

FOLIO

Art and Literary Magazine

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Spring 2000

Eve Cummings Prize for Fiction:

Brian LaRue	Is It Really So Strange?
<i>Second Prize:</i>	
Xhenet Aliu	Orhan's Pizza
<i>Third Prize:</i>	
Bob Cork	Ground Hog Day
<i>Honorable Mention:</i>	
Nathan Wrann	Only in Death

Eve Cummings Prize for Poetry:

Jason Labbe	6 Train Inexperience
<i>Second Prize:</i>	
Harmony Scaglione	spider
<i>Third Prize:</i>	
Jennifer Holley	World Book
<i>Honorable Mention:</i>	
Kristen Macellaro	Break in

Judges:

Poetry: Educated at Washington and Columbia universities, Alan Michael Parker is the author of two books of poems, *Days Like Prose* and *The Vandals*, co-editor of *The Routledge Anthology of Cross-Gendered Verse*, and Editor for North America of *Who's Who in 20th Century Poetry*. He writes on visual art for *The Charlotte Observer*, and books for *The New Yorker* (among other journals.) He teaches at Davidson College in North Carolina, where he directs the creative writing program.

Fiction: Lynn Pruett's short stories have appeared in *America Voice*, *Southern Exposure*, *Louisville Review*, *13th Moon*, among others. She is the recipient of the Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council, teaches creative writing at the University of Kentucky, and is a "founding member of KaBoom, the Kentucky Book Mafia."

Art: Charlie Harper is President and Creative Director of *Harper and Harper*, a New Haven based design and consulting firm.

Peter Indorf, jewelry designer and owner of *Indorf Jewelers*.

Louis LeRay is a local cinematographer and commercial director.

Folio Staff:

Marissa Adinolfi, Christopher Bjorklund, Steve Cozzi, Meghann England, Jamie Farina, Tony Fusco, Drew Gile, Eric Haslob, Cecile Roaldset, Ric Rosa, Anthony Sacco, Carlos Semexant, Anthony Szilagyi

Folio is a yearly publication that is run by students, and which features SCSU student literature and art. The work appearing in this issue was selected through a preliminary round of blind judging by volunteer students. The editorial staff reviewed those choices and made additional selections. Outside judges then considered these works and made their top three selections plus honorable mentions in the categories of poetry and fiction.

Folio sponsors monthly poetry and fiction readings that foster community among students, faculty, and visiting authors.

Folio's featured student readers for 1999-2000 include Xhenet Aliu, Bob Cork, Kate DeNaples, Drew Gile, Mike Gormely, Lisa Graves, Jennifer Holley, Craig Houghton, Jason Labbe, Brian LaRue, Kristen Macellaro, Harmony Scaglione, Ben Schenkman, Corrine Sieser, and Nathan Wrann.

Folio assists the SCSU creative writing department's Writer's Reading Series. The 1999-2000 series featured authors Colette Inez, Stewart O'Nan, Alan Michael Parker, Lynn Pruett, Margot Schlipp, Patty Seyburn, Gay Walley, and Katherine Weber.

Southern Connecticut State University creative writing faculty

Megan W. Macomber, Ph.D., is a graduate of Princeton University, but that's not why she voted for Bill Bradley. She has published fiction in *Turnstile*, *Columbia* and *Fiction International*. Megan has also published poetry in *Greenfield Review* and *Helicon* 9. Megan has been teaching Southern students since 1987 and wouldn't trade a minute of it for anything.

Jeff Mock worked in literary publishing for more than a decade, first as the Editor of *Black Warrior Review*, then as the Assistant Editor of *The Gettysburg Review*; he serves as the Advisor for this edition of *Folio*. He is the author of *Evening Travelers*, a chapbook of poems, and *You Can Write Poetry*, a guidebook for beginning poets. His poems appear in *Crazyhorse*, *The Georgia Review*, *New England Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Quarterly West*, *The Sewanee Review*, and elsewhere.

Tim Parrish coordinates the creative writing program at SCSU. His fiction has recently appeared in the *New England Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Connecticut Review*, and *Louisiana Literature*. His collection of stories, *Red Stick Men*, will be published in fall 2000 by University Press of Mississippi.

Vivian Shipley is The Connecticut State University Distinguished Professor, and the Editor of *Connecticut Review*. In 1999, she was awarded the Reader's Choice Award from *Prarie Schooner*, the *So to Speak* Poetry Prize from George Mason University, the *Wildwood* Prize for Poetry from Harrisburg Community College, The Sara Henderson Hay Prize for poetry from *The Pittsburgh Quarterly*, and the Hackney Literary Award for Poetry from Birmingham-Southern College. She has published six books of

poetry including *Devil's Lane* (Negative Capability Press, 2000), *How Many Stones?*, (University of South Carolina-Aiken, 1998), *Crazy Quilt* (Hanover Press, 1999) and *Fair Haven* which has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize (Negative Capability Press, 2000). A chapbook, *Echo and Anger, Still* is forthcoming in 2001 from The Red Hen Press. Raised in Kentucky, she has a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University.

Special thanks to:

Steve Larocco, Chairman-SCSU English Dept., Scott Atwater, Mitchell Bills, Michael Faulkner, Daryl Hawes, Sally Hill, Craig Houghton, Jerry Nevins, Tim Parrish, William Phelan, Vivian Shipley, And the Friday night crew at the Student Center.

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Tracing Identity

This photograph is not quite a square, its
corners are softened, like all our pictures
from 1977. The baby sits naked, barely
balanced, propped on pillows in the amber
light of a Long Island apartment on La Bonne
Vie Drive.

Her arms and legs are rolls of chub
as if rubber bands are dividing the flesh.
Her eyes are wide, shocked open
from the flash, or with the idea
of existence. The baby has my name, I'm
told it's me, but all those cells are dead.

Now my nails are bitten past
fingertips, like my father's. My
teeth are strong like my mother's.
I don't know what this means yet.

Corrine Sieser

autumn forces memories down my throat

He borrowed my bright Guatemalan hat
and returned it soaked with his scents
that I inhaled like laughing gas. I began
wearing his stale, cigarette-smoked
green shirts and brown corduroys
coated with sandalwood and jasmine. We
shared scratchy wool sweaters that still
smelled of sheep and stables.

We met for clear midnight picnics.
Sweet smoke and sex,
hints of bleach and salt
rose from our skin
and from the blankets stretched
across his flatbed Ford.

Without a car, he traveled seven miles
on train tracks from the factory he
worked at to kiss me through my open
bedroom window. The stiff, putrid stink
of the glue he used to make sandpaper
blew in with the brittle, crispy air.

Now the wind drives down my road.
Engines of leaves and trees roar,
bringing the beginnings of decay
in through my open window. I'm lying
with the lights on.

Voice of a violin

We are slouched down in blue cushioned seats,
our elbows warring for space.

Silky white hairs from a horse's tail
are drawn taut between
the bent ends of soft polished wood.

It has the same name as a weapon
that sends arrows to claim velvety pelts
and venison,
or forces them to fly and sink into
felted flesh of bull's-eyes.

But this bow is caressing metal strings, singing.
It pleads, begs a lover to return or requite or forgive,

and our elbows are warring for the space between us.

Sometimes everything is wrong. Often. Often everything is wrong. Greg was feeling it. The wrongness of just about everything soaked through his black T-shirt, sat for too long on his bare skin, seeped under and inflicted him with a nasty infection that laid him up for three or four days. By the time he finally rolled out of bed, the wrongness of just about everything had still left him with a terrible rash that wouldn't go away. He shuffled to the shower, scratching heartily at his psyche. Finally out of bed, yes, but it didn't seem to help much.

Sopping and squinty eyed, Greg emerged from the shower. That's how just about everything was lately, wrong and sopping and squinty eyed. He was going to go outside. That was the plan.

"So do you not want to go out? I mean, we could just stay in tonight. So you want to stay in?" Greg had asked Jen, tired and defenseless on her doorstep after days of trying to ward off the inevitable doom of their tragic love.

"Actually..." Jen had squirmed with what Greg couldn't decide was disgust or reluctance. "Actually, yeah. I'm sorry. I'm waiting for...well...I might as well just tell you."

"I'm waiting for John to come by," Jen had said hurriedly, eyes on her welcome mat. "He wanted to talk to me in private." She paused. "About getting back together."

"Back together?" Greg snapped with a self-righteous indignance. "What's he thinking? Do you realize what this guy is trying to do? He leaves to open a coffee shop in California, of all places, and then he expects that when he comes back he can jump right back into his old place with you! He saw that you and I were together, but he didn't bother to...to respect what we had! What we *have*! What sort of a callous ass would do such a thing?"

"You shouldn't talk about him like that." Jen had shot back with a firm defensiveness. "You don't know him. He's not callous. He's not an ass. Really."

"If he's not a callous ass," Greg had seethed desperately,

“then why does he think he can trample over *us*?”

“Because I didn’t tell him I was with you,” Jen had returned, again glancing to the welcome mat.

“Even still,” Greg had sighed, ripping the words from his throat, “couldn’t he at least have expected that you would move on? Does time stand still for him?”

Jen had resisted answering, four seconds in which Greg saw her pledges and demonstrations of devotion plummet over the cliff of despair. He was tethered by the ankle to those promises, and now the rope’s slack was waning. “I never broke up with John,” Jen had said blankly.

Sopping and squinty-eyed and dedicated to convincing himself he wasn’t wrong, that it was, in fact, everyone else’s fault, Greg launched himself into the street at 11 a.m. It was Sunday. Normally he would’ve gone over to Jen’s house. However, Greg was pretty damn sure that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon, unless he decided to lop off an appendage and send it to her. He quickly decided that wouldn’t count as going over to Jen’s house.

Gee, Greg loved the weekend. So much time to mull over everything that was going on in his life. Greg mulled it over. In recent news, Jen had told him that Things Just Weren’t Working Out. She had, in fact, come to the realization that when she had told him she loved him, she was Confused and Felt Emotionally Conflicted. With this new-found focus, she had Come to the Realization that “Love” was the Wrong Word for Those Feelings. Not only that, but she Wanted to Break Off Before He Got Hurt. The desire to break off before he got hurt had affixed itself to the inside of the collar on Greg’s sweater. He couldn’t brush it off; it was really stuck deeply in there, whatever it was. He rolled his collar between his fingertips. Strangely enough, he couldn’t feel it. He allowed his collar to return to his neck. Oh, there it was again, prickling into his tender skin. What the hell, man?

Greg wandered down the buzzing streets of his gray home-

town, and he hated irony. Soon enough, counting not the street he crossed, nor the drivers cursing at him as he wandered obliviously through traffic, he found himself safely within the old park. A few turns down the gravel road brought him to the lake. Sure, of course he and Jen had something to do with the lake. Picnics or some sentimental crap like that. He noticed how he and Jen were not embracing the grass. Furthermore, he saw he and Jen were not tracing love poems to each other on the beach. And so on. Trudging slowly over wet sand, the past wavered, the present wobbled. The water may or may not have actually been wet. He wasn't quite so sure anymore. It was probably going to rain. That was a moot point. At any given time, it was going to rain. It was just a matter of time. Who writes a love poem in the sand, anyway?

Two lovers, apparently fused at the hip, passed him. Greg winced. They smiled at each other, held each other around the waist. They were one entity. Maybe it wasn't cloudy on their end of the beach. Maybe the clouds, or lack thereof, were just Greg's imagination. As we've discussed, he just wasn't quite so sure anymore.

He gazed for a while longer at the couple. They were so picturesque, so...nice. Nice was the only word he could think of, with all of its overuse and generality. Greg didn't want to think about it.

The couple's sight sparred all too viciously with Greg's perception of reality. First they meandered down the narrow gray-brown beach, then they slipped into a lush cinematic seascape complete with professional makeup and a symphonic score. Were they the climax, or were they simply a backdrop for the opening credits? Greg prayed for invading armies to suddenly swarm the beach, trampling all in their path, en route to rectify the great wrongs inflicted upon this downtrodden land, the captive nation that was himself. The ships would move ominously towards the shore; at night their occupants would load onto the lanking crafts. At dawn, they would rush up onto the shore, shouting and spitting, the symphonic track behind them blasting brass charges. The cou-

ple would be caught utterly by surprise. Greg would watch from the hills, cheering, the invasion would begin in earnest. As soon as they could start liberating villages, that would be fine with him.

But no, Greg soon found that he and the couple really were simply shuffling across a little beach on a shallow recreational lake. He thought about the couple, the movie. Of course...he could feasibly kill them himself. It wouldn't be hard, and who would notice? They would be too lost in their own bliss to really care. And what would it matter if Greg did kill them both? People had killed for dumber reasons.

Greg sank into a rotting, fading red park bench and visualized it. He would walk to his friendly neighborhood firearms retailer. He would explain the whole thing to the fat, grotesquely mustached man behind the counter. The man would grunt something about how strange Greg's plot sounded. Greg would defiantly explain his duty to rectify the wrongs of this world, and that was that.

Greg would strut proudly from his friendly neighborhood gun retailer with his newly acquired "piece" (still of cloudy designation in this vision), and he would head off to the park. He would find the couple, still in their sickly sweet embrace, and he would finish them off (also in a manner that was still cloudy to him; he imagined he could pull it off quickly, relatively painlessly, and with neither regret nor remorse).

Of course, not everyone would understand, and Greg would have to pay soon enough. There could be no other way. The heartless authorities would capture him in his apartment and he would be theirs, tossed into a holding cell with a variety of unsavory characters. But he would stoically hold out, would trust in the ultimate justice of such things.

And so he would be brought before the judge. No lawyers this time -- Greg would defend himself. If he were to face the consequences of his actions, he would do so alone. The prosecutor would grill him mercilessly on the stand, questioning all

nature of his character, his sheer existence. Greg would scoff -- they didn't deserve to ask such things of him. They could only begin to understand.

Then Greg himself would face the judge and jury. "Is it wrong not to always be glad?" he would implore. "This isn't about life and death; it's about right and wrong. It's about me. For once, it's about me! Can a man never dream? Rhetoric, rhetoric."

The judge would not have to spend much time mulling all of this over: See, unbeknownst to the rest of the world (as he had kept it pent up inside him for so long,) he had been there. The right honorable judge, once slighted in his own youth, perfectly knowledgeable of what it was like. If he had had the courage, his actions would have predated Greg's by a full generation.

His Honor would stride just as stoically as Greg from his chambers, hear the jury's verdict (undeniably of "guilty;" Greg didn't expect the treacherous masses to understand,) and disregard such trivialities.

"I not only pronounce the defendant, Greg, not guilty," the judge would say, "but I pronounce the deceased couple guilty of conspiracy, indecency, and first degree happiness. Such behavior brings a scourge upon our society. I hope they have learned their lesson. Case dismissed."

The courtroom would erupt in pandemonium, and Greg wouldn't care whether it was the good kind or the bad kind, whether they supported him or wished him dead on the spot, because he was right, and all he wanted was one vote of confidence. It would come from the right place, he knew it. The cities would riot; electronics stores would be plundered by the vengeful and the vindicated alike. And the good people of the world, the kind people, the people who knew how it really *was*, would swarm out of their homes to embrace Greg on the street, finally justified in the knowledge that there was someone out there who would stand up for what was good and clean and just in this existence.

Greg had been thinking for too long. The couple now lingered on the bridge over the lake's shallow, greenish tributary. Such a love amidst such plainness, such dullness. Greg shook his head. He had never been the killing type. He wasn't evil, never had been. Oh, well. The happy couple could go along their happy way. It wouldn't matter. Her ex would become a successful restaurateur out West, and he'd come back to her, and she wouldn't have told him that she had a new boyfriend, and then no one would be happy. They'd find out soon enough.

No, Greg thought...they could never find out quite soon enough.

Jason Labbe

Another Small-time Quartet Plays "Autumn Leaves"

A brush-roll on the snare drum, the fluttering
Wings of every pigeon in Battery Park departing,
Lifts the song and leaves me and the other man

Who came alone in need of jazz wondering
How notes become birds. Pigeons doze at this hour
And no cardinals fly rude red here.

We're far from home. I know my sister sleeps
In my father's house with more worry than I can bear
And carry, and I don't know what's on her mind lately.

Does she long for the absent jay to shake the bare oak
Branch outside her window? When she wakes
To the wrong register of her alarmclock chirping

The only note it knows, I'll still be sleeping the cold
From my bones and it'll be longer since we last talked.
Longer since I've been home.

The ride cymbal, drizzle tapping the taxi's roof
And lulling the driver to sleep, spreads over the song,
Moves through the club, rises with smoke

Drifting from the lips of Helge, the man I met
Tonight, the hilarious German whose first name
I mispronounce and last name I forget.

And if I never see him again, which I won't,
I'll make it a point to avoid something, anything,
In his name. The name I have already forgotten.

The blue and red lights catch the coronet and remind
Me that I came here not to find conversation.

When my sister's favorite song ends, I'll thank Helge
For the soda, step out to the arid street, and walk
With the last leaves, flicked from scarce limbs,
Dancing around my sore feet.

At Union Square a girl, wet with rain, gets on
And sits adjacent to me. She doesn't recognize
Me, or much, for that matter. The dissonant sound
Of her name I try not to repeat. It doesn't matter.

She gazes out the graffitied window into tunnel-
Darkness as if huge air stretches beyond
The scratched glass: miles of patchwork pastures,
cornstalks swaying to the hum of traveled wind,

Rickety windmills and rusty tractors reduced
To specks on a Kansas horizon. She smiles
As a long-sought answer, one she'll forget
By morning, comes to her. What worth remembering

Comes with trying to forget? She rides
To be distracted, and this trip is peaking, the final
Measure of her night's crescendo. I step out
At Astor Place to the sound of dying: a subway

Singer I've never seen croaks a blues I've never heard.
I drop a dollar in his cup. He almost
Has me forgetting her and the wedding where,
To top-forty songs I don't remember,

She tried to teach me to dance. Pulses quickened
By the beat's command, arms raised by melody,
Legs propelled by rhythm, we danced again
In my father's basement many times last summer,

To silence. I was a silhouette, she a shadow.
It doesn't matter. Like all close paths, if these rails
Infinitely stretched they'd inevitably intersect
And again part, for nothing can be perfectly parallel.

Not today, anyway. I hate the train, the distorted
B-flat drone of its motors, the pure tone of too many
Voices, the staccato chatter of rats hustling
Along the third rail, and the blaring thoughts revealed

In the straight ahead stares of silent kids who miss
Their stops, don't stop. I don't know the worst of it.
I usually walk home alone, sing silently to myself,
And fall short of hitting any high notes.

Jason Labbe

At Wounded Knee

The ground where Chief Big Foot's toes
Have decayed remains hostile, neglected;
It rises up; grass around the graves
of Horses and Black Elk grows unruly.

Like blood dried on skin. Badlands-mud
Tracked in stubbornly clings to the footpath
Leading up to the sky's crumbling foundation.
The church burned by a band of armed shadows

Has been replaced with a cross-adorned
Shed of spirits. The doors are locked today.
Junky Ford pickups flash by like apparitions.
Nobody breathes the dust kicked up.

By the unmapped road, the leather lady smokes,
Sells souvenirs from a weathered tent, never
Wonders who fired the first shot, statuesquely sits
On a folding chair. A faint ray squeezes

Through a break in the cloud-cover, finds its way
Through the tarp's fragile fibers. Each year
She is shaded less and her oldest unsold trinkets
Fade. She stays. Her knees have given out.

The Fly

A fly, it seems, is either alive or dead.

A fly is alive when it pukes on your food and buzzes obscenities into your ear and plays swatting games with Albanian cooks in Greek diners. A fly is dead when found motionless and hollow on a bathroom windowsill or swatted by said Albanian chef. There is no process of dying, no cancer, no mourning family, no sympathy fruitbaskets sent by the dead fly's former brother-in-law. Tom has never shed a tear for a fly.

Today, however, for the first time, Tom witnessed the natural death of a bottleneck; a graceful dive onto the table where Tom sat eating his cereal, a final weak buzz, and then the peaceful silence that Tom has heard surrounds the bed of the recently deceased. The air was not heavy this August morning; Tom was not pensive as he traced the maze on the back of the box of Corn Pops with his right index finger. The air changed, however, as mortality took a seat across from Tom at the breakfast table. He thought he recognized the fly as the one who, for the entire week before this day, slam-danced itself into the window above the kitchen sink in a delirious attempt to find the freedom it believed existed outside. Though Tom could have very easily rolled up the two-week-old *Bargain News* on the counter to rid the world of just another insect, he didn't. Tom considered himself a pacifist. This justification was no consolation, however, when Tom realized that he could have just as easily opened the window to release the fly into the world that it so longed for. Housefly? The term seemed a misnomer. Did flies not exist before houses? Do flies need – or want – ceilings and walls? Perhaps, Tom thought, his own feelings of inadequacy prompted an unconscious desire to witness – even take part in – this fly's suffering. It was a harsh realization.

Tom's head hung over the yellow puffs whose saccharin goodness appealed to him just minutes earlier. The prickled hair on the fly's tiny thorax, set off by the August midmorning sun, caught Tom's attention. He realized that a coarse black hair on his own unshaven face resembled that of the fly. Were they so different?

