santa clara review

in this issue:

novelist Katharine Noel on fiction and mental illness. PostSecret’s Frank Warren on the art of our secrets. and introducing the editor’s choice prize.
santa clara review
since 1869

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Dear Readers,

This issue of the *santa clara review* comes with one of two different covers. Both feature artist Megan Diddie’s dreamlike images—on one cover, an intricately detailed, fantastical forest, and on the other, fragmented human bodies that morph into each other and their surroundings. This delicate imagery reflects the uncertain space that constitutes not only our dreams but parts of our reality. The subtle space where what we would like to have as easily distinguishable subjects, ideas, and values bleed into each other until we’ve lost the security of definition.

This issue explores such tenuous landscape. It traverses the muddy terrain between mental illness and health (*Mindful of Madness: An Interview with Katharine Noel*). It denies clear distinctions between art and catharsis (*Artists Anonymous: Frank Warren and the PostSecret Project*). It travels from reality to fantasy and asks what difference there really is between truth and fiction.

In this issue, we are happy to announce the recipients of the new Editor’s Choice Prize. Each section editor has chosen a favorite work from his or her section to highlight in the magazine and to receive a $100 award. The adjacent symbol indicates a recipient of the prize, which we will award again in our Spring/Summer issue.

We’re also pleased to announce that this is the first issue we’re publishing with Inkworks Press, a printer based in Berkeley, CA and committed to social justice and environmental sustainability.

Thank you for picking up our magazine. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we’ve enjoyed creating it.

sincerely,

julie jigour
and the *santa clara review* editors
The poet is a gargoyle sitting in a park filled with Chinese men, where the brusque voices are like the indiscriminate grunts of her mind thinking. She is guilty, fascinated other writing what she sees. Some of the looks tell her their life is no subject for art. Foreheads furrow in wide disapproving v’s, lips pinch tight like buttonholes, back-of-the-throat groans as they slam Mah Jong pieces on the worn game boards. But then an old man in a green plaid suit belted high on his ribs walks into her shadow, eyes the pen scrawling the page. She looks up and his face wrinkled as a dried fig blooms into the gold-toothed grin of a small proud boy. She wants to say Ni hao ma? as her husband has taught her, as she knows he would say with pride but her voice does not try the strange vowels on, just lets the man pass, his smile scatter the air like a row of pigeons.

Chinatown

jennifer k. sweeney | 1
The Eldest Daughter

i.
“Shoots, den.”
“Don’t even. You can’t talk like you’re local.”
“Oh yeah? My dad grew up in Hilo, my mom was born in Aiea, and I was raised in fucking Waipahu. I can turn ‘em on, and I can turn it off, but don’t go say I no can.”

I say this knowing that being local means being poor, knowing that pidgin has been forbidden to me since I ruined my eyes by reading in the dark, forbidden from the time my parents no longer had to go to sleep hungry so I could eat.

Being local cannot mean going to a fancy high school with a 99.4% college attendance rate and flying away to the mainland to major in philosophy. Hawaii kids don’t study philosophy.

Being local would have meant being home when my grandfather passed so my mother wouldn’t have had to hang up on me as I wailed. If I were local, I would never have left.

ii.
This morning, in the California air so dry that I felt empty when I breathed, I blew a tire with my groceries waiting on the floor in the backseat (furikake, rice, misoyaki butterfish, lychee, passion orange juice, Orion); while I got the spare out of my bent trunk, I rehearsed relaying the story to my mother whose worry would carry her the two thousand miles to me.

“I busted a tire. It was scary—”
“My tire bust. I was really scared—”
“My tire wen buss, and ho... I was so scared.”
I practiced the singsong intonation of my childhood to get it right for her.

iii.
Choujou, she calls me, I hear her smiling, even though her parents didn’t immigrate from Okinawa, and it was her grandparents who came over to swap Portagee jokes on the plantations. The word crept into our everyday language even though it’s from a place I’ve only been once. Choujou, she says, and the word drags me home. It seeps into my shiny future of policy analysis, non-Asian boyfriends, short haircuts, and heavy staplers. It flashes with every stoplight on my way from City Hall and follows me up three flights of stairs to my apartment of bare walls. Choujou, I hear, and I need to go home.

Maybe not in the next five years, maybe not even in fifteen, but one day, I will need to go back to speak like home to my mother.

It’s about letting the trade winds and Pacific Ocean waves enter my sentences, letting them move carelessly with my speech, making me forget that I wanted to teach English in Costa Rica, forget about how I drive 80 miles per hour on freeways and the way it feels to be alone for an entire day, forcing me to remember the red dirt on my socks and the plumerias that I used to string into lei to place around my mother’s head.
Climbing from the cavern
Of the Moscow Metro
I see flakes falling everywhere
White puffs
Drifting without destination
The mid-summer snow of
“Pukh” flower
Spreading its poplar seeds.

In the late 1940s
Stalin ordered 6,000 gardeners
To “turn Moscow green
In fifteen days.”
They planted thousands of poplar trees,
Chosen because they were
“Oxygenic, tenacious, and fast growing.”
Decades later the gardeners
discovered their mistake:
Nearly all the trees were female
And every June
They release excessive volumes
Of unfertilized seeds.

Moscow:
Nothing—not even nature—
Is predictable
Where men with buckets
Wash cars on the steps
Of the Moscow River
For seven thousand rubles
Where a family of women
Stand in three lines
To buy a loaf of bread
Where smiling bungee jumpers
Leap before the count begins.

Meanwhile school children light
Piles of pukh
On rusty car hoods.
Fires of wondrous white
Skate the surfaces
Of old Lada and Moskvitch sedans
And Moscow sinks its long-suffering teeth
Into a wily grin
Never losing this talent for teaching
Its delectable differences.
Tidal Navigation

I don’t sleep anymore in a house near the sea. It wasn’t exactly a house, to be honest, but a condo, white stucco, brown tile roof, an “upstairs unit,” on Frederick Street in Santa Cruz. Not near the ocean, either, at least not close enough to catch a glimpse of water from any window in Vincent’s house. Still, fog descended every evening, muffling the sky in a gray blanket as the air sharpened with the scent of kelp and salt. On winter nights, when traffic sounds died down on Soquel Avenue, I heard distant waves crash on the shore of Castle Beach, a twenty-minute walk from Vincent’s door. Other nights, I listened to the dull metal clang of the mile buoy, interspersed with the single, abrupt note of the foghorn on its rocky perch at the end of the yacht harbor jetty.

The ocean seemed almost a backdrop for my two-year relationship with Vincent, and my friendship with his daughters, whom I loved and mothered, their own mother absent from their lives. I sailed a boat for the first time with Vincent; we took his girls and my own children to Sunny Cove beach on summer days. One afternoon, my son Matthew and Vincent’s daughter Kathleen found a piece of kelp, long as a jump rope, in the riptide. They shrieked with laughter as they tried to play tug-of-war, the sound echoing off the cliffs which cradle Sunny Cove beach like a pair of hands. Later, we drew pictures in the wet, compacted sand: a fat whale, an octopus with wavy legs, a shark with a wide-open mouth.

The last day we spent as a couple, I sat reading a book on West Cliff Drive while Vincent caught a few waves on his boogie board. I watched him in surf clotted with seaweed, in his aqua-and-black wetsuit. The sun hid behind a scrim of mist; I worried a little about picking up my youngest child from school on time. Finally, Vincent climbed up the stairs to the road; we chatted about plans for the weekend as he stripped off his wetsuit and put his yellow boogie board in the back of his car. I had no idea, no warning whatsoever, that he was about to break up with me; two days later, he told me he didn’t love me. “You deserve someone who loves you,”
he said. Words he repeated over and over, like a tsunami crashing onto shore, fracturing everything I thought I knew about him. I saw him again only once after that, at Java Junction on Seabright Avenue; he brought me my clothes from his house and gave me a terse, emotionless goodbye. I never saw his daughters again.

A breakup and its aftermath makes the mind spill out the memories of a relationship, like a jewelry box violently upturned and then ransacked. It’s possible to find some pieces again, but it’s inevitable that others get lost. It astounds and saddens me still, eight months after my relationship ended, how many things I’ve forgotten about Vincent and our two years together. Occasionally a memory flickers up into consciousness, then vanishes again just as suddenly, elusive as the silver glimpse of a fish in murky water. There was a swallow’s nest, hive-shaped and made from thick gray mud, anchored to the house eaves. Sometimes I saw the Orion constellation centered perfectly in the living room skylight. A crack in that skylight meandered like a creek. Loss seems to have fractured the sequence of these memories; they arrive without prompting or connection.

A month after my breakup, I sobbed to a friend on the phone that it was too painful for me to go near the ocean again. My friend, a firm believer in nostrums and stern remedies, took it upon herself to redeem the sea for me by driving me there herself. I sat, emotionally and physically numb, wrapped in my heavy coat like an invalid, on a gray bench near the sand. She chattered like a manic parrot about taking back my power. Nothing made any impression on me; her words felt like stones dropped into sorrow’s dark well, and the ocean—mild, blue, and gleaming—seemed, in my numbness, like the bland renderings of Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light.

This is how I sleep now: with a new lover, in a wholly different life. I wake in a room lined with redwood paneling, ceiling high and pitched as a barn loft. Blinds made from delicate turquoise paper—like Chinese lantern paper—cover the room’s four windows. When the blinds are pulled, it’s like waking in a tree house, among redwoods which soar to the sky. At night, house lights across the canyon glow the color of an amber pendant my sister once gave me, a deep, burnished topaz.

I don’t know the rooms of my new lover’s house by heart, but I feel at home here. Waking next to Evan after spending the
night with him for the first time, I lay in a cloud of white down comforter and pale cotton sheets. Staying still, I watched him sleep, the way everyone watches a lover sleep.

To begin to love again after trauma is a labyrinthine journey. For one thing, I knew I would have to come to terms with the ocean: Evan owns four boats and has navigational charts spread out on his living room floor. Plus, you can't live in Santa Cruz without feeling the constant pull of salt water, like a gravitational force. One day, a decision came to me, easily, the way a redtail hawk glides on wind currents: I knew it was time to make a formal return to the ocean. I couldn't avoid it forever.

The next weekend, Evan and I, with my youngest son Matthew in tow, drove up Highway One to the Pigeon Point lighthouse, just outside Año Nuevo. I thought the lighthouse would be a good place to begin my reorientation to waves and salt water, as Vincent and I had never been there, though we'd driven by it at night many times, the lighthouse beam bisecting the darkness like a luminous blade as we passed.

I hadn't traveled Highway One in almost a year. Like most autumn days on the Central Coast, the day was sunny, with a clear, ripe tone to the light. It seemed as if every bicyclist from Santa Cruz to San Mateo also decided to enjoy the fine weather; we passed row after row of them, straining on slender bikes against the ever-present wind. All of them wore bright clothes, most memorably a woman in neon green bike shorts, a pink helmet, and a bright purple shirt spangled with yellow polka dots.

There are things about Highway One which seem perpetual: green, massed fields of broccoli, dark spikes of artichoke plants, long rattling weeds which look as if they sprouted and grew in a state of papery dryness. This time of year, signs for pumpkin stands line the road, with names like U Pick ‘Em Pumpkins. Most of the signs are white, with orange and black lettering, the pictures of pumpkins crudely and enthusiastically drawn, as if by a child. And there are fields of pumpkins as well, glowing like little suns, pumpkins stacked into sunset-colored towers or arrayed in neat, crayon-bright rows.

We drove through Davenport, on the outskirts of Santa Cruz County. I pointed out Pacific Elementary, the school where I used to teach. Across Highway One from the school, rocky cliffs
jutted straight and sheer down to the surf. I saw a stand of Monterey Cypress on the cliff top, foliage as precise as a woodcut, and remembered how, years ago, after a long teaching day, I’d sit among the cypress, looking out at the silver sea.

Beyond Davenport, I saw the green road sign for Swanton, a place I never pass without thinking of the poet William Everson, who lived there in a house he called Kingfisher Flat. Everson, when I knew him, was ill with Parkinson’s Disease, his body fragile, hair and beard long and gleaming white. I looked at the foothills, thought of his spirit like a raptor soaring over those dark forests.

As we drove, my son Matthew asked Evan science questions, most notably, “If two suns collided, what would happen?” I’m sure my twelve-year-old anticipated a reply depicting a large explosion, but Evan—with degrees in physics and computer engineering from Caltech—gave more detailed and precise answers than that. As they talked, I noticed that the fields along this section of Highway One stretched flat and bare, harvested down to dirt clods, all the way to Pescadero Beach, curved like a scimitar, brown foam in the riptide, dark from dissolved sand.

Año Nuevo Island rose in the distance, a rippled streak in water the color of a periwinkle shell. I told Evan and Matthew about the lighthouse keeper’s home on Año Nuevo island, how sea lions took it over, reclining like lazy uncles on the Victorian parlor floor, against the faded, ornate wallpaper. Sometimes rangers even find one lounging in the upstairs bathtub. Año Nuevo is the breeding ground for elephant seals and a place where great white sharks hunt, seeking the oil and richness of seal flesh. The sea itself looks slightly sinister at Año Nuevo, filled with black, jagged rocks, surf churning at the base, making a gleaming foam.

The Pigeon Point lighthouse looked like a giant’s tower as we approached it, with clusters of buildings at its base. I braided my hair before I got out of the car, as I’m prone to a mass of witch’s tangles whenever the wind picks up. As I secured the braid with a red velvet band, Matthew pointed out a daytime half-moon’s pale fretwork in a cloudless sky.

We walked to the lighthouse on a winding, garden-maze path through mats of iceplant. Iceplant, with its invasive roots, thick stalks, and neon-colored flowers, controls coastal erosion, yet is notorious for crowding out native plants. I remembered sudden-
ly that Vincent and I planned to go help the Sierra Club rip out ice-plant at Scott Creek, just a few days before we broke up: a random, floating memory.

At the lighthouse, the sea boiled over the rocks, hypnotic and seething, a keen white quality to the light. The lighthouse museum, little more than a shack of weathered boards, was surrounded with faded placards describing Pigeon Point’s great Fresnel lens, a dome made of polished glass panes. The lens itself, supplanted years ago by a Coast Guard beacon, remains at the top of the lighthouse, shrouded by pale canvas curtains.

A docent named Jim pointed out some details of the Fresnel lens, its 1,000 watt bulbs, panes in the lens the same clear pale blue as ocean water. He told us the lens may have been originally installed at the Cape Hatteras lighthouse; for years, the lens also gathered dust in a Massachusetts warehouse before its installation at Pigeon Point.

I crossed over to the railing where Evan and Matthew had wandered. Evan, crouched next to the path, drew in the sand with his index finger, explaining longitude and latitude to Matthew. Matthew looked up and pointed down the cliff, told me he’d spotted a hidden sea cave. “You can tell where it is by the way the water comes in,” he said, and indeed, the sea surged forward between rocks and foamed to the right, hissing deep under the cliff.

I looked out across sensuous curves of cliffs mantled with iceplant and a wildflower called lizard’s tail, yellow blooms at the end of a gray-green, whiplike stalk. Pinpricks of light made sequins over the water; Año Nuevo island reclined like a ghost in the distance. I felt no pocket-knife insinuation of sorrow as the sea showed its lines and angles of foam in blue water, like brushstrokes of a Japanese painting.

When the lighthouse shadow blanketed us after a few hours, we decided to leave, driving past more harvested, bare-dirt fields and heavy stands of pine and cypress. Overhead, two vultures circled; Matthew wondered aloud if vultures ever accidentally bonked their heads together. Suddenly, we saw a crooked sign, its stenciled red lettering uneven, faded to pink: “Corn Maze.” My son said, “Yes!” even before we asked.

We pulled up to a setting straight out of Hitchcock: falling-apart barns, outbuildings leaning to one side, a rusty stove with its
door hanging half off, a farmer sitting in his gleaming silver pickup. He got out as we pulled up, his skin weathered as my father’s skin, a man who also farmed as a young man. We gave him the admission fee, ten dollars, and he joked in a cackling voice with my son, “I close the door at five-thirty, so you’ll have to live there if you’re not out!” Matthew, a lover of things surreal, said, “Cool!” as he rushed off to the entrance of a path carved into a forest of cornstalks.

I had never been in a corn field, and after just leaving the ocean, I realized I walked in another kind of sea: waves of green leaves, stalks, and ripe corn towering over my head. Matthew made a game of hiding out in the corn to scare Evan and me. We wondered how the farmer managed to cut a labyrinth of paths through the corn, some with blind alleys, some meandering close to the road, then leading back to the center of the maze.

A breeze threaded through the field, lifting the green leaves, fragile as parchment, making them rustle and whisper. I showed Evan how a cornstalk swells where the ear is just beginning to show, like a pregnancy under the thick stem. Two hours later, after I began to believe we really would be trapped inside, navigating like rats in a lab maze under the night sky, we saw the exit; Matthew dashed out of it, a lightning-streak of preteen adolescence. We climbed a prickly mountain of hay bales and sat for awhile on top, looking down at a small field filled with pumpkins ripening from green to dark rust.

***

Two weeks later, Evan and I made a trip to the Point Reyes lighthouse, farther up the California coast. This place holds meaning for me like a Rosetta stone in its cliffs, its wild rocks looking out to a giant flat skirt of ocean: I saw gray whales for the first time at Point Reyes two years ago, massive bodies flying just underneath a transparent blue surface, like shadowy archangels. Vincent and I had a picnic there with the girls, eating French bread sandwiches on a bench at the lighthouse stairs. When we broke up, I told myself I would probably never go there again. And yet opportunity presented itself in the unlikely form of a Seamus Heaney reading in Redwood City. Evan suggested that we go see the poet read from his work, then spend the night in the area, and head out to Point
Reyes the next morning. And that is exactly what we did, staying at the Fountain Grove Inn, a rather fancy hotel where, as we ate breakfast in the dining area, one of the hotel workers smiled at us and said to me, “Nice husband!”

Evan and I set out after breakfast. The day loomed overcast and wet, which felt fitting for a trip to Point Reyes. One might need graphite pencils and watercolors in order to fully describe that place, or the most gray words in the language: fog bank, storm-cloud, lead, polished iron. Point Reyes and its lighthouse stand on a rock promontory far up the coast, on a winding road past San Francisco, in the true middle of nowhere, as if every tie to civilization has to be relinquished in order to go there.

The fields outside Santa Rosa undulated over low hills, golden; the first cold tinge of autumn tinted the air and showed in the color of turning foliage. Ragged barns dotted the hillsides, worn to a gray sheen; black rocks jutted up from the soil like rocks in surf. We drove past a shaggy bull standing alone by a barbed-wire fence; he eyed us, serene as a Zen monk, his winter coat coming in, pale and curly.

In Bodega, I noticed an old cemetery, stone markers stained with age. Evan asked me if I still wanted to be buried one day in the Felton cemetery—not like I’m planning to go there anytime soon, of course—and I told him yes, I did. The Felton cemetery has a certain gloomy cheerfulness about it; many of the graves have wildflowers growing on them. There’s even a grave with a birdhouse, one with a rock garden, each bright stone carefully painted, and one with a half-surfboard instead of a tombstone. When we reached Tomales, I saw a white clapboard church with a curious wooden tower, like the towers one sees in old vineyards. It contained a single window, like a picture window; behind it loomed a statue of the Virgin Mary holding Baby Jesus. The mother-and-son figure seemed to hover like an apparition behind smeary, rippled glass.

I didn’t remember much of this landscape from my long-ago journey here with Vincent and his girls. I didn’t remember Tomales Bay at all, so when we drove around a curve and it stretched huge and far to the horizon, Evan and I had to stop the car and get out. We stood in the deep silence of light on water, weeds by the roadside, going over to winter dryness, and hawks gliding over the water, dark as an elaborate form of punctuation.
As we approached Point Reyes Station, I noticed sign after sign advertising oyster restaurants, most notably one for “BBQ oysters, dancing, full bar, established 1883.” Evan pointed out orderly rows of blue buoys, oyster traps arranged neatly in the bay’s flat, gray-green water.

