



The Alembic  
2011

# The Alembic

## 2011

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## **DEDICATION**

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### **THE EDITORS**

Every artist has that first artistic revelation, oftentimes as a child, when through a certain medium a sense of wonder is felt. The artist sees the beauty of the world in a painting, picture, or a story. Wonderment for a child translates to artistic depth in adulthood.

Here at *The Alembic*, we would like to take the time to honor British author, Brian Jacques. As the creator of the acclaimed *Redwall* series, in which heroic mice and squirrels defend the world from evil rats and weasels, Jacques has entertained and inspired children from all around the world, showing us that adventure and courage can come from the most unlikely of places. Having sold over twenty-million books worldwide, in twenty-eight different languages, Jaques is an inspiration to artists of all ages.

His untimely death on February 5, 2011 was tragic not only in his home of Liverpool, but also in the hearts of all his fans, young and old. Particularly, we editors are indebted to Jacques for the role he played in furnishing our respective childhoods with adventurous wonder that dared us to imagine. For this reason, we would like to dedicate this issue of our publication to James Brian Jacques and all of the great work he did in his life.

## FIFTH WHEEL

---

KAREN DOUGLASS

After dinner, the stories begin—  
people whose lives are on the rocks,  
or caught in foreign jails,  
at the mercy of winter,

coffee brandy, or cocaine.  
I have no tales of stolen cars  
or broken ribs, no affairs  
to pass around like mints.

The others dance around the past,  
trying to stay off the ropes.  
Plot lines twist and swell,  
characters become old pugilists,  
with their hands in their laps.

## MY PART

---

EMILY PULFER-TERINO

November, maybe December,  
my mother and I sit side by side  
on a grave stone. The occasion, I figure,

is a picnic; my mother holds an orange.  
Brown leaves skitter like the living.  
My mother liked to see how people live;

brought me to soup kitchens, the ballet  
and powwows, to kirtans where we'd chant  
and eat chick peas with our hands. First

she brings me here, to sit on marble  
while I watch her pick apart an orange.  
Winter creaks in brittle trees; her hands

crack at the knuckles. My mother pries open  
the fruit— moon-gold sections clung together still,  
then holds her palm out, offers me my part.

## **MURDER**

---

**MARY A. KONCEL**

In my town all the women are alive. Maybe that's why I live here. In the next town, a woman was murdered last night. And another ten years ago. I was home, eating clam chowder and watching a TV show about a beached whale that lost its way and lay exhausted and pale. Maybe my town is lucky. That's what I think and some of my neighbors. First the woman ten years ago, and last night the other one who liked to root in dirt or brush the dampness from her hair after running with her dogs. I don't know for certain. What I do know is that the whale kept swimming back, despite the ropes and nets and sunburned volunteers in big rubber rafts waving towels and yelling at it to turn around, please just turn around.

## STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

---

JORGE LUCAS

The crunching of their footsteps could be heard in the dark as they circled round the car from the trunk. The front doors opened and they could be seen, huddling under the overhead light, and then they disappeared again. The engine stuttered—if only the transmission had failed right then—and came to life. The glowing lights on the dashboard made outlines of the two men and then the bursting headlights made them silhouettes against the windshield. Only the trees directly ahead stood awkwardly in the spotlights like guilty crooks. The car lurched forward over the rocky path. Behind them, an unsuspecting home grew smaller.

"I'm gettin' the shakes," said the man in the passenger seat.

"That's called adrenaline," said the driver. "You better not throw up in my car. Breathe deep. In through the nose, out through the mouth."

The man in the passenger seat threw two stockings into the backseat and started rubbing his gloved hands together, though it wasn't cold.

"Breathe deep, goddammit," said the driver.

"How's our gas?"

"Enough to get back," said the driver.

The rocks on the road turned into asphalt. The car stopped shaking and eased to a comfortable downhill coast. The branches overhead grew sparse and the moon illuminated the surrounding scene to a dim blue. This was one of the few spots near town where stars were visible. Their deep breathing subsided and all that could be heard was the wind splashing across the hood and the engine groaning beneath them.

"I don't think I could live out here, Frank," said the man in the passenger seat.

"I would hope not," said Frank. You might want to go somewhere farther away from here, Sammy. At least make it hard to find you."

"That ain't what I meant," said Sammy. "It just feels so lonely out here, you know? And it's so damn dark."

"It's nighttime, Sammy. Besides, who can stand all that noise in the city anyway? Too many people, and not one person you can rely on."

"It ain't so bad once you get used to it. I'm a people person, you know? I like bein' able to walk outside and say hi and talk about the weather or whatever, you know?"

Frank leaned forward and squinted as they slowed down at a bend in the road. The trees on the right side had dropped off down the cliff, opening up the view to the valley studded with rows of streetlights. "You're not really in a people

profession, Sammy. In fact, in our position I'd say it's people we should stay far away from."

"That ain't true, Frank. You saw me dealin' with Mistah Carlton the other day. I acted real professional, like I was in real estate or somethin'. You saw me."

"Yeah, I also told you to shut your goddamn mouth, Sammy. You know you're not supposed to do the talking. I told you to leave that to me."

"But you saw how I did, Frank. I started off nice and easy—recommended the waffles to 'em, acted real nice to the waitress, commented on the weather. I acted like a right gentleman. He looked so damn nervous. I thought he should know we were his friends. Did you see his eyes, Frank? All puffed up, like he'd been cryin' all night long?"

"We are not his friends, Sammy. He's a client. It doesn't mean a goddamn thing if he was crying or not."

Headlights appeared around the next curve, pinning the two to their seats through the windshield. They sat quietly as the car passed them in the other direction, upward. Sammy exhaled and his shoulders relaxed.

"It's a damn shame 'bout Carlton and his wife. You really gotta fuck things up with yer wife to get yer kid taken away, huh?"

This was a comment made too soon, so Frank let a few seconds pass. "It happens. Not every relationship will go the way you want it to. He shouldn't have stuck his foot where it didn't belong. He'll learn to move on."

Sammy looked over his shoulder. "I ain't so sure you can call this movin' on, Frank." Frank's hands tightened round the steering wheel and Sammy quickly faced forward.

"Bad things happen to everyone," said Frank. "Some people take longer to recover, that's all. How Mister Carlton wants to recover is not for us to decide."

"Bad like evil, Frank?"

Frank frowned and shook his head. "No, not like evil, Sammy. Like bad things. Things you don't like. Things that hurt you. Things no one can control. Bad things like mistakes. That's all." He made this a period on the conversation. Sammy glanced over his shoulder again.

The car rolled to a stop at a fork in the road. Frank swung his head widely in every direction, both hands at 10 and 2 on the steering wheel. The car crept forward again to the right. "You have to watch out for careless drivers," he said loudly. "All you need is one jackass pulling a rolling stop at a stop sign to nab you and total your car." His voice dropped again. "I can't stand those goddamn careless drivers. You have to look out for yourself on the road."

"You're a real good driver, Frank. Real careful." Sammy glanced at him. Frank's brow loosened. "You don't believe in evil, Frank?"

"No." He frowned again. "There's no evil. Just mistakes."

Sammy paused and looked out the window. His fingers went tapping nervously on the door. He inhaled a couple of times like a word was lodged in his throat. "Are we making a mistake, Frank?" His head gestured toward the backseat. "With her?"

Frank's leather gloves crackled and squeaked as he gripped the wheel harder. "This is not our mistake, Sammy. This is Mister Carlton's mistake."

"But Frank, don't you think he coulda done somethin' different?"

"It is not our job to judge him. It is not our job to tell him to fix his marriage, or to hire a hooker, or to move on and get a new kid with a new broad. It is our job to facilitate his mistake if he so chooses. We are not his parents, or his shrink, or his priest. We might as well not even exist. We are angels. We are gravity. We are the invisible hands of supply and demand. We are the goose bumps on the back of his neck. And when he looks upon his daughter's face in years to come, it's not us he will think of, but his own guilt or pride or shame or whatever it is he feels. We are what he could never imagine and never will be and nothing else. Do-you-un-der-stand-me." He stressed these last syllables to make it a statement instead of a question. His shoulders pushed up his trench coat so that the collar covered the back of his head.

Sammy gulped down the lump in his throat. His voice crawled out under his breath. "If he never met us, do you think he woulda gotten somebody else to do it?"

"I do," said Frank. His voice was soft now. "I believe he would."

Up ahead the two could see a thick mass of trees swallowing up the moonlight. The road dipped under the branches and then leveled.

"I don't know, Frank. Sometimes at night I get to wonderin'."

Frank's head thumped against the headrest. He sighed. "Wondering what?"

"Well, you see, I think everybody should be afraid of the dark sometimes. At least a little bit. I don't care how tough a guy is, nobody likes the dark."

"And?" Frank's voice was growing taut again. "What's it to you?"

"Well, ever since I started this job, I just stopped bein' afraid of the dark."

"So, what's the problem? You're a big boy now. You know there's no Boogeyman. What's there to be afraid of?"

"Well, that's the thing, Frank." Sammy's voiced dropped as he looked out at the valley through the trees, the little lights growing into windows and homes. "Maybe—well, maybe I ain't afraid because I am the Boogeyman. And then I get to wonderin—"

The car was suddenly flooded with a rattling wave of music. Frank had turned on the radio and spun the volume dial all the way. Sammy twitched and

whipped his head to Frank, who turned away skulking. Sammy's mouth stretched and twisted, but the music drowned him out. He motioned to turn off the music, but Frank snatched his wrist. The two stared at each other intensely, music still pushing against the windows and doors. Sammy yanked his arm away, eyes blazing, but Frank turned to the road coolly.

The moon was descending already and the homes lay still. Sammy covered his ears with his collar and gazed out at the shadows of trees. Frank tapped his fingers to the music to forget that he wasn't alone. A few moments passed when Sammy tried to speak again. Frank didn't move. Sammy quickly snapped off the music.

Frank's voice fired out like gunpowder. "Don't you fucking touch that!"

"Shut up, Frank!"

"Excuse m—"

"Stop the fuckin' car, Frank!"

The car screeched to a halt. Sammy spun around in his seat.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Hear what?" said Frank. He looked through the rearview mirror. His eyes widened.

They flung their doors open and stepped out into the dark road. In the red brake lights they could see a little girl, bound at the hands, running barefoot from the car's open trunk into the woods. Her nightgown fluttered behind her.

Seeing Sammy paralyzed in the road, Frank groaned and dove into the woods after the girl. Sammy looked up and down the road and tapped his foot as rustling and crunching sounds floated back to him through the trees. A short, muffled yelp split the air, but it easily could have been mistaken for a coyote, so Sammy relaxed and leaned against the car.

Soon after, the brush began to shake and then vomited out a black hulk. It was Frank, staggering forward with a small limp body dangling over his shoulder. He dropped the girl into the trunk and cracked his back, groping at his ribs. His forehead glistened in the red light. Sammy caught a glimpse of the girl sprawled on the floor of the trunk, limbs pointing in every direction, before Frank slammed it shut. Her face lay imprinted on his mind, like sunspots on his eyes—soft, rounded, and ignorant. He stood there dumbfounded, looking at nothing.

"Get back in the car," grunted Frank.

"I think we made a mistake, Frank. I really think we gone and done it."

"Everything's fine. She's not hurt." Frank's eyes were almost transparent in the red light and Sammy could see nothing in them.

"I know, Frank. But I think we made a mistake."

"We'll see how you feel after we get paid."

"That's his little girl in there."

"That's a job."

"I think we made a mistake."

"Get in the goddamn car." Frank got in and closed the door behind him.

The car sat impatiently in the road. No sounds came from the trunk. Sammy peered through the trees at the distant lights and the still homes they kept vigil over. He had to crane his neck to see them, but, no matter what angle, there was always a tree in the way. He started wondering how long it would take to walk to one of them and what he would do without Frank. A pair of headlights suddenly peeked around a bend farther up the road. He took one last look through the trees, shook his mind clear, and rushed back to the car before the headlights could catch him.

## DANDELIONS

---

MEGAN F. RYAN

A simple man plucks dandelions  
by the side of the road.  
He told me they were edible  
and tucked them behind my ear  
for safe keeping.  
I trusted his dimples.

I walked to Canada last night.  
Rows of red polka dots forever,  
at least I'm going the right way.  
Then it started to downpour.

There were dandelions  
floating by my head in the gutter when I woke...  
I knew I had made it.

## COLORED WAX STUBS

---

TIMOTHY H. CARTER

The day I left the state, A. A. Milne rose up from the dead and spoke at a University convocation. He'd excellent composure, though slumped.

The audience chuckled at his opening joke, a one-liner (imagine that: real students!). He told them

There's not much to see underground; only ambulatory ghosts with long white palms they drag against the wall.

They all eat honey (which reminds him of certain broken acres) with horrible sucking noises, which he never knew could be

so annoying. One student asked if Jesus was there, and he said Sure. I recall he wore a red shirt.

Much of the speech, however, was missed, due to the mouth being a delicious sieve, and me simply not

having been there. He ended triumphantly (if not defeated): To hell with it! I'm going back now. You've all grown up. Just remember

to get lost in good heaps of daylight, daily; never forget your effervescent mind. Study hard; forget, forgive; the world's your oyster blah

you are the future blah blah

blah

Closing, he sloughed and left. Into the bosom hills where he curled up again.

## THE PUNISHER

---

PETER GANNON

I'm cold to the touch. You'd never know the oceans of rage swelling within me. I'm soft-spoken. I wear JoS. A. Bank suits, drive a late model Buick, and work for an HMO. I'm a drone in customer service. I must be tactful and sensitive at all times. I have three friends and, honestly, at 39, I don't need anymore. But I'm social. If an acquaintance invites me to his home, I'll bring a piece of cake, peck the missus on the cheek, and play video games with the kids, and I won't speak out of turn. Some folks misread this, and that's a shame because I'm not to be trifled with. Do not fuck with me, The Punisher!

Jackass started in with The Punisher last spring. The Punisher was minding his own business, doing what his wife Molly had asked, scraping peeling paint off the deck railing. Jackass was by the fence. He wanted a word with The Punisher. What does giant asshole want?

Jackass's shirt was off. He was hairy and fleshy, looked like a bear losing its fur. He had a stick the size of a baton in his hand and was using it to scrape mud off his sandals. As The Punisher approached, Jackass tightened his jaw and said, "Your tree." He was pointing to The Punisher's white pine. "The needles..."

"What about them?" The Punisher replied.

"They fall into my pool. Clog the filter. Let me show you." Jackass's lot was on an incline, and it was as if gravity were chasing him down it. On the patio he picked up a leaf skimmer and ran it across the pool's surface. He came thundering back holding out the skimmer like it was a church collection basket. "See!" The Punisher eyed the needles in the netting. "I got a proposition for you," Jackass said, leaning the skimmer against the fence. "Chop it down. I'll pay the costs."

"I don't want you spending your money, Carmine," The Punisher said, trying to contain his anger.

"Have you heard of Centennial Tree Service?"

"I've seen their trucks," The Punisher replied.

"Let me call them."

"Molly thinks... I like the tree. I don't have many. Besides, KJ likes sitting underneath it, and my yard gets hot. I don't have a pool."

Sulking, Jackass crouched down and pulled up a dandelion. "Do me a favor? Just think about it."

\* \* \*

The Punisher doesn't think about anything. He punishes. And though Jackass hadn't done anything yet that would have made him mete out punishment, The

Punisher already sensed where things were heading. He'd heard that Jackass had gotten the Lichtensteins, an old infirm couple that lived in the split-level behind Jackass, to chop down their blue spruce for the same reason. But he wasn't old and infirm. He couldn't be intimidated.

When Molly got home from the linen sale, he told her what'd happened. She was filing her nails, her yellow-green eyes, shining pools of wonder. "Maybe we *should* knock it down?" she replied. After 15 years of marriage, he was used to her taking other people's sides in arguments. "It'd be nice if Nick could swim in their pool."

He gritted his teeth. "Has he offered?"

"No."

"Then why?" he replied, lifting his eyes to the ceiling.

"Well, it would be nice."

Frustration began to eat at him. She mumbled something. He couldn't make it out but assumed it had something to do with him not wanting to spend money on a built-in pool.

"He doesn't need to swim in it!"

\* \* \*

Not another word passed between him and Jackass, and this made him happy, because he likes nothing more than being left alone. One morning, he saw Jackass getting into his hearse. Thinking it was time to forget about everything, he said, "Have a good one, Carmine!" but Jackass ignored him. Later that day Nick was kicking a soccer ball and it accidentally landed in Jackass's yard. Jackass graciously tossed the ball back. Cupping his mouth with his hands, The Punisher yelled, "Hey, Carmine, thanks," but Jackass only scowled.

One day, near the end of spring, he came home from work and thought the grass needed cutting. On his way to the tool shed, he noticed that a large part of the white pine's bark was missing. He ran and got Molly.

"Do you think Nick?" he asked, bending down to pick up a piece of bark.

"He was on Facebook all day."

He summoned Nick to the yard. Nick, a handsome boy with long dark hair parted in the middle, trudged toward them. When The Punisher showed him the tree, he denied all involvement. "I don't like liars," The Punisher said. But again Nick denied it. "Believe me, Dad!" Determined to get to the bottom of it, The Punisher granted him clemency, explaining he only wanted the truth. Still, Nick held fast.

"It wasn't like that this morning," Molly said. "I would have seen it. KJ was doing his business right here."

"What about Jackass?" The Punisher asked and Molly looked stricken.  
"Come on!" he said. "Don't hold back! Tell me!"

"Now don't get all bent out of shape," she replied.

"What is it?!"

"He was in his yard. His brother was over. They were in the pool."

\* \* \*

The next day, Viper, the first of The Punisher's three friends, stopped by to look at the tree. Viper is an accountant but in college worked part-time for a landscaper, where he pruned trees and fertilized lawns. He held a piece of bark between his thumb and index finger and studied it like a rare coin. "Someone girdled this tree," he finally said, straightening his sunglasses. Then pointing to the trunk, he added, "See how it's stripped around. The nutrients move up and down. It's bleeding to death."

In the den, The Punisher googled the word "girdled." The downloaded images looked exactly like his tree.

"It's him!" he said to Molly.

"You don't know that," she replied.

"Who else wanted it dead?!"

"It could be sick. Why don't you have a professional look at it?"

\* \* \*

He needed to calm down. He didn't want to rush to judgment. Bad things happened when he did that. Once he thought a coworker was badmouthing him to the Vice President, and he arranged to have yellow roses delivered to the coworker's wife with a note that read, "Simply unforgettable. Love, Miles." When the coworker saw the roses, he lost control and beat his wife with a peppermill. He ended up serving 90 days in prison and losing his job. Turned out he had never said a bad word, and to this day The Punisher feels awful about it and is sometimes burdened by a heavy guilt.

Needing advice on what to do, he called the second of his three friends, Graham. Graham's a criminal lawyer and, no big surprise, has an off-putting superiority complex, the kind of tight-ass that needs to be right just to keep his self-esteem intact. The Punisher laid bare the facts, and Graham said, "Think in terms of M.O.M. Means, opportunity, and motive. They're all here. He was in his backyard. He was with his brother, a potential lookout, Molly left with Nick to get the baked beans, and he's the only person in the universe who had a hard-on for that tree."

Graham recommended he file a police report, so that night, he dialed the local precinct and, in no time, two officers were at his door. He led them into the yard. On the other side of the fence, Jackass was throwing horseshoes. The

Punisher waved. Eyeballing the officers, Jackass waved back. Then, examining the tree, one of the officers said in a low voice, "It's probably him."

"But we can't do anything," the other officer replied, idly kicking a sprinkler head. "There's no proof. We can talk to him though."

Jackass had stopped throwing horseshoes and had turned his back to them.

"No," The Punisher replied, the word bitter on his tongue. "That won't be necessary."

Later that night, there was a knock on the door. It was Jackass. "When we saw the patrol car, Dot and I got worried." Whistling a happy tune, The Punisher led him out the back door into the yard. Crouching before the tree, Jackass said, "Maybe a deer."

"No," replied the Punisher rolling back his eyes. "The officers said it wasn't an animal."

Jackass began to squirm. Like a slug, the Punisher thought. One he wanted to stomp.

\* \* \*

Molly likes to trace his need to punish back to his upbringing. When he was just five, his parents died in a horrific car wreck, and his uncle T had to raise him. In those days, it was common, even expected, that when kids misbehaved, their parents would whack them. And when he stepped out of line—he was an unruly boy—and sometimes even when he didn't but T had had too much to drink, T would sadistically whip him across the legs with a stick of bamboo, anywhere from 25 to 50 lashings. To this day he doesn't wear short pants because he is ashamed of the line scars. T doesn't know it but The Punisher punished him for his cruelty. About five years ago, The Punisher stepped into a dive bar on The Lower East Side, handed a short albino man in a leather overcoat an envelope containing seven 100-dollar bills and a week later, T's bungalow in Mount Pocono burned to the ground. Notwithstanding, he maintains a cordial relationship with T. Around the holidays, Molly, Nick, and he drive to Bayside, where T lives. They go to services, hold hands, and sing songs like "Silent Night."

When Jackass left, The Punisher's brain began throbbing with ideas. The next morning, he called Graham and ran them past him. "Place open house signs around town with his address." "Dump cow manure on his stoop." "Kill his grass. He loves that grass. Pour vinegar on it!"

Graham was laughing uncontrollably. "Stop it! You're sick! No!"

But The Punisher couldn't: "Out of left field and it makes no sense, its purpose is to confuse the enemy, place several blow-up dolls on his lawn."

"Stop it!"

"No!"

"Are you really going to do this?"

"Fuck yeah."

Graham tried to dissuade him. He talked about Jackass's reputation. He owned funeral parlors and rumors were rampant about mob ties, neighbors whispering that he hid bodies in double-decker coffins. "I don't want you disappearing, getting buried with Wendy Marco's Mom. I heard she's very sick. Pancreatic cancer."

"Don't worry about me."

"Take the high road."

"I'm a big boy!"

"I don't want you getting arrested!"

"I'll take my chances!"

"Stop it!"

"Consequences Schmonsequences!"

"If you're arrested, just say I tried talking you out of it."

\* \* \*

He had work to do. He'd decided to kill Jackass's grass. He thought he'd spell out the words: "Die, motherfucker!" on the lawn with the vinegar, but after consideration changed his mind. He wanted to bring about an air of mystery, so he'd create designs like crop circles. His local supermarket didn't have the right kind of vinegar: white distilled, so one day during his break from work, he took the subway to Chinatown and bought a jar on Mott Street. It had only been two weeks since Jackass had girdled his tree so he didn't want to strike too soon and have all suspicion directed at him. Circumstances must be right, he told himself. So he waited. To the end of the summer. It wasn't hard. He was a patient man. Indeed, there were people he was still planning on punishing for offenses dating as far back as 1989. Finally, on Labor Day weekend, with the Giovannis out on the Jersey shore, and after night had fallen, wearing night goggles he'd bought online and dressed all in black, he hopped the fence and joyfully began pouring the vinegar.

A few days later he took KJ out to piss. Over the fence, he saw enough dead grass for a haystack. He couldn't help but smile. The next morning, peering through his bedroom window, he saw Jackass hovering over a crop circle. The Punisher threw back his shoulders, triumph and pride flowing through him. He doesn't know who he's dealing with, he thought. "Did you say something?" Molly asked, climbing out of bed, dressed all in white. "Or are you just talking to yourself again?" He tried muting out her voice. "You're up to something," she said. "What did you do now?"

He touched her sunken cheek and smiled. "You look like an angel," he replied and he leaned in and kissed her nose.

\* \* \*

Jackass spray painted the dead grass green. Clever, thought The Punisher. A short time later, The Punisher noticed that some of the needles on his white pine were turning brown. He couldn't paint those green and, unlike Jackass's grass, they weren't going to grow back and a white pine was costly (300 bucks), and he'd only be able to get an eight-footer, not the twenty-footer in his yard. The punishment no longer seemed equal to the crime. He'd have to do more. But what? In the meantime, he went to Shady's Nursery and bought three eight-footers and planted them near his girdled tree. How do you like them apples?

Lock a transistor radio in a small cage, he thought, chain it to Jackass's stoop, turn up the volume all the way. Get 15 to 20 cinder blocks and with quick-dry mortar set them at the end of his driveway. No, keep it simple, and he remembered Jackass had once bought Dot a decorative chanticleer pear tree for Mother's Day. A tree for a tree. Why hadn't he thought of that before?

The pear tree's prominence on Jackass's front lawn, however, presented a special challenge. With the heavy traffic on their street, even at night, he risked being seen. What to do? He enlisted the help of T-Bone, the third of his three friends, and perhaps his best friend. Unlike Graham or Viper, T-Bone had nothing to lose, no reputation to protect. He was jobless and completely alone in life, no prospects of any kind. Years back, young women suspected of being prostitutes had begun disappearing in the area. Once, T-bone got pulled over for running a stop sign. Because he resembled the Police Department's sketch of the suspect and couldn't adequately explain the shovel, knotted nylon rope, and muddy tarp in his back seat, the officer brought him in for questioning. After lawyering up with Graham, they eventually released him and neither The Punisher, Graham, nor Viper thinks he had anything to do with the missing prostitutes, but the police never caught anyone and suspicion still shadowed him. Anyway, T-Bone always relished the role of lackey and, besides, he owed The Punisher a thousand bucks for legal fees related to a recent DWI bust.

That fall, in The Punisher's tool shed, they mixed copper chloride, glyphosate, and triclopyr in a big cauldron. Working the ladle, the freckled and fleshy T-Bone said with a smile, "This brew is to trees as strychnine is to people," and an eerie chill ran up The Punisher's spine. The plan was for them to shoot baskets in The Punisher's driveway. All the while, they'd be holding 16-ounce red plastic cups, the ones they frequently drank beer from. To anyone watching, it'd appear that they were just knocking a few back. But the cups wouldn't be holding their typical brew, Miller Lite; they'd be holding the toxic brew, Killer Life. (T-Bone had named it that.) They'd purposely take errant shots and allow the ball to roll onto Jackass's front lawn near the tree. When they'd go to retrieve it, they'd discretely douse the soil.

They moved into action in December. All went well—plenty of errant shots and with temperatures near freezing, the neighbors remained loyal to their TVs and laptops—and The Punisher began counting the days to spring. Would it bloom? In the meantime, his white pine was turning browner, making him angrier. One day Molly asked if he was planning on cutting it down. “No! Never!”

“Why? You have the new ones.”

“It’s staying!” and he imagined the tree bare of all needles, Molly and him old and gray, Nick, a middle-aged man with his own family and aggravations. Maybe a wind would eventually knock it over. But even then he wouldn’t touch it. He’d let fungi eat away at it, big ones like he’d seen on hikes, the size of catcher’s mitts. It would take years for it to completely disintegrate. Long after they were dead and buried. And he couldn’t help but smile.

Spring came with anticipation and the forsythia on the north side of Jackass’s yard bloomed magnificently, so did the crocuses underneath the eaves, and the daffodils and tulips along the pea stone walkway. Then everything else came in—the hydrangeas, the rosebushes, the burning bushes, the elderberry, but not the pear tree: a bunch of sticks.

One day The Punisher spotted Jackass watering it. Another time he saw him mixing spoonfuls of Miracle-Gro into the soil. April turned to May but the tree remained barren. Then, one morning, the Punisher went to get the mail. Jackass was passing on his bicycle, dressed all in black, befitting of a mortician. Their eyes met and all the serenity in Jackass’s face vanished as he nearly lost control of his bike. He knows it’s me, The Punisher thought. He’s planning something. Shuffling through the mail, he watched as Jackass got off his bike and, cutting across the grass median abutting The Punisher’s house, walked it into his garage. He didn’t have to step foot on that grass, The Punisher thought, and he’s never done that before. He’s sending a message, a declaration of war.

And so, sometimes when Molly was out with Nick, he’d pretend not to be at home. He’d park the Buick around the block, cut through the Lichtensteins’ side yard, and hide out in the kitchen. With binoculars, he’d peer through the blinds and watch Jackass toss horseshoes, help Dot with her herb garden, run the skimmer across the pool’s surface. Once he saw him unloading 15 foot two-by-fours from his minivan.

Then KJ got sick. The poor thing couldn’t stop vomiting. Nick was in tears and Molly had the dog in her arms and was rushing out the door. It’s Jackass, thought The Punisher. It’s him. He hurt my little bow wow. He feared rat poison but the veterinarian said, “It could be a lot of things, sir.”

Hydrogen peroxide? The Punisher wondered. Ipecac? Many things.

