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# santa clara review



in this issue:

interviews with Kim Addonizio,

artists Anne Faith Nicholls and Jeremy Fish,

and Colin Meloy of The Decemberists

# santa clara review

since 1869

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## contents

volume 95 number 2 spring/summer 2008

### poetry

brian dickson	1	Reading Between
brian brown	2	Compromise
lindsay wilson	39	Three Ways to Paint the Side of a Boxcar
jose ramirez	43	October, 1989
gaylord brewer	73	Calling My Mother from India
maeve riley	78	The First Snow
kelsey maher	80	Sometimes in the Night
jennifer dempsey	82	Cold Deck
ken tokuno	93	Birds
doug munsch	94	Wisdom Teeth
lily iona mackenzie	96	The Mullah's Call
nick sanchez	139	Ode to Federico Garcia Lorca
kim addonizio	157	First Poem For You
	158	My Heart
	159	Another Day on Earth: December 26, 2004
kevin schmitt	208	Garden Party
lauren karp	209	Prophecy
john grey	224	Just Sacks, Bags, Boxes
mike gustie	225	What Mother Says
austin baumgarten	226	Davana Terrace
weston cutter	227	My Son Says He Hears Tigers

### drama

maeve riley	27	Go South, Head North
devin bertsch	98	Facets and Facades
chad eschman	163	The Overlap
	228	The Collision

## fiction

tate higgins	7	The Most Normal Thing in the World
james victor jordan	45	George Who
kelly daniels	192	Service
nina schuyler	210	Water Babies

## nonfiction

maggi van dorn	3	Religion: A Body Called Church
kaitlyn evans	63	My Chronic Migraine
david wonpu	75	Open-Mic
lia eastep	83	Random Acts of Gardening
molly jo rose	141	Q-without-U Words: Confessions of a Scrabble Addict
kelsey maher	220	Reflections From the Bell Jar

## art

christinah barnett	123	Untitled
kit coyle	124	Molar
jennifer gochoco	125	Don't POP!
sean m. watts	126	Martha's Alley
veronica eng	127	Isolation
evelyn salguero	128	The Life Inc.
kathleen bradley	129	Wax Melt
megan diddie	130	Dandy Lion
c. dawn davis	131	Proofs of the Night
cecilia osorio	132	Self Portrait in Ink
lauren beaudoin	133	Cairo, Egypt
mike larremore	134	Inole
jennifer gochoco	135	Shimmering Ascent
rena satre-meloy	136	Suffocation
philip kruse	137	Untitled #3489
morgan alexandra ritter	138	The Middle Sister

## interviews

santa clara review	60	Out of Water: An Interview with Jeremy Fish
	66	Rising Above the Tide: An Interview with Anne Faith Nicholls
	152	Poems, Prose, Tattoos, and the Blues: An Interview with Kim Addonizio
	160	Castaways and Cranes: An Interview with Colin Meloy

## letter from the editor

Dear Readers,

We generally don't think of writing or visual art as temporal. Unlike theater, dance, and other performing arts, printed words and images come in an everlasting form. The literary and art journal, however, occupies a space somewhere between performance and permanence. While the skeleton of the *santa clara review* remains relatively the same, each issue is fleshed out into a unique whole whose life spans a mere six months before it's put on a shelf and replaced by another.

What defines a journal isn't constant. In the past few years, I've seen the magazine go through numerous changes and phases. The *review* is always in a state of becoming, and this issue unfolds one moment in the fluid life of the magazine. This is an exciting moment for the *review*—it marks our second publication with Inkworks Press, the inclusion of more interviews, the addition of a drama section, and the magazine's 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This moment also marks my exit from the staff, and I am proud to see how the *review* has developed in this issue and I look forward to seeing where time takes it.

This is the second issue in which we've awarded Editor's Choice Prizes. Each section editor has chosen a favorite work to highlight in the magazine and to receive a \$100 award. The adjacent symbol indicates a prize recipient. Congratulations to the Editor's Choice Prize winners for this issue: Chad Eschman, Philip Kruse, Nina Schuyler, Ken Tokuno, and Maggi Van Dorn.



Finally, a very special thanks to Kim Addonizio, Jeremy Fish, Colin Meloy, and Anne Faith Nicholls for allowing us to interview them and for being so generous with their time and work.

Sincerely,

julie jigour  
and the *santa clara review* editors



brian dickson |

## Reading Between

Clusters: song of huddled pomegranate  
seeds. Your scraping them to your palm as hearts  
to eat, as repositories in your life-lines.

I could pass.

Open hands: this speech has errands past your  
ears to aril landscapes. If we lick the seeds,  
they fly as red-throat'd sparrows, our tongues  
in pursuit of us, knots for mouths.

## Compromise

I have brought you Edmund White,  
dragonflies, and witches butter,  
with a sprinkling of fairy dust  
on the windowpanes,  
and still you break dishes,  
flit off to the bedroom,  
while I descend  
the uncomfortable sofa,  
whistling aloud  
high spots of Vivaldi's "Winter."  
The time will come, I tell myself,  
you'll no longer wrestle  
demons of my intellect,  
their taunts laying waste  
your misunderstood advances,  
your unending desire  
to always possess me  
in the physical,  
which is all you can ever  
hope to have of me.  
Soon you'll burn my books,  
slit your wrists  
with your broken dishes,  
and I'll sit frozen by the fire,  
wondering aloud  
if this search for balance  
nullifies the need for it.



## Religion: A Body Called Church

### *The American Academy of Religion*

Every year over 10,000 scholars of religion from across the nation gather their finest tweed jackets and thick, black-rimmed glasses to attend the largest collegial convention in their field. Each year, they flood the downtown district of San Diego in such deep swells that the local pigeon population begins to pair off—two by two, male and female.

At the American Academy of Religion conference there is something for everybody—Feminist Theology, Mysticism and John Lennon, Immigration in the Catholic Church, Humor in the Book of Job, Desire and Redemption with a Foucaultian slant. I sit through one presentation on the Crucifixion, knees knocking and goose bumps rising because the hotel's air conditioning has been set to a sub-arctic temperature. My purple knuckles wrap nervously around my notebook, where my gaze locks, because the theologian before me has flashed another sado-masochistic image onto the screen, which even after three years of Women and Gender studies classes, is still much too graphic for my eyes. Yes, that's right. The speaker is using a hermeneutic of gay S&M to deconstruct the crucifixion of Jesus. Deconstruct. Is that what's happening to or maybe around that man's terrifyingly erect member? Embarrassed, I look down to follow the steady blue lines trailing across the page, where very little has been written. I always thought that the image of a crucified man was galvanizing enough, no matter how you looked at it. But apparently, an idea becomes avant-garde only when there is serious *inter-penetration* of the sacred and the profane.

### *Controversies and Catechism*

In just under two weeks, the epic children's adventure story, "The Golden Compass" will be released in theaters nationwide. The mov-

ie is based on British author Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* and has already received sharp criticism within some Catholic circles for its subtle anti-clerical, atheistic themes. Appalled that such a godless message could be insidiously woven into a story that will land in the laps of babes, critics are creating an uproar that any 5th grade parent would be deaf to miss.

Amidst this agitation, one calm voice insists that the only thing under siege in Pullman's novels is an "imposter god," an empty idol, an institution laden with such hypocrisy and injustice, that it must be dismantled by the purity of truth. This is the reply of Prof. Donna Freitas, Catholic theologian and pop-culture expert at Boston University. It is also the reply softly echoing in the first commandment: *You shall not have other gods besides me.*

### *The Jesus Christ Show*

"You've got to hear this guy, Maggi, he's ridiculous," my mom says as she flips the car radio to an early Sunday morning feature called "The Jesus Christ Show." The man on the show, whose voice is strong and suspiciously emphatic, assures me that no matter what difficulty I may be experiencing in my life or how complex my theological query, he has something to say to me. Such evangelical posturing is not entirely unfamiliar to me, but the following call renders me completely aghast.

"Hi there, Jesus," a woman says matter-of-factly.

Intimacy with the divine has never been so publicly flaunted, lest you tune into John Edward's "Crossing Over" ruse. The middle-aged sounding woman proceeds to question the radio persona known as "Jesus" about the distinctions between salvation by faith and by works. Negotiating this classic church polemic, the radio host diverges to discuss the sin of humanity, as *he felt it* on the cross. He says that *he* died for her, that *he* experienced unfathomable anguish, that a relationship with *him* is central to any act of faith or service.

With radio personalities mediating people's spiritual lives, confes-

sion has never seemed so unnerving—or publically broadcasted.

The morning mist holds such peace around the trees passing by my window. I turn off the radio so that I might hear its unspoken eloquence.

### *Something Else*

A mother parses her rosary beads before a niche statue of the Blessed Virgin- another mother who has watched the sufferings of her child with piercing agony at heart. Her fingers begin to tremble between the blue crystalline beads. Perhaps she is deal-making with God again over wounds that now even her soft kisses and Neosporin will not heal: the brother whose mysterious illness has left him paralyzed and strapped to a cold hospital bed. A daughter 6,195 miles away from home, alone and writhing from a broken heart, with only foreign-sounding words to console her.

What would it look like if the woman praying with her rosary in the golden light of dusk were to suddenly flip the kneeler on its head, climb on top of it and declare the stand her personal pulpit? Maybe she could call it the *Our Lady Show*.

I do not know what to make of religion most of the time, which may explain why I study it so feverishly. What is more compelling: its perversions or its grace? Its sinners or its saints? Its saints made out of sinners?

Clearly, if radio hosts are parading as gods and children's books are being condemned for the lack there of, and 10,000 people flock to hear a man speak of a sado-masochistic crucifixion, this topic is of some inconceivable worth to people. But so what? Everyone knows how ugly religion can get. I shiver before it like I do while watching a raging political debate, where the contenders only talk *at*, never *with*, one another.

I return again to the woman on the kneeler. Prayer candles flicker before her, casting tall shadows on the adobe wall. As the shadows sweep across the walls and stained glass, they begin to take the shape

of people praying beside her. Some are praying that the unusual corners of their lives might fit into the patchwork of salvation—that the cross might emerge unexpectedly from that mysterious heap of poignantly raw experience comparable only to the severity of, well, say S&M. Another shadow, opposite the first, genuflects repeatedly before the Church, because regardless of its fraying imperfections, the Church is a wick of stability for its quivering flame.

They are all here, praying out their inflictions in the light of grace.

## The Most Normal Thing in the World

I could see her through the metal fence that surrounded the pool, but I was pretty sure she couldn't see me. I'd worn all my best camouflage, and I was being real careful to stay still. She was spread out on a white plastic lounge chair in the concrete area on the far side of the pool, talking on the phone and stirring a drink with her finger. It was hot—the middle of the day and no refuge from the thick summer humidity, not even on my belly beneath the shady bushes on the edge of my neighbor's backyard.

"That's so true. Frank is just like that, too." Her voice bounced off the water, danced across the surface of the swimming pool that rocked soft and shimmering in the space between us. She was wearing a red one piece bathing suit, her hair in a ponytail, big dark sunglasses on her face. Her voice was different than my mother's, lighter and more energetic like she was speaking to a crowd gathered around a park bench. My mother never spoke to crowds.

I was out exploring the new neighborhood, ducking behind trashcans and pretending to shoot out windows when I saw the blue shine of the swimming pool through the bushes. I'd been doing this for the last few days—spying on neighbors just to see if I could, getting a feel for the new turf in a game of unsupervised loneliness and boredom. We used to have a pool just like this one at our old house. Everyone did in Alabama, but our new house only had a few fruit trees and lots of yellow jackets.

"I should have known when I changed my name to Jones. It even looks boring on paper, like an old inch worm or something." She held the phone to her ear with one shoulder, reached back and slid her arm out of the top of the bathing suit, then the other arm, then rolled the top half of the red suit down so her breasts were bare and exposed in the sunlight. "No more excitement in my life," she said.

I was overtaken by a surge of feeling, a tingle on the backs of my thighs and the insides of my elbows that crawled up my col-

larbone and burned just below and between my eyes. I tried and I tried but I couldn't hold it in. I sneezed. The woman across the bright blue pool froze, then rose up to one elbow and looked in my direction.

"Hold on a second, Beth." She lowered her sunglasses to peer past them and sat up in the lounge chair.

I held my breath and pushed my chin a little deeper into the dirt, peering at her through the branches of her bushes. I reached for the rifle at my side. I'd fantasized about this moment—the imaginary world of war and camouflage and covert maneuvers in which my skills were tested by the proximity of the enemy, the moment of tension that leads to the heroic climax—but not the tits.

"I think there's someone in the alley. No, no it's okay. Just hold on a second." She set down the phone and pulled the top half of her swimsuit back over her breasts. She rose from her chair and began the short stroll around the rectangular pool. I backed out on my elbows, got up and ran down the dirt alley, carrying my toy gun at my side, ducking behind trees and telephone poles in case she gave chase or opened fire.

I wasn't quite old enough to appreciate or feel guilty about the details of the experience other than to know I was doing something outside the boundary of the rules. Welcome to the neighborhood.

Even when I wasn't sneaking around, I wore camouflage whenever I could—I slept in it, I wore it to school, my swim trunks were camouflage, my toothbrush was Army green. It must have started with those movies Dad kept taking me to, saying we needed to get out of the house so Mom could have her space—or maybe it started with the stories my grandfathers used to tell before they died, or maybe it started with Rusty, although, I'm pretty sure that first day we met I was wearing camouflage underneath my church clothes.

After Rusty was gone, I kept dressing like that, at least for awhile—until second grade started and what I put on in the morning made a difference where I could sit at lunch. Mom didn't seem to mind what I wore. I guess she was just happy that I got up in the morning and dressed myself while she sat at the kitchen table, silent and lost over her cup of coffee and empty crossword puzzle.



It was the beginning of the summer, early June maybe, and my family was new in a town that hadn't changed much since the Civil War ended. I finished first grade in Alabama, just before the move, and didn't know anyone in this new place. My father ushered us into an old Victorian house that was built on a hill so that from the front it looked two stories high and from the back it looked three. The sweeping yellow-spotted yard was much bigger than the little courtyard of grass next to the pool we left behind in Alabama. It was bordered by a white, peeling two-board fence and a row of maple trees along the front, and the long distance from the back steps to the dirt alley was marked with fruit trees and grape vines that the old couple who'd lived in the house for the last few decades planted from seed.

The first thing I noticed about the inside of the house was the air—thick and heavy like an open-palmed hand telling you to turn around and go back outside. There wasn't any air conditioning. I had spent my whole life growing up in the low lands of southern Alabama in the summer and even though we were never rich, I distinctly remember my mother telling my father that she would never live in a house without air conditioning. I don't know what was different here or if she knew what she was getting into, but when I asked her about it that first night she said I'd be fine, and she opened my window for me.

"We're in the mountains now. That's why we put you up here on the top floor. To catch the breeze," she said. "Don't worry. This is Virginia. It gets cool here at night."

"What about the ghosts? They'll come through the screens." I wasn't really worried about ghosts, but I loved to hear my mother tell stories, and her favorite stories to tell were about seeing ghosts.

"Josh, I told you, ghost watching is like baldness," she said. "It skips a generation. I can see them, just like my grandfather could. That means you can't. Sorry."

She got up from my bed and opened the closet door. "No ghosts in here. I haven't seen a single ghost in this whole town."

I believed her, hadn't learned not to believe her yet. I've never seen a ghost—never felt one lie down next to me in my twin bed as a boy and whisper in my ear—but it was Mom's and my

favorite topic. She bought me books about true ghost stories and local hauntings for my birthday, told me about the ghosts that used to follow her around as a girl. Mom said it's not like on television where you ask your great uncle Fred if the food is good in heaven or if he's met anyone famous. She said ghosts are little clouds of dusty colored light.

"You can't see them so they can't hurt you."

"I heard some strange noises."

"It's the wind. Every house sounds different. You'll get used to it."

When she left, I shut the window to block the sound of the strange wind and fell asleep sweating in my sheets.

My family went to church every Sunday, but my parents were never really very religious. Sometimes Dad would say a blessing before dinner, sometimes he'd ask me to do it, and sometimes we'd just go right into eating like we forgot. We went to church because we moved around a lot for Dad's job. My father was a former architect, a child tennis prodigy, and most recently an editorial cartoonist for the paper. Back then, before the Internet and the instant transfer of data, cartoonists went where the work was. They turned in their latest assignments by getting up from their desk and walking over to the Editor's office. For my dad, the work was in Staunton, Virginia, and church was the easiest way for us to establish ourselves in our most recently adopted territory—the easiest way for me to make friends and the easiest way for Mom to try and meet other mothers.

It was a Presbyterian church, so my parents went to the mid-morning service with the other adults, and I went to Sunday school. There wasn't much teaching going on in Sunday school. It was mostly just free childcare set up in a small room off the gymnasium that hosted a range of children from newborns to carefully dressed grade-schoolers.

We ate vanilla wafers and drank watered down red Kool-Aid out of wax paper cups. We looked at illustrated kid's bibles and made Joseph and Mary dolls out of clothespins. Mr. Baker, our teacher, passed out coloring books.

The books were thin and flimsy, dog eared like they'd been passed down through the years, but empty of color as if Sunday

school classes had been drawing in them for ages without leaving marks. It could have been a miracle or maybe we were the first group to actually get to use the crayons—broken and spilling out of coffee cans on the corner of the bookshelf. Or maybe Mr. Baker didn't realize that we weren't actually supposed to color in the books, ruining them for the future generations of young Presbyterians. Or maybe Mr. Baker knew and just didn't give a damn.

As one might expect, the Sunday school coloring books, that had apparently never actually felt the smooth caress of wax or were miraculously wiped clean like the opposite of the Jesus statue shedding real tears, were filled with cartooned scenes from the Bible. There on page three was Noah and his Ark, a couple pages later the nativity scene, with a donkey in the foreground that looked like he wanted to say something, and towards the back a picture of Jesus nailed to the cross.

Mr. Baker walked around the room as we worked, looking over our shoulders and speaking quietly to the class. Sometimes he'd read passages from the Bible and other times he'd just talk. "Jesus Christ will return to earth. He could be here now. What would you say if he walked into this room? Don't forget, the Holy Ghost sees everything, so listen to your parents."

It was on one of those first few Sunday mornings that I met Rusty. We broke bread over crayons. He must have been sitting somewhere across the room, but he got up and came over to lean his elbows in my space on the table. I know he wasn't sitting next to me when I opened the coloring book because I sat next to the only person in class who spoke to me—Sally, a red headed girl with the lingering odor of blueberries who regularly told me in great giggly detail what the shit in her baby brother's diaper looked and smelled like. Sally took one look at Rusty and asked to go to the bathroom.

"You got a red crayon?" Rusty asked, his voice both raspy and sharp for his age but still high pitched. He wasn't a big kid but he stood close to my chair and leaned over me with his neatly parted brown hair still showing the teeth marks of a comb, a wrinkled yellow short sleeve button up shirt and a green tie. He looked old fashioned and out of place, not comfortable in his clothes, kind of creepy for such a young guy.

I said sure, went intentionally back to my careful coloring,

and let him take the red crayon out of the coffee can on his own.

“Why are you doing the boring one?” he asked.

I was working on a landscape scene—neatly coloring in the star of Bethlehem with sunshine yellow. I hadn’t really thought of it as the boring one. It was just the first one I turned to.

“I’m just starting with this one. Then I’m going to draw Jesus.”

“What grade are you in?”

“Going into second.”

“I’m going into fourth. Let’s have a contest.” Rusty sat down in Sally’s chair.

So we did. We had a contest to see who could draw the most realistic blood in the crucifixion scene. I tried real hard. I’d been relocated before, and I knew it was important when you were the new kid in town not only to go along with local customs and games, but also to establish a certain level of skill and competency. You needed to impress people, and I hadn’t met many people yet.

When Mr. Baker said it was time to finish up and began collecting supplies, Rusty and I slid our drawings across the table to each other. It was immediately clear that Rusty had won. It was, as they say, no contest, but I still tried to establish the merits of my artistic abilities. I mentioned how I had won a blue ribbon in art class at my old school and how my dad was a cartoonist as if a little bit of my history might help, but he wasn’t impressed and he shouldn’t have been considering the magic he had worked on that miracle coloring book. The blood he had rendered dripped from the hands and feet, strung heavy on the wood as if teasing out the power of gravity and pooled around the base of the cross in deepening and complex colors of red and black and purple. You could almost see it steaming. You could almost see the sun reflected in it. I was almost scared to touch it, scared I might pull my hand away with the blood of Christ staining my fingers. Rusty had a real imagination for blood.

It turned out that Rusty lived just down the street. I didn’t know any other boys close to my age that lived near me that summer. Hell, I didn’t know any other boys my age period that summer, and I could only hang out in the house with Mom so many hours a day. It was only natural that we started spending a lot of

time together.

“Mom, I’m going over to Rusty’s house.”

She was sitting Indian style on the hardwood floor of the living room, the warm mid morning light casting her shadow on the far wall. Old photo albums were spread out around her as if one of the cardboard moving boxes still stacked on the far wall had exploded.

“Have fun,” she said.

I don’t think she ever knew exactly where I was going, and I never bothered to be more specific than “I’m going over to Rusty’s house,” which both parents had deemed a safe destination because of its proximity and the constant presence of a babysitter. Mom was just happy that I was out of the house, that I was adjusting and making friends of my own. Rusty’s mom worked all the time, and his dad was always out of town on business. April, his babysitter, spent most of the time on the back porch talking on the phone and sunbathing and drinking gin and tonics from the liquor cabinet.

The walk to Rusty’s was easy—out the back door, past the pear and apple trees, downhill through the grass, under the lattice cave of the grape vine, past the detached garage and a right turn onto the dirt road that formed the alley, follow the alley for one block, take the left fork behind the Jones’ backyard, third house on the right. There wasn’t much traffic in the alley, not many cars actually used it. Dad parked our station wagon on the street.

I rang the doorbell, Rusty yelled down from the attic window, and I let myself in.

April was in the kitchen, filling a glass with ice from the trays in the freezer, barefoot and wearing cutoff jeans and a fluorescent green bikini top. Music was coming loud and fuzzy from the little radio on the top of the refrigerator. She bent over and lit a cigarette on the burner of the stove.

“Hi, Josh,” she said, exhaling smoke into the air between us. “Rusty’s in the attic, trying on his mom’s old clothes or something.”

“That’s real funny, bitch,” Rusty said coming down the back stairs. He took the machine gun I’d brought for him out of my hand.

“Don’t be late for dinner or I’ll tell your mother.”

“Yeah right, I’ll tell her you’ve been drinking her vodka.”

“Go ahead, tell her. It’s gin. She said I could have whatever I want, you brat.”

He pointed the toy machine gun at her and she rolled her eyes, turned and went to her sunbathing spot on the back porch.

I followed Rusty through the door next to the fridge that led to the cellar. On days that we were feeling particularly excited, Rusty would get out the red can of gasoline from the garage. We wrote our names on the street and watched them burn in blue and orange flames. We poured gasoline over our toy GI Joes and watched them turn to green plastic puddles on the driveway. We stopped at the light switch in Rusty’s basement, perched halfway down the bare wooden stairs that led down from the kitchen.

“My brother taught me this one. It’s called land mines,” Rusty said.

He reached up to the shelf of tools and light bulbs and grabbed an empty mason jar. He held the jar between us, examined it like he was checking to see if some invisible lightning bugs were still alive. He turned to face the cool darkness of the underground space and tossed the glass jar out into the empty silence of the room. It arched and turned and shattered on the concrete floor with a loud pop, sending sharp shards of thick glass in all directions.

Upstairs I could hear April walking around in the kitchen talking on the cordless phone. I was sure she heard the breaking glass. I said, “Shit.” It seemed appropriate.

“Take off your shoes,” Rusty said.

Me and Rusty were friends, and we were competitive. Like I said before, it was always important to rise to the occasion when you were trying to stake your reputation in a new town. Besides, April was going to come down and yell at us any second. I sat on the steps and took off my shoes.

“Here’s the rules. You gotta make it to the far wall and back without stepping on any land mines.” He meant broken glass.

“Barefoot?”

“How else am I gonna know you’re not cheating?”

It was dim in the basement, one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, but I could see a small foot path through the shiny pieces of broken glass.

“Do it or I’ll shoot you.”

“Don’t point that at me.”

“It’s just a fucking toy.”

I could do this. I stepped off the stairs, onto the concrete, feeling like I could win at any game that Rusty could come up with.

I was about ten steps into it, halfway to the far wall, barefoot and surrounded by glass, when Rusty turned out the light. I froze and a rush of sensation flooded me, the cold concrete on my bare feet, the muffled sounds of April talking through the floor above us, the smell of Virginia dirt, the coolness of my hair and the weight of it sitting on top of my head, the tickle of a drop of sweat behind my ear. I dared not move. Rusty was silent.

“Turn it back on, asshole.”

“Nope. You gotta make it in the dark.”

There was glass all around me, I was barefoot, and I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. “I can’t see. Turn on the light.”

“That’s the point. Nighttime maneuvers.”

“Please.”

“Don’t be a puss.”

“Turn it on, asshole.”

I waited in the dark, squinting for some hope that my eyes could adjust to the change, for what seemed like a long time, but the light didn’t come back on.

Left with little choice (what was I going to do—stand there and start crying), I took a small ginger step back towards the stairs. My foot found no glass, just smooth cold concrete. If I stayed calm and retraced my steps, then I’d make it back okay and then it’d be Rusty’s turn, and I could stand on the stairs while he tried to make it through the mine field in the dark. It was the fourth step that got me. I took it with a little too much desperation, trying to hurry up and get back to the steps to get this whole thing over with, bringing my right foot down heavy, expecting more empty concrete and finding a piece of glass. I yelled, which was like breaking the rules, and Rusty turned the light back on.

“You lose,” he said.

There was a tiny puddle of blood gathering around my heel.



I hopped to the stairs on one leg, sat down, and looked at my foot. A long thin piece of glass was hanging out of my heel.

"You gotta pull the glass out or it'll get infected and I'll have to amputate your whole leg."

I pulled it out, holding my breath to keep the tears out of my eyes.

"Get a paper towel from the kitchen."

"You think I need stitches?"

"Let me see. No, it's just a flesh wound. Does it hurt?"

"No." It burned like hell, but I wasn't going to admit it.

I followed Rusty up the steps to the kitchen. Halfway across the room, he stopped and crouched down. He raised his fist next to his ear, the sign for get low we'd learned from Vietnam movies.

"Shhh." He put his hand to his lips and motioned for me to follow him to the window, the opposite direction from the paper towels. I left a little trail of dropped blood on the white linoleum floor.

Through the window I could see April on the back porch, talking on the phone, smoking a cigarette, sipping on her drink, like she did most afternoons. I tiptoed closer to Rusty. He pointed and smiled. April was leaning against the railing, topless.

"She'll see us," I said, ducking down behind the couch.

She tapped out her cigarette and turned from the railing of the porch, her bikini top empty on the chair beside her and her breasts bouncing as she walked towards us.

"I thought you guys were gone." April clasped her arms around her chest and closed the sliding glass door behind her. Rusty started laughing and pointing. I looked down at my feet.

"Oh, grow up. They're just tits, see." She opened up her arms. "Go play with your stupid toy guns in traffic or something."

"We were already going." Rusty threw his rifle over his shoulder. We didn't go anywhere without our guns. I wrapped a paper towel around my foot, put my shoe back on and followed Rusty out the front door, careful not to look back at April.

"Bet you've never been here before," Rusty said, spreading his arms before him.

That whole time we were playing in fenced in backyards and dark basements, there was a spacious and unsupervised lot a



few blocks from our houses—a place at the edge of the neighborhood that hadn't been developed. It was past a street that I was sure I wasn't allowed to cross but hadn't been told not to because I'd never asked. The oval shaped grass field was surrounded by thick woods.

Hidden in the oak trees was an old rusted car with the tires rotted off and the windshield busted out; we made it our tank. Deeper in the woods, almost invisible under green webs of kudzu were some abandoned washers and dryers, our gun turrets. Even farther into the cool shadows was a creek just big enough to hide fish. Rusty and I hunted along the rock banks for snakes and turned over rocks on the bottom to see if there were any crawfish.

"I saw Mrs. Jones's tits once," I said. I threw a rock into the middle of the creek.

"Liar."

"It's true. I was in the bushes behind her house."

"Why were you spying on her, you perv?"

"I wasn't. I was practicing stealth."

"Big deal. I see April's tits all the time."

Staunton was too small to really have any bad parts of town, but like any place, it had its bad spots. The lot could have been a bad spot, it had all the right elements, but I didn't realize it until I was old enough to look for those types of places on purpose and by then we had moved to a new state.

"I got to get home before the street lights turn on."

"Pussy."

I left Rusty there. After a few steps, I stopped and turned back. I could still hear the water of the creek running over the rocks, but Rusty's form had disappeared into the mix of shadows and tree branches. I ran home.

In the evenings, my father always smoked in front of the television before dinner. On the nights I remember best, he would let me help him load the tobacco into his pipe and I'd sit with him and watch him watch the news—the smoke hovering above us in wispy clouds that my father stared right through.

I opened my mouth and stretched my neck towards the thicker parts of the clouds and tried to catch enough smoke so I could blow it out on my own like he did.

“Quit that. You’re too young,” he said and we both smiled, out of sight of Mom in the kitchen. When my father tapped out his pipe with his ink-stained fingers and lowered the foot rest on the recliner, it meant it was time to eat. He turned off the TV as he passed. Television was not allowed during dinner.

We ate in the study. A place that jutted off the back of the otherwise box shaped house, hanging over the yard below like the bow of a ship. We ate dinner there because the study had more windows than the dining room, and it was the only place that Mom’s antique family table would fit.

Rusty watched television while he ate. I’d even done it with him a couple of times over bowls of macaroni and cheese. If something like an election or a war was on, my father would make an exception and leave the TV going in the living room so that we could hear the sound from the dinner table. There were no wars tonight, at least not on the television. There were only the sounds of forks scraping plates and the rustle of Dad turning the pages of the newspaper.

“Can you open a window? It’s hot this close to the kitchen,” my father said.

“It’s hot in this whole house,” my mother replied without looking up from the dish she was passing to me.

“It’s been a hot summer. You can’t blame me for that,” my father said.

“You’re the one that picked it,” she said. “You’re the one that moved us into a house without air conditioning.” She was raising her voice now, but it was still controlled, like she just needed a little extra volume to be heard over some noise—some ghost in the room talking too close to her ear.

“It’s gonna get cooler next week,” he said. “Open a window.”

“The windows down here are painted shut.”

“That’s not my fault.”

Mom stood up from the table, and there was a moment of silence. She looked down on Dad. He returned intentionally back to his newspaper. She walked into the living room, and turned on the TV. My father’s head jerked toward the empty doorway. He watched where she had been but was now gone, his mouth half

open, caught in the middle of a bite of green beans. She returned, the sound of the television swarming into the room with her, sat back down and resumed eating like it was the most normal thing in the world. He stood right up, slammed shut his paper, walked calmly out of the room and turned off the TV.

“I want to hear the weather report,” she said.

“We don’t listen to the television when we’re having a family dinner,” he said.

“We used to not read the f-ing newspaper either,” she said.

“I’m working. What do you think pays for all of this?”

“I hate this house.”

I put a bite of pie in my mouth and watched the sun stretch the shadows of the fruit trees across the back yard instead of watching Mom and Dad make faces at each other. The glass on the windows needed to be cleaned. There were dead flies along the sill—crunchy and brittle and shapeless, holding their chins against their chests. Flimsy gray spider webs clung to the flies in little batches of engineering that went nowhere. One greasy smudge in the center of the window bent the light coming into the study like someone had leaned her cheek against the cool glass.

I was trying to decide if a ghost could leave a greasy spot on a window, trying to imagine seeing it suddenly appear like the spots that appeared on the car windshield on our drive to Virginia, when it happened for the first time. There was a burst of gray and black against the glass followed by a violent noise. I flinched, the windows shook. It was like a surprise clap, like someone slapping his hands together a single time in the silence of church. Mom jumped up from her chair, knocking her fork onto the floor and spilling her glass of iced tea. I looked at my father for direction—should we run, is the house collapsing, are we under attack? He turned slowly to look at the window over his shoulder. He frowned.

“They’ve been doing that all day,” she said, pointing. The words burst from her mouth as if she’d been waiting her whole life to tell someone, waiting for just the right evidence to support her accusation. She walked away from the table and left my father and me sitting there alone with her peach pie.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said from the sink, her back to us, her voice mixed with the sounds of dropping dishes.

“What’d you want me to do?”

“Josh can’t even sleep at night because it’s so G.D. hot.” She pointed at me and Dad followed the direction of her finger.

“It’s okay. I can sleep,” I said.

“We moved here so you could have a garden and all you do is sit inside.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Neither is blaming the weather on your husband.”

She turned off the water and left the kitchen. The old stairs sang as she climbed them. The squeaky song finished with the deep bass slam of their bedroom door. Then it slammed again, and then it slammed again.

My father and I continued to eat in silence. Occasionally I glanced up at him, but mostly I just looked at the crust of my pie slice. It was not the first time Mom had stormed off and left us alone at the dinner table, not the first time they’d yelled at each other about something I didn’t understand.

“Do you know what that was?” my father asked. Yes, I thought, that was Mom. His face was calm and empty, ageless in the way of fathers when you’re young, and I realized that he was asking me about something else, about the loud clap against the window—the other explosion of the night that echoed deep in my ears.

I didn’t know what it was, but I tried to think hard. It was important to answer my father correctly or at least show that you thought hard before you gave up. It sounded like someone threw something against the window—like an apple from the yard or a thick skinned water balloon. I leaned out from my chair to see if anyone was in the backyard. Maybe Rusty was out there, wanting to play a little bit before it got dark.

The grass was empty—the pear tree sat still and windless two stories below the study window.

“No sir,” I said.

“That was a bird,” he said. “A mockingbird.”

I looked up into the sky and around the branches of the pear tree, but I couldn’t spot any birds.

“They see their reflection in the glass.” He motioned with his fork. “They think it’s another bird so they fly towards it. They

don't see the glass until it hits them."

"It's like they see a ghost," I said.

"No. It's their reflection. They're just birds."

I still believed everything my father told me.

Mom left early in the morning to go grocery shopping and came back with a kit from the hobby shop instead of food. It was a ship in a bottle. Well, it was an empty bottle and a bunch of balsa wood and pages of detailed directions. She set up camp on the kitchen table.

In the afternoon, Rusty showed up at my door in all his camouflage.

"Mom, I'm going over to Rusty's house." It was the last sentence I always said to her on my way out the door. A familiar phrase we'd both become used to over the course of the summer, but it had a new sharpness since Rusty and I expanded our territory. I knew full well that we were going to end up at the lot, a secret place I knew she wouldn't approve of. It was the first lie I told on purpose and regularly. She waved me towards the door without looking up from her empty bottle.

After we'd gotten tired of pretending to kill each other with our guns, we decided to look for treasure. One of us must have seen an old western or a pirate movie on the television, but I can't remember. Either way, we'd both watched enough television to know that you always found gold along stream beds by panning in the shallows. We used the door of one of the washing machines as our gold pan. It was the right shape, but the door was way too big, and sharp and rusted along the edges. We didn't worry too much about it. We'd both had tetanus boosters already that year. We had to work the pan between us to wield the weight of water and dark sand that we scooped from the creek bottom. We swooshed water back and forth like we'd seen in movies. We kept it up for close to an hour, spurred on by bits of polished glass, silver bottle caps, and a railroad spike. Each new find was enough to keep us digging deeper.

The sun was setting and we were soaking wet and hungry. I had to be back before the street lights came on and before Dad got home from work. I was just about to suggest we stop when we found it. Well, when Rusty found it. He was standing knee deep in

the water, digging around in the crater of loosened sand, throwing trash and old beer cans up onto the bank when he stopped and made this face at me.

“What?” There was no way Rusty could have known what he had his fingers wrapped around there on the bottom of the creek, but it must have immediately seemed different, something solid and substantial and full of possibility like real treasure. He must have felt its cold smoothness and its heavy weight in his hand as he pulled it from the water. He lifted the snub nosed revolver between us—sand and water dripped from the end of the barrel and splattered at my feet. We were both struck silent.

“It’s mine. I found it,” Rusty said, turning the weapon in his hands. The gun was brown with rust and tarnish.

“Is it real?” It was the first time I’d ever seen a real gun. “Let me see it,” I said.

Rusty climbed out of the creek, ignoring me, and pointed the pistol at an imaginary target. “Boom,” he said drawing back at the elbow as if the gun had recoiled in his hand. He smiled and showed his crooked teeth.

“Now we can really play war,” he said.

“Let me see it,” I said.

He shook his head and let the gun drop, his arm hanging long and heavy by his side. “Nope. We got to go home now,” he said. Rusty never had to go home.

He began to walk away like he was just going to leave me there like I didn’t exist anymore, like I was some ghost he couldn’t see. I followed. He stopped every little while and pointed at a target. Rusty had the power now—he had something that I wanted and he knew it.

“Boom.” He was teasing me.

When we got to the boundary road at the edge of the woods, Rusty stuck the gun in the front of his pants.

“Don’t carry it like that. You’ll shoot your dick off.”

“I’ll shoot your dick off”

“It’s my turn to hold it.” I followed him across the road. I tried to say it with quiet authority and not with the desperation that I was feeling. I just wanted to hold it. I just wanted to be careful with it. Rusty stayed a few steps ahead of me as we turned onto the

alley. I didn't want to beg for it and I wasn't ready to fight for it. I just wanted him to be fair. He wasn't being fair. We were almost to the spot behind the Jones' house where the alley split and we usually parted ways, and I knew it was my last chance to get to hold the gun.

"Rusty. Give me the gun."

He just shook his head. The Jones's swimming pool glistened blue through the row of hedges. I tried to keep my voice down. I didn't want Mrs. Jones to see us, but I felt like I was going to tear up out of frustration and Rusty looked like he was about to start laughing.

"We got to tell my dad," I said.

"You tell and I'll go tell Mrs. Jones you've been peeking through her windows."

"I wasn't."