We followed Sir Francis Drake road to the town of Point Reyes Station, which contained a bookstore, a coffeehouse, and a weaver’s collective, bright clothing hung around the door like banners. A stand of amaryllis belladonna, wild lilies with the common name of “naked ladies,” blazed pink in a drab yard. Evan and I both chuckled at the incongruous sight of “Vladimir’s Czech Restaurant,” with a salmon-colored paint job, among buildings for fishing tackle and real estate offices. Ravens promenaded on the tile roof of the restaurant, opening wings shiny as black silk.

The landscape completely changed past the town, from a blurry dreamscape of eucalyptus, pine, and cypress, to flat country, gray-brown, weedy and tussocked with low hills, interspersed with ranches denoted by letters of the alphabet: “M Ranch,” “B Ranch.” Black-and-white cows crowded the yards of each ranch; the houses, cream-colored, had pointillist dots of flowers in windowboxes, electric against the coastal gray weather. Blackbirds swooped over the fields, making a storm cloud of wings and flight, and fog began to drift in rags and torn sheets over a road which seemed to grow more narrow and winding by the minute.

We reached the lighthouse parking lot about forty-five minutes before closing time. “We’re almost the only people here,” I whispered, as if in church, as we began the short walk up a steep hill, stone cliffs and an enormous stretch of sand and water to our right. I touched the rough bark of a Monterey cypress in its shawl of Spanish moss, branches flattened by relentless wind pouring over the jagged coast. Finally, we saw the lighthouse museum—which contains, among other things, a glass specimen jar of whale lice, the lighthouse keeper’s coat, and shipwreck photographs, boats smashed to kindling on this dangerous point.

There are 303 steps down to the Point Reyes lighthouse, which is a low, squat tower—no need for height, the ocean such a broad, steel-blue expanse, the wind too strong for a tall structure. You don’t see the lighthouse right away; it lurks behind stands of tall rocks, their giant bodies sculpted by erosion and covered with
rusty vegetation, trentefolia, a type of algae. A sign at the entrance to the lighthouse stairs warned, “This is the equivalent of climbing a thirty-story building.” A few people straggled up the stairs, stopping every few steps to rest; the walk down felt easy, like gliding, but I knew I’d have a hard time on the way back, too.

Rags of mist blew around us like the ghosts of things vanished; a fog bank loomed low over the ocean, gunmetal blue in gray light. I came to the wooden bench, wooden, with a coat of chipped red paint, where Vincent and his girls and I had our long-ago picnic, a day when we toasted each other with plastic glasses of white wine. I’d felt nothing related to loss all day, but when I saw the bench, tears welled up in my eyes. Do such sudden tears come only for the things we’ve lost, or the things which come into our lives later, like unasked-for gifts after sorrow? I didn’t know what the tears meant; I just let them fall down my cheeks, a thin, bitter glaze.

The lighthouse itself seemed deserted. I showed Evan my ultimate, longed-for writing area: an old-fashioned desk in a building just above the actual lighthouse, the ocean spectacular in every window, a landscape made completely of water. We walked down a few more steps to the lighthouse with its squat, rust-roofed tower, the Fresnel lens at the top illuminated today, light glowing behind thick glass panes.

A lighthouse worker saw us, a young man in a khaki shirt and green polyester pants. He told us he was just closing up; I saw a bundle of metal keys in his hand. “But you all still have to see this,” he said. I liked his sweet, open expression; he seemed to be in his early twenties, not much older than my eldest son. He unlocked a tiny, Alice-in-Wonderland door at the base of the lighthouse and we stepped inside, stooping low to avoid bumping our heads.

It felt warm inside despite the cold and fog; blue paint neatly coated the walls. Looking up, we saw into the heart of the Fresnel lens with its massive oval bulbs, filaments blazing at the center. The mechanism to rotate the lens lay in a glass case at our feet, like a museum piece, an intricate clockwork of brass wheels, weights, and rods. The lighthouse worker grabbed an iron chain with a large weight at the end, pulling it high up. “That’s not enough to move the lens, though,” he told us. “You have to get things just a little bit out of balance.” He gently touched the base of the lens and it began to spin, slowly and gracefully, the brass wheels of its clockwork
ratcheting. The room filled with long bands of light, streaks flickering across our faces, glowing in our hair, thin halos.

We climbed slowly back up the stairs; I kept peeling off layers of sweaters and then my jacket as I walked, the exertion making me radiant with sweat. The lighthouse keeper followed us, locking the gate behind us. I asked him when the gray whales began migrating; he said he’d seen two Minke whales today, far out beyond the surfline, but the grays appeared from December onwards. “Just a couple more months, and they’ll be back,” he said as he waved goodbye to us.

At the top of the stairs, we paused on a lookout platform. I remembered the day I saw my first whales here, breaching the dark surface, spouts misting over the water. Fog hung so heavy now that there seemed not the merest promise of a horizon. Evan showed me one spot of light, round as a silver dollar, on the choppy water, just below a luminous place in the clouds where the sun showed through. We looked down at the rocks where waves seethed and poured in streams; a brown scum drifted towards the shoreline. Evan explained how wave action makes that dull foam, churning it from proteins in kelp.

Murres, black seabirds with stunning white chests, clung to the rocks, bobbing easily in the surf. I wondered if I could learn to be just as serene in the tidal navigations of my own life, no matter what circumstances washed over me. My lover stood behind me, touched my braid, said, “Want to feel the wind in your hair?” I let him slip off the elastic band; he combed the braid out with his fingers. The wind, filled with salt fragrance, coursed among the dark strands, lifting them around my shoulders like smoke.
Katharine Noel’s first novel Halfway House, about a young woman’s psychotic break and its effects on her family, has received numerous recognitions: 2006 Book Sense Selection, 2006 New York Times Editor’s Choice, 2006 Kate Chopin Award, 2007 Award from the Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies, and 2007 Ken/NAMI Award. Noel visited Santa Clara University in the fall of 2007 to give a reading from Halfway House and to work with student fiction writers. Noel graciously took the time to be interviewed by Austin Baumgarten, Assistant Poetry Editor at the review, who is currently working on a project investigating the relationship between mental illness and literature, and is diagnosed with bipolar disorder himself.

Austin Baumgarten: You mentioned at your reading last night that you had taught writing on a psychiatric ward. I was very intrigued by that: could you discuss that program and its therapeutic benefits?

Katharine Noel: I contacted the occupational therapy program at San Francisco General and said that I was interested in teaching writing. They already had kind of an art program, but they didn’t have a writing component. I just came in once a week for occupational therapy, which was 45 minutes or an hour, and I would come up with exercises, and people would write and then people would sometimes read what they had written, and it was great. It wasn’t a formal curriculum in any way: I wasn’t focused on “you could really improve this or that,” and it wasn’t really about critique in anyway. It really was about giving people space to write. Some of what people wrote was very much about their hospitalization or their experiences around illness, and some of what they wrote had nothing to do with that.
I’d been writing this novel and I wanted in some way to give back, in a very small way. I felt like I was writing about this community and I wanted to use this skill that I happen to have and maybe contribute something. This was a locked ward, and it was San Francisco General, so it was people who were without insurance for the most part and without a lot of options, and it was nice for me not only to be thinking about illness and writing about it, but also maybe be giving something back.

**AB:** I think that’s wonderful. I’ve done a lot of OT and I’m not big on making collages or drawing on t-shirts, and it would have been nice to be able to write. *Halfway House*, in contrast to most of the books I’ve read about mental illness, depicts mental illness in a manner that reflected my own experiences with bipolar disorder. I could tell from reading the book that you had experience interacting with the mentally ill. Most of the works about mental illness I’ve read oftentimes seem false. For instance, when I first got sick, I read—and watched—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* because everyone always brings it up when I talk about what happens in the hospital.

**KN:** Did you like them?

**AB:** I enjoyed them. I don’t know how accurate they are of what it’s like to be mentally ill—especially the book.

**KN:** Yeah, I think it’s not really about illness. The book is about people who are labeled as ill because they don’t fit into society. I think that they’re interesting works of art, but I don’t really see them as being about mental illness. I see them as being a social critique that uses the hospital as a setting.

**AB:** In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, it seems almost too fun sometimes in the hospital—especially in the movie.

**KN:** Like when they’re playing basketball. One fiction writer that I think does really well depicting illness is a woman named Stacey D’Erasmo. She has a novel that I loved called *A Seahorse Year* that’s set in San Francisco, and it’s about a woman and her son, who is schizophrenic. It’s really well done. It feels like one of the
few fictional depictions of illness that rings true for me. It would be interesting to know if it rings true for you as well. Another author is Maud Casey: she’s a woman, my age, who has bipolar disorder. There’s an anthology called *Unholy Ghost* that’s great, and in it she writes about being a writer and having bipolar disorder. She also has an essay in an anthology called *Maybe Baby* about wanting children and feeling that she couldn’t go through pregnancy without Lithium, and therefore not being sure that she could go through her pregnancy.

**AB:** I read for my project an essay by Virginia Woolf titled “On Being Ill.” It’s hard to read because it’s Virginia Woolf, but it’s interesting because she talks about how there is not a lot of writing about illness in general. That made think: why is that? I came to a tenuous conclusion, that maybe it’s because it’s so difficult to take those internal feelings we have about our illnesses and translate them into words. I want to know how you feel about that, and how you went about writing those feelings in *Halfway House*?

**KN:** I think there is a lot more writing now about illness than there used to be. In terms of taking thoughts and putting them down, I feel that it can be hard to show thought, and fiction writers particularly shy away from showing thought because it feels like, “If I say what this person is thinking, then I’m telling, so I have to have everything dramatized.” It took me a while, actually, in writing the book to be comfortable with writing a lot about thinking, and not just with Angie’s thoughts.

One of the things that I find so interesting in writing is how much we all go through our days thinking things that are entirely unconnected to what we’re actually doing. Sometimes we think things that are absolutely opposed to what we say or to the way that we act or talk to people, and we’ll be very polite to people while we’re bored or actively disliking them. These are the places I’m really interested in. Places where there’s a discrepancy.

In writing Angie’s thoughts, I tried to take my own thoughts, or what I imagined my own thoughts would be in those situations, and dial them up or down to where they might be for Angie. She
has the manic thinking, which to me doesn’t feel all too different. It’s certainly different, but all of our thoughts jump around, right? We all try to concentrate on one thing and our thoughts will just zoom around, maybe not in quite as pressured a way as they do for her when she’s manic, and some of her connections are maybe more tenuous, but I don’t think her thinking is entirely different. It’s just at a different volume—the same things that happen to anyone happen but in a more intense version. Depression is something that I was able to take from my own experiences of having a pretty typical—but pretty unhappy—depression in college, and that was something that was pretty easy to say, “OK well, what if I dialed that up?” I shouldn’t say it was easy, but it was accessible.

**AB:** I wanted to talk about something that might seem a little out of scope, but I’m a big fan of the television show *The Sopranos*, and what I find interesting about that show, is that it is built around—

**KN:** A man walks into a psychiatrist’s office.

**AB:** Exactly. *The Sopranos* is considered the greatest show of the last ten years, and it’s central theme is psychiatry and a man’s inner thoughts, yet there is this great ignorance of and resistance to accepting those who have mental illness in our culture. I was wondering how you interpret this situation?

**KN:** I love *The Sopranos* too; although I haven’t watched the sixth season, so don’t tell me anything. Part of what I think is so amazing about *The Sopranos*, especially in the first season, is that Tony’s deeply depressed, and there’s times when he’s suicidal and he’s absolutely unable to articulate it, and he lies all the time to his psychiatrist. He’s in therapy and he truly wants something out of it, and at the same time he’s working against himself. I think that’s one reason it’s such a popular show. I think that your point is a good one; I think that’s a very palatable vision of mental illness for us. I think that when people are manic or people are schizophrenic, it’s much more in our faces, so that’s part of what we reject about those illnesses. Tony continues to function while depressed. I mean obviously he does all kinds of sociopathic things, but those aren’t really presented as being part of his illness. Those are more just about the
world he lives in, which is where sociopathy is acceptable. I haven’t
watched a lot of *Six Feet Under*, but I know that on that show there is
a schizophrenic character, and one of the reasons that I don’t watch
it is that I was pretty turned off by the way that mental illness is de-
picted there. This seems to me a much more typical way that we see
mental illness shown: we see people who are un-understandable
and there’s not really an interest in understanding them. The illness
is just an excuse for them to do inexplicable, weird things. So I think part
of what makes *The Sopranos* great is that Tony’s depression doesn’t make
him “other.” His depression actually makes him more like the audience.

**AB:** You mentioned Tony lies to his psychiatrist all the time, and that
makes the show so engaging. I re-
member reading an interview with
David Chase, and he said that “most
of my characters would be telling
lies,” which I think is very compel-
ing because his characters are complex, and their motivations are
often unclear. Perhaps mentally ill characters are difficult to create
because they are not straightforward. So I was wondering if you
had difficulty writing about Angie in *Halfway House*?

**KN:** When I started *Halfway House*, I actually thought about writ-
ing it from everyone’s point of view but hers. My rationalization
was this really isn’t a novel about mental illness—this is a novel
about something that tears a family apart, a pressure that comes
onto a family and tears it apart, and I don’t want it to be about ill-
ness particularly; I want it to be about all the repercussions of men-
tal illness. That rationalization was a lie because I was just scared
to write about Angie. I just felt like I didn’t know enough and that I
would screw it up. The interesting part is that Angie became for me
the person who I am closest to and the person who I most enjoyed
writing. When I workshopped the novel at Stanford, people were
saying we want more Angie: she’s where it’s at. So it became for me
a book about Angie, and then secondarily a book about Luke, and
the parents were much less important by the time I finished writing it.

It was hard. It was hard for me to write her. I think in creating fictional characters we take ourselves and we dial ourselves a couple notches or a lot of notches one way or another. We say, what if this aspect of my personality was turned way up, and this other aspect of my personality was turned way down? At least that’s the way I work with character; and so Angie is very much me, even though I don’t have bipolar disorder. I think she’s a cooler version of who I might be if I did have bipolar disorder. I think she’s more generous than I am. I do feel very connected to her.

**AB:** I really enjoyed Angie as a character because I could relate to her personally: she was really high functioning, a student-athlete, and socially popular. You mentioned last night at your reading that in a lot of writing about mental illness, mentally ill characters are used to express societal problems or to serve an effect in the story. How do you feel about those constructions of mental illness?

**KN:** I think that anytime any fiction writing uses any character in a mechanical way, it shows. I think that I am unusually attuned to that in depictions of mental illness just because I was depicting mentally ill people for so long and I spent so much time figuring out how to do it. There’s a particular story that I used to love that happens to have a mentally ill character in it. It’s a wonderful story on many levels, but now when I look at it, I see the way in which that particular character is being used. It’s a story all about light and dark, and this mentally ill character in it happens to just kind of wander around saying things about lightness and darkness, and now that really has a false end for me. I think characters can’t be ideas first. I think characters can’t be symbols for something. If
they happen to work as a symbol that’s great, but that can’t be their purpose. So I think that is why sometimes people choose to have a mentally ill character: in a story it allows them to fulfill some kind of mechanical need. I think the flaw is in ever writing any character as a way of only getting where you want the story to go. Hopefully characters will move a story in a way, but they also must feel like three-dimensional people who can do things that are surprising and weird and that can exist beyond the reaches of the page.

**AB:** A work that I’ve read, and that you mentioned last night, is *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison, which I think is perhaps the best thing, especially about bipolar disorder in particular, which I’ve read. Even though she insists on calling it manic depression.

**KN:** Right—and she has an interesting reason for insisting on that, which I liked. She just thought it was a more evocative term—and she loved her manias. I think that there’s so much honesty in that. She not only loves them but she misses them. She wishes that she could still experience them.

**AB:** I really valued her honesty as well. In contrast, I recently read in *Vanity Fair* that Arthur Miller had a son with Down syndrome who he institutionalized and ignored his entire life. I felt that was interesting considering his work *Death of a Salesman*; however, I found an interview with Arthur Miller in the *New York Times* that said he doesn’t believe that Willy Loman is a depressive, and that society has caused him to be suicidal. So I was wondering what you would say, as an author who has written about mentally ill characters: can you control which characters are mentally ill and which ones aren’t?

**KN:** Well, I think that an author’s intentions certainly matter. I think that there are some people who believe that every interpretation of a text is equally valid, and I don’t think that’s true. I think that there are some interpretations that work and some that don’t. Whether or not Willy Loman is someone who is suffering from clinical depression or whether he’s reacting to societal pressures and the pressures of needing money for his family, I can’t speak to.
I think one of the things that I was really interested in writing about was the blurriness of the lines of what we call illness and what we accept as normal. I mean there are things that we as a society accept and endorse that are crazy. That’s something that I’m really interested in, that there are behaviors that seem equally irrational to me that we accept, and other behaviors that not only do we not accept, but that we are fearful of and freaked out by and that we try to push as far away as possible. One of the things I was interested in writing about is how all of us have a certain amount of mental illness, if we label an illness as partly being about very disordered thinking, very illogical thinking, and things that we do that don’t make sense. It’s only when a critical mass of that thinking occurs when an intervention is necessary. I’m not saying that intervention is only a societal construct, but I think that the reason mental illness is so frightening to us as a society is that we recognize pieces of ourselves in those people who we label as mentally ill.

**AB:** Definitely. In my own experience with my family, especially because bipolar disorder is genetic, there was such an aversion to my diagnosis from members of my family, because what does that say about them? So I agree completely. It’s important even for those who aren’t mentally ill to be aware of mental illnesses, not to be ignorant of them.

**KN:** Oh, absolutely. One of the things that I talked about last night before my reading was that when I went to the farm and started working there, I knew nothing. I mean I really was profoundly ignorant about mental illness. I just never even thought about it; I never had much reason to think about it. For instance, schizophrenia is misused all the time as a word in our culture to mean wanting two things that are in opposition, and obviously it’s used to mean multiple personality disorder and it’s not that at all. Even at that level, I didn’t have the very basic definitions. So I didn’t have basic knowledge, but I also never really thought about mental illness as what it means to be mentally ill. I had some very typical college
depression that sucked, but didn’t cross the line into a clinical definition of depression. I was forced to think for the first time that I’m pretty lucky, and what would it mean to have gone through that, and what it would have meant to have gone through it if it had been worse?

**AB:** As a mentally ill person, I really appreciate what you’ve done, because your book deals with a lot more than just mental illness. What I found the most fascinating were the interactions between the family members and between Angie’s close friends. Nothing has changed my relationships more than my diagnosis. I feel those who know or love someone who is mentally ill should read your book to allow them an opportunity to comprehend how their relationships will change—and how to accept and adapt to that change.

**KN:** First, I’m so glad that you liked the book and that it rings true for you. It means a lot to me. As I said, I initially did think of it as being a book about the family more than it was about Angie, even though by the end for me it really is about Angie and her journey. She stabilizes by the end of the book, and I had somebody refer to it as being a really happy ending—but for me it’s not. It’s not an unhappy ending, but I wanted it to be a complicated ending. You know a lot of people who I’ve talked to, who’ve come up to me who’ve read it, a lot of them have been people who’ve found it true; a lot of them have had mental illnesses themselves, and a lot of them are family members who’ve responded to something. But a lot of them are also people who just haven’t thought about it that much. I love that it has made some people respond and made people think. That was never its purpose: my purpose was always that I fell in love with my characters. What I hope is true of the book is that it works because Angie is a complete person, that she’s not a symbol of what it is to be mentally ill, or a representative, or some kind of object lesson. I don’t want her to be anything other than a three-dimensional person—and that’s what I hope she is, and I want to believe that’s why people respond to the novel.
nailed high in the aching rafters,  
curled, cracked, and dusty,  
the nail blooming with rust:

my father, right-center, not wearing  
a shirt. behind him, on the wall  
above the window, a poster

of a cartoon duck with large breasts.  
a cigar in his left hand and what appears  
to be a ring. he looks right

to the pretty woman resting her left arm  
on his shoulder. her smirk suggests  
she knows what she’s doing. she’s not wearing

any pants. an avocado sweater down  
to her hips, white cotton panties that peek out  
below. barefoot. in her right hand, at her side,

a cigarette. there are beer bottles and cans  
everywhere: on the coffee table,  
on the end table, on the windowsill.

it is stamped on the back, in red:  
kodacolor print, made by kodak, nov. 67.  
the nail hangs just above his head.

every photograph is filled with fading  
answers. but what can be drawn  
from a cigarette drag,

a sidelong glance, the smoothness  
of her inner thigh?
He is short and bow-legged
and when he talks his mouth barely opens.
In the first session, he fidgets too.
You feel better about not being perfect.

