The cover of "The Owl" (the previous title of Santa Clara University's literary magazine), for its second ever issue in 1870.
santa clara review

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FEATURE

Editors’ Retrospective ..................................................... 79
In the last issue we published a history of the Santa Clara Review, hoping to give our readers a broad scope on the many years of the magazine. In this issue we include several retrospectives from former editors to focus on particular periods in that history and impart the specific flavor of each. These former editors were given little instruction beyond being asked to describe what the Review was like when they were on staff and what the Review meant to them then, and has meant since.

Despite these perhaps too vague instructions (we thought of it as “sufficient creative space” when planning this section), our former editors have generously conjured up remembrances of everything frivolous, dramatic, sublime and all in between. Those things you might expect from an office crammed with undergraduate writers. We’d like to thank our former editors here for embroidering this issue with their memories.

Combined, we hope that the history and the retrospectives offer at least a sketch of what this magazine has meant to the students of Santa Clara University over its 143 years. We now continue the Santa Clara Review’s tradition of publishing the best writing submitted to us from around the world. Nothing could be more fitting as we conclude Volume 100.

— Stephen Layton, Editor-in-Chief
and the Santa Clara Review editors
THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

Now comes rainy May, gray skies, tulips laden with weeping.
Saw a weasel step across the grass.
First, there was a bronze hummingbird,
then the weasel turning its head.

In the tidepools, blood star with its thin arms
and red California sea cucumber.

No music after ten PM
Sparrows silent except for rustling in the hemlock,
whisper and wink of salmonberry.

— Patricia Clark
I think I want to tell you about the summer I started to go crazy. I don’t mean schizophrenic-bipolar-depressive, those words the professionals use that have the orange-brown color of prescription bottles and make your mouth rattle like a cornucopia of pills. There just occurred, between the light pink-white breezes of May and the nauseous humidity of August, a kind of shift in perception. A subtle something flickered in my mind, rolled over on its back to let its hot, reeking underbelly cook in the sun.

These July mornings, I’d get up and rub a fatty layer of cocoa butter into my skin, put on clothes I’d washed in the sink the day before, still damp and stiff with detergent. Something would force me out of the apartment early, when my chipped white walls were still washing in the peach after-dawn blush. Some adrenaline-like tic of productivity itched me out of bed, onto a job search.

Even at 8 AM the sky was sulfur-yellow, smog sizzling over the city beneath the mean orange eye of a sun. Any freshness coming off the lake had already boiled away and stepping out into the air felt like pulling a soiled dress over my skin. Walking down Argyle, I could almost feel the smell of piss settling into my pores, with the sour reek of fish and dumpsters simmering in the backgrounds of alleyways. To the train it was six blocks of sidewalks that were like old dirty band-aids holding together the city’s Northside wounds. The heat and the scent clattered kaleidoscopically with the bark of Vietnamese voices, the high feminine wail of trains on rusty neglected tracks, and the bray and whoop and howl of the streetpeople of Uptown.

And through it all, a trio of Buddhist monks would pass me, on their morning walk down Broadway and Argyle. They were like a vision of something holy risen up from the dirtpatch blocks. Their robes fluttered, the same saffron of the scabby sky and livid red of the signs on the Korean bakeries, their skin the red-brown of the flanks of abandoned buildings. And they were barefoot, through all those streets, where I was afraid to wear even
flip-flops for fear of broken bottles and human shit.

But nothing touched their feet. It was a supreme act of faith, of a clear and scouring sort, to walk barefoot through this dirty neighborhood unafraid of harm or filth. It scared me, and I began to wonder if they were real, those monks, and not specters of the summer’s rage or revenants haunting a brain that was beginning to cook in its own chemicals. And I’d be too afraid suddenly to go into the bagel shop and the McDonald’s to ask for an application, afraid of the fear and desperation that might come out of my mouth, afraid to go anywhere but home.

But then I was afraid of everything that summer: the girls who bloomed like fleshly flowers from cracks in the sidewalks; the bills that choked my mailbox; the crowded buses full of tangled human limbs; the phone that rang less and less frequently as the summer wore on. Anxiety girdled my bones and ground them into a fine powder, sucked all the marrow and moisture from my body. I walked about feeling like the Raggedy Anne dolls I’d had as a kid, all unseeing button eyes and stringy limbs, puffs of cotton for guts. There was an invisible pair of jaws hovering over me wherever I went, waiting to pick me up and shake all the loosely-knit pieces of my body apart.

The city made me choke, with its smell of meat, a reek like liquor-breath and deep-baked rage. I was afraid, too, of the Chicago summer night, with its fetid breath, its hordes of people like marionettes capering in the neon lights of liquor stores and bars. It was like Hell, going outside at night that summer, the broiling heat rising from sun-baked sidewalks, the red light bleeding from every street and building, the junkies and bums grinning at me like gleeful imps, and the ‘L’ roaring overhead like the jaw-splitting voice of the devil himself.

So I stayed indoors most nights, makeup melting off my face, a can of Old Style sweating in my fist, fingering the sticky pages of a library book. Sometimes I went out, if I could dig up a friend or two. My only friends were the sorts of boys who shaved their chests and scanned “men seeking men” on Craigslist in the morning, over styrofoam cups of gas station coffee. Boys like Sid and Nico, whose grins split like pomegranates in the half-light of basement shows and street corners and spoke with sharp queer lisps and stony Midwestern accents.

We’d drink and ride the ‘L’ when there was nothing else to do, submersing ourselves in the hellish brine of a pickled summer, in the crush of flesh and metal you feel when the city constricts itself about you. There were
parties and shows, too, but I can only recall the train rides; the choking heat and claustrophobia that we sought to drive off with little amber bottles of whiskey and old water bottles refilled with cheap, reeking, purple wine.

We’d start during the 5 PM rush hour, when the trains heading to the Loop were empty. The sky festered and boiled with the setting sun and filled the brown plastic interior of the cars with a dirty orange light. We could scrunch our sweaty bodies into a knot at the back of the car and pass the bottles as the crumbling concrete of Uptown, the bars of Wrigleyville, and the rainbow flags of Boystown slid by beneath the tracks and the twisted steel nest of the Loop grew larger on the horizon. The warm booze and the motion of the train turned my perception into a soup that bubbled at the edges, where the anxiety refused to simmer down. Eventually we’d tumble off at Damen or Lawrence or Belmont and dance over the long steaming blocks toward home under the phosphorescence of the night sky.

And every morning I woke up with purple bruises of lipstick and wine across my pillow and face and ate cold brown rice for breakfast and warmed up day-old coffee swimming with grounds on the gas stove. New makeup and a different skirt every morning, a purse filled with library books and job applications rattling against my hip as I walked out the door. And the monks would be waiting for me on Argyle, with their saintly brown feet in the dirt, the tops of their bald heads ready to peel like oranges and loose black scarabs of fear to eat out the pit of my stomach.

So I’d lean westward into the haze, let the city streets suck my feet forward block by iron block, and hoped my body knew what it was doing. Because when the liquor dries up in the riverbed of my bloodstream and the smoke dies in my lungs, I’m just a hunk of meat, powered by neurons firing electrical impulses, by guts and muscles churning acids and proteins and the manic matter of my brain. And, somehow, that makes me a person, maybe even a soul. And this whole mess, I have to trust that it knows what it’s doing, that it can get me through the world, from catastrophe to catastrophe. And maybe it’s the same way with the city; it’s a person like me. And that’s comforting, because it means, maybe, that I, my little body full of pain and heat and love, am the world in microcosm. The chaos outside and the chaos inside, in balance. A chaos that can chafe the skin of your soul saintly raw, till your feet are lotuses, gilding the shit-stained streets with each step.
QUERCUS VELUTINA

I

This tree is perfectly still above me like a meditating saint, not slapping at the ants crawling over her. Laughing at my vanity.

The heart wood is lightless, damp, nourished by roots pulling up and leaves pulling down.

We sacrifice this simplicity of direction in order to lift our feet off the ground without dying.

II

All the trees turn passerine in the night, their roots swallow-tailed, their leaves feathery. In the shush of day’s opening they lift with awkward flapping in a great train and the sky, full of the labial blues of their passing, sees prairie below, already looking rootless and vintage.

III

Like cordwood stacked beneath a tarp for winter, I consider the benefits of storage, of inaction followed by a brief December flare.

I long for an earthward momentum, something to twist my body like a cat’s landing assuredly. Nothing
cat-like is imparted to me. I fall
as a human body would. Limp. Akimbo.

IV

I am so tired. My dreams wear me out, my body
lies awkwardly, my hands tear and
scratch at my skin as I sleep.

I can only mistake the vireo’s
liquid note shower—it leaks
the iodine red stain the forest
ghosts trail behind them.

When it rained on the oak,
it did not rain on me, here
beneath the oak. My hands
are dry, my hair sticks
to the bark I lean against
and rain travels down its stair
of leaf and leaf and leaf.

— Phoebe Reeves
Here are a few of the things that happened:

Sam’s marrow mutates and grows tentacles. Mom and Dad manage to agree to replace the backseat with a mattress, because Sam is too weak for the twelve-hour drive for the transplant in Trenton. The mattress smells like books left in the rain. We argue about whether to bring the worn candles, the Kiddush cup. They relent and I place these objects around the mattress, like a fort. For just a moment, I feel the craving to be loosely drunk. The kind of drunk that rattles screws. We climb into the van; I scrape my index finger on the door.

“Here,” Sam whispers. He takes my finger into his mouth. I am the one that is nineteen to his sixteen, but he insists. As the blood passes from my hand to his tongue I pull back to myself.

I suggest we pretend we are in a spaceship, hurtling through distant galaxies. Sam shakes his head, grumbles. I poke his stomach hard. I wonder if cruelty is genetic. If Sam gets the chance to grow three more years, would he be so unrelenting? He flinches.

My finger throbs. Part of me wants it back in his mouth. Which part? Maybe my liver? Spleen? Where does want reside?

I think I am on a boat, but when I wake I realize the tire is cartoon-flat, and we are on the side of the road in Indiana. Sam and I are nestled like the continents want to be. His back shivers against my chest. Dad is outside whispering on his cell phone that we have an emergency, and no he is sorry, but NO we won’t wait sixty minutes. He lisps, just slightly. Dad has unbuttoned his collar and I imagine drops of sweat caught in his mustache. I can hear Mom pacing on the other side of the car, maybe doing jumping jacks. Anything, she says, to get the blood moving. The definition on her calf could cut through my father’s doughy section, and sometimes I think she may have tried. They stopped whispering about a “trial separation” when Sam got sick.
We listen to our father’s voice rise on the last syllable of “emergency” almost like singing and the slap-slap of our mother’s impromptu workout. I nestle my hands on Sam’s belly.

“Goddamnit, Delia,” he says. “Your hands are freezing.”
“You’re cold.” It is true. I rarely lie, at least not lately.
“Whatever. Ice-queen. You do frigid so well.”
“Just because I go to synagogue, doesn’t make me frigid.”
“There are 613 commandments and you act like each one was written just for you.”

“Especially the mitzvah about tending to the sick. The unwashed.” I sniff loudly. He does smell of fruit gone overripe. There is musk underneath as well. Some masculine note, like wet earth overturned.

He rolls over and sits up. He reaches for his glasses. He glares at me with those unblinking brown eyes, his body trembling. Without eyelashes or eyebrows, he looks surprised. Undefended. I sit up.

“You’re out of pills, aren’t you?” I say.

“We were supposed to be there soon.” He looks at me. He’s right. With this delay, by the time we get to the hospital they will whisk him directly to surgery. I shake my head. I have the habit of holding one or two emergency pills for him, but he had already used my store last night. His forehead is drawn, hooding his eyes, and highlighting the sharp angle of his nose. He looks like an eagle chick, all fuzz and corners. His hair used to be thick and black, like mine. Our parents reconvene near the hood of the car. Their voices sound like gravel on glass.

“I can’t believe I won’t get to find out if the Large Hadron Collider does actually make black holes and blow us all up,” he says, still staring at me. I trace a stain on the mattress with my finger, rearrange the itchy wool blanket, but he doesn’t stop.

“Or see the Serengeti. Or find out who wins the World Series. Or ride a train, an old train with a sleeping car. Or make varsity basketball. Or see Bob Dylan live. Or eat chocolate mousse, again. Or any other sort of mousse. Peanut butter? Can you make a strawberry mousse? Can you cover a girl in peach mousse? Hell, I will probably never get the chance to see a naked girl.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It just isn’t necessary.”

“No?” He holds my gaze. His skin is petal-thin and I think I can see the
rogue cells multiplying in the hollows of his cheeks. I miss the stubble that should be there, too, that used to bristle like barbed wire.

“Not once? Not even in the shower?”

“Not in person.” He grimaces, sucks in air.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?”

“I’m sorry,” he says. He lets his body fall back; the glasses slip from his face.

Sometimes touch can confuse his addled nerve cells. His bones beneath my hands feel like strong scaffolding, like they were built for the burden of weight. Not bird bones, but dinosaur. Our mom’s voice rises another octave. I’m worried if I look, I will see her shaking Dad, again, asking through her tears why he just can’t fix this. The light through the windows slants. I think about where I stashed the candles, if I remembered matches, the stained cup.

I match my breath to Sam’s soft moans. I straddle him and move my hands under his T-shirt. His skin here is nectarine-soft. Of all things on him, it feels alive. I trace the birthmarks on his hip that are laid out like Orion’s belt. I want to kiss each one. I wonder if his skin would be salty. I can feel the heat gather under my breasts.

My finger that was cut aches, but I don’t stop. Sometimes I think that Sam attempts to dodge our mother’s disappointment by being a moving target. During his punk rock phase he would put glue in his hair and I would find it dried in clumps around the sink. On my toothbrush. His teacher called to say it had coagulated on his microscope and my parents needed to pay for it. Sam blinked and went back to whatever new thing he was into. Sam and his acoustic guitar. Sam and his spy kit. Sam and his worn copy of Plato’s dialogues. Sam and the chemistry set he lit on fire just to see what would happen. The door to his room is always shut, with strange and splendid clanks coming from it. Today, though, he is wearing a frayed tie-dyed T-shirt. I know there is a small black notebook in his bag that he scribbles in meaningfully. Sam’s breathing slows too much and his eyes flutter. My muscles tense.

“Hey. Of all those things, what would you pick?” I use my nails and scratch him and he opens his eyes. He groans as I press a knot in his shoulder.

“You’ll think it is lame.”

“Most likely.”
“Do you ever feel sick with wanting to touch someone?” he asks. “Like, without kissing someone you might die?” I pause in my pushing, hold my breath for a moment.

“You know I’m Shomer Negiah. I don’t touch any males but you and Dad.” Just a few months ago, I was not, when I would lead men to the backseat and place their hands on me. When I would lie drunk on the bed and their shadows would smear together. Since I stopped any sort of even casual contact, I know I am keeping touch sacred. Something I will share with my husband. Something I now only really share with Sam.

“Don’t you want to? You are so into the Torah, and there is so much in that about the miracle of two bodies joining together. The frisson, the power. All that dirty stuff in the back.”

