maybe she won't say anything about it. And after all, it's my cake and I won it. It's not my fault they called my number. If I didn't claim the cake, who knows what they would've done with it? The thought of that coconut cake, shaped like the Easter Bunny, sitting in the back alleys of my neighborhood with melting snow surrounding it makes me ache deep, deep, deep in my stomach. Truthfully, I don't even know if we have alleys. Just the thought of it makes me... hungry. Makes me cry for no reason.

So the cake sits on the kitchen counter and everyone is happy. My mom can't eat sugar because she's diabetic, so it's between me and my brother and my dad. My brother mostly likes to eat pizza. I don't think he even likes cake. My dad eats lots of sugar and sometimes he's had so much to drink, he doesn't even know that he's eating it. This is perfect, because if I can sneak into the kitchen when everyone is asleep or watching television, I can take a knife and cut tiny pieces of coconut cake and throw them quickly into my mouth. Then I can carefully and quietly wipe down the knife

and place it back into the drawer to sleep next to the other knives. Metal against metal. Please, please don't make any loud sounds. If anyone says anything about how the cake is disappearing, I can blame it on my dad. I can even blame it on him if he asks me why the cake is slowly getting smaller and he will yell or threaten to throw the cake away, but I know that he is secretly asking himself if he ate it, and when, and how sad it is that he cannot remember the taste.

While I love the coconut Easter Bunny cake so much, I also hate it and want to throw it at a wall or pick it up and drop it on the ground and smash it with my feet. The cake is all I can think about. I obsess over it. I want to eat it all and then feel sad about it being gone. I want to freeze it and eat it again in twenty years. I feel like I will never see another cake again. I know that I will never win a cake again, or anything for that matter.

I want to wake up in the morning and crack two eggs into a frying pan, in hopes that two tiny little Easter Bunny cakes will fall out and I can cook them up and slide them onto my plate while everyone else is still sleeping. I grab the salt shaker and shake it over the tiny cakes and flakes of toasted coconut find their home in the frosting.

I cannot sleep because the cake is in my dreams. The cake speaks to me in my sleep. It stands upright and asks me, "Do you wish I had been a carrot cake or a chocolate cake with walnuts?" I shake my head violently back and forth and throw my hands up. "Why do you hate me so much?" Oh, cake! I don't hate you, I love you! I hug it tightly and the frosting smashes into my shirt and the coconut flakes get stuck in my hair. How will I hide this mess? I need to throw the cake away. I will tell my mom it got old or I gave it to a homeless man. I grab a handful and shove it into my mouth. Then, I take the big white flimsy box outside and place it carefully into the trash bin. I lift open the top and smudge the bunny's eyes closed.

I feel the tiny pieces weighing heavy in my stomach. I feel them turning into big, fat blobs on my stomach and my butt and my legs and my face and I scream, wishing I had never won that stupid cake. It's ruining my life. Why couldn't I have won something else like a new bicycle or a smelly candle or anything else at all?

All the other girls in my school are sitting at home eating spaghetti or doing their homework or thinking about boys and here I am with this stupid fucking cake. Congratulations, congratulations, oh how great! How miserable.





I feel sad like crying... like hugging and not kissing, like taking hot baths, like screaming into pillows, like putting on ten pairs of socks, like going to church and blowing out all the candles people have lit for dead people or sick people or people who have no problems at all and want it to remain that way.

What do you wish I had been? A girl with green eyes or a boy with curly hair and straight teeth? Why don't you hug me so hard that I smush into your body? What do you do with all the pieces and slivers of me that you cut off in the middle of the night? Put them back before I wake up. Put them back before I grow old and they don't fit anymore.

Solutions

I REMEMBER WHEN we were kids,
our toys could talk to us.
And us to them.

They could solve
the world's biggest problems,
usually by dinner time.

The kidnapped Barbie mystery.
A shiny villain that arrived on Christmas.
An invasion of pharmacy rejects
and forgotten hand-me-downs.

They were never a challenge for Darkwing Duck,
Ninja Turtle Leonardo,
Tim Burton's Batman,
or Storm Trooper Skywalker.

They would always employ my strategies
and employ them perfectly.

With plastic and spit flying
all around my gravity,
innocent justice littered the rug.

But even at a young age,
I was reasonably
compliant to
real-world conditions.

It would be childish if Batman
was victorious every time.
Occasionally, I made Batman fall
from the sobering cliffs
of my bed.

But the good guys always won
as they did in the real world.



LEO DANNY CASTANEDA

As I got older,
the bad guys were more and more misunderstood
and diplomacy was the rule of the day.

Sometimes, it seemed like diplomacy
was the only option for our dilemmas.

Naturally,
age began to wear on my toys.
Their backs grew stiff
with the limitations of their iconic gear.
The rotating punches
grew rusty.

It was inevitable.

They told me about their fears
and I was afraid for them.

Brilliant solutions became littered silence.

Eventually, they lost their ability
to stand up upright,
to fight with me,
to change the world.

Now I see my nephew,
leading his allies
and taking up the fight.
Employing the same new strategies,
and perfecting his command.

And there at ground level,
he searches for solutions
to the world's biggest problems.



Dead Tissue!

DEAD TISSUE! CRIED the necromancer,
So he may resuscitate this dying medium,
A skeleton key holding a centuries-long grudge.
It once channeled its ancestry,
Now it sits lobotomized in its own filth
And drool drips down its chin.

I, Moron! I defy being born of goodly parents.
Grimoires writ in ancient tongues
Salivate on the pearl of great price.

Dead tissue! he cried, so that he may give life
To this bestial tapestry made from dying parts
And bacteria cultured in controlled environments
Fed on coaxial discord through umbilical cable.
Behold! this bosom that lactates sugar
And televises a nectar generating generations of users.

Dada breaches its lips and lifts its right hand.
Form serves no function, it proclaims and raises its left hand.
And yet function requires no craft, retorts the stillborn left.

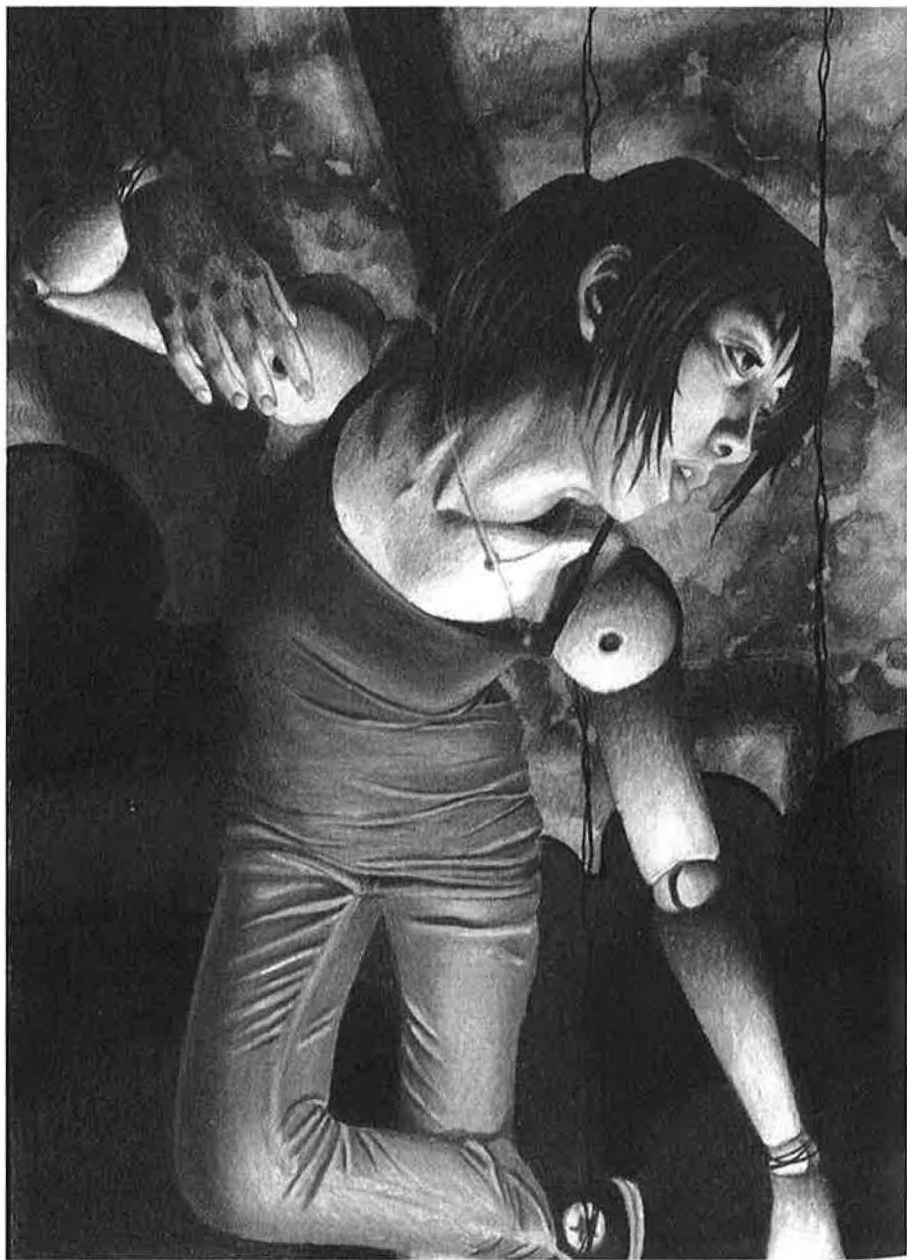
Dead tissue! wept the alchemist,
After millennia of research all he has are its dying parts.
Homunculus with gaze of grain—his beautiful creation—
It never toddled, never teethed.
Moonchild of waning flicker
Your cinema shed its red curtained walls,



ANDREI BURKE

This soil too abject to give life.
The cyborg dilates its lens
And glimpses past the pixilated horizon.
A spot of blood consumed the screen
Through the night until morning
When daylight aborted the Eleusian illusion.





ELAINE CHOU
Mannequin

Her Brother Gethsemane

BRYAN T. SMITH



Many years later, her brother came to her hospital room in the morning and though he didn't bring any flowers, Laura saw he was barefoot like before. He didn't turn on the light or say a word, but she could see him in the dark, young like he was back then, olive-eyed phantom of a 12 year-old boy.

Laura had grown up with him briefly on the farm. He wasn't really her brother but one of the lost, her dad taking him in when he was just a boy wandering in the woods, winter snow on his bare feet, crusted in his hair that was black like the tires on the old Ford. He came that night in the snow. Her brother Gethsemane.

At first, her dad had not wanted to take him. "No kind of boy goes wandering in the woods like that," he said, looking at the boy Gethsemane's feet. She had seen his feet that night as she stood behind her dad who made the boy lift up each one as if it were a weapon. Each one white, pristine and, as she would say later when she was an old woman recounting to whomever would listen, looking like God's own velvet skin.

She liked him. She had the garden over by the barn, a fixture of Rosemary plants and Verbenas, brown purple-headed flowers leaning over a lined chicken wire border. She liked him and named the garden after him. "Gethsemane," she said, plow in hand, smile on her face. "My garden is Gethsemane."

It was after Gethsemane came and she took a liking to him and the garden known as Gethsemane was ordained, that the animals started to disappear. "Don't worry, baby, it ain't no plague," her dad said to her one night as she lay down by the fire in the living room, her hand working on her cursive, her sloppy hand. One night she

snuck out after dark, looking for Gethsemane. He always disappeared at night and showed up in the morning looking as dirty as when he first came, the whistling cry of grasshoppers in his pockets, captured in poorly-sewn, small, poked cotton pouches she had made herself. But the past few nights had been different and after the last animal, a sow, had vanished she was determined to find out why.

She found Gethsemane in the barn. Looking through a knot hole in the wall of the barn's south entrance, she saw her dad standing by one of the stalls, face split in half by the light of a lantern and she saw him there, her brother Gethsemane, standing before one of the horses that had broken its sternum on a fence post the day before. She looked on, one eye shut to focus the open one and she saw him place his hands over the horse's face, white bone fingers on the horse's snout. Baptizing, she thought watching.

Many years later, when she arrived at the hospital, the disease set too deep in her 72 year-old bones, a nurse asked about her family. "My garden was Gethsemane," she said and the nurse looked confused and Laura laughed and mimicked the chirping of the grasshoppers from her childhood.

The horse snorted and Gethsemane, reckoning figure placed outside the lantern's glow, released his hands and the animal fell, long brown head colliding with the side of the stall, thunder sound of oak striking the cold air, neck twisting with the heavy bones slacking to the straw floor. She screamed and ran back to the house, exposed china doll feet running and slipping on the morning grass, her dad yelling after her in a distant voice, baby baby baby, but her brother Gethsemane silent like he always was.

A short time later, the garden was destroyed. Verbenas, still brown purple, lay smashed on the dirt with the green leaves of Rosemary scattered and crushed and blackened. "Don't know, baby, must've been a raccoon," her dad had told her. She smiled, though her eyes saw the greenish tint at the corners of his boots. "Never liked the name anyway," he said, eyes trailing to the side, red, spidery whites. She didn't ask what happened that night in the barn but he offered excuses, up until he seemed to run out, up until the day, two months later, when Gethsemane finally left, his single bed tarnished and forlorn. She would find the grasshoppers in the morning sometimes, left in the cotton pouches by her bed, knowing, even as a child, that she would see him again, reckon that he was and she would hear her dad





manble a verse from Mathew while he sat in the living room, red-eyed and stooped and lonely figure by the fire.

“Say unto you, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death,” the rest gibberish, a brown bottle glowing gold with him.

Many years later, her brother Gethsemane came to her hospital room in the morning, grasshoppers cying in a small cotton pouch by her bedside, and she was dead a short while later.



STEPHANIE PECINA
Background Concept

Transition

LEO DANNY CASTANEDA

IN THE FINAL days of summer
the night changes its mood with every breeze.
A nine o'clock purple,
a salty midnight pink,
a lucid fever in the morning.

The flash of five echoes
cause crickets to abandon their ballads
leaving the landscape of the expiring,
trembling for melodic resolve.

The lightning doesn't move closer to us;
we move closer to the flash,
hoping the running streaks change
the effects of our cause.

It came earlier this year

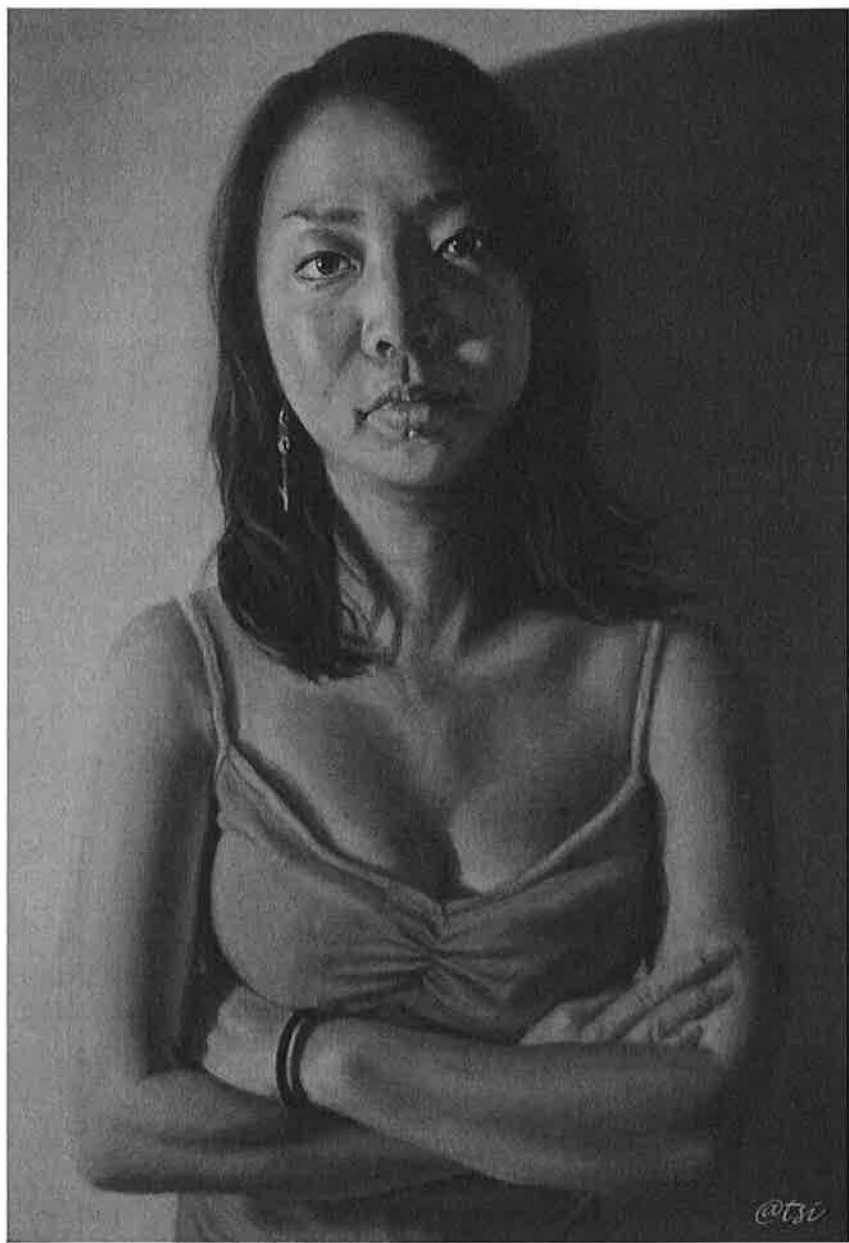
with January trailing,
clinging to the last sky filaments; contemplating
the routine of created chaos
and welcomed veils to hide the waiting storm.

Try to hold the cold in a jar for summer.
Feel the empty condensation
against your skin when sleep leaves with the sheep.
Cure the coffee-burned tongue
that changes the taste of bible ambitions.

Our eyes are fixed on the V of ravens,
flying towards Orion,
chasing away his dog,
and clearing the night for new movements
that escaped the meridian.

We intend not to be surprised. We intend.





ATSUMI KODAMA
Emi

Cossi Fan Tutte

DOUG WEAVER



You know how sometimes you just randomly meet some guy and after a few hours of shooting meth, snorting ‘K’ and performing most of the essential big city homosexual mating protocols you’ve perfected over the decades – which always have a component of showing whoever you’re with that even though you’re completely twacked out and would be hard pressed to maybe drive a tractor or fly an airplane, you still have the wherewithal to rig, in a matter of seconds, a series of mirrors that are not only at dildo level because, for whatever reason, we really like to see ourselves putting stuff up our butts, but they’re also at TV level so you won’t have to spoil the mood by sitting up to watch the gay porn that’s always playing on the DVD. And you’d never admit it to anybody, but you’re completely bored with gay porn because it’s so fucking earnest – probably because if it weren’t earnest it would just be a bunch of queens fucking each other, and that’s not exactly sexy, so the porn actors are always growling at each other and being earnest cops or coaches or convicts. You realize this greasy routine has somehow moved past the meaningless ritual stage and you’re both actually having a pretty good time, probably because you become aware that this guy has quite a few qualities of the perfect man:

- 1) He can negotiate the ins and outs of drug-induced paralysis.
- 2) He can appreciate the indescribable weirdness of being stuck in a ‘K’-hole without turning it into something “significant.”
- 3) He’s okay with driving around with you in the morning to deliver dope, and he’s totally not weirded out by the word “felony.”

4) And most important: He knows – like you do – that sex is about as important in the scheme of things as filing your state income taxes – that sex is only something you do to fill the spaces of time between doses.