He won’t let you tell your life story
over and over again.
He is not that indulgent.
Instead, he tells you to get out of bed
every morning, to eat regular meals
and to write down your emotions during the day.
So you set your alarm clock,
go to the grocery store and you write:

I feel overwhelmed when I wake.
I feel guilty when I read “Love your neighbor.”
The stray cat crosses the street and I feel tired.
The dishes rot in the sink and I feel alone.

When you show him what you’ve written
he doesn’t look at it, says
the exercise is the point, the doing,
not whether or not he reads it.

So you keep writing, and you don’t stop
seeing him. You like it
when he frowns when you tell him
you didn’t get any sleep last night.

He shifts in his chair,
tries to give you advice.
But you don’t expect too much.
He tells you, let good enough be good enough.
Help Wanted

A load of psychiatric cases, we’re sitting around the day room drinking stale coffee, joking about how we’re one big happy family, how we’re the Waltons living up on Waltons’ Mountain. The halfway house furniture is smelly and donated, so everybody’s sprawled all over everything. When the counselors show up, group’s going to start. They’ll be asking us what we’ve accomplished. I’m a girl, but thanks to Supercuts everybody’s calling me Jim Bob.

“Say, Jim Bob, what’s your day program? You can’t be living up on Waltons’ Mountain without no day program!”

A few of them start in on this skinny anorexic guy I’ve been hanging out with in the house—does he have a day program? And he turns bright red and hides behind his knees. But you can tell he likes getting to be Mary Ellen. The counselors stroll in wearing their thrift-store clothes, looking hipper than us but just as ratty. They’ve got the washer and dryer going out back. Doing their laundry at work, it’s one of their perks.

“Hey Grandma, hey Grandpa!”

They both whip out their clipboards and tell us that the topic of tonight’s group (big surprise) is day programs, how there are people in this house who have not found them, even though it is a requirement for living at this psychiatric halfway house by the sea (we’re in Santa Cruz).

“Having a productive daytime activity is crucial to your therapeutic regimen,” one of the counselors says. “Plus, it’s a rule.”

We go around the room and check in. What is our day program or what’s it going to be by like yesterday? Turns out most of these scruffy little Waltons have day programs. The schizos go to this day treatment center with psychiatrists and med charts and macrame so they’re automatically covered. Bentley, this manic, has gotten himself a job sorting and tagging at the Goodwill. Another guy (we’ve yet to figure out what his problem is) is volunteering as a set builder for a little theatre company down on Cedar Street. It’s just me and Mary Ellen that don’t have anything yet. Not living up
to our treatment plans, not committed to our regimens. Whoops.

The counselors go on and on about how we’ve got to learn to function even if we are screwed up, and how there’s this waiting list of people truly motivated to change who could take our beds in an instant, which makes Mary Ellen look over at me very worried, like, “I can’t figure out a day program, Jim Bob, I’m like incapable.” It’s one of Mary Ellen’s issues besides the anorexia, that he just can’t steer his own ship so to speak. And he’s worried they’ll send him back to his homophobic, wire hanger parents up in Atherton. He’s eighteen, so legally nobody can send him anywhere. I keep telling him that. But Mary Ellen has serious doubts about making it on his own. He knows, I guess, that if the wind picked up just right, he’d blow like a feather straight back to Atherton, as bad as it is there.

“Find something where you can use your talents,” one counselor tells Mary Ellen and me. “And where you can work on your issues,” the other one says.

The counselors at this halfway house are pretty much issue-obsessed. I barely knew what an issue was before coming here, but now I’ve got an itemized list of them under lock and key in the staff room. I can see off of Buzbee’s clipboard I’m down for Tuesday at 4:15 to meet with him and go over mine.

Issue 1: Self harm

Intervention: I will talk to a counselor whenever I get the impulse to cut.

Issue 2: Productive community involvement

Intervention: I will find a volunteer activity which will increase social skills, build self-esteem, and provide job training.

“We’re on top of the day program issue,” I tell the counselors, talking for both me and Mary Ellen. “They’re in the works, they’re coming together, we’re well on our way to finding those day programs.”

“Just shut up and get one!” the counselor says, throwing a
sofa pillow across the room at my head. I duck then scramble for something to throw back, and the schizos start bobbing and flailing. Those counselors are a hoot.

The next morning, Mary Ellen and I head out carrying daypacks. If you don’t have a day program, you should be looking for one, so everybody’s got to be out of the house between the hours of 10 and 3. It’s threatening to be a spectacular sunny day, so Mary Ellen and I baggy up some trail mix from the kitchen, pack our swimsuits, and head for the boardwalk.

We don’t have any money for the rides, so while we’re waiting for the fog to lift we roam around the amusement park and watch various things spin, lurch, and twirl. Mary Ellen’s one big wreck just looking at the rides.

“Oh no, Jim Bob, not me, you couldn’t catch me dead on—that!” he says, clinging onto my arm like a stringy vine. And it’s not like I’m even suggesting we go on anything, but I guess he knows if I had money, I’d be on all the rides. They have me pegged as an introvert back on Waltons’ Mountain, but give me a tunnel to scream in…

Mary Ellen and I stand around watching this girl spin cotton candy, and Mary Ellen’s going “Gross! Gross!” and I’m thinking, get this boy away from his pink puffy food moment, so I grab him by the shirt and drag him down the boardwalk towards the log flume.

“Look, Jim Bob,” Mary Ellen says all of a sudden. ‘Help Wanted!’

I don’t get what Mary Ellen’s saying at first because I’m not used to anything resembling initiative coming out of him. But when I realize that he’s thinking we should apply for jobs on the boardwalk, I flash a big smile, I get half teary, I think what a precious thing, because of course this is one of Mary Ellen’s issues. Buzbee has “initiative” as Issue 2 on his treatment plan.

We find this round ball of a guy with red suspenders slumped in an office behind the merry-go-round. He’s in charge of hiring, and turns out they’re desperate for people. The students are all heading back to school, and there’s nobody to do about ten of the jobs. He shows us a list of openings:
BIG DIPPER
FUN HOUSE
SKI LIFT
BUMPER CARS
GUESS YOUR WEIGHT
SWINGS
COTTON CANDY
TICKET BOOTH

Suddenly, Mary Ellen’s speaking up again. “I know which job I want.” I nearly fall over when I hear him say it’s “Guess Your Weight” he’s interested in. Then I see the sheer brilliance in it. Mary Ellen’s going straight for his number one issue, his anorexia.

Mr. Suspenders is glad Mary Ellen’s taking “Guess Your Weight.” He says it’s a very popular booth in the park because it’s positioned right at the entranceway. It’s actually age or weight you’re guessing. If the customers want you to guess their age, they’ve got to show you their driver’s license afterwards. You have to get within three years. If they want you to guess their weight, they’ve got to step up on this gigantic brass scale. You’ve got a five-pound leeway there with your guessing.

“Bunch of them try to tell you the scale ain’t accurate. You can’t listen to none of that,” Mr. Suspenders tells Mary Ellen. “Right now alls we got for prizes is these inflatable ‘lectric GIT-tars.” He pulls one out from behind the door. “We don’t want to have to order no more this season. If you’re good, you won’t give away more than five or six a day.”

The guitars are these life-sized floaty toy sorts of things. They look good for goofing around like you’re a chick rocker, and I’m thinking, I wouldn’t mind one of those. But then it occurs to me, uh-oh, is Mary Ellen going to be good at this job? Because this anorexic boy thinks everybody is way fat.

Luckily, Mr. Suspenders gets called out of the office to tighten a screw on some ride. I look Mary Ellen straight in the eye.

“Before you guess their weight, Mary Ellen, you’ve got to subtract twenty pounds from whatever it is you’re thinking, you hear?”

Mr. Suspenders comes back with this guy who’s going to help Mary Ellen set up. They go off, and I’m left with Mr. Suspenders thinking, what job do I want? The counselors don’t really know
it, but one of my biggest issues is indecisiveness. It’s why I’ve been something of a failure as a cutter really, why I’ve ended up playing sorry little razor blade tic-tac-toe games on my arms and not a whole hell of a lot else. If I had parents, I think they would say, what a wishy-washy girl.

Finally, I tell Suspenders that I want to operate the bumper cars, and he walks me over there himself. I’m thinking bumper cars, that’s all about aggression. I want to work on my relationship to aggression. Buzbee once told me cutting on yourself has to do with anger turned inward. He told me too bad it’s not the eighties so you could go to some workshop where people wack at each other with styrofoam bats and call each other goddamn motherfuckers. I said to Buzbee, if I had parents, I don’t think they’d approve of you using that kind of language. He laughed.

It turns out operating bumper cars is a fairly involved thing, and Mr. Suspenders tells me it’ll probably take me a full two days to completely learn the job. First thing, he says, is to get comfortable maneuvering the cars and learning to park them. He tells me don’t open the ride till noon, just drive around till I get the feel. And then he gives me the secret key to operating the bumper car. The cars, he tells me, automatically go into reverse if you turn the steering wheel all the way to the right or left.

“There’s a lot you can do with these cars the public doesn’t know ‘bout,” he tells me, “a whole lot.”

I spend the first hour cruising around in the cars, arm to the wheel like I’m in a little Miata heading south on Highway One. Then I master the reverse function. I get so good at backing the cars up that all thirty of them are parked perfectly, tail to the wall along each side of the rink. Suddenly I’m feeling—bring on the general public.

The park’s getting busy. Bunches of people show up at once. One group of folks all work for Apple Computer in Cupertino, and they tell me they’re on some kind of company retreat.

“Welcome to the bumper cars,” I say over the microphone. “Please walk carefully to your cars.” My voice booms. The Apple people all obey me. They’re driving their cars around like happy little mice on a mousepad. It’s a rush.

After an hour or two, I’m starting to notice issues that come up for people while riding the bumper cars. Aggression’s only one of them. For example, self-esteem is big. When people are new to
the bumper car, and especially if they don’t know about Suspenders’s reverse function, it’s easy to get stuck over in some corner of the rink, and it takes some figuring out to get yourself back out in the flow of traffic. But some people don’t even try to get unstuck. They immediately give up and just sit there, whipping posts for every two-bit Sunday driver who passes by. You think, “Why?” You think, “You are exposing your neuroses to us.” You think, “You need therapy.”

It’s all about aggression, but it’s also all about sex. Buzbee told me Freud said that, and in my estimation that is true of the bumper cars because you’ve basically got an orgy on your hands. They’re going at each other out on the rink, no bedroom sweet talking for these folks—the Apple people, the coeds, the grandmas, they’re all animals.

“Welcome to the bumper cars. Please walk carefully to your vehicles. Please wear the shoulder harness located at the back of your seat. Slide it over one arm, do not place it around your neck.”

I didn’t expect suicidal impulses to be part of this job, but I can’t tell you how many people actually hang the harness around their necks like a noose. After a couple of times having to use the emergency button to stop the whole ride, I check all my necks.

Then some of them run out in traffic. Twenty or so bumper cars ramming each other head on and up from behind, and meanwhile some lady with varicose veins is jumping out of her car to chase after her Rite Aid sunglasses. Or suddenly some low self-esteemer leaps out and heads for the sidelines. “Oh, tee hee, I can’t do this, I’ll just go hide my head in the sand now, tee hee.”

“Please do not get out of your car while the ride is in operation.”

By afternoon, I’ve got my spiel down, I’ve scoped out the issues, and I start kicking back a little, let the ride basically run itself. I’m thinking Buzbee, all the counselors, will be incredibly proud of me and Mary Ellen, this is one killer day program we’ve come up with. I start looking forward to group tonight, to all the glory.

My head goes to this one counselor, Paige, how the other day she said to all of us, hey, she was going to be on TV in a half hour, could we turn it to TV 20? She’d been up walking around Golden Gate Park a few weeks ago, and this camera crew had come over to her and said, “Wanna be on TV? All you got to say is ‘Charlie’s Angels is coming up next on TV 20.’” The way Paige watched all
our reactions while we looked at her on the TV, it kind of made me realize how everybody wants to have other people around to see their moment to shine. And there was something about it being us Waltons’ Mountain psychiatrics getting to be the ones to watch the TV 20 thing with Paige and cheer for her. We’re those counselors’ lives, they half admit it.

So I’m running the ride and I’m thinking I wish the whole house and the staff could see me now. I’m thinking this is my ‘Charlie’s Angels is coming up next.’ Then all of a sudden, I start seeing a few people carrying inflatable guitars into their cars, the kind they win at Mary Ellen’s “Guess Your Weight” booth. At first, I’m just in bumper car operator mode, scoping out where they’re storing their guitars when they get in the cars, I’m focused on safety. One guy puts his guitar behind him like a seat cushion. I’m thinking, okay, as long as it doesn’t pop. The others put their guitars in front like air bags which kind of cracks me up. It’s ingenious really.

Pretty soon, though, I’m noticing an awful lot of people with these inflatable guitars under their arms. I’m seeing a lot of airbags in the cars. And then it hits me, Mary Ellen, he’s guessing everybody’s weight wrong, he’s thinking they’re all fatties. And Mr. Suspenders is going to fire him for using up all the prizes. And before the counselors even have a chance to kick him out of the house, he’ll pack up and head to Atherton where those homophobic parents will snap him in two like a twig.

I look across the park to try and find Mary Ellen’s booth, but I’m just seeing all these arms dangling from jerky rides and bodies milling around the concession stands. I start thinking whatever happens to Mary Ellen now, it’s on account of me, it’s my fault. Because Buzbee’s told me a million times, “Issues take time to resolve, they take years.” But, I’m always trying to cut to the finish line. I let Mary Ellen think we could show Waltons’ Mountain, we could do them all in one day. I had us both believing.

When I look back out on the rink, the cars are all jammed up in one corner. My drivers need instruction, they need the reverse function. But I flick off the mic and watch the cars fester, all the bloated guitars. I run a finger along my wrist, and in my head I’m picturing a cut, a clean vertical line from the meat of your palm right up to your elbow. I’m thinking, me, I’ve only done the “cry-baby for help” kind, where you half know you’re doing it to be a manila folder in just somebody’s frickin’ file cabinet.
From My Second Floor Apartment

Through the swaying tree outside the window
I can see that Mr. President
Restaurant and cocktail lounge is closed
Despite the sign that reads “number one party place,”
Closed with no sign of soon reopening.
The meters are empty, the street is empty,
An eerie quiet for a sunny downtown Thursday morning

Four days alone
And here I am
Engaged in a witty dialogue,
Where I ask myself interview questions
To which I know the answers,
Rehearsed with eloquent words, flourishing gestures.

If I had an analyst, she might call this narcissistic,
Given that there are four mirrors in my apartment,
The grey TV reflection and
The glass from a framed nighttime photograph,
It seems futile to argue.

Sometimes I pretend.
When in reality only the phone calls at night,
A voice without skin and tissue to touch.

Outside the homeless walk slowly from the mission,
A lonely trail between the benches
Staring at the ground, searching
For a glimmer, cans or change, whispering
Their ephemeral selves to anyone.
What If?

inspired by the Marvel Comics series
of the same name

When I need to be soft— mushy
like a popsicle in the summer sun,
I’ll drink a strawberry milkshake

instead of a scotch, win a board game
rather than a fistfight, draw a hot bubble bath
and use the coconut scented shampoo,

pretend to be hip and drive to Jack London Square
eat sashimi and listen to jazz:
Charles Lloyd or Jason Moran.

But most times I’ll just read my yellowed
comic books, the ones that dare to ask
the tough questions: like what if Wolverine

battled Conan, or if Captain America
became President, or if Spider-Man
was a murderer? The absurdity always

makes me wonder— what-if?
What if I wore make-up, painted
my lips and nails, snuggly stuffed

my three hundred pounds into a short
skirt and camisole, shaved bare
my neck, face, chest, back, and shoulders,

dusted blush on my cheeks, strapped-on
five-inch heels to my feet, toes
pedicured, shielded by pantyhose,
and went out dancing, hit on boys
who smoked foreign cigarettes, sang
karaoke, and drank cosmos?

It’d be futile, because God doomed me
a brawler, a vigilante with common-sense
and conscience duller than most,

because if I learned anything from comic books,
it’s that our costumes never disguise our alter-egos.
The death of Bruce Wayne’s parents
torments him the worst when he’s alone
in his empty manor: cape, mask, and utility belt
left in the cave—solitude and memories

strong enough to make a man run across rooftops
in his underwear, pretending to be an animal,
passing off his madness as something done to help

other people. I hold no such delusions about my madness;
I know when I put on my mask and costume
that I’m doing it for my own self-interest,

for the same reasons that I hide under my bed
the old photographs of the friends I used to have,
the awards from the life I used to live, the letters
from the women I used to love, the shame
of knowing who I used to be and who I am now,
hiding in my bed, alone with my old heroes,

trying not to think about past times and trying
not to think, what if I met someone who could hold
my hand and pretend not to notice my calluses?
The Fire

We found the abandoned
Chevy in a weed studded lot
behind Fredrico’s Carpet Depot.

The doors unlocked.
It didn't stink.

We found the perfect
clubhouse. Our club
took in bored kids,
only. So, naturally Ricky
set the Chevy afire.
He was amazingly good
with a damp matchbook.

Yellow foam frothed from splits
in the driver’s seat,
smoked, then slowly
warmed us with small
orange licks.

My brother Joey joined
the crisis—he wandered the lot
harvesting bottles half full
with beer, half full with gutter water.

I booked home
at a sprint. Really
crying, then pausing
at Tasha’s money tree
where bills plucked
on the sly
from our moms
lay snug in a tree knot.

No cash there—so I dragged
tears out and ambled home
where mom squawked at
the phone and the actual Fredrico.
She marched me
back to the Chevy. I remember
panting and skipping—but

the Chevy was fine!

Mom zoomed past
that new home—that kid dominion—
bore down on the back-lot door.

Joey and Ricky sat,
office-bound,
center stage and scarlet faced,
lit by the glare of
adult eyes.

What if the car exploded?
Fredrico boomed,
sweat beading on his freckled dome—
sweat poised on the tips of grey hair wisps

like dew
on our lot’s weeds in spring.

Later,
after pulses slowed,
after our club
and some adult noise
would speak through us at our kids,
we’d whisper, *What if the car exploded!*
A Walk of My Own

If a woman must have money and a room of her own to write fiction, then what follows must be truth: for I have neither space to name as mine nor funds to wile as I will. And what a tragedy this is for the would-be writer of stories and make-believe, a drama made more bitter by its setting in London. Barry, Dickens, Austen, Eliot, Woolf—this city, this country is home and inspiration to a litany of literaries, lands of enchantment to arouse the enchanting.

And so I walk these streets, awaiting my own inspiration, my own moment of brilliance sent from the clear sky above down to my muddled brain below. I walk the crumbling church steps, the musty museum corridors, the jostling market stalls, the darkened alleyways. I walk the underground Tube tunnels, hot and humid, full of radiant heat pocketed from Earth’s fiery core, haven from the biting chill in the air and wind outside. I walk the green garden strolls, the sidewalk cafés, the mazed grocery aisles. I walk the trafficked intersections, the quiet neighborhoods. But I walk, and I wait—in vain. Nothing comes. No shoots of inspiration sprout from the crackling pavement, no divinity deciphers among the grounds and leaves of emptied cups of coffee and tea. No characters take shape in the foggy street-steam clouds, no stories come to light in the deep and dark Underground.

But why such trouble for thought? Why such painful inconclusion? Why should not this city inspire me as it has inspired so many others? Surely there is a story left untold in its rich and troubled history; a buried truth to uncover in its byzantine structure, this single city built and rebuilt and built again, its foundation layered like a cake; certainly there is a life left to illuminate among the millions who call London home. But, alas, I am left without words.

