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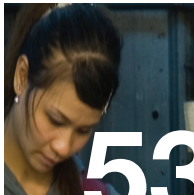
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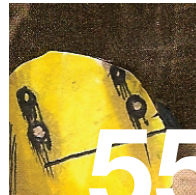
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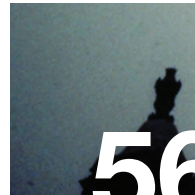
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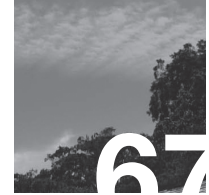
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allyson paty **dirge**

Summer, keep me in your cellar.
Pick a peck of me. Pack me in salt.
Caper, okra, and artichoke. Throw in
the sun with the pickled egg yolks.
Stave off the freeze and the cyclic little deaths
with slow swigs of long light
and sweet body, sweat body, bare body jam.
Seal me in a mason jar and I will be
your ugly buzzing orchestra, your broken night
light, a saved-up firefly that lasts.

victory

annabel graham

there

is a street named Victory in the middle of a broad, flat, hot suburb. It is lined with the agricultural experiments of community college kids, maybe even ones who play football and date my cousin and speak Hebrew and drop out after a year, or ones who used to smoke heroin with their artistic sisters and are only there for the summer. In summer, the hottest days are layered with blankets of smog and heat rising off leather car seats. The heat, the No Smoking law in Santa Monica, and ten more reasons to hate Los Angeles are why he wants to move back to the place that is so fake it's real, to the basin of the desert and the baked clay cliffs that crumble under his stylish shoes.

She is wearing a white summer dress, ocean on her skin. He has sewn a bookmark shaped like an oriental carpet to his shirt. It is a brown shirt. His face is full and rosy and poetic. He feeds leaves to a caterpillar he caught and is afraid it won't like them. He smokes girls' cigarettes: pink Camel No. 9s. She worries just for a split second about a thousand things but then the worry's gone and she knew it would happen, she planned for it last night at the gas station where she bought his favorite energy

drink in its elongated can. The can that still sitting on her windowsill because she doesn't even like those energy drinks. She bought it for him, really, and just forgot to give it to him, at that gas station on Victory where she and her friend had to pee so badly and her friend saw a trail of ants in the bathroom—how disgusting—and they made sure they locked the doors because who knew what could happen. She had always imagined getting shot, or held up at least, in a place like that.

He doesn't sleep in his bed because "beds are so final." His bed has navy blue covers and no top sheet. People were either top sheet people, or they weren't. That was something her mother would have said. Her mother favored top sheets. On the phone she says to her mother that she's on the Pacific Coast Highway, that she'll stop and get broccoli at the market and grab the dry-cleaning. But she's really stuck in traffic in middle-of-nowhere, Woodland Hills, heading in the wrong direction on Victory, towards Encino, in the navy blue Infiniti G35, pink sunset and smog creeping through the rolled-down windows ("No one in LA ever cracks their windows, they either roll them all the way up

or all the way down,” he observed) and his music playing on her stereo.

To take the place of his darling guitar in the rumpled midnight of sheets, to become his darling! It would have to happen because it had to. They had spent four hours kissing on cement because the tide had come up too high on the private beach they'd snuck into, the one with no cell reception. They were stubborn like that. He didn't like spiders or coffee drinks with more than two syllables. He had tried to teach her to blow smoke rings on the plastic lounge chairs by the steaming turquoise pool at his rehab apartment at night. He had drawn a lion tattoo on her arm in blue ballpoint pen that was already rubbing off and smearing, beginning to look like an excess of veins, too much life pulsing under the pale stretched skin where a mosquito would bite her—what kind of mosquito bites on the wrist?—a week later. He was always trying to brand himself on her, leave some kind of lasting impression, some indelible mark. Over a Divine Spice Chai latte that smelled like pumpkin pie and overwhelmed him at the Urth Caffé, he had carved his initials and an abstract drawing and a Dave Eggers quote onto his receipt and given it to her to keep.

Once from a window she had seen a couple getting married alongside the highway. They had driven past the old movie theater in a charcoal-colored Citroen. You might not have known they were getting married if not for the driver's incessant honking, the bride's veil, like gauze, pressed against the dusty glass of the backseat window. They had pulled onto the shoulder, and

there the bride had stood like a stiff doll in her thrift-store dress, auburn dirt swirling through the air. From behind, she had looked like a child, but when she turned, she transformed into a middle-aged woman, white light reflecting in orbs from her smudged glasses. The groom smoked a cigarette. They had crossed the highway, holding hands, their meager procession of family and friends trailing behind them. From where she had sat, their heads had been just a fraction smaller than the dead fly stuck to the outside of the bay window.

Now she was alive, incensed—something burned in her like a gorgeous sun. She picked lemons from the trees in the orchard, apologizing to a snail she crushed with the heel of her sandal by accident. When it got dark she lowered herself into the Jacuzzi, hot enough to boil her skin, not even bothering to scoop out the moths and spiders that laced the surface, and stared up at the expanse of black sky carved out by the mountain crags, the brilliant fire-sparks of stars, the jets floating by, orange, like people lifting cigarettes to their mouths in pitch-black night. She stared down through the night at the city. She imagined Los Angeles painted in the sick discordant colors of a three-day-old bruise; a battered drag queen crawling to her feet and applying another layer of lipstick, beautiful in her plastic handheld mirror.

She would not become the stunted, dollish bride. She would not become a terrible wide-eyed smiling sister. She would not succumb to patterns of *mauvaise foi*. She had scattered a set of marbles onto the green felt of a pool table, the same green as a shirt she had. She had made her choice.

memoirs of a tupperkid

briana severson

one

Christmas when I was eight or nine, my stocking contained small plastic key chains including, but not limited to, a miniature pop top bowl, a minutely detailed thermos, some rolling pins, and a rubbery coin purse with bright magenta lettering which read: “You can do it!!!” After sorting through this merchandise, I remember smiling at my parents with the most forced delight I could manage.

“Isn’t that nice?” my mom said. “You could carry around little bugs or pennies in the bowls!”

“Santa’s cheap,” I wanted to say. I knew that my best friend Erika would call later in the afternoon to talk about her new CDs and gold jewelry—and I would mumble a few words about a Tupperware lunchbox and a motivational tape featuring adult actors screeching messages like “Never give up” and “You are a winner.”

See, all throughout my elementary school years, my mom worked with Tupperware. I don’t just mean sold Tupperware, either; she lived it. She spent so much time on Tupperware that the company gave her a hunter green Dodge Caravan to keep for as long as she kept her monthly sales above a certain amount.

A lot of people think Tupperware is only about

Bundt pans and ice cream scoopers, but as the daughter of a Tuppermaniac I learned that the realm of Tupperware extended into even more domestic areas like clothing, stuffed animals and stationery.

Once, on a drive from South Carolina to Iowa, my mom presented my brother Alex and me with presents to keep us occupied throughout the eighteen-hour trip. I got a plush white seal whose nametag read, “Hi! I’m Tuppy the Seal Puppy!” The back of the tag explained that Tuppy the Seal Puppy® was a registered trademark of the Tupperware Corporation. I was riding to Iowa in a Tuppervan listening to a Tupperkids tape and snuggling Tuppy the Seal Puppy® under a Tupperware print afghan.

In that moment, I realized the magnitude of my family’s dependence on Tupperware, everything we did involved it. Family time? A color-coordinated picnic at Finlay Park. Play time? Markers in the shape of animals. Nap time? Sleep under a blue-and-white Tupperware comforter. Canisters and picnic baskets were the default Christmas/birthday presents from my family. Despite the fact that we gave Tupperware to everyone, the presents were never considered impersonal because Tupperware

conveniently made gift tags emblazoned with Santas, cupcakes, colorful eggs, and turkeys. I'm not sure what kind of gift would require a turkey tag. Maybe the hardcore Tupperware people needed some kind of cutesy memo shaped like a bird to attach to the seal-locked turkey bits left over from Thanksgiving dinners, which had, of course, been served on cornucopia-shaped plates.

My mom once enlisted Alex and me in a Tupperware fundraiser and we morphed from our usually loner personalities into dedicated, competitive, and fierce businesspeople. We went door to door asking for orders, sold Tupperware at a booth outside of Wal-Mart, and begged our teachers to purchase this season's set of decorative bowls or a selection of patterned eight-ounce cups. The worst kind of sibling rivalry ensued—brother and sister pitted against one another in a quest to sell the most plastic cookware.

I remember that once, during the height of this selling frenzy, I threw a dirt rock at Alex's skull, which caused a stream of dark blood to gush from his forehead. I said it was an accident, but it's hard to tell whether I threw the rock at my brother for fun or if I maliciously hoped he'd get amnesia and forget how to stick out his lower lip and ask if the customer would like to buy a spatula.

By the day the fundraiser ended, I had sold 500 dollars worth of Tupperware, and Alex had only sold 350. I couldn't imagine anyone working harder than I did, and a faint hope grew in my chest. Maybe I'd win.

My mom, Alex, and I entered the Tupperhut, where the fundraiser winners would be announced.

The Tupperware head honcho, Mrs. Cleta, handed bright red T-shirts to all three of us. Mrs. Cleta had been selling with Tupperware for 56 years. She smelled like smoke and wore earrings depicting things like beach scenes and ice skaters.

"Oh, Kathy! I'm so glad you and the kids could make it!" Mrs. Cleta said to my mom. "Now, this is what we're going to do: All the kids are going to stand in a line at the front of the auditorium, and we're going to get the parents to cheer for them with amounts of money. Like, we'll yell 'Ten dollars worth of Tupperware!' and if anyone has sold less than that amount, she can go back to her seat. We'll keep going up by increments of 50 dollars until we have the last Tupperkid standing." She smiled at Alex and me. "Y'all understand?"

We both nodded, intimidated. The shirts she had given us came down to our skinny knees, making us look like big cherry popsicles. Mrs. Cleta walked to the microphone near the front of the room. My mom pulled Alex and me into seats near her as she talked animatedly with several other Tupperware mothers. She seemed to be the queen of them all.

"Can I have all you Tupperkids up at the front?" Mrs. Cleta asked.

As we formed a line, I scoped out my competition: A few bratty-looking toddlers, a bald boy, three teenage girls with oily hair and giggles, some kids my age with faces like TV dinner mashed potatoes, and a short kid who lacked definitive gender and had watery eyes.

Mrs. Cleta repeated the rules. Then she faced the audience of parents and clapped in rhythm to

her words: "Fifty dollars worth of Tupperware!"

One of the mashed potato kids walked off.

"Hoo-rah!" cheered the parents.

Later in life, I would be reminded of this scene upon hearing the drowning, cultish voices in movies like *Children of the Corn* and *Rosemary's Baby*.

"One hundred dollars worth of Tupperware!"

"Hoo-rah!"

It took a few more repetitions of Mrs. Clela's instructions and several more increments of 50 dollars until finally it was just me, Alex, the bald boy, and a mashed potato girl. At 250, the bald boy walked off stage. At 300, no one moved. At 350, we said goodbye to Alex. 400. 450. 500. The number of my demise. I felt my shoulders drop and slowly I nodded my head in recognition of the monstrous applause and whistles all coming from my mom.

The girl who won the contest ended up having sold over 2,000 dollars worth of Tupperware. (Hoo-rah!) I was glad not to have missed winning the fundraiser by only a few bucks. I was kind of jealous though, as my mom hugged the winner and helped crown the mashed potato Tupperware Princess.

My best friend Erika knew the girl who won, and later she asked me why I hadn't gotten to be Tupperware Princess. I tried to shrug it off as no big deal.

"You could have put it on your college application and stuff!" said Erika.

"I did my best, and that's all anyone could ever ask of me," I said, repeating a line from one of the motivational tapes I got for Christmas. I didn't expect Erika to understand the logistics of Tupperware. Erika's mom sold Avon, Tupperware's

main rival. As a rule, I didn't like Avon ladies. Not just because they were competition, but because they smelled like too much perfume and often wore color-coordinated outfits and, with their overdone eyeliner, seemed to be perpetually excited.

Every now and then, some piece of Tupperware from the old days will appear in my closet or beside my bed. Each piece I find feels like a memorial relic or the missing piece to an ancient puzzle, and I can't help but think that one day I'll be as crazy about something as my mom was about Tupperware.

It's comforting to have an obsession. It gives you purpose, direction, and something to think about as you go to sleep. Granted, I can't really imagine my mom drifting off to thoughts of ice cube trays, but that's the thing about obsessions. They don't make sense a lot of the time. I think about this paradox occasionally with my feet up on the dining room table and a pink plastic cup of ice cradled in the curve of my hand, a blue-and-white afghan draped over my bent knees like a tunnel so wide and long it echoes.