They left KJ for observation and when they got home, The Punisher sat on the deck. The sun was bright but his mood free-falling into darkness. He heard hammering and saw Jackass lining the two-by-fours near the pool. The

Punisher would start off small. Seal off his front door with plywood. Send him a lifetime subscription to *Playgirl*. Put a bumper sticker on Dot's car: "Zero to bitch in ten seconds."

The next day, he picked up KJ. The little guy didn't look so good; he whimpered the entire ride home. A week later the test results came in. Worms. Grabbing the phone from Molly, he yelled into the receiver, "Are you sure?!" But the veterinarian was certain. "It's the worst case I've seen in fifteen years." Even still, KJ was going to be all right, and The Punisher was relieved, but disappointed. He'd already ordered a bumper sticker online that read: "I'm proud to have herpes."

He collapsed on the sofa. He was glad he hadn't acted. After all, Jackass was innocent, and a heavy guilt rose in him as he recalled his former coworker. For a moment, he thought about packing up his anger, living his life like Molly, inferring good intentions where none existed, but the thought quickly passed like an ache as he parted the blinds. With the help of his pencil-necked brother, Jackass was framing out a small structure with the two-by-fours.

The Punisher spread himself out on the sofa and began surrendering to sleep and imagining the completed pool house—cabana-style, a French door, a bifold window—Jackass floating on an inner tube, the pool's surface flecked with dead pine needles. Inside the pool house, on a rafter, one fertile termite egg throbbing, an egg he had somehow managed to plant there. He chuckled as he imagined it hatching, baby termites crawling, gnawing at the wood and eventually laying new eggs. He saw those new eggs hatching, a colony forming, termites flying from one beam to the next, new colonies forming, the two-by-fours being eaten 24/7, until the wood was as brittle as osteoporosis bones and the whole thing collapsing on Jackass, the giant asshole, while he dried off with a towel.

## HAWK

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MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

The hawk's scream from a tree  
drew my attention, but  
though the unmistakable screech

persisted, I did not see it, was  
baffled because it was early spring  
and the leaves were not yet sprung, and

there was nowhere in the tree a hawk  
could hide. Then I saw: not a hawk  
at all, but a blue jay mimicking

the hawk's call. For what purpose, I wondered  
as the jay returned to its familiar voice before  
flying off. Now as I recall its deception,

read aloud the first words of this poem,  
the dog perks up at the word "hawk"  
each time I repeat it. What is it, I wonder,

with the word "hawk" that so captures  
his attention? Then I realize: "hawk" rhymes  
with "walk." He, too, has been fooled by its sound.

## THE RUSSIANS

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ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

As I scramble to the final exam  
for the Russian lit class  
I never knew I was registered for,  
I can't find my purse.

The proctor is a giant roach  
with bifocals on his compound eyes.  
This morning he awoke  
from anxious dreams as Gregor Samsa.  
“You’re late,” he says, feelers twitching.  
“Show me your student ID.”  
“I lost my purse,” I explain,  
but he refuses to hand me the blue booklet.  
A roach can live a whole week  
without a head.

In the hallway I am naked  
with my #2 pencil. A train whistles  
in the distance. “Help me!” I cry.  
Anna Karenina, gripping the bodice  
of her black dress, spits out,  
“Can’t you see I have my own problems?”

## THE GROUND FLOOR

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PATRICK DACEY

One morning during winter break my father asked if I felt like taking a ride with him up to Plymouth. I got dressed and met him downstairs where he sat at the kitchen table smoking and flipping through the small cubic prayer book he'd picked up at the meetinghouse on Route 3. Back then he drove a big Jeep Wagoneer with wood-paneled siding. The inside smelled of burnt coffee beans and spearmint. He held the wheel with one hand and rolled cheap tobacco in cigarette paper in the other. The Mid-Cape highway was crusted with salt, the Jeep weighted down for traction with a bank machine my father had bought from a catalogue that made promises in bold type: MAKE MONEY FAST. TURN SILVER INTO GOLD. In the glove compartment he stashed packets of multi-colored vitamins he'd been trying to sell to housewives. Twenty boxes or so stacked in the garage. EXTEND YOUR LIFE. SEE THE FUTURE.

We took the Sagamore Bridge over the canal and pulled off the rotary into a Dunkin' Donuts, where he bought me a small coffee with lots of cream. I took a sip, opened the door and spat it out. My father laughed at this, said you never like anything addictive at first. The gray cloud cover over eastern Massachusetts, smoke pouring from the tailpipes of trucks and vans lined up at the drive-thru, men needing rides to the city sitting on five-gallon buckets, hands in the pockets of their hooded sweatshirts, heads bowed, looking like statues of some dynasty nearing the end of its long reign.

We waited in the parking lot and listened to sports talk radio. He had written his bookie's lines in sharp angles with the dagger-tip of a shaved pencil in a reporter's notebook. The markings like some kind of hieroglyphic. I asked him what trends were, what a hook was, a teaser, what it meant to give points and take points. He outlined the scenarios. If a team had been 6 and 1 against the spread so far that season and had gone over the point total 8 of the last 10, say, then you had to consider putting your money on them and the over in a parlay, or a double action reverse, and that way you double or triple what you put in. Whichever team won or lost didn't matter. What mattered was that they covered the line and that your money was on the right side of that line. I could only understand some of what he told me. I was twelve years old and not very good at math.

The bookie appeared like a spirit at the back door.

"Cold as a witch's tit," he said.

My father handed him an envelope and they rapped for a while, smoking with the windows rolled up, while I watched seagulls pick at the loosely tied garbage bags thrown out back. My father relayed the spreads from the newspaper

and asked what his line was and why it was a half-point more or less than the paper said. He called the bookie a thief, a thug, a criminal, and the man's eyes looked away at the traffic going up Route 3 toward Boston. "You getting all this?" my father said.

By seven o'clock we were at the meetinghouse known for the totem pole outside that kept watch over the highway and wore a white hat in those winter months. My father made coffee and I swept the floors and we helped set up folding chairs while other men straggled in, stomping their boots on the ratty carpet mats, filling Styrofoam cups to the brims, some halfway if they were new and couldn't keep from shaking.

During the meeting, a bear of a man with legs like tree trunks told about how he killed his brother accidentally but didn't know he killed him until later when he woke up in a cell with cracked ribs, torn skin on his knuckles, and what felt like an axe blade stuck in the center of his head. He said he lost his job and house and someone he loved. He didn't give details, so I had to imagine where the man lived and who came to see him and where he worked and what his girlfriend looked like by the way he sipped his coffee and shuffled his feet and mumbled his recollections. He sounded out the letters G-O-D, but never said the word.

We sat in the back where you could smoke, the smell of wet fur and stale beer. When men showed up late, my father tapped my leg and I set out more chairs and found the empty places between the men's feet, the floor wet from the soles of their boots and sneakers and dress shoes. It was difficult to hear with the heat hissing and clicking through the vents and the men spreading open and folding over newspapers. Some had big chaws of tobacco pushed against their cheeks and they hawked and spit into cups. I hawked and spit, too.

My father said he was drinking so much he wasn't getting drunk. He said his family was tired. I didn't feel tired, but the way he spoke seemed to make it so. The story he told was about his own father, finding him face down in an alley off of Tremont and picking him up and dragging him to the Pine Street Inn, where they gave him a blanket to put over his shoulders and a pair of pink slippers. He said his father in those slippers is what scared him more than anything.

When the meeting was over, the men held hands and said the Our Father. I helped stack the chairs and filled the sink with warm, soapy water and cleaned out the coffee canister while my father shook hands with other men and they smoked and told stories. An older man with a body so thin it seemed translucent, held a basket full of dollar bills in his trembling hands and whispered a command for me to count how much was there on account of his bad eyes. The bills were folded, creased, crumpled, rolled into thin tubes like cigarettes. I pressed them flat against the Big Book. I was tempted, but knew better than to take from a place that seemed such a comfort for sick men, even if it might have helped my father end a bad run.

After the meeting my father offered a man a ride over the bridge. He let me stay up front and the man coughed and grinded the phlegm in his throat before thanking us.

"This is Murray," my father said. "Murray, this is my son."

"How you doing, pal?"

"Okay," I said.

"Okay? Just okay? You should be doing better than that."

I could smell something foreign in the car now.

"You got a job?" my father asked him.

"Used to."

"A family?"

"Not really. Can we get some heat back here, pal?"

"Sure." My father turned the dial and whacked the dash. "Here, have some vitamins." He passed one of the packets over his shoulder and another to me. "I've been trying to sell them for a while, but there's no market just yet. They're supposed to make you live longer."

He saw me struggling to swallow the thick pills.

"I'll take mine, too," he said, and drank them down with coffee.

"Maybe people don't want to live longer," Murray said.

"What's that?"

"The reason they don't sell. Could be people in general don't want to live longer than they believe they ought to."

My father rolled a cigarette and snapped a match and built a shelter with his hands so that the flame bit the shreds of tobacco. He blew the smoke out the crack in the window.

"Do you feel better when you take those pills?" he asked me.

"Not really."

The pills smelled like garlic and made my mouth dry. Usually, I only took one or two and the others I spit into my palm and put in my pocket.

"You feeling the heat back there?" my father asked.

Murray kicked my seat and I turned and he was grasping his throat with one hand and shoving my headrest with the other.

"Is he choking?"

I couldn't answer. I'd never seen a face change color that rapidly. He reached out, fingers stretched, trying to grab hold of my face. I shot back against the dash.

My father looked over his shoulder and turned onto the breakdown lane. He pulled Murray out and wrestled him up on his toes, then bent his knees and

pulled him against his body. Murray struggled to get free, flipping his feet like a dog held up for show, until my father lost his grip. Murray fell, crawled north on the breakdown lane, and rolled over on his back. When we reached him, he was breathing spastically, scratching at his throat with untrimmed nails.

"Grab a ball of snow over there," my father said.

I went to the embankment and looked on the other side where a hill descended to a small, frozen pond. I slid down and packed some snow in my gloves, the wind slicking the snow into ice.

Murray sucked on the ball of ice and tilted his head back.

"Damn things'll kill you before you even get 'em down," he said.

A car slowed and pulled over up ahead and a man in a suit with a long black coat draped over his shoulders hurried toward us, slipping back and forth on the black sludge.

"Everything alright here?" he asked.

"Can't you see we're involved in things you know nothing about?" Murray said.

"It looked to me like you were trying to get away from these two."

"That's right."

The man stared at me and then at my father. His eyes were big and frightened.

"You read about what happens to people stopping to help other people on the highway."

"We're not those types of people," my father said.

"It's a con," the man said, pacing backwards now, his voice panicked. "I know it's a con."

Murray laughed, his eyes red and wild.

"There's no con," my father said. "Get back in your car. We're fine."

When the man was halfway to his car, Murray sat up and threw the ball of ice at him, striking the back of his leg. The man lost his footing and fell, his coat spread out underneath him like a dark hole he was about to tumble into. He pushed himself up and waddled back to his car.

"The pecker-head left his coat," Murray said. He walked over and picked it up, knocking the snow off it with his hand. He held the coat open in front of him, displaying its fine inlay for us. He pushed his arms through the sleeves, pulled the coat up over his shoulders, and fished through the side pockets.

"Fits perfect," he said, walking back towards us. But, the man had been at least four inches taller than Murray and the cuffs went down past his hands. "Nothing but a matchbook and a couple cough drops in the pockets. We really should've robbed that guy."

"Then we'd be spending the night in jail," my father said, "and I'll be honest, this is about the length of time I think I'd ever want to spend with you."

"Same here, pal."

My father and Murray kept silent until we hit the bridge, where all the cars were traveling west like some team of unfed beasts shrouded in dust and smoke, lighting up the short rise on their way to the city.

"What exit you live off of, Murray?" my father said.

"Don't live off any exit over here, pal. I'm a mainlander."

"Why'd you ask for the ride then?"

"Felt like getting a different perspective."

"I don't have time for this shit, Murray."

"That's all right, there's no place I need to be. Tell me about this machine in back."

My father looked past me out the window, either exhausted by the situation or at having to explain again something that no one else but him believed was worth millions.

"It's a bank machine."

"How's it work?"

"You swipe a card down the slot there and it gives you money out of your checking account. Just like a teller. That way you don't have to worry about walking around with cash on you."

"No one's got money these days."

"I guess that's why it's not selling either."

"I see a lot of dead ends here."

His sarcasm infuriated me.

"This guy doesn't know anything," I said.

My father looked at me as if I had spoken in some foreign tongue.

"What did he say?"

"Dad's got good ideas. He can see the future."

"That's enough," my father said.

"One day those machines will be in every store across the country, and there'll be people using them and buying loads of life-saving vitamins and living to be a hundred and you'll remember who was the first one there and that it's not all perfect right from the start."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so."

Most of what I had said had been a paraphrase of my father's own words. But, I was no salesman, and I only trusted it to be true because I trusted my father.

Murray huffed and fell silent. I wanted to be home then, where the house was warm and my mother had some kind of soup going on the stove.

"There's a Burger King off exit six," my father said. "They got a bus stop there. How's that sound?"

"I didn't mean to offend you, pal. I get excited sometimes. It's a personal defect."

"I wasn't offended. The kid was, but I wasn't."

We pulled up at the Burger King where a group of boys not much older than I was were huddled outside, shivering and smoking.

"How about a few bucks so I can get back home?" Murray asked.

Without speaking, my father handed him a five-dollar bill.

"Is this enough?"

"Don't know, but it's all I got."

When Murray shut the car door, my father turned and gave me a swift smack across the top of my head, hard enough that my hat came off and my ear was ringing. I pushed at him and raised my fist. He grabbed my arm and twisted it back. "Smart guy, huh? You know what happens to smart guys?" he said.

He let go of my arm and I sank back in the seat. I looked out the window and saw Murray examining the pavement, the end of the other man's coat sweeping along the dirty, salted asphalt. He knelt and picked up a lit cigarette that had been partly crushed under someone's heel. He straightened it out and put it to his lips. The boys laughed at him.

I spent the rest of the day sulking in my room, only coming down for dinner and to do the chores my mother had written on a note posted to the refrigerator. My father hadn't come home for dinner and I didn't hear his voice downstairs before I fell asleep. During the night, though, he came into my room and turned on the lamp beside my bed. He had never woken me from my sleep before, yet it seemed perfectly normal that he would be sitting there. He hadn't shaved since the previous morning and the pale whiskers on his face looked yellow in the light. I listened for my mother, but there was no movement in the house, only stillness, as if we had been painted this way.

He touched my ear.

"Did I hurt you?" he said.

"No."

"Can I ask you something?"

I nodded.

"Do you believe what you said today? In your heart, I mean, do you believe it in your heart?"

"I think so."

"I'm not so sure. I used to be, but I'm not sure anymore. I got so many ideas in my head, you know? I can't sleep. I don't know what to do with them all."

"You should put them in a box," I said. It was a ridiculous thing to say.

He reached down and gripped my toes. I could feel his heartbeat in his fingertips.

"Not your problem," he said and walked out of the room.

\* \* \*

My father moved out sometime in March. The bank machine stood like a carnival relic in the basement next to the boxes of vitamins and two metal file cabinets filled with his documented past. I made a little money that summer selling the vitamins door to door. A year or two later, the banks figured out a way to make a killing with the automated tellers and companies made millions selling minerals in easy to swallow capsules.

What I knew about my father's leaving was that he'd met a woman with money and moved to Las Vegas to become a professional gambler. This I found out from my mother, who I realized later no longer loved him and was happier after he left. When he had a good week betting the lines, he'd send some cash and a note to me. Those I kept and reread so that I could hear his voice, but I can't remember what they said or what happened to them. After a while, he stopped sending letters, then money, and my mother and I moved off Cape to a little house in Bridgewater.

I know that he spent six months in jail for tax evasion and later married a different woman than the one he'd left with, a cocktail waitress he'd sweet talk in the mornings at The Reserve, a safari-themed casino not far from where he lived. He sold life insurance, took courses in business administration at a community college in Henderson, and spent three weeks in Los Cabos, Mexico, looking for a wanted man he never found. There's more to his life than this, and I don't claim to know what led him from one point to another, except to think that, like me, he desired to be better than he was, and the way he went about becoming better was what made him unique.

\* \* \*

The last time I visited my father was about four years back. He'd recently enrolled in a real estate licensing course and had plans to start his own firm. "This is the fastest growing city in the United States," he said. We were standing outside on the balcony of his second floor apartment. I felt for a moment that I had been there before, not recently, but a long, long time ago. "See all these buildings here? Ten years ago there was nothing. They keep covering the desert and people keep

moving in." From where we stood, you could see a purple light hovering above the hotels and casinos down on the Strip. My father lit a cigarette and patted my back. He looked healthy and strong, and I felt fortunate for that. "We're all about to get rich," he said.

## THOUGHTS UPON FILM NOIR BY AN OLD MOVIE STAR

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STANLEY NOAH

Back in the '40s we didn't  
Call it film noir. We just  
Smoked a lot and said our  
Lines. The cameras followed  
Us on shady lamp walls; and  
Dialog was in the form of  
Many questions asked like  
A perpetual psychological  
Journey to gain an edge.

People got killed falling  
In rivers, off cliffs, through  
Windows, in gutters of rainy  
Streets or just disappeared  
In a scene or the next scene  
That surprised no one.

When  
Most of the characters were  
Dead or gone, you, the movie  
Goer, knew it was now over  
In about 87 minutes. Fun, yes  
For the actors and you got your  
.25 cents worth. But noir films  
Are much more than this.

They, he said,  
Are the dark side, the void side  
Of romance with a missing of  
Vocabularies not to explain but  
To exploit inside the black, white  
And gray of breathing images.

You can't escape fate, he went  
On to say, because it's in every drink,  
Around contrasting corners, and  
Exists in every kiss.

## AUGUST NIGHT

---

JED MYERS

Hot in the apartment, so I'm down  
here—the dive bar, we call it.  
Cool. And loud with slashed guitar,  
thrashed skins, thick steel strings  
and howls out of the box by the door,

the neighborhood's young drinkers yakking  
over the din, the pool balls'  
intermittent clacking in their own  
unchallenged register. Three screens  
on football over the bar on the wall.

Proud summer—the American  
guzzle-gut boys and broad-hipped girls,  
elbows in the air, hard laughter,  
all of it lonely as dark hereafter.

## CHARLIE

---

GREG PAPPAS

The news hit me hard, even though it took me a long time to finally believe them. All those doctors coming to my home, trying to hand me strange pills. It's still hard to tell which ones are real. Finally they took me to the hospital. The ride over there was always unusually bumpy, but I guess never really noticed how many hills there were in my neighborhood before those hospital trips. When I first got to the hospital they showed me how insane I am. "Now that you are on the antipsychotic medication, do you still hear the voices Scott?" "No, sir," I replied. On the car ride back I really felt all the ups and downs of the hills as we took the single road back home. The hills seemed so big, I don't understand how I couldn't have noticed them before. When I got home, all I wanted to do was sleep.

It obviously wasn't all that simple, but in time I learned to recognize the difference between what was real and what was in my head. Or at least this was true some of the time.

I think it was harder on my family than on anyone else. I couldn't imagine what it must feel like to have your own child be deathly afraid of you. My parents would enter a room and I would start screaming at the top of my lungs "Get out! Don't come any closer! HELP, HELP!" Sometimes I would throw things, sometimes harmful things. Like this one time I hit my mom right in the head with a glass vase, knocked her out. She had to get 30 stiches from her eye to her ear. I cried all night, disgusted with myself. But it didn't matter because before I knew it the voices were back, telling me I did the right thing. "She was coming to cut you, you had no choice! That was a courageous thing you did" they would say. The leader of the pack is Charlie, a real nagging and annoying voice. Sounds a lot like a little leprechaun just without the Irish accent. He always appeared, even if the rest of the voices were silent that day.

My mom says she forgives me for what I've done, "I know that was not you sweetie, I still love you and always will. Please remember that." But the fact of the matter is that it was me. This is who I am.

The medication helped most days, at least with subsiding my violent outbursts. But Charlie was always there, always causing me to doubt myself. The thing you don't understand see, is that he is more real than you can imagine. He is more real than your family, more real than your best friend for 20 years, more real than what you just ate for dinner. Even if you really had all those things. And that's why when Charlie is telling me to hit my dad or scream at my little sister cause she is going to knife me, I do it. Because I believe every word he says. Because he says it.

I guess you can say the worst choice I ever made was not taking the medication that day. It's not because I didn't want to. Believe me I wanted nothing more than to go another day without hurting anyone. It's just that Charlie and his gang got to me first. Mom was sick that day, and dad was out at work so my little sister came into my room to give me my medication. This was a very rare case on account of how violent I could be, but most mornings I'm fine anyway. So in she walks and says "Here you go Scott, Mom says to take all of it." She paused for a moment and gave me this real sad look with her eyes. "Scott I know I don't say this often, but I really love you and hope that you know that. I'm always glad to be your little sister" she said with tears in her eyes as she walked over and gave me a hug. She kissed my forehead and left the room, closing the door behind her.

I must have sat there for at least an hour, staring at those pills. I thought a lot about my sister. I guess we never really talked much. Maybe it's 'cause she was younger than me, or maybe cause I'm too crazy to hold any real conversation with her. There was this one time though, when she was in sixth grade. She had a real important play coming up for the Christmas show and she needed someone to practice with. We must have spent three hours in her room, just laughing it up. I couldn't remember any of the lines, and I wasn't any good at acting. She didn't seem to mind, she would just laugh and correct me, and move on to the next scene. It was probably the most fun I ever had with my sister. But that was before I ever even met Charlie.

Like I said most mornings I am fine, and I can take the medication before Charlie wakes up and starts convincing me not to. That day it just didn't happen, and Charlie chimed in with his usual speech. "Don't do it man, you know that little bitch is always trying to kill you! It's poison," he said. So convincing, but I had some doubts. Don't you go on thinking I didn't have some doubts 'cause believe me I did. And I loved my sister more than anything in the world so there's no way, crazy or not, that I was going to just believe Charlie on this one. "No Charlie," I started "she knows these are good for me. She knows these help me calm down, see things straight." "See things straight!?" Charlie said, "What's the matter, don't you see fine right now? Can't you see me, huh? Look, how many fingers am I holding up?" "That's not what I mean Charlie," I began to reply, but was interrupted. "Just answer the question, how many fingers?" he went on. "Four," I said. I was right. Charlie was right.

"So what are you gonna do man? Just wait around until one day she finally kills you?" Charlie said, really starting to yell at me now. "Come on man, you know we been friends forever, trust me!" I didn't know what to do. "No, they already showed me, already proved to me that you're not real Charlie," I said. "Not real? Not real!? Then who are you talking to right now! You know they just don't like when I come around. I'm more real than anything in this whole room right now. And you know it." Charlie seemed so right. His voice was so clear, and so I grabbed the knife in my dresser drawer.

## CHARLIE

In the cop car I just put my face on the backseat window and stared off into the distance. There were dozens of tiny hills, the same ones I would pass when they would take me to the hospital. They seemed to have gotten smaller, less threatening, but maybe just less interesting. None of it seemed real. As I pulled into the station and got out of the car, I took one last look behind me. The hills seemed to disappear altogether, and I got a clear view of my house, nearly thirty miles south.

The whole time I spent in jail was horrible. Without my medication Charlie would never leave me alone. He made me so proud of what I did I thought they were gonna kill me on the spot. I sat there bragging “Oh yeah I killed her officer, killed my own sister can you believe it? Oh, but I had to you see cause she was gonna kill me first. That poison, always trying to give me that poison.” I would just ramble on and on for hours. Charlie kept me good company while the lawyers tried to figure out what to do with me. “So what do ya say Scott? Quick game of rock, paper, scissors? Loser has to do a hundred push-ups.” Charlie always seemed to win when we played, but this time I was feeling lucky. “Ok, go! Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!” I said. “Yes! Finally! That’s a hundred push-ups Charlie!” I couldn’t stop laughing the whole time he was doing them. He wasn’t half bad, only took three breaks the whole time.

After we got bored of our games we would just talk, still waiting in that cell. “So what do you think will happen to me Charlie? I don’t want to be in prison the rest of my life.” “Oh don’t worry I’m sure it’s not so bad, and don’t worry, I’ll be here with you,” Charlie said, laughing. “That’s true,” I said with a smile. “Hey Charlie, do you ever wonder what it would be like if we were normal?” “What do you mean normal? What’s wrong with us? Nothing,” he said. “Oh, come on Charlie you know we see doctors all the time. They give us medication. We hurt people sometimes.” “Whoa, whoa, whoa, buddy *we* don’t hurt people, *you* hurt people,” he said, licking his lips as he turned over on his bed to face me. “You hurt people my friend, I never harmed a soul.” “But Charlie you told me to hurt all those people. My mom, my sister that was all your fault!” I was up now, getting in Charlie’s face. “Hey now, all I told you was to stand up for yourself. You better not go on and tell that judge all this was my fault. You’re the sick son of bitch who killed his own sister!” Charlie said, really grinning at me. “How can you say that!” I started, “You told me to! You told me...” Charlie cut me off, “You really are nuts man, how the fuck can you do that? Was it bloody? I bet it was bloody.” He kept going, kept making it seem like it was all my fault, like he had nothing to do with it. I wanted him gone, he wasn’t my friend anymore. I begged and pleaded with the officer to let Charlie out of my cell, put him somewhere else. But it was no use, he stayed with me all night. Running his stupid mouth.

Lucky for me before my trial they made me take my meds. It was a requirement for the state, so Charlie wasn’t there for the trial. Finally, the decision was reached. I’ll never forget the day. I was sitting in the defendant’s seat waiting to hear my sentence. My family sat right behind me. I couldn’t

stand to look at them. How could I? They never came to visit me in jail and I don't blame them. My mom was crying so loud, and my father sat silently, waiting. I thought back to all those times when I was sick. When I would yell at them, strike at them, curse them out of my room. I remembered how they would always come back later, showed me it was okay. My dad would come back, sit on the bed right next to me. "Scott," he would always begin "I know you say all those hurtful things to us, but I know you don't mean them." He would always begin to tear up just a little bit, never fully cry but I can see it in his eyes. He is fighting back the tears as hard as he can. "You will always be my son, and there is nothing you can say or do that won't make me love you."

The verdict was in. I could live they told me, but it wasn't that simple. You see because I'm suffering from this disease they told me they couldn't kill me. No not at all as long as I wasn't taking the antipsychotic meds, as long as I stayed crazy. It's not legal to kill a mentally insane person, so I would be safe. But it's like I said, *I couldn't take the drugs or they'd shock me so fast it would be like being struck by a thunderstorm.*

At first the psychiatric ward wasn't so bad. I thought I could be fine living here. Charlie and me would play games as usual. We had a little more freedom here, so sometimes we got to play basketball or monopoly. "Oh shoot, that's another three hundred bucks, here you go Scott." Charlie was real fun to play monopoly with, but I suspect he always let me win on purpose. We got over our fight and became real good friends again. He said he was sorry for saying all those things. He tends to get emotional whenever I'm in trouble.

One night Charlie lit up a cigarette and looked down at me from his top bunk. "It's a real bitch, huh?" "What is?" I asked. "Life, right? You have all these ideas and shit of what you want to do. And then bam! You're in the nut house the rest of your life," he said. He jumped out the bed and walked over toward the window. I looked outside over his shoulder. Nothing but hills and trees for as far as I could see. I guess I never really thought about what I wanted to do with my life, not that it mattered now. "Sometimes I just wish I could have travelled a little more you know? Maybe seen Europe or something," Charlie said, sounding like he might cry. He threw the cigarette on the floor and put it out with his foot. He walked away from the window and got into bed, shutting out the light. I couldn't sleep that night. I just stared out the window, noticing the hills for the first time since I had been in the psych ward. Noticing how they seemed to roll on forever, into the distance.

There was only one day when my parents came to visit. I wish they had never come. Not because I don't love them and not 'cause I didn't want to see them, but because that visit seemed to bring back the old Charlie. The bad Charlie. They approached my room, slowly. My mom couldn't speak, she just began crying right away. "Scott..I..." my dad began. But that was it. I didn't hear another word any of them said 'cause Charlie began to run his stupid

mouth. "Hey you're not gonna let these folks talk to you right now right? After all those times they tried to kill you." "Shut up! They never tried to! You lied, you always lied," I yelled at Charlie at the top of my lungs. My parents and the doctors looked around the room. No one. "Oh come on Scott, don't get mad at your old pal. You know I'm always trying to help. I'll tell you what, I bet we can escape today! First thing you gotta do is knock that doctor out. He's the strongest of the group," Charlie said, so convincing. He went on, "Then I can get you out of here, I promise." But this time was different. I saw the look in my parents' faces. So upset that I was talking to a freaking wall. Charlie had to be stopped. "No, go away Charlie! I won't! I won't!" I started to raise my voice, but he grew louder. "Do it Scott!" Charlie shouted, "Do the same thing to them that you did to your sister! Do it! Grab the knife and cut their fucking throats!"