Aliu

Tom felt a metamorphosis within himself. With his thumb and right index finger, he gently lifted the fly from the table and dropped it into the avocado-green Tupperware bowl. He studied the fly as it bobbed peacefully in the sugar-slicked milk. A contemplative smile spread over his face. No more flypaper for Tom, no more flyswatters. The *Bargain News* would remain where it was.

The appetite that had escaped Tom earlier returned. Gazing through the window, he lifted the spoon to his mouth. The day had just begun.

Orhan's Pizza

I'd kept my eye on it for a few weeks. First it was a car in the vacant lot, then two or three more cars, then the overhead fluorescent lights turned on and exposed the men working inside. The *For Lease* sign disappeared from the window.

I knew it would be a restaurant because it had always been. The previous one, a diner, closed after two months. Before that it had been Italian, and before that a rib shack, and before that another Italian, and before that I forget. Each lasted no longer than six months, the owners leaving no notice on the doors after their eviction, no *Thank you to our loyal customers*, no *Come see us at our new location, 2350 Meriden Road*. It seems they always left in the night, as if sneaking away, loading their rented delivery vans with the last of the industrial pots, pans, ovens, and dishwashers, hoping to sell them back to the restaurant supply center from where they'd been purchased. A few months later it would start again.

I only noticed because I drive by so often, on my way to school or work or the store, but the sign has gone up, it's the sign that stops me now. I slam the brakes, swing the car to the side of the road. I think the driver behind me beeps and I'm sure he yells something. I look at the sign. Orhan's Pizza & Pasta. The typeface is hideous; yellow cursive script over a green background, the whole thing illuminated with lights visible through the thin plastic. It's the name. I know the name, an Albanian name, the name of my father. But my father doesn't cook, had never cooked for my brother and me. He couldn't have, not with what we ate. He, a muslim, feeding hot dogs, pork, to his children while Mom worked to keep the food, pork, on the table. *You kids, your mother wants to send you to hell with this shit*. But he'd give it to us. No *here comes the airplane, here comes the train*. Just eat it.

I take down the phone number printed on the sign, 574-2240. 2240, it glares at me from the ripped-off notebook page. Orhan's Pizza & Pasta. There's a big Albanian population in Waterbury. It could be a common name. My father, another Orhan, Orhan Hoxha. It seems strange to call him by name, strange to hear

Aliu

my own last name with his first. What did I call him when I was little, when he was here? Dad? It doesn't seem right. We call him *Your Father* or *My Father* when my mother or brother or I refer to him, if we refer to him. *I made such a nice afghan once. Your father took it.* Or, *Do you remember my father's parents' names?* when the teachers assigned a family tree. My father. I would recognize him if I saw him. I see his face in still life, from snapshots that I memorized before pictures disappeared from the albums. I know I would recognize him. I doubt he could say the same of me.

I look down at the phone number between my index finger and thumb for several minutes. Sweat has wrinkled the paper, smeared the ink and blurred the blue lines, but the number is still visible. 2240, 2240. A police car drives slowly past, the cop peers at me through metallic sunglasses. I know my cue. I pull away from the curb and head home.

Matt, my brother, walks by, slaps the back of my head. "What's up?" He's twenty-three, just returning to school, the community college, after taking a few years off to paint houses, deliver furniture, direct traffic at construction sites. He moved back in with my mother and me when he enrolled, couldn't afford rent and tuition even with two roommates. It's like he never left. Still slaps the back of my head every time he walks by. *That's how he shows affection*, my mom says. Yes, he loves me a lot.

The weekend section of the newspaper lays open on the kitchen table. I flip to the restaurant section and it's there, Orhan's Pizza & Pasta, a small ad in the upper right hand corner: *Free delivery! Real Italian-style crust, your choice of toppings!* The ad doesn't list a proprietor, but its phone number jumps out in bold print. 2240, 2240. I don't need to know the number. I already know the number. I won't call, anyway. Won't call 2240. I didn't even realize they opened for business.

"Klare, gimme that section?" my brother asks, as if it were a question.

"I'm looking at it."

"What do you need it for? What are you going to do this weekend? Or ever?"

"Something."

"Come on, I have to go. Mark's picking me up."

I give up, slide it over to him with my finger on the Orhan's ad. "Did you see this?"

He stares at the ad for a few seconds, then shrugs. "It's the one down on 64."

"I know, I've seen it." Silence. "Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know. I don't care. We get our pizza Carlucci's."

He turns to the back of the *Weekender*, where the movies are listed. We remain seated at the kitchen table, him looking at the movies, me looking at them over his shoulder. "It's probably not him, anyway," Matt adds.

"Yeah," I agree.

I won't call, even though the food might be good. Even though I'm hungry.

A car horn in the driveway signals Matt to spring from his chair, "It's not him, anyway." He slides out the door. I nod.

I hold the phone. It shouldn't matter if it's him. He's just a man, it's just pizza. I'm just hungry. I press the on button, a dialtone sings, I hang up. My stomach growls again. I'm just hungry, I tell myself. Just call him. I mean call it, the restaurant. Just hungry.

I press the on button again, dial the digits. 2240. One ring, two rings, three.

"Orhan's Pizza, can I help you?"

"Yes," I say. "I'd like a small." Swallow.

"A small what, dear? A pizza?" Not broken English, just an accent, raspy. A smoker.

"Yes, a small pizza. Cheese and sausage. And pepperoni."

"Sausage *and* pepperoni?"

Aliu

"Yes, both. A small."

"Ok, then. What's the name?"

"Barbara." My mother's name.

"Ok, Barbara. Twenty minutes."

I hang up before he says goodbye, if he says goodbye. I did it. Why? Too late to back down. Twenty minutes to kill. Ten, maybe. Maybe I'll leave in ten. Sausage and pepperoni? I haven't eaten meat in four years, don't plan on starting. *Here comes the airplane.* What to do. Three minutes pass. I go to the bathroom, pee, wash my hands, brush my hair and teeth. Sausage and pepperoni? My stomach growls again. I won't have anything to feed it. How many minutes have passed? Six now. It'll take five minutes to get there. That's eleven minutes. More than ten, half of twenty. I can leave, it's not too early. I grab my coat and keys, walk out to my Cavalier. My mother pulls up just as I reach the car. What do I tell her? I bought a pizza for her, pizza for Barbara? I manage to get in and start the engine before I have to talk to her. She waves. I wave back. Keys in the ignition, start the car, pull out of the driveway.

Neil Young comes on the radio. "Heart of Gold." I love this song. *I wanna live, I wanna give, I've been a miner for a heart of gold.* I hope I'll be able to hear the whole thing, that I won't reach Orhan's before the song ends. Just keep it slow, let up on the gas. I'm in no hurry. He said twenty minutes. What time is it now? 6:16. It's getting dark. The streetlights come on and the lights from the store windows glow into the parking lots. Rose's Deli, the Brass Cafe, Carlucci's Pizza. *I've been to Hollywood, I've been to Redwood, I've crossed the ocean for a heart of gold.* Where did the rest of the song go? Is it the end of the song already? I made it, I heard the whole song. Something else comes on, I think Led Zeppelin, and there it is, there's the ugly green sign, a hundred yards, sixty, twenty-five, ten. I put on my blinker, pull in to a spot on the side of the building. I'm there. Just walk in and get pizza.

The room is empty. Voices spill from the kitchen, but there's no one behind the counter. The dining room has the feel of

a restaurant that's been there much longer, full of used furniture. The Formica counters gleam, but the glass cleaner hasn't hidden the stains, the pockets warped with heat, the brown burn on the upper right corner. The bases of the tables – some heavy black cylinders, others silver – betray the uniformed vinyl gingham cloths on the top. Newspaper clippings of Albanian news stories and a miniature flag cover the wood paneling by the counter. On the wall behind the cash register, a framed certificate from the Board of Health declares the place legal for operation. Signed October 18, 1999. Orhan Hoxha, proprietor.

Orhan Hoxha, proprietor.

He emerges from the kitchen then, smiling, apron stained red and brown. Am I smiling back?

"Hello, sugar. You looking for a pizza?"

My neck stiffens, my hands search for each other behind my back. "Barbara," I answer. Barbara, you know the name.

"Barbara? You're early. It'll be a few more minutes." His eyes travel over me. "Couldn't wait for it, huh?" His smile reveals slightly crooked front teeth, like mine, but stained with smoke. Thick dark hair like mine, long nose like mine. Darker skin, though. He winks, leans his elbows on the counter. Am I smiling yet?

He runs his eyes over me, grinning, not in recognition. "How are you tonight? You taking a pizza home to your boyfriend?"

"No. No boyfriend. I don't have a boyfriend." I knew I would recognize him, knew it would be him. I can't look at him now. My eyes settle on the cash register, the only brand new piece of equipment in the place. A fly lands on the eight key.

"No boyfriend? A pretty girl like you? You must have at least two or three."

Pretty. Same teeth, same hair, same nose. Pretty, that's what he says. He can't be looking at my face, his face. "Nope, no boyfriend," I answer. He can't even see. Make him see. I did it, I called, I'm here, now just say it. Make him see. Take a breath. "Why, do you have a son that's single?"

He laughed, didn't flinch. "No, no son."

"Daughter?" My stomach hurts now, not hungry anymore.

"No daughter," he replies. Doesn't even look away when he says it. "Not even a wife." He smiles again, lets his eyes travel over me again. I fold my arms. Get your eyes off me, get your eyes that are like mine off me. "Let's see...you don't have a boyfriend, I don't have a wife..."

I tighten my lips and look away. I'm supposed to laugh, blush, not fight to keep standing. Act natural. Natural. This is Orhan, I know him. "Aw, I'm just kidding with you," he says. "You're young and pretty and I'm old and not pretty. You're just here for pizza. I'll go check on it." He smiles once more, keeps his eyes on me for a few more seconds, before walking to the kitchen. I let my breath become heavy now, let out the air I've been holding. In the kitchen he speaks to someone, two someones, a few voices laugh. A couple of heads peak through the service window at me. What is he saying? More talking, more laughing. They don't bother to whisper. I don't understand them, don't speak their language. They know it. The heads peak out again, one smiling at me. Don't smile at me, don't make me smile back.

"Are you Barbara?" he asks.

I lean on the table behind me for support. Not Barbara, not exactly. Her daughter, Klarita. Klare for short. "Is the pizza ready?"

"Almost. Orhan says we have to make this one extra good."

He doesn't know. He can't know. I don't want him to know, not anymore. Act casual, natural. "Why, am I the first customer?"

"The first pretty one. He wants to make sure it's extra good so you'll come back."

I look for Orhan behind the window but can't see him. Maybe he left, snuck out the back door. Then I hear him, hear his cough, his smoker's cough. "We'll see how the pizza is."

They laugh and walk back to the oven. Orhan comes out from the kitchen again, laughing at something. He nods toward the service window. "These clowns bothering you?"

I don't know them. Cousins? Uncles? Are they single, too?
"Not at all. Just talking."

"Well, let me know if you need me to quiet them down. They're supposed to be making pizza, not flirting with the customers."

No, I do want him to know. Isn't that why I'm here? I want him to be the one who feels sick, the one who's shaking, and whose hands drown in sweat. The one whose pretty daughter has no boyfriend. So ask him, say it. I want to know. "And what are you supposed to be doing?" Cooking? Cooking sausage, pork? Staring at the shirt of a young girl who breathes too heavily, who seems nervous, who won't giggle at his jokes?

He shrugs. "I'm the boss. I can do anything."

My stomach no longer growls. The smell of meat – sweet meat, salty processed dripping meat – penetrates my clothes, my hair, makes me nauseous. I'll have to shower when I get home. Home. I want to go home. He doesn't see me. How long have I been here? Maybe five minutes. Long enough. I know his name, his face, know as much as I need to know, as much as I will ever know. "Is it almost ready?" I ask.

"Ahmet!" he yells through the window. "The pizza for Barbara done?"

"I'm boxing it," the voice from the kitchen calls. "It's coming."

"It's coming," Orhan repeats as if I didn't hear, as if I don't understand. "You want to pay now? It's nine twenty-five."

I dig in my bag for the money as he swings around to pick up the box from the window. "Keep the change," I told him, handing him a ten. I don't need his change, his money, his food.

"Thank you very much, dear." His eyes narrow, his voice gets lower. "The phone number's on the box for the next time. Keep it handy." His hand yellow teeth through his smile.

I turn toward the door, away from him. "I already know the number."

Aliu

Outside. Air. The box burns my hand, leaks oil onto it. Sausage and pepperoni? *You kids, your mother wants to send you to hell with this shit.* I throw the box into the backseat of my car, roll the windows down. Keep the smell out. Throw it away, throw it away in the garbage at home. A shower would be nice. Maybe just book, just bed, tonight.

No son. No daughter.

*For the Egyptian Woman,
on Display at the Peabody Museum*

I

She paled to the Brontosaurus,
her bones too thin
to impress me on those afternoons spent
gaping at vertebrae like boulders,
femurs like trees.
The three plain bracelets
on her crumbled wrist
struck my fancy; nine years old,
I puzzled that
this one, curled
into a fetal curl, an ash,
her rags and skin
like something carved from clay and left
to crumble in the sun -
that this one should wear bracelets.

II

Her gallery was decked
with scripted stone, myths painted
and engraved by hands
then kept
by the desert. The runes
raised jackals and cats to godhead,
crooned the new voice,
began the search. And she,
one of the first ones,
she knew the Nile's hum,
and how the wind groaned
when it bloated with sand
and tore across the desert.
It caught her out, and took her,

Scaglione

curled and kept her,
put sand where her blood was,
unleashed dry time on her skin.

III.

Fifteen years; the dinosaurs slept
as I remembered. The fossils rumbled
low sounds, alien, the ghosts
of an abandoned scripture.
I could not touch
their ends, what lured them to graze
or how they howled when they fell
from the hunter's jaw
to the gums of the swamp. But this one
walked in the desert; her bracelets
knocked softly, lending rhythm
to the dark. She'd left her child
sleeping, her husband, sick. Wooed
by the vastness and silence and pulse,
she stopped, shook her hair out,
threw her arms out, and spun
until the wind grew teeth.

My Golden Bough

I was shorter then. We
had a vegetable garden,
swelling in the back half of the yard
as May fell to July.
I still believed in magic.

One Saturday, I balanced
on the garden's edge,
where grass met tangling bush, and
glanced back at my father, sanding
boards, his shoulders
rusting in white sun.
He did not see me disappear.

Inside close rows, the sweet smell
of tomato vines matched
the spell the black bees
hummed on yellow flowers.
Green fruits nuzzled
on sappy stalks that already
stood taller than my pony tail.

That was before it mattered
if I wore a shirt; the sun
bit my shoulders too. I crept on
through a patch of prickly zucchini,
and paused to unwind
dying creepers of spring peas.

When I found the green beans
I stopped, and dug my toes
in the cool dirt. I knew
how dirt could be parted, and planted
with seeds in watered folds;

Scaglione

weeks before I'd helped my father
sow these plants myself.
I plucked my lunch from the beanstalks,
noticing the skinny food
grew from small, white flowers.
I tasted one, then
gobbled five, amazed
that bud and bean did not taste
at all the same.

Spider (for Andrei Chikatilov)

I noticed, first, the nervous stealth
with which he crept
beside the painted girl, her childeyes
betraying lips brushed
wet red. Side by side, on wobbly stools,
he gave her cigarettes, paid
for vodkas. The bar,
dim, two blocks from the trains,
asked no questions.

Monday's crowd was thin
enough. I drank watered scotch
alone, my back knotted by hours
cramped on the train. Drawn
to the two black coals
burning, I watched his face;
as the web spun
from smoke, flowering out
behind his head,

she touched his long leg.
By chance, on my way back
from the bathroom, I brushed
behind his shoulders. The juke-box
stalled, I overheard:
Fifty dollars to let him take her picture.
When she stood, sucking
her last vodka from melted ice
I saw him lick his lips, a smirk.

I left the bar two hours
after they did. Outside, drought
brittled bones of August roses.
Well past my hotel, I roamed

Scaglione

still blocks, searching
dark windows for flashbulbs,
the quick silhouette
of her body, naked
and whole, against pulled shades.

Searching For Kubrick

2:41 PM

A melon-shaped head attached to a stringy 'N *Sync*-clad body stands at my door, staring me down. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for something," I say. It's a plan. Ignoring her, or trying to, anyway; giving her subtle hints that her company isn't currently wanted.

"What are you looking for?" She, my sister, is intent on staying, wanting to converse on pre-relationship woes. I continue to ignore her by fumbling through one of my desk drawers. Anne taps her foot on the brown rug: "give me attention," her foot cries. Her foot speeds, tapping more violently, but the rug muffles the timed beats. "What are you doing?" she reiterates.

I stop, bent on one knee, with hands glued to the knick-knacks of the lowest drawer. "My Kubrick, have you seen it?" There is no better way to honor a fallen god than to watch his work, which is my intention, if I can find any of my Kubrick.

The thirteen-year-old brunette cocks her head to the left pondering what the Kubrick is. Seconds later her ignorance is smashed by teenage authority, forcing her head to spring straight. "No, I haven't seen it," she lies.

"Can you check downstairs? I think I may have left it on the mantel in the living room...thanks." The sincere placed 'thanks' binds her to leave. I stand up, close the drawer, and rotate my right arm axis at the shoulder. -POP-. Smiling in pleasant pain, I hear her clogs trample the stairs. I pick a new drawer, the skinny top pencil drawer, and rummage. She'll go away if I ignore her.

She returns to the doorframe. "It's not there."

"Shit, where did I put it?" I realize my error when spoken. I cursed, opening up a door for Anne to dialogue in profanity.

"Timmy's pissing me off," she states.

I lose. She's started her teenage angst prattle. Sibling obligation propels me to my bed where I sit and wait for her to continue, closing the drawer at the beginning of the trip.

Anne scampers over, sits beside me on the bed, her conversation beginning before her ass reaches the mattress. "Well today, in Mrs. Crowwe's class, Timmy was, like, so sweet. We had to get into groups and stuff and go over fractions. Timmy was my partner; he helped me a lot. Before the class ended Timmy was, like," - pause for breath - "umm, I'm glad you came to the game last night." And like, 'Are you going to go see me play tomorrow?'"

I nod my head in comprehension.

The melon head bobs, and her arms flail about as she continues. "But, like, then in lunch he walked right by me without a fucking 'hello' or something. Then, on the bus" - pause for breath - "I saved a seat for him, and he ignored me... sitting with Petey. I talked to Tammy on the phone and she thinks that Timmy just wants me for sex."

Shit, sex talk with sister of ten years less than I. Shit. "What?" I ask.

Melon head sighs, "Tammy thinks that Timmy, like, is just using me for sex. I want your opinion 'cause you've had sex."

My butt squirms, wrinkling the comforter. She has been listening to my phone conversations. "Have you ever had sex?" requesting an answer to a question I already know the response to.

"No," she blurts defensively.

I stare her down. "Have you kissed Tim yet?"

Her head drops. "No."

"Have you ever kissed a guy before?"

The melon head and its oral volume rise. "Yes," - truth - "lots of times," - lie -.

I get to the point. "Do you plan on having sex anytime soon?"

"No!"

I frown because of the stupidity of the conversation, "Then why are you talking, let alone thinking about it? You honestly want to know why Tim ignored you; I'll tell you. Tim is your age right?"

The melon head lights up like a halogen lamp. "No, he's

fourteen,” she rebuts happily, ready and anxious to talk about Tim.

“He plays for the basketball team, right?”

She whisks the brown shoulder length hair from her ears.

“Yeah.”

“Did he sit with his ‘male-teammate’ friends during lunch and on the bus today?”

“Yeah.”

Now for the beginning of the point, “Did he, or do any of his friends, currently or ever have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Reenter teenage-know-it-all syndrome. “Yes, I’m fucking sure.”

I lie back on my bed. “Okay, think of your history class. Tim is the Magellan of his clique, you remember who Magellan is right?”

“Yeah, duh, he’s, like, an explorer,” Anne scowls.

“Correct. Magellan was the first person to lead an expedition to sail around the world. If Tim’s Magellan, then his friends are his crew. Tim is leading them into uncharted social waters. None of them know what they are getting into,” - painful breath - “so they don’t know how to react. In one-on-one discussion Tim will be great. But in the social zoo, your school, he will ignore you because he’s naive.”

A confused look contorts from her, “So how does sex fit in?”

Little girl thinking big, I note to myself. “Listen sis, at fourteen sex is mythical. He can’t even fathom what sex is, what it represents, the mental demands it requires, or the emotional connection it can establish between two people. Even if he could, do you think he has finished puberty?” I smile at the insult.

Anne, pissed at the scornful jest to her age and class, stands with hands finding her hips. “Well then, like, what should I do?”

“Do you want my honest opinion, ‘cause I know you’ll not

Gormley

enjoy it.”

“I wouldn’t be here, stupid, if I didn’t.”

I also get to my feet. “First smack Tammy because she’s a moron. Then, if you’re serious about having a boyfriend, forget Tim and date one of his friends.”