9:11

jacob friedman

after careful observation
long periods of reflection
heartfelt conversation
& logical argument
concerning dramatic effect
public reception
shock value
& sympathetic appeal
we decided it would be best
if I didn't wear a tie
featuring a graphic of the Twin Towers.

maintenant le deluge

seanna sharpe

It rains in New York City

The sidewalk is littered with the skeletons

Of dead umbrellas

Slaughtered birds of canvas and wire

Wings askew, plastered against the pavement

A man with a briefcase spills his sons and daughters

In the water

the phantom spirit of coney island

sara nicholson

on

Sunday, September 7, 2008, the Cyclone will take one final car full of thrill-seekers over the twists and turns of its famed track. Then silent, stagnant, and stoic, the landmark will sleep eternally. It seemed only fitting that Hurricane Hannah would pound Coney Island on the last weekend of its “full” operation. Hurricane winds and unforgiving rain leave the sad streets desolate.

Emerging from the subway, Anjuli and I are met with a strip of buildings that seems to maintain a naïve hope that the crowds will return. Not today. Today there are no footsteps pounding the streets, only raindrops. There is a creepy aura clinging to the dreary facades of the abandoned attractions. Nathan’s is empty. No famous hot dogs. No carnival rides. The sideshow acts are canceled due to the weather—even the freaks have left Coney Island.

The Coney Island Museum, however, is open. It is nothing more than a collection of photographs,

props, and decaying amusement-park memorabilia that recollect a different time. People played here once. Now it is a stack of dusty beach chairs from the 1950s and a pile of broken manikins. Empty seats stare at an abandoned stage while a hollow mermaid costume looks out over dismembered carnival-ride cars. In the corner, a doll I can only describe as “the Coney Island Man” grins maniacally over the static room. This is a place of the forgotten. The spirit of dozens of dilapidated structures whispers in my soul, pulling my mind into a hazy world of what was. The echoes of hundred-year-old laughter murmur just out of aural range.

It is dark and dusty. We are on the wrong side of a locked door. Literally. If you let your mind wander on Coney Island during a hurricane, you may find yourself locked in a museum. An eccentric-looking woman comes to our rescue. “Oh, I forgot there were people here.” She stands on the terrifying staircase

and invites us back for the beard competition in an hour. The bar will open, freak beer will be served, and entertainment provided. In the meantime, we are to go to Totonno's. Her directions are less than inspiring. "Pass Mermaid, pass Neptune, take the next left, it's there somewhere, it was white the last time I went." And then we are again, somehow, on the wrong side of a locked door.

Now we are outside the museum, standing ankle-deep in a puddle, being blasted by epic rain and incessant wind. Umbrella up—walk. The few open shops are closing as we walk by. Foul weather can eliminate joy from even the bumper cars. Turn right (we think). The road is flowing. Nothing feels quite like submerging your feet, ankles, and shins into dirty New York City street water. Halfway across the street the water turns a little brownish and I am fairly certain that I have contracted chlamydia from it. We press on. We see an overpass stretching over the sidewalk ahead of us and blissfully think about putting the umbrella down and walking on a dry sidewalk. The oddity of Coney Island, however, never fails. We approach the overpass and realize that it is in fact raining harder underneath it than in the open. I choose not to look up; I would rather not know where the water is coming from.

We turn left. A man sweeping water away from his storefront seems to like the image of two drenched girls clinging to each other under

a barely functional umbrella. He calls out to us. We do not stop. The only other soul on the street is a woman in an apron. She is standing in front of Totonno's! We scuttle past her into the vacant pizzeria, collapse into a booth, and look around. A woman very seriously fusses with slips of paper at a table. I assume she is calculating receipts but I do not bother to ask. We order a small pizza and are told they only have large.

The woman with the slips states, "Believe it or not, we were busy earlier, we ran out of small crusts."

"Even with the hurricane?" Anjuli, asks and then expresses her delight in finding the restaurant open for business.

"Oh yes. Hm, if we need a row boat we'll go home."

The woman goes back to her papers.

"This has been here since the 1920s?" I ask.

"The place, not the pizza," Anjuli clarifies.

"1924."

The walls are covered with newspaper clippings, reviews, and photographs of celebrities from the Ramones to Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth. Photos of both George Bushes smile stupidly over our booth—there are spitballs on the photos. I sip Coke from a glass bottle and look at a framed newspaper from August 15, 1945 proclaiming: "WAR OVER." I find it appropriate that Coke is served

in glass bottles here. There are hints of the past in everything on Coney Island.

Within minutes, we learn first-hand that a hurricane does not stop people from coming to Totonno's. Locals come in for pick-up orders, families sit down for lunch. When the pizza arrives, any skepticism I had evaporates. This is the most perfect thing on Coney Island today—undoubtedly worth wading through the recently formed canals of Brooklyn. This leads me to believe that Totonno's will be here forever—regardless of the fate of Coney Island.

There is something about good food that invigorates the spirit. Lunch has inspired us. If there is enjoyment in this graveyard at the tip of Brooklyn, we are going to find it. It may be submerged underneath inches of rain, blown away by the wind, or forgotten in the endless monotony of time—but we are ready for the hunt.

The rain has all but stopped; the wind, intensified. We walk back, looking for the man who called to us from the storefront. He has left—a pity, we would have stopped and talked to him now, anything for an adventure.

I want to explore the Boardwalk before returning to the bar for the beard competition. As we approach the Boardwalk, the warmth of Totonno's is replaced by a lifeless vacuum. Everything is boarded up. Closed indefinitely. Behind a chain link

fence, tables and chairs are overturned. It is difficult to imagine people eating, drinking, partying, and playing here. But determination keeps time on our march toward fun.

The only inhabitants of the Boardwalk we can find are three men sitting under a closed unmarked pavilion. They drink openly. Police officers whiz by. There is no one here, where are they in a rush to go?

Anjuli puts up her umbrella so I can snap a picture of her. The pink umbrella juxtaposes nicely against the drab and vast gray of sand, sea, and sky. Suddenly, through the camera's lens, I see Anjuli's umbrella go berserk. It is inside out, upside down, crumbling, flexing, pulling, and pushing against her in the wind. I am sure that sometime in my life I learned what could happen to an umbrella in strong winds, but knowing does not inhibit a burst of glee when it actually happens. Mission surprisingly accomplished: We have harnessed the power of this wind and used it to create play. We laugh as Anjuli fights with the umbrella. Success.

Smiles shine like beacons in such a bleak landscape and our happiness catches the attention of a photography student down the Boardwalk. Our battle with the pink umbrella is suddenly the subject of a photo project. At least it is something to do—it will keep us smiling. Our little united crew is fairly conspicuous now and it is not long before a man drinking an enormous Coors Light stumbles

over. I ask if he grew up around here.

“Grow up around here? I climbed the Parachute Drop. I mooned the masses. I swam with the seals at the Aquarium. I did a swan dive so perfect I didn’t make a splash, but my white ass made a splash! . . . We gotta save Coney Island. You all coming back tomorrow?”

We ask what tomorrow is.

“They gonna tear this place down. Build condos. We gotta save Coney Island. I’m making a speech tomorrow that’s gonna get the media coast to coast. You come back. Ten a.m.”

“Okay, if I can.”

“‘If? If ‘if’ was a fifth we’d all be drunk! . . . More couples, more sailors fell in love here than any other place. Coney Island salt water runs through these veins. That”—he points at the Parachute Drop—“That is the Eiffel Tower of New York, and they wanna take it down. We gotta save Coney Island.”

And then the spark goes out. My smile joins the thousands that linger here as memories. The umbrella, right-side-out at last, is closed. Our crew disbands, each of us walking back into the solemnity.

Coney Island is approaching the end of its long purgatorial stint. Time will no longer be suspended here, but the past will remain as a shadow. The awe and eeriness of a sideshow will always be felt here.

The ramblings of a drunken man will drift on the salt air forever. I know that I will be asleep tomorrow at 10 a.m. This was perfection and I want nothing to do with Coney Island in the sunshine.

Satisfied by our encounter with the phantom spirit of Coney Island, I walk to the subway with Anjali in silence.







ad words for the financial crisis

brad powell

prophets

have told this tale before. The neo-classicals and the neo-cons, they're all still praying to Neo for salvation now, while the Buddha-cons and the sutra-cons been working their backward ways and means through the whole while, listing all the pros and cons in their Greenwich lo mein time anyway. Outsourced and outputted, the Cafetasians should be getting their metaphyll since we'll all be metaforaging for cents in the days to come. Our SKOR bars and Skoal cans will have to suffice until we figure out the cleanest coal system of Creative Commons and Kuntry Kitchens alike. The Fantasia that they played when we were forever young couldn't stop the Broncos from incorporating either. We won't be celebrating so much anymore when the imagineers regret having prophesized the Wall-E Street. Best get your Bug-B-Gone and start polishing that Remington. Mr. Jim Beam and Mr. Clean have already teamed up with Ms. Betty Crocker, while all the Radioheads are still Coldplaying at the Arcade Fire. Hope there, for sure, but Brown won't last that long when the dues-for-you keep rising each year, and the civillainy that they teach drops a W. in the riting. But then again, it's

just the tale of the lost profits, those short and long coattails of the market that can never be hemmed straight. All the Rice-A-Roni treats have lost their Pabst Blue Ribbons because we're boxed in by the SPAM that keeps filling up the Playbill. Engendered by endangerment, we still can't escape the desire for Gen. Motors and Gen. Electric to keep turning this economy around. TV Guide said Big Mac couldn't do the trick just right, but we've still got Time-Warner on our side to spread the good-word jelly-jams of before. A bit of Skippy and Peter Pan, WD-40 and EZ-Glide, and don't forget to add the KY for good measure. Once we get a little lubrication back in the apparatus, the cogs will be spinning like new. The failed estates will have to adjust, and maybe this time round we'll know something more about the AIDS so that all these injections won't end up refueling the Johnson & Johnsons with the same British Petroleum. Keep on truckin' while we figure it out, they say. But the Von Dutch craze has long passed, even though Joe made his admirable last stand with aplomb. Dropped the bomb there, and we're back to square one.

commerce

kaela noel

the

Japanese place next door was staffed mainly by Chinese women in kimonos. The sushi chefs, who were all men, were Chinese, too, despite the hachimaki headbands they wore with their dark blue yukatas as they chopped up the fish.

I knew they were Chinese because that's what they spoke while they stood around outside smoking cigarettes together on their breaks. They had a lot of breaks. This was because the restaurant—half-lit, smelling faintly and perpetually of an urban beach at low tide—rarely had any customers.

The fact that they had so few patrons mattered little because the place had a cash cow greater than even the most gluttonous consumer of sashimi.

They had bicycles.

All day long, bicycles went in the restaurant's front door. Big bikes and small bikes, mountain bikes and street bikes, expensive bikes, cheap bikes, and every two-wheeled thing in between. And then, of course, within an hour or so they wheeled

back out again—spray-painted a different color.

If I had stood outside the dress shop long enough over the course of that hot summer, rearranging the sale rack's collection of off-kilter vintage castoffs and folding the scarves in the five-dollar bin, I expect that eventually I would have seen a tricycle wheeled in through their door.

I assumed the men dressed in white T-shirts and nondescript jeans, heads bent under baseball caps, who did the wheeling and dealing in and out were also Chinese, though I never heard them speak. Each deliveryman hopped on and off his string of bicycles in total silence. Each had a cigarette dangling precariously at all times from the edge of his unsmiling mouth, just visible under the bent brim of the baseball cap. And each always carried a generic New York City paper-tucked-into-plastic restaurant sack that may or may not have contained Japanese food.

One time, shimmying up behind the rack

of 1950s smoking jackets on a quest to dust the furthest reaches of the dress shop, I caught a glimpse through the warped glass of the window of our shared air shaft into the heart of the sushi restaurant's mysteries. There they were, lurking in the air shaft's eternal grayish twilight: delivery boys, cigarettes, cans of spray paint, and two forlorn-looking bicycles waiting for their turn at refurbishment.

Sometimes, when my boss wasn't around to frown upon me eating behind the cash register, I would call next door and order an avocado roll. (Going vegetarian there seemed safest). I didn't bother to have it delivered (Did their delivery boys even deal with food?), but waited for an empty spell to befall the shop so I could run over and pick it up.

Inside the restaurant it was so dark I could barely make out the faces of the girls gathered in giggling clumps around the cash register. They knew I worked at the vintage dress place on the other side of our shared wall, and they were always gracious to me. We chatted about the weather and cracked jokes that now, years later, I can't remember. In the darkness, after I paid, I always squinted, never able to make out the change they had given me.

But every time I checked, stepping back into the bright sunshine on Thompson Street, it was

right.

"The customer is always right," C. told me sternly the very first hour I had worked for her. "And she always looks good in the dress."