“You mean two souls.”

“I’ve read the same books you have. You know that some rabbis think that God would rather you make love on a Friday night than give to the poor.”

“Sure. If you are married.”

I wonder how marriage is this magic alchemy that transforms an act from sin to good deed. Is there any shadow of gold in lead, before the transformation? Maybe I should reread Leviticus. The sweat beads on my neck and I shrug out of my sweatshirt, sit on Sam’s back in my pajama pants and tank-top. His muscles move beneath my thighs. My hair hangs like vines between us. I would weave him a net of it if I could, if it would hold him.

The voices outside stop.

“Thank God.” Our mom sighs as she collapses back in the car. The door slams. “I just can’t take any more of that,” she says. I know she checks to see if her mascara ran and reaches for her magenta lipstick. She left us once, when I was little, pre-Sam even. One day it was just Dad’s slumped shoulders and macaroni for dinner every night. He grew his beard out into a nest, but he wouldn’t let me rub my cheek against it. She moved in with her accountant, got pregnant, everything. But then something soured. A miscarriage, stillborn? I’ve never gotten the full story. Within a year she was back, but she closed doors with more force, her footsteps echoed. The remnants of cups littered her wake. I want to ask her about this other shadow family that she seeded, but then shranked around her. I want to, but I don’t. Sam arrived soon after she returned, some consolation child. She used to be really rough with him, like if she shook him hard enough he would metamorphose.
Her freshly painted face pokes out of the curtain between the front of the van and the back, and I get off Sam and sit apart on the mattress. For some reason, I blush. “Do you guys want any juice? An apple?” she calls from up front, hopeful. No tears in her voice at all. Sam curls up in ball. “No,” I shout back. “We’re fine.”

While they are changing the tire, I light the candles and watch the flicker through my fingers. A few months ago, when I told them I wanted to bake challah and observe Shabbat, my mom stopped chewing her tofu, and spit it daintily into her napkin. “Well,” my dad said, “You sure you aren’t really gay and just think you are religious? Is this one of those phases?” I know they fret over what to tell their friends. It was easier for them when I stayed out too late, helping Abe make his deliveries, when they could trace the track marks on my arms. They could recognize me smashing plates and eating the shards during a bad trip. Now I catch them staring at me with their mouths open, like they are holding their breath. Waiting to see what I will do next. I miss wine, the cheap, abrasive wine like sugary battery acid. I feel the urge in my throat. The grape juice I brought is too sweet. I spill some juice on my arm and it leaves a thin residue. Sam doesn’t lick it off. Sam mumbles the prayer with me, even as he rolls his eyes, even as he shivers.

When we get moving again, it starts raining. Sam and I point to drops of water on the windows and bet on whose drop will make it to the bottom first. Almost immediately, my drop is subsumed by his.

“Do you know about slugs?” he whispers into my ear as his limbs jerk the blankets.

“What about them?”

“How they have sex? They leave special scents in their slime trails to find each other. A slug can spend its whole life searching for another slug’s trail. If in the huge forest they are able to locate each other, they do this gyrating ballet. Their foreplay lasts for hours.”

“Hours,” he repeats.

“So?”

“It culminates with one of them spitting out this special silk, which is stronger than a spider’s web. They wrap the silk around themselves and
then dangle from it, like in a net. Slugs are hermaphrodites, but somehow they decide which one will be the impregnator. That lucky slug shoots out a ‘love dart’ that rips the other one’s belly and deposits sperm there. They hang there for a while, and then the pregnant slug reels back in the silk, and leaves the other one there to die.”

“Why?”

“I just thought you should know. In case it ever comes up.” Before I can answer, he is back asleep. Each time he closes his eyes, I get that nervous feeling like right before a test I didn’t quite study enough for.

Later: “I just want,” he mumbles. “I want I want I want.” His face is lemon-pinched even as he is dreaming. The pain is there, squirming under his skin. I want to ask God to release him from it, but I can’t seem to re-member the words. Trucks roar all around us. The tires shudder over a bridge.

We stop at a McDonald’s somewhere in Ohio. There is nothing I can eat except the French fries. Sam can only manage a Coke, which he knocks over with his shaking. Dad falls to his knees, sopping it with napkins, and eventually his jacket. “I’m sorry,” Mom says to the light-haired girl with acne who appears with a mop. “We’re all so sorry,” she repeats.

“Do you remember Land’s End?” Sam asks. He’s pressing his stomach to my back, like spoons, and I can feel the muscles that have survived in his thighs straining against my own.

“I remember trying to smoke oak leaves.” Land’s End is what we called the small wooded area behind our house. We named the trees and found the ones with the driest pine needles underneath and the branches like walls. We would experiment with herbs and potions, whatever we found growing. This one was supposed to make me beautiful. That one was supposed to give him invincibility. Maybe we each took the other’s potions. Maybe that is what the problem is.

I extract myself from our tangle of limbs. I wrap my arms around myself and find a silver dollar pressed against the mattress. It is hiding among the splotched napkins and straws littered between the seats.

I hold the coin in my fist and squeeze hard enough that when I let go, there is a second coin imprinted on my palm.

We pass fields, bewildered cows. I try to name them, but we go by too
quickly, so they all get the same name: Abe. After my ex-boyfriend, the last person whose lips I touched besides Sam. Abe of the gin hangovers and sultry guitar. Abe who liked it when I begged. Abe of the retreating back.

Abe, whom I left when God told me to.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Sam says.

“Of course you can. They do this procedure a hundred times a week.”

“I haven’t even kissed a girl, ever. I haven’t even felt someone’s clavicle.”

“You can feel mine,” I say. He does and there are small earthquakes in his fingers.

“I just don’t want to never be touched,” he says.

“You are touched,” I say. “Come here.”

We are driving through mountains. We go up and down, as if we are waves. The shadows beneath Sam’s eyes darken. He gestures quickly and I hand him the bucket. I rub his back during it, feeling the blades of his shoulders as pterodactyl wings that are too small yet to fly. The other cars are a hurricane around us.

It is night and no one has spoken in an hour, probably because the last thing said was “What kind of idiot doesn’t check tire pressure?” On the mattress, it does feel like we are weightlessly rushing through space, with stars streaking by on our way to an alien destination. If we stopped suddenly, I have the feeling that our bodies would continue and be caught somehow in the street light, forever suspended in flight. The road and the rain cover us in a downy hush, but I don’t sleep. Sam is drooling. I want to run my finger over his cracked lips. His teeth chatter even in sleep, and I wrap the scratchy green blanket around him. I am considering. I am weighing the value of giving and the value of living fully. I wonder if I have the courage. I don’t know what would be kinder. I don’t know whom to ask. I try to remember Deuteronomy. Or is it to Song of Solomon I should be referring? The fuzz on his head looks soft. I watch the rain against the windows, the small rivers that do not yet know they are going nowhere.

“Sam,” I whisper, and stroke his chest. He stirs. I think he sleeps because it is his only alternative to the ache.

“I was dreaming,” he says. “There was a herd of horses, wild horses. In our backyard. We were going to ride them to the hospital. But instead of
riding them, we would just jump from their backs to another horse. I could jump like everyone else. Even with the stampede. It was strange though, it was silent. I could smell the horses, but nothing made a sound."

“I just wanted to let you know that I think it is okay. I think that God wants us to have every joy we can. I don’t think we are here to suffer. I don’t think you have to.”

“Every joy?”

“Maybe there are other things possible. If you promise that you will do everything you can to live. That you won’t give up.” I bite my tongue so hard that my mouth is filled with what feels like a coppery wine. “This is a special circumstance, but you have to promise,” I say, like I believe it.

His shivering becomes shaking.

I hold him and I wish I could take some of that poison into my own flesh. I wish I had smuggled more of his pills. I know it doesn’t make sense, but I re-wish the years of stupor. I rewrite each moment when I let desire overcome courage. Each time I failed Sam, left him with our mother’s stale anger, just to feel Abe’s hands on me. I pile these moments on the altar and burn them, hoping God will smell the smoke and forgive me.

We hold each other and measure the speed of our breathing. We calibrate the pace of our pulse.

Here is what may have happened:

Sam and I talk and I decide it is something I want to give. He will have no other chance, no moment at the hospital, no opportunity to call someone to meet us at a rest stop. This is the chance God has offered. The curtain between the front seat and the back does not sway. The radio is a low murmur. It happens silently, darkly. There are tears, of course. Mine, some his. These teardrops must mingle but we do not race them. I know he is not in pain during it, because he stops shaking. My thighs cramp, but I don’t stretch. Sam’s eyes focus beyond me. I wonder if God will understand that sometimes his circumstances push us beyond ourselves. The car rocks, and the sway of the rain and the windshield wipers, and our bodies, stir together. Is the absence of pain pleasure? The mattress refuses to smell like anything but books that we have read and forgotten.

Here is what did not happen:

Sam survives. He lives through the transplant and every day I can see
him gaining strength. The Red Sox win the Series. We scour the Internet and make a series of failed mousses, including avocado and pomegranate. I am reluctant to go to college, but he is already playing basketball a few times a month. Our parents go to counseling and our Dad joins our Mom’s kickboxing class. There is still shouting, but it is with a different timbre. The cadence not quite so desperate.

Sam and I both grow up. We move to different coasts after college, but keep in touch through email and the occasional late night drunken phone call. He becomes a physicist and grows his hair out to match. We each marry, by coincidence, someone named Robin. He and his Robin buy a series of dingy duplexes and sell them all shined up for a profit. My Robin and I still light candles every Friday night. We still believe in God. There are children. Our parents die within months of similar heart conditions. The funerals are quiet, but for the scampering gum-chewing grandchildren.

But I know that is not what happens. What happens is that Sam’s beautiful body rejects the transplant. His immune system is indiscriminate in its hunger. There are never enough pills. Sam and I don’t have a chance to be alone again, even though we let the cartoons on his hospital television flash over us. I’m out getting a sandwich when it is over. I stand in the door with rye and cheese in my hand and my parents stare at me, blinking like under water.

I waver at that threshold, unsure of whether to step inside.
OASIS

There’s a spring in Tanzania
an hour’s drive from the paved road,
on Masai land where boys herd cattle
in sandals cut from old tires. I’ve seen it.
A half hour past a railroad crossing
where a tractor-trailer’s jammed
on the tracks, an entire village digging
it free before the train comes.
Miniature fish swim together,
quick bursts in clear water
under baobab trees and acacias, miles
beneath the snows of Kilimanjaro.
European tourists in bikinis
smear wet gray clay on each other
while their drivers lean on Land
Rovers in the shade and speak Swahili.
I’ve dipped my big toe into
its warmth and thought of taking off
my clothes and jumping in. But I didn’t.
My driver said we’d come back after
seeing the village and giving chocolates
to children who’d laugh at my beard and pet
the hair on my arms. But we didn’t.
The driver got lost and we missed
the spring, and now I wonder how long
those girls will keep rubbing mud
before their arms grow tired.

— Colin Clancy
Do not pour libations on the beach to the god they call Normal. It will not hear you: it is a false idol, a promise that health is separate from sickness, fullness from emptiness. Names, fellow travelers, are only shortcuts which hasten the journey from the islands fantastic to the home-fires fantastic. Turn left on *Camino Paz*, right on *Tropico*. Not left toward the park where we played on the slides as teenagers, desperate and bored and half asleep in the rain and away from the covered river, the destroyed wetlands or right where your mother once ran over a raccoon at night: she pulled over, cursing and frantic, hazard lights blinking. While the thing yowled on the road, she debated what to do, till a jacked-up white truck plowed past answering the creature’s dilemma and yours. You swore at the driver and sat in the car crying beside the silent mound on the asphalt of *Tropico*. Names are shortcuts, not answers. We never draw monsters in the center of the map. If you live in an unnamed country, don’t tell. Don’t give them a name that will
make them think they have power,
think that they know what you do not.
And if they turn you away and do not
welcome you when you are hungry,
though they have many fatted sheep,
do not spare their one eye any agony,
but step from behind your shield of wool
and show yourself. Then go to your ship
and escape, shouting no name behind you
as you sail away on the crests of the deep.

— Ainsley Kelly
OMPHALOSKEPTOPUS
Rupa DasGupta
watercolor and gel pen — 4.375" by 5.75"
Gina Marioni

YUNO AND GINA
oil on canvas — 24" by 18"
VIRGINIA WOOLF
Bridget Walsh
oil on canvas — 30” by 40”
THE SWIMMER
Kika Jonsson
collage on wood
Here's what you don't know about me—I’m a plumber who was recently chosen to be NASA’s Working Man in Space Program astronaut. I’m not actually going to fly the shuttle, but I get to ride along and report back to the world what this whole space travel thing is all about. And that’s all well and good, naturally I’m thrilled and looking forward to the journey. But I have some concerns that I would like to share with you privately, the primary consideration being what I view as the very real possibility of accidentally flying into the sun.

Look, I’m not a scientist. I’m a plumber. But the issue for me is gravitational pull. Who’s got it? Where is it? I suspect this sort of thing is more common than people suspect—accidentally flying into the sun—but it’s probably not the sort of thing that gets reported as it doesn’t qualify as your standard feel-good kind of astronaut story. Call it a plumber’s hunch, but I suspected that as we orbited the earth there was always the possibility that at any moment the sun’s gravitational pull could take us off course and directly towards the gates of nova hell.

For the record, I had approached various people at NASA regarding this drifting into the sun scenario. Needless to say, I was shocked that no one seemed to give it much credence. They had mentioned something about light years distance and the earth’s gravitational pull and other space-science-math-type things, but I just wasn’t convinced.

The net result of my theory not being taken into serious consideration (initially anyway) was that I felt compelled to start an extra-curricular simulation program that trained me specifically for high-heat situations. It took some doing, but I finally convinced one of the guys over at Mission Control to authorize me taking home one of the space suits and helmets. He made it clear that the only available suit and helmet was the previous generation but that they were effectively the same in function.

To his credit, he did warn me that wearing the suit and helmet in summer temperatures would be very dangerous as the suit is specifically
designed to retain all body heat and is not designed for use in direct sunlight, etc. But that strikes me as yet another example of what separates the winners from the losers. You see, most losers would ‘wisely’ regard his warnings and be discouraged, but the winners strike upon a rare opportunity.

I had in mind a very unique high-heat training regimen that included inserting my head into the dryer in order to simulate both the uniquely intense conditions of the sun as well as the inevitable spinning sensation of space travel. And although I found that exercise to be useful, I wasn’t able to fully insert my head into the dryer with my helmet on. (If you’ve never been to space, you should know that the helmets are very big, not to mention it’s extremely awkward to bend down in a full space suit in order to position your head inside a spinning dryer, etc.) So the dryer proved only short-term effective and I would need to find another method by which to create the intensity of on-the-surface-of-the-sun conditions.