So the sun comes up the next morning, and you're still with this guy. And this is so uncommon that you feel like putting up a plaque commemorating the occasion: On such and such a date, you actually spent a complete 24-hour day with another human being without being locked up in a cell with him. And the second day starts with some casual cock sucking, or if you're really energetic, maybe sharing a complicated enema with a mixture of various drugs and booze, which is a great way to get to know somebody really quick, or you might drag the leather out of the closet and get dressed like cops or whatever where you strike a few poses and issue a few commands. And spending this much time with somebody carries with it certain circadian responsibilities, like eating and bathing and changing clothes. So in a grand gesture of hospitality, you pour out two bowls of Fruit Loops and serve your new friend breakfast in bed. Then you shower, get dressed and head out in your truck to drop off various deliveries of meth to some of your straggling customers.

And during these little errands you both kind of realize you're not in any big hurry, kind of like the *andante* section of a Schubert sonata, like you're both walking at a comfortable pace down the halls of an art exhibit, where you're not thirsty or hungry or bored or even particularly interested in looking at the pictures on the walls—or you're just on a really nice, really easy drive—like you're both just rolling down the road in like a black Camaro or something and the windows are all open and the wind is hot and you know you look cool and you know where all the switches are and everything. And you can take time—take time—the words seem so weird like they're from a third-world country or something, but it's still got some nice scenery here and there with trees and clouds and shit, but the important thing is there's no drama at all, and you realize that you're usually comforted by emergencies – you're addicted to them because you know how to act in an emergency, like when the cops are chasing you, or the Geisha went all psychotic in the check-out line at Home Depot, or what's-his-name turned blue in the bathroom because the heroin he shot was a bit potent.

And being with this guy gives you a little hope that things might be different for





a while. It reminds you of a scene in a movie where two people are in love or something, like—I can't think of anybody right now though, but it's like when two people like each other a lot like couples in movies or commercials, whatever, and there's usually like a slow motion scene with just the two of them in a meadow with millions of flowers or something and that's like all there needs to be. And you're thinking that you and this guy might be—I can hardly breathe the word – compatible – that you've turned into a kind of unit; that you might actually have the potential to be like Dick and Tom, who're actually the perfect couple; who could actually be in the Guinness Book of World Records for shooting more meth over a seven-day period than anybody in history. They just seemed to fit together somehow. Even when they were homeless, which was most of the time, somebody from another country or another planet would look at them and there would be no doubt that Dick and Tom were perfectly matched, but instead of like a normal couple, they were perfectly matched kamikaze pilots, or maybe like twin Cadillacs from that book *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but with suicide doors, where they just keep going full speed until there's no tires left and they don't even use roads anymore, and body parts fall off faster and faster, but they don't slow down until they just disintegrate into nothing. And Dick and Tom are so connected that there seemed to be a kind of force-field around them that the police can't even penetrate, or maybe it just made the police blind to them, kind of like they were crystal meth Batman and Robin or Obi Wan Kenobi and Master Luke, or Ivana and Donald Trump or something, which was pretty weird because, from the perspective of anybody who got loaded with them, they were anything but invisible. They were outrageous, which is really saying something from the point of view of another dope fiend, but it was true. Dick and Tom'd be up for a few days and they had this habit of taking their appetites for twisted sex with other men right out in the daylight, like during rush hour on Franklin Avenue, and the sun is blazing away at like 7:30 or 8 in the morning and they'd pour peanut oil all over their jeans so you could see the shapes of their cocks through their Levis really plainly, and they'd stand where there's a stop light at the intersection of Beachwood Drive and rub their bulging crotches, like they were tweaked-out fag fishermen in a boat out on Lake Homo trawling for nibbles from the schools of the elusive giant cockfish who are known to inhabit the area.

This strategy probably worked eventually, but everybody who knew Dick and Tom thought it was really intensely outrageously stupid, like you're just asking to be arrested because in all those millions of cars packed onto Franklin Avenue all the time, there's usually a few black-and-whites. And even if any of those cops are homos, which I'm sure some were, what do you think's going to happen? Even if fate or the powers that be decided to pair two fag cops together as partners on patrol, which is about as likely as the people finally rising up and seizing power, do you really think they'd be driving down Franklin Avenue and look over and see these two saucer-eyed oily clowns on the street corner and say, "Gee, Marvin, let's take a few hours off so we can pick up these two studs and enjoy a few hours of crazy twacked-out sex with them?" Anyway, that's Dick and Tom. Maybe somebody'll write a memoir about them some day.

So you and your new friend head back home and you get high together and smoke some really potent weed, which makes you stupider than you'd like, but it's nothing you can't handle, mostly because you're a pro and have a kind of awareness of certain pitfalls, and, for the moment, you're okay with this guy having become part of your routine. But then after a while you realize that a considerable length of time has passed since this guy has said one word—has made one sound or actually given you one signal that he's still on the same planet as you, which gets your attention a little because in normal circumstances this silence is a little bit of a red flag, and you try to remember exactly how long it's been since he's said anything. You think back to the previous hours and you make concessions because of the compatibility thing and you tell yourself that he might just be a quiet sort of guy, but you need a little assurance that things are cool, and you maybe conduct a little experiment by fixing yourself a dose in a spoon—and when you do it, you make sure that you squirt the water into the drug inside the spoon and stir it up in a way that's really obvious. And usually doing this around another dope fiend is like cutting up a pork chop in front of your napping dog. They'll all of a sudden give you their undivided attention, as if you're the center of the universe. But there's no reaction from this guy—he's just lying there on the bed like a raw piece of steak and you say to yourself: Fuck! But maybe it's out loud or maybe you just thought it, but it doesn't matter because you know he won't hear anything anyway because you've been fooled: this guy is totally tripped out and his brain is busy busy





busy constructing barricades and escape chutes and the most complicated contraptions that make perfect sense to the builder, but to anybody else who doesn't literally live inside his own head, they're completely fucking cuckoo.

And you maybe remember the first time you got fooled like this which was shortly after receiving your journeyman meth dealer's merit badge, which was a couple of years ago. You're living this ultra cool dealer's life and you get a phone call from this guy – somebody you've seen around here and there, and he says he's a dealer too; that he's noticed what a nifty operation you're running, which should have been a sign that something was weird, because calling your little business an "operation" is kind of a stretch. But being a pig for praise, you say something really bright like, "Oh, really? Golly thanks!" He says he wants to meet with you to discuss a business proposition, so you're really honored at the moment. And you're kind of amazed that he sounds so businesslike, like he has a briefcase with papers in it with graphs and stuff. He comes to visit, and sure enough, he's dressed clean and neat and he's actually carrying a fucking briefcase, so you start to think you're going to have to concentrate on what this guy has to say. But you're just playing it by ear, because you don't really have a clue about what's supposed to happen, and you both go into the bedroom but you don't get high because, after all, this is strictly business. And he says he wants to join forces with you, to make a kind of alliance of meth dealers or something, and he begins to make his case to persuade you. And of course he doesn't have a curriculum vitae or a business plan or anything for you to read, which is okay because you wouldn't have understood it anyway, but what he does instead to prove to you that he's a person of substance is tell you all the steps he's recently had to take to trick the sheriff's department from focusing on him as a person of interest and a potential defendant. And and and— as if he's the founder of the Meth Dealers' Peace Corps or something, he describes in the most self-aggrandizing and heroic terms how he's perfected a method that will confound law enforcement one-hundred percent of the time, which consists of erecting a series of 50-foot mirrors in the back of his apartment building, which, according to him, rendered him and all his business dealings, completely invisible to all the hundreds of sheriff's deputies and crime-fighting scientists who were out to get him. And before he gets five minutes into this pitch, you're trying to figure out how to get rid of him, because it couldn't be more obvious that he's a guy who

really needs to lay off his own product, or turn himself in for a few sessions of ultra high voltage Edison Medicine or maybe even submit to a little slicing and dicing of his amygdala.

It's kind of like that with this silent guy. You get pissed off at yourself because you've seen this before more times than you like to admit and everything changes in a heartbeat from budding love affair to babysitting duty and your newfound ally has been transformed into just some potentially dangerous piece of luggage, and you try to remember the last time there was somebody tripped out like this who landed in quiet land, because ideally, after a silent stretch, they'll start squawking about their impending death, like they're one hundred percent sure their pulse is out of control and they can feel death beckoning and what's going to become of them? You just wish this guy on the bed with you would start spewing words – any kind of bullshit craziness, because words give you kind of a foothold so you know where things stand -- words make the situation more quantifiable. You begin to wonder how long it's going to be before this guy starts his ascent into sanity and you can safely send him on his way—or maybe drive him to where he lives or something, because experience has taught you that this condition has certain pitfalls: you turn them out too soon and they have no more wits than a puppy, who finds himself out on the street in an unfamiliar part of town and is about as inconspicuous as naked Santa Claus roller skating in the middle of the street, carrying a surfboard under his arm and with a huge black dildo sticking out of his ass and maybe a propeller cap on his head and blood dripping from his arms where he's just slammed some meth. And just like a real puppy, this guy starts to panic because he's scared that he's been abandoned and will think nothing of walking up to a cop or maybe even into a police station and describing the place where he's been for the last day or so, and he wants to go back there, and this will create a real fucking nightmare, so you reconcile yourself to being stuck with this guy for as long as it takes and he lies on the bed for an hour, for two hours, and then three. And you start to wonder what's really going on with this guy, but you don't get drastic. You put your faith in your experience, believing that it's just going to take a little longer. And finally, after almost five hours, he gets up and walks into the bathroom and pisses. And you feign good will and maybe say something innocuous like “How you doin’?” But after he flushes the toilet, he reclaims his spot on the





bed and settles back into his silence, totally ignoring your query. You can just see the wheels inside his head spinning out unspeakable tapestries of paranoia. And you become a little more concerned because it's almost nighttime again and something's gotta give pretty quick, so you sit on the bed next to him and try to watch some television or something, and the phone starts ringing, and you know it's people calling for dope, but you don't answer because of this weirdo on the bed who started out being just a cool guy but is now a 100 percent liability and it's become obvious that this little mini-romance will start to affect your income if something doesn't happen soon. But with the patience of Job, you lie down next to him like there's nothing wrong and you turn off the TV and you're both just lying there. And for a few minutes it's peaceful, like there's nothing wrong. You take a wistful look at him—you admire his body and his handsome face and muscular arms—and you feel a certain amount of frustration because in a perfect world he'd actually be a real catch, and you maybe feel a little twinge of loneliness and self pity because you've allowed your imagination to create something out of nothing—one more time, and in a panic you scramble to put these thoughts out of your head because acknowledgment of them creates a painful awareness that you're alone and you're not getting any younger; that your life is as arid as the moon; that you wish the last ten years of bad decisions and drug use and arrests and stretches in county jail and trying to avoid seeing your parents and brother and sister hasn't been real, but you feel so far away from where you need to be because there's usually a needle stuck in your arm and running amok has become normal. And you might say a tiny little prayer that will hopefully take the edge off these desperate thoughts, something maybe like please god—please give me a sign of what to do—I promise I'll—but you stop yourself from adding any real substance to this prayer because you know it's foolish to pray and you're glad no one has seen you in this moment of weakness. So you push all the bad thoughts out of your head and, because you can't think of anything else to do, you snuggle up close to this quiet guy, like spoons, and it feels good. You listen to his insides and it's so quiet – kind of like the ocean at rest. There's a kind of deep, confident rhythm resonating deep inside him. And after twenty minutes or so you sense a slight stirring. You hear his breathing change slightly, like there's a tiny increase in frequency and a decrease in depth, but it's so slight you listen harder. There's a

little catch in his lungs, and you can almost feel blood flooding into his dormant muscles. Then, in a kind of singular seamless slightly magnificent motion, like an out-of-breath diver breaking through the surface of the ocean, he powers through your easy embrace, he sits up at once, looks around frantically like a cornered animal, then wildly – desperately screams to the world: “I...!” but the thought dies with the utterance of the pronoun, seemingly smothered by the paranoid imperatives of his overactive brain.

And your hopes, at least for the moment, are dashed with the reality that this guy is completely lost. And you wonder what it was he was going to say. I what? “I want to go home?” “I like you?” “I like puppies?” “I miss my mom?” Is it a truncated version of an expression containing the contraction “I’m,” and he was going to say “I’m sick,” “I’m the rightful king of France,” or maybe even the plain, unadorned, “I’m horny.” You consider for a moment the possibility that he may have been conjugating the future tense. “I will,” but stop before finishing your speculative thought. I will what? You know it could be anything, and you catch yourself before descending into your own puddle of paranoia by settling on the possibility that the only verb that makes sense in this context is kill: “I will kill you.” And no matter how hard you try, you can’t stop yourself from going there—from conjuring scenes of your awful, inevitable fate: murdered by an unbalanced trick who couldn’t handle his dope. And all you can think of is how vulgar your death will have been. “I wasn’t born to die this way,” you think. “I haven’t accomplished anything.” And you think about how your parents will be so disappointed, along with your aunts and uncles and their kids, as they shake their heads in support of your parents’ grief. “You’re not to blame. We are sooo sorry...” And you want to call them and tell them you love them, and you’ll come and visit soon, and you allow yourself to think about when you were a kid and you were happy and things were so much simpler, and your parents still trusted you. But you know that history has taught them not to put any weight at all in your promises anymore. And after you shake off these bullshit memories, you imagine yourself being resourceful, somebody with courage and a will, and you think that this could all be solved if you just killed this crazy motherfucker and deposited him in a dumpster somewhere.

This is crazy, you think. Maybe saying “I...” has nothing to do with the self-





referential pronoun. It could be the truncated form of an expression of inner pain, like “Aiyeeeeee!!” or any combination of vowels strung together to give voice to the tortured soul; utterances that are so common in Italian opera or Mexican love songs: “Aiyeeeeee!!—this is the only sound capable of conveying the profound pain I’m in”—a concept that is completely antithetical to the non-words so common in British songs, which stay as far away from any acknowledgement of inner pain – or even acknowledgment of an existence outside of lovely decoration – as possible, and which are instead cluttered with measure after measure of silliness like “Fa la la la la, la la la la,” happy sounds which seem designed to deny the existence of any emotion at all: “Oh, let’s not talk about that messy stuff, old man...have a spoonful of sugar and a jar of plum pudding and we’ll all go a-carrying after the wind dies down.” And being a human American citizen, you try to ally yourself – along with the rest of the population – with the hot-blooded Italian/Latin side, because the British nonsense syllables seem so goddamned silly in comparison, so frivolous and superficial. “I have emotion,” you might say to reassure yourself that there is absolutely no connection between you and the United Kingdom. And you don’t know how long it takes – probably about 30 seconds or maybe just a fraction of a second – until you realize that no matter how fast you run or how many somersaults your brain does, no white guy from Southern California like you is going to be able to claim ownership of the authenticity so implicit in Italian opera. You’ve actually, over the years, mostly during Christmas season, sung all those British nonsense sounds, the fa la la la, la la la la more than once and it felt good, it felt right, like you were full of nothing but good will, and were a contributing member to the brotherhood of man, and you wish you could reclaim those feelings, like you’re just so fucking tired of being some low-life who’s always running into emergency rooms and away from the cops. You deserve to feel good, and you just want somebody to realize this fact too, kind of like Bloody Mary from that Rogers and Hammerstein musical, South Pacific, that sounds so much like the music of Brahms with all that mature lyricism growing from thick foundations of rich, complex harmonies that are sometimes more like superficially cracked dishes of brown gravy than music, and you can just see corpulent, blossom-encrusted Bloody Mary with her brown skin and bare feet, standing on a promontory of that tiny south seas island describing her plight in song through the

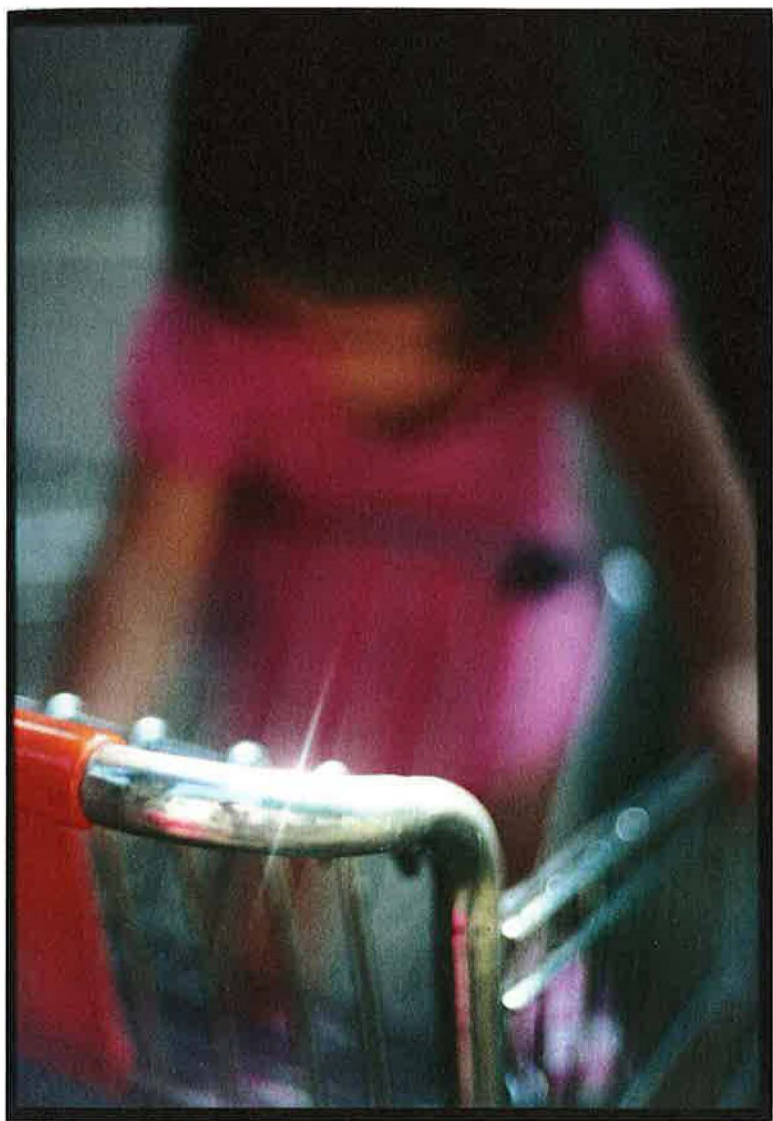
gossamer fog partially obscuring all that rich mountain top verdure, pouring her heart out in her pidgin English to all those millions of eyeballs and ear drums in all those darkened theaters, not only in San Diego, but all over the fucking world: “Sweet and clear us can be too!” And her words embolden you until you’re able to claim your share of legitimacy in this tiny instant of creation. And you might even make a pledge to yourself to remember to go caroling next Christmas so you can again sing: Fa la la la la la, la la la la!, but the syllables still sound vapid and you begin to feel self-conscious about how mindless they are, so you try to ennoble them, to elevate this silliness to a higher plane so you can own them. And what comes to mind right away is *The Messiah* by Handel, especially *The Hallelujah Chorus*, that seems to offer some substantive provenance to these nonsense filler syllables. That’s it! George Frederick Handel and you to the fucking hubs! George and you, dude! You might be condemned for singing silly sounds, but they’re actually heroic—heroic and brilliant—forged on the crucible of faith—sung by superior people that don’t get bogged down in all that morass of self, the narcissism that invites injury and hurt feelings. Fucking self-absorbed Italians! Get on with it, man! Stiff upper lip and all that. Carry on!

