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Two Hands

Geneviève Beaudoin

I. Measure for Measure

A paper tiger he calls me.
Just imagine the bark and bite

of knowing the value of what you have
by what you give up.

I'm still waiting.

II. Scale

Sometimes I think I should scream: fuck you
To realize how sacrosanct it is, a kiss.



Beat

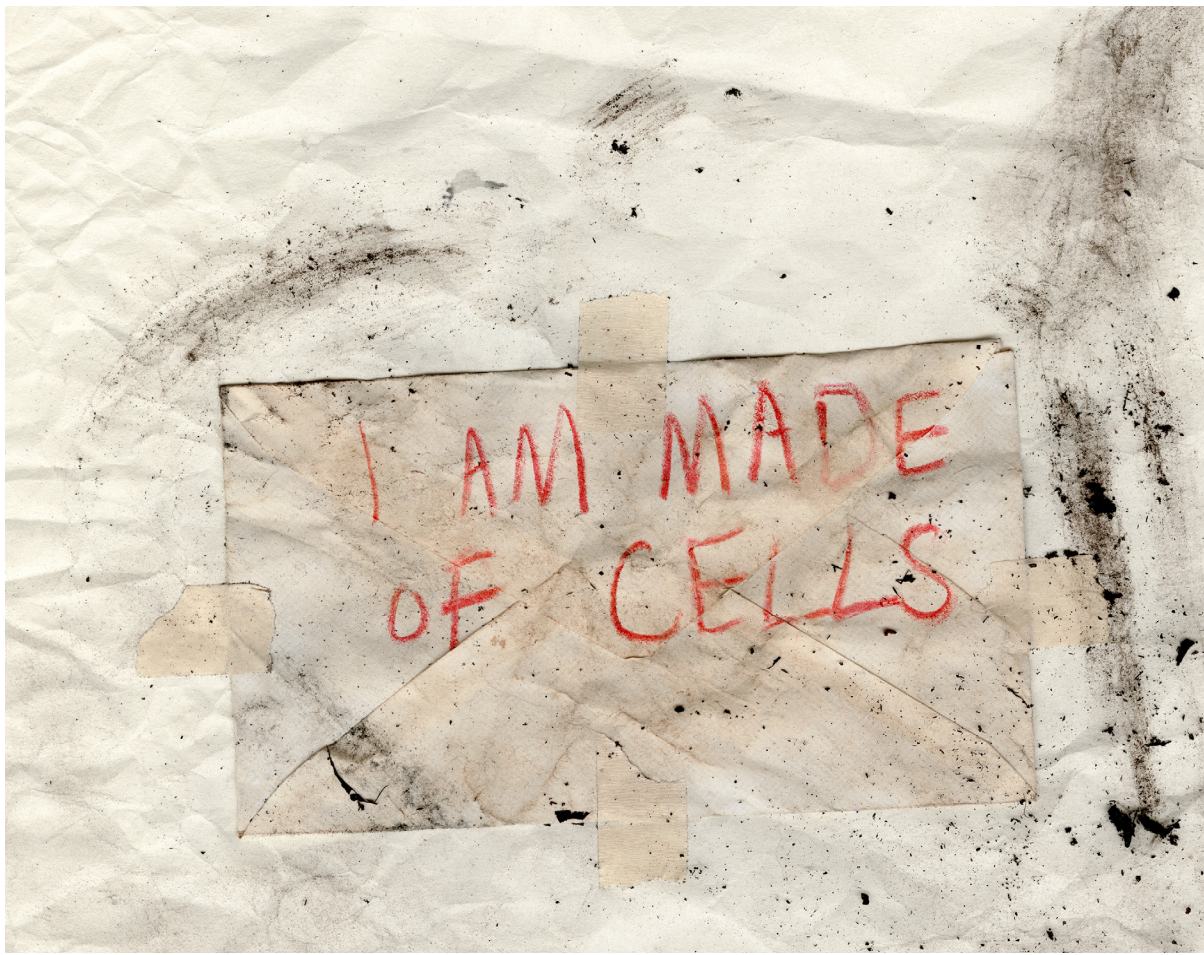
Atara Vogelstein

sadness
like a pickled rose
ruined

ruining
ducking under streamers
and knocking into walls

vinegar lungs

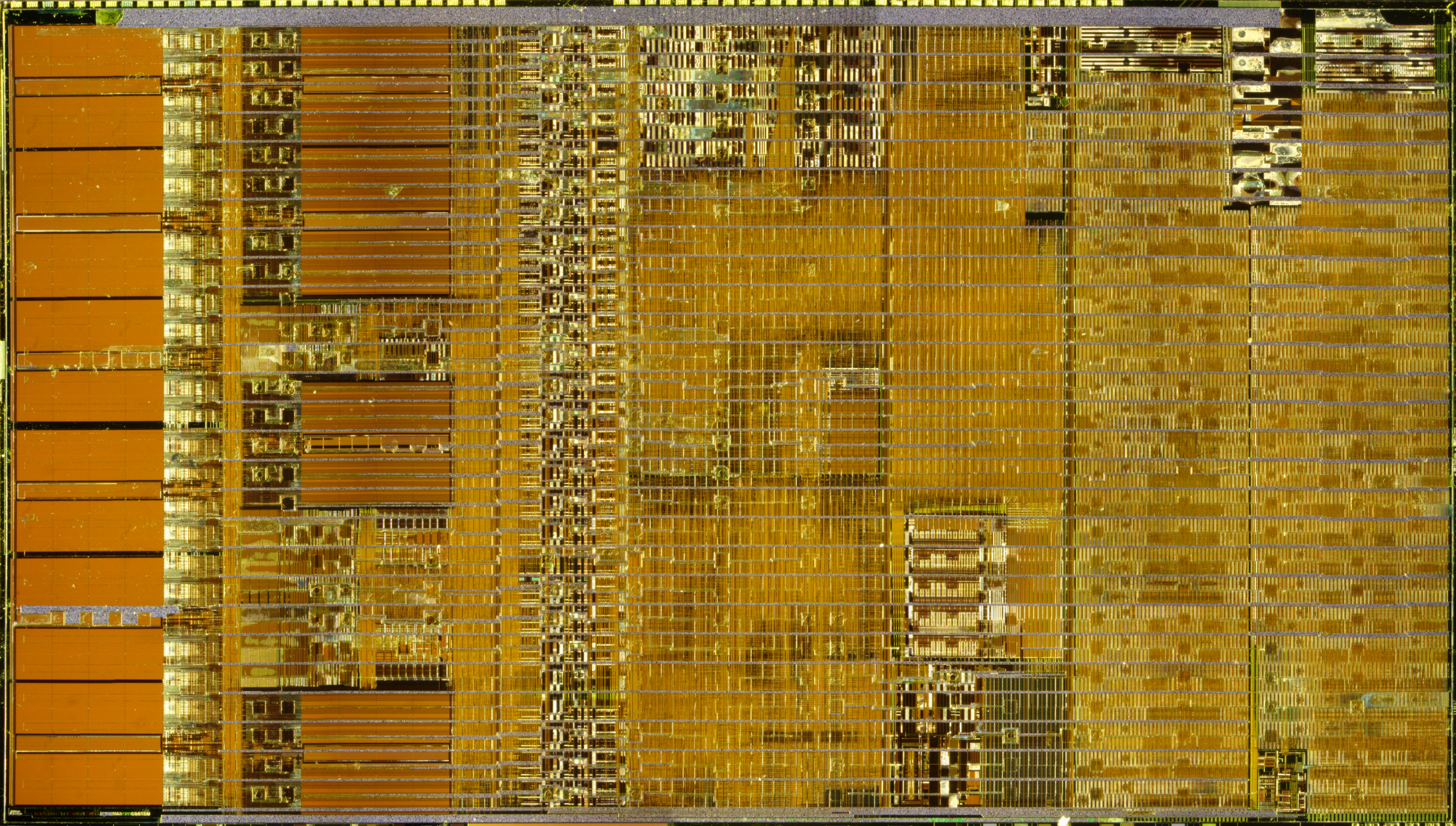




First Lesson, Luke Smithers



Untitled, Daniel Mock



Portraits of Heimlich

Ian Alcock

subliminal handtools unrestrained bolts on a door that is rusty brown
rusty liquid rust yuck. wooden you like to know? how many of my
friend's mothers had affairs? disgusting pink boychildren with thin hair.
i got surgery

for four thousand dollars to have a face and body like Shelley Duvall in
1970. in a shiny metal box, thin metal aluminium i could get out if i
wanted to. it's home. it smells minty, my eyelashes brush and whisper,
giggle.

suede feet bouncing still on the top of wedged sandals and tart curly
blond hair in a military off-green button up shirt. formica imitation fold-
ing table, witty when speaking, soothing when singing, 'how to remove
stains.'

"how to apply to change your name." i emailed as many mother figures
as i could find, i got them to agree to drug me, they put me down on a
table. it usually wouldn't be comfortable but this time it was. it could
have been a couch

they were all smiling, they would help me be a beautiful girl, a great
woman like them too, soon. I know two women who look like Joan
Cusack and Joan Cusack herself is there too.

i had pretty shell pink nails, i had a nice voice—milk and heather.



She's Not Me

Hunter Kurepa-Peers

Tonight I'm the one on the bathroom floor, christening the toilet with vomit.

It's the kind of place where the towels are folded into lotuses and the mini soaps are named after feelings. The shampoo bottle says Strength. The conditioner is Tranquility. The face wash is Bliss. We're paying 300 bucks a night for bottled emotion, and 90 a bottle at dinner to feel none of it.

"Easy, killer."

He holds my hair out of my face while I wretch up Doritos and Cabernet. His hospital bracelet digs into the back of my neck. The mini-mouthwash I need right now is probably called Fresh To Death. He picks me up off the floor and sets me in the tub. The water's freezing. I'm still in the red lace dress from dinner. He watches me there, soaked and shivering, and laughs. "You look like a wet kitten."

My teeth chatter.

He smiles out of the corner of his mouth. "You're such a mess."

If the body scrub isn't called Thinking The Same About You, it should be.

He hands me a loofah. "I'll be right out here, okay?"

The shower gel might as well be called Bitter You Tried To Kill Yourself Over Her But Not Me.

If this all seems glamorous, it's only because I grew up dirt fucking poor.

I lived in a trailer park and ate out of gas stations. Any extra money went to funding one of my father's addictions. During the holidays, a year of guilt would set in and he'd try to make up for it. He'd go around to the nicer neighborhoods and steal packages from FedEx trucks for me and my sister. Only the best for his girls.

He never knew what was in the packages until we opened them. It was always just as much of a surprise for him as it was for us. One year, I got a box of Cuban cigars. My sister got a set of shot glasses. Another year, I got a sweater with someone else's initials stitched on the collar. My sister got a see-through candy cane-striped nightie. Underneath the scratched-out shipping address would be Love, Dad in marker.

When you're rich and you open mystery presents, it's a game and you call it White Elephant. When you're broke as hell, you call it Christmas.

I'm used to presents meant for other people.



"Hey," he nudges me. "How 'bout them?"

We're watching this couple make out in the middle of the train station. It's not voyeurism if you're a thief. I can't see their faces, they're so buried in each other, but yeah—her shoes look about my style. Her ass looks about my size.

These two are so consumed in each other, they don't see us slip by them. They don't see us rolling away their suitcases. They don't see anything outside of each other. They don't care about anything that isn't his mouth on hers. You'd think they were in a bathroom stall, not a terminal.

We're walking away with their bags, and he's whispering into her hair, holding her like she's something precious. You can take everything someone has and still be jealous of them.

I've accepted that I'm not the girl anyone will ever be so in love with that they don't notice their luggage being jacked.

I'm the girl they'd steal Armani suitcases for.

●

We check into the hotel under the names Sid and Nancy. At the last one, it was Kurt and Courtney. Before that, John and Yoko. Eventually, we'll run out of tragic couples and become our own.

We dump the suitcases onto the bed. "Pick out something pretty for dinner," he says. He digs through the briefcase and pulls out a handful of credit cards. The dress I put on is red as sin and one piece of lace away from lingerie. It smells like someone else's perfume.

"You make me feel like Christmas," I tell him.

He kisses the top of my head. "You too."

He thinks I mean Christmas with wrapping paper and wishlists. I don't tell him I mean my kind of Christmas. I don't tell him I mean that he's a present meant for someone else.

●

It's the kind of place where you go to not eat, and no matter what the menu says, two-thirds of your meal will be kale. We're on our second bottle of Cabernet. Restaurant food is just an excuse for us to drink. It's not alcoholism if it's paired with bluefin tuna.

"You like this?" he asks me.

I've stolen diamonds bigger than the filet mignon on my plate.

"D'you think there's a drive-through around here?" I ask. "A corner store? Anything?"

"Sure. Wherever you wanna go."

He writes out a 40 percent tip on the bill. Everyone's a philanthropist with someone else's credit card.

●

We pull up to the gas station by our hotel. He parks out front and says, "I just want to give you nice things."

"I know."

The difference between us is that both grew up poor, but I'll drink stale beer to feel at home, and he'll drink anything else to forget where he came from.

He comes back to the car with cigarettes and Doritos. Our dessert course this evening is stale donuts and two cases of Stella. Our cheese course comes out of a can.

●

The nurse looked at me and went, "You're...uh...Yoko?"

"Yeah," I said. "At least for this week."

She led me down the hallway. "He's stable now. Sleeping a lot. He's been asking for you." We stopped outside his room. "He really loves you. That's for sure." She left me at his door.

He was staring out the window when I came in. I sat next to him on the gurney and pulled his hand out from the mess of tubes. The hospital bracelet on his wrist said John.

"Hey, killer," I whispered.

"I'm sorry." He was choked up from crying, and he's never been the kind to get confessional. "I wanted to be with you. None of this matters without you."

He turned around to look at me. "Oh," he said.

I could hear his heart break in one syllable.

"It's you," he said.

I could feel mine break in two.

He turned away from me and stared back out the window and I wanted to tell the nurse: Well, he really loves someone. That's for sure.

●

I wake up to an empty bed and the sound of spitting. For a second, I think he's overdosed again. I can't remember the last time I woke up from a dream that didn't sound like him puking.

"Morning, killer," he grins, toothbrush dangling out of his mouth. "How're you holding up?"

"Stellar." Whether I'm telling him how I feel or reading off the name of the lotion bottle, he'll never know.

"I made breakfast," he says. There's a cold cup of coffee and three aspirin on the nightstand. "You had me kinda worried there last night."

The cream I'm pouring in the mug is called Returning The Favor. "We never talked about it," I say.

"About what?" We're both not staring at his hospital bracelet. "I'm fine."

"No. No, you don't get to say that. You weren't the one who walked in on you."

"Jesus, that was ages ago. I'm better now."

"You tried to kill yourself."

"It was an accident."

"You said you did it to be with her. I fucking dare you to tell me that was an accident."

You can be the only woman in someone's life and still be the other woman.

He spits in the sink. "Oh, like you never drank too much."

I bet the toothpaste he's using is Wishing This Tasted Like Her.



We hand over our room keys to the front desk.

"Checking out. Sid and Nancy."

The death of another love story.



We're cruising downtown with the roof down, his hand on the back of my neck, a heaven of streetlight constellations above us. This is our kingdom of pawnshops and palm trees. He calls me his gypsy queen.

"No one will ever love you better than I do," he shouts over the radio.

If you think about it, that's an awful thing to tell someone.

We drive past the gas station from last night. Twelve hours ago, I was throwing up in that parking lot.



Twelve days ago, he was half-dead in a motel bathroom.

I came back from a cigarette run and he was on the floor between a bottle of Jack and a bottle of Listerine. I turned him on his side and put his head in my lap.

"I knew I'd see you again."

"Yeah." I grabbed his wrist like a lifeline. "Yeah, it's me, I'm here."

"Wait for me on the other side, okay?"

We always wait until we're dying to say how we really feel.

"I still love you so much. I never, ever stopped."

I've never wanted to own anything as much as I wanted to own his last words, but I knew this was just one more present meant for someone else.

I called 911 and they asked me for our names. I had to check the hotel registration to remember who we were that week.



It's dark when we pull up to the rest stop. There's a row of gumball machines lined up outside the bathrooms full of fake tattoos and army men. The ones where you never know what shitty toy you're going to get, but it's probably not going to be the shitty toy you want. Your first taste of fate as a kid.

"You want something?" He puts in a quarter. A plastic egg shoots out with a fake diamond ring inside, the kind that turns your finger green.

I slip off the gold ring I'm wearing. I don't even remember who it belonged to, but I know it's the kind that doesn't turn your finger green. I put on the plastic one.

"I like this one better," I tell him. "You bought it for me."



We get back on the road.

"Who are we?" I ask.

"Who do you want to be?"

"With this rock?" I flash him my new ring. "I feel like Princess Diana."



We drive through the night. I'm falling asleep in the passenger's seat to *Sweet Child O' Mine* on the radio.

"She died in a car crash, y'know," he says.

He doesn't mean Princess Diana.

