



R2 THE RICE REVIEW

R2: The Rice Review is a free student literary journal at Rice University.

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This journal is made possible by an endowment given by Bradley V. Husick '86
and Gail Clayton Husick '86.

Printed by Document Imaging Technology. Printed in the USA.

A Brief Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are proud to present to you the eighth volume of *R2 The Rice Review*. This year, *R2* received a record number of submissions in all three genres. Your submissions represented not just the largest, but also the most diverse and robust collection of pieces we've ever seen.

To us at *R2*, this collection serves as a testament to the vibrant, creative, but all-too-underdog story of Rice University's literary community. We are reminded here of a comment made by poet B.H. Fairchild during a reading he gave to a small audience of Rice students this fall. Fairchild's poems traverse the small oil towns of Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas, where he spent most of his youth. Half-sitting, half-standing on the edge of the table at the front of the room, he joked about his reputation as a regional poet or, as he put it, "what critics call anyone writing outside of Manhattan."

Well, Houston isn't exactly a dusty town in the middle of nowhere and it's likely some of Rice's students are from Manhattan, but Rice is, in a sense, a very small, very incredible, rather squirrel-ridden region known mostly for its research capabilities. However, in these pages, you will find a collection of poems, stories, and essays that reflects Rice's diversity and distinguished talents. The faculty, the students, and the editors of this magazine recognize and support the literary ambitions of our student body and wish to extend a very heartfelt *thank you* to those who submitted.

We also thank the English department faculty, particularly Marsha Recknagel, Susan Wood, and Kathleen Cambor, for their continued support. In addition, the magazine would never be possible without the guidance and direction of Marcia Carter, the tireless department coordinator. This year, it was our great pleasure to have worked alongside Ian Schimmel, the Parks Fellow in Creative Writing, whose knowledge, patience, and wit were invaluable to the staff.

R2 is more than a showcase of Rice's literary talent. It's a chance for Rice students to better understand each other. The voices within these pages share with us their experiences, perspectives, and imaginings; let us enjoy them together.

Happy reading,

John Vogelgesang, Editor-in-Chief
Mary Katherine Allen, Managing Editor

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Riot Grrrl

Amanda Mills

On Tuesday nights
an anxiety grows in me
because your fondness of Kate Bush
and the lisp you developed
after you pierced your tongue
are so charmingly alternative.

For some reason
my interest in feminism
does less for my indie cred
when detailed on Facebook
and the fear you'll discover
I once loved The Spice Girls
keeps me up nights.

So when I awkwardly mention
that I like your leather jacket,
you don't realize
I'm telling you I'd like to see
that tongue ring up close.
Or maybe just listen to *No Wave*
one day after class.

Tomato Soup

Charu Sharma

Dice me on your cutting board:
I have something of a love
for the perfect square: so undeniably
even, so inevitably proportional--

There are plenty who will be round—
the tomato fresh off the vine—glowing
and vital with brightred life
something like Mexico
will come to mind, exotic.

I am not one of them—
I would like to be simmered
in boiling water, let the excitement
shrivel me. I do not need
to be the fruit of the earth,
I am growing older, my skin
loosens, and I am

becoming something straightforward,
my parts side by side beside
the knife, something straight-edged,
easy to digest.

And now I am dinner in a bowl
slurped through your slightly
parted lips, living to be consumed
by something bigger than myself.

Double Vision

Marissa Hall

My father filmed the entire birth. It starts in the car, as he drives with his left hand, holding the bulky black camera in the right one at a ninety degree angle aimed at my mother's giddy face. Her smile bounces up and down, blurring into her eyes, as my father jolts over speed bumps, and then suddenly she groans and closes her eyes. My father says, "Honey, are you okay?" she sighs, "Keep your eyes on the road," he says, "Is it a contraction? Should I—", she says, "Rich, you were supposed to yield!" he says, "Christ, what the—", my mother's wide-eyed face lurches forward, and the video goes to grey and black static for a couple of seconds. A white-lit hospital room appears next, my mother's knees making a mini mountain under her ivory blanket. At this point I always wonder why they use white sheets, a white blanket, white pillows. Does it make the process any more rewarding for a pregnant woman to see her sweat stains on her pillow and the blood and goopy, stringy bits of her insides all over the previously spotless, odorless sheets? I don't mention this because I'm straight and shouldn't be thinking about the aesthetics of a delivery bed, and Dad would give me one of his one eyebrow-raised looks that he usually reserves for Cole.

At this point Dad always presses fast forward, and my mother's face jerks in strange super-speed seizures and convulsions that I can't get out of my mind anymore when I think about a woman giving birth. When he stops the video a minute later, just over two hours have passed in the hospital. Even without fast forward still going, a young nurse speed walks in and out of the frame, and a machine somewhere behind my father beeps in an urgent rhythm in seeming synchrony with my mother's heaving chest. This is always my cue to leave the room. The circles of sweat that pop from my mother's frowned forehead and run down both sides of her nose remind me of sex and death, an intimate moment not meant to

be caught on film.

“Cam, you’re about to miss the best part!” my father yells at me as I pick up my iced tea and turn my back on the primal moans of agony I am causing my mother from the television and head towards the basement.

If I go downstairs, refill my glass from the pitcher of tea in the fridge, bend the tray of ice cubes till they crack and pop out of their tiny incubation beds, slide two into my cup, and slowly climb the stairs, my father will be saying to the TV, “And there he is! A strong boy from the start. Cam, Cam, take a look. You came out ready to take on the world. Wait, wait, you’re about to kick the nurse!” Now I can look. My parents hold their sides in laughter on the sofa, and I try to understand how my father gets “strong boy” from seven pounds thirteen ounces, but I suppose I am in comparison to Cole.

I don’t know why this June 17, 1988 video is so popular because now my father clears his throat and adjusts his khakis as he walks briskly to the VCR and turns the video off. Then follows some variation of, “I do believe the Titans are playing right about now,” or “I sure know I didn’t pay twenty five dollars to have cold pizza tonight,” or “Well, we all know what happens next, don’t we? Cole sure is here to prove it.” My mother will attempt to imitate a light-hearted sigh of contentment, and Cole will avoid everyone’s eyes as he looks blankly into the backyard. Once on Thanksgiving, when my father was nearing on drunk from my mother’s smooth cider, he let the video keep playing, and we watched as the brief victorious calm that followed my birth rapidly reverse as the scene morphed around the words, “unplanned C-section.”

If he looked into my father’s eyes Cole would likely see the blame for the faint seven-inch pink scar my mother still wears on her thin stomach and the postpartum uterine infection and fevers that spiraled into a dangerous depression, causing her doctor to advise her (and my baby-craving young Catholic father) to have no more children. All this for Cole, my twin, what my father sees as a sloppily inferior replica of myself, a five pound fourteen ounce boy whose birth none of us choose to view a second time.

I work in a business that supports luxury but itself is not a luxury. That’s what the cheap Continental gin and tonic at eight in the morning is for on the five-hour plane ride from New York to Los Angeles. There’s a man sitting in front of me with a shaved head and

a tattoo of a skull with two axes crossed behind it and barbed wire in a line between his left and right hemispheres. He has more hair on his chin, a reddish dirt looking color, than I have had on my entire face for the last five years. I wish I was sitting next to him. Or at least not next to the woman who has me pinned between her obese thigh and the window. I try hard, very hard, to have more sympathy, but when she pulls out her Egg McMuffin, I have to look out the window at the black tarmac, peach in the light of the six a.m. sunrise. I hear her deep, constricted breathing as she chews, and I can smell the fat and oil of the fries in her crinkly white bag before she brings one to her lips. *Fries*. Not even hash browns at this hour of the morning; no, she is eating a large fries.

“And that’s when I said, well hell, if I can’t put mah purse on mah legs so all mah valuables don’t go flyin’ all over the floor of this plane, well you might as well tell me I have no right to use the lavatory this whole plane rihde.” The Southern twang that pierces my consciousness as I try to take in the sunset is coming from the salty-breathed woman pushing her elbow on the armrest into my bicep. With a slight, indifferent turn of my head I contemplate removing my Ray Bands but decide they are translucent enough not to be uppity.

“I’m sorry?” I can’t really say how long she’s been talking to me.

“Oh, it’s nothin’ really. Just gets me every time,” she says with pursed lips for emphasis. Emitting a dramatic sigh, she opens her gargantuan Louis Vuitton purse—a fake, I suspect, judging by her rhinestone studded OLD NAVY t-shirt and the dull too-large diamond ring her index finger bulges around—and pulls out an issue of *Self*. I skim the headlines: “10 Super Foods for Super Skin,” “Summer Dresses for Every Figure,” “What *Not* to Tell Him on the First Date,” etc, etc, headlines recycled every ten issues or so. My laugh turns into a snort when I see the lower right corner, “Eat Whatever You Want *And* Lose Weight!” I sniff, clear my throat, and pretend to stuff my hand in my pocket in search of a tissue.

I want to tell her that no one with her unfortunate genetic makeup can eat whatever she wants and lose weight. Maybe if she tried my morning diet—a bowlful of nuts, two egg whites, and a home-made blended green juice (kale, avocado, cucumber, green pepper, and an apple)—she might be able to shed a few. But then her motivation to give up red meat, soda, refined carbohydrates, sugar, and anything slathered in oil and fried on a

dirty fast food grill is certainly less than mine. For her, it would be costly to invest in a new Old Navy wardrobe for her slimmer figure and shop in the Whole Foods produce section instead of Piggly Wiggly. For me, I have three hundred dollars an hour on the line to arrive in L.A. ready to sport Adam Kimmel trench coats under the watchful critique of hundreds of men and women, who tightly cross their skinny legs and follow me up and down the runway, judging the clothing (its lines and shape, the ingenuity, the overarching color theme), breaking it down and evaluating everything I wear; evaluating, in the process, me.

Football players exude masculinity; male models are homoerotic symbols. But then, that's how I got away with doing both. Cole didn't start out quite so lucky.

"My gosh, Cole, wouldya quit wearing those tiny track shorts around the house? I'm seeing way more than necessary right now," my father said.

We were both juniors in high school, sitting at the kitchen table after another Thursday night after a football game for me and a track meet for Cole, the runt my parents subtly convinced from a young age that he was too weak to be the aggressive type. Cole cleared his throat and looked at my mother for support, but she picked at her cheesy grits and avoided everybody's eyes. He knew we were all lucky she was even at the dinner table that night; she had spent the entire weekend in bed with the door closed and the shades drawn, claiming it was her "time of the month" even though we all knew it was her depression, not menstrual cramps, that was particularly bad that weekend.

My father never cared about tiny track shorts before our second year in high school, when I found Cole's stash of *GQ*, *Bazaar*, and *Vogue* in the bottom of his laundry hamper while looking for some extra pot. I was planning on giving him hell for being a little fashionista when ten or so photos fell out of the back of *GQ*, ten photos of shirtless, shining men. My mouth dropped open as if a five-pound weight was attached to my lower lip. I wasn't going to say anything until a couple days later he started bragging to my father while we were watching TV that a skinny, flat-chested girl (my interpretation of her, not his) on the track team had asked him to the Turnabout dance. My father made a little comment as he sipped his Mint Julep about how surprised he was that his relay track and field runner son got a date before his star receiver. "Like he wouldn't rather have a guy on the football team invite him to Turnabout and really shake things up," I muttered. My father shouted cursing

questions at our backs as we raced to Cole's laundry hamper.

When I got there he yanked my hand and whispered with wide eyes, "Don't do this to me." I paused before the hamper and stood, rooted, unable to see anything but Cole's eyes, the same green encased by the thin gold ring as mine. They held me like a hypnotist in their pleading stare until my father pushed open the door and his eyes shot from us to the laundry hamper. He lunged. In tears, Cole said into his chest as my father waved the thin pages in his face that he thought he might be bisexual, which was the gayest response he could've come up with. Afterwards, we all noticed how my father began to clear his throat and get up from the kitchen table with his crossword when Cole came down to breakfast in just his mid-thigh boxers, as if his half-naked body was going to cause all the gay men of Bloomingdale, Tennessee to passionately sprint to our front door in their speedos.

"So, Cam," my father addressed me at the dinner table, turning his head away from Cole's track shorts. We waited for him to take a bite of his chicken and chew it. "The team gonna do anything for you for your birthday tomorrow?"

I glanced quickly at Cole, but he was staring down at his plate while attempting to cut his meat into perfect peach-colored squares. The team will probably bring a cake to practice with colorful frosting that I think tastes like crayons, I thought, or they will cover the three trees and all the bushes outside our house with seven rolls of toilet paper like they did last year when Coach announced on my birthday I'd be moving up to Varsity after the three touchdowns I scored in the JV game that day.

"Not that I know of," I said, looking out into the backyard.

My father followed my eyes and cleared his throat. "I think it's best if you boys don't do your birthday tent camp out in the backyard this year. By the time you're 17 years old I think it's a little strange for two boys to sleep together on a 7 foot wide tarp."

"What--do you think I'm going to make a move on my own brother?" Cole laughed and shook his head, but he kept his eyes on his plate, adding another square of chicken to the mosaic he was producing on the dish.

"*Ex-cuse* me?" my father stared at Cole and then outstretched his fork to Cole's plate and scattered the pieces of chicken. Most of it fell onto the floor.

"Rick, come on--" my mother said as she pushed out her chair to deal with the mess.

I thought back to when we were both ten and Cole brought a book of ghost stories

out to the tent. We set up the flashlight on the tip of its thick handle and lay in our sleeping bags on our stomachs, legs bent upwards towards the ceiling, reading about dead dogs in showers and demon babies. I remember jumping when Cole shook me awake in the middle of the night. “Cam,” he whispered. “I got scared. I think it was my nightmare. I--” He looked into his lap, and I knew he had wet himself, something he hadn’t done for almost a year to the relief of my father, who refused to purchase Super-Absorbent Pull-ups in the largest size at the grocery even when my mother put them on the list; the cashiers knew he only had two twin sons and no babies or elderly parents to use the diapers. Closing my eyes against the harsh flashlight that Cole shone into them, I wriggled out of my sweatpants and handed them to Cole. With his wet sleeping bag under my arm, we tiptoed on bare feet onto the cool October grass and avoided the motion sensor lights by the garage that shone directly into our parents’ window. Next to the trash cans, Cole stripped off his pants and boxers that clung to his pale thighs, and we bunched his underwear and pants in a tight ball inside the smooth sleeping bag and put it below the trash bag already in the metal trashcan. I woke up in the morning with Cole’s head buried into my arm and the sound of the tent being unzipped. “Smells in here,” my father’s gruff, deep morning voice said. He stared at us, me in my boxers and Cole in my sweatpants, both outstretched on my unzipped sleeping bag together.

“Mildew I think,” I said. “Should probably get a new tent. This one’s been through too much rain.”

“Mm hmm. Mildew,” he said, turning away and leaving the tent unzipped, the sun shining into the tent and Cole’s tired eyes like a cop’s flashlight.

This woman’s French fries shouldn’t set me off like this, I think to myself as I look out the smudged plane window at my reflection. Paul and Ross wouldn’t react this way. Constantly wired on cigarettes and cocaine, they are the stooped type, skinny with sleep-deprived bloodshot eyes, who live off of cheap MSG-filled Asian take-out, the macarons and tea sandwiches we get at fittings, and Fiji water. Paul gels his thick hair and bleaches it and his eyebrows a color closer to white than blonde, and Ross has dramatic light blue veins any shot-administering nurse would love to behold on his near-translucent thin arms. This summer, we ensured our shared apartment gave off an ambience of casual success without being cocky, so Paul and I cut out the spread Ross had in VMAN, Ross and I printed

Paul's photo from Lucire's website in dark Lanvin jackets, and they laminated my Dolce and Gabbana four-page underwear spread. Our collage resides in the bathroom above the sink—whose insides are always painted with a Jackson Pollack splattering of toothpaste, hair gel, and face wash—because Ross broke the mirror during a party, which we figure isn't a problem if we can simply look up at our collage and see our dramatically-lit reflections in designer clothes. We can pretend we really do look like that, the edges of our cheekbones intensely angular, eyes broodingly demonic, and every muscle in our abdomens highlighted and jumping out in pop-out book clarity.

Last time I traveled to California I was not alone. My girlfriend sat beside me, smiling quietly and looking into the eyes she did not yet think were demonic, only brooding. "What's cookin', good lookin'?" Gabriella said, resting her head on my shoulder. "You're so quiet."

"Just a lot to think about," I sighed and attempted a smile.

"Look, it's just an opportunity," she said, running her finger down my jawline. "If it doesn't work out, we head back home, and you can say you've been to L.A."

Gabriella had a thing with tracing my jaw. She liked to slide her index finger along its rough edge as we fell asleep together in my bed the summer after we graduated college, murmuring I could be a model with such a strong jaw. That July she introduced me to her friend at the gym, quite the pretty boy with perfect skin, who said he'd talk to his agent at Ford. I didn't let go of the pulleys on the cable machine for the entire conversation, while Gabriella told him about how I used to play receiver for TSU and pretty boy took out his phone to take a picture of me. "Wait, wait, he needs to take off his shirt to get the full effect," Gabriella said. She giggled and covered her mouth as I peeled my dark grey tank top from my skin. Standing in the kitchen a week later with Gabriella, a spoonful of peanut butter in my mouth, I had to put all my concentration in making the muscles of my peanut butter coated tongue respond when I answered the phone. A serious-sounding man's voice said they wanted to see some more shots, that I should send some good quality photos to their office because they might be interested in booking me for a GAP show in two weeks.

"I'm a football player, not a model," I'd told her when I hung up.

"Not any more you're not," she said gently, stroking my arm, and I knew that she was right, that football had evaporated into the success of the past the moment I threw up

my blue tasseled cap that spring. I had Post Graduation Depression, a result of that awkward limbo of questioning how a Business degree had anything to do with being a bartender, the past eight years of high school and college football receiver no longer the only security I needed for self-respect and validation.

That's how I ended up two weeks later in L.A., signed with Ford, walking down a glossy black runway in striped shirts, simple trench coats, maroon shorts, and then blue and purple pants. That's how I met Leila, who said at the after party that she noticed me at the show and had to know who the "new face" with the intense jawline was. She said Ray told her I was from Tennessee; she was from Corryton. I had never heard of Ray or Corryton, but as Leila talked to me she bit on the left side of her mouth, and as she flipped her black hair she was just another easy cheerleader, and I knew I could still get away with anything I wanted.

Gabriella flew back home alone the next morning.

As the plane into L.A. jolts onto the runway and the woman sitting next to me snorts herself awake, a chorus of bleep-bleep-bleep fills the cabin as BlackBerrys are also roused from their sleep. I listen to the voicemail my father has left me, something about doing whatever it takes, and his favorite phrase, "Some want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen"; football pep talks transferred to modeling.

I didn't tell my father about my career until it became one. He still doesn't understand half of it—that I more often get paid for shoots and shows in designer clothes and free lunch, or that I've flown to L.A. from New York for an Alexander McQueen fitting only to be told my legs were too short for their swimwear show. But he does understand that I've gotten paid three-hundred dollars an hour to "be a clothing hanger," as he puts it, and he says, "I'd be half-crazy to find any problem with that gig." I may be the one modeling in Calvin Klein boxer briefs across the pages of Harper's Bazaar, but Cole is the one spending his tip money to fly to Connecticut to visit his boyfriend of two years. Cole is waiting an entire month before he moves to L.A. to be a physical trainer at UCLA, and he took my job as a night-time bartender to pay for these Connecticut jaunts that he tries to inform my parents of as infrequently as possible; he is exempt from the non-judgmental *As Long As You're Happy, Son* clause that has always applied to me.

The clock is never on my side. The second hand on my Gucci watch moves too

fast for the rate we are drowsily taxiing on the sun-scorched runway. During these times of pointless waiting, my to-do list ticks through my mind on hyper-speed repeat, in spite of the Gin and Tonic that was supposed to calm my nerves. After I leave the plane behind, I quickly speed past the woman teetering from one swollen ankle to the other with her Louis Vuitton in one hand and McDonald's leftovers in the other.

Upon scooting out of the taxi and stepping through the polished glass doors of Adam Kimmel, the dreamy, dirty sprawl of Los Angeles and the average American vanish from sight. Ahead lives a world of makeup artist geniuses, slightly starving beautiful people, and the colorful chaotic reality of a runway show the rest of the city can only enter through the lens of a backstage camera.

"Kurt George wants to see you, Cam," a long-haired Asian I've met at a Ford party tells me, nodding towards a door to my right. Kurt George, the imposing bearded young photographer with two first names, is known for saying he will take *very* good care of the 16-year-old models he has a specific tendency to like to see in front of the camera, though he is fully aware these wide-eyed pre-pubescent girls with legs like flamingos' are trying to deceive the industry and are probably more like 13.

One light in the center of the white ceiling illuminates Kurt George standing below it. Besides this, the room is dark. I consider how often Kurt George does this on first impressions; a photographer's most trusted ally is his lighting, a tool to tone, emphasize, and deceive, and I know this setup wasn't accidental. After waiting for me to take in his intimidating presence, he says, "Cameron. Thank you for coming. I know you're in a hurry, so I won't be long. Would you flick the light switch behind you?"

With a snap of the switch the room fills with hot light. "You must be excited for this show, Cam. You really are advancing at such a fast pace." Kurt George hasn't moved from the middle of the room, and I am not sure where I am supposed to go. A shoot probably just happened in this room; it is barren and the trashcan to my side is filled with water bottles and mini sandwiches.

"Yeah," I say, and then, because I have nothing else to say, "It's really great to meet you, Mr. George." I decide to outstretch my hand but then realize that I have to take ten steps to meet Kurt George in the middle of the room. He doesn't meet me halfway, but

he takes my hand and clasps it firmly with the other.

“You’re quite an exciting new face, Cameron.”

He is transfixed, but not in the same way as when my father found me wearing makeup as a four-year-old. I had peered at Cole after dinner through the crack in my parents’ bathroom while they were still washing dishes downstairs. Cole sat on the counter with his skinny bruise-covered legs bent, feet pointed delicately together in the sink. In his hand he held the classic red Revlon lipstick my mother has worn for twenty years almost every day without fail. Holding the lipstick motionless in his right hand, he started at the top of his lips and moved his head in a sloppy circle.

“Cole--” I said through the door. At the sound of his name he jumped, dragging a line of red towards his jawline. “You’re doin’ it wrong. That’s not how Jess does it.” Jess was our babysitter, a beautiful thirteen-year-old next door neighbor whose parents refused to get her tested for ADD and who bobbed up and down with every step as she walked on her toes. As one of three sisters, she had no idea what to do with two boys after our hour of television was up when she came over on Saturday nights. She painted our nails twice with purple and blue water-removable nail polish and clipped our brown curls back with plastic butterfly clips.

When my father walked into the bathroom, already unzipping his jeans, he froze at the sight of his two sons sitting across from each other, shins pressed against each other in the sink. Cole was in the midst of shakily applying the tar-like black mascara to only the very tips of my right eyelashes. I yelled out when his hand faltered at the appearance of my father and the finely sharp prickles of the brush grazed my open eye.

“Cole, what the hell are you doing to your brother!” It is my first memory of my father cursing. Lunging towards the sink with his pants still unzipped, he grabbed Cole under the armpits and nearly threw him out onto the rust-colored carpet outside the door. He proceeded to attack my eye with a tissue, smudging the black color like the car grease he often had on his hands. Throwing the dirtied tissue in the toilet, he wet a white washcloth and pressed it into the bar of soap. He held the top of my head with his left hand and scrubbed my eye with the vigor he used to polish his 1970 black Mustang.

“Next time you call me when Cole tries to do this to you, Cam,” he said, and I felt his breath on my face. He stepped back and looked at his work. “Better,” he said. The soap

left my eyes stinging like they did from the shampoo that trickled into my eyes every time my father used to wash my hair in the tub and simultaneously shave before work with his electric razor. “And stop crying. None of my sons will grow up crying over their mother’s makeup.”

I nod at Kurt George, shaking my thoughts back to the present, back to eyes that don’t accuse me of femininity. “I have worked closely with Adam Kimmel, Oscar de la Renta, Vera Wang, Gianfranco Ferré, Zac Posen,” he coos the names, “but I am beginning to feel...disillusioned. The fragile “lost boy” look doesn’t interest me. You—you exude strength. I want the image of the strong man—the masculine, powerful man who simultaneously evokes fear and lust—to be the forefront of my work. I know you have a lot to think about today. But after the show...if you might hold back a bit, I’d love to take some shots of you. I have a lot of sway, and if I can slip your shot into conversation, you never know what could happen. Your own fragrance line, trips to Italy, Milan...”

He had me at fragrance. I didn’t know why I had to be his muse, but for Kurt George to *offer* to take my photograph, for him to volunteer to slip my name into conversation, for him to think I had a chance at years’ worth of revenue for being the face of a fragrance, all this was the essence of the industry: luck, opportunity, chance, meeting the right people at the right time. I was twenty-three, ancient for a “new face.” This career had a not so promising shelf life, and my expiration date crept closer every day despite a constant lathering of moisturizer pumped full of SPF.

Frenzied faces bob up and down in the rush of changing in and out of long black coats and tight charcoal leggings. This year the accessories look like they belong on a wealthy Spanish pirate. Black smudged eyeliner coats eyes that dart around the room like flies, never quite settling until the runway when they must stare vacantly ahead, dead eyes, struck motionless by the spotlights above and the flashing cameras to each side. Not a single female model is backstage, but Kurt George surely wouldn’t say the air was pulsing with virility; even the most muscled men shrink to the size of boys in the formless clothing, but of course this is the point. The world of backstage throbs with a completely incoherent rhythm, constant uneven crescendos of hurry, panic, and breath. My name is called from in front and behind me, I am fussed over, scolded for fussing over my pants’ seven buttons, praised

for my walk, told not to walk on my heels next time in the constricting high black boots that pinch all ten of my toes. On the runway, we are masterfully crafted objects under scrutiny on an assembly line that churns out a continuous thread of human hangers to the pulse of an unearthly woman's voice that beats through the speakers. Our features are void of emotion; we walk like obedient, unquestioning soldiers into war. Hundreds of pairs of eyes eagerly stare and devour the clothing that is manufactured perfectly to our proportions, but we do not—cannot—look to our sides. There is nothing to see anyway; we are the spectacle.

I realize as soon as I am standing in front of Kurt George again that I haven't removed the half-inch of black eyeliner from the show. I mention this, slightly embarrassed for wearing makeup in front of a man who is passionate about representing masculinity, but he says, "No, keep it. It makes you look like an animal."

I pause. "Is this a photo shoot, then?" He hasn't set up any screens, props, or lights. "Do you want me to take off my sweatshirt?"

Kurt George smiles. "Please."

In my wife-beater and gym shorts now, I ask, "Here?"

"Just do whatever comes to mind," he says, and pulls his camera out of its case.

I put my thumbs through my belt loops and stare into the camera, cocking my head slightly and crossing my left foot over my right. The camera clicks again and again, capturing each subtle dip of my shoulder and the direction of my eyes.

With a loaded sigh, Kurt George approaches me. "You're cute," he says with a sympathetic smile. "I didn't realize how commercial you were until now. You need to break out of your shell, and be as bold with your body as it wants to be. You're holding back. I rented a room in the Hilton, and I can tell that it's going to take some time to loosen you up. What do you say to some champagne and giving this another chance?"

My mind, which was still racing on a top speed post-runway high, gives me whiplash as it suddenly jolts to a stop and frantically reverses, retracing my entire encounter with the lascivious photographer. He probably sees this in my face because he says, "Of course, it's up to you..."

"Right, right," I say, pointless words to fill space while I try to recover. "Well, I said I'd be at the after party, and I haven't seen some of my friends here since the summer. I

have a fitting tomorrow too, so I might just go to bed early...I'll be back in L.A. soon though."

"Mm hmm, I imagine so," he says with an emotion I can't place.

"Right, so maybe when I'm back? I mean, maybe when I'm back we can schedule something...a shoot...you know, during the daytime." I want to slap myself for that last part.

Kurt George chuckles. "Sure."

"Okay," I say. And then, "I know we didn't do much, but I appreciate you taking those pictures. It means a lot to me that you'll try to get my name out there more."

Rocking back on his heels, Kurt George looks at his pointy-toed leather shoes and shakes his head. "Oh, Cam." He sighs. "It has to go both ways, don't you see?" He looks me in the eyes with a look that is reproaching and pleading at the same time. When I don't respond, he looks away and puts his camera back into its case.

A thought, verbalized before I have time to reconsider, is vaulted from my open mouth: "I have a brother."

"Pardon me?" Kurt George says.

"I...my brother is in town...he saw the show and is looking for an apartment for the next month. He was going to stay with me, but..." I trail off. Then, not really sure why, I add: "We're twins."

It's going to take longer than usual to get Cole drunk tonight. He's built up his tolerance since working at the bar, but the only way I can convince him is if he is intoxicated. I meet him at the Slanty Shanty, only because I went here once with Ross, and I can walk there from Adam Kimmel. We look enough alike, I think, as I enter the door sheathed in fake, rigid palm fronds and see him talking up a pretty Latina woman with hair down to her belt. If you looked past the designer clothing he wore—mostly free things I'd picked up at shoots and shows—he could definitely pass as straight, the way he laughs casually and waves the bartender for a refill for both of them. At least I won't have to push all the drink on him tonight.

"Mm hmm," he is saying as I approach. "It's been a little over two years. We met at the end of our senior year of college. He moved back to Connecticut though." Cole turns his mouth into an exaggerated pout.

"That is so *cool*," the woman to his side says emphatically. "Really. Wow. I love

love,” she throws her head back and laughs.

“Excuse me, sir,” I say, tapping Cole on the shoulder.

