



GALLATIN REVIEW

GALLATIN REVIEW

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HESPERIA

The November wind breathes a faded
Times across the sidewalk

and whispers winter in my ear.
On the pavement, a bird's folding

and unfolding shadow. Maybe
all of us are going home.

The moon already descended
into alleyways in the slow light.

A stone birdbath framed by bars
sits in the shade of a tree of heaven,

in a garden where the birds
sing a hundred summer hymns.

I turn away from the padlocked gate.
A garden, nature minus chaos,

is a lie in this universe.
To the vague sky I want to pray:

Oh keep the tree of heaven away,
leave us alone on this imperfect earth,

which sometimes has its moments, of course.
And I turn west and walk toward home,

the way the moon in morning fled
still thinking of your warm white bed.

ADAM'S LAMENT

One

Lillith, to whom my heart was first lashed with
Sinew and foam on Eden's rocky shore,
Didn't we slither? Didn't we bury ourselves,
Wearing a frayed path
Coast to gate of Eden?

Whalebone trees turned red in fall,
And Lillith sloshed back into foam.

Two

It's winter.
Eve rips me into shreds of pleasure. Slowly. Slowly.

I circle like a gray dog, all fangs and fur and fight.
Lunge.

Each time I dispatch a million
Possibilities.

Three

I toil the earth. Digging for water.
Let the sea swallow me again.
Each stroke of the hoe
A furious shout:

I want my bone back
In my chest.

BOU REGREG

The moon was lovely there in the charcoal dark, all full-bellied and simmering orange in the warmth of the North African night. Below the sky and across the river, carnival lights were gathered in a hot-burning knot of noise and movement. Their brilliance spilled over the water and onto the faces of the last of the day-beaten fisherman, who were sadly rowing their little boats back to a tired shore.

“You can’t see any stars,” she noted out loud but not really very loud at all. It felt like a gentle night meant for tender throats and soft voices, so she spoke delicately. She was sitting beside him on one of the humble white walls of the old Kasbah. The north bank of the river was stretched out before them and below them, peaceful but for the occasional bickering of street cats. Across the river, beyond the lights of the Ferris wheel and the bumper cars, the mausoleum of the late king glowed blue-white on a black hill. They could see the city’s boats sleeping in their waterbed slips, rocking with each wave and each fish dream, and they could hear the final call to prayer falling over the river and the city and the people. All those lights and all that life, and still no stars shone.

“That’s ok,” he said, looking from the moon to her and back again. She smiled and wished she could have explained the constellations to him. She would have told him that Canis Major was her favorite because it meant her favorite things: summer and dogs and the hot mystery of velvet space. But an empty sky allows little in the way of explaining away your stars, so she kept them to herself.

“The desert didn’t have stars, either,” she continued, conjuring memories of a recent excursion to the hot lands to the east. “But it did have rain.” They had traveled two days by train and car to see those great red dunes, with the sun supposedly so big above them that it melted souls, and they’d arrived to find a gray world of dusk and clouds and gloomy horizons. They curled themselves around camel humps and crept into that timeless unknown. Halfway through their trek, the sky began to tremble with wet, electric joy, and soon their faces grew muddy with sand and rain and their scarves were soaked through. It was the first rain they had seen since they’d touched that sweaty continent several months prior, and as the wind whipped a soggy sandstorm into their ears and mouths and eyes, she had to laugh first into her knuckles and then into the dripping sky for the irony and the beauty of it all. He grinned at the thought of it now, and told her how he had loved that storm and how he had felt like he was dreaming.

“That was our last train ride, you know,” he added, turning again to look at her. “It’s planes from here on out.”

She nodded, half-hearted but hiding it. They would be leaving for home tomorrow, after so many summer days on this yellow edge. Her smile grew more genuine as she reconsidered that final train ride out of the desert. That had been her favorite of them all, because it was the last, because it was a night ride, and because she had spent it next to him in the best way. They’d stood at the very back of the last car, before an open door that gaped onto the countryside, as the night sped by blurred and black and smelling of hay. She had been enchanted with that moment, in love with all the things it was: soft and slow and creeping, brightly dark with its star blues and night blacks and country oranges. That train full of sleepyheads had at once both fueled and satiated her wanderlust. It would become her poetry so many months later, when northeastern cities grew too cold to bear.

But for now, there was no coldness. The wall they sat on was still warm from old daylight, and the breezes felt equator-borne. Beneath the talk of trains and stars, she was searching for a way to convey the little poetries she'd found and felt here without leaving herself completely bare before him. It was difficult; courage is slippery at best, even when the night seems on your side. But then he caught her gaze, and in all of the evening's various lights, she could see that his eyes were very green and full of something familiar. His face shocked her into action, so she said what she'd been hoping to.

"I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you too."

His eyes were still full and colored. She met them until she couldn't bear the boldness, retreating to stare at the moon or the boats or something less affecting.

"I wish it wasn't like this," she said, her voice small.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I wish we didn't live so far apart. You were the best part of this place."

He put his hand over hers and pressed it into the white of the wall. She concentrated on the way that felt, so she could fill herself up with the memory when she needed it.

"I know. Meeting you has been . . ." but the language failed him and he didn't know how to finish. He settled for a common word that was acceptably vague: "good," or "great," or something else that couldn't scare anyone with its undertones. Then he found his own courage, and when she looked at him next, he kissed her. It was brief and quiet, but it was what they could afford at that moment, on that wall in a country so far from home. It made her heart heavier and freer, and she wasn't sure what to do with that feeling or with all the thoughts in her head. So she smiled.

“This is terrible.”

“It could have been worse,” he said, less convinced of the tragedy of time and place than she. “Besides, maybe it won’t be so bad after all. Maybe it’s kismet and we’ll meet again soon, in an airport or a restaurant or something.”

“Maybe.”

“We can at least write each other, keep in touch. I do want to know what you think of that Marquez book I told you about.”

“That sounds good. You’re right. It won’t be so bad.” She was quiet for a moment, hesitating, before adding the words she really meant. “And besides, even if it is that bad, we’re still very lucky. To be here now, like this. You know?”

“I know.”

They both smiled now, at one another and at their youth and at all the days and chances that lay before them. They would leave tomorrow with fresh faces and clean souls, and they would quietly hold on to their hopeful words for as long as they could. As with all things, though, they would have to give them up eventually. Those words were beautiful and they meant them, but they came from their hearts and not their heads. Kismet had nothing in the works for them. They would not rediscover one another in a cafe or a movie theater, and they would not run into each other on a flight to Bangkok or at their children’s preschool. In fact, they would never meet again. They would write letters for a while in a way that made them feel like they were living sensitively and with a tragic and hopeless sort of passion, and then one day life would pick up speed, and a letter would be brushed behind a refrigerator and forgotten. They would be lost to one another, and lost to graduate schools and consecutive stints with the Peace Corps, to new cities and three engagements and a new baby. And then one day, when one of them

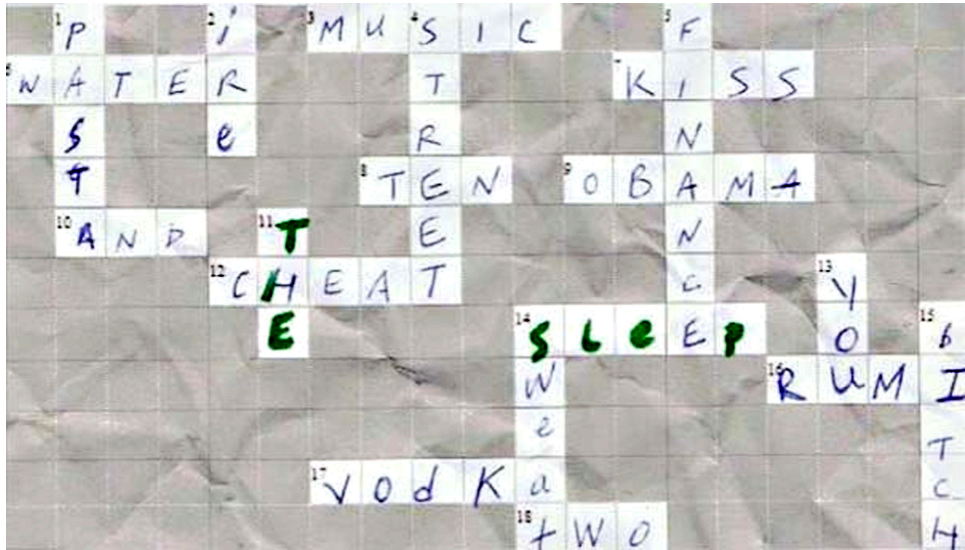
was vacationing in Spain, an innocent proposal to spend the day across the sea would strike memories like a matchbook. The smell of souks and leather and mint would burst back, and a hand would flex at the memory of its younger self, cradling another set of knuckles. The heart would palpitate at the memory of trains and hot wonder-nights. They would hide a smile and shake a head.

“I went there once, when I was young. It’s not that great. Pamplona would be better.”





CROSS WORDS



SUBMISSION 12

THE LEXINGTON GAZETTE, GAMES

ATTN: MARTIN BERRY, GAMES EDITOR

BY: Anna O'Brien

ACROSS

3. Del says that the thing about break-ups is you can't listen to the ----- you liked during the relationship. She says that's the reason you should never date. I don't know how to feel about this since, you know, she and Tom have been together for about as long as we've been apart. Tom has a nipple ring. Can you imagine? Del dating a guy with a nipple ring?

6. When you started getting all healthy, you lectured me on how I shouldn't eat so much fast food and how I should drink at least a liter of ----- every day. Recently, I read about a woman who died of ----- poisoning, as in she drank so much she like, exploded. I felt like I should tell you this. It felt like a rebuttal.

7. Our first ---- was in a stairwell. It was after the recital where the page-turner fainted and I ended up turning the pages myself. I got a standing ovation and the page-turner ended up eating a bottle of Advil after she didn't get the solo in the Bruch. Anyway, after the recital you said I had pretty hands and I shrugged. It was our third time seeing each other. You stayed after while I packed up and when we went down the stairs you stopped walking, shook your head like you didn't believe it, and ----ed me.

8. --- is the number of lots of things: fingers, toes, siblings in your family, times I had sex outside our relationship, months in the earliest Roman calendars. Del says the Mayan calendar means the world will end in 2012. I tell her that's not true—the Mayan calendar simply resets itself in 2012 and it has reset many times before. I don't tell her that I registered on a conspiracy theory website

for a license to allow me to live after the apocalypse. I felt bad so I registered you for a license too. You never know.

9. Timon and Annica next door, their kid Joelle, she's only four, she blew her finger off with a firework the night ---- was elected. They had to take her to the hospital and Timon told me that he felt so bad 'cause he couldn't stop smiling about the election even as his little girl got wheeled to the ER. Joelle liked you a lot. I wanted to call you and say what had happened with her but then I remembered you don't know who she is. She only knew about you because of the stories I told her. I told her you were a mix of ----- and her dad. I tried to tell her a story after the accident but she didn't like you anymore. She started calling herself a "Wepublican."

10. The most common connection in the English language.

12. What you did every time we played gin rummy. I don't know how you did it to be honest. Even when we played with my mom, you still felt the need to ----- . She's almost 70, Martin, and we weren't even playing for money. I feel like I should write in to one of those websites where women write about bad things their ex-boyfriends did. I should tell them about how you -----ed and then broke up with me for doing the same thing. Well. Not the very same thing.

14. Del and Sam, Timon and Annica—these people ----- together every night. I used to ----- with someone every night, even the nights you were away. Now I ---- alone, and not just at night. My friends say it's a sign of depression. I'm not

telling you this to make you feel guilty. I'm just letting you know, is all.

16. "Listen to the reed, how it complains of separation." The happiest moment of my entire life, we were reading ---- out loud to each other. You, me and Del, before Del got all mature about everything. You only knew her when she was insecure and clung to us like a sock out of the dryer. Now she has opinions. I don't like her as much. She reminds me of the parts of you I hated. "If ten men want to enter a house, and only nine find their way in, the tenth must not say: 'This is what God ordained.' He must find out what his own shortcoming was."

17. The first date we had, we drank lots and lots of -----. It was only after our eighth and fifth shots, respectively, that we were able to get to the meat of the matter. You asked me why I didn't think I was pretty; I asked you how it felt to have a monogrammed bathrobe. You said you didn't have a monogrammed bathrobe. I said you might as well. You sighed, pushed a twenty across the bar, and ordered us two more -----s.

18. I saw --- written out on a check from a student's mother to me today. I'm giving lessons now, did you know? I have three regular students. Anyway, this kid, his mom had a strange way of making her numbers all fat and loopy. She wrote me a check for a certain amount and my eyes watered, staring at the first number. It looked kind of like you with the way you lean back a little, your swagger.

DOWN

1. Del brought over ----- last night from Olive Garden. We watched music videos and got stoned. You were so good at making ----- . It's what you made every Tuesday night when I stayed over. You always used the same fresh Parmesan but still got so excited every time. "I have these whole-wheat noodles and real tomato sauce and oh, I picked up this fresh Parmesan from Trader Joe's!" you'd say. You'd shove the cheese under my nose. I'd inhale deeply and then say a word of praise. "Delicious." "Great." "Good."

2. Incredible rage. When I'd make my angry face you would laugh. I pushed my brows so hard into my eyes that everything blurred, and brought my chin into my neck and put my hands on my waist. Sometimes, when I shut my eyes really hard, I see neon bursts. Sometimes I see your eyelashes clumped together in the rain.

4. Little Joelle, remember, the girl with the fireworks? She develops a new phobia every day. I try to help her through them but she's like a hydra and as soon as you cut off one fear, two more pop up. Today's fear: Crossing The ----- . Timon and Annica were out and I babysat. In order to get Joelle to cross the ----- I told her Barack Obama was coming down the sidewalk and he too was afraid to cross the ----- . I said if she crossed the street she'd be safe from Barack Obama. Like a hydra, I tell you.

5. Campaign ----- reform is something you talked about often. Not really talked about. It was your code phrase for when we were talking about

something other people shouldn't hear, and they'd say, "What were you guys talking about?" And we'd say, "Um, oh, campaign ----- reform." And they didn't believe us but it was funny anyway. The other day, the mother of a kid I give lessons to stopped in and heard him screech through "Frere Jacques" sans rosin. She made small talk with me about campaign ----- reform even though her kid was playing his little detuned heart out. I cleared my throat while she spoke. It was textbook definition cacophony.

11. Probably --- most common word in --- English language. Probably --- most common word in my lexicon, though I'd like to be romantic and say it's actually "flaw" or "sorry" that I use the most.

