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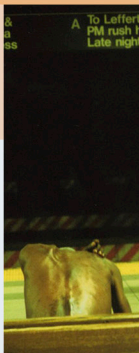
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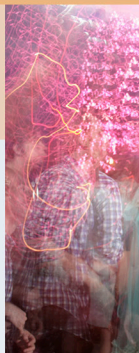
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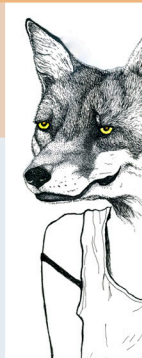
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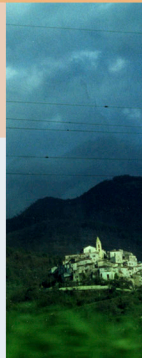
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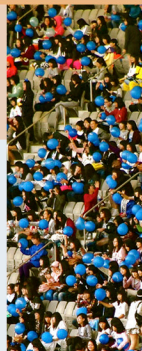
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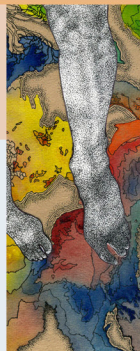
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One

“Why are there no Czech pop stars?”

“Because the market’s not big enough,” said the other American at our table. “Think about it: there are 10 million people in the entire country—not much more than New York City. You can’t sustain a career like that.” He leaned back in his chair. A smattering of “yeahs” and “mmms” could be heard, none too strong, having to contend with an atmosphere thick with the smoke and conversation of other tables. Without the fresh air of new voices, the once-amber glow of our conversation in the dark pub smoldered for a moment then turned to ash. Several new cigarettes were lit: smaller, less ambitious conversations began in twos and threes around the table.

Old Town Square near the Astronomical Clock. Sprouting from the clod of tourists wedged between two predictable restaurants and the clock tower, a line of British teenagers coiled around the corner, headed in the direction of the Jan Hus statue a few hundred feet across the cobbled square. Then they jumped, startled, and the line dissipated. A man stood five feet from that line—or the line that once was—guiding a blue plastic machine with several whirring, bristly disks. Street cleaning day.

I snapped a funny little picture to show my aunts, uncles and friends this Christmas.

MEDITATIONS LUCAS NATHAN

My uncle, far removed from that glorious semester in Sevilla (“That’s when I found myself, or at least found out a lot about myself and other cultures, and gained a nuanced understanding of how Americans are viewed in the world”), would nod and make eyes with his bleary-eyed wife, who’d be cupping a hot tea in both hands, until the baby screamed, a car door slammed in the garage, or my uncle got a text message from a supervisor.

Two

I turned and headed toward Malá Strana and passed groups—more than usual—of tourists: young swarthy lotharios, either in packs or with girls like them. They walked with tentative steps into the wrong restaurants, the ones with signs written in pink chalk that said, “Beer—49 Kč” or “Typical Czech Cuisine!” or “SCANDAL PRICES.” Outside my favorite bar were three Brits talking to each other about some girl. They spoke no Czech; neither did I. They wore military jackets and dark jeans; so did I.

You’re attracted to this city because girls’ eyebrows twitch when you say you’re from America. They stroke their hair. They ask you questions. So it’s understandable why there are many Americans in Prague. It’s understandable why others have left: “The thing about Prague,” sniveled our wormy American guide on the pub crawl in Krakow, “the thing about Prague is that there’s a huge ex-pat community, like 10,000 native English speakers. So that’s...” His voice trailed off. He peered down over his protuberant nose at his petite Polish girlfriend. She was smiling. He squeezed her with both arms.

Right, too many Americans there. Not the authentic experience. Will you look at the ground when you tell them that you work for some software company with a website Under Construction? How much longer will those Czech girls ask you questions? Must be time to move farther east. Your parents will tell their friends and relatives all about their son, the adventurous one. Their friend Bill, the one with the landscaping business, will say, “Wow, good for him. I’d never be able to do that: drop everything and go, totally adapt to another culture. Big risk.”

Three

I felt a twinge above my shoulder blade when a hiccup fizzed up my chest. After twisting in my seat, I dug into the meat of my left shoulder with my right hand. A cool murmur reverberated through my left side: aching, aching—release. I pulled my knit hat over my eyes to dull the light (or to make sure the other people on the bus wouldn’t see my face while I was sleeping).

But my eyelids were like cheap window shades at the hostels

we came to know. They quivered then rolled back up into my head. My seat didn't recline any further thanks to the stubborn knees of the girl—Spanish, I think—behind me. I watched through gray, fuzzy crosshatching as the bus screamed through the hillside crowded with trees turning yellow that you caught glimpses of from stray headlights.

Five strangers, haggard or grizzled or gristly or weary, immediately comfortable enough to pass out once we plop down in the cozy interior of a budget bus. Could you fall asleep in Old Town Square?

The man next to me, the one who fell asleep with his iPod blaring Europop before the bus had even left Budapest, might have been gripping the armrest tightly had we taken off on an EasyJet, but on this jittery bus that rippled through narrow streets at perilous speeds, he slept and yawned and complained. Well, I was awake. I was afraid.

Four

With a burst of garbled ringing, the tram chastised a taxicab that blocked its tracks. The cab inched out of the way. The tram continued in a pattern of mad acceleration and abrupt braking.

We stood in the aisle of this tram. Alex told me about this girl from home he talked to the other day. "Yeah, so she's in Berlin, and she meets this guy, and they hit it off. Turns out they have a mutual friend back in Pennsylvania, for some reason. So she's telling me all about how they traded numbers, and they're going to be friends on Facebook," he said. "And I tried to be nice, but I had to just be like, 'No. Just—why? Don't do it. Forget him; move on. It was one night. There are—'"

"It's not like they've invested much in each other at this point," I interrupted. The tram turned left, and my camera swung around my wrist.

"Right."

"You're starting to sound like me," I said. We continued like this, but soon I was preoccupied with a short brunette holding the railing near the tram doors, just over Alex's shoulder. She had shoulder-length brown hair that framed a round face and big eyes. I couldn't figure much out about the rest of her because she was wearing a boxy coat, but I admired her black leggings—the way they clung to her calves. They went well with her bright white sneakers.

Alex got off at another stop, and I snagged a seat. I felt her in the corner of my eye as I sifted through my soundtrack. Soon enough

she walked over to check the order of the line's stops and glanced at me on her way back. The tram interrupted our moment with a familiar tone. Veletržní. She turned to get off the tram.

The tram again emitted an awful mechanical din as it started toward Výstaviště.

I looked out the window and saw her running—no, sprinting.

Beneath dull streetlights, back-lit by Herna bars and empty restaurants, she ran with her head down, clutching her handbag. Her coat had unfurled, billowing out in the wind, revealing a pink sweater tight in the right place. The tram bounced on the tracks as it surged forward. Her fluttering bright white sneakers skipped around hordes of weary commuters walking on pavement.

I lost her a few times in the mottled, amber streetlight, but as the tram turned to go under the bridge, I saw her once more before the tram plunged into momentary darkness, where she'd be plucked out of this scene, mid-stride, and tucked into my memory.

Downtown &
Brooklyn via
8 Av Express

A To Lefferts Blvd or Far Rocka
PM rush hours also to Rocka
Late nights A on Local Track



A PART OF ME SAYS THIS: GINA HONG

The inner surface of my bottom lip
remembers your brow
and the heat of green flames underneath—

I kissed your forehead, and now
I bend backwards with the breaching
of this sun to ask you
if the moon of your ribs can still cradle me.

(Cut your side open and you can keep me
nestled against muscle,
rooted in your veins:
let me sit in your western
mountain cavity.)

The shadow we cast has carried me
to the swollen edge
of these bruised knees—I am
almost begging you.



It was with some relief that I dropped my letter to the Bureau of Human Operations into the mailbox. I can't say I had truly settled on the matter, but at least the decision had been made, and there was no going back.

BILL KEMMLER DISINTEGRATING MAN

While I sat in the kitchen, clearing dishes out of the oven so I could use it as a desk, everything seemed so clear. I felt cushioned, surrounded by the exhausted ticking of the wall clock, the yellow lamp light on the page and my wife's photograph, always staring off into space and never in my direction. The words came easily when I began to write; there was no hesitation, really, until I had finished. Perched on a stack of old magazines, looking down at my signature on the bottom of the page, I felt, for a moment, that something had been left out. Even though it made me uneasy, I put the dishes back into the oven and hastily sealed the letter in its envelope: a momentary—but necessary—lapse of my fastidious morals. My resolve seemed very pointed and reassuring at the time, but when I heard the metal flap shut and the mailbox say thank you, the walls of the apartment I remember pushed a little closer together.

In a few days, I received a reply:

Dear Mr. Runciter,

I am sorry to learn you have chosen to discontinue your relationship with the Bureau of Human Operations. I trust you are aware of the implications of this decision, and as you know, our business is trusting in you™. We appreciate your longstanding use of our services, and on behalf of the Bureau I would like to express our sincerest bewilderment in regards to your letter. Effective immediately, you will be removed from the database of our New York City complexes, and all records will be expunged. Should you have any difficulty with the process, please do not contact us.

All my best,
Glen Clarkson,
Assistant Clerical Administrative Associate
Bureau of Human Operations

The plain white stationery and conservative script, though underwhelming, was concrete and final. I tossed the letter and envelope into the sink with the rest of my important documents and sighed, resting my arm on top of the refrigerator. I surveyed the room, with its myopic windows and hissing pipes; it seemed that the lights had grown dimmer in the past few years since my wife had left. Or maybe they just got too close together. When she left, she didn't say anything, just looked at me with exhausted eyes and quietly shut the door behind her, leaving me at the table to push aside my take-out breakfast containers. The lights continued to burn. Finally, I settled upon my hands. A loose piece of skin hung from my thumbnail and, out of boredom, I pulled at it and watched the sliver peel all the way down to the little white crescent at the bottom of the nail. I expected some kind of trauma, but much to my confusion, it didn't even bleed. However surprised I was, the effect failed to evoke any real feeling, and the fingers simply blended with the pallid brickwork on the opposite wall.

As I stood with the hand awkwardly outstretched before my face, a loud, obnoxious tone emanated from the refrigerator, and it shot annoyed flashes across the kitchen. It was forever blinking in circles of smoky red light, which meant something, but I'd lost the manual and had no idea what. Early tomorrow morning, I told myself, I would get the hell out of this place.

Normally, I slept through my alarm clock's soothing light show and whale sounds, and dreamt about pressing the wrong buttons on the vending machine and not getting mad, or something. But that day I sat up at 1:25 p.m., the usual bile surging through my body upon waking strangely replaced with something far more pleasant, though equally intense. I couldn't describe it, except maybe in terms of being opposite to the corporeal, sinking feeling I usually experienced when I realized I'd have to get out of bed. But, instead of telling me to lie back down and let the world take care of itself, it told me to sit up. Upon dressing myself and stuffing a couple handfuls of official ID cards into my coat pockets, I opened front door and turned to face the room.

"Goodbye, apartment," I said, "Goodbye, oven; goodbye, sink;

goodbye, bed; goodbye, kitchen; goodbye, mail slot; goodbye, dead houseplant; goodbye, New York. Fuck you, refrigerator," and shut the door behind me.

Upon leaving the apartment complex, I walked around the corner to the bus stop, where a middle-aged woman sat, a wide hat and gloves over her gray skin. She was perfectly still at first, perhaps in a waking trance, willing the little red numbers predicting the arrival of the next bus to grow smaller, but eventually she coughed into her fist and looked over at me, wondering if I'd noticed.

"Take this bus often?" I said.

"Only when I have to go somewhere," she said, with no hint of irony, staring straight ahead. The bus wasn't due to arrive for another five minutes, so I decided that another attempt at small talk was the least painful option.

"Where are you from?" I asked, noting the peculiarity of formal gloves for a bus stop so near the econo-low-hassle complexes. I think their name derived mostly from the fact that they were actually old factories with the insides ripped out to accommodate the Bureau's apartment units. She studied me for a moment before answering with an uncomfortable evenness.

"I wasn't born here, but I moved to New York due to my husband's family. But they're all dead now."

Mortified, I darted my eyes around the shelter, pretending to watch for an arriving bus. Eventually I attempted a response.

"That's . . . that was very kind of you."

"Anything to get out from that wretched hellhole," she said.

"You mean where you originally came from?"

"No, I mean those pristine final-upgrade complexes where my husband and I lived," she said. I had always thought "final upgrade" sounded remarkably like certain casket choices you were presented with when you first moved into the complexes.

"Not a great marriage?" I asked, briefly considering the possibility that she'd murdered her husband and his family.

"I wouldn't say that, no."

At that point, I lost traction on the conversation and scuffed my feet along the floor a few times. There were still three minutes remaining on the clock before "thumbs up," which symbolized a bus arrival, or possibly a milestone accomplishment in patiently waiting for the bus.

At about minute two or three, I cleared my throat as if to

speak, and the gray woman cast an unaffected gaze in my direction. I impulsively began to scratch my scalp to avoid her eyes. When I went to put my hand back in my coat pocket, an enormous clump of hair came with it. I stared at it in my palm for a moment before remembering the gray woman beside me then hastily stuffed it in my pocket.

The bus pulled up shortly thereafter, but evidently it had taken long enough for me to forget about the hair in my pocket. When I reached to retrieve the proper scan-card for the bus meter, it emerged, shedding tufts of my hair onto the ground. Pausing to pull the last hairs off my pocket, one of my fingernails came with them, clattering down into the rarely used coin slot. As I swiped my card and took my seat, another nail nonchalantly peeled away from the finger and dropped to the floor, leaving a dusty strip of grime—which I had never really been able to get rid of—behind on my finger tip. The empty spots where the nails had been were shockingly nondescript, as if they had only been traces of newspaper ink on my skin where I had fallen asleep on a photograph. Now, they blinked painlessly upward at me, wanting to have their creases steamed and erased and forgotten. Frantically, and then cautiously, I pressed through all of the pockets in my coat until coming upon the only likely aid, a roll of scotch tape—with no dispenser—in the right front pocket. It was not easy with two missing fingernails, but I managed to gingerly peel the end of the strip away and begin wrapping it around all of the fingertips with nails remaining. I don't think anyone on the bus noticed, but it was difficult to tell with most of them working very hard to avoid looking at anything.

As the bus continued on toward the rail station at the outskirts of the complexes, the number of passengers began to thin. After an hour or two, all who remained were the bus driver, myself, and the very tired looking man who had decided to lie down on the floor of the bus and stop reacting to noises or motion. When the red line on the light-up bus map above the driver's head had nearly reached the green triangle at the end, I secreted my tape-covered hands in my pockets and moved to the front of the bus, carefully stepping over the tired man.

"There's a guy sleeping on the floor," I said, leaning in the direction of the driver.

"Ain't none of my business," the driver responded, with the usual annoyed tone of underappreciated municipal workers. I didn't really care about the guy on the floor.

"Shouldn't we wake him up?" I asked.

"I'm driving a bus here," he said. "How would you like it if someone disturbed your nap?"

"Um, I just thought . . ."

"Why is everyone on my case about these things?" he said. He lowered his brow a few centimeters. "If I wanna drive a bus, I'll drive a bus. If I wanna sleep on the floor, I'll do that too. Okay? God, I need a cigarette."

"Yeah, sure," I said.

"God Jesus," he said, rubbing away the red street signals from his eyes. After a minute's pause, he spoke again: "This is the end of the line."

"What?" I said, peering out the front window of the bus and suddenly realizing we were still firmly in the midst of the city complexes.

"End of the line. Time to exit the bus."

"What?" I said, still confused. Out the right-hand windows of the bus were my street corner, the bus shelter and the sun setting over the road. All of the complexes looked the same, and I hadn't noticed when they failed to change or disappear. I looked around the bus and pointed to the sleeping guy. "What about him?"

"Look, man, either get off the bus or don't. Just as long as you get off the bus."

I descended the stairwell into the street. Leisurely, I extended my toes to meet the pavement, half expecting them to stretch and fall through the bottom of my shoes, where they would touch the orange light falling across the ground. Something, clearly, had gone wrong; the wrong bus at the wrong time of day. The driver, not paying attention, failed to follow the prescribed route. I'd fallen asleep and missed my stop, or simply dreamt ascending onto the bus to begin with. The little red lights on the bus shelter were flashing red zeroes, so I began stepping toward my apartment again. With each contact with the earth, it felt like bandages were drawing tight across my bones, and each one more draining than the last. I reached the front door of my apartment building and went inside.

The dust and clutter had not moved. Every breath I took was like a probe backwards in time to the morning before I had left. My throat had, like my skeleton, begun to constrict, so I went for the first time in some years to pour a glass of water from the kitchen sink, rather than the bathroom. Reaching for the tap, I saw a foggy, electric room in its surface. Something about the metal against my skin flowed down through

my chest into my stomach, and I was overcome by a sudden, insistent upwelling of memory.

Maybe it was a dream, or my imagination, as I began to see my wife standing in my place before the sink, both hands invisible beneath a warm, soapy bath of dishwater. The color and image seemed as if reflected in a pool of transparent polished steel, the wind through her nostrils flying like a car driving through a tunnel into the country to a house with a garden and a fence and the sun. The drying rack sat nearly empty upon the counter with perhaps one plate or one bowl in it. I sat at a clean kitchen table, morosely propped up by my elbows with my throbbing stomach in my hands.

No water came out when I turned the tap and I remained standing with a dry glass in the other hand.

"Must've shut the water off already," I mumbled. I sat on a stack of newspapers and pushed the trashcan into the hallway so I could stretch my legs out, spilling an ancient half-full ashtray in the process. My wife's picture on the wall didn't look at me with more sadness than usual. When she'd left, I'd wanted to remove the photo, but after several hours spent searching for the step ladder and a few falls off of the kitchen counter, leaving me hanging from the cabinet doors, I just left it. I doubt if I could have pried it from the wall even if I'd wanted to.

Resolving to locate a bus timetable and map the following morning, I dimmed the kitchen lights and started for bed. As if on cue, the refrigerator buzzed loudly and flashed bright red rotating circles of light across the room and blew a foul, synthetic odor like melting silicone across the room. I kicked it and shut the bedroom door behind me, wondering what on earth that was supposed to mean.

The next morning, I awoke naturally, but much later than usual. The clock read 2:45 p.m.; I must've forgotten to set the timer the night before. When I got out of bed, a shower of what seemed to be fine, slightly pink sawdust followed. I looked at the sheets; more of the dust was collected in its folds. *Really bad dandruff?* I thought. Trying to brush myself off, I realized it came from my skin in torrents whenever I rubbed against it. There was no visible damage, but no matter how much I rubbed, there was still more. Thinking better of it, I stopped and went to the remaining sliver of my mirror and was shocked to see much of my hair had gone as well, leaving a patchy, topknot-like arrangement behind. It seemed all of my fingernails were missing, but I couldn't find a single one in the bed sheets. My entire appearance had become somehow

gaunt, almost shrunken. I felt the gentlest currents of air bearing down upon me from the walls and pipes of the apartment and an inappropriate affinity for the dry-radiating bricks above my head. Not the sort of affinity of attraction, but rather a sort of compelling, irreversible draw, like pressure and heat in one force. It was already much later than I'd left the day before, so I covered myself in a loose-fitting knit cap and billowing black coat and rushed down the stairs.

At the bus shelter, I stood outside and carefully studied the electronic map projected on its side. The map confirmed that the bus I'd taken—or at least had intended to take—the day before was the right one after all, and I wondered if I'd gotten on the wrong one in a haze of thoughts about the world beyond the city. Inside the shelter, a woman in dark clothing sat quite primly on the bench. I thought it might be the woman from the day before but could not see well enough through the frosted glass to tell. It was better not to risk it, I thought, and stood outside to wait.

With no red numbers or thumbs ups to watch, the bus's arrival took me off guard. I paid, trying not to make eye contact with anybody, and took my seat for the long ride. As before, the bus began nearly full and came close to empty as the twilight hours of the winter afternoon neared.

Before the glowing line on the map display approached the green triangle this time, the sun had long gone down behind the edges of the complexes and disappeared beneath their absurdity of a false horizon, leaving me staring at a blur of my own figure in the bus window. The image, although vague, was enough to frighten me. I had begun to look like plastic stretched over a coat hanger frame. Putting my spindly fingers to my cheek ridges, a substance that was neither skin nor bone flaked off. It was like crumbling plaster. I pressed my eyes up against the glass, and to my terror, the complexes had failed to disappear again.

"Excuse me," I said, calling out to the driver, the only person remaining on the bus other than myself. There was no response.

"Excuse me," I called out again. "Is this the bus to the rail station on the outskirts?"

"What?" the driver said.

"The bus to the—"

"I heard you the first time," he said. "Yes, this is the bus that goes there. To the place you said." I exhaled, feeling relief despite the snowflake sized particles that drifted away with my breath.

"Thank god. How much longer did you say?"

"Oh, this bus isn't going there now."

"What? Why not?"

"We already went to that stop. I already did that," he said. His eyes seemed to shrink back into his rippling brow as he tilted his head and tried to catch my face in the mirror. I tried to think back to whether I could have dozed off and missed the stop somehow, but all I could see was a line on a map with a green triangle at the end where the rail station was supposed to be. It didn't seem possible.

"That can't be true. What am I supposed to do now?"

"How the hell should I know? Get off and wait for a different bus, I guess."

My face wavered and shifted in the bus windows. Soon, the little arrows on the stairwell began to blink, and once again I walked down to the sand and wash of the surface. There stood the same vacant, illuminated bus shelter, like a paper lantern drifting in an empty celestial river, alongside the swift banks leading back to my apartment building. The doors gulped air from the night, and upon touching the doorknob leading into what was once my home, I could feel the fissures beginning at my fingertips. Inside, a flick of the light switch produced nothing. The power had been cut, and the only thing leading me to my bedroom was the idea of my own crumbs trailing backward. Flipping the switch downward again, some vestigial electricity jumped into me, briefly flooding the apartment in the same projection of glowing light that the faucet had done before.

I saw my wife, retiring silently to the bedroom and extinguishing the lights in the kitchen as I sat brooding, absorbed in my thoughts at the table beneath a lamp. Every so often, I heard a heavy breath from down the hall, and I would stand up to peer inside the refrigerator. A bluish light surrounded a milk carton, expired. I wasn't hungry, but over and over I stood up to look inside the fridge, still with only a carton of milk, which I didn't drink anyway, still expired. The vision fled and only the neon shining through the front windows remained, illuminating a room without walls, doors or ceiling, only a floor.

Fearing I might dislodge a brittle toe or finger, I closed my eyes and felt my way to the bed to lie in the tiny drifts of dust in the dry sheets, not opening them again until morning.

I made the best effort I could of my limited energy, determining that there was an alternate route to the railway station leading out of the

city if I walked to another bus, rode it for a while, got off, and then took another. I'd become entirely too anxious and single-minded at that point to look into the mirror before dressing, but the arms and hands buttoning my shirt felt as though they might crumble at any second. The skin felt brittle and thin, light began to show between the bones, and the slow pulsing of my internal organs against one another surely would have been visible to an observer.