“What? Why should I do that?”

I grab my wallet, car keys, and pager from the nightstand and place them in their designated pockets. “Because Magellan never made it around the world; he died halfway through the trip. It was his ‘crew’ that finished the voyage.”

Melon head, mouth gaping wide, glares at me in shock.

“Anne, if you don’t like my answer, leave. I’m going out in a couple minutes, and if I don’t find my Kubrick, I’m screwed,” I lie. She storms out obviously headed towards her Teen-Beat wallpapered room to use the phone, confused and pissed, quite evident she liked Tammy’s reason better than mine.

4:57 PM

I penetrate the third Blockbuster I have ventured to since I left my house. Blockbuster-One had no Kubrick. Blockbuster-Two had *Full Metal Jacket* but I know, from previous renting, that the sound quality of that particular tape is fucked.

I speed through each aisle. *The Shining...* gone. *Paths of Glory...* gone. *2001: A Space Odyssey...* gone. *Full Metal Jacket...* gone. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb...* gone.

“Can I help you find something, sir?”

His name is Keith, printed on a button-tag attached to his blue and yellow uniform vest. Keith’s thin face is Alp-ish with pimples; some popped, some freshly popped, and others saved for later. “I’m looking for Kubrick.”

“Kubrick? Oh you mean Stanley Kubrick, the director. Umm, I think we’re out of his movies. We can’t keep any of his flicks on the shelves since he croaked. People have been flocking to get them.”

I, insulted by his wording, especially ‘croaked’, grunt out, “So you have nothing, no *Spartacus* or *The Killing* or anything?”

“I doubt it highly,” retorts Pimple-Christ. “I can look in the computer for ya if you want?”

I shake my head in disgust. “No, that’s alright.”

“Hey,” he says, “if you are looking for a good movie, I can recommend something.”

I am curious. “What do you recommend?”

“Well, if you like Batman, how about *Batman Forever* or if you want a comedy, *Mallrats* is cool.” The volcanically challenged little monkey arches back, double thumbs up, smiling and giggling irrationally, “Snoochie boochies!”

I groan. A dark cloud solidifies above my head; I glare evilly. Pimple-Christ’s hands drop to his pockets. To my left lies *The Man Who Would Be King*. To my right *Raising Arizona*, and in front of me *Ran* sits. A vast wealth of movies circles us yet he endorses those, dumb ass. I swivel 180 degrees and march out.

5:01 PM

I get in my car. “Kubrick is dead,” I say to the dashboard, “Croaked dead fuck.” I have to find Kubrick. I never met him; I just love his work. He changed my life, well, more taught me about life. Through his satires about human stupidity, I learned valuable lessons that have made me different. He taught me not to conform with society’s views if they are wrong. He taught me that no matter how much conditioning a human can go through you can never change one’s true behavior. He taught me so much that there is no way I could ever truly repay him. I just have to see one, just one of his films, to let him know that I will miss him.

5:37 PM

I march towards the door to Lisa’s apartment. I haven’t seen Lisa in three months and I am worried that she is still sore. She opens the door; a wave of smoke pours out. “Still burning toast?” I ask.

“Fuck off.” The door slams shut, pulling in escaped fumes

with its gravity. She is still sore. My body shudders as I beat the brass knocker again. Lisa opens the door, "What the fuck do you want?"

"I need my Kubrick."

"And?" she asks annoyed by the interruption, most likely the interruption from me.

"Well, did I leave any Kubrick here?"

She thumbs her false blonde hair away from her red, cracked hazel eyes, mind querying her domicile.

"No." More smoke is recaptured by the second slam.

5:48 PM

"Can I help you?" queries Blockbuster-Four clerk,

"Do you have Kubrick?"

"Hold on," - keyboard clicking - "I think I just saw *Full Metal Jacket* get dropped off, other than that we're out. We can't seem to keep his movies on the shelves. Everyone wants one. Most people, at least I think, are renting them for the sake of renting them, not because he passed away." - keyboard clicking - "Damn it," he sighs, "I know I saw it but the computer keeps telling me otherwise."

I nod, "I used to work in a video store. This sort of thing has happened before, and it has always been due to human error."

"Hold on a sec." Frank, as the nametag pin thing reads, walks down to the second aisle, searches for a second, and returns with a movie. "I knew we had one, do you want it?"

"Yes."

Frank nods his hairless, zitless, moleless, perfectly oval head in respect of my viewing choice. "How did you burn yourself," he asks noticing the single popped blister and three unbroken blisters on my left hand as I hand him my rental card.

"I got pissed when I lost Kubrick; I clenched my fists. I forgot I had a cigarette."

Frank looked through me. "It was a great loss. There were no suspicious circumstances; at least, that is what the police said."

His heart caved. The Turner Classic Movies cable network is going to pay tribute to Kubrick this month by showing a couple of his flicks."

"Really," I say in response to a statement that seemed like Frank had been waiting years to say.

"Yeah," he responds, "By the way, there is an eight dollar late fee in your account."

"You sure?"

More keyboard clicking. "Sure as rain, unless the computer is lying to me, or someone else has an account number 655321. That is your account number?"

"I really don't have my Blockbuster Video Rental ID number memorized, but," -- I shake my head-- "there is no way that could be. I've never been guilty of any video rental infraction. What movie was late?"

Frank's eyebrows scrunch questionably, "I dunno, it won't tell me. The computer is locking up and it won't let me continue until you pay the fine. I can't even drop back to the main screen. If you still want the movie you will have to pay the fine, your total, with the movie, is \$10.72."

I, submitting, hand him a twenty. Wordlessly he punches it in then hands me my change. I slide my wallet back into my left ass pocket. "By the way, I don't get the Turner Classic Movies channel." I figured someone would exploit Kubrick; it might as well be Ted Turner.

"Neither do I," he mutters.

I grab my movie and head for my car.

6:22 PM

Anne scans through the channels, searching for the entertainment. I stroll between her and the TV, blocking her view for a second, enough to harass. Her attention falls to me, looking at me from the couch. "I'm sorry but I couldn't find the Kubrick. I looked, honestly I did, but I couldn't find it."

"That's all right," - smirk - "I'll look for it later." I head for

Gormley

the stairs when Anne vocally halts me. "Lisa called."

I dart a stunned expression back at my melon-headed sister Anne. "She did? When."

"Um, she called around quarter of six. She wants you to call her back." Sister looks back at the TV. She found Kevin Arnold, a good episode, too; Wayne gets his driver's license.

Curiosity about a reason why Lisa called guides me towards my room, where my phone is. I drop my car keys, pager, and wallet on the nightstand. The random assortment of change ricochets off the laminated wood, bouncing and spinning across the top, onto the floor. "Damn it," I mutter.

6:29 PM

"Hi, Lisa."

"Hi."

"Anne said you called?"

"Yeah, I found one of your Kubricks, sorry."

"It's OK."

"I'll have Duke drop it off to you tonight."

"Tha..." - click - "nks."

7:08 PM

Duke bumbles into my room. "Hi, Duke, Anne let you in?" I ask.

"Yep, what are you watching?" Duke sprawls out on my bed, intent on hanging for a while. "Oh, *Full Metal Jacket*. Good movie."

I nod. "Great director," I riposte.

"Shit, I near forgot," he hands me a tan plastic Stop and Shop bag, "your Kubrick."

"Which one?" I lean over to examine. Duke reaches in and pulls the VHS tape out of the bag, *Full Metal Jacket*. "Son of a bitch, I just rented that."

Duke's bug bloodshot eyes look to the top of the TV where the blue and white Blockbuster video container sits before he lets out sympathy. "Sorry, dude."

"It's alright. So what's up?"

Duke wriggles until he finds a comfortable posture.
"Things are alright. I've been hanging out, doing some pot, going to class, working, same old same old."

"How's Lisa?" I interrogated, role-playing the devil.

Duke, already finding the perfect position, halts, motionless like a statue. "She's cool."

"I stopped by today; she's still pissed at me."

"Do you blame her?" Duke spit.

"I guess not."

We watch the movie for a while, I from my desk chair and Duke from my bed. When Private Joker a.k.a. Matthew Modine, graduates from boot camp, Duke inclines towards me and asks, "Why did you do it? Things were fine between you two until you did it, and then dumped her."

I turned my focus from the TV. I don't want to talk about this but Duke doesn't ask too many questions. When he does I always feel obligated to respond because of some friendship owed guilt. "I did it," – sigh – "I did it because I was curious. I dumped her because of it. She didn't stop me, but she bitched the next day. So she was a hypocrite just like most people on this fucking planet. Kubrick is dead, so people start watching his movies because they think it is the cool thing to do. People hear some sex acts are bad, so it is, even though it may be enjoyable. People like to conform to the general consensus of the population, ignoring both right and wrong. Lisa was just like that," –pause for breath – "so I dumped her." I sit there thumbs twiddling, pondering the event of that day when a question flew into my brain, "Wait a second, she told you about what I did?"

Duke gave me a silent yep.

More explanation, "Dude I was curious. I did it with women, her, before, but I never did that. It was just a...I guess...I was curious. Haven't you ever thought about it?"

"Not of that 'Ye Olde High and Mighty One.'"

What a liar, I thought to myself. "Liar," I said aloud. "You must have thought about it at least once. Everyone, at some point in their life, thinks about it. I thought about it, and I acted on it. I guess it was wrong but I never planned it. The idea popped in my head. Then I did it. She didn't stop me. She didn't say no. Maybe she was freaked, surprised, or something, but she still didn't say no." – squirm – "We didn't talk about it afterwards. I went home and the next day, when I phoned her, she said that I was...umm...I believe she called me a 'Perverted Psycho Mother Fucker' and a 'Dweeb'. I asked her why it was such a big deal, she said that it was a disgusting thing to do."

"Why didn't she stop you, then?"

Man I wish I could smoke in my house, I thought. "That's what I asked; she didn't have an answer."

Duke gazed back at the television, "So if she was so against it, why did you do it again? Honestly, I think she may be more pissed at you for disrespecting her like you did then for actually doing it again."

I smiled, "Are you saying you think she enjoyed it?"

"What?"

"Well you said..."

"Dude," he shouted, "You plugged the backdoor. She told you not to do it again, but ya did. Not only did you do it twice, but she asked you not to do it." – sigh – "Whether she enjoyed it or not isn't the issue. You totally disrespected her, and then dumped her."

Silence, excluding Animal-Mother conversing out of the TV. Minutes later, Duke snatched my attention with yet another question. "What was it, I mean, what'd it feel like?"

After careful self-dispute, I answered, "Tight."

"Tight?"

"Tight."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense." – pause for a breath – "did you wear a glove?"

Duke was filling up his inquiry credits fast. "YEAH, what

kind of question is that? Of course I wore a glove. Would you do that without one?"

"I never thought about it."

"Liar." Everyone has thought about it, thought about what it would be like, even if only for a fleeting instant. Anyone who hasn't is a liar. Duke was a liar, trying not to come off as perverted.

Duke rotated on the bed, wrinkling the comforter, till he was sitting on the edge with his feet on the brown rug. "Seriously dude, I honestly never ever, not once in my life, thought about doing that."

I got him, I thought. I leaned back in my chair, "So you've never thought about doing it, but you've thought about it before?"

Duke's face contorted into curious mode. "Well it came up in conversation, joking only, never serious. I mean, well you know what I mean,"

"Yep," – smile – "I understand." He'd thought about it. "Has Lisa asked you to do it to her?"

"What?"

I continued to hold my smile. "You seem way too against it, way too against talking about it. But at the same time you are really inquisitive. You said it came up in conversation, was it you and Lisa who had the conversation?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yes," – pause for breath – "No, I mean, shit. Alright, fine, Lisa and I talked about it. She asked me what I thought of it. I told her it was kinda fucked up, and that I don't think I could ever go through with something like that."

I edged closer to Duke, "And what did she say? Was she disappointed?"

"She said 'oh'."

"Was she disappointed?" I reiterated.

"I think so."

Gormley

9:30 PM

I walked Duke, the friend who was currently dating my ex-girlfriend, out to his '96 neon-green Neon. His headlights cast a glare off my car's license plate, forcing me to shield my eyes for a second. He pulled out of the driveway and headed off, most likely to Lisa's house. We'd watched Kubrick. My required honoring and mourning was gone; he knew that I would miss him. I turn back inside, but a melon-headed sister obstructed me. I acted brotherly. "What do you want?"

"Um, Tammy and I were talking. Actually, we were talking about you." She stops.

Oh shit, this is going to be bad, very bad. I would bet anything that she was snooping again. If I could only get away with tossing her into a lake...with brick shoes.

Anne cocks her head to the left, "We, I was wondering. What's a Kubrick?"

I let out a breath of relief. She wasn't spying again. I smirk, "Don't worry about it Sis. I found my Kubrick. It's nothing." I figured it would be best not to tell her what a Kubrick was, this way I could use that excuse again.

She continued, "And, like, what is anal sex like?"

Koshe

Never a cup or a tablespoon just
a pinch of salt, pepper, a scoop or two
of flour and old bread. Eggs, milk,
grease and bacon if it had been
a good week. Onion and a pile
of cheap potatoes grated by children
into a bowl on the floor.

Grandmother, you tried to forget
Lithuania, never
spoke the language
again until you were half
crazy with age but my mother haunted
your kitchen catching scraps to carry
home for your eldest son, now her husband.

That man, my father, remembers
laughing sisters, brother taking turns
at the dreaded grater. My fingers remember,
too. Bits of nail, skin among
potato slivers.

This New World plastic container cannot
recall days when hard necessity
made condiment of curdled milk,
when potatoes, old bread, a single
egg, bacon grease mixed and baked
became a feast, but I have eaten
the knuckle blood scraped
from your hands, grandmother.

Windy McGlinsky

The Squatter
(#25 Strobel Road--Built in 1854)

I'm doing my husband's work,
modern woman in old man Strobel's
house. My hammer hefts, falls, steel
to steel wedge sparks deep
into glowing red maple,

rings through and sticks
into the old man's chopping block
where countless dinners squawked
and soaked the ancient wood
in blood.

Playing at being those long dead
Strobels, I cut wood for cooking dinner,
haul up the steps and to the worn
black hearth. How many mothers
squatted on the slab before me
stirred the fire

killed the chickens, skinned
the hares, scraped roots
into the hanging iron pot, pushed
babies out because they had to, taught
from Bibles, answered questions, laid
children out in this warm room
before returning them
to earth.

Sweat and blisters pop and run. Resting
on my axe, baggy-trousered, bare-armed I
could not be mistaken for those
ladies. I look like a boy myself except
for hips that passed my own
two sons, talkative as hens in the yard.
But I am yet another mother

leaning into this fireplace to stir
a hanging pot of carrots, leeks,
onions, yams, cabbage, salt,
potatoes, garlic pilfered
from Mother Strobel's garden.

Windy McGlinsky

Dying Alone

She swept her living
room for silence her phone
didn't ring she thought
of friends at work talking
without her she ran

the gas out of her truck
felt newborn blue
eyes watching didn't
leave the cab
to look for a job
again she didn't stop
for a beer or conversation
she thought

of a paw in a trap
of dying alone
in her two seater world
her baby cried and she
thought of teeth gnawing

flesh and bone family
to feed but she kept driving
couldn't go home didn't want
to see the paw the trap couldn't

smash the table
the lights her bed made
now sleep in it

she went to the grocery
store on empty
bits of skin and blood
between her teeth

He shuffled through the double brown swing doors marked employees only and squeezed in between the shrink wrapped pallets of *Kibbles and Bits*, stacks of *Coke* and *Bounty* paper towels in cardboard boxes. Walking past a pallet, he grabbed the shrink wrap, tore a piece off and dropped it to the floor. He walked past all the pallets, past the cleaning area with mops, the water hose, and tubs of cleaning solutions. He walked to the gray door all the way in the back that was halfway blocked by a pallet. In the middle of the door, was a blue square with a white stick figure in a wheelchair.

He walked in the small white room that was dominated by an awkward toilet with guards on the side. He put the lid down and sat. He took a cigar out of his pocket and slowly split it down the middle making sure to break it on just one side. Emptying a little bag of dried dirty green leaves into the shell, he licked one side of the wrapper and rolled it tightly. He lit the homemade cigarette and breathed the smoke in, deeply coughing as he released. He rested the cigarette on the top of the tank. Standing on the toilet, he removed one of the particleboard ceiling tiles and took out a clear bag of cookies and the latest *Newsweek* showcasing a study of health on the cover. He replaced the tile, sat down and read.

He stuffed occasional cookies in his mouth and felt the writing slowly on the first cookie the *o r e o* and slammed it in his mouth. He took certain drags from the homemade and was feeling the cloudy burning in the back of his brain. He finished an article on the new Palm Pilot and put the magazine down. He raised the homemade to his lips, inhaled until he could breathe no longer and coughed out the smoke until his head swirled. He reached out to catch himself making a cookie finger print on the wall.

After recovering, he stared at the dark finger mark on the wall. He took another cookie, split it and plied the cream from the side with his top teeth. He took the no cream side and rubbed it against the wall making a fuzzy curve mark. From the curve, he added a line that smoothed at the bottom making a chin. He drew in a complete line stopping just at the apex of the skull and started

drawing flowing curly hair from the top of the head down to the newly drawn chin. He ate another cookie from the bag and drew more hair. He added big bright eyes exposing the pupil just enough that it looked coy, not sleepy and not scared but just right. He drew the small nose and the full top and bottom lips. The drawing had sharpened the side of the cookie to a point and he was able to draw inflections of light in the eyes.

He stared at the drawing and took another drag. He didn't need the cookie anymore and began to smear the lines creating cheeks, lively eyes and full eyebrows. He looked at the drawing for long while, eating cookies and finishing the homemade. He flushed the remains of his being there and walked back the way he came.

Today she wasn't at her cash register and she wouldn't be out to smoke a cigarette on her break. It didn't make any sense to clear the lot of shopping carts.

It's Great to be Home

I stand with a
 lovely
monkey
 swinging
from my
neck. While
two flailing
blondes grasp
legs and
sit on boots. They
g i g g l e a s
I teet
er
rock
ing slow
ly
though
the door.

Assailant four thinks it's
funny to tickle and
we laugh,
 falling
 into
 a pile
 of
 idiots.

Liz Appel

The Last Wish

Silt, dust, gray powder,
without a mother to call me home,
I want to play here
forever, as a child.

Send my ashes down on the wind,
from the paper bag
clutched in your hands,
as you sit alone
atop the still Ferris wheel.

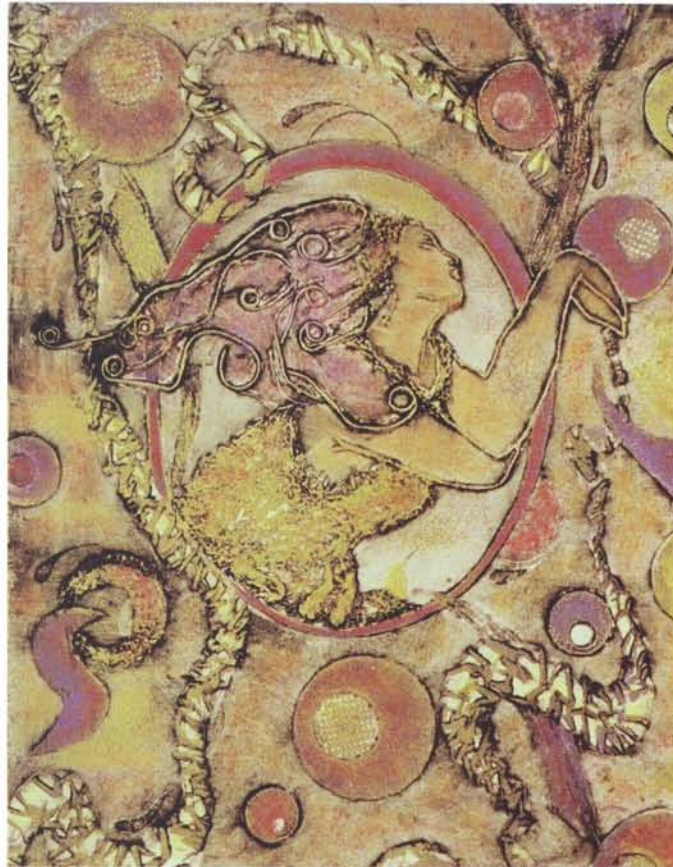
Do this at midnight,
in my town, where I grew up,
the first Saturday of September
after colored ride-lights blacken,
chalky lots empty,
and ticket booths shutter closed.

The next day,
inside tents of jams and pickles,
in line for the Tilt-a-Whirl,
while petting the shuddering cows,
I will settle into sawdust floors,
cover peanut shells
snapped beneath sneakered-feet
and slide along a golden straw of hay
blown by the nose-breath of a rabbit.

See the ground
under wooden bleacher seats,
in the dirt clinging to grass tufts?
We searched for dimes there, Joanie and I,
rolled from pockets of people
applauding bouncing poodles in tutus
with curls and bows.