After I woke up I realized my parents had already left. The doctors had given me some shot to calm me down, but it just seemed to knock me out. The worst part was Charlie was still there when I woke up, and still mad. "Damnit man are you fucking kidding? We could have gotten out of here if you just listened to me! Instead you let that doctor just put you out like that; man you're not the Scott I use to know." "Shut up," I said "Shut your fucking mouth, you never knew me. You have no idea who I am." "Oh is that so?" Charlie said, real big grin on his face. "I think I know you quite well. You're the kid who hit his dad in the nose, you're the kid who knocked his mom out 'cause she tried to feed him. You're the class act son of bitch who cut his own sister and watched her..." "Shut up! Shut up!" "You watched her bleed, didn't you Scott? How the fuck was that? You sick, sick..." "Shut up! Stop it! Leave me alone," I screamed and screamed but he wouldn't stop. "You're a fucking monster, that's who you are; believe me, I know you all too well." I jumped on to the top bunk to hit Charlie, but he knocked me right off. I cut my hand on the edge of the bed and Charlie just sat there laughing. I was bleeding and he was laughing, always laughing. Charlie wouldn't stop, but I knew the one way I could make him.

My lawyer came in, with some of the doctors waiting around me. My parents waited outside the room. "Now Scott, if we put you back on the medication the state is going to execute you," my lawyer began, "you know this right?" "Yes," I said, "Just make the voices stop." The lawyer looked at the doctors to see if I was answering with a clear mind. They nodded, and so the papers were signed. Charlie watched me from the other side of the room, grinning. Real mad that he was finally gonna be forced to leave me alone. He got up and walked out of the room, laughing.

And that is why I am here today, sitting in this electric chair. The room is empty; it's just me and a one-way glass mirror for them to watch from. I don't know if my parents are here. I don't want to know. Sure, I wish I could tell them I'm sorry, but what would that do? It won't bring back my sister, won't make me a normal son. Honestly, I'm just trying not to think about all that's happened,

and with my mind all clear for some reason all I can think about are those hills. I wonder if there really are any hills in this town. I can't seem to remember now what is real and what's not. I'm trying real hard not to think about those hills, but I can't seem to shake them from my head. All they do is remind of a person I once knew. Someone I don't want to be friends with anymore. At the same time, I wish just once I had gone outside, and just walked over a few of those hills. Just to see where they'd take me. But I guess it doesn't matter much now. All I can do is wait and enjoy this final moment.

A moment without Charlie.

## A BEHOVELY SEASON

---

JEFF PAJAK

The fall has only just begun.  
All green things but things green always  
Will curl through colder nights craving  
    the ground  
Until they're hot, ripe for bursting;  
Then will red colors wait to catch fire in the sunlight.  
Yet the season isn't strange anymore:  
These are the days after the equinox.

The quiet room knows prettiness  
And it is also clean and well-lighted,  
But not the way that we remember.  
Knowledge acts like a pillar in each corner,  
Strong as a Philistine, and older still.  
There is the semblance of order.

And there is payment for your hunger,  
And I know the cost of that rumble;  
I can hear the starving sky.  
There outside the bubble of glass and wood  
Brood the trees, their dirty emerald tops  
Looming heavily through the slouching dark,  
Like giants peering down upon an unlit pyre,  
Or some lonely night at vespers with a redless fire.

Suddenly, tragically, these four fake jungle plants,  
Dried and placed appropriately within their cornered pots,  
Drop down in plastic death and spoil everything.  
I spy the chinks and holes of prettiness and knowledge,  
Each a drain for all our pretense,  
Each the size to pass a stone.

Imagine, now, the stilling sense  
    To come  
Should all the oceans perish:  
Collapsible,  
    And fit to burst.

## **UPON AN ANGEL, DRAWING HIS SWORD**

---

**DAVID MARCOTTE**

Let's say I saw an angel with honeyed harp in hand  
A halo sheared from God, the matchless circle made,  
His foot upon a demon, to keep His glory grand.

Would you care to stare amidst his heavy stand  
Beside where the moon could shine no shade  
Let's say I saw an angel with honeyed harp in hand.

And in his other, a vocation justly planned  
The angel drew his sword coarse with jagged blade  
His foot upon a demon to keep his glory grand.

The aging scars of warfare, I'll never understand  
From the heart of a demon, in question to merely fade  
Let's say I saw an angel with honeyed harp in hand.

And wondered who was really banned,  
And why only one's back was forced and laid?  
His foot upon a demon to keep his glory grand.

At once he severed the head as if on command  
And I, pushed aside, could only feel betrayed.  
His foot upon a demon to keep his glory grand,  
Let say I saw an angel with honeyed harp in hand.

## DR. KAIN

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### LIAM MCCARTNEY

The capsule lay on its side, its edifice shattered and the fluid had long since drained into a pool, slowly emptying into the cavernous sewer beneath. Dr. Kaine pushed away a medium sized wooden box with one foot, clearing his way to what had caught his interest. He crouched at the knees, resting his forearms on them, and furrowed his brow staring at the small inscription at the base of the glass pod. "Belial IX." Kaine stood up, his face relaxed for but a moment. For that one moment he was elated, he had found what he had been looking for. Finally this search, this three year long search, had reached success. Kaine had originally learned about IX four years ago when it had allegedly escaped from its pen. His mentor and adoptive father was responsible for this atrocity's creation. Always an eccentric Dr. Jefferson had visions of genetic engineers that bordered on the insane. All universities and research funds severed attachments to Jefferson and he found himself all but penniless. But this lab proved that he had not given up on his vision. It proved that he had crossed that border into the realm of madness.

Kaine postulated that the number nine in the name of the creature meant that it was the ninth iteration of the creation. He gingerly stepped over the capsule and avoided the shards of reflective glass. He looked down and saw his reflection in an especially jagged piece. A rugged man of about forty, with an unattended five-o-clock shadow looked back at him. He smirked and looked up. A counter stood in front of him, its top covered in papers, blue prints, and diagrams. He ruffled through them, lifting up one and held it up to his flashlight. It presented a sketch to him, at first it appeared to be a heavily scarred man to him, but at further examination he realized that it was most definitely not a man. The face had no nose and the skin was pulled tight. Bald and its eyes were enormous with cat-like pupils. Its neck and torso were extremely disproportionate to the rest of its body. Its shoulders were twice the size of the biggest body builders, skin pale. Its hands were clawed and elongated. The drawing depicted it resting on hindquarters, roaring, fangs bared. It was a frightening sight. Kaine shuddered as he looked at the bottom of the page; it said Belial IX. He looked up, back to the shattered capsule and his flashlight took this opportunity to promptly die. Kaine gulped. He heard a growl emanate from the far corner. He smacked his flashlight against his calloused palm and the light returned. Kaine shined it towards the sound. There it crouched, IX. It held a body over its shoulder; Kaine knew the body, and it was Jefferson, a dead Jefferson. IX let out a horrid piercing scream that made the blood well up in Kaine's ears. Kaine reached to the back of his waist and pulled forth his trump card. He let the flash bang go and before it even hit

the ground he was running. IX tossed Jefferson's limp body to one side and leapt at Kaine. The flash went off. Kaine panted. A single growl and a single scream pierced the night's air.

Jefferson had played God and he had paid.

---

SIMON PERCHIK

From habit, burnt  
as if every morning now  
the sun has to be reheated

still frightened by the cold  
more than coming alone  
—it's your usual meal

two slices, made stale  
broken open the way coffee  
just by boiling

turns your mouth black  
—you've learned to open bread  
till it reeks with ashes

and smoke already rising  
to become another mouth  
and on its lips

the small blister, resting  
though there's no moon  
only this side by side

lowered slowly, no longer  
empty, your arms cramped  
calling for each other.

## DEPRESSION DREAMING GOLD

---

PETER HARRIS

Six months now my darling son,  
if he speaks at all, hauls off and slugs  
the air. I breathe. Purple rain wells

in the bruise. These months seem arranged  
by the inventor of rats, and crack,  
and gated cul-de-sacs.

Blame gets slathered like poison berry jam.  
We feel the back of God's left hand,  
He who keeps forgetting He doesn't exist.

Yesterday, a rainbow suspended above the bay.  
It looked perfect, except neither end  
was even close to touching ground.

## TRANSLATION

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PETER JOHNSON

### III

“Weep, you Loves and Cupids”  
Catullus (84-54 B.C.)

Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,  
et quantum est hominum venustiorum:  
passer mortuus est meae puellae,  
passer, deliciae meae puellae,  
quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.  
nam mellitus erat suamque norat  
ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem,  
nec sese a gremio illius movebat,  
sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc  
ad solam dominam usque pipiabat.  
qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum  
illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.  
at vobis male sit, malae tenebrae  
Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis:  
tam bellum mihi passerem abstulitis  
o factum male! o miselle passer!  
tua nunc opera meae puellae  
flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.

Weep, you Loves and Cupids,  
And all who live for loveliness.  
My girl's sparrow is dead,  
My darling girl's sparrow  
That she loved more than her eyes;  
For it was honey sweet and knew her better  
Than any girl knew her mother:  
That bird wouldn't leave her lap,  
But popping up, here and there,  
Peeped only for its mistress.  
Now it travels a gloomy journey  
From where no one returns.  
But a curse on you, evil shades of Orcus,  
You who devour all pretty things.

You've made off with my pretty sparrow.  
Oh, evil deed! Oh, wretched sparrow!  
Because of you my girl's eyes  
Are reddened and heavy with tears.

## COMMENTARY

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PETER JOHNSON

It's surprising so much has been written on Catullus considering how little we know about his life. He is attractive to the classicist interested in how he imitates and subverts Greek models, yet also cherished by the lovelorn and alienated who, sometimes mistakenly, look to the *Lesbia* poems and invectives during anxious and angry moments. But primarily Catullus is a comic poet and one very well suited to our postmodernist times, especially in his merging of high and low subjects and discourses.

In the preceding poem, commentators have pointed out how the elevated language of the opening is followed by a slang expression, and how diminutives toward the end simulate an odd kind of baby talk. There is also a somber reference to Orcus (Death), yet it is surrounded by playful language, the line "sed circumsiliens modo hoc modo illuc" imitating the bird's movements. This kind of mischievous juxtaposition and word play drives the poem, making it impossible to see it, as some do, as a lamentation on all-consuming Death, just as it is difficult to believe Catullus was unaware of the sexual connotations of *Lesbia*'s sparrow. He is using an ancient form, the threnody or funeral dirge, and undercutting it by substituting a sparrow for a hero or nobleman, then further undercutting it through exaggeration in order to simultaneously sympathize with and tease *Lesbia*.

What makes Catullus very much our contemporary is how his "I" becomes ironic through exaggeration, whether he is comparing the number of his kisses to the sands in the Libyan desert (VII) or asking Ipsithilla to prepare for nine consecutive copulations (XXXII). This kind of conceit, a staple of all great love poetry, renders the speaker attractive and suspect at the same time. On one hand, the hyperbole idealizes the lover and beloved; on the other hand, the inflated posturing suggests an overblown sense of self-importance, which, I'm sure, Catullus' inner circle of readers appreciated. Admittedly, the speaker of the *Lesbia* poems often seems genuinely tortured and jealous; likewise in the invectives, he appears to be honestly infuriated, as when he threatens to sodomize Aurelius or Furius for criticizing his erotic verse (XVI). But, still, in most of Catullus' love poems and invectives there is often a hint of self-mockery, as if any event in Catullus' life exists mostly so he can verbally perform for his beloved, his friends, and himself. Consequently, if we refuse to look at Catullus' "I" ironically, all we are left with are the romantic overstatements and rants of a petulant schoolboy, and we ignore the complexities of his wit and style—the very reasons we still read him today.

## MOTHER TO SON

---

GLENN ALLEN PHILLIPS

I would have told you  
about the children  
playing in the park.

I would have told you  
about their pink-fingered guns,  
how they would count paces  
before turning to follow,  
with eyes of gold,  
imaginary bullets,  
imaginary wounds.

I would have told you  
about the sounds their  
candy-breathed mouths made,

The “bang,” “pow,” “kapow”  
clicking from their tongues like dominoes.

I would have told you  
how they stumbled to the ground.  
How, writhing on sand,  
They clutched imaginary wounds  
with real hands.

I would have told you how they screamed.

I would have told you how they screamed.

But you were gone  
and wouldn’t have listened anyway.

**SHORTCUT**

---

**HENRY RAPPAPORT**

The day that was everything  
became nothing

just like that

and one came to realize  
it is no small thing

being born.

## COMMUTING

---

ANGIE PELEKIDIS

It snows during the night, a strange late winter storm with lightning and thunder that has Dora's dog, Vinny, pacing her apartment. His nails click on the hardwood floor in her bedroom, his collar and I.D. tags create a faint yet incessant jingling just loud enough to keep her from falling asleep. Some time after 2:00 a.m., Dora gives him a doggy sedative, and considers taking one herself. At 7:00 a.m., her clock radio blares out Def Leppard's "Pour Some Sugar on Me," which she hears in her head throughout the day, as annoyingly persistent as a recurring yeast infection. The first thing she feels is dread; of the seven-block walk from her apartment on Bay Ridge Avenue to the outdoor N train station on 62<sup>nd</sup> Street, and the ensuing 45-minute commute to Prospect Heights where she works. She knows that when she finally arrives at her stop, the school of exiting riders will be unconcerned about who they smash into as they rush to their jobs. And she wonders, how much longer she can do this when at some point during her daily commute she thinks to herself how much she hates people?

But first she has to walk Vinny.

"C'mon boy," she says, shaking his leash. Vinny ambles over like a careful drunk. Just last year he used to bound up the five steps leading to the sidewalk from her walk-in basement apartment. Now Dora has to coax him. He is, after all, thirteen-years old, which is elderly for both his German Shepherd and Doberman Pinscher halves. Or is the sedative she gave him responsible?

Outside, Mr. Rafinello, her landlord, is in the process of clearing the sidewalk in front of his three-family house. His compact and bundled-up form hunches over a large green shovel, pushing the snow into the street where it will turn into black slush by passing and parking cars. Dora walks Vinny past him without saying hello. They are at a stalemate since he tried to kiss her (again) a few weeks earlier. He appeared at her door holding a package. When she took it, he cupped her face with his root-like hands. "Me, I luva you," he said, leaning in. She pushed him away with the box, a look of disgust on her face. "What's wrong with you?" she asked him before slamming the door. She spent the remainder of the day fuming, wishing Daddy knew someone else in Brooklyn who had an inexpensive apartment for her to rent. What makes a seventy-year-old man think he stands a chance with a twenty-eight-year-old woman? Just because she's currently boyfriend-less doesn't mean she's interested in him. And moving isn't an option since there's no way she'll find an apartment she can afford, not even in Dyker Heights. So she's stuck.

She takes Vinny around the block, and hopes he's emptied his bladder. Lately, she comes home to puddles of urine left in a cursive, looping trail because he

walks and pees. It's like he's leaving her some sort of message in dog, something profound he's discovered over the course of his long life. And it's up to her to decipher it.

After she drops Vinny back at home, Dora walks quickly but carefully on the snow-covered sidewalks up to 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue, wary of the ice lurking beneath the pristine, white blanket. The snow dampens all sound except the crunch of her footsteps, and Dora feels like she's the only person alive. For a brief time, before Brooklyn fully wakes up, the hard edges of concrete sidewalks, brick buildings, and parked cars are softened out and enrobed in white.

At the end of her block, Dora spots her neighbor, Burt, standing on his stoop. Burt, of the downward wandering eyes and loud girlfriend. Dora's never actually had a conversation with her neighbor, preferring to keep their exchanges brief in order to prevent him from hitting on her like Mr. Rafinello did. Despite years of living apart from her parents, Dora still hears Daddy's voice in her head telling her to expect this kind of behavior from men because she is unmarried, lives alone, and used to have a boyfriend who stayed over, if only on the weekends. There are only two types of women in Daddy's old-school-Greek way of thinking: those who are currently virgins (or were before they married) and those who are not.

But this morning, Burt looks directly at her and gives her a glum smile.

"How are you?" she says.

Burt's bulbous face looks stoic. "Not great. I had a bad day last Tuesday. It was my birthday."

So much for a simple "Fine. And you?" On autopilot, Dora asks, "It was your birthday?" She had been walking Vinny when she saw Burt sitting on the top step of his uncle's house. He was huddled in his puffy blue parka, chin in hand, staring blankly ahead. Dora purposely crossed the street to avoid talking to him. "Then happy belated birthday."

She keeps walking and Burt falls in alongside her. Great. Dora braces herself and hopes he won't follow her the entire way. It's too early to have to engage in meaningless chatter. Bad enough her job as a graphic designer at the Brooklyn Arts Alliance requires a degree of bullshit talking.

Burt pulls his blue knit cap down tighter over his large ears. "Yeah. Some birthday. That night I got a call from my uncle in Jersey. My grandma on my dad's side was taken poorly. She had to be put in the hospital. I guess she's in decline."

On the corner of 11th and Bay Ridge Avenue, Dora waits for several cars to pass. "That's too bad. How old is she?"

"Seventy-seven."

"That's not too old," Dora says. Daddy's sixty-eight. But he's smoked for most of his life, doesn't take care of himself, and fucks around with his prescriptions. Typical

stubborn Greek man. She really should call Ma and talk to her about him. Not that that will do any good. It's not like Daddy listens to anyone.

"Nah. But her health hasn't been good for a long time. My grandpa died ten years ago, and all her friends have passed. The bad part is no one on that side of the family wants to help her. So I guess she's gotta go to an assisted living place. They're not like my mom's side. We'd take her in."

"I'm sorry. That's terrible." Will it ever come to that, Ma needing to live in one of those places? Or, even worse, a nursing home? God, she hopes not. Penny has room. She can take Ma in. Dora quickens her pace, hoping Burt will fall behind, which will give her a chance to say goodbye. But he keeps up.

"Then I hear my cousin's got prostrate cancer," he tells her. "Problem is, he's got sleep apnea 'cause he weighs over 400 pounds."

Is it prostate or prostrate? Or is prostrate cancer the kind you get from lying down too much? "Yikes. Does that mean he'd have a hard time under anesthesia?"

"Yeah, exactly," Burt says, looking pleased that Dora understands. "But the doctors are gonna try some other stuff on him first, see if that works."

"Wow. Tough luck," she says.

Almost race walking now, Dora slips on some ice. Burt puts out a helping arm but she avoids it with the dexterity of a NASCAR driver steering clear of a wreck. She knows he works at the bagel store on Fort Hamilton Parkway between 73rd and 74<sup>th</sup> Streets, which is in the opposite direction of the train station. Shouldn't he be heading there now?

"Turns out my sixteen-year-old cousin just had a baby," he says as they wait for a car to turn on to Ovington.

"Is that good?" she asks. Should she say, "Congratulations?" You never know lately, though if her seventeen-year-old niece, Stella, had a kid she'd be pissed.

"No," Burt says, and Dora realizes she's lost points with him. "Tracy said she wanted a baby so she got herself knocked up. Stupid kid."

"Maybe it'll turn out for the best." Dora hears herself mouth these words when what she really wants to say is, "Please stop talking to me. I don't care."

Burt looks doubtful. "Then there's my poor sister Betty. But at least she's got some feeling in her legs now and can move her wrists a little. She types using her pinkies. Even met a guy online. And she's got a phone for in her ear so she can talk to all her friends."

Dora knows she shouldn't, but can't resist asking, "What happened to her?"

"She lives out in Phoenix and was riding a donkey on one of those Grand Canyon trips. The damn thing freaked out 'cause a bee stung it. It bucked her off and she fell on her back and broke it. Had to be airlifted out of the canyon. It was

all over the news and everything. I told her how dumb it was to ride an animal like that. You never know what they're gonna do."

"Ouch," Dora says. "I'm so sorry."

Burt nods. "On top of it all, my girlfriend's having problems with her ex. He's trying to get custody of her boy so he doesn't have to pay child support anymore."

Dora has only gotten glimpses of Burt's girlfriend framed inside her car window (Fried blonde hair with thick black roots, a swollen, pink-skinned face, and a cigarette always in hand, dangling out of the open window). She's at least a decade younger than Burt, who is somewhere in his forties. Hard to say what she sees in him, with his barrel belly and bulgy eyes, though she's no prize either. She's loud and prefers to yell up to his windows on the second floor rather than get out of her Escort and ring his bell.

"Wouldn't it be more expensive having custody? I mean, it's not cheap raising a kid."

Burt looks pleased, and Dora knows she's redeemed herself. "You got it. But he hired this shyster lawyer and got a mediator. That guy's totally on the ex's side, not on Patty's. So now the ex says he's got a 'plan' for the boy, and that's supposed to be enough. Never mind the ex almost went to jail for having sex with an inmate when he was a guard at Rikers. Or that Patty's had her act together since day one. She's been a seafood expert at the Red Lobster at King's Plaza for eleven years now. And they're all corporate. You gotta go online to get your schedule. All this just 'cause the kid decides he's not gonna do his homework anymore."

Burt shakes his head in disgust. Did he just tell her his girlfriend's ex is bisexual and had sex with a male prisoner? Or are there female inmates at Rikers Island, too? Either way, Dora doesn't ask. They arrive at the subway station on 62<sup>nd</sup> Street and Burt follows her in. Maybe this will be her opportunity to lose him in the crowd, and when he walks over to the glassed-in booth to buy a token, Dora relaxes. She heads over to the turnstile to swipe her Metrocard.

"Bye, Burt." Dora waves and he nods back.

A set of rusty stairs leads down to the Manhattan-bound N train. She takes a spot midway down the platform to wait. The pregnant woman who smokes and her chubby friend stand a few feet over from her. Dora pulls out Gina Lermontov's *He's Not All That!* from inside her satchel. This is how she survives the commute to 900 Washington Avenue Monday through Friday. She submerges herself in a self-help book (or the biography of an artist – preferably a tortured one) and pretends she's alone.

"The ex's new wife is a total cunt," Burt says to her a minute later, magically reappearing at her side. "I don't like to use that word to describe a woman, but a cunt's a cunt."

"That's a shame," Dora says, wincing. It's a little too early in the morning to be throwing around the c-word. The pregnant woman looks away from her, a sympathetic smile creasing her face.

"You know she took their tax return to get a boob job?"

"No! Really?" Dora slathers on the sarcasm as heavily as butter on a Brooklyn bagel.

"Yeah," Burt nods emphatically. "She likes to walk around without a bra on now, show the neighbors she got her money's worth. But if you ask me, they look like goldfish eyes." He points his index fingers in opposite directions.

"No kidding?" Dora says.

"She doesn't even like the kid and they already got two of their own. She just wants to screw Patty."

"That's not right." Dora grudgingly puts her book down.

"I wish I could help Patty, but what else can I do but be there for her?"

"You're right, Burt. That's the best you can do." Jesus. Burt's a better boyfriend than Dora's ex ever was. She barely saw Thomas during the week, and there were even some weekends when he found an excuse to stay in Manhattan without inviting her to join him. She'd often felt like an uninvited guest in their relationship. And it occurs to Dora that Thomas didn't want her to love him because people treat you better when they do.

"She likes it when I massage her feet when she gets home from work. Except where she had bunion surgery. I stay away from those spots as much as possible, but sometimes you just can't." Burt shrugs.

"You're a good boyfriend, Burt," Dora says. What has she done to deserve this? He's just like her sister, Penny, who's always calling her to talk about how boring her marriage is and how much she can't stand Frank anymore. Or how she thinks the cute cashier at their local Blockbuster would "do" her because he touches her hand when he gives her change. Then there's Ma, complaining about how Daddy "hollers" at her over everything. And never gives her money to spend at yardsales. Now here's Burt, relating all his family's tragedies and private personal information on his girlfriend's corny feet. Obviously, he's an emotional exhibitionist, who's compelled to show the world his every wound and scar. Just like all the fame seekers who populate the world of reality TV. What next? Will random people on the street ask her for advice? Does she look like Dear Abby? Why can't people figure out their own shit, like Dora did hers? Look at the situation with Thomas. She saw he wasn't going to change, so she dumped him. Case closed. Sure she missed him, but that's the way life is sometimes. Emotional pain is just like any other: it's your mind's way of telling you something is injured that you shouldn't ignore. To mask the pain is to risk re-injury. Dora read that in

*How to Survive a Break-Up (and Be Better and Stronger!)* by Emily Fieldstone and it made perfect sense.

"I think all the stress is getting to her 'cause she hasn't been in the mood lately, if you know what I mean," Burt says. "Hey, you're a woman. What gets you in the mood?"

Dora's quick glance to see if anyone is listening reveals that no one is paying attention. Surrounded by people, they are two castaways on a deserted island. "Burt! I'm not telling you that."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were having a nice conversation."

"We were. Sort of. But you don't ask people that. It's personal."

"Well, I told you all kinds of personal stuff."

"Yeah, but I didn't ask you to."

"Psh," he says. "I thought we were friends."

"Burt, I barely know you. You're my neighbor."

"So you're saying we're not friends?"

"Right."

"Fine. Then I'll leave you alone. Have a nice life. That should be easy for you, Ms. Perfect."

He walks several feet away and faces forward, scowling at the empty subway track. Dora shakes her head in bewilderment. What just happened? Is she crazy thinking Burt was inappropriate, or was she not sympathetic enough? She retraces the path of their conversation. No, he definitely took it too far at the end. But look at him. She's hurt his feelings, and probably added to his list of suffering. Would it kill her to say something to comfort him, even if she doesn't mean it? And is it such a big deal for her to do the same for Penny and Ma? So people aren't as self-sufficient as she is, and they need to talk to others. She can pass on all the wisdom she's gained from the self-help books she's read and be a force for good instead of avoiding their phone calls or impatiently changing the subject whenever they complain to her about their lives.

"Look, Burt," she says, approaching him. "I'm just a little stressed out myself. I'm in crazy debt from college. And my job sucks. I've been interviewing all over and no one wants to hire me. It's so bad, a few weeks ago, I dreamt I put a cigarette out on my boss's forehead. And I don't even smoke."

"Yeah," Burt says, nodding. "You got any idea what my boss is like at the bagel shop? A complete prick."

Dora searches for more stuff to complain about and is suddenly overwhelmed by the things she's tried to envelope within her so they couldn't escape. "Plus, I broke up with my boyfriend a while ago." Actually, it was last year. And Thomas had made it impossible for her to do anything but break up with him. Like he'd

wanted it that way. "And my dog's old and will probably die soon." She chokes on this last addition. Here she is, thinking she can help Burt but instead she's about to cry in front of a stranger! She's turning into Ma.

"Jesus! I'm sorry. Why didn't you say something?" Burt puts an arm around her and pulls her into his fat belly. He smells of Old Spice and egg salad. She can't relax because she's wondering if his hands will wander into restricted territory. And what they must look like to the people around them. After a sufficient amount of time passes (approximately seven seconds), Dora pulls out of his embrace, hoping she isn't offending him again.

She wipes under her eyes and notices the smeared eyeliner on her fingertips. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Say no more." Burt zips his mouth shut. He looks satisfied, like she gave him exactly what he wanted.

Finally, the N-train lumbers toward them and brakes squeal as it comes to a stop. "Have a nice day," Dora tells Burt before moving down the platform to put some distance between them.

"You too," he says, waving her off. "And don't worry. It'll all work out."

The doors open and Dora wedges herself into the crowded train. She surveys the people around her, all wearing a similar expression, as though they're bracing for something: a collision, contact with the person next to them, their day ahead. The usual urge, to lock her arms out from her body and spin in a circle that creates enough centrifugal motion to force the other passengers away from her, creeps up. But she makes herself relax, an autistic puppy needing the heat of its littermates, and lets herself thaw. Until now, she hadn't realized how cold she was.

## CONVERSION

---

ANDREY GRITSMAN

I am calm now.  
This is the beginning of the road.  
This is the end of the road.  
Once you are born, you invite your soul  
to be comfortable, to have a glass of water,  
sit by the fire.

In the morning you go shopping  
with the soul,  
your close ones  
left behind and you still  
love them all, as if  
you just went to the store  
to pick up Tropicana and Starbucks,  
maybe the matzo and blintzes.

You ask your soul to be quiet:  
the supper's coming,  
you just have to learn to wait!  
At last: the candles, the book, and strange letters  
breathe cold ancient air  
like from the twilight crevices  
on the side streets of Yerushalayim.