It had to have been because I was still in New York, for there seemed to be something amidst the complexes that was drawing the metaphysical glue out of me little by little, something the Bureau of Human Operations was responsible for. Initially, my last ditch plan to circumvent the straightest bus route seemed to work. I got onto a bus at a stop with a number of unfamiliar people, reached the transfer station and stood tenuously, waiting, with my hand on my teeth to keep them from cracking and falling out. But when the connecting bus pulled up to the station, it felt like someone had wrapped a wire around my midsection and pulled it tight. Pressing my hands against my abdomen, I found standing room at the back and leaned against a pole, feeling myself disintegrate with each bump and rattle of the bus. My thoughts turned to my wife wordlessly shutting the door of the apartment, all the things expanding and pressing each other down, climbing up the walls and obscuring each other after she left. I lost track of time.

"End of the line. This is the last stop," the driver said. I pulled myself up, removing my hand from my stomach and leaving a shower of dust on the seat in front of me. While I walked to the doors, my mind entirely focused on simply moving forward, my stomach fell out onto the ground. I looked down at it lying there, and then up at the driver, who only seemed to be wondering why I hadn't left already. The stomach, initially full—probably of air—when it hit the ground, deflated pitifully. It left a powdery mark where it had bounced off of my shoe. Unsure of the polite thing to do, I left it there on the floor and got off the bus.

As I exited, I looked up again at the driver, only to see it was the same one as before, the same projecting brow and frown that seemed to deepen every curve of the face, to where the eyes sat like dull marbles behind a curtain of hills. At that point, I had expected my hopes to sink, but they lacked the capacity to do so anymore and instead, simply began to drift aimlessly.

I found myself at my front door again shortly, turning the key in the lock and entering the darkened apartment. Unable to rise, or even

think, I sat across from the kitchen, letting the grains of thought drift in and out of focus, until I became aware of the pulsing red flashes growing across the floor. Despite the power and everything being shut off, the refrigerator had not ceased its alerts. In fact, they'd grown brighter and more intense with no light in the room. The refrigerator stood there, glowing deeper with each second, as if calling me to the next life. I'd had enough of the mysterious error message, and so set to doing what I realized should have been done in the first place: I began writing a letter to the manufacturer of the refrigerator.

To whom it may concern,

I am deeply dissatisfied with my Kenmore refrigerator. The refrigerator continuously beeps and flashes and tells me there's something wrong, when I've hardly ever used it in the first place. I am what you would call an unsatisfied customer. I hereby wish to discontinue my subscription to the Kenmore refrigerator service.

Sincerely,
Doron Runciter

The letter, neatly sealing itself and traveling to the post box, took immediate effect on the fridge. Gradually, the red flashing slowed to a dull fading in and out, the way neon light would come through the drapes with the heater blowing on them. I rose from the table to peer inside of it, half expecting to see an expired carton of milk inside, and put my hand on the door. The catch of its air-tight seal reminded me quite clearly of my wife standing above an infinite vase of flowers, unfurling her hands through an ocean of hair over the floor and happily arranging great round plates of food along its edges. She moved fluidly downward onto the kitchen table, where I lay prostrate, feebly mumbling into my ear. "I'm not hungry," I answered. The vision disappeared when my fingers began to crumble over the meat drawer, and the humming of the refrigerator's motor clicked to a stop at long last. I lost my grip on the door, stumbling forward onto the flimsy shelves inside. The light inside dimmed from yellow to red, and soon there was total blackness around me and the sound of the refrigerator door swinging shut.

At that point, my memory failed me. The next thing I remember is walking outdoors toward a train platform where a woman dressed in

black formal clothes was sitting on a bench, chain smoking. I looked up and down the tracks, but there was no complex or building of any kind as far as I could see in either direction, only a gravel road and gently sloping woods in the distance.

"Hello," I said, seating myself next to the woman on the bench, who looked remarkably familiar.

"Hello," she said.

"Are you waiting for the train?"

"Of course I'm waiting for the train. Why else would I be sitting here? Clearly, I'm waiting for the train."

"Oh," I said. I sat in silence on the bench for a while, pondering the implications of the statement. I looked over for some hint of a conversation, but all I could unearth was, "I like your hat." She remained nonplussed.

"Um, thank you?" she said, placing the question between herself and any continuation of the conversational line.

"Where are you from?" I asked after a pause, hoping perhaps for a town nearby.

"Originally, from England," she said, lighting another cigarette. "You look like a nice boy. Where is your family from?"

I wasn't quite sure how to take the question. "Well, uh . . . my great-great-grandfather was from England."

"Oh, where exactly, then?"

"I'm not too sure. Does it really matter?"

"That all depends."

"I think he was from Surrey?" I ventured. "Near London?" She seemed to be a bit disappointed by the response, and after a significant pause, sighed.

"It figures. You Londoners are all alike."

We sat in silence for a long time.

I think I must have died at some point, because as time went on, my memories of the past lost their clarity, becoming fuzzy and broad. Now that I'm dead, all there is to do is sit around in this field and smoke cigarettes.



LISA DOMINGUEZ WAN CHAI, HONG KONG

Bees can remember human faces, but only if they are tricked into thinking that we are strange flowers.

-Harper's Magazine, April 2010

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FINDINGS ANIELLA PEROLD

Knowing the smell
of beeswax, melted,
pressed, rolled, dripped
onto sheets of newsprint
and strewn about,
I spot the trick immediately.
"The smell is wrong," I say,
and leave without the candles.

The babysitter
who one day stole our
parents' engagement rings
didn't melt into a puddle
like the Wicked Witch of the West.
How strange—later spotting her face
in the back of the ice cream truck,
her boyfriend selling popsicles.

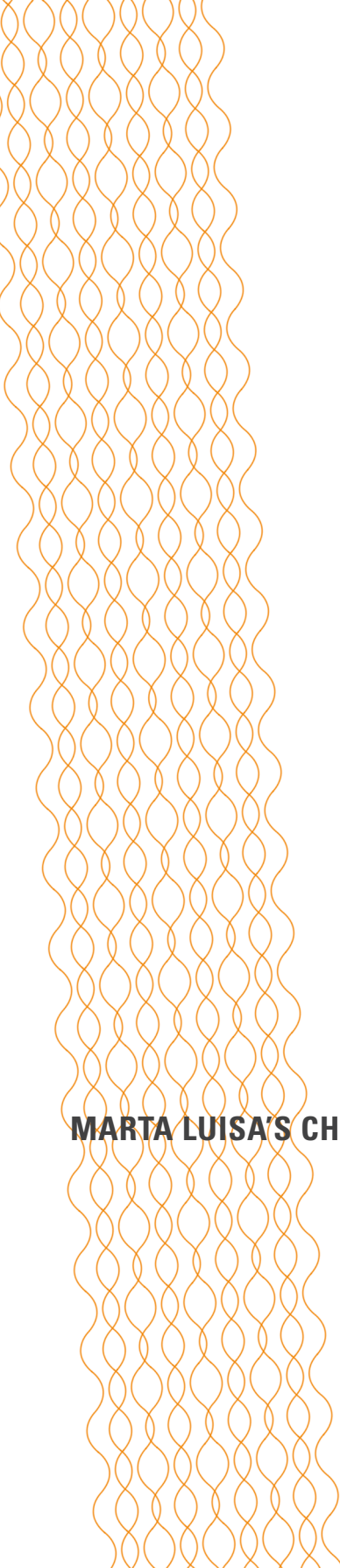
While picking flowers
on a Sunday walk,
I always remembered Alice
and how it all started with
her weaving daisy crowns.
Just a white rabbit! And the
day gave way beneath her
feet—the garden and Dinah, vanished.

To my daughter
I will say: memorize
your phone number,
the exact squish of the sofa cushions,

your map of birthmarks.

The faces, some will blur with memory—
let them—while others peel away
leaving strange, unfamiliar flowers.





After Marta Luisa was murdered in the apartment building next door, Dylan told his girlfriend that he'd probably move back to New Jersey. "It's too dangerous here," he said. "For you?" Irene said. It was August and the sidewalks were dusty and damp and lined with fruit vendors. Flies buzzed around the stiff clusters of carnations in front of delis. The police stood in Marta Luisa's yard and smoked cigarettes and didn't know who killed her.

Joey came over to Dylan's and climbed up onto the fence that divided the two backyards to watch the police walk around.

"It must have been her husband," Joey said.

"She doesn't have a husband," Dylan said.

"You don't know that. They all have husbands."

"No, they don't," Dylan said. "Not here."

"Yeah, man, they do, back in El Salvador or some shit."

"Marta was from Puerto Rico," Dylan said.

Joey stood up on the fence and looked down at Dylan. "Yeah?" he said. "Okay, her boyfriend did it, then."

When Dylan read the report in the paper the next day it said Marta was raped before she was killed.

"Fuckers," Joey said.

Marta Luisa and her children lived on the first floor of their building. They really were from Puerto Rico. Dylan had seen them in the backyard. Their garden was larger and more prolific than his, with tomato vines in wire cages and rows of

MARTA LUISA'S CHILDREN **RACHEL EASTERLY**

herbs and four tall stalks of corn. His mother had given him a basil plant, which Irene watered whenever she came over, but now it was wilting in the heat. In his bedroom Dylan had a wall of faces. They were all male and mostly white: Darwin, Paul Newman, Marx. He started putting the pictures up as some kind of joke, but now he didn't know what to say about them when Irene asked. He looked at them when he didn't

know what expression to make.

The night Marta must have died, it was a Sunday and he was looking at pictures of the earth on the Internet and eating. Her children had been away all weekend. He could have stopped her murder instead of sitting there in his room. She was alone in her room while he was alone in his.

Although, really, she could have been killed anytime between Friday evening and Sunday. Friday night he hadn't even been there.

Irene liked to come visit him to get away from the center of the city where she lived almost by accident, but he stopped inviting her over. If she came to his neighborhood alone, maybe she would get assaulted. Maybe if she walked with him, whoever killed Marta would kill Dylan first and then kill Irene.

Three days after Marta died, Dylan came home and Irene was sitting outside on his steps anyway, talking to three police officers, two youngish men and an old woman. The attentiveness on their faces as she spoke to them was almost lurid. Irene could make people look at her, although she was only pretty, not striking, with long straight hair, broad shoulders, a thin ribcage. Her prettiness had a sexless quality, as though she were unaware that other people thought they could trick her.

Afternoons when she came to his apartment, he made her toast and gave her beers, and she sat on his bed with her feet curled under her to read articles about revolutions in South America. She asked him questions about what it was like growing up as a white male. It satisfied her that he'd grown up in New Jersey, which, being a place she'd never visited, she believed to have sufficient grit. He didn't tell her that he was rich, too: if his parents weren't paying for their children to go to school and have weddings, they'd have enough money for another house.

For the officers' benefit she gestured toward Dylan with her cigarette. "He's the one who lives here," she said. "Right next door." The woman sweating in her jacket extended her hand to Dylan, and the two younger men glanced at Irene and then at Dylan and then went back inside.

"Irene already told me what you know," the woman said softly.

"I don't know anything," Dylan said.

"Yes," the woman said. "That's what Irene told us."

Dylan met Marta and her children when it first became hot

enough for them to come out to their patios. It was already too hot to be inside, and his only fan wafted dust and gravel into his bedroom from the sill. The girl sat on the cement hedging the grass and blew bubbles that drifted up toward the windows of the second and third floors of the building. Marta was thin and angular and absolutely unbeautiful, although her daughter was, with long curling hair and small elegant fingers.

When Marta said to him, "We are lucky," he thought she was saying it to her children. She said it again, louder. "No?" she asked.

He didn't know what between them could be lucky. Marta's son was playing a video game on the cement. Dylan's yard was freshly pocked with ashes. One yard further, a family had put out a grill and the smell of meat blew over. "*Por qué?*" Dylan asked.

"On the first floor," Marta said. "We have gardens."

Dylan's roommate Ivan passed the time without the diversion of extraneous objects or decoration. He didn't read or play video games or watch television, really. He stayed up late and cleaned fastidiously, as though objects around him were perpetually at work disordering themselves. All of his desires were negative: the absence of dirt, the lack of mess, shirts without colors. The only thing he didn't clean was their backyard because he never went out there. It was littered with shards of glass and bottle caps and cigarette butts from parties Dylan had and parties thrown by whomever lived in their apartment last.

Irene liked Ivan. She believed his austerity to be a sign of creative genius. "All he has to do to entertain himself is think!" she said. For political reasons Irene did not believe in recreation, which meant that she still did a lot of things that other people would consider recreational but did not enjoy them.

Dylan was heating pizza in the microwave when his mother called him and said she saw in the news something about an increase of killings in his neighborhood. He pulled open the microwave without stopping it, even though Irene told him it was carcinogenic.

"It's not an increase," he said. "It was someone I know."

"That doesn't really sound very safe," she said. "Why don't you come home for a little while?"

Dylan went home ready to be angry with his parents, but when he arrived he was surprised to find them passing into a physical feebleness so pronounced that nothing about them posed much of a

threat. His mother was sitting at the table with his sister looking at a catalogue about wedding invitations. His sister's stomach pushed against the table. On the counter, little paper plates held squares of cake frosted in different colors. "Try them," his sister said.

His friends, who'd lived in New Jersey since high school, got larger and larger each time he saw them. Jackson had been thick in a muscular way as a teenager, but now his waist settled over his hips loosely and his legs sagged against each other. Jackson threw Dylan a beer, and they sat in the yard together in the silent still hole between their houses. Their neighbors across the street had started to rebuild their house but had given up halfway through. Jackson and Dylan had worked at the city pool together in high school, and now Jackson's skin was red and lined from still working there. They were silent together for a minute.

"My neighbor died," Dylan said. Jackson sipped from his can and didn't say anything. Wind ruffled the grass, and a screen door rattled open. It was so quiet that the idea of the city seemed impossible. In his apartment, when he thought it was quiet, it wasn't; still the radio and the anonymous rumble of cranes bending and lifting, cars stopped or started.

"It's too bad about Sarah," Jackson said.

"My sister?" Dylan said. "What about her?"

"Too bad about her getting married. I always wanted to bang her more than your other sisters."

Back in Dylan's house his mother stood vacuuming the carpet while the television flashed. Everyone else was asleep. "I'm going home," Dylan said.

Irene herself was growing almost plump. Dylan thought maybe it was his fault, since she drank more beer around him than she had before she met him. She lay on his bed reading and drinking glasses of water, which was what she did when she really wanted to eat instead.

"I read online that you're supposed to exercise every day," Dylan said. "They used to say only two or three times a week, but now not just walking up the stairs, but a lot every day."

"I don't care," Irene said. "I hate it. I want work that means something. I don't want to go running with rich people who have time for fake work. Besides, the government just prints studies like that to distract you. Don't you know there's a war?"

He didn't mention that she wasn't doing very much about it either. "You could just go have kids if you want something to do," he said.

“Is that the real work your body is supposed to do?”

She hit his arm and rolled over. Her face was smashed in the pillow and her hair over it wavered in the fan.

The truth was that, to Dylan, having children was inconceivable. He couldn’t understand learning about history or thinking about the future, and he believed that if he had children he wouldn’t be able to explain anything to them. The other night, walking home he saw an unopened glass ketchup bottle smashed in a planter. The center part of the bottle with the label was unbroken, so he could still read the words. Nothing he had ever heard about history could make sense of this to him.

Bars and restaurants were the worst. His friends sat looking at menus or waiting, among them a silence long enough to become absurd; then they went on doing things like ordering food other people made. The first time he took Irene to a restaurant, they stared at the menus for a while and she drank her glass of water and his sat on the table undisturbed, and then she said, “I want to leave,” and they did. When Dylan’s brother died, his mother sat on the floor of the kitchen and said, “I simply can’t drive there.” Dylan’s brother had not died in a car accident—he had died because he drowned in a river—but their mother did walk herself to the funeral home and then for months afterwards, if she left the house at all, she went on foot to the store and the library and her job at the hospital.

“Anyway, what if my children decide to exercise every day?” Irene said. “Then there would be more parts of me wasting things.”

One night at the beginning of the summer he’d opened his window and heard Marta’s voice talking against a man’s hard low voice. Irene was sitting at the sill naked, unconcerned. Her knees were pulled up to her chest and her stomach was flat against her thighs.

Without touching her, he had said, “you’re the perfect shape.” “Don’t say that,” Irene had said. “Don’t say what?” he’d asked. She had picked up a towel and wrapped herself in it and said, “What if I get larger or smaller? What will I be then?”

When they came over to clean her apartment, Marta’s family laughed and drank cups of coffee inside, while anyone who wanted to cry rested on lawn chairs on the patio. Marta’s daughter ran back and forth between the yard and the apartment in her white cotton dress. It was the end of the day at the end of August and the light was stale over

the weeds growing around the vines. Marta's son sat next to the fence that divided Dylan and Marta's gardens and played his video game. Dylan waved and the boy nodded at him without taking his hands away. Maybe it had been someone in Marta's family, a cousin or uncle, who had killed her. Maybe he should be afraid of them.

"You know what I want?" Marta's son said to Dylan.

"What?" Dylan said.

"Microwave pizza. My mom doesn't let me eat it, but I want it."

"How can I help you?" Dylan said.

"I see you eat it every day," the boy said. "That's all you eat, and you're not even fat."

The boy was fat.

"What are you allowed to eat?" Dylan said.

"Whatever I want," the boy said.

Dylan went back inside and lay down on the floor of his bedroom and started doing push-ups. He lowered himself to the carpet and found himself level with a packet of cockroach bait Ivan must have set out.

The police stopped coming to Marta Luisa's apartment. Her son and daughter had been taken away. An Irish artist moved in and began covering large canvases in bright abstractions of the weeds growing in the backyard. Men sat out with her on the patio at night and drank wine and whispered long hushed speeches. No one else died.

He and Irene stretched out in his bed and listened to the woman and the men talk. Dylan didn't answer his mother's phone calls about what to bring for Sarah's wedding.

He lay on top of Irene so she couldn't move.

"I wish I'd adopted Marta Luisa's children," he said.

She didn't look up from her book. "Why are you talking about children?" she said. "And who's Marta Luisa?"

"Marta Luisa is the only woman I have ever loved," he said. "She was raped and killed by a terrible man."

Irene sat up. Her face was red and she looked straight at him. "How do you know he's terrible?" she said. "You'd do it. Even if you are nice enough to adopt her children, that doesn't prove you wouldn't have done it."

He took the book from her hands and set it aside. She was wrong. Marta Luisa was beautiful because she had nothing to do with him. He never would have touched her.

When Irene glared at him the skin under her eyes was flabby and wet. “Do you want to come to Sarah’s wedding?” he asked.

He didn’t find out what happened to Marta Luisa’s children. Every time he saw a group of children he looked for them. There were children in places where before he hadn’t noticed them at all—children on the subway, children jumping rope in the street, children sliding down handrails, children dancing on the sidewalk, children eating apples in the supermarket, children without their mothers, children running past him on the sidewalk without looking at him, children he couldn’t name.

Dylan stood in front of the mirror and brushed his teeth. “Marta Luisa,” he said to himself. The shower curtain was parted behind him, and the tub was white and empty. He hadn’t seen Irene in over a month, until earlier that afternoon when he walked past her on the stairs going down to the subway. She was listening to a homeless man tell her about his poetry, but she didn’t really hear him. Her face was toward him, but she was somewhere else, the way she always looked when she thought people were watching her. Dylan never felt like he was really seeing her unless she didn’t notice him. The man was looking up her skirt—Irene’s idea of affirmative action had always been to allow as many different kinds of people as possible to hit on her.

If he bothered to think about why Irene wouldn’t see him anymore, he thought about something that had happened between them last spring. It was before the day in his apartment when he mentioned Marta’s children. They’d gone to a party, gotten drunk and walked home together to her bedroom. He hardly ever stayed with her and this time, when he woke up in the morning, she was already gone. He made her bed and looked around the room for something to clean to show her he’d thought of her, but the room was nearly empty.

That night on the way home, Irene had run ahead of him drunkenly when he tried to grasp her hand. They passed groups of kids, who looked younger than they were, smoking and laughing down the sidewalk without umbrellas. A woman jogging in a bright t-shirt loped catty-corner across the wet street and cars swerved around her.

He pulled Irene under the canopy of a bodega and kissed her, next to the ropes of garlic and the rows of onions. Rain drizzled on the sidewalk and the transparent plastic curtain. A homeless man pushing a cart filled with bottles across the street saw them and whistled, but Dylan didn’t move and Irene didn’t notice. She didn’t like being touched on the

street or in front of other people except when it was late and she was that drunk. Dylan himself was usually too nervous to have sex except when he was a little drunk.

When he'd crossed the street to them, the homeless man whispered to Dylan, "Hey, let me," and Dylan spun around and punched the man in the nose. A ribbon of blood trickled into his beard. His cart clattered down the sidewalk, and glass bottles fell off and shattered. Irene ran after the cart and pushed it back up the sidewalk. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry." Even when Irene was apologizing, her face bore the complacency of a mother's or a schoolteacher's. He'd liked this about her, when he met her. She seemed honest. Her hair was damp and curling from the rain, and the way the man looked at her made Dylan want to hit him again.

Back at her apartment Irene fell on her bed and wouldn't look at him. He climbed under the quilt and waited for her to yell at him.

"How can I stand it?" she said.

"What?"

She was wrapping her arms around her hips under the blanket. "Some days," she said, "some days I just feel so big."

"Big how?" he said.

"Well, I am," she said.

He rested his head on her stomach, and it heaved up and down. Now he wasn't that drunk anymore, but Irene was.

"That's not what you are," he said. "You're hardly anything at all."

He lifted his head and opened her legs and pushed himself on top of her. All day he was surrounded by tiny folded opportunities for pleasure that he couldn't touch, but here was Irene.

When he finished and looked down at her, she was asleep. The rain fell heavily on her window and on the street carts rolling down the sidewalk clanking with bottles. Irene's breath lifted her flat hair; her face under it was placid and inconsolable, like a child, not asking for anything. He felt sick with guilt almost, looking at her looking like that—but how often had it happened that he just wasn't nervous at all?



EVERYBODY'S
DAD

-DMZL

For my parents, with regret. For my children, with hope.

37

Honest to God my heart aches

When I see them trying.

—Jack Spicer

PARENTHOOD **MARC DONES**

I.

Another year—
and your eyes
are still vacant

with hunger.

Your thimble
of memories seems
so heavy now—

it's time I told you—

there are harder
things than
being lonely.

II.

When there was no one there
I learned that
no word is
more deceitful than
“honestly.”

III.

How was I supposed to tell you

that your bones
are actually made
of little bits of songs
that we used to listen to?

You'll never know
that late at night
you become a CB radio

that I use to talk to myself.