13. Second person. Can mean one or many. Ambiguous.

14. I get nervous everywhere I go. I'm afraid I'll see you at the grocery store or that your car will pull up next to mine on the commute home from work. One of the moms of the kids I teach pays me in Klono pins. I've started -----ing a lot. In a scientific sense I should be emitting pheromones like crazy and attracting male mates. Science also said the sun revolved around Earth, once, and only fools do the same thing over and over and expect new results. Did science even say that? I ask because you would know.

15. Del and Tom got a dog together, the final step before the final step, a Border Collie named Deborah who sleeps all the time. Deborah, I suspected, had the hots for the next-door dog, a neutered Rottweiler who, as such, didn't care about Deborah's tendency to hump Tom's leg while staring in

his direction. I brought it up one day to Del when we were putting together a jigsaw puzzle for her living room. I said, "Isn't it sad? About Deborah?" And Del said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Being in love with someone who doesn't even care? Someone who can't even care?" Del bent a piece of the puzzle absentmindedly. "Maybe I'm just projecting," I said, "but seeing her hump Tom's leg while she stares at that dog just breaks my heart every time." Del stared some more and then burst out laughing. She said, "You crazy ----, Deborah's not a ----, he's a boy!" "You have a sick sense of humor naming a boy dog Deborah," I said. Del laughed at me. She tried to put the piece in the puzzle but it was too bent to fit.

LOVE ME LIKE IN THE COMICS

Their relationship was like a
Tijuana bible,
pressed together by peddled staples—
small squares
of 1930s big-chested one-liners
in red and black ink,
printed cheaply
with a pornographic Popeye
nestled naughty against some Olive Oyl
in an obscene setting
like a barbershop
or the office copy machine:
how original.

Except he looked a bit more like Jeff
without the Mutt,
and she, like Blondie
with a bit more love on her handles,
so it was odd
but it worked,
because when they spoke
the dialogue balloons
were shaped like full moons
inside the boxed narratives—
keeping them contained

with enough room
to you-mknow
how it ends.

They expressed themselves
in short sentences,
pick-up lines,
and up-the-skirt grabs—
their anger came out in perfect ringlets.
She had exactly
four emotions with her lips and hips—
six, if she was feeling sassy.
It was the only reason
they stayed together, you know.
Well, that
and her smarts.

He said,
“love me like they do in the comics, sweetheart,”
and she did.

BUYING CEREAL

At the party, there was
a roach in one of the bedrooms
and two of my friends made out
on the stoop; it was humid
but not terribly so. Today, I
have a crush on a boy who
works in a coffee shop. I don't
know him, and would prefer not to,
met a dog at a barbecue and loved her,
didn't tell anyone. I've never had
a sex dream that wasn't also a
nightmare, or else the sex didn't
happen and sometimes, standing naked
in my room, I think I have testicular cancer
and will be a eunuch. I write my landlord
checks, even though there
was a roach at the party, have a
paper towel dispenser made out of
white marble that I inherited from
my grandmother who died
very terribly and in a lot of pain.
Sometimes, when I inhale, my ribcage

cracks like my knuckles do and I
find it comforting. Other times I don't.
These times I don't say,
I love you back; I hang up instead.



THE GATES OF HEAVEN ON ADLY STREET

For the first time this Ramadan, I answered the call to prayer. Shoulder-to-shoulder, we marched down the boulevards of downtown Cairo toward the thousand minarets sprouting from the sprawling urban landscape. My fellows, weakened by the day's fast, removed their shoes and unfurled their prayer rugs, but I headed for the ad hoc military installation that separates Muslim Cairo from the *ma'abad al yehudi*, a façade of the city's diverse past.

The dozen or so Egyptian soldiers dutifully guarding the Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue on Adly Street shield it from a Cairo that has transformed unrecognizably in the last 60 years. Once a mainstay of Egypt's rich cultural milieu, the synagogue now requires a military detail. As the sun ducked behind Cairo's airborne array of kitschy neon distractions, a security guard leafed through my passport and carried out a perfunctory background check before pointing me in the direction of the main sanctuary. I followed the trickle of worshippers into the quiet synagogue, dusted off for Rosh Hashanah and witness to the demise of a community.

The service was attended by a farrago of unlikely supplicants. The women's section had been relocated from the sanctuary and was now across the aisle from the men, still divided in a nod to the community's traditional past. The women may also have chosen to sit separately because they are the solitary remainder of a community that once stood 100,000 strong, the dangling link of a 2,000-year-old chain. The seating arrangement may not be as much about gender as it is about territory. While the Talmudic tractates mandate a quorum of men be present for the service, the Jews of Cairo have been an all-girls club for quite some time. The gentlemen who sat at my elbows on the benches in the synagogue's cavernous space, were, like me, just

passing through. Even the rabbi and cantor who would lead the service had been imported from France by special request.

As we settled in our seats, I was awkwardly aware of the dissonance of our presence on this island of apostasy at the pulsing heart of the land of the Crescent Moon. Dusting off a stack of shabby prayer books that had been excavated from a long-forgotten corner of the synagogue basement, the rabbi requested that I pass them around. He, like the delicately bound volumes, had long since started to show his age. I was left with the straggler, the threadbare tome at the bottom of the already pathetic stack. Opening the volume bound in faded red leather, I scanned the printer's page looking for any hint of its origin. The prayer book was issued in 1893 and embossed with the name A. S. Acher. Nights later, in the type of indiscriminate search for which Google must have always been intended, I traced the prayer book to one Abramino Samuel Acher, one of the once numerous young Jewish Cairene entrepreneurs. I fleetingly felt as though I had reincarnated this long forgotten name, animated it like an Egyptian golem.

The cantor began to chant the afternoon prayer, and it became painfully apparent that most of the prayer books, as well as their obscure owners, would remain inanimate this year. For the most part, the men sat with their books unopened. They gathered around the synagogue's elevated altar; the prayer had become an elegy. And the death of this community could not have been more perceptible than upon the opening of the ark. The cord that must have detached from the curtain years ago, the gentleman sweating over the honor of opening the ark containing the Torah scrolls attempted to manhandle the curtain out of the way; apparently, the curtain had learned the virtues of obstinacy from its congregation. The rabbi galumphed up the ramp, although the ark proved impervious even to his awkwardly audible French maledictions. Finally, they managed to scrunch most of the curtain to one side and heaved open the ark's fortified doors. The flock of ornate scrolls collecting

dust in the fluorescent light of this once venerable sanctuary sat perched upright, ruefully outnumbering those of us congregants who could read them.

The prayers came to a close as unremarkably as they had commenced. I was one of the few people who knew which way to hold the prayer book. The farce of a service seemed oddly muffled, like the sounds had crossed decades to reach us. The cantor paraded the old traditions through the vaulted hall while the elderly women and assorted American tourists sat and watched, sometimes vaguely recalling a tune and humming along. But mostly they watched.

After the service, a reception was held in Shaar Hashamayim's basement, once a storage facility, now the grand banquet hall. I spoke to the community's terminal members, those who would witness the last phase of the inevitable transformation from synagogue to mausoleum. They seemed aware of the demise of Cairene Jewish life, acknowledging that they had made a choice to stay while others had fled. There was a resounding pride in their Egyptian identities, although none had truly reconciled their participation in a society that had done nothing short of forcing thousands of their brethren into exile. Their paradoxical identity, like Shaar Hashamayim itself, seemed to exist not in the Cairo of today, but in an idealized monochrome history. The spectacle of once-beautiful women snacking on *mezze* and schmoozing in French evoked a lost era of cosmopolitan Cairo of the 1940s and '50s. These shuffling statues continue their lives as though nothing has changed, although some of them had brought along their daughters clad in the Muslim headscarf. They unabashedly informed me that they had married Muslim men simply because no male Jews remained.

As I gathered my things, preparing for my long walk home, the Egyptian woman with whom I had been chatting for much of the evening pronounced with a sense of morbid finality, "We are the last, the last of the Mohicans." Although a striking comparison, the final Jews of Egypt bear

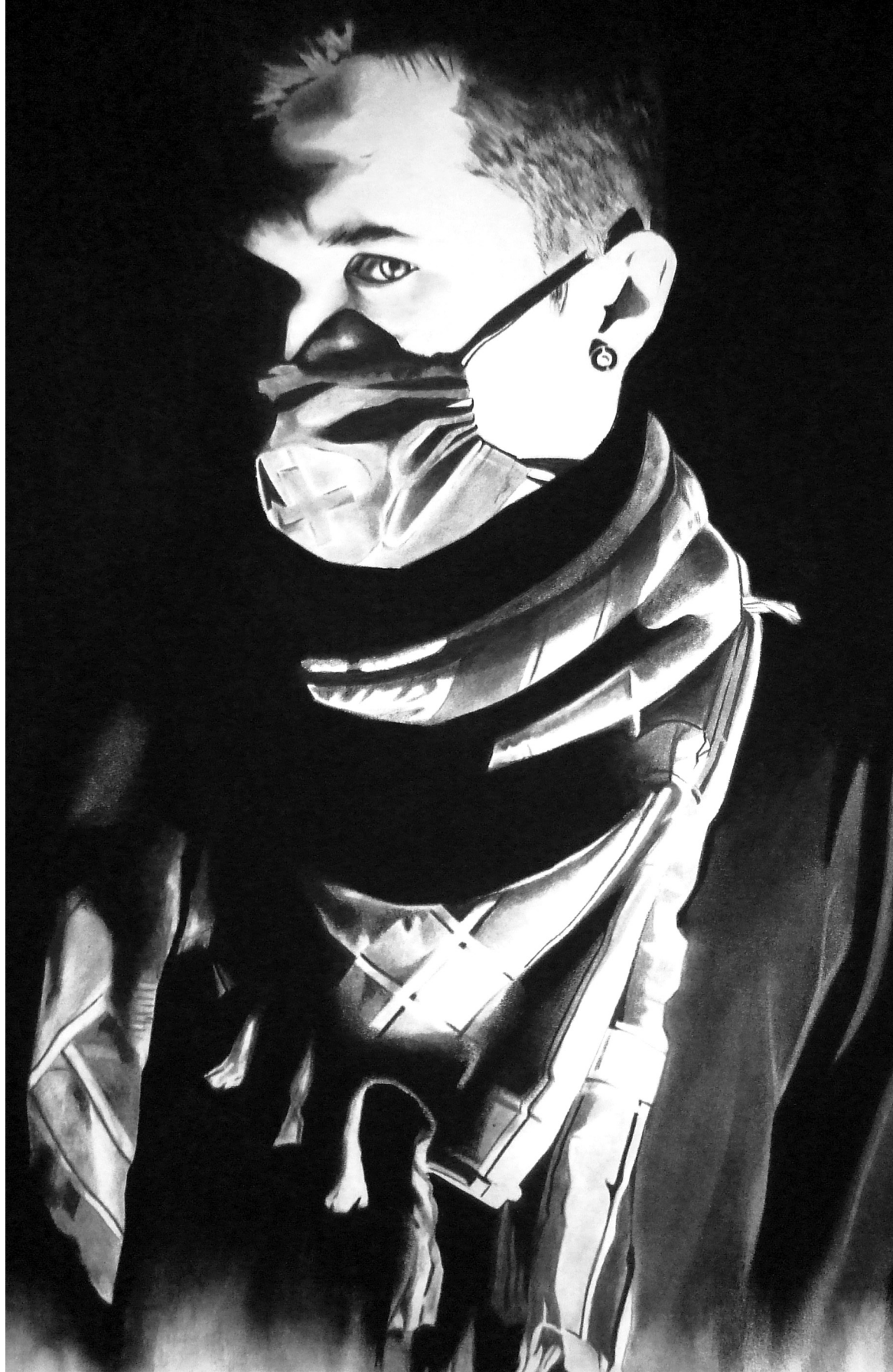
little resemblance to James Fenimore Cooper's Mohicans, or the Mohicans' Mohicans, or Mohicans of any kind who fell, fighting, for the continuity of their vanishing people. These Jews instead evoke the biblical image of Pharaoh pursuing the Children of Israel as they escape Egyptian bondage. The story is told that God commanded the waves of the Red Sea to heave Pharaoh onto the dry bank as his grand army vanished among the reeds. God forced him to watch as his army crumbled under the weight of destiny. These last Jews of Egypt, like the ancient pharaoh whose remains lay steps from Shaar Hashamayim, exist now to bear witness to what once was. Like Pharaoh, they harden their hearts and, in doing so, they modernize the tragedies of Jewish history. For they, "with the usual blindness of ambition, had interpreted these mighty destinies of themselves, and could not be brought even by disasters to believe the truth."¹ But the irony is lost on them.

After removing my yarmulke and with it every outward expression of my Jewish identity, I walked out of the synagogue's back entrance into the present. I attempted to force my way through streets congested with people celebrating the last days of Ramadan, their observance leaving no space for obscure traditions of the past. This year, the Jews of Egypt may not be inscribed in the Book of Life, for Shaar Hashamayim, like Heaven itself, is sometimes closed for prayers.

¹ Tacitus's *Histories*, 5.13







DOG

“Mary, I feel terrible.” Mary was reading a fashion magazine. She did not hear me. She usually didn’t, but that hardly stopped me from moving in with her. Neither did her utter ignorance of my existence stop me from getting down on one knee and proposing to her in a very expensive and popular Asian-fusion bistro. “Pass the soy sauce, please,” she said. “Did you drop something?” she asked when she realized I was kneeling on the floor and no longer sitting directly across from her. “Oh. All right,” she replied.

Mary is a bad person and I am a weak one. Together, we are perfect for one another, because no other woman can stand my oversensitive mawkish bullshit and no other man will tolerate her disregard for life, human or otherwise, and her relentless self-centeredness. She really is awful. She is beautiful, but in a wholly artificial and uninteresting way. The kind of woman you see on the street and turn your head to look at, but know you should not bother to become involved with because in your heart you know you could do or already have done better. She often wears black. Her skin is a soft and luminous white. Her eyes are brown but look black. She usually wears sunglasses anyway.

“Mary.”

“Mary.”

Repetition is sometimes effective. Not always.

“Mary.”

I am desperate for attention.

“Mary.”

“Mary. Mary.”