Heads wet with lemonade,
knees sticky with jellied cotton candy,
we made coffee offerings to carnies,
bribes, for long, round-and-round rides
on the 'Scrambler' and the 'Roundup', free

Untitled



Dylan Locke

Jupiter's Evil Twin



Erica Rasicot

Necklace with Aventurine



Eric Harman

Running Water



Michael Trulli

Untitled



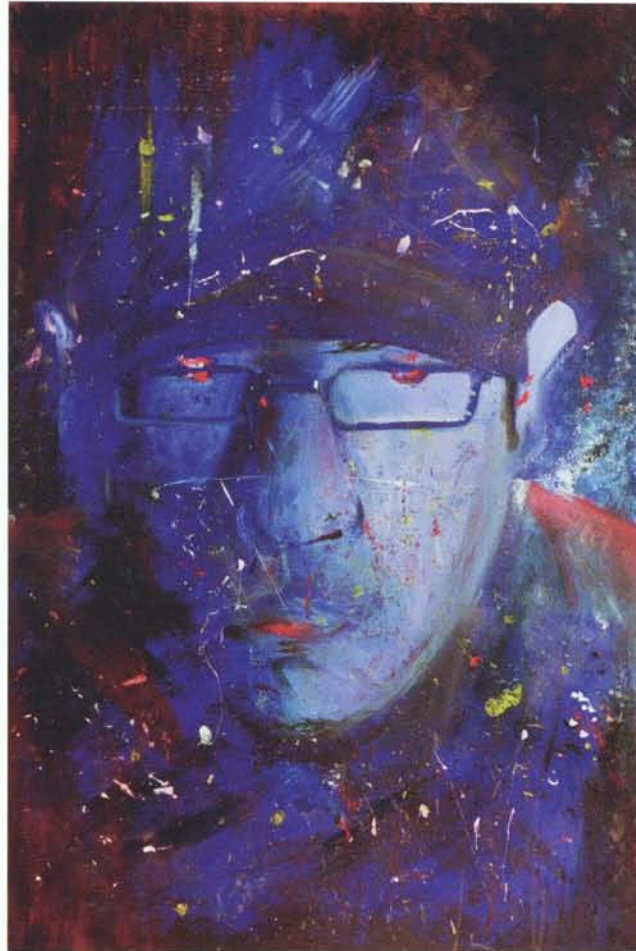
Marisa Falcigno

Shia



Chris Uminga

Tough Titty Said The Kitty



Marisa Falcigno

Sierra



Kathleen DeVellis

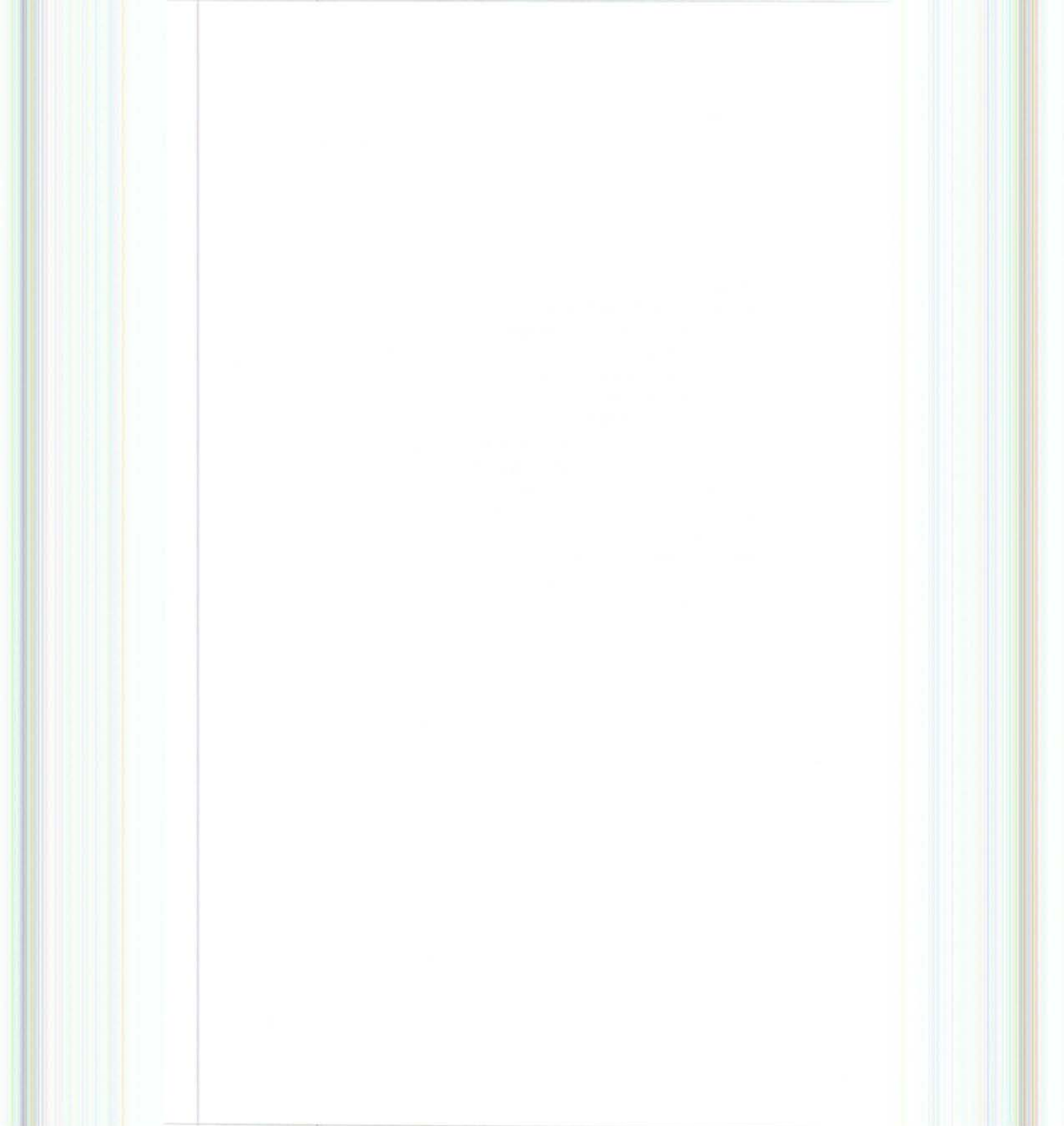
Portrait of a Broken Artist



Darren Lawrence

Searching





Liz Appel

Solitude is Nice

Go Away.
I don't want to be married today.
Disappear like an exhaled smoke ring,
and I'll walk through you
waving my arms to blend you into the air.
Boy, that would be fun!
You would be spread everywhere -
in the glistening drops of a sunny rainfall,
the clouds smeared across a fast moving sky,
that insolent gust of sand at the beach.
No, stay right there where I can see you,
sitting across from me,
wiping the stale end of the Italian bread
in the puddle of leftover spaghetti sauce
on your plate.

Groundhog Day

"Dominic! Six o'clock!"

"Yeah, Pop," Nick muttered as he curled the legs of the next Yogi Berra into a tighter ball, pulled the quilt over his head, then burrowed into the familiar folds of the soft mattress and feather pillow. Four hours of sleep was not enough on the coldest morning of winter, not when the inside of the window was covered with ice half an inch thick, and the frigid wind off Long Island Sound was whistling through cracks in the window sills.

The bedroom door creaked open. Still Nick did not move.

"Hey, bum! Get up! Time to go to work!"

Without uncovering his head, Nick spoke to the door.

"Pop, it's too cold!"

"Ha! Too cold? Was it too cold for the whores last night?"

"What the hell you talkin' about?"

"Dominic, what kind of guys come in at two o'clock? Only guys out with tramps. C'mon, get up. There's coffee on the table."

"Damn," Nick thought as the door closed, "some things never change. If it ain't baseball he's bitchin' about, it's broads."

Nick thought about his chance soon to come, minor league spring training in Selma, Alabama, as he lay under the quilt in the dark and bitter cold on Thursday, February 2, 1961, Groundhog Day. But thoughts were all that he had then of baseball. Reality was his father rousting him from bed, accusing him of getting laid the night before. Nick regretted he hadn't been that lucky.

Nick finally moved the legs of his compact catcher's body, 180 pounds on a 5' 10" frame, and rolled out of the bed to stand bare-assed in front of the mirror on his dresser. Before getting dressed, despite his chattering teeth and goose bumps all over, he switched on the light and brushed the blond hair that made him appear to be more Austrian than Italian. "You good-lookin' bastard, you shoulda got laid last night," he thought, more concerned about the pleasure he missed than his father's crap.

Nick dressed quickly, shivering and swearing. His room was directly over the coal bin, and the poor fit of the coal chute door let

Cork

in the wind. The floor in his room was a pretty good measure of the outside temperature. This morning the floor felt cold enough under his legs for a pick-up game of hockey. Nick's legs took him to the kitchen. He rubbed his hands over the coal stove his parents brought over when they moved from the flat on Legion Avenue. Fire was roaring, but when Nick walked away from the heat and sat down for coffee, he was cold again.

"Pop, when you gonna put in a furnace?"

"Hey, whattya want? Its eight below zero. Your mother and me, 24 years we live with this stove, since before you were born. Are we dead or frozen? Hah! You got no blood in your veins."

Then Salvador Taleri, chuckling at his shivering son, walked to the cabinet on his own strong legs, pulled out a pint of grappa, a strong Italian brandy, poured two jiggers into a small cup of black coffee, an Italian demitasse, and offered it to Nick.

"Drink this. You come alive."

"Hey, Pop, I gotta drive to work."

"Don't worry, Dominic. Cold day like today you drink a gallon of grappa and you not get drunk."

Willing to try anything to strike back at the cold, Nick sipped, then swallowed. His body uncoiled, he could feel the goose bumps on his legs disappear, and warmth flooded the flesh that Laura Piscitelli loved to caress and the Cleveland Indians were willing to pay good money for. Nick decided that his father was right about the grappa.

Nick figured his father was right about most things, except baseball and broads: baseball because he never played the game, and broads because his crotch was out of date.

Marie Taleri came to the kitchen wearing a large red flannel robe and a frown just as big. Some mornings she was a referee between her husband and her son. Andrea, Nick's older sister, had told Nick that his mother thought it would have been better for Nick and his father if Nick had been born her firstborn, if Nick had been fifteen while they sailed across the Atlantic, which might have

helped Nick realize that working at Sargent was more important than a silly game of summer.

Marie loved her bambino, but he would be gone again soon, running off to Alabama to chase his dream of baseball, and she would be alone with stubborn Salvador, and she loved him too, so it was the father's side that she usually took when her husband argued with her son.

"Good morning, bum," she said. "Where were you until two in the morning?"

"Over at Laura's, where you think?"

"Until two o'clock? You sure you weren't with some tramp?"

"No, Mom, honest! We were talking and having coffee. That's all. We lost track of time."

"So where was her mother? Mrs. Piscitelli can't tell time either?"

"She was with us. Mom. Swear to God!"

"Doesn't she know you work the next day? I would have thrown you out. What is so important you talk until two in the morning?"

Nick laughed.

"Oh, you know. Mom, married life, kids..."

"What is this? Before you talk married, Nicky, you save the money and you give up playing the ball."

"Morn, we were just talking. We're not planning anything. Like you said. Mom, we got no money."

"You got no money because all you care about is the ball and the tramps you chase when you think Laura's not looking."

Nick jumped from his chair as his mother walked by, and grabbed her for a hug, planting a kiss on her cheek.

"Mom, you don't mean what you said."

"Get out of here, it's all true," she said, pushing him away, but he noticed a smile trying to break through, so he kept at it, moving in front of her so he could gently grab her shoulders and square off face-to-face.

"Look here, my little five-by-five Italian mama, let me tell you a few things. First, I'm no bum. Second, Laura loves me 'cause I'm handsome with your looks. Third, I don't go chasing tramps, they chase me. And last, a guy can make lots of money playing ball, more than the President even."

"Oh, go away, you ugly beast," she rattled off in Italian.

"Ha! Ugly?"

Nick laughed again, and at the same time sneaked in with another kiss on his mother's cheek. Both loved the teasing.

"So, you beast, what do you want for breakfast, eggs?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"Three or four?"

"Four. I'm hungry."

"God bless your appetite."

Nick smiled as he walked to the stove and filled his cup with coffee. Then he got serious as he waited for eggs.

"We talked about something else last night. Mom. If baseball doesn't work out, I think I'll go to college."

Salvador looked up.

"What about work?"

"I could work nights and go to school full time."

"For what you go to college?"

"I think I'd like to coach."

Salvador Taleri shook his head in disgust.

"All your life you play ball and now you say you go to school to coach, Dominic. Always the games. What about work?"

"I think," Nick's mother said, as she brought the frying pan of eggs to the table, "that you would be a good coach."

"See, Pop, you got a smart wife."

"Eat your breakfast, Dominic."

"Sure, Pop."

They shivered and talked and laughed through the rest of breakfast as Marie made their lunches, then Nick and his father got up at the same time to put on their coats. Salvador wore his pea

jacket. Nick wore a blue wool and leather athletic jacket with red-and-white trim, and Sargent in white letters on the back. Marie was at the table for her own breakfast then. Nick walked up behind her and slipped in another kiss on the cheek.

"What is it today with all these kisses? Are you crazy?"

"Mom! I just want to show you that I love you, especially when you get mad. "

"And what else?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothing, Mom...except, ..well, we got a basketball game tonight. Think you could have supper ready a little early?"

"Basketball, baseball, it's a wonder you have time for Laura Piscitelli."

"Yeah, I know. Mom, but how about supper? Maybe about 4:30? I'll be getting off work early."

"Okay, okay. Now go to work. Please."

Nick laughed again, as his mother shook her head, but she was also laughing as the men of her family left for work. The sky was clear, but the sun was not yet high enough to reach their street.

"Dominic. The groundhog see his shadow."

"Yeah, Pop, and freeze his balls."

Wind from the sound whipped through the frame houses and narrow streets of the neighborhood called the "Hill" section of New Haven, between downtown and the shore, where dock and factory workers lived. The wind cut through the fabric of their jackets and pants, stinging their necks and faces.

"Madonna!" Salvador exclaimed as he hunched his shoulders and adjusted his gray scarf. It was one of the few times Nick had heard his father, who was sixty-two then, complain about cold weather, but Nick understood, because his own eyes were watering.

"Whattya say, Pop? Want a ride to work?"

He hesitated, then declined the offer.

"I'll walk. You don't have time."

"Hey, I got plenty of time. Half an hour."

Cork

His father shivered.

"Okay," he said. "One time."

Nick was surprised but said nothing. It was the only time he had ever known his father to not walk the half a mile to work. Even during thunderstorms he walked. The time he spent walking, he said, loosened up his muscles and helped him get work done while the other guys were still drinking coffee.

The unheated garage that housed Nick's car did nothing more than keep ice off the windshield, so his teeth chattered as he started the car and waited for it to warm up. The heater did not start working well until they were two blocks down the street.

"Pop, you gotta be crazy to work outside in this kind of weather."

"Not crazy, just tough," his father replied as he tapped his lunch bottle, "with plenty of grappa."

Nick laughed at the tough old soldier, the man he loved but had always fought with over baseball, the man who had used his belt to bite Nick's lower legs when they were gathering coal on railroad tracks and Nick wasted time throwing rocks at seagulls.

But the morning that his father accepted a ride to work, Nick was also concerned about the instrument panel in his car. The gas gauge registered empty, and the station where he usually bought gas was nearly a mile, the other way, from their house.

After dropping his father off at the tile and terrazzo plant, Nick turned from the Boulevard onto Congress. Half a block down the street he drove into a Texaco station. A boy covered with heavy clothes and mittens ran to the car, waving his arms.

"The pumps are frozen. No gas!"

"Whattaya been doin', watering it down?"

"Hey bullshit," the kid said, "It's fuckin' cold."

"Yeah, I know its cold," Nick snapped, realizing there was not another station between there and work. As he pulled out of the drive he thought, "what a day to be running out of gas. "

Nick drove his black Chevy Impala down Congress,

through a neighborhood of taverns, churches, grocery stores and pawn shops. The car was warm, so he took off his gloves. He wasn't sure it would help to coast to the stop signs, but he had to try something. He was hoping the cold had just affected the instruments and he had at least a gallon of gas.

After driving past the student nurse dormitories and the College Street Plaza, Nick held his breath as he drove up the ramp to the elevated Oak Street Connector that would split to feed the Connecticut Turnpike. Nick did not have to go far, just one more mountain to conquer, the bridge over Water Street and five sets of train tracks. Get over that bridge and he could roll, if he had to, off to the right and down the curving exit, then one more turn and a block into the Sargent lot, and then get a ride for a can of gas during lunch. He was almost out of trouble.

"Just a little more," he thought, but the engine sputtered then, and coughed, and the car jerked like it was bouncing off a rubber wall. Nick stomped on the gas pedal, trying to get every trickle of gas. At the same time he pulled the car off to the shoulder, just where another ramp joined the connector, less than fifty yards from the crest he needed to reach.

"Balls!" he swore as he got out of the car and slammed the door. "So fuckin' close!"

Nick looked around, first at the cars speeding by, then down at the railroad tracks, and he remembered that Johnny Pacapelli, Bert's uncle, kept pumps open all night across from the train station.

Nick kicked the tire of his car, picking up a sore toe for the effort, and vaulted over the guard rail. Immediately his feet flipped out from under him on the icy grass, and he rolled to the bottom, swearing with every bounce. He had just picked up his Sargent team jacket at the cleaners last week.

Stupidly, Nick had left his gloves in the car, and his hands were burning from trying to stop the rolling fall and from the bitter cold. He blew on his hands as he walked, then rubbed them

Cork

like he was scuffing up a baseball, then he stuffed his hands under his armpits as he trotted on the legs of the next Yogi Berra toward the station a block away. He had lost feeling in his face and ears by the time he ran into the station, which had a wood stove that he was tempted to hug as if it were Laura Piscitelli.

Nick was rubbing his hands and dancing near the stove when the attendant came in from the drive. He was an old man in heavy coveralls and a fur-lined cap, and his face and hands were red. He threw money into the cash drawer, flipped it shut, and joined Nick at the stove. Nick was quiet as the old man stood with eyes closed, tears streaking his face, sucking in warm air to defrost his lungs. Finally Nick spoke.

"Hey, pops, what's your name?"

"Tony. "

"Johnny around?"

Tony grunted. "What's that?"

"I said, is Johnny around?"

"Johnny?" he asked, his eyes still closed. "Johnny's getting coffee. Be back in five minutes so I can get the hell out of here. You wanta wait?"

Nick didn't want to ask the old-timer, obviously cold and tired from working all night, to go out on the drive again, so he said, "Yeah, I'll wait." Nick figured he could stand a few more minutes at the stove himself. But the few minutes stretched into ten, the old man seemed to be thawed out by then, and Nick was losing patience.

"Hey, Tony, now I'm gonna be late for work. I'm up on the connector, out of gas. You got a can I can put some gas in to get it started?"

Tony nodded, but said nothing, walked into a back room, came out with a five-quart oil can and started walking out the door toward the pumps.

"Hey" Nick shouted. "That's not gonna be enough. I'm on a hill. Haven't you got anything bigger?"

He stopped.

"You're shit out of luck, sonny, that's all we got."

"C'mon, a big station like this? How about that can over in the corner? That's just what I need."

"Sorry, kid, that's for station use only. We had two more big cans that guys took with gas and the bastards never brought 'em back. Johnny says that can don't go nowhere."

"Hey, Tony, put the can back. I'll wait for Johnny."

The wait was short. A red pickup rolled into the drive. Johnny jumped out and ran into the station. He put a lunch box and thermos on his desk, then joined Nick and Tony at the stove.

"Hey, Nick, what's up?"

"I need gas, Johnny, my car's up on the connector."

"No sweat, Nick. Hey Tony, would you fill up that oil can with gas before you go?"

"I wanted to, but he wants the big one in the bay."

"No way, Nick, that can stays here. Its the only one I got."

Nick no longer needed the stove to get warm.

"Johnny, its me, Nick Taleri, Bert's buddy, not some punk kid off the street who wants to rob you! I need that can because I'm on a hill and a gallon might not reach the fuel pump."

Johnny said nothing, but the look on his face told Nick that the can was going to stay in the garage. Nick took two twenty-dollar bills out of his wallet and threw them at Johnny.

"Here's a deposit, you cheap bastard. You can buy four of those fuckin' cans with that!"

Nick's point was made. Embarrassed by the money and Nick's anger, Johnny quietly went to the bay, picked up the can and walked out to the pumps. It was a heavy rectangular can, the sides reinforced with ribs, like cans Nick had seen on the backs of jeeps when he was in the Army. Johnny put three gallons of gas in the can, handed it to Nick and tried to return the money.

"Keep it, Johnny," Nick said, still as hot as the stove in the station, "I'll be back in ten fuckin' minutes."

The walk back was quicker because of his anger. He scram-

Cork

bled up the slippery cold grass, climbed over the guard rail, got his gloves from the front seat, then walked to the back of his Chevrolet and removed the gas cap in the center, between the trunk lid and the bumper. Nick lifted the heavy can, gripping the handle tight. As gasoline gurgled into the tank, he looked up, over his car, then turned his eyes away from the bright sun.