And by now your new friend has closed his eyes. He’s just lying there -- you can’t tell if he’s sleeping because you can see no evidence that he’s even breathing. And you realize you’re exhausted, so you close your eyes too, but your mind is still active and you’re thinking about what all this means. You want to go to sleep, but you wonder about what it might have meant if this guy had screamed another pronoun, like “You!...” or “She...!” or “They...!” instead of that self-limiting and overly mysterious “I...!” But you’ve been around a bit—you’ve read a few books—and you know a thing or two about human nature, and you know deep down that it doesn’t matter how far any pronoun drifts away from the first person, the big personal signifier “I” ...it’s always going to ultimately return to some form of self-reflection. That’s god’s cosmic joke on all of us, you think, and you’re struck by the futility of it all, that in all of human endeavor throughout all of history, and even before anything was ever written down, no matter how selfless or altruistic you’ve told yourself your motives are—you can never ever ever move past yourself; that everything you experience and everyone you meet will ultimately be mediated through the filter of you. And in what can only be considered an uncharacteristic





flash of humanity, you look at this guy with a little compassion, and when you do, you see yourself, but more than that, you see mankind, flawed and fucked up and struggling and wanting—needing more than anything else to be part of something, to be safe—to be loved. So you turn off your phone, you take off your clothes and lie down next to this guy because in this instant, you've realized that we're all just clawing climbing clinging microbes, hungry and striving for primacy, so maybe we can finally catch a lucky break and somehow squirm over the walls of this Petri dish. No one gets over on anybody else and no one gets out of here with a gold star. You close your eyes and go to sleep.



ESAU MARQUEZ
Child in Cart

When I Was Young

SUSANA MARCELO



When I was young, I encountered God in the form of a question but I did not answer so I've spent my life calling him back.

*

Stars luster in a blueprint of time around me, and I watch the earth turn like a record creating a symphony of clouds. (Silence) Stars burn moles on my pale skin. I cry because my bottle has fallen, so I reach over, peeping to make sure Mama doesn't see me standing on the high chair. She's talking on the phone with her girlfriend, the same lady whom she'll make some good ol' southern key lime pie for Papa's new automobile shop when it opens next year on the day Eisenhower will become president. I reach over but it's the cat's fault. It hates me. It runs by my chair. The leg wobbles. I fall over. Mama's red hair spins just in time to see her little boy hit the kitchen tiles before the pot of boiling water. It sprays me entirely. Moles burn into stars on my pale skin. (Sadness) That's the last time Mama sees me. The last time I see her, she throws a white rose on my grave, and I can feel her swallowing tears. But a single drop peeps from her eye—hanging—until she blinks and a flood of tears covers the hands on her face and I'm now standing in a lake.

I remembered she baptized me here with Papa when I was a newborn. Now he is holding me in his arms while Mama lights a candle. The priest murmurs his blessings. (Silence)

*

I stare at the sky where stars plot periods in this L.A. night. Taking a deep breath, I try to shake my anxiety. "Luster stars sprayed among blue," I recite a poem I wrote

When I Was Young

for Mariela, my fiancée. There's a hole burning in my pocket. I walk into her mother's house, so I can propose tonight. The first time we made love, I wrote a poem for her, and she said she loved my honey-colored skin and the curly, black hair on my head that looked as if it was covered in cotton clouds. But her destiny will be to marry the Cuban who manages the restaurant in downtown and has a lot of money, but he does not get it all from managing. In one year she'll get pregnant; in two they'll get married; in three I will meet him again. She's in bed with Alberto, the leader of the Mara on 18th Street. I didn't need to see his face right away. I saw the tattoo on his ass I've always seen above his Calvin Klein calzones. (Anger) Someone screams. Mariela screams. No, I scream. Alberto screams as I pull the knife from my jeans. Cotton clouds cover my head. (Silence) Taste of iron in my mouth. From blood? No. Gun. Powder clouds on my skull. Gun? No. Cocaine. I see red for the last time. (Darkness)

*

I saw my first pubic hairs when I cleaned as Mother always taught me: from front to back because if you don't your crotch will rot. (Ashamed) What will Mother think? Father already knows. But what will she say when the man at the coroner's office in steamed glasses asks, "Ma'am, please identify the body?"

There she is. I can feel her pain turning into nests. (Fear) The man unveils the head. There is no face; just a halo of blonde hair. (Disbelief) "Identify a mole or scar," he will say in ten seconds. His sweaty palms debate if he should wait more or maybe less. He wasn't trained for this. He doesn't want to be here. This is one of the worst cases in New York, he thinks. A record player spins a melody over our heads. "Identify a mole or scar," he finally says, as his glasses slip from his wide nose, and he uncovers all my body. He turns away not to look at the shaved cuts on my lady parts; the memory will make him quit by the end of the week. Mother looks intently. (Confusion)

She finds out the secret. She cannot bear to say it yet. The man believes he must say it because he thinks Mother is confused. He pauses. Stares. He wonders if maybe he should not say it at all. Decides he must, even though he will regret it as soon as the words leave his lips. "Scars inside the uterus means she was pregnant," he says. The last syllable lingers between his tongue and teeth, savoring the t-sound. (Naïve) Mother stares at him with a clenched jaw and a vein pops from her forehead. The





same vein I saw time and time again when I hit a wrong chord while playing Midnight Sonata on the piano she bought after working extra shifts for a year.

Words left unsaid waft in the air; I whisper in her ear, "I love you." (Hope) She screams and my words explode. The symphony over our heads begins to fade.

*

When I was young, I encountered God in the form of a question, but I did not answer so I've spent my life calling him back. (Peace) My family is here waiting. Esmeralda, my wife, massages my hands just like she has done every night for the past fifty years. But it's my time, and I'm not sad. When God called me, I was a child. He asked if I was ready to open my eyes. But I had no answer. I simply saw darkness. Now I've spent my life wondering when He would come back. Perhaps this is the time, as I see my children have built lives of their own. My daughter's eyes are as brown as her mother's the first time I met her. Esmeralda traces the roads on my face one last time.

And that's when I see her getting out of the salon. She dabs on wine-colored lipstick, matching her dress, using the reflection of the window. She sees my reflection staring at her when she drops her wallet and a lace glove. I run to grab them. (Love) Two years later we will get married in my parent's church and joke about how many children we will have—four, which we did except Leonard, the oldest who died in a car crash when he was twelve. His pull is starting to call mine.

Now my family watches as my remains are laid in the ground. "Remember when grandpa took me to see the elephants and clowns at the circus?" I hear my grandson ask his father, the middle child, Rene. (Redemption) Both of them have straight black hair like mine. It comforts me to know that when I was my grandson's age, I walked in the presence of roads not yet laid, as he does now.

Stars luster in a blueprint of time around me. "Don't open your eyes," God says, "I will tell you when you are ready."

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When I was young, I encountered God in the form of a question, but I did not answer so I've spent my life calling him back...



RYAN SMITH
Untitled #1

Adieu

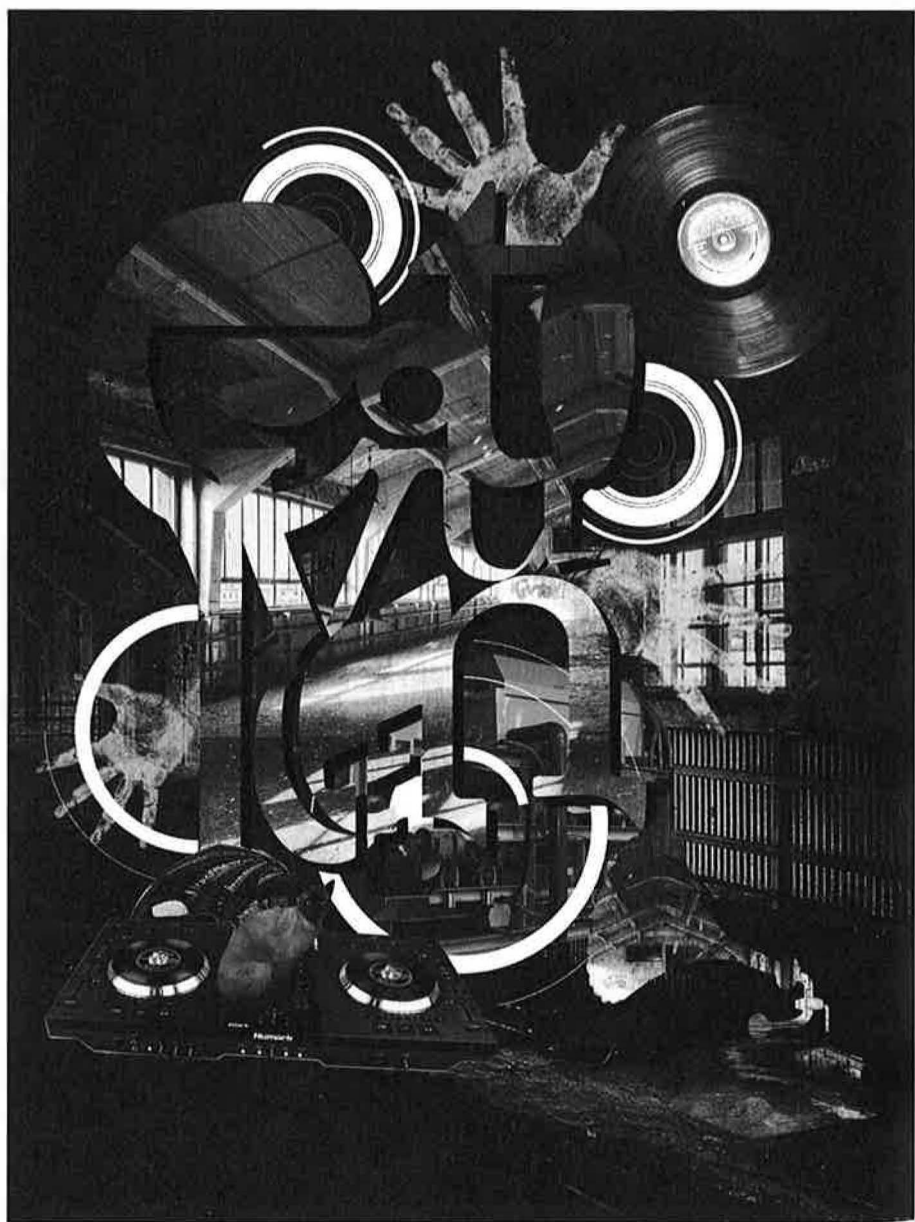
ERICA POLLOCK

I LIKE THE wind
That waltzes through leaves
There's an air of mystery in its breeze
It takes my breath away at night,
Replacing my eyes with new insight.
In a way her pain is healed,
Making it seem like it isn't real

Composing a smile only for others
So she doesn't disappoint them,
She is their mother.
Although that could never ring true
She realizes her end is being cued
As she lies upon her dying bed
She closes her eyes to eternally rest her head.

I weep beside her silhouette,
Because she is no longer, my living statuette.
She was gone with a breathless adieu
There was nothing I could do





SIU LUNG CHOW
Evolution Cover II

The Guitarist

RENEE HENDRIE



His hands were, quite simply, old. Or, more directly, there were crepe-y, spotted and calloused. His left middle knucklebone bent just a little more obtusely than it should. It had, according to the literature of the time, been a childhood accident that caused it. He never could make a fist after that. However, fixing it meant risk and downtime; and what's more, he'd have to learn to play the guitar all over again. Instead, the other fingers moved with greater dexterity, creeping spider-like up and down the fretboard.

It was a gorgeous instrument when it was made: natural blonde finish, with gold-plated knobs and pickups and a mother-of-pearl inlay along the neck. And a genuine f-hole, back when they cut them out instead of painting them on. It still wasn't half bad, despite the battery of years, when polished to a shine.

You could see a little of the young spit that he'd been- the cut of his chin a little jowly now; the regal (if slightly pointed) nose. Everything mottled and gone soft. His voice was thin and syrupy, as opposed to the thick, sweet molasses twang it had once been. Now he held it close, nestling it low in his throat like a baby bird. Only his eyes were still sharp; clear and aware. He was younger now than he'd ever been. And he knew it, too, by the way he caught her staring from the second row. And somewhere between the bridge and the chorus, he gave her a little wink.

'Oh, if you were around in my day, darlin'...'

Forty years ago that wink would've caused riots. Girls would have fought over the precise calibration of his eyeline, ready to lay claim to that wink.

Maybe she was the only one looking to claim that prize anymore. Or maybe he had just decided to throw one out there to see if there were still any takers.

With a twitch across the crinkles of his mouth, in what may have been a smile, he turned his eyes back towards the fretboard.



REZA HASHEMIZADEH
Pollination

Anthropomorphism

ANDREW FARWELL

OPENING THE DOOR into a shelter from the heat,
I find a dormant pile of fur near the couch.
This dog wasn't always so docile; I remember
wrestling in the living room with an energetic puppy,
being cured of carpet burns through medicinal licks,
and long walks around the overwhelming neighborhood.

But I'm now sure that pile of fur has seen its best days;
No more hikes or runs in the park. I'd be
happy just to see an effortless trip up the stairs.
So we take her to the vet after a good-bye burger,
as the traditions of death row permeate the air.

Our final exchange is fluorescently lit and sterile.
Her clear eyes show her age, as she gazes
upon the matured remnants of a happy toddler
who used to share popsicles with her on empty summer days.

She was more of a human to me than the strangers I've never met.





CINTIA SEGOVIA

The Kiss

The Epitaph on the Social Portrait of Naiveté

NEDA LEVI

THESE WERE THE portraits that hung on the walls of that teenager's
refuge, the address tied to lying under heavy sheets; relinquishing
sweat on every inch of her body dreaming past noon afraid of morning's
bright against window shades, pricking the pores on nuisance's
expression – sixteen, headed towards immature wrinkling.

These were the portraits on the partition of that teenager's refuge, the
address tied to the corner where wallpaper symbolic of Eden's garden
disbanded from stucco; Monday afternoons graduated kneeling against
that curvature with her face buried in hands, praying. Gunmetal

eyeliner expired with the slimmest wet charred from high
school insecurity suffocating her pulse.

These portraits vandalized her progress. Their proofs examined silence
forced upon youth's canvas. Her outline lied in tempera; in truth she bled
thick oil separate from social waters, trusting its thinness
– embracing ignorance the size of
waves never capsized.

Society chose to paint these portraits with
watercolors, so slight erasure will flood
the river a victim cries.



← Seduction

CODY DEITZ

SPLAYED OUT ALONG the couch cushions
like a dog after a long walk,

I allow the hushed television
to bathe me
in the cool colors of the spectrum
at 1:26 AM.

A young woman, tight black blouse,
tugs my attention
toward her cleavage
with an arching finger:

aryan blonde and blue seduce me,
looking at me and through me,
and into me,
holding me still
so the announcer
has a brief moment
to make his pitch
about laundry detergent.



GLENN COLLINS

HER ARDUOUS FIRE

carried brittle wings,
flies greeting dust
at her breath.
Like worm in sun –
a dried up shell,
the cold snap of being
hallowed out.
Fingers tip unbalanced
Hands jittering
and forgetting
to feel.
For the cocky soil,
crawling up on top
is close enough to
burrowing.
Shadows shake like
flickering eyes
in candles:
liquescent lives,
never leaving a trace
to understanding.
Better to die, trust in some
affliction of memory
where black meets white
at the crossing of gray.
Through the mesh of time
they washed out stones
that kept her rooted
in place.





SAMUEL ALBARRAN
Rabbit Hole

Winter Fruit

TRISTA PAYTE



We were living next to Vera for almost a year before she spoke a word to me. I did notice her though, during our very first week in the new house. I was jogging through the lonely landscape of our property, isolated both in body and mind, when startled by a sharp bark of laughter. There, behind the fence on the western side of our property, stood a very tiny, very grey old woman, mumbling into the sky. The trees, she was talking with the trees.

She stood in an orchard, amongst rows and rows of striking, magnificent trees, stoic and still sentinels beside their matriarch. They bared fruit of some kind. It hung from their boughs in pear shaped clusters, the skin raised and rough. Avocados. I peered at the cloud of dark green leaves and my mouth began to water. I decided I needed breakfast and jogged home, leaving my strange neighbor to her trees.

Jogging is my time to plan and organize. Simple things, what to make for dinner, or what my next home improvement project should be. But my mind instead snagged on the sharp tooth of a subject I thought I had well contained. It gnawed away at its cage, reawakened and hungry. I tried to push it back, but it was insistent, a phantom kick in a vacant womb.

Where the hell had my happily ever after gotten derailed? Things certainly started out all right. A good childhood with stable, loving parents. Marriage to my college boyfriend. Perfect little house on a cul-de-sac full of fresh, hopeful couples exactly like us. A place of becoming. It was the spring of our lives and we were about to bloom.

Only we didn't. There were little buds cropping up all over our community, in every house but ours. My desire for a baby, once small and secondary, became all-consuming. Frustration and desperation came off in waves. I was a walking, breathing pollution, an eye sore in an otherwise picture perfect place. The other wives, smelled infection in me and cut me out of their group. Thorns of resentment grew around the perimeter of our home; soon no one would cross them. Frost settled upon us, nothing grew beneath it. A second spring hit the neighborhood and once again skipped our doorstep. Our season was permanent winter. I, shut-in, hardly left the house anymore.

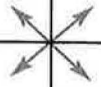
Then Jonathan received an option to transfer. His company decided on a westward expansion and as one of the top performers in the district he was offered a choice of two prime locations, Denver or Los Angeles. Skin warmed and eyes filled with starlight. Our fairytale, reborn.

Oh, California. Paradise of mild weather and beautiful people. A land where we could find a little privacy and some much-needed anonymity. At least that is what I envisioned. We were both craving space and solitude, and the realtor told us of the perfect property, if Jon didn't mind a commute. We purchased the 30 acres in a small farming community northwest of Los Angeles. Expansive and green, the perfect place for a restart.

A week after we moved into our western paradise, I stood on the porch of the newly remodeled, renovated and revamped ranch home, drinking my coffee, watching Jon's car get smaller and smaller. He disappeared down the long, winding dirt road that was our sole connection to the main highway. Off to work he went. Looking out into the distance, I felt it. Solitude. I knew there were neighboring houses, I had seen them from the road coming in, but from our house they weren't visible. Just trees, fields, and fertile, open land as far as I could see. So different from suburban Pennsylvania. There, I could look out my window into my neighbors and know what they were watching on television and having for dinner. I felt renewed. How could I feel barren when I was surrounded by such vigorous and untamed life?

But soon freedom gave way to unbound frustration. Jonathan's job was demanding; I was alone more often than not. I had three passions in life cultivated from our old Pennsylvania life: jogging, cooking and crafting. I attempted to fill up my loneliness with these. But the house was near perfect and it wasn't any fun to





cook for myself. I began to jog two times a day, then three. Anything to fill up the solitude. It was one of those jogs that led to me to the woman I would later know as Vera.

But I didn't give the old woman much thought after that first sighting. I was too busy reacquainting with my forgotten passion. I made lists of names. Girl names, boy names, androgynous names. Then I moved on to nursery design. That process involved digging through old magazines and books and arranging and my ideas into scrapbooks. I designed different rooms based upon the different names, giving a different theme to each, based upon what I was certain would be their character traits. I planned a life for a child that did not have one, yet. Of course I told Jonathan nothing. He was stressed with the new position at work, his hands full building our finances. It was my job, I decided, to build our child.