"She was always so unhappy. For a long time, before I ever met her." He lights a cigarette and sighs in smoke. "And ours wasn't an easy life for her, we both knew that, but I thought I could save her. She had a war in her mind, and I thought I could stop it. And one night, she just took the car out. Said she was going to 'the other side.' Fuck, I thought she meant the other side of town, not...y'know...god, fuck."

If there is a god, he can't hear us over the radio.

"I couldn't even recognize her face, it was so banged up from the crash. Had to ID the body from the engagement ring. Only thing I ever gave her. Took me the whole time I knew her to be able to afford it."

Axl's singing *Where do we go now, sweet child?* My ring's digging into his hand, but he squeezes tighter.

"I lost her to the road. And I just...what the hell can I do, y'know?"

Axl singing *Where do we go now?* and I myself ask the same thing.

I tell him, "Just keep driving, I guess."

He has one hand on the wheel, the other holding mine on the armrest. I look down at his hospital bracelet wrist and my fake diamond finger.

Royalty in plastic, on to our next great disaster.

Darlin'

Julia Honore Lee

carrying a bag of groceries home from the store,
crinkle clenched across the chest
forearms strapped to quell a bouncy gait
damp paper brown bottom sighs swollen
at the strength of potatoes

sometimes, the top rim of my cheeks smarts from smiling
it worsens the sore when i notice.

peeling open a sleeping house at its navel,
nestled the eggs—center shelf, right side
bananas straddle onions in a democratic wooden basket
the kitchen light slaughters responsible
11pm domestic silence

if i were to call you now to come over, we could share
perhaps, the softness of inner fingers.

commanding quiet things in a quiet house
some pastel night—chalked-choked, orange, parched of stars
i think of how you shave your face
better than i—
though, in autumn, i tried and perhaps won you for it

i do breakfast algebra, while conjuring cacti
and maybe sprinkle synonyms in my cheerios

you're colorful cold in your room,
with bigger
words and eyelashes
and tomorrows



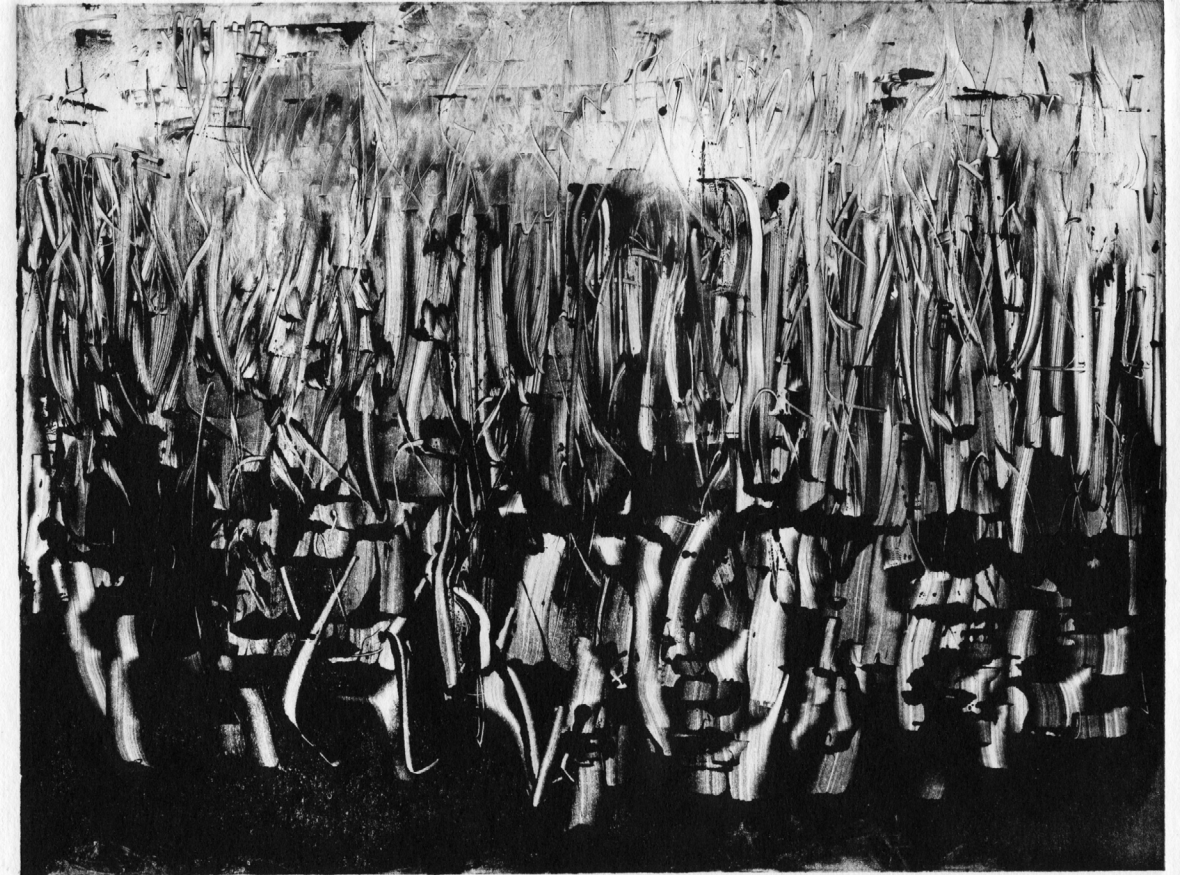
Glass of Water in Queens

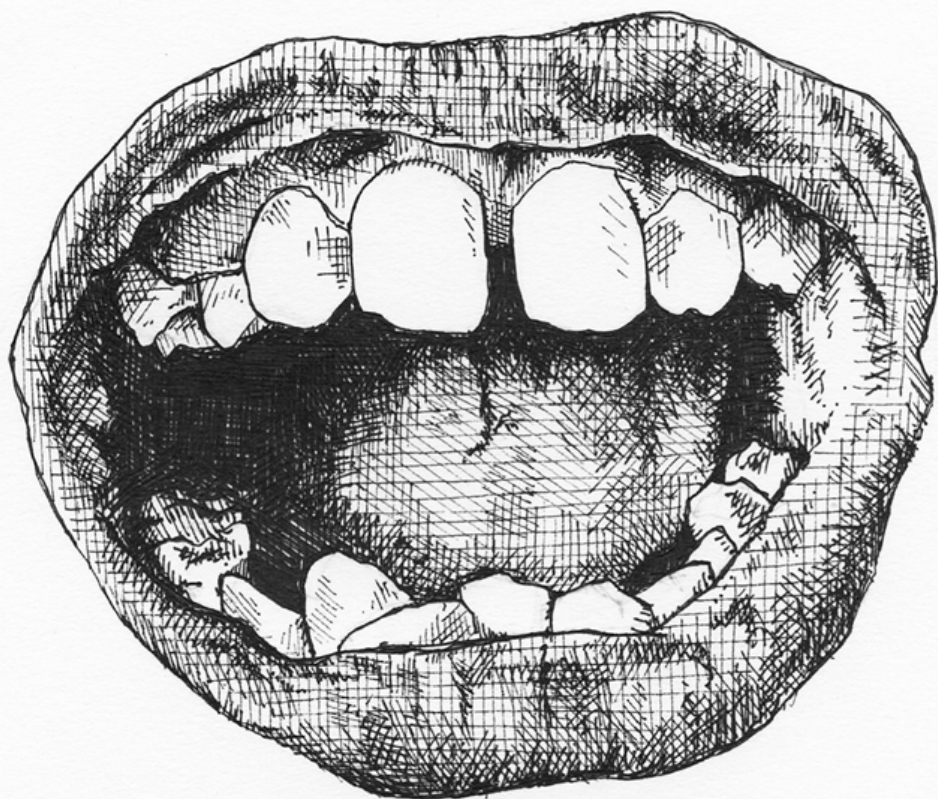
Luke Smithers

I too came into the open. Body like
flint that must learn again how to
wash itself of itself. A river turned
toward me. I held what I gathered, I
pushed to earth need of my animal.
Could I have left honey? Not used to
nothing? Not used to voice shut in.
Not used to bone pottery rattled.

How can I tell him in this diner
off Jamaica, with this one glass
of water, and this single orange
napkin, that I heard atoms screech
in delicate jostle? I'd rather the
fluorescents be out, the linoleum
buried beneath leaves, and us, knee-
deep. You'd stand behind, I'd know
you by your smell.

Touch the scar, silence. What I could
never tell you—I am a bough thieved
then returned to your hands hewn. I
can walk toward you and your plate
all I want. I can hold myself jagged
in the raised glass longer. But will you,
ever, ask for my back under heavy artillery?
Will you recognize my breath alone?





B A B Y
B A B Y
B A Y B

Norwood

Julianna J. Hurtado

The year my parents got a divorce I watched Caroline Norwood Macon stand still in a pile of fire ants during recess. The same year, there was record-breaking heat in the month of May. The sun took everything. The lake retreated into its center; a graveyard of rocks took the place of the shoreline. The grass along the highways turned into hairbrush bristles, leaving the bluebonnets to roast in their shells.

It's impossible to know the beginning of an end. If someone claims they know, that they saw the signs, then they are just trying to be smart in a situation where things such as intellect and hindsight are as useful as last month's winning lottery numbers. There's nothing beautiful about saying that you saw it coming. When I try to piece together bits of that year, I remember how we spent the evenings on the back porch surrounded by citronella candles to ward off hungry mosquitoes, and how when we opened our mouths the air felt acidic on our tongues. My mother and father didn't have anything to say to each other besides *maybe we should sleep apart tonight, it's so goddamn hot*. We were one of those families who couldn't withstand the trauma of summer. The day our air conditioner broke, the heat found its way into our rooms. My mother was glowing when she stood in the kitchen and told my father she was fed up with the heat and with everything else. That night I slept in a tent out in the backyard. In my sleeping bag I read *Watchmen* for

the fifth time from a flashlight's glow. That was the night before Caroline, who I came to know as Norwood, invited me over to climb her trees.

Caroline was up next in the four square line. I was in the second square, my best friend Jake holding down the king's square for the tenth consecutive game. Caroline stepped into the fourth square and stared directly at Jake, waiting for him to target her. I watched him as he spun the ball in between the palms of his hands, making a decision as to whom he would try to get out first. Then, before he had a chance to second guess himself, he aimed for the top right corner of Caroline's square, the point in the middle. She jumped back, angling her body behind where she assumed the ball would go after it bounced. As the ball met her hands, she pushed it out and down towards the bottom left corner of the third square, where it bounced once and flew through the air to the opposite side. The girl standing there wasn't quick enough for the return; she was out. No one said anything. Caroline smiled to herself as she took the third square. Once the ball was retrieved and thrown back to Jake, the game kept going for eight more rounds with me in the second square and Caroline in the third. At first I was afraid that she was going to aim for me next. But after the third round I realized that she was aiming for everyone but me. We passed the ball between each other politely, forming an alliance that didn't require words. When she attacked square four, or Jake, she focused her eyes like an angry, exotic bird. Her lips retreated into her mouth, a flower blooming in reverse. She smiled every time she failed. Just before the bell rang to bring us in from recess, Jake held the ball in a runner's stance and yelled *BLACK CHERRY BOMB!* We sprang from our corners to the middle; the last one to put their hand on the ball was the loser. My hand was second to Jake's and Caroline's was third to mine. She let her hand sit on top of mine even after the boy in square four arrived for his defeat. I was afraid to move. Caroline looked to the side, at me, and giggled.

We lined up single file to head to the cafeteria for lunch. She walked into line and I filed in behind her. My last name is 'Martinez,' hers is 'Macon.' She didn't take a single moment to be shy.

"We live across the street from each other, but you probably knew that already" she said.

"No I didn't," I said. The truth was I had known she lived

across from me since the first day of elementary school, when I recognized her mother's loud, beat-up car in the drop-off lane. I avoided Norwood because she was strange and I wasn't. And the worst that could have happened? That we would understand each other, of course.

"We do. My mom drops me off early because she has to work. Sometimes I catch your dad leaving in the mornings," she said. "Do you want to come over to climb trees after school?"

"I'll have to ask my mom," I said.

"Cool. You can call me Norwood."

I wasn't planning on accepting the invitation. When I got home from school that day, the air conditioner was already fixed; I found my mother running her hand under the faucet. The island in the kitchen was filled with cupcakes, at least six or seven dozen, all of four or so different flavors.

"Mom," I said from the kitchen doorway. The light was pouring in from the window above the kitchen sink. I remember the way she looked with the sun's rays falling around her like that, catching every curve and strand. I remember thinking how beautiful she was, how happy I was to have come from her.

But when she turned around there was no expression showing on her face. Flour dusted her chin and cheekbones. She was clutching her wrist with a wet wash cloth.

"Mom? Are you hurt?"

She just stared at me, as if she was looking at me for the first time, as if it was up to me to answer my own question.

"I burned myself with one of the pans," she said. Then I noticed the dark circles under her eyes, the wrinkles on her forehead, like lines made in the sand. She looked down at her wrist. I couldn't even tell if she was in pain. I scanned the rows of cupcakes.

"Which are the best ones?"

She turned and stared blankly at the island.

"Chocolate peanut butter."

Dad's favorite. I grabbed one and left the kitchen and the shell of my mother without saying goodbye. I didn't want to be home; I didn't want to know what was happening. I ate the cupcake on the walk over to Caroline's house.

The Macon's house was the sore spot of the neighborhood,

the one everyone's mothers whispered about because the lawn wasn't tidy and whoever had been hired to paint their house a few years ago stopped when the job was just halfway done. It was only Norwood and her mother who lived there.

I walked up to her door and rang the bell.

"Hey David," Norwood said. Her face was dusted with dirt and there were broken blades of grass in her hair. There were scratches on her legs; I watched a single drop of blood run from her knee all the way down to her white sock.

"Hey Norwood."

"Do you want to come in?" she said. But before I could reply, she turned around and headed towards the sliding door, leading to her backyard. I followed her, watching her ponytail swing back and forth as she led me through her house.

There was a French bulldog at the edge of the fence, barking towards us. Chewed up plastic balls and stuffed animals with their cotton guts spilling from their seams were littered across the yard. The grass was yellow and sparse. Pots filled with dirt and flower bones lined the edge of the porch. I looked up at the tree.

"Should we climb it?"

"Okay."

"Use these to get up, then follow me," Norwood said. She put her foot up against a wooden board that was nailed to the trunk. I did what she asked and didn't look down. When we were past the trunk and the low limbs, Norwood turned to me.

"You want to go further, right?"

I knew there was danger in it, but I could handle a few bruises and scratches. I also knew she wasn't afraid of heights. Every day at recess I would see her jump off of swings or dangle from the monkey bars with one hand.

"Yes."

I mimicked her moves because I trusted the way she did things—quickly—without stopping to reconsider them. To the right of the tree's lush center was a thick, stray limb. She straddled it and carefully steadied herself back up. I inched towards her and she extended her free hand out to me. I came close to her and sat. Birds chased each other from one tree to another. Rusted weathervanes rotated with the wind.

The roofs of our neighborhood were vacant except for clutters of leaves dancing across shingles before falling onto the lawn. Being above everyone made the world feel like a smaller place. The sky felt within reach. I wasn't paying attention to Norwood when she asked me a question I didn't see coming.

"Do you think I'm weird?" I could feel her looking directly at me. My face became warm with embarrassment.

"No, but my friends do," I said. I didn't think Norwood was weird, but I didn't think she was normal either; she was someone else entirely. She was born in Galveston, a beach town in south Texas, the night after her grandfather died in a plane crash above the Atlantic Ocean. She had revealed this to us in her presentation to the class about how her biggest fear is being in a large body of water because you can never see all the way through to the bottom. She explained to us that the ocean is blue because it's a reflection of what's hanging above it, that there are plenty of frightening things on the ocean floor, and there will never be a way for someone to get to the bottom and uncover everything there is to be afraid of.

"Why do they think I'm weird?"

"Maybe it's because you don't talk to anyone," I said, even though I didn't really think that was it.

"My mom says that too. I don't care if people think I'm weird," she said. And she meant it. I didn't feel bad for her; I wished that we were alike.

"I don't think you're weird," I said.

Norwood was smiling. She shifted her weight from side to side. She wouldn't look at me. She seemed to be getting nervous.

"I saw your dad crying in his car this morning," Norwood said.

"My parents are mad at each other," I said.

"Why?"

I didn't know. I didn't know my mother's laugh was beautiful until it was gone. And I still don't know why that year, our family became parts of a chess game, my mother the king and my father the queen, obligated to be in cautious orbit around her.

"I don't know," I said. Because I wasn't any of the pieces. I was the person playing and losing. I held each glossy, opaque piece by its head and suspended it a few inches above the board while I tried to

get ahead of my opponent, while I tried to find a way for both my king and queen to make it out alive. But I was playing against the computer the whole time. Each one of my moves had been long made, received, and stored in a database for player one to draw upon me the future. At a certain point I knew that it didn't matter where I played. The game was seized from the start. It was my job to go through the motions and finish the game. Then I would have to clean up, make sure all the pieces were there, still intact.