I don’t remember when the idea first occurred to me. That’s the thing about being an astronaut that’s different than being a plumber: pure instinct. But on a Saturday afternoon I headed out to the garage and prepared to take my training to the next level. It was the height of the Midwestern summer, mid-90s and a stiflingly high humidity… just brutally hot and perfect conditions for my training purposes. I had in mind to mow the grass, but instead of heading out in shorts and a t-shirt, this time I would be mowing the grass wearing a full space suit and helmet.

Before I tell you the whole story, let me say this: hindsight is 20/20. As it turns out there are any number of logistical conflicts in relation to actually landing on the sun. But you have to understand my level of commitment to appreciate that I am willing to go above and beyond in my training efforts. Nevertheless, and to my surprise, almost immediately there were complications. First of all, starting a lawnmower wearing a full space suit is uniquely challenging.

If I may, allow me here to say a few words regarding Proper Lawnmower Configuration. I am a traditionalist. I am an old-world man. As such, I believe in lawnmowers that are pushed, not ‘followed’ in that bizarre self-propelled configuration. Additionally, and this is critical, I do not push a button to start my lawnmower, no sir, I pull the cord and crank it up—old school.

In an ideal world, that would have been possible. But the fact of the matter is that leaning over and cranking up a lawnmower wearing a full
space suit and helmet just isn’t logistically viable. You have to remember, they design those suits so that the most effort exerted would accommodate someone slowly leaning down to pick up a small moon rock. And to my knowledge, we have never been required to mow the lawn while on the moon. For those particularly curious, I was able to lean over and sort of grab the cord, but when I tried to crank it my head would slam into the back of the helmet which is made of a very hard plastic that did not allow for an otherwise enjoyable afternoon of casually mowing the lawn, etc.

So it’s somewhat unusual that I admit the following, but I was glad to see my ex-brother-in-law Frankie walk into the garage that day. But how can I possibly explain the uncanny and outrageous existence of Frankie? He is, quite simply, unlike anyone the world has ever known and is rarely what you might call a “sight for sore eyes.” But the fact of the matter is I needed someone to start the lawnmower for me—and guess who showed up?

As it turns out, I had (regrettably) mentioned my plan to him and was as surprised as anyone when he arrived with what he considered the singular most instructive idea regarding my preparation for space. “I’ve been thinkin’ about it,” he said with a sideways and suspicious expression.

Now, under normal circumstances I would have immediate concerns regarding what Frankie might be “thinking” about. Case in point, Frankie carried in what looked to be a brand-new car battery and dropped it on my garage workbench and said with that strangely knowing and self-confident tone: “Truck battery. Heavy-duty.” As if the battery and its potential application were self-explanatory.

Now this is precisely the type of moment I’ve experienced hundreds of times with Frankie after he has been “thinking” about something. The point is there was no reason for him to be carrying a car (truck) battery into my garage that day. Nevertheless, he stood there looking down upon the heavy-duty truck battery with locked eyes and a twisted grin that suggested I was yet again in the presence of “greatness.”

You see, it’s so very annoying to stand near a man who presumes to be aligned with greatness or genius but who is going to suggest something so ludicrous that most people would find grounds for a brief visit to the local mental institution. And this is the reality of living in a tiny Midwestern town: Frankie does not understand that he is Frankie.

“Yep,” he says still staring down at the battery, “Low-grade electrical flow… that’s the name of the game.”
“And what *game* are we talking about?” I asked, already a little nervous. “The heat game. Don't worry buddy, I’ve crunched the numbers…”

If I may interject, there are two phrases spoken by Frankie that I find most alarming; they are “don’t worry” and “I've crunched the numbers.” He generally avoids using both phrases in the same sentence. When he does, it’s understood by anyone who knows him that one might best be served by immediately calling the authorities. It’s a phrase that is terribly problematic and things often take a turn for the worse immediately after he has “crunched the numbers.”

The fact is, during the time I was training for space flight, Frankie had a singular advantage over me—he knew I was totally, almost blindly committed to my space preparedness. I’m not suggesting Frankie took advantage of me, he doesn’t have a manipulative or mean bone in his body—but I do think it’s safe to say that people like Frankie carry within them ideas so extreme that it takes an extreme situation for these ideas to finally manifest. I was planning on mowing the lawn wearing a full space suit and helmet, therefore the situation was ripe for additional extreme thinking, and Frankie can always be counted on for such moments.

I don’t remember his thought process regarding the benefits exactly, but at the time I do remember thinking it just might work. It’s also possible that due to the fact I had the better part of my head in a dryer for nearly an hour, I was already in a state of mild heat stroke and so the logic (or insanity) of his proposal escaped me. At the time I just remember thinking that our space suits are in fact “tied into” the main computer on board the shuttle so that Mission Control can monitor our constant physical and mental condition. (It’s not clear to me why I failed to consider that NASA’s onboard computer monitoring did not include the sudden and briefly paralyzing shock that naturally results from being hooked up to a truck battery.)

Anyway, this was Frankie’s plan as he revealed it to me standing there in the garage. I should add that as odd and almost predictable as it sounds, Frankie does very much possess a sort of mad scientist expression, particularly when he’s about to unveil one of his “master plans.” Needless to say I’ve learned to slowly back away when I come across this expression of his, but in this case I felt I needed any and every possible advantage that might better prepare me for surface-of-the-sun conditions. To Frankie’s credit, his plans usually involve me only indirectly. But this plan would be my own private nightmare and I can’t help but think in retrospect that his
mad scientist intensity was heightened perhaps by the joy of imagining just how it might all go so very wrong.

“As I see it,” he began, “We’ve got two issues—conductivity and controlled flow. Actually, those issues are one in the same. Never mind that. Problem solved.”

“What was the problem exactly?” I asked almost innocently, standing in my garage wearing a full space suit and helmet so that my words echoed back to me in a way that suggested I was more alone than even I imagined.

“Jumper cable contact. Obviously I want to minimize the direct contact,” he said flatly.

“Minimize it from what?” I asked.

“From you.”

“From me?”

“Yeah. Look, we’re pushin’ the edge of the envelope here, get me? What I’m doing here is way out on some scientific edge and let’s not pretend there are not some potential side effects.”

“Sure, but jumper cables and a truck battery?”

“Duct tape should do the trick.”

“You should know that I had my head in the dryer this morning and I’m not operating at full capacity. What I mean is, it just occurred to me that you’re talking about hooking up the jumper cables to this battery and then hooking those same jumper cables onto me. Is that about right?”

“Pretty much.”

“Even if I thought this was a good idea… what would it achieve?”

“The truck battery’s low-grade electrical flow should interact with the humidity trapped in your space suit and create a kind of hyper-heat-type situation that might momentarily recreate the temperatures at the core of the sun. Hold on, I wanna show you something.” At this point he stepped out to his truck and came back pulling a Little Red Wagon. (Yes, the exact wagon that small children pull.) What’s important to note is the dead serious expression upon Frankie’s face as he re-enters the garage having to awkwardly bend over while pulling the Little Red Wagon. “The wheels on the wagon are rubber,” he says standing back up but looking down upon the Little Red Wagon as though it’s the missing link to finally understanding man’s ultimate purpose upon this planet. “That should ground the battery so you get a nice steady heat boost and not a hard shock.”

“Heat boost?”
“Yeah. Kind of a formula of the electric surge from the battery combined with the angle of the sun and the humidity trapped in your space suit. Heat boost. It’s kind of a math thing.”

“But you flunked math and didn’t graduate from high school.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that.”

“And the Little Red Wagon?”

“I’ve got some rope. We’ll tie you to the wagon so as you’re pushing the lawnmower you’ll be pulling the wagon with the truck battery in it. This will also help to stabilize the jumper cables and minimize the direct contact.”

“I’m not a scientist, but I think the direct contact scenario is problematic.”

“It’ll all work out in the wash. Let’s give it a go.”

Now I know that the Little Red Wagon would have caused most people to take pause. (Actually most people would have taken pause with the truck battery and jumper cables… but in fact most people would never have considered mowing the grass wearing a full space suit and helmet.) And again, having just recently had my head in a dryer I was perhaps not operating at one hundred percent capacity such that the plan as presented seemed mostly reasonable.

I don’t know if you have this where you live, but in the Midwest we have something called the Heat Index. I don’t quite understand how it works, but they combine the actual temperature with the humidity, which results in a Heat Index number. That number is always higher than the actual temperature and somehow equates to what the outside air “feels” like. It was mid-afternoon in early August and the actual temperature was now somewhere in the upper nineties, but the Heat Index was suggesting it felt closer to eight hundred degrees.

Frankie’s mad scientist expression had now given way to an eerie sort of calm and emotionless focus. He pulled multiple strips of duct tape about two feet long and attached them from the top of my shoulders down about midway onto my back. Next he tied some rope around my waist and knotted the ends onto the handle of the Little Red Wagon where he placed the battery and slowly walked me out to the front yard. He didn’t want to attach the jumper cables until the mower was started and I was facing the forward direction I would be walking and mowing across the yard. He started the mower and said, “Okay buddy, go ‘head and put your hands on the mower but wait till I say go.”

“Okay,” I said, not quite sensing the degree to which I might regret all
Frankie connected the jumper cables to the battery, touched the other ends together to confirm power—sparks flew—and then carefully attached the cables to my back so that they sort of hung down, but because of the multi-layered duct tape I could not yet feel any sort of electric charge. He walked around in front of me and started recording with his video camera while signaling a thumbs up and said, “Ready when you are, buddy.”

As long as I continued walking steadily forward—pushing the lawn-mower while pulling the Little Red Wagon and its cargo of truck battery and jumper cables—everything was fine. (I should probably qualify what I mean by “fine.” For all intents and purposes, I don’t think at this point I was still breathing. My helmet had steamed up so completely that droplets of water were running down the front of it as if I were suddenly caught in a hard rain. And I distinctly remember thinking I can’t feel my legs. Otherwise, I was “fine.”)

Now, in fairness to my ex-brother-in-law, had I not stopped walking forward—had my front lawn stretched on for eternity so that I never had to stop and turn around—his plan may have worked. I was in fact feeling a low-grade charge from the truck battery that gently turned my toes upwards and in my heat-stroked mind did in some way resemble what it might feel like to be hooked into the space shuttle’s onboard computer while landing on the sun. But alas, my front lawn stopped just past the oak tree and I knew it would require a very wide turn to avoid the jumper cables possibly making full contact against me. And I cannot say if it was a kind of dream or nightmare but I seem to remember hearing Frankie yelling in the distance, “Don’t cross the cables!”

He later confirmed that he had been yelling those exact words as he ran full sprint across the front yard to save me from what he then saw as a failure in logistics regarding how exactly I was to successfully turn around while wearing a space suit with sealed helmet while pushing a lawn-mower and pulling a Little Red Wagon that held a truck battery with jumper cables running up to the back of my shoulders. But as he approached me it occurred to him that in the name of science it might better serve the human race if he opted not to help me and instead continue to film the event.

Knowing the turn was critical to my success, I sort of sidestepped to my right using just my left hand to steer the mower into what I hoped would be a gentle and sweeping turn. But like anyone mowing a lawn, the idea
is to come as close as possible to trees and bushes in order to minimize the weed-eater work you will have to do later. At this particular moment I thought the plan was unfolding quite well. The low-grade electrical surge was helping to create a heat so intense I had the strange sensation that my ears were melting. The excess electrical current had seemed to settle into my teeth which created a steady shock and vibration that I thought could be endured another two or three minutes. And there was the outstanding question as to whether or not I would be able to regain my breathing and I did wonder how long a man could walk while being unable to feel his legs… otherwise the plan seemed reasonably successful.

Enter the oak tree.

While gently turning the lawnmower with my left hand it occurred to me that I was essentially walking straight into the oak tree, which caused me to briefly pause. It was then that the jumper cable terminals must have made direct full-force contact with my back which in turn allowed the maximum voltage of the heavy-duty truck battery to slam into my body which among other things caused both my legs to suddenly jerk and straighten with such force that I essentially launched my body forward which may have been a minor incident but for the fact that the oak tree was directly in front of me and the sudden jolt of electricity essentially rocketed me against the tree’s trunk whereby I was immediately knocked unconscious. (For anyone concerned, the mower has an automatic shut-off that engages when both hands leave the mower’s push bar. And to be clear, both hands most certainly left the mower’s push bar at a rather alarming speed.)

The physical repercussions of being electrified by a truck battery and thrown headlong into an oak tree might have been something I could have otherwise walked away from, but unfortunately when I collapsed face forward onto the lawn, the jumper cables had opportunity to “settle in” and administer a steady dosage of high voltage until Frankie arrived and unhooked me from the all-weather winter extreme truck battery.

When the paramedics arrived, Frankie tried to explain that he had no idea a truck battery carried that much charge. It’s worth noting that the paramedics never fully grasped what had happened and as is so often the case regarding the world’s response to the things Frankie says and does, they simply stared at him with the customary blank-faced expression.

In retrospect, there are any number of variables that are difficult to anticipate when one is wearing a fully enclosed space suit and helmet while
mowing the lawn in a mid-August heat wave while jumper-cabled to a truck battery. It was later estimated by some of the NASA scientists that the temperature in my suit that day likely approached eight hundred degrees, but the sudden battery surge may have momentarily created temperatures approaching or perhaps equal to the surface of the sun. So in that sense it was: Mission Accomplished.
MOJAVE

i
want
her
to want
the desert again
i
want
to want
her
crossing
wind-whispered
dunes
in
that silk dress
the white
train
dragging
behind
her
in
sun-fiery
sands again
i
want
her
to want
me
to want
the desert’s
white flame
i
want
to want
her
in
that tattered
dress
that sun-fiery
wet-
fragrant dress again

— David Romanda
NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE #2

When the great white bear comes
in silent ceremony, resting
her paw like a bridal wreath
upon your chest,
tips of claw draped
delicately over collar bone,
pads a muffled weight
erasing every argument
of struggle,
you will forget
to ask

whether she travels
over sea or mountain
or if the snows are deep—
you will be grateful
for the comfort of her broad back
for the fur that obscures
details
for her lope that lulls
so you forget

you meant to leave
love notes
in the wide wake
of your journey
but the bear is so certain
and the stars
above are changing
so you forget
to ask why

you are leaving.

— Laura Isabella Sylvan
LAKE DHARMA

You arrive at the lake, expecting
to meet grief on the trail. Instead:

a fleet of white pelicans
patrolling the shallows, ghost steam

rising off the water glow.
Cormorants on the watchtower

moan and tick, wing capes
shrugged toward the sun. Not even

the day moon, having dusted off
last week’s rusty eclipse, cares

to hear your story of a marriage
slowly crumbling, a young friend

lost to cancer. Then another.
And another. This whole forest

depends on that felled tree
rotting into home for salamander

eggs, centipedes, six varieties
of moss. Black phoebes rattle

winter thistles, swollen throats
percussing: this is, this is, this is…

— Cheryl Dumesnil
Willy Ingram stuttered as usual. “This is my mom who I live with. This is my cousin Jake who’s so tall. This is my Aunt Susan and her boyfriend Miguel. He’s a nigger.” Willy was pointing to a faded black and white Xerox copy of his most recent family reunion. There were a dozen of them strung out between a trampoline and a tree in someone’s backyard. Everyone in the photo had white skin.