When I ran out of lists to make and magazines to dissect, I ran. I added evening jogs to escape the smothering dense quiet of the empty house and the taunting tick tock of time. It was on one of these that I found Vera again. She was perched on tiptoe, stroking one of those firm, green orbs dangling heavy from tree limb. Soft whispers crawled from her throat as she caressed. The intimacy between her and her fruit stirred a feeling within me, long dormant, as I watched. It felt inappropriate somehow to stay and watch. I kept jogging, but the image of her long, slender fingers, caressing the fruit so tenderly, stayed with me. Fire rose in me, from feet to face, but it had nothing to do with my jog. I was jealous. Of the fruit.

Early the next morning, I rose and ran to where our property touched hers. Several yards back from the fence there was a dense line of shrubbery and juvenile trees that suited my new purpose. I cleared the ground of burs, rocks and crisp dead leaves and settled down onto the hard, cracked earth, staring through the foliage towards the fence line. Time passed. Maybe I fell asleep. Then Vera was there, singing softly, the tune, bright and cheerful, the words, foreign to me. She moved from row to row while I crawled on elbows and knees beside the tree line, belly kissing earth. Sometimes my skin would catch, but I was careful not to cry out and I did not stop. I could not stop. The song was reaching into me, pulling out long-forgotten pieces and nourishing them with its melody. It grew dark, and Vera disappeared, her song fading into the dimly light horizon. I went to wipe my dirt and bramble-crust hair from my face and realized I'd been crying.

Time passed. Soon the watching spread to every morning. Always a quiet observer, I never disturbed Vera or got in the way of her work. She rewarded me by revealing the secrets of her horticultural gift. She walked amongst the rows of trees, her hands outstretched to stroke a trunk or rub a fat, waxy leaf between two fingers. She sang, hummed or spoke to them constantly. Sometimes her words soothed, other times admonished. The words weren't in English, but it didn't matter. Their beauty translated.

One night while Jon slept, I dragged a large, weatherproof box with two blankets, a pillow, some water and snacks to my spot. Later I added an all-weather parka, a small umbrella, a towel. Then a yoga mat and a sketch pad. Spare clothes. Sunblock. Chapstick. Toilet paper. Necessary comforts. A day of watching could be ruined by chapped lips.

Vera and her work consumed me. Sometimes I forgot to eat. I didn't always get home in time to make Jon dinner either. It wasn't my fault. When Vera would sing, time would stop. And the avocados, those rich, lush, perfect little replicas, the very essence of life itself! I couldn't tear my eyes away from them most days. I wanted to climb over the fence and touch them. I wanted to look the old woman in the eyes, know what she knew. But I only watched. And yearned.

I might have watched forever, if not for the dancing. One cold, damp morning, I lay snuggled in a cocoon of blankets, sketching an avocado flower plucked from the ground on my side of the fence, waiting for Vera. I heard drumming. Or maybe I felt it. I looked up from the sketch, and peered through the bushes with squinted eyes. There she was, coming up one of the pathways. Each heavy step added to the dust cloud already threatening to envelop her tiny form. Her deep and throaty chant rumbled through my entire body. She reached the last tree before the fence, stretched her arms towards the immense canopy of green above her, and began to dance. A dance unlike anything I knew. She swayed. She jumped. She spun. Her dance rocked her entire frame and shook the earth beneath me. She would reach towards the trees and then fold in half, as if trying to contact their roots, their life unseen. Her small, bare feet were a whirl of movement, all the time pounding a rhythm of life and love into the soil. The trees stirred. My soul sang. Enchanted by her movement and seduced by her power, I let a deep quivering moan escape past my lips.

I clasped my hand over my mouth, too late. Vera stopped. The wind whispered





through the leaves above, lifting her billowing, green-grey dress upward, to reveal sinewed, slightly bowed legs. She turned, looked straight through my cover into my eyes, and grinned. Then she reached down for the hem of her gauzy skirt, pulled it up between her legs, tucked it into her back waist band and, in one swift movement, sprang up the nearest tree. Leaves rustled overhead, like laughter. The sound came from all around me, but revealed nothing.

I sat. I waited. And I watched. When darkness dropped down from the sky and Vera still hadn't, I rose to my feet. My legs shook and my head was in a fog; too long I had been crouched down, frozen and motionless. I stared at the fence for a moment but couldn't bring myself to approach it. I turned and walked on wobbling legs home to a questioning husband. I had no answers to give. He slept on the couch.

The next day I awoke to an empty couch and a husbandless house. I didn't care. I laced my shoes and sprinted across the property.

There she was. Back on solid ground and waiting at the fence, cradling a large woven basket that nearly eclipsed her from my sight. I stopped running and stood still, shaking and silent. I was chilled by the morning air on my sweat drenched skin, but I was also embarrassed and afraid. Her face folded inward like a sun-browned apple, then opened back up in an enormous burst of white. "Come, girl. I have gift for you." Her voice was rich and sweet, a balm on my ragged soul. She bounced the basket up and down in her arms as though soothing a colicky baby. Whatever was in that basket, I wanted it. Needed it. I walked over to the fence and she tilted the bounty towards me.

It was filled to the brim with avocados. Verdant, massive, they beamed at me from their woven cradle. The basket was tremendous, containing at least 35 avocados, perhaps more. I looked down over the rim into her eyes, bright green and shimmering, like the leaves on her precious trees. I inhaled her smell: fertile soil, or a garden after a heavy rain. She thrust the basket into my arms, and let go. They were mine.

"Avocados are aphrodisiac," she sang out, and then chuckled softly to herself. "You know, for the sex?" Then she turned and strode off, humming softly to herself.

"Wait!" I called after her. "I-I'm Diana. It's nice to..."

"Vera," she called over her shoulder. You call me Vera."

I stood still, watching until Vera was out of sight. My face was on fire, my throat, constricted and dry. What had she said? For the sex? How could she...? Well, she *did* talk to trees. Perhaps she knew everything there was to know about avocado lore and she just happened to share that particular tidbit with me? Or maybe my desperation was so strong that she could smell it. I wondered for a moment what desperation might smell like. Overripe berries, or wilting flowers? I peered into the basket again. There had to be 50 avocados in there. They weren't all ripe, which was good. It was going to take a lifetime to eat them all.

I carried my unbalanced load back to the house. So many avocados, it was overwhelming. I plucked one from the basket, and squeezed gently. Firm yet yielding, ripe, perfect. I grabbed a knife and sliced it open. Its flesh was absolutely gorgeous, bright green rim, lighter at the center. Creamy and flawless. I removed the seed, grabbed a spoon and gently pierced its flesh. It melted in my mouth. I stood at the sink and shoveled spoonfuls of the silky flesh into my mouth, in rapid succession, until I was left with a thin, hollow skin. I threw the remnants onto the counter and grabbed another, then another. I couldn't, wouldn't stop.

Jonathan arrived home as I was licking the skin of my seventh clean. I sat cross-legged on the kitchen counter, surrounded by the carnage of my avocado massacre. Pits and skins lay around me like shrapnel. I had abandoned cutlery. It was much easier to simply scoop the fruit out with three curved fingers and deposit it directly into my mouth. Jon shuddered when he entered our kitchen and found me there, soft, green globs up to my elbows, avocado remnants smeared across cheeks and nose, pit grasped in my teeth. I spit it into the trash and gave him a large, green-tinted smile. "Honey, you have got to try one of these avocados," I blurted out.

Jonathan looked down at the basket by my feet, still overflowing with the fruits of Vera's labors. "Where in God's name did you get all of those? Diana, are you nuts? There's got to be forty avocados in there. We cannot possibly eat all those."

"They were a gift. From Vera."

"Who the heck is Vera?"

"Our neighbor...on the west side, she has an orchard and..."

"I just don't understand why you would bring all these home. Di...you don't even like-" He stopped and stared at me, a lopsided grin slowly spread across his face. "Wait. Weird craving? Are you-"

My excitement turned to fury. "Of course not! How could I be? Issues aside,





you'd have to actually have sex with me, Jonathan.”

He face turned white, then purple. I looked down at my hands. The avocado was drying, turning an odd shade of grey that reminded me of decay. This turned my stomach. I thought of Pennsylvania, how we had stopped talking to each other. How he had started sleeping in the spare bedroom. “Jon.” I looked up. The space where he had been standing moments before was empty. I stood, viewing the mess. It could wait till morning. I went to bed, but not before I had one more avocado. Sliced and off a plate this time. With a fork, in case my husband came back. He didn't.

The next morning I went into the kitchen. It was spotless. There was a note from Jon:

Hey Babe,

Sorry about last night. I know this move has been hard on you, with me working all the time. I left you a present in your craft room. I should have thought of it sooner. I'll bring home Chinese tonight. Try not to o.d. on avocados in the meantime. -J

I ran down the hallway to my craft room, my body quivering with enthusiasm. I threw the door open and gazed around the room. My eyes fell upon a small, pink laptop, screen open, another note placed upon its keyboard.

D-

I bookmarked a couple of sites, including one called meetup where you could look for local events to attend, maybe meet new people? I want you to get out, or at least talk to people. I'm not trying to push, doll, I just love you. See you tonight.

A computer? I didn't even use the desktop in Jon's office, not because I couldn't but because I didn't want to. I reread the note in my hands. *I want you to get out, or at least talk to people.* I crushed his words into a tight ball and threw it at my gift. Then I sulked off to the kitchen to fix myself a big bowl of comfort.

The basket was on the floor in the corner of the kitchen. I snatched it and heaved it onto the table. Holding out the edge of my t-shirt with one hand, I piled several avocados into it and walked over to the counter where I dumped them and went back for another load. Eight gorgeous globes spun on the countertop. I reached out and took one and squeezed it. I smelled it, and rubbed its rough surface across my cheek. Then I bit into it. Hard. My teeth cut through the skin and into the soft flesh beneath. I sucked it down my throat, swallowed, and spit out the skin. It landed on the spotless tile. Standing there, I glanced around the shining kitchen,

my mess undone by Jon the night before. I took another bite, skin and all, and spit what I couldn't chew onto his pristine white countertop. Fuck him.

I ate three more avocados in the same fashion. Soon floor and counters were sprayed with green flecks and chunks of blackened, half chewed avocado skins of various shapes and sizes. Bored with my game, I retrieved a knife from the drawer and sliced up the remaining avocados taken from the basket. I threw the chunks into a bowl, licked my fingers clean. I needed a drink. There was a bottle of white in the chiller, I opened it, took a large sip, then reached back into the bowl. A fistful of avocado found its way into my mouth. More wine followed. My head swum. I needed to sit. I took my bowl and bottle and stumbled toward the hallway, smiling at the mess I was leaving behind. The finishing touch was a long green smear of my trailing fingers as I flipped the light switch on the way out.

I walked back into my craft room, set the new computer on the floor, and sat, with the half eaten bowl of avocado in my lap, the almost empty bottle of wine to my right. I powered up the computer and opened up a bookmarked site. My face grew warm. "I'm adjusted!" I yelled at the laptop. Deep breath. Gulp of wine. Handful of sticky fruit. I wiped my hand on the front of my shirt and typed avocado into the search bar. Wikipedia appeared first; I clicked the link. One sentence in particular caught my attention:

The Aztecs thought of the avocado as fertility fruit.

I typed Aztecs next to avocado and hit search again.

The avocado is believed to be an aphrodisiac.

I soon discovered that Aztec, Mayan and Incan cultures all believed that avocados were imbued with special powers. All three also thought that avocados nourished the body externally as well as internally. I even found an old legend that told of the necessity of locking up young maidens during the height of the avocado season, for protection from the ravenous men in their community. The deeper I dove, the more convinced I became that Vera's avocados were going to revive my marital bed.

The wine took its toll; eventually I passed out on the floor, curled around the avocado crusted bowl. I awoke to loud slamming and banging. I shot up, disoriented, and in the glow of the laptop I saw the overturned bottle and remembered. The mess, in the kitchen. Jon. I ran down the hallway and slid into the kitchen. It was even worse than I remembered. Avocado, everywhere.





“Baby? I am so sorry, I-I will clean this up, I promise.” I slunk over and wrapped my arms around his waste, breathing in his smell. So fresh and electric, like the air before a storm. I kissed the back of his neck. He stiffened.

“You stink of alcohol, Diana. Take a shower. Go to bed. You aren’t in any shape to deal with this.”

“I don’t want to deal with this,” I purred. “I want to-”

“I don’t.” He pulled out of my grasp and walked away, grumbling under his breath. Something about the ceiling I looked up. How *had* I managed to get it up there?

Dejected, I shuffled off to the bathroom and left him to clean up my avocado slaughterhouse. After he ate dinner I tried to seduce him again, with a clean face and brushed teeth this time, but to no avail. I went to bed aroused and rejected, while he stayed in his office, officially to finish up a report, unofficially to avoid me.

I tried to settle myself down by glancing through my baby nursery scrapbook, but I wasn’t in the mood for that kind of fantasy. My sexual tension was so intense, my skin felt wired. I couldn’t wait for Jon. I stripped off my clothes, piece by piece, watching myself in the bureau mirror. Once I stood completely bared, I switched off the light and gazed at my nude, moonlit body. I climbed into the bed, letting the sensation of cold sheets on warm flesh wash over me. Touching myself felt strange, like caressing a stranger. I ran my hands over my attention-starved body, slowly. I heard a humming, and began to rock in rhythm. *Vera*. Harder and faster I rocked to her song until my entire body broke out in harmonic vibration. During climax, I tasted avocados in my mouth. I fell asleep dreaming of cascading white flowers.

In the morning I awoke calm and clear. I decided to make peace by cooking breakfast. The house smelled delicious, I knew Jon would have to succumb, to me and the avocados. Instead he grabbed his thermos, filled it with coffee and turned towards the door, without even glancing at me.

“Breakfast, baby?” I prompted.

“No time.”

“But I made you an omelet.” He was silent. “Are you still...mad?”

“I’m just not hungry, babe.” He came over and kissed the top of my head. “I’ve got to go, I’m already late.”

No amount of cajoling was going to get my avocado omelet into my husband.

After he was gone I angrily picked at the omelet and then opened it and ate the avocado. Then I ran. It was later than usual, so I did not expect Vera. Yet there she was, standing at the fence line, waiting for me. I jogged over, and we stared at each other, soundless. Finally, I broke the silence.

“They didn’t work. My husband won’t eat them.”

She chuckled and reached out to caress the nearest tree. “Sometimes timing off. Males and females don’t flower together always. Patient, girl. And some manipulating too, eh?” She grinned, patted my head, and left me standing there. I stood for a few moments, staring up into her trees. They looked luscious, so healthy and full of life. I began to reach over the fence towards the nearest tree, then drew my hand back. The fence was a boundary I couldn’t cross. I didn’t want to break the spell. I inhaled deeply, turned and headed back to the house.

I spent the entire afternoon on my little pink laptop researching avocado recipes, and turning over Vera’s words in my mind. One in particular. Manipulation. Then I stumbled across the perfect way. Dessert. Jonathan can’t resist sweets, and he wouldn’t expect avocado in one either. It was the perfect ruse.

Avocado Lime Pie recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 cup sieved avocado pulp.
- 1 (14 ounce) can sweetened condensed milk.
- 1 teaspoon grated lime zest.
- 1/2 cup fresh lime juice.
- 2 egg yolks.
- 1 pinch salt.
- 1 recipe pastry for a 9 inch single crust pie.

Preparation Instructions:

- Combine sweetened condensed milk, lime zest, lime juice, lightly beaten egg yolks, and salt; blend until mixture thickens. Stir in avocado pulp. Pour filling into pie shell.
- 3. Chill pie for several hours. Garnish with whipped cream, and serve.

Jonathan was thrilled that I made him a pie. So thrilled that he ate the entire thing. He even dipped his fingers in the pie pan and licked the remaining morsels





off his fingertips, a very un-Jonathan thing to do. It was working! I rushed off to the bathroom to freshen up and get myself ready. But when I came out, my husband was sequestered in his office, again. I shuffled off to the kitchen, grabbed an avocado out of the basket and began to absentmindedly peel it. I had been so worked up over the prospect of sex that I hadn't eaten much dinner, or any of the pie. I sliced the fruit into a bowl, and took a bite. I was angry that Jonathan ate the entire pie. I didn't even get to taste it. I went over to the fridge to find something to go with my avocado. As I was bent over, rummaging through the crisper drawer, I felt Jonathan push against me.

"What did you put in that pie?"

"What? Just something Vera told me to try."

"Who?"

"Our neighbor, Ve-"

"Thank her for me later." He spun me around and kissed me so forcefully my toes curled. I reached up and wrapped my avocado coated fingers in his hair. We tumbled down the hallway towards the bedroom, clothes dropping like petals. In the bedroom, we folded into a pile of tangled limbs. Rediscovered our rhythm. Bloomed for each other. As I lay panting afterwards, snarled and twisted in Jonathan and our sex-damp, earth-scented sheets, I whispered, "*Oh, Vera...oh, I owe you a pie*".

The next morning I was up at 4am for my run. Jonathan was still snoring loudly on his side of the bed. I practically flew down to the dividing line between our land and Vera's, but she wasn't there. I waited a while and then jogged on, and came back by on my way home. She still wasn't there. I was disappointed, but not terribly surprised. She was by no means predictable. I thought about waiting, but I was hoping to catch Jonathan in the shower. Perhaps the pie's magic hadn't worn off just yet. I sprinted the rest of the way home.

The doorbell rang around 3am the next morning. I opened the door to see Vera standing in the shadows, her frail form nearly indistinguishable from the gray, lightless morning air. She was draped in brown, with just her tiny, pale face poking out at me. Her eyes were dark but her smile put me at ease. "Avocado," she said. "Of your own." She thrust her slender, smooth hands across the threshold, revealing a water-filled jar with a large seed balanced precariously upon toothpicks crisscrossing the lip. Its smooth, curved bottom just grazed the liquid surface. "For

baby. It bring her luck.”

I'm not sure if it was because it was early and I was tired, or if it was joy or gratitude, and yes, love for this odd little woman that I hardly knew, but I began to cry softly. “No baby. I can't...thank you, you really have done so much for us, for me. But on this you are mistaken. No baby.”

She smiled, reached out and gently patted my abdomen. “Soon, baby. Soon.” She turned and stepped off my porch into the darkness of the early morning. I watched her disappear into the haze. Then I carried the jar into the kitchen and placed it upon the darkened window sill. I ran a finger across the avocado pit's silky surface, wondering if I would be able to keep it alive. I really wasn't very good at taking care of plants. It was nothing more than big old seed right now though, and it looked pretty hearty. This would be my new baby, I thought. And I would have Vera to help me raise it. I smiled at my new addition and then left the kitchen in search of my jogging shoes.

Later, as I ran past her trees, I slowed to see if I could spot her. There she was, several feet down one of the rows, dancing wildly beneath the trees. She was laughing and spinning, her feet moving so fast they hardly seemed to be touching the ground. “Hello!” I called out to her. “I wanted to thank you for the seed. You left so fast this morning...”

“Did you know that all Hass avocado trees are descended from a single mother tree?” she asked me. “One tree! Amazing!” She spun out of sight, but I could still hear her laughter. It followed me all the way home.

The next several mornings I didn't feel up to running. I didn't feel up to doing much of anything. But after four days of loafing around I realized that my avocado supply was gone and suddenly I needed one. I grabbed the empty basket and walked towards Vera's house. I thought this time, for once, I would use the front door.

FOR SALE. The big bold red letters screamed out from the sign in the front of Vera's house. I stood in the road, dumbfounded. Vera, selling her house? Was she is some kind of financial trouble? I took a step towards the porch.

“Can I help you?” I turned to see a suit-clad gentleman holding a stack of flyers. He stuffed them into the box attached to the for sale sign.