"We should jump," Norwood said.

"Is it safe?"

"Maybe," Norwood said. "I am tougher than most people. I never get hurt."

"Ever?"

"Never. I don't know what it feels like to be hurt," Norwood said. She bit her lip and began swinging her feet, making our branch sway. There was no reason for me to believe her, but I did. She didn't bother with the experience of being upset in situations like being cut in the lunch line, or having your pencil box stolen, both of which would happen to her often because other kids in our class didn't like her very much. Maybe they knew she had no regard for them. And maybe it was frightening.

"Should we hold hands?"

Norwood grabbed my hand.

"On the count of three?"

"One."

"Two."

"Three!"

The fall ended too quickly before I landed, poorly, bruising my elbow and scraping my knee. I stood up; I felt raw. I wanted to climb again. But I knew the day was over when I saw Norwood. Her hand was bent backwards and blood was running down from where the skin on her wrist should have been. She sat up and leaned back on the trunk of the tree. She stared at it and once she started laughing, she couldn't stop.

Mom called me “little man” up until the day she had the stroke that took away her speech. Dad still refers to me as “son.” He looks at me with the same holy love that he did when I was just a kid sitting beside him in the stands of Rangers Stadium, spitting out empty sunflower casings into the same cup. The night my dad formally moved out of our house I was lying in bed, fully awake. I had tossed and turned for hours and in the midst of fluttering my eyes in the darkness, I caught a glimpse of the motion detector light come in through my window. I got out of bed and saw him loading his suitcases into the car. I remember wanting to climb out of my window to yell, to make him stop. *Dad, when are you coming back? Dad, why is this happening?* But I couldn’t. Instead I watched him drive away. He left us behind with the broken garbage disposal, the doormat that says *Our Home*, and a shadow of the man I looked forward to becoming in thirty years. I crept back into bed and fell asleep feeling like half the person I was when I woke up that morning.

Norwood hadn’t been to school since the day we climbed the tree in her backyard. The day she came back I was sitting on the wall during recess. I did this for days, telling my teachers that I had a stomach ache and it hurt too much to be out playing in the sun. Towards the end of recess, out came Norwood, clad in a red cast. She made it to the soccer fields where she jumped once in place, turned around to face the school, and became still. I got up and ran over to where she stood.

When I got there she was surrounded by people who didn’t know what to do. The pile of fire ants was demolished, its vagrants taking their revenge on her young, sunny skin. She smiled and watched them climb over her. The ants swam upon her limbs, like salmon fighting upstream to some unforeseeable trench. Most of them disappeared beneath her overalls, cut off at the knee. Some climbed upon the denim and wandered aimlessly into her pockets where they would become tangled within a seam and die. She bent over and used her hand to intercept a dozen of them so that she could toy with them in her palm, with the tips of her fingers. We stood there, the occasional *ew* or *oh my god* slipping from the corners of our mouths. There seemed to be no end to the parade of ants making their way over her. Everyone was terrified and

even though we wanted to look away, we couldn’t. Every person there must have imagined the pain she was feeling, or rather, that she was supposed to be feeling. Because she should have been screaming; she was on fire. But in reality, we were the ones hurting the most. She didn’t notice when Jake ran from the field to the end of the blacktop where the recess monitors stood. She just looked at me, laughed a little, and said, *See, I told you, I can’t feel anything.*

Norwood’s obituary was beautifully written. I usually never read that section of the paper. Since Rachel’s been gone I’ve been finding myself doing plenty of things I don’t normally do. I didn’t bother trying to find out how Norwood died. I didn’t Google it or make any phone calls. Instead, I spent the day sitting in my recliner, thinking of all the ways it could have happened. Because, like I said, she couldn’t feel pain. She went through life not knowing how much it hurts to fall and break something or be stung when you least expect it. I hope she didn’t see it coming. But I also hope it wasn’t a quick slip in the night. I imagined Norwood wrecking her car or something, climbing out of it all smiles, saying *Phew or That was a close one.* And then two hours later in the examination room she stops breathing because her insides had been beaten, tossed around and bleeding amongst themselves, unable to tell her *S.O.S. This one’s more than just a doozy.*

Yesterday, because of Norwood’s obituary and all, was the first time in weeks I was hurting for something—someone—besides the separation. I thought about calling Rachel, but I didn’t. I came to you instead. Do you think it’s possible, not to feel pain? And I’m not talking about physical pain only. Norwood was a wasp to emotional pain. I have a hard time believing anyone got close enough to hurt her. But I hope I’m wrong. I really do.



Untitled, Lydia Epp Schmidt

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Untitled, Lydia Epp Schmidt

Fragments

Allison Flom

I'm watching the flickering candles on Jamie's face as she admires her birthday cake. Before making a wish, she looks up at me. *Franco, did you really make this?* I'd struggled with recipe books for days trying to make the perfect chocolate cake but the eggs kept breaking and the texture wasn't right and everything tasted rubbery, so I bought one at a bakery a few towns away, in the opposite direction of her job so as to make sure she'd never recognize it. And I told her I made it. I wanted her to be proud of me. Sick, because she's my wife, but the truth, because I don't have anything else.

Her eyes are uncharted oceans and the wax is dripping down the candles fast. *Yes, baby, I did.* And then the flickering gold light around her mouth and cheeks turns into violent red and unwelcome blue in her eyes and the light comes before the sound, and the sound comes before they come in to take me. She's confused. We both are. As the car pulls away from our tiny house, I close my eyes and picture her eyes and her dress and I pray that she blew out the candles before all the wax melted into the cake that I couldn't believe I lied about.

How did you know the victim?

She's my niece. My brother's kid.

Can you describe your relationship with her?

Pretty close, I guess.

Mumbling isn't gonna get you out of here any faster.

Close, I guess.

Jamie can't believe she is going to be an aunt. When my brother first tells us he's having a kid, Jamie makes a huge celebratory dinner. With her mouth full of fresh yams, sautéed carrots, marinated roasted chicken with rosemary and wild Spanish rice, she tells us this is the best news she's heard all year. We're falling asleep and the summer breeze dances in our cheap white curtains and she complains that her face is sore from smiling all day. I rub her cheekbones with my dry hands and she teases that the skin is almost white from calloused cracks and it all leads to amazing sex and when we wake up we go to the mall and buy a baby crib with our rent money. I'm going to be an aunt, she tells everyone, *the landlord will understand.*

Do you remember what the victim was wearing?

No.

Mr. Gonsalves, what was Kiely Moore wearing when she was murdered?

I don't remember.

Do you consider yourself a violent person?

No.

You have a record, Mr. Gonsalves.

The charges were dropped.

You assaulted a minor.

I was eighteen...

Franco Gonsalves, child killer. Local man brings shame to town. Imagine the headlines. The press is gonna eat this up.

Jamie hates the news. Strange, because she's brilliant and reading the news seems like something smart people should do. But it makes her cry. Instead, she reads shallow, simple novels about flat characters and invests no energy in the plots. She says the only drama she has time for is real life. She says she hates fiction but she hates non-fiction too. The only stories she enjoys are the ones she's a part of.

Can I have some water?
Only coffee. Do you remember what the victim was wearing?
 No.
The judge has no sympathy for former felons.
 I don't know what she was wearing.
Maybe this will jog your memory.

I vomit right there on the table. A feat, since I've been in this room for almost a day and haven't eaten. The photograph is printed on fancy photo paper in sharp, precise ink. I can see the auburn undertones of Kiely's hair; she gets them from her mom. My brother's wife is hot, but she's no Jamie. Even my brother told me that Jamie was the best girl I could ever hope to get, that he doesn't know how I got so lucky. I don't know if he ever loved Kiely's mother, but that auburn hair was really something.

The ink is smudged at the top corners of the photo, as if it had been ripped out of the printer before it was done. The light on the black garbage bags in the photo is speckled, reflecting the spotty clouds of an afternoon sky. Her little fingers are bent, frozen in a lifeless grip on the trash bags around her in the dumpster. Then I remember the pink dress.

Remember it now?
 Yes.
Tell us in a complete sentence.
 My niece, Kiely, was wearing a pink dress with green ribbons.
What were you and the victim doing?
 I picked her up at school and took her to town.
Why did you pick her up?
 I always do on Fridays. Her dad works late.
How do you know her dad?
 She's my niece. He's my brother.
Don't be rude.
 I just assumed you knew that she's my—

What flavor should I get, Uncle Franco? I tell her she should probably stick to vanilla because her dad will kill me if she gets chocolate on that pretty new dress. She contemplates this for a moment, shifting her feet

on the large-tiled floor of the ice cream parlor. I consider the way her tiny brain takes in the expansive world in front of her, how she has the capacity to do anything. I picture her in the future as a lawyer, a scientist, a famous actress. An unbelievable success, with an entire closet full of pink dresses that she can stain with chocolate as she pleases. Somehow I see her in an adult's body, but her face remains childlike, trusting, eager. Her eyes wide, her eyebrows in disarray and her small chin sticking out as she ponders. *Can I get sprinkles?*

I've seen a lot of cases, Mr. Gonzales.
 That's not my name.
In your situation though, it makes the most sense to confess.
 I won't.
More coffee?
 I have to get out of here. I need help.
We are offering you a solution, Mr. uh—
 I'm not gonna say I killed my niece.
You were the last person to see her alive and you dropped her off less than a block away from where she was found dead an hour later. You have a criminal record.
 I was eighteen, I—
And when was the last time you saw Kiely Moore?
 Around 2pm, I already said—
And wasn't your only responsibility to drop her off safely?
 Yes, and I always—
And didn't you fail to do that?
 Yes, because—
So it's indisputable that you are responsible for her death, and—
 No, I—
And because her death is due to your negligence, you will take full responsibility?
 I guess—
Mr. Gonsalves, are you responsible for the assault and murder of Kiely Moore?
 Yes.

And then they let me sleep.

I see Jamie in flashing images under my eyelids. She's standing in the doorway of our bedroom. The light from the hallway behind her struggles through her wiry curls and she is laughing. I cannot see her face. Her feet glide across the floor, her small toes curling under with every step and when she gets to the bed she says she wants to make love but she turns on the news instead. I'm watching the television's light move weakly on her cheekbones and I notice that her legs are shrinking. Though she's sitting against the headboard, her little legs just barely reach over the pillow. She swings them back and forth playfully and asks again to make love, this time turning off the television and reaching out to touch me.

Get up, Gonsalves.

How long have I been asleep?

Am I your personal fucking alarm clock?

I was just wondering like, minutes or days.

And I'm wondering if my girlfriend's tits are real but I'm not gonna ask.

That's a diff—

We're moving you.

Where?

To the city. Stand up, do you think inmate transport is the only fucking thing I gotta do today?

The school bus has been painted white and blue. It's just me and three other guys, each led by a corrections officer. The bus bounces in a rickety symphony of physical emptiness and I'm convinced that if I'd eaten in the past three days, it wouldn't be bouncing so much.

I stare at the back of the seat in front of me. The fabric has two large water stains and when I'm about to fall back asleep, they turn into eyes; two large brown eyes seem to open and swallow me into their ambiguous misery. They're familiar, but they're not Jamie's. From the seat I'm strapped to, they appear upside-down and my brain can't figure out how to turn them towards me but I'm getting anxious. I need to know whose eyes they are.

You don't have a pacemaker or anything right?

Jesus, no. I'm thirty-five.

Well you're going through a metal detector before you get strip-searched and if there's any problem, I get docked.

Well, I don't have a fake heart.

They're gonna put a finger in your ass, and I need you to avoid shitting at all costs. If there's any shit, I get docked.

Well, I don't have anything in my stomach to shit out.

Excellent. I can't get docked, Gonsalves. My kids need Christmas presents.

Okay.

The entrance is up here. Stop fucking around with those hand cuffs or I'll make them tighter.

The eyes come back. Well, they dance around my head while I'm getting searched and when I'm settled in a new cell I'm able to turn them around and see them as a part of something bigger, something much more important than water stains. I feel like I've solved a mystery and the eyes are suddenly all I can see. They're looking up at me, they're telling me to follow them.

It's over here, Uncle Franco! She's right. It is the perfect little bicycle, complete with pink plastic tassels on the handlebars and shiny rims on the training wheels. I wanted to be the one to find the best birthday present for my niece, but she runs off on her own the way she does and discovers it all by herself while I am still in the front of the store looking at helmets.

Do you like it? I tell her it's almost as beautiful as she is and I instantly regret making that connection. I buy the bike.

I watch intently as two men with fat fingers play checkers and talk about the way women smell. I drum my fingers on my knee to a familiar rhythm that plays repeatedly in my head and they ask for my name. *Uh, Franco.* They laugh absently and push the checkers onto the wrong squares. *Don't tell anyone your first name, Gonsalves.* I wait for them to say more. They don't, and when they leave the room I am left waiting. A retarded man asks me to make him a crossword puzzle and I truly don't want to, but he has one tooth and I have nothing else to do.

Can you stay in here until I fall asleep?

How old are you now, six? Shouldn't you be able to fall asleep without a grown-up in the room? She tells me she's scared of bad dreams and that her parents always stay in the room until she falls asleep. They only asked me to watch her for the weekend; they never said that I'd need to sit and wait. She asks me why bad dreams exist and I tell her they're there to test us. I explain that if there were no bad dreams, we wouldn't be challenged to be happy, it would come too easily and it wouldn't be real happiness. I'm disgusted at the philosophical explanation of something so trivial to a six-year-old, so I stop myself and start over as though I'm making some sort of voice recording.

Bad dreams are little demons. She gasps, filling up her shallow lungs with air and opening her wide eyes into the dimly lit room. We have to push them away. She hums softly, as she does when she's deep in thought. She began doing that before she could even speak, and Jamie always said she knew Kiely was a smart baby.

Wanna make a deal? I tell her she is much too young to know that phrase. I smile into the dark. I tell her she is growing up too quickly.

It depends what the deal is. She fidgets under the comforter and clutches a stuffed animal. Shadows from the window illuminate a crack in the molding along the floor and I stare at it until it multiplies. Every time I have a bad dream, I can wake you up. The crack in the molding might be dirt. I squint.

Fair enough.

Even if I call you on the phone. I refocus my eyes and her eyes are closed.

Well, what if I'm far away and it's not a good time where I am?

What if I'm in Australia?

What's Australia? Her voice is getting lower and shaking at the ends of her sentences, as my brother told me it does when she is tired. I've been listening for it. I was instructed not to let her get overtired.

Ugh, far. There's a big time difference.

Well I think there's a big time difference between bad dreams and good dreams. I think of her little mind again and I wonder if mine was ever that simple.

Well, good dreams are—and she snores. It sounds the way a baby

pig probably does when it takes its first breath in the world, and she is sound asleep. It's fortuitous, really, because I don't have a good way to end that sentence.

You'll be here until you're sentenced.

When is that?

Jesus, Gonsalves, I have no idea. Do you think my fucking job is to keep track of your court date?

Well, when will I see a lawyer?

You already confessed. What do you need a lawyer for?

I didn't—

Here's a toothbrush. Don't drop it, you won't get another one.

Jamie wakes up on Christmas morning with crust around her mouth and knots in her hair. She stares at our bedroom ceiling as though it's playing a film and she breathes into her stomach, which rises and falls between thin sheets. I wait for her to speak. *Merry Christmas,* she mutters. I stumble downstairs to make coffee, which I enjoy in the shadowy solitude of our kitchen. I pour a cup for Jamie but stop on the stairs to drink it. My teeth welcome the bitter heat.

She is still lying in the same way. It's snowing. From where I stand, I can't see Jamie's eyes moving. *This is peaceful,* I offer. *I love you.*

I had a dream, Franco. Color rushes back into the vast whiteness of her cheeks. Her eyes meander back to the screen on the ceiling and she clutches the covers in her palms. *But I don't know if—*her voice trails off and she sits up, adjusting her position so her whole torso faces me. Her breasts are invisible under her loose t-shirt. The empty coffee cup is still in my hand. I mean, *I'm not sure if it was a good dream or a bad dream.*

She disappears into the bathroom and reappears with her hair in a bun, still in the t-shirt, taking deliberate, seductive steps. She looks down at her bare legs, then back up at the ceiling, then at me. *I was crying in the dream,* Franco. Sometimes she repeats my name as though she might forget it. My mother finds it endearing. *It wasn't bad crying, it was just different.* She looks at me the way she does when she's desperate for me to say something. She tightens her closed mouth until

her lips turn white and she curls her toes under. *You were singing to me in the dream. Why don't you ever sing to me, Franco?* I lunge forward and cover her cheeks with my palms, kissing her and stepping into her body and her feet float off the ground. She hates being carried (I tried to carry her in one of the photos after our wedding and she cried; she smeared her makeup and told the photographer to leave). I wrap my hands below her rib cage and hoist her up, throwing her on to our bed. *How much do you love me?* She rips off the t-shirt and I grab it from her hands. I will use it. *Tell me you love me, Franco.* Her skin is hot and her voice crackles under the muffling of my chest on hers. *Can you just say it?* She moves her shoulders and I hold them down. I plunge my tongue between her parted lips and enter her. She is screaming, flailing her limbs hopelessly under the weight of my body and she is leaning into me but she is telling me to end it. *Stop, Franco!*

Say please, I whisper into the unexpected chaos. She thrashes and squirms and says nothing.