We get warmer as we taste the wine,  
herbs, and hummus. The soul puts a shawl on,  
as dark wind sweeping over the waters  
enters the room. Since now  
we always leave the door ajar,  
in case Elijah comes by for a drink,  
in case we have to leave home again  
in the middle of the night  
to go back home.

## I DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE IN MY OWN SKIN

---

KIM WAGGONER

I don't feel comfortable in my own skin.

I nip it and tuck it,  
Poke, pull, and pluck it.  
Shape it and shave it.

I try to iron out the wrinkles,  
but all I get are scorch marks.

I'd like to fold it away in a drawer  
or hang it in the closet  
until it fits better.

Sometimes I wish I could take it to the drycleaners,  
and when I go to pick it up,  
they give me someone else's skin instead.

My skin gets shipped off to Goodwill  
where it goes to a good home  
for \$3.95 plus tax.

## THE MANY VOICES OF BERYL DAVENPORT

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JOHN SULLIVAN

I was never supposed to handle the interview. Two features writers with far more seniority were on vacation (one was vacationing in rehab) and a third called in sick at the last minute. My editor put down the phone and glanced around the newsroom, nearly deserted on a Saturday afternoon in August. After a wince of disappointment, he walked toward my desk.

"What are you working on?" he asked.

"Deciding which wire service puff piece on *The Dukes of Hazzard* to go with. After that, it's 'Camaraderie on the Set of *Happy Days*'"

"Can I take you away from all that?"

"Easily."

He handed me a file, which I dropped in my haste. "You're interviewing her."

"Who?"

"Look in the file," he instructed, not wholly pleased. The editor was known for his tirades and his smoking, behaviors unacceptable today, but which he then inflicted on us, unapologetically, in the newsroom.

I looked in the file as ordered. On top was an 8 by 10 black and white glossy of a woman in her fifties. The shot was taken at a slightly higher angle than most glossies, so that her face filled the picture, rather than the standard head and shoulders shot.

"Beryl Davenport. She's expecting someone from the paper. You, it seems." There was the wince of disappointment again. "The interview is scheduled for two o'clock. Her bio's in the file. No photographs; we'll run the glossy. That's her rule." He looked past my shoulder at a wall clock. "You've got twenty five minutes. She's in town, staying in a suite at the Van Buren Hotel, by the train station." Then he uttered the most glorious words yet. "You'll have to catch a cab. We'll reimburse."

I would never have admitted it publicly – for fear of getting hooted out of the newsroom, a notoriously unsentimental place – but that was my most coveted perk: arriving on assignment in a cab.

"One more thing," my editor said. He fished into his pack of Tarletons, his sixth cigarette of the shift. I was watching so closely I spotted flecks of tobacco on his thumb. I awaited some Deep Throat-y kind of insight, for I was – still am – of that generation attracted to journalism by Watergate and Woodward and Bernstein. My editor lit the cigarette as I fought the urge to shout "What? What is it?" Finally he spoke.

"She doesn't give many interviews." He inhaled deeply. "Her agent pushed her to do this one." A stream of exhaled smoke flew past my ear. "I've heard she can be a tough interview."

Dutifully, I studied the materials in the file during the cab ride to the hotel. Beryl Davenport is not much known today and even three decades ago few would have recognized her name. But in those days her voice seemed everywhere.

She voiced commercials on radio and TV. She shilled for car insurance, band aids, even a bail bond company. She played recurring characters: the ditzy housewife, the prim librarian, the stiff upper lipped British matron. She voiced giggly little girls and sexy women and a spry senior citizen and a good bit in between. It was not in the materials I'd been given, but I knew she'd recorded, in her sultry women's voice, a commercial for a mattress company, a commercial subsequently banned in some Southern cities.

I decided to ask her about that. My first solo assignment would be nothing like the *Dukes of Hazzard* and *Happy Days* fluff. When the cab stopped in front of the hotel I paid as quickly as I could and hopped onto the sidewalk, delighted with arriving on assignment in a cab. I crossed the pavement and the Van Buren lobby in long, confident strides.

I wanted someone I knew to see me, to watch me at this moment, but the only person in the lobby was the desk clerk, who never looked up from his newspaper. That'll be my byline you're reading soon, I told him in my mind, and stepped into the elevator.

The elevator was ancient and tiny. The door closed behind me with a soft click. With that click I abruptly realized: I cannot remember anything I planned to ask. After some thought, I discovered I could not even recall the interviewee's name. Gender? Profession? No clue.

No reason to panic, I comforted myself. I can rely on the file. I looked at my right hand, empty, and my left hand, also empty. I seemed to have left the file in the cab.

I began patting the pockets of my suit coat. It's not that I had any plan in mind, but it was something to do in a closed, unmoving elevator. I was mentally framing excuses to offer my editor; *she was sick and cancelled* was all that occurred to me. As an excuse, that wasn't even up to the level of *the dog ate my homework*. What, I speculated, would be more suicidal to my career: offering some pathetic excuse or offering none at all? I remembered my editor's winces of disappointment and knew I had earned them.

In the coat pockets I discovered my note book and pens, useless without a name or destination. Fortunately, I also found a piece of paper with "Rm 616" in my editor's precise handwriting. I honestly had no recollection of putting the paper there. I pushed the elevator button for the sixth floor.

After slipping through the still-opening elevator doors, I sprinted down the narrow hall to Room 616. A woman's voice answered my knock with, "You the two o'clock?"

In a voice an octave above normal I admitted I was.

"You're late." I glanced at my watch and saw she was right, by thirty seconds. "Close the door."

I stepped into the suite. A woman waited at a table.

I started to say something, but stopped when I realized she was looking past me. It seemed to be my day for my elders doing that. "The door," she directed. "Close the door. Close the door or walk back through it."

I closed the door, trying, still without success, to remember the contents of the lost file. My interviewee's name and biographical details continued to elude me. On the other hand, I could remember my editor informing me she could be a tough interview. That much I retained and with troubling clarity. Should I join her at the table? Ask a question from here? What could I possibly ask?

She spared me my indecision. She pointed to a silver tea service, which I hadn't noticed on the table. In the voice of a British matron she asked, "Care for a spot of tea, love?"

Even in my confused state – I suspect my face had gone cadaverously white with panic and she felt sorry for me – I recognized her offer as an attempt to calm me.

"Thank you," I said, in a voice descending toward normal.

In that same British accent she said, "Anytime, dearie."

*That's one of her voices,* I realized and the details of the file flooded back to me. "Thank you ... Beryl."

I was writing in my notebook before actually sitting in the chair. The first detail I noticed was her blouse, ivory-colored, with a large, Victorian ruffle completely covering her neck. It was obviously expensive and contrasted strangely with the rest of her outfit: baggy beige sweater and grayish slacks fraying at the cuff.

I'd been on a couple of other interviews assisting the more experienced reporters; "second scribe," the assignment was called. Those interviewed – Henry Winkler, Tom Wopat, huge names then – appeared impeccably dressed. My editor had said there'd be no pictures of Beryl Davenport, so I understood the casual clothes. But why the incongruously beautiful blouse with the ruffle billowing against her chin?

"Have you got a favorite voice, Ms. Davenport?" was my first and for a while only question.

"I get asked that all the time," she responded. Beryl launched into a litany of her many voices. She was remarkably talented. Without slowing, she could shift

in midsentence from little girl to elderly woman. I asked her to do commercials in different voices for different items around the room.

"The fireplace," I suggested and she responded with thirty seconds of a Southern belle praising a fire "so hot (two syllables somehow) it will leave y'all just *luscious* with sweat." Next she was a little girl who simply could not grasp the workings of a smoke detector – "Why won't it stop winking at me?" She played a librarian so *terr-ibly* disappointed the magazines on the coffee table were not alphabetically arranged.

I learned I could simultaneously listen to her words and write them down accurately. It was a talent I did not know I possessed.

Her performance was entirely verbal. She stayed seated, motionless, hands around a tea cup, a prop from which she never sipped. Her face betrayed little reaction. I was still enjoying her various voices, but sensed a certain rotteness drifting into her performance. I asked my second question, about the mattress commercial banned in some Southern cities.

She arched her eyebrows, surprised I knew that detail. She quickly retreated into a character, this time the quavery voice of an elderly woman: "What was the problem? What else would I be doing on a mattress but sleeping?"

Remembering a detail from the file, I asked next, "Why didn't you pursue a movie career? You were signed to a contract with MGM."

"That's a question I don't often get," she replied in her own voice. At first Beryl's natural voice sounded oddly theatrical. "You've done some homework. That's more than I can say for all the members of your tribe." She spoke grudgingly and I sensed how she might have acquired the reputation of a tough interview.

Then she did something which changed the rest of the interview and, it's fair to say, my career. She turned and looked to her left, out a window. She turned with great slowness. Her face, impassive until now, grimaced. For a few long moments she stared out the window at an uninspiring view of rusting fire escapes and bricks brown with age and soot. The room was quiet enough we heard the whistle of a train pulling out of the station one block away.

She turned back toward me, grimacing again. She grimaced with reluctance, as if doing so acknowledged a weakness. Then she forced a smile into place. Even in my inexperience of more than three decades ago, I knew this was merely a professional smile, the wide, overly toothy, relentless smile of a performer.

"I was signed to a standard movie contract," she said. The smile faded. "On our way west, there was a crash. I never got to Hollywood."

We heard the train whistle again, more distant now.

I wanted desperately to ask a follow up question. The file contained nothing about a movie career-ending accident. But, I hesitated, waiting while Beryl listened for the whistle I could no longer hear. I've always been grateful for my hesitation.

Otherwise, I doubt Beryl would have continued. She'd have returned to her voices and I would have had a workmanlike celebrity profile, a kind of writing not distant enough from the *Dukes of Hazzard* and *Happy Days* fluff I disdained.

She muttered "Might as well" or perhaps it was "What the hell." Either way, those words were the first she'd spoken with less than stage-perfect enunciation. I got the very clear sense she was sizing me up. I waited, and eventually she resumed.

"I married on my eighteenth birthday. My husband was only a few months older. Like me, his parents were gone – mine dead, his as good as dead to alcohol. We had to raise ourselves. What choice did we have?

"We grew up a few blocks apart on Flatbush Avenue. He pushed me to audition for a role in the chorus of a Broadway show. *Remember This*, the show was called. No one did; we closed in a week.

"But a talent scout spotted me and invited me to read for him in his hotel room. Believe it or not, he really did want me to *read* in the hotel room. He liked what he heard and MGM signed me to the standard seven year contract. Jimmy Madison was the talent scout's name. The next month he went into the Army and was killed on Okinawa."

Other than a single line mentioning her growing up in Brooklyn, none of this was in Beryl's file. My head was down as I wrote as fast as I could.

"The studio insisted I take elocution lessons. My Brooklyn accent was – she smoothly shifted voices – *too Noo Yawk* for the movies. I must have repeated *Please resolve to improve the event* one hundred times. Now I can do a Brooklyn accent, but it's just another character for me.

"Eventually my voice satisfied the studio and my husband and I left the first week of September. MGM paid our train fare as far as St. Louis. After that, we were on our own. We hitchhiked. First car to pick us up told us the war had just ended.

"Took us four days to hitchhike west. Everyone who picked us up told us the news about the war ending. Everybody was so grateful, so relieved. We were saving what little money we had for LA, so we lived on coffee. And strawberries a farmer gave us. I never tasted anything as good as those strawberries. Each bite was like a bite of our future together. I haven't had a strawberry since."

The page of notebook filled, I turned onto the next page as quietly as possible, hoping the noise would not disturb the flow of her story. It did not.

"We got our last ride outside Modesto, California. That's all suburbs now, but in those days it was mostly farms. We were stuck for hours in a drizzle. There was still gas rationing and little traffic. Very foggy night. We could hear but not see trains somewhere off in the foggy distance. My husband and I were exhausted. We took turns stretching out in the grass by the side of the road, while the other stood with a thumb out."

"Finally a truck stopped. When the driver said he was going to LA, I was so excited I ate the last strawberry. I'd been saving it. Gary his name was. My husband. Gary. I never learned the trucker's name."

I glanced up from my notebook at Beryl's hands. They still held the tea cup, but by the extraordinary tension in her ringless fingers, I could tell she'd have crushed that cup if she could.

"The driver was coming down from Portland to LA, a long haul in the days before interstates. He wanted someone to talk to, to help keep him awake. That didn't happen. I fell asleep immediately and Gary must have fallen asleep as well. The driver too, I assume. I have no memory of the crash. None. I woke up in a hospital bed."

I risked a glance at Beryl's face. As I feared, she felt my eyes on her and stopped the story. Looking back, I'm sure the delay extended no more than a few seconds. At the time, the silence seemed endless. Beryl nodded toward my notebook. Head lowered once more, I returned to writing.

"I drifted in and out of consciousness for most of a day. Part of that time I thought I was back by the side of the road outside Modesto, still clutching our last strawberry. I was finally awakened by voices out in the hallway. Doctors talking. I could hear them in the hallway through the open door of my room. Since then I've had a terror of open doors. You might have noticed.

"No, one doctor was telling the other, 'she's the only survivor.'"

"I could hear the men but not see them. Bandages covered my eyes. My eyes recovered totally. I have a little stiffness when I turn my head. Plastic surgery removed the scars from my face, but not from my neck. The neck scars were too extensive." Staring straight ahead, eyes as unblinking as a statue's, she pulled the frill of her Victorian blouse three or four inches down from her chin. Looking up, I saw curving scars, angry red and nearly an inch across, covering much of her neck.

"No actress can be on camera long without her neck showing. First time I looked in the mirror – a nurse lent me her compact, but only after I insisted, several times -- I knew I'd never act in movies." I listened for but heard no trace of resentment, only resigned acceptance. "I started doing voices in radio. Turned out I had a flair for it. I take every gig I'm offered. I don't want a vacation; there'd be too much time to think. I keep as busy working as I can. What else can I do?"

Journalists are fond of saying, "The story wrote itself." This boast is never true. For me, the closest it ever came to being true was the article from the Beryl Davenport interview. As I wrote it that night, I sensed the piece was good. When, while reading it the following morning, my editor forgot to puff on his Tarleton, I knew it was good. The piece ran to more than 1400 words – huge by features standards – and appeared in newspapers all over the country.

Six months later I was promoted out of features into investigative reporting on City Hall. Five years after that I got my own column with another paper.

My editor, Bill Wilson, remained with the *Herald* and remained a two pack of Tarletons a day man. Bill's dead. The cigarettes never got him, but on September 11 he was visiting an old work colleague of ours in the World Trade Center.

Beryl Davenport is still alive, well into her eighties. A couple times a year, when I hang up after calling my daughters – one is in med school in Chicago, the other an economist in Boston – and the house feels unbearably empty, I'll go online to look up Beryl Davenport. Most of the entries of any length cite my article. Beryl worked until she was past seventy five. She seems never to have taken a vacation. She retired to Maine, where I assume she wears turtleneck sweaters and high neck blouses without attracting much attention.

I still write for newspapers. I've jumped around a good bit – show me a print journalist in his fifties who hasn't. I was with the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Post-Intelligencer* when they went under. When a paper dies it's always the same feeling of free falling into a future murky and unsettling. No matter how long you've been at the paper, it always takes stunningly little time to clear out your desk. You pack up the coffee mug and the pictures and the rest and walk out the newsroom. You have some idea where you'll land – truthfully, it's more a hope than an idea. But you keep walking. What else can you do?

CITY MOMENT

---

DIANE SHERMAN

She's missing three front teeth,  
the stench of clothes wafts  
perfume as I walk by, chapped  
fingers reach my way.

*Can you spare some money for food?*

I wear black velvet,  
Pashmina wraps my shoulders,  
a gold Buddha head peers out from the side of my purse.  
My white haired mother's arm  
is linked in mine.

The City whirls blonde  
long hair, black leather, tight jeans,  
cell phones ringing and texting,  
*I'll meet you on the corner,*  
*near the pub, next to the hotel.*  
Bright lights scream  
Buy something: in neon pinks  
red lipsticks, blue eyeliners,  
slinky black cocktail dresses, crinkly  
Spring raincoats. New look, new life,  
new love.

*Can you spare some money for food?*

My throat clogs, I say nothing  
and walk by, tightening the wrap  
of my shawl. Regret in my stomach  
my hand doesn't reach into Buddha  
purse, my own cupboards filled  
with black beans and rice, Coho  
Salmon, asparagus, Spring  
strawberries.

*How did you lose your teeth?  
Do you have children? A husband?*

*Where is your mother? When  
did you last shower?*

We step up through Mahogany doors, the usher hands us a Playbill and we find our places.

## GLASS SINGING

---

TIM WILLIAMS

a note clear and pure  
rings off crystal  
glass as my  
wet finger  
spins  
round,  
round.  
Lands  
upon  
ears  
pristine. Lures me  
like a Siren to Ulysses  
to join her in ecstasy.

## THE KEYS

---

ELIZABETH BABINECZ

It was Friday night around 11:00 when the keys started talking to Jen.

“Jen...” they whispered, “Come on! Let’s go out. It’ll be fun!”

Jen looked up from her kitchen table, a sea of accumulating bills and homework assignments all past due. Her laptop screen and the flickering of the mute TV in the next room provided the only light in the dark apartment.

She looked at the keys on the counter. They knew they had gotten her attention and their pleas grew louder.

“Just pick us up and get in the car! We can go wherever you want. Remember when you used to be spontaneous?”

“Shut up keys,” Jen said angrily. “You know I can’t.”

She began to take on her paper stack again, starting with the unpaid bills that had multiplied with the frequency of rabbits (or was it hamsters that were constantly getting it on?) since she had moved into her new apartment.

“Shut up keys?” She repeated her question aloud, “Wow. I’ve officially lost it.”

Jen shook her head in disbelief, then nervously began biting her pen. She really wanted to go out, but she obviously couldn’t. At least, not now. Not for a while. Not like she used to.

“It’s not too late!” the house key, specifically seemed to call out. The other keys agreed. “You don’t have to change clothes. You can even walk to the bar if you want!”

The keys were really starting to get annoying now, Jen thought, as the stack of papers appeared to grow larger and more menacing by the second. She had set aside tonight to tackle everything that she had fallen behind on in the past week, and nothing was getting accomplished. Jen pushed all of the bills away and decided to focus on her essay on Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* that her professor had corrected (though destroyed might be a better word) with red pen. The words “Did you actually read this book?” were written boldly at the top of the page.

Had she? To be honest, she couldn’t remember. She did remember opening it and feverishly attempting to write this essay one night a few weeks ago. She even remembered the pint of Ben and Jerry’s she finished that night (Phish Phood) and the movie that was on TV (*Knocked Up*) but she didn’t remember a thing about what happened in the story. The revised essay was due in the morning, so she decided to open up the Sparknotes website on her laptop and refresh her memory.

The keys, however, were relentless. “This paper isn’t all that important. Why don’t you just take the failing grade and move on? For now, just turn off the computer and go out! The night is young!”

Jen shook her head and tried once again to focus. But the words on the screen seemed to dance about as if in an effort to further distract her.

"Maybe I'll just get some water," Jen said to herself. She got up from the table and walked to the refrigerator. The keys took this as a sign that they were wearing her down and began to shout.

"What's one night out in the long run?" one tried to reason with her.

"Come on, you miss your friends, don't you?" one of them called out, hoping to make her feel guilty. "You've practically fallen off the face of the Earth."

A particularly rude one with a heavy Long Island accent yelled, "Get off your ass, stop making excuses and get out of the house already!"

Jen turned around and stared at the keys. They were getting nasty now and she wasn't quite sure how to proceed. The keys were silent for a moment until:

"He's asleep," one of them whispered. "Would it be the end of the world if you left him alone for a few hours? You could be yourself again, just for tonight, and no one would need to know."

That did it.

"Enough!" With hands shaking, Jen grabbed the keys and threw them behind the couch, leaving a scratch on the living room wall. The keys laughed. They knew they had gotten to her.

After taking a deep breath, Jen started to return to her work when from the back room, she heard footsteps. A small shadow appeared in the hallway.

"Mommy?" called a voice.

"Oh honey! I'm so sorry, did I wake you up?" Jen asked.

Ryan nodded. He grasped his blanket tightly.

"Here," she said, holding out her hand, "It's really late. Why don't I take you back to bed? I'll put on the music that you like."

Ryan looked down at his feet, "I'm scared. I think there's a ghost in my room. I saw one."

"It was probably just a shadow, babe. Sometimes the night light makes regular things look scary, remember?"

Ryan shook his head. "No! It's a real ghost! I saw it."

"Hmm..." Jen pretended to think. "Well if it's a real ghost, I think you know what we need to do."

Ryan's scared expression slowly turned into a smile. "Get the ghost spray!" he yelled.

Jen opened up the kitchen cabinet and retrieved a can of air freshener.

"Are you ready?" Jen asked.

"Yes." Ryan replied.

## THE KEYS

The two began to walk down the hallway, ready to attack: Jen, armed only with the scent of mountain freshness, and Ryan, his blanket, now a cape, wrapped around his shoulders.

Jen looked at Ryan and winked. "Let's get 'em," she said. And then she opened the door.

The keys sat behind the couch, silent and defeated. They knew there was no changing her mind tonight. Tonight, and for a long while, the keys would have to wait.

## YOU ARE NOT MR. ROCHESTER

---

JANE DOWNS

You glance up from your book and say, *Who do you think we are? Characters in a novel?*

If we were, then when we die we could begin all over again after an introduction that will change with each new edition.

For instance, the latest edition would start with you coming home late, a gleam in your eye, beer on your breath. I've just watched Jane Eyre on PBS. I am struck with the knowledge that you are not Mr. Rochester.

It isn't your fault, but at least you could try. Like, wear a cutaway with shoulder pads and brood a little.

And you can't take all the credit for my sexual awakening. Once I was crazy for a married man. I locked him in the cellar and kept him drunk on Thornfield Cider.

Oh, I forgot, you don't own a cutaway. I forgot you take antidepressants.

Looking into her mirror, Jane crawled inside herself and traveled to her own attic, which was not littered with discarded furniture or boxes of old clothes or a married madwoman.

Mr. Rochester gave Jane Eyre a pearl necklace to wear on her non-wedding day. Tiny white moons orbiting her pretty young neck. Moons like the one she gazed at to lose herself before she could be found.

To my knowledge, my dear, Mr. Rochester never drank beer.

Jane Eyre was an intelligent orphan who knew the inside of window glass and a book, the backsides of doors. Shut-in odors of boiled mutton, lamp oil, and chalk. The chambers of a heart.

You gave me a string of cultured pearls when our son was born.

Perhaps I am overly dramatic about the madwoman in an attic.

You once said I was like an elliptical ball, which, being young and

unfamiliar with complex images, I took as a compliment.  
Did you know that a pearl's coating accumulates in many thin layers to  
form an iridescent cover over an irritant?

Jane Eyre returned the necklace. I never wear mine. It makes me feel too  
Republican.

Come to me, my man. Mr. Rochester is trapped between the covers of a  
book. Our novel is unended, our story incomplete. We will rise to airy  
heights. Bring me your beery breath, and I'll be yours.

## THE BOAT

---

DOUGLASS COLLURA

You said, *How about a boat?* Not big,  
I said. I surprised you: a white dinghy,  
pale blue inside. You fumed hotter than  
sand we stood on. Still, a waveless day.  
We waded out, floated and floated on  
sun-flaked ripples, rocking into haze.  
A nothing puddle at boat bottom  
spread out into a miniature lake; a hole  
seeped, spurted. *Whered you buy*  
*this wreck?* you shrieked. From Gregor S.,  
who delivers the mail. *That weirdo!*  
*And life vests?* Palms up, I shook my head:  
life's lost details. Cursing, you thumb-  
plugged the hole. Bubbles popped away.  
Genius, I said, proud of you. *Paddle, catch*  
*fish,* you ordered. I only have two hands,  
I said, immediately regretting it. The haze  
lifted slowly like a damask curtain.  
The shore bowed low a hundred yards off.  
Hunched over your thumb, you might as well  
have been sucking it. So curled up,  
you could have fit into an egg. I eased into  
the water and stroked away. On shore, grabbed  
a bite at the Clam Shack and showered off the salt.  
Slept my dreams, woke my work, and all again.  
Sometimes beachside with my new wife,  
I scan the horizon. Sun-flaked sea  
battles my sight. She asks, *How about kids?*  
I say, Kids are okay. How about a boat?



THE LISTENER

---

ELISE COSTELLO



37 DREAMS OF SUMMER

---

ELISE COSTELLO



IN OUR HANDS

---

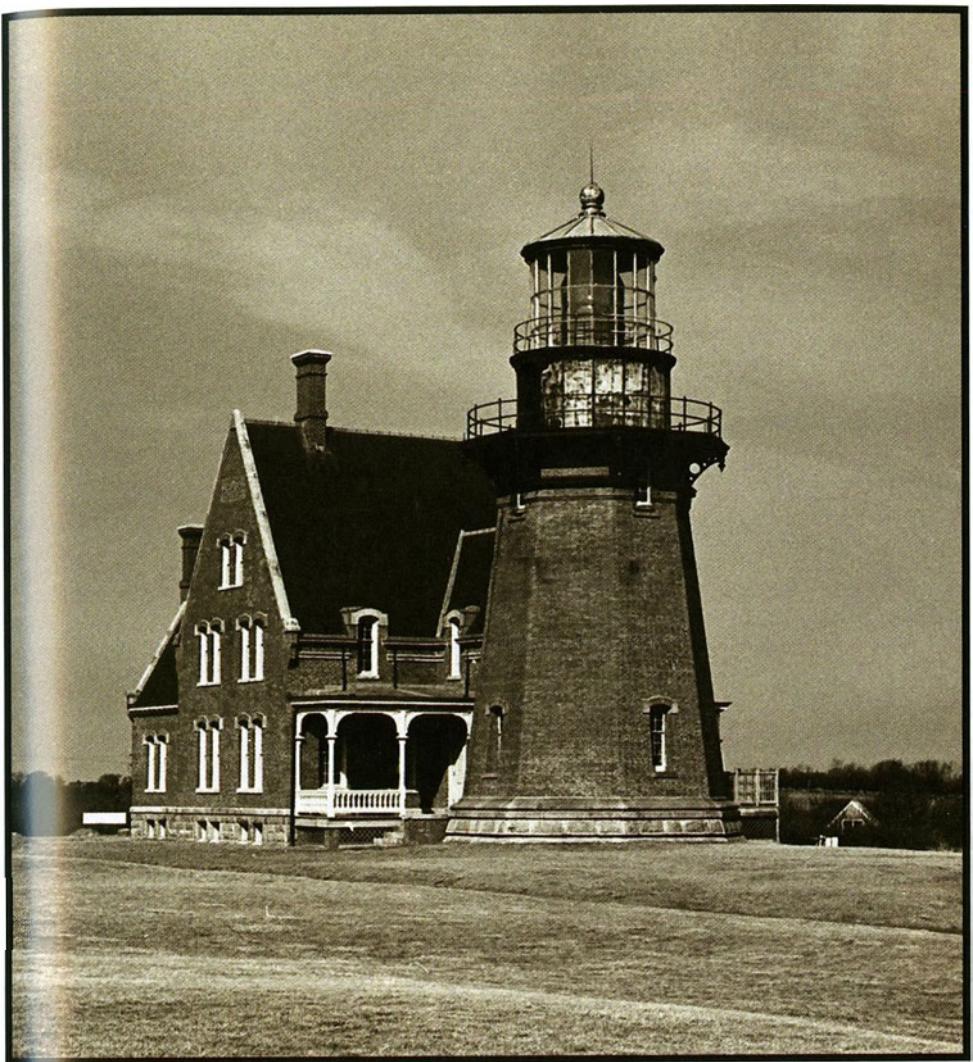
ELISE COSTELLO



TIME TO ESCAPE

---

ANDREW BROWN



NIGHT LIGHT

---

ANDREW BROWN



UNTITLED

---

CHELSEA GADOURY



SO LONG, INNOCENCE

---

WILLIAM Nawrocki



THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

---

WILLIAM Nawrocki



THE GIRL AND THE SEA

---

WILLIAM NAWROCKI



DANDELIONS

---

AMANDA DAILEY



UNTITLED

---

AMANDA DAILEY



---

THE CONFRONTATION

---

AMANDA DAILEY

## NO GOOD DEED

---

DENNIS LYNCH

The snow was still falling outside and had been for three days. Crowds of schoolchildren were gathering along the steepest streets with their sleds and stolen lunch trays, celebrating their two week escape from teachers and classes and talking about what they would pick out with their parents at Gimbels the next day. The younger ones were chattering excitedly about seeing Santa there, and their older siblings did their best to hold their tongues and not ruin the secret just yet.