“I was looking for Vera,” I mumbled into my chest.

“Who?”





“The lady who lives here?” I didn’t mean for it to sound like a question.

“Ma’am , you must be mistaken. I’ve been looking for a buyer for this house for years! I sold that one in half the time,” he said, while pointing in the direction of my own house. “Are you sure you have the right address?”

I couldn’t reply. My mind swam. Where was Vera? Did I get lost, was I at the wrong house? I spun in a circle, dizzy, without bearings.

“I’ll give you my card, in case you know someone who might be interested in buying. It’s really an interesting property. The avocados are better than any I’ve ever had, and they seem to grow even when no one’s here to tend to them! Must be a really hardy type of tree.” He reached into his pocket and held out a card. I stared, at his tan, manicured hand. I could feel the burn of fresh tears.

“Well, uh, Anyhow, I better get going,” he stammered. I was making him uncomfortable. I didn’t care. A car horn blared, making the both of us jump.

“Oh! That’s the gentleman who bought the house next door I was telling you about. Great guy, works in...consulting of some sort. Hey, sir!” he called out.

I didn’t need to look, I knew it was my husband. I couldn’t speak. Not to this strange man who was not our realtor. And certainly not to Jon. I dropped the basket and ran.

I was stumbling by the time I got to the house. A sudden tidal wave of nausea came bursting up out of my throat. I spilled the contents of my stomach onto the earth. I’d just seen her. Last night? Last week? I wasn’t sure. I’d felt so sick lately. I ran up the steps and burst through the kitchen door. I needed to see. Yes. There, glittering in the sunlight were tiny, delicate green roots, streaming from the bottom of the seed. It had sprouted.

Four Doors

UP UNTIL COLLISION, it's all just noise.

Winding deeper into passive resentment,
screeching away bits of transparent skin

and yellowed photographs
once held to the tarnished light,

to the close focal region
of a steady iris;

scanning every fragment
beneath the tattered Polaroid

and blooming vastly amidst
a segregated shore of metal to glass.

Be it by chance or devil's disdain,
by uneasiness or sudden fixation,

play-grounded children witness
the sound of a cascaded headline:

*Tires Crying to a Waltz;
Beggars Beneath The Pavement.*

To know its name, its friends,
its anything at all—



JOEY DE LA CRUZ

instead, mangled by shards
of bigger things.

They'll never stop to stutter words
of poignant frustration

stuck on the last syllables of
a two-second confession,

"I know."



← The Arming Scene

JOEY DE LA CRUZ

YES LOVE, I owe you
one, but times without need
all get the best of me and

mellow screens will captivate
me whole, spit on me calamity,
chain me to a studio chair and

force me to rewind—
until retracing if's and not's and
thoughts of showing up uninvited,

without clothes to spend the night
or pillows to rest our heads on
are all imposed onto sets of

patented film—two hours and a half—
but free most Monday Matinees,
with Helvetica font subtitles

italicized in gray so that every
optic nerve crammed inside your
hasty eyes are forced to strain

themselves to see that maybe it
isn't I who's grown so soft and distal,
but you who's never played a part.



YANA GORDIN
Defy



RYAN SMITH
Untitled #2

The Tortoise We Live In

SEAN PESSIN



We moved into a very small house with an equally tiny tortoise. It seemed paradoxical to some of us; the house only just barely housed us all when we toured the grounds, but the fact that the bedrooms lay upstairs and out of the way appealed to our aesthetic preferences. The bathroom being up on the second floor posed a problem, but one that never overran our pleasure with its other positive elements. Light tripped on the blinds and fell haphazardly onto the floor of the great room; in this room we settled, deciding it our favorite, and we signed all necessary paperwork. So we moved in, us and the tortoise, and we crammed against the walls. To move, one elbowed their way through corpulent piles of bodies wrapped around the tortoise, swam over the swells of this Charybdis, front doorways or toward the backyard. The mass always churned with disapproval at any motion that did not follow its own waves, the sine of respiration. We all, in those days, heaved synchronized breaths, those days before all the walls receded beyond the zenith of the horizon.

We sat Indian style, with our legs crossed, with our knees touching the upper inner thighs of those next to us, entirely platonic. That is not to say that sex never happened amongst us. The meetings of indexed flesh frequently led to salient dissolution, but it lacked in its origins the intent to raise carnal concerns to the forefront of our consciousness; some things just happen. The whirlpool of sloshing and splashing expressions of temporary physical desires, funneled around the tortoise who sat at the center, spun unchecked. We feared for our desert lizard only

after we thoroughly enjoyed our fill, then we worried about it drowning, about the tortoise getting the wrong idea about our play. Overcompensating, we returned to our circle, folded our limbs into place, our living leather covering our shame. We sat as lattice of skin and bone, teaching the tortoise to form its shell.

Our memories collected around us in the interim of intercourse, piling up high and shifting as we settled on our preferred postures. We began the process with those perfect little memories of childhood, when the impossibly large world flooded with the dreams that lend pigment to the desert landscape; color materialized in moments of uncontrollable euphoria. The tortoise responded well to the moments that encourage growth and expansion in this vast existence. Fortune favored us as the memories grew the tortoise, and the house along with it. Not one of us recognized this strange happenstance until we noticed that the tortoise no longer fit in the palms of our hands, and in fact, managed to push the boundaries of the group out, widening our circles and currents. And we, too, grew in number, certainly, since the room continued to demolish our personal space as it expanded. Our hearts and heads and rocks and upper inner thighs soon numbered in unfathomable quantities, pressed up against the walls and crowding the tortoise. The front door allowed people to pour in, to fill every nook and cranny, stripping bare like the rest of us and offering their stones. In this dense thicket, we coerced the tortoise to form a house of its own, stained with the concrete foundation of childhood instability.

When our knees lifted above our hips while climbing the stairs to clear out the second level of the house, we wondered about the state of the growth of our throngs; transients cesspooled in the bedrooms, lured in by the promise of unconditional love. We opened up the doors, mopping clean the now dedicated empty space. And as our home towered over the desert landscape, we forsook the aerie lavatory, retreating to the great grand room for support. Our discouragement came at our heels, as we noticed for the first time that the tortoise saw us eye to eye. Only as it stood so very close to our eyes did we notice that its firm shell also possessed an intrinsic softness, a cloudy aura similar to the one childhood itself is permanently bound by, despite the hardness of our recollection vessels.

We determined our adolescent geodes capable of fixing this nebulousity, of hewing clean the surface of the shell, of creating finite boundaries for this swelling





tortoise. These geodes, filled with glimmering crystals, captured in their coarse exteriors delimited and infinite geometries through intangible, impossible rules. For the tortoise to fully comprehend these memories, imperative directed us to crack the geodes, revealing cavernous mouths filled with jagged teeth both beautiful and terrible, errant oxidized minerals pigmenting otherwise colorless structures aligned in rigid, inferred rows. Razor ridges ripped our arms when we presented these shattered shards anchored in earthy crusts to the tortoise, hours carved into our bodies as they carved through the shell. Patterns blossomed across the dome of our rocks, guided by those influences that justified juttled spikes in the geodes. Hexagons and pentagons replicated as the shell aged, darkening from our collective experience.

We cried as the lines conformed to the meticulous contours of the shell we nurtured previously with our dense recollections of childhood, of trauma. Our tears, a sea salt brine recalling every visit to the distant ocean, of the ocean's own visit to the ancient shores previously located in our arid land, eroded that perfection; the immaculate semi-sphere housing the tortoise in the house, the soft innocence slowly accumulated in that simple shell now worn to its familiar shape known to the outside world, perhaps a tabletop map in three dimensions of both hills and valleys, perhaps just a starburst.

As the last of our tears finished slicing through the exterior of the tortoise's armor, the peaks of the shell reached up from our sight entirely. It was still there, of course, just much farther from us than we expected the tortoise to reach. Our thousands of elbows and genitals all still fit in the house, in the great room, no less, though those of us closest to the tortoise, closest to the center, no longer saw the edges of the room. Even the window with the joshua tree stood outside our visual range; the ceiling disappeared long before then. The stairwell, by this time, appeared just as another wall, and its edge slipped into the darkness of the abyss above us. We still overlapped, despite the incredible increases in size: of the tortoise, of our ranks, of the house we all lived in. Our orgies still took place without any instigation beyond the casual collusion of limbs. Our masses still writhed in identical respiratory modes. Our fears of drowning the tortoise dissipated as the possibility of it inhaling our liquids evaporated. The absence of light, though, chilled our spines. We clustered together, our density rising, the contact of our

The Tortoise We Live In

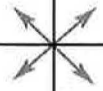
limbs becoming more frequent, our viscous fluids constantly leaking from tired frames, shivering from exhaustion and temperature.

No fright penetrated our hearts when the light retreated, but we preferred to possess light all the same. Our prepubescent rocks, polished chronologically, reflected and refracted light in exemplar fashion, which led to our placing of them across the dark tundra of limbs and tortoise. Each stone, positioned just so portioned the light, spreading modest illumination across the room. The geodes, too, split beams of light in wide rays, blanketing our hearts in gossamer light. Our constant scattering, though, proved useless directly under the tortoise; it not only towered above us, but also lacked translucence. We positioned our naked forms to act as mirrors as well, the prisms of our geodes too difficult to grapple with in this tortoise umbra. Our slick limbs behaved as many reflective, lubricated surfaces, lustroously. Our juices salted the increasing darkness against our wishes; a pinch of light here and there, to the taste of our peristalsing presence. From our observations of the tortoise feet, it remained unphased.

As the room faded to a new moon midnight, we remembered our rocky childhoods at cosmic distances for their glitter, as shards of the farthest edges of our massive mass. And we began to remember the tortoise as this comprehensible thing, a creature we perceived beyond the blind groping in the dark living room. Those of us at the center of the room, tortoise adjacent, told those on the outside of the tortoise, of its immense size and general shape. The story slithered in whispers through the group, right to the outer edges, where the stories rebounded and took on descriptions of the walls that crawled up into the sky, of the molding in the doorway that pushed beyond the visible long before the light disappeared.

The stories followed the natural waves of the group, escaping with the carbon dioxide slipped from our lips. Panic spread in our swarm. We inquired our basic knowledge of our circumstance. *Could we know for sure the turtle rests at the center of our room? Could we say with certainty that we still sexed in a room that started to grow when our tortoise's shell swelled?* Our arms reached out for the edges of the tortoise. By now, our fingers felt only the flesh of its legs, standing as pillars far too wide, not built by us or our hands. We sloshed and our heads whirred, fearing the terrible and particularly disastrous oncoming existential crisis. Imperative made us clamor for confirmation of at least our tortoise, so we started to climb.





Beginning at the base of the leg, fingers wrapped around the bulbous protrusions that formed the skin, our feet sought footholds. We rose up from the legs that found square places to push from. Our limbs tangled as vines crawl. Once our knees stopped shaking (they wobbled each time ascension progressed), we stretched out our flange tendrils to wrap around our possible grips, growing into the lizard wall, anchoring us against possible falls. Only then, when we felt safe, we began to consider the next step. Move by move, we scaled the reptile.

Upon reaching the shell, we looked down, the singular moment we did. Our bodies covered the trunk of the tortoise leg like aphids, squirming carapaces trying to understand existence. We turned to the rest of the leg, the horizon that receded into the shell over the shoulder, and stared into the darkness, surprising us that even in the tortoise there existed more intangible space. We relayed the information to our comrades on the ground and we screamed to the ceiling this concern. Those of us on the ground looked up, seeing soles rise into the dark, inches and feet.

Raising our arms as sextants amidst an imaginary sea, we tried to calculate the location of the window, of the door, of the stairwell. We wailed about the angles that our legs must make to ascend each step. And while we surveyed, the terrain we stood atop grew, reducing our desire to summit the tortoise. We just wanted to retreat into our throngs, swallowing ourselves whole, an oroboros centipede. We dreamed of how sweet our flesh must be, how it must complement our salted shapes. We thought to start at the feet, to nibble each delectable toe off each of our delicious neighbors. From there, our jaws in our dreams unhinged, accommodating the devouring of the shins, one at a time, essentially whole, a warm-up for when we reach the hip. In this fantasy, we ate the flesh first, and worked inwards, a miniature model of the oroboros process, until we reached the digestive system. From there, depending on how long we took to eat each other, our priorities shifted at one specific trigger. The moment when we encountered our partially digested neighbors, our ribs, by necessity, cracked wide, by our devourers or to devour, the end result being the same, our mouths becoming a venn diagram in triplicate, three overlapping forms juxtaposed in an uncountable fractal, spread out all over the living room, all over the tortoise. This arithmetic stretched out into the world, we said, unsure where the world started, or if the room finally swelled to encompass it, if the tortoise reached planetary proportions.

We looked again to the shoulder, to the crevasse, now off in the distance, a craggy mountain range at the other end of the shoulder valley, the room now so dark that the visibility of the shoulder itself rested on our eyes ability to distinguish between black and negative space. Those of us on the tortoise determined the daydream seemed impossible, despite our appetite – climbing the tortoise reduced contact between knee and inner thigh, and through this, we found our ability to fill denied. In order to replace the sex, we decided to retreat into the tortoise, to climb into the gap between shoulder and shell, right into the heart of the dark.

During our stationary intermission between migrations, the shoulder expanded into a treacherous terrain. Deep canyons ran around each scaly protrusion reaching upward. We no longer gripped the tortoise's stony skin; our fingers, our arms just lay flat against the surfaces, even spread wide. Climbing through the gullies and trenches of the tortoise shoulder proved far easier. Burying in its flesh, we climbed like mites most of the way to our salvatory portal, scurrying and leaping, sleeping and eating the dead skin of our focal object.

The portal stirred our spines in the chilly and fearful sea waters that caused our first migration. Liquid collected on our dermis, and our senses lacked skills to discern their origin. We assumed it sweat, shivered all the same. Walking into the vast gap between tortoise flesh and shell felt like ducking behind a velvet curtain, or getting caught in one. The entrance to the shell appeared darker still than the room, where light itself vanished from our eyes. But we wandered in the corridor for a short time before we found the central chamber of the tortoise, a space that even willingness to accept the universe at its face possessed in our very souls a grand sense of amazement. Above us, we assumed, the shell enclosed the space. Glitter embedded in the ceiling shone light down into this new cavern. We entered from all four leg holes, instinctively moving towards our bodies, separate and alive and synchronized, where we met again as one mass, enveloping the tortoise, entering the tortoise, without any fears of drowning it. As we slowly swarmed its surfaces, our desires pulled us towards the center, where our bodies shelled each other, where our sex resumed, where we rested under a starry sky without fear of diminishment; the turtle's leading edges still felt the warmth of the desert sunlight. Our childhood memories, refined and refracted by our ever-developing sense of identity, formed the stars, we formed the stars, we formed our stars. And we held





each other for the rest of our time, as the inside of the tortoise shell, too, lifted up into the sky, like the walls, like the window, like the stairs, like ourselves, and we lay in piles inside the tortoise, contiguous limbs overlapping in erotic positions, flooding the chamber inside the tortoise we lived in.

Metronome

PASSING BY WILSHIRE Boulevard, in a moment of time,
I saw a man with the worn, almost black, stitched
name of Donavon embroidered on his garb. Asking
for change. I wonder where he resides inside this body.
Crouched as a temple on the curb, while smooth sky-
scrapers stretch their necks, raise a nose to the sky, too high
to notice the ripping of his jeans. Gargoyle monuments,
building pets, staring at his plea, nothing to give him,
but grey and blank countenance. He thanks the walking
for their hurried pry into their pockets. Donavon listens,
sound has a home found in his Dixie. He finds rhythm
in the dropping of quarters. A silver lashing of wild.
Chaffing melody against itself, no rule—a miracle. I
imagine it is the kind of tempo that Donovan has followed
his entire life. A jingle that has entranced him to an
uncontrollable blind. Searching for song, running
from his own mortality, too afraid to face regret.
I wonder if Donovan listens to sound just to drown
his voice. Music has its way with memory.

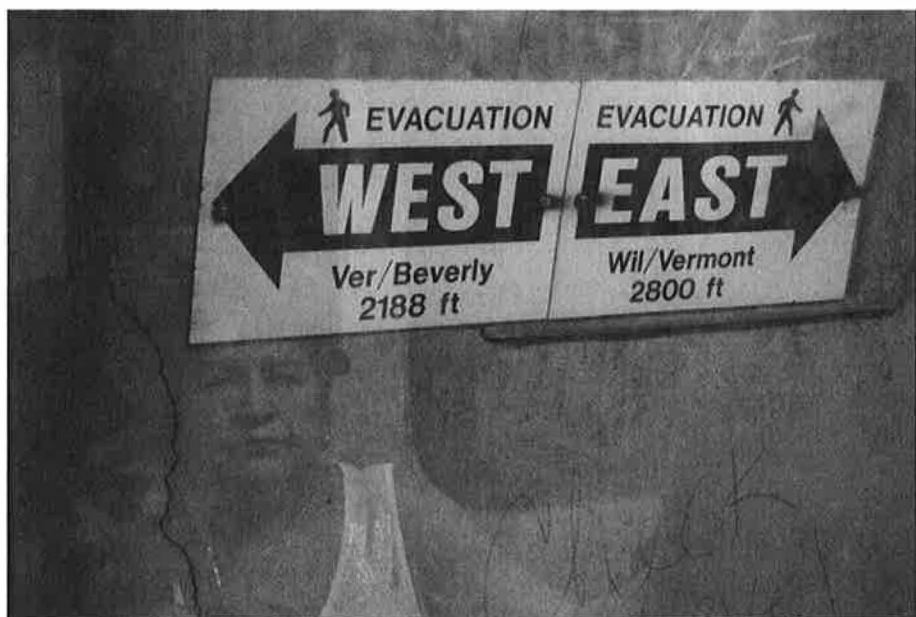
I imagine my father as the opposite of sound.
Soothing his prudent hands across the electronic
piano. *Note is meter*, he tells me. Practicing
on his keyboard he always seems so technical.
A home, careful payment, control. Mathematically
calculating each note, no risk, never letting music
take him away. It helps him confide in uncertainty
because the unknown is a frightening walk. A path



ARTHUR KAYZAKIAN

least manifest, but dreamt often. I wonder if he coils
the vibrant rings of chime beneath his ironed suit,
pushing his untamed desires deep inside himself
with authority until it sleeps again. I wonder
if Donovan and my father depend on sound.
Because music answers the questions
we are scared to ask ourselves.





Street Speak

CARLOS CANO



It was a mystery to all, how a slang-equipped Chilango came to the barrio of Chavez Ravine, he just arrived one day, dropping *Que milanesas?* on unsuspecting residents, shocking them with his vernac attack attempts at establishing contact. He wore his hair to the side and his pants rather high, his face was hairless and you could tell it wasn't from shaving but from an indigenous inability to produce hair. Illegal-alien accusations ran rampant through the neighborhood and in those days I remember thinking that the Chilango appeared quite human. I remember asking myself how did Doña Amalia and her congregation of chisme mongers know that he came from another planet? In the fifties the country was a harsh place to be any kind of un-patriotic, the feds often gathered Mexican people for deportation in downtown. Government measures required no more reasoning than the usual *we ain't reds*. Immigrants, according to my father, were what was wrong with society, they came and outstayed the welcome that the US had given them during the migrant worker programs of the 40s, they mooched from America, drained her resources and made honest working Americanized Mexicans look bad. The day he became a citizen he had cried while beaming with pride, it was as if he had been baptized into a new world where the old country was held as a distant memory. He was a balding man, and it seemed that with every hair he lost he became less and less Mexican

As a member of the journalist community and devoted anti-Socialist he was disgusted by the appearance of an illegal alien Chilango in the neighborhood.