He turns quickly. “Cam!” To the woman, he says, “This is him, Aurelia. The big shot. He’s my model brother I said I was waiting for.”

I always feel a little uncomfortable twist in my chest when someone mentions my career out in the real world. Pretending to look at the cheap statue of a giant sombrero holding Dos Equis in its rim, I glance over the crowd to see if anyone has overheard.

“Oh helloooo,” Aurelia says, sliding up an octave. “Encantado. Your brother here is going to become a big shot too. A physical trainer for UCLA. Already has the guns,” she says, squeezing his forearm. “And then he’s going to come back to this bar and make me look like Penelope Cruz.”

It’s true. Beginning mid-college, Cam started developing almost the same body type as me, though he’s still shorter. That shouldn’t be very important.

Sinking down on a red-topped stool next to Cole, I lean on my elbow and pull my eyebrows towards the edge of my face with my thumb and middle finger.

“Tired, huh?” Cole asks.

“Tired doesn’t even begin to describe it,” I say. To the stocky bartender, I say, “Four shots of Tequila, please. Two for me and two for him.”

“Damn, Cam. I thought you didn’t like shots.” Cole laughs. “You really need to loosen up, dude,” he says, shaking my tight shoulders. “The show’s done now. You’ve got nothin’ to worry about.”

One hour later, Aurelia has left with a man wearing a lime green polo and a belt with an engraved silver buckle bigger than my BlackBerry. Cole is drunk.

“You should move to Cali with me, bro,” he says. “I should probably tell Dad I’m moving out here soon. He still has no idea. Probably should inform the asshole that my life is turning out quite wonderfully without his support.” I forgot that he is always a sad drunk.

“C’mon, Cole. He’s not that bad. He just has high expectations,” I say, looking at us in the mirror behind the bar and wishing I were at the after party sitting next to some sad drunk girl instead of my drunk brother.

“Will you *stop* defending him, Cam? *God*,” Cole sighs.

“I’m not defending him. He just wants to protect you, that’s all.” It’s a bad lie.

“Ha! That’s a good one. Yup. He just wants to protect me. You hit the nail right on the head there.” He shakes his head and asks for another shot, and I am surprised again that he is ridding me so easily of the guilt of forcing drinks on him so that he will easily comply. “Sick of fucking tequila,” he mutters. The bartender gives him whiskey, and Cole grabs it from his hand as soon as it touches the smooth wood of the bar, tipping his head back further than necessary and exhaling his toxic breath in my face. “Aaaaah.” He lets his mouth relax and shakes his face from side to side. “Sorry. Sorry, Cam.” He sighs. “It’s just—well, Michael doesn’t want to come to L.A. with me in a couple months. Says he doesn’t want to leave his family in Connecticut, which I frankly *cannot* understand, family being so overrated and all—no offense, of course, Cam. I didn’t mean it that way...”

Michael is delusional. In two years Cole will have established himself as a physical trainer for a top university in L.A. He will be respectable, stable. The dewy glass in my hand reminds me that in two years, when I lose my intrigue and my youth, I will be pouring shots at a bar for costumers abusing themselves with alcohol. To my side, I see my phone’s screen light up with a 310 area code and a number I don’t recognize. *My client*, I think, and the words disgust me, but I don’t want to think his name, think about his beseeching grey eyes, his flawlessly manicured beard, his camera with my body permanently embedded into its memory. I imagine him sitting smugly in the back of his taxi, triumphant, dissecting me as he flips through picture after picture. He must be imagining if my brother will have the same broad, smooth shoulders, the same strong jawline with its slight stubble.

“Will you quit it?” I say.

“But it’s just, you know, what Michael and I have...it’s—”

“Nothing special, Cole. For God’s sake! You’re in L.A. Don’t hold yourself back. It’s a lot easier to forget about someone than you might think. I know a guy, a photographer—real famous—who wants to meet you tonight. I know where he’s staying. I can easily make it happen...” I say, trailing off suggestively.

“But it’s *Michael*,” Cole whines, sighing and resting his head between his hands.

Cole, you can make your own decisions now. No one can hold you back from doing whatever you want. I didn’t let Gabriella stop me. Hell, Dad can’t even stop you here.”

Cole inhales sharply and holds his breath. When he lets it go he spits, “Fucking

bitter bullshit.”

Once after I came home from a game, sweaty, grass-stained and triumphant, I heard Cole’s voice when I paused before the bathroom that separated our two bedrooms.

“Why don’t you just call me it? I know you want to, Dad.” Cole’s voice was strained, and I imagined him wide-eyed and challenging, the tendons in the sides of his neck popping out symmetrically. “I’ll help you out. Just three letters. F, A--”

“Cole!” I barged through the bathroom doors and into his room, where I found my father in the doorway and Cole holding his journal in his hand at the base of his bed. “C’mere. You gotta see what Mrs. Henderson said about that paper I spent forever writing. It’s *bullshit*.” Grabbing his hand, I marched purposefully into my room where I locked the door and handed him a King-size Snickers bar and turned my U2 cd on full volume. I didn’t know what to say. He knew Ms. Henderson hadn’t given back our papers yet. I just knew I didn’t want to wait to see how low my father would stoop.

“I know, I know,” I say, drumming my fingers on the bar. “But it was predetermined. He can’t see past himself.”

“He can’t see past *you*, Cam. Why didn’t you ever stand up for me?” he whispers, his voice cracking slightly.

“Cole--I,” I stammer.

During Lent senior year of high school, my father drove us to and from mass every day in his four-door Chevy pickup. Cole and I, sitting in the backseat, were the only ones in the car who looked related. My father cracked all ten of his fat knuckles while we waited for a train to pass, and my mother replaced the bobby pins in her slicked-back bun that pulled her forehead tight and made her most prominent feature appear to be her sunken pale cheeks and the dark concave circles under her empty eyes. The only feature that seemed to unite all four of us as we drove back from the Ash Wednesday service were the four smudged crosses smeared onto our foreheads. I always thought it made us look like cult followers.

“Whacha boys givin’ up this year?” my father said to fill the silence that was the norm on these car rides.

“I thought I’d give up my reserved parking spot in front of the gym for a guy on the team who broke his leg,” I said to the window.

“Wow, Cam, now *that’s* a good idea. That’s exactly what Father Webber was saying

today about searching in your life to find something really meaningful to give up.”

“Father Webber gives me the creeps,” Cole said, finding my father’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

My father grabbed the back of the passenger seat with his right hand and swerved around to face Cole. “Oh yeah? Do you have anything better to give up?”

“I was thinking candy,” Cole said with a smile.

My father laughed. “How original, Cole.” He turned back to face the road. “Might do us all some more good if you decided to get rid of that magazine stash you still have. You should know that moving it under your bed is not the most secretive of places.” He drummed his thick fingers on the steering wheel.

“Dad, what the *fuck*,” Cole said. He sat up straight in his seat and glared into the mirror. “You have no business snooping around in my room. Mom, help me out here?”

“Don’t drag your poor mother into this,” my father said before she had a chance to say anything. “There’s no reason to make her Lent any harder than it has to be.” He moved his hand from the wheel and awkwardly tried to find my mother’s thin thigh, fumbling and patting her seat cushion instead. “We all know she’s given up enough for you,” he muttered.

Cole threw his head back and chuckled. “Of course, Dad. How could I forget.”

“Did you seriously just *laugh* at that, Cole? Who *are* you?” My father slammed on the breaks at the stop sign, and we all jolted forward in our seats. His voice quivered.

“You realize you are afraid of your own son?” Cole asked.

“You’re not--” my father interrupted himself.

“What, Dad? Not your son? Not gay? I’m pretty sure I’m both of those.”

“Get out of the car,” my father said slowly.

“You think you can deny--”

“I said *get the hell out of the car!*” This time he bellowed it. I could see his chest heaving up and down, stretching the seat belt with every breath.

“I think I’d rather talk this one out,” Cole said smoothly.

“Cole, let’s go,” I said uneasily, my hand on the door handle.

“Cam, you aren’t a part of this,” my father said.

I opened the door and muttered after I heard it close and the February rain hit my face, “Maybe you could give up yelling at Cole for a week. Might do your blood pressure

some good.”

I heard Cole’s door slam a few seconds later, and I didn’t look at him when I said, “Sometimes I really hate him.”

“Sometimes?” Cole said.

Cole has his head propped on his hand and is staring at me sitting next to him at the bar, waiting. That is always like him, to never back down. He had glared at my father’s eyes through the mirror; I had spoken to the window. The only son my father had approved of was one that would never challenge him. He always spoke of my physical strength, admired how I could move our television from one room to the next, how I carried my mother from the kitchen to her bed when she fainted after coming back from a short run. But I am the weaker son. I feel as if I am a surgeon dissecting my own memories, but the nurse has mistaken the dose of anesthetic, and I am no longer numb. I feel every slight prodding of the instruments to my brain with a new pang of realization. My head throbs as Cole’s challenging eyes dare me to shout out, but I can’t open my mouth. I’ve never learned how.

The mirror behind the bar needs cleaning and the lighting above my head shows the lines in my forehead in the reflection, and dark circles under my eyes make me look sick. I see Kurt George standing before his window in a long white bathroom at the Hilton, squinting down at the shining romance of the cityscape below. His index finger strokes the lip of a beer in his hand, around and around in tight circles. The little alcohol I’ve swallowed reverses and climbs back up my throat, and I gag with disgust. I hold my stomach.

“You okay?” Cole asks, gently massaging my shoulder, and everything else reverses for me too. I remember with sickening disgust when Paul and Ross threw me roughly in bed when I drank too much at our hugely successful Halloween party, slammed the door, and returned to the party, turning the music up. I’d awakened with a sour throat, a completely arid, sour mouth, and the feeling that the sides of my head were being held by a clamp that was getting progressively tighter.

“Not really,” I say. I finally return his stare and look back at the only person capable of seeing through me, seeing more than the manicured face that thousands of people see every day as they sit at the breakfast table, or wait in airports and trains, or lie in bed and fall asleep with the magazine open to my idealized body stamped across the page. I am seen, and

maybe, on lucky rare occasions, even recognized. I am not known. Do I even know myself?

I used to call Cole after big wins in college when my heart wouldn't stop racing and I felt like I could run around the world in twenty seconds if I tried. I told him about the dancers, the cheerleaders, the Habitat for Humanity volunteers, the a-cappella singers, and the dozens of anonymous feature-defined girls (curly long red hair, coffee-colored skin, massive breasts, etc) I won over with a smirk and a story about my post-game interview. I hadn't noticed how his laughter had turned hollow the more I called.

Cole used to describe himself as "a monogamous man." He wanted a relationship, something real. I can name all three of his boyfriends: Tom, Denver, and Michael. Cole would tell me that the initial attraction was always physical, but it was Tom's dry sarcasm, Denver's flare for detailed doodles and poems on restaurant napkins, and Michael's desire to become fluent in Chinese and Japanese that reeled him in. Tom and Denver both had father issues. I pointed this out when he was dating Denver. Cole laughed. "I wondered if you'd notice. But it's nice though, I guess. They understand me, you know?"

We've been here too long. My brain is stagnant, neurons caught in the constricting swamp, unmoving. It shouldn't have taken me this long to get Cole out of here and get me away from this long bar mirror that won't show me anything more than an attractive image that can be copied, printed, and mass-produced. Would Kurt George be surprised to know that his idea of a fresh, new face is plagued by jealousy and bitterness for being the sloppily inferior replica of his twin brother? Maybe he could sense this weakness when I walked into the room.

"Look, Cole. You're drunk. I'm not feeling good either. I know of a place you'd rather be," I say.

Ignoring Cole's sputtering, I turn him around and walk out of the orange lighting of the bar, my arm around his shoulder. The streetlights don't dazzle. The air is humid and heavy, bog-like. Nobody does a double take as we exit the bar; they don't stare at the exact line of my jaw or admire my tight arm around Cole's shoulder. Cole turns his head to meet my eyes with the same appeal he gave me as we stood before his laundry hamper that

concealed his high school secret.

The taxi driver who pulls to the curb asks where we are going as we climb into the back seat.

“Take us to the nearest McDonald’s,” I say. “We’re starving.”

As we drive away from the bar, I roll down the window, and the speed of the taxi stretches the warm air, thinning it. The light outside illuminates Cole’s smooth jaw and his forgiving face, and my heavy head falls onto his shoulder.

Firework

Ross Arlen Tieken

When the last
boom has echoed
across the clouds,
lightning-bugs dance
inebriated under oak
with whining cicadas,
and all that's left
of Independence
is smoke like a dusty
cobweb hanging
in humid air,
distant black-cats
bought from wooden
stands begin their cadence,
bottle rockets banned
in the drought but
sold all the same
streak through pasture.

As I measure the anatomy
of the moment, the sounds
of a Texas summer evening,
you lay down.
Eyes half shut,
you lay down.

Starving for His Voice

Rachael Petersen

I remember the cold. But I also remember after-school rituals: blow-drying my arms and legs, crying, tallying up calories, but, mostly, I prayed for warmth. I remember not remembering the last time I ate.

The wispy whisper of my former self lingers in family photos and doctors' charts, but that image is no longer me. Years and many pounds ago, I had realized food could never feed me, so I decided not to bother with it.

Daddy, I figured, did not know. So I decided not to bother with him either. While my mother learned to adjust her days around my neurosis, beginning each morning with bravery, black coffee, and a petition imploring me to eat before I went to middle school, my father blissfully prepared pancakes – breakfast being his primary domestic responsibility – and divided them evenly among three plates. Two stacks went to my brothers to be lathered in butter and devoured with maple syrup, while my stack remained – much like me – tall, cold, and ignored. Before leaving for work, he placed my uneaten pancakes into the freezer in a Zip-lock bag to be enjoyed by him later. Born one of seven children from a poor Kansas City family, my father had been conditioned from an early age not to waste anything – an almost religious frugality he continued even after securing financial success.

Yet all the cold, wasted meals mounting at my unyielding mouth did not invoke his concern. The refused food became his for another day, another time. In the mornings, he left for work without discussion, dreaming of an imminent late-night pancake dinner. Did he orchestrate a purposeful, painful not-knowing? I thought and still do that his willful ignorance rivaled that of psychiatrists with untreated schizophrenic sons and pulmonologists with chain-smoking daughters.

My father looms, his stature six feet and eight inches - his legacy more towering. This man completed his undergraduate degrees at a prestigious university in three years and went on to graduate from medical school at the top of his class. By the time I was born, daddy had not one, but two specializations and spent off-hours teaching aspiring minds how to properly fill an extra-long starched, white coat.

When I was very young, he accompanied me to annual “daddy-daughter dances” organized by my elementary school on Valentine’s Day. Sporting a fresh carnation corsage on my red shift, I tried with each step to hug something higher than his knees. Even standing on his toes, I could never reach him. In some ways, I am still reaching. Years later, after growing several feet, I yearned to see him eye-to-eye. When I neared five feet two inches in middle school, the shortening distance between us paradoxically approached infinity; taller than ever, I was still out of sight. His thick glasses – without which he was legally blind – reminded me of how easily he could distort my world. Perhaps he *chose* not to see it as it was. Or perhaps his lenses – with glass as thick as my pinky finger – filtered out his daughter’s despair. I saw my shrinking frame reflected back to me in those glasses, and his negligence returned to me doubly painful.

If my dad got home before one in the morning, he would come upstairs to hug me good-night. Growing up, he would read me my favorite books: “Snuggle Piggy and the Magic Blanket” or “Good Night Moon.” But sometimes, bland narrations of the number of patients he had intubated that day or the dialogues of families who finally abandoned life support replaced more traditional bed-time stories. In awe of these cold recountings, I wondered if he had grown desensitized to constant human suffering – mine included. Perhaps my illness got lost in the mountains of medical charts cluttering his brain.

Ironically, I hoped he would finally notice me if I took up less space.

If one cross-bred Spock and the popular TV-show character “Dr. House,” the result would mirror the contours of my father: something unbearably logical, yet unrelentingly sarcastic. He utilizes the latter characteristic to distance himself from reality, the former to outwit it. A veritable nerd, he infused our household conversations with the seasonings of obscure organic chemistry equations or 80’s song lyrics. On the rare occasion I called upon him for personal advice, he oscillated between quoting the opening of the Lord of The Rings film saga (“And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost. History

became legend. Legend became myth...”) and bursting into an out-of-tune rendition of Monty Python’s “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” The futility of such performances seemed to be lost on him.

Throughout my teen years, I lived with the constant terror my father would resort to pretentious literary references or pithy movie quotes, embarrassing me in front of my friends and teachers. By thirteen years old, I had perfected the art of eye-rolling and wished my father would talk to me in the rational, authoritative voice he reserved for dying patients and needy residents. I hoped that this voice, which I had heard only through walls and through grapevines, would balance the cries of my overweight yet immaculately dressed mother, a unique combination of control and lack thereof. I longed for his famed doctorly directness, but received only my mother’s veiled, accusatory “you’re doing okay, right?” which she asked each time I went to the bathroom “too soon” after a meal. At dinner outings, she would nervously adjust her ever-present matching scarf (worn to mask her “large chest”) and apologize for how much she’d just eaten. She blamed her fatness for my anorexia. So while I longed for my father’s voice, I hid in his silence like a refuge from my mother’s storm of guilt and concern. His absence fed my denial: if he isn’t worried, why should I be? I would insist I did *not* have a problem, even as I lost friends more quickly than pounds. When the scale dipped below eighty or when I blacked out in swim practice, I clung to his indifference as a defense. I never approached him about my anorexia because it would have required me to acknowledge that it was killing me.

As an anorexic, I tried to distance myself from my mother – from her physical weight and the weight of the guilt she carried, a result of feeling responsible for my illness. Yet I relied on my mother for a sick game of telephone. When discussing my disorder, she often qualified her own opinions with “your father agrees that” or “your father thinks” for added support. My mother envied the intellectual connection between my father and me – perhaps the only connection we had – and cited his name like the author of a seminal text, hoping I would respect her ideas more because he shared them. A stay-at-home mom who dropped out of nursing school,

Needing to find his voice, I imagined the discussions that took place behind their thin white bedroom door when he returned from the ICU in the morning, sleep-deprived and hungry. I envisioned him rationalizing my behavior as he munched on pancakes. Or

maybe he sardonically dismissed it. Either way, I couldn't be sure. For every day of the six years of my struggle – that's 2190 days – my father went back to work without addressing my illness and I went back to starving.

In fights they had about his late hours and work-filled weekends, my mother often referred to my father as a “martyr,” other times charging him with a Messianic complex. I don't think she meant the Christ-comparison to be so stark, but I couldn't help but reflect on him bringing the sickest strangers back to good health.

To this day, I have never heard my father speak the tired words of my diagnoses, echoed by countless experts: “anorexia,” “chronic depression,” “non-specific eating disorder.” He struggled to learn the vocabulary of perfectionist daughters-in-despair. His screaming silence wasn't exactly contrary to the Hippocratic Oath of “do no harm,” but it caused our neighbors to scoff: why couldn't he take care of his own? When sickness came home, the blame fell on the parental-physician: “you were supposed to care for her better,” they'd say, “how did you not see?” Why couldn't I open his eyes? Did he tower too tall for others to watch over him? I wondered, *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

As the daughter of a doctor, you learn there is always someone who needs your dad more than you do. You envy his patients like a woman envies mistresses or husbands' ex-lovers. You feel them come home with him at night, crowding you out.

Growing up, my brothers and I learned to leave an empty place setting when we set the table, placing four blue and white Spode plates on our oak wood table, instead of five. Chores, important discussions, vacations, and crises required a perpetual simple exercise in subtraction: minus one.

So when instructed at the age of fourteen by my nutritional therapist – to whom my father's paycheck contributed a silent \$150 per hour – to form a support network during rehabilitation for my eating disorder, I did not forget this obligatory equation: *family minus one*.

Daddy, I figured, still did not know. So I decided not to bother with him.

Anorexia had greatly improved my math skills. My passive aggression took on a calculus of its own; I counted up calories and divided them by the number of times my father could have approached me on the issue but didn't. Ratios justified my rage.

One particularly tumultuous morning before school, my mother could no longer

carry my weightlessness and her guilt. She had given up. My father, straightening his tie, took a jab at the problem I didn't know he knew I had:

“Rachael Nicole, if you don't eat breakfast I will not allow you to go to swim practice.”

Surprised by his belated effort, I responded in the way I learned from him: I walked out the front door without a word to hungrily greet the obligations of the day.

It is December. I am nineteen years old and lucky. I am no longer starving – at least not physically. Adjusted for the distance of college, my relationship with my father centers on fixing flat tires, remedies for colds, debates on healthcare and climate change, and financial advice. We talk more than we used to – but rarely about me. When I report back my grades, he likes to joke that his daughter has “all those brains, and a bod' too!,” as if confidence came naturally to me. As if recovering from anorexia made me love the body I always hated.

Some days, I am sure I will relapse. Like when in 2010, while taking a mid-Winter jog around the hedge-lined trail that buffers my campus from reality, a large unfamiliar white truck drives toward me. The driver rolls down his window as he passes to yell, “Yeah, fatty, you *should* be running!”

Sobbing, I draw out my phone and frantically dial a ten-digit number, remembering to include the area code in which I used to live. A voice answers with a familiar “Yyyyy-ello.” It is how he speaks to strangers – affecting a Texas drawl for added cordiality – even though he knows it's me. The blip of a monitor makes itself known. Somewhere in the background, familiar nurse-chatter. The intercom overhead bleats “Paging Doctor Petersen... Paging Doctor...”

“Daddy, I need you.” I ask, “Are you busy?”

David Shields

An eminent American literary writer, David Shields is often praised, at least in part, for his uniquely deft melding of fiction and nonfiction. In 2010, his book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* appeared on over 30 best-of-the-year lists. His works have earned him the PEN/Revson Award and the PEN Syndicated Fiction Award, among other honors. In the spring of 2012, Rice University was pleased to host Mr. Shields as a guest of the Cherry Reading Series.



As you've progressed, your writing seems to have shifted poles - away from fiction towards non-fiction. Is that a fair statement of the development?

I think that's fair, yes, although I'd emphasize that the fiction was often very autobiographical, and the 'nonfiction' often takes a lot of poetic license. I'm very interested now in the demolition of these formal boundaries.

*Some of your more recent books like *Reality Hunger* and *The Thing about Life is that One Day You'll be Dead*, seem to delight in the effect that can be achieved by oscillating between form, style, and even genre. What exactly is that effect, and why is it so appealing to us as modern readers?*

Well, your second question here anticipates my answer to your first question. I think it's the Graham Greene line: when you are not sure, you're alive. I think I have the quote right. I'm 'unsure.' the point is that I like to be caught between floors of a difficult-to-define department store. The moment I know I'm inside a romantic comedy or memoir or novel, my mind shuts down, because the form predicts where the book will go. We get on a train and it goes from station A to station X finally. I want art to have the existential excitement, vertigo, doubt, and uncertainty that contemporary life has. That life has always had.

Do you still have an urge to dash off a few pages of fiction now and then? Or has your interest been fully drawn to non-fiction and its newer, hybrid forms?

That's a funny question, as if I were a reformed smoker. I would say that I still write huge amounts of fiction in that there are enormous amounts of essentially fictional moments in my works of 'nonfiction.' Nonfiction isn't true. It's a framing device to foreground contemplation. Memory is a dream machine. Composition is a fiction-making operation.

How are we changing as consumers of fiction and of books in general?

I don't know about 'we.' But as for moi, I want rapidity, concision, compression, velocity.

The Thing about Life is that One Day You'll be Dead forces us to address our own mortality, which seems to distract us from, but also endear us to, the story of your father's life. How do you hope a reader's own impressions (or call them fears) contribute to the effect of the text?

At the end of the book, I want the reader to feel on his or her nerve endings the fact that he or she is an animal walking the planet for a brief time. We are each a bare body housed in a mortal cage.

You have said before that this book engages readers in a discussion on life that does not seek a final answer in the spiritual. Where then should we seek answers? Where do you? In the physiological or biological? In, perhaps, these glimpses of your own progeny?

My new book,, how literature saved my life, addresses this quite directly. I seek but don't find answers in literature.

What makes you most alive?

Laughing uncontrollably.

An Unsettled Heart

Brittany Xu

is
the sea
mulling over a bit of seaweed
stuck in a crack of the levee wall
like a piece of cabbage
trapped in between bottom molars

no matter how diligently the waves lap at the leaves
the roots are on the other side.

Pursuit

Marie Chatfield

inside of sixty-dollar corduroy pants
and one long denim skirt which may have been a mistake,
between the textbooks and novels and books of poetry
standing like impatient schoolchildren in line on the shelf,
on the other end of the full-length mirror which only shows
the bottom half because it was never hung on the wall,
around a new piercing in the left upper cartilage
which seems to be adopting the lavender hue of regret,
underneath a glorious tornado of curls rising from the plains of the scalp,
wrapped within the vibrant, snaking scarves in the closet,
enveloped by the headphones murmuring bass secrets,
lingering at the bottom of red Solo cups and smooth glass bottles,
engulfed in the dark of a stranger's mouth,
interred in the worn pages of a Bible:

I have searched for myself –
still I am not found.

Banyon

Kieran Lyons

Now, in Texas we have something called the Castle Doctrine. It says that, since a man's home is his castle, he has the right to defend it with force. Some places have what's called the Duty to Retreat; means you have to at least try to escape your house if someone intrudes. Texas doesn't have that. In Texas you don't even have the Duty to Retreat if someone threatens you in public. This is called the Stand Your Ground law.

When I came upon this burglar, he was in my garage looking through the custom cabinets I had installed last year. I stood at the top of the stairs and flicked the switch and pointed my shotgun at him. The fluorescent lights shuddered on. The window on the far wall was open to the night and I could hear crickets.

I was Standing My Ground, I explained to him, and I had no Duty to Retreat.

He turned and looked at me. His black hair was shiny with sweat, but I swear he looked more exasperated than scared, like I was interrupting him in the middle of a difficult task. I would've shot him right off if he had a gun, but since he didn't I had a decision to make. I could shoot him and rid the world of another criminal or I could give him another chance.

I asked him what he was doing.

"Stealing," he said.

I asked him what he was stealing.

"Anything, I guess, mister," he said.

I asked him why I shouldn't shoot him in his Mexican face.

"I'm from Honduras," he said.

Maybe, I was thinking, he's just stealing to feed his family. He looked too young

to be a father, but you know how those people are. Or maybe he's just the product of a bad upbringing and his parents never taught him that it's wrong to steal. Or maybe his grandmother who raised him is sick and he needs the money to pay for her hospital bills.

All this made me think of a passage from the book of Numbers. This fellow Balaam is going along on his donkey when the donkey swerves off the road into a field, so Balaam beats it to get it back on the road. Soon Balaam is headed through a narrow path with walls on both sides, and the donkey tries to turn and crushes Balaam's foot against the wall. Balaam hits it again. Now the donkey and Balaam are headed down an even narrower path where there is no way to turn around. The donkey just lays down and Balaam starts beating it again. The donkey asks him what he's done wrong. Balaam says that he made a fool out of him and that he'd kill him if he could. Then the Lord opens Balaam's eyes and he sees that there's been an angel in his path with a sword this whole time. The angel tells Balaam how he was sent to oppose him and that if the donkey hadn't turned away, he would've killed him.

I always took this story to remind us that we don't really know what makes other people do what they do. I gave that Mexican boy a \$50 bill to feed his family with and let him out the garage door. When he was a little ways down the street I aimed my shotgun above his head and blew out the Thompson's attic window.

What I mean to say is that I used to be able find a way out of a situation that wasn't disgusting. The Bible doesn't help anymore. I figure all it ever really did was remind me of things I already knew.

The problem's with my son Banyon. He's 18, smart, going to college soon. He's stayed out of my way most of his life and never caused much trouble before this. I taught him to be decent to other people but there's something in him I don't understand; it's like he's jealous of everyone else.

When he was 12 he told me that he hated how girls giggled all the time. Don't begrudge any man his happiness, I told him, and they'll leave you alone with yours. "I don't have any," he said. Well, I told him, go get some.

Banyon's mother was named Dallas Crichard, a girl who was 23 to my 32 when we met. The first time I saw her was at the dog track where she worked. I didn't like gambling much, but I'd settled into a good job at the chemical plant and had more money than I could

drink. I left with my pockets empty except for a receipt with her number on it and a novelty pin that said “Delta Downs: We Let The Dogs Out!”

She liked me because she could treat me like a dog and I wouldn't crumble because I knew when we went home she would draw blood to pull me closer to her. Everything was cruel between us. I had never been much of a ladies' man, but something about Dallas watching from across the room made it easy to draw them to me. I'm sorry to say that the two of us laid waste to friends and family with our games. We wound each other up enough that when we were sprung there was nothing that could keep us apart. At first we were nothing more than good actors, but before long we knew each other too well for that to work. We learned to dredge up real lust for bystanders, brought them home night after night until we could no longer stand to be apart and tore each other to pieces.

After two years of this, Dallas got pregnant. If it was mine, she didn't say it was, but I decided to take it anyway. She kept it, probably to fuck with me. She wanted him to be named after her father, Joseph, but the man looked at me like I wasn't worthy of her. When she shit the thing out I named him Banyon instead. I told her I would never marry her and I never did.

Things were different after he was born. She still went out and dragged strange men back to our place but I didn't want to play anymore. I was too in love with Banyon, a little squirming creature as far from predatory as anything. Dallas built up so much lust with nowhere to put it that she blew her head off to release the pressure. I think she must've been drunk enough to think she'd live through it and I'd drop the boy to the side and eat her up.