“. . . Yes, dear.” Her reply is a statement, as if I had asked a question

of her. As if there would ever be anything for which I could trust her for help. She is essentially useless. She has no job, nor any need for one. An undisclosed out-of-court settlement brought her formerly unspectacular middle-class family up to an absurd level of wealth, wealth that only continues to grow, thanks to a team of anonymous, well-paid Wall Street-types. She was eleven when all of that money changed hands, from the estate of a disgraced American pop star to the bank accounts of a mother turned into a disfigured vegetable when she smashed through the windshield, a father made paraplegic after the frame of the driver-side door twisted and sliced into him, and Mary's misguided but well-intentioned aunt and uncle, her father's brother and his wife, who were both saying how thrilled they were with their high-quality steak dinners when their tibias and ulnas and radii were snapped by the power of the collision. Aunt Marie and Uncle James felt that since Mary's parents were no longer able to truly care for her, they were obligated to step in and take care of their only niece. Unfortunately, their parenting skills were rather dull, and they fully believed that many, if not all, of Mary's adolescent problems could be solved by money. All four of those people have been dead for some time, though I'm quite sure that their deaths had no impact on Mary's well-being. Her financials, however, saw an incredible boost.

In a moment of intense, unprecedented, and never-to-be-repeated candor towards the end of one of our first dates, Mary drunkenly told me that she gave her first blowjob shortly after her thirteenth birthday to a man nearly twice her age, and that she regretted this, along with the majority of her teenaged drug use and some other sexual exploits. I then drunkenly confessed to her that I did not receive my first blowjob until I was twenty-one, and that I was pretty sure the woman regretted it because she would never take another one of my calls.

When I met Mary, I lived in a three-room apartment in the Lower East Side with five other men. I owned almost nothing and had just been fired from

my job at the local branch of the library for replying to a book request from a mother and her toddler son with a succinct “Fuck off.” It was as if a circuit tripped in my brain, shutting off all power to my overactive politeness center. I had issues with anger as a boy, but had long since learned to keep those bursts suppressed. I thought they were gone forever. I was frightened by their reemergence. I spent my unemployed days trying to leave them behind again, drinking tea and breathing deeply and sitting still. I figured spending more time with this attractive woman, having something new to latch on to, would feel good.

Life with Mary has never felt good, but at least it moves forward.

“Yes, dear,” she tells me.

“I feel terrible. Really, very ill.”

“I just cleaned the kitchen.”

I doubted this. She hadn’t moved much today. “It looks very nice. I think I’m very sick.”

“You’re probably all right.”

“Should I go to the hospital?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh.”

“Have you checked the medicine cabinet? There might be some stomach stuff in there.”

“No, I’ll check now.”

“Can you get my lipstick out of there, too? I think you smudged it earlier.”

I have not touched Mary’s lips all day. No problem, honey.” I walk toward the bathroom in the back of the Upper West Side abode. I asked her after we got engaged if she wouldn’t mind getting rid of this apartment soon so we could find a new one, one that would be new and ours. She heard me say that the first time.

“Stop it, JUST STOP IT, alright?” She only rarely raises her voice. Threatening her possessions will elicit such behavior.

“Okay, okay! Stop what?”

“I just feel so trapped when you talk like that. Like you’re trying to hold me down. And that hurts.”

“I don’t want to hurt you...”

“Oh, honey. You don’t have to.”

“Okay.” We had sex that night. We have sex a lot of nights.

I open the medicine cabinet and survey the medicines. Aspirin. A few bottles of various vitamin supplements. A dozen or so orange pill bottles prescribed to Mary for conditions that I am sure do not afflict her. I peruse the orange bottles, but just take a handful of the aspirin. I close the cabinet and turn the light off before remembering that I need to bring lipstick back to Mary. I open it again. There is not a single lipstick in there, but rather twenty or thirty. Several neatly placed rows of them, all different shades of red and purple and black and brown, even a few gaudy blues and greens hidden in the back row. I hover in front of the open door for five minutes, staring at the small black tubes. I want to destroy them all. Every one of them, one at a time. Her lips do not deserve to be bright, smooth, colorful, attractive. She does not deserve those lips. They are the lips of a good person. A wonderful person. A caring, smart, warm person. Mary should have small lips, disgusting dry bird lips not worth the effort it would take to steal a great kiss from them. I remove the cap from a tube of Blazing Burgundy and smear the product over my lips. When my lips are colored in, I run it over my face. I color the palms and back of my hands and laugh as I imitate Jesus Christ, hung up on a cross. I scribble an unreadable message on the bathroom mirror before walking out of the bathroom, past Mary, and into our bedroom, our cold and beige meaningless mess of a bedroom, where I carefully pull off my clothes and try on some of hers.

This night is the first that I ever wear women's clothing.

I pass out at some point and I have a dream that I'm chipping away at the rocks on the side of a mountain, digging for something. After only a few swings of the hammer, I pull out polished chunks of amethyst and agate. I examine them in my hands and then eat them both in one gulp. When I wake up in the morning I'm on the bedroom floor, half under the bed that Mary and I share. My bare legs stick out. A shiny black dress with a frilly, lacy bottom covers me from the collarbone to midway down my thighs. I push myself out from under the dark wooden bed frame. I survey the scene from the floor. Lipstick smears all over the carpet hidden by the bed, but the rest of the floor seems clean, save for a few scattered articles of clothing. I sit up on my knees and peek over the top of the bed. Mary is lying under a sheet, the comforter kicked to the foot of the bed. Her hair is a mess, her makeup rubbed off against the pillow. I pull the sheet down to see what she's wearing, but she's nude. I leave her uncovered and make my way into the kitchen to make coffee. I run my hands under warm water in the sink and scrub roughly and watch the dark red pigments wash away down the drain.

While the coffee brews, I go to the bathroom, curious about the night's exploits. I fully remember them, but wonder what the aftermath looks like. In the bathroom there is nothing. No evidence of my evening, my exploration, my time as Christ. The mirror is perfectly clear and I'm ashamed that I can see myself with no impediment. I open the medicine cabinet. The lipsticks are still neatly lined up. Blazing Burgundy sits in the far left of the front row. Mocking me. Furious that my masterpiece would be so brazenly erased before the world could see, I march back through the apartment and into the bedroom, where I stand above the bed and don't speak but stare at Mary's long back, the curves of her shoulder blades at their perch atop her spine, the subtle rise of her hip accentuated by the position in which she lies, one leg over the other.

I take off my dress and lie down next to her. I kiss the back of Mary's

neck and leave a faint red mark that I do not wipe away. We sleep until noon and the coffee burns.

Dinner is never as awkward as the rest of the time we spend together. We both like to eat. I am a vegetarian and Mary teases me and calls me names because of it, but I let it go without argument because I feel like when we have food in our mouths all of the pressure to do everything else that other couples do—converse, share authentic feelings like fear or enthusiasm, make eye contact—is wiped away. It's all erased simply because we both love a good meal. Flavors combining to excite the taste buds, stimulate the mind. Excitement and stimulation are not Mary's strong points, so when we eat together, it's almost as if maybe we care. Maybe not about anything in particular but, for the time it takes to eat, it at least seems possible. Mary and I briefly seem human. It doesn't last long. Never as long as I'd like, at least. I live for the filler moments, though. The fruitless days or minutes tucked in between the crushing dissatisfaction of the important ones.

"How's your duck?" I ask her.

"The best I've ever had. Your ravioli?" she asks. I watch her full lips, painted tonight with Resilient Ruby and almost smiling, sound out the word "ravioli." A particular inflection on the stressed syllable, the third syllable, normally the primary stressed syllable in the word, takes on some extra heft, a little more meaning that really sets it apart. The final syllable sees a little extra action, as well, when the pitch of her voice raises just slightly as the sound slips out from above her tongue. Ra-vee-OH-LEE? A simple question: my heart flutters.

"It's all right. I like it."

Moments of positivity are always fleeting with us. Briefly, long ago, they lasted—or at least could sustain themselves for more than an hour at a time. Our first night was the most exciting. It started with us apart. I was at a gay club in the East Village, somewhere near Houston Street, a dank, long

room with a bar dropped right in the center, with sad, half-naked men feigning interest in overworked and horny patrons as crisp currency was shoved into their underwear. My roommate Cris had convinced me to go out with him and his friends as “moral support” after a boyfriend dumped him. He added that I was in need of “a good time” anyway, having been fired only a week before. I didn’t have the guts to tell him that it would actually be quite unpleasant for me. “This just isn’t my thing,” I wanted to shout. “I’m not so sure I’m comfortable with the way you live,” I scream in my daydream.

The couch in back by the dance floor was nice. Someone, a friend, I guess, had recently handed me a strong rum drink. It reeked of alcohol, of sweetness and want. I drank it and I reeked, too. The entire ordeal reminded me that I had not been with a woman in months. I sat for a while, kept drinking, pretending to smile, pretending to enjoy myself despite being wholly and irreversibly miserable and tame and scared. A woman sat down next to me. The room was dark, lit only by a video projector hanging from the ceiling and spinning lights situated in every corner, but I could see how plain she was. Not unattractive, but not striking. No curve to her hips. Large teeth. Flat, shoulder-length golden-blond hair. Dark blouse and blue jeans and patent leather boots.

“HAVING A GOOD TIME?” Every word is shouted.

“SURE.” She pauses, as if she wasn’t expecting me to be so succinct.

“I’M ELAINE.”

“AARON. PLEASED TO MEET YOU.”

“DO YOU COME HERE OFTEN?” She’s testing the waters of sexual orientation. I want to vomit. I confirm her suspicions, tell her what she needs to hear.

“NOT REALLY. I’M STRAIGHT. I CAME WITH MY ROOMMATE AND HIS FRIENDS. MORAL SUPPORT.”

“WOW! THAT’S REALLY NICE OF YOU. I’M HERE WITH MY FRIENDS,

TOO.” She doesn’t break her attempt at eye contact as she lamely waves her left arm at three men who are not paying attention to her. Elaine was absorbed in a need for attention that I couldn’t give her, and my heart sank a little.

We make doomed small talk. There is no mystery. Little is accomplished. “YOU’RE SO INTERESTING.” It is torturous.

“I NEED TO FIND MY FRIENDS,” I tell her, not just as an excuse to escape. I can’t see anyone I know. Instead I only see the elaborate computer-generated animation of a single cell becoming two. Over and over and over again, one splits itself into two. Only the colors change. Brilliant.

“YOU CAN JUST HANG WITH US, IF YOU WANT.”

“I’M SORRY”—liar—“I REALLY NEED TO FIND THEM. IT WAS NICE TO MEET YOU. I HOPE YOU HAVE A GOOD NIGHT.” That part was true, mostly. A still-unchecked angry small part, though, wanted her night to be ruined by my departure, wanted her to desperately wonder who I was and why I was so enigmatic. Surely, my heart had been broken. Surely, she could have helped. Alas.

I pushed my way past the bar to the exit, through the crowd of men enthralled by bored dancers in miniscule cowboy and policeman outfits. I tripped over the threshold and landed on my knees at Mary’s feet.

“Careful,” was all the assistance she had to offer. Realistically, it was probably all I needed.

She was standing next to Cris. “Aaron, Mary. Mary, Aaron. C’mon, get up, we’re going to Justin’s apartment over on B and 3rd.” My obsession with Mary Gordon began at that moment, as I watched her hips sway slowly, from left to right to left to right to left to right ad infinitum, as she turned and walked away from me while I sat, dumbstruck, on a filthy New York city sidewalk. I followed. I stumbled as I made it to my feet but caught up, only a few steps behind Mary, only a few steps from safety and from protection.

From love. I did not know how to talk to Mary. I did not know how to do anything. Her legs looked amazing in black stockings.

At Justin's on B and 3rd I whispered to Cris, "Please make her talk to me." He made sure she had a new drink at least every fifteen minutes. He was resourceful like that. I sat in a corner. Another nice couch. After an hour Mary sat down next to me because she needed a place to sit. She had forgotten my name but I did not care. We talked for another hour, discovering excellent compatibility with regard to the subjects of food, sex, and interior design. We went home, to her apartment. While she was preparing drinks in the kitchen, she stopped to kiss me and her lips were soft and they stained mine red.

We talked and ate and had sex all night. I want to believe that it felt natural, but I don't completely remember. Over a few weeks she slowly warmed to me. I wanted the connection and she allowed it. She adopted me like an ugly lost mutt. I never wonder what my life would be like if I had stayed with Elaine.

Mary and I fuck one night late in summer and after she falls asleep I remember that we must be nearing our anniversary and I remember that this anniversary will commemorate three years together. Her birthday is also nearing, but I am struggling to remember her age. Not thirty. Older than twenty-five, though.

It probably doesn't matter. When the nukes go off and we're all obliterated and pulverized into shadows, it'll be just Mary and the cockroaches, no matter what her age is. For as long as she's told me that she loves me, making my heart melt every time, I've been looking for her weakness. Weaknesses. Anything to prove her humanity beyond a single lapse in judgment resulting in revelations regarding a sordid sexual past. I wonder if humanity is her weakness, if comprehending why others might be disturbed by or really fucking irritated with her behavior is what breaks her down from the inside out.

She does not stir as I swing my legs over the right side of the bed and search with my feet for the slippers that are supposed to be there. They are gone. I realize that walking around nude with only slippers on my feet would look silly. I reach into Mary's dresser and pull out a pair of small silky red panties. They are unbelievably smooth in my hands. I don't put them on, though. I feel like a disgusting mess and I cry a little, drop her underwear on the ground, get back into bed, wipe my face on the pillow. Mary never moves and I'm thinking, What if she stops breathing?

Forty-five minutes later I can't sleep and I'm wearing her underwear as I pull a long serrated bread knife from a wooden block that holds about a dozen other knives. I wander the whole apartment with the knife in my hand, amused by the dull lights reflected off its unpolished surface. I walk into the bathroom. As soon as I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I break into raucous laughter. I lay the knife down on a shelf in the medicine cabinet, pushing make-up and pills and toothpaste and never-used containers of floss into the sink to make room. I pull the underwear off, feeling a bit defeated as I hold it in my hands, though why, I cannot say.

After I fall asleep I have a very brief dream about swimming in the ocean and tasting saltwater and the next morning the bathroom is clean again, the knife replaced in the block of knives. We may be near our anniversary but I still don't know when it is.

I can't say for sure if I have a problem that I ought to be concerned about, but I do have an urge to talk to someone about this. After so long together, I understand that talking to Mary would only result in me becoming overwhelmed by her indifference, so I tell myself I might as well not bother. By the time I make it home from work, though, I decide that I will do it because I have no one else besides my mother, who hates me. Seven months ago, when I last spoke to my mother, she reminded me that I'm a Failure, and called me a Pussy and a whiny, indecisive Loser wholly incapable of achieving any level

of Success, personal or professional. While I don't necessarily disagree, I was distressed and hurt by her bluntness, and have avoided contact since.