IV.

When you speak
nothing is younger
than the next word—

or the word after that.

V.

You know—

—I had lungs once

deep in my chest,

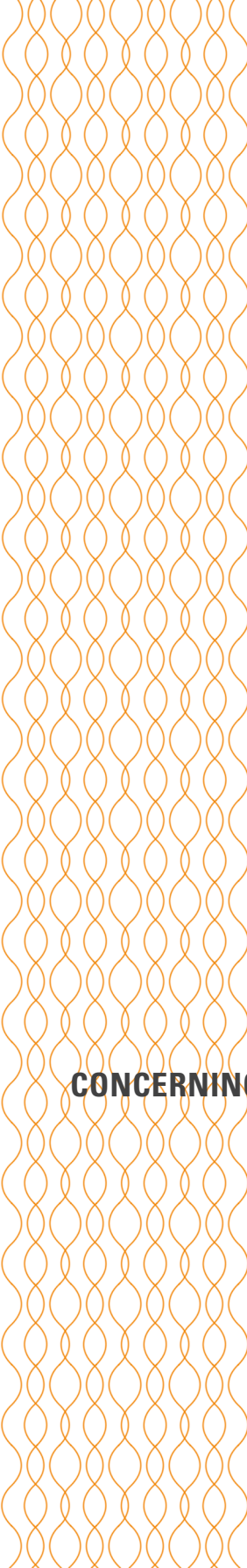
hands—

on my wrists.

VI.

We were
so sure—





Right in the middle of things, his arms and legs went numb. The lady was smiling and asking, he was smiling and responding, just like he ought to, because he'd answered these before, cakewalk, but all the while this *unusual ice-heavy numbness*. Come to think of it, in the mornings sometimes, more often than sometimes, thinking now, he wakes with the feeling of a body beside him, a thin limb, alive in that feeling so particular to skin, to life, the feeling one can sense even through clothes, through bed sheets, walls, a silent teeming. He is able to recall in the moment that dawn understanding of it—life inside a body registers like stopping a swinging bell with one's hand, the instant before the thing stops completely, the *shimmering* along with the memory of sound, the solid suggestion of the ring leftover. The arm is his arm, though, his life, heavy and half asleep. Right in the middle of things, he does not know what to do about it. He takes it as a sign to speak up and to pray, to squeeze at his icy palms and wave his toes inside his shoes.

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[Excerpt 33:04-39:52]

Property of Virginia Public Radio, Richmond, VA

Tags: 1994, Amos Breslauer, Author, Breslauer, December, Interview, New and Notable, Poetry, Rauskid, Smith River Organ

CONCERNING THE DECEASED MR. BRESLAUER ANNA DUENSING

RS: If you're just tuning in, I'm here with the author Amos Breslauer. He has just released a new collection of poetry, his first major publication since the novel that launched his career six years ago. Before we get to the new work, Amos, I was hoping you could talk about *Smith River Organ* for a moment. The novel has been called requiem, memoir, magic realism, difficult to pin down. It tells the story of a southern town and its residents over several generations, the story

centered around three boys who find and mutilate a deer carcass in a riverbed. The memory of that day. Tough to go beyond that without giving too much away, right?

AB: Yes, but that was a fine summary, Rachel, yes.

RS: So, truth and memory are two important themes in the novel, and as you've mentioned in previous interviews, drawing from your own life. How much of the novel is autobiographical?

[production note: 23 seconds dead air, edited out for broadcast]

AB: Pardon. It didn't happen quite like that, in the book, but I was there, at the river, all my young life. There, at the river. I don't know what else to write about. I don't have anything else to write about. Memoir, this tricky word. I suppose I feel that my life and all my work and toil have become—and my habits—have become an elegy, just absolutely. Elegy is a better word, probably the best one. They both sound good to me, soft, gentle words—memoir, elegy—memoir could have the implication, but not elegy, I think. I don't have, I didn't have—to my family. I suppose, because you asked, the book is about my brothers and about my parents, through my brothers. They are the most basic, the closest to real to me, for me, for them. I want to put it—I can only say to you then—I couldn't, I was motivated to write—Faulkner once said—you're smiling because of course! Who else! He advised the young writer, he said, you must teach yourself that the basest of all things is to be afraid and, teaching yourself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in your workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed. He said love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. That quote, when I read it, actually heard it first, it was in a speech, I heard a recording first in school, and it was that very afternoon I started the book. I felt so full in that moment, full of writing, full of, I felt I think the closest I have ever been in love, a desire, the ability to pour out this living thing. I had a companion, a full-bodied companion with me all of the time. I felt as if I were intoxicated with it—nights I would stay up and let the smell of autumn come in and write write write and sleep at the last moment and wake up, only to be startled, surprised at the pages beside my typewriter. I couldn't understand from where inside me this beauty was coming—this beauty child out of the best, you know, out of the beast—this 22-year-old body

and mind. I was possessed for seven, eight years, in writing this thing. I can't remember much of my life; a lot of things, I mean, from that time, only exist in relation to my typewriter, to drafts, drafts and drafts. Small versions were published in journals. The university was incredibly helpful all this time, you know, professor friends, passing along manuscripts. When I actually pulled my mind up from out of the story, things were quite easy, uncomfortably so. The full book was published then in '88. And the poems then—this release, most of these are from the margins of early drafts of *Smith River*. I put a new mind to them now, but the poems, this new book was very . . . different, nothing natural about it. Nothing natural about it at all. Abortive, even, I could say. I feel very different now—felt—different.

•

My, my, my. Writing like a wretched birth, nauseous last time, even, cramping, heaving, rocking like a waiting kid, toes curled. Fingernails sliding over my face, forehead, shoulder blades, nervous scraping, picking scabs and scraps and all that foliage. Can't get around the small tastes of myself, bleeding hands, gnarled creatures, rough landscape, the blood that pools at the cuticle. Elegant, I hold my own hands, I go to the movies instead. I imagine a beautiful, dark-haired woman pouring tea, humming "Wayfaring Stranger," feeling good beside me. So self-wrinkling, small flesh pieces and dust, dirt, deposits, put them all on a page, glue my notes together, bind it like that, sell it like that, five pages like that, blowing their goddamned minds. All I see in creation right now is my never-fail prospect victory, sweet like women, like a woman, no doubt, like that warm hand on your back that just wants you, wants to press into you and understand you, because what you made just speaks to them like that. But now I know it's at home, three goddamned pages of notes on what's published every other time, small flesh pieces of what didn't print last go round, what any decent body could make themselves. I worry now I have had that sweet prospect of stardom so many nighttimes after the only time, so many hands pressing my back from the mattress most nights, that there ain't none of that left for the real thing, if it comes.

•

In the dusk light, a car pulls into the drive, and a woman in an eggplant-colored suit steps out of the vehicle. She is in her 40s, with a large, shelf-bosom resting atop her gut, connecting the torso into a single, soft mass. A black semi-truck pulls into the drive behind her—ESTATE SALES UNLIMITED, LLC: PROFESSIONAL PERSONAL PROPERTY LIQUIDATION—and three men emerge, two in denim and another in a knotty brown sweater. The woman approaches the man in the sweater, hands clasped around the cross hanging from her neck. The other two men hang back, finishing their smokes.

“Now, you’re the one I spoke with on the phone? Mr. Denver?” says the woman.

“Yes, Mrs. Autry.”

“Please, Mr. Denver, call me Peggy.”

“All right, ma’am. Now, I’ll personally be helping you tend to the property. You’ve spoken with the lawyer?”

“Yes, and we’re to leave only the books, the university will be handling those separately. That’s what Amos wanted.”

“You mentioned a daughter. Will she be present? I understand she’s to remove anything she likes before auction.”

“No, sir, the child is not coming.”

“All righty, Peggy.”

Mr. Denver beams and gestures to his men, who open the trailer and return with moving straps and a large furniture dolly. The porch creaks and crows as the four of them head for the door. Peggy lets them in with a key from under the mat, throwing the screen open with a gesture of ceremony. They enter and the darkness of the house swallows them up. The doorway takes in their silhouettes and stands black and gaping against the white brick home and the fading sky. The light and warm air remaining in the day seems pulled into the empty space, the empty house. Cicadas hum and cry. The movers get to work.

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***The Daily Progress* • Lifestyles • Obituaries • Published July 9, 2006**

Local author Amos Jay Breslauer, 50, died on Thursday, July 6, 2006, at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was born on January 25, 1956, in Henry County, a son of the late Conrad Breslauer and Ida Marie Burgess.

Breslauer was a professor of American literature at the University of Virginia and author of the highly acclaimed novel *Smith River Organ* and *Rauskid*, a collection of poetry. He spent his final years managing the William Faulkner Collection at the UVA Special Collections Library.

He leaves to cherish his memory his daughter, Addie Forrest, and her husband, David Forrest; devoted friend and colleague, Peggy Autry; the city of Charlottesville; and a host of other relatives, friends, students and fans.

He was preceded in death by two brothers, Adler Breslauer and Conrad Breslauer, Jr.

Funeral services will be held 2 p.m. Tuesday, July 11, 2006, at the UVA Chapel with interment to follow at Monticello Memory Gardens. The Reverend J.R. Meek will officiate.

Friends will receive guests one hour prior to the service at the chapel.

Hill and Wood Funeral Home of Charlottesville is in charge of arrangements.



Oven Pancakes—Breslauer Sundays—1963

Peel, quarter, slice 6 red apples, toss and cook with butter, brown sugar, cinnamon. Mix 2 tbs. melted butter, 3 eggs, ½ cup flour, ½ cup milk, sugar and cinnamon for each pancake. Let pancake rise in skillet in oven, 450 degrees, 10 minutes or so. Top with cooked apples and powdered sugar.

Grünkohl—3/23/1957

1 bunch kale, 3 tbs. lard, onion, beef broth, oatmeal, cream. Boil leaves med. heat, onions in fat, add kale, turn, add broth, sit for 30 minutes, add a small dash of oatmeal and cream, nutmeg if desired.

Biscuits—Ida—11/14/1950

2 cups flour, 4 tsp baking powder, ¼ tsp baking soda, pinch o' salt and powdered sugar. Gently work in 4 tbs. butter and 2 tbs. shortening. 1 cup chilled buttermilk, pour in center, stir. Dust dough with flour on floured surface. Cut biscuits and place snugly together on sheet. Oven at 450,

bake golden brown. Love you.

45

ANNA DUENSING

•

Okay. All right. Um, yes. Now? Amos was a great man. I-I knew all the Breslauers growing up. Mom and Dad, Conrad . . . Adler. Great, just good, American people. New Americans. All dark hair and eyes, so serious, keeping to themselves. He was the youngest of them, of the family. They—swallowed him, like a force, kept them all together. He was this little kid. Did I love Amos? I didn't love Amos, real early on I thought so because of that loyalty, he, he had this loyalty to the people close with him, his family, me for a time, though I think he thought it was what he was supposed to do. The gentlemanly thing to do. He—just a proud, blind loyalty. And when his brothers—I think he was just horrified by life without Adler and Conrad, it was impossible to him. His whole attachment to life cracked. He stayed with me after, when his mother died shortly after. I had Addie—Adelade, I'm sure you know we were not married, but those early years were like he needed this body to hold on to so as to not slip away. He started school, I think, to be around life, to remember to be alive. I said, well, this little girl, what about her life? I knew he adored Addie but I was so sure after Amos' father died he would just die right then of grief is what they all seemed to be doing. He didn't love me but he had heart for me so I kept him. He started school and would come back when he wasn't working and then maybe it was '80 and '81 he stopped coming actually. That just killed me, but now I don't care. I got married. Addie had a real family. We hadn't talked for about six, seven years when he died. I stopped writing back, he stopped writing a time after that. He called once and said—left a message. But I'll never forget him, no, no. He didn't say much, his insides, wh-what was on the insides, anything beyond materials, sensations. Quiet like that. He would sometimes tell me he would dedicate to me something he published, that was during the book, and, well, early on when he just seemed to be alive with the damn thing, sure of everything, well, he didn't dedicate nothing, but I see myself in the page—I can find myself in there if I want to. I will miss him. Thanks, I'm through now.

•

You do not have it so bad, so bad, so bad, says the dying king snake, tangled in the vines and trash, fishing line, and dying. I'd only seen

another snake this way, stuck, black and shining in the sun in our yard with the watermelons; Dad hacked the thing's head off with his rusted hoe, pulled him in bits and pieces from the broken and twisted leaves. I don't know what to do here, Mink Creek quiet this afternoon. I can't touch the thing, he is so angry and dying, and me with this sad dead little trout hanging. June is loud with this cicada rhythm, rich and breathing all this air, a headache comes and goes like the neighbor's dog with an animal in her mouth, laughing. Staring at the thing. I used to have a real good mother and a father. Black snake crawlin' some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon, Dad sang, flinging the snake away from the porch, from us kids watching. I would always think of him singing, Don't like no black snake no how wonder where my black snake gone? When I'd be angry with him. Conrad and Adler chasin' moccasins here and there, busting their heads with rocks, sliding all up and down the river, ankle deep. There I am, here I am, at the edge, worried and wonderin'. Legs all fearful and phantom bites and grazes. Rashes. Going to the truck now, legs are killing me.

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DECEASED ESTATE AUCTION SATURDAY, 5 AUGUST 2006
CHARLOTTESVILLE/ALBEMARLE COUNTY SAMPLE LOTS

Lot of 26 Virginia State Mugs \$15
Sadler & Sons Yellow Hexagon Teapot Set \$25
Lot of 12 Photographic Dry Plates (Late 1800s, Portraits, Landscapes) \$350-\$370
Sage Green Olympia Manual Typewriter \$260
Leica M3 DS Camera Outfit with 3.5 cm f/3.5 Summaron \$1,700
1939 Leitz Leica Camera Manual (German Language) \$25
Hohner 64 Chromonica Harmonica, 4 Chromatic Octaves \$45-50
Hohner Alto Melodica, No Mouth Piece \$10-15
Anton Schroetter Violin, Made in Mittenvald \$1200
Lot of 10 50-Reichsmark Notes (UNC), City of Stuttgart, 1946 \$350
Handmade Book of Recipes \$10
59 16-oz Jars of Unlabeled Strawberry Jam \$150-170
1960 Bluebill Duck Hunting/Fishing Boat (9½ ft/ 40 lbs) \$660
A Box of Photographs \$15
Antique Blanket Trunk (Dovetailed Pine) \$270
Hickory Hill Couch \$200

Herschede Grandfather Clock (Model: Windsor No. 325) \$270

Dixie Mahogany Bow Front Chest of Drawers \$550

Virginia State Map, Printed 1945 (11x15) \$25

Luger S/42 1937 Dated Chamber with Holster \$1950-2050

***In response to popular inquiry, please note: the deceased's library has been given to the university**

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The South Street Brewery announces a new addition to their menu in honor of late local legend and regular patron Amos Breslauer!

The Amos Toddy

Bourbon, mint tea, lemon, honey & spice served with cinnamon sticks and a clementine. Cozy up to a piping hot mug this fall and remember the man behind the 800 pages that make or break young Yankee undergrads.

•

It is dark now and Peggy waves to Mr. Denver, her figure booming in the semi-truck's headlights. Mr. Denver raises his palm from inside the cab.

"So long! Take care, ma'am!" he calls.

Peggy turns and walks back into the house, hands in fists at her hips, silver bracelets tinkling. She moves down the long front hall, with each step letting her toes slide behind her on the hardwood floor. She feels graceful, ladylike.

"Mr. Amos, if only you could see me now, Mr. Amos," she smiles, shaking her head. She had been surprised by how beautiful his home was, how beautiful and clean. Of the little she knew about him, she knew he lived alone, and with this detail liked to imagine herself moving in, tidying up, loving and cooking. He rarely spoke to her beyond gruff office talk, but Peggy knew he was simply a quiet, contemplative man. She turns like a dancer and enters the kitchen, humming to herself. From the cupboard above the oven, she removes a record she stowed there earlier, after Mr. Denver had finished with the room. The vinyl is scratched, the sleeve flaky and brown. Peggy did not own a record player, she couldn't remember if she did anyhow, but she saw the thing on the floor and

thought it was funny and sad. *Another Man Done Gone* was the name of the album. "Indeed," Peggy sighs, hitting the lights, cradling the record under her arm.

•

I see matches already on the brown bench for my pipe. I see young ladies walking under the trees in small, bright skirts. I look around the hazy summer campus for students or goddamned Peggy with the plum suits always wonderin' my business, calling on Mr. Lonely. There is no one around but young ladies and I do think about my loneliness, my useless body hanging here, body like a cage, protesting, whining, demanding food and love and touch like a little kid. There are no clouds, no breeze, only the magnolias for relief, still as photographs. I think about when my body carried me up and down, a winning vessel, now it's more a tired old thing at my heel, a dear companion, a pain. Just simple and tired and feeling through. Like a shell, I poured it all out inside a starched clean jacket, discussed fonts and translations, realized they were translating my whole soul away, skimming my heart. The main thing we were taught to watch for in the library was twine and the mouth. Suspicious gestures with and around the mouth is what Peggy said. Thieves tuck it in their cheeks, moistening the string, mark a page with it, bookmarked, close, press, pull and waltz right out with first edition Poe, Faulkner, Monroe letters for sale. I'm settled and through with suspicion, as settled as one could be, really the calmest little brook you could imagine. Still as this air. Ask me what anything tastes like and I'll tell you down to the butter, the pepper, the smallest pocket tastes. I'm good. I'm making motions and not lacking pleasures but not making much else. Like when you roll over and fall asleep and the world keeps going with your books still on the shelf and your trash in the bin, your friends in their homes, your house cool and noiseless save the clock and your gentle breathing, fading back with your private thoughts. I dream about Ma and Dad, brothers, and I don't have much else to say.

•

Right in the end of things, as if he knew, he separates the good books and music and takes the rest to Salvation Army. He gives the dog to the kids next door, tells them here's a new friend, he likes you better. He sleeps

later and turns in earlier. He reads the same things over and over until faint thumbprints stain the pages. He is able to recall memories from long ago, tastes. He understands the feeling of a body beside him to be more than just his dead limbs and he clings to that, the sound of bells. Right in the end of things, he knows to do nothing. He knows to wait. He plays soft melodies before coming to rest.



SARAH SCHNEIDER STEREO HEAD

I have horrible memories I don't know are real.
of the house I moved into when I was five.
I would crouch at the stairs, listening to the desperate Korean—
the only words I understood
were God and Please, my eyes focused
on the dresser next to the window that carried two pictures:
me when I was five, my middle sister at the same age,
both against suburban daisies ;
identical smiles.

With every year I gain I hope to know what's real
and what's not, and also to forget a little of what I know
for certain—my raised hand and my sister's face,
my mother shaking questions against my lips—
the perfect breakfast my father made,
the death of my dog.

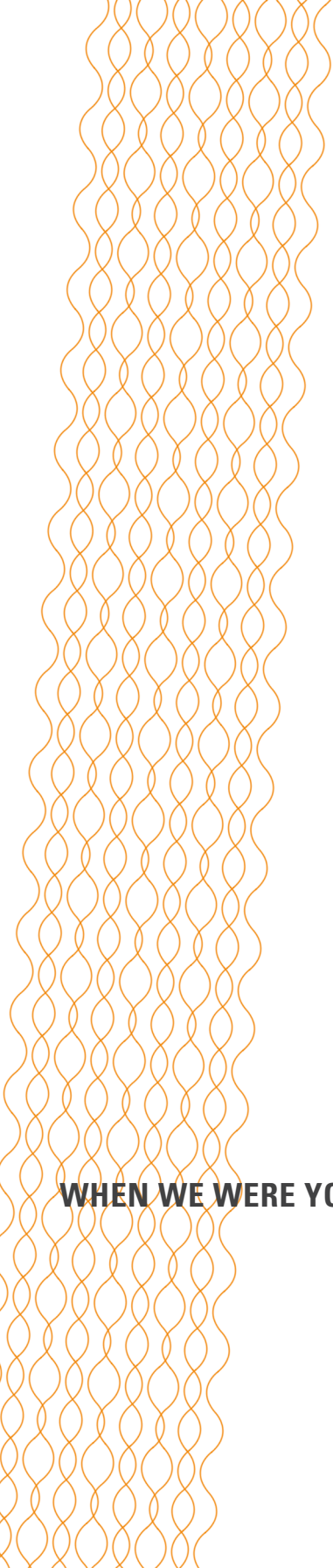
On the other side of the country my 13-year-old sister
is making and faking her own memories
while I study theory and let boys take me from my poetry,
order Chinese food with beer, skip breakfast.
I wonder if she will remember my hand and the moment
mom walked in. Me hyperventilating.
Her yelling stop. Her lack of gravity.
Hospital bills. Dance shoes.

I wonder if she'll know what's real better or worse than I do.
My mother remembers everything.
My father knows only what I show and what
my mother chooses to tell.

None of us talk enough to remember, but we love each other
upwards, never saying sorry, half embracing
while taking turns holding the seven-year-old's hand

so this last daughter can cross the street
to pick the same yellow flowers
I've seen every day since I was five.





It wasn't a warm day; grey, and the air was wet. My teacup was rocking on the table, threatening to tip and soak my scone. I had only taken a ferry once before, but I remembered it being less wobbly. Calais had long faded from my view, and we were closing in on the Kentish cliffs. I had never traveled to my English summer home from Paris before, but now that I was an adult living alone, I was neither accompanied by my family nor departing from my birthplace in Florida.

As the boat pulled in and we were hoarded off, I searched the crowd at the receiving line. They weren't the ones standing in the front grasping for their loved ones. They were the patient ones, standing to the side a bit farther off, smiles across their faces: my grandparents, warm, excited and beckoning me forward. I walked into their embrace and their age-old greeting: "Hello, love. We've missed you. How does a nice roast lamb sound?"

Grandpa was Santa Claus. He stood 5'10" with a ruddy complexion; spectacles; white, wavy hair; a double cream and sugar belly; and a propensity for hilarious jokes, breaking into song and regaling us with stories from his exciting youth. Grandma was his stately and stocky partner. Every morning as a child I would watch her comb out her long grey hair with the same green comb and tie the strands under with a jeweled barrette. She had a pillowy bosom and a nice round overall shape conducive to colorful muumuus and large knitted sweaters (sometimes worn together). Grandpa was a chef and Grandma was a gardener, and they were the keepers of a magic kingdom, tucked away in the English countryside.

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG **REBECCA DAVIS**

After less than an hour drive we crunched up to the curb, and there she was standing tall and grand as ever: 3 South Canterbury Road, surrounded by trimmed hedges, with friendly windows peering out like eyes upon me. Before I walked in, I stopped on the doorstep and took my

first deep breath. It had been waiting for me long before we pulled up to the front door, and even before I boarded the ferry: royal Kentish air; succulent Pink Lady apples; fresh laundry soap; the faint smell of toast, loganberry jam and the silky gold pillows on the comfy chair. I waited for it to knock me out and tuck under my skin with a soft embrace. This time, however, it just sat there and smiling gently back, floated by.