Her stunt got me Banyon, but once I had him I didn't want him so much anymore. He learned to talk early and even earlier than that he figured out how to read people. I'd like to say he wasn't able to trick me, but that's not true. It wasn't that I cared for him much, because I didn't; I managed to dredge up a certain sense of how a good father should act is all. To be honest, I would have been happy to leave him into a room until he was a man I could talk to.

Banyon knew just the things that would get him attention. When my vapid bitch sister visited after Dallas died, he asked her what everything was called when he knew damn well what he was pointing at. Got to where she asked me if I taught him anything. All I could do was kick her out of my house and glare at the little imp who stood at the foot of the

stairs, sucking his thumb dumbly. Other than that time, he only sucked his thumb in public, looking for all the world like a Gerber baby.

I saw what was coming, but what could I do? When he was very young I couldn't deal with him. I couldn't hit the kid and in a way I felt bad that he was stuck with me, a man baffled by this shitty trickster and unable to come up with any love except for the dutiful kind you give to old people.

By the time Dallas died I was making enough money at the plant to hire a nanny; Maria (of course she'd be named Maria) took care of the kid from when we moved into the house until he was old enough to go to school. A few weeks before Banyon started kindergarten I called up Bill Meyer, my friend from the plant who lived in the neighborhood, and asked him, seeing as he had a housewife, if Banyon could dick around with his son for the hour or so between when the schoolbus dropped them off and when I got back from work. So every day until Banyon turned twelve and started calling me "Rud" instead of "daddy" I picked him up from Bill's place, drove him back to my house, and heated up some food for us both.

We'd sit across from each other at the big dinner table, him still short enough that he had to lift his elbows to shoulder height just to eat. This was the only time we talked. I'd ask him what he learned in school and never get much of an answer. Most nights, after he cleared the table, we'd sit back down and I'd read him a story from the Bible and ask him what he thought of it. At first he never understood, so I'd explain as best I could, and by the time he was ten or so he'd learned to just recite my words back to me. There was a time in between, though, when he was about eight, that the way he would go quiet for a minute before answering made me feel like I'd at least gotten one little thing right.

When he got to middle school, I stopped with the family dinner bullshit and just left him food on the stove to take to his room. I let him go out with his friends as much as he wanted as long as he didn't bring them back home. I knew he didn't give a shit, so I spared him any attempt to explain that I knew what it was like to be young. Truth is I don't remember much and I don't want to. Sure, I probably had more fun with my idiot friends that he has with his crowd, but I'm sure I've just forgotten the boring days.

His friends aren't the same as mine were, anyway. I've seen them come by, at first in their parents' cars, polite in that insulting way when they rang the doorbell, and later in

their own cars sending seismic pounding through the pavement. After a certain age, they all seemed to get cellphones. Banyon never asked for one, but one day I told him I'd pay for the bill if he bought one, so he sold some things and made it happen. I was proud of myself for that.

Once he and his friends had cell phones, I stopped seeing much of either. I gathered from the way they walked, their constant boredom and swaggering chatter, that they were the popular kids. There were girls within their small packs, too, hip-swinging tanned beauties that already knew what power they had in their womanness.

One day he came home from school a few hours late and said "I got a job, Rud." I asked him where (some place in the mall) and that was the last I heard of it. It occurred to me that he might've been lying, trying to account for why he was never around, but he seemed to be getting money somehow so maybe it was true. Maybe he was selling drugs. Either way, it kept him out of the house.

When Dallas killed herself we were living in a green-carpeted apartment with water stains on the ceiling. Not great, but decent. The landlord kicked me and Banyon out after she shot herself. He told me that the baby was too loud but I think that he was angry about the trouble she'd put him through. I imagine she left a mess.

To be charitable, and I try to be, maybe that wasn't the reason. He was the one that found her. It couldn't have been a surprise, really, because he heard the blast, but I can't imagine being him at that moment: the room smelling like vodka and cordite, the baby screaming in the bedroom while bits of Dallas's head inched like slugs down the walls. What I'm saying is that maybe when he looked at Banyon he saw Dallas.

I left most of our stuff behind in that apartment and moved in to the house. When I bought it, it smelled like fresh paint and cookies. It's in a new subdivision, one of those with roads that curve and loop for no good reason. The realtor showed me around and explained to me how each house had a unique combination of trim, paint, and floor plan. The house on the intersection of Pinecone Rd. and Speckled Egg Loop, for instance, was Seafoam Green with Parchment trim and stone accents with a Merlot (Mirrored) floor plan.

The house I bought isn't like that. The realtor told me that the developer had the house custom-made for himself and his family but decided not to move in. It's toward the

edge of the subdivision, a little ways apart from the other houses. It's two stories, a little too big even had there still been three of us, and there's nothing too special about it except for the extra room.

You see, one of the bedrooms has another, smaller room connected to it like a tumor. At first I thought it was a closet, but that room already has one. I thought maybe it was a bathroom that hadn't been completed. Maybe it is. It has no windows. There's nothing on the walls except for a spigot, like the kind you connect a hose to, and a light switch. The door locks from the outside.

No, Banyon doesn't live there. His room is a regular bedroom on the first floor. I keep a few boxes in the extra room and the one it's connected to, but otherwise they're both empty.

A few months ago I was changing the lightbulb in Banyon's room when I noticed something. I wasn't snooping—hell, he was the one who told me the light was out and he knows I don't trust him to work on my house—but I saw a black shape peeking from under the bed. I slid it out a little bit to get a look. A TV. Good for him, making enough to buy a TV, except that he already had one – a nice one, too, bigger than this little guy. I decided to ask him about it when he got home.

“You didn't steal it, did you?” I asked him, standing just outside his doorway.

“I bought it,” he told me. He sloughed his backpack onto his bed. “From—“

I walked through the doorway and punched him in the face. He stared up at me looking like he'd just woken himself up by falling out of bed.

“Whose is it?” I asked.

Banyon didn't say anything. Even now I could see his mind working. I worked my fist open and shut. It hurt like hell but I wasn't about to let him see it.

“Come on, boy. I'm not as dumb as you take me for.”

The boy narrowed his green eyes and he seemed about ready to push himself up. For a moment he looked like Dallas, long body coiled to strike. I took a step toward him and he cringed back against the floor.

The TV was his friend Nathan Jackson's. I walked up the street with it in my arms like a big boxy baby, nodding to John Thompson, that asshole, as I passed him mowing his

lawn. I rang the Jackson's doorbell. Nathan Jackson, Sr., answered. I handed him the TV, boys will be boys, did you see the game, etc. "Nice car," I said, pointing to the gleaming red Mustang in his driveway. He thanked me and I assured him that I'd make sure Banyon learned a lesson. As I left I pictured fat Mr. Jackson driving that stupid fucking car and laughed to myself.

When I got back to my house there were two police cars outside. Banyon sat on the front steps talking to a cop who had his back to me. I saw him point my way. The cop looked over his shoulder and his two colleagues met me at the foot of my driveway. One of them was short and red-faced and the other had jowls that made him look like he'd started to melt. I held out my hand to the short one and they both stared at it as if it might bite them.

"Stop there, sir," the melting one told me, his hand on his holster.

"Are you Rudyard Hollis?" the short one asked. He had the voice of a man twice his size, a fat man's voice.

"Sure am," I said.

"And is that your son?"

"Most likely," I said. "At least I like to think so."

"We got a call!" the melting one blurted. I jumped a little. "We got a call," he repeated, his face turning red, "about a domestic disturbance."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Your son says that you physically assaulted him," the melting one said.

"Damn right I did," I said. I jabbed my finger toward Banyon, who was standing behind the third cop and watching me. "He stole a TV from his friend. Can you imagine?" No one answered me.

"Can we talk inside?" I asked.

The two cops looked at each other and then back at me. "No," the short one said.

The third cop turned back to Banyon. I could hear him asking, "Is that true?"

"Damn right it is!" I yelled over. Banyon looked at me with spooked eyes and the cop led him into the house.

"Mister Hollis--" the short cop began.

"Officer," I said, "Are you a god-fearing man?"

"What?" he said.

“Nothing against you personally if you aren’t,” I said.

He looked over at his partner, who shrugged.

“Officer,” I said, “I am a god-fearing man and that is why I can’t lie to you. Are you familiar with the Ninth Commandment?”

The short cop let out a sigh, but the melting one nodded. I turned to him.

“I’m sure y’all both know that it says you can’t bear false witness against your neighbor. Most people take that to mean that you shouldn’t accuse folks of doing things that they haven’t done, but Officers, I personally take it to mean that you can never lie about any crimes that a man has done, whether that man is you yourself or your own son.”

The short one opened his mouth to speak.

“Just one moment, sir,” I said to him. I kept on talking to his partner. “I don’t mean to be rude, but are you familiar with the Fifth Commandment?”

“Honor thy father and thy mother,” he answered before he could help himself. I guess he went to Sunday school.

“Yes sir. And the Eighth?”

He hesitated, his pink lips hanging opening in concentration, so I answered for him:

“Thou shalt not steal.” I let it linger for a moment. “Now, I don’t make a habit of hitting folks, least of all my own son. I’ll admit that I was angry at him, but both of y’all can see that he wasn’t much hurt.

“I understand that what I did was wrong, and for it I apologize to you and my son. But we can all agree on one thing.” I lowered my voice and gestured at the sky above with my thumb. “We didn’t make the rules.”

I guess the cops understood my logic because they let both of us go. Banyon drove off to somewhere in his car and I took my pickup and headed toward Town Square, which is what they call this fancy strip mall between us and the neighboring development. When I opened my door in the parking lot the pavement gleamed like porcelain in the sun. I sneezed as I pushed through the hot air into the bar.

The place is called McCormac’s. It’s not a chain but it looks almost like one. The walls on the inside are covered in wood and posters advertising Guinness are tacked everywhere, but the dartboards are for decoration only and the TVs in every corner are

showing football. I sat at the bar and ordered a Bud Light from the bartender, a blonde girl. She brought it to me and I asked her how old she was.

“Twenty four,” she said. I nodded to myself. Her nose had a bit of an upturn at the end. It was cute. Her eyes were blue. Nothing like Dallas’s – hers were almost yellow around the pupil and darkened to the green of a deep lake around the rims of her irises. They were the first things I noticed when I met her.

“Are you married?” I asked the blonde girl.

“No sir,” she said. She smiled and leaned onto the bar across from me. “How about you?”

“Never have been and never will,” I said.

“You just haven’t found the right girl is all,” she said. I heard the main door open and glide shut. A man in a blue mechanic’s outfit sat down a few stools away. “Be right with you, honey,” the bartender called.

“I’m fifty years old,” I said.

“So?”

“Means I’m not allowed to go after girls anymore,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, “I don’t know about that.” She pushed back from the bar and took the mechanic’s order. She came back over toward me to fill up his glass from the tap. “You’re a handsome man.”

I couldn’t tell if she was hitting on me or taking pity. Either way I was bored of this pleasantness. I thought of punching Banyon, how the little shit teared up as if no one had ever called his bluff before. It brought back an old viciousness I’d forgotten I had. For a split second back in the room I’d thought of hitting him again. And he’d gone and called the cops. He was smart to have left.

Another day I would’ve made this girl take me home and left in the first hour of morning, raw and triumphant from the pain I’d inflicted on her and myself and Dallas. But things were different now. Dallas was almost twenty years dead, I was an old man, or close to it, and my son was hiding from me so I couldn’t hurt him. He hadn’t asked for this the way we did. I realized he was lucky she was dead.

I had loved him once. I hadn’t realized how Dallas hated him, how her decision to

keep him had backfired on her. I sipped my beer and thought of the time she came home from some bar with another man, both of them red-faced and stinking of cigarettes. I was on the couch with the baby in one arm watching a cop show and I looked up at her with practiced blankness.

“Ignore them,” she slurred. The man leered at me as he passed like, who is this pussy? I could’ve fought him – I’d done it before when the men she brought home failed to realize they were just civilians in the crossfire – but I didn’t feel like it. I raised a finger to my lips and gestured down at the baby. Dallas rolled her strange eyes and I felt a new anger shudder in the muscles of my back: not jealousy, I was used to that, but indignation that she could roll her eyes at the one thing we shared that wasn’t cruel.

I’d never known what to do with him. If he had turned out bad, become cruel in the end, it was my fault.

Banyon came back the next day. He locked himself in his room at first and slinked around after that, shrinking against the wall whenever I passed him in the hall. Eventually I knocked on his door and told him I wanted to talk to him. He ignored me. I stood there in the hallway with my knuckles still against the wood of the door for five minutes, hoping to hear a sound, before I dropped by arm and walked on.

After a few weeks everything was normal. I saw as little of him as ever, but he stopped cringing from me and took to looking me in the eye as he passed. It was a challenge, I’m sure, but I was prouder that he’d grown a backbone than I was angry.

One day I decided to fix the tub in the guest bathroom. It was the one Banyon used and the grout had darkened over time into grainy black veins. I scrubbed the grout clean and noticed that the caulk needed replacing. I found a tube of caulk in the garage but I couldn’t find the caulking gun anywhere. Eventually the only place left to look was the extra room.

The room smelled like paint and dust. The gun wasn’t in any of the cardboard boxes, so I lifted them away to get to the plastic tubs underneath. The first one popped open with a sound like a Pringles can.

Inside was a mess of belongings: a teddy bear, a crumpled poster, a pocket knife, cheap earrings and necklaces, a slew of small precious things that filled the tub a foot deep. I had never seen them before. They were dear, worthless things, the kind that you keep in your pocket for good luck or in a chest of childhood memories.

A hundred children's keepsakes lost. Or stolen.

I stared down into the tub. My hands shook. This wasn't the kind of cruelty I understood, honest and mean. This was sneaking hatred. Banyon didn't even want these things for himself. He only wanted other people not to have them.

I felt a rush of air on my neck as the door slammed behind me. I heard the click of the lock. I sank to the floor.

I thought of Proverbs 27:4: "Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?"

I thought of the first day after we moved to this house. I had toured the rooms again, knowing secretly that most would always be empty. Why had I bought such a big house? At the end of the day I sat at the bottom of the stairs and watched the sky darken through the glass on the front door. I watched Banyon crawl around the carpet on his belly like a tortoise. His hair was blonde like mine but his eyes were green, almost yellow. He crawled over to my feet and pushed down on my foot with both hands. I moved it away. Without Dallas I was a live wire, crackling with electricity and without anywhere to put it. I understood why Dallas killed herself.

I loved Banyon because he was ours, the one good thing we'd made together. When I first saw him, bright red and swaddled in a hospital, I knew we couldn't go on the way we were. Not with this thing in the crossfire. I knew then that my old viciousness wasn't going to come back, but when Dallas died I lost my love too. So I had nothing. I've done nothing for Banyon, asked for nothing from him, given nothing to him.

Banyon was outside the door. I knew it as well as I knew why he'd taken all of these things. I looked into the tub again. Jesus, it must have taken him years. I remembered how when he was twelve I told him to go out and get some happiness. I guess he took it to heart.

Suddenly I saw something familiar in the pile of beloved scraps. The pin. "We Let the Dogs Out!"

I took Banyon to the dog track once when he was 8. We went up the escalator and back into that long arcing room I hadn't visited since Dallas quit her job there to work at the liquor store. The air was cold and dry with air conditioning. Waitresses ferried beers to

the scattered public, most of them spread far apart from each other. The little TVs at every table showed flickering charts of dog names, dog numbers, dog odds. A man in a cowboy hat sat alone smoking a cigar, peering down the rows of seats and out the plate glass windows toward the track lit by stadium lights.

I led Banyon to a table next to the glass.

“Where are the dogs?” he asked me.

“They’re not out there yet,” I told him. I flagged over a waitress and asked for a pitcher of Shiner.

“Two glasses?” She winked at Banyon, who did a little bounce and said “Yes!”

She laughed and told me I had a beautiful son. I glared at him and told her yeah, so I’ve been told. But the part I didn’t remember until I sat staring at that gaudy pin with the door locked from the outside was how Banyon looked at me then. He looked at me with those green eyes – yeah, her eyes – and I saw that he was waiting for me to say something.

I wanted to tell him about his mother, to tell him how I met her here more than a decade ago when she came by to take my order. I wanted to tell him how she would sleep in a ball with her forehead against my back on the nights we spent together. I wanted to explain to him why I hated him so very much. Then the handlers walked out of the kennel and led the dogs out onto the bright-lit track and I pointed and told him, “Look, the dogs.”

I turned away from the tub. I remembered the Mexican boy’s wet hair. Maybe he was just the product of a bad upbringing, that’s what I’d thought at the time. A thief from a bad family. If he’d been Banyon I’d have shot him.

I flipped the pin over and over in my hand.

Dallas called me at work the night she killed herself. It had rained all day and when I had gone outside after dark to smoke it felt like someone had draped a wet, hot towel over me. She was drunk and Banyon was wailing in the background.

“Hey Rud,” she slurred.

“What?” I asked.

“What if you had to choose?”

“Choose what?”

“Choose,” she said, “between me and the baby.”

“Why would I have to do that?”

“Let’s say you did. Let’s say that I’m tired of you pretending you’re so in love with the thing.”

“Why don’t you stop being a drunk bitch and we’ll talk,” I said.

“Ooo, ouch.” She laughed. “You’re losing your touch, old man.”

“Never,” I said.

I heard her turn away from the phone and yell something at Banyon, who still hadn’t shut up.

“I don’t see why you like him,” she said.

“I don’t see why you think I do,” I said.

“Come home,” she told me. She had that little burr to her voice that she knew I couldn’t resist.

“I’m busy,” I said.

“Fine,” she said, “me and big boy Banyon here will have to keep on drinking without you.”

I thought of the women who stood before Solomon, of the one who said “He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him.” I remembered the bruise that had blossomed on Banyon’s cheek. I realized I could no longer picture Dallas’s face, only his, and I forgave him for it.

I stood up, leaving the pin on the ground. I walked over to the locked door and knocked for him to let me in.

A Day in Town

Henry Gorman

Let's drive our Honda Civic hatchback
through the plate-glass window
of this drug store

The man behind the counter
has a jar of blue-bottle flies
that he snacks from occasionally
SMACK SMACK

A shop sound
SLURP SLURP

Girls in bobby socks
swallowing orange freezes
But now it's CRASH SCREECH tinkle

Buckets of confections
kerosene-drenched
burst into crickling-crackling flames

Here's Miggs the baker
sitting at the counter
his ice-cream soda
has fallen out of his hand
coke and strawberry ice-cream
paste his loafers

onto the pink-and-purple tile
he's really a werewolf
although he doesn't know it
he spends his full-moon nights
panting by the fire
wishing for a belly rub
falls asleep
with great juicy marrow-sticks
crunching in his mind's mouth

Now let's get out
can't stay in the flaming shop
all day now
let's check out the town church
they say that a relic
is entombed there
in a little plastic urn
the back molar of a bald saint
who cured unsightly facial hair
with a brush of his smooth lips

The back pew
is full of freeze-dried hippies
seeking to indulge
some drugstore nostalgia
in their ash-trail years
they sit here gentle-eyed
the incense burning here
has a reefer whiff
Breathe in
don't you feel relaxed?

Now let's walk outside
Here's a farmer's market
where Terrence Tompkins
is selling candles
made from the wax
from the ears of orphans
and Darren Marat
is swilling tea-leaf schnapps
that Karen Esterhazy
brews in her foot-bath

Let's take a swig ourselves
And listen to a zydeco band
playing in a little pavilion
they've got a woman playing Mahler
on a carbon-fiber washboard
and then we'll go and lie
on an astroturf football field
share a furtive, drunken kiss
and then run away
before the town's one tiger
slipping its cage-bonds
eats us both alive

Notes to Selves

Jessica Fuquay

To the zygotic self:

You chose a very good year to colonize my mother's uterus. 1991 is the only palindrome in the 20th century. I love palindromes.

To the five year-old self:

Your parents told you not to talk to strangers on the street, and that was probably a good idea. But do talk to the strangers you will someday be.

To the eight year-old self:

There you are, breezing through a spelling quiz, quietly suspecting that you might be a genius. You'll start to lose this arrogance after your squeaky solo clarinet performance at the band concert, and lose it for good when you take honors physics as an undergrad. As you sit in the lecture hall, the professor's words will float around you like motes of dust. The motes of dust will bypass your ear canal and sink into the porous fabric of the chair.

Carl Sagan likened the earth to a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. No sense in being prideful when you're just a dust-mite.

To the writer:

It's sad, but you might have already written your greatest humor piece at eight years old. It was perhaps the first creative writing assignment of your life: personify an inanimate object by making them the protagonist of your story. You wrote the story of Eat, the Cookie. I don't know that you've been any cleverer since.

To the budding pianist:

There are a lot of people better than you, namely the Chinese. There are a billion people in China.

To the senior in high school:

Stop fooling yourself that your vague interest in the universe, nebulae, and pulsars will translate to a career in physics. You don't want to be a physicist; you just want to be Carl Sagan.

To the inebriated self:

Yes, the Christmas tree *is* actually spinning. It's a neat feature of certain plastic tree models at Costco.

To the self reflected on a shiny red Christmas ornament:

Pretend the ornament's a planet; now you are a world and this world is you, bending space-time and the spiny limb of a Christmas tree, spinning round the axis of an evergreen universe.

To the very inebriated self:

I see you trying to place those jigsaw puzzle pieces all properly, telling everyone, *Hey look guys, I got a piece of the sky.* You're not convincing anyone that you're sober.

To the birthday girl:

For the love of God, don't go to the bathroom during your nice dinner on the town. If you do, your family will tip off the waiter and you will come back to see a resentful wait staff lugging cake to your table. They will sing you Happy Birthday in an unidentifiable key, and your weird mother will shake the salt and pepper like maracas to their lack of a rhythm.

To the happy self:

You are like the escaped chicken that runs through the streets clucking wildly,

turning the corner before I can catch it. Sometimes I grab some tail feathers. I hold on to them the best I can before they fly away.

To the self crying over The New Yorker in the waiting room of a psychiatrist's office:

Oh, get over yourself. When you fill the Xanax and Zoloft prescriptions, just sing a song and shake the pills like maracas to its rhythm.

To the self that once briefly entertained not using a contraceptive:

The average circumference of a newborn's head is 14 inches.

To the current self:

You forgot to put on deodorant this morning. Good job.

To the self of five minutes ago:

You shouldn't have finished those cheerios so fast. Not only does current self smell, she is still very hungry.

To the self laughing at the vanity of the face-lifted seniors in front row:

Need I remind you that your pre-teen self applied baby powder to her eyelids and tried to pass it off as eyeshadow.

To the self ogling venus fly traps at the Home Depot Nursery:

Now that I have one, I can tell you they're overrated. It's depressing to see a plant struggle to live on a window sill, to see it suffer through the owner's sudden disinterest when she realizes that it was just a novelty that reminded her of the forest creatures in Zelda.

To the forty-year old self:

You are living in 2031, a golden age in which all cars are run on hydrogen and the tearing mechanisms of mustard packets actually work. Do you still remember the physics you learned in that terrible first semester of college? Here is a question for you:

1. *An idiot squirts mustard at herself at an angle of 46° to the horizontal with an initial*

velocity of 1.2 m/s. If the idiot has a reaction time of 0.50 seconds, far slower than that of normal people, how fast must she jerk her head back to avoid getting mustard squarely in the eye? Or is it already too late?

To the seventy year-old self:

It's good to be in touch with the people you used to be.

To the self inherited from my parents:

I wish you knew more than the rudiments of salsa.

To the self at the brink of death:

The light at the end of the tunnel has been removed due to new energy efficiency regulations.

To the self at the brink of birth:

The light at the end of the tunnel is a more appropriate metaphor for your situation, anyway.

To the five hundred year-old self:

I regret to inform you that the cemetery in which you were buried hundreds of years ago has been turned into a strip mall.

To the self on the concave side of the spoon:

You there. Look up. Your upside-down reflection is interesting but a bunch of people are trying to sing you Happy Birthday.

To the billion year-old self:

Carl Sagan said that we're made of star stuff. The reverse is also true. Somewhere in the universe, the churning globule of a new star belches cheerio breath into a gas cloud.

Five Across

Charu Sharma

This is how it is to start again, I told myself one Sunday morning,
 watching you with a crossword, resigning myself to your taste—
 poetry before breakfast, feasting on well-picked words.
 I clutched the pages of Plath in my left hand for dear life—
 a woman so practiced in losing hers.
 Hughes, you pronounced twelve down, and I was all but surprised
 to hear the name slip from your lips so easily—
 like syllables that had always lived on the tip of your tongue .
 I kept the subtle sounds of “Tulips ” pursed between my lips, like something
 intentionally unuttered: too used to pollution to be let out
 into air so clean,

and this is what you were then, so like the magazine rack
 to the left of your spotless white couch , like *no feet on the table, Maria*,
 like no heart on the hat rack, no tears in the onions when I was cutting
 tomatoes: you would not notice, look up from the stark white countertop
 assessed for some value in home décor , and have you kept me then,
 like some vintage Mexican relic whose worth you had grossly miscalculated,
 or then an adopted orphan from streets you drove past in white gloves
 too far above dirt roads to catch the eyes of street vendors and their children,
 were you only trying to make up for holding a gaze too high?

And it's these thoughts that haunt me in white porcelain bathtubs,
hoping cold red lips tell cold hard truth: that there's nothing
a warm bath can't cure: and just for a moment I let myself slip
through the cracks, under the water—to be something more
than surface level , in some last ditch attempt,
shake a hand to the man at the marble counter top .
I'm not waving, I'm drowning,

and of course: “Yes, yes, Maria, I already got
five across.”

Maternal

Violetta Krol

Month old waste rots inside of my hip basket,
ready to be grinded down and disposed of.
Uterine cramps rip me away from my dreams.
Wet moans arouse my mother from sleep
and order her into my black bedroom,
where she searches for a lamp on my nightstand.

She treats me with a shot of questions
that I resist with a shield of swear words;
then a dose of tears come from her wrinkled eyes
that are blind to the spit crawling up my throat.
She finds the lamp switch, and then I can see,
in the standing mirror, the monster of my nightmare.

I twist right, onto my bloated stomach
and twist left onto my swollen back.
No position satisfies.
I wrestle the fire that chews through my nerves,
burns off my mother's cradling arms,
and melts away my sodden nightshirt,

the one covered in Valentine's conversation hearts
that she gave me when I was twelve.
She folds it on the edge of the bed, silently, waiting
until red ashes spread onto my underwear.
I fall back asleep and forget to hug and kiss her
and to tell my mommy goodnight.

Candle Hope

Dahyeon Kim

Let's go shopping, Mom had said. You have good tastes. Come with me.

I said okay. I knew we were going to a wig store, and I was excited. I loved hair, and I especially loved it long and straight, the way mine was long and straight. I missed my mom's longer hair, but she had cut it short a couple months ago, and eventually moved on to a wig with blonde highlights, always in a bun. What awaited me at the wig store was not as exciting as I had hoped it to be. Countless rows of mannequin heads, from the ceiling to the floor, greeted me with their overstretched smiles, oversized eyes. Strange hairstyles of exotic color and foreign texture lay on their plastic heads. Their artificiality frightened me, the same way clowns frighten small children.

The owner of the shop had a strong accent, maybe Italian—definitely different from the Asian accent Mom had, the one that hinted at the story of her immigration from South Korea to Alaska ten years ago. Mom told me to wait, look around, while she tried on a couple of the wigs. I didn't want to be left alone, but I nodded. The owner took Mom by her shoulders and led her away as I browsed the room, my eyes actively searching for one black and wavy, medium-length, with side-swept bangs. The search was to no avail. What I eventually did wander into was the store owner and my mom facing away from me and towards a mirror. On the mirror's surface, the reflection showed the owner lifting Mom's wig to reveal what little remained of her hair.

The man laughed uneasily, uncomfortably. "There isn't much hair left here, is there?"

My mom reciprocated his laughter. Uneasy, uncomfortable. She spoke to him in her broken English, as broken as my heart. "Yes, hair not many."

I glared at the man, his reflection, the back of his head lush with hair. I wanted to hit him. Hard. I hoped we would leave this horrible place at once.

I have a piece of what remains of a candle locked away in a plastic container I have christened as my treasure box. The wax is goldenrod, a hue attempted at gold but not quite. It is smooth, and for a moment, cool until it gradually warms in my hand like butter heating on a frying pan. At first glance, it looks like a clump of stalactites and stalagmites, random wax drips frozen to record motion. With my explanation, it looks like Jesus, high and mighty. He preaches with his right arm raised towards the sky like stalagmites, the wax hardened before its travel to the bottom, and his toga seems to flow as do stalactites, the wax hardened in its travel.

I was the first one to find Jesus in this remnant of my grandma's prized candle that 2004 winter. My eyes had wandered through the clump of candle wax, melted and distorted, and had found a figure, as they would whenever a funny-shaped cloud passed by a classroom window. I was in fourth grade then, and my Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. I didn't think too much of cancer at the time. I was nine years old. Deaths were for Korean soap operas we'd rent from video stores every Friday night and for faceless names of people briefly mentioned in the news. Death did not happen in real life. I was sad that Mom cut her wavy hair. I was sad that she and Dad left home at night every so often. I was sad that we were eating brown rice now, instead of white. I wasn't sad, or scared, because I thought that she might die—no, that wasn't even possible. Still I knew what was expected from me. I had watched enough Korean dramas, read enough tragic books, to learn that if anyone around you were diagnosed with cancer, you get desperate, and you get scared. You hope, and you pray. It never hurt to make sure anyway—I knew my mom would be okay, but just in case, I prayed.