"Go home and cry to your mommy." He smiled and pointed me on my way with the end of the gun. That's what set me off. That smirk. That crooked-toothed sneer I'd been putting up with all summer. I balled up my fist and aimed for his nose. Rusty and I had wrestled before, but this was the first time I had swung with the intention of doing real harm. I mostly missed. Rusty was fast, but I managed to clip him on the chin and my forward momentum threw my balance off enough that I fell on top of him. We rolled around in the dirt, grunting and screaming at each other. At least I was screaming. I think Rusty was laughing the whole time.

When we stopped, the gun was in the dirt between us. I grabbed it. What I remember most was how heavy it was, how warm it was in my hand, how different it felt from the plastic toys we carried around. Rusty rushed toward me. I had the gun in my hand, pointed towards the empty space between us, and here he came with this hungry look and he was coming fast and I could tell he wasn't messing around. It was like he didn't even recognize me anymore.

I threw the gun as hard as I could away from us and over the hedges and fence of the Jones's yard. We both watched it arc end over end through the air. We both heard it splash in the pool. Rusty widened his eyes at me and I put up my hands in defense. I was about to say, "It's gone now," but Rusty didn't wait. He crashed

head first through the hedges, climbed right over the fence, and jumped into the pool like he knew exactly what he was doing, like he had done it a hundred times, like it was the most normal thing in the world. I heard his awkward splash. It echoed through the evening air like a bird crashing through glass.

Rusty couldn't swim, but he wasn't stupid. I knew he was going to get caught flailing around in the neighbor's pool or clinging to the side. It was bad enough to get caught by the weird neighbors in their swimming pool without permission, but I couldn't imagine what was going to happen when they realized that Rusty had a gun—not just the toys we carried everywhere but a real gun. My father was not going to be happy if he found out I was there. I ran. I ran all the way home before I could be associated with the trespassing or the gun. My feet pounding along the dirt alley drowned out the sound of Rusty splashing in the pool.

When I got home my mother was sitting on the front porch. "Who won the war today?" she asked.

I paused long enough to shrug and ran past her into the house.

Dad was in the kitchen. "You're late. Go upstairs and get cleaned up."

I went to my room and climbed onto my bed and closed my eyes. I knew that by now Rusty must have gotten caught in the neighbor's pool. The last thing I thought was that Rusty was gone. Death wasn't part of my thought process yet, not in a real sense. It was the ghost stories that Mom used to tell at the dinner table and the action scenes in the war movies Dad took me to see. It was no more real than the crayon drawn blood of Christ. I had a heavy feeling in my stomach as I waited to be called down for dinner.

The telephone rang downstairs.

Mom yelled questions up the stairs. I said I didn't know where he was. Another lie. I imagined him floating on his stomach, his camo shorts moving slowly in the currents of the blue water like the smoke from Dad's pipe, the gun sitting there alone next to the drain on the painted concrete bottom of the swimming pool, Rusty staring down at it and letting the water swish in and out of his crooked smile.

That night Dad cooked dinner. He made teriyaki pork ten-



derloin and boiled spinach and served apple sauce cold from the jar in the fridge. My father stood over the table loading food onto our plates when the phone rang again in the hallway. He set the hot platter of pork tenderloin on the table and stood there with the oven mitts on his hands. He pressed one of the oven mitts against his face and he held it there, warm and rough, for just a second. Then he reached down and held it against my mother's cheek. She didn't look up or move her hands from her lap. She pursed her lips and whistled low and soft, letting out a whole breath.

The phone rang again and he went to answer it and my mother didn't. Dad stood there in the hallway with the phone held to his ear and then he put it back on the wall and turned towards my mother and me, seated around the table. He looked past us through the windows and beyond the glass so shiny and reflective it killed mockingbirds.

"He's dead. Rusty's dead." The words ran out of my mouth on their own and as I watched them bounce off the windows of the study and the shocked faces of these two people, my parents, I started to cry.

"What are you talking about?" my father asked.

"Oh my god, what's wrong with your mouth?"

I reached up and felt the warm blood running down my chin, leaned over and spit onto my plate, the spit and blood swirling in the apple sauce, the taste of copper singing in my mouth.

"Jesus, Josh, what did you do?"

Mom put her hands to my face. "Open your mouth. My god, you bit right through your tongue."

I spent the rest of the summer inside with Mom. In August, the mockingbirds began throwing themselves against the windows on the back of our house with a renewed vigor. It must have had something to do with the way the windows caught the summer sunlight just right that time of year or maybe it was because that August was so hot. Mom and I sometimes found them in piles along the bottom edge of the house, looking like the soft round shells of the fruits that fell from the trees and rotted in the yard.

Some days when the loud clap of feathers and hollow bird bones and sharp beaks struck the glass in the afternoon, my mother would scream and the swirling dust inside the study would catch

the light in long fingers. And I would go upstairs and spread my collection of toy weapons on the floor of my room—the plastic machine guns that looked real enough to rob banks and the wooden rifles and the hand grenades loaded with little charges of black powder that made exploding sounds when they landed on a hard surface, silver cap pistols and a Tommy gun that spewed sparks out the barrel when you pulled the trigger

Dad left for a new job in New York and said he'd send for us, but when he did, Mom said we weren't going to go because it was too cold there and her skin couldn't handle the snow.

I wish I could have told Dad something before he left. I wish I would have known to tell him that all we needed were some of Mom's tin pie pans. We could have hung the tin pans from the gutters or even put stickers of owl eyes on the windows. That would have kept the mockingbirds from killing themselves against the glass. That would have kept Mom from screaming.

## Go South, Head North

### SETTING

It's the night of July 2, 1964. And it's Virginia. Scene Two takes place at a gas station mart with a jukebox.

### CHARACTERS

CORNELIA is seven years and three hundred and sixty three days old. She is African American, her rough hair in braided pigtails.

BETH ANN is a thirty year old Caucasian. She passes time at the isolated gas station mart, waiting for travelers to stick around so she can hear their story.

THE MAN is a forty year old Caucasian. A biker, he wanders with destinations.

### SCENE ONE

*(Lights up. CORNELIA sits cross-legged on stage.)*

CORNELIA. Norilina ain't near the ocean, but we gots a lake a few miles out. I ain't never been to the lake but Lemont's been a whole lot 'cause he's used to swimming and he don't get scared like I do. But I ain't used to it 'cause only time I's in the water is when I's in the tub but Lemont said the tub ain't nothing like swimming because there ain't no creatures and waves in the tub and that makes for no kind of adventure and Ma said by this age I should start thinking 'bout making some adventures. Well there ain't much adventuring around Norilina so I's a-figured my eighth birthday was gonna come round and I still wouldn't have been on no adventure because we's live in Norlina but Ma said I's to make my own adventure and she said that's something called initi...initia...i-nit-i-a-tive. Yup its called initiative and I reckon that's what I's to show so that I can go on a adventure. So I took all the initiative I could find and went up to Pa and said 'Pa I wants to go swimming 'cause swimming be a real adventure and that's what I's want to do before I's turn eight and I's reckon that'd be a good

thang to do before I's turn eight because a eight year old should show initiative when it comes to thangs like swimming. So here I am being initiative 'bout swimming.' And Pa said 'So ya's got a fixin for swimming, huh? Ya reckon ya ready for a swim?' and I says 'Course Pa, 'Course I's ready to swim because I's near 'bout eight years old.' An' I's told Pa I was a-thinkin' he'd take me out to that lake that's a few miles out, but Pa said no, and I was a-scared he was thinking I wasn't ready for no adventure when I thought I was cause I showed him all the initiative I could find in me. But Pa said 'No, no we ain't going to no lake. We can't go to no lake 'cause when ya go swimming for your first time Cornelia, when its your very first time swimming it should be special. Because there's a feeling ya get from swimming that ya can't get nowheres else. There's a feeling when ya's a-gliding through the water that ya can't get in no tub. An' not really in no lake. When ya's swim-  
ming...

*(CORNELIA lifts her hands up, staring at them, spreading her fingers apart.)*

and ya spread out your fingers ya get this feelings right here, right here in between each of your fingers and ya can't get that in no tub or really no lake. And the only kind of real swim you will get is if you visit the E-lantic ocean.' An' ya know that feeling Pa was talking 'bout? Well I's was thinking it sounded like an awful nice feeling and the only thing I ever felt between my fingers was grass and sometimes grass has a no good feeling if ya feel it the wrong way and the ocean between my fingers sounds like a much better feeling than grass. And the ocean sounds better than the lake. Ya know 'cause the ocean sounds like a adventure. The E-lantic. I don't think I never even seen no picture of the E-lantic. Pa said he'd save up special for his little girl. I reckon we'd be going about a day or so, see it aint that far. Ya gotta head north, into Virginia, then go south a little bit back into Carolina 'cause that's just the way the state of North Carolina is. Even though ya gotta head north, then go south, the ocean still ain't too far from Norlina. We could see the E-lantic and feel the water in between our fingers in about a day. But Pa said no, 'cause it'll be my first time swimming and that something ya would never forget so its gonna be a big trip and Pa said I's to practice my patience and in no time we'd

be standing in front of the E-lantic. So I waited, and Pa saved. He didn't buy no cigarettes for a whole month. And Ma planned. She called my auntie Bettie who lives in Virginia because my uncle Calvin who's Bettie's husband an' Ma's brother, well Calvin got a real good job in Virginia where he drives a truck and so they moved to Virginia and that means they have a Virginia phone book so Bettie read all the names of the motels to my Ma and she heard Bettie say 'Sea Foam Inn' an' she says that name makes her think of a postcard and a postcard always shows nice places so that's where Ma' picked out for us to stay. And I practiced in the bathtub. But you can't really feel the water between your fingers in the tub. But soon enough we were at the Sea Foam Inn and ya know that place had a pool, I guess for girls who just turned seven years old who weren't ready for no adventure. Not me. I was ready to swim. So we's got to the E-lantic and Lemont jumped in the water and said it was freezing. I started to get mighty scared and I was thinking maybe I belong in the pool 'cause maybe I weren't ready for no adventure and maybe I weren't ready for no feeling between my fingers. But Pa saved so much for this trip and I was 'bout to turn eight. So I did it. I swam!

*(Pause.)*

An' Pa asked 'Ya feel it? Ya feel that water in between your fingers?' Oh I felt that feeling and that felt real good, mighty better than grass between my fingers. I swam all day and we slept in the Sea Foam Inn and there was an ice machine and Lemont and I kept running to get ice cause it was real hot that night and the next day we went swimming more and I got real good at swimming. Then it was time to head back to Norlina, and you know we had to head north and then go south this time and Pa had to stop for gas two times. The first time I slept through an' that made me sad because I wanted to go and play the jukebox but Ma said this wasn't the gas station at home so maybe there weren't no jukebox in this here station. The next station, well I woke up just as I heard Pa slam his door at the next station. And ya know I saw there was an jukebox, so I was careful not to wake no one—Ma and Lemont was sleeping like dogs—and it was dark but there were some bright lights. There was a funny sign that was lighted up bright red and it said eat going like this, like the hora-hori-ho-

rizon, and gas going like this, like from heaven down to the hells. It looked like it said 'Eat Gas' an' ya know that's real funny and I don't think anyone recognized it said that because they would of thought 'that's too funny for a sign' and I wanted to wake up Lemont cause that'd be something he'd really 'preciate but there weren't no time for that. I wanted to play the jukebox because this was kinda like the gas station at home cause it had an jukebox sitting in there as clear as day. So I crept and to the door and was gonna look for daddy to get a nickel. The ground was sticky and I wasn't wearing no shoes but there weren't no time to go back and get my shoes so I kept on to the jukebox. Two men stood outside and they saw me and they said to me, they said 'Little girl you need some shoes? Little girl where's your daddy? Little girl I know where to get you some shoes.' I wanted to tell them I wasn't no little girl nomore 'cause I swam in the E-lantic ocean and I felt the water through my fingers and that's no feeling for no little girl but ya know there weren't no time for that. So I went inside. But Pa wasn't in there. And I didn't have no nickels so I went to the counter. There was a lady there with her back turned and she had these real nice yellow curls and she wore a pretty green shirt and she turned and she smiled with these real white teeth and then I saw the deepest bluest blue I ever saw, bluer than the ocean, bluer than the pool at the Sea Foam Inn, which was just off a postcard Ma said. The lady blinked and the blue disappeared and when she opened her eyes the blue was back and so was the feeling in between my fingers. She said 'What's good little one? Ya lost?'

*(Lights out.)*

## SCENE TWO

*(Lights up. The gas station mart. BETH ANN is behind the counter, CORNELIA is at the jukebox. "Clear Cool Water" by Marty Robbins plays. As the song ends BETH ANN speaks.)*

BETH ANN. How you doing there honey?

CORNELIA. Fine.

BETH ANN. You need some more nickels?

CORNELIA. If it ain't no trouble.

BETH ANN. You wouldn't be trouble if you tried. Not when you look prettier than a glob of butter melting on a stack of wheat cakes!

*(BETH ANN opens the cash register and hands a nickel to CORNELIA.)*

Here ya go.

CORNELIA. Thanks M'am.

BETH ANN. M'am? Oh no honey I'm no M'am. I'm Beth Ann. Call me Beth. Or sometimes folks call me Ms. B. You could call me that if you'd like. Just please, please don't be calling me no M'am.

CORNELIA. I'm real sorry M'am—I mean Ms. B.

*(CORNELIA puts the nickel in the jukebox. "500 Hundred Miles Away From Home" by Bobby Bare plays.)*

BETH ANN. Don't worry your sweet head 'bout it. I just feel too young to be a M'am. I look young, don't I? What do they call you, child?

CORNELIA. I'm Cornelia. Lemont calls me Corn. He's my brother. Pa calls me Cheeky cause my cheeks are big and all. Ma calls me Lia because she says corn's a vegetable not no name for a girl so cut it off and you get Elia which don't fall so well off the tongue, so its just Lia.

*(Short pause.)*

I don't really like eating corn anyway.

BETH ANN. Well Corn-elia, welcome to Corn-land, Virginia!

*(Short pause.)*

Lia...I like that.

*(Beat.)*

Ya miss 'em?

*(Silence.)*

'Course ya do. Well don't worry your cute braids about it. Sheriff

Dan said he'll be round in a few. He's a real nice man that Sheriff. He's about as handy as a back pocket on a shirt, but he's a mighty nice man. I mean he could throw himself on the ground and miss, but ya know he's got a heart bigger than Virginia. Same was with his wife, she's now resting in peace in the marble orchard. Ya know I think that just made the Sheriff's heart even bigger. He took her love when she passed and put it right in his heart for safe keeping. Real nice man. Just a tad...ya know the engine's running, but aint no one driving. But don't ya worry cause he'll make it here real soon.

CORNELIA. Thanks Ms. B.

*(Silence.)*

BETH ANN. They didn't leave you here on purpose, ya know? It's the nature of this gas station. All stations. People are in and out. Got to fill up, get some snacks, visit the bathroom, quickly quickly. Always in and out, barely taking the time to look around. Certainly no time to play the jukebox. I swear I never seen no one play that jukebox. Not in all my days here.

*(CORNELIA approaches BETH ANN, who puts out another nickel. CORNELIA goes to the jukebox and plays "No Tears in Heaven" by Buck Owens.)*

I've certainly never seen no one play such sad songs on a jukebox either.

CORNELIA. Did ya say something Ms. B?

BETH ANN. Oh no. Well I was just wondering where ya from?

CORNELIA. Norlina.

BETH ANN. Norlina in North Carolina?! How ya like that? I heard 'bout that place before. "Norlina, nothin' fina"? Golly I love that name! What y'all doing over here in Cornland then?

CORNELIA. We was over in Mags Head stayin' at the Sea Foam Inn. Ma says it's a picture perfect motel, straight off a postcard. It was our first time staying in a motel. Pa wanted me to swim in the



E-lantic ocean for my first time swimming.

BETH ANN. What a special trip! So Mags Head is south of here, and so is Norlina, yah, ya need to drive up to go back down. Those roads don't cut over. Ain't it funny how ya got to drive north to get back south. Going south by heading north.

*(Beat.)*

Ya know I was thinking ya wouldn't say a thing and just stare at that jukebox the whole time.

CORNELIA. Oh.

BETH ANN. Ya like your country huh girl?

CORNELIA. Yes Ms. B. Pa and I always listen to records after dinner.

BETH ANN. That sounds nice Lia. Hey, have ya ever heard the Beatles?

CORNELIA. What ya mean? Bugs?

BETH ANN. Oh lordy no, here let me have a turn on that thing.  
*(BETH ANN goes to the jukebox. She plays "I Want To Hold Your Hand" by The Beatles. She moves to the music.)*

It's great ain't it? They're from England. That's cross your E-lantic ocean.

*(Once the song stops both CORNELIA and BETH ANN look up as THE MAN enters the mart. THE MAN is wearing all black with a white bandana wrapped around his blond hair. Once inside, THE MAN stares at CORNELIA.)*

BETH ANN. Evening sir. What can I do ya for?

THE MAN.

*(Snaps head towards BETH ANN.)*

What? Oh, I...

*(Looks back at CORNELIA.)*

...just looking.

BETH ANN. Well we got a special on Marlboro reds, two pack for two fifty, if that's what you're looking for.

THE MAN. It's hard to look if someone's talking at me.

BETH ANN. Sure thing.

*(Pause.)*

Lia come sit round the counter and wait til the sheriff comes on.

*(CORNELIA walks toward BETH ANN.)*

THE MAN. Whose is she?

BETH ANN. What?

THE MAN. The girl. She sure as hell ain't yours. Whose is she?

BETH ANN. She's a friend's daughter. Do ya need to fill up or anything?

THE MAN. Then why the sheriff coming round?

BETH ANN. Look, can I help ya find anything?

THE MAN. You can tell me what that girl is doing round here. It don't make no sense, a girl looking like that round here with you.

BETH ANN. Well that's my business. It don't have to make sense.

THE MAN. Look ma'am, this sight just ain't right. Little girl where is your home?

CORNELIA. Norli—

BETH ANN. Lia! Just sit tight here til Sheriff Dan comes round, alright?

CORNELIA. Sorry ma'am. I mean Ms. B.

THE MAN. Where's your parents girl?

BETH ANN. If you can't find what you're looking for here, then ya might want to try another gas station. You can either head east to Ben—

THE MAN.—Benefit or west to Douglas Landing. I tried 'em both. They don't carry what it is I've got my eye on.

BETH ANN. It don't look like we got that in stock over here.

THE MAN. Oh I think you do.

BETH ANN. Well if ya'd tell me what it is I can pull it for ya and ya'll be on your way.

THE MAN. I'm still browsing. A man can browse can't he?

BETH ANN. Lia did ya want something? How 'bout some chocolate milk?

CORNELIA. I miss my brother Ms. B.

THE MAN. You shouldn't be here little girl.

BETH ANN. Just hang tight. Sheriff Dan is on his way and we'll get it all squared away.

THE MAN. I don't like that you ain't telling me what's going on with this nigga. And why's the sheriff coming round?

BETH ANN. Cornelia how 'bout a candy bar? Huh? Hershey's milk chocolate?

*(CORNELIA tears up, BETH ANN holds her.)*

There there, don't worry...just relax.

*(The MAN goes to the jukebox and puts two nickels in. His first selection, "House of the Rising Sun" by The Animals, plays.)*

THE MAN. I know what I want.

BETH ANN. You'll be back with your parents in no time. No time at all.

THE MAN. I said I know what I want.

BETH ANN. Ya sure I can't get you anything to put in that belly?  
We even got sandwiches in the fridge.

THE MAN. I says I know what I *want*.

BETH ANN. What?!

*(THE MAN pulls out a gun, casually taps it on the cash register.)*

BETH ANN. Excuse me? Uh-uh. I don't know what kind of mess  
ya trying to start but ya can just get back on that bike of yours and  
travel through.

THE MAN. Give me that money.

BETH ANN. What makes ya think I'll be giving ya anything?

THE MAN. Well see you wouldn't want to have any trouble here.  
You've got a nigga girl and I hate niggas. You've got money and  
I've got a gun. So unless you want me taking out that nigga girl,  
you'll be giving me the money now.

BETH ANN. The sheriff will be 'round any minute.

THE MAN. Is he a nigga too?

BETH ANN. 'Course he ain't.

THE MAN. Good. I wouldn't want to make a mess of things. So  
let's move with that money.

BETH ANN. Cornelia stay calm baby.

THE MAN. I said let's move it!

BETH ANN. Okay, okay.

*(BETH ANN starts to open the register until she hears a car pull up.  
All three look outside.)*

THE MAN. You're going to tell him everything's fine. He didn't

have to come 'round after all.

BETH ANN. Lord knows that ain't working. He's here for the girl.

THE MAN. Well you gonna tell him that ain't necessary no more. The nigga's parents are on their way. He can go on back. He best go on back to the station.

BETH ANN. She's a lost child. The sheriff ain't gonna leave til he's sure she's found.

THE MAN. Well you're just gonna have to make it work, ain't you?

BETH ANN. Look if ya leave now there wont be any problems for ya. There will sure be problems if ya stay and the sheriff sees what ya got planned. So like I said, ya best be getting back on that bike if ya know what's good for ya.

THE MAN. Listen nigga-lover! That don't mean nothing to me! Who is in charge here? The woman with the fucking nigga or the man with the fucking gun? If you just give me the fucking money you won't have no fucking problem.

BETH ANN. I'm not worried 'bout *my* fucking problems.

THE MAN. Give me the money!

BETH ANN. The sheriff's coming in right now, ya want to keep this up? Ya want to see what happens?

THE MAN. SHUT THE HELL UP AND GIVE ME THE MONEY!

BETH ANN. Is this what ya really want to do?

CORNELIA. I'm sorry I got out of the car Ms. B. I'm sorry I went and caused all this trouble.

THE MAN. THE MONEY!

CORNELIA. I just wanted to play the jukebox Ms. B. That's all, I'm

real sorry. Ms. B. I'm real real sorry.

THE MAN. You best shut your mouth nigga'!

CORNELIA. I miss my brother. I want to go back to the car. I'm ready to go back to the car now, Ms. B. I think I'm done with the jukebox. I don't reckon I need to borrow anymore nickels Ms. B.

THE MAN. THE MONEY! Or else so help me god...

*(THE MAN points gun at BETH ANN, then at CORNELIA, then off stage, then back at BETH ANN.)*

I MEAN IT!

*(THE SHERIFF enters. THE MAN turns to the SHERIFF. BETH ANN pulls out a gun. THE SHERIFF aims his shaking hands at THE MAN, BETH ANN aims at the MAN. Three gun shots. THE MAN shoots THE SHERIFF as BETH ANN shoots THE MAN. THE SHERIFF shoots BETH ANN as he falls. BETH ANN and THE MAN fall. "The House of The Rising Sun" stops. CORNELIA looks to the jukebox and waits silently. THE MAN's second selection, "Cool Clear Water" by Marty Robbins, plays once again. Lights out.)*

## Three Ways to Paint the Side of a Boxcar

### 1. Train

Sometimes this tagger wishes to find his own life  
like brakemen in the train yard stumbling  
for the first time across a mural,  
to feel what the viewer feels.

Sometimes he practices his tag on the air itself  
with just a hand, the way Coltrane moved  
fingers over keys without blowing into the mouthpiece,  
until he can spray his name without thought  
onto back alleys, mailboxes, trains.

He knows his art's roots: cave paintings  
and hollow bones of birds filled with colored dust  
waiting for breath to blow it onto stone.

Because the caps keep the spray's width thin or fat,  
he worries about them  
like Coltrane worries about reeds—  
wants neither the line nor note  
to bleed into something else.

The sketch of his next mural is Philadelphia, 1943,  
where John plays alone, but he isn't Trane, yet.  
Tired from refinery work, he practices his horn  
in a third floor walk up, but none of this is in the picture.  
Instead he blows a note wrong  
and a shade of dissatisfaction crosses his face.  
From a new reed, he'll trim the slightest shaving  
before holding it against the light.  
He wants the reed to vibrate and imitate the shimmering  
legato he loves in Hodges. He's still learning

to make the music into a shape with his hands and mouth,  
still learning how his breath curves and escapes pure  
like a painting pulling out on a boxcar—  
something made that can't be owned.

This evening the tagger places *Monk's Music*  
on the record player, and when the jacket opens  
a shower of green arrives. A clue from  
his father, trapped in the plastic covering,  
from some forgotten late night after hours,  
where someone must have slurred,  
*Is this the one with Trane?*

It burns as easily as the paper he rolled it in,  
and the green casts him back to the seventies  
where he woke to horns and pianos  
drifting on smoke. He tried to hear each note,  
each muffled voice until the night turned  
its first shade of blue. This evening  
he stares at the album cover on his easel  
and thinks this kind of blue is the obvious choice,  
but he'll use it anyway  
along with other bright colors,  
which look out of tune, so tomorrow morning  
the piece will look right from his viaduct perch,  
and when it leaves there will be the moan  
of metal straining and the wheel's high hat clicks  
drowned out by the ceaseless sound of human traffic  
mixed with the singing birds.

## II. Restoration

For her, the moment happened  
during a lunch rush, the plates busy performing  
their daily disappearing act  
to the pack of barking waitresses  
when the voices merged  
with the heavy, two-beat rumble



of the Transatlantic Railroad  
cutting through Laramie.  
She felt the low rumbling at her feet,  
heard its horn release one long wail  
to the window's glass applause.

He entered then, playing his sax  
on the side of a boxcar. Someone  
captured a jazz man blowing colors so alive  
he seemed destined to fracture  
under the strain, but the tigger gave him  
such wild and elongated hands  
she imagined them capable of holding back  
any pain, and those eyes,  
huge and luminous, casting a spell that stayed  
just four beats, or two large window frames,  
before he exited stage right.

Later her palms touched  
an entire gallery of rusting canvases on stalled boxcars,  
and when her hands broke  
the very medium of the flaking murals  
she began her hatred of sun and wind.

Now she watches the trains  
bring in pieces from the plains and the Pacific,  
and when she finds them  
shedding a skin of rust and paint,  
she knows she must try to stop them from fading.

### III. Alibi

A backpack full of stolen spray paint.  
A dead fly in a web.  
Photo albums from childhood.  
The talus and screen of everyday life,  
what are they but stage props?  
Some thing to make our stories more believable.

Isn't lying easy,  
though so few grow graceful at it? Say yes.

Say I hung with that tagger in his Denver studio  
listening to all the right jazz records  
his father left. Maybe  
there's a green light. Maybe he slouched  
into his couch and told  
a story of Miles Davis in Detroit trying to quit junk.  
Cliff Brown had invited him to play,  
but he arrived late in the middle of a set

with his trumpet in a brown paper bag.

He strolled up to the stage without saying a word  
and began an awful version of  
*My Funny Valentine*. Of course,  
the tagger said, Miles denied it... said it was all lies,  
but it's better to know the truth  
and play the standards.

And if I've stood watch  
while he stole spray paint,  
or stood watch while she restored the murals  
of others in the train yard at night,

it means I've loved every word they've said,  
and I'm an accomplice to petty crimes.  
Making up stories for a painting  
I saw on a boxcar late one evening.

In my backpack the clink-tinny-clink of cans,  
flecks of colors on my hands, as I nervously  
looked all around me,  
trying hard not to be seen—  
already rehearsing a mural of alibis.

## October, 1989

In East San José, California,  
cousin Franky and me  
were home alone,  
horsing around and cussing  
in the unwatched hallway.  
He was three years taller,  
strong, thin, bicycle quick  
and blacktop tough,  
already wise in the stuff  
grown-ups stashed in shoeboxes,  
drawers, and closets.

When we got bored,  
Franky snuck a Playboy  
from under his dad Rico's bed  
(not Franky's real dad,  
just some stepdad wetback)  
and carried it down the hallway  
like a birthday cake,  
ceremonious, careful,  
a little afraid to drop  
the cream surprise.  
I followed until he sat  
and set the Playboy on his lap.  
The cover said October, 1989.

I kneeled down by Franky's legs.  
We gawked at boobs.  
Franky said the girls were *nude*.

As I leaned closer,  
chin brushing Franky's thigh,  
he turned to me and yelled —

“Stop sitting like that!”  
“Why?”  
“Because you look like a fag!”

Fag was bad. That’s all I knew.  
Fag was pocho, nigger,  
*chino chino japonés*  
*come caca no me des.*<sup>1</sup>  
I leaped up, dazed.

How’s a fag sit?  
How’s a Franky sit?

It was like being a balloon  
loosening from a kid’s wrist  
and lifting into hard blue sky.

When Franky closed the Playboy  
and tucked it under the bed,  
I came back. Six more days  
and I’d be eight years old.  
Then there was an earthquake.

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1. Literally: “Chinaman, Chinaman, Japanese/ eat shit and give me none.”

## George Who

Phoebe toyed with her fork, sculpting her uneaten salad into a moonscape. If she'd been her usual self, she would have been *kvetching* about her anorexic loser boss, soapboxing for stem cells, or going on and on and on about one of her daughters or the other—the Itzhak Perlman or the Albert Einstein. Instead, she was reticent and laconic. I chattered about global warming and our friend Helene's third divorce, trying to draw her out, but nothing was working. As the lunch hour wore on I became increasingly convinced she had hot gossip and was biding her time, waiting to spill it.

We often met at a local park midway between the high-rise where Phoebe worked and the high school where I taught. But the wet heat of the South Florida day had driven us indoors. We were sitting in a booth at Highway 61, a “make love, not war” tribute luncheonette. That's what I called the place because of its decor and the playlist on the jukebox. The posters on the wall had a sixties theme that reminded me of those times as if they were yesterday: Soviet tanks in Prague, Joan Baez at Woodstock, the Chicago Seven on trial, Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, and Vietnamese civilians hanging on to a helicopter lifting off the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. My father had said of this image that it captured our national shame, the United States lacking the backbone to stanch the spread of communism.

The jukebox had twice played “Don't Think Twice, It's All Right” and was playing it again. Somebody, in bad taste or as a bad joke, had queued the song to play repeatedly.

I glanced at my watch. Fifth period began in twenty minutes. It was time to cut to the mustard. I freshened my lipstick and said, “Shall we get the check?”

Phoebe signaled the server, asking for more coffee. When our cups were refilled, she pushed her salad aside and said, “I told Eli to move out.”

My cell phone rang, but I ignored it. “I hear that,” I said. “I've been trying to get Phil to move out for twenty years, what

with the towels on the floor, clipping his toenails in bed. The man thinks peeing is like horseshoes?" She scrunched her nose in puzzlement. "You know, in horseshoes you don't have to hit the target. And remembering to put down the toilet seat?"

"Forget it. Lately, I've been hinting he should go to Schenectady..."

"Hailey!" she said. "I'm serious."

Her voice was thin, almost mechanical, and for a New York second I thought maybe she was serious. But no way. Phoebe and Eli? They were an institution, a monument to marriage.

"So who's he *schtupping*?" I said in a lighthearted tone, having missed just a beat.

"Eli?"

"Exactly."

"God, I hope it's someone because she sure ain't me," she said.

I leaned forward. "No sex? For how long?"

"Months. He looks at TV like he used to look at me, and he looks at me like I'm furniture." She put sugar in her coffee and stirred slowly. "Why are you thinking of leaving Phil?"

"I said Schenectady, not Siberia."

"A woman doesn't joke about such a thing."

"So you're Anna Freud now? Let me tell you, Phil's as good as they come. I love him, I love our stable life. What I don't want is drama. What you don't need is drama. Why not spice up the conjugal bed?" I said, shrugging my shoulders, turning my palms upward.

She held her cup in both hands, turning it as if molding clay on a potter's wheel. "It's over between me and Eli." She looked away from me, drumming her fingers on the table, keeping time with Dylan's song. "I'm seeing someone," she said. "We're in love."

I swallowed the last of my coffee. The cold liquid broke over my tongue in waves of bitter grounds.

She leaned her head against the back of the booth and closed her eyes. "It's Roger Knox."

"Whoa!" I said. "A name I haven't heard in what? A lifetime?" I glanced at my watch again. "I have to run, and we have to talk."

"I'm meeting Helene at the Chocolate Carousel at four."

“I’ll be there, too,” I said.

We each put ten dollars on the table and then walked out of the air-conditioned comfort of Highway 61. The sky was a gradation of blues streaked with pink and orange clouds. White oleander was in bloom. Coconut palm fronds swayed in the breeze.

When we hugged goodbye, I was thinking about Phil. By the time we married, I was old enough to know that romance fades. He was Gibraltar—a board member of our synagogue, a bank president, a man who brought home a handsome paycheck, a husband who came home sober. A better father for my boys I couldn’t ask for.

Still, I felt uneasy.

I was still thinking about the tradeoff I’d made and feeling good about it as I hurried up the street, wishing I’d worn running shoes, thinking I could make it to class on time. Then my cell phone rang again. I grabbed it without breaking stride. The caller ID said: MA. I threw it back in my purse and walked faster. It rang again. I was breathing deeply; my blouse clung to my chest and back, but the exercise felt good. I was almost jogging when I flipped the phone open and said, still on the run, “Ma, I’m late. I’ll call you.”

She was crying.

“Ma? Ma, what is it? What’s the matter?” I came to a standstill at a crosswalk across the street from the school. “Ma?” I said again. The traffic light changed from green to red.

“Papa—” was all she could say.

A crush of students rushed passed me. “What about Dad?”

The light changed. The din of traffic resumed. Her voice was soft. “He’s—dead. My Melvin. He’s dead.”

I was holding onto the post with the traffic control button. It was the only thing not moving.

“What happened?”

“He came home—said he needed to rest.” She was struggling for words. “He sat on the sofa and died. Call Stanley. Come home. Hailey, please come home.”

“I’m coming,” I said.

I called the principal’s office, then slowly walked to my car. My senses were hyperactive, every breath distinct. I gazed at the hibiscus and palmettos, sensing the love of humidity that formed a bond between the flora of my childhood and me. Jets in landing

patterns floated overhead. I visualized the face of every passenger, searching for someone, not knowing who.

On the way to my parents' house I noticed people—riding bicycles, jogging, strolling—and was happy they didn't have to work on such a gorgeous day. An older man, about my father's age, was teaching a young boy to ride a bike. Then my hands shook, and I felt chilled. I wanted to call Dad, hear his voice, tell him about this outrageous mistake, and share a laugh. But it was Stan whom I called. His secretary answered, and I heard my voice, strained and formal, as if someone else were talking.

"Hi Sally. It's Hailey. May I speak to my brother, please?"

More than a hundred people gathered at the cemetery. I stood next to Ma. A mixture of tears and mascara congealed beneath her eyes. Her lipstick had rubbed away on the cheeks of well-wishers. She held the flag—folded like a napkin in a neat triangle—that moments before had draped the coffin.

Phoebe stood between Eli and Helene. As they lowered Dad into the ground, Eli touched Phoebe's arm. She bristled, brushing off his hand. Her rigid bearing reminded me of the way Dad stood when he was angry.

I thought of the year he wouldn't speak to me, the year I'd lived in California with George, and I whispered in Ma's ear, "Did anyone tell George about Dad?"

"George who?" she said.

George who? I thought, asking myself the same question. George Who? As if that were his name: George Who.

She put her arm through mine. "George? George Carver?" she said. "Is that who?"

After high school George was going to Berkeley, and I was going to Gainesville. One night, about a week before he was to leave, his parents were out of town, and we were in his bedroom, making out. I pushed him away.

"We might as well break up now," I said. "I'm moving back to Coral Cove after college and you'll probably fall in love with California."

He kissed my neck, brushed his fingers over my nipples, and whispered, "Perihelion," as if the word would seduce me. But it had the opposite effect. I swung my legs over the side of the bed,



sat up, and reached for my bra.

“Go ahead. Change the subject.”

“I’m not,” he said. “Coral Cove is my sun, and you’re my perihelion.”

“Peri what?” I said, pushing him away again, but this time without conviction.

“Perihelion. The point in the orbit of a comet...”

He paused and I let him run his fingers over my stomach. Then I caught his hand. “The point what?”

“The point when it’s nearest the sun,” he said. “Berkeley is my aphelion.”

I tried suppressing the memory. It was disrespectful thinking of George as I stood beside Dad’s grave in Coral Cove. But it kept returning, as if I were trapped by its gravity.

George had meant to reassure me, to tell me he was coming back. But now I was seeing the deeper implications of what he’d said. Had I been talking to Phil, he would have meant to reassure me, nothing more, and nothing less. But Phil and I would never have had that conversation because Phil never met a metaphor he understood. What I didn’t get with Phil was subtext. Dad and George had provided me with enough complexity to last a lifetime.

And George—George who could have put everything in perspective—where the hell was he? I hadn’t heard from him in decades. Was he at his aphelion? Was he coming back?

“George should have been here,” Ma said, interrupting my thoughts. “It would have made Papa happy.”

I stuttered, trying to form words. Before I could, she said, “Sometimes we become the angriest with those we love the most.”

What did she mean? Had Dad changed his mind about George? Phil took my arm, and we followed our sons in a line of mourners, who tossed handfuls of earth on the coffin and said their goodbyes to my father.

After the funeral I felt more crowded in my parents’ home than I had in Times Square on New Year’s Eve. In one of my favorite passages in *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan Baker confides to Nick Carraway, “I like large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties there isn’t any privacy.”

I felt no intimacy. The press of bodies, the clamor of con-

versation, the onslaught of friends and strangers conveying their condolences deprived me of what I needed most.

Phil and I huddled.

"The boys are suffering Instant Messaging withdrawal," I said.

"Good," he said. "They spend too much time in hyperspace."

"Cyberspace," I said. "They've got homework."

"It's Friday afternoon."

"Phil, I need space."

He took them home; I headed for Dad's study.

I hadn't been in that room in fifteen, maybe twenty years. The high school-baseball decor—mounted bats and balls, newspaper clippings and photos of his teams—hadn't changed. But there were more bookshelves. The library was still devoted primarily to science and sports. And although Dad had said there was no way to compare the experience of combat with reading about it, he'd read a wide array of books about war. So I wasn't surprised to see several shelves marked "Vietnam." I was surprised to see books authored by Ellsberg, McNamara, Kovic, and Kerry: cold warriors who'd later opposed the war. I took several volumes off the shelves and thumbed through them. "Dammit," I said, remembering the times he'd grounded me for protesting.