When I walk through the door I'm ready to scream MARY, I WEAR YOUR UNDERWEAR SOME NIGHTS AND I FEEL GREAT IN THEM but for the first time in thirteen weeks her sprawled form is not lying on the couch to greet me. The last time, she was out at a dinner with "old friends," to which I was not invited. At least she had told me ahead of time. I was given no warning this evening. Mary has disappeared. There is a note on the bed. A curious place to leave a note, as I'm more prone to finding food in the kitchen and sitting on the couch before making my way to the bedroom. Unless she was expecting me to search for her. But to assume that she might have expectations would imply some measure of forethought. Would she ever expect anything at all? I snatch the note off the bed, turn it over immediately. The comforter ruffles and I smooth it out. I'm warm and red-faced before I even read it. I try to predict its contents and feel my stomach turn. I put it back on the bed, face down, and stare at the wall.

I resign myself to the likelihood that this weird dream has come to an end. This wretched goddess with her perfect fucking shoulder blades and bony hips and pale white feet has rejected me, finally. No discussion was necessary. When it was done, it was done. She knew. I consider briefly that perhaps she just left a note about going to a bar or some restaurant with "old friends" but let it drift away in favor of this more terrifying prospect. I know I can put a quick stop to this but I'm so fucking sick with worry that I feel kind of alive. A hard lump of anxiety is building in my chest, as if I'm on the verge of an intense, perhaps even painful, panic attack, and why would I let that go now, just as the getting is good? Not being with Mary might be the best thing for me, realistically, but I'm not ready to face that reality. In that world my anxieties are focused on taking care of myself and making friends and meeting women and trying to talk to them and trying not to fall in love and wanting to

get out of bed every day. It's all changing all the time. I much prefer this one, wherein life is consistent. The disappointment, the fine meals, the aching. It's all there all the time. Reliable.

I can't afford to lose that now.

I leave the letter on the bed and walk to the kitchen to make dinner. I find the news on the television, turn up the volume real loud and I open a bottle of red wine and pour it into a tall glass, fill it up all the way. The more physical and mental distractions I can fabricate, the longer I can go without thinking about her note. Maybe I'll even be drunk enough that I can tear it up.

Culinary commands and snippets of the 10 o'clock news pound like drums in my head, overload my senses, push my mind over the edge.

readitreaditreaditreaditreadit turn on burners heat pans add oil
 boil noodles turn heat down readitreaditreaditreaditreaditreaditreaditrea
 ditreadit BUS CRASH IN QUEENS THIS readitreaditreaditreaditreaditread
 itreadit chop vegetables careful not to cut my fingers pay close attention
 to every rise and fall of the knife as if it is not my own right hand in control
 readitreaditreaditreaditreadit BLAZE CLAIMED THE LIVES OF THREE
 readitreaditreadit throw them in pan listen to popping hissing sizzle feel
 content readit

As I empty the tall glass I can breathe again and the bone-crushing suspense has been whittled down to nothing and it doesn't fucking matter anymore what Mary has to say to me. My mouth is dry and my teeth are stained that deep reddish-purple color that red wine can't help but leave behind and my throat burns as I pour a second full glass, just about emptying the bottle. I sip from it and let my eyes glaze over with the haze of an impending stupor. I remember the mushrooms and onions and garlic and broccoli sautéing in a large, flat pan. They have been reduced to mere slivers of their original chopped selves. I add in a serving of fake meat, a step in the process often vocally criticized by my beloved. "WELL FUCK YOU ANYWAY,"

I yell. I drink the last drop of my wine from the glass, suck the rest from the bottle, both of which I drop into the sink while reaching above it for a second bottle of red wine. I struggle with the cork. Some bits of it flake off into the drink. I admit defeat, temporarily, to drain the pasta. The steam rises and warms my face and hands with moisture. Warm and simple satisfaction. I return my attention to the wine, improvise a way to jimmy the cork from within the neck, take a deep slug straight from the bottle. It tastes like dirt.

I pick at the food as I arrange it on a large white dinner plate. I sit, plate in my lap, in front of the television, which remains at maximum volume. I want to enjoy my food but am becoming agitated by the anchors' voices so I mute the program. I pick up some pasta and broccoli with my fork, put it in my mouth, savor the blandness, wash it down with more wine. Sirens scream down below on the street. Fire truck? Ambulance? Police cruiser? What's the rush, I wonder. The shrill, hollow tones roll in so clearly through the open windows that I briefly fear they've taken up residence right outside, but even before that fantasy leaves me, the screams are long gone down Columbus Avenue. I put the plate down on the coffee table and stare at my feet. I realize that they're freezing so I take another hit from the wine bottle. I stand up and go into the bedroom to find socks. Mary's note to me lies on the bed, forgotten, the paper crinkled slightly with my frustration. I tell myself that I am above these games and better than Mary and her fucking notes and I read it.

Aaron

I love you.

Mary

I run to the bathroom and spew purple vomit into the sink. I sit down on the floor outside of the bathroom and read it over and over and over again

until I pass out. For the first time ever, I dream about Mary, a complicated insane drunken dream that I am watching from the outside despite being a part of it. They are dancing, left hands clasped and right hands on hips and shoulders, in an empty room the size of Aaron's old apartment, which is not quite big enough to stand comfortably in, let alone dance. Slowly their dance becomes more sex-obsessed and abusive, groping, scratching, punching, and Aaron thinks he can hear Mary's thoughts and they sound like static coming in over a radio. Their clasped hands start bleeding as if pierced through the palms. He laughs. Then they fall into a bed. The sheets are a dark red-black, like dried blood. Aaron rustles, sits up, stretches. Mary turns over and is wearing a horrifying rubber wolf mask and cute pink rabbit ears, one of which is bent over at an angle. They stare at each other. He doesn't know if she can see him through the mask but he looks deep into its wide yellow eyes, which, in turn, gaze into his light brown irises. It feels like they're staring at each other for hours. All he can hear is static. He puts his bloodied hands around her neck, one at a time, and then squeezes, hard. They're still staring at each other as Mary starts screaming for more. "Yesyesyesyesyesyesyes MORE PLEASE MOREMOREMORE," she shouts, muffled by the rubber in her mouth and the hands around her tender neck. She orgasms, he thinks, and I wake up in the hallway between the bedroom and bathroom. I'm confused but I remember quickly what happened the night before, recollecting the events while wondering vainly if my dreams aren't too obvious.

A blurred period of time passes in which I enjoy myself, relishing Mary's prolonged and otherwise unexplained absence. I cook, and I drink, and I feel my chest tense and burst every time I think I hear the door lock turn over, but I've always imagined it. I don't work and I spend a large portion of each day wearing some of Mary's clothing. I make my way through most of her underwear and many dresses and quite a few of her fancier gowns. Although none of it fits me quite right, I feel good, and soft. Close to her while gaining

some kind of indefinable leverage. Maybe this is what she feels. Some silky black garment sets me over the edge and I know it's time to make a decision. Over the course of a few hours spent drinking, crying, sleeping, and changing clothes I conclude that I must break off my engagement to Mary and move out. There will be no discussion with her for or against this. If she comes home, it will happen. I won't care what she has to say. I am strong and can do better than her nonsense and I think more highly of myself than I do of her useless and misinformed opinion. If she comes home, it has to happen. She will see that I am strong.

I hide some of her clothing in with mine so that I'll still have some to wear after I leave.

I leave to buy groceries one morning. It is a clear day, almost autumn, I guess. I walk a while and I am gone longer than I intend to be. When I return to the apartment, the door is open a few inches. I feel the blood drain from my face and my heart goes into overtime. Resting against the couch are Mary's purse, shoes and a suitcase that I didn't know she had taken when she had left. I hang my head as I crawl to the bedroom, leaning against the wall along the way. Her clothes sit in a pile on the floor. She is drunk, or maybe high on some of her medication. She sees me come in and opens her arms wide. The white satin sheet slips off her torso, revealing her lily-white breasts. Her ribs protrude slightly. "Mary," I squeak. She says nothing. I suppose she probably has nothing to say. I shuffle closer to the bed and she cranes her neck up, like an insignificant baby bird waiting for its mother to regurgitate a meal down its throat, and sticks out her lips, dark with Blazing Burgundy. I kiss her gently and she giggles and rolls around under the sheets. I stare at her for a few minutes through bleary eyes before I take off my clothes and lie down at her feet.







YOU ARE THE SPACE
IN BETWEEN DAYS

This leaves me with no time

I love once and hard
branching too far

then

like a lesion

I weep

having been torn like
your easily fallible philosophies

our

fallible philosophies

that I remember forming with burns and tongues
back when our sleep was rude

and the arch of the sun was like a womb

MARRIAGE

I

Table

or on second thought hammer

is what he said when I asked him
to choose one noun for our
relationship.

Drip

was his verb.

II

The truth is the truth

What a silly construction.

Tautology, they taught me
in a logic class, is a statement
which uses itself as its own proof.

I love you because I do.

The error is in the stasis, the sentence
begins and ends in the same place.

A house burning up instead of down.

Floor boards on fire, polished and gleaming.

A finished attic one arsonist away.

To say that logic is a thing on fire,
is the neighbor's cat on fire, lit
by the neighbor's kid who will go
to juvi, get out, stalk women.
Breathe heavily in their doorways.

Enough. Strong coffee in a big carafe.
Red wine in the evenings. The paper says
it's good for you.

When I was five I planted a tree
behind our deck. It was taller
than the house by the time
the bank foreclosed on us.

III

The stitching on the bottom
of my wallet has come undone
and the crotch tore out of
my second-favorite pair of
shorts the other day while
I was at work.

The shorts were cheap, but the wallet
was Gucci. I'm not bragging,
it was a gift. I'm bragging because
someone thought I was worth a gift
so expensive. I like the extra space
in my sock drawer because I
don't wear underwear so I
can keep books there instead.

If only time would do something else,
instead of pile up underneath me
like mud. Or compost, that
will become mud. Someone's bones
deep down in it, anonymous and clean.

I make decent stir-fry,

order things off the Internet.
I could be anyone. Children. Love handles.
Big grill in the back yard. Pot hidden
in the bedside table.

IV

There are good pens and
bad pens for the things
I want to write to you.
You have to make a judgment call.

This one is good for oak,
teeth, effervescent, solid joy,
margarita, push pin, day lilies,
and ice fishing. Asparagus too.

V

You're going to say (you the reader)
that this is a bad restaurant for
fish, I'm going to ask why,
and you'll say you got sick once.
I'll say that doesn't mean I will,
the audience (my lover) will applaud.
It will be the end of the show,
but the lights will stay on,
the curtain will stay up.

Everyone will breathe
heavily as the waiter
brings out the salmon.
Miso coated.



SHOW ME A GLIMPSE

Photographed in Pune, Maharashtra, India. This series is inspired by a newspaper article below:

A ban on women covering their faces while driving motorbikes has irked several women's organizations in the city. Satyapal Singh, who took charge of the City Police Commissioner last week, has disapproved women covering their faces while driving. The contention of Singh is that terrorists can take advantage of the practice to disguise themselves. Pune, which is reportedly has the maximum number of two wheelers on the roads, is listed among the most polluted cities in the country. The controversy also hit the blogosphere with girls on blogs and social networks such as Orkut and Facebook protesting the ban. – *Times of India* 27 July 2008

An online forum Fun Enclave stated this:

Twenty-two-year-old engineering student Chaitra Date always wears a scarf to college to protect herself from city pollution. "This is ridiculous. Why are they banning scarves? We need to protect our hair and face from pollution. Even helmets hide faces, but they are compulsory. Why don't they ban helmets?" Chaitra asks.

"Terrorism is on the rise and the police want to be stricter and increase security, so it's ok," says another student Anuradha Joshi.

"Pune has about 3.5 million women who use two-wheelers and most wear such protective scarves. It remains to be seen whether they abide by the orders of the police chief." – blogger "Zeus King of Gods" 1 Aug 2008

On the other hand, blogger 'Amit Paranjape' wrote in an article about "50 ways in which Pune has changed over the past 15 years":

"Even back then, Pune was the national leader as far as the beautiful collegiate crowd of the fairer sex was concerned. Back then, the teenage boys (and many, if not all men) had a great time enjoying this beauty on strategic places such as FC Road, as the crowd zoomed past on their 2 wheelers. Unfortunately today, with the invention of the 'wraparound scarf,' it feels like Pune has significantly regressed in this area! Keep aside the security debate for a moment – in the wider interest of the male population, an immediate ban should be passed on this headgear!"



India, a place with a sense of humor and a widespread nonchalance towards following rules and regulations especially on the roads, has dealt with this ban by simply ignoring it. As the heated arguments weave in and out of political content, the women continue to protect themselves from the vicious smog.

A famous pop song by Himesh Reshamia came to my mind while photographing this series. *Jhalak dikhla jaa, jhalak dikhla jaa, ek baar ajaa ajaa ajaa* – Show me a glimpse, oh show me a glimpse, just once come here, close to me. Show me a glimpse, criminal, says the police. Show me a glimpse, beautiful women, say the boys on FC Road. *Jhalak dikhla jaa* Pune.

OUR CAB

When she died, I wasn't sure
what to do.
To get out of bed,
shower,
make breakfast,
not eat it.
I never knew what to do with
my hands,
my eyes,
my heart.
Where to focus?
Where to live?
I'd shuffle, drink water
from the tap and
only get use out of
one tumbler,
her lipstick, still sticking
to the rim.
Whiskey, water and tears.

I'd sit in the back of cars,
running meters
until the driver
made me leave.
Only once did I ever speak to one,
an old Italian man

who'd lost his lady too.
His wedding band, still on,
despite his poor circulation.
He told me the hurt
would never end,
it could only change shapes.
He said the worst of it
was at night when you
lay in your bed awake into
the darkest hours; that is when
the loneliness slowly surrounds you
like a living thing.
Tomorrow, I will see her.
Tonight, I will paint her.







NOISES

It was early in the morning, but Cecile was already awake and dressed. She had put on her heels and now she was walking around on the tiled floor of the bathroom, making incredible clapping noises. The noises woke up Greg. Oh, goddamn it, he heard her say. And then: *Why won't you work?* Greg lay still beneath the soft weight of the comforter. He was weak with too little sleep, so he kept his eyes shut and stayed in bed. He listened. The bathroom was down the hall, and the door was closed so that her sounds ricocheted off ceramic and porcelain. Things resounded sharply in that small space. He heard her opening the medicine cabinet and running the shower. He heard something light and plastic drop into the sink. He imagined her in there now, tall and pale and violent, frustrated with the blunt functionality of some appliance. Maybe it was the blow dryer. He remembered, recently, Cecile coming to him with a ruined blender: the blade had been bent into a distressed clump, the glass flecked red. She had put a steak in there, t-bone and all. She'd cradled the broken thing like a football and she hadn't been embarrassed. She'd been trying out a new smoothie idea. "Why can't it cut through calcium?" she had said, pleadingly. Her curiosity was disarming. People were willing to indulge her because she was a strange, thin beauty with good hips.