Doña Amalia and her reasons were much more grounded on something I could understand, something that made sense, as she would say, I can never comprehend that street speak dialect, is he insulting me or saying hello? She had a voice which came deep from her diaphragm, like a member of some theatre company.

What breaded beefs? became a popular salutation among the barrio boys, one which would not go well at grammar school or the dinner table. Stories flew through the ears of onlisteners, about a crime infested ghetto named Chilangolandia which surrounded the capitol's District Federal, or el DeEfe. Here, in this abyss of society where the realm of humanity bordered on chaos and perhaps came in contact with hell, many calamities and misfortunes awaited any average and honest law abiding citizen who dared enter. Watches and wallets would disappear without a trace, in plain daylight. Obscenities, low brow humor, and other lingual indulgences littered the atmosphere, along with a thick mixture of trash and pollution that made the air dense to the point that you could feel yourself walk through it. There was apparently a river, once constructed by the warring Aztecs, it was a foul smelling river on which a black substance traveled, the contents flowed into the heart of the city, its state a result of the ignorant Chilango methods of waste disposal. The stories were fascinating and in fact Chilangolandia came to, in a sense, mirror Chavez Ravine, where Santa Ana whirlwinds of dust, trash, and baseball cards performed twirling pantomimes.

The stories our trash would tell.

Blue streamers and confetti from a quinceañera the night before. Champagne from the brindiz.

Someone's forgotten cake wrapped in tin foil. Tres leches, peach filling and that frosting with shaved nueces in it, rotting your teeth and still you can't help it. Bad for you like skipping class, and still you cannot pass, condemned, to a mouthful of frosting, like you missed mass.

The campaign against the Chilango was a persistent propaganda which was aimed at demonizing this new entity, at distinguishing its image from that of good barrio folk, much like the ostracized, garbage can dwelling, reasonless heathen Junebug the Orphan. Before he was an orphan Junebug had a family over on Volo Drive, his street and my street, Brooks Avenue, came to an intersection with Spruce Street. Three streets intersecting meant that corner houses were neat little pizza





shapes and car wrecks were common. Junebug's father never owned an automobile, his demise came by way of a Nazi bullet during the war. His mother lost her mind, she was feverishly opposed to the father's decision to defend America. She was instituted after burning the same American flag which the military had brought her in lieu of her husband's death. Doña Amalia the teller of stories had agreed to take in the boy, along with his monthly government stipend, and all along the boy was told that his father had gone with God.

He was eventually put on the streets for biting Doña Amalia's fat hand after she tried washing his mouth out with soap for saying that he hated her god. He became an example, as if on a crucifix, to which parents could point at and say, you see. They would warn their children that if they misbehaved they'd find themselves worse off than Junebug the Orphan, citing that it was his bad behavior which put an end to his father's life and his mother's sanity. During this time the fork, as we referred to our intersection of streets, had two out casts; the Chilango and the Orphan.

The situation would have passed had the Chilango not began to build himself a home just a few yards away from our house. When Doña Amalia saw the skeleton of two by fours begin to take shape she almost had a heart attack. It was not long after that that the chota showed up to put the Chilango in his place. We all expected his transgression to go punished with the entirety of the law. We expected him to finally be out of this neighborhood, but what actually happened shocked every person who witnessed it. The police had come and every metiche was present, they were all very interested in the fate of the immigrant man. We found out that he had been a member of the armed forces and pledged his life for the United States. On top of that he was capable of reading and speaking English, something that not many people in the barrio could do. His name was that of the last Aztec leader, Cuauhtémoc, who I later learned was kept under close surveillance by the Spaniards out of fear that he might inspire the Mexica people into a rebellion. The most rebellious part of Cuauhtémoc was his tongue which refused to be subdued and defined by the Mexican adopted Castellano or the Americanized English. The officers were courteous to him; they made an announcement to the neighborhood, letting us know that he owned the piece of land on which he was building. They said that we should all treat him with respect, but by that time Doña Amalia and

my father had both gone inside. They had missed the part about the purple heart. Cuauhtémoc shared a few words with the officers before they left with smiles on their faces. One of the officers would return every other week, in plainclothes but I could recognize him because of his chin like the sculptures on Easter Island, with a mustache like a paint brush. The two men would sit out on the porch, drink beer and talk about men things like the war or sports; sometimes they would listen to the radio when there was a Sugar Ray fight or when there was a game. The people of the neighborhood socialized very little with Cuauhtémoc but this all changed after the incident at the fair. Every year during September the local park would lend itself to Las Fiestas Patrias, which was a celebration of Mexico orchestrated by the local residents but monopolized by the local business owners. While celebrating the heritage and independence of another country was as un-American as it gets, finding a way to relieve Mexican and Mexican-American people of their hard earned money was about as patriotic as it got. You can be all hunky-dory Mexican if-and-only-if our wallets become swollen to Doña Amalia proportions as a result.

My mother and I had walked to the fair that night, my father was busy with his deadlines for headlines, it was different because it was the first time I went without holding my mother's hand. She had explained that I was a big boy and that I could even decide where to spend my five cents. The newfound freedom meant that I was to roam the fair on my own, without a parental care.

Cuauhtémoc had taken a job at the fair in the fish bowl game. His popularity among the barrio people, or lack thereof, meant that his post was to go mostly unvisited. Aided by a lack of activity and boredom, Cuauhtémoc was able to discover when a pinche pendejo was making advancements on my mother.

I had noticed too, but I was unable to respond. I sat there bulgy eyed, as Cuauhtémoc proceeded to trounce the assaulter. My mother was in tears and I was paralyzed, I had never witnessed any sexualness, much less any violence. So the shocks came as one-two as the combinations which Sugar Ray used to stun his opponents, as quickly as the Aztec Avenger's left-right which left the assailant bloody lipped, busted nosed, and ground bound. After the fight, Cuauhtémoc approached my mom, but she turned away, searching for me like some kind of blinded animal. I ran to her and she clutched my hand all the way home, harder





than she ever had before, as if letting go would mean losing me forever.

She was silent until confession, from which she emerged with a rejuvenated vigor, with a youthful bliss, as if the her that had been assaulted had disappeared into the confessional and replaced with one from a previous time. Perhaps she had realized that she was not condemned for being attractive, pray that the years pass fast and that your beauty may fade with them, is what she was probably told.

That day she had cooked carne con chile, the butchery down on Sheila always had the softest meat, tender as the clouds, succulent and juicy, ready for meticulous marinating. It would bask in my mother's homemade salsa, born out of green chilies and the molcajete in mixtures which would never be too thick or too watery, always as consistent as her care for all things. This dish would accompany her denser frijoles refritos perfectly, along with some thick tortillas from the tortilleria down the street. These were the contents which she entrusted me to deliver to Cuauhtémoc's house, or at least what was currently built of it. He had completed a living room a bit smaller than the classroom, he had erected a hallway which he doored off in order to continue building in other parts of the house.

He was very thankful, he even wrote her a note with a very elaborate signature, in Mexico fakers forged frequently, so this was a habit he developed out of the necessity to avoid the possibility of fraud. He showed me his house, with a furnace for the cold and a small stove on which he set down my mother's offering. He said laughing that during the fight someone had made off with three of the goldfish which were colored in tiger like patterns. I remembered how as a kid I wondered if the scheming plot was to attack a civilian in order to acquire the expensive fish; fish which ended up coming out of Cuauhtémoc's salary.



CINTIA SEGOVIA
Melrose

I Could Have Drowned

KATIE McMAHON



It all comes back so quickly, not just when you step off a plane, but when you simply crack an egg incorrectly. Someone might be eating that shell later and they won't even know it. Someone's jacket smells like cigarettes and the glass spins and tips, beer dripping off the table and onto the tip of your toes. The sound of phones with cords that drag from room to room, all around the house and back again. The taste of foods you were never allowed to eat before. Somewhere, deep under my skin, I am still sixteen and I have to look into at least three different mirrors to see the differences between her and me.

Someone somewhere has compiled a list of all the things you're not supposed to do. You're not supposed to pick favorites. You're not supposed to get drunk and call your children. Don't make a fool of yourself. Don't cheat or lie. Don't steal from anybody, especially yourself. You really shouldn't leave the Christmas lights hung around the house until Spring. The chair goes there. Fold the towels like this. Put the socks behind the couch.

Then, there is the incessant list of objects to fix that will never get fixed. Parts missing. Broken, irreparable things. Unrealistic lists of damages that do not even exist.

But maybe when they were lying in bed, picturing stars on the ceiling, they decided what I would be like. Maybe my hair was lighter and my eyes were green. I would be tall and thin and tap dance around the house and not just in the basement. If I stepped on glass, I would never bleed. My teeth would be white and straight. I would win prizes and cure diseases. We would all have too much money and buy each other fast cars and silk pajamas.

I Could Have Drowned

I won a prize in the third grade. It was a book about a moose with mood swings. This was the only time I had won anything in my entire life. At school, I always raised my hand. I always knew answers. I sang louder than anyone else and laughed at all my own jokes. At home, I was nervous to let words fall out of my mouth. I could not be alone without throwing up. I sang in the closet, behind the umbrellas and the box of winter gloves.

So when I am disappointed, I remember that maybe they are disappointed too. The banging of pots and pans in the morning is her first husband. An untied shoe is the first time he tasted whiskey on his lips. Maybe she has to look into six mirrors to understand that she is not the same person who said the words she used to say. That her feelings don't have to stay the same, no matter what other people feel and no matter how much it hurts someone else to see that people are not at all what they are supposed to be. Maybe he cries when he parks in the parking lot. Maybe he fears that asking questions will be more embarrassing than the answers he refuses to hear anyway.

Disappointment is not the worst feeling. The worst feeling is not letting go. The worst feeling is building up ideas and frantically holding onto those ideas; using all your strength to hold it together, when you could just use it to swim to the other side.

What we have expected in each other is impossible to attain. If I tried their path, my pants would be too small and my lips and teeth would be purple from drinking too much wine. If they understood me better, then I wouldn't exist.

Bitter resentment. Never apologizing. Saying you can't do something because no one ever taught you how. Pretending that you know the answer.

We could all be strangers, but we're not. Maybe none of us had a say. When I don't know where I am, I ask for directions. If my car gets too dirty, I wash it. I use an electric toothbrush. I don't go to church. I find the matching socks immediately. I eat ice cream behind your back. I wear sandals in the rain. I make eggs that are not scrambled. Sometimes I put sugar in my coffee. I cry when I am hurt. I shave my legs above the knee. When I tell a lie, I admit the truth within minutes. When I need help, I make a phone call. I walk alone in the dark in safe neighborhoods.

And I swim and I swim and I swim.



THERESA SHREFFLER

SIR, YOU ASK, and ask again
and look as though you expect my words
to come with ease; but I am unversed
and slow in speech; I have not the means
to speak falsely, lie, nor confess
my heart, which is a cavernous room,
its corners unknown to me.

If I could describe these darkened drapes, or drab fortress
built of ice-blown stone; if I could run your hands
over cold climbs and show you rivers dammed, and salt-rocks
densely packed to stop all visitors -- would you turn back?
The walkway has not been cleared in a year
and the snow is solid-packed.

But here, at the window, with you looking in
and I, gazing out, a glance through the glass--
one hand to the frame, fingers grasping
at smooth surfaces. Again, again, you tap the pane--
Which way inside? your lips have asked,
and I try to draw the curtains, but can't,
so I am left to fog the glass.





ELAINE CHOU

Without A Grin

8 Sneezes and an Orgasm

BRYAN T. SMITH



Lara sneezes again and grabs another cut line and snorts and gags, spilling the white powder across the armoire in the bedroom like it is some illegal drug and not the powdered sugar from the cupboard. She holds her nose like a diver performing the valsalva maneuver and snots in her hand, wiping it on her blouse, the side, far away from her nipples which pop out from the thin white cotton fabric like two crooked eyes. I put down a line, dividing the sugar with Lara's Wal-Mart preloaded money card, and take the rolled up dollar bill and snort the line. I have the condoms from the cupboard, and as I put one on I glance at Lara, curled brown hair of the steel wool kind that looked great on camera ten years ago when she still was Miss California. "Yes, ladies and gentleman," Lara had said a few times mostly when she woke up in the middle of the night, drunkenly half-dazed, "I did drink my own urine as a diuretic." It's only when she's doing household chores, humming Janice Joplin lyrics, dusting under the fridge or doing the laundry, one finger always curling a lock of that steel wool hair, usually when she thinks I can't hear her or that I'm just not listening, that she smiles distantly and finishes the statement--"and I have my agent to thank for it."

It's with a few lines and the sneezing, counting, getting up to five and, after sometime, six in a row, that Lara complains that her throat feels a little dry.

I grab for my wallet off of the armoire, opening the leather fold for another dollar bill making sure not to glance at the old card, the one that's creased and brown and has my name—Sam Brown—followed by a number.

"I think I feel it," Lara says, excited now, and she's taking off her blouse, the pointed eyes of the shirt lost to real flesh and the kind of nipples Dad, with his Jim Beam eyes and a cigar strutted from the tip of a baroque smile, would call "Half Dollar-Sized Wonders." Lara's smiling again, her upper lip quivering over her yellow teeth, and saying that there's a warmth in her chest that she hasn't felt in years, and before I can think about how I mixed the sugar and cinnamon or if I was supposed to use the $\frac{1}{4}$ cup or the $\frac{1}{2}$, I roll up the new dollar bill and snort a line. I sneeze: once, twice, three, four, five, six, seven but not eight times trying to catch my breath and clear my nose of white crust, feeling the dryness in my throat and a cough building. I start thinking about ten years ago, the old card in my wallet and being at the AMTRAK station on Alameda Street, looking at the business card that was still new at that point. I poured \$20 in quarters into a payphone and kept guiding my index finger, numb and swollen knobby thing, to the metal keys. Me, this little man, breathing and dialing. Dialing, breathing, dialing, breathing, dialing, shouting, dialing, crying, dialing, screaming, dialing, breathing, breathing. Breathe. Me, this little man, hoping that someone would pick up on the other end of the line, the eee-eee-eee disconnected sound from my talent agency office telling me that there was no one there anymore, there's no one there, not me or another Agent Sam Brown, and as I think about that AMTRAK station and how I should've left after everything came out, I wonder if Howard Stern's fact about 8 sneezes and an orgasm might be bullshit.



HUDIT SIMONYAN

GO, SMOKE, TELL them how you were let out
just two hours
before sunrise.

How you were locked inside a thick pipe
embracing your ancestral flame,
And how one lighter and a pair of lips
helped you escape –
Tell them of that first kiss that became your last.
No need to tell them you come from Cohiba – they won't understand.
Talk, instead, of tree branches and power lines,
of that confused old bird,
of the cold ocean fog you took for a friend,
and of the way my roof looks from above.

Dance your way up to see what is there,
just two hours
after sunrise.



The Man Burns Fireplace Rubble

THE MAN STANDS at the open door,
picks up the acrid ozone scent of new rain
on asphalt, notices wet speckled ovals
under the streetlight and feels soup-weather
chilled. The temperature inside is
metered by heat, but souls need
a different kind of warmth.

The hearth. Repository of
a burnable life. This man's version
of "spring cleaning", he assesses
the kindling forgetfully heaped
on this flat, inviting surface,
soon to be too hot to rest anything
on it but feet.

He calls a 10-minute warning to
his family; everything still there
will be primer for the two logs
ready to do their duty, just needing
the ashy foundation of starter.
He feels connected to none of it,
not even the guitar.

His wife turns down the stove,
shakes her head with calm
authority, rescues a tutu and
Spike, the stuffed gray sentry



for Heat, Light, and Satisfaction

TOBI COGSWELL

of a pug with the Persian
studded collar. His stale
body aged from years of
guard duty, he will not burn.

17 colored pencils ranging
from tapioca to blue violet,
a math book and 200 trading
cards all get themselves rescued.
The man wonders briefly if
any of the smoke will be poisonous,
cracks a window slightly for
protection, and ignites the blaze.

The crackle inside matches
the rain outside beat for beat.
The man throws on a wooden
dinosaur. His eyes reflect
excitement and burn, he is controlled
out-of-control. Supper's ready
just in time to rescue him...





ARACELI COLATO
Untitled

A Gracious Wind →

THERESA SHREFFLER

YOU ARE A gracious wind
and i, alone in a woodland, wandering

on restless nights, i have awakened
to your hands pressing on the windowpane
calling me gently, *outside, look, my voice*
sweeps years away, and I have brought the rain.

oh wind, many have whispered to me
of your tuneless song, imperfect, drifting
across my cabin's door, you are twist-turning
and plotting a storm to peak;
they warn of your myriad ways
and although i close the window, still your hands rattle
and your voice calls strong, *out, out the door*
and deep into the wild throne
my kingdom in moonlight, come hither
but you are darkness sweeping darkness
and i am a lone light, adrift;
your force as strong as the willow's bend;
my sweet joy, you've come, dare i dash
and leap through the woodlands, you tempt
me to a madness of dreams half kept;
I clear the clouds for you, so you would promise
not a storm, but passion rains.





ATSUMI KODAMA
Untitled

The Story of the Robot

JOHN BEADLE



I.

The town of Weedon was a rather remote place, located about two hours by car away from the nearest city. Despite the distance, this old-fashioned town full of brick cottages with anachronistic thatched roofs received more than its fair share of visitors. For those people who made the journey, the main attraction was the locally grown vegetables, primarily tomatoes and carrots, for which the town gained some measure of fame in the surrounding counties. Consequently, most visitors came on Sunday for the weekly farmer's market and spent the day slowly navigating among the stalls placed around the edges of the square at the heart of town. They moved carefully between piles of produce, intently studying an onion here, dubiously prodding a potato there, focusing on a task as important as any they might go back to on the following Monday. Sometimes, the visitors looked up from the crates of vegetables and spoke a word or two to the person behind the stall, usually a farmer's wife or an older child. The men rarely appeared at the market. By tradition, they spent Sundays at the town pub, forgetting the troubles of the week past and the week ahead.

When the visitors were done examining every item and picking out only the firmest and most flawless pieces, they loaded up their cars and began the long journey home. Few people felt the need to stay and explore the town. To be honest, there was not much to see beyond the market. The oldest building in town, used as the

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town hall, was constantly under repair and buried under blue plastic sheets. There was a library, but it was closed on Sundays. Sometimes, however, people wandered off the main streets into the maze-like back alleys that twisted through the town. Though the town was small, it was easy to get lost among the winding roads that went past endless rows of fields, all filled with the same few vegetables, all surrounded by bushes on which the same red poisonous berries grew. The problem was compounded by the fact that there were no longer any street names visible. The signs had long since fallen down or become illegible due to the constant exposure to wind and rain or were simply never there at all. With no way to tell where they were, and confronted by unchanging scenery, visitors felt like they were walking in an endless loop. It was on these endless roads that a visitor occasionally encountered the robot. On seeing her approach, they stopped and watched in silence as she walked past, the only sound the clinking of her metal feet on the granite road. Then they raced back to town, sprinting along the back alleys and bursting into the pub, looking for a local to explain what it was that they had seen.