Every night when Mom and Dad left for the hospital, Grandma, my brothers, and I would huddle in a little corner of our living room, where a figure of Holy Mary as tall as my arm stood, her hands clasped in prayer. Our hands would mimic hers. Our fingers, intertwined with the beads of our rosaries. We would shut the blinds, turn off the television, turn off the lamps. We'd dim all light but the one radiating from the lone candle beside the Mary statuette, and recite Hail Mary and Holy Father in prayer. Before the diagnosis, my

brothers and I were never fond of praying, and most of the time Mom would have to force us into it. Since the day we learned Mom was ill, we voluntarily spent many of our nights praying by the candlelight. Her absence was a harsher disciplinarian than her chastising voice.

“Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners...”

One night, we were praying with our rosaries, as we had done countless other nights. My grandma led the prayers, steadfast in her kneeling posture for nearly an hour. My brothers and I kneeled too. We had convinced ourselves to think that if we did, ignoring the pain and the tickles that accompanied suppressed blood flow, God would be so impressed that he would listen to our prayers. We did not follow through with our end of the deal, though.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord be with...be...with...”

Grandma had always been strong. In fact, in my nine-year-old eyes, she was *the* strongest, clearly above Mom and Dad. She was the one to turn to when I could not pry apart the Lego pieces locked firmly, the one to turn to when there was a bug that needed to be squished. The possibility of her crying, of her being capable of crying, in my nine-year-old eyes, was zero. So when I looked up at her, confused by the cracking of her voice, I was shocked. And then I was scared. When I saw drops of tears travelling through the wrinkles of her face, I realized that this was real—the glass dome protecting me and my innocence from reality shattered under the weight of cancer, of the prospect of death. Frightened and clueless of what to do, my brothers and I tried our best to comfort Grandma when we ourselves needed comforting. I limped into my room to retrieve a handkerchief, legs buzzing from the hour of kneeling. In retrospect, it may have been to avoid watching her cry. At the moment, though, I felt as if that would be the most adult-like thing to do, and at the moment, an adult-like figure was exactly what all of us needed—someone to protect us, someone to tell us that everything was going to be okay.

My grandma was strong; after a couple minutes, she went on to finish the Hail Mary as if nothing had happened. But something did happen. After the prayer, I volunteered to blow out the candles as I always do. This was a special candle, Grandma had told us. It was made by melting the candles many people used in prayer, wishing for something dearly, just as we did. We had melted much of the candle away already. Some was left, but most of it

lay in a pool underneath the firelight or hardened during its plunge. In the plunge, I found a Jesus figure, so I picked it up. I needed reassurance; I needed hope. I found them in a puddle of wax.

Dad found his in a strange fungus he learned about through a friend. There were mushrooms that grew on birch trees, rare and expensive in Korea but found every so often in the Alaskan forests. They grew on barks and were hard and woody. You could brew them into tea. They did miracles. They were all his friend's wife's friend had when she was receiving treatment for cancer, and now she was all better.

On top of my parents leaving home several nights a week, they left every weekend too, to search for these mushrooms. They drove all over rural Alaska, and every time they returned home after hours of hunting, Dad would beam, carrying in each of his hands what looked to be a random hunk of wood.

While Mom was battling cancer, we moved from our one-story fourplex to a two-story single family home. We had been house hunting for years, and when the house came up, Dad bought it, and we moved. Whether he hurried the process in case something did happen to my mom or because a new home was long overdue, I do not know. I was just happy that even though I still had to share a room with my grandmother, the room at least had enough space for two beds now. The last homeowner had also left us their piano and their refrigerator, which were both in fairly good condition. A key on a piano didn't play, but that was okay—I didn't play the piano anyway. The shelf on the refrigerator door fell off every time someone closed it carelessly, and the person who opened it would take all the blame—but that was okay too, as long as that victim wasn't me.

That Sunday, during lunch, the victim was Grandma. When she opened the fridge door, the shelf fell, spilling all of its content: packs of ketchup and soy sauce collected from restaurants, a bag of dried shredded squid, and Mom's tea. I don't remember how, maybe the container was made out of glass and it broke or the lid of the container flew off. I do remember, however, the dark red brown of the tea they had brewed the night before from the special mushrooms. How the color diluted to reveal a more yellowish tint; the way the puddle silently crept and spread gradually on the peach vinyl floor. Time seemed to slow

then. Grandma looked helpless. Dad was mad and yelling. Mom looked overwhelmed, and she slipped out of the kitchen as everyone focused on my dad, who was fuming and trying to figure out who closed the door improperly and who put the tea on the faulty shelf.

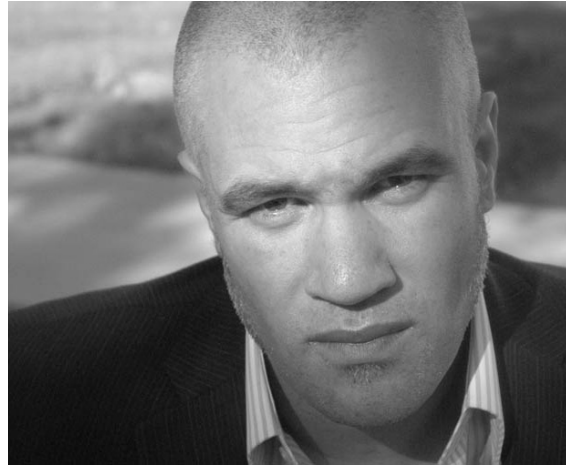
I followed my mom. I found her sitting on the carpeted floor, leaning on the other side of the wall separating the kitchen from the family room. Her head was hanging down. She looked so hopeless and small that I could feel my heart plunge to an abyss of what seemed like never ending darkness. I'd never seen her like this. I walked up to her, sat beside her, a few feet away, and watched her—I didn't know what else to do. Light flooded into the white, bare room through the huge window we had yet to curtain, and the dust particles danced in its rays. It appeared to engulf her: the room, the window, the emptiness of the newly occupied house so big and her so tiny. I saw something glisten down her cheeks; I reached for it with my fingers. Something wet, something warm. It soaked the pads of my finger tips, and a part of her became a part of me—the same way something so foreign, so abstract, and so unrelated to me, the tears, the hopelessness, death, had become a part of me. A part of my life.

My mother cries. My mother dies.

She faced away from my touch, got up, and walked away into her bedroom. She probably didn't feel comfortable, revealing her vulnerability to her nine-year-old daughter. And so, alone, I sat there, my fingers still wet with her tears, Dad's frustrated voice still booming in the kitchen.

Mat Johnson

Mat Johnson is a novelist and creative writing professor at the University of Houston. His work includes *The Great Negro Plot*, *Pym*, *Hunting in Harlem*, and *Drop*. When I interviewed him, however, I focused on his two comics: *Dark Rain* and *Incognegro*, in order to get a better idea of what it is like to write in this genre. People often associate graphic novels with super heroes and children's comics, yet that isn't all the genre has to offer. Authors like Mat Johnson have expanded the medium to include just about everything (in his case, historical works of fiction).



As someone who has both written novels and graphic novels, which one do you enjoy writing more? Are there particular elements about either that you like or dislike?

Writing graphic novels is fun in that for me it's a comparatively quick process, usually taking only two or three months, and then the heavy lifting is done by the artist. I write the instructions for a story, and the artist has to put it all together. Novel writing is creation in entirety, and the beauty comes as you work on it. It's far more difficult, but more rewarding. The process can take me nearly a decade sometimes, from conception to publication.

How is the process of writing a graphic novel different from writing a traditional novel?

Comics are a visual medium, so in conception you think in images, and telling a story in symbols. Novels tend to be more internal, with even the physical movement being a representation of the internal conflict. My novels tend to be more visual anyway- I have no sense of smell, I've always leaned on the visual sense- so the transition between forms was more natural for me.

What advice do you have for a writer who wants to make the transition to writing graphic novels?

Lean on the pictures. The less words, the better. Let your images tell your story, otherwise, just do it in prose.

*You've written some historically inspired works, including *The Great Negro Plot*, which is a non-fiction novel. Would you consider writing a similar non-fiction work as a graphic novel?*

I'd love to, and probably will. I've actually talked with a publisher about doing a project set in the 19th Century. At this point, it's a matter of time. I have a family, I teach full time, I speak nationally, and I write novels full time. It will have to wait until I have a window open I can jump through.

*Why did you choose to write *Incognegro* as a graphic novel as opposed to a short story?*

In fiction, the topic of race from that angle has been thoroughly done, particularly by African American writers. Part of this is because of the history of African American literature, and part of this has been market concerns. In comics, this aspect of reality has been virtually untouched, so it was a chance to break ground in a new medium.

*Both *Incognegro* and *Dark Rain* address issues of race. How much of what you are writing about is based on your own experiences, especially concerning racial identity?*

Everything is based on my own experience, my own perspective. That's part of what I enjoy so much, making my own view of reality real in the world of story. Claiming the landscape for my view of the world.

What level of collaboration (storyboarding and layout) do you have with the artist? Did you choose the illustrators for your stories? If so, what about that illustrator's style were you drawn to?

I, and the editor, go through about a dozen artists, looking for the right one. Each project has it's own demands- for *Incognegro*, for instance, I wanted the book to have more of an indie feel than a superhero genre influence, so Warren Pleece was perfect. I give basic instructions for each image in the book, but I try to make them as brief as I can to let the artist have space to bring their vision to the page.

Have you ever considered doing the illustrations for your stories?

I would love to, and have been tempted. But it took me a decade to even become a passable writer, and it would take me at least that to do the same with illustration, and the human lifespan is relatively short.

As you are writing, I assume you imagine the characters and the scenes in your head. Have you ever been surprised by the way an illustrator renders your stories?

For the most part, oddly, no. And in a good way. When the artist and I are in sync, the images match the vision in my head, just usually much better.

The styles of art used in Incognegro and Dark Rain are fairly realistic. In your opinion, how would the interpretation of your stories have changed if they had been drawn in a different fashion?

I wanted realism for both stories. Actually, to me, what Simon Gane did in *Dark Rain* was more stylized than I'd done before, and I liked that. Earlier versions of the characters were even more stylized, but I wanted to make sure we had a sense of reality to the project.

Have you always been drawn to comics and graphic novels?

The first things I read willingly were comics. My mother used them to get me involved in reading, and that's how I fell in love with reading and story. I still buy comics, and have through out my life.

Is there any graphic novelist that you admire?

A ton. In mainstream comics, Warren Ellis, Garth Ennis, Michael Oeming, Brian Michael Bendis, J. Michael Straczynski, Joe Hill and a long list of others. In the alternate comics world, Pete Bragg, David Mazzucchelli, and Jason Lutes.

Often people don't regard graphic novels or comic books as serious forms of literature. What are your thoughts on that?

In America, the medium is associated with children, with low quality art and storytelling, because the first explosion of comics here was within that context. But since *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize, and the growth of more mature sophisticated work, the perception has changed and continues to rapidly. At this point, it's largely generational. Older people tend to associate comics with an early, less serious context. Younger people, having grown up with a wealth of sophisticated work, often see it for what it is: a medium capable of a varied level of artistry.

Making Friends

Kieran Lyons

I leave behind me a trail of light-filled rooms. On my monthly visits home from college, out of deference to my father, I turn off the lights only when I leave a room. The windows of my house light and darken as if I am glowing. When I'm in my apartment, I leave my curtains open so that the lights of Seattle can light the room while I sleep.

I once met a girl who had been badly burned, a friend of a friend. The skin of her face looked as if I could stick to it. I imagined her before she was burned: the fine hairs on her cheeks, the sound of her voice different from soft lips although it had not changed. I'm an imaginative man.

My best friend Drew is in love with me. I wish I could give him what he wants—maybe that would make me happy as well— but I can't. I can only repay him with aching, with a longing repulsion. I entertained the thought of it once, of giving in, but the thought of soft lips and stubble on my throat made me shudder. I haven't told him this.

Once, drunk, Drew touched me on the shoulder and murmured his fantasy in my ear. He left smiling with blood-rimmed teeth. I think that he imagined the blood was mine. I thought of the burned girl. How I mourned her though she wasn't dead, how I missed the smooth throat and thighs that had been burned away before I could lay hands or eyes on them.

I met the burned girl again at a party. I can be quite charming, but it didn't take much; I lay my hand on her shoulder, left bare as if to prove that not everything had been

burned away, and I had her. I knew that she would hold fast to anything I gave her. I brought her back to my room. In the dark, her long pale legs were like birches. She touched me softly but her hands were restless, as if she wanted to pull me tight but feared it. She was right to; even in the dark she looked like she was wearing a Halloween mask.

Drew knocked at my door the next day. It was never locked during the day, he knew that. I told him to come in. He stood in the doorway instead. I could hear someone talking in Chinese down the hall.

“Why didn’t you go to class today?” he asked.

“I’m sick,” I said. His lip curled like a dog’s.

“I know you are,” he said. I turned in my chair to face him. “How was fucking the burned girl?” he said.

“She has a name, you know.”

“I’m surprised you know it.”

“Who said I did?” I turned back to my computer. “She was the same as anyone else. Just no face.”

I heard the door click shut. He had come up behind me. He put his hands on the back of my chair. I could feel his arms on either side of my head. My gorge rose but I didn’t turn.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“If you can fuck a girl with no face, why not me?”

“Back off.”

He didn’t move. Of course he’d always push back when I provoked him, anyone worth anything would, but this felt different.

“Drew.”

“Yeah?” he said from above me. He sounded like he had phlegm in his throat.

“What are you doing?”

He didn’t say anything. The proximity of his arms was unbearable. I pushed back against my desk, kicking the chair back against his thighs. I stood up and turned. There were tears on his face.

“Drew,” I said.

His arms tensed and he rammed the chair into my shins. I fell. He threw the chair aside and straddled my stomach, pinning my arms to the floor. I could barely breathe. He leaned toward my face. I could feel his erection against my belly. He lifted his weight off me and peered down the space between our bodies. I strained to head butt him while he was distracted, but he only tightened his grip on my wrists. He returned his gaze to mine and sat up. He released my arms and wiped the tears from his cheek. I turned my head away as he drew his wet fingers down the side of my neck.

He stood up and left. I lay where he left me. If cruelty and love go together, then ours was a deep and true love.

By the middle of my freshman year it so happened that I ended up with more drugs than I could make use of. If I took a pill or a tab or whatever and sold another at a 25% markup it was like printing a coupon for the one I took. It was nothing official – just something I did. A good way to make friends. It's how I met Drew.

One night, I had a few friends over for a get-together. There were maybe six of us in there, leaning and sitting and lying on beds and the floor, blinking in the thin haze of smoke.

Marian and Julie sat on my bed. Marian was a chubby girl with a freckled face. Julie was her best friend, tall and pale with ringlets of black hair. I liked the curve of her collarbones. I'd invited Julie over with the intention of sleeping with her. I wouldn't have tolerated Marian's presence otherwise.

I'd invited Perry, who was slumped in my desk chair, because he always had weed. He'd come in with a beanie on and I explained to him how it's rude to wear a hat indoors. For a moment I had hoped he'd take the bait, but instead he nodded and said "Ok, Jackson." I'd have been disappointed if I hadn't already known he was spineless. Besides, I really do hate hats indoors.

Justin sat on the floor. I liked him because he was always losing fights. Sometimes I'd goad him into it a little, but I'm sure he didn't mind because he liked the thrill.

I drank vodka out of a coffee mug while we passed Justin's pipe around. There was a knock at the door. My friends fell quiet and I peered through the peephole.

I saw an unfamiliar face with the angles and stubble of a movie star and the over-wide grin of a madman. I opened the door and grinned back.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Drew,” he said. He seemed happy about it.

“Great!” I told him. “Come in.” I closed the door behind him and addressed the room. “This is my friend Drew,” I said. “Marian, Julie, please give Drew some room.”

I plucked the pipe and lighter out of Perry’s hand. He didn’t seem to notice. I walked over to Drew. He was taller than me. Blonde. His black t-shirt was tight across his chest.

“Do you smoke?” I asked.

“Weed?” he asked. I placed the pipe and lighter in his broad hand.

“Sure,” I said.

A few hours later I was sprawled against the wall, blinking through heavy lids at my few remaining guests. Drew, who was by now sitting next to me on the mattress, had developed a strange twitch: first his foot would jump and then a moment later he’d blink. It was mesmerizing.

“Jackson,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“How much for molly?” he asked.

“Who told you?” I asked.

“I want five,” he went on, smiling as if I hadn’t said anything at all.

“Who told you?” I asked again. I pushed myself up to my feet and addressed the room. “Do I sell drugs?” Three heads shook. Perry didn’t seem to hear me. I turned back to Drew, who wasn’t smiling any more. “Who told you, Drew?”

“I’ll come back later,” he said and stood to leave. I ignored him until his hand was on the doorknob.

“Twenty each,” I said to his back. He turned with his grin rekindled.

“Ha! I knew you’d come around,” he said. He extended his hand with such enthusiasm that I couldn’t help but take it.

“Anything for a friend,” I said.

When I was younger, my father spoke with authority about monsters.

There was the thing that waited at the foot of my bed, under the sheets, for me to grow tall enough for its fangs to reach my toes.

I sleep in a ball.

There were the clouds at night, which weren't clouds at all but masses of revenants. If the clouds were moving, the things were searching for their prey. When the clouds stopped, they had found him and were swooping down to bear him away.

I don't look up when I walk outside. Sometimes I can feel a grasping at my shoulders, a coiled fear.

He said he'd told James the same stories when he was my age. I believed him at first.

When I was eight, my father took me into the woods for a walk for the first time since James died. It was night and he carried the flashlight. There was no path. We reached a birch grove, the white bark like cold skin in the light-beam. The leaves in the breeze flashed faint silver like schools of fish. I heard a sound like waves. The breeze stopped and my father extinguished the light. He walked away and when I tried to follow he flashed me once in the eyes. I held out my hands and found a smooth tree. I clung to it as my eyes adjusted.

There is a German word, *eigengrau*, for the color we see in perfect darkness. It isn't black but grey, lighter than the night sky or a black object in the light because there is nothing to compare the darkness to. Hanging on the tree, I closed my eyes as they adjusted. When I opened them I saw a figure sitting on a log outside the birch grove.

I raised a hand. It didn't stir. I couldn't speak. I wanted to know if it was my father, but only if the answer was yes. The air was still but my every breath seemed snatched away into the deeper woods. After a while it stood and began to move. In the darkness I couldn't tell if it was moving toward me or away. My blood rushed with so much force that the tree seemed to pulse. I saw the thing had begun to head back the way I had come. I didn't know the way out on my own. As I followed it through the dark, I understood that no matter what form this thing took in the light, my father wasn't coming back.

I first met the burned girl early in my junior year, but it was a few months before I got around to texting her again. I asked if she wanted to watch a movie with me. She knocked on the door so soon that I knew she had come straight away. I sat on the edge of my bed when she came in. My laptop was open on my chair nearby.

"You made good time," I said, smiling. She smiled back-- sort of-- and approached timidly.

“Sit down,” I said. I patted the bed next to me. She did. She looked straight ahead.

“What are we watching?” she asked.

“*Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

“That’s my favorite movie.”

“Really?”

I knew it was, of course. I’d looked it up online. Her profile picture was a photo she had taken of her dog, Jasmine.

I stood up. I locked the door and turned out the light. She was lit up blue by the computer screen. Her raw skin didn’t look so bad in the dark. On the way back to the bed, I hunched over the laptop and started the movie. I pulled down my sheet and comforter and crawled in. I left a space for her in front of me.

“Join me,” I said.

She did. She was more comfortable in the dark. I moved by body close enough behind her that I could feel her heat. She eased back against me. I felt her hand moving on my thigh. I stirred against her. She slid her hand up between us and I caught it in mine.

“Watch the movie,” I said.

We watched in silence for several minutes. She pulled her hand away.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“Quiet,” I said. I draped my arm over her waist.

Silence again for several minutes. The movie’s volume was almost too low to hear. Their voices silent, Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard could have been dancing.

“Jackson,” the girl whispered. She turned and pressed herself against me. I didn’t stop her.

When I was in high school, my father asked me over dinner why I always leave the lights on.

“I don’t,” I said.

My father put his fork down. My mother kept on chewing, cow-like.

“Jackson,” he said, “You do.”

He was looking at me like I was a stubborn stain.

“Your father is right,” my mother said. She had food in her mouth. “I have to turn off

all kinds of lights in the morning. Your father gets up very early and it's very distracting to have all kinds of lights on." She swallowed. "I hate to think of what it does to our electricity bill!"

"Shut up," my father said without looking at her.

"I don't leave the lights on," I said.

"I didn't ask you *if*. I asked you *why*."

I didn't say anything. The tines of my mother's fork scraped across her plate. I stared over her shoulder at the china cabinet full of delicate moons.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

My father settled back in his seat. His chair creaked.

"Jesus," he said. He stared at the dark window as if it might help him. A few seconds of silence ticked by before my mother started prattling about her friend Beth's precious new dog. I could hear rain dripping from the trees outside and the occasional whoosh of a car making its way down the street. My mother stopped talking as my father stood up and walked into the open kitchen with his plate. He dropped it in the sink with a clatter.

"Hey, dad—" I began, but he cut me off.

"Spare me," he said. He strode over and leaned across the table toward me.

"Jackson," he said. "There is something wrong with you. I don't think you know it, but there is. Don't think I haven't been watching you." He was breathing heavily. He pushed back from the table and walked around it to stand behind me.

My mother's gaze flicked from my face to where I'm sure my father's face was.

"What your father means is that we're worried about you and—"

"That's not what I mean at all," my father said, leaning in close to my head. "Can't you feel it too? He has this disgusting smell on him." I stared flat-eyed at my mother. She gulped. "Tell me, son, do you love anything? Anything at all?"

He grabbed the top of my head with one hand and twisted it both ways.

"That's right," he said. "You don't and you never will. Do you know why?" He took his hand off my head and put it on my shoulder. He leaned in close to my other ear. His breath smelled like meat. "Because you're like me." He pointed over my shoulder at my mother, who was staring at her plate.

“Do you love her?” he hissed. “Take a look at her face. What has she ever done for you? What is she worth? She used to be pretty once, you know. Now look.”

The bags under her eyes were wet with tears and her soft body shuddered with quiet sobs. The hairs on her upper lip shook like catfish whiskers.

“Do you love her?”

“No,” I said, and it was true.

My father patted me on the shoulder.

Drew came back every few weeks for the rest of freshman year to buy more molly, but it wasn't until sophomore year that we became friends. Whenever I had people over, somehow he knew. He came to see me. Only once did he get drunk enough to tip his hand, to whisper that he wanted to fuck me, but it was obvious enough. I taught him a lesson with the Maglite I kept in my desk in case my guests got unruly. He was big enough to stop me if wanted to. He left with a broken rib and a grin and I loved him for it.

He took to following me around, not like a puppy but like a pit bull. His lust for me made him a snarling enforcer. When a guy tried to start something with me for fucking his girl, Drew would hold his arms while I chastised him with the Maglite, which I kept on a loop hanging from my belt.

After midterms that year was the first time we had to go after a professor. I had taken three days to write this paper for art history. It was about the painting of Saturn devouring his son by Goya. I had shuddered with the power of it while I wrote it and Professor Davis had given me a B. It was a good paper. It was important to me. I decided to remedy the situation.

Professor Davis kept a tiny vial on her desk. It was filled with what looked like sunflower seeds but what were actually, as she explained to us, hand-painted ceramics commissioned by some Chinese artist. Her late husband had gotten them for her from an exhibition of thousands of them in New York. At times she would hold the vial between her palms while she talked as if to warm it. Evidently it was important to her.

They weren't as easy to crush as I expected. At first I tried to grind them between her desk and the butt of the Maglite, but all that did was strip off the paint. Eventually I had the idea of putting them under the legs of a chair and asking Drew to sit on it. We swept the

powder onto a piece of paper and funneled it back into the vial.

As with Drew, I first met the burned girl when she was a guest in my room. Natalie brought her in. Natalie was a girl I'd met in class and taken home a few times. She was thin and dark-skinned. I had liked her casual cruelty toward the dumber kids. She practically sparked with spite. A line of thin, dark hairs led down from her navel. She'd caved quickly and that's why she lost me. A good lover pushes back. She still came around and I didn't stop her. No reason to turn away friends.

Natalie led the burned girl in like a sacrifice, which I suppose she was. She stood just inside the doorway and blinked at Drew and me, who had been talking over a few drinks. I stood to greet them.

"Natalie!" I called as I walked over to them. "How are you?" I glanced at the burned girl and smiled. She was hideous.

"I brought a friend," Natalie said triumphantly. She winked at me.

"Why'd you wink?" I asked.

Natalie's eyes widened. The burned girl looked at the ground.

"I – I didn't," Natalie stammered.

"I could've sworn you did. Maybe you got something in your eye?"

"I don't think so..."

I shrugged good-naturedly. "My mistake, I guess" I said. I extended a hand to the burned girl. Her hand was cold but looked normal enough.

"I'm Jackson," I said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Thanks," she said. Her voice was higher than I expected, girlish. Her eyes were blue.

"You have beautiful eyes," I said. I couldn't tell if she blushed.

"Thanks," she said again, quieter than before, "I get that a lot."

I invited the girls to sit down on my bed. I made them both drinks. They demurred but I insisted they accept. I like to be a good host. The room was silent for a while except for the clink of ice.

"What's that?" the girl finally asked, pointing to the Maglite on my desk.

"Just a flashlight," I said.

“Well, yeah,” she said, “but why do you need such a big one?”

“Monsters,” Drew murmured. He was very drunk. Embarrassing. I made a mental note to discuss this with him later.

“It was a gift from my father,” I said. “He gave it to me when I went to college. When I was a kid he used to hold my hand when I was scared at night. He told me that, since he wouldn’t be around, I should have it so that the darkness would never stand in my way.”

Drew nodded drowsily.

“That’s so sweet,” the burned girl said. I swallowed.

“He was right about not being around anymore. He, uh, died last year in a—”

I was about to say “fire.”

“—in a car accident. So it’s important to me, you know? That’s why I keep it around.” I kept my gaze fixed on the flashlight for a moment longer before I looked back at the girl. My eyes glistened.

Does it make it any better that I wish I was telling the truth?

I didn’t see Drew for several weeks after he assaulted me. Eventually the first weekend of November rolled around, which meant that I had to make one of the monthly visits home that my father imposed on me. My parents live in a two-story brick house on the fringe of the Seattle suburbs. I don’t know if it’s old or made to look old. The street in front was slick from the rain and the trees were still and sodden. The engine of my old Toyota ticked as I made my way up the walk. Tiny raindrops caught in my hair like snowflakes. After a while in Washington you barely even notice the rain.

Over dinner, my mom made the usual chatter about relatives and the weather as my dad stared at her with barely concealed disgust. She had once been slender but was now only frail. Her skin hung pendulous from her thin bones as if everything inside her had liquefied. My father was tall, dark-eyed and ruddy. He drank three glasses of water with dinner. He insisted that we set an extra place at the table for my older brother. I was almost too young when he died to remember him, but that empty chair had been a presence at the table as far back as I could recall.

I stayed up late in my room reading, the overhead light casting yellow on the walls. The switch was on the wall next to my bed. I flicked it off without getting up and slept with

my head under the covers.

My father was eating breakfast when I came down to the kitchen in the morning. I put a pan on the stove and waited for it heat. My father ate with his back to the window, watching me. I didn't look back. My heart clenched when he pushed back his chair and carried his plate into the kitchen. I scurried to the other side of the kitchen island and took a block of butter from the fridge as he ran the faucet over his plate. The butter was cool and heavy in its wax paper wrapping. I watched the tendons jump in his hairy forearms as he scrubbed the plate clean with a sponge. I put the butter down. He looked over his shoulder at me, his thin lips drawn down at the corners. If only I could flick the lights on and make him disappear with the rest of the monsters.

I smelled burning and turned to remove the dry pan from the heat before it scorched. When my fingers touched the hot panhandle I froze. I looked over my shoulder. My father had gone back to his work, his head shaking back and forth as he scrubbed. I looked at the rough metal of the pan and the sharp blue tongues of flame reaching up for it. I hefted the pan, padded barefoot around the island, and brought it against the side of his waggling head. He collapsed away, flinging the sudsy fork against the fridge. The faucet sprayed sideways over the counter as if its neck had been wrung. He held his ear and blood leaked from between his fingers like pitch. His head snapped toward me. It looked like he was holding it up with his hand like a palmed basketball.

The heat of the metal bit suddenly into my hand and I dropped it. My father pushed toward me. He took hold of my wrists and held my hands up before me as if I should see them. His blood ran down one arm as I struggled. He wrenched my wrists in opposite directions, forcing me to my knees with my palms upwards like a penitent. I knew he was staring at me and I looked down where one knee lay on the pan. Only then did I notice warmth bleeding through my pants. It bloomed into coursing electric pain. I tried to push away but could manage only a full-body shudder as if I was freezing to death.

My father released my wrists and I fell against the kitchen drawers. I stared at the drawer pull, a chunky jewel of cut glass. I could see my father's legs through a scrim of smoke. The smell of burning hair rose to my nostrils. Further down the counter, the water from the faucet rolled down the face of the drawers and splattered the tile. The fire alarm keened and my mother shouted distantly "Smoke, smoke" as my knee pulsed with such pain

that I thought the skin must be roiling.

I drove back to campus on Monday morning and searched for Drew. I finally found him at the campus coffee shop. One whole wall of the place is glass and I could see him typing on his laptop through the windows. I tapped on the glass with my Maglite and everyone inside looked at me. Drew held my gaze. His eyes were dark. I went inside and sat across from him at the small table. I set the Maglite down in front of me and he closed his laptop.

“Let’s go. Come with me,” I said.

“Jackson, I—“

“Come with me.”

He shook his head. I rolled the Maglite back and forth like I was flattening dough.

“Drew, I’m giving you one more chance. Get up.”