By the time Greg had gotten out of bed, it was five a.m., and Cecile was in the kitchen. She was running the coffee grinder on a high setting. It whirred and made the countertop tremble. The utensils shook near the edge of the sink. A fork fell in. She also had the kettle on. The kitchen was small and Greg stood close to Cecile out of necessity.

"Honey," he said. He spoke over the noise.

Greg was 30 and a high school English teacher. He wore boxers and socks and a T-shirt, and his stomach curved smoothly outward. But Cecile had on her work uniform: a creased, light-colored top, then a skirt. It wasn't exactly regulation. Regardless, she was a vision, incongruous with the dull closeness

of the kitchen, the hanging pans. Her legs glowed whitely. They were stark and long and a little translucent, and her calves were delicately veined. Cecile's hair was dark and it fell softly onto her shoulders.

"It's temporary," she said, "but it is all that's keeping me sane."

She turned to him. The flesh around her eyes was flushed and spongy: she had been crying, and she hadn't slept. She pressed a button on the coffee grinder and the noise became louder. She wanted Greg to hold her. They were standing in the narrow space between the counter and the oven. She was taller.

"I need you," he said, speaking over the trebly grind, "to tell me what's *wrong*." Greg reached out and up, putting his hands on her shoulders. He looked into her eyes.

"My ears are ringing!" She almost screamed this.

"Explain it to me," said Greg. "Describe what you're hearing."

Cecile paused. She was searching for the phrase.

"Imagine an alarm clock, going off forever," she said.

"Darling!" said Greg.

"It woke me up," she said.

"Yes," he said. "We would normally sleep until seven."

"Like something far away, yet very, very close." There was a certain poetry in her words, but it was undeveloped, lacking. Greg recognized this. He was her critic, secretly. He was her teacher more openly. He started for the phone on the wall.

"Tinnitus," Greg said. "I'll call the doctor. I'll call the school. I'll tell them you aren't coming in. Family emergency. It's *tinnitus*, Cecile. I think that at this juncture, you should lie down."

He was slow and pedantic with her out of habit, and she understood him that way. They had fallen into a comfortable communication pattern. They had met in the teacher's lounge during lunch break, where he'd explained to her some important thematic elements of *A Catcher in the Rye*. Cecile's eyes had gone watery with astonishment; literary analysis was an utter novelty. *Analysis* was an utter novelty. She had grown up on a farm. She was child number eight. Books were the gateway to knowledge, and Greg, round and graying and boyishly proportioned, held the key. Holden *wants* to love Sally, but he's built a

wall around his heart. Greg wore owlsh glasses, which helped her understand that he was harmless. That night, they'd continued the conversation at dinner. She was the best kind of student: eager, cooperative, blindly receptive. And then, afterward, supine atop damp sheets, she'd said, But does Sally want to love Holden? Greg had found it a little obvious. But that body! He'd been powerfully spent, sedated, for the first time in a while. Cecile was the school nurse, and she kept in great shape. More often than not the boys who came in to see her weren't really suffering at all.

"Other noises drown it out," she said. But she wasn't looking at him. She was bent at the waist, unloading the dishwasher. Maybe the clanking china helped. The dishes she was putting in the cupboard were still dirty. Greg didn't say anything about it, though. He watched her effort, ineffective as it was, with certain pride. Then the water began to boil, and they both turned toward the whistling kettle, surprised. Cecile stood erect. Greg turned his head. The kettle was a small silver dome with a stubby spout. They were reflected in it, elongated and curved, a freakish pair. Cecile pointed a rigid finger at the thing.

"It sounds *just like that*," she said. She spoke accusingly. But Greg knew this to be an exaggeration. The sound coming from the kettle was shrill and complex; it was a chord. And most of all, it was too loud. Cecile was turning hysterical. He switched off the burner.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," he said. He picked up the receiver, and he lodged it between ear and shoulder and thumbed through the Yellow Pages. He had small hands. There were eight ENT specialists in the greater White Plains area. Greg chose one of the numbers on a whim. But the secretary told him: You need a referral. He wasn't sure what that meant. *I'm no good at procedure, at following rules, at being closed-minded*, he thought. He was listening to the secretary speak. *I'm good at thinking abstractly*. He hung up and then he dialed another doctor, and then another. Finally, a man named Dr. Schlesinger came on the line. Dr. Schlesinger was direct and angry, and he wanted specifics. He wished to speak with the patient herself. So Greg put the doctor on hold, and asked. But Cecile wouldn't have it. She was horrified at the prospect. She shook her head and then she smoothed out her skirt with stiff, long-fingered hands.

"I'm sorry," said Greg, after having picked up the phone again, "but the

lady is indisposed. She is in pain. Earlier, she vomited from panic.” Schlesinger snorted at the lie, and Cecile frowned. But Greg continued: “It’s true. The bottom line is, I need to schedule an appointment. This is just short of an emergency.”

There was a pause, and then Dr. Schlesinger spoke: “The earliest I have is Monday at eight. Bring her in 15 minutes prior.”

“Fine,” said Greg, “but what should we do until then?” Dr. Schlesinger told him, and then Greg hung up and related the information to Cecile.

“The doctor,” said Greg, “wants you to prop your head up on a pillow and listen to a gentle hum, such as a box fan makes. There’s one in the closet. It will help to distract you from the ringing. And Mr. Addley will understand. I swear to you he will, Cecile.”

Cecile was silent. She was resigning to something. And she was biting at her bottom lip.

“He can see you on Monday,” said Greg. “Dr. Schlesinger.”

She bit her bottom lip some more. Greg wondered if she might tear into the skin. She had expected a more immediate solution. She often expected immediacy. In this way she was childish.

“I’ll call in *for* you,” he said. “You’ll take the day off.”

He took her by the shoulders and led her to the bedroom. She moved slowly; her lanky frame slumped. She was heavy with anxiety and fatigue. Then she spoke, proposing something: what if she were to go insane, staying here alone all day, listening to the phantom ring?

“That’s silly,” said Greg, but he wasn’t sure. “I’ll phone at noon. In the meantime, try to get some rest.” Soon, she was lying down. Her head was elevated by way of a large pillow, and Greg had brought her a warm, damp washcloth. The washcloth lay on her forehead. She stared up, toward the textured paint on the ceiling. She was a beautifully slim, pallid thing, on the bed like that.

“You’re my convalescent angel,” Greg said, moving his face close to hers, breathing in the scent that rose from her cheek. But she didn’t budge. When she spoke, she kept her eyes to the ceiling.

“I can’t *stand* it,” she said. “I can’t stand for this noise to be with me

always.”

“It won’t be always, darling,” said Greg. But he didn’t know. He didn’t know and both he and Cecile were aware of his not knowing. So he brought the box fan from the closet and he switched it on to the highest setting. Its sound expanded, filling the room entirely. At which point he left.

Greg drove to work in the rain. He drove west on 287. Traffic was bad, and several times he stopped dead and craned his neck to look at the sinister sky. Big gray clouds moved with real direction and sentience and unity. They moved as an evil, nebulous herd. Greg merged onto the Taconic. There had been an accident, but soon a lane opened up and the traffic began to dissipate. He listened to a program on NPR about ant colonies, and he smirked upon understanding the irony. Worker ants strive ceaselessly toward the preservation of the colony. He wondered who the queen was, metaphorically speaking. Mr. Addley? Mr. Addley was the principal, not the queen. Greg didn’t know. Then he thought of Cecile. He thought of her lying in his bed, forlorn, weak. The image excited him. He wondered what her tinnitus sounded like, exactly. And he wondered if it was really *that* bad. But he felt guilty for wondering, so he concentrated on the road.

When Greg arrived at the school, the rain had begun to let up. Now it was only misting, a fine, white presence. He pulled into a space next to the athletic field, so that the front bumper hung over grass. He took his briefcase and he got out of the car. He saw Coach Walsh standing near the quarter-mile track, whistle in mouth. Walsh watched his students jogging on the miserable black rubber. The students moved in a large, slow group, as if for safety. Coach Walsh was a relic, a Korean War veteran, and he still had some muscle on him from basic training. His arms were lean and colorless. He had been drained of fluid. He was an efficient chauvinist, and he was 80. As Greg understood it, the school board was waiting for Coach Walsh to die.

“Felix,” said Greg. Felix was Coach Walsh’s first name. Greg had to traverse the athletic field in order to reach the main building.

“Mr. Rosenblatt,” said Coach Walsh. He let the whistle drop from his mouth. It hung on a string around his neck. He looked Greg up and down. Then he turned back to his students, who were now on the far side of the track. He

called something out, loudly. The students kept moving. Greg had time before his first class, and so he lingered.

“I wanted to ask you something,” said Greg. Greg knew what Walsh thought of him. But maybe that had changed: last week, Walsh had run into Greg and Cecile, holding hands, walking toward Greg’s car. School had been over for an hour. The campus had been empty, except for Walsh. He stayed indefinitely, out of habit, inventorying basketballs. Greg had seen surprise and respect light up in those old eyes. But maybe Walsh had forgotten. He was 80, after all. He wasn’t all there.

“I wanted to ask you about tinnitus,” said Greg. Walsh wouldn’t look at him. “Because I remember reading, somewhere, that ringing in the ears is a frequent complaint among members of the armed forces. And you being a veteran, I thought I’d ask.” Walsh was wearing shorts. The shorts were a blue, neon material. They billowed in the damp wind. The students were coming around the bend of the track now. Walsh glared into the middle distance.

“I’ve been mulling it over for a little while now, Rosenblatt,” said Walsh. His voice hadn’t aged; it was that of a younger man’s. “But I can’t figure it out. I can’t figure out how a little person like you nets a bird like Cecile.” Walsh was famously rude. At school board meetings, he cursed. He’d made the front page of a local paper once for spitting on a parent. But he was also a legend, a staple, a living mascot. And he led the Stuyvesant High School Girl’s Basketball team to victory time and again, with the ruthless, warlike coldness of a Viking.

“Maybe,” Walsh continued, “it’s that she’s new here, and didn’t know better. Is that it?”

Walsh was right: Cecile *was* new. She’d replaced the older nurse. She’d been at Stuyvesant for only a few months.

“Don’t be scared, Rosenblatt. I’m not *upset*. I’m just curious. I’m just very, very curious.”

The students were on the far side of the track again, but they had stopped, and were now standing near an orange water cooler. Walsh let them be. He gave his attention, wholly, to Greg. He was waiting for an answer.

“Some women are attracted to literacy,” he told Coach Walsh.

The coach smiled largely at this, showing big, white teeth. He possessed

the happy intensity of an athlete. Years of disciplined physical upkeep had left him dangerously, perpetually drunk on endorphins.

“Not women like that, Rosenblatt. Women like that are drawn to either strength or money. Women like that are attracted to authority. Cecile has *legs*.”

As Walsh spoke, Greg looked down at the shoes he had put on that morning. They were penny loafers. And they were darkening, becoming soggy with moisture. He could feel the wetness on his socks. He *did* have authority, and Cecile recognized it in him. He had the authority to know, and the authority to solve. He had the authority to help her through a crisis. But had he failed by leaving her on the bed and alone, plagued by some strange and sourceless noise? Coach Walsh blew his whistle, and the students began jogging again. Greg looked at his watch. Coach Walsh looked at Greg.

“Don’t sweat it, Rosenblatt. I’m an old fart. I don’t know anything. I’m lonely. Don’t sweat it.”

Walsh could have moments of compassion, of sympathy. He was having one right now. He had recognized the deep concern in Greg’s face. But then he counteracted by spitting frothily. In the distance, a boy in gray sweatpants tripped, falling onto the coarse artificial track. Greg saw Coach Walsh watch with vague glee. So he started toward the accident himself. He would reach down and pull the boy up. He would ask if the boy had been hurt. As he walked away, Walsh called after him.

“Give her a good screw for me, Rosenblatt. Give her a good screw and tell her courtesy of Coach Walsh.”

Coach Walsh winked and then laughed. He was holding a clipboard. He slapped the thing against his bare thigh and it made a taut, horrible sound.

After lunch that day, Coach Walsh suffered a stroke. It happened in the men’s room, and it happened while Greg was in there with him. Coach Walsh was shaving his head. The hair floated down toward the sink in big, wispy coils. The electric razor was plugged into the wall by means of a black extension cord. Coach Walsh was known to shave his head periodically in public restrooms with ritual fanaticism. Greg was standing over a urinal when he heard the razor hit the tile. He rushed over. Walsh hadn’t collapsed, but he wasn’t quite standing, either. He had assumed a squat. He was resisting. He had only finished a quarter

of the shaving.

“Rosencrantz,” he said. He looked to be concentrating on a point just above his nose.

“Coach Walsh!” Greg took both of Coach Walsh’s hands in his own. They were very, very dry.

“It’s a woman’s trick. Don’t listen to a word she says. Let her suffer.” He was being nonsensical, and his irises were sliding back into his skull. His teeth began to chatter. When the whites had risen entirely, Greg let go of Coach Walsh’s hands. He stood back and watched the old jaw go loose. Then there was a deep rumbling. It took Greg a few moments to understand that it was coming from far back in Walsh’s throat. It was some coagulated evil pushing toward the man’s tongue. At first, he couldn’t move himself to get help. But then he was leaning against the swinging door with his shoulder. He was out of the bathroom, and the hallway was empty. He took a cell phone from his pocket. He brought it to his ear. He had dialed already. Someone picked up after only one ring.

“I need an ambulance. We’re at Stuyvesant High and there’s a man in trouble. Coach Walsh. He’s having what I think is a stroke.”

“Honey, I thought you’d forgotten.” The voice on the other end was soft and confused.

“I need an ambulance here right away. This is an emergency. Do you want an address? I can give you an exact address.”

“Greg? Darling? I thought you’d forgotten. It’s two p.m. already. I’ve been asleep. I had such awful dreams! And the ringing is louder, honey, it’s become louder. I’ve thought of ways to describe it to you. You’ll be proud of me. It’s like hornets in a distant nest. It’s like several microscopic drills.”