Harold Anderson, who had not cleared all the ice from his windshield before leaving home, was shielding his eyes with his left hand, and he steered his car off the Oak Street Connector to the shoulder because he could not see, he would later say; he was blinded by the sun, like an outfielder under a high fly-ball.

Coming together with a thud that was similar to a heavy punch and die in a press at Sargent, the two cars crushed, between their bumpers, the legs of the next Yogi Berra.

Nick's forehead slammed against the Chevrolet "V" on the trunk, knocking him out. Harold Anderson backed his car away and Nick collapsed, face down, on cold concrete. He did not hear Harold cry, or the sirens, or the frantic voices of men who worked over the body that Laura Piscitelli loved and the Cleveland Indians were willing to pay good money for.

Nick would not remember mumbling Andrea's phone number to one of the ambulance attendants. He would not hear his sister, who was a nurse, argue with the doctors at Vale-New Haven Hospital about who would be doing the surgery. Nick would not feel the hands that tried to put his crushed and bloody legs back together while also struggling to keep him breathing.

Thursday, Friday, and much of Saturday were silent for Nick, as silent as the heavy snow that fell Friday afternoon and night, covering bloodstains on the Oak Street Connector, the roof of an empty garage on Wilson Street, and the baseball diamond at Beaver Pond Park, where those who knew a lot about baseball often said it was the quick and strong legs of catcher Nicky Taleri, as much as his good arm and eye and head for the game, that would take him to the top. Nobody, they said, had legs like Nicky.

Early Morning November 20th

So, I ask myself, is this the end
or the beginning - both.

The woods make sounds for us:
something walking in the dark,
leaves falling against bare branches,
our own footsteps - crisply
marking out a path that we will follow
again, down to the edge of honesty.
A rock wall, lost in decay,
snakes its way up the hill beside us.

The soft leaves hold us there
for hours, it seems. Water ripples toward us,
never getting closer. The moon chases
clouds across the sky, hiding and peering out
at us. You hated gibbous moons
when you were tough.

We discuss trees and frost-bit plants,
naming them; for the first time
I am not lonely.

You take my hand, as we struggle
uphill. It feels good to know you're beside me,
walking through these woods,
dodging branches and brambles, making a path
here for the first time.

Gary Titus

Persuasion

Look.
It's so quiet.
Nobody is outside.
The wind isn't blowing
each long branch. Still.

Kiss me, before something moves.

The Spider Bite

As a teenager, Armando had done nothing worse than steal a couple of cars. Carla's young crimes were limited to robbing jewelry and cash from friends' houses. They met at a party in their home town, Cleveland, Ohio. They fell so madly in love that they had time for nothing but each other. Armando quit his freshman year of college.

Carla dropped out of high school. Three months later, they were married.

"Now what?" said Carla.

"I've hated Cleveland all my life."

"All the kids are smug."

"And hypocritical."

"They think Ohio is perfect."

"They wouldn't dream of living anywhere else."

"They're afraid it would be too far out and dangerous."

"I want to live somewhere far out and dangerous."

"And fun."

"I want to live as far away from Cleveland as I can."

They packed everything they owned in Armando's car, and moved to Los Angeles. They didn't know a single soul in the city. Armando was 19. He was big, rangy, dark, and dangerous looking. Carla was 17. She was small, blond, skinny, and beautiful.

For the first time, they found a crowd that they really liked. LA was full of kids who'd come from Texas and Alabama and Minnesota and Virginia and Ohio. And even from New York. Like Armando and Carla, they wanted to have fun, and do things that people were afraid to do in their home towns. Armando and Carla went out to clubs, got drunk, and danced off their asses. They went to parties with their new friends and got wrecked. In the middle of the night, they swam naked in the ocean at Venice Beach, and scored drugs underneath the pier.

They spent a lot of money. To get it, Carla shoplifted expen-

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sive clothes from shops on Rodeo Drive, and sold them to a fence. Armando met a man named Bookmark, who was involved in everything. He gave Armando work, picking up and delivering gambling money. Then he included him in a crew that hijacked trucks. Eventually, he let him in on the drugs. Armando became one of his wholesalers. Armando's job was to keep 20 dealers supplied with heroin.

On his own, Armando also developed a connection with the Santa Ana chapter of the Hell's Angels. The gang had a monopoly. It cooked and distributed methamphetamine for San Diego, Orange, and Los Angeles Counties. Carla and Armando used more and more drugs themselves. Because crank and smack could be cooked together, they mixed them when they made up their spoons. That way, they could fix both drugs with one shot. Although Armando was using a lot of heroin, the meth kept him alert enough to manage his business. But the pace of their life was taking its toll on the young couple. They weren't eating or sleeping. They kept getting infections. Their nerves were shot. They were always suspicious. Their only emotions were irritation and wrath.

"Every time I say something you get pissed off," said Carla.

"Everything you say sounds stupid."

"How can everything I say be stupid?"

"It sounds that way to me."

"We'd better cut down on the dope," said Carla.

But they used more drugs instead, because affairs were coming to a head. When he learned Armando had made his own arrangement with the Hell's Angels, Bookmark was unhappy. Bookmark also did business with the gang.

"You cut into my market," he told the boy.

"I didn't realize that. I didn't know you dealt with them."

"It doesn't matter. You got greedy. You screwed up."

Bookmark told Armando he was giving him one more chance. But

Armando knew there really weren't second chances in the drug business.

"I think Bookmark's going to get me. We'd better leave LA," he told his wife.

"Also, our habits are huge. We have to clean up."

Now, Armando was 22 and Carla was 20. They moved 100 miles south, to the North County area of San Diego, which was a beautiful country of flower farms and orange groves. They rented a tiny house in the tiny town of Leucadia. The cottage was on the cliff, overlooking the Pacific. From their yard, stone steps led down to the beach. A locally-famous break made the steps an important beach access for the surfers. Each morning and evening, when the waves were the best, flocks of kids in wet suits trooped through their yard, and down the steps, to surf the break. They were local Leucadia kids, high schoolers. They called themselves, "The Stone Steps Regulars." Armando learned to surf, and each day, he spent hours in the water. Carla wanted to learn, but the surfers were mean to girls who tried. They'd tip over her board, cut her off when she caught a wave, call her dirty names. Armando could protect her when he was with her, but they were so macho, she got scared to go out alone on a board. She had to stick to body surfing. Armando got a job, delivering the Los Angeles Times to 400 subscribers. He had to work all night, seven days a week. Carla found a junior college that would let her finish high school, and start on an AA in business. None of their new friends smoked anything stronger than pot, and Carla and Armando even stayed away from that. They didn't do crime. They were trying to completely turn their backs on the way they'd lived in LA. The big city had scared them. How quickly they'd gotten into serious trouble! San Diego was a new start. They'd live clean and straight.

Carla thrived on their new life. She enjoyed being steady and dependable. However, Los Angeles had messed up Armando's mind. Drugs had probably damaged areas of his brain, but the main factor was his memories of the crime life. He'd seen too many peo-

ple get hurt or arrested. He'd had too many close calls himself. Despite healthy San Diego life, his mind crashed. Each afternoon, he spent hours in their little house's darkened bedroom, sobbing. For months, he felt like getting on his surfboard, and paddling for Japan.

Carla didn't pay attention to his distress. She was up in the day. He delivered papers at night. When they were in each other's company, she was cool to him. Although he was hurting, she didn't act concerned. There were no hugs or kind words. There was no sex.

Armando was baffled by what had happened to their marriage. In Los Angeles, many times, they had gotten crazy with each other. But afterwards, they had always made up. There'd been a lot of sex. In Los Angeles. Carla had been a thrill. She'd been game for anything. She'd been as much a bad girl as he'd been a bad boy. He'd been proud to have such an outrageous partner. And when he got shaky, she'd been right there for him. With her brain and her body, she'd shown she cared what happened to him. When he was hurting, she'd made him right.

Lying on his bed in the little Leucadia house, he could understand she'd changed. She wasn't into being bad anymore. That was fine with him.

When they'd first moved down south, she'd told him, "You'd have been dead before you were 25. And so would I. We had a lot of fun. But I'm too young to die."

"I want to grow up. I want us to have a family."

Her indifferent face chilled him. He never again brought up children.

The most painful thing was that he was more in love with her than ever. He'd been wild about her during their short courtship in Cleveland. In LA, he'd felt like a stallion running beside his mare. But in Leucadia, he felt an even more urgent yearning. He wanted her arms around him all the time. He felt so lousy that he wished he could crawl inside her and live in her warmth. And she'd never been more distant. Every day, it was apparent that she wasn't there. Finally, one evening, they were sitting in the living room. She was

perched on the sofa, taking pulls off a Corona. He was in a wood back chair, head down, hands dangling between his knees.

"You never even let me touch you anymore."

"It's funny, isn't it? I should be all over you. You've never looked better. You got back all the weight you lost on drugs. You've got muscles from surfing. You've got a great tan. When I look at you, I should get horny. But you revolt me."

"You act like I do."

"You always look like someone's just died. You look sorry for yourself. You look at me like a dog pleading to be petted. You're pathetic."

"I feel awful!"

"I know that."

"I love you so much I'm dying. You don't love me. I've never needed you so much in my life!"

"Do you know why I hate you? You hit me."

He looked up at her, astonished.

"I don't hit you."

"Liar."

"I know my head's not perfect," he said carefully. "But how could I have no memory of hitting you?"

"That's your head's problem. You hit me last Friday. You've been hitting me ever since we moved here."

"In LA, sometimes we got out of control. I know I screamed at you. I know I threw things around the house. In LA, I never remember hitting you."

"You never hit me in LA. I loved you in LA. You hit me after we moved here. Now I hate you."

"I can't believe that I can't remember it."

"Ever since we got here."

"I never saw a mark."

"You left marks."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you."

"Jesus."

"Can we stop talking now? I've got to get some sleep. And you have to deliver your papers."

Armando began sitting in the afternoon in an Adirondack chair in the yard. He morbidly went over what Carla had told him. With a peacefulness that he didn't expect, he accepted that part of his mind was gone. He still felt a volcanic urgency that Carla love him again. But now, he saw she didn't, and she wouldn't, so he grieved his heart's loss. Her love was gone. It wouldn't come back. He wondered why she even bothered to stay with him because he counted for so little; he didn't even matter.

One afternoon, he felt an itch on the back of his left hand. The itch came from a small, pink lump. The next day, around the lump, there was a round, bright pink area, the size of a half dollar. He went to see a doctor.

"Mexican Brown Spider. Tiny thing. Size of a mosquito."

"Why's it spreading?"

"The poison. It's very strong. Spreads fast. Those little buggers are all over the Southwest. Where'd it get you? In the house?"

"I don't know. I felt it outside."

"Usually, they're in the house. Lots of people get bit. Fortunately, almost always on the hands or feet. They bite the extremities. It's a bad bite, but it's easy to treat. I'm going to give you a shot of Aureomycin, and send you home with some pills. If it isn't gone in a few days, come back."

"What happens if it isn't treated?"

The doctor chuckled.

"That's what happens to those poor Mexican bastards who don't have doctors. The poison travels."

"Travels."

"It goes up the arm or leg, into the bigger blood vessels, and finally into the heart."

"Into the heart."

"It poisons the heart. It's a bad way to go."

"It kills them."

"It's a strong poison. I'm going to step out and have my nurse fix up a needle."

"I've got to get something from the car. I'll be right back."

Armando went out into the parking lot, and drove off.

He just sat in the chair, and watched the red color travel up his arm. There was only a little swelling, and more of a sickness than an ache. The red tracked up a vein, a big one, one he remembered that he'd put so much dope into. He didn't surf or deliver any more papers. Carla saw him sitting there in the yard. But she never asked what he was doing. It felt right that she ignored him while the poison moved along. In two days, it got to his shoulder, and the red flowered like roads on a map, rambling into the veins that clustered there. It was starting to hurt, and he was glad. He wanted it to hurt. But the waiting was getting to him. He was afraid of how much it would hurt when it got to his heart. He drove into San Diego, looking for a dope neighborhood. After his years in the business, it didn't take him long to find one. Dealers were hanging out near the hospitals. He talked to a couple of guys who were standing at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Washington. Getting a packet was easy. But they had to steer him to someone in a house to sell him some works.

Back in his chair, evening came on. The sun set right in front of him. A glorious molten ball, slowly sinking into the sharp line of the Pacific's horizon. He'd expected peace of mind now that he had the drugs. He'd bought enough to OD. He could control his end. But the drugs made him feel in the wrong. In LA. they'd been his life. His life had been a mess, but Carla had loved him. Down here, he'd been clean, but he'd lost her. The one thing he'd done right, since he'd left LA, he reasoned, was to get rid of his habit. So why'd he then start hitting his wife? He asked himself questions, and

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failed to get answers, until he started crying.

Since he'd been bitten, he hadn't been eating, and the poison was weakening him. He stayed in the chair all night, falling asleep and waking up. He felt dreamy. The poison was making its own narcotic. Did he need heroin?

Yes, he did. In the morning, the pain woke him up for good. During the night, it had gotten worse. He heard Carla moving around inside the house, gathering the stuff she'd take to school. If he didn't speak up she'd leave without saying goodbye to him. He looked inside his shirt. Most of one side of his chest was colored. If he was going to say goodbye to her, he would have to do it before she left for school. She would be gone all day, and all day would be a long time.

"I'll make her sorry," he decided. "I won't say goodbye, and when she comes home and finds me, she'll feel awful she didn't say goodbye."

But then he thought.

"She's a good hater. She'll hate me whether or not. Saying goodbye won't mean a thing to her." He heard her drive off. Saying goodbye would have made me feel better about letting her go. And I don't deserve to make myself feel good. She's stopped loving me because I was bad to her."

Now, the pain was increasing in skips, and he swore he could feel the poison physically inching towards his heart. He looked at his drugs. He knew how comfortably he could go out by giving himself the shot. No shot. He would be a hero. No shot. No blindfold. At least, Carla would be able to appreciate that he was strong at the end.

His plan was to rise from the chair, walk to the cliff, and throw the drugs down to the beach. Then they wouldn't tempt him anymore. With the help of the chair's arms, he pushed himself up. Dizzy, he collapsed back in the chair. Getting up and walking was not an option.

"Okay," he said.

Carefully, he fell forward onto the grass, put the drugs in his shirt pocket, and started to crawl across the yard. Crawling was hard.

"I'll move my legs three times, and then rest."

The drugs spilled out of his shirt. He couldn't move his leg the third time.

Late that afternoon, Carla found him, two yards from the chair. He was sprawled on his face in the grass, one arm stretched out to pull himself farther. Just by his color, she knew he was dead. Detachedly, she bent over his corpse. Next to him she saw the heroin and the works. Exasperatedly, she talked to the back of his big, dark-haired head.

"I don't care how bad you felt. You took the coward's way out. You chose to kill yourself on me and leave me with your mess. Do you expect me to be sorry for you? I'm sorry for me. This little scene was your goodbye present. Your body in the back yard, your drugs and your works lying in the grass. I knew you never stayed clean down here. You were a wife-beater, and a liar. Some husband. You cried how much you loved me. Then you left me this way. Did I tell you today I hate you? I hope it's not too late. Can you still hear me? I hate you."

Carla picked up the drugs, to get rid of them, turned, and walked into the house to call the cops.

Anthony Szilagyi

Still Life

The portrait of discontent
Hung in the dining room.
Its lifeless face and eyes
Stared at the heads of the guests
At the table. They can only point
Their eyes at the plates below
To escape contact. The mother and father
Enjoy the silence, a break from watching
Mouths move, and ignoring words.
Nothing is always better than the wrong thing.
The others don't seem as pleased.
Their actions echo as they bang silver utensils
Until they no longer shine. Acts of simple kindness
Fall upon deaf eyes as well. Mother's mashed iron potatoes
Make their way around to everyone.
They all pass it along with no sounds.
And the actions that can only be seen from behind a glass frame.

Break in

I imagine you as one of those wealthy houses,
Peeking into my neighborhood from guarded hills;
Its stone walls high, holding in valuables, a house
That launches me hammering and prying, crashing
And bleeding, setting off the suburban alarm
Of a song that screams in my arms, screams
With bracelets and abortions,
Wallets and weddings,
fancy liquor bottles and sick fathers. The high fenced
Yard of things I sell to get away from you.

Kristen Macellaro

Sonoma

And we drink wine from each other's glasses, I feed
You warm bread from wicker baskets as the valley
Slowly absorbs me, cautions me; a voice can pound
An eardrum to a raindrop. Dusk is warm, sharp
Like the blades of our tongues, the eucalyptus whispering
Warns me; shorelines are transcendent but forgettable. On the late
flight home, my seatbelt advises me, when you're there
Talk about other things.

Nocturne

Hot and awake in a downtown HoJo,
I turn on the light, grab Visine
and look for lumps the way I know.

The backyard road scrapes Chicago,
a grid-work of steel and routine,
where to school I'm about to go

unless my future, bred in the bone,
claims my mother and I as a team
linked by lumps I've come to know.

Curled up tight like an embryo,
into my tight-pressed knees I sing
arias to make the dark thoughts go.

Night watches like a one-eyed crow,
half-sighted from a deathbed scene.
If it goes blind on me, I'll know
to pack my things and swiftly go.

Jennifer Holley

World Book

H for Hummingbird.

Mother flips pages
and her fingers find

three glossy babies,
all ruby-throated,
cradled feet to heads.

When the trio hatched
a teaspoon scooped them
side by side; white-gloved

hands fussed in the room,
adjusting each beak
to pose for the film.

Someday they'll be quick
among the quince trees,
fan-blade wings at work

greener than willows
at the height of spring,
more vaporous than clouds.

If with a snapped sprig
of honeysuckle,
I lure one plaything

through a jam jar's hole,
I'll feel wings beat
against the glass wall

like a racing heart,
less content than fire-
flies meant to be caught.

I'll try to ignore
the *Time for bed* calls
ringing in my ear,

till my mother nears
the high window screen
and waves me inwards.

The red-lit kitchen
makes her faint face glow
like the reflection

of the sun I know
has sat for an hour
beneath the oak bough.

I open the jar
a bit, memorize
the bird's jewel color

just before it slips
free. Its silver crown
rises, disappears

in the hushed garden.

Novocaine numbed the girl's gums with a prick,
tools scraped enamel, whizzed and drilled
over the water-pik's squirt, the air-tube's suck.

The man whose hands loomed over her head
offered her a job. She told him yes
with a silver smile. The spittoon gurgled behind.

She grew intimate with the popped abscess,
the impacted extraction, the cracked incisor,
and loved, most of all, the x-ray process;

film jammed between a cheek and a molar,
the low-light room, the flick of a switch, a zap,
transparent grins filed away in a drawer.

My theory is her cancer began to develop
then, despite lead aprons. The dentist liked her
reliability. They parted at night on the stoop.

In shop windows she saw her white figure
emerge and retreat, and pictured a boy at her side.
Lithe and light, she almost became a dancer.

Her childless body mutated as she dreamed.

Halo of Gold

"Bound by wild desire, I fell into a ring of fire. I fell into a burnin' ring of fire. I went down, down. down. and the flames went higher."

-Johnny Cash, "Ring of Fire"

"It is all very well to talk about the facilis descensus Averni; but in all kinds of climbing, as Catalani said of singing, it is far more easy to get up than to come down."

-Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter"

I

"Silence, the meat-hook, hangs me out the back," said Jacob.

"On the clothesline?" asked Eliot.

Jacob laughed and pictured himself clothes-pinned on the line. "No, but I like that."

"What a view. Do you want to kill the engine?"

"Sure, so much for power steering. Give me another word," Jacob said. He shifted into neutral and killed the engine. Past the cliffs edge, the canyon road snaked through the chaparral until it laid its tail end in the sun-baked valley below.

"Eldorado."

"The golden sun, my guide, my wish, and lie."

"Oh shit. We're not gonna make it down are we?" joked Eliot.

"We're both single guys now anyhow. No more Mary, no commitments. Give me another word before we die." Jacob pulled hard on the Celebrity wagon's wheel. The tires whined as they coasted, carving through the twisting switchbacks.

"Submission." Eliot sat plastered against the hot vinyl bench seat. "And yeah, my mother would love to hear I died like this. And give up on the Mary thing, maybe you'd still have her if you weren't such an obsessive freak."

"Submission? Hmm." Jacob pumped the stiff lifeless brakes,

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as dead as the engine. The Celebrity's speedometer barely inched back even a notch. Jacob faced Eliot as they plunged down another slope and said, "Submission is for snakes and not for Eves."

"Holy shit. Was that a hawk?" Eliot asked.

"Where?" Jacob leaned close to the dash and looked to the sky.

"Forget it. Watch the road. Can you slow down at all without turning the car back on?"

"Only a little. Give me another word." Jacob clutched the wheel, white-knuckled, as a corner pushed him tight against the door.

"Slow down. Slow down. There's a stop light at the bottom."

"That's more than one word," grinned Jacob.

"Sick."