The robot had been present in the town for longer than most of the inhabitants could remember and few of them had any interest in talking with an outsider about her. An old man, Luis Feynham, a more-or-less permanent fixture at the pub was usually the one who, for the price of a beer or two, would tell visitors the story behind her. Feynham claimed to have heard the robot's origin, he didn't remember from who, which he told to anyone who inquired in the manner of letting them in on a privileged secret. According to his story, there had once been a scientist, a man who was usually Russian, but sometimes Feynham made him German. This scientist had a beautiful young daughter who he loved more than anything in the world. As every good story needs a tragedy, the daughter fell ill from a terrible disease for which there was no cure and passed away, leaving the scientist consumed by grief. In his desperation to bring back the beloved daughter he had lost, the Russian or perhaps German scientist constructed a mechanical replica of her in his workshop. Yet, upon finishing the machine, he discovered that, although he was able to give it the likeness of his daughter, the robot had no soul and existed only as a shadow of his child, never truly alive. Feynham usually paused here to let his words sink in before continuing. The scientist spent the rest of his days trying to craft a soul for the robot, but eventually died without ever succeeding. Unable to





understand the concept of death, the robot waited many years for the scientist to return. Eventually, she wandered out into the world to find him. She traveled for many years and underwent many hardships before coming to the town of Weedon. Lost and confused, she was said to now wander the streets of the town in her search for the man who created her without even being able to understand why.

After a few drinks, this story seemed entirely plausible to the visitors and, since there were no challengers willing to speak out and oppose this story, it became the accepted history of the robot. Having heard this story, tourists would seek out the robot and use their observations to confirm what they had been told. They noted that there was indeed a sense of femininity present in her form, which was slim and curved. They were not sure why they had not noticed this previously. She stood about five feet tall and, on closer inspection, it was agreed that her proportions were very much like those of a child. As they watched her wander the back alleys and narrow streets of the town with no destination, they pointed out to each other the scrapes and dents she had picked up on her long journey.

Their curiosity took on a facade of pity at the robot's situation, which they felt was made worse by the robot being unable to understand the misery of her own situation. Occasionally, this pity would motivate visitors to donate their spare change to help her in some way. A wooden collection box, balanced on a small folding table surrounded by blue plastic sheets, was set up just inside the door of the town hall for this purpose. Feynham's story apparently moved many hearts as this box proved to be a steady source of income for the town. There was some confusion over how to spend this money, since it was intended for the robot and no one had ever been able to communicate successfully with her to determine what her needs entailed. After much discussion, the town council came to the unanimous agreement that the robot, if she could make her wishes known, would want to give back to the town. Thus, the money was used to repair the roof of the town hall, which had taken a severe beating in a fierce storm and needed patching up before the first rain of winter. The robot herself showed no apparent concern for either the weather or the appearance of the new set of blue sheets which were draped across the town hall roof in preparation for the repairs. As winter came, she continued to wander the streets oblivious to the rain pelting against her face.

At some point, no one recalled exactly who brought it up, it was questioned

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why the robot never went outside the boundaries of the town. Whenever she reached the outskirts, she would simply turn around and walk back the way she came. A rumor sprang up that she stayed in the town because she was waiting for something. This rumor turned into fact when a young child, Timothy Spraight, turned in an imaginative essay to his English teacher on what he had done over summer. In this essay, Timothy claimed that the robot had told him she had come from space to invade Earth and was waiting for the rest of her robotic allies to arrive. With the conviction of a child who believes everything he says, Timothy added that this particular robot was special because she was the commander of the robot army. Her status was designated by her left arm, which was painted black in contrast to the pearl white of the rest of her exterior. Mrs. Archen, the teacher who received this essay, responded by assigning Timothy an F for failing to complete the assignment as required. His parents intervened to prevent any stain on their son's permanent record and, after a bit of back and forth, the grade was subsequently changed to a C for acceptable work. Someone, again no one knew quite who, leaked the story and a copy of Timothy's essay to the local newspaper, which, having nothing much else to report in a small town, ran the story to fill up blank space on page five.

Laughs were had by the townspeople at Timothy's expense. Didn't the boy know, they said, that no one had ever been able to talk to the robot? The story was completely ridiculous. The townspeople could not deny that the robot was real, but to ask them to believe she was an alien as well was just going too far. But, someone remarked, what if there were other robots out there after all? One robot was alright, it might even be said she benefited the town by bringing in tourists and their money. A whole bunch of robots wandering around and blocking the roads was another matter entirely. Undoubtedly, people said, this robot was something special. There was no way that that asymmetrical black arm was normal; it was clearly meant to mark her as unique, as an important figure. It was suggested that her short and stocky proportions would give the robot good balance in a fight. She had definitely been through some rough encounters, the dents and scrapes were more than enough proof of that. There was no telling what she was capable of. "Watch yourself around that robot," became a repeated phrase among the townspeople, though they kept their thoughts to themselves when the tourists were around.





Around this time, people started to recall that the robot had been involved in all kinds of nefarious incidents. Kent Williams' kitchen window had been broken by a large rock, one that was certainly too heavy to be easily thrown by a human. One of Richard McHane's cows had previously disappeared and the body had never been found; he now remembered seeing the robot in the immediate area around the same time. These sorts of tales went on for a while until, one evening, after hearing Doug Michaels claiming that the robot was responsible for sabotaging his sprinkler system and causing the subsequent loss of an entire acre of tomatoes, Luis Feynham slugged him in the face and asked him where people got off blaming their problems on a little girl who had already suffered more than enough. His speech would have been more impressive if he wasn't so drunk that he slurred half the words, but it had the intended effect regardless. Ashamed of themselves, the townspeople vowed to treat the robot better and to be kinder to her in the future. As a token of this new attitude, the mayor presented the robot with a red woolen scarf, emblazoned with the town crest, to keep her warm in the coming winter months. There was some difficulty in putting it on her as she continued to walk throughout the ceremony, but, with the assistance of two council members, the mayor eventually managed to get it round her neck. The robot showed no sign of being aware of the scarf or the reasons for its presentation.

The town's attempt at befriending the robot lasted up until she had an unfortunate encounter with a group of young boys. Three teenagers, drunk more on the thrill of breaking into a parent's liquor cabinet than on what they had actually taken from it, were stumbling through the town square around midnight and came across the robot. The exact details of what transpired that night were never fully made clear, as each of the three boys told a slight variation of the events. However, the agreed upon facts are as follows. The leader of the group, a kid by the name of Stephen Coadle, approached the robot and began to speak to her. The other boys, following his lead, also came up to the robot and, the three of them together, formed a wall obstructing the robot's path. At some point, one of them (accounts differed on exactly who and where) touched the robot. This contact, possibly in combination with the speech of the boys (the unspoken understanding is that their words consisted mainly of jeers of a sexual nature), provoked an unexpected reaction from the robot. Without being conscious of how it occurred,

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the boys suddenly found themselves sprawled against a wall on the opposite side of the town square with several broken bones among them.

When morning came and the incident became public, the town was in an uproar. How could anyone feel safe, the townspeople repeatedly exclaimed at a meeting in pub as soon as it opened, when a mechanical monster that attacked children in the night was wandering the streets at will? A mob was quickly formed and, armed with various farming implements, set out to locate the robot. It was unfortunate that the one man who could have possibly talked sense into these people had not long ago passed away from sudden illness. Luis Feynham's existence was quickly forgotten by the people of Weedon; the only remaining evidence of his having lived was an oak bench dedicated in his memory, established at the whim of a distant relative who had never visited the town, and which the town council decided to hide down a rarely used back alley. Thus, there was no one to prevent the mob from rallying against the robot. Upon spotting her near the center of town, as she emerged from a side street between the post office and the building that housed the local newspaper, the people eagerly rushed forward and began to strike at her. These blows proved ineffective as their pitchforks and hoes shattered upon contact with the robot's white shell. Their sole accomplishment in this meleé was managing to tear the red scarf from her neck, leaving a few threads dangling behind as if to represent the blood they could not draw. Realizing that their attacks were useless, the people were forced to resort to angrily telling the robot to leave the town and never return. The robot ignored them and resumed its journey, leaving the frustrated mob in its wake.

There was a movement to make the robot stand trial, led by Doug Michaels who still harbored resentment over the loss of his tomatoes, but this was abandoned as impractical. The robot could not be injured or imprisoned, and she had no money or possessions of which she could be deprived. Accordingly, the only punishment the people could carry out against the robot was to completely exclude her from society and pretend to not be aware of her existence. As time passed, ignoring the robot became the accepted practice. This attitude spread to the children of following generations and the robot was forgotten even as she continued to walk the streets of the town.





II.

At the age of seventeen, Emma Castile decided that she wanted to write stories. She wrote eight short stories in the years that followed, five of which made it into print in various magazines. Feeling that this was sufficient qualification for her to move up to the next level, Emma set to work on what she conceived as her ultimate goal, writing a novel. She soon ran into difficulties. Her short stories primarily dealt with the subject of human nature, of which she had a negative view. Self-conscious of her appearance since early childhood, Emma grew up seeing insults and slights at every turn. She therefore imagined humanity to be disappointingly shallow, an opinion she gave full vent to in her stories. In these stories, however, she exhausted all her childish anger and was left with nothing to write a novel about. Without a subject, her novel made slow progress. By the time she was twenty-five, only a single chapter was finished and even that became continually worse the more she reread it. Deciding that the chief cause of her problems was the fact that it was simply impossible to write a novel in the city, Emma moved to a suitably remote town. This town was named Weedon.

There was a little brick cottage on the outskirts of the village which was available for rent at a rate that was within Emma's meager finances. She brought with her only a few essential items of furniture (namely, a comfortable bed, a well-worn desk, and a familiar chair) as a reminder that she was there to work. In keeping with this attitude, she worked for eight hours a day every day except for Sunday, on which she ventured out of the cottage to browse the weekly farmer's market. Though Emma bought the occasional carrot or potato, she went there mainly in hopes of finding some inspiration in the faces of either the locals or the visitors. There was a wooden bench with peeling moss-green paint located in an alley off the town square from which Emma could watch the people moving among the stalls without being seen herself. When they inevitably failed to provide her with anything to write about, Emma's attention switched to attempting to decipher the dull bronze plaque on the back of the bench. A combination of time and frequent rain had worn away most of the name, but Emma thought it might once have read "Feynham" or something similar.

By the end of a month, Emma had filled several sheets of paper and written

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nothing of value. She then resolved to take advantage of her surroundings and went on long walks through the nearby countryside. She returned home with the intention of writing, but always found herself too tired to actually produce more than a few lines. Since she was unable to write anything meaningful anyway, Emma spent an increasing amount of time on her walks. These walks were always conducted alone and in silence. On the rare occasion that she encountered another person, such as old man Coatle, limping back and forth from the town to his distant farm, their only exchange was a simple nod.

One day, on returning to the town after exploring some hills to the north, Emma was surprised to find a person waiting for her on the road. She first thought it was the daughter of a visitor who had gotten separated from her parents, but, as she drew nearer, Emma was astonished to find that it was a robot. The robot was staring out at the horizon, seemingly oblivious to Emma's approach. However, as Emma drew level with it, the robot turned and began to walk with her back to town. Unsure of whether to draw attention to herself, Emma kept silent whilst snatching sidelong glances at the robot. She observed that the robot was immaculately sculpted and possessed a flawless complexion of white, the exception being her left arm which was colored black below the elbow joint. As they reached the door of the cottage, they both paused and Emma, unaware of the pointlessness of talking to the robot, invited her in. The robot watched her in silence and Emma felt a lump appear in her throat, along with a brief resurgence of her childhood insecurities, before realizing the robot was simply waiting to follow her inside.

The robot expressed no interest when Emma offered her a glass of water and simply stood in the center of the living room. Emma, to fill the silence, nervously rambled on about any subject which came to mind. She spoke of the city and coming to the town and of her novel and of wandering the countryside. Eventually, she paused and asked the robot for her name. The robot did not reply. Back in the tail end of her school years, Emma had held an unrequited love for a classmate named Julian Porter. She had not thought of him for several years, yet suddenly remembered him and asked the robot what she thought of the name Julia. The robot remained silent as she did not possess a mouth of any description and was therefore unable to speak or express any particular fondness for the name. Regardless, from that day forward, Julia came to live with Emma.





Upon taking up residence in the cottage, Julia adopted a new pattern of behavior, which mostly consisted of standing in one place all day. Emma continued to go on her daily walks and would return in the evening to find Julia in the same spot she had been in that morning. Worried that she might be bored with nothing to do, Emma dug out some pages of her old writing one morning before leaving and gave it to Julia to read. It occurred to her later, as she made her way along a dirt track surrounded by prickly bushes popping with red berries, that the robot might not be able to read. On her return, however, she found the papers scattered about the place as if they had been caught in a tornado. Julia stood at the center of the debris, watching Emma with expressionless eyes.

Following this event, Emma adopted the practice of stopping by the town library as part of her daily excursions so as to continuously supply Julia with fresh reading material. The library was an L-shaped building; an old grey brick affair that seemed in continuous danger of suddenly collapsing into dust, like nearly everything else in the village. It was run by an elderly woman with grey hair named Mrs. Archen who was in the habit of thanking everyone who spoke to her, even thanking them for thanking her. Friendly, but without a hint of curiosity, Mrs. Archen proved a helpful accomplice in selecting which books Emma brought home. As she considered herself a writer, Emma would have preferred to apply her own standards in choosing books, but her elitism was rendered impractical by the inhuman speed at which Julia read. In a little under two weeks, she read everything in the library's children section and Emma, with assistance from the librarian, was obliged to begin picking books from the main collection. Though Julia was not a picky reader, there were certain standards to be followed. On one occasion, Emma ventured away from fiction into the reference books contained in the shorter arm of the library's L. The book she took from there, *A Brief History of the Development of Hydroelectric Power* by Doug Michaels, went unread, and from that developed an unspoken agreement that Emma would only bring home stories. In addition, there were two further guidelines in book selection. The first of these was to avoid any books which contained robots, on Emma's belief that this might be a sensitive topic. The second was to forsake the romance genre entirely as it seemed inappropriate for Julia due to her youthful appearance.

As Julia's reading progressed, Emma began to note changes in her behavior.

The Story of the Robot

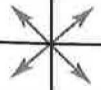
While she previously read standing up, she now took to perching herself on the edge of the desk and, on a handful of occasions, Emma came home to find her sitting in a chair. Initially, she was concerned for the state of her furniture, but Emma's fears were alleviated by the discovery that Julia was unnaturally light despite being made of metal and even a spare cardboard box was capable of supporting her weight. One night, awoken by a sudden thirst, Emma found Julia stretched out on the floor in an imitation of sleep. Until then, she had simply assumed Julia spent the nights reading or standing around as she did during the day. Feeling guilty and embarrassed, Emma invited her to share the bed. They slept together every night after that, although, as Julia's eyes consisted solely of blue lenses, devoid of pupils and with a continuous soft glow only evident in the dark, Emma never knew if she was actually sleeping.

Inevitably, the moment came when there were no more books for Julia to read. Emma returned the last of them to the librarian, thanked her for her help, and was thanked in return. Then she returned home, where Julia was waiting for her. They sat down together on the floor and Emma explained that there was nothing left to read. Julia still could not speak, but Emma thought she understood.

The next morning, Emma took Julia with her on her walk. They headed west along the main road that stretched out from the town square, ignoring the passing cars of visitors flocking into the center. They turned down a dirt track, walking past a series of identical fields in which various things were growing. Presumably, they were different vegetables, but Emma could not make a distinction from the few green shoots rising above the dirt. They reached the end of the farmers' fields and carried on into the countryside, untouched except for the dirt road that indicated other people had gone this way at some point before. Eventually, they came to the base of a small hill. Though the incline was slight, Emma was breathing hard by the time she reached the top and stopped to rest. Julia continued on, disappearing down the far side of the hill and coming into view on the track below. Emma stayed there for an hour, watching until Julia was so far away that she appeared no different than the countless trees on the horizon. Then she turned around and walked down the hill, through the open countryside, past the farmers' fields, and back into town.

She passed by her cottage and kept on towards the town square. She passed the





library, closed, and the post office, also closed, until she reached the town pub. The door was open and noise came from within, so Emma entered. Though it was early in the day, the place was filled with people, all talking loudly, all laughing at their own jokes. Emma noted the presence of a few obvious tourists among the locals, recognizable by their fancy white shoes completely unfit for walking the countryside. She wondered whether she herself possessed some telltale sign that made her look like a tourist to others. Pushing her way through to the bar, Emma signaled the bartender. She thought of ordering champagne just to see if they had it, but got a Coke instead.

Emma asked the bartender, she gathered his name was Tim from the greetings he exchanged with other patrons, if he could tell her about the robot. Tim laughed and told her he didn't know what she was talking about, before moving down the bar so he could listen to the friendly argument of a couple of regulars. Moving away from the counter, Emma repeated her question to a few more of the bar's patrons and received similar answers. Some of them invited her to join their group, knowing she was a writer and eager to hear a story. She politely declined their offer, finished her Coke, and left. Returning to the cottage, she was struck by how quiet it was, a thought which seemed strange considering Julia had never made a sound. Emma gathered up a few stray papers that had fallen to the floor. She had already been out for a walk today and didn't feel like going out again. Instead, she sat down at her desk, grabbed a pen and a clean sheet of paper from a small stack, and began to write the story of the robot.

← Neon Sparrows

ROBIN JEWEL SMITH

BEFORE HER FIRST lover
placed his palm on the small
of her back.

Before neon sparrows
swooped down the almond
curvature of her spine.

Before she arched
with round peach belly
(une nouvelle vie.)

Before she read
Goodnight Moon
to tiny glowing fingernails.
Before cancer and Ursa Minor
intertwined below pale
gold skin,
and those fading sparrows.

There was a birthmark bathed
in shade of eggplant,
and squalling vida.



Benzene

JAMES MEDINA

GREEN ALGAE FLOATING in the rainbow atoms,
the blackened meat smell in the air,
the old white smoke exhaust.
Fuck it, I'm just gonna drink my rations,
and drive the Wasteland dust.

I mean I could, but I'd miss what's going to come next.
What is the New World Ouroboros to do?
Worshipping old neon in darkness and fire in the sky.
Grey sand in my back tooth
and my jaw is pushing the horizon's nexus.





DANNY ESCALANTE
Big Black Nothing

Epigraph of Xy

MILES SIMON



The story I'm going to relay to you is long in the tooth, almost long forgotten to the mouth, but well alive in the throat like a hummingbird about to chitter. It's a tale too big for a codex (but maybe quick in the telling,) an epic older than old Gilgamesh that only the crickets and whirligig beetles beneath the moss of the middling Eerie Tree remember. More, more, it's a tempest-tossed tale that the wind cannot winnow, and that the land cannot couch, and that the sea cannot quench, although it's said to come on a gale, and wrench up the earth, and remain bent on the sea throughout its telling. It was relayed to me on a night that smelled of salt and sulfur and cinnamon, in the hulk of a ship that tread the water like a grebe, like a basilisk, like foam and steam, in a slow, distant, lunar voice that threatened the stability of my mind's orbit altogether.

The teller was the most prolific writer I ever knew, a man who never lifted his pen from the page, yet often dragged it like a bleeding anchor along with him so that ink trailed and traced his trajectory, the body of his work an oil leakage confluence of unbroken symbols. I bet there was a little something of every language that's been and might be in the twisting shapes of his shadow language, crude letters spilling into complex arabesques of Hebrew and Sanskrit calligraphy, and back out again so that vast passages seemed to be merely letters or hieroglyphs and a single section might be an entire conference of birds.