We were in second grade. Show and tell.

Mrs. Hill leapt from her stool and dragged Willy out of the room by his wrist. We were silent as we watched him go. We didn’t even make fun of him for being such a mess. His shaggy hair was thin and covered his eyebrows. His puffy maroon vest that he wore every day was too big and flopped around in back. One of his sneakers was untied. His big toe poked out of the other.

Willy looked up and down the photo for a clue then back at us for sympathy. He got neither.

We knew it wasn’t the photo. Mrs. Hill had it in for Willy too.

We hated Willy because he had Willy Germs. We feared him because we didn’t want Willy Germs and knew he could give them to us without even trying. We could get them from sitting next to him too long, rubbing arms in the lunch line, sharing food, being his partner for more than one activity in a week. From smelling his farts. The only way we could get rid of them was to shout “Willy Germs” ten times or else we would turn into a Willy Ingram clone. No one ever took that risk.

Kelsey said the n-word was bad and that’s why Mrs. Hill took him out, but the city kids said it all the time and never got in trouble. Us Clayton boys never said it. The n-word didn’t seem mean when the city kids said it; we just didn’t know how to use it.

Michael Greene agreed with Kelsey. “My mom said you guys can’t use our words.” He extended his long brown arm to point at us.

Kelsey nodded and said, “Told you so.”
Willy and Mrs. Hill returned to the classroom. Willy’s eyes were red and his hair scattered. His vest hung off his shoulder. His teeth chattered and his eyes blinked rapidly.

Mrs. Hill was calm, back to her usual self, and so what Willy said no longer seemed like such a big deal.

We dared Amy to kiss Willy. It was recess, third grade. Our first year on the big playground. We chose Amy because she lived near Willy between a Del Taco that proudly advertised 39-cent tacos, and In-N-Out, a small convenience store with lots of empty shelves. We figured she might want to prove herself.

Our teacher, Mrs. McDonald, used this time to daydream. She sat at the wooden picnic table and looked out over the playground fence and at the third floors and shingled roofs of the big white houses and the branches of the ancient oak trees. It was September, but the hot and sticky air from August lingered. We didn’t care about the heat, but at the start of each recess, Mrs. McDonald complained that she was already sweating.

We meant for Amy to kiss him on the cheek. She ran over to the monkey bars where Willy stood debating whether or not to give them another try. Twice he had already slipped from the third bar.

She got close to him then looked over at us hanging out on the blacktop where we played foursquare and held foot races. We must have all been grinning. The city kids paid no attention until Amy’s lips grazed Willy’s and we all hooted and hollered. Mrs. McDonald snapped out of her private thought just long enough to make sure no one was hurt.

Willy just stood there and waited for something else to happen.

Amy came over to us and said “Willy Germs” all ten times, but we were still afraid to get too close. We worried that she might now have Willy Germs forever.

Willy followed Amy around for a couple months and called her his girlfriend. He gave her a purple beaded bracelet that his mom gave him to give her. Amy gave it right back. At the end of each day she rushed out of the building so it would be harder for Willy to tag along on the walk home.

At lunch, Amy sat with the city kids because they didn’t care so much about Willy Germs. Michael Greene’s mom said there was no such thing and he relayed that to the rest of the city kids. They didn’t fear Willy like we did.
In his last effort to impress Amy, Willy challenged Michael Greene, by far the longest and fastest kid in our class, to a foot race. Michael Greene told Willy to race someone else. He said it wouldn’t be any fair. Willy struggled to find his words. “No, you and me. You and me.” Willy’s tongue hung out of his mouth and flicked moisture into the air. “You and me. Right now, Michael.”

Michael Greene bent over and touched his toes. “A’ight, Willy.” He headed over to The Tunnel, our most sacred piece of playground equipment, a gigantic concrete cylinder that lay on its side, cemented to the blacktop. It was orange on the outside and could be entered by either end. Sometimes four or five of us at a time would hang out in there. All sorts of writing was on the inside walls: “Emily likes Kevin,” “David was here,” “Willy eats farts.” The Butt Licker was the one piece of originality, a red blob with eyes, a mouth, and tentacle-like arms. Its name was passed on from the city kids in the class above. The Tunnel was also used as the start line for races.

When Michael Greene touched the fence at the other end of the playground, Willy was only halfway done with the race. He waddled along and his vest and undershirt rose above his waist. The fat around his stomach jiggled.

We didn’t really want to make fun. It was too easy. But we felt an obligation to each other. Someone said he ran like a dog with three legs. Amy said he must be eating a lot of jellyroll donuts. Someone else said his stomach was a jellyroll donut.

Michael Greene jogged over to Willy and slapped his upper back. Willy had his hands on his head like we learned to do in gym class. His eyes were closed and he breathed loudly.

“You gotta use your arms more. It ain’t all legs,” Michael Greene said. Willy wiped the sweat from his eyes then opened them. “Let’s do it again tomorrow.” He sucked in a bunch of air then blew it right back out. “I can beat you.”

Michael Greene laughed then walked over to us. “That nigga is crazy,” he said.

We all laughed and Michael Greene seemed pleased.

A few of us were called into the school counselor’s office. We didn’t know why. She paced around the room and looked beyond us. We only knew her from assemblies and the times she came into our classroom to
introduce a new kid.

We were happy to get out of class. It was fourth grade and we had Mrs. Sommers. She was older and more serious than our other teachers. She made us straighten our notebooks at the end of each activity, and we couldn’t have anything extra on our desks, not even a spare pencil.

The counselor pushed her glasses closer to her eyes. They were slightly too big and easily slipped to the tip of her pointy nose. “You’re leaders.” She stopped herself from saying something else, then sat down and used her hand to brush through her brown frizzy hair. Her other hand tapped the top of her shiny desk. “Get what I’m saying? Kids look up to you guys so that means you have a lot of responsibility. Know what I mean by responsibility? If you do a bad thing, someone else might do a bad thing. If you do a good thing, someone else might do a good thing.”

We only stared, wondering what we were supposed to say until finally she told us to go back to Mrs. Sommers’s room and think about it.

A few weeks later the counselor returned to our classroom. She held the hand of a boy our age, whom she introduced as Yung Chiu. “I want you to make him feel welcome and at home. His dad is a visiting psychology professor at Washington University.” She applauded until everyone joined in.

Yung was told to sit next to Willy, where there was always an empty seat. He placed his backpack, which was much littler than ours, on his desk. He looked down at his feet and up at Mrs. Sommers but not around the room.

The city kids erupted in laughter as Yung sank in his chair.

Willy scooted towards Yung. “Put your pack in a cubby. That’s why they’re laughing at you.” Willy tapped Yung’s shoulder and we all cringed, especially Amy who was still said to have a serious case of Willy Germs.

The city kids paid no attention to Yung or Willy and continued to laugh. Some of us laughed too, so we didn’t feel like we were the ones being laughed at. Mrs. Sommers shouted, “Quiet down now. Let’s set a good example for Yung on his first day.”

Usually we protected the new kid from Willy but no one protected Yung. Every day Willy invited him over after school, but he always went home with his mom. She waited outside at 2:30, half an hour early. Willy sat next to Yung at lunch and followed him around at recess. Sometimes Yung smiled at Willy, but mostly he pretended Willy wasn’t there. Willy bragged about being able to go to In-N-Out without a parent and told Yung...
they could go together and get root beer and jerky. Yung never accepted Willy’s proposition.

One day Willy started to call Yung “Chop Suey.” He said it more at us. We joined in and eventually shortened Yung’s name to Suey. Willy was pleased with himself. We told Willy that Yung called him a loser and said his vest smelled like a dead squirrel. Willy immediately announced that Suey loved the Butt Licker and that he went in The Tunnel to kiss it. We laughed and the city kids laughed even harder. They loved Butt Licker jokes more than anything. Mrs. Sommers made the rule that no one could talk for the rest of the day.

The next day Willy shoved Yung into the fence. He then ran over to us on the blacktop where we were admiring each other’s high tops. “You guys like that?” We pretended not to know what he was talking about. “C’mon. C’mon. I pushed Suey, then I took something from him.” Willy unclenched his fist and showed us a clump of Yung’s shiny black hair.

We looked out and saw Yung kicking around a rock at the far end of the playground.

The next morning, the counselor pulled Yung out of class. He was gone about an hour. He returned with a man who had his same shiny black hair and yellowish skin. Yung blushed and now had a sticker on his sweater of a smiling green frog. The man introduced himself to Mrs. Sommers as Doctor Chiu. They shook hands and left the room. Mrs. Sommers forgot to give us instructions.

Dr. Chiu was almost shouting. “He’s so scared he doesn’t even talk to us anymore!” We couldn’t hear Mrs. Sommers. “Why don’t you stop them? Is it the Africans?”

Parent–teacher conferences were scheduled a month earlier than usual. Our parents came home from them and asked if we felt the Deseg program was working. “The city kids, you mean?” we asked. “Yes, the ones that take the bus to school.” We weren’t sure what was supposed to be working but said that it was anyway. “You know we pay for them to come in? So if they’re being troublemakers, you should tell us.”

We needed the city kids. We were sort of friends with them, but more importantly they showed us what was cool. The girls were the first to have their ears pierced and the boys the first to have Nike Pumps. Michael Greene and Monique Stephens were already kissing. We didn’t know much
about them. We didn't know where they lived or what their parents looked like. In the mornings they were always at school before us. When the day ended, they quickly disappeared onto the bus.

We barely recognized Willy. He wore a tan vest that fit perfectly and had no obvious stains. His hair wasn't in his eyes. He didn't slouch.

We didn't notice he wasn't called in the usual order until Mr. Pershing read the name Willy Saunders from his clipboard and Willy stood up from the back of the room and shouted, “Here! Here! Here!”

It was the first day of fifth grade. We were the oldest in the school. Yung and his family moved back to Chicago and Maurice, Michael Greene’s best friend, was sent back to the city school. Michael Greene said it was unfair and they should have kicked out Willy or some other stupid kid.

Mr. Pershing called a name from his attendance list, and then played a few notes on his harmonica. He alternated name and harmonica until he got through all nineteen of us. Mr. Pershing was bald and a little fat but seemed younger than a parent or a teacher, like Kelsey’s older brother who was twenty-three.

“There ain’t no Willy Saunders. That’s Willy Bighead Ingram,” Michael Greene shouted.

“There’s no such thing as Willy Ingram. My mom got married this summer and now I’m Willy Saunders.” Willy barely stuttered. He stayed standing and brushed off a speck of dust from his vest in a big, slow, swooping motion.

For a couple of weeks we let Willy think he had a fresh start. We started to like girls over the summer and found out about puberty and periods, and we were getting nervous about middle school and combination locks, so we just let Willy be.

He strutted around the playground pushing out his chest and letting his arms swing carelessly. He put his shoes on his desk so we had to see them. They were the same high tops we had, black L.A. Gears. He raised his hand in class to brag about his father. “My dad said I can drink a beer with him when I turn thirteen. My dad loves my mom so much that he only yells at her when he’s really mad. My dad says I’m smarter than people think. My dad is taking me to a Cardinals game.” Willy stuttered very little and was still not used to hearing sentences come so smoothly out of his mouth. He wanted to keep talking.
We let Willy sit near us. We let him listen to our conversations. We let him walk a few feet behind us.

Then he said the wrong thing. We didn’t know exactly what he meant, and neither did he. We were at lunch and let him sit within a few seats of us.

“My dad says you Clayton boys don’t know very much.”

“Your dad is poor and has sex with dogs.”

“My dad says you guys and the city kids aren’t my real friends.”

“Give up, Willy.” Someone threw a pretzel at his head.

Then he moved to the empty seat across from Michael Greene and flung his arm onto the lunch table. When he sat down, his hand nearly landed in Michael Greene’s applesauce.

Willy leaned over the table and pushed up his sleeve. There was a bulky silver watch that slid up and down his wrist. He held it in place and caressed it with his other hand.

“Let me see that thing,” Michael Greene said.

Willy leaned towards him. “No way, José! My dad says I can’t ever take it off at school and can’t let anyone else wear it, especially the city kids.”

Michael Greene’s mom must have instructed him to do what he did in this moment. It was ahead of our time. It was mature. It didn’t even seem possible. “You better say you’re sorry,” Michael Green said. Everyone listened. Willy didn’t know what Michael Greene was talking about and said he didn’t owe anyone an apology. Michael Greene tried once more and Willy said, “Why don’t you ask the Butt Licker for an apology?” No one laughed.

Michael Greene shoved down the second half of a corn dog and stabbed at the remains of his cold tater tots. He didn’t look at his food, he looked at Willy.

We all thought he would hit him or at least call him a fag or a buck-tooth idiot. These were our default fifth grade insults. We waited to finish our food; we couldn’t risk missing a punch in the face.

The city kids crowded around Michael Greene and chanted, “Hard one, hard one,” their word for a slap to the back of the head.

We joined the chanting and so did Willy. He tilted his chin up, pounded the table with his fists, and chanted louder than anyone.

Mr. Pershing hopped onto a cafeteria stool and balanced himself on one leg. He held a shrill note on his harmonica until the chanting stopped. Lunch was over.
Michael Greene let go of his fork and for what seemed like the first time in minutes, he breathed.

We smoked cigarettes before and after school, in the alley, under the persimmon tree. The soles of our shoes were sticky from the fruit on the ground. We were in sixth grade, and knew we had to be more mature than we felt. It wasn’t just us anymore. We were a mix from all three elementary schools. We egged each other on to smoke and go after girls. Most of the time we talked about the size of Tammy’s breasts. She had an eighth grader’s body and always seemed to be sneezing.

We could acknowledge the city kids in the classroom, but in the hallways and at lunch we had to pretend they were strangers. They owned the three tables farthest back in the cafeteria. Even when it wasn’t lunch period, their sweatshirts and backpacks claimed the space.

Willy and Fuzz were inseparable. Fuzz had been the Willy at one of the other elementary schools. We didn’t know his real name. He had poofy black hair and a trace of a mustache. He was normal looking except for his trunk of a nose and the little nostril hairs that stuck out and blended into the hair above his lip. We were too worried about getting our images off to a good start to keep track of Willy and Fuzz. Instead, we ganged up on each other. Whoever was last to get new shoes, try weed, ask out a girl—he would get it. Most of the time Willy and Fuzz were off our radar.

It was the day Jacob said he had sex and we made him describe exactly how it worked that Willy popped back into our lives. We were supposed to simulate the market crash of 1929. The entire sixth grade was in the cafeteria trading imaginary stocks. Our teachers were the brokers and wore felt hats and gray suits. We pretended to go through the motions listlessly, even though we were actually trying to win. Every ten minutes one of the teachers announced over a megaphone that the market hit a new record low.

After a few rounds of trading, Willy recognized what was happening. “It’s gonna sink! It’s just gonna keep going down!” he shouted. The kids that didn’t know him like we did must have thought he was joking. We buzzed around from table to table trying to sell but no one would buy. Another announcement came and another realization from Willy. “It’s black something. We learned about this in class. What’s it called again? We’ll lose it all! We’ll all be poor and depressed! Black something it’s called. Sell now! Sell!”