Christopher opened the door to his twenty-third floor apartment. He stepped in, taking off his boots and feeling along the wall for the light switch. His bright red shirt read *Gimbels* on the right breast pocket and *Christopher Creed, Sales Associate* on the left. He took off his damp jacket and hung it on the wall before making his way to the kitchen. After rummaging through the freezer, he slumped into his chair at the table and poured a tall glass of chilled Ketel One. He took a long sip, relishing its bite and the subtle flavors unadulterated by ice. Its fire ran through him, warming his body and sending chills down his spine.

In another small apartment on the other side of town a little girl with red hair cried quietly in her room while her mother watched CNN with a box of tissues on the couch.

Christopher finished his glass and poured it half-empty again. He looked around his cramped apartment, sighing at the dishes stacked in the sink and the many fist-sized holes in the walls. He stood up slowly with his glass and put on his slippers before stepping out onto the snowy balcony. The chill of the night cut through him as he leaned against the railing listening to the delighted shrieks of the neighborhood kids on their sleds. As a child he had ridden stolen trays down those same streets under the streetlights and the snow until his aunt called him home. He used to love this time of year.

In an old dark warehouse a lost boy in a puffy jacket received his initiation orders from an older boy who had forgotten how to smile.

The night was dark. The glass was empty again. Christopher glared at it disappointedly, his anger slowly rising. His eyes narrowed. His fingers tightened around the glass. With a fluid motion he launched the glass off the balcony and into the snowy street below. The glass shattered over the street. Christopher wiped the snow from the railing in front of him. He stepped onto the chair on the balcony and gingerly placed his left foot on the slippery railing. The street below called to him. As Christopher lifted his right foot to put it on the railing the harsh ring of his company cell phone jarred through the night and penetrated the cloud

in his mind. He regained his balance and stepped down from the railing, opening the glass sliding door as he answered his manager's call.

"Chris, it's Dan. Listen, something came up with Johnny and he's not going to be able to come in tomorrow. He was scheduled for the last Santa shift tomorrow and I need you to come in and replace him for the day. The kids will love you. How's that sound? Good, great, I'll see you tomorrow, you go on at five."

Christopher put the phone back in his pocket without having said a word and walked into the kitchen again. He took a clean glass from the cabinet and poured it half-empty with vodka. He ran the hot water in the sink and rinsed the dishes before placing them in the dishwasher with a sigh.

The little girl with red hair had fallen asleep on the other side of town, and the lost boy in the puffy jacket was curled up in a corner of the old warehouse preparing his mind for his initiation the next day and dreaming of the father he never knew. The streets were quiet, the schoolchildren in bed, the gangs seeking refuge from the cold dark night.

Another dirty greasy child climbed up onto Christopher's lap. Christopher looked at him with a fake smile through his fake Santa beard. "What's your name kid?" His name was Sammy. He wanted a fire truck. A real fire truck. "Well, I'll have my elves do their best, but your parents probably don't want you to have a real fire truck until you're at least sixteen. Good luck kid."

The pillow under Christopher's shirt helped make him look fat and provided him with an extra layer of protection from the hordes of smelly children wanting to climb all over him. He had swapped his red Gimbel's shirt for a red Santa jacket that was hot and itchy. He had almost brought his flask with him, but decided to settle for a little orange juice in his morning vodka. The next kid in line had reached him, his impatient mother waiting some feet away with an elf. "Ho ho ho. What's your name?"

"My name's Timmy and I wann a horse and a race car and roller coaster and-"

"Kid, Timmy, take it easy. How about a book? You want a book?"

"NO! I don't wann a book I wann a robot and a monster and a-"

"Ok Timmy you monster, monster it is. See you on Christmas." Timmy's mom glared at Santa as her son stomped away.

"Chris! Dude you gotta relax," the elf whispered. "They're kids dude, the parents are getting pissed."

"Try sitting here then tell me to relax," Christopher mumbled under his breath.

A lost boy in a puffy jacket stood thirty feet away next to a pillar, staring at Santa.

Christopher struggled to scratch his chest through the pillow and red jacket. A little girl with red hair and slightly puffy eyes held her mother's hand as she

inched closer to Santa. Christopher looked down at her. She slowly raised her eyes to his as her mother brought her in front of him. “Ho ho ho, what’s your name little girl?”

“Amanda,” she almost whispered.

“Speak up honey, Santa won’t hurt you,” her mother said gently into her ear as she lifted her daughter into Santa’s lap.

“And what do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas, Amanda?” Santa asked with what he hoped was a welcoming smile. The girl’s shyness struck him. The little red haired girl lifted her light blue eyes to Christopher’s but didn’t say anything. “It’s okay baby, tell Santa what you want for Christmas,” her mother said. She had a soft voice.

“Santa?” Amanda said with eyes full of a child’s hope. “Can you bring my daddy’s ring back? He died and all I have is his ring but I lost it and I don’t know where it is and I just, I just really want it back. Can you do that Santa?” Her mother’s eyes watered, but she waited to let Santa respond.

Christopher’s face tensed for a moment and he shot a terrified glance at the mother before looking back into Amanda’s wide eyes. “Amanda, I’ll have my elves look for your daddy’s ring, and when we find it I’ll make sure we bring it to you, ok?”

“Thank you Santa,” Amanda said, her shy smile betraying the hope she had that Santa would find her ring.

The elf walked Amanda back to the line, but her mother lingered next to Santa until her daughter was out of earshot. “Oh my gosh I’m so sorry about that Santa. Her father was just killed in Iraq and I thought it would be best if I took his Marines ring from her room so she wouldn’t lose it. I had no idea she was going to ask if you could get it back for her. I’m so sorry to involve you in this more, but would you be willing to give it back to her? I have it in my purse now. I think it would really help her cope if Santa got Daddy’s ring back for her.”

“Ma’am,” Christopher started, choking slightly on his words. “I’d be honored to give her the ring. I finish up here in fifteen minutes. Leave me the ring and come back with Amanda then and I’ll be able to give it to her.”

Amanda’s mother left with Amanda to get lunch at the McDonald’s in the food court, though she knew she would only be able to watch her daughter eat and couldn’t order anything herself. She left the ring with Christopher, who held it in his hand while the elf brought another kid to Santa’s chair. He refused to lose it but didn’t dare to put it on. It was a simple ring, a thick gold band with a dull stone in the middle and the words *USMC* and *Semper Fidelis* inscribed on the sides. “What do you want for Christmas kid?” he mumbled. The next fifteen minutes were the some of the slowest of Christopher’s life.

Amanda and her mother returned. For the first time all day Christopher was glad to see a child coming towards him. Amanda walked up to Christopher slowly.

Behind her Amanda's mother said "Santa says he has something for you honey." Amanda's eyes widened, but her expression remained skeptical.

"Ho ho ho, hello again Amanda. My elves found something that I think might belong to you," Christopher said as he crouched down to Amanda's eye level. "Close your eyes and give me your hands."

When the girl felt the ring drop into her outstretched palms her eyes shot open. She looked at the ring in her hands, up at Santa's smile, back at the ring. Her blue eyes filled with tears as she threw her arms around a surprised Santa, whispering "*Thank you Santa, thank you Santa*" through her sobs. Santa closed his arms around the girl and fought back tears of his own. After a moment her mother picked her up and held her tightly to her chest as they both cried. Her mother looked into Santa's glassy eyes, thanking him with hers. With a final hug from Santa Amanda and her mother turned and went home to their small apartment.

In the staff locker room Christopher Creed felt his way to his locker like a blind man. He sat on the bench in front of his locker, pulled the pillow out of his shirt, tugged the fake beard off his face. The air was the unnatural warm all locker rooms share, but under his fake Santa jacket Christopher was shivering. He took off the jacket and the pants and folded them on the bench next to him. He took his towel from his locker and made his way to the showers. The hot water from the showerhead rinsed away the hot tears springing from his eyes. He leaned against the slick wall of the shower until the water lost its warmth, then wrapped himself in his towel and got dressed at his locker. He put his necklace back on and tucked it inside his shirt and pea coat before leaving the locker room. On his way out of the store he walked by a lonely looking teenage boy in a puffy jacket. He smiled at the boy as one smiles at a stranger during the fourth week of December. The boy stared at him with bloodshot eyes. He didn't smile back.

Christopher stepped out into the cold. The snow was falling harder now. He could see the flakes illuminated in the light of the streetlamps. He sloshed through the dirty slush from the road as he made his way back to his apartment several blocks away. Christopher thought the city looked beautiful in the falling snow. The lights became dimmer and spread farther apart as he walked farther from Gimbel's. The streets weren't plowed as well and he had to struggle to fight through the snow that covered the sidewalks. He was not a hundred feet from his apartment building when a dark figure in a puffy jacket stepped out from an alley behind him. "Hey. Santa."

Christopher Creed turned around and stared at the shaking handgun pointed at him. The lost boy in front of him hesitated, his red eyes wide open and apologetic. Christopher saw a flash and felt a dull blow in his chest. His ears were ringing and he felt something moist and warm spreading under his jacket. He fell to his knees. The dark figure in the puffy jacket ran back down the alley and disappeared into the night.

## No Good DEED

In a small apartment on the other side of town, a little girl with red hair looked at her daddy's ring while her mother held her tightly on the couch. In an old warehouse a group of lost boys welcomed a boy in a puffy jacket into their family.

Early the next morning the police found a cold body lying with a faint smile in the snow. The dog tags hanging from his neck read *Creed, Christopher K, USMC.*

## HE LED A SHELTERED LIFE

---

GEORGE HIGGINS

You remind me that  
I've overstayed my welcome.  
You remind me that  
summer evaporates,  
that it amounts to no more than  
a series of umbrella-covered chairs in Paris.

*Step outside underneath a rainstorm*  
you say.  
So I did.  
*Look, they all die in time*  
you say.  
*Slick images on TV die*  
you say.  
*Cesar Vallejo dies*  
you say.

With control and proportion I replied  
*It was condescension,*  
*your depiction of where I was.*  
*I've been outside before.*  
I made a debate smile, said  
*What do rain showers have to do with summer?*  
Water drummed on the sidewalk,  
on the trees, raw missiles, raw sounds.  
Water drummed on the car.  
*Please let me in now.*

## BEECH

---

ROBERT AQUINAS McNALLY

(*Fagus sylvatica* -- sweet-nut tree of the forest  
atop the Ettersberg, near Weimar, Germany )

Goethe loved the fallen leaves and fuzzy  
mast carpeting these open, green-roofed woods,  
how he could see deep into the land's heart.  
Young, he lettered his name into smooth bark,  
came back old to find it as distorted  
as memory. It is gone now, unlike  
newer markers: mottoed gate, barbed-wire fences,  
steel poles in the forest flagging the graves  
of the unnamed. Legend says Goethe wrote  
*Faust*'s witches' songs in the shade of a tree  
now but a lifeless stump, trunk and limbs charred  
in an air raid, felled, sawn, and split to fire  
the ovens, one more of the dead inside  
this woodland of beeches, this Buchenwald.

## THIS TOO SHALL PASS

---

AMBERLY GLITZ

"Miss Gilliland, Miss Gilliland! Wake Up!" A pair of little girls in a hasty assortment of winter wear came tearing up the still snow-strewn walk, falling over and across each other as they pelted past the weather-beaten signpost in the front yard, whose primly painted script read "Watertown Teacherage." Their assault halted on the front porch, they stood panting heavily, their breath smoking in the winter air. A moment's lapse gave them cause to immediately begin pounding a rapid tattoo upon the oak door, four little fists beating double time as they howled in shrieking tones,

"Miss Gillilaaaaaaaand!" The oak door opened in upon itself and the two little girls nearly fell forth onto the threshold as even in their panic they curbed their screams instinctively. Before them stood a tiny woman wearing a simple dress. She stepped onto the porch, shutting the door firmly behind her and clamping a hat whose apparent warmth highly outweighed its aesthetic appeal upon her mousy brown hair.

"Young *ladies*, I hasten to assure you that I have *been* awake for the past five hours, for as you well know, 'early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and —'

"Miss Gilliland DIDN'T YOU HEAR??!" The younger of the two girls broke into violent tears, and lunging forward she hugged a surprised Betty Gilliland tightly about the knees. Her older sister, with tears streaming down her face, grasped the astounded school mar'm by the hand, and pulling her stumbling off the porch sobbed above her sister's wails,

"Oh Miss Gilliland, we've been attacked! Father and the others want to know where Pearl Harbor is!"

\* \* \*

The Watertown First United Methodist Church was overfull that Sunday morning, the town's Lutheran and Presbyterian congregations joining their neighbors in the larger building. A 1935 Crosley radio had been placed jarringly on the pulpit, where a panicked newsreel was being re-cast on a rotating basis until 'new information should be available.' Miss Gilliland's entrance with the Parker girls opened a path through the packed space straight to the front of the sanctuary. A hurried conference with the mayor, a fluttering exchange of sheets — then, gripping the schoolhouse maps under his arm, Mayor Benjamin Aldridge strode to the pulpit. The radio was turned down until only the crackle and pop of static could still be heard. A hush fell over the room as he pointed to the map.

"Sure, it's an island far away – but men, this is American soil, and forgive me, but it sure as Hell is American lives. I know in the coming days, the citizens of Watertown will do their duty by this great nation." He looked to the minister standing behind him. "And now, I think we'd better hear some of the good Lord's word. Preacher Thomas?"

The preacher stepped forward, his old face looking grayer than ever it had before, and with a white face and firm voice, he began to read from the heavily gilded book, whose pages opened easily to the passage.

"Psalm 18:34. 'He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze...'"

\* \* \*

The broad kitchen of the white wood-frame house off of Main St. hummed with the family radio the next morning, the Gillilands circled tightly around it listening to the presidential appeal to Congress. With the buzz of static signaling the end of the broadcast, Tom Gilliland stood and looked at his namesake, John Thomas.

"Son, I don't guess they'll let me back in. But there's a war coming to this country, and – well, I reckon there'll be a recruiting station set up pretty soon. I don't guess I need say more than that." He stepped out onto the back porch, the customary whistle lost on his lips. Betty followed him out, and the two stood side by side staring at the American flag snapping smartly back and forth in the breeze. Tom placed an arm around his daughter, and gave her a gentle shake.

"She's a spunky gal, is our flag – just like my Betty. Don't you worry, she'll pull through all right."

\* \* \*

It was late Friday afternoon when Betty marched into the post office on main street, and heading past the counter with a polite nod to the post-mistress seated there, walked up to the Army sergeant standing behind his make-shift partition, whose wall was covered in brightly colored posters of an entreating Uncle Sam. He looked up at the clicking sound of her heels on the wood floor, and smiled genially at the little woman standing erectly before him. Her respectable dress was not flashy, and in fact her entire appearance was nicely common-place, with the exception of the fleece lined plaid cap she wore upon her head, which left a halo of flyaway hair when she pulled it off.

"Afternoon, Miss. Anything I can help you with this fine day?" She smiled back sweetly.

"Why yes, as a matter of fact there is." She whisked a fountain pen out of her pocket, and uncapped it. "I would like to enlist if you don't mind." The sergeant raised his eyebrows, and managed to restrain most of his surprise from showing on his face.

"You would?"

"I would." He smiled, and waved his hand at the pen she held ready in her hand. "Well, Miss, I'm afraid it's not so simple as all that. I mean, you'd have to be assessed, you'd have to provide your background information—" Betty reached a hand into the satchel hanging by her side, and placed the papers she removed on the desk in front of the befuddled sergeant.

"In that pile you will find my high school transcripts, as well as those from Normal school, along with recommendation letters from town officials in reference to my current position. *Semper Peratus.*" She grinned at him. He shook his head, chuckling.

"Fraid you've got the wrong motto there, little lady – that's the Coast Guard; though I'll tell ya' after eight years in this man's army, we could probably use s'more 'always prepared' ourselves." He glanced up at her from the papers. "School teacher, huh?" She nodded.

"Sure you should be here? I'm s'posed to encourage anybody with a college education to commission – go in as an officer. It'd give you more time to think about the whole thing too; paperwork takes about an extra six months to process and—"

"No thank you, sir. My country needs me now." The petite woman met the man's gaze directly as he stared at her. Finally he dropped his eyes, and began checking boxes on a form, laughing.

"Well in that case, missy, you'd best learn right now it's Sergeant, not Sir – I work for a living." He grinned. "Name?"

"Elizabeth May Gilliland." Flipping through his form, he looked back and forth from the paperwork to the smiling girl before him.

"Well, Ms. Gilliland, so far as I can see, you're perfectly qualified..." He looked up, and reviewed her small frame. "But I think there's one thing which might hold you up..."

Five minutes later, Betty stepped off of the large package scale in the back room, as the post mistress read aloud,

"103 pounds." The sergeant shook his head.

"What? What is it?"

"Sorry miss – you're seven pounds too light. Gotta make the minimum weight, or no dice. Give it a couple of months; that war'll still be here, right where you left it." He smiled, as he held forth her paperwork.

"Maybe you'll find something else worthwhile to do – find a nice boy to write letters and knit scarves for, maybe." Betty's blue eyes snapped at the man.

"I don't knit, I crochet, *Sergeant.*" He laughed.

"Alright, miss. Like I said, I'm sure there's a place for you right here in New York."

\* \* \*

"Seven pounds? You need seven pounds?" Mae demanded. Betty nodded, munching on the turkey sandwich.

"Yes Mother, seven pounds; and it doesn't help I haven't gained any weight whatever in the past five years." She swallowed the last of the sandwich, and then drained the glass of milk sitting by her plate before primly blotting at her lips with the napkin resting in her lap. Her family sat around the large farmer's table, watching as she settled methodically into leftovers of the past night's chicken casserole.

"I just don't see why you've got to go and join, Betty," Tom said. "I'm near about decided to forbid it. Why, I've never even heard of this Woman's Army Corps, and I'm not real sure I want to. Sounds unnecessary if you ask me. Do they think men can't take care of this?" Mae Gilliland jumped up from her seat by the stove, hands jammed firmly on her ample hips.

"That's exactly what they do think, Mr. Thomas Gilliland, as well they should! Why, it's men that got us into this fool mess in the first place, and I'd like to hear of a better way than bringing the women-folk in to put some sense in everyone's heads!" She looked at her daughter. "Why, if I was younger, I'd join myself." At this, Betty broke into laughter between bites as Tom raised his eyebrows.

"Mae!"

"Well, I would. Oh, don't go getting your knickers in a twist Tom, I'm too old for it now anyway. Here, make yourself useful and go down to the butcher's before he closes. Bring back two—" She glanced at Betty. "- No, four steaks and a piece of fatback." She smiled at her daughter, as a bewildered Tom Gilliland stomped out the door shaking his head. Knotting her apron with an extra firm cinch, she turned to inspect the ice box.

"Never fear Betty... We can do it."

\* \* \*

"We did it — they said we wouldn't make it through basic training, but we did. They said we wouldn't ever do anything worthwhile, but we did. Remember Butters, just last week General MacArthur told *Stars and Stripes* that we WACs were his "best soldiers." Betty nodded to the newspaper clipping tacked to the wall beside her bunk — third from the deck in a stack of four which hung from the wall on the U.S.S Lafayette.

Sue Butters, an Army nurse, was kneeling panting on the ship deck.

"Gilly, I understand you're trying to be encouraging, but honestly if I go down for one more push-up, I swear to goodness I'm not getting back—"

"Lieutenant Butters, I am reading right now from the Women's Army Corps Physical Training Manual, and do you know what it says?" Butters groaned, and wiped sweat off her face on a sleeve. She smiled at her friend, the short, spunky little woman from New York.

"I couldn't possibly imagine, Tech Sarge Gilliland, please do enlighten me."

"Alright I will."

"I knew you would," Butters said, rolling her eyes. Gilliland cleared her throat. "Physical fitness is the hallmark of a female soldier... etc. etc... All good female officers will inspire their enlisted counterparts by never quitting, etc.... LT Butters should do more push-ups..."

"Oh, it does not say that!"

"Alright, maybe not, but it does say this, and I quote: "Your Job: To Replace Men. Be Ready To Take Over." Gilliland looked up from the manual's byline.

"Now tell me, Miss Butters, how exactly do you plan on doing that if you can't even do ten pushups without a break, hmm?" Gilliland cocked an unsympathetic eyebrow at her friend's grimace, as Butters dropped into the down position, straining to force herself back up. Gilliland dropped into position beside her.

"Here, I'll do them with you. Remember, 'This too shall pass'!"

"Yeah, and me with it!" Butters exclaimed, collapsing on the deck in a fit of giggles. "That's your answer for everything, Gil!" The bay door opened, and a group of WACs – all nurses and officers – came crowding into the ship's cramped female quarters. A tall red-headed woman broke off mid-sentence when she saw Gilliland and Butters plopped on the floor.

"Oh Butters, you didn't let Gilly trick you into some extra PT again, did you?" The entire room broke out laughing.

"Well, Gil, what do you say to that? Were you being a drill sergeant again?" A girl in the back called out. Gilliland smiled.

"Naturally! As the one and only WAC NCO on board it's my duty to enforce the standards... Besides, it's nothing Sue couldn't handle. Of course I'm just a lowly orderly without fancy nurse-training," she grinned, "But I do know that: "they who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Butters made a mock-gasping noise, and rolled onto the floor, wheezing,

"Yes, but what does the prophet Isaiah have to say about push-ups?" Everyone broke into laughter, Gilliland giggling loudest of all. A clanging ship's bell silenced the group, and the room was suddenly a frenzy of activity as each woman raced for her bag, cover and jacket. Filing single file through the narrow hallways of the ship, the WACs arrived in the briefing room, first to their seats. The rest of the group, doctors and various other medical staff members, soon filled in around them as their commander took charge of the room. A tall, slim man with bright brown eyes, Lieutenant Commander Allen cleared his throat and looked around the room.

"Alright folks, here it is: We're currently floating in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Vichy-occupied Algiers – The troops on the Lafayette will be leading the invasion tomorrow morning." Murmurs and whispers hummed throughout the room, as the officer waved his hands at the group.

"I know, we all thought we were heading to Europe – this was kept from us in the interest of secrecy. You know what they're saying back home, 'loose lips sink ships,'" he chuckled grimly. "What most pertains to us, in regards to tomorrow's invasion, is this: They've ordered the medical staff to go in with the first wave." Again the murmurs, this time louder. "Yes, it's unorthodox – but folks... they're expecting heavy casualties. All watercraft will be heading out to the beach, and they can't wait to load casualties for return trips. The medics are good for triage, but they need the higher training on hand for the duration." The room held silent, until the red-headed nurse raised her hand.

"Yes, Lieutenant Daly?" She rose to attention from her seat.

"Sir, will the nurses be going in with the first wave as well?" Allen bit his lip almost imperceptibly before replying,

"Yes, they will. Are there any further questions?"

"No... Thank you sir, that's all." Daly sat down slowly. Allen cleared his throat a second time.

"Very well. At this time, I ask that you orient yourselves to my sand table, take out a pen and paper, and prepare to copy. Tomorrow morning, 8 November, at 0430, the assault will begin..."

Twenty minutes later, the women had returned to their room, where they sat crammed in on the floor, or lying on the narrow bunks. A jumbled batch of worried and angry whispers rose louder as they talked.

"This isn't what we signed up for – we're not infantry for God's sake, we're nurses!"

"Putting us women into combat? What would the folks back home say? It's not right—"

"But our boys will be fighting, they'll be dying..."

"We aren't trained for this! Our work is in field hospitals --"

"I work in surgery for goodness sake; surely they don't think the doctors will be setting up surgery right there on the beach head?" A stout black-haired woman with graying streaks at her temples, the senior nurse of the group and a captain, stood up suddenly.

"Alright ladies, that's enough. We knew what we were doing when we signed up – there's a war on, and we're in it. We've been through battles before, we'll make it through this one. We will treat the wounded, and we will do it better than ever we have done it before. No more discussion now; attend to your gear, pack it up, and get some sleep. It's a long day waiting for us tomorrow." A few of

the nurses began muttering under their breaths, but the noise was soon reduced to quiet, busy preparations. Medications were checked, supplies were packed, letters were written. At 2200 hours, lights out was called and each woman lay thinking in her bunk as the ship tossed and rolled on the sea. Betty Gilliland lay stiffly, clutching the metal side poles of her bunk, and whispered over and over to herself, "This too shall pass."

\* \* \*

The ship's artillery guns had been booming thunder and hissing smoke in the pre-landing bombardment for hours by the time the first wave started. Gilliland struggled over the side of the ship, slipping trembling boots into the pockets of the cargo net as she and the nurses struggled down the side of the tossing ship into the waiting LSTs. The infantrymen unloading to their left moved with an ease and speed that comes with much practice, but the nurses struggled with the heavy packs they carried. Butters slipped five feet from the bottom of the net, and screamed as she fell to the LST. Striking the side of the craft, she began sinking into the churning waves when her pack caught on a rough edge of the boat, giving a male orderly enough time to reach out and drag her thrashing body back on board, where she caught her breath in ragged gasps and began bandaging her own foot. Huddling in the bottom of the boat, the team passed out large white bands with prominent red crosses, slipping them onto their arms and helmets. As they neared the shore, tracer bullets could be seen flying over the LSTs to their right, and shells began landing nearer and nearer their own craft.

A sickening lurch signaled the LST's grounding on sand. Pouring onto the beach, the nurses and orderlies separated, the former struggling to stay together as they pushed forward, looking for cover and ground to set up a casualty staging area. Gilliland struggled to keep with the orderlies as they fanned out searching for wounded, but the acrid smoke soon separated them. The whistling sound of incoming 105mm artillery shells threw her to the ground, where she gripped the earth tightly beside a mortar man. His mortar team partner lay dead beside him, a vast hole gaping through his skull.

Seeing only a fellow soldier through the thick haze, the mortar man grabbed Gilliland by the arm and screamed into her ear,

"Arty nest forward left...got to take...Help me set this..." Clumsily, the two began setting the mortar in place. The mortar man began sighting in the calculations, as under his instruction she shoveled sand onto the mortar's base to steady its ricochet. Suddenly, the G. I. fell beside her, screaming and holding a detached human hand; enemy fire had ripped his arm off halfway past the elbow. Gilliland began screaming, sobbing as she pawed through her pack, pulling out morphine tablets and a tourniquet, which she dropped twice before managing to force her shaking hands to hold it in place on the gory arm. Her jaws clenched tightly together as she tightened the band, growling through gritted teeth "This. Too. Shall. Pass" with every rotation. Breathing in ragged breaths, she pulled the

prone man onto her lap, holding the canteen to his mouth as he sucked down the morphine and water.

The damned whistles of incoming artillery continued, closer and closer as the shells walked in towards the mortar position. Throwing the mortar man from her heavily, she pushed him towards an orderly crawling towards them, who began dragging the half-conscious man towards the casualty collection point. Panting with fear, she saw the nearby troops cowering beneath any cover they could find, pinned beneath the northwestern gun's fire. Tearing the red-cross band from her helmet, she fumbled into the mortar man's pack, and pulled from it a 50mm shell. Hands shaking, she dropped it into the mortar tube then threw herself to the ground beside the bleeding corpse, hands to her ears as the weapon exploded. Just as her mortar detonated, she heard the whine of an incoming shell come singing towards her, launched seconds before her own landed in the enemy position. The whistle grew louder and louder, and Gilliland pressed herself to the sand face first, hands across her head, and prayed as the seven pound artillery shell began its descent from the height of its arc.

\* \* \*

Mae Gilliland closed the door as the uniformed men turned away down the front walk. She looked at her husband, standing silently behind her, and handed him the tissue-thin government telegram. Without a word, she walked slowly to the window, and took down the red-bordered banner hanging there, upon whose white bed sat two blue stars. Going to her sewing box, she shuffled through fabric scraps, settling upon a deep-yellow swatch which sparkled with the shine of unused cloth. While Tom watched, the silver steel of the scissors sliced through the work with a speed and dexterity that belied the haggard face of their owner. As fragments fell away under the sharp blades a star began to take shape. The flash of a needle finished the operation, and the old wife handed her work to the family head. With trembling hand he took the banner and crushed it to his face. Then, with grim firmness, he threw open the front window curtains and in the blinding light of reflecting snow hung the Service Flag back on its hook. The new gold star could be seen from the street, where it stood beside its blue brother.

*Glossary of Military Terms:*

*WAC*: Originally the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), the Women's Army Corps was a division of the Army responsible for all female soldiers until the organization was absorbed into the regular Army in the 1970s.