When it's over I stumble out of the shower and downstairs, naked, in a sudden haste to get more coffee. I admire her near-lifeless body, sprawled out once again on the bare bed, all of the blankets on the ground around her like a turbulent moat and she is scared to breathe. Shortly afterwards, we pile wrapped presents into the car and silently drive to my brother's house, where we always spend Christmas. Neither of us speak until Kiely runs out onto their snowy lawn in her pale yellow pajamas to sing carols to us. She begins with a squeaky and unmistakable rendition of *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree*. Beautiful, I offer. *That was unbelievable.*

My cellmate uses string to tie an empty shampoo bottle to the rungs of the top bunk so it hangs right above his stomach when he's lying down. He grunts every time he hits it and watches it swing back and forth. He tells me his name is Jim. Jim has a gray beard and leathery skin covered in colored tattoos that have been afflicted by time. He speaks in his sleep.

I remember. He interjects comments into silence and is usually talking to himself. *I remember Joni,* he offers in his gravelly vibrato. He swings a skinny arm at the shampoo bottle and it hits the wall. A corrections officer comes into view, loitering silently outside our cell. He

watches. *There are a lot of pretty girls,* Jim continues, and I consider the possibility that these fragments, spaced at least forty-five seconds apart, may be addressed to me. He hits the shampoo bottle again. *So many pretty girls.* He is immersed in the world he is describing. I imagine his arrest, his processing, his life ending at the age of seventeen. I imagine what he looked like without a beard and I can only see him as a toddler, pushing a wagon and smiling at the sun. I can't remember which one was Joni. More than two tragic minutes pass and the CO leaves.

Well, you remember that you loved her, right?

*That's right. So many pretty girls, they're all—*He falls in and out of sleep and I watch him. His own snoring wakes him up. *We can think about a lot, Gonsalves. We can convince ourselves—*

Anything. He is about to sleep again. *The brain is a powerful thing. Do you remember what it felt like to love Joni?*

Do-you-remember-what-it-felt-like-to-love-Joni, he whispers softly and breathlessly to himself, I do remember. *But, so many pretty girls, I can't—*

It's okay. You don't have to remember what she looked like, right? Fuck it, you know she was hot!

Hot, ha. Hot.

Right. The details aren't so important, Jim. You can remember how she made you feel. You can remember love, and you got to experience it, even if it was just for a moment. Who cares what she looked like? Make up a picture of her in your head and love that person. It's better that way anyway.

He hums, tapping the shampoo bottle with his bony fingers until he falls asleep again.

It is summer and we are at the playground. The overcast sky is a blanket of vastness and the children run through shadowy heat. They sing; curious, restless, untainted. A group of slightly older children are playing a version of hide-and-seek and I ask if she wants to join them but she shakes her head absently and runs her fingers through the sand.

"Alright, kiddo," I offer, "are you okay?" The shallow questions hang idly in the space between us.

Her dirty hands, impossibly small, build mounds of sand just to break them down and her eyes wander up to meet mine. "Is it hard

being a grown-up?” I build a mound of sand on the ground in front of her. She waits.

“Sometimes. Sometimes being a grown-up is the worst thing. But grown-ups have tons of freedom; we can make choices, get married and have our own families so in that way, it’s pretty cool.” Her mouth is slightly open and I become very aware of the gaps between her tiny teeth.

“Why do you want to get married? I’m not married, and I’m happy!” Her eyes are smiling but the bottom half of her face remains serious, with the darkness of her mouth emerging from behind her lips. She breathes into her round stomach and watches me intently.

“Marriage is great.” She squints quizzically and I try to look away. “You can share everything, live in a house together and, I mean, you know who you will be with for the rest of your life. You can be certain. Certainty is nice.”

“Are you married to Aunt Jamie?”

“Of course, silly goose.”

“Well, what do you talk about?” I build another mound and she knocks it down. Her expression offers sympathy beyond what a six-year-old should be able to summon. I am, once again, in awe. “Uncle Franco?” I nod through glassy eyes and veiled embarrassment. “I don’t think I want to be a grown-up.”

“Well, of course you do. You’ll be a great grown-up.”

“But I don’t wanna be one. I wish I could be a kid, just like this, forev—”

“Stop that.” She jolts her head up, surprised as I am by my abrasive interruption. “I just mean, you are going to do important things when you grow up.”

“But my daddy said the only important thing is love.”

“He’s right. Your dad says some pretty smart things, huh? You’ll grow up, and find someone to love. He’ll be your best friend, and you’ll live the perfect life.” I imagine a heart with an anatomically correct aorta, not the traditional cookie cutter heart, in a small box. In my mind, the box grows smaller and smaller around the increasingly large heart and its walls are closing in, crushing it. I am wrapped up in anxiety and I dig my shaking hands into the sand. I feel out of touch, alienated from myself, and I can’t see why. She hums before she speaks.

“But you’re my best friend, Uncle Franco. If I could stay a kid and you could stay my best friend, that would be...” Her voice trails off and she is lost in the residue of a daydream. She dusts the sand off her hands, shrugs her shoulders and jumps up, allowing her tiny, pudgy legs to carry her to the slide. The ladder is facing me, its rusted metal rungs are a stairway to nowhere and the sand feels chalky under my fingernails. She climbs up, slipping on one step but regaining her balance. At the top of the ladder, she pauses and turns around, not to look at me but to pose against the naked sky. She stretches her arms out to both sides, laughing about freedom and turning back around slowly. All too quickly, she sits at the top and pushes off with her feet, disappearing down the slide and filing away a million little demons.

- A. little wire, little heart, little lock
- B. little wire, little heart, little lock
- C. little wire, little heart, little lock
- D. little wire, little heart, little lock
- E. little wire, little heart, little lock
- F. little wire, little heart, little lock
- G. little wire, little heart, little lock
- H. little wire, little heart, little lock
- I. little wire, little heart, little lock
- J. little wire, little heart, little lock
- K. little wire, little heart, little lock
- L. little wire, little heart, little lock
- M. little wire, little heart, little lock
- N. little wire, little heart, little lock
- O. little wire, little heart, little lock
- P. little wire, little heart, little lock
- Q. little wire, little heart, little lock
- R. little wire, little heart, little lock
- S. little wire, little heart, little lock
- T. little wire, little heart, little lock
- U. little wire, little heart, little lock
- V. little wire, little heart, little lock
- W. little wire, little heart, little lock
- X. little wire, little heart, little lock
- Y. little wire, little heart, little lock
- Z. little wire, little heart, little lock





Mom's Bag of Hair

Andre-Naquian Wheeler

My mother has a plastic bag of my hair inside her fireproof briefcase. One day, as she was looking through the briefcase, I snatched the Wal-Mart plastic bag and opened it, holding my thick chunks of ten-year-old black curls up to the light.

"Why do you still have this?" I asked Mom, hysterically laughing. "It's so weird. It's already bad enough your room is a shrine to me," I said, looking around at the pictures of my dimple-heavy smile covering her walls.

Mom stopped going through her mountain of papers and looked down at the plastic bag of hair with seriousness on her face. "Tie that back up," was all she said, concern over my former curls heavy in her voice.

I obeyed Mom's command, tying back up a piece of my identity. Then I laid down on her bed and stared at one of her fifty photos of me. It was a photo of me at eight, breaking one of Mom's major rules by sitting on the arm of our living room couch covered in plastic (Mom was intent on making the couch last until I graduated high school and, well, she succeeded). In the picture, my shiny curls reach down to my skinny waist. Mom had pulled out her disposable camera and snapped the pic right before my step-dad cut the locks she had spent five years nourishing and loving. She'd shook her head and muttered: "Why?" the entire

haircut. Each snip cut not only my locks, but her heart.

"Promise me you're not doing this because of some little rugrat," Mom grilled me before the haircut, referencing my handful of fourth-grade bullies. Kids who were no more than five feet tall but scarier than Goliath. "Cause I'll come up there and talk to them my damn self," my mother yelled. "You're a boy! I don't know why they wanna tease you and call you a girl. They should be there to learn. Not worrying about your hair."

My white Texan classmates had a hard time wrapping their heads around my hair in the same way I wrapped my do-rag around it every night. Mom and I are black and originally from the Bronx, where almost every black guy had afros, braids, dreadlocks, and ponytails. But in the suburban town of Wylie, Texas, black people were an endangered species. The only other black boy in my grade, Terrence, had a safe buzz-cut. He was the only one awed by my hair. The rest were just confused.

"No one's making fun of me," I lied. Because my mom really would strut into Birmingham Elementary School and put my cartoon-watching bullies in their place. "I'm just tired of my hair," I went on. "It's hot and heavy. And I hate not being able to dip my head under the bath water. And besides, I feel bad that you have to stay up and braid it when you're tired from work."

"I told you I like braiding it," Mom whined. "It relaxes me," she said as she twirled her nimble fingers around my curls. I brushed her hand away. I turned around and blinked away my tears, using my hair as a curtain.

"Well, let me just make one last braid. Before it's gone forever."

And Mom sat there for a couple of minutes, braiding and then unbraiding one part of my hair over and over again, a deep concentration in her eyes and a small smile on her face. I closed my eyes, just like always, and soaked in her love.

Eventually, my step-father ruined the moment by stomping into the living room with a razor in his hand.

"Let's get this over with," he said, patting an empty chair.

I swear David had a smile on his face.

He'd been one of my hair's fiercest opponents, almost as bad as my bullies.

"You're going to make him look like a little punk," he'd say as Mom would braid my hair, spitting the word "punk" out like a loogie.

"Oh shut up. Don't listen to him, André," Mom would say to me. "He's just jealous because he doesn't have hair," she'd joke, a reference to David's shiny bald head. I would crack up and Mom would yell at me to keep still.

"Hmph," David would respond, scratching his chest hairs and flipping through the T.V. channels. "I'm just saying, you gonna get that boy made fun of."

"Who cares," Mom would spit out. But the thing is, I cared. Which was why I was cutting my hair.

"You ready?" David asked me as he turned his razor on. He'd covered me with a black garbage bag for my hair to fall onto. And before I could lie and say yes, little itchy black curls began to fall like snow.

Immediately I regretted my decision. But it was too late to yell and run away from David's razor. My bullies had made me go bald. Yes, hair grows back, but those strands of hair David cut held years of my mother's love. And besides, I never had the courage, or patience, to grow my hair back.

Until now.

"Guess what," I said to my mother as she dyed my hair four months ago. I was returning to college in two days, and even though she pretended to be against it, Mom was dying my hair a strawberry blonde she had picked out for me.

"What?" Mom vigorously massaged the dye into my one-inch hair, well past the ten minutes the box recommended. ("Let me work my magic!" she'd yelled when I pointed out the box's directions.)

"I'm going to grow my hair back out," I answered, and that made my mother stop and step back.

"For real this time?" she asked, looking down at me with disbelief and excitement.

"For real this time."

"Okay," she said, returning to lathering up my hair. "Just don't dye it no crazy colors and when you come back for Christmas, I should be able to braid it."

I'd been acting like an abusive husband to my hair, punching it with spontaneous self-dyes. I'd been using wacky colors like aqua-blue

and old-woman gray to inform the world I was an "artist." But to Mom, it just said crazy.

"You're ruining your hair. You know how many black people would kill to have good hair like yours," she'd cried when I first dyed my hair blue a year before. So if anything, she was just happy she was getting to dye it herself: this time, a sane strawberry-blonde.

Even though I couldn't see her, I knew she was beaming at the thought of getting to braid my hair again. In four months she'd be able to twirl her fingers around my future curls and craft a part of me into whatever she wanted.

So I've been trying to take care of my hair, for her, fighting off the urge to dye my hair whatever color matches my feelings. Ever since coming across a WebMD article on it, I've been massaging coconut oil into my hair every other night, praying the hair growth claims are worth the weird smell. And I moisturize it a lot which as anyone with black hair will know, is a lot of work. I'll spend up to thirty minutes combing and moistening my hair, leaning into the mirror, and watching my curls slowly appear like a developing picture. And every week I'll send Mom a selfie of my hair.

"Looks real nice," she'll text back. "Keep taking care of it."

And I do, twirling my fingers around my hair during class, as I talk to my friends, and pretty much anytime I'm stressed out by life which is frequently. Making sure my hair stays nice and curly for my mother's nimble fingers.

One morning, I woke up and walked into the bathroom. I turned on the lights and looked at the mirror, hopeful my hair had suddenly grown down to my broad shoulders. Then I could immediately fly back home, sit on the floor between my mother's legs, and become her muse again.

It hadn't. But soon.

And when it does, I won't let the world cut it.

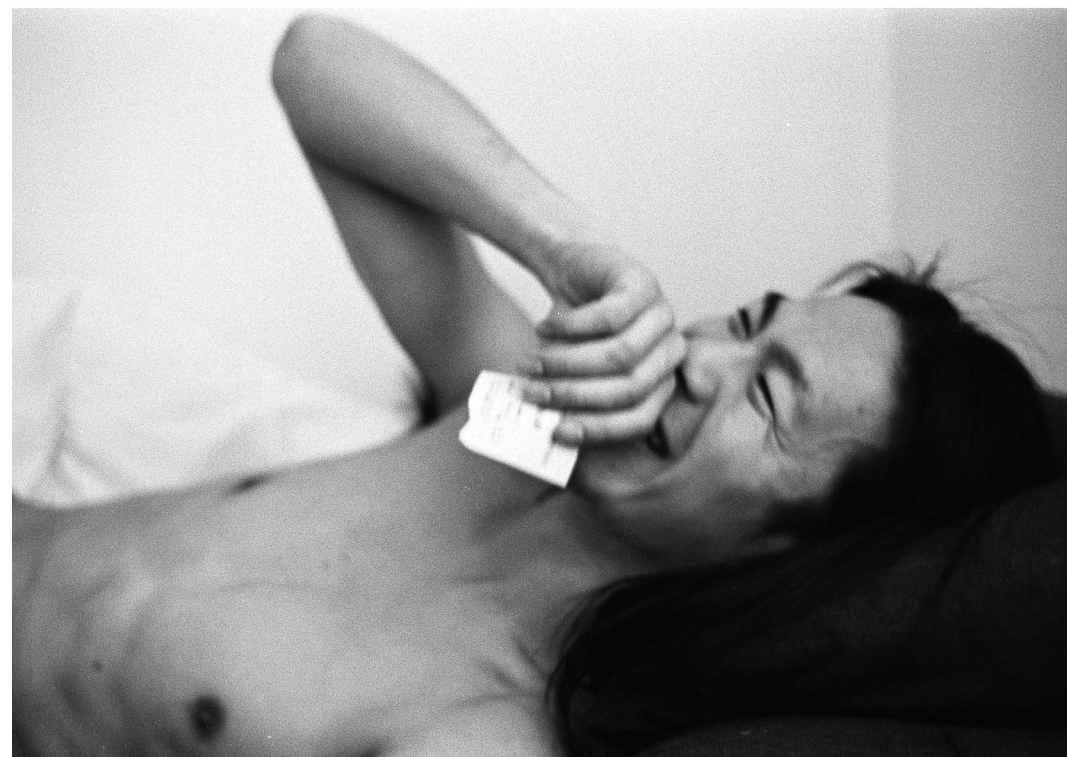
Tequila Sunrise

Thomas Collins

cheat river
it will cheat you of your life

best friend dies
under rock in the river
while you watch. Or

is that what happened,
Dad?



Derivative

Anna Tatelman

This is the story of a writer who is also a drunk. But what writer is not? In the writer's more lucid moments, he rolls his hands over and over, ashamed of what he has become. His baby would speak if only the writer knew how to listen and not just observe. His wife's voice is heavy with the sleep she cannot find as she asks him to stop, to rest, to be, but still the alcohol pours down his throat and the pens run dry and the mosquitoes wander maliciously over eyes, holding sleep hostage. And still no one in the family can either sleep or say what they mean.



"Harry's finally got himself a lawyer, so today he sent in another appeal."

The wife looks up from her notebook. "That's wonderful!"

"Is it?" The writer sits atop the kitchen counter inbetween a half-full bottle of vodka and a stack of used, red plastic plates. "Is it really better to prolong the waiting even further?"

The wife returns to her notebook, pushing aside the tower of her husband's half-filled journals to make room for her elbows on the table. Now, if Jane Eyre had chosen to go to India, would St. John have stolen her spunk or would she have only grown stronger?

"Well?" The writer grabs the vodka bottle and gives the rim a long kiss. "Don't you agree?"

Jane Eyre would have only grown stronger, the wife decides, scribbling upon the lined, yellow pages. True inner strength can never be bested.

"He's just prolonging the inevitable." The writer sweeps the bottle about like a baton. "He isn't guilty, of course, but the American justice system is deranged. A man can appeal his death sentence for years, but if it's a high-profile case, and they don't have other suspects.... Well, someone has to pay. The public demands blood repay blood, guilty or not."