A framed photograph of one of his championship teams hung on the wall above his desk. In the front row the smaller boys crouched on their right knees in a semicircle. The coaches and taller players stood behind them. Dad—smiling—stood at one end with an arm around George.

I didn't hear Phoebe and Helene when they came in.

"Old stuff coming up today," Helene said, slipping an arm around my waist and staring at the photo with me. "Phil said you and your mom talked about George at the cemetery."

"It was nothing," I said, sinking into Dad's desk chair.

Phoebe had a bottle of wine and three glasses. She poured a glass for each of us. We drank the wine, then she said, "Why were you thinking about George?"

I swirled the few remaining drops of wine over dregs of sediment. "In the cemetery, I remembered a promise I'd made to him."

“What promise?” Phoebe said.

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Helene browsed through the books on the shelves, Phoebe picked up McNamara’s memoir, and I read Dad’s copious marginalia in *The Pentagon Papers*.

After a long silence, I said, “There’s something I never told you. When I was a junior in college, I had a fight with Dad.” I squeezed my eyes shut, the memory washing over the levee that had kept it at bay.

I was asleep at dawn on a Sunday morning when the doorbell rang, though at first I didn’t recognize the sound. I pulled a pillow over my head, hoping it would stop. It didn’t. So I got out of bed and slipped into a thin, pink-cotton robe, intending to give the schmuck ringing the bell a swift kick in his privates.

When I opened the door, Dad was standing on the porch, looking bedraggled. His eyes were swollen. He must have driven all night. I grabbed his hand and pulled him in.

“Dad? What’s wrong,” I said. The folds of skin on either side of his eyes crinkled. He was holding an olive green rucksack, one he’d had for as long as I could remember. On the front it said SEMPER FIDELES beneath the insignia of the Marine Corps. His gunmetal gray hair was cut in a flattop to regulation one-quarter-inch length, his bearing was military, his grimace menacing. He plopped down on the sofa, pulled my high school diary out of his rucksack, and smacked it on the coffee table.

“What’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong,” he said. “I’m sick thinking of those soldiers, boys your age—patriots—”

His anger tossed me into memories of antiwar protests turned violent. Police in riot gear swung clubs, broke bones, spilled blood. Feeling as if I were choking on tear gas, I walked to the window, intending to open it, but my path was blocked by dust particles reflecting sunlight, swirling in a vortex, and I burst into laughter. “Don’t tell me—don’t tell me you came all the way up here to pick a fight about the war.” When I caught my breath, he was still sitting on the sofa, staring at me. I went into the kitchen.

“I’m making coffee,” I called out. “You want some?”

When I returned, I said, “Tell me you didn’t read my diary.” But of course he had. I could see it in his face. He’d figured it out,

put it all together: protesting the war, smoking pot, making love, and listening to rock 'n' roll were all symptoms of the same plague. And I was a carrier of the disease.

Instead of answering me, he put on his reading glasses. Then he opened my diary and began marking it with a highlighter. It wasn't until then that the full impact of what he'd done hit me. He'd read about me and George making love. He'd read about sexual fantasies even George didn't know. I thought about grabbing the diary; I thought about strangling him with my bare hands. And I thought about telling him he was a pervert. Instead, I said between shallow breaths, "We were trying to save lives."

He put his highlighter down. "Tell that to the boys left maimed," he said, peering over the tops of his readers. "Tell it to the parents of the boys who are dead. Tell it to their wives and children. Make love, not war! What bullshit!" Then he returned to his work, stabbing a page of my diary with his highlighter.

"There is nothing indecent about protesting a senseless war," I said.

"Honor!" he said. "It's about honor. Honor begins with honesty. When I said you could play in that rock and roll band, you promised me you would never use drugs."

"Is this about the war or is it about smoking pot?"

He was quiet, and I thought he was considering the question until, without warning, he slammed his fist on the side table. "It's about betrayal," he said. "It's about George."

I sat on the other side of the sofa, looking at the floor. He was quiet, breathing hard, not saying a word. He finished his coffee and asked for another cup.

I couldn't move. Apparently, the weight of the moment had the same effect on Dad because he, too, was motionless. We sat there, still, not talking, for only a few minutes, but I felt the passage of a generation.

Dad capped the highlighter, put it in his shirt pocket, and closed my diary. "Well," he said, "Are you getting coffee?"

When I returned from the kitchen he was pacing.

"I trusted that boy, and he gave you dope and used you," he said, waving my diary like an evangelical preacher threatening his congregation with the Good Book. Then his voice cracked. "You were only sixteen."

I trembled, spilling hot coffee, feeling its sting.

"So was he," I said, shaking my hand to cool it off. "That was a long time ago. Why do you think we're engaged, for God's sake?" I held up my ring. "We're in love!"

"Love? You know nothing about love. Love isn't sex. Love is your family, your community, your country."

"My life is helping others. That's love."

"Yeah," he said, his voice trailing off, his lower lip protruding. "Helping George Carver get laid! Well, I'm telling you now, if you marry that snake, you'll never have my blessing, and I won't be there."

I grabbed the diary and waved it in his face. "You read my diary! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"For what? For loving you? For protecting you from a drug-addled pervert?"

"For possession of stolen property! For violating my privacy! For never really understanding me!" I threw my diary on the sofa. "Take your pick!"

"All right," he said, "I'll turn myself in. And when I do I'll give the evidence to the police." He picked up the diary, holding it like an indictment. "Evidence of statutory rape, possession of narcotics, and treason. Let the police read the passages I've highlighted and decide who should go to jail." Then he sat on the sofa and looked away from me, rubbing his temples.

"You make great coffee," he said, "like your mother."

"Let me make you breakfast."

"No. I'm driving back to Coral Cove."

"No, you're not. You need sleep. I'll go out and get lox and bagels. When you wake up, we'll eat. Then you can drive home."

He said okay. When I got back, my diary was on the coffee table and Dad was gone.

It was dark outside when I finished telling Phoebe and Helene the story.

"I can't imagine how you and your dad got beyond that," Helene said.

"I told George that Dad needed time to cool off. But even a year later, when I mentioned George's name Dad would say, 'Who? The Pinko Penis?'"

“Ouch,” Phoebe said.

My eyes were drawn to one of Dad’s meticulous notes in *The Pentagon Papers*. He’d written: CAPT. G. ALLEN—K.I.A. 4/25/75. The date struck me. It was four days before the fall of Saigon, a year before he came to Gainesville to confront me with my high school diary. Memories of our fights about the war flashed through my mind like a medley of nightmares. Then I began drowning in other memories: the passion George and I had shared the year we’d lived in Berkeley, his first year of law school, and the pain of breaking up when the alienation from my family became too much for me to bear.

I remained in Dad’s study long after Phoebe and Helene left, reminiscing, unable to get the promise I remembered at Dad’s funeral out of my mind.

Three years after I broke up with George our high school class held its ten-year reunion in the Galaxy Ballroom of the Fontainebleau Hotel. The band played our favorite songs, the hors d’oeuvres were scrumptious, liquor was included in the price of admission, and almost everyone was present or accounted for.

I sat at a table toward the rear of the ballroom with Phoebe and Helene, watching my classmates from a distance. Cliques reunited, orbiting each other. And my classmates—the lost and the found, the popular and the outcast, the jocks and the nerds, the druggies and the straights—unshackled from high school’s hierarchical conventions, roamed the floor like rogue asteroids. Phoebe nodded toward the ballroom entrance where Roger Knox was slinking in like a wounded dog, barefoot, wearing a scraggly beard and a bead necklace over a white-ribbed tee shirt. “Talk about losers!” she said.

Roger joined Chuck Lampson at the punchbowl.

“Look at Roger,” Helene said to Phoebe. “Can you imagine that’s the boy who broke your heart?”

“If I wasn’t over him before, I sure am now,” she said. Then she added, either with genuine curiosity or to divert the conversation from her breakup with Roger, “Do you think George will show?”

“George who?” I said.

“Gorgeous George!” Helene gave me a lascivious wink.

"Oh, *that* George." I waved her off and sipped my drink.

Phoebe laid a crumpled bill on the table. "Ten bucks says he'll show."

I snapped open my purse, found a five and five ones and slapped my bills on the table.

"All right! To George Who!" Helene said.

"To George, the no-show, that's who," I said.

Helene drained her glass and lifted another.

"Helene, easy," Phoebe said. "I thought you wanted to dance 'til dawn."

"Course I do," she said, "but we gotta lubricate our locomotion."

"It's your elocution that's lubricated," I said.

She started to say something, then turned her head in the direction of Phoebe's gaze. Phoebe took my five and five ones, stacked them on her ten, folded the bills, and put them in her purse.

Past crepe streamers hanging from the ceiling, past dazzling gowns and tuxedos rocking under spotlights on the dance floor, past familiar but older faces, past faces flirting, faces laughing, past the memorial for the boys killed in Vietnam, past a slide show of senior-yearbook photos, past moms and dads I'd known as teens now living paycheck-to-paycheck, past Roger and Chuck, past nostalgia, and through a tunnel of time, I saw what Phoebe saw: the face of George Carver. He was standing by the bar.

Helene grabbed another margarita. "Here! Here! George is here!"

I said, "I hope he doesn't see us." Several of his pals from the baseball team surrounded him and swept him toward their tables.

Helene downed her drink, grabbed Phoebe by one arm and me by the other. "C'mon. It's 'The Wah Watusi.' Les' dance."

And so we did, spinning and whirling, bumping and grinding, bopping to the beat, retracing the steps of dance fads of the past: The Watusi, The Jerk, The Fly, The Shake.

As we stumbled off the dance floor, I looked around the room. George was nowhere in sight. "Do you think George is out by the pool, smoking a joint?" I said.

"Who? George?" I trembled, hearing his maple-sugar voice. "He wasn't in that degenerate crowd of yours, was he?"

"George!" Helene screamed. In a heartbeat, she was cover-

ing his face with kisses.

“Helene!” he said. “Take it easy.”

Phoebe took Helene by the arm, and they disappeared into a throng of celebration.

I took George’s hand and sat close to him. Our knees touched. I dipped a napkin in a glass of water and wiped Helene’s lipstick off his face. He was wearing a gray pin-striped suit and Mickey Mouse cuff links I’d given him in high school. His hair was short—a look I hadn’t seen on him since he’d first left for Berkeley. He could have just stepped off the cover of *GQ*.

I leaned into him and squeezed his quadriceps. “You’ve kept in shape.”

“Want to meet for a run in the morning?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You seeing someone?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

“No,” he said. “Is it serious?”

“I don’t know.”

He cupped his hand behind my neck, massaging it, drawing my face toward his. When his breath was on my lips I whispered, “He’s Jewish, but Dad says I’ll never be happy with him.”

He brushed his lips over mine and said softly, “Why not?”

“Insufficient mettle.”

I put my arms around him, feeling safe. And then there it was, George’s sadness, a sadness at the core of his being. In all the time I’d known him, I’d never discovered its source. It was why I loved him—not because of his brilliance, not because of his integrity, not because of his strength or his beauty, but because of that unspoken sadness.

“How’s your dad?” he said. “We should talk.”

The Grateful Dead singing, “I’d rather be in some dark hollow/Where the sun don’t ever shine” was piped in over the PA system. Helium-filled balloons rose from the ends of the buffet tables, the backs of chairs, the stage, and the bars at opposite ends of the ballroom.

“Look,” I said with rancor, “Nothing’s changed. It was never about Dad. It was you! You sold out!”

“Me? You used to say your dad was a sellout. Now you’ve got the same establishment job he has, teaching at the same high



school.”

“We help kids,” I said. “Who do you help?” I ran my fingers over his lapels. “Look at this suit. You’re not practicing poverty law. And that bi-coastal thing. ‘You’re my sun, so Coral Cove is my perihelion!’”

“I said Coral Cove was my sun and you were my perihelion.” He caught my hand in his. “I’ll move to Coral Cove now. I took the Florida bar exam. I’ll quit my job and practice poverty law here if that’s what you want.”

“Dad will never...”

“I can make him understand it wasn’t about betrayal.”

I tried to imagine Dad changing his mind about George, the outbursts, the threats, the recriminations. I untied a red balloon from the back of the chair next to me and held it by its ribbon. Then I slipped my hand into his, letting the balloon drift up to the ceiling.

“No,” I said. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

George pulled me to my feet and sang with the band, “Dance all night/Play all day/Don’t let nothing get in the way,” rocking back on his heels, then twisting. He lifted my hand over my head, and I turned under it. He raised my hand again, I turned in the other direction, then spun toward him. When our bodies met he wrapped his arms around me, and we floated just above the music as if we were one. When the song ended, we kissed.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, you can.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes. Yes. I can, yes.”

“Yes,” we whispered in unison.

Then, suddenly, we weren’t alone.

“Hey, George!” It was Eli, walking briskly toward us.

George raised his hand like a running back about to stiff-arm a tackle. “Bad timing, Eli.”

Eli stopped, looking befuddled. Helene, Phoebe, and Phil walked into the ballroom, then looked in our direction. George gave me a rueful smile.

There were bear hugs, back slaps, “How you doing, bro?” “Long time, man.” A bottle of champagne appeared, and we toasted the past—high school, college, the insanity of the war, even an acid trip that, as Helene recalled, had taken us to the center of the universe and back.

"I hear you're practicing corporate law," Phil said.

"Guilty as charged," George said.

"You were smart to go to law school." Phil's face was expressionless, his voice bland.

"Banking's exciting," George said with warmth.

"Yeah? I'm assistant branch manager," Phil said, as if his job were a death sentence. "I approve loans up to five thousand bucks. You got a sports car?"

"A sedan."

"A beach house?"

George laughed.

"You got a girl?" Phil asked.

"No," George said.

"So I take it you haven't heard," Phil said, putting his arm around me. "Hailey and I are getting hitched."

"Phil!" I said, pulling away from him. "It's not official."

"Hey," Helene said. "How come you haven't tol' me?"

George looked even sadder than the day we'd broken up. But I didn't say anything else. I couldn't speak.

After another half-hour of chit-chat, George and I walked together toward the ballroom entrance. Before he left we stood face to face. He placed his hands on my hips and touched his forehead to mine.

"Promise me you'll tell your dad I said hello."

"Okay," I said. "I promise."

He walked to the ballroom doors, shook a few hands along the way, and disappeared.

A week after Dad's funeral Phoebe and I met at Highway 61. I settled into my seat, drank coffee, and listened to the music until Phoebe said, "Did your mom tell you what she meant when she said your dad loved George?"

She didn't have to, I thought. By the time Dad had revisited his views on the war and my rebellion against the silent majority, I was already married. In Dad's mind, George must have no longer been a threat to my love for him. And the times had changed: gang warfare had replaced civil disobedience. Dad had often said he wished that kids today would become as engaged in world affairs as we had. Maybe that was his way of apologizing.

"Phil asked me the same question," I said.

"What did you tell him?"

"What Ma told me. She said Dad saw a lot of himself in George."

"Well," Phoebe said, "that was obvious. So did everyone else."

"They were as different as—" I looked at the posters on the wall "—the guardsmen and the students at Kent State, guns and wildflowers. But enough of the past. How in the world did you get involved with Roger Knox? Last I heard he was posted to Addis Ababa."

"Our paths crossed from time to time over the years..." she said, but I lost the rest of what she was saying, thinking instead about Dad and George, both of them now gone, wondering what Dad's reaction would have been had I kept my promise and conveyed George's regards after our high school reunion. I swirled the remaining drops of coffee around the bottom of the cup, watching the mud-colored liquid wash over the grounds.

## Out of Water: *An Interview with Jeremy Fish*

*San Francisco-based artist Jeremy Fish's unique style combines cartoonish animal figures in complex overlays, often resembling Russian nesting dolls. Most well-known in the streetwise skateboarding world for his limited edition designs, Fish's work features a mixture of whimsical nautical imagery and caricatures designed to resemble human traits. Spanning mediums that range from pen and ink drawings to large-scale murals and wooden sculptures, Fish has also recently started his own clothing line, Superfishal through San Francisco's Upper Playground. Fish has designed his own pair of exclusive Nike Air Classic sneakers, hand painted a guest room at San Francisco's Hotel des Arts, and collaborated with rapper Aesop Rock to design cover art for his 2007 album None Shall Pass and a book of illustrations entitled The Next Best Thing. Fish's style experiments with form in a fresh, innovative way and his accessible work reflects a talented eye that incorporates influences from human experience as well as the ever-changing natural world.*

**Santa Clara Review:** When and why did you start making art?

**Jeremy Fish:** Like everyone else, preschool I think. And as far as why, I think it's because the preschool paint and paste smelled so delicious.



*Crafty Badger, acrylic on canvas*

**SCR:** What's your favorite medium to work with?

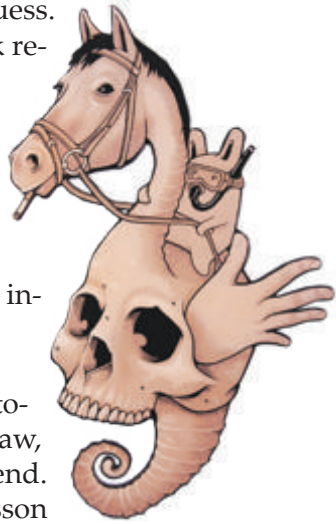
**JF:** Honestly just black and white drawings are my favorite. Pen and ink on paper. Simple.

**SCR:** What's the most challenging medium to work with?

**JF:** Large scale paintings, like murals, I guess. I have less control than I do when I work really small.

**SCR:** On your site, you have extremely humorous explanations for each piece. How do you come up with the visual representations that go with these explanations and where does most of your inspiration come from?

**JF:** The work is usually based on little stories. Something I read, something I saw, something that happened to me or a friend. Sometimes they have a moral or a lesson and sometimes not. I use little symbols pieced together to tell these stories. I will use animals with stereotypical traits to represent humans to help tell the story. For example: if you are slow, I would draw you as a turtle, if you are a cute lady maybe you are a fox, and so on. It's not really too deep.



*Sea Whores, acrylic on cut plywood*

**SCR:** Are there specific narratives in your work?

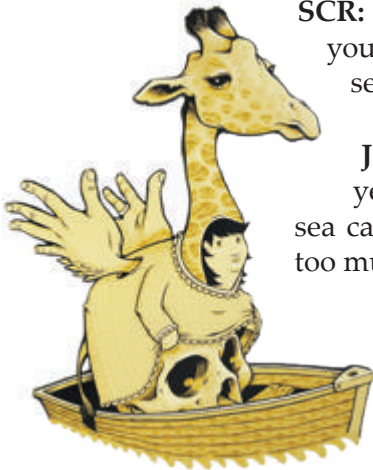
**JF:** A lot of the stories are about love lost. I think it may be my age and time in my life.

**SCR:** Who are your favorite/most inspiring contemporary artists?

**JF:** I like Mike Giant, Jeff Soto, Josh Keyes, Travis Millard, Phil Frost and Barry McGee.

**SCR:** It seems that you pile characters upon characters and put characters inside other characters—it seems totem-esque. Is there a reason for this? How did it come about?

**JF:** To cram a lot of story into one drawing. I like the challenge to fit as many symbols in to tell the story without making the image too busy.



High Hopes, acrylic on cut plywood

**SCR:** There is an aquatic theme in some of your work, do you have an affinity for the sea?

**JF:** Yes. I lived by the ocean most of my years in California. I love the fictitious sea captain and mermaid romance. I use it too much.

**SCR:** You recently collaborated with rapper Aesop Rock to do the cover for his album *None Shall Pass* as well as a book of art. How did this collaboration happen?

**JF:** I am a huge Aesop fan and have been for nearly a decade. We were introduced when he moved to San Francisco a couple of years ago. The collaboration started there. I loved working with him. I consider him one of the only real genius types I know.

**SCR:** You recently talked to online publication Hypebeast about the commoditization of art and the reason that you choose to sell T-shirts with your work on them. Do you see a distinction between so-called “high” and “low” art, or what do you see as most valuable about the more accessible type of art you create and would you consider yourself a “pop culture” artist?

**JF:** Yes, there is a distinction between high and low art. High art is designed to communicate with those who can afford to be involved. Education and money usually allow you the “luxury” of art. In my opinion, low art is there for everyone to enjoy. Take it or leave it. Enjoy it or not. Communicating with the public. Openly, not selectively. It’s a much different language of communication. I prefer the latter, even though it doesn’t pay as well.



Pig Style, t-shirt design part of fish's superfishal clothing line

## My Chronic Migraine

My head is pounding in Florence  
Like a heartbeat  
wandered up a couple of no name streets  
looking familiar by night  
and foreign by day  
having lost its way

My head is pounding in Florence  
From the apocalyptic sirens  
screams bursting from silence  
ricocheting from  
cobblestone  
to apartment building  
to my frostbitten ears

My head is pounding in Florence  
As I always seem to swim upstream  
Tourists exhausted their stay — I'd say  
and I'd swear fucking foreigners...  
but then that light clicks-on

My head is pounding in Florence  
The same techno beat the discothèques play  
on the dance floor  
spinning and sipping my wine  
its fine because everything here's a blur

My head is pounding in Florence  
With each stair I twist to the basement  
digesting the dinner talk  
by portion  
and step  
my metabolism raging on phrases

My head is pounding in Florence  
Each pulse a drip of addiction  
dropped in my morning mug of survival  
and an afternoon shot to fortify  
the sip  
I savor obsession

My head is pounding in Florence  
Its blond cover lifeless and dull,  
the brunette  
that I watch walk by on the streets,  
I swear  
has stripped my gold flesh and fled

My head is pounding in Florence  
against the back wall of my Witchcraft class  
I chip away at my blasé  
with continual tap-taps  
to a brain more solid than sponge  
with one more tap  
I believe it would burst a river from its core

My head is pounding in Florence  
post 16-hours by bus  
8-hours in train  
4-hours of sleep  
half-hour I walk each morning  
if you want to find it  
my mind  
go searching the clouds

My head is pounding in Florence  
Deciphering faith in frescoes  
and meanings in meticulously-laid tiles of gold  
I shake to decide  
but find  
these dice have mirrors on all sides

My head is pounding in Florence



Perhaps from a drought down south—you know?

My head is pounding in Florence  
A chronic migraine of sorts  
and I would be concerned about something severe  
but when I write this  
I start to see why

My head is pounding in Florence  
A heavy head  
from those sing-songy things  
of finding myself—though I'd done this before  
and culture and pasta and love

My head is pounding in Florence  
its force erupting  
pressing my skull  
and in just one week  
I will be boarding the plane from this place,  
escaping the throbs  
by fleeing the cause

But...too...  
I'll come home to my light-headed life  
and forget this disarray I adore

## Rising Above the Tide: *An Interview with Anne Faith Nicholls*



Photograph by Tod Brilliant

*Born with a backwards heart, Anne Faith Nicholls had to undergo open-heart surgery as a child. This along with other experiences of her youth fostered a need for artistic expression that has fed into a fruitful career. A graduate of the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, Nicholls has received national recognition for illustration, fine art, and advertising design. Her whimsical paintings traverse a landscape of uncertainty, loneliness, decay, and growth, and the characters and symbols that weave through her work are as memorable as they are poignant. In January, Nicholls began documenting her experience as an artist at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, and she's currently working on a book entitled Collect My Thoughts. The artist has also collaborated with Vans shoes, which features her in its national ad campaign for young women's publications, such as Nylon and TeenVogue. Nicholls recently exhibited her Low Tide Collection at the Shooting Gallery in San Francisco, and she currently resides in Los Angeles, where an exhibition of her new work will open at the La Luz de Jesus Gallery in September 2008. For more information about Anne Faith Nicholls, go to [www.annefaithnicholls.com](http://www.annefaithnicholls.com).*

**Santa Clara Review:** Your art seems to be narrative. Are there stories involved in each piece?

**Anne Faith Nicholls:** Yes. I myself am naturally attracted to paintings that have a little mystery, which I see a lot of in the Surrealist and Colonial Folk Art of early America. My art education was also focused around illustration, so I always try to tell a story. I don't always start out with the story in my head. Sometimes it develops itself into a much deeper scenario as I paint it. I've got a lot to say, and painting is just a way for me to express myself and say things that I might not necessarily want to say aloud.

**SCR:** Certain images—like the heart, whale, bird, bed, and micro-

scope—recur in your work. What is the significance of these recurring images?

**AFN:** All of the recurring images in my work are directly symbolic of something in my life that identifies me. For example, clouds and rain in my work pay homage to the Pacific Northwest, where I grew up. The Heart, of course, is symbolic to me emotionally and physically, as I had some pretty major open heart surgery as a child. I still have a big scar. The bed is a nod to the Surrealists that have inspired me—Rene Magritte especially. The bed represents my subconscious. The Bird represents flight, flying away, more specifically. The microscope represents self-examination—taking a good hard look at yourself, and who you are. Everything in my work is symbolic, but I do hope that people can interpret the symbols into their own meanings.

**SCR:** Do you know what the characters you depict are thinking when you paint them?



*Low Tide Collection*

**AFN:** I would like to think the characters in my work are usually plotting a grand scheme to rise above their current reality.

**SCR:** The mood of your paintings tends to be dark and somber. Why are you attracted to this emotional landscape?

**AFN:** I myself can be dark and somber at times. I hide it pretty well, but everyone has a dark side. Better this outlet than another, right?

**SCR:** A lot of your work uses text. Why do you choose to use text in certain pieces and how do you decide what text to use? How did you develop your own font for your artwork?

**AFN:** I've always liked how Mexican artists, Folk artists, and Circus artists used text in their work. Funny, my mother *hates* it when I use text in my work—she thinks that the art should just speak for itself, which I understand, but I don't mind it. I developed my own font just by playing around in my sketchbook. In February at [www.annefaithnicholls.com](http://www.annefaithnicholls.com), the T-Shirt-O-The-Month was my hand drawn font. You can still buy it!

**SCR:** Some of your mixed-media works use old photographs. Where are these photographs from and how do you decide to use them? Do you know who the people in the photographs are?

**AFN:** I have hundreds of antique photographs. I collect these photos at Flea Markets, in my travels, and anywhere else I can find them. Some have been given to me as gifts by friends. I am very particular about which ones I use. The character has to speak to me. I look for interesting clothing, hair or faces. I have no idea who these people were, usually only the time the photo was taken and where, if even that. And the fun part for me is creating their missing identities by adorning the pictures with painting and illustration. I try to re-realize and glorify who I thought they could have been.

**SCR:** You've studied a lot of art history. What periods in art history are you most drawn to?



*Hold Back Against the Nay Sayers, oil on canvas, 18" x 24"*

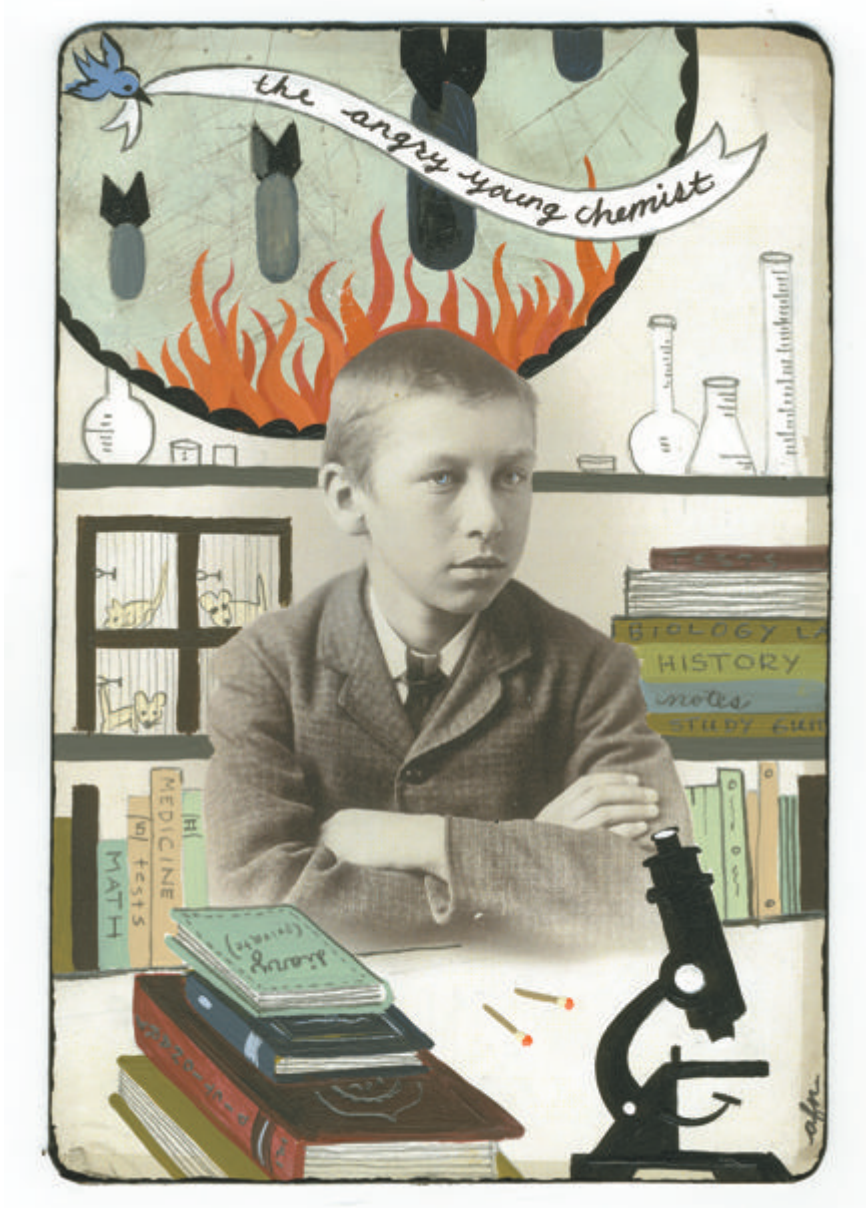
**AFN:** I think every movement has something interesting behind it. I am a *total art history junkie*, and it's my goal in life to visit as many museums as I possibly can before I'm dead. But my favorites would have to be Turn of the Century European Art, Colonial American Folk Art, Surrealism, 20th Century Modern American Art and Furniture, and, of course, Low Brow Art.

**SCR:** Do you collaborate with other visual artists, writers, musi-



cians, etc.?

AFN: Yes. Aside from my personal work and exhibitions, I run The Pretty Picture Movement (My Production Company/ Creative



*Angry Young Chemist*, acrylic on antique photo, circa 1940's

Collective) with my boyfriend artist Jacob Arden McClure and our business partner Dan Levy. We work on all sorts of commercial type projects like graphic design, album covers, set design, etc. together. I also am very inspired by and like to work with photographers. Tod Brilliant is my favorite of the moment! You are only as good as the people you work with, and I am excited about all the collaborative projects coming up for me this year. I would especially like to work with more musicians on album packaging. I did Strata's album last year, and it was a great experience working with the band and the label.

**SCR:** Would you consider illustrating for a publication?

**AFN:** Yes, I have done it in the past and I am definitely open to and hoping for more opportunities in editorial illustration. I have also done ad campaigns in the past for Visa and Vans Clothing and Shoes, and I am hoping my recent move to LA will open even more doors to projects of that ilk.

**SCR:** Who have been the greatest influences on your artwork?

**AFN:** Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali, Chuck Close, Frida Kahlo, Neo Rausch, Liz McGrath, Mark Ryden, Diane Arbus, Gregory Crewdson, Aaron Hawks, Damian Hurst, the band Interpol, my boyfriend Jacob, my family, my friends, my travels.

**SCR:** You mention Magritte's "The Menaced Assassin" as one of your favorite paintings. Why is this particular piece one of your favorites?

**AFN:** Everything works for me with this piece. The color palette, the mystery, the blood, the relationship between the characters, the tension, the phonograph, the size, the perspective, the painting technique. It just works.

**SCR:** Where do you find your inspiration? From certain places, experiences, people?

**AFN:** Museums, New York, LA, San Francisco, Europe, the beach, the woods, music, photographers, flea markets, movies, and tons and tons of books.

**SCR:** What projects are you working on now?

**AFN:** Getting ready for my solo exhibition of new paintings showing at the La Luz de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles, CA in Sept. 2008. Finishing up my book, published with 9mm Books, out around the same time. Clothing designs. Developing my online store. Tour posters for bands. And shooting a pilot for a kids' TV show. I've got a full plate!

**SCR:** If you weren't an artist, what would you be doing?

**AFN:** Hair and makeup. Or real estate. But I just can't imagine a life without art, and I still plan on doing both those other things too.



*Cameo Appearance*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 3ft x 4ft x 2.75'



## Calling My Mother from India

I punch in the Hindi figures  
and, amazingly, a muted ring begins.  
Eight thousand miles away  
in Kentucky, my mother lifts

the receiver in a mottled hand  
and asks hello. She is surprised, happy—  
it is her baby, after all—but I hear  
too her slight disorientation,

taint of worry about my choices.  
I play the part, explain I am sitting  
beneath a cube of mosquito netting,  
speak of goat-brain curry,

great bats that circled my head  
and, with a slightly cheating flourish,  
of nine-foot spitting cobras  
discovered in Kenya, each

with venom enough to kill fifteen men.  
*My god, she says, isn't that where  
you are?* I regret the cobras  
and make assurances. Back on topic:

the house is finally decorated,  
the family is coming  
for Christmas on the 22nd,  
Goldie's husband recovers poorly

from his stroke and this call  
is costing me a fortune. The echoes,  
stalls, hollows make joking difficult.

I hear my voice, stiff and loud.  
My brother's just walked in  
for a visit and says hi. My father  
wants sugar, goddamnit, for his cereal.  
Seconds and rupees gone forever,

dispensed to black infinity,  
babble until the sugar bowl is found.  
I don't mention the sadness  
that has just come over me,

a palpable wave, frail cloth,  
thickness I can taste. Instead, I stress  
to this aging woman I love  
that all is well, then get fancy

and note that it is late here,  
that I've lived already through  
their Sunday morning. Too much.  
I miss her. I'm tired and should go.

Once more she mentions the cost  
as if some haunting abstraction,  
a loss beyond human recovery—  
no one expects to hear from me again.

## Open Mic

"I'm scared as shit."

"I know."

"Any advice?"

"Get over it?"

"Thanks. How very '90's of you."

"Why are you nervous? Didn't you act in a play in college?"

"I did. And it was the debacle to end all debacles."

"Yeah, I remember."

"So, why are you bringing it up?"

"Why do you always confide in me? I don't know what to tell you."

"Oh, this is getting nowhere."

I wash my face again. Well, it's more like slapping me into submission with the aid of cold faucet water in the hopes of calming down. I take a look in the mirror again. He's not there anymore. It's just me. Outside the door, I hear, "OK, next up, David!" I take a deep breath. "Uh, David? Is David here?" At least I'm already a one-name wonder, like Madonna.

I make my way up to the stage, which is really just the corner closest to the outside window, and adjust the height of the mic stand to accommodate my decision to read my story standing up. I nudge the stool out of the way like I'm afraid it'll bite me. Then I say, "Hi, I'm David. I'm a writer. I graduated from Santa Clara last year. I'd like to read one of my short stories for you tonight. It's called 'BEND'." Before I begin, I'm afraid the Asian accent I don't actually have made it hard for the crowd to hear the title, so I clarify. "Again, this is called 'BEND'. B-E-N-D." One more thing before I start. "Also, this story is pretty depressing, so I apologize in advance." When it comes to stage presence, Justin Timberlake has nothing on me.

The first two paragraphs are shaky. I look down at the paper the entire time, but I can feel what seems like countless eyes judg-

ing every part of me. Instead of thinking that they're actually paying attention, all I do is run through a mental list of all the things that make me a shitty, underwhelming person. And I have no idea what this crowd, a mash-up of old folk dudes who make me feel too young and paper-thin androgynous hipsters who make me feel ancient, will think of a story about a guy who doesn't know his girlfriend is a transsexual prostitute. Maybe I should've read a chapter from the fifth Harry Potter.

As I round the corner on page one, I see the word "pussy" on the bottom of the second page. It's the first of four times I employ the word, which, in the context of the story, is actually how the nameless narrator refers to the transsexual Cassie's penis. *Oh, this is going to be super*, the guy from the mirror whispers in my ear, making what I hope will be his final appearance tonight.

When I get to the word, I find that I can't say it. I've been stammering and stuttering a far amount by this time, but the prospect of having to say this positively pedestrian word, nearly half a century after Betty Freidan, fosters a debilitating fear I have never known. I to push the pussy out of my mouth, but it's lodged somewhere between my lead tongue and the organ where my confidence is supposed to be. I stop. I take a deep breath. Then I hear him whisper in my ear one last time: "Fuck them." He's right. *I'm* right. He's me. And I might suck, but no one's gonna accuse me of not trying. "I love the way her pussy tastes."

The discordant noise that has been challenging my voice all night suddenly dissipates. For the rest of my story, no one talks, coughs, or dares to take another sip of iced Vietnamese coffee. Even the baristas stop taking orders and shuffle to the front of the counter and listen. Now, I don't just imagine everyone looking at me. Now everyone really is. And there is something about an immature perception becoming a blunt reality that imbues me with the confidence to read the rest of it about as dynamically as I can without the use of sock puppets.

I read the last line: "I held her." There is applause, but it is noticeably slower and heavier than what was accorded the musicians who preceded me. Cassie kills herself at the end of the story. Specifically, she cuts her "pussy" off in reaction to being denied gender reassignment surgery. Good times. "Thank you," I say, before returning to my seat. "Wow, that *was* damn depressing," the

MC says when he retakes the mic.

When I leave, one of the baristas shouts, in the middle of explaining to an old lady what the difference between a latte and a mocha is, "I really liked that story, man." And just like that, it's over. Some tepid applause and a vague compliment I wish I could somehow spin into a book deal with Simon and Schuster. I still don't know if the story's good, on a level *The New Yorker* could appreciate. I don't know if I should continue on this path when I can't even see the trail, or if I suck and should really just enroll in law school. It's something I imagine I will have to deal with for the rest of my life. Writing is so lonely and so difficult to quantify and understand. It is a passion that is neither hot nor heavy. And words sometimes just feel so imprecise and limited.

I'm not sure how to end this story.