These twin maxims were stewing together somewhere in the fretful nether regions of my brain several months later, as C. was getting ready to depart for a weeklong vacation cum retirement villa-scouting trip in Puerto Rico.

"The military is going to stop bombing Vieques any day now," she told me. "I have to get down there and buy before the market heats up."

So she left, and left me with the keys to the shop. "If anything goes wrong, call me. But nothing will go wrong."

It was a hot July, and that week the rain seemed to fall with tropical regularity. In the mornings, I placed the bins of patterned silk scarves and the racks of sale dresses in a cluster on the sidewalk, just as C. had shown me. It was her trusted means of enticing vintagely inclined passersby into the store. Invariably, when afternoon came and the sliver of sky I could see down toward Bleecker Street thickened blackishly, I'd rush to pull the whole lot in again before the first splatters of hot rain splotted the sidewalk.

All day long, the inhabitants of Thompson Street shifted in and out, too. The shady sushi

place's waitresses smoked in the doorway of their restaurant, joking in Chinese. Above the dress shop, stacked one on top of the other in peeling, one-room, rent-controlled apartments, lived a dozen elderly Italians. Each morning, canes in hand, they descended their rickety staircases carrying lawn chairs. They set up in a stooped, grumbling, but nevertheless solid, row on the sidewalk on our side of Thompson. When the rains began, they folded themselves up slowly, muttering to each other in Italian, and drifted back upstairs. The sushi waitresses stopped giggling and stubbed out their cigarettes. And I hauled in the barrels of scarves. But as soon as the skies cleared, the rain dried up almost immediately and everyone went back outside.

The customer is not always right, because some customers are, unfortunately, crazy. Not every dress looks good on every girl, but perhaps it is still wise to take this second part of C.'s advice to heart, and lie when confronted with an occasion where she might be proven incorrect. To tell a crazy customer that she is wrong and the dress looks bad on her can be very dangerous indeed.

There was more than one customer that summer who was a little unwell, or a little irascible, or a little overweight and not yet zen with it while trying on dresses. But when I think of crazy

customers that summer, I am really only thinking of one woman, who took the cake—the craziness cake—and trumped them all.

When she first stepped through the door, on the heels of the day's afternoon shower, she looked harmless enough: middle-aged, a little chubby, with a blonde Martha Stewart bob and a set of Upper East Side-y pearls finishing off her preppy sundress. She moved with the slightly jerky gestures of someone suffering a back problem or a serious mental illness. In her case, I soon learned, she was afflicted with the latter.

She, like a half-dozen others that day, wanted to try on the prim little cherry-printed 1950s sundress bedecking the manikin in the window. C. had put it out the morning she left, along with a warning that, measuring 24" at the waist, it was a dress I shouldn't bother taking down for anyone who wasn't part stick insect.

I had been following C.'s instructions without incident, turning away hopeful but healthy-sized women one after another, when this lady showed up. The dress could very well have been an enchanted glass slipper, and nothing I said could persuade her that she wasn't cut out to be its Cinderella.

Finally, it seemed easiest to just take it down for her. "Really," I said as I did, wrestling with the plastic

arms. "I mean, it's tight on the manikin."

She snatched it from my hands and steamed away to the dressing room, glowering. When she emerged again, cherry dress tight in her fist, she had only partly finished putting her clothes back on. She announced she was going to buy it.

Perhaps the whole edgy encounter would have finished up from here without real incident, had it not been for the presence of Customer #2, who was also a touch out of touch, and had also had her eye on the cherry-printed dress.

"I saw it. Through the curtains. It doesn't fit you!" snarled Customer # 2.

"Excuse me?" Crazy Customer said darkly. Blood rushed up her pearly neck toward her pale face. "Excuse me?"

"I said, it looks awful on you," Customer #2 continued, smirking. "You're fooling yourself if you think it fits."

"Bitch!" hissed Crazy Customer. She continued with a stream of other unpleasantries, which Customer #2 returned in kind.

Then Crazy Customer began ripping dresses off the racks.

"You young people! You don't understand what it's like! You don't understand!" She screamed, tearing dresses pell-mell from their hangers. Turning to me, she lunged. "You all should die! I

should kill you! Kill you!"

Panicking, I fled to the street. I shouted for help, and grabbed the first passerby I saw. It turned out to be a 250-pound tourist from Iowa.

"My customer!" I shrieked, holding his arm. "The dress doesn't fit, so she says she's going to kill me!"

He had a crew cut and may very well have been wearing one of those I ♥ NY shirts from Chinatown. "What the hell?!" he said, looking shocked. Pushing past me, he entered the shop. I followed him.

Crazy Customer was now hurling dresses towards Customer #2. "You all think you know me!" she screamed. "You don't! You don't! I'm gonna kill you! You should all die!"

"Just get out, lady!" I heard the Iowan shout as I dialed 911. He pointed towards the door and growled at her, staring her down. "Just leave!"

And—miraculously—she did. I finished giving my information to the dispatcher, hung up, and watched with a gathering crowd as she stomped up Thompson Street towards the park on one high heel, waving the other above her head like a grenade, muttering to herself. Her blonde bob was askew. She hadn't bothered to zip up her cream-colored sundress, and it was drifting off one shoulder.

Things quieted. Customer #2 had disappeared in the mayhem. Waiting for the cops to come, I

picked up the dresses the crazy one had torn from the racks. My hands shook. The lowan lingered for a while, but after half an hour had passed without sign of the police, he left me his name and number and went on his way. "Call 911 again if she comes back," he told me nervously.

The cops did show up eventually. As soon as they'd figured out she hadn't been brandishing any real weapon, they thought it was a hoot.

"You said she headed towards the park? With one shoe on and her dress falling off? Yeah? What color were her underwear?"

Shell-shocked, I watched them get in their squad car, still laughing to each other, and drive away.

Then, shaky-breathed and innocently 17, I pulled the tubs of scarves back out on the street. The day's puddles had mostly dried up. The ones that were left glowed golden in the four o'clock sun. I left the manikin naked in the window, but I don't remember it occurring to me, for even a moment, to close up for the day—C. had told me not to close under any circumstances. There are some benefits to employing teenagers.

I made my way to the back of the shop and started steaming hats. The antiquated steamer, which dated, like everything else in that place, from some lost era predating the Kennedy

administration, was a formidable dragon of a weapon should the crazy lady return.

But she didn't. Instead, sometime later that afternoon, the door creaked open and in came one of the Italians. He was about 90, completely bald, and moved slowly, inch by inch, through the sea of dresses with his cane. When he reached me at my station by the steamer, he stood up straighter. "You all right?" he asked me sternly, his voice ragged and thickly Italian. "My friends and I, we saw the cops come. Somebody tried to bother you?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

"Me and my friends, we're watching out for you. Anything happens again, you come find us. We'll sort it out. Okay?"

"Thank you," I managed to squeak faintly. I was certain at that point that if I opened my mouth any further, I would start bawling.

Nodding, he turned around and shuffled back out the door.

it eats right through everything

jacob kaplan

i quit smoking and now all I can bring myself to do is make sandwiches. So I sit at the counter with my lidless mustard and mayonnaise containers and worn-out butter knives, spreading and chopping in half. I have a sink full of dirty china and the soapy water is spilling out over the sides. When the inheritance money came in, I splurged on kitchen renovations to make the place look new again. I had the cabinets redone and the walls painted Bone White. It looks nicer, sure, but it's still a mess. And here's the worst part: there is this sticky yellow grease that clings to everything in sight, and I can't for the life of me figure out how to get rid of it.

On Saturday morning, I am standing amongst that very grease, thinking about breakfast sandwich options. I open the fridge and root around, pushing aside milk and OJ in order to get to the good stuff. I find large supplies of Swiss and mustard but I fail to locate any lunchmeat. That's when it dawns on me:

I used up all the ham and turkey the other night. I made sandwich after sandwich to stave off the nicotine cravings and all that's left are these sheets of wax paper, blotchy and stained with meat juice. I am in no mood for a plain old grilled cheese. I throw on my coat and head down to the deli.

The deli is called Manny's and it is attached to a video rental store that is also called Manny's. It is possible to access the video rental store from the deli—you just walk past the frozen foods and you're surrounded by VHS and DVD racks. I've found myself browsing the horror section while waiting for the deli guy to wrap up whatever I ordered. Today, though, I don't wander. I stand in front of the glassed-in meat and cheese display, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I ask for a pound of turkey and a pound of ham. Then I notice this thing taped to the glass. It is an ad for a maid.

The ad is an ordinary piece of printer paper,

a little tattered. There is a crude illustration of a broom in the center of the paper, and below that: **Maid! Cheap and Thorough.** It is one of those ads with a row of tear-off telephone numbers along the bottom, like a bunch of crooked teeth. I take one and pocket it. A maid could get the kitchen looking clean again, I think. And it's not just the kitchen that needs straightening up; the rest of the apartment has become so cluttered that I can't make much sense of it anymore. Before Uncle Mick died, I didn't have any stuff, but once the money started coming in, so did the stuff. I have begun to pile things in the corners.

"Mister," says the deli guy, which means that my order is up. My order is two bulky mounds of wax paper: the turkey and the ham. I leave the deli, turkey in one hand, ham in the other.

I am walking back and then I start thinking about cigarettes again because most of the time I just can't help it. Since I quit, I've noticed smokers everywhere. I've seen ten-year-old kids taking drags from mentholated tobacco, squinting as the smoke makes its way through their tiny lungs. I've seen old ladies hacking their way through packs of Virginia Slims. I watch all these people enjoying their smokes and some kind of primal rage or lust begins to build inside me, starting at my stomach and working its way up to my throat. But then I take a deep breath and think of Uncle Mick. He died

because he smoked. Technically, though, he died from emphysema, but that is close enough. What I mean to say is, after all that emphysema nonsense, the last thing I need is another cigarette. And also I have this girl who is nagging me about it. She calls sometimes in the middle of the day to ask whether or not my addiction has finally gotten the better of me. Her name is Julia.

When I get home, I pause on the front stoop and think about sprinting back to the deli and buying a pack of Camels and smoking the whole thing. Instead, I go inside and set the lunchmeat down on the kitchen counter. Then I start laying out my other sandwich stuff. The yellow grease is still everywhere and I try to place my spreading knives so that they don't touch it. I take a good look at the grease and figure that it is a combination of crusted mustard and some kind of mildew or fungus. I can't be sure. I consider calling Julia for a moment and then decide not to. I take the phone number out of my pocket and dial the maid.

The phone rings for a long time and while it rings I lodge the receiver between my ear and shoulder. I remove a jar of super-fancy jalapeño mayonnaise from the fridge and twist the lid until it opens. I bought the mayonnaise at a gourmet grocery store. I've been to several gourmet grocery stores recently, and here's what I've noticed: the shopping baskets are made out of wicker and there

are usually hired greeters at the door. The greeters smile and tell you to have a good time inside the store. The greeters are made to do this all day.

I slice some rye myself because I don't buy pre-sliced, and then a man answers the phone. I ask for the maid. He says, "Hey, this is Gary. I'm the maid." Then I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. I put ham and turkey on the rye and top it off with extra sharp cheddar. I spread the jalapeño mayonnaise on the other slice and put the mayonnaise side and the meat and cheese side together so that they make a sandwich.

Gary jumps in. He explains that my surprise is normal. Most people, upon hearing the word "maid," envision a female. He goes on to explain that he is not some kind of weirdo, and that advertising himself as a "maid" is a purely practical decision. It yields more customers.

I decide to believe this. Gary is a maid, and if he can get the job done, that is enough. So I ask him when he can come by.

"Actually," he says, "I have an opening today. I can come by in a few hours."

I tell him to hold on, then I put the phone down and complete the sandwich by adding pickles. I bite into it. It is one of my better sandwiches. The jalapeño mayonnaise provides a kick that takes me by surprise. I pick up the receiver and tell Gary to come over as soon as he can. I tell him to bring his

best cleaning supplies. Then I hang up.

I get a plate for the sandwich and leave the kitchen. I can't stand to look at the yellow for much longer so I decide that I will stay holed up in the living room with the television on until Gary comes over and fixes everything. I just bought this new couch with leather upholstery, and I am excited about putting it to use. Before I sit down, though, I have to push aside some snow globes that are in my way. There are many of them, all from different states, even states where it definitely doesn't snow. The strangest is Mississippi. I remember buying them all at the same flea market. They came in a 20-pack. As I am remembering this, Colorado rolls off the leather upholstery and splits itself open on the carpet. Weird gel drips out. Gary will deal with it.

I flip through the channels with one hand while eating the sandwich with the other. I finally settle on *Conquest*, a program about the Middle Ages or something. It is on the History Channel. I am just getting into it when Julia calls. This does not take me by surprise. I let the phone ring a little. The narrator says something about chivalry. Then I press the Send button and say, "Julia, you're going to be proud of me."