I remember a dream I had of him as a child where I was living in a room without windows, just me, and he sat there at the helm of the room, there to record my

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story, a story I wanted to populate with birds, a story I wanted to breathe under the open sky, but he hasn't any paper to write on and he doesn't see the walls, doesn't see them because he's so intent on me, and so he comes over with his pen raised and begins pecking me with his purple beak, tattooing me to the marrow, burying me in the details of his own story, a nautical web, dragging his pen like a scalpel through my body until I'm just another character in his story and he smiles and says, at least it's not just any story but The Story, old as any other, basic and seafaring and long, long, long, the prayer to prolong your wayward journey, or a curse on the idler who forgets himself long enough to listen, and I look up through the murky blues of water and sky where rays of sunshine and birds plummet towards me only to drown before we can comprehend each other. Their bloated bodies sink like pale fish in the depths, and I bubble upwards like a jetting squid.

He never spoke to me but once. Would that he hadn't at all. For as silent as he was, I developed as a keen listener, maybe in dreadful anticipation. Maybe not though, because I still hear his pen dragging even now, and I drop my head in fear, not to disturb him in his obstreperous success. Would that I'd never gave him my Vowels, those birds that chirped endlessly at me disrupting my sleep as I waited.

While the most prolific writer I ever knew told me the story I'm about to tell you, he gesticulated with his writing hand without removing it from the scroll in front of him. He never looked at me once and I grew queasy in trying to watch his handiwork, looking for that unshakable human tic in his jumpy, jumbled, evolving style, unable to find any corners to round or angles to dissect, although as I looked longer, a few words shimmered in the back of my mind like a mad hum, and then a sentence glowed in my skull like euphoria, and then too much light was spilling forth to see anymore and I knew I was back in the Story and he had me; it was about then I would have run to the gunwales to empty the contents of my stomach, shed its lining, but I knew my place now was only in here, an Oarsmen in the hulk of the storyteller, and so I focused on the steady beat of waves that slapped our tiny vessel around and let them at last put my stomach at ease.

I closed my eyes and listened.





Xy was born on a parched pillow full of feathers, opening his eyes to the cries of his own, or maybe the bleating of many fleece-haired brothers, and seeing at once a nameless She who stood scratching his doughy features into a lozenge stone likeness, marking his arrival in what turned out to be nothing but a vast meadow scattered with headstones, graves made up at the outset scattered in mossy circles. He crawled to a stony resemblance, as did all of his brothers by the sound of it, and She disembarked like a sliver of moon into the hilly distance, wearing the shadows like a black veil upon her face.

But unlike his brothers who were entangled in creeping vine at the base of their respective stones, Xy paused, witnessed her in his expanding peripherals, and soon looked beyond her to the hills that she walked towards, the peaks rearing out in jagged points, all seemingly leading to the house that sat sentinel atop it all, and he began to crawl after her, or maybe just towards the cliffs, or maybe just away from the stones and his brothers who by now sounded sleeping lambs for good.

He never did remember exactly how he arrived at that house, but it always seemed to have something to do with the pillow that had emptied its feathers and been refilled with a set of perfumed pages telling a story he knew was for him to read, although he could never quite complete a reading of it, or even decide the right order of the pages, all scrawled in languages that seemed somewhat familiar yet strange, maybe compiled of some of the words he'd witnessed on the stones, maybe a story to account for the time he'd lost which must have come between awakening on the pillow and making his way up the hill to the house. In fact, the house was the first thing he recognized as his body, long before he became familiar with the rolling gray shape people that passed through the window positioned where the ordinary man has a door.

Everywhere he looked were animate frights, ghostly presences which each wore symbols of the tangible like the poisonous insignia of spidertoads, and they passed him like a panorama procession spun by a spindle and dragged by a conveyor belt; there went a swirl of silky cloth, and a scent of dusted spokes, and a seam of fitted suits; here came the sound of steady gait, and the sweep of seconds ticking, and the song of children humming. He sat in a chair that rocked but didn't creak, enrapt in the people that passed as if looking away from them would draw his mind to the persisting ovoid eyes that he feared still looked out of that meadow, waiting to

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pounce on him and reduce him to stony silence. The anxiety became an acute awareness as he watched the world interact in its death-defying easiness. The ghosts converged in familiarity, which he only recognized as a delicate little sound like the chirping of a canary in a shaft of light, and as a moment of stillness when the frights paused in front of his latticed window which he hung upon gently like a flutter heart hermit.

And as he looked, her features danced around him like the bustling of a larger community, dwarfing the town's inhabitants: her jaw like the lay of land extending into horizon, a curl of lips like foliage upturned on tempest breaths, a sighing relief no more; the nose at the center like a shamanic memorial, only good now to bury in the pages, and ovoid eyes like speckled eggs, hatched moths that dwindled from item to item until they wearied and came to rest where Xy swatted only to discover what must be his own face, but what felt for a moment hers. And so he confirmed he hadn't turned to stone even as his reflection remained nothing but the intimation of a ripple in stagnant ocean, as every time he felt on the verge of finding her he was interrupted by a rattling headache. He'd lose focus of her as, like clockwork, the ghosts came streaming before the window, and he watched in sympathy as they too followed, knowing to himself that the only place she would be found for him was somewhere in the perfumed pages just as surely as he knew the ghosts within the pages long before they ever arrived to haunt his vision, or he to haunt theirs.

For he would've thought himself the only real ghost were not he constantly bombarded by the kindness of those he watched. In the wee hours, when the green old magic of the world renews itself, Xy would crack open his window, which to him was like removing a glass eye, and shudder in delight at the goods laid out on his doorstep. Pitchers of water, a carton of eggs, a jug of milk, and freshly picked fruits and vegetables of such wonderful color that Xy would let fall tears so large that he almost caught his reflection in them. A commoner man might have suspected the gifts as sacrifice or tithe, but Xy regarded them wholly as he did the frights, and took them in as in an act of consecration. It's tempting to call a man who only interacts with himself and merely observes others as arrogant, or to believe that if he had an ounce of empathy he'd tear down the bars that divided himself and the world, or at least seek to; it's tempting, but not befitting of Xy, who, despite his monolithic fear, loved those that passed through his world view as





if they were of his own eminence, and precisely because they weren't – no, each new beautiful distinct image he knew instinctively only as strange convey of his beloved emanator, ghostly signs of Something More: of Her.

Because for Xy, everything beneath the sky was ethereal except for ghosts, and ghosts were born from words, although they were sturdier than the words themselves as they peopled corona, shaped themselves and go. As he looked, and he looked, and he looked through the fogging of his thoughts, each as sharp as teething letters until they yielded into words which funneled into the deeps to lodge like seed husks stuck in maws, he became increasingly sure that what he saw wasn't abyss alone. If people were islands, the trajectory of their lives were isthmuses; if people were ships, then Xy's window was just another porthole opening on the ocean where his eyes leviathan skimmed the surface and his eyelids beat like wings and waves. And still, something was missing from his life, a life the shape of the darkly mapped bug that sits at the center of the infinite Mandelbrot Set. He was large enough to see infinity in the beyond, that much was sure, but he had yet to discover the imaginary number that might link him to all the real ones and confirm his own existence as a man, a demiurge, or both. For Xy, moonbeams creaked and long black vales were as gauzy as the eternal firmament they threaded into.

Arranging the pages was like a cocktail of valerian root and rarebit fiend for him, inducing the easiness of sleep that he perceived to be the organizing principle of the world beyond his window just as it yielded to a febrile cacophony of geometric generation that somehow always calmed the rapid eye. During day and night he would sit at the window and count ghosts and think of stones. He only slept like a brick while he read, dreaming of castles where time would suspend like a drawbridge. Where the moths met the glinting edge of the letters, colors cascaded like a chromatic field casting shadows that lived, shades more vivacious than he, almost as radiant as the lady that was the land. And then the perfumed pages would turn fusty and he'd awake with a startling rattle and there were the ghosts, walking their blind route before him.

Though he could rearrange the papers differently and they'd always yield new worlds, each seemingly more real in its siren call than the last, he never knew what to do with the outliers of the pillow - those few pages it contained which were

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unscented, and where nothing had been written: where he only assumed he'd eulogize himself when the time came. For he knew that when he started writing, etching his own name, it would be a promise to the dirt and the beginning of the end, the old ragnarok determinism, the cleft pledge. Time would cease to be a sound and it would clock him over the head, dragging him off into the boggy wilderness where he knew all his brothers waited like impulse amethyst eyes in the dark. He wouldn't be able to stop until he'd emptied his insides then, which he was still rather interested in, and so he avoided the blank pages and the window like they were parasitic and dedicated his life merely to a fanciful arrangement of the pages with scent, heft, and marks.

He'd arrange them by smell, or in a chronology of the letters that began them, or by odd mathematical formulae of his own devising, or merely by suggestion of the voice from the western wind. Of course, no matter the strangeness of the arrangement, it'd eventually bore him into a frenzy where he'd stuff them back into the pillow, shake it up like loaded dice, stand vigil at his window for a spell, and then begin reading the story anew. It wasn't so much mining for gold as it was the only way he could sift his hands through the loam that loomed beyond his house—the greenbrown loam he smelled but couldn't touch.

And so Xy spent his youth tossing leaves about and glad he could scale the craggy jaw, leap off into the sweeping lips, and sit at the fault line of the nose while the moth-eyes burned above the pocket lodestars words he carried. Sometimes he thought he could've happily spent his life in the story, dreaming of her, sitting like a stone house, a pox on nobody and a fire unvanquished in his belly, yet he always found his way to that window and the permutations of the latticework there—but why? It must've been the sustenance provided by his faceless subjects that allowed him the hidden blossoming of his inward life, even with its many problems.

Then came a particularly sticky day in a red season when the ghosts grouped in their finest clothing and spoke their favorite words and Xy pressed himself so close to the window that he nearly burst through the partition altogether. He imagined himself among them and the idea became so prominent to him that he was almost certain it had a face, when a sharp whistle came, a caterwaul snapping his reverie and carrying it off like a carrion bird on the horizon, closer to him than any sound





but the echo of his thoughts had been for longer than he could remember. This wasn't his design. No, it came from a slate-gray cat.

And before he knew it he was a paroxysm of bones clicking in the corner, holding himself from the base desire to run over to the door, throw it open, and pull some poor animal to his bosom once and for all. For Xy, that would be the end of all beginnings. He'd distanced himself from love as he'd distanced himself from allegiance, unwilling to be caught in the snare where his own face would become visible to the outside world, unwilling to trap himself in a statement when he knew that this would make him no better than the pad of perfumed pages, and cause the ghosts such resentment that they'd tear him to pieces, limb by limb, bough for bough, casting his lark of a heart out the window just to see what new shapes they could make of the rest of him, using pieces of him as stone tools, him the pestle and her the mortar. He was determined to avoid this by doing it himself, avoiding the breakers by acting on their behalf, exhausting himself on the pages so that the scavengers might find nothing but a pristine set of bones, nothing left on them to pick clean. If a connection were formed with even a cat, he'd have to speak on the behalf of something other than himself, have to write it down on a blank page, even if only a word or a sentence... And yet that whistle again, as if the window had become a mouth and sound was a disembodied traveler returning to it, manifesting in the form of a slate-gray cat that seemed to materialize out of moon itself. Xy ran to his pages tail tucked between his creaking legs and indulged in a furious composition, an arrangement so thorough he nearly felt as if he were writing his own story, before passing out cold in the heap of parchment, hardly breathing in his sleep like an admonition against the drone of summer cicadas and the tall tales of crickets.

It was the tale of a parasite bird that entered into the nest of a black-chinned hummingbird and left with honeysuckle glazing its down feathers. The black-chinned hummingbird lived at the center of a raptor grove, but it was too fast for the birds of prey to devour, although the raptors neatly massacred all other dangerous predators that pierced the inner sanctum of their grove. That is, any predator other than this particular parasite bird, who hangs plump as a plum from a sagging branch of the faery-quick hummingbirds—a branch that is about to snap, scaring away the hummingbirds, and alerting an army of raptors to the

interloper who has fattened himself on nectar and is ready to digest forever.

He awoke somewhat sobered to the tickle of twilight, rubbed the sand from his eyes and wandered to his windowsill where the gifts were laid out as usual, more abundant than ever. One by one, he carried in the tokens of generosity, all smiles and globular tears as usual. He carried in the water, and the eggs, and the fruit, and was carrying in a basket of colorful vegetables when a head of lettuce tilted itself at him and then started nodding as in agreement with Xy's forking thoughts.

But before he could hurl the possessed green head the way of the parasite bird, there was the slate-gray cat leaping out at him from behind it with the velocity of a chummy prankster, the small animal exploding forward with so much force that it nearly knocked Xy into the hearth where, until presently, only he had found warmth. Before he could resist (and he never really could), the animal was licking at him with a sandpaper tongue, a tiny pink interloper that in an instance abraded a lifetime of ascetic aversion. He held the cat to his chest and rolled into a new landscape, arcing with the beast through fledgling patterns and sending the perfumed pages scattering to the edges of the house like yesterdays leaves. There there, he cooed to the animal. Here here.

Eventually the moment became another one, as all moments must, and a lifetime of habit returned to Xy who collected the pages and returned them to the pillow where he slept dreamless for once cradling the cat that dreamt of birds. Thus the wheel began spinning and Xy destined himself to death just as he leapt into his life, no longer ashamed to be the man Xy. The greatest victories in our lives are leaps, yet we always must crawl again to the next point of departure. Xy didn't mind. To leap is a grace that redeems any crawl. He spent the next day completely removed of the window and the pages, content to simply watch his accomplice and all the quirky arbitrariness that distinguished the honest life he discovered in his modest home—his modest home that wasn't so modest, because as he chased the playful cat the house expanded into wings he'd never imagined, as though the cat were his lost architect. What he didn't know what that a crowd had amassed beyond the window, and were watching him with an intentness that rivaled his own, rivaled any but the cats, who could fix his attention on things for so long they inevitably became real. The cat pawed at the walls, and consistently





raised its behind for a good scratch, and seemed as embarrassed as Xy at discovering that her immense grace only transcended matter so much, sauntering away disgusted when she failed to stick a particularly difficult jump. Me too, me too! thought Xy, squashing empty space in a gleeful clapping which brought to attention hands that Xy had long forgot, and the ghosts that were now watching began clapping and hallooing in tandem.

The cat had the adorable habit of cuddling up in the crook of Xy's arms each night, and the rather disgusting habit of licking at hair, wherever he found it, which disconcerted Xy until he realized it to be an attempt at grooming by his new friend who only knew order a coat of fur. He was so moved by the thought that he closed his eyes, leant over, and in a quick flick lapped his tongue along the animal's back, such that afterwards he himself had to cough out a hairball. The ghosts rolled onto their backs guffawing, holding what they learned to be their disparate torsos at the absurdity of it all, while the animal sulked away at the impolite interruption of a bath she was rather enjoying. Humor had finally arrived at Xy's door, and with it a sobering dose of sanity that carried away years of his life in a self-affirming HA!

As the days passed, and Xy grew older still, and as his body became a home beneath a veneer of fur and the gaze of ghosts, the gifts at his door began to deteriorate, both in kind and quality. It was as if the ghosts were testing his viability, as if a hook were coming to drag him through the screen of his window to can his act. Instead of clear water, he'd find lagoon black liquids, too sweet or too bitter to quench him, and the eggs grew unnaturally large, as did the fruit although it wasn't nearly sweet enough; sugarcane was replaced with treacle, and the vegetables which had so fascinated Xy in their infinite shapes and sizes stopped appearing at all. Xy grew gaunt, both from a genuine expenditure of life and the lack of the old sustenance, and only found solace in his cat companion, graying now beyond slate, who at least could leave him and find herself clean water and food by virtue of her tremendous nose before returning home.

When the malnutrition grew even worse, Xy did the only thing he could, the thing he knew he must. He rummaged through the pages that had become feathers again, long since ripped to shreds by the investigative and playful cat, deep down and into the bottom where a blank page remained intact, and he took up a feather

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along with it and he wrote down MY CAT, as outside his window ghosts wailed in big peals of laughter. Who was this obdurate Xy who dared to make such a claim in the world of ghosts? And suddenly they grew lonely and began moaning, crying for help, and then shouting in anger, and then yelping in paeans of joy, but he hardly noticed because the feather was busy swishing by this point, composing a piece which ran from the pages, then up the wall, then to the pillow which he looked in to find full of fragrance once again.

But before he could start his story, he looked up and he noticed his friend the cat at the door, something changed in her demeanor. She was ready to leave; he thought about it, and so was he. Xy petted his cat into a purring ecstasy so that his friend would not lose charter of itself in a world buzzing with too many sounds, and smells, and images that promised too much and ended up still nothing but buzz. She headed out into the thick of the night with one last kiss, this time right on Xy's nose where nothing but skin stretched between them, and this was the last he ever saw of his friend who had promised nothing and delivered him everything. Here here, girl. There there.

Xy wandered back to the window that he hadn't visited for a score of years, and threw it open, half expecting the sun to wither him to parchment and then dust in kind. What he saw was the audience of frights, faces of every sort, so remarkably similar and as varied as the vegetables that rotted at his doorstep, such tiny deviations constituting the difference between those you loved and those you didn't much care for, nothing really stone-like at all- and despite the breathtaking scene, he looked into his heart and found it impossible to thaw, none of the emotion which he had so effusively endowed the mere details of the world in the pages out there. It was as if he had traded a condition of prosopagnosia for one of capgras, and he instantly knew how wrong he was, how very wrong he'd been. They weren't ghosts, they were lost.

It's tempting to say that Xy was always wrong, that we saw it from the outset, that his realization was remarkably obvious; it's tempting, but not befitting Xy, who also got a tremendous amount right in his time, and upon seeing the error of his ways, hesitated not a moment before making the silent promise which all hermits of the parched pillow eventually must: Not like this. I must be on my way. And so





that night, when the wee hours rolled out from outwhere, Xy left his home with a pillow of perfumed paged slung over his shoulder and the blank ones that remained trembling in his hands, and a feather tucked behind his ear, and he went door to door, silent as a scout, quietly slipping an empty page from his own book beneath each of the doors so that those few who were interested might rewrite their dreams upon him and triumphantly return to the castle that sits on the drawbridge which suspends like time. When the deed was done, he emptied the pillow of the tattered pages, and watched them as they scattered once last into all the branching directions of possibility, some to be netted by the butterfly nets of adventurous children and others merely to float beyond sight, departing a hint of their fragrance to the hills that swayed beyond all houses, always waiting and watchful for new beauty despite the terrible blunderings in the stubble-plains.

At the edge of town sat an ocean without ripple, and here an Oarsmen who Xy recognized as a long lost friend stood with what Xy could now recognize as a coppery face in each eye socket. Without pause, Xy approached and plucked each out like apples revealing eyes the shade of violet that exists just beyond the visible spectrum of light; they were beset with bags, evidence of the tremendous things they'd carried, and gleamed with a determination that wasn't meant to strike fear but lived lost like the shade of a beaming isthmus that led back into a tangled naïvete of neurons like a single gossamer dendrite. You've rowed too long, Father. There there. Here here. And Xy hugged the Father of Time to his bosom, and there they remained where the beating waves of life meet the beating waves of death for longer a span than any of us will ever know. And at long last the Father dropped his Oar, and Xy took it up, and they crossed the bar together, and Xy dipped it into the sea and bent his back to part the water; and as they left the land of living, there was a moment, as infinite as it was fleeting, where Xy's lifeline waned against the gray horizon and he became only X, and Why ceased to be a question and once again became the same name of the world, Let Ys be, at which point he too dropped the Oar and skipped time like a rock so that he could return to it someday to redouble his efforts, and finally become a member of the living, and find his friend the cat to thank her once again, there where the stones read your name and the lady sleeps and the ghosts watch.

X was borne by a wave that did not peter, like a bird that cut through the air...

NR