Grandpa was trying to get my bag up the first few steps, but I intervened and took it the rest of the way to my room. It was all there: the flowered bedcover, the wide window that looked across the garden and the little green wooden chair welcoming me home. It felt the same, but not completely. It felt . . . expected. And suddenly the whole house was smaller, the way the Christmas tree is each year.

At dinner downstairs, our plates packed with tender lamb, soft carrots and crispy potatoes, we sat in a circle around the aging wooden table, laughing about my grandparents' recent visit to Paris where I yelled at an ornery cab driver in French on their behalf. "We had a wonderful time seeing you on that trip," Grandpa said. "We are very proud of you, you know." Grandma heaped potatoes on my plate in agreement. As the meal progressed our conversation turned to stories about the absent family members, eventually resting on my mother, and her early years.

"She was a tender girl," Grandma recounted. "She clung so close to me, and for a long time. We couldn't leave her anywhere without me there. I wasn't always sure how to respond." I was surprised by this admission. I had never heard my grandmother talk about my mother with such frankness. "It's a good thing really that your father came along when he did; she had already traveled a lot with us, so she had seen the world, but she didn't have any major plans. She was never the type to take off by herself, not like you."

I remained silent; how was I supposed to respond? This was my mother, my confidant. I knew everything about her and her growing up years. She had often shared with me that Grandma was a hard parent, at times quite harsh and less affectionate than my own. Some of her methods have even made their way into a few therapy sessions.

Accordingly, Grandma was a strict grandmother when I was young, and it was apparent that she was someone to be feared and placated. I rebelled against this precedent, however, when I was about 11. I decided that Grandma needed more hugs and less blind obedience, and I was not afraid to be honest with her about my own opinions. After

some work, I even convinced her to try a stick of gum, a sign that she had temporarily abandoned her struggle to teach us proper manners. Because of this, we were always closer than she and my mother had been. But there remained a distance, a clear distinction between seasoned adult and child.

This comment dissolved it. My grandmother was admitting that she did not know how to deal with a “tender child.” And I saw myself in her vulnerability. At the time, I was babysitting a little girl who had hysterical breakdowns in which she refused to be comforted. I vacillated between my mother’s tactics—tender hugging and use of a baby voice—and my grandmother’s methods—attempting to get the child to be mature and get a hold of herself. This tug made me worried about my effect on her, and I often wonder if I will make an appearance in therapy sessions in her future.

This was not the first conversation that had changed things between my grandparents and me. Grandma and Grandpa had visited me in Paris not two months before. Each evening at dinner the conversation topics became more intimate, and the two became increasingly relaxed, their filters fading. When they spoke of their move to America and the year of distance between them, I saw myself leaving for college; and when they talked about the early days of their relationship, it was not like a distant affair, but almost the same kind of conversation my friends and I would have. “We had to avoid his mother,” Grandma had said. “She was very controlling and it was really hard for us when we were living near her.” Grandpa interjected, “No, she was just very interested in my life and you took me away from her. You both were competing with each other.”

I was becoming included in their private worlds, not as a granddaughter but as an equal. They were talking to me as if I were their peer but also as if they had only just experienced what I was going through.

“Now that you’re here, I have some projects for you, my love,” Grandma said as we scraped the last morsels of lamb from our plates. “I’d like to show you around the garden and teach you how to make the loganberry jam. I know you want to relax, but we don’t get to see you very often, and I want to show you how I do it.” Though I had always dreaded the garden, I allowed her this opportunity and acquiesced enthusiastically.

The next morning, Grandma handed me the old silver bucket

with the squeaky handle and the shears, and we ventured out into the garden. As we walked past the pots on the patio, she showed me exactly how much water each one needed. She led me across the lawn where she told me which bushes to trim and which ones to leave alone, carefully pronouncing every name. We discussed the state of the roses and ambled our way towards the vegetables and fruits. As we weaved between the mint and the basil and the parsley, we rubbed our fingers under the leaves to smell what was what in case I forgot later. We picked the dead apples off the trees and walked past the loganberries, where she told me how to hold the stem just under the berry so that I didn't get pricked. The raspberries were just beginning to bloom, and she told me what kind of soil she had used to get them back after the frost had killed them. Then she gave me her trowel and her yellow wellies, which were no longer too big, and showed me how to dig for the good potatoes. With our gatherings, she took me back to the house to teach me how to make the jam.

"It's so nice that my granddaughter takes an interest in my garden. I'm a very lucky grandma," she said as we watched the jam boil like a muddy geyser. "I know I'm being pushy, but I like to show you how I do things so then you can do them." With that she shoved the wooden spoon in my hand and left me alone to tend to the bubbling mass of fruit, sugar and water that apparently would turn into jam. When she came back, she told me to take out a teaspoon and put it into the mixture. The jam was thick enough that it stuck to the spoon, so she sent me to get Grandpa. He boiled the jars and handed them to us as we filled them, then he closed them tightly before they went into the cupboard. I noticed that some of the caps still weren't sealed and turned them once more when he wasn't looking. When all was cleared away, I looked at the jars in the cupboard and felt victorious. They were my jars this time, my jam.

A few days later, I went downtown and entered the grocery store that my brother and I had loved when I was a child. I tried to track down all the treasures, but some of the packages were different, and I realized that there weren't enough of us this time to eat everything that we used to get. I just picked my favorite ones. The fresh crunchy runner beans that Grandma cuts up on her lap in front of the TV. Ripe red Kentish strawberries. Toasted teacakes with sweet currants. Fisherman's pie with creamy, cheesy sauce and crusty mashed potato on top. Sausage rolls wrapped in flaky pastry. But when I brought them

back home I noticed that they weren't as good as I remembered. The tastes were the same, but without my brother to fight over them with me, they lacked the necessary excitement.

When we were young, my brother and I were enlisted to do the dishes or help with the weeding, but for the most part we were able to sprawl lazily across the lawn while my mother helped around the house. This time there was no one to share the dish load. I spent a lot of time cleaning up and making tea. The kitchen floor was often dusty and sticky. The bathroom needed a once over with a sponge. There were a few items in the fridge that were past their due date, and when I pointed out that the cream was getting clumpy, Grandma brushed it off by telling me that I just had to stir it in better. One of the banisters was loose. I noticed because I sledded down the stairs for old times' sake and tried to grab a hold of it when I hit the bottom. The house seemed emptier, and it wasn't shiny like it used to be. I noticed how much upkeep was required, and I felt sorry that they were stuck with it when I wasn't there. When I sat down to watch my favorite movie for the umpteenth time, the tape was shaky. Though the picture was fading, I sat there for a long time, trying to catch the remaining scenes.

On the last day, we drove down across the cliffs and towards the beachy shore where the ferry waited. Grandpa spent ages getting the bag out of the car for me. Grandma had trouble walking to the gate, but she tried to hide it with chatter and pleas that I call more often. When we hugged I pulled her bosom into my mine and felt her sturdy arms. I was surprised to find her cheek wet. My grandfather was hovering. "It's so nice to have our granddaughter in England. You're a lovely girl, helping us with the house and taking care of us. We're going to miss not having you around."

"You can always come back, you know," Grandma added. "Just tell us when and we'll arrange it. Don't worry about the money." They both made a point to say, "I love you," more than once and seemed to keep forgetting that they had already hugged me.

As I walked with heavy feet along the hallway towards the boat that would take me back to another, harsher land, I looked back. There they were, like they always were, like I will always remember them, looking at me with that steady, eternal gaze.



FLUCTUATIONS KATJA KRISHOK

I make my wishes vague in the mornings.

Something good, as the eyelash
floats from fingertip.

.

Asphalt pillows may bring me closer
to that lost word:
an extravagant false wish.

.


I look for signs of whales
in soot streaked evenings,

a blue can in water,
a typewriter.

.

I rearrange furniture as ritual,
in darkness, glasses off.





Mrs. Wagner and her son Ben liked to hit golf balls from their freshly clipped lawn down into the water. They lived on a piece of property that overlooked a steep ravine, which they owned, and the Narragansett Bay, which they did not. Mrs. Wagner was good at golf—especially for a woman, and a woman of her age—but Ben was better and he would often instruct his mother on her swing. Crouching on the ground, safely out of range, he would say, “You’re lifting your knees, Mom—you’re looking to see where it’s going before you hit it, so you’re topping the ball. Remember when I took those lessons at the club? Scott told me that the key to a solid drive was to keep your body relaxed.” Mrs. Wagner would adjust her stance; she, too, took lessons at the club, once a week in season, and her swing was a great source of personal frustration. It was difficult for a woman to accumulate enough power in her upper body for a good, hard shot.

AGAWAM GOLF & HUNT ROSETTA YOUNG

As a family, the Wagners belonged to Agawam Golf and Hunt. Of course, for Ben and his mother, hitting golf balls from their lawn was an irreplaceable activity; it contained a plunk of victory that a full game never would. However, they learned to extend this pleasure—one couldn’t pretend, Ben often thought, that golf was a game of drives alone. To forget it was a sport, to forget it occurred on a tailored course, with greens and flags and holes and scorecards, would be a lie. And the course at the club was beautiful. Impeccably maintained, the only imperfection was the telephone tower and its wires, and these had always been there; the course had been built around them. If you hit the tower—its tack-metal skeleton looming near the seventh hole—you had the option of taking a mulligan. Ben and his mother repeated this rule often between themselves and even more often to guests. They loved the fair, firm line of it; they wished they could live their lives by its logic.

So, it was for a different kind of luxury that Ben and his mother—and, really, the whole Wagner family, his father, sister and brother, too—would load their golf bags into the back of the car and head to the club. The rest of the family played golf, although they scarcely knew it, to give Ben and Mrs. Wagner the illusion of casual intimacy. The truth was, his sister Lillian, at the age of ten, enjoyed the club for its pool and would swim laps in her floral one piece, as she put it, hand on her hip, “to tone her figure.” And his brother was a tennis player while his father, it was plain to see, loved sitting on a lawn chair in the shade, reading the newspaper and drinking iced tea. After conquering the stretch of highway that led out of Providence, the Wagners would disperse to their individual activities of leisure, which, invariably, left Mrs. Wagner and her son to play a round of golf alone. Their shadows were a familiar sight at the end of the long summer day, the two of them always being the last to abandon the course before dinner.

•

This is why Mrs. Stevenson is surprised to see Ben at the first hole without his mother. Peering through the window gallery, she had watched them play all season from the dining room. Having been at the club every summer for the past 20 years, she knows the ways of the other members. She herself would now only golf the front nine; she is 67 and the beating sun drives spots into her vision. Her husband is dead anyway and, as everyone knows, it is infinitely less fun to play outside of a couple. Mrs. Stevenson’s children are in their 30s, both of them, and married, one living in the recesses of Massachusetts, the other in the wilds of Connecticut.

Now, she spends a lot of time traveling, and when she is not on another continent, she is at the club. Three afternoons a week she lunches with Mrs. Molona in the dining room. Over the past five years, Mrs. Molona has become her closest friend, though they seldom talk of more than their children (neither has grandchildren and their anticipation is earnest and intense), the politics of the club’s management and the traffic outside the window gallery. They would stretch a lunch over three hours, taking care to observe the comings and goings on the front pavilion and the first hole. They feel their insights are keen and important. In each other, finally, is the audience a lifetime

of childrearing has denied them.

“Ben Wagner,” Mrs. Stevenson says, narrowing her eyes and pointing a finger through the glass, “Ben Wagner, there. Who is he with? That isn’t Lillian, is—”

“Certainly not,” Mrs. Molona interjects. “Lillian is much younger. That is—”

“Does she belong here?” Mrs. Stevenson blinks, leaning to get a better view of the couple teeing off. “I don’t think she’s golfing.” The girl watches the boy make the first drive—a swift, high-arched effort—and then the two get into the golf cart and drive down the fairway out of sight.

•

Ben reaches the seventh hole and sweat is already soaking the waistband of his shorts. The day is sweltering. He hates warm weather and he hates to sweat. He parks the cart roughly—his hand is loose on the wheel and it causes them to bounce on the narrow asphalt path. Marla stands up from the cart seat, the back of her legs peeling from the plastic. The sound does not attract him. He watches her eyes graze over the course’s landscape, at the expansive tailored green and thick fringes of pine. The shorts she is wearing, deep navy blue, are too short for the club. He had thought of making her change and then had thought it wasn’t worth the trouble for a Monday afternoon. Plus, Marla would have been offended. He knows, although she has not said it, that she thinks the club is snotty. He resents her haughtiness, just because her family doesn’t belong to a country club. Ben hates the way her brows raise on the subject. She comes, he knows, only out of interest.

“Oh, curious,” she had said over the phone, pausing, a heat rising almost audibly in her voice. He’d imagined her sitting inside her house—of which he’d only seen the outside—draped over an armchair, blushing. She had such a strange way of talking and he never could decide if it was an affectation or genuine strangeness—either way, it failed to hide what she felt, which in this instance was nervousness. “The club, uh . . . yes. Yeah. I will come, definitely. Hold on—” Another pause, as if she were gesturing to a third party nearby, although he had no idea who such a person would be. He knows, for example, that she has no sisters. “Hold on, give me a few minutes, to get ready.” Fifteen minutes later he’d appeared outside her house and she’d emerged in

those blue shorts, as if she hadn't given a thought to where she was going.

Looking at her now, Ben vaguely remembers something about her father and the Communist party. A story she had told? Maybe in one of their classes at school she had said that he used to be a member. He couldn't remember what she had said, but only how she always looked before talking in school, her nose wrinkling and her hand in the air—her mouth about to be solid and proud.

They walk to the tee and he begins to explain: "The red markers are for women; women can hit from there—oh, and children; women and children—and then the silver are for juniors, the ones who are just starting out, and the white is for intermediates—that's me, I usually hit from the white, my father hits from the white—and the blue for, for professionals or when you're really good."

Marla holds his nine-iron in front of her, nodding her head, leaning it into the ground, just barely driving the head into the earth. Not good for the club, not good for the course. "Does it say something about you," she says, "if you golf from the blue; about what you think about yourself? That, say, you think you're a really good golfer?"

"No," Ben says, annoyed by the question and its presumption; the search for meaning, romance, error. "It doesn't say anything. It's just golf."

Marla shrugs and sets her ball on the tee. She leans over it, bending her knees like he'd shown her, her hair shading the right side of her face. She doesn't look bad, he thinks, in her silly blue shorts. Her dark hair looks clean and her thin white shirt hints at the development of a summer's tan. There is a certain grace, maybe a dainty elegance, to her form that he likes to watch. Marla has always had that nice, red mouth, he thinks, and, unlike most Jewish girls, her nose is straight and small, sitting prim on her face. How lucky for her, only to have that slight Slavic tilt to her features and those brown eyes that swallowed the pupil, like a doll's. She swings the club behind her shoulder and then brings it back down, sweeping the grass and missing the ball completely.

•

Mrs. Stevenson turns from the window, the boy and girl long gone, having been replaced a few times over by odd amalgamations of people, the current party being the club director Mr. Wyatt, a new

member and his wife. Mrs. Stevenson turns to her companion and says, "Do you think that was a girlfriend? With Ben Wagner?"

"Don't you think Elizabeth would have told us about her?"

"Maybe she's new."

"How old is Ben now—17?"

"A good time for a boy to start dating . . . But that girl . . . Her shorts, well, they were practically indecent, weren't they?"

Mrs. Stevenson watches the new timid wife take a shot, swinging the club sloppily from behind her shoulder, with locked joints. Poor form. The ball shoots over the course, fast and low, barely arching, only reaching halfway to the green.



Ben's father is a local businessman who has had great success. He owns a chain of pharmacies along the Eastern Seaboard and with this franchise affords his family a lifestyle that is exceedingly comfortable. In the community, he is important because of his money and his straight character. Businessmen and politicians court him freely and without shame; he always has statesmen or the mayor cutting the ribbon at his store openings.

Therefore, Mr. Wagner is a considerable man in the small city. He takes his responsibilities and the responsibilities of others heavily and feels it personally when those around him fail. Failure of his own, even of the dimmest order, is infrequent and he has long closed off the chasm of shadows from an earlier and less perfect life. He has learned to dismiss his doubts. His best friend is his wife and he is an excellent husband. He is attentive and compassionate, listening to her strife about tasks at home or in her part-time work as an optometrist. He enjoys spending time with her more than anyone else—she who is, admittedly, quite different from himself, frank and opinionated where he is mild and careful—and the idea of straying outside of their marriage seems to him barbaric. He would no sooner drive a car without a fender or suck restaurant soup from his fingers. He would no sooner tromp through the house with a golf club and smash all their valuables. Dutifully, and for the past decade, he has made love to her twice a week with appropriate skill and liberal affection. In return, Elizabeth is a fit and able mother to their children and fills the household with an emotional vastness that never ceases to awe him. He never understands how he married

such a creature. She is so fit a wife and parent that in her firm affection even the words she speaks brush the strands of hair from the forehead, hush the whirring brain, bring relief in her capability and faith in her goodness, and all with an impenetrable humor that bolstered the spirits of those she surrounds. She plays golf with a skill that makes him teem with pride. He can fall asleep at night thinking of the other men's faces when, at the club, his wife hit a long hard drive down the fairway.

Today, a Saturday, he and his wife are to go to the club. Mr. Wagner currently stands in their foyer, waiting for his wife to change into her tennis outfit. They had been planning to golf—Mr. Wagner had been looking forward to it—but at the last moment Mrs. Wagner changed her mind. Looking into one of the large mirrors with which his wife had decorated their parlor, he flares his nostrils slightly. He likes to test the muscles of this blank plate, his face; he always finds it to be such a curiosity. He wonders idly that it seems his wife is only ever eager to golf with their son Ben. He is their oldest child; his wife, if he had to be honest, dotes on him, although intangibly, with an absolute lack of clarity. Truthfully, if he has any complaint in his marriage it is that Elizabeth worries too much about the children. It seems to him that while the children remain dynamic, growing characters, he is frozen in her mind, a stolid figure. Undoubtedly, he thinks, when others in the family besides Benjamin want to play golf, she switches the game as often as possible.

The floors under his feet are shiny, healthy marble. He can see the veins from where he stands. Mr. Wagner dislikes having to wait for his wife when all his thoughts are of her, in her tennis whites, bouncy and spry. He hopes that she will gather her brown hair—which she still keeps long, blessedly, even as her friends and the other women at the club have sheared themselves in flocks—into a single tail at the back of her head. He likes the way it splashes down over her sports outfits: tennis or golf or swim. She seems younger, his wife, than other women her age, and always had.

Mrs. Wagner emerges from their bedroom into the well-lit foyer. The windows, the summer day, ah, his wife's tan limbs—it is all so promising! Mr. Wagner can't help but be happy. She is indeed in the process of gathering her hair at the back of her head—showing him her shaved armpits, smooth hollows whiter than the rest of her skin, vulnerable, like a lobster's thin leg right before you crack the joint.

"Sweetheart," she says, looking around distractedly for

something—her cell phone, perhaps? Her purse? No matter what it is, Mr. Wagner can never guess. “Have you spoken to Ben today? Did he tell you where he was going when he left this morning?”

Mr. Wagner can see by the grave, concentrated look on his wife’s face that the only answer he can give is the unvarnished truth: “No,” he says.

She frowns. “Well, I’d like to know where he is.” Mr. Wagner wants to kiss her behind the ear; he wants to tell her about all his happiness. He is not worried about his son; he cannot imagine a world in which Ben is not fine, where he is not sure Ben or any of his children is fine.

However, he knows he cannot say this to his wife and, instead, says brightly, “You can call him from the car, on the way to the club.” She nods at this, sighing, moving into the kitchen for her tennis bag, and he knows that, somehow, her problems with Benjamin are sometimes personal, although for the life of him he never knows why.



Mrs. Stevenson and Mrs. Molona have finished their Cobb salads, and their gourmet turkey club sandwiches are sitting under the warming lights in the back, when Ben Wagner and the girl come into the lunchroom. They sit to the east of the room, near a long line of windows and speak in low tones; the old women cannot hear what the young people are saying. Moreover, Ben faces towards them, so all they can see of the girl is the back of her head.

“I wonder who she is,” Mrs. Molona says, lowering her voice slightly, not wanting to risk being overheard. “She certainly doesn’t belong to the club. I wonder if Elizabeth even knows.” Mrs. Molona’s eyes widen and her blond bob—dyed to wash over the gray—shakes with the strength of her inquiry. In one hand, she clutches her iced tea.

“I am sure she goes to the school,” Mrs. Stevenson says, craning her neck to catch sight of the girl, but is met again only by an unremarkable sheath of dark hair. “I am sure she goes to the school,” she repeats, “or one of them. You know I sent my children to Wheeler, like Elizabeth, but if she doesn’t go there, then surely she goes to Moses Brown or Falmouth Academy. Though, Putnam Country Day is always a possibility...”

“Mmm,” Mrs. Molona adds, “My son, once, took a PCD girl to

one of the dances . . . He came back so drunk, he had to miss school the following Monday.”

Mrs. Stevenson raises her eyebrows at this. She wonders if her friend is simply being emphatic. Mrs. Molona keeps nodding at her own statement, looking her companion in the face, but is then distracted by the green-shirted waiter making his way across the dining room. Two white plates holding gourmet turkey clubs and side salads are balanced unmistakably in his arms. In her tracking of the waiter, Mrs. Molona misses what Mrs. Stevenson sees: making his way in the same direction, Mr. Wyatt comes to talk to the ladies himself.

•

Ben watches Marla eat her red-pepper panini. She has strong white teeth that cut the bread, the pepper and the cheese evenly; he only sees red pepper sliver up from her lips once or twice. When this happens, she covers her mouth with her hand and bobs her head, which makes her look like she is miming laughter. They do not talk; Ben has nothing to say. He can see Marla would like to—her eyes keep flashing at him from above her white plate, her painted nails flit across the tablecloth. Ben has nothing to say; his gaze goes to the window and then the ceiling of the dining room—he looks straight down at his full plate and back to Marla again.

“How’s the panini?” He says this to be polite; she is eating with solid veracity. Whenever his mother has a guest, she asks this.

“Oh, splendid,” Marla says, her tongue rolling in her mouth, flicking briefly over a tiny freckle on her top lip. “I usually don’t like paninis too much, but this one is very good.” Her eyes flash again: liquid brown, viscous like a swamp or molasses.

“Why did you order a panini if you usually don’t like them?”

Marla blushes. Her eyes widen ever so slightly. Her hand goes to the thick middle of her water glass. “Oh, oh . . . I don’t know, it looked good . . . you know, on the menu. It changed my mind; you know, when you don’t usually like something and then, all of a sudden, you change your mind?” Here it is again: an erratic search for blunders, faults, slip-ups. She is always grasping at the cracks.