I tell Julia about the maid, and it becomes clear that she isn't proud of me at all. I thought that she would approve of my initiative. I thought she might refer to it as "taking action." Instead, she refers to it

as “lazy and spoiled.” She thinks that I am avoiding my responsibilities as a grown-up in the real world. She thinks that the inheritance money is making me soft. She thinks that I need to learn how to clean my own goddamn apartment.

“Julia,” I say, “If you saw this place, you would understand. There’s this yellow stuff. It looks toxic.”

She pauses.

“Are you smoking?” she asks. “I can hear you smoking.” I am not smoking. I tell her this. What I don’t tell her is that I wish I had a cigarette this very instant. And as to what she is hearing, I have no idea. She doesn’t believe me about the cigarettes, though. She tells me she’ll be over soon, so I better get my act together.

I look around the living room and think about how to make it more presentable before Julia shows up. I look at the broken snow globe and the cardboard boxes and the huge sound system that I wasn’t able to set up due to bad Japanese-to-English translation in the user’s manual. I notice that some of the yellow stuff has made its way onto the living room coffee table. I scratch at it with my fingernails, and it hardly gives. “That is some mysterious grease,” I say out loud. I settle back into the upholstery. The narrator is talking about mercenary knights who killed people in cold blood regardless of class. I watch for a while, and then the doorbell rings.

I go to the door and open it and there is Julia and a guy who is almost certainly Gary. Julia is wearing a sweater that looks like an ugly rug. It is frumpy and shroud-like. It masks her body. Julia is fat and she doesn’t want anyone to see any part of her most of the time. When we are in bed together she will remove only those items of clothing that are completely necessary to remove.

Julia looks at me and I can tell that things are not about to go well. She points to Gary and asks what he is doing here. Gary introduces himself. He shakes my hand and then Julia’s. He is small and dwarf-like. His sideburns are immaculate. He is carrying a bag of supplies and an ancient boom box. The boom box’s radio is on at a very low volume. It buzzes faintly, and, for a moment, we all listen.

But Julia cannot be distracted for long. She makes a beeline for the kitchen, nearly knocking me over. Then she does one of her mock screams, though this time it sounds a little more real. “Disgusting,” she says, making sure that Gary and I can hear. Gary looks uncomfortable. I smile and tell him to come with me, and we walk into the kitchen, where, of course, we find Julia. I offer both of them a sandwich. I tell them about the great new mayonnaise. Julia cringes. Gary shrugs. “Why not?” he says. “I’ll have a sandwich. As long as I can get to the cleaning soon. It looks like I have my work cut out for me.”

I start making Gary's sandwich. Julia grunts and stomps out of the kitchen. I bet she is nosing around the place, looking for incriminating evidence: ashtrays, spent butts, lighters. But I concentrate on my creation. I decide to really go for it. Sure, I include all the staple ingredients. But then I open the fridge and take out my secret weapon: Pickled radishes. *Shit*, I think, *This sandwich is going to knock Gary on his ass*. I cut it diagonally. I even find some of those toothpick umbrellas, and I stick one into each of the halves. The sandwich is a beautiful mess. I put it on some nice china and hand it to Gary.

Gary doesn't notice that I am handing him a sandwich. Gary is busy. He has set the boom box down and is rooting through his bag of supplies. He pulls out a spray bottle of Windex. He looks up from the bag and our eyes meet.

"This is not Windex," he explains. "This is my signature cleaning cocktail. It eats right through everything. I'll have your kitchen clean in no time."

He starts spraying it on the counter, and I can tell that he has forgotten about the sandwich and that perhaps I should give him some space while he works.

So I take the sandwich for myself. I retire to my place on the leather upholstery. And then I eat the sandwich. It is perfect. The radishes are so good that they practically make me cry. I think of Uncle Mick, who introduced me to pickled radishes. I remember

sitting on a wraparound porch with him a few years ago, indulging in cigarette after cigarette.

"If you find a woman who can put you in your place every once in a while, well, there's the girl you should be with," Uncle Mick wheezed. It was the middle of the night. We were at his house in Florida. You could see about a thousand different constellations.

"I have a girl like that," I told Uncle Mick. "I think we're in love."

Uncle Mick got really excited. "Is she a looker?" he asked. Then he calmed down and took a long drag. "At your age, they're all lookers." He said this plaintively. He exhaled towards the stars.

"She's not so much a looker, Uncle Mick. But she knows me. And she knows how to take care of me."

I take another bite and think about whether or not this is still true. My thoughts are interrupted by a vacuum cleaner-like sound. The sound is coming from the kitchen. I wonder how Gary fit an entire vacuum cleaner into that bag. Maybe it is a very small vacuum cleaner. But then I think, *First things first*. I put the sandwich down without finishing it and I go off to find Julia. I will eat the rest of the sandwich later. Right now, though, I am going to save our relationship.

It turns out that there is no vacuum cleaner. The sound is coming from the radio, which has been turned up extra loud. But all I can hear is static. The

radio must be between stations, I think. And then I realize what is going on. Gary has Julia pinned to the kitchen floor. He is smaller than she is, but, apparently, stronger. Her large body struggles and flails underneath his tiny one. It is a sight to behold.

I try to remain calm. I can't think of what to do. I stay still for a while, frozen, it seems, in the midst of all the static. I look away from Julia and Gary. I look back. Gary's pants are off. I panic and run into the living room. I am searching for something that might help me through whatever it is that is going on right now. And then all of a sudden I find myself holding this authentic machete I bought on eBay a few months ago. I am holding it with both hands. It cost \$3,000 dollars.

I reenter the kitchen. Gary and Julia are writhing on the very unclean tile floor. I can't get a good shot. I don't want to hit Julia. So I say, "Julia, goddamnit, keep that little freak still for a second." And she does. My Julia pulls through. She holds him in place and I bring the machete down on his head, making sure to use the side of the blade, the blunt part. The last thing I need is a big red bloodstain in the middle of this already god-awful mess.

And then I am in my bed with Julia, my girlfriend, and for the first time in the history of our relationship I have gotten her completely naked. She is huge. She is beautiful. She lies down on top of me and her skin is a warm and porous blanket. Gary

is unconscious in the kitchen. We have forgotten about him for now.

Julia says, "Take me, you crazy fucking samurai!"

Samurais did not use machetes. I know this much about history, at least. But I do not correct her. I do as she says.

Afterwards, I have the upper hand for a while. I hit up my secret stash and smoke a Camel Filter. I offer one to Julia, and she smokes, too. It is the first cigarette I have had in so long. The nicotine hits my brain and I experience an honest-to-god high. I show her the snow globes and we are careful not to step on broken Colorado.

We go into the kitchen and move Gary's limp little body aside. I make us sandwiches, pickled radishes and everything. Julia is still completely naked and she eats ravenously.

We decide to move Gary out into the hallway. We decide not to press charges, to let bygones be bygones. Then I look around and I realize that that little motherfucker hadn't cleaned shit.



twenty-three years

gina pollack

each

golf ball hit the water with a plunk, creating a polite splash before sinking into the five-foot depths of the concrete basin below, leaving several chlorinated ripples behind.

With each splash, she received a powerful sense of satisfaction, one that filled her up but left her empty, craving more.

She threw in another one. Plunk. Splash. Ripple. She couldn't stop.

The golf balls were collecting on the bottom of the pool now, rolling slowly to the deep end.

She let out a deep breath and took another sip of Scotch, reclining in her padded lounge chair. This was the first time in 23 years that she'd had a drink that strong. She threw her head back and felt the sun on her skin. After all the Botox treatments, the chemical peels, the years of powder and make-up remover, she was surprised that she could still feel anything.

The sprinklers whirled, feeding the immaculate lawn, each blade mowed evenly, sparkling in the daylight.

It sickened her. The lawn, the pool, the patio furniture, the monstrous barbeque grill that no one ever used. All of it.

And now the golf balls were losing their appeal. What next? She had already tossed in a closet's worth of business suits, an electric razor, an assortment of hideous ties, a box of cigars, a stack of paperwork, and two tennis racquets. The corners of her lips raised into a self-congratulatory smile as she watched his favorite brown leather desk chair bobbing through a sea of black suits, its legs sticking into the air, the little black wheels turning slightly in the breeze.

The bastard. He would never expect this.

It all started that morning. Not when she caught him canoodling with his young secretary

during the lunch break or when she stumbled upon evidence of a long-term affair with Sheila, the flirt neighbor who had just lost half her body weight with the help of Jenny Craig. Because neither of those things had actually happened. He wasn't the kind of guy who would fuck other women. And she wasn't the kind of woman who would go through all the trouble to catch him in the act. She didn't discover him embezzling money or jerking off to strange fetish websites either. She would have liked something more dramatic, but he couldn't even give her the courtesy of being a closeted homosexual or a pathological liar.

It happened that morning when she woke up to the sound of snoring. This was not your average irritating snore, the kind that could be attributed to heavy breathing or a slight cold. It was more of a rumble, one that began deep in the chest and pushed its way through the nose. If a steam engine ever collided with a rupturing volcano, she imagined that it would sound something like the noise that her husband expelled from his nostrils.

Surprise was not the emotion that enveloped her at that moment. Perhaps she was hit with the realization that she was not surprised at all, that she had, in fact, been subjected to this ungodly roar every morning since that fateful gold band slid onto her naïve little finger. She had glanced at the ring momentarily, then let her eyes drift from

her left hand to his stomach, which was rising and falling with each snore.

His stomach was round and large, sagging over his sides, losing the age-old battle against gravity. The skin stretched over it, begging for mercy but receiving none. A line of graying hair trickled from his chest, growing coarser until it reached his bellybutton. The hair moved up and down, up and down, with every painful breath. His mouth was open, allowing more noise to escape, the result of trapped phlegm gurgling in his throat.

She looked at her husband and winced. She tried to ignore the rumbling sound that poured from his body, searching for a redeeming quality. Just one was all she needed. Her eyes gazed over his protruding stomach, down past his pinstriped boxers, and further down to rest on thin legs, opened slightly and covered with curly hair that ran right down to the toes on his feet, which pointed out like a ballerina's. A hairy, snoring ballerina with a beer belly. And a ring that matched hers.

She couldn't pinpoint what bothered on this morning in particular. It had been like all the rest before it. She woke before him to a sound slightly more pleasant than tectonic plates crashing against one another in the earth's core, slightly more pleasant than being in the front of a 20-car pileup. But only slightly. She stepped out of bed, showered and blow-dried her hair, making sure that it was

smooth before applying her lipstick.

This morning she looked into the mirror and noticed the lines that surrounded her lips, the deepening line between her eyebrows, and the really pesky lines that crept in on her lids from every angle, forming deep, loose bags underneath. Evidence of 23 years of agonizing sleep. The kind of sleep that most people only get on red-eye flights, the kind of sleep that makes those people look forward to waking up to the stale aroma of airplane food, their necks stuck in 45-degree angles. She smoothed some firming lotion onto her skin with the balls of her fingers.

As she made her way back through the bedroom, the snoring stopped and was replaced by three wet smacks of his mouth. He rolled onto his side, scratched his outer thigh, sat up, and stepped out of bed, yawning and barely opening his eyes. His feet hit the carpeted floor and he stumbled downstairs to wait for his breakfast.

The sound of his snoring remained in her ears as she put on her mascara. She didn't even enjoy picking out the right necklace for the charity event that afternoon, a task that usually gave her great pleasure.

His breakfast: Two scrambled eggs, buttered toast, and three slices of bacon. Her breakfast: Low-fat yogurt topped with sprinklings of low-fat granola. They sat at the table and ate in silence,

while he squinted at the daily Sudoku puzzle.

She had given up on the Special K diet, the South beach diet, the No-Carb diet, the Weight Watchers diet, the Cabbage Soup diet (oh yes, it exists), the Three Hour diet, the Fit for Life diet, the Curves diet, the Slim Fast diet, and, most recently, the Raw Foods diet. She had also invested in Bob Greene's Total Body Makeover diet and Bill Phillip's Body for Life diet. Only \$19.99 with guaranteed results.

She still had 15 pounds to lose, but this morning she looked at her husband and had the sudden urge to devour his bacon. For the first time in 23 years, she envied him. And it was then that a deeper craving hit her. She wanted something that tasted good, none of that fiber-enriched, low-fat soy crap that she'd been force-feeding herself for god knows how long. She wanted a cheeseburger. The kind that made its brown paper wrapping clear with hot grease. The kind with Thousand Island dressing, mayonnaise, and mustard. And a fat slap of melted cheddar cheese.