## The First Snow

It was a snow day but everyday that winter was a snow day and she was new to this environment so slipping on ice and snowflakes on her eyelashes were a novelty while they annoyed everyone that walked by her but it was her first real winter and when you're twenty-four you rarely have firsts anymore and he recognized that so he would call when she was walking home from work or some place like that because that's how she got around from places to home even though it was zero degrees but it cost zero dollars to walk from places to home and from home to places and she would answer his calls saying hello in a different accent every time and she never ran out of accents because those are the sort of things you can make up and the people walking by would be annoyed but it pleased him every time "meet me at the park" and she would run through the snow in slow motion because she thought it was cute and he kind of thought so too so he would throw snowballs at her and sometimes they hit her cheek the only part of her body that was not covered by snow clothes and she wondered if he did it on purpose but she thought he wouldn't hurt her intentionally because he liked making snow angels with her and one night they made a snow angel chain along the perimeter of the park but the next day it was gone because snow can erase angels even if those angels are made of snow themselves.

Nine days later she walked home from a place and it was thirty seven degrees but still zero dollars and a dog cut his foot two hours before on a nail in the street that was previously covered by snow but because it was a warmer set of days some of the snow melted and dogs don't wear shoes unless they have that kind of owner and in that case we can say dogs shouldn't wear shoes even though there's a risk of nails nor should they wear sweaters even if it's a perfect fit and this dog didn't have that kind of owner so it didn't wear a sweater either and he stepped on that nail and yelped and the owner assumed he himself had stepped

on his dog's leash and pulled at the dog's neck "sorry bud keep walking" he didn't notice the blood that traced along the street and diagonally through the park and she didn't get a call that night so she didn't speak in accents she didn't speak at all but she went to the park and she walked diagonally following the blood trail and the snow made the blood even bloodier in some way maybe it changed the color maybe it was the reddest red ever and she cried because she didn't know where the blood came from so she assumed it was from a human and she thought terrible dark thoughts and it was her first time seeing blood on snow because as you learned it was her first time seeing anything at all on snow and she made a snow angel near the north entrance of the park and she cried silently and the next day the angel was still there because that night there was no chance of snow or rain and that morning it was forty-one degrees and a little boy went to the park entering from the north and lay in her snow angel which was too big a fit so he got up to make his own and he lay down slightly south of her angel and started the process waved his arms spread his legs closed his eyes began moving and turning his head to the east then fast to the west one two three four he counted to ten forwards ten nine eight then backwards ended on one which he started on and his head laid steady to the west opened his eyes realized he made an angel in a pool of blood he cried all the way home his mom drew him a bath with bubbles but he wouldn't tell her why he was crying.

End of the day much of the snow had melted and still no call as she walked home from a place because ten days earlier he found a foreign woman with one real accent everyday and it was a novelty so he fell in love and spring came and we know what happened to all the snow angels as for the girl who made them she made a real angel out of herself.

## Sometimes in the Night

Lying in bed, I pull the covers up over me,  
Wrap them around like the blanket of a dark velvet night.  
Underneath this big black sky,  
My body is like the open ocean:  
Unnavigable, unconquerable, vast expanse uncatchable by the eye.  
My right and left float from rib to waist like empty vessels,  
    Cupped as row boats, then flat as ocean liners,  
Waiting, searching, all hands on deck to find port.

Rise and fall,  
    Rise and fall,  
        Both right ship and left rise and fall,  
Carried by the buoyancy of breath.  
They follow the waves of my deep, heavy ocean,  
    Up,  
    Down,  
        Up,  
        Down,  
The gentle, lapping waters rise and fall,  
Spill into my empty ocean vessels,  
Filling them with unbearable weight.

And thus fated these two ships sink,  
Sink below to the dark, unchartered depths beneath my surface  
sea.  
They are submarines now:  
They pull out their periscopes,  
Searching, probing, spying for a sunken treasure.  
Perhaps one night they will find what they seek,  
Find what they've always hoped for:  
Abandoning the heavy cargo they've so long known,



So long carried,  
They will discover a sunken ship below,  
The skeletal remains  
Empty and hollow,  
Abandoned,  
Secret beauty hidden inside a vacant, barren body.

## Cold Deck

1.

Lake Huron campsite      the night  
under elm we touched  
our palms to earth      the dawn  
reshuffled our skins  
    into two      then four      then eight  
cells that split and began

a tiny closed fist inside beating  
a tadpole of our own making  
the hand      that beautiful  
                    mimic of mine

freckle

between index and thumb

    if I touched it I could  
would squeeze the skin so tight  
                    the hand would pinch off—.

2.

The trout I caught flopped  
    side to side      gashed fin  
paled silver hook gleaming  
    me      the line      the fish  
gasp for water

but we throw it back  
so small                      baiting the hook  
  releasing

you reel in another                      scales still crisp—.

## Random Acts of Gardening

There is a house in my neighborhood with a long row of tangly bushes that obscures an otherwise prominent front porch. It seems less like the deliberate act of a recluse hiding from the world than neglect. I drive past this house every day, to and from work. As the days turn to weeks and months, and the branch tips begin to poke above the second story windows, I am routinely compelled to sneak over in the middle of the night with my pruning shears and have a go at it.

I am not entirely sure where this compulsion originates. I do not usually notice other people's overgrown yards. It's not like this house is the sole eye-sore among a community of exquisitely manicured lawns. Perhaps it is because the house sits so close to the road. Perhaps it is because a high school acquaintance once lived there. Perhaps it is because that particular row of bushes represents the only type of gardening I've come to enjoy: the severe before-and-after victory at my own hand.

\* \* \*

My mother is an avid yard gardener. To say I never fully understood would be an understatement. Growing up, I had zero interest in her hobby. Maybe it was because I didn't see it as a hobby; to me it seemed part of one's weekly domestic routine—change the sheets, balance the checkbook, work in the yard. I was thirty-six years old before it occurred to me to ask my mother a thoughtful question about her yard.

We were standing together in her kitchen, me rinsing dinner dishes for her to place in the dishwasher. I was thinking of the meatloaf dinner she'd prepared just an hour before. Despite the collective family delight in the meatloaf meal, there is little joy in its preparation. I've seen my mother, in monotonous, irritated haste, prepare this meal and nearly a dozen stock meals throughout the course of my life. Her recipes have gone unchanged for as long as I have consumed them. I've never once seen her get lost in the flow

of cooking the way I've seen former roommates who could cook delight in their ability to surprise themselves.

"Mom?" I said.

"Yes," she said, attentive, but not slowing her pace.

"You know, there are some people who cook the way you garden."

She didn't respond, knowing I would continue my pondering and eventually ask her a question.

"Well," I went on, "I guess I was just wondering why you do it." She knew what I meant—the hours of tedious clipping, the tugging and planting, the browsing and buying, not to mention the constant watering and disposing. I expected an understated, practical answer, a modest dismissal even, reducing the passion to routine. Instead, she turned off the faucet, gazed out the window, beyond the top of her Contorted Filbert, across the grand display of pansies, hostas, tasteful statues, and miniature flags.

She then turned to me and said plainly and with great certainty, "Well, because it's all just so beautiful now, isn't it?"

\*\*\*

I have seen a clip of silent 8mm film footage of my father mowing the grass. In the film, I am two. My dad, dressed in plaid shorts and a white V-neck Hanes, is bonding with my five-year-old brother Kip by letting him "help Dad." This footage is evidence that my dad probably mowed the grass regularly before he suffered a stroke at the age of fifty-three. Despite his obvious participation, I will always see the yard as my mother's exclusive domain. In the film, I wander in and out of the frame with a hand-me-down toy mower. Sometimes I cross in front of my smiling brother and father; sometimes I drag the thing behind me with one arm. More than once I abandon the tool altogether and want my camera-operating mother to pick me up.

When I was eight years old, my job was to pick up twigs from the front yard before my mother mowed. It was a tedious job I begrudged because she religiously mowed every four days, every third day if there was rain. I was thorough, but only because I had convinced myself that if the mower encountered even the smallest of twigs, it would break or blow up.

Any interest in the yard that I might have accidentally acquired all but disappeared with my growing awareness of our neighbors. Debbie across the street was young and funny and had a brand new baby. A few doors down lived a family with four girls who went to my school. Often, Mom would send me to the garage for a special gardening tool only to find me ten minutes later on our next door neighbor's front porch, lemonade in my hand, a little dog snuggled up in my lap.

I returned to my task beside her without complaint, but not without judgment. I could not understand how my mother could allow herself to be tied so tightly to something so demanding. Like a slave, I thought. After all, it was *her* yard, and she could certainly invest in something less time-consuming: rows of low-maintenance bushes like the Keitzman's, or an extended patio like the Keirney's. I also could not understand how she could remain so indifferent to the seemingly endless opportunities to connect with potential passersby. It was true that we lived on a side street with little foot traffic and even less actual traffic, but I often wished we could be one of those families who sat perched on the front porch, night after night watching the world pass us by. I was constantly aware that at any given moment someone could round the corner: a friendly stranger (maybe with an interesting accent), or a mother with a brand new baby, or a classmate's cute older brother flying by on a ten-speed.

When Kip turned fourteen he acquired three lawn-mowing jobs in the neighborhood. When he turned sixteen and took a part-time job at Zetler Hardware, I inherited the "family business." I was less than thrilled. My mother had to remind me every single week that it was time, once again, to mow those yards. I always hoped for rain, or that the mower wouldn't work; sometimes I even wished for a minor injury (a twisted ankle would put me out of commission for at least a few weeks.) I always wore a Walkman despite the fact I could never hear it over the noise of the mower. But I knew my tapes by heart and would sing along, one song after the next.

When I turned sixteen, I headed straight to the closest fast food restaurant for a "real job," and Mom regained complete control over her yard.

\* \* \*

I've accompanied my mother on probably a hundred plant-related errands. There were the quick trips to Frank's Nursery and Crafts for flats of pansies, or Plantland to investigate their hanging baskets. Places like K-Mart and Gold Circle always had something we needed on sale in their garden center. I rode in the burnt orange Hornet next to my mother with the Sunday advertisements in my lap. Sometimes, on a recommendation from a church friend or fellow garden club member, we would drive out into the country to an unnamed place on an unnamed road.

These garden shops were primitive structures that stood all day in the blaring sun next to houses we weren't allowed to enter. I'd aimlessly wander the aisles: leaf, leaf, leaf, purple clump, leaf, gravel, leaf, leaf. Mostly, I passed the time thinking of some TV show I'd seen the night before, or an inside joke I'd helped create at school, or a boy I had a secret crush on. Sometimes, Mom would give me money to buy a cute notepad with a daisy emblem, or the rare piece of 19<sup>th</sup> century stick candy at the counter. Most of the time she would let me stay in the car, where I was content to read magazines or write letters to camp friends, or listen to the radio until she returned, an attractive, suntanned boy trailing behind her carrying a cardboard box lid filled with assorted leafy purchases.

\* \* \*

I can't recall asking my mother a single question about the things she grew in her yard. She also never offered any insightful information. To be fair, maybe she tried when my brother and I were very small, pointing out the colors on the tulips or the different types of stripes on the hostas. Maybe she called us over to her side while she watered and tried to tell us about how the water helps to nourish the plants and make them healthy. Maybe she did all of this and was ultimately discouraged by our insensitive indifference. Maybe the yard was something she felt was hers and didn't feel like sharing.

Looking back, I see how my mother's involvement in her yard grew as my brother and I grew. She once told me that when my brother and I were small, she had my father remove the rose bushes that came with the house because they were "too much trouble." After a few years of being happy with just keeping the yard

cut, Mom planted a small Japanese garden at the side of the house. By the time she started to invest two or three hours a night every night, Kip was at play practice, and I was asking to ride bikes with my friends, or was happy to sit in my room clipping pictures out of *Dynamite* magazine to tape into my *Trapper Keeper*. The times she made me work beside her induced considerable eye-rolling on my part. There was also a lot of keeping track of “who helped last” between my brother and me; we were quick to point out the lack of fairness in her request.

\* \* \*

In second grade, on Arbor Day, everyone in our class received a small, foot-tall evergreen tree. My best friend’s tree wasn’t in the ground a week before her teenage sister ran it down with a mower. I suspect a great many more Arbor Day trees never made it home at all, much less into the ground. Mom planted mine in a triangular patch of grass next to a sidewalk a few feet from the back of the house.

The tree grew slowly but quite steadily, year after year. Occasionally, I’d pay attention to it, but only as a prop in telling the story of its origin—the novelty of being able to refer to it as “my tree.” One Christmas, when I was home from college, Mom decided she wanted to string it with lights. It wasn’t until I was standing up on the ladder, my face inches from its branches, that I realized just how big it had grown.

In my late twenties my dad had to trim big chunks out of one side to clear the walkway from the driveway to the house. Today the tree is taller than my parent’s house. But its days are numbered. On the recommendation of the repairman called to unclog its roots from the sewer line, the tree will have to come down. When I heard the news, my thoughts immediately jumped to symbolic items I could have fashioned from the wood—perhaps a foot stool or maybe a bookshelf. When I asked my mother when it might come down, she sighed and said, “Oh, I don’t know. It needs to be done, but it’s been such a nice tree...” There was a tenderness to her voice that I would come to recognize as the tone she often took when she spoke of the things in her yard.

\* \* \*

In the winter of 2001, I left my job at a production studio where, for two years, I had been doing creative work for a local museum's massive renovation and relocation. Those two years turned out to be the most intense, challenging, creative, frustrating, heartbreaking, and ultimately emotionally taxing period of my life. I left because I was thirty years old and completely burned out. I had nothing lined up to replace my job, and lived for six months on a matured certificate of deposit my grandmother had given me for high school graduation.

After a self-induced month of near-seclusion, getting reacquainted with books and music and the thoughts of my own mind, I started getting a bit restless. One afternoon, heaving the winter's worth of garbage to my trash receptacle, I passed a large bush at the edge of the rental property that I shared with three other tenants. I'd probably passed this bush at least twice a month for the four years I'd lived there, but on that day I stopped for a closer look. At the tips were the starts of new leaves, but underneath were massive tangles of dead branches.

Later that afternoon, I went to Target and bought a new pair of pruning shears, gloves, a package of lawn and leaf bags, and new batteries for my CD player. I went to the library and checked out the unabridged audio recording of *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand, and went to work on that bush. Every afternoon (and sometimes a quick touch up before settling in for the night) I worked, snipping and pulling and considering. I couldn't help stepping back frequently to admire my discard pile, to admire my work.

One day one of my neighbors passed me on her way to her trash receptacle.

"Is Chuck having you do anything about the front bushes that are growing over the windows or the killer weeds?" She was referring to our landlord, and to the tangle of brush that grew up through the cracks in the concrete that had developed thorns that resembled a shark's gum line.

"Oh, I'm not doing this for Chuck. I just thought this needed some attention," I answered.

"So you decided to work on this one, here by the trash, and not the one up by where we live?"

"Um. Yeah, I guess so," I said.

"Oh." She gave me a look that was part confusion but mostly pity. I didn't elaborate and she didn't continue. Instead, she dis-



posed of her trash and walked back to her apartment.

"You should really call Chuck about those other bushes," I called after her.

\* \* \*

In the summer of 2004, I bought a house eight blocks away from the house where I grew up. That following spring, my mom asked if I had any thought as to what I wanted to do with the nearly vacant front flower beds. I hadn't. She suggested flowers for the front of the beds and a series of different plants for up against the house. I told her I'd thought maybe bushes would be nice, and less maintenance. She asked if I'd driven around the neighborhood and seen any that I liked. I hadn't. The next time she picked me up for a dinner out, she started pointing out my neighbors' bushes.

"How about those... or those?" It was hard to tell, driving by, trying to mentally transpose the various shapes and sizes of the bushes onto my bare beds. I said they looked fine.

I decided to be proactive. "What about those?" I pointed to a row of interesting-looking miniature bushes that twisted themselves up into perfect little points.

"Those are really hard to keep alive. Besides, they're really expensive."

"How about I try to make an effort to pay attention to the neighbor's lawns the next time I go on a walk." I said, hoping that would temporarily stop the search.

"That sounds like a good idea." We turned a corner. "Those there are good. And so are those." I'd stopped looking. "Are you even looking?"

"Mom, I'm not really sure I'm in the mood right now."

We drove. She pointed at another house. "If you get that kind over there, you can put..."

I raised my hands off of my lap just high enough to emphasize my words. "Enough," I said, restrained and as polite as I could manage. "I cannot think about these beds any more. I just want to live in my house and not think about improvement projects for a whole year."

"Okay," she said, and we went to dinner and didn't speak of it again.

Several months later, I went home from my parents with

a usual bag of assorted things my mother left for me by the front door—coupons I might use, a clipped magazine article, a T-shirt from Kohls with an orange clearance tag. Included in this bag was a paper sack full of tulip bulbs. That bag sat atop my kitchen table for several weeks.

One day, on a whim, I drug them out to the front yard with a shovel and put them in the ground, nine on one side of my front steps and eight on the other. For three days I worried I hadn't planted them far enough into the ground, or maybe they were too deep, or maybe they weren't facing the right direction and they would grow sideways into the dirt. I called my mother.

"I'm sure they're fine. Just leave them alone." And so I did; I forgot about them. Then one of the first spring days came and I walked out my front door and there they were: dozens of teeny tiny green points just peeking out of the ground. Brilliant. I checked their progress every morning and when I got home and sometimes even before I went to bed. The tulips that emerged were pink and white and yellow. I'd never before felt responsible for something so beautiful.

\* \* \*

The tulips came and started to go, and I was eager to help "create" something else. I called my mother. She said I could tour her yard and take some cuttings. Everything I picked had either a novelty element (stripped or spotted leaves, twisted stems) or needed little care. She carried a shovel while I followed behind with an empty cardboard box lid. She stepped into a clump of hostas and drove the shovel head hard into its center. She brought her heel down hard and the force made a terrible ripping and crunching sound. I scrunched up my face in sympathy.

"It'll be okay," she reassured me. "I've taken plenty away from these plants and they always come back. Look at them." She actually stopped and gestured with her hand for effect.

Then she loaded up her favorite yard tools (the yard bucket, the child's snow shovel, a long-handled claw tool, and a pair of faded gardening gloves) into her trunk and we drove the eight blocks from her house to mine. I rode with a box top of plants in my lap that had already started to wilt.

At my house, Mom encouraged me to decide which plants

should live in which beds. I decided to focus only on the front yard. Once I determined to place alike plants symmetrically across from one another, my mother picked up the shovel and went about digging holes. I fetched her water to pour into the holes. I didn't know how to help, but felt restless standing there, so I busied myself preparing us Diet Cokes and a small dish of Cheddar Chex Mix for a break. Then I just stood there holding the box lid of plants. When she was ready, she called me over. I was instructed to hold up the limp, leafy tops while she placed each plant in the hole and redistributed the dirt around it. When the task was done and all of the plants were in the ground, we stood back. My mother was quite pleased. I was not so sure.

"They don't look so good," I said.

"We just ripped them out of the ground and placed them in a new soil—of course they don't look very good. You just need to give them extra care. You need to water them every day."

"Okay."

"I mean it. They're very fragile right now and they can't make it on their own like that one." She pointed at the sole hosta, the one that came with the house. I'd never once watered it, let alone cut back for winter; it was lush and beautiful.

\* \* \*

That summer, every night, still dressed in my work clothes, I unfurled the hose and pulled it around to the front of the house to water those front beds. I never felt completely certain I was doing it right. I could never get a feel for exactly how long was long enough to hold the water on the plants. I felt I needed an exact time, a way to measure my progress. I decided on a count of seven full-bodied seconds on each plant before moving on to the next. Sometimes I got antsy and did three rounds of three seconds. Sometimes, not often, I was calm enough to just stand there and not count, enjoying the moment of just watering.

One night, my ten year old neighbor came bounding across her lawn and mine and stood next to me.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Watering my plants," I answered. She seemed disappointed by my obvious answer. "Do you want to help?"

She shrugged. I handed her the nozzle. Her hands were too

small to squeeze the trigger apparatus. She used both hands, ultimately soaking one of her shoes. She handed it back.

“I think I’m going to see if Sydney’s home. Okay?”

“Sure.” I said. I finished watering the last plant as I watched her get on her bike and ride down the street, around the corner and out of sight.

\* \* \*

I’d like to say that my nightly watering ritual continued past that summer. But the hose has been unfurled only twice: once, hooked up to a sprinkler for a friend’s visiting children, and another time to wash my car. The plants we put in the ground that day continue to return with vigor, a reward I know I do not deserve. The beds are choked with weeds that my mother resists pulling, except when she is collecting my mail while I am on vacation and is too close to pass them by without some attention.

While I am still a negligent gardener, I can no longer ignore my yard. I am ever-aware of the dead rose blooms that await my attention as I exit and enter my house each day, the shriveled orbs often drooping over the stair railing of my back porch, sometimes trapped in the closing screen door. I get to them, eventually, but it still takes a tangled mess for me to derive any real pleasure from the activity. I will likely never inherit my mother’s green thumb, but I realize I have always embodied her intolerance for being idle. That impulse for consistent maintenance has simply manifested itself into other activities, like writing and playing music—thousands of jottings and corrections and the incorporation of influences accumulating into a life’s work.

I no longer accompany my mother on her plant-related errands, but riding in the car with her anywhere becomes a garden tour. She is inclined to point out beauty in the most unlikely of places—sprouting buds in the cracks along the sidewalks, in a large portable flower bed tucked between a corn dog stand and a Guess-Your-Weight game at the Ohio State Fair, and in the light blanketing of wild lilacs along a grassy highway divide.

I find I can take nature for granted as long as I have my mother.



## Birds

My late father-in-law cared too much about birds.  
He would nurse baby birds who'd fallen out of their nests  
Taking an eye dropper filled with mashed grain.

He'd feed the doves that clustered outside his door  
Every day, from the bottles of birdseed he kept.  
The birds still came every day weeks after his death

Waiting for the soft clucking sound he used to make.  
I was surprised how long they persisted when we stopped  
But doves are just smart enough to find other food.

When I was fifteen I once shot a killdeer for no reason  
Regretting it at once the way it dropped so suddenly  
Right on the spot my bullet had pierced its breast.

The killdeer is one of those birds who fakes injury  
To draw predators away from their nest. I saw many of  
Them trying to draw my tractor away from its inexorable path

As I harrowed our field where I had over-run  
Thousands of unhatched eggs, ignoring the mothers' act.  
It is too late for me to ask the killdeers to forgive

The hands that jerked the earth mover's triggers  
But I give them and all their cousins my children,  
The grand-daughters of a man who knew that nature

Is just smart enough to outlast the machinery.

## Wisdom Teeth

I am writhing in discomfort from hypodermic stabbings  
of Novocain shots - bam! bam! bam! bam!  
and utterly lost from these laughing gases.  
which there is nothing funny about.  
there is no laughter. there is no chuckle. a kid who made the stupid  
local anesthesiatic  
choice to hear his gums squish with the puncture of a needle  
and the splicing of a scalpel and feel the cold of a world he did not  
know;  
blood is being lost, iron is being extracted, the smooth and frighten-  
ing tools of a surgeon  
join the cleaving and yanking of bone.

desperate clutching of armrests and spastic convulsions of fear  
this is my pain, this was my choice: I want out.  
my heart is heard through the beeps of a monitor

drill bits accelerate  
bone-shrapnel bounces around my tonsils  
and fresh pink strips of gum stick to the  
Dentist's hand  
blood wells at my closed esophagus

Joe DiMaggio! third base! shortstop! bottom of the 9th!  
it doesn't work  
my heart baboombaboom much too fast

Om mani padme hum*	baboombaboom
Om mani padme hum	baboom baboom
Om mani padme hum	baboom ba boom
Om mani padme hum	ba boom ba boom
Om mani padme hum	ba boom ba boom

Hail Jewel of the Lotus Flower!\*

Bring me peace!

Temperance!

Hail Jewel of the Lotus Flower!

## The Mullah's Call

The mullah's call  
to prayer shatters  
my dreams at 4:30 AM.  
I surface in  
an Istanbul hotel  
room, arms flailing  
the air as if drowning  
in all  
that darkness.  
The voice rises and  
falls, savoring  
the minor key  
and Arabic  
words I can't  
understand. They clash  
with horns from yellow  
cabs crowding narrow  
streets, cabbies shouting  
at each other and  
pedestrians, voices part  
of Istanbul's fabric,  
a magic carpet  
we ride along  
the Bosphorus,  
that ancient route  
leading out to sea.  
Each time I hear  
the call I feel  
deep melancholy,  
all those Arabian  
nights I read as  
a child, magic  
carpets drifting



in and out of view.

The real thing hangs  
in every shop

we pass, intricate  
patterns and gardens  
of praise interwoven.

Burka clad women

stare into jewelry  
and dress shop windows,

fingering the goods  
with their eyes. The blue  
eye of Allah watches  
from cheap trinkets  
sold in souvenir shops.

## Facets and Facades

### CHARACTERS

FRANCIS TOMS. Male, late 20's. Doesn't know what he wants.

OWEN FARNER. Male, early 30's, Francis's roommate. Knows what he wants.

NATE GREENLEY. Male, mid 50's, public defender and has been at it for a long time.

TRACY DAWES. Female, late 30's, prosecutor, ambitious and iron faced.

CORY. Female, early 30's, Francis's girlfriend. Feisty and short tempered.

### SCENE ONE

*(Lights up. Present time. Interrogation room in a police station. The space is very bare except for one table and two chairs and a back mirror. FRANCIS TOMS sits in the chair staring blankly ahead. In from the lone door walks Mr. NATE GREENLEY. He is dressed in a suit that is none too imposing. He carries a briefcase and papers.)*

FRANCIS. *(Without looking.)* Finally.

GREENLEY. Shall we begin?  
*(GREENLEY sits.)*

FRANCIS. What am I looking at?

GREENLEY. Along the lines of 30 to 40.  
*(Pause.)*

FRANCIS. *(To himself.)* Shit.  
*(Pause.)*

How bad is it? How screwed am I?

GREENLEY. *(Sighs.)* I'm going to be frank with you, Mr. Toms;

you don't have much of a case.

FRANCIS. How's that?

GREENLEY. Factually speaking. Evidence is...fairly conclusive.

FRANCIS. So? You're a lawyer. Be creative.

*(GREENLEY stands and begins to pace the room impatiently.)*

GREENLEY. Look. I can gain sympathy but we're going to need more than that in order to get anywhere.

FRANCIS. I told you I can give you a name—

GREENLEY. Unless you can pinpoint his whereabouts I'm afraid that will be insufficient.

*(Pause.)*

Do you have any information other than his name?

*(FRANCIS shrugs.)*

Of course. Well, that won't hold up.

*(Beat.)*

FRANCIS. I'm willing to be on the stand.

GREENLEY. Putting you on the stand will do nothing but give the prosecution a chance to discredit you.

FRANCIS. At least I'm coming up with ideas.

*(GREENLEY slams his hands onto the table.)*

GREENLEY. I'm trying to think of a logical way of going about this. We need to *have* a case before we can defend a case.

FRANCIS. Really? I didn't know...

*(Sigh. GREENLEY rubs his eyes.)*

GREENLEY. Look. If you want to have even an outside chance of getting anywhere, you'll need more than that cock-and-bull story to back it up.

*(Pause.)*

I have other clients to attend to. Do you want my help or not?

*(Pause.)*

FRANCIS. No.

GREENLEY. Have it your way.

*(GREENLEY gathers his stuff, walks towards the door, and starts to walk out.)*

FRANCIS. Wait...

*(GREENLEY stops and waits for FRANCIS to speak. Pause as FRANCIS collects his words.)*

My dad was a lawyer. A great lawyer. Terrible father.

*(Pause.)*

I hate lawyers.

GREENLEY. Is that your way of asking me to stay?

FRANCIS. Something like that.

*(GREENLEY smiles, turns around, and walks back to his seat.)*

GREENLEY. You're smarter than you look.

*(GREENLEY sits.)*

FRANCIS. Well what do we have then?

*(GREENLEY shifts through the case folder.)*

GREENLEY. Your alibi wasn't conclusive or incriminating so that's a wash.

*(Pause.)*

Your associate did have a name, I suppose. We could at least run it through to see if anything comes up.

*(Pause.)*

They have witnesses who claim to recognize you. We need someone to testify for you. If there is any such person, who can?

*(Pause.)*

Since you say the files contained both of your so called “marks,” we’ll need to find out the marks he hit and cross them with the witnesses of the prosecution.

*(Pause.)*

Do you have a photo of this other guy?

FRANCIS. Maybe I do.

GREENLEY. We’re gonna need one. And this attitude of yours won’t help.

*(Pause.)*

FRANCIS. You think I’m guilty, don’t you?

GREENLEY. I’ve been a public defender for 20 years. I don’t do this because I think you’re innocent. I don’t care. I don’t do this because I want to believe the best in people. I do this because if I don’t, it fails. The system fails.

*(Beat.)*

From the way you speak, I can speculate which you are. And whether you committed these crimes or not...well...I’m here to do my job. To the best of my ability. And I need something resembling facts here. All the cash and candor in the world isn’t gonna save your ass if you’ve got nothing to back it up. So stop your asinine remarks and short responses and give me what I need from you.

*(GREENLEY stares at him. FRANCIS looks shocked for a minute. Then slowly his face shifts into a smile and he starts a slow, mocking clap.)*

FRANCIS. Bravo. See now that’s what I need. I knew you’d come through.

GREENLEY. This. Is not a game.

FRANCIS. It nearly is. Exploiting the jury.

GREENLEY. Is that what you want me to do?

*(Pause.)*

It's more than just that. This is presenting cold, hard facts. Which the prosecution will have. We might be able to work out a deal, but they'll want something in return.

*(Pause.)*

Answer me this. Honestly...Does he even exist? Your thief?

FRANCIS. I thought you didn't care about all that.

GREENLEY. Consider this your one exception.

FRANCIS. Yes.

*(Lights out.)*

## SCENE TWO

*(Lights up. Flashback. Five months ago. We are in an apartment. It is nicely furnished and all of the furniture looks either brand new or almost brand new. Even though it has a nice look, items are still everywhere. OWEN FARNER is rapidly packing a suitcase, stuffing money and clothes and whatever he can into it. He is clean cut and wears worn business casual attire, yet does not look entirely comfortable in it. FRANCIS enters, he is dressed very nicely and struts. He looks at OWEN. He was not supposed to see this.)*

FRANCIS. Where you off to?

*(Silence from OWEN. He continues packing.)*

I see. So it's come —

OWEN. I'm leaving.

FRANCIS. I can see that much.

OWEN. I'm done.

FRANCIS. Coward.

*(Pause.)*

I thought we were partners?

OWEN. I can admit when I make a bad call.

FRANCIS. I seem to remember this being *your* fucking idea.

OWEN. Your point?

FRANCIS. You're bailing on me. Leaving me out in the cold.

OWEN. You're reckless.

FRANCIS. And you're timid.

OWEN. You didn't even—

FRANCIS. I told you it wasn't abo—

OWEN. Bullshit. It's always about the money.

FRANCIS. Wrong. It's about a life free of—you know what? Just forget it. You don't actually care.

OWEN. Not anymore. You're one facet of my life I'm glad to be rid of.

FRANCIS. Please, tell me how you really feel.

*(Beat.)*

I know why you're really leaving.

OWEN. That a fact?

FRANCIS. Yes. You don't like playing second-fiddle.

OWEN. That's absurd.

FRANCIS. Is it?

OWEN. Yeah. It is. You never listened to me about how to go about this. I'm out because you can't control yourself.

FRANCIS. I did listen. I just ignored you.

OWEN. Well, aren't you a prick.

FRANCIS. You're the—

OWEN. This is over.

FRANCIS. Some partner you are. I thought you wanted the same.

OWEN. I'm not denying that. I'm just still humble. Arrogance makes you lazy.

FRANCIS. Humbleness got you very far?

OWEN. It will.

FRANCIS. Don't bet on it.

OWEN. You know what the problem with what we do is? This life you love so much. As much as you are freed by it. You're also trapped. Trapped forever in someone else's...ghost. Because truthfully, you're no more real than an apparition. Just a whisper in the air, an outline of your former self. You can't feel, you can't touch, you can't taste...not for very long anyways. When it comes down to it, all you are, all I am, is a phantom. And nothing will ever be permanent for us except these lies that we've built to sustain ourselves from drifting away into nothing.

*(There's a knock at the door. FRANCIS stares at OWEN for a moment, then crosses to the door and opens it. OWEN continues packing. In walks CORY, she is medium in height and beautiful. CORY and FRANCIS briefly kiss. Then she sees OWEN packing.)*

CORY. Vacation?

FRANCIS. Owen was just leaving.

CORY. Where?

OWEN. Haven't decided yet.



FRANCIS. The important thing is he's not returning.  
(*Awkward pause.*)

CORY. Am I interrupting?

OWEN. No. (*At the same time.*)

FRANCIS. No. (*At the same time.*)  
(*Awkward pause.*)

OWEN. Well. I'm off.

CORY. You want any help carrying stuff out?

FRANCIS. No. He doesn't.

CORY. I'm just asking him if he wants help.

FRANCIS. He doesn't. Want help. He's made it quite clear what he wants.

CORY. I'm just—

OWEN. Cory, it's fine. Don't worry 'bout it. See you.  
(*OWEN takes his stuff and exits. CORY rounds on FRANCIS.*)

CORY. Okay. What the hell was that about?

FRANCIS. Nothing. Don't worry about it.

CORY. That sure looked like something to worry about.

FRANCIS. Well it's not, so just forget about it.

CORY. No. I want an explanation. All I offered was a little help carrying his things. God forbid I should've offered him a bottle of water for the road.

FRANCIS. Look. We had some disagreements and decided this is for the best. That's it. End of story.

CORY. Disagreements about what?

FRANCIS. (*Sighs.*) I don't know. Something 'bout how I'm different and blah. Blah. Blah. He's gone now. And. It's for the better.

(*Long silence.*)

CORY. He's right, you know.

FRANCIS. So now you're gonna side with him? Is that right?

CORY. I'm just saying what's true, Francis. That's all. I'm not siding with anyone. Jesus.

FRANCIS. Just forget it. I don't want to talk about it.

CORY. But you have changed.

FRANCIS. I just said I don't—fuck, you know what? I'm not having this conversation twice in one evening. I'm out.

(*FRANCIS turns away from CORY and walks to the other end of the room.*)

CORY. Fine. You don't want to listen, I'm done talking. Call me when you're tired of being an ass.

(*CORY angrily grabs her purse and storms out. FRANCIS watches her leave and then goes and sits down. He sighs. Lights out.*)

### SCENE THREE

(*The same interrogation room as before. Present time. This time FRANCIS and GREENLEY sit on one side of the table with Ms. TRACY DAWES on the other side. She is not to be taken lightly. Dressed in a power suit. Very dark in color.*)

DAWES. Guilty plead. Half sentence.

FRANCIS. Half sentence?

GREENLEY. Twenty years then?

DAWES. Yes.

GREENLEY. That sounds good t—

FRANCIS. No deal.

*(GREENLEY turns aside to FRANCIS.)*

GREENLEY. No? Francis, this is the best one you're going to get.

FRANCIS. No. Deal.

DAWES. Well?

*(GREENLEY sighs and turns back to DAWES.)*

GREENLEY. No deal.

*(Pause.)*

Ten years? With rehab and charges for the damages incurred.

DAWES. Rehab?

*(DAWES laughs.)*

You're client is a thief, not a drug addict. Nice try counsel.

GREENLEY. Offer stands.

DAWES. I don't think so. Your client is aware that as of this morning his accounts were frozen due to irregular activity?

FRANCIS. No. I wasn't.

GREENLEY. You have no right to access of my client's financial status.

FRANCIS. Which accounts?

DAWES. Mr. Greenley, considering the type of case this is, if there is one thing in your client's life I do have access to it's his financial responsibilities. Guilty plead. Twenty years.

FRANCIS. Which accounts?

GREENLEY. That isn't the only offer on the table.

DAWES. Your client doesn't have the money to repay. No. Deal.

FRANCIS. WHICH ACCOUNTS!

*(DAWES finally recognizes FRANCIS has been speaking.)*

DAWES. All of them.

FRANCIS. How much?

DAWES. I'm merely giving you facts. I'm sure Mr. Greenley here is more than capable of checking up on your financial statements, since he seems to be very abject to my viewing them, let alone talking about them in detail.

GREENLEY. This is outrageous. Why was I not informed of this beforehand?

DAWES. I assumed you already knew.

FRANCIS. What about the inheritance account?

DAWES. What about it?

GREENLEY. Stop jerking us around, Counsel. Has that account been touched or not?

DAWES. ...

GREENLEY. Counsel, stop stalling. Answer—

DAWES. Yes. That one has been emptied and closed.  
*(FRANCIS hangs his head.)*

FRANCIS. This just keeps getting better and better.

DAWES. *(To GREENLEY)* Apparently I'm more in tune to your client's needs than you are.  
*(GREENLEY stands up.)*

GREENLEY. How dare you insinuate—

DAWES. Sit down, Mr. Greenley. You are in no position to negotiate here.

*(GREENLEY stands for a moment, glaring. He motions for DAWES to go to the other side of the room with him. Pause. DAWES follows suite.)*

GREENLEY. Francis, excuse us a moment.

*(GREENLEY and DAWES walk over to the far side of the room before FRANCIS can answer.)*

FRANCIS. Uh...sure...go right ahead.

GREENLEY. Do we have a problem, Tracy?

DAWES. Why would there be a problem? The only problem is your negotiating terms. You don't have anything.

GREENLEY. Stop it. This assault won't work on me this time. This is disrespectful and aggravating.

*(Pause.)*

I thought we weren't supposed to take cases personally?

DAWES. I'm not taking this personally. Are you?

GREENLEY. I didn't mean this case.

DAWES. Well—

FRANCIS. Anytime now.

*(Pause.)*

DAWES. I think your client wishes to get back to his incarceration.

*(DAWES walks back to her seat. GREENLEY, after a moment, does the same and sits.)*

GREENLEY. I don't appreciate your tone.

DAWES. Well, isn't that too bad for you.

GREENLEY. This is still a negotiation. He's not in prison yet.

FRANCIS. Yet? I think I'll handle my own affairs from here.

DAWES. Well, until you have some leverage to offer me, I'm afraid you have no power in this room at all. I set the rules here. And I don't back down easily.