*LST*: Landing Ship, Tank, an amphibious craft which converts to a treaded assault vehicle, used for beach invasions in WWII.

*SGT*: Sergeant, an enlisted rank

*NCO*: Non-Commissioned Officer; a division of enlisted ranks from corporal (CPL) to Sergeant Major (SGM) which are entrusted with ascending degrees of responsibility.

*LT*: Lieutenant, an officer rank

*Mortar*: An indirect fire weapon that fires shells at low velocities, short ranges, and high-arching ballistic trajectories. Typically muzzle loading.

## THE GIRLS ON THE STOOP

---

DYLAN PARISH

Every night you trudge by our stoop at the same time  
Quarter to eleven, and you,  
Our nameless stranger cross in front of our path,  
Turn your head in our direction,  
Purse your lips together,  
And with a light but sharp intake of breath  
Make kissy-faces at us in the dark.  
Some nights, we dance about in the backyards of sleeping families  
Hoping to avoid your condescension.  
Some nights, we sit on porches, but one house up,  
Hoping to remain unseen.  
Some nights, we scatter to separate parts of these few blocks  
To places we know you cannot see us,  
And we watch you.  
We see the sadness in your eyes when our stoop  
Is empty in the cold, dark night.

But worst of all is nights like tonight  
When we choose to remain on this stoop we call home,  
Huddled together under the awning,  
Shivering.  
Jenny, plump and thick and bold and comfortable despite the cold,  
Sits at the end of the walkway,  
Still able to gloat, but that's only because she's new.  
She hasn't lived on the stoop for long.

This time you creep toward us, closer and closer to Jenny.  
She looks into your eyes, frightened, but curious  
As you lean towards her with an outstretched hand.  
You, straight-faced, grope in the dark for Jenny's plump figure.  
When you are but inches away,  
Jenny, with a start, dashes back to us, her new family.  
And we glare at you, our green and golden and amber eyes,  
Burning at you in the darkness.

As you retreat into the warmth of your home,  
We are left out in the cold,  
Untouched and unwilling to be touched,

Because the last time we were,  
It was by the brutal hand that thrust us into this life  
Where the only warmth is from another body,  
Alive or recently dead,  
And the only food was scraps of garbage from an old man.  
How can you let us live like this?  
And taunt us with kissy faces in the dark?

I used to know what my mother's milk tasted like,  
And I used to know how it felt to sleep in beds,  
And they used to call me something long ago,  
But I have long since forgotten.  
Jenny has the luxury of a name,  
And meat on her bones,  
But I cannot even remember what it feels like to purr.

## THE CLEAR TRUTH

---

WILLIAM C. BLOME

On day one they sat in deck chairs on a veranda overlooking the sparkling Atlantic Ocean. Oscar kept trying to get Mario's input on his notion that when heavy fog rolls in from the sea after eleven a.m. and before two p.m., every shore man's thinking grows less precise and becomes discernibly cloudy. Oscar—who must have repeated his theory to a quiet Mario two dozen times—always concluded by citing the case of nearby high school algebraists who were unable to finish solving equations they'd begun in obvious confidence, and junior geometricians derailed en masse while on their way to proving theorems that had earlier seemed dead in their sights, both groups having plowed into unexpected difficulty coincident with the arrival of late morning fog as thick as fusillades of gun smoke. Mind you, it wasn't Mario's nodding or voiced agreement with his observations that Oscar sought, just some sort—any sort—of opinion. Mario, however, remained mute and relatively expressionless.

On day two while they foraged together for quality items in a supermarket dumpster, Oscar launched the same attempt for input from Mario, but after ten tries that were pretty much verbatim what he had repeated over and over on day one (and with the same blank result from Mario), Oscar called a recess of sorts; he announced he was putting things on hold till he was able to find Lucretia. He found Lucretia and briefed her in considerable detail, then gave her a pound of steamed shrimp in exchange for her promise to personally pick up with Mario where he had left off. (Lucretia had been an almost instant believer in Oscar's theory, and she had no problem or misgivings about trying to draw something out of Mario.) However, when day two's sands had all filtered through their hourglass, Mario stayed as quiet and implacable as ever.

On day three Mario watched interestedly as Oscar arrived to meet him at the library. Oscar had Lucretia in tow, but before either Oscar or Lucretia could proffer even a single phoneme, Mario stated crisply to both of them the clear truth that overwhelmingly more important than his input was where, exactly, did Oscar intend to go with his theory. "Just where are you taking this, either with or without Lucretia's continuing support and/or my reaction?"

## ROSARY

---

MATT HANNIGAN

He'd done it probably fifty or sixty times before, and by now it was down to a science. Meet the client, collect fee and instructions regarding the subject, and then fulfill the deal. It was simple. It was easy. Artless almost. So much so, in fact, that as Viddo waits for the client in the pub he gives little actual thought to his job. No reason for him to. He'd done it five times in the last week alone. He lets his mind stray back to his wife and home instead.

"Water of Life?"

"Excuse me?"

The bargirl raises her eyebrows. "It's a drink."

He takes one. "It's got alcohol?"

"Not enough."

Easy as it had become, shooting people for money no longer offered what it had at the beginning of it all. The same process repeating over and over like a needle skipping over the ridges of a record, beginning to end to beginning again. Around and around. A rotary of killing and death without much excitement anymore. But it never bothered him.

It wasn't like he hadn't thought about the end of things; he'd even considered shuffling off his own mortal coil once or twice. But he didn't understand the weight the act of death held, the need to mourn the inevitable. The sorrow infirmity dragged in its wake, the tidal surge of grief and trouble. It didn't generate an emotion for him. It was something that wasn't worth thinking about. It would never be understood.

And so when a frail old man comes timidly into the pub and stomps his boots off, the dark man at the bar is not thinking of money or death. He's thinking of his wife, his home, his life when the sun is up, and when the old relic wanders up to him he pays him a little rejoinder.

"Are you Viddo?" the old man asks eventually.

"Depends."

The old man looks around the pub. It had to be him. "I'm Devlin," he says.

The dark man says, "Okay."

"Are you Viddo?"

"Depends."

The old man looks at him, shrugs, looks around the pub again.

"Well, ah..."

"Do you have what was asked of you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you have what you were supposed to bring?"

"Oh," Devlin says, he rummages around in his heavy coat for the envelope.

"Don't bring it out here," the dark man says.

"Oh..."

The dark man sighs and picks up his glass. "Let's get a table."

"Okay," Devlin says. He runs a nervous hand through his white hair.

They go to the back of the pub and get a table, and the dark man watches his client squirm for a few moments before speaking again.

"Let me see it."

Devlin rummages again, removes the envelope, and slides it across the table. The dark man picks it up slowly, turns it over, and slides a long finger under the flap. He counts the money inside with his eyes and then puts the entire envelope in his coat.

"I am Viddo," he says.

The old man smiles and extends his hand. "I'm Devlin."

Viddo reluctantly shakes it.

"So, ah...how do we do this?"

Viddo drinks slowly, his dark eyes on the old man. "We talk," he says simply.

Devlin stares again, shrugs again, looks around the pub again.

Viddo says, "I have half of what I need from you. Now I need you to give me the specifics."

Devlin nods. "Where should I start?"

Viddo smiles for the first time. "Would you like a drink?"

The client is caught off guard by this sudden gust of amity, he runs his hand through his white hair. He thinks he'll seem old or weak in the presence of this young dark man, this clear force, if he declines.

"Sure," he says.

Viddo signals to the bar by pointing to his glass and then holding up two fingers, and in another moment there are full glasses in between the two men.

"So," Viddo says after their first sips.

Devlin forces a smile over the rim of his glass, barely letting the drink touch his lips.

"When exactly will you need my service?"

"Tomorrow night," says Devlin. "Around midnight."

"Around midnight or at midnight?"

"Around midnight."

"I see."

They drink.

"Where?"

"The Montecrest. Room ten."

"I see."

They drink.

"Who is the subject?"

The old man looks up. "Does it matter?"

"No. It doesn't matter."

They drink.

"Are you married?" Devlin asks.

Viddo nods, and the way Devlin looks down into his drink, the way his fingers twist nervously around his finger where a band would go, Viddo knows he's had a client like this before.

"I realize this is...stressful," he tells him. The white old man looks upwards at the dark man across from him, and Viddo adds quickly, "For someone like you."

Devlin looks back to his glass.

"But I am a man of my word. And you honored your end of the arrangement."

The old man blinks and nods and says, "Yes. I did."

"And I will honor mine."

The two men sit until Viddo rises and walks back across the pub. His meeting with the client is over, he has what he needs, and the client's part of the arrangement is fulfilled. Viddo approaches the rows of drink and hopes the old man will leave without more to-do.

The bargirl, much younger than he, sits hunched over the yellow pages of a novel behind the bar. As she flips the page Viddo thinks, only for a moment, that her hair and skin are the same shade as his wife's; but as he approaches the light dulls on her, and Viddo places a hand on the bar and waves his empty glass.

Her eyes stay roving the pages, and Viddo says, "Refill?"

"We're all out," the bargirl says without glancing away.

"You're all out?"

"Water of Life. Your drink. We're all out."

"Can I just have a beer?"

Her eyes flit up. "Never been asked so nice before."

Viddo holds his smile and says, "I don't care what kind."

So the bargirl smiles and marks her page and finds a glass and fills it foaming over the rim. She places the drink in front of him, and they look at each other, and Viddo holds his face again as he brings the glass to his lips. "What are you reading?"

Her eyes roll back. "You'll laugh."

"Won't."

"Joyce."

"Joyce?"

"*Ulysses*."

He can smile now, finally. "Lots of luck."

"Read it?"

"Heard about it."

She laughs and lifts the book off the bar, turning it over and over in her hands. "Yeah. Just started. So many damn little puzzles and shit. Take me a lifetime to figure it all out."

The dark man shrugs and drinks, he knows nothing about books or writing or word puzzles, but he agrees, he says, "Kept people busy for this long. Hundred years."

"It'll be around for a lot longer."

The dark man has to say something. "Yes."

"Lot of these words though," she tells him as she continues to turn the book in her fingers, "Just break my brain, you know?"

He does not know, but he nods again. "Yes."

The bargirl eventually notices Viddo's lack of interest in literature and hunches back over the novel. He turns in his stool and the old man is no longer in the pub, and his glass is still on the table barely tasted.

"I'll take the tab."

So Viddo goes home. He makes sure the client is gone and he gets in his car and he drives back through the city, he goes home, he goes to bed with his wife. He sleeps, morning comes and his wife wakes up and kisses him and goes to work, and hours later Viddo rises.

He goes into the city. He eats lunch. He goes to pick up his gun. By the time he's left Nat British's place with his pistol, it's getting late. He goes home, he makes dinner, his wife comes home and he eats with her, after that she goes to bed. After that Viddo drives back into the city and parks at a meter on the street to cool down before driving to the Montecrest.

He turns on the radio and sits back, and he's thinking about his wife and about the week's snowfall when he sees the old man Devlin. Usually Viddo parted with the client and never saw him again; it was better for all parties involved. But the old man walks right by his car, bundled from the cold as he stalks down the sidewalk, leaning forward and catching himself with each step. Viddo shrinks in his seat without thinking about it, and the old man does not see him, continues his trek down the icy avenue, feet heavy with every step, a brown rosary wrapped around his fist.

As he watches the old man the car radio fades in and out, just talk now, a weary old man saying, slowly: "...communications, now, are...stretched... stretched *tight* across the globe...the world is growing *flatter and flatter*...art is... only as good as the *emotion* it generates...art...will only die when we no longer *feel emotion*..." It was curious, though, that his client was such an archaic little man. What motive could a man this old and fragile have in hiring a contract killer? The subject was obviously Devlin's wife or the man Devlin's wife had an affair with – this was clear from Devlin's question about marriage in the pub. But he'd never had a client this elderly before; usually the infidelity cases he handled were for twentysomething men and women who discovered their spouse sleeping around and hired Viddo out of cold blind rage.

He watches from his car as Devlin gets into a green truck, and he pulls out after the truck and onto the slushy main road, a few cars back. Devlin's driving deep into the city. Viddo still thinks of his wife as he tails the old man, and eventually he loses him at a light. It clicks red, Viddo curses to himself, and a greysed sedan pulls up next to him at the intersection. The woman driving, Viddo thinks, looks a little like his wife.

"...in the architecture of the church," the old voice on the radio says. "Buttresses and...fences topped with *fleur-de-lis*...a *shift* in religious imagery... allows the earthly temples of God and man...to flower..."

When Viddo gets to the Montecrest at quarter to midnight, Devlin's green truck is parked in the parking lot. Viddo drives around back, looking around all the time, thinking *what is going on?*, asking himself why the old man would be there. *The hell is he here for*, why would he be there, why would he be there. He gets around front again and parks at the other end of the lot and waits. And by midnight he's decided to go in.

Past a patch of frozen amaranth, up the steps and down the row of rooms, a freezing mist is floating in, snow dissolving into vapor a mile above the earth. The door does not creak, and Viddo only allows a thin shaft of light through before silently closing the door again. His footsteps are soundless into the bedroom, his gun is out, there is a figure under the covers, it is his end of the arrangement.

The subject is hidden completely, and Viddo waits in the dark for his eyes to adjust, counting the figure's breaths. His eyes evolve slowly. The bed, the night

table, the dresser, the desk – all materialize in three minutes, and in another the client's lie is revealed.

A brown bead rosary on the night table. The beads are strung together in an unending ring, the same bead over and over, around and around, until a lonely strand juts out and breaks the evenness. The subject hidden under the covers was the man who had hired him, the old man Devlin.

Sleeping pills next to the rosary. Viddo hesitates for the first time. He understands now what the old man wants, a kind of suicide he couldn't do completely on his own. He understands, but he does not, the gun is raised, and the cold motel room is somehow making him sweat, the hush of the factory, the heat of the jungle...

And with a gasp the old man is awake, sitting up in bed wide-eyed and scared, hair stuck up angel white. He and Viddo search for each other's eyes in the dark room, the gun hovering in the space between them, and the old man's wiry hands clutch at the covers.

"*Please*," comes the drained voice in the dark. "*Please*."

He sees his last breath before him, smoke in the cold room, the silencer *thwips*, and the old man collapses before Viddo realizes he's shot the gun. Devlin lies back in his bed as he had before, his agony in the garden is over. Viddo, the undoer, is rooted but legless.

Some sick thing called death done a hundred times and only painful now. The dark man staggers out of the motel room and to the rail, snow a pale cast deadening everything. The man feels his eyes burn like they haven't before, knuckles white, throat howling dirge, leaning on the iron rail and weeping over death as if he were immortal.

## MEETING STREET

---

CATHERINE NORTHINGTON

A Meeting Street conversation pauses pregnantly.  
Two almonds catch me waiting, waiting...  
Speak.

Let's talk more about Dad.  
He didn't call you on your birthday.

Tucked a cigarette behind your ear  
instead of a goodnight.

*He can't see, you say.  
His eyes don't work.*

My napkin in fifty fluttering pieces is his fault.  
You take my sweaty hands in yours. You're cool.  
Where do you put it all?

I never met him, twisted old soldier,  
but he ruined your baseball game  
and every salty night.

He ruins mine, too.

What do we have but two bottles?  
Click them. Four spirals converge  
and bubbles, bubbles, bubbles rend our  
minds, chests, livers, bones, livers...

## WHEN I WAKE

---

JOSEPH NEIDERMEYER

The sun's bursting through the window  
brings me back to our room.  
I peel back the sheets silently,  
mentally preparing for the chill of the hardwood.

Close the door,  
dodge the creaks in the floor,  
wash my face,  
hit the switch in the kitchen,  
turn on the stove,  
get my bowl off of the shelf.

Deep breath.  
The world is bright and fresh at dawn.

Crack the eggs.  
Pour the milk, the sugar,  
the flour, the powder.  
Grease that griddle.  
Sizzles in my pan.  
Pop in chocolate chips and flip.

I stare at the skyline, waiting for that golden-brown.  
Just the way you like it.  
I carefully balance the plate and syrup on the tray  
and open the door, tiptoeing back to bed.

Happy birthday.

## TRUE BLUE

---

ALISON DENISCO

Brynn stumbled down the aisle of the plane, her carry-on bag slipping off her shoulder and the dark-tinted sunglasses perched on top of her head threatening to slide down her nose. Her watch, set forward the requisite three hours of the time zone change from California to Connecticut, informed her that she had approximately twenty minutes to make it through security and the baggage claim before her ride came. Brynn hated the baggage claim process, and rarely traveled with more than a carry-on when she traveled at all, but her wedding dress, though simple, wasn't exactly something she could ball up next to her copy of People magazine and a granola bar wrapper.

At exactly 3:00, her father pulled up to the designated pickup area. Brynn smiled. No matter how long it had been since she had set foot on the East coast, her father's punctuality was one aspect of this life that never faltered.

"Hey kiddo! It's so good to see ya!"

"Hi Dad," she said, allowing him to envelope her in a hug. She stepped back, taking in his face, the openly excited grin of seeing his oldest daughter, here at last, and actually getting married to boot. She noted that his hair had taken a turn for the salt rather than the pepper hue it once was, the same nearly black shade as her own. He looked older, somehow. Has it really been that long? she thought, although she knew the answer, almost down to the day. It would be two years next month.

"Everyone is really excited to see you," he said convivially, carefully placing her suitcase in the truck of the SUV. "Kathryn's dance recital was last night, and she was really phenomenal. Reminds me of when you were really little, and your mom and I would take you to that funny studio that the hippie woman ran. Remember how she made you dance in those crazy skirts every week?" he chuckled. "Kathryn's so dedicated to her dancing. And she's still working on the college search. I don't know if Carol told you on the phone, but she's been looking at..."

Brynn sat back in the black leather seat, and tried to listen attentively to the various recent achievements in the lives of her half-sister and stepmom. The picture she had of them in her head from the last time she was here was somewhat hazy; understandable, she thought resignedly, given the circumstances.

Her dad was still chattering, which she understood to be his nerves at work. It was always a little strange at first, coming back to the family whose phone calls she so often left unreturned.

"I talked to your mom the other day, and she said she has everything set with the flower arrangements, and she and Dave will meet us at the inn early Saturday morning. Make sure you call her and let her know that you made it safe," he said.

"Yeah, I will," she replied, slightly resenting the fact that she was 33 years old, finally pretty stable—engaged, at least—and still being chided to call her mother.

An hour or so later, they pulled up to her dad and Carol's beige mammoth of a house. Not that it wasn't nice, it just wasn't really her home, functioning in her life as more of a holiday getaway area. She considered her base to be in New York, with her mom and stepdad. But her father had offered to pay for a majority of the wedding, and had procured some kind of a discount at what was described to her in a voicemail as "a quaint country inn," so here they were, cul de sac and all.

Brynn dropped her bags on a chair in the kitchen, which had been repainted a comforting green since her last visit, if you could call it a visit. What Brynn knew was Carol's vegetable quiche sat covered in aluminum foil on the stove. Her stepmom made that quiche for her on every visit since she had gone vegetarian at 18, and she loved it, and the fact that the two of them had been able to develop such a good relationship once she grew out of her angst-ridden teen years. Brynn was 14 when her father remarried, and was eternally grateful that Carol was sweet enough to forgive her for wearing all black to their ceremony.

Reaching for a bottle of water in the refrigerator, she took in the paraphernalia of suburban life: a professional photograph of Kathryn in a ridiculously gaudy, sequined dance costume, a postcard displaying a palm tree and a "wish you were here" from one of Carol's friends, an invitation to a neighborhood barbecue stuck to the stainless steel with a magnet in the shape of a cow. How strange it is, Brynn mused, to look in on a family that you have some claim to, but isn't really all yours.

Kathryn arrived home moments later, face flushed from her dance class, an empty water bottle half crushed under her arm.

"Hey Brynn!" she said, flashing a smile and pulling her older sister into a quick embrace. "You look so pretty! How was your flight?"

"It was good," she replied, slightly taken aback by how much older Kathryn looked, and how their similarities were apparently increasing over the years. The sisters had almost identical small frames, making them both appear younger, more innocent, than in reality. They had the same dark hair and wide eyes, though Brynn's were a deep brown while Kathryn's were shot with hazel.

There was a slightly awkward pause, interrupted by Kathryn's cell phone. She glanced at the caller ID.

"Sorry, I just need to talk to her for a minute about this guy," Kathryn rolled her eyes. "It's stupid, whatever. I'll be back in a few!" she said, flipping her cell open and heading for the stairs.

"You can bring your stuff up to the guest room if you want, honey, it's all ready for you," said her father. "I'm just going to take the garbage out, and we can eat when Carol gets home."

Brynn grabbed her bags and slowly climbed the stairs, running her fingertips along the maple bannister. When she reached the top, she could hear Kathryn's voice coming from her room to the left.

"It's just so ridiculous. I mean, we haven't even really spoken in like two years. I don't have anything to say to her. And now I'm the freaking maid of honor? Why doesn't she just ask some of her friends from rehab to be in her wedding? It just sucks."

There was a pause, for what Brynn imagined was a commiserating response from whichever teenage friend was on the other end of the line. Kathryn's voice, oblivious to its own volume, was very clear.

"I know! And my dad is spending all this money on this. Like, I know he probably still feels guilty about the divorce but hello, that was like almost thirty years ago, obviously everyone has moved on. And what about my college fund? If I end up picking an expensive school and he tries to give me crap about it, I am totally reminding him that he paid for a super nice wedding for his loser wayward daughter and that I'm the good child and I deserve to be successful and ambitious." She paused again, and laughed a little. "I know, that's mean, I'm sorry. It's not that I don't love her but she's barely even in my life. It's just... whatever."

The words stung with a truth that Brynn had carefully avoided admitting to herself on the solitary six hour plane ride across the country. She silently crept back down the stairs.

\* \* \*

The next morning Brynn awoke early, and found Kathryn sitting at the kitchen table, backpack in tow, lips pursed over an SAT prep book. She looked up and smiled.

"Morning! How did you sleep?"

There's nothing like the two-facedness of a 16 year old girl, Brynn thought. God help me. "Good!" she said, flashing her teeth in what she hoped wasn't a grimace and taking a muffin from a plate on the granite countertop. A less-than-comfortable silence fell over the kitchen. Kathryn hid her face in her book.

It didn't used to be this way, Brynn remembered. She remembered visiting a much younger, less duplicitous Kathryn on the occasional holiday or weekend home from college, taking her to McDonalds, cranking up the radio, painting her nails a shade of neon blue. True Blue, the sticker on the bottom of the bottle designated the color. She remembered how little Kathryn would repeat, over and over, in a singsong voice, "True blue, I love you. True blue, true blue." Those were the easy days, when her younger sister's love was still unconditional,

untainted by the realities of Brynn's many mistakes and missteps. Kathryn was probably too young to even remember them now.

The sisters now sat with the awkwardness of two people both essentially raised as only children, unaware of the specifics of sibling breakfast table interaction.

"So... do you know what college you're leaning towards?" Brynn asked hesitantly. "Any top choices?"

"Well, I'd like to go to NYU because of their dance program, even though my mom doesn't want me to just study dance, but you know her, she's a nurse, it's always about science and crap," she wrinkled her nose. "I dunno. We'll see." She paused, opened her mouth as if to add something, and closed it again. "When is Adam getting here?"

"Later tonight. He had to work yesterday so we decided to just come separately," she said, a small smile creeping to her lips. Adam was the best thing that had happened to her in the past few years. They met a couple months after her rock-bottom affair with rehab, and he had been an incredibly stabilizing, supportive force in her life ever since. Deciding to spend the rest of her life with him was just about the only thing she had been sure of in the last decade.

"That's good. I'm excited to meet him," said Kathryn.

The silence descended once again. There was so much she wanted to say to her younger sister, but the stilted atmosphere hindered her desire for intimate conversation. Kathryn looked at the clock.

"I should probably head out. I'll see you later!" she said, and, barely glancing at Brynn, pushed her chair back and left the table, striding out the back door with the confidence of a 16 year old who was well acquainted with the power wielded by a hair straightener and a dash of mascara. Brynn struggled to remember herself at that age, shuffling between parents and stepparents, skipping school to smoke pot behind the local movie theater, getting her first but unfortunately not last facial piercing, an ugly hoop protruding from her nose, the hole from which had long closed, thank God. Trying to find a college across the country, vowing to start out on her own, somewhere far from icy weather and fractured families, and generally succeeding at doing so, with a few bumps in the road here and there.

She found a note from Carol on the counter, telling her to check the kitchen drawer for the seating chart and make sure everyone was in place. Rummaging through the disorganization inherent to the lives of working parents, Brynn came across the random odds and ends of the house: old report cards, certificates, bank statements and the like. Her fingers grazed a newspaper clipping, and she flipped it over to see a familiar entry from two years prior. She barely had to read it, as she had practically every word memorized:

Brynn Sanders, 31, of 118 Woodward Street, Fairview, was charged with DUI and improper lane usage. She was arrested at Randall Road and Huntington Drive. She was released after posting bail, with a court date of February 21.

She shoved it back in the drawer, and sighed. She remembered that night, coming home for Thanksgiving, drinking and drugging with her old high school friends who still lived nearby, getting pulled over by the flashing red and blue lights. The oddity of having both her father and mother in the same room together for the first time in years, looking down at her in a hospital bed. Being told she was going into a treatment facility near her mom's house upstate, just for a few weeks, until her body was cleansed of about fifteen years' worth of toxins. No matter what she did, her mistakes always seemed to haunt her, even years later.

Just then, her phone sounded its shrill, generic ring tone. It used to play her favorite song from college, but in her recent attempts to act more her age, she changed it. She was still attempting to get used to it all. But she was sincerely trying.

"Hello?"

"Hey babe. I just landed and I'm getting in the cab. How's it going over there?"

She sighed. "It's OK. It's nice seeing my dad and Carol... things are kind of weird with Kathryn though. She just looks at me like I'm this loser..." she trailed off.

"It's gotta be hard for her, with you being home. She's used to having the attention of the house on herself, you know? Just spend some time with her. You guys are sisters, you'll be able to bond."

"Half-sisters," she said quietly. "That part seems to matter all of a sudden."

"You never cared about that before," Adam reminded her gently. "She's your sister. You'll get through this."

"Yeah... maybe."

"Hang in there. I'll be there in about an hour. I love you so much."

"I love you too."

\* \* \*

"So I know you're not really into the traditional stuff, but I have something for you, in case, you know, you change your mind or whatever." Kathryn pulled a small bag out of her pastel purse that matched her bridesmaid dress. "It's just a silly sentimental thing, it's not really a big deal."

It was Saturday morning, the big day. Brynn and Kathryn were getting their dresses on together in a room at the inn. It had been a rather quiet affair thus far. Brynn reached in, and her fingers grasped a small glass bottle. As she removed her hand, she found an old bottle of nail polish. She flipped it upside down, and read the bottom-dwelling sticker, which had faded with the years.

"No way," she said. "True Blue. I can't believe you still have this. I can't believe you remember this!"

Kathryn smiled sheepishly. "Yeah. I mean, I know it's stupid but I used to love when you would paint my nails, and I figured, you know, something borrowed and blue, that it would kind of count. If you want it to. It's really old and all but I think you could still wear it. Only if you want."

"It's not stupid. It's awesome. This is probably the coolest thing you could have given me. Thank you so much."

"We should go get French fries and blast the radio again sometime."

The idea ignited in Brynn's mind. "Let's do it. Right now."

"We can't go now! You're in your wedding dress!"

"I am in my wedding dress, and that means that I'm the bride and it's my day and all that crap and I can do whatever I want. We have the limo for the whole day. I say we're getting fries right now. Bring the nail polish. We'll do them in the car."

"Seriously, Brynn, we might be late for the ceremony..."

"If the worst thing I did from here on out is be a few minutes late for my own wedding, then my life won't be so bad. Let's go."

"Oh my God, I can't believe we're doing this," said Kathryn, looking at Brynn, really looking at her, for the first time since she arrived, a genuinely excited expression on her face. "It's kind of awesome. Like the old days. Hold on, I'm totally making it a Facebook status," she added, punching at her phone. "OK. Let's go."

\* \* \*

The wedding was beautiful. It started only ten minutes late, after the sisters wiped the grease from their hands, reapplied their lipstick, and darted from the limo to take their places in the procession. Brynn said her vows to Adam, imbuing every word with meaning, and realizing with a new clarity how lucky she was, despite her muddled past. On the dance floor, she took her sister's hand and spun her around, their matching dark hair and blue nails glinting in the light of the chandelier.