But she knew that a cheeseburger was out of the question. She needed something else. So when her husband left, dressed in a black suit and an ugly patterned tie, she walked upstairs and opened his closet door to reveal piles and stacks and hangers, all full of him. She then opened a second door, the sliding door, stepped onto the concrete balcony,

and threw all of it into the sparkling pool below. All of him, piece by piece. It felt almost as good a cheeseburger tasted, although she couldn't remember exactly what that taste was.

Plunk.

Another golf ball landed with a splash. Another sip of Scotch burned its way down her throat. She pictured him in his golf outfit. Those white shorts that ended above his knees, the white polo shirt to match, the one that hugged his stomach. The way he stood there, with his pouch of golf balls and his club holder, smug and proud. Like he had just made a hole in one and eaten a mouthful of bacon at the same time.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a head pop up over the fence. Two beady eyes, one nose job, and a pair of collagen plumped lips. It was Sheila, her favorite neighbor. She was staring at the leather chair, the one that resembled a drowning animal. Her mouth was open, just a little. Her eyes were still beady, but were wider than usual with a wistful look that said she wished she could click her red heels and go back to Kansas, where things would be more, well, normal.

"Oh, mind your own fucking business, Sheila."

A golf ball flew through the air. This was too much for Sheila, who let out a little yelp and retreated. Her eyes scanned over the chair, the soggy ties, the watery suits, a translucent check

book, scattered cigars floating like little twigs in all directions. For Sheila, this was worse than the apocalypse. As she scurried back to her kitchen, she felt her Jenny Craig meal rising in her chest, all 134 calories of it.

The sprinklers stopped. It was almost six. She heard the door to the front of the house open, the key turning in its lock.

She heard his footsteps in the front hall, pictured him hanging his coat in the front closet, heard his footsteps entering the living room, going through the living room, sensed him feeling the breeze created by the open glass doors that led to the backyard. It would be only a few seconds before he laid eyes on his waterlogged wardrobe. His expression would be priceless, more satisfying than a fat, juicy burger with bacon and cheese and a toasted bun.

There was nothing to do but wait. She lifted the glass to her smiling lips once more and took a long sip, turning another golf ball over and over in her other hand. Twenty-three years, she thought. She had waited long enough.

mom drinks at night

sarah secunda

Your face fell forward

Into your plate,

Then reared up:

Your ketchup nose—

A night-wound—

I wiped it clean with your napkin.

How often had I heard you say

You liked to eat alone.

And night after night that's how I found you.

katherine bernard **re: benny**

Benny never leaves the study
I could throw a fit if it weren't for my Lord
The other night I was ironing a hem
When I heard the sound
Of ripping hair
I'd seen the skulls of maddened saints
So I fetched the study key
And blew open the door
There was Benny
The base of my taxidermied owl near his lap
A naked bulb with glass eyes
And feathers strewn in tufts
Like moth wing bouquets.

my father thought this new faith would last

katherine bernard

In the thickest city you saw a bird
And its swerve inspired you to uproot your family.
Your youngest child carried a rake
And dragged it over your path
Pained by the finality.
Over the steady walking he sang school rhymes:
Euphony for the migration,
And when it got to be miles and miles
Since you had seen a familiar turn
Or recognized a mountain
You said: *children, stand in a line.*
And you gestured to the land
Like you were sowing seeds.
This, this, this! you said,
Beaming at the foreign dell,
Will be our new quietude,
Within and around us.
Feeling unprepared for comfort lost,
Your youngest child wailed and
Through fertile air, his cries advanced
A litany of your fears.



a strange confession

carol cho

the

air was damp and muffled, like a cotton ball that had been dropped into a small pool of water. I left a little early from the gallery so that I could bring a package to UPS to be delivered back to an artist from the last exhibit. But before I could do that, I went to meet up with an old friend. I waited for him outside of the café across from the subway station. He arrived right on time.

I chose the table with three seats by the window. I decided on an Earl Grey tea and a cinnamon scone. He ordered a tuna sandwich and a coffee. I rested my package in the third seat and massaged my sore shoulder. The waitress brought our drinks and food pretty quickly; the place was quiet at the awkward hours in-between meals.

"Looks pretty heavy." He yo-yoed the box in his hands. "That's pretty heavy."

I shrugged.

"When do you have to drop that off?"

"Any time before five o'clock. So," I glanced at the clock, "I should leave in about an hour."

It had been some time since I had seen him. We both had busy schedules, and at the end of the day, it was hard to find the energy to see each other very often. We shared a mutual appreciation for certain things and enjoyed each other's company. Drinking his coffee, he looked peaceful under the fluorescent light. No, peaceful wasn't the right word. Although there was something different about him, I couldn't place what it was. The change felt subtle but definite. It was as if the pile of books sitting on my shelf had been rearranged; I couldn't tell you which books had been switched around but I could sense it. We had the usual chitchat about what we had both been up to, movies we had seen, books we'd read, and stories of mutual friends. And while reminiscing about trip we took during our freshman year in college, I remembered his roommate that

year, Frank. On a whim, I confessed to my friend that I had liked Frank for a while. A lot of other girls had crushes on him as well and I was a pretty shy girl back then so I made do with bumping into him on campus once in a while.

"That doesn't come as such a surprise. I always knew you had something for Frank." He pulled his lips back slightly, showing only a portion of his top teeth. Was it a smile?

"I'm not quite sure why, but I feel like I could tell you anything." He said plainly, taking a sip of his coffee. "I'm not just saying it, I really mean it." I could only assume that he was being sincere, the usual playfulness from his speech was gone.

"I always felt the same way about you," I echoed.

A pause.

"This is going to sound weird."

Another pause.

"I had no intention of telling anyone about this because it's going to sound pretty unusual."

I asked him to go on.

"I saw Frank a couple of weeks ago. It's been around three weeks."

"Oh?" I was curious, "How is he doing?"

He sat there for a moment, fixated on the question.

"It's hard to say," he began, "I'm not even quite sure if it was Frank."

I tilted my head, "What do you mean?"

"Well, I'll have to start from the very beginning. I hope you don't mind, I mean I just don't feel right telling you what happened without giving you the whole story."

I broke off a piece of my scone and put it in my mouth. I sipped my tea and let the scone dissolve in the warm liquid, blending the two together.

"You don't mind, do you?" I did not realize he was waiting for my confirmation.

I swallowed. "I don't mind at all."

"It was a Friday. The morning that I saw Frank, I woke up late for work."

His speech picked up momentum.

"For some reason, I had slept through my alarm clock and woke up at 10 A.M. This was weird because I'm a pretty light sleeper and I have never slept through my alarm before. I just shrugged it off and told myself 'Hey, there's a first time for everything,' got dressed and hurried to the subway. I was running late but I wasn't too worried about it because I'm hardly ever late to work. Actually, I had never been late to work before that day."

He must have realized that he sounded nervous. He took a drink from his mug, and continued in a more controlled tone.

"Well, anyway, I figured my boss would understand and I patiently waited for the train to arrive. When the train came, I barely squeezed into

the car because it was rush hour. I was pushed up against the door, breathing in peoples' scents."

His eyes were half closed, and he inhaled deeply as if he could smell it even now.

"The girl next to me smelled citrusy and sweet, it mingled with the muted smell of sweat and cologne from some older guys around me. After a couple of stops, the train emptied out and eventually I sat down. There were only a handful of people left in the train by then so it wasn't hard to spot Frank. He was sitting at the other side of the car, across from where I was."

He turned his head, I followed his gaze to an empty corner.

"I had a pretty good view of his profile. At first glance, I immediately recognized him and was about to go over and say hello. Then, I changed my mind—"

He stopped, "I'm sorry, is something bothering you?"

I must have been making a strange face without meaning to. I said no. I blew on my tea and put the cup to my mouth without drinking it.

"What happened next?"

"Where was I?" He rubbed the back of his neck.

"You were about to go over to Frank, but you changed your mind."

"Yes. Something changed my mind. He turned his head to look at the time and I was struck with a

knotted, heavy feeling in my stomach. As if my gut, literally, was telling me something was off."

He looked straight into my eyes and asked, "Do you ever dream about people you know, like your friends or family? And in your dream they look and act a certain way that makes perfect sense in the context of the dream but when you wake up you think: That looked nothing like so-and-so and if it had been real life, I would never have associated this person with these characteristics."

I nodded.

"That's what it was like. Seeing Frank that day. Don't get me wrong, he had the same face, same color hair, same height, same build . . . It was like I was dreaming, and I knew that it was Frank but it didn't feel like it was Frank. I just stared at him from a short distance. Anyone else would have noticed that they were being looked at and looked back, but he didn't. I missed my stop. I didn't even care, I wanted to follow him. It was such a strong feeling that I didn't even try to fight it.

"I watched him get up, walk over to the door to get ready to get off at the upcoming stop. I saw him look at his reflection in the glass. His expression was blank. He didn't blink once. For some reason, I had to know if this was really him, you know, my old roommate. So when he got off at the next stop, I got off too."

He took another bite of his sandwich and

chewed on it for a long time. Even after he swallowed, he kept the sandwich in his hands.

“He walked up the stairs in quick choppy strides, I followed closely behind. I don’t know what was going through my mind at the time. I was so focused on following him and I couldn’t even tell you why. I stepped out onto an unfamiliar neighborhood somewhere far downtown. Frank seemed to know where he was going. He was walking fast like he had an appointment to be somewhere; it took some effort on my part to keep up with his pace. Roughly about 10, 15 minutes from the subway station, Frank stopped outside of a small restaurant and went in. It was one of those places that you wouldn’t even notice if you were just passing by. I waited outside for a little bit and then went inside.

The setting was dimly lit and intimate. I remember thinking to myself that it was a little early to eat at this kind of joint. I sat at a table diagonal from Frank. He hadn’t even picked up the menu. He must have been a regular customer because when the waitress came, he knew exactly what he wanted. The waitress was small and plain. Her hair was pulled back into a thick ponytail that hung low, tied at the nape of her neck. A few minutes later, the waitress came over to me and asked me if I was ready to order. I had been using the menu more to hide myself than anything else, so I told her to get me whatever the other customer had ordered,

discreetly pointing to Frank. I could tell she found this odd; it didn’t matter to me.

“Frank’s appetizer arrived first—it was spinach gnocchi in a Gorgonzola cream sauce served with large rustic pieces of bread. Mine arrived soon after. Then came the black squid ink spaghetti with sautéed calamari and cremini mushrooms. Our tables filled up with more and more plates—pan-seared steaks and seasoned potatoes and a generous piece of a rich lemon cake. It all smelled delicious but I couldn’t bring myself to eat any of it. Watching Frank eat his food was hypnotic. Fork in his left hand, knife in his right; they sliced and prod, swung and twirled in the pasta and meats. Frank ate continuously for nearly two hours. He ate it all, pausing between plates only to drink some water to clear his palate.”

He paused once more, put his sandwich down on his cold, ceramic plate and looked at it briefly. He went on.

“Then, the strangest thing happened: as soon as Frank finished swallowing his last bite of lemon cake, I felt a strong wave of nausea. Worse than anything I had felt before. I made my way to the bathroom and knelt down in front of a toilet. I felt the toast and eggs make its way up my stomach as my mouth moved closer to the toilet bowl. I opened my mouth and let the vomit pour out from between my lips. It was warm and acidic. I could

even taste the orange juice I had with breakfast.”

I had no desire to take another bite from my scone.

“And while I was throwing up, suddenly I was looking down at myself, or rather, the back of my head gushing vomit into the toilet, staring at my fingers turning white from gripping the toilet lid. Then, when I was done throwing up, as unexpectedly as I had left my body, I was back. I felt completely normal. Maybe even better than normal. I stood up, dusted my pants off and walked out of the bathroom like nothing had happened.

“When I got back to my seat, I saw that Frank had already left. His table had been cleared and set up for the next customers. I asked for the check. The waitress offered to wrap the food but I declined. I left and started walking. I walked aimlessly until I got to a train station that I recognized and went home. When I got home, I fell asleep. I slept for a long time. A long dreamless sleep.

“I woke the next night and I couldn’t remember some of what happened the day before. I could remember every detail of what happened before running into Frank, the citrus smell, what I was thinking on the train platform, but not the name of the stop Frank and I got off of, or the name of the restaurant . . . ” He placed his hands, palms down, on the table.

“The weirdest part is,” He lightly shakes his head

from side to side, “I can’t even remember what Frank looks like anymore. I drove myself insane trying to remember his face but I couldn’t do it. I still can’t. I don’t even have pictures of Frank.”

His gaze shot through me. He had finished his story.

“How strange,” I stammered.

“Yeah. How strange.” I looked for traces of confusion, anger, regret in his expression but found nothing.

He pointed out that it was nearly five o’clock. I stood up, hastily pulled out some folded dollar bills, picked up the box from the seat and apologized for having to rush off. I said goodbye and that I would call him later tonight.