FRANCIS. That so? You don't make the rules. You just enforce them and bend them when you can. You're no better than me.

*(Pause.)*

You remind me of my ex when she's pissed off.

DAWES. Spare me, Mr. Toms.

GREENLEY. Francis, stop. Let me do the talking—

FRANCIS. And you know what else?

DAWES. No. I don't. And I don't care.

*(Beat.)*

Your games won't work in here Mr. Toms. You may be able to swindle the average American citizen but not me. So don't try it. I'm not as easily misled as your representation is.

*(DAWES glares at GREENLEY. He stands up.)*

GREENLEY. I believe we're done here.

*(GREENLEY stands and motions for FRANCIS to get up as well.)*

FRANCIS. We are?

*(GREENLEY pulls FRANCIS away from the table and DAWES.)*

GREENLEY. Yes we are. I've seen this before. She's just going to push and push until we give in. If she realizes we won't be intimidated she might be more...forthcoming.

FRANCIS. And if she isn't?

GREENLEY. Then we go to court.

FRANCIS. I thought I didn't have much of a case.

GREENLEY. You don't. But we might be able to get your stolen

accounts to work in our favor. It gives us leeway. Very little. But some.

*(Pause as FRANCIS contemplates the decision.)*

FRANCIS. Fine.

*(GREENLEY turns back towards DAWES.)*

GREENLEY. I'll confer with my client.

DAWES. My deal will not get better, counsel.

*(Lights out.)*

#### SCENE FOUR

*(Lights up. Flashback. Eight and a half months ago. We are in the same apartment. However, instead of lavish furnishing and brand new furniture, we have a mixture of old and new furniture. Items still cover the place. OWEN is sitting in the chair on the phone.)*

OWEN. So how close are you?...Few more months?...Of course... No, he's out right now...Yeah.....

*(Pause.)*

Hey Joan...I love you...See you soon...Bye.

*(FRANCIS enters as OWEN hangs up the phone.)*

FRANCIS. We're in business.

OWEN. We've been in business.

FRANCIS. Well yeah...but—

OWEN. But what?

FRANCIS. Just pulled off a major one.

OWEN. How major?

FRANCIS. Like twenty thousand major.

OWEN. Twenty thousand? That's a hefty amount.

FRANCIS. (*Quickly.*) Yeah, I know. But still. It was too easy. Practically handed me everything on a silver platter gift wrapped with a card saying thank you. I couldn't resist.

OWEN. You should have resisted.

FRANCIS. Don't worry. I'm just excited. That's all.

OWEN. Still. Keep them small from now on, okay?

FRANCIS. Yeah. Yeah. Sure.

OWEN. Good. Beer?

FRANCIS. 'Course.

*(OWEN goes into the kitchen and returns with two beers. Hands one to FRANCIS. He goes to the couch and sits. OWEN returns to his seat. They drink. Then silence. Beat.)*

I just don't understand. Why?

OWEN. (*Sigh.*) I've told you. Small is harder to detect. That way we can accumulate bits at a time without being noticeable.

FRANCIS. But I am careful.

OWEN. Maybe you are. But the less attention we attract, the better. Besides, we're not doing half bad.

FRANCIS. But look how good we'll have it if we go for more.

OWEN. Francis, stop. This is all about patience.

FRANCIS. Sorry.

*(Pause.)*

It's just...I don't know. Exhilarating. There's no limits.

*(Pause.)*

The money isn't bad either.

*(OWEN smiles, finishes his beer and then stands up as if to get an-*



*other one. There is a knock at the door. OWEN goes over and opens it. CORY walks in.)*

OWEN. Well surprise, surprise. Look who's here.

CORY. Hi boys.

FRANCIS. Hey.

OWEN. What brings you to our side of the park?

CORY. Am I not allowed to see my boyfriend?

OWEN. Is that what he is now?

FRANCIS. Shut up. Don't listen to him. He's just jealous.

OWEN. Yeah. Right. Me. Jealous of you.

FRANCIS. It's okay to admit. We won't tell no one.

OWEN. *(To CORY.)* Seriously, you listen to this crap all night?

CORY. After a while I just focus on the TV.

*(They smile and laugh.)*

FRANCIS. I am still in the room.

OWEN. That's the point.

*(OWEN looks at FRANCIS and shakes his head.)*

You're a little slow aren't you?

FRANCIS. You're an ass.

CORY. Hey, play nice.

FRANCIS. He started it.

OWEN. Way to be mature about it.

CORY. Okay, I think you two have had enough for one night. I

honestly don't know how you guys do it. Work and live together. I'd hate that.

OWEN. There's benefits.

FRANCIS. Yeah...I think.

CORY. You think? Nice confidence. I have no idea why I find you so endearing sometimes.

FRANCIS. It's my charm.

OWEN. Right...

*(CORY and FRANCIS smile at each other.)*

Well. I'm off.

FRANCIS. Where you going?

OWEN. Oh just around. A few errands to take care of.

CORY. Stay. Come on. We don't bite.

OWEN. Sure you don't.

*(OWEN smirks.)*

Don't worry 'bout me. I'll be back before you know it. Have some private time with...him.

*(OWEN exits. CORY moves to sit next to FRANCIS. They kiss.)*

CORY. Dinner?

FRANCIS. *(Chuckles.)* Sure. I guess I can spare a little on you.

CORY. You better.

*(They kiss.)*

Oh. By the way. The lawyer came to visit me at the bank. He said the transfer would be fine.

FRANCIS. That's good news. You've been a big help with all of

this transferring funds and such. Thanks.

CORY. I am in banking.

FRANCIS. Yeah, I know. It's just confusing and having to deal with the lawyer, and the will papers, and just—

*(Pause.)*

Lawyers make me nervous. Always putting words in your mouth. Forcing you into a corner. It's frustrating as hell.

*(Lights out.)*

## SCENE FIVE

*(Lights up. Present time. Courtroom. DAWES and GREENLEY stand downstage facing the audience as if they were the jury. FRANCIS sits behind but equidistant from each of them. They are all in individual spotlights. )*

DAWES. Identity. What is it? What makes up our identity?

GREENLEY. Manipulation. Control. Money.

DAWES. Is it our name? Or characteristics, such as nice or beautiful or honest? How about the model of car we drive, or the brand of clothing we wear? Type of food? Demographic?...Gender? Race?...Heritage?...

GREENLEY. These were no doubt involved in this case.

DAWES. The definition of identity is as follows: "the condition or fact of being a certain person or thing and recognizable as such."

GREENLEY. But these are not the only definitive aspects of it.

DAWES. "Certain person." That's what each of us is, right? We are individuals. Unique. Exclusive. One of a kind.

GREENLEY. Those are, however, powerful ideas to fight against.

DAWES. But what happens when that exclusivity is taken from

us?

GREENLEY. Remember that.

DAWES. The defense will try to mislead you with stories of conspiracy theories and framed attempts. They will have sympathy, and nothing more. I will have facts and proof of his guilt.

*(DAWES looks at GREENLEY in disgust.)*

GREENLEY. I will not try to shift the story as Counsel Dawes believes I shall.

*(GREENLEY looks at DAWES in counterpoint. After a moment they both face forward again to address the audience.)*

I will present you with a story. A testament of one man that is just as much a victim as the many others who were so dutifully wronged.

DAWES. This man made a mistake and lead the police to a gold mine of secrets, money, and fraud.

*(Beat.)*

I have financial records and bank accounts. And witnesses. I have a fireman tricked into believing he was getting a vacation for cheaper and instead lost hundreds of dollars.

GREENLEY. There is proof that my client is innocent. Just a few weeks ago he was a victim of identity theft himself. His accounts frozen. An entire account. Gone.

DAWES. I have a business owner who believed she was donating money to a charity to help children. Hundreds. Gone.

GREENLEY. I will show you my client's grandfather's will leaving him an enormous sum of money. Proof that my client didn't need the money.

DAWES. A doctor believed he was investing in an up-and-coming company. He fell victim to a Pyramid scheme. Thousands. Gone.

GREENLEY. My client was victimized. Just as the others were. He

will tell you in his own words, how he is no different from anyone else involved in this unfortunate event.

DAWES. Phishing, dumpster diving, skimming...who knows what real lengths this man went to in order to obtain money.

GREENLEY. It is a distressing idea that so many were so easily duped.

DAWES. This is about consequences.

GREENLEY. But it's about responsibility...

DAWES. His consequences...

GREENLEY. Our responsibility...

DAWES. For his actions and his crimes.

GREENLEY. To educate others on how to prevent this.

DAWES. There is undeniable proof that this man sitting in front of you is guilty.

*(DAWES points to FRANCIS.)*

GREENLEY. We must look at this as an opportunity to further prevent these thefts through education.

*(GREENLEY motions his hand at FRANCIS. Pause.)*

DAWES. He must be held accountable—

GREENLEY. He is an average citizen—

DAWES. He has outlasted punishment far too long—

GREENLEY. I ask you to not judge a book by its cover—

DAWES. People like him are cowards, nothing more—

GREENLEY. Listen to his story—

DAWES. Listen to the facts—

GREENLEY. To him—

DAWES. To me.

*(DAWES and GREENLEY now stand staring fiercely at one another instead of the audience. FRANCIS is still staring blankly ahead at the audience. Lights.)*

## SCENE SIX

*(Lights up. 10 months ago. We are in a shady club. It is fairly popular however. OWEN and FRANCIS sit at a booth drinking beers and talking. People pass by occasionally.)*

OWEN. 'Nother round?

FRANCIS. Nah. Give me five.

OWEN. Pussy.

FRANCIS. Hey...I didn't say I was done. Just gimme five.

OWEN. Fine. You buy though.

FRANCIS. Sure.

*(Pause.)*

So you're really serious about this?

OWEN. Yeah. Come on, we'd be partners.

FRANCIS. Seems risky.

OWEN. Of course it's risky. But this ain't new territory. Everything has its risk. You just gotta manage it. Like a business.

FRANCIS. How?

OWEN. Go small. Nothing large. Stay under the radar.

FRANCIS. And how exactly do we go about this?

OWEN. There's plenty of ways. Sweepstakes claims are the easiest...Or the Pyramid scheme route. Though it involves investing...False charities, free loans, dumpster diving...the possibilities are endless.

FRANCIS. You've done this before.

OWEN. *(Pause.)*

Yes. I have.

FRANCIS. How long?

OWEN. Long enough.

FRANCIS. I still don't know though. I should think about it.

OWEN. Come on, Francis. You know it's what you want.

FRANCIS. You have no idea what I want.

OWEN. Yes I do. Come on.

*(Beat.)*

You have that impulse. The urge to do something with your life, you just don't know what yet. You're life is boring Francis, lets face it. And you know it. And what's more...you hate it. Your job is repetitive, your family, aside from your grandparents, don't talk to you for one reason or the other, and I'm the closest friend you got. And, frankly speaking, that ain't saying much. Just accept what you feel and do something about it.

FRANCIS. I'm still going to think.

OWEN. *(Sigh.)* Fine. Think. And while you're thinking about it...think me up another beer as well. It's been five.

FRANCIS. Yeah I'll be back.

*(FRANCIS gets up out of his seat. At the same time CORY enters from the side holding a martini glass, and as FRANCIS turns they collide, spilling CORY's drink onto her. FRANCIS is horrified.)*

CORY. Shit.

FRANCIS. I'm...so...sorry. I didn't see you there. I—

CORY. No. I should have been more careful.

FRANCIS. I know...I mean...no, it was my fault.

*(Pause.)*

Um...Francis.

*(FRANCIS holds out his hand.)*

CORY. Cory.

*(Awkward pause.)*

OWEN. Don't just stand their Francis, replace the nice lady's drink why don'tcha?

FRANCIS. What? Oh. Right. Um...Another martini?

CORY. No. Just a beer. I'll stick with enclosed drinks for a bit.

FRANCIS. *(chuckles.)* Sure. Be right back.

*(FRANCIS exits.)*

OWEN. Sit.

*(OWEN motions for CORY to sit.)*

Cory?

CORY. You know we're not supposed to use our actual names.

OWEN. I know. Just thought you'd be more...creative. You went from Joan to Cory. Not much of a dramatic leap if you ask me.

CORY. *(Rolls eyes.)* It's simple. Which is what we're supposed to be right? Simple, everyday people.

OWEN. *(Smiles.)* Right.

*(Pause.)*



CORY. That's the mark then?

OWEN. Yup.

CORY. Seems nice.

OWEN. And naive. Which is even better.

CORY. Shouldn't be too hard then.

OWEN. Just remember. Everything from here on out needs to look, feel, and taste real. If he catches our scent we're done.

CORY. Yeah I know. We have done this before you know.

OWEN. Just reminding you. If there is a problem, we bail. Hopefully with something in hand by then.

CORY. And the account? Has he told you about it?

OWEN. Only the amount.

CORY. How much?

OWEN. Three hundred.

CORY. Thousand?

OWEN. Yup.

CORY. That's a lot.

*(Pause.)*

Biggest one we've hit.

*(Pause.)*

Do you think he'd suspect us?

OWEN. No.

CORY. Good to know.

*(CORY tries to use a napkin to wipe the martini off of herself.)*

Thank god I didn't wear anything nice tonight.

OWEN. You still look great though.

*(OWEN eyes her flirtatiously.)*

CORY. Always the sweet talker.

*(CORY shifts closer to OWEN and their eyes meet.)*

OWEN. I try.

*(CORY goes up to kiss. They kiss briefly before OWEN pulls back.)*

Not here.

CORY. Right. Sorry.

*(CORY moves back to her original spot.)*

OWEN. We'll have our time soon enough.

*(OWEN smiles at her. FRANCIS returns holding 3 beers and hands them out.)*

FRANCIS. Here we go. Did you guys get a chance to...uh...meet?

OWEN. Yes we did. Charming girl.

*(CORY smiles. They all take a sip of beer.)*

FRANCIS. Well...would you like to...uh...dance...or something?

CORY. Sure. That'd be great.

*(FRANCIS starts to lead CORY off to the dance floor and then turns around.)*

FRANCIS. Watch our drinks—

OWEN. Will you go already...

*(OWEN points for him to go to the dance floor.)*

FRANCIS. Right. See ya.

CORY. Nice to meet you.

OWEN. You too.

*(They exit. OWEN sips his beer looking very pleased with himself.)*



christinah barnett |  
digital photography

# Molar



| kit coyle  
ceramics  
8" by 4.75" by 4.75"

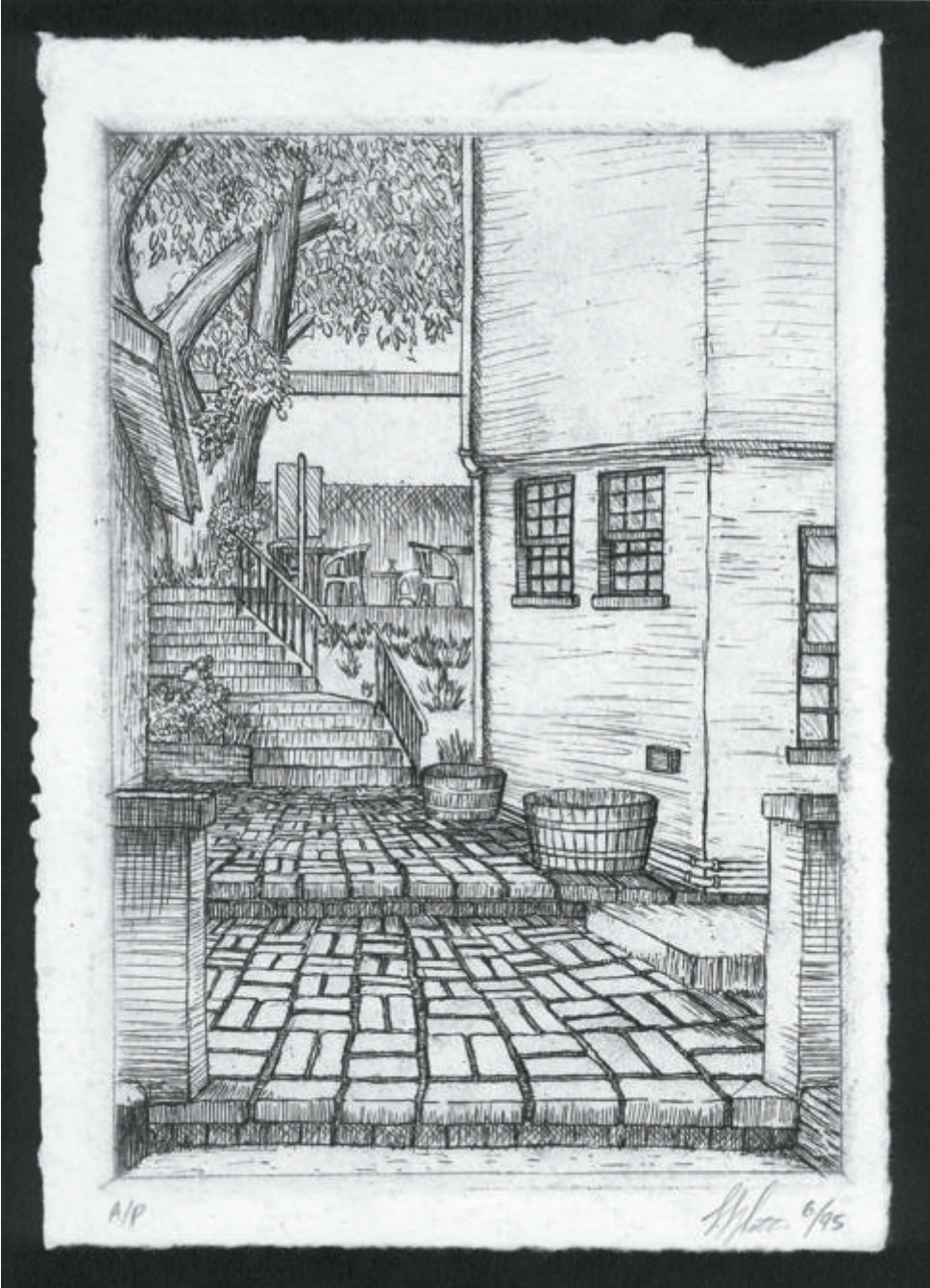
Don't POP!



jennifer gochoco |  
digital photography



Martha's Alley



| sean m. watts  
zinc etching  
8" by 5.5"



veronica eng |  
oil on canvas  
61" x 27"

The Life Inc.



| evelyn salguero  
watercolor on paper  
6" by 12"

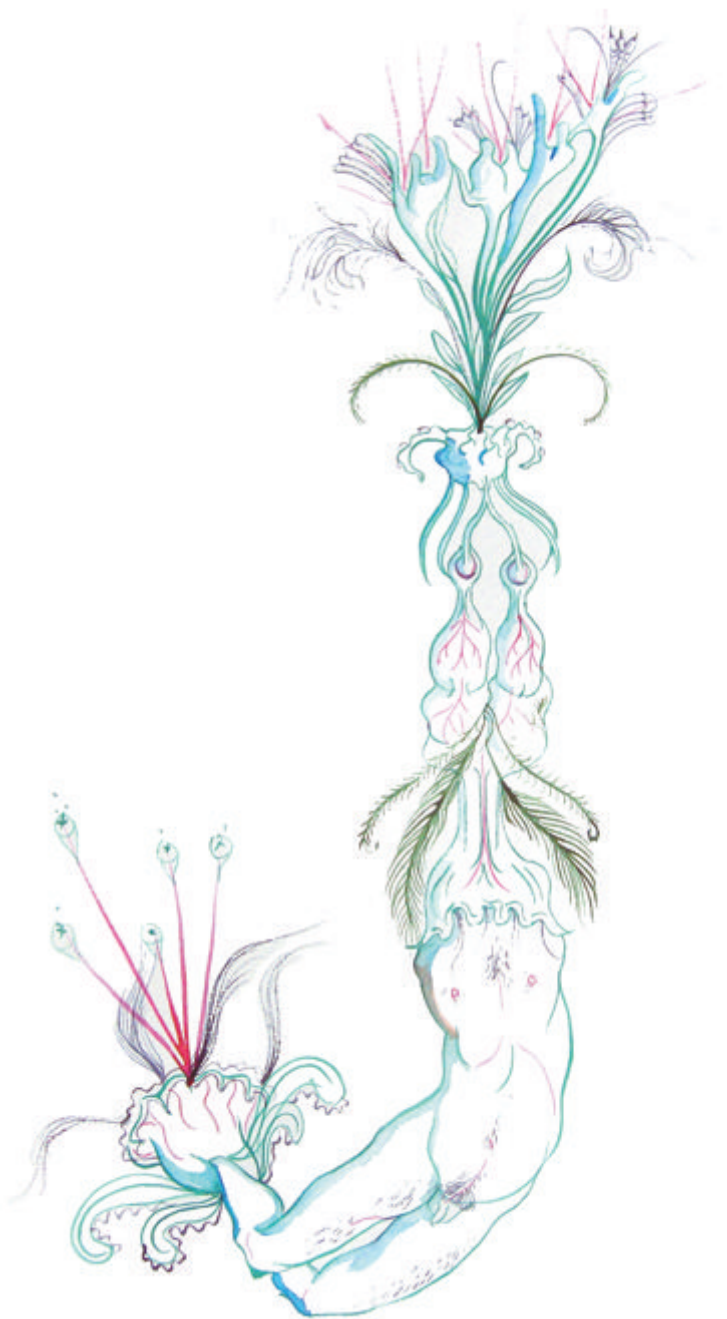


# Wax Melt



kathleen bradley |  
digital photography

# Dandy Lion



| megan diddie  
acrylic, watercolor, paper  
22" by 12"

Proofs of the Night



c. dawn davis |  
mixed media on panel  
27" by 24"

## Self Portrait in Ink



| cecilia osorio  
ink on paper  
11" by 14"



Cairo, Egypt



lauren beaudoin |  
acrylic on canvas  
30" by 40"

Inole



| mike larremore  
digital photography

# Shimmering Ascent



jennifer gochoco |  
digital photography

# Suffocation



| rena satre meloy  
digital media  
48" by 39"





Untitled #3489



philip kruse |  
acrylic, pen, watercolor, paper  
12" by 24"

# The Middle Sister



| morgan alexandra ritter  
india, walnut inks, watercolor, gouache, paper  
3.5" by 3.5"

## Ode to Federico Garcia Lorca

with your ink-stained hands  
you rubbed your eyes.

I creased your notes (missives),  
put them in a pocket.

with eloquence  
you introduced me to life-in-death.

from the nighttime patio  
I watch you

stride down sidewalks,  
assorted corridors,  
eyes rising from the ground  
to their profiles  
casual look countenance,  
over telling knowing,  
slicking your hair back,  
pulling the sun's reflections through  
your fingers

shoes never scuffing  
movements sincere,  
striding through

worn, deadened eyes, exhausted,  
standing solitary:  
covert-feathers to you, dear friend.  
with full eyes in their orbit,  
they permeate illusions,  
but never fail to enchant with  
notions of crumbling buildings

and vespertine pillars that rake the sky

never have I failed to see  
your collar cutting  
through transparent cones  
under street lamps,  
slitting necks,  
dividing tumescence,  
trapping impressions  
as you turn light.  
a cascade of glass

never have I failed  
to witness you place idols  
on the ground  
and walk away,  
running your hand  
along Dionysian walls.

pulling pastels down  
the fronts of hips;  
you dressed me so well;  
every seam embodied an offense

to those born a small interval  
before the end of fame

## Q-without-U Words: *Confessions of a Scrabble Addict*

It's all about the letters. When I was little, I would lie in bed before going to sleep and focus on the white sign in my room with the red capital letters that spelled out: STOP—DO NOT ENTER. It resembled a street sign, but was on flimsy plastic meant for hanging indoors. It was a warning to my brothers to stay out of my room. I don't remember what my brothers did to earn this warning—maybe they had wrestled me to the point of gasping for air—but I do remember the words the letters on the sign could be anagrammed into: pots, opts, tops, dent, rent, tenet, tent, pretend, onto, stone, stoned, donor, door, dote, note, tree. Even Trent, the name of a kid in my neighborhood who swung a broom over my head when bats were flying at night. "They'll swoop at the highest object," he said, "Kinda' like lightning." As soon as he said the word, I was rearranging the letters: tiling, hint, gig.

Every night, I did the same thing. I rearranged those letters over and over again until it was a struggle to create more words out of the fourteen letters available. But each time I came up with a new one, it seemed more words were right around the corner. I just had to learn more words. I went to sleep with the letters drifting behind my eyes, floating around, pushing in at one another, looking for classic combinations I hadn't thought of before, SP- words, STR- words (strep, spree, street).

I won spelling bees at school, not because I cared all that much about being literary, but because I loved the letters. My sister quizzed me from her spelling books, which were three grades above mine. In seventh grade, I went out on the word cadre, a word I will never forget, meaning a nucleus of trained personnel, which I spelled with a Y on the end instead of an E. My principal waited offstage to tell me in his somber, Catholic principal way, both the definition and the correct spelling. I nodded as if to say, "Well, yeah. I totally knew that."

All through elementary school, I made up games with letters, squishing them together on the page to create a scrunched

language of L's piled on P's piled on U's. I'd make my sister try to unscramble the words or we would have contests to see who could uncover the newspaper Jumbles sooner. She was good, but I found the answers more quickly every time. If the letters refused straightening out into a word, I'd cross my eyes slightly and wait for them to rearrange themselves. They would dance around on the page and then find an order that meant something: APSRTTU became UPSTART.

The games continued and then my mom introduced me to Scrabble. I began to think in terms of those tiles, automatically linking their point values to the letters themselves. J equals eight. N, S, U, and T all equal one. Sentences became point accumulations, as in, "Mom, when are we going to play?" That equaled 41 points.

"In just a minute!" 24 points.

My mom was a classic enabler, spending hours at the Scrabble board with me when I was only seven. In retrospect, I marvel at the patience this required of her. As an adult now, I sit with nieces and nephews around the age of seven or eight and I just about go crazy waiting for them to lay down words like bat or dog. They snap down their proud words in places on the board where there is no real advantage, which is to say, where there are no bonus squares. Their little faces light up when the tiles are all in place and I have to find the best part of myself to say, "Good job, buddy," when what I want to say is, "Dog? You're going to play dog there?"

If I show my impatience with them, my mom just says one word: saloon. A word I am ashamed of. A word that speaks to my dogmatic hounding of certain words, a weakness in any Scrabble player. The board and the tiles really dictate the plays. Pursuing certain words can be a blind spot when many other perfectly good words, some of them possibly bingos, are waiting to be played. But I am getting ahead of myself and to be honest, I'm not ready to talk about saloon yet. I'll leave it deep in the bag until I'm ready to explain it.

I have one niece who I leave alone because she doesn't drive me crazy. She reminds me of myself, endlessly shuffling the tiles on her rack, rearranging, putting the—ED at the end and shifting the remaining five letters around and around to find a verb. At seven, she is smarter than she has any right to be. I stand back and admire her mind at work. I imagine my mother doing the same thing

with me at that age. Like her aunt before her, Abby is destined for Scrabble domination (domain, nomad, donation, one letter short of badminton).

I started playing young and over the years, more and more people have bowed out of playing with me. "No way," my best friend tells me, an educated woman who teaches high school Chemistry. "There's no way I'm playing with you. That's no fun for me." I want to tell her that listening to the new and exciting labs she's come up with for her lesson plans is not exactly what I call a rocking good time, but I let it go. I get what she means. There are those people who play Scrabble casually and then there are people for whom Scrabble is a way of life. I have been known to spend an inordinate amount of time with the Official Scrabble Player's Dictionary, what some of us call the Bible, even while away from the Scrabble board. I consider myself personally grateful for the two-letter words which make my killer game, well, killer. And I look for any opportunity to pick up a game, no matter the competitor, no matter the time. You want me to meet you at Perkins at two a.m. with my Scrabble board? I'll be there.

When asked what they are looking for in a man, many women will say good looks, sense of humor, and intelligence. I think those things are nice, too, but more importantly, he has to be willing to play Scrabble with me. My last relationship was swallowed by the game. At night, we'd finally leave the board after several death matches in a row, only to return silently to an unfinished board upon waking in the morning. Rarely were any words spoken in these instances. "My turn?" he might ask, and I'd nod, shuffle my tiles around a little, and reassess the board in the morning light.

\* \* \*

There are always those people who think they can beat me. And for the record, I am, of course, beatable (bleat, table, belt, bale), but not by the sort of people who think they can beat me. Most of these people think Scrabble is about being a consummate reader with a large vocabulary. For example, knowing that transmogrification means to be altered in a negative way does very little in the game of Scrabble. For starters, there's way too many letters in the word transmogrification to ever be able to play it on the board. And

secondly, the word doesn't have that many points in it. Without any help from a bonus square, the word's face value only equals twenty-five points, which isn't bad, but that's from an eighteen-letter word. This is not considered a good Scrabble ratio.

Being able to explicate a section of *The Canterbury Tales* in no way prepares a player for the game of Scrabble, which is a fallacy of the hyperliterate (tripe, taper, pretty, elite, pirate, trailer). The same is true of someone who has written a dissertation on the origins of Shakespeare's First Folio. None of this training can be applied to Scrabble playing, though an awareness of the Bard's playfulness with words might be useful in understanding that nearly every verb can become a new word when an -ER is added to the end, as in racker, one that racks, or fluffer, one that fluffs.

What the game really requires is an unusual and creative relationship with letters, like say, having a compulsive need to anagram every street sign and then to add two random letters to create new words once the original combination of words is exhausted. The Wembley in Wembley Court becomes blew, mew, wee, and on and on until I can't come up with any more variations. Then I add a T and an R to make the game fresh. The words *tremble* and *brew* start to form and for the next ten minutes, I am tenaciously tearing the word apart and opening up every possible option. I know this is not normal behavior. I know it's a little compulsive. But I just love the letters. They are satisfying in a way nothing else is.

And so there are very few people in my life who will play Scrabble with me, which I consider a very serious personal loss. The truth is I just love the game and am not terribly concerned about my competitor's abilities one way or the other. The game is really about me and the letters. I have been known to play alone, filling up two racks' worth of letters and playing competitively against myself. Sure, it's not as fun, but I get to create words. They are not a real person, but they aren't bad companions all the same.

That having been said, it is my preference to play with a real person who can play really well. This makes the board more interesting. I have one friend who understands the mild addiction that is Scrabble and who also confesses to anagramming signs while he is waiting in line at the supermarket. The first time I tell Bob that I do this, his face becomes illuminated in a way I suspect happens at AA meetings when previously hidden behaviors are shared and



understood by others for the first time.

After looking left to right to see if anyone is listening in, Bob tells me, "When I was little, I used to compulsively count by sevens because I loved football. I would think, how many touchdowns old is grandma?" And while this is not about letters, this is the way Scrabble players think. At a certain level, Scrabble is about puzzles that can be spun in a thousand directions. It's about variables. It's about creating a space in the brain where letters and numbers are wed in a jumbled pursuit. The top championship players are, in fact, mathematicians or computer techies. They are not English teachers like myself. They are the type of people who have probably come up with computer programs that calculate the number seven into infinity.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Scrabble is one letter at a time. Or two, which brings me to the next key to serious Scrabble play: a willingness to memorize obscure two-letter words, like li, ut, and ka.

The Scrabble Gameplay Guide lists 96 two-letter words, but is by no means an exhaustive list. There are 120 total and knowing them is the difference between being a pretty good player and a serious one. Knowing the two-letter words means being able to maximize every play for the most points as one play might create three or four new words, all of which are counted toward that turn's total score. For example, if I play the word pix along qat starting one letter before Q, I can create three words total: pix, qi, and ax. Depending on where I place it, I stand to get at least 32 points for the play.

Thirty-two points is a fine score. I have nothing personally against thirty-two points, particularly if it's as artfully done as the example given. However, it's not a bingo, which is the use of all seven letters and gives the player an additional 50 points on top of the score of the play itself. If a player doesn't play a number of bingos, the player will lose. Until I played with Bob, I'd never seen anyone skip turns over and over in order to get a letter that would give him a bingo. This is Bob's strategy and it serves him well. My strategy is to take an excruciatingly long time with every turn. He likes to remind me of this.

"There's a 25-minute limit to the game, ya' know."

I like to remind him. "This isn't a championship game."

"All right, but just keep in mind, you'd be losing if I kept

you to the time limit.”

And he’s right about that. I need time to make my moves. I sweat my strategies while he turns in letters in the hopes of getting a bingo. I want the puzzle to last forever. The fun is the combinations. I don’t want to spin my turntable board around before I’ve had a chance to tease out every possible word. But Bob, he’s all about the quick turns and the letter trade-ins.

“That’ll never pay off,” I always tell him. “You’re wasting turns.”

He doesn’t say much about it. He just smirks and sits in quiet confidence (fence, concede, fennec). He is a competitor who often has far too much faith in himself. But after a couple of turns, it works out for him. Three turns lost to trading in a few letters here and there allows him to throw down a huge word: pretext on a triple word score. And with that, Bob’s in the game again.

Good players play tight games. We line up words alongside each other, creating what championship players call hooks. We maximize plays, waiting to use an X in a spot where it will count twice on the triple letter score. We box out the use of triple word scores. We play defensively. Yes, we want to have fun with our letters, but the fun is to play well on a challenging board—one that has only two or three openings for the six consonants on a rack. When Bob and I play, the board clusters instead of sprawls. It folds in on itself and we navigate it for loopholes (poles, lopes, shool).

It’s a puzzle, a shifting, glorious puzzle that changes with every move.

\* \* \*

Some nights, Bob and I bring a board to the bar and ignore all the lights and spectacle around us, focusing in on destroying each other and talking smack. One night, I brought my board to a bar appropriately called Shakespeare’s Pub. Again, I think Shakespeare would have been good at Scrabble. He would understand the strategy, the creativity of it, the building up of words along another word for multiple point opportunities.

“You goin’ down, son,” I like to tell Bob.

He responds with, “You think so?” Like his Scrabble playing, Bob’s smack-talk isn’t as good as mine.

“Oh, I’ll play,” says Cindy, a colleague of ours who is sitting down the table from us.

“Me, too,” says Michelle, another woman Bob and I work with at the local university where we all teach writing.

These are women I know, respect, and admire. As my colleagues, I have come to rely on them as both editors and mentors. But I know the minute they scoot down to where I am setting up the board that this is not going to go well. Bob protests their joining.

“It’s not a real game with four players,” he says and he is adamant about this, but Michelle cleverly schemes her way into the game with a greasy layer of compliments.

“Well, you’ll beat us, of course,” she’s quick to tell him. “I mean, I haven’t played in years and I know you guys play really competitively. So you’ll win, but it will be fun for me and I just feel like playing.” Bob relents.

“You can play,” he tells Cindy and Michelle, “but this game doesn’t count.” As though we are keeping a record. If we are keeping a record, let it be known, Bob has only beaten me five times. But it’s not like we’re keeping a record.

Official Scrabble tournaments are limited to one player against another player. The games are limited to 25 minutes and are regulated by judges who are often competitive players themselves. Bob and I are not at this level, but if we wanted to drop out of our lives, we could be. It just takes a lot of training and seven or eight hours a day of Scrabble playing. I’m sure we’ve both considered becoming professional players, but the best possible income a Scrabble champion can make is the \$25,000 take from the annual U.S. Scrabble Open.

We pull one letter from the bag to determine who goes first. The closest to A begins the game in the center, using the double word score with a star on it. I hate going first. I see no advantage in it whatsoever. Many, many more points can be accumulated by building off other peoples’ plays. That’s part of the strategy. But I pull an A. At my right, Cindy asks, “Do I go next?” Bob and I exchange a nearly unnoticeable glance.

“No,” I tell her, “It goes clockwise.” And we’re off, and while Scrabble players are not generally interested in the meanings and actual denotations of the words they use, I do mean the many variations of the word off in this context (next, oxen, conte, cox).

When Bob and I play, it's pretty cutthroat. There are a few other people I can play against this way. The rest haven't bothered to buck up their game. They are the type who balk at the use of obscure two letter words such as mm, xi, and el, as Cindy did when I laid down the word moil alongside the word mixer, creating five new words out of one vertical play. For the record, a 37-point play on a double word score.

"That's cheatin'!" Cindy shouts in her thick Texan voice. She's one of those types of Southerners who can turn her accent off and on. It's on in full tilt for the game. "Y'all are a bunch of cheaters!"

"It's not cheating," I try to explain. "They're acceptable words."

"You can't phonetically spell out the letter M," she hollers. "That's cheatin'!"

Bob and I stare at the board. There's really no defense for this. We don't make up the rules. We just know what they are and we abide by them. When I play xu with the X on a triple letter score that counts twice, Michelle goes nuts.

"Xu? Xu? What the hell is that?"

I have to admit to her that I don't know what the definition is. I just know it's a word. "Think of the brain capacity involved in memorizing 25,000 words," I say in defense. "Why would you bother learning all the definitions attached to those words? I'm pretty sure no one needs to know that redowa is a lively dance."

"You can't use words you don't know the meaning of," Michelle argues and I can't think of how to explain this to her. Scrabble is not about vocabulary, or rather, it's not about a utilitarian vocabulary (bovary, cabal, carob, larva). It's about the communion of letters and the unlimited juggling of them. But she is one of those people who thinks Scrabble is a game for people of the language arts variety. Because I want her to play with me again, I don't tell her that several of the most recent Scrabble champions were analysts who don't care what quaid and sheqel mean or when they were first used in the English language. Champions only care about their point value.

Which brings us to Q-without-U words.

"They don't exist," Cindy contends when I try to explain where the real game of Scrabble lies, which is to say, in the strategic

use of bonus squares and in the use of the premium letters J, X, Z, and Q.

“Oh, but they do,” I tell her. And then I begin to list them off by spelling them: “Q-A-T, Q-A-I-D, Q-A-B-A-L-A-H, S-U-Q...”

When I slow down for a moment, Bob chimes in, “Q-O-P-H, Q-I, F-A-Q-I-R...”

“But those aren’t words!” Cindy insists on this. My 2-inch thick Scrabble dictionary, my Bible, is on the table to my left. I heft it and lay it down in front of Cindy.