“No,” he said. I stopped rolling the flashlight.

“What?”

“I’m sorry for what I did, but I’m done. You’re...” He struggled to find something to say.

“I’m your friend!” I said, a little too loud. People looked up from their laptops. I leaned closer. “Your best friend,” I hissed.

“No,” he said. His eyes welled up. “We’re not ‘friends’. You don’t have ‘friends.’”

I leaned back in my chair. A girl sitting behind Drew was looking at me. “What *ever* could you mean?” I said.

“There’s something wrong with you. I’m not like that.”

“I think you’re forgetting a little something,” I said.

“I know. I’m sorry for what I did, if you can even understand what that means. I’m sorry for what I did to you and what you made me do. I’m done.”

I didn’t know what to say. My face burned. A tall male employee had moved around the edge of the counter and stood watching my hands. Two girls in aprons whispered to each other behind the espresso machine.

“I never made you do anything.” I said. “We’re friends.”

“Don’t kid yourself.”

I stood up, the Maglite in my hand. I pointed it at his chest and opened my mouth to say something when he grabbed it from me and threw it to the ground. The lens shattered. The long body rocked slowly to a stop.

“Go home,” Drew said.

I summoned the burned girl to my room that night. I greeted her from my bed with a tilt of the head and a smile. The lights were off. She turned them back on. I asked her what she was doing. Standing there, leaning against the wall with her face running down her neck as if it were the most natural thing, she asked me to look at her. I told her I already was. I told her to turn off the light.

“Why?” she said.

“What do you mean? So you can come to bed.” I smiled again.

“That’s not why.”

“Come on, love.”

“That’s not why.”

I settled back against the wall.

“Ok, fine. That’s not why. Come to bed.”

“Say it.” She seemed to tremble. The effect was frightful.

I stood up, sending a flash of pain up my leg. I limped toward her but she didn’t back away.

“It’s because,” I said, stepping toward her, “In your case I would rather not see what I’m fucking.” I flipped the switch and darkness fell almost audibly. She put her hands up in front of her and I grabbed her wrists. We froze. Our chests rose and fell. Her wrists seemed made of bird bone in my grip but she didn’t pull away. I eased pressure against her and she pushed back, our arms held before us as if we were dancing. She looked back at me without fear or anger but with pity. I looked at her hands, her fingers tangled like some strange lily, and I did not know what to do with them.

The burned girl’s name is Mary Swanson. She had been beautiful once, but it was longer ago than I thought. Funny how I’d never thought to ask before.

One day when she was four, she ran around her kitchen while her twenty-year-old

birth mother got ready to prepare dinner for herself and her two daughters. The ignition device on the oven failed, so when Mary's mother turned the oven on it filled with flammable gas. Mary was standing in front of the oven when her mother flicked the switch on the garbage disposal. The old wiring behind the oven sparked and the gas ignited, sending blue goutts of flame out of the vents on the front of the oven and into Mary's face.

Surgery could have prevented some of the scarring, but her mother was afraid that it would cost too much or that Child Protective Services would take her away. If that happened, the check she received from the government each month would've gotten smaller. Mary's mother refused to call the hospital. Instead she draped wet washcloths over Mary's face and lashed her down to the mattress when she thrashed. The neighbors called the police. Her new foster parents took her to the hospital for a series of surgeries, but her face was too damaged at that point to salvage.

And people wonder why I keep the lights on at night.

My older brother died of meningitis when I was four. He was ten. My parents named him James, after my grandfather. Only a few traces of him remain: in a framed photo on my parents' dresser, in the Cub Scout uniform in my closet that I inherited and outgrew, in the spidery "James" inside the front cover of the books I grew up reading. Everywhere I went he went ahead of me. Whenever I rounded a corner, he disappeared around the next.

I used to sneak into my parent's room and stare at the picture. He looks like me at that age, except his cheeks are tanned and he's smiling. My mother and father stand on either side of him, smiling too, as if a cold park is a fun place to be. I'm not in the picture.

My mother explained to me a long time ago that I was far too young to remember him, but she's wrong. Now sometimes I wake and I can remember him. I stare up into the dark and I see him, just for a moment.

It's always the same. I look up at him and he looks down at me. He's tall, impossibly tall, but he kneels down so we can see eye-to-eye.

Carving Apples

Brittney Xu

Whenever my mind wanders to why we are no longer together
or what he is doing now
I think instead of
carefully and slowly
carving an apple with a small curved knife
each shaving so thin you can see the glistening in it
the buttery flesh giving away
to spirals of fragrant skin
Perhaps I will cut lengthways as well
pluck out a small dark seed entombed inside its chamber
put it in my mouth
and bite down
taste bitter

Engrossed

Amanda Mills

There is something about
The roundness of the “oh”
you forge before your mouth
fills with floating sweetness.
An “oh” later echoed in the form
that fills your mind, your palm
(spring wound tight, begging to uncoil)
as your lips graze the pencil’s eraser,
that perfect pink nub offered
for nipping, nuzzling, suckling.

There is something about
the boundlessness of the “oh”
even as it parses progress
into portions—
slice open a limb and see
a ring for every milestone.
And what is always the same
is your closing “oh,”
the quaking breath,
the denouement of recognition.

Pray for Rain

Ross Arlen Tieken

The soil under our grass was drier than the heart of a hay bale; we nodded at the few skinny weeds in respect, rather than tugging them out of the ground. We stopped trying to force the vegetables to drink the well-water. Shriveled squash like corpses' fingers poked out from under brown leaves. Dad in his Sunday get-up walked through the crooked rows, shaking his head at wasted tomato plants, wasted sweat, wasted time. The rest of my family waited for him in the car, ready to go to church, but I stayed behind watching him survey the drought-ridden field. He stood with his back to me, and I asked if there was anything I could do to help. I was home from school just for the summer.

“Pray for rain,” he said, turning his heel in the dust.

On the drive from Houston to Shiner, I had noticed the same injunction on every church sign, and no doubt on every preacher's lips—Pray for Rain.

In church, cattle farmers with their heads bowed looked out the window, almost expecting dark clouds to form instantly in the glare of the washed blue sky.

In rural Texas, no small farmer can afford lakes of irrigation or long sprinklers that hover like steel arms above the grass. They depend on the rain. Trouble is, rain in Texas is undependable. The farmers pray for gentle rain that will fall like a soft hand on the blonde-haired hay; the hard, arid ground softening under the warm touch of a spring shower. They want the rain to go on for hours, days even, as long as it's soft.

But here, it's either drought or storm. Desert or deluge. Under the endless sky, we've come to recognize the indifference of the weather. The clouds lumber by in the upper dome, deaf to the cries of supplication.

Farmers believe in the sky-god—wrathful and withholding, bountiful and benevolent, but essentially unknowable, terrible, and fiercely adored. He’s our God, and He’s just like we are, restless and untouchable, and shatteringly kind, as hard and soft as water. The all-being sky is over my head as well, with furrowed eyebrows of cirrus like some ancient idol. Couched in Christianity, the ancient storm god hides, a natural outgrowth of rural life.

My own prayers were about a different drought.

I’d studied religion for several years, and throughout my studies I had constantly examined, re-examined, rearranged, and rejected my own beliefs. Reality was important to me; God couldn’t be proven—therefore He was not real. Therefore, not worth my time.

But I’m all contradiction, changing seasons, my mind, my beliefs with the dramatic twists and turns of the weather on our farm. Texas has only two seasons: Dust and Mud. Spring and fall are temporary flashes of fine weather that are carried away on the first wind. The plants get confused, and sprout their spring flowers in the dead of winter if there have been a couple of warm days.

I wasn’t sure what I believed.

I’d tell people different things to avoid really digging. I used to think I was an atheist. But at church camp, at confirmation, I was a Bible-believing Christian.

From our farm, we could see the storm coming for miles. My house is boxed in with windows—crystal eyes looking out on the fields. From any room in the house I can look out the windows as a storm approaches and see the twisted wind biting the huisache and the deep gray-blue chill of the light and the clouds like dark angels lumbering towards an unknown destination, unmoved by the fear and praise of their booted suppliants, the shuddering fear of the livestock, the eerie unrest of the prairie.

That summer, the third worst drought in Texas history was made visceral for me. I tottered on the edge of belief, and the desiccated landscape became inseparable from my own turmoil, my own drought. And now I was watching the sparse hay flail under the wind like a ragged flag.

You need to know storms don’t always mean rain. They mean thunder and wind and broken fences and cool air, but not always rain. The first you know of rain is the smell. If you see the curved cloth of precipitation streaming to the ground from some grand thunderhead,

you know that by the time it reaches the farm, if it does at all, the cloud will be spent and will flee for the Gulf of Mexico, panting.

When a storm approaches, I take a deep breath and let the smell wash over me. If I smell the dust of parched pastures, if I smell the sweat of horses and the dry liquid of molten tar—if my lungs can hold to nothing but the arid stench of ultraviolet decomposition, the rain will go away, come again another day. But if I smell wet dirt, life bathed, death washed, rust streaming from old tin roofs, cattle cooling off before taking shelter in the hackberry copse—if I smell the tar being cleansed and the whole ground breathing a sigh of release, I know it's coming. When rain releases her pheromones I come out of the house to stand at the barbed wire fence. I take it in.

Over the years, I've studied mysticism, and realized that reality is less solid than I thought. I've studied humanity, realized that they were even more complicated than reality.

I studied God, and found that God defies being studied.

Lately, I've contented myself with Beauty. I've looked out over our prairie and I saw Her growing out of the ground, touching the stars with hands of gold. But the rain—the rain wasn't Hers.

The storm blackens the sky on one side like a bruise. I turn to the Southeast; it is as bright as day there. I turn to the Northwest, to find myself in blackest Night beneath the wrath of God. There is a buzz in the air like static electricity, then the lightning licks the cumulonimbus and hits the ground. Lickety-split. It splits open a mesquite tree miles away. My whole body is opened. I wait... two...three...four... Thunder crumbles the humming summer atmosphere. My ears are full of it. The sky is black but the prairie is still lit by the sun somehow.

My mother, who fears the lightning, creaked open the screen door and yelled nervously for me to come inside. The lightning was getting closer—she could tell by counting the seconds between strike and roll. And the rain was getting closer too. I went inside the house, and stood at the big living room window. First a fat drop hit the glass and shattered. Then another. Then the drops began to fall like nervous applause. The wind whipped around the porch and swung the hanging onions. Puddles crept under doors. We let in the

dogs—they rushed us, with tails between their legs. One of the windows in our living room doesn't lock closed anymore. The wind hits it against our house. It sounds like someone knocking.

Mom made some tea, and I sat by the window, mesmerized. The storm was for ten minutes; the storm was forever. The rain that the clouds gave wasn't a gift or curse—lightning strikes, we yield. Thunder claps, we bow. This is our prayer. Have mercy on us.

When the thunder abated and the lightning grew far enough to satisfy our mother, my little brother went outside to play in the mud. He looked at the sky for a minute and then got on his knees in a puddle, striking the mud, sending it splashing. Then he started dancing, *dancing*, in circles like a Comanche as he hollered “*Woo, rain, rain, woo, rain, woo, rain.*” It was a rain-dance, his primal release of fear, his celebration of rain.

“Thank God for the rain,” is the refrain heard across the pasture, a rumble in the air, as if the wind carried the words. From every church sign, from every preacher's mouth, an invocation is chanted to the sky-god, our God, Texas God.

What God did I believe in? The one from Vacation Bible School? Daniel and the Lion's Den? Jonah and the Whale? These stories didn't seem as important to me as the tangible miracles—the bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes in the fields near Easter-time, the beaches of South Padre Island, the crunch of leaves on the sidewalk, the chilled humid air, the mud of a Texas winter. The thunder and the lightning and the wind of a Northern, when the sweaty summer is wiped clean for the first time by a blast of cold air. When we were in the house, and the first Northern of the fall blew in, we would all run out onto the porch and throw our arms open and our heads back, welcoming the wind with the complete surrender of our bodies. Is that any less miraculous than the raising of Lazarus? We're raised from the dead once a year.

“Thank God for the rain.” It's an exclamation and a command; all must show their gratitude, or else the rain may not come again for many weeks.

For me, the storm comes before the calm. What my faith needs is gentle rain, a soft and constant flow, warmed and enlivened by intermittent sunshine. But my mind is Texas. It's desert or deluge for me. Most of the time, I'm parched for God, always looking up in awe at

the boundless sky above me, always on the verge of tears for its indifference. But every once in a while a black cloud appears on the horizon, and I smell the coming rain. I sink to my knees and open my mouth and I taste the rain.

Oh God! come and soak me in your boundless presence. I build an ark and prepare to float in the flood.

But then it passes and I am left with the prospect of drought and dust, thirsty soil. Even though I can't depend on the rain, I'll keep planting. I'll keep praying.

Ann Beattie

Ann Beattie is renowned for her writings on the disillusioned, upper-middle-class generation of the 1960s. Her works have been featured in four O. Henry Award Collections and in John Updike's The Best American Short Stories of the Century received. She has received awards for excellence from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a PEN/Bernard Malamud Award for excellence in the short story form. She holds an undergraduate degree from American University, a master's degree from the University of Connecticut and is currently the Edgar Allan Poe Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Virginia.



In the late 70s and early 80s you called yourself a short story writer, not a novelist. Having written many more novels, as well as a “teleplay” and the hybrid work that is Mrs. Nixon, how would you characterize yourself at this point in your career? Would you still say you are primarily a short story writer who writes novels?

Yes. (And I hope humility becomes me.)

In the first few years of your career you were very resistant to being grouped with other writers, but you have also talked a lot about the influences of people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald on your work and your view of American society. Would you say, now, that contemporary writers influence your work? Do you think you fit into a movement, genre, or other type of category, or do you still avoid those generalizations? What (or who) do you like to read when you're not writing?

I thought many of the comparisons were not on-target, even if they might have been flattering (Cheever and Updike). I continue to think that the tone and the shape of a story is a very individual thing. I was influenced by Hemingway and by Fitzgerald, because I learned from them about the importance of things omitted (esp. from Hemingway). Hemingway, though,

learned this (in part) from Turgenev – so I was just in the line of descent. I wouldn't say that contemporary writers influence my work so much as they sometimes inspire me and make me feel not so lonely, and that it's always energizing to admire good people. Tone is very important to me, and I don't really think I sound like anybody else, for better or for worse. Oh, sometimes, sure – there are phrases and ways of observing that are just in the air. But I wouldn't benefit, personally, from some grouping, so I don't spend much time thinking about it. What I like to read when not writing? All kinds of stuff, including magazines (Harper's; the New Yorker; Paris Review; Granta; Ecotone). I admire so many writers, but I'm sure to be first in line for anything from Geoff Dyer, Aleksandar Hemon, Edmund White, Louise Glück, and friends like Debra Nystrom, Susan Wood, Gregory Orr, Charles Wright . . . more writers than I can name. The book that has knocked me out most recently is "The Pilgrim Hawk," by Glenway Wescott. Wow.

You said in 1980 that you considered yourself a feminist, but that you felt feminist activists would want to shake many of your female characters. Do you still consider yourself a feminist? Would you call yourself a feminist writer?

I'm a feminist. I'll leave it to others to say whether I'm a feminist writer. I do resist categories, as mentioned above. Not that I think I'm above such generalizations, just that they aren't personally very important to me.

Much of your work concerns characters' private lives - secret thoughts and desires - and how those affect their relationships. Do you think a person can ever truly know another person? Do you know everything about your characters, or are there facets to them that are beyond your purview?

I would risk sounding pretty smug if I said that "Yes, you can really know another person." I'd be asking for trouble . . . Andre Dubus's wonderful story "The Fat Girl" is an interesting view on that subject, among the many other things it is. I think that sometimes people don't articulate to themselves their secrets – that they're not all willfully kept, conventional "secrets" – and that complicates the issue of whether someone other than that person

can know more than the person. I guess psychoanalysis would have disappeared if it was universally agreed that that was true. I certainly don't feel that I know everything about my characters. Or even that I know everything about stop signs.

You have said before that your characters often contain pieces of your own friends and reflect the circles you run in. In Mrs. Nixon you write creatively about an historic woman with a very public persona; you mentioned in an interview that this type of writing helps you examine your own preconceptions and test your writing. How would you compare writing about Pat Nixon to writing about some of your more familiar characters? How did it test you?

She seemed so unlike me, she seemed a possible foil. I guess I might have ended up thinking otherwise, but in many ways she did seem more familiar to me than I would have guessed, when I began researching. Yet I was never trying to get the “real” Mrs. Nixon down, any more than, say, Donald Barthelme was trying to expose the “real” Batman in “The Joker’s Greatest Triumph” (or the “real” Robert Kennedy in the magnificent “Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning”). To me, those stories are about our assumptions, as much (or more than) they are about the real people or characters, who are points of departure. To involve yourself in such a project at all probably means that at some unconscious level, you’re testing personal assumptions. I don’t see the world differently now, through Mrs. Nixon’s eyes, or anything like that – but I do see that I’ve articulated some things I would never have written about if I hadn’t decided to test my assumption that she was Other.

How has returning to teaching affected your writing? Do you feel like you have significantly less time and energy to devote to your craft? What made you come back to teaching after being somewhat disillusioned with the academy?

Well, it’s always difficult for writers to read a lot and absorb a lot and admire a lot and still remain distinct from those things, not absorb them. In many cases, I’m just so reassured to find that many of my students are very bright and keen and capable readers, which makes me despair less about the level of reviewing and criticism that exists now. May they all go forth and be great, illuminating reviewers. They know how to read.

In interviews you've mentioned that you write when you're inspired rather than using a stringent schedule, yet you are prolific. What inspires you? How does inspiration play into your writing? What do you do if you have a deadline but no inspiration?

Intermittently prolific, but because of the way things are timed (in terms of publication) it can seem there is a lot of work, all at once. Or am I deceiving myself a bit here? I'm not a mystical person, but it seems to be courting disaster to admit you're on, or have been on, a roll. I did write more, in quantity, when I was beginning – it was a game, on some level, and just by doing, I was teaching myself so much. Now, I am on to my evasions and tricks – perhaps hyper-aware, sometimes – and that can be dismaying, though of course I try not to fall into my own trap. Sometimes a change of place inspires me; rarely to write about that place, but to surprise me into remembering the place this is not. The flip side of that is that it can become a habit, too much moving around. Writers will do anything to avoid writing. In terms of deadlines, I only have them for non-fiction. Nobody knows what fiction I'm writing or even asks much. I like the non-fiction deadlines, because they're like an assignment I can respond to, if I'm lucky. That wouldn't be the same with fiction. There, I really am at the mercy of inspiration. I write when I can't not write.

The Talk

Rachael Petersen

The Sex Talk my older brother received in high school when he started dating his first girlfriend – and unbeknownst to us his future wife – is legendary. The details have been lost in time or distorted in the ways most families enshrine their finest moments. In some versions, my mother administered the wisdom; in others, my father. In the most popular rendition, my mother began the sentence, my father clairvoyantly finishing the final clause, tag-teaming for a dramatic finish:

“Jason, if you’re gonna be stupid... *don’t be stupid.*”

The simplicity! The cleverness! It was as if parents and son shared secret language or an inside joke, namely that if they both avoided directly talking about sex, perhaps the need to discuss it would cease to exist altogether.

Generations of Petersens to come would marvel at my parents’ linguistic agility, their swift dodging of a Hallmark moment of mutual embarrassment effectively reducing the experience to eight simple yet enigmatic words (a few contracted for good measure.)

Perhaps my parents – believers in trickle down economics – saw no need to address the issue again with their second child. I received no direct advice on the matter. So although The Talk wasn’t directed at me, I grappled with their advice to my brother for years, as if I were on an inevitable collision course with stupidity myself. Stumbling through all types of stupid, I have somehow emerged as a grounded college student who inhabits “sexually-liberated” third wave feminist circles. My philosophy on sex diverges dramatically from that of my parents’. Namely, I find that stupidity – the “unstupid” kind – can not only be fun, safe, and productive, but downright necessary.

Even as the responsible hedonist I have become, I sometimes catch myself recounting the famed Sex Talk to my fellow feminist friends, my eyes twinkling with the memory of the brilliantly efficient, yet slightly permissive eight-word ordeal. My “sisters” are not so impressed. “That’s all they told you?!?” they gawk. “Way to absolve themselves of all risk and responsibility! Sheesh.”

Others gasp, “your parents damned you to a life of sexual ignorance and dissatisfaction by avoiding the topics of contraceptive methods, female pleasure, sexual communication and the pros and cons of monogamy.” One New Mexican friend, who attended a small arts high school in the O’Keeffe-ian desert, admitted her sex talk even touched on selecting a vibrator (a miracle I did not discover until my late teens). She quips, “Where did you learn about sex toys? The produce aisle?”

While slightly angered by their responses, I admired their advanced sexual literacy; I longed for it in the way born-again Christians wish they had seen the light just a few decades earlier. But no one could deny that I had climbed the furthest out of the pit of ignorance. Despite my parents’ grandest efforts, I had turned out pretty damn *normal*. In fact, if a friend had told me these same words were their sole sexual education growing up, I would retort with similar disgust and incredulity. But what these girls do not, and cannot, understand is that The Talk was the closest I could get to a contraceptive “how-to” in my small, conservative Texas town. Much like sex in Victorian England, sex in our dusty railway town was everywhere to be had but nowhere to be discussed. If nothing else, The Talk allowed a little room to be stupid, just not doubly so.

While sex is never any parent’s favorite dinner-time topic, it is my theory that Southern, and in my case, Catholic, parents have to craft a unique strategy for avoiding the topic while sneaking in veiled advice as insurance for a future “I-Told-You-So”; They reveal just enough to claim they warned you, but too little for you to understand the threat. Consider it a type of pre-emptive educational scolding.

The Petersen household was not the only local source for sexual un-information. Abstinence-only education programs had swept through Texas schools like “the clap”, infecting 94% of districts – mine included. Beginning in elementary school, my public sex education adhered to a single grand mantra: “don’t do it.”

For whatever charges of inadequate sexual counsel leveled against my parents, my public education proved doubly guilty. While the thought of sex ed in middle school typically evokes images of bananas, giggles, and clumsily placed condoms, “Worth the Wait,” as our abstinence-only curriculum was alliteratively known, examined everything *except* sex: negative consequences, STDs, pregnancy, economic burden, and social stigma. We received grades for word-association exercises where “causes” had to be matched with their corresponding “effects” on the other end of the page: premarital sexàbaby and STD; babyàfinancial strain; financial strainàalcohol and drug abuse; alcohol and drugs abuseàincarceration. No matter what the social ill, “Worth the Wait” could link it to premarital sex in a way that seemed utterly logical, if not completely inevitable, to any level-headed elementary school kid. Lessons often incorporated the misfortune of the missed prom as the pinnacle of pregnancy-induced social suicide – a surprisingly powerful tactic in a Texas town where girls

dreamed of prom like Rick Perry dreams of the presidency. After all, who creates sleek, strapless satin dresses with beach-ball compartments built into the mid-section? And, more importantly, who would want to wear them?

Besides a 24-hour Wal-mart and a bowling alley that burned down in my late teens, Temple boasted surprisingly few options in the way of adolescent entertainment. To combat boredom as a slippery slope to sex, Worth The Wait compiled an online list of “101 Fun Things to Do (Besides Having Sex).” Among exciting alternatives to coitus, Worth the Wait proposed 7) having a potluck dinner, 15) starting a collection 55) taking a nap, 61) going to a flea market and “searching for cool stuff,” and 95) rearranging your room. While my friends and I frequently referenced the list (out of sheer boredom), in retrospect I realize it might as well have been called “101 Reasons Why Temple Teens Have So Much Sex.”

Given the technical nature of chastity, science teachers took charge of abstinence teachings. My particular eighth grade IPC teacher suffered an unfortunate allergy to soap. According to previous years’ students, she had to bathe in mayonnaise and shampoo with egg whites – a hypothesis that needed no other vetting than the rigors of the olfactory method. Every seventh period, students fought to sit near the rumbling air conditioning window unit, hoping for a brief, cool respite from the lingering stench, worsened by the Texas heat. When the “Worth the Wait” portion of class came around, I doubted Mrs. Dakote’s authority on the matter of sex; I assumed her pervasive odor precluded the possibility of any and all intimate human contact. How could she know it was worth the wait?

I almost forgot the smell altogether during my favorite part of the curriculum: the “refusal skills” role-playing – scenarios intended to mimic pressures we might face to have sex. Mrs. Dakote recited various “come-ons” from hypothetical boyfriends to which we responded with abstinence-saving “come-backs.” I didn’t even have a boyfriend, but as an aspiring thespian, I relished in these exercises, adding my own flair of exasperation: “No! Is that all I am to you? A body?!? I’m waiting until I’m married!” The line between method acting and preparation for the future blurred as I fantasized about my own marital consecration. These routinized denials caused me to not only expect, but yearn for the inevitable awkwardness that would surround two equally-untouched, blissful virgins.

Recently, my parents bribed me not to send our local home newspaper an incendiary letter to the editor concerning this abominable ongoing approach to sexual “education” (if we kid ourselves enough to call it that). Perhaps they did not want the town, including the creator of the curriculum – a family friend who lives down our street – knowing their daughter was now a libertine. They also liked to hold it over my head that in the seventh grade, I was sold. Call it scare tactics, call it Catholic

guilt, call it common sense, but I was once a cheerleader for chastity (belt not included).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I invoked the “missed prom” trope for a poem I submitted to the annual “Worth the Wait” Fine Arts Contest, a competition challenging students to glorify the values of abstinence in myriad forms: music, painting, poetry, and mixed-media. My epic piece, written in AB rhyme scheme, traced the downfall of a head cheerleader, her social life ruined by unwanted pregnancy and a revoked prom queen title. The cause-and-effect exercises seem to have stuck.

My middle-school mind was blown when I won first place, \$500 and the honor of reading my work at the awards ceremony held at the local hospital where, embarrassingly, my dad worked. In the moment, I didn’t care. My recitation dazzled. Sporting opaque black tights, a grey pencil skirt, and a stiff white dress shirt buttoned to my neck, I articulated each line of my poetic purity with the utmost chaste pride.

I rarely publicize this accolade. As the current director of the women’s center and feminist initiatives on my campus, I fear the reputational implications of this knowledge in the way I was taught in middle school to fear STDs, babies and wrecked proms. My friends joke that if I had somehow predicted my impending sexual revelation, I could have invested the prize money and bought the world’s fanciest vibrator or a lifetime supply of condoms years later.

When we completed the “Worth the Wait” curriculum, our science teacher presented us with wallet-sized abstinence pledge cards, which we signed like decency debit cards and stowed away to divert future steamy transactions. The idea was to whip out the cards (instead of our members) when moments turned dangerously sexy. Signing the abstinence pledge, I imagined halting a snowballing back-seat situation in the mall parking lot with an attractive high-schooler with football shoulders. “Oh gosh, geez, I’m so sorry, this card proves I already pledged my chastity to my 7th grade teacher. I’m worth the wait!” You get the idea.

Much to the delight of the curriculum administrators, our school district offered a separate bus for transporting expectant young mothers to and from campus. A yellow school bus like any other, you might miss it were it not for the rows of baby seats peeking out from the back windows. The irony of this seemed to be lost on the teachers, who highlighted the lumbering bus as a harsh exemplification of the grave effects of premarital sex.

The bus proved a convenient self-fulfilling prophecy. Each time it rolled by the classroom window, we would freeze in solemnity, almost pity, as if these young women were inmates on death row inching day by day toward the end: childbirth. Or, so we were supposed to believe. The young girls limped into school an hour and a half late with invisible copies of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and tomes of unheard concerns shackled to their swollen ankles. Judgmental looks of school administrators weighed on their backs; if you couldn’t identify them by their bulging bellies,

their inability to stand up straight and maintain eye contact bespoke their shame.

The attitude toward the pregnant bus passengers shifted only slightly when we reached high school, morphing into a privileged sort of *schadenfreude*: the rich girls got silent abortions, the boys blissfully got away with it all, bragging. The pregnant bus rolled by.

While the curriculum formally stopped by junior year, the school remained diligent. Parent and faculty chaperones at school dances wielded yellow rulers like swords of propriety, ready to measure the distance between girls' derrières and boys' crotches. "Ladies don't dance like that," they scoffed, cautioning, "you don't want to end up on the pregnant bus, do you?"

In my mind, Temple is a place of silence: at school and in my home, no one discussed pleasure or why people bothered having sex in the first place. I knew I was "Worth the Wait" – but what was I waiting for? It took me years to fill that vast silence with the voice of my own politics of desire: to decouple sex from marriage, to research safe practices, and to see myself as an empowered stakeholder in my own experiences, instead of a diligent gatekeeper to an overvalued "virginity." This transition required fumbling college hands, reflective mornings, and making peace with thighs I always thought were too big. It took wine. It took moving away to college and finding a community of women that believes our sexual decisions have no bearing on our value as human beings.

Growing up, sex had to be either a silent confession to a wrathful God I didn't believe in or a pledge to a protective patriarchy I would soon outgrow. Perhaps I had to get as far away from that grotesque geography of shame in order to discover my own intimate geography of pleasure; In a small rural village in the Andes mountains, at nineteen years old, I learned to speak Spanish as I uncovered the vocabulary of my own desire. One night after dancing for hours to Huayno music, I recited a hollow "come-back" – this time to a real boyfriend – for the last time. It felt inauthentic, like I was speaking someone else's language: "No, I can't. I'm a virgin." That night, I finally ditched the method acting I had once perfected back in that stinky science classroom. I realized that I had given myself my own "Talk" long ago: "Rachael, be stupid. *Live.*"

When my mother learned of my Peruvian "deflowering," she berated me for giving myself away to someone who "wasn't even special." I unpacked the dirt-caked clothes and sweat-caked memories from my suitcase as she poured it full of guilt, as only Catholics know how. I mostly ignored her tirade, until her voice softened at the end, adding "but...just so you know...I wasn't a virgin when I got married either."