He didn’t respond. He gazed down at his coffee, his fingers fixed tightly around the mug. It looked as if he was looking into a dark, empty hole.



the stain

tegan mcdonough

WE

called him 30 times that day. Maybe more. We just wanted to hear his voice. It rang, one, two, three, four times before he spoke: "Hey guys, it's Nate. You know what to do after the beep." Before the programmed voice of that patronizing woman could start, we would flip the phone shut. Open, and repeat. We passed the phone around, each one of us taking our turn to listen to the recording.

My phone was the only one still in commission. Blake's was being ground further into tiny pieces on a sidewalk in Dixon, Missouri, where he had smashed it after getting the call. Alex's was at the bottom of West Lake Okoboji, thrown off the side of his parents' motorboat before he had even hung up. Jesse's was simply broken in half, discarded on his bedside table. He had been in his bedroom when he got the news. And Connor's was in that field somewhere, hurled as far away as he could manage after he had made the calls. Anything that

connected us to what had happened we destroyed.

I bought a pair of aviator sunglasses that same day and wore them the entire week. We all wore sunglasses that week, doing whatever we could to hide from it. Nothing worked.

The scene was stained on my mind. It played over and over again on the inside of my sunglasses and played even when I shut my eyes that first night, when I tried to sleep. I couldn't sleep. No one could. We couldn't sleep; we couldn't eat. We could simply exist, and we could only do that with mild success when we were together. So we stayed together. We got bags under our eyes together. We covered those bags with our sunglasses together. We lost our appetites and 15 pounds each together.

We acted out the same scene every day. We congregated in Blake's basement, Alex's room, Jesse's attic. We sat idle, made snide remarks in mechanical voices, microwaved frozen cuisine, let

the frozen cuisine cool to uneatable, threw stuffed animals or books at each other, then pretended to be offended after being hit by these objects. We thought about what we could do that day, debated about what we could do that day, pushing off decision after decision because not everyone was there, not all opinions had been offered, before remembering that we were all there. Nate wasn't going to saunter into the room and validate our decision. This was it.

They played "Good Riddance" by Green Day at his funeral. It played over a slideshow of all our favorite photographs, and the five of us clung to each other in the second row, trying to keep it together. From the sniffles and sobs behind us, I could tell no one else was. For the next four years, any time that song came on the radio, I fled. The first time I listened to it again was the last time I ever went back.

It was the summer after my sophomore year of college, and it was the first time I had been home in over a year. I knew the real reason I was there from the day I drove into town in my rented car, but I waited until my last day there to drive out to County Road 341. I had waited five days, staying in a town that was no longer my home, on the couches of friends I didn't really know anymore, before I pulled that unfamiliar car onto that familiar gravel shoulder and shut off the engine. I would never

forget that driveway.

I went to the memorial first, knowing it wasn't the real reason I had come. Everything was still there: the laminated photos, the messages, lamentations, and wishes scrawled all over the wood with the Sharpies purchased for the occasion, the poems, the faded ribbons and fake flowers wound around the post. It was all still there. I found the message I had left almost instantly. I could feel the Sharpie in my hand as I had scrawled the words at the bottom of the Polaroid, remembered the slick feel of the packing tape as I had laminated it.

Once again, I was choosing the perfect spot on the board to attach my photo, my tribute. Once again, I was taking that photo—Connor in the driver's seat, pushing 80; Nate and me with our heads hanging out the window, cheeks flushed, laughing at the thrill of being alive. The Polaroid camera had been further out the window, attached to my wrist with its strap but still in danger of being lost forever to an Iowa ditch lining a cornfield, miles from any town. I had clicked the shutter and quickly pulled my hand inside, grabbing at the picture.

"Move, asshole! I'm gonna lose the photo!" Nate laughed at my indignation and shoved me closer to the window. I tried to push against him, but I never won against any of the guys. He grabbed the wrist of the hand holding the photo and held my arm out the window.

“The wind’ll help it develop!”

Real wind hit my face, bringing me back to the present. I looked at the Polaroid again. The lamination hadn’t been perfect, and the photo had lost its color in one corner, washing out the top of the Jeep. I turned away from the memorial and started walking down the road, heading toward the spot I had not visited since that day. Everyone else had returned, multiple times even, often together, maybe seeing through my excuses to stay away, maybe not.

Blake and Alex still came back from college to stay every summer, as far as I had heard, and made a habit of visiting every year on the anniversary of Nate’s death. They stopped calling me after I didn’t make it back the first two years. The last time I had talked to Jesse—maybe a year ago—he had mentioned he still stopped by whenever he was home from Oregon, which wasn’t often. He had been working at a pizza place full time, having given up on college, and time off was hard to come by. Connor had made it back with Blake and Alex the first year, but no one had heard much from him since. We had all known something had broken after that summer—that our friendships with each other would never be quite as genuine, never quite as necessary.

I passed the first driveway, my steps slowing, my eyes on the ground. Each step got me closer,

and before I knew it, I was there. The blood would probably never wash away; it had stained too deeply. My eyes started at the edge they had first bumped into, slowly tracing the image until I saw it fully: the bloody print from Nate’s body, starting closer to the road where he had first hit and dragging up the driveway five feet to where he finally stopped. At the top, where he had come to rest, I could still see where the remnants of his head had ended up, where each limb playing at being an arm had stopped.

“What the fuck is that idiot doing?!” Connor yelled, laughing as he swerved around another curve on County Road 341.

“I don’t know, being Nate.”

I tried to catch a glimpse of Nate’s bike ahead of us, but he had just swerved around the last curve before the home stretch, disregarding the posted speed limit signs as we always did. No one ever drove on this road.

“Can we just get to Jesse’s? I have to pee like a motherfucker.”

“Watch your language. Girls don’t pee.”

“Oh, fuck off.” I reached over and pulled on the steering wheel, forcing Connor to overcorrect and make us swerve further in the other direction.

“Bitch.”

We rounded the last curve and saw Nate 50 yards ahead of us, closing the gap between himself

and the SUV in front of him.

“Bets on how long it takes him to pass them.” Connor probably would have owed us all thousands of dollars if we held him to his bets.

“Six seconds.”

“Buuull shit. At least eight.”

“One-one thousand—” Nate was 20 yards behind them and speeding up. “Two-one thousand—” Ten yards and he already had his blinker on. “Three-one thousand—” He closed the gap and pulled out into the other lane, glancing back to grin at us.

I don’t know if Nate saw the expressions on our faces change, but if he did, he didn’t have time to turn and look before an SUV executed a left turn without a signal, turning into a driveway, and turning into Nate. I don’t know why I kept watching. Nate and his bike were pulled under the SUV, and I couldn’t understand what all the red could mean. The SUV stopped. We stopped. I heard a car door open and close, and saw Connor running toward the SUV. A woman in her 40s was getting out of the driver’s seat. I watched her cry as Connor yelled at her. An ambulance arrived. I already knew what they would decide.

At some point I found myself outside of the Jeep, standing next to Connor on the gravel shoulder. He was doing something with his phone. I heard words and names—Jesse, Alex, Blake—that I recognized,

but I couldn’t figure out how to fit them all together. Connor chucked his phone into the field, and it was the only action that made sense to me. The ambulance left. Cops arrived. Jesse arrived. People asked us questions that we couldn’t understand, and then went away. The three of us stood there amidst it all, not moving—knowing, feeling, and denying that he was gone.

justin spees **the widower**

Settled on the cusp of his kitchen chair,
he noticed the pixelated face of a Chinese conscript staring
at the overhead lamp from the confines of the newspaper.

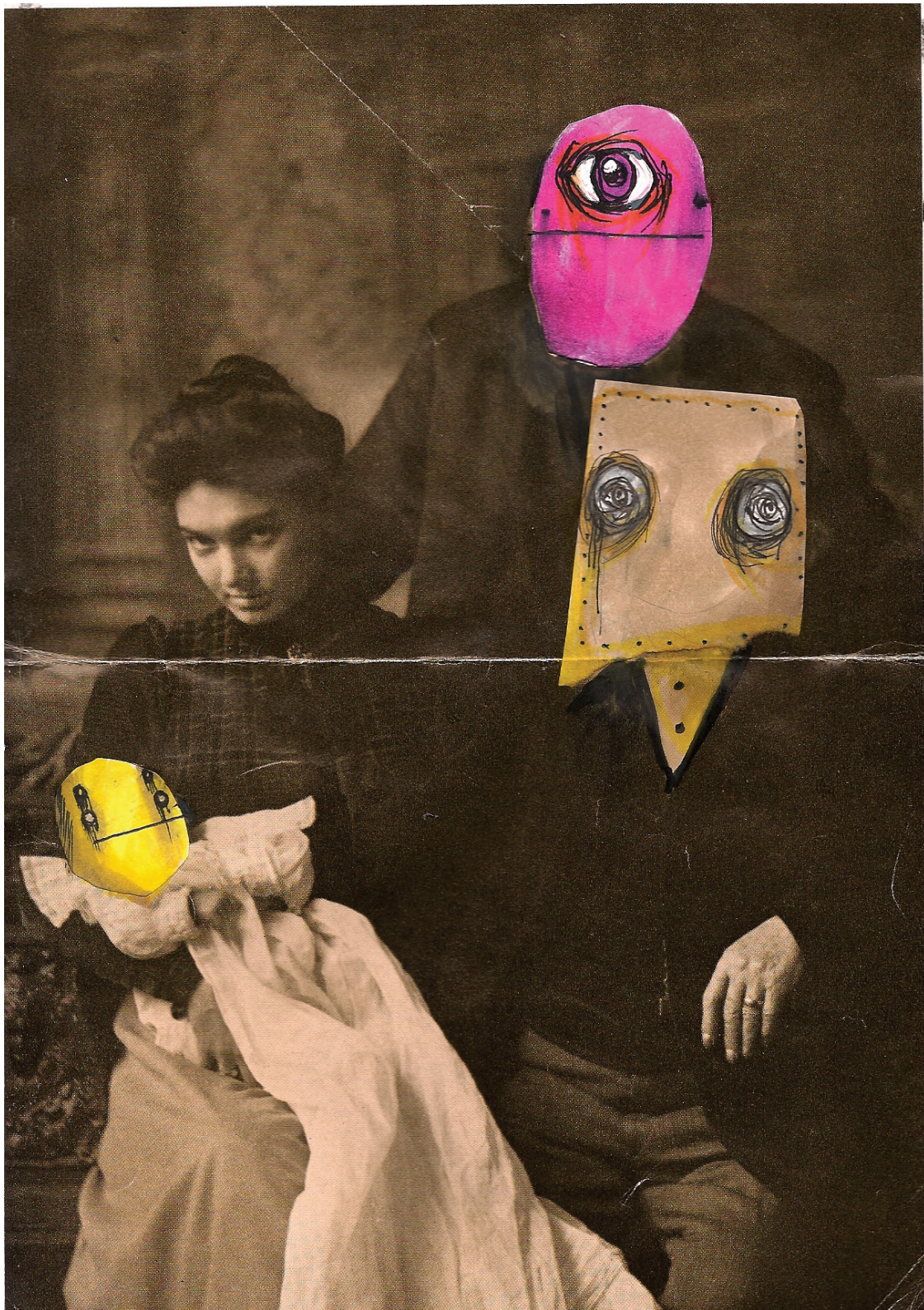
From outside, an echo of stranded dialogue
advanced to the walls of the house
and fell onto the ground at its edges,
like the dust that follows in the silence after a gunshot.
A basketball lay in the grass by the driveway.

“Don’t tell anybody what you’re thinking,” he smiled,
and his face was softened in the peaks of his lips.
“Don’t tell anybody else.”
He flipped the switch on the wall,
and floated into bed.

稍挑細選. 現殺現賣. 新鮮好吃









proper decibels for the dead, the deaf and the dumb

briana severson

they

played King and Servant; Luke was the King and Abigail was the Servant.

"We'll switch up after five minutes," Luke said.

Abigail nodded.

"Get me some orange juice, slave," he ordered.

Abigail bowed to him and ran frantically up the stairs, her long blond ponytail slapping against her back. She filled a green Tupperware glass to the top with Tropicana, then darted back down the stairs, out of breath by the time she reached Luke, who sat rod-straight in a wooden rocking chair.

"Here you go, master."

"Thank you, slave." He took the glass from her and drank the juice in four ferocious gulps. "I'm tired now. Fetch me a pillow."

Abigail fetched him a pillow.

"Prop it up behind my neck," he instructed. "My bones are weary."

Being a 10-year-old boy, Luke's bones were

anything but weary, but Abigail believed everything he said. She brought him her favorite pillow, the one with the Beauty and the Beast pillowcase, and wedged it between his bony neck and the equally stiff wood of the chair.

"Thank you, slave," he said. "Now let me nap."