“No,” Ben said, “that has never happened to me.” He looks behind Marla, gazing over her head, not wanting or liking the way her lips droop at his response. The light has changed through the windows:

there is a shadow now on the tablecloth and on her cheek.

His eyes went up to the vaulted ceiling and the yellowing antlers of each stunned deer. What the hunters killed. He looks past the two old women at the north of the dining room and out the windows. Outside, he can see the tops of the green-and-white striped umbrellas and the women sitting in the lounge chairs by the pool, their skin greased and lazy, and the first hole empty for now, and his eyes scan inside once more, the old women . . . here all indistinguishable from one another, the same bright visors over those tough, breathing faces, who all call out to his mother on the golf course—a thought glides across his mind: Why should I talk to anyone?

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Mr. Wyatt stands at the ladies' table. Mrs. Stevenson looks down at his legs; his khakis hold a crease that is almost obscene. Mrs. Molona does not notice, she cannot notice—her eyes are trained on Mr. Wyatt's face even as she holds her gourmet turkey club in two hands. Mrs. Stevenson watches her lip quiver; she sees how her friend yearns to take a bite. Mr. Wyatt talks about his last round of golf. He has just lost to the club's newest member, a younger man now perched with his wife at another table. Mr. Wyatt is dining with the couple; Mrs. Stevenson had tried to ignore the shrill bray of the wife's voice. Mr. Wyatt's mouth bends in a bow of consternation.

"—and, you know, Betty," he says, holding his hand out to Mrs. Stevenson, "you've seen me golf more times in your life than you've probably ever wanted to . . . I've never had a fade, never. And then I go out there today and all of a sudden, the ball is curving to the right! To the right! When all my life I've had at my worst a hook to the left—This game . . . This game . . . I'll never understand it . . ."

Mrs. Stevenson knows that Arthur has never been a particularly good golfer but dedicates most of late spring and summer to his game. When her husband was alive, he avoided playing with Mr. Wyatt for he always beat him and Mr. Wyatt always became overexcited.

"Arthur," Mrs. Molona says, under her breath, "have you noticed the girl that Ben Wagner has with him?" Mr. Wyatt smiles and glances at where the two had just been sitting; they are gone now, out of doors.

"Oh, yes," he says, winking kindly at the two women. "We saw

them in the golf cart down by the tenth hole, necking."

Mrs. Stevenson watches Mrs. Molona's face turn slack and her rubbery mouth loosen into an O. "No!" she says. "You're kidding, Mr. Wyatt."

"I'm not," he says, "They looked quite comfortable. He had his hand on her leg. Oh, yes, very certainly," he lowers his voice, "it did not look good for the new members—I had to convince them it was very unusual. I would have said something to Benjamin but they sped off in the cart when they heard us coming. They must have already golfed the hole—if they even were golfing!"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Arthur," Mrs. Stevenson says quickly, shifting in her seat and refolding her napkin on her lap. "You're both being so silly. Of course they were golfing. Don't raise your eyebrows, Nancy, we saw them."

"She wasn't golfing."

"And what's a little harmless kissing? As if things weren't the same in our day."

Mrs. Molona and Mr. Wyatt exchange glances.

"I don't think that's what Elizabeth would think, Betty," Mrs. Molona says, still holding her sandwich aloft. Mrs. Stevenson suddenly resents her friend: the wrinkled jowls, the dull eyes that flickered perpetually between her sandwich and Mr. Wyatt.

"Yes, I doubt she would agree with your liberal views, Betty—I had no idea you felt so strongly on the issue," Mr. Wyatt says, winking warmly in all directions. Mrs. Stevenson gives him a tight smile. "Have a lovely lunch, you two—Nancy, don't let this firecracker convert you."

Mr. Wyatt returns to his table; the brittle wife leans back in her seat. "Say," says the new member to Mr. Wyatt, "this Indian name the club has, they used to be a big tribe hereabouts?"

"Yes, Mr. Johnson," Mr. Wyatt says, "Yes, but the club isn't, uh, named for the tribe. It's named for the road, the one it's on, here—fellows used to come out here to hunt, and they called it just that."

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Ben walks with Marla to his car. He hates the parking lot and all the senseless, baking metal. It always makes his mind heavy to see each slumbering car in its marked bed. It makes him feel the way he had as a kid, at his father's store openings. They'd always forced Ben and

his brother to wait through the ribbon cutting. They would stand there with the store tied up like a big present, each end of the bow dipping and rising with the wind. They were summer openings—windy but warm, at times about to thunderstorm. Afterwards they would pose for photos, the flashes from the wives' point-and-shoot cameras adding to the already unbearable brightness. He'd hold his brother's hand as the littler boy slowly stained his mouth blue with candy. His father's shoulders made a hard impressive line; his mother smiled cheerily and shook the hands of men in suits. There had been so many openings during July and August—the memories had that slow hazy feeling of the season, when the colleges were out of session and people went to seaside homes. He knows Marla spent the summers in Providence. The weeks he wasn't on Cape Cod he would drive down Elmgrove and see her reading on her front porch. Sometimes, he could glimpse only the top of her head or a foot or an ankle or a lone hand reaching for a glass of lemonade. There hasn't been an opening in a few years.

At one opening, he remembers, the corrupt mayor had been there, before he'd been caught. He had, in fact, cut the ribbon while everyone applauded. He had one of those ugly Italian mugs so common around the state, especially in politics, and hands like cuts of meat, pink palms, brown on top. Ben remembered the little bags, each shaped like a woman's purse, which hung under his eyes. He'd had this laugh that Ben couldn't recall just now, though it had been low and distinctive. Only a few years after, he was busted for kickbacks and working with the Mafia. He had gone to jail for six years and T-shirts and mugs were sold in stores that said "Free Buddy" because most people here didn't care that he'd broken the law. Ben wondered if he actually remembered that day or if he had just created something around the photograph. The picture was in his desk drawer at home: Ben and Buddy both look right at the viewer. Ben wears a Donald Duck hat he'd gotten at Disney the winter before and the mayor's hand rests like a bear trap on Ben's tiny shoulder. However, the unsettled feeling passes as he approaches his car. He is already thinking of the drive home and how he will leave Marla outside her house, pulling away before she goes inside. He lives only down the street, really, a few long blocks. Knowing she will be gone soon and with a warm, melted feeling spreading quickly over his chest, he says:

"Acht, it's terrible how hot it is."

She doesn't look at him, but keeps her eyes on the steaming

concrete and replies, "Certainly."

He nods, resuming the old loop of thought. His family had always lived by the water, where the houses are newer, and are not built in the colonial style. He liked to stand in his backyard and hit golf balls into the ravine—a deep and rambling indent, an eye socket with the ball gouged out—filled with thickets. You never got any of the balls back; there were probably hundreds down there and near the water. Sometimes, he would see figures at the end of the ravine collecting the ones that had reached the sliver of grainy beach. He spied them from a distance, nosing around, ducking up and down, picking up the balls. What could they want them for? These non-golfers, these intruders in the dusk. He has never been down there himself. Ben knows his family does not own the Narragansett Bay—although they owned the ravine—but sometimes he would forget that and stand with his hands on the low black fence and look at the water.

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Mr. Wagner eases his long-nosed car over the slight bump that leads off the road. After years of making the move, it has become second nature; his wife is only jostled slightly, her body shifting next to him, as she looks down at her cell-phone. The phone is square and black with many buttons; he gave it to her for her birthday and now it is never out of her reach. As they pull into the lot, her brows knot over its screen and she punches furiously.

"Where is Benjamin? I have been calling him all afternoon. It's nearly four and I haven't heard from him all day. He took off with the car going god knows where. He just can't do that, Mark. He really has to tell us where—"

The parking lot of the club is full. Its surface is smooth and unending. Mr. Wagner is unworried as he maneuvers into a spot; the day is fine, he has no doubts about his son's safety. And as he thinks this, as if by some strange chemical magic, he sees at the end of the lot, coming from the club, his son and a girl he has never seen before. The girl, he can note from a distance, has long pale legs in blue shorts.

"Honey," he says to his wife, whose brown hair mats to her cheeks, as she talks frantically, wringing her words out only to wet them once more. "Honey, there he is." He points across the parking lot at the two figures.

"Oh, there," Mrs. Wagner says, her face easing and then tensing once more. "Oh, there he is."

Mr. Wagner watches his son cross the asphalt, the girl trailing. He wonders who she is—did she go to the school? From the way she walks—leading with her chin—it seems so.

"Who is he with?" his wife asks. They are still inside the car; Mr. Wagner wonders if this is spying, as they have not moved. Their son cannot see his parents and Mr. Wagner does not feel the urge to call out, although he knows his wife does. She only holds back now because of the uncanny voyeuristic spell cast by the present moment. They seem to be looking into the future or down the mouth of a large animal.

"I am just going to go see . . . where he is going," Mrs. Wagner says quickly, the sound of her closing door jolts the car before Mr. Wagner can say anything.

"Elizabeth—" He wants to stop her, he feels somehow that this isn't fair, but he only says the name to the empty interior. He watches his wife pad across the asphalt, her pleated tennis skirt swishing above her spandex thighs. She catches their son and the girl just as they reach their respective sides of the car—Ben's car, the bold blue Toyota Camry they gave him seven months ago when he passed his driver's test. Through the windshield, the image of his wife and son sings to him a strange song. Ben smiles reflexively. His expression is familiar to Mr. Wagner, although not on his son's face. The girl on the other side of the car looks nervous; she keeps running her hand through her dark hair. She finally raises it in greeting to Mrs. Wagner but his wife's eyes are too trained on her son to notice. He sees the lines of her figure lean towards Ben. He cannot hear what his wife says, but from the way her shoulders rise, he knows she asks a question.

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Mrs. Stevenson starts her car and then looks down at her hands on the leather wheel. They are similar, she thought, these two things. Really, here, is skin on skin, cured hand on cured hide. The sun is setting. In her oversized vehicle, she'd come to the club alone and that is how she would arrive back in Cranston—to the country home she'd bought with her husband years and years ago. It is a nice house, with a bay window and French doors that open onto a sundeck, a peaked roof that makes the rain run down into the ground. Truly, she thinks, taking

one hand off the wheel, the skin on the back of my hands is translucent, like tissue paper—thin and alive like the belly of an amphibian. Spotted, too. However, she cannot remember when her hands had looked otherwise. She often feels that she can remember almost anything, especially about other people—faces, faces of spouses, faces of children, names, names of spouses, names of children, places of education or employment, even the month of a wedding or a funeral—but the way she looked before this point in her life is lost to her. Mrs. Stevenson knows it was in country clubs and summer homes like these that she had been young, but she cannot remember how any of it had really been.

She remembers, in fact, when the club had been for hunting. Easing her car out of its lined berth, she sees the men gathered in the left hand corner of the club parking lot. They would drive hours to New Hampshire and shoot at moose and deer until five o'clock when they'd come home in the dark. Each other's company and their mountain boots in the soil were a monthly reprieve from wives and children, dress shoes and business suits. Her husband smiled as he left the city those mornings, having taken off from work: all dressed, a thermos hooked over his thumb, he would kiss her goodbye and good morning when she was barely awake. A few times, but only a few, she had dropped him off here, leaving him to his day. Mrs. Stevenson knows this had all happened. She remembers it in the same the way she remembers movies. However, truthfully, she feels only her days now, their repetition: the rising at 6:30 a.m., the fresh newspaper and weak coffee, the familiarity of the clothes and shoes satisfactory and unsatisfactory, everything changing so slightly from week to week it was almost imperceptible.

Driving to the edge of the lot, she passes Elizabeth Wagner and her son. They stand at the nose of the silly blue car Benjamin has bungled around in all summer. The girl stands by too. On the near side of the car, the girl is not speaking. She clutches the handle of the passenger side door, where the other two can't see. Mrs. Stevenson can now see her clearly: the girl is made of delicate, graceful lines and her face focuses around a pair of lips that are large, mostly very red. *What is happening here?* Mrs. Stevenson asks herself, as her car makes a shadow on the scene. She cannot say, definitively, one way or the other. She has only caught a moment before she is moving onto the local road that leads to the highway. She has only seen the way the girl's head

bent, like the waterlogged face of a flower; Elizabeth's jaw set at a sharp angle; and Benjamin squinting at her face. Already, Mrs. Stevenson is heading for home and that long stretch is now in front of the car and the car eats the road. She drives directly into the sun and the light fills up the car's carriage. She'd tries pulling down the visor but the golden brightness still makes her eyes curl into slits. She will just have to keep driving into it.



SARAH SCHNEIDER FOX

WEST COAST GINA HONG

A Hispanic man blocked my view of the skyline.
The train lurched and my gaze skipped
so that I was no longer staring blankly at an advertisement
and was instead focused on the man's forehead,
skin slightly darker than mine, a few deep wrinkles.
A head that would seem round if the hair wasn't so square—
strands of grey, ears slightly protruding.

From the brow up he looks like my father, who
always gets rectangular cuts, and whose hair
is more grey every time I see him.
In the peculiar way in which a stranger
will remind me with the slightest cues
of my father reading his newspaper, sitting cross-legged,
I was flushed through memories of his telling me
Work hard in school, Do you need anything,
Nothing else matters for this family other than you doing well,
I'm proud of you.

I leaned harder against the pole in the subway car
as the chambers in my heart contracted to cradle
everything he never spoke of:
giving up his inheritance,
coming to America, buying his first home, renovating it,
the robberies and riots in Los Angeles,
never speaking to his mother,
looking older at an ever faster pace.

He used to record every episode of *Pokemon*
for me to watch since I liked to sleep in on Saturdays.
He helped me recycle enough plastic bottles
to buy a Furbie with "my" money.
Since we had no English books in the house,
we'd visit the bookstore every weekend.
During the drive home we'd listen to Simon and Garfunkel.

I had to sit down in the subway car.
There were the things he did speak of: College tuition.
Losing a business. Wanting to send me money.
Halting conversations on the phone, after which
I always wonder why he started smoking again
and why I can't quit.
Two more daughters still in grade school.
A Confucian ritual heir with no sons to speak of.

The Hispanic man was still there when I got off;
in my peripheral vision the rounded square
carried away my eight-year-old self.
I walked down the station stairs,
gulping and blinking, imagining
the M train riding off to Orange County, California.



RACHEL WEBB STILL

He pulls my fingers up to the lump behind his ear and makes me feel it.

He says, "It's bad. I know it is. It's cancer."

I say, "What kind of cancer grows behind your ear?"

Dash shrugs. I kiss him on the forehead and say, "You're such a queen. You're fine, little queen, I promise," and I go into the kitchen to make coffee. I ask him if he's going to the store today.

SOPHIA PIERCE-SLIVE THEY CALL IT FAGGOTITIS

"No," he tells me. He's feeling a little housewifey. He's going to stay around and mope. I kiss him again and walk out the door.

He calls me later at the office. He moans, "It's cancer. I'm dead."

I say, "Dash, be reasonable. We haven't even gone to the doctor yet." And he's quiet for a bit and then goes, "Matt?"

And I say "Yeah," slowly, because I don't want to talk about this anymore.

He says, "Matt? Can you pick up some tuna after work? I want to do a Niçoise for dinner."

And I say, "Yeah." I say, "I love you, Dash."

This is Dash's and my seventh year together. Though I won't say it to him, I think, *We don't have time for cancer! We're too good for it!* I panic. Dash and I have a life. I met him at this horrible gay cabaret that my friends dragged me to after an especially horrendous break-up. I sat slumped over in my chair, pathetically drunk, and then Dash came out. He was Miss Dashing Diva. He was glowing. He sang to us, terribly, in a green sequined dress. When he came into the audience, he lifted my chin and looked me in the eyes, studying me.

He said, "Honey, go sober up, and then I'm buying you a drink."

I asked him to move in three weeks later.

Dash once told me that he always knew he was gay—"from the womb," in his words. Something about his

name, he said. He reveled in his gayness, wore it like a comfortable new shirt. He had grown up in Massachusetts, and his parents were standard liberals, all-accepting. He never hid his sexuality, and therefore was one of those rare gay teens who was quite popular in high school. He starred in every theater production and was a star tennis player and a ferocious member of the debate team. By being so intense, so strong, he didn't leave much room for people to make fun of him. He wouldn't allow it.

I was not so brave. Dash was my second relationship with a man after a long, miserable flirtation with heterosexuality. My parents were quite sweet but preferred to pretend that gay people didn't exist. No need to rock the boat, you know. It was only when I moved from Michigan to D.C. that I gave up on trying to understand the intricate world of femininity that I really had no interest in. I met Dan, a nice, conservative gay like me, and we enjoyed a quiet, furtive relationship for some time. No need to advertise it. But soon enough, we became sick of each other, and days later, I was at the cabaret.

"You're not a criminal," one of my few gay friends told me. "You're gay. Have some fun with it."

Unlike Dash's badge of honor, I wore my love for men like a leotard beneath my normal "straight" clothes; it would only come out when it needed to. While I politely put my homosexuality aside, Dash would often yell out, "Fabulous!" in the middle of crowds and exaggerate his swagger. He was a Gay Man. When I cringed, he told me, "Honey, I'm an entertainer. I give the people what they want."

That, among so many other things, was why I fell so hard for Dash. And I'm still falling. I love that Dash is happy. I love that he says all the things I don't say. I love that he understands and appreciates my understatedness, that we balance each other out. I love the way he sits through my occasional bouts of shame for being gay, though I know it pains him. I love that we have a committed relationship. I love the lovely lunches he packs for me and that we take hikes in Virginia. I love the life we have made, that we have worked for together. Dash got out of the club business, and opened up a furniture store with a friend (Swedish, all beautiful blonde wood). We built that life together. I love the man. I would give my life for him. And I am concerned for that lump residing below his ear.

When I get home that night, Dash meets me at the door in his robe, panicking.

"Matt," he says. "The lump is changing. Come look."

I have him sit on the toilet while I peer at the beautiful conch of his ear. I look. I touch. I'm confused.

I say, "Honey, it looks like a pearl." It's ivory and luminescent and glows in his skin.

He says, "I know! That's what I thought. Just like one of my Grammy's pearls. What is it?"

And I say, "I don't know." I call the doctor, leave a message for an appointment. Grammy's pearls. Christ. I slip some Ambien into our tea and wait for the day to be over.

I wake up before Dash and glance over at him. I'd been dreaming of that pearl all night. I didn't know what to make of it. I dreamed of a woman with a broken string of pearls coming to take Dash away. I feel behind Dash's ear and turn him over. The pearl has been joined by a ruby and a diamond. They stand out like a stunning brooch climbing towards Dash's scalp. The gems are hard and lustrous. A sweat has broken out around the cluster, rimming it with moisture. The ruby is red, like blood, the diamond garishly white. I rub them, feeling the facets of the gem cuts.

He sleepily asks, "What is it?"

"You're bejeweled," I whisper.

We go to Dr. Epstein right away. Dr. Epstein knows everything. We're panicking at this point. My boy has jewels erupting from under his skin.

Epstein shakes his head. He says, "I dunno, boys."

Dash cries. Epstein runs tests. He says Dash is in perfect health. He sends for an MRI, an ultrasound, X-rays. Nothing. He shakes his head. He says, "I dunno, boys."

I say, "Listen, Epstein—tell us what to do. Tell me what to do."

I cry. He gives me a list of specialists and says to call them immediately. I'm on my cell the whole ride home.

By the time we walk in the door, an emerald has joined the jewel cluster. It reflects a greenish glow around Dash's neck that looks sickly. The mass is starting to climb down his back. There are more jewels, small ones we haven't seen before. It looks as if Dash is wearing an elaborate necklace tossed backwards, like one he used to wear when he was performing. I wonder if this is a dream. I wonder if I will wake up in a terrified sweat and see my old priest and parents standing over me.

I think, *What the fuck?*

Dash says, "What the fuck? What the fuck is wrong with me?"

I undress him and put him in the tub. I go into the study, determined to do some research online, determined not to feel useless. But when I get to WebMD, I think, *What do I put in? Bejeweled skin?* It sounds like a porno. I try to remind myself that this isn't real. It can't be.

I dream that night that I am back at home, in my childhood room, with its soccer trophies and science awards. Lisa Tentley is blowing me for the first time again. I remember thinking that life couldn't be better than this: being popular, exploding with pleasure, feeling adored. I never thought then that it could be better, as a computer programmer with a job I hate and a home in a shady neighborhood, as long as I am with the man I love. I dream of Dash with me in that room and I wake up.

The next week is doctor week. We have appointments with several specialists each day. By now, Dash's brooch has extended over his neck and shoulders, covering him like a cape. There are stones in every color, embedded as if in a setting. The mass is continuous, with no gaps. It looks as if Dash glued these stones on.

Maybe he did, I think. Maybe this isn't real. He is multicolored and gleaming, the gems catching every ray of light. He wears one of my black button-downs to cover them up and layers an extra scarf over his usual one. I notice that this is the most conservative I have ever seen him dress. We bring along Jonathan, his best friend, former lawyer and current business partner. We are a team, ready to take on whatever anyone tells us. Ready to take on the perplexing tragedy of Dash's back.

But no one tells us anything. Day in and day out, the three of us troop into unknown offices where people begin to stare. Whether it's because of the jewels that peek out from Dash's collar, or just the sight of three men traipsing along together, we don't know. We try not to care. I ignore it as I usually do, tugging my simple button-down over my "Gayman" leotard. But I notice Dash looks more and more irritated and withdrawn. At first I'm relieved, thankful that he isn't going to put on a show. But then I'm startled. I have never seen him hide anything. This scares me. I repeat to myself, "Nothing is wrong. Nothing's wrong. Just some precautions."

Still, we're determined. Jonathan dubs us the "Brigade." We laugh nervously at that and pile onto another examination table, waiting for good news. But none comes. As we become more pleading, the doctors become more indignant.

We say, "Can't you tell us anything?"

They say, "Sorry, guys." Flat and unfeeling.

Finally, one doctor rudely levels with us.

"Please," we beg.

He says, "Look, fellas."

Fellas? I think.

"Fellas, I don't know what's wrong with Mr. Stanton here. Never seen anything like it." The doctor moves carefully around us, avoiding any sort of contact. His body is even more distant than when we first came in, when he first dangled Dash's wrist and grimaced as he took his pulse. "But what I do know," the doctor continues, "is that despite his otherwise good health, Mr. Stanton's body will not sustain the weight of his . . . condition if it continues to grow. His body will shut down."

We cry, we swear, we beg. Jonathan looks away, his arms pressed against the table. I drop my head. Dash palms his fists together. I say, "Please. What can we do?"

The doctor shrugs. He says, "I really don't know. My only guess is that some conditions are brought on by certain . . . lifestyle decisions."

He looks at us wearily, the three of us piled on the bed, and leaves, happy to get rid of us. Dash holds his head in his hands. I expect wails but get silence. Jonathan and I look at each other nervously.

On our ride home, we are livid, tapping our feet anxiously and yelling. Jonathan says, "I'll report him to the Better Business Bureau." We nod furiously. Dash says, "I'll kill him with my little fag hands."