“I don’t care if it’s in there,” Cindy continues, which is, of course, blasphemous to Bob and me, but we let it go. We’re used to our Bible meaning nothing among the heathens.

\* \* \*

My downfall started with saloon, the play I cheated on my very own mother to get. I was ten and I wanted to play that word so badly, which makes absolutely no sense as it’s a six-letter word with minimal point value. I suppose it just sounded pretty great at the time. I kept at what I call the Bob Method now, trading in single letters instead of taking a turn. I had S,A,L and N on my rack and I couldn’t pull an O to save my life. Three turns had gone by and still I was pulling the wrong letters, nothing that could help me spell out my word. When my mom took a break to use the bathroom, I broke down and cheated. My fingers searched the bag and felt along the letters, feeling for a wholesome O. I retrieved two of them just in time and waited until my mom sat back down in her seat to spell out the word on the board.

“S-A-L-O-O-N!” I spelled the word aloud as I snapped the tiles down. My mom looked suspicious.

“You finally drew the right letters?” she asked.

“Yeah, I got ‘em,” I told her, hoping my exuberance covered my deceit.

“You just happened to get the right ones?” she asked again.

“Yes.” I was sticking to my story.

“Molly—”

“What? I did, all right! I did.”

“Okay, all right. You got saloon,” she said. “Wow. You got

saloon.”

I have never lived saloon down. If there’s ever an instance of questioning my character, my mother simply mouths the word the same way she did that day more than twenty years ago. Saloon, she says, and singsongs the end of it in mockery of my cheating ways.

This is what makes Bob and I different from the top-level players. At the end of the day, as much as we want to win, we love words. We are word people, not computer techies. We can try to bridge the difference with an unbridled competitiveness and a willingness to do a fair amount of rote memorization, but there are words like saloon that will cripple us every time.

“Well, this doesn’t get me much,” I say as I click down my tiles in the smoky bar atmosphere. “But I like the word anyway.” The word is drunken, which I built off an existing E on the board so it’s not a bingo.

“Nice,” Bob says. “Good word.” And it is a good word, particularly to play in a bar. I like the coincidence of it and the humor. Scrabble can be played with a sense of humor, after all. But this is my Achilles Heel. This is what keeps me from glory. This is why I will never be a champion.

Still in regular play, I often am. But not a game goes by that the memory of saloon doesn’t haunt me. I like to think it makes my game more passionate, remembering as I do how low I made myself for that dumb word. But my compassion dwindles as Michelle and Cindy continue to balk at our playing.

“You can’t line ‘em up like that!”

“There’s no way you can play qwerty!”

“You can’t trade in your letters!”

And finally, Michelle has had it. “But you’ve just reduced it to a game of points!”

Bob and I exchange glances again. It is subtle, but I can see in his quick glance what Michelle cannot. Yes, it’s about the points. Of course it is. But it’s also about the letters and the beauty of their infinite variables. It’s about how the board is different every time you play. It’s about strategies the board presents and the meanings the words take on in light of those strategies. It’s about the shuffling around of seven letters until a bingo appears that seemed impossible. Buddhists believe the individual letters are sacred, that they have meaning in the utterance of them outside the context of the

words they can create. I see all that in the quick glance between Bob and me.

But then again, maybe Bob's not thinking any of this. It's entirely possible, and really, it's a whole lot more reasonable to believe that all he's thinking about is his leave. Like pool, Scrabble players are concerned with how the board is left once they make their play. I can tell Bob's eyeing a spot near the bottom right triple word score corner. If he leaves the board open for me, I can play just about anything. I have six of the seven best letters on my rack for a bingo: REINAS, the only thing missing from it is the T, a mnemonic device commonly referred to as RETINAS. I won't know until he plays, and for once, he's the one taking his sweet time.

While I wait for his play, we all order another round of beer. The waitress smirks at the board consuming our table, really consuming our lives. I'm guessing she's one of those people who just doesn't get it.

## Poems, Prose, Tattoos, and the Blues: *An Interview with Kim Addonizio*



Photograph by Joe Allen

*Kim Addonizio is an award-winning poet and the author of four collections of poetry: The Philosopher's Club (1994), Jimmy & Rita (1997), Tell Me (2000)—a National Book Award Finalist, and What is This Thing Called Love (2004). A writer of prose as well as poetry, she has authored a collection of short stories, In the Box Called Pleasure (1999), and two novels, Little Beauties (2005) and My Dreams Out in the Street (2007). Additionally, she co-authored The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry (1997) and co-edited Dorothy Parker's Elbow: Tattoos on Writers, Writers on Tattoos (2002). Her word/music CD with Susan Browne—Swearing, Smoking, Drinking, & Kissing (2004)—is available at cdbaby.com. Addonizio resides in the Bay Area, where she teaches private workshops. Her work is a personal favorite of the review's editorial staff, and we are honored that she took the time to talk to us about her current projects, her views on teaching creative writing, and her sources of inspiration.*

**Santa Clara Review:** Your latest book, *My Dreams Out in the Street*, is one of two novels that you've written in recent years. Has your focus shifted from poetry to prose?

**Kim Addonizio:** I've been writing prose almost as long as poetry. I consider myself, first and foremost, a poet. Poetry is really my preferred means of expression. It does something beautiful inside my head. It's definitely a different space than prose. They're both interesting spaces, but the one closest to me is poetry.

**SCR:** The characters in *My Dreams Out in the Street* come from an earlier novel in verse, *Jimmy & Rita*, and you've said that the book *Jimmy & Rita* developed from a single poem about the two characters. What about these two characters inspired you to continue to explore their lives? Are the Jimmy and Rita in *My Dreams Out in the Street* the same as the Jimmy and Rita you started with?



**KA:** It's hard to know, now, what inspired me. Just an apprehension that there was more. A little spark I wanted to fan into a bigger flame. The characters changed somewhat from that book of poems to the novel, but not in big ways. The novel was a chance to dig more deeply into their characters, their lives. Or into the lives of people who were poor and full of longing and trying to get their shit together. I guess that's the central question that interested me: how do you live? How do you get through when you feel alone, when the world seems set against you?

**SCR:** Your first novel, *Little Beauties*, takes place in Long Beach, and *My Dreams Out in the Street* takes place in San Francisco. When writing works of fiction, how do you decide upon setting? Is the setting critical to your vision of the characters?

**KA:** I think setting *is* a character. Long Beach is sunny. Long Beach is not-quite-LA. It was a good place to set a novel about a former child pageant contender. And the San Francisco of *My Dreams* is a certain kind of place, as well: rainy, gloomy, urban, indifferent. The setting is key to what happens to the characters, and to how they see life. I don't think I really "decide" anything like setting; it just sort of happens. I visited friends in Long Beach a few times, and it felt like the right place for that novel to happen. I know San Francisco really well, having lived there for over twenty years. And *My Dreams* is partly about homelessness, and in a certain time and place—the dot-com boom in the city.

**SCR:** Do you imagine your future novels also taking place in California? How has your own "setting" in the Bay Area influenced your writing?

**KA:** Right now I don't want to even think about future novels. Sometimes I have a fantasy about a historical novel that would take place outside New Orleans. I really hope I don't feel compelled to try to write it, though. For me, writing a novel is analogous to my first and last backpacking trip, a grueling ten-day hike with a heavy pack, being exhausted, huddling under a spindly tree in the freezing rain eating handfuls of trail mix. When it's over, I thought, "I'll never do that again." I haven't backpacked again. I did write another novel but I'd really prefer to sit in a cafe and write poems.

**SCR:** You've mentioned Keats and Whitman as two of your favorite poets. What about their work intrigues you?

**KA:** They're both intensely spiritual poets, in very different ways.

**SCR:** In your informal bio on your website, you identify Edna St. Vincent Millay as a previous incarnation of yourself. How do you identify with Millay as a woman or as a poet? How has her work influenced your writing?

**KA:** Millay had a hard time, in terms of her reputation—there were the Modernists with all their fragmentation, and there she was writing sonnets. But her sensibility was very modern. I like her directness. I like her fucked-upness. She could be melodramatic, but she was willing to risk that for the sake of saying something.

**SCR:** What contemporary writers and poets do you read?

**KA:** I don't seem to read all that much lately. I've been writing and playing music. But recently I've been reading poets Dean Young, Kay Ryan, and Marlena Morling. I got about halfway through Denis Johnson's novel *Tree of Smoke*. I read a novel by A.L. Kennedy called *Paradise* that I liked a lot.

**SCR:** You work as a freelance writing teacher and lead workshops. Can you discuss your teaching philosophy?

**KA:** Writing is a difficult art. If you are going to become a writer, you need a lot of self-direction. So many people come to me saying, "How do I make a living at this? How do I become a writer?"—and they feel cheated if I say, "I have no idea." I don't know what's right for anyone. All I can do, I feel, is try to help people with the work at hand, and encourage them to keep going. The discoveries you make are private ones; a teacher isn't going to hand them to you. I try to teach my students about craft, and to stress their separation from the poem, so they can see it as something outside of themselves rather than as therapy.

**SCR:** You've been working on a new book on writing. How will

this book differ from *The Poet's Companion*, which you co-wrote with Dorianne Laux?

**KA:** It's sort of a companion to *The Poet's Companion*. It's called *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within*. Lots of writing ideas, discussions of craft and process. I think it will be useful both for poets starting out, and also for poets who want some fresh inspiration. It's much more involved with the Internet. There are chapters on the usual topics, like metaphor and description, but also on sexuality and race and addictions. So I hope it's a little more open and expansive, the kind of book that could be used in a college classroom to teach the basics, but that also is very connected to creativity and the real world and useful for people that are already writing poetry.

**SCR:** You mentioned in an interview that you think having a university job would kill the poetry in you forever. Do you think the university environment stifles creativity? How do you feel about university MFA programs?

**KA:** I used to teach in Goddard's low-residency MFA program, and I had really interesting students there. I don't have any axe to grind over university programs. I just feel I'm not very suited to teaching in that environment. I kind of like my private little life. It gets isolated sometimes. But I think, for me, it's less stressful to organize my own classes than to attend department meetings and sit on committees and shackle myself to those kinds of responsibilities. Okay, maybe I have a small axe. But mostly it's a matter of temperament.

**SCR:** Your writing comes off as authentic and personal: do you ever fear exposing too much of yourself to your readers? How do you tackle writing about your own personal experiences and about people in your own life? How do the people in your personal life react to the subject matter of your poetry?

**KA:** I don't think I'm more or less "authentic and personal" than any other writer. That is, every writer is "authentic and personal." Keats and Whitman, to me, were both. I'm interested in how to make the poem, and I don't think about "personal experience" versus some other kind. Is there some other kind? I write about what engages me, whether that's my own psychology or some atrocity

in the world. So, no, I don't fear exposing myself. I don't see it as self-exposure. I'm just writing a poem. Occasionally, if I'm writing about someone else, I may run it by them if I've used some details.

**SCR:** Do you find writing therapeutic, a way to manage yourself/your life?

**KA:** It's just a deep need. Writing is how I respond to the world.

**SCR:** You and Susan Browne released *Swearing, Smoking, Drinking, Kissing*, a CD of poetry and music, and you initially studied classical voice and flute and have in recent years played blues harmonica at your readings. How does music influence your writing? Who have been your greatest musical influences?

**KA:** Probably Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan had a lot to do with my writing before I ever wrote poetry. I can't say how music has affected my work, but I know that it has. I want to integrate the two more. The harmonica player who has inspired me from the beginning is Sonny Boy Williamson (the second one; there were two. The first was great, also.).

**SCR:** You and Cheryl Dumesnil co-edited *Dorothy Parker's Elbow*, an anthology of writers on tattoos. How do tattoos and/or other visual culture fascinate you or influence your work?

**KA:** That was a great project. We got to put Sylvia Plath and Kafka and Madame Chinchilla, a tattoo artist, into the same book. But I wouldn't say tattoos influence my work; I just happen to have them.

**SCR:** Of all your poems, which would you say is your favorite? Of the characters in your novels, who intrigues you the most?

**KA:** I don't have any favorite poems. I'm always hoping to write the next one. I feel pretty close to Rita in *My Dreams Out in the Street*. I feel like she's still out there, trying to find her way and stay out of the rain, and I hope she's okay.

## First Poem For You

I love to touch your tattoos in complete darkness, when I can't see them. I'm sure of where they are, know by heart the neat lines of lightning pulsing just above your nipple, can find, as if by instinct, the blue swirls of water on your shoulder where a serpent twists, facing a dragon. When I pull you to me, taking you until we're spent and quiet on the sheets, I love to kiss the pictures in your skin. They'll last until you're seared to ashes; whatever persists or turns to pain between us, they will still be there. Such permanence is terrifying. So I touch them in the dark; but touch them, trying.

## My Heart

That Mississippi chicken shack.  
That initial-scarred tabletop,  
that tiny little dance floor to the left of the band.  
That kiosk at the mall selling caramels and kitsch.  
That tollbooth with its white-plastic-gloved worker  
handing you your change.  
That phone booth with the receiver ripped out.  
That dressing room in the fetish boutique,  
those curtains and mirrors.  
That funhouse, that horror, that soundtrack of screams.  
That putti-filled heaven raining guilt from the ceiling.  
That haven for truckers, that bottomless cup.  
That biome. That wilderness preserve.  
That landing strip with no runway lights  
where you are aiming your plane,  
imagining a voice in the tower,  
imagining a tower.

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Previously appeared in *New Letters*, forthcoming in *Lucifer at the Starlite*.

## Another Day on Earth

*December 26, 2004*

Souls were arriving, souls were departing  
amid the usual screaming and crying.  
A lot of drinks were being tossed back,  
a lot of women were thinking about their hair.  
People were loving the quiet as snow fell,  
burying the cars. More than one man  
was thinking about his penis. Birds were landing  
on statues, birds were snapping up insects.  
Prisoners were tending invisible flowers in their cells.  
A lot of televisions were feeling vaguely spiritual.  
A lot of shoes were hurting.  
A lot of hearts had fallen from the trees  
and were skittering along in the wind.  
All the oceans suddenly realized  
they were one ocean, whereupon  
the Akashic angel whose job it is  
to record each moment's folding and unfolding  
paused, then went on furiously writing.

---

Previously appeared in *Barrow Street*, forthcoming in *Lucifer at the Starlite*.

## Castaways and Cranes: *An Interview with Colin Meloy*



Photograph by Onno Siemens

*Colin Meloy fronts the folk-rock band The Decemberists, which has produced four full-length studio albums and six EPs chock-full of sprawling tales about sea captains, trapeze artists, legionnaires and chimney sweeps. Before founding The Decemberists, Meloy attended the University of Montana where he majored in creative writing and no doubt cultivated what has been described as his “venturesome lyrical palate.” In addition to writing lyrics, Meloy has also authored a short nonfiction book about The Replacements’ Let it Be album as part of Continuum Publishing’s 33 1/3 series. This interview is made possible by our fiction editor’s willingness to exploit the kindness of his relatively famous relatives.*

**Santa Clara Review:** Do you have a “writing schedule” or a process by which you write? Could you explain?

**Colin Meloy:** Not really. It’s pretty haphazard. I’ve learned over the years that if I allow myself some time to work, I’ll eventually amass a body of songs. I’ve learned just to have faith in that process. I do find that I write in fits and starts; I’ll have a week where I’m compelled to write and I’ll finish up 4 or 5 songs by the end of the week; other times I’ll go a month without touching a guitar.

**SCR:** What has been your favorite book in the past year? What are you reading currently?

**CM:** I finished Dave Egger’s *What is the What* a few months ago and adored it. I read Michael Chabon’s *Gentlemen of the Road* around the same time, a real ripper. More recently, I’ve hacked my way through 300 pages of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* but I have a feeling that’s going to be a long slog. I’ve been tempted away already by a nonfiction book about death and the Civil War, a collection of H.P. Lovecraft stories and Dan Kennedy’s *Rock On*.



**SCR:** Do you continue to write outside of the world of music? You've written a piece for the *33 1/3 series*, but do you write short fiction or plays or nonfiction?

**CM:** No, not really. I toy with stuff here and there. Carson and I have a kids' book which is on the farthest back burner possible right now.

**SCR:** When writing songs, does the instrumental music or do the lyrics come first?

**CM:** They sort of come simultaneously. A chord progression will often suggest a lyric which will suggest a melody. But sometimes a melody will begin the thing, which will in turn suggest a lyric and then a chord progression. But there are times when a lyric begins it all, and the melody and chord progression fall in place.

**SCR:** Which songwriters have had the biggest influences on your writing?

**CM:** Tons. Grant Lee Phillips, Morrissey, Van Morrison, Bob Mould, Shane MacGowan. You name it. If it's in my record collection, odds are I've been influenced by some degree by it.

**SCR:** How has being a musician affected your non-lyric writing? Or when you're writing works that aren't music lyrics, do you feel like your experience as a musician brings a certain musicality to your words?

**CM:** I suppose so—I imagine it's all connected somehow. I think I was initially drawn to writing by the musicality of language...

**SCR:** Can you discuss how coming across the story of *The Crane Wife* has influenced your art?

**CM:** I don't know that it's influenced my music any more than it provided the subject for a few songs on our last record. I probably learned a lot from the process of adapting the story to music, but I

don't know that it has anything to do with the story itself. Or maybe it has; these sorts of things are hard to quantify.

**SCR:** When you're working on covers, how do you go about re-imagining another artist's work? Is it about an homage or a reinterpretation?

**CM:** I'm usually drawn to cover songs by other people when I'm struck by the song. Sometimes I wish I'd written it; other times I'm just curious about how the thing works. It's both an homage and an interpretation.

**SCR:** Your background in literature is apparent in your songwriting through your use of story, character, and even archaic vocabulary. What kind of works do you read, how do you read them, and how does that play into crafting your music?

**CM:** I read all sorts of books, provided I have time. I think I read them like everyone reads them; front to back. I always skip prefaces, though. I have a real fear of spoilers.

**SCR:** There is a fascination with Europe's history and mythology in your work: legionnaires, mariners, the Shankhill Butchers, The Tain. Where does this fascination stem from, and why does this world work for you as a writer?

**CM:** I have no real idea, to be honest. I guess I find that stuff to be exotic, other-worldly. I studied a lot of Irish and British lit in school—it might just be where my natural inclinations lie...



## The Overlap

### CHARACTERS

VOICE ONE. The Overseer. Urgent and professional. She sings with THE MUSIC.

VOICE TWO. The Matchmaker. Patrols the overlap of conscious and subconscious. She is also CHRIS and SERVER.

CHRIS. The Receptionist. Has a sense of humor underneath. The physical entity of VOICE TWO.

SERVER. Patient.

SETH. Kind, warm, intelligent. School was his first priority. Best friends with FELICIA since they were kids. Died during his first year of college, about three years ago.

FELICIA. An insomniac with a translucent mind and natural curiosity. In high school she spent all her spare time with her best friend, SETH. Now works as a painter, children's storybook illustrator, and freelance designer. Her dreams have been increasing in frequency since SETH died.

ALICE. In a relationship with DUSTIN, but secretly seeing JOSEPH. She is busy, overbooked, working as the administrator of a law firm. She'll tell you anything when she's drunk.

DUSTIN. ALICE's boyfriend, EMORY's longtime friend and flatmate. Somewhat quiet, cynical, but caring. He played clarinet in high school. Now he helps run sales training for a national insurance company. Loves classical music.

EMORY. His suppressed anger comes out in strange ways, and keeps him up at night. He sometimes disappears for a couple of days without notice or explanation. Works repairing elevators.

JOSEPH. Has a dark sense of humor. Is attracted to women who are too young, dates women who don't need him, and sleeps with women who are already involved. A lawyer. Occasionally goes on hunting trips by himself.

THE MUSIC. Follows restless dreamers.

## NOTES

Isolated punctuation marks denote moments of expression outside of dialogue. They may be played through the body, breath, or face, but not with words. Think about how a given mark would be used in a sentence.

The symbol “<<<>>>” indicates a visual shift in focus. Scene changes should overlap.

*(Somewhere in the overlap of consciousness and unconsciousness. It's dark there.)*

VOICE ONE. Does she know?

VOICE TWO. She suspects something, but she seems very confused. She's not sleeping regularly.

VOICE ONE. How far did she get last time?

VOICE TWO. She made it within sight of the riverbank, but she never touched the water.

VOICE ONE. You're sure.

VOICE TWO. Yes. She was still pretty far off.

...

What happens now?

VOICE ONE. Keep watching her. You will need to go in person again.

VOICE TWO. Okay.

VOICE ONE. Just don't let her get across the water. If she gets that far, we've lost her. And you know what that means for us. For all of us.

VOICE TWO. Of course. I'll make sure.

*(THE MUSIC floats in. Grows louder, louder. It suddenly stops as*

*FELICIA wakes. She checks the time. She picks up her phone and dials.)*

FELICIA. Hi, it's me. Um...it happened again. Yeah. I'm scared. I'm sorry, what time is it there? I just...needed someone to talk to. Thanks. Seth...I miss you.

*(THE MUSIC starts in again. She hears it. As it crescendoes, her fear increases. THE MUSIC suddenly stops.)*

<<◇>>

*(Dustin and Emory's apartment. DUSTIN comes into the living room with a suitcase. He turns on a lamp. EMORY is on the couch.)*

DUSTIN. — — !!! — —

Hell! Emory! Scared the hell out of me. What are you doing up?

EMORY. Couldn't sleep.

DUSTIN. Nightmares again?

EMORY. ...You heading to the airport?

DUSTIN. Yeah. Oh, if Alice comes by, can you give her her sunglasses? She forgot them, as usual.

EMORY. Yeah, sure.

...

You're going to Boston this week?

DUSTIN. Yeah. How's your week looking? Busy?

EMORY. Look, I just want to tell you. I could find another place if you need. It wouldn't be a problem.

DUSTIN. ?

EMORY. If you two wanted to move in together.

DUSTIN. Oh. No. No, no. I don't think so. I mean, thank you, but.  
You're not planning on leaving, are you?

EMORY. No. I just wanted you to know.

DUSTIN. Oh. Okay. Well, don't worry about it, buddy. I like this setup. We always said we'd have a place together, right?

Besides.

I don't think she's ready for that. She's got...other things going on in her life right now.

EMORY...Okay.

You don't want to miss your plane.

DUSTIN. Oh. Yeah, I gotta go. I'll see you. Get some rest.  
*(DUSTIN exits. EMORY turns off the light.)*

<<<>>>

*(Alice's apartment. ALICE and JOSEPH have just finished having sex. He is dressing.)*

ALICE. Are we still going wine tasting next week?

JOSEPH. You'll have time?

ALICE. I'll make time. I'm telling them I have a wedding to attend. Or was it a funeral. Same thing to an office schedule.  
*(Her cell phone rings.)*

JOSEPH. ?

ALICE. I don't want any calls right now.

JOSEPH. What if it's important?

ALICE. That's what voicemail is for, silly Joseph.  
*(Ringing stops.)*

JOSEPH. Okay. Well, I've got to get to the office. Have a meeting with a client soon.

This week is going to be hell, I'll be living at the courthouse. Well...maybe on Wednesday...a lunchtime rendezvous? That is, if you can keep your panties on until then.

ALICE. You'd better take me someplace nice.

Now get out of here before I pull you back into bed.

JOSEPH. Hm.

*(They kiss. The phone beeps. A voicemail.)*

...

ALICE. .

JOSEPH. I'll call you.

*(He exits. She makes sure he's gone. She picks up her phone and dials.)*

ALICE. Hi, baby. Yeah, sorry, I was in the shower. Mmhm. Oh, fine. How's it in...where are you this week? Oh right, Boston, it must be cold. Hmm. When will you be flying home? Yeah, I will.

Dustin? Is there someone there with you? Oh. No, I just thought I heard a voice.

Okay. Yeah. Okay, call me then.

*(She hangs up. Lays back down. Gets up, goes to take a shower.)*

<<◇>>

*(EMORY is running on a treadmill. He turns up the speed. He runs. He turns up the speed. He runs. He turns up the speed. He runs, sweats, falters. Runs harder. He turns up the speed. His voice is leaking out in his breaths. He slams the stop button and collapses on the treadmill, breathing painfully. He punches the floor of the treadmill. CHRIS has been watching.)*

<<◇>>

*(FELICIA is sitting on the train. ALICE enters and sits nearby.)*

FELICIA. .

?

ALICE...

FELICIA. !

ALICE. ;

*(ALICE sits elsewhere. After a moment, FELICIA follows.)*

FELICIA. Excuse me.

ALICE. Yes?

FELICIA. We've met before?

ALICE. I don't think so.

FELICIA. ...

... !

Yes. We have. But you wouldn't remember it.

ALICE...Why?

FELICIA. Because you weren't actually there.

ALICE. I think this is my stop.

FELICIA. Oh...Oh, no.

ALICE. Nice meeting you.

FELICIA. You have to tell him.

ALICE. —

FELICIA. This is your stop.



ALICE. ...

*(ALICE exits. THE MUSIC creeps in. Hearing it, FELICIA exits, too. CHRIS exits, following FELICIA.)*

<<◇>>

*(A lobby. EMORY is repairing the elevator. The entrance is taped off and a sign posted. FELICIA enters the lobby.)*

FELICIA. Is the elevator broken?

EMORY. Nope.

FELICIA. Well, then why...

Oh.

That's not very funny.

EMORY. There's a staircase around the corner.

FELICIA. I'm already late and I'm on the seventeenth...shit. Thank you.

*(She exits into the stairwell. EMORY continues to work. After about thirty seconds, he emerges.)*

EMORY. ...

?

!!!

*(EMORY tosses his tools and exits into the stairwell.)*

<<◇>>

*(FELICIA, alone.)*

FELICIA. Do you believe in past lives?

VOICE ONE. I'm not sure. What do you think?

FELICIA. Sometimes. Because of the dreams. There's places I've been to in my dreams that I've never seen before, but...they're fa-

miliar. Like even though I don't recognize them, I know I've been there before.

VOICE ONE. Are they places you like?

FELICIA. I think so. It's hard to remember them once I'm awake. There's one place I've been to several times. There's clouds...and water. Some kind of lake or river or something.

Oh. And a streetlamp.

VOICE ONE. Streetlamp?

FELICIA. Yes. A streetlamp. It's green, I think, the light from it.

VOICE ONE. Anything else?

FELICIA. No...except I know there's someplace beyond, past the water. Past the lamp.

Somewhere I'm trying to get to.

VOICE ONE. Where is that?

FELICIA...

.....

I don't know.

<<<>>>

*(A hotel. DUSTIN lays on the bed, half-reading a magazine. His hotel phone rings. He gets up to answer it, leaving the magazine on the bed.)*

DUSTIN. Yeah.

Hi, I was waiting for you. Mmhmm. No, this is a great time. Actually, I already have some champagne chilling here. Room 325.

*(His cell phone rings.)*

Hey, I have to take a call, but I'll see you soon? Perfect.

*(He hangs up. Answers cell phone.)*

Hi, babe. Yeah. Not bad. Well, a lot of meetings today. You? Hm. Oh, Chicago this week. Yeah. No, actually I'm pretty tired. Think I'm gonna get some rest, another long one tomorrow. 'Kay. Love you.

*(He looks at the bed. He takes the magazine off of it and puts it away. He looks at the bed again.)*

<<◇>>

*(EMORY bursts in to a waiting room. CHRIS sits at the front desk.)*

EMORY. ?

CHRIS. Can I help you, sir?

EMORY. Yeah, I need to know...there was a woman...

CHRIS. Who?

EMORY...

CHRIS. You have an appointment?

EMORY. No, I...this is the seventeenth floor, isn't it?

CHRIS. Yeah.

EMORY. How many offices are on this floor?

CHRIS. Just us.

EMORY. You're the only one?

CHRIS. Yes, sir. Just us.

EMORY. What's on the rest of the floor?

CHRIS. If you'd like to make an appointment, I can help you. Otherwise, I'm very busy, sir.

EMORY. Oh...no, I'm just the repairman. Elevator. Just...wanted to make sure this was the right...that it's stopping at the correct floors.

CHRIS. I'm glad to hear it's working, our clients will be pleased.

EMORY. Yeah.

CHRIS. Thank you.

EMORY. Thank you...

CHRIS. ...

EMORY. ...

.....

Bye.

CHRIS. Goodbye.  
(EMORY exits.)

Well. This is new.

<<<>>>

(A café. JOSEPH is sitting at a table by himself. Two glasses of white wine and two menus. SERVER enters.)

SERVER. Sir?

JOSEPH. Just come back in a few minutes, please.  
(SERVER exits. JOSEPH waits. ALICE enters and sits with him.)

ALICE. I'm sorry sorry sorry, I'm so so late. I got caught on the way out of work and Jackson had all these things to go over and I tried to get out of there but then when I finally did I had just missed the train so I had to wait for the next one and  
(JOSEPH hands her a glass.)

ALICE. Oh. Thank you.

*(She takes a sip.)*

It's good.

Look, for tomorrow, I was thinking we'd better leave early. I can't wait. It will be so nice to get away from here, even just for a day.

JOSEPH. .

ALICE. *(Giggle)*

I had a dream about you last night. You know. A good dream. Wanna hear about it? We were in a jungle like a safari or something, except we were on foot hiking around, you know? And I knew we were being stalked, I could feel the eyes of a tiger or something watching but we couldn't see it, just elephants and parrots and things like that. And I was really scared but it was also exciting you know? And I told you I was scared I was really freaking out and I started to cry, and you just said "We'll be safe." And then you took us into a cave and it was dark but once we were inside I knew the tiger couldn't get to us but I was still scared and...excited, and then you took me. And you held me down on the floor. And you made love to me in the most powerful way... and then you wrapped your arms around me...so tight... I woke up...mmm, I've been thinking about it all day.

JOSEPH. I had a dream about you, too. It was very similar, actually.

ALICE. Really...What happened in yours?

JOSEPH. ...

I was at my apartment and you came in the door. You just said "I'm sorry," and at first I didn't know why, but then I understood.

ALICE. ...

JOSEPH. And I didn't need to ask, and you didn't need to say another word. I just knew. And then I took you. And I held you down on the floor. And I made love to you in the most powerful

way...Like I was beating you. Like I was trying to shatter your body with mine. And then, just as we were coming, I wrapped my fingers around your throat...so tight...and strangled you. Then I woke up wet and shaking, and I looked over, and you weren't in the bed.

ALICE. .

JOSEPH. Again. You were out on the landing, making a phone call. Again. Alice. I'm not stupid. And I'm not sticking around for this.

*(He starts to leave.)*

ALICE. Joseph, sit down.

JOSEPH. Do you dream about me when you're with him? Do you wake up after those good dreams and feel his body against yours and smile? That's what I picture.

ALICE. You don't own me, Joseph. I can leave anytime I want to. I'm not yours.

JOSEPH. Then why do you tell me you are? You tell me every time I'm inside you. But I realized that's the only time you say it. Don't call, I'll know it's you.

*(He exits. SERVER enters, looks at ALICE from a distance, leaves.)*

<<<>>>

*(The lobby. FELICIA is leaving the building.)*

EMORY. Excuse me.

FELICIA. Yes?

EMORY. ...

FELICIA. Chris told me the elevator was working...but I couldn't get it to work. I kept pressing the button. Eventually I just took the stairs again.

EMORY. Do we know each other?

FELICIA. ...?

No, I...

.

Maybe.

EMORY. Do you know how?

FELICIA. No.

EMORY. Do you know my name?

FELICIA. No.

EMORY. May I...what's your name?

FELICIA...

*(She starts to go.)*

EMORY. No, wait! I...this is going to sound crazy. I've seen you before, but...

FELICIA...What.

EMORY. But. I'm sure we've...never met. Not really. I just. I recognize you, though. It's been...Can we talk? I'm really not—

FELICIA. Shut up shut up shut up.

EMORY. .

FELICIA. Did you see me...in a dream?

EMORY. Yes. How did you know that?

FELICIA. ...

I don't know. You wouldn't understand.

I have to go now.

EMORY. Wait. I need to see you again.

FELICIA...I think you will.

EMORY. But how will I—

FELICIA. Goodbye.

EMORY. Wait, I—

FELICIA. Goodbye.

*(She exits.)*

EMORY. ...

*(He sits in the broken elevator. THE MUSIC begins, softly. EMORY hears it. It stops. EMORY stands. He tries to go back to work. He throws a wrench at the elevator and exits.)*

<<<>>>

*(JOSEPH sits in his apartment with a glass of red wine. The phone does not ring. The clock reads 3:30, and it is dark outside.)*

<<<>>>

*(Dustin and Emory's apartment. EMORY sits. DUSTIN enters with his luggage.)*

DUSTIN. Hey.

What a week that was.

*(Starts to fix himself a drink.)*

Do you want one?

EMORY. .

DUSTIN. All right.

...



EMORY...

DUSTIN. Come on, let's have it.

EMORY. You just got home. Relax, I'm fine.

DUSTIN. I am relaxed. I'm always relaxed. Tell me all about it, friend. Let's see, it can only be a few things: work trouble, girl trouble...actually, I think that's all. So which is it?

EMORY...

.

I saw her.

DUSTIN. Ah, girl trouble.

EMORY. She was there and gone, so fast, but I felt it, it was just like...

DUSTIN. Who?

EMORY. Just...okay. You have to take me seriously here. All right?

DUSTIN. Yeah, sure.

EMORY. I had this dream once. It was really short, just a glimpse. But it was the most powerful dream I ever had in my life.

DUSTIN. So what happened.

EMORY. I roll over in bed, and there's this woman lying next to me. This woman I've never seen in my life. She smiles.

DUSTIN...?

That's it?

EMORY. Yes. Then this light starts to glow, and I wake up.

DUSTIN. Okay. So what's it mean.

EMORY. Well that's all that happens, but...

When she smiled. It was like she knew me. Really knew me. Like we were best friends who'd been separated for years. And then when I woke up. You know when someone slams a door and you wake up, and you didn't really hear it, but you know you heard something?

DUSTIN. Yeah...

EMORY. It was like that. I woke up and I swear, it was like she had just left the room. I could still feel her presence. And I just started bawling because I suddenly missed her so much.

DUSTIN. Wait, is this still in the dream or in real life?

EMORY. It was like I'd had amnesia and suddenly my memory came back. It felt like someone was trying to call me from heaven, trying to remind me.

DUSTIN. Of what?

EMORY. Of her. Us.

DUSTIN...That's heavy, friend.

EMORY. I saw her today.

DUSTIN. Her. Her from the dream?

EMORY. Yes. She's been in my mind for years, ever since I had that dream, and then, yesterday, there she was.

DUSTIN. So how do you know her.

EMORY. I don't.

DUSTIN. But you said you saw her.

EMORY. It's like this. I've met her twice. The first time was in the dream. The second time was yesterday.

DUSTIN...Oh. Are you sure?

EMORY. Very.

But now I don't know how to find her again. She left so quickly.

DUSTIN. Wow, it's so...Outer Limits.

EMORY...Right.

DUSTIN. So, go to sleep.

EMORY. ?

DUSTIN. You first found her in your dreams, right? Go sleep.  
Dream. Find her there.

EMORY...

...

Do you believe in past lives?

DUSTIN...No. Too easy. Like love at first sight.

'Night, friend. I'm going to bed. Good luck with the dream girl.

*(DUSTIN exits. EMORY lays down on the couch. He closes his eyes.  
THE MUSIC begins. He sits up. It stops. He lays down. He falls  
asleep.)*

<<◇>>

*(JOSEPH is smoking a cigarette outside his office building. FELICIA  
walks by. She stops.)*

FELICIA. ...

JOSEPH. ...

FELICIA. ...

JOSEPH. Hey.

FELICIA. Hi.

JOSEPH. ...

FELICIA. You shouldn't smoke.

JOSEPH. You shouldn't harass strangers about their vices.

FELICIA. You know it's bad for you.

JOSEPH. Of course it is.

FELICIA. Then why do you do it?

JOSEPH. Do I know you?

FELICIA. No.

JOSEPH. Well, then. I had a pretty bleak night, so if you don't mind.

FELICIA. ...

...!

Oh.

You're the lover, aren't you.

JOSEPH. ?

FELICIA. I'm so sorry. I think Alice is one of those people who has to keep moving, you know, like sharks.

JOSEPH. Woah, woah, who are you? How do you know Alice? You just said we don't know each other.

FELICIA. I said you don't know me. Besides, I don't really know Alice. I just know about her.

JOSEPH. You're not making any sense.

FELICIA. That's okay.

JOSEPH. What's your name?

FELICIA. That doesn't matter.

JOSEPH. Well, I'd like to know something about you, since you seem to know so much about me.

FELICIA. ...

JOSEPH. You're very beautiful, you know.

FELICIA. There. You know something about me.

JOSEPH. I'd like to know more.

FELICIA. I think you need some time to grieve. You had a bleak night, remember?

*(She starts to go.)*

JOSEPH. I want to see you again.

FELICIA. I don't date smokers.

JOSEPH. I've just given up.

*(He tosses his pack on the outdoor ashtray.)*

FELICIA. I'll call you if I need a lawyer.

JOSEPH. You don't have my number.

FELICIA. That's okay. I know where you work.

*(She exits. He retrieves his cigarettes and goes inside.)*

<<◇>>

*(Somewhere in the overlap.)*

VOICE ONE. He dreams of her?

VOICE TWO. He had one dream about her. A long time ago.

And when they met.

He recognized her.

VOICE ONE. Did she recognize him?

VOICE TWO. No. But she sensed something. Has this ever happened?

VOICE ONE. You will need to visit him.

VOICE TWO. Okay.

VOICE ONE. Does he desire her?

VOICE TWO. Yes, he does.

VOICE ONE. Well. Make it happen. If he can connect with her...

VOICE TWO. There's one other thing. He can hear it.

VOICE ONE. You mean...

VOICE TWO. Yes.

*(THE MUSIC begins to play.)*

<<<>>>

*(EMORY lies on his bed, awake. It is dark outside. He gets up and looks out his window. He opens the window. He sits on the edge of his bed. He pulls at a thread on his blanket, breaking it off. He goes to the window. Closes it. He goes to the kitchen.)*

<<<>>>

*(ALICE and DUSTIN are lying in bed. Just before dawn.)*

ALICE. ...

DUSTIN. ...

ALICE. ...

DUSTIN. ...

ALICE. ...