Some of the city kids glared at Willy like he had said the word “black”
too many times. Fuzz slipped away into the crowd and we waited to see if anyone would take Willy on.

“Black Tuesday,” Michael Greene said. He stood on his tiptoes and spoke over a few heads. He was now only average height.

Willy wedged himself through the crowd to get closer to Michael Greene. “Today is Thursday, Michael. But, thank you. You should sell right away.”

There were a couple city kids at Michael’s side waiting for Willy to do something wrong.

“You ain’t too dumb anymore, Willy. We used to think you were retarded.”

“That’s cuz I got a new family.”

“You got yourself a boy.”

Willy looked around for Fuzz.

“Relax, kid. You can’t be with him every second. People will start thinking you’re gay too. That’s even worse than retarded.”

Fuzz had pink eye one day and didn’t come to school. Most of us had kissed a girl already, although we couldn’t be certain who was telling the truth, and we were feeling invincible, except for when the occasional badass seventh grader enlisted us to steal chips or donuts from the cafeteria. This made us nervous but we couldn’t say no.

Willy tried to sit down with us at lunch, but Elliot, who had yet to make out, said he didn’t want Willy’s germs. He assumed Willy had pink eye too. “Go sit with Tammy. There’s room for you between her boobs.”

Willy was turned away several more times, then headed all the way back to the city kids, his hamburger and fries already cold. The city kids had a bunch of empty seats. They were notorious for spreading themselves out and lounging around their tables at all hours of the day. Only substitute teachers ever questioned them.

Willy sat down at one of the city kids’ tables. He smiled, his buckteeth hanging over his lip.

“We ain’t doing any favors. Get on somewhere,” Brandon Thompson, one of Michael Green’s new best friends said. He held up his hand, ready to give him a hard one.

Willy picked up his tray and walked to the trashcan. His jeans were too low and we could see the top of his butt. He probably planned to toss his
food away then flip through old National Geographies in the library until lunch period ended. We felt bad for him, but there was nothing we could do.

We were confused when Michael Greene hollered, “Willy.” The entire cafeteria heard him. He spoke much louder than he needed to. “Come here, Willy.” Willy was confused but used to following orders. On his way over, he held up his pants with one hand and his tray of food with the other. Michael Greene patted the stool next to him. “Sit down, kid, before your pants fall off.” Willy nodded and put down his food. “You got ten minutes. Can’t let you go messing up the crew.”

Some of the city kids left the table, some stayed. Willy was confused. We were confused.

For a moment we thought Michael Greene was a fool. Then we went back to not caring, or at least pretending not to care. Still, we glanced over, waiting for the punch line of what we thought must have been a joke. It never came, and we finally understood that Michael Greene was never going to punch Willy, and that we’d never know anything about the city kids beyond what we saw at school.

It didn’t seem like Willy and Michael Greene talked. They just ate next to each other, kept company by mostly empty seats. Willy dipped French fries into a puddle of ketchup, two at a time, three at a time, sometimes four at a time.

Brandon Thompson shook his head and called out, “That nigga is crazy.”
Who is that young woman who has stolen my heart?
So much taller than me
She stands straight with nothing in her pockets.
Sometimes late at night
I think of her wide skirts &
There is singing thru the Spanish needles.
Sighing I stand under her window.
“Every day,” the proverb says,
“The Devil helps the thief,
But someday God will help the watchman.”

— Louis Phillips
A PRAYER OVER LENTILS IN WINTER

I can do without

fresh rosemary,
puréed squash,
even red onion

in place of vidalia.
I can do without dill
or sage

if only cumin seeds
remain. I can do
without tomatoes

and ham hocks. However, I cannot
do without

the last broth
saved from a roast,
or lentils—

the basis
of the stew. Thank you
for flavoring

this provision
with salt.
Amen.

— Karen An-hwei Lee
MUSES
Conrad Roset
anilines on paper — 12” by 12”
GRANDFATHER
Natalie Kelly
mixed media — 42”
ASSORTED CANDIES

Kelly Shi

acrylic on paper — 13.75" by 16.5"
DECEMBER 2012 COLLAGE
Ira Joel Haber
collage on paper
A roach appeared out of the electric socket near G’s bedside table. Its long antennae tasted the air, twitching back and forth. It licked the small hairs on its legs and wiped its head and eyes. Once, twice, three times. A pair of wings the color of stained glass fanned from beneath the coffee brown shell on its back. G propped his head up on his pillow and put on his glasses. After three years in this basement apartment, he was still taken aback when roaches appeared, going about their roach business. He snagged the Poets & Writers magazine by his bedside table and rolled it quietly in his hand. As he raised it over his head, the insect took two jittery steps forward and then disappeared back into the wall.

G got up and made the bed, smoothing the edges with his hand. He slid into house shoes and headed to the kitchen for coffee. Near the refrigerator, a hole in the ceiling plopped yellow drops into a bucket. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, when his upstairs neighbor showered, the water came. He grabbed a can of air freshener off the bookshelf and gave the room a couple blasts of vanilla breeze to cover the ever-present smell of moist drywall. He pulled the blinds back from the row of windows on the right side of his apartment. No matter how much G cleaned them, the windows never relinquished their cataract whiteness. It didn’t seem like such a big deal because the main view from his basement apartment was parked cars and disembodied feet. This morning the windows glowed.

He scooped grounds into the coffee machine and let the faucet run. It took a few seconds for the water to lose its wine color and turn clear. He filled the pot and poured it into the machine. Tiny footprints checkered the white trails of boric acid he had left on the counter. G read somewhere that the powder was supposed to kill roaches, but the creatures tramped through the chemical like school kids through fresh snow.

It wasn’t until the second week in the apartment that G realized he had roommates. Perhaps it was a respectful reticence that held the roaches at bay, but one morning he looked up from a plate of scrambled eggs and saw
a small roach in one corner of the ceiling. It wasn’t scurrying, just ambling along on what looked like a prescribed route. G armed himself with a loafer and crept over the creaky floor. The roach stopped its ambling and stood rock-still. G tossed the shoe and the creature darted to the safety of a small crack overhead. The shoe dislodged a piece of brown plaster, which fell directly into his scrambled eggs. G felt a flash of anger, but then chuckled at the grim novelty. Perhaps his early morning roach hunt could be fodder for a good cocktail party story. One of those *Once upon a time when I was a poor struggling writer* tales.

Later that evening, however, while going to make a grilled cheese sandwich, G found another roach, on the kitchen counter this time, cleaning a pair of ungodly long antennae. He smacked the bug with a thrice-folded newspaper, leaving a smear of legs and guts and wings. And then there was the one trekking through the folds of his bedspread with pioneering fervor. And then there was the one in his bathroom sink, dining on gray flakes of dried toothpaste. And then there was the one waiting for G and his date on the front door knob one evening, its zen-like stillness disturbed only by the screams of the woman who fled both man and roach.

G soon realized that there was no such thing as just one roach story. If someone told a good roach story, that meant they had a thousand other roach stories they weren’t telling. And no one gets popular talking about roaches. He could endure their presence if it made him a better writer, but the less said about them, the better.

G flicked on his computer and it hummed to life. He sipped his coffee and reclined in his squeaky folding chair. In his email he found a message from his editor:

G,

I’m writing to express my concern about your novel. As of today, *Man-child’s Promised Land* is officially three months late. As indicated by my previous comments, I enjoyed the first three chapters, but we agreed that there were at least seven more chapters to be written. I gave you my notes and our phone conversations indicated you were clear on what I was asking for. Although there is some powerful writing here, it still is not completely convincing. I understand that the epic sweep of this novel is about reclaiming the narrative of the African-American historical experience, but for lack of a better expression, where’s the “realness?” This voice should speak to this
generation of disenfranchised people of color. I’m thinking more Mos Def and less Henry Louis Gates.

The crucial thing is that you need to deliver the complete manuscript so we can have a more in depth conversation about where you’re headed. I believe in this book, but I can no longer justify continuing our relationship if you fail to deliver this manuscript by the end of the week. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to give me a call.

Best,
Helen Sanderson
Peach Pit Press

He laughed at the thought of Helen sitting at a cubicle in a Banana Republic cardigan, thumbing her iPod to find the precise music reference that would convey the exact flavor of Oreo she tasted in his writing. Years from now, when he wrote his book on writing, he would include this anecdote to illustrate the perils of being an African-American writer. *Chapter 3: What to do when your white editors are all blacker than you*. He thought about sharing the email with his dad, but the last thing he needed now was to hear another angry history professor rant against Skip Gates. *That old bucky beaver-looking motherfucker.* G took a deep sip from his coffee.

G was trapped in a never-ending series of revisions. *Manchild’s Promised Land* was a historical epic that documented the struggle of black people in America through the eyes of an African ghost named Manchild. G sometimes described it as “A Christmas Carol” of black history. He spent hours in the library researching to make sure the historical depictions were accurate. He sent each draft to his father, who would give him pages of corrective notes. And then there was the story itself. New characters. New plot lines. New settings. It seemed like every time he opened the manuscript, the voices inside all had different things to say. He had somewhere around 400 pages, but couldn’t see the end of this behemoth.

With the correct sequence of keystrokes, G felt like he could move the minds of the masses—like James Baldwin or Richard Wright. He would become a voice. His words could transform the understandings of whole generations. Unlike his father, who made a career of one-year adjunct positions in small midwestern colleges, G would find a place. His work would be discussed and taught in schools. He would be invited to academic conferences to give talks about what it meant to be him. He would chat it up
with Tavis Smiley one day and Terri Gross the next. Walk the red carpet at
the NAACP image awards and make a teary-eyed acceptance speech for
the National Book Award.

But none of that could happen if Peach Pit dropped him. An agent
had once advised him to change his name if his first book ever flopped. He
needed to submit what he had, and despite all of her white Negro-ness,
beg Helen for more time, even if the novel wasn’t as “real” as she wanted.
Otherwise, his current employer, Bread and Gas Mart, would become more
career than job. G took a deep breath and opened his book file. Instead of
his novel, he found a note:

Dear G,

We have removed all versions of your novel from this computer. We
will erase it completely if you do not follow our instructions.

Our apologies if this all seems a bit forward. First, we hope all is well
with you. We’re glad to be sharing our home with someone of such im-
mense literary talent. We’ve read your novel; we think it’s a work of genius.

And we don’t offer compliments lightly. We come from a long line of
literary roaches. Our great-great-great-great grandmother lived in a bath-
room sink at the downtown library. She ate binding glue when she had her
brood and read them Chekov while they were gestating. The smell, the feel,
the taste of a well-written page is a part of who we are. It’s such a relief to
cohabitate with someone who knows the value of a good book. We’re not
picky about many things, but we’re discriminating in our literary taste. Slim
pickings in this dump of a building.

We say all of this to tell you that we need your help. We need you to tell
our story. As you may know, roaches have gotten a bad reputation. Humans
think we’re all just dirty harbingers of filth and disease. And many roaches
are, quite honestly. But we’re also so much more than that. We have hopes
and aspirations. We want our millions of eggs to grow up and be strong,
caring blattaria. We don’t want to just consume books, we also want to be
in them. And not just how we are normally, as some irritant or problem to
be solved. More importantly, our nymphs need to aspire for more than to
end up squashed on the sole of a tennis shoe.

We need you to add a roach to your story. A brief sympathetic descrip-
tion of a single roach. You decide where. Of course we could have added the
roach ourselves, but we need your visionary talent to help us live on the page,
so to speak. We figure if we can encourage brilliant writers like yourself to foster positive images, maybe someone will see the value of a roach’s life.

If you grant us this favor, then we’ll not only return your manuscript, but we’ll leave your apartment building forever, if you wish. Please consider our offer.

Best,
The Roaches

G looked around the room, but he was all alone.

Eighth grade was still the highlight of G’s literary career. In Ms. Mason’s social studies class he’d written a story called “Take Me Home,” which was about an ancient African ghost named Manchild who wept for his lost children, stolen away to toil forever in a distant land. The story featured a lot of sad scenes of slavery and slave ships and slave masters. Cruel whips. Cotton being picked. Pregnant mothers sold. White houses. Masters in big hats and mustaches. All the while, Manchild wept.

But Manchild wasn’t the only one to weep. Even though the story had been an extra credit assignment, Ms. Mason, with her horn-rimmed glasses and ruler-wielding demeanor, teared up when she read it aloud to the class. The principal asked him to read the story at his middle school graduation, which provoked a wild ovation at the ceremony. Next thing he knew, Ms. Mason entered the story into a national young writer’s competition, and by all of the judges’ estimations G was the clear winner.

He made the trip with his father to Washington and accepted the award. He shook hands and listened while people said nice things about his writing and his future. His father sat in the front row of the large banquet hall, flashing a toothy grin and clapping louder than would seem humanly possible or appropriate. Sitting on the stage, G traced his name in the cold bronze etching of his award, and was warmed by the feeling that his destiny would forever be tied to Manchild. The presenter with the mountainous breasts introduced him as the heir apparent to Richard Wright. At the time he didn’t know who Richard Wright was, but he couldn’t wait to be him. G’s mantra became, “What Would Richard Do?”

The technique turned out to be quite successful. All through high school, he made a cottage industry of lamenting the condition of Manchild and his children. As he grew older, however, G noticed that the praise was harder
to come by. In college, white students said his writing was “dogmatic” and “boring.” He blamed this criticism on the racist mentality that kept most white people from understanding the words and feelings of anyone with dark skin. G was similarly disappointed by black classmates who killed him with faint praise: “Right on, brother. You write some heavy stuff.” After reading Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, G decided he shouldn’t judge them too harshly for thinking with a colonized mind.

The light from the frosted windows was blinding. The summer heat was awakening, and a layer of cold sweat thickened on his brow. He could smell the rotting banana peel he had thrown in the trash two days ago. G read the note again.

Just as the note said, the novel was gone. It was there and then it wasn’t. All versions kaput. He ground his tongue between his teeth and his mouth watered. He let out a yelp when his tooth cut through the soft flesh of his tongue.

He tried a virus scan. Perhaps it was something he downloaded. If this was the case, he couldn’t very well tell anyone. His old roommate, Paul, worked for Geek Squad and often shared stories of losers bringing in computers infiltrated with the byproducts of online vice. The scan came back clean.

G was haunted by the note and the thought that the roaches were watching him, making demands. Who ever heard of library roaches anyway? He frowned at the screen. What exactly was the harm of adding one bug? he thought. *Native Son* began with Bigger Thomas battling a monster rat, after all. But that’s not what these roaches were asking for. They wanted him to create a sympathetic roach. G drew a blank trying to recall any African-American classics featuring friendly bugs of any kind, let alone roaches. As if he wasn’t having enough problems with his editor.