Dash laughs tiredly. I have never seen him like this, so reserved, and it scares me. I am secretly thankful for the doctor's ignorance: it means that we are allowed to feel anger rather than begin mourning Dash. But it has finally hit me. Dash is sick. I can't wake up. My sadness stuns me, chokes me, drowns me. I struggle to stay steady on the road. I believe what the doctor has told us, and I know that Dash's gems will not stop growing, that they are hell bent on overcoming his beautiful body. But it's easier to be angry. I have seen Dash angry; that could still be the old Dash, but I know this sullen, sunken, hiding man is not my boy. The anger, I know. So I thank the doctor a little for that. But I'm also furious for how he makes my boy feel. Dash feels ashamed.

"Who the fuck does he think he is? I hate that asshole. Where's Epstein?" Dash fumes. He smokes, and I don't have the heart to tell him to stop. "I mean, really? What does that mean? What is that arrogant prick trying to say? That because I like dick I'm going to die?"

He is silent for a second, then says, defiantly, "I hate being gay."

This drops my heart into the pit of my stomach. I can't stand it. Dash had always been my reassurance that my being gay was right. That it made sense to be a bit uncomfortable in exchange for being happy with him. He is my comfort. I can't be the strong one. I can't be the gay one. I need him to stop. I squeeze his hand, but he keeps going.

"I get it," he says. "I get jewels 'cause I'm a queen. People don't know what this shit is? I'll tell you. It's fucking faggotitis."

"Faggotitis!" Jonathan shrieks from the back seat. "Faggotitis!" He's trying in his own way to fix the situation. He can't make Dash better, but he can make him laugh. He can't understand Dash's homosexuality, but he understands Dash.

"Honey," Jonathan says, "if anyone's a candidate for it, it's you. You've certainly put in your fag years, my queen. Faggy, faggy!" He pokes at Dash. "Can I have your jewelry collection, finally?"

Dash giggles at the ridiculousness of it all. He seems relieved. He takes a breath. Soon both of them are in hysterics, Dash imitating Jonathan's hysterical, unbridled passion, just like the times Dash has told me of their childhood together. Faggotitis, faggotitis. I look over at them, horrified. How can they joke? This is real now.

"Baby," Dash says. He clutches my hand. "I just have to laugh."

That night we rent Pink Flamingoes and make flirtinis and garnish our canapés before we devour them. We get ridiculously drunk and make Dash perform opera for us. I watch him as he sings "A Chorus Line," his hips barely swiveling due to the near paralysis in his covered back. I think, *I love this man*. I think, *That doctor made me more proud of being gay than I've ever been*.

I tell the boys, "I want to go get rainbow flags and drape ourselves in them." I holler, "I've got faggotitis, and loving my man is the only cure!"

I make love to Dash furiously that night, impressing his body into my mind. The lights are out, but I can make out Dash's form because the gems seem to glow. I lay on top of him, and the jewels scratch my chest, little markers of him. We sweat, but the gems stay cold, smudged with my sweat. I carefully move Dash around with his frozen back, the first time I have taken the lead in our bedroom. I cling to him, feeling hard against soft, cool against burning. I cling to my boy.

I wake before him again and examine his back. The mass has grown. He glitters so brightly in the morning sun. The light reflects

off him onto the wood floor like stained glass in a church. An emerald seems to glare at me. I kiss a pink diamond and he wakes. He smiles mournfully at me. He says, "I'm going to shower."

Lying in bed, I try to open up my mind, let in a little of the idea of life without Dash. Not for the first time, I am left breathless by my immense grief. I wonder if I'll even have breath when Dash is gone, frozen. I think about our home. I think of taking pictures, as many as possible, of Dash now, jewels and all. I think about going to the Rainbow Parade with Jonathan (uncomfortable, but loyal to the end), something I had always hated and Dash loved, and drinking champagne there and remembering our sweet, irreplaceable Dash. I think about undressing to my leotard. About being a Gay Man. About Dash.

After a few minutes, I walk into the bathroom. Dash is standing under the stream of water, mouth open, legs apart. I watch my beautiful boy. I watch him strain his glorious back. I watch the water bounce off his jewels. I watch the light go through him, making him sparkle. I watched my bejeweled man stand in the shower, alone, glittering.



EMILY PEDERSON NEAR PRATA SANNITA, ITALY

WHAT THE SPARROW SAID **MARC DONES**

You said
If I'm reincarnated
let it be
as a flock
of birds.

•

I'm only alive
in the space between words
—the places where
breath lives.

My heart—
narrow as a wasp.

•

Oh:
another thing to remember—
another story
for a numb tongue
to tell.

Oh:
My teeth are sharper now—
than they were before.

•

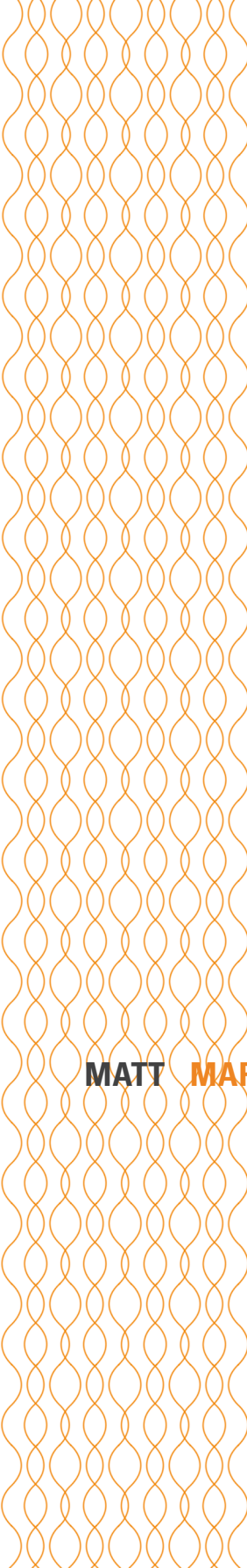
My head—a huge
bell that echoes.
Sure of nothing—

except my own ignorance.

Oh:

Please don't
die.





The halls of Montgomery County High School are clean, almost spotless, with the kind of sterile sparkle that reminds you of a hospital or a mental institution. It's not the most inviting aura, which is fitting, I guess, because it's not the most inviting place. For me, at least. The lazy days of summer are long gone, and fall is upon us—school has been in session for nearly two months. Cotton cobwebs and plastic skeletons decorate the lines of lockers, in preparation for Halloween.

"...And so I went down, I mean I went down to Pearl's, you know the art supply store across from the Starbucks? And I ask the guy who works the cash register—his name is Sean—if they have any pale olive paint, which I think is going to be the perfect color for Mother's face, you know. But he says—but Sean says that they don't have any pale olive. But they do have frosted lime, he tells me. Can you believe it?"

"No," says Tasha, the girl I love. I can't tell if I'm boring her or not. She brushes her hair—which is maybe a dark saddle brown—behind her ear. I try not to cry. "So what are you gonna do?"

"I dunno. Maybe I can order it online or something. But it'll take ages to get here. I mean ages. I can't just go and use frosted lime, though, you know? It's all wrong. Mother was a Mediterranean woman, and the only color that captures that glow, you know that certain glow, is pale olive. So I guess I'll just have to wait."

MATT MARK PUTTERMAN

"I'm sorry, Matt. I know you've been trying to finish that portrait for months, ever since...well, for a long time now." She places her hand lightly on my shoulder. I melt, trickle down into a puddle of flesh in my New Balance sneakers. Somewhere far off, the shrill cry of the passing bell sounds. Suddenly I'm human again, muscles and bones and desires and inhibitions, the whole shebang. By now the halls are swarming with all sorts of strange teenage creatures, buzzing and blowing about like giant, gangly

insects.

“Shoot. I’ve gotta go. I’m late for class...Will you be okay?”

“Yes. I mean yeah, I’ll be fine.” I tug on the drawstrings of my green-gray sweatshirt. “I’ll be fine. I’m going home. I’ve got a—I’ve got a lot of work to do anyway.”

“Homework?”

“No, no. I mean no. Painting. I did manage to get stars forever blue, you know, for her eyes. I’ve gotta work on her eyes.”

“Oh. Okay. Bye Matt. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She smiles and turns to go.

“Oh...g’bye.” I stand and watch her go. She’s wearing a teal sweater, blue jeans and a pair of Converse sneakers. She looks like a million dollars, I think. Not that I’ve ever seen a million dollars—it’s just an expression. Her hair bobs up and down as she makes her way down the hall, clutching a stack of books close to her chest. She turns into her classroom; I dash to my locker, grab my old Razor Scooter, and make for home.

This is the part of the story where I tell you I have Asperger’s. That’s what Gus says, anyway. I wasn’t going to mention it; I didn’t want to mention it. Because I knew that once I did, I wouldn’t be just Matt anymore. I’d be Matt, the poor, misunderstood retarded boy, or Matt, the “very special young man.” I know. But I just want to be Matt. I mean I just want to be Matt.

It’s not that I’m ashamed to be an Aspie—not at all. I might not be “normal” like the kids at school, but who wants to be normal? It’s just I don’t like being treated differently, like I’m stupid or like I need to be coddled. I don’t like it when people talk to me like I’m a child, or pretend I don’t exist. I do exist. I guess I just have a tendency to make some people uncomfortable. In truth, I’m really not that different from most people, I like the same things as your average 15-year-old guy: art, books, girls, video games, music. But people hear the way I talk—my deliberate, sometimes spacey cadences; the way I sometimes repeat myself; how I can get unexpectedly overemotional—and they think there’s something wrong with me. I guess maybe there is something wrong with me; people just don’t understand me. It makes sense, I guess—I don’t understand them either.

Gus says that it’s good for me to get my emotions out, but in constructive ways. I’m not sure exactly what that means, though.

All I know is I've got a lot of emotions. Sometimes I think they're too much for me, that one day I won't be able to contain them anymore and I'll burst into a thousand pieces like an atom bomb or something. Sometimes I want to burst. I think maybe it would be easier that way. Gus says I shouldn't think that way. Gus says a lot of things. This was his idea actually; I mean writing this was his idea. He said it would be good for me to get my feelings out in a constructive way. He says yelling curse words like fuck or ass-wipe at people is not constructive, but sometimes it feels constructive.

That afternoon I go to see Gus. I go to see him three times a week, sometimes more if I'm feeling lousy or just plain old bad. He works in this fancy office building in the center of town, about 10 minutes away from my house by scooter. I like riding my scooter because it means I don't have to get a ride from Dad. Anyway, I pull up to the building at 4:58, which is good because I'm supposed to be there at 5:00. This way I won't have to wait in the waiting room, which I hate. Nancy, the fat old receptionist, always smells like eggs, which makes me nauseous. It's not that I don't like eggs—they're a perfectly acceptable breakfast food—I just don't think people should smell like them, you know?

"Well, look who it is," Nancy says as I swing open the door. "How are you today, Matt?"

"Hi. Fine." I stare at my shoes and make sure to breathe through my mouth.

"Dr. Williams is in his office. You can go right on in."

"Okay." I scurry out of the waiting room and down the hall to his office. His door is half open.

"Hi, Matt. Come on in." He's sitting at his desk, jotting something down on a notepad. I sit down in the comfy green chair opposite him.

"Hi, Gus."

"How are you today, Matt?"

"Good. Fine. I mean I'm fine, so that's good right?"

"Yes, yes, that's good," he chuckles. He flips the page of his notebook. "How are things at home?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how are things at home? We've talked about how you and your father have had some issues since...well, since your mother passed. How have you been getting along lately?"

"Okay, I guess. I mean it could be worse. We don't talk much—which is good, it's good that we don't talk much, because when we do talk we always end up fighting. Or at least I always end up fighting him. He just...he just doesn't understand, Gus."

"What doesn't he understand?"

"Anything. He doesn't understand anything. He just goes to work all day at his fancy job and comes home for dinner and talks to me like nothing's happened. I mean as if nothing's changed. It's like he doesn't care or something. He just goes on with his life like it was the easiest thing in the world. But I can't just do that. I don't want to do that."

"Matt, do you think your father misses her? Do you think he misses your mother, just like you?"

"Um. I don't know. I guess I haven't thought about it much. I mean he must miss her at least a little bit. She was his wife and all. But it doesn't seem like he misses her. I mean, he's got Natalie now. He doesn't care. He's already replaced her."

"Who's Natalie?"

"You know, Natalie. This dumb blonde that he works with. She comes over for dinner sometimes now. I mean, it hasn't even been a year and already he's replaced her with some dumb blonde. They must be fucking. In Mom's bed, no less. He makes me sick."

"Have you ever thought, Matt, that maybe this whole ordeal has been as difficult for your dad as it's been for you? Can you try to imagine how he might feel? For instance, maybe he goes on with his life and pursues new relationships because there's nothing else for him to do. Because that's the healthy thing to do, don't you think? To move on? To keep on living your life?" I chew that one over, staring at the office walls. They're a sepia-toned off-white, bare save for a single painting behind Gus's desk. It's a childlike watercolor of a small boat at sea. I take a deep breath. Above me, the ceiling fan whirs lazily. I try to change the subject.

"Why does Nancy smell like eggs?"

"What?" He adjusts his jet-black tie, which clashes with his brown woolen sweater. I decide not to mention it. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing. It's just, Nancy, your receptionist. I mean why does she smell like eggs all the time? It's gross, don't you think? I mean, don't you think it's gross?"

"Matt, I thought we went over this. First of all, she doesn't smell like eggs, and second of all, even if she did, it wouldn't be nice to mention it. Now, back to your father, don't you—"

"But why not? Wouldn't you want to know if you smelled like eggs?"

"Matt, would it make you happy or sad if someone told you you smelled like eggs?"

"But I don't smell like eggs."

"That's besides the point, Matt. The point is you should try and keep in mind how what you say may make another person feel."

"I know. I mean, I know. You always tell me that. But how am I supposed to know what's gonna make people feel good or bad? I just can't tell what other people are thinking, if they like me or they want me to go away or if they're excited or bored...It's like everyone is speaking in some secret code that everyone knows except for me. I hate it. I just don't understand."

"I know, Matt. It's very difficult. But it's not just you—a lot of people have trouble with this." Pulling open a drawer of his desk, he removes a stack of papers and shuts the drawer again. "Listen, why don't we move on? I'd like us to do some more emotional recognition exercises. Does this sound okay?"

"Fine," I say, crossing my arms. We do this a lot. Gus holds up a picture of a face and asks me how I think the person is feeling; happy, sad, tired, annoyed, scared. You get the idea.

"Okay, let's try this one." He holds up a picture of a young girl. Her lips are slightly parted, showing her teeth. Her eyebrows are slanted upward. "Okay, Matt, how do you think this girl is feeling?"

"Umm." I finger the zipper of my sweatshirt hoodie. "She looks...happy?" Gus flips over the page:

ANXIOUS

"Oh," I say. "Okay, so she's anxious."

"Can you see the tenseness in her face? How her eyebrows are scrunched upwards and her mouth is a little distorted? She looks like she's worried about something, doesn't she?" I stare at the picture, examining every inch of the grainy, black and white photograph. I might as well be looking at a tree.

"Sure. Now that you mention it, I guess she does look a bit

disconcerted.”

“Good. That’s very good, Matt. Let’s try another one, why don’t we?” He draws another picture from the pile, another girl. She’s older, with dark brown hair that falls softly in curls around her face. I think of Tasha, as if I need an excuse to. I look at her eyes. I know that there’s something there, some clue or hint of an emotion—joy, fear, embarrassment...But what? I scan the rest of her face, desperate to find the key to the code, but there’s nothing there. Just a face. “What do you think, Matt? Try to remember the cues we talked about.”

“She looks like she has a secret,” I say, rubbing my hands against my jeans. “And the secret is what she’s feeling. She’s hiding it from me—like, beneath the face I see is her true face, her true feelings. This one is just a plastic exterior, like a protective case or something, and there’s no way for me to see through it. I don’t know how. I just can’t. I mean I JUST CAN’T, OKAY?” I can feel my emotions getting away from me, like a rug being pulled out from under my feet. I can’t stop it. I’m not sure if I want to, anyway. “CAN I TELL YOU SOMETHING, GUS? I HAVE NO FUCKING CLUE WHAT THIS GIRL IS FEELING, AND I DON’T GIVE A FUCK, EITHER. YOU UNDERSTAND? I DON’T CARE!” Against my will, hot tears spill from my eyes. I try to rub them away with my sleeve. I look at Gus, who has by now put down the picture. He runs a heavy hand through his thinning dirty-blond hair, looking at me with big puppy-dog eyes. For a second, I pretend his face is one of those pictures in his pile; I try to figure out what he’s feeling in this moment. All that comes to mind is sadness. That makes me feel even worse. Now I’m balled up like a pill bug in my chair, my head smothered in my arms. “W-won’t you just leave me alone, Gus?” I say through my sweatshirt. “I’m begging you, just leave me alone. Let me be alone. Let me be alone forever. I don’t care; it’s easier that way.”

“Matt,” he says, in little more than a whisper. He puts his big, hairy hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay, Matt.”

I sniffle. “Can I go home, now? Please, I just wanna go home.”

“Okay. Go on, Matt. But I’d like to see you again tomorrow. Not because I’m your therapist. Because I’m your friend. We are friends, right, Matt?”

I don’t respond. I sprint through the waiting room, and before Nancy can say a word I’ve slammed the door behind me.

It's 6:00 when there's a knock on my bedroom door. I'm lying in bed, already wearing my blue-green plaid pajamas. My headphones are in, playing *In Rainbows*, Radiohead's latest album. It's also my favorite Radiohead album, and the best part is I didn't have to pay anything at all for it. They released the album online, and you could pay however much you wanted for it. I don't have much money, so I didn't feel bad not paying. They have enough money already, probably. Radiohead, I mean. Anyways, I'm on the song "Weird Fishes," which is one of the best, when I think I hear someone knocking. It's not in the song, that much I know, because I've listened to it about three thousand times. I pull out my ear buds.

"Matty, can I come in?" It's Dad.

"What is it?"

"Can I come in? I just wanted to say hey." He opens the door a crack and pokes his head through. "Hey, kid. I haven't seen you all day. You've been quiet up here."

"Okay, you might as well come in, so I'm not talking to a disembodied head, I mean. It's a little unnerving." He steps in, wearing a big dumb grin, a pair of grey slacks and a white button-down shirt. His tie hangs loosely around his collar.

"So how's your day? You met with Gus, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"And how's he doing?"

"Fine."

"Well I don't wanna bother you, kid. Just wanted to check in, is all. Oh, before I forget, I got us a pizza for dinner. Extra cheese and olives, just like you like. We'll eat at seven, okay? Unless you're hungry now—are you? I just have to heat it up in the oven—should only take a few minutes."

"Fine. Seven is fine, I mean. Do you mind? I was trying to read." I pick up a book from my desk and busy myself by leafing absently through it.

"Yeah, yeah of course. I'll leave you to it." He turns to leave, but something catches his eye. I follow his line of sight to my easel by the window, on which sits my unfinished portrait of Mother. His face grows pale, contrasting with the black stubble that lines his chin and cheeks. "Well I'll be." He gravitates towards the canvas, as if being pulled by an invisible string. "Matty," he says, his fingers inches away from her face. He takes a breath. "This is really coming along, kid."

"Yeah. I did her eyes today. I mean, I finally finished her eyes."

"You got 'em just right. I mean it." His hand is shaking as it hovers just above the canvas. "God, it's nice just to look into those eyes. She would be so proud, Matt. So proud of you. You know that, right?"

"Thanks." I'm sitting on the edge of my bed now, looking up at him. His eyes are moist. "Dad, do you miss her? I mean do you miss Mom?" Suddenly he's laughing, or at least I think he's laughing. Definitely not crying, because there aren't any tears coming out of his eyes. It doesn't sound like any laugh I've heard—it has a certain quality to it, a certain heaviness.

"Kid, are you kidding?" He's still chuckling a bit, but it's dying down. Now he's silent for a moment. "God, do I miss her. She was the world to me. She was my everything. I mean my everything. You know, when she—when she passed away, it was like I lost something. Something physical—not like an arm or a leg, mind you. That would be easy." He paws vaguely at his still-full head of hair. "That'd be nothing. It was something bigger, something inside. Like I swallowed a big old rock, you know? Just this emptiness, this terrible, dark heaviness inside of me. You probably understand better than anyone."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're a lot alike, you and me. Maybe more than you'd like to admit. We both love the same woman, for one. Both lost her, too. I know things haven't been great between us, you know, since Mom left us. But we ought to stick together. I think we can make it through that way. Because she's gone, kid. It's just the two of us. And it pains me as much as you to say it or even think it, but it's the truth all the same. She's not coming back. And you know, she'd want us to move on, the two of us. She'd want us to keep going, hard as it is."

Maybe a part of me knows he's right. A part of me wants to hug him and tell him I love him. A part of me knows I should. But instead I feel angry. Instead I feel hatred. Because she can't be gone. She just can't.

"You think she'd want us to forget about her? Like she never existed at all? Is that what you want? God, you just don't understand, do you? I mean, I mean you just don't understand. You never did. You never did." I realize I'm crying again. Some day. "Mom was...Mom was all I had. I mean all I had. She was the only pers—" I choke on my tears. "She was the only person who understood. And now she's gone and I'm all alone. God, I'm all alone. And all I've got left are my memories and

her half-finished face staring back at me from that fucking canvas." Dad rests his hand on my back.

"Shhh. It's okay, Matt. It's okay."

"Please, don't touch me. I mean don't touch me! Just leave me alone, please! I pick up the book again and hide my face behind it, drying my face in its crisp, clean pages. "CAN'T YOU ALL JUST LEAVE ME ALONE?"

"Okay, okay. I'll go." He stands up and makes for the door. "You know, Matt," he says, turning to face me in the doorway. "No one has to go it alone. I'm here for you, if you'll let me help you...I'll see you at dinner." He shuts the door behind him, and I bury my face in my pillow and scream. I scream for a long time, until my lungs scream for air. When I'm finished, I stand up and walk towards the unfinished portrait in the corner. Mother's eyes stare at me, lovingly, understandingly. I feel my hand tighten into a fist, and before I know what's happened, my arm is through the canvas. "FUCK!" It doesn't feel as good as I might have thought.