Greg took the phone from his ear, and looked at it. He held it at arm’s length. The voice coming through was tiny now, a small, far away thing. And then he couldn’t hear it at all, because class let out. The bell rang, and doors opened, and students poured into the halls. Some were smiling and laughing, and some were blank faced. Some were ugly and some were pretty. There were too many. Together they produced an awesome roar.



I HAD PLASTIC SURGERY

I practiced my excuses while I spent my week in exile, “sick at home,” or, “spending time with my mother.” As the bruises faded from under my eyes, I looked at myself in the mirror, touched the bandage and debated between “I got hit in the face with a racket at tennis camp” and “I really needed to get my deviated septum straightened out, it was a matter of breathing or death,” you know? Not that I was really planning on telling anyone, I mean, I hadn’t even told my GBF, but everyone would clearly figure out that something changed, that the ridiculous seagull beak that once had total control of my otherwise adorable face, shadowing my super-cute lips and distracting from my pretty blue eyes, was now nothing more than proportional and appropriate. It was pretty obvious, even with the bandage, swelling and Percocet, that I looked completely different.

Except when I emerged from my pile of ignored phone calls and ashes, plumed and perfect, nobody noticed. And not in the “whispering behind my back about my new nose but pretending nothing was different in real life to my face” way, because I may or may not have hacked into various e-mail accounts to see if cyber-messages had been exchanged about the change in my appearance. I did it just to make sure that they weren’t making fun of me, or anything like that, because that would’ve been so not okay. And text message inboxes might’ve been thoroughly examined as well, under the guise of needing to look up some random acquaintance’s number. But I couldn’t find anything. At all. No one noticed anything.

Which is cool, I guess, because I didn’t want them to know, you know? It’s a private thing, a secret. I didn’t tell any of them because I didn’t want them to know, didn’t want them to judge me or anything. It’s just between me and my nose. And Dr. Sklansky. And my parents. And my therapist. And my

doorman. And that guy on the subway who told me that he liked my dress. But it's just not something I really feel comfortable talking about, or having other people talk about, because it's a personal thing. And I'm really happy about it too, because it looks really good, according to the chick who sits next to me in my Intro to Physics class, who only knows because we were talking about the theory of relativity and stuff, so obviously my rhinoplasty came up in conversation, because of the idea of gravitational pull and all, and she told me that she thinks it looks really great after I showed her a "before" picture, one of the pictures on my Facebook, which was sweet of her, even if it's totally not any of her business.

It's just that I can't understand how my friends didn't realize that I did it, because I really look so much different now and you'd think that after so much time spent looking at my face it would be really obvious to them. It's kind of funny, because we all used to joke about how if my nose was a person, it would definitely be that fat girl in the corner that nobody ever wants to talk to because she's just so, you know, fat, and I imagined that I could say something really clever like, "Well, my nose did Jenny Craig and it really works!" and maybe then I'd shoot some kind of sympathetic but still firmly persuasive look at this one friend of mine, whose newly-minted muffin-top suggests that she's definitely been drunkenly eating more than an acceptable amount of late-night pizza, whose name I won't say because that would be rude. And I'd never tell her anything like that to her face directly, you know? Because that would just be kind of insensitive, I guess kind of like if my friends just came up to me and said, "Thank God you cut off the Jew nose!" because they probably think I'd feel totally horrible about, you know, the past, when I had the schnoz, because I'd think that they really thought I was ugly or something, which makes a lot of sense and actually I appreciate how considerate they're being. But I totally am not the kind of girl who would be offended by that because they're my friends and I know they love me, and I know we're all so much happier now that I look so much better. Just like we'd all be happy if that certain friend lost 20 pounds, and the rest of us wouldn't

look like we're slumming it.

But I get it, I really do. My friends are just looking out for me and trying not to upset me because I obviously felt strongly enough about my nose to get the surgery done in the first place. And it's not just like a nothing surgery, like when one of my friends had to get a mole removed because she had skin cancer, which is really not a big deal because they just sliced it off and it was over and she was fine, even though she made it sound so bad. But I looked it up online and, like, a dermatologist does it and it's over in three seconds, and I was in the hospital, well, this place that was affiliated with the hospital, just like this surgical room for outpatient procedures, but I had to wear a gown and they gave me anesthesia and like, actually cut open my nose and stuff. I won't go into it because it's kind of gory and hard for me to talk about, and when I woke up, my mom had to hold a cup of water with a straw for me because I couldn't really move my head for a little while and it was traumatizing a little bit. And now I have to be really careful not to put any kind of pressure on it because if, like, a feather lands on my nose for the next six weeks it could totally mess up everything. One of my friends, I can't tell you who because this is kind of graphic and that would be embarrassing for her, but you'd probably figure out who it is because she's totally like that. Anyway, this friend would totally never be able to get the surgery because she likes it when guys get kind of rough with her, even though she says that when she really likes a guy, she doesn't need him to smack her in the face, but that's totally just because she's trying not to sound as creepy as she really is. And she also likes coke way too much, which is totally not allowed after a nose job. I told this guy at Starbucks, because he grabbed my soy chai latte by mistake, and obviously that turned into a conversation about party drugs and how I can't snort anything because my nose is just way too expensive, you know? And he agreed with me and said I should protect my investments, or something, I guess he's in banking. But anyway, it's kind of a big deal, the whole situation, and my therapist said I'm handling all of it really well on my own.

I'm just really proud that I chose to do something constructive instead

of only complaining, like so many people do. And I'm really relieved that nobody noticed, because there's such a stigma attached to cosmetic surgery. But I really do think that it's important for people to be comfortable in their own skin, no matter what they have to do. And I'm already so much more confident—you probably won't believe it, but I was really insecure before. And I know how awesome I look, I just feel so great about myself, and you totally get that vibe from me, right? I was so worried about what people thought about me, and now I'm just so, so mellow, so relaxed.

BRIANA SEVERSON AND THE FLOOR

There is a floor. It is about thirty square feet and the carpet has been ripped up in anticipation of a newer, better carpet, so the floor is only cement with nails running along the perimeter like evenly spaced soldiers whose job, keeping the carpet steady, is now obsolete.

It looks like a torture chamber, the room containing this bare floor. Despite the sage-green, sloppily painted walls, and the framed posters of race cars, and the king-sized bed with the plaid comforter and yellowed pillows, despite the sheet-less mattress and the closet full of too-big T-shirts with Bible verses emblazoned in bright colors, the room looks like a torture chamber because, despite all these things, you can see the nails jutting up, erect, dangerous, from the floor.

The room is not important but this floor is. This floor is where 15-year-old Briana Severson spends the entirety of her 10th grade nights. She is not a masochist, though she will occasionally tie rubber bands around her fingers and watch them turn purple, desperate for blood.

Briana Severson, whose name, she stresses, is pronounced bree-AH-nuh *SEE*-vur-son, has something wrong with her. Obviously, I mean, *obviously* if she is sleeping on a concrete floor surrounded by nails, then *obviously* there is something wrong. She doesn't know why she is doing what she is doing but she does know there is something wrong. Like with the rubber-banded fingers, she wants to see how long she can sleep on the floor of her brother's bedroom before she has to stop.

Actually she does not want this but this is her rationalization for her irrational behavior. She has been doing a lot of rationalizing these days.

Her father does not understand it. He is, she thinks, a lot like the kid in second grade who ruins the mystery of Christmas for the other kids by telling them Santa Claus isn't real. Dammit, Dad, just play along. Everything is fine.

Before the carpet was ripped up for the new carpet, it was a disgusting floor. Disgusting in the way that visitors to the house would squinch up their noses, almost imperceptibly (but Briana Severson, she was quite

attuned to such things) and then suggest maybe Briana come hang out at *their* house next time, okay?

I mean to say, this was a seriously gross carpet. Fifteen years old itself, this maroon carpet had stains from Play-Doh, nail polish, that time when a rabbit hopped into Briana's room and died behind her dresser, blood (and sweat and tears, the whole shebang) and vomit.

It was neither the fault of Briana Severson nor her family that the carpet served as a cesspool. The Seversons vacuumed and washed and dusted just as much as their next-door neighbors, but for some reason the carpet just looked like shit. Eventually Briana and her brother grew so ashamed of their carpet that they stopped inviting people over. They were gossiped about at school. Times were tough. Finally her father got a raise and he decided to not spend his money on camping equipment (like he did, exclusively, the time he won the lottery in 2000), but instead on Refurbishing the Home.

The first thing to go was the carpet. Her father, a handyman, read some articles on the Internet and then stripped the entire two-story house of its lining in a way this writer can only liken to perhaps the stripping of the lining of a uterus. In this way, the entire house transformed from being disgusting to being really abnormal.

Brianna had been a disgusting kid, not intentionally, but, well . . . things happen. Regardless, now it's 10th grade and her body is finally starting to calm down. She is trying to be a grunge kid like her boyfriend but Something is making it difficult to be dirty and uneven. It is the same Something that is making her sleep in her brother Alex's room, on the cement floor surrounded by nails.

There is something wrong with Briana Severson. It is getting to be a problem.

Every night she lies in bed and waits for the almost-silent *zlllp* of the TV turning off. She waits for her parents to turn off the lights, to take their medicine in the kitchen, to fill Tupperware cups with tap water and shuffle to their sad bed. It may be 9 p.m. when this happens, or it may be as late as midnight.

When they do finish their evening rituals, Briana Severson leaves her bed. She slips across the hall into the room of her brother, Alex Severson, 13. He is usually listening to a pop-punk singer that Briana, in her attempt to be grunge, hates. Alex lets Briana coast along in her weird habits. He doesn't

mind that she is 15 years old and sleeps in the two-foot-wide space between his bed and the nails every night. Or if he does mind, he doesn't say anything. Briana stops teasing him about girls.

Some nights she can't sleep until four in the morning. Some nights she cries and other nights she makes up stories and drifts off —so peaceful— until myoclonic jerks bring her to the surface of consciousness and god *damn* it she was so close, too.

Tenth grade is not a good year for her. She gets Cs in her classes and eats lunch in the bathroom, too tired to make friends, too tired to really even comprehend the three-chord progression of “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” too tired to protest her 14-year-old boyfriend's abuse of Adderall. Tenth grade is not a good year for her.

Trust me, you are not alone in your wondering what the hell is wrong with Briana Severson. I can assure you, Briana Severson was wondering the exact same thing. You are not alone. But she was. Alone, I mean. And not in the cool, loner/stoner grunge kid way of “nobody understands me.” She was alone in the way that only a person who sleeps in her brother's room on the floor every night can be.

This sleeping ritual was not a matter of choice. Briana had a nice bed that she liked a lot. I mean, she thought it was okay. It was okay as far as beds go. But when she tried to sleep in it, her heart throbbed against her rib cage, sweat poured from her temples, her pupils dilated, her muscles tightened like violin strings about to snap, she panted and panicked and sobbed. The intensity of the feeling was like you can't go any farther but someone is pushing you against an invisible wall and everyone else is moving past you. It is not a matter of choice. You simply cannot do it. I wish I could explain this frustration. So did Briana Severson, back then.

Her father suddenly got bogged down with a lot of work and didn't have time to put in new carpet. He recognized this and decided to do the second best thing, or so he thought. He painted the cement light beige in an attempt to home-ify the decrepit Severson abode. This made everyone feel anxious, like new carpet would never be installed. Like they would be surrounded by nails for a very long time.

Her father was the one to discover that she slept in Alex's room every night. He was not an understanding man. He had wanted Briana to be a boy, but more than that, to be normal. The first night he discovered her sleeping in

Alex's room at 3 a.m.. He told her to stop being stupid, it's a school night and you need to be sleeping in your own bed. Don't keep your brother awake.

Briana went to her room. She lay in her bed and waited for her father to go back upstairs. He did, eventually. But he was sneaky just like Briana, but Briana knew he was sneaky just like her, so she knew he would come downstairs again, 10 minutes later, to make absolutely sure she was in her room. She feigned sleep. He grumbled. It was 3:20. He went back upstairs. Briana waited another 30 minutes. She hated herself. She did not want to do this. But she had to. She went back in Alex's room and lay rigid on the cement floor.

Her mother, her brother—these people did not question why the wayward Briana did what she did. She had always been a weird kid. But her father, he did not understand things that were different, so the second and third and fourth times he caught Briana sleeping on her brother's floor, he yelled. She just wanted it all to stop. Calm down.

Her mother comforted her one night.

"Honey, why are you doing this?"

"I don't know."

"Why can't you just sleep in your own bed?"

"I don't know. I feel...I don't know."

"Do you need to talk to someone? A psychologist maybe?"

"I think so."

The truth is that Briana Severson *did* know why she couldn't sleep in her own bed but it was too embarrassing to say even to her mother, the same woman who used to sing in the bathroom while on the toilet: "I've got poo-poo/ comin' outta my bot-tom!"

The truth is, Briana Severson had been raped in that bed.

That would be a nice, neat answer. Briana Severson, a girl whose compulsion to be neat prevented her from being aptly grunge, thought so. But alas, just like the floor she slept on, Briana was stark. Her mind was like a torture chamber and, double alas, she had never been raped (though her therapist would one day suggest she had been, as it would explain all of her problems). She hated herself for the real reason she could not sleep in the bed, which was:

If an evil person (i.e. a thief, a murderer) entered the house, he would enter on the ground floor where Briana slept. The first room other than the

den would be Briana's room. I mean to say, if anything ever happened in quiet, suburban Whiteford Lake, Briana would be the first to die. She did not want to die.

She read the statistics that said no one had ever done anything menacing in Lexington County, that the worst crime was someone stealing a shopping cart from Piggly Wiggly, that Jesus loved Lexington County, that she had a two-story home and two parents, two brothers, a minivan, a station wagon, two dogs. . .

But she was deathly afraid. She could not sleep in her room. She could not risk being killed. In the two-foot space along Alex's floor, she was nigh invisible from any potential invaders. They would shoot her brother without ever seeing her. She tried not to think about the moral implications of this, that she would willingly sacrifice her brother for her own pathetic life. But the moral implications were there and this made her hate herself even more.

It was irrational. Her father could not find the time to re-carpet the house. The family had tried to improve their quality of life and, in doing so, ended up with a baby-shit-colored concrete floor where a welcoming shag carpet should be by now. And their prized daughter? Well, she was hiding from an intruder that would never come, and cutting her wrists with broken Nirvana CDs, and hating herself as she wrapped rubber bands around her fingers and listened to pop-punk in the suffocating space next to her angelic brother's bed while her father descended the stairs wearing only his decade-old Fruit of the Loom briefs and roaring obscenities at his discomfort of a daughter.