DUSTIN. ...

ALICE. ...

DUSTIN. ...

How long was this going on?

ALICE. ...

Almost two months.

DUSTIN. Hm. I thought longer.

ALICE. You knew?

DUSTIN. Of course.

ALICE. You never said anything.

DUSTIN.

ALICE. Why?

DUSTIN. Because I've forgiven you.

ALICE. Why?

DUSTIN. Because. I've given up.

ALICE. On us?

DUSTIN.

ALICE. I haven't.

DUSTIN. That's why you ended it with him?

ALICE. Yes.

DUSTIN. That's why you're still here?

ALICE. Yes.

DUSTIN. .

Did he know about me?

ALICE. He figured it out eventually.

DUSTIN. But you didn't tell him.

ALICE. ...

DUSTIN. He thought he was the only one? That you were all his?  
Poor bastard.

ALICE. I feel terrible.

DUSTIN. Hm.

ALICE. I'm sorry, Dusty. Please stay. Stay with me, okay?

DUSTIN. On my business trips, I... Alice, I've been sleeping with  
other women when I'm away.

ALICE.

.

That won't work.

You wouldn't do that.

DUSTIN. .

ALICE. Teaching me a lesson, Dustin? Want me to know how it  
feels?

DUSTIN. Actually, I thought it would bring us closer together. You  
know. Having a common hobby. I've given up. This is over.



<<◇>>

*(Dawn. EMORY is still in the kitchen.)*

<<◇>>

*(FELICIA is in her apartment. A knock on her door.)*

FELICIA. ...Yes? Who is it?

SETH. Special delivery for...Fell-ish-ah?

FELICIA. I'm not expecting anything. Goodbye.

SETH. ...

Candygram?

FELICIA. ...!!!

*(She rushes and opens the door.)*

Sethie!

*(She jumps into his hug, laughing.)*

SETH. Hey, Leecie.

FELICIA. I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow!

SETH. I managed an earlier flight. Thought I'd surprise you.

FELICIA. How'd you get in the building?

SETH. Good looks will open a lot of doors in this world.

FELICIA. Ha. Well, come in, sit down. How are you, how's school and...where's your luggage?

SETH. It's so good to see you.

FELICIA. Do you want something to drink?

SETH. Sure. How about our usual?

FELICIA. 'Kay. Oh, I'm so glad you're here. We're gonna have so

much fun. How long are you staying, again? Three weeks?

SETH. You've decorated, it looks nice.

FELICIA. Oh, thanks!

*(She brings the drinks.)*

Cheers!

*(The phone rings.)*

Mm. Just a sec. I want to hear all about your classes!

*(Picks up phone.)*

Hello? Oh, hi Chris. Reschedule? Oh. Actually, you know what? Just cancel my appointment, that's better anyway. Yeah, my friend Seth flew in a day early, so I'll just come in next week.

...

Yeah, Seth. Why?

*(SETH slowly exits.)*

No, don't put her on right now, Seth is here, I—

...

Yes. Hello. Well, he just got here.

...

But—

*(She turns, realizes Seth is gone.)*

But he was...

Yeah. Yeah, I'll see you at three.

*(She hangs up. She walks back over. His drink is on the table, still full.)*

<<◇◇>>

*(FELICIA, alone.)*

FELICIA. ...

Well, I don't remember how it starts. I think I'm at my high school or something, I'm not sure why. But then I'm at home.

I get this letter. I hold it in my hand, this white envelope, and...

And I just know. I know right away.

VOICE ONE. What do you know.

FELICIA. That he's gone. You should have seen his smile, he had this...smile.

...

He was so smart. I knew he was going to go to some big ivy league. And he did. For one semester.

VOICE ONE. What did the letter say?

FELICIA. I'm not sure what it said in the letter, but there was something on the envelope. On the outside.

It said, "You can write, but you can't call." That's how I knew, I think. I knew exactly what that meant. I mean, it made sense in the dream, anyway. You know. How things just make sense in dreams.

And then...

Then I was somewhere else. I'm not sure where. But it was blue. And there was this music playing, this...music. So sad. But beautiful. Very beautiful, very clear, distinct. And then I woke up.

And just for a moment, I could still hear that music. And then it was gone. And I just started crying and crying.

We got the call that morning.

VOICE ONE. About Seth.

FELICIA. Yes. He was supposed to fly in that day. He was coming home for three weeks for Christmas. I had already bought his present, it was a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. It was our favorite, we would read it to each other when we were younger. They said...they said he just got caught in the crossfire, that he wasn't even involved. Just the wrong place at the wrong time.

VOICE ONE. You don't believe that?

FELICIA. Well, I don't think he was involved, but...he got himself involved. I know it. He tried to intervene or something, be a hero. That's just the kind of stupid thing he'd do, I.

...

He was always trying to help people.

...

I miss him so much.

VOICE ONE. So that was when you first started to...dream.

FELICIA. Yes. Ever since then, I...they don't leave me alone.

VOICE ONE. And lately it's been worse?

FELICIA. Lately it's been...different.

VOICE ONE. How so? Do you still encounter the people from your dreams?

FELICIA. Yes, actually I met this couple—well, not exactly a couple. Two lovers. But I met them both. Separately. And I recognized them. As usual.

VOICE ONE. So what's changed?

FELICIA. Well...this week I met someone...who recognized me. From his dream. He...he knew me, but I didn't know him. It was reversed.

VOICE ONE. That's never happened, has it.

FELICIA. No.

VOICE ONE. How did you feel?

FELICIA. At first I was scared, but. But he...even though I didn't recognize him, I felt like I knew him. Like he was familiar.

VOICE ONE. Are you going to see him again?

FELICIA. ...

VOICE ONE. Felicia?

FELICIA. ...

I don't think that's up to me.

<<◇>>

*(EMORY lies sleeping in his bed. CHRIS watches. CHRIS approaches. THE MUSIC plays. CHRIS whispers in EMORY's ear. CHRIS exits. EMORY slowly gets up. THE MUSIC continues as he exits.)*

<<◇>>

*(THE MUSIC continues. FELICIA wakes up crying. She can't stop. SETH comes in and puts his arm around her. She quiets down and then falls asleep. SETH watches her. The door opens. CHRIS enters.)*

CHRIS. ...

SETH. ...

*(CHRIS walks aside. THE MUSIC shifts. EMORY enters the room.)*

EMORY. ...

SETH. .

*(SETH looks at FELICIA one last time.)*

...

*(SETH exits. EMORY approaches FELICIA, still asleep. He touches*

*her. THE MUSIC finishes. They both awake.)*

FELICIA. ...

?

...

Oh...

Emory.

EMORY. There you are.

FELICIA. What are you...

EMORY. I...don't know.

FELICIA. Where were you?

EMORY. I knew I recognized you.

FELICIA. Where were you?

EMORY. I was looking for you everywhere. I didn't know where...  
I couldn't remember how to find you. I missed you so much.

*(CHRIS has been watching. She exits.)*

<<<>>>

*(Somewhere in the overlap.)*

VOICE ONE. It stopped.

VOICE TWO. Yes.

VOICE ONE. They could see each other?

VOICE TWO. Yes. They finally knew one another. And...her apparition was there. I saw it. But when he came in the room...it left. It seemed to know who he was.

What will this mean?

VOICE ONE. It means they've woken up.

VOICE TWO. So now...

VOICE ONE. Now they can sleep.

*(EMORY and FELICIA are sleeping.)*

Keep watching them.

*(ALICE, JOSEPH, and DUSTIN, all separate, are not sleeping.)*

Make sure the dreams are regular. These things aren't permanent.

VOICE TWO. I'll keep an eye on them.

VOICE ONE. As long as we can keep them on this side of the water...Just keep watching.

VOICE TWO. Of course.

*(CHRIS emerges. She watches EMORY and FELICIA sleeping.)*

These things aren't permanent.

*(THE MUSIC begins. ALICE, JOSEPH, and DUSTIN hear it. CHRIS does, too. EMORY and FELICIA do not.)*

## Service

I placed two slices of rye on the industrial toaster's conveyer belt, just behind Nick's bagel, and watched as the bread advanced into the machine's glowing belly. "It's like God has freed them of the responsibility to tip," Nick said, referring to the Christian Republicans of California, a stingy, demanding group of hard-line evangelicals who'd chosen our hotel for their annual convention. I remained silent, fixed on a hair of crust that had burst into flame and now appeared to be writhing in pain.

"Not so complicated," I finally said. "They're just spoiled pricks who've never worked a day in their lives. Ignorant and arrogant. The worst combination possible."

"They know not what they do," Nick replied, and broke into a wide, generous smile. He slid the bagel onto a plate, and one of the slices dropped to the floor. "Look at that," he said, stooping, "right on a napkin."

"Good thing our floor is so clean," I added, the standard line.

Paris, the morning manager, walked up and asked which of us wanted to serve a fifteen top to finish off the breakfast shift. "They're pains in the asses, I know," he said, "but money is money." A handsome forty-year-old with salt-and-pepper hair, he occasionally confided in me his difficulties with his partner. "Half the time we don't even like each other," he'd once said. "But we stay together anyway. That's love, I guess."

"You take it," Nick said. "I made some money already."

"You sure?" I asked, not convinced he'd earned anymore than I had. He tended to give me the better deal in our friendship, a balance I always wanted to even out, but never quite got around to.

"You bet. I'll pick up Benny later and meet you at Cocktails." I agreed. Benny, my younger brother, had been released from prison a few weeks before, and I'd made it my job to try to keep him out this time. Since turning eighteen, he'd been freed twice, only to



return in a matter of months. A classic recidivist. In both cases I'd been away, once at college and once backpacking through Europe, so I figured he had a shot this time, now that I was around to teach him about life without drugs. My method, if you could call it that, was simple. I took him out drinking three or four times a week to stave off boredom without breaking the law. It worked for me, but I wasn't so sure about Benny. After years in prison, he was a strange, scary man: frequently sullen, coarse, aggressive. He didn't know how to act on the outside, not yet, and I was personally afraid of him.

When I got to the table, guests were shooting orders at Ernesto, the busboy, who was filling water glasses. "Certainly, sir!" he exclaimed, one of a handful of phrases taken directly from the employee script that made up most of his English.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," I cut in, holding a pitcher on a snowy napkin. "Can I offer you some fresh-squeezed orange juice?"

One woman raised a finger to accept when a falcon-eyed lady in her fifties cut her off. "It's not fresh squeezed," she said, casually calling me a liar.

"Actually," I said, veering from the script, "it depends upon your definition of 'fresh.'" The guests—aside from my accuser, who'd dismissed me already—waited for an explanation. "Our juice is delivered every morning from a company that squeezes it overnight," I said, and shrugged, as if to ask what they expected from a fallen world such as ours.

"I had it yesterday," the lady said. "It is definitely not fresh squeezed."

"I already ordered a latte from him," interjected a man several years younger than my twenty-seven. He was handsome and satisfied in a pale-haired, sun-burnt way, wearing a pink shirt that matched his face.

"Okay," I said, beginning to sweat. "Let's start over, shall we? I'll be your server today."

"Brian," the middle-aged man at the head of the table said, reading the name plate pinned to my vest. "Please forgive our impatience, but the Lord's business calls." His mild, ironic voice cut through the space between us and seemed to reach me as if he'd whispered in my ear. He wore a gray summer suit one shade dark-

er than the wave of hair swooping over his brow.

“All is forgiven,” I said, matching his irony. The guests were having none of it though.

“Oatmeal,” he said. “Nonfat milk on the side, steamed. Raisins, brown sugar. Plus the nonfat, decaf cappuccino I ordered from that young man.” The orange juice pitcher kept me from my paper and pen, but Ernesto, thankfully, took it from me. I scribbled down the man’s order, while the others called out their own, much too rapidly to record.

“I apologize ladies and gentlemen, but let’s slow down, okay? And while we’re at it,” I added, returning to the script, “can I interest anyone in the buffet?” I swept my arm toward a long table set with the usual fruits, grains and chafing-dish eggs, accented by a tower of tropical flowers.

“No!” the orange juice connoisseur said. As often happens, everyone followed the man at the head of the table’s lead, with subtle variations, just to throw me off. I scribbled down the sixth straight oatmeal combination with a sinking feeling, and each of the next nine orders was another shovelful of dirt on my grave. The drinks alone—all involving steamed milk—would take twenty minutes to make and deliver. Worse still, though no customer could know this, the responsibility for preparing oatmeal lay entirely upon the server, and was therefore, by miles, the most time-consuming of all orders. Plus it was the cheapest thing on the menu.

I rushed to the kitchen. The breakfast shift was over, so the other servers had either gone home or were counting money in the office. Paris, a typical manager, was no where around. I yanked espresso into the shooters, pushed buttons, arranged cups and bowls, saucers, steamed milk, and so on. By the time I’d served the drinks, the customers were openly complaining. “I know these waiters aren’t brain surgeons,” the young one said, “but you’d think they could manage a few cups of coffee.”

Back in the kitchen I glopped oatmeal into china bowls; stacked serving plates on my tray; filled ramekins with raisins (brandied and dry), cranberries, dates, fresh fruit; added miniature pitchers of milk (steamed, nonfat, two percent and whole), cream, syrup, and slapped a few pats of butter and margarine onto bread plates. I shoved my notepad into my pocket—dizzy from the stupid complexity of the order—hefted the tray and remembered the

brown sugar. "This is ridiculous," the orange juice lady said after I'd delivered the first installment. She was angry because she hadn't made the cut. "I mean, it's only oatmeal."

"I apologize, ma'am, but I'm doing the best I can. You'll remember that I suggested the buffet," I couldn't resist reminding her, "which we supply specifically for those guests who are in a hurry."

"Oh, sure," she said, "for seventeen dollars."

I dearly wanted to recommend the Denny's beside the freeway, and while there perhaps the CRC would consider booking the adjoined Days Inn for next year's convention. Servant though I was, snobbery was not beyond my scope.

"Please," she said, waving the back of her hand toward me, "just go."

More trouble waited in the kitchen, but it didn't matter by now. I'd passed the point of redemption. I served the final oatmeals silently, ignoring the outrage as well as I could. Then I stood by to splash a little water here, to warm up coffee there. Eventually the conversation turned to topics other than my incompetence. The man at the head of the table was a big-shot pastor, apparently, and everyone waited breathlessly for a chance to impress him. "What about money?" the guy in the pink shirt asked. "I'm so sick of people acting like it's a sin to earn a decent living." Nervous now that he'd gained everyone's attention, he kept fiddling with his tie. "God helps those who help themselves," he concluded.

"Amen," the pastor said. It was clear he didn't take any of his admirers seriously. "The Lord likes a good profit." He laughed and everyone laughed after him because it was a pun. I quite hated these people.

Tallying the check, I hesitated only a moment before adding the gratuity. It was policy, after all, for large tables. Plus, the whole expense would be covered by some tax deductible fund, so what should they care. But sure enough, the pastor, tan and healthy, called me forward and stabbed his finger at the check. "What's this?" he asked, as if he didn't know. The others watched smugly.

"An automatic gratuity for tables of more than six guests," I responded.

"Do you think that's fair, given the service we received under your watch?"

“So you want to stiff me,” I said, abandoning the hotel speak. “Fine.” I yanked the leather-bound booklet from his grasp and strode back to the kitchen, on the verge of walking out forever. I didn’t though. I was saving for another backpacking trip. Just as soon as I got Benny on the right track, and managed to save \$2,000 plus airfare, I would be gone. It was the only thing that kept me from scalding these sorts of guests with coffee. So I dreamt of better times ahead and removed the gratuity. “Thank you for joining us, and I apologize for any inconvenience,” I uttered in a curt monotone.

Back at the office, I found that I’d earned \$38 for the entire shift. Paris entered. “Trouble,” he said.

“No shit,” I answered. “Where were you? I got killed out there.”

“The pastor of Christ’s Church of whatever has complained. He said it took forty minutes to get oatmeal.”

“Fifteen oatmeals, Paris. Fifteen capa-fucking-chinos. I did my best. And it wasn’t forty minutes.”

“You should’ve asked for help.”

“From whom?”

Paris’s jaw muscles worked and he folded his arms across his chest. “I’m going to give him a fifty dollar voucher for his next meal.”

I snorted. “What do I care?”

“And you’re going to deliver it. And you’re going to apologize.”

“No way,” I said, and dropped the calculator on the desk.

“Fine. Then I’ll write you up and you’ll be fired.”

“Don’t do this, man. You know what these people think of you.”

Paris stiffened and presented the stony expression we all learn from serving. I’d crossed a line. He knew better than me what the CRC thought of him, and how he dealt with subordinating himself to them was none of my business. I got it.

“You can either deliver the voucher or I’ll fill out the report. Period.” He placed the booklet in my hand and left the office.

Walking down the hallway, I caught my reflection in a rococo framed mirror. I was fit. I ran, surfed and occasionally lifted dumbbells. But the monkey suit transformed me into a pear-shaped little paisley eunuch, which was, of course, the idea. Outside the room, I

opened the booklet. Across the front of the envelope was scrawled: "Mr. Timothy Powers." Pastor Tim, I thought. Ever occur to you that Jesus would vote for Nader? Among other worries in my life, I had a bad feeling that the Democrats would lose the White House to a pampered, dim-witted frat boy, a likelihood I could hardly bear to consider.

I tapped on the solid wood door, which opened immediately. "Yes?" the pastor asked, head cocked, leaden hair a horizontal S over his brow. "It's you."

"Mr. Powers," I said. "I've come to offer my most heartfelt apology for my inability to serve you properly, and with my apology I'd like to offer you this voucher for fifty dollars toward your next meal at the Veranda Restaurant!" Powers registered the sarcasm, but it was the best he was going to get from me. He stepped away from the door and to my dismay invited me in. The room was opulent, of course, but rather small, overlooking the pool instead of the ocean. He sat at the desk and began to sort through papers.

"Bad day?" he asked, removing the voucher and replacing it with something else. I made a noise of affirmation, and he turned to me. "A little humility never hurt anyone."

"Pride cometh before a fall," I said. Over the past days, I'd been looking up biblical quotes that cast the evangelicals in a bad light.

"Close," Powers said. "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." He grinned, enjoying the exchange, and I could see why people were lining up to give him money. "The real thing is less forgiving than the popular version," he said. "God's no pushover."

In the hall, I opened the booklet and found a brochure for "Saturday Night Rock of Ages: Evening Ministry for the Young and Young at Heart." I tossed it into a gilded trashcan. What had I expected, a tip?

An hour later I entered Nick's and my local joint, a place whose only sign read "Cocktails," though that probably wasn't its name. Inside, it smelled like old man, smoke and bleach. A ranchero ballad played on the jukebox. Two Mexican concrete workers sat before sweating bottles of Pacifico at the bar. "Brian," the bartender, Skippy, said. He was a cheerful man with a white beard that earned him an annual role as Santa. "Anchor?" he asked. I mounted a stool while he filled a goblet. The others arrived soon after. Skippy

greeted Nick, and tried to cover his shock at the sight of massive, tattooed Benny. "Two Anchors?"

"So let me get this straight," Nick said after they'd settled, "you had to deliver that piece of garbage a voucher? To his room?"

"At one point, I swear it, I almost popped him right in the nose," I claimed, a blatant lie, to impress my brother.

"You should have done it," Nick said, "just to see the look on his face. Whack!"

I glanced at Benny, who didn't appear to have been listening. He was gazing into his beer, marking signs into the sweat on the glass. He wore his hair pulled into a tight ponytail. Somehow even his face had grown larger than mine during his time inside.

"Last night," he said, "about three in the morning, I'm working the station and this old broad pulls into full service in a convertible Jag." He glanced up and smiled. His teeth were badly gapped. He was wearing braces when they first locked him up at age twelve, and a state dentist pulled them off, years before they'd done their work. "She keeps flashing her ring finger at me. No wedding band. Then she asks when I get off work." He laughed and covered his mouth with his hand, a gesture carried over from his childhood, when his crooked teeth embarrassed him. "I'd of hopped in if there was somebody else to watch the station."

"She was old?" Nick asked. He was the only one of my friends who liked Benny, who wasn't afraid of him. "How old are we talking?"

Benny shrugged. At one point we'd had similar builds, short-stop physiques. Now he carried eighty extra pounds, some flab, but mostly muscle, gained in prison weight rooms. Blurry tattoos wrapped his forearms and disappeared under his sleeves. Shirtless, Benny was monstrous, covered in those crude tattoos, many of them signifying White Power. Hushed family gossip had it that he'd killed someone during his last rampage. "I don't know. But she wasn't too bad looking. And with all that money... bonus!"

The beer tasted good. I bought another round. And Nick bought a round. And we ordered shots of tequila. "Salt and lime?" Skippy asked.

"Hold the toys," Nick responded.

I looked up from my glass and, experiencing a sudden frac-

ture of time, discovered the room packed with tradesman, laborers, kitchen help, and a few raw-looking women. I realized I hadn't seen Benny in some time, so I walked out, surprised that night had fallen. Benny was standing in the front parking lot before a police officer, who studied some papers in the beam of a flashlight.

"What's going on?" I asked, a little drunk and angry. No wonder Benny had spent half his life locked up. Cops were always hassling him, whether he'd done anything or not.

"Just making sure everything's on the up and up, sir," the officer said. His badge identified him as Guerrero, and he had a round, Mayan face.

"This is my brother," I told him, then mentioned that I worked at the hotel, which happened to be the major entity in the economically lagging fishing town. He returned Benny's papers.

"All right then. As long as everything's above ground. You gentlemen have a pleasant evening." At the door of his car he turned, just to get the final word in. "Stay off the roads, would ya? Don't want to be scraping anyone off the pavement tonight." I laughed, the same kiss ass laugh I used on my customers.

"What was that all about?" I asked when Guerrero had pulled away.

"Nothing. I just came out for a smoke. I seen him drive up and he seen me. I knew he'd mess with me, so I just stood there and got my card out. That's all."

"Damn. It's all them tats," I said, and winced a little at the slang. For some reason I couldn't help trying to act like a badass around Benny. It began when I was thirteen. I'd started to smoke pot with a friend who pinched some from his father. I'd come home stoned and brag to Benny about joints and nickel bags and buds, words I hardly understood, but that seemed tough and grown up. Benny, nine years old, idolized me in those days, and was always nagging me to give him a toke, so finally I did. I knew it was wrong to get a little boy high, but I did it anyway, twice. And that was all it took to get him going. Soon he was running with a bunch of young gangbangers, who made me and my friends look like the skinny little wimps we were. I never admitted any of this, but always knew that Benny's downfall could be traced directly to me. And Benny knew it, too. It was a kind of blackmail.

Inside, we joined Nick, who'd moved to a high table, and



was watching Thursday Night Football.

"The goddamn Raiders," a customer at the bar said. "Team of the wastrels of the planet."

"Oakland's not that bad, is it?" Skippy said, trying to establish peace. Though not strictly a local team, the Raiders had their constituents at Cocktails.

"Not Oakland, per se," the man replied. He was an outsider, huge and fat, dressed in a charcoal suit. "The idea of the Raiders," he sneered. "I speak of those aligned to the skull and cross bones, silver and black, the glorification of evil. Proud to be a criminal. Like rap music. An excuse to be a loser." He exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke that overwhelmed every other stench in the place.

"I take it you're a Dolphins fan," said a man in a painter's jumpsuit. He spoke slowly, like he wanted to start a fight.

"Who doesn't love an animal that can't help smiling every minute of its life?" the cigar smoker replied, turning to the painter, and showing me his chubby profile. He appeared, then, younger than I'd first thought, certainly under thirty. The painter chuckled and returned his attention to the game.

"You're from the convention," I said. The smoker pivoted on his stool. Facing me, he became a different man altogether, an avuncular fellow with kind eyes. "The Republican Christians of California," I continued.

"Christian precedes Republican," he said, and drained the amber fluid from his glass. "But yes, I'm involved in that convention."

I didn't bother to mask my contempt.

"The name's Bill," he said, undaunted. "Bill Gunterson." He shot his hand out and I accepted it. I gave him my name. "And what do you do?" he asked. I paused because I didn't want to admit I waited tables.

"He's a pianist," Nick said.

"Ah, piano. What style?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Jazz? Classical?"

"None of that," Nick told him. "He's avant garde. Beyond the labels. Get this, he plays the strings of the piano, instead of the keys." Gunterson turned from Nick to me. I shrugged, playing at modesty. "He gets right in there," Nick said, "plucks those moth-



ers." Benny laughed, though he might have been laughing at anything. Nick hunched over and pretended to pick the strings of a piano. If Gunterson saw through the goof, he didn't show it.

"You don't exactly look like a Christian," I told him. "No offense intended."

"We're all of us sinners, Brian. The flesh is weak." He tapped ash onto the floor and leaned forward. "Between you and me, I'm not really one of them, strictly speaking." He sat back, lost balance for a moment and caught himself on the bar with his elbows. "Oh, I go to church, love the Lord, and all that. But I'm from Washington. National Committee sent me to help out the yokels. California's in our sights, by God." Over his shoulder, he called for another scotch, a double, and I saw his true form then. Bill Gunterson was an underage drinker. His bluster, the suit, the cigar, and the double scotch—his father's drink, I was certain—all brought to mind dozens of boys who'd over the years tried to trick me into serving them liquor. Gunterson was good at it though. A cocky smirk covered his young, yearning-to-be-accepted, fat boy self. I wondered how much the Republicans paid him. "So, who you like?" he asked, nodding toward the television.

"I don't really care much," I told him, "but if pressed I'd vote for the Raiders."

"No," he laughed, "you don't vote for a team. You root for the Raiders." He explained this as if I were a child. I felt queasy as I realized that I'd been making this error for years. "You vote for the candidate who gives you the most money," he concluded.

"I vote Green Party," I said, just to yank his chain. With little variance, I'd voted straight Democratic the last two presidential elections, and considered myself a pragmatic moderate who thought everyone should have health care and education.

He chuckled and stifled a belch. "Thank you. That's a waste of one vote that might have gone against us." I was miffed because in truth I felt the same about third party votes. I particularly feared that Nader would cost Gore the election.

"My folks vote Republican," Nick said. "I used to vote that way, back home, but I changed my mind."

Gunterson appeared on the verge of following up on this declaration, but instead he smiled and turned to Benny. "How about you, friend?"

"Huh?" Benny hadn't been paying attention.

"Which way you vote? Democrat, Republican?"

Benny's eyes cleared. His face took on an aggressive, happy edge. "I'm a convicted felon," he said. "I don't give a fuck." Gunterson had no answer to this. He fidgeted with his cigar, downed his scotch and swiveled back to the bar. The Raiders had just scored a touchdown, the first in the game.

"Shit," Gunterson muttered.

"Damn, Ben," Nick said, "you are one freaky bastard." Benny smiled broadly, trying to hide his teeth behind his lips.

The crowd got wilder as the shots and beer added up. Gunterson began to sway and jerk on his stool. He directed a stream of curses at the hated Raiders.

"I'm going to have to cut your friend off pretty soon," Skippy told me.

"How did he become my friend?" I asked, but Skippy had gone to the other side of the bar.

In the second half, the Dolphins overtook the Raiders, and soon pulled well ahead. The game became a blowout. The Raiders suddenly could do nothing right and the Dolphins no wrong. Fumbles, bad calls by the officials, even their own mistakes all worked in the Dolphins' favor. Gunterson, who'd slipped into a stupor during halftime, was fully recharged. He aimed insults not only at the players, but at the fans. "Come on," the painter exclaimed, slamming his cap against the bar after a tipped Dolphins pass landed in an unintended receiver's hands for a thirty-five yard gain. He turned to the ecstatic Gunterson. "You have to admit, that was pure fucking luck."

"God's will," Gunterson replied. "One thing about losers. They always have an excuse."

"You calling me a loser?" the painter asked.

"How much you make in a year?" Gunterson shouted, and promptly tumbled from the stool, upsetting a woman's gin and tonic on the way. The glass rolled off the bar and shattered on the floor beside his heaped body.

"Jesus Christ," said the woman, plucking her purse from a puddle of gin.

"You're out of here, pal," Skippy shouted, but Gunterson did not and could not respond.

Everyone stood around the fallen man until Benny took him under his arms and hoisted him off the ground. The crowd parted. A mariachi song began, and Benny dragged Gunterson out the door. He returned a moment later, and at first I worried, then hoped, that he'd kicked Gunterson's ass in the process.

"He wants you to call him a cab," Benny told Skippy.

Everyone could sense closing time coming, so they drank frantically, trying to squeeze every drop out of the night. I was drinking too, but whereas everyone else grew louder, I turned in on myself, and kept replaying the day's humiliations, inventing devastating responses to the kid in the pink shirt, the orange juice lady, the pastor. Soon the fantasies moved from talk to violence. I imagined beating the hell out of Powers, popping him in the nose right there at the table. "What were you saying?" I asked him gently, while he stared in shock at the bright blood filling his cupped hands.

"Shit," Skippy said, "could someone go out and find that bastard? He hasn't signed his credit card." A woman near the door stuck her head out and informed everyone that Bill Gunterson was nowhere in sight.

A small party poured out and returned a few minutes later with the news that Gunterson had disappeared. His cab driver arrived, and the painter and the woman whose drink had spilled decided to leave together. In no time, everyone forgot about Gunterson, except me. He was one of them, the CRC, who would soon take over the presidency, and everything else. I felt righteously wronged. Nick was watching me, and I realized that I'd been muttering.

I left the bar. I skirted the building and headed directly toward the dumpster out back, precisely where I knew I'd find Gunterson, the same place I'd go if I were drunk and looking for a place to hide. Out back, between a cinderblock wall surrounding the dumpster and a hedge, I found him on a patch of grass the size of a grave. He lay on his side with one leg crossed over the other. I studied the flesh sagging from his jaw and throat, spilling over his collar. He wore a watch, a class ring and a silvery chain around his right wrist. A roaring sound like heavy surf crashed through my head. I wanted to do something awful. The longing felt almost sexual. I held my dick through my jeans and considered pissing on Gunterson. But that wasn't enough, wouldn't satisfy the lust.

Benny, I thought. I wanted to bring Benny out here to show him what I'd found. He'd know what to do.

I returned to the bar, walking straight now, sobered by my purpose. "Come outside for a minute," I told Benny.

"What's up?" Nick asked, and I turned on him.

"None of your fucking business," I said. I clenched my fists, suddenly hating my friend.

He looked at me carefully, searching for the joke in my eyes, and when he didn't find it, he turned to the television.

I led Benny to Gunterson. "Huh," he said. "That's where he's been hiding." He looked at me, and I thought how easily he could squeeze my neck until I died. "What do you want?" he asked.

I hadn't thought about it, exactly. But the answer came as if I'd planned it all along. "I'll get my car. We'll toss him in the trunk."

Benny laughed, and my feelings were hurt. "What are you on?" he asked.

"Wait," I whispered, "we can..." I ran out of words. "Ransom him," I finished.

Benny shook his head slowly and stroked a bit of chin hair he'd cultivated.

"Let's at least toss him in the dumpster."

"I'm on parole," Benny replied. "I ain't doing shit. Besides, why?"

I snarled and threw myself on Gunterson, growling like a beast. I cradled his neck and worked my other arm under his side. When I'd managed a hold, I heaved with all I had and managed to roll him onto his belly. I gripped his coat and slacks and lifted with my legs. Gunterson would not rise. I jumped to my feet, and wiped the sweat from my face. "Fuck," I yelled, and dropped to my knees, yanked one of Gunterson's loafers from his foot, and I chucked it into the dumpster.

"You showed him," Benny said. I stood there panting, and the rage began to sink back inside. Benny, meanwhile, was going through Gunterson's pockets. He removed a few bills and a slip of paper. "Signature," he said, as if that explained something. I followed him, demurely now, back into the bar. Drained and remorseful, I waved to Nick, who was shooting pool with a dishwasher we knew from the hotel. He smiled and pointed toward me compan-

ionably. I wondered if he had something ugly inside, like I did, and I thought that probably he did not.

At the bar, Benny told Skippy that Bill Gunterson was outside, in a cab, too drunk to walk. "But he wants to pay his bill. I'll bring the credit card slip and his card out to him," Benny said. Skippy looked to me for confirmation. "He said he'll leave a big tip, and because of the mess, he wants to buy everybody a drink." A conversation nearby halted. "He said, 'Tell them to order anything they want. The best. And vote Republican.'"

"All of us?" a man asked.

"Shit yeah," Benny said.

"It's what Bill Gunterson wants," I added. "I heard him."

"He's in a cab? You sure?" Skippy asked.

"Absolutely," I said.

Customers began to mull over the possibilities of one final drink, anything they wanted, funded by a rich man who wished them well.

"Okay," Skippy said, and made the general announcement. This shot life into the drowsy bar, and everyone crowded to order, many thanking Benny, as if he were buying the drinks. A minute later, Benny and I returned to Bill Gunterson. Using his body as a desk, Benny forged the signature, added an obscene tip, and returned the card and copy of the receipt to the wallet.

We returned to cheers. Benny, now the Mayor of Cocktails, sipped a bottle of Heineken and shook hands all around. Nick threw an arm over his shoulders. "Fat man really bought all this?" he asked.

"Oh, you know," Benny said, "we talked him into it." I'd rarely seen Benny happy, and I felt certain he'd stay out this time, that he'd finally located a place in the outside world. I leapt onto his back and he carried me around the bar, slapping the hands of strangers. Five weeks later he was back in prison.

Since then, I've only spoken to him once. It was a sunny, California Christmas, and even though I'd grown distant from my family over the years, I was happy to be away from the icy Midwest where I'd moved for graduate school. Several of us were sitting in the backyard, drinking wine and catching up, when a cousin placed the cordless phone in my hand.

"Hey, Brian." It was Benny's voice, crisp and sober and

youthful, as it always sounded when he called from inside.

"How are you doing?" I asked, sitting up and moving away so the others wouldn't hear.

"I'm alive."

"I hear that."

"Listen, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure thing," I said immediately, feeling guilty and eager to please. He told me to get a pen and paper, so I went into my mother's bedroom and closed the door. At her desk, I wrote down a first, middle and last name, followed by a series of digits that I recognized as a social security number. A beep sounded, something that happened every thirty seconds on prison phones to signal that the call was being recorded. The institutional sound of the beep reminded me of the first time Benny had gotten into trouble with the law. He was twelve, and had a mouth full of braces, dime-sized freckles on his face, and thick reddish hair. Just a confused kid with a disappeared father and a big brother who got him stoned, sitting in a guarded box beside hulking adolescents with tattoos on their faces and necks. When the judge sentenced him to two years in a work camp, he began to cry, and our mother cried, and I cried. That was the last time I shed tears over my brother, but the pain never went away. It only sunk into the center of me and hardened there like scar tissue that aches in cold weather.

"Just call the number, and give the information to either Jackie or Pete. You got it?"

"No," I surprised myself by saying. In the background, I heard the echoing shouts of men surrounded by concrete. They sounded angry, as I was sure they were.

"What?"

"I won't do it," I said.

"Why?" He sounded baffled.

I thought about my answer for several heartbeats. "It's not right," I finally said. I could see him, leaning into the phone to keep the conversation away from the men waiting behind, shaking his head in disbelief. He explained that the number belonged to somebody inside who didn't care, and that his friends only wanted to turn on their gas, and couldn't because of bad credit. It was no big deal.

"Sorry," I said, and searched for more but couldn't find it.

Benny snorted. "I always knew you were a pussy."

I was angry, and wanted to tell him that it was never my fault that he'd thrown his life away. He only had himself to blame for all the terrible decisions. And look what it's done to our mother, and to me for that matter. But as soon as I formed the ideas, I knew that he'd only agree with me. "Sorry," I repeated, and I was—sorry that I hadn't been there for him when it mattered, sorry that it was too late to repair the damage. "You want to talk to Mom?"

"No. I have some more calls to make. Merry Christmas," he said, and hung up. I put the phone in its cradle and sat in the dim room for a while. Then I joined the others outside.

## Garden Party

Even though my glass is only half-empty,  
You come and fill it anyway.  
The ice clinks, *ching*, as it beats the fragile barrier.  
It is still summer on the terrace, at your garden party,  
Even if only in the barest sense.  
The transition from dry summer heat  
To that of moistened autumn has just begun.  
But it is still heat; temperature knows no seasons.  
Sweat beads on my forehead and on the glass,  
Forming little tears of mourning for the passing.  
Our eyes meet briefly, during which time I convey gratitude.  
It is no longer the same, what we have;  
And now we who know passing will also part  
Like leaves from the branch,  
Our own heat sputtering out, leaving questions like ash:  
Was it love? Was it meaningful? Is it worth our grief?  
You smile sadly; a liquid tension structure suspends  
Between our souls, and I find that I wonder:

How much energy does a hydraulic lift exert  
To keep up the weight of the past?  
Oh, Atlas,  
Where are you when I need you?



## Prophecy

We rely on the sky to tell us our futures.  
Constellations bowing over like wedding arches,  
Stretching far as the eye can see,  
Spelling out time like a seer at Delphi.  
But it's cloudy up here tonight,  
And all you can see is a single, orange dot  
Dipping behind a palm tree—maybe Venus.  
The red light-bulb  
Casts shadows over the rooftop—  
Flickers and dies.  
The sky is darker because of it.  
The bulb wavers hesitantly back on again.  
One last shot of power before it all goes black.  
The apocalypse is coming.  
Soon, there will be just this rooftop,  
The cold buildings surrounding it,  
And a sky without any light.



## Water Babies

When the Japanese war bride moved in across the street, my mother warned me not to stare. “I mean it, Merle. She may look different, but she’s the same as you or me.”

She pulled the car into our driveway, sideswiping the boxwood shrub again. She never made the driveway’s turn without hitting the hedge. The engine sputtered to a halt.

“How is she the same?”

My mother’s upper lip tightened, which meant she wouldn’t answer any of my questions. I knew the woman’s husband had brought her over from Japan, but I still couldn’t help picturing hundreds of war brides floating across the Pacific Ocean and magically washing ashore. Even here, in the dull town of Port Angeles where nothing happened except the slow death of our boxwood plants, run over by my mother.