That night, G slept on the couch and left his computer running at his desk so he could see the screen. He watched until four in the morning before sleep overtook him. Birds were chirping outside his window when he awoke. On his computer, another note:

Why don’t you get some sleep? You look terrible.
Signed,
The Roaches
G was flummoxed, but he still had to go to work. The gas station was a twenty-minute bus ride from his house, and he worked a double shift during the week. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he could tell the note was correct. The skin under his eyes was fluffed like a soft pillow. But he would have to go. If he called in sick, he knew that his manager Leona would do everything she could to make sure his life at Bread and Gas was even more hell than usual. G wiped crust from his eyes and slapped cold water against his face.

He thought he saw a roach in the mirror, hanging off his shower curtain, but when he turned it was gone. It seemed like the roaches were making an effort to avoid him now.

Maybe it was a sign, he thought to himself. Maybe God was really trying to send him a message. Maybe he needed to get out of his malaise and let go. And if things didn’t work out with the novel or with Peach Pit, then he would just have to get over it and move on. It also occurred to him that he should buy a bug fogger. Several.

After his shift, G rode the bus as usual. He fought a yawn and turned one of the boxes of insecticide around in his hand. To himself, he resolved to start anew. He would scrub clean the apartment and start fresh. Leave Manchild and his tragic brood behind. The roaches could find someone else to advance their roachy cause. As he slipped his key in the lock, however, G couldn’t help but hope that God would take pity on him and return his novel. He looked at his computer screen:

You should be ashamed of yourself. No, your manuscript is still not here. We’re trying to help you, but we need you to work with us. Please.

Signed,
The Roaches
PS: You need groceries.

“The fucking balls!” G yelled out to the room. It seemed like an appropriate response in his mind, but once he heard it out loud, it sounded silly. He jammed his finger down on the keyboard and deleted the message. He got more than a little thrill out of this. He set up six canisters of roach bomb in the middle of the room and pulled the tops off. A hissy plume of insecticide sprayed forth.

He went for a walk for an hour. When he came back, the apartment was
thick with a poison that left bitter chalk on his tongue. On the computer was another note:

Time’s a-wasting. Helen’s going to be quite upset if you don’t finish, and it would be a shame for you to not finish just because of a single roach.

Best,
The Roaches
PS: Still out of food.
PPS: You know who else used gas? Hitler.

G cradled his head in his hands. He could see his whole literary future slipping away. No one would return his calls once word got out that he had failed to finish after getting an advance. He took a deep breath to calm himself, but the insecticide sent him into coughing spasms. He felt the sudden need to vomit and rushed to the toilet. After several dry heaves, G looked up at the ceiling and saw three roaches looking down at him.

“Okay,” he said. “You win. I’ll add the roach, just give me my story back.”

The roaches waved their antennae at him and scurried away. How was this his life? he thought. He tried to hold the tears back, but they came quick and hot. After he blew his nose, he returned to the computer. His novel was open on the screen, just like he’d left it before.

It occurred to him that he could have saved the file on a flash drive and told the roaches to stick it, but he remembered that they had promised to leave his apartment for good. He wasn’t sure about the value of a roach’s promise, but he figured he had nothing to lose, except roaches. He scrolled through the novel and implanted the creature in the scene where Manchild witnesses Frederick Douglass address a room full of white abolitionists.

Douglass stood impossibly tall on the podium above the crowd. His hair fluffed like a dark storm, his eyes trimmed with lightning, his voice rumbling with thunder. Manchild’s eyes began to moisten as Douglass testified about how his shackles were loosed by the power of words. Everyone in the room was transfixed by the master orator. Even a small brown roach sat attentively at one corner of the stage. After Douglass was done, the assembled mass stood up and the rafters rumbled with applause. Manchild didn’t try to stop the tears that came.

G coughed. The air inside his apartment was still thick with insecticide. He looked over what he’d written and felt a bit silly. He would definitely have to go back and exterminate the roach, no matter how benign. He
stood and propped one of his windows, but was suddenly struck by a bolt of inspiration. He plopped down in front of his keyboard and the words flowed from his fingers. All the voices in the novel were speaking to him, but now they were all saying the same thing. He was half conscious of what he was writing, but it felt like magic. Hours passed and the light in the windows softened and turned to shadows. He sat there, and the pages spilled forth. A feeling of immense satisfaction swelled in his chest when he got to the end. He scrolled through the novel quickly and then sent it off to his dad and to Helen.

To celebrate, he boiled a hot dog for dinner and then went to sleep.

The next morning, G checked his email. The first was from his dad:

Son,

I’m a little confused by your latest draft. What are all these goddamn roaches doing in your book? Who put you up to this? Give me a call. We should talk.

Dad

Next from Helen:

G,

Oh my God, this is brilliant. I don’t know what to say, but it’s like a whole other book. The idea of narrating these painful vignettes of African-American history with roaches was a stroke of genius. Thematically it provides so many layers and gives the story a magical realism that makes the narrative fresh and inviting. Awesome job, my friend. I’m working on some more substantive notes for you, but you may have saved both of our jobs. Call me. Let’s talk about how we’re going to sell this thing. I see big things in your future.

Best,

Helen

G looked around his apartment, but there was no one. He opened the manuscript and there they were. There were roaches all over his novel now. They scurried from musket fire as Crispus Attucks fell. They helped Harriet Tubman hold steady a shotgun at a cowardly runaway slave. In Eskimo hats
and boots, they trekked northward through Matthew Henson’s footprints. They licked clean the gun sites of a Tuskegee Airmen on a cold Florence morning. They swung from the zoot suit pocket chain of Detroit Red as he stalked the streets of Harlem. They marched in front of southern lunch counters with “I Am a Roach” signs held aloft. They pulled the bus chime for Rosa Parks. They tossed Aretha Franklin’s pillbox hat in celebration at the inauguration of the first black president. They were everywhere.

G stared at the words on the screen for a long time. He heard a clicking sound coming from his kitchen counter. A roach stood there, flapping its wings. And then another joined in. And then another. And then another. They came from all corners, all crevices. The ceilings and walls were thick with small flapping roaches. Their applause sounded like rain.

G could think of nothing else except to bow.
OUR FIRST AUTUMN

Late October. Fonz and I stand in the driveway. California’s sky is navy, still light for evening. Orion’s belt gleams, but I can’t find his head. Fonz holds a box cutter. We’re stooped over the debris of our new life, evidence of all we left behind: white plates from Mikasa, lamps of bent iron with spiraling bulbs, miscellanea from Horchow, Sur La Table, Amazon. 6 x 6 and laid flat, the recycling instructions said— I went in twice to check, and a third time for the tape measure. We never did this in Manila: segregated our own trash, wheeled it onto the street. We never felt cold wearing shorts in the evening, never smirked about owning a beautiful house. When the cutter doesn’t work Fonz picks up the boxes and says, “I will Hulk this,” and rips them apart with his bare hands, straining. On the smaller boxes, I set down my scissors and do the same.
I walk over them and stamp my feet,
again and again, trying desperately
to keep them there.

— Isabel Yap
ART NOUVEAU TIGER
Goyo
pen — 12" by 8"
FACE #5
Hildy Bernstein
acrylic and charcoal on canvas — 6" by 12"
ROOTED
Casey Clifford
mixed media — 18” by 24”
RUNNING WATER
Dominique Nasmeh
wood — 19”
I can't sit here staring at a ceramic horse
all afternoon watching the sun move

from snout to rump and not think idly
that its maker must have adored his subject

so lovingly does it curve and swell, so
majestic its intent; how fondly has he

smoothed its neck and taught us tension,
how carefully the lesson expressed

that one must become something other
when one creates, something close

to an afternoon's movement of the sun.

— William J. Rewak, S.J.
THE COUCH was comfortable enough, but like everything else in the living room, it smelled like an ashtray. The room was cluttered with chairs that didn’t match and pictures of family and friends were everywhere. On a shelf above the TV sat the largest collection of stuffed clown dolls I was sure anyone had ever possessed. I was very worried about the mental state of someone who would collect stuffed clowns.

I sat there staring at the old Nintendo console under a thin cover of dust, and could feel the people in the room sizing me up. The three guys had tried to start conversations with me in the beginning, but once they figured out that I wasn’t their kind of guy, I sat silently, like a nervous ghost. I was there but I wasn’t. They sat across from me, talking about trucks or football or some other topic that I both knew and cared nothing about. Earlier they had tried.

“Yer dad says you play tennis. You any good?” asked the guy I nicknamed “Mullet.” All three of these guys had mullets, perfectly groomed and designed to fit their ball caps. But this one, this particular mullet, was something born from God. Instead of being born in a manger, this son of God was born in the hair-care aisle at Walmart. He had the most beautiful mullet I had ever seen. Which is similar to saying it was the best murder scene I had ever witnessed, but I was too concerned about getting on with the evening that I didn’t have time for name-memorization.

“I once played a guy who was ranked 385th in the world and…” I trailed off as I realized that Mullet was completely focused on my dad’s girlfriend’s ass.

My dad was dating a woman in early 1996. I don’t remember her name, but many of the women he dated in those years were named Linda, so she probably was, too. He wanted to take me out on the town with her and her roommate and their friends. My dad had told me that the roommate was a model and suggested setting us up. This made me nervous, to say the least. Who was I to be dating a model? What kind of model needs a roommate?
What kind of model lives in Tulsa?

“She’s really cool, and she really wants to meet you,” he had told me earlier that day.

“What does she model?” I asked.

“Not sure. But she’s really pretty. Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

I was uncomfortable with the notion of my dad suggesting that I have sex with his new Linda’s roommate. What if I had sex with the model and I started crying or something? I had only had sex a few times by this point, and the two girls with whom I had had sex were both good friends, forgiving of my naïveté in the field. And this girl was a model. She probably had sex with lots of hot guys who spoke French and had driving gloves. She probably wasn’t too thrilled with a guy who knew a lot about Star Wars and who, at any given moment, was probably thinking about the Bugs Bunny/Daffy Duck Rivalry. But I came along because my dad was at least trying to make up for eight years of absence. By making me his dating sidekick.

I waited for the model to make an appearance as conversations went on around me. My dad was, as usual, the life of the party and everyone loved him. He tried to integrate me into the conversation, but I was as uninterested in the people around me as they were in me. I had never had any positive experiences in Tulsa, having spent much time there on and off for the first three years of my life. The term godforsaken place, I believed, had been spoken by the first person ever to exit Tulsa, and I maintained that Tulsa was, in fact, a weigh station between Hell and Hellier.

“Have Dan come in here!” someone yelled from the kitchen.

My dad looked at me encouragingly as I sighed heavily.

“He’s on his way!” he yelled back. “Go in there and have a look,” he said to me quietly, like he had just bought me a puppy.

I walked slowly into the kitchen and saw a girl’s rear end coming out of the opened freezer door.

“I’m makin’ some pizza rolls? Y’ins want some?” she asked in a Tulsan twang. She pulled her head out of the freezer and made her way to the counter. She had straight dirty blond hair that went down the length of her very curvaceous figure. As she prepared the pizza rolls, I glanced over to the counter and saw a harbinger of disgust: an ashtray. There is something that repulses me about smoking in the kitchen. It is a place of food preparation, and I don’t think cigarette ash should ever potentially be on the menu. Who was she? A short order cook? Who smokes in the kitchen? What kind of
model smokes in the kitchen? Do you model kitchen fires?

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry.”

“Oh, okay, darlin’. Lemme just nuke these and we’ll be off. Grab some-thin’ outta the fridge if yer thirsty.” She placed five pizza rolls on a paper towel, hit some keys on the microwave, and turned to me, igniting a Camel Light. I opened the refrigerator and saw a hearty supply of Mountain Dew and Franzia, the Lamborghini of boxed wines. “It’ll just be a minute, darlin’.”

Okay, now I wasn’t an expert on love or model lingo, but you don’t call potential suitors darlin’. Not in Tulsa, not anywhere. Darlin’ is reserved for nephews, paperboys, and diner patrons. Was she unaware that this was a date, or did she take one look at me and decide to not make it a date?

Her name was Connie, and all the anxiety I felt about going on a date with a model quickly evaporated when we met face to face. She was pretty, but not model pretty. Everything about her was dirty blonde: hair, teeth, skin, complexion, fingers, and personality.

“So you’re Mick’s son. He’s a great guy,” she said, exhaling a cone of acrid smoke.

“That’s what I hear.”

“You live in California, right? I’ve always wanted to go there.”

Wait a minute. A model that has never been to California? Was she just knee-deep in the fast-paced world of the Tulsa modeling scene?

“Yeah, just here visiting.”

“Your dad’s such a funny guy. He must’ve been the best dad a boy could have.”

“That’s what my step-brother said.”

The microwave dinged, and she eagerly opened the door to get at her pizza rolls. “These things are so good. I just love ‘em.”

“So my dad says you model? That’s cool.”

“Ha! Your dad’s such a kidder. I’m a beautician. Ya know, hair, nails, all that stuff.” Her teeth squished into a pizza roll. “I wanted to be a model, but it didn’t work out.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, ya know. It’s complicated and stuff.”

It didn’t seem that complicated.

She wrapped up the rest of the pizza rolls in the paper towel, shoved them into her purse, and slid her smokes into her back pocket. “Let’s go have some fun, darlin’.” She exited the kitchen into the crowded living
room, grabbing my arm as she went, and let out a raucous “Let’s party!” My dad made eye contact with me, smiled big, and gave me a thumbs up as we went outside.

While walking down the front walkway, my date flicked her ciggy into the dark street; the glowing orange stub flickered and died. We piled into two pick-up trucks: my dad and Linda and one of the Mullets from the living room in Linda’s Chevy, and Connie, the other two Mullets, and I into a Ford. Clearly, the two guys were pining for Connie, which was both relieving and humiliating. I was out of the running for a race I had no desire to run, so I automatically lost. The ride over to the bar was short and loud, but it gave me a lot of time to focus on my theory that if they just worked together, Bugs and Daffy could easily thwart any pathetic scheme thought up by those idiots Elmer Fudd and Yosemite Sam. Just put aside the differences, fellas. Connie offered me a smoke, and I politely refused.

We pulled into the dirt parking lot of the bar and exited the trucks. Everyone was excited beyond comprehension at the prospect of going inside. My dad, as usual, would probably get up to sing and play guitar. My dad had always been an extremely talented musician and singer, and it was a foregone conclusion that he would get up on stage to do his thing. We entered the bar, and I was immediately punched in my consciousness by the Midwest. Cowboy and work boots stomped all over the peanut shell laden floor as beer bottles clanked. The bar reeked of cheap cigarettes and designer imposter perfume.

My dad and Linda chose an oval table near the door, diagonally across from the bar. My dad, in an effort to make my presence somehow important, handed me some money to get drinks for everyone.

“What does everyone want?” I asked.
“Bud.”
“Bud.”
“Coors.”
“Bud.”
“Miller.”
“Bud.”
“So. Beer, then.” I turned toward the bar.

I panicked as I knew my terrible little secret would soon be brought out into the open, a secret that only my friends back in California were aware of. And even they didn't accept it. This was a secret so horrible and socially
paralyzing that even friends treated me as a party pariah. Ridicule and harassment were my constant companions at parties and all social functions, and now it would transcend time zones.

I sincerely hated beer.