Perhaps I am looking too closely—but isn’t that what writers do? So perhaps my eyes aren’t focused closely enough. Or perhaps the saying is true: Perhaps I do need money and space.

And yet I’m left to wonder, for I am not the first to be with-
out these prerequisites of prose. Plath did not have private space in her own head, the bell jar descended, her shortened life trapped inside. And even J.K. Rowling began with little more than coffee shop napkins on which to write (though undoubtedly her grounds showed more than mine)—but look how these women stand today!

So what is my excuse? For on second thought, I have more than at first I am willing to admit: I have a room, and I have money. Not completely my own, shared among three others and so often without privacy, my room still offers the basic comforts of a home, a place to sleep and store my belongings. And while not free to spend according to every whim and fancy, I am far from impoverished. These are not the symptoms of one in desperate need.

No, on third thought these conditions seem entirely characteristic of London life. A city of 7.5 million, crammed in an area little more than 1500 square kilometers, means about 5000 people per square kilometer. And that leaves little room or space for anyone, writer or not. Now to matters of money: London ranks 4th among cities with top billionaires, but it is also one of the most expensive places to call home. For the billionaires, the sky-high real estate prices might feel like the blink of an eye; but for the millions of others who don’t make the list, the high cost of living can feel like a wrecking ball.

So when I start to worry about the 6 dollars I spent on a cup of tea, or when the voices of 17 others pound against the walls like heavy hammers, pummeling to dust the paper-thin plaster that divides each room in a mockery of privacy—then I go for a walk. I don’t care where. I just walk. I walk over the four sets of tangled computer cords, across the musty blue carpet hallway, down the three flights of creaky stairs, and I meet the open air outside. One deep breath in, one deep breath out. Right foot forward, left foot follow. A feeling of relief somehow unveils itself amidst the car-clogged streets, familiarity found in the unfamiliar faces passing by. Breathe, step, step, breathe.

Knowing that I am alone and unknown, unnoticed, even uncared for—these feelings give me a strange sense of safety as I walk the crowded streets. Even without a destination, the motion is always forward, always progress, and so it is healing, rejuvenating. So after that first breath in, that first step off the curb, I walk
away from my space, and I forget about my money. I walk out to the street, turn the corner, catch my reflection in the darkened window of a car parked outside the brick embassy building next door. I walk down the sidestreet, wonder *why it’s paved red?*, past the rows of hanging flower pots blooming brightly from the houses nearby. I walk down a quiet drive, stepping softer than before, and feel for a moment a sense of guilt—this may be my shortcut, but *it looks like someone’s driveway, too*. So I squeeze through the door in the black wooden gate, small enough that my umbrella won’t fit on the rainy days, and I breathe another sigh of relief to be back to the street, to hear the sound of the traffic bellowing down Gloucester Road, to see the rush of people racing to get *who knows where*.

And as I walk further on, I look for the undiscovered within the well-known. I smell the smoky rose and spicy ginger of the Indian hookah bar, snatch a fragment of the conversation between the men sitting outside. I walk past Partridges, the local grocery store, and spy through the window to see what’s left in the wicker bakery baskets (the double chocolate muffins go fast, they might all be gone on the way back). I walk past a row of apartments—*how long will they be under construction?*—and watch the men working outside.

There is safety on this street because it offers solitary peace. Not a place to call my own, but a path to walk, alone. A path where I can look for my hidden story, where I can discover, create. I realize now *the path is the source.*

And it is also the return to reality, for it always leads me back to the truth of a room shared by 4, in a flat of 18, with the burgeoning desire to quit the cares of space and money to one day walk, and write, again.
Giant Mother

The twinge of a headache creeps forward
Unfurling from her voicemail
From her cracking tambourine tears

Giant mother.
She stretches her body out across the country
With her knees pointing fingers
And her nipples pointing fingers
Through a cotton white nightgown,
She shivers and sniffles.

Old woman newly broken hearted, I will listen on my lunch break
I will wait for the bus uh-humming to your heavy buzzing til you
Wake up.
The Pilot Dream

I.

I was ten. We were riding
in a riverboat in a terrible current.
Whole trees, roots gaping, floated past.

My grandmother sat on deck,
a black shawl covering her face.
Her arms were stumps, cut clean.

We had to choose, she said:
the price of passage was our hands.

II.

I chose the river. I dove and dove
to rescue that which had been cast over:
my fourth-grade teacher, little friends,
dresser drawers and ceramic cups.
But nothing I touched could stay.
They gasped at air and drowned again.

I was spared, and yet
I salvaged nothing.
The river ran clear, blue

as the catahoula’s glassy eye.
The boat disappeared—last trace
of all I knew gone south,
my grandmother wounded onboard, and I floating, bound for no known shore.
Varda Falls

After what I did last night with big-hipped Varda from document control, my nerves should be shriveled like a dick in a cold pool. Instead, I wake up naked at the Reno Ramada feeling strangely calm, as though I’ve come through to the other side of something. How soothing it is to lie here on the beige wall-to-wall, accept its fibrous buoyancy against my buttocks. With a little help from gravity, my chest looks almost solid. The guys have taken to calling me Boomer, because the high-carb life has upsized me. But this morning, Boomer is the only one with a war story—however much I may have bungled things toward the end.

When I stand up, I feel faint, my chest spasms arhythmically. But it’s probably fatigue. Check out the view. To the east stretches a vast expanse of dirt and snow, the Great American Desert smeared with the Cookies and Cream of spring thaw. To the west rises the ragged edge of the Sierra Nevada, upper peaks now dabbed with a wash of pink light.

I reconnoiter with my buddies in the Chuckwagon Cafe. “Where is she?” asks Johnson, head of sales. “Where’d you dump the babeage?” queries Stubbs, with his accountant’s gift for bare essentials. “Did you not leave Houlihan’s last night accompanied by a full-figured woman of Neapolitan visage,” wonders Thacher, b-school grad.

I let the questions ride, settling into the banquette beneath sepia photos of Old West gunmen. We ease slowly into conversation in the morning, appreciating the marginal returns of silence as we perform daily rituals. Johnson, Mr. Manly Stud, pats the grease from his bacon. Crazy Stubbs draws mustaches on dastardly personages in the sports sections. Thacher harumphs through the New York Times. In the familiar presence of the guys, I’m tempted to think about the good parts with Varda, but if I open up the file I might have to scroll through the freaky parts. Instead I suck on a sugar cube and daydream about reconfiguring the restaurant’s
ductwork. If we were the Beatles, I’d be George.

Johnson, Stubbs, Thacher, and I constitute the Pacific Region Start-up Team. This means once a month we ship out from the home office in San Leandro, fly to a high-growth, weak-union city, rent a town car, lock in some strip-mall real estate, do all the new hires, throw up an infrastructure, and get out before the paint dries.

Johnson resumes his cross, forehead resplendent beneath slicked-back hair. “Where is she?” he asks.

“No clue,” I say. He gives me that piercing stare he considers his most valuable sales tool.

“What’s that corny smile, Boomer?” he asks. “You’re such a crazy fuck. You did some sick shit with Varda, didn’t you? You’d have to with a fat chick like that, right? You’re a better man than me, bro.”

“You said she had a beautiful face.”

“We’re not talking about her face. It’s that gargantuan backside. Dude, you’re brilliant with networks, but, otherwise, geez.”

“Maybe I’m looking for something else in a woman,” I say.

“For something else? Perhaps you wanted to perform one of your whacked out experiments.” OK, it’s true. I once had a couple of mice that I moved to different parts of my condo every few nights. I was concerned about all the traveling I was doing. I wanted to see how it might affect smaller mammals to sleep in multiple environments.

The guys have long since reached a judgment about Varda, but Stubbs, fanatic enforcer of the party line, feels compelled to reiterate: “She’s a pig.” God knows, in the past such negative peer-group response has rushed me into a divestment posture. There was the time in Boise when I went on two dates with shy Millie, but after the guys pointed out the unapologetic horsiness of her laugh and the surreptitious patch of down above her lips, I had to blow her off.

Today, however, such concerns seem so remote. I feel as though I’ve surpassed the guys in some way. I’ve always been a middle-of-the-pack guy, but last night I set the pace.

“We should give him a break,” Johnson says. “When’s the last time Boomer didn’t spend the evening planted against the wall with his beer?” I drift off for a second, thinking about the bar/res-
taurant Johnson and I have discussed—where he’d be the maitre d’ and I’d handle the infrastructure. We’ll have blues on the weekend, a pool table for slower nights, but how about live-band Karaoke?

“Damn, he’s smiling again,” says Stubbs. “Now suddenly you’re Mr. Happy when yesterday at the driving range you’re dishing all that whack verbiage about us being glorified migrant workers.”

Says Thacher, “I believe his exact words were ‘town-car cowboys blinded by macho myths to our role as errand boys for Big Business.’”

“You think too much,” Johnson says.

“What I’m thinking is, it’s time to put down roots,” I say.

When we leave the Chuckwagon and walk outside, spring offers up a bracing blast of cool air scented with wild flowers. At the end of Fourth Street, the Sierras loom so large it fills me with hope.

“You guys are the greatest,” I say. “It’s great to be in the warm bosom of my buddies.”

“The shit that comes out of your mouth,” Johnson says, reaching over and twisting some of my chest flab. “Look at these hot tits.”

“Give me a dollop of that sweet stuff,” Thacher echoes, tweaking the other nipple. “Come over here. I want to blow a load in you,” Stubbs declares.

***

We hop in the town car. It’s a slow morning at work, so we’re going to play. In the trunk we have a large canvas bag containing mitts, baseballs, bats, a football, and a basketball. Johnson drives, Thacher rides shotgun, and Stubbs and I assume our usual positions in the rear, him with his head out the window, tongue dangling, me with a map on my lap to chart our progress around town. The other guys have little interest in the places we travel to, but I like to know how a town is put together, what the streets are called, where people get their dry cleaning done. We pass the Catholic High School where Varda pulled a 3.35 and starred in the Pirates of Penzance. On the right is the hospital where they tried to blast out her mother’s breast cancer.
Before things got all crazy last night, Varda and I racked up major face time on the shop floor. The first time she saw me she said, “What are you looking at?” I was peering out of my office, running calculations in my head about trunk-line capacity, watching her slink by in stilettos.

“Come out and show yourself,” she said. There was a fierce-ness in her voice, but she was smiling and her face was all strawberries and cream, alabaster skin, fleshy mouth. After I ambled out, she circled behind me and wrapped her arms around my upper body.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “I just needed to feel a man with some bulk to him. My old boyfriend was like that.”

Stubbs snaps his fingers in my face. “Boomer where’s your mind at? You haven’t told us yet what went down with you and Varda.”

“Usual shit,” I say.

“Come on man,” Johnson takes over. “Give us the war story.” The guys have a strange metaphysical outlook. They believe you haven’t actually slept with a woman until you tell your buddies about it.

“Her mouth tasted like a peach,” I say.

“Give me a fucking break,” Johnson says. “Give us the hardcore.”

“She wanted me to turn her around and hold her up against the wall.”

“Sick,” Johnson says. I see his eyes gleam in the rearview.

“And she expressed a desire for me to yank her ponytail.”

Johnson pulls the car over to the side of the road so he can concentrate fully. We are in a quiet residential section and a toe-headed ten-year-old is cruising back and forth on his stingray, practicing wheelies.

“I seem to recall the use of a necktie as a restraint,” I say.

“Too sick,” Johnson says.

“Things got a little rough, though.”

“You didn’t hurt her did you, Lenny?” Johnson says with a laugh. I never should have told the guys that I played Lenny in a high school production of Of Mice and Men.

“Tell us about the rabbits, George,” says Stubbs.

I don’t say anything. Johnson turns around and gives me the salesman’s stare. “Are you telling us what I think you’re telling
us?” The stingray boy has pulled up alongside our car and is staring in, so I reach over and roll up Stubb’s window. The little guy gives me the finger.

“I don’t know,” I say. Weren’t these the guys? Shouldn’t I be able to tell them everything? I think about the time Johnson said the ultimate orgasm would be to kill a chick while you’re coming inside her.


“Allergies, I think,” I say.

“Lenny, you petted her too hard, didn’t you, you fat fuck,” Johnson says. I wish I could tell them about the mad swirl of feeling when I was holding Varda.

“I don’t know.”

“Great war story,” Thacher says, looking up from some financial documents. The stingray boy tries an overly ambitious wheelie and wipes out badly on the sidewalk. He sits there, examining his bloody knee, trying not to cry.

***

After that first meeting outside my cubicle last week, every time I’d see Varda around the office she’d upend me with her hologrammic smile. On the surface, her face would light up with 1,000-watt good cheer, but underneath was a layer of great sadness that would periodically flicker forth, in a sudden downdraft of the tea-colored eyes, or a tightening of the muscles beneath her skin. She was a complex equation with unknown variables that I couldn’t solve. I went to assess her technology needs and one thing led to another and we started having deep talks in her corduroy cubicle.

Of course when the guys caught wind of the chat sessions, they busted me big time. “You’ve got one strange rap with the ladies,” Johnson said.

So one day Varda and I took things to the parking lot, hunkering down in the back seat of her Raspberry Red Camry while outside winter and spring did battle in driving gusts. Varda casually draped her mini-skirted bounty about the upholstery and asked if I could massage her hands, which were killing her from hours of input. I felt more comfortable than ever with her, though my voice was shaking.
“How’s your little brother?” I asked.
“I don’t want to bore you with that stuff.”
“No, it’s an amazing story, you raising him by yourself. If only I’d had a sister to raise me, instead of my dad.”
“You’re a great listener,” she said. “Much better than my old boyfriend. Though maybe he’s not the best example, since he did email while I talked.”

I redirected my massage, fingering scales on her neck, rubbing her earlobes with my fingertips, tracing lines on her scalp.

“Mm, feels good,” she said. “You like touch. You probably didn’t get enough as a child.”

“My mom left us when I was young. Dad was a total asshole so she went and joined a commune.”

“You need some womanly influence. Can I cook for you?”

She described what she would make—herb-encrusted rack of lamb, mashed potatoes with sour cream, green beans with mushrooms and garlic—and I had to hug her. After a time, she said, “Um, that’s a little hard.” I pulled back, we looked at each other’s lips, everything seemed good to go, when she said, “I really want to kiss you, but we probably shouldn’t yet.” I groaned. And that’s the position we were in when the guys appeared, pressing their faces against the car windows.

“They’re not even doing anything in there,” I heard Johnson say.

“What is that, Romeo and Juliet?” Stubbs queried.

The guys had their mitts on, which meant that it was time for our daily game of parking lot whiffle ball. They couldn’t play without a fourth.

***

Stubbs sings rap-style, “Jump up, everybody jump up,” and pulls me out of the town car because we’ve reached the high school where we’re going to have a field-goal contest. At the field, the gate is locked so we spiderman over the 20-foot chain link.

We start the contest at the five and move back in increments of five, following an elaborate code of rules that specify number of attempts per distance (3), time allotted per kick (20 seconds), and points per successful kick (distance divided by attempts). I’m
generally a spaz, so at the half-time break when I’m solidly in second place, I’m elated. But as I stretch out on the sidelines to relax, tossing handfuls of grass on my chest, I get these weird visions of Varda’s frowning face. I look over at the guys and they are huddled up, talking seriously about something. My throat constricts. Johnson strides over.

“Boomer, I’m not going to sugar-coat it. The guys are concerned. Putting aside whatever legal quagmire you may have exposed us to, on a practical level we think there are steps we need to take ASAP. Like for one, getting you the fuck out of view.”

“What for?”

“Jesus. I don’t even want to ask you this. So before, like, were you implying something about doing bodily harm to Varda?”

“Why would I hurt the best thing that’s happened to me?” Yeah, why?

“Strong words, Boomer. But why would you let our imaginations run wild? Why didn’t you just tell us the war story? What’s that look? You actually like fat Varda, don’t you?”

I nod my head a little. He puts his arm around me, curling it tight around my neck. We walk some.

“Man, why don’t you talk to me more?” he says. “You can tell me shit.”

“Johnson, about the bar slash restaurant,” I start. “I don’t know what we’re waiting for. Between us we’ve got enough for a down payment.”

“What? Oh that. We can always do that.”

“Why not now?”

“Hold on, now. Take a breath you crazy fuck.”

***

Shower at the hotel, into our street clothes, and on the way to work, a quick stop at the Golden Nugget, where we gather around a fertile crescent with our favorite dealer, Farrah, a Mexican-American beauty who’s paying her way through a credit program in art psych with this job. This time of the morning the buzzers and bells seem muted. A pit boss is asking a cocktail girl about the down payments on her pickup and describing his plan to take his step kids to Tahoe for Easter.
Each of the guys has his system: Thacher counts cards, Stubbs does whatever is necessary to stay at the table for complimentary cocktails, and Johnson plays on the edge, but consistently, always hitting on 17, always letting his winnings ride. I’m a systems guy, but I have no system. Somehow in ten minutes, I rack up a hundred dollars, and Johnson’s pissed.

“Look at what Boomer’s doing, Farrah,” he says now. “He just stayed on eight, Farrah.”

“He won the hand,” Farrah says.

“Don’t you think his behavior is erratic?”

“Actually, I think it reflects his passion,” Farrah says. “He gets a feeling he’s going to win, he goes with it.”

“I’m the passionate one darling,” Johnson says, trying to grab and kiss her hand as she’s stacking $25 chips. She jerks back her hand and the pit boss edges closer.

She winks at me, “How do you put up with them?”

In the men’s room, Thacher picks lint from his flannels, Stubbs checks out the condom dispenser, and I examine the wobbly mirrors—sure enough, they’ve used inferior brackets. Squinting into a cloud of Armani that Johnson is spraying all over the place, I say, “You know, dude, you might want to try a more subtle approach with Farrah.”

“You of all people are going to tell me how to treat women?” Johnson scoffs. For emphasis he sends a finger jabbing toward my chest, but I knock it away. “What is your story, Boomer?” he hisses. “Whatever crazy shit is churning inside you, make no mistake: my first obligation is to the company.”

***

The office we’re setting up is in a new executive park on the edge of town where Reno is leaching into the desert. There are fresh black streets out here that lead to nothing. Don’t ask me what an executive park is—there’s no greenery in sight.

When we walk in the door, some guys in jumpsuits are loading in the last of the cubicles that will give our new employees a home away from home.

“I hear you were having wild time last night,” says Svetlana, our receptionist, a savvy Ukrainian bleach blonde who’s got
three semesters of communications from UNLV. “Varda is wonderful woman and you are lucky dog,” she declares.

Dottie, the office manager, cuts me off in the hallway, which reeks of new carpet. She wags her finger at me, jangling the massive turquoise bracelets whose construction she listed as a special skill on her resume. “You naughty boy. You take care of Varda, you hear.”

I slip into my office and close the door. The document control secretary walks in. “You haven’t seen Varda, have you?” she asks. “She was supposed to be here half hour ago.”

“Don’t ask me.”

***

I slap my own face, say aloud, “Get a grip.” I close my eyes, force myself to review. Last night after ditching the guys at Hoolihan’s, Varda and I are back at her place talking life stories. The house is a yellow-with-white-trim bungalow, full of flowery wallpaper and ancient smells, and feels so much more like a home than my condo back in San Leandro. All her brother’s trophies and pennants fill me with crazy sympathy. How this gets to her father’s meanness before the divorce, I don’t know. Was it abuse—not clear—maybe that’s the hardest kind. He spanked her naked when she was fourteen, does that count?

“I feel so grungy,” she says, disentangling. “Give me a few minutes.” She goes off to the adjoining bedroom and through the open door I hear the sound of the shower turning on. I get up from the couch and catch a glimpse of her naked self darting into the bathroom. I go outside and make myself into a hood ornament on her Camry, smell freshly cut lawn, look back at the house. The square white windows are pulsing with a golden glow, like coals in a fire. At this hour the gauzy curtains don’t have much opaqueness to them. In fact, when Varda gets out of the shower, I can basically see everything, only it’s slightly blurred, like a painting. I watch her hold a series of sexy dresses up to herself in the mirror. She dabs her skin with perfume in choice locations.