But what a shame it would be if Jane Eyre never got her happy ending. Would she have ever heard her Mr. Rochester's voice in India, calling her back home? Can love really conquer all, both emotional and physical boundaries? The wife frowns at her pen. She is a romantic, so she wants to believe so, but she is also a pessimist, so she doesn't.

"But I understand why he keeps appealing. What else can he do with his wasted life? That's why I live in the moment: you never know when someone'll screw you over. I don't ever regret being laid off because now I have time to do what I love—to do what I was meant to."

The wife ponders her new story in silence. The writer caps the vodka bottle, stands up and declares, "No regrets." Then, in a moment of spontaneous remembrance, he seizes his wife's fingers and kisses the back of her hand.

"No regrets," she echoes, kissing his hand in return, but her mind remains shrouded in the golden temples and fragrant mysteries of the India that neither she nor Jane Eyre ever visited.



The baby is always surrounded by books. The writer checks out eight picture books, the library's maximum, a week. Yet the baby only ever reads one book, over and over: a tome of the wife's about penguins. The baby sits for hours, spellbound, staring at the pages. There are pictures of penguins sprinkled throughout, but the baby spends longer on the pages with only words, running fingers no bigger than licorice drops over the undecipherable symbols.

When someone asks what his novel is about, the writer laughs. To believe you can reduce a novel to a few spoken syllables is juvenile. For a novel, he explains, is truth and lie served in a cocktail of inked words and invisible silences. A novel is the printed manifestation of humanity.

Harry is the only one who has read any of his novel. Before the baby is born, the writer mails Harry the first five chapters (*not in final form, you understand*, the writer includes in a note, *writing a novel is an evolutionary process*) and visits in person a week later.

“What did you think?” the writer asks.

Harry’s orange shirt is too big on him. That is clear to the writer immediately, even though he and his brother are separated by the partition glass. Beneath Harry’s armpits there are faded stains which the writer is certain belonged to the last inmate because Harry never sweats. When Harry was five and the writer (although not yet a writer) was three, Harry threw a rock at a hive of bees after one stung the writer and reduced him to a puddle of tears. Harry got stung many more times after throwing that rock, but he wore the sting marks like trophies, proud that he had defended his younger brother.

“What am I supposed to think?” Harry asks.

“I can’t *tell* you what you’re supposed to think. That would defeat the purpose of me trying to convey what you should think through my *written* words.”

Harry’s breath fogs up the partition glass. He traces his finger through the condensation. The writer tries to read his brother’s symbols, but they are only a bunch of unrelated lines.

“It’s fine, I guess,” says Harry.

“You guess?”

“I’m not sure what you want me to tell you, frankly. It’s all right. It will sell a decent number of copies and win all the highbrow awards. It’s too literary for me, though.”

The writer’s forehead furrows. “But you love literature.” When Harry was thirteen and the writer was eleven (and still not yet a writer), Harry caught him reading the SparkNotes version of *The Outsiders* for school and Harry slammed his brother upon the head with his copy of

the novel. *But I can get the same information in here, only faster*, the writer protested, rubbing his skull. *Never substitute someone else’s experience with your own*, Harry told him, replacing the SparkNotes in the writer’s hands with Hinton’s novel, and ever since, the writer never has.

Harry does not answer. His random lines turn into an animal’s bristling fur. The writer can’t tell if it is a wolf or a porcupine or both. But he is sweating through his Goodwill shirt.

“You’re the reason I started reading,” says the writer. “You’re the reason I’m a writer.”

Harry grins. “I’m glad that I’ve played such an important role in your life. So do I get more chapters?” He draws a face onto his wolf-porcupine. The mouth smiles, but the eyebrows slant down, as though angry. “I could use some entertainment here, even if it is highbrow.”

The sweat beads on the writer’s forehead and upper lip. He pretends he is swiping at a pesky mosquito as he wipes his face. “Sure. I’ll send more. After I edit them a little, I mean.”

“Great.” Harry sketches another form, something round and smiling and vaguely feminine. A girl, constructed not of sticks, as most amateur artists would do, but of ovals, emphasizing her plump youthfulness. When Harry covers her naked circle body with the Hello Kitty insignia, the writer’s mouth dries. Georgina Reynolds, one of three New England prepubescent girls that Harry is accused of raping and murdering, was wearing ripped Hello Kitty underpants when they found her body in the Swift River.

“But you didn’t,” says the writer before he knows what he’s saying. It isn’t a weakness a writer should have—forming words without deliberate intentions—but he can’t help it. More sweat pools on his face but he doesn’t wipe it away this time. “You’ve been falsely accused.”

Harry’s smile grows. “You know I can’t talk about that. All my conversations are monitored and I haven’t given up on my appeals. I still plan to walk out of here as a free man.”

“But do you deserve to?”

Harry draws the last of Georgina’s body parts: her right arm. The arm inserts its circle-fingers into the porcupine-wolf’s mouth, willingly and smilingly feeding itself to its predator.

“That’s not for you to decide,” says Harry. “You might be writing a novel about other people, but I’m writing one about me—and I’m

going to give myself a proper happy ending.”

●

Their phone only ever calls two people: the writer phones up his older brother, Harry, as often as prison phone regulations permit, and the wife phones up her fan-fiction friend whenever their time zones permit.

The wife doesn't have to call him by his screen name (Holmes24601), and he doesn't have to use hers (SmashingSkies). They know each other's real names. But she prefers this anonymity concealing intimacy, prefers that she addresses him as Holmes and that he addresses her as Smashing. She prefers to keep this one happiness separate from her innumerable miseries.

That Thursday evening after work (Friday morning before work, for him), she gives him her verbal critique and praise for the latest chapter of his novel, a *Les Miserables* story on Javert's childhood, and promises to have finished reading it by Sunday. He thanks her and proceeds to tell her about his latest fandom—*Beowulf*, of all things—insisting she give it a chance. She prefers stories with strong females, but she promises she will, for him. She tells him about the rising popularity of her *Buffy* novel, as well as the *Jane Eyre* novella she's just begun. He says he cannot wait to read it. They then move onto their favorite reality television shows, their mundane day jobs, their opinions on politics, their children, their neglected piles of laundry.

“Why do you waste so much time on a friendship that isn't even real?” the writer snorts each time she hangs up. “An unreal relationship built on unreal art. What a profound place this modern world is, where you can make friends with people you've never even met.”

This is the story of two writers. The wife is a writer just like her husband. Unlike her husband, however, the wife's sole identity is not as a writer. The wife compartmentalizes life, work and art. While he slaves away day after day at a magnum opus that he believes fulfills all three categories, she neatly subdivides them. Her life is balancing checkbooks and measuring cereal portions to ensure that each box lasts as long as possible. Her work is the daily grind as the secretary of the Gibsons & Sons firm. Her art is her prolific body of fan-fiction.

So the wife does not answer the writer's derisive remarks. Instead, she fits the baby into her high chair and props open the penguin book on the tray. Instead, she asks the writer, “How'd your writing go today?”

“Oh, it went as well as it could have gone,” sighs the writer, drawing squiggles in his notebook over his scattered penmanship. “My characters refused to cooperate with me, but that's only to be expected when they're strong, well-rounded individuals. How was your day?”

“Fine,” she says, measuring out Minute Rice into a pot. If she follows the suggested serving size of half cup per person, this one box will feed them both for three nights. She smiles. Hunger is hardly pleasant, but she does enjoy utilizing her pragmatic skills. “Answered calls, took meeting notes. The usual secretarial chores. My boss went on a tirade at one point, saying I don't know how to use the copier. I use it perfectly well. I mean, what is there not to know?”

The writer chews his pen and gets ink on his tongue. “Well, he just lost a big supplier yesterday, right?”

The wife opens a Tupperware container of beans and adds five-eighths of a cup to the rice. “Right.” While dinner cooks, she mashes up a banana for the baby; baby food is an unnecessary expense.

“You were an easy target to unleash his anger on, then. Don't take it personally, dear.”

“Good point.” The wife turns up the stove's heat and neglects to mention that she had a wonderful lunch break writing a new chapter for her *Buffy* novel. The writer would not want to hear about that part of her day. The writer derides the wife for only ever producing writings that are derivative, uninspired. Parasitic, he had sometimes snarled when his eyes were too bloodshot and when she tries too hard to make him understand her passion for the fan-fiction community.

She no longer tries.

The family sits down to dinner. The writer and the wife talk and eat, the baby eats and flings banana mash everywhere, and everyone laughs when appropriate (not the baby, for she is the serious one of the family).

●

Hunger is pink. Not neon pink, like the leggings of fresh teen-

age girls, but pale and lukewarm, like salmon.

They will not perish of this lukewarm pink hunger. There are always cans of beans, boxes of rice, jars of peanut butter, half-crushed boxes of cereal with dead mosquitoes sandwiched between bran flakes. They never know the agony of starvation. But neither do they ever experience the satisfaction of feeling full. Of contentment.



He no longer remembers the baby's first moments: watching the umbilical cord being cut or hearing her first screams into the blank void that is the universe. He no longer remembers his wife's long agony of labor or his own crippling anxiety, the foreign terror of helplessness as he clutches her hand and declares that she is okay, that everything is okay because they are together.

But he does remember the first time he holds the baby and she opens her eyes. They are a wide and deep blue—just like the ocean, he remembers thinking and he also remembers thinking what a trite simile that is, but he doesn't have the energy to think of a better one.

The baby's expression is so solemn. He wants to make her smile, so he begins creating funny faces. From her hospital bed, his wife tells him he'll scare their child, but the baby is neither scared, or pleased, and only continues looking. So he stops making faces and looks back.

They look at each other for 21 minutes. This is not hyperbole. The writer tracks the time. Not even a week old and she is already too much like him, observing everything and never participating. It scares him. He is sweating.

Just as the 21st minute turns into the 22nd, the baby moves. The writer grins as the baby reaches out one arm, grabs the writer's index finger and places it in her toothless mouth.

The writer jerks his hand away.

"For pity's sake," says the wife, "don't get antsy. Babies put everything in their mouths."

His hand is trembling. The writer cannot speak because he cannot remember how and the baby cannot speak because she does not know how, but if either of them could it would be of prisons and

wolf-porcupines and how you can never really know another person or protect them from all of the world's invisible dangers, no matter how much you love them.

"You look affronted," notes the wife. "Like she's just challenged your authority or something. You must know that's silly, darling. She's an infant. Real life isn't like a novel. There isn't a great big literary subtext to every human gesture."

The writer still cannot speak. Sweat beads on his upper lip and trickles down his spine.

The baby puts the writer's finger back inside her mouth and smiles for the first time in her life.



The wife keeps her fingernails perfect at all times, long but rounded evenly, painted a glittering turquoise. The writer does not understand how she can cough up enough money for biweekly manicures when they can barely cough up enough money for diapers. But he never says so aloud. He may not understand the need for expensive nails, but he does understand the need to mask the hideous reel of life with nuances of perfection.



"You don't use the phone anymore," says the wife, stroking the baby's hair as they sit together upon the floor, the wife fiddling with her notebook and the baby reading her book.

"Aren't you glad?" the writer sneers through breath stained with vodka. "Now you have more minutes each month to talk with your unreal friend."

"Holmes is a real friend," says the wife steadily, "but I don't need more minutes. You can still call Harry. I don't mind. In fact, I want you to."

"Well, *I* don't want to."

The writer never tells her that he now knows Harry is guilty. What could he say? That he knows Harry is guilty because of the coincidence between a childish drawing of foggy breath and his first inter-

action with the baby? He already knows what she'd reply: *There isn't literary subtext to every gesture, darling*. And that may be true, he thinks, but it's also true that the people we trust the most not to hurt us are the ones most likely to do so.

"Well, if you don't want to, I won't make you." The wife tickles the baby. The baby doesn't laugh because the baby is the serious one, but she does let her mother show affection. "Just keep in mind that, if you stop talking to him, Harry might think you no longer love him."

The writer doesn't hear her. He is busy studying the baby's profile as she studies her penguin book. He suddenly kneels beside his daughter and pulls her into his lap. "Don't worry," he whispers into her tiny shell of an ear. "I'll never let anyone hurt you. I'll rewrite human nature. I'll be there for you even when everyone else is gone."

The baby starts wiggling and crying, refusing to stop until he's released her from his grasp and she has resumed sitting by her mother's side, reading the book she cannot understand.

"Over 300 reviews for not even twenty chapters! That's unbelievable."

"Yes," says the wife, pacing into the living room, cradling the phone against her ear and bouncing the baby in her arms, "isn't it? Some might say the last thing this world needs is another *Buffy* fan-fic, but, well, apparently it does."

From their decrepit maroon sofa, the writer spares his wife and baby a single glare before returning to the contemplation of his scotch. She smiles at him as the baby chews on her finger.

"And you didn't even have to degrade yourself to *Twilight* erotica to get all those hits."

"How dare you even *suggest* that I would disgrace myself like that," she laughs. The baby touches her mother's smiling mouth, her eyes wide at this novelty. The wife's grin widens.

"I wouldn't. I didn't. I'm glad your writing is finally getting the attention it deserves."

"I hope you don't feel obligated to say that just because you're my beta reader?"

"Smashing," he groans and her throat closes up; she loves the way his British accent curls over the 'a' in her screen name. "Of course not. I'm saying that because it's true. And because I'm happy for you."

She panics as her eyes prickle: she never cries, never permits either her husband or herself to see her inner strength crumble. So even though her husband isn't paying attention to her, the wife turns away from him. She massages her fingers over her throat, coaxing the muscles to open back up and permit her to whisper into the phone, "Thank you."

"Why is she always reading that damn encyclopedia!" the writer rages, thrusting an accusatory finger in the baby's direction.

The wife looks at the unwanted—but no doubt justly earned—purple trophies beneath the writer's eyelids. She wonders why no one ever told her how undesirable trophies are. She wonders if she should spend the money for next week's manicure on a psychiatrist instead. Or maybe just extra protein. Does malnourishment create the inability to understand other people?

"It's not as though she can actually read it." The writer's arm slams out for the gin bottle, but his fingers are clumsy and the bottle falls to the floor. It doesn't shatter, but the gin spills into the carpet. "She's not even a year old. She can't read. So what does she see in those pages?"

The baby glances up, as though knowing she is the topic of discussion, but then returns to her book, far more captivated by the reality of print than the reality of pain.

"And penguins, of all things." His hands scrabble at the carpet, like he intends to siphon up the spilled gin with his fingertips. "Why penguins? Dumbest animals around."

The wife stands up, goes to their bedroom, and returns with a bottle of stale olive nail polish. Her husband still scratches at the rug. He has not noticed her momentary absence. She reseats herself and liquefies the aged polish, then paints her own nails for the first time in three years. She feels victorious, satisfied in the way self-made humans are. Just like *Jane Eyre*, she tells herself. Her stomach creaks with hunger

and her eyelids weigh heavy with suppressed tears.

The writer stops his ravaging of the carpet and slumps backwards, leaning his head against her knees. It is only with effort that she does not pull away.

“Shouldn’t you be happy?” the wife asks. “Harry’s being released today.”

“Yes.” He no longer speaks with anger, only the aching drowsiness he normally hides.

“I never thought he’d be released, either.” The wife blows on her first coat of polish. “But I’m thrilled that he has been. It really gives you hope that there is still justice in America.”

“Yes.” The writer watches the baby run her dewdrop fingers over the words of her book. He wants to tell his wife the truth. He wants to tell everyone the truth: the courts, the public, his future readers. But he has spent too long being the writer: he no longer understands how to use oral speech to convey his meaning.

This is the story of a family that no longer understands the text of reality.

“Penguins are the dumbest animals around,” the writer repeats, because he feels that he must say something, even if it isn’t what he means. “Pathetic excuse for birds. Can’t even fly.”

The wife strokes her husband’s hair once, then begins her second coat of paint. “Honey, that’s hardly fair. You can’t fly either.”

Not Home

Rob Kellet

I was walking through an unfamiliar town one night when I grew tired and hailed a cab. When the driver pulled up and asked for my destination, I simply told him that I was lost and wished to go home. He nodded and repeated “home” in his strange accent as I got into the vehicle. I gave him my address, but he shook his head and said “not home.” I took it as a miscommunication and tried to be clearer about where I live, but he smiled and said, “Yes, home, I take you there.” I was at first worried that I was being kidnapped, but the man appeared impossibly docile, as if he were concerned for the safety of the very air he breathed. Deciding that the man was harmless, and too tired to protest, I slumped back into my seat and reckoned that the worst that could happen was becoming more lost than I already am.

The driver kept silent throughout the trip, keeping himself completely focused on taking me “home,” wherever that was. To ease my own anxieties regarding my unknown destination, I asked the driver about the town I was in. I figured I should at least know one end of this cab ride before we go too far. “This town...” the driver began, seemingly searching for the right words. “This town you are leaving behind.”

As he said this, we turned onto the highway.