I hated beer with a passion. It was like drinking carbonated urine, and I was ritualistically teased for my tastes. Every party I ever went to inevitably went as follows:

“I’m going on a beer run. Who wants what?”
“Sierra Nevada!”
“Newcastle!”
“Sam Adams, fuck yeah!”
Shit. “Bartles & James Wild Peach Mango.”

I knew this would not go over well with the NASCAR crowd I was with. But I couldn’t sell out. Beer and I would never get along. I walked up to the burly guy behind the bar.

“Hey. I need four Budweisers, a Coors, and a Miller,” I said. Quietly, I added, “And a wine cooler.” I knew Linda’s crew were regulars, and they would sooner watch PBS than order a wine cooler. And I knew the bartender knew it, too. I tried to match his scowl with a tough grin.

“Comin’ right up, pal.”

The beers were popped open and set on a tray. I turned around to look at the table. Everyone was having a blast. I was having an aneurism. My dad was giggling with his newest Linda and Connie was taking conversational offers from everyone. The three Mullets were all chatting her up, and she was eager for the attention. My dad winked at me, and I tried to smile. With my smile, I was trying to tell him, “You know, this whole night could’ve been avoided if you’d been around to buy me a bike when I was seven.”

“Here ya go, buddy,” I heard the bartender say behind me. I turned around and looked down at the tray. Apparently bottled wine coolers were not sold in Tulsa bars. Standing in the middle of the redneck necklace of beers was an enormous sinuous shaft of red fluid. He had made the wine cooler from scratch and poured it in the curviest glass ever made. If Pamela Anderson and Raquel Welch had mated and given birth to a glass, this was it. It stood three inches above the beer bottles and had a lovely swirly straw coming out of it. The color was, I think, called Humiliation Red.

I picked up the tray and walked toward the table. It must’ve been about a mile and a half to the side of the bar where Linda and her crew sat. I was
like a little baby trying to swim across a pool, struggling not to drown in a foreign environment. I just wanted to be seated. I’d realized through many years of research and school dances that catastrophic embarrassment was an emotion best suited for the seated. I could feel the scornful eyes of real men and their real women trying to figure out what kind of little pixie had just entered their smoky denizen. I, of course, tried to act tough, but it’s nearly impossible to act tough when one is carrying a fruit-blended inferno that, oddly enough, is redder than the neon Budweiser sign hanging outside. I set the tray down and took a seat as hands went for the beer bottles. The towering glass of glowing femininity stood alone in the center of the tray, the lonely red-haired girl no one will talk to. The curvy chalice of neon red called to me, like a siren song of mockery and enticement, snaring me in its trap of sweetened shame:

“Daaaan, I’m ready,” it said in a sing-songy lilt.
“Damn you, wine cooler. I can’t drink you. Not here.”
“But I’m fruity and delicious. I taste like the Kool-Aid of your youth. But I get you drunk. Eventually.”

“Why couldn’t you be in a bottle? If I’d asked for a glass of water, would the bartender have actually blended hydrogen and oxygen atoms together and served it to me in a test tube? He doesn’t have any bottled, mass-produced wine coolers back there?”

“What’ll you do then, Daaaan? Hmmm? Sit here while these people know you’re too embarrassed to drink me, hmmm?”
“I’m drinking you, you goddamn sugary vixen. But just one.”
“Atta boy.”
I grabbed for it and sat it down in front of me. Records skipped and tumble weeds slowly rolled past as I sipped from the straw.
“What is that?” one of the Mullets asked, his hand on Connie’s lower back.
“Oh, I don’t drink beer. Don’t like the taste,” I said. Take that brutal honesty, Mullet Man.
I might as well have said, “Fuck the flag. I don’t like the colors” or “Sex with women? Ick.”

Time unfroze and the table soon forgot about my indiscretion. My dad tried to talk to me, but he was too busy, I think, trying to convey to people that I grew up in California and that I didn’t know any better. In addition, Linda was complaining about some townie that was giving her evil looks
from across the bar and my dad was trying to calm her down. So his plate was pretty full. I took a few sips from the straw and was pleasantly surprised by how good it was. It was more like a Slurpee than I was used to, but it felt like home. Having a tiny grasp on my reality, I turned to Connie to ask her about being a beautician, and she was making out with one of the other Mullet brothers. This put me over the edge. I angrily took out the straw and guzzled the flaming red wine cooler. However, due to the curvy opening and slushy consistency, it rushed downward at my face and spilled all over my shirt. The table erupted in laughter, and I tried to play it off. It didn’t work.

“I usually chug these things straight out of the bottle. This glass sucks.”

I excused myself and went to the bathroom. On my way, I passed my dad, who was deeply focused on keeping Linda from getting into it with Evil Eyes in the corner. But at least he was able to squeeze out a giggle in my direction that twisted the knife a little more. I escaped to the bathroom and found the nearest urinal. I didn’t have to pee but both of the stalls were taken. I stood there and pretended to urinate until one of the stalls opened up. Once the sleeveless defecator left, I immediately entered, shut the door, and sat down.

I swore when I was three years old that I would never be back in this goddamn shithole of a shithole town ever again. And now, here I was: pretending to use the toilet as a homemade wine cooler seeped into my underwear, as my blind date made out with everyone except me, and as my dad indicated that I was either a total coward or close enough. But why should I give a shit? Where was he when I should’ve been learning how to behave around girls or drink beer like a “man?”

But I did care. When I was thirteen, during one of the rare terms he spent as a dad, we were driving home from a movie. He had driven us past a pond that he claimed had fish “in there so big, you could catch them like this,” his hands spread wide apart.

I had said, “You can catch them by just spreading your hands like this?” He laughed heartily, and I felt powerful. Like, “You bailed on me when I was four, but who has all the power now?” Ever since that day, I had been trying to replicate the pleasure he took in my existence. This evening, I thought, was hardly a worthy sequel to that day by the pond.

I sat in the stall, an emotional Sisyphus, still pushing that huge boulder of acceptance up an endless hill. I knew I would have to go back out there.
From my seat, I started to hear screaming and chairs falling. I ran back out into the bar, happy that something had distracted the locals from my wildly inept attempt at manliness and spotted my dad prying Linda’s lengthy fingernails from the scalp of the woman giving her the evil eye earlier. A small crowd had joined in to pull the ladies apart, but they were intent on killing each other. I looked over at Connie and one of the Mullets was trying to keep her away from the fray. Having none of that, she broke free and leapt at Evil Eyes and took her down to the floor. In between shouts of “You fuckin’ bitch! I’ll kill you!” and “Ouch, my hair!” my dad and the Mullets did their best to gain control. The bartender came over, broke everything up, and kicked Linda and her party out of the bar.

Once outside, Linda showed us the scratches on her face and arms, and Connie, full of Franzia and Buds, lit a cigarette and yelled back at the bar. My dad remained calm and I remained silent, my chest still sticky from the spilt wine cooler. The crisp night air soon calmed everyone, and we piled into the vehicles. The Mullets took Linda over to her truck.

Connie came over to me. Her lip was starting to swell. “I’m really sorry about all that shit. That bitch started some shit with us a couple of months ago. It just came to a head. Sorry.”

“Oh, it’s cool. Bar fights are fun.”

“It was great talking to you tonight. I had fun with you. Have fun in California. Maybe I’ll come out and see you.” That was our longest conversation the entire evening. One of the Mullets came over and put his arm around her and led her back to the awaiting truck.

My dad and I drove back to his house. We sat in silence for a few miles. “I think Connie really liked you. She told me she thought you were a nice guy.”

“Did you guys talk when she was getting punched in the face under the table?”
A red bird
—Rothko’s idea of red
color! pure color—
flies across what once
was an empty road now
empty whiteness only
whiteness

— Dani Douvikas
A Post-War Owl:
Sam Winklebleck, 1950–51

In 1951, Santa Clara’s student body was a mixture of returning World War II veterans and young men anxious about being drafted to serve in the then-current conflict, the Korean War. The editorship of The Owl, the previous title of Santa Clara’s literary magazine, was shared by Donald F. MacDonald, an Army vet, and me, a prospective draftee.

We ran fiction, some based on reminiscences of wartime experiences, essays, poetry, and the occasional scientific piece. The Owl format was usually 16 pages, printed by letterpress on coated 9.5 by 11 inch paper. The cover was adorned with an angular rendering of an owl, from a woodcut of unknown origin.

There were no photos and few other illustrations. A monthly feature was “Ululatory Miscellanea,” a column which commented on current campus issues, such as whether The Owl was the literary adjunct of The Santa Clara, the campus newspaper, or an independent publication standing on its own two legs. Competition for writers among The Owl, The Santa Clara, and The Redwood (the yearbook), was intense. The column’s name was derived from “ululate,” the hooting noise made by an owl. We thought the title was pretty clever, even though the contents often weren’t.

The enterprise was overseen by the venerable Fr. Edwin Shipsey, S.J., chairman of the English department, who reputedly believed the last great poem written in English was “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold, published in 1867. So modernism was not our forté.

We learned about proofreading and ghostwriting, sometimes the hard way. On one occasion, when prospective offerings for the next issue were slim, I enlisted my roommate, who was a member of the victorious Orange Bowl football team of 1950, in a dubious enterprise that would not have stood the test in Fr. Fagothey’s ethics class. I had already planned two of my
own bylines, so I asked my roommate to let me put his name on another poem I had written. He agreed, probably after a few beers at The El Camino, The Hut of our generation. An enterprising San Jose Mercury sports reporter (what was he doing reading The Owl?) picked up on the poem and wrote a full column on how football players, in particular this one, could also have literary talents and sensitivities. The few in the know kept the secret, but there was a frigid air in our Nobili dorm room for a few weeks thereafter.

The final blow in the publications’ rivalry was dealt by The Redwood. In the centennial (1851–1951) issue, under the picture of the five Owl staffers, was the legend “A.I.E.E.,” the initials standing for the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. A proofreading error or a dastardly plot we would never know, for it was June and we all were starting our journey across Matthew Arnold’s “darkling plain.”

Mike Malone, 1975–76

My time at The Owl, as it was then called, spanned the mid-1970s. It lasted about five years (I earned my MBA at Santa Clara as well) and I never held the title of editor, but mostly ceremonial titles like associate editor. All of these consisted of the same thing: sitting around on the couch or beanbag chairs in The Owl office, talking endlessly, killing time, and occasionally reading the latest submission. Jim Craven and Larry Zelenak, the two editors I remember best, were both very bright guys. They did all of the heavy lifting. I hung out… and occasionally submitted stuff that was usually selected, but not always. This was one of those brief periods of half-life for The Owl; we were a long way from the glorious early days, but still far from the perfect-bound/full-color/fully-illustrated Santa Clara Review of today. But at least, compared to several decades over the last 150 years, we were still alive.

Most of my time during those years I was busy writing my column, the “Weekend Wanderer.” It was a sometimes scurrilous (and obscene) weekly contribution to the school paper that almost got me expelled twice, but also proved to be the longest-running column in the history of The Santa Clara. I believe it still is. It proved to be the beginning of my journalism career, which continues to this day. However, if you had asked me at the time where my future lay, I would probably have told you that it would be in fiction—as exemplified by my work for The Owl.
During my first few years at SCU, the newspaper was upstairs in Benson at the end of the building towards the Alameda. *The Owl* was in the basement, where it is now—so I was a comparatively rare visitor to the latter office. But when the paper moved into its current location in the basement, just across the hall from *The Owl*—and more important, as an editor I was given a key—it became something of a second home. There, we would spend long hours shooting the bull, snoozing, doing homework, meeting newspaper story deadlines, and playing a game that only college kids are pompous enough to invent. It was called “Glittering Generalities” and consisted entirely of one person tossing out some superlative like “Best Horror Film by a Rookie Director,” “Best Opening Sentence of an American Novel,” “Best Single Season by a Left-Handed Outfielder.” Then everyone else present would come up with a competing, different answer. Then the next person would throw out a superlative. It could go on for hours. There were no winners—other than the juvenile satisfaction we got for believing ourselves to be so damn clever.

I can remember one afternoon when another person who hung out in the office decided to surprise us. Paul Derania, who would later become an attorney in San Jose (and godfather to my sons), was also a columnist for the paper and a rugby player. He came leaping into the office out of nowhere, but the only person he managed to surprise was himself when he caught the top of his head on the door frame. He nearly knocked himself out and spent the next ten minutes on a beanbag chair holding his head and trying to stay conscious. It was only when he took his hand away and we saw that it was covered with blood that we realized that Paul had nearly taken off his scalp. Off we went to O’Connor Hospital to get him some stitches.

In later years, when I sat on various boards at SCU, I would occasionally walk through Benson. One day, to my surprise, I discovered that *The Owl* was back, now reincarnated as *Santa Clara Review*. In the years that followed, whenever I saw a copy of the *Review* I picked it up and thumbed through its pages. I enjoyed the ambition of the young writers and the occasional flash of real talent. It reminded me of my own outrageous dreams and ambitions at that age. I had won The Owl Prize, as well as the McCann short story prize—consolation awards for my mediocre grades—and it seemed inevitable that my next step would be the well-received first novel at 21, the Great American Novel at forty, and the distinguished elder statesman of letters at sixty.
Life, as we all learn, never goes as planned. There was no novel; no glittering generality category in literature for me. Instead, it was the work across the hall that came to define my life: decades as a newspaper and magazine writer and editor, and almost two dozen nonfiction books. Not a bad life. But the spirit of those days at The Owl never really left me. And so, ironically, at just about the same moment as this issue of Santa Clara Review will be published, my very first novel will be hitting the bookstores. And I owe it all to those long, lazy afternoons at The Owl.

The Lessons of Libel, 30 Years Later: Christine Long Brunkhorst, 1982–83

Where other people might have classmates’ signatures, the back flap of my 1983 Redwood is covered with these scrawled notes: “university lawyers in contact with insurance company lawyers”; “not responsible”; “as publisher, the university doesn’t review articles, doesn’t censor.” I wrote these cryptic phrases in a panic on the steps of St. Joseph’s Hall one spring day during my senior year as I tried to wrap my head around a conversation I’d just had with the university president, Fr. William Rewak, S.J.

A phone call from the university president is shocking in itself, but when it informs you of a potential libel suit you have brought upon the school, it blasts you right out of your cocoon.

In the fall of 1982, I took a magazine writing class from one of Santa Clara’s most demanding and thorough instructors, James Degnan. Mr. Degnan, a notorious stickler for thorough research, exact phrasing, and perfect grammar, was so demanding that his class sizes gradually dwindled as the biggest student egos crumpled under the threat of getting less than As. But the few of us who stuck it out—checked our vanity at the door, performed revisions, researched our subject matter from every angle, then revised even more—learned what it takes to write well.

My chosen topic for his class was corruption in inter-collegiate athletics. By corruption, I mean when universities violate NCAA rules in order to lure top athletes. These violations take many forms, but the goal is usually the same: to bring money and athletic prestige to schools, oftentimes at the expense of academic integrity.