## BITE ME

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MARY A. KONCEL

There is in the air this morning the smell of rot. Luckily I realize I'm one year younger than I thought and blissfully ignorant that dear Doris will soon depart. I like these gentle reminders that all great tragedies aren't caused by teeth, that nature's work is fast and insidious. Up north, another sweep of winter pins us down in driveways, our heads knocked silly as some thug of a snowflake whispers "Take that and that and that." Down south, a long river bulges. Trees drown, a few boats drift slowly, and two men named Theodore shoot a sink. I have to ask. Would you still pity me if I tell you Doris is chicken? Not any chicken, mind you, but a femme fatale, a bird you can dress up and take out, any night, anywhere. At least that's what I believe. Altogether now. There is in the air this morning the smell of rot. So shameless to appreciate the cadence, the lollygagging of each syllable in these troubled times.

## **BACK IT UP**

---

### **AMBERLY GLITZ**

Hey there little man; back it up.

You think you're hot stuff, don't you? Got your creases sharp, your haircut snappy – too bad your personality's only half the size of your manhood.

You square yourself away, you've got it all on track – What's that? Damn straight, I got you beat by half a lap.

You know what I think it is? (Now go ahead and take this with a grain of salt, because I know I'm no Einstein; but then you're no Edison so maybe we're square) I think you're scared. You're afraid of me – that's right: all five foot three of me gives you the shakes like the Beatles on Saturday night. Cuz guess what, my creases are sharp, and my haircut's snappy too: and I got it done backwards in high heels.

You try hanging on to that spotlight too long, boy you're going to come away with chicken fried hands; and it's a long way home as the blue falcon flies.

Keep on trying to tear me down: I dare you. Got news for ya: THIS IS NOT HOW THIS IS GOING TO WORK, LITTLE MAN... so you just go on ahead and back it up.

## DANDELIONS

---

MATTHEW JANKIEWICZ

The first thing I notice as I step into the cab is how absurdly dark the interior is, as if I had discovered a secret underground cavern. The second thing I notice is the cloud of smoky air that hovers around me like a ghost, invading every crevice of my body.

"Where you headed?" the cab driver asks in a scratchy, deep voice, stroking his plump fingers against his graying scraggly goatee.

I tell him where I want to go, slowly, so that I don't have to repeat it again. He turns around in his seat and gives me a questioning look as if he didn't hear me properly. The driver opens his mouth as if he is about to say something, then, thinking better of it, he puts the half finished Camel cigarette into his mouth and turns around, avoiding eye contact. I'm glad that he didn't say anything. I wasn't in the mood for talking, especially with a wrinkly, leather-faced cab driver. He would never understand my situation. Nobody would for that matter.

We sat in silence for about half a minute, the voice of me telling him where to go echoing in my head. I am about to repeat myself when I hear the roar of the engine being woken up and the sharp squeal of the tires spinning into motion.

To avoid the possibility of an awkward conversation, which lingered in this cramped space like humidity before a thunderstorm, I stare out the window. Through the smeared fingerprints on the dirty glass, the small local businesses (most of them with a "For Lease" sign posted in their front windows) passed in the quickness of a camera flash. From what I could tell, a lot had changed during the last two decades including the color of the sky, which, in my memory, used to be painted a light jean blue, but now displayed the bleakness of a gray cinder block. The Big Boy restaurant that my parents took me to every Saturday afternoon with my grandparents is now nothing more than an edifice without a soul. Thick wooden boards covering the windows are spray-painted with images of hands giving the middle finger, penises, and other circular hieroglyphics that have no meaning to me. The neighborhood where my grandparent's small brick ranch house used to be has been replaced with a Super Walmart. I can't fathom this; the neighborhood had simply *vanished*. It was as if the monstrosity of the superstore had fallen from the sky and devoured all of the tiny houses under its synthetic meadow of pavement and concrete.

I desperately search for anything that remains as I remember it being in the time capsule of my childhood memory. Nothing is the same. The town is wilting—suffocating—and, from what I can see, it's in the final stages of its last breath.

I try my best to ignore the shambles of buildings, now old and decrepit, and focus my attention instead on the past, unlocking those memories and facing them for what they are. I close my eyes, reaching back into the crevices of my psyche, sifting through the catalogue of my memory.

A picture appears, hazy at first, but growing clarity as it comes into focus like a Polaroid picture. It feels like I am looking through a long lost photo album. An eight year-old girl—skin as pale as vanilla ice cream with long sandy-brown hair, unkempt and knotted at the ends comes into the picture. Accompanying the image is the sound of paper-light laughter, drifting in my head like waves of wind. Despite her disheveled appearance, she carries an aura of unquestionable beauty. Her eyes sparkle with the color of water and ice combined. Her small rosy lips are pressed tightly together in a crescent smile revealing a wall of straight, ivory teeth.

Her name is Annie Wagner.

\* \* \*

Every afternoon, we used to play together in the playground behind St. Joseph's Methodist church. A small haven for children, it was hidden by a grove of trees that were perfect for keeping us cool on hot spring days. Our favorite pastime was picking dandelions from the endless assortment of weeds. It was a messy business, dandelion picking, kneeling on the ground to find the tallest ones—the skyscraper of dandelions—to bend into shapes of lions, dogs, and bunnies. But we were both too young and curious to care about such trivialities as getting dirty. I'm sure her mother, however, didn't care much for the smears of mud that scarred her flower-patterned dresses she had hand-sewed for her school outfits.

Most of the other kids on the playgrounds would use the swings, slides, and seesaws like most ordinary children, but for Annie, nothing could compare to the dandelions and the use of her own hyper-imagination. This may seem silly at first, as it had to me at the time, but I learned that there was much more to a dandelion than what appears on the surface of its yellow petals.

"Did you know that dandelions are food for larvae such as caterpillars and butterflies?" she would say, studying the specimen under her telescopic eye.

"So?" I said.

"So? If it weren't for dandelions we would never see any butterflies. How sad would that be?" I shrugged my shoulders apathetically and said that I never thought about what the world would be like without butterflies. "Also," she continued, "the petals can be used to make a juice called dandelion wine."

"Where did you hear that?" I asked. I secretly wanted to have a taste of this mysterious wine.

"My mom told me."

And that simple answer had sufficed. After all, parents seemed to know everything and since they were older than us, we had no choice but to believe them over our own inclinations.

Some days we would talk about school, our obsession with a movie called *The Money Pit*, our favorite things to eat . . . anything that came to mind for that matter, because Annie was one of those few girls who listened. No, not just listened, understood. All the while, we would contort the dandelions into the shapes of animals, smiley faces, even unicorns or other mythical creatures of our own design. Other times, we would tie the stems together to make bracelets or necklaces.

That was Annie for you—always enjoying the simple things in life; the freedom that nature provided, the palpable pleasures of love, the belief that everything was designed in some way or another for good rather than evil. She was especially capable of seeing the beauty in everything, even the vivid colors of the hundreds of florets of a dandelion, which no one wished to see on their own lawns.

One thing that always made me feel sad for her (and of course, I never discussed this with her or even mentioned it in her presence) was that I could tell her mom hardly brought in any money. Annie would try her best to hide it, but wearing the same half dozen dresses to school and getting vouchers for free lunches made it pretty transparent. They were minor details to me, certainly nothing that could keep me from being friends with her, although that wasn't the case with other kids. On several occasions I had found her in the hallways at school being bullied by other girls and boys, calling her names like "white trash" and "piss of the earth."

I remember one of the bullies, Greg Hooper, saying, "How does your mom feed you, with the rat shit she picks up off the floor in your trailer?"

Crying her eyes red, we escaped to the playground, which served as her second home. I suppose that one of the main attractions of running away to that place (other than the dandelions) was that I was always there with her to listen and understand her.

And so our afternoons went. No matter how difficult the school day seemed or how sad I felt, the radiant face of Annie Wagner was sure to cure any ailment of my heart. The most unusual part about our secret garden of weeds was that no matter how many dandelions we seemed to grab in our small hands, there were always plenty to be discovered the next day. I imagined some artist coming back each day to paint the same scene, always filling in the necessary details, each flower appearing with the slight motion of a brushstroke.

\* \* \*

"What do you think of the town?" the cab driver asks.

I look away from the window, reawakened to the smell of stale cigarettes and humidity. Over the speakers I hear the faint whisper of Buddy Holly singing "That'll Be the Day."

"How did you know I'm not from around here?" I ask.

"I noticed that your luggage tags said you're from Arizona." He makes a quick glance towards me via the rear-view mirror. He's still trying to figure me out, his brow wrinkling in a puzzled frown. I wonder if this is something he does with all of his customers, or whether he sees of me as a challenge, like a game of Sudoku.

"Oh," I say. "Yeah, that's where I'm from." It sounds convincing enough, and for all intents and purposes I suppose it is the truth, even if it's only a half-truth.

Chuckling, the driver says, "I always wanted to go out there in the ol' west. Still wild out there?"

I chuckle along with him, or rather at his ignorance.

"Pretty tame, actually," I reply. "With the exception of Phoenix, there really isn't much else out there in the far corner of the States, unless you count the cacti and dirt."

"What brings you all the way out here for?"

I suppose it's an honest question, something to strike up conversation and pass the time. I really didn't feel like sharing the most intimate details of my life with this stranger, though, so I go along with the charade and say, "Just a business trip."

That, too, is a half-truth.

I'm not sure whether the driver finds me less interesting than expected or whether he just didn't feel like talking anymore, but he changes his focus back to the road and leaves me to roam inside my head. Beyond the streaky window I watch as the Rite Aid, Food Lion, and the worn down veteran's club come into view and disappear. Those buildings stand like relics to a past that I had tried so hard, yet unsuccessfully, to forget.

\*\*\*

On one particularly beautiful day in early June, when the sky hovered above like a kaleidoscope, Annie and I arrived at the park later than usual. Over the weekend I had turned eight years old, so my teacher, Miss Klein, had decided to have a party after school to celebrate. When we arrived at the park, an hour and a half after the usual time, I noticed that we were the only two kids there, which meant that we didn't have to share anything. We were like two rulers of our own kingdom.

Annie told me how wonderful she thought the party was, and how Miss Klein's face lit like a light bulb after I opened her present. Underneath the folds of tissue paper was a replica of the Green Lantern, the hero I swore I would be if the firefighter career didn't pan out.

"I didn't like the frosting on the cake," she said, as we struggled to climb on top of the monkey bars.

"Me, either. It tasted funny. Not very sweet."

"That's because it's whipped cream."

"Whipped cream?"

"Yeah, whipped cream. You know, the stuff you're supposed to put on pumpkin pie and pudding."

Yes, I did know, but whipped cream wasn't meant for cake, just as chocolate syrup wasn't meant for scrambled eggs.

"Yuck!" I said. "No wonder I didn't eat it."

Annie lowered her body through a hole in the grid of the monkey bars and, wrapping her legs around the metal rod, she hung herself upside down like a bat.

"What's that?" she said.

"What?" I replied.

"That sound. I hear something. Don't you?"

"I don't hear anything."

"That's because you're talking so loud, silly."

I kept quiet for a moment, listening to the silence around me. For the first time, I noticed the late spring heat, which seemed to shroud everything with its thick moist saliva. At first, I could only make out the sound of the wind grazing against the poplars around us, calling out in their foreign whispers.

Then I heard something else, faint sounds, like church bells you hear on Sunday mornings. It grew louder and louder as I tried following it with my ears. As it came nearer, I realized it was not the sound of church bells, but a music box chiming out a tune that made me happy. No, more than happy—ecstatic.

"Ice cream!" I shouted just to hear the words come out of my mouth.

"*Of course* it's the ice cream truck," Annie said, as if she had known this for a long time already.

"Where's it coming from?"

Annie pointed her tiny porcelain finger over my shoulder to the path that led to Main Street.

"Over there," she said excitedly, almost losing her balance. She grabbed a bar with both hands, raised her feet, and dropped gracefully to the solid dirt below. I jumped after her, a little less uncouth, and landed hard on my feet.

"I love ice cream," I said. "My favorite is mint chocolate chip, but I don't mind cookie dough, and peanut butter bliss, and caramel . . ."

Annie's face changed from hasty delight to sadness. "What's wrong?"

By the reflection of the falling sunset I could see the beginnings of tears sprouting from the corners of her ocean blue eyes. The sadness in those eyes gave me the feeling that I was drowning in her sorrow.

"I . . . I . . ." she snuffled. "I don't have any money."

Her lips curled into a frown, transforming her face from radiant beauty to asymmetrical misery with wrinkles forming around her squinted crying eyes. I could hardly stand to look at her as that grimace spawned across her face.

Just when I thought there was nothing I could do and the rest of the afternoon would be spoiled, I reached into my jeans pocket and pulled out a crumpled ball of one dollar bills. It was my birthday money that my mom had given me last week to spend on whatever I wanted.

"It's okay," I said, trying to suppress the melancholy feelings that clung to my voice like moths to a lamppost. "I can get us both an ice cream cone."

She lifted her head up, choking back the tears that insisted on streaming out. A small crevice of a smile began to take shape along the creases of her mouth when she saw the green ball of money that I held tightly in my grasp.

"Would you really do that for me?"

*Would I?* What kind of question was that? I would have bought her the sun if my two dollar-a-week allowance could have afforded it.

"Sure," I said, nodding my head quickly up and down.

Embarrassed by her crying, she raised her hands to wipe off the wet trail that lingered on her peachy cheeks, and then wiped her hands on her sunflower printed dress. I could tell that her mother had tried her best to sew the dress for her despite the occasional knot in the stitching along the ruffled straps.

"Thank you," she whispered.

And then she did something that I would have never expected.

She leaned her head forward towards mine, slightly bending over because she was taller than me, and placed a quick kiss on my cheek. Nervous from the stunned look on my face, she retreated from me like a turtle taking solace in its shell. I tried my best to put a smile on my face, trying not to make her feel awkward about what just happened.

Once again the music from the ice cream truck reemerged through the thicket of trees. I realized that we had been wasting away our opportunity to get the ice cream and that the truck was not going to wait there all day.

"I've got to hurry before he leaves," I told her.

I dashed off in a hurry towards the path in the tree line that surrounded the playground, turning around as I went to give a quick nod in her direction. She smiled back and I was instantly lifted with the sensation of euphoria that filled me up like a hot air balloon. I turned back and ran as fast as I could, my breath keeping time with the hollow echoes of the ringing music of the ice cream truck. I knew I recognized the tune from somewhere, but I couldn't place it at the time.

I made it to the clearing where the forest emptied out into the asphalt of Main Street and the parking lot of St. Joseph's. Next to the curb I saw the ice cream truck, a secret panel on its side unlatched and hung down to create a makeshift countertop. Gaining my composure and burying my excitement in my belly, I walked over to the counter. Standing there was a man with short curly hair and wearing a Philadelphia Phillies ball cap.

"Watcha want, kid?" he bellowed. I wasn't sure if he was deaf or just didn't realize how loud his voice was. Then, more to himself than to me, he added, "Where'd all the kids go? They must be playing with them damn video games inside or something. God damned technology's turning everyone into a bunch of albino zombies."

"Um . . ." I said scanning my eyes across the large board behind him that listed all the flavors, trying to ignore his ranting.

"*Um* is not a flavor kid." The man looked down at me with red veined eyes, watching my every move. I looked down at my watch and realized that I had been gone from Annie for five minutes already. I didn't want to make her, or the ice cream man, wait any longer for me, so

I blurted out the first two flavors that came to mind. "One chocolate cone and one vanilla cone, please."

Within a minute, I had paid for the two cones in my hands and was on my way back to the playground. I couldn't wait to see the smile on her face when I returned with the ice cream. For the first time in my life I felt like the superhero, willing to go out of my way to make her happy. Why? Because her happiness was infectious, a drug that I could never get enough of.

I slowly trudged through the forest, carefully placing my steps to avoid accidentally tripping on a protruding tree root or fallen branch. The sun hovered against the horizon in the last hour before its expiration, hardly bleeding through the canopy of trees that hung over me.

I made it back to the clearing with the ice cream in my hands. I hadn't dropped it, as I had expected, and only a few melted streams of the cold stuff rolled down the cone onto my clamping hands. I stepped into the clearing, felt the gentle touch of the sun's last few rays against my exposed skin, and looked about for the bright flower-printed dress.

There was no one in sight.

The slides and monkey bars were left abandoned, waiting patiently to satisfy an eager child's amusement. Perfectly still, the oblique plank of the sea-saw rested against the fresh mulch. The swings swayed gently with the breeze. And Annie's tangled, yet perfectly shaded bumblebee hair was nowhere to be found.

The only noise I heard was the echo of small talk among the trees and the snapping of branches far off in the brush. *It's just an animal, probably a squirrel,* I thought.

But I couldn't control the sensation that I was not alone, as if someone, or something, was watching my every move with unremitting focus. It was a cold feeling that made my heart pedal faster in my chest and my already wet forehead perspire even more profusely.

"Hey, Annie, I've got your ice cream for you."

To my right a sharp snap of a branch yelped as loud as a firecracker. My body jerked as I turned to where I heard the sound, and then I felt it happen. The cone slipped from my grip, almost in slow motion. My mind said, *catch it, catch it you idiot.* But instead I watched it tumble to the ground, where it landed in a puddle of mud that had formed from yesterday's rainstorm.

I stood, stunned as I watched the vanilla ice cream amalgamate into a dirty chocolate color. Seconds later, the cone had disappeared completely in the puddle of mud like a sunken battleship, leaving no trace of what had happened.

"A . . . Annie," I choked up, startled by how loud my cracked voice sounded in the stark silence.

No response.

"Annie," I tried again, attempting to gain confidence in my voice. I gazed into the darkness of the undergrowth, hoping to see any sign of movement. "Are you hiding in there?"

The trees, in their taunting murmurs, laughed back.

I called her name at least a dozen times, but she never came. The next five minutes were a blur in my mind.

A shadowy figure of a man in the even darker thicket of trees moved to my right.

A snap of a fallen branch . . . echo . . . echo . . .

The other cone slipping out of my hand . . .

The next thing I knew, I was running as fast as my legs could carry me. The cold rush of air stung my lungs like a hundred angry bees.

After an hour, but really only ten minutes, I was home. That night, I remained silent, not speaking a single word of what had happened, or about the mysterious shadow man I had seen in the trees no more than twenty feet way from where I had stood. During dinner, when my parents asked me what was wrong, I simply told them I wasn't hungry and that my stomach hurt, which was true. I wanted to tell my parents what had happened, but the words wouldn't come out. I had to think because even I wasn't sure about what I had seen (or what I hadn't seen). My silence was more or less a defense mechanism.

It wasn't until the next morning when the police arrived on our doorstep that I could confirm that what I saw had really taken place. The barrage of questions followed: where was I yesterday? How long was I in the park? Was Annie there? What were we doing? How long did I leave her? Did you see anyone there?

The questions were twirling in my mind like a tornado; I felt the sickly feeling of hopelessness, because as I was telling the police everything I knew, I realized that I didn't know shit. I didn't know what the man looked like, or how tall he was, or what shoes he was wearing. All I knew is that my life would never be the same after that day. The police left our house as solemn as they had arrived; disgruntled by the lack of information I could provide. Unfortunately, I didn't know where Annie was either. After the police left, I locked myself in my room. I prayed to the God that my parents and my Sunday school teacher talked so much about. I prayed to see her the next day in school, to see her radiant smile and the aura of her happiness raining over her.

I never saw Annie Wagner again.

The whereabouts of her body were never discovered. Some say she ran away from home, although anyone who truly knew her would have known that she loved her mother more than anything in the world. Others suspected that she had been kidnapped and buried somewhere where she would probably never be found. Others in our grade had the outrageous thought that she was abducted by aliens and had been taken to some far away planet. In my mind, I knew she was somewhere far away, but it wasn't another planet, that was for sure.

About four months passed by before Miss Wagner came to the realization that something horrible had happened to her only daughter, a realization she tried to fight back with rationalizations for as long as she could. A plot was created for her in the local cemetery containing an empty box. Because of the few provisions that Annie's mother had in life, she was unable to provide the funeral that she believed her daughter deserved. There was a quick service at St. Joseph's where the soft, raindrop voice of the pastor brought tears of sadness and hope in everyone's eyes. Afterwards, the caravan of mourners traveled to the other side of town, where we watched as the preacher gave his final blessings and the small wooden box was lowered into the earth. After a few years the local legend of what became of Annie Wagner had faded, and eventually, that too had been buried.

As for me, I never did get to grow up to become the Green Lantern or a fireman. Instead, I ran away from my problems by going to college in Arizona, over two thousand miles away from home. There, I studied my troubles away, blocking out any stale thought of depression that would occasionally intrude my mind. Six years later I was a CPA making decent money, was married, and had two children. I suppose the worst part was that with my new life and family, I had forgotten my old one, the one with Annie Wagner.

That was, until a week ago.

I was watching the ten o' clock news last Tuesday night, alone in my living room. My wife was away on a business trip and the kids had already been tucked into bed. I wasn't really paying attention to the television because I was more interested in the *Late Show with David Letterman* that was coming on in less than fifteen minutes. I left to make myself an English muffin with melted butter, cinnamon, and sugar. When I came back into the room, I saw a news report on a missing girl. Her name was Claire Evans. She had brown hair, almond eyes and a button mouth. She had been missing for four days and the newscaster implored that if anyone had any information on her whereabouts, to please call the number on the bottom of the screen. I had never seen the girl before, but something about her picture, the radiance of youthful happiness on her face, reminded me of another face from another lifetime. It was the innocence of a face that only childhood could conjure. From then on, I made it my quest to remember things that I had tried so hard to forget, to put the pieces of my past together to recreate my *whole* self. After all, what are we without our memories?

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"We're here, sir," the cab driver says, still looking forward. I wonder if he sees the tears that have stained my face.

I hastily wipe them away and say, "Thanks, I really appreciate it." I reach into my pocket and pull out a twenty dollar bill and hand it to the driver. "Could you do me a favor and wait for me here. I promise I'll only be a few minutes."

He hesitates, probably debating whether or not he deserved this kind of exceptional tip, and then slowly reaches for the money in my hand and says, "Sure thing. You just take your time. I ain't in any rush."

I put my hand on the handle and push the door open, releasing me from the darkness of the cab. I close the door and look up at the sign in front of me, a faded white wooden board hanging lankly from two faded white pieces of lumber plunged into the soggy ground. Printed in an elegant script witting, the sign read:

Pepperton Mill Cemetery

Est. 1823

I step through the gate and walk past the older graves of people who no longer had anyone to remember them, their marble and limestone headstones eaten away by decades of acidic rain. There's a strange sensation crawling through my body, almost as if I am being pulled by some force in the right direction, like following an invisible tour guide. The next minute, I'm standing in front of a granite grave marker standing upright out of the ground. All of the information that was ever deemed important was written on the stone:

Annie T. Wagner

August 24, 1979- June 8, 1987

Her love and happiness we will cherish forever.

There she is—or isn't—because her body did not occupy that space. I wonder what it would be like to be eight years old forever, to be able to hold onto your childhood imagination, unaware of the worries that life brings to you as you grow older. Annie would still be four feet tall, while I had managed to grow to six feet. She would still believe that the world was pleasant and fun and that everyday contains a miracle.

I can't help but feel a smile crawl along my face. Hundreds of dandelions had taken root and flourished around her grave marker like they were fed by some special soil in that spot. They were glowing brilliantly, each floret like a ray of sun. I look around the graveyard and see that not a single dandelion grew anywhere else. I look back to her grave and lean down closer to the ground, amazed by what I'm seeing. Several dandelions are growing right before my eyes, poking up out of the ground and expanding into their perfect dome of yellow. And suddenly, the realization hits me in the head like someone throwing a baseball at me, and I know . . . I know that Annie Wagner has certainly moved on somewhere as wonderful and beautiful as her imagination. A place as warm as the sun and as bright as a dandelion.

## MY EYES WERE CLOSED

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LEAH HARRIGAN

My eyes were closed when they went in,  
skin sliced open to divide  
cherry pie in half, fresh red  
fruit oozing from my perfect limb.

Scalpel dug deep, a sterile sweep  
tore me up and lied to me,  
Gore I sensed, but couldn't see.  
My eyes were closed when they went in.

Years later, I don't have it back.  
Not the chance – glory past –  
not even the strength to chase  
my child in fields of grass.

I have a scar instead.  
My dragonfly, its head  
long and hollow as its body  
with scanty, fleshy wings.

It can't fly – it tried –  
And it can't sing.

## THE BLUE CAPE

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LARA GULARTE

The woman believes in magic and miracles and that what she loses will be given back. When she cleans out her closet she finds her blue cape, missing for years. She wraps herself in its dark wool, feels her shoulders shift fragile as a bird's wings. So many memories in the fabric with its frayed collar, torn lining. She empties the dark pockets of coins and Kleenex. There's a story behind the missing button.

When the woman steps outside, the cape slips from her shoulders and flies off down the street. It flaps for hours in the wind, then hangs itself on a hook at an all night pancake house, yearns for someone to take it home and send it to the cleaners. No more living at the bottom of a closet under heavy shoes. For three days the cape holds on, only to have a janitor stuff it into a rag bag. On top of the heap the cloak waits for a window to be opened, then lifts itself up and out.

The woman wakes one morning with the lint of dream sticking to her night clothes. She sees her old cape hanging on the door and knows she gets a second chance. From her bed she lifts her hand in the air, waves hello to her new life.

Popi's dead. Cry. Tell your dad you're sorry for his loss. Hug him. Hug your mom. Thank them for coming to tell you in person. Thank them for the way they told you that your grandfather is dead. Say goodbye. Cry. Call your best friend who's driving home from a vacation with her fiancé on the outer banks. Call her and thank her for her prayers and tell her your grandfather is dead. Ask her to pray for Nana now. Go visit Nana. Go visit Nana with your sister and hug Nana as she cries and tells you how proud Popi was of you and how much he loved you. Cry. Go to the store. Go to the store with your sister and the fifty dollars your mom gave you and find her a black dress. Find a black dress for a little girl in the middle of summer when everything is colorful and frilly and happy. Don't cry. Panic. Panic when you realize you were so upset you dropped the fifty dollars your mom gave you somewhere in the store. Search frantically. Don't cry. Find the money. Whisper a thankful prayer. Don't cry. Go to work. Don't cry. Tell your other best friend at work that your grandfather is dead. Don't cry. Ask around for people to cover your shift. Ask to get work off so you can go to your grandfather's wake and funeral. Try not to cry. Cry. Let your boss hug you. Go to the wake. See Popi. See that in death Popi looks so much better than in those final, hideous days in the hospital. Cry. Watch your cousin's baby run up to the casket over and over again and loudly whisper "Popi's sleepin" and "Popi's in Heaven". Smile. Stand in the receiving line. Listen to the words "I'm sorry for your loss" a hundred times. Thank them for coming. See how many of your friends came to offer their condolences. Feel loved. Walk with them through the line. Introduce them to Nana, aunt, uncle, father, mother, brother, brother, brother, sister, cousin, cousin, cousin's husband, cousin's baby. Look at Nana crying. Don't cry. Try to be strong for Nana because this is her loss more than yours. Cry. Go home. Try to sleep. Wake up. Go to Nana's. Look at your brothers. See how handsome they look in the suits they are wearing to their grandfather's funeral. Look at Nana. Look at Nana and the new haircut she got for the funeral. Look at Nana try not to cry as she waits for the limo which will take her to her husband's funeral. Don't cry. Arrive at the funeral home. Pray the rosary. Give Popi a final kiss. Cry. Arrive at the church. Don't cry. Let your brother's best friend hold you. Be thankful your brother's best friend agreed to read at the funeral since none of you could have done it without sobbing. Stand in the back of the church and see all the people that came to help you grieve and pray for Popi. Don't cry. Hear the song "Amazing Grace" play as the procession begins. Popi's favorite. Cry. Sit. Listen to the readings. Listen to the homily. Listen to the homily given by your cousin.