Over the next month, I watched her closely. On Monday mornings, when the milk truck rumbled by, the war bride stepped out on her front porch. If I didn’t look right at that moment, I’d miss her. Her gray raincoat was too short, revealing a splash of her flowery dress. Her hair was in a bun and she wore lipstick, as if she was going somewhere special, but I knew she was just crossing town to the grocery store. She popped open an umbrella—sun, fog, clouds, it didn’t matter, always that umbrella. Nobody in our town ever did that. When she returned, she left her shoes outside. Side by side, small white shoes that could have fit my feet.

It was 1948, and I knew all this because when I was nine-years-old, I spent the fall term at home. When the doctor had declared my weak heart probably couldn’t withstand the long days at school, my mother rolled her eyes, as if to say, “oh, brother.” She’d grown sick and tired of me coming home with new bruises—the boys picked on me, mostly because I was short—but she wanted me to stay in school and toughen up. “You need to stand up to them like a man, Merle,” she said. So did my father, who was also short. But my father was gone so much on his fishing boat, he didn’t have

much say. And in the end, my mother couldn't bring herself to go against the doctor.

After my older sisters left for school, my mother heaved the card table out of the hall closet. She sat on one side and I on the other, as if we were about to play a no-holds barred game of Go Fish.

"Fractions," she said, her tone already exasperated.

I opened my math book. I already knew about fractions, but I wanted to hear her explain it.

"Well, imagine you have a fish. A whole fish. A salmon. Like your father brings home. At least he better if we're going to have dinner tonight."

It wasn't long before she breathed a long full sigh. It meant she'd had enough and it was time for her coffee break. She rang her neighbor friends and they gathered in the kitchen, and I watched out the window, hoping to spot the war bride. After a while, I snuck into the playroom next to the kitchen. They must have thought I was in my room upstairs studying. Their favorite topic was why on earth the war bride and her husband, Bill Bull, didn't have any children.

"Do you think she's incapable? Her tubes deformed?" That neighbor always arrived with her hair in black curlers.

"Maybe she doesn't have good eggs," said another.

"Maybe *he's* deformed," said my mother.

Someone had heard of sperm that didn't know how to swim. Surely they wanted children. "Well, maybe not," said one of the women, laughing. The war bride had miscarried, they decided. Poor girl. Do you know what the Japanese call miscarried babies? A neighbor heard it from her brother, who was in the army and stationed in Japan. "Water babies."

Water babies. Babies floating in water. I pictured mothers carrying babies around the house, tripping over something, a shoe, a fold in the rug, and there were the babies flying into the bathtub, where they floated, slowly turning blue. But I couldn't leave them there. In my mind, they gathered themselves, learned to swim, climbed over the tub's edge, and crawled out the front door to hunt for parents who knew how to hold them right.

Eventually, my mother and her friends turned their conversation to Bill Bull. I'd met him. He had a wandering left eye and you never knew what he was looking at. Our neighbor said her

husband was friends with Bill Bull and had heard the story. Bill was stationed in Japan when he found the war bride wandering around Tokyo in a daze. Fires burned down the city; the wooden buildings lit up so fast. They left acres of rusty-looking soil and ashy rubbish. Her father was killed by an American soldier while he was plowing his rice field; her older brothers died in the Battle of Iwo Jima. As the war waged on, the war bride, her mother, and grandparents ran out of food. Once a day a single bowl of rice, until everyone but the war bride caught pneumonia and died. She'd seen a big white explosion in the sky, and she did what so many in her village were doing; she began walking from her small town to Tokyo.

A couple years ago, when the war bride first arrived in America, she could speak only two words of English: "Hello" and "Good bye." "Can you imagine?" said one of the women. I imagined her trudging along to Tokyo, her white shoes turning black from soot and ash. Unlike my mother, she wouldn't hum, *Glory Glory* or *Blessed Little Ones*. She moved silently, or maybe whispered to herself, hello, good-bye, and carried an umbrella. With nothing to eat, she felt light, as if she were floating. She kept marching—anything was better than what she'd left behind. When Bill Bull saw her, I supposed he thought she was the most beautiful woman. And he must have felt bad—so much gone, all because of the Americans. He filled out the paperwork and married her. An Army chaplain in Tokyo conducted the small ceremony.

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My mother said she needed a day off from schooling me—"Besides, you know too much, Merle." That was true; she was horrible at math and thought verb conjunctions were a waste of time. By then, I'd looked up miscarriage in the dictionary. I was still curious, but I knew she wouldn't go into more details.

"We can talk about Japan," I said, "or the war bride."

She frowned, her upper lip tightening.

"Or any country."

"I'm not going to talk about other countries. Why should I? I'm not going anywhere."

"Well, I am." We were standing in the kitchen.

"Well, Mr. Smarty-Pants. Good for you."

I went to the public library and found a book, *We Japanese*. The pages were thin, almost see-through and you had to turn them carefully or they'd rip. I felt like I'd found a treasure. In a corner chair, I read about moon-viewing festivals and flower arranging. You never used chopsticks to pass food to someone—that was how a deceased's bones were handled. I didn't understand the next section, so I had to read it a couple times: *The Japanese are highly emotional but early acquire the habit of suppressing evidences of their deep-seated emotion. They encase themselves in an armor of inscrutability impossible of penetration by the Westerner.*

Armor? Inscrutability? How did she get the armor? I looked up inscrutable: *not readily investigated, interpreted or understood, mysterious*—and the war bride became even more intriguing. *Impossible* rang out like a challenge.

When I came home, my mother was gone and had locked me out. There'd been a burglary two streets over, a vase taken from a hallway table. Probably a prank, but everyone in the neighborhood was locking their doors and windows. It began to rain, and I slumped on our sagging front steps, waiting, staring at the thick silvery sheet. The air was cold and I pulled up my coat hood. Our bare dogwood tree stood forlornly wet. A puddle formed at the base of the stairs, and in it swam a black ant, its thin legs frantically kicking. I was surprised; I didn't know ants could swim—when suddenly, all motion stopped. Now it was just a black dot drifting on the surface. A small yellow light flickered in the war bride's house. Then her front door opened, and she stepped onto her porch. The rain made her blurry. Stretching her hand toward me, she motioned for me to come over. I sat there, unsure, but she kept waving, so I raced across the street, a crackle of excitement running through me.

I took off my sneakers and left them by the welcome mat. She handed me a towel, and as I dried my hair and face, I felt her looking at me as raptly as I'd watched her. My scalp tingled and the hair on my arms stood up. I knew I'd find her shoeless. Through her thin socks, I could see the outline of her toenails.

Her house was so still; I heard her breathing and mine. She led me down the hallway, and I tried to walk like her, straight-backed, without a sound. She gestured for me to sit at the kitchen table. Her house was laid out like ours, but without the piles of dirty shoes, coats hanging off chairs, puffs of balled-up hair in the

corners. Nor did her house stink of cooked cabbage. And no one was whining or shouting or crying. The whole world seemed to disappear.

Soundlessly she swept into the kitchen and returned with a cup of hot tea and what she called rice crackers. "What your name?" she asked.

I blinked, then told her. She repeated it, turning it into three syllables. "Meru-san," she said carefully as if it were special. She pointed to herself and told me her name. Kagami. As she ate her rice cake, she covered her mouth with her hand. Still, I heard her nibbling.

Afterwards, Kagami pulled out a small square of blue paper, folded it over and over, and handed it to me. "A fish. For overcoming obstacles." She gave me paper. "I teach you."

She folded slowly, carefully, making sure I followed along. I made one, marveling that a single sheet of paper could come to life, as if the fish were always there, tucked in, waiting for the right folds, the right touch. I made another, then another, and together we covered the table with them. Blue, purple, red, orange, yellow, a whole school of fish came to life. I could have stayed there all day with her. When her hand brushed mine, my heart raced.

The rain subsided, and she went to the living room window. I came over beside her. I'd never seen my house from over here. My bedroom was on the second floor, and I'd left my desk light on. I saw myself in my room, sitting there, paging through the library book that showed the insides of the female and male bodies. Each transparent sheet revealed a different aspect—the bones, muscles, internal organs, digestion, nervous, respiratory, reproductive systems. You removed one colorful layer of the body after another until you were left with nothing but a black and white outline.

"So you want to be a doctor?" my mother had said. She'd found me staring at the book.

I renewed the book over and over for no other reason than to look at those insides. Girl, boy? What did it matter? On the inside, they were almost the same. And under all the layers, they were simple outlines, nothing more. Though women tended to be slighter in build and shorter, which troubled me a little. "Maybe."

"Good. You can support me in my old age."

Kagami opened her front door. We stood for a moment,

smiling shyly at each other. She bowed and I did, too. "Come back, Meru-san."

"All right." There was nothing to do but shove my feet into my shoes and run home. My mother was fixing dinner and yelling at my sisters for leaving muddy footprints in the front hallway. She hadn't noticed I was gone.

\* \* \*

Twice more I ran across the street. When my mother left and I knew she'd be gone for a while, I sat outside on our front stoop, trying to look forgotten. It didn't take long for Kagami to open her front door and wave me over. At her kitchen table, we ate mushy white balls with a brown sweet center. She served me green tea and I declared it my favorite (though I'd never had tea before). Pickled cucumbers, a bowl of thick noodles, and sheets of seaweed, I loved it all. Was I part Japanese? Though how that could be, I didn't really know.

One time, after I'd finished eating, she asked me to stick out my tongue. "Too pale. Meru-san, please take off socks." She pressed her thumb into my foot, working the edge and then slowly moving to the center. Now and then her fingers found a tender spot, a terrible pain seized my body, and I gripped my chair. After a while, my face felt hot. "Better," she said. "You worry too much. Use up energy."

Did I? I didn't worry about my father being lost at sea, but I did imagine it a lot. ("An extravagant imagination" was a common complaint among my teachers.) A storm swept in too quickly, whisked him into dark waters where the shore was a memory. Sometimes he fell asleep and the boat drifted far away, to another country, his fishing line still dragging behind the boat. I imagined other things too—living in a different house, with a different mother and father. If I'd been born to another family, to Kagami, who would I be?

She pulled out a piece of paper and with long slender lines, wrote my name in Japanese.

"A good name, Meru-san. Most fortunate."

I'd never seen that in myself before. Something wonderful and private. "What about your name?"

Kagami meant mirror, she told me. "Nothing but a reflection."

"Is it fortunate?"

She smiled and shook her head no.

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My father had come home. That evening during dinner, my older sister announced she no longer wanted to go to school. "It's boring and everyone is mean."

"You're staying at Water Ridge and that's that," said my mother.

"But you let Merle stay home."

At the other end of the table, my father set his knife down. He glanced at me, then my mother, his bushy eyebrows storming into one harsh line.

I took a deep breath. My mother's upper lip tightened. "With Merle, there were special circumstances."

"I told you this was going to happen," said my father. "You treat them the same or else there's problems. I told you."

"What's so special about Merle?" said my sister.

"If everyone is staying home, I want to, too," said my other sister. "The teacher made me pound out the erasers and dust got up my nose."

"See? Treat them the same. I don't care what the goddamn doctor said."

My mother glared at my father. "Let's just eat."

Under my breath I said, "I guess I'm just fortunate."

My father left the table and mother stepped into the kitchen. My older sister reached over, grabbed my ear lobe and twisted. "You're just weird. That's what you are. Everyone at school thinks you're sick and dying of something. That's why you have to stay home."

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Everyone in town knew what was going on before Kagami did. I knew because a neighbor told my mother in our kitchen. That woman found out from her friend who worked Tuesday nights at



the Tiki Lounge. At a dark corner table, she saw Bill Bull with a red head who had a loud laugh and drank highballs like tall glasses of lemonade. They sat hidden behind a fake palm tree, but she was so loud everyone looked over and saw her stroking his hair.

Bill Bull went on a trip and didn't come home for five days; then he did and left again, this time with a heavy, black suitcase. "I never did like him, his fake smile, his fancy wancy suits," said my mother. She cooked a tuna noodle casserole and put it on Kagami's doorstep. When it was still there in the morning, I snuck outside and dumped its contents in our trash. I put the empty dish in the sink and told my mother I found it on our porch.

That next Monday, Kagami didn't come out at her usual time. "Merle, get away from the window," my mother called. I couldn't concentrate. Her beige living room curtains were shut. What was she doing in there?

Three days later, she emerged. Wearing a white gown that flowed to her ankles. The sleeves were long and flapping, as if she might fly away. She carried a small purse, robin egg blue. Her black hair in a high bun, her face, white, almost translucent, and I imagined her pink lungs, the dark bulk of her liver, the coil of her large intestines. It was so real. My mother was in the kitchen, shouting something about my math assignment. If I didn't get it done, there'd be an entire afternoon of math. "Only math!" I stood there, mesmerized, watching Kagami take small steps down the driveway, the hem of her gown tight around her ankles. Where was she going? A party? A chill ran through me; she'd left her umbrella. She looked straight ahead, even though a group of kids stopped playing kick ball to stare; even though two houses down, a neighbor stopped sweeping her porch and called out, "Are you lost, dear?"

I remember after my mother shouted I went back to my math and spent another hour working on long division. What if I'd run over to her? Would she have stopped?

People said later, as she went across the rocky shore, she lifted her gown, as if not to soil it with the seaweed-covered rocks. I've been in that icy water at that time of year, stepped in it because of my sister's dare. Only a few seconds and then my feet turned numb. People said they didn't know what she was doing. Something foreign, something strange.

Maybe she listened to the waves racing over stones, tinkling

like small bells. Then the stillness before the water rushed toward the land as if to reclaim her.

The water swept her up. The waves tossed her up and down, moving her to shore, then farther out again. "I thought she was swimming," one person told the newspaper reporter.

The waves carried her out to the orange buoy. A school of dolphins may have come by, nudged her body with their noses, as if to rouse her. The sharks, the silver fish, and the orange crabs scuttling along the bottom, all swam away. Then she was alone, her body curled around the buoy.

When this happened, I was in town, sitting outside the water company office, waiting for my mother to pay the bill. Our water had been turned off—again. It was mid-afternoon, and gray storm clouds hovered along with a pale streak of light. I was drawing a skeleton, trying to remember the bones from my book, not thinking of Kagami and her white gown. A fisherman hurried up from the docks. He ran down the street, then ran by again, this time with the sheriff huffing behind him. I followed them down the ramp, my heart pounding. My father, I thought. The fisherman has found him dead in the sea.

She lay face down on the dock. Her knobby spine like pearls in the almost transparent gown. When the sheriff turned her over, I flushed with shame and made my eyes move quickly over the curve of her breasts, and rest on her blue lips, slightly open, as if she were about to speak to me.

A small crowd of boys quickly gathered. Seagulls cried out in the eerie silence. I stood for what felt like hours. Other people pushed to see. Finally a boy said, "She's dead." The sheriff snapped, "Get the coroner! The rest of you, scat!"

When my mother got home, she grabbed my arm, "Don't ever disappear like that again!" She didn't say anything about Kagami and set about making dinner, as if everything was normal. Cooked cabbage and salmon I couldn't eat. Mother said, "Are you sick, Merle? Then stay away from your sisters." My older sister said, "Even if you aren't, stay away."

Afterwards, my sisters did the dishes and I stood beside them, numbly drying. My father went outside to stretch the fishing nets on the front lawn. Then I went to my room. Blood thudding in my ears, I saw my ghostly reflection in the window, and across

the street, her dark house. By now, she'd have turned on the living room lights.

I found my mother in her bathroom brushing her teeth. I told her what I'd seen. She put down her toothbrush and spit. "Oh, dear Lord." She was staring straight ahead, thinking what I could not say. I waited for her to say more. Then I went to my room, lay down on my bed, and cried.

That Sunday, the pastor told us to pray for the woman's troubled soul. To find it in our hearts to forgive her. It was not her life to take. I sat there, furious with him. She should have asked someone for help, he said. "Anyone would have obliged."

Shortly after it happened, Bill Bull left town. Eventually the house was cleaned out and put up for sale. But no one wanted to buy it. So many mornings, I woke and stared at it, and the dark windows stared back.

"That a young woman would take her life. I'd never do such a thing. No one I know would." My mother had just come back from the funeral.

"Maybe she was lonely."

"Who knows what went on inside that house."

"Maybe really lonely. So lonely nothing in this world mattered anymore."

"It's incomprehensible to me."

After that, we never spoke about it again. The one time I did, my mother's upper lip tightened and she snapped, "We don't know why she did it. She was different, Merle. That's all."

The next fall I returned to public school and was moved ahead a grade. The boys left me alone, as if they sensed I had more to me. And I did: I knew how the body expires; how underneath the placid exterior, a secret interior resides, powerful as an undertow.

I did go back to her house one more time. Before it was cleaned out and put on the market. Her bedroom was exactly where my parents had theirs, up the eight steps and to the right, across from mine. Her closet door was open and her clothes hung limply, as if waiting for her to fill them again. I touched the sleeve of a long, blue gown. I'd never felt anything like it, like liquid. As I put it over my clothes, her bed floated in the middle of the room, and I lay down, curled myself inside her outline, and listened as the rain tapered to a drizzle. In the darkness, I drew my fingertips over the rise and fall of the gown.

## Reflections From the Bell Jar

11 February 1963, morning:

Cookies, homemade, on a plate. Next to the plate, a glass of white milk. Not fresh—it's yesterday's—too early yet for the milkman to have laid out the heavy glass bottle of the day. Otherwise the counter was clear. They'd just returned home to the maisonette, the upstairs flat on Fitzroy Road, after a four-day visit to the Beckers in Islington. The flat remained clean in the absence of wife and kids, but understandably so; given the fatal perfectionism of Plath, said woman of the house, the au pair and maid (left behind for the short vacation) knew to always keep appearances immaculate. No room for a mess in her home when there was so much mess in her heart.

Thinking about that other woman—that awful woman—made her heart run cold. Jillian Becker, the family friend she'd taken the two kids to stay with for a few days, the friend from whom the children and she had just returned, had told her not to go: "It's too cold" she'd said—but nothing could stop a woman whose mind was so made up. The bitter cold outside, the frosty chill from one of the worst winters in memory, one of the worst perhaps on record—it didn't raise a hair on her skin. They'd have jackets; they'd switch the heaters back on. More than a cold wind would have to blow to sway her from her course towards home.

Standing in front of the oven now, she held her hands out, palms up, desperate to catch the heat. Radiant energy. She could sense the warmth, almost see it, feel the flow from one body into the next. But it was all made up, imaginary, all in her mind: Everything she felt was terribly unreal. She hadn't lit the flame to spark the heat. She hadn't even switched the gas on yet.

*Think about the kids.* Dr. Horder said remembering them might keep her alive. Before Mr. Becker (she called him Gerry) left that evening after driving them home, he'd promised to take Frieda and Nick to the zoo again. They'd had such fun last time. Once

Gerry left she'd snuck into their room, careful not to wake them as they slept so innocently in the dark. Despite the cold outside, she'd opened the window. Fresh air would be good for them. Next to the cribs she'd set bread and cups of milk (like the ones she stared at on the counter) just in case they woke up hungry. There was enough for two, but at thirteen months old, Nick would be helpless, too young to feed himself. So before leaving she'd left a note on the pram: "Please call Dr. Horder." She wrote his number on the line below.

Outside the room she'd laid a pile of cloth and towels, stuffed them into the crack between the floor and the door, in that small space where even the softest light peeks through. She'd wound adhesive tape along the door edges, twisted it like a snake wrapped tight around a tree.

*As out of Eden's navel twist the lines  
Of snaky generations: let there be snakes!  
And snakes there were, are, will be—till yawns  
Consume this pipe and he tires of music  
And pipes the world back to the simple fabric  
Of snake-warp, snake-weft...("Snakecharmer")*

Now all was right, her conscience before God clear. She'd left nothing unaccounted for—not even those stamps she'd borrowed from Trevor Thomas, her neighbor in the flat below: He wouldn't leave for work until a quarter or half past eight, and when he opened his door to leave like usual, he'd see the money she'd left to repay him.

But the letters marked with those very stamps never made it to the mail. Of course, they weren't completely lost; she didn't destroy them. Even so, her mother would never see the one addressed to her, led to believe *it would be better if she never read it*. Regardless of the intent of those letters, getting the stamps for them wasn't the real reason for visiting Trevor the night before: She'd needed to talk to him, she'd needed to find out how long he'd be home in the morning. She'd had to make sure he would be there late enough to let in the new nurse.

Her name was Myra Norris. Nurse Norris. Or Nurse Myra? Just Myra? Who knows what she would have come to call her. She

certainly hoped this girl would be better than the one before. She couldn't survive as a writer without help; the cooking, the cleaning, the children—it was all just too much. There had been quite a scene when the German au pair left. The young girl talked to Trevor Thomas, claiming “Madam had been awful” on her last day there, shouting and screaming at her to go, refusing to pay, and hitting her on her way out. But the new lady Norris would never get the chance to either please or dismay: When she arrived to 23 Fitzroy Road at 9 AM, as planned, she found the door locked, unresponsive to her multiple rings, and the sound of crying children coming from inside.

*But we must choose that silence for ourselves, not have it imposed on us, not even by death... Those who by their very nature can suffer completely, utterly, have an advantage. This is how we can disarm the power of suffering, make it our own creation, our own choice, submit to it. A justification for suicide. (Diary, 1938)*

Amidst the noise of her crying children she rests in peace, this time forever. For years, she'd found a quiet but short sleep in the pills Dr. Horder had prescribed: “How they lit the tedium of the protracted evening!” Those “sugary planets” won for her a “life baptized in no-life for a while, and the sweet, drugged waking life of a forgetful baby.” (“Insomniac”).

That fateful winter morning, she'd still had enough of the sleeping pills pass out of this world entirely. But she chose gas instead.

And she'd chosen gas before. Years ago, in a visit to the dentist, she'd turned down novocaine for gas as he prepared to remove her wisdom teeth. It tasted overwhelmingly sweet, the gas rushing into her mouth and lungs in steady waves, crashing against her like the ocean against the shore, filling her, overpowering her like a sunken vessel. The bright from the light above shattered into tiny fragments and danced in the air, and she smiled as she drifted out into the sea of sleep. She'd remembered all these feelings after the surgery and recorded them in her diary: On the experience of going under, “No one had told her how simple it was.”

Had this moment, this realization of the ease of darkness, been the turning point? Likely she'd say no. The struggle, the long-

ing to break free, the curiosity about another life, another world— all of it had been a part of her for as long as she could remember. Even at the young age of two, she had tottered down the sandy shore towards the vast ocean, seduced by the powerful waves. Her mother had grabbed her in time, but she had always wondered: “What would have happened if she hadn’t been stopped?” Maybe she would have morphed into a mermaid, shed her skin for that of another. Only some form of destruction in this life could create purity in the next.

She certainly felt her life destroyed. She couldn’t go on. Not the way things were, without Ted. Some might say he’d run away; some might say she’d pushed him away. But she knew it was all that awful woman’s fault. They’d been happy together until that woman had come to steal him. Now Ted and that scarlet woman, that Jezebel he called Assia, now they were in Spain, leaving her alone with the kids and the house, spending the money she’d worked hard to help earn.

And so she found herself in front of the oven in the flat at 23 Fitzroy Road. The milk poured; the note written; the children taken care of. One last cloth left to fold, not to guard and protect but to offer a dying comfort. She turned on the gas and put her head deep in the oven.

*It is more natural to me, lying down.  
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,  
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:  
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time  
for me.  
("I am Vertical")*

In life she saw death, but in death she found new life, a poetic re-creation of the self: “Dying is an art, like everything else.”

## References

All quotations and diary entries taken from Ronald Hayman’s *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991.

## Just Sacks, Bags, Boxes

She lies beside him  
like a sack of marbles.  
She rolls around inside herself.  
She clicks. Hold her  
and glass knocks against stone.

How can he love  
something so inanimate.  
And sex?  
May as well try it with  
the stove, the washing machine.

But he's no Adonis either these days.  
Just a bag of rags.  
They wrap around each other  
like telephone cords.  
Form knots out of nothing.

Why kiss a tangle, she figures.  
Why risk frustration, humiliation.  
Why not just sleep. Same with him.  
In dreams, he's safe from moths,  
from fraying at the edges.

All this collecting...  
breath, dirt, scars and souvenirs.  
And marriage,  
the box they're stored in.



## What Mother Says

You can't step outside anymore. It's too dangerous.  
The poor people're getting madder and madder,  
but no one knows how to fix it, and we can't help.

I'm not qualified to help. I'd just mess it up, trying  
to give some bum on the street some cash. All  
men are equal, sure, but the poor ones are pissed.

Violent or crazy, wearing puke or shit-stained blankets.  
Schizophrenic and writing oscar meyer oscar meyer  
on a notepad over and over. Can't make eye contact

or they could ask your name, look you up in the yellow  
pages, call you every day. Your kids might answer  
and sleep with bad dreams like the boogeyman called up.

In 1965 my friends and I saw a guy lying in a car,  
slung all over the back seat, no sign of breath  
or movement. We called the cops from a payphone.

When the cops came, they found the man was  
only sleeping. We laughed with the police,  
and they sent us home. "Go play," they said.

## Davana Terrace

White walls, blue shutters, old books,  
dark green ivy and faded red bricks.  
Liverwurst, Munster cheese, rye bread,  
mustard, and skim milk. Black leather  
office chairs, maroon bathroom tile, a yellow  
rubber ducky next to pink bubble bath bottles.

An old plum tree with a wooden swing  
hanging from a rope. Squeaky stairs  
and iron railings. Grey-blue smoke  
from Nana's cigarette, the slap of cards  
on the table, her legs crossed,  
drinking tea and playing solitaire.

My brother and me crawling  
in the brown dirt underneath the deck,  
our skin sticky with sweat; bright red  
blood on my brother's skinned knee.  
My Grandpa, who we called Bruce  
because my brother couldn't pronounce G's,  
telling us to come inside and wash up for lunch.

That immortal old house, so arrogant and assured  
before my grandparents sold it,  
before we moved away,  
before the riots and the earthquake;  
back when Los Angeles was safe,  
back when I was little,  
back when Nana and Bruce  
could still scare me when they yelled.

## My Son Says He Hears Tigers

as he lies in bed, trying to fall asleep. Can hear growls, rough breathing. My daughter tells me she hears something else, she's not sure—fairies maybe, insects, she says she can't quite tell but whatever it is it sounds small, and she's less than three feet tall so small means something. Eventually, I tell them, they'll fall

asleep. The tigers will leave one alone, fairies the other, and either way they both believe I could protect them. I tell them to close their eyes and for a moment they stare at me in disbelief. We used to stand in doorways, my wife and I, trying to see ourselves the way we wanted to appear, our children the way they really were.

I don't tell my kids to savor the tigers, the small sounds—that eventually nights will fill with noise of a different sort, that the quiet that will come may not be the silence they'd once hoped for. In our bedroom, my wife lies on her side of the bed, propped on elbows, chin sunk to chest. She's fallen asleep reading again. I tug the book

from her loose hand and she unclasps, slides under the covers like a fish into water. She used to demand that I wake her when I came to bed, sure each night demanded its own goodnight kiss. While I brush my teeth I hear her stir, some reshuffling, her voice groggy as she says *honey*, and when I pull beside her she's already asleep again, soundless.

## The Collision

*(There is a traffic light hanging. The red light is glowing orange instead. The sky is haunting and radiant. It is dark onstage. Enter THE CONSTABLE. During his speech the following types of images are projected across him and the stage, at various speeds:*

*a child blowing out candles on a cake  
a dandelion's seeds flying away  
a cat stretching in a square of sunlight  
raindrops on the moonroof of a car  
a seagull floating over a pier  
ice cream melting  
grapes growing on a vine  
dolphins  
a woman cross stitching  
bread coming out of an oven  
a waterbug skimming the surface of a lake  
a gumball rolling out of the machine*

*or other such images.)*

THE CONSTABLE. ...

...

...

.

They say when you witness a car accident, everything slows down. Slow motion. That cliché is a lie. Nothing slowed down. It was rapid fire. I ordered a coffee at Rose's. It was too hot. I stood out on the corner, pulled the plastic lid off. Blew on it.

It was a flurried snowstorm.

It was a thick brick, heavy,  
a stone block of fire. An orchid of blood. Tender.

The woman was in a hurry; she only looked once. She had brown  
hair, chocolate wisps. The man, the van turned too soon. Blue.

Powder sky. Rust over skin.

The collision was gunfire, a child screaming, cotton in a fireplace.

It erupted and spun and danced frantically as the van leapt over  
the coupe and ripped the air with careless abandon...

The ambulance came, a white horse with flashing eyes. It galloped  
in with two passengers. It ran off with four.

I turned back to my coffee.

It was cold.

*(Exit THE CONSTABLE. The orange light goes out, and the green  
light glows blue.)*

## Contributors' Notes

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**devin bertsch** is a junior Theater major with an emphasis in Scenic Design and Playwriting at Santa Clara University.

**gaylord brewer** is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he edits *Poems & Plays*. His most recent books are the poetry collection *The Martini Diet* (Dream Horse) and the forthcoming novella *Octavius the 1<sup>st</sup>* (Red Hen), both in 2008.

**brian brown** has recently published or has work forthcoming in *Inkwell*, *Roanoke Review*, *Quercus Review*, *Farfelu*, *Powhatan Review*, *Snake Nation Review*, and *Birmingham Arts Journal*, among others. Trained as a historian, he spent several years involved in research at the site of Jefferson Davis' capture by Union troops at the end of the Civil War, and appeared on Georgia Public Television's *Georgia Backroads*. He also diligently tries to blend his rural South Georgia background with the wider world he's explored.

**kit coyle** made *Molar* for her father, who is a dentist.

**weston cutter** has had work recently in *Mid-American Review*, *Ninth Letter and Duck*, and *Herring Quarterly*.

**kelly daniels's** stories have appeared in the *Sonora Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Cimarron Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *GSU Review*, *Orange Coast Review*, *Eyeshot*, and other journals. In 2003, John Updike judged one of his pieces the winner of the Agnes Scott College Award for personal essay. He's an assistant professor of Creative Writing at Augustana College, in Rock Island, Illinois.

**jennifer dempsey** recently earned her B.A. at Western Michigan University. Named the Presidential Scholar of English at WMU and a fellow in the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets, she will pursue her M.F.A. in poetry at University of Maryland this fall.

**brian dickson** balances his time between four realms of education

with tutoring, farming kindergarteners, teaching composition in the cyberworld, and teaching composition at the Community College of Denver. He enjoys spending time riding his bike to work and around Denver, cultivating an awareness of things around him.

**megan diddie** is a senior art major at Santa Clara University.

**lia eastep** is a writer whose essays have been published in the *Columbus Dispatch* and *Tintype Review*. Her theatrical monologues and sketch comedy have been performed on small stages throughout her hometown of Columbus, Ohio. Lia recently earned her M.F.A. from Spalding University.

**chad eschman** graduated from Santa Clara University this year with a degree in Theatre and Creative Writing. His work can be found at [www.eschman.org](http://www.eschman.org).

**jennifer gochoco** is a junior at Santa Clara University. She is majoring in both Art History and Studio Art. Photography is her passion. She would like to thank her sister, Jaclyn, for being her gorgeous model.

**john grey** is an Australian born poet, playwright and musician. He has also recently been published in *South Carolina Review*, *Caesura*, and *Cape Rock* with work upcoming in *Georgetown Review* and *Poetry East*.

**tate higgins** is a graduate of Colorado State University's M.F.A program.

**james victor jordan** has a J.D. degree from U.C.L.A. and a Master of Professional Writing degree from The University of Southern California, where he studied for three years with T.C. Boyle. Aram Saroyan was his thesis advisor. His story, "Stalemate," appeared in the 2007 edition of *Limestone*, the literary journal of the University of Kentucky. He may be contacted at [james@jordans.us](mailto:james@jordans.us).

**lily iona mackenzie**, a Canadian by birth, has taught Expository and Creative Writing, Humanities, and English at the University of San Francisco and other Bay Area colleges for over 20 years. Her poetry, critical and personal essays/articles, travel pieces and short fiction have appeared in numerous U.S. and Canadian publica-

tions.

**kelsey maher** is a junior at Santa Clara University working towards an English major and Creative Writing minor.

**doug munsch** is a Philosophy major at Santa Clara University. His dental health is great, thanks for asking.

**josé jesse ramirez** graduated from Santa Clara in 2006 with a B.A. in English. "October, 1989" was born and received valuable criticism in Rebecca Black's Advanced Poetry course in Spring 2006. The author now lives with his wife and daughter in New Haven, Connecticut, where he is a graduate student in Yale's Program in American Studies.

**maeve riley** graduated from Santa Clara University in 2007.

**molly jo rose** is a writer and Scrabulous addict living in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where it snows letters outside her window. They spell the words long, terrible, winter.

**nicholas sanchez's** poem in this issue was inspired by Federico Garcia Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman."

**kevin j. schmitt** is a sophomore political science and religious studies major, lifelong student, halfway competent writer, possible musician, and wannabe philosopher. He asks that you kindly ignore the man behind the curtain.

**nina schuyler's** first novel, *The Painting*, was published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. She teaches creative writing at University of San Francisco and has also just finished a second novel.

**ken tokuno** lives in Hawaii, but being originally from California, his work often finds a voice from the Sacramento Valley.

**lindsay wilson** teaches English at Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada where he also edits the literary journal, *The Meadow*. His poetry manuscript, *Low Company*, was a finalist for the Philip Levine Prize, and his poetry and reviews are forthcoming or have been published in *Talking River*, *South Dakota Review*, *the Small Press Review*, *Gulf Stream*, and *Diver* among others.



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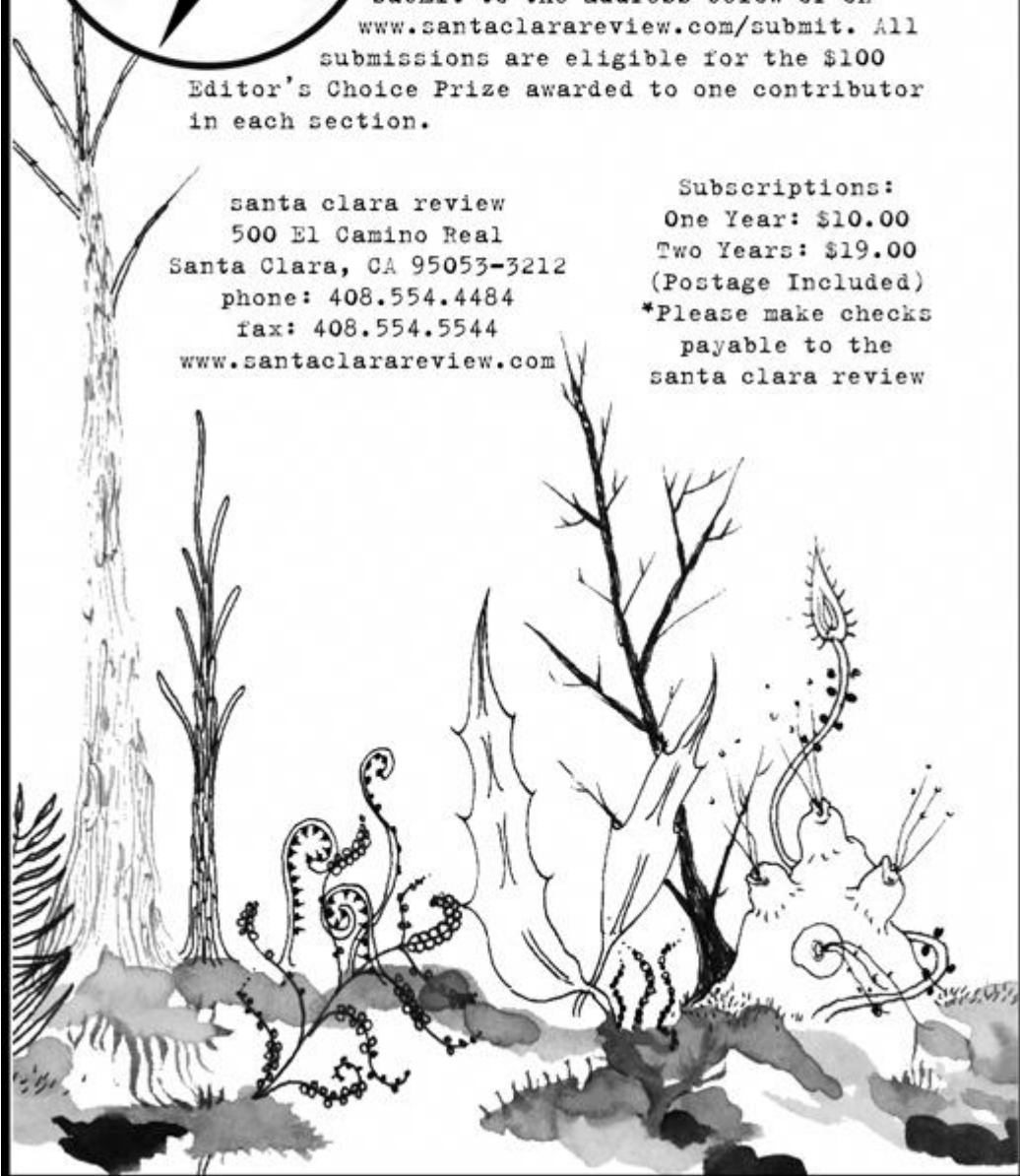


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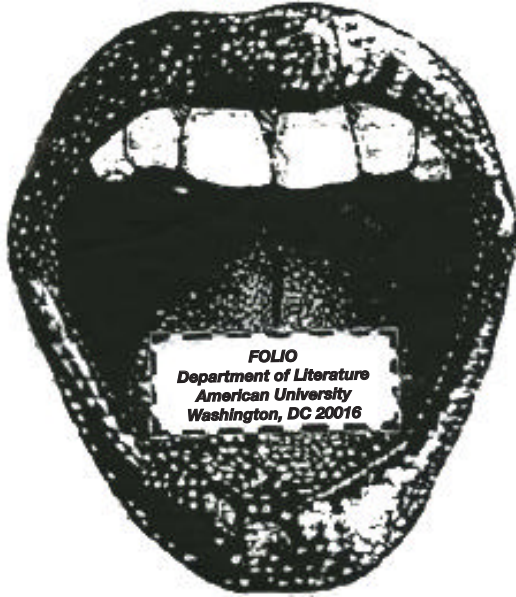
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