Looking behind me, the town began to seem somewhat familiar yet so distant, like that feeling when you reunite with an old friend only to forget their name. The driver, breaking the silence, asked how I got to

that town. “I have no idea,” I answered. I was being honest, too. Even if I had remembered that old town, I couldn’t think of a reason for why I’d be there. My friends, my family, and my job were all in the town I call home. Why would I abandon my life like that?

In no time, we were pulling into a more familiar town. The town I called home. I guessed that the cab driver really did know where “home” was. Excited (and relieved), I asked the driver how he knew where I lived. He just smiled and kept on driving. Looking out the window, I saw a row of the cute little townhouses I admired as a child, all different hues of bright pastel colors. I had always wanted to live in one of those tiny houses, but as I found out as I grew older, it would have been more economical to throw my money into the river. At least the water doesn’t charge interest.

“Nice houses, yes?” my foreign friend asked. “Sure,” I said, “but you could live in something much bigger for those prices.” He chuckled a bit and said something to the effect that price isn’t always an honest indication of value. I had lost focus because I saw the town park to my right. I had many fond memories of being here as a child, running and laughing and playing and falling and crying and begging to stay for just one more minute. And here I saw my friends, young and full of life and doing what they enjoy without worrying about rent or gas or electric or water or cable or family or work or disease or disaster. Only smiles, the sun warming their faces. It then occurred to me that last I checked it was still night. Where did the sun come from? Well it was a long drive, maybe I fell asleep on the highway. I admired the simple joys these small children had here at the park. I asked the driver if he could let me off here so I could play with them, smile with them, but all he said was “not home” again and continued driving.

“Say, you should have taken a right there to get to my apartment. Do you really know where it is?” He either didn’t hear me, didn’t care, didn’t want to answer or any combination thereof. Instead we kept on driving, heading for what seemed to be, once again, an unknown destination. Looking out the window to the right, I saw more townhouses. Even if they were too expensive, it would be the ideal place to raise a family. Big enough to fit a wife and one or two kids, small enough to maintain, close to the highway, next to the school.

The school.

Looking to the left, I saw the school, now releasing its students for the day. I saw my friends, wearing uniforms too small and backpacks too large, standing and smiling and laughing and talking to me. I was smiling too. I was happy. It was impossible for them to see ahead of them, to know who would be the doctor or teacher or actor or writer or pencil pusher or burger flipper or witless loser. They didn’t even care. And near them I saw my daughter and she waved at me, as if to ask for a ride. I told the driver to stop to let my daughter in. He merely shook his head. She did not pay the fare, he said, so she could not enter. “Neither did I,” I protested, “I haven’t paid you anything yet!” He had no reaction and continued driving. “Just let me out here,” I said, “and I will walk her home myself.” With a firm conviction, he continued to drive and never took his eyes off the road.

“Not home.”

As I looked back at the school, I saw my daughter staring at me, her hand slowly lowering from its waving position. As we grew more distant, it became impossible to tell how she felt. Was she angry? Disappointed? Did she hate me? Have I failed her as a father? Am I fit to call myself her father? Do I just cause her pain? Am I overprotective? Overreacting?

Would she be better off without me?

As we continued down the road, I watched the school become smaller, the image of the previous unfamiliar town on my mind.

After a very roundabout route, we finally turned onto the street on which my apartment stood. On the right, those townhouses again. I tried to run the numbers through my head. If I worked a second job, took the night shifts, saved aggressively for a year, canceled the cable subscription, bought store brands, took out a hefty mortgage, never took a vacation again, we could probably squeeze ourselves into one of those houses. That might make my daughter happier. That might make my wife happier.

That might make me happier.

On the left, I saw my wife exiting the apartment. She appeared flustered about something. She headed in the direction of the school, so I could only assume that she was worried that our daughter hadn’t come home yet, and so had gone to pick her up herself. She was obviously angry, likely angry at me. I had not only failed my daughter, but I had failed

my wife as well. It wasn't enough that we were trying to raise a child in such a small apartment on a meager income, but I couldn't even do the basic tasks that a father needs to do. I did not try to draw attention to the cab, hoping my wife would travel out of sight without noticing my presence. The driver continued past my apartment, but I did not protest this time. I would rather have been anywhere else at that moment. I would have liked to get away from my daughter, my wife, my friends and even that cab driver. Oh, what I would have given to just disappear and never return.

For the remainder of the cab ride, I refrained from peering out the windows. Instead, I sat slumped down in my seat, wondering if I would ever have a chance to amend my failures. Could I ever be a father to my daughter? A husband to my wife? A friend to my friends? A functioning member of society? I could not provide for my family, I could not smile for my friends, I could not pay my bills, I could not love my neighbor.

How can a father support his family if he cannot support himself?

How can a friend help a friend if he cannot help himself?

How can I love others if I do not love myself?

The cab came to a stop. Jerked away from my thoughts, I wanted to ask the driver why we had stopped, but in my confusion I could not form words at that moment. Instead, he got out of the car and opened my door.

“Home.”

I stepped out of the car and inhaled my first breath of fresh air since the unfamiliar town last night. It was such a relief to get away from those smelly, sticky leather seats of the cab. We were at the middle of the bridge that ran over the river that split the town in two. This was no small river and this was no small bridge. The bridge's huge size and majesty never made sense in a town full of little pastel houses. Obviously, I was a bit confused that we stopped here. I turned around to get back in the cab, but the only other presence on this bridge was the driver. There was no cab to bring me back to my apartment, no other cars, no other

people. Just him and me.

I had many questions for him, but I started with the most obvious one. “Why are we here?”

“Home,” the foreign driver began, “I brought you home.”

“But we passed my home. I live in the apartment down there.” I pointed.

The cab driver shook his head in a way that I was growing used to. “Not home.”

“Well, call it what you want, but that's where I live. I'm going back.”

“No,” the cab driver said with a very serious tone. “Not home. This is home.”

“This is a bridge,” I said. “I'm going back to my apartment.”

The cab driver stepped in front of me and grabbed me by the shoulders. “You cannot go. You paid fare, asked for home, I brought you home.”

“Well I didn't pay a fare and I'm going to walk back to my apartment.” I removed his hands and pushed my way past him. As I walked away, he shouted back at me: “No going back.”

He was right. There was nothing beyond the bridge. It was all missing. What lay before me was a vast nothingness, devoid of apartments and schools and parks and houses and houses and houses.

“Here is home,” the driver said. “You stay here.”

I want to see my daughter.
“She is not here.”

I want to see my wife.
“She is not here.”

I want to see my friends.
“They are not here.”

I want to see my apartment.
“It is not here.”

I want to see the school.
“It is not here.”

I want to see the park.
“It is not here.”

I want to see the pastel houses.
“They are not here.”

Stop lying to me.
“I am not lying.”

They were just here.
“Then where are they now?”

Why won't you tell me?
“Why won't you listen?”

My mother had purchased all my furniture. When I was born, she bought me two dressers, a chest, and a small bed. When I turned thirteen, she got me a bigger bed and a nightstand. That furniture was mine, she said, and once I left home, I could do anything I wanted with it. Specifically, I could bring all this furniture into my future apartment. Furniture was (is) expensive, and so it would significantly reduce my total costs for moving out. This was probably most appealing to my parents, as they wanted me out as quickly as possible after graduating college. That was another issue. Before all of this, I'd have to go far, far away (and yet so, so close) and live with strangers and study and study and study and college is expensive. You need to try your best, can't lose your scholarships. We can't afford your education without them. But also don't stress too much: your personal well-being is also very important to us. And we love you and we want you to know that. We love you so much. We want you to be happy. And we want you to be out of the house by the end of the month.

You have no wife. You have no daughter. You have no friends. You have no job. You have no apartment. You have no school. You have no park. You have no pastel houses. You cut all of that out of your life after you graduated high school. You were scared of going off to college, moving away from home, starting your own life. You were worried that the world wouldn't like you. You were worried that you would have to change, that you would have been forced to change, that you would have changed even if you didn't realize it. You never wanted a day that you couldn't see all these pastel houses. You never wanted a day where you were unsure about what tomorrow would bring, you never wanted that feeling of helplessness as you saw your daughter trip and skin her knee. You never wanted to stop smiling, to be weighed down, you never wanted a reason to stop smiling. You never wanted those summer days to end, you never wanted to leave your parents and apologize and find the words that would liberate you from your own pitiable existence.

A local boy's body was found on the shore of the river last night. The body has been identified as a recent graduate from the local high school. He was eighteen. Cause of death has not yet been determined, though the police have announced that his back has severe bruising and his pelvis has torn from his tailbone. This may indicate that he fell off the local bridge, the large industrial monument that separates the pastel houses from the other pastel houses. He appears to have suffered from anxiety over leaving the only town he has known in his whole life, the town that is familiar yet unfamiliar. He seems to have worried over his future and his past and grappled with his existence in a world where children have to be nice and obedient and do as you're told and only speak when spoken to and pay your bills and marry young and have children and get an education and get a good job (but not in that order) so you can support your family and not be a drain on society and make your parents proud and let them retire in peace. His parents have declined to comment. No note was found.

As night fell I grew worried and told the cab driver that I really should go to my apartment before it got any darker or colder. However, there was no cab driver there. I walked down the bridge to where my apartment was supposed to be, but it was dark and I was tired and I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. I was lost and the town was frightening at night and the pastel houses started to all look the same and I lost track of where or when I was and I must have fallen asleep at some point.

When I awoke it was still dark out and I was still quite poorly rested, so I got up and took a quick look around me. I walked around a bit but grew tired again and hailed a cab.



The Purple Flower

Tamekia Sharee Jackson

The field was full of yellow flowers. In the middle of it stood a single purple flower. The purple flower wondered why it was the only one of its kind, which it knew because all of the yellow flowers told it so. The purple flower wanted to be yellow, but it knew this was impossible, so it just enjoyed being with all of its yellow friends. Until, one day, a pretty girl with blonde hair came and picked all of the yellow flowers.

Every. Single. One.

She liked them because they matched her hair. She got closer and closer to the purple flower, which began to dread being picked. It didn't know what being picked was like, but it couldn't bear the thought of leaving its roots. And what if some of its friends were left behind? Finally, the girl arrived at the purple flower and reached out for it. But, instead of pulling it up, she bent down to smell it. Then she released it and went on picking the yellow flowers. The purple flower was relieved and filled with joy as it swayed in the wind, happily grounded by its roots. Until it realized that the little girl had left the field and taken ALL of its yellow friends with her. The purple flower started to cry because it was alone. Then, it heard a soft buzzing as a bee flew by. The bee paused, turned back around, and flew back to the purple flower.

"What a pretty flower you are," said the bee. "Why are you crying?"

"All of my friends are gone," said the purple flower. "At first I was the only one of my color and now I'm the only one of my kind."

"Don't cry," said the bee.

The bee began to rub up against the flower, then he flew off. He came back the next day with a few friends. They talked with the flower and flew around the field. In a few short weeks, little purple flowers began to sprout all around the field. A few days later, there was a new field of bright purple flowers with many bees that danced among them. In the middle of the flowers, one stood slightly taller than the rest, slightly happier than the rest. The little girl returned to the field and when she saw it was full of purple flowers, she lay down in the field and rested, because the flowers were far too lovely to pick.



Melting

Joshua Tarre

Black eyes
reflect the dim little lights
that dance around
the bright, emaciated crescent.
A delicate island,
of pawed ice
that wanes and drifts and shivers
across the night sea.
Through the cracked ice
bony arms wade in their wake
head chinning the surface of the water.





Wolf Lake Lodge

Becca Pecaut

My father took my fishing rod
while I slept on rain
and he lost it to a bass.

I'm no robin's egg,
I made him regret it.

In a dream
the Star of David
eloped with the big dipper,

a constellation no bigger
than my fist.

Now I wonder
about the moth
and the butterfly.

Beautiful is my man
who can't tell the difference.

Grandfather's muskie
mounted on the wall, my glory
bubbles in the water's basement.

A thorn begging forgiveness
hooked my rib, cracked me in the end.

In spite of it all,
I can unclench.
In spite of it all,
lonely is fresh
and I miss him like new.



Jackie

Helen Isaac

Grandmother married a Jew
ten years her senior with sad
blue eyes. She left Connecticut
College, her degree unfinished
and her collar bones like knives
pushing at the skin above each
breast. She didn't smile in her
engagement photo in the *St.*
Louis Post-Dispatch—it wasn't
the style. She crossed her
forearms and raised her brow as
if to say I am occupied with the
business of living. She addressed
me like she was the Magic Mirror:
she'd tell me, with more vested
interest than any mirror had, how
I looked. (To me, she was honest, never cruel.)
Her brown eyes always looked the same
in that spacious sitting room, always
silently wanting love. Those eyes

were like my brother's, like cups
of strong Earl Grey. My brother,
who cuts his nails too short with care,
keeps empty bottles in his bedroom closet,
lined up against the baseboard like mercenaries,
awaiting orders in their dusty
hiding place. He is a lieutenant,
adored by his men, and doesn't
want for love; love just comes
to him. He is honest, and less
cruel with each passing day, but
his voice still trembles on one end
or the other, never in the middle.
And here am I, always in the
middle. They watch me still,
their irises like cups of tea
left steeping and forgotten,
now too strong,
too cold to drink.

Plover, Wisconsin (February)

Emma Behnke

I should like to be very small.
Remedios with a taste for ice.
A star-nosed mole dragged into the light,
Touched in a tender, cankered spot.

Who would pay for a manicure to hold someone's hand,
To watch her cuticles peeled off.

The obol of answers,
A lead-tongued conniption prick.

And when you look at me, I get this warmth,
Like holding a lot of photocopied papers to my chest.

But I am left without, like a cow with very large eyes,
Who, after a snowstorm,
Licks the fence on the side of the road for salt.





Reminders

Gillian Avina

I saw a man die on the street.

I saw someone put a plastic bottle in the trash.

I keep myself walking watching my feet.

Man in green hat says, "Women are not guaranteed education."

Rihanna says, "Shine bright like a diamond."

I keep myself walking singing whispers to the ground.

Mount Ontake killed 47 people yesterday.

They are still uncovering bodies.

I drag my finger and move my thumbs.

Sea levels are rising.

We are still uncovering bodies.

Sea levels are rising.



Every Bit of It Reid Williams

I was signed onto two leases, halfway out of one apartment and half-way into another. I needed to find two renters, one to fill my current bedroom and one to move into the vacant space in my new place by the first of the coming month. For a week I'd been fishing with a deadline – desperate for a catch, but ultimately powerless as to what might nibble on my line. For my sanity, I needed to step out of my boat, put my rod down so to speak, and take a break. Such a decision perhaps also contained in it a vaguely superstitious hope that the river I was on might replenish itself in the interim.

I went to the park, the one twenty-five minutes from the first apartment. There're lots of parks in New York, some doubtlessly a shorter walk from where I'd been living, but this one was cleaner and sunnier than most. Families and tourists and kids were there. Happy, well-behaved dogs were there. After too many days with a clenched abdomen, checking multiple inboxes on a regular schedule, I couldn't settle for anything less.

It was three o'clock, very warm but not oppressive. I sat on an open spot of grass on one of the few lawns without tree cover and took off my shirt to tan. I'd been thinking around that time about the nature of approaching people. There were always attractive women in the park. Pretty people flocked to public spaces, it seemed, when the places were in line with their own beauty. Two young women sat near me. Thin

and fashionable, their skin sun-kissed, one was brunette and the other blonde. I looked over at them from time to time, gently and from a small distance. I didn't aim to be noticed, or even to make eye contact, but simply looked and mused and felt the sun on my skin and the blades of grass flattened beneath me.

A group of men, seemingly in their late twenties, entered the sunny lawn, stepping over the chain that divided it from the concrete portion of the park. They were conspicuous and looked around the lawn—never directly at one another—as they projected loud voices and abrasive laughter. Beers were in their hands despite laws against such things. Sitting down next to the two women I'd been watching, they continued to attract attention to themselves, competing with one another to open their respective bottles with lighters and keys in lieu of a bottle opener and either clinking their drinks together when someone succeeded in opening a beer or jeering at those in the group who failed to do so.

They were, if not trouble, rambunctious. These men did not travel in self-contained company; they seemed to have come to the park with some vacuum within their ranks, looking for action to fill some lust or empty space.

I'd stopped watching them after their arrival. Before two minutes had passed, though, a volley of cheers erupted from their group. When I looked up, one was squatting, more mobile than his lounging companions, clapping. He then held out his right hand and those with him obliged, all high-fiving him in turn. He sat back down.

"I did it—I talked to her first! I did it," he said, his voice loud, gaze unfixated and roaming.

Even before his piddling triumph, this man seemed to be the leader of the bunch. He was tall, tan, and muscular. He wore a tank top with a printed graphic. From a distance, one may have mistaken him for handsome. With his facial features fully discernible, he looked grotesque. His eyes were wide and crazed. They were tense but were not hard and still the way some proud men's are. It unsettled me to look at them even from a distance. His face wore an expression caught between excitement and anger, his mouth and nose shaped by what may have been years of jeering, forced laughter.