Abigail sat patiently at his feet. Every few seconds she glanced at the broken digital wristwatch that Luke had given her for Christmas. ("It's a relic of an ancient ruler," he insisted.) When she was sure that more than five minutes had passed, she tapped at the top of his bare foot. "King?" she tried. "King?"

But Luke was asleep or at least pretending to be—he let out bellowing snores every few breaths and a slender line of drool reached from the corner of his mouth.

"Luke? It's my turn now, I think." He continued sleeping. "It's been ten minutes, Luke." Snores. Abigail grabbed his shirt sleeve and tugged it.

"Wake UP!" she insisted, frantic but not knowing why. Suddenly she remembered something Luke had done once to her to get her to wake up, and she walked to the bathroom. She returned with a Dixie cup full of water and poured it in to Luke's right ear. Then she sidled up next to him and screamed, "Wake UP, Luke!"

Though she apologized as soon he returned from the doctor's office, Abigail never forgave herself for deafening her brother in his right ear. Every glissando she played, every gust of wind, every rain drop—she knew that Luke wasn't hearing it right, that he was hearing only choppy beats through his broken ear. Since that day 12 years prior, Abigail heard everything her brother asked for, loud and clear.

"It's just that, my 18th summer, Mom made me look after Grandma, y'know? And it wouldn't really be fair, would it, Abby, for you to have a free summer where I couldn't?" Luke said.

"No, no," Abigail replied.

"Good. I'll call Ms. Mallorca and tell her to take the summer off."

"Okay," Abigail said. She tried not to think about how much she hated her grandmother, hated that her creamy face was a cocktail of colors—rosacea, burn scars, liver spots. How her blue eyes rolled back in her head at random, how even when they focused on something, that something was never

Abigail's eyes. She could look at Luke, and she had been able to look at her late husband, but Abigail felt that not once in her entire life had she made eye contact with her grandmother

"It's not too bad," Luke said. "Grandma goes to sleep pretty early. And you can pick up whatever you want at the grocery store."

Abigail thought about how Luke knew that she was on an eggs-and-grapefruit diet. "Sure."

"The only thing that sucks is that she makes you read to her until she falls asleep every night. Sometimes that takes hours. Well, I guess it depends on your reading voice. If you have a really soft, kinda melodic voice, she's out in 10 minutes—20, tops."

Abigail thought about her chronic smoker's cough. She smiled and, as if on cue, let out a harsh, ragged cough.

"Oh," Luke said. "And after Granddad, she has this huge thing against smokers, so don't do it, 'k? She can smell it on you."

"Has she changed that much?" Abigail asked, remembering the story her grandmother used to tell about meeting her husband in a cloud of clove-smoke.

"Well, when was the last time you saw her?"

"September," Abigail said. "Two years ago."

"The funeral, then."

"Yup."

"Listen, Abby, it won't be that bad."

"I know," Abigail said. She felt like crying.

"Thanks," Luke said.

For a moment, she saw the King in his eye, saw him waving goodbye as she went to fill his glass with juice. A thick, molasses-like hatred seeped inside her chest, but Abigail smothered it with thoughts of the Bruch violin concerto, how she had lost her virginity to that piece, and how Luke would never really be able to hear it the way she heard it. And how that was her fault alone.

Luke patted her on the shoulder. "Get back to practicing," he said, and left the room.

Abigail sat with her violin cradled like a baby in her lap. She stared at the sheet music before her, heard the trills and crescendos rushing across the page. She breathed deeply, biting her lip as she exhaled, then picked up her violin and played.

Her grandmother said, "He's such a good boy. Stayed with me several summers ago."

Only because Mom made him, Abigail thought. "Yes ma'am," she said.

She pressed herself against the wall, willing the wallpaper to consume her, suck her in to obscurity. The heat was unbearable and her grandmother refused to turn on the air conditioning. It was only the second week of summer and already Abigail craved the cool air of university, the weekends in the practice room—anything other than eight hours a day spent next to her flatulent, sweaty

grandmother who only wanted to talk about Luke.

Her grandmother leaned to the side, squinted her eyes together, then relaxed. Abigail smelled boiled eggs, and pressed herself harder than ever to the wall.

Her grandmother leaned back in the chair, the same chair that Luke the King had sat in 12 years ago. It was older now, with several scratches through the polish where the raw white wood stuck out in splinters. It rocked just the same as before, with the same harpy squeak.

"I've lost 10 pounds," Abigail blurted.

"Good." Her grandmother rocked back and forth.

"Remember? How you told me it would be good for me?"

"No," her grandmother said. She frowned. "To be honest, you're looking too thin as it is."

Abigail brought the corners of her mouth up as high as she could. "Oh," she said. "What do you recommend?"

"Oh, I don't know," her grandmother said. "Does it matter?"

Abigail lowered her head. "Am I that hopeless?"

"What?"

"Nothing," Abigail said. Her leg cramped up from pressing so hard against the wall. She shuddered, stepped out of her invisible cocoon. "I'm sorry," she said. "Forget I asked."

"You shouldn't mumble," her grandmother said.
"Only mumble when you want the dead to hear."

"What?"

"You talk to the living," her grandmother said,
"and you whisper to the dead. God doesn't hear
screams. And it's silly to think he can hear thoughts.
You whisper to the dead and they hear you."

Abigail coughed, rubbed the corner of her eye.
"Right, Grandma."

"If you want to tell your grandfather something,
just . . ."

She trailed off, and her head fell lazily onto her
shoulder. Abigail turned and walked out of the
room, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

**

Luke gets the call while at a bar. He's on his fifth
Stella of the night and is three-quarters of the way
done telling a rapt group of drunkards about the
biggest trick he ever played.

His grandmother's voice is strangely calm. She
speaks as though she's reading from an obituary,
dry and solemn. He turns off the phone and stares
at the foam in his amber bottle.

A ruddy Irishman named Chris O'Malley snaps
his fingers near Luke's face. "So wait," he says. "So
she still believes you?"

"I should tell my wife that she deafened me,"

says the bartender. "Maybe then she'd stop bein'
such a frigid bitch every night."

"Do whatcha ask for, all the time," says a stout
man drinking stout ale.

"Like role-play all the time," says a man with a
gold-flecked moustache.

"But she still believes you, right, killer?" says
Chris O'Malley.

Luke nods. For the first time since he lied to
Abigail 12 years ago, he feels a twinge of sadness,
something as remote as guilt, something that
whispered its purpose, and then echoed so quietly
only the dead could hear.

But he swallows the guilt with the last of his
Stella, burps, then fixes his eyes on the grainy wood
of the bar. He thinks about Chris O'Malley's words.
How he heard "killer" as "kill her" and isn't that a
funny play on words...

my december

lisa danielle conn

on

this particular December afternoon, each room in the house is alive. Shutters flap, breezes lilt, the waterfall dribbles, the kitchen chop-chop-chops, outside chirp-chirp-chirps, and my mother's heels click-click-click up and down the stairs. It smells of mint and lemon juice, of smoky wood and gardenias, of pipe tobacco and seaweed.

Uncle Steve hasn't brushed his hair since last December. Nor has he cut it, washed it, or looked in a mirror. He suffered from polio as a young boy, leaving him with uneven limbs, poor hygiene, and an unusual lack of awareness for social graces. Working as Ralph Nader's press secretary, Uncle Steve is more liberal than Trotsky and more politically incorrect than Michael Moore. He takes out his carved tobacco pipe, inhales deeply, and blows a puff of smoke into the already cloudy kitchen.

My 92-year-old grandfather is sitting in a wheelchair by the fireplace studying the morning

newspaper with the assistance of an oversized magnifying glass. The paper is upside down, but I don't say anything.

His head bobs as he falls in and out of a snore and drips sleep-drool onto his chest. "Where is my cane?" he snorts, half asleep.

I reassure him that his cane, warped and wooden, is safe by his side.

A minute passes until he bursts, "Where is my dog?"

I verify that Queenie, his fat, pit-bull mutt is happily snoring on the carpet, letting out poisonous smelling gas from time to time as a result of Grandpa furtively feeding her his own afternoon snack of cheese and Saltines.

Grandpa's angelic Filipino nurse, caretaker and 24-hour associate, Mila, chops, stirs, and sprinkles in the kitchen. Five feet tall and round as a bowling ball, Mila smiles and laughs constantly. She wears

a shirt that says, "I might grow older, but I'll never grow up."

"Meleesa!" Grandpa squeals. He can never seem to remember her name.

"Yes, honey," she purrs.

Grandpa whispers, "Do you...do you know where my comb is?"

"Yes, honey! Comb in you pocket!" She points and giggles. Most things make Mila giggle—a full-bellied, high-pitched, contagious, smile-inducing laugh that could warm even the cold depths of old Scrooge's heart.

"Poached pairs, coming through!" My mother clicks past Mila into the kitchen. She is one of those women who, like fine wine or George Clooney, improves with age. She doesn't believe in the I'm-too-tired-not-to-shower-or-brush-my-hair ideology, so she radiates with loveliness on her way to the gym, in line at the grocery store, looking at tile samples with the interior designer, and shopping for an apron that most flatters her figure.

Cooking dinner even in the privacy of our own home is no exception. She stands tall in pointy heels, the flattering apron, with big rollers in her hair and a large square emerald jewel on her neck.

"Somebody hand me the basil!... Did anyone check on the walnuts?...I said THINLY sliced!"

She dictates to her kitchen staff, a meager group of just Mila and me. We are no longer her family, her

dear ones or her partners. We are her army and we have one mission: to cook our annual December dinner for the family. My mother's commanding air suggests that we bring to the task the same intensity, concern and focus that we would bring to deactivating the fragile core of a nuclear bomb.

"Lisa, go to the garage and bring me seven 500 ml bottles of Penta water. The recipe calls for Laguna tap water, but that simply won't do."

Formal restaurants in my hometown of Laguna Beach offer a selection of flat, sparkling or "Laguna tap" waters. My mother has picked up on the lingo.

Two of my older brothers, Elliot and Brad, sit on the couch in the living room in front of the biggest TV in the house. Elliot, 21, is watching the *Twilight Zone*. One of his hands clutches the remote, and the other is rested comfortably in his pants. Years of December dinners with the family have taught me that if I attempt to steal the remote in hopes of changing the channel, Elliot will take out his other hand, wave it around, and threaten to touch me with it. I've grown to tolerate the *Twilight Zone*.

"Is this the one with the manikins?" I ask Elliot.

"The After Hours'?" He furrows his brow condescendingly. "Ha, no. This is 'Long Live Walter Jameson.'"

Brad, 29, looks up from the *LA Times* sports section. "In the bootleg copy you gave me, this episode's called 'Live Long Water James.'"

My father's son from a previous marriage, Brad doesn't have my father's green eyes or light hair, but has inherited his mother's African-American skin and tight curls. At six-foot-six-inches, Brad is tall like the rest of my brothers, but his stature is like Hercules, sculpted and precise.

"He gave me the complete first season of *Arrested Development* dubbed in Russian with Chinese subtitles," I add.

Elliot has been to 10 different Asian countries in the past 12 months. He just returned from a two-week trip to the Philippines and Indonesia, where he not only interviewed government officials for his senior thesis on terrorism in developing countries, but also purchased nearly a thousand bootleg DVDs from a German named Hans who allegedly had no thumbs and a glass eye.

Uncle Steve has moved to the music room, hair frantic and electric, shaking to a beat seemingly independent from the rest of his body. He strums Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps' "Be-bop-a-lula" on one of my father's many expensive and delicate acoustic guitars. Only he isn't strumming it, but rather attacking it, his fingers a wolf and the guitar strings a piece of meat.

Well be-bop-a-lula, she's my baby.

Be-bop-a-lula. I don't mean maybe.

Well be-bop-a-lula, she's my baby.

Be-bop-a-lula. I don't mean maybe.

My baby love, my baby love.

He sings, or screams, screeches, really, and I hear Mila giggle and clap in the other room. Elliot turns up the volume. *You're traveling through another dimension. A dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind...* Queenie whips her head around until she is satisfied that the clatter is not a threat. Grandpa is the only one who appreciates Uncle Steve. He snaps his fingers and taps his toes, casually, as if enjoying a pleasant Christmas carol.

A Christmas carol would have been an inappropriate addition to the house's symphony, because our holiday has no religious affiliation. We have no festive evergreen tree shedding on a squishy carpet, no myth of a jolly Santa Claus, no talk of reindeer or snowmen. When I was little, I wanted a holiday like in the mostly imaginary world of postcards and snow globes, an Eloise-esque white Christmas, complete with real life gingerbread houses. My mother did her best to satisfy, teaching me about both Judah the Macabbee and the miracle of Jesus' birth. One year she even hired a man to wear a yellow polyester costume and entertain the kids as the Holiday Banana. The banana bruised years ago, and after my mother ruled that eggnog had too many calories, the family stopped obeying or inventing any customs, or even relying on a particular date. The holiday is just another dinner, only we are all together, and it falls on whatever

day in December we can gather to celebrate at our house on the beach.