She re-emerges fully dressed in the kitchen, where she puts on an apron. An old couple is coming toward me on the sidewalk, leaning against each other in matching sweat suits, and I realize it
might look strange that I’m staring into Varda’s house with an erection. So I hasten back inside where my lungs fill with the outstanding aroma of chocolate chip cookies.

Varda starts to untie her apron, but I say, “No, please.” She laughs, gives me a leer, says, “Oh, I see.” She leans against the counter, pulls me to her, feels me against her thigh, and again says, “Oh, I see.” Suddenly there’s mad kissing. She grabs me from different angles, like she’s running quality control. My hands are grasping for anything they can reach, her ass under her skirt, some tit through layers of fabric, when she says, “I think the cookies are ready” and I totally lose it and come.

“Oh god, I’m sorry,” I say.

“Why sorry? Wasn’t that the objective?” By strange magic, I get turned on again immediately.

“You’re a frisky pup,” she says as I nibble on her neck. “Before, when you were sneaking around outside like a prowler, it gave me some ideas. Am I a bad girl?” She slips out of my grasp, splays out against the kitchen wall, beneath a kitten-faced clock, beckons with a finger. She turns around, presses flush against the wall and I run my hands through her thick black hair.

“Pull it,” she says. I pull on her ponytail and she lets out a yell. “No, harder,” she says. She starts to claw at me and reaches her mouth back to bite my neck. She instructs me to blindfold her with my tie and shackle her hands with the belt. I apply the restraints and she moans. I turn her around and roughly pull off her pants and her pantied hips are so smooth and plentiful you want to eat them.

“Make love to me,” she says. I wrap my arms around her, meaning to hoist her into the air and carry her to a couch or a bed. But as I do, I’m suddenly overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts. I take in the baking smells that still fill the air. I flash on the guys, which I really don’t want to, hear them call her “thunder thighs” and “barrel-ass,” hear Stubbs’s monkey laugh. I squeeze my eyes tight, fighting off their voices.

“I love hugs, too, but that’s a little tight,” Varda says. But I’m caught in the whirlwind, trying to recapture feelings that keep flitting off. Varda tries to wiggle her shoulders a little, create some space for herself, leans back some, repositions her legs. I make it out of the kitchen and struggle toward the living room couch. But
At some point our balance gets thrown off, I lose my grip, and she starts tumbling backward, struggling in vain to get her hands free, her head making a b-line for the antique coffee table. We go down in a heap, and when Varda doesn’t answer right away I head for the door.

At least I think that’s what happened. On the way home I was already straining to piece it together. It was only when I got back to the hotel, knocked back half a bottle of vodka, threw off my clothes, lay down on the wall-to-wall that I realized what the whirlwind was, that the wild tumult of emotion I’d felt hugging Varda was something akin to love. I decided I needed to go back, kept meaning to get up and put on my clothes, tried to think of just the right words to explain my hasty departure, took more swigs, paced the floor, lay down on the rug to ponder, fell asleep in the middle of a thought.

***

“Come on, all work and no play, something something dull boy,” Stubbs says, bursting into my office, handing me a mitt, and leading me out to the parking lot for whiffle ball. We have hard-and-fast rules for this game, too: a single for a poke into the spaces where the part-timers park their Saturns, a double for a rope into the support-staff Preludes and Voyagers, a triple for a shot that lands among managerial Beamers and 4x4’s, and a home run for a screamer that reaches our Lincoln in its special reserved spot. Choosing up teams, Johnson says to Thacher: “Why you always got to pick Boomer? You guys got like a thing going?”

“You sound like a girl,” gasps Stubbs.

Pitches dance in the crazy wind and I strike out in my first two at-bats. I finally manage to connect, but as the ball twists past Stubbs in left, a red Camry pulls into the lot, so my blast is officially void. I have a vision of how things are going to go.

Varda will wriggle out of the Camry, brush off her clothes, locate the ball under her left-rear with mock irritation, and rifle it toward Johnson, who’ll stare at her as though she’s an alien. She’ll stride toward home plate, heels clicking with authority, and stand next to me with her hip cocked.

“You owe me an explanation,” she’ll say, removing her sun-
glasses to reveal a big shiner next to her temple.

“You big pussy,” she’ll continue. “Get over here and kiss me.” The rough wind will have flecked her milky skin with flashes of red, her hair’ll be freshwashed, she’ll have on that red power suit. Damn, I’ll wonder, does she even have a shirt on underneath that low-cut blazer? I won’t be able to help myself.

“I love you, Varda,” I’ll say.

“Now slow down, big fella,” she’ll say with a wide smile.

But when the Camry door opens, it is not Varda’s curvilinear calves and stiletto heels that emerge but the Docker khakis and Bass Weeguns of Larry Warshovsky from bookkeeping.

Something in my gut catches fire and I need to move. Walk, I must walk.

“Hey Boomer, step back into the box,” Johnson screams. “That was a decent poke but you’ve admired it long enough. Come on, Boomer. We don’t have all day. Wait, where are you going? Work can wait.” The further I go, the faster he talks. “Step back in, Mr. Babe Ruth, sultan of slut. Mr. Town-car Cowboy. This is exactly why we’re not corporate slaves working for the man.”

When I look back, Johnson is yelling something but the wind sucks it up. He has the pouty look of a spoiled child. I think he’s pissed that I’m walking across, instead of around, the whiffle field, disregarding clearly designated boundaries.

I near the edge of the parking lot, look back one last time, and the guys are still just standing there, hands to their sides, knees slightly bent, like gunslingers waiting for something to happen. I start along the strip of blacktop that connects to Frontage Road and lose my momentum, stumbling like someone who’s been punched, bending over to pant, sitting down on the curb, arms around knees to prevent total collapse.

Hands shaking, teeth clacking, I wait for salt grass to catch fire, for a lighting bolt to descend. Isn’t that how god communicates in your arid climate zones? After a while, I lie on the ground to look for answers in the big sky, settle my upper body into the orangish mail-order wood chips that line the road. But there are rogue burrs lurking, so I sit up and throw an angry handful of rocks that disappear with a tiny ping into the shimmering expanse. To my left, there are a couple of half-built malls and then the red earth falls gradually away, bristling with cactus, pocked with sinkholes. I hear
the bass hum of Highway 80 from somewhere out there and, from closer by, the tick tick of ice melting in the stream that emerges from a corrugated pipe into the arroyo between our executive park and the new Costco.

I came so close. I was almost there.

***

“Oh, aren’t we romantically morose,” Varda says, rolling up from nowhere. Her window is down and she parks the Camry next to me so I’m in shadow. “Gazing out like Clint Eastwood when I could be dead. What gives you the right?”

She adjusts her inscrutable shades, shakes her head. She turns away to touch up her lipstick in the rearview, revealing a shaved patch on the side of her head that’s partly covered by an oversize band-aid.

“Bring this message to your people. Lesson one, dickhead: you don’t leave a lady lying in a pool of blood. I take back everything I ever said.”

“Does that mean we can start over?” I ask ridiculously, pulling a burr from my hair. Rays of sun searchlight above the Camry roof. The pavement smells fresh-made. I probe its soft spots with my loafers.

“Are you even listening?”

“How’s your head?”

“You don’t get it, do you? Lesson two: there’s probably no second date after you hurt a girl.”

Suddenly there’s a boom from the direction of the arroyo near Costco. We both look over and see that a thick slab of ice has broken away from the side of the stream, leaving a gaping hole in the smooth crust. In the process it has flattened a stretch of bushes along the bank and sheared off a sizeable hunk of the root system of a mesquite tree. How violent nature can be, it strikes me, how much destruction occurs as a matter of course in its annual cycles.

“Well now,” Varda says, refocusing her eyes. With a hint of a smile, or maybe it’s a twitch, she rolls up the window.
Civic Center

Picking apart
pieces of a sweet
navel orange
with sticky fingers

on an inbound
underground,
the conjoined citrus
sections summon days
when folded bodies

would bloom
like wildflowers
lining California highways,

the orchid arching
toward an open window.

A fly - buzzing near,
longs for contact,
sees his loneliness multiplied
in compound eyes.
Finding Feige

for my cousin, Feige Frutcher, whose fate remains a mystery

I

Her skin was white like the flesh of a peach, not the seasoned olive of her younger sisters, and legs strong for spinning. A dancer, like her name, Feige, little bird.

Her breasts began to bud that summer when the breeze died in Seiget and the sun settled on her tongue, like sand. She dressed behind the coat rack in a room three families shared and made up stories to keep her sisters quiet, liked a boy who lived in the basement with his grandpa.

Her father had a produce stand before the war, built from forest wood behind their house. They sold apples, lemons, oranges, beets, jars of pickled fruit and jam. Her mother cleaned the counters and her grandma arranged bins. Now, there was no room to dance. There was just waiting.

II

In a small northeastern town near the Atlantic, a 73-year-old woman called Fanny will not talk about the war. Even with her husband, even with her children. After soldiers freed the camps, she was lost in the forest and a boy, hardly a boy, thin as a branch, yet old enough for Bar Mitzvah, grabbed her hand and ran.
They slept in fields and stole crops. Her hair grew like a shadow, and at Seiget, Feige found a boarded building where she used to dance and her house, a field of ash, but nothing of her family, no uncle who searched later, after Feige left for Holland with a Christian woman who once bought her father’s pickled beets.

Six years, then she sailed to America with a husband, also a survivor. Waves swelled like her belly and she missed trees. At night she watched stars connect like branches stretching the sky toward a new world.

III

Feige just turned twelve two days before they boarded the train, and her lips burned, feet swelled, but she stood tall, held her sisters’ hands until the train stopped and they were shoved into the snow. Lines to the left. Lines to the right.

She was selected to sew uniforms for Nazis, and she never sewed again, though her husband was a tailor.

IV

Fanny never searched or let herself be found by cousins in Israel or America. Feige Frutcher was a girl forgotten, a girl who danced on a stage after Shabbos in a red-orange dress her grandma sewed, her peach skin glowing like a flame. A girl who twirled, who was a bird in a swaying tree.
Crawling Up Her Ribs

Kim is wrists-deep in the dead most days. Or was, at one point, until her efficiency with the dead proved her worthy of the living. Now Kim chases stories—festivals named Potato Days, fired city officials, reconstructed libraries (the typical news on the plains of North Dakota)—but she misses knowing about her people. This is what she calls them, her dead, she calls them “my people,” and this is your first clue to Kim.

In her closet, Kim’s clothes are tweed and loose cotton, neck ties and long skirts, garage-sale-thinned tees, corduroy-patched elbows. Mismatched buttons, few zippers. Blue velour. No tie-dye. The tank tops are increasing, as she has grown more at home in the folds of her skin. The polo shirts were always there.

How does Kim walk? With her rounded hips swaying and her pudgy arms gravitating away.

How does Kim celebrate? Stomping through puddles or riding her basketed bike through downtown streets, her beaded dreads flowing like vines behind her.

How does Kim cry? Through wine-stained teeth in front of Tetris TVs, wet and uncontrolled, but usually in secret.

Kim has recently been promoted to full reporter at the Fargo Forum, where her closet holdings receive wary looks from her mostly conservative co-workers. I suppose no one ever thought this dreadlocked activist would climb the office ladder, where the only displayed story is a framed picture of George Bush’s reelection. But Kim is good with words; she knows about semicolons. More importantly, she knows how to ask questions and really listen to the answers. So after two years of writing obituaries with the occasional Saturday story, Kim has been promoted. I want to get to her soon, before she forgets what it’s like to contain a person’s life in a small newsprint square.

This is what I imagine: Kim smoking in a chair with wheels, taking deep drags before punching definite sentiments on an old tin typewriter with final, meaningful, two-finger jabs. Perhaps she
is wearing a scouts’ cap with a single patch. No time to twirl hair because she is always holding tight to the moment; the frames on her walls are askew but she does not notice. There is coffee—lots of it—only black and in old mugs. Leaves morph from yellow to red right outside her window, and the distinctions are worn irrelevant. The possibilities in these moments! Kim knows she can allow this world or create it.

Except Kim is not a smoker, save the occasional clove on nights of drinking with friends from out of town. She owns a typewriter, I am fairly certain, but not for typing and certainly not for obituaries. She prefers tea to coffee, though she finds coffee more romantic. The scouts’ cap should be true.

I want to ask her about them, Kim’s beloved dead, what it was like to freeze in time a person’s whole existence. It feels important somehow; there is something there I can’t see but want to find. We’ve talked about it, sure, over White Russians and cloth napkins, sitting at the bar and getting warm from alcohol and each other’s company. But our list of items to cover is always long and there is never enough time, never enough time in the world for anything. The last time with White Russians (well, the only time because usually it’s wine), Kim and I constructed mental lists of our perfect people—people we will one day meet but never love as much as we did before we really knew them. This seemed more urgent than work or death.

Kim’s perfect person wakes and reads the newspaper every morning, not thinking breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Kim’s perfect person sleeps with one arm draped around Kim’s stomach, sweet dreams passing between them, hip point to hip point. Kim’s perfect person talks about being on her period and not too much about zodiac signs. Kim’s perfect person wears no perfume or heels, although she is okay with sensual oils. And this perfect person is lucky for all of it.

What I do know of Kim’s dead is that people will say grandma loved to make Dutch apple pie and Kim deletes it. For formatting. And she hates it. Kim used to have the goal of memorizing where Harold went to high school, what award Sophia won, repeating these details to herself on her walks home. “I delete so much from obits,” she told me, “I just wanted to keep some of it instead of sending it all into the dumpster.” At one point in Kim’s obit
writing career, she bought three books about the craft ("Who knew people wrote those?" she muses) and afterwards decided she was doing a service people really need. "People need to know where to send flowers, not when milk is on sale," she told me.

I want to wrap my head around this business, this dealing with the dead in cold hard facts. But if I call her up and ask her why it all matters, will she tell me? Can she?

Kim is hard to get on the phone these days. Her dad has recently been diagnosed with lung cancer (his third try with cancer, each one a different variety) and she has this rolling about in her head.

They told her not to bother coming back. Her family doesn't love her as much as they did before they really knew her. Before they learned about the gender of Kim's perfect person, before they realized all the childhood Sundays in pews hadn't been enough to make her Catholic, before she started reading books with words like "cunt" on the cover. Kim's family moved all of her belongings out of their home after learning of her sexual orientation, but Kim's mom still calls every Sunday to remind Kim that it is the Lord's Day. Kim answers these phone calls, even though she is twenty-four and knows it is all wrong, because she is still a daughter and hopes that one day her mother will say, "Hey, sweet girl, you are a precious treasure."

I am not sure if there is etiquette, a rule book, on asking a person whose father is dying about what it's like to deal with the dead. How many sympathetic "mmms" are needed before it's okay to go in for the kill? Will she be able to hear me smoking through the receiver, and think it cruel? Will she cry and I won't be able to hug her because she is two-thousand miles away now? Mountains to cornfields is a lot of geography to communicate love across.

But I have a list of questions to ask. Like does she keep the photographs? Does she remember the names of each one? Does she keep these strangers locked tight in her top desk drawer, take them out and pretend on the faces, walk them across her lap like paper dolls and allow them to live on forever? Kim told me once she writes obituaries for her friends. "I've written yours," she said to me with a shrug of her shoulders, and I want to read it, to be read it over the phone, while I drink wine and hear about how she has decided I go, to see if she includes any poetic somethings that will
make me live in a way worth mourning.

I hope she will have good things to tell me. Like the time she told me she wished she could collect laughs in jars and take them out one day and hear the escape, one by one, and then a rush all together. She didn’t say anything about the laughs climbing up the walls, waltzing across the ceiling, and raining down on our heads, but the way she said it, with her blue eyes wide as will go and her tiny fingers—softer than my mother’s—tapping at the table, made me hear that part, wonder. I want her to tell me things like that about her dead, quirky romantic facts that will make her job seem delightful, but also important. And I am not sure why I want that, exactly, except maybe I think she deserves as much. Or maybe because I want to have reason to believe that the things in life we pass over—obituaries, Laundromats, toothpaste—are really secretly artwork, like dirt churned to electricity. I want to believe we can make beauty from this stuff, like the elves with the shoes, secret in the night and then—shazaam!—something so complete it has no choice but to look ordinary.

Kim downloads art into herself. Her body is a fantastic display of contemplated ink. Simple wave etchings scribble her left forearm, a large lady stick figure—which her friend Pete refers to as her “women only” tattoo—on her right. A scratchy shading of dandelions near her left breast (a Valentine’s Day present to herself), a spiral on her right upper arm that matches the ones Pete, myself, and our fourth best friend got together. And soon, when she has enough money or it seems time to stamp a day with something permanent, the words “We are not crumbs, we must not accept crumbs,” taken from an essay by Larry Kramer, will crawl up Kim’s ribs.

I once asked Kim, if someone were to write a book about her, what its Aboutness would be. She didn’t pause. “A Midwesterner’s struggle to be progressive in a conservative area,” she answered, eyes locked. Kim moved to Seattle for a try after college. She lived in a house with three other lesbians and her dreadlocks were common. She walked the streets with likeminded people who had most likely read Cunt. It seemed right, after there was no family to stick around for, when the one gay bar in her college town of Fargo played lots of Madonna and Cher. Now, back and cradled in the traditional plains, Kim says that lots of Midwesterners move
to Seattle to be activists because they think that’s enough. She says they should have stayed in the towns they grew up in because to be an activist it’s not enough to live among them; it’s easy to grow stagnant. To make a place change you have to be there to change it.

Now that Kim has been promoted to full reporter it will be easier to feel like there’s progression. She is documenting the living—what matters—instead of reiterating the lives that have already been made. But this isn’t what I care about. I know there will be fireworks in Kim’s stories; she will wake up and write them. But that’s a splendor that is easy to see. I want to hear about the esteemed dead, and Kim cheering heartily for them. Because maybe if our lives on paper, after we’re gone, are spun like gold from gondolas, there is magic in the mundane. There’s still a puppet master, back behind the curtain, keeping the photographs, rolling in them like leaves, knowing it all meant something, even if the rest of the world can’t read it in the Sunday paper.

Kim does not believe in an afterlife; she is not religious. She believes trees have things to tell us, but that is the extent of her spirituality. She believes in oceans and friendship and that squirrels will always have the ability to make her smile, but Kim does not know how this will help her in death. She was raised with an ashes to ashes mentality, but a friend of Kim’s tells her that we will become food for the earth. There might be days when Kim likes to think optimistically, that we’ll get another chance (or as many as we need) at life. But she doesn’t know for sure. She has mostly ruled out heaven. I imagine in these ways, Kim takes her work home at night.

If I were Kim, I would have long ago started to imagine my own death. This might not be an uncommon thing, but I would imagine it more than most. Who is to say what sort of scenarios? Perhaps I would dwell on my father’s cancer returned for the third time. Or maybe one of those accidents no one ever saw coming. The trains run on the hour in Fargo, and I know Kim can hear them from her bedroom window. Maybe I would sit awake in bed at night with thoughts that the trains will get me. Or a gas leak. Maybe thoughts of lightning striking would even enter my consciousness. But all Kim has shared is that she has begun to focus on things like age. And that if the dead who find their way to her desk are younger than she is, she thinks back to what she was like at that age, what
type of person she was, and if she had died at that age whether she would have been more or less missed than the person she is now.

I want to know whether or not she mourns for each one, whether or not she has favorites, whether or not she cries for the living, which is always late, always half done.

But maybe she’ll be able to tell that all I’m really after is a good story, a story like the laughs in jars, and she will be suspicious of me cutting out all the other stuff—size of margins, daily grind, her promotion—just as she cuts out the beautiful facts while constructing concise memorials for the ones who left us behind. Maybe I’ll eat her story and starve.

And as I think about dialing, though Kim is forever speed dial four, I can’t help but think that it’s like the time I dated that bearded man. After getting the call that he was on his way over, I would arrange my life the way I knew I wanted him to find it: blue incense burning, thick book open so he’d believe my thoughts to be miracles, hoody zipped halfway like I’d been cold and barely thought of it. And when he would walk in, at just the right time, when I was just as I wanted to be, I would smile up at him, casually. I would be happy to see him, and equally—but perhaps more—happy to be seen.