Briana Severson needed some serious therapy.

The therapist listened and seemed disappointed that Briana had not been raped as a girl. It would make things so much easier. The therapist gave her a prescription for Zoloft. Briana, unlike her artsy, anti-antidepressants friends, never missed a dose. She was stupid in the way that all 15 year olds are stupid, but she didn't want to wake up to her palms cupping nails like stigmata in the making. Not anymore. She would take that Zoloft and never miss a dose.

The Something that had been making Briana weird was called OCD, said therapist Dr. Linda Zaepfel. However, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder did not make sense. I mean, it made more sense than, say, chicken pox, but still. People with OCD washed their hands three times or had to say the alphabet

backwards before they walked through the door. *I*, thought Briana Severson, *do not have Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*. But she did. She had irrational obsessions glommed to irrational compulsions. At least she had a label and a projected trajectory of healing, a yellow brick road paved with 100mg tablets of Zoloft, 1.5 tabs, once daily, for the rest of her life.

She still slept on the floor for a while after the Zoloft started. Her cheeks still clung, sticky with sweat, to the sandpaper-textured beige cement and Alex still listened to Avril Lavigne every night. The therapist, still probing for evidence of rape, upped Briana's dosage. "Would you like to try hypnosis?"

Meanwhile, her father went to a counselor on his own accord. He had anger management issues and social anxiety disorder and they gave him Zoloft too. He did not always take his medicine. Sometimes he and Briana would trade Zoloft pills, two blue 50mgs for a yellow 100mg. They would talk about gaining weight and headaches. Her father calmed down. Things got easier.

Roughly a year after Briana had first desperately slinked into the corner of her brother's bedroom, the father finally bought the requisite thirty square feet of brand new carpet and he covered up the nails and the cement in Alex's room and that was that. It might have been a coincidence. She never saw the nails again.





PLUMS

Years ago, my family lived on the cul-de-sac of a little road that tapered off from a little town. I was young and small and did not yet know many things, so I gave my world its own simple order. The facts of my life were easy and innocent: babies came from belly buttons, my father's scars came from Captain Hook, and the bruises in apples were lucky patches of Coca-Cola. I was fresh-souled and happy.

The nights on that road tended to feel older and bigger than they really were. They crept up slowly and slyly, and, in a matter of moments, swallowed my whole little house, the whole neighborhood and all the sleeping babies and creeping parents inside it. I do not remember if this had been one of those sneaking nights, or if it had been known from the start for what it was—day's death, an end to playhouses and water fights and chasing down ducklings in the fields behind the house. I only remember that it had arrived, thick and definitive and covering all.

Suddenly dinner had come and gone and the world was growing quiet. The lights were mostly out because the house was tired and my parents were weary and it was almost time to sleep. I was sitting in the darkened dining room at a table that was too tall for me. My father sat beside me, a man too young to have a wife and a house and three children to fill it. He was eating a bowl of cereal and had never seemed so silent and far-off. My three-year-old hands clutched a plum that shone triply purple in the dark dining room.

The walls and the furniture and my father's profile were vaguely illuminated by runoff light from the kitchen. My mother was washing the dishes there, with the same soap she would use to wash my mouth out when I became too sassy to bear. I could hear the silverware clicking together beneath her

fingers and I could hear the faucet turning on and off. Above all, I could hear the nothing coming from her mouth.

In the dining room, I tried to copy my father's stillness. I do not know how we had arrived there, eating together so late after dinner in such a dark, wordless room. I do not know where my brother was, or why my sister was not with me. I remember feeling older and better for the solitude, though. I was a very small person back then. My mind was so new and my heart was so much my father's that to be alone with him was still a dream and a moment cherished. At that moment I felt special and favored, and yet I couldn't become comfortable with the space between us. I couldn't open my mouth and my words and my baby soul to my father the way I could at breakfast or bath time or bedtime. There was something fragile circulating in those rooms, and I knew my words would break it if I let them out.

And so my father ate and my mother cleaned and I made my body quiet. I remember the plum juice rolling down my cheeks and chin and fingers, down to my elbows and my knees beneath the table. I remember the yellow of the doorway to the kitchen, and how it seemed harsh and alien against the purple-blue of our dining room nighttime. I remember the late-night sounds—the cleaning and the chewing and the clinking of so many spoons. I remember the way the silence between the people in those two small rooms resonated in my ears. My parents were communicating volumes that evening, to the night and to our dark house and to one another. It was a language I did not yet understand, but I would spend the rest of my childhood dreaming backwards to interpret it.

In two weeks that silence would be broken, though not by my own childish voice. I kept quiet as the moving vans grumbled up our chalky driveway and drove away with my booster seat and my stuffed animals and my mother's wardrobe. I kept quiet as my older sister moaned about the change and as my mother turned on the ignition with a hiccup and a roar. But in that dark room

that night, with my parents so near, I had no way of knowing how soon and how drastically and how permanently the tune of life would change. I only knew that it was not a night for speaking or sharing or laughing. So I pressed purple fruit to my lips, and whispered into my plum with my teeth and my tongue all the things I wanted my parents to hold on to.

VALENCE

I wasn't the only one who decided Sappho was
hot
after finishing her complete works handed down
which reads like a spit-roasted book
90% of the words charred to black.
could she have been so charming
if she hadn't been covered in so many places
by the shroud of time



I WISH YOU A LONG LIFE

we sat Shiva
holding eggs
in cupped palms
shaped from mourning
too hard
as the purple afternoon
floated its way
into our living room
leaving ribcage stains

today is day number
four of seven
as we press
low to the ground
like an Arabian carpet
stretched out
between neighbors when
father frayed
too far past
repair

my feet are bare
and blackened
from no
bath water
running

the kitchen aches
from visitors
stacked dishes
smells of floral stems linger

my clothes
feel of casket dust
the aftertaste
of thin
and overused ellipses
I want to wash the sound
of his handshake
off my
shoulders

for twelve months
I will
mourn like a
wilted bluebonnet
anxious
for a premature
spring
until the noise
of winter
leaves me hollow-eyed
for good

BIOLUMINESCENCE

Remember when we were
exploring those caves and
I kissed you under the flank
of foxfire? That unspent
underground blue-green glow—

Or when we slipped down to the beach
from that end-of-summer party,
the tide had turned too quickly, and
soft blue jelly lights littered the shore.
I stepped on one that had gone out—

Or how building and building
causes implosions, explosions,
collections of memories—
flashing wakes and glinting waves,
milky seas and red tides.

I think you are jealous of things that glow.
You told me I am color constant,
not so beautiful or accessible as
votive fish and fireflies—

Tonight, when I am sleeping
you should soak me in luminol,
my curtains will quiet the streetlights.
Imagine, everything else visible
as blue light.



WRITERS AT WORK

In preparation for this, volume 25 of the *Gallatin Review*, we visited the archives. As we were reading through earlier issues of the Review to learn how the journal has changed over the years, we discovered its proto-history in the form of a 1981 text titled “The Writer at Work.” This publication, from the days before the *Review* existed as a journal of student writing, contains contributions from distinguished authors who participated in an ongoing lecture series on the theme “the writer at work.” In his introduction to this volume, Gallatin’s first dean, Herb London, writes that “because writers are isolated when they engage in their work, it is the work situation that goes unrecognized. All one sees is the result. But the chemistry of writing involves every nerve ending, every thought and the full range of emotions. That is what we have attempted to explore.” The papers that follow his introduction, by novelists Joyce Carol Oates, Erica Jong, and John Gardner, among others, reflect, often profoundly, on many dimensions of the writing process and are certainly revelatory of the isolated “chemistry of writing.”

But the labor of the writer, as the *Gallatin Review* in its current incarnation suggests, is not reserved only to the established and the well-known. Student writers, too, find writing a complicated, often isolating process that demands hard thought, a spectrum of emotions, and indeed, sometimes agitated nerve endings. In the special section that follows, three of this year’s Prose Editorial Board members engage some of the texts published in “The Writer at Work.” This 2010 update provides us with the reflections of *young* writers at work; as they listen for resonances with their celebrated elders, they also mark some differences from them that are both generational and situational.

Reading Joyce Carol Oates' "Notes on Failure," Ryan Casey registers initial surprise that such a prolific and well-regarded novelist should express so readily a lack of confidence in the possibility of success; in his essay, he explores the idea that while all writers, students or not, fear failure, the very fact that it seems such a pervasive fear might turn out to be liberating.

While Ryan takes some solace from Oates' notes, Anna Mullen delineates some of the enormous changes technology has wrought in the writer's landscape since Erica Jong presented her lecture "Freedom of the Mask." Jong recounts how writing a fiction set in the eighteenth century, "a milieu sufficiently far from my own to prevent any temptation towards autobiography," in fact enabled that autobiographical impulse, precisely to the extent that she was writing "masked." Anna suggests that the Internet, particularly the various forms of social media, is reconfiguring our idea of self-representation, producing permutations of "mask" and "real identity"—and blurring the boundaries between the two in ways that no one, in 1981, could imagine.

Finally, Stephen Brown asks, with John Gardner, "What Writers Do," and finds that student writers frequently do things that are conditioned by the demands of institutional pedagogy—and those things may not be conducive to what writers should be doing. Feeling constrained by classroom protocols, revising toward a better grade rather than toward the discovery of a voice, the student writer can end up foiling his best aims, what Gardner calls the achievement of that "wonderfully simple thing...a true work of fiction."

Our essayists in this section show us that reading in the archive is a very revealing thing to do; no matter how lonely an activity, writing is always a conversation with others, past voices just as much as a present audience. And they remind us—alongside their peers whose works of fiction, poetry and visual art are published here—that the *Gallatin Review* is devoted to *student* writers at work.

The Fear of Creation: All in Our Heads?

Even as I begin this piece, a flicker of fear sparks in my stomach. If I finish it, I can send it in and bask in the transient feeling of accomplishment. But then I will have to take care of my laundry and study for an exam and resign myself to other chores I am loathe to perform. Most likely, I will sit here biting my nails, waiting to see what your reaction will be, worried that perhaps I have not made my most salient points or nobody will bother to comment on it or everybody will condemn me for poor writing. And if I do not finish it, well, then Sara Murphy will have the honor of effecting my removal from this editorial board, and I will be left with nothing to put on my résumé and a rather heavy disappointment.

It is hard to imagine Joyce Carol Oates, one of the most prolific authors of our time, having any fear similar to mine. She has established herself amongst the pantheon of American authors, and yet admits that she carries herself as a “precarious pyramid of eggs” because she is afraid, ostensibly, of typing the words that most writers adore the most: “The End.” Indeed, the dichotomy of success is a curious one, but Oates writes specifically of a fear of “dying or becoming seriously ill” before completing a manuscript – obviously something Dickens and other writers did not plan for – because she does not favor the idea of leaving a piece (and, transitively, all of the proverbial sweat, blood and tears that went into it) unfinished. But I think there is more to it than the possibility of sudden death, for if that were a legitimate concern, I doubt she would have even a single book to her name, or that anybody would accomplish anything in this world with such an albatross around his or her neck.

After all, is a work of art ever truly complete? Books wait on shelves

and artwork hangs on walls and music plays on the radio, but are those works ever finished? Being an artist means continually revising, editing, changing, and reevaluating. There is always a place in an essay where you could employ a more suitable word, a dance routine that could use another arm somewhere in the choreography, a watercolor in need of another daub of this or splash of that. But once the public eye roves over it, it becomes theirs. The artist moves on to the next project, but the piece lives on through those who interact with it. They ask questions, they express outrage, they feel inspired, they tell their friends, or they condemn the artist – who no longer has control over what s/he has created. The work is now a creature that stands almost independently from its maker, speaking for itself, living on its own, a perpetual work in progress.

It is when that creature first sees the light of day, when it first emerges from the remote recesses of her imagination, that Oates experiences the trepidation of which she writes. Surely the thought of an incomplete manuscript does not daunt her; like every other writer, who routinely endures a process of creative trial and error, she must have her share of fragmentary or ongoing opuses that have been abandoned in a file, their fate unknown. It is a great feeling to be done, and yet it signals the beginning of new fears: What is next? Will it be as good? Worse? Better? And then the cycle begins again, as the new project incites its own share of questions for her: Will I say everything I have to say? Will people ever get to read and appreciate this? Will all this writing be done in vain?

It is a fear that impedes before it motivates, one that hinders not only novices, but artists of all experiences and abilities. When we doubt the value of our work, we lose our incentive to continue. Our art may be cathartic, a talent we feel is innate, something we “have” to do, but if we cannot share it, then what is the purpose? The only way we can share it is if we finish it to our satisfaction. So we persist, aware that failure is around every corner, that at

any time we can leave it to wallow in the company of other deserted projects, waiting like Santa's misfit toys to be given a second chance, and move on to something else. We are afraid because we are taking a risk, exploring new territory in our minds, pushing the limits of creative expression, trying something without knowing what the reception will be. It is only natural, and it pushes us not just to keep writing, but to improve constantly. I have come to understand that is a cocktail of excitement and energy and apprehension and nerves, one which we imbibe through the passion that we maintain for our art.

If we cannot take risks, we cannot grow. And if we cannot grow, then what is the purpose of practicing our craft? The more time we spend colluding on schemes to cheat death, the less time we can spend doing what we love. Therefore, I suggest to Ms. Oates and other fearful artists that they simply continue to do what they feel they were born to do. We have no control over the timeline of our lives, but we can make art and speak our minds.

And that is nothing to fear at all.

The Freedoms of the Mouse: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTION, AND TRUTH IN THE WORLD OF THE INTERNET

In “The Freedoms of the Mask,” her 1981 essay written for the *Gallatin Review*, Erica Jong states: “The words ‘confessional’ and ‘autobiography’... imply a dichotomy between ‘fiction’ and ‘autobiography’ which, in fact, every writer knows is illusory; and they imply a dichotomy between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ which both the philosopher and the artist know to be no more than a semantic distinction. In truth, every autobiography is full of fictions, and every fiction is full of autobiography.” This false dichotomy does not belong solely to literature. It can be applied more generally to the concept of identity, where perception often lies far from fact.

Often, Jong goes on to summarize, we are allowed to be ourselves more fully behind the mask of fiction, to expose our truths in ways impossible even in the confessional novels for which she is famous. In autobiography, we edit and censor. We create an image of how we want others to see us. With fiction, we allow fact to creep in around the edges, the dark truth behind the invented mask. We are allowed a certain lenience due to the assumption of falsity, in which we are allowed to voice unpopular, embarrassing or deeply personal truths without admitting to their fact. In autobiography, we must stand by what we write, so we must be careful what we write. In fiction, we can pretend to be invisible, so no one will see our true face.