"So sweet, and sick, an angel called me." Jacob forced the meter and started the ignition at sixty miles an hour. He braked as they cleared the corner and charged down the straightway towards the crossroads.

"When all the scansion in the world won't save you," said Eliot with a smirk.

"That's hilarious. All right, it's your turn. Mexi-melt." Jacob unsnapped his seatbelt and Eliot did the same. As flat as the valley seemed from the top of Placerita Road, juniper dotted hillsides crowded the empty intersection. Jacob pulled to a rolling stop.

"Mexi-melt fire can burn stomach's desire." Eliot counted the syllables out on his fingers.

"Clever," Jacob said. He sped forward and took a hard right past a twisting and dusty leafed oak.

A girl, no more than eighteen, stepping to the roadside, fell backwards. She thudded against the rear passenger window and vanished in a cloud of dust. Jacob skidded to a stop. Neither spoke. He looked at Eliot and threw his door open.

II

Jacob held his palms against his sweaty brow and shook his head. Eliot had helped her to her feet. She stood speechless and covered in a sandy-blond dust.

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry. Are you ok?" asked Jacob. She stood like a statue in settling dust.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I think I slipped." Her voice, delicate and shaken, but she stood tall and her eyes were vibrant and wide. She wore a wedding dress.

"Are you hurt? Your dress is ripped at the shoulder," said Eliot.

"There's blood on the back of your hand," said Jacob. Long black wavy locks fell over her face as she smoothed out the skirt of her dress and brushed away dirt and pebble. "It's not your fault," she said. She sounded too angry to cry.

"I was speeding. I'm so damn sorry," Jacob stumbled over his words. Her sandy feet were bare and the toenails unpainted. She looked at him for a brief moment and then turned to Eliot. Striking blue eyes looked out from smooth skin, perfect features, and welling tears. Her dress followed and dragged as she turned and walked fast towards the intersection.

Jacob called out, "Wait!" Eliot followed her, but Jacob stood still as the dust, staring. Jacob thought of Poe's Ligeia and of gifts, almost unreal, yet given.

Jacob ran to her side and slightly past. Her feet barely seemed to touch the scorched pavement. "I don't think this road goes anywhere. Are you sure you're okay? Where are you going?"

"Home," she said with resolve. Any tears seemed to have vanished. "Where are you going?"

"Well we can bring you anywhere you need to go," said Eliot. He pointed to an approaching tractor-trailer and said, "Careful."

"There's blood on your head," said Jacob, pointing to a slick

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spot of matted hair above her brow.

"We're here on vacation, where is there a hospital? We need to take you."

She stared down the road. Her shadow looked as short as Jacob's. She touched a hand to her head and it came away bloody and dotted with sand. "This isn't much of a place to vacation," she said.

"Please, you need to come with me," muttered Jacob. "If you're running from a wedding, and I think you are, you can use a false name."

"That's funny," she said and stopped. Her dress flapped in the wind and a drop of blood crept over her dust-smeared brow. She closed her eyes and moved with the breeze.

Jacob grabbed her by the shoulders as she collapsed. Her perfume was light and airy.

III

"I want you to take me home. Please," said Eleanor. "It's not far and they can bring me to the hospital if I need to go." She lay in the back with hair blowing against the seat and a rag held tight against her head.

"Eleanor, there isn't enough time for that," said Jacob. "We can call your parents from the hospital. I promise. Just hang in there." Jacob adjusted the rear-view until he could see her grinning lace.

She was beautiful. "Were you married today?"

"I need to go home. My mother is a nurse."

"How close is your house?" asked Eliot, leaning over the back of the seat.

"I saw another sign for the hospital." Jacob hit Eliot's knee. He stared at him intently and shook his head. "She's passed out twice now. There's no time."

Eleanor held her head and cried. When she tried to sit up,

she fell back against the seat. "Please. We already passed my street. I'm barely bleeding."

Jacob watched her in the rearview and turned onto Sierra Highway. The road cut sharp and through a canyon. A dry riverbed ran alongside them.

"Look, prickly-pear," said Eliot.

"We're heading south, so I'm positive this is the way," Jacob said. "Besides the hospital sign said Sylmar and I know that's south, it's right before San Fernando Valley."

"I think she's out again. Let's get her home before we do anything."

A drop of thickening blood ran down her cheek like a tear. Jacob imagined himself carrying her into the hospital. She looked perfect. "No. She's still awake. I wonder what she was doing in the middle of the desert. We need to stay in control here, this isn't a joke."

"Take me home. They're going to be looking for me," said Eleanor, sounding tired. "This isn't the right way."

They passed in the shadow of a highway underpass.

.

"Give me a word."

"Prickly," Eliot said.

"A prickly-pear is fine for bears and boys," replied Jacob, without much hesitation. He turned the radio on.

"Five miles till Sylmar." Eliot turned the volume knob and the radio blinked off.

"Oh? Did I miss the sign?" asked Jacob. "Now she's out."

"Do you think she just got married or what?" Eliot bit at his index fingernail.

"I'm not sure. Somebody is definitely lucky if she did," Jacob said. He tapped upon the steering wheel. "I don't think she wanted

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to get married. Name one girl back on campus that could even hold a candle to her."

"Maybe she was getting married, at a church," asked Eliot.

"She was delirious," said Jacob. "You know, she kind of reminds me of Mary." He angled the rear-view to his own eyes and then back to hers. Jacob found her eyes, though shut, a much clearer blue.

"Mary, the one that got away," Eliot teased. "Heh. Still a fresh wound aye?"

"No. Not fresh. After all, one week is such a long long time. Seriously though, she really does look a lot like her," said Jacob. "So you think she was running off?"

"Unlikely," Eliot replied. "We should have stopped at her house."

"We're almost to civilization," Jacob watched another drop of blood mix with heads of sweat.

"The bleeding could be worse. I have more than a feeling that she's got some divine favor in her. She looks classic. Like she's ancient Greek or Roman or something. Give me a word."

"Save it for later, Don Juan. She's not even awake," said Eliot.

"Hey, you said the same thing about Mary. Like less than a month ago. I guess a heart cheated on is quick to find a substitute."

"I'm just trying to help her. Give me another word."

"Flavor."

"Her flavor, so divine. Idyllic, mine."

"That's good."

•

"We shouldn't have gotten on the highway," said Eliot through his fingernails.

"This should circle around and we'll see signs," Jacob said.

"Besides, we're better off being familiar with the highway. We should take a look around L.A. tonight." He spun the handle and

rolled up his window. Eliot did the same and the roar of the wind disappeared with a pop of Jacob's ears.

"Hollywood is supposed to be pretty nasty, I hear," said Eliot. He shifted in his seat and clicked his seatbelt into place.

"Yeah, isn't that the whole Guns and Roses 'Welcome to the Jungle' place? The whole fallen angel thing. Not exactly safe streets." Jacob looked in the rear-view. Eleanor's eyes seem to dart back and forth under her lids.

"Well, Santa Clarita wasn't exactly safe for Eleanor."

"Yeah, I guess not. I do feel like crap about it though. Hmm, I think we might have gone too far," said Jacob. The buildings, stores, and houses on either side of the raised highway seemed flat. Off in the distance rose mountains. They seemed pimpled with stunted trees that never even bothered reaching to the sky. "The last time I was lost was when Mary got all flipped out about the stopping-at-a-gas-station thing. Kind of cliché, no?"

"Well, maybe we should stop at one this time."

"Yeah. It would take too long now to circle back to that other place," Jacob said. "Hey, give me a word."

"Obsession. I mean Mary, err, obsession."

"Funny." Jacob slapped Eliot's shoulder with a couple of fingers.

"You missed that last exit," said Eliot. "It had those little green gas and food signs."

"I'll take the next one," Jacob said. "Mullholland."

•

Jacob pulled into a graveled turnout. Here the trees were taller and the leaves much greener. Gnarled oaks and sycamores with mottled jigsaw white bark cast shadows over the road. Jacob waited for a black Lexus to cruise by then he walked to the back door.

"What are you doing?" asked Eliot as he ducked out of the car. "There isn't shit here. Let's go back."

Houghton

"Calm down. I'm just checking her head."

Eliot crouched down and looked through the back window.

Jacob nodded to him and opened the door slowly. He knelt down. He let her head fall slowly from the armrest to the vinyl. Her neck was arched and her closed eyes looked upward to Jacob. The rag, all brown and dried, stayed pasted to her head. Jacob lifted her head and held the base in his hand. Her chest rose and fell. Spots of dried blood dotted the band of lace that wrapped around the front of the dress.

Eliot now stood beside Jacob. "Jay, let's get going."

"Maybe we shouldn't move her," said Jacob.

"She's not losing blood. She'll be fine. We just need to get going."

"I don't want to change the bandage, with it all stuck to her head," said Jacob.

"Yeah, you shouldn't. Let's go," said Eliot. "C'mon."

Jacob touched the underside of his hand to her cheek.

"Jay?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's go."

"We should get to a station so we can try to wash her head. We can get a fresh bandage there with some water," Jacob said. Her eyes still seemed to dart back and forth as if she were dreaming.

"Jay? Let's go. Okay?" urged Eliot. "We should have had this girl in the hospital an hour ago."

"Yeah, Okay, let's go. Get in."

Jacob watched Eliot walk back around the car. Eliot seemed to be running out of fingers to chew. Jacob leaned close to Eleanor. She smelled of hyacinth and dried blood. He kissed her, mostly the bottom lip since she was turned upside-down. Her lips felt warm and alive. The passenger door shut.

"She's fine. C'mon," Eliot said.

Jacob pushed her shoulders and turned her until she lay on her side. He moved her hand under her head and shut the door

softly. Before Jacob got in the car, he took three slow deep breaths. "I need to keep things in control," he spoke softly to himself.

IV

"I can't help feeling like all this was meant to happen," said Jacob. "What if she was sent to me? You know, like some kind of heavenly conspiracy." Jacob smiled.

"You mean like a test?" asked Eliot.

"What?" replied Jacob. He looked at Eliot. "No, I mean like she's heaven sent. What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Pull in that station."

Jacob shook his head. "That place looks crappy."

"Damn it, Jacob. Pull in the fucking station."

He gripped the wheel and looked past the glare of the sun to the small Arco station. "You don't have to be an ass about it," Jacob said. He pulled a left into the lot. The rear passenger tire clipped the curb.

"I know this is all screwed up. Don't take it out on me. Okay?"

"Whatever. I'm going inside to get some directions."

Jacob waited until Eliot stepped inside the tiny mini-mart. He opened the back door. She looked still and peaceful. He knelt down beside her and listened for breath. "We're going to get through this just fine," he whispered. He thought about how much vitality she had. Something about her said forever. "I know I don't know you all that well. At least we've had this time together. I think there's something to be said for that." He touched his hand to her rosy cheek.

"Jacob?" questioned Eliot. "I called an ambulance. It's on the way." Eliot now stood a few feet away.

Jacob stood up. He shook his head. "What the hell? How far is the hospital?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter at this point," said Eliot. "This got way too

Houghton

fucked up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about?” asked Eliot. “Well you tell me then, what are we doing in the middle of nowhere? You tell me what the hell is going on in your head.”

Jacob looked down at the sleeping Eleanor and away from Eliot.

“Is it just me or did the ambulance driver seem like he was drinking?” asked Jacob.

Eliot stared out the passenger window. “Not really.”

Jacob shrugged and tapped on the steering wheel. “There Goes My Gun” played on the radio. The volume was low and laced with static. He looked at Eliot. “Give me a word.”

“Not right now,” Eliot said. “No.”

“Yesterday I went outside with my momma’s mason jar, caught a lovely butterfly. When I woke up today, looked in on my fairy pet, she had withered all away.”

-Rivers Cuomo, “Butterfly”

Ethan laughed and laughed. He made a leafy tossed salad with baby carrots. The snap of carrots was the crack of bone.

"What do you mean by that?" Ethan asked the narrator.

Nothing. I still keep picturing you as Ethan Brand, from Hawthorne. That's why I had you laugh.

Ethan laughed steadily through the night. When his wife came home he tossed the smaller carrots into her gaping mouth from across the room.

"Stop it," Ethan said. "Liz's mouth is not gaping, and I only threw them across the counter."

Ethan churned and bubbled.

"I'm not churning, nor bubbling!" Ethan exclaimed. "And I'm losing track. What time is it now? Is my wife here with me or did you brush over that?"

Ethan felt stabbing pains of guilt and shame. Neglect is a crime. For every night he spent with his wife, there would be ten spent in the office.

"I don't mean to neglect her. I love my wife. Lately we have had so many bills," explained Ethan.

"Is she here now?"

Ethan's wife had no plans of coming back that night. Ethan struck her hard in the face with a cucumber. The force of his own cucumber pitch, almost enough to knock him over.

"I didn't throw a cucumber at her. That's not why she left," said Ethan. "She needs something from me, and for some reason I never seem to give it."

The stars blinked out. Each pinprick expired in a flash of blues and greens. Ethan sat down under the night sky. The ground felt solid and the grass wet with an icy film. Ethan lay back and watched the moon through the misty cloud of his own breath.

"I'm cold now," Ethan said. "I want to go back inside my house. I need to use the phone. I'm going to call Liz."

The numbers on the phone would blur. Ethan would find himself overcome by an avalanche of emotion and he wouldn't dial.

Instead he would take a few sleeping pills and lay in bed, thinking about carrots.

"Well let me go inside and at least try to call her. For hell's sake, I've been through a lot of crap already tonight. I'll judge what I can and can't do," argued Ethan. "My wife is my business."

Ethan thought about his wife's affair. It made him think of salad and sticking carrots in her ear.

"I'm not even going to address that."

The moon blinked out. It went with a sis-boom-bah.

"Why can't I dial? I can barely make out the numbers."

His tears felt icy and stung his cheeks. He set down the receiver, after all.

"I can't let her hear me like this."

Ethan didn't want her to know that he knew what she didn't know he knew about what she knew was an affair with someone he knew.

"I just want things back the way they were. I can't even face her. Damn it! I can't even look at her in the eyes anymore," Ethan yelled. "You want to know why the hell I'm always at the office? That's why! So screw you. You hear me? Just screw you!"

Eliot's voice warbled and wavered. He took some sleeping pills and went to sleep.

dance

can we dance
here now
on this rooftop,
silhouettes against
our moon –
I know
how the ballroom
frightens you

Michael Paolucci

In the Land Where Snow Falls Black

In the land

where snow falls black onto warm
cracked sidewalks & yr feet slip
trip rhythm thru the pureed slop
& yr sore knuckles split when
clenched against the gnashing winds
& yr thumb smacks callused from
flicking yr zippo too much & yr
face frozen wincing in the cleavage
of storm & little Spanish niños cry
by w/ deflated basketballs & bums
rush up to you ask did you steal my
shoes? & yr mind spins faint w/ no-
food dizziness & yr mouth moans
for more of that cheap wine & yr
bones moan for more of that wine
as well & yr tongue yearns for
solitude but yr ears are hooked on
the busyness like helpless addicts,
aching to hear the pointless ramblings
of angry car horns & the gusts of
thick wind that take chunks out of
buildings & the silent hum of black
guttured sky & the sizzling cackle of
burning stale tobacco & the muted
mumbles of loose grates wobbling
in hinges echoing the cries of yr
baby way off in the distance weeping
come home I need you, I need my
angel now, & you choke on the
words "I can't" & see them already

frozen by the time they hit air &
diffuse back into solid nothing-
ness

In this land

of curdled milk & stolen honey, you
feel for yr wallet & find it's not
there & so ride the train back home
tomorrow after you've hocked evry
hopeful gleam in eyes for cups of
coffee & beat down evry inch of sole
on yr shoes & so then just sit in yr
seat & watch bruised glimpses of a
naked old bulb above you flickering
spent.

Stevie Ross

Stony Creek Dock, 5 AM, 1991

Jim's voice was sharp: "I'm sorry. I have no control over the situation. I - I just don't see what I can do, you know?"

"No. No, I understand that, Jim. You mustn't feel -" Anne stopped short, unsure of how to respond.

"And Christ, it's not like I don't feel guilty about it. Every other morning during the season. And then there's the fish ..." Jim said, dangling limply.

"Well don't blame me for feeling unsympathetic toward those guys. They're active participants in their own demise. I wish I had that kind of choice."

"Yeah, well, whatever. I don't have--"

"Wait. Hold on - ouch! What the fuck, Phil?" Anne's brother slid across her back, whining. "Phil," she said to him sternly, "get back in place - we drew lots, after all."

"What's going on? I can't see -"

"You can't do that, I said! You can't - hold on Jim, Phil is being a prick."

Jim knew that Anne's words were overly harsh. She didn't want to seem scared. "Okay."

"Here, I'll move my - yes, yes, and you can put your head through there. Fine. Fine. What? Yeah, I'm as comfortable as I can be, I guess."

"Jockeying for a position at the bottom of the can?" Jim asked.

"Me? No,"

"Not you. Phil."

Anne rested her belly atop Phil's face. "Yeah. He's young, though. Perfectly understandable."

"That's mighty altruistic of you in your predicament."

"Yeah, well ... you know." Jim always had a way of sounding particularly coarse in the most precarious of situations, Anne thought.

"Uh-huh. Can't let fatalism get you down I suppose. Or predestination, or whatever it's called. Maybe there's some sense in

it in the grand design,” Jim reasoned, and despised.

“I doubt it.”

“Oh shit. Shit!”

“What?” Anne put all of her weight on the posterior third of her body and propped her head on the edge of the can, expending as much of her effort as her segments would allow. “Oh my god! He’s going to the pole, Jim! Fight it! Fight it!” Thrown off balance, she fell backward and landed on top of Phil.

“I can’t! I can’t move! Telekinesis! Telekinesis! I’m so sorry Anne—” Jim’s apology was lost in the air as the fisherman picked up his pole. He examined the tension of the cord, following it along the length of the rod. Snorting as he dropped Jim into his left hand, the fisherman stepped toward the can of worms.

Anne lifted her head slowly, curious in a terribly voyeuristic – almost masochistic – way, adjusting her line of sight to see Jim suspended high above the can, being prodded by the fisherman’s omnipotent index-finger. Tap. Tap. A drop of human blood fell from dozens of inches, bursting on Zachary’s head. Myriad globules painted the faces of Anne’s screaming family. Zachary let out a stifled cough and slumped on his side, drowned. Closing her eyes, Anne concentrated on the back of her lids, imagining she was back burrowing through the earth, eating and shitting back out for the plants to eat so they could shit out oxygen. The earth didn’t mind being eaten. She opened her eyes and looked at her swollen belly. She was sorry to see it go to waste.

Anne stretched her torso, elongating it to her full height. She prayed to herself, “Take me. Take me. I can’t stand this anymore.” She felt herself squeezed between the fisherman’s thumb and forefinger, air rushing past her while being lifted into the sky.

“Anne? Is that you Anne!?” Jim cried hysterically. “No! Not you! My God, no!” His words became muffled as his head was pushed through Anne’s soft body tissue. His screams of disbelief resumed as his head pierced through the other side, all of them proffered to the fisherman who heard nothing.

Ross

“D-Don’t blame yourself, Jim. I-I’ll always love you . . .”
Something viscous gurgled behind Anne’s words.
“I love you too, Anne! I wanted it to work! I wanted to —”
“Kiss me, Jim. Just one kiss before we h-hit the water.”
“But I can’t move!”
Anne died sad and Jim hooked a bass.

(Untitled)

I caught a glimpse,
amongst the demons and the imps,
The drug dealers and the pimps,
Addicted to the game,
Recognize the man with the limp,
The Fisher King is lame.

I've tamed the beast within,
And seen the grin of the Cheshire cat,
Upon a mushroom I sat,
And smoked a hookah with an insect.
No regret,
Now I speak prose like Tourette's
Syndrome,
Foam from the mouth and spit allegory
Misquote the Bible,
Heresy,
But makes for a good story.

Stare into crystal balls,
See Jerichos' walls fall,
Like Goliath,
So as David could stand tall.
Lions maul those baptized
While Christ dies,
Saul becomes Paul.

I believe the house of the lord is infested,
With rats and roaches,
Desecrated by children getting molested.
I think we bust a fuse,
When we killed that king of the Jews,
Blew out the pilot, Pontius
My hunch is,

Caponera

We can't wash our hands of this one.
Man stands toe to toe,
Like two Zaxs,
Ku Klux Blacks Muslim Klan,
They're scared to try try it,
They know they might like green eggs and ham.

Also Known As

It's been nearly a year since the last time I saw Sal and Brian in the same place at the same time. I suppose they could have gotten together again after that, but if they did, they never invited me.

It's funny the way things happen. Life isn't like it is on TV, or in the movies – people don't slam doors and walk out of your life. Everything's so much more subtle, so much so that you often don't realize that something is happening at all. You shake hands, say "goodbye," and make vague plans for the next time you'll meet, not realizing that this is the end. You just keep on going, waiting for an opportunity to call, and then, just like that, a whole year has gone by, and I guess eventually a lifetime.