I don’t call her. And the next time I do, it won’t be with a list of questions. She may not have the right answers. There might be beauty. To me, it is a world where anyone could be our perfect person and we are just waiting to collect them in jars.
The Return

for my mom

On my bed with a plastic bag
of photos we (still) need to sort,
I find your photo: Debi, 1974
written in red on the crease-crinkled back.

I love that cardigan—warm as egg yolks, aged mustard
brown eyes (my eyes) squint from smiling
cheap pearls cool against your olive neck,
and plucked eyebrows arched like wings.

A neurotic mess, you called yourself
on that unnerving, uncomfortable day
back to Bullard after your lost freshmen year
from Lancaster to Fresno—the hopeful trip home.

But: big sister married, her flares packed away
Grandpa’s third heart attack raw in your dreams
friends who forgot you already, all there:
Kitty Wolf, Laura; lank, handsome Marc.

That’s when I crave your notebooks of poems,
pages burning with boyfriends and pain
tossed by Grandma, one day, in the trash
with her insulin shots and used Jean Nate.

Didn’t she know those were mine? you still say
loss for our loss kneads in my chest
silent, I grieve like those deep, wounded screams
when you saw new space glaring under your bed.

Now, I picture you standing, alone
your bedroom bright with Snoopy and sun
catching your face, like a flash, in the mirror
expressive and angry, exhausted—by smiles.
Projection Malfunction
for our first real anniversary, April 18, 2007

You take my hand and
I’m suddenly in a bad movie…

Other people are leaving
but I always stay till the end
I paid my money, I
want to see what happens.

In chance bathtubs I have to
peel you off me
in the form of smoke and melted
celluloid

Have to face it I’m
finally an addict,
the smell of popcorn and worn plush
lingers for weeks

—Margaret Atwood, You Take My Hand

i can never pin it down
in writing
what kind of a man you are
or explain how much you mean to me.
when i try to, it never seems right.
so i turn to other poems
and parts of books
that i think
try to touch
what i feel
because you did take my hand,
and i was suddenly in a bad movie
with feelings and thoughts that everyone
first in love
feels and thinks.

the only difference is that
for me
the credits never rolled
the exit music never came on
the people around me might have slowly
stood up, stretched, ambled out,
murmuring
that was good, and
i liked it.

i didn’t even want to go near a bathtub.

i stayed seated.

i waited for the next showing,
and the next,
and the one after that—the midnight one,
full of m&m wrappers and twittering teenagers
high on the thrill of being
out
so late!

even when the guy cleaning up came around
and quietly said,
excuse me, miss...
i stayed.

because it doesn’t matter who sits down or gets up
in that seat next to me.
my attention is fixed forward.
i’m here, in this
grimy theater seat
with someone’s greasy hair stains on the headrest
and gum in the cup holder
and under the armrest

until the next time comes
when the lights dim down
and i slide down a little in that
repulsive seat
to get comfortable,

and the screen flickers,
filled with the image of your face.

and i think:
that flicker!

it happens because
not even the immense movie screen
that shows all of those films,
that absorbs all of those gazes,
that captures all of those imaginations
for all of those moments

can manage to project that
complete
image of you.
Hands

a fall leaf withered in places,
you held your hands together
attempting to hold in a delicate secret.
the dips and valleys,
carved and shaped with precision,
each mark,
a moment with and without her.
her—with the beaded scarf and amber eyes,
slivers of gold glimmering in an ancient sun.
her—my mother.

she was young then
and so were you.
like a dream—
you walked
through the snaking maze
of cashew trees,
humming quietly and laughing,
tripping sometimes on the roots.
You brought a hammock,
tied it to the higher branches—
the silvery sweat from her forehead
dripped onto your collarbone.
You kissed her temples and the tip of her nose,
kissed each finger and eyelid.

five years,
a dream suspended above the heavens.
her belly grew wide
and then, like silent smoke that swallows the sun,
she was taken—away from the cashew forest,
away from the satin vines
away from you and me.
I see the print of her lips there
on the top, on the smooth part,
right before your hands split and swim into fingers.

I see the boat.
I see the boat and I see the fish that you caught by the river,
the cold river that you crossed to chase those lips.
I see where the tired ore burrowed
in between your thumb and forefinger.
I see where the calluses piled higher and higher,
were destroyed and again rebuilt.
I see where the hair began to grow there on the top,
on the smooth part,
to protect her lips from the summer rains.

I see on the tips where your hands were dry,
when the rain was gone and
yellow grass and wild weeds snaked through
the brittle slats of your boat.

in your eyes she was
washed away by wet skins of sorrow,
but the story is here, in your cupped hands,
in your cupped hands that still try to protect
the rosy hue that swam across her lips.
Hubcaps, a railroad lantern, buckets of nails, a Sanka can of spark plugs, the birch-bark canoe upright in the corner behind biscuit joiner and belt sander. I look at the cylinder my father removed from the Cushman scooter, the mower blade chipped on hidden willow root.

The summer evening when he brought home a used clutch for our go-cart, smiling, pleased with his luck at the Trash & Treasure, I never dreamed of this place without him.

Now with uncertain hand, I hold up a greasy bolt for inspection, tighten a nut on what I think is a carburetor, other broken things left behind needing work.
Surprise!

Jennifer Gochoco | Digital Photography | 6" by 4"
Mercedes Umana, El Salvador 2007

david pace | digital photography
12” by 18”
Alumni Field

| jackie herring
digital photography
12.6” by 9.5”
zsofia otvos |
acrylic on burlap with light source
46” by 30”
Untitled

| robert raymond  
| microsoft paint  
| 6.5” by 8.7”
Reflection

cauty happ |
photography
6” by 6”
Mountain Men

| halina boyd  
mixed media  
60” by 34”
megan diddie | watercolor
12” by 24”
Grease Age

| tara meyer
pencil, food grease
11.5” by 8”
kathy aoki | two-plate lino cut with watercolor
14” by 15”
Segmented

| francisco “pancho” jiménez
| ceramic
| 86” by 17” by 11”
Old Mother

Gautam Rangan | Pencil, acrylic, watercolor | 11” by 8.5”
What Lies Beyond the Moonlit Glass?

| cristal friesen  
mixed media on mirror  
24” by 36”
I met him in the fifth grade, standing
On two crutches. He was little, like me
Maybe that’s what bound us. Or the crutches.
I never did ask him why he needed them
And he could not see mine. I did not know why
He liked me and I did not know why Mike Costa
Did not like me, only that one day after school
He tried to pick a fight with me. Donnie stood
Between us, fought him to the ground. It ended
When Mike realized who he was fighting.
I thanked Donnie as warmly as I could. Despite
That, I did not see Donnie after the fifth grade

Until four years later as freshmen in high school.
I never did ask him what happened to the crutches.
What held him up now seemed to be his use
Of a lot of foul language. I tolerated that
Because I was so much stronger now, yet
He knew how much I disliked such profanity.
He seemed to swear more at me than anyone
And when I asked him to stop, he laughed,
Warmly, but it made me cold, as if a fight
Was waiting. I began to walk away, slowly,
He said he was sorry, but it was already broken.
I did not see Donnie again for the rest of his life.

for don culver wherever you are

ken tokuno
A Hippie Poem

A hippie poem that a girl who called herself Sequoia wrote for me in 1974:

Tender is the night and gentle as the fallen snowflakes, your sensitivity plucks a golden string within my heart. I have wanted for a time to utter a few words of wanting to be friends, but now I know that we are. There’s a difference between communications, though my lad, sometimes I know when people want to share the sunshine with you or not—some are too busy to meddle in such things as companionship true. The flowers of our youth flourish in our goodness—and I smile to see this in you.
(Signed, with a Rapidograph squiggle)
Sequoia.

***

A Grateful Dead concert June 8, 1978 in Isla Vista, the first week after finals. It’s a blazingly hot day at the Campus Stadium at UCSB. The concert was only a couple of blocks from my apartment: a terrific novelty for a person who grew up in Los Angeles, where you needed to drive ten miles for anything.

I went with my friend Drew, and his buddy Bob, a guy as fat and hairy as Jerry Garcia himself. We walked past the two story cinderblock apartments in Isla Vista, the pocket-sized gardens with their spiny yuccas, students sunning themselves on webbed lawn chairs, or sitting in window sills, smoking cigarettes, their legs dangling in the air.

The lemony taste of LSD on my tongue spread into a dull alkaloid numbness, and the walk began to turn into a trudge. I felt the first swell of what was going to become a tsunami of panic. At every step I expected the ground under my feet to drop out.

The arena was a mob scene, surrounded by the hulking Orcs Bill Graham hired as security guards. Once we were in the
gates, they rummaged through all the picnic baskets and backpacks we brought. They searched with admirable thoroughness. They lifted up wooden tollgates to let in about a hundred fans at a time into a holding zone. Inside we stood in a narrower gate for a more thorough examination of our possessions and ourselves. It was 95 degrees and there was no shade. It was one of those days that reminds you that the desert goes all the way to the coast in Southern California.

The first acid-rush gave me the sense of hanging on to a moving train by my fingers. Shaking my head to clear it, I tried to face up to the visible hatred of the security guards. Underneath the drug, which I could feel stretching and coiling in my mind, the tableau became starkly clear to me. Graham, a Holocaust survivor, was trying to give us a taste of what a concentration camp was like. I thought about this for some time.

We got through and found a place to lay our blankets. I was parched, and filled with a feeling of terrible unease. I expected violence at any second. The music echoed of the foothills, a mile away, and came back warped and out of tune. Bob, Drew’s pal, took off his shirt and slowly began to redden in the sun. I watched him cook. At this instant, I got an idea of what my own fatness looked like to people who were disgusted by it. Bob’s freckles, moles and clumps of body hair were nauseating me.

Water.

I got up, blind with sweat, and ran right into the girl who used to call herself Sequoia.

***

I went to an alternative school, I should explain, held in a former dental lab in a graying district of LA called Mar Vista. It was fixed up with carpet remnants and room dividers and staffed by mid-1970s idealists. They furnished the school with salvaged pine-wood, Salvation Army furniture and Styrofoam walls. One morning, I walked by a cubbyhole, a six by twelve storage room underneath a barred window. It had been taken over by hippies. In my life, people arrived and departed as if they’d come or gone through a trap door.

I didn’t really know any hippies. I knew a few psychedelic
juvenile delinquents, people who piled into rented Venice Beach firetraps, took plenty of drugs, and who always had some long-standing court case with the Santa Monica PD. They worked fast food and engineered petty crimes, like crowbarring pay phones off of walls and breaking them open with cold chisels for the dimes. If they made some money, they might parlay it into a kilo of weed, which had been soaked with Coca-Cola, pressed flat with an automobile tire jack, and wrapped in Mexican newspaper. Seeing all that pot being broken up into a plastic dish strainer was my idea of being as rich as rich could be.

But these were hippies, the real deal: aromatic with patchouli, calm, fluffy and sleepy as roosting chickens. These hippies wore white sacks and shirts. Carol, their leader, wore an ivory-colored knitted white stole around her neck. She waved me in and offered some tea from a huge glass jar. She was a big-breasted earth mother of 16.

I’ve never met anyone who had such natural calm, not even therapists. Amid the turbulent adolescents around her, trembling with hormones, she was without anxiety. Her eyes were guiltless and clear as blue marbles. She stared back at me without curiosity; she’d reached a point where some internal switch had been tripped. She would be stoned for life.

While we drank honeyed tea, Sequoia rubbed Amy’s shoulders. Amy was short and squat, and looked a little like Al Franken.

Sequoia was the one who drew me the most. She was long and rangy, but with tiny features, a straight nose and a spray of freckles: a long legged cowgirl in a “The End is Near” robe. She looked straight at you, and if you were slumping in some teenage misery, she might pass you a note. Like the one I’m writing about today, for instance.

That spring I cut class with three in combo. I lay around with them in the alcove, watching them lean on their elbows, in all their cool lovely idleness. They played Yes tapes on a portable cassette player: “You can tell Rick Wakeman is into purity because he wears white,” Sequoia said. They kissed each other with big tonguey kisses and wrote poetry with Rapidograph pens.

I tried to join in. I was working at McDonald’s and used the money to buy flowers; we stuffed them into old glass jars as vases. At work, I wore a sky-blue polyester tunic with clown lapels and a
ringed zipper. It didn’t breathe. I sweated in it, and I stank. I should have thought of it as the sweet honest smell of good hard work, but this was the first time I was aware I had any kind of odor. Beneath that sweat stink, there was a different, worse stench: the smell of virginity. It was my considered opinion that sex was the cleanest thing in the world. If I had it, I would be cleansed.

I’d go on outings with them, up to smoke herb in Topanga Canyon. My heart was in my throat for fear of the police, and the hike didn’t do my asthma any favors. Except during group walks like this, I never really left the sidewalk until I was past 30. I remember one moment of peace; a guy named Jet showing how to flip a beer bottle cap so slowly that it hung on the air like a flying saucer. That’s just how I was with them, hovering. I gave myself a new name, to be one with them. I trembled like a wire sometimes, hoping to be asked to Sequoia’s house.

***

On Monday nights, they headed up to Sunset Boulevard to a natural food restaurant for dinner. I had just enough money for something called mu tea, and I soaked it down with honey to make it count as dinner. The manager, Father Ivy came by, bearded, grinning; he took my hand and gave me a hug. The dinner was the opening act for a free breathing class with Mother Ivy, held in an A-frame behind the parking lot, away from the rush of traffic. Mother Ivy, a wiry, tiny woman entered, and sat herself down at the front of the room. She was a few months pregnant. We folded ourselves into cushions and began to breathe, consciously joining Mother Ivy in the chant: “Yod he vav he, ya ho wah ho.”

Yod he vav he, ya ho wah ho. Looking over at Sequoia, her cedar-smelling dark brown hair as straight as if it had been ironed, long and lean, spine firm in a perfect lotus, I thought about God. I imagined God as the better version of me: the self I would be if I were a good person. I’d listen to my family instead of snarling at them whenever they got between me and the TV. I’d be a better person if I didn’t talk about things that people didn’t understand and weren’t interested in. I wouldn’t harbor retrograde, earthly desires. When Carol sat across from me on the school’s floor, quilted out of carpet remnants, I wouldn’t notice the pigment of her aureoles.
showing through the white of her gown. If I were God, I might under-
stand why Baba Ram Dass thought the goddess Kali was beauti-
ful instead of hideous, with her necklace of severed dripping heads
and a gaping womb. I’d have a house where the plumbing worked.
I’d really like the outdoors, instead of feeling sand lining my wind-
pipe every time I stood near a blooming eucalyptus. When I was
out in nature, I wouldn’t dread that something with claws or fangs
was bounding out of the underbrush.

Inhale, exhale. And now Mother Ivy had a lesson for us:
“God spelled backwards is dog,” she said levelly. This was relevant.
Surely the divine was in my grasp. I knew what it was to be a back-
ward dog.

***

When I was at the library later that week, I made a discov-
ery. I happened on the fact that yod he vav he was the Hebrew
tetragramatton, JHVH, the four initials of God’s name. When I told
Sequoia, I saw the first cloud cross her cloudless brow, the first flash
of disenchantment: “So what?” she frowned.

I’d been analyzing again. Knowing I was being analytical
made me ashamed. Shame made me clingy. And suddenly I had
the sense of being a tag-along. Before I could kiss them all goodbye,
the trap door opened one day and they were gone. Later I’d heard
they’d gone off to Maui. The health food restaurant was sold, be-
cause Father Ivy had gotten word of Kahoutek. This comet, larger
and worse than Hailey’s comet could ever think of being, was going
to swoop down. Its fiery tail would scorch the earth. It would give
Hollywood the purging it had deserved for decades.

Maui would be spared; there would be the new Zion.

It wasn’t Zion for them, as my friend Wiley told me gleeful-
ly, a few years later. In Maui, they’d gotten the works, all three girls
and the Ivys and some new toddlers Father Ivy had sired without
the help of Mother Ivy. There were health inspectors, sub-tropi-
cal diseases, the locals giving them grief for housing that violated
even Hawaiian senses of propriety. As for Ivy, he tried hang-gliding
without learning how to do it first.

I suppose he thought he could intuit the skill, soak it up
through mediation and contemplation...
...on the beach below the cliff, he lay with a broken back. His spiritual family, and let's imagine Sequoia among them, clad in their long white robes, held hands in a circle and tried to chant him back to wellness.

***

I hadn’t thought of the hippies much, during the years between high school and my first year of college. That trap door kept opening and shutting, swallowing old friends and disgorging new ones. In came my first girlfriend. Out went my mother’s boyfriend, a bartender she discovered embracing a male UCLA student.

When people vanished, they vanished. Maybe five years later you’d hear they had a new husband, and a new name, 500 miles away with a child or two. Imagine my surprise when one reappeared.

In the swirling of warped music and the punishing heat, inside a skull whirling with LSD, I came face to face with Sequoia. We locked eyes. I’m not the kind of person who believes in the paranormal. I have a hunch that LSD acts as some sort of solvent to the natural walls that prevent telepathy. Was Sequoia tripping, also? Maybe it was just that my wall was very thin at the moment.

And I knew I’d been made.

What I read in her eyes, in the fifteen wordless seconds we made eye contact, was a shock of disappointment as profound as any I’ve ever encountered. It was as if she could read all the sin and malice in my heart. It was as if she could see behind a mask I didn’t even know I was wearing. She saw all my motives. She saw what I was looking for in those 16 year old days and never finding, what I had never let slip in either words or gestures: the vague pastel idea I had of going to bed with her. How I pictured the act would have been sickeningly naïve to someone who’d actually done it. There would be an Indian printed bedspread, lit candles, the right record... and then what?

Her eyes turned stern. She saw it all: I don’t have a spiritual bone in my body. Not a molecule. Never had, never will. At heart, while I enjoyed watching hippies at play, I was only biding my time. Rather than “flowers of goodness,” what I’d had inside was as ordinary and carnal as anything.
Even though I wasn’t lusting, at that moment, for anything besides a getaway from the burning, stinking crowd, she could see the echo of that covert desire.

I’d spent all that time... all that time chanting and holding hands, passing around flowers and staring at Indian mandalas... all that time, just waiting for sex. Just like the other men in her life, the ones that yelled at her from cars as she walked down the street, or the one who had pretended to be her guru.

She saw through me at last.

I got out of there, fast.
Tangled

Tangled, as the moon falls away from the night,
Our pretzeling limbs, and one wish:
To be a snake.
Neither venomous nor constricting,
But simply able to see through my eyelids.
To be able to watch as you unknowingly trace
My shoulders with your fingertips,
Thinking I’m asleep.
I feel your gaze on my brow
As you brush aside a wisp of hair.
I wish to see the way you look at me
When you think I’m not looking.
But I pretend to sleep,
Listening to your breaths,
In time with mine.
Artists Anonymous:  
Frank Warren and the PostSecret Project

In November 2004, Frank Warren printed and distributed three thousand self-addressed postcards asking people to mail their anonymous secrets to him. Since then Frank has received countless artfully created and evocative postcards that tell secrets both humorous and poignant and that reveal the unspoken threads of our shared humanity. Frank posts these cards on his award-winning blog PostSecret.com and displays them in an internationally traveling art exhibit. The PostSecret project has produced several books, and the featured postcards in this interview come from the latest one—A Lifetime of Secrets—which HarperCollins released this fall.

**Santa Clara Review:** What led you to start the PostSecret project?

**Frank Warren:** I think in my own life, in my childhood, growing up, there were secrets in my family, and some of those secrets I think I eventually found out but others are a mystery. And so maybe as an adult I’m trying to search for the secrets that I couldn’t find when I was a child.

**SCR:** What do you think motivates people to send you secrets?

**FW:** I think some people just want to share a funny story or talk about a sexual taboo they might have, but for other people—I mean if you look at some of the postcards, you can tell that they’ve been painstakingly created and maybe have taken more than an hour to create. So for those folks I think the postcards represent something more. I think of them almost as sacred objects. So maybe those people are searching for reconciliation with themselves, maybe they’re looking for grace or absolution or greater authenticity. Or maybe they’re just trying to take another step on that path of facing a secret they’ve been hiding from.