A few years ago, I developed a jaw condition that resulted in a painful, audible "pop" each

time I open my mouth. One Christmas, I demonstrated this unfortunate development to Jason and his new wife (with whom, I imagine, he was *never* stupid).

My little 14-year-old brother – the third and last of the Petersen children to graduate the “Worth the Wait” program – walked in on the scene. He was the same age I was when I wrote the chastity poem, and equally uptight. Smirking, he nonchalantly observed, “it must sound super awkward and percussive when you give a blow job.”

Just like that. That blasé.

I’m not sure which surprised me more: the fact that he thought of such activity, or the fact that he assumed I engage in it. Jason and I exchanged glances, shocked by the statement that just escaped the mouth of our “tween” little brother, perhaps a more honest and real than any exchange we’d had with our parents or teachers. How had he gotten the amatory jump-start we missed? Was he not passing his days in fear of missed proms and bulging baby buses?

“It’s okay, guys,” said Joshua, pre-empting a potential scolding or amazed congratulations. “I grew up with the internet.”

The Poet's Will

Claire Schaffer

I will write poems
On thin brown paper
And bequeath them to doorsteps.

Burger King,
One small Coke
And 200 napkins.

Sick with dreams and sonorities,
I will drench these napkins with my interiors,
Plaster them on strange exteriors,
Door by door,
Then wither.

In hands beneath porch lights,
My brown paper napkins will unfurl by night,
Bloom in minds, be transplanted
Into trashcans.

Somewhere in a garbage dump
My manuscripts will flock,
Wadded into crumpled origami cranes
That cannot fly.

But their rain sodden wings will mulch the landfill
And a green bud will sprout,
Tiny like a syllable,
The cranes' celestial desires pulling it
Upwards, towards the sun.

The Excursion

Marie Chatfield

The excursion does not go as planned. Highway construction has backed up traffic on every mountain curve. The omnipresent vendors amble past the stalled cars, peddling their wares to the passengers inside. One stands directly beneath their stopped bus for a few seconds, holding up her packages of dried mango and popcorn balls with such a forlorn expression that the woman reaches out the window with a fistful of *lempiras* and purchases one of each. The man knows that this is a mistake, as was letting the woman sit by the window in the first place. He holds his tongue but declines with an upturn of his nose when offered a share of the goods. He has not forgotten that their Nalgene bottles are empty, the carefully purified water consumed within the first hour of the trip. He can already see her quietly nursing her parched throat and dreaming of glasses of clear American water, straight from the tap without the noxious white mist and lingering aftertaste of chlorine tablets.

The woman finishes her snack, folds the empty plastic bags and deposits them in her pack. She reaches for a Nalgene, remembers, and then shrugs. She buys a can of pineapple juice from the sad-eyed boy who next walks past their window. The man closes his eyes and counts the drops of sweat slowly rolling down the backs of his legs and pooling at the top of his socks.

An eternity of sitting side-by-side passes, and at last the bus stops in Guamma, deposits them in the street with their bags in hand and moves on with a sickly exhaust of fumes. The man shakes out his legs, stretches his arms above his head, and cracks his neck from side to side. He follows the woman toward a stable of taxis and begins negotiating with the driver closest to them. The woman half-listens to the stilted Spanish and pokes her tongue around in the juice can's metal recess, trying to pick out the last stubborn piece of

pineapple. Finally, a price is reached, and they pile their bags and their bodies into the taxi, followed by a short *mestizo* girl wearing a tight pink shirt and a small yellow backpack. She and the driver exchange words like bullets and he begins to drive. The cab juts its nose into traffic before lurching and bucking across the pits in the road.

The man and the woman and the girl cannot fit comfortably in the back seat. The man is too tall; he must bend his neck and stoop, and even then his head slams against the top of the taxi every time it goes over a bump. He rubs his neck to ease the cricks, and the woman picks at the torn leather of the seat, and the girl pulls out her cell phone and jabbars away until her *saldo* runs out and the call drops. But her friend calls her back, so there are only twenty-three seconds of silence. The man knows because he counts. He will remember those twenty-three seconds as the best twenty-three seconds of the entire ride in that damn clown car.

When at last the taxi pulls into the drive of Hotel Agua Azul, the man and the driver argue over the cost again while the woman gets out with their bags and takes off towards the lobby. The girl remains inside the backseat, talking on her cell phone and playing with the zipper on the small yellow backpack. The driver is paid more than the fair cost and the man joins his wife inside.

The lobby is quiet and dark. A silent young man stands behind the front desk and solemnly checks their reservations, handing over the key to Cabana 2. It faces Lake Yojoa, a black expanse of water which yawns across the landscape. The walls of the cabana are stark white with fresh paint and the shower has hot water, even if the toilet stinks. The woman walks around the small cabin, opening cabinets and examining their barren interiors before slamming shut the doors. She turns on the television, a black box smaller than a microwave with an unnaturally thick plastic border around the screen. There is only static.

They dress for dinner silently. He showers, washing the grime of travel from his skin and letting the stream pound against his aching muscles. He feels his irritation wash down the drain with the sweat. The hot water steams up the bathroom mirror and she cannot see to put on her makeup. She perches on the side of the bed and balances a compact with a mirror on her left palm while putting on eyeliner with her right hand. The line is slightly crooked.

They walk together down the winding path to the patio restaurant and he whistles into the dusk. The hostess smiles at them as they walk up the stairs and seats them at a table

overlooking the sunset on the lake. There is a scattering of other patrons speaking softly or sitting at the bar. When the waiter arrives the man tries to order in Spanish. The woman looks away; she does not know the language but even she winces at his flat American vowels.

“*Queremos compartir el pescado,*” the man sounds out carefully.

“You want two plates, yes?” replies the waiter in his own accented English.

“*No, no, solo un plato de pescado, por las dos.*”

“But she wants a plate too?”

“*Sí, mi esposa quiere un plato. Pero solo un plato de pescado.*”

“Two plates, one fish?”

The man nods and grins at the waiter. He is proud of himself for speaking Spanish and the waiter smiles back, pleased to use the English he has been learning from one of the cooks. The waiter brings them their drinks, a local beer for the man and a glass of wine for the woman. Soft music – the tinny strains of guitars on a radio – wafts up the stairs.

“Isn’t this romantic?” says the woman. “We should dance.”

The man looks around at the patio, and shakes his head.

“There are other people here.”

“It’s nearly empty. Come on – what did we take all those salsa classes for if not to dance?”

“It’s not a salsa song.”

“What sort of song is it then?”

“I’m not sure, but I know it’s not salsa.”

The woman sips her wine and taps her feet to the beat. Before she can argue further the fish arrives with an extra plate so that they can share. It is good but not excellent. He attacks the white flesh with gusto while she picks at her plate delicately.

“It’s too hot to eat,” she announces. At the mention of the weather, his head perks up from the fish in front of him.

“That bus ride was hell, and the taxi was worse. Hasn’t anyone here heard of air conditioning?”

“I don’t know how you could stand to take a hot shower earlier.”

“I always take hot showers and cold baths, you know that. Too bad there’s no bath tub here.”

“There’s the lake. We could go for a night swim to cool off.”

He frowns and complains, “I packed my trunks at the bottom of my suitcase.”

“Who says we have to wear anything?”

They can hardly finish their meal and pay the waiter fast enough. He is scared of the alligators he has heard roam the lakeshore so they wrap their bare bodies in worn towels and tiptoe to the pool. There is no moon and so they can see nothing. The warm air caresses their legs and their faces and he is having a hard time waiting. He grabs her hand and pulls her to the deep end. Towels drop as they dive in. For one silent second beneath the surface, the man remembers the first time they went skinny dipping together. He sees their younger selves holding hands, suspended in the waters of a cool, clean stream just outside the small town where he’d grown up. He had brought her back to meet his parents, because he thought it might be serious this time, because he felt just a little bit drunk every time he touched her. He wonders if the feeling would be the same if he held her hand now and he reaches out blindly for her underwater. He finds her wrist and wraps his fingers around it as they emerge from the pool’s depths, weeds clinging to their hair and bugs skittering across the surface of the water. She screams and he yells and the mood is ruined.

In the rush for cover, the man’s clumsy feet knock the towels into the deep end. The woman is not pleased and tells him so. Neither of them is willing to face the murky waters again.

“You’re the man,” she announces to the darkness. “And in any case, it’s your fault that we don’t have towels anymore.”

“It was your idea to skinny dip in the first place,” he retorts and then shudders. “There’s probably staph and who knows what other kinds of microbes lurking in that pool. I’m not going in again.”

“How was I supposed to know that the pool hasn’t been cleaned? It’s standard procedure for hotels to upkeep their amenities.”

“Apparently not in this godforsaken hellhole of a country.”

“You’re the one who came up with the damn idea. I was perfectly willing to go to Miami again. But no – you had to insist on Honduras. Some anniversary this is.”

They both sigh, but there is nothing to be done but sneak back to Cabana 2 in the nude. They splay their arms across their bodies and scuttle from tree to tree. He can’t help

himself. He giggles.

“We look like a couple of Bonds, don’t we?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she whispers. His voice is too loud in the quiet. They will be seen.

“This will be funny in a couple of years, you know. A story to tell the grandchildren.” She doesn’t reply. Her silence stifles his laughter.

That night, lying side by side, the man wants to fill up the night air with possibilities and options but he knows that she won’t answer. He directs his silent questions upwards, toward the cracked ceiling through the fine green mesh of hastily-erected mosquito netting. He admires the way it forms a neat box around them, keeping out malaria and dengue fever and chagas.

In the morning she wakes up suffocating. The mosquito netting has collapsed in the night and now she is entombed. She thrashes, trying to free herself, and he sits up confused. She has only entangled them even more and he tries to get her to stop but by now she is panicking. She rips the net with her teeth, pulls it apart with her hands, emerges.

“That was our only mosquito net.”

He wants to admonish her, but his voice comes out resigned. She can’t stand it. She wishes he had just yelled at her so that she could defend herself. She defends herself anyway.

“I don’t care. I couldn’t breathe. I had to get out.”

“It’s okay, darling. We’ll just get another one at the store.”

The man knows that there will be no good nets at the store, that she has destroyed the only American net in the area, but he doesn’t push the issue. He just removes the mesh from his own limbs and walks into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He pretends not to hear the screen door shut but he leaves a note for her on the back of a bus ticket: *Gone to town to buy net*. When he leaves, he locks the door carefully behind him. He proceeds through his warm-up methodically and when he is done he begins to jog down the driveway back toward the main road. He remembers seeing what looked like a general store a few miles away. He thinks a short run will do him good.

She is not in the middle of lake, but far enough from shore to make the prospect of paddling the canoe back daunting. The burst of adrenaline has long worn off and now she is left only with aching arms and a strange queasiness. She listens to her ragged breaths with shame, remembering her college crew days when this workout would hardly be considered a warm up. She trails her fingers off the side of the canoe but remembers the alligators and pulls them back inside. Like a Disneyland ride, she thinks, "Please keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times."

She had once imagined taking children there for vacations. He would carry the girl on his shoulders and she would hold the boy's hand as they strolled down Main Street. They would all look up at the fireworks display in awe, they would scream in terrified joy on the rollercoasters, they would beg for an ice cream and she would relent because they had been so good and wasn't it nice to have a treat every once in a while?

The two of them have been trying for almost a year. At first she had thought that the pill was taking its sweet time to wear off. Then she had thought that they just had bad timing. Then she had tried to stop thinking about it at all. She knows that he has been worried, that he has made an appointment with the doctor for the week after they return from Honduras. She is not sure that she wants to go, to have a diagnosis, to have a discussion about their options. She wants to ask him if maybe this is a sign that they shouldn't have children. But she knows how much he wants a baby, more so than she ever has, and she is scared to make such a suggestion. She has not been able to talk to him the same way she has not been able to cry. She has not cried for months now. No tears have fallen from her eyes, not when she watched a showing of *The Notebook* on television, not when she grazed the top of her hand against the fully-heated oven, not when her childhood dog had to be put down a few weeks ago, and certainly not at night when she is isolated in her fears and doubts.

She does not cry now, either. She reaches over the side of the canoe, splashes her face with water and takes three deep breaths before rowing back to shore.

She has been sitting on the stoop of the cabana for eight minutes when he returns, empty-handed.

"Where have you been?" she asks, noting his running shoes.

"Went out to find a net. There weren't any. Didn't you get my note?"

“You locked me out.”

“I thought you had a key.”

“It’s inside on the bedside table.”

“So is the note.”

“Aren’t you going to let us inside? We only have forty five minutes before the bus to the falls.”

He pulls out his key from his pocket and jiggles it in the lock until the door opens. She jumps in the shower before he can. She shouts over the running water that she needs the time to wash and dry her hair. By the time her hair has been thoroughly rinsed there is no more hot water and only twenty minutes until the bus leaves. He spends the entirety of his brief shower cursing in colorful, if mispronounced, Spanish. She quickly blows out her hair, and they gather their day packs and travel guides and assorted currencies and the waterproof disposable camera she purchased in the airport.

They catch the bus with a minute to spare. He groans and shakes his head as they board and the damp tips of his hair fling droplets of water at her face.

“No air conditioning again. Damn public transportation,” he mutters.

“Hush, they might hear you!” she scolds him, tilting her head at the Hondurans scattered throughout the interior of the bus.

They both shut up for the rest of the ride when the passengers around them turn and stare. They pretend interest in the villages rolling past the window and the tour books sitting on their laps until the bus groans to a halt and dispenses its load on the street.

The man pulls out a map and the woman flips through the tour book.

“It’s this way,” he says, pointing south.

“The book says to go that way,” she responds, gesturing north.

“You can’t argue with a map.”

“The book was written by experts who have been here before. Are you even reading that map correctly?”

“Of course I am. I was a Boy Scout.”

She opens her mouth to respond, but an older man with a genial smile walks over and addresses them in perfect English.

“I couldn’t help but overhear. Are you lost?”

“No, we’re not. My wife is just confused by this book.”

“We’re looking for the Pulhapanzak Falls,” she interrupts. “Do you know where those are?”

“Of course,” the older man says, “You just follow this road east. It’s about a half mile walk, not very far at all.”

The couple thanks him and the stranger nods, ambling away in the opposite direction.

The walk to the falls is short but the road is dusty. He is wearing his running shoes, but she chose water sandals and her toes are soon covered in grime between the straps. Cars – trucks and small sedans with Japanese names and peeling paint – rumble past them on the road, kicking up small rocks and pebbles which sting their legs. He sees the park entrance first, the large wooden sign on the side of the road welcoming them. They pay their entrance fees and wander over to the assorted picnic tables and the counter selling snack foods and drinks, looking out at the banks of the river. It is wide and swift, the water a hazel-brown color like his eyes. They wander down the shore, following the direction of the flow. She walks a few steps in front of him, as if drawn along by the water. She hears the falls before she sees them. The roar of water is tremendous, a pounding and thrashing, anger in sound wave form. And then through a slight bend she sees where the river ends and white mists slowly rise skywards.

She spies a set of stairs and rushes to them. He follows closely behind her. The steps are each one-inch too small and their knees jar on the way down. She reaches the first landing and runs to the side, blocked from the drop-off by wooden posts in a mockery of safety. He joins her, fumbling in the daypack for the waterproof camera. They gaze upon the Pulhapanzak Falls in all their glory. The river does not just stop. It throws itself over a cliff violently, free-falling forever until suddenly crashing into the rocks below, breaking itself open into vapors and recollecting the pieces in rapids below the falls.

She is immobilized by the sheer force of the rage of the river. She stands, frozen. He snaps pictures of the falls from their perch on the side of the hill, takes a few steps back and captures her face in the frame, mesmerized. When the prints are developed weeks later back in the United States, he will pause when he picks up that picture. He will trace the outline of her face with his finger, will want to jump inside the frame and stand next to her again the

way that he is now.

“Señor, Señora, would you like a cave tour? It costs only 100 lempiras each.”

The melodic voice of the boy interrupts their private thoughts. He is slight and small, no more than 14 years old, wearing dampened cargo shorts and a thin shirt. His feet are bare and brown and calloused. They glance at each other and shrug.

“The book doesn’t mention any cave tours,” she says.

“It’s only five dollars apiece. Why not go? This could be our big adventure.”

She nods, smiling, and he counts out the bills and hands them over.

The boy grins and leads them down three more flights of stairs. They are downstream from the falls now and the noise is deafening. The boy follows a sidewalk sandwiched between the side of the cliff and a rickety metal fence until it stops at a small wooden structure. The boy reaches through the fence to a padlock and produces a key. He swings open the gate and gestures for the couple to follow him out. When they do, he closes the gate and locks it back. He points at the ground behind the wooden structure.

“Leave your bags here. We will get wet.”

The woman looks at the boy, unsure, but she can already feel mist from the waterfall grazing her face. The man glances around, sees that there is no one else in the area and places his bag on the grass carefully. She follows suit. The boy nods at them and takes off towards the waterfall. They stumble along behind him. The grass here is muddy and slick and the trail they are taking is little more than a glorified goat path.

The boy looks behind his shoulder, checks to make sure they are still following, and jumps down a series of rocks. He stops beside a small stream on the edge of the main river. The man is in front of the woman and goes down first, taking a short fall below. His tennis shoes slide on the slippery ground and he catches himself on a sharp rock, slicing his thumb at the base. He sucks in his breath and mutters a quiet curse. The woman leads herself more carefully down the drop.

They navigate the rocks until they reach the bank of the stream and the boy gestures for them to step into the water. It is cold against their ankles, almost like ice. The man’s shoes and socks are instantly soaked through. The woman grins when the cool water rushes in between her toes and she looks down and wiggles them. When she looks up she sees that the boy and the man have walked deeper into the current, heading upstream. She tiptoes across

the rocks in the stream, feeling the water pushing against her feet as if it wants to knock her down. It is futile, she thinks triumphantly.

The man and the woman wade further in until the water submerges her knees and darkens the cuffs of his shorts. The boy cuts on a diagonal path to a point where the current rushes through two large rocks, a mild rapid. He stands in the center of the gap and prepares to help them cross. The man wants to argue and does not want a small boy to help him. But the boy insists and the man agrees, grumbling. The woman follows behind him with the boy standing between her and downriver. When the bed of the stream suddenly sinks and the water pushes against her hips and her waist with a fury, the boy catches her before she tumbles down the rapids and helps her gain footing on the rocks again.

The man reaches out and pulls her up standing. The boy jumps out of the water nimbly. He walks them towards the cliff itself until they stand on a ledge in its shadow, their shoulders brushing the immense wall of rock. They are directly to the side of the falls and white mist violently sprays their faces like the cooling stations at amusement parks. The main river bubbles and gurgles at their feet. The boy drops into the water and holds a hand up. The man carefully jumps in and helps the woman. She perches on the ledge and lowers her body into the river. The water is even colder than in the stream.

The boy reaches for her hand and when she makes to pull away he shakes his head. "It is dangerous. We must all hold hands."

He shouts to be heard above the roar of water but she places her hand into his, not sure how he can save her from anything. She reaches out for her husband with the other. He grabs her smaller hand, engulfing it in his, twining his fingers through hers. He feels more than a little drunk, he feels invigorated and enthused, surrounded by cold water and barely able to hear anything above the tremendous roar of the water. The three of them in a linked chain walk deeper and deeper into the river, approaching the falls with their backs against the rocks of the cliff. They cannot hear anything, can hardly see anything for the drops of water attacking their eyes. The river deepens until is past their hips, past their waists, up to their chests. The cold penetrates the woman's bones and stops her heart and she's not sure that she can take any more of this – then they are underneath the falls.

The force of the water dropping from 140 feet above them is enough to shove her shoulders down towards the river. It churns about her legs and her arms, pushing her

forwards and backwards and sideways until she doesn't know which way is which. She stumbles, her foot catching on a rock, and she barely feels the sting of a cut. The water is so cold, so forceful; everything is washed out of her mind.

Her husband stands perfectly still, his arms at his sides, his fingers entwined in hers. He lets the water flood around him and penetrate his every pore. Every piece of grit, every mistake, every sin is being washed away. He is being made new, he thinks. They are being made new, being given a second chance. And standing there in the water, he knows that everything will turn out all right. He sees them holding hands, walking down a street, with a little boy on his shoulders and a little girl in her arms. He sees them eating dinner together and laughing, he sees them swimming as a family in the small, cool stream outside the town where he grew up. He sees them all and he smiles.

She lifts her face upwards and feels the arctic blast against her cheeks mix with tiny drops of warmth. She tastes a single speck of brine on her lips and she realizes that she is crying. A strange peace courses through her, settling into her bones as she realizes that she can make a fresh start on her own. She can stop worrying about trying to conceive, stop fretting about how she'll balance children and career, stop wondering if she's a terrible person and wife because she hasn't tried harder, stop feeling guilty every time he smiles at young couples with infants in tow.

She takes back her hands from the boy and the man and reaches her arms upwards to embrace the water. She sobs with relief, her mouth opening into an "O" as she sighs out and breathes in.

It is a mistake. The water rushes into her nostrils and her mouth and down into her lungs. She falls down with the pressure of it, feels as her body is shoved underneath the falls and against the rocks by the torrent, tossed backwards and forwards and spun around like clothes in a spin cycle. She feels the frantic grasp of fingers against her clothes but they cannot hold onto her for long and then the undertow spits her out and she goes tumbling down the river with the current, bouncing against the sharp boulders like a pinball.

He tries to follow her but he can't stop slipping on the rocks and so he half runs and half falls down the riverbed. He shouts her name as if it could stop her but the sound is lost in the waterfall's din. The river widens and shallows before him and soon he is sloshing through water that only reaches his knees. The eddies and rapids slow their furious foaming

until the river is calm and still.

He sees her then, the yellow hue of her t-shirt drawing his eyes. The way she floats facedown, she could be some tossed-aside rag doll. He stumbles to her and gathers her limbs in his arms, tucking her arms into his body and cradling her head against his chest. He carries her back towards the falls, climbs carefully back up the rocks and the stairs, and waits with her while the boy calls for help. He holds her close until the paramedics arrive and gently lift her from his arms.

He is left staring at the air in his hands. They look so lonely that he entwines the fingers of his left with those in his right. And when he closes his eyes he could almost believe that it is her hand in his if it weren't for the distant rumble of Pulhapanzak Falls.

Night of the Living

Anna Meriano

If I had to pick my least favorite time of day--the part I'd most like to rip the face off of and devour--I would have to pick dawn. Before, when the rising sun meant that the day was starting, I used to think I was a morning person. Now it turns out I'm just not a sleep person; I can't stand the settling down, the quiet. Too much time to think before I actually lose consciousness. When I was little I would pitch a fit at every bedtime, begging my parents not to leave me alone in my room. They bought me a nightlight, not realizing that the one thing I had never been scared of was the dark.

I miss my iPod. It was a lifesaver from the moment I got it, the perfect cure for a neurotic insomniac. And then I also had my phone, and my Gameboy, and I could even use the upstairs TV if my parents were asleep and I kept the volume low. With so many distractions, it'd been years since I had identified with little-kid me, cowering under the covers trying to escape the terrifying spirals of her own brain. But now that the distractions are gone, she's back. Maybe that's why my best defense against pre-sleep panic now is to recreate the distractions: mentally rerun scenes from *Dexter* and *Desperate Housewives*, relive some of my fondest *World of Warcraft* memories, sing Ke\$ha songs in my head. It doesn't always work, though. On quiet mornings like this one, as I huddle next to a still-burning chunk of U.S. Post Office and watch the sky turn from black to grey, my brain won't stop throwing up memories I have no interest in revisiting. So I imagine I'm inside one of my distractions, a guest on a morning talk show, presenting my past with a smile and a heavy dose of creative editing. It's so much easier to hold it together when you have an audience, even if it's just one you've created inside your own head.

[Upbeat theme music plays, camera pans across live audience seated in ascending rows of folding chairs. Perky Blonde Hostess enters stage left, takes seat on plush green armchair.] Perky Blonde Hostess: Gooooo Morning everybody! Welcome to the Perky Blonde Hostess Show! [Cheers and applause.] It's been a crazy week here in Anytown, USA, and I hope you've all stayed safe in these troubled times—although, statistically, most of you haven't. [Nervous laughter, one audience member whoops and then looks around, uncomfortable.] Good news for the rest of you though, [she smiles even more brightly] we've got a very special guest here today who just might shine some light on the recent apocalyptic plague. She's been kind enough to visit us all the way from the epicenter in Houston, Texas, so please give a warm-blooded welcome to... Alexandra West. [I enter and sit on the yellow couch across from PBH. Applause. Camera pans over audience as floating letters scroll across the bottom of the screen: Today's Segment—Confessions of a Teenage Zombie.]

Two other girls and a hulking man have joined me around my makeshift debris campfire. I'm not surprised; they're my pack, or more sentimentally, my family now. I don't know anything about them that I haven't seen with my own eyes—not their feelings, not their histories, not even their names. I know that one of the girls is Hispanic and the other is Asian, but in the dark their silky black hair makes them look like twins. I know the man is missing two fingers on his left hand, and that his hair used to be very short but in the past several months has grown enough to curl around his ears. I know that he's strong, so strong that he can lift a grown man and throw him at least six feet, and I know that the two girls can claw and bite his stunned victim into a shining squishy slab of bloody entrails in just a few minutes, with my help. I know that the Hispanic girl steals glasses from every bespectacled corpse she gets her hands on, but that she still hasn't found the right pair.

My companions grunt in greeting and make themselves comfortable on the warm concrete. The girls curl together and begin breathing deeply and evenly almost at once. Across the rubble, I can see that the man's eyes are still open, staring at the side of the sky that the sun hasn't brightened yet. I wonder if his brain is as hyper as mine, and what he does to keep it occupied. But I can't ask him and he can't tell me, so I return to my own fantasies while the rest of the horde drifts to sleep.

[The commercial break ends, and the theme music plays as Perky and I exchange silent pleasantries under the audience's applause.]

PBH: So, Alexandra—

Me: Call me Alex.

PBH: Alright, Alex. How are you doing today? How was your flight?

Me: Oh, you know, Perky, [I hold my hands straight out, give my best blank stare]

Plaaaaaaaanes! [audience chuckles appreciatively].

PBH: Haha! Well, we're so glad you could make it—

Me: Glad to be here.

PBH: And I know that I speak for everyone [nods to the audience] when I say...please don't eat us! [Uneasy laughter. I hold up my hands, totally innocent]. But seriously, Alex, let's start with the obvious question. How did you become a zombie?

There's something moving beyond the edges of our camp. Not a straggler; one of us would make obvious shuffling footsteps, probably some friendly groans or growls. This is subtler. A kicked stone here, a stifled cough there. Humans. I sit up, lock eyes with the man across from me who was up a split second sooner. He growls with a tiny grin. Usually we have to work so hard for fresh meat—tearing through doors and boarded windows, breaking locks and avoiding traps to get at the violent morsels barricaded inside. It's been weeks since a human has delivered itself to us so nicely. And since most of the others are asleep, we can take the kill without competition. I return the man's grin with my own.

Me: It started with this website. MobUSA.com. They organized groups of people into flash mobs, the kind of thing where a bunch of random people would show up at a mall or a park and all start doing the same dance or moving in slow motion or singing everything they said. Such a college thing to do, just for laughs, a harmless way of occupying your space. For people who are in on the secret, you can magically become part of a community for an hour or so, no strings attached. For everyone else, it's a weird and quirky performance. Or, you know, it used to be...

PBH: [enthralled] Go on...

Me: About three months ago, one of my Facebook friends linked me to the website because

they were advertising a Zombie Walk. They had been building up their reputation for a while, and this was going to be their biggest event ever. Anyone in Houston who was interested was supposed to show up on Saturday morning at one of the six or eight major locations—The Galleria, Herman Park, Discovery Green, The Marq'E, and I don't even know where else—in full zombie getup. The Facebook invite said, "We will proceed to terrorize the city in a Zombie-like fashion. Lunch will be provided."

PBH: And did you suspect...?

Me: That I was less than a week away from becoming a mindless flesh-eating monster? Hardly. MobUSA had pulled plenty of similar stunts over the past year or so. There was no reason to think that this event would be any different from the others.

PBH: But when you got to the meeting place...

Me: When I got to Herman Park, the hill was covered in Zombies. I had to park a couple of blocks away and walk with the beginnings of a horde making its way to the meeting point. I was self-conscious because some people had obviously put a lot more thought and effort into their costumes, but at least the weather was nice. Blue skies, sixty-eight degrees, the kind of perfect November day you get maybe once per year. The ground was still muddy from the previous day's rain, but that just added to the atmosphere. People were chatting around picnic tables, or adding the finishing touches to their prosthetic stumps and scars, and some were already in zombie mode slumping around with blank faces. I couldn't find any of the friends I was supposed to meet. Then one of the MobUSA volunteers showed up with a megaphone and outlined the route we were going to walk—pointed out the rest areas and reminded us to stay in character. And then we headed out.

PBH: But how did they do it? Was it a chemical spray? Some bacteria in the drinks they passed around? Did their motivational music hypnotize you?

Me: I don't follow.

PBH: How did the event leaders turn you all into zombies?

Me: Well...They didn't.

We aren't quite sure how to start this hunt; we don't usually rely on stealth as our predatory style. The sun irritates my eyes as I scramble to my feet and shuffle over the sleeping bodies. I'm disoriented by the brightness; I feel exposed without dark shadows to

hide me. A three-fingered hand waves to the left and I head in that direction, ears straining for another clue.