Having been given a spotlight, he clung to the attention of his peers. As the boyish congratulations of his friends died down, he sprung once again to a squatting position and grabbed for a blade of grass.

"I bet I can play this," he said, and then, though no contradiction came from those around him, punched the nearest in his company on the shoulder. "Call bullshit, go ahead," he said.

The group as a whole laughed in reply.

The man, the alpha, cupped his hands around his mouth, the blade of grass between his thumbs, against his lips. He blew hard. The sound produced was low and loud, but had none of the solid roundness associated with a deep note. It was an ugly sound, like that produced by a goose or, imaginably, a failing truck horn.

Growing frantic, his performance in full swing, he turned around again to the women behind him.

"Wanna learn how?" he asked.

The blonde, who was seated closest to him, attempted a reply, but he spoke again, his insistence arriving before she could get a word in.

"Lemme teach you how," he continued, turning all the way around now, his bent knees pointing towards the women.

"No. No I don't," she said. I found her directness commendable.

"Come on," the alpha replied. He reached down for a new blade of grass. "First you you gotta pick a—"

"We don't want to know," the brunette said, leaning forward to engage the man.

I raised myself off my elbows to an upright sitting position for the first time since I'd reclined. The tanned alpha did not turn back to his group, now wholly in the exchange with the women.

"You don't want to fucking know?" he asked with aggressive incredulity. "You don't wanna fucking learn how to do a new thing?"

The women did not reply to him. They began to pack up their things. The brunette had been drawing something and put it in her bag. They stood up. The man stood up too.

"You're choosing to leave instead of learning something? That makes you an ignorant—no that makes you a stupid bitch," he spat at them.

The women's silent packing quickened. Another man, older, black, perhaps in his early fifties, spoke to the women from where he sat a few yards away.

"Hey, I'm drawing something too. I drew a picture of you

actually,” he said.

The two women immediately smiled and responded to the man, blatantly ignoring the angry, bronzed alpha who stood in front of their path out of the lawn.

“Really? Let us see,” said the brunette.

The two walked over to the older man, grateful for an excuse to engage with someone else, to find refuge from their dogged intimidator.

The younger man, ignored and left momentarily alone, turned back to his group and descended onto his haunches, his body tense and tight. His voice, though heated, was lowered, and while I couldn’t make out what was being said, watching the group provided explanation enough. The alpha gesticulated violently, speaking more with his hands than before, and kept his head in constant motion, never stopping to engage with one specific listener. Nobody appeared to dissent to whatever claims he was making, nor did there seem to be much active agreement beyond the implicit backing of companionship.

Perhaps it was the dissatisfaction with the lack of excitement from his company that spurred the younger man’s next move. He lifted himself from the squat without reaching a fully erect position. Halfway through his rise he began moving towards the women again. His walk hunched and aggressive, he seemed ready literally to pounce.

“So you’re drawing pictures and he’s also drawing *these little pretty pictures*,” the alpha began, contorting his face into a malicious squint, his tone mocking and high pitched, a barely restrained yell just below its surface. His hands were raised up to his cheekbones, fingers wagging in exaggeration, his complete contempt for the connection between the older man and the women apparent.

The trio ignored him to the fullest possible extent, but the women had begun to flinch at some of his more explosive, jerky movements. He got closer to them, leaning his face in the space between the two women’s shoulders.

“You’re embarrassing yourself,” he said, “you don’t even want to talk to a man—rather draw pictures with some faggot. All fucking women—”

His sentence was interrupted as the women, having never unpacked their things, suddenly turned in sync and briskly walked away. Their exit was silent and with a definitive lack of protest, an incontestable finality in it.

The older man rose with their departure, but the women were stepping over the low black chain at the edge of the lawn before he’d even gotten to his feet. The alpha yelled something unintelligible after the women, but he did not follow them. Once the older man had fully stood up, the two men faced one another, but no words were exchanged. The older also walked away then, but he did so less quickly, his back straight, shoulders back, and chest out.

I sat and watched the young men seated on the grass for a few minutes longer. Their behavior did not change; the one continued to incite adolescent antics among the group, the group’s energy reciprocally fueling his hungry, rampant search for attention.

Like the older man who’d left, I adopted a strong stance and walked slowly off the lawn once the commotion had largely settled down, deliberately coming close to the group, my chin out, trying to project dignity. I didn’t leave the park in its entirety immediately though, but slowly meandered through the crowds of smiling people as I searched for the tranquility I’d been robbed of. I saw the older man again. He was walking toward the street, his back to me. I sped up to catch up with him.

“What was the deal back there? With those guys?” I asked once I’d come up beside him.

He looked at me but did stop walking. I moved along with him.

“Huh? Oh, those dudes back there? Man,” he said, “they were crazy. I don’t know what their problem was. The dude that was standing up had a scar, like, right here.” He stopped walking, leaned his head forward, and pointed to a spot behind his ear. “He’d had some sort of accident, musta lost part of his fucking *brain*, man.”

“I know,” I said. We started walking again, even on pace and angled toward one another. “They were complete dicks. I mean way too intense. I wanted to say something,” I said.

“All I know man,” he responded, “is that dude was this close—I mean like a second away—from getting this camera,” he brandished a long-lensed, heavy, black digital camera that he wore on a strap, “shoved down his *throat*.”

“Totally,” I said. We kept walking. We soon reached the edge of the park, and I repeated myself as we parted. “Totally.”



Blue Hearts

Marissa Elliot Little

There was an abandoned shed in the parking lot of Roy's Diner—right on the edge, away from customers. New employees were told to take their smoke breaks there. They would later discover it also served as a place for illegal transactions and sloppy encounters.

For Stella, the glorified box was a second home, a sanctuary—though she was rarely awake in it. It was a place of refuge as she waited for her boyfriend to pick her up after her graveyard shift. There, she slept on the sticky cushions that spilt over the edge of the aluminum couch. No one bothered her. New employees didn't need to be told that.

"Stella." Ed waited. "Hey, Stella." He sucked in more of his cigarette. "Stella." He hesitantly nudged her, accidentally blowing smoke in her face.

She woke up coughing. "Fuck," she groaned, sitting up and shielding her eyes.

"I think your ride is here," Ed said. A car horn resounded again.

"Oh, fuck." She swung her legs around, bringing her feet to the muddy floor. "What time is it?" she asked, reaching for her duct tape-covered shoes. They were white when she bought them for her cheerleading uniform senior year of high school—four years ago, was it? She'd just worked a double-shift; maybe she'd made enough in tips to

buy a new pair. But they needed every cent to fix the car....

"A little after five." Ed stomped out his cigarette. "He's been here about ten minutes."

"Shit." Stella jammed her other foot in her shoe, not bothering with the frayed laces. She stood up and grabbed her bag, a souvenir from high school. The "D" had faded, leaving the bag to read "over 2009."

Ed reached for the door, but Stella grabbed his arm. "Don't."

Ed turned, dropping his hand.

"Sorry." She hadn't meant to grab Ed like that. "He'll just...I-I don't want him to see you...he'll assume...please?"

Ed wordlessly moved out of the way so Stella could squeeze between him and the door, opening it just enough for her thin frame to sliver out into the heavy rain. There, pulled up to the curb, was her ancient blue station wagon, a hand-me-down from her aunt. And there, in the front seat, was the guy she had sworn "forever" to in the backseat.

"Can you lay off the horn?" she snapped, slamming the passenger door.

"I've been out here ten fucking minutes. Maybe you should've come out the first fucking time." Mike crumpled a McDonald's bag and tossed it in the backseat, a graveyard full of others like it. He jerked the car to the right and sped towards the exit.

"What? Too busy sucking off another guy? I saw you sneaking out of there. What, you left him with his pants still around his ankles?"

"Can you just shut the fuck up?" Stella rubbed the sides of her head. "If you could pick me up when my shift actually ends—actually, if I could take my own car—"

"Your car? Your fucking car?"

"Yeah, my fucking car."

"It's our fucking car."

"No, it's not. My aunt gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday. It's my car."

"Then our house is my house."

"Really? I'm the only one who pays any bills for it."

"You're a real bitch, you know that? It's my fucking house. I grew up in that house and my dad left it to me. If you don't like it, you can go live with Wayne."

Stella stiffened. She crossed her arms and looked forward, out the window and into the rain. She ignored Mike's smug look of satisfaction.

"Mike, look out!" she screamed.

"Shit!" Mike went for the brakes and yanked the car to the right. He felt something collide with the front.

"You hit a deer." Stella buried her face in her hands and slouched in her seat.

"Well, what the hell do you want me to do?" he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air.

They both sat there, neither knowing what to do. Their pounding hearts and rapid breathing punctuated the silence.

Stella took a deep breath. She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door, expecting the worst.

"Oh, fuck!" She immediately recoiled at the sight of the mangled animal. It quivered. "Jesus Christ, it's still alive." She flung open the passenger door. "Are you seriously just going to sit there?"

"What the fuck do you want me to do?"

"Something!" She slammed the door and peeked over at the injured animal. She heard Mike getting out of the car.

"Shit..." he muttered, rubbing the back of his head. He wasn't fazed by the gruesome display. He looked at the car and winced. "Fuck, we need to get this fixed."

Stella hadn't even thought about the car. She closed her eyes. Fuck, fuck, fuck. They had already been driving with a flat tire; now there was a shattered headlight, a missing fender...the hood was a mess too....

She knew they couldn't afford to fix the car. They had been delaying getting the engine looked at for over a month, opting to let the noise fill their tense silences. The radio had gone last summer, months before the heat and air conditioner began to work sporadically.

"We'll need to get it towed. It won't even start."

Stella opened her eyes. She hadn't even noticed Mike had tried to start the car.

"My phone is dead," she said, looking down at her cracked iPhone. "Probably don't even get service out here."

"Yeah, no bars," Mike confirmed. "Piece of shit phone." Four

hundred dollars and he couldn't make a call when he needed to.

Stella looked around. They were on the back roads, surrounded by trees. She noticed a clearing behind them.

"I think there's a house up there," she said, straining to look up the steep hill.

"That paper say anything?" Mike pointed to Stella's feet.

She picked up the drenched paper: ESTATE SALE TODAY. 66 VERONA COURT. 9AM to 6PM.

She looked up the hill again. "I'll go see if they have a phone."

As she turned to go, Mike gently grabbed her arm.

"Wait, Stella...I'll go. You're... just, wait in the car, okay?"

She hesitated. She waited for him to say something more. Did he want her to stay in the car because he cared about her? She searched his eyes for a sign of some kind. She wanted him to say something.

Something to show he really cared. Anything.

He didn't.

"Okay," she whispered. She went into the car and Mike went up the hill.

His ascent slowly revealed the back of an old, blue Victorian house. He walked around to the front and saw a number of cars parked in the driveway and the street. He flipped down his hood as he stepped through the open front door—was this a foyer?

He wandered into what looked like a living room. There were tables with items on display while well-dressed people with graying hair chattered lightly around them. He was clearly out of place. Embarrassed, he began to observe the objects on the table.

"Can I help you?"

He'd been noticed. He looked up. There was a short, bald man with owl-like glasses staring him down. The man's blue pin-striped suit could easily pay to fix the car.

"Oh, I, uhm...uhm, just looking."

"I came to see if you needed anything." The man made no attempts to be polite. "You look..." He examined Mike, dressed in a faded Dover football sweatshirt and workboots. "Lost," he finished.

"Oh, uhm, I..."

"Harvey, are you stealing my customer?" Mike felt a light touch on his shoulder.

Harvey took one last look at Mike, looking up and down all seventy-five inches of his inferior frame. He walked away curtly, leaving Mike with an over-friendly middle-aged woman.

"Please excuse him. I think he left his manners at home this morning." She chuckled. "Can I help you, darling?"

"I..." Mike felt his head spinning. He didn't belong here. He was out of place. Everyone knew it. He knew it. He saw a lumpy blue ceramic vase out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, this vase? How much?" He swallowed. He had no idea what he was doing. "It's just...blue is my girlfriend's favorite color."

The woman waved her hand. "Just take it. You seem like a nice guy."

Mike didn't know what to say. Stella actually hated the color blue. And it's not like he could afford flowers to fill it with. "Th-thank you. I...she'll love it. But...isn't this...valuable?"

The woman laughed. "Darling, look at the bottom." She held the vase up to him. It read, "E.W. I'll love you forever. B.D. '66."

"See? Nothing more than a high school art project. It's worthless...well, unless you're E.W." She laughed again. "I'll wrap this up for you. Wait right here."

The woman left Mike awkwardly alone again. He felt as if everyone in the room was staring. He slouched over to the corner of the room where a wedding picture hung. The groom stared into the camera, emotionless. The bride forced a smile, positioning a large bouquet of roses over her stomach. The caption read, "Ben and Anna Daniels, September 1967."

"Excuse me?"

Please, not another salesperson, he begged. But this voice was different from the salespeople; it was a little out of breath. Small, timid – almost afraid.

Mike turned. The voice belonged to a woman with silver hair and a wet coat. She cleared her throat and asked, "Did you just buy that blue vase?"

"Uhh, yes. I just...gift for my girl, you know?"

The woman smiled meekly. "You look a little young to be here," she said.

"Actually, my car broke down out back...I came to look for a

phone. My car...well, we hit a deer and need a tow truck.”

“Please, use mine! I can’t believe a hip young man like you doesn’t have a phone!” She laughed nervously and reached into her purse – another item of clothing worth more than their car.

“Here you go! Is there anything else I can help you with?” The over-friendly saleswoman had returned. She handed Mike a paper bag.

“I’m all set, but thank you.” He tried to smile and return her kindness, but it wasn’t something he was accustomed to.

“Eleanor! Eleanor Williams! I didn’t even recognize you!” The saleswoman hugged the silver-haired woman.

“Oh, Stacey, how are you?”

“I’m good, I’m good. And you? I’m so glad you made it! We’ve barely sold anything today.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

“Well, look around and let me know if you need any help.”

Eleanor turned to Mike as Stacey walked away. “I’m sorry, dear, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh, uh, Mike.”

“Mike.” She smiled. “It’s probably quieter outside.”

On the porch, Mike called the garage—a number he had memorized months ago, slowly dialing the numbers as he waited for Stella to come home, beer bottles strewn around the armchair as he sat in the dark, empty house....

“Wayne’s Garage, this is Wayne. How can I help you?”

“Hi...this is...uh...” He coughed. “This is Mike Baxter. I’m having car trouble. I was wondering if I could get a tow truck?”

“Hey, Mike. What’s up?”

“I’m actually not sure where I am, let me ask.” He rested the phone on his shoulder. “Excuse me...Ms. Williams? What’s the road behind the house?”

“Lovers Lane. The address of this house is 66 Verona Court.”

“We’re on Lovers Lane.” He almost choked on the words. “It’s near 66 Verona Court. Uhm, behind the house. Oh, and there’s a deer.”

“We’re kinda backed up today, so just leave the car and we’ll come get it, okay? I’m assuming you trust me at this point.” Wayne laughed, then caught himself. “Uhm, with your car. I’ll call you tomorrow, yeah?”

Mike hung up. “Thank you,” he said, handing the phone to Eleanor.

“No problem at all, Mike.” She paused. “Do you need a ride home?”

“Oh, uhm...we live close so it’s fine to walk.”

“Please, it’s no trouble at all. I can’t let you walk in this.”

“Well...” Oh, what the hell. “We’re not that far...we’re on Benjamin Street.”

Eleanor blinked. Benjamin. She regained her composure.

“We? Are you with someone?”

“Oh, sorry—my girlfriend. She’s with the car. Right around the back of the house.”

Eleanor smiled. “Well, let’s go get her. I’m parked in the street, at the end.”

Mike tried to smile back. He flipped up his hood as he followed Eleanor down the driveway.

Eleanor carefully maneuvered her way down the street, turning right at the end. “You think someone would do something about these roads!” She laughed nervously. “Is this you?”

“Yeah...I’ll get Stella.”

Eleanor pulled behind the blue car. Mike got out and jogged to the car. He opened the passenger door, expecting to see Stella.

The seat was empty. The car was empty.

“Fucking hell.” He slammed the door shut. He walked back to Eleanor’s car.

“She’s...gone.”

Eleanor opened her mouth, as if to say something, but was cut off by Mike, who slowly sank to the ground, leaning against Eleanor’s car. Eleanor got out and leaned over Mike.

“Maybe she started walking back to your house. Maybe we’ll catch her.”

“No. She’s gone. I know she is.”

Eleanor bent down so she and Mike were at eye level. He used his hands to shield the glazed look in his eyes.

“Mike,” she said gently. “How about we look for her?”

He shook his head. “No, she’s gone.”

“Mike, you’re a sweet guy. Why would she leave a sweet guy

like you?”

“No, I’m not sweet. I’m awful.”

“Mike, don’t be so hard on yourself. I’m sure she’ll love the vase you got her.”

Mike didn’t say anything. He knew she would hate the vase. She hated the color blue. It would only remind her of the flowers Mike never bought. It would only remind her that she was stuck with a jerk. She was probably on her way to Wayne’s. He was a nice guy. He’d buy her flowers to put in a red vase. Red was her favorite color.