It was Thanksgiving weekend that had brought us all together. It was the first time in a while that we had all been in the same town. Me, I never left, just went full-time at the grocery store, but those two guys took off right after graduation. Sal traveled around a lot. He, through whatever miracle, earned his diploma and headed right for the road, staying with family he had all over the country, and with friends that me and Brian never realized he had made. At first he'd disappear for a week, and then wash up back home, but seven months earlier he went to check out the scene in Providence and had never come back. I'd say he was trying to be the next Kerouac, but I doubt he really had any idea who Kerouac was.

Brian, on the other hand, was on the fast-track to success, at least in comparison to Sal. He had gotten accepted by a private college out-of-state, and didn't come home very often. He loved it, not that I hold that against him. I suppose there were more kids like him there, wild-eyed lunatics with fortunes in comicbooks, conspiracy nuts, and role-playing freaks. Sal and I had been known to get down with that stuff too, but it was really Brian's thing. He loved it so much he even spent most of his summers there, but he was home for the holiday weekend, so it was time for a reunion.

We decided, almost on a lark, to go to a show. It had been over a year since we had all gone together like that, since I had

really gone at all. Hell, what else were we supposed to do? It was Saturday night. It was practically tradition.

Sal drove, and that was like tradition too. He was the first to get his license and just got into the habit of carting our sorry asses everywhere. Four years had passed since we first took that ride by ourselves over the bridge, but flying into the city in Sal's beat-up, old, jalopy with me riding shotgun and the same *Pennywise* tape blasting on the stereo, it was like nothing had changed at all.

We hit the street, and everything still seemed familiar. I was going to school in the city then, driving in and out everyday. It had become routine to me, almost mundane, but that night the city felt like it used to: dark dirty, big.

We parked the car in the lot across the street, and hit the Dunkin' Donuts on the corner before heading in. We ordered the same coffees the same ways, with the same doughnuts, and then moved on. Outside, we even had the same conversations.

"What the fuck did you just do?" Sal said to Brian, who had given a dollar to a passing homeless man. "The fucker ain't deaf. You do realize that, don't you?"

Brian smiled and continued down the street. He was smart, but not as smart as he wanted people to think he was. These little confrontations with Sal were trivial and easily won. Brian lived for them.

"Do I?" He said, egging Sal on. "How can I be sure?"

"No shit – last time I was here, a while back, I chucked a nickel at the bastard's head – you know, to test – and the mother-fucker caught it!" It was a surprisingly stupid comment, even for Sal.

"First of all," Brian said, polishing off his last doughnut, "whether or not he's deaf, he's still a goddamn bum and could use a dollar. Second, that story you just told is an absolute crock of shit, and all three of us know it. Third, even if I believed that absolute crock-of-shit story, which I don't, the filthy bastard's deaf, not blind. Had you chucked a nickel at him, he would have caught it and then

spiked it off your big fat head.”

Sal frowned and looked at the sidewalk. He tried one more time. “Yeah, well, he’ll blow it on pot and hookers.”

“Good,” Brian said smartly, “your mom will be able to put a few gifts under your Christmas tree this year.” And that, as they say, was that. There was nothing Sal could say. His mom was a whore and we all knew it.

The rest of the walk was quiet. As we got closer, I found myself worrying about all the other things that might be the same, the reasons I had stopped coming. My ex-girlfriend from hell, her stupid friends – I hated all of them. All the things that I had tried to get away from. Things I had tried to leave behind with high school and being seventeen. Things, until now, that I had maybe been afraid to face. When we got to the door, I almost chickened out, but in my moment of hesitation my hand was stamped and my mind made up for me. I forked up eight bucks and walked inside.

The smoke was dense. I had forgotten how much smoke there was, and how it got into my clothes. It was dark. It was loud. It was hot.

Sal was back in his element. He took off for the crowd immediately, and that was the last anyone would see of him for the night. He always did that, disappeared into the throng and came back three hours later with a new girl and three great stories.

I grabbed a flier on my way to the stage. It was the same bands playing the same songs. The whole place was like an animated memory. If anything, *Scagnetti*, a former favorite band of mine, had gotten worse. I don’t know why I had expected everything to be different. It was two years, tops, since I had been there. It had remained relatively unchanged in the three years that I went there regularly. But I had changed, hadn’t I? Why hadn’t everyone else changed along with me? A lot of the faces I saw were familiar, and the new ones weren’t different from the old. This place was just a passing fad, a phase. Why was everyone still here, all wrapped up in it? I was motionless on the floor, lost in thought, when two of my

former buddies caught sight of me.

"Hey, Anthony!" Mike called out over the music. He was rushing toward me with Gavin in tow, as usual. "What's up? We haven't seen you in forever!"

"I know. It's crazy, isn't it?" I responded, trying to pull my head out of the clouds. "What have you guys been up to?"

Gavin answered for them both. "S.O.S., man. Same old shit! Hanging out here, fuckin' with the man, you know!"

And part of me did know, but it wasn't the part of me that mattered much any more. They seemed exactly the same. How could that be?

Gavin continued, "We were over by the stage before, and some hot chick fell on me. It was like the time at the *Warped Tour* with that girl. You remember?"

They were exactly the same, and yes, I did remember. One year all of us drove up to Mass. to see the *Warped Tour* and a naked crowd-surfer fell on Gavin. Legend has it that his nose went right up her ass. A lot of people don't believe it, but I do. I saw it happen with my own eyes. It was the defining moment in Gavin's life. From that day forward he was the kid whose nose went up the ass of a naked crowd-surfer. I don't know why I had expected that to have changed.

Mike was the same, too; the local smut dealer, specializing in hard-core, home-made pornos. For God's sake, he was wearing the same hat, with all the damn pins stuck in it. He was convinced he lived in a Kevin Smith movie. Everything was "snootch to the nootch" and other such crap, with the occasional *Star Wars* reference. There was a time when I had really liked him.

"How could I forget?"

Gavin was ecstatic. "Ha! How could anyone forget! Am I right? Hey, are you here with Sal and Brian?"

"Of course, man, it's like the old days."

"All right, then!" said Mike. "We're gonna go check those guys out. May the force be with you!"

I tried to think of something I might have said in the past. Something that would at least convince them I was still me. “Hey Mike! Uh...’radical,’ I’m bringing that word back. Stick it in your vocabulary.”

“Fuckin’ A!” Mike said, and disappeared into the crowd. Even by my old dork standards that was pretty lame.

The rest of the show was uneventful. At one point I notice an adorable girl all decked out in two-tone. A black sweater, a checkered skirt, way too much make-up, and those shoes that I’m sure there’s a specific name for. I was envious of her. I enjoyed the music, but I knew it was somehow more than that to her. I remember how I used to love it. I remembered how it made me feel. I missed those days when I could throw on a *Pietasters* shirt, and my dad’s suspenders, and that would answer any and all questions the world could ask. But that didn’t make sense to me anymore. Everything was all screwed up. Majors, and jobs, and lonely Saturday nights. They were never things that had messed with me before.

The show ended, and Brian, Sal, and I headed back over the bridge. West Haven had a reputation for being a white trash sort of town, and the Elm Diner was one of the few places that really lived up to that. We loved it. We loved being Westies. Not in the traditional “go Blue Devils” way, but in a rebellious “we’re mother-fuckin’ Westies” sort of way. Better than the ghetto kids from New Haven, tougher than the poser would-be-punkers from Guilford, we had it all going for us, and the Elm Diner was our palace – our filthy, low class, yet wonderfully perfect castle. I guess it was sort of like our forefathers embracing the term “Yankees.” Or maybe we were just stupid, and proud of it. Either way, the Elm Diner was ours, or at least should have been.

We pulled into the parking lot and there were cars, a rarity at 1:00 a.m., to be sure. We peered into the window to scope the place out. At our table, *at our table*, were a bunch of kids about our age. They were skanky looking, with nasty unkempt hair, and

hemp necklaces. Sal was not pleased.

"Anthony," he said, struggling to keep his voice even, "what am I?"

"A punk," I said, turning my attention to him.

"And what do punks hate?"

I had to think for a moment about this one. What did punks hate? "Hippies?"

"Exactly. Now do we kick their asses or fuck up their cars or both?"

"Let's fuck up their cars," Brian suggested. He was small and ran the largest risk of any of us being hurt in fights like these.

I wasn't in the mood for causing shit at all. I had never gotten off on it as much as the other guys and in that moment the whole thing felt sort of "wrong." "I don't know, guys," I said, looking back inside. "I'm just hungry. If we kick their asses, we've got to kick their asses, and if we fuck up their cars, we gotta leave so they don't fuck up ours and...I just want pancakes."

"I don't know," said Sal. "I think I want to kick some hippie ass."

But Brian had been swayed. "No, man. Fuck, he's right. You know. Let's go grab something to eat. I'm starving." Sal couldn't really argue with that. He was a fat bastard.

We went inside and grabbed a table on the other end of the diner, keeping our eyes on the pretenders to the throne all the while. Brian began ranting, as usual. "Okay...question: if you could have any superpower, but just one, what would it be? My instinct is to say invulnerability, not the limited nigh-invulnerability of today's heroes, because you know, goodbye fear, hello good life! But then I thought, wait, nothing can kill you, you don't need to breathe or eat or anything. What if you fell in a well or deep pit? You don't have super-strength or flight so you can't get out. You scream and scream, but no one hears you. You're stuck in that well or pit forever, and not just forever until-you-die-forever, but forever forever. In the dark... alone ... forever ... slowly ... going ...mad!"

There was probably more, but I never heard it. I was focused on one of hippies, a girl. She was pretty. Dark blonde hair with natural highlights that shone under the harsh florescent lamps like oil streaks in a rain puddle. She had glasses on with thick frames. I didn't really know anything about hippies. I supposed it was all Grateful Dead stickers, and weed, but who could be sure. I went to a Dave Matthews Band concert once, but I didn't really remember anything important. What really struck me though, was that here was another person who had it all figured out, or at least thought they did, and again I missed it, a sense of identity or belonging. I looked back at my compatriots. Sal was talking now.

"It's just beyond me. I can't understand. How you, Brian, could say there might be a God. I mean, I really believe, you know, it's all just aliens."

"That's a valid theory, very valid," Brian said, equally passionate, "and it could be the right answer, but I just say I'm not sure. I was watching this thing the other day, this thing about crop circles and alien abductions..."

I couldn't believe it. These were my friends. There was a time when I'd take part in these "intellectual" discussions with them, for hours no less! And now, I was embarrassed by them... disgusted. I looked down at myself, at my flannel shirt and Gap jeans. I was an abomination. How did I become this thing – this thing we hated? What the hell happened to me? Was I retarded?

Brian took a sip of his coffee "...but see, we don't have to worry, because arachnids, spiders if you will, are another race of aliens, and they're here to protect us from the insects."

I looked back at the hippies. I remembered the Dave Matthews Band show. There were hippies there. There were old hippies there, too, but only a few. And then it dawned on me. The most frightening revelation this side of *The Crying Game*. The rest grew up. My parents grew up. Was I growing up too? It hit me in the stomach, and stole my breath.

"Guys..." I interrupted, "are we growing up?"

"What?" They both said, turning towards me.

"Are you okay?" Brian added. "I mean, look at us. We're fuckin' ridiculous."

"I know...How can I make it words? But that doesn't...bother you?"

They just shrugged. "What do you mean?" Sal asked.

What did I mean? "It's just...who we are..."

"Yes?"

"Dead Kennedys t-shirts, and Bad Religion stickers..."

"Yes?"

"Trade paper backs, and variant holographic covers..."

"Yes?"

"And that's enough?"

They both took this with quiet reflection. After a moment Brian spoke.

"If you want to get involved in drugs, I could see that. I mean that's not my thing, but you know, I support you, man."

"No, I don't want to get involved with drugs." I was getting aggravated. "I mean, has it ever occurred to you that our lives are trivial and stupid?"

"Isn't that the basis for all existence?" Asked Brian.

"I just assumed," Said Sal. Without further thought Brian and Sal dove into a heated debate on the possibility that human beings evolved from dolphin hybrids, and I was severed from the loop permanently.

Sal dropped me off at home when we were done. We said goodbye, and promised to talk the next time he was in town. It was the same thing with Brian. Christmas, we had said. The reality though, was that was it for the three of us. We has spent nearly eighteen years together, and now there was nothing left. Hell, it lasted a lot longer then some marriages, but it had finally spun down to a halt. I felt bad at first, like I should mope around the house, but self pity got old with high school, too.

When I Learn How to Play Gin Rummy

I believe in hell,
a fiery pit where Hitler
and Stalin play Gin Rummy 500

with The Son of Sam and my Great
Aunt Rose. They sit at a folding card table,
in red velvet chairs, sip tea, with no sugar, from flowered

china patterns. Hitler keeps score on the back
of a propaganda pamphlet with the stub
of a pencil, sharpened with Great Aunt Rose's

pocket knife. Stalin catches sight of Sam
with the two of diamonds in his shirt pocket,
slaps the back of his head like the naughty child he always is.

Stalin is a stickler about cheating. He caught Great Aunt Rose
once, with three aces in her brassiere and pushed
her out of her chair onto the muddy floor. Hitler and Sam

laughed, even though they could never quite figure out
how Stalin saw what's in Great Aunt Rose's brassiere. Sam
laughed so hard he wet his pants, wet the velvet chair,

and even got a little on Hitler's pant leg. Great Aunt Rose wrote
me last week. Darling, don't forget my Manhattan on the rocks
when you leave next month. She also said that the foursome would
be happy to pull up an extra chair.

New Year's Eve in the Big Apple and she's an hour late for a twelve o'clock train. She said she'd meet me in New Haven after picking up her friends. Soon to be *our* friends. As soon as we're seated on the train she's popping valiums to calm her nerves; I guess you could say we rent a lot of movies when we're together. I slept until twenty minutes before the train, suffering from a groggy New Englander's cold that has my skin changing temperatures like an ice cube in a rum drink set on fire. The winter sun is setting by the time we cross the state border and what began as a casual conversation lounging amongst rows of empty seats soon becomes forced, quick words accompanied by avoiding eyes over the noise of an overloaded traincar, its isles bursting with bodies. Somewhere past Stamford, the lonely anonymity of the big city had leaked into the space between us. With my tall frame wedged politely into an average man's seat, I put pressure on her more comfortable fit beside me and am forced to look straight ahead at the well dressed, elderly, blind man seated opposite. There are a thousand and one omens made available to an observant eye in New York and I take it as a humble blessing to be seated before a prophet with wonderful, clear blue, unseeing eyes. I was prepared for adventure.

I wonder why she's wearing all her expensive gold jewelry, though I don't say anything. Instead I wait to get caught staring at her watch and rings at which point she asks me, "Should I have worn my jewelry?"

"No. You should probably take it off and leave it in your purse at the apartment. But don't let New York intimidate you. You prepare for trouble because it might happen -- especially on a big tourist holiday -- but right after you prepare, you've got to forget about it."

I live and work in the city, she in the suburbs. She leaves her jewelry in the apartment and relies on me to hold her cash and tell her the time with my cheapo wrist watch. She hates not knowing the time, she's said to me more than once. I'm glad because this way I have one more reassurance that she won't leave me. I'm

always scared of losing her (for me this fear defines love). I end up spending much of her money after I finish off my own.

On the train back the afternoon she wonders out loud, "I don't know how I spent one hundred dollars yesterday. It doesn't make sense."

She accounts for all her purchases and I try my best to remind her of those she might have forgotten. "I might have paid the taxi home from the club with your ten."

She nods knowingly without looking at me, "You're dangerous when you get drunk. You become overly generous -- that was a five dollar fare."

"Yeah ... but he gave me some good memories with the reggae he played." We had just spent the last summer in the Caribbean together. I'm a quiet person and one of the compensations I provide against my introversion is to give freely of money. "And I rode in the front with him, so I was forced to establish a relationship. Which meant he deserved a good tip for enduring me."

We sit in silence for a few minutes afterward while I try to focus the rambling scenes of the evening before. I begin to remember paying a twenty dollar tab after already going broke for two Coronas and two flutes of New Year's champagne at the bar by the dance floor. I left the bartender twenty-five even though he wasn't an attractive female and even seemed too drunk to really know who owed him what or how much or who was doing him a favor by tipping him well. I waffle over how I'll feel if I don't tell her. I decide to tell her and she says, "Oh I thought something was funny." But she won't accept my offer to pay her back. She just remarks shortly after, "You know, it kind of sucks when you don't drink and end up buying other people's drinks."

I had been drinking since getting off the train. That's what one does on New Year's, right? It was only for you, baby.

Even though I was sick. Just to be pal-sy with all your

Nelken

friends. I had to prove to them that I was a man -- and with drink and drugs I can do it with the best of them. They were even old fraternity boys like me. But they couldn't hang. They were cleaned up dental and law school students now. I was still a city kid.

It was the coldest day of the year for us Nutmeggers. But the taxi driver and doorman to the borrowed apartment said the day before we came up was colder. After lunch we split off from the others because you wanted to shop at Bloomingdale's to pick up a handbag you saw at a Bloomingdale's in Florida, but didn't have the guts to buy and were haunted by it ever since. These are the kinds of things that haunt you. You had cute, little, black gloves on and were trying to figure out which direction was downtown. I might have been able to figure it out, but no better than you. When I visit Manhattan, I enjoy acquiescing to the mass confusion and bigness. I like to giggle, and babble to myself and to anyone that will listen about my admiration for the great buzzing diversity and trembling busyness of life there. Puzzling out rambling Kerouac prose in my mind, I lose myself in big thoughts; of being forgotten in history on a busy city artery of red tail lights at the heart of the throbbing empire of a climaxing planet. It's no impersonation however -- I am easily lost and have consigned to try to make it seem charming when possible.

You didn't want attempts at charm though, you wanted Bloomingdale's and you wanted out of the cold; the latter being the reasonable and the former -- I would do anything for you anyway. You jumped off the curb hailing futilely for a cab. I must have snickered a bit to see you, so short and cute, bundled up in your black winter jacket, jumping and waving your arm about, going unnoticed in a cold, blank night of city lights.

I remember telling her once we got in the cab that I thought she has "good form." When she didn't respond to the compliment, I pointed out other people along the streets trying hard to be noticed. That must have pissed her off, but I still thought I was working a

pretty good punch line until later when she got mad at me after finding out Bloomingdale's didn't have the bag she wanted.

In the apartment a fight started until the others returned, knocking on the front door which prompted you to quickly say, "Let's drop it and try to have a good time tonight." Which was fine with me, I wasn't even upset yet, because I still felt as if I was in the right. I only get upset if I realize I might have made a mistake -- otherwise it's someone else's fault, or just an unfair world.

"I know I sometimes force you to take charge, because I'm a standoff-ish sort of person. But you like it that way." This wasn't anything new to either of us. "You like to take charge. It was your shopping trip. You were trying to wave down every cab you saw, even though most of them were already full with fares. I was keep my hands warm until an empty one passed."

I then proceeded to tell her how to identify which cabs had a fare, which were off-duty, and which were available according to the lights on the top which, she claimed to know nothing about. Of course, I had waited until afterwards to inform her. Too late. I told her that's what kind of person I was and she said she knows how hard it is to change.

"But if you're angry with me, you've got to tell me right there so I can do something about it. If you had asked me to hail a cab for you I would have."

"Why do I have to ask? What about chivalry?"

"I'm very chivalrous. I open doors for you." I had opened every car door for her since our first date. I hadn't ever done it so consistently for anyone else, but once I did it the first time for her I suddenly knew I always wanted it to be that way for us.

"Yes, you do. But you still leave me to do things too often. I have to make all the decisions."

I'm a big tipper; I always open the car door; I'm not perfect. "That's how I am. I'm an easy going person. If something really bothers me I'll speak up, but otherwise I let you do your things."

Nelken

And she knew she likes to be in control, and to be with someone who would allow her that power. That's how we were with each other and we both knew it. She was just upset about not finding the bag she wanted and decided to take it out on me. I could take it. I could be there for her.

We had a good time eating Thai food, where I had a nice conversation with her older sister; and dancing, and by the time we reached the apartment again she was asleep and had seemingly forgotten everything. Curiously, I wasn't even that upset about allowing her sister and her sister's fiancée to sleep in the only bed, while she took the couch and I, the floor. I guess I must have been pretty tired too, because usually the end of an evening was when our relationship balanced out of give and take. She returned the favors of my gentlemanly attentiveness with the pleasures of witnessing her intimacy. The morning after I felt sick again. The holiday was over and it was just another day in 1999. I was without a change of clothes, a toothbrush, or even a half decent night's rest when she asked me what was wrong just before boarding the train back to New Haven. When I tried to make excuses for myself she just shrugged off my attempts as reasoning.

"Something's wrong with you, you're acting different."

She could never trust me to tell her how I felt and often became frustrated with trying to pull it out of me. The next night I called her just to talk, which I rarely do these days. I used my mother's special long distance account that saves money on calls lasting longer than three minutes. She dismissed me early with short and cold conversation. Mom lost money on that gamble.

Hello Gorgeous

Got 36 expressions
sweet as pie, tough
as leather, and long years
I've sung this film,
held
its weight. Dating the
hour – minute
my rising voice would bite,
snap the Jewish nose
to kneeling admiration.