**SCR:** Do you think the secrets people send you are true? Does their veracity matter?
FW: I don’t think of the postcards as being true or false. I think of them more as works of art. And just like if you walked into a museum or a bookstore, you wouldn’t necessarily discard all the fiction novels because they weren’t true. I think there’s value there, and I think sometimes when you’re dealing with secrets, truth or veracity can have different levels. In fact, I’ve heard more than one person talk about how when they were sharing a secret with me, they thought they were telling a lie when they wrote their secret on the card; but once they released it and thought about it for a while, they realized that sharing that secret was a way of coming out to themselves, and what they had written as something they thought was false turned out later to be something that was true for them. They just weren’t ready to know that at the time.

SCR: Do you see trends in people’s secrets?

FW: I see a lot of the same issues that you see in literature or film. Human issues that reflect our full spectrum of emotion—the funny, the sexual, the tragic, the profound, the hopeful. But I do get a surprising number of secrets that deal with serious issues, like self-harm or eating disorders.
SCR: Do you think some people use your project as a space for exhibitionism or voyeurism?

FW: I’ve read emails from both people who have mailed in secrets and also people who have visited the website, and I’ve heard cathartic stories from both groups of people. Sometimes people will come to the website initially, maybe, for a voyeuristic reason; but once you see these soulful, funny, thoughtful, poetic secrets—if you come back enough and if you read enough of them, you eventually see one that speaks to you at maybe a very deep level, and maybe it will even remind you of a secret that you’ve been hiding from yourself.

SCR: To your knowledge, has the publication of the secrets you’ve received proved harmful in any way?

FW: Most everybody submits their secrets anonymously, so I think when people share a secret with me they want to release it, and they don’t necessarily want somebody to respond to them. But I do have a link on the website to 1-800-SUICIDE, which is a national suicide prevention hotline. And PostSecret has raised over a $100,000 to support that noble charity.

SCR: According to a video posted on your website, you had to take a week off because the project was becoming too much for you. What led you to need this time apart from the project? How has the project affected your personal life?

FW: I’ve faithfully been posting secrets for, I think, two years in a row, and it sounds pretty simple. But week after week always having to have them up on Sunday morning… it can be difficult when you have a business, which I have, and a family, which I have, and so this was just a time when I felt like I had to get away. I left with the family and it was kind of tough not to do it for a week, but at the time it was a break that I needed so that when I got back I would be ready to continue.

I don’t get that much negative feedback. I think people, when they come to the website, they really can connect or understand the pos-
itive nature that it has and how these postcards are allowing so many voices to speak that normally we wouldn’t hear. And I think people can recognize that as a good thing.

SCR: What value do you think a community and/or interactive art project like PostSecret has in contemporary society?

FW: What I’ve tried to do with PostSecret is create a safe, non-judgmental place where people can share secrets. I think allowing people
to tell their thoughts, their feelings, their desires in a place where they know there won’t be any negative consequence, not only allows them to unburden themselves but also allows other people to see this conversation, this community of the parts of our lives that we don’t talk about. And one thing that I believe comes from that is that we begin to understand that everybody has a secret that would
break your heart if you knew what it was, and if we could remember that, I think there’d be more understanding, more compassion, more peace in the world.

**SCR:** Do you think that cathartic and/or community art is less or more valuable than “high art”? Or are the two incomparable?

**FW:** I wouldn’t want to rank it, but I would certainly say that this project has shown me that sometimes courage is just as valuable as artistic training or talent in creating beautiful, meaningful art.

**SCR:** A project like yours in which all artists are anonymous seems almost antithetical to our society’s notion of art and to the value that we place on authorship. How do you think anonymity functions in your project?

**FW:** Well, I received a postcard not long ago that said, “I only create art when people don’t know who I am.” This person felt like she couldn’t share herself in her artwork if she felt like she was being judged. And so I think that’s one example of how with artwork or with feelings we can be very sensitive and not share things in a way that might be healthy for us. And I think that element of anonymity allows us to share more of ourselves with others and with ourselves than we would otherwise.

**SCR:** Do you think anonymous art is more genuine?

**FW:** I think it can be. In a strange way sometimes you find more truth when you allow somebody to be anonymous. And I think the same thing is true with the artwork that comes on the cards in addition to the text. I think there are some secrets that we might feel so uncomfortable to say that we might never share them. But if we can use images and pictures and drawings to express those feelings, we can share them in a way that they’re recognized without our having to put them in words. I think words can sometimes be an obstacle that art can help us overcome.

**SCR:** What relationships do you observe between the secrets on the postcards and the visual art that accompanies them?
**FW:** I should look more carefully for patterns. I kind of just let it wash over me. I look at them more viscerally instead of trying to analyze them.

**SCR:** What do you do with all the postcards you receive once you’ve read them?

**FW:** I keep them all. I read them all and I keep them all. I even keep some of the envelopes.

**SCR:** How do you decide which secrets to post online?

**FW:** I choose cards that have a ring of authenticity to me and speak to me personally. I like secrets that are new, that I haven’t seen before or that express a secret in a new way. And I like to share secrets that reflect our full range of emotions. So every week I try to include a funny secret, a sexual secret, a profound secret, a poetic secret, a confused secret, all different kinds. I really like the diversity of our secrets.

**SCR:** Do you think we live in a particularly secret-keeping society?
FW: Recently scientists discovered dark matter in the universe—like 80% of our universe is stuff we can’t see or detect. We just know it’s there because of the effect it has gravitationally on other objects. I think that our social lives are like that too. I think there’s all this dark matter, these experiences and feelings and beliefs that we don’t talk about and sometimes don’t even acknowledge to ourselves, but they’re there. And I think projects like PostSecret allow us to view this hidden landscape that we all share but that people don’t talk about.

SCR: Have you found that since you started the project, you’ve become more open with that landscape?

FW: Yeah, I think so, with my family.

SCR: How do you see the PostSecret project changing in the future?

FW: There’s a new book coming out in October called *A Lifetime of Secrets*, but beyond that I don’t try and plan or force the project down a certain path. I just try and make decisions day by day that respect the purity of the project. I just try and protect its specialness to me.
Gadsden Purchase

South of the Gila border country
Gran Sonora Desierto splendor space
Ripped off late from Mexico
Through which to run a railway
Proposed as a site for Israel
But left to the Tohono O’odham
Trogons and Arizona woodpeckers
High desert exquisite clarity
Intense sun brilliant over washes
Shark tooth mountain bajadas
Exotic hawks spiral on thermals
Here the cold Northeastern day
Run into Gadsden’s descendant
Calls himself Jim G. knows Chinese
Claims it’s easier than Hungarian
And we talk Xi’an and Budapest
In bad air and weak December sun
Pickling People

“I’m saving sixty dollars a week by not smoking.”

I smiled and congratulated Katie, glad that both her wallet and her lungs would be in a better state of being due to her commitment to quit. Fortunately for me, nicotine has no perceptible effect on my system, and I’m grateful for that. There’s one addiction that I don’t have to worry about.

The car sloped down Santa Clara street and rounded the curve up Market, and I began to consider where we would park. Downtown San José’s mass of concrete was glaring; the sterile September sunlight punched my eyes, and I realized that, despite growing up within the city limits, the downtown area was still largely a mystery to me. I smiled as the high, flat-faced, oddly orange walls of The Tech Museum appeared. We had arrived.

Large vinyl signs stretched overhead: “Body Worlds 2 & The Three Pound Gem.” It sounded like a bad summer movie sequel. As we entered the glass doors, the clean, waxed wood floor reflected tiny halogen lamps, and the air conditioning circulated cold chemical cleaner residue through the air. On the other side of the sheetrock walls, which were decked with framed photographs and paintings, the headline exhibit was waiting for us. Far different from any summer action flick, the next two hours were to be rather unique. We were about to encounter an entire building filled with human remains.

“Plastination, the groundbreaking method of halting decomposition of anatomical specimens and preserving them for medical study and health instruction, was invented and patented by anatomist and physician, Dr. Gunther von Hagens,” we read from a pamphlet. When I turned the page and saw a picture of Dr. von Hagens, I was surprised by his taut eyes and broad, nonchalant smile, not to mention his dark, wide-brimmed hat, which seemed more akin to a jungle treasure hunter than a German doctor from the University of Heidelberg. In any case, I readied myself as a scrubby teenager scanned our tickets and showed us to the entrance.
“Well,” I said, “here we go.”

Walking around the corner, we encountered our first helping of human anatomy. A full human skeleton stood tall, and in front of it was a glass display case filled with various body parts: a leg bone cut in half to expose the dry marrow, a polished shoulder joint, and a collection of inner-ear bones—tiny sound wave receptacles as frail-looking as lightbulb filaments. Wandering down the line, Katie and I exchanged semi-gasping expressions at a severely deformed spinal column, complete with a claw-like collection of spindly ribs, the vertebrae twisted almost as acutely as the piping beneath a kitchen sink. Glancing around, I realized the whole place felt like a cross between a butcher’s shop and a mechanic’s garage, full of chopped tubing and socket joints, body parts laying about like carburetors and bellhousings. A couple was approaching the erect skeleton with their young daughter, a timid girl of maybe ten. “Have her come over here,” the woman was saying to her husband, “so she knows it isn’t bad.” I watched the girl slowly creep around to the back of the fossil, her hands hidden in the sleeves of her slightly oversized hoodie. As she gave the ghostly figure a sideways glance, I heard another, younger girl asking her dad, “Do they smell bad?”

My eyes scanned the captions and explanations on the walls, while Katie mused over the origins of the bodies: “I mean, I have the donor sticker on my driver’s license, but...” Apparently, each body or piece of body now on display was here because people had signed themselves over, in the event of death, to be used by Dr. von Hagens for the education of the general public, to be dissected and preserved through a yearlong process of infusion with silicone polymer. In the end, they were posed as ice-skaters, baseball players, and high-divers, sans athletic wear, with their skin peeled back and muscles split, organs leaping out from under their ribcages, their sinews draping down like dry, botanical tendrils. I, too, had the donor sticker on my driver’s license, but I had never considered a plastination donation. Maybe there’s a sticker for that, too.

One particular piece suddenly caught my eye. The skull of a newborn child was placed on a block, the facial cavities minute and closely clustered in front of a smooth, sloping forehead, the entire thing no larger than a baby eggplant. Mapping out the surface of the skull, I felt I was looking at tectonic plates. A placard explained
that the sections overlap and move to allow compression during passage out of the womb, and would later on fuse and harden to one solid piece. I wondered if the child had actually made that passage.

Katie and I drifted down the halls, finding a leaping horse (named Filly), its muscles posed, legs kicking in the air. Alongside the petrified animal was its spine and internal organs, arranged in the exact same position. Across the way was a similar pairing: the skeleton of a man walking, with his muscles completely separated and reassembled alongside. The difference in this scene, however, was the inclusion of a young boy’s skeleton, walking with the man and holding his hand. On the child’s head was the preserved cartilage of the nose and ears, and without skin or hair, the pointy protrusions gave the kid an impish, goblin-like visage. Perhaps I was simply over-aware that Halloween was a month away, but the demonic little skull made my forehead wrinkle. Standing all around the display was a horde of young boys in Old Navy jeans and bright sweatshirts, their ears attached to electronic handheld audio-tour units. Their feet, clad in skate sneakers, shuffled and kicked restlessly as they stared.

Moving around the corner, we came upon a section devoted to the lungs. Three intact pairs of the respiratory organ sat in a row. The first was a normal, healthy set, pink and gray and teeming with blood vessels below the surface. The second was darker, dirty looking, as if rolled in dust and graphite—a smoker’s lungs. The third pair, at which Katie was staring, appeared to be crafted out of charcoal, and was in fact those of a coal worker, who, after years of inhaling the black dust, had left behind this relic for us to consider. Turning around, we met with the inner workings of an entire torso: intestines, stomach, liver, heart, and on top, a second example of a smoker’s lungs. One of the chambers, though, was more than discolored. It was shriveled, shrunken down, resembling an unharvested fig cast underfoot, the result of lung cancer devouring the like away. Katie dwelled for a moment. “Just think,” she said to me, “of how many people in here smoke. And how many are just going to look at this and not care.” I considered this as she studied the wrinkled lump. “A few months ago,” she continued, “I wouldn’t have cared, either.”

Next, we approached a room about life in the womb. Sev-
eral examples of the fetus were lining the walls, encapsulated in tall glass tubes. One had been injected with a dye, making its skin glow red and revealing the skeletal structure beneath. Its face was terrifying, eyes and mouth ablaze in neon, an angry stare piercing through the clear fluid of the glass cell. The bones appeared as dark purple tattoos, a soft shoulder blade and sharp knuckles accenting the gummy skin like sutures, bringing to my mind the pointed ends of semicolons cutting through an unfinished paragraph, a vivid description of halted embryonic life. Behind these tiny bodies was a larger one—a mother. She stood upright, her muscles wrapped around her rigid bones, her womb sliced down the middle, exposing a cramped, pillow-like cradle in which her child was curled. The mother’s face was serene, unassuming. Her hands were turned out, palms toward me, and her eyes were level, as if to say simply, “Here I am.”

Across the room, amongst a sea of plastic casings and stray arteries, I felt drawn to a female ballerina in the midst of an elegant arc of movement, her arms delicately sweeping the air and her back leg stretching out behind her. There, staring at her body without cover of clothing or skin, her raw breasts and tight ribcage under the lights, and her dry plastic labia calmly parted, I could not tear my eyes from the single ballet shoe neatly tied to her floorbound foot.

Leaving the dancer, I advanced to the final rows of glass-covered tables. There were unknotted intestines, spliced reproductive organs, and swollen stomachs, but I found myself hovering over examples of the liver. As with the lungs, there were three of them: one healthy, one swollen from drinking, and one completely shriveled up with alcoholism, lying dry and small off to the side. The placards described the detoxifying function of the little slab of tissue, and the irreparable damage incurred through heavy, incessant drinking. Only yesterday had I finished another handle of gin, and I thought of it, too, lying dry off to the side, even though its frequent use had not altered its shape. What a funny comparison, I thought.

Finally, while passing skeletal ice-skaters, their muscles locked as they spun on the ice, Katie and I exited the exhibit. Before we left, however, we browsed through the guestbooks that were situated on podiums near the door. Flipping through their pages,
we found a vast array of comments, left by a wide variety of people. One paragraph, left by an Oxford professor, offered a detailed appreciation of the opportunity for common people to be able to see what, previously, only surgeons had been privileged to view. Several entries were from middle school children and their teachers, grateful for the unique learning experience. I was surprised at how many people had come here to celebrate their birthdays, in my opinion a rather ironic way to mark the passing of one’s life. After skipping past “Suzie wuz here“ and a young man’s offering to one day donate an impressive set of male genitals, we came across some almost prayer-like impositions. “This is no accident,” one read, “PROOF that God exists! Glory be to Him.” One man left behind, with his praise to God, a New Testament reference next to his name: John 3:16. I knew this one well: “For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” I was puzzled that, despite the unique nature of this gallery, a man would leave the most oft-quoted piece of Christian scripture by the exit door. Perhaps, in the face of dead bodies, he wanted to comfort people with the thought of conquered death. Maybe he was making an ironic comment on this man-made method of preservation. It could be he was just taking the opportunity to preach salvation with the one tired scripture he knew by heart. I’m not sure, but as Katie and I drove home in complete silence, I was convinced that the most intriguing specimens we encountered that day were not part of the exhibit.

That night, as I poured myself a cocktail, I thought again of the group of boys circled about the devilish child skeleton. I wondered if it scared them. I wondered if it would have scared me at that age, seeing the walking remains of someone my own size. As the alcohol began to settle into my blood, my mind returned to Katie’s awe at the blackened lungs. She was clearly disturbed by the sight, but it also seemed to further her resolve to stay free of tobacco. Next, I pictured the fat, swollen liver under the glass. “Irreparable damage,” the caption had said. “Well,” I thought, rinsing the cocktail shaker, “that is unfortunate.”
New Bedford

The wharfs are scattered with Atlantic spines. There, I walk without a sense of you:

   no rise, no wind, no cirrus arc
to gut the twilight pink,
   for this New Bedford autumn
is the lurk of bald-eyed sailors,
   the dawnside shiver
of machine shops,
   the tattered purse of seiners
pegged to pastel shacks.

The places I return
are obvious with ghosts:
   from this port
men dragged two days upon a fin
   to own it, were towed
by harpooned flukes as far as the Outer Banks just to put the water
to a choice.

When finally you do arrive:
it is as a fine Atlantic cod, this morning slapping its way from a brimmed and idling semi
down onto the frosted slats
of pier eleven,
   all the flail and concentration of escape
tapping
   a death rhythm
among similar scattered bones,
tapping softer till the slosh of tide
   softer till the slosh of tide
   overtakes its beat.
Shards Like Glass

When Mama said it was all gonna be better now, I wanted to believe her. She’d said it before. *Hush now baby don’t cry like that,* she’d say, wiping fresh away the wet-hot tears as they came burning down my cheeks. Then she’d put one of her soft white hands on my little head and comb the rowdy blonde hairs back into place, taming them, patting them down real careful like she’d fix the pillows and sheets on her and Papa Joe’s bed everynight, smoothing them just so. Next she’d get down on her knees, so she’d be right level with me. Sitting like that, she’d look me right straight in the eye and put her soft gentle hands on my little shoulders, maybe rub them once or twice. Then she’d wrap her arms with those hands around me so tight, *Mary Sue we’re gonna be just fine,* and hug me close, *just fine,* sway me so slow you couldn’t hardly see it even if you were looking.

But not this time. This time when she leaned in to hold me, to press her half-fallen self against mine, she felt my flinch. Just real small, and quick. Like I wasn’t even trying to let her know. But it was enough; she knew. She knew something was different. So she pulled herself back, looked her face straight at mine, stared at me with those eyes of hers. And when she asked where it hurt, and when I didn’t say anything, she turned her face away from me and looked out that front window at the empty driveway, head to the side, with a nose so crooked-like for I can’t even remember how long.

Then she got up off her knees, up off the floor real slow. I watched as she walked across the carpet over toward that window, saw how that white cotton dress Papa Joe had given her day before last stuck a little bit to her knees, how she pulled it away from her as she moved. When she got next to the glass, she looked straight out and put her hand palm-down against the window, five fingers spread. Then she brought those long, thin fingers together, rolled her outstretched hand into a ball and hit her fist against the glass, just once, just barely. Window hardly even moved. Next thing, she
dropped her hand down all the way, let it fall right into her side, all limp-like, no life to it. When she turned back to me, I could see her eyes shining with wet. I saw a little tear fall down her cheek, spilled over no matter how hard she tried not to let it, and I could feel it sting all the way down her face, feel that salt cut down through those fresh red scars.

***

One time Mrs. Carver asked me about Papa. During recess, when all the other kids were out playing, jumping around on the hopscotch and swinging on the bars and kicking up the bark chips. I didn’t feel much like playing that day, so I stayed in, helped pick up the papers and put the picture books straight again on the shelves. Mama had been in there just the day before to pick me up. She hadn’t even been late. But when she’d walked in the door to get me, as she’d told me to grab my knapsack and better not forget my lunchbox this time, I saw the way Mrs. Carver’s face changed. That smile of hers, that look she had that was always so calm-like, made you feel better after taking a tumble outside just by seeing it—that look was different. I don’t know exactly how, but it was different all the same. Not quite so calm-like.

She looked Mama up and down and up again, staying real close on the purple on Mama’s chin. Mama had left her hair down that day. It was so pretty you could see how soft it was just by looking at it, you didn’t even have to touch it. But people mostly did anyway, always reaching out their hand for those soft, smooth strands. Sometimes she’d toss her head back just to show off a little bit, make those hairs fly through the air. She’d tossed her head that day she picked me up, too, probably not on purpose, just all out of habit like she did most things. But that day when she did it, you could see the bruise along the side of her face, like a shadow over that one side. Mrs. Carver didn’t say anything about it. Just gave Mama that funny look.