“Mike!”

He looked up—Stella!

“Mike, what are you doing?”

He stood up. “Where did you go—I was worried.”

She rolled her eyes. “I went into the woods to smoke.” She noticed Eleanor. “Oh, I’m sorry—I’m...uhm, Stella.”

“I’m Eleanor Williams. How nice to meet you. You must be Mike’s girlfriend?”

Stella looked at Mike. “Uhm...yes. Nice to meet you too,” she mumbled.

“Well, let’s get out of the rain, shall we?” Eleanor climbed back into the car.

“The tow truck is coming but it’s going to be awhile so Eleanor’s dropping us off,” Mike explained.

“Mike, what the hell. We can’t just get into the car of a stranger,” she hissed. “The garage will drop us off.”

“Stella, just get in the car.”

“Mike, we’re going to get murdered.”

“Stella, just get in the goddamn car.”

He got in the car before she could say anything else. She silently slid into the backseat moments later. “Thank you so much for doing this, Ms. Williams,” Stella said.

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all.” Eleanor started driving. “Stella, I see you’re wearing a uniform from Roy’s Diner. How long have you been there?”

“Since I was sixteen...about six years.”

“You seem like a hardworking young woman. And Roy’s has such delicious pie. I always stop by when I’m in town.” She flicked the

turn signal. “And what about you, Mike? What do you do?”

“I don’t have a job,” he said flatly. He looked out the window, the rain did not allow him to see much. “I guess you’re not supposed to show up drunk and punch your supervisor,” he said, attempting to laugh. He looked in the rearview mirror at Stella. She was also looking out the window.

“We all make mistakes. You’re a nice guy, I’m sure you’ll find something,” Eleanor said, encouragingly.

Mike didn’t say anything. He wasn’t a nice guy. He wouldn’t find anything.

“How long have you two been together?”

Mike and Stella straightened up. They both waited for the other to answer.

“Since freshman year of high school,” Stella said softly.

“High school sweethearts,” Eleanor responded just as softly. She looked in the rearview mirror and smiled at Stella.

“I had a boyfriend in high school. We were together all three years,” she continued. She paused. “They were probably the best three years of my life.”

Mike looked over at her. She had a dazed expression, as if remembering something fondly.

From the backseat, Stella noticed Eleanor wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Maybe she was a widow. Then again, she and Mike weren’t married—weddings were too expensive and they didn’t have any family or friends to invite anyway. But Eleanor seemed to have plenty of money. Stella noted the leather briefcase in the seat next to her, the stack of manila folders.

“Is this where I turn?” Eleanor’s cheeriness interrupted their thoughts.

“Uh, next right,” Mike said.

Eleanor made the next right. Her luxury car was out of place in their rundown neighborhood, one step above a trailer park.

“What number?”

“Eight,” Mike said. “The blue one on the right.”

“Wait!” said Stella. “Don’t pull into the driveway. There’s, uhm...glass.”

Eleanor pulled alongside the curb. “Is there anything else I can

do for you?”

“You’ve done more than enough,” Stella said. “Thank you so much.”

“We’re all set. Thank you.” Mike began to feel his jeans, looking for his wallet.

“I got it,” Stella said, leaning forward to hand Eleanor a bill.

Eleanor waved them off. “Please, it wasn’t any trouble at all.

The pleasure was all mine.”

Mike and Stella paused. They weren’t used to nice people. Not knowing what to say, Stella and Mike whispered, “thank you,” and headed into the house.

“What the hell was that?” Stella snapped.

“Stella, I was so scared when you weren’t there. I—”

“Mike, please don’t do this.” She began to walk away from him, going up the stairs.

“Stella, I’m sorry for earlier. I just—”

“No, you’re not.” She turned to face him. “We go through this every week. I’m sorry. I love you. I hate you. Go live with Wayne. You know what, maybe I fucking will.”

“It’ll be different this time. I was scared you really left.”

“Mike. Just...just fuck off.”

They stared at each other, both waiting for the other to escalate the fight. Or maybe one of them would just walk away.

“Hey, wait...I got something for you...fuck. I left it in her car.”

He knew Eleanor would be gone by now. It didn’t matter though. Stella would hate the vase as much as she hated him. He went into the kitchen and took a beer out of the fridge so he could at least hate her too.

The East and the West Are Within Me: Excerpt Angie Liao

VII. Dear Nainai,

It is not that all I have from our limited exchanges are things for which to apologize.

It is rather that, I suppose it is the nature of humans that we are sad when someone dies because we have had happy times with them, but our sadness causes us to become consumed with all that was not so happy—with our regrets, and our confessions.

I am sorry that I would not come out from underneath the bed when I was afraid of something I can’t remember, and that you had to count to *er-shi-jiu* for me to emerge. That must have been a terrible first impression of your granddaughter.

I am sorry that I hated you when you spanked me, once I slid out from underneath the bed.

I am sorry for finding you and Yeye both a little gross because of the chamber pot.

I am sorry I cried and fussed and wet myself, all in protestation of the chamber pot.

I have just realized it was, in fact, the chamber pot that put me under the bed in the first place.

I am so sorry I was upset over such a little thing.

I am sorry because you, who poor and alone pulled a family

of six children through the decade that your husband was imprisoned, must have found it reprehensible that anyone should become so hysterical over a chamber pot.

I am sorry, similarly, to have become so upset in the new apartment that my parents bought for you and Yeye. It had toilets, even a shower, and smelled like incense, but there was a live chicken squawking in the kitchen, whose neck was being wrung by your nurse, and I found it disturbing, but I could have done without making such a scene.

I am sorry I was never able to say anything to you that you understood, but I know you had already forgiven me for that.

I am sorry we missed the funeral—I did not finish school until a week after—but we left right then.

I am sorry—

I had not known you had been ill; it was years since I saw you. When my father told me that he suspected you had Alzheimer's I could not believe that someone so closely related to me was stricken with a disease so familiar to America and I had not known. I asked how that could be. "Well, in China there's no real diagnosis for these things. No one will talk about mental illness," he said. How odd, that we could have had the exact same conversation, only about his disease, and not yours. At your memorial, set up on the same dining table where I had a fit over the sounds of the dying chicken, I was too fascinated watching my father kowtow to cry.

I only cried later, in the car driving back to Puxi. Even then, I am not sure if I cried only for you, or if some tears fell for my father, who will never have an eldest son to kowtow at his memorial.

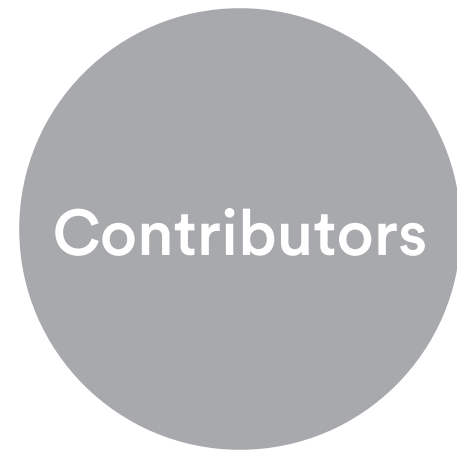
I am sorry most of all that I wished you could be something different. I am sorry to have looked at the doting, cheery grandmothers of my friends and wished I had one to spoil me. They are only tropes, Nainai, and they do not matter as much as inspiration does, and I am inspired by your story, and by your strength, by your survival. I have never needed a grandmother baking cookies and telling stories after all. I thought we had less love between us because ours was silent and stretched across an ocean. But I know that you loved me as much as anyone else's grandmother, and I loved you too; I grieved you as I have watched my friends grieve their grandmothers, with no less desperation, and no less sadness, no fewer regrets and no fewer happy memories.

Your hands were as warm as any grandmother's. Your sweaters as soft. Your laugh as wrinkled

This is what matters.

Nainai, I have seen Yeye several times since you left, and he misses you but lives on. His smile is still toothless. He still needs someone to peel his grapes for him. He still laughs at anything he can't hear, which is most things. Every time I come to the apartment he shuffles around, deaf to protests, bringing more and more plates of watermelon, berries, and grapes. I used to hate the strawberries at your apartment because they had been soaked in water to make them softer. We eat all the fruit now, until the plates are clean. Nainai, you are gone and you are missed, and I am sorry I did not understand the love possible for us until you had died.





IAN ALCOCK grew up in London and studies studio art with a concentration in drawing. His work has appeared in group shows *Normal* and *Twice What They Are Now*.

CHARLES AMBER is concentrating on the history and theory of the avant-garde, with focuses on music and art. He is interested in the inevitable intersection of emotional expression and global commerce and hopes to further explore this topic in his future work, both musically and artistically.

GILLIAN AVINA is a musician, writer, smoothie-maker and aspiring farmer from Portland, Oregon. She is currently working on her first album in which she plays guitar, banjo, bass, drums and sings. She graduated from Gallatin in December with a degree in music and a minor in creative writing.

TESS AYANO started taking photographs at the age of nine while growing up in Tokyo, Japan. She is a second-year Gallatin student concentrating in photography, creative direction, and aesthetics.

JULIA BASSIRI has a passion for all things humanistic, specifically in the context of arts, athletics and aesthetics. This active painter, personal trainer and fitness professional's phenomenal (and phenomenological) course of study at Gallatin is allowing her to explore the symbiosis of Gestalt-minded therapies and philosophies as they huddle together under the umbrella of health and wellness.

GENEVIÈVE BEAUDOIN studies philosophy and performance at Gallatin. She recently gave her colloquium on "Ecstasy and Poïesis."

EMMA BEHNKE is a January 2015 Gallatin graduate whose concentration focused on illness narratives as articulated in modernist texts.

THOMAS COLLINS is a senior at Gallatin, originally from West Virginia. His concentration is titled "Literature and the Craft of Fiction-Writing." Occasionally—late at night—he writes poetry.

BRIGID CRISPI will graduate from Gallatin in May 2015 with a

concentration in "Studio Photography and Legal Studies." Although she began photographing in high school as a hobby, she plans to pursue a career in the art world after graduation.

MARISSA ELLIOT LITTLE is a junior concentrating in "Storytelling and the Human Experience," exploring the fields of film, literature and writing, psychology with a French minor. She is slowly conquering the film industry and dismantling the patriarchy.

LYDIA EPP SCHMIDT is graduating in May 2015 from Gallatin with a concentration in "The Creation, Manipulation, and Consumption of Visual Identity."

ALLISON FLOM is a junior concentrating in "Narrative Performance to Activate Social Change." She's written and performed two solo shows, and is currently conducting a workshop for her latest play. She is also the President of Colleges Against Cancer at NYU. She's excited to be a part of the *Gallatin Review*.

CASSIDY GEORGE is a sophomore in Gallatin studying Modern Art and Social Revolution. She is the creator of Renegade NYC, a local zine, street wear and street art project founded on the principles of '80s DIY aesthetics and Riot Grrrl revivalism.

TANYA GUPTA is concentrating in "His and Her Story: Redesigning the Self," which explores the creation of the self and identity through understanding the conflict between the internal and external environments. Art and design is her platform for redesigning the self. Tanya is the founder of here there and EVERYwhere, a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to empowering survivors of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking.

ZOEY HART is a graduate student at Gallatin studying the cultural implications of creativity and emotional expression. She holds a BA in English and Studio Art from Brandeis University, and studied for a term in the painting and printmaking department at Glasgow School of Art. She will be graduating with her MA this May.

JULIANNA J. HURTADO will be graduating from Gallatin in May

2015 with a concentration in creative writing and psychology, specifically with an interest in the relationship between creativity and madness. After graduation, she is planning on attending graduate school for an MFA in Fiction. She will continue to pursue blogging, music-loving, and being a foodie.

HELEN ISAAC is a student, writer, and artist from Columbus, Ohio. Her concentration explores the relationship between art and contentious politics. She is now working on a senior project which examines the production of silences in historical and cultural archives.

TAMEKIA SHAREE JACKSON hails from Houston, Texas, and is a first-year graduate student at Gallatin. She is interested in using theater and film as a stage for marginalized voices, particularly those of women and children. She believes that life is meant to be celebrated ferociously.

ROB KELLETT is in his third year of study at the Polytechnic School of Engineering. He enjoys writing both code and prose, though he often confuses the two.

ERIN KIM is a Gallatin senior concentrating in "Media Storytelling," exploring modes of expression in writing, cinema, and art. She has conducted a street-fashion photo ethnography, "Style Intro," through Gallatin's Undergraduate Research Fund, and constantly calibrates herself in her surroundings through self-portraiture.

SONYA KOZLOVA is a 22-year-old illustrator and designer. She was born in Moscow, brought up in Milwaukee, and is currently based in Manhattan. She is a senior at Gallatin with a concentration in visual perception in art and design. Her illustration work primarily explores ambiguity in romantic relationships.

HUNTER KUREPA-PEERS is still undecided as to what her quirky Gallatin concentration will be, but is very invested in the arts, particularly dance, writing, film/TV, and music. In addition to being a student, Hunter is also an intern for Warrior Poets, a film/TV production company, and a full-time starving artist.

JULIA HONORE LEE will graduate in 2015 with a concentration in "Art in the Anthropocene." She will go on to work for a contemporary art gallery as a curatorial assistant and continue to write poetry about men in other parts of the country.

ANGIE LIAO is a sophomore in Gallatin concentrating in Human Rights Law and NGO Management. She is a researcher at NYU Law's U.S.-Asia Law Institute and works at the International Center for Transitional Justice. She would like to dedicate this piece to Chinnie Ding, whose class helped bring it into being, and who is the only professor for whom she has ever stayed up until 5am writing.

ZOE CARMEN MCGEE has a background in creative writing, fashion, and the visual arts. She explores ways of combining these interests, with the intention of designing a new space to collaborate and share art. She continues to draw inspiration while abroad in London this spring, fulfilling her love of travel, while making connections between her previous experiences in New York and NYU in Paris.

MATTHEW MAHONEY is a sophomore in Gallatin concentrating in Environmental Studies applied to the Arts with a minor in French. He is interested in how thinking about art and creating art can be seen through the lens of environmental studies. He will be spending next fall at Bennington College in Vermont studying farming.

DANIELS MEKŠS is a first-year Gallatin student from Latvia. He is interested in photography, literature, cinema and philosophy. He also practices mindfulness and yoga and is interested in how they affect one's health and well-being.

DANIEL MOCK is a studio art BFA in Steinhardt. His practice explores the rhetoric of whining, bragging, and ridicule in mixed media.

BECCA PECAUT will graduate from Gallatin in May 2015. She is concentrating in "Storytelling," which she approaches through a variety of artistic and literary forms, ranging from screenwriting to poetry to visual arts.

ALEXANDRIA RYABL is graduating from Gallatin in May 2015 with a concentration in media criticism, critical race theory and studio art. She is a multimedia artist whose practice includes photography, painting and assemblage, and focuses on the intersection of popular media with social issues.

GENEVIEVE SACHS is a first-year student in Steinhardt studying studio art, with special love for illustration and film photography. Much of her work tends to study and embrace the obscure details of day-to-day life through the creation of anecdotal collections. She's also excited to begin combining her love of visual arts with her love of theatre through a minor in performance studies.

LUKE SMITHERS is a Gallatin sophomore from San Antonio, Texas. His study of the philosophy of religion informs his work in performance and video art. His pieces contain the marks of his grappling with existential questions, of an effort to actualize the abstract.

JOSHUA TARRE is a Gallatin sophomore interested in creative writing and literature. Passionate for basketball, his approach to reading and writing is inspired by Kobe Bryant's work ethic: indefatigable.

ANNA TATELMAN is a senior concentrating in "The Construction of Literature." Her studies combine literature, history, creative writing, and sociology. She recently had her first play, *Life on the Moon*, produced by Gallatin Theatre Troupe.

BAILEY THEADO is concentrating in "Human Security, Rights, and Development with an interest in Visual Ethnography." Her most recent photographic and research work has been in Malawi as Gallatin Global Fellow of Human Rights where she conducted ethnographic research with a community-based organization to understand how they advocated for children's basic economic and social rights.

IZEL VALLARBA is a junior in Gallatin with a concentration in "Aesthetic Psychology: Behavioral Studies in Creative Production," studying the reasons why people make the things they do. He works through the mediums of psychology, screenwriting, and visual art to

create experimental videos, installations, stories, and everything in between.

ATARA VOGELSTEIN is a junior in Gallatin concentrating in Creative Writing, Drama, and Psychology. Her work has been featured in online publications such as *Escape into Life*, *The Baltimore Jewish Times* and *The Times of Israel*.

ANDRE-NAQUIAN WHEELER is concentrating in "Writing Children's Literature." He is currently a fashion writer for *Bleu Magazine* and has had his stories featured in *Romance Magazine*, *Forth Magazine*, and *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*.

REID WILLIAMS is a junior in Gallatin concentrating in "Reconciling Rationality and Emotion." Besides the odd story, he didn't write anything for a long time, but has recently begun doing some poetry and thinks it's pretty good.

**v.30
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