Over several months of research, I discovered hundreds of violations across the country (they are not hard to find), and eventually turned in
the assignment. Some time later, before submitting it to The Owl (now Santa Clara Review), I became aware that USF had suspended their men’s basketball program due to what the professional media termed a “scandal,” and “abuses” of NCAA rules by “overzealous” and “arrogant” boosters. So, to make my article timely, I added these recent USF infractions to the many already cited. However, caught up in the rhetoric of scandal and not being a professional journalist sensitive to red-flag libel words, I slipped the regrettable word “crooked” into my retelling of USF’s brouhaha just before the article went to press.

Soon after the magazine was published, the university lawyers alerted Fr. Rewak of the potential libel in my article. For that reason, Fr. Rewak immediately had all of the copies of The Owl destroyed (sorry to everyone who had a story or a poem in that issue). But, despite this heads-up defensive move, six months later, after I’d graduated and was well into my first semester of grad school at Marquette, the USF alum I’d cited in my article sued me, the editor-in-chief, the board of trustees, and the university for $80 million. At the time, it was the largest libel suit ever filed.

That was October 1983. One day I was a bored student in a graduate-level media law class and the next I was peppering the professor with questions about school publications, malice, public figures, burden of proof, and punitive versus compensatory damages.

Friends from around the country sent me articles about the record-setting libel suit. Dee Dee Myers mailed the blurb she’d read in the L.A. Times. Former classmates sent what they had read in The Mercury News and The S.F. Chronicle. As a research assistant at Marquette, I came across the reporting of it in The Student Press Law Report. Oddly, the plaintiff, by quoting my offending statement in his complaint, had made it possible for my sentence with its single inflammatory word to be reprinted everywhere.

The suit dragged on for about three years. There was a “demurrment” releasing the trustees from the suit; I flew back to California to give a deposition; the University’s insurance carrier informed me that their policy didn’t cover students; my parents frantically tried to remove me from their homeowners’ policy; and finally, after the editors of Santa Clara Review wrote a sycophantic retraction that irks me still, following some behind-the-scenes good will gestures I suspect, the suit was dropped.

I’d like to say I can laugh about it now, but I recall too vividly how bad I felt for inflicting a lawsuit on Santa Clara, a place where my professors
trusted me to take an idea and run with it. But that leads me to the biggest lesson of all. The best schools inspire you to try hard, take risks, make mistakes, and suffer the consequences if it comes to that. It’s a fine line between stifling growth by being overly cautious and empowering a student by letting her find her voice.

So, back to the freaked-out student on the steps of St. Joe’s. After our initial conversation, Fr. Rewak kept me apprised of the situation after I graduated. I still have the letter he sent to me that fall when the suit became official. The letter begins and ends with the same fatherly words: “Please, don’t panic.”

I learned a lot from the ordeal—that a single adjective can precipitate the destruction of 3000 magazines; that no matter who you are—a columnist for the New York Times or a blogger in your bedroom—there are certain words you must avoid. But what I couldn’t have realized, at least not until I became a parent and a teacher myself, is how fundamentally important it is, once you’ve given young people the freedom to screw up, to be there to ease the panic when they do.

The United Church of Poetry:
Cheryl Dumesnil, 1990–91

**B**eing **a poet** is like practicing a religion very few people understand. The world offers you an endless supply of prayers—a pigeon letting up out of an oil-slicked puddle between streetcar tracks, or a catfish pulled like an ugly secret from the bottom of a lake—prayers that others just don’t see.

Somehow these prayers, they speak to you, they become important to you, like clues to a mystery you know you’ll never solve, but you can’t help but delight in the trying. So you write them down: prayers of devastation, of confusion, of praise. Parasitic mistletoe sharing equal space with white blossoms on spring’s apricot tree, the scrawl *Tice Tigaz Turf* spray-painted on a pristine suburban retaining wall.

You arrange the prayers on a page in a way that makes sense to you. Sometimes you speak them out loud. Sometimes your speaking makes people uncomfortable. Sometimes your speaking gives people a new way of seeing the world.

And sometimes, if you’re lucky, your speaking allows avowed members of the United Church of Poetry to identify you, to welcome you into the
tribe. This is what happened for me at *Santa Clara Review*, where at weekly practicums we translated the gospel of the image, the gospel of rhythm, the gospel of the word; where we sifted through piles of prayers and held the best of them up to the light.

**Remembering the Review:**
Carrie Dodson Davis, 2000–2002

I *admittedly don’t have* the greatest memory, but I’ll never forget the 2001 Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference. We were in Palm Springs, promoting the *Review*. Our booth was set up with fanned out copies of the magazine and T-shirts for sale (the baby-T was a new addition that year that we were especially excited about). We got to meet poets, professors, and other students. And, as with any event that gets massive amounts of undergrads together, there were bound to be some stories to tell afterward. And since this wasn’t Vegas, I’ll share this one: A student from a peer lit mag had a bit too much to drink one night, decided to come knocking on our hotel room door, and proceeded to barge into the bathroom and expel his stomach contents all over my roommate and fellow *Reviewer* who was unsuspectingly brushing her teeth at the sink.

Mortified as she was (and as he was the following morning), that story provides both her and me belly-aching laughs to this day. Maybe not the most highbrow of memories, but a funny example of *Review* members experiencing the good, the bad, and the ugly together. There were countless other memories: the annual *Review* retreat in Saratoga; the late nights piecing the magazine layout together with print-outs of art and poems and fiction covering the floor; the heated discussions over whether we should publish or reject a short story about a man and his rubber doll (we published it, FYI); going to poetry slams in downtown San Jose; hosting publication parties at various campus venues…. So many memories with such a great group of people who all believed in the power of literature, education, and camaraderie. To this day I feel so privileged to have been the editor of the *Review* in 2001–2002.

When I came to Santa Clara from Texas, I wasn’t finding my niche freshman year. I was so miserable, in fact, that I sent in an application to NYU, thinking the opposite coast might give me an opposite college experience. Around that time, I remember being invited to something called
“Practicum” by my English teacher, Cheryl Dumesnil. I showed up, liked it, and kept coming. Before I knew it, I was assisting Suzanne Barnecut, the fiction editor, my sophomore year. (When the acceptance letter from NYU came, I just threw it away…. I now felt I belonged at SCU.) In my junior year I became the associate editor for the magazine, which I loved because I got to be a major support for the organization—filing submissions, sending out acceptances, ordering office supplies, and managing the budget—but still stay behind the scenes. Then, in the blink of an eye, I was a senior and leading the Review as editor-in-chief. My first task in that role was to draft a vision statement for the magazine, strangely one of the few documents I still have from my college days. Here it is, from my twenty-one-year-old self, circa 2001:

“My main goal for Santa Clara Review is to produce an exemplary magazine that people not only read, but think about. The best way to produce such a publication is to have a staff of thinkers who carry open and innovative minds. Since my introduction to the magazine three years ago, I have only seen the staff grow stronger and more dedicated, each time producing a stronger magazine. I want to give each person who walks into the Santa Clara Review office the conclusion that this is a place to develop or strengthen his or her leadership skills, to learn diverse perspectives and feel comfortable in sharing one’s own, and to gain valuable information on contemporary literature and art and its publication. I want to empower both current and potential members of the staff by delegating involvement in the organization, holding one-on-one meetings regularly, and being a creative and professional leader both in and out of the office… I want Santa Clara Review to continue to attract a wide variety of students and receive a diverse array of submissions, while maintaining a strong sense of purpose: to publish strongly-crafted art and literature that is both original and thought-provoking.”

On my visit back to campus for my ten-year reunion last October, I fortunately ran into Stephen Layton, current editor of the magazine. As he gave a tour of the office (ah, the good old Benson basement… not much has changed there!), it’s obvious that the vision I had during my editorship is still relevant and in practice today. The Review continues to be a place where all students are welcomed and their voices heard.

Like many students, when I graduated Santa Clara I had no idea what
life would be like. What is surprising to me, after ten years of a career in publishing and now marketing communications, is how many of the skills that I learned at the Review I still use today. For instance, I work on page layouts in the Adobe Creative Suite daily. I lead a team of graphic designers to pull together publications. I proofread all the time. I interface with printers, choose paper, weigh costs. I photo edit. I work with administrators to advocate for my group. I listen to other team members and help to empower them as I was empowered at the Review.

Above all, my most cherished takeaways from the magazine are the relationships I built there and the memories I have with other members. I’m still connected, either closely or distantly, to almost every fellow member of the 2001–2002 Review staff. I am grateful for the leaders before me who encouraged me to make my mark—Mariah Dabel, Cheryl Dumesnil, Elsie Rivas Gomez, and Suzanne Barnecut. The close friends I still spend time with today—Leslie-Ann Holt Bergstrom, Christy Krueger Frame, and Lindsey Wylie Kouvaris (strangely, we all had baby girls in 2012, making us way more likely these days to be covered in baby spit-up than puked on at literary conferences). More shout-outs to all the other staff members who I still keep in touch with, whether just via Facebook or at the occasional SCU reunion—Natalie Calderon, Seth Dobrin, Josh Rector, and so many others.

I am so proud of the fact that I was involved at the Review, and that I made lifelong friends through the magazine. Here’s to another 100 volumes of SCR to come!

Cantie Nguyen, 2009–10

We—the staff and editorial board—gathered once a week in that cramped little office in Benson basement full of bright, opinionated people to discuss and debate art for art’s sake. We championed pieces from fellow artists around the world—yes, our humble undergraduate magazine got submissions from everywhere—that made our heads spin with joy. All this to put together a collection of soul-provoking pieces that, once printed and distributed around campus, made us want to grab the nearest Bronco with a magazine opened to our favorite piece and declare, “Look! Look! I love this.”

The staff and I poured this joy into immortalizing in print pieces that inspired us to share what we love with the world. Every Monday afternoon
we facilitated passionate and plain fun appraisals of work, and enjoyed being around others excited about art.

That was the Review for me.

J.B. Fredkin, 2010–11

With the release of this hundredth volume, Santa Clara Review solidifies itself and its mission within the framework of the American literary journal. In an industry where journals typically print only solicited, known writers, the Review gives the unknown a voice. I was so pleased with the diversity and the depth of our contributors that I wrote in my last letter from the editor:

“An ancient belief from the Talmud states that within every generation there are thirty-six Lamed Vav Tzadikim, thirty-six righteous people on earth, whose role it is to justify the purpose of humankind to the divine. Individually, the thirty-six writers and artists displayed within the pages of this journal may not be able to substantiate the significance and goodness of the human race, but together they exemplify the depth of soul of which we are capable. They capture that worth by creating it. With brush, pen and camera, they confine aspects of life, arrest them and throw them on canvas, splash them on the page, and thrust them before the lens.”

I was delighted by the variety and originality of the artists we published. However, I was even more elated to work with some of the most remarkable individuals day-in and day-out. I believe nothing affected my undergraduate experience more than the time I spent in the basement office in Benson Hall. That time gave me the courage to try and become an artist myself. I congratulate the current staff, the chosen writers and artists, and all the editors who came before, on this one hundredth volume.

Taara Khalinaji, 2011–12

The summer before my senior year at Santa Clara University, the bank called. My hands began to shake and nausea crept up my throat as the representative told me that my student loan had been rejected. You’ve met the educational debt limit, she explained. You owe too much money, and we can’t
I asked how this was possible, how they could keep me from earning my degree, now, after three years.

I stood in the apartment where I had just spent the last of my money for a deposit and first month’s rent. As I hung up the phone, my thoughts went immediately to the Review, and to the staff I was looking forward to leading. The only thing I could think to do next was call Joshua Fredkin, who had just passed on the title of editor-in-chief to me.

*We’ll take care of this,* he said. *Don’t worry.*

Throughout the next few days, as I made more calls, talked to my father, and tried to come up with a solution, I couldn’t help but feel I’d made a terrible mistake in choosing to attend this private university. Ending up at Santa Clara wasn’t planned. It was a choice I made at time in my life when happiness had turned into an ugly joke I didn’t want to hear—when escape seemed to be the only option. I thought that this must be some cosmic force telling me it was time to pay my dues, time to admit to weakness.

My junior year of high school, I started to notice my mother becoming increasingly callous and anxious. We’d always thought of her as dramatic, mistrusting, and well, difficult. But something was happening and it wasn’t one of those things we could tip-toe around anymore. She began to accuse my father of infidelity, her friends of being witches, my twin and me of plotting to kill her. By the following year, my father had moved out, my mother believed the government was watching her through our walls, and the idea of school, grades, exams, seemed inane compared to the immeasurable shift in consciousness that I continued to bear.

My mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I decided to stay at home instead of go to college. My brother had been accepted at UC Berkeley, and I, who had half-heartedly applied to universities, believed it was my place to take care of my mother.

Then, shortly before graduation, I changed my mind. As quickly as my mother’s mind seemed to transform, dread for what my life would be if I stayed overwhelmed me. I told myself I couldn’t be brave anymore. I told myself I couldn’t stand another year of my mother looking at me with those glazed, grey eyes.

One summer later, I was a freshman at my first practicum class with *Santa Clara Review.* As guilt and grief interfered with my ability to relate to my classmates, I grew addicted to the soft relief I felt when I sat in a circle with people who saw beauty and achievement in the products of the
human mind.

As you might have guessed, I did follow through with my commitment to serve as editor-in-chief of the Review. And I graduated college, too. Josh put me into contact with a friend of his mother’s who worked at the university’s financial aid department. She introduced me to the Jesuit Scholarship Fund. I wrote an essay, and was given enough aid to finish school.

In that final year of school, all the regret I’d felt that summer, and all the guilt I’d entertained throughout my college career, quietly abandoned their residence in me. I no longer saw my financial debt as the universe hinting at my heartless choice to allow my mother to be a lonely prisoner of her psyche.

Instead, I saw my staff at the Review feel passionately about my being there to celebrate and explore our hearts, as readers and as writers. I saw myself as capable of harboring more than sadness—but intellect and good judgment. The community of writers, editors, and faculty, reminded me of the exquisite capacity of human nature, allowing me to no longer dwell on its tenderness, its fragility.

I must extend my thanks not only to Josh, but to my family at the Review: to Kirk and to Stephen; to Dana and to Sara; to Hallie and to Coco; to Felicia and to Max; to Shafa and to Alec; to Professor Goodman and Professor Frisbee. Thank you for allowing escape to be okay, to be right, to be what I needed to recover.
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Casey Clifford is a freshman at Santa Clara University. She’s majoring in environmental studies with a minor in studio art. This piece, Rooted, is meant to show that while we leave imprints on the environment it simultaneously surges through us. We are all connected, united with our earth. Sometimes it just takes courage to notice.

Rupa DasGupta is an artist, designer, and teacher. She has drawn and painted over 800 octopuses for her ongoing “An Octopus a Day” project. She lives in Asbury Park, NJ, with her husband, the poet Michael Paul Thomas.

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**Louis Phillips**’ most recent books are *The Woman Who Wrote King Lear* and *Must I Weep For the Dancing Bear* (two short story collections published by Pleasure Boat Studio). World Audience Books published his poetic sequence *The Kilroy Sonata*.

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