So next day when I was in the classroom instead of playing, Mrs. Carver looked at me funny, too. Sitting cross-legged in front of the book shelves, helping make the room all nice again while the other kids were outside, that’s when she asked. We were alone together, her at the desk, me on the floor. It had been real quiet
for a while, her voice almost kinda scared me when she said it. *What’s your daddy do, Mary Sue?* she said. I kept straightening those books, pushing each of them back all the way into the shelf so they wouldn’t fall out. I told her Papa worked in the mines. Then she asked what Mama did, and I said she was just Mama. Mrs. Carver told me I could always talk to her about anything—Mama, Papa, home—anything at all. I said ok and just kept on straightening, moving up to the second shelf to line up those books all right-clean and straight like the others. Mrs. Carver didn’t say much of anything else. Just sat at her desk watching me work with that same funny look on her face, that look that didn’t go away until all the other kids came tramping back inside.

***

Mama always read to me a lot. Especially at night, right before she put me to bed. That’s when she did it most. She’d sit herself down on the little chair by my bed, grab me up and sit me on her lap, wrapping those arms of hers around me so warm and close, hold me there right next to her. Sitting together we’d rock back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Felt like I melted right into her. She’d hold me so close I could feel her heart pump steady, beating inside of her slow and calm, *beat, beat, beat*, matched up just right with the sway of our chair.

Usually the room would be dark, only light there coming from the lamp by the chair and my little nightlight plugged in the corner to keep me safe. Under the lamp, living together in its little world of light, that’s where we’d sit in the chair and read. Mama always let me pick out which story—didn’t even get mad when I always picked the same one. She was patient like that. She’d read those pages over and over, day after day, to the point where we both knew that story by heart. So even before I could read, I knew when to turn each page, all just by the sound of Mama’s voice.

First time I had a babysitter and I made him read that story like Mama did every night, he told Mama I was something like a child prodigy.

***
That story we always read, it was about a princess who once upon a time lived in a beautiful castle in a kingdom far, far away. All the princes from all the far-flung lands dreamed of the day they could win the princess over and make her their wife. But that little princess didn’t dream of being won, didn’t wish all the while to be someone’s wife. She dreamed instead of riding all over the world on horseback, traveling across those far-stretched countries just her and her horse. Lying in bed at night, she could feel the wind whipping through her hair, hear the steady clip-clop of the horse’s hooves on the hard ground, smell the rich spices of those foreign, far-off places. She imagined it all in her dreams. She imagined being free.

Then one day a prince from a nearby kingdom came to visit this little princess. He wanted to win her heart, so he brought her a gift, the very best gift he could find. Up to the top of the castle towers he climbed to reach the room of his beloved princess. When he got there, and when she saw him, this prince told her to look out her tall bedroom window. Down in the courtyard below, walking back and forth between the flowers and fountains and statues in her favorite garden, was the horse of her dreams. How could he have known? wondered the little princess to herself, for she had never told anyone of her long-treasured hope. She turned from her window to face the prince, tears of joy brimming from her eyes, and she gave him a kiss of thankfulness, a kiss he hoped would make her his.

Later that night, when the prince had left but not without a promise to return soon, when the king and queen and all the servants of the castle were fast asleep, this little princess abandoned her high tower room to scale down to her favorite garden below. When she reached the yard she found her horse, standing among the apple trees. She climbed atop its high, strong back, brushed her fingers through its soft and shiny mane, and whispering into its ear, the princess gave her horse just the slightest kick. Off they rode into the night, leaving the castle walls behind to race into the rising sun on the horizon.

***

Papa Joe called Mama his princess sometimes. When every-
thing was real happy, when his eyes sparkled real bright and he laughed so loud you couldn’t hear anything else. Those times he’d give her presents, too. Usually just something small, flowers from the country store or maybe some sweets.

Day before he left though, he gave her something else. He walked in the front door carrying a big box with a red satin bow tied all pretty and neat on top. He held that box real proud, not tucking it under his arm or anything but holding it straight out with both hands, a big smile on his face, walking all the way up the stairs and into the kitchen looking like that, ready to give it to her, make her smile big as his. Mama was at the stove, stirring something in a big pot for dinner. I sat at the table drawing out castles and horses with my paper and crayons. Still smiling, Papa Joe gave her that big box. Mama put down her wood spoon, set the box on the table next to me and started to open it up. Her soft, delicate hands worked real quick, untying that red bow like she’d done it a million times before. She reached down inside and pulled out from a whole stack of tissue a dress so pretty any princess would’ve worn it. So white you wondered if you could almost see through it a bit, like it was made with all that tissue paper it’d been hiding with.

Mama turned and gave Papa a great big hug, arms stretched all around. Then she gave him a kiss, right on the lips. I never knew what to think when she did that.

Pretty soon Papa Joe walked over to the fridge, opened it up and pulled out one of those tall, brown glass bottles. The corners of Mama’s smile fell down just a bit. She put that dress back in the box real careful, making sure not to wrinkle it all up. Then she went back to check on the stove.

After dinner we all sat in the TV room, Papa Joe stretched out on his chair, bottle in hand, and Mama and me together on the couch. I think they were watching the news programs. I wanted to get my drawings, to see those castles and horses again, but it was so warm and soft sitting next to Mama on that couch, I just didn’t want to leave. The TV remote was lying there on the table in front of us, next to a whole line of those empty brown bottles. I reached forward a little bit, trying to stay as close to Mama as I could to grab that remote. I hit the channel up. Thought maybe there was one of those old movies on.

Soon as that screen changed Papa Joe’s face did, too. Eyes
all glazed over, his mouth turned to that one I’d sometimes seen before, that one that made even Mama go all tense. I watched as Papa Joe’s hand clamped tighter and tighter around his bottle; I snuggled up even closer to Mama when it broke right there in his very own hand. He got up out of that chair of his, stumbling just a little on his feet, and came right towards us, that arm with that broken bottle swinging the whole time. There he stood, towering above us, with Mama turning her whole self in front of me and holding me with her arms like she was some strong castle wall to keep him out. I didn’t even have to shut my eyes—I couldn’t see hardly anything with Mama so close. But when she turned her head back towards him to yell stop I could see that look about him, could watch as he smacked the broken-sharp edge of that bottle right across her face. Mama turned back to me and everything went dark again, but I felt her warm-wet blood when she pressed her cheek against mine. And I felt it when his boot kicked all Mama’s weight into mine, heard it snap that little part in my side as those arms of hers wrapped around me too tight.

***

Sometimes at night in bed, right after Mama had left and right before my dreams came, I’d lie there in the quiet and think about all the places I’d go if only I could just ride away. Take off into the still, dark night. Alone. My wispy hairs flying every which way, untamed and free. I saw it so clear, I could almost feel the wind come through the window and start to carry me away. That warm rushing air lifting me up in its wide, wide wings, like flying, through the night and into the day, dark to light, taking me up to be with those big, white, puffy, cottonball clouds. My very own castle in the sky.

***

Night right after Papa Joe left, night when it still hurt too much to sleep on my side like usual, I lay there in bed feeling that wind and seeing those clouds clearer than ever. It was the first night me and Mama were alone.

I thought it was all over.
When the rock came through the window, though, that’s when I knew it was gonna be bad again. A crash so loud its sharp, shattering cry rang all through the house. Of course Mama heard it. Right after she ran real quick into my room, saw me lying there eyes wide open. She told me to *stay there honey everything’s gonna be just fine*. Then she left my room. I heard her dialing on the phone in the kitchen.

Pretty soon I heard a car pull up in the driveway, heavy tires crunching the gravel all the way. Flashing lights came pouring in through the blinds of my window. No time at all Mama opened the creaky front door, and I heard her talking real fast and kinda shaky, every once in a while a man’s voice trying to calm her down. I wanted to be by Mama, wanted to calm her down too, so I crawled out of bed and put my slippers on to keep from sliding down the slick wood hallway.

Mama didn’t see me at first when I got into that room. Her back was turned to the man all in blue. They were still talking, but Mama’s voice was a little steadier now, more like usual. Man said something about arresting, kept repeating *we got men out there look-ing, miss, don’t you worry*. Said something about a restraining order. I didn’t know quite what that was.

While they were still standing and talking like that I looked at the window. The glass was all broken, like a web of cracked lines with a big hole in the middle. Laying all over on the carpet right below were pieces of that broken glass, scattered every which way. Some of them flashed real bright, like diamonds, reflecting the light of the moon coming in. The rock sat there, dead and gray, right with them. I bent down on my knees to pick up some of those broken jewels, but Mama came up behind me, lifted me up in those arms of hers before I could reach. She held me real gentle—I could feel how careful she was, trying not to hold me too tight, trying not to make it hurt. Together we rocked back and forth, her whispering in my ear *careful sweetie, I don’t want you getting a cut*. I closed my eyes, lived in those gentle arms of hers. Feeling the warmth of Mama’s voice against my ear, I believed her when she said we were gonna be alright.
Vast Tracts on the Topic of Love

I

Patty has no choice. I bought an ergonomic chair today, and if I use it properly, my spine will grow two inches in two weeks. Then Patty will sleep with me. She said so. She said to me, “Scotty, I would go to IHOP with you, if you were two inches taller.” That means that in two weeks we will drive to IHOP, order the Rutti Tutti Fresh ’n Fruity, fill our mouths with whipped cream and processed blueberry compote, and then, in front of our waitress, a pear-shaped woman named Lurlene, we will tongue-kiss.

I have read that the tongue-kiss is the first step toward intercourse.

II

Patty has marshmallow breasts. That means that I’d like to stick them in the microwave until they get real big and then eat them with my eyes closed. The salesman at the Ergonomic Chair Emporium said that I should not share this with Patty, but it’s too late. I believe in honesty.

“You told her that her breasts remind you of marshmallows?” he asked. “Like the food?”

I said yes. Honesty is the second step toward intercourse.

Then I told him our story.

I was new at the office. She was standing beside the coffee machine, stirring Splenda into her mug. I said, “My name is Scotty.”

She looked at me and kept stirring her Splenda.

I said, “I like your hair. It’s long.”

She stopped stirring and said that she shouldn’t talk to me. She owned birds, she explained. Illegal birds that carry a disease that will kill everything on the planet.

“I could infect you,” she said.

“I will tell no one about your illegal birds,” I said. “Will you go to IHOP with me?”
That’s when she said that I needed to grow two inches. I asked her to clarify. She said, “You’re too short. And you’re creepy.” I told the salesman that sometimes Patty can be too honest. He said that I should not worry. He said that Patty and I share a common value system which means our children will be well-adjusted individuals reared for success. Then he smiled, and I thought, I will invite him to the wedding. He is the type of man who will bring something nice, like embroidered oven mitts.

III

I found my chair at the back of the Emporium. “The Liberty 5000,” the salesman said. “Straightens your spine, supports the neck, relieves tension in the lower lumbar area.”

It was a masterpiece of knobs and dials—delicate arms curving out of its smooth body, dark brown leather, plump in all the right places. I wanted to undress and spend the rest of the day rubbing my skin against the dark cushions and imagining Patty’s illegal birds. They must be gorgeous creatures, sitting in their cages, preening themselves like underfed French models, elegant and bored. I could see them absentmindedly chewing or yawning with their green beaks, green as the panties that Patty wore on Tuesdays, the lacy ones that crept over her beltline. The birds did not intend to destroy the world, but they did not care to save it either. They were only birds, but their secret disease made them dangerous and exotic, like Patty. My life is neither of these things. My body is two inches too short and I live alone. I looked at the salesman. “I need to grow two inches.” “Well,” he said. “I don’t think that’s possible, scientifically speaking. I mean, if you really need a boost, I’d say your best bet is a pair of Dr. Scholl’s and some hair gel.” “Patty says I need to grow two inches or she won’t go to IHOP with me and that means she won’t fill her mouth with whipped cream and tongue-kiss me in front of Lurlene and that means you can’t come to our wedding and give us a pair of embroidered oven mitts that say ‘Dream’ on one hand and ‘Lover’ on the other.” The salesman gave me a pat on the shoulder.
“Well,” he said. “Give it two weeks and call me.”

IV

I assembled the Liberty 5000 under my desk. I raised each piece from the cardboard box and thought: this is my day. Persistence is the third and final step toward intercourse. There can be no more than three steps.

I heard Patty walking down the hallway. I ducked behind my file cabinet and clamped my eyes shut—she must not see the chair yet. Secrecy is the fourth step. There can be four steps. Four is fine. I held my breath and imagined the illegal birds until Patty was gone.

When the chair was finally assembled, I wheeled it into her office.

“This is my new chair,” I said. “Look. These cushions will straighten my spine and in two weeks we can go to IHOP.”

“You’re still creepy,” she said.

I had forgotten about that.

“My chair might fix that, too. I can call the salesman.”

“I’ve got deadlines to meet, Scotty.”

“The salesman wants to help me. He said my devotion is admirable and that you are lucky to have me.”

“Go find some work, Scotty.”

“I like your hair.”

“You’re doing it again, Scotty.”

“And your shirt.”

“Please—”

“And marshmallows.”

“Scotty!”

She took a deep breath. It sounded pleasant, like the inside of my fridge, and I took a deep breath, too. I should have picked up some bird seed from the drug store. That would have been the romantic thing to do.

“I have an idea,” Patty said and stood up from her desk. She looked different, smug. “You like my birds, don’t you?”

“I love them.”

“Would you like to know another one of my secrets?”

“Yes.”

“I am sleeping with Brad from Accounting.”
I was silent for thirty seconds.
“That doesn’t mean you love him,” I said.
“There’s more to the secret.”
“He has the bird flu.”
“No, Scotty. I want you to listen closely, and when I am finished speaking, you will leave my office, stop inviting me to IHOP, and find a new marshmallow girl. Do you understand?”
I was confused. Secrets meant that Patty trusted me, and secrecy is the fourth step toward intercourse, but if this secret meant that I could never invite her to IHOP, then I would be two inches taller and own a four-hundred dollar ergonomic chair for no reason at all, and I didn’t like the sound of that.
“Scotty?”
“Okay. I’m ready.”
She cleared her throat and straightened her skirt.
“Scotty,” she said. “I am a man.”
I was silent for another thirty seconds.
“But I’ve seen tampon wrappers in your trash can,” I said.
“It’s a part of the ruse. I am in the middle of a complicated procedure, and I need to maintain a spotless image around the office.”
“But you’re sleeping with Brad.”
“He used to be a woman.”
“But I’ve seen him using the urinal.”
“Do you think I’m lying to you, Scotty? Is that what this is? I thought you trusted me. I thought you wanted to buy me pancakes with blueberry compote, and everybody knows that means you want to take me back to your apartment, undress me, and have your way with me. If you won’t take no for an answer, we can think of it this way: the surgery will be complete in two weeks. You will be two inches taller in two weeks. In two weeks, we can reevaluate our whole relationship—the whipped cream, the tongue-kiss, the marshmallow thing. You want that, right? Or am I mistaken?”
Thirty seconds is a long time to be silent. I looked at Patty’s skirt. Then her desk. Then her trash can. There was an empty tube of lipstick sitting at the bottom. It looked very feminine. But something was different. It looked more than just feminine. For the first time, it looked infected. I stared at that tube of lipstick, and I realized, standing in Patty’s office beside my new chair, that the bird flu
is a dangerous thing. It makes people vomit until they run out of internal fluids, and then they vomit until their insides come out of their mouths, and the doctors say, “Quarantine the building!” but it’s too late because one of the ambulance drivers found the birds and thought they were so beautiful that he snuck them home in his knapsack, and so everybody dies anyway.

At this point, I think Patty said my name, but I couldn’t respond because there was a little bit of vomit in my mouth. It did not taste like whipped cream and processed blueberry compote. It did not taste like intercourse.

V

After work, I returned the Liberty 5000 and told the salesman that Patty and I no longer shared a common value system. Our children would end up dyslexic and near-sighted.

“Never love a woman that wants to change you,” he told me. “She’ll only cause you heartache.”

He asked me if I wanted to buy a different chair, and I said no.

“I don’t think I will need any more chairs, salesman. I like my insides on the inside.”

He gave me a firm handshake and said I should call him “Nicholas.”

“You know, Scotty. You could always drive to IHOP by yourself.”

I thanked him and told him that he has was a wise man. He ought to save his embroidered oven mitts for someone more deserving.

When I let go of his hand, the chair was gone, Patty was gone, and the bird disease that will someday kill everything on the planet was gone, too. I waved goodbye to the salesman and stepped outside. I was hungry and done with love for the day.
Man is in the World, and Only in the World Does He Know Himself

He pressed the moth into the invisible grain of the bathroom mirror with his thumb until its distinct Mothiness became a mere vague texture, eyes fixed on that extended digit, though not really looking at anything at all.
Garth Trombley

Ninety-Nine Islands

A day off in Sasebo, Japan.
I’m down the gangway and gone.

I reappear on a sightseeing boat
  cruising the nearby Ninety-Nine Islands.
  Japanese tourists along the rail,
    cameras clicking and zooming,
  me sitting on a bench, eyes shut,
    absorbing the fallow winter sun,
  savoring a brief respite from the
  arduous dirty sweaty greasy toil in the engine room,
  the drunken brawling, bitching and whining,
    gratuitous violence and hidden racist agenda
  that makes up life on the dilapidated tanker
    which has been my home
      for the last six months.

I open my eyes and see a black-haired kid,
  three years old at the most, with dark shiny eyes,
    soft pink face, and outstretched hand,
  unsteadily holding out a crumbling rice cracker
    in my direction, gently encouraged
      by a silent smiling father behind him.

  The kid smiles and I have to smile too.
  I watch him working to overcome
    the last barriers of shyness and timidity,
  seeing his tiny struggle as emblematic
  of some greater, more meaningful struggle,
    in which all of us are teetering on the invisible edge
      of some last confining indecision.
Next day, back on board the rusty tanker,
plying the waters of the East China Sea,
amidst the deafening boiler-turbine cacophony,
belly full of chicken-fried steak and pie à la mode,
pumping bilges, reading gauges, mopping oil and sweat,
a sudden flashback puts the salty delicate taste
of the little kid’s sweaty rice cracker
right back in the middle of my tongue.
Contributors’ Notes

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b.j. best holds an M.F.A. from Washington University in St. Louis. His work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in Cream City Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, North American Review and Nimrod. His chapbooks Mead Lake, This and Crap are available from Centennial Press.

megan diddie was born and raised in the suburbs of Southern California. She is a Studio Art major and an Art History minor. She looks forward to graduating this winter quarter and moving out of California to enjoy city life in Chicago where she will continue her endeavors in the visual arts. She will eventually apply to a graduate program after an adequate amount of time out of school has passed.

chad eschman is a senior at Santa Clara University studying Theatre Arts and Creative Writing. He also works for the university as a graphic designer. His work can be found at www.eschman.org.

lizette faraji is depending on the poets.

neil ferron lives in Seattle, where he recently wrote and produced his first full-length play, “Sweet, the Breath of Children.” He would like to thank his brother Scott for allowing the use of his name in this issue’s story. He would also like to thank the International House of Pancakes for fostering a stable breakfast climate in an otherwise hectic world.

gabriela flowers graduated from Santa Clara University in 2007 with a B.S. in Political Science and a B.A. in English. She now studies law at U.C. Davis but continues to write poetry and fiction in her free time. She would like to dedicate “Hands” to her grandmother, Joe Ann Flowers.
Jennifer Gochoco is a junior at Santa Clara University majoring in Art History. She discovered her love of photography during her freshman year at Santa Clara and hopes to continue making super cool photos.

Pierre Hauser has published stories in The Iowa Review, BOMB, Storyglossia, Carve, Northeast Corridor, and other journals. He is co-president of a foundation in New York and has degrees from Yale, Columbia, and the New School.

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jason schossler’s stories and poems have appeared recently in *The Sun, Rattle, Poet Lore, Willow Springs* and *Pearl*. He has received fellowships from the Ragdale Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Oberpfälzer Künstlerhaus in Germany and was a
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