Me: We started walking. Across the park and down Main Street, sticking to sidewalks like the girl with the megaphone had said. Everyone had their own particular shuffle, some of us more in character than others. I was a little bit self-conscious as we started, especially when cars started slowing down and giving us funny looks. But when we reached the tall hedges that blocked off Rice University, I got this weird surge of pride. We looked powerful, holding up cars as we crossed Main in a huge clump, snarling at those that honked and shuffling even more slowly out of spite. I noticed this jogger, an older woman with a high ponytail and a fanny pack. She was standing on the side of the gravel path that surrounds Rice campus, watching us with this expression...she was nervous. I wanted to laugh, but instead I locked eyes with her, making sure mine were dead vacant. Arms raised, I veered away from the crowd to aim at her. She giggled anxiously, then stopped, and her eyes got wide. Before I could reach her, she took off jogging, heading toward the back of the column. I felt a surge of triumph; I really spooked her. I stumbled back to the center of the mob, and just a few minutes later I heard a scream from behind me, toward the back of the column. Of course, I didn't think anything of it, just assumed it was someone having fun with the charade. I didn't have a clue until I passed the first shredded corpse.

Falling bricks crash and a muffled voice curses. I'm running toward the noise, throwing myself at the crouched figure that appears behind a black plastic trash can. I hit its upraised knife, grazing my arm, and I snarl and dig my nails into the human's wrist. The man who is my teammate catches up and, with one quick stomp to the neck, silences our prey. I rake the body a few times for good measure, and then we start the feast.

PBH: So...so you found a body...?

Me: Barely. Roadkill, ribbons, practically unrecognizable. If it hadn't been for the shoes... [PBH retches, tries to play it off as a cough]. Everyone was just...walking past it. The people in front of me didn't slow, the people around me weren't even looking. I thought, maybe it's a prop. And I kept walking.

PBH: You still didn't know?

Me: I was starting to. Something was changing in the air, solidifying. I hear more screams, and I couldn't pretend that they were all members of the walk. And I began to realize, slowly, what was happening.

PBH: People were becoming zombies.

Me: No.

PBH: But you said—

Me: There was no becoming. There was no transition, no change, no border to cross. We were a mob that glorified the apocalypse—had been since we had first clicked “attending.” I had put on the makeup, shown up for the walk; I was already a zombie. We all were.

PBH: But...but then...

Me: I was panicking at that point. I got everything ready in my head, prepared myself to say that I had no part and no idea and it was all awful and I couldn't believe. But part of me had gotten hooked when I had scared the jogger away, and that part kept me moving forward, limbs stiff, jaw slack. It was like watching the gruesome opening of any zombie movie; I couldn't break away just yet. I had to see where this was going.

I used to be terrible at eating fried chicken. I couldn't navigate around the tendons and the bones, I worried about which parts were edible and which weren't and why was that stringy bit still red? By the end of the meal my plate was full of half- or less than half-eaten wings and drumsticks. My dad would have to play vulture, showing me how much meat I had missed, how wasteful I had been. I don't have that problem anymore.

PBH: But you can't just decide to become a zombie—a killer!

Me: I didn't have a choice anymore. I was trying to make my way to the front of the mass, hoping for some explanation, maybe, or...I don't know what. The further forward I went the worse it got: the smell, the squishy bits strewn across the ground, the other zombies with their mouths full of gum or something equally chewy. I didn't notice my phone ringing in my pocket until I saw a girl with fake blood on her face and real blood dripping from her hands answer hers.

“Hello? M-mom?” Every head close enough to hear turned toward her. “No, I'm at...I

went to the..." She started to frantically wipe her free hand on her already paint-smeared shirt. "Mom I think maybe I need a ride..." One of her neighbors growled at her. "I just want to go home!" she wailed suddenly, sinking to the ground and shaking, "I'm not a monster! I want to go home!" That pretty much settled it.

PBH: Oh, God...

Me: If you're not with us...I was close to her, but I couldn't have moved fast enough. A teenage boy took the first lunge, and then everyone fell on the human, biting and shrieking and clawing. Wasn't much left to do by the time I got to the body, but I dug a hand through the warm pulp anyway, adding to the authenticity of my costume. I made sure to ignore my phone after that, and when no one was looking I ditched it on a curb. That's when I knew there was no going back.

When we slow down, our stomachs full and our faces and hands smeared with gore, my friend and I share a contented smile. We flip the leftovers and find a blue backpack, the straps frayed but otherwise in good condition and still bulging with supplies—double luck! We rip it open excitedly and howl with glee at the canned vegetables that pour out. I smash a can of green beans on the ground until it bursts and scoop the contents off the ground and into my mouth. For practical reasons, we still loot food whenever possible to supplement our protein-heavy diet. As my partner pours out the remaining cans, the several Nalgene bottles full of water, and the various knives, something unexpected tumbles to the blood-soaked concrete. I almost laugh when I make out the title of the dog-eared, waterlogged, been-through-hell little book that our victim honored above all others: *The Zombie Survival Guide*.

Me: Houston isn't a walking city. If we'd been up against crowds from the start I don't think we could've made it. We'd have been overcome in the first advance, and the media could've done a nice panic-inducing piece linking zombie-culture to dangerous violence. A couple of suburban parents would've been spooked for a week and everyone would've gone on waiting for the next big scare. But we got to start small: the bearded old man on the corner with the cardboard sign, two middle aged black women with tired eyes waiting at the bus stop, a biker dressed all in spandex. If the nearby drivers saw, they didn't stop, but I think probably most of

them didn't notice. I think they got all the way back home, kicked off their shoes, and listened to a frantic message left by a worried friend or relative. "A body on Westheimer?" They'd gasp, "But I was just there! My God, I could've been killed!" Then they'd rush to call all of their loved ones before making a beeline for the nearest grocery or gun store, ready to loot or kill for what they imagined they needed to survive. That's why, by the time we caught the attention of anyone important enough to do anything, it was too late. We had already fired our biggest gun—fear. Word was spreading, fact and fiction mixing until we were an invincible, unending horde. Our prey ran blindly and helplessly, expecting to be caught, knowing there was no hope. Ever hear of a self-fulfilling prophecy? We'd all been expecting the end of the world for years, hadn't we? It was almost a relief when it finally came.

I read it of course, back when I assumed that the end of the world—if it ever happened—would find me on the opposing team. I thought the book was boring, mostly because some of its advice was legitimately practical. I wonder if the owner of this copy survived so long thanks to its guidance, or whether it had just given him false hope.

My friend has turned his attention to a can of corn, so I grab the book by its cover and let it flip open. I see that the book is annotated, the margins riddled with added notes and stars and the occasional “***REMEMBER!***” marking of an especially important tip. I don't even know where our victim found a highlighter, but he managed to illuminate one sentence of the introduction: “Ignorance is the undead's strongest ally, knowledge their deadliest enemy.” Rolling my eyes, I let the book drop back to the ground. It doesn't hold any answers.

PBH: So you think the public facilitated the onset of chaos?

Me: Absolutely. I think humans killed more of each other in the first couple of days than we ever could have. Fighting over resources and hideouts, resisting the police's attempts to keep order... car crashes alone probably took out a huge chunk of the population. Not to give you guys all the credit, of course; we were the ones who sent the world into free-for-all in the first place. But you definitely took to the new rules. Plus, there were the recruits...

PBH: Recruits?

Me: The zombie apocalypse could only happen because people believed in it, right? We were

like freaking Tinker Bell hanging on your applause. So what's the biggest part of the zombie myth?

PBH: Shoot them in the head?

Me: Not what I was thinking, although that was a big help too. Really keeps the casualties down when everyone's taking their sweet time trying to line up a head shot and completely missing more than half the time. But think, what's the one advantage that zombies always have over humans in the movies?

PBH: You're talking about numbers. Multiplication.

Me: Right. We can turn you into one of us.

PBH: But that couldn't have worked...A bite wouldn't—

Me: In the old days, it was magic that gave us life. Later it became radiation, and then a virus: whatever society feared most at any given time. But the real change, the real danger, came from an idea—would you believe Inception got it right? People started to figure out what we were, and they decided their bets were better hedged with us. Maybe some got bit and thought they had no choice. Whatever the reason, as time went on, we grew. And every recruit for us was a deserter for you.

The sun is well overhead now, glinting off the rusting red pools and the abandoned knife lying next to the corpse's hand. After such a late feast my eyes are drooping, and I turn back toward our campsite hopeful that this time the chorus of voices in my head will stay quiet so that I can sleep. I only make it a few steps before I hear pounding footsteps and frantic shouts, and the belated warning growl of my partner. The humans surround us before we can react, six of them forming a ring that isolates us from our pack. Their speech turns to wordless grief when they see the gutted body, and I notice for the first time that our victim was small, not yet full grown.

My friend moans loudly and reaches for one of the humans. He gives me the courage to set my stare, raise my arms, and hobble after him. Three shots crash from around the circle; at least one takes him down in a splash of bone and brain and blood and dark curls. The human nearest to me is sobbing too hard to reload her shotgun. She doesn't look like a mother, but maybe she became a surrogate one in this new world. It doesn't matter; she's not only the closest target, but the most vulnerable. I head straight toward her.

I don't expect her to pull a handgun from her waistband and shoot me in the chest.

PBH: So Alex, before we sign off for today, I have one more question for you. Do you have any regrets?

I cough weakly, watch the humans collect the scattered supplies before gathering around their fallen comrade. I approve of their practicality.

Me: Perky, I'm a zombie. We don't get regret any more than we get love or loss or cold.

Their respects paid, they turn their attention to my dead friend, double-checking their aim and severing his ruined head with a machete for good measure.

Me: You don't go into this not knowing how it will end. You don't torture, kill, and eat people and then expect to die peacefully in your sleep.

Now they turn to me, a loose half-circle, approaching warily. I try to hiss at them, but I lack the strength.

Me: I haven't been human in over a month, and you never were. We're both just pathetic figments in the imagination of a dead girl.

The woman who shot me raises her machete. [*The studio audience disappears in smoke and fire while PBH shrivels into dust on her armchair.*] I am alone in my empty, silent mind.

The machete falls.

Cypresses

Lilly Yu

My father and my sister and I
hiked past the grumbling blue trucks
with their piles of dirty red bricks,
ready to lay the foundation of the buildings
the highways the streets.
We could see the tallest crane
from between the mountain peaks.
My father and my sister and I
crossed the dirty river,
the mud squelching beneath my boots,
bamboo forest on each side of me –
displaced sheaths of green.

But when we came upon the clearing,
bamboo forest behind us,
the mountain before us
rising like the Parthenon,
level after level of white marble tombs,
I saw the cypresses,
their liquid arms flowing towards the sky,
sweeping away the smog,
wiping away the sound of exhaust.

Van Gogh painted cypress trees
because he wanted to be closer to god,
because the smallest sleeping town
and the tiniest window out of which he gazed
is connected to something larger, heavenly.

I climbed the steps to my grandfather's tomb
between the cypress trees
and prayed.

Susan Wood

Susan Wood is the Gladys Louise Fox Professor of English at Rice University and the author of four books of poetry, most recently The Book of Ten. She has received numerous awards and distinctions for her poetry, including the Lamont Poetry Selection for Campo Santo, the Pushcart Prize for her poem “Diary”, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in the Antioch Review, Missouri Review, Ploughshares, Northwest Review, Poetry, among other publications.



When did you know that you were a writer? Was it something you discovered after other interests waned or did it always seem like the natural path for you?

I was always a huge reader, and I remember that for my 16th birthday I asked for a copy of Louis Untermeyer’s *Modern American Poetry*, which introduced me to Plath, Sexton and Bishop. And I was enchanted by Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was out of fashion for so long but has since been somewhat rehabilitated. Still, I didn’t write much during high school and college—there were no creative writing classes at my college. However, a professor later suggested I try writing poetry and I went back to reading contemporary poetry in order to better educate myself. Apparently, it took someone else to give me permission to do this!

In the past, you’ve called yourself a “cat,” a writer that unlike the “ox,” does not write every day. Are you still that cat today? If so, what brings you to the page?

I’ve definitely always been a cat, but I always thought I would like to be an ox. Somehow, I found it hard to do unless I was at some kind of a writing retreat—I used to go a lot to places like Yaddo and the Djerassi Foundation, places in beautiful settings where a staff cooks for you and you have nothing to do except write. What brings me to the page? An image, a word,

a story gets in my head and takes up residence—I let it settle in for a while, but ultimately I have to kick it out on the page. I wish I could say I’m always writing in my head, but I’m not always. Right now I’m having a very long “cat nap.”

Much of your poetry seems to have a narrative sensibility. Do you find that you are drawn to the narrative mode more than other forms, and if so, why?

My first book is much more a book of lyric poetry, but even so the narratives are lurking beneath the surface. I really think my poems mix lyric, meditative and narrative modes, but it’s true that I’m drawn to stories and have been all my life. I don’t know the why of that. I’d like to think it’s the Southern tradition of storytelling—certainly my mother and grandmother told a lot of family stories. I’ve just always been very curious about people and what they do and, most of all, why they do it. I sound very much like a fiction writer, don’t I?

How do you know when a poem is “finished”?

That’s a question poets are often asked, and I’m still not sure I can answer it coherently! W.H. Auden was still tinkering with his published poems until he died, and I think if you look back at poems, you can always find things to change, even—especially—years later, so I don’t know if a poem is really ever entirely “finished.” But you have to let them go, just like teenage children. You’ve done all you could do and now it’s up to them; you just hope they thrive out there in the world. For me, it’s kind of an instinctive thing, knowing when a poem is ready to be let go. I’ve written and revised it, let it sit in a drawer a while, maybe even shown it to a fellow poet I trust. Sometimes I’ve let a poem go too soon, but I don’t usually see that until it’s already published, unfortunately.

You open the Book of Ten with a quote from director Krzysztof Kieslowski, which meditates on the concept of sin. Was this quote a generative force for the book of poems?

I didn’t find the quote until after I’d written many of the poems, but Kieslowski’s *Dekalog* was what began my writing the ten poems that feel to me like the core of the book.

Kieslowski's *Dekalog* is actually a group of ten short films made for Polish television, all set in the same ugly apartment building in Warsaw, and each of them is somehow related to one or more of the Ten Commandments. Seeing them seemed to focus my thoughts on issues of sin and of God, but I believe I'd already been thinking about them; the films gave me a form—a frame—in which the narrator, or narrators, of the poems could speak. And I loved what Kieslowski said about some sins being sins against oneself, against one's *best self*, perhaps.

In many of your poems, the speaker and the poet seem to be very close to one another. Why do think you're drawn to this close voice?

You're right, they do seem close. This isn't terribly fashionable now, in a postmodern age in which the very concept of the self has been repeatedly called into question, but I've always felt that writing from personal experience—and that doesn't necessarily always mean the *facts* of my personal experience—is a way of connecting emotionally to a reader, of saying that *my life matters, and if my life matters, then yours does, too*. And that's very important to me. It's one of the things I want from the poems I read as well, that sense of connecting emotionally to a poem first, and then intellectually.

An Elegy for Dust

Marie Chatfield

Man was born of dust, they say – I believe.
His face was always streaked with dirt and sweat,
his hands roughened by the tools of his trade.

He told me once, *I wish to be scattered*,
for such a soul could never be content
buried in the earth, so far from heaven.

After he died, I held my grandfather,
in my hands held my grandfather's ashes,
and I spread my grandfather to the wind.

He is under my fingernails, I thought
and my tears were slightly hysterical,
He is the dust in the cracks in my skin.

Unbidden, my grey fingers moved themselves
and on my forehead left the mark of grief;
an early Ash Wednesday, ritual of loss.

This Language

Emily Pettigrew

If this language had a word for loneliness
 without the lonely
 the feeling that your soul was at low tide
 drawn further into your own body than ever before
If this language could easily sum up the wanderer aesthetic
 the perennial outsider
 the person uncomfortable unless they find
 somewhere to be foreign
If this language would supply a neuter singular pronoun
 perfect for talking about myself in the general
If this language could be succinct about passion
 could easily demarcate
 love vs. lust vs. want
 and everything in between
If this language did not fail when my thoughts did
 if it spoke for itself
If this language encompassed God
Then you'd have gotten a birthday card this year
 on time.

Blame and Beauty

Jessica Fuquay

The Magritte painting hangs in the surrealist collection of the Menil. When I first noticed it from afar, it looked like the portrait of a cartoon woman. Her eyeballs were mounds of flesh that swelled outward from her face, the nose had sunken to a small hole, and the mouth was a dark expanse that twisted improbably high. As I walked closer, the form revealed itself for what it really was. The eyeballs became breasts, nipples for irises; the nose, a navel; the open mouth, a hairy groin. The face, transformed into the body. I moved closer to read the title: *The Rape*.

I am seven years old, visiting my grandparents in Colombia. I have just tried on a dress *abuela* bought me for my birthday. She fans herself as she rocks her chair, displacing dust into the shaft of light that slants through the windows. Between flutters, her rouged cheeks pull her face into a smile. “*Eres divina, mi nieta.*” You are beautiful, my granddaughter.

I spin around for her, feel the hem of the dress whirl around me, stop to study myself in the mirror. What do I see? My olive skin glows in the scarlet-red fabric. My collar bone frames a neck toned and lengthened by years of ballet. The sparkly bodice of my dress hugs a tiny waist. I am a wisp of a little girl, a gesture of human, like the airless mannequins I see at the mall.

I go to a private Christian school. My classmates are the sons and daughters of the South Florida elite, who from an early age learned to distinguish the letter logos of fashion designers. Girls in my fifth grade class tote leather handbags instead of backpacks, from which they extract compacts and jewel-encrusted cell phones.

I am above these girls, I think, impervious to the vanity and materialism that preoccupies them. I am spelling bee queen, essay contest winner, Mozartina at her piano. While I read chapter books, my peers read *Seventeen* magazine. I decide to become a “deep” person, to live a life of the

mind rather than the surface.

I'm in a 7th grade life science classroom, listening to a lecture on circadian rhythms. I contemplate how my own might be altered by sleeping through it. Riselle taps on my shoulder. I glance sideways to see a note held taut between two digits. Her face is grave as she passes it to me, as if this scrap of paper contains some great secret.

I pity Riselle. She is the girl at lunch with an open Sailor Moon comic book as her only companion. She holds the book to her face, obscuring all features except the dark caterpillar eyebrows that meet at the bridge of her nose in a violent V-shape. The girl who's a head taller than all her classmates, as gangly as they come.

The note crinkles as I open it. Do you think I am pretty?, it reads. Two unmarked checkboxes lie next to the words "yes" and "no."

I put the note down on my desk and feel my chest constrict in discomfort, my stomach churn. Nausea. It comes to me every time I'm embarrassed, whether for myself or someone else. In this case, I'm embarrassed for both. I see in her, not just mirrored but magnified, the vanity I have sought to obscure, to tuck under my stacks of books. I think of the acne that has colonized my face, of the stretch marks scrawled into my burgeoning hips. I'd never write this note, but the question it contains still plagues me as it has plagued women before. Do you think I am pretty? Please tell me yes.

"You're so pretty," Danny says.

I'd never tell anyone, but I think so too. I'm all dolled up in my graduation gown, hair ironed, stomach sucked in. I'm stupid about compliments, and I ride the wave of flattery like a brainless buoy. On this day of May 20, I am a young woman in love and inclined toward happiness, looking forward to college and a summer spent well.

As Pomp and Circumstance starts I lose myself in the din of whirring cameras and out-of-tune violins. I feel my mascara run as tears well up. I sit in the front row of the stage and look for the receding hairline and adoring smile particular to my father, who at 6'3", has the best chance among my graduation guests of being spotted. I find him easily—his tree limb arm sticks out high in the air, a blinking camcorder at its tip. That morning, I'd primped and preened, walked out of the bathroom to see the pride swelling in his face, not just because I am graduating but because of how pretty I look today.

It is late June, when the Florida days yawn at the coming of night. It's hot. There's not much

to do. Cicadas buzz loudly in my ears when I walk my dog. I bide my time making pillowtalk with Danny, filling out crosswords, also with Danny, and sipping tea at cafés.

Every year, come summer, my family goes to Colombia, the place my parents call *patria*. My grandmother is now dead. My *abuela* was a perpetual malcontent—index finger eager to point—from whom I likely inherited my inclination toward anxiety. She took pleasure in little, not even music and good food. Morphine and the knowledge that her grandchildren are beautiful were two exceptions. *You're so pretty*, she used to say. *You get prettier every year*.

Las Islas del Rosario is a tiny archipelago less than an hour off the coast of Cartagena. It's the sort of place one sees on glossy postcards, that Vanna White presents as a gameshow vacation prize on Wheel of Fortune. The cliché of paradise. The islands boast white sand beaches and transparent ocean, picturesque straw-roofed houses and a native population of mulattos who wear white aprons and give massages and are treated like part of a package rather than people. We are here because my mother couldn't stand the silence of the house without my grandmother, without the sound of her complaining about the maids and the food and the pain in her *columna*.

Life on the island is easy. At lunch, we gather around impressive displays of lobster and fruit and munch on plantain chips until our stomachs distend over our bathing suits. I take naps in the sun with books sprawled over my stomach and chase the little crabs that scurry around the shore.

There is a coral reef here prized for its beauty, and groups are shuttled hourly by the hotel for snorkeling trips. I awaken on my lounge chair to the sound of children gathering on the dock from which the tours launch. From afar the tour guide looks like a bronze statue in motion, the Grecian ideal realized, his yellow swim trunks and shell-white smile the only accents on the brown palette of his skin. The children file into the motorboat, fight over the seats, as children do. *Let me sit in front!* The guide laughs and tugs at the motor, and they are off, shrinking to a point between ocean and sky.

I can't place myself in the memory anymore; I function only as its removed narrator. There's me, getting into the motorboat with the guide, alone. As I hold his hand for support, he brings mine up to his lips. Kisses it.

Leave while you can, I want to say to the girl in the motorboat. *Don't be wooed. Don't smile back.*

When it's over, you'll indict yourself for getting in that motorboat. For not seeing the trajectory his gesture pointed to; for letting it charm instead of disgust you. For ignoring the momentary intuition you had to convince your mother to go with you on the tour. You felt, for a second, that you didn't want to go alone.

You'll sit across from the therapist, a runway of mahogany desk between you. "You're blaming yourself, Jessica," you'll hear her say, "because it gives you back the control that you didn't have during the assault." Her words will be only sounds.

I want to shake the girl in the motorboat, rip apart the fabric of the memory, tell her these things. But the boat has left the dock.

The guide tells me to jump, slowly now, he warns. Jump slowly out of the motorboat. He asks me if I tread water well. I don't, I say.

"The coral is sharp," he says. "You'll likely cut yourself if you don't tread well. "Would you like me to help you swim?"

It seems smart to let him help me. It seems responsible of me.

He fastens my mask and shows me how to breathe through it. "*Qué hermosa eres,*" he says, while he tightens the strap. How pretty you are, "even with that mask on."

I float face down in the water as he guides me through the reef, his arm around my waist like the collar to a leash. He knows this place, swims in it every day, knows every crevice and every piece of coral he can put his foot on as leverage. The lounge chair was my domain; the ocean is his.

The reef below us scintillates in the sunlight. Schools of fish, silvery like shards of steel, swirl around the sun-dappled coral. I see the shadow of our intertwined bodies trail across the ocean floor. I watch the shadow shift and transform as his hand descends down my stomach into the bottom of my swimsuit.

I do nothing. It is not fear that compels me to inaction, but disbelief. Surely his hand has simply slipped there by accident. Surely I am imagining that his grip has tightened.

His hand rams down my crotch, the digits parting my folds along the way, probing my vagina. He fondles my breasts with the other hand, twisting them like wads of clay he could break off and take home with him. I have always hated my breasts, and I feel the burning weight of them as he digs his fingers in deeper. Oh God, Oh God. My screams gurgle, gather into clouds of bubbles. I struggle to writhe free and get to the surface, to bob my head up for air. He pulls my snorkeling mask back and gags me with the rubber strap.

We surface after two minutes, or maybe ten.

"What's the matter?" he asks. I feel his gaze but do not tilt my head to meet it. I say nothing, let waves lap at my lips. To answer is to admit what is happening. I shake my head. Nothing is the matter.

"Why so nervous. Do you have a boyfriend?"

I think of Danny, my boyfriend of two years. I see his beautiful almond eyes, the slightly

gummy smile, the chin scruff, the suggestion of a mustache etched in stubble. This is not the face kissing mine.

The ocean dilutes the shock of the scene, like time eventually will the memory. I bring my awareness, what remains of it, to the signs of paradise that lie beneath my private hell. Seaweed sprouts from the sand and sways in the current. Minnows swim in and out of the coral's pores. A yellow fish approaches my legs, and frightened by their wild movements, veers quickly away.

How it ends I do not remember; there is only the sensation of my mask being uncovered, of fresh air hitting my bare face, of his arm tugging at mine. The tour, both of the reef and of my body, is now over. "This is our little secret," the guide says as we swim back to the boat. We ride back to shore in silence. When we dock, my mother greets him with a tip.

I wake up lying supine, my skin clinging to sheets damp with sea and sweat. In the fog of waking, I feel the silence in the room and wondered whether I should dare disturb it. *Did it happen?* I grasp at the air and cannot tell if I am dreaming or awake.

Beneath the cover of blankets, I browse the internet on my cellphone. Some search terms I enter into google: *was I assaulted, definition of rape, definition of sexual assault, I can't sleep, please help*. I want to pathologize my symptoms, to diagnose myself, and on wikipedia I seek answers.

Behaviors present in the acute stage of rape trauma can include:

- Diminished alertness.
- Numbness.
- Dulled sensory, affective and memory functions.
- Disorganized thought content.
- Vomiting.
- Nausea.
- Paralyzing anxiety.
- Pronounced internal tremor.
- Obsession to wash or clean themselves.
- Hysteria, confusion and crying.
- Bewilderment.
- Acute sensitivity to the reaction of other people.

I read rape literature. It makes me feel worse. Stories of temples pressed into gun barrels, of flesh wounds and examination rooms; to these my snorkeling fiasco seems to pale in comparison. For that's all I know to call the story—fiasco—though fiasco it is not. Language fails to discern the hues of gray, to offer a word other than the legalese term “sexual assault” or the euphemisms “violate”, “ravage”, “shame”. Without the right word, I cannot find my bearings, I am lost at sea.

I can still feel them, the impressions of his hands on my body, like a film of dirt on my skin. I take near-scalding showers, scrub, scrub harder, walk out the bathroom with my body splotched red, raw as if someone slapped me all over. Still dirty. I lie awake in bed, wish I could slip out of my skin and leave its shriveled, papery shell in my place.

The body knows what happened. The hairs on my skin stick up like little soldiers when eyes linger too long, when men on the island approach me. My breath quickens at the sight of the sea.

The body knows what happened. It's my mind that needs to catch up. It trails behind me like a balloon on a string, gaseous and unaware.

“I have something to tell you,” I say. My voice seems to come from the walls and not myself. Danny draws me closer to his chest. I study the way his fingers curl between mine as we hold hands, the way his fingertips whiten as they press against my knuckles. His nails are raw from biting, and his skin peels in white wisps at the cuticle. He never tends to them, no matter how much I nag him.

That Danny bites his nails, however common the nervous habit, strikes me as odd, for he is the calmest person I know. He takes me aside at my worst moments, when I am stressing over certain things—I forgot to take my medicine, the scratch I left on my father's car won't come off, *a man touched me*—and says, “let's do a deep breathing exercise.” Says, “just five deep breaths. One.”

I inhale. It is not the breath that consoles, but the boy breathing with me.

College starts in a week. I do not think much of the man in Las Islas; I do not think much at all. I stare out of car windows and note the way lane markers elongate in space.

My body is transport for the sleeping head. It takes me to class where I stare at formations of chalk. It takes me to the cafeteria and commands me to eat, to socialize with others under the guise of normality. It takes me, finally, to a therapist's office.

I hear myself talking to the therapist, saying them, the words: *I was assaulted*. In time I

believe them, the words an incantation I echo to summon my old self. To bring her back is to pull her stroke by stroke from some great and murky depth. She appears, stroke by stroke, on the page.

In my second semester of my freshman year, Danny came to visit me for his spring break. We walked to the Menil Collection drunk off each other, drunk off the day. I want to say we walked hand in hand, but I'd be lying. Memory seems to color it that way because he led me by the hand through the darkness of assault, one which I hadn't quite left on that beautiful afternoon in March. I loved Danny for who he was but also for who I was with him: strong, healthy. He was a mirror in which I saw myself smiling back.

The painting was another mirror. Then, I recognized the portrait's features--degraded to the erogenous parts of her body, like I thought I had degraded myself--as my own. Stunning, to go to an exhibit and see yourself on display.

But I missed something on that outing with Danny. The act of peering, of recognizing myself, seemed to confirm some horrible vanity, seemed to validate my fate. I struggle, still, to forget this. I'd rather you not know that I apply my makeup in the morning slowly, meticulously, in the hope that the reflection I see before I go out is one that looks untouched by product. I still haven't let go of the time I applied baby powder to my eyelids at twelve years-old, convinced, in my pimply desperation, that it would make my eyes look luminous. After the assault, to "adorn" myself to get attention from others was to somehow admit I wanted the attention I got from my assailant. To seek beauty and its affirmation in others was an indictment, of myself, to myself.

Now, I look closely at the Magritte in my mind's eye, and see not only victim, but victimizer. In depicting assault, Magritte himself mimics assailant, he the perpetrator of perversion, he who paints the woman's torture. Looking at the painting now, I see the man who rendered that torture into being, the man who tortured me. I think of natural beauty, unnatural acts, love, desire, the body parts that were once separated from my mind, the work I've done to re-assimilate the split, to gather together what once was fragmented. Maybe you can get over assault; maybe you can't. Maybe part of recovery is just being able to say, "kiss my ass, I never deserved this." There's still work to do, but at least I'm there.