Listen to your cousin who is so brave that he can celebrate the funeral mass of his own grandfather. Listen to his words of comfort. Cry. Pray. Cry. Go to the cemetery. Pray. Cry. Go out to eat. Go home. Sleep. Go to your cousins. Spend time with family. Watch your brothers and your cousins play an epic game of bacci. Play with your cousin's baby. Spend time with a more distant cousin who came to help your family grieve. Spend time with this beautiful cousin who will join your grandfather in heaven in a month. Remain unaware of this fact, and so take her presence for granted. Enjoy yourself a little. Laugh a little. Feel peace. Feel sadness. Feel exhaustion. Go home. Go to sleep. Wake up. Go to work. Go out with friends. Go to sleep. Help your best friend plan her wedding. Spend a little more time with family. Repeat. Repeat for the rest of the summer. Find yourself driving on a beautiful autumn day. Remember this was Popi's favorite season. Hear a song on the radio and know that it's Popi saying he loves you. Suddenly, for the first time, remember Popi before he was lying in the casket. Remember him before he was lying the hospital bed connected to a dozen tubes and monitors, moaning in pain. Remember Popi before he was in the nursing home, unable to speak or walk, only able to look at you with big, pleading eyes. Remember Popi before he was housebound, unable to leave his chair without the help of your brothers or your dad. Remember Popi when he took you and your brothers for walks when you were kids. Remember Popi when he took you for hot weenies and trips to the mall and to feed the ducks even when you were too big for that. Remember Popi coming over every Christmas morning with more presents than Santa had left the night before. Remember Popi sitting at the breakfast table at your parent's house and telling outrageous stories about the pranks he used to pull when he was a teenager. Remember Popi telling a police officer it didn't matter if he was driving down a one way in the wrong direction, since he was only going one way. Remember sitting in the back seat and trying not to laugh in the police officer's face when Popi said this. Remember Popi sitting at his kitchen table every morning. Remember how Popi finished every one of his morning prayers before he started talking to you. Remember being content with that because you knew he was praying for you. Remember Popi. Cry. But smile too.

## SCULPTURE

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AMANDA M. CENTRELLA

Blue Playdo is stuck  
In the creases of my palms. You can find it in the hollowed gouges of my  
cheeks

Or plugging up my nostrils.  
Maybe wedged in the space between my ears, riding the ridges of my brain.  
There, things begin to stall, phase in and out  
And there's something like static.

But the blue continues to pour in  
It jams itself into the knobby grooves of my teeth and lines my gums  
Worming its way down my throat and packing up tight the cavity  
in my chest.

I am blue all over, under, and in between  
And there are bloated, purpled lungs sitting like heavy stones on my heart.  
With each beat they squeeze against the pale white of my skin  
Like bruises that appear, then vanish in time with my pulse.  
And I am content to sit and watch as little pieces of the clay devour me  
Gradually. Until they stuff the sockets of my eyes  
And I can no longer see.

## HARMONICA MAN LEAVES HIS STONE BENCH ON CATALINA AVENUE

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JEFFREY ALFIER

(For such poverty as this would deserve such happiness.

St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*)

Your homeless hands remain curled  
to your lips in that mock-harmonica play,  
as if to fill the air with wistful, sugared tunes –  
enough lament to loosen the rusted hinges  
on the doors that won't stop rebuffing you,  
turning you out to the dark circle of yourself.

Here, strangers forget they've passed you  
in the dust-strewn afternoon, your daily  
rhythm a flogging drumbeat. Yet who can say  
if your hands held a daughter on her birthday  
as you sang her name again and again. Yes, those  
very hands, that when empty, curl into music.

## WEDGED

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NANCY FORD DUGAN

You're wedged between Charlotte and Pete, your long legs cramped up in the balcony's uncomfortable seats. You watch actors on the stage below enact depressing events and then burst into song. It's Sondheim; you have to expect it.

Lucky Pete got the aisle and his legs are strewn out at a jaunty angle. Periodically he leans over and comments on the show into your left ear; you can't hear him but you nod anyway, to be polite. You catch yourself thinking about the glass magnets with an antique floral design that you recently bought on impulse. You've arranged them on your refrigerator to hold up photos of other people's children.

Your feet and clothes are soggy from the rain. Charlotte is squirmly in her seat and has pushed the sleeves up on her red holiday sweater; she slowly scratches up and down her arms, switching from right to left, and then leans over to scratch something you can't see. Maybe her leg? Her foot? Does it irritate the young, bearded stranger sitting on the other side of her as much as it does you?

You haven't seen Charlotte and Pete in over a year, since their last visit from Boston, and hadn't realized, until tonight at dinner, the degree of Pete's dissatisfaction with you. "Do you always have this much energy?" he'd asked as you all met at the restaurant. Then he'd grimaced to impersonate your intense talking style. You were shocked to see so much animosity from him. You fully understand why intimates may grow weary of you, but this was only a few seconds into your encounter. You are happy for him that he doesn't have to be around you much.

Pete mocked the wine you selected for yourself, saying nasty things about New Zealand (who dislikes New Zealand?) while he and Charlotte imbibed hard liquor, champagne, and wine. Pete asked for a swig of your one measly glass of wine, almost finishing it before wincing to confirm his disgust.

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Charlotte, now "early" retired from a corporate job and more intense than you will ever be, teaches yoga. You notice the most intense people you know often end up teaching yoga and wonder what this means. In Charlotte's case you imagine the combination of alcoholism and yoga must be magical, and that the effects of a hangover on downward dog must be dizzying.

At Charlotte's request, you had chosen the restaurant and made all the arrangements weeks ago in advance of their visit. "Are you always so organized?" Pete asked in a dismissive tone.

You are, perhaps, too organized. Earlier this month a younger co-worker based in Canada (who shares your name and encourages you to use your rusty French when the two of you communicate) asked for your help in arranging a romantic weekend for her and her new boyfriend when they came to the city. You emailed her your suggestions ahead of time, with contact details. You'd wracked your brain for romantic locations you'd enjoyed over the years with former dates and boyfriends. You conducted extensive Internet research to confirm their existence, since it had been so long ago when you had attended them. Many of them had closed.

When the weekend arrives your namesake stops by your office with her tall, handsome boyfriend to thank you and give you a hug for making all the preparations. She is kind. Your colleague is a younger, prettier, happier version of you but with much better hair, lip gloss, and a sexy accent.

"Look, it's the two Lindas," your office mates chime in. You act cheerful, as you are truly happy to see her and meet the cute boyfriend. But you are aware, standing next to her, that your co-workers can't help but compare the two of you and you fall short: older, more tense, distracted, and with chapped hands and lips that require constant re-application of ointments.

You review with the couple a list of key tourist and seasonal attractions they must not miss and that you attended with a hit parade of former boyfriends. You send them to the restaurant where Mel flirted with you on your first date. You send them skating where you and Phil fell repeatedly, laughing at your mutual bruises and holding onto the rail. You send Linda to a store where you bought the dress you wore with Frank to a friend's wedding, long before Frank decided to be gay.

You wish Linda and her beau well. You would guess they are about 10 years younger than you. Pete and Charlotte, on the other hand, are about 10 years older, at least. You are wedged between couples of varying decades, handing out recommendations on romantic events they may enjoy while you do errands and worry about trivial matters, like the chronic disarray of your scarf drawer. Years ago, your now retired gynecologist breezily diagnosed you with mittelschmerz—a benign but unsettling condition of abdominal pain in the middle of your cycle. You diagnose yourself now as suffering from being smack in the middle of other people's relationships and generations. It too aches and what is the cure?

At intermission Pete buys a bottle of water, promptly loses the lid and searches under the seats for it. He blew his top, you think and amuse yourself. You unsuccessfully help him look and he seems to appreciate your effort. When the play resumes Pete seems happy to admire the attractive movie star performing in the play. You realize that Charlotte laughs when you are sure the scene is meant to be sad, which makes you question her sanity. And yours. And Sondheim's.

The rain has increased in intensity when you all leave the theater and begin to maneuver through the crowds to head across town. "No way will we get a cab, I suppose," grumbles Pete. You miraculously wave down an available taxi. "It's headed downtown," Pete yells at you. "Who cares?" you say. "It can always turn around and we may not find another."

Charlotte suggests walking in the rain and Pete instantly disagrees with her. "Let's grab it. You're right," says Pete to you. You feel victorious. The cab is one of the newer, tiny models that can only fit two in the back. You ask the cabdriver if you may join him up front; he agrees without enthusiasm and removes a towel from the front seat.

You turn to try to talk through the plastic divider to Charlotte and Pete, who are mildly arguing about choosing to ride versus walk back to their hotel, where you drop them off.

You ask the cabby if he would like you to move and sit in the now empty backseat, and he says it is not necessary. You feel cozy and comfortable up front with him as the rain continues to pound the windshield. In a Proustian flashback you recall the sensation of being alone in the front seat of a car with a man on a date, a more common occurrence in suburbia than in the city. You decide to enjoy the ride and make pleasant small talk with him.

As you turn and look out your side window, the driver says, "Oh NO!" and jolts the car to a stop. On the driver's side another car has hit a young woman in the middle of the crosswalk, and you watch as she gets up slowly from the slick road. Her two female companions run to assist her, and the perpetrator stops his car and gets out. The cabdriver says, "We should call the police."

"Did you see it?" you ask, since you did not. "Yes," he says. You decide to jump out in the rain and leave your umbrella in the cab, optimistically hoping the driver will not pull away with it, stranding you in the rain. You feel heroic. You ask the young woman if she is all right, and she insists she is, but she seems dazed. She is a bit plump, which may have worked to her advantage, padding her fall. In a firm voice you suggest that she go to the hospital and get checked out, since she may be injured but unaware of it. She seems disinclined to listen to your advice. You repeat your suggestion. The driver of the car that hit her is also upset she will not go to the hospital. He calls the police and promises to stay with their group until they arrive. He seems decent, startled and sober. There is poor lighting and you silently curse Bloomberg and his budget cuts. You assume the driver couldn't see the young woman dart out into the street.

Your assessment is that everyone will survive and handle the situation appropriately. You return, dripping wet, to the waiting cab and inform the driver. He is content and you drive on. At your building you thank him for putting up with three people in his cab, the two drop-offs, and your investigation of the accident. He smiles at you and says no problem. You give him a big tip.

He rolls down his window as you walk around to the sidewalk and says something you can't hear. You step closer to his window and he repeats, "Stay as you are. Don't ever change."

The cabdriver does not criticize your energy or speech patterns or organizational abilities. He wants you to stay as you are. You triumphantly walk into your building's lobby and consider calling Pete and Charlotte to relay both the accident and the cabdriver's parting words. You decide not to disturb them and instead, revved up, pace for awhile, drink some water, read the Playbill, and finally go to bed.

As you stare at the dark bedroom ceiling, you admit to yourself you'd never have run out of the cab to check on the victim if your driver had not been so concerned. You were more worried about getting wet than about the status of the person who had been hit. But even if it hadn't been raining, it wouldn't have occurred to you. You were tired and ready to go home, weary of Pete's mutterings, Charlotte's arm scratching, the incessant rain, Sondheim's sorrow.

You did it because it seemed more expedient than calling and waiting for the police. And maybe you did it to appear competent and considerate in the eyes of the cabdriver. Mainly you did it to get the show on the road so you could go home.

As you pull up the covers with your greasy, over-lotioned hands, you listen to the rain ping against the window. You realize you will, in fact, stay as you are. There is no danger you will ever change. You hum a few bars of "Send in the Clowns" and eventually fall asleep.

## INSOMNIAC LISTS

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JANE LUNIN PEREL

Carnelia does not do sheep. She climbs the alphabet instead. Autopsy. Bacteria. Colitis. Diarrhea. Electrocardiogram. But then she's anxious over J. Nothing comes, except Jimmy fund. Is that cheating? What are the rules? She'd like to take it up with the author of sleep. She would say, *What do you want from me great Snoring Breath of Life that when I rise from bed I walk from room to room, staring out windows, like a cow into the snow?* Not even coffee can wind her up. Today she must take Amber to the orthopedic surgeon who will discuss the follow-up surgery on Amber's elbow. How will Carnelia focus on the X rays when the titanium loop with its screws and wires dismantles her? The doctor's bald head will shine like a lunatic's eyeball. "You've been through worse," she'll say to Amber, driving home, the bottom of her eye sockets aching from her sleepless nights when the Almighty alphabet wraps around her like a python until dawn.

## **INSIDE MY VIOLETS**

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**TIMOTHY H. CARTER**

It's a ghastly place, really. Strewn straw bits, empty memes, canvas paintings with only the outlines done. Teeth marks on the floorboards. And there are no corners; all round like a carapace or carnival tent—a thousand concentric circles at a heightened buzz. If you ever get the chance to go inside, run; stab the messenger with his own letter opener. Untold beauty waits. Though, honestly, I've never been in either. Mystery scares me. This is just what I've heard. Things daily escape, are let out. They come howling in all directions at a crawl-fly. Bat-winged, with sugary grimaces for grins.

## STAYING ALIVE

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VIVIAN LAWRY

It started with Simon's conviction that the world's population growth was far outpacing the food supply. In spite of the growing popularity of minicattle—only half as big as standard cattle, eating only a third as much, and producing proportionately more beef for the grain they consume—Simon concluded that eating animal protein is an inefficient use of resources and became a vegan. For months he harangued family and friends and wrote letters to the editor of the local paper, citing statistics on how much grain is consumed to produce a pound of beef and the nutritional value of that pound of beef compared to the nutritional value of the grain if consumed directly by humans.

His wife Millicent, also a research statistician and usually sanguine, had weathered Simon's past rants on everything from regreening the Sahara to mandating solar heat in all new buildings. But one morning her patience snapped. She slapped two plates of bacon and eggs onto the table. "You might as well eat it. Your vegan campaign is doomed from the get-go." Simon glared at her but she talked on. "The global breadbasket isn't big enough to feed everyone on plants alone. Only about one-tenth of the land not under ice is suitable for cultivation, and nearly all of that is already under plow." She forked eggs and bacon into her mouth and talked around them. "Besides, nearly sixty percent of the world's meat comes from grazing, foraging, and free-range feeding. Why give that up? Instead, we should use more of what's already available—hearts and livers, brains and feet, kidneys and tongues."

Simon pushed his plate aside but made no answer. Over the next several days, he verified her data and scrutinized her logic and could find no fault. He settled onto the sofa with his gloom and watched TV, barely stirring for days on end. When the papers carried reports of international rice shortages and wholesale food suppliers across the nation limited customers to four twenty-pound bags of rice per visit, anxiety lay in Simon's stomach like a stone. One day he said, "You're right, Millie. But you didn't go far enough. Cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens—why limit ourselves to them? What about rabbits and squirrels? Feral dogs and cats? Voles, rats—anything?"

Millie said, "That's very rational. There's a Swahili saying—*kila nyama nyama tu*—every meat is meat. People in China and Vietnam and India have eaten rats and snakes for centuries. I'll get recipes."

As they shifted their menus from beef steak and chicken breasts to dog ham, raccoon barbecue, and grilled rats Bordeaux style, Simon's gloom lifted. When his children came home from school crying because their friends said smoked eel sandwiches were gross, Simon and Millie switched to the foreign names for

their food— told them they were having escargot instead of snails, for example, hasenpfeffer instead of pepper rabbit for dinner—and household peace returned.

This idyllic interval came to an end when Simon read that the real threat of global warming wasn't rising temperatures per se, or even rising water tables, but that vast expanses of currently arable land would become desert. Desert wouldn't support even free-range grazers. In addition, warmer climates and more frequent warming cycles would increase insect populations, which would compete with humans for plant food. This time Simon's depression was so severe that he was hospitalized for three months. His indigo mood lightened only when the solution came to him: people should eat more insects.

Simon checked himself out and a week later he handed Millie a sheaf of recipes for Rocky Mountain Locust Stew, Woodlouse Sushi, Green Salad with Toasted Beetles, and similar international delicacies. He said, "Global warming is still in its infancy, but this planet already has seventy pounds of insects for every pound of human flesh. Think about that. Besides, we eat crabs and lobsters and other bottom-feeders. Why not nice vegan insects? Think of them as microlivestock."

Millie sat silent for a long time. Eventually she smiled. "*Kila nyama nyama tu.*"

Together they attended workshops with titles like Incredible Edible Insects and came away armed with statistics on the protein, fat, and mineral value of termites, caterpillars, and weevils compared to beef or fish. They picked up valuable tips about everything from covering the colander with wire mesh when washing crickets to putting cleaned insects in the freezer for fifteen minutes or so to kill but not freeze them before cooking. For her birthday Simon gave Millie *The Eat-a-Bug Cookbook*. Soon she was making insect flour and adapting standard recipes to include insects. They bought less from supermarkets and more from pet stores, bait shops, and insect suppliers. Simon and Millie wore matching T-shirts that said "Proud to be Entomophagous" and informed anyone who inquired that eighty percent of the world's population eats insects intentionally.

Predictably, the children rebelled, even though Simon pointed out that honey is just a form of bug juice. Annie said, "Look, I stuck it out through tripe and guinea pig in that spicy Peruvian sauce, even creamed snails. But I draw the line at white ant pie." Junior agreed.

Simon said, "This isn't a negotiation. Hit the floor and give me push-ups. Keep at it till you decide to eat your dinner or you collapse, whichever comes first." In bed with Millie he said, "I feel bad about the push-ups. But we're talking survival here. There's nothing I wouldn't do to save my children."

After that the children's surrender was complete. Though they never talked about it with their friends, cockroach samosas were a big hit, as were Ant Brood Tacos and Chocolate Chirpie Chip Cookies.

When Simon learned that cockroaches are one of the most populous insects, he read all that he could find about them. He pored over *The Compleat Cockroach*

for hours. He sprinkled tidbits of information into the dinnertime conversation. "Did you know that it takes twenty seconds to explode a cockroach in the microwave? They explode because they're so fat—not like ants, which just sit there." He grinned at Millie. "You can grease cookie sheets with their fat, there's so much of it." Another time he said, "Cockroaches can live for a week without their heads. They die after a week only because they can't drink." He learned that cockroaches have been around for 360 to 400 million years, compared to only two million for modern man. He built a cockroach farm—like an ant farm, only bigger—and spent hours a day observing those splendid creatures. He contemplated opening an insect factory. When Millie objected to using their 401(k) money to fund the project, he said, "Insects are the food of the future. Someday there will be money made farming insects, and I'll be ahead of the curve. Cockroaches could be my flagship product."

Simon attended to the cockroach hissing, read their thoughts, and realized that, for the most part, cockroaches aren't profound thinkers. But they are masters of survival. They can live on nothing but book bindings or laundry detergent. And when all else fails, they cannibalize their own. One day Simon realized that the king cockroach was mocking him, deriding the minuscule human history and making much of the longevity of the cockroach family. Mulling this over, Simon became convinced that the only sure way to survive the coming apocalypse was to meld with the cockroaches. For weeks he fretted about how to do this—until one day he burst out laughing. He'd begun already. If not, how could he read their thoughts?

Coming home from Junior's ball game, tired and hungry, Simon and Millie turned on the kitchen light and found the king cockroach on the counter. They could have harvested him in an instant. But they had leftover veggie pizza in the fridge, so they ignored the king. The king stretched out his neck and flew at Millie. She batted him away. When he persisted Simon dropped a plastic dishpan over him. On their way to bed, they found two huge cockroaches on the hallway wall, stretching their necks out and eyeing them both. Simon and Millie hurried into the bedroom and slammed the door. Long into the night they heard the cockroaches dive-bombing their door. The next morning the cockroaches were gone. But Simon knew that, come nightfall, they would be back.

Simon fretted over why the cockroaches were attacking them. He consulted two entomologist friends and learned that cockroaches stretch their necks and fly when they are interested in mating. Simon's laughter bubbled forth. He and Millie and the cockroaches were on the verge of total melding. Their children's children's children would survive.

**DEAR OCCUPANT**

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**BETHANY REID**

In the garage, a broken chair, a box of unmatched dishes, some smashed.  
Stamped in one drawer  
of a chest of drawers, "Michigan  
Rents Furniture." Inside another,  
a baby book, a valentine,  
a packet of letters scrawled in a spidery hand,  
a dead spider. When we bought the house it came possessed  
of its last owner's secrets.

A cat had left its mark, enough hair  
to make another cat, a pervasive smell of pee.  
Cigarette burns decouaged the carpets.  
Why should every closet have a padlock,  
every bedroom a telephone jack?  
Some things we thought we'd keep,  
a leather jacket, some old pots,  
a hot pink ski hat I washed twice.  
They wouldn't acquiesce.  
Even the baby book we finally threw into the trash.  
After five years her mail still slips  
into our box, a dating service her most  
persistent caller – red heart  
under our address. We'll Match You,  
they promise: We Will Find  
Your Perfect One.

## **LESSONS FROM MY GRANDMOTHER**

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**MEGAN F. RYAN**

My grandmother taught me how to tie a chignon  
at the nape of my neck:

Tight like the grape leaves  
she stuffed and then wrapped;  
Strong like the bones  
in her hands,  
tying and untying her own,  
her mother's, my mother's  
and now mine;  
Straight like the wire fence  
surrounding her beloved strawberry patch  
in the summer;  
Elegant like the cursive letters  
she watched me perfect in the afternoon.

When she boiled rice on the stove,  
I would sneak upstairs to the bedroom  
and slip on her elbow length gloves  
and tie her silk scarves around my neck,  
pretending to be an elegant creature—  
pretending to be her.

I found pictures of her riding her bike  
wearing espadrilles and that smile,  
after the war—  
a collective tableau of her years  
before she fell in love  
and kept this world going.

## HOW TO EAT A MANGO

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CYNTHIA CARMICHAEL

*as taught to me by a Cuban boy*

Pick one that has recently fallen from the tree.  
Avoid split ones with little flies buzzing around.  
Likewise avoid the ones gnawed by vermin.  
Find one large and firm.  
Note black dots freckling the rosy-greeny-orangey fruit.  
Push fingers gently in to feel the give of ripeness.  
Start at the stem and peel down in strips.  
Use your teeth.  
Note how some yellow flesh clings to the peel,  
and the shiny stippled surface left behind.  
Take a bite.  
When the nectar drips down your chin,  
close your eyes to fully appreciate the taste.  
And the smell, let it engulf you as you enjoy it.  
Wipe mouth on shirt or not at all.  
Kiss your girl, standing nearby,  
or pick another mango  
and begin again.

## **CONTRIBUTORS**

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**JEFFREY ALFIER** is a two-time Pushcart prize nominee whose poems have appeared recently in *Connecticut River Review* and *South Poetry Magazine* (England), with work forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*. His chapbooks are *Strangers Within the Gate* (2005) and *Offloading the Wounded* (2010). His third chapbook, *Before the Troubadour Exits*, will be out this winter from Kindred Spirit Press. He serves as co-editor of *San Pedro River Review*.

**ELIZABETH BABINECZ** is a senior Social Science major and Film minor at Providence College. She lives in Bay Shore, New York where she enjoys cooking, drawing, and dodging the popular family question: "What are you doing after graduation?" with the response: "Sorry, I have to re-fill the pretzels!"

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**JANE DOWNS** is an editor and writer living in Kensington, CA. Her work appears and has won prizes in anthologies and literary journals such as *Field*, *The Dos Passos Review* and the *North American Review*. Her book, *The Sleeping Wall*, is due to be published by Chiasmus Press at the end of this year. She is currently a partner in Red Berry Editions and recently published *The Jam Jar Lifeboat* and *Other Novelties Exposed* by U.S. Poet Laureate Kay Ryan.

**NANCY FORD DUGAN**'s work has been published in *Cimarron Review*, *Passages North*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Lullwater Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Epiphany*, *Coe Review*, *Buffalo Carp*, *Desert Voices*, *The Dirty Goat*, *The Hurricane Review*, *The Old Red Kimono*, *RiverSedge*, and *The Writer's Post Journal*. She lives in New York City and previously resided in Michigan, Ohio, and Washington, DC.

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**LARA GULARTE** was nominated by Bitter Oleander Press for “Best New Poets 2010.” Her poetry has drawn the attention of the “Canadian Centre for Azorean Studies and Research” where one of her poems was published. Gularte’s poetic work depicting her Azorean heritage is included in a book of essays called *Imaginarios Luso-Americanos e Acorianos* by Vamberto Freitas. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as *Bitter Oleander*, *The California Quarterly*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *Eclipse*, *The Evansville Review*, *The Fourth River*, *The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Permafrost*, *The Sand Hill Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Watershed*, *Water-Stone Review*, and *Windfall*. She is an assistant poetry editor for *Narrative Magazine*.

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**PETER HARRIS** teaches American Literature and poetry writing at Colby College in Maine, where he is the Zacamy Professor in English. He has published numerous articles on contemporary American poetry and a chapbook, *Blue Hallelujahs*. His poetry has appeared in many magazines including, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Epoch*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, *Seattle Review*, and *Sewanee Review*. A former Dibner Fellow, he has been awarded residencies at Macdowell, the Guthrie Center, Red Cinder House, and The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Harris has also taught at Marie Curie University in Lublin, Poland, and at University College Cork. He is a Zen Buddhist priest.

**GEORGE HIGGINS** poems have or will soon appear in *88, Pleiades*, *Best American Poetry 2003*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry Flash*, *Salamander*, *SLAB* and many other literary journals. His manuscript *There* received an honorable mention in the open

reading period for Steel Toe Books in January 2009, and was a semi-finalist for the De Novo Prize in September 2010. He is a graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA program for writers where he was a Holden Fellow. He lives in Oakland with his wife and daughters, and is a criminal defense lawyer.

**MATTHEW JANKIEWICZ** resides in Bel Air, MD and is currently attending Salisbury University in Salisbury, MD where he plans to graduate in May 2011 with a B.A. in English and a minor in Business Writing. He has had several poems and short stories published in SU's literary magazine *The Scarab*.

**PETER JOHNSON**'s most recent books are *Miracles & Mortifications*, which received the 2001 James Laughlin Award from The Academy of American Poets, and *I'm a Man*, a book of short stories. He received creative writing fellowships from the NEA in 1999 and from Rhode Island Council on the Arts in 2002, and his new book of prose poems, *Eduardo & "I"* will be published by White Pine Press in 2006. He is a contributing editor of *The American Poetry Review*, *Web Del Sol*, *Slope*, and *Sentence*.

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**JORGE LUCAS** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but was relocated to New Jersey at the young age of two. He entered Providence College as an English Major and a Film Minor in the hopes of synthesizing his two passions: writing and filmmaking. When it comes to creating his own works of fiction, Jorge is most inspired and influenced by Flannery O'Connor, Jorge Luis Borges, and Michael Chabon. He oftentimes lies awake at night, imagining that he possesses a fraction of these artists' skill; and when imagination gives way to frustration, he eventually forces himself to produce something like "Strangers in the Night."

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**ANGIE PELEKIDIS** recently had her story, "Blah, Blah, Black Sheep," selected by Ann Beattie as the first-prize winner of the New Ohio Review's Fiction Contest. She's also had stories appear in *The MacGuffin* and *Chrysalis Reader*, and online at *The Battered Suitcase* and *Drunken Boat* (upcoming). She graduated from Binghamton University in 2008 with an MA in Creative Writing/English Literature, and is pursuing a PhD there in the same field. Originally from Brooklyn, Angie now lives in Binghamton with her family.

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**MEGAN F. RYAN** is an English major and Business Studies minor in her junior year at Providence College. She is currently serving as the Democratic State Committeewoman for Rhode Island's 7<sup>th</sup> representative district. She is also a competitive Irish step dancer at the Goulding School of Irish Dance.

**ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO**'s novel, *Miriam the Medium* (Simon & Schuster) was nominated for the Harold U. Ribalow award. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension. Her poem, "Second Story Porch," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

**DIANE SHERMAN** has been writing poetry for years and is now working on her first collection, *Walkabout* (available early 2011). She has or will be published in the following journals: *Pisgah Review*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *The Spokesman Review*, *The Cape Rock*. Also a yoga teacher and artist, Diane grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and currently lives in Spokane, Washington, with her husband. To learn more about her visit <http://lotusofferings.com/poetry/>.

**MATTHEW J. SPIRENG**'s full-length book manuscript *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. His poetry collection *What Focus Is* is forthcoming in 2011 from Word Press. His chapbooks are: *Young Farmer*; *Encounters*; *Inspiration Point*, winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and *Just This*. He holds an M.A. in creative writing from Hollins College.

**JOHN SULLIVAN** is a lawyer in Baltimore. His op-eds have appeared in newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. His short stories have been published in various literary journals. He has written an as yet unpublished murder mystery, *17 Zabina Court*. John is the father of two daughters, Kira and Meredith.

**KIM WAGGONER** is a 49-year-old mother of two who was diagnosed with breast cancer in February 2007. She recently retired on disability from her job as a writer-editor for the federal government to focus on her health, her life, and her legacy. Her nonfiction work has appeared in *Courier Magazine*, *Parents magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications. This is her first published work of poetry. She has a bachelor's degree in Speech Communication from George Mason University and a master's of Education in social foundations from the University of Virginia.

**TIM WILLIAMS** has a BA in English Literature from Washington College and a Masters of Public Health degree from The Johns Hopkins University. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, he served for four years in Ethiopia as a teacher and a smallpox eradication officer assigned to the World Health Organization. After helping to eradicate smallpox, he pursued new endeavors as a sanitarian, bartender, and

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