That night I dream about Mom. I come home from school and find her painting in the kitchen, like she always did. I'm just a kid in the dream, of course. Matthew, she says. How was school? She looks at me with her lagoon-blue eyes and we embrace. She accidentally brushes the tip of my nose with her paintbrush, staining it. Oops. Hold still, Matthew. She licks her thumb and wipes off the paint, giggling. What are you painting? I ask. She steps back, revealing the image on the canvas. The blood drains from my face. It's a self-portrait. More specifically, it's my portrait, the one I've been working on since she died. Only it's almost finished. Would you like to help me finish it, Matthew? She places the brush in my hand and guides me towards the easel. All that's left are the eyes. I raise my hand to the canvas, trying to steady it, but I can't stop shaking. As the brush meets the canvas, I lose control, and my arm swings violently from side to side, slashing the painting with blue streaks that dribble like fresh claw marks. I can't stop, Mom! By now I've lost all control of my body. I'm flailing around like a fish out of water, like a deranged maniac set loose. I look at Mother, who is standing, almost floating, motionlessly. Her skin looks cold and hard, her eyes desperate with some message. I realize we're underwater. She's mouthing something, but I can't make it out. Bubbles jet from her

open mouth. As the pressure in my lungs builds, I try to reach for her arm. I strain, but our fingertips are separated by a few insurmountable inches. I look at her face, but she's gone. Instead it's Tasha, writhing and struggling violently, like she's being held down by some invisible force. Suddenly, for a moment, she is still. Matt, she whispers. By now, instincts take over, my mouth opens, and a rush of cold water fills my throat and lungs.

I wake up with a start.

"Do you ever think that maybe no matter what you do, no matter what happens to you, you'll never be happy?" I say to Tasha, whom I love. We're sitting at a picnic table in the school courtyard. The autumn air is cool, but not cold. I'm staring at my worn New Balance sneakers. "I mean, I mean do you think some people just aren't...meant to be happy?"

"You're not talking theoretically, are you? Do you think you're not meant to be happy, Matt?" I wipe my sweaty palms on my blue jeans.

"I mean it doesn't matter what I think. I'm asking you what you think."

"I think anyone can be happy. And I really mean anyone. But it's up to you to do what it takes to be happy. Like it's up to you to recognize what it is that you want and to go out and get it." She takes a stick of lip balm from her pocket and glazes it over her lips.

"Can I tell you something, Tasha?" I stare into her eyes for a daring second.

"Yeah?" I take a deep breath and pinch myself until the pain numbs my nerves. *Do it Matt. Don't be such a wuss. Just do it.*

"The thing is, um. See the thing is, we've been friends for a while now, and you know, I don't think I could make it through everything....without you helping me along. I mean you should know just how much I need you. You mean a lot to me...and...I love you. There, I said it! I love you, Tash. I mean I'm in love with you. For a long time now. For a long time."

"Oh, Matt." She puts her hand on mine. It's soft and warm to the touch. Inside, my heart bursts and blooms, blossoms into a thousand tiny, beautiful petals. "Matt, I know. Or at least I've had a hunch, for a while. I've been wondering when you would mention it, or if you ever

would. And I'm glad you finally did." She shifts her seat, scooting an inch or two closer to me. "Matt, I really like you. You're my best friend, you know. It's just...God, Matt. I just can't do it. I just don't feel like that, towards you. Sometimes I wish I did, really. Sometimes I wish that one day I'll wake up, and the feeling will just be there. I wish for both our sakes. It would make things so much easier. It's just..."

"Oh." My insides wither, shrivel down to nothing but dust and ash and lousy shit. *I'm going to die here*, I think. *I'm going to die here, in front of her.* "Oh."

"Matt...I'm sorry. Please, don't let this come between us. I need you, Matt. I do." *Don't cry in front of her, don't cry in front of her, DON'T CRY IN FRONT OF HER.*

"Oh," I say again. "I..." I reach for words, any words, but there's nothing for me to say. Trying to hold back the tears, I bite down on my tongue until I taste blood.

"Matt," she says, lifting my chin gently with her fingers. I feel her eyes on mine, but I'm staring at the ground. I won't look at her. I can't look at her.

"Listen, I've gotta go. I mean, yeah. I gotta go. I'm sorry."

I run all the way home. Surprisingly, the tears don't come till I shut my bedroom door behind me. I collapse on my bed, hide my head beneath my pillow. I kick and I punch and I scream, because what else can I do? But strangely enough, when my throat is hoarse and my eyes are all red and puffy, the feeling has passed. I open my window shade; the pale October light drenches me. Outside, leaves are falling, blanketing the ground in shades of burnt russet red and squash yellow. Maybe a rumba orange here or there. I open the window and let the cool, tart air fill my lungs. I feel okay. I pick up the ruined canvas from the floor and examine it. A crude hole has overtaken the nose and mouth, but my mother's moist blue eyes are still there, staring back at me. I feel okay, though. Placing the canvas delicately on my bed, I go to my closet and remove a fresh one. I put it on the easel and step back, taking in the pure, white void. I'm not sure where to start. All I know is I need a new subject. I mean, I think I'm ready for a new subject. And that's okay. I mean that's good, right?



RILEY O'NEILL HILL IN DESERT

THE HEARTS OF MEN **STEPHEN BROWN**

I have seen
The beauty of
My grace

He died
Across the sea

His righteous sentence
Sounded forth
With a glory

That shall never
Make men free

Retreat
Transfigures
My feet

Oh, be swift, my soul
Let us die

*[Lyrics to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" by Julia Ward Howe.
Arrangement by the author.]*





Charlotte is to be married.

It is a cold December morning. She sits on the porch drinking black coffee from a Styrofoam cup.

The sound of muffled footsteps causes her to raise her head.

It is Jonathan.

Charlotte stares.

“Could you come with me for a walk?” he says.

A small eternity follows the request, with the only movement the skeins of steam unspooling from Charlotte’s cup.

“No,” she says. “I can’t.”

“It’ll be quick. Right around the park,” he says.

“I can’t,” she says again, but finds herself standing. “There’s so much to do. I’m getting married, you know.”

“Yes,” he says, his expression unfathomable.

“How did you find out?” she says.

He shrugs, and outstretches a hand.

She does not take it but begins to walk, as if impelled by a cushion of air. Though they remain a comfortable distance apart, she can feel the warmth of his body: the beads of sweat sleeping under the skin.

The trees are stripped bare, and the gray of the sidewalk is covered in a thin layer of pale white. Jonathan sighs, leaving a trail of warm air that Charlotte feels against her skin like a palm, his breath as deep as stones within a river. As they step into the clutter of the plaza, she suddenly feels naked.

RETROSPECT MATTHEW CHONG

Restaurant men hose bits of greasy meat down the gutters. There is the familiar scent of just-struck matches from men who look at her, men who don’t look at her. A woman sits by herself in a cafe, stirring her coffee with a small spoon as she stares into the gray city. Charlotte does not feel for her. She feels her.

They reach the top of a hill. A homeless man rolls

a cart down the street. A nun reads on a broken fountain. Charlotte had once refused to be carried into the water of the beach, sitting instead on wet sand, scraping barnacles off a rock with a mussel shell. The memory bobs to the surface of her thoughts as she stares; there are leaves in a drained swimming pool.

“What was that poem you loved?” he says.

“I’ve forgotten,” she says.

“I thought it was your favorite.”

“Sorry.”

“I met a poet in Cairo. He didn’t think poetry deserved the title until read in moonlight by a beautiful woman.”

“Hm.”

They begin to walk into Istrate Woods.

She notices that Jonathan has a scar on his neck shaped like a scythe. What was it about scars that held such secrets? Perhaps it was the thought of permanence, to be forever marked by something that remains, even after death.

He tells her of having swum in the Red Sea. She imagines the water swirling with cinnamon powder so thick and so sweet.

“There was an Arab man,” he says, “who carried with him a collection of all the secrets of his travels. On his back he wore a yoke heavy with bottles and scrolls from his many journeys: a glass filled with ink, the skin of an indigo snake, the crushed petals of a flower that wards off death. He wanted to record that which was doomed to be forgotten. It started when a powerful wind—the Samoun—gusted him into an underground grotto the shape of an angry fist. An elephant lay dead on the wet, salty rock. He said he wept for hours for the elephant that no one would remember.”

Charlotte marvels at the ambition of the man, the scribe who sought to capture the world in bottles and animal skins and sleep within the knowledge like a snail. She wonders how he could bear it.

The snowflakes ghost overhead like wisps of smoke.

She glances at him once more. His arm had been a pale river with the occasional clump of stubborn muscle; now it has the strength and brownness of a rock. She wonders, briefly, if the vaccination scar on his shoulder—an aureole like a thumbprint—remains untouched. She hopes.

The two continue to walk. A crow squawks from overhead; it is in an unfamiliar place.

He tells her that while stationed at a Lake Nasser, the richest man in the town cut off the heads of his sheep, made a bonfire out of his finest silks and killed himself with hemlock.

"He discovered that he was losing memories," Jonathan explains, "a form of dementia. He was found buried under his house with a painting of a woman. His first love."

Charlotte opens her mouth to speak when, suddenly, a flash of red tumbles from a powdered maple tree.

It is a cardinal. It gives one final shudder before falling limp over the frosty wisteria. The bird seems to have become somehow smaller; the space around it seems to have shrunk. Charlotte remembers gazing into her mother's coffin as a child, surprised at how death had enveloped the body like a placenta. And here was death, a little pocket of red, exquisite in its muted slumber, waiting quietly to be relegated to the world of objects.

Jonathan removes his scarf and swathes the winey body in the fabric before placing the bundle in the hollow of a tree.

The two continue to walk. The path tapers into a strip of gravel. Charlotte remembers Jonathan's confession from a distant Christmas morning, when he had refused to walk with her because he couldn't stand to blemish the stretch of white. She had hated him for that; she had hated the casual smile that had ballooned her with guilt. He is different now. His stance, the curve of his lips, even the smell of his skin, which was once that of burnt almond, is a coalescence of foreign scents: a trace of blood, smoky tar, the perfumes of exotic women. He is Donatello's David carved from desert stone.

Jonathan tells her of a town that lived on the life of old stories.

"Their favorite was the tale of the beautiful Queen. There was a young prince, you see, with skin thinner than sugar paper. The Queen carried the boy up the tower at Bezabde and read to him the tales of the North; the child died with a view of Painted Hills. He was set aflame and his ashes blown into an ostrich-skin purse. The Queen carried it with her till death; my heart is in my pocket, she would say."

Snow mutes a stand of lightning-struck trees. Charlotte wonders how they could be so close to a city and not see any signs of it. They pass the shadow of a Paulownia full of broken-limb branches. His eyes look black in this light.

"I think we're lost," she says.

"We could live out here among the crows and the ghosts," he

says.

They reach a lonely bench. They had sat here once, Charlotte remembers. She had unraveled a peach with her fingers and transferred the flesh into his mouth.

“I waited,” she says. The words scatter like beads of water on a heated stone. “I thought you’d forgotten.”

He is silent, but reaches for her hand. The lines of his palm are deep, as if cut with a blade. She can smell deep earth and the salt left by tears. The day before he left, the sun was the color of cement. In its light he was a drunken Greek bust: cold, dark, eyeless.

They pass the lake. Somewhere far away is the sound of bells.

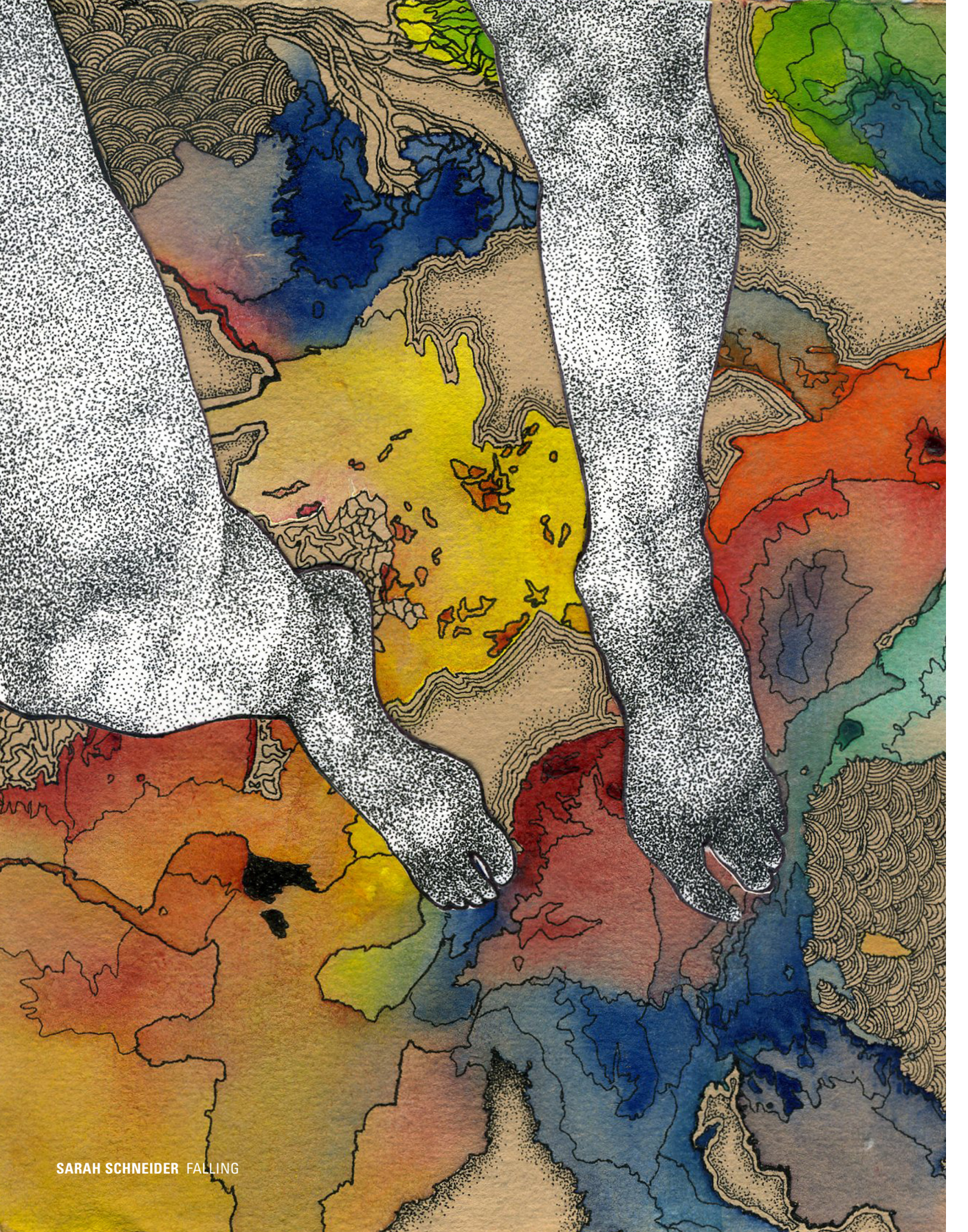


The only gift I bought when I traveled alone
for the first time was a Degas print for my mother
to hang with the other ballerinas
and naked ladies in her bedroom.
I stared at it for the next four years, blinking if she cried,
but otherwise shifting my weight
with every unanswered question. Empty.
She always stopped when she heard my father
opening the garage door.

Degas also drew horses.
Not as popular as his dancers.

I still know his brush better than I do
what she tried to tell me.
Sometimes she'd say something that
would bring my heart to the crook
of her artery, my bones to her feet, my ears
to the pounding in her chest,
but I'd blink,
staring still.

As I heard her preparing dinner and my father
watching golf on TV, I'd take a few minutes
to be alone—
sweaty toes sore against the hardwood floor,
a joint stressed from the wrong angle,
breath steady and small.
Alone with ballet dancers,
their tulle skirts, delicate arms,
and curved backs, alone
with a single, silent charcoal horse,
hanging above my mother's dresser.



CONVERSATIONS

TAYLOR ANTRIM

LISE FRIEDMAN

JAIME ARREDONDO





TAYLOR ANTRIM STRUCTURE AND THE WRITER'S LIFE

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
Anna Duensing and Marc Dones

TAYLOR ANTRIM: I started teaching here last year, so I'm in my second year, third consecutive semester of teaching here. I really like it. I taught at Columbia undergrad and advised MA theses in the MA program there before this and I love Gallatin. And I vastly prefer undergrad teaching to grad.

MARC DONES: Why?

TAYLOR ANTRIM: It's the professionalism that creeps into graduate writing programs that I don't respond well to—or know how to talk about usefully. I did an MFA program but I went to the University of Virginia. UVA is a really more of a conservatory-style MFA program. Agents don't come and give presentations; editors don't come and give talks. And Charlottesville's its own place; it's at a remove, certainly from Manhattan. I really felt like that was a plus to being there because it lets you concentrate on what matters. There's plenty of time to find an agent once you get your book written, et cetera, et cetera. So at Columbia, advising those theses, it just was a really intense moment for those graduate students because a lot of them had taken out loans and spent quite a bit of money to be there. This was their final thesis and of course they were thinking: how do I get this published and become a famous author? And that's just—it's an impossible discussion to have. The only discussion worth having is about the writing itself: if I respond to it as a writer, what the writer's intentions are, how it could be better, what's good about it. And with undergraduates, that's really all the conversation there is. Some quite precocious ones are thinking about agents and things, but for the most part, no, and I prefer that.

ANNA DUENSING: Can you give us a general introduction? Talk about your development as a writer; tell us about your writing experience when you were an undergraduate or even younger.

TAYLOR ANTRIM: I took a ton of creative writing classes in college as an undergraduate, which I have lived to regret a bit. That's an irony because I teach writing to undergraduates. I don't understand creative writing as an intellectual practice in a liberal arts education. It seems like a fine arts type of pursuit. You take a creative writing class the same way you would take a painting class or a sculpture class or something. I definitely think it's a good thing to do, to take creative classes while you're an undergraduate, but too much of it and it seems like you start missing the point, which is to learn things. So I took a few too many classes, I think, but that speaks to the fact that I was raring to go as an undergraduate.

I wanted to write fiction. I wanted to be a writer. But I didn't really understand how you go about doing that, so when I graduated I had applied and been accepted to Oxford University to do a literary degree, like a master's, an academic degree, not a creative degree. I did that mostly because I liked school, I wanted to stay in school and like I said I just didn't understand how to leave school and presto, be a fiction writer. So I went to Oxford and there I continued to write fiction when I had time, and I formed a little writing group with some of my peers there to share work. Kept my hand in. I realized quite quickly over the course of those two years that I didn't want to be an academic. I didn't want to get a PhD; I wanted to write and so instead of doing it when I graduated from college, just taking the plunge and becoming a fiction writer, I put it off two years and then I had to do it anyway, you know what I mean?

So I picked a city where I had a lot of friends, which was San Francisco. I moved there and that was an important moment for me as a writer because I realized quite quickly that I wasn't just going to be a fiction writer. I was always going to be a fiction writer who did something else full time, you know? I got a full-time job. I worked at a wine magazine in San Francisco for three years and I learned to write every day, write in the mornings, and then go into work and work a full day. That balance, to me, was very satisfying and provided a model for how I continue to live my life, however many years later. There's a

problem that: you don't feel like you get enough hours in the morning to write, but at the same time, that leaves you feeling like there's more to do, not so much exhausted as cut off by the responsibility of going to the office. And that's a good feeling to me, makes me want to get back to it.

ANNA DUENSING: In a poetry workshop I was in last year, so many different poets would come in and say, "I reserved this time and space everyday to write and sometimes I would meet a friend to make myself sit down and write." I can imagine it would be easier having a set job to go to, whereas as a student with these erratic hours, I always find something really creative happening at three o'clock in the morning and then return to it later wondering, "Where did this come from?"

TAYLOR ANTRIM: It's a question of personality too. I have a personality that is sustained by structure and predictability. I call myself a creative person who likes structure and predictability. I am sustained by that. I'll tell you a funny story. Four or five years ago, I was working at *Forbes* magazine as an editor there. My boss was really simpatico; I mean, the editor-in-chief there was Christopher Buckley, a fiction writer himself, and he loved the fact that I was writing fiction. It was a pretty easy gig, actually, sort of the golden-oldie days of magazine publishing. I got offered a spot at one of these artist colonies, like a Yaddo type thing—Ledig House, which is up the Hudson Valley. You usually go for four weeks and I couldn't, obviously, because I had a job, but we had a very dead period in the publishing cycle in the fall and so I asked to take two weeks off. Buckley let me do it and I was really psyched.

At that point I'd already published my first novel and I'd been thinking, *God, do people, are people really supposed to carry on fulltime careers and write fiction?* All these other first novelists I know are writing fiction primarily. I feel like I'm a magazine editor primarily and I'm fitting fiction in around the edges and is that really sustainable? I thought, *Great, I'll go to Ledig House and I'll be a real writer for two weeks.* This is what I'm telling myself. So I got there and I'm there for only two weeks and the typical stay is four, and after three days I was like, *Are you kidding me? This is all I get to do? Is work on my novel? All day long? I'm going to kill myself.* I have nothing but wonderful things to say about Ledig House. It's a beautiful place, had this sculpture park you could walk through and there are interesting international writers there

you have dinner with every night.

But I think I learned something pretty important about myself from that which was that the Forbes job, my magazine career, was not what was keeping me from being a fiction writer. It seems that way because you've got to stop writing in the morning and get to work, but it's actually what allows me to keep writing every day. Instead of blocking off the space, it seems to somehow make space for me. And it's limited. I don't get to write for four hours a day, thank God, but it's the way it works for me. Let me just say, people go to those writers' retreats all the time and they get so much work done. It's really a personality thing. I'm saying, for me having all that time and license was hard.

MARC DONES: There's this narrative around writing as a practice where people think you're erratic and ridiculous. So I guess my question is how often do you find that people are surprised by the fact that you like structure? And part two of that question, how important do you think structure is to your success and in general, success in the practice of writing?

TAYLOR ANTRIM: Something just popped into my head while you were talking, so I want to mention it before I forget it; it's related to what you were asking me about. There really was a moment, when I was an undergraduate, where a door opened and I saw what it meant to be a writer. I was at a reading given by a writer named Ethan Canin. He's a hotshot, I mean, he's great. *Emperor of the Air*, a couple other collections and novels. He was describing his life in Iowa where he was teaching and how he wrote whatever novel he was reading from. The question always comes up, what's your process? So he said that he had this studio that he rented in Iowa City or wherever and that was where he went to do his writing in the morning and he made some offhand comment like, "I hate it." And one of these book-clubbers, inevitably some blue-haired woman in the audience was like, "My goodness, how could you possibly hate such a wonderful thing that you do?" And he says, "No, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. I go into that office and I do 500 words a day and that's it. That's all I can bear to do." And a light went off for me; I thought, *500 words a day, I can do that*. I can understand that. That's been my guiding goal ever since, which is you write five days a week and you shoot for 500 words and that's it and 500 words, to

me, seems like a hell of a lot actually.

MARC DONES: If the words matter.

TAYLOR ANTRIM: Well, even if they don't matter! Most of the time those 500 words are terrible. Most of the time it's 300 words and they're terrible. It just lowered the bar for me. That was so important to hear from a writer I really admired, a writer who seemed like a superstar telling me that he hated it, he struggled at it and he set himself a modest goal. I've never forgotten that. The deal is, are you going to write a novel or not? Because you cannot write a novel through bursts of occasional inspiration and drunken or drug-fueled writing drags. It does not happen. The novel does not permit that. You can do a short story that way; you can do poems that way. Some people talk about novels getting written that way, but I never believe them. A novel is the result of discipline, period. So I think the myth of writers as these free spirits, or whatever, falls apart when you think about just how damn hard it is to write a 400-page novel. How many months, how much perseverance, how much sober reconsideration of what you're doing: Am I serious? Am I going to actually sit down and put myself through this again? Because if you're someone who exists only on a pleasure principle you will not do it, because it is so unenjoyable after a while.