City Dreams

Thomas Boyd

Yuri Androvich looked around his shithole apartment, pieces of the room swimming into focus and sinking back into the dimness. He would look for her again first thing tomorrow, he promised himself. She wouldn't mind this dump, would forgive him for ignoring her and worse and simply be pleased that he had traveled across half the world to find her again. He smiled and poured another hot dash of vodka over his tongue, banging the bottle clumsily back onto the table. They would both be happy to see him. Tomorrow would be the day. He lit another cigarette, exhaling the smoke through his nostrils, losing himself in visions of how good life would soon be.

Yuri woke quickly, the sting of the lit cigarette tip reddening the fingers that held it. "Fuck."

He stared at the full ashtray on the table in front of him, then ground the glowing tip into the dark skin of the couch leaving another circular scorch mark. Perhaps fifteen minutes had passed, and his life was still the same. The same cracked dark green space of wall where a TV would have sat. The same worn mattress on the floor under the room's single window. The same sliver of bathroom visible from the couch, easily visible through the doorframe which held no door, the tiles worn by age and grime from white to yellow. The same two dishes and two bowls, splattered with hardened brown grease sitting in the sink behind him, and the same smell of three days of beef stew hanging in the air and mixing with the sappy promise of beer and the lingering ash of half a pack of cigarettes.

The still air stank, but the air conditioner didn't work and he enjoyed the familiar cold that New York City in winter provided. His booted feet splayed oddly on the small table, looking like they had been dropped amongst the empty bottles. The bottom of his

stomach began to tingle, and he stared at the bathroom, the entrance swinging repeatedly from right to left under his uneven gaze. He drew the crumpled paper from his pocket and tried to bring the words into focus. No good; the sloping black lines slid sideways and blurred, eluding him. It didn't matter. With a hundred readings he had bored a hole into his memories and buried the words there, where they sat untroubled by the wet vodka storm that flung the rest of his thoughts wildly about. He drew the words easily back up and felt their weight. "Yuri, I've left. Don't follow. My dreams are not with you. Marya." He had loved her way with words. Kicking bottles to the floor as he moved, he staggered from the couch to the bare mattress and fell onto it, fully clothed.

Yuri dreamed about fire; the heat of the sealed metal door searing his palm, a sound that could have been the scream of death or the warping of metal and engine parts, soon covered by the blaring klaxon, the scene always jumping between red and white light. A girl naked under her lieutenant's cap, smiling as she ordered him around.

His tongue filled the space behind his teeth, dried and sticking to the raw insides of his mouth. The yellow haze of street lamps was gone. Sun rays crystallized in the winter cold passed through the window above his head and stuck in the hardwood floor, imitating the chilled sunlight of his northern Russia. He missed it, missed the gray ice and blue snow over everything, the austere concrete and steel of uniform buildings, the warm, earthy taste of burnt peat borne on the gray clouds that blew across the city. Imperfect elements to build a home from, but he was built from them too. He missed Marya and Adrian, and saw them in the harsh winter light. Marya sitting in the kitchen singing "The Way You Look Tonight", and bouncing a chubby Adrian on her lap. The boy spewed an excited slew of random words and noises in time with the bounces, "Up, up, ga, go, mom, ma, me, you, ree." Marya answered with a velvet voice "You're lovely, never ever change." Yuri had put his hand on her shoulder and as they both looked up at him and smiled he breathed in and enjoyed a moment as a man with a full memory and no regrets.

A car horn wailed, and two voices rose in anger outside his window, pulling him back to the present. He was sweaty, and his wool shirt sat heavily on him. His head pounded, and he shielded his eyes, but stood on numb, booted feet and stumbled into the bathroom, where he fumbled with his trousers and urinated for two full minutes, guiding almost half of it into the toilet bowl.

Marya's parents lived in a spacious apartment in Brooklyn, a nice neighborhood though the paint was peeling off the door Yuri remembered from the one visit he and Marya had taken to see them just after Adrian was born. They had been so excited he could hear Irina asking "Is it them? Is it them?" over her husband's shoulder as he buzzed them in, then shouting when they finally reached the right apartment door and Marya knocked. Little Adrian didn't know what to do with all the cooing and tickling, and so had just squirmed and cooed and bubbled right back, all of them clinking glasses and grinning until it seemed their faces would split in two. It would be a different sort of visit this time.

He took a bus to Brooklyn College where Marya's father taught Russian, then tried to retrace his steps from that afternoon five years ago. After two hours ignoring the growl in his stomach and the wind whipping the edges of his jacket back and forth, wandering in the shadow of great buildings down every street within several blocks of the college, he found their apartment building, smaller and shabbier than he remembered. He tried the buzzer, snorting at his father-in-law's vanity in labeling his ringer "Professor Kuznetsov."

No one answered. After buzzing for the third time he decided to try and find the professor at work, stopping at a convenience store for a beer to soothe his hunger. Two streets later he threw the empty bottle into a dumpster where it smashed loudly. The uneven city sidewalk made him stumble.

The middle-aged secretary at the university's language department building smiled kindly at his poor English, and told him Professor Kuznetsov was teaching his last class of the day, but he was welcome to wait here, or if it was urgent she could look up the room number for him. She understood of course that family matters must take priority. Yuri asked for the room number.

A dozen or so young people leaned on their desks and gazed soporifically at the professor, his stomach bulk pressing out against a grey pullover and hanging over his dark corduroy pants as he diagrammed a sentence in Cyrillic on the blackboard. Only two students were taking notes. Yuri hovered just outside the door imagining all the eyes turning on him, staring as he interrupted the boring lesson, the Professor glaring from his pulpit. He shuffled farther down the hall until he found a small office labeled Kuznetsov, and sat in the single wooden chair outside the door. Twenty minutes later Yuri lifted his head at

approaching footsteps. The Professor walked towards him with unfocused eyes, mouthing to himself in Russian until he almost bumped into Yuri, who raised his eyes and then lowered them.

The older man stared down at the back of Yuri's head and the navy pea coat stretched across his shoulders.

"Senior Petty Officer Androvich, you look well." Professor Kuznetsov said in English and moved to open his door.

"Can we talk in office?" Yuri asked, trying English.

"Will you go away?" Kuznetsov asked.

Yuri sat silently, looking at the floor.

"Huh. Come in then." Kuznetsov led the way into his office and sat behind his desk, while Yuri slid into the chair across from him. "So, you are looking for my daughter."

"My wife." Yuri replied in Russian, still not making eye contact.

"Not according to her and the law, and either one would have been good enough for me." Still in English.

"Please, I need her back. And Adrian. I love them." Russian.

"You should have thought of that before you thrust your great stupidity into that slut sailor." Finally his father-in-law switched to Russian as well.

"I know. It was... a mistake."

"A mistake? It was monstrous. You disappeared into a bottle for months after that accident, God rest those men, trying to drown yourself in a bar while she spent the whole time chasing Adrian around and making sure you had your pants on properly when you left and made it into bed on the nights you decided to come home."

"She, she said all that?"

"It all came out when she arrived."

Yuri squinted hard at the wooden corner of the Professor's desk. The plastic border which wrapped around the edge was scraped in several places, and loose. He had nothing to say.

"So tell me Yuri, even if I could be of any help, why would I help a moping, alcoholic, half-man crawl back into my daughter's life? She was lucky enough to escape you with Adrian after only ten years. She can get residency here. She can marry again. Adrian

can have a father who isn't a drunken lecher. You're not fit for them."

Yuri could think of nothing to say to deny that. The scratches on the table-edge seemed deep and jagged. It was a miracle there was any table left under those gouges.

"Well then I guess we are done here. Take care Yuri."

"My son, has five years. He is very lovely." He tried to explain in English, to appeal to his heart and his intellect, meeting the Professor's eyes for the first time. "I want watch him get bigger. I want hold Marya. She is best."

The professor exhaled, long and slow through pressed lips. He rocked forward as though about to rise, then leaned back against the wooden chair.

"Give me something." Yuri switched back to Russian. "Just a chance to talk to her."

"We haven't spoken to her in a couple weeks. She has her own apartment now. We asked her to stay longer with us, but she didn't want to accept too much help."

"That is her." English

The corners of the Professor's mouth twitched upwards.

"How long do you have on your visa?" The older man asked. "Before you must return."

"Sixty days. Fifty-six left."

"You had better get looking. I couldn't tell you where she is until I have spoken with her. And to be clear, if you do find her and she doesn't want to talk to you, then leave her alone and go." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his first two fingers. "Before she moved out she told us she wanted to sing."

He gave Yuri his home phone number but did not invite him over.

Yuri balanced on the steel barstool, leaning his elbows on the counter and looking at his reflection in the long bar mirror. Seeing nothing of interest he lowered his eyes to his half-glass of piss-colored beer. A large, bald, muscled man in a striped t-shirt nodded at the glass and said "One more?"

Yuri shook his head and listened to tonight's band, two stick-thin boys with tall hair jumping around and screaming in Irish accents while a bald thirty-something flailed randomly at a drum set. Definitely not his Marya. Not even the type of place she would sing, he thought. But he didn't know. He guessed she would still be living in one of the cheaper

parts of Brooklyn, but would be willing to pay a little more for a safe neighborhood because Adrian was curious and liked to wander off exploring when you let him out of your sight. He grinned. She would try to sing close enough to home to walk and save the cab fare, and far enough away from the universities that she wouldn't be surrounded by college students. College had been a happy time for them, bright memories that shone even more brilliantly alongside the dingy present, and neither of them wanted to be forced to remember it. She would sing jazz. He started searching in bars that fit those criteria.

It had been three years since they had talked about her singing. She had mentioned volunteering with the Navy choir at Severomorsk. He remembered her asking him what he thought about the idea. She had joked about her getting a uniform too, and he had replied... he didn't know. Like reading a newspaper in the wind, the words flew out of his grasp and scattered.

The music stopped. No more for tonight. The crowd told the band what they thought with jeers and splashed drinks. Their criticisms didn't seem to be well received. This bartender, like the eight bartenders at the eight bars with live music before this one, had glanced at the picture of his Marya and shook his head no he hadn't seen her. Like the past eight nights Yuri had then ordered a drink and stayed to watch whoever was supposed to play in case Marya was with them anyway. He stayed until the music stopped every night, in case they brought her on as a surprise act at the end. He tried not to order more than six or seven drinks, but when it became clear she was not coming he tended to lose count and start over. More noise came from the end of the bar. He slid off his stool and began to navigate the shifting floor and close press of tables to leave the room. A meaty fist with wet knuckles pressed into his cheek and pushed him to the ground. He heard glass shattering. Yuri rolled over to see the thirty-year old drummer punching someone else, then the victim stabbing the drummer in the leg twice with a broken bottle, twisting after he stuck it into the meat of his thigh. The drummer fell down next to him, and the victim bottle-man sprinted out the door. There was blood on the floor, but less than when that navy nurse had stabbed Pasha after he wouldn't stop groping her.

Yuri and his friend had carried him from the enlisted bar over to the officer's lounge to find Dr. Kozlov, their unit surgeon, so drunk that all he could do was laugh. After five long minutes trying not to make a scene Yuri managed to explain the situation and led the good

doctor staggering outside and around the corner of the building to where he had left Pasha laying on the ground biting down hard on a bar rag. Another friend, fairly drunk himself and colored with the boy's blood, leaned mercilessly on Pasha's leg to slow the bleeding. Yuri looked furiously at his friend and by silent agreement the other man picked Pasha up, alarmingly pale even under the yellow night lights, while Yuri swept his arm under Dr. Kozlov's legs and at a run carried the full-grown man to the infirmary. Antiseptic fluorescent light illuminated the cramped, metallic room with unbearable clarity. The doctor tried to find the right supplies, knocking bandages and bottles off shelves and clattering across the tile floor, before giving up. Leaning on a steel gurney to steady himself, he swayed and called out instructions for Yuri to stitch shut the hole in Pasha's leg.

Pasha's blood had felt just like the drummer's did now as it rushed hot over his fingers. The drummer screamed. Yuri looked around the bar but saw neither thread nor needle.

"Shhh" he said. "Ok, Ok" just like he had for Pasha. Dr. Kozlov had told them to tie one of his tourniquets around the leg while he tried to control his giggles and prepare a needle for them to use.

"Ok, Ok" Yuri said again as the drummer went limp against him. He set his jacket on top of the drummer's leg, stopping to make sure he had it on the bleeding one, as both were now soaked red, and wrapped the jacket sleeves around it as though they were hugging the wounded body part. He tied them as tight as he could, a double knot that woke the drummer up and helped him to scream some more.

"Ok, Ok." And he wrapped his arms around him, a hand on his chest, and felt the drummer's heart beating weakly, thump thump, thump thump, until men in blue uniforms picked him up and put him in the back of a van full of light. They patted Yuri down too and rushed off leaving words he didn't understand. He sat on the curb waiting for them to bring him back his jacket, but after an hour the blood on him had crusted and he felt very uncomfortable, so he gave up on them returning and staggered back towards his apartment to shower in the nicotine-yellow bathroom. Pasha had jokingly called the uneven red marks and odd lump of flesh he wore on his leg after that night his Yuri-scar. Yuri smiled as he walked.

Several nights later he sat in an upscale bar named after a man he didn't know.

He drank cheap whiskey to pace himself because the vodka they served flowed down his throat like water. The singer for the evening, an old man, smiled a lot and muttered tunefully into the microphone. Yuri leaned hard on the wooden counter and felt his ass press uncomfortably into the inverted dome of the wooden seat. Orange bar lights stretched into thin lines reflected on the dark lacquer coating every surface. A blond woman smiled at him and arched her plucked eyebrows. He looked into his drink and again dredged for the words to give Marya when he found her. He would apologize, he knew, but should he first say he loved her? He needed her and Adrian to believe him when he told them how valuable they were. He'd put in for a transfer, work on shore in the shipyard so he could spend more time with them. He'd quit the Navy altogether if she asked, never set foot in a submarine again. They could move to Vladivostok, a house on the shore of the Caspian Sea, a cabin in some dark crevasse of the Urals where they skinned reindeer to make shirts as far as he cared. Whatever she wanted. Ten years in a submarine engine room had honed his skill with machines, he could read them as Marya could read the subtleties in an English story. He could find work anywhere, but he didn't know what to say to her.

Two blocks north from his apartment was a gym with big glass walls putting fit people inside on display. The beautiful wore undershirts and briefs, and spun bikes and treadmills and curled dumbbells with swollen, veiny biceps. The ugly, fat, or lumpy took positions far away from the windows to exercise, wearing clothing thick enough to walk home in. Returning from an amateur concert followed by his twenty-first bar Yuri paused, eyes fixed on the spinning thighs of a woman taking her pre-dawn exercise. She was not Marya, Marya did not look like that, but he stared at the smooth muscles stretching down from her buttocks to her calf anyway.

He had known thighs like that once, on a capable young radar officer serving on one of the surface ships, not a day over twenty-three, almost too slight to look as though she served in the Navy. Sitting alone in a bar, not quite drunk enough to forget he shouldn't, and she had looked up from a conversation with two loud and drunk young sailors just as he signaled for another drink. She had colored slightly upon catching his eye, beautiful and full of promise in the sickly yellow light of the bar, and held his gaze evenly. She looked like Marya, but so slender. She bore not even the slight softness Marya carried since giving life

to Adrian. Her face was smooth, freckled and unlined. She looked like Marya, but Time had not yet marked her. This Marya had never nagged, or scolded, or shouted at him to behave differently, hadn't given up all together as terse conversation faded to silence. She had never failed to understand how it felt to hear a friend burn to death two inches away and yet unreachable. She did not look at him with disappointment for the drink in his hand. He found her irresistible.

He could not remember what he said when she had walked over swaying and smiling, but she had laughed. They had returned to her standard, shabby junior officers' quarters, his young Marya and he, and sent the screams and flame a little farther into the back of his mind. They made their rendezvous a habit until she abruptly grew tired of him. He had returned to haunting the bar, noticing her indifferently a few weeks later with a loud young sailor's arm slung about her waist.

His wife had heard about those thighs he learned on the day he shipped out for his last tour. Hung-over and tired from fighting all night he had stood shabbily before her in the dull morning light, squeezing Adrian tightly and running his coarse fingers through his child's brown hair as his boy's strong little arms circled his neck. For the sake of appearances before Adrian Marya allowed him one kiss on her cheek, which she bore stiffly. Then he had turned and joined the rest of the crew as they shuffled into the familiar steel bowels of the submarine. On the New York street he colored with the cold swoop of remembered shame and turned away from the gym and the woman.

The stationary bicycle in the torpedo room was not nearly as nice as the one in the gym, nor fortunate enough ever to seat an attractive woman. Covered with the unwiped sweat of a hundred cramped men, and old to begin with, Yuri had used it almost every day, trying to ignore the ripe smell while his lungs burned and he gasped for breath. When his legs got too tired or the smell overpowered him he did chin-ups on one of the sturdy pipes running across the ceiling or push-ups on the floor. If he managed to wear out each part of his body he was sometimes able to sleep; otherwise he would pass his off-duty hours staring at the rusty ceiling in the dim red light of the bunk room, listening to the creak and flow of the ocean outside. When it came the sleep was perfect. Dreamless. It was the hours spent staring into the red gloom when he transformed back into a twenty year old boy that tormented him. Running from the last class of the afternoon at his technical university to the subway which

took him, always too slowly, across town to the college of humanities and languages where he stole an hour alone in the room of a pretty girl before her roommate returned from her last class. Where he listened to her lecture him at length on the importance of characters in her favorite stories, and the human truths their actions revealed, which he tried to answer with his own pragmatic arguments about the way of the world. Where he made the interesting girl with big eyes and russet hair and a pointed nose laugh by refusing to get dressed before her roommate returned, or pretending to dive out the window with only his pants on as she approached. A time and place he could no longer reach.

Neither of them took the relationship seriously at first. He hoped to get accepted into an advanced technical school and she wanted to translate novels. But she opened her mouth and he wanted to keep listening. They had blinked and it was twelve years later, they had created Adrian and broken each other. He was wondering how to tell her that the most triumphant moment he could remember from that youth so far away was drunkenly putting his arm around a girl in the hallway and seeing her smile soberly and lean into him. If he could just tell her this, convince her of its truth, it would fix them, maybe. Undo his actions. But he didn't know how to make Marya believe one of the most important truths he knew when he had acted as though it was a lie. When he gave up on sleep he would sit on his bunk chewing a pen and staring at his notepad, trying to put some spark into the words "I'm sorry and I love you" to make them believable.

Upon returning to shore one hundred days after departing he was in the best shape of his life, had a letter that sounded like it came from the heart, and his wife was gone. He left his letter and took hers with him.

"How did you lose your wife?" The usher asked in Russian as they smoked outside the small theater after Yuri had shown him her picture. The choral show Yuri had come to watch was done, and after Yuri had helped the Russian usher, stack the community center chairs against the wall the man, happy to meet another Russian, had invited him outside to share a few cigarettes. Yuri suspected they were rolled with something more potent than tobacco.

"I didn't so much lose her as she ran away." Yuri explained, receiving a light.

"Ahh," the usher nodded sympathetically. "It happens. I had the same problem. She

caught me cheating on her.”

“Did you find her?”

“Yes, she went to live with her sister a few blocks away. I spent a month apologizing, every day after work.” He looked down into the glowing paper in his hands.

Yuri waited. “And?”

“It was strange, she believed me. She told me she really did believe I regretted it, wished I had never done it, and would never do it again.”

“How is that strange? That sounds great.”

“She still wouldn’t come back.” He looked at his hands some more. “Must have been unhappy before.”

Yuri had nothing to say, and they smoked in silence while he thought of Adrian. After a minute he asked “Did you have kids?” He wanted noise. He was starting to feel dizzy and serene.

“No. A good thing I suppose. You?”

“One. A boy. Five now. Big and strong for his age. This is his second time in New York. I wonder how he likes it.”

They continued to sit in the alley smoking and thinking until two processes reached their natural conclusions. First, after two more cigarettes Yuri was sure Adrian was very close but just out of sight, and kept whipping around trying to see him before he could dive back into hiding again. The usher snapped at him several times to stop checking inside trashcans and poking his face into shadows, but twitched noticeably himself. Second, the sparking fuse box in the basement of the low-rise down the block had, unattended, set the basement on fire, and the flames had succeeded in licking their way through the ground floor of the building, destroying the apartments there and sending a blazing plume of flame and smoke into the upper floors and out into the night, visible for miles even against the city glow.

“Oh, shit!” The usher shouted, turning to look at the flare and dropping his cigarette.

“Adrian!” Yuri cried, and took off running.

The usher’s shouts weren’t fast enough to catch him, and Yuri let them fade indistinguishably into the noise behind him.

He rushed through the door of the low-rise, almost knocking two fleeing residents back inside. Adrian was calling him from the top of the stairs, he could hear it clearly, and

ran up four stories, feeling the heat rise and his son draw closer all the time. This was his door. He knew it. He touched the doorknob and felt his hand burn. He could hear Pasha and another young sailor calling from the other side of the steel safety door the watch officer had stupidly locked before the two of them could escape. All three of them, his son and the doomed submariners screaming as one in their scared children's voices. He grabbed the wheel used to open the chamber doors, but the heat conducted through from the other side was too great. He felt his hands sear, and the wheel wouldn't budge.

"Help me Yuri! Don't let me die here."

He slammed his palms against the wood, feeling it jump but not give. The heat burned him in the familiar places. He had seen this end before. He knew how his son's body would look, charred black with soft pink patches randomly recalling that the lump in front of him had once had skin. There had been no sign of Pasha's Yuri-scar, no sign of anything that would mark him as Pasha by the time he had burst into the chamber from the other side, spraying the fire extinguisher on everything and screaming death upon the watch-officer. They would give him a medal when they got to shore, which he would promptly unbutton from his uniform with clumsy, bandaged hands and flush down the toilet when he got home. He hadn't been able to tell which body had been Pasha until Doctor Kozlov performed the autopsy and matched their dental records. He watched the dull brass coin clink against the toilet bowl, disappearing with the crimson ribbon into the depths of the toilet. He felt no relief, but unlocked the bathroom door and brushed past Marya who perched outside, not hearing the soft words she called after him, just looking for a drink to douse the flames that still scalded the inside of his skull.

"Dad, save me!"

But this was not then. This was Adrian, not Pasha, and the door was softer this time. He stepped backwards, and smashed bodily into the door, which shuddered and held. He coughed and spun around, dizzy and unsure of which was the right door. He picked one, ran at it one more time, and smashed right through, shooting sparks and splinters and loose bits of frame into the room. He grabbed the tiny boy hugging the bottom of the kitchen island and, holding him tightly against his chest, spilled into the hallway and fell down four flights of stairs, twisting to keep his precious charge safe, finally bursting out into the street in a mad rush of lights and air and joy. He had done it. A man ran up to him and tried to rip

Adrian from his arms, so Yuri punched him in the mouth. Strangely Adrian started to cry and squirmed out of his grasp to run to the fallen man. And Adrian was blond. Yuri spun in circles to take in the beautiful street around him, then began gasping for breath and felt his head burn, then vomited and fell down in the street.

The stamp on his passport showed an expiry date three days from the present one; the hard bureaucratic wall against which his hopes would soon shatter. His apartment was packed back into his one canvas bag. He had called his father-in-law to say goodbye and they had talked for a few minutes. He sounded genuinely sorry, but he said nothing about Marya or his grandson. The city inhaled the first warm breeze of pre-spring and he realized he would only ever know New York in the winter. His last seventy-seven dollars pressed against the flimsy passport in his pocket, inviting him to drink it and forget like he had last night. He had not seen his ex-wife. He had not seen his ex-son. He had told the cameras at the hospital that he was searching for his family and the story had been on the TV, which he could watch from his hospital bed, for a couple of days. All that came of it was two women who he had not loved when he was twenty and who had not mothered his child came to see him and pretend. Ten days after surgeons had removed scorched shards of doorframe from the side of his head the angry red flesh had stopped oozing and he walked out of the hospital and into the nearest bar. A doctor had told him the crimson patch of skin would peel and then fade steadily back to normal over the next year, though his hair might be a little thinner on the right side of his face. He might also keep a few small pink scars for life, where the wood had actually pierced skin. Yuri nodded through it all. No one at the hospital had seen his jacket.

Three days was too short to nourish hope, especially a hope worn so thin. Percussion played irregularly beneath his skull. His stomach growled, but the bowls in the sink had grown spots so he would have to eat elsewhere. He shuffled out the door, smoking through his last few cigarettes and ignoring the million inimitable buildings, cars, strangers drifting past him with the unceasing rapid indifference the city used to greet and console and condemn and bid farewell to those who passed through it. When the sun slanted far enough down toward the horizon that it could only sneak a few mournful glances at Yuri around the buildings, he turned and pushed his way into a hotel bar. Brushing past strangers in soft jackets and casual suits without a glance, he moved through the dark lacquered room to the

bar, a bar where three olives soaked in a little vodka would cost him twelve dollars and the server would expect a tip, no doubt. He threw a ten and five dollar bill on the long wooden counter and signaled for a drink. A short guy in a shiny suit with glistening porcupine hair rammed into his elbow, and Yuri spun to face him.

“What?!” the guy shouted at him.

Yuri said nothing, just looked past him to the piano, and the wide-eyed russet haired beauty leaning on it who seemed about to open her mouth and sing.

Leaving

Jessica Fuquay

Home and driveway and Dad
stands for an eternal second
on the threshold in between.
The plaid of his shirt-back, the duffel bag fat
with clothes, how night framed
his figure like the dark of a coffin.

The Holm Oak

Anne Parker

For Matt

Behind this tree
there's an even bigger
even kinder tree;

the earth between its toes
is cradled, and the leaves
pass only gently

through wind—
if you look and you are lucky
you may see the secret:

a bee nest held
in the crook of a branch
held like a child

so young you must hold
with one hand the body
with one hand the neck

a heart grown of honey
a small, dark mouth
clinging to breast—

hear—more secret yet
—the whisper that
behind this tree

there's an even bigger even
kinder tree
of which this one

is only a very young
and very precious
seed.

Contributors' Notes

AMANDA MILLS spends too much time watching YouTube videos, insists on the Oxford comma, and does everything last minute, including this blurb.

ANNA MERIANO is definitely not a zombie...yet.

ANNE PARKER loves growing things. She feels every person would be better off if she or he had something, even a very small something, to water and watch eat the sun.

BRITTNEY XU is hungry for wonderful.

CHARU SHARMA is a dwarf with a slight tendency to shopaholicism, likely to be spotted in a tutu and some very tall shoes.

CLAIRE SCHAFFER writes poems and short stories in French, Spanish and English, in hopes of making pretty word splotches on mundane reams of paper, for lack of a Burger King napkin.

DAHYEON KIM will leave her mark.

EMILY PETTIGREW owns more whimsically colored tights than most people have toes. Over the course of her 18 years she has called 105 different objects her "favorite thing." (43 of them were puppies, so she can hardly be blamed.)

HENRY GORMAN is a mathematics and history major at Rice University. His interests include blazers, Turco-Mongol tribal succession politics, glam rock, point-set topology, the Holy Roman Empire, and more blazers.

JESSICA FUQUAY, while writing her blurb, realized she was going to miss Sunday omelettes if she kept typing and erasing and re-typing.

KIERAN LYONS has a bad memory so he writes things down.

LILLY YU loves slicing vegetables.

MARIE CHATFIELD is a recovering boba tea addict and current data geek. When not cooking her own tapioca or poring through Census records, you can find her dancing with RDT, rehearsing Shakespearean spoofs with Wiess Tabletop, or rejecting your petty cash forms in the Cashier's Office.

MARISSA HALL is a rare Rice species who actually strives to get eight hours of sleep a night. She works at Coffeehouse, where she drinks tea and is prone to passionate dancing behind the counter. She has been known to peer pressure her friends into meditating with her.

RACHAEL PETERSEN has been giving too many damns about too many things since 1989. Rachael majors in falling in love between languages. Despite colossal efforts and gallons of coffee, she will never be a morning person.

ROSS ARLEN TIEKEN has a grumpy-old-professor persona but likes armadillos and hot tea so how can he be anything but kind-hearted? He wishes dearly that he was smoking his pipe in a Yorkshire hunting-lodge/library, and has spent his life thus far trying to get there.

THOMAS BOYD has no idea where he will be in six months, and is pretty excited about it. He also hopes you like the story.

VIOLETTA KROL: On June 27, 1990, Polish blood, an American heart, a Spanish tongue, road cycling muscles, a photographic eye, and an entrepreneurial brain were compressed under high Houstonian summer temperature and pressure to form a rough diamond that, to this day, refuses to be cut and polished.

ABOUT THE AWARDS

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judges were Eric Ekstrand (poetry) and Michael Gutierrez (fiction and nonfiction). Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing endeavors.

ADDITIONAL GRATITUDE

The publication of *R2* has also been made possible by a gift from Sandy '86 and David Epstein and Family for the five-year period 2009-14. The entire *R2* editorial board wishes to express their gratitude for their generosity.



2012 AWARDS

FICTION

1st prize: "Night of the Living" by Anna Meriano
2nd prize: "Making Friends" by Kieran Lyons

POETRY

1st prize: "The Holm Oak" by Anne Parker
2nd prize: "An Unsettled Heart" by Brittney Xu

NONFICTION

1st prize: "Notes to Selves" by Jessica Fuquay
2nd prize: "Blame and Beauty" by Jessica Fuquay