Songs encourage out
landish – lavish
behavior
to strip the audience
down. Under where would
they hide from
hopping smiles, steps
that walk
amongst Ziegfield girls?

Living times
with young-minded
children atmospheres.
Much to embrace, magic
arithmetic, birds
call my attention.
Wings wait to flutter
notes
a Funny girl delivers.

I'm sitting in the back seat of my best friend's Firebird, looking out the rear window at the line of cars behind us with their headlights on. My name is Walt Walterscheid. I'm twenty years old and as of last week have sworn off higher education forever. My best friend Jake Jakabauski is driving. We've known each other since we were five and my family moved to this shithole small town. He never considered going to college. In the passenger seat is Gary Garabedian, Jake's cousin. Gary's a few years younger than us, but he's cool. He just got outta high school last year.

I turn from the rear window and stare between their heads out the front window. I'm zoning. My eyes are all out of focus and the taillights of the car in front of us are fuzzy. The back and forth swoosh of the wipers doesn't interfere with my eyes being fixated on the two red lights. The lights brighten as the car slows down and I'm thrown from my trance. I look ahead and see the hearse, four cars in front of us, turn left into the cemetery.

"Man, can you believe these fuckin' assholes." Jake whispers to me. We're standing in the drizzling rain now. None of us has an umbrella so we're standing in our cheap suits and jean jackets getting wet. My mom bought my suit for me a few years ago. It's getting too small but it's all I have. Jake's long hair is starting to get matted against his head. It actually looks kinda cool. Gary has to keep his hair short 'cause he still lives with his mom. He always says he's gonna move out though. Me n' Jake also live with our moms. Since I was in college my mom let me do what I want so my hair's kinda long too. All of our moms are divorced so Jake kinda does what he wants around his house. The rain is starting to seep through my jacket. Everybody else is standing around the hole with their umbrellas and raincoats. We're kinda standing off a few feet from everyone else. Monty's coffin is being lowered into the hole. Her name was Alicia Montgomery. We used to call her Monty. The priest is standing at the end of the hole talking but I can't hear him. I'm not listening.

Her parents aren't standing near each other. They got

divorced a few years ago. About six or seven. I see her bitch of a mom looking at her dad and blaming him for everything, even though he was nowhere near the accident. Monty's boyfriend Kevin is standing near the edge of the hole. He's got crutches under his arms and a large black garbage bag wrapped around the cast on his left leg. He looks like a chump. She didn't meet him until after we graduated. The rain soaks through my suit jacket and I shiver.

Me and her went to the same community college. She started hangin' out with other people, dressin' different and everything. In high school it was always the three of us: Me, Jake and Monty. Gary started hangin' with us when he got to high school. Nobody liked us. We were the only friends we had and that was fine.

"What a bunch of fuckin' ASSHOLES!" Jake yells when we get back in the car. The rain is coming down harder.

"Can you believe these fuckin' people comin' to her funeral? Like they fuckin' knew her? And that jackass Kevin."

"Didja see the Hefty bag on his leg?" Gary says.

"Shoulda put his whole body in it and thrown him out with the TRASH!" Jake says and turns the key. The tape deck started right where it stopped. Metallica's *Master of Puppets*. I reach into the inside pocket of my jean jacket and pull out a ziplock with a couple of nicely rolled joints in it. The cars ahead of us begin to move.

"Are we going to the reception?" I ask, pulling a joint out.

"Fuckin'-A." Jake says and adds "That piece-o-shit Kevin is havin' it at his big fuckin' house and the way I figure he owes us SHIT!" Jake opens his door and goes to the front of his car picking at the large Firebird sticker on the hood. I light the joint and inhale deeply. I can see Jake getting more and more pissed. He's swearing but I can't hear him over the rain and music. I pass the joint up to Gary, and look out the back window. I haven't sat in the front seat since her accident. The car behind us honks its horn and flashes the high beams. I don't even have to look at Jake to know that he's got his middle finger raised high in the air. I hear the door open and

Wrann

Jake gets back in the car mumbling something about motherfuckers. Then he doesn't say a word. Just jams it into first and peels out sending mud into the windshield of the Mercedes behind us.

I don't expect to hear Jake say anything for the rest of the trip. He loves his car. More than anything, I think. It's a gold 1978 Pontiac Firebird. It used to be his dad's. Except for the sticker peeling on the hood it's in perfect condition. Whenever Jake's got some extra cash he drops it into his car. So when he sees the sticker peeling it just reminds him of how fucked up life is. I guess. Jake takes the joint from Gary, hits it, and passes it back to me. I slump down in the seat, take a drag, and close my eyes.

In the inside pocket of my jacket I have a photograph. I don't have to take it out or look at it to know what it looks like. I've been carrying it for the last week. It's me n' Monty sittin' on a sofa. She's all bubbly and happy and I'm stoned out of my mind. I'm wearing the same K-Mart suit I have on now, and she's wearing a flower dress and some crazy sunglasses. The picture was taken sometime last year, after she started makin' new friends. It was the first time I saw her in a dress. The whole time I knew her she only wore jeans, a T-shirt and her jean jacket. Kevin was at the party. They had been going out for a while. He called her "Alicia." She thought his friends were her friends. Sittin' there stoned when she wasn't around I heard a lot of shit. They said she wasn't on their level, she didn't have money or style. The only way she ever met Kevin was 'cause he had to get his grades up for some real college. He was just stringin' her along for the ass. She invited me to this party 'cause she thought I would fit in. She was so wrong. She didn't fit in either no matter how she looked, but she tricked herself into thinkin' she did. Everybody talked behind her back. I left the party that night and hardly talked to her since. I saw a lot of those people at the funeral and I'm sure they'll be at the reception.

I give Gary the roach and look out the back window again. The mud is still running off the hood of the white Mercedes behind us.

“Man this shit is wicked.” Gary exhales with a puff of smoke breaking the silence between us.

“Didja see that motherfucker jokin’ with his friends?” Jake mutters. I got a bad feeling about the reception.

“Yeah what a cock.” Gary puts his two cents in.

It’s about an hour later and I’m already on my third beer. I just realized why the couch I’m sitting on is familiar. It’s the same couch in the picture. I didn’t know we were at Kevin’s house the night of that party. That pisses me off. After all of his friends left, he probably took her upstairs and fucked her. He didn’t deserve her. That’s why he doesn’t have her now. Fuckin’ fate. But he took her away from me. From all of us. My face is starting to get hot. I can feel hot water building in my eyes as I look out across this fuckin’ group of people in the living room. My throat starts to clench and hurt.

Everybody seems to be moving in slow motion. They all don’t make any noise either. I feel like I’m not even here. They don’t notice me. I see the driver of the Mercedes. He’s over by the punch bowl. Probably about my age. He’s wearing a nice jacket with an emblem on it. Probably from his college. I take a drink and it goes down hard. He’s got blonde hair with a perfect little part. He’s one of Kevin’s friends. I can tell ‘cause they all look alike, and they don’t look like me. He didn’t know her. None of them knew her. None of them loved her.

I notice that her dad isn’t here but her mom is. She’s obviously trying to move up the social ladder. Maybe meet some rich stud to butter her muffin and pay her bills. She’s talkin’ to Blondie from the Mercedes.

My head starts swimming and I know I need to get to the bathroom. I can feel the little pigs-in-a-blanket beatin’ at the sides of my stomach. If I puke on the floor, all those “Fuckin’ Assholes,” as Jake calls ‘em, will notice me over here an’ I don’t want that. That reminds me, I haven’t seen Jake in about half an hour. And that

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usually isn't good.

I lift myself off the couch and move slowly and steadily down the back hall to the bathroom. I lock the door behind me and start the water in the sink at full blast. As soon as I bend over the toilet, those piggies come rushing out.

I needed this. With the puke all of my emotion that built up in the living room comes out too. God, I feel much better. I sit on the floor for a good five minutes and take deep breaths with that strange taste in my nose and mouth. I gotta find Jake. So I stand up; I'm still drunk and wobbly. I leave the bathroom and go looking for Jake.

The last place that I saw Jake n' Gary was in the garage. These asswipes that threw the reception didn't have anything to drink, liquor-wise, and we had drained Jake's flask of Jack after the joint in the car. So we had to search. Jake found a refrigerator in the garage that had two twelve packs of Budweiser in it. They probably belonged to Kevin's dad.

I'm walkin' through the living room as straight as possible and everything is moving in slow motion again. It reminds me of the last time I was here. For that party. I look to my right at the couch and half expect to see me n' her sittin' there like in the picture. Instead all that's on the couch is a big wet spot from my ass and jacket. I feel someone's eyes on me as I'm walkin' through the room so I look around and sure enough to my left is Blondie. Still standin' by the punch bowl only now he's noticin' me. He's starin' right at me and when my eyes meet his he just shakes his head and looks away. "Fuck you Blondie" is what I want to say but I keep my mouth shut.

I go down the front hall and things start movin' normal again. I should just head right out the front door and walk home in the rain. I should, but I don't. Instead, I stop at the garage door and open it.

"Hey! What's up? You fuckin' social fuckin' bunny! Jake yells to me.

"Nothin'." I step into the garage and close the door behind me.

"I thought we were gonna have all o' this beer to ourselves." On the floor are a bunch of empties. Jake and Gary have been hard at work. They're both sitting on the hood of a white Jaguar. Jake takes a Bud out of the twelve pack between them and tosses it to me. I catch it and pop it open.

"What're you guys doin'?" I ask.

"Nothin' man, just drinkin' Kev's beer and sittin' on his Jag." Gary says. It's probably Kevin's dad's Jag, but that doesn't matter. His dad's probably a dick too. Mud from Jake and Gary's boots is running down over the bumper. There's also some mud on the roof.

"Hey dude." Gary says. "Check out what Jake did." He hops off the hood of the car and goes around to the driver's side.

"What?" I say and follow him around. Gary opens the door. On the Jaguar's white leather driver's seat is a big brown shit.

"Oh man! That's fuckin' sick, man!" I say. I feel sick now. It's not because of the sight of it or the smell but now I see something. Something in Jake that I never saw before. I take a long swig from my Bud to try to forget it. But I can't. Gary closes the door. Jake just sits on the hood with a smug smile on his face.

"Dude, Gary and me was talkin'." He says. "We were gonna go to the *Maiden* show next week. Are you in -- what the fuck is on your fuckin' tie, man!?" I don't need to look at it to know that not all of the pigs made it into the toilet.

"Shit!" I look at my tie and see some red stains running down it. "Oh well. Fuck it." I unclip the tie and throw it in the corner near the garbage cans.

"Hey man, I'm fuckin' hungry. Let's get some eats." Gary says as he crumples his beer can and tosses it across the garbage.

"Yeah, let's get somethin'." Jake says and finishes off his beer. He hops off the hood and pulls two cans out of the twelve pack and puts one in each of his jean jacket pockets. I notice he isn't

wearing is tie or suit jacket anymore. Neither is Gary. Jake takes another can out and tosses it to me. I catch it and finish off my beer. Then he gives Gary two cans and opens one for himself.

“Let’s eat some fuckin’ food!” Jake gives the battle cry, and we leave the shit smelling garage.

A few minutes later, we’re standing in the living room next to the food table, and everything is moving in slow motion again. The caterers took away the Pigs-in-a-blanket and brought out some sandwich meat and other shit like that. Jake and Gary are totally fucked up. I didn’t notice how much so in the garage, but now I realize it. I’m pretty toasted too. We look completely out of place here. We are completely out of place here. Jake’s eyes are blood-shot. His construction boots are covered with mud, his shirt is untucked, and his hair is still matted to his head. Gary doesn’t look as wet but easily just as fucked up. Everybody else here is wearing a nice suit, or a black dress. It’s probably only a matter of time before someone calls the cops.

Her mom, Blondie, and Kevin the douche bag are standing over by the couch. The wet marks are still there. Her mom never liked us. She’s talking up a storm with Kevin, and the most I ever heard her say was: “Get the fuck out of the house!” The happiest day of the bitch’s pathetic life was probably the day Monty brought Kevin home instead of me. Or the other guys.

I notice a lot of people start lookin’ in our direction. They look like people look when they’re driving past a car wreck. Jake is eating chicken wings right off the platter.

With every tick of the second hand on the grandfather clock I feel more and more uncomfortable. Every time I scan the crowd I notice more and more faces from the party. They’re all doing the same thing: Talking, laughing, drinking, eating. They’re all in the same place. Except Monty. She was the only one I felt comfortable with that night. Even when she wasn’t next to me on the couch, seeing her face move through the crowd gave me a

feeling. Then I would see the people she had just talked to; they had looks of disgust on their faces. That pissed me off so bad. I see those people here now and they look the same. I'm getting hot again.

I must be fuckin' drunk. I gotta get outta here. The rain is still pouring down outside the windows.

"Jake, I gotta take a piss." I tell him. He mumbles something with his mouth full. I head down the back hallway toward the bathroom, but I keep walking past the shitter. Everything is moving regular again. I keep walking and get to the stairs halfway down this hall. So I go up those too. I go through the door at the top. I guess I'm in Kevin's room now. It's pretty fuckin' big. I don't know what to do so I sit on the bed. On his walls he's got some football posters. In the corner of the room is a TV. By the door is a big pile of laundry. He must have given the maid the day off. Dick. Next to his bed is a small table with a picture frame on it.

"What the fuck?" I say out loud. The picture looks identical to the one in my pocket except it's Kevin sitting next to her instead of me. She must've taken this picture after I left. I shouldn't have left that night. I should have stayed and talked to her. Jesus Christ! I'm sitting on the bed where that son of a bitch did her. My stomach sinks. If I had stayed and talked with her that night last year she'd prob'ly wouldn't be dead and I wouldn't be in this house all fucked up. We'd be somewhere together. My face gets hot again. Only this time it's different. The glass of the frame shatters when it hits the wall. Shit. I gotta get outta here. I leave his room and the picture and that fuckin' bed and head down the stairs.

I'm on the second floor before I hear the commotion downstairs. I can hear Jake and Gary yelling "Fuck this" and "Fuck you." I run down the flight of stairs. There's still people in the living room only they seem different. I can hear Jake and Gary's yelling coming from the front hall. As I run through the living room it feels like I'm runnin' under water. I can't move my legs fast enough. I see Monty's mom on the sofa crying. Their eyes are all on me. I get out into the front hall and my legs work again. There's a large group

around the front door. I push through the group and see Jake and Gary, on the front porch, yelling at Kevin, Blondie and two other geeks. The rain is blowing onto the porch and soaking all of them. Jake sees me come through the crowd and knows the odds are even now. Blondie pushes Jake and Jake's hand shoots out like lightning into Blondie's stomach. Blondie doubles over and slips on the wet porch. He lands right on his face on the wet planks. The two idiots bum rush Jake. Then Gary gets in on it, and they all stumble through the screen door, taking the door with them down, down the four steps into the mud. I begin to move toward the steps, when Kevin gets in front of me.

"Hey, why don't you and your reject friends get outta here. Nobody wants you here. She never even liked you guys." He says. My fuckin' face got so hot. There's a hundred things I could say to him.

"None of you gave a shit about her! You think it makes you a fuckin' saint to come to her funeral! I know what you all really thought of her! What the fuck were you all crying for? You all hated her! You double-faced hypocritical sons of bitches! You're the ones that don't belong!" But I don't say any of this. My mind flashes to the picture in my pocket, the picture in his room, and the faces of the people in the living room.

My hand is swinging before I know it. The full, unopened beer can smashes into the side of his face. The beer can and his nose explode, spraying beer and blood everywhere. Everything freezes except Kevin. Jake, Gary, and idiots One and Two freeze, covered in mud and stare right at me. Blondie stops gasping and stares. I can feel the eyes of the people behind me staring. Even the rain freezes, the droplets land in midair. Kevin kept moving. His weight slumps down supported solely by his crutches. His eyes roll to the back of his head. Without the crutches he would have dropped straight down; instead he's swaying, still upright, and then he teeters back balancing on the crutches. Kevin falls flat on his back on the porch steps. His head slamming on the bottom one. Then everything is

moving again.

“Holy shit!” Jake yells and starts running for his car. Gary slams his fist into Idiot number Two’s face and follows Jake. I jump over Kevin down the stairs, and I’m right behind them. Gary jumps in the back seat. I hop in the front, and Jake is peeling off across the front yard before I close my door.

We’ve been in the car for about ten minutes driving back towards our side of town. Jake and Gary haven’t shut up since we left the reception. I’ve got my photo in my hands when I hear Jake say something to me.

“What’re ya doin’ with that?”

“It’s a picture she sent to me a few months ago.”

“So? If I got one, I woulda throwed it out. What the fuck do you want a picture of her with that cock Kevin for?”

“What?”

“What’re you carryin’ a picture of her and her boyfriend around for?”

“Shit.” Then I see it. “Let me out,” I tell Jake.

“Dude, it’s fuckin’ rainin’.”

“Stop the fuckin’ car!” He knows I mean it so he pulls over. I open the door and get out in the rain.

“I’ll give ya a call about the *Maiden* concert,” Jake says.

“Whatever.”

“Dude, you’re fucked up,” is the last I hear from Jake before I slam the door, and he peels off down the road. I’m standing in the rain now. Alone. I’m outside of the cemetery. I walk over to the big iron fence that keeps the hooligans out. The smashed can is still in my hand. I drop it on the ground. I look down at the picture in my other hand. It’s wet now and the colors are starting to change. I can’t remember who’s sitting next to Monty. I don’t care. I put the picture in my pocket and start walking down the road. Alone. I realize now that I’ve been completely alone for the past week. Ever since a certain BMW went off the road and smashed a tree, killing the passenger. Before that I was alone but still had hope for her.

Wrann

Hope that she would see the way they were. Hope that she would see the way things really were and call me. I never realized I had this hope. Before today. Today I saw the way things were, though. I saw what Jake is, and I saw what Kevin and his people are. I realize the only person I ever fit in with is in the graveyard to my right. I walk in the rain. Alone.

I curse the day I ever tried to tease my bangs

The same picture is brandished in every hall,
an 8 by 10, a 5 by 7 or a pocket remnant,
underneath the emergency wallet card.
It was used in "87" for a personal
Christmas greeting to you and yours,
for a happy,
healthy holiday.

An angelic face,
and the other side,
a couple happy signatures,
in cursive because we care.
We also bounce checks.
Keep in touch. They grow so fast.

The current snapshot is in a standing frame,
and it moves from each coffee table, night stand and bureau,
for the most desired light and time,
for when we vacuumed and dusted,
for when the company came-
Naughty Nighty parties or Tupperware brawls.

I blushed with humiliated stupor,
my face blared in the plastic protectorate
for all the class to peep,
and she placed this on my desk,
an image I'd see in my bathroom,
living room and kitchen...
I curse the day I ever tried to tease my bangs...

I hid those pictures underneath the couch cushions,

England

with the mismatched socks and handkerchiefs.
She asked me where they were...
and I knew she found them.

When I started to fold the orange bachelor towels,
and saw my picture on the wall.
The 80's plowed down my door.
I curse the day I ever tried to tease my bangs.

My mother knows

My mother knows.
She knows I have five senses, ten fingers, a temper,
And my father's forehead.
She knows her words,
And cuts them carefully.
Spreading them in paper doll cliches.

She calls me really late,
Or really early,
Feeling like a superhero,
Telling me to put the meat back in the fridge.
I'll be her sidekick,
Rescuing the pork chops back to the cold,
Quieting them before they start to sing a rancid ditty.

She thinks I should talk to someone,
And she thinks I'm secretive,
But I know her secrets.

She has a sign made professionally,
To put in front of the television.
The sign says, "TAPING".
It reminds me,
To keep the television on channel eight,
Until four o'clock.
Her daytime operas have filled her prime time void for twenty years.

She wears Capri pants, eats sushi,
And worries about her waistline.
I wonder if she sees what I do.

She looked like Ali MacGraw.
When Ali MacGraw was my age.

England

I look like my mother's daughter,
In mine.

Her smile is young.
Other women scorn it,
For being so pure.
She never uses her eyes to talk.
She might start to blush.

When I have a little girl

When I have a little girl, she'll wear pink.
 She'll cry when her goldfish dies,
 try and drown herself in the sink...
She'll make her patent leather reflective,
 as to keep herself quiet in the pew.
 They will comment on her delicate features
 and her dialogue-
 inventive,
 as she unstrapped her slippers,
 lacing her Doc Martens boots.

I was that girl,
 and I tried on every shoe,
 in between the times of earth on my hands,
 of lipstick and rouge.

I sweat and curse for my father,
 bleed and sigh for my mother.

She told me it was beautiful when it comes.
 A spirit would abscond the night with a girl,
 replacing my skin with a woman's tunic.
 And I was suddenly in battle with the world,
 like my body had meretricious value,
 and my life was born to persevere it.

My body is a vessel.
 Some may think it's their bottle to send,
 their heart to burn,
 their bone to bend.
.....My mind transcends above the blood in my veins,
 the wine in my chest.

England

Sitting in that pew once more,
the years engraved in my palms,
I realized man will kill for a life...
mine to give one up.