I also think that the more writers you meet, the more you hear just what you said and just what I said about the whole predictability, routine. Routine is sustaining. You know, Updike talked about writing from 8 to noon and then having lunch and then reading something in the afternoon, doing that day after day after day, and that's how I see pages get written. I just don't see them get written in any other way.

There's something undisciplined about the expression "creative writing," so there's the conflict. What we're doing is always imperfect, emotional in some way; it's about exploring, it isn't about being definite. We don't know what it is we're doing when we sit down to write. We're figuring it out as we go and that feels incredibly unstructured and unpredictable and yet, that's the generative conflict. I sit down between these hours in the morning to do something completely unpredictable and immeasurable. I think that's what I like about it, too. And I think that if you were truly a creature of habit, if you, if I, if we were truly creatures of habit who thrived only on predictable situations, we would never write fiction because fiction itself just isn't predictable. It's sort

of like if you decide to go to therapy, you're admitting something about yourself, something's wrong, something's imperfect, something's worth exploring.

MARC DONES: And you want to talk about it.

TAYLOR ANTRIM: And I'm willing to, I'm brave enough to try to look at it. And that's what fiction writing is. It's a kind of bravery that I admire and it requires discipline to keep at it, because it's so unpleasant most of the time. The fiction writing that I truly admire has a quality of braveness rather than a quality of perfection. I like stuff that's quite flawed; but brave.



LISE FRIEDMAN
**THE ART OF
ADAPTATION AND
THE POWER OF A
GOOD TITLE**

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
Anna Duensing

ANNA DUENSING: So, to start off, would you speak a little bit about your history, both in life and as a writer?

LISE FRIEDMAN: Well, I started training as a dancer when I was quite young, as most dancers do. I was fortunate enough to get into Merce Cunningham's Company and I danced with him for almost eight years. When I left the Company, I wanted to figure out what else I could do and became interested in writing and editing. I'm not really sure how that happened, to be frank. I'd always read a lot, maybe that's part of it? Anyway, I got a job at *Vogue* of all places and worked there for a couple of years doing a lot of editing and a little bit of writing. Then I started to work at an independent dance publication; I ran that for the publisher, worked very closely with the designer and photographers and sort of got my feet wet in terms of magazine production. I was later the editorial director for a travel book company. But writing became something that I got increasingly interested in. I started working on a book, my first, which was a ballet book for kids. Shortly after that I did an acting book and then I did a book with the Ailey Company for adults.

Several years ago I worked on a project with my sister, who lives in Italy, called *Letters to Juliet*, which is a nonfiction book about the people who have been writing to Juliet for more than 100 years and the secretaries who have been responding to them. That was a great project. That book inspired a movie and the whole nine yards. Now I'm working on a book with the Boston Ballet tentatively titled *Becoming Clara*, which is really the story of a young girl who is a dancer and what's involved with her becoming a professional, essentially, a performer. The Nutcracker Ballet is the foil, the backdrop, for that.

ANNA DUENSING: One thing that seems specific to you, but also seems specific to a lot of students here is that they find a happy mix between whatever was their original passion and applying it to writing. For instance, I study history and memory and I've just started visiting the two a lot both in fiction writing and also journalism. What was it like when you first began writing about dance, conveying that it's not only your passion and what you've done for years but also this very physical thing? And how did it affect your writing that you were making books for children?

LISE FRIEDMAN: It was challenging, but challenging in a very good way. It forces you to look at an art form that has been almost intuitive. Not that you don't work hard as a dancer, you do. Very hard. But you start when you're so young, the habit of working is instilled at a very young age. So coming at writing later requires a tremendous amount of discipline and focus and I don't know if it matters what the subject is finally. The task of writing and the challenge of writing may be what the question is, more than the subject matter.

ANNA DUENSING: As much as it involves a re-approaching and rethinking of your interest, there's also something that seems very natural about your story. It's almost as if, what else could you be writing about?

LISE FRIEDMAN: You write what you know, right? Isn't that the adage? When I started working at *Vogue*, for example, part of the reason I was hired was because I could write about and edit material that dealt with dance and theater performance, because I understood those arenas already. I really think that having knowledge, curiosity, an open mind and the skills—you can approach writing about any number of topics. It helps to know a lot about something but you don't always have that opportunity to know that much. In fact, learning as you go can be very satisfying. When the act of discovery is happening at the same time, it's much more interesting, exciting and challenging because you have to shape it as you're beginning to understand what it is you are trying to investigate.

ANNA DUENSING: How did you come about the *Letters to Juliet* project with your sister?

LISE FRIEDMAN: My sister lives in Verona and she was doing a lot of translating of Italian into English for work and was given some letters to translate by the city. She shared them with me because she thought they were so crazy. We hadn't really heard anything else about this phenomenon, so we started looking into it and discovered all these crazy things and put together a proposal and our agent sold it. It was really just happenstance, in a way. It seemed like a great project and there was just so much more information out there: the son of the very first secretary, Juliet's self-appointed secretary in the late 30s and early 40s, is still alive, as was the daughter of the secretary during the 60s. So these were very important resources for us and the stories were just so amazing. The project just fell into our laps and took off from there.

ANNA DUENSING: So then what was the adaptation like? I admit, I haven't seen the movie.

LISE FRIEDMAN: It deals with aspects of what we cover in our book but it's different; the movie is inspired by our book. It deals with a lot of the sites, a lot of the history, but it's a romantic comedy, as opposed to a little history. It's a different animal.

ANNA DUENSING: What has been your approach to editing and then the difference between editing others' works and editing your own?

LISE FRIEDMAN: Well, I think it's very hard to edit yourself. If you know that you've written something that needs to be 2,500 words and it's 4,000, you know? You get better at it. I think it's very hard if you are attached to something to be ruthless and excise, but you have to learn how to edit yourself to some degree. Everybody needs an editor aside from oneself. I firmly believe that. You need an objective eye. Someone who can look at what you've done in terms of the shape, in terms of the construction, in terms of the rhythm. Every piece of writing should have a very clear and coherent rhythm, an internal momentum. I think it really helps not only to have other people reading your work to give you feedback, but someone who could just say, "You know, you really need to change the structure," or "You said the same thing 45 times. It needs to be cut." I don't feel that I could edit myself to a printable form. You know, it's like looking at yourself in the mirror and you see what you want to see. That's how we

are as humans.

ANNA DUENSING: What is your typical approach—I know you’ve written in a wide range of places and about a lot of different stuff—but what is your typical approach to writing something?

LISE FRIEDMAN: If it is something that entails research, first of all, I try to figure out what the nature of the thing is and then, of course, how big it is, how long it is, what the general scope of it is and then the due date. It’s very important to know when something is due and then you work backwards from that date. If it’s a book, then you have to figure out, okay, what am I going to talk about and you make 89 different outlines and you have to create a scaffold onto which you can build this thing. You have to come up with some kind of superstructure—at least I do. Because otherwise it’s just too terrifying. Just this kind of big yawning openness where nothing is finite.

ANNA DUENSING: I definitely understand. Do you know the storytelling theater The Moth?

LISE FRIEDMAN: Oh, I think so, yes.

ANNA DUENSING: Well, they have these StorySLAMS where you get up and you can tell a story, and one of their rules that I have found helpful sometimes in my own writing is always know the last line of your story, even if everything else is improvised. I’ve found that latching on to something like that was incredibly helpful in writing, just having one destination, something to root you.

LISE FRIEDMAN: Yeah, I think it’s important even though it probably will change. I do something similar with my students. When they work on projects, I ask them really early on, “What’s the title?” It’s not that I want to confine them to something, but I think it helps concretize it. I say, can you tell me what it is in one sentence? It’s not that I’m trying to create an advertising sound bite, but if you can describe what it is you are trying to do, succinctly, I think it would help you approach the work in a way that’s much more deliberate.

ANNA DUENSING: And sometimes it can even surprise you, when you have

to say something like that. It's like, "Okay, yes! That's exactly it!" It's a moment of clarity.

LISE FRIEDMAN: It's true and it's the same thing as when someone says, "What's your concentration?" and you could just go, "Well, uh, Media." No, that's not it. That's not a concentration. That's an interest. What is it exactly that you're spending your time doing here? What kind of shape is it taking? The ability to be specific is extremely important with writing in particular, but in any art form. The same thing is true for composing music or choreographing a dance. You have to be clear about what it is you are trying to say or no one's going to understand it.

ANNA DUENSING: Do you have any other advice for the young writer today?

LISE FRIEDMAN: I wouldn't presume to advise anybody about anything. But when you're doing something, I suggest trying to learn as much about it as you can and if you feel the urge to do it, you should do it, and if you don't have the urge to do it, you're probably not doing the thing you should be doing. I mean, I think that any creative work you do should have a sense of urgency about it. You know? I have to be doing this because it's what I love, it's what I need to be doing. Without that is very hard to keep going.

ANNA DUENSING: Do you have a moment that you can think of where you sensed that for yourself in your own work?

LISE FRIEDMAN: A sense of urgency? I hope I have it all the time. I mean, of course, everyone has to do things that they don't want to be doing. That's where discipline comes in, right? But I feel fortunate in that a lot of the work that I've done has been work that I've wanted to do, so I feel a sense of urgency and desire when I do it. Not all the time, of course not. But it's certainly a goal.

Professor Jaime Arredondo and I sat in a coffee shop on 13th Street that seemed like a beehive with all the espresso-craving commuters darting in and out the ever-swinging door. My open computer sat atop a tiny round table, hogging all of the elbow space. I popped in a CD that Professor Arredondo gave me of his most recent paintings: an array of miniature flowers lined my computer screen.

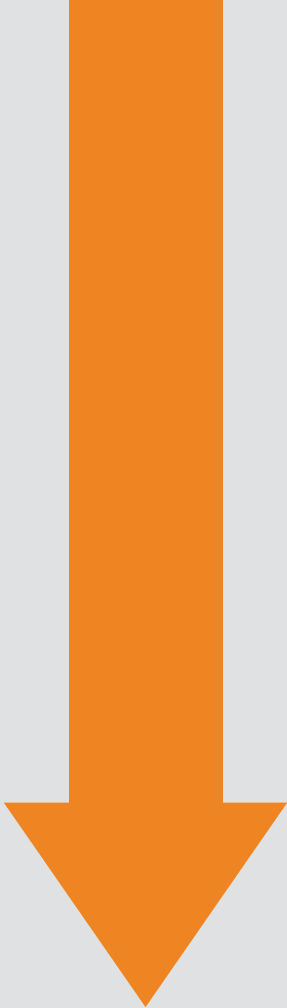
JAIME ARREDONDO: These paintings are of flowers that I found at the Queens Botanical Garden. Even this cluster of three, here. I didn't manipulate the flowers; they were just like that when I came to them.

CAROLINE OWEN: How were you introduced to the practice of painting?

JAIME ARREDONDO: I was 15 or 16 years old when I was inspired by the great muralists. I was looking at [Diego] Rivera, [José Clemente] Orozco and [David Alfaro] Siqueiros. I didn't know much about them at the time, but I knew their work was powerful.

CAROLINE OWEN: What sort of environment is conducive to your creating art? Do you prefer to work with music or in silence, with company or in solitude?

JAIME ARREDONDO: One may presume that a positive aspect of being an artist is solitude. I actually view it as a real disadvantage. I work alone when I paint my flowers, but it's that solitude that I hate at times. There's something so selfish that goes on within a closed studio. You're turning your back to the world and you're shutting yourself off from a lot of things. I envy actors and



JAIME ARREDONDO **FINDING A PALETTE OF ONE'S OWN**

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
Caroline Owen

dancers who collaborate with other people.

CAROLINE OWEN: I feel there is a sense of irony in the isolation that many artists create because they then want to share their product with the rest of the world. The process isn't revealed; it's just the outcome that is seen.



JAIME ARREDONDO:

You are painting or creating work destined for an audience, and yet you close the door until the piece is finished. When you're cut off from your audience as an artist, you're left with a lot of guesswork. I hate that aspect. You're always just wondering—will people like this? Are they going to confirm and give value to what I do?

CAROLINE OWEN: It

would be interesting to see an artist open up their workspace to reveal a piece as it was being made. I feel like not a lot of artists would be open to that idea, but it would be fascinating to see what could happen. How would people react? Would it have any sort of effect on the artist's process?

JAIME ARREDONDO: Yeah, I wonder what it would be like if an artist were to ask questions of their audience.

CAROLINE OWEN: How do you feel about this color next to the purple...

JAIME ARREDONDO: Hahaha, exactly. Does this work with the flower or not? How should I fill in the background? This should really be done. Maybe I should do that...

CAROLINE OWEN: Do you feel like you ever do get the chance to collaborate or have others share in your process?

JAIME ARREDONDO: Mural painting. One of the best things about mural painting is that you get to be around other people. You're exchanging ideas at the same time that you're painting. One idea can be transformed by giving it to another person who then passes it along to the next person and it goes and goes and goes. You are connected to and giving voice to a community who may not have the opportunity otherwise.

CAROLINE OWEN: There's such an interesting juxtaposition: art created by an individual artist with the intention of sharing it with an audience, versus the creation of murals, often by groups of people, to benefit a community. Do you have any rituals or routines you incorporate into your art making? Are there certain times of the day during which you prefer to work?

JAIME ARREDONDO: I drink coffee. I try and stay very alert! I have to paint during the day, especially when I'm painting something with lots of detail. I need the natural light. Some people can only paint during the evening—I used to do that for years—but I can't anymore. I find it depressing now, working at night when everyone is asleep.

CAROLINE OWEN: Have you ever worked outside of oil painting, and do you find that your process changes when you use different mediums?

JAIME ARREDONDO: I started out working with acrylic, but then when I was in my early 20s I switched to oils. Acrylic dries too fast and it's hard to adapt and do the layering effect that you can get with oils. Also, oils have this translucency that you can't get with acrylics. In Texas, there weren't many people working in oils at the time I switched over. I had to

teach myself a lot of things after grad school: how to get the beautiful gloss and luminosity, which oils work better with which colors, which colors dry faster.

CAROLINE OWEN: So you feel as though it was a slow transition process and a state of constant learning from experimentation?

JAIME ARREDONDO: Yes. There's a mystery to oil painting that you don't find in acrylic. That's one of the most important aspects of art making—this sense of mystery and also failure. You can fail much quicker and easier with oil painting.

CAROLINE OWEN: With every successful painting there were several failed attempts. How long does it take you to complete a piece of work and how do you know when a work is complete?

JAIME ARREDONDO: Anywhere from a month to years. Color is the most important aspect in my opinion, a sense of color and light. I have to get that very heightened sense of luminosity and saturation with my colors before I'm satisfied. Here's an interesting story about color. When I went to grad school at Yale from Texas, I had a very sweet palette—turquoise, cerulean blues, bluebonnets, you know. But then I came to New York and everything was grayed out—burnt umber and dark shades. So when I went to Yale with my soft palette, I had an instructor who said I should really get rid of those sweet colors. He said, "You know that shit that accumulates at the bottom of your can after you clean out your brushes?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I want you to take that and just throw it on, just throw that shit on your canvas." And I did, and I started painting with it. The next day another professor came in and was giving critiques and said to me, "My god, what is that? It looks like you took what was in the bottom of your water can and put it on your canvas." So, I lost my sweet palette when I came to New York and started painting with dreary colors. I didn't like it, and they didn't speak to me. Eventually I was able to recreate a palette I was comfortable with. A more refined and mature Texas palette.

CAROLINE OWEN: You were able to gain a better understanding of how you connected with your sweeter pallet by leaving it for a time. The loss of colors made you realize how necessary they actually are to your

vision. Would you tell me more about another transition in your work, from the flower paintings to the female figure works? You portray Latina women with such honor and give an audience the space to interact with powerful Latina women.

JAIME ARREDONDO: Well, I found out over many years I was really good with figurative works. I didn't know I was good until I started painting them. I always wanted to paint figures, but I didn't want to paint them on a platform, it was too academic for me. I finally realized that I have experience and knowledge in mythology and Mesoamerica that could really help create context. That's when I found a reason for using figures. I wanted to create a beginning body of work with flowers because I could talk about color, light and beauty, but with figures I can talk about stories, narrative and mythology. I couldn't do that with abstraction, and I was getting closer with the flowers, but with the figures I can talk more specifically about history, identity and culture.

CAROLINE OWEN: It sounds as though you may be getting at this point, but would you say that your art has a purpose? What might that purpose be?

JAIME ARREDONDO: I think it has several purposes. One thing I realize now that I have a daughter is that it will be a great and rich learning experience for her. And I also take pride in and possess a sense of honor that I, as her father, am a working artist. Secondly, I think that I'm contributing something to the world of painting in general, by creating the things that I do. The third purpose is that I always felt that I was doing something very noble and very important. I had a lot of chances where I could have gone in a different direction, to law school or med school. I even worked for the IRS for a period of time. I was destined to climb the ladder. I quit against my parents' wishes. I hated it; I had dizzy spells and couldn't take it. There are so few Latino artists, especially in New York. I hope I have some sort of impact on other Latino artists. Most students see me as someone who had it easy, no struggle. They automatically pin me as being privileged because I work at NYU, but I don't come from a wealthy family. I'm very conscious of my background. Where I grew up, I could easily have ended up in jail, but I didn't. Where I come from, it guides me, it affects what I paint and I can't deny that. Context and culture are everything.

CONTRIBUTORS

STEPHEN BROWN doesn't defecate where he masticates. When not reviewing Gallatin, you can find him with the boys of Delta Lambda Phi or June Foley and the fine editors of Gallatin's own *Literacy Review*. His passions include comics, cats and comics about cats.

CHELSEA BRYN explores "Art as Experience" at Gallatin and in life. She loves glitter, yoga, friends, family, cooking, crayons, biking, breathing and laughter. Wherever you go, there you are. Words are birds. I believe in everything; nothing is sacred. I believe in nothing; everything is sacred.

MATTHEW CHONG is a freshman at Gallatin studying art history, literature and film.

REBECCA DAVIS started writing as a kid, analyzing people and over-philosophizing in leather-bound journals. She is an art, fashion and film lover, studying the role of business in creative industries. Her passions include acting, writing and yoga, and she wants to be an agent/manager when she grows up.

LISA DOMINGUEZ is a Gallatin senior studying Visual Culture, Media Marketing & Communications. She has also completed a cross-school minor in the Business of Entertainment, Media & Technology from Stern & Steinhardt. Her photograph, *Wan Chai, Hong Kong*, was taken during an NYU summer course in Media & Globalization in Hong Kong in May 2010. She is originally from the Philippines.

MARC DONES is a Gallatin senior.

ANNA DUENSING is a Gallatin sophomore studying the presence and preservation of history, memory and identity through film, oral history, literature, ethnomusicology, museums and memorial space. "Concerning the Deceased Mr. Breslauer" came from many sleepless nights listening to Blind Lemon Jefferson and making plans to open a German-Appalachian Fusion luncheonette.

RACHEL EASTERLY is a Gallatin senior. She is studying the intersections of religion, sexuality and colonialism, and trying to understand what people are talking about.

JADE FUSCO is a Junior at Gallatin. Her studies at Gallatin consist of exploring the intersection of foreign language, community, visual art and performance art. She makes multi-media work and performs as a singer and actress.

GINA HONG is a sophomore at Gallatin studying art, politics and economics (to put it simply); she is a poetry editor of Gallatin Review. In her free time, she writes, goes to cafés with friends and tries to cook. She now lives in Brooklyn, but she misses her younger sisters and her home in California.

BILL KEMMLER is concentrating in white noise, tinnitus, degradation, empty movement, inverted glass and bathroom freak-out. Bill Kemmler is a beacon of pure and total idiocy.

KATJA KRISHOK likes balance, farming, poems and suspended objects (hammocks, clothes on clotheslines, tomatoes on vines...). She will be graduating in May and hopes to be involved with all of those things in the future. She studied Postcoloniality at Gallatin and may eventually continue her studies.

CASEY KWON is a junior at Gallatin concentrating in "Photojournalism and Social Inquiry." She is currently studying abroad in Shanghai.

MELANIE MCMANN is a third-year Gallatin student interested in both literary and visual art and the blur between fiction and nonfiction in narratives. She captured the photographs included in this publication in Ghana.

MATTHEW MORROCCO spends his free time visiting his grandparents, whose luxurious home he hopes to one day appropriate. He lives and works in Manhattan with his messy, yet lovable German Shepherd, Rosetta. He is currently represented by Cyr Morr Studio. For more information please visit www.CyrMorr.com

LUCAS NATHAN is finishing up his junior year at Gallatin. He likes to work on writing with other people. Email him: lsn225@nyu.edu.

RILEY O'NEILL likes things in space and things on earth and things in his mind. He studies environmental science, astronomy, mathematics and design. He is in his first year at Gallatin.

EMILY PEDERSON grew up in Rhode Island taking photos with her grandfather's camera. She is now a junior at Gallatin studying photography, foreign languages and social justice. After graduating she hopes to work as a photojournalist and human rights advocate.

ANIELLA PEROLD is a senior at Gallatin, with a concentration in Critical & Creative Writing, a minor in French, and a life-long love affair with literature, art and music. She envisions all of her pursuits—writerly, personal, and professional—as acts of translation: transformations from one form into another.

SOFIA PIERCE-SLIVE is a senior in Gallatin studying Communication through Advertising with a minor in Creative Writing. A native of Cambridge, MA, she has also studied ceramics and media studies. "They Call it Faggotitis" is her first published piece.

MARK PUTTERMAN is a freshman at Gallatin studying social action through the creative arts. Born and raised in Concord, Massachusetts, he is an aspiring singer-songwriter and creative writer, working primarily with the short story medium. Contact at: mip233@nyu.edu.

SARAH SCHNEIDER was born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA. She is currently a senior at Gallatin studying visual art with a focus on comics and graphic narrative. After graduation, she hopes to spend most her time drawing.

At Gallatin, **RACHEL WEBB** hopes to toe the discerning line between psychology and creativity, exploring the symbiotic relationship between madness (or sanity) and artistic genius. She found photography during her studies abroad and travels in Europe, where it seemed to be the best medium to capture the still, disconnected and beautiful nature of tourism. In her spare time, she thinks.

ROSETTA YOUNG is a junior in Gallatin studying English Literature, German and Creative Writing. She loves reading, Jersey Shore and living in the East Village with her cat, Matthew. She plans on being the oldest woman in the world one day and being casual acquaintances with JWOWW. She hates James Franco and loves to sleep.