Grandpa likes to impress Brad. He knocks on the dark green wall beside his cushioned chair and brags, "You know, I built this house." Grandpa stares at the wall, as if admiring his greatest work and says, "Yep, yep, yep. That's a fact."

My grandfather knows as well as Brad does that our home was built in the 1920s and that Grandpa, although a successful businessman in his day, probably hasn't picked up a hammer in his life.

Finally, I hear the jingle of my father's keys in the living room, a sound I've come to associate with warmth; my father's balding grey head, soft wrinkles, and clean blue scrubs that only make a brief appearance before dinner.

"Anybody home?" he howls, as he does every time he enters the front door.

He extends his arms out for Brad, his first born, and exclaims, "Brad! My main man!" I imagine him greeting Brad the same way when he was a little boy, with "main man" pleasing the four year old. He messes the hair on Elliot's head, but his son remains steadfast in front of the TV. He nods at Grandpa, smiles at Mila, and tries to halt his brother's wolf-strumming.

"Steve!" My father affectionately pats his brother on the back. "How was your flight?"

"Fucking better than expected." Years of working

behind the scenes in politics left Uncle Steve with the tic of inserting the f-word in otherwise prosaic sentences. "No babies, no sick people, no turbulence."

My father nods, and after several seconds of silence, makes his way into the kitchen.

"I sat next to an obese guy," Uncle Steve continues, speaking to no one in particular. "Hey, I have no problem with that lifestyle. Fucking eat on, man! I just wish he'd buy two seats. I would rather *not* be sexually assaulted by Jabba the Hut's love handles in First Class, man. Am I right?"

"My favorite girls!" Daddy announces. He smiles at my mother and their gazes lock. Few things bring a brighter glow to my father's face than seeing her. Not his beloved jazz guitars, not sunny vacations, not even a successful day at the office. He kisses her cheek and she stops her pedantic chatter to laugh like a schoolgirl. They are momentarily alone, lights twinkling, bells chiming, a modern-day Tristan and Isolde, but with a better ending.

My turn. I am four years old again, a weak puppy in giant arms. My nose digs in his chest and he smells of cleaning product and lavender. I inhale.

"You in the mood for blue tonight?" he asks Mommy.

"I was thinking red. More festive."

A couple of years ago, my mother gave my father a black velour leisure suit as a gift. My father was less

than grateful, indignantly calling the outfit a geezer suit and reminding her that he was no geezer. The outfit was non-returnable and since my mother refuses to let perfectly good clothing go to waste, the next day she donned the rejected ensemble and strutted nonchalantly around the house, proclaiming how comfortable and liberated she felt. The spectacle was convincing; my father wanted a comfortable and liberating outfit to call his own. Since then, the two have each accumulated seven matching leisure suits in various colors. My mother and father like to match while lounging around the house, while jogging on the beach, and especially, while driving their matching silver Priuses.

The couple sneaks away to change before dinner: Mommy to take out her hair curlers, freshen her red lips, and re-powder her nose, and Daddy to chuck off his Gucci shoes and slip into Rainbow sandals (with socks).

I position the appetizers, garnished and colorful, ripe yellows and creamy whites, each carefully arranged on a square porcelain plate. Elliot jumps up, Brad hurries over, and Steve puts down his guitar. Grandpa taps his cane, winks at me, takes a blue pin comb out of his front pocket, to comb his hair, then reaches down to comb Queenie's, and finally gestures for Mila to wheel him over to the table. My parents float down the stairs together, matching in red leisure suits, holding hands, Daddy beaming

and Mommy glowing, and dinner begins.

"How much did you pay for this fish?" Elliot asks suspiciously.

"Twenty-four ninty-nine a pound," Mommy reveals. "Because it's organic. And wild."

"Are you interested in fresh fish cheaper?" Elliot asks.

Mommy shrugs, "Why?"

"I know a guy."

I look around at my family, and varying shades of white, brown, and black stare back at me. Uncle Steve tells wildly inappropriate jokes that make even my mother uncomfortable and Mommy shares newspaper clip-outs that she has neatly placed in a manila folder in preparation for the occasion. Witty comebacks and political references bounce like a ping-pong ball between avocados and salmon puffs.

"It's all racialized! The whole fucking system!" Uncle Steve sputters when we talk about California's Three Strikes Law. "Two thirds of prisoners are racial minorities, upward of 80 percent of prisoners were represented by state-appointed lawyers. Its undeniable!"

"Sure, but in today's world, its almost impossible to separate racial discrimination from class-based discrimination," Brad proposes calmly, as he twists the hair above his ear into a tight coil. "Take a look at Latin American countries. Bolivia, Venezuela. Hugo

Chavez is dealing with the same kind inequality."

My brothers tease my mother when she mispronounces the president of Iran's last name.

"Its Ahmadinejad," Elliot condescends.

"I think I had that for lunch yesterday," I joke.

"Very funny," Daddy sings.

"Very funny," Mommy chirps.

"Did you hear what she said?" My father tugs at the collar of my mother's leisure suit. "Did you hear that?"

"That was a good one!" My mother nods aggressively. "Good for you!" She smiles.

This is one of their "bits." If someone makes a cheesy joke, my parents chuck flattery just far enough for the other person to suspect sarcasm. Mila chimes in occasionally in her limited English.

"That one was a funny!" she giggles and claps her hands.

Grandpa listens and smiles, all the while calculating the perfect moment to surreptitiously feed Queenie bits of home-made bruschetta under the table.

"What do you think, Daddy?" My mother likes to include Grandpa as much as possible.

"I'm thinking about my dog," Grandpa explains. "I'm thinking if I go back East again, they might give me trouble."

"What do you mean go back East, Grandpa?" Elliot inquires facetiously.

"Oh hell. I never know why."

After dinner, when every succulent tomato is eaten, each cup of green tea is consumed, and all the biscotti crumbs are cleared, we retire to the living room. Elliot and TIVO have prepared the best of the *Twilight Zone* marathon to share with the rest of the family. We all huddle on the couch, embrace the black and white images, and slowly doze off one by one.

The house finally sleeps. Shutters closed, breeze stilled, waterfall exhausted. Knives buzz around the dishwasher, chirping birds are silenced, and my mother lies barefoot. I bury my face in Daddy's chest.

And it smells of my December.



little lady scuppernong

allyson paty

I was born in the wake: after the boll weevil,
after the trees had been mostly hacked down
and carted away.

That land was stumps and naked dirt.

Daddy's leg was never right. He shambled
home, tired and proud, and smelling of pines.

Up the road Uncle Arthur had a well. We sisters
walked there in the dark: one in front to look out ahead,
one in back to watch for what followed, me in between,
me to hold steady, not to slosh from the pail.

On damaged earth unruly underbrush comes thick.
I fed on wild plum and persimmon so sour, played
Grapevine jump rope and broomsedge hideout.
I learned my hardy luster

from a muscadine hull.

night stories

sarah chow

Tell me again the dream
where you and I swim to Africa.
We reach the shore, but the tide
pulls me back and I'm gone.

When we meet again it's dark—
I'm barely extant. The air
breathes like a lungful of glass
and we're standing at the edge
of a cobalt bank in an underwater cave,
a dim room suffused with dusk
and rippled light that shatters
our skin like meteors.

Contributors

Katherine Bernard is a Gallatin student graduating in 2009.

Allison Bitzer, class of 2009, developed a concentration she calls “The Human Condition Through Image.” She is from a small town in Pennsylvania and enjoys photographing rural environments.

Carol Cho will graduate in 2011. Her focus is the visual interpretation of contemporary culture. She’s currently taking classes in creative writing, studio art and cinema studies.

Sarah Chow is a bright / young / thing / moon / tribal / 21 / and ancient / done for / bursting with deadpan / flavor. She is a Gallatin junior graduating in spring 2010, concentrating in “New Digital Culture.”

Lisa Danielle Conn lives in New York City and Laguna Beach. She enjoys travel, politics and boxing. She’ll graduate from Gallatin in 2010, having concentrated in metropolitan studies and American studies.

Hannah Dunphy, Gallatin class of 2009, formerly a dance major at Tisch, is a human rights organizer with anti-human-trafficking coalitions, youth leadership organizations and Iraq Veterans Against the War. Her photograph “Rosa” was taken in a Zapatista caracol in Chiapas, as part of her photo-documentary on land rights and social movements in Mexico. Hannah hopes to work with the International Criminal Court.

Josh Freydkis is a Gallatin freshman pursuing a concentration in illustration and urban studies. Born and raised in beautiful San Francisco, CA, he fervently enjoys comic books, black metal and warm afternoons. For more of his work, check out www.flickr.com/joshfreydkis.

Jacob Friedman is graduating in 2009. He’s studying allegory—a “name for something that never could be named” other than “inconceivable idea,” existing “in the difficulty of what it is to be.” He is also developing a film series where puppets tackle scientific, existential and professional questions. “Hire me, please.”

Annabel Graham, class of 2012, is concentrating in English and creative writing, visual art and art history. Her interests include writing, drawing, painting, acting and playing guitar.

Kat Harrison is a Gallatin junior obsessed with all things creative. She is interested in the ways in which stories are told journalistically, poetically, pictorially and in Spanish. Kat hopes to continue exploring the relationship between text and image. Coffee, loopy handwriting and terrible jokes are good friends.

Jacob Kaplan got through high school and then enrolled in college. He'll graduate from Gallatin in 2010. He is concentrating in fiction writing.

Amanda Knudsen is a sophomore at Gallatin studying philosophy, politics, creative writing and linguistics. Photography is one of her many hobbies. She hopes to continue to create in a variety of media, and pursue her interests through studying the place and function of art throughout societal/cultural evolution/interaction.

Tegan McDonough is a junior at Gallatin concentrating in trauma studies and creative writing. She is an active member of the Coloring Club, and enjoys knitting, reading Kundera and finger painting in her free time.

Sara Nicholson, class of 2009, has concentrated in "The Social Responsibility of Theater." Her other interests include travel and travel literature.

Kaela Noel, graduating from Gallatin in 2010, was born in San Francisco and raised in New York. She's in the process of starting Marzipan, a small press for picture books. "Commerce" was written in Fall 2008 for Ed Park's Gallatin writing class *Only Connect*. She's concentrating in literature and cultural studies. Kaela blogs at foundbeloved.blogspot.com.

Allyson Paty is a Gallatin senior studying poetry, choreography and cultural studies. "Thank you to Scott Hightower, who is wise about poems."

Gina Pollack is a junior at Gallatin, with a concentration in writing and photography. She wrote "Twenty-Three Years" while studying at Cambridge University. She is originally from Los Angeles.

Brad Powell studies a mix of political topics through Gallatin, and he expects to graduate in 2010. He's been writing poetry and short prose for about five years and has published much of his work on his "Sisyphus Speaks" blog.

Juliana Reiters is concentrating in cinema studies, philosophy and visual arts. She will graduate in 2010; her colloquium is tentatively titled "Theories on Human Existence in Film."

Antonio Santini was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He is a Gallatin junior concentrating in new media and communications technology. His interests include reading, writing and constructing

images that either reflect or attempt to make sense of the senseless convergence of media, and the effects of living in a screen culture.

Emma Sartwell is in Gallatin's class of 2010. She plans to concentrate in art and alternative health.

Sarah Secunda will graduate from Gallatin in 2009. She has focused on good people and interesting conversation.

Briana Severson, graduating in 2010, is studying mental health awareness through theater arts, particularly playwriting. In her spare time she enjoys working for the gay porn industry (not as an actress), drinking Vitamin Water and mispronouncing words on porpoise. She's been published in the *Gallatin Review*, *Farmhouse*, *Plankton* and several other small literary magazines. Her play was performed at the 2009 Gallatin Arts Festival.

Seanna Sharpe is majoring in metaphor at Gallatin, studying art, dance, writing, philosophy and politics. Currently, her art explores the line between expression and abstraction, breaking down the literal in the search for truth.

Justin Spees is a Gallatin senior studying literature and culture.

Michael Stolte is in the Gallatin class of 2009. His photograph "Dead Man's Pose" was taken on the causeway leading to Le Mont Saint-Michel, a tidal island in Normandy, France. "My eye follows patterns, and in this photograph, the way the crowd forms and reforms."

Samantha Teich, graduating in 2012, comes from outside Washington, D.C. She hopes to concentrate in graphic design and visual communications. Her interests include photography, playing and listening to music and traveling.

Brian Wang is a Gallatin senior concentrating in advertising, graphic design and media. He is from Dallas, Texas.