Today, however, we do not need to be published writers to understand the freedom of the mask. We have the Internet.

The Internet is like a magical land where the illusion of identity is recognized and celebrated. Especially in the beginning of the Internet, we could be anyone we wanted online. Our true selves were invisible, physically and metaphysically, and we were allowed to construct ourselves separate from the identities we had chosen or had thrust upon us. We were able, essentially, to lie

our asses off. Because there was no oversight, who would know?

In recreating ourselves separate from who we were or who we had to be, there was a beautiful honesty to interactions. Through the fiction of Internet identities, we could be honest about the facts of our lives not included in or recognized by our offline identities. The concept of identity can be incredibly limiting; a woman or a person of color is allowed to be or look like *x*, *y*, or *z*, which does not leave room for *a*, *b*, or *c*. This is true for any and every culturally recognized label or identity, but not so online.

Of course, people started to recognize this fiction of the Internet pretty quickly. The Internet is not the anonymous playground it once was. There is some sense of accountability; thanks to the advent of social networking sites, we are held to some semblance of who are are offline. It is hard to completely reinvent yourself, physically and metaphysically, when you are using the Internet to interact with people who have some sense of who you are or how you represent yourself offline. However, there is still that reminder of the anonymity of the early Internet, that disconnect and freedom from who we are in our offline lives.

Online, I have: a facebook , a twitter account, at least two livejournals, a Google Wave account, an okcupid account, and a gmail account which now includes all sorts of crazy things like Google Buzz. In the past, I have had a Myspace, a hi5 account, a Hotmail account, a Xanga and a Blurty. Of my current Internet representations, my interests for one include "having exact change" and "bad horror movies," for another "bromances" and "webcomics," and for a third "media analysis" and "iCarly." Are any of these more or less myself?

I'm not going to lie: I love all of those things. Would I admit that in real life? Probably not. There is an assumption of fiction on the Internet that allows space for confession of fact: I am a 20-year-old human being who loves iCarly. In that expectation of fiction, there lies a space that allows for truth in a way not allowed anywhere else. By pretending to pretend to be someone I'm not, I am allowed to express all of the things I truly am, that don't fit into any single one of my limited identities or offline presentation. The people whom I know

in real life and with whom I interact over the Internet expect untruths, and so in creating my Internet alter ego I can inject truths I do not feel comfortable associating with my offline identity. I don't have to own anything I say or do online, thanks to the imagined veil of fiction.

Online, I am allowed to present different iterations of myself that might otherwise remain hidden. The way we present ourselves on the Internet is more than the tv shows or bands we admit to liking. Through listing interests and reciting biographies, we represent different versions or sides of ourselves to those who can only know us in a limited fashion in regular life. You would think very differently about someone who lists iCarly as their favorite television program than someone who lists 30 Rock, but surprise! I like them both. We weave different interpretations of ourselves through the things we say about ourselves online and allow our friends and peers to see us in a more faceted fashion. Due to the fictitious nature of the Internet, we are not held to anything we write. We can always hide behind the fact that what we write is a joke, and in that assumption are made bold.

I have 766 friends on facebook. These friends include classmates, acquaintance, old friends, new friends, friends from home, friends from school, ex-lovers, teachers, cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings and my mom. They all know me differently, have known me through different stages of identity, are aware of different parts of my life. I present myself differently around each of them, allow each of them a certain amount of intimacy. Through the Internet, they are allowed to know more of me, more of my iterations, to appreciate the facets and layers that create me as a human being. And maybe if they can never know all of them, they are at least awoken to the fact that there are more parts of me that exist, beyond the identity I present to them or to my computer screen.

What *Do* Writers Do?

“What is it that the writer is trying to achieve – or ought to be – as he endlessly fiddles with rough drafts?” – John Gardner

Midway through his treatise “What Writers Do,” John Gardner proposes this question and answers without much pause: writers try to write true fiction. As student writers, it might be more effective for us to stop reading short of his response. His “vivid and continuous dream” of successful fiction is not a concept to ignore, but we might be getting ahead of ourselves. Gardner, pretentious but incredibly insightful, makes points that still register in an age when nearly a fifth of all books sold in America contain sparkling vampires. I suggest that we might want to give ourselves a moment to decide how well equipped we are to answer this question, and how our environment affects our deviation from Gardner’s ideal audience.

To begin to understand what the student writer is trying to achieve through endless revision, we need to examine the context of revision. I can’t speak for everyone, but for the bulk of my K-12 education, “revision” meant typing an essay I had previously written in pencil and catching spelling errors. Little, if any, of an essay’s substance changes between draft number one and the finished product.

The transition to college changed how I perceive revision, but it didn’t solve all of my issues. Instead of thinking of the rough draft as illegible scrawling, I understand it as a chance to gauge my professor’s willingness to award me with an acceptable grade. Our educational system is constructed around a graded performance system, so our investment in an assignment will always be balanced with our desire for a good score. A second, and all-too-

often “final,” draft is an attempt at improving upon a previous grade. Once this process is over, many of the essays in question slink back into the recesses of the hard drive, collecting digital cobwebs with each passing day. Revision, for the grade-minded student writer, becomes little more than a set of hoops to leap through.

Of course, Gardner isn’t concerned with the essay, but with fiction. Skills and mistakes in one medium or genre of writing translate easily into another, and this can often be the case for the student writer. A classmate in a writing workshop recently confided in me that he was waiting to begin his submission until the professor provided him with a prompt so that he knew what the professor “wanted him to write about.” The class was entirely freeform with no submission guidelines beyond thought, effort, and passion, and yet the student still believed that he needed to tackle a specific topic to receive a good grade. This is the mindset of the student essayist, and it makes sense that similar learned habits about revision would carry over to the student fiction writer.

An essay is graded on content and execution. A work of fiction, at least on the undergraduate level, is graded on characteristics like timeliness, attention to grammar and effort. In challenging courses that intend to push students toward producing Gardner’s idea of “true fiction,” professors will assign grades for reasons both objective and subjective, working to prepare students for the harsh world of literary publishing. I have witnessed a professor address an entire class and say that some of the students will undoubtedly be published whereas other never will without a drastic change in writing ability. This sort of frankness is responsible coming from a writing professor: creative writing is something that is coddled in most K-12 educational systems but is subject to ruthless critique in the “real world.” However, these sorts of statements can awake pressure in grade-minded students. Under the constraints of deadlines, stress can often override passion.

On the other hand, if the professor is more relaxed about the product, focusing instead on the process of writing, the *lack* of pressure can result in equally negative reactions. In these classes, the bulk of the grade comes from how well a student responds to peer critiques in a second draft as opposed to the polish of the initial submission. If a student can submit an awful writing submission in a workshop setting without fear of a poor grade, it is likely that the student would, at least occasionally, take advantage of this opportunity. It is an unspoken rule that stressed students will take the path of least resistance. Additionally, as student writers, our works of fictions are very often *assignments*. Many of us are indoctrinated to believe that assignments are revised for the sole purpose of receiving a higher grade.

As a result, I'm not convinced that a student writer can achieve Gardner's idea of great, true fiction in a 15-week school semester. An exceptional author who has spent years honing his craft and is able to commit many waking hours to rereading and rewriting might hope to create something that would fall under Gardner's umbrella in a similar time span, but a student writer has almost no chance at all. Our time is occupied with assignments, jobs and social activities. In most cases, we're only required to turn in a product that is "better" if not "best," and changes will be gauged from what might have been a diminished initial submission. When we hand in our last revision, we're usually glad to see it go and happy to be free of the pressure. Under such a strained writing experience, it is unlikely that we'll return to a piece unless we come up short for another class.

What a writer – student or not – needs is a lengthier revision process, one that exceeds the due dates of a writing workshop. The classroom is a springboard for editing and rethinking, not a beginning and an end. Revision requires more than one mindset, more than one environment and, while a workshop is an essential stage of revision, it can't be the sole step. The student must accept that writing submissions only moonlight as class assignments;

their primary role being that of a burgeoning piece of literature, waiting to be reworked into perfection.

Writers should strive for Gardner's idea of "true" revision in the same way they endeavor for his idea of "true" fiction. After pondering his essay, I'm sure that one leads directly to the other. In Gardner's word, "That process, endless revision and rereading - in different moods, with different models in mind - is the writer's chief hope." We will never attain the kind of true fiction writing that he envisions as a writer's goal if we don't allow ourselves the "different moods," the "different models," and, most importantly, the time and dedication it takes to experience both. Instead, every piece will be an assignment, one that we will be all too willing to turn in, scribbled in pencil, before it is ready, for the best grade possible.

CONTRIBUTORS

SHRADDHA UDAY BORAWAKE, born and brought up in India, is interested in creating visual works to illustrate the life she left behind to come to the dreamland, America. She has been a photographer for seven years, skipping college when she had no idea what she wanted to study. Her work has been exhibited at the DUMBO Arts Festival and International Center of Photography, published in *Art India* and *Seventeen*, among other venues. At Gallatin she studies visual media and Asian studies, and is discovering her love for Japan. Her website is www.borawake.com.

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STEPHEN BROWN's concentration is "Comic Books from Concept to Creation." A member of the Gallatin class of 2012, he is a Gallatin Orientation Leader, *Literacy Review* editorial board member, Admissions Ambassador, Project Outreach Leader and the managing editor of prose in the *Gallatin Review*.

RYAN P. CASEY, a 2009 scholarship recipient from the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts, is pursuing studies in journalism, literature and education at Gallatin. In addition to his work on the *Literacy Review* and Gallatin Review editorial boards, he is currently fusing spoken word poetry with his primary passion, tap dance, which has earned him an appearance on the most recent season of "So You Think You Can Dance," as well as solo performances throughout New England and in New York, Baltimore, and Miami.

WINSTON CHMIELINSKI engages in visual dialogues with the subjects of his fluid and vivid portraits, emphasizing the one-sided completeness of such staged and candid representations as print ads, mobile phone snapshots, online profiles, and webcam recordings. His exhibitions include the Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C.; Collective Hardware, New York City; Art Modern Gallery, Florida, and Fei Space, Beijing. Born in Boston to a Chinese mother and Polish father, Winston currently lives, works, and studies in New York City, and will graduate from the Gallatin School later this year.

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JACOB KAPLAN is concentrating in fiction writing. He’s graduating *really* soon.

IAN KESSLER

CHLOE MOORE, a Gallatin senior, has studied photography through a sociological lens, and French language and culture. Born in Hilton Head, SC., she was home-schooled while traveling around the world with parents until settling in St. Petersburg, FL. She spent two years studying Humanities and French at Wofford College in Spartanburg, SC. She is currently the studio manager at Dominick Media, and holds apprenticeships with photo department at *Vanity Fair* and with photographers Wendy Hope, Carol Friedman and Michael Halsband.

PAASHA MOTAMEDI is a Gallatin sophomore whose proposed concentration is “The Social History of Costume and Fashion.” He is currently working in PR at Tom Ford, but wishes to work at some point as a stylist and then as a designer of men’s clothing.

ANNA P. MULLEN is a junior at Gallatin and a prose editor of the *Gallatin Review*. A recent transfer from the General Studies Program (RIP), she is studying creative and dramatic writing, social justice, media studies and gender and sexuality studies. She is especially interested in identity politics and the power of television. She has purple hair, and often appears to be yelling when she is really just projecting. She would like to thank her family and friends for listening to her ramblings and supporting her in her occasionally foolish endeavors, and Sara Murphy and the 2009/10 *Gallatin Review* staff for their encouragement and patience.

CHELSEA NEWSON is a Gallatin sophomore concentrating in the intersections of health, culture, and the environment. She is currently studying abroad in India, China and South Africa, trying to satiate a wanderlust and find a way to be. She loves good food, old books and long train rides.

AMALYAH OREN is a sophomore in Gallatin concentrating in art history, photography, and business. More specifically, she is studying art in the media and how art can document the world. In her photograph New Orleans, she hoped to achieve an aesthetic beauty while maintaining a journalistic purpose.

EMILY PEDERSON is a Gallatin sophomore from Rhode Island studying analog photography and languages. She is also interested in human rights. Her photograph *Siegfried Lampe* was taken on the island where her great-grandmother grew up, St. Eustatius, in the Netherlands Antilles.

GINA POLLACK is graduating in 2010 with a concentration in photography and writing. She is currently bartending. If you would like to ease her existential crisis and fear of finishing college with little to no marketable skills, think about hiring her. Her skills could be marketable. If not, at least she can make you a drink. See more

of her work at www.behance.net/GinaP. Special thanks to Betsy Newman for agreeing to pose precariously on a rooftop for this photo shoot.

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ANTONIO SANTINI was born and raised in Puerto Rico and now lives in Manhattan where he draws and makes video mashups about the Googlization of everything and our insatiable consumption of the world as images. His photographic work exhibited at the Gallatin Galleries in "The Technology Show" depicts the new worlds of isolation that are formed by sitting in front computer all day and the impact and exhaustion of everyday life.

JORDAN LEE SCHNEE's poems have been published in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, *Chautauqua* and in Spanish in *Voices De La Luna*, among other journals. He received the "new voice" distinction in the 2010 issue of *Chautauqua*. Jordan also writes songs and takes photos.

SAM SELINGER transferred into Gallatin this year and is focusing on literature and creative writing. He will graduate in 2011.

BRIANA SEVERSON, a three-year veteran of the *Gallatin Review*, thanks especially the professors who sit up front at the readings and laugh at her stories. She has been published places and won things. Here is her website: brianaseverson.com. Here is some cleavage: (Y)

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ADAM UHL will be graduating from Gallatin this spring after concentrating in "Images as Society." His photographs have been exhibited in Philadelphia, Minneapolis and New York.

MAX VERNON is a songwriter, performer and visual artist at Gallatin. His music has been written up in *Rolling Stone*, *Paste*, *New York Magazine*, *New York Post*, among others. His original costume designs were recently featured in *W*. He hopes to be the first pop star with a degree in Foucauldian analysis.

REBECCA YALE is a senior at Gallatin. Her concentration is "The Effects of Photographic Manipulation on Authenticity in Contemporary Culture." These images were taken on an Arctic expedition in August 2009 as part of a series documenting endangered and threatened species world wide, which she will continue after graduation in Africa, India and Asia.

AMIA YOKOYAMA, Gallatin class of 2010, is a visual artist and fashion designer. She is studying art in relation to the digital revolution and how it reflects and affects the future of our social evolution. Amia hopes to launch her eco-friendly jewelry line later this year.